



Scotland to Norway

Edinburgh, the Shetland Islands, Norway's Jan Mayen, the Svalbard Archipelago, and Oslo



The islands of the North Atlantic and the High Arctic are legendary for their rugged beauty, spectacular geology, the surround-sound drama of thousands of cliff-nesting seabirds, the magnificent wildflower-dotted heaths and tundra, and cultural traditions dating back to the first Viking explorers. Our voyage aboard *M/V Plancius*, Oceanwide Expedition's ice-strengthened ship, gave us the opportunity to experience all this and much more. For those who love the mystique of remote islands and Arctic wilderness travel, the 1,845-nautical mile voyage from the Shetland Islands to the

Norwegian Arctic islands of Jan Mayen and Svalbard was a rare and special gift. The images here are some memories of our trip. To them, if you are able, add the cacophonous symphony of the seabirds, the close-quartering flight of fulmars dancing over the swells alongside our ship, and the intoxicating feeling of being on the open ocean and headed for the Arctic.



A Fine Scottish Blend: Kilts, Cakes, Lighthouses, and Seabirds Galore

We began our trip in Edinburgh with a tour of the city and views of St. Giles' Cathedral, the Royal Mile, historic Old Town, and men and women in kilts. A drive through hillsides of gorse brought us to Cringletie House in Peebles, where we admired the gardens and grounds after indulging in a sumptuous traditional Scottish tea. Traveling north, we crossed the famous Forth Road Bridge and followed the coast road to the Kingdom of Fife.





Touring Scotland's coastal nature reserves set the stage for the voyage to come. June marks the peak of seabird nesting activity and the cliffs and sea stacks were alive with thousands of Atlantic puffins, razorbills, guillemots, gannets, kittiwakes, fulmars, gulls, and shags. Our trip to the Isle of May National Nature Reserve gave us our first introduction to the wonder of being in a seabird colony during the breeding season—a treat for all the senses. The fortuitous opportunity to watch famed wildlife artist Keith Brockie working on a painting from his cliff-edge blind will never be forgotten.



Immersing ourselves in Scottish maritime history in Aberdeen, we visited the Scottish Fisheries Museum, Discovery Point, and the *RSS Discovery*, touring the ship that played a role in the heroic expeditions of Shackleton and Scott. We explored



the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, which honors the engineering genius of four generations of Robert Louis Stevenson's family that designed and built 97 lighthouses on the Scottish coast. The fortress-like ruins of Dunnottar Castle, situated atop a sheer wave-battered cliff, provided a stunning window into Scotland's colorful but often violent past.



Two Island Treasures: Fair Isle's Puffins and Mousa's Broch

The excitement was palpable on the foredeck of the *M/V Plancius* as we sailed out of Aberdeen's harbor and into the North Sea, escorted by several bottlenose dolphins. At our first stop, Fair Isle, the most remote of Britain's inhabited islands, we climbed to a high promontory where we could see the dramatic volcanic cliffs encircling the island. Below, sheep grazed verdantly green pastures dotted with picturesque crofts and homes, a reminder of the importance of wool and the Fair Isle knitting patterns that have become famous

worldwide. Settling into a wind-protected swale, sketchbook or camera in hand, we gave in to the magical allure of Atlantic puffins busily setting up their burrow nests and flying back and forth to the sea.

There is never enough time to sit with puffins, but the beautiful little island of Mousa awaited us, offering the chance to visit its 2,000-year-old broch, the tallest and best preserved of the stone watchtowers built during the Iron Age. Mousa's broch is especially intriguing because thousands of European storm petrels nest in crevices in the walls and in the rocky beaches nearby. Mousa's windswept heathlands were in full flower, resplendent with magenta sea thrift, yellow marsh marigold, and pale pink spotted orchids.





As we walked the trail above the rock-buttressed beach, we began to hear strange cricket-like calls emanating from beneath the rocks and could smell a sweetly musty aroma—storm petrels! Returning that night, we sat quietly, watching spellbound as these diminutive night-active seabirds emerged from their rocky burrows, the breeding pairs changing shifts to forage, their silhouettes arcing across moonlit skies. Sheer magic!



Jan Mayen Island: A Remote and Breathtaking Arctic Apparition

Sailing into the steel-gray vastness of the Norwegian Sea, we watched from the deck as a convergence of gannets and fulmars marked our crossing of the Arctic Circle. At last, steaming north into the Midnight Sun, we caught a glimpse of the coastal edge of Jan Mayen Island emerging from the sea fog like an apparition. Long and narrow, the island is dominated by the towering Beerenberg volcano, a snow-capped massif that last erupted in 1984. Jan Mayen marks the only exposed portion of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge north of Iceland. Because of the island's remoteness and the harsh Arctic weather, fewer than 200 people a year visit this breathtakingly beautiful place. The Norwegian base commander who greeted us, smiling broadly, told us that the volcano is visible only a few days a year and that we were exceedingly lucky to see it and also to safely land our Zodiacs in the surf.

Taking advantage of the glorious Arctic sunshine, some chose to explore our nearby landing site and then to circumnavigate the island aboard the *Plancius* while others hiked 10 km along the coast and across the island to Kvalrossbukta, the site of a 17th-century Dutch whaling station. The volcanic landscape of Jan Mayen seemed raw and new, almost lunar-like with great drifts of black ash, the sand sparkling with sunlit shards of volcanic glass. Here and there, cushions of purple saxifrage provided a striking color contrast to the black sand. Upland slopes were draped with massive ropey lava flows, dotted with bomb-shaped boulders of basalt, and blanketed by small cobbles of pumice. On Kvalrossbukta beach, we read a sad calligraphy in the bleached-white whalebones arrayed on a canvas of black volcanic ash—a tragic reminder of whaling's toll on whale populations worldwide. As the *Plancius* sailed along the island's northern coastline, past Weyprechtbreen and Kjerulfbreen glaciers, which cascade from the main crater of Beerenberg, skeins of Brunnich's guillemots flew beside us. Departing, we saw clouds once again envelop Jan Mayen in a secretive shroud.



At the Edge of Arctic Sea Ice: Harp Seals, Walrus, Guillemots, and Entrapment

It was truly an amazing experience to stand behind Captain Alexey and monitor the ship's radar, watching for the leading





edge of the Arctic sea ice to appear on the screen. Passing through floes of drift ice is always eerie because of the ominous noises made by the largest patches of ice as they bang against a ship's steel hull. The first glimpse of an unbroken expanse of sea ice is a sight never to be forgotten. But this time, arriving at the leading edge of the ice, we saw something few have ever seen—mind-boggling aggregations of harp seals as far as the eye could see. There must have been at least 20,000 to 30,000 seals, a small fraction of the 2 million in the east Greenland population. Most were in the process of molting and must have bred a month earlier on the ice west of Jan Mayen. Once molting is done and the seals are no longer vulnerable, the harp seals continue their northbound migration to summer feeding grounds off Svalbard and in the Barents Sea. Our ship's course now paralleling the leading edge of the sea ice, we began to see a few hooded seals amid the harp seals. Then we started to spot the tracks of polar bears on the ice.



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Ice controls everything when traveling in the Arctic. Our first glimpse of Svalbard, the water dotted with sea ice and the jagged snow-clad peaks disappearing into storm clouds presented the quintessential Arctic scene. Navigating through a maze of ice floes, we landed the Zodiacs at the small island of Ytre Norskøya. Hiking past the desolate graves of 165 Dutch whalers, the voices of little auks greeting us, we climbed to the island's summit where we had a spectacular 360° view directly to the North Pole.



Repositioning the ship to Hamiltonbukta in Raudfjord (meaning "red" fjord) set the stage for an Arctic adventure that few among us had experienced. With all 11 Zodiacs launched, we set out to explore some of the most incredible Arctic scenery on earth. Evidence that the magnificent Hamilton Glacier has retreated drastically in the past 20 years was apparent—a reminder of what is happening throughout Arctic regions as a result of global warming. Cruising below an amazing seabird nesting cliff, with the mesmerizing sight of thousands and thousands of Brunnich's guillemots flying to and fro, we learned by radio that sea ice was packing in around our ship and that we needed to return immediately. That proved to be easier said than done! Eventually, the combined efforts of our ship valiantly cutting its way through the ice and our Zodiac drivers pushing through openings brought us safely back on board. I'm sure that many of us were remembering the hardships experienced by the great Polar explorers.





Oslo: Mecca of Museums and Seafaring Traditions

Visiting five museums in a day might seem overwhelming for some, but we enthusiastically took on the extraordinary mecca of Oslo's cultural history, seafaring traditions, and intrepid voyages. We began with a visit to The Norse Folkemuseum, a splendid collection of more than 160 restored historic buildings, including a 12th-century church, farm houses, guest houses, and shops, that represent life in Norway from the Middle Ages to the present. The cross-shaped Viking Ship Museum displays three of the best preserved ships from the 9th century as well as the treasures preserved within them. The *Fram*, constructed in 1893, is housed in the Frammuseet, which was built around the ship. The museum contains the extraordinary accounts, displays, and photos of both the Arctic and Antarctic voyages. Our visit left us in awe of the extraordinary vision, strength, and will power of those who ventured to not one but two poles. The Kon-Tiki Museum pays homage to Thor Heyerdahl, one of history's most intrepid adventurers, and the spectacular journeys he made in his reed boats, the *Kon-Tiki*, the *Ra II*, and the *Tigris*. We did not want to miss the work of one of Norway's great artists, Gustav Vigeland, whose massive 150-foot, 180-ton monolith of 121 human figures overlooks Frogner Park, adorned by Vigeland's decorated fountains, friezes, and dozens of granite sculptures of human-sized figures depicting a cycle-of-life theme.

Reflections

There were many rewards during our voyage of discovery in the Arctic—the highlights for each of us a reflection of our interests and expectations. For some, it might be the experience of cruising beneath seabird colonies so burgeoning with life and so boisterous that they defy description. For others, seeing firsthand the thinning sea ice and thinking about what global warming really means for Arctic ecosystems might have inspired the desire to make a difference in how people perceive what is truly at risk. Sightings of polar bears and walrus, those iconic mammals of the Arctic, proved to be a rare gift and one that carried a warning message of what is at stake. For all of us, the hues of the sea and the ice—steel gray, jade, indigo, aquamarine, and electric blue—will color our dreams for years to come.

