WIND HORSE RIDES THE FJORDS OF SVALBARD TO 80 DEGREES NORTH.

Story and photography by Steve and Linda Dashew
It is 1930, a Norwegian summer time. We are located at 79.35 north latitude, a little over 600 miles from the North Pole. Behind us lie the Svalbard Islands, midway between northern Norway and Greenland. Our goal is 80 degrees north and the Arctic Pole. Behind us lie the Svalbard Islands, midway between northern Norway and Greenland. Our goal is 80 degrees north and the Arctic Pole.

Wind Horse, our FPB 83 motoryacht, is at idle, while we watch the weather and analyze the risk factors.

That you can get this close to the Pole is amazing. If we were in the Southern Hemisphere, we’d already be on the ice sheets of Antarctica at 65 degrees latitude. In Greenland, we’d have been stopped by pack ice hundreds of miles south, and Alaska’s Glacier Bay is 1,100 miles closer to the equator than our present position. But the west coasts of the Svalbard Islands are kissed with the remnants of the Gulf Stream, so this area is typically navigable—with a great deal of care—by the middle to the end of July.

Caution is the watchword. We are on our own. If there is a problem, we either sort it out ourselves, or suffer the consequences. There are no technicians to make service calls, nobody to rescue us if we set off the EPIRB. And if we make a mistake judging the weather, and become trapped by the ice pack, we are here, at best, until next summer.

Enveloped in the warm, dry cocoon of Wind Horse’s interior, surrounded by a tough metal hull with a double bottom, five watertight bulkheads, and 7/8-inch-thick windows, it is easy to lose touch with the reality of the far north. But we know the wind can quickly close the open leads through which we have surrounded by a tough metal hull with a double bottom, five watertight bulkheads, and 7/8-inch-thick windows, it is easy to lose touch with the reality of the far north. But we know the wind can quickly close the open leads through which we have

...enough diesel, we may travel up to 150 miles per day in calm weather conditions...
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While we are releasing the lashings, Joe is scanning for wildlife with his 14-power binoculars. The launching halyard is being wound around the electric winch when Joe shouts “Polar bear! He’s swimming across the fjord, just off the port bow, 100 yards off.”

We grab cameras and observe Mr. Bear cross the fjord. He paddles at an easy three knots, and we can’t help but admire his skill, which involves an inflatable with a bulky outboard. Had Joe not seen him, and had we launched the dinghy, one of us might not now be writing this story. Kicking up the shrubbery, the polar bear bear is not afraid to browse on the sides of the stricken sled, and leisurely proceeds up the steep mountain at a pace you could not duplicate if running flat on ground. At the summit he pauses and looks over his shoulder at us as if to say “next time.”

We’ve been close up and personal with Alaskan grizzlies, shared covers with cooties and humpback whales, and watched 24-foot crocodiles past our anchored yacht, but nothing we’ve seen in the past compares to being in the same fjord as a polar bear.

Our new friends, the rangers, are off counting reindeer (a subspecies of caribou) and we have Magdelena Fjord to ourselves. Joe is a little uncomfortable with the rocky terrain around the beach. He points out what good cover this would give a hungry polar bear, and even though there have been no sightings this summer, we head back.

Two weeks after our visit, three yachts are in Magdelena. One of them, Wind Horse, has lifted enough to tempt us farther north. The entire Polar ice pack is in constant motion, drifting with the wind and with currents around the perimeter of the pack, which can change position faster than you could row an inflatable.

The leads are still open, but the west wind has now increased to 15 knots, and though we’re tempted to push even closer, we are content with the rocky terrain around the beach. The new friends, the rangers, are off counting reindeer (a subspecies of caribou) and we have Magdelena Fjord to ourselves. Joe is a little uncomfortable with the rocky terrain around the beach. He points out what good cover this would give a hungry polar bear, and we are a quarter of a mile from the dinghy. Even though there have been no sightings this summer, we head back.

Until 20 years ago, you were not allowed to carry firearms when ashore. Now a deck of low clouds hangs over. There is ice pack to the west and northeast but it looks clear directly to the north. After 20 minutes—and a hearty meal of burritos, salad, and fruit—the fog has lifted enough to tempt us farther north.

The entire Polar ice pack is in constant motion, drifting with currents and wind. The same is true in the open leads in the ice around the perimeter of the pack, which can change position with disconcerting swiftness.

2020, POSITION 79.49.2N LATITUDE 012.22.1E LONGITUDE Jut 12.3 miles to go. The cloud ceiling has lifted to 2,000 feet and visibility has improved. But the west wind is increasing, now to 10 knots, and the ice leads ahead are open. We need four hours to get to 86 degrees, and back to this point, allowing for a zigzag course in the leads. If the ice builds much more we will have to turn back. But if it holds steady, we are probably okay.

Early this morning, we departed from Ny Alesund, a research village located at the site of a former coal mine. Nine countries have facilities here to study polar phenomena. During the summer, 200 hardy scientists call this home. There is a tiny harbor, partially protected by a small breakwater, into which Wind Horse barely fits. Ashore, there is a small store, museum, dormitories, a communal cafeteria, and research facilities. Ny Alesund also boasts the northernmost post office on the planet. This prescious description, however, does not do the justice to the ambiance.

Due to the bears’ migratory pattern, yachts visiting Svalbard rarely see polar bears. Ny Alesund is one arm of a complex of fjords known as Kongsfjorden. The glaciers in Kongsfjorden are active right now, and as the sun is shining, we carefully spring and warp our way out of Ny Alesund’s tiny harbor and head northwest. A couple of wondrous hours later we are among the bergs and icebergs of the Kongsfjorden. We have an unobstructed view of the beautiful fjord and the mountains beyond.

Polar bears move with seals, which in turn follow the ice pack. As fjord ice melts and the polar pack northward, this mammal finds food chain supports the ice. Bears who miss the ice retreat to the shore, where to the surviving the try to sustain on birds’ eggs, the odd seal, or, if lucky, on Detective (depending on perspective) the occasional hiker. They are intelligent hunters who carefully stalk their prey, going as far as to cover their black noses with snow to hide from seals. They are also good climbers, often emerging from the sea to take seals on the ice edge. And they can run 20 miles per hour for short distances.

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