

ARCTIC SUMMER

The top of the world is breathtaking — and surprisingly green



PHOTOS BY HILLARY RICHARD

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“Ladies and gentlemen: We have just crossed into the Arctic Circle. The time is 7:15 a.m. The temperature is 63 degrees.”

We sailed past Vikingen Island, making it official. This short, grassy, rock that peeks out from the sea is unremarkable, aside from the stark globe statue marking the border of the Arctic.

On the deck of Hurtigruten, passengers in polo shirts and sunglasses leaned over the railings to search the waters ahead for icebergs and polar bears that never came. As the ship turned, a German tour group trudded deck chairs from port to starboard so that they could work on their tans.

The Arctic towns of Norway are enormously popular in winter, when frozen tourists shuffle outside at all hours of the night in order to view the spectacular Northern Lights. In summer, an entirely different version of the Arctic opens up — one with just as many colors and far more predictability.

The Arctic Circle in summer has the air of an old-school holiday destination. Many Norwegians from “the cities” have their summer homes in towns along the Arctic Circle, in the ultimate bid to get away from it all. At sea, speedboats parted jewel-toned waters and men cast fishing lines into crisp winds. On land, people lingered outside, basking in the kind of manic glee that comes from an acute awareness that the sun could decide to hibernate at any point.

The 780-mile coastal route from Bergen to Kirkenes offers some of the world’s most pristine views. Small villages sit at the bottom of jagged green mountains, creating scenes that reflect perfectly off of the glass-like sea. We cruised by dozens of islands, uninhabited and undeveloped save for the occasional red wooden house with its hand-made dock.

Just like in the fjord regions of Norway, there is only one guaranteed way to experience the breadth of the Norwegian coastline, and that is by boat. Norway’s national line, Hurtigruten, has been ferrying passengers and car-

go around Norway for over 100 years. Hurtigruten (“the fast route”) started as a shipping vessel that reached remote areas of the country in a fraction of the time it would take to drive the circuitous routes. These days, the Hurtigruten ships carry as many tourists exploring the Norwegian coastline as locals using it for transportation.

The Norwegian Arctic in the summer hammers home the grandiosity of nature. Every form of life seems heartier and healthier — from the tall, thick pine and birch forests to the flourishing bird colonies to the island residents who grow and catch their own food. As we glided past scenery so perfect it couldn’t be photographed accurately, I felt like I had stumbled into some kind of secret, colorful utopia.

It takes just over three days by boat to go from the start of the Arctic Circle to Kirkenes. In that time, Hurtigruten stops at 22 ports in the Arctic Circle. Since it’s a hybrid passenger ferry, car ferry, and cruise ship, many of the stops are under 30 minutes and others are several hours, allowing for local tours.

Around Bodo, sea eagles flew between giant nests perched in trees



Above: A speedboat makes its way through the Norwegian fjords.

Left: A lone red house on an island in the Arctic Circle.

halfway up the green mountains, which were dotted with public huts for through hikers. (“Affordable, clean and on the honor system,” a Norwegian man told me in passing).

Farther north, the ports’ claims to fame become increasingly specific (“This town has the largest concentration of wooden houses”) and the local characters more impressive.

In Finnsnes, a group of men drove their impeccably maintained classic cars into town, parked them next to each other, and walked off without a word. Meanwhile, a sharply dressed man with white hair idled a shiny motorcycle next to the ship. In front of

him sat a fluffy white dog with a miniature pink helmet and matching goggles, flanked by tiny Norwegian flags. Both watched the ship intently, as if waiting for someone to disembark.

(“He does this every day. He says his dog enjoys it,” shrugged one of the boat’s workers.)

In Tromsø, a tall Norwegian man and his girlfriend sat on the step of a candy shop as he recited a recipe, punctuating the air with a whisk he was twirling intently. “I am sorry!” he called out in perfect English as I walked by. “I have been drinking a long time today,” he explained in earnest, gesturing towards the sun with

his whisk as his girlfriend tried to grab it from him.

Tromsø, the third largest settlement in the Arctic Circle and historically the most important, was the base for polar journeys and exploration to Svalbard. The town was an Arctic Wild West of sorts, with a tragic past full of scientists and explorers perishing in the name of research. These days, its university brings in a surprisingly international crowd — like a kayak instructor from Spain who pointed out an abundance of colorful Arctic starfish and jellyfish as we paddled through an icy fjord.

Then, there’s the Top of the World: Nordkapp (“North Cape”) on Mageroya, the northernmost point on continental Europe. Everything is “the northernmost,” which gives this otherworldly landscape 62 miles above the tree line even more prestige. Mageroya is only 559 miles from Svalbard and 1,300 miles from the North Pole. There are systems in place to warn Mageroya’s residents of approaching polar bears swimming over, but that rarely happens. (The last polar bear sighting turned out to be a fluffy dog.) The herds of reindeer found all over this area swim regularly during their annual migration, however.

The Top of the World is surprisingly green for a place where snowstorms can last until mid-June. Herds of furry reindeer cross the stark landscape, with antlers that would easily blend in with barren tree branches if there were any. Because of its year-round fishing, humans have existed in this part of the world for 10,000 years — and its bird colonies are spectacular. Gjesv¼rstapan Nature Reserve is home to Norway’s largest sea bird colony. Warm and cold ocean currents meet, creating an incredibly rough sea that bashes waves against slick black stone cliffs. Dozens of oyster catchers, eider ducks and Arctic skuas nest amid this oceanic chaos. Flocks of clownish puffins bob and flap comically while curious seals pop out of the ocean to stare at the commotion. It was an all-encompassing moment at the top of the world, surrounded by nothing and yet everything.

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Putting the focus on photography

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Small-ship cruise provider Lindblad Expeditions now includes a photo workshop on every trip. Uniworld, which runs river cruises, has photography-themed itineraries with travel photographer Marc Edward Harris. Globus added a photography tour to a Barcelona package last year for which there turned out to be so much demand, it’s looking at doing the same thing this year in other European cities.

“We’re seeing more requests for photography tours as an option,” said Steve Born, a vice president at Globus. “People appreciate the value of capturing these places that in a lot of cases they’ve waited their entire lives to see. And while there’s a place and a time for the phone camera, I think there’s more and more of a place and a time for what I’ll call a real camera.”

African Travel operates a “photographic safari” led by a professional photographer on an off-road vehicle bristling with stationary tripods. Alexander & Roberts has added a photo tour to Ethiopia. Avanti Destinations sells four-hour private walking tours with local professional photographers in Athens and Ho Chi Minh City as part of its escorted trips. And Abercrombie & Kent is offering photo expeditions to Iceland, Greenland, Antarctica, the Falkland Islands, and other destinations with professional wildlife photographers and photography coaches leading daily workshops.

“We see an increase of not just the number of people keenly interested in the photography, but the level of equipment they’re bringing,” said Bob Simpson, Abercrombie & Kent’s vice president of expedition cruising. “People recognize that in places where they’re trying to get good landscape photography, where they need the benefit of magnifying the shot, you just can’t do that with a smartphone.”

The travel arm of the company perhaps most closely associated with scenic photography, National Geographic, has added a series of destination photo workshops and photo expeditions so popular that almost all of this year’s expeditions are sold out, including the newest, to Cuba. The one-to-seven-day destination photo workshops are being expanded from the current sessions in New York and San

Francisco to Austin, Boulder, and Santa Fe.

“Any time we’re putting together a new program now, we build a photo program into it,” said Scott Kish, vice president of guest experiences for National Geographic Travel. “People enjoy photography like they enjoy cooking. It’s something they’re becoming more and more passionate about — capturing the moment, and remembering it.”

Much of the credit for the revival of interest in high-quality photography, say experts, goes to . . . the smartphone.

“Smartphones made photography ubiquitous,” said Harris, who will serve for part of this semester as a visiting scholar at Suffolk University. “And now that we’re all photographers all the time, some of us want to be better photographers. People think, ‘Wow, I can do this. I want to do more with it.’”

Steve Juba calls the camera phone a gateway to his customers’ resurgent interest in the photo tours he leads. The North Andover native and Northeastern grad, who got into photography himself as a student at what was then called Governor Dummer (now Governor’s) Academy, runs the Photo-Fly Travel Club, which goes to places that are distinctly photogenic in Hawaii, Vietnam, Cambodia, Costa Rica, China, and elsewhere.

“It’s become a pretty decent-sized niche in the travel industry,” said Juba, whose guests have included Yonit Viner. “When I’m building these adventures, photography is one of the things that’s of utmost importance—where can we go, that even people who have been to these countries before may not have been, to get some really interesting and unique photographs.”

But not with smartphones. “As good as the phones are, unless they morph into an SLR, they’re always going to be limited in zoom and quality,” Juba said.

More sophisticated cameras, by comparison, allow the user to better manage the aperture and focus, said Harris, who will lead a “floating photo workshop” in August and September off Burgundy and Bordeaux for Uniworld.

“I think the iPhone’s great, but there’s not the control,” he said. “If you really want to use F-stops effectively,



MARCO FAVERO



Above: Larry Hobbs leads an Abercrombie & Kent photo expedition in Antarctica.

Left: African Travel operates a photographic safari led by a professional photographer in an off-road vehicle.

you can’t do that with an iPhone.” Conventional cameras “are more about self expression. You can express yourself more. If you can create an original image from what’s out there that really is still beautiful and amazing, that’s the ideal.”

Especially for travelers. One of the comments he hears more and more from his safari guests, said Banda, “is, ‘Wow, I wish I had a real camera.’ You can’t really capture the essence of the animals and the detail of what you’re seeing with your eye on a smartphone. And it’s not every day that you can come face to face with an elephant or a lion. You do want to capture it in a really remarkable and memorable way.”

With an emphasis, said other experts, on “memorable.”

People are less willing to entrust their memories to smartphone photos,

Banda said. “It’s like reliving this experience, every time you see this picture.” Added Kish: “In general it plays into the trend of, people are tired of collecting things other than memories. And photography can capture memories.”

Good photos have another advantage travelers have sought since the days they returned from their vacations and invited friends and relatives to endure their slides projected from a carousel: They make other people jealous.

“Social media has taken bragging rights to a whole new level,” said Dan Austin, president of Montana-based Austin Adventures, which operates “active adventure” and family vacations worldwide.

There’s increasing competition among travelers, too. When Aber-

crombie & Kent ran a photography contest for passengers on a Northwest Passage cruise last year, 80 percent of them entered, Simpson said.

John Nickerson, whose photos from Tanzania and South Africa won a photo competition run last year by the safari provider Lion World, lugged 40 pounds of camera gear with him. But the ends justify the means, he said. So good were his photos, they not only won the contest; he’s printed them on canvas and sells them in a gallery he co-owns, Courtyard Art Gallery, in Charleston, South Carolina.

“Your smartphone is something that you use for pictures of your daily life,” Nickerson said. But “travel,” he said, “is something special.”

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