

Norway trip report – February/March 2014

Winter 2013/14 was promising to offer one of the best opportunities in recent years to view the Northern Lights. One Saturday lunchtime, a Hurtigruten advertisement to that effect in The Times caught our eye. Hurtigruten runs the daily coastal ferries that visit the Norwegian coastal towns between Bergen and Kirkenes, which is virtually on the Russian border. They are the size of cross-Channel ferries, and a mainstay of the Norwegian transport system, particularly in winter when so many roads are blocked by snow. Hurtigruten promised us a flight to and from Tromsø, on the Arctic Circle, coupled with three nights on the ferry, from Tromsø to Kirkenes and back.

In the end we flew (via Oslo) to Kirkenes, to allow more time to look for overwintering ducks in the north of Norway, so you can tell that the plan changed somewhat between gestation and booking. However, that did give us the opportunity for an overnight stay in the SAS Radisson hotel at Oslo Airport, which provides what is probably the best buffet breakfast in the world (see [Peter's TripAdvisor report here](#)). We chanced upon it for the first time en route to Spitsbergen eight years ago, and have salivated over its memory ever since.

The principal reason for the change in plan was that, at the BirdFair in Rutland in summer 2013, a group of enthusiastic, burly Viking types had thrust into our hands some leaflets about the birdwatching opportunities in the Varanger peninsula, the most North-Eastern part of Norway. The leaflets had been printed by Biotope, a local architectural practice specialising (amongst other things) in bird hides. In that part of the world, hides are a necessity for watching birds in the winter. The leaflets revealed that large numbers of ducks that breed in Siberia in the summer spend winter in this part of Norway. The Gulf Stream keeps the principal fjord, Varangerfjord, ice-free all year. Travelling on the ferry would mean reducing the chances of seeing the ducks. Travelling by air (two days quicker) and hiring a car was the solution we reached. The Hurtigruten can wait until another year – and ideally summertime, to take advantage of the midnight sun at these latitudes.

To Varangerfjord

So we packed up as many warm clothes as we could get into our cases, and our driving licences, and set out for Varangerfjord. SAS took us from Gatwick to Oslo where we stayed overnight in the hotel mentioned above, and enjoyed our breakfast the next morning. The hotel is so close to the airport – about 600 yards – that you can check in your bags before breakfast and then return to the hotel to enjoy a leisurely meal. And in Norway you check in both yourself and your bags using a machine, and dump the bags onto a conveyor yourself (scanning the labels that you have yourself attached). Apart from showing your passport to the machine (on an international journey), no-one seems to worry about who you are – and indeed no-one seems to care whether you are the person in whose name the ticket has been booked. (The same happened in London except that a very nice lady had to scan the bags as they went on the conveyor – and she insisted on checking our passports to make sure we were really us. So the rules are different in London and Norway.)

From Oslo to Kirkenes is almost half as far again as from London to Oslo. Norway really is a very long, thin and slightly curved country – which explains why the Hurtigruten ferries take five days to get from one end to the other. In fact, as we kept being told, this part of Norway is *further east than Istanbul* (although only just!). We arrived mid-morning and collected our hire car at the airport – a very smart VW Golf that wanted to do a lot of things itself that we normally do manually at home, such as switching on the

windscreen washers and the headlights. It was black, which in the UK in the winter would be a bad choice but in Norway showed up brilliantly against the snow. (It had an electronic handbrake as well, which was a bit scary at first. And the steering wheel and the gear stick were on the wrong side. The steering wheel caused no problems but the gear stick took days to get used to.)

We were a bit surprised at the amount of snow on the Norwegian roads, as we had been told by our helpful Norwegian travel agent (Din Tur) that the roads would be cleared of snow. It turned out that this meant the top several feet of snow. The road surface was now effectively ice covered by whatever snow had fallen recently. But our car's tyres were studded, so this surface proved no problem and we were soon whizzing along at Norway's maximum speed limit of 80 km/h (50 mph). It did feel a bit weird though. So unlike Woking.

The temperature hovered around freezing during our trip, which was much warmer than would be expected for the time of year. For most of the time, and indeed for most of the year so far, Norway was covered in a thick layer of cloud, keeping the temperature much warmer than usual. There were occasions on which the wind blew and we needed to wrap up a bit more warmly, but there was none of the really cold weather that we had been expecting.

Vadsø

Our first base was the Vadsø Fjordhotell, on a large island overlooking Vadsø, which is the centre of the administrative area and home to about 6,000 people. The island is famous for its airship mast (*luftskipsmasta*), used by Umberto Nobile and Roald Amundsen at the start of their expedition over the North Pole with the airship Norge in 1926. It took us about five hours (with a few stops) to drive from Kirkenes around the head of Varangerfjord to Vadsø. The hotel looks stunning and is very comfortable inside. It is run by Frode and Ingeborg, both excellent English-speakers, who bought it a few years ago after it had been closed for some time. They have renovated it and clearly spent a lot of money on it. Sadly we were the only guests during our stay, but Ingeborg still produced a full Norwegian buffet breakfast for us (we like breakfasts!) on both days. (In a nice twist, Frode turned out to be one of the burly Vikings handing out leaflets at the Bird Fair last year.)

There is no restaurant at the hotel, so we ate in the town in the evenings. The first night we ate an astonishingly expensive pizza, beer (Peter) and glass of wine (Penny), and the second night an even more expensive (but delicious) oriental meal served to us by a Norwegian of Indian descent. The menu – mainly of Indian dishes – was entirely in Norwegian, which presented a few challenges. When people say Norway is expensive, they really mean it. A glass of wine in a restaurant costs the same as a decent bottle of wine in a UK supermarket – about £10. A glass of beer is not much less. However we were able to take away the uneaten half of our pizza – which served as a picnic lunch for us over the next two days.

It was on our first evening in Vadsø that we had our only sighting of the Northern Lights (every other night was cloudy). The sky cleared above us at about 8 pm and there was a strange ribbon of dull grey light across the sky. It twisted and turned, and sometimes shot out spikes, or split into pieces and then re-assembled. It lasted about an hour. There was (to Peter) no colour at all although Penny said the light was pale green. It was a tad disappointing, to be honest. It certainly didn't look anything like the photographs one sees (and certainly not the photographs of the sightings of the Northern Lights the previous day in various parts of Britain, kindly shown on the [BBC website here](#)). Being British we are good at irony, fortunately. At that time we were

holed up in our hotel in Oslo, under a thick layer of cloud. We later discovered that photographs show much more colour than the human eye sees, as cameras are more sensitive in low light than the eye is (which sees mainly in black and white in the dark). Never mind. There will be plenty more opportunities to see the Northern Lights.

On our one day in this area, we drove the 75 kilometres to Vardø, which is a curious town that is built on an island a few hundred yards from the shore, and accessed by a narrow winding tunnel with very hard concrete sides of the kind that make you hope you won't meet a bus coming the other way (we didn't, fortunately). We called in at various villages and harbours on the way there to look for the Siberian ducks and saw a satisfying number of Stellar's Eider and a disappointing number of King Eider, as well as a ludicrous number of Common Eider (of the sort you can see in Northumbrian harbours all year). There were also plenty of other ducks such as Long-tailed ducks and Mallard. We also came across a herd of Reindeer feeding on what little vegetation they could find. In fact we had quite a few sightings of reindeer but, apart from a squirrel, these were our only mammal sightings – despite keeping a good look-out for whales, which we were told could be seen regularly in Varangerfjord.

There is an offshore island at Vardø that is home to hundreds of thousands of seabirds, mainly Brunnich's Guillemots it seems. We could see them through the telescope. It was a staggering site and there was continuous movement out at sea where they were feeding. Unfortunately tours to the island run only during the short Norwegian summer. There were also lots of Purple Sandpipers in the area. We watched a flock feeding in the seaweed on the beach when we were eating our picnic in the car (cold pizza, since you ask).

Norwegian joke: if red houses are made of red bricks and yellow houses are made of yellow bricks, what are green houses made of? The usual answer is "glass" (smiley face) but in Norway the answer (substituting wood for bricks) is green wood. Houses come in all shades of the rainbow (see photos).

Vadsø and Vardø are both stops on the Hurtigruten (Vadsø in the "Northbound" direction only, although, at this point on the route, the ships are actually heading south towards Kirkenes). The ships are exceptionally manoeuvrable to enable them to dock in small ports without the assistance of tugs. We saw *Finnmarken* at Vadsø while we were eating our breakfast on the first day and then again in the early evening at Vardø on her "Southbound" journey (going north at this point – do keep up) having been to Kirkenes in the interim. On the second day Peter went down to the quay at Vadsø before breakfast to watch *Polarlys (Northern Lights)* being unloaded. Everything that would normally arrive in a town by lorry (bananas, building sand, lavatory rolls) arrives by ship and is lifted up to quay level by an internal lift and then whisked away on a couple of fork-lift trucks. After almost an hour of watching this I was too cold to continue and had to carry on. I think it was an unusually large delivery (maybe because it was a Sunday) as the ship is timed to stop for only 30 minutes at Vadsø. Meanwhile two people disembarked and about twenty embarked, with all the ceremony of a bus ride. The passenger gangway descending automatically with no humans in sight reminded me eerily of the boarding ramp of the alien spaceship in *Close Encounters* (see the photo of the passengers waiting to board the spaceship I mean ship).

Pasvik Valley

Our second hotel was BIRK Husky, in the forested Pasvik Valley an hour's drive to the south of Kirkenes – so about a day's drive from Vardø, back around Varangerfjord and almost but not quite through Kirkenes. We never saw the town around which we actually created the holiday. According to our Lonely Planet guidebook, the town was

heavily bombed during the war (the Russians were trying to prevent the Germans extracting the local iron ore) and most of it is modern so we are not sure we missed anything.

BIRK Husky is literally next to the border with Russia (which is just over the frozen river at the foot of the garden), and only a few miles away from the post that marks the point where Norway, Finland and Russia meet. It is, as the name suggests, a dog-sled centre. There are some 40 huskies (or similar) there, with names similar to those of Santa's reindeer. The owner, Trine, also runs a small (but highly recommended) restaurant as well as a B&B and some cabins (some adjoining and one in the forest about 10 miles away, reachable only by dog-sled or, it turned out, VW Golf. We wanted to visit the Pasvik Valley to see the local forest birds, and in particular Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay, Pine Grosbeak (like a crossbill) and ideally some owls. We saw the first three, anyway, by the cunning means of driving along the track to the forest cabin where there were bird tables. Fortunately the track had been cleared by snowploughs to allow lorries to bring out timber. It was cold there, with a noticeable wind-chill factor.

We also took the opportunity (never-to-be repeated, I suspect) of trying dog-sledding. Not as easy as it looks, especially when you have to fetch and then attach your own dogs (five of them) to the sled. The dogs are extremely enthusiastic, but that seems to make it more difficult. We and the dogs managed three circuits of a large field (two guided and one on our own) without incident, Penny in the sled and Peter standing at the back, but we decided that it isn't something one needs to do twice. Although it might be more fun if it isn't just getting dark and you have a real destination in mind (but not a very cold forest cabin, preferably).

We stayed for two nights at BIRK Husky. On the first night, once again we were the only guests. But on the second night we shared the hotel with a party of eight Russians (from Moscow). They had been staying at the very cold forest cabin the previous night. It was the midst of the Ukrainian crisis and the Crimean peninsula was already in the hands of unknown (although Russian-speaking) gunmen. It could have made for an awkward evening, but the Russians were too sensible, and probably too pro-Western, to allow that to happen.

After breakfast on the second day, we drove back to Kirkenes airport, dropped off the car and flew back to Oslo and then to London. At Oslo airport we bought an excellent bowl of salad (£14 each) from a self-service restaurant – but all the food was described only in Norwegian. At an international airport! And in a country where virtually everyone learns to speak English at primary school. Most odd. Even without a good sighting of the Northern Lights, we had a great time, however, and wished we could have stayed much longer.