

Norway

By DOMINICK A. MERLE
Photos by Susan Merle

Susan Merle on snowmobile above arctic circle



LAPLAND, Norway--For the first few days, the spectacular landscape has an almost hypnotic effect. Gradually, you tend to take it for granted. But by the end of your voyage, you savor every last scene, wishing you had paid more attention. We are cruising north of the Arctic Circle off the Norwegian coast, heading towards the northernmost point of Europe. Yesterday, at the small city of Bodo, the beginning of the "Land of the Midnight Sun," we left the ship to go rafting under sunny skies as giant sea eagles hovered overhead.



Today, we are on snowmobiles in the North Cape where temperatures often drop to 50-below Celsius. And where the sun never sets for two months in the dead of summer, resulting in all types of real or imaginary sleep disorders.

Our cruise ship, the MS Trollfjord, is a nine-decker with two space-like observation lounges on the upper decks, and hot tubs on the top level--which were fully occupied and a line of passengers waiting--when we crossed a signpost indicating we had entered the Arctic Circle. Actually, the weather was not

that warm and many hot tubbers were shivering through their smiles, unable to resist this contradictory experience.

But the Trollfjord is definitely not your fun-and-games, casino-and-karaoke, dress-up-for-dinner-with-the-captain type of cruiser. In fact, despite its spit-and-polish appearance, it is a working vessel, delivering mail and supplies to remote villages along the coast, and also picking up commuters who go from town to town.

Something like a Norwegian bus stop and floating delivery service.

The ship, part of the Hurtigruten fleet of fourteen, can accommodate more than 800 passengers and was at near capacity. The cruise, which begins in Bergen and continues to the northernmost point in Europe, passes through some of the most untouched land and seascapes in the world.

The undisputed stars of the show are the snow-capped sea mountains that rise above the waters like sentries---some as high as 1000 meters---and

the magnificent fjords tucked between. At times it seems the mountains are forming a protective lane for the ship to sail, and then suddenly you burst out into open sea with nothing in sight.

"I have the most beautiful office in the world," said our tour guide, Tone (pronounced Toni) Haukland, a tall, vivacious blonde with hair falling well below her shoulders that whipped around like on some of those models in TV shampoo

View of sea mountains





ads. And rightly so, as her desk was on the 8th level with a panoramic view of the voyage.

"But you know what?" she continued, "some people are never satisfied. One couple wanted a refund because they thought the midnight sun was different that the usual sun. "Know what I told them?" she laughed, her hair whipping from one side to the other. "No rainchecks for the sun."

The ship stopped at a number of ports during our six-day cruise, beginning with Alesund, a

surprisingly urbane town known worldwide for its art nouveau architecture. From Alesund, we visited Geiranger where we viewed long, silvery waterfalls cascading into the deep emerald waters of the fjords.

Then it was on to Trondheim, founded by a Viking king in 997 and for many years the capital of Norway. The chief attraction here, although the city is charming enough on its own, is the Niadros Cathedral, built over the burial place of St Olav, Norway's patron saint.

Much of the next day was spent simply enjoying the spectacular scenery as we continued northward. At one point, our ship, which measures 24 meters wide, passed between two majestic sea mountains 36 meters apart, to enter a tiny fjord. Besides having to "squeeze in" between the mountains, the ship made a 180-degree turn in the cramped fjord, going back and forth as you would in a tight parking space, to get back into the open sea. Mark it down as one of the highlights. After our rubber rafting experience at Bodo where we viewed the giant eagles with wingspans of more than six feet, and our snowmobiling through reindeer country---we spotted a few groups here and there during our 90-minute ride---we stopped at Tromso, the largest town north of the Arctic Circle. Tromso has a unique history that includes hunting for polar bears and walrus in the Arctic Ocean, coal mining and sealing.

Stockfish (cod) drying



Susan Merle on snowmobile above arctic circle



Finally, the very top of our voyage, the North Cape, as far north as you can go on the European continent. Here we visited some members of the Sami tribe, often referred to as Laplanders, who make up the largest indigenous ethnic group in Europe.

There are almost 100,000 Sami living in the region and in parts of Finland, Sweden and Russia, whose borders are nearby. They trace their origin back 2500 years and their chief means of support are reindeer herding and fishing.

There are also about as many reindeer as Sami in the region, and the Sami rely on them for food and clothing, including reindeer soup, which we were given at one Sami settlement. It tasted fine, but I felt a bit like the grinch who stole Christmas. (Legend has it that Santa Claus himself came from around these parts.)

Our final stop was the town of Kirkenes at the Russian border, before flying back to Bergen where our voyage began. Food aboard the MS Trollfjord was both good and plentiful, but

naturally heavy on seafood. So for our going-away meal, we opted for something simple---pizza.

On the way to the Norwegian pizzeria, our guide claimed---and we later verified---that Norwegians eat more pizza proportionately than any other nationality in Europe, including Italy. On the other hand, Italians eat more cod proportionately

than any other nationality in Europe, or so they say.

It seems like a win-win exchange: Italy imports most of its cod from Norway, and the Norwegians import their pizza-making techniques from Italy.

Well, not exactly. The Bergen pizza was fine, but I noticed one of the toppings offered was reindeer. That would shock even the most hardened Neapolitan. ■

Bergen Hanseatic village



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For further information on the cruise, go to www.hurtigruten.com; for Bergen www.visitbergen.com; for Norway www.visitnorway.com