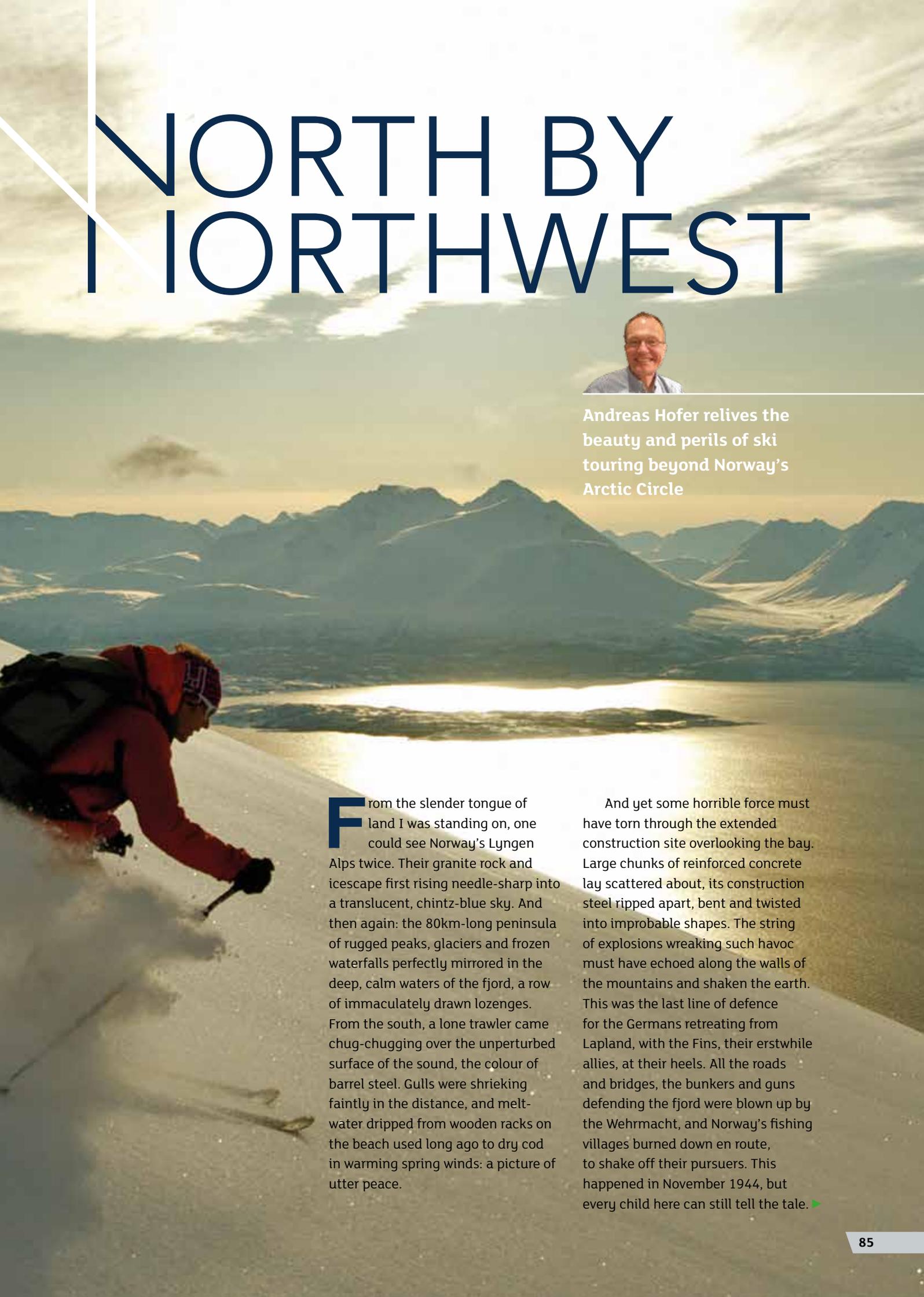


NORTH BY NORTHWEST



Andreas Hofer relives the beauty and perils of ski touring beyond Norway's Arctic Circle



From the slender tongue of land I was standing on, one could see Norway's Lyngen Alps twice. Their granite rock and icescape first rising needle-sharp into a translucent, chintz-blue sky. And then again: the 80km-long peninsula of rugged peaks, glaciers and frozen waterfalls perfectly mirrored in the deep, calm waters of the fjord, a row of immaculately drawn lozenges. From the south, a lone trawler came chug-chugging over the unperturbed surface of the sound, the colour of barrel steel. Gulls were shrieking faintly in the distance, and melt-water dripped from wooden racks on the beach used long ago to dry cod in warming spring winds: a picture of utter peace.

And yet some horrible force must have torn through the extended construction site overlooking the bay. Large chunks of reinforced concrete lay scattered about, its construction steel ripped apart, bent and twisted into improbable shapes. The string of explosions wreaking such havoc must have echoed along the walls of the mountains and shaken the earth. This was the last line of defence for the Germans retreating from Lapland, with the Fins, their erstwhile allies, at their heels. All the roads and bridges, the bunkers and guns defending the fjord were blown up by the Wehrmacht, and Norway's fishing villages burned down en route, to shake off their pursuers. This happened in November 1944, but every child here can still tell the tale. ►



► Around the dining table at Lyngen Lodge sit Norwegians, Swedes, Germans, Italians, Americans, English and two Austrians, talking about a long day of skiing in pristine wilderness, rather than war. The past is part of the landscape now, not a topic of divisive debate. Outside, separated only by lofty floor-to-ceiling windows, the ice fields and summits are turning blue while somewhere behind the North Pole the sun is disappearing - if only for a few hours, lighting the sky in crimson and pink.



Austick: Lord of all he surveys!

In a few weeks the sun will not set at all any more, but by then the snow will be too slushy for us to ski anyway. Tourists have been flocking to Troms

province - some 300km north of the Arctic Circle - for quite a few years now. They marvel at the Northern Lights or the Midnight Sun, fish, go rock climbing, or ski the Lyngen peaks and the mountains on the east side of the fjord, and on islands further into the Arctic. Graham Austick, a mountain guide from Newcastle, who taught his fellow Brits how to ski off-piste in the Arlberg for more than 20 years ("Piste to Powder", St. Anton/Austria), used to come here regularly with ski-touring clients. They stayed on boats, as most skiers here do, or in very basic B&Bs. It was difficult to get things dry overnight, and the showers and toilets were

somewhat tricky - but the skiing was outstanding. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Austick was dreaming about a luxurious boutique hotel to come home to after a long day of skinning - soaking in a whirlpool, or sweating in the sauna with vistas across endless peaks and eternal ice.

On a sunny spring day in 1997, taking a group of regulars down the slopes of Storhagen (1147m), he saw the ideal spot: a wide, spacious hill, just a few metres above sea level, lodged between two wind-battered farmhouses and overlooking the sandy beach, the fjord, the sea and the Lyngen Alps in all their majestic glory. It seemed so right, that he even took a photograph of the spot, to show it later to Elisabeth Braathen, his Norwegian business partner in St. Anton. On the way to the airport he realised to his

chagrin that he'd lost the camera. It would have been the end of the story if there hadn't been an email two weeks later from Olderdalen - the few scattered farmhouses near the small fishing town of Djupvik - where Austick had taken the pictures. A farmer had found the camera in the snow a few days later, and started to inquire about the owner. Looking through the images, he could identify the skiers' boat, contacted the vessel's owner, and with his help tracked Austick down in Austria. "It was like a sign" said Graham. The next day he and Elisabeth were on their way to Tromso. A year later the spacious log house with its grass roofs and sundecks, with garages, housing for the staff and a villa for Elisabeth's and Graham's families was overlooking the bay.

Now the Lyngen yacht was speeding over dark water

towards Uloya Island, dropping us in Hamnes Harbour, complete with a wooden church, spacious warehouses smelling of stockfish, a general store and a 1920s 'Esso' gas pump for the farmers and fishermen living all year on the island. We put our skins on where a few thousand stiff cod, tied in pairs, were left to dry on long wooden racks: *bacalhau*, the coast's century-old export to countries like Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Then we followed Stefan Kosz and Burkhard Bichler, our Austrian mountain guides, to Kjelvagtinden (1104m), a peak north east of the harbour with views of

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1000 islands petering out into the Atlantic.

The mountains of Troms and Finnmark have a peculiar shape: massive ice-age glaciers have smoothed all elevations from west to east, creating long, gentle slopes facing the sun, the sea and the beaches below - ideal for skinning and skiing. On the east side, alas, these mountains drop off in 800m, 900m vertical walls - deadly cliffs right beyond the summits. These formations made it impossible even for the indigenous Sami, Lapland's migrating reindeer herders, to use the otherwise rich pastures here, abundant with wild herbs and berries - they would have risked losing their entire livestock.

Like a nursery teacher watching over a group of unreasonable toddlers, Stefan would draw a line on each summit and, walking



backwards and forwards, make sure that none of us would step beyond the line. "When these massive cornices break off, their sheer size creates such a pull that skiers standing nearby will be sucked to their death," he said. We saw the rock walls and the looming mushrooms of snow jutting over the abyss, but felt more like taking pictures of each other standing on these wild roofs of rock and ice, rather than being cautioned. Little did we accept the danger as we tip-toed towards the brink.

It was a sunny day - to our great good fortune, the entire week would be warm and dry - and we skied to the bottom of a wide chute in fast spring snow, approximately 800 vertical metres, stopping just above a belt of dwarf birch growing almost at sea level. Porpoises, small Nordic dolphins, frolicked in the bay, waiting for the spring shoals of cod to arrive. Some peaks on the Lyngen peninsula can reach 1500m: the rocky crest of Jiehkkevarri (1833m) is the highest. But the mountains on the eastern shores of the fjord, where we mostly skied, were rarely higher than 1300 metres, making hiking an easy exercise. Here, untormented by the lack of oxygen experienced at high altitude, we would typically climb some 2000 metres a day without overly exhausting ourselves.

We skied various faces of Rissavarri (1325m), Sorbmegaisa (1288m), traversing into Engnesdalen and passing a steep gully where a year earlier a group of French skiers were tragically killed by an avalanche; then Boazovari (Reindeer Mountain - 1142m) and Storhagen peak. From the summit ridges, the vast, frozen wilderness of Lapland opened up: no houses, no road, only row after row of craggy

mountain chains, more and more of them the further one could see, until they were tiny teeth, and finally a mere ripple on the horizon, disappearing at last into perpetuity. The glens showed no traces of human life - in fact, no trace of life at all. Sometimes we saw the tracks of a wolverine in the snow, claw prints of white grouse, a few strangely shiftless jackdaws dropping off into the void, or a lone eagle circling above the fjord. Then again: emptiness. Somehow our lurid skiing outfits seemed strangely out of place.

A headmaster's memories

His twinkling eyes and swift movements made Einar Storslett look more youthful than he was.

Yet when the schoolteacher warmed his stiff, gout-ridden fingers in front of the open fireplace, one could see that quite a

few years must have passed since his retirement as the head-teacher of Djupvik comprehensive. In fact, the school doesn't even exist any more. In the 1960s, the fishing village was still a striving parish of 500 hardy souls, where men worked as builders and their womenfolk in the fishing industry, both earning a subsistence with cod fishing and small scale farming. It has shrunk fast over the years. In 2000 the school closed, and the last eight students were sent to join another school some 40 miles south along the E6 highway towards

the shipyards of Narvik.

Of a once proud fleet of 700 fishing boats, only a few old men like Einar keep fishing - for ever more dwindling stocks. "It became difficult," he says, "to catch Norwegian redfish, and even herring are rare now". But cod are still plentiful, at least for the time being. Storslett's tales recall a past as remote as yellowing monochromes you might find in the attic. He remembers the fate of the salmon fishermen from Hammarneset, who ventured too

When these massive cornices break off, their sheer size creates such a pull that skiers standing nearby will be sucked to their death

close to the cliff line of Lyngen - to be battered to death by collapsing ice walls; he still sees the heavily laden boats of the haymakers, who always risked capsizing in the fjord, like the last farmers of Lyngen, who died in just such an accident - grandfather, father and son; he recalls the lone fisherman from Lyngslett, who was killed on Christmas day by an avalanche, splitting his nets and his boat in two. "They only found half the boat and half of his nets." And he remembers how every morning he used to share his school lunch with



prisoners of war who were suffering so terribly from malnutrition and sub-zero temperatures.

Einar did not stay for supper, which was a shame, because Steve Newson, the chef at Lyngen Lodge, would dish up a three-star menu every night. No matter how many vertical metres one hiked each day, Newson's sophisticated dishes made it well-nigh impossible to lose weight. For many years head chef at the 'Hazienda', one of St. Anton's most prominent restaurants, he would amaze us with king crabs, scallops, reindeer roast, Wagyu beef, fresh cod and heavenly desserts. Come to think of it, the entire catering staff were recruited in the Arlberg: Astrid from Denmark, Linda (Switzerland), Laura (Norfolk), Pernilla (Sweden) and the mountain guides Florian, Stefan and Burkhardt



Andreas Hofer: Lapping up the Lyngen Alps, and (above) Speeding to the slopes: The Lyngen yacht

(Austria).

Oil-rich Norwegians are one of the most egalitarian societies in the world; also one of the most affluent, environmentally aware and best connected - high speed internet and cell phones work virtually on every floating piece of ice. Yet when it comes to hospitality they have to rely on help and expertise from abroad. Norwegians may have reindeer, but Santa comes from another country. When I tried to hitch-hike back to the lodge, only car no. 50 bothered to stop - 49 others, including heavy trucks, tried their utmost to run me off the road. A teenager cranked down the window of his Wrangler Jeep with a smile and asked: "You are not from here, are you? We never stop for hitchhikers, don't you know? You'll have to get yourself a car if you want to go anywhere. Now get in. And don't you ever be so foolish again. Next time you'll freeze to death."

The days not only got longer for a quarter of an hour every day, they became much warmer too. By now, everyone in my group had a deep tan, and we started to shed one layer after another, until most of us were hiking in T-shirts. The many-metre thick snow cover no longer froze overnight. Skiing became trickier, and on my last run, on the nearby mountain of Storhagen, rising right behind the lodge, the snow was melting into ever deeper layers, and becoming difficult to ski. On the last slope - close to the lodge, where Graham Austick must have lost his camera six years ago - the snow was so wet that falling over would have been distinctly uncomfortable.

We felt sorry for the next group - five Austrians, all of them

experienced ski tourers - blissfully unaware of the slush and wet spring snow they were to encounter. The day after our departure - a late April Sunday in fair weather - Stefan Kosz led the group to the summit of Storhagen. It took them less than two hours to reach the peak at 1142 metres. Kosz swiftly secured a resting place for them, drawing a line in the snow and marking the no-go zone with his skis. Repeatedly he warned, as he had done so often with us, of the imminent danger of collapsing cornices on the summit ridge. But the skiers immediately started to eat their sandwiches and sip tea from their thermoses. The day was hot - much warmer than they had expected. There was much talk about the incredible beauty of the world surrounding them. Pictures were taken. Conviviality. Nobody noticed when one of them, a young woman of 38, ignoring all warnings, stepped forward onto the solid-looking overhang. Her boyfriend, father of her two children, was talking to the others and wasn't looking in her direction when she hurtled 700 metres to her death. When the rescue helicopters came in from Tromso, they could only recover her shattered body. ■

Lyngen Lodge 'Summit to Sea',
Djupvik AS
www.lyngenlodge.com
Six days guided skiing plus full board
approx. £2,800 per person in double room;
drinks and flights not included.

All photography by **Konrad Bartelski**.

A collection of features covering Andreas Hofer's decade as Ski+board's lead ski adventure writer can be found in his coffee table book *The Adventures of Andreas Hofer* which also includes his articles in Conde Nast Traveller. A copy can be ordered by email to andreashofer@f2s.com. The cost of £97 includes postage. Andreas Hofer is not seeking to make a profit from any sales, which will simply cover his publishing production costs.