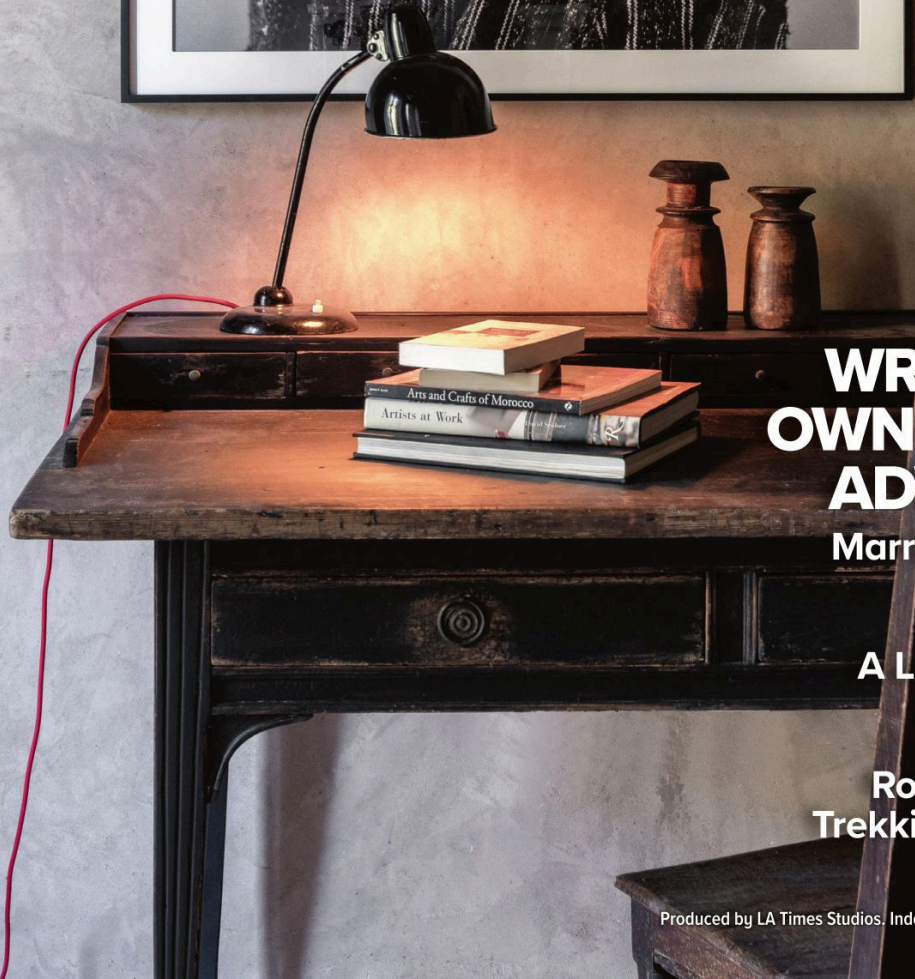
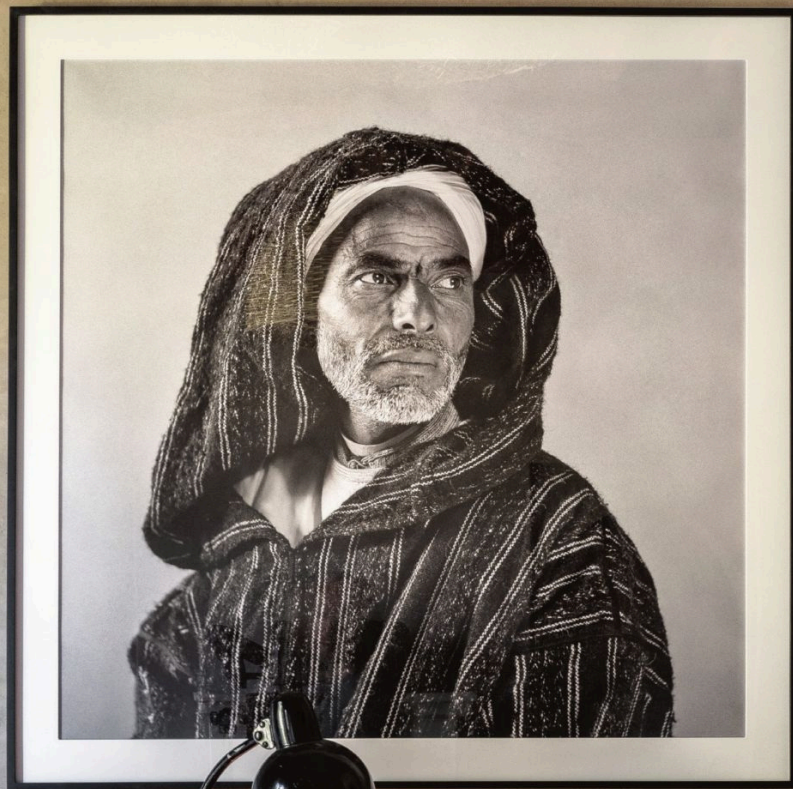


TRAVEL

by LA Times STUDIOS



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Road Tripping and Trekking in Wisconsin

In Search of the Northern Lights

Take a chilly adventure to the top of Europe within the Arctic Circle

Seeing the Northern Lights from Hurtigruten's MS Trollfjord's viewing deck (photos by Jenny Peters)

We're standing at the top of mainland Europe, as snow is blowing across Norway's North Cape, well inside the Arctic Circle. It's so cold our teeth are chattering. It's barely daylight at 2 p.m. and it is fantastic, one of the many wonderful (but seriously cold) wintertime adventures we found on our **Hurtigruten Signature Astronomy Voyage**.

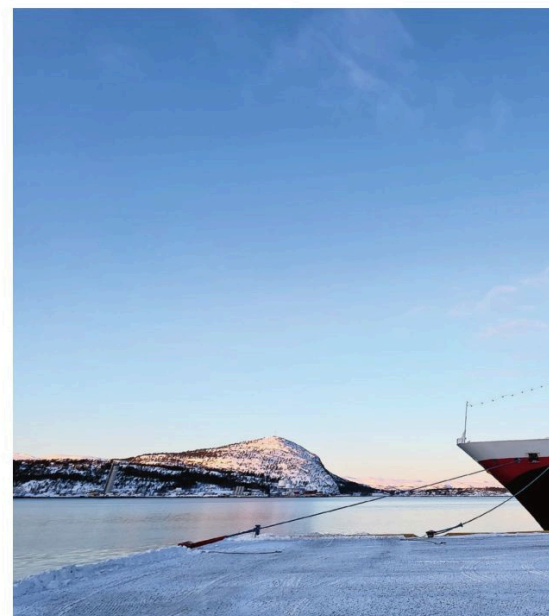
Taking the journey on that Norwegian cruise line in search of the Northern Lights (aka: the aurora borealis) definitely checks off a big "must do" on my "things to do before we die" list. Plus, Hurtigruten has considered everything we intrepid Arctic explorers could want, for in addition to having astronomers onboard certain sailings to the far north, they are so positive that guests will see the Northern Lights that they actually guarantee it.

This "**Northern Lights Promise**" is in place until March 2028. They promise that if you take

an 11-day or longer cruise and do not see the lights, the company will give you an additional six-day southbound trip to try again. That should be especially appealing, but hopefully not necessary, especially if you take this adventure from 2026 to 2027. For the world is currently in what NASA scientists agree is the "solar maximum period," as the agency's James Favors explained in a recent NASA article about the phenomenon.

"During solar maximum, the number of sunspots, and therefore the amount of solar activity, increases," he said. In other words, those sunspots increase the aurora activity, which is currently at the highest rate it will be for the next 11 years, as it begins declining to the minimum until about 2030 (meaning less aurora action), so now is the time to go.

But don't go from May to July, as that's when Norway is in their "midnight sun" period, when the sun is present for up to 24 hours each day, precluding sightings of the Northern Lights. That's especially true if you go on a cruise into





A fish-drying stand in Honningsvåg in the Arctic Circle

the Arctic Circle, for the further north you go, the more sunlight you'll find. (That said, we want to do that one next!)

So, wait until September and later in the year if seeing the aurora borealis among Norwegian fjords is your dream. You're most likely to see them in the fall and the early spring, when the highest activity levels occur. We went in



Hurtigruten's MS Trollfjord docked in Alta Norway

February, and it was both astonishing and educational, too.

To the Top of Europe and Alta – The “City of Northern Lights”

Settling in on the 15-day North Cape Line Roundtrip, an all-inclusive sailing from Oslo to the North Cape and back, is easy on the Hurtigruten **MS Trollfjord**. That's a small, intimate cruise ship that offers 270 cabins, a maximum of 500 guests, three excellent restaurants, lounges/bars with huge viewing windows, a library with a view and a massive back outdoor observation deck that's perfect for viewing the Northern Lights.

It's one of their winter Signature Voyages that features renowned astronomers as your onboard experts and wends through the fjords on a coastal voyage to the Arctic Circle



North Cape in Norway

and the “Top of Europe” in Honningsvåg at the North Cape. On our trip, we traveled with Tom Kerss, the astrophysicist and author dubbed Hurtigruten's “Chief Aurora Chaser,” who gave interesting scientific lectures on the phenomenon and (more importantly) kept us apprised of when the lights were possible, sending out text alerts and making onboard announcements whenever the sky began dancing.

When that happened, it was usually later in the evening or in the wee morning hours, when the skies were mostly clear, but sometimes even somewhat cloudy. Having a professional onboard who tracked the weather for us was a brilliant addition to this already comfortable and luxurious small-ship cruise experience; and it kept us from standing on the observation deck for hours, shivering and hoping to see something appear.

That was a perk that made the 15-day Signature trip worth the price of admission, which on Hurtigruten ranges from \$3,000 to \$19,500 per person, depending on which sailing you choose and what cabin or suite you book. Excursions are at an additional charge, while many on-ship activities are included. Must-dos included the traditional Sámi dinner on board, a nod to the indigenous people who have lived in Scandinavia's far north for thousands of years, a fish-and-potatoes culinary delight. And tasting the Havets Bobler, an English sparkling wine specially aged by Hurtigruten at sea depths of over 100 feet was a crisp bubbly surprise, as were the bottles: still studded with barnacles.

On one of our most memorable ship excursions, we settled into a big bus, riding for miles across a snowy, windswept landscape leaving the ship and the village of **Honningsvåg** behind and heading to the North Cape, the northernmost point in all of Europe. At the cape, we slipped our crampons (thankfully purchased onboard) over our boots to gain traction in the snow, practically skating our way across the icy plateau to the massive iron globe sculpture at the cliff's edge. It's a surreal sight as the grey winter Barents Sea roils toward the North Pole, still over 1,300 miles away.

Rumbling back across the even-snowier landscape, we next found ourselves in the tiny village of Sarnes, standing beside a large lake. There, a fisherman explained all about the massive live Dungeness crab he held in gloved hands, then showed us exactly how to kill it. Perhaps a bit off-putting, but when the busload of us then clomped through the snow into a giant teepee for a crab feast, it turned into a convivial chow down and topped off a highlight of the whole trip.

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Other fascinating stops along our sea journey among the fjords included seeing the gigantic cannon installed by the Nazis at Kristiansand and witnessing more of World War II history in Narvik, as well as running dog sleds there. In **Åndalsnes**, incredible tales of the Golden Train brought back WWII again, while a gondola ride to the top of the Romsdal Alps opened up gorgeous vistas on a crisp, clear day.

It was **Alta** that was truly astonishing, beginning with a visit to the ultra-modern and visually striking Northern Lights Cathedral and then to the UNESCO prehistoric rock art



The spectacular Northern Lights Cathedral in Alta Norway.

at the Alta Museum, perched on the edge of the Altafjorden. This city of nearly 22,000 inhabitants is the commercial hub of Norway's north, and a place so sure of itself, it's known as "The City of Northern Lights."

It's a boast that held true, as the night sky there came alive, with an aurora borealis show that danced across the sky, huge swaths of swirling brilliant green hues, intermixed with red and pink tints. The show on the ship's back observation deck went on and on, until we were frozen to the bone and had to break for an inside warmup with hot toddies and hot chocolate, while watching from inside the toasty bar.

Other nights onboard gave us more glimpses of the lights, and the excited feeling of seeing them stayed strong, with that joyful communal experience aboard ship spreading a giddiness that made strangers into friends.

On to Oslo, Norway's Sophisticated Capital City

Saying goodbye to our Hurtigruten ship and new friends, we jumped into our next adventure, determined to see as much of **Oslo** as we could in four days. Grabbing 72-hour Oslo Passes



Continental Oslo Theatercafé
(photo courtesy of Hotel Continental)

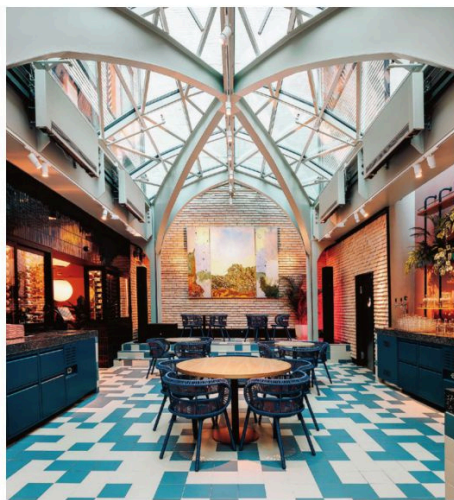
meant we could ride the fantastic tram system all over the city, as well as buses, boats and the metro. Plus numerous free museum admissions, including the MUNCH, a striking building, and a massive place dedicated to Edvard Munch's often tortured works (think "The Scream"), and the slightly surreal Kon-Tiki Museum, where seeing Norwegian ocean explorer Thor Heyerdahl's famed balsa wood raft will completely boggle your mind.



Norway fjord view from Andalsnes Romsdalen Gondola (photo by Jenny Peters)

We wandered through the **Oslo City Hall**, an art-filled icon that welcomes visitors and still serves as the city's municipal hub; and took in the Nobel Peace Center, a museum and learning complex dedicated to the ideals of Alfred Nobel. Near MUNCH, the Oslo Opera House is an architectural marvel, sitting right at water's edge, a massive structure that allows visitors to actually walk on the roof. Inside is as spectacular as out, and our \$20 per person, one-hour English-speaking guided tour was a real winner, as our small group went everywhere, backstage, into costume, hair, and makeup centers and more.

Seeing all these sights using the GPSmycity app's self-guided walking tours definitely helped us find the best routes, using those audio guides to wend through the streets and never feel lost. With guides in over 1,500 cities, you can download your favorites ahead of time, then walk with specific directions and hear fascinating history, trivia and even a few scandals thrown into the tours. The Oslo GPSmycity has five guided walks and numerous other hot tips to this very cool locale and was



Oslo Hobo Hotel's cool interior design (photo courtesy of Francisco Nogueira Hobo Hotel)

incredibly useful for us first-timers to make the most of our time there.

We needed time to sleep, shop and dine, too, so we chose to start our stay at the trendy boutique **Hobo Hotel**, located in Sentrum, the downtown area close to the central train station. With its colorful mod vibe, fun hangout spaces and reasonable prices, it's a hub of activity day and night.

Nearby walking/shopping streets led us to **Norrøna**, one of Norway's top outdoor clothing companies, whose rugged, colorful clothes make you ready for Norway's often unforgiving weather; they also offer hardcore adventure travel trips, if you've got the strength and stamina. Resale shops are popular in Oslo, like the UFF Flagship Prinsensgate in the Hobo's neighborhood, a large store filled with lots of vintage clothing in terrific condition.

For a quick bite, we loved Hobo's Yeast, a tiny pizza-tapas place with big flavors, and were bowled over by **Savage**, the incredible Michelin-starred restaurant helmed by Chef Andrea Selvaggini. From the moment we stepped into the curtained-off "Green Room" to start this "Shapes of Nature" 17-course culinary dream, special moments abounded. Little bites of caviar atop tuile flowers, Norwegian cheese topped with Italian truffles and other delights began



A delicate – and delicious – creation by Savage in Oslo (photo courtesy of Savage)

the journey, then led us into the main dining room where artistic designs and sublime tastes (paired with sips of excellent wines) made it a slightly overwhelming night filled with countless sensory delights.

Rounding out our incredibly satisfying Norway bucket list exploration, we made time for some luxury, moving into the five-star **Hotel Continental**. Opened in 1900, this landmark sits just across the street from the National Theater and steps from the Royal Palace and its massive public park. Everything about the hotel is elegant, from the liveried doormen to the unique modern design in every room. The beds are so comfortable we didn't want to budge (especially since it was snowing outside), but Oslo's dynamic sights and sounds lured us back out, snow boots and all, first fortified with a meal at the hotel's famed Theatercafeen, a must-do while in Oslo.

Word was that we had to see **Bjørvika**, the hot new neighborhood near the Opera House, so off we went. Once simply unattractive industrial waterfront warehouses and shipping containers, it's now a fast-growing place filled with architecturally striking apartment buildings, chic shopping, kids' playgrounds and an incredible bar and culinary scene. Bjørvika is buzzing with life.

Lunch at Palate, one of the area's top eateries, was a delight, as we gobbled up melt-in-your-mouth Iberico ham croquettes and beef tartare with mustard seeds, made with meats sourced from Annis Oslobutka, the butcher shop next door. Later, we checked out Anam Cara, the swinging cocktail bar known for its gorgeous drink concoctions (try the tequila-based purple Elizabeth Taylor), a perfect spot to close out four amazing Oslo days and nights.

Saying farewell at the crack of dawn the next morning was eased for us by **Daytrip**, the award-winning, worldwide car service that guarantees pickup, even at 6 a.m. We were bleary eyed and a bit teary at the thought of leaving Norway, but our driver was as alert as ever! And as we rode to the airport, my BFF and I were already planning the next adventure to this spectacular country, this time during the summer months when the sun never sets. |

- Jenny Peters



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