

NORTH OF NORWAY UNDISCOVERED

By Pete Oswald.

Sophie never feels quite right when she is too far from the sea, she has a deep nostalgic connection to it from her childhood on the Isle of Wight. The problem is Sophie also loves mountains and skiing. Mountains and sea don't normally hang out together but in 2016 when Soph saw a photograph of the Lofoten Peninsula in Northern Norway she organised us an epic trip skiing in the beautiful fiords where her freeride playground of fun snowy mountains met her desire for endless ocean and nostalgic coast line.

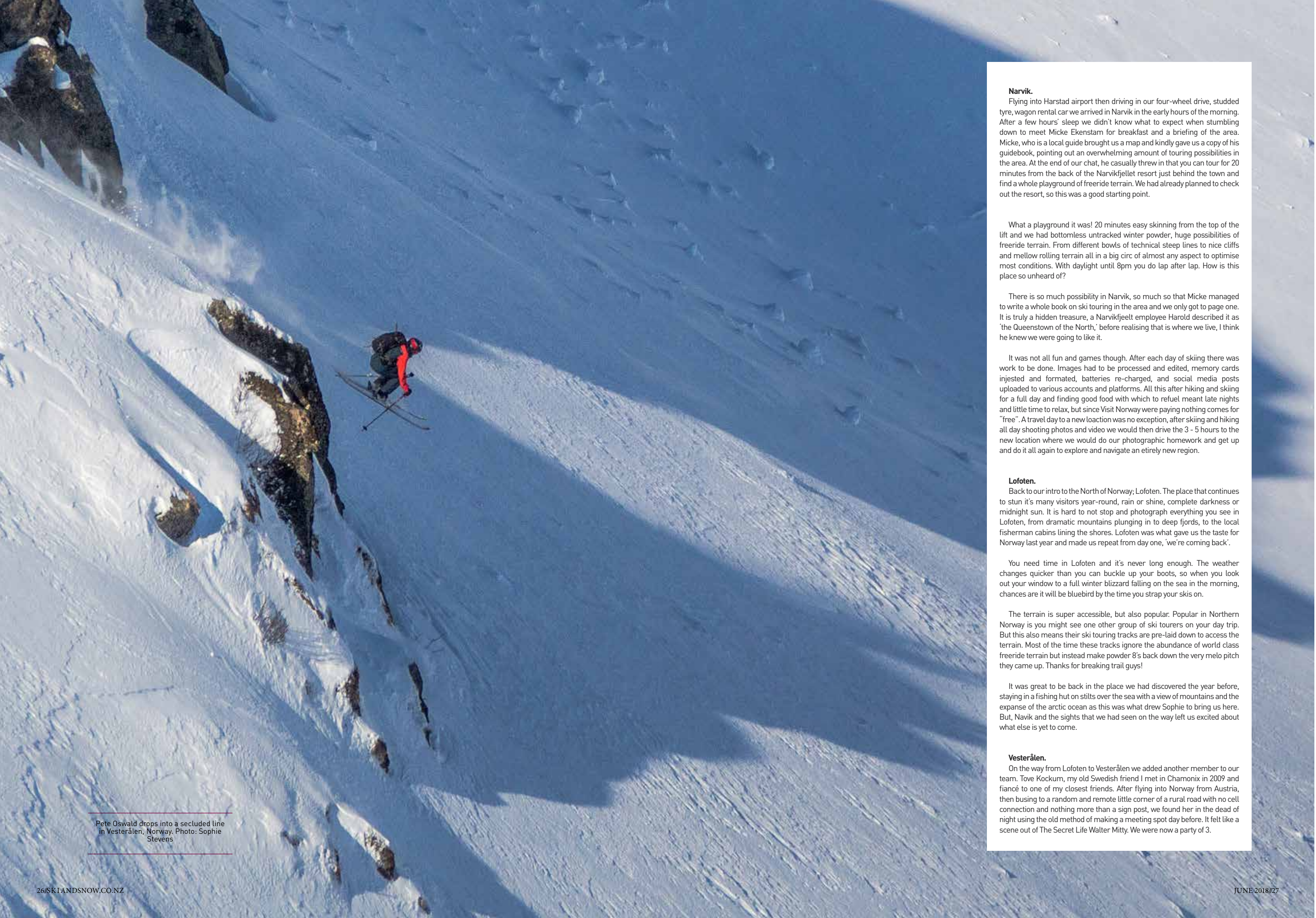
Norway resonated with Sophie, it captured me too. We both wanted to go back the following year so bad, but starting our new business, "Little Difference", meant we had very limited cashflow so it was simply out of reach. We are used to solving problems with more creative methods than money and we have a moto of "the squeaky wheel gets the grease". So, we asked Norway if they would have us as guests, if they would pay for trip and we would give them all our photos, videos or whatever imagery assets they might want in return. The email was sent, and reply was never expected... but our timing was good. Visit Norway had just started focusing on ski touring as a tourism income stream and needed imagery for their promotion, in particular their Ski Touring Norway instagram account.

It was not pure luck, Soph and I both have experience on both sides of the lens and Pete has trained and worked as a professional photographer, short film producer and filmer for ski films. But as always it is how you package and present your skills to your audience. I guess on this occasion they liked our wrapping.

Visit Norway were paying the bills and consequently were calling the shots on where we went and what they wanted to promote. They wanted us to go to the undiscovered parts of the North of Norway. Lofoten, where we went the year before was relatively well known but they assured us there was much more on offer in the North.

We had 12 days to visit, ski and shoot 4 locations; Navik, Vesterålen, Senja but also Lofoten, the place that drew us back to Norway.

Pete Oswald skis into the evening to 8pm in the slack country of Narvikjellet north of the Arctic circle. Photo by Sophie Stevens



Pete Oswald drops into a secluded line in Vesterålen, Norway. Photo: Sophie Stevens

Narvik.

Flying into Harstad airport then driving in our four-wheel drive, studded tyre, wagon rental car we arrived in Narvik in the early hours of the morning. After a few hours' sleep we didn't know what to expect when stumbling down to meet Micke Ekenstam for breakfast and a briefing of the area. Micke, who is a local guide brought us a map and kindly gave us a copy of his guidebook, pointing out an overwhelming amount of touring possibilities in the area. At the end of our chat, he casually threw in that you can tour for 20 minutes from the back of the Narvikfjellet resort just behind the town and find a whole playground of freeride terrain. We had already planned to check out the resort, so this was a good starting point.

What a playground it was! 20 minutes easy skinning from the top of the lift and we had bottomless untracked winter powder, huge possibilities of freeride terrain. From different bowls of technical steep lines to nice cliffs and mellow rolling terrain all in a big circ of almost any aspect to optimise most conditions. With daylight until 8pm you do lap after lap. How is this place so unheard of?

There is so much possibility in Narvik, so much so that Micke managed to write a whole book on ski touring in the area and we only got to page one. It is truly a hidden treasure, a Narvikfeelt employee Harold described it as 'the Queenstown of the North,' before realising that is where we live, I think he knew we were going to like it.

It was not all fun and games though. After each day of skiing there was work to be done. Images had to be processed and edited, memory cards injected and formatted, batteries re-charged, and social media posts uploaded to various accounts and platforms. All this after hiking and skiing for a full day and finding good food with which to refuel meant late nights and little time to relax, but since Visit Norway were paying nothing comes for "free". A travel day to a new loaction was no exception, after skiing and hiking all day shooting photos and video we would then drive the 3 - 5 hours to the new location where we would do our photographic homework and get up and do it all again to explore and navigate an etirely new region.

Lofoten.

Back to our intro to the North of Norway; Lofoten. The place that continues to stun it's many visitors year-round, rain or shine, complete darkness or midnight sun. It is hard to not stop and photograph everything you see in Lofoten, from dramatic mountains plunging in to deep fjords, to the local fisherman cabins lining the shores. Lofoten was what gave us the taste for Norway last year and made us repeat from day one, 'we're coming back'.

You need time in Lofoten and it's never long enough. The weather changes quicker than you can buckle up your boots, so when you look out your window to a full winter blizzard falling on the sea in the morning, chances are it will be bluebird by the time you strap your skis on.

The terrain is super accessible, but also popular. Popular in Northern Norway is you might see one other group of ski tourers on your day trip. But this also means their ski touring tracks are pre-laid down to access the terrain. Most of the time these tracks ignore the abundance of world class freeride terrain but instead make powder 8's back down the very melo pitch they came up. Thanks for breaking trail guys!

It was great to be back in the place we had discovered the year before, staying in a fishing hut on stilts over the sea with a view of mountains and the expanse of the arctic ocean as this was what drew Sophie to bring us here. But, Navik and the sights that we had seen on the way left us excited about what else is yet to come.

Vesterålen.

On the way from Lofoten to Vesterålen we added another member to our team. Tove Kockum, my old Swedish friend I met in Chamonix in 2009 and fiancé to one of my closest friends. After flying into Norway from Austria, then busing to a random and remote little corner of a rural road with no cell connection and nothing more than a sign post, we found her in the dead of night using the old method of making a meeting spot day before. It felt like a scene out of The Secret Life Walter Mitty. We were now a party of 3.



LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM: Tove Kockum and Sophie Stevens tour up through a quaint forest in Vesterålen. Photo: Pete Oswald
Pete Oswald, Tove Kockum and Sophie Stevens finish their ski run on the beach in Senja. Photo: Pete Oswald
Sophie Stevens and Pete Oswald hike up a peak above fiords in Vesterålen. Photo: Tove Kockum



ABOVE: Sophie Stevens chills in the Narvikfjellet resort cabin for lunch over looking the Ofotjorden sea part of the Norwegian Sea. Photo: Pete Oswald

From that random little corner, we drove on to the undiscovered beauty Vesterålen, a place for those who want to go ski touring in solace to not only not cross another track but who want to go where no one has ever been before. To be able to find the goodies in this place Visit Norway put us in touch with the local guide and the-man-to-know Lasse Uppman, he grew up here as basically the only freerider and simply knows everything about the place.

Day 1 in Vesterålen we drove 5 mins from our accommodation and, under Lasse's instructions, ski toured up a prominent ridge that looked back across the small village and the surrounding fiords. We found a nice big sweeping face scattered with small features but in no way committing. A great, fun, high speed low stress line.

Later that night after posting our photos online, we got a comment from someone who lived in a hut in a valley near that face. They had watch us intently walking up the ridge and ski down that line. They told us that he was the only person who had ever skied that face and that we were the 2nd 3rd and 4th people to ever ski it. Our next few lines in Vesterålen were most probably first descents.

Senja.

Our last location on the list from Visit Norway was the island Senja, this place feels like the end of the world. From the mountain peaks you can see only ocean and other mountain summits. The good thing is that the mountains are not so high; yes, it's a good thing. This means you don't have to climb so many vertical metres but because of the cold climate they get snow down to sea level. You can literally ski to the beach.

In each of the 4 locations we went to, finding good terrain to ski was a big part of each day. We would ask locals and the contacts that Visit Norway gave us, but it takes a freerider to identify freeride terrain so we would often resort to topo maps and Google Earth to find what we were looking for. This would also often be fruitless as the aggressive fjord terrain would mean short but vertical cliffs would not show up on maps and satellite imagery and would halt our access to possible terrain that we found. In Senja we found the purest form of looking directly at the mountains to be the most effect form of scouting terrain.

While driving around the coast we found a 600 vertical metre high couloir that ran from a mountain peak to the seaside. It was steep, tight, scary and exhilarating. The climb was long and exposed, a fall would mean a supersonic 600 metre ragged rocky pinballing slippery slide to a rocky beach with crashing waves. From the knife edge saddle ridge top we saw belittling steep peaks dropping to the endless Arctic ocean but with a pod of whales to calm the nerves. The ski down was a white knuckled ride dodging our own stuff to avoid the deathly slippery slide. It was epic but one of the most tiring runs I had ever skied.

After the adrenaline and stress of that massive couloir our last day skiing in Senja and of our trip Northern Norway was on mellow, rolling terrain in perfect powder with one of the best views of the trip. We took our time, took it all in and reflected on what was a high pace, hectic adventure, with extraordinary skiing, a sensory overload with little time to breath. Very different trip than the year before but an eye opener to what is still yet to be experience.

Sophie had her dose of mountains and sea, her skiing buzz bursting, her nostalgia fulfilled. But I think... I fear... but also, I secretly hope that it is just fuelling an addiction that will never truly be satisfied so this quest never ends.