

Trip Report – Norway – Snorkelling with Orca

20th November 2024

We had an evening flight from Heathrow to Oslo with SAS. We were able to check our main bags all the way through to Tromsø which was helpful (although I would have packed a few more bits and pieces in my hand luggage had I known this in advance). The flight was ok and we made use of free lounge access with priority pass – although I have to say that if I had to pay for the lounge I would be very annoyed as it was crowded and the selection of food and drink was pretty terrible. We landed in Oslo, collected our bags, and got the airport shuttle bus to the Radisson Park Hotel. The shuttle bus is very expensive – it costs around half what it does for an uber, so if there are 2 or more travelling you are definitely better off in an uber. We just couldn't seem to get an uber late at night.

21st November

We were up very early for an absolutely fantastic breakfast in the hotel before heading back to the airport for our flight to Tromsø. The flight was uneventful and we collected our bags and got an uber to the Thon Hotel Tromsø where we would be staying later on in our trip. We left our bags at the hotel and walked to the alpine botanic gardens. The first snow had already fallen and some of the footpaths were snowy and icy but we made it there and back without incident. We headed to the ferry terminal to catch a boat to Skervoy, which took around 2 hours. We were met by the team from Northern Explorers and taken to the Duin III, our home for the next week. We were given a briefing on how everything on the boat worked, and fed dinner. However, the boat had an issue with the engine cooling system which a mechanic tried to fix that evening, and failed. So it looked as though we would be stuck in the harbour until that was sorted.

22nd November

The mechanic came back with a repaired part and by late morning we were able to leave Skervoy. This was excellent news as a storm was on its way and we would have been stuck in the harbour for a day otherwise. So we sailed through choppy seas to a protected area that was good for whales.

23rd November

Today we did our first excursion with the RIB. We had been warned that conditions wouldn't be great, with rain and sleet, bad visibility and choppy seas that would severely limit how far we could go. With expectations set low Andy and I decided to go anyway. It wasn't as miserable as we expected and we did see our first **orcas**, as well as some distant **humpbacks**. The Northern Lights put on a very brief appearance for us that evening through a brief gap in the thick cloud.

24th November

The weather started to calm down a bit today and we were able to move the Duin III from its protected anchorage. We motored around the fjord, spotting orca, humpbacks and a single group of **fin whales** from the boat. We transferred into the RIB to get a closer look, however the orca didn't want to interact with us. There was one orca that came close enough to potentially be able to see underwater, but none of us were ready with fins on, so only Andy and Stephan jumped into the water for a look, but they were too late and saw nothing. The Northern Lights put on another very brief show through the clouds.

25th November

We were very glad to wake up to clearer skies and calmer seas. After breakfast we were out in the RIB again to try to find some orca that would allow us to watch them underwater. There were certainly plenty of whales around – both

Orca and Humpbacks. Most of them were on a mission to get from A to B, but we did find one group who were more relaxed and we were able to jump in and watch them briefly as they swam past. We thought the day couldn't get much better, but little did we know...

We carried on and found some promising bird activity with some orca around the periphery. We dropped into the water and were rewarded with a few glimpses of orca swimming past. Then there were some bits of chewed up herring, and then a massive tight baitball of herring rose up in front of us, having being pushed to the surface by the orca. We were then treated to the full range of feeding behaviour – showing the herring their white stomachs to scare them and corral them into a tight ball, tail slaps to immobilise the herring, and then picking them off one by one. It was a large pod, and watching them work together to keep the herring tightly bunched while feeding was simply brilliant. The water was full of their whistles and communication calls. We thought it simply couldn't get any better...and then the humpbacks showed up to join in the fun! There were at least four of them and they would get under the school of herring and lunge through it, gulping huge mouthfuls of herring as they went. It was awe inspiring seeing these enormous whales in their own environment. The whole thing lasted around an hour, but it felt as though time stood still, and then it was over in a moment. Despite being in the water for so long I certainly wasn't aware of being cold – I was just having too much fun for that! Eventually another pod of orca showed up and the original pod abandoned the baitball, which melted back into the ocean as quickly as it started. We carried on for a bit longer in the RIB to see if we could find anything else, but the light was starting to fade, and the wind was picking up once more so we returned to the Duin III. While we had been in the water, Sven had picked up any dead herring that were floating in the water near the RIB so we had Orca caught herring for lunch the following day!



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26th November

We spent the morning in the RIB looking for more whales – there were loads of Orca and humpbacks around, but all just passing through and not suitable for watching underwater. The wind was picking up once again, so we returned back to the Duin III. The weather forecast for the next few days wasn't looking good, so the decision was made to return to Skervoy while we could. That night the wind really picked up and it was a noisy night with the waves slapping against the side of the boat



27th November

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The wind was still howling in the morning, so we went for a walk. We were walking through the harbour when we had a brief sighting of a very cute pair of small **otters**. Unfortunately they didn't stick around long enough for a photo. The plan was to walk up one of the local hills past a lake, but we hadn't gone very far when we were summoned back to the boat as the wind had dropped enough for us to be able to leave the harbour to look for whales. This turned out to be a fairly fruitless exercise – there were no whales and the weather was pretty foul with sleet and snow, so we returned to Skervoy harbour. The wind dropped eventually, but it was now too dark to see anything, so we just had our final dinner on board before heading into town with the group for a drink in the hotel bar.

28th November

We were up early to catch the fast ferry back to Tromsø. It was lumpy in places, but not too bad. We headed to the Thon hotel to check in and drop off our bags (they were able to give us a room despite it being 10am) and then we headed out to catch our minibus to take us dog sledding.

The Alaskan huskies were very friendly and also very excited to be out sledding. We both really loved this. Andy drove our sled and I was the passenger. There had been enough snow for it to feel like a winter wonderland.



We returned to Tromsø for a couple of hours before heading out on a Northern Lights chase. The skies around Tromsø were very overcast as the next storm rolled in. So we headed over the border into Finland. The skies were clear and there were plenty of stars but the Northern Lights didn't want to play ball. We got some photos, but you could never really see them clearly with the naked eye, so the whole thing was really quite underwhelming.



29th November

We had a late breakfast then headed to Polaria. This is a small aquarium home to some bearded seals. It snowed all day, with strong gusty winds, so the weather wasn't conducive to being outside. We headed back to the hotel to try to catch up with photos before heading out to dinner at Restaurant Smak. I found this a bit disappointing given the cost. Almost all of the dishes lacked the wow factor for me, everything was technically very well cooked, but most of them weren't flavoursome enough except for an over reliance on salt. There were a few that really were very good – one of the snacks, the halibut, the apple sorbet and the final sticky toffee pudding style dessert. However, at this price point almost everything should be lovely.

30th November

We went snow-shoeing today. There was loads of snow on the ground, and on the top of the exposed hills there were some strong gusts and some snow and sleet, so we got the full arctic experience. Snow-shoeing was harder work than I expected. I am reasonably fit and I was finding it tough going towards the end. We found a recently deceased arctic grouse, so one of the guides made a campfire in the snow and cooked it so we had a bonus snack of freshly cooked grouse! Apart from that there was no wildlife except for a few crows.



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In the evening we headed out to the Sami camp operated by Tromsø Arctic Reindeer. We got to feed the reindeer, which was lovely, they are much smaller than cows and fairly gentle. We did a short ride on a sled pulled by reindeer (by this stage it was snowing gently again which added to the atmosphere), and then we had reindeer stew for dinner. After dinner one of the Sami women explained about their culture and beliefs and also talked about what it was like to be Sami in the modern world. I was expecting this bit to be a bit cringe – I'm not a big fan of culture for sale – but it was actually really interesting and I really enjoyed the whole experience. We had been hoping for Northern Lights, but the cloudy skies meant that wasn't going to happen.

1st December

Our original plan was to go up the cable car, but the weather was very cloudy and the visibility wasn't great, so we gave it a miss. We had a late breakfast then headed to the airport for the flight home.



If anyone is interested the youtube video can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/1hWAFIXsoXk?si=EFGkBJLDkG6qLOWM>