The Dream of Open Borders is Real—in the High Arctic

The Norwegian territory of Svalbard has been open to citizens of the world since 1920. But don’t call it a utopia.

By Atossa Araxia Abrahamian
WHEN YOU LAND IN

Longyearbyen, the largest settlement in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, you can step off the plane and just walk away. There’s no passport control, no armed guard retracing your steps, no biometric machine scanning your fingers. Svalbard is as close as you can get to a place with open borders: As long as you can support yourself, you can live there visa-free.

That doesn’t make Svalbard an egalitarian place—far from it. All commercial flights currently go through Oslo or Tromsø, so travelers must obtain transit visas and wait in lines there instead. Svalbard provides minimal social services, so it won’t attract the world’s tired, poor and weary. When in 2015 a right-wing Norwegian politician offered to send refugee families north rather than accommodate them on the mainland, it was not meant as a kindness.

Still, there is something utopian about a place where almost anyone could live. Amid scaremongering about unrestricted migration, I went to Svalbard because I wanted to see whether there were lessons we could learn from this 2,300-person community a few hundred miles south of the North Pole.

What I discovered was a historical accident, rooted in environmental determinism and shaped by economics, that is being irreversibly upended. There’s a dismal symmetry at play: As climate change renders the rest of the planet as hostile to human life as the far north, we too must make the choice between throwing up walls and letting them down. Svalbard’s geopolitics provide an imperfect but alternative vision of how places can be governed, whom they can accommodate and how communities can form.

Formally, Svalbard—known as Spitsbergen until the 20th century—belongs to Norway, which writes the laws, enforces order, builds infrastructure and regulates hunting, fishing and housing. Last year, when a Russian man was caught trying to rob a bank in town, a Norwegian judge sentenced him under Norwegian law to a Norwegian jail. But Norway’s control over Svalbard comes with obligations outlined by an unusual 1920 treaty signed as part of the Versailles negotiations ending World War I.

Written in the aftermath of the war, the Svalbard Treaty is both of and ahead of its time. Its architects stipulated that the territory cannot be used for “warlike” purposes. They included one of the world’s first international conservation agreements, making Norway responsible for the preservation of the surrounding natural environment. The treaty also insists that the state must not tax its citizens more than the minimum needed to keep Svalbard running, which today typically amounts to an eight percent income tax, well below mainland Norway’s roughly 40 percent.

Most radically, the treaty’s architects held Norway to what’s known as the nondiscrimination principle, which prevents the state from treating non-Norwegians differently from Norwegians. This applies not just to

![The top map depicts all the islands of the Svalbard archipelago. The inset shows Svalbard's relationship to the rest of the Arctic.](PHOTOS: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO)
immigration but also to opening businesses, hunting, fishing and other commercial activities. Other countries could not lay formal claims on Svalbard, but their people and companies would be at no disadvantage.

That freedom might be a function of how logistically difficult life here can be. In June Svalbard’s weather compares to January in New York City. But the winter brings three months of night, when temperatures can dip below −40 degrees, where Fahrenheit meets Celsius. In mid-February, the days start to lengthen, and by mid-April, the midnight sun makes a mockery of the body’s circadian rhythms. Come August, the sun’s transit shortens once more, and the cycle repeats.

You can tell a lot about a city by its arrivals terminal. Geneva, where I grew up, is full of ads for expensive watches and wealth management firms. New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport assaults you with opportunities for commerce and consumption—Starbucks, taxis, currency exchange. In Longyearbyen the terminal is about the size of a school gym. There are posters for the local research university, a logistics and shipping company named Pole Position and satellite operators whose white orbs dot a nearby mountaintop. Because of its northern latitude, Svalbard is ideally located to pick up communications from polar-orbiting satellites and houses the world’s largest commercial ground station.

The terminal’s most prominent signs, however, are aimed at the growing number of tourists—walrus safaris, trips to see the Northern Lights and shops, restaurants and bars. In the middle of the baggage claim belt stands a taxidermied polar bear with Svalbard’s most famous bylaws displayed by its side: To leave Longyearbyen, you must respect nature, notify the government and carry a gun. These days, travelers from around the world go to Svalbard for what has become known as last-chance tourism: The desire to see polar bears, glaciers and icebergs before they disappear.

Svalbard never had an indigenous population, and seafaring Vikings may have spotted it around 1200. But Willem Barentsz, a Dutch explorer, is credited with the discovery in 1596 during his expedition to find the Northeast Passage to China at a time when maritime embargoes blocked Dutch ships from much of Southern Europe. A decade later, on one of his trips in search of the Northwest Passage, Henry Hudson noticed pods of whales swimming off the archipelago’s coast, helping to spur the development of a whaling industry.

As foreigners clamored for whales and territory, Spitsbergen’s wildlife suffered. At
the end of the 17th century, the Dutch fleet alone killed 750 to 1,250 whales a year. By the 1870s, overexploitation had taken its toll. In a recent book, the legal scholar Christopher Rossi describes the remains of butchered whales lining the coasts even as the industry declined: “Denuded of its cetological economy, human interest in Spitsbergen was swept away, along with the detritus left by flensers at the water’s edge.” Those slaughtered whales are said to haunt Svalbard’s bays and beaches to this day.

In the late 19th century, Sweden and Norway—at the time one nation—tried to claim sovereignty over the archipelago. But Russia, then a monarchy, objected. Through an exchange of diplomatic notes, Russia and Sweden-Norway reached a compromise, declaring Spitsbergen terra nullius: It “could not be the object of exclusive possession by any State.” So until the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Svalbard was officially a no man’s land, arguably the world’s last.

This, unsurprisingly, led to conflict. At the turn of the 20th century, prospectors found coal buried deep below Svalbard’s ice, and coal production and export became the archipelago’s main industry. Companies competed against one another for land, resources and labor in an essentially lawless environment. When workers went on strike, no one knew whom to appeal to. At one ill-fated mine operation named Advent City, English managers tried to petition the Royal Navy to intervene in the unrest. Later, disgruntled Norwegian miners complained to their government about how an American company was treating them, objecting in particular to the food. In neither case did the governments do much to help.

Among Svalbard’s most prominent personalities was an American businessman and coal entrepreneur named John Munro Longyear, who cofounded the Arctic Coal Company in 1906. It established a company town called Longyear City—now Longyearbyen. He fancied himself a kind of polar emperor, bragging about being the “King of Spitsbergen.” The more money he poured into his creaky mines, the more entitled he felt to political control.

Longyear was shameless. He lobbied the U.S. State Department to expand the Guano Islands Act, which allowed U.S. citizens to take possession...
of uninhabited islands caked in bird feces, to apply to coal as well. When
that didn’t pan out, he tried to preempt a 1911 conference on the future
of Svalbard’s governance by proposing that the region be run by a private
corporation, registered in the U.S. or Britain and capitalized with a combined
$10 million from interested countries; naturally, he, his business partners and
their Arctic Coal Company would control a combined one-third of the stock.

Under his plan, the territory would remain open to
all nationalities and the corporation would oversee government
functions like regulating hunting and fishing, managing prisons,
administering land and real estate and limiting the sale of booze (to deter
the miners from getting drunk, which the coal boss resented). Longyear’s
contact at the State Department was not impressed, pointing out that
should shareholders opt to liquidate their assets, another country could
seize control. Also, the company could purchase a majority of the shares,
turning Svalbard into a corporate dictatorship overnight.

Norway, meanwhile, was inching closer to staking its own claim. It built
the first telegraph station in Svalbard in 1911, establishing control over crucial
telecommunications infrastructure; two years later, a papal decree combined
the archipelago “with the Apostolic vicarate of Norway,” suggesting an
entitlement of a more divine provenance.

Conferences came and went without a decision on what to do with
Spitsbergen. Then war broke out across Europe. Exhausted by his efforts,
Longyear sold his holdings in 1916 to a Norwegian company, Store Norske
Spitsbergen, which continues to operate a mine on the archipelago.

Svalbard remained ungoverned until the Paris Peace Conference, when
the Allies accepted Norway’s sovereignty, in part as a reward for its wartime
support. Even the neighboring U.S.S.R. agreed to the deal. The Bolsheviks
were apparently so desperate to establish their own sovereign legitimacy that
they ceded the land in exchange for diplomatic recognition from Norway.
The treaty went into effect in 1925, and 46 countries have signed, notably
North Korea in 2016.

I remember the moment I realized I needed to visit
Svalbard. A college friend and his partner were visiting from Boston, and
after listening to me complain about my difficulties in applying for a U.S.
green card—the interminable paperwork, the agonizing delays, the black box
of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and most of all, the feeling of
not quite belonging in the place I have called home since I turned 18—my
friend asked if I’d heard of Svalbard. His partner joked that I should consider
relocating. “I have a high school friend who moved there for good,” he said.
“My sister went last year, and she had a great time.”

I had heard of Svalbard, but it never fully registered as a real place where
people actually lived. I’d read Wikipedia, skimmed an academic paper or
two and glossed over a couple of articles about a doomsday vault that holds
specimens of nearly a million seed varieties. I’d assumed it would be like
Werner Herzog’s portrayal of Antarctica in Encounters at the End of the World:
governed by an international treaty system but monotonous, closed off and
full of scientists.

I’d also never thought of myself as a polar kind of person. They seemed
to me to be a different sort of animal—ruddy, straightforward, strong of
nerve and keen to endure physical challenges. Australian, perhaps, and on the
taller side. Definitely blond.

I—small, dark, often anxious and usually cold—have few polar qualities.
But I was restless for adventure, and when my green card finally arrived,
I applied for an art residency to sail around Svalbard for two weeks. We
departed from Longyearbyen, which was nothing like what I expected. The
town, perhaps obviously, has lots of normal towny things: roads, a veterinarian,
a supermarket and museums. Its center is a small strip of shops and colorful
prefabricated buildings. Longyearbyen was unremarkable—ugly, even—save
for the dramatic backdrop of mountains with names like Sukkertoppen,
Gruvfjellet and Trollsteinen.

Evidence of Svalbard's open-border policy is subtle. There are people of 53 nationalities living here, including a significant Thai and Filipino population and a number of younger backpacking types (seemingly all polar) from around the world who show up mainly to work in the tourism industry. According to Svalbard's governor, 37 percent of Longyearbyen's population is foreign.

The leader of our traveling expedition—let's call her Anna—was the platonic ideal of a polar person. Blond and agile, with sun-seared cheeks and eyes blue as glacier ice, she spends much of her time on ships, passing the northern summer months in the Arctic and the southern summer in Antarctica—a migratory pattern comparable to that of the Arctic tern, a bird that traverses the globe to chase the sun. Our ship was the *Antigua*, and it was where we slept, worked and ate. Mealtimes, regular to the point of being military, kept us on a schedule in the endless daylight. We quickly learned that the experience of visiting the Arctic depends overwhelmingly on the season, the weather and the thickness and thaw of the ice, which can immobilize waters for months at a time.

Far from a frigid monochrome, the landscape can be varied and full of life. Our first stop was Gnålodden, a landing spot in Hornsund, a fjord where we anchored after a queasy day at sea. A Zodiac took us to shore at the foot of a mossy mountain where small white gulls called kittiwakes chattered over waterfalls and crackling ice. There was no discernible smell other than an occasional whiff of loam. The ground under my hiking shoes felt damp and squishy, with snowmelt trickling its way through rocks and clusters of purple flowers.

Back at sea, we were well within Svalbard’s territorial waters and subject to the 1920 treaty. But beyond 12 nautical miles from the coasts, governments don’t all agree on how Norwegian—or not—the waters are. Maritime regulations can be complex, but disagreements, not unlike those over the U.S. Constitution, are essentially over whether the Svalbard Treaty is a living document. The Norwegians contend that any area not explicitly mentioned in the treaty defaults to ordinary Norwegian sovereignty. Critics like Russia and Spain say the spirit of the treaty, namely the nondiscrimination principle, should prevail.

The reason this is more than an abstract dispute is that, in 1969, Norway discovered oil in the North Sea. More recently, snow crabs, escaping warming waters, migrated north, bringing renewed attention to the Svalbard Treaty.
January 2017 the Norwegian Coast Guard held a Latvian trawler, the Senator, in Svalbard’s port for setting out 2,600 crab traps. The ship claimed to have a permit from the European Union, but Norway insisted that only it could hand out licenses; the case made it to the Norwegian Supreme Court, where all 11 of the judges ruled against the trawler.

The case wasn’t just about shellfish, though. Snow crabs are sedentary species, unlikely to move far during their short lives. That means they’re regulated not like fish but like minerals. Snow crabs were a proxy for oil. The crab case is settled for now, but the underlying conflict over jurisdiction is unlikely to stay dormant for long.

Svalbard has always been a place for superlatives. It was the site of the northernmost battle of World War II, after which much of its population was evacuated. Today, Svalbard boasts the world’s northernmost pub, northernmost wine cellar, northernmost alternative weekly newspaper and northernmost jazz festival. A performance artist once traveled here to make the world’s northernmost piece of toast—a metaphor for climate change, or late capitalism, or something.

Svalbard is also home to the northernmost statue of Vladimir Lenin: a symbol of faded Soviet ambitions as well as the nondiscrimination principle at work. Norway owns all the land in Svalbard, except for the settlements belonging to a state-owned Russian coal company, Arktikugol. The treaty granted the Soviet Union (and now Russia) the right to maintain a commercial presence on the archipelago as long as it abided by Norwegian law; because the USSR could not go in as a state, it asserted itself with industry instead.

One Arktikugol company town, Barentsburg, was founded by the Dutch and sold to the USSR in 1932, destroyed by the Nazis in 1943, then rebuilt in the 1970s. Today it has a population of roughly 450 and a sputtering mining industry. Barentsburg is just 35 miles from Longyearbyen but is accessible only by boat, snowmobile or helicopter. In 2014, The New York Times described it as “grim,” and a decade earlier, a Norwegian court sentenced a murderer to just four years in prison, reasoning that conditions here provided “mitigating circumstances in favor of the convict.” We did not visit Barentsburg.

Pyramiden, on the other hand, has none of these problems: It has been practically a ghost town since 1998. We arrived there about 12 days into our voyage, and it was the first sign of human life we’d seen since departing on the Antigua, save for some run-down trapper cabins, one of which had been destroyed by a polar bear. When I stepped onto the decrepit pier, a rotting wood plank collapsed, nearly claiming my ankle. In the distance, coal tunnels raised above the permafrost snaked their way up the peak for which the town is named, passing by the words “Miri Mir” (Peace on Earth) painted in white Cyrillic letters on the side of the mountain.

Today, Pyramiden—or Pyramida, as the Russians call it—has only a half-dozen residents, but for decades it was a thriving Soviet town. Between the crumbling remnants of its mining infrastructure, the classic Soviet architecture and some surprisingly resilient monuments (including Lenin), you can see clues as to how it prospered. Unlike other settlements on the archipelago, Pyramiden boasts grassy lawns, with soil the Soviet government shipped in from the mainland. The town has an old greenhouse where tomatoes, cucumbers and greens grew; a barn for imported livestock; a playground; and workers’ dorms, where iceboxes still sit on windowsills.

Over the years, mismanagement and dwindling coal reserves—not to mention the fall of the U.S.S.R.—caused residents to trickle out. Then a Svalbard Airport plane crash in 1996 killed more than 100 residents, pushing more to move away. Most didn’t bother to take their belongings, so it looked as if the people of Pyramiden had just evaporated, leaving their furniture, clothes, books and tools behind. The most unsettling thing about Pyramiden today is the massive colony of kitiwakes that have taken up residence in the ruins and shriek at all hours as they build nests and feed their young.
Under their din, the town may be experiencing the beginnings of a revival. Wandering around the nearly abandoned Soviet recreation center, complete with a basketball court, a movie theater and music rooms with untuned pianos, broken drum kits and Russian sheet music for songs from Paul McCartney’s band Wings, I ran into four young men in skullcaps. I asked them in Russian how they got here; they replied that they were builders from Tajikistan who arrived on a charter flight from Moscow that flies every few months (thus avoiding Norwegian transit visa requirements). They were hired to restore a few of the buildings; it’s lonely, one of them said.

The builders live alongside a small group of entrepreneurial Russian hipsters who lead tours trying to capitalize on Pyramiden’s Soviet kitsch and spooky ghost town appeal. There is a hotel, Tulpan (Tulip), with a bar that serves negronis (yes, the world’s northernmost) and vodkas infused with local cowberry, ginger and horseradish while screening black-and-white footage of the town from decades past. It’s easy to picture boatloads of tourists filling Pyramiden, or at least this bar, ready to let loose, as we were, after long days at sea. It’s hard not to resent them in advance for ruining something so perfectly ruined.

The problem of overtourism in Svalbard is hardly confined to Pyramiden. During the summer months, cruise ship passengers descend upon Longyearbyen, sometimes doubling the town’s population in a matter of hours. It seems everyone in the town—tour guides, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, the governor—agrees that the archipelago’s infrastructure cannot handle this many bodies. Longyearbyen still runs on coal, has no septic system and ships most of its trash back to the mainland. But regulating these arrivals is contentious and brings up bigger issues of governance, regulation and economics.

Tourism, like whaling and coal before it, is a lucrative industry that can’t continue growing indefinitely. Only this time, instead of frontiersmen acting largely alone, decision-making happens by a great many people. Svalbard might appear to be a libertarian fantasy of open borders, self-sufficiency and low taxes, but managing such a society requires a surprising amount of government.

The highest authority on the islands is the sysselmann, or governor, of Svalbard, who is appointed by the central government in Oslo. The job—a combination of police chief, spokesperson, and consul general—is a bit like being a sheriff in the Wild West. “I never thought I’d have to learn to use a rifle and a satellite phone for my job,” the current governor, Kjerstin Askholt, told me as we walked down the halls of her office (per local tradition dating to coal-mining days, I took off my shoes upon entering and thus conducted the interview in Hawaiian print socks).

She said her office manages search-and-rescue operations, arrests drunken drivers and snowmobilers, and occasionally officiates marriages. She also expels people to the mainland three or four times a year if they are homeless, ill or broke. “This is not a cradle tograve society,” one of Askholt’s colleagues told me.

In Longyearbyen, there’s also a democratically elected mayor and community council, which oversees the school, roads, waste management and other town affairs. Residents can vote if they’ve lived in town for at least three years, though, oddly, Nordic citizens—not just Norwegians—can vote after only a few weeks. (The Svalbard Treaty’s nondiscrimination clause does not mention democratic representation.)

Askholt said the governor’s office is working with the council as well as with tourism companies to make recommendations to Oslo on how to manage the crush of arrivals, but the final decision gets made on the mainland. Her immediate concern is that there is little regulation about who can lead tours. “A few years ago, six Saudi tourists hired a guide who took them out with a weapon but no real license,” she recalled. “They thought they saw a polar bear, but because the guide wasn’t certified, he tossed the weapon, left and told them all to run for their lives.”

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She added, “We found six very cold Saudi tourists a few hours later. This is the sort of thing that needs to stop.”

Askholt did not criticize Svalbard’s diversity, but she did note, referring to a government white paper, that making sure Norwegians aren’t outnumbered here is a national priority. Norway appears to want to avoid ruling over a community made up mostly of nonnationals. “What matters the most to us is to protect the wilderness and maintain the Norwegian community in Svalbard,” she said.

In a place with open borders, crafting incentives is complex: If you make life on Svalbard appealing—with good schools, for instance, or better housing—there’s no way to guarantee that it will be Norwegians who come. At the same time, Svalbard cannot turn away anyone on account of nationality. The result, which can be easily justified with the treaty’s mandate of low taxes, is that the Norwegian government provides as little as possible: Unlike the mainland, the islands have minimal health care, child care and housing benefits.

And that, in turn, shapes Svalbard’s spirit—for better or for worse. “A lot of people are coming here with different kinds of dreams and visions, and it’s not always a success for them,” Askholt said. “When you can come from so many countries, to come up at all says something about the kind of person you are. You have to have something in you.”

Or maybe Svalbard is where you go to find it. On midsummer, my shipmates and I stripped down and jumped into the ocean from the side of the boat. The water is not like other cold water—not the chilly North Atlantic, not an icy shower, not even the cold pool at a Russian bathhouse. It does not register as having a temperature at all. Swimming in the Arctic is a senseless act, but it brings you to your senses. Afterward, you feel weightless, like everything is new. You feel almost polar.

When you spend enough time at sea, especially while writing, you come to a deeper understanding of many maritime clichés: to be in the same boat, make waves and have the wind in your sails. And then there’s cabin fever. I can describe it only as a mania of the limbs, a wrestling of the spirit trying to escape its human cage. It is my idea of bodily hell, and I fought it until our landing at Sarstangen, a sliver of a beach jutting into a glassy sound with a blurring palette of blues and whites—sea, ice, clouds and sky—stretching.
out to the horizon. If it hadn’t been for the stench of a nearby walrus colony, it was how I imagined heaven. But then I looked down; the ground was covered in trash.

The refuse of humanity came in all shapes, colors and textures—yellow fishing nets, rusted tin cans, pink candy wrappers, a black TV. We picked up as much as we could, filling white bags that we dragged back across the sand to our Zodias so we could drop them off in Longyearbyen. It was so distracting that we couldn’t look up.

**EVEN WITHOUT THE SPECTACLE OF ARCTIC GARBAGE, WE** encountered human damage at every stop—glaciers calving as though they were losing their teeth, their shorelines receding like sickly gums. It put the idea of sovereignty into perspective in a different, cosmic way: Who are any of us to be here at all?

In the modern world, the concept of state sovereignty governs how we govern. Its legitimacy is rarely questioned, even though it is a human invention—the setting of borders, the wielding of power, the deciding of who belongs. But in the Arctic, as in any remote place, it’s obvious that we’re not actually in charge.

We carry no special privileges or diplomatic immunities in spaces where nature makes the rules. It is absurd to impose the construct of the nation-state, what with its laws and regulations, on something so wild, so unruly. Svalbard’s landscape disregards any concept of national borders, of industrial time, or of politics as we know it. We aren’t its citizens, residents or denizens; we are its guests.

No wonder it’s a place that, for a hundred years, has quietly challenged what countries can do.

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Atossa Araxia Abrahamian is a senior editor at *The Nation* and the author of *The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen* (Columbia Global Reports, 215), Canada.