

On top of the world

There was only one place Anil Thadani wanted to be to celebrate a personal milestone... his beloved Arctic. He recounts an epic voyage with *Cecile Gauert*



Photography - Courtesy of *Latitude*

OWNERS' CLUB

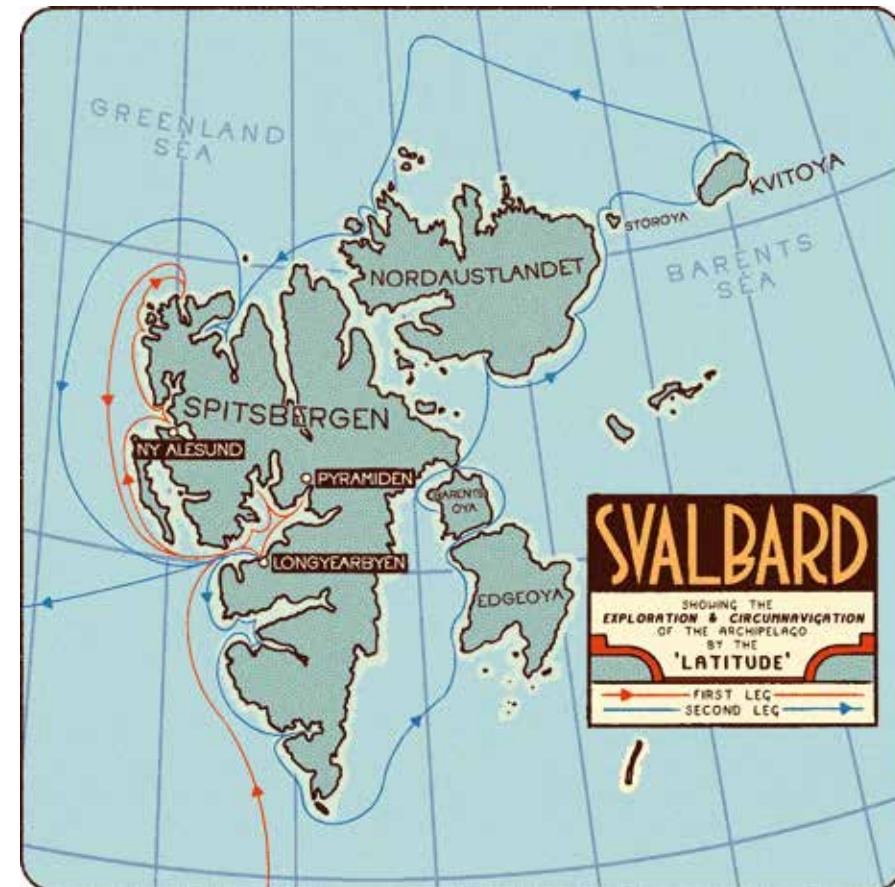
Below: Latitude cruises near Longyearbyen, the capital of Svalbard and site of the Global Seed Vault. Right: a bust of Lenin stands in the abandoned Russian mining town of Pyramiden



Below: despite its often inhospitable climate and terrain, Svalbard is home to all kinds of wildlife and Latitude's party found much to see and photograph



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even the earth's largest bears are afraid of them, especially in the water.

It was Thadani's interest in polar bears (he calls it an obsession) and his admiration of Sir David Attenborough's nature documentaries that sparked his desire to explore the Arctic. "Frankly, I could have just kept on going to the Northwest Passage," Thadani says. He's been there twice, in two consecutive summers, cruising from east to west and then west to east - a trip that earned him and his crew the Voyager's Award at the 2016 World Superyacht Awards. "It's a photographer's dream, with a golden glow and soft light. But there is something else to it, this special feeling of wellbeing. It's also the way the birds fly. Arctic gulls are the most amazing aeronautical flyers on the planet. They put a tip of the wing in the water and draw a line; then the one behind does it longer. They seem to compete. There are things happening there that don't happen anywhere else," says Thadani, as we catch up a few weeks after he's returned to a more temperate climate - Monaco.

It was this love of wildlife and zeal for exploration which first piqued his interest in the Svalbard archipelago, due north of Norway. *Latitude's* intrepid captain, the Massachusetts-born Meagher, and his crew weren't too hard to convince as they prepared for their third Arctic adventure in as many summers.

Svalbard is one of the earth's most unusual places, if only for its political status. A barren land back in 1596, when it was discovered by Dutch explorer Willem Barents (as in the Barents Sea), the 41,000 square metre island group formerly known as Spitsbergen became the centre of disputes over whaling rights in the 17th century. Rivalries



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intensified when minerals were discovered there. The 1920 Spitsbergen (or Svalbard) Treaty, signed as part of the Treaty of Versailles, awarded the Kingdom of Norway sovereignty over the land but gave all signatories the rights to exploit the resources on shore and in territorial waters. Citizens of the 42 member nations who signed the agreement (implemented in 1925) can come and go as they please and become residents if they so choose. In 1935, the Soviet Union added its signature to the treaty and that's how Pyramiden came to be one of two Russian settlements on the archipelago. By the 1960s, there were more Soviets than Norwegians living on Svalbard.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the thawing of relations between East and West, the strategic importance of the archipelago diminished, at least temporarily. In 1998, the mining company that built Pyramiden shut down its operations, but a few years later attempted to revive the settlement chiefly as a tourist attraction. The town has a working hotel, but the empty buildings and six full-time residents, all carrying guns for protection against bears, give the town a haunted quality. With personal objects left as if in suspension, it is a sort of frozen Pompeii. "The gymnasium conjured up every Stephen King novel I have read and vampire movie I have seen," Meagher says.

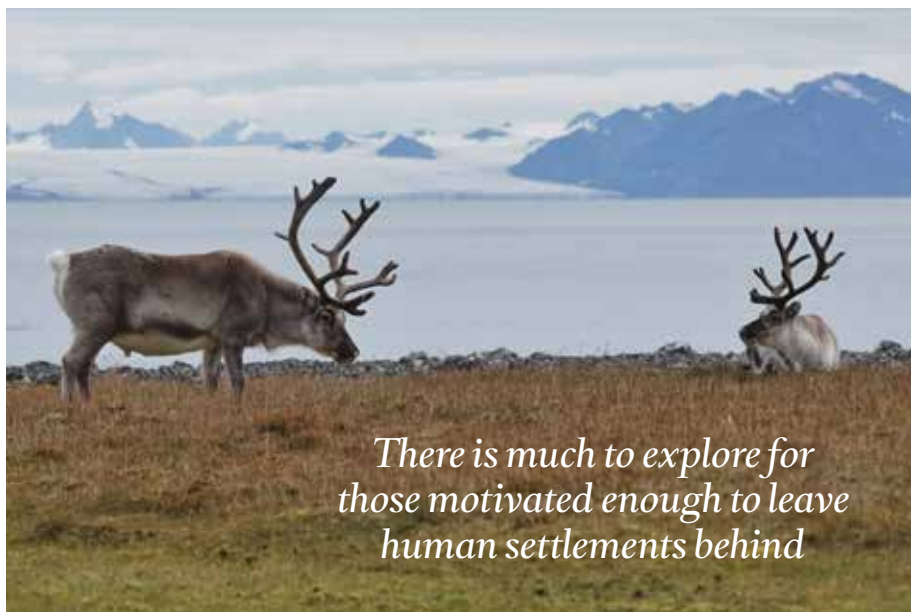
The archipelago is also home to a slightly creepy treasure. A vault buried deep inside rocks and the permafrost - the soil here remains frozen through summer - some four kilometres from Longyearbyen, holds the world's largest collection of seeds. The so-called doomsday seed vault is the "final back up" in case of

ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT G. FRESSON



AS LOCATIONS FOR 70TH BIRTHDAY PARTIES GO, THEY DON'T GET MUCH better - for a superyacht owner with a taste for adventure and a love of the Arctic. Anil Thadani, owner of 45 metre *Latitude*, welcomed the dawn of his eighth decade at 81° 25' 14.9"N, on an ice floe just 400 miles from the North Pole. The only other boat there was an ice-breaking vessel the yacht's AIS picked up, somewhere to the south of them. "It turns out that we are one of a handful of boats in history to have circumnavigated Svalbard," says Captain Sean Meagher. "We are also the only superyacht to have ever gotten so close to the North Pole without an ice-breaker. So to celebrate we decided to break out the Hula Hoops!"

Meagher, Thadani and his family spent over a month cruising in Norway, a trip that included a rare circumnavigation of the Svalbard archipelago, accomplished in 17 days, preceded by a five day cruise along Svalbard's spectacular western coast. They came close to polar bears - the one they nicknamed "Smokey" popped over a ridge and put an end to plans for a barbecue on an icy island. They saw a 30 metre fin whale feed, "its mouth large enough to drive a car into it". They drank vodka in the Russian coal mining settlement of Pyramiden, where polar bears outnumber residents. They walked through a blue ice cave winding its way through a glacier. They burnt plastic debris deadly to reindeer in bonfires built of quick-burning driftwood that the current brings ashore from Siberia. And they took hundreds of pictures and videos of bears, birds, foxes, reindeer and walruses, which Meagher deems the Arctic's real "badass" -



There is much to explore for those motivated enough to leave human settlements behind

a global catastrophe. Investors in the endeavour include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Monsanto and the Kingdom of Norway. One of the reasons they chose this location is that it is so remote. Parts of Svalbard, however, seem to have become quite the happening spot, at least for a few months a year (when the sun returns in early March after three months of total darkness).

Latitude started from Stockholm on 8 July, stopped in Copenhagen and Bergen and cruised the west coast of Norway to Tromsø. The next stop was Bear Island, an odd name for Svalbard's southernmost island, since it is known for its amazing seabird colony (more than a million birds nest here). The *Latitude* party photographed birdlife, of course ("puffins are so cute," Thadani says), but Meagher found the rusted *Petrozavodsk*, a Russian trawler that was wrecked after a lively celebration of one crew member's engagement, pretty interesting too.

Latitude finally arrived on the west coast of the archipelago on 3 August.

"I was shocked to discover the west of Svalbard is such a touristic area," Thadani says. "It's beautiful but you're not alone there." After exploring several of the west coast's fjords and glaciers, the yacht returned to Longyearbyen. An "amazing meal" in a world-class restaurant was another surprise as was a bar with a remarkable collection of spirits. Some 5,000 snowmobiles lining an empty car park are clues as to how busy things can be in the height of the season, generally late February to April.

American industrialist John Munro Longyear's Arctic Coal Company started a settlement called Longyear City in 1906. The Nazis bombed the town during the Second World War and when



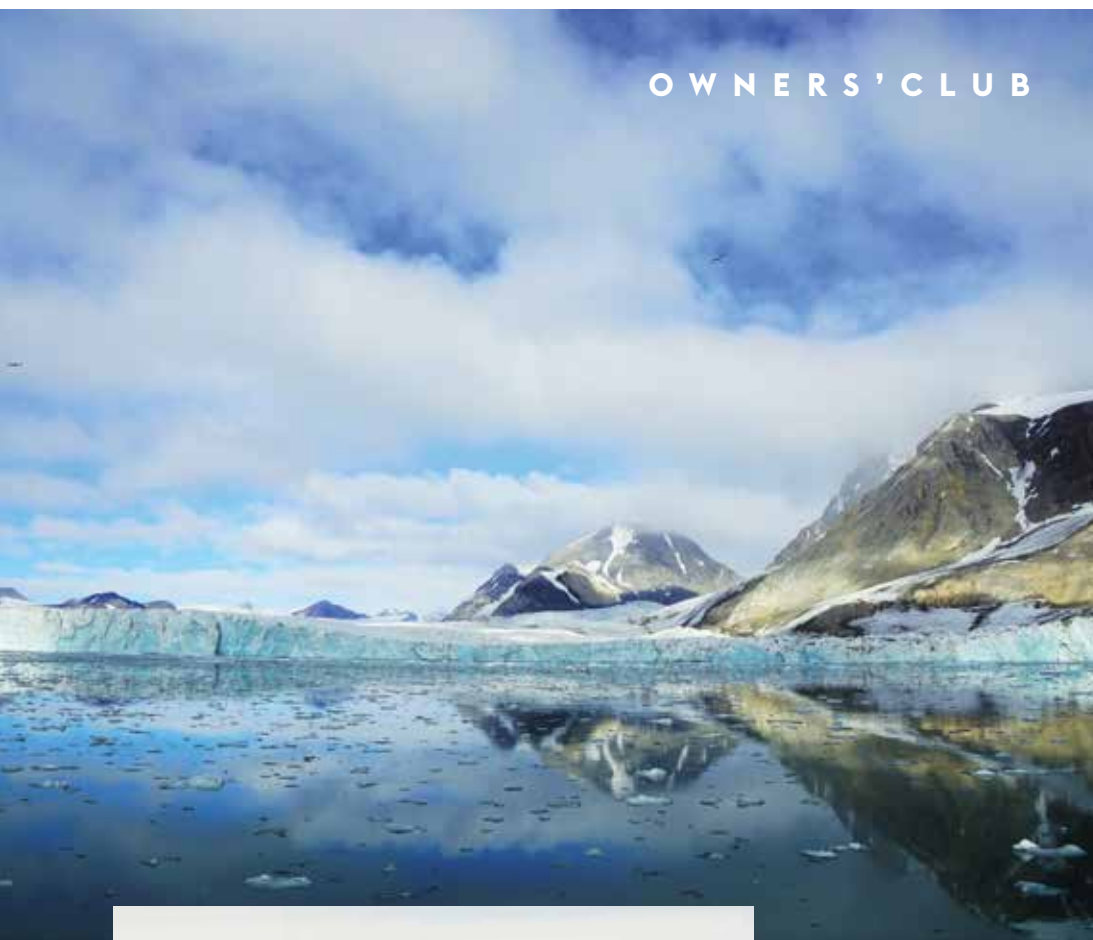
Clockwise from top left: Anil Thadani, owner of Latitude, launches a drone; reindeer feeding; a "cute" puffin; kittiwakes in the snow

it was rebuilt it became an international centre for mining and scientific research. Life in this alien part of the world, which a recent BBC documentary describes as "north of normal", inspired the TV drama *Fortitude*, where the permafrost plays a starring role in a murder mystery.

Longyearbyen has a population of just over 2,000 and is considered the capital of Svalbard. "It is definitely the centre of activity in the archipelago. There are museums, good shopping, galleries and an infrastructure to support tourism – quite remarkable, considering the population!" Thadani says. A couple of days of inclement weather gave the *Latitude* party plenty of time to enjoy the restaurants and museums and appreciate the locals' warm hospitality. Despite moving to one of the world's remotest places (where dying and burials are not permitted, since the permafrost doesn't let anything decay), the town's residents are welcoming. But there is much more to explore further north for those motivated enough to leave human settlements behind.

To create their itinerary, the *Latitude* party consulted Jason Roberts, who has taken care of logistics for Sir David Attenborough and the BBC on nature programmes such as *Frozen Planet* and *The Blue Planet*. Roberts, nicknamed Mr Polar Bear, is an Australian who has lived in Svalbard for more than 25 years and his company is the go-to authority for filming and exploring in the Arctic.

After dropping off guests in Longyearbyen, Thadani and friends headed south, rounded the archipelago and started up the east coast. Along with *Latitude's* crew ►



From above: preparing for the famous Hula Hoop photo; a glacier in the area; polar bears were a concern throughout the cruise

by Eliassen made the gradual climb to the top. Thadani's wife, Coni, who had stayed back, was observing their progress with binoculars when suddenly she spotted polar bears following them. She waved to them in a panic, but they had seen the bears and changed course. Eliassen proved a great resource in understanding the bears' behaviour. "They have different personalities, like humans," says Thadani.

On 20 August, they left Kvitøya in dense fog, heading north to the ice shelf. It was impossible to anchor so they hitched themselves to an ice floe and drifted with it. "We were 400 miles from the North Pole," says Thadani. "Frankly I would have tried to go further but the weather started to turn and the combination of ice and bad weather is not a good thing." So they took the picture with the Hula Hoops, a couple of guards standing by with guns they'd fire in the air in case polar bears got too close, and then started heading back south. A few days later they visited the Monaco glacier (named after Prince Albert I of Monaco, who in the 1900s was a pioneer explorer in the area). "After dinner, we took the tender to an extraordinary 'beach' under a huge red mountain. We made a bonfire and roasted marshmallows and watched the changing colours as the sun moved slowly from one side to the other – without ever setting. While we were sitting by the fire, an Arctic fox popped his head up over the rise but was too shy to come any closer."

Five weeks later, Thadani was in Monaco itself, basking in the afterglow of his recent adventure. During our interview, strangers who'd heard his story stopped him on the docks, seeking advice. My favourite might be this one – "Go have some fun". ■



"It's a photographer's dream, with a golden glow and soft light... and a special feeling of wellbeing"

and the Thadani family was Einar Eliassen, a young Norwegian guide who works with Roberts in Svalbard. "This was the best decision we ever made because his knowledge of the archipelago and its wildlife was indispensable," Thadani says.

One of many treats that Roberts's production company was able to make happen for *Latitude* was to provide access to the archipelago's remotest island, which is only 40 miles from Russia's Victoria Island. "We were told we were only the third private motor yacht to get there," says Thadani. Kvitøya, or White Island, is covered with packed ice nearly year-round and has almost no natural growth. On the way there, *Latitude* stopped at the northern tip of Storøya, a smaller island. They ventured out on the Everglades tender and spotted a couple of bears near walrus. "It was so interesting. We did not return to *Latitude* until after 3am. That is the advantage of the 24 hour sun – we could do whatever we wanted, any time we wanted," says Thadani. They spent an extra day in Storøya before continuing on to Kvitøya. Part of the Northeast Svalbard Nature Preserve, the white island is generally off limits to visitors and very few people have ventured ashore. A marker commemorates Swedish explorer Salomon August Andrée and his two companions, who died there in 1897 several weeks after their hydrogen balloon crashed on the island.

"This is paradise," says Thadani. The weather had been touch and go for most of the trip but, as luck would have it, when they approached the island the weather cleared. "It was all blue, ice and water." Equipped with spiked shoes, a small group led