



Travel with Liz Barry

LIZ LOVES TO TRAVEL AND HAS BEEN TO MANY COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD, BUT SHE STILL HAS A WISH ON HER TO DO LIST - WITNESSING THE AURORA BOREALIS OR NORTHERN LIGHTS

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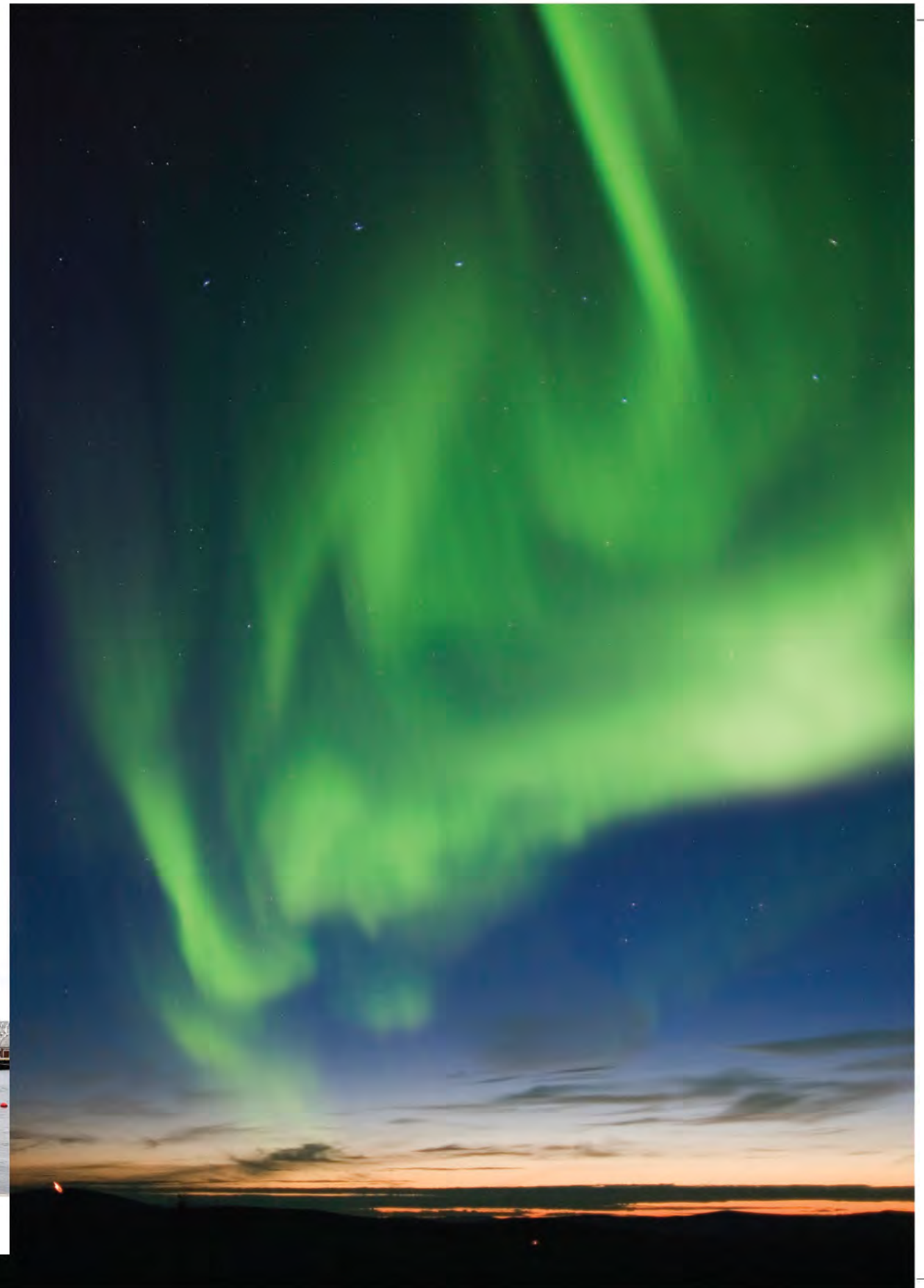
Chasing the Northern Lights

On my list of things to do and places to visit was a trip to see the Northern Lights. Having seen many spectacular photographs of shimmering curtains of iridescent green and blue dancing across arctic skies I decided to travel to Norway on a Hurtigruten cruise to chase the Northern Lights.

I joined the MS Trollfjord at Bergen for a week long cruise heading north to Tromso. For over 120 years the Hurtigruten ships have carried passengers, cargo and the post stopping at 34 ports between Bergen and Kirkenes along the Norwegian coast. A lifeline to outlying communities, they run 365 days a year. My journey included stops at Alesund, Trondheim, Bodo, Svolvaer and Tromso.

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MS Trollfjord in the port of Alesund





Alesund



Alesund life vest



Alesund fishing nets



Isolated villages on route to Trondheim

◀ The crew are always on watch and if the Captain spots Aurora Borealis putting on a display it is announced over the tannoy which allows everyone to stop whatever they are doing and head for the decks, even in your pyjamas - but of course with your snow suit on top.

My nightly check list was camera, tripod, torch, hat gloves and snow boots all to hand so if the call came I could tumble out of bed into my gear and run to the deck.

On the afternoon of my second day we arrived in the charming city of Alesund with the ship docking near the centre. Fishing boats were tethered along the harbour walls, some with their catch of cod hanging out to dry. Blue and red fishing nets cascaded over the back of the boats, the vibrant colours a stark contrast to the grey overcast day. Around the port, old warehouses have

been transformed into art workshops, antique stores and galleries. Within minutes of leaving the ship I was able to stroll around shops and elegant homes. The town has beautiful Art Nouveau architecture, in part due to a devastating fire in 1904 when subsequently the town was rebuilt in this style.

As the afternoon light faded the ship left port and sailed past isolated villages, individual islands accessible only by boat, dotted with coloured wooden dwellings and jetties reaching towards the water's edge. The landscape around us was gradually changing as I got my first glimpse of snow capped mountains.

At 6am the following morning we sailed into Trondheim, Norway's third largest city. A short walk from the Cathedral I crossed over the red-painted Old Town Bridge which led to the narrow streets and alleys which are typical of old Trondheim. I meandered

around the quiet streets taking photos of decorated doorways, candle lit windows and coloured benches partially hidden under blankets of snow. I then followed the river walk back into town passing old wharves which date back to the 18th Century passing wooden houses painted yellow ochre, green and white. The whole area just oozes charm and even though it is a large city it feels intimate and has the allure of a small town.

Later in our journey we sailed through the Trollfjord, at 2 kilometres long and a 100m wide it was a dramatic journey as we inched our way through the inky darkness. The surroundings were silent, searchlights on deck revealed unexpected mountains, so close I felt I could stretch my hands out and touch them. As the beam of light shone across the surface of the water flows of broken ice glistened, it was a magical moment.

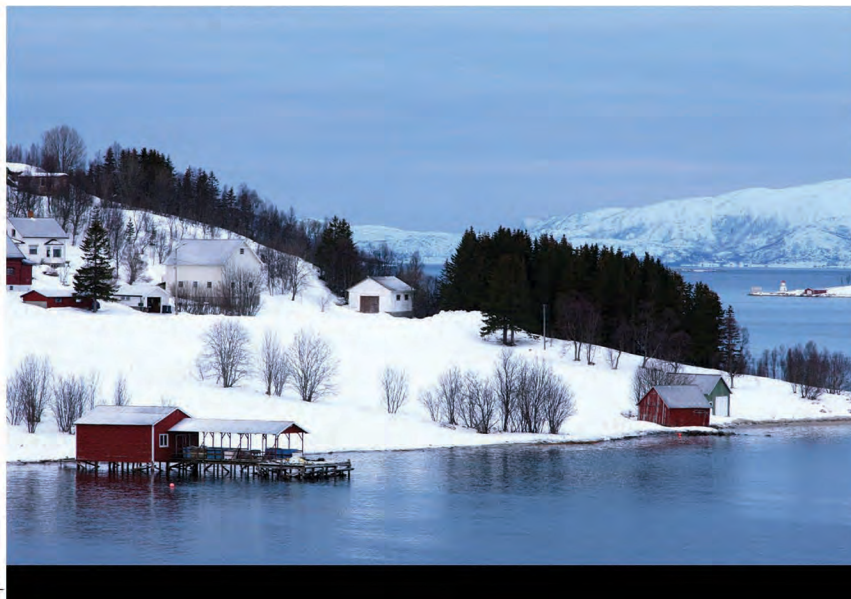
The crew were on hand to serve hot fresh fish cakes

and Trollfjord-schnapps to keep the cold at bay and round off an unforgettable evening. Whilst on deck all eyes are forever drawn sky wards in search of the coloured swirling lights. Unfortunately it was another cloudy evening and again they eluded us.

The following afternoon I disembarked in Tromso, capital of the Arctic and the largest town north of the Arctic Circle. It is home to the Northern Lights Observatory and the Cathedral of the Arctic. Tromso also boasts some of the highest levels of Northern Light activity, so my fingers were crossed that during my stay here they would appear.

Going away from the lights of the town would improve our chances of seeing the Northern Lights and there are plenty of options of excursions and activities. Snow mobiles, Husky sledging, Jeep safaris and dinner cruises offer many opportunities to search for the lights. I chose ▶

On route to Trondheim



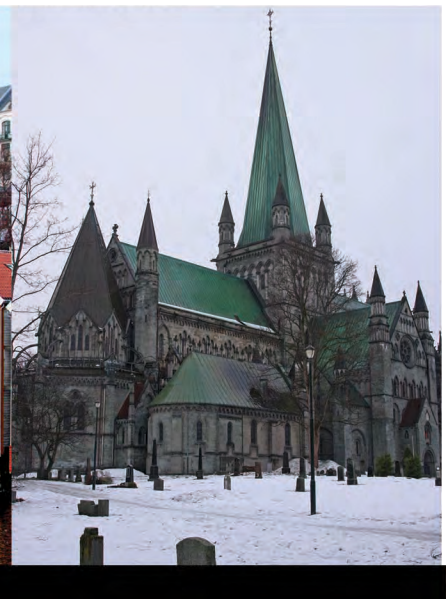
Coloured wooden dwellings



Old wharves of Trondheim



Trondheim Cathedral





Snow capped mountains



Cathedral of the Arctic - Tromso



Tromso

to board the Northern Lights bus. After driving about one and a half hours from Tromsø we all got out of the bus and stood on top of a mountain, heads turned upwards, eyes combing the heavens just for a glimmer. Cold and disheartened I thought my trip north would leave me without a sighting until in the dark sky above, the stars sparkled through the patchy cloud cover which soon began to part and the next moment shimmering green streaks of lights began to flaunt across the night sky. It was hard to believe this was actually happening. I have to say the colours weren't as dramatic as some pictures I have seen but here I was in the dead of night, in a field, up to my knees in snow watching the Northern Lights dance above me. An experience I'll never forget. The Aurora Borealis did not disappoint - we watched until the light streaks faded and cloud cover rolled back once more. Sleepy eyed but content we began our journey back through the arctic night to Tromsø.

My trip had come to an end and I could tick off another entry on my wish list. Whilst on that journey I had visited some beautiful towns, experienced a cruise with a difference being part of the supply route to the communities along the Norwegian waterways, seen spectacular scenery and crossed the Arctic Circle. Overall, the adventure had turned out to be a whole lot more than just chasing the Northern Lights.



FACT FILE For Northern Lights Holidays visit
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Tourist Information Tromsø www.visittromso.no