



Getting the short end of tourism

30 percent drop worse than many destinations and recoveries seen elsewhere may be farther away

The good news: Many places with more tourists this year are recovering from wars and terrorism. And lots of areas having a bad year are going through similar turmoil or other disasters such as the swine flu epidemic.

The bad news: Svalbard's 30 percent drop in visitors during the first six months of 2009 is among the highest of locations surveyed worldwide and the recovery many other places expect during the rest of the year is unlikely to happen as the polar night sets in here.

Still, numbers don't always tell the full story. Svalbard's decline is partially a return to a normal curve after landmark events caused a sharp upward spike in 2008. Also, total "guest days" are down a somewhat less severe 20 percent.

Some tour operators say they haven't seen a



See TOURISM page 4 A lone tourist gets her bearings Monday at the main road intersection in Longyearbyen.

Arctic Circle of life



A polar bear and a flock of Glaucous Gulls feast on a whale in Magdalenefjorden the morning of July 31. Photo by Heiko Kühr, expedition leader of the *MS Expedition* for Spitsbergen Travel.

Young, wise, wealthy and scooter nuts

'This Is Svalbard' says locals work harder, spend more, are outnumbered by snowmobiles

High income, low crime and more than one snowmobile in every garage. What more could a person want?

Maybe a garage, for starters.

Svalbard offers an idyllic life compared to mainland Norway in many ways, although

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50 years later, the map has changed

Rescuer, mapper and mailman returns on less dramatic mission

Fifty years after literally putting Svalbard on the map, Bjoern Kraby Svendsen says the landscape has changed.

Back in the day, photographing the Svalbard coastline was just a side occupation to evacuating miners who'd lost their legs and winter dwellers who'd lost their minds. There was also the mail run, air-dropping supplies to field researchers and occasional need to bail out when engine failure caused a crash at sea.

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Bjoern Kraby Svendsen takes a coffee break while touring the area he patrolled 50 years ago.

Who's to blame and how to express your wrath

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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.

Cheap housing means more recreation

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residents working harder and sacrifice a few things like houses and family members in exchange, according to a newly published profile of the area by Statistics Norway.

Not much in "This is Svalbard," available free in Norwegian and English at www.ssb.no/this_is_svalbard, is likely to surprise locals. But it affirms the pristine archipelago (albeit with warming temperatures and melting glaciers) is best appreciated by people who are a little bit different.

Such as how its 2,600 inhabitants prefer to get around.

"There are more snowscooters in Longyearbyen than residents (2,672 registered snowscooters in 2008) and 69 percent of households on Svalbard have one or more snowscooters," the report notes. "In comparison, only 49 percent of households have a car."

Makes some sense for an isolated town with only 50 kilometers of roads, especially since most people can't keep vehicles out of the elements during the polar night.

"Of Longyearbyen's 1,200 houses, only 5 percent are detached or semi-detached," the report notes, adding only about 10 percent of residents own homes since employers generally provide subsidized housing. Dwellings are also relatively small but, on the positive side, housing and heating account for about half as much of residents' total expenditures compared to the mainland.

Also, it's not like residents are coming to be homebodies.

"People settle in the archipelago because, among other reasons, they want to earn good money," the report notes. "Those employed in the coal mines certainly do a lot of work; each Store Norske employee performs on average 1.25 man-years of labour."

With an income 40 percent higher than mainland residents and almost tax-free goods, all that money has to be spent somewhere.

"An average mainland Norwegian household spends NOK 43,000 on leisure and cultural activities over a year, while the figure for Longyearbyen is NOK 80,000," according to the report. "For couples without children on Svalbard, culture/leisure is generally their greatest item of expenditure and swallows NOK 127,000 of their annual budget."

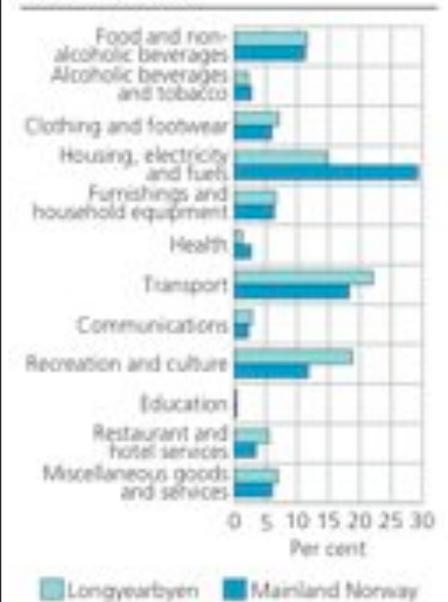
There's a high ratio of people ages 25 to 44 and "an almost total absence of anyone over 66 years of age" in Svalbard compared to the mainland. Children are somewhat fewer in number, but "the age group of 13- to 19-year-olds is notably small; perhaps Svalbard is not a place to attract teenagers?"

Seven out of 10 Svalbard households are single-person compared to four in 10 on the mainland. Males continue their historical dominance, representing 60 percent of Svalbard's population, but the lone dwellers aren't all eligible bachelors.

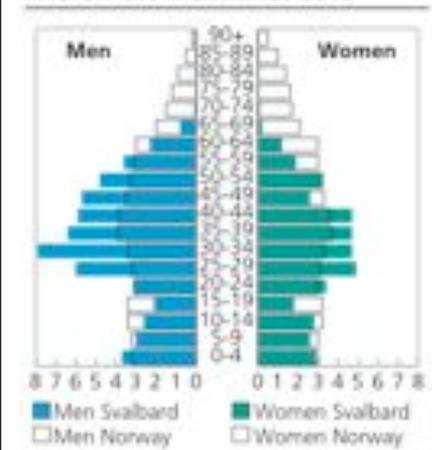
"Many of the single-person households on Svalbard have a family on the mainland and their solitary status is temporary," the report states.

A transient population is another longtime characteristic, with the average resident staying 6.3 years. But a "temporary" stay means differ-

Shares of combined consumption for all households by goods and service classification. The mainland and Longyearbyen, 2006. Per cent



Age distribution in the Norwegian settlement on Svalbard and on the mainland, 2009



Source: Statistics Norway

The report "This Is Svalbard" is available in English at www.ssb.no/this_is_svalbard.

ent things to different people.

"At the start of 2009, for example, a good quarter had moved to Svalbard before the year 2000," the report notes. "It is mining employees in particular who reside in Svalbard for a long time. Also, employees in local administration stay for relatively long periods. Students, employees in higher education, and the travel industry and government employees have far shorter periods of residence."

The report is part of a series of statistical profiles of Norway and individual communities. It's more anecdotal and less detailed than a "white paper" released earlier this year outlining long-term governing strategy for Svalbard.

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



Svalbard coal miners, at left, worked in harder conditions and lived in more spartan housing 50 years ago, according to Bjoern Kraby Svendsen, a retired military airman responsible for evacuating them after medical emergencies. Flying into Longyearbyen, pictured above in 1958, was frequently a difficult task due in part to primitive aviation facilities which, Svendsen said, included "miners standing on the runway with their headlights on."

Airman gets a safer landing 50 years later

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Now Svendsen, who turned 75 without a celebration during his return trip to Longyearbyen at the end of July, has a different fear - things may be too nice. He said he's concerned about the impact from the large number of tourists he encountered, even though "I think people should come here and see Mother Nature."

The 42-year military veteran, who now writes poetry in longhand at his isolated forest cottage in Jordet, said he has long wanted to return to the archipelago where he flew missions for the Royal Norwegian Air Force between 1957 and 1960. It took a personal misfortune to make the trip a reality.

"After my wife died the feeling got stronger because I spent so much of my air force career up here," he said.

Svendsen's primary duty, operating from stations on the northern mainland, was medical rescues ranging from two babies born early on Spitsbergen to mine workers involved in traumatic accidents.

"There weren't many, but some had lost their legs," he said.

It's still tough working the mines these days, but Svendsen said the situation is vastly improved.

"We talked to a couple of miners," he

said. "I know the difference is very big - environmental laws, pay (and) they have nice houses to live in. I saw the houses were painted in different colors, which I thought was good. It was clean, and the people were very well behaved and giving us great service."

Flying to Longyearbyen for a prepackaged group tour was also drastically different than the old days, when there were constant problems because of the weather and primitive aviation facilities.

"It was always miners standing on the runway with their headlights on," Svendsen said.

That's assuming the plane got there, which wasn't necessarily a given.

"We had to ditch a couple of times," he said. Luckily, the aircraft was amphibious, making those ocean encounters more of a nuisance than a catastrophe.

Navigation wasn't any easier for those following maps of Svalbard that were incorrect at time. Svendsen said the coastal photography was to correct those errors. There was also the time he had to airdrop winter clothes to an ill-prepared expedition.

His modern-day tour stopped in Barentsburg where, Svendsen said, "it's so big a difference it's hard to point out one or two things."

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

HEADLINES STOLEN FROM SVALBARDPOSTEN

VERDENS NORDLIGSTE AVIS

Rot of historic buildings and ruins to be measured

Specialists in rot decay have been granted permission to take samples from a number of older buildings and ruins. High heat from the midnight sun and humidity resulting when water doesn't disappear into permafrost are causing conditions ideal for decay, said Siri Hoem, the Svalbard governor's heritage advisor. Consultants familiar with biological building damage will begin work in Ny-Ålesund and other locations next month.

Group banned from pubs, restaurants after disturbance

About five people from a Norwegian fishing trawler were banned from all Longyearbyen restaurants and pubs after they reportedly caused a disturbance and stole a bottle of liquor at Karls-Berger Pub, according to police. Officials also received a report of a missing car from a man returning from a sailing vacation, which was apparently "borrowed" illegally and left elsewhere in town with the keys in the ignition. Also, a person was reported riding on a bicycle not belonging to him; officials are asking anyone missing an older bike to contact the Svalbard governor's office.



Five people predict 'breach day' for Champagne snow

Five of 228 entrants correctly predicted July 28 as the date when the Champagne snow on Opera Mountain in Adventdalen would "break" in a contest by *Svalbardposten*. Mild weather and rain in recent days accelerated the melt, making the fateful date the same as last year.

Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Cloudy, foggy, late showers. WSW winds at 4 km/h. High 7C (7C wind chill), low 3C (3C wind chill).	Morning showers, low clouds. SSW winds at 11 km/h. High 9C (8C wind chill), low 8C (7C wind chill).	Cloudy, a few showers. SSW winds at 11 km/h. High 10C (9C wind chill), low 7C (7C wind chill).	Cloudy, possible showers. WSW winds at 8 km/h. High 8C (8C wind chill), low 6C (4C wind chill).

Extended forecast: Sunday, cloudy and showers, 7C (7C), 4C (-4C); Monday, occasional rain, 7C (7C), 1C (1C); Tuesday, low clouds, 3C (2C), 1C (-2C); Wednesday, cloudy with late sleet and freezing rain, 1C (-4C), -2C (-6C).

Data provided by AccuWeather.com



Tourists crowd the main walkway of Longyearbyen shortly after a cruise ship arrives Monday. Total visitors to Svalbard are down 30 percent this year compared to last, but streets and shops are still full on days when more than 4,000 passengers combine with those arriving by air for other tours.

Travel decisions about more than money

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drop in business. On days when cruise ships carrying more than 4,000 people arrive, packing streets and shops with shoulder-to-shoulder humanity, it's easy to find plenty putting aside concerns about the global recession.

"You don't worry about expenses. Live for today," said Debbie Marson, a Perth, Australia, resident celebrating her 50th birthday by taking a 10-day Spitsbergen cruise.

Her husband, Howard, said his commercial building business has been hit hard, down to one project at point instead of the normal six to eight, and Norway's currency exchange rate is "not as good as I thought it was." But he agreed "life's about the journey" and, if anything, he'd splurge on upgraded ship cabins if he had a do-over.

A total of 16,585 visitors arrived between Jan. 1 and June 30 this year, compared to 21,708 in 2008, according to statistics published by *Svalbardposten*. Total days spent in Svalbard by visitors were 43,511, down from 52,007, and lodging occupancy was 45.53 percent, down from 51.7 percent.

"The economy is tighter in Europe than in Norway. I think it may be a reduction for the summer," said Tove Eliassen, who recently departed as the manager of Svalbard Tourism, in an interview with the newspaper. During the coming months "it will be even harder to keep the wheels in motion. It is difficult to fill beds in the fourth quarter."

Total visitors rose 8 percent in 2008 compared to 2007, the fourth straight year of increases, as event such as the International Polar Year and the opening of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault focused attention on the area. But tour operators and government officials said they started seeing a decline toward the end of 2008 as the recession set in.

Conferences and large tour groups in particular are down, and some officials say a recovery may not start until mid- to late-2010.

The World Tourism Organization reports international tourism in Europe is down about 10 percent for the first half of this year, but there are signs of a turnaround during the second half. Wide-ranging factors beyond the economy means figures for individual destinations on the continent and elsewhere are equally diverse.

Among Arctic destinations, cruise ship voyages to Nunavut in Canada are down 25 percent from a year ago, about equal to the tourism decline elsewhere in the country, although one northern lodge operator said his business is down 60 percent. Operators in Alaska are reporting drops of 15 percent to 50 percent and cruise ship companies are slashing many fares by nearly half to attract passengers.

Among the first-half reports from other destinations:

* Thailand reports a 16 percent decrease, with room occupancy rates at 44 percent compared to 66 percent last year, as flu concerns and political protests that closed Bangkok's airport earlier this year are adding to economic woes.

* Hawaii received 8.7 percent fewer visitors and 15.1 percent less revenue, in part due to flu concerns and a 33 percent drop in Japanese tourists.

* Israel reports a 20 percent decline, but the total is still 15 percent higher than 2007, with political stability playing a key role in visitor numbers.

* Political stability is proving a boon for some areas. Lebanon, touted as the "Paris of the Middle East" decades ago, reports a 30 percent increase in tourism this year following the election of a pro-Western parliament and infrastructure rebuilding after a long civil war. Tibet officials say a record 1.5 million visitors arrived, up from 342,000 in the wake of riots last year.

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

What's up

Aug. 9

8 p.m.: Movie: "Knowing," U.S. action/drama, ages 15 and up. Huset.

Aug. 14-20

Northern Traveling Film Festival in Barentsburg and Pyramiden. Movies, tours and discussions about history, politics and science. More information at www.norfest.ru.

Aug. 16

8 p.m.: Movie: "Drag Me To Hell," U.S. horror/thriller, ages 15 and up. Huset.

Aug. 23

6 p.m.: Movie: "Coraline And The Secret Door," U.S. animated fantasy, ages 11 and up. Huset.

8 p.m.: Movie: "Last Chance Harvey," U.S. drama, all ages. Huset.

Aug. 27

2 p.m.: Meeting of cultural and leisure enterprise board. Næringsbygget 1, "Tundra" room.

Aug. 28

9 a.m.: Meeting of the board of enterprise growth. Næringsbygget 1, "Tundra" room.

Aug. 30

7 p.m.: Movie: "Harry And The Half-Blood Prince," British adventure/family, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Sept. 3

6 p.m.: Activity Fair. Information about activities offered for kids, students and adults by various organizations in Longyearbyen. Coffee and waffles will also be sold. Svalbardhallen.

Sept. 6

6 p.m.: Movie: "Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs," U.S. family, ages 7 and up. Huset.

8 p.m.: Movie: "The Hauntings In Connecticut," U.S. thriller/horror, ages 15 and up. Huset.

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:

- *A 'doubtful' search for Amundsen's plane*
- *Here's your Svalbard bird-defense stick*
- *Most northern species found at N. Pole*
- *Flu 'doomsday' fears in north Canada*
- *Hippie telemarkers ski Arctic Circle*