



S W  O P

Explore · Discover · Belong

Guide to the Arctic

Dear Traveller...

Familiar and yet deeply mysterious, inhospitable and yet teeming with life, remote and yet accessible, the Arctic is a place of contradictions and surprises. It is so vast and diverse that one of the biggest challenges for the Arctic visitor is knowing where to begin. That's why we've produced this guide.

We'll help you understand the different destinations in the region so that you can see which is the best option for you. In addition, we'll introduce you to the wide range of activities on offer. Whatever your interests – adventure, photography, history – there is something for you in the Arctic.

The team at Swoop Arctic have over 50 years' combined polar experience so that, once your appetite has been whetted, we can help you turn your Arctic dream into a once-in-a-lifetime trip.



Jon Goldsmith

HEAD OF SWOOP ARCTIC

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ARCTIC OVERVIEW

Imagine a land where both the brightest white and the darkest black seem perpetual; where life can thrive, yet struggles to survive; where expansive seascapes give way to overpowering landscapes; where there are few people, yet a myriad of cultures.

Why go to the Arctic?

Wilderness

The Arctic is one of the least-populated or explored places on the planet – the High Arctic receives fewer annual visitors than Antarctica. This is the ultimate opportunity to get off the grid.

Accessibility

Unlike Antarctica, the Arctic is a year-round destination. Each season offers something unique, from the Northern Lights in the winter to polar bear spotting in the summer.

Wildlife

The region is home to an extraordinary array of wildlife, but most spectacularly the Arctic 'Big Five': polar bear, walrus, beluga whale, musk oxen and narwhal.

Adventure

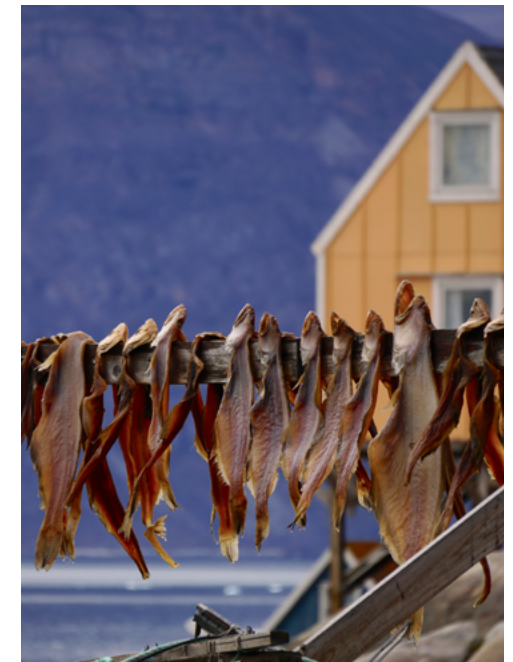
The conditions and way of life here result in a vast array of opportunities for the adventurer. Dog sledding, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, fishing, cycling, hiking, kayaking and even diving are just some of the options.

History

From the early whalers and trappers, to the European colonizers and explorers racing to reach the North Pole and the mystical Northwest Passage, the Arctic has a rich human history.

People

The extremes of the Arctic require great strength, resilience and humour of its peoples. It is only through encounters with locals that the visitor begins to truly understand life in the Arctic Circle.



What is the Arctic?

The Arctic is usually defined as the polar region north of the Arctic Circle (latitude 66° 33' 44", about 1,650 miles south of the North Pole), an imaginary line circling the top of the globe.

It consists largely of ocean encircled by bordering land. Much of that ocean is covered in ice – glaciers and icebergs formed from freshwater, and frozen sea ice.

Covering approximately 5.5 million square miles, the Arctic is a vast area made up of eight different countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Greenland (under the Danish monarchy), Canada, the United States (Alaska) and Russia).

While the Arctic covers around 2.8% of the globe it is home to just 0.05% of the Earth's population – that's around 4 million people (about the same as Los Angeles).

It is a place marked by extremes: during the winter months, the Arctic is one of the coldest and darkest places on Earth (the North Pole has 163 days of total darkness), whilst in summer it is the Land of the Midnight Sun.

The landscape, climate and wildlife of the Arctic are extremely diverse – multiple landscapes provide a variety of ecosystems, home to an incredible array of wildlife and flora. There are also approximately 4 million humans who call the Arctic home.



What can I expect?

People

While the 4 million inhabitants of the Arctic may have embraced modern technology, traditions are still hugely important – almost all Greenlanders rely on subsistence hunting for much of their food, for example. Spending time with locals and learning about their traditions and way of life often provide some of the most memorable experiences for visitors.

Wildlife

One of the richest and most diverse habitats on earth for wildlife, the Arctic is home to a vast array of animals – the megafauna of the ‘Big Five’, smaller animal residents such as the arctic fox and hare, the millions of migratory birds that fill the skies in summer, and not forgetting the summer mosquitoes!

Diversity

Across this vast region there is extraordinary variety in almost every way: landscape, climate, wildlife, culture and accessibility. Unlike the Antarctic in this respect, it is full of contrast.

Seasonality

There is a huge difference between summer and winter in the Arctic. Much of the region is ice- and snow-free during the summer, but in winter temperatures plummet as the darkness sets in.

Space

If you like wide open spaces and untrammelled wilderness, you’ll love the Arctic. The sheer scale and size mean much of it is hard to get to, and while there are land-based options, an expedition ship is often the best base for exploration.



Swoop Says

Don't ask to see Eskimos living in igloos. It's a sensitive topic, but the peoples of the Far North prefer to go by First Nations, Inuit or their tribal names, such as Chuki or Evenks.



Where to go in the Arctic

CANADIAN ARCTIC



Sandwiched between Alaska & Greenland, Canada's 'Far North' covers 39% of the country's total land area, yet with less than 1% of the population.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE



The Northwest Passage is the sea route through the labyrinthine Canadian Arctic archipelago between the North Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. Ship access only.

GREENLAND



Covered by 80% ice and with the world's lowest population density, Greenland is wilderness personified and should be on every adventurer's bucket list.



RUSSIAN ARCTIC



Stretching some 7,000 km (4,300 miles) from east to west, this vast region comprises roughly one-third of Russia's total area and includes her Arctic Islands.

NORTH POLE



Located 700 km (430 miles) from land in the Arctic Ocean and only accessible by icebreaker or helicopter, the geographic North Pole really is 'terra incognita'.

SVALBARD



Midway between Norway & the North Pole, Svalbard is home to mountains, glaciers, fjords and one of the Arctic's largest bear populations.



WHAT CAN I DO IN THE ARCTIC?

Whether you've been drawn north by the wildlife, scenery, culture, empty spaces or history, you'll find much more. Few places hold as many surprises. Each day is different and every location offers new opportunities.



Wildlife

The Arctic is one of the richest and most diverse habitats on Earth. Here humans are definitely in the minority, and arguably not even at the top of the food chain!

The 'Arctic Big Five' (polar bear, beluga whale, musk ox, narwhal, walrus), land and marine mammals (e.g. arctic fox, seals) and millions of native and migratory birds often top people's wish lists.

The animals of the north can be shy and widely distributed. Much of the excitement, therefore, lies in searching for them, something which requires perseverance, patience and a dollop of luck.





NARWHAL



WALRUS



MUSKOX



BELUGA WHALE

Swoop Says

The Arctic 'Big Five' are at the top of most visitors' wish list but sightings are often far from guaranteed and the search is part of the fun. Put yourself in the best position to have that sighting - out on deck.

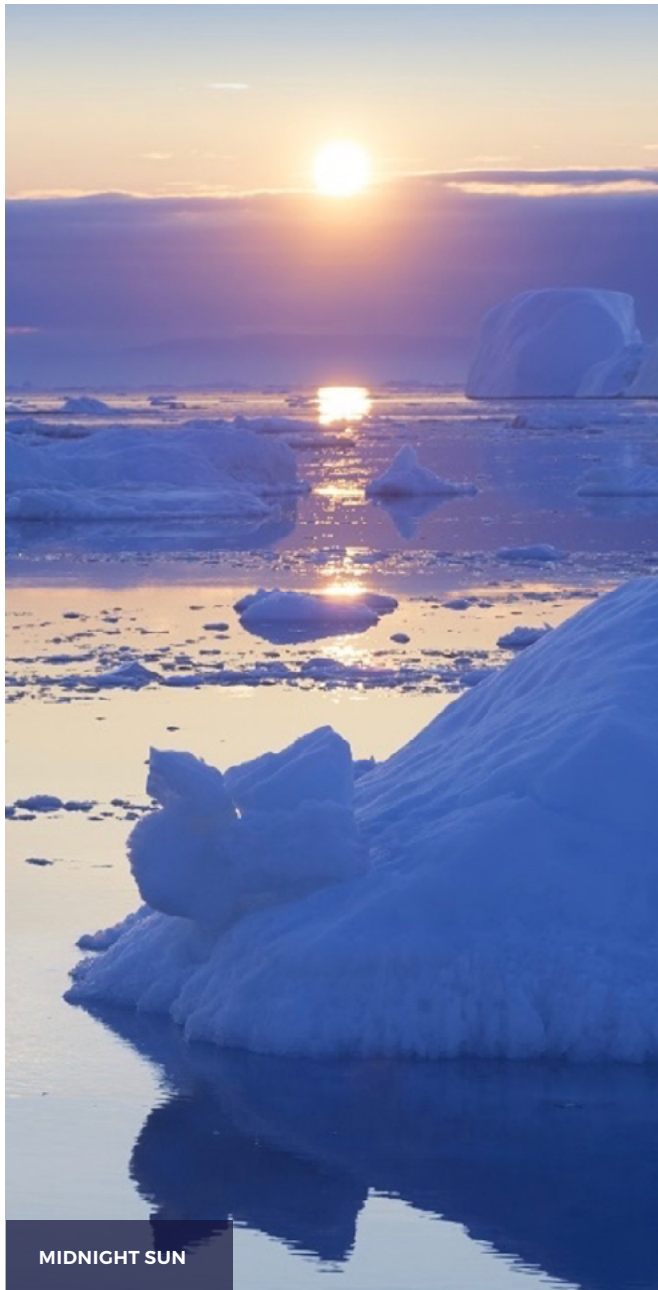


POLAR BEAR

Natural wonders

A vast, underpopulated wilderness, the Arctic is unrivalled as a destination. Glaciers, mountains, volcanoes, deserts, sea ice, massive bergs, midnight sun and pitch dark noons, not to mention the aurora, make this an ever-changing wonderland.





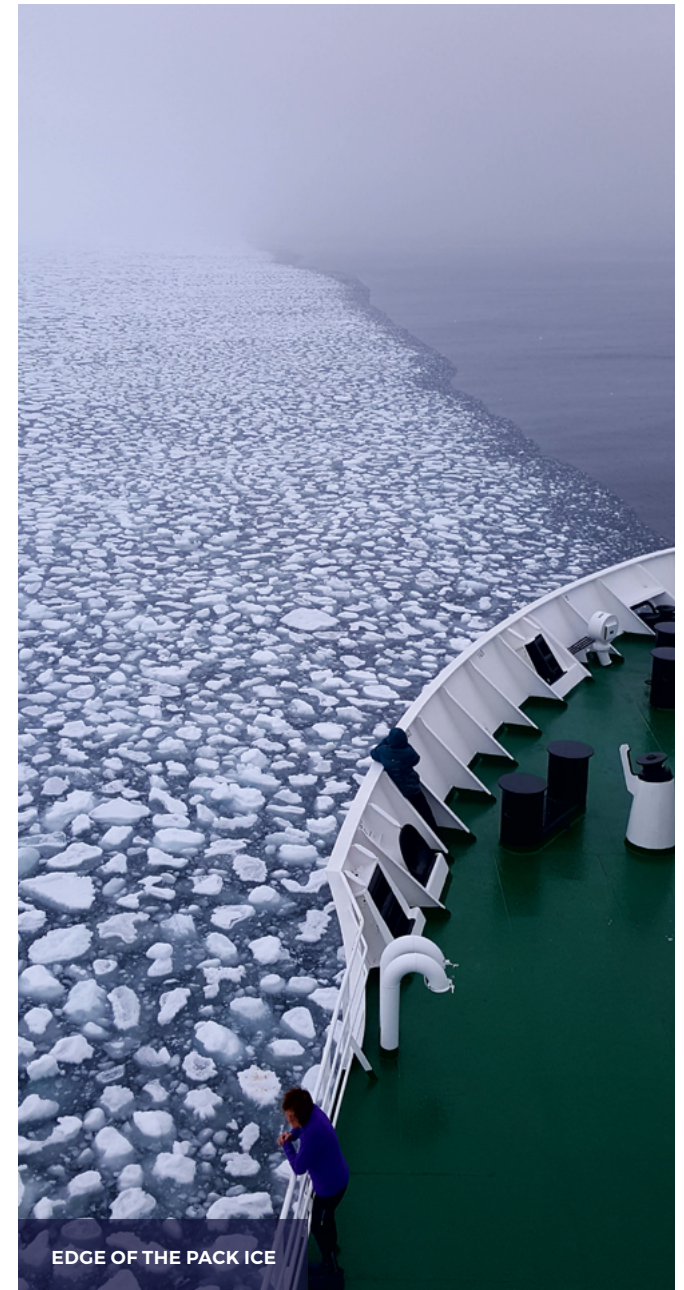
MIDNIGHT SUN



TUNDRA

Swoop Says

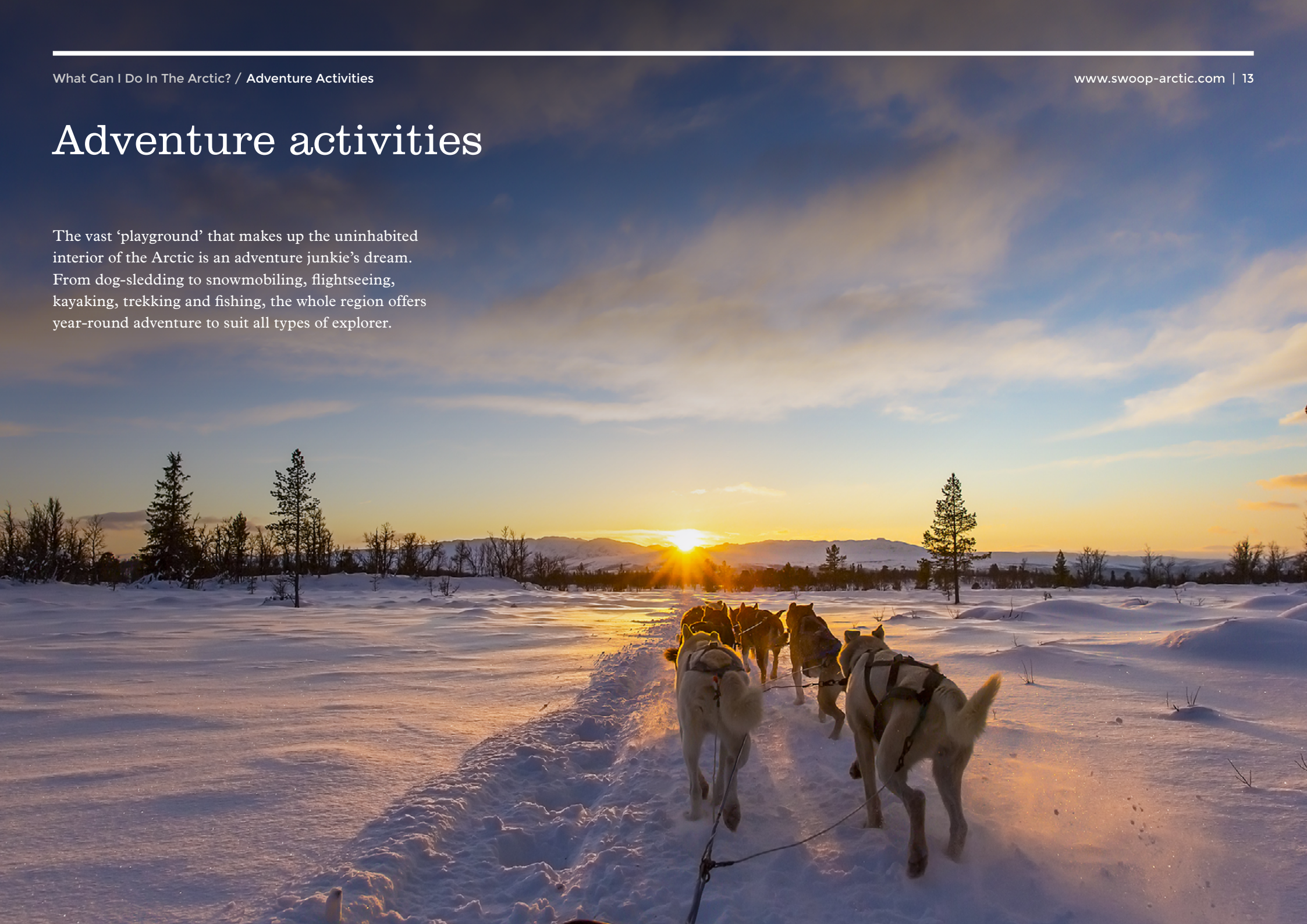
The sights of the Arctic produce some truly astounding photographs, which serve as wonderful memories. But also don't forget to put the camera down and enjoy the moment.



EDGE OF THE PACK ICE

Adventure activities

The vast 'playground' that makes up the uninhabited interior of the Arctic is an adventure junkie's dream. From dog-sledding to snowmobiling, flightseeing, kayaking, trekking and fishing, the whole region offers year-round adventure to suit all types of explorer.





HIKING



KAYAKING



FLIGHTSEEING

Swoop Says

An endless playground for the active, please make sure you talk to us about the options available to help maximise your trip.



SNOWMOBILING

History

The region is steeped in history. Indigenous peoples can be traced back over 10,000 years, and from the 9th century onwards Europeans began to arrive and colonize.

Documented Arctic exploration took off in the 16th century with attempts to find trade routes to Asia – the search for the fabled Northwest Passage.

And from the 18th century the race to the Pole inspired a roll call of the great explorers – Nansen, Amundsen, Ross Clark, Peary, Franklin. Preceding these titans of exploration are the stories of Vikings and even Greeks venturing north to the ice.



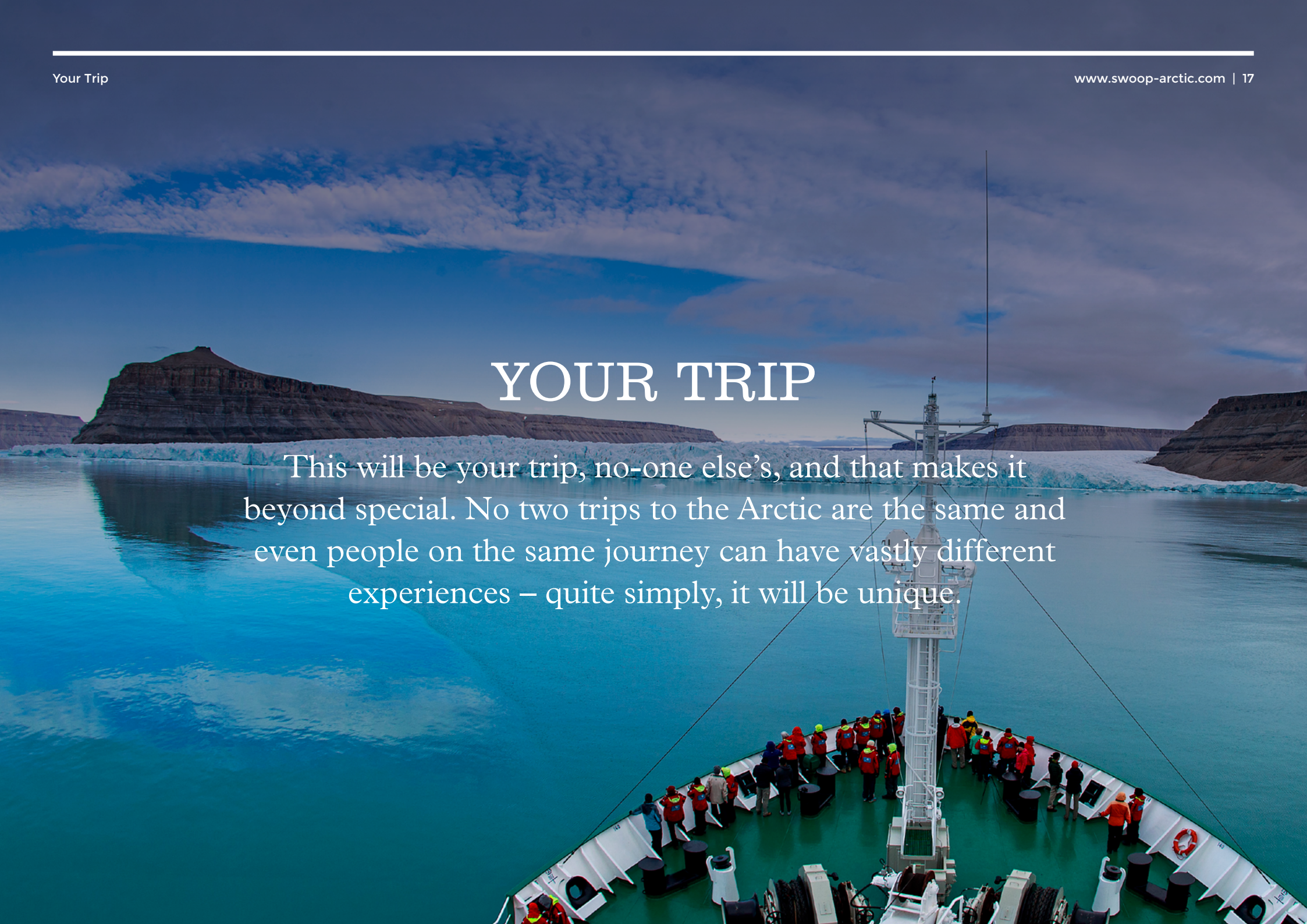
People

The thinly spread population of the Arctic live close to nature, adapting to the seasons. They are often reliant on ancient traditions and techniques, which can vary widely from region to region and culture to culture.



YOUR TRIP

This will be your trip, no-one else's, and that makes it beyond special. No two trips to the Arctic are the same and even people on the same journey can have vastly different experiences – quite simply, it will be unique.



Where should I go?

Svalbard



- The archipelago of Svalbard is one of the world's great wild places to see birds – gaze up in amazement at soaring cliffs teeming with millions of nesting birds
- Svalbard's wildlife is present in abundant numbers and polar bears outnumber humans up here – visit the north and east of Svalbard for a good chance of sightings
- The opportunities for wildlife photography are unrivalled – coming across a walrus haul-out is a moment you won't forget
- After the Midnight Sun (24 hours of daylight) of the summer months, Svalbard experiences the Polar Night – see the Northern Lights in the middle of the day

Canadian Arctic



- Canada is one of the best places to see polar bears in the wild, and the town of Churchill can claim to be the polar bear 'capital' of the world
- The Canadian Arctic spans across 36,000 different islands and covers around 500,000 square miles – experience a landscape of vast untouched wilderness
- The Northwest Passage plays a critical part in the rich history of Arctic exploration – soak up the stories of great explorers like Franklin and Amundsen
- Immerse yourself in Canada's thriving Inuit culture and history on Baffin Island, and meet local artists continuing the traditions of Inuit art, sculpture and printmaking

Greenland



- A playground for the intrepid, Greenland ticks every adventure box – try trekking, fishing, snowmobiling, dog sledding, kayaking, fat biking and flightseeing
- The world's largest island is also the least densely populated – explore vast swaths of beautiful, unfenced wilderness, and stunning fjords crammed with monumental icebergs
- The Northern Lights are one of the great natural wonders of the world – camp out on the ice cap under a canopy of ethereal dancing light for an unforgettable experience
- Greenland has a rich culture, both historical and present day – visit remote coastal communities where hunting and fishing still play a central part in life

Russian Arctic



- Trips by ship to the North Pole start here – travel on the most powerful nuclear icebreaker in the world, 50 Years of Victory, and enjoy an optional polar plunge
- For seasoned travellers in search of a truly remote destination, they don't come much wilder than the Russian Arctic – enjoy expeditionary cruising in its purest form
- In late summer Wrangel Island becomes temporarily accessible – experience almost-guaranteed sightings of polar bears in this important denning site
- Abandoned Russian bases tell of Russian's more recent history

When can I go?

	Spring			Summer			Autumn		Winter			
	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February
Svalbard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Greenland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
Northwest Passage				✓	✓	✓	✓					
Churchill	✓							✓	✓		✓	✓
North Pole		✓		✓	✓							
Wrangel Island (Russian Arctic)					✓	✓						

Land or sea?

Unlike Antarctica, which is very limited when it comes to land-based travel, the Arctic offers far more options. However, limited infrastructure, challenging accessibility and safety concerns all mean boat-based Arctic travel is often the best option.

Ultimately what it comes down to is what you want to do and see, and when you want to travel (as the ships only sail approximately May – September).

Best from a boat-based tour

Wildlife sightings

Accessing remote areas

Whale watching

Best from a land-based tour

Snowmobiling

Dog sledding

Trekking

Good from both land and boat

Photography

Northern Lights

Polar bear sightings

Swoop Says

Travelling by boat is a very practical way to discover the Arctic, allowing you to comfortably explore otherwise inaccessible areas. For those who prefer dry land, Greenland in particular offers some outstanding ground-based experiences, as does Churchill in Canada - the 'Polar bear capital of the world'.

What is expedition cruising?

If the word ‘cruising’ typically conjures up images of vast ships, cocktail parties and evening floor shows, polar cruising couldn’t be more different. Expedition cruising (as it is also known) in the Arctic is the very antithesis of a traditional cruise – it is active, adventurous and fully immersive.

Small ships with between 50 to 200 passengers follow flexible itineraries, responding to ice and climate conditions, accessing remote regions inaccessible by other means.

Each ship will have an expedition team, whose purpose is to get you off-ship whenever possible. Typically, this will be twice a day, ensuring that you experience the Arctic environment up close and personal. Optional additional activities, such as kayaking, are also available.

Onboard activities are not limited to lectures and library facilities. Although education is a key part of an expedition voyage, many ships offer much more, from citizen science programmes to photography and cultural workshops. Each boat has its own team of experts making it imperative that you get the right ship for you.

There are few hotels in the Arctic – a vast area largely devoid of infrastructure – so travelling by ship is the ideal way to comfortably explore otherwise inaccessible untouched areas of wilderness.



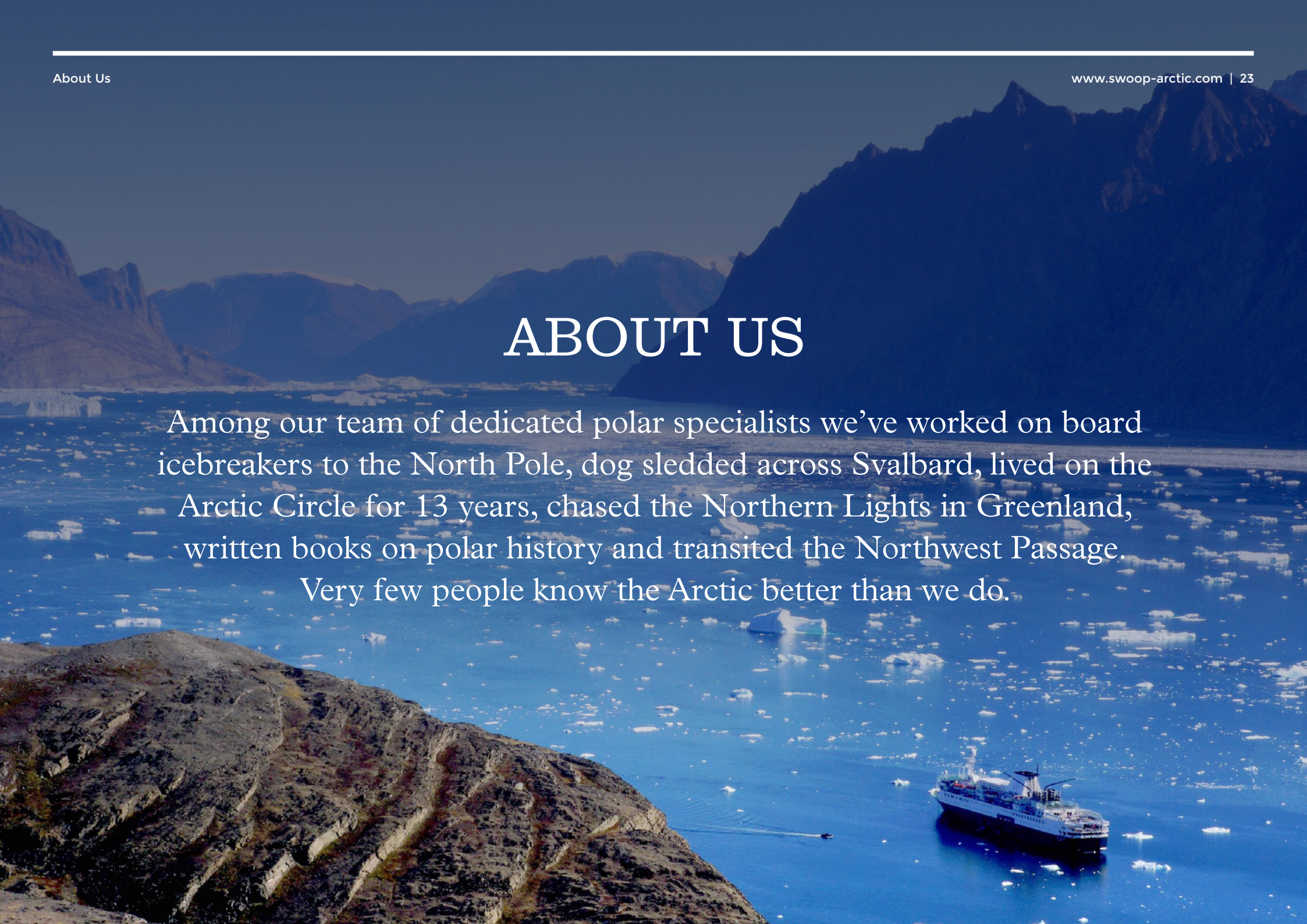
Swoop Says

An expedition voyage by small ship in the Arctic is the antithesis of a traditional cruise. It's all about getting off the ship and up close to the exotic wildlife, icebergs and jaw dropping scenery - prepare for a sensory assault like no other destination.



ABOUT US

Among our team of dedicated polar specialists we've worked on board icebreakers to the North Pole, dog sledged across Svalbard, lived on the Arctic Circle for 13 years, chased the Northern Lights in Greenland, written books on polar history and transited the Northwest Passage. Very few people know the Arctic better than we do.



Meet the team

Together we have over 50 years of accumulated polar experience!



Jon got involved in polar travel over a decade ago. Since then his adventures have included a polar plunge in Antarctic waters and tripping over an elephant seal on South Georgia, but it's the Arctic that he's most passionate about, particularly Svalbard, Greenland and the Northwest Passage.



Loli visited the Arctic for the first time in 2008 on her way to the Geographical North Pole. Since then, as an expedition team member, she has taken part in over 20 Arctic expeditions, mainly in Svalbard, Greenland, Franz Josef Land and has been to the North Pole a total of five times.



John spent 13 years living in Finland, just south of the Arctic Circle, working as a fisherman. Since then he's deepened his Arctic knowledge with two trips to Svalbard and also Canada's Northwest Passage. An inveterate traveller, he's now visited an impressive 155 countries.



Alex was first bitten by polar fever over 14 years ago and since then has returned to the Arctic regularly, drawn by the region's staggering diversity. Adventures have included two trips to East Greenland, mushing his own dog sled team across Spitsbergen and tracking polar bears in Churchill.



Cassia has had the good fortune of specialising in the Russian Arctic and Antarctica's Ross Sea for over ten years, working for a ship operator. Her familiarity with the operational logistics of expedition voyages complements her deep knowledge for these little-travelled polar regions.



Tennessee has had a passion for exploration and the polar regions since childhood. A Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and keen history enthusiast, he's currently writing a book about James Clark Ross, one of the most under-appreciated polar explorers.

Why should I choose Swoop?

We know the Arctic.

We're lucky enough to visit the Arctic every year, so we know the strengths and weaknesses of every vessel and the ins and outs of every trip.

What this means for you:

We can help guide you through the maze of options, as well as giving you first-hand recommendations for where to go, when to travel and how to get there.

We offer you incredible choice.

We work with all the main Arctic small ship operators, offering 15 different vessels and over 40 Arctic voyages plus selected land-based expeditions. This means that we can arrange the best trip for you based on what you want to experience, whether that be by land or by sea.

What this means for you:

Whatever kind of adventure you're looking for, we'll work with you to plan your perfect expedition – one that suits both your budget and appetite for adventure.

We're not biased towards any expedition operator, vessel or voyage.

We are 100% independent and have no commitment to anyone but you.

What this means for you:

We'll listen to what you want from your trip and suggest carefully selected ideas based on your exact requirements.

We offer free, impartial and expert advice.

We don't charge for our advice and you won't pay extra booking through us. We help Arctic operators to market themselves and their voyages to the international market – when you book with us they will pay us a small commission.

What this means for you:

You'll pay no more or less with us than if you booked directly with the operator and you benefit from our team's 50 years of combined polar experience.

We can arrange your pre- and post-Arctic travel.

We can help you book your flights to and from the region.

What this means for you:

Your entire adventure is taken care of and runs seamlessly.



What do I do next?

6 easy steps to booking your Arctic Trip

Step 1 - Get In Touch

To start the planning process.

Step 2 - Let's Talk

A phone call is crucial during the planning stage to really understand what you're looking for.

Step 3 - Swoop Recommends

Leveraging our many years of experience, your Swoop Polar Specialist will handpick the most well-matched trip(s) for you.

Step 4 - Holding An Option

We'll place a courtesy 24-hour hold on your preferred option.

Step 5 - Securing Your Trip

To confirm your reservation all we require is a deposit & completed booking form.

Step 6 - Congratulations, you're now on your way to the Arctic!

FAQs

Which areas should I visit?

To help you understand the key characteristics of each region, look at pages 16–17 of this guide, or the [Arctic Region Guide](#) on our website for tips.

When is the best time to visit?

The Arctic is accessible throughout the year – look at page 18 of this guide for information about [when to travel](#) to the different regions.

How can I get to the Arctic?

It's actually pretty [easy to reach the Arctic](#) as there are airports dotted throughout the region. To access:

- Svalbard go via Oslo in Norway to get to Longyearbyen.
- Greenland travelling from either Europe or North America, travel via either Iceland or Copenhagen in Denmark.
- the North Pole travel by plane and then helicopter via Oslo and Svalbard, or by icebreaker from Murmansk, Russia.
- the Canadian High Arctic, including the Northwest Passage, travel through Edmonton, Toronto and Winnipeg, with onward flights.

Should I cruise or not?

The concept of [travelling by small ship](#) is new to many, but in a watery wilderness like the Arctic, where vast areas lack even basic roads, Arctic cruises on board a small expedition ship provide often not only the best, but also the only means of safe and comfortable access. These are active, highly immersive trips curated throughout by Arctic experts and aimed at getting you off the ship and into the wilderness on a daily basis - the very opposite to a traditional 'cruise'.

How adventurous will my holiday be?

The Arctic really can cater to everyone, regardless of individual appetite for [adventure](#).

What wildlife can I see?

The Arctic offers some outstanding [wildlife opportunities](#), including the 'Big Five' (polar bear, walrus, musk ox, beluga whale & the elusive narwhal), other mammals such as the arctic fox or reindeer, and a spectacular range of migratory birds visit during the summer months.

What are the best places to see polar bears?

Few people head north without some hope of seeing the white bear and this is one of the most common questions we're asked. While the polar bear's territory stretches across a vast area, there are [known 'hotspots'](#) where you have the best chances of successful sightings:

- [Svalbard](#) (May - Aug)
- [Churchill](#), Canada (Oct & Nov)
- [Wrangel Island](#), Russian Arctic (Aug)
- [North Pole](#) (travelling by icebreaker)
- [Canadian Arctic](#), especially Devon Island, Prince Leopold Island, Bellot Strait and Akpatok Island (June - Sept)

What are the best places to see the Northern Lights?

They can be seen throughout the whole Arctic region as long as there is darkness and no cloud cover. The very best and most consistent sightings are to be found in and around the rim of the Arctic Circle, an area known as the 'Aurora Band'.

How long a trip should I plan for?

Given the distances you're travelling to get there, the minimum trip length is really a week. However the vast majority of Arctic trips - whether exploring by ship or from land - are more like 8+ days.



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Association of
Arctic Expedition Cruise
Operators **AECO** 

