

Sleds and Sleighs, Auroras and Fjords

Text and photos by Dr Yap Qi Rou, Editorial Board member

A trip to the Nordic region to chase the northern lights has long been on my bucket list, so when my friends and I heard that there would be stronger and more frequent auroras due to the peaking solar cycle, we decided to make the trip a reality. What I came away with was the holiday of a lifetime. While it was the allure of the northern lights that first drew us to Finland and Norway, I quickly realised that they had much more to offer than that. From striking mountains to the serene, breathtaking fjords, my winter trip to Finland and Norway was truly an unforgettable one!

Winter activities

We arrived in Rovaniemi, Finland, and travelled further northwards on a three-hour bus ride to Saariselkä, a small village high up in Finnish Lapland. There, we checked into a cosy cabin tucked amid piles of snow, offering us respite from the freezing weather. We spent the next few days exploring winter activities in the region.

Dog sledding

One activity that should definitely not be missed is dog sledding. Each sled carries two passengers – one seated in front and the other standing behind to guide the dogs. As the dog handler explained, the passengers and the dogs work together as a team. On steeper slopes, the dogs would glance back at us, providing our cue to step in. Keeping one foot on the sled, we would push off the

snow with the other to help with some added momentum. After our ride, we were given some time to play with the dogs that had pulled us through the snow. They were extremely friendly, pouncing on us and showering anyone who crouched down with enthusiastic kisses. We also got to learn more about the different dog breeds and how they are trained and taken care of.

Reindeer sleigh ride

In contrast to the thrilling dog sled ride, our journey on the reindeer sleigh was a much more tranquil one. Wrapped warmly in a huge blanket on our own individual sleighs, I almost fell asleep as the reindeers pulled us through snow-covered woods. While the ride usually ends in a wooden hut, the hut had caught fire earlier that day. Undeterred, we sat outside in the snow on reindeer hides, drinking warm berry juice as our guide taught us about reindeer herding and the indigenous Sami people. I was surprised to learn that these reindeers are usually allowed to roam freely in the wild for most of the year and are only herded back in winter!

Day tour to Tromsø

After wrapping up our winter activities in Finland, we took an eight-hour bus ride to Tromsø, Norway for the next part of our trip. There, we joined a day tour which brought us around the coast of Tromsø to explore the amazing views of the islands nearby. We started the day off with a drive to

Hella, a scenic area 30 kilometres south of Tromsø on the island of Kvaløya, where we were greeted with stunning views of the Norwegian sea and the surrounding mountains. Hella is also known for its historic wooden houses painted in vibrant hues of yellow, red and green, standing out against the natural scenery.

We then headed off to Sommarøy, a small, picturesque fishing village on the opposite side of Kvaløya. Sommarøy is famous more for summer activities like fishing, kayaking and hiking due to its sandy beaches and turquoise water, but in winter it still offers a beautiful coastal view of the snow-capped mountains nearby. We had our lunch here facing the majestic mountains – simple sandwiches filled with lettuce and berry jam along with steaming hot cups of tea and caramelised biscuits, all prepared by our lovely guide! As time was running out at this point, we had to head back to Tromsø, only briefly stopping on the way to snap a few quick photos of wandering reindeers and the snowy mountains.



Reindeer sledding in Finland



A beautiful day in Svolvær



Local harbour in Ballstad

Exploring the Lofoten Islands

The next part of our trip took place in the Lofoten Islands, an archipelago located in northern Norway known for its stunning natural landscape of clear waters and towering mountains. We first had to take a propeller plane from Tromsø to Ballstad, which flies at a lower altitude compared to jet planes, granting us amazing visuals of the natural fjords and snow-capped mountains below us! We spent our first day in Lofoten cosied up in a small cabin in Ballstad overlooking a great expanse of water, which was the local harbour. Norway is also especially famous for its white fish, and we enjoyed a tasty dinner of fresh cod and bacalao (dried, salted cod) at a local restaurant that night.

Next, we headed further north by bus to Svolvær, another small town in Lofoten. There, we caught a silent cruise out to see the Trollfjord, one of the most iconic fjords in Norway. As our guide explained to us, fjords are deep, narrow sea inlets with steep mountainous sides formed by glaciers carving out U-shaped valleys, which then fill with sea water after the glaciers have melted. While most pictures of the Trollfjord depict it against bright blue skies, the weather on that day was particularly uncooperative and we were met with hail and rain throughout our cruise. However, the clouds shrouding the Trollfjord lent it an unexpectedly

mysterious atmosphere; different from what I had imagined, but still equally captivating.

Chasing the northern lights

We had set out on this trip determined to catch the northern lights, and we booked multiple light-chasing tours to maximise our chances. The high solar activity meant that the lights were present almost daily, and the real challenge we faced was finding open skies devoid of clouds to view the lights in their full glory. Our first two attempts were rather unsuccessful, and we only managed to catch a glimpse of the muted lights through dense cloud cover.

On our third attempt in Tromsø, we drove two hours to the Finnish border, pulled over at the side of a highway and waited for the magic to happen. After about an hour of waiting, we started spotting streaks of white lighting up the sky. While most pictures of auroras show them in brilliant hues of greens, purples and reds, they often look much subtler to the naked eye and appear as bright waves of white light undulating across the sky. As the night progressed and the lights started shining brighter and brighter, I was left staring in awe as the dazzling auroras started dancing right before our very eyes, twisting and turning in the starry night sky. It was truly a moment that I will not forget for a long time to come.

Final thoughts

What began as a trip to see the northern lights turned out to be an unforgettable journey full of memorable experiences. From dog sledding and reindeer sleigh rides in Finland to exploring the Norwegian fjords and scenery, every part of the trip offered something new. Despite the freezing weather and unpredictable skies, the amazing experiences, quiet beauty of the region and dazzling auroras all made the trip entirely worthwhile! ♦

Dr Yap is a medical officer in the public health system. In her free time, she enjoys reading, painting and spending time with her friends and family. She can often be found looking at new destinations to travel to and aims to visit one new country per year!

