



Not so grim up north

It is a bleak, icy Russian mining outpost that looks like it might be at the end of the earth. But the inhospitable wilderness of Barentsburg is home to a small community that actually seems rather glad to be there. **Gautier Deblonde** spent nine days photographing their lives. Report by **Joanna Kavenna**

No daylight for half the year, an average winter temperature of -16C and just one canteen for the whole town – the community in Barentsburg would seem to have few reasons to be cheerful

It could almost be Siberia. The icy mist; the rows of shabby, wind-lashed wooden buildings; the sallow, featureless apartment blocks; and the snow – greasy and stained black – standing in great drifts at the road edge; all are bleakly suggestive of Soviet times. Sounds carry eerily on the wind: smothered Russian voices, the clank of iron in the harbour and the endless whirring of mining machinery. But this town – barely a town, in fact, just a street and a coalmine and not much else – is a long way from Russia. This is Barentsburg, a lost Russian outpost. A mining community on the edge of the world.

It stands incongruously on the island of

Spitsbergen, part of the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard in the Barents Sea. Svalbard – meaning ‘cold coast’ – is one of the most beautiful and remote of lands, stretching between 74 and 81 degrees north, roughly two thirds of the way from northern Scotland to the North Pole.

The archipelago has been Norwegian territory since 1925. For the Norwegians, it is an Arctic dreamland, a grand and barren place where the mountains dominate the landscape like vast, crumbling sphinxes and the glaciers rise into huge blue walls, spilling ice into the sea.

Svalbard has a landmass of about 62,000

square kilometres, of which about 60 per cent is covered with ice. The human population is fewer than 3,000. Ring seals and walrus bask on icebergs, kittiwakes and guillemots gather on cliff-tops. Shabby Svalbard reindeer graze in broad, white valleys, and Arctic foxes scavenge under the cliffs. The few small settlements are dwarfed by ancient rocks, and the residents carry guns to protect themselves from polar bears, whose numbers equal the human population. It is a place of extremes: there is constant daylight from April to August, and constant night from November to February. In January, the mean temperature

is -16C (3F); in July, it is just 6C (43F). It is an inhospitable but carefully maintained wilderness and protected by strict environmental edicts.

The Norwegians on Spitsbergen tell you not to visit Barentsburg. It is a blight on the landscape, they say, a symbol of bad old Soviet disregard for nature. I have come to Spitsbergen to research a book about the mythical land of Thule, the Atlantis of the Arctic. In the main settlement of Longyearbyen, I ask people about Barentsburg, and the place seems to be built on rumours and mystery, just like Thule itself. I cannot resist a visit.

I travel by rusting ship from Longyearbyen, past



a line of jagged white mountains, their edges softened by snow. Only 25 miles separate Longyearbyen – a place of brightly coloured wooden houses, with a slick Radisson hotel and a modern university – from Barentsburg. Yet it feels like travelling into a different Arctic, with different rules. One of the Norwegians on the ship tells me that Barentsburg's Russian and Ukrainian colonists are always drunk, and that its only hotel is full of rats, and also that the town is a seething pit of violence.

'Don't step out at night,' he says. 'After dark, they all brawl on the streets. They're only here for strategic reasons; the coal is an excuse. The Russian government wants a base in the north west, somewhere not too far from the USA. It's the military that keeps them here.'

After we dock, he says, 'You won't want to stay long. Ring me when you want to come back. I'll expect your call soon.' He laughs as he turns the ship around.

Barentsburg is a grim, functional place with an air of brooding melancholy. At the harbour, there's an unwelcoming line of broken huts with shattered windows. Warped containers full of coal are stacked in messy piles, abandoned until the spring comes and the ships can collect them. On the walls of the older buildings are Soviet-style murals,



Life in the mining community offers few diversions, but the majority of workers are pleased to be here because of the wages. Most stay only a couple of years before returning home. **Far left** the entrance to the Barentsburg mine. **Left** the librarian, Alisa Sova

showing burly men exerting themselves for Mother Russia. Brooding over the town is a bust of Lenin, with a sign behind his head which reads 'Arctic coal', should anyone forget why they are here.

For thousands of years, Svalbard was unspoiled, unknown. Even after the first recorded arrival of the Dutch explorer Willem Barents in the late 16th century, the islands remained an icy no-man's-land for centuries. Gradually, the archipelago attracted Norwegian, Dutch, British and Russian hunters and trappers. In the late 19th century the coal miners came, and there have been, at various times since, British, American, Dutch, Swedish, Russian and Norwegian coal companies on Svalbard. Only the Norwegian and Russian firms remain.

Until recently there were two Russian mines on Svalbard – Pyramiden and Barentsburg. The former closed a few years ago, its coal no longer economically viable for the Russians. Its buildings still stand, deserted: a library, a theatre, a sports hall, a hotel, a nightclub with a mosaic portraying a polar scene: it has been left for tourists, an Arctic



ghost town. Barentsburg, established in 1932, is the last Russian settlement in the region. But its population is dwindling: in the 1980s, 1,200 people lived here; now there are about 600, on two-year contracts, who remain.

Barentsburg produced about 160,000 tons of coal last year; projections for this year are for about 120,000 tons. The Russians have been trying to find other resources in the area and a few years ago the Russian coal company in Barentsburg, Trust Arktikugol, applied for permission to search for oil in central Spitsbergen. The project is yet to receive the go-ahead, but with estimates that up to 25 per cent of the world's undiscovered gas and oil resources may be hidden beneath the Arctic ice, the Russians could be in Svalbard for some time.

The miners, blackened figures emerging from the darkness of the pit into the darkness of the afternoon, trudge silently along Barentsburg's main street. Their shift over, they are drawn towards the town's canteen by the smell of hot borsch. There's nowhere else to go; they are trapped in space, hemmed in by miles of ice. There are other amenities, though the inhabitants generally seem too weary to use them: a swimming-pool – empty – a hall, a library.

With the men busy underground, Barentsburg is



Clockwise from far left Shatohin Valery, a pig farmer. The community at Barentsburg tries to be as self-sufficient as possible; the canteen, where miners gather after work; the school canteen. Many families leave their children with relatives in Russia while they work at Barentsburg; a deserted room in the abandoned town of Pyramiden

run by women. The librarian, Alisa Sova, joined her husband here five months ago, leaving their seven-year-old daughter in the Ukraine with a relative. Maria Kincheerskaya, the chief accountant, has been here since 2000. Her contract expires this year, although she'd like to stay longer. Olga Jhimdalck, the headteacher of Barentsburg's tiny school, has been here for 18 months with her husband, the local surgeon. Alla Marko, who came here from the Ukraine to pay for her daughter's studies, runs the canteen which produces 500 meals a day. The community strives to be as self-sufficient as possible to reduce costs: Shatohin Valery runs a pig farm at the edge of the settlement which provides meat. Vegetables are grown in greenhouses nearby.

I'm relieved to find that there are no rats in the hotel – perhaps it's too cold for them. The bedclothes are clean and bright orange; the bathroom gloomy, but OK. Downstairs is a yellow-tiled bar,



decorated with faded pastel scenes of Barentsburg by Russian painters – everything is for sale. The woman serving in the bar tells me enthusiastically that I must visit the hotel shop. ‘We have lots of souvenirs,’ she says proudly, before telling me how much she loves it here. ‘The nature is very beautiful, yes, and I don’t really mind the winter.’ Does she travel much around Svalbard? ‘Oh, we’re too busy here,’ she says. ‘We don’t have so much time. My husband is a miner, and he works very hard. We’re here for two years, that’s all, so we have to make the most of it.’ Everyone I talk to in Barentsburg says the same thing: the wages are good (better than at home), and they are glad they are here. The majority of the residents are men. Some bring their wives, but it is rare for entire families to come.

Later that night, with the warnings of the Norwegian sailor ringing in my ears, I creep back down to the hotel bar, half expecting a mass brawl. It is completely deserted. The street outside is silent, except for a howling wind. A clear moon illuminates the mountains, and there are lights on in the residential blocks, as the miners prepare themselves for another long shift tomorrow.

Coal is still the driving purpose of Barentsburg, but tourism is now offering an alternative source of income. In the summer months, large cruise ships

on dream-tours of the remote Arctic stop for a couple of hours at Barentsburg, and there are day-trippers from Longyearbyen. You wonder what, besides grim fascination, makes them come. There isn’t much wildlife-spotting here, and the attractions are sparse: there is a shop called ‘Polar Star’ selling cut-price vodka, Russian dolls and Lenin badges, and a post office where you can send postcards with Russian stamps. There is a local museum, housing a collection of minerals, a reconstructed coalmine, and a gallery of paintings of miners. A central exhibit is a room full of stuffed animals, frozen in time like so much else here. A polar bear stares mournfully through glass eyes, paws raised impotently, mouth open in a silent growl. There is also a detailed history of the town; it makes you wonder what sort of future Barentsburg has.

There is a limited supply of coal, and there are growing concerns about environmental damage. Like the rest of the Arctic, Svalbard is already showing the effects of global warming. In the summer months, the sea ice around Svalbard becomes thinner each year, threatening the habitat of polar bears and other Arctic animals. A few miles north of Barentsburg is a scientific colony, Ny-Ålesund, where international researchers are busy studying the increasingly visible effects of global warming in the region. There is a post-

The museum in Barentsburg is one of the very few tourist attractions. Arctic cruise ships occasionally make quick visits to the community

apocalyptic feel to the place, and it seems appropriate that Norway recently revealed plans to build a ‘doomsday vault’ hewn out of a mountain on Spitsbergen, to store two million crop seeds to be used in the event of a global disaster.

After I leave Barentsburg and return to the relative civilisation of Longyearbyen, I find myself thinking about a poem painted on the wall of Alla Marko’s canteen. It promises that the experience of Barentsburg will stay with you for ever: ‘So, wherever you now travel/ On the threshold of any spring/ You will think of Arctic ways/ You will dream snowy dreams’. My dreams of Barentsburg are of dirty snow, battered buildings and hardy inhabitants eking out a way of life under almost impossible circumstances. But they linger all the same.

‘The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule’ by Joanna Kavenna (Penguin) is available from Telegraph Books for £8.99 plus 99p p&p. To order, call 0870-428 4112.

Gautier Deblonde’s trip was arranged by Cape Farewell, which brings together artists and scientists in the Arctic to address global warming (capefarewell.com)