



Orca whales North Norway

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In winter, the herring arrives at the coast of northern Norway. They are followed by the hunters, especially the orca whales. It comes to an amazing natural spectacle in the Arctic when orcas and baleen whales jointly launch the great feeding.

The Nordic counterpart to the famous "Sardine Run" has been an important part of the expedition calendar of NORTHERN EXPLORERS for many years now.

Also in January 2016, we met orca whales and humpback whales underwater and on over water on each tour - often even from very close when they were hunting. Also we saw fin whales, minke whales, various seabirds, seals, the mystical northern lights at night and the unforgettable light of the Arctic winter during daytime, shortly after the polar night.

Over two weeks photographers who have documented these spectacular experiences accompanied us. Here is a summary and photos that make us looking forward for the next winter already! Our expeditions in 2017 will start on 06th January.





The days are short. The weather is unpredictable. The trips by ship we can schedule only the day before, and even then, in some cases, the next day we have to adjust and adapt plans due to current weather conditions.

To observe the whales during the winter in northern Norway in their natural habitat also means letting nature always having the last word. The whale, however, seems not to be stressed by the sometimes harsh weather in any way. They even give birth right now, because there is an abundance of food and the families do not have to travel any long distances. Not infrequently we see newborns who keep close to the mother and not participate in the hunting event.

When hunting the killer whales work in teams and circuit parts of herring, in order then to swim in the crowd of fish and to numb the herring by strokes with the flukes. The easy prey can be "collected" then with little effort.





Also the baleen whales obviously work as a team. They do this, however, much less sophisticated than orcas, but swim with open mouth into the shoal of herring and devour everything they get. In shallow water, humpback whales perpendicular break through the surface, then slowly sinking back into the depths with a full baleen bag. The caught herrings are filtered out with their baleen plates, while the water is pressed out.

So every day hundreds of tons of high-fat fish disappear in the stomachs of whales, probably, and yet currently the herring stocks off the Norwegian coast are big. Sea birds and larger fish, such as cod and saithe also get their part. And of course the fishermen are not far off, when the wealth of the sea occurs so richly.

We start our trips from the harbor Andenes at the northwestern end of the island of Vesterålen, which extends north of the Lofoten into the Atlantic. Famous is the place for spotting sperm whales. Nowhere else in Norway the continental shelf and the deep sea are as close to the coast as here.

Our ship is the about 50 feet long former trawler "Sjøblomsten". Both the ship and the skipper are from the region, which also ensures good communication with local residents and fishermen - not unimportant when it comes to finding the herring and the whales. But often this is not difficult. Sometimes we spot orcas and humpbacks already immediately out of the port entrance.

But it is nature. The whales decide where they reside, which also can cause a longer search on some days. With a little luck we see whales that hunt in shallow water. What is now happening is unforgettable: the well coordinated hunting of the whales which drives the herring in panic together. The Herring is pushed together into so-called baitballs, small flocks, that is crowded in pure panic and surrendered from trying to escape.



The water "boils" sometimes when pounce orca whales and humpback whales push the herring into shallow bays and start feeding. Snorkellers and underwater photographers can get close to this action and it may happen that the feeding on one single baitball is going on for more than half an hour at the same place. With the dinghy we try to bring the divers as close as possible to where the action takes place, without disturbing the animals. Therefore, we stop the engine outside the baitballs and the divers glide silently into the water to approach the event slowly.





The magic light of the Arctic winter is just fantastic on these expeditions. And even if the lighting conditions can be a real challenge for underwater photography, yet it is an unforgettable experience. We started our tours one week before the sun climbed above the horizon for the first time in the year. On the first day we used approximately four to five hours of light on the water. But each day then gave us about fifteen minutes more light. In summer it is never dark so far north.







The whales respond partly curious, partly indifferent. Aggressive behavior towards divers we have never observed, so far.

But when the humpback whales swimming into the shoal of herring with wide open mouths, it is appropriate to use some extra caution. It is difficult to believe that the whales can distinguish between a crowd of hundreds of herring and one single snorkeler.

This winter we had very few days lost due to weather-related conditions. But by far not every day we were able to observe the feeding action described herein. Whale sightings, however we had nearly every day. However, sometimes the whales also hunt in deep water and surface only for breathing. Even then, it is possible to snorkel with them, and often young individual come and can be quite interested in the divers in such situations. Also the humpback whales are sometimes curious as fin whales, minke and sei whales normally keep distance to the snorkelers.



On board our ship we have warm lounges, a toilet and a small kitchen. So long days on sea are possible and an advantage compared to open RIBs.

In the evenings after the boat tours the participants are brought to their hotel in Andenes - just a couple of minutes away from the harbour. And after the daily boat trips one looks forward to a cup of coffee in the lounge and a little peace in their own room. In Andenes there are several supermarkets, restaurants and pubs. Also it is interesting to explore the commercial fishing port. There are also eider ducks, often even King eider and seals can be spotted. In the evening we meet for dinner and also to plan the next day, based on the current weather reports.



When the sky is clear, then it is always worth to keep the Northern Lights forecast in view or even better to search the sky for signs of this polar natural spectacle. Chances are extremely good during these orca expeditions to experience the fantastic Aurora borealis.

On the tours of the past five years all participants have seen on each week Northern Lights and whales, of course. All those who have snorkeled, also have seen orcas underwater, about 80% also saw humpback when snorkeling. The number of weather-related lost days varies considerably, but is on average at about 1 to 1.5 days a week.

It is a gigantic natural spectacle, and never before the conditions were as good as in recent years. The amount of herring is large, and a corresponding number of whales follow them.

Who wants to see orcas hunting, should do so in the coming years, as the past has shown that the herring regularly change the winter habitat. And whether their future wintering area is also close to the coast or far out in the ocean and thus practically unattainable as in the 1980s, can no one know for sure!



