'A superbly written travelogue. He's an annoyingly talented bugger. Darn it.'
TONY HAWKS

ALEXANDER ARMSTRONG

LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

MY ARCTIC ADVENTURES

About the Book

In an adventure of a lifetime, Alexander Armstrong heads north into an ever more hostile Arctic winter to explore the farthest reaches of the globe. On his epic journey, he navigates some of the Earth's toughest terrain, first travelling through the glittering landscape of Scandinavia, then on to the isolated islands of Iceland and Greenland, as far as the infamously treacherous Northwest Passage. His final frontier is Canada and Alaska, where his journey ends on the international dateline between the USA and Russia.

It's a voyage that takes Alexander half way around the planet, experiencing many of its natural wonders and living alongside some of its more extraordinary people. Getting stuck in wherever he goes, he learns from the Marines how to survive wildly unpredictable weather and temperatures as low as minus 40°C, drives along a hair-raising eight-hundred-mile road that's a river in summer and takes a plunge in the freezing Arctic waters. And that's all before wrestling Viking-style with a sporting legend called Eva as part of a traditional Icelandic winter festival.

Combining adventure and humour, *Land of the Midnight Sun* is an entertaining travelogue that takes readers on an exhilarating journey to this rarely seen corner of the world. It is an exploration of man's relationship with the harshest climates, set against the stunning backdrop of the Arctic landscape.

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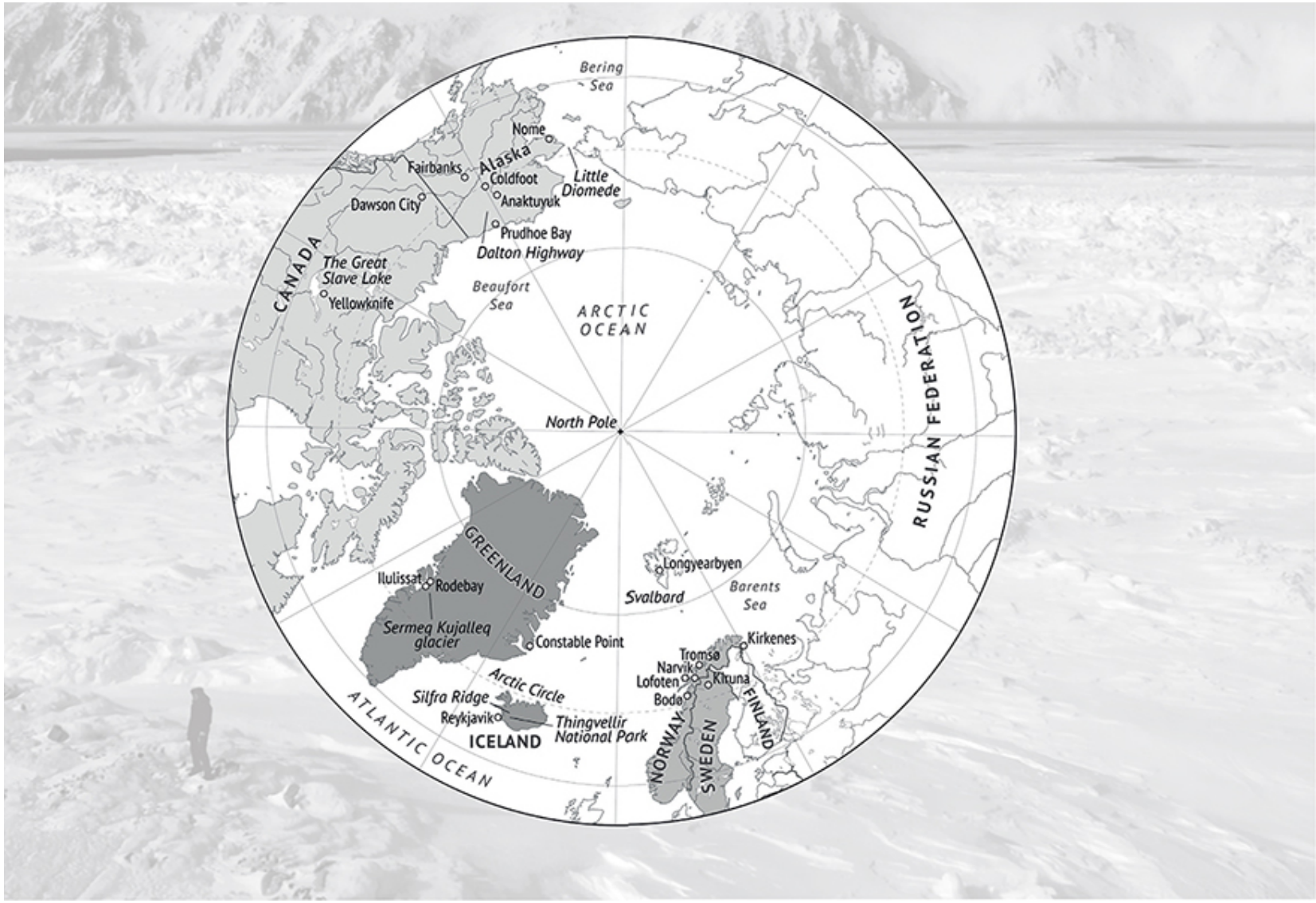
LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

My Arctic Adventures

ALEXANDER ARMSTRONG

To Hannah and the boys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Introduction

I HAVE STARTED seeing ghosts. Not everywhere, of course – I'm not weird; just very occasionally in the darker corners of my vision a shape appears that my brain interprets as a person. So far no headless cavaliers, just an endless procession of grey ladies who disappear under closer scrutiny. The ghosts came suddenly; in fact I know the day they arrived, even the hour, and their emergence – which I shall get into shortly – is entirely down to the planning of this Arctic journey.

I first started talking to ITV about the possibility of doing a complete circumnavigation of the Arctic region in the spring of 2014, and the programme was officially commissioned in May that year, just two weeks after my wife and I discovered we would be having another baby (our fourth – I know). The baby was due to arrive in time for Christmas, which is exactly when I was due to be heading off to the cold. It is some testimony to the forbearance and resilience of my wife that I write this introduction in the summer of 2015 from the warm hearth of our happy marital home still very much attached to all those organs a lesser woman might have been tempted to have on a plate.

The series has been called *Land of the Midnight Sun*, which I think sounds wonderful. The 24-hour daylight in northern summertime is just an extraordinary phenomenon, utterly baffling to us temperate zone dwellers although not entirely unappealing. On family holidays to Scotland in August there was always something stupidly exotic about the persistence of the light up to midnight – as

children we took it as divine justification for staying up far too late. Despite this title, I am actually starting my journey in the depths of winter, when the whole region is in fact blanketed in polar night. But over the course of the journey, the Arctic rapidly switches (literally in a matter of weeks) from being permanently sunless to being in permanent daylight. What a ringside seat I will get for this little trick, and seeing what effect it has on us all.

I don't think I'm alone in nursing deep, almost atavistic, feelings about the extreme cold regions of the world. There is something so inviting about nature in its coldest state. There's not a landscape or vista on the planet that doesn't look ten times more enticing hung about with snow and crisp with ice. But the allure goes beyond the mere picturesque; I think – fanciful nonsense though it sounds – that we're nicer people in the cold. Seriously. It's no coincidence that Christmas is known as the season of goodwill. It is in our nature to gather together in the cold, for reasons of instinctive economy if one wants to be pragmatic about it, to preserve and perpetuate body heat like the emperor penguins (I know, I know, NOT in the Arctic). And the beauty of a snow-bound wintery scene comes hand-in-hand with this implicit sense of heightened comradeship: what schmaltzy Christmas cards like to call 'good cheer'.

Yes, this may amount to nothing more than the sharing of warmth and victuals, but coming as I do from a temperate zone of the globe, I find that overwhelmingly appealing – even mystically so. Notice how often we use words like 'magical' to describe winter scenery (which itself of course is a 'wonderland') in a way we never would a summer landscape. And we're not wrong: sending things sub-zero casts an instant spell on nature. This, I reckon, is why we all trog off skiing in our droves. I'm not saying that sliding down hills isn't fun in itself but being somewhere so thoroughly wintery is sublime. Throw in log fires and

several jugs of mulled wine and you begin to see my point, surely. Put it this way, if the Disney film had been called *Scorched* I doubt very much there would be a million children in the world singing ‘Let It Go!’ at any given moment.

I, however, have never been further north than Stornoway, so have long been hankering after an excuse to go up to the proper North, to meet the people, first those of our continent up in Scandinavia, then out across the wider Arctic. I’ve longed to see the Lands of the Midnight Sun (for there are many), to watch icebergs drift across bays, to stand in solitude beneath the Northern Lights, to walk across glaciers, to ski across majestic icy wastes, and then come in each night to a roaring fire and cosy glass or two in excellent company. And this was surely the trip to do all of those things.

It’s a lovely thing to be in that TV grey area of Having Once Been A Sketch Comedy Performer. Had I gone off into my own little sideline of practising obstetrics, manufacturing stairlifts or training racehorses, I daresay I’d have been released from the duty of care that the industry (very decently) feels it has towards me. But I’m afraid I haven’t; I’ve just hung around on the sidelines of TV like one of those people that won’t leave a party (my mother’s rather brilliant trick with them, incidentally, is just to say ‘I think we might all now say a prayer’ and they’re gone in seconds flat), and so therefore I’m in line for the glorious treats that get lobbed out occasionally. As a comedian, one is supposed to have the requisite balance of curiosity, bonhomie and scepticism that make one the perfect stand-in for all the millions of people who are better qualified to front television documentaries. And ‘Amen’ I say to that.

The trip was ultimately scaled (very slightly) down to a journey from Norway (up near the Russian border in the east, just a stone’s throw from Murmansk) round to Alaska

(up near the Russian border in the west, just a stone's throw from Siberia). That is to say we covered the entire Arctic Circle apart from Russia. Russia's Arctic region was deemed simply too mind-warpingly enormous for us to be able to encompass it in this particular tale. Perhaps one day I will get to put in that missing piece of the puzzle.

One of the things I discovered during our Arctic preparations was that we could expect to be at temperatures below –40° Celsius, at which point the tears in your eyes start to freeze. As a contact-lens wearer of some years' standing, I asked if lenses were practicable and was told roundly 'No, they aren't', so I went for the nuclear option and had – not laser surgery, which, as is well known, is for wusses, but – lens implants. This involved my own lenses being whipped out of my eyes and synthetic Carl Zeiss lenses being put in in their stead. So, yes, I now have German eyes. And thanks to their rather beautiful design these new lenses throw strange concentric light refractions on to my retina from time to time, and it is this that has created the strange spectral figures on the edge of my vision.

I suppose the relationship between my optic nerve and my brain has been so good till now that the brain just takes everything the former offers it on trust. If there's the merest mischief of a shape on the periphery, then – no questions asked – the brain will ordain that it is most likely a person, or a thing, or a … oh, hang on, it's gone. And so I now have to live with the possibility that all these chimeras are actual things (right up until the moment they vanish) and hope that my brain learns to recalibrate before too long.

This journal of my Arctic travels occasionally suffers from the same effect. I am no expert on the wider Arctic region; I am only really able to write about the experience of following the particular narrow path I took through it. But, occasionally, little eddies on the periphery of that narrow

journey get blown into subjects on which I have very little authority to speak, yet somehow feel perfectly entitled to bang on about. Please overlook these moments – I hope they're rare – and accept my apologies.

Thank you very much. I now leave you entering the Arctic Circle somewhere in Norway …

Part One

Nice On Ice: Scandinavia

1

Do You Come Here Lofoten?

IT'S EARLY FEBRUARY and Day One finds me arriving in Bodø, the capital of the Northern Norwegian county of Nordland (just in case there's any doubt about which point of the compass we've been following to get here). It's about halfway up the country, pushing north, on the narrowest strip. It is reassuringly cold, which is terrific, as that was the first Arctic novelty I had been looking forward to experiencing, and, yes, just a couple of feet outside the cosy interior of the Norwegian Air fuselage, there it is: The Cold. On first impact not noticeably colder than the surprising chill I've often felt stepping off the train at Newcastle Central on a winter's evening, but a good deal more aggressive. This is a temperature that, were it stepping off the train at Newcastle, would be heading straight down the Bigg Market in its finest Friday-night vest, looking for trouble. By the time I get to the bottom of the steps, I am pulling fistfuls of everything out of my rucksack. Somewhere in there amongst my spare thermals, my water bottle, my crampons, my head-torch, my survival blanket, my emergency bothy (a sort of flat, folded Wendy house of thick polythene to which I might owe my life AT ANY STAGE), my spare bars of chocolate, my nice Williamson tea from home, my extra-thick spare socks, my hand warmers, my spare batteries for the head-torch, my Blisteze, my Gore-tex rain-hood-y thing, my compass, somewhere there must be my gloves, my hat, my scarf, anything …

Yes, there's nothing polite about this climate; it is, just so we can be absolutely clear on this point, insistently cold. However, I have a bigger concern at this juncture. I have spent an entire day now, from the moment we all checked in at Gatwick at starling's parp this morning, in the care of Norwegians, and I am beginning to spot some alarming consistencies among them. In fact by now, well into the evening, I am quite certain there is something rum afoot: a very troubling conspiracy. They are all actively genial, and in one or two particularly worrying instances they have even gone out of their way to help us. It is all deeply suspect. So far 100 per cent of the Norwegians I have met have been 'lovely'. It's as if just before I've turned each corner they've come whooping and high-fiving out of a huddle in which they've been focusing on how they, as a people, can polish their interpersonal skills till you can't look at them with the naked eye.

Is this a weather thing? Do they feel they have to atone for the intransigence of their climate? Or maybe they get so used to having to change their plans every hour of the day to make the best of whatever's thrown down on them that they're just inherently easy-going. I am determined to get to the bottom of it. When we turned up in Oslo with a hundred massive flight cases and wanted to check them in for a connecting flight that didn't leave for seven hours (we had quite a lot of that – Norwegian Air's schedules are clearly drawn up by a Brit), they had the effrontery to say 'OK!' and then be funny, even charming. In English. It is almost like they are showing off, and I can't begin to tell you how annoying it is. I ask if anyone else in our party has noticed this whole-nation-of-Norwegian-people-being-nice thing, and it seems the others have picked up on it too. In fact it turns out they're renowned for it; Norwegians are the second happiest race in the world after the Danes. Of course that sounds like the kind of terrible old bollocks that fills the middle pages of Sunday tabloids until I tell you that

this is according to a survey by the United Nations General Assembly. The top nine are: Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Austria and Iceland. Now, if I were a maverick detective inspector and I'd written that little list down in my notebook, I reckon I wouldn't even have got through my fourth pint in the picturesque pub before the eureka moment came: all those countries are cold – some of them get famously snowbound. There simply has to be a link between happiness and the cold. Barman, another pint of heavy, please.

What is it about these Norwegians? Well, I've already spotted two things. They eat an awful lot of fish and they sound like Geordies. No, really they do, and as a Northumbrian I can't tell you how comforting that is. If I blur my hearing (don't tell me you don't know how to do that – didn't you ever have a *Magic Ear* book in the nineties?), the hurdy-gurdy inflection and ümläütëd vowels of Norwegian suddenly transform into the beautiful 'Eeeeeeeh Aa knooooow' of home. I might be back on the Morpeth bus. But perhaps even more pertinently they are, as a people, astonishingly rich. Their mineral wealth is something they don't like to boast about – preferring to spend it very sensibly on ethical investments for future generations rather than hosing it up the wall in London's glitzy nightspots. Or at least if they do they're being extremely discreet about it. Put it this way, I've certainly never seen a Lamborghini with the number plate 'Morten 1' hooning it down Park Lane in a blizzard of Class As and East European hookers, but maybe I just haven't been looking hard enough.

Our first evening in Bodø (this incidentally is not pronounced to rhyme with 'Frodo', which my Norwegian interlocutors found hilarious, but rather more with 'murder', which, appropriately, is what I was committing on their tongue) is spent as I hope many subsequent nights will be – having an extremely convivial time eating baked

cod in a rough wood-panelled restaurant about a quarter of a mile's slither along the ice slab from our hotel.

The very first outing of the series to capture that exciting First Shot Of The Series – always a symbolic and nervy experience presenting for the first time with a new crew and new director – takes us to the military end of the airport at Bodø (is this something all airports have?). We are going to be flying up out of the airport in a little twin prop on a round trip so that we can catch the very moment of my crossing the Arctic Circle and coming in to land. I don't know how I'm feeling about this – I'm going to say 'excited', but, having never been up in a small aircraft before, there's a tiny bit of 'bricking it' in there too. It's a bit like that moment where you've paid for your ride at the fair and now you're just sitting waiting for it to start and you've noticed that all the other passengers are teenage boys.

We're ushered into one of the huge half-submerged hangars that crouch up by the military end like lots of mini Gateshead Sages built of reinforced concrete. They each have terrifying 60-tonne steel doors that open outwards on vast hinges like the lids of giant pedal bins sleeping off a binge. The hangars were originally built to house single NATO jet fighters in those crazy Cold War days of the 1980s. Nowadays our one looks like any non-military aircraft hangar anywhere in the known world: a hotchpotch of maybe seven or eight small aircraft, some with missing bits, some under tarpaulins; piles of tools (religiously ranked and filed in gleaming order), spare parts, broken kettles and buggered armchairs with what appear to be Don King's barber sweepings bursting out of them here and there.

A crisp and alert fellow called Jon is introduced to me. He, I'm delighted to say, is my pilot and not the stout man next to him breathing through his mouth, with the untucked shirt and the cold sore. Jon and his friend drag

out two planes (one for me, one for Rog the cameraman) on the campest, dinkiest little trolley you've ever seen, which attaches on to the front wheel of the plane. Never has a tool so undersung its role – it's like watching Ben Whishaw rip up a phonebook. When all is ready, Jon and I climb into the cockpit and by now I've already seen and heard enough to know that he too is part of the Norwegian Conspiracy. He is an exceedingly nice person. I recoil and shudder inwardly.

Having never been 'up front' on a plane, I've never witnessed the catechism of pre-take-off procedure before, so I can't say if this is normal, but Jon has a laminated card in front of him and as he goes down the forty or so bullet points thereon, he reads them aloud in English (for my benefit?) and checks the corresponding dials and switches and coils and glitter-drops (I think that's right). After about seven minutes, during which time the props have been started up (first the starboard, then the port) and seemingly every one of the 120 knobs and breakers in front of us has been switched, turned or caressed, Jon says we're ready to go, reassuring me that the heating will be turned on as soon as we are in the air. I hadn't even noticed till now that I am shivering with cold. God, yes, it's freezing. Of course. I was so transfixed by the excitement of leaving the ground in this tiny bit of fibreglass that I hadn't been checking up on my thermostat. Wow – I've got my big gloves on and my fingers are about to drop off. Jon says something friendly in Norwegian to the control tower, who in turn say something delightful back, Jon wangs up the throttle and we blast (not very far) down the runway before lifting blithely up into the snowy heavens. We're off!

When my brother, sister and I were little, we used to have something that we called, for some reason, The Bogey. It was basically just an old-fashioned pram base that we'd found in the garage. We would sit on it at the top of the hill on our quiet single-track road, whoever was at the front

would steer by manoeuvring my father's old sack trolley to the left or right with their feet (my idea that, remarkably effective) and off we'd fly down the hill into any oncoming traffic (happily rare) with the wind and midges in our hair. There were no brakes, so if a car did come along or you needed to stop urgently for whatever reason you just had to swerve the trolley off into the hedge and hope the pram base would follow (it DID!) and it wouldn't hurt too much (it DID!). The Bogey's time came to an abrupt end, though, not as it happens in a smash-up or a delicate sack-trolley-being-extracted-from-child A&E trip. But because some passer-by came to the door one day when it was just me at home and asked if they could have the pram base. And being only eight and rather a drip, I hadn't really learnt to say 'no' to grown-ups, so off it went in the back of someone's car. I was so distraught I could barely get the words out to tell my parents when they got back.

Aaaaaanyway, the incredibly dull point you can probably sense I'm about to make is that nothing I've ever been on or in has ever given me the madly exciting sense of propulsion I got from walloping down the hill on The Bogey. Until being in the cockpit of a twin prop. That is the closest thing to having wings of your own. It's possibly the noise, or the thinness of the membrane between you and the sky outside, or maybe it's the fact that you can see and feel the instant effect of every control the pilot touches, but this is a million miles away from strapping yourself into Row 12 in an Airbus. This reminds you how thrillingly unlikely the laws of aerodynamics are when seen up close. The temptation to shout 'Wheeeeeeeeee!' is impossible to ignore …

Bodø slides away beneath us, jets of warm air start very obligingly to curl into the corners of the cabin and spread their goodness, and then without a moment's warning Jon passes me the controls.

‘It’s quite complicated,’ he tells me. ‘Push to go down, pull to go up, turn to the right to go to the right and to the left to go left. You think you can remember that?’

He shows me the two dials I have to watch for altitude and bearing, and I try not to grip the joystick too hard. I’ve steered plenty of boats before so can keep a steady course when right and left are the only options, but it’s this up and down business that’s going to be the problem here. Sure enough, we immediately start drifting quite high above the ceiling height Jon has recommended, so under his instruction I gently move the joystick forwards. The plane lurches down, and even though it’s my hand on the controls my stomach freefalls away to my knees.

‘A bit more gently,’ says Jon, a bit more gently than I would have said it.

I ease the joystick towards me, and the plane swoops back up like a flush going round a U-bend. I don’t feel especially scared, as Jon has a joystick in front of him too and can take over the second anything goes woefully wrong (he doesn’t), but I do get a strong sense that if I had ever thought of flying as just ‘driving in the sky’, then I may have overlooked certain complexities. Jon then instructs me to bring the plane around in a wide arc, so I turn the wheel (I bet it’s not called a wheel) and sure enough the starboard wing dips down rather exhilaratingly, and the crew behind me (the film crew; we didn’t opt for cabin crew) start to tighten their grips on the armrests. I’m quite grateful when Jon offers to take back the controls for the return to Bodø, but my relief subsides after about five seconds into a feverish need to DO IT AGAIN. Sadly we’re on a tight schedule and have to get ourselves de-rigged and off to the ferry port in time for the last boat to Moskenes, so my pilot’s licence will have to wait. Interestingly, just as we land, the roar of seven fighter jets taking off puts me right on a small historical inaccuracy: turns out the Cold

War hasn’t finished – it’s just moved to a hangar further down the runway.

We hop on to the ferry to Moskenes in the Lofoten Islands – about 100 km northwards from Bodø – at 3 p.m. Embarkation is a very informal affair – a world away from boarding the Townsend Thoresen at Stranraer. In Norway you simply amble on to the boat at any moment up until the very last, whereupon you are given the kind of unmarried-billionaire-uncle welcome that makes you wonder if perhaps the crew have confused you with someone else. But, no, this is repeated for every single party that strides up the gangplank. I do wonder if I’ll ever get used to the cussed loveliness of these Devil-forsaken people.

We disgorge from the ferry at what feels like midnight but is in fact only 7 p.m. (this is the inevitable effect of it turning dark not long after lunchtime). We drive the short distance to Leknes, where our hotel is to be found. After the pleasing functionality of our Bodø accommodation, this has the soul-sapping appearance of a place that, were it in the UK, would make you want to examine your life and make binding promises to yourself that you would ‘never do this again’. It’s an industrial barn on two floors with tiny little cells off a central corridor that are essentially storage lock-ups. I have a brief but potent bout of homeward yearning and then things quickly start to pick up. Because even here in the most God-awful surroundings, the preternatural warmth of these people shines through. Yes, we seem to be penned for a couple of nights in the sort of place you’d more normally expect to bump into an antique dealer locking up his Chippendales, but the family who run this place go so many extra miles to make it lovely that I end up rather feeling huge affection for it.

For example, screening off part of the reception area is a rather chic row of white-painted tongue and groove panels behind which is one of the friendliest restaurants you could hope to find anywhere. There’s a cluster of maybe seven or

eight tables each decorated with flowers and little night-light candles, and the whole thing is served by just one single chef, who can be seen and heard cheerfully cooking everything to order, and a wonderfully dry, deadpan and very pregnant waitress. (‘Well, I hope you like cod and reindeer.’ Why, what’s on the menu? ‘Cod, reindeer, or I suppose you could have cod and reindeer.’ As it happens we badly wanted cod and reindeer, and both were ambrosial.) I like to think the chef and the waitress were an item, as that would just complete the idyll for me, although it is entirely possible that they weren’t and merely worked together – I’m aware this does also sometimes happen. It was so cheering to find that even here in this unlikely place there were so many personal touches, so many instances of someone doing something just because it struck them as being a nice thing to do, that my momentary homesickness was banished. We even tried to make reservations for the following night. The waitress thought that was hilarious (‘I don’t think it will be necessary’).

The Lofoten Islands themselves are famous for many things, chiefly their beauty. You’ll never find a more pleasing rugged-coastline-and-soaring-mountains combination. But just a couple of clicks behind the beauty come the celebrated Lofoten fish. The islands are a kind of lush Eden for the codfish – albeit the kind of lush Eden from which some of their number are routinely plucked and served up on a plate. But the long and the short of it is that every year the world’s largest cod shoal (indeed the planet’s only growing cod stock) drops by for the famous ‘skrei’ season. By virtue of the happy confluence of the Gulf Stream and inch-perfect submarine direction-finding, each February millions of these wonderful fish swim here all the way from the Barents Sea, over a thousand kilometres away, in the hope of getting lucky, which, judging by the statistics, pretty much all of them do – it’s essentially Club 18–30 for our scaly friends. And thanks to the Norwegians’

innate knack for practical forward thinking, they have never fished the things to extinction – *au contraire*, they have caught them through patient line fishing, always being particularly strict on themselves to respect their quotas, never taking more than is sustainable.

The way the shoal has grown and grown over the centuries remains an exquisite if rare example of man and nature living in per-fect har-mo-nee. Man protects the shoal and its breeding grounds and, in exchange, can take a healthy proportion of the fish therein. As ever, man gets the better half of this deal and STILL – in other parts of the world at least – his greed gets the better of him and he ends up cocking it all up. Not here, though. Not in Norway. I am beginning to wonder if this curious agreeableness I keep coming across here mightn't actually spring from genuine decency. It's still just a theory at this stage, but it's not entirely out of the question.

We have arrived in the Lofoten Islands at the very beginning of the skrei season. In fact that's nonsense, we have arrived at what should be the beginning of the skrei season. We are due to go out to sea with Børge, a fine fellow with twinkly eyes and a beard and a voice like tearing metal, who has been fishing from the village of Ballstad all his life. His father fished in Ballstad before him and both his grandfathers before that. He didn't provide any further lineage, but I'll eat my hat if any of his great-grandparents were quantity surveyors. He also has a son who has fished with him since boyhood. Oh, so that's good, your son will take over the family fishing business one day? 'No,' says Børge. 'He's going to work in the oil industry – they will pay him twice as much as I can, hahahaha.' If there's a trace of rancour in this answer, Børge keeps it well hidden behind bravura cheerfulness and a hard, film-star smile.

The very words Fishing Village magic up an impossibly romantic tableau, don't they? We may picture something Cornish or something like our lovely Craster in Northumberland, built out of dark coastal whinstone, dotted about with lobster pots and bobbing fishing boats, where hardbitten sea swains go out in the middle of the night risking their necks to bring in their haul, while salty old men and women with pipes sit on the pier and mend nets or dress crabs and perhaps a man with anchor tattoos plays shanties on a squeeze-box. The whole scene, slightly soft focused at the edges now I look more closely, is scented with oak smoke from the smokery and seaweed from the foreshore (a blend I was brought up to recognize as being 'Ozone' – which we're now told is complete rubbish: the air at the coast is apparently no richer in oxygen than anywhere else. Ah well …). In truth our fishing industry, sometimes because its hands are tied by the quotas of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, sometimes because the enormous shoals are no longer there, hasn't really got enough going on to support the communities that once thrived on it, so the shanty-man (if he ever existed) is now an estate agent in Fulham and the net-menders run an amusement arcade where the Plymouth Brethren hut used to be, the villages are full of holiday cottages that sit empty for much of the year and those few boats that do go out have little choice but to take an industrial approach to their fishing. The CFP's fish quotas, however well intentioned, haven't done anything to halt the decline in fishing stocks. Huge numbers of fish are still caught, only to be thrown back into the sea dead.

Ballstad, however, is the very acme of fishing villages. You only have to look at the gleaming factories on the quayside that process the thousands and thousands of tons of fish that come through every day to know how well it does from its industry. Ballstad is also very beautiful – one might almost call it a fishing resort: all pastel-coloured

villas and beautifully kept painted wooden houses. This happy community is completely supported by a sustainable natural resource at its heart. It does make you wonder what it would take to get British fisheries back to this state or if that's even possible. Craster happens to be going through a purple patch thanks to the enormous popularity of its kippers, but for many of our other fishing communities it's just been decade after decade of steady decline.

We meet Børge at the fishery at 5 a.m. in order to join his early-morning outing to check on his lines. The boat is a smallish one with a modest wheelhouse and a deep hull into which all the catch will be thrown. Børge had been out fishing just the evening before and says the skrei still hadn't arrived then. There had been some cod in his catch but nothing like the quantities he will see once the season has started in earnest. The boat has an unsurprising tang of fish about it but nothing like as back-of-the-throat yacky as I was expecting. I suppose the fact that it is in constant use and the fact that it is freezing bloody cold keeps it from becoming toxically fishy. A fishmonger opened up on our walk to school a couple of years ago, which changed our lives and hugely improved our diet; they had the most beautiful silvery bounty spread out each day on the ice. But you really wouldn't want a fish shop to open up next door or, worse still, beneath you. They were meticulous about scouring the shop each evening with disinfectant and scrubbing the pavement outside, but still you always held your breath when you walked past.

Callum, our sound guy, spent several weeks on the trawlers filming a series for the BBC, and I notice he heads straight for the deck of Børge's boat and doesn't dare venture down below even once, the combination of swell and smell, I guess, just brings back too many gorge-raising memories for him. We pull out of the harbour and on to the flat sea beyond. There is a gentle rise and fall but nothing

too unsettling, Callum still looks fairly hale. Børge shows me below to the galley where all the kit is kept, and digs around for some overalls and trousers in my size and a pair of enormous fishy gauntlets.

Børge doesn't speak superb English, but his trademark '*Ja! Ja!*' is delivered with such a slow and winning inflection – and at such a high decibel level – that it's hard not to think he's somehow sending himself up. He has something Tom Waits-like about him, something granite-edged. Come to think of it, the cod themselves also have little Tom Waits tufts growing just below their mouths. That must be the reason I've somehow got the lyrics of 'Shore Leave' going round my head …

Børge ordains it is time for coffee (he seems to have had a cup on the go since we arrived, but I'll certainly not say no). Børge drinks out of the same coffee cup from season's start to its end and tells me proudly that he NEVER WASHES IT UP. I'm not sure if this is down to superstition, like an actor talking about his lucky socks, or pragmatism simply because the cup is never really out of use for long enough to warrant a proper clean. But I say 'Wow' in response, which I think just about covers both contexts.

Certainly Børge puts the hours in on the water – apparently over four thousand of them a year (he points to the wheelhouse tachograph as he says this, so, although I don't inspect it to verify, I take him at his word). Each evening he splutters out across the bay to lay up to 7 km of lines with baited hooks. He puts a buoy at each end of them and marks them up on the swish electronic chart on his computer so that by the time he's finished the screen shows seven or eight thin scraggy lines in parallel, as if the sea has wrinkled like Cornelius the Elephant. Then each morning he heads back out for ten hours to pull them all in. He's usually on his own – the boat is set up to run as a one-man show – and I can readily picture him at his wheel in all weathers and at all times of day and night, shouting '*Ja! Ja!*'

at the horizon, a flinty smile on his face, a filthy mug in his hand: a supremely happy man.

We start winching in the lines. The key thing about line fishing is that only a tiny sliver of the shoal is caught, a minute fraction of a per cent, so there's none of the indiscriminate blanket hoover-up that you get with netting. Also, each fish is taken from the line by hand, so if any are undersize they get thrown straight back to live for another day. It's the difference between picking ripe apples from a tree over a season as and when they are ready and coming along with a dirty great machine that rips the entire tree out of the ground and shakes all the apples, ripe or not, into a pile to be sorted later. After fairly inauspicious beginnings, more and more cod start coming in over the side, one or two of them by no means small. Then there's one that Børge estimates to be about 30 kilos. If it's over 30 kilos, then it'll win Børge a kilo of coffee back in Ballstad. This elicits a broad grin from the man of the sea, and he announces sheepishly that maybe the skrei season has just started after all.

What, I wonder, will happen to these beautifully maintained habitats without future generations of Børges tending them so carefully? What if the next generation brings in bigger ships or introduces a more industrial means of extraction? I suppose, as long as it's the Norwegians in charge, the cod stocks should be in safe hands, but the allure of heavy industry's big money, the kind that is drawing Børge's son away from his birthright, does seem to be such an unstoppable force. You can't help wondering how these fragile and beautiful quid pro quos with nature can possibly survive against the seemingly unarguable arithmetic of the wad.

We chug back to Ballstad with the ship's belly full of fish and find that news of Børge's whopper has brought a man from the local paper to the dockside with the kilo of coffee to hand over if the cod weighs in over the magic 30 kilos.