

In Search Of The Light

During the summer holidays, we took a long-awaited cruise to Norway. The trip included crossing the Arctic Circle with the chance of seeing the Northern Lights. As it was a once in a lifetime opportunity, we spent many evenings looking up in search of those lights!

Norway is a fascinating country. Originally, it was home to the Sami people, who raised and herded reindeers across the vast plains of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. They were a completely self-sufficient race, using the meat for food, the hides for homes and warmth, and antlers for trade and decoration.

Today, there are about five extended families in the Svalbard region who continue to raise and husband reindeer in this traditional manner. Around 50,000 Sami people still inhabit the Finnmark peninsula, roaming freely between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Northern Russia.

Until the 1900s, Norway's main industry was fishing, plus some agriculture and herding of reindeer and sheep. Then came mining, steel production and hydroelectricity. In the 1960s oil was discovered and the country has flourished ever since.

Today, Norway is a modern, wealthy country. Over its vast land mass, 5.2 million people inhabit the more hospitable areas, mostly hugging the coastline. Its small villages and towns are immaculate, everything is pristine, the people polite and reserved, and the tax and cost of day-to-day essentials high. It is an incredible place to visit, green and verdant, the air crisp and clean, and its culture ordered, reserved, polite and logical. There is a high respect for nature and Norwegians spend a great deal of their free time outdoors.

We sailed from Southampton and visited Haugesund, stopping to admire the monument to King Harald Harfagre, which commemorates the establishment of Norway as one kingdom in 872, and to see the magnificence of the Langfoss waterfall, falling over 600 metres from the melting ice-caps above.

Travelling north, we stopped in various ports. The fjords are narrow and deep, allowing cruise ships to call at many small, otherwise isolated, places. The variety of activities on offer were mostly outdoor and active, and we took great pleasure in walking with llamas in Skjolder, taking a trip around the fjord in a rib boat in Olden, and visiting Stappen Island to see the puffins, seals and eagles.

On the Sunday, we visited Tromsø Island and attended morning worship in the Arctic Cathedral. The people of Tromsø first decided they wanted a community church building in November 1955. Before then, the Christians met in small church huts, each holding around 50 people. Throughout Tromsø, there were about 60 church huts, with separate worship. Construction began on 1st April 1964 and the church was consecrated by Bishop Monrad Nordervalon on 19th December 1965.

The Cathedral was built in a central and beautiful location on the rise near the Tromsø bridge. It is visible from Tromsøya Island and the mainland, from the air, sea and land. It is the most popular attraction in Tromsø and a true symbol of the town. With its huge spotlights, unique triangular shape and perfect location, it can be seen by everyone approaching the town.

Inside the church, there is one space with no side room or alcove. The idea was that all could be seen - transparency. There is a magnificent organ with three manuals and 42 stops, and an

altar with two large and two small candelabras and a cross made from two silver pipes soldered together and then split open at the front revealing the gold-plated interior. Behind the altar, Victor Sparre's beautiful stained-glass window covers the entire east wall 23m in height. This symbolises the return of Jesus Christ and examines this theme in detail.

The church welcomes everyone: Norwegian, Sami, refugee, visitor and tourist. It is friendly, warm, child-centred and inclusive. The space is used for worship, concerts, recitals, rites of passage and celebrations. Its exterior walls, made from glass, steel and timber let out the light, illuminating the landscape to represent faith in action, solidarity and community in a land where the winter is long, dark and bleak. The Arctic Cathedral is Tromsø's northern light and it was a privilege to visit.

We pray that our church and its fellowship may also be a light in our community.

Anna Smith