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ARCTIC EXPERIENCE FOR AN UNDERGRADUATE

On the 7th of August 2009, I left Scotland for a semester at the University Centre on Svalbard (UNIS). It is the world's northernmost higher education institution, located at 78°N. I arrived at half eleven at night, the sun was still shining and there were lots of mountains with no trees on them at all - very different from Oban!

Student accommodation was in old mining barracks: these were amazingly sociable. On my floor were three Swedes, three Norwegians and three Germans. We hit it off immediately and became close friends. In fact, meeting new people from all over the world was one of the best parts of the experience.

The first week on Svalbard included a two day safety course: we had to jump into the fjord (thankfully wearing a survival suit), learn first aid, how to set up camps, and finally received rifle training.

This included how to load, aim and fire in case we were ever in a situation with a polar bear. Polar bears are common in Svalbard and rifles are used as a standard safety precaution. If you see a polar bear, firstly you must try to scare it off using a flare gun; the rifle is a last resort.

Our term started with "Arctic Hydrology and Climate Change" and "Arctic Pollution". I really enjoyed both, and in particular my project on

the effects of shipping in the Arctic. Shipping is predicted to increase as Arctic sea ice extent decreases, expanding access and opening a short route from Asia to Europe. My project focussed on the effects of antifouling paint on organisms. (Several gastropod species exhibited "imposex", when female organisms display male sexual characteristics).

The courses concentrated a lot on team work, which was fun and a different way to learn, teaching me a lot about my strengths and weaknesses. There was also a lot of field work. During "Arctic Hydrology and Climate Change" we went to Kap Kinne to look at hydrological structures in the area. We got there by speed boat, passing many "ghost towns" abandoned from the old mining days, looking run down due to the harsh weather.

During "Arctic Pollution" we had a trip to Svea, a small mining village. We took a small plane there, which was brilliant as the plane flew quite low and everyone had a window seat – and a bird's eye view of the beautiful mountains and glaciers. We worked all day doing experiments on oil spills, putting different types of oil down on the beach and recording how long each took to disperse, the viscous oils taking the longest. We took turns on polar bear watch as there were three in the area at that time. I was awful at this as I forgot to load the rifle or even take bullets with me, so if we had seen one I would have been useless! We did see a polar bear from a safe distance, on

the hill behind where we were staying. Although it was just a white dot in the distance without binoculars, it was still an amazing experience to see a polar bear.

Not only the courses were filled with enjoyment; the social life in Longyear was brilliant. Every week we had "Friday Gathering", the perfect way to finish off the week. As I was the only Scottish person there, I tried to teach people how to Ceilidh dance by playing Scottish music through an ipod but this usually turned into a disaster after a few drinks.

Just as my time on Svalbard was coming to an end, I finally saw the Northern Lights. This experience made my trip, and I wish I could have shared it with my family and friends from Oban as it was amazing. The lights were moving pretty fast across the sky, bright green in colour. The whole setting was incredible as there was a glacier in the background and snow all over the mountains.

Going to Svalbard was an experience that will stay with me forever. The environment was so different from any other I have experienced: when I arrived it was 24 hours of sunlight and when I left it was 24 hours of darkness. It was also very cold in winter, but these reasons are what made my trip to Svalbard special.

Further information

Jill's full blog at: www.sams.ac.uk/expedition-blogs/students-in-the-Arctic/jill-mccolls-blog
www.unis.no