

Rail journeys



Window seat: Emma Thomson on the Dovre Rail route to Trondheim. Husky: she also tried her hand at husky mushing in Sweden

How I explored the Arctic – by train

On a new rail odyssey from London to the far north of Norway, Emma Thomson gets a unique perspective on Scandinavia and the lives of people she meets along the way

A group of barrel-bellied men lined the leather-clad booth. They waited with bated breath for their friend to deliver the punchline of a joke which – when it landed – set their bellies bouncing with laughter. A waiter arrived with a fresh round of frothy steins to loud cheers and the men clinked glasses with gusto, spilling puddles of amber ale on to the table sandwiched between them. But this was no German beer hall; it was the dining car on the Cologne to Hamburg train. Agatha Christie once said: "To travel by train is to see life", and 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of Interrail – the rail pass that permits unlimited travel through most European countries. To

celebrate, I had embarked on a slightly abbreviated version of Discover the World's new 21-night Arctic Rail Odyssey – a "Grand Tour" that departs from London St Pancras station and snakes ever northward through Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. At Padborg, we left behind the bratwurst and Kolsch beer of Germany and slipped across the border into Denmark. Instantly, the conductor began handing out chocolates, and the language on the tongues of the newly embarked passengers took on a delicious fairy-like foreignness as we powered towards Copenhagen. After a few days beneath the cloudless skies of the City of Spires, where the

canals are so clean seals have returned and locals on two wheels glide around like swans, I tracked on to Oslo to where I swam in the city fjord and defrosted in a riverside sauna overlooking the soft ski-like slopes of the opera house. From there, I boarded the historical Dovre Railway. Travelling between Oslo and Trondheim for over a century, its wood-paneled carriages journey for six and a half hours past partially frozen lakes and buildings that seem to square their shoulders against the cold, with the best scenery unfolding after Dombas. The highlight is the 7,500ft-high Dovrefjell mountain plateau, which is home to wild musk oxen marks the start of Trondheim, the heart of Norway.

In the hope of catching a glimpse of these shaggy oxen related to goats, I walked the length of the train to the observation area and stood by a large window. A woman wearing a yellow and red plaid shirt sat nearby. "I see musk ox a third of the time and I do this route four or five times a year," she said, introducing herself. She was an ecology lecturer from Britain who had been living in Norway for a number of years. I asked her what her impressions of the country were. "During Covid there was a joke going around that Norwegians were looking forward to the one-metre rule being dropped so they could go back to two metres," she said with a pop of laughter. "They are reserved, yes, but the further north you go, the more they open up – and the more they swear!" she added. In Trondheim, to test the theory, I knocked on the door of a stranger. It opened to reveal rosy-cheeked Bjorn Fjeldvaer, wearing a red apron. A musician, he invites guests into his home for a night of live music (including his own songs) and five courses of homemade food prepared using old family recipes. He has just started offering the experience in English.

of the richest cod and herring fishing grounds in the world, and its red-roofed towns were built on the back of it, so it only seemed fitting to try my hand at reeling in a skei (Arctic cod). I boarded a Skei, a traditional *jekt* with a wooden mast and deck spotted with old blood stains, that pootled out of Svolvær harbour, bound for the cod grounds guarded by jagged mountains. "Coming from Oslo and arriving in northern Norway makes a difference," shouted Bjorn, a fellow wannabe fisherman, as the fresh air slapped our faces like a cold kipper. "I come from Alta in the far north. Oslo is closer to Rome than to me!"

We unspooled our lines, dotted with red lures that dangled like chillies, into the abyss. "The cod can swim as deep as 390ft," said our captain, Bengt, pointing to the small blips on his sonar screen. He was a man of few words. His eyes did most of the talking and the conversations he had were with the mountains and water. He has fished these fjords for more than 40 years and, with his thick white beard and ice-berg-blue eyes set in sun-baked skin, he looked uncannily like Captain Birdseye.

Time and time again the lines came up empty but high above us, knifing through the clear blue sky, were sea eagles. Then a pod of orcas arced past the boat, the patchwork white of their bodies shimmering like moonlight near the surface of the water. As we chugged back into the embrace of the harbour, we passed a bronze statue of a fisherman's wife, a headscarf held about her chin and a hand held aloft, welcoming fishermen home. "They were the tough ones," Bengt said, eyes on the woman. "Ten kids and looking after a farm all on their own while their men were at sea," he marvelled. It was an unexpected show of words and sentiment from this self-contained man. At Riksgränsen, we crossed into Sweden, alighting at Kiruna and bound for Jukkasjärvi, a nearby hamlet of 610 souls pit on the map by the Ice Hotel. Carved afresh each year from blocks of ice heven from the local River Torne and "snez" (man-made snow), its array of suites sculpted by international artists are a bucket-list must to bed down for the night. The experience is now available year-round at the adjoining IceHotel 365, which never melts.

I had come to try mushing my own team of huskies. In the yard, master musher Jan, a rather four dogs – Katz, Kip, Bags and Bunny – to a sled and handed me the reins. "Press this with your foot if you want to brake," he said, pointing to a metal bar not far from where my feet straddled the wooden skis. And then he was off, ahead of me, chasing through the pines, the world silent save for the patter of paws and panting breath. I felt completely free.

For the last time, I boarded the train, bound for Boden. In the yard, master station dates from 1894. From here I would travel to the hamlet of Harads to stay at the Treehotel, a quirky collection of individually designed Scandinavian tree houses in the shape of a UFO, a dragonfly, a mirror cube (which disappears completely amid the treetops) and the brand-new Biosphere, covered in 350 bird-nest boxes. The passion project of locals Kent and Britta Lindvall, it is a final reminder of the Nordlendinger's lack of reserve.

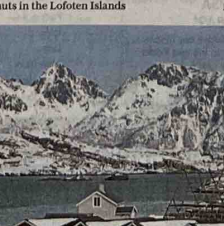
"Some are in shock when they arrive," they told me. "We're not like other four-stars – and we don't try to be somebody else. We are authentic; you get hung on arrival. Here, you can leave your layers and just be who you are." But for now, in this small world suspended between two places, life had been put on glorious pause. Each of the trains I had taken – from slick and efficient commuter carriages to the grandma-esque Dovre Railway – had had its own distinct personality. It is no surprise that numerous stars – from Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash to Rod Stewart and Ozzy Osbourne – have sung about trains. For each journey develops its own rhythm, metered out by the clack-clack of wheels on rails. They remind us that, in the words of Paulo Coelho: "Our life is a constant journey, from birth to death. The landscape changes, the people change, our needs change, but the train keeps moving. Life is the train, not the station."



Fjord transit: sights along the way included traditional fishing huts in the Lofoten Islands

Essentials
Emma Thomson travelled with Discover the World (01737 214250; discover-the-world.com) which offers a 21-night Arctic Rail Odyssey, running between March and October, from £3,520 per person. The price includes all rail travel, transfers and accommodation. Arrivals must show proof of Covid vaccination no more than six months prior to travel

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Emma Thomson

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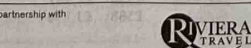


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