

Elaine Prior paddled in the High Arctic in 2001. She wrote this story for the “West Australian” newspaper.

Sea Kayaking in the Norwegian High Arctic

Our challenge, as we eat, is to avoid becoming part of the food chain ourselves. With eyes peeled, we feast on cheese, crackers and chocolate washed down by orange juice and champagne. We have gained a vivid awareness of various stages of the food chain, and can easily visualise where we might fit into the picture. The region’s most feared predator tends to stalk prey on drift ice rather than when swimming, and swims more slowly than we paddle (or so we hoped – we don’t want to test it!), so we feel comfortable in our boats. Here, in the hunting grounds of the Lords of the Arctic, a small ice-floe is the ideal breakfast spot – water on all sides lets us keep watch for hungry polar bears.

The ice-floe lies in a tranquil lagoon, bordered by sheer ice cliffs glistening in the early morning sun. Several inquisitive ringed seals surface to investigate the five bright red and yellow kayaks invading their peaceful world. The gateway to this secret place is a surreal maze of aquamarine ice, fashioned by tides and sun to create intricate passages barely wider than our kayaks. A celebration with champagne chilled on ice! What a fantastic finale to our 11-day sea kayaking adventure in the High Arctic.

Svalbard lies half way between Norway and the North Pole. Longyearbyen, the capital, is about three hours by air from Oslo. There, in August, we board the Russian ice-strengthened mother ship the “*Polar Pioneer*”.

Smeerenburg, or “blubber town”, is our first excursion ashore. Here, on Amsterdamoya, a community of whalers lived and died on a bleak gravel spit in the 1600’s. After a short stroll past the remnants of blubber ovens and whalers’ graves, we familiarise ourselves with our plastic double kayaks. Whether relative novices or experienced paddlers, all ten kayakers are new to polar waters. Quick bracing practise, in case an unexpected wave threatens to capsize any of us, then it’s off for our first Arctic paddle. Al Bakker, our kayak guide, muses that here in the High Arctic are some of the smoothest waters he’s seen.

The polar bear equivalent of the “bush telegraph” must be effective, or maybe it is their well-developed sense of smell. At Parryoya a beached whale carcass, possibly a minke, has

attracted at least 20 bears. We are elated – this is a rare event for a normally solitary animal. Several bears sleep, splayed out on engorged bellies. Some chew blubber, another gnaws marrow from a huge bone.

Alkefjellet, a series of 80 metre high dolerite towers, is home to many thousands of breeding Brunnich's guillemots and kittiwakes. Arctic foxes prowl beneath, in search of an opportune meal. Paddling here, we feel under siege, as young guillemots taking their first flight plummet perilously towards us.

This year, the pack ice around Svalbard is surprisingly scarce – whether a sign of global warming or a statistical variation isn't clear. Venturing north, we find the ice edge only 495 miles from the North Pole itself. Dry-suits donned, excited kayakers glide between loosely drifting sheets of sea ice, listening to the "shoosh... shoosh..." as boats and paddles part the slushy grease ice. A stable floe is selected and there we stand, triumphant and crazy, on the Arctic ice cap itself!

Svalbard's once whale-rich waters supported exploitation on a grand scale in the 1600s and 1700s. At Ekongen, bowhead bones have been assembled into an impressive skeleton. Standing between its massive jaws gives an extraordinary feeling of scale. Suddenly the VHF radio breaks the Arctic silence, telling us that dinner is roast lamb and the chef is getting impatient – the five kilometre paddle back to the ship is definitely the fastest of our trip!

Paddling about ten times during our 1300 nautical mile voyage, we cover around 70 to 80 kilometres in our kayaks. We venture into rarely visited areas of the High Arctic wilderness and take sea kayaks into unknown territory. Reason indeed to celebrate our final paddle with champagne on ice!