

FROM SHIPS AND SNOWMOBILES

Norway Coastal Cruise – February

By Anne Kazel-Wilcox

"I KEPT WAITING FOR A DISNEY 'IMAGINEER' TO POP OUT, REVEALING THAT THE DANCING LIGHTS WERE ALL SOME ELABORATE PROJECTION."

LYDIA SCHRANDT, WRITER

I'd long dreamed of seeing the aurora borealis but never embraced the idea of a sleepless sojourn, sitting in wait in the frozen tundra. Then I heard about Hurtigruten. This small shipping line has been ferrying goods up and down Norway's coast for 100+ years, serving as a life-line to remote areas, with cruise amenities added in more recent years. So my hunt for the northern lights began by cruising out of the pretty city of Bergen, on a clear winter's day.

The ship's foghorn blared a few days later, announcing we'd entered the Arctic Circle. It was supposed to be a bountiful year for northern lights, given plentiful solar storms, and the crisp skies of the Arctic enhanced the possibilities. That night, as I sipped fine wine, the foghorn blared again, noting a possible sighting. I scampered up deck and saw gray wisps in the skies, like phantoms stretching, swirling and dancing, the visions taking on hues that began to grow and glow – the northern lights. In the days following, these fluorescent images swirled on and off in the night skies while I enjoyed the comfort and warmth of my cabin in between light shows.

Upon the ship reaching the North Cape, I embarked on an evening snowmobile excursion, traversing the forested landscape, far from city lights. That's when Mother Nature raised the curtain for her grand finale, the most spectacular show yet. The lights were still dancing in my head when I returned to Hurtigruten, content with having captured the elusive prey.

Anne Kazel-Wilcox is a travel writer and non-fiction author and recently co-authored the book, West Point '41: The Class That Went to War and Shaped America, in conjunction with seven U.S. generals.

Atop Reinebringen mountain, overlooking the Lofoten islands.
Photograph by Alex Conu, Visitnorway.com

Vilna, AB, Canada.
Photograph by Nataliia Korzhenevska

THE DANCE THAT'S OUT OF THIS WORLD

Polar Bear Safari, Churchill, Manitoba – October

By Lydia Schrandt



It was my last night on a weeklong safari with Natural Habitat Adventures, searching for polar bears by day and the aurora borealis by night. We'd seen a few of the elusive great white wanderers – mostly from a distance as they rested in the grass, patiently waiting for the Hudson Bay to freeze over so they could venture onto the ice to hunt. The northern lights had proven more elusive.

With a weather forecast showing nothing but overcast skies and snow for the foreseeable future, my hopes were not high as I showered and hopped into bed in the tiny Canadian outpost of Churchill, population 813. I was on the verge of sleep when the knock came. It was my guide. The sky had

cleared. The lights were out.

I threw on a parka and ran out to the bus, still in my pajamas. Two minutes later I huddled with my tour group on the beach, wet hair frozen and fingers seizing up from the cold. But none of that mattered.

What first looked like little more than a wisp of cloud in a star-filled sky began to dance, its greens and reds shifting and shimmering across the sky, seemingly just a few dozen feet above our heads. I giggled, giddy and unexpectedly emotional. It didn't seem like it should belong to the realm of the natural.

The show went on for about an hour. The locals told us it was the best they'd seen in a decade.

OTHER NEARBY ACTIVITIES: See polar bears in the wild (September to December); dog sledding; bird watching; Prince of Wales Fort National Historic Site; York Factory National Historic Site.

Lydia Schrandt is an American freelance travel writer, photographer and editor based in Barcelona, Spain.