

Longyearbyen: The City that Bans Death

Where dying is illegal and no one is born

Cultural Moorings

By Rachel Perry

Rachel is the Managing Editor of Dispatches and hopes to soon travel to Norway for her first O.A.T. adventure.

Left: Don't be fooled by the lack of snow, these homes in Longyearbyen stand atop ground that remains perpetually frozen no matter the season.



As the world's northernmost city, the people of Longyearbyen, Norway have adopted some seriously strange practices to survive, but the most bizarre is a 1950 proclamation outlawing death: Residents nearing the end of their lives must fly to the mainland of Norway to live out their final days. The reason behind the prohibition of death? The freezing cold climate.

Located above the Arctic circle, the temperatures of Longyearbyen rarely ever exceed 32°F, and the ground remains frozen year-round. Even when the temperatures rise, the soil never completely thaws, and that means anything buried beneath it will also never thaw—or decompose.

The citizens of Longyearbyen made this frightening realization in 1950 when they discovered that the bodies of those who died in the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic had not begun to decompose yet. Not only did this make for a ghastly sight, but scientists began to fear that the perfectly preserved bodies still contained the rare flu virus that killed 50 million people, about 5% of the world's population, in the early twentieth century. Afraid that the diseases of the dead would soon spread among the living, authorities closed down the cemetery and outlawed any more burials.

In 1998, researchers visited the cemetery in Longyearbyen and exhumed a few of the bodies to study, finding that the deadly influenza virus did remain preserved in them. After extracting the virus, scientists were able to gain valuable insights on how to prevent a similar outbreak from happening again.

So while dying cannot completely be avoided in Longyearbyen, lawmakers do urge residents to do their best to move to the mainland when they are near the end of their lives. The town's small hospital lacks adequate facilities to treat serious illnesses, as well as lacks the resources for pregnant women to give birth—making the city of Longyearbyen home to no deaths or births.

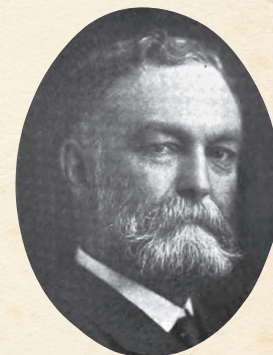
When a rare death *does* happen here, there's a good chance a polar bear was the culprit. With 3,000 bears inhabiting the area of Longyearbyen and only 2,100 human citizens, it's required that residents carry a firearm while traveling outside of the town borders for protection. Even students in school are instructed on how to operate a firearm,

should they ever need to defend themselves from an angry neighborhood bear.

This resourceful population has come up with other ways to adapt to the challenges posed by nature. The colorful homes give the town a quintessential Norwegian feel—but underneath the bright facades lies the secret to their survival. To prevent them from sinking when the active permafrost layer melts in the summertime—an increasing concern due to the effects of climate change—all modern buildings in Longyearbyen are built on stilts.

Inside those homes, you might imagine keeping a furry companion to snuggle with on long winter nights—but cat people contemplating Longyearbyen would be wise to reconsider. The area is home to several Arctic bird species—many of which are endangered. To protect these populations, lawmakers have enacted another interesting law: a ban against all cats in the city. So, you won't find any feline pets in the homes of Longyearbyen, a sacrifice made to protect the at-risk birds.

But nature lovers can content themselves with another common animal spotted around town: reindeer, which are often seen peacefully wandering by. And while four straight months of darkness may seem unimaginable, the intense absence of light makes Longyearbyen one of the best places in the world to witness the Northern Lights. Add to this its idyllic icy scenery, those who visit Longyearbyen may leave with “island fever,” as the locals call it, and dream of returning to this unspoiled, yet quirky, Arctic city.



Raised in Michigan, John Longyear was the face of the Arctic Coal Company and settler of the town of Spitsbergen—eventually renamed Longyearbyen to honor its founder.

Explore the unique Arctic landscape and fascinating city of Longyearbyen when you join O.A.T for *Arctic Expedition: Untamed Norway & Svalbard*. Learn more and watch travel films at www.oattravel.com/nar.