



WRANGEL ISLAND

POLAR BEAR ISLAND

WORDS JULIET RIX

Journey to Russia's Far East and step back in time to the Ice Age to uncover the last place where woolly mammoths roamed and where hidden wildlife gems still flourish

T

hey called it 'Doubtful Land' – a place long sought, even preemptively marked on maps, before it was finally discovered. And as we approached, it looked doubtful indeed. Our ship, the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, crunched to a halt, sea-ice blanching the water, blocking our way to the desolately beautiful shore. The northernmost UNESCO World Heritage Site, Wrangel Island was once again playing hard to get.

Fortunately, we'd already made friends with the ice – and been richly rewarded. Out on deck early that morning, meandering through the floes, a pearly panorama glistening in the Arctic sun, we had seen more than a dozen polar bears before breakfast. Some took us in their stride, continuing their wanderings, ambling over icy islands, bounding across freezing sea-streams. Others – literally – came to meet us.

Standing on the ship's bow we saw a mother and two cubs staring up at us – an extraordinary moment of connection with the Arctic's top predator. With bears becoming scarcer in other parts of the North, those in this little-visited corner of the Russian Far East were, at least for the moment, still bright-eyed, curious – and plentiful.

Eighty per cent of the region's bears breed on Wrangel or its little sister, Herald Island, collectively known as the 'Polar Bear Maternity Ward'. "There is

no need to bother the bears by following them," says Nathan Russ, expedition leader and co-owner of Heritage Expeditions, which has – uniquely – been bringing visitors here for a decade, "We like to leave the wildlife as we found it. We can be relaxed. We know we can always find another one."

Wrangel Island sits in the Chukchi Sea at the top of the Bering Strait, which divides Russian Chukotka from American Alaska by, at its narrowest, just 82km. We had sailed 1,852km, hugging the Siberian coast of Chukotka. It is a journey taken by only a few ships a year – a huge boon for the wealth of wildlife, undisturbed sightings of which are the main draw for the few hundred annual visitors like myself.

And it isn't just bears that call Wrangel home. Never completely glaciated, it is a biodiversity hotspot, a wildlife time-capsule that can carry you back to the Ice Age. This was the last known place on earth where the woolly mammoth roamed and their monumental white tusks are still washed up in Wrangel's rippling rivers. And then there's the human history. As the *Kapitan Khlebnikov* steamed north up the Strait and onward to our remote Arctic destination, we'd also encountered the people who'd somehow carved out an existence in this unforgiving region.

Nineteenth-century biologist John Muir described Wrangel as "this grand wilderness in its untouched freshness" in the first writings about the island. There is no permanent human settlement on the island today. A small number of rangers protect it from the few summer visitors, and from the handful of military men confined to their newly-constructed base concealed behind a 20km exclusion zone. This is border country even Russians need permits to visit.

Top of the world

Our journey started at Anadyr, Russia's easternmost town. Still moored in the mouth of its vast river, we were treated to an eye-popping show of salmon-feasting ring seals bobbing among belugas, before setting sail and travelling east to the indigenous settlement of Lavrentiya.

Created by collectivisation of the region's native people – mainly Chukchi, Eskimo and Yupik – ►



Mother bear

A mother and its cubs on Wrangel Island; (previous page) Wrangel Island is known as the 'maternity ward' for polar bears

*'This is still John Muir's
"land of the white bear".
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A whale of a time
(clockwise from top)
Whale Bone Alley on the north side of Yttygran Island; one of the 52 polar bears seen on the journey; Arctic fox with a musk ox skull; a bowhead whale surfaces close to the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*



◀ this community made up of a few mud streets and peeling apartment blocks, has a fragile sense of identity. I found that most Russians don't have much respect for the Arctic people. "They wake up, drink, and go back to sleep," one of our ship's Russian crew shrugged dismissively.

But Russ is proud that his Heritage Expedition's occasional visits have encouraged respect for indigenous heritage, and motivated elders to pass on traditional customs and knowledge to the younger generation. We were warmly welcomed with cloudberry jam, walrus meat and whale blubber, before a performance of dramatic traditional dance. Beneath the stony stare of a bust of Lenin, a diminutive local woman with a weather-beaten face told us her polar bear earrings reflected her clan. Indigenous families, she explained, are genealogically linked to the Arctic wildlife that for millennia sustained them.

This respectful dependence was palpable at uninhabited Yttygran Island, 129km south of Lavrentiya. Here, through atmospheric drizzle, we





explored perhaps the most intriguing archaeological site in the Arctic, Whale Bone Alley, constructed by Eskimos some 600 years ago. Amid lush green vegetation and vibrant purple fireweed, giant skulls lurked altar-like along the shoreline, backed by an evocative half-kilometre ceremonial avenue of creamy-white archways created from the giant jawbones of the bowhead whale.

This indigenous whaling base is a hotspot for cetaceans. We rode a Zodiac amid fountainous blows, huge grey heads and elegant flukes, and as we dithered over which way to turn, a great grey whale glided alongside us, its gnarled, barnacled back almost touchable. We even smelled its cabbagey breath – the only time I’ve ever welcomed the stink of school dinners.

The whiff was different at our next stop at Gilmymil, northeast of Yttygran: damp air with a tinge of sulphur. As we stomped across the tundra, I picked blueberries and cloudberries, before – somewhat counter-intuitively – stripping off my many layers to step gingerly into a square

wooden tub in the middle of nowhere. Built by a Chukchi man who used to spend his summers here, it was filled through a makeshift pipe from the river’s yellow-flecked hotspring. We basked in the warmth, gazing up at snow-tinted hillsides silhouetted against the rain-haze, a pair of cranes trumpeting overhead.

We continued our drift north towards Wrangel. At the nominally challenged but picturesque Unnamed Bay, the weather was the polar opposite. Sun streamed down as we stood around a large rocky burrow from which Arctic ground squirrels popped up almost beneath our feet. They stood sentry meerkat-style, chased, played and posed like pros.

We examined a hut striped with the claw marks of a bear and watched salmon leap from the river, as the sunset threw a yellow ribbon across the landscape. I walked as slowly as I dared towards the last Zodiac back to the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*. We floated awhile with rafting short-tailed sheerwaters, patterned like pixels across the sparkling sea. Every now and then they rose ►



Seal of approval
(above) Beluga whales and spotted seals feed in the mouth of the Anadyr river



◀ together with a musical rustle of wings on water, criss-crossing in balletic formations, before settling a few metres away in the wake of a pair of humpback whales swimming serenely in unison.

Nearing Wrangel, we settled into the lecture room for a talk about the island's history. Our historian had barely uttered a word when the tannoy crackled: "more whales." We were surrounded by humpbacks: blow, fluke, curving back, on and on as we snapped, 'ooh'ed and 'aah'ed.

"Bowhead!" came an excited call. We had to lean right over the deck-rail to see as a majestic 15m body slid smoothly across our bows. Even the ship's cetacean expert Mark Carwardine was awed and he has seen more whales than I've had hot dinners. He estimated this bowhead was 200 years old – a survivor of the heyday of Arctic whaling whose visit made Whale Bone Alley seem all the more evocative.

It was almost as if the wildlife was making a point. It became a ship's joke that every time there was mention of human history, unmissable natural sightings hove instantly into view. "Walruses," came the next cry. And there they were: bundles of blubbery brown, overflowing the edges of their floating ice islands. They fidgeted, scratched and nudged one another with their shiny ivory tusks, before collectively belly flopping into the bubbling sea.

Land of the white bear

Our doubtful arrival at Wrangel was thankfully a brief hiatus; the island didn't freeze us out for long. A little further round the coast, we took a Zodiac in and steered around an ice hummock, crouched like an Arctic dragon.

The desolate-looking shore turned out to be a meadow of tiny delicate tundra vegetation. Snow buntings flitted around us as the ship's botanist bent low pointing out some of the island's 417 plant species, 330 mosses and 310 lichens that cover ►

On tusk

A group of walruses on Wrangel Island; (above) snow geese chicks in the tundra

Naturepic, AWM images



'Wrangel has every habitat the Arctic can offer. We wandered stark beaches, snaking shingle spits and foothills of lowering mountains'





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A polar pair
A mother and her cub
look out across the ice



◀ flat faces of rock with intricate patterns in near-fluorescent shades of orange, red and yellow.

We spent five days circumnavigating Wrangel, landing once or twice a day, mostly in glorious sunshine. The island has almost every habitat the Arctic can offer and we wandered stark grey beaches and snaking shingle spits, foothills of lowering mountains and cliffs marbled in layers of creams, greys and pinks.

We stalked a snowy owl perched on a hillside like a fluffy snowman; sat still and silent in wait for lemmings and cute little pika; and crept up on a herd of primeval-looking musk ox. On verdant green tundra dotted with wispy-white cotton grass, we observed a feeding flock of white snow geese – some of the record one million estimated to have resided on Wrangel this summer.

There were millions of other birds too. The ptichy bazaar is appropriately named; these seabird cliffs were crammed with noisy, busy birds attending chick-filled nests like competing stalls, perched precariously on precipitous ledges. Kittiwakes, cormorants, glaucous gulls and all sorts of guillemots, were joined by plump bright-faced puffins, horned and tufted.

Mist rose and fell, drifting along valleys creating cloud-roads across the landscape. “It’s like the edge of Mordor,” someone commented as we were told to stay together. You couldn’t see polar ▶



Taking flight
(from top) A snowy owl flying over Wrangel Island; thick-billed murres on Herald Island; musk ox





Drum roll
(from top) Polar bears foraging for food in old oil drums; a cute little pika; Herald Island is uninhabited, except for the occasional polar bear researcher



◀ bears because of the weather, but wherever we were on Wrangel there was always a creamy presence lolloping, observing or lazing somewhere in the vicinity. This is still the 'land of the white bear' that John Muir had described nearly 150 years earlier.

So too is Herald Island. As we approached Wrangel's smaller, even more remote and rocky neighbour, the mist lifted to reveal a sleek white bear parading along the island's ridge. Muir landed here in 1881 and somehow scrambled up its steep sloped side to build a cairn and hide a copy of the New York Herald.

It's a very odd thought – that little bit of human ephemera once tucked away in the least human terrain. We didn't land – it was too windy – but circumnavigated the island, only later finding out that the north coast is literally uncharted. Around us drifted ice-bits like paper sailing boats and floating meringues, while constantly shifting light on sea, sky and striated rock, created an ever-changing gallery of natural art.

Uncover the 'invisible land'

With one day left at Wrangel, we arrived back at Doubtful Bay. The pack-ice was looser but today the island was living up to its Chukchi name – 'Invisible Land.' We could see nothing but fog.

Layered like the Michelin Man, I found myself huddled at the head of a snake of semi-visible Zodiacs speeding between ice sheets into an all-encompassing silvery grey. Rust-brown hulks of old machinery and hundreds of matching oil drums emerged through the mist as we landed.

There are 300,000 of them on Wrangel," explained our rangers. "Nothing brought here was ever taken away – until last year." The drums are now being cleared – 10,000 per season. It's going to take a very long time.

Picking my way through the red-brown skeletons of human 'civilisation', I couldn't help reflecting on what humanity is bringing to this extraordinary island now – without even setting foot on it. The warming climate means there is less sea-ice each year – a direct threat to wildlife, especially polar bears – and more open water, making northern sea-routes increasingly attractive to commercial shipping and larger cruise ships.

However, as the *Kapitan Khlebnikov* sailed away from Wrangel Island, the mist cleared. The sun was warm, the sea calm and everything was in sharp focus. This desolately beautiful place had filled our minds and cameras with unforgettable images of Muir's 'grand wilderness' and wildlife in its element.

The future of the island and its inhabitant may look uncertain, but this is the place to come – now, responsibly – to see the Arctic before it disappears. Wrangel may be known as the 'invisible land', but this once reclusive island and its wildlife gems are waiting to be uncovered. There is no doubt about that. ▶

Footnotes

Wrangel Island & Chukotka

THE TRIP

The author travelled with New Zealand-based expedition cruise company **Heritage Expeditions** (heritage-expeditions.com; +64 (0)3 365 3500) which offers the 14-night, 3,700km cruise *Across the Top of the World*. The trip costs from US\$9,000 (£7,363) including full board but excluding flights.

UK operator

Wildlife Worldwide

(wildlifeworldwide.com; 01962 302086) offers an 18-day photography tour package out of Heathrow including all flights, Moscow stopover and the cruise, for £13,395. The author flew with British Airways direct to Moscow (ba.com; 0344 4930787).

Vital statistics

Where: Wrangel Island is about 125 km across with an area of 7,600 sq km and sits right on the 180-degree meridian, 140km off the Chukotka mainland, a region of Siberia in the Russian Far East.

Capital: Anadyr (Chukotka)

Area: 737,700 sq km

Population: About 50,800

Languages: Russian (and a few remnants of indigenous dialects)

Time: GMT+12

International Dialling Code: +7

Visa: Required and has to be applied for in person. An expedited single-entry visa takes about

three working days and costs £170. Unexpedited is cheaper but takes up to 15 working days without delays. Your application requires documents from Heritage Expeditions and a lengthy form filled in online (<http://ru.vfsglobal.co.uk/>). Travel to Chukotka (a military zone) also requires a special permit. The tour operator deals with this but it means you will need your Russian visa confirmed two months ahead of your trip.

Money: The Russian ruble is currently RUB79 to the UK£, but the on board currency is US\$. (or credit card).

When to go

July-August: Trips are all during the short Arctic summer between July and August. 2020 departures from Anadyr run on 13 July, 3 August, and 17 August. Or Wildlife Worldwide has its own trip, led by photographer and cetacean expert

Mark Carwardine, departing London on 18 July (boarding at Anadyr on 20 July).

Health & safety

On the ship, use **hand sanitizer** that should be supplied at the entrance to dining areas. Follow the maxim, 'one hand for you, one hand for the ship'; hold on to the ship at all times, especially if there is a little rock and roll.

You need to be fit enough to be happy on stepped gangways and getting in and out of Zodiac boats even when there is a sea swell, but there will always be an experienced hand to help you. Ensure your **floatation aid** is on properly and always take backpacks off in Zodiacs.

Ashore, stay behind your ranger (who will be armed with flares and a gun, but does not want to use them) and follow their instructions, especially if there is a polar bear about. The ship has a doctor on board but it is a long way to more substantial medical facilities. Make sure you **take ample supplies** of any medication you need and check your insurance covers ship evacuation.



Map illustration by Scott Jessop, Juliette, Chris Breen

5 Wrangel Island & Chukotka tips

1 Kit up

This is the Arctic, so get properly equipped. It may not get many degrees below zero, but when it rains and the wind blows and you are sitting still in a Zodiac you can get very cold, very fast. Lots of layers and proper waterproof top and trousers are essential.

2 Flying can be trying

The Moscow-Anadyr flight

is the longest domestic flight in the world – but not the most comfortable. Get some sleep ahead of it – seats do not recline. Pack something to do – there is no inflight entertainment. And bring food – Utair's grub is 'no frills' and the flight is eight hours

3 Take it as it comes

In the Arctic, the weather rules, and in the Russian Arctic, the Russian authorities rule next.

Then there are the polar bears. Plans change. Relax and take it as it comes. Something may not happen, but something else will.

4 Toes on the tundra

Unless there's an overriding reason, don't be tempted to wear walking boots on tundra. Water doesn't sink into permafrost and there's a decent chance of squelching your way to completely sodden feet.

Wear the excellent Wellington boots provided.

5 Going off-grid

There is no internet on board, except a very basic email service (not your own inbox) so set your out of office and enjoy a total break. There are of course emergency contacts, with a satellite phone (limited hours of the day) if you really need to call home.



Getting there & around

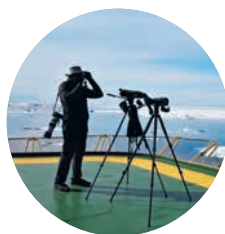
The easiest route to Anadyr from the UK is to fly direct to Moscow, then take an internal flight to Anadyr. **Wizz Air** (wizzair.com) fly direct from London to Moscow. Flight time is around 4 hours; return fares from £62. **Utair** (utair.ru/en) fly direct from Moscow to Anadyr. Flight time is around 9 hours; return fares from £622.

If you travel with Heritage you will be met at Anadyr Airport and transported to the ship. Occasionally there are mooring difficulties and you may be transferred to your ship by barge. Once cruising, all trips ashore are by **Zodiac and foot**.

Accommodation

The author travelled on the *Kapitan Khlebnikov*. In 2020 passengers will travel on the *Spirit of Enderby*. The ship carries **50 passengers**, has a couple of dining rooms, a bar, library and outside deck space. Cabins range from triples with their own wash basin and shared showers, to suites with separate bedroom (including double bed) and lounge

A whale of a time
(clockwise)
Riding a Zodiac to
Wrangel Island State
Nature Reserve;
birding on the ship's
heli deck; en route
to Anadyr



TOP TIP
If there's a general dash for the deck, take notice. There's something worth seeing. And if the tannoy goes off in your cabin at the crack of dawn, don't turn over and keep snoring. Throw on some layers and get out.

and en suite bathrooms. **Cheaper cabins** have portholes and **pricier ones** have **larger windows**.

Food & drink

Antipodean chefs run a Russian-staffed kitchen turning out **international meals** ranging from OK to excellent. Breakfast is self-service, lunch and supper usually sit-down. Restricted diets are catered for. The bar has a good range of spirits and, mainly **wines** from **New Zealand**.

Further reading

Journal of a Voyage with Bering, 1741-1742 by Georg Wilhelm Steller (Stanford University Press, 1988) – diary of the German naturalist-physician aboard the dramatic Russian-sponsored expedition that brought European discovery of the Alaskan coast.

Ada Blackjack: A True Story of Survival in the Arctic, by Jennifer Niven (Hyperion New York, 2003) – the extraordinary tale of the only female, only inuit, and only survivor, of a 1920s British attempt to colonise Wrangel Island. **Birds of East Asia** by Mark Brazil (A&C Black, 2009) – comprehensive field guide to birds of the region. [W](#)

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