

Embracing winter on a Norway cruise

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER • Special to the Post-Dispatch

Seated on reindeer skins in a wooden sled skidding across a frozen fjord, I wondered what I had gotten myself into on this crisp, winter day high above the Arctic Circle in Norway.

But my doubts faded when I held up a king crab freshly pulled from a hole drilled in the ice. The wriggling monster stretched arm to arm — and tasted delicious, boiled and served on a

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platter in a cozy farmhouse on shore.

This is how Norwegians do winter. And I'm all in.

The freezing season may be just around the corner in the Midwest, but don't dread it, embrace it on a cruise along Norway's fjords with shore excursions for dog sledding, king crab safaris, snowmobiling, city tours and a stop at the "Top of the World" at the North Cape. You can sleep on a bed of ice in a Snow Hotel one night if you wish. On any night you might see the Northern lights dance across the sky.

And it's not as cold as you think. The Gulf Stream passes along the coast keeping average high temperatures above freezing. On my cruise in late February, the thermometer often read 20 to 30 degrees warmer than back home.

CRUISING THE COAST

Ships of the Hurtigruten line have been a fixture of life along the fjords since they began delivering mail to Arctic outposts in 1893. Hurtigruten's 12 vessels now have berths for 150 to 650 passengers and carry commuters, cars and cargo. Part ferry, part freighter, part cruise ship, they link 34 ports along 1,490 miles of wildly indented coastline. Briefcase-carrying businessmen board, then drive their Teslas off for meetings in distant ports.

Families take the Hurtigruten to grandma's house; school kids ride on field trips.

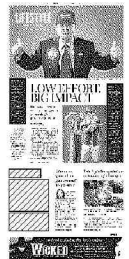
Ships might remain in port for a couple of hours, sometimes for just 15 minutes in the middle of the night while the crew offloads cargo — refrigerators, caskets, toilet paper — and take on supplies, including fish, meat and produce. The Hurtigruten's Coastal Kitchen concept takes full advantage of the freshest, locally sourced foods. Arctic char on my dinner plate was swimming in the fjord that morning.

Don't expect the frills of an ocean liner on these expedition vessels. No casinos. No floor shows. Cabins are simple but functional. The swimming pool might not appeal in winter, but the saunas and hot tubs sure do.

Lonely Planet called the Hurtigruten's coastal cruise "the world's most beautiful voyage." I passed pleasant hours in the Panorama Lounge gazing at mountains dabbled with snow and dark pine forests. Houses and barns clustered along the shore like ceramic snow villages set on a mantel at Christmas-time, their bright colors reflected in the fjord, rippling in the ship's wake.

After we crossed the Arctic Circle, I joined a costumed King Neptune on deck who "baptized" willing passengers by pouring ice water down our backs to shrieks of laughter. A complimentary shot of cloudberry liqueur afterward helped counteract the cold.

After dinner, passengers scanned the dark sky looking for Northern lights. The ship's deck makes an ideal perch for viewing the aurora borealis bloom as electrically charged solar particles cross into Earth's atmosphere. Yellow, green or violet, the lights may appear for just a few seconds or ripple above the horizon for several minutes when skies are clear.



ADVENTURES ON SHORE

Passengers had another chance to see the lights on a nighttime snowmobile excursion. Suited up in provided cold-weather gear and helmets, we zoomed across the frozen tundra, headlamps lighting the way as we waited for nature's elusive illumination to appear.

All eyes focused on the dogs for a run through the snow on a dog-sledding excursion. Some 300 animals, each an Alaskan husky mix, excitedly awaited their turn in the harness. I hunkered down under blankets and let the sled driver guide the barking mass of canine energy. Afterward, I spent time cuddling husky puppies.

At the top of the ladle-shaped map of Norway stands the North Cape, the northernmost point in Europe. In winter, drifts blow across the one road to this windy, isolated headland rising 1,007 feet above the shore. Our tour bus joined a convoy following a snowplow that makes the trip only twice each day. Once there, I waited my turn to pose for a selfie at a black metal globe at the edge of the cliff.

CITY SIGHTS

My northbound cruise on the Hurtigruten began in Bergen and ended in Kirkenes at the Russian border seven days later with time to tour cities along the way.

Bergen's colorful fish market brimmed with an amazing selection of seafood. Whale anyone? Across the harbor, a UNESCO World Heritage site once contained the warehouses and living quarters of the German Hanseatic League that set up trade here

in 1360 and flourished for nearly 400 years. The colorful wooden buildings now stand on 12th-century foundations and house galleries and gift shops.

The turrets, spires and soft pastel colors of buildings give Alesund the look of a toy town. One of the world's most concentrated collections of art nouveau architecture rose here from the ashes of a fire in 1904. My trip to the top of Mount Aksla gave me a fine view of the town, the fjord and surrounding mountains.

Norway's Viking king, St. Olaf, founded its first capital, Trondheim, in 997. Nidaros Cathedral rose over the tomb of this saint who brought Christianity to Norway, but his remains were removed during the Reformation and reburied in secret somewhere on the grounds. While I couldn't pay my respects, I did take time to tour what has become the world's northernmost gothic-style cathedral.

The Hurtigruten turns around

at Kirkenes, so I disembarked for my king crab safari and a tour of the Snow Hotel. Built anew each December, its 23 rooms are made entirely of snow and melt in April. Overnight guests are given sleeping bags. An adjoining wooden building houses showers, restrooms, restaurant and bar.

Anyone choosing not to spend the night on ice can do as I did: Check into a cozy hotel in town. Sated by a belly full of king crab, I fell asleep in a warm bed watching the Northern lights dance outside my window.

IF YOU GO

Hurtigruten's Classic Winter Voyage runs Jan. 1 to March 31 on itineraries lasting from six to 12 days. The seven-day Classic Voyage North, for example, costs \$1,114 to \$5,029 per person, double occupancy, depending on cabin category. Shore excursions are extra.

More info • 1-866-552-0371, hurtigruten.com



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Colorful houses cluster along the harbor in Honningsvåg, Norway, near the North Cape.



The view of Alesund, Norway, is worth the trip to the top of Mount Aksla.

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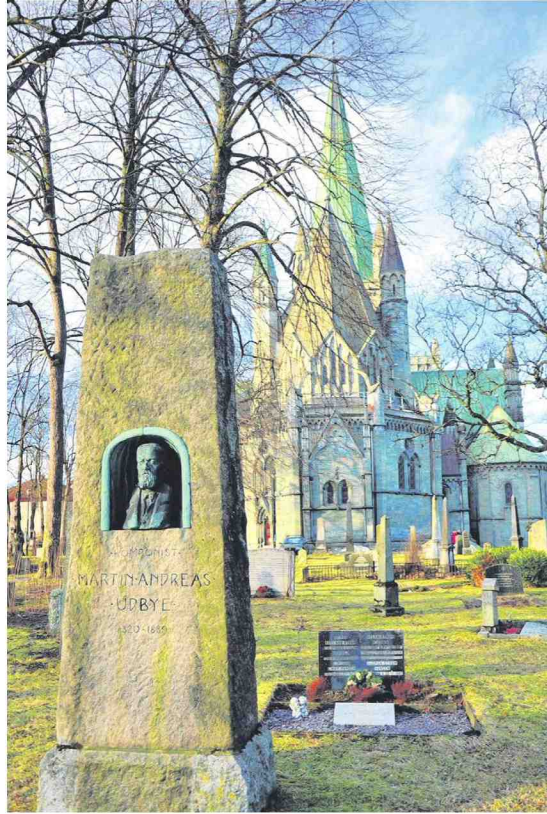
Snowmobiles pull wooden sleds across a frozen fjord taking cruise passengers on a king crab safari.

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Northern lights bloom over Tromso along the coast of Norway.



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Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway, dates from Viking times.



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LEFT: Cuddling Husky puppies is a highlight of a dog-sledding excursion near Tromso, Norway. **ABOVE:** A live king crab pulled from a frozen fjord is part of the fun on a king crab safari in Norway.