

Tour Report

Norway – Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights

28 November – 4 December 2019

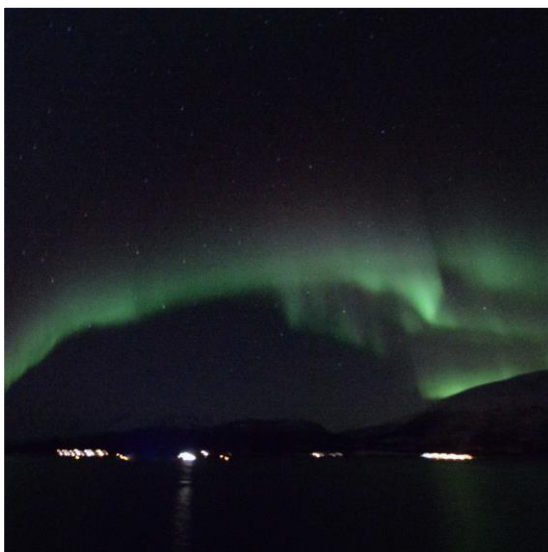
Male orca & juvenile



Orcas swim past Skjervøy town



Aurora borealis



Orca surfacing



Compiled by Cathy Harlow

Tour Leader: Cathy Harlow with 4 participants

The six-night holiday gave us wonderful sightings of orcas and humpback whales in a scenic setting among the sheltered fjords and islands of Skjervøy municipality. Our visit coincided with the herring moving closer into the fjord system and on our boat trips we managed to find whales within 30 minutes of leaving port. The very overcast skies made photography more challenging than under normal light conditions at this time of year. We only managed two of our five scheduled whale watch trips due to a severe storm with gale force winds and snow that resulted in the cancellation of all whale watching in the area for three days. Avalanche danger hindered land-based activities but on one outing we saw humpback whales from shore and on another day observed a herd of domesticated reindeer. We saw a good display of the aurora borealis on our first night but subsequent nights were overcast and coincided with a period of low aurora activity.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Skjervøy via Oslo & Tromsø

Thursday 28 November 2019

Weather: Snowy in Oslo; a clear sky & -8 °C in Tromsø

We met up at the departure gate for our 7am flight to Oslo. On arrival in Oslo we had several hours before our onward connecting flight to Tromsø, which gave us a chance to get to know one another or renew previous acquaintance. The next flight was slightly delayed due to de-icing on the runway before take off. Soon we were in the air, making our way north into Arctic Norway and landing at dusk. We took a taxi transfer to the Hurtigruten terminal in central Tromsø, where we had a drink in a quayside bar before boarding our ship. Because of very icy road conditions throughout northern Norway, we'd arranged to travel by ship to Skjervøy instead of by road. The Hurtigruten ships sail daily along Norway's marine highway between Bergen and Kirkenes, calling in at cities and towns. They are an important link for remote communities, especially in winter, and are used by locals as well as visitors. We found a convenient spot on the top deck at the stern of the ship to check for aurora borealis activity during the four-hour voyage, while keeping our eyes on the online aurora forecasts. While we were waiting we went through camera settings as some of our group had purchased new equipment for the trip. We also had a briefing on clothing and equipment for the whale watching and general information about the holiday.

Pulling away from the city lights, we were soon in almost total darkness with a splendid starry sky above us boding well. Soon the ship's crew announced that the aurora was visible and we spent the remainder of the journey watching a wonderful display evolve. The aurora often starts as a broad but static arc across the sky and you could be fooled into thinking this is all it is going to do. In time, the arc began to break up into a zig-zag pattern rippling to and fro. We noted a pink edge to its waving curtain of light, ever brighter as the evening went on. With a temperature of -8°C plus wind chill, we needed to dash back inside from time to time to warm up but the lure of an ever more spectacular display was irresistible. We managed to get some reasonable photographs but the image quality was affected by the movement and vibration of the ship.

Arriving at Skjervøy at 10.30pm, we disembarked and walked the short distance to Hotel Maritim, overlooking the quayside. We checked in to the hotel's well-appointed and comfortable rooms. Some of us had intended continuing the Northern Lights vigil but now the activity level had dropped and was forecast to stay weak for the rest of the night. It seemed a good plan to get to bed, after this long day of travel.

Day 2: Whale watching from Skjervøy

Friday 29 November 2019

Weather: -3 °C with snow showers & wind increasing as the day progressed

After tucking into the hotel's copious breakfast buffet, we met Marten, who runs the RIB boat trips for a briefing on the arrangements for the day's whale watch. Overnight the temperature had risen and the day dawned to an overcast sky. That said, we were advised to dress warmly with a thermal base layer and several additional warm layers. We then wrestled our way into padded one-piece all-weather suits and life-vests and waddled down to the quayside where the boats were moored. At an Arctic latitude of 70°N and almost 400 kilometres north of the polar circle, the town of Skjervøy is sited on the small island of the same

Find out more about our [Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

name. Its half-moon harbour is perfectly sheltered in most winds and this safe anchorage has allowed it to develop into a thriving fishing centre in spite of the isolation.

Soon we were seated on the RIB – passengers straddle the seats, which all face forward and after a safety briefing we were off. Marten explained that just over a week ago large shoals of Norwegian spring-spawning herring had moved from more open seas closer into the fjord system around Skjervøy. Once beyond the shelter of the harbour the wind picked up, as indeed had been forecast, but the sea was still calm. We headed in the direction of Haukøy (Hawk Island) where Marten pointed to a white-tailed eagle sitting on a rock just above the shoreline.

After about 20 minutes, we saw blows up ahead and first one, then a second and a third tall black dorsal fin pierced the surface – three mature male orcas! We cut the engine and watched as they took shallow dives surfacing randomly around the boat, behaviour that suggested they were feeding. Shortly we observed dead and stunned herring floating on the surface. Norwegian orcas hunt cooperatively to round up herring into a tight ball. Then they slap the ball with their powerful tail fin to stun the herring, before picking them off one at a time. A few herring gulls were picking up scraps from the surface. After a while the group of orcas began to move again and we followed alongside them as they met up with some ten female and juvenile orcas. Low light, bad visibility and sudden snow showers made photography challenging but added an element of mystery and excitement. Next we encountered a second larger group of 25 orcas dispersed over a wide area together with about 15-20 humpback whales. The humpbacks were an unexpected bonus and stole the show from the orcas as we witnessed them fluking up for a deep dive, one after another. It has also become apparent that in this area humpback whales are stealing the orcas' dinner by lunge-feeding from below, just as the orcas have corralled the herring into a ball. The orcas have also learned new strategies and have been regularly observed stealing herring from the fishing boats as they pump the fish from the net onto the boat. By now the wind was increasing, whipping up whitecaps on the sea and blowing stinging snow flurries into our faces. We headed back to port, spotting several smaller groups of orcas along the way. It is likely that we may have seen as many as 50 or more orcas during the morning.

After a lunch of steaming hot soup, bread and coffee, Marten showed us his photos from the morning's trip and we had a discussion about herring, orcas, humpback whales and the research being conducted in the area. With the daylight now all but gone, we went for a walk through the town, past shops and cafés all decorated for Christmas. We continued to the harbour where the smaller fishing vessels were jostling for space, their owners tying them up safely as a storm was forecast to hit during the night.

Dinner was a traditional Christmas buffet consisting of different roast meats with a few vegetable trimmings and an extensive dessert selection. After dinner it began to snow lightly and with heavy cloud cover there seemed no chance of aurora. Marten announced we would not be going out tomorrow due to the storm forecast.

Day 3: The storm arrives – whales from shore

Saturday 30 November 2019

Weather: -3 °C with strong winds & heavy snow falls as the day progressed

After a calm start to the day, the wind got up in earnest, yet apart from some rogue gusts, from the shelter of the town it was hard to believe this was a full-on storm. However, looking through binoculars out to sea, we witnessed the surf crashing on the shore and a sea of foaming white caps. So it was definitely a no for a boat trip today and in fact the port area was packed with boats of all sizes, taking refuge from the storm.

After breakfast we walked into town to see the Christmas market and some of us bought hand-knitted gloves. In the port, we watched a raft of common eiders swim to and fro and a pair of mallard flew by. Herring gulls and great black backed gulls were flying around the harbour area doing battle with the wind, some preferring to hang around the fishing boats in the hope of a meal. At midday we watched as the town's people gathered for the switching on of the Christmas tree lights. We bought a traditional wheat sheaf to hang up for the birds outside the hotel and following this we walked up the hill behind the hotel

Find out more about our [Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

for a view out to sea. At that point we got a call from Marten to say that humpback whale blows had been spotted in one of the nearby fjords. We drove out of town for 20 minutes to a point overlooking the fjord where we could see five humpback whales travelling slowly and fluking up for what were possibly short feeding dives. We stopped for about 30 minutes here but as the light began to fade we went back to the hotel for a late lunch of soup and bread. There was no chance of auroras as the snowstorm had moved in. Some of us went out to photograph the very wintry conditions and had a bit of harmless fun making snow angels in the soft powdery snow. Mostly the town was deserted as the streets became clogged by drifting snow. Dinner was an expanded version of the Christmas buffet with cold starters as well as the hot dishes and desserts. The hotel was hosting a Christmas party for the staff of a local company and there was music and dancing afterwards.

Day 4: Locked in by snow – the storm is not over

Sunday 1 December 2019

Weather: -2 °C, partly clear sky with strong wind gusts

According to the weather maps the low-pressure system had not moved from its position over Arctic Norway. The boats would not be going out today, so bad news for us and all other whale-watchers in the area. Moreover, the heavy snowfall had brought a red alert for avalanches for the region north of Tromsø and most roads were closed as a result. The bridge connecting Skjervøy to the neighbouring island was also closed due to high winds. So we could not get out of Skjervøy on land nor by sea as the Hurtigruten was not running either. There wasn't mooring room for all the boats seeking shelter in the harbour so some were obliged to keep their engines running and turn circles. The lifeboat was called out twice during the day on rescue missions. The locals said the situation was quite unusual. As the day dawned we saw gaps in the cloud cover and decided to make the best of it by exploring on foot.

After heavy snow during the night the snowploughs were out in force and residents were digging their cars and homes out of the snowdrifts. Norwegians seem to take the extremes of winter in their stride and are well prepared for it. We even came across a dog dressed in high-visibility leggings and little padded booties! We did a three-hour leisurely walk in a broad semicircle above the town, but stuck to the roads as the snow was too deep to walk on any of the footpaths in the area. The walk took us through quiet residential areas with good views of the harbour and beyond, where the sea was foaming with whitecaps. We found flocks of waxwings feeding on rowanberries, flitting restlessly from tree to tree. Gathering around garden bird feeders we saw great tit, greenfinch and house sparrow, with magpies and hooded crows in abundance. Our walk took us to the outer limit of the town, where we enjoyed a view out to sea on the other side of the island. After a late lunch of burritos, we had down time and in the evening Cathy did a talk on the aurora, orcas, herring and humpbacks.

Day 5: Exploring on land – the storm still rages

Monday 2 December 2019

Weather: -2 °C with snow showers & strong winds

The low pressure had still not shifted and the forecast for the morning was not promising with winds of 12-25 metres per second and continuing snowfalls. We went for a short walk at first light past the salmon farm to where we could witness the waves crashing on the shore. The road off the island and the bridge were open again and so we set off by road with driver Piet, one of Marten's colleagues. The plan was to look for otters and perhaps elk and reindeer, all of which are seen in the area. Driving conditions were difficult and visibility limited. Through gaps in the snow flurries we could admire the steep 1,200-metre-high mountains of Kågen, the neighbouring island. The island's birch and willow scrub is ideal habitat for elk, which nibble the bark and shoots, but we did not find any. We stopped by the shore where we spotted a pair of long-tailed ducks, some cormorants, herring gulls and great black-backed gulls. We looked for otters along the shore but had no luck. A herd of reindeer in an enclosure, including some very young calves, were as curious about us as we were about them and we got some good photographs. Both bucks and cows have antlers, which the males shed before the females in early winter, allowing the pregnant cows precedence over grazing. We noticed the velvet had stripped off the antlers of some of the animals in preparation for

Find out more about our [Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights trip](#) or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

shedding. Their hooves toughen up in winter so they can dig through the snow for lichen and their thick coats insulate well as the individual hairs are hollow. Fascinating animals.

We looked for otters along the shore but gave up when the wind lashed us with stinging snow flakes. The weather was clearly deteriorating so we went back to base. We were pleased to hear that it looked probable that we would be able to do a boat trip tomorrow.

Day 6: Whale watching

Tuesday 3 December 2019

Weather: -2 °C to +2 °C & light winds with occasional snow showers

At last, back to sea on our final day in Skjervøy. The storm had weakened overnight and the wind dropped. As we left the harbour a juvenile white-tailed eagle flew overhead. We found orcas 15 minutes out from port, a small group travelling slowly. We followed alongside for a while, observing a very young baby among them. There is a peak in births over the winter months and the new calves' white patches are slightly pink or yellow and easily identified because of this. Passing in front of the town, the orcas then hugged the rocky coast of Skjervøy and we stayed in view of them as far as the end of the island. We then headed into more open sea and found a larger group of around 20-25 orcas porpoising and we enjoyed wonderful views as they broke the surface. Photography was again challenging due to the overcast sky and poor light conditions but video produced some reasonable results.

After soup and bread back at the hotel there was time for some last-minute shopping. It now appeared that driving conditions would be hazardous with red alerts for both avalanches and rock falls due to an expected overnight thaw, as well as the night closure of one of the tunnels en route. Instead of driving we arranged to take the Hurtigruten after dinner, arriving Tromsø at 11.45pm. Unfortunately, the sky was overcast so there was no chance of aurora during the journey. We walked the short distance to the hotel, where rooms had been booked for us.

Day 7: Flight from Tromsø to Oslo, connecting on to London Heathrow

Wednesday 4 December 2019

Weather: 3 °C, a clear sky & light winds

After a good breakfast we took a taxi transfer to Tromsø Airport and the flight departed on time. We had a few hours in Oslo before boarding the flight to London Heathrow. It was then time to say our goodbyes once we'd collected our luggage.

Sign up to our e-news

Sign up to our e-news to find out more about our tours, events, late availability, offers and tour reports at <https://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/subscribe>

Find out more about our [Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

Checklist



	Common Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS						
1	Mallard			✓			
2	Common eider		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Long-tailed duck					✓	
4	Cormorant		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	White-tailed eagle		✓				✓
6	Herring gull	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Great black backed gull		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Waxwing				✓		
9	Great tit			✓	✓		
10	Magpie		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Hooded crow		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	House sparrow				✓		
13	Greenfinch				✓		
	MAMMALS						
1	Humpback whale		✓	✓			
2	Orca		✓				✓
3	Reindeer (domesticated)					✓	

Find out more about our [Skjervøy's Whales & Northern Lights trip](#) or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com