Government hastily drafting new blueprint for Svalbard as Parliament begins Store Norske debate

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

With Longyearbyen anxiously awaiting word on a bailout to save its biggest employer, the Norwegian government has decided it needs to do a quick overhaul of what is its vision of the area's economic future.

An hour-long discussion about the challenges Svalbard is facing during a Parliament meeting last week revealed plenty of support for economic activity here and optimism about potential industries. But there was also general agreement the primary industry of coal mining has a short future – which some want ended sooner than later due to environmental impacts and the struggle to be economically viable.

Anders Anundsen, minister of Justice and Public Security, which has oversight of the archipelago, announced the Conservative-led

See BLUEPRINT, page 4

Getting a kick out of 'sledsharing'

Communal transport arrives
Svalbard style as 25 kicksleds go where bikes and cars can't

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

Being without wheels – which aren't always all that helpful in Longyearbyen – just got a bit easier.

Locals and visitors, especially students, are discovering the joys of cruising the town on 25 new kicksleds available free for the sharing. The sleds were strategically distributed in January, but are now more likely to be found at schools than stores.

"I think it's a very nice thing to do for us
See TRANSPORT, page 8

Burning ambition

Polarjazz aims for new musical and geographical boundaries with both local and global artists

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

Forget cigarette lighters. If you want to be a flamer at a concert in Svalbard you'd best bring a torch.

A lineup of almost entirely new offerings, including the free torches provided for a short hike to a refurbished mining warehouse for a first-ever concert there Saturday afternoon, will be featured during this year's Polarjazz festival starting Wednesday. The five-day event

See FESTIVAL, page 7
‘Gotta love how you’re the one on a leash’

An eight-foot-long “polar bear” confronts a poodle while wandering through the streets of London Jan. 27. The semi-animatronic bear costume was crafted by 19 Hollywood prop specialists using 90 square feet of fur and about 80 other types of materials. Two puppeteers guided the animal after five days of practice and studying real polar bear movements. The costume weighed about 20 kilos, compared to the 400 a real bear weighs. The tour was a publicity stunt for “Fortitude,” a new 12-episode TV series based in a town that’s Longyearbyen in all but name. The highly acclaimed and publicized series, which debuted Jan. 29, is airing on British and U.S. networks.

Random bits of the week’s weirdness:

You’d think overwhelming heat would be the last thing to worry about during the prolonged cold spell we’re having (a couple of blissful days in the middle of this week aside), but it turns out the Other New Burning Problem in Longyearbyen is still leaving many smoldering. Yet another fire caused by a person falling asleep with a no-longer-frozen pizza in the oven occurred Saturday, two days after the fire department reported it responded to a record number of alarms in 2014. The most recent incident occurred in an apartment complex with 36 units when the culprit came home from a party in the wee hours of the morning with the munchies, according to our counterpart publication responsible for All That Snooze That’s Fit To Print. Although “it was one of the blackest pizzas I’ve seen,” according to the fire chief, the worst damage was likely the ill-will of the culprit’s neighbors who were left standing out in the cold and the fines of about 11,000 kroner the perpetrator is facing. The fire department responded to 181 calls last year (compared to an average of about 145 since 2005), with 14 classified as fires or severe smoke situations. Of those, seven were caused by people – most or all drunk falling asleep with food cooking in the early morning hours. The phenomenon, for the benefit of our many visitors this weekend, is attributed to the closure last January of a pizza place that was the last remaining food option for folks after the pubs closed, forcing the hungry to fend for themselves … Of course, a proper and nutritious diet is essential, and it’s hard to think of better way to illustrate this than a study getting lots of exposure that shows polar bear penises are weakening due to eating food loaded with harmful additives. The study, published in Environmental Research, examined penis bone samples to determine their density and whether PCBs are affecting the results over time. They found high PCBs led to a “low baculum density” which, while we’re not exactly sure what that means, is certainly inclined to leave us feeling (even more) impotent … But the creatures remain fearsome for now, much to the relief and delight of people who depend on them for a living. No, not “junk scientists,” silly. Hollywood (and its foreign equivalents), which is on a tear these days when it comes to Svalbard-based entertainment where there’s always a fur factor. Among the latest is the bear-attacks-isolated-girls film "Operasjon Arktis" which, aside from "the cheesy freeze frame of the reunited family," screened to lots of positive publicity last week at the U.S. Sundance Film Festival.
Cast your eyes on...um, the art

Queen Sonja to attend opening of new art hall during second visit to Svalbard in two years

By MARK SABBATINI

Her Royal Majesty is about to experience a rather skewed redefinition of what it means to eyeball a glacier in Svalbard.

Queen Sonja will be among the guests of honor during the official opening Friday of the new Kunsthall Svalbard, featuring an opening exhibit of eclectic imagery and sounds built around the tale of an Arctic glacier.

The art hall in a 77-square-meter space behind the reception area of Svalbard Museum is a branch of the Northern Norway Art Museum. The queen, who is taking a previously scheduled personal trip to Svalbard with no public events scheduled as of Tuesday, accepted an invitation from the Tromsø-based museum museum to attend Friday’s invite-only opening.

“Obviously we think it’s an honor she is attending,” said Knut Ljøgodt, director of the museum.

Queen Sonja, a frequent participant in art events nationally and globally, visited Svalbard almost exactly two years ago for the debut of an exhibit of artistically altered photos she took during other visits to the archipelago.

A public reception for the opening, featuring Minister of Culture Thorhild Widvey, is scheduled at 5 p.m. Saturday. She will also be one of several guests making presentations during a breakfast seminar at 10 a.m. Sunday titled “Art and Society in the North.”

“Then it will be more open for discussion about what part art will play in the north,” Ljøgodt said.

The opening exhibit, “Glaciers” by U.S. artist Joan Jonas, is a video work featuring modernistic embellishments of a Lofoton glacier. The project is an interpretation of the novel "Under The Glacier" by Icelandic author Halldor Laxness, and the soundtrack features passages from the book and Sami joik lyrics.

There’s more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

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<th>Wednesday</th>
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<tr>
<td>Snow. NW winds to 45 km/h. High 0C (-7C wind chill), low -5C (-13C wind chill).</td>
<td>Snow. NE winds to 29 km/h. High 0C (-5C wind chill), low -14C (-21C wind chill).</td>
<td>Cloudy. SE winds to 32 km/h. High -20C (-25C wind chill), low -13C (-21C wind chill).</td>
<td>Cloudy. Variable winds to 32 km/h. High -17C (-24C wind chill), low -20C (-26C wind chill).</td>
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<td>24-hour darkness</td>
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Extended forecast: Sunday, cloudy, -19C (-25C), -21C (-28C), light 0:00h; Monday, p. cloudy, -21C (-27C), -23C (-28C), light 0:00h; Tuesday, p. cloudy, -19C (-25C), -23C (-28C), light 0:00h; Wednesday, p. cloudy, -19C (-25C), -20C (-27C), light 0:00h

Data provided by storm.no
Gov't turns dark into white

What the last paper found

Svalbard, much like now, went through dramatic changes during the first decade of the 21st century. But the government was feeling a lot more optimistic about them. The white paper drafted during 2008 and 2009 found "development of infrastructure and services in Long-yearbyen and Ny-Alesund has continued," prompting the government to also increase its budget for the area. The area was more diverse economically and socially, keeping with the goal of developing a family community rather than a "company town." Yet, the "company" was doing fine as coal mining made a big upturn after a decline during the 1990s.
More than 100 Longyearbyen residents, left, gather in the town square Wednesday during a two-hour national strike protesting proposed changes in labor regulations they say will result in longer hours and weaker worker protections. At top right, many of the protesters reconvene indoors at Fruene as temperatures of -20C cut their planned two-hour outdoor stay short. At bottom right, a notice at Avinor's website warns travelers to expect flight delays.

Exposing employees

Longyearbyen residents brave -20C cold during national strike over proposed new labor laws

By MARK SABBATINI

Considering how hard it is to find a job in Svalbard and the sacrifices often required of family members far away, Synnøve Polden says it doesn't seem fair to be able to fire people at will because they won't suddenly work longer for less pay.

"Those of us who come from foreign countries can be exploited," she said during a strike last Wednesday objecting to proposed changes in Norway’s Working Environment Act by the Conservative-led government. "It takes advantage of the weakest employees."

More than 100 Longyearbyen residents gathered outside in the central square at 2 p.m. for the nationwide strike by three of Norway's four labor organizations. Although many of the locals said they intended to remain outside in the -20C cold during the entire strike, most retreated indoors to cafes after about 30 minutes and by 3 p.m. the square was empty.

Strike organizers expressed concern the proposed labor law changes will result in more temporary employees working longer hours, more mandatory hours for permanent workers and more work on Sundays.

Polden said temporary workers face hardships beyond job insecurity, such as banks refusing to provide loans. Conservatives argue the changes will help businesses at a time when the country is facing severe economic challenges, but she said results of similar policies in other European countries have failed.

"Everything says this will not give the government what they want," she said.

Many of the local strikers are employees at Store Norske, where layoffs, worker concessions and more efficient operations are being embraced as the mining company struggles to survive a crisis brought on by low coal prices. But Anne Rakel Østli, a city government employee, said there's a big difference between the labor policy Store Norske has to follow and the proposed changes.

"You can't fire people overnight," she said.

The strike, which organizers claims drew 1.5 million participants, largely halted flights and public transportation on the mainland, along with some kindergartens that closed. But the impact in Svalbard was considerably less noticeable.

"There are no scheduled flights to the mainland (that day) since it’s Wednesday," said Svalbard Airport Manager Morten Ulsnes. "We only have the mail plane, which departs before the strike."

A flight carrying workers from Longyearbyen to Svea scheduled to take off shortly before the end of the strike was slightly delayed.

Labor organizations participating in the strike include the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, the Confederation of Vocational Unions, and the Confederation of Unions for Universities College Graduates.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

Oil blocking Norway's vision?

Critics: Offering 'Svalbard block' of sea to drillers counter to goal of keeping the archipelago 'quiet'

By MARK SABBATINI

Ensuring Svalbard remains a “quiet” area might be one of Norway’s main goals for the area, but opening what other countries are calling the “Svalbard block” to oil exploration is raising a bit of a ruckus, critics say.

Licensing rights to 57 areas in the Barents Sea, 34 of them in waters where borders with Russia have been disputed, were announced by the government late last month. Three of the parcels are above latitude 74 degrees north, roughly equal with Bjønøya, which both proponents and opponents of Norway’s drilling plans in the north said could be provocative.

"Norway should abstain from drilling in the areas immediately adjacent to the Russian border," Johan Barlindhaug, an Arctic oil analyst, told the Barents Observer. He said the activity could worsen already-strained East-West relationships.

But an article in Teknisk Ukeblad declares so far there has been "an international silence surrounding the announcement...confirming Norway's position on 'shell' around Svalbard."

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

Polar Institute hacked

The Norwegian Institute was the victim of a network-based intelligence operation, apparently by a foreign power, officials told TV2 this week.

The Norwegian Police Security Service confirmed the attack, but did not speculate which country may have been responsible.

Security assessments have stated the Arctic is a prime target for espionage activities, with Svalbard being among the most likely locations due to the large number of foreign and temporary residents. The NPI, which advises the Norwegian government and manages large amounts of vital data, acknowledged detecting firewall irregularities but did not know their cause.
Radical weight loss

Austfonna ice cap melting 25 times faster than 1995, loses 16 percent of depth in three years

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

It's only Europe's second-largest ice cap. Those of you living at least a meter or so above sea level probably have nothing to worry about. Unless other glaciers are also disintegrating freakishly elsewhere (oops).

The Austfonna ice sheet in northeast Svalbard is losing ice 25 times faster than 20 years ago, according to observations from eight satellites since 2010. The glacier, about 2,500 cubic kilometers in size, shrank about 50 meters in height between 2012 and 2014.

"What we see here is unusual because it has developed over such a long period of time, and appears to have started when ice began to thin and accelerate at the coast," said Andrew Shepherd, a University of Leeds professor who co-authored a study about the results, in a prepared statement.

The study, published Dec. 23, 2014, in the journal Geophysical Research Letters, notes the ice cap lost 16 percent of its depth during the past three years.

The most significant changes during the past five years occurred within the Basin-3 ice cap in the eastern part of the larger field. Basin-3 is surging forward rapidly, the first surge in 140 years, while also thinning quickly.

The researchers said they cannot state with certainty the reasons for the disintegration, although climate change is a likely cause. They are planning to study the impact of warming ocean currents since air temperatures in the immediate vicinity have remained relatively stable, in contrast to most of the Arctic where they're warming at twice the rate as the rest of the world.

"Whether or not the warmer ocean water and ice cap behavior are directly linked remains an unanswered question," Shepherd said. "Feeding the results into existing ice flow models may help us to shed light on the cause, and also improve predictions of global ice loss and sea level rise in the future."

The report is available free at tinyurl.com/pvhs8t.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

A midsummer's night scream

Distress cries of calving glacier in Svalbard help researchers track melt's causes and impacts

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

A recording of a tragic tale in a foreign language listeners struggle to comprehend the meaning of.

No, not a night at the opera, but the similarities are rife for researchers studying recordings of large-scale calving of Svalbard's Hansbreen ice front. The main theme centers around two compatible-yet-opposite voices concealing a mystery that may end in triumph or fatally harm.

"Understanding the sources of noise – and putting numbers on how loud ice can be, at what frequencies – will help many other people," wrote Philippe Blondel, a physics researcher at The University of Bath, in the official blog for the newly published study (tinyurl.com/n5sk4u8). "If glacier environments are very loud already, this might help assess how certain types of human activities will impact the environment."

The five-member international team monitored the glacier on three days in late August of 2013. Using microphones to record underwater calving and time-lapse photography to observe changes above the surface (with the mics recording the impact), determined each type of detachment has distinct characteristics.

"For example, submarine cracks are most likely preceded by underwater cracks and disintegrations," a summary of the study notes. "Typical subaerial calvings, in turn, are generally followed by small detachments, but there no audible cracks underwater."

The results allowed the researchers to more accurately determine how much ice is breaking off and thus contributing to the rise in the global sea level.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

Cruise ship passengers, at left, observe a few of the meltwater rivers flowing from the Austfonna ice cap. Above, satellite images show changes in the ice since 2010 (elevation has dropped in the red areas).
Polarjazz schedule

**Wednesday**
8 p.m.: Vorspiel (warm-up) show by various local musicians. Radisson.

**Thursday**
8 p.m.: Vidar Johnsen; Violet Road. Radisson.

**Friday**
8 p.m.: Emilie Nicolas; Bugge Wesseltoft & the Organ Club. Radisson. Followed by Solid Comfort in Barentz Pub until 3 a.m.

**Saturday**
1 p.m.: Nora Konstanse. Kroa.
4 p.m.: Free bus from Lompensenteret to Huset, where torches will be available for walk to concert at Gruvelageret.
5 p.m.: Nina & The Butterfly Fish. Gruvelageret.
6:30 p.m.: Free bus from Huset to city center.
8 p.m.: Årstíðir; Bo Kaspers Orkester; Morten Abel. Radisson.
10 p.m.: Solid Comfort, followed by open jam session. Karlswerger Pub.

**Sunday**
7 p.m.: Svalbard Kirkes Trio: Premier of "Svalbardmesse." Svalbard Church.

Tickets
Festival pass: 1,500 kr. Good for all shows Wed.-Sat. except Nina & The Butterfly Fish and Solid Comfort.
Passholders may enter Radisson shows one hour in advance, but must enter with regular ticketholders afterward.

Individual shows: Vorspiel. 150 kr.; Thursday and Friday evening concerts, sold out; Saturday evening concerts, sold out; Solid Comfort, 100 kr.; Svalbard Kirkes Trio, 100 kr.

Online purchase of most tickets and other festival information is available at polarjazz.no.

And for a change of pace...
A free performance of Edvard Grieg's "String Quartet No. 1 in G minor" featuring Henning Kraggerud, described as one of Norway's best violinists, is scheduled at 3 p.m. Saturday at the Kulturhuset Café.

Kraggerud will lead a quartet of visiting members from the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic Orchestra.

The piece is the famed Norwegian composer's only known completed string quartet work, which he described as "not intended to bring trivialities to market. It strives towards breadth, soaring flight and above all resonance for the instruments for which it is written."

The quartet is also scheduled to perform at the public opening of the new Kunsthall Svalbard at 5 p.m. Saturday.
Cold no sweat for nakedly ambitious

Freestyle race, photo tour, swim and sauna offer outsiders an alternative during artsy weekend

By MARK SABBATINI

Editor

Just because its -25C doesn’t mean you have to wimp out at a swanky concert or art hall gala instead of going to the beach for a swim.

A weekend filled with arts events is also offering plenty for those into the extreme outdoors – with bitter cold and winds providing the extreme – including an annual free-for-all race, a ski and photo tour, and a beachside tent sauna for those braving the waters.

The Spitsbergen Up And Down, starting in Nybyen at noon Sunday is a three-hour "photo safari" ski tour of the surrounding area. Those craving an even more leisurely – if not entirely relaxing – afternoon can participate in the Spitsbergen Hot and Cold sauna and swim gathering at the beach next to the Svalbard Sailing Club.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

Sledsharing brings green in wintertime

TRANSPORT, from page 1

students and schoolchildren who don’t have the opportunity to take the bus,” said Sivert Krystad, 28, at student The University Centre in Svalbard who was helping his friend Stig Lunde escort a kicksled with a large package from the post office to Nybyen.

The kicksleds were made possible by a 100,000-kroner grant to Svalbard from the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund. last fall. The sleds are painted a distinctive green and are fitted with a sign explaining the rules of sharing (in Norwegian).

"We chose the largest and most robust kicksleds," wrote Trine Krystad, the project's manager, in an e-mail interview.

Several sleds have been spotted in relatively abandoned areas and/or with damaged signs during the month they’ve been in use, but Krystad said so far the sleds are holding up and it appears people are respecting the rules.

One concern, Krystad said, is the city frequently needs to spread gravel on roads due to ice, which hinders the sleds.

Kicksled sharing is not a new concept, with Krystad noting they’re available in a handful of other Norwegian communities. There’s more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

What's online

Icepeople.net provides daily updates of news about Svalbard and the world’s polar regions, plus extras for articles from the print edition. Among the latest news:

- North Norway-Russia traffic down a third
- Climate turning Iceland into a trampoline
- Saving underwater robots in Antarctica
- 1,700 private jets fly to climate summit