

customs & exercise

Arctic Norway

Not enough hours in the day? Explore Arctic Norway under the midnight sun where it never gets dark and you can cycle all day and hike up mountains at midnight

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH STIRLING

YOU young ones will be far ahead of me today. I, after all, have more than 72 years,” challenges our cycling guide, Elisabeth, confidently throwing a leg over her rugged white steed. Clad in practical Scandinavian soft shell, she is lithe and has the rosy glow of someone half her age. Our only hope of keeping up is that she is a walking guidebook and we are on her favourite island.

Pointing to an impressive grey peak glowering behind us, I ask, “What’s the name of that one?” then quickly start battening down my panniers. Restless blue eyes alight on mine briefly. “That is Breidtinden, ‘wide peak’, the island’s highest mountain,” Elisabeth begins. “It is 1017m tall...”

The hulking massif rises to form a long, jagged ridge, like a cockscomb. Below it stands a small cluster of

“Everyone here seems to have a boat, and a row of fish drying under the eaves”

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typical Scandinavian houses, made out of wood panels and topped with tin. Everyone here seems to have a boat, and a row of fish drying under the eaves in the cool, salty air. The peaceful, bright bobbing boats and turquoise fjords contrast dramatically with the sharp, dark, monochrome mountains rising out of them.

A hard day’s night

It looks surreal, like a dreamscape; an effect enhanced by the fact that I’m over-cafeined on sunshine. A summer’s day lasts for weeks north of the Arctic circle. Between May and July, the sun meets the horizon ➤

Allmansratten
- a Scandinavian
concept meaning
everyone has
shared rights to
the wilderness



Next stop - polar bears!



Fairytale houses



Fish icecream, anyone?



here at around midnight, then bounces up again. The result is that the landscape is bathed in an extended magic hour glow from 10pm till 2am.

The problem is, humans evolved in 'the temperate zone': cues from dawn and dusk help to wake us up and make us feel sleepy. It's called Aschoff's Rule. This German physician found that messing with light intake also messed with your mental stability. The upshot? We don't feel tired, forget to go to bed, go out hiking and exploring in the small hours and start going a bit mad. We're both extremely sleepy and extremely wide awake.

While I've been day-dreaming, Elisabeth, who, as a northerner, is better used to all this, has become a distant dot on the coastal road, wobbling slightly with the effort. We zip up our jackets and pedal valiantly into the wind, trying not to crash into each other while staring in awe at our surroundings.

To zoom out a bit and offer you some perspective, Norway has a long, exposed west coast that is cracked

like an eggshell into an explorer's paradise of sheltered fjords and off-shore islands. We are currently on Senja, the country's second largest island, which lies above the more famous Lofoten archipelago. We are right up high in the chilly Arctic circle, level with northern Alaska and the middle of Greenland. The next landmass north of us is Svalbard, home of polar bears.

Island hopping

It sounds exotic, but is relatively easy to get to: we'd flown into Tromsø, Norway's most northerly city, which covers a 22km² island and spills across a bridge onto the Norwegian mainland. Here we had hired sturdy bikes and panniers, and cycled across two bridge-connected islands, Kvaløya and tiny Sommarøy, before taking a short ferry hop to Senja. This journey, 60km in total, had taken a lot longer than planned due to stopping to photograph the glorious sunny splendour round every corner.

“ This 60km journey had taken a lot longer than planned due to stopping to photograph the glorious splendour round every corner ”

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When it's light all day, sometimes you forget to go to bed



Thinking twice about taking a dip

We have been really lucky with the weather. A week before we arrived, there had been gales, snow and frantic advice from our tour operator to dress head to toe in wool. The Northern Norwegians love the stuff, because it is warm even when you're being battered by wind, rain and sea spray on the outside, and sweating profusely on the inside from pedalling into such weather. It's a beautifully challenging environment. In the sun, the sandy beach of Ersfjorden on Senja island looks like the Med but feels like the North Pole.

Another appealing aspect of the place: Senja is like Norway in miniature. The northern coast faces the open sea, the west faces the islands of Andøya and Krøttøya, and a spine of steep, spiky mountains rise straight out of the sea, with fishing villages such as Mefjordvaer and Husøy wherever there is some lowland. The eastern and southern parts of the island, meanwhile, are milder, with rounder mountains, forests, rivers and agricultural land.



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Reflecting on our time in Norway



Guide Elisabeth laughs at all the young cyclists she has left behind



Round every bend is more stunning scenery



Wild Arctic

There are plenty of off-shore islands, too: Bergsfjord in particular is a sea-goer's heaven, with 98 off-shore islands. We take a boat trip out and watch the sea eagles hovering in the golden evening light.

The wildlife here is incredible. One day an arctic hare – long-legged and scruffily patchy in between changing

his winter white coat for one of summer brown – hops across the road in front of me. Another day I get off my bike to sit and eat my lunch by a herd of reindeer, grazing by the sea.

On our last night in Tromsø, we hike up to the Arctic Cathedral and listen to a breathtaking concert of simple, beautiful Scandinavian vocals and a guitar. At midnight – still wide awake, of course – we take a cable car up above the city, and hike in the mountains, looking down over Norway's incredible landscape.

In Scandinavia they have a wonderful concept called 'Allmansratten'. This translates as every man's right to explore the wilderness as he wishes. You can camp anywhere here, as long as you are thoughtful and not too near houses. As the plane taking me back home rises over the mountains and fjords of Arctic Norway, I look down from the sky and vow to come back with a kayak, tent and a thick eye-mask for night-time! **oag**

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WAY TO GO

Getting there

Flights to Tromsø from the UK via Oslo from £167.20 return with Scandinavian Airlines. www.flysas.com or call 0871 226 7760.

Norwegian Airlines operate a twice-weekly service direct to Tromsø from Gatwick through the winter. Fares from £140.90 return www.norwegian.com/uk or 0330 8280854

Staying there

Quality Hotel Saga, Tromsø - nordicchoicetohotels.se

Sommarøy Hotel, Sommarøy - sommaroy.no

Mefjord Brygge, Mefjordvær - mefjordbrygge.no

Hamn i Senja, Hamn - hamnisenja.no

Getting around

Tromsø Outdoor - tromsooutdoor.no
Hurtigruten hurtigruten.com - this cruise ship is useful for local transport - it sails from Senja to Tromsø for example

Discover Norway - tour operator offering bike trips to Senja discover-norway.no

National Tourist Route, Senja - nasjonale turistveger.no/en/routes/senja

Useful links

visitsenja.no
visittromso.no
nordnorge.com
visitnorway.com

OAG RATING

SENJA	
Scenery	●●●●●●●●
Comfort	●●●●●●●●
Value	●●●●●●●●