

OF SLED DOGS AND KING CRABS

My
Hurtigruten
cruise

A Canadian writer
leaves her comfort zone
and learns to embrace
winter in Norway's
frozen fjords.

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN

I am absolutely terrified. Fifty-one sled dogs are baying and howling by the light of a fat-bellied moon. I am in Svanvik, Norway, near the Russian border. In spite of the crystalline air, or perhaps because of it, the smell of the dogs is sharp.

I am dressed in a too-large snowsuit, felt-lined mukluks and wool-lined mitts.

I move closer to hear Trine Beddari, our wilderness host, as she spells out how to operate the sled, "There are only two rules to remember about dog sledding. One, whatever you do, do **not** let go of the sled."

Her long blonde hair flickers, illuminated in the dark by someone's headlamp, as she slowly looks around the group. "And two? Always remember rule number one."

Great. No liability waivers, no real instructions





beyond how the brakes work. Hang on for dear life and, as a last resort, use the heavy-duty snow anchor in case the driver forgets rules one and two.

My friend Amy takes the driver's position on the back rails while I sit in front for this first leg of the journey. My fear, along with the snow anchor on my lap, is heavy and cold.

Much more than a cruise

This heart-pounding excitement was not what I expected when I signed up for a northbound Hurtigruten cruise along Norway's coast. Traveling with a group of fellow travel writers, I counted on drifting through lovely fjords, strolling along a snowy sidewalk

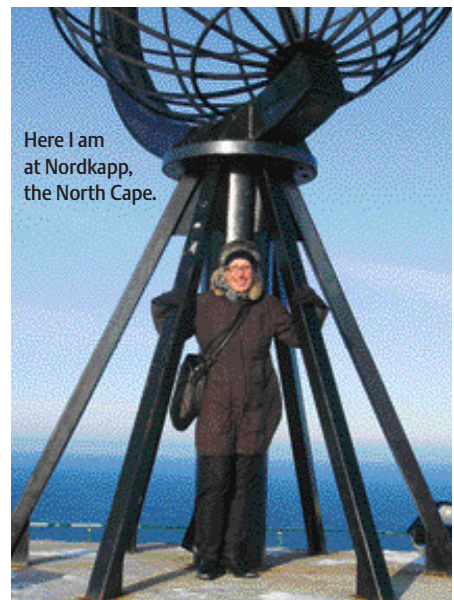
somewhere or perhaps soaking in the view of colorful coastal houses from an on-deck hot tub. I'd already fallen in love with our departure city of Bergen and knew this March tour might even offer a glimpse of the Northern Lights.

To be fair, I did all those things. But if that was all I had done, I think the memory of the trip would have been relegated to the category of a nice but non-eventful holiday, filled with recollections that fade from lack of an edge.

But my memories from

this trip will be crystal clear and very sharp. Because, instead of just lolling about the ship's decks and lounges, our group sought out the add-on experiences, such as this dog sledding trip, that Hurtigruten offered in its ports of call along the way.

I don't want to paint a false picture. It's not like we were activity addicts. There were many nights I could barely



Here I am at Nordkapp, the North Cape.



Our king crab safari in Jarfjorden

This trip taught me that "thrill" lives on the other side of that fenced area known as the "comfort zone."

shuffle back to my snug cabin after gorging on the ship's all-you-can-eat seafood buffet. But the dog sledding experience turned out to be one of the highlights, not just of this trip, but of my entire life.

The far-from-ordinary experiences didn't stop there, however.

An Arctic safari

I think back to another adventure, which started with a bus ride through the frozen Norwegian landscape. When we arrived at Jarfjordbotn, we were all given multiple layers of winter gear, topped off with a dull red survival suit. Our king crab safari had begun.

The inflatable boat ride across the fjord left my teeth frozen from

PLAN YOUR OWN ARCTIC ADVENTURE

Whether its skiing, dog sledding or searching for Nordic lights, Norway is a winter wonderland for travelers. Check out these resources for inspiration. For more information on winter cruises and expeditions, contact a travel agency specializing in Scandinavian travel.

Arctic Adventure Resort

arctic-adventure.no

Hurtigruten Cruises

hurtigruten.us

Birk Arctic Experiences

birkhusky.no

Visit Tromsø

destinasjontromso.no/english/index.html

Visit Norway

visitnorway.com





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the cold. We struggled out of the boat and onto the ice as we were handed our final protection: an orange plastic baggie-suit that covered everything. Our guide demonstrated his buoyancy by promptly falling into the icy waters.

We took turns sitting on the edge of the icy crust and falling backwards into the frigid water. I lay on my back as if in a hammock, orange feet poking up out of the dark waves, my hands like paddles with only the thumb separate from the hand's mitt. We waved at each

other, splashing and playing like children.

There were moments when we floated apart and the snowy silence filled the world—strangely peaceful, buoyant and blissfully bizarre.

Beneath us, a scuba diver grabbed up king crabs from the bottom of Jarfjord. He stacked the creatures into a waving pile of purpley-orange appendages on the ice. They were enormous, with legs that can reach a span of up to 2 meters, and with bodies as heavy as 13 kilos.

Reluctantly, I bobbed my way back to the boat for its return. When we were safely back at the Arctic Adventure Resort, our hosts handed us thick felt booties to warm us while the crab cooked. The table awaiting us was filled with crab legs, mayonnaise and thick slabs of Norwegian bread.

We were all quiet when we finally boarded the bus for the ride back to our



ship. The day spent playing outside had finally caught up with us. I smiled as I watch heads nod. Finally, I let my own fleece-cushioned head slump against the dark window as the Norwegian woods slid by.

Rediscovering winter

“Thrilling” is one of those overused words, unless you really feel it. This trip taught me that “thrill” lives on the other side of that fenced area known as the “comfort zone.”

As my Norwegian adventures continued to unfold I realized that at some point in my life I’d quit giving myself permission to just give things—any things—a whirl. There is something about being an adult that says we shouldn’t fall off our bikes anymore, that we should *conduct ourselves*.

Admittedly, it is probably a much safer and less embarrassing existence. But it also can be boring.

I pride myself on my Canadian, true-north heritage, but I live on the mild west coast of Canada. Before this trip, I’d always thought of snow as something you looked at through a picture window with a glass of wine, a good book and a roaring fireplace.

But after these experiences, I know that’s a lovely way to end, but not spend, the day.

It took a fjord-filled land half a world away to teach me how to really enjoy winter. There in the Nordic winter, the locals know “*det finnes ikke dårlig*

vær, bare dårlige klær.” (There is no bad weather, just the wrong clothing.)

Enjoying some heart-pumping excitement every day is a wonderful way to embrace winter. Meet it on its own turf, where it knows how to play for real.

It’s a thrill.

