

N O R W A Y

A Tour of the Land of the Midnight Sun

by Elisa
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Norway. Land of the Midnight Sun. Where rugged coastline, magnificent fjords, active weather patterns, and breathtaking scenery greet you at every turn. Bordered by Sweden, Finland, and Russia to the east, embraced by a number of waterways, including the North and Barents Sea to the west and south, and surrounded by mountains, glaciers and waterfalls, the country's topography is like no other.

Sometimes it's hard to believe your eyes as a landscape filled with radiant fall colours transforms into one of snow-capped mountains in just a matter of hours. Travelling from one end of the land to the next, one is immediately struck by the abundance of resources that pave the route. Thanks to petroleum and other natural assets, this country – the first European nation to declare independence in the 20th century – is among the wealthiest in the world.

To get a feel for this vast and unique country, your adventure must capture the landscape from every angle. Thanks to GLP Worldwide, one of Canada's pre-eminent niche cruise and land tour companies, our 11-day tour combined travel by rail, a coastal cruise, and a few days landlocked in the country's most fascinating towns and cities. From the southern tip to the northernmost point, the trip was chock-full of Norway's delightful sights and sounds.



All Aboard!

Taking the train from Oslo to Bergen is an awe-inspiring way to start the journey. The Bergen Railway is Northern Europe's highest-altitude railway line, at one point ascending more than 1,000 metres over a distance just under 100 km. From a comfortable perch in the modernized railcar, you soar high atop mountains, overlooking miles of rugged, untamed nature, a testament to the country's vast and incredible land mass. At Finse – the highest station on the line at 1,222 metres above sea level – the ascent is palpable, with the highest point in the journey, Taugevatn, sitting at 1,301 metres.

Continuing on to Bergen, the Flam Railway takes you to the bottom of the Flam valley at the base of the Aurlandsfjord. Considered one of the steepest railways in the world and a masterpiece of skilful engineering, the one-hour ride from Myrdal to Flam involves a height difference of 863 metres. It took 18 years to build, with 18 of 20 tunnels having to be drilled into the mountain manually. One in particular, the "hairpin," involves a 180-degree turn to navigate the tremendous change in altitude.

Beautiful, Bountiful Bergen

Upon arriving in Bergen, the second largest city in Norway, its uniqueness is immediately evident. Set magnificently at the fjord's cusp, with seven mountains serving as its backdrop, Bergen is often called *Trebyen*, wooden city. Though wooden homes dot the landscape all across the country, no other city in Europe has as many, with the majority dating back to the 17th century. Moreover, the homes are painted with a rich and vivid pallet. So, while the city is also known as *Regnbyen*, "Rainy City," due to over 200 days of rain per year, the colourful cityscape still manages to emit a luminescent glow of red, blue, green, and yellow.

There is much to see in Bergen, from bountiful fish markets and art galleries – housing collections from national and international artists like Edvard Munch and Ansel Adams – to historical buildings in the old harbour, Bryggen. One of the

LEFT: A closeup of the Flam Railway picking up passengers; BOTTOM: Hurtigruten's MS Polarlys docks at Kirkenes (Credit: Elisa Birnb Baum); OPPOSITE PAGES (Left): A majestic view of one of Norway's spectacular fjords; (Right): Overlooking the town of Alesund (Credit: Elisa Birnb Baum).

most charming spots in town, the row of 14th century wooden buildings, found on the UNESCO World Heritage List, defines the glorious harbour they face. A short distance from the city centre is the summer home of Edward Grieg, the country's most famous composer. Named *Troldhaugen* due to Grieg's fascination with trolls – a fascination shared by many in Norway – the house is now a museum, its 1907 interior intact, providing a realistic glimpse of the eccentric yet beloved artist.

Sailing Away

Our seven-day cruise up the coast on the charming MS Polarlys began in Bergen's lively port. Definitely not your typical cruise, the trip targets those looking for a unique excursion, a casual, intimately crafted adventure rather than a lavish affair of pampering and grandiosity. That said, the boat is replete with comforts – from its charming cabins, exquisite architecture, and a panorama lounge on the seventh floor, it also boasts floor-to-ceiling windows and a cozy atmosphere, making it one of the most popular spots onboard.

For more than a century, coastal steamers run by Hurtigruten were a lifeline, connecting fishing communities scattered along the coast. Today the company runs 12 ships – including the MS Polarlys – with daily calls to 34 ports between Bergen and Kirkenes, continuing the tradition of delivering cargo and passengers to diverse towns.

Therein lies the journey's main attraction: the opportunity to enjoy Norway's varied and fascinating cultural landscape while simultaneously inhaling the magnificently natural one that envelops you from morning to night. Another appeal presented itself early in the morning, our fourth day at sea – 7:11:22 a.m. to be precise – when the ship passed the Arctic Circle. Though technically just another spot on the map, this literal rite of passage was celebrated, capturing as it did the imagination and excitement of all on board.





mobiling. But a trip to this bordertown wouldn't be complete without seeing the 90-year-old iron ore mine (and taking home a souvenir magnetic rock) and the Russian border. Yet, the biggest attraction is the snow hotel. Built in 2006, this tremendous piece of architecture decorated with ice sculptures and surrounded by live reindeer, has already gained international acclaim. Its rustic, intimate restaurant serving Arctic-inspired meals prepared on an open fire deliciously caps off the unique experience.

Bright Lights, Big City

The tour culminated in the nation's capital of Oslo. With just under 500,000 residents, it is still the biggest and most vibrant city in Norway, having seamlessly transformed itself from its small-town roots to the modern, trendsetting metropolis it is today. From culture and nightlife to restaurants and shopping, Oslo buzzes with activity, simmers with charm, and captivates with mouthwatering beauty. Just take a walk from Central Station to the Royal Palace along Karl Johan's Gate in the vibrant city centre and you'll see why. But make sure to look down occasionally or you'll miss the prose of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen inscribed on the sidewalks.

By far, the most popular tourist attraction in Oslo is the 80-acre Vigeland Park, featuring more than 200 sculptures made of bronze, granite, and cast iron. The park is the brilliant life's work of Norwegian artist, Gustav Vigeland, with each sculpture telling a different story, capturing life in its many varied forms. The city's international stature is reinforced by the Nobel Peace Centre, honoring past laureates and providing exhibits, films, and other works on issues relating to war, peace, and conflict resolution. Finally, Oslo's newest landmark, the Opera House, opened its doors in April 2008. Architecturally stunning, with its borders literally caressing the waterfront, the initiative is considered one of Norway's finest of contemporary times.

There seems no better place to end a tour of Norway than in Oslo. For much like the capital city, Norway itself is a fascinating blend of old and new, traditional and modern, maintaining its strong grasp on history while accelerating forward with vigour and passionate vision. Protecting its natural assets as fiercely as it promotes innovation, it's no wonder the landscape remains one of the most magnificent the world over. ■

Ports-a-Plenty

Norwegian cruises dock at a number of ports-of-call along the coast. The quaint town of Alesund was a particularly memorable one, with its cobblestone streets, cozy cafes, and unique architectural marvels. After 90% of its homes were destroyed in a 1904 fire, the city was rebuilt in the Art Nouveau style – using concrete instead of wood. Then there's Tromso – the Gateway to the Arctic – northern Norway's largest town with approximately 65,000 residents, sitting at the same latitude as Alaska and Siberia. It's not unusual for tour guides to endorse everything as "the northernmost" (as in, "welcome to the northernmost Burger King in the world!"). Located in the centre of the Northern Lights zone, Tromso is also among the best places on earth to observe this phenomenon.

As the capital of the North Cape – considered the northernmost point of Europe – Honningsvåg is a highly popular port. Photo opportunities are abundant at the North Cape Hall visitor centre, as travelers commemorate their trek northward. Until 1956 when a road was built to North Cape, visitors climbed 300 metres to reach the plateau.

To Russia With Love

All cruises make a final stop in the little town of Kirkenes. Bordering with Russia, the topography is uniquely flat for Norway, with only one hill in the entire town. The city is known for its outdoor activities, including dog-sledding, king crab fishing, and snow-

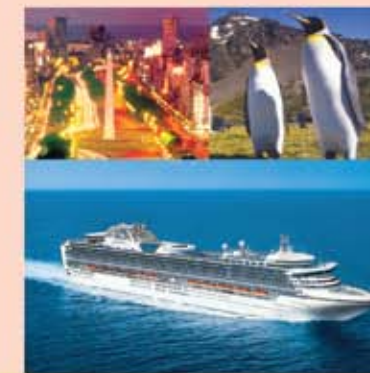
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