

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

LONG-DISTANCE DIARY: **GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN TO NORDKAPP, NORWAY**

CM heads to Scandinavia for a gruelling 1,500-mile roadtrip across a stunning terrain where the sun doesn't set. The truck of choice is a Volvo FH Aero 500 LNG



A tough ride: The Volvo FH Aero in which we take on the challenging but spectacular terrain

WORDS: WILL SHIERS / PHOTOS: TOM LEE

Commercial Motor Fed up with the short days and long nights? We thought so. That's why, for this Christmas issue, we're taking you somewhere the sun doesn't set – quite literally.

Back in late June, we headed north. Way north. Our mission? A 1,500-mile journey from Gothenburg, Sweden, to the North Cape – the northernmost point of mainland Europe. For three months each summer, the sun doesn't dip below the horizon up there, and we made the most of every sleepless minute. To add a bit of extra challenge (and a lot more planning), we did it in a gas-powered truck: a Volvo FH Aero 500 LNG 4x2 with fully loaded triaxle trailer. Four days, endless daylight, reindeer on the roadside, pine forests as far as the eye can see, and some of the most spectacular roads Scandinavia has to offer.

Think of it as a blast of midsummer sunshine to brighten up your Christmas reading.

DAY ONE: GOTHENBURG TO HORNBERGET

Our journey begins at Volvo Trucks' demo centre in Gothenburg, where a map of Europe on the wall reminds us just how far we have to go. We hadn't fully appreciated the scale of it. Sweden is nearly 1,000 miles long, and we'll be driving most of it before slipping briefly into Finland, then crossing into Norway. All told, it's about 1,500 miles to Nordkapp (the North Cape). For context, that's about the same distance as Gothenburg to Tuscany.

With Martin Tomlinson, Volvo Trucks UK & Ireland's head of media and truck demonstration, riding shotgun, we ease through Gothenburg, and he talks me through the truck. It's a Volvo FH Aero 500 running on 95% LNG and 5% diesel – the diesel's there to

ignite the gas, so it's not a spark-ignition engine. We're carrying 215kg of LNG (a UK-spec 6x2 carries 165kg), 140 litres of diesel, and 64 litres of AdBlue, which is the smallest AdBlue tank Volvo offers.

Back home, Tomlinson says these trucks are selling well. Supermarkets are taking them in their droves – Asda and Tesco among the early adopters. Now that LNG prices have dropped again, interest is picking up. During Covid, gas soared from around



NEED TO KNOW
Volvo's FH Aero 500 LNG runs on 95% gas and 5% diesel – the diesel's there to ignite the gas, so it's not a spark-ignition engine

75p to £3 per kg. There's currently only a handful of public LNG filling stations in the UK. – Gasrec at Daventry – though another is in the works. Supermarkets have their own infrastructure, usually a tanker on a skid at base. Great for back-to-base operations. Thankfully, with around 1,000km of range and some careful route planning from the Volvo Trucks team in Sweden, we're in good shape – on paper at least. But with long distances between LNG stations and the risk of turning up to find one closed, we'll be taking every opportunity to top up the tank along the way. Opportunistic filling will be key.

THE FIRST LEG

We head north-east to begin with, almost as far as Stockholm. Passing through Örebro, we're reminded that it's the hometown of the late F1 driver Ronnie Peterson, Sweden's most successful Formula 1 racer. And judging by the number of speed cameras along the way, it's easy to see why there haven't been many more!

The speed limit is 80kph and we're on the main road north, a mix of single and dual-carriageways. The road surface is flawless, like polished glass, but if I'm honest, the scenery's a bit dull. Sweden has an

LDD: GOTHENBURG TO NORDKAPP

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On its way: The Aero heads out of Gothenburg at the start of the 1,500 mile journey north





The long haul: Crossing the Högakustenbron, Sweden's answer to the Golden Gate Bridge

estimated 70 billion trees, covering 69% of the land, and I feel like I've seen most of them already.

Still, what the landscape lacks in variety, the traffic makes up for. Almost every truck we pass is Swedish-built, and most look like they're on their way to a show. Even the comparatively plain DHL units are dressed to impress, sporting extra lights, bull bars and custom touches. Yes, those accessories are practical up here, but there's clearly pride, time and money behind every one of these trucks.

CRAM FILLING

At lunchtime, we find a public LNG filling station and take the opportunity to top up. We've only used about a third of a tank, but I'm told it's best to fill up whenever you can. Regular top-ups help keep the gas fresh and the remaining fuel colder. That lowers the tank pressure, which means you can squeeze more gas in – a technique known as cram filling.

The filling process turns out to be far less complicated than I'd expected, though definitely more involved than diesel or CNG. The main challenge is the temperature: LNG is delivered at around -160°C, which explains the heavy gloves, face shield and PPE.

Still, the procedure is simple enough – vent



Fill her up: CM editor Will Shiers makes sure that fuel top-ups are carried out regularly

the tank, attach the dispenser, and hold down the button to fill. Within seconds, the hose turns white with ice. When it's full, it whistles like a boiling kettle. Disconnecting it proves a bit trickier – it has frozen solid – but a bit of brute force soon sorts that. We manage to squeeze in 64kg.

Adaptive cruise control is a brilliant tool for motorway driving; smooth, stress-free, and great at maintaining a safe distance. But in more complex environments, with roundabouts and twisting roads, it's not always perfect. It takes a while to build confidence in it, especially when approaching a roundabout. The system not only slows down automatically; it also seems to know what speed to take through the roundabout itself. Assuming there's nothing coming from the left, you can let it do its thing – in theory. In practice, it can be a little too cautious, setting lower speeds than most drivers would. It's easy to see why many professionals choose to take over in those situations.

After a few billion more pine trees, and not much else to look at, we stop for refreshments at Tönnebro, a truckstop on the banks of a lake. It's about as far removed from anything you'll find in the UK as you can get. Peaceful, scenic and

spotlessly clean, it feels more like a nature retreat with truck parking than a service station.

It's Burger King for dinner, and I'm blown away by the minuscule cups for soft drinks. An extra-large here is vastly smaller than a UK small – and would be a total insult to an American trucker. No wonder only 14% of Swedes are obese, compared with 28% in the UK and 42% in the US.

A NEAR MISS

Practising cram filling again, we top up the tanks – this time at a Swedish Post Office depot. We manage to squeeze in another 73kg of LNG.

As we leave the site, we find ourselves behind a fully loaded 25.25m timber truck. In a *Final Destination* moment, it passes under a low bridge and an entire log drops off the back, landing on the road right in front of us. Had we been in a car, and just a few metres closer, it could have ended very badly. A little shaken, we pull over for the night at Hornoberget, in the shadow of the Högakustenbron, one of Sweden's most iconic and impressive bridges. Opened in 1997, this 1,867m long suspension bridge offers stunning views over the UNESCO-listed High Coast area. We've covered 810km today.

NEED TO KNOW
Adaptive cruise control is a brilliant tool for motorway driving, but not always perfect in more complex environments

Did you know? Just 0.000004% of Sweden's many pine trees are sold as Christmas trees each year



Photo: ChatGPT

NEED TO KNOW

The Umeå Volvo Trucks' cab factory began life in 1929 as a furniture carpentry that started building cabs on the side

DAY TWO: HORNOBERGET TO KIRUNA

We stop at Docksta for a morning coffee – a place I'm told is one of Sweden's most famous truckstops. Roughly halfway up the country, it's a popular fuelling point for diesel-powered trucks heading north or south. No gas pump for us here, but it's a good place to stretch our legs and take in the view.

The scenery is definitely picking up now, with lakes starting to break up the wall-to-wall pine forests. But with all that water and 26°C temperatures come the midges. Every time we open the truck door, a fresh swarm dives in. And judging by the bites, they've developed a real taste for British blood.

A RICH HISTORY

A few hours further on, we pass near Umeå, home to Volvo Trucks' cab factory. It's an awfully long way from Gothenburg, which makes me wonder: why build cabs all the way up here? Turns out the factory has serious heritage. It began life in 1929 as a furniture carpentry that started building cabs on the side, including one for a Cadillac. Its founder, Gösta Nyström, was a safety pioneer, developing

A multi-tasker: When not behind the wheel, editor Will Shiers keeps himself busy with window-cleaning duties



On the lookout: I-Spy, with my little eye, 70 billion somethings beginning with 'T'!



the world's first self-supporting steel cab and even inventing early rollover hoops. Volvo bought the business in 1964, and it's been a key part of the brand's safety legacy ever since. With so much know-how embedded in the site, it's clear why Volvo's still building cabs here today.

THE WINDOW CLEANER

Every time we stop, photographer Tom Lee insists that I clamber onto the FH Aero's fold-down grille to clean the windscreen. It's become a full-time job. The glass is a bug cemetery, and not just midges, either. Some of these flying beasts are the size of light aircraft and make a hell of a racket as they commit kamikaze acts against the cab. You don't get anything like this in the UK. At one stop, Lee's joined by a sparrow pecking squashed insects straight off the number plate. Nature's little clean-up crew.

We're passing through Skellefteå now, a name that sounds more Greek to us than Swedish. We're



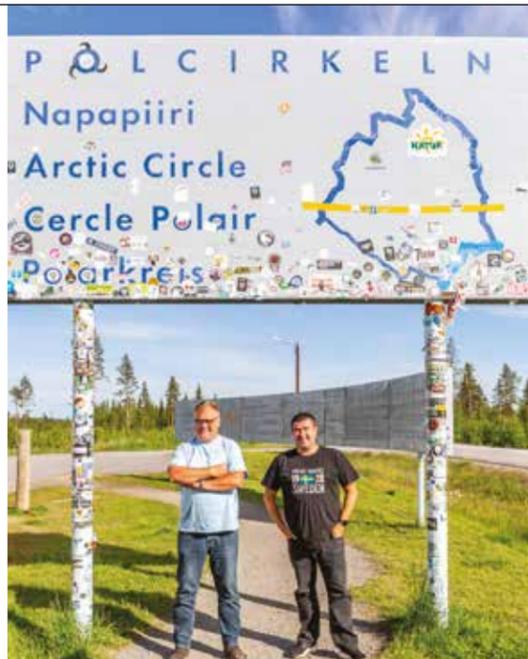
Did you know? The Arctic Circle shifts by about 14m every year due to changes in Earth's axial tilt

only about 75 miles (120km) south of the Arctic Circle at this point. A coffee stop at McDonald's sparks a debate: where's the world's northernmost branch? A quick Google confirms it's in Tromsø, Norway, about 220 miles (350km) inside the Arctic Circle. There was one even further north, in Murmansk, Russia, but that closed in 2022 following McDonald's withdrawal from the country after the invasion of Ukraine. Every day's a school day!

There are a few more hills now, but the Aero takes them in its stride. The torque and power curves are virtually identical to its diesel sibling, and the only real difference is that at the bottom of the green band, the LNG version holds on to gears a little longer before dropping down. It's also slightly quieter.

WATERING THE PLANTS

After lunch, we pull into another unmanned LNG filling station, and add a further 100kg to the tank. Like the others we've encountered, it offers zero facilities – but there are plenty of trees nearby, one of which I help irrigate. Shortly after, we cross into the Arctic Circle. We stop for the obligatory photo shoot by the sign, swat away the midges, and note the temperature: a balmy 23 degrees.



In the picture: Will Shiers and Martin Tomlinson, Volvo Trucks UK & Ireland's head of media and truck demonstration, can't resist stopping for a photo as they cross the Arctic Circle

There are no motorways this far north, and while traffic is blissfully light, progress slows considerably when we pass through towns. There's rarely a bypass – the main road just slices straight through, bringing speed limits and red lights with it.

Things get even slower later in the afternoon when we hit roadworks. The surface has been planed, and for 25km we're crawling along a single dirt lane. Southbound traffic gets the priority, so we wait. And wait. It adds an hour to our journey, and by the time we're moving again, everything – and we mean everything – is coated in a thick layer of dust. Our resident clean freak photographer wants me to wash it down, but that will have to wait until tomorrow. Instead I'm looking forward to a £15 half pint of beer. Or two.

We stay overnight in Kiruna, which, it turns out, is rather famous. The entire town is in the process of being relocated a few kilometres east because the iron ore mine beneath it is causing the ground to subside. Rather than risk the buildings collapsing into holes, they're moving them, brick by brick.

DAY THREE: KIRUNA TO HAMMERFEST

I decide to stay up until midnight, just to see what it looks like – and to be honest, it could be midday. The midnight sun is surreal, and it really messes with your body clock. I eventually manage to get to sleep, but it doesn't come easy.

Before leaving, we fill up again, putting 68kg in the tank. The payment machine doesn't work, and it takes an hour, but we get there eventually.

About 10 miles north of here we pass the site of Sweden's world-famous Icehotel. Built each winter

NEED TO KNOW
The northernmost McDonald's in the world is situated at Tromsø, Norway, about 220 miles inside the Arctic Circle

from huge blocks of ice cut from the nearby Torne River, it gradually melts back into the river every spring, only to be rebuilt the next year. "I wonder if that's it," I ask, pointing confidently at a lake. It isn't.

It's a bit cooler today, about 12°C. In winter, the temperature in this part of Sweden can plummet below -40°C. That's one of the reasons it's such a hotspot for winter vehicle testing. It's not uncommon to see camouflaged prototypes being thrashed around on frozen lakes by engineers in Arctic-spec balaclavas.



MELTING POINT

Yet curiously, despite the sub-zero temperatures for much of the year, there are far fewer 4x4s than you'd expect. It's a reminder that what you really need up here is a decent set of winter tyres and a bit of know-how.

The scenery is changing, with fewer trees and a

lot of boggy tundra – presumably the result of melting permafrost.

Every so often, we spot a reindeer wandering in the road. At first this causes much excitement, with Lee leaping out to grab photos. But after a few hours, we've become pretty blasé. Sweden has around 250,000 reindeer, and most of them seem to have absolutely no road sense. They're a major problem too – every year, vehicles hit more than 4,000 of them, often causing serious damage and the occasional human fatality.

It's not long before we cross into Finland, where >

Did you know? It takes about 5,000 tonnes of ice and snow to build Sweden's Icehotel each year – and even the beds, glasses and church are ice.





Eyes on the road: Briefly enjoying the jaw-dropping views from the Kvalsund Bridge

A rest stop: The FH takes a breather in Norway, where every lay-by looks like a postcard



the scenery shifts and the air thickens – not with mist, but mosquitoes. I’ve practically bathed in repellent and still resemble a pincushion.

The roads in northern Finland are narrow, remote and punishingly bumpy. But that doesn’t seem to deter the locals, whose arctic barrels towards us at full tilt, barely lifting off the throttle.

I’m grateful for Volvo’s CMS cameras. We’d have lost a conventional mirror several times over. There’s often barely a cigarette paper’s width between us and oncoming trucks.

Soon enough, we reach the Norwegian border. We’re bracing for a drawn-out delay while we attempt to explain our bizarre cross-border mission. But there’s no queue, no drama – just a bored-looking official who checks our carnet and waves us through. Apparently, there’s nothing unusual about a British journalist briefly exporting concrete weights into Norway.

And then it hits us – the scenery. It’s breathtaking. This part of Norway

is sensationaly beautiful. Towering mountains carpeted with firs, glassy rivers surging through glacier-cut valleys, and endless photo opportunities at every turn. We pull into a lay-by carved into the heart of a mountain pass. A roaring, fast-moving river tumbles alongside the road on one side; a sheer rock face towers above us on the other. The air is cool, clean and crisp. It feels like another world.

LDD: GOTHENBURG TO NORDKAPP

I’m grateful for Volvo’s CMS cameras. We’d have lost a conventional mirror several times over. There’s often barely a cigarette paper’s width between us and oncoming trucks

The descents are steep, but the FH Aero 500 LNG takes them in its stride. The engine brake does an admirable job of holding us back – a reminder that, while this isn’t a spark-ignition engine, it doesn’t need a separate retarder. That saves about £4,000 and a decent chunk of weight too.



Photo: Will Shiers



cross the mighty Kvalsund Bridge, a 741m-long suspension bridge that was, until recently, the northernmost of its kind in the world. Opened in 1977, it carries the E69 road across the Kvalsundet strait and onto the island of Kvaløya. The views are jaw-dropping, but I don’t get to enjoy them properly, because the road tightens up immediately after the bridge. It snakes along the cliffside with no guardrails in places, and a series of roadworks make it even narrower. I assume they cram all the resurfacing into the short Arctic summer, and tonight, it’s our turn to crawl through it.

Salmon farms dot the fjords here, their circular pens bobbing in the calm water like floating crop circles. They’re everywhere, and they work on me. I decide there and then that grilled local salmon is what I want for dinner.

But Hammerfest isn’t just about fish. It’s also home to Europe’s largest LNG export terminal

ISLAND MENTALITY

We are heading for Hammerfest tonight, and the road there clings to the side of a steep hillside, with the sea shimmering beside us. But this isn’t just any sea; it’s the Barents Sea, part of the Arctic Ocean. To reach the island that Hammerfest sits on, we

Alta, when we arrive, is surprisingly green. Nestled on the edge of the fjord, this small Arctic city is fringed with birch and aspen trees, giving it a gentler, almost alpine look. (Turns out Alta enjoys a mild microclimate thanks to the Gulf Stream.) There’s even a cruise ship in the harbour, looking slightly surreal this far north.

As we climb out of town, the scenery shifts again. Now it feels more like Snowdonia – only instead of sheep, we’re sharing the road with reindeer. Dozens of them. Snow still clings to the shaded hillsides, refusing to melt.



A fuelling point: Despite Hammerfest being home to Europe's largest LNG plant, a lack of public filling stations means we have to scrounge a tankful from the port

– the Equinor-operated Melkøya plant, which liquefies gas from the vast Snøhvit (Snow White) field in the Barents Sea. The gas is piped ashore, supercooled, and loaded onto tankers bound for global markets. This facility is a key part of Norway's energy infrastructure and sits on a remote island just across the bay from the town.

DAY FOUR: HAMMERFEST TO NORDKAPP

Despite being just a few miles from Europe's biggest LNG plant, we somehow struggled to find somewhere to refuel last night, which felt like the Arctic equivalent of running out of ice in an igloo. Incredibly, there wasn't a single public LNG pump in Hammerfest. In the end, we managed to blag a fill from a tanker that usually supplies gas-powered ships moored at nearby Polarbase – the industrial port that supports offshore operations in the Barents Sea. It took 110kg, our biggest fill so far.

No salmon either, as it happened. Not a fillet in sight. You'd think in the salmon capital of Europe it'd be easier to come by, but unless I fancied one still flapping, I was out of luck.

It's a short drive today, at least in mileage. Just 135 miles separate us from North Cape, but the sat-nav estimates 4.5 hours – and it's easy to see why. The roads are incredibly tight and twisty. Not that this seems to bother the constant stream of tourist coaches coming the other way. They're taking no prisoners. A few times I slow to a near halt to let them pass, expecting a grateful wave, but instead get nothing more than a confused stare.

TUNNEL VISION

There's one tunnel where I'm particularly glad we don't meet anything coming the other way. Roughly carved out of the rock, we're advised to straddle the middle of the carriageway to avoid catching the roof. Later on, we pass through the mighty North Cape Tunnel, 6.9km long and plunging 212m below sea level. The climb out is steep enough to drag our speed down to 36kph, despite the FH Aero's best efforts.

Around 30 miles from our destination, we park up behind a 1969 VW Beetle with South African number plates. Its young driver has driven solo from Cape Town to Nordkapp. That's Cape to Cape. He tells us it's broken down hundreds of times



on the seven month journey. I'm not sure what he's planning to do with it once he arrives at his destination, but if it were me, I'd probably roll it off the nearest cliff and fly home!

The scenery in this final stretch is absolutely breathtaking – stark, rugged, and wildly beautiful. The treeless hills are a deep green, carved with ribbons of mountain streams and dotted with mirror-like lakes. One minute you're looking out over the tundra, the next you're catching glimpses of the Arctic Ocean, glistening in the distance. It's the most

spectacular driving of the trip, hands down.

The roads, however, are easily the worst; narrow, shoulderless and clearly not designed for arctics. Adding to my woes are the extraordinary number of cyclists. We pass one struggling up a particularly steep incline. I give him as much space as possible, which is just as well, as seconds later, in the mirror, I see him grind to a halt and topple sideways in the direction of our trailer wheels. We stop long enough to see him spring back up, brush himself down, and pick up his bike.

THE END OF THE ROAD

Eventually, after four days and 1,500 miles, we arrive. It's a proper moment. Even in a brand-new gas-powered truck, the journey has felt like an achievement, so I can't imagine the elation of arriving here by bike or in a 1960s Beetle.

The weather here is notoriously foul, and can turn in minutes. But we're in luck. The sky is clear, the sea is calm, and the sun is shining – all the more surreal given it's the Arctic Ocean we're looking at.

We reached Europe's edge under a sun that doesn't set. May your Christmas be just as bright. □



Photo: Will Shiers

Did you know? Each year, more than 200,000 tourists visit North Cape to experience the midnight sun or polar night



Did you know? North Cape isn't mainland Europe's northernmost point, but it steals the spotlight thanks to its epic cliffs and drive-to-the-edge appeal



Photo: Will Shiers



A good ride: The Volvo FH Aero certainly lived up to expectations, offering its passengers a safe and comfortable ride, while turning in an impressive driving performance