



SVALBARD'S 10 STRANGEST STORIES OF 2014



M. KARDEL / UNIVERSITY OF OSLO



MARK SABBATINI / ICEPEOPLE



GREENPEACE

Faux paws: Eigil Reimers, left, is wrapped in a polar bear costume by Sindre Eftestøl to determine if the disguise will frighten reindeer faster than a human in street clothes. At center, Solveig Egeland, foreground, looks through debris for building blocks for her shack made out of trash picked up from Svalbard's coastlines. At right, Lego figures reenact actress Emma Thompson's visit to Svalbard aboard Greenpeace's *Esperanza*.

BLAZING SADDOS

Drunk pyromaniacs, pervy tourists, trashy environmentalists and cherished cons add to woeful year

By **MARK SABBATINI**
Editor

Not to go on a major downer just before Christmas or anything but, face it, this year basically sucked.

Things got off to a not-cool start with house fires and hellishly warm winter weather, and ended with a lot of locals seeing their futures here go up in flames due to the collapse of the coal mining industry. Tycoons came off more as buffoons, greenies couldn't keep their act clean and there were many fond memories of when a master crook largely ruled the roost.

Still, a bad day (or year) in Svalbard beats a good one almost anywhere else, and is probably more unique and interesting as well. So since sometimes there's nothing to do with misfortune but laugh at it, here's the weirdest happenings of 2014 in roughly chronological order:



RUSSIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

Killer routine: Champion figure skater Miki Ando's demand for a large rink at the North Pole reportedly used up resources that delayed the rescue a youth group stranded by a storm there.

1. Classic Pizza closes, lots of drunks respond by setting their homes on fire

Call it a Classic case of unintended consequences, as the shutdown of Longyearbyen's last after-pub-hours eatery (and the only one offering delivery) at the end of last year left

bombed boozers fending for themselves in the wee hours. That sparked a multitude of fire alarms and damaged kitchens due to starving sots slumbering with their stoves still simmering. While police and firefighters merely got a lot of annoying early wakeup calls, the culprits paid dearly for their carelessness with fines of nearly 11,000 kroner each.

2. Chinese guy scares locals by bidding for land without knowing there's ice here

Lots of Very Scary Headlines appeared in early spring as one of only two private tracts of land in Svalbard was put on the market, with a Chinese tycoon who supposedly wanted to turn it into resort property emerging as the most-oft mentioned potential buyer. But nobody seemed to have a clue about what the hell was really going on, including him after he told a TV station he didn't realize the land he was bidding

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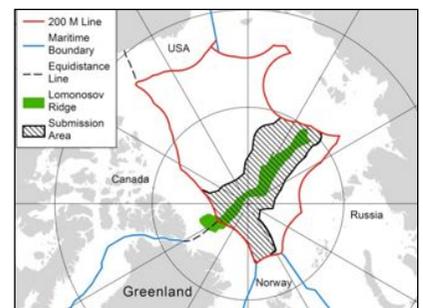
Denmark joins Canada, Russian in trying to claim N. Pole and beyond

By **MARK SABBATINI**
Editor

Maybe it's not the oil. Maybe countries are looking to get rich by pilfering all those toys for themselves.

Santa, who's managed to escape having his workshop detected despite all the tourists and other activity at the North Pole, might have a tougher time escaping the intense scrutiny of the vast surrounding area countries are now officially trying to claim as

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UM.DK

Denmark is trying to claim the North Pole and a large area near Svalbard as its own.

Who's to blame and how to express your wrath

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When we screw up you'll know about it – on the front page. One of the big complaints about newspapers is they tend to bury corrections and clarifications deep inside where few people who read the original article see them. If we need to fix something, an alert box on the front page will state what story is in error and where the full correction is printed.

Submitting material

Letters, columns, photos and other material are welcome, but we can't offer pay for published items since nobody here is getting paid at the moment. Submissions in electronic form (text, Word documents, JPEGs, etc.) are highly preferred, although typing and/or scanning of items will be considered on a per-case basis. We reserve the right to edit submissions for length, clarity, accuracy, libel and other reasons, but we will also make every reasonable effort to contact the author about any changes prior to publication.

It's Christmas. Kids are cute. Therefore...



Kids carry lights through Lompensenteret, at top, during a St Lucy's Day celebration Dec. 13. At lower left, Longyearbyen School students perform a musical skit during a holiday variety show Dec. 18. At lower right, Thor Eklund, 4, struggles to keep a Christmas tree upright while his family purchases it outside Svalbardbutikken on Dec. 19. Photos by Mark Sabbatini / Icepeople.

Icesheet

Random bits of the week's weirdness:

Every year engineers, scientists and other masterminds come up with their complex theories of how Santa gets all those presents delivered in one night, but here's one this year that has us stumped: To carry what's surely the biggest loads of cargo in the world, you need the smallest animals. That's part of the thesis advocated by Sharon George, a physicist at Keele University who notes "we know, from Clement C Moore's poem,...which first introduced Santa's reindeer, that the animals are tiny." Where to find those reindeer? "Father Christmas uses a team of Svalbard reindeer, which weigh a maximum 90 kilograms," she told *The Stoke Sentinel* (of the rather suggestively named U.K. town Stoke-on-Trent). "Normal male reindeer can weigh up to 182 kilograms, well above the maximum load of 122 kilograms per meter which a normal roof can



SOMEBODY WHO'S NAME ISN'T MENTIONED

How much in fines has this guy racked up? e Considering how far Santa makes them fly in a night once a year – not to mention whatever he does to give them that ability – you'd think The Governor of Svalbard could force him to buy all of his coal from the crisis-plagued Store Norske.

hold. If Santa didn't use these smaller reindeer, it would ruin Christmas, reindeer would be falling through roofs and people would be suing Santa. It would be very bad." The rest of the thesis, which includes something about how a poisoned cat in a box can be alive and dead at the same time, is at tinyurl.com/nf8fb3r ... And since the end of the year is approaching, we're seeing lots of the inevitable "best of" photo lists with local winners. There's only space for one this week, so we're going with the **misguided headliner of The Weather Channel's contest featuring a bear from "Svalbary"** (at tinyurl.com/nw35d4m).



JOSHUA HOLKO / WWW.TPOTY.COM

You just think it's blood: She's embarrassed you can't get the name of this place right.

Who in their right mind goes rafting at Christmas?



The answer, for those choosing not to treat this as a rhetorical question, is 10 people from the Norwegian Coast Guard's *KV Svalbard* icebreaker who were hoisted from the raft, above, up to one of The Governor of Svalbard's rescue helicopters during a joint exercise Dec. 15 in Isfjorden. At right, a crew member on the ship guides the helicopter onto the landing deck as part of a series of landing and flight pattern exercises. Photos by Håkon Kjøllmoen / www.kjollmoen.com.



Denmark wants to get *really* close

ENCROACHMENT, from page 1

their own. Denmark became the first country to officially file such a claim on Dec. 15, with Russia announcing two days later they will file a similar claim.

Canada, the United States and Norway are also engaged in the long-running turf war that's heating up as climate change opens access to natural resources and shipping routes.

Denmark's claim, based on its interpretation of Greenland's continental shelf, includes a wide swath extending about halfway from the Pole to Svalbard. That could potentially affect expeditions to the North Pole, since Russia currently operates the Barneo base camp at 89 degrees latitude North, as well as shorter trips.

The claims expected from Russia and Canada also extend past the Pole toward Svalbard, although not as far. However, Russia is also continuing to challenge the authority Norway has to control commercial and other activity in and around the archipelago.

The claims are being submitted to the United Nation's Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Norway became the first Arctic nation to settle a continental shelf dispute with the commission, receiving a boundary extending to about 85 degrees North, roughly the edge of the area Denmark is seeking.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

HEADLINES STOLEN FROM SVALBARDPOSTEN VERDENS NORDLIGSTE AVIS

Minister: Parliament supports city, but no promises of help

A bipartisan majority in Parliament wants to ensure Longyearbyen remains a robust family community despite the serious challenges and likely decline in population the city is facing due to the crisis at Store Norske, said Anders Anundsen, Norway's Minister of Justice and Public Security, during a visit this week to meet with local leaders. He declined any specific pledges of support, saying the government needs to see the restructuring plan Store Norske is scheduled to present in January. The company is laying off 100 of its 340 employees this month due to a financial crisis that threatens its ability to operate beyond the first quarter of 2015, with family members and workers in related industries also facing the possibility of leaving Longyearbyen.

Mobile station along Svea snowmobile route closing

The mobile base station that provides phone signals during a portion of the snowmobile route from Longyearbyen to Svea is being taken out of operation, said Oddmund Rønning, health and safety manager for Store Norske. The company received permission from The Governor of Svalbard in 2009 to set up the station, but Rønning said the goal of improving safety isn't being realized because there is a false sense of security in a station that doesn't cover the entire route. The station is also expensive to operate, a significant concern due to the company's financial crisis.

Queen to attend opening of local branch of art museum

The Longyearbyen branch of the Northern Norway Art Museum is scheduled to open Feb. 6 with the initial works emphasizing contemporary artists, according to officials. The branch, located inside a rented portion of Svalbard Museum, will have an opening reception featuring Joan Jonas' video/wall images project "Glacier," Sami joiker Ánde Sombi and a classical performance by members of the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic Orchestra, said Knut Ljøgdø, director of the Tromsø-based museum. Queen Sonja and Norwegian Cultural Minister Thorild Widvey will also attend.

Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Partly cloudy. E winds to 32 km/h. High -17C (-22C wind chill), low -19C (-26C wind chill).	Partly cloudy. E winds to 29 km/h. High -16C (-21C wind chill), low -20C (-26C wind chill).	Cloudy. NE winds to 18 km/h. High -14C (-19C wind chill), low -16C (-21C wind chill).	Partly cloudy. SE winds to 29 km/h. High -15C (-20C wind chill), low -16C (-21C wind chill).
24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness

Extended forecast: Sunday, cloudy, -8C (-15C), -15C (-22C), light 0:00h; Monday, cloudy, -6C (-11C), -13C (-19C), light 0:00h; Tuesday, p. cloudy, -13C (-18C), -15C (-20C), light 0:00h; Wednesday, cloudy, -9C (-15C), -15C (-21C), light 0:00h

Data provided by storm.no

A year so weird there's no room for a big headline

BIZARRE, from page 1

millions for is largely covered with ice. One popular rumor was he was a puppet of the Chinese government's effort to establish a beachhead here. Another was the landowners were playing up his alleged bid to scare the Norwegian government into paying more to keep the property out of foreign hands. The owners said in early August an imminent sale could happen "at any time," but there hasn't been a peep since – possibly because the coal-rich land no longer looks like a wise investment.

3. Figure skater's diva act at North Pole endangers stranded youth expedition

This year's roster of people attempting novelty acts at the Pole included champion figure skater Miki Ando of Japan who, according to Russian base camp's blog, used up much of the available hot water by demanding a bigger rink at the top of the world. That, for some reason, complicated the rescue of seven teens and three adults who got trapped at the Pole for two nights with little food or fuel when a storm hit. But ultimately things worked out for everyone, as the youths' ordeal earned them a heroes' welcome from President Vladimir Putin and news reports gloating about their success while expeditions from Norway and the U.S. failed.

4. Greenpeace takes its Jekyll and Hyde act to new (and costly) levels

They briefly halted a nearby oil drilling rig by boarding it, only to have their members and ship end up in the hands of authorities. They got lots of attention by bringing actress Emma Thompson on an anti-drilling cruise around Svalbard, only to get busted for not having the required licensed personnel on board. They embarrassed Norway's petroleum directorate into abandoning seismic tests in Svalbard (or not, if the government's strangely-timed denials are to be believed), only to see Big Oil make a major finding south of the archipelago. Finally, a collapse in oil prices at the end of the year might have given Greenpeace cause to celebrate, except pretty much the entire world's pissed at them right now for massively defacing Peru's world-renowned Nazca Lines in a useless PR stunt during a nearby climate summit.

5. Aging cabin geek helps Telenor pull off media stunt (and scandal) of year

It seemed like corporate PR gold: bring journalists to a rickety old cabin with no water or plumbing in the "remote" Arctic, let them watch Svein Nordahl fly a virtual plane on the mother of all gaming rigs, listen to him rave about his new 4G internet hookup and reap the rewards as your marketing stunt goes viral. But Telenor's free-publicity flight crash landed after Nordahl's tale spent a couple of days on the "most read" list of publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, as it was revealed a video shot by a "journalist" that accompanied most of the coverage was actually filmed by Telenor publicist Kristine Meek. Nothing ever truly disappears from the internet, but the video is obviously not quite as easy to find these days.

6. Cruise passengers take the piss

The bizarre behavior of the hoards invading by the thousands some days finally boiled over as, not content to merely walk uninvited into locals' homes and rifle through their cars, their antics targeted preschoolers in ways that

got national notice. One guy walked over to a fence the tots were watching him from and without warning used it as a urinal, other folks walked through kindergartens like they were museums and/or treated the kids like they were animals to be fed at a zoo. For more than a few young'uns, learning to shout "no photos" was probably their first words of English.

7. Hut made of garbage gets trashed, junked and (finally?) recycled

Trash/treasure cliches ran amok in August after artist Solveig Egeland and a group of volunteers built a beachside hut made of debris collecting during the governor's annual cleanup cruise along the coast of northern Spitsbergen. But while colorful and creative, there were numerous locals less than thrilled about gazing upon a monument of trash – and even less so about the fact it was funded by an environmental grant that could have funded something more practical. The debate got even more heated when Egeland said she was looking for somebody to take responsibility for the hut so it could remain standing after its scheduled Oct. 1 takedown date. There seemed to be no takers and she hosted a farewell beach party on the eve of its destruction, only to have a small group offer their support at literally the last moment. And even detractors came around, saying the debate's intensity shows the hut does indeed have legit value as an art project.

8. Two guys in polar bear costumes scare reindeer, win major science award

Sharing the awards stage with someone who's project is "stopping nosebleeds with pork" doesn't suggest your research is going to get a lot of respect. But Eigil Reimers and Sindre Eftestøl said serious science was served by dressing up in polar bear costumes and running around Svalbard scaring reindeer. The University of Oslo due won the Ig Nobel Prize for Arctic Science in September for the project, which they say shows reindeer are becoming more alarmed by the presence of polar bears as the shrinking Arctic sea ice makes interactions with the predators more common.

9. The Return of the Yeti – twice

Ugh – it's unreal this is on the list for a second straight year and, even worse, made global headline twice (in July and December) after being declared a hoax last year. So to repeat for (hopefully) a final time: NO! Svalbard polar bears didn't migrate to Nepal 120,000 years ago and somehow evolve into Yeti monsters. The guy who says he has DNA samples proving otherwise has been exhaustively and repeatedly found by experts to be full of crap.

10. Corrupt ex-leader Robert Hermansen the big winner in Store Norske crisis

Suggesting there's any feel-good stories during the worst – and potentially last – year of Svalbard's biggest industry is absurd enough. But Hermansen, who spent 15 months in prison for a corruption scandal that arguably triggered Store Norske's multiyear decline, hit the mother lode as the bottom fell out of the company he led for nearly a decade until 2008. He got a hero's welcome as he returned with a new biography that claims he was a scapegoat for the company's bad decisions as many locals noted that, whatever else may have transpired, the company thrived while he was in charge.

What's up

Dec. 24

2 p.m. and 4 p.m.: Christmas Eve Mass. Svalbard Church.

Dec. 25

Noon: Christmas Mass. Svalbard Church.

Dec. 26

Noon: Father Christmas procession, beginning and ending at Svalbardhallen. Medals for children afterward.

Dec. 28

11 a.m.: Mass. Svalbard Church.

5 p.m.: Christmas tree festival. Svalbard Church.

5 p.m.: Movie: "The Penguins of Madagascar" (3D), U.S. animated comedy/adventure, ages 7 and up. Kulturhuset.

7 p.m.: Movie: "Girlhood," French drama, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

Dec. 29

6 p.m.: Christmas party for juniors and seniors at Longyearbyen Youth Club.

Dec. 31

7 p.m.-4 a.m.: Formal New Year's dinner, fireworks viewing and party. Huset.

Jan. 3

1 p.m.: Movie: "The Penguins of Madagascar," U.S. animated comedy/adventure, ages 7 and up. Kulturhuset.

3 p.m.: Movie: "Horrible Bosses 2," U.S. comedy, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

5 p.m.: Movie: "The Hobbit – Battle of the Five Armies," New Zealandic/U.S. fantasy/adventure, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 4

8 p.m.: Christmas concert featuring Reidun Sæther, Espen Grjøtheim and other visiting performers. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 5

8 p.m.: Trivia quiz. Barentz Pub.

Jan. 7

6 p.m.: Movie: "Calvary – Golgata," Irish/British drama, ages 15 and up. Kulturhuset.

What's online

Icepeople.net provides daily updates of news about Svalbard and the world's polar regions, plus extras for articles from the print edition. Among the latest news:

- *Lima climate deal: Worthy or worthless?*
- *Norway drops to 24th in climate ranking*
- *Oceans have (only) 5 trillion bits of trash*
- *Will skeptics ban Global Warmer beer?*