Return of short- and long-time Svalbard residents cause for killing the fattened riff at Polarjazz festival

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

Spend 18 months writing a complex Mass and then bring in a handful of musicians to learn it during a week they're busy with other projects? Challenging, certainly, but it's not like trying to bring peace to the Middle East. Leif Magne Helgesen would know. The priest at Svalbard Church returned home in January after spending the last three months of 2014 in the West Bank helping Palestinians and protesting illegal Israeli settlements. As if that wasn't enough challenge (and controversy) to take on right before the premier of his sacred suite, he also debuted a new book about the ethics of climate change three days before the show.

"It was a bit rushed this week," he acknowledged of the rehearsals. But the performance of "Svalbardmesse" by the Svalbard Kirkes Trio and three guest instrumentalists at the church brought this year's Polarjazz festival to a blessed end Sunday.

See FESTIVAL, page 6

Minding the art

Tiny new museum offers a vision for the future, backers say

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

As with most art, it's about more than meets the naked eye. Physically, it's a nearly empty meeting room with a video screen, a TV and a few small black-and-white paintings on one of the walls. But art lovers from Queen Sonja on down are calling it a profound statement about Longyearbyen’s future place in the world.

"By establishing a branch here, the Northern Norway Art Museum has created the northernmost art museum in the world," the queen said during an official opening ceremony Friday night. "And an exciting and inspiring place in this beautiful and dramatic landscape."

The 77-square-meter room behind the reception desk at Svalbard Museum looks more like an add-on to the historical museum than an attraction likely to draw visitors on its own. But it is actually the first branch of the Northern Norway Art Museum.

See KUNSTHALL, page 4
Who's to blame and how to express your wrath

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Corrections policy
When we screw up you'll know about it – on the front page. One of the big complaints about newspapers is they tend to bury corrections and clarifications deep inside where few people who read the original article see them. If we need to fix something, an alert box on the front page will state what story is in error and where the full correction is printed.

Submitting material
Letters, columns, photos and other material are welcome, but we can't offer pay for published items since nobody here is getting paid at the moment. Submissions in electronic form (text, Word documents, JPEGs, etc.) are highly preferred, although typing and/or scanning of items will be considered on a per-case basis. We reserve the right to edit submissions for length, clarity, accuracy, libel and other reasons, but we will also make every reasonable effort to contact the author about any changes prior to publication.

Hopen to see the sun again soon

A polar bear wandering near the Hopen Meteorological Station on Feb. 10 is among the first lifetimes to see the sun return to Svalbard after the three-and-a-half-month polar night. Bjørn Ove Finseth, a researcher at the Polish weather station, wrote on the station's official blog (http://hopenmeteor.no) that both the bear and the sun were spotted at about 11:30 a.m. The first sunrise in Longyearbyen will be Sunday, although the surrounding mountains means the first rays of sunshine won't reach most of the city until early March.

Random bits of the week's weirdness:

With foreign spying in Svalbard once again a thing in the news, it seems only fair some prominent locals are turning the tables on visitors by monitoring their every move. Svalbardutikken, which installed a few cameras and theft-protection scanners two years ago to combat a proliferation of shoplifting that thrived primarily during cruise ship season, is going all-out this week with lots more cameras and a video screen at the entrance that ensures all shoppers can see themselves as the star of the show. Call it a hunch, but we're guessing the overwhelming madness of the crowds arriving for next month's solar eclipse was more than a mild factor. Aside from the fact a lot of folks might feel the need to pinch pennies because they're paying 20,000 kroner a night for a place to stay, the fact they could be facing Soviet-era lines at the cash registers might make them think about the advantages of trying to sneak out undetected in the melee … And speaking of bad ideas for visitors during the eclipse, The Guardian was full of them in an article last Sunday about coming here to observe the March 20 event. Among the classic howlers is suggesting places to stay for as little as £90, with no mention ever of the extreme environment, treating the locals – especially kids – like zoo animals to be gawked at, wandering uninvited into people’s homes too (see how the locals live, etc.) … Still, at least the British were nicer than a write-up in the U.S. publication Western Journalism (at tinyurl.com/1zqs52) titled "Pictures: See The Truth Behind The Land That Obama Is Desperately Trying To Keep Oil Drills Out Of." Svalbard gets largely blown off since cars are useless, "but there are a lot of great sights to see, including this detached head" of Lenin in Pyramiden.

Get some real dirt on icepeople!

Our global headquarters available for rent during the March 20 eclipse! Sleeps three on actual furnishings (double bed and sofa), plus a few can squeeze in on the floor. Washing machine, turbo wi-fi and about a 5-10 minute walk to most places. Plus, you'll be helping provide our pitiful little newspaper with desperately needed funds. Contact marksabbatini@yahoo.com for details.
**Revising a ghost in 120 hours**

2,700 people worldwide vie for the best way of ‘Preserving Pyramiden’ in five-day contest

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

It took the Russians 120 months and buckloads of money to make a bit of progress in Pyramiden. A handful of student volunteers are hoping to surpass that in 120 hours.

It'll be a theoretical rather than physical re-making of the world's northernmost ghost town, however, even though the students have enticed 2,700 people to pitch in on the effort. The participants are detailing their “radical ideas” for preserving the abandoned Russian mining community of Pyramiden, which is now a tourist attraction.

“Whatever concept the contest winner comes up with probably won't be used by Trust Arktikugol, the Russian state-owned company responsible for oversight of the settlement. The Russians’ long-planned vision for the area aside, the contest also ignores certain practical requirements like the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act.

"This is the first time we are using an area off the mainland and with a more complex political background," wrote Helene Offer-Ohlsen, a student and contest organizer at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, which started the event in 2010, in an e-mail interview. "The feedback we have received to far has only been positive, so it seems like people found the site very engaging to work with."

"Another reason for our choice was related to the theme of this year: experimental preservation. We were looking for a place that could start a discussion about preservation."

Pyramiden, founded by Sweden in 1910 and sold to Russia in 1927, was a coal mining hub for decades with more than 1,000 residents at its peak. Mining came to a halt in 1998 and efforts to revive it as a tourist destination began nearly a decade later, but dragged on far longer and at greater cost than expected. The refurbished Tulip hotel finally opened last March and Russia is now planning to place a small research facility there as a satellite to a future science center in Barentsburg.

Tourist w/ only a sleeping bag for -20C night hospitalized

A Ukrainian man was hospitalized with a frozen hand Saturday after trying to camp out east of Nybyen with nothing more than a sleeping bag and a compass in temperatures of about -20C, according to The Governor of Svalbard. "During nighttime one hand had come out of the bag so that he had gotten frostbite," said Irene Sætermoen, a police chief inspector for the governor. A friend brought the man back to Longyearbyen on a snowmobile and he was flown to University Hospital of North Norway in Tromsø for treatment. Sætermoen said the man, making his first visit to Svalbard, also did not have proper clothing or equipment for the trip.

**Weather forecast for Longyearbyen**

Wednesday: Snow. W winds to 18 km/h. High -19C (-25C wind chill), low -22C (-28C wind chill).

Thursday: Snow. SW winds to 15 km/h. High -16C (-22C wind chill), low -18C (-25C wind chill).

Friday: Cloudy. S winds to 18 km/h. High -17C (-23C wind chill), low -22C (-29C wind chill).

Saturday: Cloudy. Variable winds to 18 km/h. High -15C (-21C wind chill), low -22C (-29C wind chill).

**Avalanche warning system sought after fatal snow slide**

Establishing an avalanche warning system in Longyearbyen similar to a program on the mainland is being initiated after a man was killed by a large snow slide near town Jan. 24. The University Centre in Svalbard, Longyearbyen Red Cross and tourism companies are working to collect data for the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate, which maintains a nationwide warning system and database. Rune Engeset, a sector manager for the directorate, said it must shown comprehensive and accurate data can be collected daily before Longyearbyen is added to the system, but in the meantime reports about conditions submitted by observers are available at regobs.no. Engeset said he is also hoping to include the area around Pyramiden in the agency’s warning system.

**More layoffs at Store Norske subcontractors due to crisis**

The impact of the Store Norske crisis is continuing to affect other local companies, as AF Arctic and Sodexo announced they have laid off a total of 19 employees at Svea. AF Arctic, which provides transportation and road maintenance, cut 15 of its 50 employees. Sodexo, which provides catering, trimmed four from its staff of 22 at the coal mine. Store Norske is also continuing to renegotiate terms with subcontractors such as AF Arctic.
Big hopes for small space

KUNSTHALL, from page 1

of what the Tromsø-based art museum says is meant to be multiple branches across northern Norway – and the main art museum got off to a similar start in a single room 30 years ago.

"Thirty years ago people wondered 'What's the point of doing this museum here?'" said Knut Ljøgodt, director of the Tromsø museum. "It was very small. It was probably impossible to see how it would develop. Perhaps in a way this is also a historical moment where we're witnessing a modest beginning with the Kunsthall here."

"It's not just about this space. It's about the idea. Let's hope it doesn't take us 30 years to have more space."

Beyond the physical space, museum and other officials are hoping the new branch will lure more artists to Svalbard through a residency program. Such residencies are already offered for three-months for up to three artists at Galleri Svalbard, but the museum's intent is to offer a higher profile and funding.

"Hopefully the Museum of Northern Norway can help provide the higher-ranking artists with better conditions than we can," said Jan Martin Berg, manager of Galleri Svalbard. He said the gallery's approach is essentially "you're welcome, but you have to manage yourself."

The remarks were made during a forum at the new museum on Sunday discussing art and its role in the Arctic. Ljøgodt told the audience of about 30 people that artists have the opportunity to collaborate with a unique variety of societal elements in Svalbard due to the political, scientific and other activities here.

"One possibility that's very interesting is increased tourism to Svalbard," he said. With an emphasis on art "I think we will have more and quality tourism in Svalbard, not just mass tourism."

Such offerings can play a vital role with Longyearbyen going through major economic as well as social changes due to a prolonged coal price slump that has resulted in steep cutbacks at Store Norske and other mining-related companies.

"We know Svalbard is in crisis because of industry," Ljøgodt said. "I think that is where art can enter into the equation and play a favorable role for change."

Svalbard's pristine environment has also made it an ideal setting for certain controversial art projects, including an "army" made of trash that was deployed in Adventdalen in 2011 and a "rubbish hut" built on a beach in Longyearbyen last summer. The hut, initially scheduled to be taken down last October, is still standing and during Sunday's seminar people gathered outside it for a beach fire/swim/sauna party.

Katya Garcia-Anthon, director of Norway's Office of Contemporary Art, said "history tells us the north has always been provocative, a desire to cross abyss at edge of the north and what lays beyond." The new Svalbard museum and residencies, she said, should look beyond tradition art boundaries when selecting projects.

"I would favor something more along the lines of research and reflection, symposiums, texts, lectures or publications," she said.

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

U.S. Embassy officials scout out Svalbard, envision bigger role as country heads Arctic Council

By MARK SABBATINI

Remember that other Cold War superpower? It turns out we'll probably be seeing a lot more of them in the near future as well.

While Russia is making aggressive military and economic pushes north (and China works to broaden its Arctic footprint), the United States is ascending to an actual leadership position in the region as it will become the head of the Arctic Council for two years beginning in April. A two-person delegation from the U.S. Embassy in Oslo visited Longyearbyen last week to, among other things, get a preview of the issues the U.S. will face in Svalbard and northern Norway.

"I think we'll have a number of senior U.S. officials paying visits," said Julie Furuta-Toy, the embassy's chargé d'affaires. She said Tromsø will likely be the primary destination, but she also wants to emphasize Svalbard.

It's been 15 years since the U.S. led the eight-nation council and Svalbard, along with the rest of the Arctic, has undergone drastic changes during that time. Climate change is now a dominant international issue, with numerous high-ranking U.S. officials and politicians visiting the archipelago during the past several years to see the impacts firsthand.

"Coming up here is also an opportunity to see how Norway handles its Arctic," Furuta-Toy said.

Some U.S. politicians and officials have cited Norway as a model for balancing development of resources such as oil and environmental preservation.

The main purpose of the visit was far less political, as the embassy representatives were among the guests of honor at the official opening of Kunsthall Svalbard last Friday. A U.S. resident, Joan Jonas, is the museum's first featured artist.

'Oh, there's a chance that sort of thing makes you shiver, bourgeois! You're done with!'

REPORT: Soviets planned Svalbard invasion in 1978

The Soviet Union was secretly preparing an invasion of Svalbard in mid-1978, plans which were thwarted when a plane carrying weapons and film crashed at Hopen and was found by researchers there, according to an article in the network's magazine (computer-translated version at tinyurl.com/l7vkujm).

Arne Prytz Larsen, a researcher at the Institute for Peace Research, told NRK he explored the area with a colleague two days later and found the wrecked plane with Cyrillic lettering. The crash was published in newspapers the next day, but the purpose of the flight and cause of the accident remain a mystery.

But Furuta-Toy also met with a few top officials, including Lt. Gov. Jens Olav Sæther to discuss emergency rescue capabilities in the area in the event of an incident such as a cruise ship accident, since a large increase in tourism in recent years makes it likely U.S. citizens will be on board.

"On a scale from one to 10 I would say a seven," she said. "I think the skill levels of the people here are very high, but there aren't a lot of people around if there is a major accident."

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.
Finn Sletten, left, and Bjørn Jensen, exchange drum solos during a Friday night Polarjazz concert by Bugge Wesseltoft & the Organ Club at the Radisson Blu Polar Hotel. Sletten grew up in Ny-Ålesund and was hoping to perform the festival’s first-ever concert in the international research community, but bad weather forced the cancellation of the show. He has been a jazz drummer since 1972.

Festival organizers were hoping to send the band to Sletten’s childhood hometown for a first-ever Polarjazz concert there Saturday, but were thwarted by bad weather. It was one of two festival shows scheduled outside Longyearbyen, as yet another wayward local – Ragnar Ólafsson, a former student at The University Centre in Svalbard – returned after seven years as a member of the Icelandic band Árstíðir for a Friday night concert in Barentsburg.

"It was in Svalbard I found out I could sing," the vocalist/keyboardist told the audience during a show in Longyearbyen the following night. He said his first gig was for a Store Norske Christmas party that got a little wild.

"I liked it so much I took off my shirt and started crawling on the floor like I’ve seen singers do, and I’ve been doing it ever since," he said. "I’ve been waiting seven years for a chance to apologize. I’m here to try to make up for it, pay some dues."

While Ólafsson said afterward his hands were shaking during the first couple of songs because he was nervous about returning to play in front of his friends from UNIS (and his parents, who are instructors there), Sletten said playing a couple of vastly different gigs on-the-fly was just part of the job. The drummer has played with a wide variety of mostly jazz bands since 1972 and in 2009 was awarded the biennial Stubøprisen, the highest honor given to a northern Norwegian jazz musician, for being "a significant pioneer and source of inspiration for several generations" of musicians.

Sletten, now living in his birthtown of Bodø, has returned to Svalbard regularly to perform concerts since 1986, when he “was hired to play in the kindergarten with a person who was signing.” He said he hopes to return during next year’s Polarjazz and play in Ny-Ålesund, which
The Bo Kaspers Orkester plays a rock/funk set Saturday at Kulturhuset. The final multi-concert night was moved from the Radisson to the performing arts center because of its larger capacity.

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

- U.S. facing decades of megadroughts
- Fight climate change w/ geoengineering?
- UN goals set for Paris climate summit
- Icelandic foxes look for love In Norway

Heavy snow, hurricane-force winds in some areas Sunday, followed by heavy rain Monday

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

A storm expected to arrive in Longyearbyen early Sunday morning will bring heavy snow and winds of up to 75 km/h through Monday morning, after which a day-long warming spell is expected to result in heavy rain followed by more snow on Tuesday.

Conditions in some other parts of Svalbard, especially the southwest coast, are forecast to be considerably worse, with winds exceeding 115 km/h. The Hinlopenstretet passage between Spitzbergen and Nordaustlandet is also expected to be unsafe.

"So far the forecasts about this development have been consistent," The Governor of Svalbard stated in an advisory issued Friday. "The governor urges everyone who planned on taking tours to take account of this notification."

The storm is the result of a strong low-pressure system passing northeast of Framstredet, according to the Norwegian Meteorological Institute in Tromsø. The highest winds and largest amounts of precipitation are expected during a 12-hour period beginning at about noon Sunday.

Temperatures in Longyearbyen are forecast to be below minus 20 degrees Celsius when the storm hits, but gradually rise to above freezing by Monday morning.

The high winds and snow will mean poor visibility and deep snowdrifts, while the subsequent rain is likely to result in flooding, possible washouts, avalanche danger and exceedingly slippery surfaces. Cancellation of at least some passenger and mail flights Sunday and Monday is likely. There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

LATE ALERT: Major storm expected

A map from the Norwegian Meteorological Institute in Tromsø shows hurricane-force winds are expected to reach the southwest coast of Svalbard by midday Sunday. Gale-force winds are expected in Longyearbyen at least through Sunday night, along with heavy snow turning to rain.

What's up

Feb. 10
7 p.m.: Evening Mass and fireplace social. Svalbard Church.

Feb. 12
7 p.m.: Longyearbyen Community Council meeting. Næringsbygget 3, Newtonstopen room.

Feb. 14
1 p.m.: Movie: "Night at the Museum 3: Secret of the Tomb," U.S. comedy/adventure w/ Norwegian subtitles, ages 7 and up. Kulturhuset.

Feb. 15
11 a.m.: Carnival liturgy, costumes welcomed. Svalbard Church.
7:30 p.m.: Concert by Siri Nilsen, Norwegian folk/pop singer. Kulturhuset.

Feb. 16
4 p.m.: Meeting for youths interested in participating in UKM Svalbard talent competition. Kulturhuset.
8 p.m.: Trivia quiz. Barentz Pub.

Feb. 17
7 p.m.: Evening Mass and fireplace social.

Feb. 22
11 a.m.: Mass. Svalbard Church.
3 p.m.: UKM Svalbard. Local stage of annual national youth talent competition. Kuturhuset.

Feb. 23
8 p.m.: Trivia quiz. Barentz Pub.

Feb. 24
7 p.m.: Candlelight Mass w/ candidates for Confirmation. Svalbard Church.

Feb. 25

What's online

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