

Star power

When it comes to spring skiing, boat-based touring is as good as it gets, and Norway's Star Island offers some of the best

By Leslie Anthony



PHOTO by Leslie Anthony

Wielding an engraved silver ladle, Captain Charles Wara dredges homemade leek soup from an antique 18th century ceramic tureen. The skiers noisily slurping seconds and thirds around the thick, wooden table in his ship's mess haven't left him much, but Charles is nevertheless grateful for a share. A long day in the mountains means he needs it — if only to fund the energy required to cook dinner. Later, around 9 p.m. (no one will know for sure as the sun never really sets) Charles will whip up some *reinskav*, a traditional Sami stew of sautéed reindeer meat. Afterward, we'll lounge on deck in a spell of bluebird warmth unprecedented for late May so far above the Arctic Circle. We'll watch dolphins and condor-sized sea eagles, spin maps in sunburned hands and point to ski lines on the horizon, count the waterfalls lining the fjord like silver threads woven in a green tapestry. And though it's only Day 1 on the boat, and most of us are veterans of Norwegian skiing who've plumbed this mountainous land of surpassing grandeur in winter, we'll all have the exact same thought: this is the best trip ever.

While most in Whistler are done with spring skiing by May, northern Scandinavia's second season is just beginning, and airports bustle with people dragging ski bags northward to the likes of Riksgränsen in Sweden, or Norway's Lyngen Alps. No small number are heading off on boat/ski trips like the one that found us slurping Captain Charles' soup.

That morning, we'd Zodiac-shuffled from the ship to a black-sand beach where streams braided into the fjord. We'd hiked tussocked benches and muddy meadows before burrowing into the ubiquitous dwarf-birch fairy forest ringing lower hillsides. Skinning up, we'd shadowed a stream riving the snowpack, following into an alpine bowl invisible from below. Breaking onto a long, sloping plateau characteristic of the area's flat-topped summits, two hours of sunny sloggling brought us to an overhanging promontory from where, down in the fjord *S/Y Goxsheim* fluttered at anchor like a wooden ring set on an improbable emerald finger.

The descent began in a shallow basin that funnelled onto a steep face. Diamond arcs peeled from behind as we picked our way down on perfect snow, landing at the base of a whaleback hillock. There, guide Per Ås, a Swede based in La Grave, France, laid out our options: ski down *this* draw to the ship, or a 20-minute skin to the unknown valley on the other side of the snowy cetacean? Mattias Fredriksson, Chad Sayers, Janne Tjärnström, Klas Granström, Captain Charles and I had all answered by slapping on our skins. Our reward — other than climbing and skiing something no one ever had — was to circle the aquamarine ring of a

thawing lake to its outlet, a natural tube pinched by cliffs that yielded a several-kilometre rock n' roll halfpipe ride.

No one had expected the reindeer herd we practically skidded into above the fairy forest, or that below, the morning's braided creeks were now rivers roaring with snowmelt; like armoured Vikings, the Scandos simply waded through, while Sayers and I, in true Canuck fashion, doffed boots to ford the icy cascades *au naturel*, continuing barefoot across moss, snow, grass, and beach. Back on board, we hung sweat-soaked gear in the rigging, made spastic plunges from the foredeck into an icy sea, swilled cold beers hauled aboard in buckets, and enjoyed our daily après soup.

We would do it all again the next day. And the next. For a week in fact, and never in the same place twice. Most would be map-in-hand exploration, the daily theme a seven-to eight-hour tour and single 1,000-metre descent from a nameless summit in perfect weather. "It can't get any better," we would say. And then the next day would be — better terrain, better snow, better everything.

That's not hard to imagine in one of the most magical, and least-trodden mountainscapes on earth. The sail-and-ski concept was developed during the 1990s in the Lyngen Alps by the Italian mountain guide, Lucas Caspari. In 2005, Lyngen vet Per started working with Charles, who originally purchased *Goxsheim* — a two-masted, 24-metre, wooden ketch — for his dream trip of sailing the world. To fund a necessary refit, he'd decided to offer sailing/skiing tours. The first year, Charles shuttled folks around on *Goxsheim* without participating (he was only a cross-country skier), but was nevertheless intrigued. He obtained a touring set-up, followed groups when the weather was nice and the boat anchored safely, and was soon hooked. It was only logical that he began to explore the untapped areas northeast of Lyngen, particularly the fjord-riddled reaches beyond the port of Alta around Stjernøya (Star Island) where we spent the majority of our trip. Here, so far north, snow lies lower and longer in the fjords, with the added bonus of being relatively safe.

Our last 24 hours on *Goxsheim* we knocked in two enormous day outings, and then, anchored in the prettiest fjord yet, made a post-dinner tour in the midnight sun, with summer temps far above freezing, copper light, and genuinely amazing skiing that ended at the water's edge. The only downside was that rather than time for soup, it was time to get some sleep.

Editor's note: Michel Beaudry is away for the next few weeks, so Pique contributor Leslie Anthony will be writing about all things mountain culture for us.

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