

Sunday 12 October – Bergen, Norway – rain which cleared up in the evening

It was a 3am start and we drove to Heathrow in thick fog; it's not surprising as yesterday was one of those wonderful unexpected sunny, warm October days. I couldn't fit everything into my 20 kilo allowance so I had to wear my jumper, heavy boots and Jen's ski jacket. Last on the plane again as we were originally sent to gate 27 only to find it was going to some obscure Saudi country. Arrived at the correct gate absolutely sweltering hot, I couldn't wait to take a few layers off and it wasn't help by me having a menopausal hot flush in the panic.

Arrived in Bergen via Oslo. The airports are modern, very Scandinavian with lots of wood and stainless steel and ground staff scooting around on scooters. The airport bus takes you to the centre of Bergen for around £8 each (800 Norwegian kroner). My friend Magnhild was picking us up at 5pm to have dinner at her flat. I was so excited as I haven't see Maggie for 31 years. She worked as a temp with me for 9 months when she was married to Campbell who came from Portsmouth, and she last visited me with Campbell and her first baby son Robert in 1977. We have written to each other every Christmas since. Would I recognise her and would she recognise me? I had emailed her a photo of Jen which she thought had an uncanny resemblance to me at that age. It was just wonderful to see her again and you know people don't really change that much.

Maggie drove us to her flat that overlooks Bergen and where you can see the boats going in and out of the harbour. We were joined by her language teacher friend Benta with her British partner Neil who works for an oil company and Karen a faith healer – all very interesting! We were served baccalao which is a fish stew made from dried fish from the north of Norway. This was followed by hot raspberries and ice cream and washed down with wine and Norwegian liqueurs. Everyone spoke excellent English and we discussed our respective political and economic situations. They think Gordon Brown is lacking charisma and has a weak expression, and of course we agreed. We laughed about the time Maggie and I worked together, Rick and I weren't an item then but she recalls seeing him in the lab. She remembers us with our make-up and high heels tottering around the factory and handing out the wages through a window on Fridays. After putting the world to rights and as it had stopped raining we went for a walk down the meandering, steep pathways through woods and streams towards the city. I thought Norway would be all fir trees but many of the trees were golden brown and shedding their leaves. We said goodbye halfway down the hill and walked through the town past the Irish Bars and restaurants back to the hotel. I knew Rick couldn't wait to ask me if I had witnessed Karen laying her hands on Benta. I knew something he hadn't picked up on and that was that Benta is a psychic!

Monday 13 October 2008 – Bergen – very wet but not cold

Great breakfast at Rica Bergen Hotel. Met Magnhild (Maggie) and took the funicular Floybanen railway to the top of the hill to get a fantastic view of Bergen. It took about an hour to walk down in the pouring rain following part of the pathway that we took last night. Walking through the autumn scenery made it difficult to believe we could be so close to the city. It is a forest with streams and waterfalls coming out of everywhere. Maggie took us through Bergen's narrow cobbled streets with the pretty, coloured wooden houses that were packed close together. There is a problem with these wooden houses burning down. Maggie was constantly on the phone to her Estate Agent who is trying to sell her flat. The Norwegian housing market is suffering much the same fate as at home with people putting in low offers. The agent seemed desperate for her to accept an offer but Maggie was holding out and is seriously thinking of finding someone to rent it from her. She is a community nurse and uses a bicycle to visit her patients but she has given in her notice as she is going to move to Sognafjord. She will be renting a house in this remote village of about six families. In the summer it is full of Germans who come to fish and take their catch back home in freezers attached to their camper vans. Maggie hopes to get a job in the town that is about 30 minutes away. In the meantime it is a beautiful quiet place where she hopes to mend her recently broken heart and write a book.

Lunch was fish soup at £12 a go, nothing is cheap here. It cost £10 for an adapter plug. The estate agent is persistent and said Magnhild has until 2pm tomorrow to consider the offer on her flat. Norway has had a

very good summer which is unusual but now it is nothing but rain. We were absolutely soaking wet when we got back to the hotel. I am well prepared for the cold but didn't expect this amount of rain. This evening we met Maggie and her friend Torild in the Irish Bar. Torild used to work for Hurtigruten. We are going to join one of these ships tomorrow for an eleven night voyage to the top of Norway and back to Bergen. She lived with one of the captains for five years until he left her for a younger woman but tragically he and his new partner got killed in an accident shortly after. Maggie and Torild work together part time on a Veteran Ship that they are fond of, giving them the chance to sail for free to places nearby and sometimes as far as Finland and Sweden. They seem to have loads of fun and get to meet lots of interesting people at the same time contributing to the upkeep of the ship. I could do with a voluntary job like that as all the voluntary work I have enquired about seemed depressing. Last night Neil was telling us about the satisfaction he gets from his voluntary work with dogs for the blind.

Maggie said she had consulted her clairvoyant who advised her not to accept the offer on her flat; something better was going to come along. Rick is amused by the entire goings on i.e. faith healer, psychic and clairvoyant! Another amazing thing is that they don't seem to have heard of the ice hotels. Unfortunately, we won't be able to see one as they are re-built each year and only open from December to April.

We were joined by Magnhild's youngest son Stephen who has too many hormones and is a bit of a rebel but has travelled all over the world. He speaks English with a strong American accent due to watching too many American films but he loves British films such as Snatch and Lock, Stock and Smoking Barrels. Stephen did his work experience on one of the Hurtigruten ships and said the best bit was the stormy high seas and of course the Northern Lights. Rick's round of drinks, 2 glasses of wine and a pint and a half of beer cost £28 (282 Norwegian Kroner). We left them to find somewhere to eat but all the main courses started at about £28 so we settled for a snack from the 7 Eleven convenience store of which there are plenty around.

I'm looking forward to joining the boat and getting a decent meal as there wasn't much gluten free in the store so went to bed on 2 packets of crisps, 2 Snicker bars, a few peanuts and a banana.

Tuesday 14 October 2008 Bergen – Heavy Showers

I am thinking a lot about Maggie going to spend the winter in this very remote village that is often cut off from the main roads. What will happen in the summer when the rent increases dramatically and she can no longer afford to stay there. I haven't had a chance to speak to her on my own. Despite several blatant hints to Rick like "why don't you go and play with your computer" he insists on staying with us at all times.

Spent morning in hotel as it was raining and I had bad tummy which we put down to the crisps from 7 Eleven. The terminal is about 15 minutes away and we didn't get too wet as we walked the big cases to the Hurtigruten check in. Bergen with its population of 230,000 has one of the highest rainfalls in Europe (1,958 mm per annum), they even have an umbrella repair shop. Maggie was right when she said it always rains in Bergen. Every Saturday and Sunday from mid-March to May five to eight year olds march through the city. By the time of the grand finale on Independence Day (17 May) they are able to march in time with the drums. Bergen was founded in 1070 and in the 13th and 14th centuries it was Norway's capital and a major harbour for trade. Salt and wheat were exchanged for dried fish in the Hanseatic period and in the 14th century all the trade was handled by German merchants who were later driven out of the city. During World War II Bergen became the centre of the Resistance movement. We got the impression the Norwegians don't have much time for the Germans who come in their campervans and fill up their freezers with Norwegian fish to take home. They even bring all their own food with them, park along the roads instead of using sites and empty their toilets anywhere. Apparently measured by turnover, Bergen is one of the largest ports in the world, with oil reserves in the North Sea playing a major part in its prosperity. It didn't appear that busy or big to me.

We walked back through Bryggen, Bergen's most famous street that is lined with fine wooden warehouses rebuilt after the fire of 1702. We then went back to the same restaurant as yesterday for some more

Fiskesuppe. We looked around the shops to compare prices as our money was going fast. It's very expensive to eat out and we saw a Burger advertised in a café (not a posh one) for approximately £10 and then found a Burger King where you could buy a basic burger for about £5.

We boarded the Midnatsol about 4pm and Rick bought a water package for £32 (a bottle of sparkling water for lunch and dinner) and a coffee and tea package for £38 which entitles you to have as much tea and coffee as you like. He turned down the wine package £380 which gave you a bottle of wine each evening. Maggie came on board and we had a couple of gin and tonics in our cabin as it is £8 a shot in the bar. We like our cabin even though it is one of the cheap ones. After saying goodbye to Maggie until Saturday week we had a lovely buffet supper with lobster, crab, salmon, prawns etc washed down with our sparkling water. In an emergency you are issued with a thermal suit and life jacket. We were in bed by 9.30pm totally exhausted but relieved that all the food, water, coffee and tea is now paid for.

Wednesday 15 October 2008 – weather mild



Maggie & Sue - exit funicular Floybanen



Walk on way down to Bergen

We booked this 2-for-1 holiday with £50 on board credit through the Telegraph as it just seemed too good an offer to miss. I had just seen part of a lovely programme where Joanna Lumley took a similar voyage and it was a good opportunity to see Maggie again. The Hurtigruten ships are working ships, subsidised by the government to run daily from Bergen to deliver post and cargo to remote parts of Norway. Our ship Midnatsol is a bit smaller than the ferry to France and holds just over 40 cars, there is no entertainment. In many of the small places the ship only stops for 15 minutes. The ship weaves its way up the convoluting coastline and in and out of fjords to the top of Norway, the ports that we miss because it is dark or we are asleep are visited in daylight on the way back to Bergen. I think there are about 100 passengers plus an International Conference Party of about 100 who all came on the boat clutching a Norwegian Jumper, not sure if they were Dale ones as they cost about £200 each.



Bergen Wooden Houses & Cobbled Streets



Torvik & Midnatsol

First stop was for 30 minutes at Torvik, not much here but a few houses and some sheep and goats. We sailed past Runde where there are at least 30 types of birds: puffins, kittiwakes, razorbills, guillemots, cormorants, fulmars and gannets – didn't see any though. The buffet lunch was great with all kinds of fish plus a few hot dishes.



Alesund centre



At the top of the mountain overlooking Alesund

Next stop was a three hour one at Alesund which burned to the ground in 1904 and was rebuilt in the distinctive Art Nouveau style with a myriad of turrets, spires and beautiful ornamentation. We managed to climb to the top of Aksla mountain despite Rick gasping for breath as he had forgotten his puffer and his legs still aching from the mountain walk in Bergen. It was worth the climb as the view was fantastic. There are 21 oil rigs out to sea from Alesund the closest being Njord, 200 km from shore and only producing 17,000 barrels per day and the furthest being Ekofisk, 680 km offshore at a depth of 75m producing 236,000 barrels a day. It seemed quite mild, I don't know if that was just because of the big climb. My coat and handbag have now dried out from all the rain on Monday. The lady in the tourist office lives in a house with a grass roof, she said the roof is reinforced because of the weight but it keeps the house well insulated and looks very attractive with the grass and flowers growing out of it.



Molde modern buildings & Cathedral



Sue with a troll – lots of legends about these

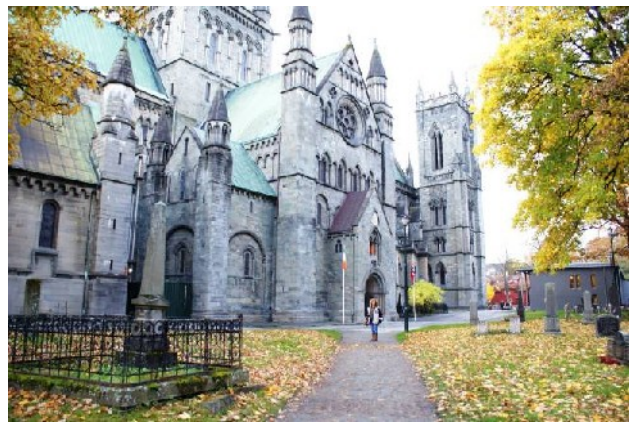
Back to the ship and we sail over some of the many Norwegian subsea road tunnels that connect the many islands. We next berthed for an hour at Molde where 2/3 of the town was blitzed in 1940, therefore, most of the buildings date from the 1950's more boxy architecture. Molde is home to industries such as furniture making and the production of lighting fixtures. It is the most northerly limit for trees such as horse chestnuts, maples, holly, linden, ash and copper beeches. You hardly have time to catch your breath or take a meal before the ship stops again.

Wore my new Scandinavian looking woollen dress to dinner but couldn't wait to take it off as it was very itchy. Just in case you are wondering we both have a full signal on our phones so no arguing there. Rick wants to synchronize our cameras but I haven't the faintest idea how to do mine. It was an early supper tonight and no alcohol making it a long, long evening.

Thursday 16 October - Trondheim, City of the Viking Kings - weather still mild with no wind

We were in bed by 9pm and I thought we must do something, so we started to watch a Casablanca DVD on Rick's computer. Haven't seen it before and it's got all those wonderful famous lines. At 10pm we docked at Kristiansund for an hour and we were invited for a walk along the prom. We couldn't be bothered to get up and dressed again so we gave it a miss as we stop there for 30 minutes on the way back.

After breakfast we walked in to Trondheim where we were docked until midday. It was Norway's first capital city and is situated at the mouth of the River Nid. Many a Viking ship was dragged onto the sandy banks of this river to celebrate after an expedition. The first ever export of American goods to Europe took place here around 1000AD. Our first stop was the picturesque Gamle Bybro, an old drawbridge with colourful old warehouses, some built on stilts, lining the river. We made our way to the gothic looking Nidaros Cathedral that is built over the grave of saintly King Olav. Trondheim became a religious centre after St Olav's death in 1030 as pilgrims came from far and wide to be healed at his shrine. Until well in to the 13th century Trondheim was the seat of the Norwegian kings and Norwegian kings are still crowned in this cathedral. Unfortunately, it didn't open until midday as the Royal family and the Irish Prime Minister were visiting today. The Archbishop's Palace, dating from 1160's next door was also closed, this is used for official State and Church receptions and the Crown Regalia is stored in the museum there.



Rick will keep fiddling with his camera settings and taking lots of pictures of the same thing using different exposures. In 1681 Trondheim suffered a fire, as it seems most built up cities have, and it was rebuilt with wide roads to reduce damage from further fires. Walking along one these wide roads we came across a Vinmonopolet shop which are the government controlled shops and the only place where wines and spirits are sold. Wine was about twice the cost of a bottle in England but gin and vodka were £38 a litre! We have been invited to a crab party in Bergen on our last night and we have to take our own food and drink. Wine by the box seemed a more economical choice so we bought one. How are we going to make it last until a week Saturday, we will have to be strong. It was £30 for equivalent to 4 bottles, not bad value. Bottles of wine in the ships restaurant start from about £30.

Back on the ship and we have sailed past the fertile communities that line the long, wide Trondheims Fjord where agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting help provide excellent living standards. We are now on the ship until a 45 minute stop at Rorvik this evening at 8.30pm but that will clash with our supper. So far you wouldn't really know that we are in a Fjord as it appears more like a lake with lots of islands. This afternoon we passed through the narrow opening of Stokksundet which looks more like I expected, higher mountains on either side and narrower water. If it were not for the Gulf Stream the Norwegian coast would have not developed as the fjords would be blocked by ice for several months of the winter.



Watched the rest of Casablanca – “Here’s looking at you kid” and “Of all the gin palaces in the world” – great stuff. Breakfast and lunch are buffet style but the evening meal is a set menu that is served to you. We have requested a table for two as we don’t want to get stuck with a drawn out meal and polite conversation. The food is excellent but being on our own we wolf it down it record time even though we are trying to go slow. Last in and first out again. Have to confess we have started on the wine, it was Rick’s fault he said there will still be plenty left for the party – um I think not!

Friday 17 October – Bodo – weather bit colder, rain in afternoon.



The 12 Hurtigruten ships are locally known as “The Coastal Express” and during the night our ship made 3 shorts stops but we didn’t wake up. Just before 8am, **bump**, didn’t feel that either, we crossed the Arctic Circle! The border with the Land of the Midnight Sun. We were 15 minutes late arriving at our next stop, Ornes but even if we arrive late we always have to leave on time. As it was only a 15 minute stop we stayed onboard and watched them unload 3 parcels. They are really swish at docking and leaving port, they have it down to a fine art. So much so in fact that a young couple ran towards the ship once it had started to pull in the gangway. It hesitated for a second and then continued pulling it in and left the couple to find their own way back to the ship. The only way I can think they can catch us up is by road, hope they’ve got lots of money on them! Ornes (1700 inhabitants) with its popular beach is very pretty and is the centre for local boat services, it has a small marina.. The scenery was spectacular with snowy mountains in the distance.

Rick says he would love to live in one of the remote places but would he be able to survive without his computer. They are such time wasters but a necessary evil. The rain delayed our walk into Bode but we hadn’t missed much as it was an industrial town. The cathedral was modern and like the one in Molde where the spire is separate from the main building.



Modern Cathedral in Bodo



Very appropriate name for Bank at the moment

Back on the boat we were invited to meet King Neptune on deck 9 for the Arctic Circle Ceremony. He gets about as this is the third time we have seen him in the last year, once in the middle of the Atlantic, then Galapagos and now Norway. Ice was poured down the backs (underneath their clothes) of brave participants, that sorted out who were the real Viking men, and then they were rewarded with a typical Norwegian liqueur.



Passengers are coming and going all the time, most of the conference delegates have gone home and now some families have come aboard. They seem to be putting on some light entertainment as we watched 3 amateur magicians perform a short stint each. We didn't watch the film on the Northern Lights as I want to be surprised. After supper we had an hours stop at Svolvær, just enough time to visit the Ice Bar. It's the wrong time of year to visit the Ice Hotel as it is rebuilt each December and is only open until March. The Ice Bar seemed like the next best thing, it was OK but they charged £26 to get in, but that included a drink. However, we waited half an hour for a barman to appear so it was a bit disappointing. Also, they must use some chemical to make the ice that affects Rick's breathing. At 11pm we all went up on deck and the ship slowed down to almost stop. All went quiet as the searchlights circled the surrounding mountains looking for a way into the Troll fjord. There didn't seem any obvious opening and then slowly, cautiously the ship crept slowly forward into the eerie fjord. Everything was still and the mountains were reflected in the dark, still waters. It was eerie but magical and just what I had imagined although I hadn't imagined going through whilst it was dark. The ship could only go a little way in and then it had to turn around and go back. I didn't realise the fjords were dead ends. What a fantastic piece of navigation and what a magical moment!

Saturday 18 October – Harstad, Finnsnes & Tromsø – weather a bit colder but bright



Ice Statue from last night



Lovely bright day and a bit colder as we walked into Finnsnes for the 45 minute stop. Some of these short stops are the most interesting. There was quite a bit of traffic here, the tyres were making a crackling sound as they are all full of studs to help in icy conditions. Rick is continuing to take loads of pictures of the same thing i.e. tyres with studs and the clear sea water. The goods in the shops were much cheaper and houses especially so, as there were lots for sale between £50K and £100K. I suppose not so many people want to live in the colder north. Despite their huge reserves of oil and gas and plentiful fish supplies the Norwegians seem a hard working, cautious race. They are not building expensive glitzy hotels and skyscrapers like the oil rich Arabs and both men and women don't receive their state pension until 67. They smoke a lot, but then their cigarettes aren't taxed as much as ours, unlike their alcohol.



Studs in the tyre



In Shopping Mall with bras hanging down everywhere

We have had loads of trouble getting connected to the ship's internet and have more or less given up with it. We are now going to save our emails up for a few days and then use Rick's Nokia thingy. It's so, so frustrating and time consuming. Even Rick who has loads of patience with computers, less with me, has got frustrated with the slow connection.

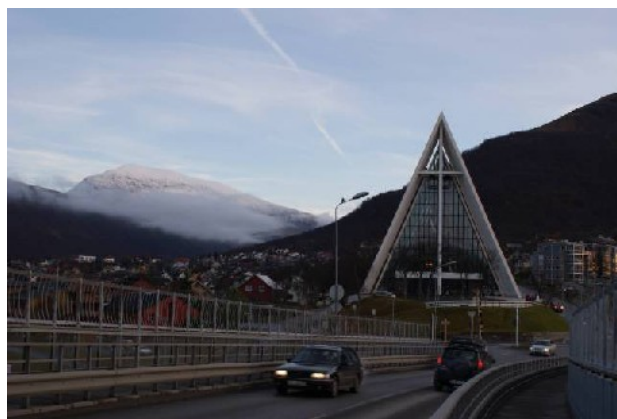
I am confused about the trees, we read that deciduous trees don't grow in the Arctic but it must have meant certain types as there are still plenty about, although they have lost their leaves already whereas further south they are still a wonderful golden colour. As we sail by the mountains they must be edged with trees because they resemble a man's bristly chin. There are also a few wind farms which despite local opposition are set to increase.

The lunches are still fantastic and it's hard to cut anything out so we have to do a marathon walk once we reach Tromsø, the Arctic Capital. First stop was an interesting and enjoyable visit to the Polar Museum. Historically there was a lot of whale, seal and walrus hunting which led to a bit of bother with the Russian, British, Dutch and Germans. The Norwegians are very environmentally aware and reindeer hunting is now forbidden. A considerable amount of the exhibition was devoted to North and South Pole expeditions especially those of Roald Amundsen. The equipment they used was extremely basic but it was their perseverance and bravery that saw them through. We then walked across the bridge that connected the islands toward the Arctic Cathedral. The bridge can't take all the traffic so they also have a tunnel under the

sea. As the cathedral didn't open until 4pm we carried on walking through a residential area to a cable car that took you to the top of the mountain so you could overlook the city. However, that was closed, as has most of the tourist attractions everywhere at the end of September – we are between seasons it seems. Back to the Cathedral that cost £2.50 each to get in and it just wasn't worth it, very small, no pictures and no atmosphere. I thought I would get my £2.50's worth by using the toilets downstairs. Everything was bare, all white walls, no pictures, bare floors, just nothing. I had about ten minutes panic after using the toilet and trying to escape. I kept coming to the stairs that were shut off. I must have tried every door at least three times. Help, the place was empty apart from the chap upstairs taking the money. I eventually found my way out and found Rick oblivious to how long it taken me to go to toilet as he was taking about fifty photos of the cars on the bridge all with different exposures. The town was relaxed with a mixture of new and old buildings. Most of the shops shut about 4pm on a Saturday.



Arctic Cathedral in distance



Front of Cathedral

We were pleased with our long walk of nearly three hours; others had caught the bus to the cathedral. Back on the ship it was time for a bit of relaxation so we sat in the dark in the panoramic lounge to watch the ship leave port. It was nearly supper time again, too good to miss as they have adapted almost everything for my gluten free diet. I don't think our 3 hour walk was enough to compensate for the huge supper I ate, after which we all had to rush out on deck to wave to a sister ship passing by. I think reception wanted to have a bit of fun; they got us all out of bed at 11.15 pm as there was a possibility of seeing the Northern Lights. We stood on deck in the cold (yes it was quite cold) for about half an hour and then moved into the panoramic lounge until midnight but no luck. Tomorrow night we will be at the most northern point so perhaps we will be lucky then. Anyway, it was a good opportunity for Rick to take loads more photographs of the dark but all at different exposures!

Sunday 19 October – North Cape– weather dull and raining

The ship has emptied out quite a bit, the conference delegates have gone home; consequently the bar is empty as there are not too many left who are on expenses. The couple who missed the boat the other day haven't resurfaced and next door to us have had a "Do not Disturb" sign on their door for two days; I don't know what is going on there because they certainly don't look like a honeymoon couple. There is a group of Americans who are all wearing a tag with "Vantage" round their necks, they are a jolly lot but perhaps should be called "Vintage". You can identify the Norwegian women as they are usually knitting, I haven't been very successful in identifying any Telegraph readers who may have taken advantage of the same offer as us but there are quite a few Americans aboard. I am no good at recognising accents but one old chap has the most fantastic sexy deep throated, gravelly sleepy accent, Rick thinks it's a Texan drawl. There is a slight swell this morning so the best place for Rick is in bed as he gets seasick quickly. Our cameras may now be synchronised but our sleeping habits aren't, it's difficult to get him up in the morning.

Breakfast finished at 10am and lunch started at 10.30am as there was a trip out to the North Cape. We haven't booked any trips as they are really expensive, this one was £67 each for a short coach ride to take a picture from the top of the cliff and a stop at a souvenir shop on the way back. There was a 3.5 hour stop at Honningsvåg which is supposedly a busy fishing port that has led to a growth in the fishing, processing and

refrigeration industries in and around the town. It was a dismal, dull raining day and being Sunday everything was shut. We caught up with the Vantage group at the church just as their guide said “What a beautiful place” and we thought not today, as it is just the sort of day you want to be snuggled up in front of a fire watching an old film.



1311 miles to the North Pole



Aren't I brave fortunately there was no struggle

Watched a short film on the Sami and was called up on deck to look at a rock formation (Finn-church) that was a sacred Sami place. Then some King crabs were brought aboard, the Russians introduced them in the 60's for extra food and they made their way to these waters. There is a down side to them as they eat all the small fish and their eggs. It's a dull day and there is still a swell which doesn't suit Rick. Tried to distract him by watching Lord of the Rings but it is too complicated for him to concentrate. He must really be feeling off as he hasn't even been interested in working on the ICT website which he usually does at every opportunity. There's no chance of seeing the Northern Lights tonight as it is raining and there is too much cloud about. Rick isn't bothered about trying as he just wants to go to bed and wake up to a calm sea.

Monday 20 October – Kirkeness – weather bright and much colder

Rick is back on form and we ignore the buses and decide to walk to the Reindeer Park that is quite some way out of the town. We reached a lake and asked the odd person who was coming our way how much further it was, one man said 4 kilometres. When we eventually reached it a man greeted us and said it was £10 each to get in; we balked a bit as we only had 15 minutes before we needed to walk back. He explained that the muddy field at the entrance was where they were going to start building the Snow Hotel again in a couple of week's time. He then led us into another field where we were able to feed the tame Reindeer on some moss. There were lots of little animal huts in fenced compounds and we were told these were for the huskies that were currently at a training camp. We were the only people there and he must have been impressed with our endurance as he offered to make us a cup of coffee and take us back to the ship in his car. Our coffee was served in the wooden restaurant that they use for the Snow Hotel. He then became our personal guide imparting general information and explaining to us how they build the hotel.



Immediately behind Rick is the site for the Snow Hotel



These are the Huskies kennels

They can't start building the Snow Hotel until it is at least -3°C and it is built of artificial snow as that is denser than natural snow and lasts longer. He said in 3 weeks time the place will be a hive of activity, full of engineers, workers and ice sculptors. This will be the third year the hotel will have been open and despite

the economic turndown they have 800 forward bookings from British people alone. It takes about 70 people but he likes to run it with about 50 - 60 because he wants visitors to feel they have a personal service. A package usually includes flights from London to Tromso, the Hurtigruten ship to Kirkeness, a couple of nights in the snow hotel and sleigh rides with the huskies. When the snow comes in few weeks time the landscape is completely transformed. They use the ice from the frozen lake to build the Ice Hotel. The restaurant is open to visitors out of season serving the King Crabs and Reindeer.



I asked about the lack of fir trees and he said you only have to go about 3km inland to find plenty of them. I commented that we hadn't seen the Northern Lights yet and he said you could be a very rich man if you were able to predict when they were coming. A Finnish company sold a "Northern Lights" holiday to some Japanese who didn't get to see them and they were sued. The town was originally built around mining and an Australian company have recently bought the disused open cast iron ore mine and will be starting it up again employing about 250 people. The Russians export the King Crabs (Kamptsjatki) to Alaska; it is a multi million pound business. The Gulf Stream doesn't reach here and ice-breakers are often used to open up the harbour, On some days there are as many as 80 trawlers, many of them Russian, using the harbour. I said it's surprising that the petrol seems to be about the same price as at home and he agreed saying that is to do with the government. Norway suffered from the German occupation and Kirkeness was actually almost destroyed by the British and Russians who tried to get the Nazis to retreat. 2,500 people sheltered in a tunnel in the mine for over 2 months in the autumn of 1944 before the Russians liberated the area.



Only 2626 km to Bergen



House with grass roof

We are now turning round and are on our way back to Bergen where according to Maggie they are all drowning! She has advertised her flat for rent and is busy deciding what of her belongings she is going to take with her and what is going to be sent to the jumble sale.

For lunch today there were 21 types of fish: Herring with mustard or sherry marinated or curried; salmon smoked or baked, or marinated or whole; Greenland halibut smoked or marinated; eel; smoked red fish, prawns; mussels; crab dressed or fresh; 2 types of lobster; redfish and 3 types of roe. The meat was mutton and cabbage stew! There are also cold meats, soup, vegetable dishes, cheeses and many mouthwatering desserts.

Had a couple of short stops, the last one being at 8pm in Batsfjord. We stepped out of the ship and gosh it was cold and windy, the coldest we have been, just like stepping into a deep freezer. Needless to say we only managed about five minutes before we shot back into the warmth of the ship.

Couldn't help but glance at the headlines, brilliant news about England's recent football results and Hamilton's and Andy Murray's win. We also read that Alistair Darling is going to spend our way out of the recession – he is now well and truly on Rick's hate list right next to Gordon Brown.

Tuesday 21 October – Hammerfest & Tromsø – weather wet

Had a quiet day as the weather was wet and a little windy. They must have a change of captain or something as we haven't kept to our timetable. Our stop at Hammerfest was cut short because of our late arrival but we managed to fit in a flying visit to a museum of reconstruction after World War II. We missed out a stop and were 45 minutes late for the main stop Tromsø at 9.45pm which made it a bit late to go out. Anyway it was good to have a day off and it passed quickly, I finished *Brideshead Revisited* and Rick finished his book. Tried the gym out but we are both stiff, Rick says he feels like he has been through the spin dryer.

Although the weather had cleared up it was still not conducive for the Northern Lights. Might have to end up buying the video. The Aurora Borealis are a natural phenomenon which occurs in arctic regions in particular. They are caused by electrically charged solar particles, high in energy, entering the earth's atmosphere usually around the Arctic Circle (67N) ° and are usually yellow-green or sometimes green and reddish-violet.

Gadget mad Alun sent me a very amusing response to my comments about Alistair Darling:

“I read your comments about Alistair Darling, it would be nearly impossible to trust a man with white hair and black eyebrows, there is something very sinister about him. However, if I were to name the person most untrustworthy and dodgy in the government it would have to be Peter Mandelson, he is as bent as a 9 Kroner note and as slippery as a marinated eel. As he is the newest appointed Lord I heard that they are thinking about abandoning the Ermine in favour of weasel and rat fur.”

Wednesday 22 October – Harstad, Risøyhamn, Sortland, Stokmarknes, Svolvær

Woke up to a bright morning, over 100 young and exciting delegates from World Wide Adventure Holidays joined the ship last night which has added a bit of atmosphere. We sailed through Risøyrenna a 3 mile long dredged channel that in places only had a metre of water under the ship. We got out at Sortland, the headquarters of Norway's coastguards. The herring stocks have been almost depleted but Sortland, like a lot of towns grew from the herring years which in turn led to the development of modern fishing fleets and processing industries. Fish offal is used industrially in oil, enzymes and proteins for the cosmetic, pharmaceutical and health industries. There were a lot of modern shops for only 4,600 inhabitants.

By the time we arrived in Stokmarknes it was absolutely tipping it down so we quickly made our way to the Museum of the Coastal Express. We got to have a look around one of the very early ships. The Coastal Express has been in operation for over 100 years and until the 60's there were three classes of travellers. The captain then steered us very carefully through Raftsundet a 20km narrow strait and then once again he entered the Troll Fjord. If you remember on the way north he took us through it at night but although this time it was daylight the weather was atrocious. However, the drinks of hot rum made it more pleasurable.



Delivering post to remote places is an important task for the Coastal Express

The Troll Fjord

As I was writing up my diary the sea started to get rough and I went and lay on the bed as I was feeling very sick. The next thing I knew everything went flying including my precious laptop. The weather was so bad that they couldn't dock at one of the stops and the Viking Feast had to be cancelled. This sent the kitchen into panic as they had to unexpectedly cook for another 130. Rick had been reading in bed for quite some time so for once it wasn't him being ill, mind you he aches all over from the walking and he thinks the narrow, leaning bed. He has borrowed a couple of German hardback books to prop it up with. The weather got worse and worse and eventually we had the first ever message from the Captain. As we were experiencing a force 9 -10 gale from south-west it was dangerous to cross the sea and he was going to have to find a sheltered spot until it subsided. I went into panic mode and wondered whether I should go to bed with my clothes on just in case we have to be evacuated. Rick got his World Wide Radio out of the case to try and get the shipping forecast; it was useless and needs throwing in the bin.

Thursday 23 October

We have survived the night and what a long one it was too, at least the driving rain has stopped. I slept with my alarm clock under my pillow and looked at it almost every 30 minutes. At 12.30am we left our sheltered spot as the wind reduced to force 7 – 8 and waves were 5.5 to 10 metres but were back again into sheltered waters at 3am. The timetable is now completely out and we are keeping to sheltered waters until 3pm today. Will keep you posted!

Rick visited the Bridge today and the Captain said that we only get weather such as last night about twice a year. The ship is usually steered automatically but in such stormy conditions like last night it has to be set to manual. We had about 20 minutes at some unpronounceable place to stretch our legs. This has been an interesting trip not at all as I was expecting. Not having entertainment hasn't been a problem it has just meant lots of early nights. Having to frequently get on and off the boat for short stops means, that apart from yesterday, you are never really on the ship for too long a stretch. By the way we have caught sight of the couple who got left behind a few days ago and also seen someone reading the Telegraph but found out the same holiday was also advertised in The Guardian. To summarize it appears that most of the Norwegian towns initially grew out of fishing and later oil and gas, many were either destroyed by fire or the Germans. Future development will be due to the recent finds of oil and gas in the north and also tourism. I found the Norwegian World War II history very interesting. The return trip from Bergen to Kirkeness is 4930 kilometres.

We will be back in Bergen on Saturday in time for the crab party with Maggie and her friends in one of the warehouses on the quay.

We will be sunning ourselves in Tenerife from 22 November until 18 December.

Then on January 6th we are making our way towards Sydney to see Lorne, Carolyn and Homer. However, we have found another 2 for 1 deal, and will be going via:

Grand Canary, Antigua, Curacao, Columbia, Panama, French Polynesia, Tahiti, Society Islands, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, New Caladonia, Brisbane, Tasmania, Melbourne, Adelaide, Albany, Perth, Freemantle, Mauritius, Reunion Islands, Richard Bay in South Africa, Durban, Cape Town, Nambia, Ghana, St Vincent, Tenerife, Lisbon and returning home on Easter Monday April 13th.

Don't worry I won't be sending a daily diary but will give you an update now and again instead.

In the meantime Rick has taken some seasickness pills and is dead to the world.

PS Once the world trip is over I must seriously think of getting a job as Rick is going nuts. He is having bizarre dreams. Last night he dreamt that he organised a trip to the opera for the Artetch staff and one of the ladies had a very good body. He took them all to dinner, Elton John was sitting on the next table, and the attractive woman decided to tell them all she was really a man. To prove it she opened her blouse and exposed her breasts that were made up of many small pyramids. Then the doorman wouldn't let her into the opera because she was really a man. I wonder what a psychiatrist would make of that!

Friday 24 October – Trondheim

I finished my diary a bit prematurely as the dreadful weather conditions were making it difficult to do anything but lay still on the bed. As a result of the storm the timetable had to be changed and we were able to spend 4 hours in Trondheim in daylight. It was a beautiful day and we walked to a fortress at the top of a hill. On our way down we saw the world's first ever cycle lift that after putting your foot in a slot it takes you and your bicycle up to the top of the hill. The magnificent gothic cathedral was open this time and we watched some children singing. We then had a look at the crown jewels, there weren't many of them and they were quite understated, not full of diamonds, more rubies and emeralds. I mentioned this to Maggie and she said that it is only in recent years that they haven't shared sovereignty with Denmark and Sweden; perhaps they are the caretakers of more grand jewels.

Back on the ship the weather turned again and we had to miss a few ports but at midnight we were able to stop at Alsund as the conference delegates were having a champagne reception at the top of the mountain that we had climbed the week before. A restless night then followed as we were back in Force 10 storm conditions and more messages from the captain. We would be unable to make any other stops and our arrival in Bergen was going to be delayed. Instead of having to vacate our cabins at 10am on Saturday we could keep them until 4pm. This was good news as all we could really do is to lie on our beds, at times reading even made us feel sick. However, we managed to fit in all the meals and now and again make it to one of the lounges. Passengers have by now started to form friendships and there was a good atmosphere, the Norwegian ladies were still busy knitting. The telegraph readers had bonded and were talking politics. One of the waiters plucked up the courage to ask a girl he had been eyeing up out. He was quite slick and they arranged to meet for a drink in Bergen. We were on nodding, brief conversation or observation terms with a few by now especially after Rick's trip to the Bridge when he came back with a sore back, as result of standing up for a long period and was also feeling very sick from the storm.

A brass band welcomed us back into Bergen; there was quite a spirit of adventure at our return. Let me tell you that the rain was horizontal; I have never seen so much rain all at once. Maggie said they have had a wonderful summer with three months of sunshine, nobody could believe it. There were abandoned broken umbrellas everywhere. She then drove us to the Crab Party which was being held to raise funds for a society that she does voluntary work for; they try to uphold the traditional methods of sailing and fishing. It was held in one of the old wooden warehouses on the quay. The seafaring people openly welcomed us, the Norwegian ladies proudly wearing their home knitted dresses. They put us to shame at their grasp of our language. I sat next to the extremely politically aware, rotund, bushy bearded fisherman who supplied the

crabs. For 20 years he was a stressed out, high blood pressured teacher but each day now he take a group of nine 7 -14 year old boys out on his fishing boat to teach them how to fish. He says it is a wonderful life; we were even taken to the window to admire his boat and generator of which he is most proud. We were back to reality as after having an abundance of food on the ship, especially fish, we had to push a few bits of crab around the plate all night. Every now and again someone would stand up and make a speech that would be followed by a toast and a rousing song; they even gave us a toast. Another man couldn't wait to speak to me about his visit to Rye, he spoke very deliberately just like the farmer in The Vicar of Dibley. I felt sorry for one of the men opposite me, he was driving so he couldn't drink and he was allergic to crab, needless to say he left early. Before he left he did say that our ship the Midnitsol had a design fault and a while back whilst in a storm they had problems starting it and had to put the anchor down – glad I didn't know that when we were stuck in the stormy, unforgiving North Sea. The man next to me was just wonderful; he was full of good stories and the icing on the cake was just after saying our goodbyes and promising to join him on his fishing boat he recited Kipling's "Road to Mandalay", there was no stopping him when he was in full flow.

Just after we left Bergen, Maggie moved to a remote fjord and is singing with the local choir. She has started working part time in the nearest town called Vik that is 30 minutes drive away. It's a bit scary as there are no street names or house numbers, everyone knows each other. She doesn't feel like working much anyway as she is enjoying going for a walk or visiting a neighbour and listening to a good story. She says that nature around her is so beautiful, the moon shines against the snowy mountains and the fjord is always there. There is no sun now but it will be back on 27th January and she doesn't miss her old life in Bergen one bit.

I am using this to test the email addresses for our World Cruise that begins on Tuesday. We are busy packing; somehow Rick has managed to cram three and a half months of stuff into one suitcase. I am not worried as it is all the more room for my 17 Formal Evening dresses, 19 Dinner Dresses with matching handbags and shoes together with the usual shorts, teeshirts and day dresses. I honestly didn't realise I had so many dresses and have only treated myself to two new ones both at half price. Our first stop is Grand Canaria on Sunday. The 4 days at sea will give us time to settle in and a chance to work off last year's excesses in the gym. I expect Rick will get all competitive about it and start devising weight and body mass spreadsheets for us to fill in. Yes, I am sure that will be his first objective as he won't be able to do his internet betting on the ship. I will leave you with my favourite photo of Rick last month in Tenerife when he was still insisting his betting is not addictive!

