

# 70° North

Searching for Orcas in Arctic Norway

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PHOTOGRAPHY: KURT ARRIGO // ANDREAS HEIDE // ALEX FLEMING  
LOCATION: NORWAY



PHOTOS: ALEX FLEMING

Cold hues of Arctic sunlight paint snow-capped mountains in a fading array of pinks and reds, as if by the hand of Odin himself. In this light, which floats between dusk and dawn, time as I have always understood it ceases to exist. At 70 degrees north, in late November, the onset of winter's darkness grows by the hour. There's a macabre humour to be found in the darkness and cold, one that cuts to the core with indifference to life. Yet in this realm life thrives.

I'm standing on the bow of *Barba*, a 37ft expedition yacht owned and captained by Norwegian sailor, adventurer, and marine biologist Andreas B. Heide, and on the horizon, life abounds in the wilderness. Seabirds float effortlessly on the north-easterly breeze; herring cavort in their millions beneath the surface; and down in the murky depths, pods of orcas search the rich waters for twilight feasts. While this world may appear barren, life courses through it with an unbounded ferocity.

For me, Norway has always been a place of majesty and intrigue. Over the years, it has pulled me back time and time again. But while I have explored its mountains and fjords, its forests and coast, the waters of the North have always eluded me. Between November and January each year, migrating herring filter into Norway's Arctic fjords to seek shelter from brutal winter storms. And while they may be safe from turbulent waters, they are not alone. Humpback whales, sperm whales, and orcas pursue them, seeking to gorge during the otherwise lean winter months. So it was that Heide contacted me and suggested that we, during this short feeding window, got up close and personal with the planet's largest mammals. Heide is an expert in free-diving with orcas and has taken *Barba* on numerous expeditions in the Arctic regions. Over the course of his three-month Arctic Whale Project last year, Heide and a team of leading scientists sailed from Norway to Iceland to document the effects of microplastics on the whale population and wider marine life. During the three weeks I was aboard with them, from the Faroe Islands to Iceland, I came to learn that Heide is a lean, precise man. He captains with hardened stoicism, yet beneath his exacting façade is a jovial man who laughs freely. So, it is with almost childlike anticipation that I leave the ferry in Skjervøy, far above the Arctic Circle, and walk head first into a snowstorm to meet Heide. It is fitting that I can barely see him through the spindrift. With outstretched arms we embrace. 'Welcome!' he howls into the wind.

Stepping onto the deck, it feels as if I'm returning home after a long absence. Everything is as it was when I last lived aboard *Barba*. Colour-coded mugs for each member of crew hang from coat hooks beside the cooker. A thick pair of woollen socks is hanging out to dry beneath the table. Across the cabin, a collage of images from Heide's numerous expeditions decorates the wall. The crew sits around a modest table to discuss the coming trip. It is a multinational assemblage, focused on one mutual goal: to find orcas. The weather is favourable for the

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PHOTO: KURT ARRIGO



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coming days, so we head into our cabins early. Swedish sailor Peter and I share a stern cabin so small that only one of us can move at any given time. We share a bed, divided in two by a thin sheet of wood. Life onboard *Barba* is intensely intimate. It throws strangers together and asks that they become family.

Rising early to the smell of freshly ground coffee and feet shuffling near my head, it takes me a few moments to realise where I am. Orcas are highly intelligent cetaceans and it's not easy to predict their movements, despite Heide's vast experience. At this time of the year, with only five hours of usable daylight in which to search, our days must be precise. Heide has already observed a potentially alarming change in the whales' behaviour: 'The orcas are moving farther and farther north,' he says, handing me a cup of coffee. 'Initially when I started, they were down in Andenes, and now they're up here in the Skjervøy region. While there's speculation in the direction of warming waters and global

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warming, there's no definite conclusion.' Steam from my coffee billows as I open the hatch and peer outside. Sunrise is still an hour away, but the glow of the dawning Arctic day brings a smile to my face. 'It's not all bad,' Heide says. 'This autumn, we saw tuna in Norwegian waters again for the first time in 50 years. Tuna were close to extinction and now they're coming back to the original waters, which is fantastic. This shows that there is hope and that we can make the tides turn.'

We gear up, untie from the dock, and push off into the wintery nirvana. I'm struck by the gnawing cold, which at first feels manageable, but once in the fjords, with the blistering windchill, is almost unbearable. We're sailing north towards the tiny island of Loppa, where Heide predicts the orcas will be. It will take us all day, so we settle into the routine of panning the horizon for any sign of whale movement. It is the very nature of searching that it bleeds time and saps energy, but we all know the ultimate reward is worth it. It is also a deeply cathartic process. Everyday life and its woes are diffused, and the distractions of land evaporate; there is nothing to do but think, talk, and absorb the surrounding seascapes.

And so our days follow much the same pattern. We rise early, pry ourselves from the warmth of our sleeping bags, and drink coffee. We check weather charts and don our gear for another day of intense searching. Leaving Loppa behind, we've already travelled through the fjords to the small community of Bergsfjord. We've sighted humpbacks far in the distance, but the orcas are nowhere to be found. Savage wind in Bergsfjord forces us to hunker down in the cabin until it is once again safe to set sail. Frustration deepens, but this bonds us and camaraderie grows. We install Heide's latest piece of specialist equipment, a hydrophone.

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PHOTO: KURT ARRIGO



PHOTO: MATTHEW FERRARO

Mounted directly into the hull, it will pick up the click communication of whales and rebroadcast them through *Barba's* speakers. Heide can also record the sounds to pass on to specialists in the hope of better understanding what it is the whales are saying. In this way, Heide has attracted significant interest. He's hosted the BBC's Blue Planet team, worked with numerous US documentary filmmakers, and has a French film crew from the Cousteau Foundation joining him the day after I leave. For Heide, storytelling is the only way to engage with people and raise awareness about oceans and their inhabitants.

When the weather finally breaks, Heide makes the call to head back towards Loppa. 'It's our only chance for a while,' he says, surveying the charts. 'It'll be rough, but we'll get through it in a few hours.' Rounding the southern tip of the island of Silda, the northerly swell slams against the bow, launching us into a ceaseless pitching, surging vacillation, one moment staring into the darkening Arctic sky, the next drowned by frigid, charcoal water. All we can do is clip our safety

cords onto the boat and ride the waves until they abate. I cry into the onslaught, immersed in its sheer power. By the time we reach Loppa, the wind has faded and the swell eased. There's relief as we drop anchor. Although darkness has now cocooned us, and we're exhausted, the North still amazes me. The opaque shimmer of the aurora borealis flutters across the sky as if in reward for a day spent battling the Arctic waters, and as I sit alone on the bow under this magical green mirage, it is time for reflection. For me, this frontier comes with a powerful, humbling sensation of insignificance. It can, in an instant, make you intensely aware.

On the final morning, we rise to glass-like waters. The pink moon is mirrored in the fjord's surface. The air is still. 'We'll find them today,' Heide says. 'These are perfect conditions.' Binoculars in hand, I take up position on the bow, scanning the horizon for any movement, desperately willing a black dorsal fin to slice through the water. We sail around the backside of Loppa and the water becomes choppy. But Heide's

expression tells me everything I need to know: he is the picture of determination and focus. He tells two of us to put on drysuits, myself and Vincent, a Dutch underwater photographer and the Global Lead for WWF. We're close now. Nervous anticipation fills me. Spend too long in search of one elusive thing, you forget the reason you're searching in the first place. The search becomes the focus and the true objective wanes by comparison. But as I squeeze into my drysuit, fumbling with the zip, I hear the cry I've been longing to hear for days. 'Orcas,' Heide bellows from the helm. 'We've found the orcas and they're feeding.'

Adrenaline drives me as I pull on neoprene to protect myself from the cold. Gloves. Boots. Hood. Mask. Snorkel. Fins. Yes, I'm ready. I peer over the stern into the abyssal dark. I can't quite grasp that below us, all around us, a pod of orcas is hunting. Vincent and I slide into the dinghy towed behind *Barba* and await Heide's call. 'Not yet,' he says. My hands begin to tremble, but not from the cold. A dorsal fin appears, not more than 10m from me. ▶▶

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‘Not yet,’ Heide says again.

‘When?’ I silently ask.

*Barba* glides silently ever closer. ‘Now!’ he calls. Without thinking, I slip beneath the surface. My face, the only exposed skin, tightens in the frigid water, but I focus on Vincent and we career towards the pod. On the surface I see a dorsal fin, but beneath, in the black water, I see nothing. That familiar sense of insignificance swells inside me. *Barba* floats up to us – the orcas have moved too far away for us to reach them now. We clamber back into the dinghy and Heide follows the pod once more. This time we creep closer and Vincent and I plunge back into the ocean. I kick hard in the direction of the pod, willing them to remain for even a moment.

And then it happens. Surrounded by herring, I see an orca below me in the gloom. The white flash of its underbelly is the only shift in the otherwise featureless dark. It sparks a sensory abundance; the cold, the adrenaline, the profound mystery of what lies beneath me, the domineering elegance of the orca. It all eddies and whirls around me like a storm. Everything else fades. It’s like a narcotic coursing through my body, and for just a moment, I’m alone with the orca in the unfathomable immensity.

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