

Keep your cool in Norway's magical Lofoten islands P.11

TRAVEL

Dive in to the marvels of Malaysia

Beyond the skyscrapers of Kuala Lumpur lie white-sand beaches, lush rainforests and rich cultures to explore, says Cheng Sim



Find a map of south-east Asia and spot Malaysia in the heart of it, with lush rainforest, glittering cityscapes and pristine seaside. But despite being in the centre of the region, Malaysia is often reduced to a quick stop-over in Kuala Lumpur, overlooked for its more popular neighbours Thailand and Indonesia. But the country has plenty to offer within its own borders: white-sand beaches, rare wildlife, unique street food and a rich cultural history.

With a population of nearly 36 million, the country is divided into Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia

– essentially two trips in one. In Peninsular Malaysia, you can experience the cosmopolitan rush in Kuala Lumpur, savour street food in Penang and trace the colonial past in Melaka. East Malaysia, situated on the island of Borneo, is an eco-adventure paradise, whether you're climbing Malaysia's highest mountain in Sabah or spotting orangutans in Sarawak.

After nearly five years, British Airways resumed direct flights to Kuala Lumpur earlier this year, and before the end of 2025, the country will see new openings from major international hotel brands such as

▲ Flying start: let the dizzying skyline of Kuala Lumpur soak in before plunging deeper into the country

Kimpton, Park Hyatt and Waldorf Astoria. Now is the time to go, before the crowds descend on the country's lesser-explored beaches and sights. The country has already seen an increase in British visitors, and in the first months of 2025, Malaysia saw a 20 per cent increase in overall tourist arrivals, compared with the same period last year.

Bottom line? It's time to make Malaysia a memorable trip that extends far beyond the transit gates.

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Recharge on Norway's magical Arctic islands

Shunning the Med's summer heat, Rebecca Swirsky heads to the Lofoten archipelago for spectacular nature, clean air and outdoor pursuits

On pure white sand, my young daughter is building a sandcastle. In the water, snorkellers in wetsuits are on the lookout for jellyfish and sea anemones. Further out, surfers take to the sparkling waves.

Soon we'll be licking an ice cream in the clear, bright sunlight. The tableau feels wholesome. Innocent. Like the summer holiday beach scenes of my childhood. Maybe it's the peace and

quiet. Maybe it's the light: rinsed clear of pollution. Maybe it's the slight chill behind the warmth of the sun.

It would be surprising if there wasn't a certain coolness in the air. We are, after all, more than 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle. We are at Skagsanden beach, on Flakstadøya, one of the Lofoten islands off the north-west coast of Norway. From the shoreline, we can see the undulating Flakstadinden

▲ Gone fishin': traditional villages add splashes of colour to the shores of the Lofoten islands

mountains, while the hanks of exotic and variegated seaweed decorating the shoreline are another indication of this landscape's wild and ancient bones.

Summer holidays on an Arctic beach may sound unconventional. But for my family, it has become a necessity. Boiling like sardines, gill to gill, along a Mediterranean beach no longer cuts it for us. With a young child in tow we need to be active, not worrying about heatstroke.

The previous year in the South of France, the charms of oysters washed down with Picpoul de Pinet were rendered nil by the drone of helicopters dipping large containers into the sea, as they raced to put out raging mountain fires, smoke billowing across the azure skyline.

The heat was so enervating, we could barely gasp, "Je peux avoir une glace au chocolat?" before retreating back to the shade. We'd reached boiling

point. Like the ptarmigan of the Scottish Cairngorms, ascending higher up the mountain for a cooler climate, we needed to set new co-ordinates for our summer holiday.

So, we headed north, in search of what the Norwegian playwright Ibsen called *friluftsliv* – or "open-air living" – a sort of outdoor summer complement

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to the Danish idea of *hygge*, or cosiness in winter.

We arrived in late August after the Norwegian school holidays but when it is still warm and sunny enough (average daytime highs in summer here peak at 15C) to enjoy the beach and combine day-time hiking and Icelandic unicorn – (well, pony) – riding for my daughter Lorna. Another bonus is that, by then, the nights are dark enough to see the northern lights.

Using a rental car (having caught a dinky 39-seater plane from Bodo to Svolvær, the largest town in the Lofotens) we travel between islands largely using the panoramic E10, a road that connects the archipelago across a series of spectacular bridges.

Our first stop is the picturesque fishing village of Henningsvær. At Fiskekrogen restaurant, we slurp sublimely creamy fish soup, facing pellucid harbour waters and a rainbow so intense my daughter winningly asks where the treasure is, while my husband, Sam, wonders aloud, “How does a fishing village in the Arctic get so chi chi?”

Despite being situated on the edge of the world, Henningsvær is home to the Kaviar Factory, a gallery that has shown world-class artists, including pieces by Ai Weiwei, trendy home-ware boutiques and where the bars serve Aperol spritz.

Over breakfast at the recently opened Bryggehotell, confronting platters of smoked whale and thimblefuls of cod liver oil, presumably to keep us hale and hearty, our tattooed and nose-ringed waitress notes our ambivalent expressions. “Maybe it is strange to see a wild animal on the menu, but for Scandinavians it is normal. Although I prefer it unsmoked.”

Having deposited Lorna and Sam for a surf lesson at Lofoten Beach Camp, I climb halfway to Kvalvika (whale bay),



‘Maybe it is strange to see a wild animal on the menu, but for Scandinavians it is normal’

a fair-to-middling difficulty hike, rewarding my effort with a vertiginous mountain view of two-scooped out inlets, and glimpses of bright blue lakes between undulating mountain tops. I hear the wind, the raucous cacophony of birds, the gentle but insistent buzz of insects, and no human noise. And, despite being north of the Arctic Circle, warmed up by my climb, I’m wearing just a T-shirt.

Back at sea level, Lorna’s surfing lesson is a success. The following day, her sunset ride on “Sif”, an Icelandic pony, complete with a “unicorn horn”, at Hov Gård farm on the island of Gimøy, proves equally magical, as does our local lamb, which has just come into season, and a desert of brown panna cotta with cloudberry jam at the farm’s restaurant.

The northern lights prove more elusive. A tour in Svolvær is a damp squib. Searching the skies with strangers for what, to my eyes, looks like grey smoke, while hearing phrases such as, “the

Getting there

SAS flies from London, Heathrow, via Oslo to Bodo for £1,624 for two adults and one child (flysas.co.uk)

Widerøe Airlines flies from Bodo to Svolvær for £128 (wideroe.no)

Where to stay

Nusfjord Resort, from £550 per night (nusfjord.com)

Reine Rorbuer in Reine, from £210 to £450 per night (classicnorway.com)

Henningsvær Bryggehotell from £190 to £290 per night (henningsvaer.no)

Svinøya Rorbuer in Svinøya, from £250 per night (svinoya.no)

polar vortex is pushing hard, which is good, and the magnetosphere is strong,” feels a bit like an episode from a Phillip Pullman adaptation.

By contrast, a stay at Nusfjord resort, a World Heritage Site and one of Norway’s best-preserved fishing villages, is a success. We admire a trail of lights from a steaming hot tub, designed by students from the Oslo School of Architecture and Design to echo the shape of the mountains beyond.

At night, envelopes placed on our pillows contain bedtime stories of Norse folklore, while also bidding us to “sleep tight”. In the daytime, Lorna and I potter around the village. She enjoys exploring the children’s playhouse, and buying hot, salty, sugary buns at the bakery – all buildings authentically preserved. Later, we discover an unmanned whaling museum containing the skeleton of a minke whale, its bones bigger than Lorna.

▲ Active duties: late summer in the Lofotens offers long, pleasantly cool, sunny days perfect for hikes

▼ Off the walls: Kaviar Factory in Henningsvær has shown works by major global artists including Ai Weiwei

Lofoten’s wilderness is combined with plenty of, sometimes exotic, creature comforts. Where else can you order beetroot carpaccio or whale steak with sugar kelp and cherry tomatoes? Even driving is a joy – the Norwegians really know how to style health and safety.

Near Reine, a sleek, James Bond-vibe tunnel protects against loose boulders while offering sweeping sea views. In Reine, we catch a cheap, passenger-only ferry ride around the fjord. It stops at minuscule, road-less villages, reachable only by the boat.

As Lorna is tired, we opt not to hike to Bunes Beach, which begins from Vinstad village, but instead enjoy marvelling at the steep post-glacial granite of the fjord and the rorbuer (fishermen’s huts) built on stilts over the water to make them easier to access. Their deep red hue originates from a mix of blood and fish guts.

Everywhere we go, we meet people who have come here in search of *friluftsliv*. Many are seasonal pilgrims. Only one employee working at Reine Rorbuer – where we stay in an atmospheric *rorbu* (a traditional Norwegian fisherman’s cabin) scored with 200-year-old graffiti – is Norwegian. And he’s the handyman.

There is a WhatsApp group of 38 nationalities and 300 members. To be included, you must work a full season (May to September). Back once again in Svolvær, staying at Svinøya Rorbuer, our tour guide, Dave, is an ex-UK policeman whose beat once included Tottenham, London. Now he delights in using his huskies to pull him around town on a sled in winter.

On our return home, we fill a four-hour stopover on the mainland in Bodo (last year’s European Capital of Culture) at the newly opened Wood Hotel, splashing in the heated, open-air rooftop pool. The view is splendid: harbour, sea, mountains, clouds – and a last gaze towards the Lofotens – and an obligatory post-swim sauna sets us up for the next two flights.

Back at Bodo Airport, Lorna enjoys the enclosed children’s climbing wall, complete with reassuringly soft landing, while we catch up on current affairs. The world has felt far away.

Months on, Lorna still reminisces about riding “Sif” across the powdery white sands. I’m continuing to print up pictures of such clarity, thanks to Lofoten’s lack of pollution, that they make my basic iPhone seem like a Hasselblad X2D. That Norway possesses supermodel bones is no secret. That the



OUTDOOR ADVENTURES IN THE LOFOTEN ISLANDS



Riding at Hov Gård

Hov Gård farm on the island of Gimøy offers horseback riding with Icelandic horses year-round. There’s camping and a sauna by the white beach; dine at Låven restaurant, and don’t forget to keep an eye out for the northern lights outside of high summer. Follow hovgardlofoten on Instagram



Scenic ferry trips

Catch the passenger-only Reinefjorden ferry, which connects Reine with the tiny villages of Vinstad, Kjerkfjorden, Røstad, and Forsfjorden, which you can get to only by boat. From Vinstad, you can hike to Bunes Beach, a sandy beach surrounded by magnificent cliffs. Visit guidetolofoten.com



Silent Trollfjord cruising

On this three-and-a-half-hour cruise through Lofoten’s majestic Trollfjord with Brim Explorer, you’ll look out for white-tailed eagles in a quiet hybrid-electric boat, passing the *Fiskerkona* (the Fisherman’s Wife statue) that has waved goodbye and welcomed back the fishermen of Lofoten on this route for decades. brimexplorer.com



Organic cheese-making

Get involved in the organic cheese-making process at Lofoten Gardsysteri Farm in Saupstad, where the goats graze in the mountains and farming is based on biodynamic principles. lofoten-gardsysteri.no



Surfing courses

Surfing, camping, sauna with sea views, sunrise yoga and sunset sundowners at the beach bar are highlights of a stay at Lofoten Beach Camp; there are also slack lines, hiking trails and bike rentals available, as well as hot showers and beach BBQs. lofotenbeachcamp.no