

In the air

A journey in space and in time

Ariel Wagner-Parker

The first question is: what can you leave behind and what must you take.

The only things that are, literally, vital are – or should be – in the medicine chest. I've checked it at least five times but still worry: this journey is different; we are to be at sea, where there are no pharmacies and over-sights cannot be made good. I check again.

We're being fetched from home, which means nothing concerning the car is necessary. I'll need my passport, but not my residence permit – or any of the rest of the stuff that's accumulated in my wallet.

I pack our suitcase and bag: astonishing how few things really seem necessary. There is some space left. We usually travel light, but this time others will be carrying our bags and I'm tempted into adding some extras that will make for simplicity or comfort ... It's a relief, finally, when it is time to leave and to just close the case.

Then the front door is closed behind us too and we've begun our journey to the North Cape.

Later on that day, before embarking, we give up our land identity, exchanging passports for board passes bearing just a number. We can also pay with these, so even wallets become redundant.

Things are getting simpler and simpler ...

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On board ship, time changes gear. None of the usual markers is in place and other people – sometimes even the weather – decide what happens and when.

We have no obligations yet are always occupied. I spend my time on our balcony, staring at the constantly changing landscapes – sea, sun, glaciers, dark ridged mountains that rise up out of the water, islands and little groups of red-painted houses – absorbing it all through the pores of the mind. Impossible to turn away from the fascination and beauty and strangeness we are passing through. I don't even want to read; I write a bit, but only to try and fix all this in words: how light moves on the sea, the different ways water falls down mountains ...

I also stand at the prow of the ship, sometimes whipped by powerful winds, sometimes part of a dreamlike onward motion. Our journey a narrative: What happens next? What lies round that headland? The exhilaration, the power – I am the ship! – freedom in time and space.

It's getting colder, then one morning, the air smells quite different, tastes sharper, ice and sun-tinged; the light has changed too.

The further north we travel the more time goes out of joint. The sun sets later and later – and once in the Arctic Circle, the land of the midnight sun, no longer sets at all. The rules we know of day and night no longer obtain and our notion of time grows hazy: it seems quite normal to be gazing at the sun-dazzled sea at two in the morning; anyway you're loath to waste time sleeping.

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We arrive at Honningsvåg late one evening and are driven through black and white landscapes that soar and plunge, with icy turquoise lakes, to the North Cape, the high point, literally, of our journey.

It is cloudy. There will be no midnight sun. Even so, just before twelve we are standing with the other visitors on the broad terrace, gazing out over the vast steel and topaze sea north of our continent, 307 metres below. But then, as we watch, the cobalt and grey clouds begin to brighten and tinge with rose, peach and gold. At midnight the darkness parts and a molten radiance throws a pale gold path across the sea. The radiance becomes a disc and to a slow

C-major crescendo, the sun comes forth and shines upon us. A swelling human murmur rises to greet it; eyes widen, throats tighten. We turn to each other, shaking our heads, smiling, tears starting, in a moment of shared wonder at this magic conjured, the blessing bestowed.

A man makes a remark to his neighbour about „Angela Merkel“ and the people around him start to laugh. „Sarkozy!“ cries another and the merriment spreads; „Berlusconi!“ – „Brown!“; „Bush!“ splutters an American voice and hilarity explodes. We the people, laughing together at our leaders under the midnight sun ...

This scene didn't quite happen, but it could have – so remote, ridiculous, seemed our little world of humans in the face of this grand natural wonder at the North Cape.

Back on board ship, we sat around drinking wine and talking about the sun at midnight. It felt like being young again, staying up all night and going to bed at dawn.

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From the North Cape we turned back south and were homeward bound. We experienced the sea in altogether darker mood, rain and even a blizzard; we saw the lovely Lofoten Islands in the sun and the waterfalls of the Geiranger Fjord both sombre and sunlit. Then, inevitably, the sun began to rise and set again ...

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We arrived home late one evening to a scarlet sunset. This journey was utterly unlike all others. Home did not seem strange or unfamiliar as it had after other journeys; everything seemed unchanged, as if we'd returned from a different dimension, where time passed more quickly.

Yet you never come back to the same point: our grass was taller and the peony had blossomed and gone over.

We spent the first few days between worlds. The impressions of the journey lay too deep to recover, almost wilfully indistinct; and though we read the papers – the world had gone on without us – we were not yet ready to return to everyday life.

Finally, I looked at my photos: images of sun on sea, waterfalls and the midnight sun at the North Cape could not recapture the grandeur of the land- and seascapes we had seen, the emotion, the physical sensations, but they helped revive the memories – and those have changed us for ever.

We'd travelled far and seen much – the present notes are inadequate fragments – and our journey was not just in space but in time: when we left home it was spring, when we returned, summer.

Yet we were only away the time it takes a peony to bloom and fade, the lifetime of a flower.



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

At midnight a molten radiance throws a gold path across the sea