



## Cruise Like a Viking

Silent, snow-caked scenery and Arctic adventure await along Norway's coast

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIT BERNARDI

Typically, I would never abandon a plate piled high with fresh king crabs pulled from Arctic waters just hours earlier. But when the captain broadcasts an important announcement into the dining room of my cruise ship, I grab my parka and head topside.

Stiff, cold winds blow over the MS Finnmarken's rollicking bow, now crowded with those hoping to spot the Northern Lights. Scanning the heavens above Norway, we wait. Then a faint, shimmering white smudge emerges from the darkness. Neon-green streaks stretch and cascade, drawing squiggly lines across the blackboard sky.

Seeing the Northern Lights is one

of many ways to experience local color while aboard one of the 11 ships of the Norwegian transport corporation Hurtigruten AS. Operating as both a tourism company and lifeline to the coast of Norway, the vessels stop at the ports of 34 coastal towns, tiny fishing villages and remote polar outposts.

My ship, the MS Finnmarken, transports 11,000 tons of goods

and 1,000 people, including crew, commuters and cruise passengers (who sleep in 628 beds in comfortable cabins). In port, cars drive into the cavernous hold and forklifts load pallets of construction materials, household supplies and food from fjord farms to keep the coastline running.

### NATURAL BEAUTY AND BOUNTY

There are no casinos, theaters or spas aboard this ship and even the Wi-Fi is spotty. Instead, your entertainment is Norway's stunning scenery: 2,500 coast-hugging, nautical miles.

Passengers look up from their novels to see barren tundrascapes, gritty industrial ports and snow-smothered houses painted in cloudberry yellows, evergreens, currant reds and glacier ice blues. Time lapses as the ship passes a coast of silvery fjords, icy shores and impressive mountains that look like encroaching storm fronts.

While taking in the serene scenery, enjoy the cruise ship's elaborate meals. The communities we sail past supply fresh ingredients for the seasonal Norwegian dishes filling Hurtigruten's buffets. Count on herring, fish soup, cheeses and decadent cakes such as custard-meringue *kvæfjordkake*. Winter entrées may include Arctic char, cod, lamb and reindeer raised by the indigenous Sami people.

"Rudolph doesn't like to be in the oven too long," jokes executive chef Kurt Gjertsen, when explaining how he cooks the reindeer dish.

### ONSHORE ADVENTURES

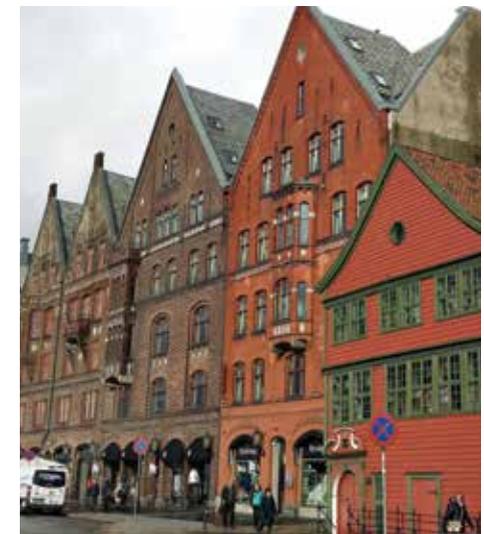
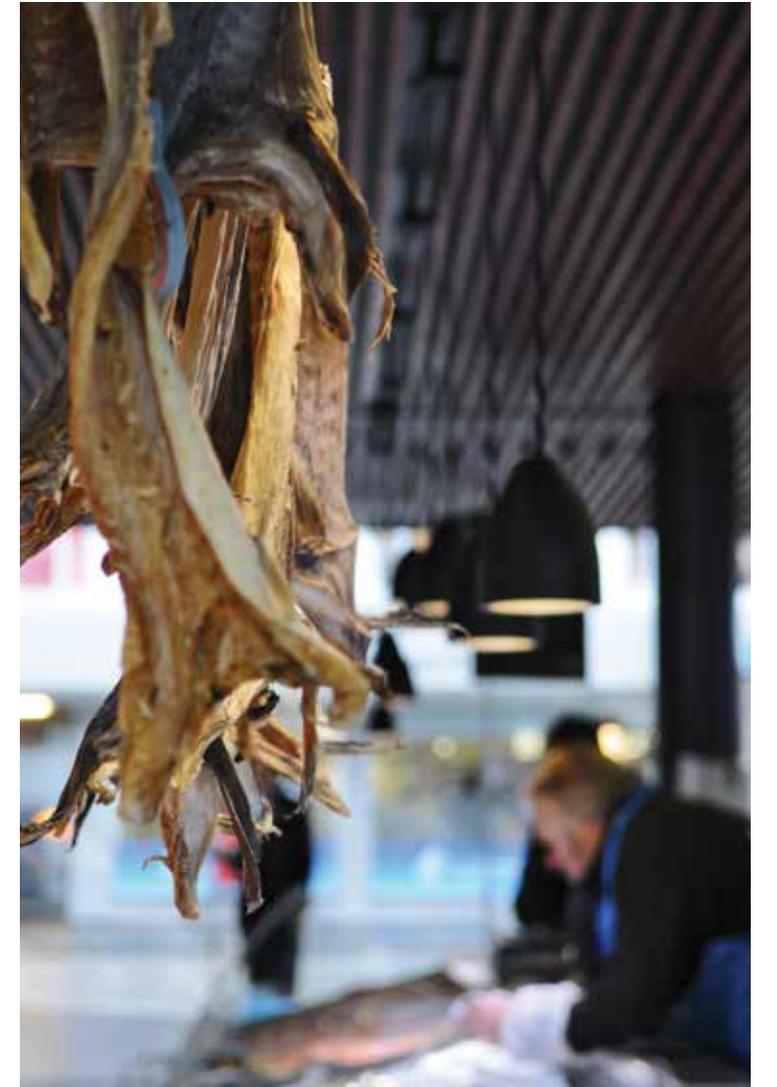
Port excursions focus on Norwegian history, culture and polar adventures. The options are endless.

Guided tours through Bergen, the country's second-most populous city, explore the UNESCO-listed medieval wharf buildings of the Hanseatic League. Architectural walks Ålesund take visitors through the art nouveau buildings and the town's Atlanterhavsparken, the Atlantic »



While they vary in frequency and intensity, the Aurora Borealis around the Arctic Circle (66° North) is most visible October through March. Hurtigruten guarantees the Northern Lights will make an appearance on all winter, 12-day Classic Roundtrip Coastal Voyages through February 2016 or you get your booking fees back.

877-301-3117; hurtigruten.com



**Opposite page:** Ålesund is Norway's largest fishing town, surrounded by fjords and the snow-capped peaks of the Sunnmøre Alps. Top, Bergen's Torget Fish Market sells fresh catch of the day and traditional *klippfisk* (dried and salted cod), one of Norway's oldest exports.

**Bergen's historic Hanseatic League** wharf warehouses were the center of Norway's 13th-century cod trade.



**Enjoy traditional Norwegian** foods, including waffles, brown cheese and reindeer casserole, at Baklandet Skysdsstation café in Trondheim.



**Gurlie, owner of** Baklandet Skysdsstation in one of Trondheim's oldest buildings, welcomes visitors to her café for traditional Norwegian fare. Above right, a wall mural in the industrial port town of Bodø pictures a giant troll, a common character in Norse mythology.

Sea-Park aquarium.

On the Lofoten Islands, guests dine and watch folk dancing during a Viking feast re-enactment. And in Trondheim, a vibrant university town founded by Vikings in 997 A.D., the homemade waffles and creamy hot cocoa served at the cozy Baklandet Skysdsstation café are more than worth the trek.

Above the Arctic Circle, I earn bragging rights from my fellow travelers for braving the cold (temps average in the low 20s most of the winter) at North Cape (71° North), billed as Europe's northernmost point. And while dog sledding in the frozen wilderness of Kvaløya, an island in the Norwegian municipality of Tromsø, I imagine

myself an intrepid adventurer, coasting over the wintry landscape.

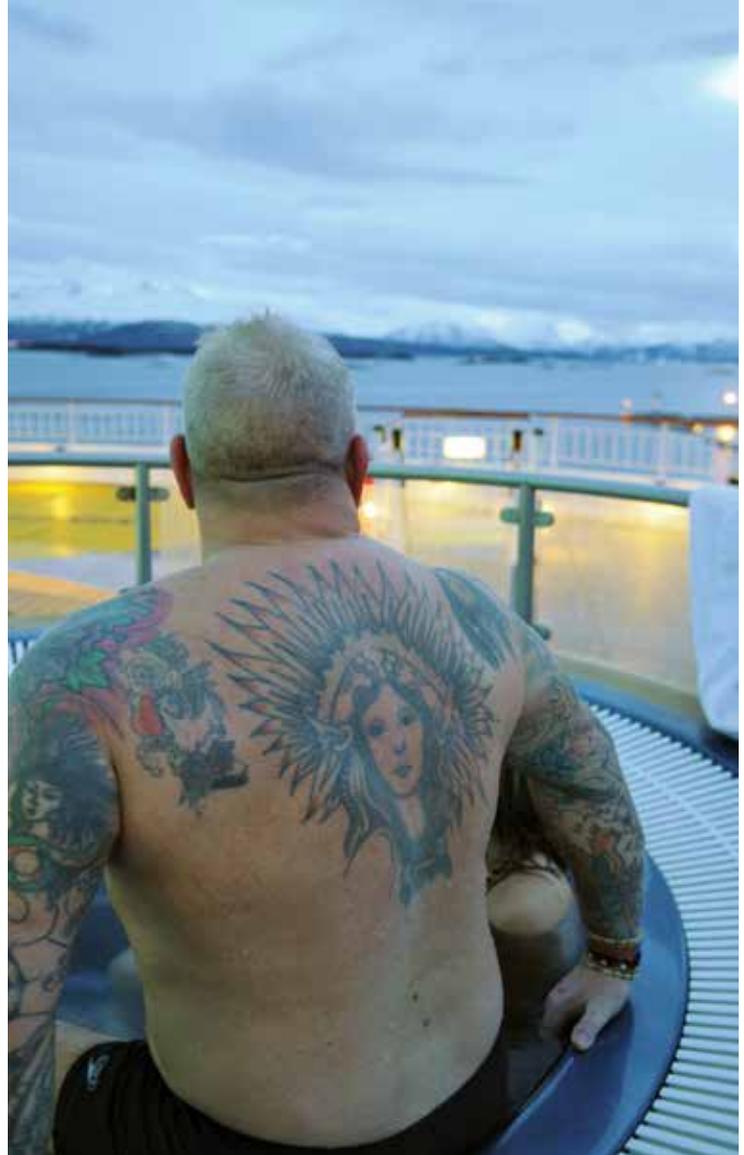
Our last port, Kirkenes, a town in the far northeast, nudges the Russian border and is rich in iron ore, World War II history and king crab. From Langfjord's frigid waters, we pull crabs with claws that span 3 feet long, immediately boil them over an open fire and feast in a log cabin. Then, like a pack of growling beasts, our snowmobiles prowl across windswept, blank-white fields as we hunt the Northern Lights.

#### **NATURE'S FIREWORKS**

Vikings believed the celestial lights were armor and shields of valkyries, warrior maidens of Norse mythology.

We now know that the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, is caused by gaseous plasma explosions on the sun's surface. Energized particles are released, creating solar winds that travel through space, sometimes colliding into the Earth's atmosphere. "Energy is released in the form of intense green, red and sometimes blue dazzling lights best seen in dark, cloudless night skies," says Jim Spann, a heliophysicist at the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala.

And that's exactly what I experience my last night in Norway, while staying at the Kirkenes Snowhotel in Bjørnevattn. Lynx, fox, reindeer, wolverines and the occasional brown bears »



Cruisers aboard **Hurtigruten** ships enjoy shore excursions such as the King Crab Safari, left. Or they simply watch Arctic scenery float by as they soak in the outdoor heated pools, right.

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— HELIOPHYSICIST JIM SPANN

roam the transcontinental Siberian taiga, or boreal forest, that surrounds the unique hotel. My room, one of 20 giant domes made of snow and ice, keeps the temperature at 28 degrees, just a smidge warmer than the 14-degree cold outside.

“You’re in the animal kingdom now,” says my guide, Astrid Lund, as she demonstrates how to zip up my mummy sleeping bag to stay safe and warm.

While I’m perhaps safer within my walls of snow, it’s outside where I want to be. The Northern Lights sparkle in the skies above, a miraculous display of color and light, more than worth the journey to this remote outpost and a night sleeping in a snow cave.

Watching the display, it’s easy to imagine Viking warriors doing the same thing hundreds of years ago, feeling the same awe for this vast, frigid, wild world. ●