

A herd of reindeer stands in a snowy, hazy landscape. The reindeer have various coat colors, including brown, white, and grey. Some have large, dark antlers. The background is a soft, white glow, suggesting a bright, overcast day or early morning light. Snow-covered trees are visible on the left and right sides of the frame.

The perfect trip **Norway**

Take a winter journey through Arctic Norway in pursuit of the northern lights

WORDS ANTONY HAM | PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP LEE HARVEY

Your trip mapped out

Sail into the Norwegian wilderness where you can hunt for crabs in Jarfjord, go sledding in Karasjok and maybe catch the northern lights along the way

1 HURTIGRUTEN
Best for coastal cruising

Start by taking a Hurtigruten ferry from Tromsø to Kirkenes and take in the dramatic scenery along the way.

2 JARFJORD
Best for catching dinner

King crabs, the world's largest crustacean, abound in Norwegian waters. Join a king crab safari for a closer look – and taste – of this giant.

3 SNOW HOTEL
Best for an unusual sleeping experience

It might be cold but the Kirkenes Snow Hotel will amaze you with its intricately sculptured surroundings. You'll need to wrap up warm!

4 KIRKENES
Best for winter speed

A tranquil landscape of dense forest and remote lakes, the Pasvik River Valley is best explored on an exhilarating snowmobile ride.

5 DOG-SLEDDING
Best for Arctic wilderness

Dog-sledding is the perfect way to travel. Lead a team of huskies deep into the forest, where you can admire the stillness of Norway's interior.

6 KARASJOK
Best for traditional life

The indigenous Sami people have lived in this region for more than 2,500 years. Visit a traditional Sami hut for an insight into their way of life.

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Elusive and unpredictable, the aurora borealis can be difficult to catch sight of. But if you're lucky, you might just see this magical light show.

MAP ILLUSTRATION: TINA ZELLMER

1 HURTIGRUTEN *Best for coastal cruising*



Ferry from Tromsø to Kirkenes takes 39 hours.

To travel from Tromsø to Kirkenes in the warmth of a Hurtigruten passenger ferry is to ease gently into the northern Norwegian wilderness. The jagged ramparts of the mainland and islands unsoiled by human footprints drift past, an endless drama wrought in ice and snow.

Along the route, villages shelter in the deeply fissured shoreline. As the ferry draws near land at night, nothing moves. Moving closer, the welcoming glow of gas-lantern light in home windows beckons. As the boat drifts back to sea, the retreating pinpricks of light along the shore resemble isolated outposts somewhere close to the end of the earth.

That these villages, the world's northernmost inhabited settlements, survive owes much to the Hurtigruten fleet. The boats may possess cruise-ship comforts – bars, a restaurant and open-air Jacuzzi – but their primary purpose is to keep viable Norway's Arctic north.

'Sometimes the Hurtigruten are the only way to get supplies to these villages,' says Kjell Jonassen, captain of the Hurtigruten's MS *Midnatsol*. 'We're the artery that keeps this part of the country alive.'

Captain Jonassen is still awed by the Arctic landscape: 'Even after many years, it is still beautiful to me. I'll never tire of it.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Cabin accommodation in a Hurtigruten for the trip from Tromsø to Kirkenes costs from £267 per person, full board, based on two people sharing (0844 448 7601; hurtigruten.com).



The Hurtigruten's maiden voyage was in 1895 – they have connected the villages to the outside world ever since



2 KING CRAB SAFARI (KIRKENES) *Best for catching dinner*

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 423



Beneath the freezing surface of Jarfjord, east of Kirkenes, the red king crab stakes a strong claim to be Arctic Norway's most unusual inhabitant. A creature of protean ugliness that seems to have emerged not from the gentle waters of a Norwegian fjord but from some Jurassic epic, the king crab and everything about it seems founded on gargantuan economies of scale.

This is the world's largest crustacean and the seven king crabs introduced here from the North Pacific by Russian scientists in 1961 have multiplied at an astonishing rate. Every year, each female king crab gives birth to around 10,000 surviving offspring and there are now 20 million in the Barents Sea alone.

Such figures have alarmed environmentalists, but Lars Petter Øie, who has been diving these waters for more than two decades, is more cautious: 'Even after so many studies, the Norwegian government can't decide whether the crabs are a problem or a resource.'

Lars has plumped for the latter. Undeterred by formidably sub-zero winter temperatures, Lars and his crab safari team regularly dive off the side of an inflatable Zodiac to a depth of 25 metres in search of crabs. They invariably do so accompanied by the audible gasp of the paying customers on board who shuffle around

the boat like a clumsy congregation of penguins, grateful that they won't be asked to leave the relative warmth of their polar suits. After what seems like an eternity, Lars emerges in a chaos of crab legs, pincers and human arms.

'The biggest one I caught weighed 8kg and was almost my height, at around 170cm,' recalls Lars. 'Others have caught crabs that weighed 15kg, and were almost two metres long.'

But size matters little when it comes to eating the crabs at the end of the safari. 'The most important thing is that they're boiled in seawater,' says Lars. 'That way, you can taste where they come from.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

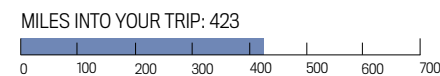
- Arctic Adventure runs four-hour king crab safaris for £136 per person, including lunch and cold-weather clothing (arctic-adventure.no).
- Rica Hotel Kirkenes This place has modern rooms, some with views over the town. You'll appreciate the under-floor heating in the bathrooms in the depths of a Norwegian winter, and there's a good restaurant (from £140; rica.no).
- Kirkenes Snow Hotel (see page 48). ▶

Lars Petter Øie (above and left) has dived for the world's largest crustacean, the red king crab, for over 20 years



3 KIRKENES SNOW HOTEL

Best for an unusual sleeping experience



Coming in out of the Arctic night and into the Kirkenes Snow Hotel is like stepping into a giant igloo. You are hit less with a sense of warmth – it is minus 4°C within – than an awareness of the blue-hued perfection of snow and ice, created by nature and sculpted by man.

Every year in a frenetic three-week burst at the start of winter, Ronny Østrem, a former airline pilot turned co-owner of the hotel, and his team fashion 25 tons of ice and 15,000 cubic metres of snow, working around the clock to be ready for the first guests in mid-December. It's a Herculean task and, says Ronny, a race against time: 'The rooms shrink by about one centimetre every day as the snow compresses, so the hotel gets smaller and smaller until it starts to melt in the spring. Then we have to wait for winter to start all over again.'

Where the Kirkenes Snow Hotel differs from others of its kind is in its personal touch – the sense of one man's dream crafted by hand, and the meal that he prepares to send you to your bed. Guests cook their own reindeer sausages over the open fire, then sit back to a warming main course of baked salmon and potatoes.

But there's no postponing the main event: bedtime. It's an experience that wavers between the novel (sleeping surrounded by ice, albeit in a polar-strength sleeping bag) and an exercise in endurance. 'One of my guests said that sleeping here made him understand how a bird feels when they emerge from the egg,' Ronny recalls. 'I prefer to think of it as a Kinder Egg. Either way, one night is usually enough.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

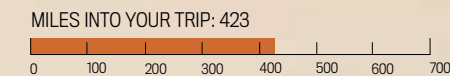
- Kirkenes Snow Hotel costs £236 per person, including transfer from Kirkenes, a three-course meal, breakfast, sauna and a sleeping bag (kirkenessnowhotel.com).

Enjoy a chilled drink at the bar (top left) at the Kirkenes Snow Hotel, before warming up around an open fire and retiring to your room (bottom right), complete with artworks made of snow and ice



4 SNOWMOBILING (KIRKENES)

Best for winter speed



Cut through the snow in the Pasvik River Valley, home to wolves, wolverines, brown bears, elk and relatively rare birds including the Siberian jay, pine grosbeak and redpoll

A narrow finger of land surrounded by Finland and Russia, the Pasvik River Valley is one of the most quietly beautiful of all northern Norwegian territories. Quiet, that is, until snowmobiles cut a swathe through the snow.

The dense fir-and-spruce foliage, blanketed in snow and interspersed with tundra and remote lakes, stretches for more than 60 miles south of Kirkenes, the westernmost extent of the great Taiga forests that reach far into Siberia. Throughout, secluded wooden cabins inhabit the frozen lakeshores and forest clearings, telling in microcosm the story of this once-disputed frontier territory. In the mid-19th century the Norwegian government, eager to colonise with people a terrain it owned in name only, offered free land here to impoverished farmers from the south. In an apt metaphor for Norway's transformation into one of Europe's wealthiest nations, the spartan huts that they built now serve as comfortable country cabins for the well-to-do of Kirkenes.

Although seemingly at odds with the tranquillity of the surroundings,

snowmobiles make a visit deep into the valley's heart possible, with stop-offs at some of the cabins en route. Travelling at up to 60 miles an hour, they are a rare combination of exhilaration and solitude: the wind rush of cold night air with the prospect of a glimpse of the northern lights; the sun-kissed snow of twilight; and the ringing silence of the remotest country when the engine is switched off.

A popular perception of snowmobiling as a pursuit restricted to the young is dismissed by Hans Hatle, a former Norwegian army officer who trained British soldiers in winter warfare and who now leads snowmobiling safaris: 'Age is no limitation. Our oldest snowmobiler was 93, and he was an excellent driver. More important than a person's age is to remember to bring your driver's licence, lower your shoulders and have fun.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Barents Safari (barentssafari.no) and Radius Kirkenes (radius-kirkenes.com) run three-hour snowmobile safaris starting at £158 per person.
- Rica Kirkenes Hotel (see page 47).
- Kirkenes Snow Hotel (see page 48). ▶

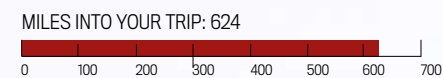


Sven Engholm, 11-time winner of Europe's longest dog sled race, and his Alaskan huskies can guide you through the hush of the Norwegian interior



5 DOG-SLEDDING (KARASJOK)

Best for Arctic wilderness



4-5 hours by hire car from Kirkenes.

Silence and stillness, darkness and light: in the northern Norwegian interior, life is reduced to its most elemental.

Deep in a boreal forest of birch and pine just outside Karasjok, Sven Engholm is a man who has found his place in life, far from the world and its noise. The founder and 11-time winner of Europe's longest dog-sled race, the 600-mile-long Finnmarksløpet, and a veteran of Alaska's epic Iditerod, Sven is perfect company for mushing a team of huskies into a land yet to be tamed by humankind.

'This is not a job for me,' he says. 'I just love it out here. It's clean, pure. It's the exotic light, the darkness and the great

plateau. This is one of the last great wilderness regions left in Europe.'

In the strange blue half-light of the forest, sounds are invariably few – the panting of the dogs, the coarse scrape of the sled across the ice, the crunch of heavy boots in the snow – but they seem amplified in the mute landscape.

It is possible to simply immerse yourself in this silent world, to just sit back on the sled and enjoy the ride. But mushing your own dog team is central to the whole experience – after careful instruction from, and under the watchful eye of Sven. The quiet thrill of standing tall behind the sled while you rush through the snow – at such

moments Sven's love for 'the freedom of being in wilderness' makes perfect sense.

'Travelling with huskies,' he says, 'you feel you can be a part of nature, work with the dogs and have a relationship with them. Once infected with the mushing virus, there is no cure. There is only trail.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Four- to five-hour husky trips with Engholm Adventure Tours cost £137 per person (engholm.no).
- **Engholm Husky Lodge** Owned by Engholm Adventure Tours, the lodge's comfortable cabins are in the forest, four miles outside Karasjok. They come complete with hand-crafted reindeer-antler coat hangers and hanging slate tables (from £240). ▶

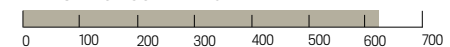
In her traditional family winter home, a teepee-shaped Sami hut (or lavvu), the mother of tour guide Nils Mikkel Somby prepares a reindeer stew



6 SAMI (KARASJOK)

Best for traditional life

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 624



30-minute drive west of Karasjok.

While many in northern Norway explore the wilderness for fun, the Sami, the Arctic north's most enduring human presence, do so as a way of life.

Around 60,000 Sami – approximately half the world's Sami population – live in northern Norway. Although most lead modern lives indistinguishable from non-Sami Norwegians', a few Sami families still inhabit the high country in winter, herding reindeer above the Iešjokha River.

This is the domain of Nils Mikkel Somby, who has taken it upon himself to initiate non-Sami visitors into traditional Sami ways. After collecting them from the main road, he transports his guests in a small, covered sled towed behind his snowmobile up into the rolling hill country and into another world. There, atop hills haired by thin birch forest, are

the prodigious antlers of his family's reindeer herd, more than 2,000 strong. They move silhouetted against a land white as white, bathed in gentle light as the sun traces a low arc across the horizon. Here, Nils lets the landscape and the Sami life within it speak for themselves.

Later, he takes his guests to the family's winter home, a teepee-shaped traditional Sami hut or lavvu. While his mother serves a warming reindeer stew, Nils wonders about the Sami's future: 'The modern world needs so much, things like roads and resources from remote places. And with so many distractions for young Sami, it is difficult to keep our culture alive for the next generation. Fifty years from now, I hope that there will still be Sami up here. But I am not so sure.'

And yet, throughout their history, the Sami have always faced down seemingly insurmountable challenges, from a harsh and changing climate to the hostility of non-Sami peoples. Whatever the future may hold, moments spent here with Nils and his family feel like a fleeting gift, a rare opportunity to pick up the unbroken thread to a past stretching back over 2,500 years.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- A half-day Sami excursion with Nils Mikkel Somby including lunch, costs £113 (nilsmikkelsomby@dcpost.no).
- Engholm Husky Lodge (see page 51). ►

Nils Mikkel Somby with his reindeer herd (above). His family's winter cabin (below) is in Karasjok, Sami Norway's capital



WITNESSING THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

The aurora borealis might be the greatest show on earth. Like smoke signals from infinity, these shape-shifters in the Arctic night sky have the quality of some half-imagined fairytale.

Seeing the northern lights for the first time is a thing of wonder. One moment, the ethereal white or green curtains of light with a streak of violet take on forms that evoke the ancient mythology of the north – a palace of lights, a Sami fire in the wilderness, the prow of a Viking ship. Then they dissolve into nothing, only to form as if by stealth on a different horizon, dancing across the sky in the shape of a sea horse or crescent moon.


The scientific explanation – streams of charged particles from sun storms interacting with electrons in nitrogen and oxygen atoms in the earth's upper atmosphere – does little to demystify the experience. Elusive even when staring straight at it, the aurora follows no discernible schedule. The most important

element is a cloud-free sky. And, statistically, 10pm to 11pm is the optimum viewing time.

While making this feature, I saw the lights through the plane window en route to Tromsø, and later from the deck of a Hurtigruten. But they didn't reappear. To see the northern lights requires patience and good fortune.

'Aurora is a diva,' says Knut Hansvold, a Tromsø native. 'But when she shows up, she is the most unforgettable of beautiful ladies.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The northern lights are visible in northern Norway from October to March. 



Anthony Ham has contributed to more than 20 Lonely Planet guides, including *Lonely Planet Norway*, *Madrid*, *Morocco* and *Tunisia*.

NEXT MONTH'S PERFECT TRIP... **EGYPT**