

SVALBARD EXPEDITION

Chasing the Light at 79 degrees North

In the fall of 2008, Rena Bass Forman and her family carried WINGS WorldQuest Flag #19 to the extreme northern archipelago of Svalbard to catch the last light before the onset of polar night. Rena planned to create a photographic portfolio of toned gelatin silver prints of this austere and stark landscape.

SVALBARD, EXTREME NORTH

Svalbard is an archipelago, which lies between Latitude 74 degrees and 81 degrees North and Longitude 10 degrees and 35 degrees east. Lying less than 400 miles from the North Pole, more than 60% of Svalbard is covered with glaciers that spill dramatically from the mountains down to the sea. This fragile environment is home to whales, seals, polar bears, fox, reindeer, migratory bird species, and the northern most settlement on the planet. The mountainous island Spitsbergen, with a deeply indented coastline, is the largest of three inhabited islands in the archipelago.



*Leila, Rena, and Zaria Forman at sea on MS Farm.
Photo: Scott Forman*



Scott, Rena, Leila, and Zaria Forman at sea on MS Farm. Photo: Scott Forman

AN ARTIST FOLLOWS THE LIGHT

Rena has a passion for capturing the alchemical magic of light. What better place to travel to than where it is most elusive – the polar regions of the world at the moment before winter's darkness? Chasing the light is never easy. It requires determination and patience and the willingness to remain outside and on the watch at all times.

Rena knew that the sun would never reach higher than 10 – 12 degrees above the horizon, and that the hours of daylight would decrease rapidly as each day passed. She also knew that she would have to contend with bone-chilling cold.



Ny Alesund. Photo: Ron DeStefano

What she did not anticipate while at sea on the 50 ft. M.S. Farm, were the high winds, raging seas, icy sleet, rain, and fog that persisted for twelve full days in a row. She used the International Arctic Research Base, in Ny Alesund, for shelter. The Research Base is located in a unique arctic fjord environment, with calving glaciers, sandy beaches, bird and plant sanctuaries, diverse geology, and no pollution. It is a pristine, ideal environment for research in the natural sciences – and proved to be an excellent base for photographic opportunity for the adventurous artist.

After the seemingly endless rains, and with a treacherous period of ice in between, the snow finally arrived and the landscape was transformed into the Svalbard Rena had envisioned in her dreams. She worked feverishly to capture on film images of this incredible Arctic desert. On her very last night, she had her biggest surprise. She saw the sun for the first time in thirty days just as it set over the snow covered valley of Bjorndalen into the Arctic Ocean.

EXPEDITION EXPERIENCE

We headed West out of the Isfjord in Longyearbyen on the 50 foot M. S. Farm into the wild and open Greenland Sea. We spent time with a family of subsistence hunters at the remote Trapper station, Farmhamna, learning of the skills of hunting, skinning and curing reindeer, fox and seal.

WHO

Rena Bass Forman

WHAT

Capturing the last light on film before the onset of polar night

WHERE

The world's Northernmost settlement: Longyearbyen and Ny Alesund, Svalbard

WHY

To document and render glacial ice in large scale, toned gelatin silver prints



Svalbard (top center) in relation to Greenland, Iceland, and Scandinavia

“One feels humbled to be in an environment as vast and beautiful (and freezing) as Svalbard, where one must constantly be on the watch for polar bears. We are mere visitors and must tread lightly.”

— Rena Bass Forman



Greenland #7 – Rena Bass Forman



Greenland #5 Ice cap – Rena Bass Forman



Greenland #4 – Rena Bass Forman

We continued North to Ny Alesund, home of the International Arctic Research and Monitoring Base. A small team of international scientists spoke with us on subjects as varied as ice core samples and what they revealed about the permafrost, the Aurora Borealis, its origins and interactions with information sent from our man-made satellites and the giant orange jellyfish, which they graciously collected for us in buckets so that we could observe, draw and photograph them.

The watch for the light continued day and night, because we couldn't miss an opportunity to photograph the Aurora Borealis.

EXPEDITION TECHNIQUES

The most challenging part of planning the expedition was finding a suitable boat and crew. We decided to work with Stig Henningsen, a sea captain born and raised in Longyearbyen. We obtained special permission to transport all the equipment and visit the research base through Kings Bay, a private company responsible for managing the base and all its logistics.

The day to day work was organized by Rena with the advice of the captain. Good communication between the crew and the team was essential as we were all living on the boat in very close quarters and working under extremely difficult weather and sea conditions.

EXPEDITION ADVICE

Rena tells us, "I think it is very important when planning a trip like this to give great time and consideration to all the details that you can possibly control, and then realize that one must leave home with a lot of courage and no expectations because arctic travel in particular is fraught with unpredictable and varied situations. Traveling as a family has its advantages as

we all work well to support one another and each brings different skills, knowledge, and point of view to the group.”

EXPEDITION RESULTS

Rena’s process of slowly developing her film by hand, making work prints, and then producing large scale, sepia toned exhibition prints takes about two years. She will concentrate on creating a portfolio of images from her expedition as the next stage of her project. Looking ahead, she plans to return to Svalbard when the sun emerges again in early March 2010.

ABOUT RENA BASS FORMAN

Rena Bass Forman is an internationally recognized artist whose work resides in private, corporate, and museum collections all over the world. Following the footsteps of 19th century explorers and artists, she has traveled the world with her family.

This expedition was part of a longitudinal project photographing glacial ice. Rena has made five previous trips to the arctic, and often involves her family, each skilled to assist in the field in diverse ways. Their last expedition together was to Greenland in 2007.

“At a time when climate change – particularly at the P oles – threatens to alter fundamentally humanity’s relationship to the land, Forman creates luminous photographs that celebrate nature’s constancy.”

– Lisa Hostetler, Curator of Photographs,
Milwaukee Art Museum



Rena at work. Photo: Scott Forman



Svalbard #1 – Rena Bass Forman

EXPEDITION TEAM

Expedition Leader:
Rena Bass Forman

Field Assistant:
Leila Bass Forman, CNM

Artist in the field:
Zaria Forman

Documentary Photographer:
Scott Forman, MD

Captain of M.S. Farm:
Stig Henningsen

Logistics and Guide:
Stig #2