

Norway's "quick route" offers visitors unmatched vistas, year-round adventures and a unique slice of Norwegian culture.

120 YEARS OF HURTIGRUTEN

BY CARTER G. WALKER

Between Bergen and Kirkenes lies nearly 1,500 miles of the world's most spectacularly beautiful yet perilous coastline. In 1891, with the intention of unifying the country through improved communication, the Norwegian government proposed the idea of a year-round express steamship route between Trondheim and the far north. The ships would need to travel quickly, reducing transport time for passengers, cargo and mail. The company that could realize such a feat would be entitled to 150,000 NOK in annual aid from the state. Numerous shipping lines studied the prospects and made attempts, but only one man, Captain Richard Bernhard With of Vesterålen Steamship Company, met the challenge. He proposed to sail night and day, year round. In July of 1893, the first Hurtigruten ship, *DS Vesterålen*, sailed from Trondheim to Hammerfest with Captain With at the helm. The ship made the journey in a mere 67 hours, forever changing life along Norway's coast.

Today, 120 years after that first ship set sail, Hurtigruten (literally "the quick route" or often interpreted in English as coastal express) is still central to Norwegian coastal culture. The shipping line—with 11 ships and daily departures year-round—still transports cargo and passengers to its 34 ports of call between Bergen and Kirkenes. And for visitors to Norway, a journey on Hurtigruten provides a unique, insider's view of life along the coast.

BIRTH OF A NORWEGIAN INSTITUTION

Before he could revolutionize travel and communication along the Norwegian coast, Captain With spent a great deal of time with his friend, Anders Holthe, mapping the seas along the coast. Before that time, only two charts and nine light-houses existed to help sailors navigate the treacherous waters. Following With's much heralded success, other shipping lines utilized his charts and began serving the route. But it was Hurtigruten that was reliable enough—offering several weekly departures, first from Trondheim to Hammerfest, and by 1914, from Bergen to Kirkenes—to transport mail, important cargo and, not least of all, passengers.

As important as Hurtigruten was for shipping and communication—the time it took to mail a letter from Trondheim to Hammerfest in winter dropped from five months to seven days—tourism was always considered a significant source of business. In 1897, With built a hotel on Spitsbergen and the “Sportsmans Route” was added from Hammerfest to Spitsbergen on *DS Lofoten*. The Hurtigruten fleet evolved, first with steamships taken from other domestic and international routes, and then with ships specially designed for the Coastal Express route that included refrigerated compartments and vehicle holds. In 1925, guest comfort was made a priority on a new ship, *DS Dronning Maud*. By 1936, daily departures from Bergen began. Hurtigruten was still the primary mail carrier along the coast until 1983, a tradition that is celebrated by the flying of the colorful Norwegian postal flag on every ship.

During World War II and the German occupation of Norway, many of Hurtigruten's ships were put into military transport operations by the Norwegian government. Nine of the 15 ships were lost between 1940 and 1945. Shortly after the war, rebuilding the Hurtigruten fleet was a top priority and new ships were built with diesel engines. By 1952, Hurtigruten ships carried 500,000 passengers annually.

THE COASTAL EXPRESS REBUILDS ITS FLEET AND EXPANDS ITS ROUTES

The popularity of the Coastal Express grew among both foreign tourists and Norwegians, who relied on the ship for faster-than-car transport for everything from visits to relatives to trips to the nearest hospital. Hurtigruten updated its fleet again, replacing nine ships between 1993 and 2003. Of the company's 11 regularly operating ships today, only two—*MS Lofoten* (1964) and *MS Vesterålen* (1983)—pre-date 1993. Both ships have been meticulously updated and in 2001, *MS Lofoten* was listed by the Norwegian Government as a national historic monument.

Smaller than average cruise ships, Hurtigruten ships are built as much to accommodate necessary cargo as they are to provide a more intimate experience for travelers. Each one offers significant deck space for passengers to enjoy the magnificent scenery and indoor lounges with panoramic windows when the weather is inhospitable. The oldest ships are the smallest, accommodating up to 153 (*MS Lofoten*) or 294 (*MS Vesterålen*) overnight passengers. The newer ships range in capacity from 458 up to 640 overnight passengers and offer various amenities including on-deck Jacuzzis and well-equipped gyms. Cabins are simple, comfortable and decidedly Scandinavian. Prices vary according to ship, cabin size, season and length of voyage.

As their fleet was modernized, Hurtigruten expanded its routes to offer additional Arctic tourist destinations: 2002 marked the company's first season in Antarctica, and 2007 saw the advent of cruises along the Greenland coast.

COASTAL HAMLETS AND DAILY LIFE AT THE HEART OF HURTIGRUTEN

Despite its dramatic and far-flung offerings, Hurtigruten's voyages along the Norwegian coast continue to be their defining experience. Mette Indrevik, tour leader for Hurtigruten for more than nine years, sums up the ship's mission: “We are not a cruise ship,” she explains. “We are a part of daily life—an explorer ship, a bus for locals, a small cafeteria, [transportation for] cargo ... The further north we go, the more society relies on it.” On any given day, at any one of the ports of call between Bergen and Kirkenes, locals shuttle on and off the ship. They head to the cafeteria for a sandwich and a cup of coffee. They settle into the oversized seats arranged comfortably alongside oversized windows.

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Crew on Ragnvald Jarl



MS Skjerstadt

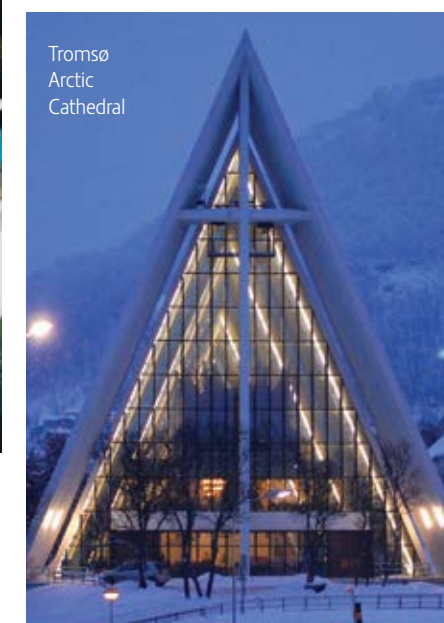


Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim

HURTIGRUTEN OFFERS A RANGE OF YEAR-ROUND EXCURSIONS THAT TAKE BEST ADVANTAGE OF NORWAY'S LEGENDARY FJORDS, RICH WILDLIFE AND UNIQUE CULTURE.



Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum, Trondheim



Tromsø Arctic Cathedral



PHOTOGRAPHY AT RIGHT BY (CLOCKWISE) MARTINE BOUGARAN, STEIN J BJØRGE, GIAN-RICO WILLY, NINA HELLAND, ALTAFOTO.NO, STEIN J BJØRGE, AJ-JELMENDORP, TRYM IVAR BERGSMO

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For visitors, including Boston-based travel writer Julie Hatfield, the opportunity to interact with locals onboard is unique. “I really enjoyed being on a nearly 100 percent Norwegian-staffed cruise ship, with real, everyday Norwegians going about their lives up and down the coast of Norway, rather than on a larger party cruise,” she said. “I met Norwegians on this cruise who were on the ship going from hospital visits and work-related commutes, which is a completely different type of cruise traveler than on the larger vacation cruise ships in other parts of the world,” Hatfield continued.

Mark Stuczynski of Cruise Norway, a New York company that has been specializing in cruises to Norway and

arctic regions for 15 years, points out another difference between Hurtigruten trips and larger cruise lines that also sail the fjords. “It’s the only cruise that calls at so many ports during either a 7-day or 12-day cruise,” he says. “You’re traveling deep within the ports and you’re calling at small towns and hamlets that larger cruise lines [don’t visit].” Larger ships, he points out, often stop at four or five ports along the fjords during a given week, compared to Hurtigruten’s 34 ports of call.

EXCURSIONS GIVE HURTIGRUTEN PASSENGERS INSIGHT INTO ALL THINGS NORWEGIAN

In addition to stopping at so many ports, Hurtigruten offers a range of year-round excursions that take best advantage of Norway’s legendary fjords, rich wildlife and unique culture. Options vary depending upon the route (heading north or south) and season. In winter, when guests have an especially good chance to see the Northern Lights, optional off-ship excursions include snowmobiling, dog sledding and a midnight concert in Tromsø’s Arctic Cathedral, to name just a few. Spring and summer voyages bring tremendous opportunities for guests to see nesting seabirds via RIB (rubber inflatable boat) tours, or try sea kayaking and glacier hiking. And throughout the year, guests can participate in guided sightseeing tours of the ports—including Ålesund, Trondheim and Tromsø—and various cultural tours such as a Viking feast in Lofoten, a trip to the Russian border, and an introduction to Sami culture.

Whether passengers board the Hurtigruten for one of their classic 6-, 7-, 11- or 12-day voyages, or just jump on for a port-to-port cruise, there is no match for the authentic experience of traveling aboard this slice of Norwegian history and culture. ♡



A FEAST FOR THE EYES ... AND THE PALATE

Like everything else about Hurtigruten, dining aboard the ships is a uniquely Norwegian experience. The chefs take advantage of local flavors and traditions, offering passengers a literal taste of the seascapes they are quietly slipping through. From deliciously salty clipfish bohlinos in Ålesund to aquavit-cured reindeer steaks in Hammerfest and juicy king crabs at the North Cape, each meal is a sumptuous exploration of Norwegian flavors and traditions. Though there are buffets of Norwegian standards—including pickled fish, brown cheese, and cured meats—for breakfast and lunch, most of the dinners are elegant three-course affairs featuring the freshest, local ingredients from the sea and the forest.

