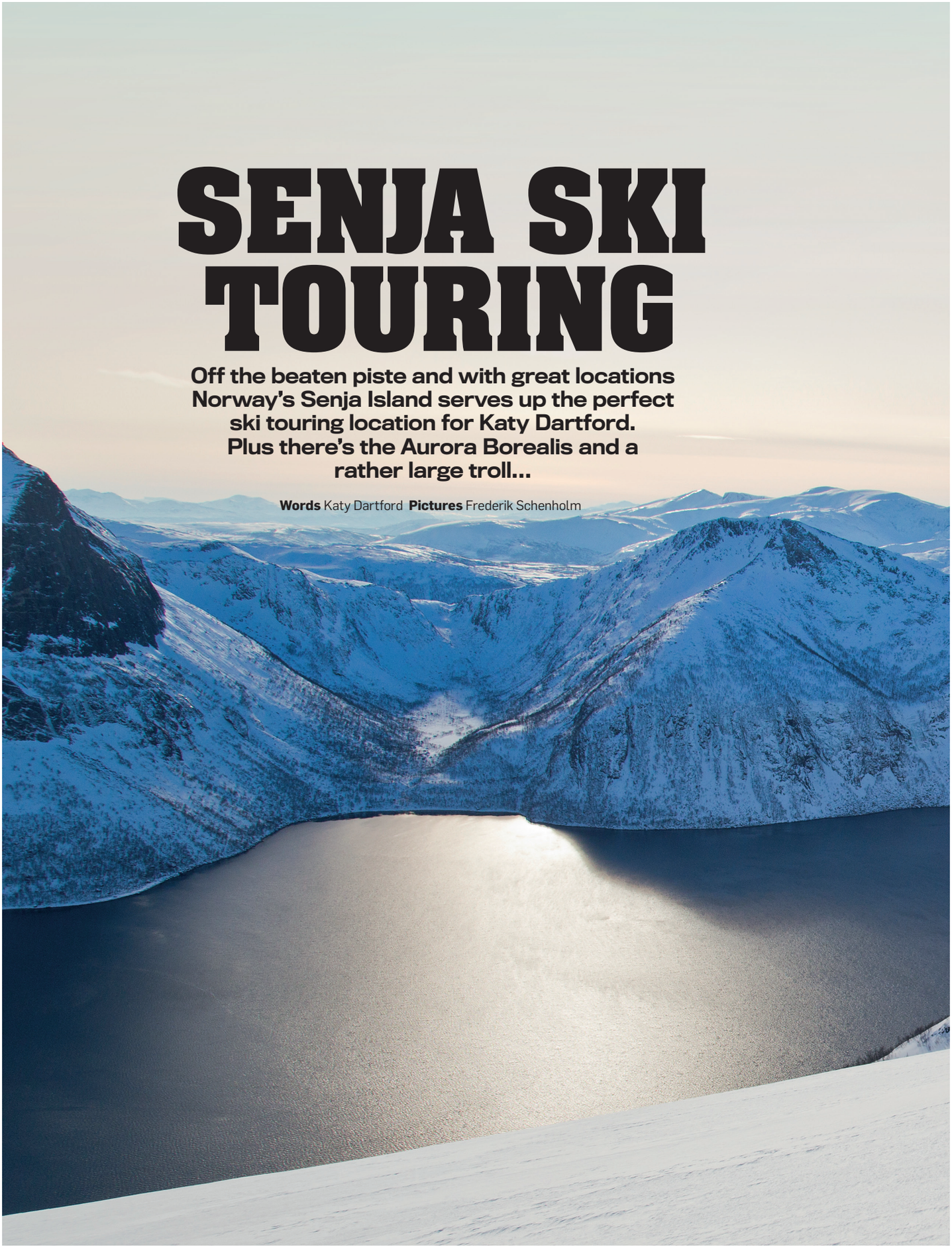


SENJA SKI TOURING

Off the beaten piste and with great locations Norway's Senja Island serves up the perfect ski touring location for Katy Dartford. Plus there's the Aurora Borealis and a rather large troll...

Words Katy Dartford **Pictures** Frederik Schenholm

050 senja ski tour.indd 50 01/02/2017 14:50

I keep my head down, shielding it from the howling wind which manages to find its way to the exposed side of my nose, chilling it, almost painfully. Crystals begin to form around the strands of hair that escape my beanie. We crunch through a few metres of thin ice as we head for the summit of a 750-metre peak on Senja - Norway's second largest island (not counting Svalbard). Senja is situated at a latitude of 69 degrees north. We quickly take a few photos of the nearby mountain, Stormoa which at 975 metres makes it the island's second tallest peak, and its neighbour Litjemoa (838m) which rises directly from the blue-black sea and the fjords. We rip off the carpet-like mohair skins from our skis that allowed us to climb up the snow, switch our boots and skis to downhill mode, and swop our sunglasses for goggles. We drop down the gentler side of the mountain, where after just a few turns we're out of the wind, laying down some figure-of-eights in the untouched, shaving foam like snow. We reach the bottom, high-fiving, before climbing a few hundred metres to do it all again.

Senja Island is ideal if you want to escape the crowds, which can now even be found in the backcountry. There are no lifts, which might not be everyone's idea of fun but it also means there aren't many other skiers around. The wilderness, deep fjords and rolling terrain dotted with lakes and summit-to-sea skiing sets Senja apart and that's why I am here. Hundreds of low-angle approaches make ski touring accessible for most, and with relatively little avalanche danger and no problems with having to deal with altitude sickness, it's the backcountry skier's dream. Once you'd climbed up, summited, and skied back down the beautifully consistent, spongy snow, you'll have time to do another lap. Each finishing through perfectly spaced deciduous trees at sea level. And if you're feeling fit, you can link up ascents and traverses, to make for some steeper descents for bigger days out.

I had never skied this close to the coast before. Squinting in the sharp light, I gaze across mountains that are more open and expansive than I'm used to in the Alps. They offer some steep couloirs but mostly open bowls, which despite it not snowing for several days, have been refilled – a consequence of the swirling wind rolling in from the plunging fjords. You can pretty much ski everything you can see here and the mountains feel like they extend forever.

Senja isn't the easiest place to get to. You take a flight to Oslo then Tromsø, followed by a three-hour bus ride. Yet all this just added to the adventure. The island is part of a 612-square-mile archipelago that sits in one of the northernmost, least-populated counties in Norway, 100 kilometres west of the well-known Lyngen Peninsula. About 7,000 people live on the archipelago, which is dotted with small towns and coves, lined with fishermen's cabins - their boats gently bobbing in the harbours.

Between February and May is the best time to visit, as there are seven hours of daylight, with temperatures low

We drop down the gentler side of the mountain, where after just a few turns we're out of the wind, laying down some figure-of-eights in the untouched, shaving foam like snow.





050 senja ski tour.indd 52 01/02/2017 14:50









050 senja ski tour.indd 53 01/02/2017 14:50



enough for powder, and a chance of seeing the Northern Lights. By mid May it's the land of the midnight sun.

My trip was organised by Pure Ski Touring who run holidays in all sorts of adventurous destinations, from Canada, Switzerland and Japan to Iceland, northern Norway and Lapland. All trips are led by UIAGM guides (the international federation for mountain guides) and they only go to a destination once a year - with March being the month for their annual visit to Senja. Founder, Camilla Antonsson, says Senja is probably the most isolated of all their destinations. Our base is a converted fishing lodge in Hamn on the west coast of the island. Hamn i Senja sits in a cove protected from the wind by a small fjord – there are about twenty houseboat-style apartments around the main hotel which provide comfortable guest quarters for tired ski tourers.

Every morning after a huge Norwegian breakfast buffet of open sandwiches with meat cuts, spreads, cheese or jam and cereals, which we then make a lunch from, our guides check the weather reports and drive us to the base of a mountain that looked interesting on the map. Before they leave us they make sure we know how to use our equipment - skins, touring bindings and ski crampons - and we also learn how to use our air bag packs.

To get anywhere on Senja you need a vehicle. The island has a good road network, so you can get to even the most remote spots in about an hour from Hamn. After parking our van, gearing up and clicking into our bindings we begin ascending metres off the road - there's always virtually no approach. Each day it seemed like the skiing just got better. Our guide, Tovo Spiral, climbed at a steady pace, pointing out changes in the snow and features in the landscape to be aware of, looking out all the time for the safest place to go. He is the most graceful skier coming down, skiing heel-free telemark-style. Our group also included an older couple from Stockholm and some repeat visit Norwegians who seem to have this self-powered sport in their blood. They are smooth in all their transitions, kit handling and temperature regulation and make jokes all the way up.

On our first afternoon after lunch we carry out a mock rescue using shovels, probes and transceivers to search for a beacon buried in the snow. We then make another short lap, taking a slightly different line, spraying powder tails all the way down to beers waiting for us in the van.

The following day the wind was quiet and it felt warmer. We made a 700-metre lap of a peak, called Letteden, then a shorter skin to a mountain called Torsken before leaving via a stop to see the world's largest troll in the town of Senjatrollet. The next day I decide to rest and I join a fishing trip on one of the hotel's boats. Hamn i Senja offers all sorts of activities from fishing, kayaking, whale watching, to snowshoeing – there's even scuba diving if you're feeling brave. And of course, there are the Northern Lights. (Senja is right under the main Aurora-belt.) I didn't manage to catch much but dressing up as a Norwegian fisherman, casting lines and seeing the coast and many, many more skiing possibilities from sea made for an exciting rest day.

The penultimate day brought the softest of conditions but after three days of bagging nearly two summits a day, I returned to base heavy legged, and headed straight for the sauna. I then had a beer in an old fishing boat that's been converted into a hot tub. Some of us decided to jump into the freezing ocean and revitalise tired legs but I wasn't brave enough. After a well-earned dinner of local cod or salmon - I'm ready for bed.

Just after midnight however, a gang of very excited Americans, Swedes and Norwegians bang on my bedroom door trying to wake me. Outside, swirls of green, pink, yellow and blue light are doing a pirouette across the night sky. The aurora had finally decided to make an appearance - it stretches over the mountains and fjords all the way out to the horizon. It's one of the most spectacular and unique shows that Mother Earth can offer. Or at least I supposed, after looking at photos the next morning. Unfortunately I had completely crashed out and missed the once in a lifetime experience of seeing the Northern Lights. After four full days of ski touring, I was beat....

050 senja ski tour.indd 54 01/02/2017 14:51