A visit to the king of the Arctic

by Heide Wilts – www.freydis.de

Basically it had been a fantastic journey on Freydis in the Arctic. We had sailed from Newfoundland over the Labrador Sea to Greenland, the largest island in the world. We cruised through the imposing fjords in the south and had the incredible good fortune to get as far as Scoresbysund, its largest iceberg producer in the north-east and surrounded by pack ice. To top it all, we also visited Iceland with its volcanoes, geysers and sandy deserts, the old whaling island of Jan Mayen and,last but not least, Spitzbergen, thus almost reaching the 80th parallel. Yes, 1 could have been truly satisfied with this cruise. Skipper and crew returned equally enthusiastic and with a wealth of memorable impressions and valuable experiences. Immediately after a wonderful cruise is the best time to plan the next. For the following year our crew decided on a cruise in the Caribbean - as a contrast, so to speak. Their hunger for adventure in icy regions had been stilled for the time being. I felt quite differently. It is true that the trip had been unique and wonderful, but I had missed the crowning glory, which I had been secretly waiting for all the time - an encounter with a polar bear, for me, the king of the Arctic. How can I describe it? A journey to the South Pole without seeing any penguins - impossible! A journey to the Arctic without once setting eyes on the king of the Arctic - not for me! The premature onset of winter, which had surprised us on the north-west comer of Spitzbergen, had been responsible for this dilemma and thwarted our plans to sail round the island. The pack ice had sent us "packing", frostily closing its doors in the north and west and forcing us - without having achieved our goal- to turn back. But the

cradle of the polar bears is in the north-east! Just imagine my disappointment (in this instance it was, above all, my disappointment). After all, I do not only want to get to know sea and country, but, in particular, the native "inhabitants" ,in this case, polar bears and walruses (incidentally, we did not discover either). Although the cruise had been quite arduous for me, there was nothing I longed for more than to sail to Spitzbergen for a second time to make up for this - though this time in the Arctic summer. "If you say "A" for Arctic then you must be prepared to say "B" for bear," I growl. I object to Erich's not so seriously meant comment: 'But you had your polar bear.' He was referring to his theatrical performance in the middle of an ice floe. At home he had secretly organised a polar bear costume for himself, just in case we did not catch sight of any real live polar bears. Towards the end of the trip Erich kept his promise and took the crew for a ride. One of the members of crew acted out the "bear" scene brilliantly. Well, I did get the opportunity. Since it is best to leave for the Caribbean in the late autumn -to avoid the hurricane season - there was enough time after all to first make a "detour" - of over 6000 sea miles - to Spitzbergen. There were lots of hurdles to overcome first, in order to establish a reasonable distribution of time between hobby and profession. The yachtsmen in our family helped us. Erich's brother took Freydis to Tromso, the "gateway to the Arctic", and after our cruise around the island his brother-in-law brought her back from there. We had five weeks for Spitzbergen; five weeks to find the king of the Arctic in his icy realm. And so in the summer month of August, we set off from Tromso to try and sail, this time anticlockwise, round Svalbard, the land of the "cold coasts", as the Vikings called it. The ice reports in Tromso are anything but favourable, but fortunately out of date. When we arrive at the island of our hopes a week later, we only come across a few blocks of ice round the island. And we presume the polar bears, the ice and the seals - their favourite prey - have all moved up north to the edge of the pack ice; not a sign of them here anyway! That is what you think? We are well armed for all eventualities with a carbine 98, a so-called "bear killer" (Although the last thing 1 would want to do is kill bears!) and a heavy

magnum revolver which Marius swears by. He is a keen hunter, but a nice fellow all the same. 1 have enough to carry with my 16 mm camera. As a safeguard against bears I have a whistle hanging round my neck. Its shrill sound is supposed to frighten them off- at least, so I have read. In the densest of fogs we try to find our way across the col to the small Norwegian radio and weather station on the opposite side of the island, but without success. Instead we come across paw prints, the size of a plate, in the snow and soft morass several times. Undoubtedly, bears' tracks!

Imagine our astonishment, when Geir, the meteorologist from the weather station, later reports what happened at the small research hut, situated ten kilometres north of the station, shortly after we had passed it on our expedition in the fog. As Geir wanted to enter the hut a bear stood in his way, but luckily he was able to put it to flight by firing a blank cartridge. The bear had already broken into the hut and caused a certain amount of damage. Geir had thought it best to shoot the fugitive as it represented a constant threat to the hut and people in general. Geir admits: 'It was one of the saddest moments of my life. I love these animals very much and had hoped never to have to kill one of them. However, sometimes it is simply inevitable.' No food was found in the bear's stomach or intestines which indicates that it had been starving. Shortly after that, Svein, the radio operator, was forced to shoot another starving bear which had made its way into the station. A few bears still wander around on Hopen in the summer, the latecomers that missed the last ice floes drifting north. The terrible part is that they do not find anything to eat and have to starve. However, strong, healthy bears can survive for up to half a year, but due to a lack of seals with their high calorie blubber, they also attack people who are not normally an item on their menu. In Lonyearbyen on our first visit to Spitzbergen, Sysselmann gave us a brochure on rules of conduct in Spitzbergen, including warnings about polar bears. It read as follows: *'Beware! Bears attack without warning. Keep your distance' A hear that is a 100 metres away is already dangerous. Also, if a hear is hit from a distance of 20 metres, it is still in a position to kill the marksman.*

Bears are not necessarily aggressive hut very curious. If they are hungry or feel threatened, they will attack. Never lure hears with food or feed them from a ship. Never leave food near a tent.' Additionally, we were informed that the bear has been protected since 1976 and may only be shot in the case of self-defence. Prior to the hunting ban, any tourist visiting Spitzbergen was permitted to shoot bears, so long as he had the necessary petty cash. Consequently the numbers decreased alarmingly. This Nature Conservation Act was a circumpolar agreement, which is particularly important as polar bears are not concerned about national boundaries during the long distances they cover in the course of the year. All the same, between five and ten bears are shot every year as they threaten human lives. Several accidents in recent years have shown that bears always have to be reckoned with, even on the west coast where the research stations are located. In 1977 an Austrian alpinist, camping in the Magdalen Fjord, was killed, and in 1972 a Russian was attacked by a bear in Barentsburg. Although the Russian suffered serious facial injuries, he was able to put the bear to flight by poking his fingers into its eyes - a kind of last, desperate reaction. A rusty rifle, found by a Swedish expedition in a branch of the Konigs Fjord, is on display in the Svalbard Museum in Lonyearbyen, the northernmost museum in the world. Human bones were found lying next to it. A cartridge was lodged in the barrel. In 1921 the then well-known trapper Georg Nilsen was on his way from his winter hut to a weather station to spend Christmas there with friends. It is presumed that he was attacked by a bear and that his rifle failed to function. Geir shows us a very impressive film, which he made last February, about bears which passed the station in the winter. We also learn that, sometimes, up to 20 bears go past, down on the beach. The especially curious ones even come into the station grounds and investigate the instruments set up there. However the sledge-dogs, which, incidentally, mostly come from Greenland, usually drive away the unwelcome visitors rapidly. It is seldom that a dog is injured or, for that matter, killed by a bear, as the dogs are much faster and more agile. Geir: 'Before a bear turns round once, a dog has run round it three times.' There are

bears which are particularly audacious, he tells us, which do not let dogs chase them or even react to warning pistol shots. They then have to be shot like the one that Svein had to kill, or the one which in 1979 forced its way into the entrance of the station and whose magnificent skin - measuring 3.14 metres from head to tail - now decorates the wall in the day room. Svein, who used to be a trapper himself with an impressive "record of bears", shows me a half dilapidated log cabin near the station. 'Two Norwegian trappers spent the winter here in 1908. They set up several traps along the coast and shot 78 bears,' he reports. A similar trapper's cabin is situated on the shore of the bay we are anchored in. The strange wooden frame that looks like a butcher's bench, surrounded by a big pile of ungainly, big bones partly covered in greenish mould, is what is left of a bear trap. (A box-like contraption with the bait on wooden posts and an automatic firing device which is released as soon as the bear puts his head inside to get the bait - a piece of seal fat.) On Hopen we did not, it is true, catch a glimpse of a real live bear, but we were without doubt hard on his heels - or he on ours? The weather is good and the winds favourable, so we sail further north. The dark bank of cloud on the horizon, which we notice immediately when leaving the bay, turns out to be Edge Island. It is 50 sea miles away and separated from East Spitzbergen by the Stor Fjord. Once again it is hard to believe! The amazing visibility in the clean Arctic air leads us, as it has on many other previous occasions, to completely misjudge the distance. If we had not had a map we would have seriously miscalculated. As we sail into the wide Stor Fjord the areas of drifting ice become increasingly denser. It is like "open sesame", the ice floes part and let us pass - we must have done somebody a good turn. Sometimes, however, this path is so narrow that the ice thuds loudly and scrapes against the side of the ship or traps us for what seems like an eternity. We have to be constantly on the watch to avoid being jammed, encircled or put off course. Our thoughts are dominated by the worry that the pack ice may get denser still. In that case, we would have to turn round and try again in the west. 1 am dog-tired as I stand at the helm, trying to concentrate on the ice in

order to be in a position to avoid dangerous ice floes. Suddenly I am wide awake and have forgotten all my worries. There are some gulls ahead, flying up and down, again and again, over a particular spot as though they have found something to eat. The water also seems to be strangely ruffled. Filled with curiosity, I steer in that direction, and to my delight I soon recognise the round, bald heads and whiskers of three walruses, diving up and down, puffing, snorting and romping in the water, I dash below and fetch my video camera. In no time, Erich and all the crew are on deck. The colossal walruses repeatedly dive close to the ship, looking up at us with their big eyes as we lean right over the railing with our little black boxes, trying to take the best possible close-ups of them.

In past centuries, walruses were described as sea monsters of "demonic appearance". Despite their powerful "vampire-like teeth" the three fellows with their wrinkled, troll-like faces strike us as good natured and amusing creatures. They are evidently just in the middle of a tasty picnic on the seabed. It is amazing how elegantly these huge animals - the males grow up to 4 metres long weighing two tons - move in the water. The powerful ivory tusks, huge canine teeth, jut out like two daggers from their upper jaws. They make excellent "ice picks" with which the animals pull themselves up onto the ice; but they are mainly dangerous weapons which keep all natural enemies at bay. Even polar bears do not dare to approach them. And so we are back to the subject again: where are the bears? By midday we find ourselves in a calm. We are only able to cross the 78th parallel by using the engine. To starboard we are still passing Edge Island with its tabular, snow capped mountains, reminding one of white icing. On the port side, the mountain panorama of East Spitzbergen appears in the distance, so different from the west side of the island. While there the landscape is characterised by pointed, steep mountains, here the mountain tops have been ground flat by powerful glaciers. Through binoculars, we admire the waterfalls which plunge vertically down the furrowed rock faces into the deep. Sudden excitement on board. We have visitors in this godforsaken region. Two men with grey beards come along side Freydis in a rubber dinghy. They are

Dutch biologists who have moved into a hut near Kap Lee at the entrance to Freemansund to observe reindeer. The research results are intended to throw some light on the behaviour and development of reindeer populations, living where man has not interfered with their environment. The islands of Edge and Barents, the whole of North East Land and an adjacent part of North West Spitzbergen along the Hinlopen Strait form a nature reserve where everything is forbidden that could possibly be harmful to flora and fauna. One is neither allowed to mine coal, nor drill for oil. Planes may not land, motor sledges may not be used, houses may not be built and, of course, hunting is not permitted. For this reason, the area is simply a paradise for biologists, like the two Dutchmen, who have been spending their summers here for twenty years. I note that they are not armed. I then ask them if there are no bears on Edge Island? One of them answers: 'Oh yes, there are masses, but we get along fine without a rifle. We respect the bears and they respect us.' Their reaction to Erich's question, as to what might happen if the bears' hunger were to become greater than their respect, is merely to laugh and shrug their shoulders. They soon take their leave, as the weather conditions are ideal for their work. And we almost forget the most important question: 'What is the ice like in Freemansund?' - 'Good! Very little ice about,' resounds from a distance. Later on, we hear that both the biologists were attacked by a bear, but despite serious injuries were able get back to their hut where the bears beleaguered them for three days. As we turn into the Hinlopen Strait the sun is shining brightly, just as it has been for the last 72 hours now, day and night. We are surrounded by milky glacier water and greenish shimmering icebergs. From November to June the Hinlopen Strait is impassable, particularly at the narrow point in the north, due to the ice masses which pile up as in a funnel. There is no danger for us - not yet. Auks and storm petrels are swimming on the smooth sea. Large seals are taking a nap on the ice floes. They are not as gregarious as walruses; they tend to be loners. They are very shy, as are all the seals in the Arctic. (The opposite of the seals in the Antarctic, especially the good-natured Weddell seals.) Their fear of polar bears causes

them to be exceptionally wary. They cannot allow themselves to sleep as deeply as walruses. Hundreds of icebergs drift into the Hinlopen Strait from the enormous tongueing glaciers which front the south-east edge of North East Land. The ice is becoming more and more dense. Erich scours the ice floes with his binoculars. This territory - partly water, partly ice -is the hunting ground for polar bears. If we do not get to see any here, then where? I notice that I am not the only impatient one. Those off-duty ask to be woken at the slightest suspicion of a bear. It is midnight when we arrive at the wide entrance to 2the Wahlenberg Fjord, a 25 sea mile long inlet into North East Land. The fjord is absolutely crammed with icebergs and sea ice floes. The ice, frequently pressed together and piled up into curious shapes, pushes its way into the Hinlopen Strait. The setting sun pours its warm, golden rays over this magnificent white scenery. There - an ice floe which looks like a bloody battle field! On it are the remains of a dead seal: its hunter cannot be far away. And, indeed, there on a small ledge dozing peacefully: a large bear with a yellowish coat. Erich is so excited that there is almost no stopping him. He very nearly jumps onto the ice floe and hugs the bear. After all, we have waited long enough to see our first bear in its natural habitat. Whispering, we alert the rest of the crew who with unusual agility creep noiselessly onto the deck with their cameras. Only Marius stands with his pistol at the ready, just in case the bear should decide to jump from the ice floe onto the ship. Master Bruin sits up in a surly fashion and inspects us inquisitively. The flapping of the sail in the wind or the clicking and buzzing of our cameras has woken him. He feels uneasy. Being sensible, he jumps into the water and makes himself scarce. With shaking sails, but using the engine, Freydis catches up with him quickly. The bear with his slender, streamlined body and small, narrow head is a fast swimmer, but he cannot give Freydis the slip. If we get too close, he growls angrily. In the end he scales the nearest ice floe. There he hesitates, cranes his long neck forward and sniffs. We approach very slowly, but when we get within five metres, he takes off again. He walks with amazing skill and elegance over the uneven, sharp-edged ice, in order to plunge into the water

again on the other side. We veer away, we do not want to disturb him. After all, we are the intruders. And the bear? He swims back to the ice floe with the ravaged seal which, in the meantime, the gulls have been making the most of. They are, as scientists have found out, not only parasites, but they actually help the bears locate seals. They are then entitled to their share. I have achieved my goal, as regards, Spitzbergen and I fervently hope that the photos and film of our encounter with the king of the Arctic will turn out well. However, it is not to remain the only encounter. Ahead of us lies the narrow, northerly exit of the Hinlopen Strait, flanked on both sides by gigantic glaciers. In comparison to the west coast of Spitzbergen, the distinctly lower temperatures in the north-east, where hail and snow showers fall instead of rain even in the summer, have led to the formation of the largest glaciers in the region on the coast of Neufriesland and in North East Land. Banks of thick, white cloud hang along the ten sea mile long edge of the Walhalla glacier, the most extensive of all the glaciers in Swalbard. The pale sunlight makes the pack ice and the icebergs floating in front of it appear like a distant lunar landscape. We make very slow progress due to a counter current of 2 knots, but we are not unhappy about this, as we are not in a hurry. Moreover, we cannot imagine a more beautiful or rugged part of Spitsbergen than where we are at present - and we are taking our time and enjoying every minute of it. To crown it all, the "king" appears once again on the white stage, moving slowly and majestically across the ice floes, hardly a hundred metres away from us. Aboard Freydis it is all action again. We furl the sails hastily, so that they are not in the way in case we have to manoeuvre quickly. Using the engine we slowly approach the ice floe. When the bear notices us, he pauses and glances calmly over to us. He is larger than the first, and seems better built. He does not move over-hastily, everything about him appears deliberate and well co-ordinated. He turns around in a leisurely fashion, ambles over to the edge of the ice and swims to the nearest ice floe. As we follow close behind, we soon realise that we are dealing with an experienced and sly fellow who knows how to lose tiresome pursuers like ourselves. He dives down under

large ice floes and lures us, time and again, into blind alleys, until we finally end up in, for us, an impenetrable, white maze. Then with a certain air of arrogance, he watches how we give up our pursuit and withdraw, tacking with difficulty between the ice floes. He remains the winner. Having been swept away with enthusiasm for bears, we have not concerned ourselves with the weather which has been getting increasingly worse. Visibility is down to 50 metres. The sea is steaming round about us. We keep on colliding with ice. We can, in fact, only hope we do not get caught in the Hinlopen Strait which is like the eye of a needle. After numerous attempts and dead ends, we do succeed in passing through this barrier of ice. The Murchison Fjord lies ahead of us. We finally want to look for a resting place. While we steer between the many offshore islands, the weather clears up again somewhat, so that we find a place in the north which is, to some extent, protected from the wind and ice. Late in the evening, we anchor at 80°02 N, 18°28'E. We fling our arms around one another, absolutely content and happy with our voyage. After all, we had been allowed to play with bears, conquer the Hinlopen Strait, cross the 80th parallel, and if we want to, there are less than 600 miles to the North Pole!

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