

Norway, July 2005

Cheryll and I flew from Detroit to Amsterdam, where we connected with our two-hour flight to Oslo. Norwegian customs was amazingly carefree. We didn't show our passports to anyone. In fact, we didn't show our ID to anyone for over two weeks. We took the train to the city center and walked to our nearby hotel. The Norwegians we met were universally helpful, hard working, quiet and punctual. Excellent English was spoken everywhere and 75% were blond. We never saw so many six-foot tall blond women in our lives. Most everything was neat, clean, tidy, in good repair and freshly painted. The only shock was over the prices. If you want to visit Norway, bring money, lots of money. Beer is a popular drink and a pint costs ten dollars in a pub. A case of beer in a supermarket is around \$100. A pack of cigarettes is \$14. An average restaurant dinner is over \$50. Six-dollar per gallon gas has not slowed motor traffic and there are lots of SUV's. Everything's expensive, but it's nice to visit a country where the tap water is safe and you can feel comfortable on the streets at night. The taxes on your purchases will be helping to finance the massive Scandinavian social welfare system. Medical care is free. A university education is an entitlement. New mothers get extensive maternity leaves and can then work part-time for up to two years at full-time wages. Thanks to oil exports, Norway is the richest country in Europe and has chosen not to join the European Union. It's interesting to note that money cannot fix every social problem. Oslo seems to have as many homeless as any other European capital.

We spent the day in Oslo, visiting museums, touring the royal palace and a statue park, which was full of works that would surely have been the ire of conservative censors all over the United States. The park centerpiece was a fifty-foot high monolith composed of hundreds of writhing naked bodies piled on top of each other. Well, OK, they weren't actually writhing. After all, this is just a statue, but it was a rare sunny day, and the lawns were adorned with lots of bikini-clad maidens. In another section of the park the local American club had brought in a Frank Sinatra band to celebrate the 4th of July. It was just like we never left home. Well, sort of.

We flew for two hours to Kirkenes in the far northeast corner of the country, high above the Arctic Circle, near the Russian border. Northern Norway has no trees and there were still patches of snow on the ground in July. Here we joined the Norwegian coastal ferry, which would make 31 stops on the six-day southbound journey between here and Bergen. The stops range from fifteen minutes to a few hours. It carries 500 passengers in cabins comparable to a cruise ship, but apart from the scenery, there is no entertainment. We saw a multitude of fishing villages and countless lighthouses along the rugged coast. There were WWII relics and satellite listening antennae left over from the Cold War.

The Norwegian food, while not exciting, was good. We enjoyed the fresh salmon. There is a wide variety of seafood, although the locals seem to prefer pizza and hamburgers. One day, we had a reindeer meat snack. It tasted like beef jerky, but provided an intestinal experience quite unlike any other. Now we really do know how reindeer can fly.

We disembarked midway down the coast in Tromsø, where we caught a 600 mile flight north to Longyearbyen, Svalbard. Svalbard is a jagged mountainous archipelago ten degrees south of the North Pole. The Svalbard Treaty has Norway in charge, but other countries can set up

operations subject to Norwegian environmental and administrative regulations. Our flight was uneventful until late on our final approach to the airport, when the pilots poured on the power to quickly climb back out of the valley. The captain announced that sea fog had prevented him from landing. They tried from the other direction, but missed that approach as well. He said that there was not enough fuel to wait for the weather to clear, so we must fly to the nearest airport, right back where we started in Tromso. Svalbard was to be our 100th country, but it would not be easy. The airline provided a hotel room and meals, and we made the best of our extra day in Tromso by climbing above the tree line on a mountain near a fjord. Our alternate flight arrived in Longyearbyen 36 hours late at 1:30 AM in bright sunshine. We had to wear sunglasses on the ride to the hotel, and not just because we look so cool wearing sunglasses at night. When the sun had risen on April 19th, it would not set again until August 23rd. The average summertime high temperature is around 40 degrees, but we were lucky, with highs in the 50's and low 60's. Svalbard has no vegetation higher than your ankles. The locals are in the process of converting their economy from coal mining to adventure tourism. Every business is competing to be the world's farthest north. We flew into the farthest north airport with scheduled service and stayed at the world's farthest north full-service hotel. There are 2300 human residents and 2500 polar bears. Regulations require you to carry a rifle outside the settlement and register your travel plans with the government. Humans are not at the top of the food chain in Svalbard.

We took a boat ride to the face of a glacier and the Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg. 700 Ukrainian miners live there in decrepit Soviet-style apartments. The Norwegians believe that the operation is not commercially viable. The reason for Russia supporting the town is unclear. There are many theories from this being a cover for spy operations to just staking a claim in case something more valuable is found there in the future. I used my ten-word Russian vocabulary and best smile to greet several passing miners, but no one would smile back.

Before the trip, Rich's friend Hugh Bauer had taken him to a rifle range for some weapons training and target practice. The plan was to rent a rifle for hiking in the mountains. At the range, Rich placed 39 out of 40 bullets in the center circle of the paper target, so Cheryl was satisfied that her life was not in jeopardy. Unfortunately, the place that rented weapons was closed when we arrived. Instead, we followed a well-armed group from the Norwegian Coast Guard vessel visiting the town and stayed near them for a hike to the top of a ridge. We saw several reindeer, which are herbivores, but no polar bears.

Under the Svalbard Treaty, Norway cannot charge the same outrageous taxes on alcohol as they do on the mainland. Instead, in Svalbard, alcohol is rationed. This policy was originally intended to keep the miners relatively sober. Locals have a red ration card that is punched at the liquor store before checking out. They can buy one bottle of liquor and 24 beers each month. We had to show our plane ticket that was stamped and signed by a government official.

On our last day we bought a disposable charcoal grill and grilled hot dogs on a rock on the outskirts of town. We watched cautiously, but the smell of cooking meat did not attract any furry friends. We did see a stuffed polar bear at the entrance to the church.

We returned to Tromso and boarded another ferry. Twelve ships make the twelve-day round-trip journey between Bergen and Kirkenes, so another is along every 24 hours. We spent three and a half more days visiting small towns and lighthouses and sailing through the spectacular steep, narrow fjords for which Norway is famous. This fjord cruise is popular with retirees, but not many young people. Perhaps the reason is the cost. Some ships run year round, and it's cheaper in the winter. Of course, the sun never rises for much of the winter, so it would seem to be a false economy. I suppose that not everyone can afford the price of Norwegian social justice.

The final two days were spent in the city of Bergen, situated in a valley surrounded by seven mountains. Bergen is deservedly a UNESCO World Heritage Site. They have lovingly restored the old section of town. We visited several small museums and did some hiking in the mountains. Norwegians are not afraid of exercise and we saw lots of small children on hills most Americans would not climb. We took a seven-hour train ride from Bergen to Oslo. There were lots of streams and waterfalls. High in the mountains, some of the lakes were still frozen in July. It looked like great hiking, but we needed more time. It was almost enough to tempt us into returning.

Political correctness is apparently not part of Norwegian culture. Billboards here declare that if you drink Pepsi Max (whatever that is) through a straw, they'll "Kick your \_ss." Midgets are used to symbolize low prices. McDonald's has a TV ad where a mother walks into a bathroom and accidentally bumps a toilet seat that smashes her young son's privates as he is relieving himself. She makes up for it by taking him out for a Happy Meal. Tipping is also not part of the culture. We stayed in some top hotels and never saw a bellboy. People seem to be working very efficiently, and standing around waiting to hustle a tip is not perceived as adding sufficient value. Taxes definitely are part of the culture, and most everything is taxed like nowhere else. We left wondering what's different between Norway and the US? Why do the people trust the government to take care of everything? How can Norwegian politicians raise taxes endlessly without jeopardizing their re-elections?

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