

GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



Geirangerfjord

NORWEGIAN FJORDS

BOWL-YOU-OVER BEAUTY



glacial lake

If you're ever out on a Sunday afternoon and you find yourself in the North Sea, take a right turn once you've gone past England and Scotland, and you should end up in Norway. You probably won't see any Vikings, because no Vikings have been seen on Sunday afternoons for almost 1000 years. But you probably will see some of the most mouth-wateringly gorgeous landscapes in the world ...

The Norwegian fjords are quite simply sensational. These huge clefts in the coastline were created by glacial action a squillion years before the first tourists, when the whole of Scandinavia was buried under ice. Like water-filled wedges, they stretch inland for hundreds of kilometres – in some places emerald green-and-serene, in other places misty wet-and-wild ... here edged by pocket-sized farms and fishing villages, there ringed by teetering cliffs and plunging waterfalls.

And if you prefer your beauty clean, unspoiled and natural, well, this region has it by the truckload! It's a World Heritage Site, and was voted No.1 in a *National Geographic* survey of the top environmentally-attractive destinations. They don't come better than that!



There are some roads in this wilderness, and more than a few float-planes and helicopters. But we chose to do our sightseeing hanging over the deck-rails of a cruise-ship – drifting through the deep reflecting stillness, oohing and aahing on cue, and docking or dropping anchor wherever and whenever possible.

I'm told that it rains 300 days a year in these mountainous parts. And our first day here (in the long,

skinny Sognefjord) was one of those – so it was on with raincoats as we were ferried ashore to the tiny village of Flam. We rode a historic train up-up-uphill past snowy peaks and gushing, exploding waterfalls ... then, following a hearty Norwegian smorgasbord lunch, we rode a coach down-down-downhill around 13 hairpin bends, to another fjord and another tiny village called Gudvangen!



Something that's hard to get used to in Northern Europe is the serious shortage of darkness. I mean, it was still light that night after midnight – and I took the best sunset photo ever at 1:15am, no kidding!

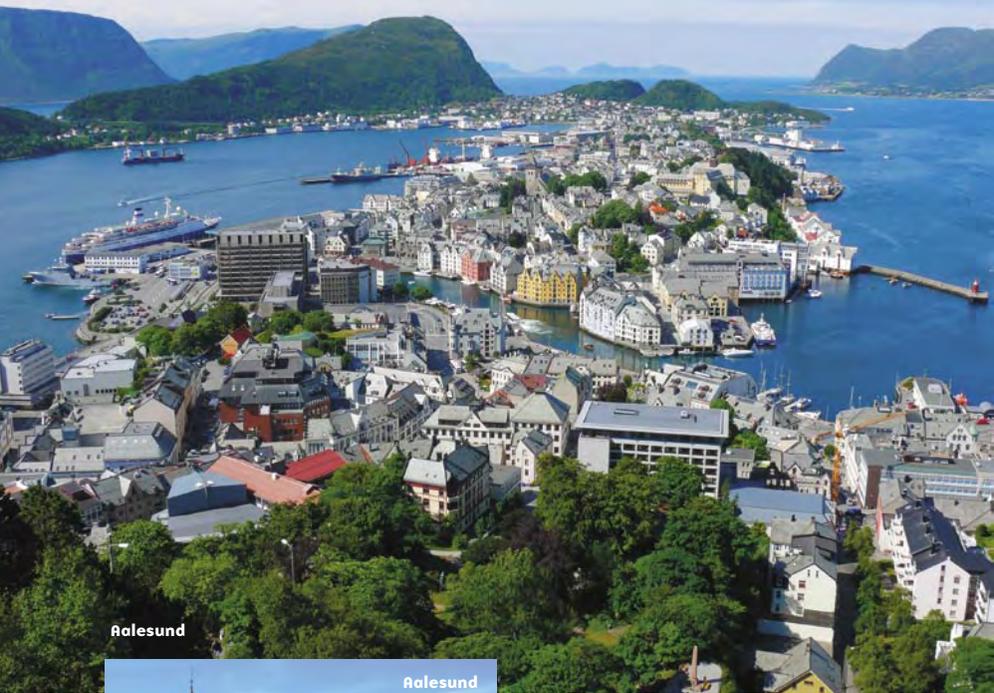
(The flipside, of course, is that in mid-winter, when these fjords freeze up, they get just three or four hours of daylight. Which wouldn't be so much fun, I guess.)

Anyway, our week in Norway was quickly becoming a one-on-top-of-another pile-up of unforgettable adventures:

In colourful Kristiansund we learned about 'klippfish' ... and the town's early beginnings as a cod processing and exporting centre.

In Aalesund, a stunning larger town with turrets and spires and a fairytale feel, we drove through some of the world's longest undersea tunnels ... climbed to the top of

YOU KNOW THAT DISTANT COUSIN OF MINE? THE MORE DISTANT THE BETTER!



Alesund



Alesund



an ancient wooden lighthouse ... and met Gangerolv, a Viking King who conquered Normandy in 911 (and became the ancestor of William the Conqueror, sire to the English royal family).

In Hellesylt, surrounded by waterfally cliffs at the tip of the dramatic Sunnylvenfjord, we eyeballed small hilly farms (one of them only accessible from the water, by way of a flimsy rope ladder) ... marvelled at colourful rural dwellings with grass growing thickly on the roofs (good insulation, apparently) ... and motored to the alpine town of Stryn (pronounced 'Streen'), where we lunched on freshly-caught salmon and freshly-picked cloud-berries.

By this stage, we were 1000 metres above sea level, in the middle of a summer ski field, with blinding



white snow all around us. Ignoring my wife's protests ("What on earth will you do with THAT?") I bought myself a Viking helmet ("I'll wear it in honour of those fearsome Norsemen!"). Then, after skirting the shores of a magnificent glacial lake, we were driven up this steep, zig-zagging, heart-stopping road to the summit of Mt Dalsnibba, now 1500 metres above sea level.

Oh, boy!

Neither words nor photos can describe the bowl-you-over beauty that awaited us up there on top of the world. We were quite simply gob-smacked by a 360-degree panorama of endless dazzling peaks dropping down to miniature lakes and farms and roads and streams far, far below us.

Our floating hotel had moved during the day and was now anchored off in the distance – a tiny toy ship on the spectacular Geirangerfjord. And from our vantage

point on the Flydalsjuvet lookout, we soaked up more sights—for-sore-eyes and filled another memory-card with photos.

As we up-anchored that evening and cruised out through the dark, mirror-like waters, we were treated to yet another highlight: a glorious up-close view of the world-famous Seven Sisters waterfall.

Take your breath away? You'd better believe it! And one fabulous week I won't ever forget ...



Seven Sisters

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