

ROCKING IN THE ISLES

ARTISTS ARE SHAKING UP NORWAY'S COD-AND-KNITWEAR IMAGE IN THE LOFOTEN ARCHIPELAGO, BUT THERE ARE STILL COSY CABINS TO HOLE UP IN AND PLATTERS OF SEAFOOD FOR SUPPER. BY SOPHIE CAMPBELL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY YADID LEVY

The fishing village of Reine, on Moskenesøya in the Lofoten Islands



IF YOU ARE A COD, these are the killing fields. Bunches of drying fish twist in the wind on birch frames the size of Dutch barns, and chunky working boats bristle with radar, net winches and fish-finding gear. If you are an artist, this is a land of light, clear and simple, which is why so many have made their way here in the past century and a half. If you are a visitor, this is where mountains shoot out of the sea like fins, their reflections diving to unfathomable depths in the fjords, and sweet little wooden houses cluster in shades of lemon and dove and brick and sky. But you mustn't look too hard in case you fly off roads raised to let meltwater flow away and edged only with flimsy red poles.

The Lofoten Islands barely qualify as an archipelago. They are more like a vestigial tail off the coast of Norway, 100km above the Arctic Circle and 230km south of Tromsø, connected to the mainland by a bridge about a kilometre long. More bridges swoop between the seven main islands, and around them skitter innumerable rocks and skerries.

Fish is everywhere. It glints through the history and swims through the art. It's the backbone off which everything hangs, because these islands happen to be perfect – not too cold, not too warm, with a steady wind – for the production of stockfish, a dried cod with a designation as prized as any Champagne or jamón ibérico and more than 20 grades of quality. The Vikings exported it across the known world. They still do: bodies to southern Europe, heads to Nigeria; eggs go to make Lofoten 'kaviar', and nibbly bits are sold from sweetie jars in the shops.

I visited NNKS, or Nordnorsk Kunstnersenter, an artists' cooperative in Svolvær, the de facto capital that is not even a city. On its vast white walls swam a circle of silver fish, chasing each other for eternity, and in a trellis of thick felt nestled a dozen sea urchins, as fragile as eggs. 'Cod?' I said, fingering a fish-skin purse. A shake of the head. 'Salmon.'

My hotel room was a *rorbu*, or 'rowing cabin', a survivor from the days when square-sailed, straight-prowed boats rowed out to sea in search of the wind. There are hundreds of these huts in Lofoten. They are stilted so that boats could tie up below; fishermen would climb up and sleep head-to-toe in bunks. Today they are cosy holiday cabins with gingham curtains and hurricane lamps. Mine had a terrace overlooking the harbour.

I got chatting to the guy behind the counter at the old general store on Svinøya, an islet off Svolvær. The store has been left as it was when it supplied everything from leather boots and fish hooks in 16 sizes to tobacco tins and pictures of King Haakon VII. A hand symbol points archly at the price in kroner and øre, rung up on an ornate nickel till. Now its owners organise ski-touring, hikes and Northern Lights nights and run a fine restaurant next door called Børsen Spiseri.

'Cutting cods' tongues is what lots of kids here do for a holiday job,' said the man at the counter. 'Some of them make €3,000 a week. Fried cods' tongues are a delicacy,' he added, noticing my appalled expression.

You've got to try these things. I stayed, only to find that the French chef eschewed tongue fritters in favour of a delicately gamey carpaccio of smoked whale – just a hint of moccasin –

Right, from top: homemade bread, goat's cheese and sausages at Lofoten Gårdsysteri farm on Vestvågøya; an organ in one of the cabins at Unstad Arctic Surf camp. Opposite, the old general store on the islet of Svinøya





stuffed with nuts and horseradish, stockfish with saffron aioli and Arctic char fillet with the squeakiest of leeks, ending on a flourish of vanilla-and-cloudberry parfait.

Shouts of laughter from rosy Norwegians bounced off the walls as I sipped my £10 beer, thinking about the next day's route. Svolvær is on the island of Austvågøya, and my destination was four islands away, 120km west on Moskenesøya, home to the villages of Reine and Å (pronounced 'or'). This is, literally, the end of the road: then you need a boat to cross the twice-daily sinister swirl of tides known as the Maelstrom.

The next morning, at KaviarFactory, an icing-white box of an art gallery by the sea at Henningsvær, 20 minutes down the coast, Venke Hoff nodded when I told her I had nearly crashed the car because the approach was so beautiful. 'It's just been made a national scenic route,' she said. 'We came here first because the lighthouse was for sale – we bought it off the internet. Then we got here and thought, this is incredible!'

Hoff and her husband have been collectors for 30 years. They lend their lighthouse for informal artists' residencies – the Spanish Turner Prize nominee Angela de la Cruz stayed a couple of years ago – and they opened the disused factory nearby as a gallery in 2013. They had a little help from their friends: the German artist Michael Sailstorfer turned the gallery sign into a conceptual piece, with letters missing like teeth; Bjarne Melgaard ('they say he's our most talented artist since Munch') designed

a trail of more than 30 sculptures across the islands, including works by Anish Kapoor and Antony Gormley. It seemed fitting; artists started coming here in the 1860s, pulled by the islands' empty beauty, and they've been coming ever since.

As I drove, the scenery spooled past the window: the grassy plains of Vestvågøya, houses on concrete feet like mushrooms, an eccentric gallery and café that looked as though Robinson Crusoe had engaged an architect to build a driftwood palace gazing out to sea. One island down, surfers in 8mm wetsuits rode the cold, green, curling waves at Flakstad, near a pretty red-and-white church shut tight as a clam.

Someone in Svolvær had described Lofoten's peaks as 'spectacular, but lower than the Alps: imagine Chamonix under 2,000 metres of water'. I remembered that at Reine, stopping on the bridge to admire the village on its arm of land, fringed with cabins and fish racks and ringed by jagged mountains, black with rain and still snowy on top.

'I've never known a year with less snow or more fish,' said Michael Gylseth, the 36-year-old manager of Reine Rorbuer, showing me into the cosiest cabin I had seen so far. It had a blanket of tabby-coloured herringbone wool on the bed, grey pine trunks for ceiling beams, a softly ticking wall clock and a sturdy terrace overlooking the water.

Gylseth was born here: his grandfather was responsible for painting all the houses on the neighbouring island of Sakrisøya

MY HOST'S GRANDFATHER HAD PAINTED ALL THE HOUSES ON THE NEIGHBOURING ISLAND ORANGE TO IMPRESS HIS FUTURE WIFE

the door handles, and the extreme artist Eskil Rønningsbakken celebrated by balancing on top of the building. An opening cut into the upper floor looks down on a machine set into a pool of oil by the Paris-based Norwegian Per Barclay. The windows are squares of pale amethyst sea, broken up by snouts of scaly rock.

'Come and see my flat,' Hoff said gleefully, and we ascended a flight of polished concrete stairs, each step with a pair of shoes at one end, emerging into a home/work space full of crystalline Lofoten light. She smiled and shook her head, as if not quite able to believe her luck. Hoff directed me to a candle factory and café – run by the candlemaker and her fishing-skipper husband – packed with locals eating cinnamon buns and tourists buying candles. Down by the harbour, a glass and ceramics studio glowed in a former cod-liver-oil factory. In the deli up the road I cracked, and bought a pot of tomato-red cod roe.

'Make it myself,' said the cheery owner, holding up what looked like a pair of lungs. 'These are the roe sacs, and I mix the eggs with salt and pepper and a little sugar.' She said that Lofoten's long export history had brought ingredients and ideas back from the Mediterranean. 'We used tomatoes and garlic long before the rest of Norway, and we've always used spices,' she told me. 'But in winter I do traditional food, with power, because I feed a lot of fishermen. Otherwise, I mix it all up.'

A little further down the road, a big grey box stood by the fjord. When you got closer, it was a curved mirror facing the water: I could see myself in triplicate, dwarfed by the landscape. It's by the American artist Dan Graham and part of Artscape Nordland,

orange – ochre being an imported pigment, more expensive than the usual iron red – in order to impress his future wife. It worked.

I had arrived early in the season, and the hotel restaurant was not yet open. Gylseth had friends up from Oslo and asked me to join them. We ate outside under fleece blankets – cauliflower soup, salt cod, a stockfish stew – then retired to the restaurant stove for cured lamb leg on the bone, each slice thinly rinded with yellow fat. The talk ranged from Norwegian sweaters (everyone but me was wearing the same one, like a homely cult) to the musical Lofoten idiom that drops the ends off words, to why it is perfectly OK to call someone, though possibly not your granny, a *hæstkuk* or horse's dick, whereas helping yourself to other people's cloudberry is not OK at all.

I went to Å, but it was too early and made me sad: it's a museum village, probably great in summer, but as I wandered past empty cod-liver-oil cauldrons and terns nesting above the doors of the old fish factory, and watched a video in the bakery to a soundtrack of Boney M singing 'Mary's Boy Child', I decided it was time to move on.

Far better to climb onto the fjord boat that chugs about delivering post and supplies to remote hamlets on the water's edge. At one of them, an islander told us about an elderly woman who lives there and never leaves. Ever. She has never been ill. Her provisions come by boat. The other passengers exclaimed and wondered what kept her there, what sort of life she led, and why. I don't know. If I wasn't such a townie, it wouldn't seem that crazy to me.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: fruit and ice cream at Gammelbua, the restaurant at the Reine Rorbuer hotel on Moskenesøya; Jérôme Douay, the French chef at Børsen Spiseri restaurant on Svinøya; a bowl of fish soup at Gammelbua; a waterside fisherman's cabin reinvented as a hotel room at Reine Rorbuer. Following page, a view of the harbour from one of the cabins at Reine Rorbuer

SOMEONE TOLD ME THE PEAKS HERE ARE SPECTACULAR BUT LOWER THAN THE ALPS, LIKE CHAMONIX UNDER 2,000 METRES OF WATER



EATING & DRINKING

Kjøkkenet

The restaurant at Anker Brygge hotel is in Svolvær's old harbour office, a big timber building with a large bar. The menu is full of game and fish (yup, time to try fried cods' tongues), the waitresses wear black dresses and white aprons and there's a stove in the middle of the room. *Lamholmen, Svolvær (+47 7606 6480; www.anker-brygge.no)*. About £110 for two

Børsen Spiseri

Another timber building with embroidered curtains and vintage farm implements on the walls, but the food is sophisticated and the French chef has taken many Nordland staples and turned them into little works of art – try the stockfish salad with quinoa and citrus. *Gunnar Bergs vei 2, Svolvær (+47 7606 9930; svinoya.no/en/restaurant)*. About £110 for two

Henningsvær Lysstøperi og Café

Pål Pettersen and Line Jensen's candle factory and café is packed with locals of all ages eating the excellent cinnamon buns. Wherever you are in the islands, specify your coffee – cappuccino, espresso – or you'll be directed to a thermos of the weak stuff. *Gammelveien 2, Henningsvær (+47 9055 1877; www.henningsvarlys.no)*

Fiskekrogen

Chef Johan Petrini cooks traditional Lofoten food – fish soup, baked cod, braised leg of reindeer – with a light, contemporary touch. *Dreyers gate 29, Henningsvær (+47 9941 7900; www.fiskekrogen.no)*. About £90 for two

Gammelbua

Yes, it's timber, yes, it has a cosy stove, and yes, the food is traditional country style, using whatever fish has been caught and seasonal delicacies such as reindeer and cured lamb. The wonderful terrace overlooks the harbour and surrounding cabins. *Reine Rorbuer (+47 7609 2222; www.reinerorbuer.no)*. About £85 for two

Hamnøy Mat og Vinbu

This convivial, family-run wine bar in Reine serves as the local pub and is a great place to meet islanders and have a chat about fish prices and bridge-building. *Hamnøy, Reine (+47 7609 2145)*

GREAT GALLERIES

Nordnorsk Kunstnersenter

A huge, airy building that stocks fine art and crafts by local artists. It's really well curated, with plenty of space and light for the work. *Torget 20, Svolvær (+47 4008 9595; www.nnks.no)*

Galleri Dagfinn Bakke

Owned by Dagfinn Bakke, a Lofoten artist and printmaker whose work is witty and bold, and run by his journalist son. *Richard Withs gate 4 (+47 7607 1998; www.dagfinnbakke.no)*



KaviarFactory

Truly a white cube, set in a glorious, scoured landscape. Owner Venke Hoff organises an ambitious programme of shows featuring international as well as Norwegian artists. *Henningsværveien 13, Henningsvær (+47 9073 4743; www.kaviarfactory.no)*

Engelskmannbrygga Glass Studio

Formerly a cod-liver-oil business run by an Englishman – hence the name – this workshop/gallery is owned by a photographer and a ceramist, with two young artists in residence, both currently working in glass. *Dreyers gate 1, Henningsvær (+47 7607 5285; www.engelskmannsbrygga.no)*

THINGS TO DO

Go back to the 19th century

The **Lofoten Museum** is a charming collection of buildings from the 1800s – including the 'big house' owned by the local nobs – on the site of the oldest settlement in the archipelago at Kabelvåg. There is also a café and art gallery. *Storvåganveien, Kabelvåg (+47 7606 9790; www.lofotmuseet.no)*

Visit an organic farm

Lofoten Gårdsysteri is Hugo and Marielle Vink's lovely goat farm at Bøstad on Vestvågøya (near a great surf beach), with cheese-making lessons and an expanded café selling yummy salads and dairy-based dishes. The sweet goats spend all summer up on the mountain. *Unstadveien 235, Bøstad (+47 7608 9631; www.lofoten-gardsysteri.no)*

Meet the Vikings

Lofotr Vikingmuseum towers over the road like a vast, upturned boat. It's funny, and refreshing, to see the horned invaders from a domestic angle for once. *Prestegårdsveien 59, Bøstad (+47 7608 4900; www.lofotr.no)*

Catch the fjord boat

A great way to visit tiny fjordside hamlets. The boat departs from Reine, and a one-hour round trip costs about £12. www.reineffjorden.no

Be adventurous

Reineadventure is run by Sandro della Mea, who organises hiking, climbing and ski-touring. **Aqua Lofoten Coast Adventure** focuses on Arctic diving, snorkelling and boat trips across the Maelstrom and to see the archipelago's extraordinary Stone Age cave art. www.reineadventure.com; www.aqualofoten.no

GETTING THERE

Sophie Campbell went to the Lofoten Islands with **Discover the World** (+44 1737 214291; www.discover-the-world.co.uk), which offers tailor-made holidays to the archipelago and throughout Scandinavia. A seven-night self-drive trip costs from £1,217 per person (based on two sharing), including three nights at Reine Rorbuer, two nights at Anker Brygge in Svolvær and two nights in Vesterålen, plus car hire and return flights from Heathrow to Harstad/Narvik (Evenes) via Oslo. Departures May–September. For further information on Norway and the Lofoten Islands, go to www.visitnorway.co.uk and www.lofoten.info.