



PHOTOS: BERTIL LINTNER

Longyearbyen from the air

POLAR BEARS ROAM THIS BURMA ROAD

The name of a famous Asian war-time supply route lives on inside
the Arctic Circle

By BERTIL LINTNER

The memory of the Burma Road is alive and kicking even in mankind's northernmost habitation. It winds its way over the hills outside Longyearbyen, the main settlement in the Arctic Norwegian territory of Svalbard, or Spitsbergen, as it is more commonly known after the main island in the archipelago. No one seems to know how or why the road got its name, but it is marked on official maps as "Burmaveien," Norwegian for Burma Road, and leads

from the outskirts of Longyearbyen to the airport, a few kilometers away—much shorter than the original version through upper Burma to Kunming, China.

According to Birger Amundsen, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Svalbardsposten*—the world's northernmost newspaper—the reason for the name could be that it was built in 1950, a few years after World War II, when memories of the Burma campaign were fresh. To some people the winding



road apparently resembled the supply route to the Kuomintang forces that were resisting the Japanese in China in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Despite its remoteness—it's no more than 1,000 km (600 miles) from the North Pole—Longyearbyen is a surprisingly cosmopolitan place. Only 1,800 people live here, but they represent at least 17 different nationalities. No Burmese, but the Thais—even more surprisingly—are the largest ethnic group after the Norwegians. About 70 Thais live and work here, and most of them are female cleaners and chambermaids in Longyearbyen's hotels and restaurants. And apart from Longyearbyen, there are only a few other settlements: the scientific station of Ny Ålesund to the north, and the Russian mining town of Barentsburg to the west.

Ing-Ing comes from Phitsanulok, in central Thailand, and her friend Duanjai from nearby Petchabun, and it's hard to imagine a scenery and climate that is more different from their home towns. More than half of Spitsbergen's 61,000 square kilometers is permanently covered by ice and snow. The sun doesn't rise at all for four months in winter, but then it doesn't set in summer, when the temperature hovers around 9-12°C. In winter it drops down to -20°C, or more. There are more polar bears than people in the territory—at

least 3,000 compared with only 2,500 humans. And the bears are dangerous. People venturing outside Longyearbyen are requested to be armed, not to kill the beasts but to scare them off if they attack, which they often do.

But the money here is good, say Ing-Ing and Duanjai, and that's why they stay, working as chambermaids at Hotel Spitsbergen. The territory's unique history makes it possible for them to be here. It was disputed—and virtually uninhabited—until an agreement called the Svalbard Treaty was signed in 1920 at the final stages of the Versailles negotiations after World War I. Norway was granted sovereignty over this Arctic archipelago, but citizens of the 39 countries that signed the treaty gained the right to reside and do business in the territory. No visas and work permits are required, there is no VAT or other indirect taxes, and even income tax is much lower than in mainland Norway.

Thailand was actually not a party to the treaty, but, as Hanne Ingebrigtsen, legal adviser to the local government, explains: "We don't discriminate against citizens of non-treaty countries." Anyone is welcome, anyone who is prepared to put up with the harsh conditions, that is. The Russians were the first to take advantage of this unique arrangement, and started

mining for coal at several locations in Spitsbergen. During the Cold War, it was widely suspected that the Soviets were not only interested in coal, but in having a foothold inside a member country of NATO as well.

The Thais came much later, in the mid-1980s. A Norwegian mining official—coal was the main source of income here before tourism became more important—spent his holiday in Thailand and fell in love with a young Thai woman. Then mainly a mining community, it was male-dominated, and few Norwegian women were prepared to move here. But Sompong Haug did, and she is still here, now a prominent member of the local Thai community. Then the word spread about this "free zone" near the North Pole, and more Thais followed.

Ing-Ing and Duanjai have spent a year in Longyearbyen and send money home to support their families in Thailand. In order to get here, they first had to get a tourist visa for Norway, which they just transited on their way to Spitsbergen via Tromsø, a town in northernmost Norway, from where there are flights to Longyearbyen. When they go back to Thailand, all they need is a transit permit for Norway. Their Norwegian visas have expired so they cannot stay there.

The Thais are well liked by the local community, editor Amundsen explains: "They do work that Norwegians don't want to do, they are good workers and they don't cause any trouble." In fact, the only complaint about the Thais is that they are a bit too discreet and seldom take part in community events. An exception was when in April this year Longyearbyen celebrated its 100th anniversary as a permanent settlement. Norway's King Harald V and Queen Sonja were present at the celebrations, which included a Thai cultural show at the local school.

Thus, globalization has reached one of the remotest corners of Earth. It's only Burma and a few other countries that have gone into almost total isolation. The rough and desolate Burmaveien, which is hardly used these days, serves as a reminder of bygone times, when Burma and the Burma Road were household names all over the world. ■



Svalbardposten, the world's northernmost newspaper