

# Norway - Orcas, Humpbacks & Northern Lights - A Winter Arctic Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Report

29 December 2017 - 6 January 2018

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Orca by David Phillips



White-tailed Eagle by Mario Acquarone



Orca watching by Mario Acquarone



On Deck by Mario Acquarone

Report compiled by David Phillips  
Images courtesy of David Phillips & Mario Acquarone



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Tour participants: David Phillips & Mario Acquarone (leaders) with 19 Naturetrek clients  
Crew: Floris (Captain), Svinda (1st Mate), Aris (2nd Mate) & Menta (Chef)

## Summary

The region visited by this trip lies north of the Arctic Circle and at the end of December/early January, the sun does not rise above the horizon. That said, twilight lasts for around four hours and the reflected light off the snow-covered mountains makes for a brighter scene than you might expect, particularly if the skies are clear and the moon is bright, as it was on this tour.

The s/v Noorderlicht is a beautiful antique vessel and was a fine boat to enjoy the starkly dramatic scenery of the northern fjords.

### Day 1

**Friday 29th December**

The majority of the group left London on the 5.30pm flight from Heathrow to Oslo, where we stayed the night in the very comfortable Radisson Blu hotel on the airport. The evening arrival was early enough for us to enjoy a meal in the hotel before turning in for the night.

### Day 2

**Saturday 30th December**

A good breakfast was taken in the hotel before returning to the airport for the one-hour-50-minute flight north, across the Arctic Circle to Tromsø.

Once in Tromsø, a coach took us to the quay where our vessel, the Noorderlicht, was moored. Although we couldn't go aboard immediately, luggage was taken onboard and most took the opportunity to explore the city which has a good selection of museums, art galleries and shops. Some crossed over the bridge to see the Arctic cathedral – a modern architectural wonder. Reconvening at the ship we were welcomed aboard, shown to our cabins and settled in for an evening meal. Mario and the crew introduced themselves.

### Day 3

**Sunday 31st December**

A 6.30am start had been advised as it was planned to sail towards the area where good numbers of whales had been seen the previous week. Many got up early to be on deck as we sailed under the high arched bridge and out from Tromsø harbour. The lights of the city slipped behind us and the light of day enabled the first views of the beautiful coast. Around lunchtime, to help us gain speed, the crew decided to hoist the sails and make the most of the tail wind. Under instruction, those of us feeling energetic were given the chance to help by pulling on ropes as the sail was gradually raised. This exercise and group involvement was greatly enjoyed and made us feel like as though we were sailing in a bygone age. Shortly afterwards, whilst passing through the narrow gap between the islands of Arnøy and Kågen, we had our first view of a huge White-tailed Eagle as it flew over the boat.

Light was dropping as we approached the small village of Reinfjord and we docked alongside the town's jetty. A walk along the village 'high street' took us past inviting-looking houses with Christmas decorations on show.

Tracks of Ptarmigan were seen in the snow. A dark area away from houses was considered as a suitable place for evening viewing of northern lights – and so it proved to be!

Before dinner Mario brought out a hydrophone and lowered the sensor into the water. As we listen, we could hear the sounds of a Humpback Whale. It wasn't possible to tell how far away it was but it was probably in the bay.

After dinner and a talk about Northern Lights from David, the skies started to clear and around ten o'clock signs of auroral activity could be seen from the boat. Once everyone was dressed in warm clothes and ashore we walked to the dark area and enjoyed a fabulous display surrounded by snow-covered mountains in the moonlight. Arcs of light stretched from the north-eastern sky across the zenith to the north-west. Detailed ray structures moved along the bands and at times the arc developed the classic curtain-like formation. Very pleased with the views, the group returned to the boat just before midnight to a glass of sparkling wine and hot individual portions of apple strudel. It had been a truly Arctic way to see in the New Year.

## Day 4

## Monday 1st January

The inlet and village of Reinfjord is at the northern end of a broad fjord called Kvænangen, where whales had been congregating over the winter season. We left the jetty at 9am and were soon sailing across calm water looking out for the signs of cetaceans. With increasing light in a blue sky, we caught sight of the blow of a Humpback Whale at a distance and directly ahead. Soon we could see there were a number and we watched as the group of four whales surfaced, expelled air and, arching their mighty backs, dived with the tail fluke aloft.

Our second species of cetacean, the Orcas, were spotted close by and the boat was manoeuvred slowly to approach the area. Several males with their large black dorsal fins high out of the water were accompanied by females and calves. We observed relatively small groups of up to 12-15 animals and some lone individuals. They were all spread out and at times there were several groups in sight. We cannot know if these were really separate groups or if they were just temporarily spatially separated but in acoustic range and thus hunting or traveling together. The composition of the groups included a few lone adult males, a couple of lone sub-adult males or females (impossible to detect the difference as the dorsal fin is identical), while the larger groups tended to have more than one adult male. We also had calves of the year, born probably in the fall or early winter, and in one particular case there was a calf swimming together with an adult male for a prolonged time. This is actually not the usual situation as calves of this age, newborns, typically stick to their mother's side.

Once the light began to fade, the crew steered the boat to the island of Skorpa and docked alongside a jetty by the village. There were a few walking opportunities on Skorpa and we were given the chance to try out snowshoes, which although tricky to strap on, helped us to walk through the snow which was quite deep in places. The village was deserted as many of the houses are summer residences for people working in Tromsø. Mario led a walk up to a frozen lake on a crest above the village.

Dinner was followed by a talk from Mario about the ecology and movements of Herring in the North Sea and the whales that feed on them. In the evening, under clear skies, a moderate display of Northern Lights was seen.

## Day 5

## Tuesday 2nd January

The day dawned bright and clear and the crew charted a course around the same area south of Skorpa. We were soon picking up sightings of both whale species. Many of the Orcas were travelling fast and we had the impression that the groups were simultaneously spread out and traveling in the same direction i.e. exhibiting cooperation across a significant distance.

At one point we observed some interesting behaviour when an Orca came for a 'spa' in the wake of our propeller. One of the Humpback Whales did some tail slaps and one attempted to spy-hop. All in all, the Orcas were calm but acted busy by travelling relatively fast.

This evening we moored on the island of Spildra and walked along tracks to the village. Later Mario gave a talk about whales and whaling.

## Day 6

## Wednesday 3rd January

Our good fortune with the weather started to change and, with a forecast of strong westerly winds, the crew decided to gradually head westward over the coming days, mooring in some of the sheltered harbours and bays.

Around midday, whilst sailing across high seas towards Skjervøy, it was evident that whales were ahead because of the number of day trip vessels from Tromsø. Despite being more difficult to see in the rough sea, it was evident that greater numbers of Humpback Whales and Orcas were present and in larger groups. This may have been a consequence of the heavier boat traffic, the rougher weather or simply because the way the Herring bank was placed which did not warrant another feeding strategy.

As the light level dropped, the crew steered the ship through the narrow channel between Uløya and the mainland and to our night stop alongside the jetty at Havness. Havness proved to be a most interesting port. Behind the jetty a row of 19th century wooden buildings formed part of the oldest trading post in northern Norway. The buildings were spared destruction during WWII because of a simple notice left by the German Army "Kulturell wertvoll, daher nicht zerstören" ("Of cultural value, do not destroy").

Before dinner most of the group enjoyed a walk through fresh snow around the village and down to a quay. Two group members walking ahead saw an Elk cross the road in front of them and an Otter on the water's edge.

## Day 7

## Thursday 4th January

Before departing Havness we had an opportunity to look around the small shop which was full of historic objects and photographs from the past.

The sky was grey and the sea a little choppy as we set sail. Unfortunately low cloud prevented us from seeing the Lyngen Alps as we sailed up north along Lyngen Fjord and rounded the tip on Lyngen Peninsula.

With stronger winds forecast, the captain decided to head to the harbour at Nordlenangen at the southern end of a sheltered bay. The jetty hadn't been used for some time and snow had to be cleared before we could get off the boat to walk into town.

## Day 8

Friday 5th January

The last day at sea took us back towards Tromsø. We passed close to the group of islands off the tip of Reinøya where three Common Seals were seen in the water. One adopted the banana posture with tail and head out of water. At one point a fishing vessel passed by with four White-tailed Eagles among the dozens of gulls following the boat.

Upon reaching Tromsø at 2pm the boat had to be filled with fuel, so we had the opportunity to visit various places around the city. One couple even walked over the bridge and took the cable car to the top of the mountain opposite and walked on from there.

With a special four-course dinner, our final evening was rounded off by a thank-you to crew and guides.

## Day 9

Saturday 6th January

A very early breakfast was necessary to be ready for a 6am coach to the airport for our 8.30am flight to Oslo. The long stopover in Oslo soon passed as the airport had recently been transformed with shops and plenty cafes and restaurants. We then had a flight back to the UK, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

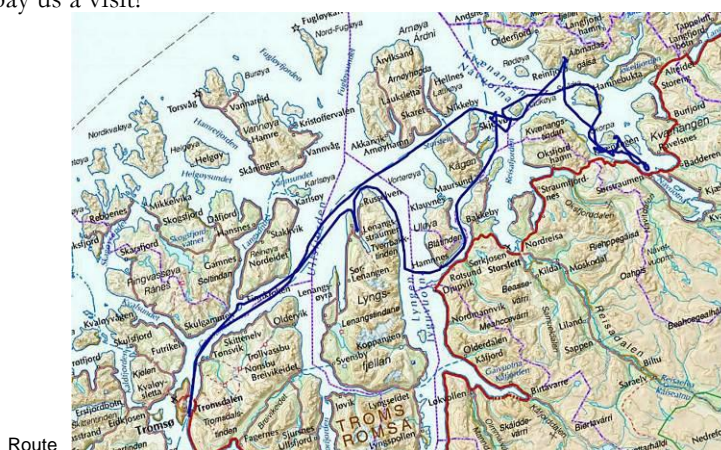
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Route

## Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	December/January						
			30	31	1	2	3	4	5
1	European Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>					1		
2	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					1		
3	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>				20+	15	25	
4	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				10+	20	50	
5	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>							3

### Birds

1	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2	2	40	40+	✓	30
2	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		100				60+	100
3	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1	2	6+			5
4	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>							✓
5	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		1					
8	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		10					✓
9	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓				✓
10	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2					
11	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		4					
12	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	3						
13	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	4	6		✓	✓	✓	30
14	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	2						



Aurora by David Phillips