

The NORTHERNMOST

Bruktikken

Prospective customers at Bruktikken must present one of two things: an ID card from UNIS, the University Centre in Svalbard; or an alcohol ration card.

Bruktikken is a store in a reclaimed two-bedroom house on the outskirts of Longyearbyen, the northernmost settlement in the world, on the far-flung Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. Svalbard has a few claims to fame: polar bears; superb Northern Lights shows; the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a Noah’s ark of plant embryos carved into a sandstone mountain; and the fact that it has zero visa requirements—though not many are clamoring to live 800 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The population is about 2,500, and the average tenure is three years. The ration card is a relic of the city’s legacy as a mining settlement; authorities hoped to limit the miners’ spirit consumption to preserve both their work ethic and livers. Nowadays it doubles as a residency card for the local population, none of whom are legally allowed to be native-born (to give birth, prospective parents must travel to hospitals on the Norwegian mainland).

Chockablock with skiing poles and well-loved tea kettles, Bruktikken possesses two critical features: its contents are only available to residents, and everything is entirely free. The island’s isolation has dissuaded even Amazon from shipping here, for fear of intensive shipping fees and taxes. Consequently, Longyearbyen’s residents have developed an understanding of the true meaning of a circular economy.

“You use that thing until the end of its life, or you return it so that someone else can use it,” explains a community member. “We can do that here on Svalbard, because it’s such a tiny community.”

The shop doesn’t depend exclusively on donations from departing students or mining families moving away. (Norway’s last coal mine, in Svalbard, is slated to close in 2023). It has also partnered with the local trash processor, Miljøstasjonen, which combs through shipments destined for the mainland to salvage anything of value.

Of the hundreds of items given away in a typical day, precious kitchenware and clothing consistently remain the most in demand. And it is particularly crucial for parents, who utilize the space as a kind of toy library. As utilitarian as the community may be, Bruktikken also regularly receives items whose journey to Svalbard only raises more questions than answers. “We had a huge glow-in-the-dark rosary. Huge! You could hang it on your wall,” recalls the community member. “Where did that come from? Who brought it up? It’s huge!”

At this secondhand shop on the edge of the world, not a single soul—or thing—has arrived by accident.

Skua

As the third generation of my family to work in McMurdo Station, Antarctica, I felt confident that I’d packed everything I’d need when I set out for my first season supporting science as a janitor. My mother had been shuttling passengers to and from the sea-ice runway in oversized vehicles for years—something she still does now—and we were both introduced to the coldest, windiest, southernmost continent by the slides my grandfather periodically showed from his 1960s Coast Guard stint. But despite the advantages of intergenerational advice, a month later I found myself in an Antarctic Halloween costume contest with nothing to wear. Luckily, there was Skua.

Named after local chicken-sized seabirds, Skua is McMurdo Station’s reuse system. It’s housed in a petite prefab building, its doorway flanked by painted Roman columns and ivy, in sharp contrast to the black volcanic dust underfoot and white expanse beyond. McMurdo Station’s population ebbs depending on the season, peaking in the austral summer around 1,200 people. With its heavy machinery and weather-worn buildings, it’s easy to forget one is in Antarctica and not some ramshackle mining town.

The Skua shack is a glorified freebie bin. Its origin is fuzzy, but long-time Antarcticans agree it was constructed in the late ‘90s as a collaboration between the waste department and volunteers, a partnership that continues today. Shelves sag under the weight of others’ discarded items: puffy jackets, boots, an occasional ball gown. Labeled containers offer secondhand clothing of varying quality, and any unwearable garments get sorted by material for upcycling purposes. For those willing to dig, untold riches lie in wait.

For that Halloween costume, I found a discarded Tyvek suit, probably used by a carpenter on station, which I stitched into a form-fitting dress to become Lady Gaga. My mother showed me how to do this—much of her wardrobe is created with Skua finds, patchworked into new, beautiful, bespoke items. Her favorite jeans were found already worn in, and she continues to add layers of hand-stitched patches.

My best find was a cashmere sweater, seemingly brand new aside from a tiny hole at its neck. With some simple mending, the sweater became a staple item I wore for years. When I stopped going to Antarctica to start a family, I sewed the sweater into supremely cozy pants that my daughter wore for the first year of her life. As she’s grown, my mother regularly brings her hats and shirts from Skua, often embellished with hand stitches. Who knows if my daughter will become the fourth generation in our family to journey to Antarctica, but its secondhand gifts will keep finding her.

and

SOUTHERNMOST

FREE STORES IN THE WORLD

5 Story by Elizabeth Endicott.

4 Story by Jonathan Feakins.