NORTHERN LIGHTS IN NORWEGIAN FJORDS

Chris Morley heads north to experience the world's finest natural show

I'm wrenched from sleep by an announcement from the ship's captain, one I've been longing to hear: 'Northern Lights sighted on the port-side deck.' Dragging warm layers over my PJs, I exit the cabin and join an excitable flow of people heading to the deck. The icy air pinches my cheeks as I go outside, finding a gap in the line of woolly hatted passengers along the railings. And there it is – a sweep of green lights flickering and pulsing over an ink-black land mass. Everyone is grinning, sharing the thrill of witnessing this rare and beautiful cosmic dance. Encountering the mercurial aurora borealis was top of my wish list when I signed up for a Norwegian cruise, yet it was only one of many sublime moments.

I start my adventure in the old Hanseatic port of Bergen, where red- and ochre-painted wharves glow against periwinkle-blue skies. I'm sailing on the Viking Venus, a luxurious vessel that ploughs through a wind-blasted Norwegian Sea to the Arctic Circle, where weather systems are fast and ferocious. Cruising allows me to see the country in all its raw, elemental grandeur, while maxing-out on *koselig* – the Norwegian concept of embracing winter by being cosy, comfortable and sociable. Once on-board, I'm soon snuggled under a blanket in the lounge, glued to the drama of snow-draped fjords passing by the window.

'EVERYONE IS GRINNING, SHARING THE THRILL'

After two days at sea we cross the Arctic Circle and dock at Narvik, an industrial port with a gritty, Scandi-noir vibe. On a tour that ventures along the Arctic Highway, I peer through the steamed-up coach window and see a white wilderness of ice-capped peaks and lonely conifers that stretches all the way to Russia. Visibility narrows as we drive into a blizzard, but our driver reassures us this is normal for Norway and, actually, temperatures are unseasonably mild.

We arrive at Polar Park wildlife centre, where native animals roam in vast enclosures. The Arctic foxes in their fluffy white coats were raised by hand, so come readily to greet us, as do the brown bears, woken early from hibernation and hungry for the meaty snacks tossed to them by a ranger. So far, so cute, but it's the howls from a pack of elusive wolves that lift the hairs on my neck, a visceral reminder of the untamed expanse beyond the park perimeter.

At every port there are excursions that draw you deeper into the landscape and culture, whether meeting Sami reindeer herders or scudding through fir forests on a snowmobile. I snowshoe through mountains that are Christmas-card pretty, stomping through powder and puffing out plumes of warm air. The hike finishes at a chalet, where I devour waffles heaped with sour cream and jam, and let my chilled fingers defrost around mugs of strong coffee.

We head south to blue skies over Stavanger, Norway's oil capital. I'm here for a heart-thumping rib-boat ride along Lysefjord, a 40km-long, mountain-flanked channel that looks like it's been hewn by giants. Zipped into a thermal suit, I hold tight as the rib slaloms through the Stavanger archipelago and into the still, glacial-blue fjord. The boat idles under Preikestolen (Pulpit Rock), and I crane my neck to take in the hunk of granite hovering almost 2,000ft above. Further along, we stop close enough to catch the spray from Hengjanefossen, a cascade that ripples through the air like a wedding veil. It's a glorious trip in sparkling sunshine, but as the cold seeps into my bones, it's bliss to return to the comfort and warmth of the Venus.

✢ 12 nights on Viking Cruises' In Search of the Northern Lights cruise costs from £3,990 per person; viking.com >>

