The “capital” of Svalbard is Longyearbyen, not named after anything having to do with its many weeks of summer daylight and winter dark, but rather after an American coal mining entrepreneur named John M. Longyear, who founded the town in 1906. Approaching ships take the broad Isfjord in from the sea, make a right turn into the smaller Adventfjord, pass the airport and pull up at the pier. The town stretches up from the shore to the snow-covered mountain slopes like bare raspberry canes in winter. At the upper end of town is a cemetery where victims of the Spanish flu lie alongside the mine entrance, which is why we were able to drive metre-long bolts into the ceiling to stop it from collapsing. Unlike coal layers in Germany or West Virginia, the seams on Svalbard are above ground — indeed, tens of metres above ground — so one goes up to them, not down. This also means they are easier to ventilate, which is why we were able to drive a car into the seam. Half of Mine Number 7’s production goes to the Longyearbyen power plant and the rest is exported to mainland Europe.

Fewer than a dozen people still work in mining in Longyearbyen, although quite a few more commute in shifts over to the large coal mine in the nearby settlement of Sveagruva. Longyearbyen is reinventing itself as a tourist and education centre. I had a small-world moment when one of the other mine tour participants turned out to be an acquaintance from Reykjavik, who had just spent seven days circumnavigating Svalbard on a small cruise ship, the Polar Star. She said she’d seen 30 polar bears. We met two middle-aged Danish women in front of the shop, newly in from a trekking tour, broad smiles on their faces and their rifles still strapped to their back. Anyone who leaves settled areas must carry a rifle and know how to use it, as Svalbard’s polar bears can and do eat humans.

The most impressive building in town is the brand-new university centre, which also houses the museum, bookshop and tourist office. The university centre is a cooperative project of several mainland Norwegian universities, not an independent institution. It has beautiful polished wood floors, and everyone has to take off their shoes even to enter the public spaces. I couldn’t resist buying a book on polar bears at the bookshop and another on Franz Josef Land.

I once imagined Longyearbyen as a sort of arctic camp, with Nansen-like figures chews at the mountain and showed us how to circumnavigate Svalbard on a small cruise ship, the Polar Star. She said she’d seen 30 polar bears. We met two middle-aged Danish bands for the big glacier-capped volcanoes, called Bønn- enberg, and a weather station with 18 crew members, who have found that the island has an average of four truly sunny days per year. There is no harbour, so we couldn’t land. When I woke up and looked out the window, the ship was sailing through a giant fog-bank, and I was afraid I wouldn’t see the island at all. But the fog cleared during breakfast, we’d hit one of the four annual sunny days, and the view of Bjørnøya and the north coast of the island was great.

I have mixed feelings about the life of a cruise lecturer (at this stage in my life I prefer to work for money instead of free time). But I can recommend Svalbard and (if you can ever get there) Jan Mayen. Svalbard is easy enough to reach, with frequent flights from Oslo and Tromsø. My ship sailed under bright sunshine like a bowl of soup.