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TRAVEL ARCTIC NORWAY

Into the deep

Jane Cornwell finds herself sliding into frigid waters to swim with killer whales in a feeding frenzy.

Clockwise from top left: Swim times last from five to 20 minutes; a whale trails the ship; on the watch for orcas; the MS Stronstad. PHOTOS: FRANCK GAZZOLA

In a bay inside a fjord in north-west Norway, high up in the Arctic Circle, an orca whale rises vertically from the water – a spyhop – and side-eyes us for a beat before slipping back into the deep.

"It has probably never seen humans before," reckons Mads Odgaard, one of two team leaders with Majestic Whale Encounters, a Sydney-based agency offering the chance to swim with orcas and see the northern lights in locales few travel outfits dare to go.

A tall, lean Dane, Odgaard is standing in the bow of a Zodiac (an inflatable rigid boat), holding a rope taut like a charioteer. Seven of us sit on either side of him, squeezed into drysuits with hoods and booties, ready to pull on flippers and masks at his say-so. His walkie-talkie buzzes; it's the other inflatable with seven more neoprene-ed guests. A pod of orcas is approaching, their white undersides flashing, their black dorsal fins scything the inlet's choppy surface. A moment and we're ready.

"Go," says Odgaard, and we drop gently off the rim into the salt water, remembering not to splash or shout, and to swim alongside – not into – the pod. As the animals pass, calmly, even languorously, a squeak of joy comes from the end of someone's snorkel. This is what guests have paid $1500 a day for: male orcas, averaging 6.2 metres, and female orcas, around 5.3 metres. A matriarch orca, a grandma boss, steers the pod's direction as a couple of orca calves, cute as baby pandas, leap playfully in their mothers' wakes.

Save for a lonely sea eagle soaring overhead, and our host vessel in the distance dwarfed by the snow-covered cliffs rising sharply behind it, there isn't another being in sight. It's just us and the orcas.

A toothed whale, and the largest member of the dolphin family, orcas are found in every ocean in the world. They live in family groups, communicating sonically, working co-operatively, deploying remarkable instinctive smarts. This North Atlantic Type 1 species has come to the gelid, labyrinthine fjord-inlets of Arctic Norway to feast on the vast shoals of herring that migrate from the Atlantic for winter.

Forget their 'killer whale' moniker. These pescatarian North Atlantic orcas are benign, even soulful. "If you get to look into an orca's eyes you can see their intelligence and spirit," says Odgaard, who owns a Copenhagen-based worldwide diving business called Kingfish and has run orca expeditions in Norway since 2008. "And you are more likely to do that where there aren't crowds of people scaring them off."

It has been four days since we left white-Christmassy Tromso, Norway's northernmost city, from where whale watching and diving day trips depart. Sometimes these boats compete to get close to orcas, even when they're sleeping (a no-no for us), which duly sends them vanishing into the deep. Our group, however, is spending a week onboard the MS Stronstad, a refurbished ferry with wood finishings, twin and triple cabins, a hot tub on its upper deck and an Icelandic chef, Kjarten, who makes a mean fiskesuppe (fish soup).

Built to sail the harsh waters of northern Norway, the Stronstad's small size allows it access to areas not visited by larger ships; swift transfers from boat to inflatable minimise time spent searching for pods, a perk denied those staying on land. It's a wildlife expedition run by whale enthusiasts for whale enthusiasts: guests from Australia, New Zealand, California and Hawaii bond early over their passion for marine animals. All except me have swum with other kinds of whales, from humpbacks in Tonga to whale sharks in Ningaloo. They've brought binoculars, GoPros, and huge underwater cameras with two-handled frames.

Carmen Ellis, a former zookeeper and the Sydney-raised co-founder of Majestic Whale Encounters, is here, having run this trip annually since 2018 with Odgaard as her representative. She's reading a new book, *The Killer Whale Journals* by biologist Hanne Strager, whose themes – the biology, ecology and preservation of orcas, and their unforced connections with humans – dovetail with the concerns of everybody present.

Maybe because this presents like a bucket-list experience, a hero's journey involving fabulous forces and boundary-pushing verve, most guests aboard Stronstad are yet to dive with orcas in Arctic Norway.

Not that we are guaranteed to see, let alone swim, with these monochrome beauties, cautions Jeppe Dalgaard Balle, a tattooed Danish marine biologist and our other team leader, before we leave Tromso.

"But the weather is looking good, and we can see there is plenty of herring," he tells us, having checked his orca-related apps. "Ideally we want to get you guys in where there is a bait ball, since where there are bait balls there are orcas. There are probably humpbacks. If we are lucky, there might even be fin whales."

Somewhere along the evolutionary line orcas hit on a collective feeding method involving corralling herring into tight spherical swarms, slapping them with their tail flukes, then picking off the KO-ed fish individually and – since they only eat the middles – fastidiously.

Educational details are sprinkled into the end-of-day recaps in the Stronstad's downstairs lounge. Thoughtful touches abound across the week: the distribution of logo-ed polar buffs to tuck cold noses into as temperatures average minus 3; hot water from flasks trickled into neoprene gloves to revive freezing fingers on the inflatables.

Zipped up with assistance, a weight belt around my waist, my cheeks squished by the rubber hood, the watertight rubber polo neck making me hoarse, on day one I breathe myself out of an anxiety attack. It doesn't help that once the suit is on, there's no going back to the boat until last light (which admittedly, is around 1.30).

"If you pee in a drysuit you will get cold very quickly, and you will also have to buy it," we're told between safety instructions: hold onto a railing when out on the slippery deck; if you start shivering during a drop (time in the water ranges from five to 20 minutes), hightail it back to the inflatable.

The further north we travel the more orca pods we swim with and the fewer vessels we see. Each evening Dalgaard Balle dots the day's route on a wall map in marker pen: along the channel of Sternsundet, say, into Øsfjord, or Altafjord, and bays that don't seem to have names. The dark afternoons are spent napping, reading, or drinking hot chocolate in the hot tub under a sky with pinging constellations and the odd gauzy glimmer of white and green.

Day four's pod ends up being one pod of many. Two hours in, after drop after drop, there are orca fins wherever we look. Forty or 50 of them, moving, playing, feasting. Bits of herring – scales, tails, heads – bob past us on their own little oil slicks. "Look," exclaims Ellis, pointing at a distant section of water unsettled by tall, violently expelled plumes of air and water. "Humpies."

Humpback whales. Ten to 12 of them. Each around 35 tons, intent on gatecrashing the orcas' herring-feasting party. "The orcas will probably make a decoy bait ball for the humpbacks then keep eating the herrings somewhere else," says Odgaard. We're on our way back to the Stronstad when a ginormous grey-brown shape cleaves into view, water shearing off its ridged back – a fin whale, after the blue whale the second-largest mammal in the world. Endangered, unencumbered and unobserved – by everyone apart from us.

"This day cannot get any better," says our driver, Tron, who until now hasn't said much, as 90 tons of fin whale arcs and dives, its great chevroned tail disappearing with what might be a mammalian flourish.

But extraordinarily, the day exceeds itself. That afternoon we sail to Sør-Tverrfjord, a village in Troms og Finnmark, Norway's northernmost and least populated county, where we dock in a tiny, deserted harbour. Rugged and booted up, we follow Odgaard and Dalgaard Balle along a snow-blanketed coast road, under a clear, cloudless sky, past a couple of houses each with a single lantern in their windows ("A sign of hospitality, and a way to navigate through the darkness," we're told) until we turn a corner to find a snowy bluff overlooking the water.

Whoah, we say, our jaws dropping inside our polar buffs.

What greets us is a psychedelic fanfare, a finger painting by a Nordic neon god: a night sky flaring with curtains of violet, white, rose pink and iridescent green. Shimmering. Dancing. Making patterns on the surface of the fjord. The northern lights as they should be seen, away from city lights and crowds.

Retrieving a large flask from his bag, Odgaard begins pouring hot chocolate into recyclable cups.

"Let's enjoy the show," he says with a grin. "We've got ringside seats." L&L

The writer travelled as a guest of Majestic Whale Encounters.

Need to know

Orcas and Lights Expedition 2024 | Aboard the 37.5-metre converted research vessel MV Kinfish from Nov 30 to Dec 6.

Price | $US7150 ($10,560) per person twin share with ensuite. A post-tour extension is available at extra cost.

More information | majestic-whaleencounters.com.au or call 0405 594 253.

Book | Via website contact form or email carmen@majestic-whaleencounters.com.au.