

# Photographing in the Arctic: Svalbard 2013

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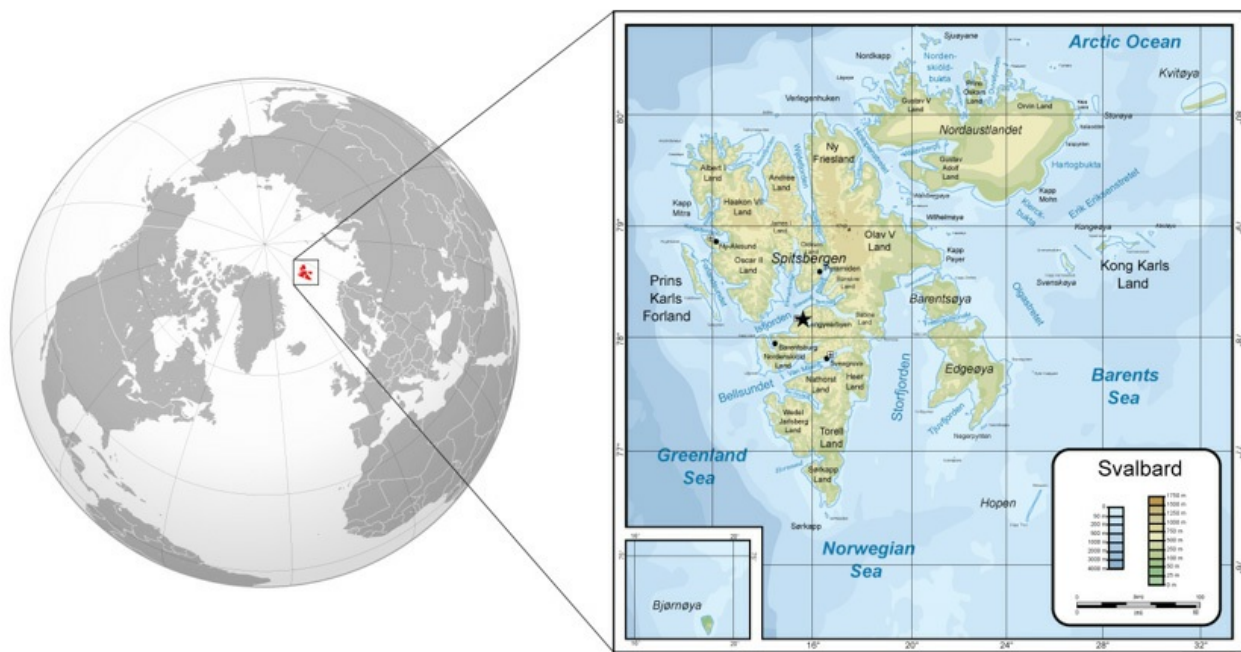
February 10, 2014 by Peter  
Cox

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## The High Arctic

On August 24, 2013 myself along with two other photographers – Chas Glatzer, and Daniel Bergmann, boarded the M/S Quest in Longyearbyen, Svalbard. We were about to head out for ten days of photography in and around the Svalbard archipelago. We were joined by 47 clients from all over the world. Kevin Raber, publisher of this site, was also with us.

The Arctic has long held a fascination for me and I was very much looking forward to experiencing all it had to offer. This is a sort of combination of trip report and photo essay to give you a taste of what it's like to explore this part of the world on board ship.

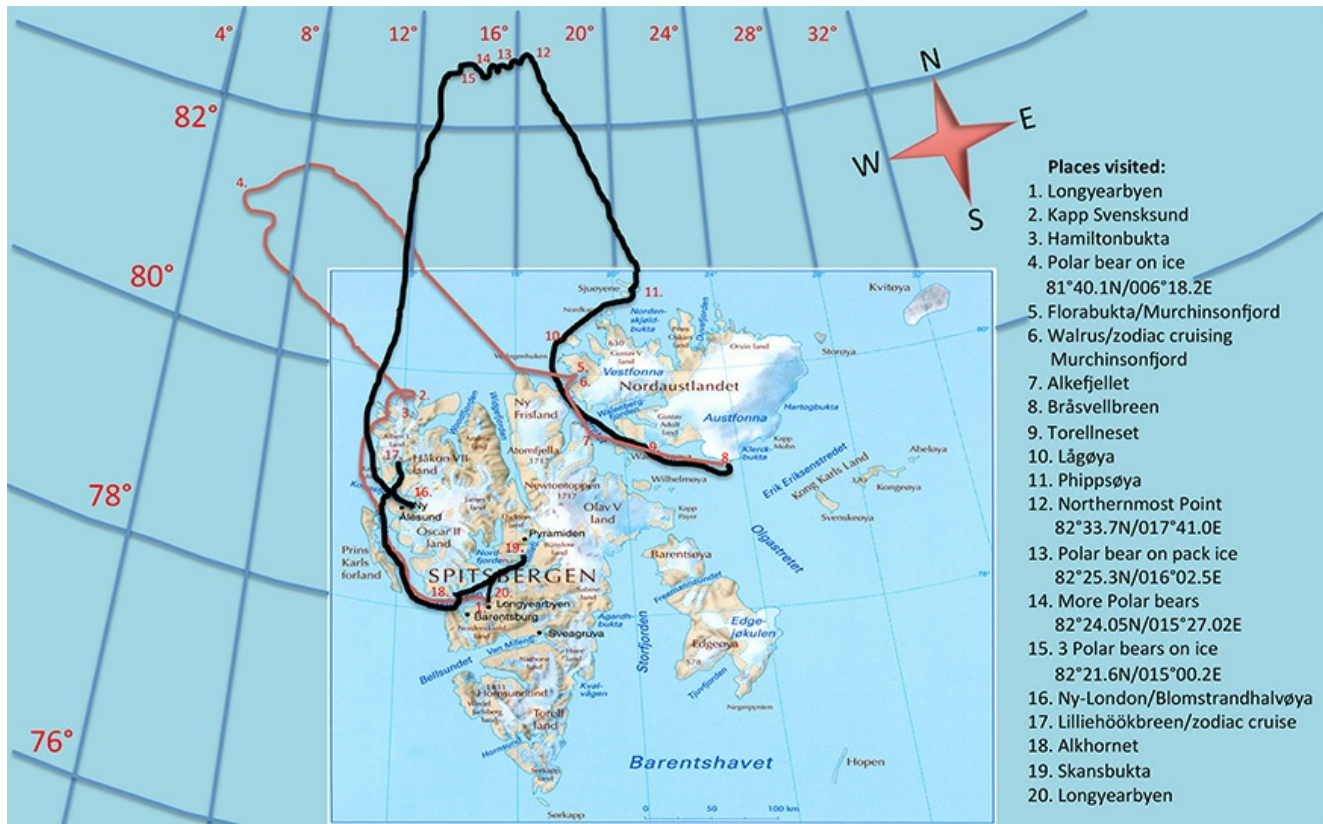


### Overview Map Showing Svalbard in Context

Svalbard is located between 76° and 80°N, well into the Arctic Circle. During the summertime, the sun doesn't set, nor does it rise in the winter. For this trip, we were right on the transition – the swing from permanent day to permanent night happens over the course of just a few weeks. On our first day, the sun set for the first time since April.

We specifically planned the trip for this time of year as the sun would be lower in the sky, which would provide more dramatic light for wildlife and landscapes, as well as some pretty dramatic nights with red clouds, etc. Unfortunately, as it happened, the weather didn't cooperate and we had overcast conditions for pretty much the whole trip. This made the

photography a little challenging but everyone was very satisfied with their results in the end.



## The Route We Took

As you can see from the map above, we covered quite a bit of ground, reaching a furthest north of 82° 33.7'N. This was further than the ship or anyone on her, including the Captain, had been before. We went this far because that's where the pack ice was – much further up than it had been in previous seasons.

## The Adventure Begins

We got settled on the ship and headed for Spitsbergen's north-west corner. Along the way, we were treated to some beautiful jagged scenery for which the area is renowned. Peak after peak, glacier after glacier slipped past. The brooding overcast light served only to emphasize the remote and harsh nature of the landscape.



Mountains and Glacier, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 14mm f/2.8L II

Exposure: 1/160th @ f/8, ISO 200

After a relaxing overnight passage through the Forlandsundet, we rounded the corner and entered Raudfjorden. Here we had a quick landing at Kapp Svenskund to stretch our legs and photograph the landscape. Unfortunately, the weather was too good for photography (blue skies, not a cloud in the sky), so it was a case of enjoying the sunshine and the experience of being in the high Arctic with our sleeves rolled up! As photographers, of course we wished for a bit more cloud. Nature provided later on – but with a bit more enthusiasm than we had banked on!

## Our First Bear Encounter

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We returned to the ship for a delicious lunch. Afterwards, we were informed that another ship, which had been in Hamiltonbukta across the fjord, had seen a pair of polar bears. We wasted no time getting suited up again and into the zodiacs once more.

Hamiltonbukta is a spectacular cove into which a pair of glaciers flow. We headed for the northern side of the bay where one of the bears was reported. As we closed in, we saw what could have either been a bright rock, or a sleeping polar bear. Closer yet, and all doubt was removed – our first polar bear of the trip!

The bear was doing what all bears do when stranded on land after the ice has retreated – as little as possible and living off its stored fat reserves.





Sleeping Polar Bear, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/640th @ f/6.3, ISO 800

After spending time photographing the bear, we went exploring the rest of the bay, photographing the icewalls and icebergs that had calved from it. There's little I enjoy photographing more than old, blue ice. The colours and textures are incredible and provide endless possibilities for abstracts. In the image below, I elected to include the water at the base of the glacier but exclude the sky above. This gives an imposing sense of scale, more so than would be achieved by excluding the water as well.



Glacier Front, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/1250th @ f/7.1, ISO 800





Cruising the Icebergs, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/4000th @ f/2.8, ISO 800

The Zodiacs were large, 5 meter affairs and capable of comfortably seating up to 10 photographers without any difficulty. Our team of expert guides did a fantastic job of putting us in the right place for the image at the right time.

Eventually, some of the boats swung back to the bear. Shortly after arriving, they were rewarded with a burst of action – a bearded seal had poked his head out of the water and in a flash the bear was up and moving. The seal immediately slipped away, but those in the nearby zodiacs had a rare treat to see a stealth predator in action.





Meals on Wheels? Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L  
Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

My boat was a little further away when this happened, and on getting back I was able to capture this scene. The bear has given up on the seal but now regards the nearest boat with interest. Even though bears are incredible swimmers, there was little danger here. Had the bear decided to try something, the boat would be out of range before he even entered the water.

There was much excitement among all of us. Our first bear, and what a treat to see this behaviour in action.

After this, it was time to return to the ship and start steaming north. Our objective was to photograph bears on the pack ice on the open ocean – where they are most at home.

## Into the Pack Ice

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The sea ice was much further north than usual, and we got up to 81°40'N before we encountered it. This was our first furthest north, and was also further than the ship or anyone on it had previously been. As we closed in to the ice, the weather did also. Ice fog surrounded us and dropped visibility to less than half a mile. Spotting bears in these conditions would be just about impossible, unless we encountered one right at the edge of the pack. In fact, Daniel, Chas, Morten and myself had just had a meeting where we'd essentially decided that staying here was pointless and we should consider heading back down to the coast and try again later.

No sooner than we'd come to this conclusion than out of the mist appeared a bear! Even better, he was curious about us and tolerated a close approach by the ship.





Curious Polar Bear, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/6.3, ISO 800



Polar Bear, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/800th @ f/5.6, ISO 800

We spent quite some time photographing him before he had enough and wandered off. It was very enlightening to see the difference between a bear on land and one better fed out on the pack ice. Seeing the confidence and ease with which he moved from floe to floe was very impressive. The largest land predator on earth, moving with ease on the frozen ocean!

Before we moved on ourselves, the ship got close to one of the ice floes the bear had been walking on. It's a strange thing to see bear tracks on thin sea ice!





Bear Tracks on Ice Floe, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 95mm

Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/6.3, ISO 800

A major goal of the expedition checked off, we decided to escape the worsening weather at the ice pack and head back south to the northern reaches of Svalbard. We sailed south into the Hinlopen strait between Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet, then into Murchisonfjorden. After a quick landing to stretch our legs we went cruising in the zodiacs looking for walrus.

## Back to Svalbard

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Unfortunately, the walrus we did encounter were shy and showed no interest in the boats. However, the colours of the landscape were spectacular.



High Arctic Desert, Svalbard



Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/1250th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

Later that evening, we sailed back out to the Hinlopen and photographed Alkefjellet – a massive dolomite cliff that is home to hundreds of thousands of seabirds during the summer. At this time of year, the cliff was largely deserted, but there were still thousands of birds present. I found myself drawn strongly to the wonderful patterns and colours of the cliff itself, using individual birds as elements within that composition. Our captain was incredible, handling the ship with ease, keeping the bow pointed at the cliff and at very close range. A complex operation that was made to seem effortless.



Alkefjellet Bird Cliff, Svalbard. Spot the bird?



Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 200mm

Exposure: 1/200th @ f/2.8, ISO 1600

## The Bråsvellbreen Icewall

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Our next stop was one of my favourites from a landscape point of view. The great ice cliff of Bråsvellbreen on the south coast of Nordaustlandet. Cascading meltwater waterfalls, spectacular patterns in the old blue ice and wonderful icebergs!



Waterfall, Bråsvellbreen Icewall, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 200mm



Exposure: 1/400 th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

These meltwater falls are a common sight along ice walls and never grow old for me. The water comes through in a torrent, seemingly from nowhere. I enjoy the triangular shapes created in this image from the diagonal lines of the glacier and the verticals in the waterfall.



Fulmar, Bråsvellbreen Icewall, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/640 th @ f/4, ISO 400

I found myself drawn to the birds flying in front of the ice wall and spent quite some time working with participants to capture a lone bird against an interesting section of wall, with the bird placed in just the right area, and 'posed' nicely. Here, a fulmar obliged nicely in all respects.



Waterfall II, Bråsvellbreen Icewall , Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/640 th @ f/4, ISO 400

Another waterfall, this one emerging from a beautifully sculpted part of the wall.



### Iceberg Abstract, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 200mm

Exposure: 1/800th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

Out from the ice wall were a collection of icebergs. These provide an opportunity for a different sort of abstract. In the image above, you can see the diagonal black line where volcanic ash has been washed into a fault in the ice, and the bedding lines as season after season laid down new ice, now turned vertically as the iceberg rotated in the water. Below, a small cave in the side of a berg shows beautiful colour graduations and concentric shapes. I made several images of this one, waiting for a wave to lap up against the side.





Iceberg Abstract II, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 200mm

Exposure: 1/800th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

## Walrus!

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Reluctantly, it was time to leave the ice wall and start looking for the other major animal we wanted to photograph. Walrus! To start our search, we sailed to Torellneset. Into the zodiacs again and we made our first landing for walrus on the beach. Walrus startle easily and are not comfortable on land. You have to be very careful not to frighten them as they will make for the water in a stampede, potentially injuring smaller and weaker members of the herd (or pod, or huddle, depending on your preference).

This means discipline in the approach is vital. Morten, our expedition leader, was excellent, and the group responded very well to his direction. We walked up slowly in one line, staying quiet and making no sudden moves. We stopped at various points to make photographs and to allow the walrus time to acclimate to our presence. This slow, methodical approach allowed us to get close enough for full-frame portraits with the 400mm lens. I particularly enjoy the image below which was made on the initial approach. The icebergs in the background give a real sense of place and there's a wonderful colour contrast between the reds and browns of the walrus and the blue ice beyond.



Walrus Party, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/320th @ f/5.6, ISO 400

Walrus are formidable animals, with two inch thick skin and four inches of blubber below that. They're very safe from predation by polar bears – they are far more capable swimmers, and even if caught on land the bears simply can't penetrate deep enough to do real damage.



Walrus, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L + 1.4x (560mm)

Exposure: 1/160th @ f/11, ISO 800

After everyone had got the images they needed, we (carefully) headed back down the beach to the boats. Upon arrival, we found that there'd been a bit of excitement. One young walrus in particular – this guy, in fact...





Young Walrus, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/500th @ f/5.6, ISO 800

... took a fancy to one of the zodiacs while it was up on the beach. Either curious, playful or something else, he gave each of the pontoons a bit of a love bite, piercing them with his tusks and deflated two of the air bladders!

The ship carries a spare for this sort of eventuality and it was brought back. The damaged one was driven back to the ship empty by one of the guides – showing how resilient these boats really are. The day-glo case in the bow of the damaged boat is a gun case – all the guides are armed when we're on land as a last-resort defense against the sudden appearance of a polar bear.



Punctured! Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 24mm f/1.4L II

Exposure: 1/200th @ f/4.5, ISO 100

While we waited for the zodiac situation to be sorted out, there was the opportunity for a little sunbathing on the beach.



Taking it Easy, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 24mm f/1.4L II

Exposure: 1/200th @ f/4.5, ISO 100



This excitement over, we steamed north again, stopping on the island of Lågøya to photograph more walrus on the beach. From there, we headed further north to the Seven Islands, Svalbard's northernmost point. Here, we landed on Phippsøya, but not before our closest-yet encounter with walrus in the water.



Curious Walrus, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/640th @ f/4, ISO 1600





Taking a Breath, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/640th @ f/4, ISO 1600

This was an incredible experience, probably my favourite of the trip. At a certain point the walrus were just too close to photograph with the 400mm lens I had mounted. After giving time for everyone to get their photographs, I called for the participants on my boat to put down their cameras and actually experience the encounter directly. This is a very important part of photography – knowing when to stop and just take in the situation.

## Back to the Pack Ice, Furthest North

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Once again, it was now time to head north to the pack ice. The weather was forecast to clear, and we wanted another shot at encountering bears on sea ice. The crossing was rough but the ship was expertly handled and for me, the motion rocked me to sleep.

It was even further to the pack ice this time – we encountered it at 82°33'N. A new furthest north for the ship and everyone on her.

This was our most fruitful time for encountering bears, with around ten bears in the roughly 24 hours we spent there. My favourite image is probably this one, however. I love the shape of the bear tracks on this floe.



Bear Tracks on Ice Floe, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 24mm f/1.4L II

Exposure: 1/250th @ f/9, ISO 200





Going for a Walk, Arctic Ocean



Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/6.3, ISO 800



In its Element, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 24mm f/1.4L II

Exposure: 1/125th @ f/9, ISO 200



From One to the Other, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 400mm f/2.8L

Exposure: 1/800th @ f/5.6, ISO 800



Pack Ice Detail, Arctic Ocean

Canon EOS 6D, EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS @ 90mm

Exposure: 1/500th @ f/8, ISO 400

## Returning to Longyearbyen, Calving Ice and Reindeer

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After a fruitful day and night at the ice pack, we headed south again, starting the long journey home.

We spent the next evening in Lilliehöökfjorden, a spectacular fjord where six glaciers converge and flow into the water. This was my favourite zodiac cruise of the trip and resulted in my favourite image. While cruising around, we heard several calving events, but because the sound got to us after the event was over, we weren't able to photograph it. On this occasion, the calving took place in several stages – starting small and then building up until eventually a large section of the wall fell away. This gave plenty of warning to keep our cameras on the spot. My favourite aspect of this image is the flock of kittiwakes silhouetted against the splash.





Calving Glacier and Startled Kittiwakes, Svalbard  
Canon EOS 6D, EF 300mm f/2.8L IS II + 1.4x (420mm)



Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/5.6, ISO 800



Photographing Icebergs, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 300mm f/2.8L IS II + 1.4x (420mm)

Exposure: 1/1000th @ f/4, ISO 400

The next day, we made our way back to Longyearbyen, stopping in a few locations along the way. The most productive was Alkhornet, where I made my favourite 'traditional' landscape image of the trip and where we had good encounters with Svalbard reindeer. A couple of participants were lucky enough to see and photograph a young Arctic fox up close and personal.



Alkhornet, Svalbard



Canon EOS 6D, EF 24mm f/1.4L II

Exposure: 1/50th @ f/11, ISO 400



Sparring Reindeer, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 300mm f/2.8L II + 1.4x (420mm)

Exposure: 1/500th @ f/5.6, ISO 800





Svalbard Reindeer, Svalbard

Canon EOS 6D, EF 300mm f/2.8L II + 1.4x (420mm)

Exposure: 1/1250th @ f/4, ISO 800

At last, it was time to say goodbye after one final night on the ship. This was a very enjoyable expedition for all three of the photography leaders. Our expedition leader, Morten Jørgensen and his staff of guides were really exceptional, and the group of clients we had along made the trip really worthwhile with their humour and enthusiasm.

## Join us in July for Two Exclusive Workshops!

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This July, in partnership with the Kevin Raber and the Luminous Landscape, I'm running two trips, back-to-back in Svalbard. The 2013 trip you've just read about was on a large, 50 berth ship. These two expeditions will be on a much smaller ship and we're taking just **11 participants** on each one. This is a much more intimate affair. We will have two zodiacs at our disposal – the same size as the ones we used in 2013, but with a maximum of 6 participants in each – this means even more room to move around and get the ideal composition.

Kevin Raber will be joining me as host and instructor and Morten Jørgensen, our excellent expedition leader from this trip, will be coming along as well. Morten was a big part of the success of the 2013 trip, getting us to the right place at the right time and always working

with great humour and professionalism.

With a smaller ship we also have lower decks, allowing us to get closer and lower-angled images of any bears we encounter on the ice. To read more, and to join us on these incredible journeys, head over to the [workshop page](#)! I look forward to seeing you there.

## About Peter Cox

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Peter is a landscape photographer and workshop leader living and working in the beautiful south-west of Ireland. He sells his prints from his [gallery in Killarney](#), the gateway to the Ring of Kerry tourist route and one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland.

He also runs [regular photography workshops](#) in Ireland and abroad. He jokes that he likes the cold, running trips mainly in Scotland, Iceland and the Arctic.

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