

# FORK IN THE ROAD



Bergen's fish market carries an eye-popping variety of fresh seafood from Norway's fjords. Bergen at one time was the biggest city in Scandinavia, built upon a thriving fish trade.

## Foods of the fjords

Arctic dining while cruising along the coast of Norway

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
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For Kurt Gjertsen, what's for dinner lies just off the port railing. The chef thinks of the entire fjord-indented west coast of Norway as his ship's pantry when he's on the Finnmarken, one of 12 combination cruise ships, ferries and freighters of the Hurtigruten line.

Amber cloudberry native to the Arctic tundra. Scallops hand-picked by divers and delivered to the ship alive. Reindeer raised by Sami herders. Goat cheese from a farm in the Lofoten Islands.

And this being Norway, lots of fresh fish: cod, halibut, salmon. Arctic char come aboard when the ship docks in Sortland and end up on dining room plates just hours after swimming in the fjord.

Gjertsen, who started as a galley boy with Hurtigruten at age 15, says the ships remain part of life in the coastal village where he grew up. Begun in 1893 to deliver mail and supplies to Norway's Arctic outposts, they now carry cargo, ferry locals between ports and offer international cruise passengers an authentic Norwegian vacation experience.

And part of that experience includes a true taste of the fjords thanks to the ships' Coastal Kitchen concept.

It works like this: The ships dock in 34 ports, day and night, as they travel up and down the coast, taking in foods from local suppliers like the Grondalen Gard organic dairy and Judith van Koesveld, who's made a business of gathering wild herbs of the Arctic. With no intermediary between supplier and buyer, the Hurtigruten ships contribute to the sustainability of small businesses along the coast. And because the ships cruise nonstop year-round, they can pick up the freshest local fare in any season. It's a win-win for all concerned.

During peak summer season Gjertsen and his kitchen staff of 10 — nearly all of them English-speaking Norwegians — turn out as many as 2,000 meals a



Waffles and hot chocolate warm up visitors to Baklandet Skysdsstation, called the best cafe in the world, in Trondheim.



The Hurtigruten ship Finnmarken calls at 34 ports along Norway's coast, picking up fresh food along the way.

day, including the ships' set three-course dinners and selections from new a la carte menus. They put in 12- to 14-hour shifts, working 22 days straight before taking 22 days off.

The most popular dishes? Fish soup made from finely ground haddock formed into balls with potatoes and flour and served in a creamy broth. Bacalao, from the Portuguese name for cod. For centuries this fish was exported from Norway to the Iberian Peninsula, but only in the last century has the dish, made from Spanish and Portuguese recipes, been eaten in Norway. And salmon, so popular with the Japanese that they're packed on direct flights

from Norway's Arctic capital, Tromsø, to Tokyo. The ships' salmon is fresher; it comes straight from the water.

Meat eaters dine on leg of lamb raised on a small farm clinging to a coastal hillside. Gjertsen slow cooks reindeer steaks at 135 degrees to make the lean, heart-healthy meat ever so tender. The animals come from the Arctic's indigenous Sami, whose language contains 50 words for reindeer, 100 for snow.

And then there are the desserts. Norwegians are known for luscious layer cakes and pastries. Gjertsen whips up a concoction called Veiled Farm Girls made from baked Hardanger apples, the so-called



Kitchen staff, 99 percent of them Norwegian, work long hours turning out meals aboard Hurtigruten vessels.

Champagne of Apples by the northernmost apple production company in the world.

But the culinary clincher on each cruise is the once-a-week Arctic buffet. Counters practically groan under the weight of heaping piles of seafood — prawns, crab legs, mussels — platters of whole fish staring glassy-eyed up at diners, vats of reindeer stew and a separate artsy table filled with the creativity of pastry chef Hege Solvbørg, a six-year veteran of Hurtigruten galleys.

Food also figures into shore excursions offered by Hurtigruten. One takes passengers inland by minibus to a replica of a medieval Viking longhouse.

Raised wooden benches along the sides of the room face inward toward a fire pit and throne where a Viking king oversees the feast. Traditional dances are performed and tall tales told while visitors down plates of lamb, barley, bread and carrots using only a hunting knife and spoon as utensils. Shouts of "skoal!" accompany pours of beer and wine.

Bergen, the southern terminus of Hurtigruten's route, is a city — once the biggest in Scandinavia — built on fish. Bryggen, a UNESCO World Heritage site, sits on the wharves of the medieval Hanseatic League that flourished for nearly 400 years. The biggest commodity of these

### If you go

**Hurtigruten:** 866-552-0371, [www.hurtigruten.com](http://www.hurtigruten.com)

**Norway tourism:** [www.visitnorway.com](http://www.visitnorway.com)

German traders? Cod. Ships full of dried, salted fish set sail for the Catholic countries of Europe to satisfy the need for fish on Fridays and meatless Lenten meals. Today, visitors find all sorts of fish and seafood across the harbor in Bergen's colorful fish market.

In Kirkenes, Hurtigruten's northern terminus, snowmobiles pull a wooden sled onto a frozen fjord for a King Crab Safari. Michael Decker leads visitors to a hole he's drilled in the ice and pulls up traps of wriggling crabs, each weighing up to 30 pounds. After everyone gets a chance to hold up the monsters — by the arms, please, not the pincers — Decker quickly dismembers them with a knife and leads the group back across the ice to an old chicken coop-turned-rustic dining hall. Anticipation hangs heavy in the room while Decker boils the seafood over an outdoor fire. Then platters of crab legs and claws pass from table to table.

Hurtigruten vessels stay in port in Trondheim long enough for passengers to tour Norway's old Viking capital. In the old town neighborhood of Baklandet, they might stop by what National Geographic's Digital Nomad Andrew Evans once called the world's best cafe. Baklandet Skysdsstation occupies a wood-frame building dating from 1791. Inside, the apron-clad owner serves warm, heart-shaped waffles and steaming cups of hot chocolate. Those who want something more substantial can order bacalao, fish soup or reindeer. And since Trondheim is where Norway's first glass of aquavit was served, the cafe offers 111 varieties of the liqueur, most of them 40 percent alcohol.

Skoal!

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