

The dark charm of Arctic islands

Forget midnight sun — try ‘midday night’ on Norway’s Svalbard

BY ALISTER DOYLE
REUTERS

OSLO — A Norwegian chain of Arctic islands is seeking to turn numbing cold and total winter darkness into a draw for visitors who usually only venture north for the midnight sun during fleeting summers.

TRAVEL

The new focus on winter in the Svalbard archipelago, 750 miles from the North Pole, is part of a drive to attract tourism and environmental research to diversify the economy after a century of dependence on now-failing coal mines.

“We’re advertising the exotic side of being in the dark,” said Arild Olsen, mayor of Longyearbyen, the main settlement with 2,200 inhabitants. It’s winter temperatures are around 14 Fahrenheit.

Winter tourism can include night-time dogsled rides, visits to ice caves or cross-country skiing, with guns to protect against polar bears. And the northern lights — flickering colors in the sky generated by charged particles from the sun — are only visible in the dark.

Norway mothballed the main coal mine on Svalbard last year, which had been due to produce 1.9 million tons a year until 2019, after mounting losses. The right-wing government will issue a plan to parliament this spring about the long-term future of the islands.

“Research is definitely part of the solution” for Svalbard, said Unni Steinsmo, head of the board of Kings Bay AS, which runs Ny-Alesund, the world’s most northerly permanent non-military settlement.

Ice has been receding fast in the Arctic because of climate change. In Ny-Alesund, scientists from 11 nations including China, India, South Korea, Norway, Germany, France, Britain and Norway have



Dawn at the scientific base of Ny-Alesund, Svalbard, Norway, recently. A Norwegian chain of islands just 750 miles from the North Pole is trying to promote new technologies, tourism and scientific research in a shift from high-polluting coal mining that has been a backbone of the remote economy for decades.

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A sculpted bust of Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen is seen at the scientific base of Ny Alesund in Norway recently.

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research stations.

Steinsmo told Reuters scientists were carrying out more winter research, such as into how plants and fish adapt to the polar darkness. The fjord by Ny-Alesund has been ice-free in recent winters, making marine research easier, she said.

Ny-Alesund was original-

ly built around a coal mine which shut after 21 people died in an accident in 1962. Old wooden buildings still stand, and a train that used to transport coal stands marooned in the snow.

“I think we’ll manage quite okay after coal,” Olsen said, adding that fishing, for crabs and cod, could

also help. There were 60,000 tourist visitors last year, from 41,000 in 2008.

NATO-member Norway wants to maintain settlements on the islands partly as a strategic foothold in the Arctic, all the more so since its neighbor Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014.

Traveling to Rio for Carnival or the Olympics?

What you should know about Zika virus

BY KATE SILVER
THE WASHINGTON POST

Nearly 500,000 visitors are expected to travel to Rio Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, which kicks off Feb. 5. Six months later, about 380,000 visitors are expected to travel there for the 2016 Olympic Games Aug. 5 through Aug. 21.

For travelers to both events, warnings about Zika virus, which is spread to people through mosquitoes and has been found in Brazil and more than 20 surrounding countries, are causing alarm. The Centers for Disease Control is advising women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant to consider postponing travel to areas impacted by the virus, which may be linked to microcephaly, a birth defect resulting in a small head.

Sports Traveler, a sports-centric tourism company based in Chicago, has been selling travel packages to the Olympics since May. Founder and owner Anbritt Stengele says that one or two clients have inquired, specifically, about Zika virus, but she is finding more often callers are asking questions about the company’s cancellation policy.

This week in Rio de Janeiro, more than 3,000 city workers have been spraying insecticide and searching for mosquitoes in preparation for the upcoming festivities.

Infectious disease specialist Kyle Petersen spent years studying Zika virus as commanding officer of Naval Medical Research Unit 6 in Lima, Peru. He oversaw a 300-member team that studied infectious diseases and developed vaccines, medicines, and strategies to detect and combat illnesses such as dengue fever, West Nile virus and yellow fever, all of which are in the flavivirus genus

and are in the same family as Zika.

Petersen says this isn’t the first outbreak of Zika virus, which actually dates back to the 1940s in Uganda. While testing rhesus monkeys for yellow fever, researchers found a virus they didn’t recognize. They named it Zika for the forest in which it was found.

The mosquito causing the outbreak is the Aedes aegypti species, which Petersen says is one that is drawn to people, rather than nature. “It lives near a house and in flower pots, in tires, in garbage, in any small container that can collect water or make a nice place to lay its eggs. It is easy for them to get into an urban area and just spread all over the place,” he says.

Petersen said that women who are pregnant or considering getting pregnant should avoid traveling to countries associated with the Zika outbreak, including Brazil.

For others, he says, the risk of Zika virus is a less serious concern.

He says the symptoms of Zika virus are usually fairly mild and can include joint pain, fever, a rash and red eyes, and the illness goes away in a few days. Petersen adds that the majority of people who get infected — estimated at more than 70 percent — experience no symptoms at all.

Petersen says that those traveling to Brazil and other areas where the virus has been reported should bring insect repellent with DEET or picaridin and put it on every day — and continue to reapply it throughout the day. “The Aedes mosquitoes are day biters, they feed from sun up to sundown, and so you really want to protect yourself during that time period,” he says.

“I would say just bring lots of repellent and wear it,” Petersen says.

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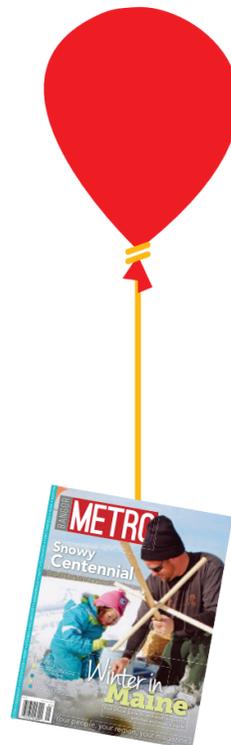
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