

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 11 January 2020



Northern Light



Humpback Whale



Snow-shoe walking



Our vessel moored in Hamnes

Report & Images by Sara Frost



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Sindre Frahm Jensen (Leader) with 31 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This 9-day cruise in the Arctic provided fabulous views of both Orca and Humpback Whales, plus White-tailed Eagles and a wonderful display of the Northern Lights. The main highlight was on the second day, where we spent the morning on the deck of the boat surrounded by groups of Humpbacks and Orca feeding on the abundance of Herring. We could clearly see (and hear!) the whales as they surfaced near our boat – an experience which will certainly live long in the memory! Despite challenging weather towards the end of the week, other highlights included watching a group of six Moose, getting “all hands on” deck to hoist the sails on our three-masted Schooner to sail along a fjord, and snowshoeing through frozen birch forests and peaceful arctic villages. We also enjoyed an afternoon in Tromsø to visit the Arctic Cathedral and the Polar Museum.

Day 1

Friday 3rd January

This morning most of the group flew from Heathrow at 10:30am, arriving into Oslo at 14:30 (local time). After collecting our bags, we walked the easy 100 metres to check into our lovely airport hotel. It was an extremely comfortable place to spend the night, with a warm and welcoming reception area, complete with seating area and a fire. The group had the afternoon at leisure, and some went into Oslo to explore and dine in a local restaurant, whilst some relaxed in the hotel. Throughout the afternoon Sara met passengers on the remaining flights coming from other UK airports.

At 7pm, those who hadn't gone into Oslo met in the hotel bar for a drink, and we dined at the hotel, before opting for an early night.

Day 2

Saturday 4th January

We had the morning at leisure to enjoy the hotel's fabulous buffet breakfast (some sat grazing, sampling the different dishes, for well over an hour!) and all met Sara at the hotel reception at 12 noon to check out and go to the airport for our flight to Tromsø. We landed at 4:30pm – stepping out into the fresh arctic air and boarded our private coach for the short ride to our boat. There had been a 'polar marathon' on in Tromsø in the afternoon(!), and we could see all of the finished runners gathering in the square, wrapped up in their foil blankets. It was dark, but the snow and lights around the town made it look very picturesque.

After a 20-minute journey we arrived at our wonderful boat and boarded. We settled into our cabins and, after a safety briefing (and safety drill on deck!) were served a delicious buffet dinner. Once folk had finished eating, Birgit, Sindre and Sara properly introduced themselves and we set sail north east from Tromsø to Hasnes, dropping anchor at Hasnes at about midnight.

Day 3

Sunday 5th January

After a delicious and leisurely breakfast at 8am, we readied ourselves to depart the boat for a morning stroll at Hasnes. We hopped on shore at 9:45am and split into 2 groups – one for a long walk through the frozen birch

forest, and one for a shorter, more leisurely walk through the village. Equipped with snow shoes, both groups set off into the wonderful winter wonderland, admiring the quaint houses with their beautiful Christmas lights (which, in the darker climes of northern Norway, are apparently left up until March to brighten the long winter days!). It was snowing, and cloudy, but the thick snow falling in the silent woodland was truly a wonderful winter wonderland experience to enjoy. Two magpies were seen flying around the village, along with two Hooded Crows and a Red-breasted Merganser fishing in the harbour.

Once back on board at 1pm, we had a very welcome lunch and then moved the boat across the channel over to the little village of Stakkvik. Here, we could disembark the boat and put on crampons to explore this small snowy village. Everyone was back on board for 4pm, where we listened to a very interesting talk on Norway's history from Birgit over a cup of tea and biscuits.

We then sailed until 10pm to Haukøysundet in Kvanangenfjord, where the whales are often seen, to be in position to look for them the next morning.

Day 4

Monday 6th January

This morning we started exploring Kvanangenfjord at first light (about 9:30am). By 9:45am we had already spotted our first whales on the horizon - Humpbacks! There were several of them (appearing as distant black blobs in the sea due to the low light) which were swimming nearby a group of fishing boats. This was no surprise – both the boats and the Humpbacks were there for the same thing; the abundance of Herring which arrives into the fjords over winter.

As we approached, we started to get better views, and even had more Humpbacks appearing on several sides of the boat. Thirty minutes later, we saw two Orca off the starboard side of the boat! We slowed down, and watched the feeding unfold, as we had sailed into the middle of a very productive area. The fishing boats gradually came closer, and so did the Humpbacks and Orca, surrounding us as they fed on the herring. There was an excited buzz on deck, as everyone stood on the bow, not knowing where to look or to point their cameras!

We enjoyed a fabulous hour watching the whales feed around us, and even as it began to snow, we barely noticed! It was truly a privilege to not only be witnessing this superb event, but to be on our very own private boat and floating in the heart of the action. Many of the group couldn't contain their excitement, and whoops and cheers were constantly erupting from the bow as the whales appeared at the surface, particularly when a Humpback Whale started breaching behind the boat! We also had several White-tailed Eagles fly overhead nearby, including an adult and juvenile grappling and displaying together in flight.

After lunch we landed on the abandoned island of Skorpa and split into two groups for either a long or short walk. It was fabulous to explore this area with no one else around – another benefit of taking a privately-chartered cruise; we could land at as many remote sites as we wished! We had a good leg stretch, some of the group walking to a frozen lake, where we enjoyed five minutes of total quiet to truly appreciate the Arctic silence (which was interrupted by a Tengmalm's Owl calling from the trees near the lake, which we were only too delighted to hear!). We also walked around the abandoned houses and church, and after an hour or so came back to the welcoming lights of our boat to warm up with a cup of tea.

Once back on board we sailed across the channel from Skorpa to drop anchor in the sheltered bay of Kvitebergbukta off the mainland. Before dinner, Sindre gave us a fascinating talk on the biology and behaviour of Orca.

After dinner, Birgit started to organise a 'Aurora watch' schedule, when people could put their names down to volunteer to get up through the night and each spend an hour on a rota watching for any sign of the lights, and to alert the rest of the sleeping ship should they appear. Just as most people had finished putting their names down for a shift, Sindre calmly announced that the Northern Lights were already outside, visible above the boat! There was a rather comical three seconds of stunned silence as everyone stared at him, thinking he was joking, until Sara shouted 'Go, go go!' and everyone leapt up from their seats, abandoning drinks and quickly throwing on coats before storming outside.

The lights were directly above us, and we were perfectly positioned in a dark bay, away from light pollution, to allow our eyes to adjust and see them. They started as a very pale narrow band of 'cloud' above our heads, which came and faded. Another band of lights appeared above the mountain in the bay where we were anchored, which again shimmered and faded. Then, after about 20 minutes of us watching, a band reappeared above our heads, becoming stronger, and then started to dance across the sky. Pale greens, pinks and purples could be seen in it, and we all stood on the deck in awe, watching the mesmerising performance. We stayed out watching them until midnight, by which time we were all more than satisfied with our spectacular viewing and could abandon our 'Aurora watch' rota for a very peaceful night's sleep after a day of back to back encounters!

Day 5

Tuesday 7th January

We set off this morning to go up and around Kvanangenfjord and Spildra island, near where we had been the previous day. Sara found a lone Humpback Whale, which we watched for 45 minutes before moving into Jokelfjord to look for Orca, but nothing appeared to be around – everything was quiet. The weather was quite cloudy and rainy by this point, but the keenest members of the group stayed out on deck with Sara and Sindre to look for wildlife, although we didn't see any more cetaceans.

In the early afternoon we came into Reinfjord, and at 3pm disembarked for a Zodiac ride to the shore and to enjoy a walk. The short-walk group strolled around the village, and the long-walk group donned their snowshoes and went for a good leg stretch up through a valley which contained huge boulders. Standing in the valley looking back to the bay where our boat was anchored, it was easy to see how the area had been created from a glacier thousands of years ago, which had left these enormous boulders behind after it had melted.

We stayed the night in Reinfjord and, after dinner, listened to a talk from Sara on how northern lights are formed, followed by a talk from Sindre on Humpback Whales. Afterwards, Sara played a charades-type game with some of the group in the saloon (which was the cause of huge roars of laughter!) whilst others wrapped up and sat out on deck with a mug of hot chocolate to enjoy the tranquil silence of the beautiful mountainous surroundings and the sound of the arctic waters gently lapping at our boat.

Day 6

Wednesday 8th January

We set sail after breakfast and left Reinfjord, sailing slowly south-west to look for whales. En route, we saw six moose walking through the trees along the snowy shoreline. At least one of them was a mother with two young. They paid no attention to the boat whatsoever, and we were able to quietly approach the shore to get marvellous views of them as they walked in the snow. It was heart-warming to witness them interacting with one another – sniffing each other and occasionally frolicking. We noted that one of the moose was trying to befriend the mother and her two young. She didn't take kindly to this, and chased it off each time. It is possible that this was a young moose, wanting some maternal care and affection. However, mothers of many species will not take another's offspring under their wing, as all of their energy and efforts must go into successfully raising their own young, so despite the moose's efforts, it was not befriended by the mother or her offspring! We also spotted a single female Goldeneye which was on the water between us and the shore.

After half an hour of admiring the moose we continued on our way, scanning for signs of cetaceans. We could see on our radar that the fishing boats following the Herring had moved north out into deeper water (and so likely had whales near them), but as this water was much more exposed, we decided not to follow them, as the seas there were looking very unpleasant and certainly would have made some people turn green! We still had chances of seeing whales where we were in the fjords, so we stayed in the sheltered areas. Before lunch we had the excitement of stopping the engine and getting 'all hands on deck' to raise the sails and start to (slowly!) move under our own power. There was very little wind, so we peacefully moved along the fjord at a couple of knots. At 4pm Birgit gave a presentation about White-tailed Eagles, and afterwards Sara did the checklist. We then arrived into Hamnes late afternoon and some got off the boat to have a walk along the harbour.

The evening sky was clear and the aurora forecast was good, so after dinner we headed out onto the deck! Sure enough, after 10 minutes or so, we got a glimpse of a faint aurora over the harbour with the mountain behind it. We stayed watching it come and go for an hour, and then Sara took some of the group off the boat and along a road to the nearby fish racks (where cod was drying to produce stockfish (air-dried fish), a popular product of the region) and watch the phenomenon in a darker spot. It was a cold and windy evening – a storm was forecast! Nonetheless we enjoyed a wonderful view of the aurora, and we ran an 'aurora watch' all evening, taking it in turns to volunteer to watch for the lights appearing. It seemed, though, that we had already witnessed the best of the show, as by 1am it started to cloud over. The team were determined though, and stayed out through the night, but they didn't see the aurora appear again.

Day 7

Thursday 9th January

This morning we woke to bad weather – the forecasted storm had arrived. Force 9 winds (47–54 mph) blew up the fjord, but, due to the captain's excellent preparation, we were safely tucked into the harbour against the pier, sheltered from the worst of it! At 10am we braved an hour's walk along the coastal road. To say the wind 'blew the cobwebs away' is an understatement! Nonetheless, the group were in exceptionally good spirits, many of them giggling as the gusts of wind from behind ushered us along with road. We got back on board at 11:30am looking extremely wet and windswept, but with big smiles, and certainly very ready for lunch!

At 3pm, Sara gave a talk on the cetaceans of the North Sea (most of which are also seen in Norway) and marine conservation issues, and then half of the group braved another walk at 4pm (now in force 10 winds!), while others stayed and chatted over coffee and biscuits in the warmth of the ship's saloon. At 5pm we watched a film on the fjords of Norway, followed by dinner at 7pm and at 8:30pm we enjoyed a talk from Birgit on her

incredible expedition of skiing to the North Pole – a feat of herculean proportions which had all of us on the edge of our seats!

Day 8

Friday 10th January

This morning we started sailing at 6am to head back to Tromsø. The weather was still a little choppy, although fortunately not as bad as anticipated! Most of the wind had died down by 9:30am and many of us stood out on deck, enjoying the gorgeous morning light over the fjord and the calm morning waters. By 11am we were sailing into snow clouds, and thick snowflakes started to fall heavily on the deck and those of us outside, but we didn't mind! We had good clothes to keep us warm, and embraced the wonderful Arctic weather. People stood with mugs of tea and chatted excitedly while Sara stationed herself at the front of the boat in the hope of seeing a porpoise or dolphin. A lone Guillemot flew past the bow, and a distant White-tailed Eagle was perched on some rocks by a lighthouse on the shore, but nothing else was around, probably due to the extremely high winds and storm the day before.

We arrived into Tromsø harbour at 2pm. The warm glow of the lights from this charming Arctic city were very welcoming, and we disembarked to spend the afternoon exploring. Most of the group went to the Polar Museum and Sara organised a taxi to take some of the group to the Arctic Cathedral – a stunning yet minimalistic structure built in 1965 – before visiting the cathedral. Others browsed the shops or went to an ice bar to drink from 'ice glasses'.

At 6:45pm all of the crew gathered in the restaurant and the captain made a speech to thank them for all of their hard work. Sara said a few words to reiterate our gratitude for their assistance, and after several cheerful rounds of applause we happily tucked into our final meal on board.

After dinner Sara gave a presentation about the wildlife in the Hebrides which can also be seen in Norway, including River Otters and White-tailed Eagles (which were re-introduced to the UK from Norway) and showed a short wildlife film. Then, most opted for an early night, ready for our early departure tomorrow.

Day 9

Saturday 11th January

We had a wake-up call at 5:45am and collected our packed breakfasts before gathering in the restaurant and bar to ready ourselves for our departure. The highlight of the morning was a wonderful surprise from one of the guests, Allan, who got down on one knee and proposed to his partner Trace on the bow of the boat... and she said yes! The group were delighted (there were tears of joy from the happy couple and from some of the group and crew!), and we all gave them huge congratulations. Ali, the captain, even handed them a special certificate to mark their Arctic engagement. It was a wonderful way to end the trip, and we all wished them a very happy marriage together.

We then said our goodbyes to the crew, and boarded our coach transfer for the 20 minute journey to the airport from where most of the group flew to Heathrow via Oslo (a couple of guests chose to stay in Tromsø, while some were staying in Oslo for a few days and a couple of others flew to other regional airports in the UK). At Heathrow we all said our goodbyes and stepped out into the British winter weather – which felt remarkably

balmy after our Arctic week – and left with wonderful memories of a fantastic cruise in a truly special part of the world.

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Orca



Elk



View from the vessel



Whale watching

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only; T = Track; P = possible; Pb = probably)

	Common name	Scientific name	January						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>			T				
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			✓	✓			
3	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			✓				
4	Arctic fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>				T			
5	Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>					6		

Birds

1	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>					✓		
3	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			P	P			
4	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					1		
5	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1					P
6	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			T	T			
7	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	2	1
8	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					✓		
9	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					✓		
10	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓		
12	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>							✓
13	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓						✓
14	Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>			H				
15	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓					
16	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>						Pb	
17	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		2					
18	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		2					
19	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2	1	✓	✓	
20	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>						✓	
21	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>						Pb	

Other Species

1	Starfish sp.	<i>Asterozoa sp</i>			✓				
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