

## SVALBARD

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Though discovered in 1596 by Willem Barentsz, Svalbard was already known to the Vikings who had been travelling far and wide. In 12th century Icelandic texts, Vikings were already referring to Svalbard as Svalbarði fundinn, or the 'land of cold coasts', for it is here, where you still find – through the centuries – a wild archipelago blanketed in frost and ice.

Once at the bottom of the sea, Svalbard surfaced as a result of land collisions, giving the archipelago its distinct and stunning landscape characterized by fjord systems, low-land coastal plains, rugged and steep mountain highlands and glaciers, where fantastic fossils and skeletons from the Jurassic period have been found – including the famous gigantic Predator X. In fact, Svalbard is exceptionally rich in geological diversity that visitors are allowed to pick as many marine fossils as they are able to carry – most of which can easily be found in front of the glaciers. You just have to be ready to do it in a comparatively frozen environment.

In Svalbard, the average temperature ranges from -20°C to -30°C (-4°F to -22°F) in winter to 5°C/41°F during the summer. In the summer, travelers can experience periods of heavy fog, but with hardly any rain since Svalbard can be categorized as an arctic desert, with annual rainfall and snowfall at a mere 200-300mm (8-12in). However, like the rest of the Nordic region, the weather can shift very quickly and the variations between locations are often significant. It is therefore important for travelers to dress correctly when traveling to Svalbard.

There are many things to do when traveling to Svalbard, and most of these activities are dependent on the season as each brings with it something unique for travelers to marvel at and experience.

What may count as Spring to most, is what locals call Light Winter in Svalbard. This is an exciting time to visit Svalbard, as the days become increasingly longer and by the turn of May, the midnight sun is in full swing, bringing warmth to the frozen landscape. It is this time when the birds begin to return and the mountains' small plants spring to life, and from the ice, seals surface to take in the sunshine. For travelers, this is the ideal time to enjoy all of Svalbard's numerous outdoor and wilderness activities like dog sledding, hiking on snowshoes, and snowmobiling.

During the summer, which is rapid and fleeting period, travelers are treated to the blossoming of its fragile and protected flora, the rush of wildlife activity and the disappearance of snow. And as sunlight drenches the region all day long, you will find yourself wanting to spend your nearly every waking hour outside, taking in as much of Svalbard's beauty as possible either from your husky-drawn sled on wheels or on a fatbike as you go riding through spectacular Spitsbergen. On a kayak, you can glide over the frigid waters with the wading birds, the occasional inquisitive seal or even a whale.

The coming of autumn is rapid but beautiful. The days shorten and almost overnight, travelers will see the onset of snow over the mountain peaks, making hiking a wonderful activity this time of year as the ground, though frozen, is still easy to walk on. As you follow the trails up the mountains, breathe in the clean crisp air and celebrate this wonderfully quiet yet fleeting season.

In winter, travelers will find themselves wrapped in Svalbard's cold darkness and on a clear day (or night), enjoy the wonderful pearly glow of the moon, the starry-lit sky. At the onset of winter, travelers can experience polar nights, which are unique to this part of the world, and are characterized as though one were suspended in seemingly endless twilight, brought about by the sun being more than 6 degrees below the horizon. And as winter progresses, twilight folds into complete darkness, and it is during this bleak period where travelers can revel in the ethereal beauty of the northern lights whilst on a calm cruise over Svalbard's waters, or from the warm comforts of a snowcat or behind a pack of delighted mushing huskies as they dart over the frozen tundra. It is only in places like Svalbard, where one can witness the northern lights even at daytime, making it one of the most ideal places to not only witness this natural phenomena.

And while every season brings unique offerings and experiences for every traveler, the one constant marvel of Svalbard – aside from the majestic beauty of its nature – are its impressive resident polar bears. With a population of 3000 bears, travelers should be prepared for a chance encounter anywhere on its islands, which is why it is recommended to always travel with an experienced guide, since polar bears tend to be curious and can become aggressive and dangerous when it feels threatened.

Indeed, Svalbard, though small and remote in comparison to other Nordic destinations, is a treasure trove of rugged beauty and unique experiences. It is here where travelers hear amazing stories about the mysterious lore of the land, epic polar expeditions, and the often tragic lives of its transitory settlers – and perhaps follow in their legendary footsteps as they make their own adventures and memories to last a lifetime.

### Did You Know?

- ❖ In Longyearbyen, you will find Restaurant Huset, which is the northernmost gourmet restaurant and home to one of Scandinavia's finest wine cellars, storing more than 22,000 bottles. And the pub Karls-Berger has been rated the 6th best pub in the world.
- ❖ The colorful wooden buildings that make up Longyearbyen are built on permafrost, and while the permafrost can go 40 meters deep in certain areas, it has an active layer that melts during the warmer months. To avoid sinking and flooding, all of the settlement's buildings are built on piles (or stilts) to keep them away from the active layer.
- ❖ Svalbard's nature and wildlife are legally protected, so travelers are recommended to know the rules before traveling – such as it is forbidden to pluck the flowers or disturb polar bears.
- ❖ It is local custom to take one's shoes off when stepping indoors, and this is not exclusive to private homes but also places like the church, museums, hotels and even the tourist information office. Warm slippers are, of course, provided to keep your feet warm.
- ❖ It is forbidden to die in Svalbard, since the permafrost preserves the bodies. The last known person to be buried in Svalbard was over 70 years ago.