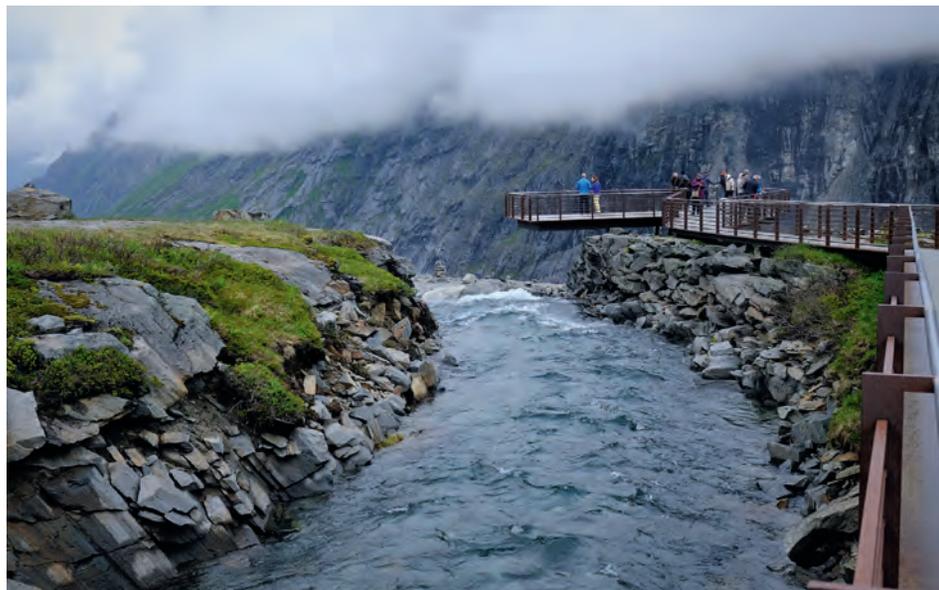


Discover Norway under the midnight sun

A cruise along the lacy coastline of Norway is not all lolling about on the deck as ANGELA BENSTED hikes, kayaks and cycles the fields and fjords.



A lookout is cantilevered over the sheer drop below for stunning mountain and valley views.

“I’m a cruise ship virgin,” I whisper to the tall man behind the bar, as I struggle to understand the card-swipe and signature process.

“Well there’s no better way to pop your cherry,” he replies, passing me a glass of pink champagne as the ship sounds two blasts from its horn and slips away from the dock.

On a whim I’ve picked Norway for a holiday, its lacework coastline making it feel less like a country than the crumbling edge of a continent, as if someone smashed along the edge of Sweden with a hammer and the fallen rubble has taken root and declared its independence.

Many cruises include pit stops at Norway’s fjords but I’ve chosen Hurtigruten, literally “fast way” in Norwegian, a local shipping line established in 1893 to ferry passengers and goods between remote coastal communities. With an increasing reliance on tourism for its economic viability, Hurtigruten has woven daily excursions into its cargo route, changing with the season.

There are 540 passengers aboard the MS *Midnatsol*, the aptly named ship I’m calling home for the next six nights.

It’s June so we won’t see the northern lights on our trip – they only dance across the sky in the autumn and springtime.

But we will cross into the Arctic Circle for the summer solstice, the longest day of the year when the sun doesn’t set, but dips to kiss the horizon before climbing again. The north-bound journey starts in Bergen, Norway’s original capital and second largest city.

Shops selling souvenirs, mink hats and down jackets fill crooked timber-fronted shops along the old wharf,

Bryggen, and narrow houses with steeply pitched roofs are stacked neatly behind them, playing leapfrog up the hills towering over the water on either side.

A funicular hauls people above the city for a view from Mount Fløyen, but before embarking I prefer to walk off the morning’s waffles by joining the locals, hiking the zig-zag roadways up the same hillside for a breathtaking experience.

Thanks to the hike and my pink champagne I sleep well on my first night at sea and wake ready to explore.

On day one the *Midnatsol* enters the World Heritage listed Geiranger Fjord, sailing slowly through mint-green waters, past sheer cliff faces dotted with farmhouses and striped with waterfalls.

Many passengers disembark at Geiranger. As the ship does a U-turn to continue its journey north, we board a coach to run a parallel course overland, starting with a steep ascent through nine hairpin bends called Eagle Road.

Our driver Raphael is from Poland but has an Australian wit. I remark upon his impressive driving, after he takes us along skinny roads, squeezing past campervans and other coaches to reach a lookout high over the Geiranger Fjord.

He shrugs and says this road isn’t the worst of it, then leans in closer and says “Anyway, I am drunk.”

From here we travel through dewy farmland producing berries, pears and apples. Roadside verges look like neglected English gardens, carpeted with lupins, flower spikes like foxgloves, heavy with pink and purple blooms.

These plants, introduced by well-meaning bureaucrats to beautify an already breathtaking country, now threaten native vegetation and are considered pests.

The bus climbs higher, over stone bridges and churning streams. We reach bracken-covered plateaux with pockets of snow by the road, and crane to see the peaks of the adjacent cliffs, shrouded in heavy mist. Our guide calls this weather “trollish”, perhaps inspired by the location, Trollstigen (“troll way”).

At the highest point there’s a lookout, cantilevered over the sheer drop below, giving photographers the chance to snap mountain and valley views. For the more adventurous there are rickety stone stairs and a narrow track ascending higher.

Of course, what comes up must come down, and after enjoying the view and shopping for souvenirs, we hold our breath and, in my case, close our eyes, as Raphael manoeuvres our coach down 11 hairpin bends to the valley below.

He pauses for us to take photos at the waterfall and jokes about the brakes failing; reassuring us only a few coaches ever get stuck, before delivering us to a restaurant for coffee and snacks.

By now I’m ready for a stiff gin but instead I feast on bread with cheese and reindeer sausage and pancakes filled with sweet cream. From here we continue north to meet the ship at its next port of call in Molde. Rivers and streams, watery capillaries making their way to the fjords and then out to sea, weave like ribbons across the landscape.

Strips of emerald green are wedged between waterways and hillsides, scattered with white houses and red barns and boatsheds. We reach the port at around 9pm and dine at a local hotel; a piece of fat, firm cod served on creamy mashed potato, sprinkled with sautéed cabbage and crispy bacon pieces.

This adventure sets the tone for the rest of the cruise. At one stop I join a cycling tour, at another I take to the water in a kayak. One morning, in the middle of a wide fjord, a small charter boat sidles up to the *Midnatsol* to welcome on board a few dozen passengers and whisk them away to Svartisen, Norway’s second-largest glacier. After a short journey through Holandsfjord followed by a gentle hike, we sit by the edge of the



Lupins bloom on the roadside verges.



It’s a gentle hike to Svartisen Glacier.

glacier’s lake, sobered by the news the ice slick has receded 15m in 17 years.

Some visitors drink coffee and eat slices of lefse, a traditional Scandinavian flatbread. Others raise a toast to nature’s majesty with Moscato served over 2000-year-old ice. The sun shines on our first day north of the Arctic Circle and the passengers, mostly Norwegians and Germans with a few French, some Americans and a couple of Australians, are in a party mood.

Just before midnight the captain steers the vessel into a narrow gorge, Trollfjord, a space so narrow we feel we can reach out and touch the sheer cliffs on either side. The ship slows to a crawl and the skilled crew take her round in a circle, spinning on her own axis.

Passengers put down their drinks and drift outside, standing as still as the night air, soaking up the midnight sun glinting off snowy peaks. A family picnics on the distant shore. Once we curve around the top of Norway, leaving the sheltered fjords for the Barents Sea, the weather turns bleak. Howling wind and needling rain forces passengers inside to play cards over hot chocolate or beer. I’m tempted to cancel my shore excursions but soldier on and my tenacity is rewarded.

In Honingsvåg, I join a dozen or so people for a bird safari. We travel by coach past fish drying racks, timber frames as big as houses strung with nets and shrivelled cod, and the world’s northernmost petrol station. “They don’t even bother advertising their prices,” our guide says. She tells us the locals have two seasonal wardrobes, both woollen.

“The only difference is the colour.”

We pass through snow-pocked tundra, nibbled at by reindeer and silver foxes, to board a small fishing boat. Eventually the fishing boat slows and circles. Binoculars and zoom lenses work overtime as we shuffle in our weather-proof jumpsuits from portside to starboard, squealing like children.

On day seven we leave the cruise at Kirkenes, the final port on the northbound journey before the ship returns to Bergen, and fly two hours to Oslo for the connection home.