

Norway

By Suzanne Wright

Like many people, I've come to Norway to see the fjords and, hopefully, catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights.

It's about 7 p.m. and I'm aboard the MS Polarys. An announcement has just come over the PA from the silky-voiced cruise director Nils Eriksson that the "Northern Lights have been spotted at the aft of the ship." I stick my head out of my cabin. The corridor is rapidly filling with my fellow passenger, bundled up—it's a blustery February evening—and marching like purposeful ants to the aft doors on deck five. I grab my coat, pop on my hat, wrap a scarf around my neck and join the procession.

We all crane our necks up to the black sky. A faint grayish arc appears in the distance far above and in front of us, like a skinny version of the Milky Way or a plume of smoke. In truth, it's a bit disappointing after seeing all those brochures of polar light with lurid pink, red and green colorations. There's a collective silence, save for the sound of a few cameras clicking.

Finally, a 60-something British woman says to no one in particular and in the most polite tone, "It's more like the Northern smudge, isn't it?"

A few of us chuckle: she nailed it. We trudge back inside and head to the dining room.

The Northern Lights may be a letdown—we won't see them again during our six-day voyage—but there were numerous compensating factors.

I Can See Russia From Here. After overnighting in Oslo, I took a two-hour flight to Kirkenes, a remote outpost just six miles from the Russian border near the Arctic Circle, where I spend two nights at the Rica Arctic Hotel, which is welcoming and comfortable, if not luxe. Whale carpaccio is listed as a special in the hotel's restaurant, but I don't have the heart to order it.

There's a certain sharp, bleak beauty in the heart of this border country. Just 5,000 hearty souls reside here, with its seasonal extremes of lightness and darkness. Locals use kicksleds as transport, loading groceries into small baskets, some shoppers wear skis into the grocery store. It's charming. The houses, like many in Finland, are painted in rich shades: barn red, gold, slate blue, avocado. The main industries are oil and gas, iron mining and fishing, though tourism has an economic impact. A wide range of winter activities are offered for visitors, including dogsledding and a "king crab safari," both of which I have signed on to try.

Trine Beddari is a Sami native and the manager of BIRK, located in the beautiful Pasvik Valley. She outfits a group of us in warm layers, then leads us out to harness the canines. It's a calamitous scene: the dogs are yapping and yelping, straining on their chains, pacing on top of their individual houses. But once we begin to run, they are silent, which allows

me to better appreciate the iridescent snow as we whoosh rush the hilly land. Afterwards, we unsuit and head to the longhouse, logs blazing atop a grate that runs the length of the room, warming us. Beddari has changed into a multicolored Sami dress and shiny sealskin boots. As the simple, local and delicious lunch is served—reindeer stew and yogurt-like kesam with cloudberry—she tells us more about the customs and folklore of her ancestors.

The following day, I'm off on an arctic safari with Artic Adventure Resorts, named by *National Geographic Traveler* as one of the best trips in the world. We stop briefly at Storskog, the Russian border, which brings to mind the Cold War days of yore; there are soldiers behind the fence. Once we arrive at the company's headquarters, we are told that the boat needs a motor, so we won't be going out for the king crabs. Instead, we are helped into bright orange survival suits and led to the edge of the Barents Sea.

“Just lean back,” says owner Lars-Petter Oie, and I let go. I am floating, my suit puffing up comically around me. Due to the high salt content, I am very buoyant. I have a sense the water is cold—but I can't really feel it. Just behind me a diver is bringing up lunch: several giant crabs, which can span six feet and weigh 26 pounds. The crabs are simply boiled and served with a squeeze of lemon and a sauce of sour cream, mayo, garlic and leeks for dipping. We are given a demonstration of how to eat the crustaceans. The meat is moist, sweet and saline and I gorge myself, washing the morsels down with white table wine. It is certainly the freshest crab I have ever encountered. Later that night, I drop into the Snow Hotel (one of several in colder climes), feeling a bit guilty eating reindeer sausage after feeding the gentle beast frozen moss in the hotel's park.

All Aboard for the Fjords. For more than a century, the Hurtigruten Route—a national transport system—has served as a lifeline for citizens of remote communities, connecting people, mail and supplies to ports along the coastline. Norway has a boggling 15,000 miles of coastline due to its fjords and bays; Hurtigruten's 11 working liners traverse the dramatic 1,250-mile west coast. The ships are at the center of arctic life.

The MS Polarys was built in 1996 and carries up to 737 passengers and 50 vehicles. I board the ship for the six-day southward journey to Bergen. As a working ship, there are 34 stops, though many are just 15 minutes in duration; there are two half-day excursions on this journey; 11 if you are traveling northward. The handsome and well-maintained ship has more than 100 commissioned artworks by coastal Norwegian artists and the décor is tasteful, with the occasional eye-popping effect, like the bar and chairs covered in plasticized fish skin. My small, functional room, with its two beds, desk and bathroom on deck five offers great access for picture-taking but is accompanied by the regular soundtrack of slamming door. Otherwise, the whirring, whining, clanking, scrapping and vibrating are kept to a minimum. There's no entertainment onboard and no spa, though there is a tiny sauna accessible during the day.

Norway has been shaped by running water and moving ice. The Hurtigruten is considered the quintessential voyage, affording passengers an up close, personal view of its poetic, lonesome beauty. The scenery is the main attraction on this cruise and when I

am not on deck, I sit snuggled in my warm cabin, peering out of my window at the passing view of sleepy fishing villages. At 4 p.m., darkness descends like an inky cloak and I take a delicious nap to the ship's rhythmic motion. It is the first of many, many naps that will allow me to put a significant dent in my sleep deficient.

Touring the Towns Along the Way. Hammerfest, the world's northernmost town, prides itself on being the first town in Europe to have electric street lighting. The Germans bombed it savagely in World War II, but today the town is best known for The Royal and Ancient Polar Bear Society, just steps from where we dock. At the museum, you can pay a membership fee to receive a small lapel pin as proof that you made it to this far-flung trading post.

Bombs missed most of Harstad, the largest town in the Vesteralen islands. A deluxe coach and our excellent guide, Harald, squire us to the Trodenes Kirke, a Lutheran church and fortress erected in the 1300s beside the fjord. The sky is a brilliant cornflower blue and the snow drifts are pristine save for the many crooked headstones that mark fallen Soviet soldiers in the cemetery. Inside the gloomy church a short service is conducted for a clutch of visitors by a robed minister. Our next stop is the Adolfskanon, the largest shore-based gun remaining from World War II, where I learn that Barbara is the patron saint of artillery. Finally it's off to the Trondenes Historical Center, a modern complex with dioramas that explain the local history. I am most intrigued by the display of stockfish, dried cod hung over a ladder-like contraption.

If I had to guess, I'd say the average age of the Polarys passenger was 55 or so, though I saw a few young couples, the occasional family and a smattering of singles including one middle-aged woman that said she was inspired to make the trip by the movie *The Golden Compass*. Time moves deliberately on a ship. For the most part the sailing is smooth. The landscape is sharp, the sun shines fitfully, breakfast and lunch buffets and three-course dinners are consumed, perhaps a movie is shown. Because the ship doubles as a ferry, you'll find the odd passenger sleeping in the library. At one point, a co-ed teenage student chorus boards, commuting to a competition. They offer several lively impromptu concerts dressed in ensembles featuring suspenders, stripes and polka dots.

The most magnificent day onboard—the reason we have all come this far—is sailing through the Lofoten and Vesteralen Islands. The captain navigates us through the narrow Raftsund Strait, where the steely waters meet creased mountains covered in snow. The snow-clad granite peaks—some of the world's oldest—dwarf our vessel, their reflection mirrored in the sea which has taken on a ghostly tint at dusk. It's two hours of icy, otherworldly, show-stopping scenery forward, aft, port and starboard, seemingly close enough to touch. It definitely makes up for the Northern “smudge.”

We pulled into Svolvær after nightfall so not much was open. But the amiable William Hakvaag, proprietor of the Loften War Museum, which has a large exhibition of World War II uniforms and artifacts, happily strikes up a conversation and shows me his “Hitler” painting. There's also an art gallery in an old industrial building, with a pricey collection of paintings (the Norwegian kroner slaughters the dollar). Trondheim was

Norway's first capital and the city center is largely intact; the biggest attraction is the Nidaros Cathedral, Scandinavia's finest medieval structure. I oversleep for the excursion. I am loving my bunk.

A storm kicks up at 4 a.m. on the last day of the cruise, lashing the ship. Queasy, I stay mostly prone, alternately reading and keeping my eyes shut, until we disembark in Bergen, Norway's second largest city. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage City, it was founded in 1070. Though many of the medieval buildings were destroyed by fire in the 1700s, the historic wooden warehouses of Bryggen Wharf built by timber barons remain. Then I jump the Floribanen funicular which whisks me to the top of Mount Floyen for a bird's eye view of the city. It is good to be on land again.

After checking into the friendly Hotel Neptun, I walk the cobblestone streets to cozy Femte I Andre Bar in the Strand Hotel adjacent to the fish market, now shuttered. The red-cheeked owner Hans Bru explains that Bergen was once home to 15 distilleries of aquavit ("water of life). We hoist small glasses of the strong, anise-flavored liquid and enjoy its warming effect. Bru beams; he is the perfect host, delighted to share his country's national spirit with a guest. His grin and the syrupy elixir take the chill off a wintry evening. As I walk back under a canopy of night I look up: the sky is smudged with clouds. I think of the witty English lady and hope the rest of her trip was rewarding nonetheless.

If You Go: For general information on the country, log onto www.visitnorway.com/us. For more on Hurtigruten cruises, visit www.hurtigruten.us.