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# The fish that built Norway

**For centuries, cod has been central to Norway's survival and prosperity. It is woven into the country's history, identity and coastal way of life – so much so that Norway can, quite literally, be said to have been built on cod.**

By Nane Steinhoff

Visit Lofoten in northern Norway, and cod is everywhere – especially during skrei season, where harbours, menus and local events centre on the migratory Arctic cod. The word skrei comes from the Old Norse skreið, meaning the wanderer, a reference to the remarkable journey that these cod make each winter from the Barents Sea to the Norwegian coast to spawn. That long swim gives skrei its firm, lean, snowy-white flesh and helped make it one of Norway's most prized seasonal catches.

For centuries, it has fed communities, driven trade and shaped life in the north. As early as the Viking Age, dried cod, or stockfish, was a valuable

commodity, and as trade with southern Europe took hold, it became Norway's most important export. "For close to 400 years, skrei accounted for around 80 per cent of the value of Norway's exports," explains Barbra Elise Grøgaard, communications and marketing manager for Lofoten's new SKREI centre.

As a result of the growing trade, Northern Norway saw a large number of small fishing villages and trading cities appear all along its coastline.

## Centuries of catches

In the 1800s, during the heyday of the Lofoten fishery, thousands of fishers from across Norway gathered in Lo-

foten to catch the migratory Arctic cod arriving in their millions. The season still runs from January to April, peaking in February and March. Remarkably, catches remain close to historic levels: where seasonal landings once reached 40 to 50 million kilos, similar volumes are still landed today, making Lofoten the world's largest seasonal cod fishery.

In the peak year of 1895, around 32,000 fishers and 6,000 open or sail-powered boats were active participants in the cod fishing season, while today, due to advanced technology and better boats, the season sees around 2,000 to 4,000 active fishermen. Despite the smaller number of active fishers, the importance of cod or skrei has remained undiminished as it has grown into a billion-dollar export market, which sustains coastal communities around Norway and boosts tourism. "Even today, the Lofoten fisheries remain an active industry, and we



Reine in Lofoten. Photo: Hallvard Kolltveit / Destination Lofoten

SKREI - The Otolith.  
Visualisation: © LPO  
arkitekter, Museum Nord



still dry the cod to create stockfish in the same way we did a thousand years ago," says Grøgaard.

### Travels shaped by skrei

Besides marvelling at gorgeous views and hiking amid breathtaking landscapes, Lofoten visitors can delve deeper into the importance of skrei by visiting one of the many fishing villages dotted along the coastline or joining a guided cod-fishing trip throughout the fishing season. Some picturesque fishing villages with rich fishing history include Henningsvær, Kabelvåg, Nusfjord, Røst and Å in Lofoten, Nyksund in Vesterålen as well as the old trading post Kjerringøy.

In many of these villages, visitors can stay in a rorbu, the traditional fishermen's cabins that have long been part of life along the coast. Introduced by King Øystein Magnusson in the 12th century, they gave seasonal fishers a proper place to sleep, replacing the makeshift shelter they once found beneath their boats. And, if you are lucky, you might come across the unmistakable scent of

stockfish, known locally as the scent of money, and rows and rows of wooden fish-drying racks.

Of course, no cod-inspired trip would be complete without tasting the actual produce. In Lofoten, skrei reaches the table in two main forms: fresh and dried. During the winter fishing season, fresh-

ly landed skrei appears on traditional and modern menus across the islands and in the big cities like Oslo, Trondheim or Bergen further south. Just as visible, however, is Lofoten stockfish – a commodity that is protected under European geographical indication rules. The dried fish gets rehydrated and used in stews, baked dishes and other regional recipes.



The Lofoten Aquarium. Photo: Marie Nystad  
Helgesen / nordnorge.com



Photo: Hallvard Kolltveit /  
Destination Lofoten



Dried fish in the Lofoten Museum in Kabelvåg.  
Photo: Marie Nystad Helgesen / nordnorge.com



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Photo: Petr Pavlíček / Visit Lofoten

stone, where events, an innovative main exhibition and changing exhibitions will use sound, light and atmosphere to tell the story of the Lofoten fishery from past to present and into the future.

"The main exhibition is an immersive experience that follows the journey of Norway's most important fish through the lens of marine biology, cultural history, art and current research," explains Grøgaard. Together with the historic Lofoten Museum, the Lofoten Aquarium and the Espolin Gallery, the new centre will offer visitors a rich, multi-layered way to understand how skrei has influenced life, work, trade and identity in northern Norway.

"For a long time, the history and culture of the coast have been slightly overlooked, despite its obvious importance for Norway as a nation," Grøgaard says. "We believe it's very important to tell the story of skrei at this moment in time, precisely because fish stocks are at a low-point and sea temperatures are rising." That is why an important aim of SKREI's work is to help a broad audience better understand the region's history and marine life, she explains. "Knowledge is the basis if we want to manage the resources of the sea in a sustainable way. Only then can we hope to live both with and from the sea, well into the future."

Especially recommended is the Boknafisk, a semi-dried cod, which is a local staple and impresses with a dry exterior and a tender, slightly sour, moist interior.

Still central to Norway's culinary history, the near-total use of the skrei, from roe and liver to dried heads, also reflects a long-established culture of using the catch as fully as possible. Nigeria, for example, imports Norway's dried cod heads to be used in their country's national dish, while cod milt, the sperm

sac of the male cod, is primarily sold to sushi restaurants in Asia.

A new chapter for Lofoten's cod heritage A major new addition to Lofoten's cultural landscape arrives on 30 June 2026 with SKREI, a museum experience in Storsvågan, Kabelvåg, devoted to the history of the Lofoten fishery and the migratory cod that has shaped Northern Norway's coastal culture. At its heart stands The Otolith, a striking new 5,000-square-metre building inspired by the fish's ear