

# The Norwegian Arctic

## Experience Abroad Reflection



## Where was my LiA?

My Leadership in Action Experience took place in Spami on the traditional homeland of the Saami people, who are Indigenous to the north of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. I was primarily based in a town called Harstad, or Hársttáid suohkan in the Sami language equivalent, which is on the island Hinnøya. The organization that I was working for was based in a different Arctic community a couple of hours away called Tromsø, so I travelled between the two quite regularly.

Throughout my LiA experience, I also got the privilege to travel to other Arctic towns including Bodø, Narvik, and Setermoen. I also travelled through Brussels, where I attended the EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples Dialogue, and the first ever EU Arctic Youth Dialogue.

*I was here in  
Harstad, Norway*



The experience of living in a foreign country was made significantly easier because I was lucky enough to billet with a family in Harstad. This made it easier because I was living in a household with a family who were familiar with the city, language, and culture and who were super friendly and helped me navigate the new place with relative ease.

# What I did for my LiA?

I worked with the Arctic Mayors' Forum, which is a pan-Arctic forum representing the voices of Arctic Peoples through elected leaders at the municipal and community level. It is made up of 19 member municipalities from across 7 Arctic states, and represents 1.2 million Arctic inhabitants. The Arctic Mayors' Forum works to ensure the participation of mayors and elected community leaders at Arctic governance tables to ensure the values, goals and interests of Arctic peoples are voiced and considered.

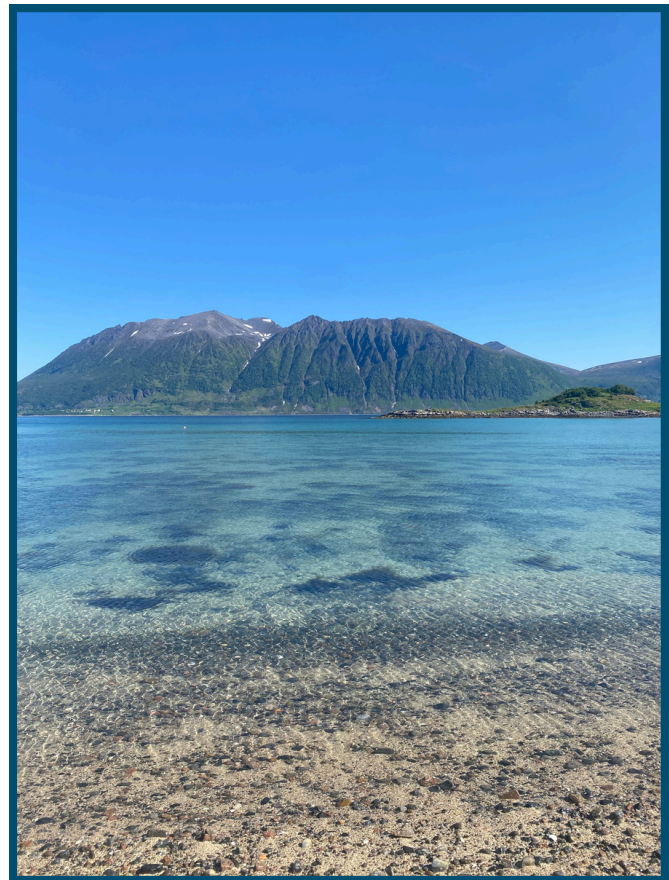
While at the Arctic Mayors' Forum I did a lot of random tasks for the Secretariat, and also worked on a handful of projects. As a member of the Secretariat I ran the AMF social media accounts, helped with communications, helped coordinate workshops, town halls, and conference talks, attended meetings, helped write and appeal funding applications, and worked to increase the membership of the organization.

## Living abroad

Spending 6 weeks in Norway was absolutely incredible. I really fell in love with the people and the nature in Northern Norway. The family that I was living with was really welcoming, and helped me figure out many important and basic things, like public transit, navigating the town, and helping me learn basic Norwegian language.

There were some aspects of Norwegian culture that I found unexpected. There are a lot of regulations in Newfoundland that people follow very attentively; things like jaywalking, not littering, and parking illegally are much less socially acceptable in Norway.

I was also shocked by the liquor laws in Norway, which prohibit people from buying alcohol past 4pm. Further, liquor can only be purchased at Vinmonopolet, which translates directly to 'Wine Monopoly'. All grocery stores bigger than 100 square meters are closed on Sundays, which was also just kind of silly.



View on a hike close to Harstad, Norway.

# Language

Although I do not speak any Norwegian, while I was there I began to learn some of the basics of the language. Most Norwegians have really good English, so I was always able to communicate with locals with relative ease, and because I was living with a family who did speak Norwegian, they often helped translate for me. Having said that, it felt like it was important to learn the language out of respect, and I was able to pick up on lots of basics relatively quickly.

## English Norwegian

Please Vær så snill?

Thank you Takk

You're welcome/Here you go! Vær så god

My name is Alice, and I'm from Canada. Jer heter Alice, og jeg er fra Canada.

Can I please have some water? Kan jeg få vann vær så snill?

# Culture

As I was working with an international organization with members from 7 different cultures, there was not one single culture that I was immersed in. Obviously, as I was living in Norway, I got to experience Saami and Norwegian culture more closely, but I also got to learn about many other peoples, cultures, and traditions of the north.

Some quintessentially 'Nordic' things that I got to experience in Norway included eating Saami foods like reindeer meat, narwhal, seal, and fish. During my trip to Bodø I attended a conference dinner where I got to hear Inuit throat singers, Saami yolk singing, and Finish folk singing. I was in Oslo on May 17th, which is Norway Day and one of the most important cultural days in Norway. There were parades, and everyone was wearing 'bunads' which are the Norwegian national dress.

I had a lot of important takeaways from this trip, but I would say that the most important cultural competency that I developed was humility. The Arctic is so vast, and the communities that I was working with were so diverse that I really learned to listen, and have no assumptions about people's culture or how they practice it.

# Challenges

On the whole, my LiA went really well, but there were a couple of things that I found challenging. Luckily, with help from my co-workers, friends, and support circles I was able to tackle all of the challenges that I faced.

One of the first challenges that I encountered was familiarizing myself with the 'Arctic Theater' which is a huge network of organizations, projects, forums, conferences, working groups, and people who work on different topics related to the Arctic. My first week at AMF was largely spent making my own Arctic Dictionary to help myself keep track of who was who, and what they did.

Another challenge that I encountered that I was not expecting was social anxiety. I am generally an outgoing person and I have not struggled with social anxiety in the past, but while in Norway there were a couple of occasions that I found uncharacteristically stressful. I found that reminding myself that people are kind was really helpful, and made it easier for me to feel confident engaging with new people.

Learning from Arctic leaders at the EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples Dialogue, and at the Arctic Congress.

Working with intelligent, compassionate, and enthusiastic people who taught me what it means to work **for** communities.



## Highs and Lows...

Being overwhelmed by the unfamiliar network of Arctic people and organizations.

Collaborating and communicating with challenging partners.

# Final reflection

Overall, my experience abroad was incredible. I met so many people and learned so much. The family that I was staying with demonstrated such hospitality to me – they welcomed me so warmly, and shared so much wisdom with me. Patti, who hosted me and who is the Secretary General of Arctic Mayors' Fourm was a really mentored me and taught me so much about the Arctic, but also about working on teams. She also shared so much wisdom about what it means to work for communities by prioritizing their needs, listening to them, and being open. Her partner, Olav, who I got to know really well taught me lessons about leadership and working with people. He showed me the importance of really getting to know the people that you work with so that you can better show up for each other. Their sons, Carter and Kai, welcomed me so warmly by bringing me climbing, inviting me to hang out with their friends, and travelling to Tromsø with me.



I also got to meet so many people who work in the Arctic. Everyone was so kind to me. People were interested in me and took time to get to know me, even though I was super new to the Arctic scene, and am not local to the Arctic. They really showed me how kind people can be. It was also super interesting to witness Arctic diplomacy, which has a long history of cross border cooperation. Even now, when the tensions in the Arctic are very high due to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, states are cooperating to protect the region.

It was also really special to learn more about this part of the world, that is part of my home as well. The Arctic is facing unique and diverse challenges that require innovative solutions, and it was an honour to get to work with people who are playing a role in protecting the Arctic. I have become deeply invested in the region, and am really excited to continue learning about the Arctic, and to get the opportunity to travel back to Norway, and to the Arctic more generally.