

James Innes Williams tours Arctic Norway. Pictures by the author.



JAMES ON SYLTFJORD

# Fjord Fiesta



CRASHING WAVES BY FJORDINES LIGHTHOUSE

» The landscape of Arctic Norway, carved by the ice, evokes a sense of intense drama. Everywhere you look you can see the effects of millions of years of glaciers forming and melting, sea levels rising and falling, and the land being pushed and pulled by incredible forces. Add to this the fact that the area spends half the year drenched in sunlight and the other half blanketed in darkness, with the electric light show of Aurora Borealis in the skies above, and you have the perfect setting for a breathtaking getaway.

My journey to Finnmark, Norway's most north-easterly region, came in mid-June,

when I enjoyed a positively balmy 10°C. Thanks to the Gulf Stream, the coastline here at the very northern edge of Europe is able to enjoy a relatively mild climate for the latitude, even in winter. And while the flights from London – a hop, skip and a jump via Oslo and Kirkenes before reaching Båtsfjord – take a little while, there is no rush to arrive when daylight lasts until August.

For the locals, this Midnight Sun acts like an energy boost. Some will even choose to go out to sea or walking in the hills in the middle of the night, making the most of daylight conditions. Arriving in Båtsfjord at night on midnight, my little group of travellers would



PULLING UP LUCKY CRABS

have been happy being told it was three in the afternoon, our bodyclocks seemingly suppressed by the warm sun. Even so, after a couple of glasses of Aquavit – a favourite Scandinavian tippie – and our first taste of king crab, we bedded down for the night at the Polar Hotel.

The next morning we took a quick tour of this working fishing town – home to the largest population of any settlement I'd visit,

## “A hot tub under the Midnight Sun makes for a great way to end the day”

at 2,300 people – and headed on to Syltefjord. For half the year this little village is closed off. Its residents, which can never number more than 15 or so, head south and the road becomes impassable – and anyone hoping to make a visit in the dark season has to take to a snow scooter.

Here, a local fisherman dressed us up in bright orange warm waterproofs, preparing us for travel at 40 knots along the fjord and out into the Barents Sea. The waters remained relatively calm, but with every splash I was quickly reminded that these are indeed of the arctic variety. The long and varied coastline offers innumerable opportunities for fishing

and down a bit before being taken in hand by the fisherman, and whacked on the side of the boat, quickly killing them while also separating their legs from their bodies. The brutality of the show was alleviated by the trail of gulls that stretched behind us, grateful for the free meal from what we threw back. Meanwhile our own hunger was soon assuaged back on dry land, once the legs had had a few moments in the pot. Fresher, tastier crab you surely cannot get.



BARBECUE HUT



CABIN ON SYLTEFJORD'S SHORE



SEAGULL OVER SYLTEFJORD

and also for birdwatching. In Syltefjord itself is one of Norway's largest and most important bird colonies where we spotted gannets, sea eagles, puffins and countless gulls, all swooping, diving and standing perilously on the cliff edge.

At the deepest point of the fjord, we caught hold of a buoy and pulled its rope, which extends 200 metres into the depths. After much heaving, finally a cage emerged chock-full of king crab. These things are massive. Their bodies easily the size of a dinner plate – but alas that is not for eating – while the leg-span of the largest creatures is more than a metre, toe to toe. Once in, they'd scamper up

That night we stayed at Arctic Cabin – a few small wooden buildings further along the shore, right on the water's edge. From the outside these cabins appear very basic, possibly a little grim. In the small towns this is due to the scorched-earth policy invoked by the Germans when retreating at the end of the Second World War, razing towns to the ground. However, on the inside, they are delightful, with all the usual mod-cons you would expect. Indeed there's a sauna in one cabin, while a hot tub near the water's edge makes for a great way to end the day, relaxing under the ever-present Midnight Sun. The little barbecue-style huts are also good fun – a place to while away the night time hours telling tall tales about the size of your day's catch and roasting reindeer meat on the fire.

Over in Kongsfjord, a small town of 35 people to the west, you'll find the world's most northerly diving centre. Here, scuba diving and snorkelling trips can be arranged in the fjord or out in the Barents Sea. There it should be possible not only to see shipwrecks and fish swimming around some of the world's most northerly coral reef, but you should also see birds diving through the waters in search of lunch. Due to time constraints I only had a short sample in the harbour, and while there was not much for me to see, save the odd jellyfish – the prettiest I've ever seen in fact,

all multi-coloured tentacles – the real treat was just how warm and dry I remained in the arctic waters, thanks to the warm overalls and drysuit.

Veines, just up the road and populated by just one family, would be our base on this third night, and again the rooms were beautifully kept, while the underfloor heating in the bathroom was a real treat after the arctic waters. From here you can take a bracing walk out along the peninsula, spotting nesting colonies and the ruins of a German fortress – in the winter months the view of the Northern Lights from here is meant to be spectacular. As, indeed, is the view from Kjølnes, where a lighthouse stands exposed on a tiny spit of land, bombarded by big waves and strong winds, keeping watch on passing ships, hoping to keep the drama to the landscape. ❏

**£** **A 4-day summer tour of Finnmark costs from £749 pp incl. transfers, 3 nights NB accommodation & a king crab safari & lunch. A number of optional extras, incl. snorkelling, fishing & photography workshops, can be arranged upon request. A 5-day winter expedition costs from £799 pp incl. transfers, 4 nights BV accommodation (incl. the Kirkenes Snowhotel), sleigh & scooter excursions, king crab safari, guided snowshoe walk & 1-day Hurtigruten cruise. International & domestic flights not included.**



Both of these tours make excellent extensions to the hugely popular Hurtigruten cruises that run between Bergen & Kirkenes. Our expert consultants can tailor any length stay you desire, even if it just be a night at the world famous Kirkenes Snowhotel. Call a European expert on **020 7838 5965** or email your enquiry to **eurohols@wexas.com**. To read more about James' tour in Norway and to see summer and winter itineraries, visit **www.wexas.com/blog**.