

History

In 1891, August Kriegsman Gran, the national steamship advisor, came up with the idea of providing an express boat service between Trondheim and Hammerfest. Two steamship companies, "Det Nordenfjeldske Dampskibsselskab" and "Det Bergenske Dampskibsselskab", were offered the route, but turned it down as sailing during the dark and stormy winters was considered impossible. At this time, only two marine charts existed and there were only 28 lighthouses north of Trondheim.

Vesteraalens Dampskibsselskab, a relatively young steamship company based in Stokmarknes, took up the challenge. For some time, Captain Richard With and his pilots had been keeping accurate notes on courses, speeds and times taken to sail the route and felt that the service would be viable. A compass and a clock were the only navigational aids necessary in the Polar Night. On 18 May 1893, the government entered into a 4-year contract with Vesteraalens Dampskibsselskab, providing the company with the backing for a weekly sailing between Trondheim and Hammerfest during the summer and, Trondheim and Tromsø during the winter. There were nine ports of call on the route.

On the morning of 2 July 1893, the steamship 'Vesteraalen' left Trondheim for Hammerfest. This started a communications revolution, giving industry and coastal inhabitants better access to the outside world. Letters from Trondheim, which had previously taken up to three weeks to reach Hammerfest during the summer, and five months during the winter, could now be delivered by the Coastal Express in just a few days.

Svolvær was reached in 36 hours - and 67 hours after leaving Trondheim, the ship dropped anchor in Hammerfest harbour on 5 July at 03.30 - half an hour early! The ship and its crew were greeted with salutes and cheering all along the coast.

Once Richard With and Vesteraalens Dampskibsselskab had shown the way, several shipping companies followed. In 1894, Det Bergenske Dampskibsselskab and Det Nordenfjeldske Dampskibsselskab were granted permission to operate ships on the route. The number of ships serving the route constantly increased. In 1898, Bergen became the southernmost port on the Coastal Express' route. Vadsø was included on the route in 1907 and Kirkenes in 1914. For a short period, there were weekly sailings from Stavanger but, from 1936 to the present day a Coastal Express has left Bergen daily heading north. This service was only interrupted by the war.

Over the 100 years of the Coastal Express' operation, more than 70 ships have been used on the route. The first ships were taken from other Norwegian domestic or foreign routes. Eventually, ships were specially constructed for the Coastal Express. These were equipped with refrigerated compartments, roll on/roll off facilities, vehicle holds, as well as course and conference facilities. They were specially designed for loading pallets and were single class ships.

From its conception, it was believed that tourism would form the basis of the Coastal Express' operations. Early on, brochures were printed in several languages promoting the Coastal Express and the wild and beautiful Norwegian coastline. These were distributed to travel agents and individual customers abroad.

The advent of the Coastal Express meant that places such as the Lofoten Islands, Troll Fjord, Skjervøy Island, Hammerfest and the North Cape became accessible to international travellers who wanted to visit the Land of the Midnight Sun. Tourists came in their thousands, making the Coastal Express one of Europe's biggest attractions.

Today, the route is internationally known as "The world's most beautiful voyage". There's nothing else like it anywhere in the world.

Companies involved with the Coastal Express:

1893	Vesteraalens Dampskibsselskab	1945-1958	Det Nordlandske Dampskibsselskab
1894-1979	Det Bergenske Dampskibsselskab	1979	Troms Fylkes Dampskibsselskab
1895-1989	Det Nordenfjeldske Dampskibsselskab	1987	Ofotens Dampskibsselskab and Vesteraalens Dampskibsselskab merged.
1919-1979	Det Stavangerske Dampskibsselskab	1988-1996	Finnmark Fylkesrederi og Ruteselskap
1936	Ofotens Dampskibsselskab		