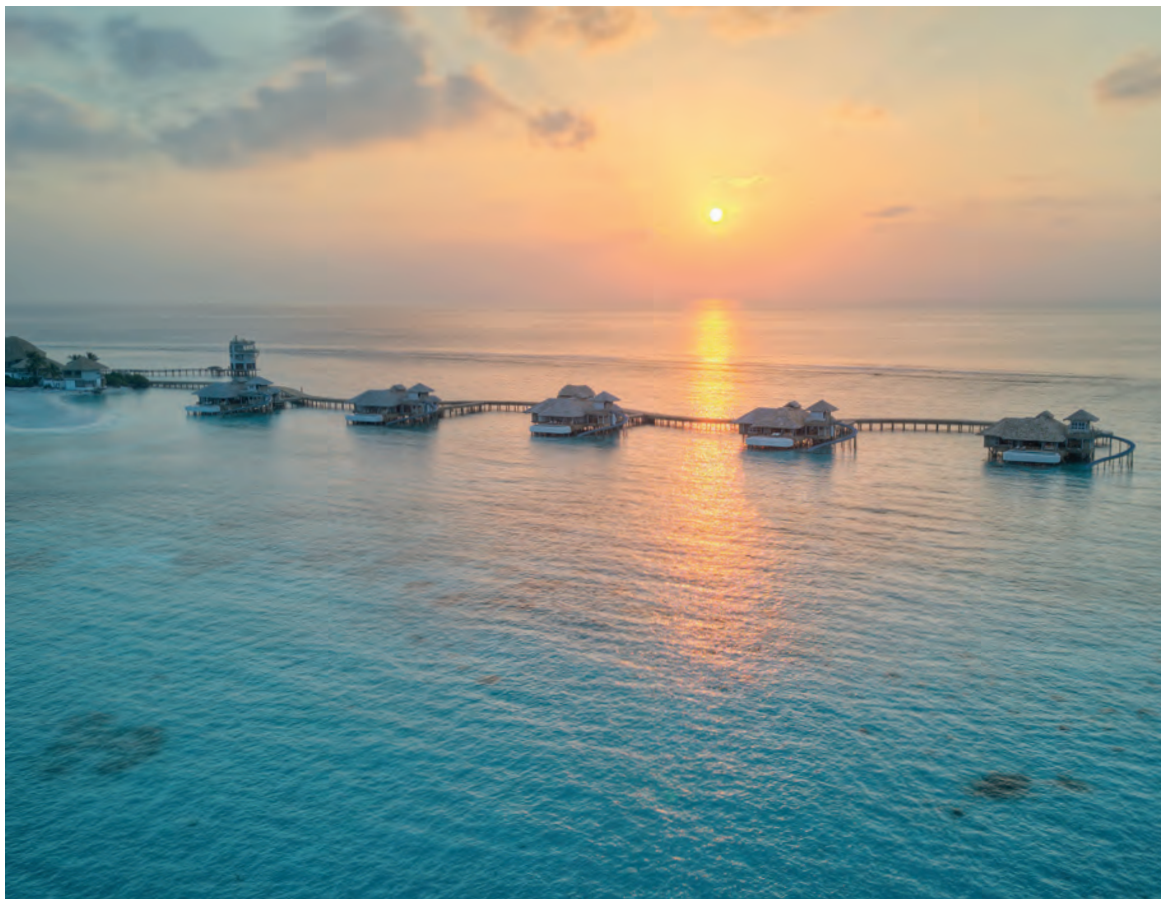


SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

QANTAS



The luxury of time, the thrill of discovery, the pleasure of travel.



TRUE NORTH

Uncover Norway's lesser-known gems on a bespoke
tour to the country's farthest reaches.

STORY BY

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It's just past midnight and I'm huddled by the fireplace – shoes off, woollen socks on and many wines deep – with a small but lively group of fellow diners and lodgers. The remote Vesterålen archipelago is a slice of Norwegian never-never land that's home to grazing cattle and gentle waves lapping silent shores. It's also the far, far northern location of our animated after-dinner conversation at Kvitnes Gård (previous page; kvitnes.com), a farm, restaurant and 15-room guesthouse that's put the remote district on discerning travellers' maps since the eatery opened in 2020.

To get here – where I peel off my muddy boots at the door and sink into the 17-course tasting menu that's dictated by nature but finessed by chef Halvar Ellingsen (left) – I follow the National Scenic Route Lofoten, which is layered with cliffs, colour-shifting valleys and jagged mountains with the odd dusting of early-autumn snow. Apart from a lunchtime detour to Henningsvaer, a 16th-century fishing village-turned-hipster haven, I probably only see five other humans during my five-hour journey (my private driver and travelling companion excluded). There's no way I could find this fjord-to-table diamond of fine dining – nor any of the Norwegian dishes I've tasted, hilltops I've climbed or saunas I've sweated in – without the guidance of Up Norway (upnorway.com), which plans sustainable luxury travel experiences and is setting a new bar for Scandinavian exploration.

The enchanting through-line in my five-night itinerary is “soft adventure”.

That's what Up Norway's founder, Torunn Tronsvang, calls it when I meet her for dinner at The Thief, a buzzy boutique hotel in downtown Oslo. Tronsvang – who worked in hospitality everywhere from Bhutan to the Emirates – began her company in response to how her home country sold its marvels to visitors. “Norway was doing its marketing based on geography,” she tells me. “‘You're German, we'll market this to you. You're English, go here.’ But it should be based on interest.”

Me? I crave timeout in nature but my favourite hikes are those that end with generous lunches. An RIB sailing experience? A kayaking trip? That sounds great – if I can pair it with fjord-facing spa visits or jaunts through quaint villages. Tronsvang and her team picked up on my personal vibe, setting up two nights in Nusfjord, a storied fishing village in the Lofoten archipelago, two nights in rural escape mode at Kvitnes Gård and a brief stop in the bustling capital.

Cocooned in Nordic blankets, I'm in the softest realm of my trip. Kvitnes Gård attracts a range of visitors and during my stay, I meet a trio of New Yorkers, a Norwegian superfan of chef Ellingsen (who says he's a regular), a group of middle-aged men on a university reunion trip and a retired Norwegian-American couple who indulge at dinner but





spend the night in their RV. It may be the location's remoteness and the effort it takes to get here but we quickly develop a camaraderie.

As I bask in the afterglow of the exquisite meal, an antique beverage cart keeps rolling around and I can't get enough of the dill-infused digestif. The post-dinner drinks are definitely talking when everyone agrees that if a heaven exists, it likely serves the flower-adorned halibut with "almost-burned" cream and brown butter. A dish of crisp fried lamb neck, with pickled salad and shrimp is, for me, a close second and a distillation of how the inventive Ellingsen balances savoury, pungent and sharp flavours.

Earlier in the evening, our group had spoken of hopes to see the aurora borealis. Now, in a cosy-as-Christmas haze of fireside banter and full bellies, it doesn't occur to anyone to even peek out the window, much less put shoes on and head outside. Lost in conversation and the lingering tastes of gooseberry ice-cream and blood pancakes – an intimidating and traditional (but delicious) Scandinavian dish made with whipped pig's blood – we collectively forget about the phenomena. A sure sign that the proverbial party has been a good one.



The next morning, I join Catherine Thoresen, sommelier, co-owner and manager of Kvitnes Gård, on an energising hike. Pocket knife in hand, she escorts me through the shaded, secluded wood where she sources extra mushrooms for the restaurant's kitchen and often goes for solo walks in the quiet after work. While Thoresen manipulates the undersides of one promising porcini, taking to it like Michelangelo to marble, I tell her that Kvitnes Gård feels like staying at a friend's home. Even the shoes-off policy seems more an invitation than a regulation. "That's exactly what we're going for," she says with a grin.

Observing Thoresen's agility with the spoils of the land, it doesn't come as a surprise that the kitchen here does little to no recruiting. A steady stream of home-grown and international cooks show up, eager to get their hands dirty and as close to the raw ingredients as possible. This region, after all, was powerful enough to call a hot-shot urban chef like Ellingsen back home to his roots. "I was sick of ordering vegetables mid-season in Norway and getting Italian carrots," he tells me. "Being able to run a farm and not order things, just pick things – that's what I wanted to do."

Focusing on provenance and a shared reverence for anything and everything local is common to everyone I meet during my Norwegian travels. While Ellingsen's rugged self-sufficiency and Thoresen's casual savvy with fungi are reflective of this paradigm, it isn't just about what's growing in the ground or the greenhouse. I notice, for example, that the matt magenta plates at Kvitnes Gård are by Cecilie Haaland, a ceramicist I'd watched working at her



kiln just 36 hours earlier in Henningsvær. Not everyone in Norway knows each other but Up Norway and its partners seem to have connections everywhere.

Nusfjord Arctic Resort is a fairytale-like lodge set in its namesake former fishing village (above, right), which is home to just nine permanent residents. Arguably the most idyllic town on the Lofoten archipelago in Nordland county, it welcomes a handful of seasonal employees for the resort (qantas.com/hotels/nusfjordarcticresort), like Argentine-Italian Eduardo, who drives me from Leknes Airport and tells me that he moved to Lofoten out of sheer love for the land.

I can see why. Nusfjord gives me a full baptism-by-fire in northern Norway's mystical beauty and Viking heritage. On arrival, the resort's guest relations manager, Renate Johansen (one of those nine year-round residents), walks me through village highlights, such as the general store and shabby boat shed, with her teenage daughter in tow. Those who share her heritage "are few", says Johansen, "and it's crucial for us to pass on the history." Looking at me but clearly addressing her daughter, she relays an anecdote about how the girl's grandfather only learned to swim at the age of 76. The hard-knock fishermen of his generation were of the mind that fighting the sea was futile. "You can hear about such harsh conditions of life in Lofoten

and wonder, 'Why did they even go there?'" she says. "But diaries will tell you it was the highlight of their year."

Later, I watch eagles swoop over the shimmering sea, which looks deceptively peaceful from the docks. When I venture out for an RIB ride with guide Svein, I understand why these tumultuous waters once spelled both thrill and terror. Svein's expertise ensures I only feel the first sensation, not the second.

Back on shore, I peel off my goggles and heavy-duty gear and head to the village bakery, home to what my hosts say is the largest woodfired stone oven in Norway. A cinnamon roll seems obligatory and fuels a leisurely hike with Eduardo, who shepherds me uphill past firepits, sweeping views and semi-abandoned cabins, plucking berries as we go (although I await his green light before eating any).

My repurposed fisherman's cabin – or *rorbu*, as the pole-anchored structures are called – is painted in soothing neutrals and decorated in elegant Scandi style that nods to its original function. While comforts for its present-day purpose have been added, including wi-fi, soft linens and a tub that looks out on a fjord, the living room retains four bunk beds where weary fishermen once slept. The preservation of these details is another reminder that my carefully curated itinerary doesn't just showcase the country's cuisine and natural wonders, it shares the stories of its people. ↘