

At the bow, on a crisp,
cold day near Svolvær.

north-by- NORWAY

Leslie Forsberg discovers Arctic
winter charms aboard a
Hurtigruten Coastal Voyage



Bergen, Norway's second-largest city, is divided into eight boroughs.

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ressing my face against the porthole glass, I turn out my stateroom lights. It's after dark in midwinter, far north of the Arctic Circle. But the scene unraveling beyond my window—steep-pitched mountains streaked with avalanche chutes—is bathed in an intense, glowing indigo light that locals call “Arctic blue.”

A nighttime panorama in the far north?

I had no idea. But I'm learning much I didn't know on an astounding, world-class expedition from the Barents Sea town of Kirkenes—as far north as Barrow, Alaska—to the colorful Hanseatic town of Bergen,

aboard one of Norway's Hurtigruten coastal cruise ships.

Tonight, we're moving slowly in a mirror-like bay, surrounded by mountains so steep they're like upside-down ice-cream cones ... and we seem to be aiming straight for a mountainside. The ship's engines strain as it repositions, the way a skateboarder rotates on a single axis. I can't imagine there's a passageway here.

But there it is, and we squeeze between monolithic granite slabs with only feet to spare on each side. Throwing on a parka, I sprint up the steps to the top deck and dash from side to side, gauging the gap as we glide past what appear to be the toy blocks of a giant. A cluster of French passengers stare, too, with the side-to-side head motion you see at a racecourse. When we slip out of the marine crevice and into open water, everyone cheers. The engines throttle up, and we churn toward a sparkling galaxy of a tiny town at the base of snowy Floya Mountain: Svolvær, population 4,000, in the remote Lofoten Island archipelago.

The snowy main street is lined with one-story wood buildings, and candles flicker in snow-

drifts outside businesses. A red lantern, its flame vacillating in the breeze, shines outside Dagfinn Bakke's Galleri. Dagfinn's wistful auroras, in swirling tendrils of blue and green, splash across an entire wall. “Do you see the northern lights often here?” I ask the small-framed man with wispy, snow-white hair. “Yes, of course,” he says, eyes gleaming. “When I was young I would whistle to try to make the aurora move,” he adds with a chuckle.

It must be magical to grow up here, where cherry-red houses perch precariously on the hips of mountains, the sea is the playground, and the mountains are Norse gods, frozen while on epic missions. I discover my own new delights every day on this journey aboard the 404-foot *M.S. Polarlys* (Norwegian for “northern lights”).

The vessel has a dual personality: half cruise ship, with passengers from throughout Europe and beyond; and half working ferry, carrying locals and their goods from port to port along the fjord-riven coastline. The ship makes 33 ports of call on its six-day journey; some stops are mere minutes long, but others last several hours and offer a chance to explore the towns and countryside.

Before we even climb aboard, though, the Hurtigruten cruise line offers several wintry excursions in Kirkenes, a ship-repair town on the Russian border, including a snowmobile safari, a king crab fishing expedition and a dogsledding adventure. In Kirkenes it's

so cold and dry the snow squeaks underfoot and the air is filled with tiny flakes that glitter in the sun like pixie dust, giving the impression of being inside a snow globe.

My guide harnesses a dozen huskies to the sled and, barking and leaping, they race off, the sled zipping through thigh-deep snow. They run like lightning past boreal birches bristling with thick hoarfrost, the air crackling with static electricity. Our destination: the Kirkenes Snow Hotel and adjoining Gabba Reindeer Park. I prowl the tunnel-like cor-

ridors leading to the guest rooms. Each is unique, with an artfully carved ice bed (topped with a mattress) and sculptures made by a team of Chinese artisans. Afterward, I join others for drinks—from ice glasses—in the glowing lobby, where the lighted ice sculptures include a chandelier.

The park's five reindeer trot to the fence, observing us brightly. The Grace Kellys of the animal kingdom, these creatures are both graceful and statuesque. They're also life itself for the local Sami people—the northernmost indigenous people in Europe—who rely on them for their food and livelihoods in this Arctic landscape.

Aboard the ship the next day, we cruise north from Kirkenes before hooking around the top of Norway and heading southwest. The ship stitches loops down the coastline, stopping in at tiny ports where just a few houses cluster near a dock surrounded by wintry mountains, and at modest towns where moms zip along on sparks or kicksleds, a peculiar Norwegian invention that's a wooden chair attached to two skis. Tots or groceries occupy the seat, while moms maneuver their way down snowy streets to grocery stores and coffee shops. I join them for steaming cups of coffee and skoleboller, cardamom-flecked, vanilla-scented buns topped with drifts of coconut that evoke the wintry scenes outside.

The dramatic landscape makes it easy to understand why this is a place of legends. South of Svolvær we cruise past the Seven Sisters, a cluster of triangular peaks that play a role in Norse mythology: They're said to be dancing maidens, frozen midflight as they flee from a horseman in search of a bride.

Myth and history mingle at the Trondenes Historical Center, near Harstad, where a fabulous multimedia experience with sounds and scents tells the story of this area as a Viking center of power a millennium ago. Next door, I'm stunned by the antiquity of the gold-leaf images inside Trondenes Kirke, which dates to the 1200s. Farther down the coast, in Trondheim, Norway's third-largest city, I explore the hallowed spaces of a much grander church; the Gothic Nidaros Cathedral, constructed on the site where the country's patron saint, Saint Olav, was buried in 1030.

Back aboard the ship, a half-dozen high-school choirs climb onboard, bound for a festival in Bergen, and we're treated to an impromptu evening concert, the boys revving imaginary motorcycles as they sing about the joys of driving, the blonde girls (yes, all of them) vamping during a love song.

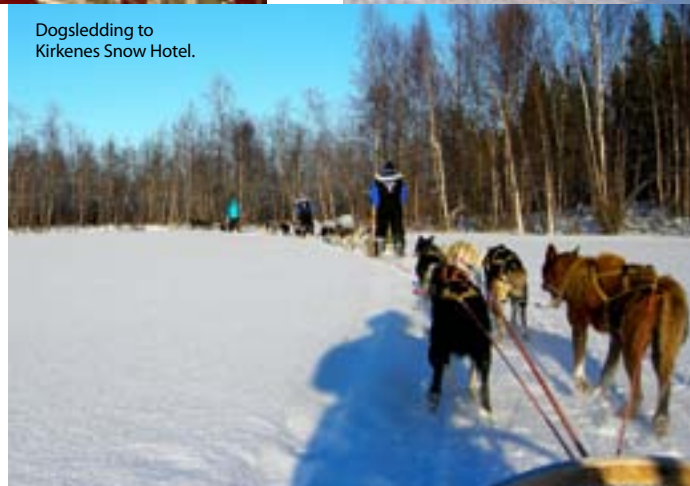
This heady mix of mingling with spirited locals, time travel and surreal Arctic landscapes comes to a climax for me when finally, on the last night, the northern lights appear. They swirl and curl in mint-green wisps like the steam from my breath in this epic winter kingdom of Norse gods, Vikings and modern-day travelers. ■

For a special member discount on a Hurtigruten cruise, see page 40.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: NANCY BUNDT; THIS SPREAD, ALL BY LESLIE FORSBERG

A friendly Sami woman stops to smile.



Dogsledding to Kirkenes Snow Hotel.