

Lights, camera, action

Glimpsing the northern lights is by no means guaranteed on *Viking Venus*, or any other cruise ship, but **Lesley Bellew** finds herself in the right place at the right time

It all feels so right. After almost two days sailing north from Bergen, Norway, the sky is pastel blue and almost cloudless. As the evening draws in, an apricot-coloured glow backlights the snowy mountains. When darkness falls, the pale hue turns into red-hot poker orange. Mother Nature is hinting that something special is about to happen.

Viking Venus bathes in this changing light and across the ship – at the Living Room bar, over afternoon tea in the elegant Wintergarden, in the lift, by the library and even in the spa – there is excited talk of the northern lights. This Scenic Sailing: Norwegian Inside Passage route takes guests across the Arctic Circle to Alta, Tromsø and Narvik, and everyone is hoping this bucket-list cruise will deliver.

At the packed aurora borealis lecture, resident astronomer Howard Parkin is cautiously optimistic

that we could be “in with a chance”. He explains the best time to see the northern lights is close to the Equinox (March 21 or autumn, September 21), so my sailing to Alta and Tromsø on March 20 immediately ups the odds.

Howard adds: “Being inside the Arctic Circle is the prime position, but we also need plenty of solar activity, a new moon and little or no cloud.”

Passengers are so excited that they go to dinner dressed in layers of outdoor clothes in case the call comes and, even before meals are ordered, word gets round that we have ‘visitors in the sky’.

FLUTTERING ACROSS THE SKY

There’s a dash to the top deck and, sure enough, what looks like the finest green silk scarf seems to flutter across the dark sky. Within seconds, it ➤

PICTURE: Alastair Miller



Viking Venus bathed in the northern lights

PICTURE: Alastair Miller

disappears before reappearing and morphing into a dancing green genie.

Everyone cranes their necks to look at a blueish vapour trail directly above, as if a spaceship is rocketing skywards, before it twists into a sharp fork of vivid green over the ship's bridge.

No wonder the Vikings believed they were seeing the 'Bifrost Bridge' – a glowing arch that led fallen Viking warriors to their resting place. The Vikings called the lights *norðurljós*, which they believed were reflections on the armour of the Valkyrie (legendary female warriors on horseback).

It's easy to see how Norse imaginations ran wild; the lights begin to move faster, with fantastical shapes appearing, from a raging waterfall of blue-grey and pink to the shape of a steam train flying through the stars.

Most passengers are watching through their cameras or mobile phones when a curtain of shimmering magenta with a green hem fills the sky for the finale.

We are speechless – but it's -16C, and as the lights subside, there's a mass retreat inside, as we celebrate our extraordinary luck.

Viking Venus is buzzing, but this is only the start of the fun, with all-action excursions – from husky rides or a night in a tepee to ice-fishing and rib boat rides – on the agenda to make the most of Norway's stunning natural landscape.

During our overnight stop in Alta, many passengers sign up for a night-time snowmobile tour alongside the Alta River, where snow-dusted spruce trees look like they have come straight off an iced Christmas cake. The aurora borealis is with us all the way, filling the sky with soft pinkish-purple hues.

PLANETS AND CONSTELLATIONS

At our pit stop, we drink warm fruit punch by a fire as Howard points out the planets, stars and constellations. We can see Mars glowing red, Orion's Belt close to the horizon, Taurus the bull, Gemini the twins and the Plough.

Even Howard can't contain his delight. "It's one of the best shows in more than six years," he tells us with a huge smile. "This activity works in an 11-year cycle, so from now until 2025 offers great possibilities to see the aurora borealis."

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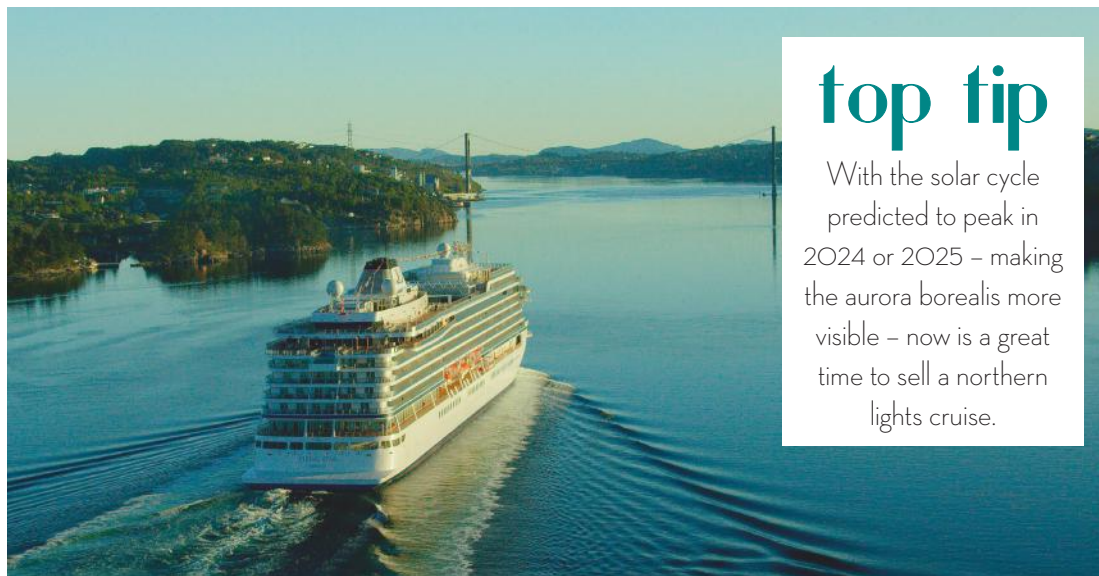
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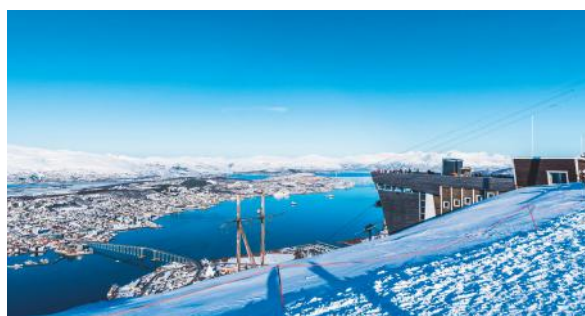
“Although included excursions are always available on Viking journeys, the optional shore excursions are the highlight of this itinerary, as they include some of the most unique experiences we offer.

The voyage starts or ends in Bergen, an ancient city with deep Viking roots, where the excursions are established around learning about local Norwegian life. For example, passengers can attend a mini concert at the home of accomplished local musicians who complement their performance with stories and anecdotes from historical Bergen, as well as from their own lives. The most popular excursions are the ones where guests can go in search of the northern lights using differing and exciting modes of transport. Cruisers can enjoy the stark beauty of northern Norway’s icy tundra on a snowmobile tour or while being pulled by a team of huskies. During the day, guests are given a taste of popular Norwegian winter pastimes such as Nordic skiing, snowshoeing and ice fishing.”



top tip

With the solar cycle predicted to peak in 2024 or 2025 – making the aurora borealis more visible – now is a great time to sell a northern lights cruise.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Setting sail from Bergen; the northern lights; Mount Storsteinen and Tromsø

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Daniela Baumann, V. Belov

Back on board, we relax during sea days and take time to appreciate this elegant Scandi-style adult-only ship, which features a stunning, free-to-use Nordic Spa with hydro pool and ice grotto.

The Explorers’ Lounge offers 270-degree sea views, a bar and Mamsen’s snack bar, which serves Norwegian treats including everything from waffles and cakes to open sandwiches piled with salmon and prawns.

Before dinner, we listen to the pianist and lounge on sofas draped with woollen throws in the grand Atrium, with waiters bringing drinks from the bar. There’s no charge for dining in the speciality restaurants; Manfredi’s serves succulent steak and lobster, while the Chef’s Table offers international menus paired with complimentary wine at lunch and dinner.

As we sail towards Tromsø, there’s a call that the lights are back. Captain Torbjorn Stenula is mesmerised. He has seen the northern lights many times, but says: “I have never seen amber rings flashing in the sky. This is very unusual.”

SNOWSHOEING EXCURSION

In Tromsø, we take the cable car to Fjellheisen for an evening’s snowshoe excursion on Mount Storsteinen, with views of the illuminated city. We crunch through the crisp snow, forgetting to look up.

“The ship’s captain is mesmerised. ‘I have never seen amber rings flashing in the sky,’ he says. ‘This is very unusual.’

American honeymooners Ashlee and John point out a light forming in the sky. For the fourth night running, another show begins, this time in meandering waves of green.

John and Ashlee are on their first cruise. “We wanted to see the northern lights but didn’t know how,” says Ashlee. “We found Viking and thought ‘this looks the best option’. We certainly got our wish.” The aurora borealis might be elusive, but sometimes, the lights can be very generous indeed. **TW**

BOOK IT

Viking’s 12-night In Search of the Northern Lights cruise from Bergen to Tilbury starts at £4,740. The price includes a one-way flight; onboard meals; wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner; an excursion in each port; Wi-Fi and gratuities. viking.com