



PHOTO: KOLBJORN DAHLE

Everyone should know how to find Polaris in the night sky. Locate Ursa Major, align the two ‘pointers’, Merak and Dubhe, and follow their line upwards. There it is: the still centre of the revolving constellations, a dependable guide for navigators on land and sea.

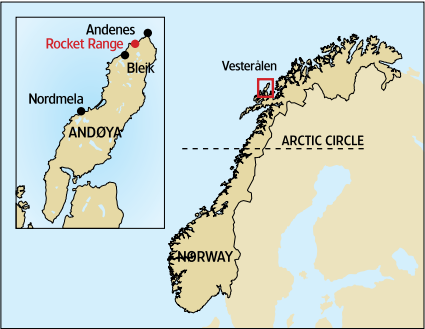
The North Star doesn’t just point towards the top of the world. If you measure its elevation you know your latitude. If you also know the latitude of your destination, you’ve got a fair chance of finding it. Along with a luck, prayer and judgement, navigators made do with little more than this for thousands of years.

To a modern seaman used to push-button accuracy, such ancient wisdom might seem a little theoretical. What is not theoretical is the pain you get in the back of your neck when you seek out Polaris at close to 70° North. It is so high it seems almost directly

overhead. You have to be careful not to fall over – which I nearly did, on the waterfront at Andenes, as it finally sank in that I was standing very close indeed to the top of the world.

People come here every year to stand and gaze upwards, and on a clear night in winter it’s not just the stars that command their attention. Positioned at the northern tip of the island of Andøya, 300km (nearly 200 miles) above the Arctic Circle, the peaceful fishing port of Andenes has a front row seat at the greatest light show on earth – the Aurora Borealis.

“The town is perfectly positioned for the northern lights,” explains Kolbjorn Dahle. “That is why we are here.” By ‘we’ he means the Andøya Rocket Range, a research establishment just outside Andenes that sends up ‘sounding rockets’ for commercial clients, including NASA, to investigate the upper atmosphere. “It was set up for aurora research,” he explains. Over 1,000 rockets have been launched from the low-lying site since it was established 45 years ago. The associated ALOMAR atmospheric observatory sits atop the nearby peak of Ramnan, 376m (1,234ft) above sea level, transmitting radar and its eerie green and red LIDAR (light detecting and ranging) beams vertically skywards. “It means this is the only place in the world where you can take atmospheric measurements with rockets, LIDARs and radar at the same time,” says Dahle. ⇒



Sitting on top of the world

for eagles, whales and the wonders of the heavens, this arctic outpost is never out of season

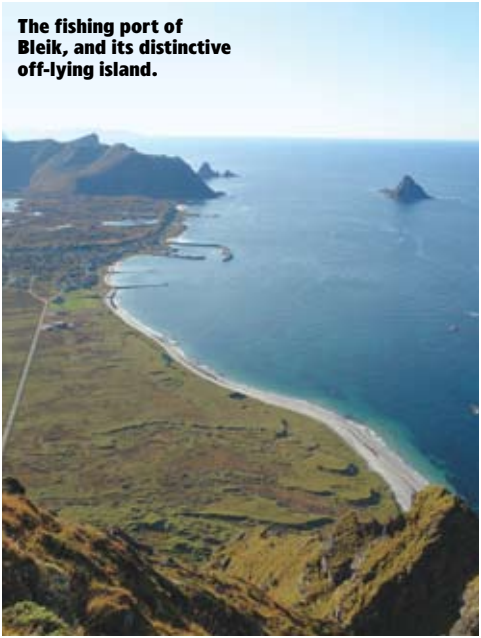
words & photos alan harper



Andenes from the top of Royken. Main picture: the aurora.



Andenes town,
with Royken
rising beyond.



The fishing port of
Bleik, and its distinctive
off-lying island.

BLUE PERIOD

Dahle was born in Andenes and spent 20 years in the air force before returning to the island. “Whenever you come back to Andøya you remember why you live here,” he says. “It’s the smell of the air when you get off the plane – fresh and salty. The shops still close. Even when the weather is bad – storms and hurricanes – it’s amazing.”

And what about the winters – two months of 24-hour darkness? “You don’t miss the sun,” he insists. “And it’s not really dark in the daytime.” An accomplished photographer, he shows me a picture taken on a clear ‘day’ in December. The sky is liquid blue, like an autumn twilight – but with snow. “I call it the ‘blue period’,” he says. “It is beautiful.”

That clear Arctic air does seem to pull the mainland closer. The views are phenomenal, both from the observatory and from neighbouring Royken, 468m (1,535ft). Mountains directly across Andfjorden look about five miles away – in fact the fjord is

30km (18 miles) wide – and the snow-clad peaks disappear over the hard northern horizon like a giant army on the march. In doing so they show the curvature of the earth – it’s tempting to imagine you can actually see it.

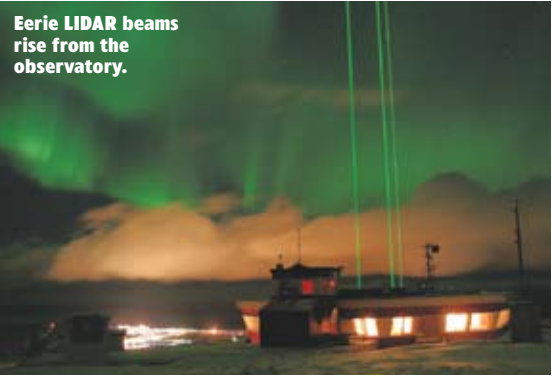
The island of Andøya marks the northern extremity of Vesterålen, a rugged, heavily glaciated archipelago that extends up from Lofoten (see *Zephyros* 1, 2006) off Norway’s Arctic coast. It measures 50km (about 31 miles) from north to south, with a permanent population of just over 5,000 – half of whom live in Andenes – and it is not just the drama of the winter sky that attracts increasing numbers of tourists. Birdwatchers come for the whooper swans and sea eagles, fishermen come for trout and salmon in the inland lakes and rivers. The mountains offer excellent hiking and unsurpassed views. There are three marshland nature reserves, and coastal excursion boats take visitors off in search of seals and puffins.

MODEL VILLAGE

But most summer visitors come for just one thing: to see the sperm whales. “They go out to Bleiksdjupta,” says deputy harbourmaster Odd Mevold, unrolling a chart in the first-floor harbour office. “It’s like an underwater bay, where the whales come to feed.” The chart shows a steep drop about 12 nautical miles offshore, where the soundings plunge from 100m to 1,300m. This is the closest approach of the continental shelf, and the big Hvalsafari trawler makes the one-hour trip to the feeding grounds every day between May 25 and September 15. Whale sightings are ⇒



The Rocket Range,
just outside town.



Eerie LIDAR beams
rise from the
observatory.



Looking down on
the observatory
from Royken.

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Andenes from the lighthouse, looking south. Left: town scenes.



Fishing boats in the old harbour at Andenes.

Bleik, nestling beneath the 430m Durrmålshaugen ridge.

guaranteed – if you don't see one, the next trip is free.

Mevold has seen a few whales in his time, though mostly from the bridge of a cargo ship in the Southern Ocean. He also served aboard the famous Hurtigruten ferries, which run the length of Norway's west coast. While ferries and fishing boats provide most of the traffic in Andenes, there is a small local fleet of pleasure craft, and also, during the summer, increasing numbers of visiting sailboats. "They are usually on their way to Tromsø and the North Cape," he says.

From the top of Andenes lighthouse – an imposing, red-painted, cast iron structure dating from the mid-19th century – Mevold shows me the breakwaters and the old railway line, and outlines the plans for future expansion of the port. But I am distracted by the startling number of low-lying, unmarked, offshore rocks, which would surely make the place a forbidding prospect for the navigator.

"It is a tricky harbour to enter," he

concedes. "The buoyage changes from one entrance to the other. And yes, there are a lot of rocks – but most visiting yachts come during the summer, when we have 24-hour daylight."

The white wooden houses of Andenes lie beneath our feet like a model village. In the east, the mountains of the mainland loom sheer above the sea, while to the south Andøya's own peaks stand like islands within an island, rising out of a flat, low-lying plain of peat. It is a surreal landscape, and reminds me yet again that this is some of the most far-flung terrain on the planet, seemingly as far as it is possible to get from the cares of the wider world.

COLD WARRIORS

Yet for nearly 40 years this extraordinary island was at the forefront of global geopolitics, as Cold War brinkmanship was acted out in the skies and oceans of the Arctic Circle. From the peaks above the rocket range, the long runway and low buildings of Andenes airport are clearly

visible to the east, and although the little Widerøe commuter planes hop over from the mainland several times a day, this is a NATO air base, constructed in 1952 as a defence against Soviet bombers attacking from the north.

"It was built along with bases at Bodø and Bardfoss, on the mainland, as the front line," explains Colonel Christian Schönfeldt, the base commander. "The idea was to hold the Soviets off until the Americans and Canadians arrived." The fighters are long gone, but Andøya is still host to 333 Squadron's six P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft. They were designed for submarine-hunting – the long tail prong can detect magnetic fields below the surface, while sonar buoys dropped into the water listen for threshing propellers – but nowadays they're as likely to be spotting Russian trawlers as Russian subs.

"In the Cold War the idea was to track every submarine and 'hand it on' to the next NATO platform," says Schönfeldt. "Now we might be looking for algae blooms or oil spills, reporting fish dumping, or surveying sea ice." The squadron also helps with Coastguard search and rescue. Every aircraft carries an air-droppable liferaft and survival kit.

The air force Orions are a constant ⇒



An air force P-3 Orion returns to base.

life in the front line

Andøya and the USSR

Colonel Christian Schönfeldt's Cold War was actually hotter than most people's, thanks to one notorious incident, little known outside aviation circles, that could easily have ended in disaster.

In 1987, he was mission commander aboard a 333 Squadron Orion patrolling over the Barents Sea, when a Soviet air force Su-27 'Flanker' approached the Norwegian aircraft for a closer look. This was not unusual, but this particular pilot seemed uncommonly aggressive, coming dangerously close then slipping underneath the lumbering patrol aircraft, before pulling up suddenly into one of its propellers. One blade tip pierced the Orion's fuselage, just missing its startled occupants. In fact the only casualty was the aeroplane's humble vacuum cleaner.

"It's a good war story, I suppose," smiles Schönfeldt. "But it was frightening at the time. The fuselage decompressed, but the worst thing was the vibration from the damaged propeller." Both vacuum cleaner and shattered propeller blade are now prize exhibits in the squadron's 'black museum'.

Amazingly, the Soviet pilot, Vasily Tsymbal, made it home with one of his fighter's tail fins sliced through by the Orion's prop. He was reportedly awarded the Order of the Red Star



shortly afterwards. The Soviet government, meanwhile, apologised to Norway.

Serious as that incident was, it pales compared with the Andøya rocket in 1995 which could have started World War 3. The Soviets had been told of the impending launch, but the message hadn't filtered down to their radar operators, who thought it was a submarine-launched missile. "Someone hadn't done their job," says Kolbjørn Dahle. "The radar guys should have pressed the button, but they waited for higher authorisation."

It soon became apparent that the rocket wasn't heading towards Russia. But the next day's papers were full of pictures of Boris Yeltsin with his launch command briefcase.



Sheep graze near Stave, on the western shore of Andøya. Right: the road south.



Wooden racks at Nordmela, for (below left) wind-drying fish.

finding whale on the menu in a premier whale-watching centre is like tucking into elephant at a tsavo game lodge

feature of the skies above Andøya, taking off on long patrols over the ocean, or inscribing wide circuits on training flights. The steady hum of their turboprop engines and tubby profile gives them a friendlier demeanour than most military aircraft – although one young pilot, Lt Bjorn Kveli, told me that they were powerful and surprisingly responsive, which must be reassuring when you're flying up a fjord



with a sheer rock face on each side. “It handles like a Porsche,” he smiled.

SCIENCE FICTION

Night fell on my last day in Andenes, and an Orion droned overhead as I headed along the coast road. I wondered if it was the young lieutenant. I wanted to get away from town, beyond the glare of the street lights, to a place where the October sky was truly dark.

After a few kilometres I pulled off the road, onto a rough track, and stopped. The night was still, the silence faintly underlined by a distant murmur of engines from the air base. The sky overhead was awash with stars – including Polaris, I noted, still uncomfortably high – while in the north the smoky presence of the aurora played mysteriously over the town, like an illuminated, animated cloud.

Kolbjorn Dahle had explained what it meant. The red light, I knew, indicated the presence of nitrogen high in the upper atmosphere. Green denoted oxygen. He had also explained the purpose of the green LIDARs behind me, lancing upwards into the night from the mountain top, in search of photons and ozone.

But, I realised, I didn't really want to know the science. This was more like science fiction. The observatory's eerie beams of light looked like an attempt to communicate with that ghostly northern glow. Which, in a sense, is exactly what they are. *///*

arctic cuisine

Whale meat again

Finding whale on the menu in one of the world's premier whale-watching centres might seem like tucking into elephant steak at a Tsavo game lodge, but they've been hunting whales off Norway for over a thousand years, and old habits die hard.

Of course it won't be a majestic blue, sperm or humpback nestling alongside your seasonal vegetables, but a slice of the (relatively) diminutive and (relatively) plentiful minke.

Like Kolbjorn Dahle, restaurateur Dag Lund left and then returned to his native island, and like Odd Mevold it was the merchant navy that took him away. He has been back in Andenes for more than 30 years, and has two restaurants – one open all year, and a seasonal one, with rooms, on the waterfront.

“We get the military in winter, and tourists in summer,” he confirms. “They come from all over the world.” He does well with Norwegian dishes, many of them traditional to the north of the country and based on the local staple, dried cod – lutefisk, boknafisk and a particularly delicious stockfish soup – and alongside the calamari and scallops on the list of starters is ‘cognac-marinated whalemeat’. This is thin slices of minke, dried, smoked and salted, served with cranberries and a little feta cheese. With buttered toast and a robust glass of red it proved rich and flavourful – a sort of Arctic carpaccio.

The most popular dish on the menu, however, is steak: minke steak, served with pepper sauce, onions and vegetables. “It's our best seller,” confirms the proprietor. He acknowledges the potential for controversy. In a back-handed compliment to the notorious director of the Sea Shepherd environmental organisation, which violently opposes whaling, this signature dish of Lund's Lysthuset Bistro has a singular name: the ‘Bloody Watson’.