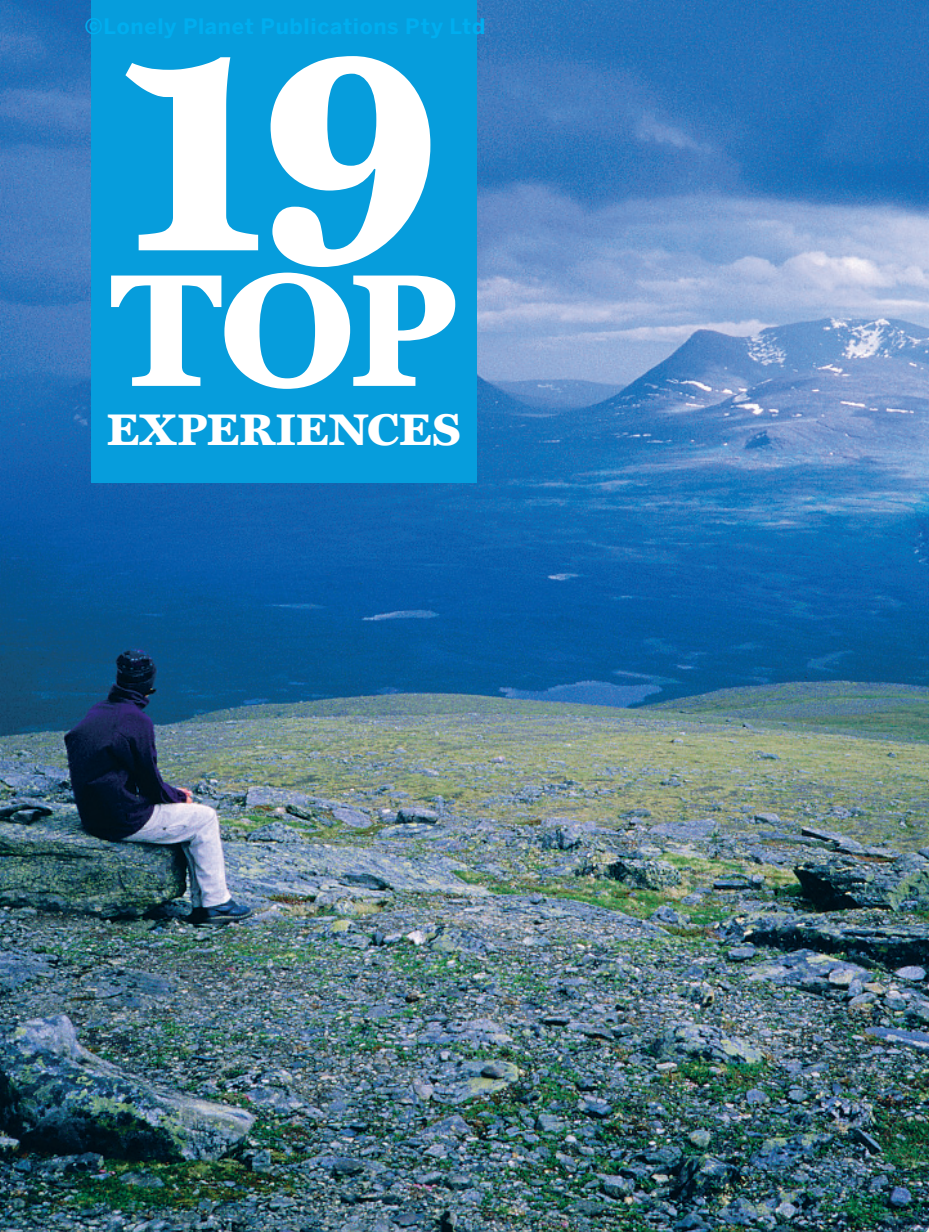


19 TOP EXPERIENCES



National Park Hiking

I Scandinavia's unspoilt wilderness areas are the finest in Europe. If you like dark pine woods populated by foxes and bears, head for northeastern Finland's Karhunkierros trail (p206). Norway's Jotunheimen National Park (p338) encompasses hundreds of lofty mountain peaks and crystal-blue lakes. Lying inside the Arctic Circle, Abisko National Park in Sweden begins the epic 440km Kungsleden hiking trail (p500). Walkers will never forget the bleak volcanic slopes, steaming pools and mossy valleys of Iceland's Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk trek (p298). Abisko National Park (p499, above)

Fjords, Norway

7

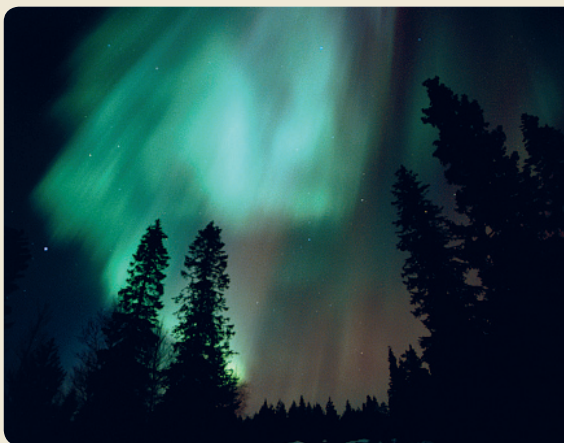
2 The drama of Norway's fjords (p340) is difficult to overstate. Seen from above, the fjords cut deep gashes into the Norwegian interior, adding texture and depth to the map of northwestern Scandinavia. Up close, sheer rock walls plunge from high, green meadows into water-filled canyons shadowed by pretty fjord-side villages. Sognefjorden, over 200km long, and Hardangerfjord are Norway's most extensive fjord networks, but the quiet, precipitous beauty of Nærøfjorden (part of Sognefjorden), Lysefjord and – the king of Norwegian fjords – Geirangerfjord are prime candidates for Scandinavia's most beautiful corner.



Aurora Borealis, Lapland & Iceland

3 Whether caused by the collision of charged particles in the upper atmosphere, or sparked, as Sámi tradition tells, by a giant snow fox swishing its tail as it runs across the Arctic tundra, the haunting, humbling splendour of the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights, is an experience never to be forgotten. Though it is theoretically visible year-round, it's much easier to see and more spectacular in the darker winter months. The further north, such as the Lapland region (p207) in Finland, the better your chances of gazing on nature's light show.

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The Hermitage, St Petersburg

4 Housed in the Winter Palace, the Hermitage (p238), centrepiece of St Petersburg, embodies the opulence and extravagance of the tsarist regime. Climb the impossibly grand staircases to discover dazzling staterooms decorated with enormous chandeliers. You'll also find gallery after gallery stuffed with an eye-boggling collection of glorious artworks and rare artefacts, ranging from Egyptian mummies and Scythian gold to treasures of the Italian Renaissance, not to mention some of the most famous images created by 19th- and 20th-century Impressionist and post-Impressionist painters.

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