

Northern lights, Abisko

NORDIC EXPEDITION

On board the Polar Express

From Luleå, the Iron Ore Line weaves through spectacular Swedish Lapland: extensive wetlands, vast old-growth forests and crystalline lakes. It skirts past the Kiruna mine, and the Abisko National Park on the slopes of the snowy Scandes. Once in Norway, buses trundle to the rugged Lofotens, where the E10 winds past cascading waterfalls, sandy beaches and colourful, turf-roofed houses. Ferries connect the archipelago with Bodø, from where Norway's longest railway route departs. Windows frame views of Saltfjellet-Svartisen National Park's glaciers and Lomsdal-Visten's rainforests en route to Trondheim, the 'Home of Nordic Flavours'.

THE JOURNEY

This epic journey begins at Luleå Centralstation at 5am, minutes before the train to Narvik departs in the twilight. As the train pulls away, the first pastel glints of sunrise brushstroke the sky, reflected back in the Lule River's still waters. In Boden, the train makes its initial stop, at the point where the Northern Main Line (Norra stambanan) meets the Iron Ore Line (Malmbanan).

As the train clatters on, the rising sun illuminates a string of crystalline lakes beyond the window and vast wetlands, carpeted in snow come late September. The railway line tracks the meandering path of the Lule River until the waterway veers off into the dense, untouched primeval forests of Muddus National Park, at which point the train crosses the symbolic boundary of the Arctic Circle. Europe's last remaining wilderness, this unspoiled polar region shelters

numerous species of arctic flora and fauna, including lynx, bears, wolverines, pine martens, weasels, elk and (in summer) reindeer.

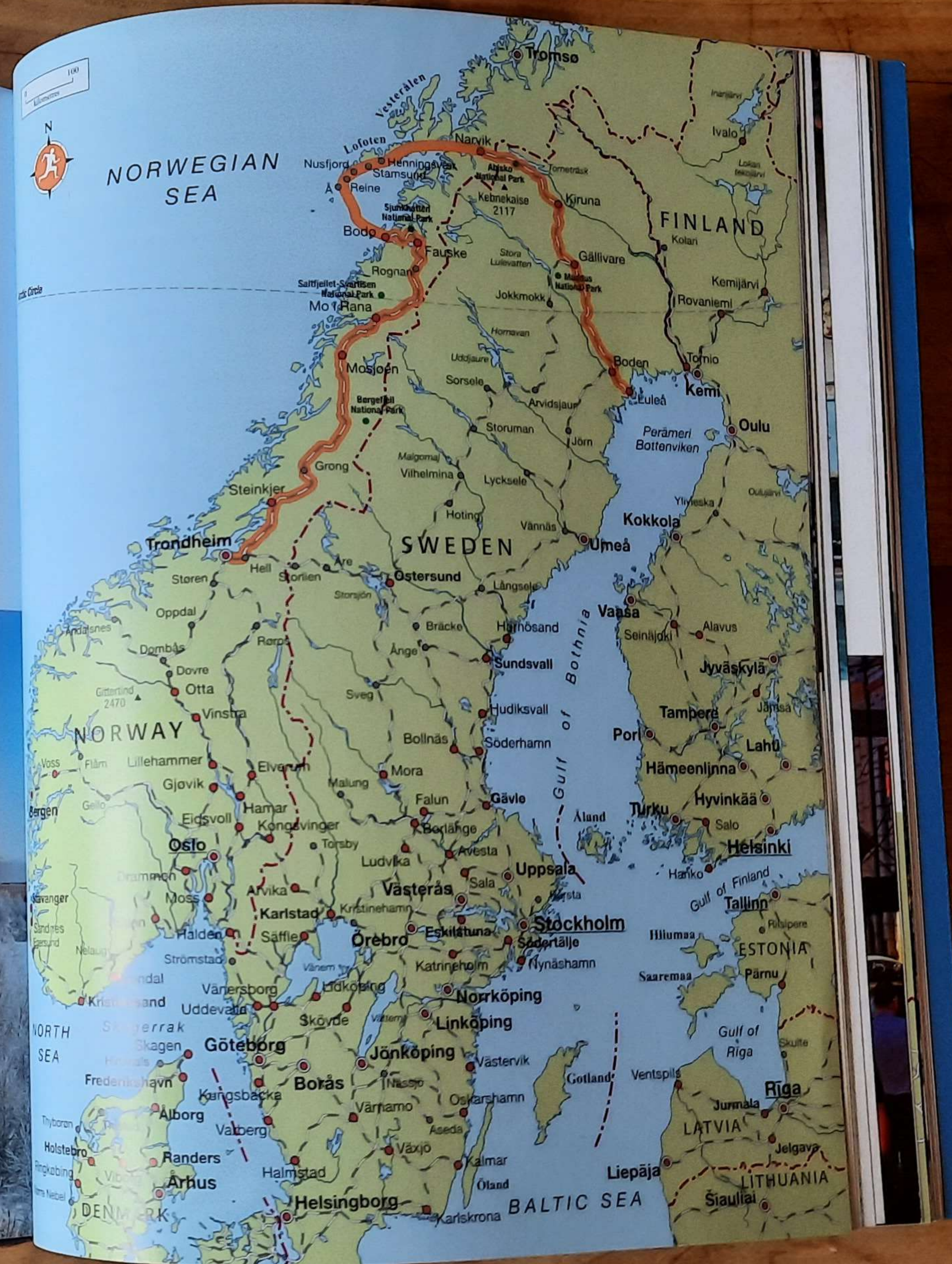
ACROSS SWEDISH LAPLAND

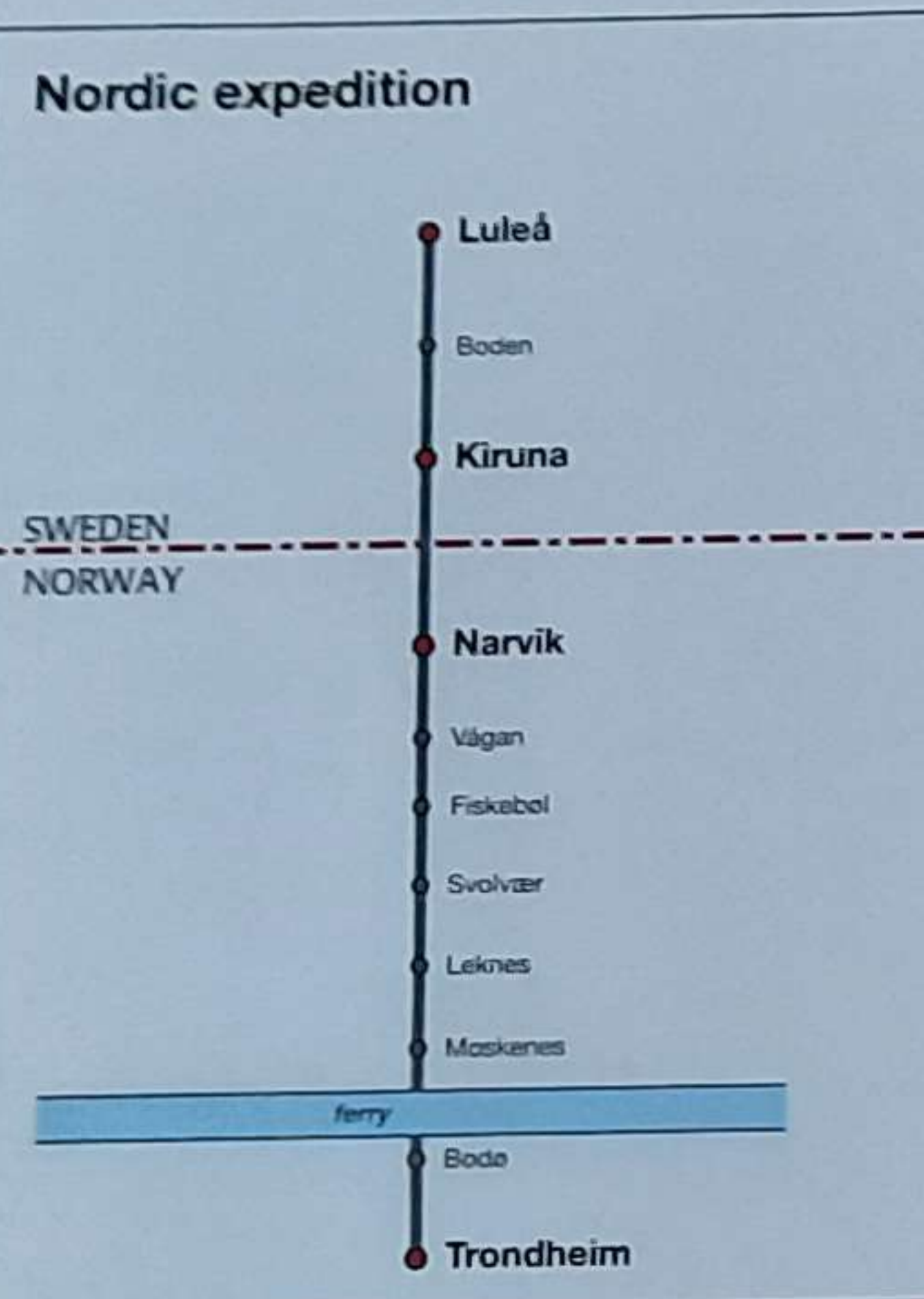
Muddus, along with the national parks of Stora Sjöfallet, Sarek and Padjelanta and the nature reserves of Stubbå and Sjaunja, is protected under the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Swedish Lapland. The heartland of the Indigenous Sámi, Lapland is characterised by giant swathes of pine and spruce forest, foaming rivers that drain the snow-cloaked fells, and tranquil villages tucked into the folds of lake-dotted hills. You could alight here to hike through glacial valleys and visit Sámi settlements, or in winter, ski the powdery slopes and catch the aurora borealis dancing across the sky.



Polar Express

40 SLOW TRAVEL IN EUROPE





As the train approaches Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost town, the landscape grows increasingly austere. There are fewer trees, and a huge black mound looms on the horizon: the world's largest underground iron ore mine – an ugly brooding reminder of Kiruna's prosperity. The train station faces Lake Luossajärvi, and a fifteen-minute stop allows a quick stretch of the legs and a glance at the monument dedicated to the Malmbanan workers who built the Luleå–Narvik line in 1902.

The last stretch of the Iron Ore Line is astonishing, passing through the mighty Scanes, whose snow-capped peaks rise to 2000m, before pushing on towards the vast vermilion-coloured forest surrounding Torneträsk, the peninsula's largest alpine lake.

The train slows down in Abisko National Park, one of the best places to see the northern lights. Opposite the STF Abisko fjällstation, a chairlift climbs 500m up Nuolja mountain (1169m), from where fantastic views unfold over the wilderness below, taking in the 70km-long Torneträsk Lake and the horseshoe-

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Distance covered: 1642km

Recommended journey time: 10 days

Transport details:

- Norwegian train operator Vy runs night services from Stockholm to Luleå (12–14hr; from €55; www.vy.se) and onward day services from Luleå to Narvik (8hr; 1–2 daily; from €58). Swedish counterpart Sjö operates the Polar Express from Bodø to Trondheim (10hr; 2 daily; from €48; www.sj.no), and a service from Trondheim to Oslo (7hr; 10–12 daily; from €43).
- Ferries connect Moskenes to Bodø (3hr 30min; 1–2 daily; free for foot passengers; www.reisnordland.no).
- Buses run from Narvik to Leknes (5hr 45min; daily). The Nordland Travel Pass offers seven days of unlimited bus travel (€110; www.reisnordland.no). Check bus schedules for the Lofotens at www.reise.reisnordland.no.

shaped mountaintops of Lapporten; the latter used as landmarks by the Sámi for guiding their reindeer between summer and winter grazing. Tucked away in a corner of the café at the top of the chairlift, the Aurora Sky Station is the place to go to see the northern lights in all their glory; Abisko lies in a rain shadow so the sky is often clear and free from cloud. Experts are on hand to explain the hissing and clicking equipment used to measure the lights.

CROSSING THE NORWAY BORDER

Once past the Sweden–Norway border, the train rumbles 43km along the northernmost railway of Norway, the Ofoten Line (Ofotbanen), twisting and tunnelling through hostile mountains and rounding the deep-blue Rombaken fjord until it reaches the final station: Narvik, a likeable industrial town. Here, the Fagernesfjället cable car glides 656m up the severe Fagernesfjellet, depositing passengers at a café and

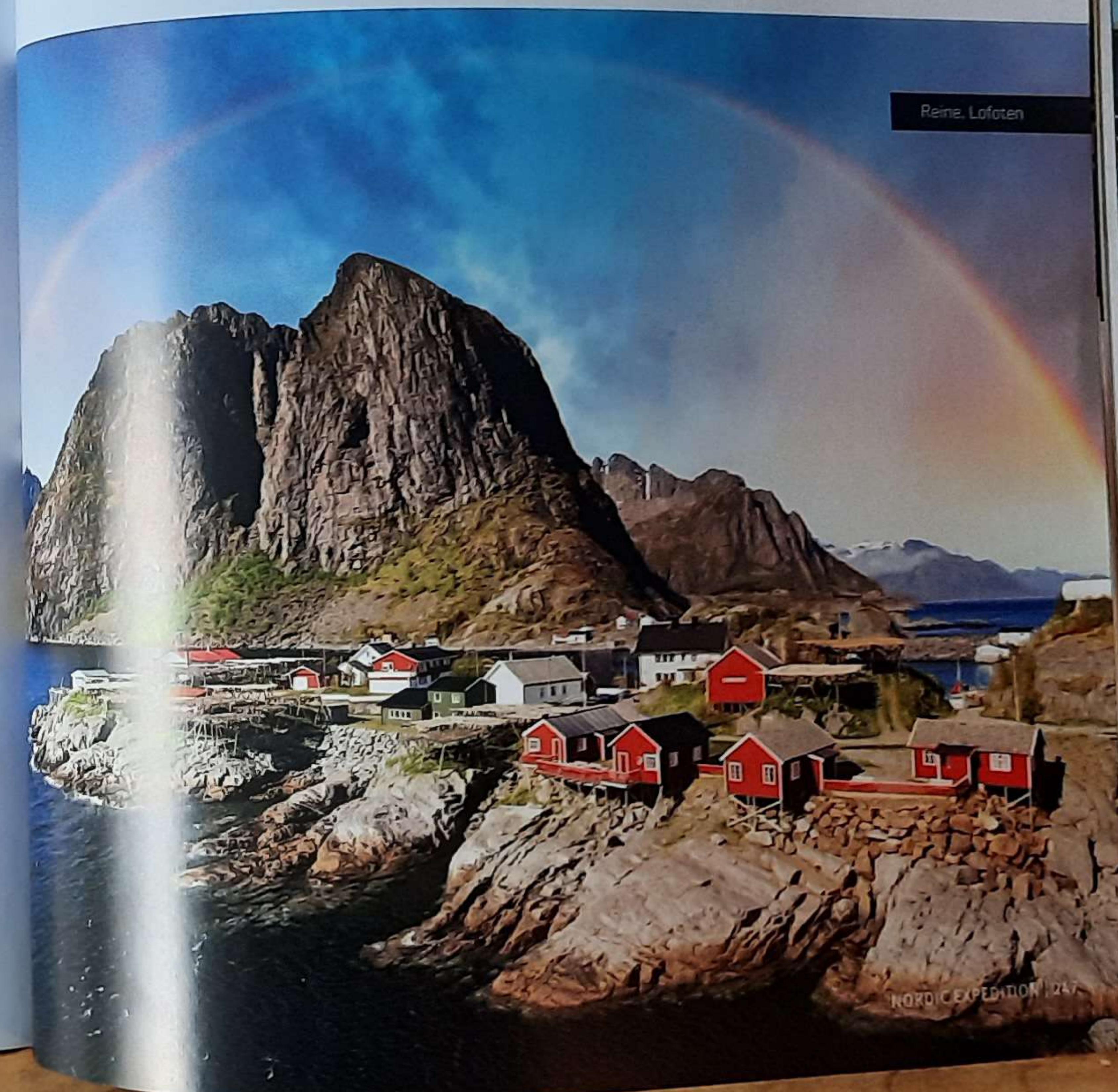
viewing point overlooking the pewter-hued Ofotfjord. On a clear day, the landscape glows in the midnight sun (late May to mid-July). Hiking trails delve into the mountains, and from late November to May, skiers and snowboarders descend on the snow-carpeted slopes. This is the best time to see the aurora borealis.

THE OTHERWORLDLY LOFOTENS

There is no doubt that the #300 bus traces the most beautiful and unique route in Scandinavia (and probably the world). From Narvik's dramatic fjord, it traverses six Lofoten islands by bridge, causeway and tunnel – occasionally boring through the mountains

and under the sea. The highway slips through, or skirts close by, all the archipelago's most fascinating villages and towns, many pressed against the shore by the ominous Lofotenveggen (Lofoten Wall), a 160km-long range of cloud-raking mountains.

At first glance, it appears impossible to pass through this rocky fortress but, in fact, the labyrinth of straits, sounds and fjords is peppered with charming fishing villages, in particular Henningsvær, Stamsund, Nusfjord, Reine and Å. The pace of life here drums to a slower beat, calling for unhurried days spent hiking and biking around the stunning coastline in the summer (despite being so far north,



the weather can be exceptionally mild). On rainy days – frequent in these parts – locals shelter in the *rorbuer* (fishermen's huts), grilling boat-fresh fish over wood-burning stoves and gently wasting time.

ISLAND-HOPPING ADVENTURE

Lofoten's largest town, Svolvær is draped across a long, tattered peninsula on Austvågøya's southeast coast. It might not be the quaintest of Lofoten's towns, but its harbourfront huddle of red-painted wooden buildings is attractive and it has more places to stay and eat than its siblings. Plus its dramatic landscapes are ripe for exploration: boat trips to the slender Trollfjord, hiking Mount Høgskrova on the idyllic islet of Skrova, mettletesting climbs to the 'horns' of the 150m-high rocky pinnacle Svolværgeita ('Svolvær Goat').

Another decent base is Leknes, southwest of Austvågøya and home to one of the Lofoten's two

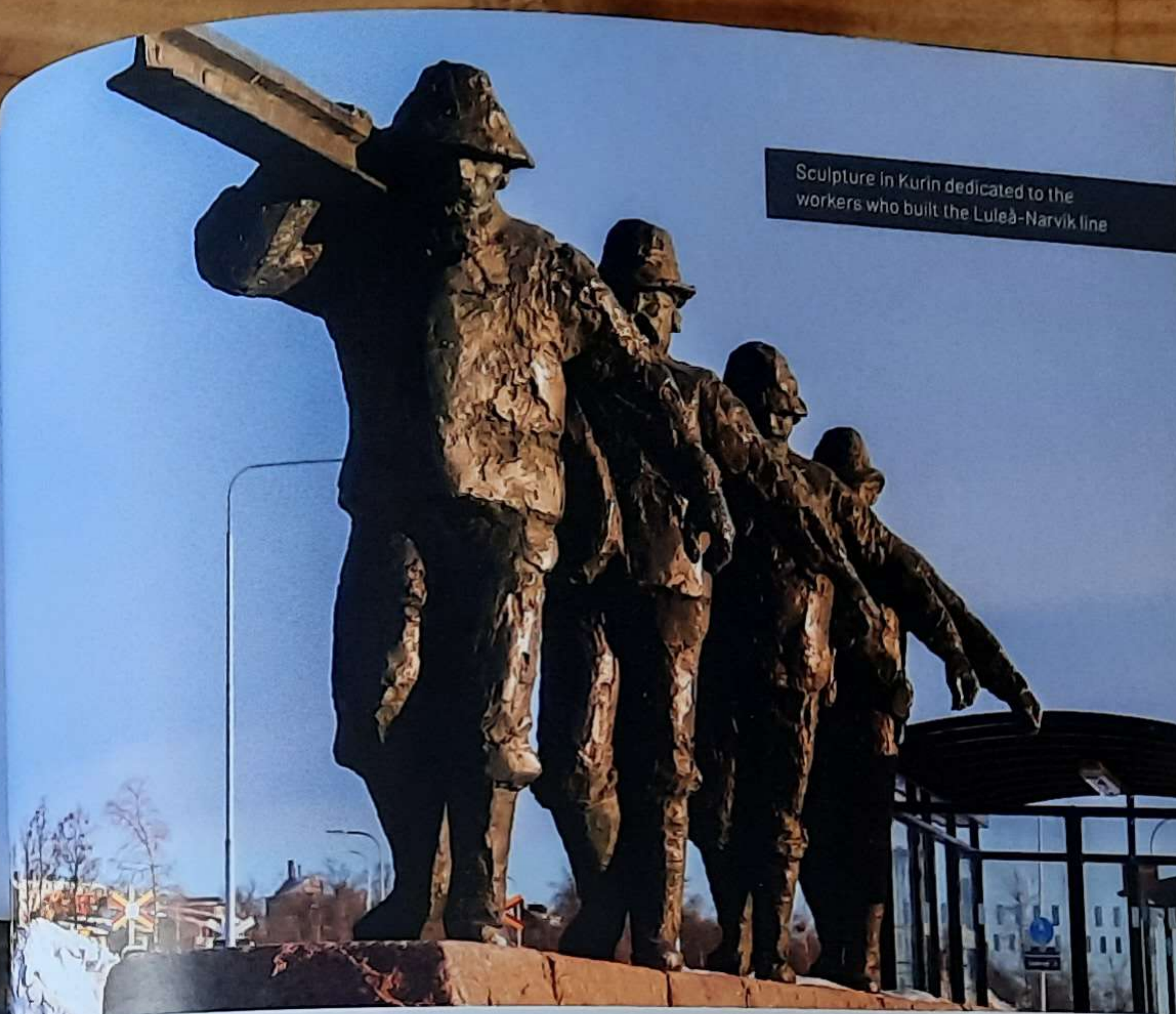
airports. It's a humdrum town, redeemed by its location on the spectacular island of Vestvågøy: whose serrated coastline is contoured by a necklace of coves and inlets. You're well placed to explore Stamsund and Ballstad, a pair of pretty fishing villages on the south coast, and the wind-whipped settlements of Unstad, Eggum and Utakleiv strung along the wild northern fringes.

The coastline is laced with unspoiled beaches: among the best is the state-protected Hauklandstrand whose pearly sands ribbon between the grey-green Himmeltinden and Mannen mountains.

On neighbouring Flakstadøya, Ramberg hooks around a sugar-white beach with turquoise waters. The E10 wiggles along the coast, between severe mountains and the ocean, to Moskenesøya. At the tip of a tiny promontory, Reine huddles at the foot of rearing peaks, its red-painted *rorbuer* gleaming in a pure light that's long stoked the imagination of



Bergefjell National Park



Sculpture in Kurin dedicated to the workers who built the Luleå-Narvik line

artists and photographers. It's a great spot for hiking, kayaking and seafood feasts.

From here, embark on boat trips to Vindstad, an abandoned village with just one permanent resident; the Moskenstraumen, a churning maelstrom feared by fisherfolk; and the prehistoric cave paintings at deserted Vefsvika. Within fifteen minutes of Reine is Sakrisøy, a rocky speck adrift in the Reinefjord dotted with ochre-hued *rorbuer*. Look out for the wooden racks festooning the harbour that are used to dry migratory cod (skrei) caught in the winter, a tradition that dates back to the Vikings. Learn about the Lofoten's fishing history and former *rorbuer* inhabitants at the Norwegian Fishing Village Museum Å, whose well-preserved nineteenth-century buildings include the old grocery store, post office, fish oil factory, boathouse and bakery – where you can taste freshly baked cinnamon rolls.

NORWAY'S LONGEST TRAIN JOURNEY

After exploring the onelric landscapes of the Lofoten Islands, it's time to return to the Norwegian mainland. Ferries ply the Vestfjorden from Moskenes to Bodø, a good overnighiter for forays into Sjunkhatten National Park or boat trips to Saltstraumen, one of the world's strongest tidal-current maelstroms (reaching up to 10m in diameter and 5m in depth).

Alternatively, hop straight on board the Polar Express – Norway's longest railway – for its ten-hour journey to Trondheim. Beyond the window, the bluish maw of the Svartisen Glacier clings to the mountains in Saltfjellet-Svartisen National Park. The driver will soon announce the approach to the highest point of the journey as the railway line climbs to 680m. The train then crosses the Arctic Circle, traces the emerald Ranaelva to the mighty Ranfjorden before meandering along the River Vefsn

to Børgefjell National Park, refuge of the Arctic fox. For much of the year, the last stretch through Trøndelag will be illuminated only by moonlight until you arrive in Trondheim, Norway's third-largest city.

Admire the sculptures adorning the magnificent Nidaros Cathedral; marvel at the colourful houses

LIKE A LOCAL

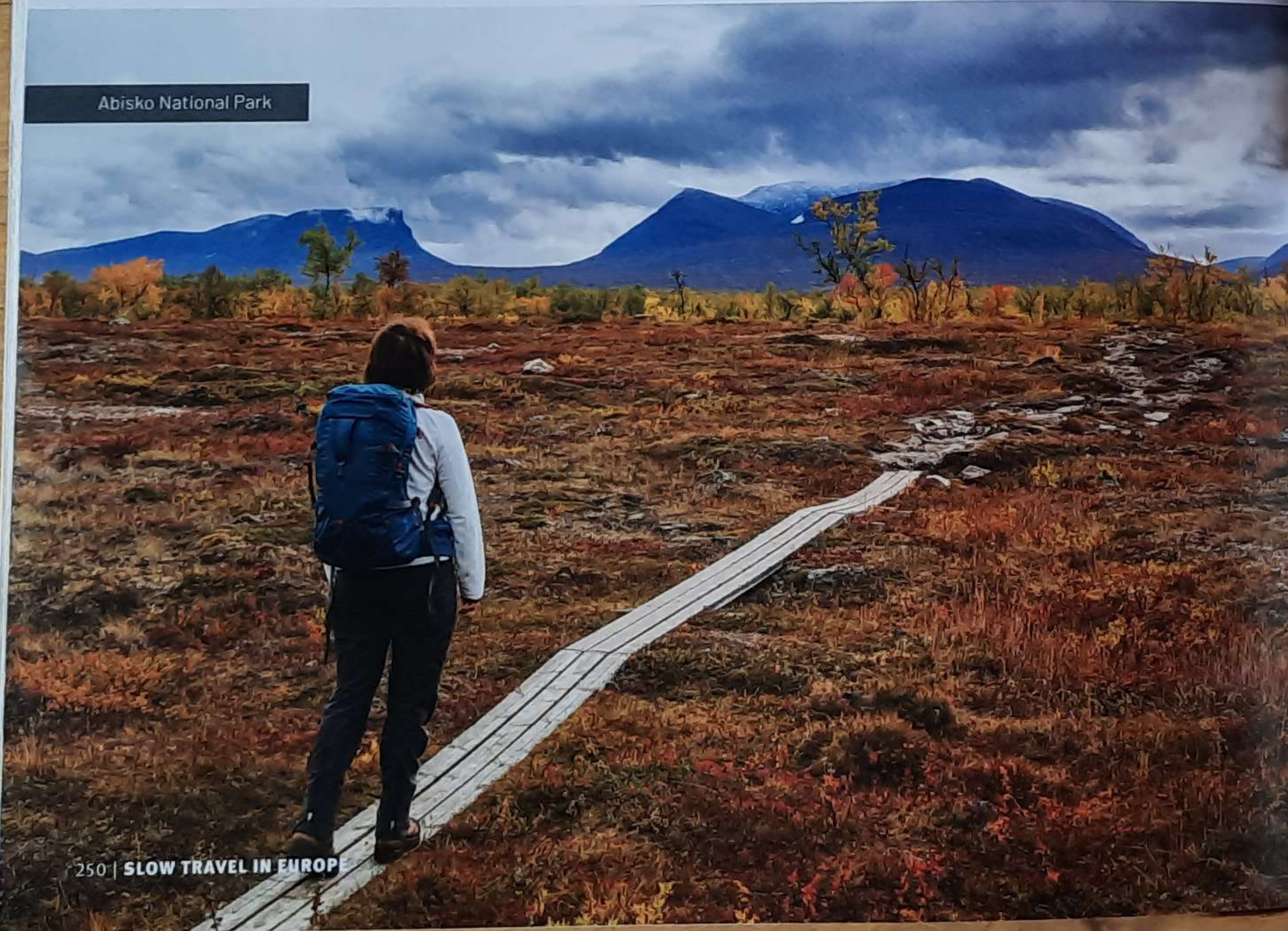
STAY

HI Hostel Bodo Sjøgata 57, Bodø, 8006; www.hihostels.com/hostels/hi-bodo. Next to Bodø's train station and within walking distance of the ferry terminal, this comfortable hostel offers spacious rooms, some with a private bathroom. There's a shared kitchen and a common room filled with board games and books. Laundry facilities are available.

reflected in the Nid from the Gamle Bybro (Old Town Bridge); and take in fine views of the city and its sweeping fjord from Kristianstenfestning Fortress. Before heading home, dine at one of the excellent restaurants earning Trondheim its culinary clout: it isn't dubbed the 'Home of Nordic Flavours' for no reason.

Lofoten Å Hi Hostel Å, 8392; www.hihostels.com/hostels/hi-lofoten-a. A welcoming hostel offering dorm beds and a few private rooms with shared bathrooms and a communal kitchen. It is set across two locations: the Hennumgården house, in the centre of Å, and above the Lofoten Stockfish Museum (Tørrfiskmuseum), from where you gaze at the vast pewter-toned sea. Reliable wi-fi.

Abisko National Park



Trondheim's harbour is flanked by restaurants

Lofoten Rorbuer Jektveien 10, Svolvær; www.lofoten-rorbuer.no. At this long-running Svolvær institution, converted *rorbuer* provide cosy digs; the pick of the bunch overlook the Marinepollen lagoon. A few share a kitchen and bathroom; others have kitchenettes.

EAT & DRINK

Antikvariatet Nedre Baklandet 4, 7014 Trondheim; www.facebook.com/antikvarene. At this Trondheim-based café-bar and cultural venue, you can read over a cup of coffee, taste home-made Norwegian sweets or chat over a local beer. There's also a book swap and regular performances by artists.

Ramberg Gjestegård Flakstadveien 361, 8380 Ramberg; www.ramberg-gjestegard.no. In this cosy café, restaurant and guesthouse near Ramberg's heavenly beach, warm your body and soul with a

marshmallow-sprinkled hot chocolate while playing board games with like-minded travellers. Or enjoy freshly caught cod or salmon dishes washed down with a pint of Lofotpils, the local beer.

SHOP

Anita's Sjømat Sakrisøy, 8390 Reine; www.sakrisoy.no/seafood. This Reine shop and seafood bar shines a light on local produce, best enjoyed on the outdoor terrace with dizzying mountain views. Feast on dishes like shellfish soup, *tataki* or fish burgers, or buy fresh fish for self-catering stays. Also rents out traditional fishermen's cabins.

Lofoten Gaver og Brukskunst Storgata 38, 8370 Leknes. Family-run shop in Leknes selling souvenirs (magnets, cuddly toys, mugs), maps, artisanal crafts and hand-knitted winter clothing.