



Explorers in the Arctic

With our onboard expert guides, your journey to the Arctic will also be presented as a journey through time, revisiting the arctic past with its rich cultural history of exploration and endurance. Along with the rest of the Arctic region, Svalbard has long held the imagination of explorers and adventurers throughout the ages. Whether for money, pride or glory, several names have shaped our understanding of the High Arctic and through sailing, sledding or even flying, these brave and often reckless men risked (and sometimes lost) all in the cold lands of the Arctic.

John Davis (1550-1605) Early Arctic Hero

This British scientist and cartographer was a prolific explorer of the Arctic and is known most for his detailed maps of the Arctic region. Amongst one of his 'discoveries' was Greenland, having been seemingly forgotten for three hundred years after early Norse settlers abandoned the harsh land. Like many early explorers, Davis sought the "Northwest Passage", and although he was convinced that a passage existed, he was unsuccessful because of the ice, trying on multiple occasions to find a route through this barrier. Famous not only for his exploration but also his invention of both the 'backstaff' and the 'double quadrant' (the Davis Quadrant), Davis greatly forwarded Arctic knowledge during his era. He ironically died whilst on a voyage for the British East India Company in Indonesia, where he was ambushed and killed by pirates.



Willem Barentsz (1550-1597) The 'Finding' of Spitsbergen

Barentsz was a famous Dutch navigator and explorer, leading several early expeditions to the far North, in search for the fabled Northeast Passage. On his third voyage, Barentsz led an expedition of two ships, captained by Jan Rijp and Jacob van Heemskerck. After first finding and naming Bjørmøya (Bear Island), the expedition arrived at a land characterised by high, jagged mountains, which Barentsz appropriately called 'Spitsbergen'. The 'discovery' of Spitsbergen occurred on the 17 June, 1596. They explored up along the south and eastern coasts of Spitsbergen before the expedition split due to a disagreement back on Bear Island, with Barentsz leading one of the ships North East to Novaya Zemlya. It was here that his ship became stuck in the ice and the crew was forced to overwinter in a hut they built from the lumber from their ship. Ironically, after the ice had thawed and the crew left the island, Barentsz died after just seven days in the open sea- a victim to scurvy.



Robert Peary (1855-1920) First to Conquer the Pole?

On the 6th April, 1909, this American explorer became the first man to officially reach the North Pole – although his claim was subsequently argued back and forth for several years, even though his achievement was 'officially recognised' by the US Congress. Finally, in 1990, the National Geographic Society concluded that he was 'as close to the Pole as navigational equipment in his time could confirm'. In this achievement, Peary travelled by dog sled and was only accompanied by five other people; Matthew Henson and four Inuit. After the dispute of his achievement, Peary was to return to the Arctic several times; finally with a team of 89 people and more than 240 dogs. After this trip, he wrote; "My life work is accomplished . . . I have got the North Pole out of



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Roald Amundsen (1872-1928) A True Polar Legend

This famous Norwegian explorer was the first person (in 1905) to successfully navigate the legendary 'Northwest Passage' in his 45 tonne fishing boat, Gjøa – although the journey did take three years to complete, due to events such as long periods of the boat being frozen in by the ice. This eccentric explorer liked to be known as the 'Last of the Vikings' and conditioned himself to deal with the Arctic chill by sleeping as a young boy with the windows open to feel the Norwegian Arctic winters. His other achievements included being the first person to make it to the South Pole in 1911 and was one of the first people (along with Umberto Nobile) to fly over the North Pole in an airship in 1926. He disappeared in June 1928 while taking part in a mission to rescue Nobile up in Spitsbergen and his body was found more than thirty years later on the eastern side of the archipelago.



Richard E. Byrd (1888-1957) North Pole Flight?

Byrd was an American navigational aviator in the U.S. Navy who, in 1926, organized and funded a private expedition to the Arctic, where he planned to be the first person to fly over the North Pole. After taking off from his base on Spitsbergen, Byrd and his pilot, (Floyd Bennett), claimed to have reached the North Pole on May 9, 1926 and were both awarded the Medal of Honour upon their return. However, doubts to the validity of Byrd's claims soon arose and persisted until the late 1990's. In the 1950's, the Norwegian-American aviator, Bernt Balchen, publicly expressed his doubt as to whether Byrd has succeeded in his quest, later saying that he probably just flew around 'aimlessly' due to being lost. When his expedition diary was publicly released in 1996, faint notes which has been rubbed out showed discrepancies between where he was and where he alleged he was. Still, no-one knows whether he actually succeeded or not.



Umberto Nobile (1885-1978) Up and Over

This Italian explorer was the designer and pilot of the airship Norge (Norway). He, Roald Amundsen and Lincoln Ellsworth became the first explorers to fly over the North Pole in the airship in May, 1926. However, Nobile wanted to make an all-Italian flight to the Pole and planned to fly the airship Italia from Spitsbergen to the Pole. Reaching the Pole in 1928, the party could not land, due to bad weather. The airship struck the ice, destroying the pilot cabin, leaving some of the crew stranded on the ice. The rest of the Italia rose back up and disappeared with six men still aboard, leaving nine members of crew, including Nobile, stranded on the pack ice for seven weeks before being rescued. During this time, the explorer, Amundsen died whilst taking part in the rescue mission.

