



NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS

Boldly fly where no one has before, on an inspired journey in the remote northern wilds of Norway with Lars Sletten and friends

When I started flying in '86, things were pretty clear: if you wanted thermals, you travelled south. At 69 degrees north, you don't get thermals. Or so we thought. So we flew along the ridges for hours on end and 'mysterious lift' was explained away as turbulence. I escaped home and spent my summer months in southern Norway. Then, things changed.

APRIL 24, 2003: THE EYE OPENER

I was driving towards our family summer house on the island of Andøya, the northernmost island in the archipelago of Vesterålen in the far far northern extreme of Norway, distracted by a sky full of nice cu's.

I grabbed my Nova Vertex and headed up the hill. It wasn't long till I found myself in a 5 m/s thermal. I had no problems reaching cloudbase. Wow, here I was, over terrain that nobody had considered to be good for thermals. In fact, nobody had ever flown here, ever! I began to make plans. Just where would it be possible to go now I knew how to use thermals? That next long, dark Norwegian winter I studied the potential routes that wove their way through the mountainsides and fjords of the region. I found one. An intricate

journey that would lead me north from a launch above Sigerfjord back towards my summer home on Andøya. It was a complex line that followed a contour of beautifully sculpted ridges and valleys to a short sea crossing 40 km out. From there, if the long glide worked and I got up on the other side, it would be a thrilling 50 km fight through some of the best landscapes Europe has to offer.

MAY 18, 2007: THE BIG DAY

After two failed attempts over the previous two years when I'd managed 20 and 32 kilometres, I was ready again with my friends, Egil Fonn and Daniel Bjerkås, to launch from Sigerfjord, a south-facing hill.

Clearing the summit in buoyant air, we started hunting for a good thermal for our first three km crossing. Below us, a spectacular mix of alpine and coastal terrain unfolded. After the crossing we gathered under a beautiful cu and chased each other along the western side of the Osvoll valley. By now, the sky ahead of us had started to improve. As we crossed over the Hognfjorden, a brisk easterly wind could be seen on the water. Arriving low under the slopes of Rismåstuva we inched along in a headwind onto the eastern slope, where

finally the altimeter started to wind up and we were carried upwards towards a large cu.

It was one of those rare moments of pure happiness, the beauty of the land around us, the thrill of flying, and the anticipation of what was next. From here I could see the place where I ended a 32 km fight on the same day last year.

Now we had a six-kilometre crossing over the wet flatlands to the slopes of Innerheia, but the gods were in a good mood and provided a surprisingly good climb over the plains. We climbed lazily in the slow, but large, thermal. Reaching cloudbase, we realised we could skip Innerheia, and glided directly towards Godfjorden.

Although nobody had flown here before, I knew these mountains like the back of my hand. From my early childhood, I have always felt closely connected to this peaceful place. I've often sat on a summit, watching the eagles gracefully soaring the grassy slopes.

We climbed again and assessed the crux of our route that lay ahead: a ten-kilometre crossing over wetlands and water to the island of Andøya. A daunting task considering our low bases.

It was a long time until I saw Egil enter a thermal about 100 m below the summit, my pulse increased