ISLAND HOPPING IN

How far are you
ARCTIC NORWAY

willing to go for the perfect campsite?

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN LEONARD
The first drop of sweat fell off my brow and dropped onto the pannier in my hand, spattering on the yellow waterproof nylon. I stepped up onto a rock, got my balance, then climbed up onto the next rock. The second, third, fourth, and fifth drops rolled off my head and hit the panniers, building toward a cascade. A few feet behind me, Hilary carried her panniers. I wondered whether she was fully committed to the mission or thought I was an idiot for suggesting it. We were hiking all our gear to a beach in a cove on the west coast of Norway’s Lofoten Islands near the end of our 10-day bike tour — without a backpack. We’d just lock up the bikes and carry our stuff to the beach to camp for the night. The website said it was “an easy hour’s walk.” Not quite.

It’s a 590-foot climb up to the pass, then down to the white sand abutting the ocean on the other side. We estimated that we were each carrying 35 or 40 pounds, mostly by the straps of the panniers. Hilary was smart enough to attach the shoulder straps to two of her panniers before beginning the hike. We would have stashed the bags at the trailhead, but there were 40 cars parked and too many people around. So there we were, feeling like a couple of pack mules, heavy loads slowly pulling our arms from their sockets.

“Do you think you have enough luggage?” joked a British gentleman walking the other way.

“This is mostly beer,” I joked back. “And ice. I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“It’ll get lighter then,” his wife, following behind him, said with a smile.

In Norway, thanks to something called allemannsretten, or right to access, travelers can camp anywhere they want. As long as you’re 150 meters from a building and not on cultivated land, you’re free to set up a tent — for free — which is a steal of a deal in a country with a reputation for being expensive. A longtime cultural tradition in Norway, allemannsretten was finally made law in 1957.

Because of this, our trip from the city of Tromsø in northern Norway to the fishing village of Å at the southern terminus of roads in the Lofoten Islands, had become a kind of game of one-upping ourselves each evening when it came time to find a campsite. The next one didn’t have to be better than the previous one, but we certainly established a standard. Above all else, it had to have a view — easy to come by on the mountainous islands north of the Arctic Circle. But sometimes we chose aesthetic qualities over, say, flatness, or privacy, or road noise, or access to an obscure spot to use for a restroom. We always felt the pressure (self-inflicted, of course) to do our best.

Bicycle tourists are, perhaps out of all travelers, the best at stealth camping — finding clandestine spots to pitch a tent for the night, leaving no trace, and moving on the next morning. Norway, because of allemannsretten and because of its abundance of natural beauty, is heaven for anyone who considers themselves even a little bit of a connoisseur of stealth camping.

On the eighth day of our quest for the ultimate allemannsretten campsite, I crested the saddle above Kvalvika beach, setting my four panniers down for a second to let blood pump back into my fingertips. A breeze instantly cooled my soaked T-shirt and I peered around boulders to see a turquoise wave rolling into a white sand beach the size of two football fields, a U-shaped cirque of 1,700-foot dark granite peaks ringing it. Probably 70 people and 50 sheep spread across it and the dunes behind it, where half a dozen parties had already pitched tents for the evening. It was idyllic, but no secret. I picked up my panniers and hurried down to claim a site before more people came over the pass behind me. Regardless of where we pitched the tent, this campsite, I could tell, would be hard to beat.

We started our ride out of Tromsø in early July, the warmest month of the year in this part of the country, and nearly the driest. Our proposed route included almost the entire length of three of Norway’s Nasjonale Turistveger, or National Tourist Routes: Senja, Andøya, and Lofoten. With 300 miles of pedaling and three ferry rides, we planned to cross nine islands all above the Arctic Circle. That sounds...
cold — but mercifully the coastal region is warmer than other maritime climates at the same latitude, thanks to the warm North Atlantic Current and the Norwegian Sea's heat absorption capacity and volume. July temperatures stay between about 45 and 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

We wanted to embrace allemannsretten and talked about maybe only getting one or two hotel rooms during our 10-day trip — you know, if it starts raining nonstop or we really, really, really need a shower. We pedaled out of Tromsø around noon, riding under grey skies to the Brensholmen-Bothnhamn ferry, and then riding into the evening, which lasts several hours at this high latitude in July. About 10:30 PM, we crested a pass and descended to a fjord and — camera in hand — noticed it had gotten really dim. Not dark, but dim. Under a cloudy sky, night takes on an eerie, nuclear winter sort of illumination. Darkness never comes — you just can’t see that well, and neither can your DSLR. We talked about finding a place to sleep for the night and hoped for a flat spot to appear on either side of the highway. I turned my bike up a slightly overgrown two-track road on the left, hopped off, and started walking. A hundred yards up, I found a flat spot looking up at the steep granite east face of 2,470-foot Burstinden. Still within earshot of the occasional car passing on the road below, it was quite nice for the first night.

“This isn’t bad,” I said to Hilary, sharing a morning snack break along the coast of Rolvsjorden in northern Norway.
congratulating ourselves. “A waterfall and a big snowy peak.” We set up the tent and I sat down, fired up the stove, and started cooking dinner. Then the mosquitoes began to swarm. Hilary waved them away while I stirred a pot of boiling water and noodles.

Thus began our criteria for the Dream Campsite: Positive points for good views. Positive points for a short approach from the road and minimal traffic noise, as well as flat ground to set up the tent. Negative points for wind and mosquitoes. I had googled something along the lines of “mosquitoes Lofoten” before we left and found a TripAdvisor forum in which a guy said he didn’t think the mosquitoes were bad in this part of the country. Based on this, we didn’t pack any insect repellent, which turned out to be a poor strategy.

Even with the mosquitoes, Campsite #1 got 3.5 stars out of 5. Our campsite rating system would continue to evolve. The next night, just after 11 PM, we lifted our bikes over a highway guardrail just outside a tunnel north of the village of Bleik, and popped up the tent in a fairly flat spot out of the wind with an ocean view. We watched the sun not quite set but do what it does north of the Arctic Circle in July: get low on the horizon and move rightward, slowly. This time, it cast the crags above our campsite in a rosy glow. The road noise was loud, but our jet lag finally caught up with us and we slept for 13 hours.

Campsite #2 got 3.5 stars, mostly for the view, and for the moose that walked right through our kitchen.

Here’s the thing about tailwinds in the land of the midnight sun. You can ride them as long as they last — or as long as you last. We rolled into Risøyhamn around 9:30 PM, having ridden 35 miles, almost all of those after 5:00 PM, stopping to take photos of beaches, lighthouses, and sheep. It was dim again and town was quiet as we searched for a place to stop and have “lunch,” a meal that began to creep later and later into the evening, thanks to the 24-hour daylight. We leaned our bikes up against a leeward wall on the town’s grocery store, which had closed three hours earlier, and chatted about the ghost-town feel you get when it seems like daytime but no one’s outside because it’s a normal hour to be in bed. As we sat eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at a picnic table, a woman pulled up in a station wagon and spoke to us in English.

“Do you have a place to sleep?” she asked. “Yes, we’re camping in a tent,” we said.

“You can camp up the road here,” she offered, pointing. “It is flat, and there is water.” I smiled and thanked her but said we were going to keep riding, which probably seemed like an odd thing to tell someone at 10:00 PM on a Tuesday. But there was a tailwind pushing us. We rode another 13 miles, searching for a dry, flat, somewhat obscure campsite with a view as the light got dimmer and dimmer. We finally gave up and marched our bikes a couple hundred feet into a hummocky...
tundra field in full view of the road, finding only a semi-flat spot for the tent, and perching our backpacking stove on top of a particularly firm foot-high hummock to cook dinner, which we ate at 1:30 in the morning. Campsite #3: 2 stars.

Heading south from the town of Sortland, RV 82 parallels Sortlandssundet, a straight, deep-blue sound with a tall, unbroken fence of alpine peaks on the other side three miles away, topping out on 4,140-foot Møysalen, a square-topped peak with year-round veins of snow lining its steep faces. A brief rain shower pinged our Gore-Tex jackets as we pedaled south on Day Four, wondering if we should just flag down one of the farmers cutting hay in their small fields tilting down to the sea and ask if we could camp on their land tonight. We decided that might be cheating.

After a few miles of riding, the sun began to intermittently poke through the clouds, washing patches of land in evening gold. We turned up a dirt road leading northwest — away from the mountains — and a half-mile off the highway saw a clearing. I jumped the wet ditch and scrambled up a short slope, tiptoeing through the tundra. It was a minefield of sogginess, one step on firm grass, the next squishing into a spongy patch and soaking the toe of my shoe. I walked back to the highest rise I could see and looked back to see the mountains across the sound on fire with evening summer sun. It was an easy decision.

The thing about camping on bike trips — anywhere — is that you get to build your dream home every night. Sure, the bathroom is a hole in the ground, and the walls are drafty (or is that just “a nice cross-breeze?”). In the right parts of Norway, you can say, “Well, do we want a mountain view or an ocean view tonight?” Or sometimes both. And should the front door face the water or the snowy peaks? And you can watch the sun set — for hours — while you cook dinner at 10:15 pm. Campsite #4: 4.5 stars.

A voyage on the Hurtigruten, a fleet of cruise and freight ships, from Bergen to Kirkenes is not cheap: $1,200 to $1,800 for six days, including meals. But if you just want a taste of it, a three-hour ride through narrow straits from Stokmarknes to Svolvær, passage for two people and two bicycles costs about $110. We hopped on in Stokmarknes, where the boat service originated in 1893 and revealed in a roof over our heads and ceramic cups of coffee in the café as the mountains slowly rolled by both sides of the MS Lofoten, built in 1964 and the oldest ship in the Hurtigruten fleet of 12.

For our entire Norway trip, we planned for three ferry shuttles to get between islands, all arguably necessary, besides the Hurtigruten, which trimmed about 45 miles of riding. Bike tour, emphasis on tour, I joked. All our ferry rides were a respite from the elements, a break from riding, a seat, and a cup of coffee from the snack bar. Only one — the hour-and-a-half ride from Gryllefjord to Andenes — was adventurous. As the huge boat carrying 50 cars pitched and rolled across the

The author prepares breakfast at camp outside the town of Bleik.
waters of the Norwegian Sea, Hilary and I focused on the horizon and hoped to avoid seasickness. Passengers staggered like drunks between café tables and railings on the deck, and I watched one woman take a dramatic, but injury-free, fall across the café floor all the way into someone else's booth. In perhaps a dozen Norwegian ferry rides, this was the only one I'd seen with vomit bags hanging next to all the tables.

But the Hurtigruten was a calm ride in a narrow sound, steep walls rising over the boat, and at the end of the ride we rolled our bikes down the gangway into Svolvær for the second half of our trip into the famous Lofoten Islands. In the town square we met Ulke, a man from Turkey who was hitchhiking his way to Kirkenes to board a boat for Svalbard. He told us about free camping on a spit east of town, and we chatted about the joy of allemennsretten.

Lofoten, we would discover, had a culture of travelers exploring the islands in small RVs, rental cars, or on foot with a big backpack and a shopping bag or two, thumbing rides. As bike travelers, we were in the minority but kin with the hitchhiking crowd sharing a slow traveling speed and often-free campsites.

We rode to just outside of Henningsvær, a fishing village famous for its classic architecture, rock climbing, and scuba diving perched on two tiny islands that were not connected to the mainland by roads until 1981. We got inventive, hopping a guardrail to scramble down a coastline among huge boulders above the calm ocean water. We found a spot of tundra grass big enough for the tent and a dinner view of the sunset over the water, which, again, lasted for hours. But so did the attacks by the mosquitoes. Campsite #5: 4.5 stars with an asterisk. If you don't bring bug repellent, probably 4 stars.

Could there be a better place than Norway to ponder what makes the best campsite ever? There are the physical attributes: flatness, proximity to water, protection from wind, reasonable cathole/bathroom possibilities, some privacy, the view. But what about situational aspects? Just because it was windy or buggy when I was there
doesn’t mean it will be every time. And if clouds hid the mountains from view one day, they might be totally visible in great sunlight the next. Finding a great campsite is an act of self-expression, even if you’re just sniffing out a tent spot that others have used in the past. If there are no road signs leading you there, it is — at least in some sense — yours, if only for the night. Before this trip, I had a mild fascination with the art of finding campites. But in Norway, it was becoming an obsession.

Campsite #6 sat on top of a small hill called Rasteplass, overlooking the village of Valberg — mountains behind, wind rushing over the pass relentlessly. After cooking dinner and eating in the cold wind, I went to bed with numb feet. We were awakened by a hiker’s dog barking at us at 8:00 AM. I can’t blame them — the only flat and dry spot we could find even somewhat sheltered from the wind was 15 feet from the hiking trail and we had pushed our bikes a half mile up to get there. 3.5 stars.

Campsite #7: The E10, the busiest road in Lofoten but sometimes the only choice, rings the turquoise water of the Flakstadpollen sound. We pedaled south, watching our ribbon of asphalt rise and fall under the great east face of 3,054-foot Stjerntinden. At the south end of the sound, it was hard to imagine not camping underneath the view of that mountain, so we did, in a flat spot out of the wind on the leeward side of a 15-foot-high boulder. We set up the tent, filtered water from the nearby pond, and I started dinner, noticing the wind dying down and a few gnats starting to appear. Hilary took note of the bugs buzzing around my lower legs. After seven days of biking and not showering, a cloud of insects really makes you feel like Pigpen from Peanuts.

“Do you want to put on some pants?” she asked as I stirred the pesto pasta. “Nah, I think I’m fine,” I said. Gnats are harmless, right? Two lessons: I was not fine, I was dumb. And gnats (or gnat-like bugs) are not always harmless. I would spend significant time in the final days of our trip scratching at clusters of welts on my calves, shins, and ankles. But that view! 4 stars.

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The idea of outdoor adventure begins, I think, when we slow down our speed of travel and move under our own power. We step off a plane and onto our bicycles, or get out of our car with a big backpack and walk into the woods, or go climb a mountain. Our bike trip in Norway never exceeded 37 MPH, if I can believe my bike computer, and probably averaged 11 MPH. That is, until we parked our bikes against the guardrail at the trailhead for Kvalvika beach, took our panniers off, and started the long climb over the pass. Then we slowed to 1 MPH. At that speed, with sweat pouring off my forehead and my shoulders screaming for mercy, I began joking in my head: “You too can bicycle tour in Arctic Norway! Ocean views, beaches, relaxation!”

We set up our tent on a nearly perfectly flat patch of sheep-trimmed grass and pointed the door straight at the ocean lapping into the white sand on Kvalvika beach. We took a swim in the frigid water — for about 10 seconds each — and debated whether we were swimming in the Arctic Ocean or just the Norwegian Sea (which we inconclusively decided was part of the Arctic Ocean). We watched the midnight sun on its sideways path to not really setting and stood on the beach until exactly 12:00 AM when it became a soft, reddish orange dot just above the horizon.

We would have two more campsites after Kvalvika, spots on the fringes of the towns of Reine and A, both popular with hitchhikers and touring cyclists, both with great views, both solid four-star spots. But Kvalvika, maybe because of the effort we put in getting there, or the lack of wind and mosquitoes, or maybe because of the beach, the friendly sheep, or the midnight sun, was the best. 5 stars out of 5.

Denver-based writer Brendan Leonard wrote about his tour on Adventure Cycling’s Southern Tier in Adventure Cyclist’s April 2011 issue. For more of his writing, visit semi-rad.com.