



# The World's

# Most Beautiful



# Voyage

## SAILING THE NORWEGIAN COAST WITH HURTIGRUTEN

BY EMMA ENEBAK

PHOTOS (FROM LEFT) TOMMY SIMONSEN/HURTIGRUTEN, MYKOLA KSENOFONTOV/EXPLORE TRØNDELAGE, EMMA ENEBAK, DIRK MOLLMANN/ADOBE

**It** was an unusually warm October morning in Kirkenes, Norway, when I rounded the corner of the city's harbor to spot the regal MS Polarlys ship gleaming back at me—the vessel which would be my home for the next six days as I journeyed down the Norwegian coast with Hurtigruten. Docked in the icy mountain town of Kirkenes, our journey was beginning at the very tip of the country, over 250 miles above the Arctic Circle and just a 10-minute drive from both the Russian and Finnish borders. All three of these borders intersect in the nearby town of Pasvik, a remote corner from which—as locals like to joke—you can celebrate the new year three separate times in one night.

I had spent the previous night at Snowhotel Kirkenes, where I went dogsledding, fed reindeer, held Alaskan husky puppies, wandered through wondrous sculptures of ice and snow and—to my dismay—ate reindeer meat smothered in cloudberry (hopefully not an acquaintance of the reindeer I had fed just hours earlier). It would be fair to say I had acquired the full Arctic experience in just one short day in Kirkenes. But the MS Polarlys had plenty more in store for me across the vast fjords of the polar north.

Over the next six days, I would experience over 1,000 miles of Norway's diverse coastline aboard the south-bound Coastal Express, Hurtigruten's signature voyage that has been in operation since 1893. My journey fell within the window of Hurtigruten's Northern Lights Promise, a pact that guarantees passengers a free voyage if they do not experience the northern lights on any 11-day voyage between Sept. 20 and March 31. This is just how certain the chance of experiencing the swirling glow of the aurora borealis is in Arctic Norway—especially on the open water of the Barents Sea, where they are rumored to glow as bright and clear as a portrait.

As I boarded the Polarlys, I knew fully well I was about to experience some of the most breathtaking landscapes on Earth. What I didn't know was that I would simultaneously fall in love with the steady pace of everyday Norwegian life, which charmed me more and more with each crystal fjord and remote fishing village we sailed through.

## A Maritime Marvel: The MS Polarlys

The modern, Arctic-inspired MS Polarlys is named after the Norwegian word for “polar light,” a natural phenomenon that frequently paints the northern sky throughout the ship’s winter voyages. Refurbished in 2016, the Polarlys reflects a state of convenience and luxury that makes it hard to believe you’re coursing through the open sea. Passengers can choose from four different dining experiences, enjoy cocktails at the panoramic lounge and bar, sweat at the fitness center and sauna, relax in the two outdoor hot tubs and take in sweeping Arctic views from the 360-degree outdoor observation deck. All the while, the coastal experience team maintains a constant presence, offering insightful lectures and presentations that immerse guests deeper into the wonder of Norway.



HAMMERFEST KIRKE

MUSEUM OF RECONSTRUCTION

Royal and Ancient Polar Bear Society. Why polar bear tracks? The city, while devoid of any real polar bears, long ago adopted the great white bear as its official mascot and heraldic crest, an ode to its reputation as the world’s northernmost town. Visitors to the town can commemorate their experience by joining the Polar Bear Society, which will grant them a certificate, a polar bear pin and a lifetime membership providing access to the club’s yearly meetings. This solidarity with the polar bear is not just a charming symbol, but a vivid metaphor—mirroring the strength and willpower needed to thrive in Arctic climates.

I followed the life-size tracks to the tall, triangular church in Hammerfest’s city center, which was designed to look like a fish drying rack, and later to the rocky beach where the Fuglenes lighthouse lies. On the remote shoreline, two historic buildings are now preserved as museums—a small barracks and red boathouse erected during World War II reconstruction. In tandem, the three structures combine to tell the story of Norway’s tumultuous yet steady recovery from the war years—a story that has been well-preserved among the small Arctic towns of northern Norway.

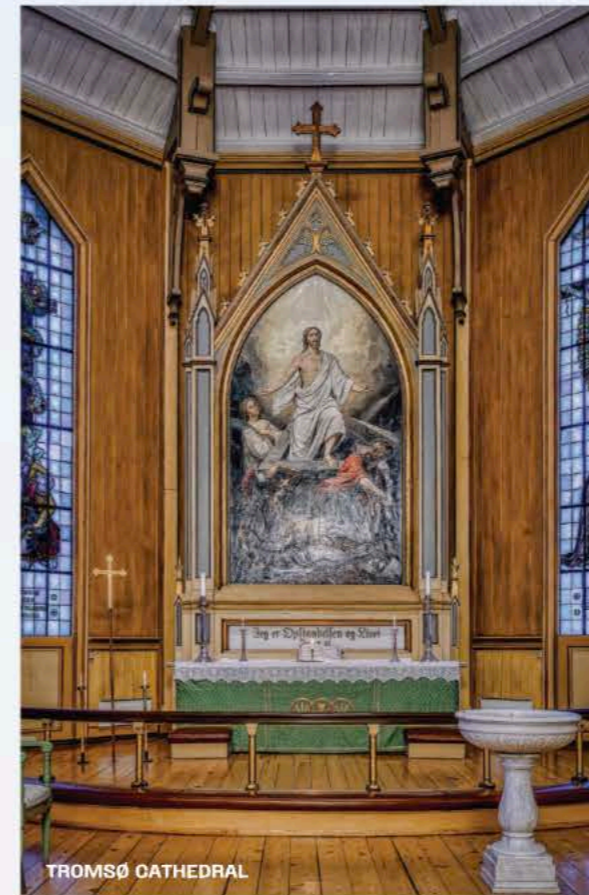
### ON BOARD—THE TASTE OF SÁMI TRADITION

The menus at Hurtigruten’s main on-board restaurant Torget are not just curated by expertly trained chefs, but also reflect the culinary traditions of each new region the ship sails through. Preceding our visit to Hammerfest, our dinner menu offered an authentic dive into traditional Arctic ingredients and cuisine, from cured reindeer to oven-baked trout to cloudberry cheesecake. Perhaps the most adventurous offering was a starter dish called *Bidos*, a traditional stew of Scandinavia’s Indigenous Sámi people, prepared by boiling reindeer meat and bones for several hours to create a nutritious broth.

### ▲ 70°39’N – THE TOP OF EUROPE

**ON BOARD—A HOME AWAY FROM HOME** When I entered my cozy cabin on the fifth floor of the Polarlys, I was delighted to find an expansive window on the far wall, offering a glimpse of the mountainous fjord we were sailing through. On my bed, I also found a sign outlining Hurtigruten’s Green Stay concept, which gives guests the choice to reuse their towels and bedsheets in order to conserve energy, water and detergents. Guests can hang the sign on their door to signal they wish to opt into this initiative, and in return, Hurtigruten will donate 5 NOK (about 50¢) to partnering sustainable projects for every sign seen. This is just one small example of Hurtigruten’s daily commitment to environmental sustainability, a central value of its business model. In perhaps its most ambitious mission, titled Sea Zero, Hurtigruten aims to develop a ship with zero-emission propulsion by 2030.

**HAMMERFEST, 11 A.M.** It is difficult to lose your way in the northern town of Hammerfest, as a linear trail of polar bear tracks paint the pedestrian walkways, guiding visitors to notable sites in town, including the towering Mount Salen, the UNESCO-listed Geodetic Arc and the



TROMSØ CATHEDRAL

### ▲ 69°40’N – MIDNIGHT MAGIC IN TROMSØ

**TROMSØ, 12 A.M.** At midnight we docked in Tromsø, Norway’s largest city above the Arctic Circle and a thriving destination for nightlife. Home to the Arctic University of Norway, the largest educational institution in northern Norway and the sixth largest in the country, the city has a substantial student population, and conveniently—as our coastal experience team noted—the most bars per capita of any city in Norway. When we stepped off the Polarlys at midnight, I wasn’t surprised to find the city buzzing with activity, with many students trailing through the streets as they hopped between bars and open-air food stands.

One by one, our group filed inside the wooden yellow cathedral, a neo-Gothic-style structure built in 1861 with timber from nearby Målselv. We were greeted by a trio of local musicians—a soprano, flutist and pianist who perform regular midnight concerts for the Hurtigruten passengers passing through Tromsø. The program featured a mix of classical music, religious hymns and Norwegian folk tunes, comforting with familiar melodies like Tchaikovsky’s “Autumn Song” and enlightening with Scandinavian traditions like “*Bruremarsj fra Sørfold*,” a Norwegian wedding march, and “*Gammal Fäbodpsalm*,” a Swedish folk tune. The acoustics were chillingly clear

PHOTOS (FROM LEFT) BERGKINDER/JUNSLASH, NORD NORGE, MICHAEL KNÖBLJADOBE

and powerful, reverberating from the cathedral’s tall ceilings to fill the sacred space around us. When we finally returned to the Polarlys at 1:30 a.m., the melodies still swirled in my head, lulling me to sleep alongside the steady waves of the Barents Sea.

### ▲ 68°48’N – INTO MEDIEVAL NORWAY

**HARSTAD, 8 A.M.** The sun had not yet risen when docked in the sleepy town of Harstad at 8 a.m., nestled along the eastern coastline of Norway’s largest island, Hinnøya. Our tour bus led us up into the verdant hills of the scenic town, passing by a collection of colorful family homes on our way to Trondenes Kirke, the northernmost medieval church in the world.

The solitary stone church stands perched at the edge of the fjord, guarding over the idyllic mountains and island of Hinnøya. As our group filed inside, I hung back to take in the early sunrise, which was painting the placid fjord in shades of pink and orange. Standing in the silent, serene churchyard, it felt as if I might be the only person on the planet. I was starting to realize that this is a common feeling when it comes to the tranquil scenery of northern Norway. Inside the stone sanctuary, we were greeted by magnificent wood-carved altarpieces depicting various Catholic saints. Our local guide, Chester, shared that these sculptural pieces were purchased through the trade of stockfish, or dried codfish, which was one of the most valuable forms of currency on the island of Hinnøya in the Middle Ages.

“These fjords are full of fish,” Chester later noted, as we drove into the mountain town of Sortland, home to Hinnøya’s highest mountain peak, Møysalen. “If we stopped the bus right now and went down to the water, we would have our dinner in 15 minutes.” He was hardly exaggerating, as there is no license or fee associated with fishing in Norway. Anywhere with saltwater is free range, a lawful embodiment of Norway’s *friluftsliv* philosophy, which holds that nature belongs to everyone.

“A good reason to live up in the north,” Chester added, which I couldn’t help but agree with. I watched locals cast their lines in the open air of Sortland’s dramatic valleys, across which an abundance of horses and lambs roamed freely due to the island’s lack of natural predators. I imagined it was the very same scene one would have encountered in medieval Hinnøya 800 years ago, its grassy valleys practically untouched by the ravages of time.

### ▲ 68°21’N – POLAR FAIRY TALES

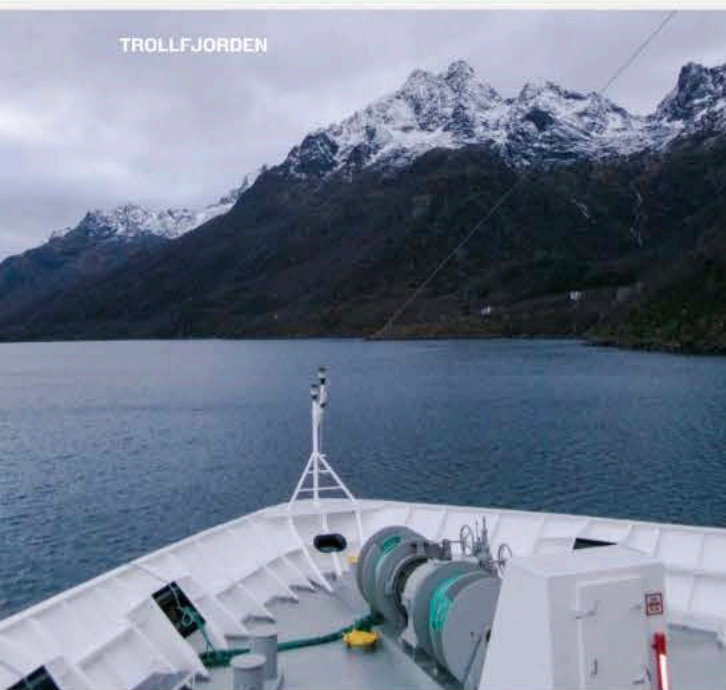
#### ON BOARD—THE MYSTICAL TROLLFJORDEN

“Our captain has alerted us that due to the favorable weather conditions, we will commence with our passage

to Trollfjorden,” the coastal experience team alerted us through the ship’s speakers. I was huddled with a large group of passengers at the bow of the boat, the biting wind turning my fingertips pink. Our ship was cruising through the calm waters of Raftsundet, a 15-mile-long strait that is bisected by the magical Trollfjorden. All around us, jagged mountains rose up from the clear blue water, scraping the clouds with their snow-capped peaks.

That morning, Hurtigruten served us piping hot gløgg in signature Trollfjorden mugs, and shared with us the stories behind the natural marvel. Deeply intertwined with Norse mythology, the narrow blue fjord is fabled to be the resting place of two mischievous trolls, who will wake from their slumber in 1,000 years’ time. Tightly framed on either side by towering mountain peaks, the 328-foot-wide fjord happens to be just large enough for the MS Polarlys to enter through.

The tricky maneuver requires perfect weather conditions, which we were lucky enough to receive that afternoon. Despite the mild but chilly wind, the reflective waters stood placid as our captain began the journey into the fjord, cutting west from the Raftsundet strait. I marveled from the bow as we sailed by the 3,000-foot-tall peaks of Trolltinden and Blåfjellet, which came so close, we could nearly touch them. It was easy to see why this scenery has been the inspiration behind countless works of art and literature, its Arctic landscape so dramatic it was almost otherworldly. Once inside the fjord, where a series of gentle waterfalls cascaded down the mountainsides, our captain made a tight 180-degree



TROLLFJORDEN

turn on the spot, exiting back the way we came. No trolls awoke on our short passage through the mystical landmark, but it surely still felt like a fairy tale.

**SVOLVÆR, 6:30 P.M.** A short bus ride from our port stop in Svolvær brought us to Hov Hestegård, a seaside horse stable and farm with views of the towering Mount Hov. It was already dark when we arrived, a notion which made me just the slightest bit nervous—were we really going to ride horses across the beach in the dark?

But once I was saddled up on Mist, an even-tempered, white Icelandic horse, and was led onto the beach, I realized that it wasn’t dark at all. The sky was lit by the clear northern stars and the vivid pink and green of the northern lights, which were glowing brighter by the second. Our guide led us across the white sandy beach and upward into the rugged hills above the shoreline, riding directly into the light of the luminous sky. All was silent save the steadily crashing waves of the sea and the clack of hooves on the mountainside.

Our guide was from southern Germany and had moved to Lofoten last year in search of new scenery. When she accepted a job at the stables, she knew she had found a home for herself.

“I’ve already been working here a year, but I’ll never tire of riding at night,” she told me, as we wined back down toward the greenish glow of the Norwegian Sea. “It feels like you’re not of this world.” Holding Mist’s horseshoe back on the Polarlys that night (which had been gifted to me as a souvenir), I felt there was no better way I could’ve experienced the beauty of Lofoten.

#### ▲ 66°30’N – CROSSING THE LINE

**ARCTIC CIRCLE, 7:30 A.M.** Our group huddled on the open-air deck of the Polarlys’ seventh floor, gazing out at the icy Norwegian Sea as we drew nearer to a momentous occasion—the crossing of the Arctic Circle. The invisible line that splits Norway in two is marked by a silver globe on the small islet of Vikingen, which shines vibrantly against the snowy white mountains rising from the sea. Now crossing south of it, we were officially saying goodbye to the unforgettable Arctic stretch of our journey.

As we passed the solitary globe, our captain and crew whistled, cheered, popped bottles of champagne and passed around spoonfuls of Norwegian cod liver oil in celebration.

#### ▲ 63°25’N – HVETEBOLLER IN TRONDHEIM

**TRONDHEIM, 6:30 A.M.** The city of Trondheim was mostly asleep when I stepped off the Polarlys the next morning, but the twinkling lights strung above its colorful streets were already glowing bright. I ducked into



HOV HESTEGÅRD



KYSTEN

I chose the butter-fried snow crab from Dragøy, which was finished in a dill and chive emulsion and truffle seaweed.

#### ▲ 60°23’N – DISEMBARKING THE MS POLARLYS

**BERGEN, 2:45 P.M.** I internally waved goodbye to the MS Polarlys as I wheeled my suitcase toward Hurtigruten’s shuttles, destined for Bergen’s city center. The disembarkation process was quick and seamless, requiring nothing more than a swipe of each passenger’s key card, as we shuffled toward the luggage cart where our bags were already waiting for us. Walking away from the marvelous ship, I felt uneasy upon the solid brick ground, my body and mind still accustomed to the steady rise and fall of the Norwegian Sea. I knew it would take a few days to shake the feeling. But one feeling I hoped I wouldn’t shake was the Arctic chill that embraced me from the Polarlys’ windswept bow, where I sailed through visions of glowing green skies and red-painted seaside villages—a haven where the pace of life is slow and the appreciation for nature, deep. On my way to Bergen’s city center, I tucked my key card into my pocket to bring with me on the long journey home—a small but symbolic token of my stint aboard the world’s most beautiful voyage.

To read the story in full, visit [sofn.com/Hurtigruten](https://sofn.com/Hurtigruten). ▼

Dromedar Kaffebar, a popular Scandinavian coffee chain, and took in the early morning smell of rising bread and roasting espresso beans. Of the many things Trondheim is known for, its designation as a foodie heaven is, perhaps, most prominent—crowded with an abundance of cozy cafes, microbreweries and Michelin-starred restaurants. The city holds a large-scale food festival each August and has played host to both the World Cheese Awards in 2023 and the Bocuse d’Or Europe in 2024, gathering some of the world’s top culinary names in its charming city square.

With this in mind, I set off in search of breakfast, landing on a gourmet bakery in the city center called Onkel Svanhild. Known for its decadent cakes and authentic Scandinavian *hveteboller*, or sweet wheat buns, the bakery is a favorite in Trondheim, and was already attracting traffic that early Monday morning. In an indecisive moment, I ordered both the rhubarb sticky bun and the vanilla custard bun, two Norwegian specialties.

Clumsily balancing a latte and two pastries in my hands, I walked toward Nidaros Cathedral, an architectural wonder that rises high above the city’s treetops. Built over the burial site of King Olav II in the year 1070 and completed in 1300, the ornate, gothic-style cathedral is a true masterpiece, and also happens to be Norway’s national sanctuary. The building’s melodic bells began to ring as I relaxed in its courtyard, savoring the sweet taste of rhubarb and vanilla—a brief immersion into the sensory dreamscape of Trondheim.



BERGEN

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW) LEFT: EMMA ENEBAK (3); MARTIN HÅNDLYKKEN/VISIT NORWAY