



The harbour at Honningsvåg, the northernmost town in Europe



THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Golf Punk heads to the very top of Europe, just to find out what's there... Words & photos: Richard Asher

I'm not sure I like Norwegians. In fact, I think they might just be the cheekiest people on the planet. Number one: their country loops right around the top of Sweden and Finland, hogging the entire Arctic Ocean coastline of Northern Scandinavia. Believe it or not, Norway shares a border with Russia. Number two: Norway has dared to create an imitation of our very own Cape Point. They call it Nordkapp, or North Cape if you like. Yes, alright, it's the northernmost point in Europe, a pretty cool place and has the bonus of being baboon-free. But it's a cheap imitation of the real thing. Number three: Nordkapp lies on an island and the Norwegians dare to charge visitors 500 bucks for a return trip through the tunnel. That's in a regular motor car,

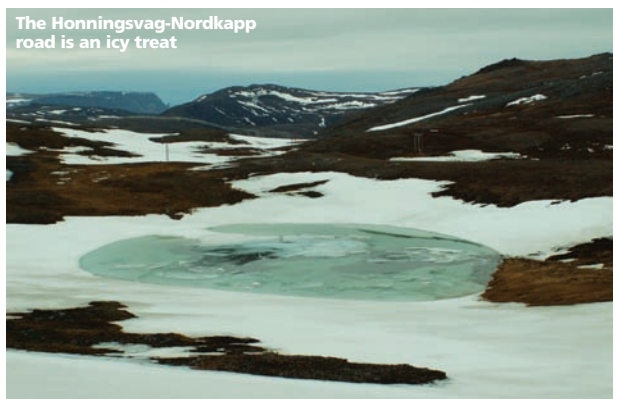
my friends. If you want to drive a truck through this glorified mineshaft then you'd better sell your house first. Number four: I think they shot all their reindeer.

I've got no issue with Norwegians on an individual level. Not the blue-eyed blonde ones, at any rate. But as a nation they've got a few things to answer for.

Alright, I jest a little. Norway's bloody expensive, even for Europeans. But don't let that put you off a foray into the Arctic Circle and a visit to Nordkapp. It's a vital box for every traveller to tick, and our trip there was unforgettable for its majestic scenery, its biting cold, its inspiring silence and that wonderful midnight cricket match.

I'd looked at the top of Scandinavia on my world map before, and always assumed you'd need a specially adapted vehicle to drive around the far north. I was wrong. That may be true in winter, but you can quite safely drive a hatchback around up there in early May.

There's a little airstrip at Honningsvåg, the only town on the island and the last port of call before you reach Nordkapp itself. (Think Simon's Town and Cape Point.



The Honningsvåg-Nordkapp road is an icy treat



A lovely Finnish work of art. But what is it?



Snow vehicles rule in these parts

Actually, scratch that. Think Bredasdorp and Cape Agulhas). But flying there, even if you could find someone to take you, would mean passing up one of the great road trips. The thrill of visiting Nordkapp is really all about the getting there.

To really get a sense of achievement, you must drive the enormous distance north from one of the major Scandinavian capitals, like Oslo or Helsinki. From Helsinki to Nordkapp is roughly 1700km on roads littered with speed cameras. We drove almost the entire distance in our little rented Fiat – it's a three-day trip if you want to do anything on the way up besides drive.

The excitement only really begins once you cross the Arctic Circle at Rovaniemi, the northernmost proper city in Finland. From here it's still a day's drive to Nordkapp, but this is where you start to feel you're really on the road to the North Pole. The forest starts to thin out, snow begins to appear and – joy! – you start to see reindeer everywhere. You're now so far north that even Father Christmas wants nothing to do with it – Santa's Village is firmly planted at Rovaniemi.

This children's Mecca is where you say goodbye to the tourists: head north from here and you're pretty much alone with the handful of hardy Scandinavians who live up here and drive around with their headlights on all day – for some reason the law requires it around here.

The route takes you through the wild-west town of Ivalo and up the western shore of giant Lake Inari. Finally you turn north-west at Kaamanen and, after an hour or two without seeing a soul, you cross into Norway.

Norway looks different. The licence plates are green, the road signs are yellow. But don't be fooled by the kindergarten colour display: some ruthless reindeer-killing must have gone on here. For immediately after you cross the border, the reindeer completely disappear. Hmm.

Finally, at last, you reach the Arctic Ocean at Lakselv, which sits at the bottom of a long *fjord*. Here begins the best part of the road trip, as you wind through endless switchbacks along a near-deserted ocean road. It's easy to get bewitched by the scenery and the rhythm of the route, but when you reach the end of the mainland, reality comes knocking hard – on your window and asking for money.

You won't see a sign before you enter the tunnel under the ocean, and when

you see the toll gate on the other side it's too late to turn back. This is when you realise Norway still uses its *Krone* currency, and you forgot. Not that you've seen a bank since Rovaniemi. Disaster! You can get away with using Euros at the toll booth, but that only makes it more expensive. Be warned.

After a few minutes spent cursing the meanness of it all, you hit Honningsvåg. Bredasdorp has a definite edge on this place, if only because the Southern Cape gem isn't situated on an island. Which means a good deal less in-breeding. Honningsvåg looks good from some angles, but there was just something about the people there. We later discovered that the tunnel was only built a few years ago...

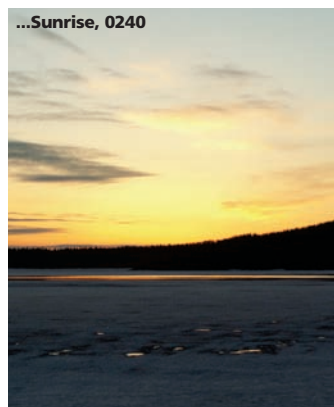
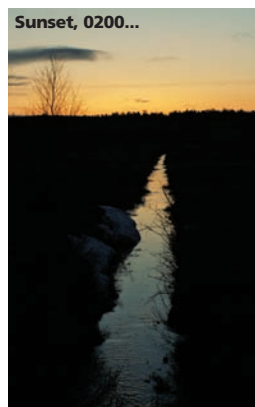
An hour strolling around here is enough, unless you've got a particular affection for moored fishing boats, giant oil depots and hooded pre-teens on bicycles. Once you leave Europe's northernmost outpost behind, though, you're in another world. For about 30km the road takes you through an awesome moonscape as you cross the rocky, snowy island. You'll take in a couple of passes, as well as plenty of deep breaths. Whether it's blue-frozen lakes nestling in the snow, glimpses of the mighty Arctic Ocean on all sides or simply the beautiful contrast of snow patches on black rock, there's a cracking view around every corner.

Nordkapp itself? Well, apparently they charge you a fortune to go in here too. Go after hours in summer though, and you can just drive in and have the place to yourself in broad daylight. Which is a good thing, because the look of the monstrous visitor centre suggests you don't want to be there when it's packed with snot-nosed kids and fast-food droppings. Nordkapp, at 71 degrees latitude, is a place for quiet contemplation. Though not for everyone, clearly – the graffiti on the plaque suggests this might be where the Honningsvåg yobbos go bicycle touring.

As a dream-like round-off to the trip, try driving back south through the 'night' any time from May to August. We had no choice, because we had a flight to catch in 24 hours, but it turned out to be an even better drive than the journey up had been. There's something magic about driving in broad daylight at 1am, and something quite disturbing about the sun's behaviour. Watching it dip under the horizon on one side of the sky and then turn up on the other side forty minutes later will fry your



Reindeer roam free in Finland, but dare not visit Norway



mind. Don't try and work it out, just enjoy the colours. And perhaps stop for a spot of stick-and-pebble cricket by the side of the road, just to say you played daylight cricket in the middle of a Norwegian night.

Don't take too many photos when you cross back into Finland, though, or you may end up getting pulled in by the border guards. It happened to us. They were absolutely certain we couldn't be tourists, driving around at that time of night with no clear plans for spending the night anywhere.

"Do you have guns?" they asked. We laughed. They didn't like it.

"Marijuana?" Negative.

"Do you smoke?" Sorry...

"Not even at home?" Seriously!

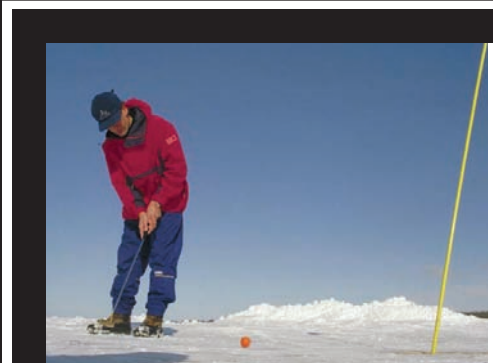
After turning our car inside out in search of narcotics – perhaps Finland's drugs enter the country via the port of Honningsvåg? – they waved us away with a smile, warning us never to drive into a moose.

"If you hit a reindeer, it's ok," they said sternly. "But if you hit a moose, that's very bad."

It would have been nice to see a moose, if not to hit one. But sadly the elusive giants stayed hidden in the woods. Ah well, it's another excuse to come back... 🇳🇴

How to get there...

You won't find direct flights to Norway or Finland from South Africa, but going via London gives many options. Ryanair flies from London to Oslo and Haugesund in the south of Norway, while Easyjet can take you from London to Helsinki. And that's before you even investigate the national carriers, Finnair or SAS, which offer connections from other parts of Europe as well as London. If you're pressed for time, you could get a flight from Helsinki to Rovaniemi (or Tromsø via Oslo) and hire a car from there – from here you still get the fun half of the road trip. If money's tight, remember you can camp quite easily in the Scandinavian countryside, but bring a tent made for freezing conditions even if it's summertime.



If you really have to get in a round

The beauty of golf in these parts during the summer months is that you can tee off at 10pm if you like. And many people do – at no time did we see an empty golf course. The extreme north is a little light on courses, though, so get your round in before leaving Rovaniemi. A few holes at Ounasvaara Golf Club will still allow you to say you've played a stone's throw from the Arctic Circle. Rovaniemi also boasts an ice-golf course, but don't expect to play there and see the midnight sun on the same trip!