

Arctic Circle

Where east meets west in the land of the white bear

Polar bears, whales and walrus abound near Russia's Wrangel Island. **Juliet Rix** takes an amazing expedition cruise



A polar bear and her two cubs are wandering towards us across the sea ice. They jump, stepping-stone style, from floe to bright-white floe, sliding into the water to paddle smoothly across wider gaps. The ship has slowed to a stop and the bears are coming to examine this vast blue-and-yellow berg that has floated into their territory. Soon

they are just below the bow, looking up at us, and we down at them. It's a remarkable moment of shared curiosity. The bears observe, sniff, and observe again, before turning and casually lolling away.

We are in the land of the white bear in the Russian Far East, above the Arctic Circle, just south of Wrangel Island. Also known as the Polar Bear maternity ward, Wrangel is the northernmost Unesco world heritage site and sits on the 180th

meridian, on the opposite side of the globe to Greenwich. Here the world's day begins, and never ends from May to August.

These bears may not have seen a human or a ship before — only one supply ship a year visits Wrangel (supplemented by half a dozen long-haul helicopter flights), along with a handful of expedition cruises. Most of the cruises are run by Heritage Expeditions (HE), a New Zealand company that has been coming here for a decade. I am travelling with it aboard the Russian icebreaker *Kapitan Khlebnikov*.

We boarded at Anadyr, one of Russia's northernmost towns, after an eight-hour flight from Moscow — the world's longest domestic plane trip. Our luggage is passed through security on the way out of the airport as we enter the military zone of Chukotka, for which even Russians need a special permit. This is borderland. The US is the other side of the Bering Strait, which is a mere 55 miles wide at its narrowest.

A beat-up, high-chassis yellow school bus bounces us off to the mouth of the Anadyr River, where we wait for a suitable tide to transfer to our ship. And what a wait it is. The water is thick with life. Spotted seals bob friendly-faced in the silver-grey sea. And every few moments there's a blow, the top of a square head, a sleek white back — a beluga breaking the surface, often with a smaller, darker calf alongside. One, two... seven whales at a time. They are here to harvest the plentiful salmon — as are the men in little green inflatables beetling back and forth on the shoreline.

"Secure your cabins tonight," announces Nathan Russ, the expedition leader and second-generation owner of HE who has travelled with the family business since the age of eight. Thankfully, everything stays in place in our cosy cabin as we rock and roll our way over the Bering Sea to Lavrentiya (from St Lawrence, Captain Cook's name for it).

Here we visit an indigenous settlement created by Soviet collectivisation and rescued from deep post-Soviet depression by Roman Abramovich, the owner of Chelsea Football Club and Chukotka's governor from 2001 to 2008, who is deified by some people here. The Chukchi and Eskimo women brighten a drizzly day in floral overdresses and beaded headbands. It isn't cold enough for their reindeer furs, but we are grateful for warming chai. It boils in a bucket over an open fire on waste ground by the central square, with its chiselled grey bust of Lenin.

We visit a little museum in the bottom of a peeling Soviet accommodation block where the highlight is a thousand-year-old



harpoon made of tusk and walrus penis. In a performance of traditional narrative dance, the women crane their necks back and forth to portray "girls who help their mother", while a man accompanied by dramatic drums athletically acts out "collecting eggs from the cliff".

I think of him later as I look down from the top of the bird cliffs of Wrangel's Ptichy Bazaar at fluffy black cormorant chicks, little lines of ledge-guarding guillemots and nesting kittiwakes, a few precipitous metres away. Furry heads of baby glaucous gulls poke above the clifftop as if wearing miniature spotted beanies, while two species of mega-puffin (twice the size of those in Britain) flap back and forth. The sun is shining, the sea below mirror-calm and crystal-clear. "All we need now is whales," I say. Ten minutes later a vast speckled grey whale glides into view, its body laid out in perfect detail beneath us.

We see hundreds of humpbacks too: blowing, curling, fluking around the ship, and even a couple breaching. "Under the bow," comes a call from above. We lean over the edge to see as a gigantic bowhead swims smoothly past a few feet below. "I never thought I'd have to pull in my zoom to photograph a whale," an elated woman next to me says. Even Mark Carwardine, the top UK whale expert, who is on board with a group, is thrilled. "I've not seen a bowhead like that in 30 years of Arctic whale watching," he says, adding later that from the colour of its tail this whale was probably about 200 years old.

We've arrived in the ice. The ship grinds and cracks through white sheets before

gliding near-silently between floes. It's ethereally calm in a way unique to horizon-touching icescapes, and every so often a creamy figure appears, loping, lazing, posing beneath an ice arch. We were woken at 5.30am to bright sunshine. Approaching Wrangel Island, we see a dozen polar bears before breakfast.

From the ship, the tundra looks bleak and barren. Walking there, it is anything but. Snow buntings flit overhead, a distant snowy owl perches like a virginal puffball as we explore an intense carpet of miniature plant life. The flowers are beautiful: red-hot pokers of Arctic dock, swathes of purple fireweed and delicate Arctic poppies amid soft yellow mosses and intricate orange lichens, nothing more than a few inches tall. Wrangel is a biodiversity hotspot, its 150km by 125km home to 417 plant species, 23 of them endemic. Walks with the ship's botanist don't get far.

Never having been glaciated, Wrangel is a Noah's Ark of early wildlife and the last known place on earth where the woolly mammoth roamed, dying out as the Great Pyramids rose in Egypt. Mammoth tusks are found regularly, and we see several outside the rangers' summer cabin at Doubtful. The bay is probably so named because the existence of Wrangel was proposed decades before it was found, so it was marked on maps as "Doubtful Land".

It seems a bit doubtful when we anchor, shrouded in thick mist and rain, but we wrap up like Michelin men and travel in by Zodiac, landing amid a jungle of rusty metal. This used to be a military base. Nothing was removed until last year —

Main: Polar bears on an ice floe near Wrangel Island. Top: Doubtful on Wrangel. Above left: the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*

Need to know

Juliet Rix was a guest of Heritage Expeditions, whose 15-day Wrangel Island: Across the Top of the World voyage costs from \$9,000pp (£7,300) full board sharing a twin cabin, including all excursions (heritage-expeditions.com). Flights cost extra. British Airways flies London to Moscow in four hours from £265 return (ba.com). Utair flies Moscow to Anadyr in eight hours for about \$1,400 (utair.ru)

and it's a very slow process. Nature is taking over, however, with lemmings, little pika and tundra flora colonising the scrap.

Back on board under clear skies, one of the ship's two historians is starting a talk on the discovery of Wrangel when the public address crackles into life: "Walrus." The engines are cut and dark shapes on three floes ahead slowly form into huddles of wrinkled brown blubber, ivory tusks glinting in the sun. As we drift closer some splash into the water, bobbing about in sea huddles. "Look!" Half a dozen sleek brown swimmers are streaming along beside the ship — so different from walrus on land.

The sun holds as we land at Dream Head. We are in pursuit of a herd of musk ox. These primeval-looking beasts were reintroduced to the island in the 1970s, a dozen individuals becoming 1,500. The dots in the distance grow as we splash across sodden tundra flecked with glowing white cotton grass, gazing at a beacon-like flock of feeding snow geese. A record one million birds are on the island this year — along with one researcher counting them.

"We will walk until they stand," says Samuel, the deputy expedition leader. "Then we sit. We like to leave animals where we found them." From vast Afghan-rug males to shaggy little calves, they look at us as we sit idyllically amid this vast, swampy, sun-drenched tundra glinting many-coloured into the distance.

A polar bear is shambling about a few hundred metres away. There is always one in view on Wrangel, and the rangers keep a watchful eye. Seven rangers live here for the short summer, three or four over winter, to support the handful of visiting scientists, protect the island from the occasional overenthusiastic tourist and contain the soldiers in their new military base, hidden inside a 20km exclusion zone.

We plough through pack ice across the top of Wrangel, nothing between us and the North Pole, to its little brother, Herald Island, which is famously desolate. The wind is too strong for Zodiacs, but this proves a blessing. As cloud rises and falls atmospherically, and a polar bear parades along the rocky ridge, we circumnavigate the island. At the nightly recap we discover that on Herald's northern side we were sailing through uncharted waters.

We've been right round Wrangel in five fabulous days. Now we're heading south, past Cape Dezhnev, the easternmost point of the Asian continent, and through the Bering Strait. We pass the Diomed Islands — Great Diomed (Russian, also known as Tomorrow Island) and Little Diomed (American, Yesterday Island); Russia and the US divided by 3km — and the international dateline.

The tundra gets higher, the now-distant bears become brown, and the weather turns wet, but not before a glorious stop at the fjord-protected Unnamed Bay, with salmon leaping from the river and ground squirrels posing like meerkats.

Rain cannot mar our landing at Whale Bone Alley on Yttygran Island, a unique archaeological site. Totemic curved bow-head jawbones rise from the sand, while vast skulls sit on the shore. Indigenous people placed them here in the 14th to 16th centuries. This was not simply a hunting ground; there are no other whalebones on the island — like an osseous Stonehenge, debate about its purpose still rages.

One thing is certain: this was — and is — a hotspot for whales. We buzz around the fjord on Zodiacs, rasping in-breaths all round. A grey whale glides by, cutting between two of the boats. Like the polar bears, it is entirely unperturbed. That's the beauty of visiting wildlife in one of the most remote places on Earth: close encounters of the ethical kind. As we putter towards a final blowing whale, we even smell its cabbagey breath hanging in the air.