

# The Ambassador Abroad... Into the Midnight Sun with Viking

Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch reports on his recent voyage with his wife Kris from Bergen to Greenwich and back again on Viking Mars, with calls including Orkney, Shetland and Lofoten.

## A Quiet Start

The voyage began on 18<sup>th</sup> July but we didn't actually sail until the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> after an overnight in Bergen. Herring and lesser-black gulls flew with us as we sailed down the fjord past the picturesque suburbs but unfortunately in heavy rain and poor visibility. I wondered whether our resident lesser black-back, who seemed to regard the World Café as his personal territory, was part of our escort!



Harbour porpoise are often seen in and around Storfjorden and its stunningly beautiful branch, Geirangerfjorden, but not this time. Common gulls were ever present and the distinctive call of oyster catchers could be heard. Our coastal sailing on 21<sup>st</sup> added a few gannets and great-black-backed gulls to the mix as well as fulmars and occasional guillemots and razorbills. Even a heron passed close over the bow just after we passed Rørvik on our voyage northwards. Although we didn't see them, guests reported at least 5 or 6 dolphins at around 1700 and earlier, "commic" terns were also reported. The most exciting sighting though, was of a Royal Norwegian Airforce helicopter which exercised with us!



Shortly after, we sailed past the famous Torghatten which has a hole right through the middle!



Late in the day, we crossed the Arctic Circle, passing the globe which marks the exact point.



## Leknes, Lofoten

I always have mixed feelings about these islands. It is an area of stark natural beauty, and rich in wildlife but also one of the centres of Norway's continuing whaling activity. Local hotels and restaurants serve whale meat and it's even for sale in the tourist shops, a trend that is sadly now growing all over the country. I take the view that by not patronising such establishments, and indeed politely letting them know why, I am doing my bit to end what is in any case a dying industry, hopefully.

We chose to join the included tour which was a great boat ride to Henningsvaer and an interesting sightseeing coach ride back. We were very happy to have good views of a minke, with a noticeably notched fin, and a possible glimpse of a second.



Guests on some of the other sailings were even more happy as they were treated to an orca encounter with one large male and four others. Sea eagles were also in evidence during the dedicated wildlife tour.

The sightings continued in the evening light, with three light blows at 1755, presumably from a minke and then another blow 200m off the port bow six minutes later. Here's hoping that the whalers don't find them.

## Tromsø, Kitty City!

Sail-in on the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> produced quite a few puffins and a guillemot and around the harbour were common gulls, herring gulls, hooded crows, a grey heron and once again the sound of oyster catchers. The highlight though were the many kittiwakes nesting on ledges in the harbour area, including in the Tourist Office and the Troll Museum.



More gulls, a couple of razorbills or guillemots and a skua hassling a common gull for its catch were our sail-away sightings.

## Honningsvåg and Nordkapp

Common and herring gulls were feeding with kittiwakes in the bay all day, become quite frenzied at times. Guests also reported puffins, guillemots and a

couple of arctic skuas during the sail-in, as well as what they believed to be a minke.



At 1815, shortly after sailing, we had a good view of a minke perhaps half a mile to starboard and throughout the evening we were treated to groups of puffins flying through, many with fish in their beaks and also fulmars, gannets a great skua and the usual gulls. At 2045 at least three dolphins surged away from us, probably white-beaked.

## Sailing the Norwegian Sea

Our two sea days were quite productive. A guest reported seeing orca at breakfast, from the starboard side but our first sighting (aided by a guest) was at 1055, a sperm whale, a mile away to starboard. Two minutes later, a minke surfaced barely 50m to starboard and another, or was it a sei/fin, a couple of miles away. At 1145 another sperm whale was seen blowing ahead by Iain (another guest on board) which then we saw close to the starboard bow as it dived.



At 1210 a huge splash, which could have only been a whale breach, was seen two or three miles ahead fine on the starboard bow but nothing more was seen.

During the afternoon, a fin was spotted breaking the surface by another guest but again nothing more was seen but much clearer was the dead whale being feasted on by gulls. A sad sight to be sure, an done



wonders what killed it, but it is all part of the great cycle of life.



The second day was quite rich in bird life with fulmars ever-present and gannets of all ages regularly seen too, including this immature bird, perhaps 3 years old.



## Lerwick, Shetland

A whale seen by a guest during sail-in may well have been the minke logged by a local observer near the lighthouse. Around the harbour, and the fishing fleet, herring gulls, a few great black-backed gulls and common terns were active all day, as were the local grey seals! Guests were very pleased to see puffins on the bird cruise too and a black guillemot was spotted near the town. As always, gannets and fulmars joined us once more as we sailed on towards Orkney that evening.

## Kirkwall, Orkney

Our sail-in and sail-away sightings on 28<sup>th</sup> included cormorants quite often, as well as the inevitable herring gulls with fulmar and gannets mainly further out from land. However, guests subsequently reported seeing white-beaked dolphins during the sail-in and showed me a photograph which confirmed it. As always, guests on the dedicated tour saw all the usual suspects!

## Edinburgh and the Firth of Forth

Sail-in and sail-away sightings included vast numbers of guillemots, with many razorbills and of course gannets in great numbers too. A few puffins were in evidence too as well as cormorants, kittiwakes, assorted gulls and a few fulmars.



Bass Rock (above) could be seen clearly, although at some distance, and this is of course the biggest gannet colony in Europe with 120,000 birds resident in the breeding season! It is actually also home to other species too.

It was only later that we heard that guests on one of the tenders taking them ashore to the little harbour of Newhaven earlier in the day saw 4 or 5 dolphins escorting them and guests on board had seen them too!

## North Sea and River Thames

We were very hopeful of minke sightings during 30<sup>th</sup> but unfortunately had passed the best areas, off Yorkshire and NE England, in the night. Only one was seen by guests, under a feeding frenzy of gulls and gannets near the big windfarm off East Anglia. Gannets, kittiwakes, herring (below) and black-headed gulls, lesser and great black-backed gulls and a small group of sandwich terns were the key birds although two keen birders onboard logged a Manx shearwater and we occasionally saw cormorants too.

That evening we sailed up the Thames to Greenwich, mainly in the dark and arriving around midnight. The following morning, 31<sup>st</sup>, black-headed and herring gulls, Brent geese and mute swans kept us company on the moorings. We stayed in Greenwich, London for two more days, departing during the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> August.

The timing of our voyage northwards on the North Sea coast of England again meant that we reached the

best minke areas as it became dark so it was to be a day of similar seabird sightings once again.

## Wildlife in the Firth of Forth

There was plenty of seabird activity during the sail-in on 4<sup>th</sup> August, and around the anchorage.



Lots of guillemot (above) and razorbill chicks could be seen with their fathers fishing for them.

and quite a few young kittiwakes too. Gannets were also present in numbers of course and many cormorants which rest on nearby Inchkeith Island. Around the ship it was interesting to see large numbers of blue jellyfish.



But it was sail-away when the action really started, when at 1750 we spotted our first 2 harbour porpoises, ahead and then to starboard.



Between 1815 and 1818, two or possibly three minke whales were spotted. One was 250m to starboard the other(s) perhaps  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile to port amidst a frenzy of birds which is always a good place to look!



Then at 1028, two more harbour porpoises, travelling quite quickly passed 100m ahead and then 50m to starboard. Two more minke whales completed the sightings, the first at 1840 and the second at 1853. In both cases, the distance was  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile. This was a great sail-away but better was yet to come around Orkney!

## Kirkwall, Orkney

The conditions for both sail-in and sail-away were still and calm and undoubtedly this contributed greatly to our tally.

My first minke was logged at 0646, surfacing 3 times, just  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile to port. Then just 2 minutes later another,  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile off the port bow and then 4 minutes later yet another fine on the port bow and  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile ahead, surfacing four times. At 0713, 2 minke whales could be seen  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile to port and then at 0730 another was seen  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile ahead which then surfaced just 75m to starboard and then off the starboard quarter heading away.



I'm as certain as it is possible to be that this was 6 different minke whales given the distance between



the sightings and our course and speed. Not a bad start to the day!

The excitement continued that evening with our first minke at 1820 and then 15 to 20 large dolphins a mile to starboard which we later identified as Risso's from our photographs, taken in fading light.



Then suddenly amongst them was a minke whale surging hard in the opposite direction!



At 1854, 4-5 harbour porpoises could be seen swimming perhaps 150m to starboard and then a large bull grey seal continued bottling as we passed him by close on our starboard side.

Harbour porpoise sightings continued, usually in pairs and quite close to the ship, at 1908, 1918 and 1928, the sequence broken only by a strange shape seen underwater at 1921. Kris though possibly a basking shark from the shape and movement but we'll never know for sure!

The evening was not yet over as a minke surfaced close to starboard at 1942, two more at 1957 ½ mile off the starboard bow, another very close to the port bow at 2002 clearly showing the white flipper bands and another ¼ mile to starboard at 2007.



## Lerwick, Shetland

Our return to Shetland on 6<sup>th</sup> August allowed me an enjoyable but brief catch up with our Regional Co-ordinator Karen Hall, and to once again enjoy the many birds to be seen in the area, including many gannets, fulmars, guillemots and the inevitable herring gulls, especially around the fishing boats! There was even a solitary puffin and at least half a dozen grey seals eyeing the main chance! At 1646, as we headed out to sea, at least 6-8 white-beaked dolphins graced us with their presence but never came closer than about ½ mile as they fed in association with the local gannets.



## Sailing the Norwegian Sea

The Norwegian Sea once again delivered, albeit in quite difficult conditions. Sperm whales were seen twice during my Wildlife Watch on the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> but only really the blow was seen clearly at a distance of ¼ to ½ mile. The next day saw us 45NM SW of Lofoten with 40kt winds and deep swells! At 2055 Kris still managed to identify one, or possibly two sperm whales blowing hard to port. The distinctive angled blow was seen clearly 5 times. At 2113 another large whale was spotted blowing hard and moving fast ahead and then to port, first spotted by a guest, Derek. This was possibly a fin whale but no positive ID was possible.

## Honningsvåg and Nordkapp

The wildlife highlights in Honningsvåg on 8<sup>th</sup> began during my walk around the bay where I encountered a small herd of reindeer which had come down from the hills to get cool during an unusually hot day!



As my walk continued I was able to photograph both lion's mane and aurelia "moon" jellyfish in the harbour.



Sail-away brought more minke whales, beginning at 1744 with a sighting just 75m off the starboard bow, another 150m to starboard at 1752 and another less than 50m off the starboard bow at 1803 which Kris captured!



Shortly after, we rounded Nordkapp in unusually calm, clear conditions offering great views of the most northerly point in Europe accessible by road! The nearby Knivskjellodden is actually further north, but inaccessible! Many guests had visited during the day so it was wonderful to see the monument and the 307m cliffs so clearly from the sea.



Further sightings followed, at 2128, perhaps ¼ mile to port, and then at 0950 and 0953, reported by Joe, Jan and Diane. There were also many sightings of puffins, in flights of up to 8, often carrying fish, as well as guillemots, kittiwakes, assorted gulls and a few gannets.

## Tromsø , still "Kitty City!"

Guests reported seeing 2 minke whales in the early hours of the morning as we threaded our way through the channels to the arctic city of Tromsø on August 10<sup>th</sup> . There were still some kittiwakes on their nests in the city and although many were now abandoned, some late-fledging young birds were still being fed by their parents.

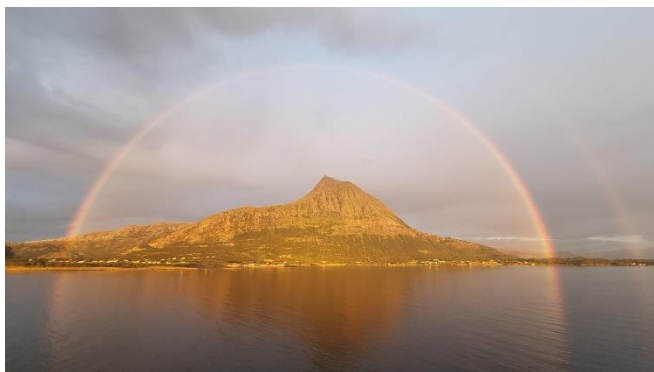


## Leknes, Lofoten and the Inside Passage

There were just the usual birds around the harbour but we did catch a glimpse of 2 minke whales shortly after leaving in the early evening. They were just outside the bay, in an area where many small fishing and angling boats were in evidence.

This was an evening of absolutely stunning scenic sailing in the land of the midnight sun and the best sighting was of a full rainbow arch followed later by a beautiful almost setting midnight sun!





The following day, 12<sup>th</sup>, we enjoyed more stunning scenic sailing, and some good sightings, in Norway's "Inside Passage" between the mainland and outlying islands.

Our sightings began with 7+ pilot whales between 1033 and 1034, when amazingly neither Kris nor I had our cameras handy! During the afternoon, 3 harbour porpoise were seen close to the port side at 1345 but they swam quietly away. At 1454, just after spotting another ahead of us a minke surfaced quite close to the port side with another possibly 2 miles away. At 1505, an apparently large whale was spotted briefly port/aft 1½ miles away. Was it a large minke, a sei or even a fin? After much debate, we remained undecided! The day finished with a guest report of two whales, believed to be larger than a minke, about 300m off the port bow.

## Geirangerfjorden and Sunnlyvsjorden

Geirangerfjord is widely agreed to be one of the most beautiful of the Norwegian fjords and I would agree. It's a long way from the sea so usually it's just harbour porpoise that represent cetacea here and there were glimpses during sail-in and for excited guests on the kayak excursion. As always, lots of common gulls too.



## Bergen Overnight

Our sail-in to Bergen was as pretty as ever but produced no cetaceans. There were plenty of great and lesser black-backed gulls, herring gulls and

cormorants though to keep us entertained as we enjoyed one of the most scenic of the big city sail-ins.

## Final Thoughts

This is a great itinerary with varied destinations, stunning scenery including arguably the most beautiful and spectacular fjord in Norway, the amazing experience of the midnight sun and many opportunities for seeing a wide variety of marine life. There may not be any iconic cetacean destinations here but there are some very good ones throughout as my report shows.

## Whaling in Norway

There is a long tradition of whaling in Norway and the government still subsidises and justifies the industry. It is of course controversial and upsetting to many in other parts of the world but is not widely discussed in the country although very few people actually eat whale meat today, and most have never eaten it. Despite this a quota of around 1000 minke whales is still awarded each year and over 500 are actually killed by a declining fleet of ships, based in the north of the country. In order to create a new market, tourists are being targeted with brightly packaged souvenir whale sausages and whale snacks!



If, like me, you would like to see this industry end in what is after all a wealthy, modern and otherwise environmentally aware nation, please consider not eating at restaurants serving whale meat and not purchasing from shops selling it. And even better, let them know politely why you are not buying from them. This strategy has worked well in Iceland and is close to ending whaling there.

Final minke image: Kris Simpson, all other images: Robin Petch - [www.TheWhaleandDolphinMan.co.uk](http://www.TheWhaleandDolphinMan.co.uk)

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