

A little piece of Polish heaven

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Svalbard

July 2017. I am walking around in the airport of Longyearbyen, Svalbard, trying to figure out where the Polish passengers are. That is not easy, as I do not really know what the Polish language sounds like... I hear some difficult words, with lots of consonants, so I take my chance, in English, as my Polish is unexisting. I am lucky, these are Polish people and so I have found my travelling companions!

The Polish sailing vessel Oceania

The Polish sailing vessel Oceania awaits for us in the bay of Svalbard. She will be our home during a scientific cruise around the fjords the following two weeks. 24 Polish researchers and crew members are exploring the Arctic sea around Svalbard. The Oceania, owned by the Polish Oceanographic Insittute – Academy of Sciences, comes here since 30 years. They will look for signs of climate change. Is the Atlantic water coming too close to the Arctic? Are there only cold water organisms in the ocean or will we find Atlantic species as well? As a marine biologist and a science communicator, I am curious for the ocean and for the North Pole. But now, I am even more curious for the other “Poles”, the people from Poland. And there we go, a little piece of Poland, sailing away in Svalbard.

The first day on board, I tried to order breakfast in English, I wanted eggs, without bacon. The cook made me an excellent plate full of eggs...and bacon. By the next morning, I learned my first Polish sentence by heart “Eggs, no bacon. Please”. The eggs were wonderful! And it proved that I had to do some effort to get the most out of the trip.



Me, Weronika and Maciek working on board (and learning Polish).

The real Belgian chocolates that I brought for my fellow crew members, were a good help to learn some Polish words. I did not want to put the chocolates near the coffee machine, too impersonal. So I tried and tried to get it right, and I presented the chocolates to captain Piotr saying “czas na czekoladę”. The crew members appreciated my effort, and my chocolates. I appreciated their work and their knowledge of the ocean.

And so the journey continued. We worked day and night, to take samples of the ocean, the water, the animals and the sea bottom. We saw the most beautiful landscapes with glaciers and mountains, with sea birds and even a polar bear. And the few spare moments we had, I made it really difficult for my colleagues because I kept on asking them to teach me words and sentences. I wanted to learn the menu at lunch time, I wanted to learn the names of the animals (ptaki, ryba), I just wanted to be part of the Polish crew, not just the “Belgian visitor”.

The Polish Polar Station Hornsund

I had the privilege to spend a whole day in the Polish Polar Station in the Hornsund Fjord. The Oceania dropped me off at the beach and left for a whole day of sample taking. The Hornsund research station is manned during summer and winter by Polish researchers. They monitor the fjord, the glaciers and even the bird colonies all year round. So there was not only the little piece of Polish heaven on board of the Oceanai, but also here at the polar station!



The Polish Polar Station Hornsund, a little piece of heaven in Svalbard.

The researchers really feel at home in the Station: they eat and live together, they work, they play games, they go skiing, they even organise a triathlon (run to the station, bike to the ocean, swim in the icy water....seemed like a lot of fun!)! I felt very welcome in their home: they took me in and gave me breakfast 😊. Joanna showed us around. Janek let me meet the husky dogs (they only understood Polish!). Kasia took me to the bird colony, showed me the nests of the Little Auk and explained me the changing diet of the birds, due to climate change. The Polish Polar Station Hornsund truly is a magical place!

The more I learned the Polish language, the more I wanted to learn. So students Klaudia, Maciek and Weronika helped me out: every day we learned some words, sentences, funny jokes, Polish songs and habits. Chief scientist Sławek told me about the universities and research centers, the beautiful wood of Białowieża. I listened to stories of Captain Piotr who had been to Belgium before to visit our oceanographic research ship Belgica. It's a small world after all....

And after some of the most beautiful days in my life on the research vessel Oceania in Svalbard, I returned home with hundreds of pictures on my camera and lots of Polish friends in my heart.

Back in Belgium

Back home in Belgium, I found out there is a big Polish community in my home town. There are 3 Polish shops, I have a Polish neighbour and there is a Polish school. And so I signed up for Polish lessons. Why? Why not? It is great to learn a new language, it is fun to make my brains work, and I will be so proud of myself when I see my old Polish friends again and I can actually say something (or at least, understand something!).

When I look back to my research trip on Oceania last year, I am just so happy that my travel companions did not all speak English! They pushed me to go further, to get out of my comfort zone and to (try to) speak Polish. I have found a little piece of Polish heaven in Svalbard. Time to find out what Poland on land is about! So I will give myself an extra year to learn more, and then I will take my family for a trip around Poland. I want to order my food in a restaurant, buy something in a shop, ask the taxi driver to take me to the airport. And I want to do this, not in Dutch, not in French, not in English. In Polish!



RV Oceania, my Polish home in Svalbard.