



Norway's ancient port town of Bergen

NORWEGIAN WOOD

BY ALEXANDRA ROACH

From ragged mountain peaks to crystal-clear fjords and blindingly white glaciers that span for miles, Norway's natural beauty is both staggering and unique.

Norway's diversity – from the rolling, endless Arctic plains of the north where reindeer roam and the aurora borealis dances across the night sky, to the colourful, heritage-listed wooden buildings of the ancient port town of Bergen – offers something for every traveller.

If an adventure in the wild outdoors is sought, Norway is one of the most remarkable places on earth to travel to. Whether hiking up mountain peaks, kayaking down fjords or taking a tour of the Arctic north via dogsled, even the most daring voyager will be exhilarated.

If a more cosmopolitan journey is sought, the numerous museums, art galleries, restaurants and shopping centres of the nation's capital, Oslo, or the traditional Viking capital of Trondheim, should satiate the needs of even the most avid culture buff.

And whether you seek luxury or are on a more moderate holiday budget, Norway offers everything from five-star resorts with breathtaking mountain views to cheap and cheerful youth hostels and budget hotels.

Norway is a more expensive country to visit than some; one Australian dollar will buy you about five Norwegian krone, but a meal at a restaurant will often be more than 120 krone because of the high salaries Norwegians enjoy. But Norway is also one of the world's safest countries to visit. So while it might be a more expensive holiday than one to, say,

New Zealand, which is often said to have a certain degree of similar geographical features, you will not regret a trip to Norway, which is likely to inspire travellers to return again as soon as possible.

The tiny village of Geiranger, with fewer than 300 inhabitants and only one, potentially treacherous road linking it to the outside world, may not seem a sought-after tourist destination, but it is hardly an ordinary place.

Situated at the base of the UNESCO Heritage-listed Geirangerfjorden, the village is surrounded by steep, sharp, jutting mountain peaks and looks as if it has been plucked straight out of a fairytale.

The 15-kilometre fjord has a depth of more than 600 metres at its deepest point, making it a perfect port for the 200 or so cruise ships that coast down its crystal-clear waters every year. Indeed, before the



Left and above: Some of the Vigeland sculptures in Oslo's Frogner Park.

Far right, top: Flam Railway, which takes you through mountain ranges and past stunning waterfalls.

Far right, bottom: Sognefjorden, the world's longest and deepest fjord.

road out of Geiranger, Ørnevegen (otherwise known as Eagle Road), was built less than a century ago, the only way in or out was via the fjord itself.

Known as the “jewel in the crown” of the Norwegian fjords, Geirangerfjorden is a place of breathtaking natural beauty. Many of the towering peaks are snow-capped year round, providing plenty of snowmelt to keep the mighty waterfalls that dot the landscape flowing without pause.

Gliding along the fjord’s waters at any given time are a wide variety of vessels exploring the sights, including kayaks, motorboats and the daily sightseeing cruises.

But Geirangerfjorden is hardly Norway’s only fjord a traveller must explore; the nearby Sognefjorden is also a must-see. The world’s longest, deepest fjord, it stretches more than 200 kilometres from the mouth of the sea and is more than 1300 metres deep at its deepest point.

As in Geirangerfjorden, a number of methods

of sea-bound transport grant onlookers a spectacular view. And, if you are extremely lucky, the waters of the fjord you are visiting will be perfectly still, creating a perfect specular reflection of the land, mountains and sky. You will not be able to tell where the earth ends and the heavens begin.

Traversing from Sognefjorden to Oslo was once a treacherous journey, where travellers risked avalanches, flooding and rock falls. But the roads and railways the Norwegians invested in during the past few decades have rendered the trip not only safe but enjoyable and scenic.

The famous Flam Railway, carved into the mountainsides and reaching a peak of almost one kilometre above sea level at its height, will take you through mountain ranges and past stunning waterfalls to the aforementioned Bergen

In Bergen, a ride on Scandinavia’s only funicular railway up the steep side of Mt Floyen will grant you a stunning panoramic view of the city and its

bustling port, and a trip to the home of legendary composer Edvard Grieg will bring alive the mountains that so inspired him to compose famous melodies such as *Morning Mood*.

From Bergen, you can cross the stunning Hardangervidda mountain plateau, sampling the flat, barren, but beautiful Arctic landscape, to reach Oslo. One of the world’s safest cities, Oslo has many remarkable sites and the Viking Ship Museum is certainly one of them. The museum’s pride and joy is the fleet of five ancient, almost complete Viking ships, which are on display alongside hundreds of other authentic Viking items including everything from furnishings to weapons.

The Norwegian Royal Palace and the magnificent Frogner Park – with its beautifully manicured lawns, colourful and fragrant flower beds, and its Vigeland Sculptures, depicting the cycle of human life – are must-sees before leaving Oslo.

For such an attractive people, the Norwegians have an intriguing fascination with trolls, the ugly little beasts that populate much of their folklore.

The Norwegians have long told their children about the dangers of associating with trolls who, while often dim-witted, are fond of serving up human soup at their tables. Alongside the old Norse myths, Norwegian folklore has a place in contemporary Norwegian society, and not just when it comes to selling postcards or figurines to tourists; one of the nation's best-known feats of engineering is named Trollstigen, or the trolls' road.

Taking almost a decade to build and opened in 1936, Trollstigen winds tightly around the towering, craggy mountain peaks that lie between Geirangerfjorden and the coastal town of Åndalsnes, which sits on the banks of Romsdalsfjord.

Trollstigen is littered with sharp hairpin turns and a steep incline, and is so narrow at several points that vehicles longer than 12.4 metres are banned from the road.

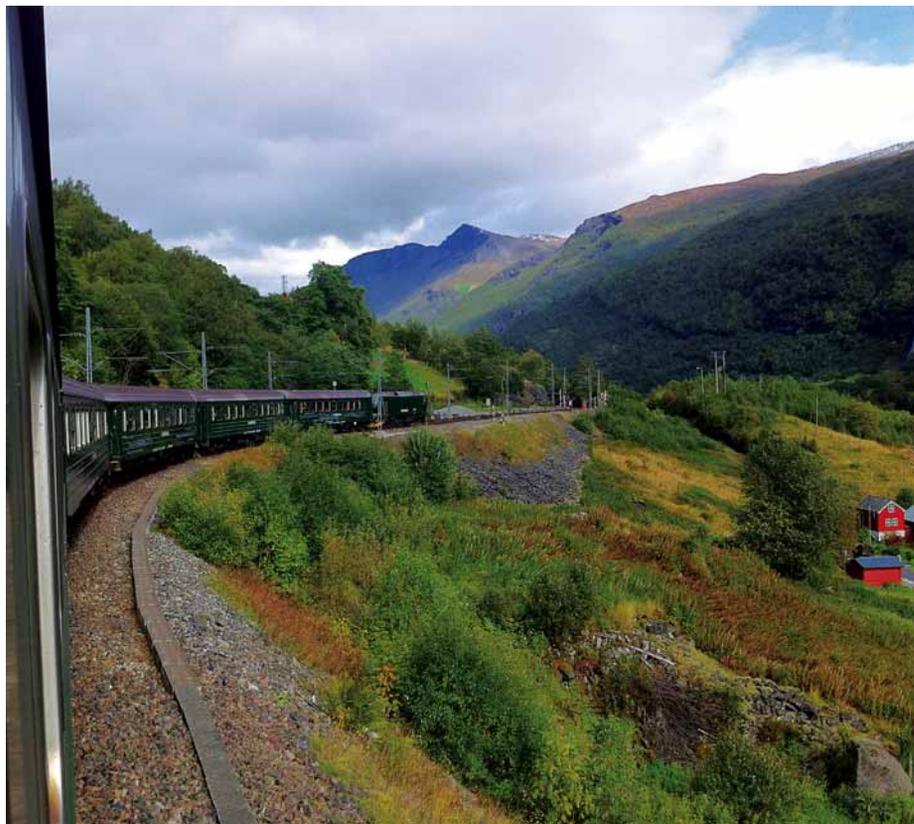
At the height of the tourist season, more than 2500 vehicles traverse Trollstigen's twists and bends each day, with drivers of the lumbering tourist coaches – which make up a large proportion of those 2500 vehicles – facing a particularly tricky task.

Although the road is carved into the mountainside and is structurally more than sound, nature has hardly been conquered; depending on when the snow begins to fall, Trollstigen is usually closed from October or November to April.

From the several large viewing platforms at the top of Trollstigen, visitors can enjoy a breathtaking panorama of Trollstigen, the mountains and the majestic Stigfossen Waterfall. Stigfossen, which drops almost 350 metres down the mountainside, is crossed at the halfway point of the journey up (or down) Trollstigen and makes for a perfect photo stop, thanks to an alcove the engineers thoughtfully included in the road design. Crossed via a sweeping arched stone bridge, the waterfall can give vehicles and photographers quite a soaking during the snowmelt or after heavy rain.

Beneath Trollstigen, with the scrubby underbrush at the foot of the mountains juxtaposed against the rolling green fields and forests of the Isterdalen Valley in the distance, is a large sign warning visitors of the presence of trolls. The sign sits among many little piles of stones. What do the stones symbolise? Why, the trolls they once were, of course. After all, the little fiends turn to stone in the light of day.

But trolls aren't the only stars of Norwegian folklore to be enjoying a surge of popularity. Thanks to leading roles in the blockbuster Avengers and Thor film franchises, based on the Marvel comic book series inspired by Norse mythology, king of the gods Odin and his dysfunctional family of deities and giant anthropomorphic animals have returned to international prominence.



PHOTOS: ALEXANDRA ROACH

“For such an attractive people, the Norwegians have an intriguing fascination with trolls, the ugly little beasts that populate much of their folklore.”

From Oslo to Geirangerfjorden, one can't turn around in a souvenir shop, newsagent or even a 7-Eleven without bumping into a statue of Norse thunder god Thor, or Loki, god of mischief, or Loki's son Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse.

But despite the dark threads contained in their mythologies, the Norwegians are a relaxed, friendly people, not unlike Australians. And they will welcome you to their country, again and again, with open arms.