

THE GREAT ESCAPE TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD

Why Norway is Europe's Best Kept Travel Secret

BY LISA ARCELLA

A brochure for Norway's Coastal Express voyage describes it as "The World's Most Beautiful Voyage" and that's hardly an exaggeration. A cruise along the country's expansive waterways, with views of tiny red houses nestled in the midst of majestic fjords, affords one of the world's most incredible scenic adventures. This Scandinavian treasure is often overlooked by many travelers to Europe. But with its picturesque landscapes, fun cities, abundance of English speakers, low crime and small size (about as big as New Mexico with a population of just 4.5 million), it is growing in popularity with African Americans, who are attracted by its welcoming spirit.

OSLO

We begin our tour by flying into the bustling capital city of Oslo, which is definitely worth exploring for a day or two. The pedestrian-only shopping street, Karl Johan's Gate, stretches from the railway station to the Royal Palace and includes the Stortinget (Parliament House) and the National Theatre. The Akershus fortress and castle built at the end of the 13th century, dominates the city's harbor. History buffs can take a 10-minute ferry ride to Bygdoy where there are several great museums to choose from including one dedicated to excavated Viking ships. Also worth seeing are The Nobel Peace Center and the Munch Museum, which features the work of Norway's most celebrated artist Edvard Munch, renowned for his painting, "The Scream."

After exploring the sites of Oslo, we hop a puddle jumper and travel north to Kirkenes, a tiny city wedged between the borders of Finland and Russia. This area is known for its wildlife (the country's largest bear population lives here and you can actually get very close to reindeer at the Gabba safari park) and for the fact that it was the second most bombed city in Europe during the Second World War. A really fun excursion from Kirkenes was traveling to nearby Jarfjord and the Arctic Adventure Resort for a king crab safari.



CRUISING

From Kirkenes we board our Norwegian Coastal Voyage steam ship cruiser, much better known by locals as the "Hurtigruten." The Hurtigruten operates something like a

cruise ship on a train schedule, making regular brief stops for locals to get on and off and then longer stops along the way for places of interest to tourists.

First stop is Honningsvåg in the North Cape to have breakfast at the northernmost spot in Europe. There's not a tree in sight here at this part of the Arctic Circle, but the weather is surprisingly mild and the sights are breathtaking as birds dive off the cliffs and land near the sparkling water below. And at some of the tourist spots you will also see the Sami themselves dressed in their traditional colorful costumes.

Back on board, the views out the cabin windows never cease from being amazing. In fact, staring aimlessly out onto the horizon seems to be a favorite pastime on board. And since the sun stays up almost 24 hours here during the summer, you can virtually do it all night long!

By the way, Norwegians seem to have this thing about mythical trolls. You can find the ugly little creatures in every gift shop and mountains, waterways and just about everything in between seems to be named after them.

BERGEN

As we continue to cruise along, a sense of complete peace and relaxation pervades the air. If you want to leave the rat race behind, this is certainly the way to do it! A day later, our ship will make its final stop in Bergen, but for now it's great to get some sun out on deck and watch tiny towns come and go in the distance.

Arriving at the port in Bergen, you can quickly see it is one of the loveliest cities in all of Europe and best of all; nearly everything is within walking distance of Bergen's beautiful harbor. The city features a large fish market that also doubles as an outdoor shopping. The colorful wooden buildings in the historic Bryggen area, are a haven for high priced shops but once were the former historic homes of the Hanseatic traders and careful care is kept to keep them looking exactly as they did in the 16th century.

Just as you fall completely in love with Norway, it's suddenly time to part. But you'll leave with a suitcase full of memories and a promise to return.

WHERE TO EAT

Meals are included on the cruise but in Oslo, try the Lofton Fish Restaurant:

www.lofoten-restaurant.no

Or Theatercafeen:

www.hotel-continental.no

In Bergen, try the Bryggen Tracteursted:

www.bryggen-tracteursted.no

Or Kafe Kippers, a restored sardine factory:

www.usf.no

WHERE TO STAY

Oslo-Clarion Hotel Royal Christina:

www.choicehotels.no

Bergen-Neptun Hotel:

www.neptunhotell.com

WHEN TO GO AND WHAT TO WEAR

Most tourists visit in July and August when the weather is the most mild and it is the land of the Midnight Sun, but Norway's coast is warmed by the Gulf Stream, which keeps it from freezing even in winter. Even though there is very little sunlight, some people prefer to go in winter when you are very likely to see the spectacular Northern Lights. Even though the weather is relatively mild, don't forget sweaters and raingear.

WHAT TO BUY

Norway is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but nothing is cheap here, even for Norwegians! Nevertheless, beautifully made sweaters, pewter and silver items seem to be the best values. Norway doesn't use the Euro, instead it uses its own currency called the Norwegian kroner.

DON'T MISS

In summer the strawberries and cloudberries (a sort of yellow raspberry) from Harstad are the sweetest you will ever taste.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Norwegian Tourist Board: phone 212-885-9700

or visit www.visitnorway.com

Oslo Tourism: www.visitoslo.com

Bergen Tourism: www.visitbergen.com

Norwegian Coastal Voyages: www.norwegian-coastalvoyage.us