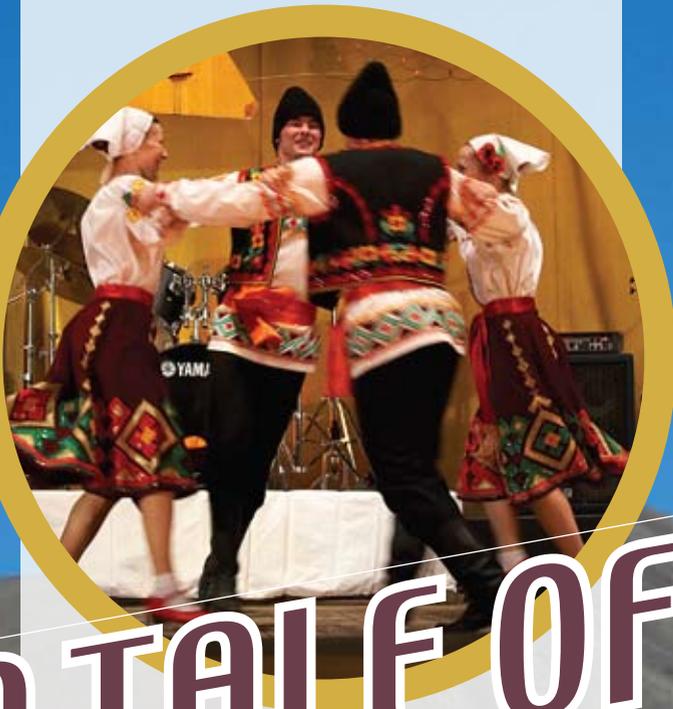


In various states of decay and rebirth, Barentsburg and Pyramiden reflect Russia's past — and future — on Svalbard

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By Carter G. Walker • Photos provided by Spitsbergen Travel

Approximately 600 miles from the North Pole, the Russian settlement of Pyramiden has nearly stopped time, preserving it in a neatly arranged collection of buildings that are slowly being overrun by the natural forces of the Arctic. Rivers run where there were once streets. Tiny fuzz-covered plants grow green and purple, miraculously, among mountains of coal waste. There is a steam locomotive—its red still vibrant, its black still shiny—poised on tracks that are disintegrating into nothing, and going nowhere. There are trucks in the service shop. Books in the library. Glasses in the bar. But not a soul in sight. The resident Kittiwakes—cliff nesting birds that settle for empty windowsills here—are the only ones to watch over the place.





Top left: A cultural show in Barentsburg. Left: Houses in front of the mountains in Pyramiden, a once-abandoned settlement on Svalbard. Right: A Lenin bust in Barentsburg.

Across the fjord, just over 60 miles by helicopter or boat, is Barentsburg. Its buildings, surely glorious in the 1950s with their colorful Olympic icons and curved brick design, are falling apart; large chunks of plaster have simply fallen away to reveal the structural skeletons. The competition-sized pool in the sizable sports complex is losing tiles as quickly as the green algae grows. Nothing is replaced. Nothing repaired. The whole town looks as if it has been dusted in soot. But unlike Pyramiden, this ghost of a more prosperous Soviet era pulses with life. Some 550 residents, mostly Russians and Ukrainians, live and work here. Nearly all of them, 520 work for Trust Arktikugol, the Russian-owned company that operates the local mine.

Both outposts are being resuscitated, slowly, nearly invisibly for now, by a renewed Russian interest in the islands of Svalbard. Their histories are filled with a series of rises and falls; perhaps their futures promise rebirth. These two settlements—one abandoned, the other decayed, both trying to rise from the ashes—offer a telling glimpse at the Russian influence—past, present and future—on Svalbard.

From No Man's Land to Norwegian Sovereignty

Though few dispute the fact that in 1596 Dutchman Willem Barents was the first explorer to map the Svalbard Archipelago—a jumble of islands halfway between Norway and the North Pole that, when combined, rival Ireland in size—there is less agreement about who first saw and explored Svalbard, Old Norse for “Cold Edge.” Generally accepted belief in Norway is that Vikings discovered the islands as early as 1194. The Russians, on the other hand, have long recognized the theory that *Pomor* hunters from the White Sea region were the first to utilize the islands between the 14th and 16th centuries.

Whoever set an icy foot ashore first, Svalbard's history centers around exploitation of the islands' natural resources—whaling, sealing, fur trapping, fishing and, more recently, coal extraction—and includes a hodgepodge of cultures. It was a No Man's Land that offered its bounty to anyone hearty enough to seek it. Prior to World War I, American, British, German, Dutch, Russian, Swedish and Norwegian interests were at stake on Svalbard. But after the war, only Russia and Norway sponsored permanent activity and built sustainable communities. Nearly a century later, the two are still the only countries with permanent presence on Spitsbergen, the largest of the islands.

The 1920 Svalbard Treaty gave Norway sovereignty over the islands, but allowed signatories (there are approximately 40 today) equal rights to en-

gage in commercial activities, primarily coal mining. The treaty also ensured that the island would not be used for “warlike purposes.” The Soviet Union signed on in 1935, only after its government was recognized by the United States in 1933. Since that time, the Soviet Union, now Russia, and Norway have dug in their heels to make staying



Barentsburg has its own watering hole: The 78th Parallel Cafe and Bar.

A Spitsbergen expedition cruise heads toward Barentsburg, an old Russian mining town.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BOTTOM LEFT: SPITSBERGEN TRAVEL/NINA BAILEY TOP LEFT: SPITSBERGEN TRAVEL/RAGNAR HARTVIG TOP RIGHT: SPITSBERGEN TRAVEL/RAGNAR HARTVIG BOTTOM RIGHT: SPITSBERGEN TRAVEL/IVENKE IVARRUD

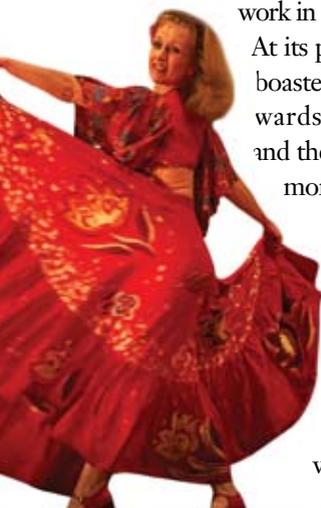
on Svalbard a worthwhile endeavor.

In stark contrast to Barentsburg and Pyramiden, Longyearbyen—the primary Norwegian settlement with a population hovering around 2,000—is bursting with brightly painted buildings, elegant eateries, fancy tourist hotels and a rosy economic picture that is divided between tourism, research and coal mining.

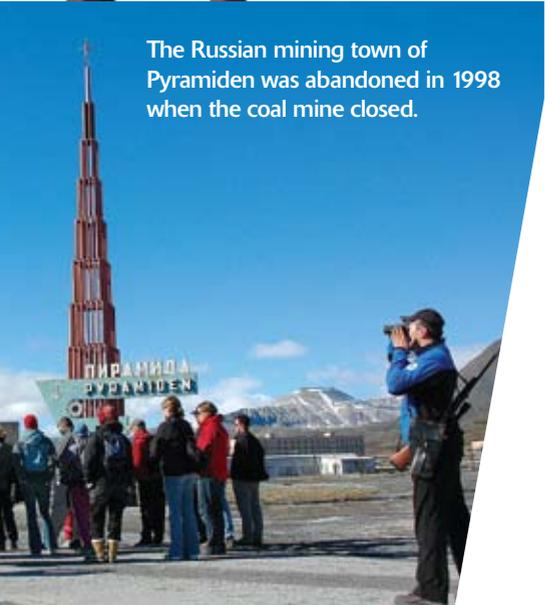
Barentsburg looking to change its economy, and its future

Barentsburg was established by the Norwegians in 1912, sold to the Dutch in 1921 and then to the Russians in 1932. During the Soviet era, Barentsburg was the face of communism in the West. Money was poured into the town, and Soviet workers lined up for the opportunity to live and work in the coal mine there.

At its peak the settlement boasted a population upwards of 1,000 people, and the infrastructure was more than ample with a recreation center, sports complex, a Pomor museum, hospital and kindergarten, hotel and bar. But the collapse of the Soviet Union halted



The Russian mining town of Pyramiden was abandoned in 1998 when the coal mine closed.



Pyramiden captures the Russian heritage of an isolated, barren and spectacular island.

the flow of cash to the settlement. Though coal mining continued at a slower pace, the rest of the community lost its momentum and fell into disrepair as the population dwindled to a low of 470, according to numbers provided by Trust Arktikugol.

Recently, however, there is an influx of money, and perhaps more importantly, new ideas. In 2006, the Russian government worked with an Austrian company, GIVO Energo, on plans to make Barentsburg one of the most environmentally friendly towns in the world. The plan proved not to be feasible, but even the kernel of the idea is significant.

There are other plans, too, for developing tourism, research and possibly a fish-processing plant. Jørgen Jørgensen, a Russian interpreter and adviser in the Norwegian Governor's office in Longyearbyen, is hopeful about Russia's plans to refurbish the mining town. "Barentsburg has for a long time been run far below the Norwegian standards, but as the Russian economy grows and as the world's attention is turning towards the northern territories, Moscow has allocated more funds to Barentsburg lately," he says.

Pyramiden to become a living ghost town

Pyramiden too is poised for change. Established by the Swedes in 1911, sold to the Soviet Union in 1926 and abandoned by the Russians in 1998, the town lived—and died—by its coal production. When the mine ceased to be profitable, the Russians left it to the forces of nature, and the occasional tourist, souvenir hunter or polar bear who might wander through.

Until now.

Ten years after the town was abandoned, there is a plan afoot to bring Pyramiden back, not as the bustling mining community it once was, but rather as a relic. A place where tourists can see and feel the Soviet Union heritage on this isolated, barren and spectacular island. "The Pyramid represents a historical monument," explains Olga Mirzaeva of Trust Arktikugol. "The settlement and its infrastructure represent historical and cultural heritage of Spitsbergen, which should be kept."

There is a small team of workers (one of whom was killed in a tragic helicopter crash this spring, along with the pilot and co-pilot) based in Barentsburg who are working to take Pyramiden back from the elements. A dam was built to re-route the rivers channeling through town. The hotel is being repaired, perhaps one day it will be habitable. But for now, the Russians welcome tourists strictly as day-trippers, showing them around some of the buildings.

"As for the future, one thing seems to be clear," said Jørgensen. "The Russians are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Whether they will continue with coal mining or try to diversify their economy there remains to be seen, but I would not be surprised if they would try to learn from the experience in Longyearbyen for the last 20 years."

Only time, and perhaps the Kittiwakes, will tell. 

Carter G. Walker is a freelance writer living in Montana, and an enchanted return visitor to Svalbard.