

Cold climbs

As the Arctic Race of Norway returns this month, we find out what it's like to tackle the world's northernmost road race

Words Felix Lowe • Photography George Marshall

For all the warnings of roaming moose, it's sheep that are proving the main obstacle to today's ride. As I cycle along the ridges of the beautifully barren Ljøsenhammeren summit, they lie in dozy clusters with their lambs, warming themselves on the tarmac, oblivious to the few cars and bikes that approach.

It's the price you pay for a landscape like this, I reflect, freewheeling down the twisting, forested descent to the village of Rognan. The road that runs, fast and flat, beside the inland Skjerstadfjorden gives ample scope to admire the shimmering water, lush green plains and jagged peaks, dusted with snow.

But while the sheep are fairly easy to navigate for one lone cyclist, they might want to think about moving on pretty soon, as in just a few weeks a peloton of 110 professionals will tackle this same route – going decidedly faster – for the opening stage of the Arctic Race of Norway (ARN).

Organised by ASO – the team behind the Tour de France – this four-day event brings some of the world's best riders to different parts of the Arctic Circle each August. Since its debut in 2013, it has attracted unprecedented attention from the cycling world – primarily, no doubt, because of the rugged, dramatic, distant terrain not usually associated with bike racing at this high level.

My love affair with the event dates back to that first year, when, on television, I watched the riders snake their way through the stunning Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelagos. Having covered the »



Opening pages
Writer Felix Lowe makes the descent from Ljøsenhammeren down towards Rognan and the Skjerstadfjorden
This spread, from left
Sheep are just one of the hazards on the Arctic Race of Norway route; amazing scenery in the bay south of Oddan on the Saltfjorden



“You have the mixed terrain of fjords and mountains, which makes it hard enough to be exciting, and then there’s riding between the reindeers too – that’s a bit special”

next two editions as a sports journalist, I’m now back for my Arctic hat-trick – but this time with my bike to sample some of the roads used in the first and last stages of this year’s race, which concludes in Bodø, the second largest city in North Norway.

The slightly overcast weather cannot disguise the beauty or scale of my surroundings as I ride past secluded coves, over the swirling tidal maelstrom at nearby Saltstraumen, and along the Nordland fjords with their traditional red fishing huts and grass roofs. It sure beats my traffic light-interrupted training rides back in the real world.

As I negotiate the section of hairpins ahead of the exhilarating drop down to Rognan, I spot – daubed in red paint on a rock face on the side of the road – the words “Takk Thor”, in commemoration of Scandinavia’s biggest cycling star. The only Norwegian to wear the Tour de France’s coveted yellow jersey and the rainbow stripes of world champion, Thor Hushovd won the inaugural edition of the Arctic Race in 2013.

In the remote fishing town of Hammerfest in Finnmark one year later – some 600km deeper into

the Arctic than Bodø – I asked Hushovd what made the race so special. “Firstly, it’s so far north. Then you have the nature and the mixed terrain of fjords and mountains, which makes it hard enough to be an exciting race. And then there’s riding between the reindeers too – that’s a bit special.”

Indeed, in that surreal stage to Nordkapp – often referred to as the most northerly tip of mainland Europe – it was a rogue reindeer (as opposed to a snoozing sheep) that careered into the peloton, causing a handful of riders to hit the deck. It’s not something you see in “normal” cycling races.

Hushovd’s glittering performances on the bike in the Tour de France – along with those of Norway’s current stars, Alexander Kristoff and Edvald Boasson Hagen – was what “spurred the interest in cycling among Norwegians,” according to Knut-Eirik Dybdal, managing director of the race.

In 2011 it also inspired Dybdal to approach the famously choosy Tour de France organisers with the initial idea to bring pro-cycling to this part of the world. As far as he was concerned at least, it was a no-brainer. »

Riders complete a loop of Senja island – often referred to as “Norway in miniature” – during the third stage of the 2015 race



Left
A Sami reindeer herdsman stands on the side of the roads, 2014
Below
Fans wait for the peloton to pass on the island of Senja in 2015

The 2016 race

Billed as the toughest yet, this fourth edition will straddle the Arctic Circle, with two stages below and two stages above the line of latitude.

Starting in Fauske on Thursday 11 August, the opening stage is a loop of the Salten region of Nordland via Bodø, the Straight of Saltstraumen (with its strong tidal currents) and the Ljøsenhameren climb, ahead of a fast finish in Rognan. Two stages below feature the *Sju søstre* (Seven Sisters) peaks as a backdrop (stage 2) ahead of the ARN's highest summit finish on Korgfjellet (stage 3). The final stage starts on the Arctic Circle before a long northerly descent and then a rolling ride to Bodø for a triumphant finish on 14 August.



"We didn't need to build anything that we didn't already have," he says. In addition to being "the most beautiful arena in the world for a bike race", his proposed event could boast the title of 'northernmost pro-bike race', plus backing from a bevy of strong sponsors including Statoil, Sparebank 1 Nord-Norge – not to mention the kind of local fishing companies able to award 500kg of salmon for the first rider over climbs of the calibre I've just completed.

Luckily for Dybdal, his pitch impressed Christian Prudhomme, general director of the Tour de France, and his increasingly global ambition for the Tour, which has witnessed foreign starts in Yorkshire, the Netherlands and Belgium in recent years, with Germany inked in for 2017.

"Our aim at ASO is to keep pushing back the boundaries of the sport and reaching larger audiences," he told me on the eve of the race's second edition in Hammerfest. "The frontiers of cycling are getting ever bigger and the Arctic Race is a pioneering one."

More than proving his point, viewers from 110 countries as far away as China tuned in to watch the maiden race. This rose to 180 for last year's edition – which included a quite sensational loop around Senja island under cobalt blue skies more readily associated with the Caribbean.

The route has certainly pushed boundaries. One outing saw teams tackle the most northerly road in continental Europe; to get there, they faced the sport's first-ever subterranean climb – exiting the 7km-long Magerøya tunnel with its negative altitude gain of 212m. This year there will be two stages below the polar circle – including the highest summit finish in the race's history, atop the 575m Korgfjellet – followed by a final stage to Bodø, which starts on the exact location of the Arctic Circle. All

amid scenery described by Prudhomme as "amazing, astonishing, stunning, sumptuous and humongous".

I'll add another word to the list: jurassic. For as I ride back along the plateau above the Misværøfjorden on my return leg to Bodø, entering a mini canyon, I half expect to see packs of dinosaurs emerge from behind the crags of this prehistoric landscape. It's certainly the kind of pinch-yourself scenery that goes down a storm with ASO's legendary helicopter cameras that beam aerial images around the world.

As well as capturing global audiences, the race has made an impact closer to home, where spectators line the roads with – as Prudhomme says – their "infectious enthusiasm" and "countless Norwegian flags". August Jensen, the first professional cyclist from this neck of the Arctic woods and winner of the ARN's (aptly) salmon-coloured jersey – awarded to the best climber – for the past two years, says he has been moved by the enthusiastic response to his success. "To have a home star was important for the spectators and media," Jensen says. "It was a great message for the youngsters to see that you can actually achieve something from this area."

He believes the race has made a "huge difference" in Northern Norway's cycling scene, which he describes as "dead" five years ago. "It was just 50-year-olds on expensive bikes not exactly sure how to train. But now you can see the younger generation coming through, and an interest and understanding of cycling and the sport."

Understandably, given the mountainous terrain and cold, dark winters, Northern Norway has lagged behind the rest of Scandinavia for cycling. Visit »



FELIX LOWE, ARN/P. BALLETT



Excellent roads, minimal traffic and sumptuous terrain makes the Arctic the ideal playground for cyclists

"In 2014 a rogue reindeer careered into the peloton – that's not something you see in 'normal' races"



Norway's own website admits: "Let's be honest, on paper Norway looks like a difficult place to enjoy your cycling holiday." However, for races like the ARN, the challenging climbs and winding roads are seen as an advantage – and amateurs are starting to agree.

"More and more people use bikes here now," says Bodø teacher Trond Vegard Seivåg, who runs the Midnight Sun cyclosporitive every June. His first in 2008 attracted 500 people, but hit its peak with 1,800 participants the year the Arctic Race first came to town. Now there are two major bike retailers set to open stores in Bodø. "We're a little behind but we're getting there," he says.

Jan-Oddvar Sørnes, president of Bodø's cycling club, believes the ARN "has been a good thing for the entire country. It has demonstrated to politicians that cycling has come to stay and that we need to put more money and effort into making it more accessible – to kids, the disabled and professionals."

They seem to be listening. In March it was announced that a new network of bike highways in and around the country's nine biggest cities would be built to promote commuter cycling, at a cost of NOK8 billion (€852 million) – a staggering figure for a country of five million people. Reflecting Norway's growing stature as a cycling nation and the globalisation of the sport, the cycling world championships will be held in Bergen in 2017.

Where can the Arctic Race of Norway – ambitiously branded by Dybdal and his team as "more than just a race" – go from here? There's talk of a stage between the Arctic's biggest city of Murmansk, in Russia, to Kirkenes, the most easterly



Top ✓
Bodø marina, taken from the top of the Scandic Havet hotel
Above ✓
Felix checks out the map on the Kvikstadheia climb

town in Norway. Most intriguingly, Dybdal confirms that a prologue time trial in Svalbard – almost 1,000 km out in the Norwegian Sea and half way between mainland Norway and the North Pole – is on the cards. "It's going to be so special," promises Dybdal, of an event where sheep, moose or reindeer won't be so much an obstacle as the 3,000 polar bears that roam the island.

Prudhomme's backing certainly means the Arctic Race is no fleeting gimmick. To realise its full potential, however, it may well have to join forces with the country's two other professional races – the Tour of Norway and the Tour des Fjords – and »

ARN riders to watch



Alexander Kristoff, 29

With Thor Hushovd retired, Kristoff – the self-styled Viking – will be favourite to add to his tally of three ACR stage wins in the flat sprint stages.



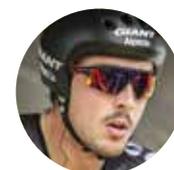
Arnaud Démare, 24

On his day, the Frenchman – winner of Milan-Sanremo this spring – is the fastest of a strong roster of sprinters heading to the Arctic.



August Jensen, 24

Winner of the salmon-coloured climber's jersey for the past two years, Jensen's local supporters will expect him to make it a hat-trick in his birth town of Bodø.



John Degenkolb, 27

The German superstar sprinter – winner of the prestigious Milan-Sanremo and Paris-Roubaix classics in 2015 – is in line to make his Arctic debut after a troubled season battling back from injury.

“The Arctic Race has shown we need to put more money and effort into making cycling more accessible”

create a larger, week-long event under ASO’s umbrella. According to Jensen, having more cities to host stage finishes and a greater variety of roads “would be the right recipe” to become part of cycling’s WorldTour – the pinnacle of the sport.

But until then, the Arctic Race will continue to capture the minds of fans both home and abroad. This year the Sky team of Tour de France winner Chris Froome will be making its Arctic debut. Meanwhile my own pre-race recce is blessed by the clouds parting over the Saltfjorden south of Bodø as I cross the bridge above Saltstraumen. It’s just days before Froome starts the defence of his Tour crown with a Grand Départ in Normandy but my mind can’t be further away from France.

Later I tuck into dinner on the 17th floor restaurant at the Scandic Havet. Gazing out as the sun (almost) sets over the outline of nearby Landegode island, I’m reminded of something the man in charge of the world’s biggest bike race told me: “There’s enough fervour and beauty to host a Grand Départ here in Norway.” I couldn’t agree with Prudhomme more.

letour.com/arctic-race-of-norway



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Above ✓
Crossing a bridge ahead of the Ljøsenhammeren climb after Misvær
Bottom ✓
Bodø from the air



Cycle the Arctic



Midnattsol Rittet

Cyclists of all levels can tackle the overnight Midnight Sun Ride in the Salten region of Nordland, which covers the same roads as the stages to and from Bodø during the Arctic Race.

It takes place on the second weekend of June with courses of 34km, 53km, 105km and 178km.

midnattsolrittet.no



Lofoten Islands

The picturesque route from Svolvær to Å weaves its way along the coast over bridges and through colourful fishing hamlets such as Henningsvær – the Venice of Lofoten. Serious cyclists can ride the full 270km from Å to Lødingen overnight during the midnight sun in the gruelling Lofoten Insomnia Race (30 June and 1 July 2017).

lofoteninsomnia.no



Helgeland coast

This seven-day island-hopping tour along the coast of Helgeland does not involve too much climbing despite the dramatic backdrop of the Seven Sisters mountain range. The itinerary is flexible and involves taking the odd ferry. Kayak rental around the Vega archipelago is possible too.