

The Bergen waterfront.

# Cruising along the fjord-filled coast of Norway

It was 4:30 in the morning and I had been up since 3 a.m. My natural time clock was completely confused by the bright sunshine pouring through my cabin window, for I was in the Land of the Midnight Sun in northern Norway.

It had taken me four days and four flights through nine time zones (with a stopover in Oslo) to arrive in Kirkenes from California. There I boarded the MS *Nordnorge* for a 6-day cruise over the top of the world and down to Bergen.

## The ship

This was not a cruise ship we were on but a cargo vessel that also carried passengers. Working ships like these, once the lifelines along the Norwegian coast, began service in 1893 carrying cargo and mail. Today the fleet of Norwegian Coastal Voyage, referred to as *Hurtigruten* within Norway, comprises 12 vessels which look like modern cruise ships.

My cabin on board the MS *Nordnorge* was a "large standard with sofa/berth," and it was roomier than I expected, measuring 107 square feet. Though it was designed for two people, I was alone, part of a press group hosted by Norwegian Coastal Voyages, Inc., and the Norwegian Tourist Board.

The bed I slept on was a frame attached to the wall containing a piece of foam which was pulled down in the evening. The second bed was a couch which opened to reveal another piece of foam.



Passengers returning to the *Nordnorge* in Hammerfest are greeted by an organ grinder.

## Patricia Arrigoni Fairfax, CA

The bathroom was typical for a ship, with a miniature shower, toilet, sink with potable water and cabinets for medicines and cosmetics. A welcome surprise was the heated tile floor.

Built in 1997, the *Nordnorge* carries passengers to 34 ports between Bergen and Kirkenes, Norway. The ship contains 464 berths but can hold 691 passengers, as some people are just on board for a day between regularly scheduled stops. There is also space for 50 cars.

Like a modern cruise ship, the *Nordnorge* supplied passengers with a dining room, cafeteria, bar, library, children's playroom, sauna, a small gym, conference rooms and lounges with panoramic views.

Because this is a working cargo ship, passengers, supplies and vehicles were being moved on and off the ship all along the route, day and night. The night deliveries were a bit noisy, with some cabin passengers hearing more than others.

I could hear engine sounds, the opening and closing of the side compartments to transfer vehicles

and cargo, and the lowering of anchors. In spite of earplugs, a stop at any port during the night almost always woke me up. However, after a day or two, I got used to the sounds and learned to sleep through most of them.

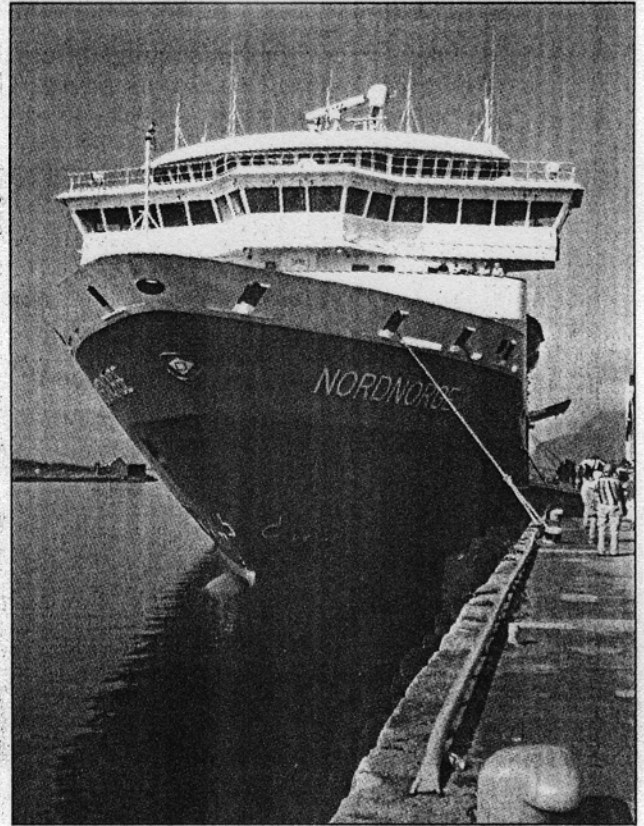
### The food

The food aboard the *Nordnorge* was surprisingly good. Breakfast and lunch were served as a buffet, and dinner was a fixed menu. The breakfast featured both an American spread of sausage and bacon; scrambled, boiled or fried eggs; potatoes, and cereal plus more European selections such as sliced cold cuts, liver pâté, Norwegian caviar and a variety of cheeses, salads and fruit. All this was accompanied by a selection of breads and rolls plus coffee and tea.

Lunch offerings included fresh or smoked salmon, halibut and other

fresh fish and shellfish as well as oven-roasted potatoes, reindeer stew, lamb chops with rosemary and smoked ham. Among other selections were salads and fresh strawberries and blackberries, with puddings, chocolate chip mousse and chocolate cake for dessert.

Dinners were fixed, but over the five evenings that I ate in the dining room the variety included venison, chicken, pork tenderloin and oven-baked salmon.



The MS *Nordnorge* stops in Bronneysund.

*Below: The Nordnorge's lounge offers a panoramic view.  
Right: My cabin (No. 324) on board. The bed is fastened to the wall on the right.*



town of Honningsvåg and the North Cape, Europe's northernmost point, to have breakfast at the "Roof of Europe." This was part of a 6½-hour tour through the Finnmark region, the home of Norway's native Sami population.

After touring the cape, where we saw a fascinating slide presentation, we followed the coastal road past several majestic fjords. The tundra landscape was typical of the area.

We stopped at a Sami village where the native people were dressed in their traditional costumes. They

### **The cruise**

Our first day on board at Kirkenes was counted as day seven by the ship's staff, who started their count from Bergen. The ship departed from Kirkenes at 1:30 p.m. and stopped in Vardø at 5:00. There was no planned excursion, but passengers were allowed off the ship during the 45-minute stop to explore the town and the old Vardøhus Fort, built in 1737.

No one kept track of who left the ship, but everyone was given an identification card which needed to be shown when leaving or boarding. If passengers did not make it back on time, the ship left without them.

Several large buses picked up passengers from the ship the next morning at 6:00 for a long excursion to the

posed for photographs along with their reindeer.

From our bus we saw large herds of reindeer feeding freely on a large range, part of some 210,000 protected animals which live there in the summer. We learned that there are also 800,000 puffins and three million other birds in Finnmark County.

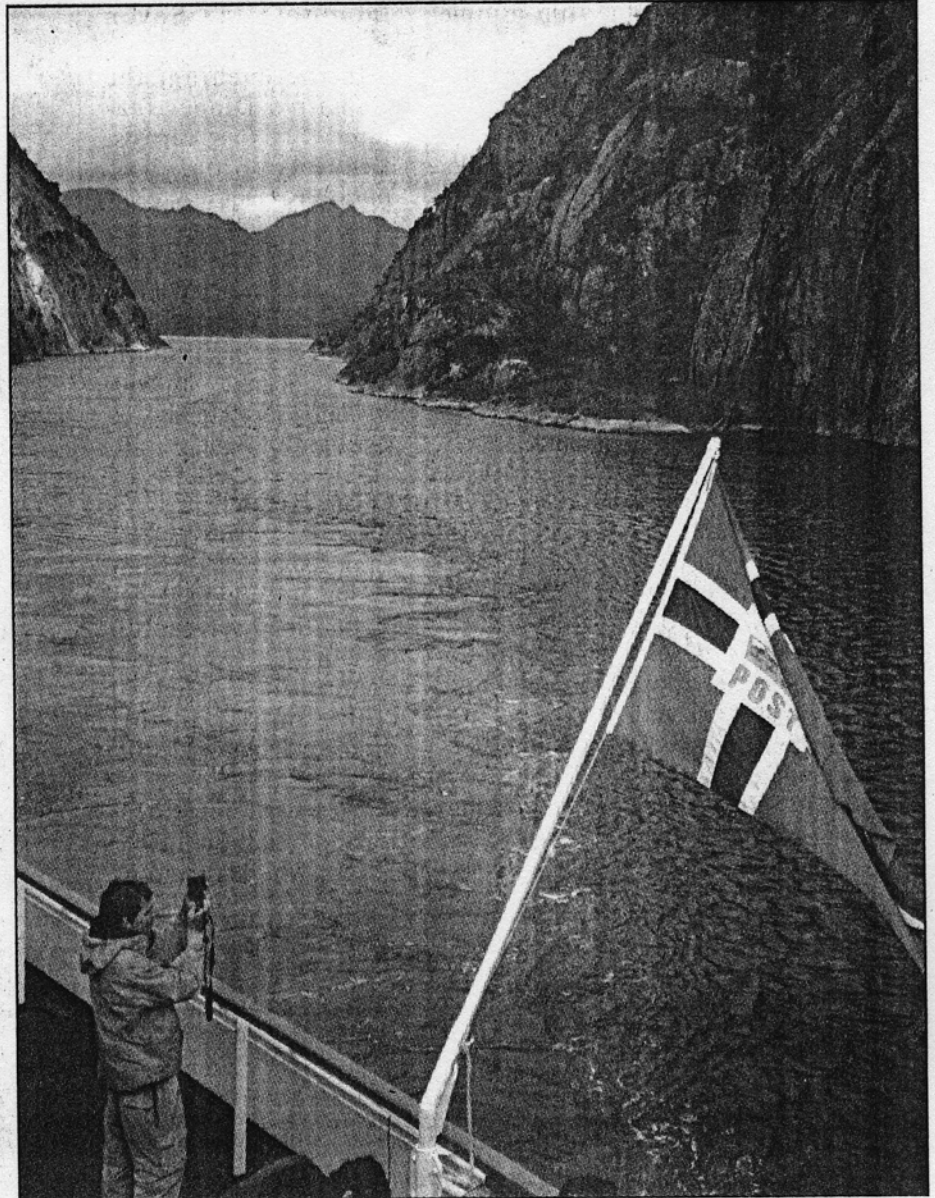
At the end of the day's tour we returned to the ship at Hammerfest and spent a glorious sunny afternoon stretched out in lounge chairs on the upper deck.

### Islands and fjords

Our ship arrived in the town of Harstad at 8 a.m. the next day and we disembarked to take a 4½-hour tour of the Vesterålen Islands. Harstad, a town of picturesque wooden houses mixed with more modern concrete structures, celebrated its 100th birthday in 2004. Situated 155 miles above the Arctic Circle, I was amazed to find temperatures quite pleasant, in the 70s. Norway's coast is warmed by the Gulf Stream, which keeps it from freezing even in winter.

After leaving Harstad, we drove by green farms with crops of strawberries, large stands of birch trees and wheat fields already harvested. We then took a 20-minute ferry ride from Refsnes across a fjord to Andsfjord.

As we sailed along, we learned there had been many avalanches in this area. I looked up to see high



Sailing through the narrow Trollfjord.

mountains with patches of snow and glaciers, even though it was deep

into summer. It began to rain as we neared the fishing village of Sortland,