

Magnetic north

THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO EXPERIENCE THE ALLURING ARCTIC WILDERNESS OF NORWAY'S FAR NORTH - FROM THE COMMANDING COMFORT OF A WELL-FOUND SHIP

WORDS ALAN HARPER

▶ Cruising in high latitudes is like entering a different realm. The human world is left behind and the natural world takes over. Venture further and even nature seems to recede, until you are left with something primal – just sea and sky, as if the Earth was suddenly very old, or very young. Yachtsmen come to these latitudes for the adventure, artists for the elemental drama and the light. Those of a mystical bent are drawn for reasons they can't always explain.

In northern Norway one place has come to symbolise this complex combination of desolation and spirituality – a place put on the map by a 16th-century Englishman, and associated ever since with storms, sea battles and exploration. The Norwegians call it Nordkapp.

There are many ways to get there, but whether you choose to travel by the ghostly light of the *aurora borealis*, or with the midnight sun dazzling on the horizon, there ▶

Spectacular Svolvær, Hurtigruten ferry port and birthplace of master landscape painter Gunnar Berg.

is really only one way that I could seriously recommend. The Hurtigruten line has 11 comfortable ships, which run to a metronomic fortnightly timetable that would put Mussolini's railways to shame. You can join a ship at any of the ports en route, but each two-week voyage technically begins and ends in Bergen, latitude 60°N, with the ship turning for home at Kirkenes, close to the Russian border, after an outbound trip of 1,330 nautical miles that includes no fewer than 33 stops.

Mine was to be an Arctic adventure, so I joined the motor ship *Midnatsol* in Bodø, 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle, as forklift trucks busily carted pallets in and out of her hold and passengers drifted up the gangplank to check in. At 16,000 gross tons, she's as much a cruise ship as a ferry – observing the approach of our far-flung ports of call from the upper deck, more than 20 metres above the water, felt more like arriving by helicopter than by boat.

The first *hurtigruten* vessels – it simply means 'express route' – were steamers a fraction of the size of *Midnatsol* and her sisters, which made sightseeing excursions into the dramatic confines of the famous Trollfjord relatively straightforward. It's a narrow inlet that leads nearly two miles into the heart of the Lofoten island of Austvågøy, with sides of sheer, glaciated rock and a deep pool at the end reflecting tall, pyramid peaks. Incredibly, Trollfjord is still on the itinerary for Hurtigruten cruises, provided it's not too windy. The entrance is only 100 metres wide, which concentrates the mind of the captain – *Midnatsol* is 136 metres long and 21.5 metres in the beam. There is only one place to turn around, close to the end, where the ship must swivel on her own axis, bow and stern seemingly in danger of scraping the rock walls. "There is about 25 metres on each side," smiles *Midnatsol*'s Captain Roy Pedersen, but from on board it looks a lot less. It's like negotiating the tightest of marinas in your Windy, but with pontoons

Not meant for big ships: nosing gingerly into the Trollfjord. Right: the awe-inspiring mass of the mighty North Cape.



ON BRIGHT DAYS THE HORIZON HAS A CRISP, HARD EDGE AND SUCH IS THE CLARITY OF THE ATMOSPHERE THAT DISTANT ISLANDS SEEM CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH

made of solid rock and no fenders. You can't fend a ship off with a boathook, either.

After the drama of Trollfjord, it was a surprise to discover that the more gentle topography of Raftsundet, the sound between Austvågøy and Hinøya, is almost as narrow – and so shallow that the suction of the ship's hull in the confines of the channel as we swept past at 15 knots caused the water to recede from the shore, as if she were a narrowboat in an English canal.

Pedersen, a youthful 46, hails from Tromsø. After a seagoing career aboard tankers he joined coastal shipping line

TFDS 12 years ago, which merged in 2006 with OFDS to form today's Hurtigruten company. "I prefer the passenger ships," he says, surveying the sun-dappled sea ahead – his home waters. "I certainly can't complain in the summer time. In winter it's different, of course. It can be challenging. But then you get the Northern Lights, and the passengers love that."

It's the mixture of passengers and cargo that makes Hurtigruten special, Pedersen feels. "We take cars and pallets to small villages – ten or 20 years ago this was the only way to reach them. It's part of our history."

Visibility in these high latitudes can be breathtaking. On bright days the horizon has a crisp, hard edge and such is the clarity of the atmosphere that distant islands seem close enough to touch. Leaving Tromsø well behind, we emerged from Grottsund into open water between Vannøy and the mainland. An island far off to the north revealed itself as we cleared the land, every detail of its craggy cliffs picked out in sunlight and shadow: "Fugloya," said Pedersen, adjusting the range rings on the radar. "Twenty-six miles away."

Radar, and the lack of it, proved the downfall of the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* in 1943. She left her moorings at the German naval base in Altafjord on Christmas evening and headed out into an Arctic gale, never to return. The shores of the narrow Stjærnsund channel and the islands of Silda



From the top: the statue marking the entrance to Svolvær; Capt Pedersen and safety officer Camilla Smedegaard on *Midnatsol*'s bridge; Honningsvåg; and a glimpse of the midnight sun from latitude 70°N. Below: enjoying an on-board Arctic jacuzzi.



and Sorøy, so clear in the midnight sun of June, would have been but dim outlines for her crew in the depths of winter as she reached the sea. She was searching for an allied convoy, but steamed straight into a trap. Within 24 hours she was a flaming hulk and went down in 280 metres of water, taking nearly 2,000 men with her.

While in the perpetual gloom of winter the *aurora borealis* might be bright enough to navigate by, in the summer months the quality of the Arctic light has long been a source of inspiration to artists. The Lofoten group of painters, active at the end of the 19th century, rejected the safe 'Sunday painting' traditions of Norway's Romantic movement and insisted on working outdoors. And it shows. Though trained in European art schools, particularly in Germany, many of them actually came from northern Norway and returned to the land of their birth to create some of the most arresting and dramatic landscapes of the era. Their work is powerfully represented in the permanent collection of the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø (www.nnkm.no). Canvases by Otto Sinden, Adelsteen Normann and Gunnar Berg, in particular, provide a lesson in how to look at the landscape and appreciate the light. Some of them are huge.

Berg was born in Svolvær, now a Hurtigruten port of call, and apart from development around the waterfront, its narrow, rock-strewn harbour and looming backdrop of Lofoten peaks have not materially changed since he braved the

Right: Mehamn, as seen from the upper deck of *Midnatsol*. Below: sculpture atop the Nordkapp. Bottom: examples of Viking boatbuilding at Vadsø's modest museum.



elements with his easel. These far-flung harbours barely show up on the chart, but they have grown up grittily independent, refusing to hide in the shadows of the bigger towns. Tromsø might have the toppled-domino architecture of its hard-to-miss Polaria museum, as well as a superb art gallery. Bodø may boast the elegant Nordland Museum, dedicated to Lofoten life since Viking times and recounting in harrowing detail the German destruction of the town in 1940 (www.nordlandmuseet.no). But the small fishing settlements seem determined to tell their own story. Svolvær itself has a famous and hard-to-find little museum dedicated to the not insignificant part it played in World War 2 (www.lofotekrigsmus.no). At Vadsø, a shed opposite the ferry wharf overseen by a solitary Englishman celebrates local traditions of boatbuilding, with several beautiful examples from the early 20th century that look like miniature Viking longships. Suspended from the roof is a



SUCH A NAME LENDS THE PLACE A MYTHIC WEIGHT. IT HAS A SYMBOLISM THAT DRAWS NORWEGIANS IN THEIR THOUSANDS

replica of the airship *Norge*'s gondola, commemorating the island's brief period in the international limelight, in 1926 and 1928, when polar explorers including Roald Amundsen stopped en route to Svalbard and the North Pole. A few hundred metres away at the seaward end the island, the airship mooring mast still stands.

As writers of guidebooks take great satisfaction in pointing out, even though it lies at latitude 71° 10.21', Nordkapp is not the northernmost point of mainland Europe – because it is on an island, Magerøya. That honour belongs to the headland of Nordkyn, at 71° 08.01'N and about 80 nautical miles further east. Technically Nordkapp is not even the northernmost tip of Norway, because the low-lying rocky promontory a

mile or so to the west is closer to the Pole by about a mile. But Nordkapp is a tall, noble cliff. This is where English merchant adventurer Richard Chancellor turned the corner in 1553, en route to open trading links with the court of Ivan the Terrible. As he gazed at the forbidding mass of rock towering a thousand feet above his starboard beam, he gave it the name it has borne ever since: the North Cape.

Such a name lends the place a mythic weight. It has a symbolism that draws Norwegians in their thousands every summer, to park their cars and camper vans and ponder the vastness of the empty northern ocean in their glumly spiritual way. It marks a turning point for travellers, whether by land or sea, and offers a final glimpse of land for those whose business takes them further north. It is a place of pilgrimage for secular mystics – rocky and windswept, barren save for some tenacious lichen, there is nothing to see. But what a lot of nothing.

When historians needed a name for the engagement which saw the *Scharnhorst* plunge to the bottom, they could have followed custom and chosen the nearest land, Nordkyn, or gone for geographical precision and called it after Bear Island, near to where the shooting started. But, scanning the charts, their eyes lit upon a name that evoked the *sturm und drang* of that pitiless and unequal struggle. It became the Battle of the North Cape.

It's a place with a magnetic hold on the imagination, and you don't have to be Norwegian to feel its pull.

www.hurtigruten.com

Left for the imagination: Amundsen's lonely airship mooring mast still stands at Vadsø.

