

## **Greetings from Spitsbergen: Tourists at the Eternal Ice 1827–1914**

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## Book Review

GREETINGS FROM SPITSBERGEN: TOURISTS AT THE ETERNAL ICE 1827–1914. By John T. Reilly. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2009. 227 pp. \$108.00 (hardback). ISBN 825192460X.

The most surreal experience in my few field seasons in Spitsbergen was an encounter with a tourist ship. My companions and I were lost in the fog in a zodiac boat. After some tense moments, we discovered we were off course by 180°, heading out towards the north Greenland Sea. We corrected course, and with relief and exultation plowed through the fog into the safe arms of Kongsfjord. As we neared the community of Ny Ålesund, out of the fog loomed a large cruise ship, the largest vessel I had seen in Spitsbergen. The contrast between the placid comfort of the champagne-sipping passengers leaning over the rails high above us on that ship, and our bedraggled crew hugging the waves in a zodiac was extreme. The deliverance from a personal brush with calamity to being an object of idle curiosity was uncanny. Until that ship came into focus in the fog, I had been unaware of tourism in Spitsbergen.

Given my experience, I was interested to learn from the new book GREETINGS FROM SPITSBERGEN: TOURISTS AT THE ETERNAL ICE 1827–1914 that the tourist ship I encountered in the mid-1980s was just the latest in over 100 years of tourism to Spitsbergen. Author John Reilly traces tourism to Spitsbergen from its early roots with 19th century adventurers, through the advent of organized tours, until the blossoming industry was cut short by the onset of World War I. Spitsbergen today still seems romantically remote and indisputably Arctic, just as it was in the 19th century, but the modern visitor is also aware that this wilderness outpost has a fascinating human history. Although Spitsbergen does not have a native population, whalers, hunters, and explorers have left their marks since its discovery in 1596 by Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz. Graves and ruins of centuries-old whaling stations were among the objectives of the tourist ships. In a fascinating convergence, however, some of the tourist ships called on base camps of well-known arctic explorers, including balloonist André, and the Wellman expedition.

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Reilly uses beautifully reproduced postcards as a source of information from the late 19th century, a time he dubs the “golden age” of organized cruises to Spitsbergen. By the turn of the century, several steamship companies ran tourist cruises each year. They produced postcards to sell, as well as special cachets (cancellation marks) and etiquettes (tourist stamps engraved with iconic arctic scenes, but generally not recognized by post offices). Post offices were established in settlements on Spitsbergen in part to handle the demand from tourist ships. Anyone who enjoys philately, antique postcards, or foreign franks will find this book pleasant browsing. Postcards are reproduced at full scale. Etiquettes are carefully documented and displayed in an appendix. We see how these elements come together in full color reproductions of the back sides of several postcards, festooned with etiquettes, stamps, and cachets from Spitsbergen locales, Norwegian post office cancellation marks, and delightfully vague addresses.

The text chronicles tourism to Spitsbergen roughly chronologically. The 1827 in the title refers to the year German adventurer Barto von Löwenigh and Norwegian geologist Professor Keilhau hired a sloop to travel to Spitsbergen. Organized tourist ship cruises to Spitsbergen began in 1881. The nature of these cruises are documented with paintings and photographs by ship passengers and memorabilia such as advertising posters, printed itineraries, and menus. The text does not present a scholarly analysis of tourism, but instead, has the feel of a well organized private collection placed on display. Although the book includes appendices on etiquettes, postcards, chronology of cruises, and place names, it lacks an index. The book will be of interest to Spitsbergen researchers (such as myself) familiar with some of the locales and history covered, and to history buffs, especially students of steamships, philately, and arctic adventure. The book is nicely produced, and makes for fun browsing.

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