



SVALBARD'S 10 BIGGEST STORIES OF 2013

Sunk low, sky high

Russian mining accidents, city gov't makeover, return of Norwegian Air, cruise ship decline among top events

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

Offering yet more proof Svalbard is truly a world apart, Norway's biggest story of 2013 didn't get any coverage from the local paper of record.

While the nation voted in a new Conservative-led leadership that's promising drastic changes, the local impact isn't likely to be felt until late in 2014, if not beyond. Instead, the most newsworthy events of 2013 were – as usual – a mix with either more local or global significance.

In order of importance (and mostly bypassing last issue's "strangest stories" list), these are *Icepeople's* picks for the 10 biggest stories of 2013:

Deadly negligence in Barentsburg

What might have been a triumphant year for Svalbard's Russian community instead became one of disgrace due to a string of accidents in Barentsburg's coal mine. Two resulted in deaths – and the fifth since 2008 – and another man lost his leg due to injuries in September. Norwegian labor officials repeatedly closed the mine, calling management's lax attitude toward safety "totally unacceptable" and the mine infrastructure so unstable it's unknown if it can ever be reopened. The accidents overshadowed long-delayed efforts to restore tourist-oriented facilities in the communities, including a hotel in Pyramiden that got some global notice as it finally opened for guests.

Extreme Makeover: City Edition

The three-headed monster of a government became what's supposed to be a single-headed chum, as the infrastructure and educational entities were consolidated into the main municipal branch. Unfortunately, the

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MARK SABBATINI / ICEPEOPLE

Barentsburg's coal mine, top, remains inactive after being shut down in September due to a series of accidents. Meanwhile, activity is brisk at Svalbard Airport after the return of discount carrier Norwegian Air in March, with passenger traffic increasing 40 percent a month later.

Got a *really* big wish list?



MARK SABBATINI / ICEPEOPLE

The world's largest mailbox for Santa, more than nine meters high, is lit Dec. 22 at Sjøområdet.

Longyearbyen gets huge holiday surprise with world's largest Christmas mailbox, built in secret

By MARK SABBATINI
Editor

Yes, that's a massively impressive Christmas mailbox and it sort of blows the mind its construction was kept a secret in this tiny town. But here's the truly mysterious thing: Nobody's actually seen Santa fetching the letters that nonetheless are now reaching him.

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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.

Christmas cookies – the universal language



BJØRNØYA METEOROLOGISKE STASJON



POLISH POLAR STATION HORNSUND



ÅSNE DOLVE MEYER / KINGS BAY

Residents at the Bjørnøya meteorological station, top, decorate a "freely interpreted" gingerbread version of the facility just before Christmas. Other holiday activities including a few residents making the traditional polar bear dip in the icy waters, although "most preferred the hot tub," according to the station's blog. At bottom left, Priest Leif Magne Helgesen, far left, accompanies other Svalbard Church staff and officials with the Svalbard governor's office on a visit to the Polish Polar Station Hornsund on Dec. 4. The visit was part of a tour that includes all of the archipelago's outlying settlements, concluding with a Jan. 7 trip to Barentsburg to celebrate Russia's Orthodox Christmas Day. At bottom right, a polar bear approaches a cottage in the annual gingerbread town built by residents of the international research settlement in Ny-Ålesund.

Icesheet

Random bits of the week's weirdness:

This seems like the right place to mention the happenings that didn't quite make our list of the year's biggest or strangest stories, which everyone who knows anything will judge as comically wrong. Being the tabloid hacks we are, that obviously means leading with royalty, as Norway's king and queen made separate visits, as did a princess from Thailand. There were also a couple of polar bears shot trying to invade cabins, a woman killed when a huge wave capsized a sightseeing raft, and a loss of innocence as Svalbardbutikken was forced to install security cameras and scanners due to skyrocketing thefts in what's supposed a nearly crime-free town. In addition, since sports are also a tabloid mainstay, it's worth noting a serious upgrade to the Svalbard Ski-marathon's status due to the participation of six-time World Cup champ Eldar Rønning ... Our lack of news judgement when it comes to "best of" lists isn't stopping us from mocking others' picks, with this week's being "The best of Travelbite in 2013." The website's Ben Taub



KITTY TERWOLBECK / FLICKR

They're everywhere! They also get tiresomely repetitive, but shoot a stuffed polar bear from the right vantage point and it can look fearsome.

"explores one of the most remote and unforgiving landscapes on Earth – Svalbard – and discovers that little has changed since the first Arctic explorers arrived on its frozen and wildlife-rich lands." He actually **equates drinking and taking polar bear photos aboard a tour ship with a 17th century whaling expedition whose members drew straws "to decide which of the ship's crew would be left behind at Smeerenberg to guard the blubber ovens until spring."**



MARK SABBATINI / ICEPEOPLE

About 20 Longyearbyen residents, top, light torches at Svalbardhallen and begin the traditional Santa March around town Thursday. At bottom left, Suzanne Marie Lie, 7, left, and Tara Karoline, 7, write letters to put in the new world's largest mailbox for Santa as it is unveiled Dec. 22 at Sjøområdet. At bottom right, Anne Lise Sandvik, right, greets a family after Christmas Eve Mass at Svalbard Church.

Record-size mailbox still holds a 'surprise'

POSTAL, from page 1

The record-size Christmas mailbox, in Santa-like red and more than nine meters high, was officially unwrapped Dec. 22 at Sjøområdet. Children immediately began writing and depositing letters, which are somehow vanishing to make room for more (as if that's going to be a problem) from locals and visitors year-round.

Funds for the box, built by LNS Spitsbergen, were donated by Po Lin Lee, a Hong Kong woman who moved to Longyearbyen three years ago and recently started a tour operator business. She said she feels like a mailbox offers a universal way to express people's inner thoughts and hopes.

"Why not send a letter to Santa Claus to

tell him they're happy, to tell him they're sad, to tell him their dreams?" she said. "Everybody can have Santa Claus."

She said the project took about a month from conception to completion, with only the few LNS workers who built the box in on the secret.

"Even my father and sister didn't know," she said.

While the outside is decorated with lights, an array of international flags and a "Welcome to Santa Claus Town Longyearbyen" message in two languages, Lee said the two-story interior of the mailbox is incomplete. It will feature decorations and an area to read.

"There's a surprise coming," she added.

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



PO LIN LEE

HEADLINES STOLEN FROM SVALBARDPOSTEN

VERDENS NORDLIGSTE AVIS

Major storm destroys most cargo on Svea-bound ship

A storm causing massive waves destroyed most of the cargo aboard the *Green Frost* during its voyage to Svea last week, according to officials. The ship was about 60 nautical miles south of Svalbard when the storm struck with unexpected severity, due to weather reports that estimated wave heights at less than half of their size, said Bjørn Tore Zahl, owner of Zahl Transport, which operates the vessel. "The ship was in a full storm with average wave heights of 12 meters," he said. "This means that some waves were much higher than that." The ship's cargo hold also sustained severe damage. Store Norske Administrative Director Per Andersson said the company is still assessing the extent of damage to the cargo.

Two new hotels, restaurant to form complex at Elvesletta

A 150-room hotel/restaurant complex and a themed hotel with accommodations for about 100 people are being planned for a three-lot site at Elvesletta next to Melkeveien, according to Store Norske. The company, which owns the land and has been planning the project for a few years, offered the plots this month to separate operators. The larger hotel site was assigned to Sandmo & Svenkerud, although rumors it may become part of a chain by developer Olav Thon could not be confirmed. The attached restaurant was awarded to Steakers Svalbard AS, which operates Kroa, with the type of dining still under consideration. The third lot for a "fun" themed hotel was awarded to Po Lin Lee, a Hong Kong businesswoman and tour operator who gained notoriety for donating the world's largest Santa's mailbox to the city this month.

Man fined at least 5K kr. for setting off fireworks indoors

A man in his 20s who set off fireworks inside an Elvesletta apartment complex Friday night has been fined 5,000 kroner and may be facing additional penalties, according to officials. The Svalbard governor's office imposed the 5,000-kroner fine and it is possible the city will demand compensation because the fire department responded to the incident.

Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Snow. S winds to 32 km/h. High -4C (-9C wind chill), low -7C (-13C wind chill).	Cloudy. SE winds to 29 km/h. High -4C (-9C wind chill), low -9C (-17C wind chill).	Cloudy. SE winds to 29 km/h. High -6C (-13C wind chill), low -8C (-14C wind chill).	Cloudy. SE winds to 32 km/h. High -6C (-12C wind chill), low -8C (-14C wind chill).
24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness

Extended forecast: Sunday, cloudy, -8C (-14C), -10C (-16C), light 0:00h; Monday, p. cloudy, -6C (-12C), -9C (-14C), light 0:00h; Tuesday, cloudy, -4C (-9C), -6C (-11C), light 0:00h; Wednesday, snow, -4C (-7C), -4C (-8C), light 0:00h

Data provided by storm.no



WIKICOMMONS

Endangered species? A lone cruise ship docks in Ny-Ålesund, which reported a 40 percent drop in passengers this year due to tougher government regulations. Revenue from tourism provides critical funding for the settlement's scientific research programs and officials say the situation may get worse.

Not everything shipshape in '13

NEWSMAKERS, from page 1

kinder, gentler rulers are still being forced to reach into residents' pockets more because Parliament, while approving an upgrade that extends the power plant's lifespan by 25 years, provided only a fraction of the money for it. They also gave the city a bunch of money for a new port with an eye on expanding Svalbard as a tourism and international shipping hub, but again it's only about half of the total cost – and not all of the locals are thrilled about seeing a traffic jam of industrial and commercial activity from their windows.

Flying the frigid skies

There was a lot of reason to be skeptical about discount airline Norwegian Air after two rapidly aborted attempts to provide service to Longyearbyen in past years. But the direct flights to Oslo were an immediate hit as passenger traffic increased 40 percent a month after service resumed in March. The carrier announced toward the end of the year it will offer year-round service, instead of seasonal as originally planned.

Coal: From horrible to merely chaotic

After a few years of costly scandals and record losses due to a collapsing coal market, Store Norske was grateful to merely have a year of severe turbulence. The company shipped nearly 40 percent more coal from Svea than in 2012, but its struggling bottom line and layoffs continued due to low prices that may not rise anytime soon. Similarly, the company extracted a first ceremonial load of coal from its new Lunckefjell mine, but officials are now dubious if the project can make a profit.

Sinking prospects in Ny-Ålesund

While Longyearbyen's cruise ship traffic declined a bit after a 40 percent jump in 2012, an ominous situation surfaced in Ny-Ålesund as a 40 percent drop in passengers was reported this year due to stricter government safety and environmental regulations. Ships must now have a pilot with Arctic experience and a ban on heavy oil is scheduled to take effect in 2015, both of which have cruise industry officials saying they may redirect ships to other, less-costly Arctic destinations.

Climate change indeed a 'hoax'

The ice sheet grew after decades of shrink-

age because it was kinda chilly during the year, so pay no attention to the arrival of king crabs, flesh-eating plants, those cracks in your walls due to "thawing permafrost" or the landslides threatening to wipe out large sections of Longyearbyen (although the national government has mercifully agreed to deal with the latter, sparing locals at least some of the cost).

Plight of the polar bear films

While some of the quirkier antics of the BBC documentary "The Polar Bear Family and Me" were mentioned in our strangest stories list, the more serious impacts for man and beast are considerable. Filmmaker Jason Roberts saw several projects involving major media companies canceled and his business put into peril as Svalbard's governor cracked down on field activities after fining him for disrupting the protected species.

News by newbies

If the big stories are defined by what's in the newspaper, then the paper of record makes the list as *Svalbardposten's* entire editorial staff changed during the year. Now led by Editor Eirik Palm, who replaced controversial legend Birger Amundsen, readers are getting fresh perspectives on some familiar issues, plus an online experience that's more open and features more prominent opinions.

The great health care scare

A new policy largely eliminating health insurance for foreign workers if absent from their jobs for more than a few days would be near the top of the list if welfare officials who discussed the change with locals in October hadn't quickly rescinded it due to "confusion." The change was based on a court case where an African national unsuccessfully sought coverage despite working only intermittently, resulting in a howl of protests from local businesses and politicians as well as the workers.

Savory is out, sweet is in

Also known as A Tale of Two Eateries, as Classic Pizza was forced out of Lompensenteret after 12 years so Fruene can expand its hugely successful new chocolate-making operation. It may be just the beginning of major changes at the shopping center, which was purchased in November by Amfi Drift AS, Norway's largest owner of malls.

What's up

Jan. 1

6 p.m.: Movie: "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," U.S. drama/comedy, ages 7 and up. Kulturhuset.

8:15 p.m.: Movie: "The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug" (3D), U.S. fantasy/drama, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 4

2 p.m.: Exhibit opening: "Thor Heyerdahl Anniversary 1914-2014," anniversary collection in collaboration with the Kon-Tiki Museum. Galleri Svalbard. Followed at 3 p.m. by lecture "Who was Thor Heyerdahl?" by Halfdan Tangen Jr. from the Kon-Tiki Museum and author Ragnar Kvam Jr.

Jan. 5

5 p.m.: Movie: "Hundraåringen Som Klatret Ut Gjennom Vinduet og Forsvant," Swedish drama/comedy, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

7:15 p.m.: Movie: "Prisoners," U.S. drama/thriller, ages 15 and up. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 6

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

Jan. 8

6 p.m.: Movie: "Hundraåringen Som Klatret Ut Gjennom Vinduet og Forsvant," Swedish drama/comedy, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

5 p.m.: Movie: "Frost," U.S. animated family film dubbed in Norwegian, ages 7 and up. Kulturhuset.

7 p.m.: Movie: "47 Ronin" (3D), U.S. action/drama, ages 15 and up. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 13

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

Jan. 15

5 p.m.: Movie: "Vi Er Best!" Swedish drama, all ages. Kulturhuset.

7 p.m.: Movie: "The Book Thief," U.S./German drama/crime, ages 11 and up. Kulturhuset.

Jan. 20

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

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:

- *Ship in Antarctic rescue now stuck itself*
- *Arctic energy security: A tepid frontier?*
- *Russia bans Norway's fish as of Jan. 1*
- *The Arctic's (gasp) good news in 2013*