



# After Dark

The breakfast candles are still lit at 9 a.m. when sunrise comes to Norway's Arctic town of Tromsø. The flickering flames add a romantic touch to the otherwise dark winter mornings when the sun "oversleeps" for two months. The solar sabbatical overshadows life in the northernmost areas of the country. By 2 p.m., "night" will have arrived. It takes some getting used to, but something tells me I'm going to like seeing Norway in the dark.

Though I admit that the thought of visiting in winter sent chills down my spine at first, I am beginning to warm up to the nightlife, thanks to the candles. Now I'm eager to shed some light on the north's midwinter deep dark secret: What is there to do when Mother Nature turns off the lights at mid-afternoon?

A coastal nation once covered in glaciers from the last ice age, Norway is naturally a land full of fjords. And Norwegian Coastal Voyage (NCV), the country's Coastal Express, knows what to do with them – cruise. So I look forward to boarding *Polarlys*, one of their first-class cruise ships, to see a short stretch of the country's celebrated 1,250-mile coastline. The joy of darkness awaits.

By Susan Zimmerman  
Photography by Randall Hyman

*A winter cruise in Norway will warm up your outlook on travel.*



Homes line the snowy hillside on Kvaløya Island near Tromsø, Norway.



## A Cruise in the Dark

Arriving in Norway’s capital of Oslo, in the far southeast of the country, puts travelers a long way from Tromsø. For those short on time, charting your own course on any of NCV’s fleet of 11 ships is a great option; the ships sail both north and south along the route from Bergen to Kirkenes 365 days a year. It takes about four days to reach my port of call, so flying directly to Tromsø, the “Gateway to the Arctic,” is the only way to get to the ship on time.

Tromsø has become trendy in the past five years. This “Paris of the North,” as it was called in the 19th century, still has style. Before my ship arrives, I head to Tromsø Villmarkssenter (a popular NCV shore excursion) for a dogsled ride – in the dark, of course. It’s led by a former Iditarod competitor. Then I chart my own excursion to whet my whistle with a beer from Mack’s Brewery, billed as the world’s northernmost brewery.

Thanks to the kindness of a waitress at Gründer Café & Bar in the Grand Nordic Hotel, I wile away the last evening hours long after my soup bowl is empty. Norway is chilly this time of year, but the people are warm. Finally, it’s time to head down to the dock to hop aboard my polar express.

A nighttime dogsled ride proves to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.



The lights of *Polarlys* brighten the dark winter afternoon.



Svolvær is Norway’s fourth-largest fishing village.

## Looking for Nightlife

There are fewer than 100 passengers aboard the 480-berth ship, and in 20 minutes I’m registered and settled in my cabin. November in Norway is definitely a less-traveled time (though the ships fill up in December for holiday gatherings). It’s midnight but it’s hard to choose whether to sleep or tour; the luxurious room beckons, but the ship’s inviting atmosphere makes it hard to call it a night.

There is no cutting of corners in elegance on the over 400-foot-long *Polarlys*. Norwegian sculptures, carvings, and paintings – a collection worthy of any fine art gallery – are displayed throughout the ship. Lots of mahogany paneling, polished brass, and chic comfortable furniture add the perfect finishing touches. Hurtigruten (Norwegian for “Coastal Voyage”) may be the only Coastal Express in the country, but it sure doesn’t look or act like it.

“Most passengers are not coming aboard to play bingo,” the ship’s captain says and laughs. He fills me in on who cruises in the dark as he steers us into the night. Sure, there are locals who use Hurtrigruten as a water taxi to go between villages, but he adds, “this time of year, north of the Arctic Circle is very dark, so many who come aboard now are looking for the light.” His comments remind me

to keep a watchful eye on the sky. This is Northern Lights country.

“Hurtigruten is a lifeline this time of year,” says a crewmember, who explains that since 1893 this route has linked the isolated north to the rest of the country. It’s often the only way to get to this remote part of the country in winter.

Time flies as the ship sails south and the end of the ride comes all too soon a day later. It’s time to jump ship in the darkness of the Lofoten Islands – one of NCV’s 34 ports of call along the Coastal Express’ 1,250-mile route. Svolvær, the unofficial capital of the Lofoten archipelago, is where my search for nightlife continues.



## Seeing the Light

“People think there’s nothing to do here,” a Svolvær local tells me as I sip my espresso in the trendy Du Verden restaurant. I’m tucked into a cozy booth overlooking the town’s harbor as the sun splashes a golden glow following a solid morning of wind and rain. Actions speak louder than words here.

Svolvær, Norway’s fourth-largest fishing village, with approximately 4,000 residents, is surrounded by ocean and breathtaking, snowcapped mountains. The town’s surrounding landscape is a magnet for extreme sports enthusiasts who come to

climb, surf, kayak, and ski, but the area is equally a crowd-pleaser for the down-to-earth thrill-seekers.

Day-trips to several nearby villages keep me grounded. Galleri Espolin in Kabelvåg is a jewel of a find, exhibiting the works of one of Norway’s best-known artists, Kaare Espolin Johnson. Both the Lofoten Aquarium across the street and the Lofoten Museum down the road are worthwhile stops. The Lysstøperiet candle shop in Henningsvær is the place to be when the sun goes down.

A visit to Svolvær’s larger-than-life frozen artwork at Magic Ice is chilling. The 19-degree-Fahrenheit temp in this former fish freezer warehouse makes for a good place to find your inner polar bear. The visit makes me anxious to head back to Svinøya Rorbuer to warm up. The modernized fishing cabin is cozy and quaint and feels like home, especially with the giant fish-drying rack outside the door.

The highlight comes when the Northern Lights take to the sky. I park the rental car on an empty stretch of road outside of town and watch as these fantastical colossal cloud-like light formations fill the darkness with green fireworks. It’s a stellar, captivating performance. No waving at the lights, however; I’m told that it’s bad luck. I forget to ask if applauding is OK.

The notorious Northern Lights take to the sky.



Spotting an orca whale is just one of the highlights of the cruise.

## An Orca Whale of a Time

“It’s nice to do different things,” says an Englishman who came to this neck of the Lofoten Islands for the same reason I have: to see orcas. “I could have gone to the Caribbean,” he laughs. We both know that winter is the only chance to view orcas up close on their own watery turf.

I wasn’t sure what to expect, except that the four-hour Killer Whale Safari would be a very wintry experience. The Arctic air rushing against my face during the boat ride makes me glad I’m staying on deck; the more intrepid orca fans don dry suits and jump overboard for an underwater view. Everyone’s in the dark (the captain included) as to how long it will take to find whales, but Orca Tysfjord’s (the tour operator) track record is good.

When we finally spot the whales, all second thoughts I harbored about whether this would be worth it fade away as I watch dozens of these exquisite creatures gallop through the water. I put away my camera and listen and watch. The orcas are so close that I can hear their breathing and blowing. These whales have charisma, and their show leaves me smiling.

Long after the trip is over I find myself still staring at a very full bottle of aquavit, Norway’s potent caraway-flavored brew known as the water of life. Though the drink is too strong for me, this gift from a Norwegian friend now sits on my desk and reminds me of that warm feeling in the dark, cold northern Norway.

Looking back, winter was a great time to visit. Although the daylight hours are shorter, there were no crowds. It’s the calm before the storm of summer tourists when you can have Norway to yourself. As for the country’s deep dark midwinter secret I was searching for, I think I know it. Yes, there’s light on the edge of darkness. ■



Skimming across dark waters in search of orcas