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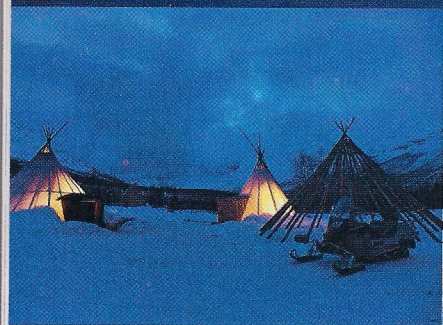


ARCTIC CRUISING

DISCOVER NORWAY'S WINTER PASSAGE

BY GLENN KAUFMANN

An ethereal green glow is there and then gone, then back again. Or was it? More a perceived pulse of energy than a solid thing, the Aurora Borealis (the Northern Lights) made its appearance in the midst of a fabulous salmon dinner on the third night of my seven-day cruise from Bergen, on the southern coast of Norway, to Kirkenes, on Norway's northeastern border with Russia.





Aurora Borealis off the coast of Norway

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HURTIGRUTEN: SWEET HILMHEIDI KNUTSSEN/NATURE PHOTO JAN R. OLSEN

With the Gulf Stream bathing it in warm currents swept up from tropical climes, the coast of Norway is typically 10-30 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than Alaskan ports of call at the same latitude. For Arctic cruise enthusiasts, the fjord-splattered Norwegian coastline, warmer weather, and the potential for unique outdoor adventures tilt the cost-to-life-reward scale firmly in favor of a late winter passage along the Norwegian coastline.

THE FAST ROUTE

While the Northern Lights come and go, the fjords aren't going anywhere, and Hurtigruten ships have been plying the frosty waters of the Norwegian Coast for more than a century.

While there may be other cruise lines servicing the coast of Norway, the name everyone knows and trusts is Hurtigruten. Literally meaning "Fast Route," and synonymous in Norway with "coastal ship," the name is a nod to the days when the most expeditious way to get supplies and people up the Norwegian coast was by boat, and Hurtigruten vessels delivered the pinnacle of service.

Though it's the fast route, Hurtigruten ships are still considered "working" boats, and as such, they stop in many small remote outposts to exchange cargo and supplies, exposing passengers to a decidedly intimate side of the Norwegian Coast.

While the company's roots lie on the service side, today's Hurtigruten ships are state of the art, offering luxury accommodations and amenities, but not fawning excess.

Emphasis is placed on experiencing the natural world and the ports of call. While there are no casinos

or shows aboard, the passing view testifies to the fact that the fjords, villages, and snow-covered mountains are entertainment enough. And when combined with Hurtigruten's fine dining and luxury amenities, time aboard soothes mind and body, and sates the soul.

HANSEATIC TRADERS AND ART NOUVEAU

As the jumping off or destination point for a late winter cruise, you can hardly do better than the historic town of Bergen, nestled in the coves and hills of Norway's southwestern coast. Bergen is a port town, a university town, and home to one of UNESCO's most visually identifiable World Heritage sites.

The iconic colored warehouses of Bryggen, the 16th century Hanseatic trading center along Bergen's waterfront, vault the mind back to the days of tall ships riding low in the water as they enter the harbor, their hulls filled with exotic goods from distant lands. Strolling through the district is a nostalgic way to pique your interest in a cruise up the coast.

A little way up the coast from Bergen, the town of Ålesund lies tucked in the protective grasp of one of Norway's many fjords. Thanks, in part, to a devastating 1904 fire that leveled the town, Ålesund is now the undisputed Art Nouveau capital of Norway. After the fire, the town was rebuilt in the Art Nouveau style, which was quite popular at the time. The result is a communal sense of style that one would not expect this far from a major commercial center.

A visit to Ålesund's Jugendstilsenteret (Art Nouveau Center) just a few blocks from the cruise ship pier



Nidaros Cathedral



offers visitors a look at the inner harbor as well as a glance at a traditional Norwegian pharmacy. The center is housed in a preserved Swan Pharmacy building. Behind the pharmacy, and in the two upstairs galleries, visitors experience a detailed account of the city's history, including the historic fire and the rebuilding thereafter, as well as examples of classic Art Nouveau interior decorating and classic architecture.

CATHEDRALS OF ICE AND STONE

The grande dame of Norway's coastal architecture resides roughly a third of the way up the Norwegian coast. As Norway's first capital city, Trondheim distinguishes itself as a magnificent, historic jewel of the north. Trondheim is home to the towering Nidaros Cathedral, built on the site of St. Olaf's grave. And next door to the cathedral lies the Archbishop's Palace Museum, which houses the Norwegian Royal Regalia (royal crowns, scepters, royal orbs, sword of state, royal standard, and anointing horn).

As it is with Bergen, Trondheim is also known for its picturesque wooden homes and warehouses, set along the river and in the Bakklandet

section of town. One of the best places to get a classic photo of the warehouses is from the Gamle Bybro (Old Town Bridge). And with its carved gates, the Old Town Bridge, just a few steps from the cathedral, is itself a photo op not to be missed.

Moving up the coast from one captivating piece of architecture to another, visitors know they're close to docking in Tromsø Harbor when they spot the Arctic Ocean Cathedral on a hill overlooking the quay. It's quite large, and designed to look like an abstract interpretation of an iceberg.

The largest city north of the Arctic Circle, Tromsø is also home to the northernmost university in the world. In addition to checking out the university area and the cathedral in Tromsø, Hurtigruten offers dog sledding as a shore excursion on the island of Kvaløya, just a short drive from Tromsø.

DOG SLEDDING

The dogs did all the work. There were seven of them, much louder than I'd imagined. Standing on their kennels begging to pull our sled, they barked furiously, collars and chains prevented them from pleading with us directly. I imagined that

this was their chance to stretch their legs and get warm. Our guide said this is what they are bred to do, and the drive is so strong that they'll half choke themselves for the chance to run in the snow.

Out on the trail, our job was simply to hang on and give occasional guidance/encouragement. The dogs knew where they were going, and were eager to take us. When

I overcorrected and took our sled off trail, I realized why the guide encouraged us to stay in the sled if this happens. Standing hip deep in snow, righting my sled, I turned red with embarrassment. The dogs glared back at me with contempt. "Ah, the humans have done it again."

NORTH CAPE AND THE RUSSIAN BORDER

Stepping ashore in Honningsvåg, you get the feeling you've come ashore at a very remote Arctic settlement. The icy wharf is filled with expedition-grade, four-wheel drive vehicles and some serious meteorology equipment. Despite its



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HURTIGRUTEN-ØR.NEWTON/CASPER TJEJER/INNOCASION NORGE



Trondheim Wooden Homes



rugged surroundings, the village of Honningsvåg is quite welcoming, charming, and a bit sleepy. Tour guide rumor has it that except for a small incident with a cat left alone in a squad car a few years back, the local police siren hasn't been heard in 32 years.

The featured shore excursion in Honningsvåg is a trip to the Nordkapp (North Cape), the northernmost safely accessible point in continental Europe.

The wind at the Nordkapp howls relentlessly. You'll want to hold on tight as you get your picture taken in front of the iconic metal globe out on the point. Afterwards you can

retreat to the interpretive center, grab a warm drink, and learn more about the area's native Sami people, who still tend reindeer herds in the area during the warmer months.

At their northernmost port, Hurtigruten cruise ships stop (or start) in Kirkenes, just a few miles from the Russian border. While Kirkenes is primarily a working fishing village, Hurtigruten offers a number of shore adventures out in the surprisingly lush rolling countryside.

Though you won't be allowed to actually cross into Russia (a stone-faced border guard sees to that), a visit to Storskog, the Norwegian/Russian border station offers the opportunity to take pictures of the guards, and perhaps purchase a few Russian souvenirs.

Outside Kirkenes, Hurtigruten also offers its passengers (pre-or post-cruise) the chance to participate in a King Crab Safari. This adventure begins with a snowmobile-drawn sleigh ride from a traditional fisherman's home out onto the ice in a frozen fjord. After sawing a hole in the ice, participants try their hand at luring and catching crustaceans weighing up to 30 pounds.

Finally, if casting your steely gaze on a chilled Norwegian border guard, or hoisting a six-foot crab from the frozen inky depths of the Barents Sea aren't your idea of fun, perhaps you'd prefer to roar through the snow-covered hills on a snowmobile.

Hurtigruten's Snowmobile Safari takes travelers on a guided tour through the frosty ice and sun dappled Arctic environment in the hopes of catching sight of some of the area's hearty winter wildlife. At the conclusion of the snowmobile tour,

participants rekindle their inner furnace with a hot drink and some reindeer meat in a well-heated lavvu, a traditional Sami tent/hut.

For anyone with the desire to take a cold climate cruise, the relatively warm coast of Norway from Bergen, Ålesund, and Trondheim in the south to the harsh Arctic climes of the north, offers the promise of the Northern Lights, hooking a King Crab, snowmobiling along the Russian border, and braving the winds at the North Cape.

And, of course, there's always the option to remain aboard and simply eat well, relax, rejuvenate, and take in the unvarnished splendor of the fjords. **H**

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If you go



Best time to go:

With no glitzy shows or casinos, this family-friendly, cruise offers an intimate view of nature. Beware booking between November and late February when the Polar Nights bring up to 24 hours of darkness.

Be sure to:

- Book Hurtigruten's three-hour Lofotr Viking Feast excursion starting at \$127 per person, where the largest Viking building ever found has been recreated.
- Round out your experience by adding land excursions such as dog sledding or coastal city walking tours. Prices run between \$50 and \$415 or more, depending on the activity.
- Visit North Cape, and earn bragging rights for visiting the northern most safely accessible point in continental Europe.

While you're there:

Add a day or two to the beginning or end of your cruise and visit Oslo, the oldest of the Scandinavian capital cities.

AAA can arrange your cruise to Norway. Call 1-877-248-6962 or visit AAAaz.com/hurtigruten.