

Orcas, Humpbacks & Northern Lights – a Winter Arctic Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Oslo & overnight.
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- Day 2** Fly Tromsø; embark s/v Rembrandt van Rijn
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- Day 3/7** Wildlife & scenery cruise.
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- Day 8** Return to Tromsø & overnight.
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- Day 9** Fly London.
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Dates

December / January

Focus

Whales, other wildlife, Northern Lights and Arctic scenery.

Grading

Grade B (see Page 4 for additional information).

Cost

Search NOR10 on Naturetrek's website



Highlights:

- Spectacular scenery of the Norwegian Fjords.
- Orca (Killer Whales) and Humpback Whales.
- Join the 33-berth sailing schooner s/v Rembrandt.
- Look for the Northern Lights.
- Explore the pretty Arctic town of Tromsø.
- Birds including White-tailed Eagles, Common and King Eiders & Long-tailed Duck.
- Led by a Naturetrek naturalist & experienced expedition crew.



From the top: Orcas, s/v Rembrandt & Northern Lights. Images courtesy of Oceanwide Expeditions & Shutterstock Ltd.



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Introduction

In recent winters the precipitous fjords of northern Norway have become the stage for one of Europe's great wildlife spectacles. Between November and February, vast shoals of Herring have been congregating in the fjords and inlets in the region of Tromsø, several hundred kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. Such an enormous glut of food does not go unnoticed in the natural world and shadowing these huge shoals are pods of Orcas (Killer Whales), Humpback Whales and, overhead, White-tailed Eagles. Although there are now daily boat-trips out to see the whales from Tromsø, a lot of time on these excursions is taken up in getting to and from the favoured feeding areas of the whales, and the amount of time spent actually watching them is limited. A far better way to witness this amazing wildlife spectacle is to base oneself aboard a vessel out in the fjords, close to all the action. In January 2019, Naturetrek will be offering the opportunity to do just that!

This new 9-day holiday will include 7 nights aboard the historic three-masted schooner s/v Rembrandt van Rijn which accommodates just 33 guests in 15 twin-bedded cabins and one triple cabin. From this comfortable floating base we will explore the magnificent scenery of the Norwegian fjords, white with snow in the middle of the winter, enjoying the mountains, whales, eagles and other wildlife. Although the sun does not break the horizon in early January, it hovers just below, on clear days lighting the landscape with a diffuse pink glow. Even in early January there is sufficient light from the hidden sun to enjoy northern Norway's winter highlights and once the sun has dipped away once more, and darkness falls, the long winter nights are just perfect – weather permitting – for witnessing that other wonder of nature, the ethereal flickering of the Northern Lights!

Itinerary

Please note that this itinerary should be treated as a guide only, not an exact program! Flexibility is the key to all Arctic voyages and our exact route and program will depend on the weather conditions, wildlife encounters, the experience of the expedition leader and the advice of the ship's captain and crew.

Day 1

Oslo

We take a flight from London to Oslo, the capital of Norway. On arrival we transfer to a comfortable airport hotel at the airport. Depending upon the timing of the flight there may be the opportunity to spend some time in the city which is easy to reach by the train. The train station is next to the hotel.

Day 2

Fly Tromsø & board s/v Rembrandt van Rijn

This morning we must return to Oslo Airport to catch the flight to Tromsø in north Norway, located 200 kilometres inside the Arctic Circle. The flight should take in the region of one and a half hours and ends with a spectacular landing over dramatic fjords and past snowy mountains. From the airport we will transfer into town to the historic s/v Rembrandt which will be moored up in the harbour, our comfortable base for the next 7 nights. The rest of the afternoon is free to explore the pretty town of Tromsø. The s/v Rembrandt will remain moored in Tromsø overnight.

Day 3 - 8

Wildlife & Scenery Cruise

We will keep the exact itinerary of the cruise flexible to take account of the weather conditions, recent sightings of the Orcas and Humpbacks and the advice of the captain, Naturetrek tour leader and expedition crew. The route of the cruise will roughly follow the map at the end of this itinerary, although we may head off at a tangent if the wildlife or weather dictates! During the first tour in December 2017 the whales were most abundant to the east of Tromsø around the island of Skjervøya and the fjord of Kvænangen. The tour focused on sailing in this region.

Early in the morning of Day 3 the s/v Rembrandt will leave Tromsø and head north-east into the dramatic landscapes surrounding the town. In Langsundet we will aim to make our first landing at the small village of Hansnes where we can hike to a viewpoint, around 360 metres high, which offers a spectacular panorama of this mountain-lined fjord. We are likely to spend the night of Day 3 in Dyrsfjorden at the northern tip of Ringvassøya Island.

The long polar nights are ideal for looking skyward in the hope of catching a glimpse of the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights. North Norway lies directly beneath the *Auroral Oval*, a doughnut-shaped expanse of atmosphere that sits over the Earth's magnetic north pole. This oval expands or contracts with the intensity of the solar wind, the stream of hot plasma ejected from the sun which is channelled to the poles by our planet's invisible magnetic field and reacts with gas molecules in the upper atmosphere creating the light display itself. When solar wind activity is high the aurora often take the form of dancing curtains which evolve and change continuously, each curtain consisting of many parallel rays lined up with the direction of the magnetic field. At other times it may take the form of a diffuse slowly pulsing green, blue or red glow in the sky. Aurora watching is challenging, however, for there are many variables outside our control (cloud cover and solar activity being the primary two!) which need to come together for a display and ultimately only 'mother nature' will decide whether or not the show will take place! The Northern Lights can be active at any time after dark, but activity tends to peak around midnight.

Moving on, we will spend the next 3 days exploring Vengsoyfjorden, Kaldfjorden and other nearby fjords, deep water inlets favoured by the Herring and, as such, favoured feeding areas of the Orcas and Humpback Whales. White-tailed Eagles and numerous gulls – which often include Iceland and Glaucous Gulls – take their share of the fish bounty, whilst Harbour Porpoise and Common Seal are also occasionally seen. Most birds head south for the winter so there is not the abundance of seabirds and divers in these northern fjords as in those further south. However, during the course of the cruise we should still keep our eyes open for Common and King Eider, Long-tailed Duck and both Common and Velvet Scoter. Elk (the North American 'Moose') and Reindeer are occasionally seen on the snowy hillsides, whilst along the rocky coastline we need to keep our eyes open for families of Otters.

It has been estimated that Norwegian coastal waters hold about 1,000 Orcas, although estimates vary as an accurate survey is difficult to complete with such a mobile and oceanic species. Several hundred animals have been following the Herring into the fjords around Tromsø over the past few years, moving north with the fish as the shoals changed their wintering grounds from the fjords around Tysfjord and the Lofoten Islands they used to prefer a decade or so ago. There are no guarantees in the world of wildlife watching, and no guarantees that the Orcas will return to the Tromsø area during the winter, but they arrived in good numbers in January 2018 so there is every chance they will be back again this year too.

Orcas are intensely social creatures living in stable 'pods' of up to 50 members (although a dozen is more typical) and it is thought that calves of both sexes remain in their mother's group throughout their lives. Inevitably some interaction occurs when different pods meet, but physical aggression is rare and often groups will temporarily combine together when there is an abundance of food. We will be hoping to see many aspects of Orca behaviour including breaching which is a common, but spectacular, form of surface display. An adult male can reach a length of 9 metres and weigh 10 tonnes, creating an impressive splash as it falls back into the water after jumping several metres above the surface. Frequently these inquisitive creatures will also raise their heads out of the water to take a look at us, behaviour known as 'spy-hopping'. No matter what the whales are doing, spending time with these awe inspiring creatures is sure to leave an indelible image in the memory and we can only reflect on our good fortune to be spectators of such a stunning show in this most scenic of environments.

The Herring shoals are not only preyed upon by Orcas. Huge Humpback Whales also move into the area in the winter to take their share and groups of these leviathans are occasionally seen lunge feeding in close proximity to the Orcas. They are also one of the most enjoyable of cetaceans to watch for not only do they lift their huge tail fluke out of the water when they dive, but are frequently seen 'playing' near the surface, slapping their long white pectoral fins on the water's surface or even launching fully out of the water for the fortunate few. Most Humpbacks move south into warmer waters in the winter months, but these animals remain in the fjords of north Norway for as long as the Herring shoals hang around.

Although the majority of wildlife and landscape viewing will be done from the deck of the s/v Rembrandt, it will be done safe in the knowledge that the warmth of the bar is only a flight of stairs away should we fancy a warming cup of tea, coffee or a hot chocolate! Winter days are short in the Arctic north at the end of the year ('civil twilight' in mid-January lasts from around 9.00am to 2.30pm), and as the light levels fall too low to whale-watch we will make our way to a nearby small town or village for the night and offer a shore excursion - either before or after dinner - to stretch our legs and look skyward in the hope of seeing the Northern Lights. In fact we will keep our eyes open for the Northern Lights throughout the cruise, whenever the skies are dark enough, and can also arrange a night-time 'aurora-checking' rota to ensure that nobody misses a good display in the middle of the night!

For our final couple of days we will complete our circumnavigation of the island of Kvaløya and, weather permitting, make our way to the small island of Sammarøy. We will continue to keep our eyes open for wildlife as we go and also offer a landing on this lovely island for a walk along its sandy bays and rocky headlands. If the conditions allow there may also be the opportunity to hike up to Mount Hillesøya, a 210-metre hill that offers a panoramic view of the surrounding coast and mountains.

We are due to arrive back into Tromsø mid to late in the afternoon on Day 8. We will spend a final night onboard the s/v Rembrandt moored in Tromsø Harbour. Group members are then free once more to explore the town at their leisure.

Day 9

Fly London

We must say goodbye to the crew of the s/v Rembrandt early this morning to check-in for our 0830 hours SAS flight to London, via a change of aircraft in Oslo. We are due to arrive back into London's Heathrow Airport at around 1630 hours.

NB – The 0830 hours flight out of Tromsø is the only option on the 19th January 2019 as the later flight does not offer a long enough transit time in Oslo before the departure of the onward SAS service to London. (The current connection time in Oslo for the 0830 hours flight around 4.5 hours).

Tour grading

Grade B – Although this is not a difficult holiday, it will be cold and snowy/icy underfoot. All wildlife viewing will take place from the deck of the s/v Rembrandt which is exposed to the weather (although a hot cup of tea, coffee or chocolate is only a few steps away!). Optional longer walks are occasionally offered for those who wish to stretch their legs, but please be aware that the terrain can be steep and rough in places and it will be snowy/icy underfoot.

It is also important that you are able to get up and down the short, but steep, gangway from the ship's deck to the water level to board the zodiac craft. Please also be aware of the need to climb up and down several short (but steep) stairways when moving around the inside of the ship. Should you require additional information on the above please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

Finally, please remember that you are travelling in remote areas without quick access to sophisticated medical facilities, so we would ask you not to join the tour if you have a life-threatening condition, need daily medical treatment or have difficulty walking.

Weather & Daylight

Not surprisingly, you should expect cold weather on this holiday, with daytime temperatures around freezing and night-time temperatures dipping somewhat below that. The weather can be snowy, overcast and windy or calm and clear. A mix of the two is most likely, although we will be hoping for a week of the latter! Wind-chill on board the s/v Rembrandt can also be significant! You will need plenty of warm clothing for this cruise. Further details will be sent on booking as part of the 'Pre-departure Pack'.

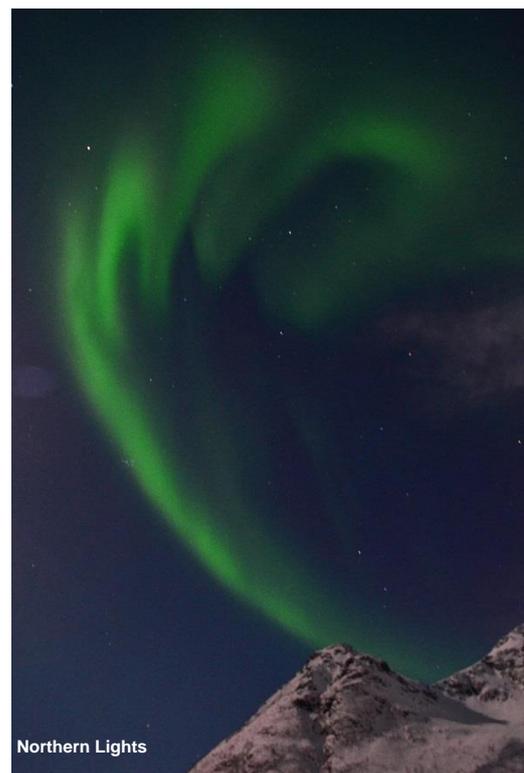
The sun does not break the horizon in north Norway in early January. This is not to say, however, that it is dark all day! Civil twilight lasts from around 0900 hours to 1430 hours, light enough to watch the wildlife (and photograph it if using a relatively high ISO). The hidden sun casts a refracted pink light on the mountains at certain hours, whilst at other times the attractive 'blue light' of the Arctic winter dominates. The exact duration and intensity of light, however, is subject to the weather, clear skies allowing for longer and lighter conditions than overcast skies. The snowy mountains also help to brighten the landscape.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the cost of the holiday except for evening meals in Oslo and lunches on Day 2 and Day 9. For the night in Oslo we use a comfortable airport hotel with private facilities.

For this cruise we will join the 33-berth s/v Rembrandt, a 50 meter long, three-mast sailing schooner built as a herring lugger early in the last century and converted to a passenger vessel in 1994. The vessel is well suited for expedition cruising and offers plenty of deck space for wildlife viewing.

The ship features a spacious dining room (where meals are served buffet style) and a separate bar. She can accommodate a maximum of 33 passengers in 15 small twin cabins (with limited storage space) as follows: 6 inside twin cabins with private toilet and shower but no porthole; 9 twin cabins with private toilet and shower and porthole and 1 triple cabin with porthole, private toilet and shower. Twin-bedded inside cabins with private facilities are included in the tour cost, outside twin cabins with portholes are available at an extra cost. Please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 for further information. The electrical supply aboard the ship is 220V/50Hz. Electrical outlets are standard European with 2 thick round pins. The s/v Rembrandt is a non-smoking vessel.



Extra expenses

Dinners in Oslo is not included in the tour cost along with any meals on the journeys between the UK and Tromsø (unless supplied by the airline). Drinks, laundry and all items of a personal nature are also excluded. Although solely at your discretion, you might like to allow approximately £50-£70 per person for tips for local expedition staff and the ship's crew.

NB - Please note that due to the volatile nature of fuel prices and currency exchange rates at the moment Naturetrek reserves the right to impose a surcharge on this cruise should fuel prices increase significantly (and the boat operators request an additional payment) or if there is a further significant weakening of the Pound Sterling over the coming months. As always, however, we will do our very best to avoid such increases in costs.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

