Longyearbyen

Photo: Ann Kristin Balto

Longyearbyen was named after the American John Munro Longyear who bought Norwegian coal fields west of Adventfjorden in 1904. Two years later the American Arctic Coal Company built the first house and named the place Longyear City. Longyearbyen's economic base has diversified, as employment within tourism, education and research has grown substantially in recent years, along with smaller businesses.

Population

Longyearbyen is not a "cradle-to-grave society", but families are welcome. Forty per cent of the population is female (mainland 50 %), and 75% are people between 20 and 60 years of age (mainland 55%). Twenty-six foreign nations are represented, with Thailand topping the list. Non-Norwegians constitute 13% of Longyearbyen's nearly 1800 inhabitants (2005).

Inside coal mine in Longyearbyen 1953. Photo: Tiseth, NPI Photo Library

History

1904 John M. Longyear bought coal fields
1906 The first house erected; the settlement named Longyear City. Longyearbyen became a "company town"
1916 Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (Norwegian state-owned company) took over the coal mining business
1920 The Svalbard Treaty, assigning Norway the sovereignty of the archipelago, drawn up. Explosion killed 26 miners, one tenth of the labour force
1921 Consecration of Vår Frelsers Kirke, the church of Longyearbyen
1925 The Svalbard Treaty ratified. Celebrations at Skjæringa
1941 WWII: the population of Longyearbyen (570 men, 140 women and 55 children) evacuated to England
1943 The German battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst* and two destroyers attacked Longyearbyen, doing extensive damage to the settlement. Nine Norwegian soldiers lost their lives
1946 Nybyen, a new part of Longyearbyen, built
1947 New lodging quarters, an office building, hospital and three family dwellings erected on Haugen

Celebrating the 17th of May in Longyearbyen, 1953. Photo: Tiseth, NPI Photo Library

1948 The first issue of the weekly newspaper *Svalbardposten*
1949 The Governor of Svalbard's residence and office inaugurated
1952 Six people killed in a mine accident
1953 An avalanche at Haugen took three lives
1958 The present Svalbard Church consecrated
1971 The local Svalbard Council established
1975 The airport opened at Hotellneset
1981 The Norwegian State took over the health service and hospital. Svalbard connected to the national and international automatic long distance telephone networks. Svalbard Museum opened
1993 The University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS) opened, established by the Norwegian Government and all four Norwegian universities
1995 On 30 March two young Norwegian women attacked (one killed) by a polar bear at Platåberget, near Longyearbyen. This led to the Governor strongly advising all residents and visitors to carry a gun when on the outskirts of the settlement
1996 A Russian airplane en route to Longyearbyen crashed at Operafjellet, a peak at 927 m.a.s.l., 10 km east of the town. All 141 passengers and crew perished making this the largest airline disaster on Norwegian territory
1998 The governor of Svalbards present office building inaugurated
2001 The Norwegian General Assembly agrees to the opening of the Svea coal mining field south of Longyearbyen. The government grants new share capital of NOK 150 mill. Miners commute between Longyearbyen and Svea
2002 Local democracy introduced, after a Government decision to adjust the Svalbard law to a more modern rule. Longyearbyen lokalstyre (local government) established, and the Svalbard Council ceased to exist
2003 Broadband connection to the mainland established
2006 The opening of Svalbard Science Park on 26 April, housing UNIS, Norwegian Polar Institute and Svalbard Museum

Miners arm-wrestling. Photo: Tiseth, NPI Photo Library

Norwegian Polar Institute

The foundations of Longyearbyen and the Norwegian Polar Institute were laid almost simultaneously: 1906 saw the construction of the town's first dwelling while a 1906-07 expedition to Svalbard, financed by the Prince of Monaco, eventually led to the establishment (in 1928) of the NPI. As far back as that early expedition, mapping was an important part of the exploration of the archipelago. Mapping Svalbard remained of national interest to Norway as it contributed to Norwegian economic pursuits, particularly mining, which was concentrated in and around Longyearbyen. Aerial photography, introduced the summer of 1936, resulted in better maps for use by the mining industry.

The opening of the airport in 1975 greatly facilitated access to Longyearbyen by scientists and others. The NPI established offices, field operations and equipment storage rooms in the hangar. In 1980 the Institute moved to Næringsbygget, while field operations and storage remained at the airport. Finally, in 2006, NPI's Svalbard branch was reunited under one roof in the Science Park.

King Olav V visited Svalbard for the first time in August 1961. Photo: Herta Grøndal

Science and technology

Students come from all over the world to study at The University Centre in Svalbard. Research ranging from studies of the ocean floor up to the higher atmosphere is conducted by departments Arctic Biology, Arctic Geology, Arctic Geophysics and Arctic Technology.
Several scientists from NPI are lecturers at UNIS, and the two institutions also co-operate on logistics and services for field expeditions. NPI projects based in Longyearbyen include research on Arctic foxes, Svalbard reindeer and seabirds.
Svalbard is a well-suited location for access to polar orbiting satellites. At SvalSat, run by Kongsberg Satellite Services, data from satellites passing the polar regions 14 times every 24 hours are downloaded, stored and passed on. These data may include signs of global climate change.

Northern lights over Longyearbyen. The mountain Sarkofagen can be seen in the background. Photo: Andrea Taurisano

Photo: Bjørn Frantzen - Text: Gunn Sissel Jaklin, NPI - Design: Rudi Caeyers, NPI

References: Longyearbyen, NPI fact sheet; Polarboken 1997-98; The Place Names of Svalbard, NPI Rapportserie 2003; Samfunns- og næringsutvikling på Svalbard 1991-2005, Longyearbyen lokalstyre; Svalbards jubileumsmagasin 2006, Thor B. Arlov: Svalbards historie 2. utg. 2003; Svalbardposten; Birger Amundsen, Svarthvitt 2001
www.spacecentre.no; www.esa.int; www.unis.no; www.lokalstyre.no

www.npolar.no