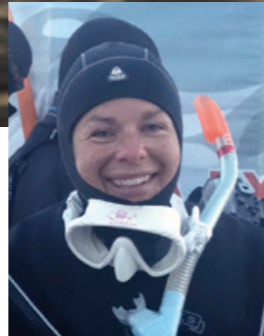


Norwegian orcas have 23 different calls. By combining these calls, they can make words. Photo: Orca Adventures

# ARCTIC ADVENTURES WITH ORCA

**Kathryn Curzon** heads to Norway to go swimming with orcas in the middle of an Arctic winter.



“Go go go!” were the words I’d been waiting to hear. Gijs, our guide, shouted at us urgently, signalling it was time to drop into the dark Arctic waters below. Without hesitation, I threw myself into the ocean. With snow-covered mountains above and orca fins seemingly everywhere, the world ceased to exist.

I was eye-to-eye with a group of wild orcas casually checking me out. I had expected to feel nervous, intimidated maybe, as orcas close up are huge, but instead felt a sense of complete peace. Mesmerised, I watched these incredible sea mammals move gracefully past in the quiet waters, and my long-held dream came true. I was swimming with orcas. There was, and still is, nowhere I would rather be.

The waters off the Troms region in the far north of Norway host hundreds of orcas each winter from the



An adventure of a lifetime awaits passengers boarding the *Sula*. Photo: Orca Norway

end of October to the start of February. Thought to be the largest gathering of killer whales in the world, they arrive in family groups to feed on the spring-spawning herring that migrate down the coast. It is a time of feasting for the orcas, and also humpback whales, a time of drama for the herring, and a time of getting exceptionally chilly if you want to get in the freezing water to swim with them.

Norway is the only place in the world where you can reliably freedive or snorkel with orcas in the wild – sometimes in groups of up to 50–60 strong. But there’s a catch – you have to do it in the middle of an Arctic winter when there’s only three hours of daylight and a wind chill of -20°C. But if you’re prepared to endure the cold, it is the adventure of a lifetime.

Boarding *Sula* just outside Tromsø, a picturesque Norwegian hub above the Arctic circle, I knew this week-long expedition would be like no other. The *Sula*, an ex-fishing vessel turned cosy liveboard boat, takes small groups of adventurous guests (a maximum 12 people) into the remote fjords each winter searching for orcas.

Safety was paramount. We were warned not to go on the deck alone, in case we fell into the dark water, and not to disembark at night without signing out – presumably in case we fell into the water. We also had to take extra care when stepping from the *Sula* onto our dive boat, which resembled little more than a tin can but turned out to be quick, stable, and ideal for the conditions. I can’t say I slept much that first night but not for fear of the orcas.

I was terrified I was going to perish in the Arctic winter, which, given it was my 40th birthday celebration, seemed a terrible way to go.

I needn’t have worried though. The crew were attentive, fun, and exceptionally knowledgeable about orcas. They worked tirelessly to find them each day, and we spent hours throwing ourselves in and out of the water with gusto, laughing at the snow all around us and marvelling at the orcas. I discovered the water was surprisingly warm when compared to the wind chill in-between dives. At a balmy 2°C, I never wanted to get out.

Learning how to interact respectfully with the orcas is a key feature of the *Sula* expedition and evening lectures were provided by an international orca expert Pierre Robert De Latour. During his fascinating talks, we learnt about orca behaviours and their complex social lives.

“Norwegian orcas have 23 different calls. By combining these calls, they can make words,” Pierre told us.

“After 6000 underwater close encounters with them, [it’s clear] we must invest time, money, and power to understand their language. They are the key to the biodiversity of the oceanic ecosystems, and we have much to learn from orca.”

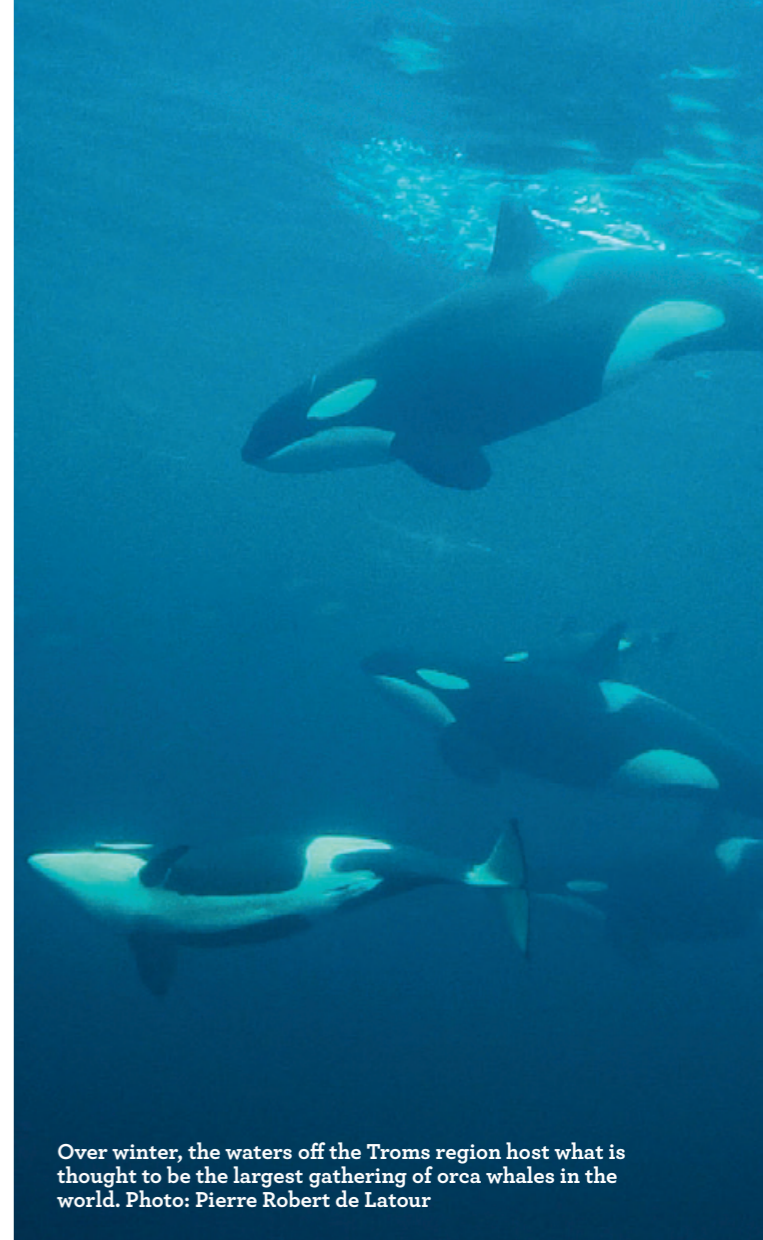
This educational focus really deepened our understanding of the orcas we swam with each day. Approved by scientists working with marine mammals, Orca Adventures uses the Undersea Soft Encounter Alliance (USEA) guidelines to ensure the wellbeing and wild nature of orcas isn’t compromised by the swimmers.

“It’s surreal!” exclaimed my new-found friend Sarah as we huddled on the boat one day, waiting for more orcas to arrive. “You almost have to pinch yourself to remind yourself you’re actually swimming in the Arctic with wild orcas!”

Looking around the boat, I could see everyone felt much the same. Crew and guests alike were beaming, chatting about the baby orcas we’d seen earlier swimming



Learning how to interact respectfully with orcas is a key feature of the *Sula* expeditions. Photo: Orca Norway



Over winter, the waters off the Troms region host what is thought to be the largest gathering of orca whales in the world. Photo: Pierre Robert de Latour

alongside the boat. Perfect miniatures of their adult parents, they had bobbed along reflecting the sunrise off their skin and charmed us all.

It wasn’t unusual to hear Cedric, a guest from Switzerland, screaming into his snorkel every time an orca passed. He couldn’t get over his excitement, and rightly so. It is astounding to share space with these misunderstood predators. Thankfully, the orcas didn’t seem to mind his vocals and carried on hunting the herring bait balls below.

By the end of the week, while we were exhausted from the cold and continual diving, all we wanted to do was keep going. Huddling in the dry room for warmth after our last dive, we weren’t ready to leave the wilderness behind. Cruising back to our port that night and already missing the orcas, Norway gave us one last show. Lighting up the sky in flowing green and pink streaks, the aurora borealis filled the night sky in spectacular fashion. While we had seen the lights most nights, we had never seen a show like this. The sky was on fire, reminding us once more of the overwhelming beauty of Norway and its incredible orca.

■ For more information, see [www.orcanorway.info](http://www.orcanorway.info).

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