



Svartisen Glacier in Nordland



Picturesque village of Geiranger

# NORWAY

## The Breathtaking Beauty & Old World Charm Will Captivate Your Spirit

BY MARCI MANNIS, TRAVEL EDITOR

**T**he importance of knowing ... at what age do we begin to consciously care about our family's heritage? More importantly perhaps, at what age should we? It was a recent trip to Norway this past summer that made me appreciate once again the importance of knowing my family's life lineage. Discovering the stories of those that came before you can add a greater depth to one's life and even affords the opportunity to learn from your ancestors. How far one goes to unearth their heritage is a personal quest, but, coming from those that have been there, allocating time and money to this endeavor sooner rather than later can prove to be a life-rewarding gift to yourself.

Lucky indeed, are those whose heritage leads them to Norway. Of course, here in Minnesota we have many - The University of Minnesota reports that more than 850,000 people, 20 percent of Minnesotans, claim Norwegian heritage. Though I cannot claim Norwegian ancestors, the breathtaking beauty of this country was enough to captivate my spirit and fuel my desire to know more about this place and its people.

In addition to beautiful vistas and nature at its finest, Norway boasts a strong history of progressive social programs that reinforce the value of all life. Imagine a place in our world that cares about its inhabitant's healthcare program, and the acceptance of aging is as natural as giving birth. Where tradition infuses everyday life, rather than a few selected days on an annual calendar. Norwegians also instill in their youth the knowledge of their ancestry at a heightened level. Learning about the past is like learning how to tie your shoe.

As a visitor, I found this backbone of tradition extended easily to the accommodations and eateries I experienced while navigating my way through the country. I always find it is an added bonus if you can have the opportunity to stay in places that embrace tradition, making one's trip even more meaningful. Being at the helm of a company for 18 years I can assure you that no one cares more about their customers than the owner themselves. Service is key and the unsurpassed hospitality of the boutique inns I resided in and visited were as rich in history as my daily excursions. In many of the hotels, it was 4th and 5th generation family members that were my hosts.

The adventure path I took was to cover primarily the western and northern coastal points of Norway. After my overnight flight from Minneapolis into the city of Bergen I had no time to worry about any sort of jet lag that I might experience. The mere 6 hour difference was virtually unnoticeable once my senses were exposed to the grand viewing of the fjords, the subtle fresh air scent of the heather flower and the sounds of Nordic music piped into all the townships that I stumbled upon. This country holds a population of 4.5 million spread over a stretched out land mass that it is equivalent to the size of Germany and Austria com-

bined!

In order to really sit back, relax and witness the scenery 100%, travelers can skip the experience of driving the winding narrow roads and hop on one of the multi-lingual tour buses readily available. The tours offer plenty of opportunities to get out, stretch your legs and take photos of the endless sweeps of landscape. Visiting tourists flock to every inch of this country year-round from all over the world and I can now understand why. I was in awe of the gigantic glaciers, majestic mountains and jaw dropping waterfalls.

Splitting your time up equally on land and water is a great way to see Norway. Frankly you really have no choice. Ferry rides are as common as car rides in this country. Viewing the magnificent fjords really should be done up close and personal. Fjords are long, narrow fingers of the sea, bracketed by steep rocky slopes that are the result of deep gouging by ancient glaciers. Unless you are a mountain goat, a boat is the way to go!

Warning: bring a camera with as much memory as possible. My digital camera soon became my new best friend on this trip. It was clearly the single most important item that I had packed. There is so much to see and experience, you won't want to miss a thing. After days of fascinating informational tour buses, coastal ferry rides and bird watching excursions, I began to feel like a local and that my next career just might be in nature photography!

What fascinated me as much as the fjords were the countless charming towns we passed through during our days of driving. Each quaint area had a personality of its own and it was difficult not to stop for a day in each of them to explore. But on this, my first visit, I opted to immerse myself in the two largest cities in Norway. Oslo is the capital of the country, but Bergen holds the treasured title of the "Gateway to the Fjords," leading it to be dubbed the "secret capital." With two distinct personalities, these cities captured my heart, though it was Bergen, with its continental character, that I became especially enamored of.

The spirit of this vibrant town of 240,000 lucky residents is solid. It is an active importing and exporting town shaped like a horseshoe around the Bryggen, its picturesque harbor. Oodles of shops stuffed with Norway's mystical trolls and stunning Norwegian sweaters make Bergen a lovely oasis. Seven mountains surround the city and one trip up the mountain on the Fløybanen Funicular mountain railway to experience this treasured town from an aerial view will have you planning your next trip back to Bergen!

Back on terra firma, touring the Edvard Grieg Museum was a real treat. The world famous composer of the Piano Concerto in A Minor masterpiece, among others, bequeathed his lake home "Troldhaugen" as a museum and the adjacent grass-roofed Troldsalen Concert Hall as a destination for music lovers the world over.

Built in 1885, this house situated by the Nordas Lake, inspired Grieg for 22 years. The lovely, well-



managed enclave offers insights into the life of a composer who put Norway and Scandinavian countries on the map. For a man that stood only a hair taller than 5 feet, his presence still seems to linger in the walls of Troldhaugen. Do not leave Bergen without experiencing this home. It takes you back in time like no other tour I have taken.

If it were not for the excitement of sailing on the sea during the next leg of my trip, it would have been close to impossible to remove me from Bergen. There were so many fascinating museums that I couldn't possibly have covered them all in my short stay. I took the brochures with me so I could plan strategically on my next trip back!

Departing from the city on the MS Nordnorge, one is able to take in, once again, the beautiful topography of this picture perfect country - truly one of the highlights of my trip.

Embarking on a 5-day cruise throughout the fjords was simply splendid. This particular vessel was easy to negotiate and though I have been dubbed "directionally challenged" by my own darling daughter, I was ready to contest the title with her after easily mastering the MS Nordnorge.

This ship proved to be the perfect size for me, enhanced by a peaceful and calming atmosphere. Each day my quest was to just sit outside and soak up the panoramic scenery of the fjords, mountains and glaciers. Inside was equally as relaxing. I melded into a small sea of seniors, seemingly as spunky as their high school days, sitting and sharing stories hour after hour. One of my favorite snapshots is of four lovely ladies having a very early happy hour late morning! Whether one chose to knit, read or nod off, this cruise experience was far from too slow for me.

The gentle pace aboard ship was complemented by the fabulous variety of daily excursions. Each town in which we made port had its own special "must see" or "must do" that was carefully spelled out to the passengers each day in the "Daily Facts" sheet. No matter how big or small these quaint towns were, they all seemed to have a special landmark or story that engraved them in the history books. The final port we experienced was Kirkenes, from which one could see off in the distance - Russia, the country of my heritage. Remarkably, it is only but 4 kilometers (3 miles) away!

After days of small towns I was now off to the finale of my adventure - the capital of Norway - Oslo. This metropolitan city is impressive. The topography seemed almost identical to the Midwest, being much flatter than the craggy coastal environs and still very green even though winter was right around the corner. I was on a mission to make the most of my time in Oslo and the Oslo Pass, which grants you free entry to various museums and attractions, free parking on municipal car parks, free public transport and discounts on sightseeing, among other things, helped me accomplish that. It is the easiest and most cost-effective way to experience this bustling big city. Like Bergen the museums and landmarks are bountiful and the locals are passionate about preserving and promoting their Norwegian heritage.

As I reflect on my trip and the numerous stories I listened to during my stay in this incredible country, one couple's conversation struck a particular cord with me. We met on the MS Nordnorge and I discovered that we all hailed from the same state. My family's ancestry is Russian, but I was born and raised in Madison Wisconsin. This particular couple, also from the Dairy State, traced their roots back to Norway and had come to celebrate their upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. When I asked where they distinguished their 25<sup>th</sup> - their answer - Norway! Eloquenty whispering to me how this trip was much different now being active empty nesters. I was charmed by how happy they were to finally have time together to enjoy one another and have a chance to explore the world. It made me smile because my own parents are only a few years away from celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

In sum, Norway, a sprawling narrow stretch of land in this big world of ours, is a country to behold. But its pull reaches beyond the captivating beauty of the landscapes, and the charm of its stories. It is a place where I found inspiration to find the time in my life to seek out and learn more about my family's roots. I am sensing more and more that discovering and learning about your heritage can be life changing.

I also think I can suggest the perfect anniversary gift for my parents to give one another - take a journey to explore the richness of the past and their Russian roots, but be sure to go by way of Norway!