

Cool cruising



Wildlife watching and fossil hunting in Svalbard were just two of the activities at Clia's inaugural expedition showcase, reports **Samantha Mayling**

I'm going to tell you something that will blow your mind," says our Svalbard guide as he and his colleague hoist rifles onto their backs. "I am Thor and this is Freya."

Having Norse god namesakes to guide our mountain fossil hike is just one of the mind-blowing aspects of this remote Norwegian archipelago, a mere 650 miles south of the north pole.

After Thor and Freya warn us of the dangers of polar bears – though an encounter is highly

unlikely – Thor hands out hammers (of course) for us to hunt for fossils within the ancient rock.

WILD WALKS

With a walking pole for added balance, I chat to Freya as we navigate scree and streams of glacial meltwater, trying not to tread on any tiny Svalbard poppies, delicate blooms of saxifrage and Arctic cotton grass, and dodging a fluffy Arctic fox that scurries past. ➤

Kayaking in
Spitsbergen
PICTURE: Al Bakker

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | SVALBARD

AGENTS' views



"Svalbard opened my eyes to the unique experience that expedition cruises offer, as well as the majesty and beauty of the landscape. I've had some enquiries already from clients who kept up with my adventure."

Tim Jackson-Thorpe,
director, Heacham Travel



"During the wildlife boat tour, I found myself contemplating life while looking at the view. I'd done the Clia Expedition Cruise Champion course, and it couldn't have been better to see six ships in one place."

Kelly Uniacke, travel consultant, The Travel Nook UK, part of InteleTravel



"Longyearbyen was like a wild west frontier town, rustic and industrial, but I fell in love with the place – especially those huskies."

Jane Middleton, director, Authentic Travel Company



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Zodiac excursion from Quark Expeditions ship *Ocean Explorer*; Clia Expedition Showcase agents on *Sylvia Earle*; Svalbard's capital Longyearbyen

PICTURES: Steve Dunlop; Atlas Ocean Voyages



Freya explains residents are not allowed to be buried here when they die because of the permafrost, and they can't give birth, either, as there are no maternity facilities. Once reliant on coal mining, Svalbard's last mine shut in June this year, so the 3,000 locals now rely heavily on tourism and research. The unique rock formations are a geologist's dream, while Arctic flora and fauna attract scientists, birdwatchers, photographers and cruise passengers – hence our excursion during Clia's Expedition Showcase.

We clamber over snow to reach the fossil-hunting grounds – which come with breathtaking views – to find plant imprints from 40-60 million years ago. Hammering rocks is very satisfying, but not always necessary; I find a large tree bark fossil just by turning over a stone.

Curiously, visitors are allowed to take small fossils home from Svalbard, but my find would probably account for half my luggage allowance, so I leave it for another fossil hunter. Most of my suitcase was already occupied by thermals and waterproofs, as Svalbard can still be icy even in the height of summer.

COLD COAST

Warm layers are also required on our four-hour wildlife-spotting boat trip, which sets off from the pier in Svalbard's main town Longyearbyen, where cruise ships dock. Within minutes, we spot the white humps of beluga whales, followed by puffins and guillemots circling the boat.

While we sip hot chocolate, our guide Lorna Wallis tells us about Svalbard's history – it was discovered ➤

3 EXPEDITION SHIPS AT THE CLIA EXPEDITION SHOWCASE IN SVALBARD

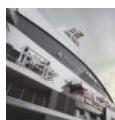
SH DIANA, SWAN HELLENIC



"Service on board is very intuitive and understated. There's a home-from-home feel; the cabins all have [holographic] fireplaces. Our line offers the polar regions, Africa and Latin America with interesting itineraries, taking you to places that other lines don't."

Mario Bounas, UK & Ireland general manager

LE LYRIAL, PONANT EXPLORATIONS



"[Ponant] is unique for its international experience. It is French-owned so presentations are in French and English. For evening dining, you'll see ties and jackets, sometimes a tuxedo if guests are celebrating an anniversary. Sailaway parties may have an opera singer."

Anthony Daniels, UK & Ireland general manager

WORLD VOYAGER, ATLAS OCEAN VOYAGES



"The expedition team is very important. Their end-of-day recap wraps up pictures and videos in a fun, relaxed style. While expeditions leave at 7am, passengers stay up until late having fun. *World Voyager* will be chartered by Quark Expeditions for three winters from November 2026."

Bernie Carter, international sales lead

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | SVALBARD



ABOVE: Clia team, cruise line members and agents in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, during the Clia Expedition Showcase PICTURES: Steve Dunlop; Richard l'Anson; David Merron

in 1596 by a Dutch explorer, and coal mining began in 1899. The main island is Spitsbergen, which means 'pointy mountains', while the name Svalbard is a Viking word for 'cold coast'.

Most settlements are on the western side because of the warming effect of the Gulf Stream, while the eastern side has cold Arctic currents. That's where cruise ships can sail past glaciers and, hopefully, spot polar bears down by the shore.

Lorna's slides show us some of the birds to look out for, such as Brünnich's guillemot, little auk, northern fulmar and kittiwake. My

favourites are puffin chicks called pufflings, which look like grey balls of candyfloss, and the Arctic tern, which migrates between the Arctic and Antarctic, clocking up about 1.5 million miles during its lifetime.

We spot a small iceberg and, as the ice melts, we can hear the popping of bubbles formed thousands of years ago. There's more excitement as we glimpse the brown hump and tusks of a walrus and then a minke whale – nicknamed 'stinky minke' because of their bad breath.

Sadly, we don't spot any of Svalbard's 3,000 or so polar bears – but a colleague sailing around

“We spot an iceberg and hear the popping of bubbles formed thousands of years ago

Svalbard on AE Expeditions' Sylvia Earle the following day is lucky enough to catch a glimpse.

SAFARI BY SEA

That's the appeal of an expedition cruise; they take clients to remote places, often only accessible on

Zodiacs, to view calving glaciers, and flora and fauna up close while accompanied by wildlife experts who can add valuable insights. It's no wonder expedition cruises are dubbed 'safaris on water' or, as Clia UK & Ireland's managing director Andy Harmer tells me, a 'seafari'.

These cruises can be expensive but Harmer says: "Price-wise, it is value for money. You get lots included and the experience is incredible."

If our sojourn in Svalbard is anything to go by, expedition cruisers certainly have some awe-inspiring experiences in store. **TW**

3 X-BOW EXPEDITION SHIPS AT THE CLIA EXPEDITION SHOWCASE IN SVALBARD

OCEAN ALBATROS, ALBATROS EXPEDITIONS



"Our USP is we offer good value compared to competitors. Single cabins sell out quickly. We're a Danish company and have visited Greenland for 40 years. We also have a team of historians, biologists, geologists and photographers on board."

Melissa Waidner, sales manager, Europe and South Africa

SYLVIA EARLE, AE EXPEDITIONS



"We are the only B Corp-certified expedition operator, with no single-use plastic on board. Sylvia Earle has 130 passengers and you can have four to five hours off the ship every day. We offer citizen science projects and, being Australian-owned, it's very casual on board."

Andrew Turner, EMEA sales director

OCEAN EXPLORER, QUARK EXPEDITIONS



"The vibe on board is chilled – you'll often find the expedition crew in the observation lounge or bistro, which has stunning views. You can have a glass of champagne in the outdoor Jacuzzi or see lectures in the theatre or on your cabin TV."

Becky Francis, senior sales director, EMEA and China