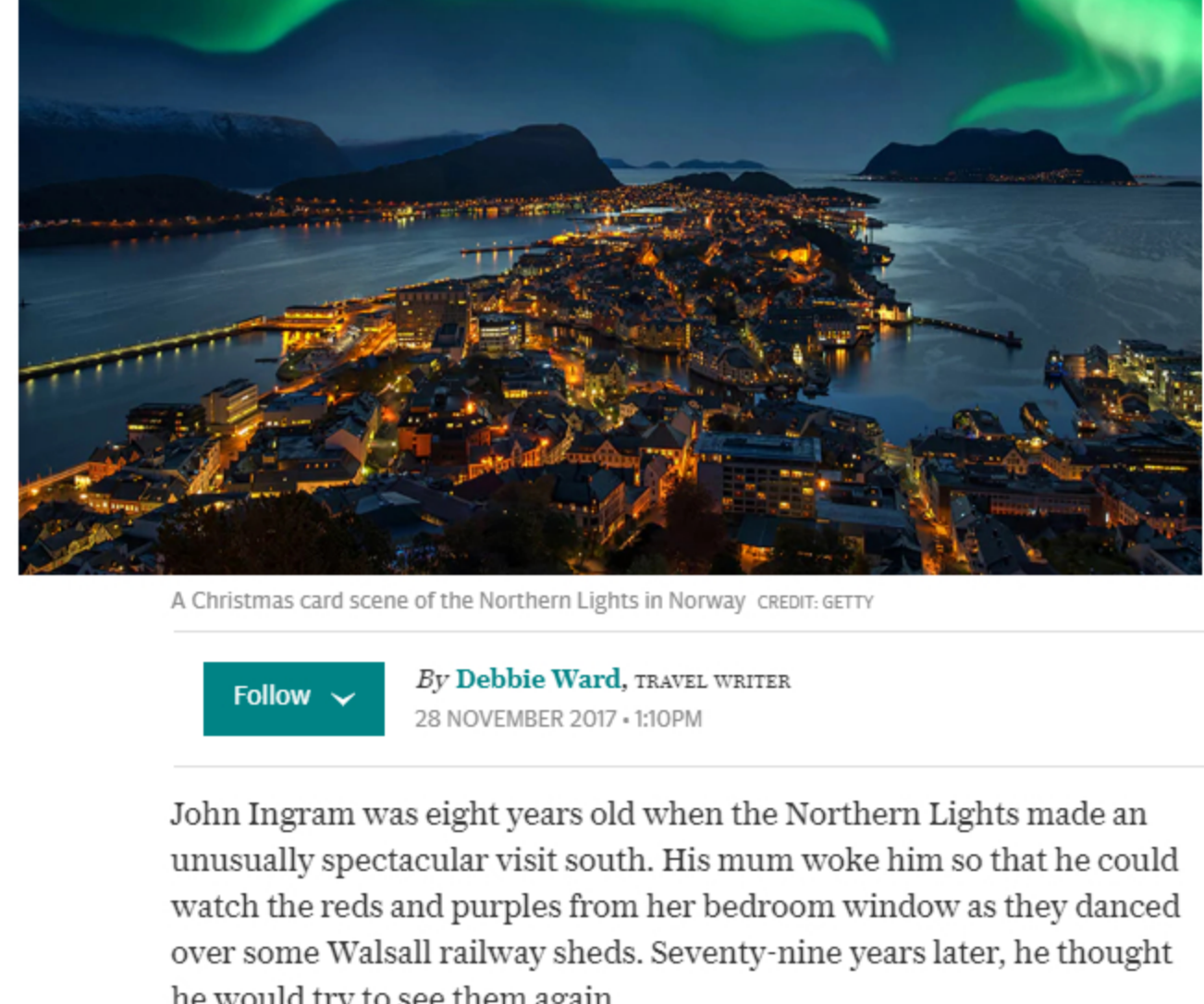


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This cruise 100 per cent guarantees you'll see the Northern Lights – so did it deliver?



A Christmas card scene of the Northern Lights in Norway CREDIT: GETTY

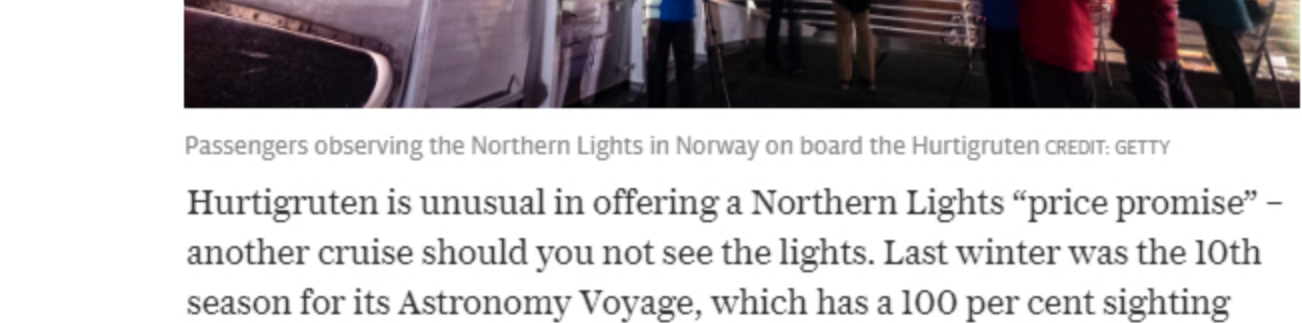
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By **Debbie Ward**, TRAVEL WRITER

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John Ingram was eight years old when the Northern Lights made an unusually spectacular visit south. His mum woke him so that he could watch the reds and purples from her bedroom window as they danced over some Walsall railway sheds. Seventy-nine years later, he thought he would try to see them again.

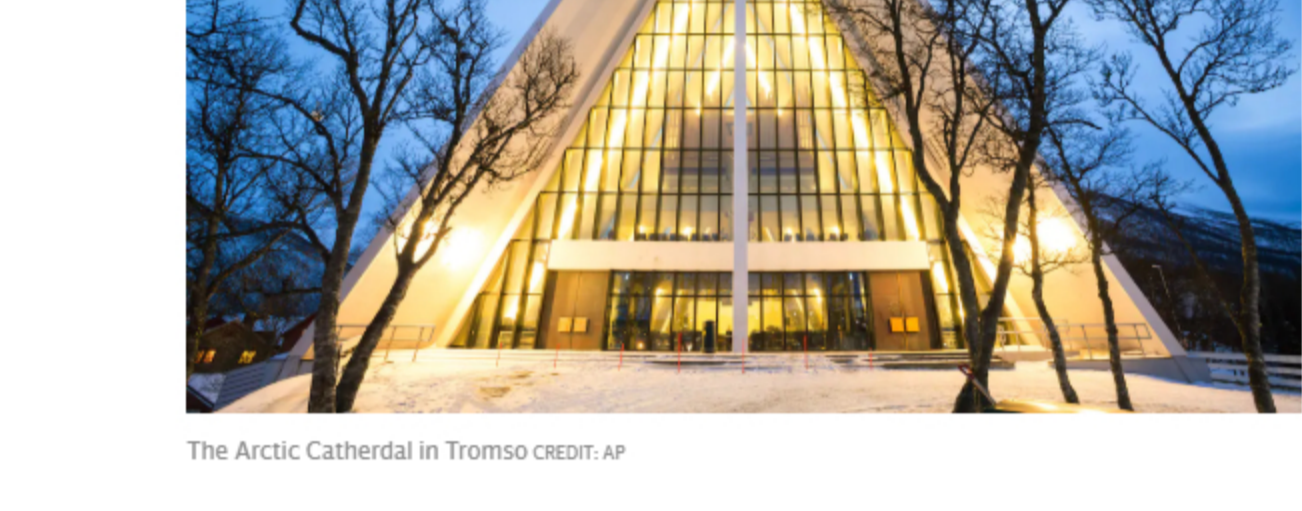
Ingram was among my fellow light-chasers when I joined a Hurtigruten cruise up the Norwegian coast to the more usual hangout of the aurora borealis, the Arctic Circle.



Passengers observing the Northern Lights in Norway on board the Hurtigruten CREDIT: GETTY

Hurtigruten is unusual in offering a Northern Lights “price promise” – another cruise should you not see the lights. Last winter was the 10th season for its Astronomy Voyage, which has a 100 per cent sighting rate.

It's a calculated risk; six of the 11 nights are spent right under the auroral ring around the pole, and there's a secret weapon: well-travelled astronomer Dr John Mason MBE.



The Arctic Cathedral in Tromsø CREDIT: AP

“I don't want you to be disappointed; that's why I'm going to stay up all night,” he pledged at our first meeting. He admitted later that it isn't always plain sailing.

“People ask, ‘What time are the lights going to appear?’ I don't throw a big switch at the back of the ship! On the last cruise it was cloudy for the first six nights. People were getting twitchy. I was getting weary. Then the next three nights were spectacular.”

On our first night, as the cruise sailed out of Bergen, I was happy to bank some sleep, with my in-room tannoy switched on for possible alerts. On the second night, the astronomy group gathered on deck for a tour of the night sky. “And that glow on the horizon...” Dr Mason concluded with a flourish of his laser pointer, “...is the aurora.”

He managed our expectations; we were not yet in the high Arctic. Yet an hour later we slipped past a Christmas-card scene – hilltop church, homes with windows aglow and, above them, the now outstretched fingers of the northern lights.

Even as we passed through the light pollution of a town, the aurora remained visible, now as a fluttering fan that seemed, rather prosaically, to hang mere metres above a branch of the clothing store H&M. As a bonus, we were charmed by a series of bright shooting stars.

“One meteor was so big I expected to hear it splash. It was like Superman coming to Earth!” a British woman enthused over breakfast the next morning. She was on her third Astronomy Voyage: “I got the bug!” she told me.

Our 87-year-old Walsall watcher confirmed that after an eight-decade gap he had just shared his second Northern Lights experience with his son.



A village church under the Northern Lights in Norway CREDIT: GETTY

There was a palpable sense of relief that we had ticked the bucket-list box so early but we were keen to see more. It was a game of chicken; the lights appeared every evening, but we didn't know if or when they would dance.

Incongruously wrapped in layers, reclining in a deckchair, I generally stayed on deck until lam and then prayed I wouldn't sleep through a great display too brief to warrant an announcement.

Of course, we were also here to learn through daily lectures. Dr Mason was mentored by the late, great Sir Patrick Moore. He tells me: “He had an incredible influence on me; I knew him for 45 years. He taught me about enthusing people.”

Dr Mason's astronomy lectures were perfectly pitched to a range of knowledge levels. His excitement was contagious and his descriptions memorable: “...a stream coming from behind gives the one in front a kick up the arse”.



A humpback whale in Tromsø CREDIT: AP

He warned us that we may not see the lights in colour because our eyes do not register the spectrum well at night. Indeed, I mostly experienced greenish-white.

But my luck changed one deep-blue twilight night as I was struggling into a duvet-thick onesie on the back of a whale-watching boat at Tromsø. As I looked up I noticed a distinctly green ribbon of light waving a slow farewell from a hilltop while we pulled away from the harbour.

The whale-watching excursion is new and somewhat bizarre as, due to the latitude, it takes place in the dark. It is billed as a 'Singing Whales' cruise but we were unable to dangle our microphone because the whales congregated close to some noisy fishing boats.

We were rescued from disappointment when we spied a pod of orca nearby and our skipper span our spotlight towards the splashes and exhalations every time they surfaced.

As well as Dr Mason, our astronomy group had a regular guide who led free walking tours at most ports. In Tromsø we trudged to the showy Arctic Cathedral, with its triangular roof and Bob Dylan-lookalike angel, and there was another bucket-list tick for the Australian and Thai passengers – thick falling snow.



The North Cape in Norway, Europe's northernmost point CREDIT: AP

At Bodo, in the pinky half-light of noon, I had joined the Winter Walk excursion. We were told secrets of early navigation as we stood on a Viking burial mound. Unmarked and undisturbed, it was one of hundreds in the area. We stopped for flasks of coffee on a pretty beach and I photographed a mussel shell the length of my foot. Those I ate on board were the best I've ever tasted.

The whiteout increased and the daylight decreased as we voyaged north. When we reached the North Cape most people took the popular trip to Europe's northernmost point, made by coach with a snowplough clearing the way. By now “day” was little more than splashes of pink and orange above shadowy mountains. We got three hours to photograph the sunset.

The experience, not the ship, was the star. Although Trollfjord has comfortable viewing lounges, there are few facilities beyond bars and an on-deck hot tub. Cabins are neatly functional, with heated bathroom floor and twin sofa beds.

Although dining was a very informal affair (we often ate wearing fleeces), the food was well-presented and of excellent quality, with an emphasis on fresh fish and local meat (reindeer included). One night we feasted on the legs of king crabs, whose colossal cousins we had just been introduced to on deck.

The ship is also a vital local service, making multiple stops each day. One night, during a break from light-hunting, I sought out the sauna. I peered in, wearing woolly hat and ski gloves, and, to our mutual amusement, saw two women in bikinis sipping wine. They had come aboard on a corporate jolly.

For my astronomy party, our fifth night of foot-stomping and neck-cranning was rewarded with an aerial ballet. A scarf of light rippled in one part of the sky; fingers stretched up in another. We oohed and ahed at the shifting shapes as if we were watching a slow-motion fireworks display. Then, as if sketched by an invisible hand, a strip of light made a loop around the ship's funnel.

If Dr Mason could really call the aurora to order, this is surely what he would have planned.

Essentials

Ignore talk about waiting for years when sunspots are most active. Coronal holes also create the all-important solar winds that produce top auroral activity.

Be patient and prepared. It's not just about the lights, it's about the condition of the sky – the transparency. You can go on safari and not see a lion and then see 10 in one day.

Don't get hung up on seeing colour. Enjoy the movement, the structure, the delicate beauty, like chiffon scarves wafting in the breeze.

Pack enough warm clothing as you'll be out on deck for long periods. You've got to put in the hours to get the reward.

Hurtigruten (033 3405 0194; hurtigruten.co.uk) offers an 11-night Astronomy Voyage from Bergen to Kirkenes and back, with departures from October 2017 to March 2018, from £1,455pp cruise only. Dr Mason alternates on cruises with another astronomer.