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ARCTIC CIRCLE

BEACHES, ROYAL ENCOUNTERS — AND THE CHANCE TO CHANNEL YOUR INNER VIKING

PHOTOGRAPHS: SCOTT SALT





A DRIFT IN THE

A KAYAKING EXPEDITION THROUGH NORWAY'S LOFOTEN ISLANDS OFFERS WHITE-SAND

WORDS: DUNCAN CRAIG

VIKING CHIEFTAINS IN NORWAY'S MOST SOUGHT-AFTER ARCHIPELAGO HAD A NOVEL WAY OF ENSURING THEIR GATHERINGS PASSED OFF WITHOUT THE CUSTOMARY BLOODSHED.

Swords were left on one island, shields on another, with the power talks themselves staged on a third landmass, broadly equidistant between the two.

That this is being explained to me with the trio of islands within eyeshot, and by a man with a robust resemblance to a Viking warrior, lends the point a splendid indelibility. With his imposing bulk and long russet beard, one could well imagine Vidar Hansen riding the prow of an advancing longship brandishing a double-edged sword and unleashing the odd ice-meltingly fearsome roar.

Alas, today the guide is wielding nothing more offensive than a kayak paddle, and the only pillaging on his mind is the snack bag stowed in the little hatch just behind his seat.

We're on a four-day kayaking expedition in the Lofoten Islands, a destination that — as those Vikings knew only too well — is tailor-made for seafarers. This ostentatiously proportioned island chain probes nearly 100

miles into the Norwegian Sea: a bafflingly intricate network of inlets, skerries, natural harbours and gargantuan monoliths partitioned by abyssal depths. Through these slender channels, the longships that once terrorised the North Atlantic as far afield as today's Nova Scotia manoeuvred with skill and (fratricidal bloodletting aside) impunity.

Setting off from the teeny settlement of Tennstrand — an hour's drive from the islands' unofficial capital, Svolvær — we're following a 25-mile, broadly north east to south west trajectory. The area is what's known as the 'inside' of Lofoten: the southern flanks that face the mainland, sheltered from the full force of the Arctic currents and storms from the north.

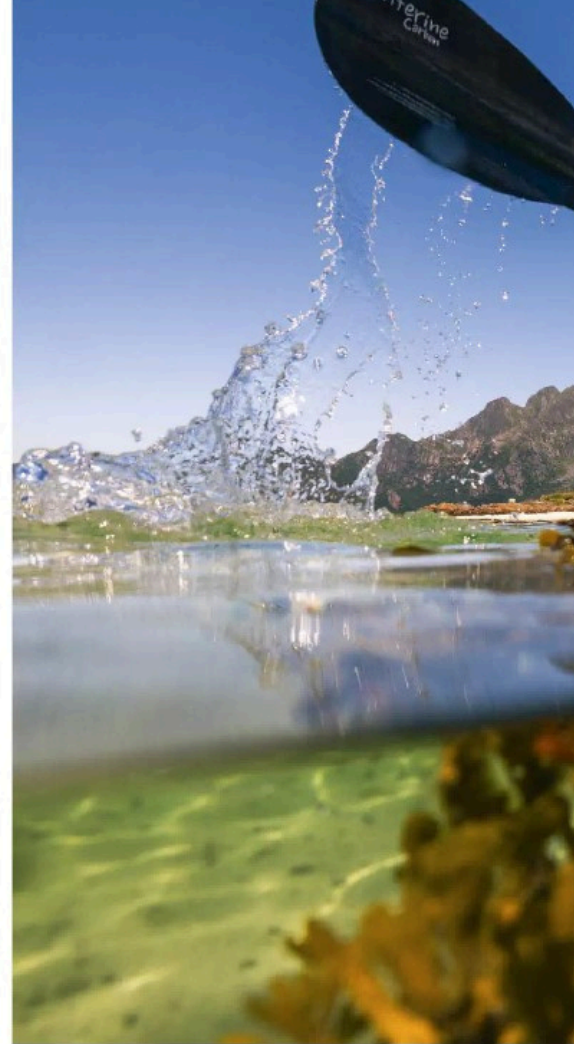
You might say we're island-hopping, though that would be to bestow on our enterprise a dynamism that's conspicuously lacking. Our progress is slow, serene even — inspired by tranquil, sunny weather and the wonderfully pacifying effects of 24-hour

daylight. When the sun's in no rush, why on earth should we be?

Our craft — highly stable, and easily up to the odd skirmish with a recalcitrant rock — are packed with sufficient water and snacks to survive an Arctic winter. I'm quickly reminded of the inestimable joys of 'the bicycle of the ocean', as kayaks are known in these parts: nimble enough to probe even the tightest channel, yet sufficiently sleek to tick off multiple, largely effortless miles a day. We're low profile, in both senses — doing nothing to intrude on a silence so comprehensive it's almost disquieting.

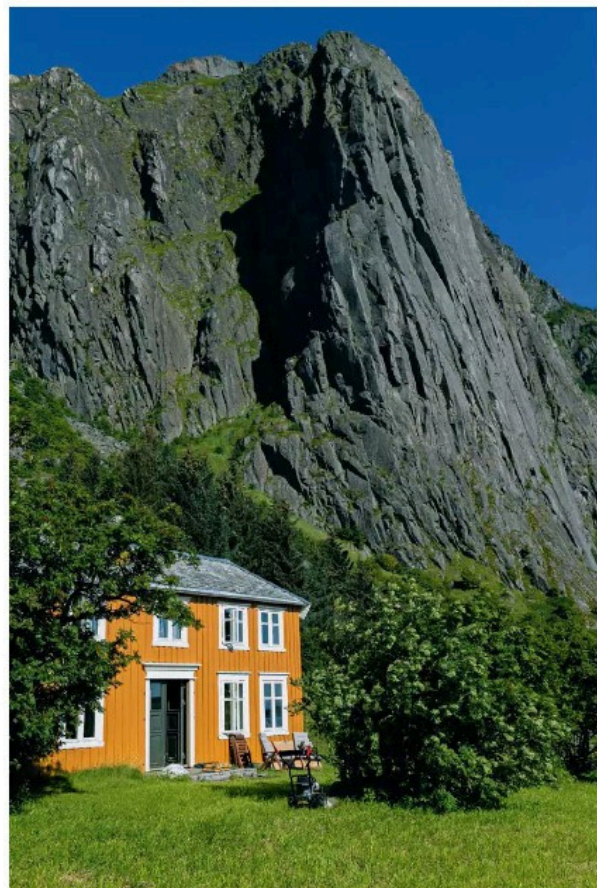
Human encounters prove infrequent yet memorable. There's the Ellingsen family — husband John William, wife Hilda and their eight-year-old son William — who we meet early on day two as they fish from their little white launch off the island of Årsteinen. John William has been visiting Lofoten for 32 years, he tells us. His is one of the summerhouses that dot the island's eastern shore. As we chat, William's rod suddenly bows. He shouts excitedly and wrestles the fish to the surface: an infant coalfish, not yet of size. The boy's father unhooks it and places it carefully back. A sea eagle, which has watched the encounter with rising interest from its perch on the honey-coloured cliffs, takes to the skies and flaps languidly away. It'll have to do its own fishing today.

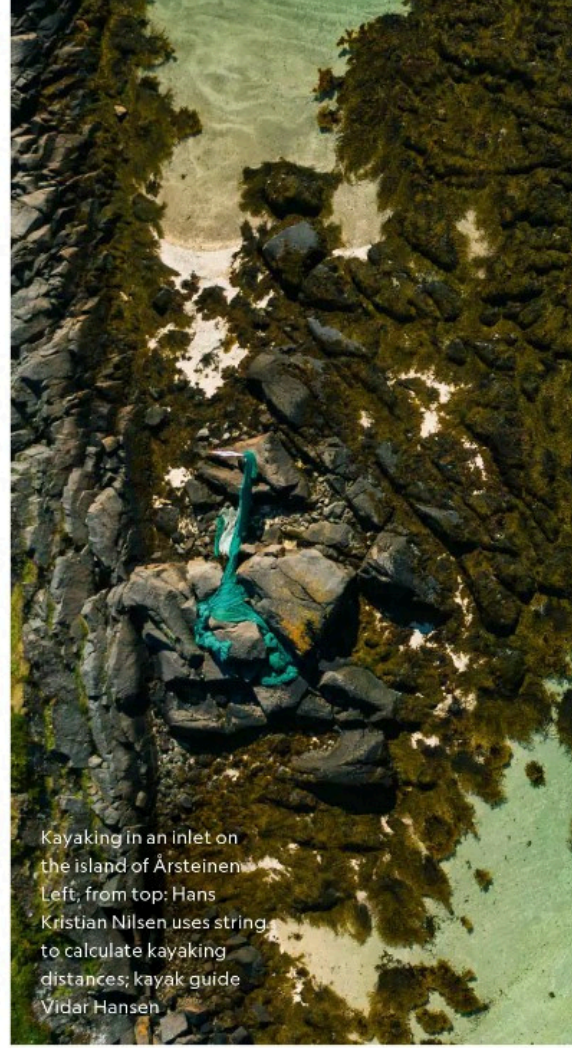
A mile or so further on, another John is spearfishing for halibut. We spot his bobbing





Kayak guide Hans Kristian Nilsen off the island of Gårdsøya
 Right, from top: Summerhouse on Årsteinen belonging to the Ellingsen family; Anne Myrlund works the loom at her home in the village of Brettesnes
 Previous pages: Turquoise waters at the south tip of Årsteinen, with Lofoten's chain of peaks beyond





Kayaking in an inlet on the island of Årsteinen. Left, from top: Hans Kristian Nilsen uses string to calculate kayaking distances; kayak guide Vidar Hansen





neoprene head and bright orange swim buoy from a distance and glide over for a chat. John Sällebrant is a marine biologist from Bodø — the gateway town to the islands, situated around 70 miles south on the mainland. Eschewing the more convenient propeller plane or ferry, he's driven here with his family on holiday — an epically circuitous journey that his manner suggests was worth every mile. "It's truly beautiful, isn't it," he says joyfully, treading water with his flippers and gesturing to the ring of distant peaks that encircle us. The sea around him sways with the gloopy lethargy of brash ice, yet the water is so clear I can see the kelp strands fluttering on the seabed nearly 20 feet below.

As we depart, I ask Vidar about the marine wildlife at the other end of the spectrum to coalfish and halibut — specifically the mighty orca, or killer whale. His eyes light up. Sightings have risen exponentially in the past five years, he says. They come for the *sild* (young herring), best thought of, he says, as "orca Haribo". It's not uncommon for a pod to pass by just a few yards from a vessel — Vidar shows me footage of exactly this, captured from the RIB tours he also leads. Fortunately, we're not really their type.

What should we do if one were to pass underneath us, I ask my guide, a touch tentatively. He tugs his beard and beams. "Enjoy the moment — and just hope it doesn't tip you over," he says. From the look on his face, I sense that a sticky end courtesy of a

killer whale is far from his worst-case scenario. Call it a Viking's death.

ROYAL APPROVAL

Humans have been trying to tame the Lofoten Islands for nearly six millennia, with limited success. Much of the 25,000-strong population still clings to the islands' fringes, concentrated around Svolvær and the town of Leknes further west. For centuries, the temperate Gulf Stream-vitalised waters have drawn spawning Atlantic cod by the tens of millions, creating one of the world's greatest and most lucrative fisheries.

Today, the emblematic red *rorbuer*, or fishermen's cottages, are often converted to accommodate visitors, but the cod is still hung and dried on large wooden racks called *hjell*, which rise from the shore throughout the islands like medieval gallows. Vikings would take this *tørrfisk* (stockfish) on their voyages, both as sustenance and currency to trade.

Vidar has brought some of this maritime biltong with him. He pulls it out as we bob contentedly in an inlet. The rocks above the tidemark are coated in a creamy-beige moss as thick and inviting as a deep-pile carpet. Through this insulating fleece, the elegant purple flowers of the *blåkløkke*, or harebell, protrude, the head of each like an exquisite inverted vase.

The stench as the bag is ripped open is enough to make my kayak rock. But the dry, unsalted *tørrfisk* proves gently addictive and

I'm soon gnawing away as we push on, like a cowboy with a cheek full of tobacco.

All of the properties in which we overnight during our expedition — a blend of guesthouses and homestays — owe their existence in some way to Lofoten's oldest trade. The first night is in the fishing hamlet of Pundslett, on the island of Årsteinen. The cottage is set on the water's edge, meaning we can haul up outside and launch with a short portage at low tide the following morning.

Leading up to the peak above the property is a trail inaugurated in 2016, after Norway's revered Queen Sonja — then 79 years old — tackled the three-mile hike to the top. At the summit is the Dronningvarden (Queen's Cairn), which contains a plaque with a quote from the mountaineering royal. It reads simply: "What a country!"

"Do the royals come up to Lofoten often?" I ask Vidar. "All the time," he responds, sounding like a tour guide on autopilot. Yet, sure enough, later that day his phone beeps with a local news update and there it is: *KS Norge*, the royal family's elegant, white-hulled 1930s royal yacht, negotiating the very same sheer-sided fjord into which we'd ventured the previous day.

The second night's accommodation is even more memorable. Around nine miles from Pundslett as the kayak meanders, draped around a large natural harbour on the southern shore of Stormolla, lies the settlement of Brettesnes. Of the dozen or so

ONE OF THE MANY BEGUILING
INCONGRUITIES OF LOFOTEN IS THAT
HERE — HIGH UP IN THE ARCTIC
CIRCLE — IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S
GREAT BEACH DESTINATIONS





A portage across the tidal flats between the islands of Kjeppsøya and Stormølla
Right: Glass fishing floats on the island of Skrova



properties, one immediately catches the eye: white and stilted, with boathouse vibes and a small jetty that extends out across the clear water. Standing on this is a little wooden crane and a jovial woman in glasses and a green dress who waves as we approach.

This is Anne Myrlund, daughter of the local fish dealer who used to receive fishing boats here to unload their catch. Mostly cod, perhaps some pollock. Anne and her husband Odd (“as in ‘not even,’” he says, when I’m momentarily wrong-footed) live in the adjacent cottage and use this creaking, lovingly converted space for visiting friends and family. Also, it transpires, for the occasional peripatetic paddlers. There are a couple of bedrooms upstairs, a little kitchen and a space with a pedal-operated *vevstol* (loom), which Anne calls her therapy room.

We unload our dry bags, shower, then stand on the edge of the jetty in the evening light as Anne takes us on a trip down memory lane. “See the house with the green roof?” she says, pointing across the bay. “My old school. And the one with the brown? That was the shop run by my godfather in which I helped out as a child.” The little road that I can see arcing round the bay wasn’t built until 2000: 20th-century trappings arriving just in time for the onset of the 21st.

Brettesnes marks the approximate midway point of the trip. Vidar has to depart for a family engagement. Dropped from the RIB

that whisks him away is his 20-year-old replacement, Hans Kristian Nilsen.

The younger man — a kayaking-climber originally from Bergen in Norway’s south — immediately hurls himself off the jetty for a quick cool-down swim, then further endears himself to me by preparing a feast of freshly caught fish, heaped vegetables, ice-cold lager from the Lofotpils microbrewery in Svolvær, and *lefser* — traditional flatbreads, on this occasion served as a dessert, and filled with sugar and cinnamon.

We study a map of the islands as we dine, Hans Kristian using a little piece of red string to calculate kayaking distances. Then I take advantage of the sun slipping behind the adjacent peaks in a horizontal sunset to turn in, and nod off to the sound of water lapping idly against the jetty’s timber supports a few feet below.

ARCTIC BEACHES

One of the many beguiling incongruities of Lofoten is that here — high up in the Arctic Circle — is one of the world’s great beach destinations. Over the first couple of days this has been apparent only in little smudges of sand here and there. As we leave Brettesnes at the start of day three, things go full Caribbean.

We pass Kjeppsøya — the gathering spot for Viking chieftains that Vidar had pointed out from afar, then swing right towards Oddvær, the smaller isle on which warriors’ swords were

temporarily left. As we do, the most enormous arc of white sand opens up, so broad it almost meets to form a circle. Beyond, imposing even from a distance, are the muscular, snow-splashed peaks of Austvågøya, Lofoten’s largest island.

I accelerate towards land, raise my paddle and allow the kayak to slide up the beach to rest in the firm sand. An orange-beaked oystercatcher picks its way meticulously through the shallows, then skims off, beak full. At length, I peel the elasticated fringe of my spraydeck from the rim of the kayak’s cockpit, stand up, take off my buoyancy aid and other gubbins, and plunge into the exhilarating cool of the bay.

It sets the tone for the day, as we follow an impulsively meandering path through the skerries west of the island of Litlmolla like a brace of beach-seeking missiles. By mid-afternoon, our target island for the night is within sight.

They call Skrova, not entirely convincingly, the Hawaii of Lofoten. It’s a reference to those beaches again but also the long summer hours of sunlight — even more protracted here, away from overshadowing mountains. One June day in 1972, locals will proudly tell you, the mercury touched 30C. Somewhat aptly, given the sobriquet, our approach yields the first surf of the trip — a manageable half-foot or so that rises to stern as we’re crossing the glistening strait and speeds our path to harbour.



Monica Viegas runs Heimbygga restaurant and guesthouse on Skrova with her partner Mario

A close-knit community of just a couple of hundred people lives here year-round. Amid the cottages and cabins that fringe the horseshoe-shaped harbour in the north west are art galleries and photo exhibitions. The two dozen children that attend the sole school are celebrated in pictures and quotes on the colourful rental bikes in the harbour.

The focal point isn't hard to spot: a striking, ochre-hued timber building with a steeply pitched roof, green picture windows and wraparound decked terrace. This is Heimbygga, a restaurant and guesthouse set on a fishing pier and dating back two centuries. Tonight, it's seemingly playing host to every one of those 200 locals.

We pull our kayaks up onto an adjacent pontoon, check into the stylishly refurbished rooms upstairs, and then I descend with the sort of thirst and appetite that only multiple days at sea can work up.

Behind the pale-blue wood bar, Monica Viegas is battling to stay on top of the orders. Mounds of mussels, battered cod and wedges of homemade bread are being ferried out from the kitchen behind. Despite the frenzy, Monica — who bought the place with her partner two years ago and thoroughly revitalised it — has a smile and familiar word for everyone.

During a lull later in the evening, I catch up with her taking a breather out on the deck. It's gone 10pm but the low sun shines with a late-afternoon lustre. Originally from

Portugal, Monica arrived in Lofoten in March 2020, planning to spend just a couple of weeks on the islands. "But I was trapped here by Covid!" she says, sounding whatever the opposite of distraught is. She met her partner, Mario, bought Heimbygga and now really can't imagine being anywhere else.

She paints a picture of life on the island that's not unpleasing: of daily swims, year-round and wetsuit-free. Of the sunshine and optimism and energy of those endless summer days. When I ask what she loves most about life in Lofoten, she smiles broadly at the challenge, thinks for a moment, then says: "The light." She immediately corrects herself: "Sorry — make that 'the lights'."

I ask what she means. "The midnight sun. The Northern Lights. The polar nights [the period between early December and early January when the sun doesn't breach the horizon], and the weeks that follow when the sky is a delicate blend of purple and pinks. All are distinct. All are magical."

A late, joyful night follows, necessitating a lie-in. In the morning I'm presented with a choice by Hans Kristian: kayak the six or so miles back to base in Svolvær, or hop on the ferry moored just a few tantalising feet from our digs and scheduled to depart shortly.

I think of the Vikings. Of their ferocious drive and hard-earned seamanship. Their never-a-backward-step mentality. "Yeah, let's get the ferry," I say. "My arms are a bit tired." ☐



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Norwegian and Scandinavian Airlines fly from UK cities to Bodø via Oslo. norwegian.com flysas.com

Average flight time: 3h40m plus stopover time.

Widerøe has several flights daily from Bodø to Svolvær and Leknes, and in summer also offers direct flights from Oslo to both Lofoten hubs. wideroe.no

Average flight time from Bodø: 30m.

The seven-day Nordland travel pass includes unlimited bus travel in Lofoten and use of the Bodø to Svolvær express boat, which takes three-and-a-half hours (NOK1,290/£91). reisnordland.no

WHEN TO GO

From late May to mid-July the sun doesn't set. The weather is variable, but a clear summer's day in July and August can see temperatures creep up to 20C. It's the busiest period, with accommodation scarce. Winter lasts from November to March, with polar nights between early December and early January. Spring, when the days lengthen and temperatures rise, is excellent exploring weather.

WHERE TO STAY

Anker Brygge, Svolvær. Four-person *rorbuer* cabins from NOK2,635 (£185), B&B. anker-brygge.no

Nusfjord Arctic Resort, Nusfjord. Doubles from NOK2,535 (£180), B&B. nusfjordarcticresort.com

MORE INFO

visitlofoten.com

visitnorway.com

HOW TO DO IT

Go2Lofoten offers a four-night multi-island guided kayaking expedition from £3,400 per person, including equipment, meals, the services of a kayaking guide, RIB support and accommodation in a variety of homestays and guesthouses including Heimbygga. Excludes flights. Previous kayaking experience desirable. Other itineraries also available. go2lofoten.no