



Johan Augustin

Sailing to the midnight sun

On a Norwegian cruise with his father, Johan Augustin enjoys deep fjords, snow-capped mountains and a night-time wilderness trek

Norway is the most striking of the Scandinavian countries. As a Swede, I've travelled there often, so when dad asks me to join him on a week's sailing trip in Northern Norway, the answer is easy. He has already been sailing for a month – having started from Bergen on Norway's west coast – and plans to travel to the remote and pristine archipelago of Central Troms.

It's a rainy Sunday afternoon when I reach Harstad, a hub on Hinnøya, Norway's largest island outside Svalbard. Even

though it's the first week of July, the summer has had a slow start in Northern Norway, and the temperature hovers around 10°. I meet dad in the port where his Bavaria Cruiser 37 is docked. Just in order to reach this distant town I've travelled for about 20 hours from Stockholm by train and bus, and feel pleased to have reached what – for the next six days – will be the joint home for me and dad.

The port of Harstad doesn't showcase the best of Northern Norway's gems, particularly not in this gloomy weather, so early next morning we take off, heading

north towards the island of Senja.

Dad is an early bird, and usually up by five. I'm a night owl and never get out of bed before eight. Surprisingly, this is feasible on board – since I sleep in the stern cabin and dad in the bow, we don't see each other until he starts the engine, a couple of hours after he wakes up.

We motor out of the port, with the wind blowing only four knots. While dad helms and navigates, I sit by the rudder taking in the surroundings. We pass the tiny fishing village of Engenes, situated on the north-western tip of Andøya. The island

has the highest number of peaks in the country, 20 of them rising above 1,000m. Even the waters are inhabited by giants: here swims one of Earth's largest shark species, the Greenland shark, which is similar in size to a Great White, and can grow to 7m and weigh 1.5 tonnes. It's also the vertebrate with the longest known lifespan; between 300 and 500 years! However, unlike the Great White it's docile and non-confrontational, maybe due to the fact that the water temperature in summer hovers around 10°, and most swimmers stay out of the water!

I imagine huge sharks swimming beneath us when we pass through the strait – past the emerald green slopes of Eastern Senja, which are capped in snow. On the chartplotter I notice the great variation in depth across the seabed; from 20m to

'The only sound is from a rippling creek. The taste is pure. No additives. Just nature'

400m – the same structure of the landscape seen above and below the surface. "It's a reflection of nature – where the sea bottom resembles the mountain range," says dad.

A few houses are scattered at the end of the slopes, some in glades surrounded by forest, some on sandy beaches. We contemplate how the locals can make a living in what appears to be a long way from any form of civilisation. Today is the first day of sunshine after several weeks of rain. As we pass the 69th parallel north, dad looks at me. "Cheers," he says, with a smile.

The Arctic Cathedral

After sailing 45 nautical miles and spending the first eight hours on the boat, it's a feeling of relief to disembark in Finnsnes – a town on the mainland separated from Senja by a narrow sound.

Away from any potential shark attack, I decide to go for a swim in the turquoise water, or rather a quick dip: off a cliff close to the jetty. Afterwards, dad and I cook reindeer stew with boiled potatoes and a salad. We relax in the cockpit, sipping red wine and watching the sun that won't set – it's still fully bright long after dinner. I



The village of Husøy covers the island with the same name – which is connected to much larger Senja

LEFT The Norwegian wilderness has a calming – and bonding effect – on those who venture into it

RIGHT A quick dip in the turquoise and chilly waters of Finnsnes





Tromsdalen church in Tromsø is known as the Arctic Cathedral



Finding charming, hidden natural ports is never difficult in Northern Norway



The midnight sun mesmerizes the visitor



LEFT 'Rorbuer' are typical red fishing cottages found throughout the Norwegian archipelago

RIGHT Orcas frequent Senja's coastline



Sturdy ships, built to cope with the changeable weather, cross these waters,



have always wanted to experience the midnight sun, and have been obsessed with sunny climates, which is partly the reason why I have resided in Sydney the last two years. In Northern Norway, well above the Arctic Circle, the midnight sun – or midnight light, which would be a more appropriate name – is apparent for about two summer months from 20 May until 22 July each year.

As if reading my mind dad looks at me: "You can stay up, I'll go to bed," he says. But the stew and wine have made me sleepy, enhanced by the soporific effect of the waves slapping the hull. As the temperature drops, dad switches on the diesel heater, which, though noisy, doesn't stop me falling into a deep slumber.

In the morning dark clouds hang from the sky and it's raining. The constant change in weather makes it hard to plan far ahead, which throws me back a few years – to a sun-drenched sailing trip on a

'Dad and I cook reindeer stew with boiled potatoes and sip wine in the cockpit, watching the sun that won't set'

catamaran in the Whitsundays. There, it was the tropical storms that delayed departure. Another parallel with Australia (aside from the white beaches scattered around Troms archipelago) is a landmark that resembles Sydney's Opera House. Tromsdalen Church, also known as The Arctic Cathedral, has in fact been called 'the opera house of Norway' due to its distinct look.

As we approach Tromsø, the largest city of Northern Norway, and the northernmost point on our journey, the building – which takes form as an iceberg – juts above the rest of the buildings. The church is particularly famous for its midnight

concerts, which on rare occasions occur during midnight sun.

"You seem more relaxed now than when you first came onboard," dad observes. It's been a month since he left Bergen, and his usually impatient personality has calmed down substantially. Dad, or Hans as his name is, recently retired from working as a tinsmith for over five decades and running a company with many employees. He feels relieved, free from the stress that came with running a business.

"I've never felt this good," he tells me. "I'll probably sell the house and continue sailing around the world."

After exploring the small harbour in Tromsø with its picturesque cafés and restaurants, we set sail for another island, Kvaløya, where the highlight of the trip is to come. We dock at the jetty in the small fishing village of Tromvik, and since dad prefers us not to use the minimalistic shower on board I take off my clothes and jump into the clear aquamarine water. It looks tropical, but the Arctic salty sting quickly forces me back out – feeling like

an unshaved sailor with salt in my hair, invigorated and highly rejuvenated.

We cook dinner and make ourselves comfortable in the cockpit. It's gone 9pm but the sun is still warm. Dad seems completely at ease.

"What an evening, this is sailing at its best," he says with twinkling eyes.

The small village of Tromvik is surrounded by a mountain range – where the snowy pinnacles resemble the spiky back of a dragon basking in the sun. I don

my hiking gear and head for the trails – where I plan to do a seven-mile trek, which will take four hours. The island of Kvaløya has at least 10 peaks reaching over 700m, and three over 1,000m.

This is the first night in two weeks that the midnight sun will be fully present in clear skies, and there are other hikers with the same mind-set as me. Surprisingly, though, I'm the only one on this particular trail. The only sound I hear is from a rippling creek. I squat and drink. The taste is pure. No additives. Just nature.

I ascend one of the peaks and find a flat rock to sit on, about 800m above sea level. There is no wind, no sound, no phone connection. Only the midnight sun warming my face, and colouring the ocean golden. It's as though the sun hangs from an invisible string over the horizon. My watch shows 1am and it still feels like afternoon. Now I realise why people travel long distances to see the midnight sun. This is truly one of the most mesmerising experiences I've had. Nature and I, nothing else. When I reach the boat, dad is long asleep. Tomorrow we will continue southwards along Senja's

coastline and pass the fjords that cut into the island where the waters are shared by orcas and humpback whales. The trek has raised my serotonin levels and I feel fulfilled. The small port of Tromvik in Northern Norway, where nature is at the centre of everything, has heightened my awareness and taught me to be fully present in the moment. That in itself, has also brought me closer to dad.



Tourists come to Northern Norway to fish in waters teeming with cod and other species



Dad gives navigation directions



ABOVE Hans Hansson at the helm of his yacht Cutty Sark

RIGHT A lone bench in Kvaløya – becomes a landmark for a couple to watch the surroundings



Travel in Norway

Like other Nordic countries Norway has legislated for 'the right of public access to the wilderness', or the 'right to roam'. In some cases this includes privately owned land. This makes it easier to trek and camp out in the archipelago of Northern Norway. The climate in the Troms archipelago is mild in winter for such a northerly destination, due to the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. During this time you can also spot the Northern Lights.

There are a few options in travelling to Troms archipelago. Tromsø and Andenes have airports that are both linked to Oslo's international airport. Norwegian, SAS and Widerøe fly domestic routes. Regular bus and speed boat/ferry services link the archipelago together. Rail lines reach as far as Lofoten's Bodø and you can take the train from Sweden as far north as Narvik (2½ hours by bus from Harstad). The national route planner covers all modes of public transport for trips across Norway: en-tur.no

For information about Northern Norway, visit visitnorway.com