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NORWEGIAN DARKNESS, DOGS AND OMEGA-3S

By Colleen Friesen


For Travel Writers' Tales

I am absolutely terrified. 51 sled dogs are screaming, baying and howling by the light of a fat-bellied cheesy moon. I am in Svanvik, Norway, as close to the Russian border as you can get without being shot. In spite of the crystalline air, or perhaps because of it, the smell of dog feces is sharp. I am dressed in a too-large snow-suit, felt-lined mukluks and wool-lined mitts. I'm freezing.



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

Her long blond hair flickers from someone's headlamp, as she slowly looks around the group, "And two? Always remember rule number one."

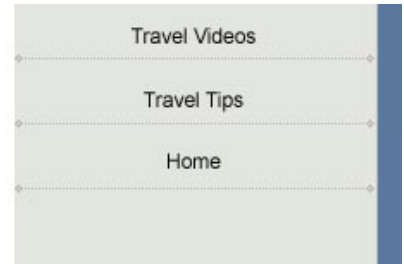


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Great. No liability waivers, no real instructions beyond how the soft and hard brake works, hang on for dear life, and oh yeah, the rider carries the heavy duty snow anchor in case the driver forgets rule one and two.

I feel like I'm heading to my doom.

When I signed up for the Hurtigruten cruise along Norway's coast, I counted on cruising through lovely little fjords, perhaps a snowy shuffle along a sidewalk somewhere or a good view of the rugged coast from an on-deck hot tub. 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 under the category of a "nice" but non-eventful holiday. The kinds of soft memories that fade from lack of an edge.



Instead, we went ashore and did excursions like this Birk Husky trip. A trip that turned out to be one of the highlights, not just of the trip, but of my time on earth. I ended that excursion with a grin frozen in place, a grin that stayed there long after the warmth of the subsequent fireside Viking dinner had thawed my skin.

Thrilling is one of those overwrought words. Unless you really feel the word. Thrrriiiii. It has a

lovely vibration like a rapidly pumping heart, along with a bit of a fillibration like chattering teeth and goose pimpled skin.

Which brings us to what happened earlier on this memorable day; a King Crab safari. I usually associate the word safari with African veldts and long-legged giraffes. Instead, we are encased in layers of winter gear, though this time the outfit is finished off with a dull red survival suit. After a zodiac ride across a fjord that leave my teeth ready for a dentist's drill, our Zodiac is driven up onto the thick ice edge. We waddle out of the boat and are handed yet another layer, a fetching orange plastic baggie-suit that covers everything.



And then, we sit our big orange butts on the edge of that fjord's icy crust and plop backwards into the frigid water instantly doing a Dead Sea float in our puffy plastic moon-suits. I cannot stop laughing.

We are absurd. And yet, it is also strangely peaceful, buoyant and blissfully bizarre.

Beneath us, a scuba diver scoops up King Crabs from the bottom of the fjord. He stacks these enormous crustaceous creatures into a waving pile of purpley-orange arms. Arms that can reach a span of up to two meters with body weights as high as 12 kilos.

Reluctantly, I bob my way back for the boat's return to the Arctic Adventure Resort. Thick felt booties warm us up while the pile of crab is cooked. The table is piled with crab legs, mayonnaise and thick Norwegian bread.

I know I have never eaten so much crab, in such large lobster-like chunks, as I did for that lunch; blissfully unaware that those calories were necessary for the upcoming nighttime dog sled adventure.



Did I mention the previous night's snowmobiling excursion? Or the reindeer sled ride? The North Cape wind that had us clinging to fences to avoid being blown asunder? The staggering piles of seafood on offer at every Hurtigruten meal?

I pride myself on my Canadian True North heritage, but I only learned how to really enjoy winter in a fjord-filled land half a world away where they know there is no bad weather, just the wrong outfit.



It seems you can do anything when dressed with the right props. Overdosing on Omega-3s at every meal and ensuring some heart-pumping excitement once a day seems to be the way to attack winter. Meet it on its turf, where it knows how to play for real.

It's a thrill.

More information:

www.hurtigruten.us

www.birkhusky.no

www.arctic-adventure.no

Photos by Colleen Friesen

1. #22 Reindeer Sled
2. #181 Fjord Float
3. #194 Crab Feast
4. #169 At Sea
5. #103 In Port
6. #084 Alesund, Norway

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