Sailing North

A Voyage through Norway

by Liam Proven

Day 0, Thursday: Prelude - Arrival in Bergen

Upstairs bar, Scruffy Murphy's, Stortorget, 10pm, 30 September 2004

There is something about visiting a city for the second time, after a long interval, that is a little like greeting an old friend for the first time in years. It's a good sensation: they're familiar, yet there will be little differences. It's only possible to befriend a city by living in it, of course, although some can quickly become infatuations - but always unrequited ones. They only want you for your money.

I am in Bergen, Norway's second city, in the fjordlands of the west coast of Europe's longest nation. Pick up Norway and move it its own length south, and while the northern towns would lie within the same country's latitudes, Oslo would be as far south as Rome. I will travel through Tromsø and Hammerfest, the world's most northerly city and town respectively, to Kirkenes on the Russian border, further east than Istanbul.

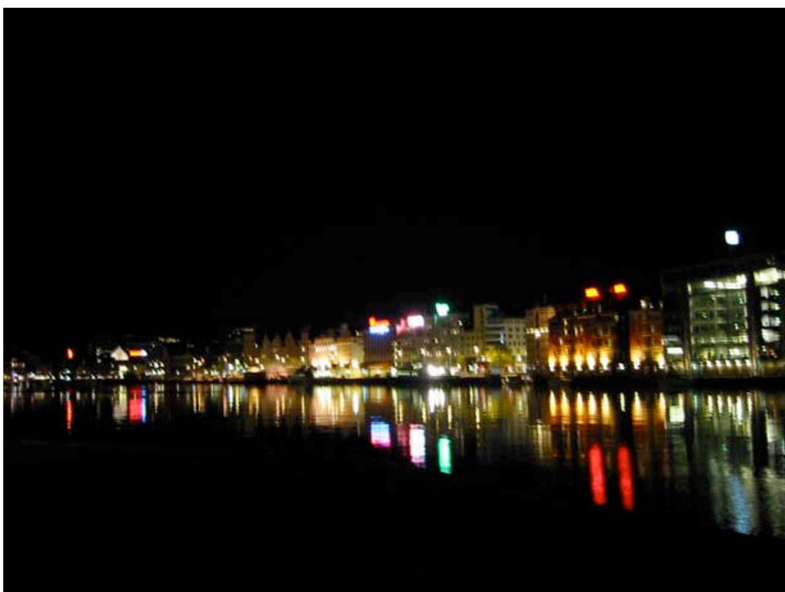
I was last here in Bergen, very briefly, ten years ago, on my first ever visit to this most beautiful of countries - for it has some of the most spectacular scenery Earth has to offer, matched with the highest standard of living there is, too. And, because every silver lining has a cloud, some of the

world's highest taxes and the most expensive alcohol, as well. As a visitor – albeit a regular, if occasional one - for more than decade now, the former doesn't bother me, and the latter wouldn't nearly as much as it does if the beer was any good. Alas, it isn't. Here in a fake Irish pub, listening to Dire Straits - I yield to none in my pursuit of authenticity, and this city is a tourist trap *par excellence* - I'm drinking a pint (no, not some fraction of a litre) of locally-brewed Hansa lager. And it's dire.

But no matter.

A common element to many European cities I have known is that there is almost invariably some wide open space in the centre, ringed with large, imposing buildings - though often unlovely - which for some reason are consistently topped with huge neon advertising signs. It's something Britain doesn't really do - London's Piccadilly Circus is instantly recognizable for its signage, so rare is the phenomenon.

In Bergen, it's the old harbour, which is the end of a fjord - which as any GCSE geographer will tell you is a flooded valley carved by a glacier. Norway's fjords are arguably the world's finest - indeed, the Norwegians gave us the word. Here in the western edge of continental Scandinavia, the rock strata have been folded and creased and convoluted, then these deep wrinkles ground away by ice age glaciers and flooded by the North Sea and the North Atlantic. These are cold, grey, uninviting seas; one suspects that the only people who would wish to swim in it are the sort who actively enjoy leaping naked out of saunas, rolling in the snow, plunging into icy water and scouring one another with birch twigs. And rinse and repeat. I blame Lutheran Protestantism, myself. The locals, naturally, vigorously deny this and point accusingly at the Finns, who *everybody* thinks are weird.



I must confess at this point that I *have* once swum in a fjord. It was July, high summer - I'm not *completely* daft - and far in the south of Norway, near Stathelle in Telemark. And it was glorious. The water was as brown as weak tea, like the runoff from a Yorkshire moor. (If you've never drunk icy fresh water from a moorland stream, you've missed one of Britain's great treats.) But unexpectedly, it was warm, almost bath-like - especially

surprising given how cold it feels when dashed in your face by the swift passage of a small motor-boat taking you to one of its owner's favourite islands.

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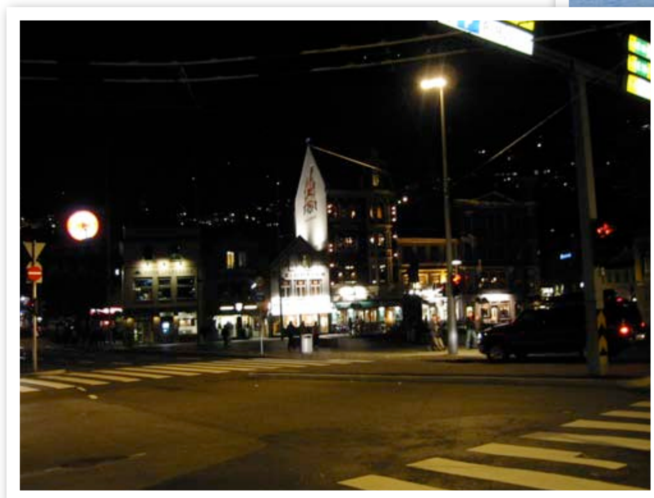
It's that kind of country. No, not everyone has a boat; this *is* a twenty-first-century country - as Sir Les Patterson said of Australia, it's "in the big league now. We've got organized crime, racial prejudice, cable TV, AIDS, disabled toilets and under-age drug abuse." Still, for a hundred thousand Sterling you can buy a five or six bedroom house overlooking the coast in outlying regions of the relatively balmy South. With Norwegian pay scales, at this kind of price, it's not a great luxury to keep a boat or yacht for summer. And with literally tens of thousands of tiny islands around the coast, many only a handful of metres across, there are plenty to go round. Pick one, sail out, have a swim and then lounge around in the sun on your own personal islet. Bigger ones often have tiny holiday cottages perched on them. This is a country with much to offer, and it's really going to be deeply shafted if the greenhouse effect both raises sea levels and causes the Gulf Stream to shut down.

But back to the fjords. What results from these wrinkled rocks, ruched up like a pleated skirt – or, more prosaically, a torn piece of corrugated cardboard – the folds' long axes pointing out to sea, are a myriad of deep valleys leading far inland, carved by ice and now filled with calm water. They're seldom perfectly straight and the kinks and wiggles block the breakers. You can sail around placidly inside, but stray close to the mouth and suddenly you find yourself tossed around like the change in the pocket of an enthusiastic *Dance Dance Revolution* player. It's more than disconcerting: in a small boat, it's truly frightening, and your response is to turn tail and flee back into sheltered waters.



If you're not piloting yourself - or at the mercy of a gleefully sadistic host - but instead relaxing on a large cruise ship, the upshot is numinous views of towering cliffs over smooth water, precipitous valley walls that make England's peaks look like a scale model. Scattered amid this epic landscape are islands, busy little towns and villages and a culture that still lives much of its life on the sea road. Trips that might take a flying crow a few kilometres can here take hundreds by road or train, even with a government that literally spends a fortune (earned from North Sea Oil) on providing a positively lavish

infrastructure, in large part to try to persuade people to stay in the North. There are subsidies, tax breaks and massive investment to keep these gorgeous but remote and often bleak and forbidding vastnesses populated. Tiny villages have their own airports with daily flights, but still, the ships that ply up and down the coast still form one of the major links of the northern communities. And this country has a *lot* of coast: it its 2,650km length, there is 25,148km of coast, counting the fjords and bays. Include the islands and it's 83,281km. Lovely crinkly edges, as Douglas Adams observed.

Supported by the Gulf stream, government subsidies - and a significant tourist industry.

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On a more personal note, it's a little strange for me to be arriving back in Norway. This trip wan't planned far in advance and I'm a little startled to find myself here. I have made more trips to this country than any other in my life – this is perhaps my twentieth visit here this century. I was once engaged to a Norwegian girl for a while. Things proved not to be, but for a couple of years, I visited Norway approximately once a month, every month.

I have grown to love this country as I once loved one of its daughters, but aside from my first visit, to Bergen and Voss in Yule 1994, I have only visited Oslo and Telemark in the far south, and points in between. The north of this most northern of countries is unknown to me.

I have even studied Norwegian, to the extent that I can speak a smattering – really only simple present-tense stuff, but enough to get by, which is a rare thing in this corner of Europe. There are only about four and a half million Norwegians and nobody else in the world speaks their language apart from a few exiles in North America. Generally, people are delighted to find that I know a little and are more than happy to speak to me in it – but perhaps because so few foreigners learn it, most natives are unused to beginners and will go at full speed ahead from the start, which can be hard work.

I got an early opportunity to put my skills to the test on arrival. I wanted some more suitable footwear for wandering around onboard ship than my normal all-purpose army-surplus combat boots, but Copenhagen airport offered nothing but expensive designer-label ware. I needed a late-night shoe shop offering cheap trainers, preferably on sale given this notably expensive country. And lo, that is exactly what I found a hundred metres from the door of my hotel, and on rummaging through their bargain bin, I found a pair of Nike mules in my (gargantuan) size. I was able to ask if I might try it on, obtain its counterpart and successfully negotiate payment entirely *på norsk*, a gratifying and emboldening experience given more than a year without practice.

This included the hurdle of using a British credit card. All Norwegian plastic cards carry on their reverse a small photograph of the bearer, a wonderfully simple and low-tech security measure that renders stolen cards little use and leads to the most cursory of signature checks.

Another hallmark of Norwegian ingenuity is the system for recycling bottles and cans. In the lobby of any ICA or Rimi or other local supermarket is a large machine. This offers a receptacle into which can be placed used bottles or cans. These are drawn into the machine on a tiny conveyor belt and rotated in front of a scanning laser which reads their barcode. This enables the machine to tell exactly which product was once contained therein and thus to correctly sort the items into the appropriate containers. In return, you get a kronor or so per bottle; when you are done, the machine spits coins.

Norwegian drinks bottles are plastic, like anywhere else in the developed world, but they are made of thick, durable plastic and are refilled and reused many times over. Metal is simply recycled in the normal way.

The machines are expensive, certainly, but the system is much more elegant than large bins of broken glass and far less reprocessing is needed. Thus they quickly pay for themselves.

This clean and simple system is emblematic of the nation. Norway is rich, prosperous and beautiful. Measured by various standards, it has the world's highest standard of living. Vandalism and litter are rare in its cities, it is relatively sparsely populated and thus unspoiled. The people are friendly and English is spoken almost universally. With practice, Norwegians can speak understand and be understood by Swedes and Danes, who speak very similar languages, but they are fiercely proud of their independence.

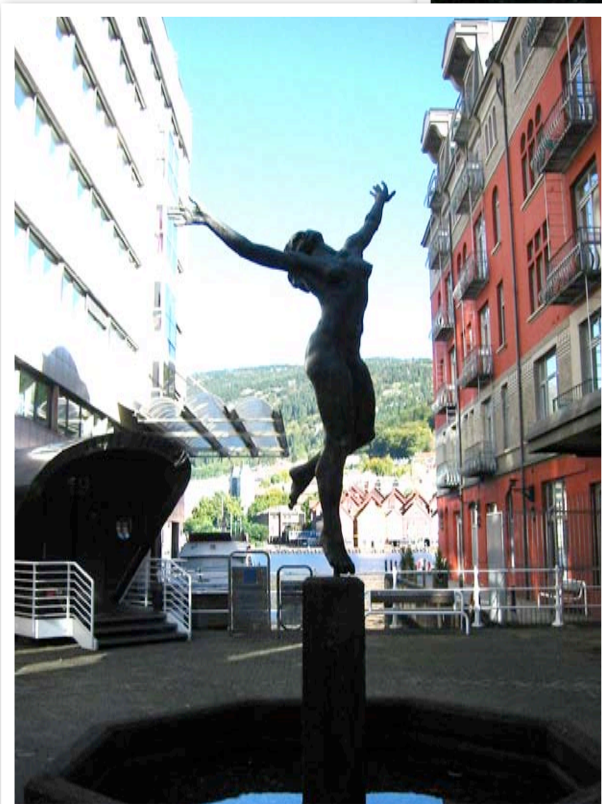
All this and some of the most spectacular scenery in Europe, if not the world.

It's a great place. It's good to be back.

Day 1, Friday: Exploring & leaving Bergen

Cabin 370, M/S Polarlys, 11:48pm, 1 Oct '04

Bergen is a beautiful city, but then, beautiful cities are ten a penny in Norway. English cities slump flatly, as two-dimensional as a stranded jellyfish, drying and dying on the beach. Norway doesn't have enough flat land to waste on this – if it's level enough so that you won't fall off it if you stop paying attention, they farm it or put an airport on it. Thus many of its towns sit at the conjunctions of mountain valleys, spreading tentacles of development along the valley bottoms. (The locals wouldn't call these hills "mountains," but then, the locals have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to rugged terrain.) Town centres may be small and condensed, but the outlying residential areas branch out and away, winding for kilometres along the lower land, divided up by towering spines of tree-covered rock. It's pleasing by day and nighttime both: in the light, rather than a sprawling conurbation, there's a lace doily of development, dissected by tree-covered peaks. In the night – and bear in mind, nights and days here can last for months – you can see how far up the slopes people live.



With its plenitude of watersheds, if Norway were the gargoyle of northwestern Europe, it would have hydroelectric power coming out of its ears, nose and mouth. Result: electricity so cheap that by British standards it's free. You fit a light-bulb and then turn it on just once; turning them on and off shortens their life-span. When I first visited a Norwegian household, a plague of blown bulbs (*lyspære* in Norwegian: "light-pears") followed me like some tungsten Typhoid Mary. Heating and hot water run straight off the mains – domestic gas and oil, central heating systems and time-clocks are unknowns. People heat their bathroom floors, because it's unpleasant to stand on cold tiles. (Mats, schmats. Why clean them?) People heat the driveways of

their houses – it's easier than shovelling snow or spreading salt. Think about that. Power is so cheap, people *heat their gardens*. It's another world.

So at night, it's lit up like a fairground. In Britain, you can only see the extent of a town from the air or a high tower. In Norway, just look up: the land rears up into the sky on all sides. In the dark, you can trace streets and neighbourhoods on the hillsides, like a map in reverse. The horizon is above you – to the sides lies landscape.

In recent, richer years, they're also got really good at digging tunnels. They need to be. A few strategic bores can save hours of driving. Dozing in the back seat of a car for any distance in some parts is a punctuated arrhythmic series of starts and stares: darkness falls many times an hour but the nights are just two minutes long.

Bergen has a long history, longer than this mere centenarian of a nation. Annexed by Sweden for a century before that and Denmark for the preceding few, Norwegians date their history in terms of things like the writing of the constitution and so on – actual independence is almost within living memory. The second-greatest city was a major trading port, strategic within the Hanseatic League, nearly half a millennium ago. It grew downhill, from a precipitous fishermen's hamlet above the bay – now largely uninhabited but preserved as Gamle (Old) Bergen, a free open-air museum with views to die for – to a waterside port known as Bryggen. Few original buildings remain intact among a higgledy-piggledy maze of rebuilds, replicas and new ones carefully built in a matching style. Waterfront ones hold souvenir and craft shops; away from the promenade are offices and an art school, but it's still very much alive. Downstream, as in London, former warehouses are busily being converted to apartments.

Many of the original structures were lost to fire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Few buildings were of stone; then as now, the Norwegians like their houses made of wood. They tell me it's warmer. Homes and workplaces are built of horizontal logs or planks, churches of vertical staves – thus the famous *stavkirker*, of which under thirty survive. Although widely known in subculture circles today for alternative electronic music from Apoptygma Berserk to Røyksopp, the local black-clad spotty youths favour black metal. Some of the more impressionable – or more stupid – ones moved from this into Satanism and thought it'd be cool to, like, burn down some of those old churches, man.

It's fair to say that black metallers are not universally popular and well-loved in Norway.

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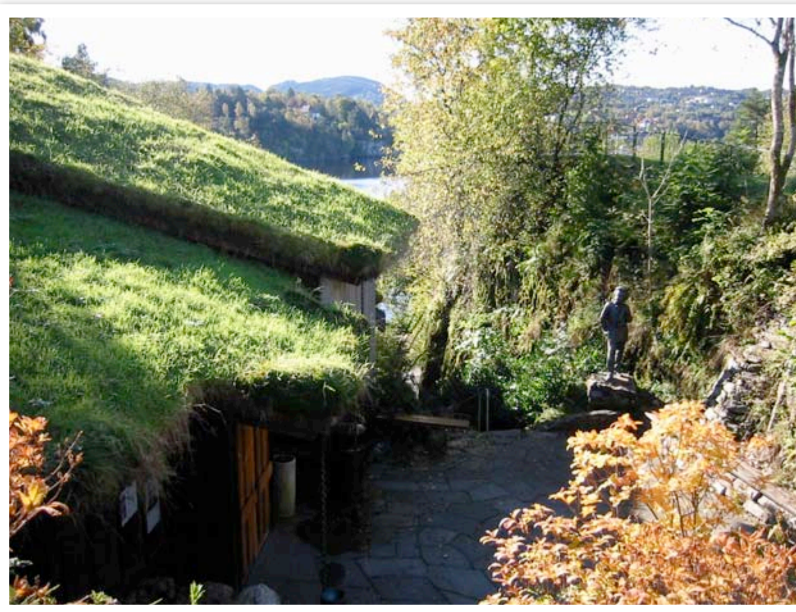
In older times, Norway's most famous musical

export was local boy Edvard Grieg, who remains much loved today. Given early recognition by Ole Bull, a Bergen violin prodigy, Grieg was schooled in Leipzig and spent much time in England, but his music is rooted in traditional Norwegian folk melodies. Brits of a certain age might remember BBC2's slightly surreal science-fictional game show "The Adventure Game"; its theme tune was Grieg's *Norwegian Dance Number 2*.

Some way out from the city centre, his house is now open to the public, carefully (if not entirely authentically) preserved or restored to how it was when he and his cousin and wife Nina, lived there. It's filled with old photographs, paintings, busts and statuettes, with some authentically Norwegian features such cast-iron woodstoves in each room and elaborate silverware featuring traditional motifs such as reindeer, eagles' claws, fishes - and small dangling crinkled petals, which scare off the trolls with their sparkles, you see.



In the grounds sits a small purpose-built museum. Its main contents are a photographic biography and a restaurant with spectacular clifftop views over the fjord. Further along is a tiny grass-roofed concert hall, with the composer's statue standing by its door. It's all to scale: Grieg was a small man. With a shock of prematurely-white hair and a bushy moustache, he reminds older Brits of Lloyd George; Europeans and Americans might perhaps think of Albert Einstein and Samuel Langhorne Clemens. An abstract iron sculpture by the entrance, intentionally rusted into rich earth tones, suddenly turns into his profile when viewed from the correct angle. Just past this, you walk down a steep path to a tiny waterside cove, where high in the cliff above is a sealed doorway: his tomb.

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Bergen's days as a port are gone; now the dockyards are full of high-technology companies who preserve a crane here and there, and place vaguely boat-shaped sculptures in fountains out front, to remind you – or perhaps themselves – what the district once was. Now, it's a university town – there are over 20,000 students, a tenth of the population. The fish market in the main square still goes on, huge stone tanks holding squabbling crabs, morose lobsters and miscellaneous threateningly-large fish, who perhaps have an inkling that their future contains kettles. Now, though, there are more coffee shops than fishmongers and the old meat market is just one among many restaurants, from Indian through a throng of Chinese to Louisiana Cajun. And don't forget the Irish pubs.

More appealingly and away from the hurly-burly of foreigners being relieved of their burden of cash, hiding down at the far end of the south quay, is northern Europe's largest aquarium. Inside, you'll find the usual assortment of piranhas, lungfish, neon tetras and invisible frogs, but it's good to see that most of the exhibits are locally-caught. (A Norwegian friend once gravely informed me that the panels next to the tanks only tell you about marine biology in English – the Norwegian texts are serving suggestions.) Different tanks display different ecosystems, from deep sea to littoral shallows. One holds a swirling vortex of pelagic species – herring, mackerel, sprats and "sardines", which were first preserved and tinned here in Bergen. A miniature kelp forest has impressive breakers crashing through it – you can't help but pity the beasts as they're sloshed around the place, but they don't seem fazed at all. Other tanks show you other environments, such as that beneath the piers and quays - their décor including bicycle wheels encrusted with barnacles and discarded car tyres with lobsters lurking within. There's even a miniature salmon farm and an indoor fish ladder to illustrate their lifecycle.

Rarer specimens include tropical exotica like triggerfish, Technicolor wrasse, scorpion fish and more – all, their labels proudly proclaiming, caught in Bergen waters. These involuntary hitchhikers are mostly carried here by the Gulf stream, that warm current which is all that keeps Norway habitable, right up to Kirkenes in the far north, on the Russian border, where its tail ends curl into the bay and provide geographically-aberrant temperate climes – meaning it's not always completely frozen over.

Not all the foreigners came by sea the hard way, though. Many came by boat or plane or even overland, like American lobsters, various southern European species of trout and even minnows. These sit segregated into their own tanks. They were imported – for farming, food, or fun - but all have escaped into the wild and are doing well in these frigid but fecund waters. The colder the water, the more dissolved oxygen it can hold, so polar oceans teem with life where there are the nutrients to support it – and the Gulf stream also freights these in, dragged up from the depths. Some of these immigrants are taking over, either eating the locals or just crowding them out. Wherever Man goes, alien life follows… and all hell breaks loose.

Outside, the aquarium blends into a little SeaWorld™ (but without all the showbiz, which suits me fine). There are Gentoo penguins and a small colony of seals. From the upper stories inside – it's built on a hill, if you hadn't already guessed – windows look into the bottom of the seals' pool, with a big chart to help you individually identify them by name.

Moving back into the open air, a large part of the seals' pen was cordoned off to give some space to a mother and her cub. They're not tame and they don't do tricks, but the baby, still under a year old, already knows it's worth hauling himself out of the water for a fish. I got the impression that the cooing of the crowd left him much less moved than a fresh herring.

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Bergen faces the sea, indeed, enfolds two arms of it in its two fjords, the old and new harbours - but in a more metaphorical sense, it revolves around it. One of lifelines of the far North is *Hurtigruten* – the Coastal Express, more literally "the fast route". All year round, this continuous line of daily ships plies up and down between this southernmost extreme (already further north than anywhere in mainland Scotland) and the Northlands of old Finnmark. Even in October, a ship a

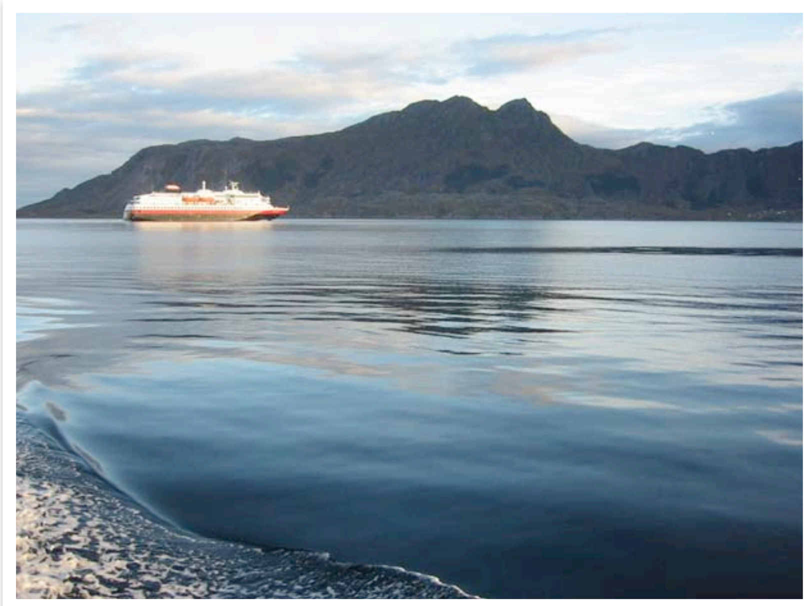
day departs in the direction of the nearer Pole, returning eleven days later to do it again. For the locals, it's a rather flash bus service. It stops several times every day and night, and people leap on and off just to go up the coast a bit and visit Granny. Today, it's faster to fly, but modern Hurtigruten ships are luxuriously comfortable and it's a very pleasant way to travel. The bulk of the passengers, though, are represented by the masses filling the restaurant: Brits and Germans taking "the most beautiful voyage in the world".

Next stop for me: Ålesund.

Day 2, Saturday: Eight hours from the Arctic

Florø – Måloy – Torvik - Ålesund – Molde - Kristiansund

***Polarlys*, about 50km north of Rorvik, in the North Atlantic off the coast of West Norway.**



For more than a century, Hurtigruten has been the primary link tying the northern half of Norway together. I've heard southern Europeans marvelling at "what persuades people to live 'up here'" – but we are only just leaving the Norwegian midlands. Our starting point, Bergen, is firmly in the South by local reckoning, notwithstanding that it's north of anything short of the Orkneys or Labrador. Today, the boats are not so important– although they're still used for local transport, the train line now runs through Trondheim up to Bodø, there's a motorway network spanning the entire country and many villages of only a couple of thousand people have their own airports. Life in these small northern towns is much like that of the rest of Europe now, thanks in part to the infrastructure paid for by North Sea oil.

Ålesund was once the favourite retreat of pre-war Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm. He came every summer for many years to this tiny fishing community – and he was the first to come to its aid when disaster struck. In midwinter 1904, fire broke out in a fish-preserving factory by the docks – where most of town's poor women worked, the widows of fishermen lost at sea. It quickly spread thought the all-wooden town, engulfing the whole town and overnight rendering nearly 2000 people homeless – in a season when temperatures routinely drop to −20°C. The town wasn't connected by road or rail to anywhere else and no one could afford motor vehicles; the people piled their possessions and children onto handcarts and pushed them out into the night to nearby villages and farms.

The Kaiser's ships arrived just four days later, bearing blankets, clothes, food and building materials, long before help from southern Norway. The main street is still named Keiser Wilhelm gata – using the Norwegian spelling of the Emperor's title. Rebuilt in stone, the houses were designed in then-painfully-modern Art Nouveau style – or Jugendstil as it is in German. The main chemist (or Apotheke) is now an art gallery, but its fittings, including scrollwork wooden inlays on the counters and a cast-iron till disappearing under a froth of frilly metal foliage, have been preserved.

What didn't occur to them was to paint the houses, and by the 1960s it was considered the most ugly town in Norway: grey and cold and bleak, in contrast to warm, welcoming wood. Sadly, then followed a rash of modernization: in the centre of town, a towering rock pillar, home to thou-

sands of nesting seabirds, was dynamited to make way for a new town hall – in ferroconcrete. A towering block in the best '70s monolithic style, it is now crumbling and rusting and quite spectacularly ugly. Even on a Saturday afternoon, this medium-sized town of 40,000 is quiet. The shops are fashion boutiques, sports shops inundated with trendy trainers and photo studios. Moody teenagers haunt a small shopping centre and the first store I encounter is The Body Shop – where I gladly buy some lip balm from a plump blonde teenager in hipsters and thick-soled trainers. The food stores and local businesses are all dead, displaced by shopping centres 10km out of town. The ring of islands around the harbour are all linked into most of a circle by bridges and undersea tunnels, although the ends don't quite meet, so going from the island at one end to the next involves a long drive – and the government-funded tunnels all charge tolls.

Now, moves are afoot to brighten things up. The surviving old houses are painted bright colours: yellow and orange and pink and the uniquely Norwegian "barn red" – a deep hue the colour of drying blood, which covers the walls of most farms and country houses. Many shops and hotels bear moulded floral wreaths and other decorations on their façades, which are no longer the sole splashes of colour. The old warehouses on the wharves are converted now, holding luxury flats or Comfort Hotels; down by the modern dock where the Polarlys awaits is a Radisson SAS.

In the midst of this rears a small grassy hill, its top crowned by a signal tower and still ringed with cannon – although these are now just receptacles for many empties of the local supermarket chain's authentic German pilsner. There's graffiti too, rare in Norway. It must be an awful place to be a teenager; there is no escape.

Hiding up here is another colourful stone house holding a local museum, but alas the imminent departure of the ship prohibits a visit. Outside, though, is an amazing relic: Brudde's Egg. It's a steel ovoid, 14' long and completely closed – there is a tiny windowed turret, a hatch, a small keel and rudder and a stubby mast at the very front.

In 1904, this was the latest thing in lifeboat design, and Brudde proved its seaworthiness the hard way. With three other men, he sailed it from here to America. It took them five months – inside a closed steel egg just high enough to stand in, if it contained no ballast or other contents. History does not record how they stored enough fresh water, but at least toilet facilities would be easy.

Despite this, it was a commercial failure. Only 22 were built and this is the last to survive, although it sailed again in 2001. Yet Brudde was eventually vindicated: now, all emergency vessels are enclosed with roofs, just like his visionary design, and the Polarlys' lifeboats are provided by Brudde A/S.

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(A personal aside. This was a very affecting visit for me; this is where my former fiancée Kjersti Thunem spent her early years, although the family left after only three or four years here. A local shop is even called Vic. Thunem – a distant cousin of the family. Formative years, though, her elder brother tells me.)

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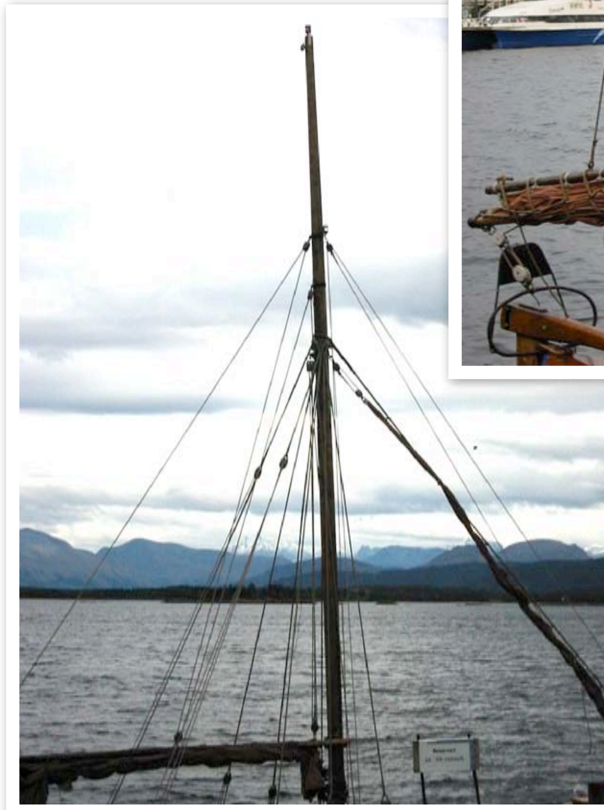
And then on to Molde, only a couple of hours steam away but much longer by road; to get around the fjords and rivers, one must backtrack and go far inland. The only landmarks here are the church and the football stadium and the ship pauses for only three-quarters of an hour and then is off.



Day 3, Sunday: "Northern" is relative

Trondheim, Rorvik and beyond

Before dawn, the Polarlys docks at Trondheim, former capital and the major city in these parts. (Some older Norse still call it Trondhjem - its name in Bokmål - though the days when it was Nidaros are long gone.) With two universities and some 20,000 students to only 150,000 inhabitants, this is a thriving, busy city, nestling in a river valley surrounded by mountains. By Norwegian standards, it's not really northern, though it is more northerly than Scotland's Shetland islands.

Here, I have local guides – my ex's brother and sister-in-law Sigurd and Hilde. Although the gangplank hit the docks at 6am, we left meeting until a slightly more reasonable 8 – but little is open in Trondheim at such an hour, so I broke my fast at my hosts' apartment in a residential district inland from the town.

Although the heavy industry is gone from here now, the old trade districts are now transformed into riverside apartments or development centres for telecommunications and other modern businesses. Hilde works ten minutes from their apartment for the Norwegian national Internet registry, which maintains a far tighter leash on website names than the more relaxed American and British registries. Norway has three national languages: traditional southern City Norwegian, bokmål; modern country Norwegian, nynorsk (a language constructed artificially in modern times and hated by generations of Norwegian schoolchildren); and the Sami language – an official hybrid of the various Finno-Ugric dialects of the people of Lappland in the far north. Given this complexity, the American-designed Internet is a problem. How do you call a website "bokmål", for example, when the American ASCII computer alphabet contains no "å" – or "æ" or "ø", either? There are agreed conventions, such as a double A for Å, so that the Danish town of Århus has www.aarhus.dk, but it's not ideal. Her husband Sigurd, meanwhile, spends two to three days a week working for the national telecoms company Telenor in Oslo or further afield still, flying into the office in the morning - an inconceivable commute in just about any other part of Europe.

The days of steamships as the artery of life and commerce are gone. However, the government still props up the route, as it has done since August Kriegsman Gren announced the competition to run a service from Trondheim to Hammerfest in 1891. Local heavyweights Det Nordenfjedke Dampskipselskab and Det Bergenske Dampskipselskab said it was impossible to do in the endless winter nights. There were only 28 lighthouses amongst the literally thousands of islands of the northwestern seaboard and just two marine charts.

Local captain Richard With had been keeping his own precise notes and records, though, and the upstart Vesterålens Dampskipselskab said it could do it. The first run took 67 hours, arriving at

03:30 – half an hour early. Before this, letters took three months to make the journey in summer and five months in winter. Now, it takes days. He's not forgotten: at Trondheim, the Polarlys ties up next to southbound Hurtigruten vessel Richard With.

After breakfast, the Thunems take me hiking in the tree-covered hills above the city. These are ***utmark***, land that is owned, either by individuals or the state, but unused and open to the public. From the forest, just ten minutes drive out of town, you can look down at the town, under 4km across, built around the meandering river. The flat land around the edges is still full of corn, golden in the warm sunshine of a perfect autumn day. This is the very northern edge of the range of the European oak tree, *Quercus robur.* There's still room for trees here – the tree-line is at seven to eight hundred metres, around half the height at Bergen – but only a short way north, it's down to 70 metres. Much less than that and it meets sea level and there are no trees at all, but down here in Trondheim there is fertile farmland, although it lies at the same latitude as northern Canada.

We're too far north for the wild strawberries that I enjoyed in the hills above Porsgrunn, far in the south, a few years ago, but the woods are rich in wild mushrooms - it's common to come mushroom-picking up here. Even at first thing on a Sunday morning, by the time we're heading back, the woods are coming alive with walkers, from solitary people and those with dogs to entire families, three generations out for a constitutional in the weak sunlight. It's refreshingly cool and crisp, just warm enough for me to have to carry my coat as we pick up the pace a little. You can't help but envy people who have such amenities on the doorstep: hiking all year, skiing in winter, parks and farmlands for gentler strolls and of course the sea, with fjords for gentle cruises or many small islands and nearby towns for coastal sailing. This would be a wonderful place to live, were I not so fond of going out in the evenings quite so much - though Sigurd defends its nightlife vigorously.

Yet in just a few stops on the Polarlys' route, at about 7am tomorrow, we will cross the Arctic Circle into the land of the midnight sun – and the three-month night of wintertime.

Intermission: Entering the Arctic

Of human foibles and failures

The Arctic Circle is much like the equator: a purely human boundary about which people make a considerable fuss, although it has little meaning in the real world. The equator is, of course, the globe's widest point, equidistant from the poles, delimiter of northern and southern hemispheres - but if you're actually there, and I've crossed it several times, then it actually makes no perceptible difference. Near the equator, it's always hot – it doesn't get hotter the closer you get. Daybreak and nightfall come with almost unseemly haste – twilight is a short period. There is no summer or winter here, only rainy or dry seasons, with a short, roughly one-month, intermediate season of dust-storms – at least in my part of Africa. There is a widespread urban legend that the water swirling out of a plug-hole move in different directions according to your hemisphere, due to the Earth's Coriolis forces – but do you actually know which way the water normally spirals out of your sink? Clockwise or widdershins? I don't, I have to say. (By the way, the force is quite real, but several orders of magnitude too weak to have any effect.)

There are differences, but they're subtle and for the most part you'd only notice them if you lived there or stayed there for a significant part of the year.

The world's real barriers are less arbitrary but more affective: they make more actual difference. The Convergence, for example. Most people don't know what or where that is – I didn't myself until a few years ago, when I was informed by an enlightened and well-read girlfriend. It's a boundary in the southern oceans, separating the cold circumpolar currents of the Antarctic sea from the warmer ones of the northern oceans – as almost everywhere is northern from there. It's a formidable nautical blockade that has sunk many ships and killed many sailors.

And yet, apart from explorers of the last continent and round-the-world yachtsmen, who has heard of it?

So, really, it was foolish of me to expect some magical instant transition when we crossed the Arctic circle. I had vague notions of polar bears, icebergs and frozen wastelands.

Needless to say, perhaps, there was none of this.

Ask yourself: what do you know of the Arctic Circle? Can you actually define what it is? I would have been hard-pushed. It is the line north of which the sun never sets in midsummer. It sinks into the west at night, but after a certain date - exactly when depends on your latitude – it never quite touches the horizon but merely circles in the sky. The Arctic is the land of the midnight sun – but not, as I tried and failed to explain to an elderly lady taking the trip on my ship, at all times; only for a month or two around June to July.

The corollary of these days of twenty-four-hour sunlight is the Arctic night... when the sun never rises. For a couple of months in midwinter, the sun never comes above the horizon and the day is dark: a night sixty days long, or more. It's not pitch black all the time: when the sun is as close as it will get to rising, there is twilight, for some hours around noon. When it returns, the day is a public holiday and children are let out of school. At first, it rises for just a couple of hours, but quickly, the days grow longer until they never end.

Endless daylight, endless night.

That's it. That's all that there is. The Arctic does not automatically mean frozen wastes; the effects are just those of daylength. And of course they're not really endless, though for we mortals, a three-month night is nearly as good as.

Of course, the North is cold. These are regions relatively close to the Pole, receiving little insolation; other such latitudes encompass the largely-uninhabited wilderness of northern Canada, Greenland and Siberia. What makes Norway different is another natural feature of the oceans, little valued by we dwellers in the south. The Gulf Stream. This never-ending current of warm water comes up from equatorial oceans, bearing heat to the lands of northwestern Europe, as well as nutrients and the occasional very badly lost fish, as previously discussed, but these matters are mostly of concern to fishermen. The further north we travel, the more of the populace are fishermen, mind.

Because of the heat gradually surrendered by the seawater flowing up the coast, the margins of the land are heated. This is what really delimits Norway: it's the country whose coast is heated by the Gulf stream. It matters to Britain too, but without it, Britain would be colder and more inhospitable, but not uninhabitable. Norway would be snow, rock and ice without it; apart from the south, no one would live here. It would belong to elk, wolves, otters, lemmings, foxes and mink – and in the waters, teeming fish and the birds, seals and cetaceans who feed on them. It now looks as if the pattern of circulation of the Gulf Stream is being disrupted by the progressive global warming of the greenhouse effect. If the Stream shuts down, Norway will die. It is as simple as that. This, home of the most northerly homes, schools, churches, factories and all the other teeming aspects of human life, this incredibly beautiful country of mountains and lakes and forests and glaciers and fjords and pale blonde people, this land of the highest standard of living in the world, will freeze and shrivel and die.

The effects have recently, as I write, been dramatized in the movie The Day After Tomorrow, but as ever, Hollywood, that home of lies, is unable to portray the simple unvarnished truth. For dramatic effect, the chilling is shown as something that happens in days, with the temperature plunging instantly to the coldness of space, freezing the AvGas in aircraft's fuel tanks. This is, not to put too fine a point on it, bullshit. But what may happen is that the Stream falters and sputters and gradually shrinks, and the winters of Norway – and Sweden and Britain and Denmark and the north-eastern USA, of Iceland and the hardy Danes and Inuit on Greenland – will get colder and longer and harder, and the summers damper and shorter and bleaker. Crops will fail, garden flowers will brown and die. The only things to grow in the North will be the glaciers, creeping down from their mountain retreats and covering the land once more.

People will die, but people always do. It won't be overnight. If it happens, it will take years. They will give up their homes and their livelihoods and they will flee south. You can bet their insurance won't cover it. Norway is rich, but for the most part, the people of the far north are not, and they will lose everything. But we will all lose something. This is an amazing place and we all will be poorer without it. But we are without dodos and moa and quaggas and thylacines; increasingly, we're without rainforests or remote islands with unique species. Most of us never notice.

And still people buy more SUVs every year and America refuse to sign the Kyoto protocol. Wind power and tidal generators and hydropower and solar power are great, but they can supply only a fraction of the needs of twenty-first century civilisation. We only have one realistic option: nuclear. This is I was asked to leave the Friends of the Earth and stopped supporting Greenpeace. There are many frothing so-called environmentalists, but many are scientifically illiterate

Nuclear power is the only non-fossil power source we have that's plentiful enough - and it's relatively cheap and clean. The developing world knows this, and it wants it. Even China is embarking on a dramatic program of nuclear reactor development.

But the Americans are not using it. They have oil. Would that their government had ethics to go with it.

*****

The actual passage into the Arctic is, of course, rather an anticlimax. I am up and dressed before 7am to witness the transition, but of course, you can't actually see any difference. Off to one side of the ship is a small, uninhabited island, Hestmannøy, which straddles the line of "Polarsirkelen". There is a marker, in case you miss it: a metal globe, formed from the lines of longitude and latitude. Lots of tourists obediently take photographs; I cannot help but conform. But really, there's nothing to see here. No sudden influx of icebergs or polar bears. The low countryside rolls by, undisturbed and unchanged by the fact that sometimes sunrise and sunset can be months apart.

Day 4, Monday: Bodø and beyond

Ørnes – Bodø – Stamsund – Svolvær

Glaciers aren't all bad. So long as one isn't threatening to eat your house, it's quite beautiful. So distressingly shortly after the Polarlys crossed into the Arctic, I was down in one of the ship's car decks, boarding a small and somewhat battered 1960s fishing boat, Melløycruise II, now converted into a tourist conveyance, to be ferried to *Svartisbreen*.

The Svartisbre – the Black Glacier - is Norway's second largest glacier, out of more than 1,700 – the greatest of all being Jostedalsbreen. It's not actually black – it's mostly a pale turquoise-blue colour, where it's not covered in fresh snow – and the locals aren't actually sure why they call it by that name, but they do. It might come from a Sami word which sounds a little like the Norwegian for "black ice" but actually means "blue ice".

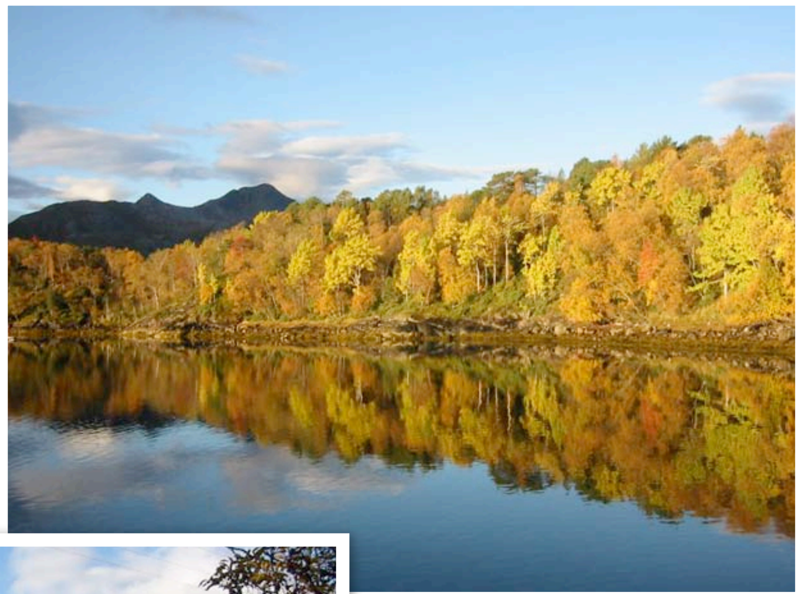
From sea level, onboard a small boat chugging quietly up a silent fjord in an early Arctic morning, the glacier is remote, aloof, a roof across the top of the mountain range to our right. Behind distant peaks I catch a glimpse of white, bridging their gaps.

Our young guide, who sadly doesn't introduce herself, is a classical Scandinavian beauty: blonde, leggy and lovely - and fluent in English and German besides her own tongue. She also has a remarkable knack at bird-spotting. Occasionally, a sea-eagle sweeps across our path, sometimes settling in a waterside tree – there are many such growing on a scattering of small, uninhabited islands. These great birds, wingspans reaching up to two and a half metres, are so plentiful here that some have been taken and moved to Scotland in an effort to reintroduce the species there. They sit in trees and regard us. I gaze back through binoculars, rapt. Their eyes seem to hold a mixture of aristocratic, elegant disdain and insane imbecility.

An hour's sail up the fjord, past tiny villages and their apparently inseparable fish-processing factories, and the occasional salmon farm, we come in sight of two lobes of the great glacier as it

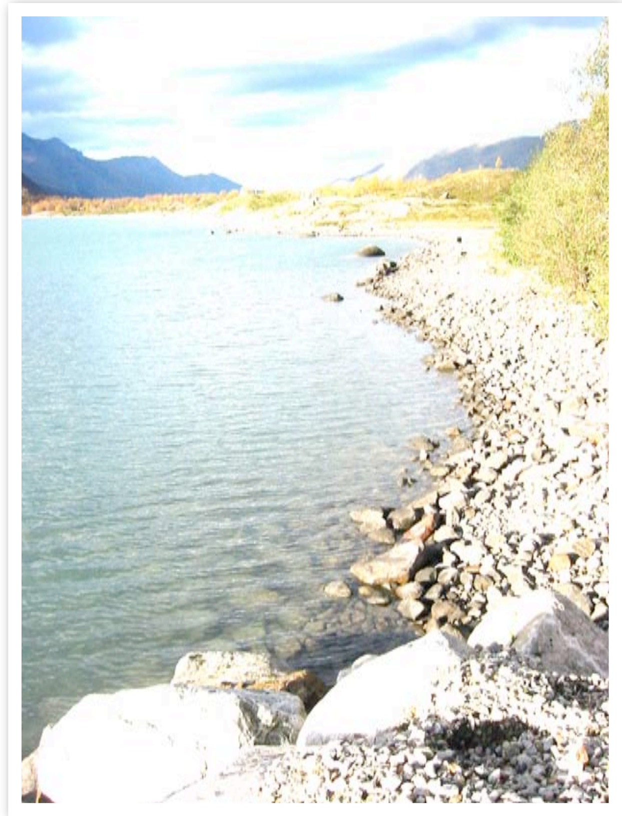
spills down precipitous valleys towards the mirror-smooth water. The sun barely skims the mountaintops right behind it, making it almost impossible to get a clear photo, but the sight is dazzling. At this moment, the guide's voice over the boat's less-than-hifi PA system is replaced by the instantly-familiar soaring strings of the *Peer Gynt* Suite. It's old, it's hackneyed but it's perfect: archetypically Norwegian, hauntingly lovely and perfectly plangent.

I actually weep for the beauty of it.



Soon the Melloycruise arrives at a rickety-looking jetty, where an equally rickety old coach awaits. The more vigorous among us set off toward the mountains on foot, strolling through an Alpine scene. On both sides are the sounds of cowbells, although in this case they're actually on the necks of placid sheep, eyeballing us incuriously. They graze on scrubby grass growing from thin, rock-scattered soil; but a few generations from raw scree, it nonetheless supports a sparse but lush forest of birch. The trees are small and thin-trunked, too slender to yield useful wood for building, but their sheer numbers mean that they're used for firewood and sometimes paper.

The visitors' centre, built from barn-red-painted wood along the same lines as local homes, lies on the opposite side of a tiny circular lake from a descending arm of the glacier itself. Sadly, though, this is nearly as close as you can get. The tip of the ice nearly enters the nacreous blue water in the middle of a broad stretch of smooth-scoured rock: the ice is in retreat, having shrunk back some 50 metres in recent years. This slick expanse is bracketed in birch forest for a hundred-plus metres on either side, after which the lakeshore is gravel, so you can get no closer than this to the ice. It's probably wise: glaciers are dangerous places to walk, riddled with concealed crevasses and treacherous rotten ice – but despite this, they're also fragile things. So I returned to the centre for my complimentary drink and cake and browsed the absolutely invariable assortment of carved wooden trolls and T-shirts with reindeer on. For a novelty, though, the postcards here were unusually tasteful,



with the exception of an extremely-badly superimposed sea-eagle on a picture of a flock of birds swirling over the fjord. For a country with a certain degree of taste and discretion, except, perhaps, apart from the matter of eating intelligent cetaceans, the Norwegian souvenir range is stereotyped beyond belief. Suffice it to say that the occasional shop with a collection of Viking-themed craftworks or Telemark sweaters is one of rare distinction.

I did not buy a troll.

After a shorter ride up a side-fjord, we boarded a rather more modern-looking coach for the ride to Bodø, where we would rendezvous with Hurtigruten. First, there was a brief rest stop at Sandhornøy, complete with a perfect little sandy beach – albeit a very frigid-looking one. The charming and giggly guide, Ida – shortly to move to Tromsø to train as a nurse - was a native of Bodø, claimed by some as modern Norway's ugliest city. She passed around a coffee-table book proclaiming its charms in pictures, but I can't help but suspect that the shot of smiling bikini-clad teenagers at the seaside was more than a little posed. Perhaps I do the summer climate an injustice. No one took her suggestion for a quick swim, though – not even she. Shame.

Next came Saltstraumen with its famous tidal whirlpool: the *Mælstrom*. Several sea currents converge in a narrow channel here, now bridged, causing a chaotic swirl of icy seawater. It's possible to follow elements of the movement as the area is strangely popular with local seagulls: a small flock sat resting on the surface, continually being dragged through and across and around the whirlpool. Frequently the flock would be drawn out into a long thin line, which then folded back upon itself, looped around or converged into a clump again. It's a real-life fractal: a live strange attractor, constantly changing and never the same twice. It's not only a fun fairground-ride for seafowl, either: two inflatable dinghies were plying to and fro across the currents too, full of happily-screaming passengers. As the boats entered the vortex, their pilots killed the engines, allowing the boats to be pushed and pulled around in random directions. Only on our return to the ship did we discover that said passengers were also on the cruise, members of a different expedition. I wish I'd had time to do both!

On climbing up away from the shore, a problem manifested, in the form of billowing clouds of black smoke from beneath our coach. Ida apologized for its advanced age and assured us it would get us there, but soon we had to stop while the driver phoned his base for help. Time to be grateful for Norway's remarkable telecomms system: even sailing a mile off from uninhabited Arctic shores, I typically have a full-strength signal on my cellphone.

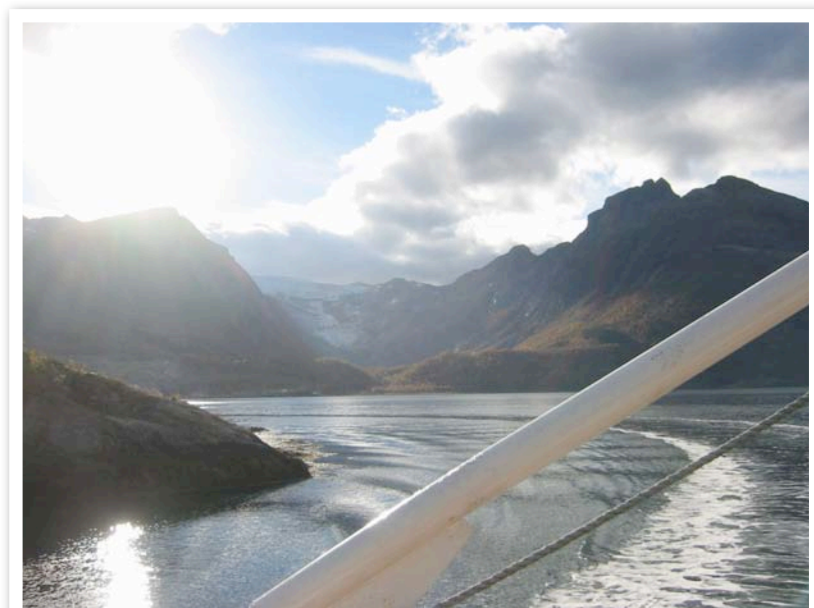
Our problem is more immediate, though: Hurtigruten does not count people on and off and if we do not return in time, the ship will sail without us. But we're still 30km from Bodø and it departs in 30min.

Whatever the driver's told, he fiddles with something and we are shortly off again, sans smoke trail. We drive in through the outskirts of Bodø, which is an unappealing city of sprawling suburbs – it lies on a coastal plane, beneath a mountain range. The houses are small, generic Norwegian wooden dwellings, mostly painted in the traditional colours of barn-red, yellow and white. One seventeenth-century one is even all three. Apparently, these once represented fixed points on a scale of expense. Red was cheap, pigmented in part with blood. Yellow was more expensive, so a yellow house advertised prosperity, whereas white was costliest of all and proclaimed riches.

Although it lies well within the Arctic circle, there's little to show it about Bodø; it's a very ordinary-seeming city, with shops, businesses and homes – and during our visit, massive roadworks, delaying us further. It also boasts some of the governmental administrative offices, in an effort at decentralisation and retaining business and employment in the north. There's an ancient church, some 600 years older than the city itself, and a modern aircraft museum, although regrettably there's no time to visit this. As we near the docks, we see that the Polarlys is still there: apparently a coach full of thirty or forty people is worth waiting for.

Lunch awaits us too – a special sitting laid on for returning travellers. The meals aboard are consistently impressive: buffet breakfasts and lunches and *á là carte* dinners. The buffets, particularly, are not wonderful for vegetarians: breakfast beans or scrambled egg are likely to contain bacon stirred in and the cold offerings revolve around fish and cheese. These days, I've made an executive decision that as soon as I leave the British Isles, all cheese instantly becomes vegetarian – the alternative is a vegan diet and an inability to eat just about anything in any restaurant anywhere. So breakfast is cereal and boiled eggs with toast, supplemented with fruit.

The toast, mind, is a joy: Norwegian bread is, in my humble opinion, the finest in the world, coming in half a dozen different forms from white through to rich browns full of seeds and nuts. It's baked in square loaves, so it's not the French's mass of crust with a wisp of white fluff within, but it's sold and served whole: you slice it yourself, with a bread-slicing machine in most homes, for maximal freshness. Even tiny corner 24-hour stores bake their own bread, albeit from frozen dough. I've spent years trying to recreate something like it in Britain, but even scouring health-food shops for exotic flours, we cannot match the Nor-

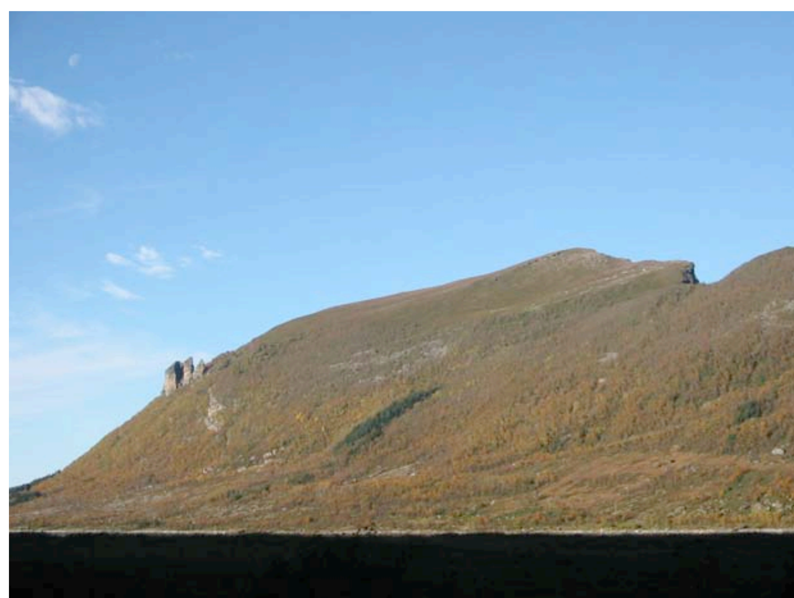


wegian's breadth of flavour and texture. Nor, incidentally, can the Swedes.

Lunch is more open: the choice of hot dishes is seldom of any use, ranging from chicken, turkey and a profusion of fish to meatballs and even, appallingly, whale steaks. However, the salad bar is excellent – if one ignores the fish and cold meats – and often the soups are veggie, too. There's always a range of tempting desserts, too: jelly, blancmange, stewed fruit, tarts and pies and puddings, and occasionally exotica such as *rømmegrøt*: sour-cream porridge. Smooth-textured as semolina, this is served with melted butter and cinnamon sugar. Locals extol its virtues with gusto. Norwegian sour cream (*rømme*) is much milder than that of southern Europe, and like Italian mascarpone cheese, it's as likely to be found in a sweet dish as a savoury. It's served in waffles with *syltetøy* (home-made-style runny fruit jam), on vegetables and potatoes, as a pizza topping or dip, with cakes and desserts - as well as on the side with Mexican foods such as quesadillas in Oslo's profusion of Mexican restaurants.

After the first day, we don't get to choose our own seats or dinner. From now on, you sit at the same table every night and eat what you're given. The menu is varied, but all European, centred around meat and fish with small amounts of vegetables or pasta on the side. Presentation is immaculate: the dishes are vaguely nouvelle cuisine in style, served by a friendly, charming and multilingual crew of young Norwegian waitresses. There are also recommendations of wines and the ship's own mineral water. I told them that I was a vegetarian on the first night, when I was told I could have whatever I wanted – I chose an omelette, to make life easy for them. From then on, though, I was presented with an individual veggie starter and main course every day.

Some of the fussier eaters among the British were not best pleased with the diet. If you're used to nothing but meat and two veg, boiled of course, then this comes across as exotic fare and I saw many plates being sent back full – especially when the seas were high. If you're a little more flexible, though, it's good stuff. The Coastal Express cruise – especially the eleven-day round trip, the full experience, as opposed to the popular option of flying back from Kirkenes – is nicknamed the ten-pound cruise. It's not what you spend – that's two drinks at the bar – it's how much weight you gain en route. After a week, I'm already distressingly close. A year's running is undone, to my dismay; getting rid of it again will keep me busy all winter.



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From Bodø, the ship leaves its normal coast-hugging route and sails into open water, sailing west into the sunset across the Vestfjord toward the southern end of the Lofoten island chain to dock at the tiny port of Stamsund on the second island, Vestvågøy. Alas, we don't call at

the southernmost tip, home of the splendidly-named village of Å. Rising out of the sea since the end of the last ice age, the islands are extremely mountainous, their jagged peaks forming Lofotveggen: the 100km "Lofoten Wall", outlined against the western horizon. Since to effete, decadent Southerners such as myself, northern Norway seems a remote and harsh place to live, it makes me wonder what sort of person eschews the mainland for these even more isolated towns and villages, so I struck up a conversation with one of the crowd who joined the ship at Bodø. (Yes, a cute blonde one, if you're asking.)

She was making her way home for her birthday the following day, to a village on the far side of the island from a trip to visit friends in Oslo. The fast way home would have been to change planes at Bodø and fly to Svolvær on Austvågøy, the next island along, but being in no particular hurry and with such beautiful autumnal sunny weather, it was more pleasant to relax on Hurtigruten for a few hours – if not very much cheaper. She'd lived in Oslo for years, as well as København and Berlin and other places, large and small, but Lofoten was best. Why? Well, because it's a quiet, unspoiled region, rich in wildlife and raw nature. It's not really that remote any more – all the islands are joined by bridges and tunnels, or at least ferries, ending with Hinnøy (Norway's largest island).

The traditional islander occupations were fishing and hunting - mainly for seals and whales.

(Now, as a former biologist and quondam member of and fundraiser for Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, I confess that I'm not at all happy about this, but the locals are avid to defend these traditional – nay, hallmark – regional activities. They arguments are familiar from repetition from a number of people I've discussed this with hereabouts: it's traditional, it's natural; the balance of nature has been disturbed by humans, and it's their part to keep populations of everything from seals to elk in check by taking on the rôle of top predator. As for those things which aren't teeming in hordes – from herring and cod to whales – well, they'll recover, left to themselves. Meantime, it's only fair to keep taking a few, as they always have; if stocks are low, if the catches are smaller in size as well as number, it's not the Norwegians' fault, it's that of the others fishing their waters. And yet, Norway is still the largest exporter of fish in the world. And they don't hunt the whales that are really rare any more; the little ones they go for now are abundant - relatively.

It is not my place to tell them they're wrong, but whaling, in particular, is in my humble opinion Norway's great shame in front of the world. They are not alone; it is that of Japan as well. For the British, it is fox-hunting; for the Spanish, bullfighting; for the French, foie gras… And so the litany continues.

It's the twenty-first century. Practices such as killing for pleasure, or the killing and eating of animals either rare, putatively intelligent or both, are inhumane, barbaric and as obsolete as cannibalism or slavery - both of which, to name just two, are ancient, traditional and were once enshrined as basic rights. If wild fish populations are noticeably, measurably and significantly depleted, then we should all stop fishing those stocks, totally, unless and until they recover. And if that means some traditional ways of life perish, sadly, then so be it, I'm afraid, just like those of the honest people who once made their livings in other jobs that no longer exist.

There is, I feel, a lack of balance in some of the "environmental" arguments I've heard here. That the problems with things aren't the local's fault, so it's not their responsibility. I am afraid that the world doesn't work like that.

But enough of this.)

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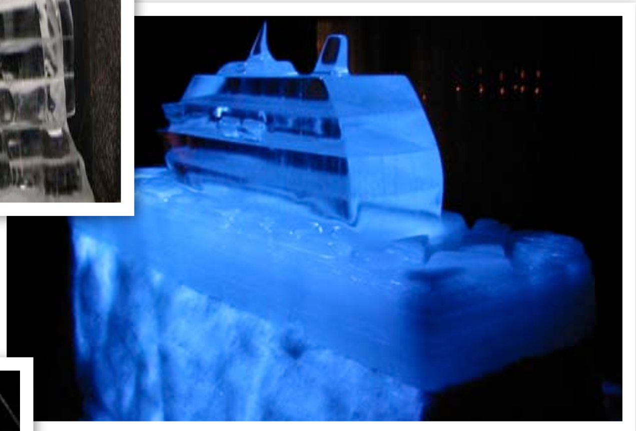
Today, alongside the ancient ways of life, Lofoten is also a home for artists, craft workers, retired people and others seeking peace and quiet and inspiration from the beauty of nature. My companion was the co-curator of a modern art gallery, one of several on the islands, and next month they were presenting the world première of the newest work by a video artist from London – showing that Lofoten wasn't really so out of the way after all. It is a small community – only about 2,500 on her island and 12,000 or so on the whole chain – but this is a comfortable size. It's enough that you know most of the locals, but not all, and today, when you can nip down to the capital for an overnight visit, it's a good place to live.

Well, I can attest to the islands' beauty, austere though it is, and I should like to return and visit them again. But I'm not sure I'd want to live there.

The islands are dotted with small towns and Hurtigruten stops at several: first Stamsund, where my companion disembarked, then the slightly larger Svolvær, which offers two attractions for those making a flying visit. One is a museum dedicated to the effects and aftermath of the German occupation and the other is Magic Ice. Give me a choice between worthy or cool and fun and it seldom takes me long to decide, so off we trooped to Magic Ice.

It's a new attraction, based in a converted whalemeat coldroom (so they claim, with, I suspect, a hidden grin) right on the quay. Cooled to an almost painful -5°C, it's a permanent ice-sculpture exhibition which opened in May 2004. There's even an ice bar, with both bar itself and shelves made entirely of solid-phase H_2O – even the glasses. Order a single (eye-wateringly expensive, but that's normal) shot with your entrance ticket and it's served in either a fragile ice beaker or a more solid tumbler. The latter is an etiolated pyramid with a large depression in the base, so the only way to put it down is in a special rack. Used once, they're tossed into a hopper. Why recycle? It's just very slightly impure water!



I had a *snaps* - *linjeakvavit* - and shared most of it around. I like it just as little as last time, but it's vaguely authentic.

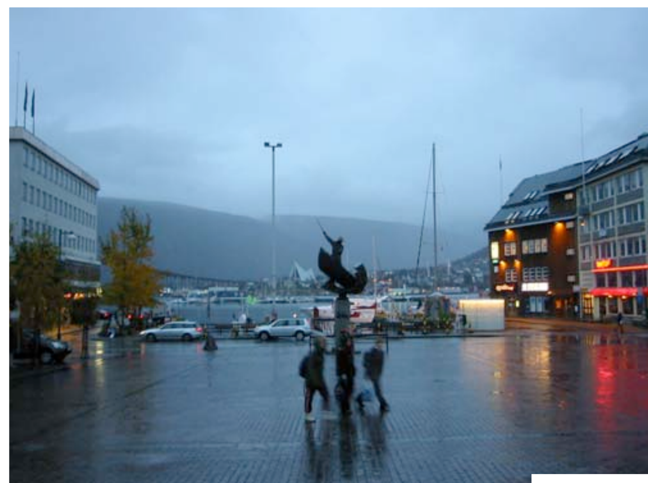
The sculptures are impressive, though I know little of ice sculpture. There are animals, a cliff of birds, seating and standing groups and figures and more. Some is simply figurative - a model of a Hurtigrute ship - some is less so (a partly-melted copy of a famed stone statue of a sailor's wife waving him off). I particularly liked a huge fisherman hauling in a vast steel net, pushing 10m long. In the net is a huge ice fish, struggling heroically. This piece was epic and must be planned for some permanence, given the metalwork.

Happily, such blatant tourist traps are fairly rare, which means that when you do see them, it's harder to resist. Even at £15 for half an hour.

Day 5, Tuesday: The Northernmost of their kind

Harstad –Finnsnes – Tromsø – Skjervøy

The further north in Norway you travel, the more and more things you encounter which are the northernmost of their kind. The northernmost town, village, stone church, wooden church, cathedral, chapel, medical school, university, mine, reindeer herder... The list seems endless. In some cases, these are the northernmost in the world; sometimes, Europe; sometimes, just Norway. To be fair, mind, the three categories overlap hugely.



Tromsø either is or has quite a few of these. It's the northernmost city, it has the northernmost cathedral, the northernmost mosque, the northernmost university, the northernmost medical school and, perhaps not coincidentally, given all those students, the northernmost brewery. By southern standards, it's a small town, really, of around 60,000 people, but it's a busy one. It is split between the mainland and a large island, Tromsøy; the soaring vertigo-inducing bridge between the two parts probably deserves some such accolade. What it is not, in all fairness, is pretty. The medical school is a complex of large modern buildings which can most charitably be called "plain", their main point of interest being trilingual signage: Norwegian, English and Sami.

The Sami actually speak a whole range of dialects, some of them quite mutually unintelligible, but the Norwegian national government takes a pragmatic attitude to this: the Sami can nominate a single prevalent dialect and that's the one that will be used, at least in that area. The north of Norway sees itself as quite a distinct entity, Nord-Norge, comprising the counties of Nordland, Finnmark and Troms. Up here the Sami are widespread, though a minority today. Much of this region was once called Finnmark - "the realm of the Finns", from just one early name for these people. A section of this is now the synonymous county. Tromsø is, obviously enough, in Troms fylke, a neighbouring county. (Incidentally, I am unsure of the ethnic relationship between the modern Finns and the Sami, but they're certainly not the same – although their languages are related.) They were once known as Lapps, but today the Sami reject this name as being pejorative – as did the Inuit, the one-time "Eskimo" or "Esquimaux" - although the Norse reaction to this judgement seems to be bemusement. They were once nomadic reindeer-herders, with a distinctive language and culture, from clothing to a rich oral folklore. After years of little

to no recognition as a separate group, things have changed significantly now: they have their own governing body and are recognised in law. However, modern Norwegian policy is integration and assimilation: whereas schools teach in the Sami language, they are expected to speak Norwegian and are encouraged to settle down in fixed homes. The few I met, in a small tourist concession, all have Norwegian names such as Nils-Oscar, and our tour guide cheerfully remarked that you really can't tell the difference any more: they look and sound the same as anybody else.

And so another unique human culture dies out. I think it's a damn shame, myself.

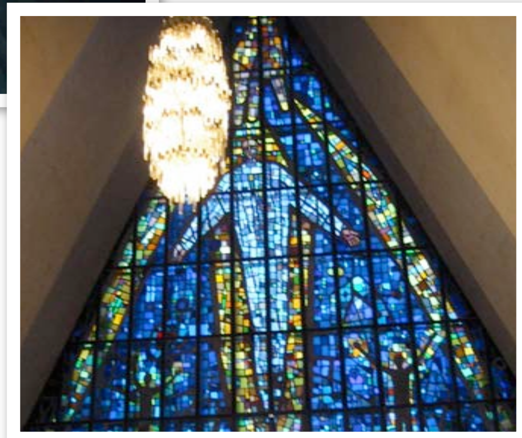
Tromsø is a busy port and industrial town and the main street, as usual called simply Storgata – "big street" – contains the usual assortment of chain stores. Walk along it for ten minutes to the south, though, and it peters out into a residential area; the houses, many in the traditional wooden style, are dilapidated and in many cases apparently abandoned, although there are many small blue plaques pointing out places of historical interest.

In residential areas, like other towns here in the Arctic, people don't seem to go in for gardening. (I am as guilty as they in this respect, I should observe.) Many dwellings simply sit in the middle of a patch of scrubby grass, with no marked boundary between neighbouring properties. If there are walls or fences, the land within is untended, and we see more peeling paint than further south. A fellow-traveller, while purchasing a two-day-old English newspaper in a Narvesen newsagent on the main street, asked the assistant how it felt to live on the top of the world. She looked surprised and replied that she'd never been asked that one before, and that she didn't think of it that way: it was just a town, just where she lived, not somewhere remote or special.

And so it is, up here. The landscape is a bit hillier, a bit bleaker than in the south, and yes, it stays light all day in summer and dark all day in winter, but otherwise, this is nowhere special. There are no icebergs, no polar bears, nothing polar about it. The towns just tend to be a bit shabbier and a bit uglier than further south, compared to decorative places such as Trondheim or Bergen or even Ålesund or Molde.

The city centre is littered with monuments and statues to various heroes, from Roald Amundsen on downwards, but it's otherwise unremarkable; our tour bus didn't stop anywhere until it reached Tromsø's most famous landmark, on the far side of the harbour: *Ishavskatedralen*, the "Iceberg Cathedral". Vaguely reminiscent of the Sydney Opera House, this looks like a giant

house of cards, comprising a set of huge nested triangles. From the outside, it's imposing and majestic; inside, as befitting Norway's Lutheran Protestant state church, it is stark and bare. The far end faces a mountain which is climbed by a cablecar and topped with a restaurant, a small beckoning point of



warmth and light on a wet and dreary day. This huge window was once clear, showing the majesty of their deity's handiwork, as postcards attest - but I'm told that the priests found problems keeping their congregations' attention – people were wont to watch the world going by outside. So it was replaced, some years later, with an imposing stained glass window in a '70s modernist style, its panes set in concrete rather than lead. This is almost lush by Lutheran standards, as is the pipe organ at the other end.

The Ishavskatedral is not the only bit of impressive modern architecture around. In the Eastern side of the city centre is a striking roof. At the moment that's all it is – the building beneath, once a cinema, has been completely removed and construction of a new one is just beginning. The roof alone remains like some giant rigid tent, a huge square made from four intersecting arches, supported at its corners by pillars – thus allowing the structure it covered to be demolished separately. I hope the new place lives up to its crown.

The one that pleased me the most, though, resembled the cathedral in just one way: the outside was more interesting than the interior. Close by the Hurtigrute quay is Polaria, the Polar Museum. It's mainly devoted to Svalbard – which you might know as Spitzbergen – Norway's archipelago in the polar ocean, some thousand kilometres closer to the pole than the uttermost point of the mainland. Svalbard is truly Arctic, a wilderness of tundra, permafrost, polar bears and countless seabirds. From the outside, the museum is a half-collapsed row of ice blocks, like a row of giant books fallen to one side. Each huge white block lies at a different angle, the gaps bridged by glass, the whole series propped at one end by a glass wedge: the entrance hall.

Inside, it's a little too theme-park like for my tastes. I rather liked a giant globe of the earth, suspended on water so you can freely rotate it to and fro to show the effects on world coastlines of a sea-level rise of a few meters. Well, you can freely rotate it if you're stronger than our small,

middle-aged female tour guide, anyway. An animated depiction of the flow – and cooling – of the Gulf Stream as it flows northwards was pretty good, too, for something driven by slides – a £300 PC could do better today, albeit connected to a £3,000 LCD projector.

There's a 20-minute film about Svalbard, with a score of music and the sounds of nature – no dialog, no narration, no subtitles apart from occasional place names. It's presented on a band of five screens, a sort of poor man's IMAX – sometimes these repeat one or several images, sometimes they hold a whole panorama, slightly disjoint as it's filmed from an arc of five separate cameras – you can very occasionally glimpse the shadow of the cameraman on the snow. Svalbard looks like an amazing place and I now yearn to go there. It's inhabited, but only my miners and a few biologists – but I'm told they're very grateful for any company. It is divided into Norwegian and Russian-run halves; the capital is in the Norwegian part. It's called, oddly for a town in Norway – or at least in Norwegian territory – Longyearbyen, "the longyear town". While I don't doubt that a year in Svalbard would be a very long one, this makes no sense in Norwegian, and indeed it's pronounced as if a hybrid of English and norsk – "long-year-bü-en", with the peculiar sound of a Scandinavian "y".

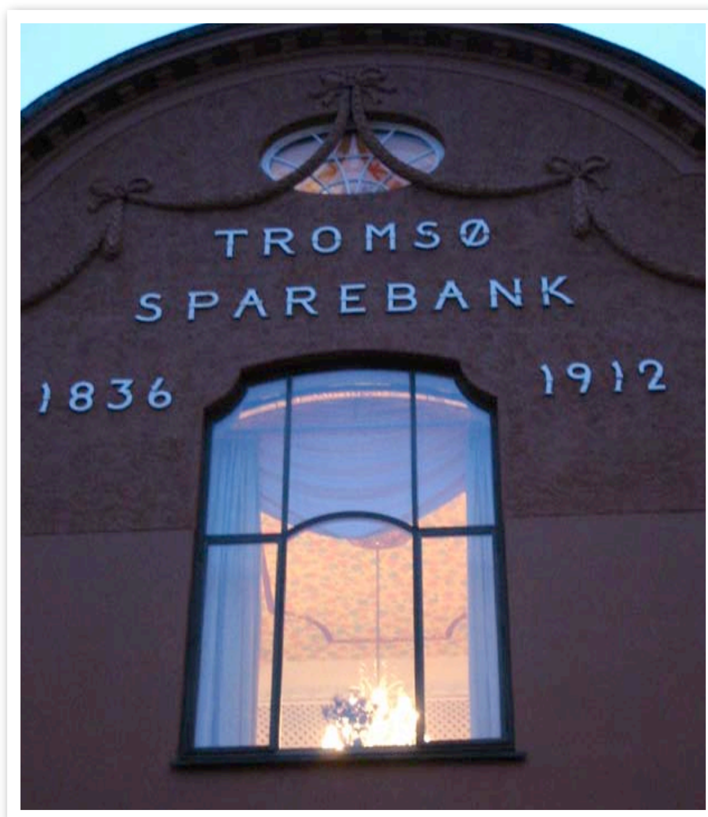
(Try it! Purse your lips in an exaggerated kiss and try to say "eeee". What emerges is a sort of long hooting sound somewhere between "ooh" and a moan; it's a vowel sound that simply doesn't exist in English, although it's very close to the nasal sound of the French word "tu". The Swedish one is closer to "ooh" and the Norwegian to "eeee", but it's neither. It's widely used and you have to get it right to understand the language – it's not the same as "ooh" or "eeee", but it can easily be mistaken for either, in which case you'll hear an entirely different word. After eleven years of practice, I still can't reliably distinguish it and it regularly throws me. Just out of interest, in phonetics, this is called a minimal pair – meaning that the difference is all that distinguishes otherwise-identical words. One is "y" versus "u", but so are "å" and "æ" against "a" and "ø" against "o" – but happily, the latter three all occur in English, so you just have to learn what the letter sounds like. Examples are "paw", which a Norwegian might write *på*, "hat" to *hæt* – by Norwegian rules, you might pronounce *hat* as the English "heart" – or "sir" becoming *sø*, more or less.)

Anyway, Longyearby was named after an American called Mr Longyear. So there you go.

* * * * *

In the Polaria museum, you leave the theatre into an attempt to realise a polar environment: as you walk through the automatic door into a cold room full of fibreglass ice, a sprayer above the entrance squirts you with snow – actually more like tiny flecks of foam – and a tape plays howling wind noises at you. Displayed for your delectation are a polar expedition's tent, skis and supplies, a stuffed dwarf reindeer and a fake ice-cave with a stuffed polar-bear. A tray holds some shale scree arranged atop a rubber membrane above a water-bath containing padding and springs, which is, apparently, much like walking on part-melted permafrost. It is, I must admit, a disconcerting sensation – it feels treacherous, as if like quicksand it might at any moment suck you under.

Thankfully, this one small room is it for the Svalbard experience. You go downstairs, disconcertingly underneath the transparent base of the permafrost, into a miniature aquarium, which is interesting, if aimed at kids: the tanks bulge in or out of the room in hemispheres, so you can either look through or stick your head in – or up into, in a painful crouch if you happen to be 1.88 metres tall. I think the designer had substantially smaller people in mind. I particularly liked a demonstration of camouflage: three small shallow tanks at waist-height, roofed in Perspex. In two, you play spot-the-beastie on beds of gravel, but one is in quadrants: one bare, one gravel, one sand, one artificial reddish grains, perhaps of brick. Each quarter contains one or more baby lemon soles and you're asked to count them. Against blue plastic, it's easy. Despite his best efforts to turn sky-coloured, he's yellow and so sticks out - and he knows it, eyeing you nervously. In the others, though, his kin shift colour and pattern to blend in perfectly and the game is hard. You can cheat by waving your hand so its shadow passes over them – they're used to it and don't move, but you might catch their eyes tracking you. Nicely done, though the fish might disagree. The prawns didn't seem to care.



A small dome allows you to peer into a larger tank where shadowy shapes swim, perhaps a yard long. They look like baby seals.

Next, you walk through a submerged transparent tunnel, and you might well jump when you realise that these are no babies but nearly full-grown and you're a long way down in the bottom of their swimming pool. They loom suddenly out of the dark, longer than I'm tall and twice my not-inconsiderable weight, veering aside at the last moment but sometimes probing the cylinder with their whiskers – these are Bearded Seals. In their element, they're a lot faster and more agile than I am in my own.

Upstairs, it's time for a show: a girl instructs the three females and a guy the larger males as they perform tricks and obey commands. It's not, the humans insist, to please the crowd, it's to keep the seals active and learning and interacting in an artificial and restrictive environment.

The subsequent displays were a little less impressive. Flasks of phytoplankton and zoöplankton look suspiciously like, well, water. I'm not sure why displays of crabs and anemones are in 5cm deep tanks, although I can guess why they're only a meter off the ground – but it's damned awkward for adults. A touch-tank allows you to fondle starfish and urchins, which don't look happy about it. Another contains rocks, anemones and a single small blenny, peering at me with deep suspicion from under a rock. Naughtily, I dig in my pocket for a few crumbs from a long-ago stashed pastry, and sprinkle them on the water. He eyes me mistrustfully then lunges out to grab one, his tiny jaws closing on it with a startlingly loud snap. But then, others appear – literally dozens of them – and the metre-square tank is transformed into a writhing nest of snakelike little fish vying for flakes of a Gregg's vegetable pasty, which I venture is not their natural diet – but I think it should be a pretty harmless variation. I am so spellbound I almost miss my bus.

It's not bad and at least half the show is good and informative for adults, but mainly it made me wish I was in Svalbard instead of Tromsø. And maybe a little bit that I was twelve again.

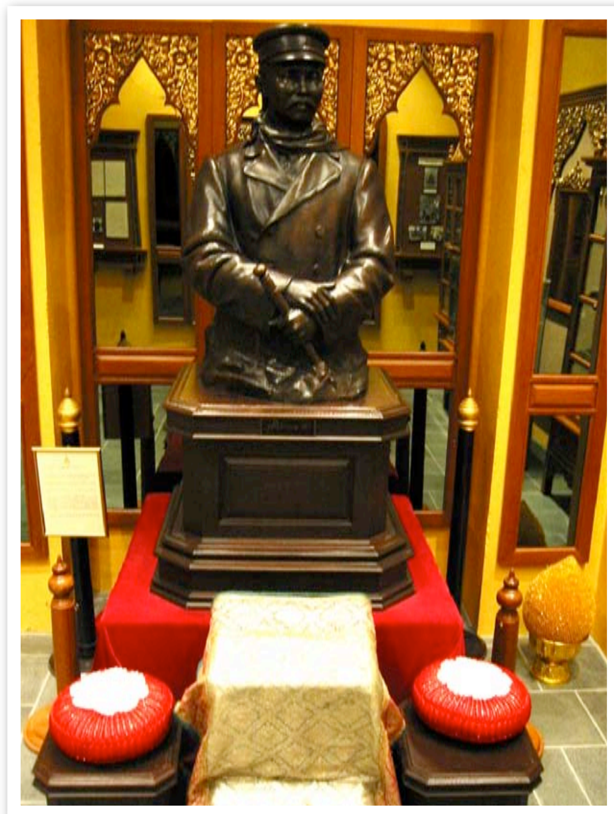
Day 6, Wednesday:
The roof of the world - the North Cape and the end of Europe

Hammerfest – Havøysund – Honningsvåg – Kjøllefjord – Mehamn – Berlevåg – Båtsfjord - Vardø

The northernmost town in the world, Hammerfest, we sadly pass through at after midnight, and with so many things to do early in the morning – October nights start early here – I can't afford to stay up to explore it. Not that there'd be a lot to see at that time, although resident Karsten is keen to sing its praises. He's on the way up from Tromsø. He's an old sailor – I dare not venture how old, but I'm pretty sure he didn't retire too recently. A small, weatherbeaten man who's visited China and anywhere else I can name, his English is basic but functional – the first Norwegian I have ever met who isn't fluent. "I… not say so much, so good, but I… I understand. I getcha, no problem." He's delighted to learn I speak a smattering of Norwegian – as is Sigrunn, the statuesque Valkyrie barmaid.

"Of *course* I'm Norwegian! I'm six foot tall and blonde," she says, gesturing with a two-foot plait at an enquiring (male) passenger. "Where do you *think* I'm from?" She's impressed that I learned Norwegian for an ex, though. She tells me, in Norwegian, "So? I've had an English boyfriend as well - and he didn't learn one *word* of Norwegian." [She switches to English] "Not bloody interested."

I think Sigrunn doesn't want to condescend to me - and she speaks excellent colloquial English, plus functional German. Someone does throw her with unexpected French, though. In contrast, Karsten, who's not that much better at my language than I am at his, is happy to speak v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y to me, with small easy words, and we get on fine. Hammerfest, he says, is His Town. I must visit it and come drinking with his friends. The mere fact that we leave it, after a stay of under three hours, at 5.15am does not daunt him. It does me.



So in practice, our first stop up here is Honningsvåg, a tiny fishing village on the island of Magerøya. Here we disembark for a trip to the North Cape, which is very nearly the northernmost point of Europe. Actually, after it was named and given this honour in about 1655 by Richard Chancellor, a slightly lost English ship's captain who was looking for China – I kid you not. It was later discovered that Knivskjelodden, a kilometre to the west, actually sticks out about 100m further north. By this point, of course, tourists, from Negri, an heroic seventeenth-century Italian (who took two years to walk most of the way here; there wasn't much public transport in 1664) to the King of Thailand (in 1907) had made their pilgrimage here. It was a bit

late to move the visitors' centre, too, although the old one was a lot less impressive than the half-buried but airy 1990s one that currently graces this extremely bare bit of land.

Honningsvåg is 31km from Nordkapp, giving us time for a scenic tour. In the rain. Falling out of a cloud base of about, oh, knee height.

It has to be said, there's not much here. The town has a bit over a thousand inhabitants and mostly consists of docks and warehouses, although there is a supermarket and a hotel on the edge of town. This used to be a campsite – a remarkably unappealing one, I'd imagine – and it's not a lot prettier now, consistent of a campus of boxy prefab-looking buildings squatting on the rocky ground. The treeline has sunk to sea level hundreds of kilometres south of here, so all that grows is yellowing grass, moss and lichen. "Bleak" is a good word for it, along with "bare" and "barren". Much of the soil is flakes of rock, of which there is an abundance, rearing out of the sea in great rounded lumps, ground down by glaciers but too crumbly to polish smooth.

Our guide here is 17-year-old Jula, a compact, rounded and constantly-giggling brunette with startlingly blue eyes. She doesn't confirm it, but she looks much more like a Sami than a tall pale Norse. She's had to move "into town" recently to go to high school – she's actually from Skarsvåg, Norway's (you guessed it) northernmost fishing village, a few kilometres away on the northern coast. We see it in the distance from the road – a few houses huddling together for warmth. Jula rents her own apartment in Honningsvåg, but it's an exciting place – there are more than 20 people in her class. She was half the entire school roster at home. She loves it, though. Nature is right there, all around you. You can… go for walks! And she loves to go out on her father's fishing boat, even though (giggle) girls aren't really meant to be fishermen. And her friends are there, but she's making lots of new ones in Skarsvåg. If they get bored, they can go out to the Cape and go round the visitor centre. She's been there a lot. She hopes to go on to study, probably in Trondheim, but it's a bit scary.

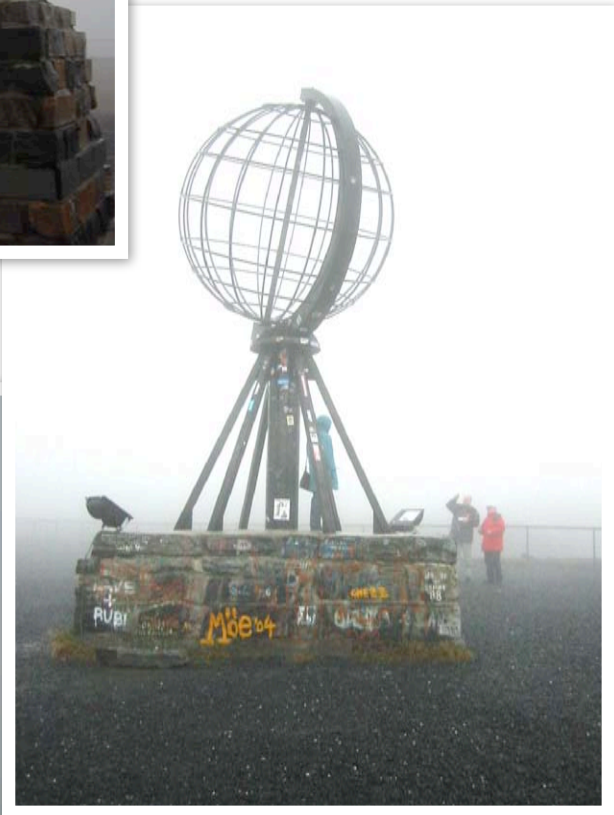
I'm impressed, and I say this with no hint of mockery. She's sweet, charming and nervously but competently trilingual. ("But I much prefer guiding, talking, in English! I hate speaking German!" I can't help but wonder if she says the same to them.) I'd have gone hopelessly insane in weeks if you'd put me here as a teenager. I thought the Isle of Man was bad.

On the drive up from the port to the cape, we pass the turnoff to Jula's village – she points it out with a note of fondness while we goggle at it in astonishment. Then comes the turnoff to Knivskjellodden, the real northernmost point of Europe, otherwise unmarked. "There's nothing there," Jula tells us, dismissively. It's a tough trick to giggle dismissively, but she pulls it off. "There's a visitors' book you can sign, to say you've been, but that's it. There's really nothing to see." She forbears to say that there's bugger all to see at Nordkapp either, but then, by local standards, the visitor's centre is a feast of delights. There's a post office; you can send a postcard with a postcard from the far north. There's a gift shop and café, of course. Jula recommends the waffles: appar-

ently a Norwegian tradition – news to me; I thought they were Belgian, myself. They're served *med rømme og jordbær syltetøy*: the mild local sour cream and homemade-style strawberry jam. It sounded dubious to me, but I could not deny that voice anything, so I tried one. Even tepid, it was truly delicious.

I might as well treat my sense of taste and the others; there is little to delight the eyes. The weather has settled into freezing fog, blown on the howling polar wind, leavened with icy rain.

Nice.



Actually, it reminds me of the Isle of Man in my youth: barren windswept hilltops facing into the horizontal rain, with glimpses of the cold iron-grey sea far below. I am almost nostalgic, and in a perverse way, happy. This is something like the kind of weather I expect at the extreme tip of my continent as we head into winter, and though I am being deprived of the view, it's a view of emptiness. There aren't even many seabirds to admire: the sensible ones have all set off for the South for winter.

I stand on the tip of the cape, baring my teeth into the wind. I can't see a thing, but if the weather had been clear and calm, I still wouldn't be able to see a damn thing: there is nothing to

see here until the sea freezes to form the polar icecap, far over the horizon. Even the wreck of the German warship *Scharnhorst*, sunk here by the British at Christmas 1944, is long gone. I have colossal respect for any men who fought in ships in these freezing seas in the middle of the endless arctic night. One member of our tour group, Peter, is here on his umpteenth trip back to Norway – he can't remember how many, or can't be bothered. He was a signalman on a Royal Navy minesweeper at the close of the war, working the west coast, later with two commandeered German minesweepers. He fondly remembers the friendliness and support of the grateful Norwegians; it has given him a love of the country that persists sixty years later. He smiles as he recalls being chewed out by the captain for not running up the Norwegian flag on May 17th.

"How was I supposed to know it was their Independence Day? I didn't have a clue! I was only a kid!"

I don't know how old he is and I don't want to ask, but he's wearing terrifically well. He's come back to this place he loves, again, with his son and daughter. I hope it's not his last time. I feel an urge to salute him, but I am no serviceman. Minesweeping was no task for the timorous.

There's a fair bit to explore at the centre. In the middle of the main chamber, a glass bubble in the floor reveals a rounded bolder. Incised deeply in the rock is a strange looping graffito and the numbers "1907". A case displays a photo of some men in uniform posing around it. It is, in fact, the King of Siam – now Thailand. That year, he formed a hankering to visit the end of the world – their first royal visitor in centuries, if the displays are believed, since the Swedish king. It was not a trivial trip then. Beneath the building, a tunnel runs downhill to the Grotto Bar and an outpost overlooking the sea from some way down the rock face of the cape. Along this tunnel are two small rooms. On the right is a non-denominational chapel, modernist and decorated with blue mosaic – quite lairy by Norse standards. Behind the tiny altar is a pictorial mosaic, showing Jesus, a dove and a cross – according to the sign outside, the only symbols in common to all the branches of Christianity. So it's not much help if you want to pray to Allah or JHVH, then.

Almost opposite is the Thai Museum. Donated in 1989 by the people of Thailand – which I interpret to mean a bureaucrat somewhere – it contains images, statues and various souvenirs of the King's visit, nearly a century ago. Sadly for me – and I daresay most of its visitors – the bulk of the labelling is in Thai script. Well, I take it to be Thai; it's not in my repertoire, so for all I know it could be Gujarati, to be honest. Some labels explain that there are pho-

tos of the king, a statue of him and some commemorative medals. The strange looping carving in the rock upstairs, a little like a valentine's heart, is, I learn, the King's signature – or at least initials. I recall that some of the men in the photo were holding a hammer and chisel; I imagine the King signed the rock and his men promptly carved it deeply in. Odd that it didn't register on me that the men in the picture were not Norwegian, especially given how rare a sight any non-Caucasians are up here. A black family board the Polarlys at its next stop and they stand out, so few brown faces are to be seen here.

Also in the tunnel are tableaux, set into the walls, of the namers of the cape, in their storm-tossed ship – the other two got truly lost, looking for China, and their starved bodies were found on an Arctic island, years later. The lead ship made it into a Russian port and they were escorted to Moscow as guests of the Tsar.

Others show the first tourists, from the King and Queen of Sweden to that lone mad Italian to the King of Siam. It's a popular place, given that it's not really the furthest north and that there's absolutely nothing of interest to see. Such is the human fascination with extremes – and willingness to be fooled.

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For me, one of the most interesting parts was a small Sami family we visited on the way up here from Honningsvåg. On one side of the road are a few wooden houses, which aren't mentioned. On the other, a long hut with a sign saying "SOUVENIRS" and a man in a remarkable hat standing holding a reindeer. He is Nils Oscar Smorre, and his is the world's northernmost reindeer-herding family. Several rather ineffectual fences straggle around the area, not visibly impeding the movement of a dozen or so reindeer which wander about randomly. I get the feeling that Nils Oscar has restrained his more by the large bucket of "reindeer moss" – a fruticose lichen, *Cladonia* spp., I adjudge – in which its nose is buried. There's moss scattered on the ground all around, which I suspect is why there are so many animals around. I daresay the labour of gathering it is poorly rewarded by the profits of selling trolls, dolls and postcards, but hey, it's a living. To me, the wooden houses look more appealing than the crude tent standing next to Nils Oscar. It's a simple conical arrangement of wooden poles with tarpaulins draped around it. At ground level, there's a circle a few meters across, scattered in reindeer hide, with a smoky fire burning in the middle. The peak of the tent is open, allowing the smoke to escape.

It looks a grim life to me, constantly following the herds, living in this, with no spare time or room for many possessions – certainly not books, let alone modern luxuries such as electronics for music, radio or TV. Even so, I'd not be the one to tell these people that they must give up their lifestyle and settle down like the fishermen and farmers from further south. Yet that is what they are doing and I'll bet that in a few generations there's nothing more left of the Norwegian Sami than some Norwegians with a few weird words in their vocabulary, a trace of an epicanthic fold and a tendency to plumpness.

Declining to pose with him, I buy a couple of postcards depicting a slightly younger and less weather-beaten Nils Oscar. I cannot speak his language, to my shame, so I ask him in Norwegian.

"Excuse me... These pictures. They are you, no?"

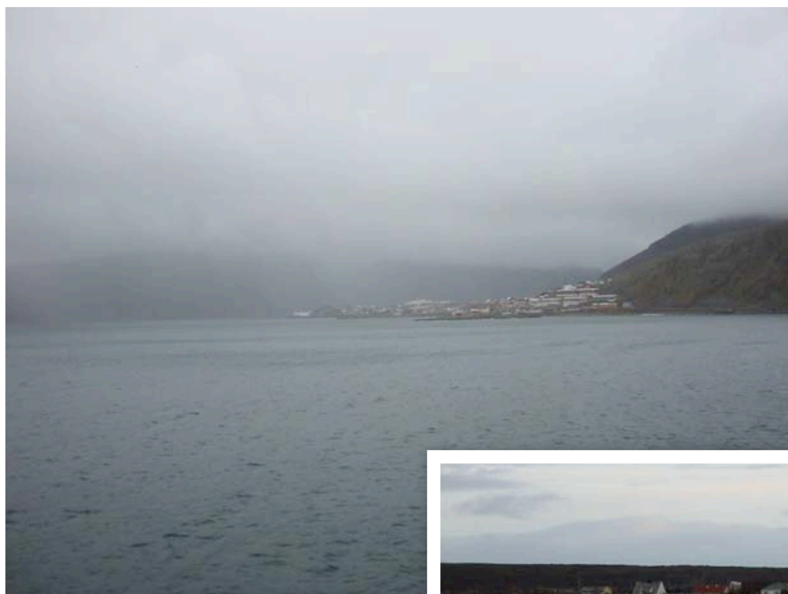
"Yes, they are."

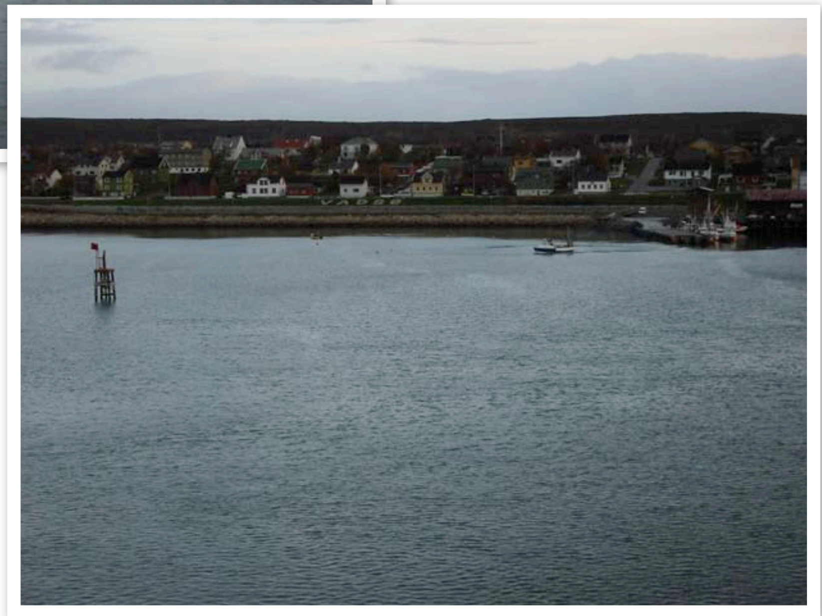
"Then can I have your autograph, if you'd be so kind?"

He looks at me. I cannot read his deeply-wrinkled face, either. But he nods, grabs a pen from the plump, cheerful woman at the till – perhaps his daughter, though surely not the golden-haired child in the photos from the '60s or '70s – and scrawls his name across the back.

I hope he's pleased at this tiny gesture of recognition. The faces on my coach are more surprised: they were too busy photographing reindeer, or posing with an impassive Nils Oscar, to notice the resemblance or to actually try to talk to him. Getting his autograph didn't occur. He just stood there in the frigid wind, his colourful embroidered tunic dirty and threadbare, his red hat, like a jester's or something worn by a teenager at a rock festival, flopping in the wind. He didn't speak to the tourists nor they to him. Some merely dropped a few kroner in the hat by the tent.

To be honest, following migrating deer around Finnmark and northern Norway doesn't sound like an exciting, stimulating or honour-filled life to me, but I think that in many ways it's better than this.





Day 7, Thursday: Europe's Eastern Edge

Vadsø – Kirkenes – Vardø – Båtsfjord – Berlevåg

So far, we've not been struck by the beauty of Finnmark. This is the last stop. We're already heading south – on account of there being nowhere much to go north of North Cape – but after Kirkenes, the ship turns around and heads back towards Bergen again. Kirkenes is the region's last chance to redeem itself as a place of beauty.

And what is here in Norway's most remote corner, east of Istanbul, north of Sweden and Finland both? We're 1,150km from Helsinki – less than half as far as the 2,500km to the capital Oslo, and our starting point in Bergen is 2,600km away.

What is here is a former mining town. Whoo-hoo.

Our guide, Torbjørn, is the first male guide of this trip. His English is hoarse and guttural and he gets a lot of the vowel sounds wrong. I'm used to this, as I know what the sounds of Norwegian and Swedish are like, but it throws a lot of people. To make matters worse, as opposed to the more conventional technique of speaking *ad libitum*, he's reading from a script – and it repeats itself. A lot.

"Here on the left, you can see a large building. On the left. It is very new and it cost fifty million Norwegian crowns. It is on the left. This large building is our new sports centre. It is very new. It cost fifty million Norwegian crowns."

Then – I'm not making this up – we go round a roundabout and along the other side of the building and he goes through it all again.

The sports centre was quite impressive, in a sort of many-hundreds-of-meters long Nissen hut sort of way. No expense had been spared on decoration. Really none.

The sights of Kirkenes are many but not exactly beguiling to the eye. Most of them revolve around two things: the town's mine and the proximity to the Russian border. The town centre is small and unremarkable, with the usual Norwegian chainstores: Rimi and ICA and Expert and – nille. The first oddity I notice is the sign for the main street, invariably called Stortorget. This time, it also says Сторторгет, which throws me for a second, until I realize. It's in Russian. So is the town library – both Bibliotek and Библиотек. There aren't many such signs, but they're there. These pass unremarked by our guide, perhaps on the reasonable basis that not many Brits can read Cyrillic and they're unremarkable words anyway. What he does point out is a road sign

on the edge of town. One side points to Киркенес/Kirkenes, on the other, Мурманск/Murmansk.

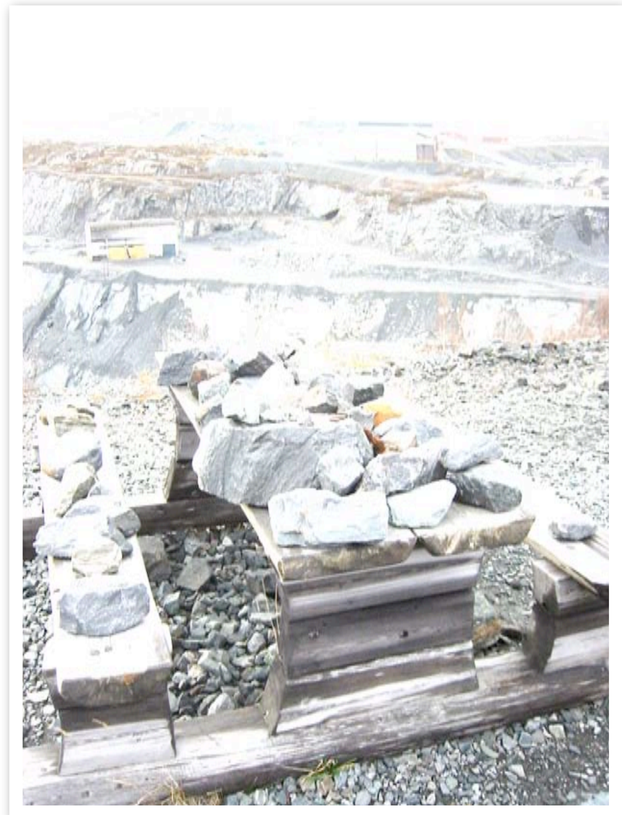
(I beg the indulgence of any Russian-speaking readers for any errors; my Cyrillic is not so much rusty as a faint impression in the soil.)

A signpost to a well-known Russian city causes quite a stir; I confess to a *frisson* myself. This truly is somewhere far-off and unknown, and it drives home just how far we have come. This country is vast; not only does it stretch further than from the Hebrides to Rome, it goes from the western coast of Europe to its Eastern edge, too.

It sports the world's northernmost railway, now disused, running 8km from the port to the mine works, as Torbjørn tells us before we get to it, again when we see the start, again as we pass parallel to a stretch and yet again at the mine at the far end.

One stretch of the road lies between the line and a small lake, quite pretty in its way, but today a sheet of iron-grey ripples driven by a bitter wind. Before the war, it was the town's water supply, but no longer: now, it's too polluted.

But our first stop was the mine.



It's a strip mine. Open to the skies, huge stretches of the landscape have been ripped completely away, leaving giant gashes in the earth, grey and ugly, with water pooling in the deepest. I need scarcely point out that it was Norway's northernmost mine - probably the world's. What they delved for here was iron – or more precisely, iron ore. Very rich iron ore: from 25% up to 40% metal. Overlooking the vast chaos of the mine is a small information board – but it's for business visitors, not tourists. Even if you were interested in the geology of the area, which I am not, hugely, it's all in Norwegian.

Next to it is a picnic table. The kind you find outside a pub, with integral benches. It is laden, seats and all, with a feast – of rock. Big cold grey chunks of rock. I stoop to pick up several fragments.

"Is this ore?" I ask Torbjørn.

"Oh, no," he says, "this is just rock. This is ore," picking up a fragment superficially identical to my untrained eye. (My training is as a biologist; if a rock doesn't have fossils in it, we're not much interested.) He pulls a small magnet from his pocket. It picks up his fragment but spurns mine. He passes another to me; I can collect my own ore samples by merely passing it over the ground. It's quite amazing.

Torbjørn enthuses over the place. There are huge stolid grey buildings, for processing the ore in some mysterious way. Great rusting iron chimneys, huge spoil heaps, and outside the reception area, a sort of Zen rock garden as built by someone who's had the concept described to them but isn't entirely clear on the notion. It comprises an arrangement of huge lumps of ore, from 5 tonne tiddlers to some 30 tonne chunks the size of a car. They've been carefully placed in no apparent pattern whatsoever, sitting on the concrete apron, a walkway weaving between them. "This is what we do and we're proud of it."

It's a place Built By Men For Men, I suppose; largely unrelieved by any decorative features and designed solely for brute utility in a harsh job in a harsh climate. Still, there's the occasional touch of humour. Independent bits of machinery such as vehicles and digging machines were individually named, all with female names; we are shown a huge rusting yellow earthmover of some form, like an acromegalic JCB, its tyres taller than I am. The very large dumper truck in front of it is quite dwarfed.

It's called Marion.

A dozen men could stand in its digging bucket without crowding. In fact, they regularly do. Just by the mine entrance is a housing estate, the most British-looking of its kind I've seen in Norway – which is not a compliment. Where its entrance road joins the main road, there's a bus shelter.

Apparently, over the years, this repeatedly got vandalised.

It's not surprising. Kirkenes went into a considerable slump in the late 1980s when the mine closed, and as Torbjørn puts it, "we all thought our town would die." There was nothing here but the mine. But now, they've found new industries: tourism, fishing, shipworks, new businesses, and

a unique position at the head of the European highway leading from here straight into Russia. This is the main land gateway between Norway and Russia; you can drive from here straight to the Eastern port of Vladivostok on a single road.

But in the meantime, times were hard. I'm not surprised the local kids smashed the place up a bit. Vandalism is very rare in Norway, but if anyone had a reason, it'd be these kids.

They don't any more. Not because they're deliriously happy to be here – somehow I rather doubt that – but because the glass bus shelter was replaced with one of Marion's buckets, upturned on a brick foundation. There's plenty of room to shelter under there and the kids are unable to harm it in any way whatsoever. Without something the size of Marion, they can't even push it over.

It's a fun touch and a typical bit of local humour. I can't say it's a very pretty bus shelter, but then, have you ever seen a pretty bus shelter?

After the mine, it's off to the border checkpoint. As we drive out of the town into the countryside, it becomes a bit less forbidding. There are meadows and forests. Looking back, I half expected permafrost and no scrap of green, but actually, there are farms here. We've come a couple of hundred kilometres south from Nordkapp and we're below the treeline again; there are birches everywhere and pines and other conifers too. This isn't a very mountainous area, by Nordic standards, but high in the craggy hills, there are summer houses, and apparently it's a great area for cross-country skiing.

The checkpoint itself is at the end of a long lake called *Pikevann* – "Girl Lake", as Torbjørn puts it, although to be a bit more poetic, you might translate that as "Maiden's Water". Hmm. Perhaps not.

The border post was *meant* to be 40km or so further west, using a river as a natural boundary, but this would have put an old church inside atheist Russia, so they moved the border a bit.

It's not a welcoming place. There's a small car park, a tiny prefab holding a souvenir stand, and some information boards, in English, Norwegian and Russian. They tell you a little about the area and threaten dire things if you stray too far. No sightseeing, no pedestrians, no trespassing, no

taking of suspicious photographs; no fun, really. You can peer through the open gates at the buildings of a small administrative compound, and beyond, into some frankly identical-looking countryside which is imbued with some special significance because it's Russian.

Actually, it all looks vaguely Russian up here. The unfarmed land has stands of beech but it's mostly long grass, rich with herbs and wildflowers. It's flat or gently undulating, atypical for Norway but just how I picture the steppes. I find it easy to imagine it continuing like this for thousands of miles, riding a bike for day after endless day across the taiga, right across Siberia and the north of Eurasia to the Pacific Ocean. This has been a long journey, but knowing that this road would take me to the mysterious east, though really foreign lands, a country where I've never been, don't speak the language and can barely read the alphabet, fills me with a yearning to just keep going. Not by bike, actually – it's too far; I want a big tough jeep or something, solid and unfancy and not worth stealing, packed with supplies and a course in conversational Russian.

I snap back to reality. We're still in Norway and we cannot even step onto Russian soil. I can't see any guards but I don't want to push my luck. This side, just before the gates, are posts marking the border. One side's half green, half red; the other, fierce yellow and brown stripes like the warning markings of a wasp. The signboards tell you that you don't cross into the other-coloured area unless you have a damned good reason and papers to prove it.

So instead, we run for shelter from a sudden shower of sleet into the souvenir shop. It's tiny, cramped, and currently even more full of tourists than tat, but it's a close run thing. For once, though, it's not all trolls and moose. You get bears and Matrioshka dolls as well. There's also some cheap decorative jewellery and some exquisite wood carving and beautifully-dressed dolls. If there's one thing Russia has lots of, it's manual labour. For once, I'm tempted by a tacky souvenir. It's an apparently hand-painted mug. One side and has trolls gambolling in a meadow – then there are the colourful border posts, and on the other side, a family of brown bears. One side of the handle says "Norge" and the other "Россиа". It's twee and contrived but it's somehow appropriate. We're standing here on an anonymous and unremarkable bit of highway except for a purely arbitrary human boundary, so why not mark it with a symbol of the two countries touching.

On the way back, the coach drives up into the most elevated bit of the town, Priest's Hill, giving a panoramic view over the town. It's no Bergen, but I can see why the locals are proud. It's a forbidding place to make a living, and they're only here because of the mine. To survive and even prosper now that's gone is an achievement to be proud of.

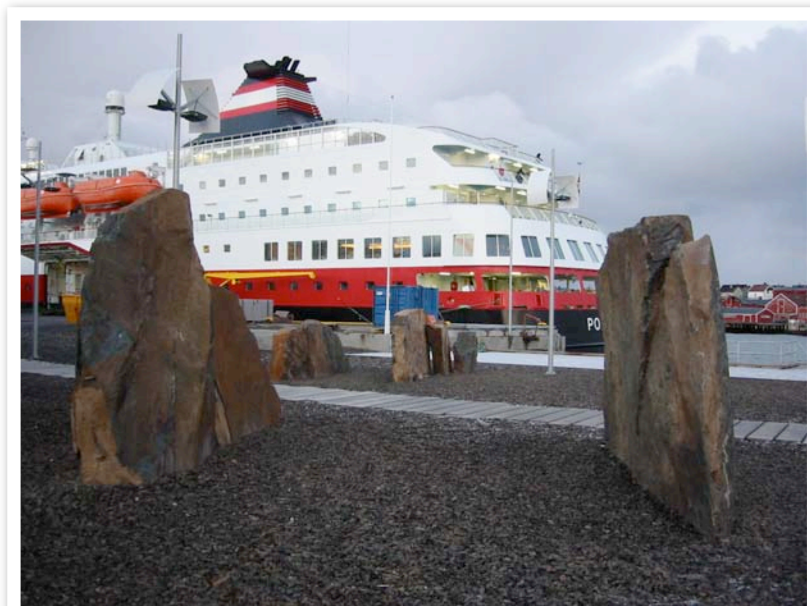
On the way back to the ship, we went past the sports centre again. "This large building on your left is our new sports centre," begins Torbjørn…

Day 8, Friday: Homeward bound

Vardø, Vadsø and Hammerfest

And so the Polarlys reaches the end of its voyage to the top of the world – or at least its inhabited portion – and turns to point its prow towards the balmy South. The last couple of stops have given us a taste of the real North. It's bleak and in places frankly ugly. Our tour guide, Kari, a Norwegian who lives in Ipswich with her English husband, is apologetic. She warned us that the towns of the far north didn't bother much with their appearance. That we'd see no gardens and rubbish like cars just abandoned in people's yards. Well, in fairness, it wasn't that bad.

The tiny fishing ports are unlovely, yes, but they're functional. If you can't grow anything more than grass and moss, there's not much point in trying to cultivate a garden. Still, the towns, though plain, are fairly tidy, and there's little vandalism or litter. Kirkenes itself is far enough south that gardening and farming is possible and it's visibly trying to transform itself from a brutal miners' dormitory into an attractive place to visit and live.

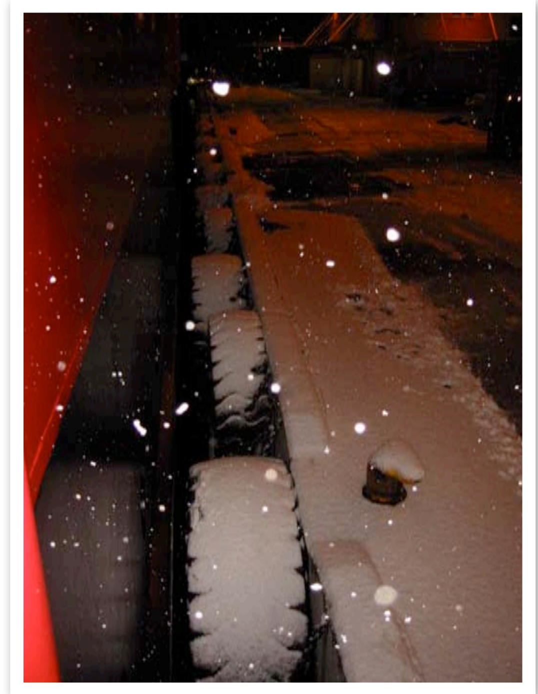


As we sail back, we visit some of the many tiny ports that seem to lie in every inlet. Many of these we passed in the night last time, so I rise early and go ashore at two of them, Vardø and Vadsø. I needn't have bothered: after a few, one set of docks is much like another. What's impressive is how busy they are. Even at 6am, there's a scurry of activity as harbourmen rush to load and unload cargo. We all marvel at the extent of these towns. So far from anywhere else, with no chance of farming, these are substantial towns of two, three thousand people or more, stretching for kilometres along the sheltered shores of the northern-facing fjords. To visit each one, the ship must make a substantial detour, sailing miles inland along fjords and then retracing its path after a bare 3m minute stop. Up here, though, Hurtigruten really is a lifeline; it's still the primary way to get goods in and out.

By mid-morning, the sleet that fell at Kirkenes has turned to snow. In October, it's early but not that unusual. Out at sea, little settles, but we passengers rush ashore to photograph the thin dusting on the ground and on another not-quite-right rock garden. By nightfall, it's settling thickly, and when the ship docks just before dinner, a crowd gathers on the quay. A gaggle of the younger waitresses and chambermaids, all in uniform, run giggling down the gangplank for this winter's first snowball fight, to general delight, although it only lasts five minutes before they have to start preparing for dinner.

As Kari says, it's a true Norwegian scene. A small and less than decorative town's harbour area is transformed by a few inches of snow into a pristine white wonderland. Everyday items like bollards, rolls of cable, heaps of sand and even a delivery van seem somehow magical when iced like a wedding cake.

I stop to chat to Oddbjørn, the ship's passenger liaison. A polite and charming young man,



fluently trilingual and as smooth as you like, he's been charming the many elderly ladies on the trip. All day every day he makes announcements over the ship's PA about sites to be seen, upcoming events and so forth; he prints a daily newsletter, has an inspirational quote of the day in three languages on the noticeboard, prints out newssheets of the

world headlines for English, French, German, American and Spanish readers. He is indefatigable.

But he seems unmoved by the snow, or indeed by the gambolling waitresses. (Personally, my suspicions are that his interests do not lie in that particular direction.) He knows me by now; I'm usually the last one back aboard at every stop, and I surprised him by speaking Norwegian to him as he pointed me towards our first excursion. He gives me a look of almost disappointment as I happily take photos of the snow.

"We don't see this stuff much in England," I protest. "Well, not in my part, anyway. I never saw this much until a few years ago!"

"You have to remember," he says, wearily, "that for the people up here, this now won't go away until maybe May next year. It's no novelty for them."

I cannot argue with this. "But it's still one to me," I respond, "and Lisa and Lia and Sørunn and Siv-Irenn seemed to like it!"

Perhaps his good cheer is just a veil. If so, it's usually impeccably maintained.

* * * * *

Next morning, we stop at Hammerfest, where the snow is now falling thickly and constantly. I didn't see it on the way up, but now, in the swirling white, it's quite lovely. I have come prepared, with a long leather coat with insulated lining, two sweaters, a broad-brimmed hat and a walking stick with an ice-spike. I've experienced several Norwegian winters before.

The main tourist destination here is the Polar Bear Club, as plugged by Kari and all the ship's tour-guides. For a fee, you get to join this society and are rewarded with a certificate and a small polar bear lapel pin. Kari's is special: her bear stands on a fragment of packice, denoting that she joined the special Svalbard chapter. The club's building also has a small museum, which I am happier to pay to see – but there's not a lot to it. A variety of stuffed polar animals and some old-fashioned snow hunting equipment are the bulk of it; myself, I find more interest in the photos of old Hammerfest and their captions.

This town has been a busy one since the 1600s. An English visitor then was clearly impressed: he reports how odd it is to walk the streets of this remote place and hear nine languages being spoken around him. Though there is not much to do here apart from trade, he writes that the locals pass their time by throwing a great many soirées and parties, and that these are just as good as anywhere, with good food, music and company. "I can report," he says, "that the ladies of Hammerfest as quite as lovely as those of Paris or London," and encloses an etching of two local sisters to prove it.

The Polar Bear Club is, to be honest, a bit of a tourist trap, though if you don't join the club the entrance fee is modest. Instead, I set off into town to the other town museum: the war museum.

The Museum of Reconstruction is dedicated to the after-effects of the German occupation. The chap on the counter tells me where to go and what to see, which is very helpful, but perhaps my accent is too good, as he tells me entirely in rapid Norwegian. I catch enough of it to get the gist

and am too chastened and ashamed to ask if there's an English audioguide or anything – which is a pity, because this isn't a tourist place, this is for the locals. Everything's in Norwegian only.

I cope. Just.

Early in the second world war, the Nazis moved into Norway and took it over. Tens of thousands of troops were sent here, many in the far North, where Hitler believed that an Allied re-invasion of Western Europe would start. Apart from sea battles and a few strategic air strikes in the south, he was wrong, but the Nazi expulsion was started from the North by troops from Russia, many of whom paid with their lives. As the Germans retreated south, they lay waste to the country. Every telegraph pole was felled, all laboriously hand-planted by small crews who spent years in the 1860s and 1870s working their way slowly across country, linking even the most distant towns to the nascent network. As the Germans left each town, they razed it to the ground. No buildings were left standing; entire settlements were reduced to the smoking rubble of their foundations. The people up here build in wood; nothing survived. In Kirkenes, the townsfolk took refuge in a deep tunnel in the mine, thousands of people living in a few hundred metres of tunnel into the cold rock. In Hammerfest, it was even worse; there was nowhere to go except into the woods.

When they heard the Germans were coming, people took their most precious belongings and tried to keep them safe in the only available way: they buried them. Whole suites of furniture, prized possessions, the local barber's leather swivel chair, imported from Chicago in 1909; everything was wrapped in tarpaulin and concealed underground, where it stayed for years.

So the whole town is only a little over fifty years old. They all are, up here. Everything had to be rebuilt in the whole north of the country. It goes a long way to explaining why it's so plain and utilitarian: buildings were centrally planned, sometimes prefabbed in units, and thousands of them were thrown up in the space of three or four years.

At first, conditions were very basic. There are reconstructed homes from right after the war, from the late 40s, the early 50s; entire families living in a single room, cooker in one corner, beds and cot in the other, dining table in the middle. Almost complete self-sufficiency was the only way: people made their own clothes, furniture, toys, everything. At this time, Norway was grindingly poor. It was before North Sea Oil and pretty much the only thing that got the ravaged country back on its feet was the Marshall Plan. This was America's great effort to rebuild Europe, and Norway benefited hugely.

After a decade, signs of improvement are coming fast. Families have two or even three

rooms, there is disposable income and magazines start to appear advertising home furnishings and fashion. The contrast here must have been even more extreme than in other parts of Europe; whole Norwegian families went from scratching a living to relative prosperity in ten years. The museum shows the development of a whole new economy, with new Norwegian-language media advertising Norwegian-tailored luxury goods. In 1949, with a new salon built, the barber dug up his chair, and it served for more than fifty more years.

The centre of the building is a tower, and as you descend, photographs show the reconstruction of the town. There are architects' plans – that's one trade that did very well – showing how modular houses could be varied slightly as they were built, or later customized. The same street plan was kept, with new houses put up right where the old ones stood. After fifteen years, you can hardly tell the difference between the before and after pictures. It's amazing and chilling to consider that in between was the smoking empty wasteland shown downstairs.

In 45 minutes, I barely have time to scurry around the whole place, but it was well worth the rush. I stroll along the main street, prosperous and filled with cheerful shoppers. This place has seen great change, but Nietsche was right, although some of his admirers weren't. Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger.

Day 9, Saturday: Northern Christianity

Harstad – Risøyhamn – Sortland – Stokmarknes – Svolvaer – Stamsund – Bodø

What with the schedule of Hurtgruten's many ports of call, some places that we visited in the middle of the night on the way out we now call at in daylight. One of these is the small city of Harstad in South Troms. It lies on the island of Hinnøya, which is the largest island in Norway, but that is not its chief claim to fame. This is, as you might have guessed, another one of those northernmost things – in this case, a church.

Trondenes kirke is a modest stone-built church a short distance outside the town, sitting on a small peninsula next to the sea. Like many ancient holy places, it's a remarkably tranquil and peaceful place with a small tree-filled churchyard. In England, we're lucky enough to have a rich supply of ancient churches and other sites, and a thousand-year-old building isn't a hugely big deal to we Brits. It's probably something of no particular interest or attention to most people, but I personally – even as a staunch atheist – love old churches and holy buildings and have seen more than my fair share of them. I don't claim any particular special knowledge of them or their architecture, but I visit as many as I can whenever I find myself in an area containing them.

It is thus perhaps a little paradoxical that I thus don't find Trondenes church quite as moving or impressive as many of its visitors clearly do. I've explored dozens of Norman churches before, so it's not a hugely special experience to visit one here, where the Normans originated.

This is Norway's northernmost Mediæval stone church, although it's original primacy is now supplanted by much newer structures. It dates from around 1434, replacing two previous churches on the site, which were wooden - the famed Norwegian "stave churches" or *stavkirker*. These were built around stout wooden poles ("staves" or *staver*) sunk into the ground, between which were slotted vertical wooden planks. The style of construction bears a distinct resemblance to Viking shipbuilding techniques, and that's no coincidence – these were Viking buildings.

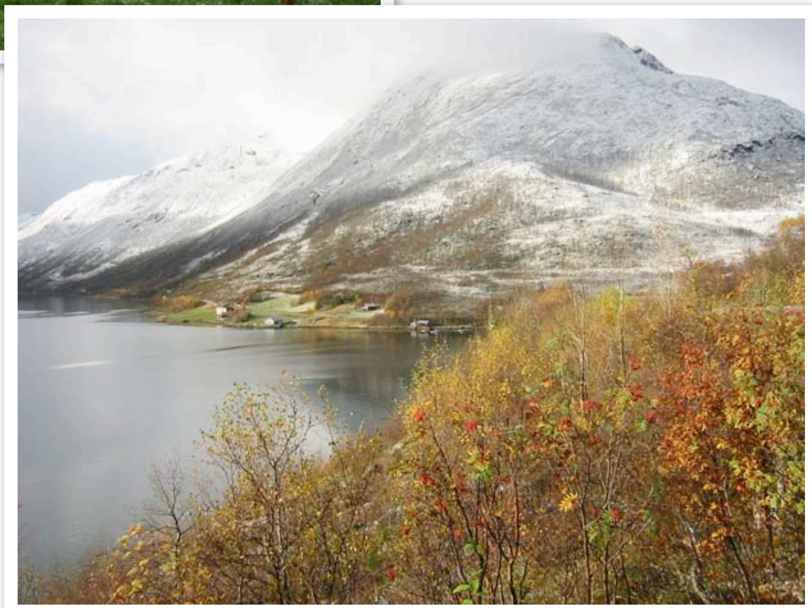
And so is the current church at Trondenes. Considering that it's one of the largest of its time, it's quite small – about 35m long. The exterior is plain and white, but inside, it's quite lush, with paintings and decorated woodcarving – but unfortunately, I didn't get very long to explore the interior. A special service was put on for the visitors from Hurtigruten and since I am no Christian I quietly left, to spend a little while exploring the grounds and then get a head-start on the nearby museum.

The Trondenes Historical Center is a museum dedicated to the area, especially the mediæval period. It's pretty good, and almost all the displays are multilingual – except, to my amusement, the section on witchcraft and witches. There's a terrific array of Viking-period relics and artefacts and lots of information about the religious history of the area – too much to take in during our brief visit.

All too quickly, we're hustled back onto the coach for a lightning tour of Hinnøya. There's a fair bit of it to see – it's over 2,000 square kilometres and contains mountains of more than 1,200m, which is to say that it's around four times to the size of the Isle of Man and its mountains are twice as high. The views are, to say the least, spectacular; we stop high above a fjord to take in the view, at a small hamlet in the hills and even take a brief ferry crossing – complete with free cakes and traditional weak milk-less Norwegian tea.

It seems like a remote, if beautiful, place to live, but this island, 300km north of the Arctic Circle, is well-connected – as well as the ferry, there are bridges to the islands to the north and south and a kilometre-long suspension bridge to the mainland.

The next stop for Polarlys is Stokmarknes on Vesterålen island, where the main attraction is the Hurtigruten Museum. There are two parts to this – a three-storey building attached to a hotel, the ground floor of which contains the museum itself. There's only time to rush around and glance at the exhibits, but it manages to convey an impression of the age of the Coastal Express and its importance to the people of North Norway. The modern ships are to all intents and purposes luxury cruise liners, just ones which happen to also be an important mode of transport for people and a lot of cargo. A few decades earlier, though, before commonplace cheap air travel and North Norway's profusion of

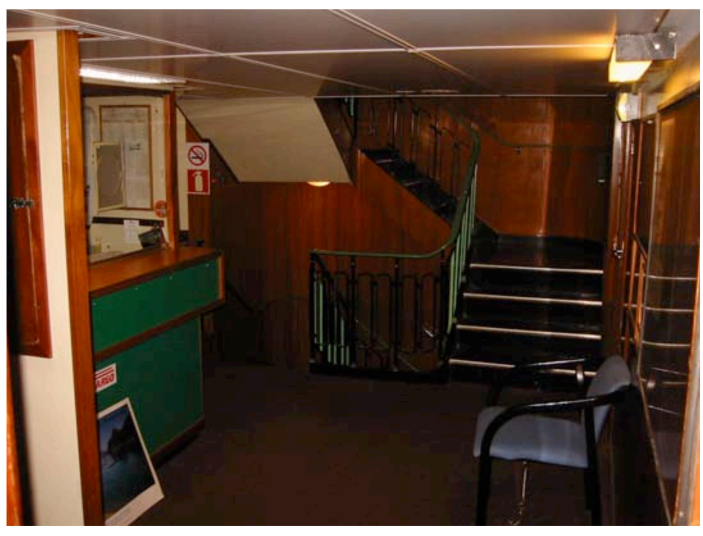


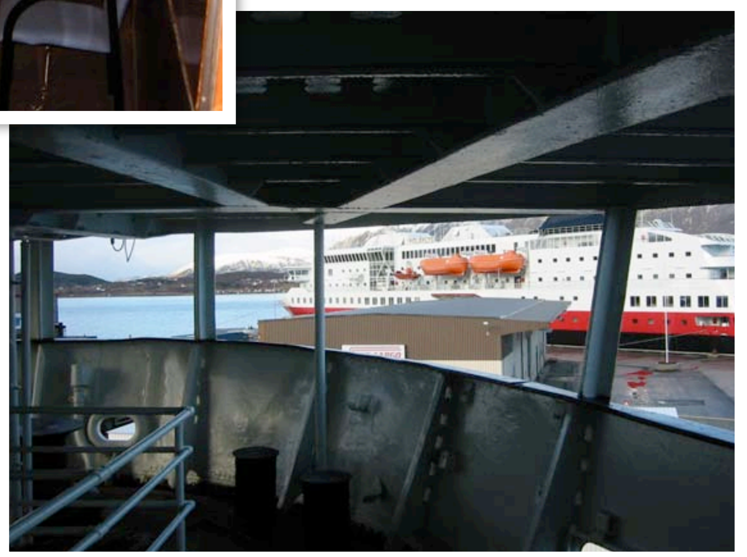
tiny airports, this was the only way to get around. Not so very long ago, these were purely working ships and there wasn't much luxury to them. Even the post-war ships were much smaller, far more cramped inside and offered little luxury. In fact, they remind me of the rather basic vessels of the Isle of Man Steam Packet in the 1980s when I started routinely using that route. Tiny, cramped cabins, a single, rather basic canteen and narrow walkways and stairways offering a constant threat to someone of my 1.88m (6'2") height.

But if you pay a little extra and rush even more, it's not necessary to imagine what the older ships were like. Parked up on land next to the museum and accessible from a covered walkway emerging from a restaurant on the hotel's third floor is Finnmarken, This 1956 vessel only retired in 1993, but the contrast with the modern ships is stark. There's not much resemblance between this 82m ferry boat and the 123m Polarlys, built just three years after Finnmarken retired.

Parts of her are roped off but I happily clamber around the ship, exploring and taking photographs, until I hear the Polarlys' ships' whistle announcing her departure. Fascinating as this it, I don't want to stay here until tomorrow and travel back alone and without luggage, and I have to run back to the ship. At the top of the ramp I find a grinning Oddbjørn, who tells me that he's been waiting. He saw me walking around the stern of the Finnmark and thought "hang on, he's one of ours!"

That was *entirely* too close for comfort.





Day 10, Sunday: Respite

Nesna – Sandnessjoen – Brønnøysund – Rørvik

The Coastal Express has been a tourist route long enough to have its own sayings. One of them I've already mentioned – that of the ten-pound cruise. Another is that "you can sleep on the way south." There are seventy ports of call on the full eleven-day round trip, and the schedule is such that most of the daytime stops at interesting places are on the northbound leg of the route. Indeed, at Kirkenes the ship loses many of its holidaying passengers, who fly from here to southern Norway and thence home again.

Once the ship's turned around and begun to retrace its path, many of the daytime stops are short ones for loading and unloading cargo and there are fewer longer stops at places of special interest. The tour guides now spend more of their time pointing out scenery that can be seen from the decks of the vessel, or even from inside its large comfortable lounges with their panoramic windows.

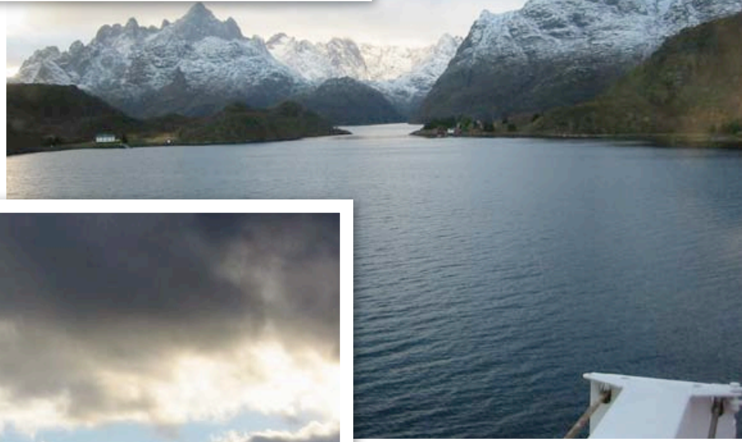
It was during this stage of the trip that I had leisure to write up my notes and impressions of the trip, which also means that there's less to describe of this stage of the trip – but it's not all over yet.

On this quiet Sunday, the Polarlys again crosses the Arctic Circle as we have breakfast. It's a sad moment; from now on, we are back in the boring ordinary quotidian world. The Arctic doesn't fit the preconceptions of ignorant Southerners - it's not a land of ice and snow, floating mountains and big white bears. Still, though, it is a special place and I think we are all sorry to leave it.

After an almost unnoticeable 15 minute stop at the small port of Nesna – after you've seen five dozen small port towns, it really is hard to raise up much enthusiasm for yet another one – we pull in at Sandnessjoen.

Since we're here for an hour and many people haven't been off the boat for a day or so by this time, it's a good time to go for a stroll and explore a little. The snag being that it's Sunday and this is a very small town, so nearly everything's shut. After wondering the length of the main street and admiring the statue of local priest and poet Petter Dass, I browse around a craft shop and a couple of newsagents, looking for recent British newspapers. Down on the quay, I admire the high-speed catamaran ferries that link the small offshore island communities together. It's a little odd to see a fair-sized high-performance boat labelled as a "sea taxi", but around here, that's pretty what they do. I suppose it sounds better than being a sea-bus.

We are all soon back on the ship and taking in the views from the windows. Autumn is the ideal time to make this trip; although you miss the midnight sun, you also avoid the black days of winter, yet still have a chance of witnessing the Northern Lights. And now the season is turning, the hills that were green and brown on the way out are now snow-covered. Indeed, as we leave, we sail past the "Seven Sisters", a cluster of sea-mounts rather more impressive than anything that Sussex has to offer, and Torghatten, the mountain with the hole.



Day 11, Monday: We don't go to god's house any more[1]

Trondheim – Kristiansund – Molde - Ålesund

Trondheim has the distinction of being about the only halt where we stop at about the same time each way. In other words, again, we get in painfully early in the morning. Since last time I was visiting with friends, I didn't get to sightsee around the town much, so again I set out to explore.

It's also one of the only examples of Nynorsk I've ever met out in the field. In Bokmål, the city's name would be rendered as "Trondhjem".

There's a fair bit here that I'd like to see, from the city's ancient docks with their colourful wooden warehouses to the University and perhaps even the Museum of Music. However, the prime attraction of Trondheim is indisputable.

For once, it's not just a "northernmost" something. We're back in Central Norway now. Nonetheless, *Nidarosdomen* – the Nidaros Cathedral – is mightily impressive. Named for the old name of the city (after the mouth – *os* – of *Nidelven*, the River Nid), the cathedral is over a millennium old, though it has been completely gutted by fire and rebuilt several times, the last time being completed in 2001.

Unlike Tromsø's impressive and even beautiful but modernist Iceberg Cathedral, Nidarosdomen is a real, traditional cathedral. It's built of stone, festooned with saints in niches and the interior is cavernous, gloomy and full of dark wood. It is almost too dark to see, in fact, but then it *is* a subarctic autumn. The great rose windows are illuminated enough by the pale sun to shine magnificently, but not enough to photograph.

The interior is a patchwork of styles, as the great structure was built, destroyed, rebuilt and altered over the centuries. Here is the burial place of King, later Saint, Olav Haraldsson, an important site of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. The Catholic archdiocese here was established by Nicholas Breakspeare, later Adrian IV – the only English Pope.

Alas, this time around, we only have two hours in Trondheim, so after a sinfully brief inspection of the remarkably detailed stonework of the exterior, I must leap back on the bus and return to the ship.

Trondheim is Norway's third city, and we drive past bustling shopping streets, pretty residential districts and even pleasantly-regenerated docks, now transformed into modern trendy apartment blocks. I wish I had more time here.

It's a small city, but it's beautiful. Clean, fresh, attractive and big enough to offer diversity. I can imagine living here. For all that it's north of the Hebrides, this former capital feels very much like a metropolitan European city. I hope I will get to visit again. As well as the coastal voyage, I've long yearned to travel the length of Norway by motorbike. Friends have done so and told me spellbinding tales. Perhaps that is a dream that is attainable, one day…

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[1] It's a Chumbawamba song, from *Uneasy Listening*, inspired by Alabama 3's "We don't dance to techno any more".

Day 12, Tuesday: Bergen redux

Torvik – Måloy - Bergen

Finally, the ship heaves to once more at the dock at Bergen. There were two stops in the small hours and a long crossing of a patch of open sea, the Stad, so there really isn't much to see before we are back in Bergen again.

But Bergen is beautiful in the weak autumn sun; in fact, the weather's balmy and mild compared to the Nordlands. Why, I only need a single sweater! We've been extraordinarily lucky with the weather. By some reckonings, Bergen is the rainiest city in Europe, so to get two days of sun at either end of the trip is remarkably fortunate.

Since we've already "done" Bergen at the start of our trip, and it's now all over, we are cast loose. I return to my hotel to drop off my bags then set off to see some of the bits of this city I didn't get to on my previous visits.

One of the single most visible aspects of the city is its mountain, Mount Fløyen, rearing 320m above the city centre. The lower slopes, steep as they are, are covered in roads and houses, connected by *Fløibanen*, Scandinavia's only funicular railway. I expected a clanking nineteenth-century relic, but I was surprised: it's a gleaming modern vehicle, all glass and steel, with barcode-reading gates and automatic doors. It's full of locals, too, especially chattering teenagers. No idle tourist amenity this. Since so much of the train is glass, the views are amazing.

At the top, there's a cluster of restaurants and cafés – several shut so late in the year – and spectacular panoramic views of the city and its surrounding pine-covered mountains.

While reading an information board, I make a startling discovery. A photo taken from the same point at the turn of the nineteenth century shows the mountains as bald. By then, the forests were long gone, felled for fuel and building materials. All the trees I can see, out to the horizon, we planted by hand by a club which set out to beautify the Bergen landscape by re-greening it. It's astonishing. It only took a few decades of people rivalling one another to plant more seedlings to completely re-cover the hills. Now, to walk in the woodlands on the top of the mountain, you would never know.

It's a fitting end to the trip, in a way. For all the whalemeat in the supermarkets and T-shirts about "Intelligent food for intelligent people," the Norwegians care for their environment.

Norway is a staggeringly beautiful country. It does not have jungles or deserts, no, but it's not all mountains and fjords. It is a huge place, rich and varied, with vast tracts of unspoiled landscape – some of the most dramatic on Earth. I'm happy for my association with the place, and whereas my plans of living here someday are now rather more remote than they once were, I can still hope.

You can fly here in under two hours from England and a return ticket on Ryanair can be had for £40 *including tax* if you're lucky. It's worth it.

As their national anthem says, *Ja, vi elsker dette landet*. Yes, we love this country.

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