



Erasmus: an academic and cultural experience

UK Erasmus Student Photography Competition 2006: first prize image by David Tett

Christopher Lee is a physics undergraduate who recently enjoyed an Erasmus placement with a difference – he spent six winter months in the Arctic studying the aurora. He also gained first prize in the 2006 Erasmus Student Awards for this essay.

“There’s still no sign of it”, observed my friend as he peered out of the aircraft window into a thick fog. It was the final leg of our journey. Twenty-seven hours after our departure from Heathrow, tired and hungry, we were approaching our destination.

Suddenly the elusive runway announced its presence as the pilot slammed the aircraft down with a jarring thud. I exchanged glances with the now silent figure next to me, confident that the terrified look in his eyes was mirrored in my own, amid the deafening roar of the tyres clawing at the ice encrusted asphalt for the slightest grip. We had arrived in the Arctic.

Minutes later we were shuffling towards the small airport. It was January, and it was dark; indeed it would be dark for the next month,

and even then the long polar night would be broken for only a couple of hours a day by a dull twilight in the south. Temperatures below -20°C were normal, and with the wind-chill it could be expected to drop another twenty.

Standing in a fjord on the west coast of Spitsbergen, only six hundred miles from the North Pole, we had just landed in Longyearbyen. One hundred years after its foundation as a small coal mining settlement, Longyearbyen is the administrative centre for Spitsbergen and its neighbouring islands - the archipelago of Svalbard.

Mining is still big here, and there is also a small tourist trade, but of increasing importance is science. Svalbard is still a pristine Arctic wilderness. Far from mainland Europe there

is little pollution, and its proximity to the pole makes it ideal to study the polar environment.

There was little time to waste after our arrival as we plunged into our first week of studies. Living in the High Arctic presents unique challenges. Sure, we'd climbed mountains in Britain before, but this was another ball game altogether, and if we were going to survive the next six months we were going to need help. This came in the guise of the security course, and it was like nothing else I'd done before.

We were trained to navigate through the snow covered and featureless terrain, to rescue colleagues from the deep crevasses that cover the island's glaciers, and to set up and protect field camps in the inhospitable wilderness.

We practised field first aid, from dealing with frostbitten feet, to treating snow blindness. We learned how to identify and minimise the ever present avalanche threat, as well as to organise search parties, and even to guide down rescue helicopters; but of all these hazards, the most unpredictable were polar bears.

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Far from the blood thirsty beasts often portrayed, polar bears are still dangerous. For the protection of those leaving the town, firearms are a necessity, so the final aspect of our course was weapons training.

Whilst 'trained marksman' would do little to enhance most CVs, we learned a lot of other skills that proved useful, not just on the frozen tundra but throughout everyday life; for example, planning and attention to detail were vital to avoid falling foul of avalanches, the cold, or the local wildlife; and were equally useful when setting out on complicated scientific campaigns.

Many people might question why we would leave the comfort of the British climate to study in the unforgiving conditions of the polar winter, but it is precisely those conditions that draw so many scientists to the islands.

The University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS)

specialises in studies of the polar environment, which includes the focus of our studies; the aurora. Conveniently, Svalbard is one of the few places on Earth where aurora can be seen at midday, thanks to the three months of winter darkness.

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Flown in from across Britain and Scandinavia, UNIS attracts the foremost experts in their fields; consequently the breadth and standard of the teaching is unrivalled. All those benefits aside, the smallest university in the world has one more draw for the auroral scientist.

Several miles up the fjord from Longyearbyen is Adventdalen Auroral Station, an observatory with instruments run by institutions throughout Europe. This facility provided opportunities to use and develop the knowledge picked up in the classroom, as well as offering a unique insight into physical research.

However, despite the excellent teaching, the fantastic facilities, and the beautiful surroundings, the Arctic was no holiday. The first month was particularly testing as we revised for our first semester exams set by our home institution; attended a full complement of lectures at UNIS; tried to keep on top of the work expected of us by the visiting lectures; and in the twenty-four hour darkness, tried to fight the overwhelming desire to sleep.

Despite all their unpleasantness at the time, such difficulties did have a very positive impact on my development as a scientist, particularly with respect to my time management.

Longyearbyen is not the only settlement on Spitsbergen; almost fifty miles south is Barentsberg. Whilst arranging a visit to the Russian mining town, I had mentioned my plans to a friend.

"That'll be an experience," he replied. "They're still fighting the cold war there."

The comment surprised me, but I can see his point. Five years previously the Russians had pulled out of Pyramiden, another mining settlement further north. Like Pyramiden before

it, Barentsberg's population is dwindling. Coal is no longer exported to the mainland, but still Russia appears reluctant to see the town follow in the footsteps of its neighbour, worried about leaving Svalbard to the Norwegians and losing the foothold in Europe.

Relations between Longyearbyen and Barentsberg are good, and twice a year the two meet for a sports tournament. As much a friendly social event as a sporting one, there is more than just a desire to have fun. National pride is at stake as the teams of predominantly Norwegian students and miners battle against the enthusiastic and well trained Russians.

Despite their proximity, the economic gulf between Longyearbyen and Barentsberg is huge. Barentsberg is very poor. With the end of the cold war, the Kremlin lost interest in their Arctic outposts and the funding quickly dried-up.

The contrast with Longyearbyen, a town funded by an oil rich Norway, is stark. Even on a sunny day in early March the atmosphere in Barentsberg was one of emptiness, but in Longyearbyen there is a sense that you are part of something special and an important member of the community. As with Barentsberg, there is little to do outside work in Longyearbyen, but far from inducing depression among the residents, the recreational vacuum coupled with the harsh climate, fosters a community-orientated mentality, particularly among the students. Numbering around sixty a semester, the student population is an extremely tight-knit group, and quite unlike anything I had ever experienced.

Longyearbyen's isolation from mainland society does nothing to weaken the patriotism of its Norwegian residents, and never is that patriotism demonstrated more strongly than on the Norwegian Constitution Day, the 17th May. There are carnival style parades in most towns and cities, and Longyearbyen is no exception, but of course, on Svalbard things are a little different: there are no spectators here as everyone parades around a deserted town. Although the public celebrations may be short, the parties continue long into the night.

It is impossible to understand the culture of Svalbard without first understanding the place itself. Both Barentsberg and Longyearbyen are essentially outposts removed from everyday realities of their respective parent nations. Both are solely reliant on the mainland for their survival. Such isolation breaks down the social practices and undercurrents that dominate life in mainland society, and through necessity the focus shifts to simply 'getting the job done' and surviving. Everyone knows why they are there and what is expected of them.

Surrounded by sixty-two thousand square kilometres of frozen wilderness, humans are not adapted to live in this environment, so those that do, adopt a unique and simple culture. Life here is about 'everyday life', and central to that is the community.

Svalbard changed all of us, and not just academically. The culture highlighted the often unnecessary complexities of mainland society, and moreover, the importance of those around us. The Arctic is infectious. The site of a glacier on the front of a magazine, or a snow covered landscape in a travel agent's window, revives an overwhelming desire to return.

But the final word must go to Barentsberg. As the population dwindles so the community dies, and it becomes increasingly hard for those who remain to survive. In all probability it will follow Pyramiden to leave yet another ghost town on the shores of Spitsbergen. But Barentsberg is more than just a town 'on the edge'; it illustrates the reality of the human presence on Svalbard. For all our hard work, we are only transient in this landscape after all.



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