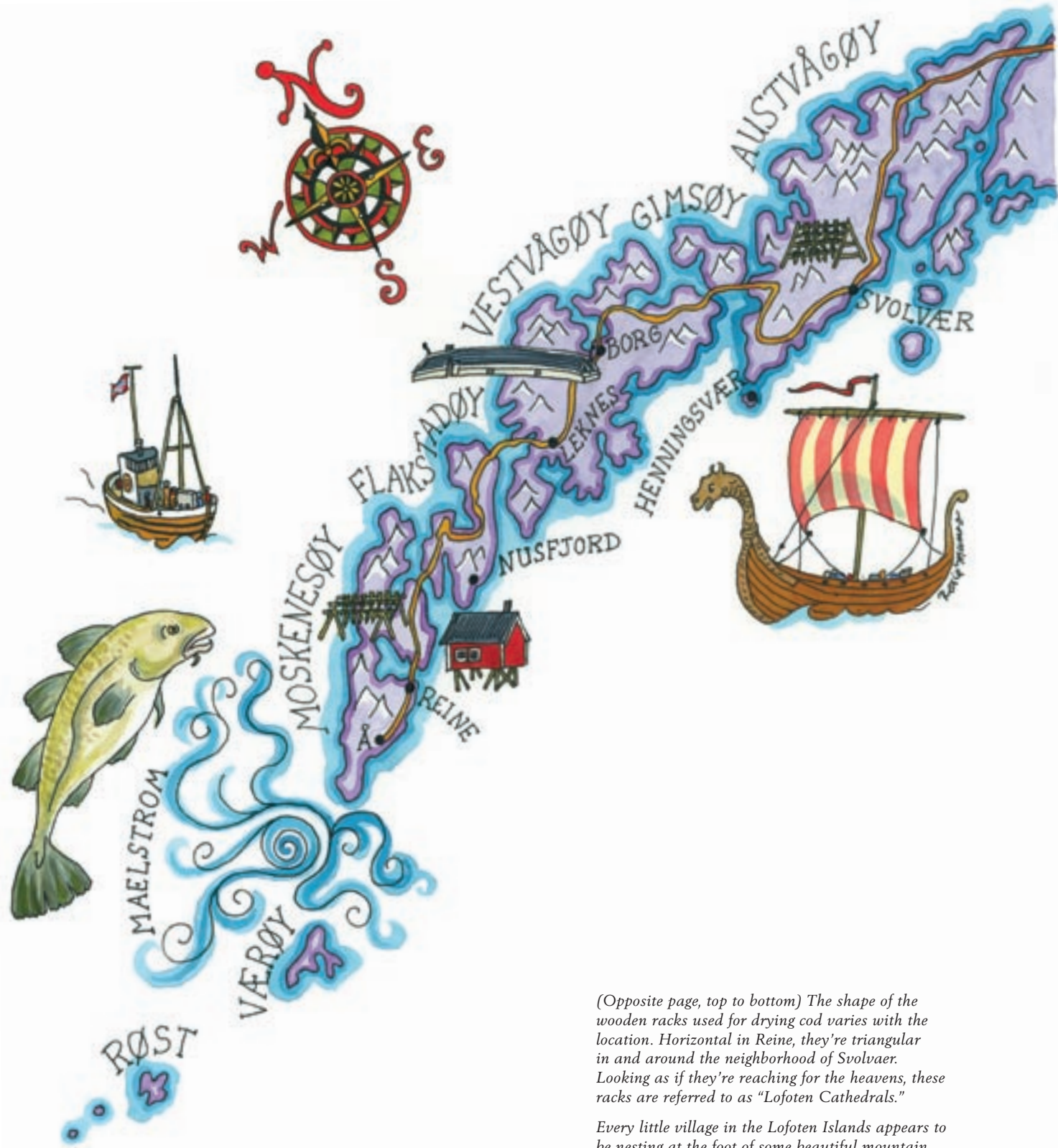


IN COD WE TRUST

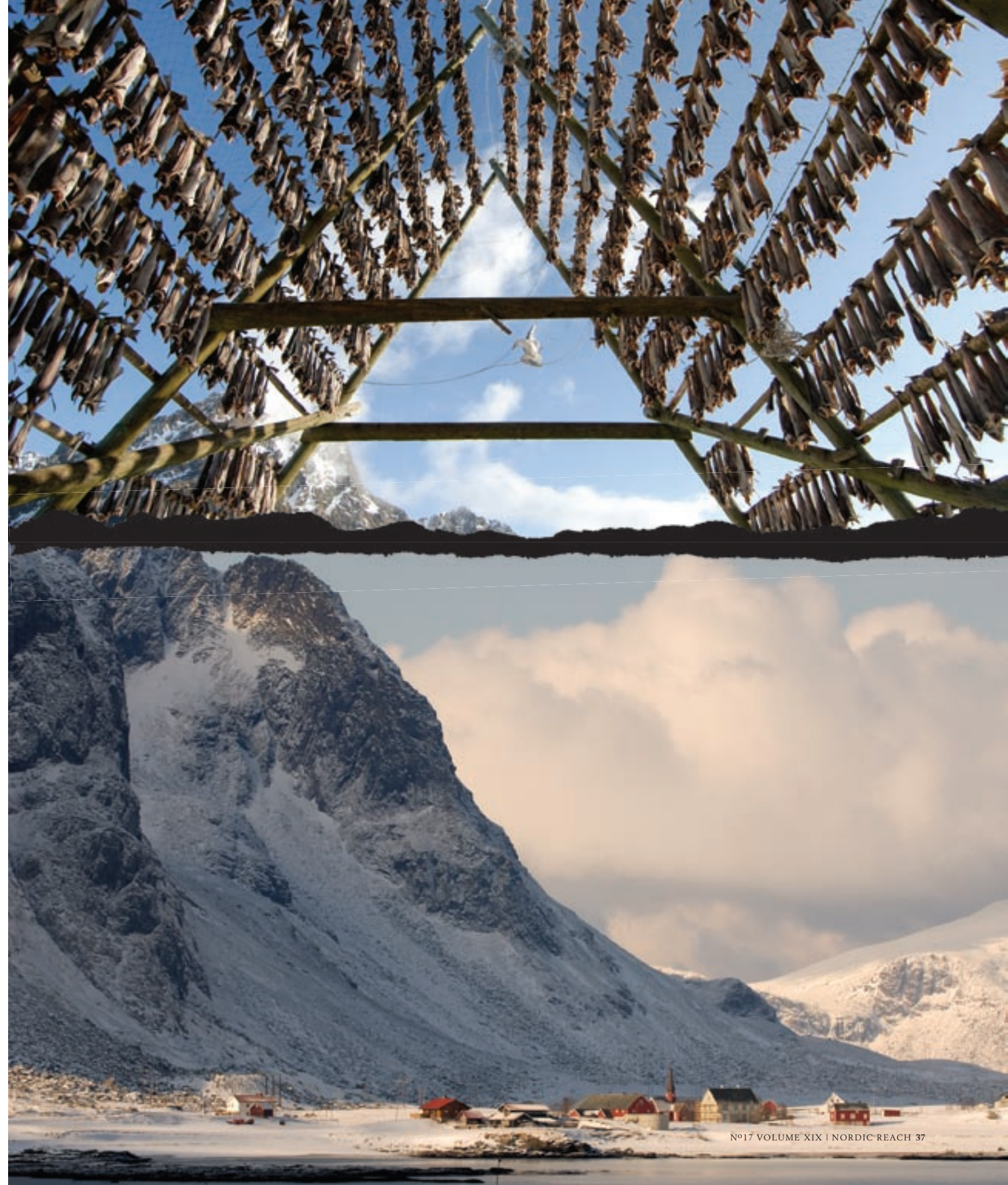
A Lofoten Encounter

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BO ZAUNDERS / ILLUSTRATION BY ROXIE MUNRO



(Opposite page, top to bottom) The shape of the wooden racks used for drying cod varies with the location. Horizontal in Reine, they're triangular in and around the neighborhood of Svolvær. Looking as if they're reaching for the heavens, these racks are referred to as "Lofoten Cathedrals."

Every little village in the Lofoten Islands appears to be nesting at the foot of some beautiful mountain.





Stretching out into the Norwegian Sea, well above the Arctic Circle, and topped by a 60-mile long range of steep mountains, the Lofoten Islands offer not only outstanding scenic beauty – in a country where spectacular scenery is commonplace – but also insight into a unique lifestyle, in which codfish, for thousands of years, has played an all-important role.

Bo Zaunders, who with his wife Roxie Munro recently visited these remote islands, brought his camera and kept a diary. And Roxie mapped out the region.



(This page) Ice fishing. Traversing the islands, we ran into this peaceful setting: a frozen lake with a man comfortably seated and patiently waiting for a fish to nibble.

(Opposite page, top to bottom) As elsewhere in Norway, fjords – inlets flanked by steep mountains – is an integral part of the landscape.

Reflections of three rorbuer in Solvaer.



WEDNESDAY

Yesterday had been a long day, starting in a Manhattan apartment and ending in a rorbu, a converted fishing cabin, in a small village tucked between steep snowy mountains above the Arctic Circle. Newark » Copenhagen » Oslo » Bodø » Svolvær. The aircrafts had shrunk with each flight, the last of which had been a 20-minute jump in a small propeller plane. Even then, following a smooth fourth landing, we were hours away from the village of Reine, our final destination on this, our first day in the Lofoten islands.

Now, after a good night's sleep, any sense of hardship is gone. Our rorbu, despite its inherent rusticity, is very comfortable, surprising us with heated marble floors in hall and bathroom. The view from the living room window contains all the elements of a classical Lofoten fishing village: a jumble of red cabins on stilts, one of which has a rowboat tucked under it; a little fish factory and, in the near distance, two snow-covered mountains, ascending precipitously into the clear morning sky.

I recall our 4-hour drive on still icy roads. We came by the main thoroughfare, the E10, traversing a string of islands, connected by elegant curved bridges. The road stretched endlessly through a landscape of stark Arctic beauty. Despite mounting jet lag, we both felt miraculously revived. Lofoten has been described as a 60-mile long range of steep mountains, stretching out into the Norwegian Sea. Arriving in Reine, on the Moskenes Island, we had reached, almost, its farthest point.

Outstanding scenery, of course, was one reason for coming here in the first place. Another was, of all things, cod. Having read Mark Kurlansky's highly acclaimed book on the subject, I had been reminded not only of the multiple ways in which cod has been the "fish that changed the world," but of Lofoten as the world's cod capital par excellence. It was cod that brought human beings to these remote islands some 6,000 years ago, and it is cod – apart from tourists – that still keep them going.

This morning, Morten Nilsen, a young fisherman and travel guide, took me to the Norwegian Fishing Village Museum in the nearby village of Å. There, under a ceiling with roughly hewn wooden beams,



Reine, on the island of Moskenesoya, is on a tiny peninsula almost surrounded by steep mountains.



(Clockwise) For drying, cod is hung in pairs, tied together by the tails. The drying period is about three months, from March/April to the beginning of June.

Removing a cod's tongue is something you learn at an early age in the Lofoten Islands.

In Svolvær, as in all other villages or towns in Lofoten, you see a lot of fishing paraphernalia.

A compact assembly of drying fish rises like a wall behind a row of Svolvær rorbuer – traditional fishing cabins on stilts.

I got my first glimpse of Lofoten's history and unique lifestyle. Tools, tackle, and fishing boats were on display, as well as imaginary creatures of the sea. In a dark corner from one of the boats rose a ghastly-looking sea troll with outstretched arms. According to Morten, he represented the ghost of a drowned fisherman, attempting to drag others down with him. Attached to one of the beams, encircled by a stylized hook, hung the depiction of what to me looked like a redheaded fish, but which Morten told me was a merchild. A merchild, he explained, is the son of a mermaid. He personifies the voice of the sea, and you'll do well by listening to his advice.

Stumbling into the bright sunshine outside, Morten pointed to a red shanty across the small harbor. "That's a cod-liver oil factory," he said, reminding me of the length to which Norwegians go in their pursuit of a healthy life.

I then learned that cod, in early January, come from the Barents Sea to Lofoten to spawn by the tens of millions. January also marks the beginning of the fishing season, which lasts until the end of March, and during which some 25,000 guest-fishermen join forces with those 3,000 or so who live on the islands permanently. Together they catch 35,000 tons of cod.

It was now March 29, three days from the World Championship in cod fishing in Svolvær, an event we had every intention of attending.

THURSDAY

Before we parted yesterday, Morten told me the story of his Great Great Grandmother. It went as follows:

One fine morning in the 1820s, a young Norwegian woman named Petrine decided to take her baby, a son born out of wedlock, and leave home. So, in a small boat, she rowed all the way to the village of Helle in the far west of the Lofoten Islands. It was a distance of 37 miles, or as far as she could get from the straight-laced community of her hometown Henningsvær. In Helle she married its most prominent citizen, and the little boy became the founder of a fishing dynasty of which Morten was now the fifth generation.

Hardiness and fishing. It struck me that Morten's slice of family history summed up the tenor of Lofoten life.

Moskenes, it turns out, is an island of some prominence - the location of a huge cave, with 3000-year-old Stone Age paintings. Guided tours are arranged during the summer months, when, quoting a brochure, "the Midnight Sun shines right into the mouth of the cave,

creating a magical atmosphere.” Moskenes also has the distinction of being next-door neighbor to the infamous Maelstrom, one of the strongest tidal currents in the world. Back in the 1500s, this is how this 3-mile stretch of water was described: “An ocean vortex that runs up and down the sea, devouring great ships and spewing them up again.” A few centuries later, Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe added to the hype by writing about it as a current that smashes ships to smithereens and “rumbles like a buffalo herd on the prairie.” Though considerably less dramatic, the Moskenstraumen, as it is called here in Norway, is a fearsome natural phenomenon which, over the centuries, has claimed thousands of lives.

On my return to Reine, I visited the fish factory glimpsed through our rorbu window. At the quay outside, a boat was unloading its cod cargo into large plastic bins, which were then fork lifted to the factory. There, through an opening in the wall, the fish were sent hurtling down a chute into a large processing room. On my arrival, a group of twelve-year-old boys had gathered for a couple of hours of work. Their job: to remove the tongues of the newly caught cod. This procedure, I learned, is something of a Lofoten initiation rite, your first lesson in becoming cod savvy. I thought that some might have been a little repelled by the thought of ripping out the tongue of 2-foot fish. Not so. Everyone did it with gusto, one boy telling me with pride how much money he made in just one hour.

Work in the fish factory struck me as efficient, well organized, and repetitious. In one room, on a freshly hosed floor, a line of men in orange slickers gutted fish, and in another two women, also in slickers, bustled about in a measured fashion amidst piles of salted and dried stockfish.

As dusk descended at 8 PM and we were having our dinner – a *pyttipanna* bought in the local store and heated in the compact rorbu kitchen – I noticed through the window that the factory still hummed

with activity. A crane was moving back and forth, bringing more fish to be processed by people now barely discernible, tiny figures inside the yellow rectangles of lighted windows.

Cod, cod, cod! Not surprisingly, when I woke up this morning and looked out the bedroom window, the first thing I saw was one of the scaffold-like cod-drying racks which, at this time of year, cover a good portion of the Lofoten islands. (I read that about 35 million pounds of cod are set out to dry every year.) This particular rack, apparently, was not yet filled up. On top of it perched men in orange overalls, receiving fresh produce from a cherry picker attached to a small truck.

Enough of that. Today we would just drive around on these beautiful islands, and find some good places to eat.

An icy back road took us first to Nusfjord, a fishing village on Flakstadøy, the island just north of Moskenes. With its cute harbor and cluster of aesthetically arranged fisherman’s huts, Nusfjord met all the requirements of a picture postcard. Not surprisingly, it is one of the island’s major tourist attractions, and one of the livelier spots during the summer season. But now it lay almost deserted. Snow-covered mountains rose mutely on all sides, and all we could hear as we lingered on the quay, was the sound of someone moving around inside one of the boats and the distant screeching of a lone seagull.

From Nusfjord we drove east, crossing Vestvågøy and Gimsø, stopping briefly to watch a man ice fishing, then continuing on Austvågøy until we reached Henningsvaer, the largest fishing village in Lofoten – the one that Morten’s ancestral mother had found so unbearable. In Henningsvaer we lunched at a seafood restaurant named Fiskekrogen.

As expected, cod loomed large on the menu. It came fried, with potato purée; as stockfish in a garlic marinade, baked with Parmesan cheese; as semidried “Boknafish,” with bacon and creamed carrots; and in a few other varieties. In addition, there was a Fish Soup and a Large



(This page) A boat loaded with contestants has just left port and is heading for the fish-rich waters outside Svolvær.

(Opposite page) A Viking ship in full sail. (In Kurlansky’s book, the question is raised of how the Norsemen had enough provisions to push on all the way to Vineland. The answer: codfish that had hung in the frosty winter air until it lost four-fifths of its weight and became a durable wood like plank. “They would break off pieces and chew them, eating it like hardtack.”)





(Clockwise) Lars Letho from Kiruna, Sweden, displaying his prize-winning 42-pound cod.

The fishing fleet consisted of boats of all shapes and sizes. Here, from a three-masted schooner, catches are held up for everyone to see.

Everybody was having a grand time during the final phase of the World Championship, drinking beer and waiting for the winner to be announced.



Mussel Pan that sounded good, and, conceding to the notion that not everyone is crazy about seafood, the menu ended with Saddle of Veal.

My curiosity peeked after yesterday's encounter with the boys in the fish factory, I settled for an appetizer of fried cod tongue. It was quite delicious, tasting rather like fried oysters.

After some hesitation, Roxie sampled it as well. "This is pretty good," she said. "If I hadn't known what it was, it would have been fabulous."

On our way back to Reine, we passed Leknes, a town in the middle of Vestvågøy, where we would spend the following night at Norlandia Lofoten Hotel.

FRIDAY

After Reine, Leknes seemed un-picturesque, a busy commercial town you may run into anywhere. Our hotel had originally been built in Lillehammer to house athletes for the Olympics a few years ago. It was then taken apart and shipped off to Leknes, where it was reassembled and turned into a four-star hotel. They don't coddle athletes in Norway, which, perhaps, is why the Norlandia Lofoten Hotel, though smoothly run and perfectly comfortable, felt slightly on the utilitarian side.

About ten miles from Leknes, on top of a plateau, rises the gently arched shape of a 273-foot long Viking Age building. It is the largest

ever found in Scandinavia, and was discovered only 25 years ago. Buried under the earth for centuries, it was excavated by a team of Scandinavian archeologists, and turned into *Lofotr* – the Viking Museum at Borg.

The chieftain's residence was an enormous room with a ceiling that must have been 30 feet high. The air was heavy with the smell of wood tar. In the semi-darkness, light flickered from a huge hearth and gleamed from cod-liver-oil lamps. There were some high-backed wooden chairs and other furniture, including a Viking dining table, laid out with ancient-looking food products. As this was off-season, we had the place to ourselves. Then a guide showed up, dressed in a Viking outfit and carrying a sword. We learned that he was Dutch, spoke 6 languages, and had fallen in love with Lofoten.

In the early evening we drove to Svolvær for dinner at Du Verden, a trendy new restaurant with several cooking awards under its belt. Continuing with cod, I ate a most tasty Bacalao, with olives, tomatoes and artichokes, while Roxie, less of a fish fanatic, decided on a Pasta Carbonara with ham, topped with Parmesan.

The World Championship of Cod-fishing is now underway, but the major event will be tomorrow. As I skimmed through a list of participants, I noted that, apart from a good many Norwegians and Swedes, 8 Russians and 3 Germans are signed up, along with a handful of people from Latvia and Lithuania. On the list are also France, Dubai and the United States, each with a single contestant.

SATURDAY

Today was the big day. The contest began at 10 AM and lasted five hours. The Arctic seemed to be holding its breath. Who, among the over 500 participants would catch the most colossal cod? To ensure that we saw some of the action, we were scheduled to board a tour boat, which, as it turned out, was overbooked – besides, as we later learned, it was going on a whale-watching expedition.

Wandering around the bustling harbor, we were lucky to find Kjetil, the owner of a 29-foot fishing/speedboat that he was willing to let us charter at a reasonable cost. So off we went, with his friend Bjørn, for a closeup view of the Great Cod Battle. We saw plenty of action, men – and a few women – lined up along the sides of various boats, casting and recasting their lines. Occasionally a fish was caught and, if deemed worthy of admiration, triumphantly held up for everyone to see. The fishing fleet consisted of boats of all shapes and sizes, affording a fascinating glimpse of a millennium of shipbuilding. Traditional Scandinavian fishing vessels mixed with fiberglass cruisers. At one point we sighted a medieval Hansa boat, its heavy bulk ponderously plowing the waters. Then came a three-masted schooner, followed by a Viking ship in full sail.

Back in Svolvær, we trotted over to *Svolvær Dobbeltfrysningssanlegg*, a commodious warehouse where everybody had gathered for the final phase of the World Championship. Fishing boats kept arriving on the dock outside, disgorging happy loads of fisher persons, replete with black grass bags containing the day's catch. Rows of weighers and cleaners waited inside, ready with scales and an assortment of tubs.

There was quite a bit of excitement as each cod was weighed, marked, and gutted.

Even more excitement awaited at the other end of the warehouse, where a brass band was playing rousing tunes to a crowd of about a thousand congregating Scandinavians, most of whom were sitting at long tables, consuming huge quantities of beer. The band eventually left the small, improvised stage, and a hush fell over the packed assembly. Who had won first prize in the 2006 World Championship?

The winner proved to be Lars Letho from Kiruna, Sweden. Thunderous applause greeted him as he and his prize-winning 42-pound cod were brought up on stage.

A photo op followed. Jostling for a good angle, I joined a couple of newspaper photographers and at least 50 other people with digital and phone cameras. Flashes flashed; Lars Letho smiled, and the 2006 Championship in Cod-fishing was over. It was a rousing end to the contest – as well as to our Lofoten experience. Tomorrow we will be on that small propeller plane again, as we start winging our way back to the United States. We had come a long way for a look at an oversized dead fish.

Still, it was well worth it.

BO ZAUNDERS

Turn to page 78 for incidental intelligence and a number of "dos and don'ts" for your visit to Norway. Turn to page 71 for a novel cod recipe by Chef Morten Sohlberg.



At the end of March, Lofoten was already preparing for the Midnight Sun. With each day lengthening by some 10 minutes, a pink dusk fell at about 8 pm.