

The VIKING EXPERIENCE

Riding in one of the most spectacular places on earth with Edelweiss Motorcycle Tours



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Norway is one of those places that, I think, judging from those I've spoken with, is a destination on most people's bucket list. The appeal is the rugged Nordic landscape and out-of-control scenery, the fjords, and its ancient history. For me, a trip to Norway is one that I've waited a long time to come to fruition.

My reason for being here was to participate in an Edelweiss motorcycle tour, aptly called the Viking Experience that ran from Alesund to Oslo. The night before the tour started, I met

FAST FACTS

INLAND WATERWAYS

There are 1,190 fjords in Norway — the highest density in the world — and each one offers incredible beauty. The country also boasts the deepest and longest fjord — the uber dramatic Sognefjord, which is 204 km long with a depth of 1,309 metres. It's known as the King of the Fjords. Because of these sea arms, Norway's coastline measures an incredible 75,000 km.

THE VIKING EXPERIENCE PARTICIPANTS

Thanks to everyone who participated in the tour. In alphabetical order: Jeffrey Barker and Deborah Holmes, Ontario; Craig Bridges, California; Kristine Ellis, Ontario; Scott Fishman, Massachusetts; Ross Fleming, Ontario; Glenn Roberts, Ontario; David Rousay, Ontario; Fernando Salamanca, North Carolina; Christopher and Trudi Seiwald, California; And much thanks to our amazing Edelweiss guides: Angela de Haan, Austria; Arild Korstadhagen, Norway

DAY BY DAY

DAY 1: Arrival in Ålesund
DAY 2: Ålesund to Geiranger – 150 km
DAY 3: Geiranger to Fjaerland – 245 km
DAY 4: Fjaerland to Bergen – 315 km
DAY 5: Bergen - rest day
DAY 6: Bergen to Sola – 405 km
DAY 7: Sola - rest day – 220 km
DAY 8: Sola to Vrådal – 325 km
DAY 9: Vrådal to Oslo – 280 km
DAY 10: Depart from Oslo

Because of small roads, traffic patterns and slower technical manoeuvring, riding in Europe is far different than riding in North America, where you can cover great distances in a reasonable amount of time. Our longest day in the saddle during the Viking Experience was the 400-ish km from Bergen to Sola, which took around 11 hours.

NEVER STOP LEARNING

The one really cool thing about motorcycling is the skill level to operate efficiently is always ongoing. Edelweiss offers multi-day advanced rider training in three European regions — Italian Alps, Spain's Andalusia region and Spain's Tenerife region. Sign up for the course while your better half enjoys the local sights. Go to edelweissbike.com for further information on this tour and many more.

A GLOBAL LEADER IN EV SALES

Walk down any city street and you won't hear many vehicles. That's because as of June 2022, 90 per cent of all new car sales in Norway are electric. Furthermore, the country has legislated an end-date of 2025 for new passenger gas and diesel-powered vehicle sales, including hybrids. During one of our fjord crossings, even the ferry was electric. As the ferry docks to unload and load vehicles, a huge cable attaches to a tower on the ferry to charge before making its way to other side and repeat the process. That ferry is dead quiet and without a single vibration. There are more than 60 electric ferries plying Norway's fjords.



No railings needed. The crew perched 1,500 metres above sea level on Scandinavia's highest road above Geirangerfjord far off in the distance. (above left)



Mountaintop view of Alesund. Most of the town burned down in 1904 and was rebuilt by a number of European architects making for a wide variety of building styles.

my fellow travellers at the first night's hotel, where we also met our tour guides, Angela and Arild. Both are highly experienced in their field, with many years guiding guests in many parts of the world with Edelweiss.

My regular ride at home is a BMW R1250GS and, while BMWs are the bike of choice for many tour companies, on this trip I chose to ride a Honda Africa Twin 1100 — why ride the same thing that I ride at home? With the exception of a Ducati 950 Multistrada, every other rider chose the 1250GS as their ride for the tour, and for good reason. It's an exceptional touring bike.

I researched some of what to expect during my time in Norway, but as it turns out, I really didn't need to spend much time searching for information as Edelweiss sent its tour participants a very complete 68-page tour booklet describing all aspects of the country, from road and traffic rules to currency and history, expected weather and the type of clothing to bring — just about everything a person would need to know when going to a foreign country.

Switchbacks at Every Corner

Hairpin turns are something you can't properly practice to any degree in

Canada. Of course, you can practice slow-speed turns till the cows come home in an empty parking lot, which I did the day before leaving for Norway, but it just isn't the same as ascending or descending a mountain road while staying in your lane to avoid oncoming traffic. And if that traffic happens to be a full-on luxury passenger coach, then you'd better be looking through the turn — almost backwards — and taking appropriate action, because there is no way a motorcycle is going



Free range cattle, sheep and goats were a common occurrence in Norway.

to win that battle. It's quite a sight to see the bus drivers navigate these corners. Sure, there are hairpins sporadically located in Canada, particularly in the mountains of B.C., but not to the intensity or frequency you'd find in mountainous European countries.

The Tour Starts

We wasted no time getting into hairpin corners: within minutes after getting on a new-to-me bike we were ascending the mountain in the small city of

Alesund to the towering lookout high above the city for an amazing scenic view of the centuries-old buildings and surrounding islands. Now, learning how to deal with switchbacks on your own bike that you already know is one thing; throw a passenger in the mix, and we have a whole other ball game.

I signed up for this as a solo rider, but that plan changed a few months before go-time. My passenger was Kristine, who I've known for about 20 years; her riding partner couldn't make the already-booked tour. In addition to wanting to see part of the country, she had an important personal interest in going to Norway, and talked about renting a car instead; that just didn't seem right to me, so I volunteered to take her as my passenger. Now, I'm pretty adept at riding anything with two wheels and a throttle, but being immediately thrown into city switchbacks on a new-to-me bike along with a passenger presented a challenging learning experience.

Switchbacks

There are many distinct things on this tour that make travelling in a foreign country so much fun, and Edelweiss are masters of making tours that are

unique, organized and entertaining. Switchbacks would become a daily occurrence during this tour, with sometimes several dozen of them in a single day.

One thing I did struggle a little with was the Africa Twin. Finding the sweet spot of the proper gear for dealing with the many inclined switchbacks, especially climbing the side of a fjord, was challenging. First gear seemed too low, but second felt too high. Descending was, of course, much easier. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect, and after a few days being bombarded with hairpin turns, it got much easier.

Remember I mentioned earlier that nowhere in Canada can you find this number or intensity of switchbacks? Take Day 3 for example, when we rode 13 hairpins with a 20 per cent grade in just 2.5 km.

Standout Days

While all of our riding days were outstanding, some days were more prominent than others, and our first and second days of riding were a couple of them. We boarded a ferry on the first day for a one-hour ferry ride into the Geirangerfjord, the most famous fjord in the world and

Norway's most famous landmark. Sheer rock walls 260 metres high on both sides and countless waterfalls make this one of the reasons I wanted to experience Norway. The fjord is surrounded by mountains that range from 1,600 to 1,700 metres above sea level. The natural beauty of the area is astounding.

Once we landed in Geiranger we immediately hit the "Eagle's Road" — 11 switchbacks that climb 620 metres to a lookout overlooking the fjord and the ferry we had just arrived on. While this was spectacular, it was nothing compared to the next day's ride overlooking the same area.

Other than the ferry, there are two ways into Geiranger: the Eagle's Road, also called the winter road, which is open year-round (although I can't imagine going up or down it in winter); and the Geirangervegen, or summer road. At the top of the 16 km ribbon of twisty tarmac is a toll road that climbs to 1,500 metres and is the highest road in all of Scandinavia. From the skywalk viewpoint, the large cruise ships in the Geiranger harbour we had just left were just long dots. If you dare, you can walk on the glass floor — or, better yet, jump on it when



Snow along with ice cold mountain lakes and rivers were all in a day's riding but surprisingly the air was warm and it didn't seem cold.



After being in so many tunnels, on-ramps and off-ramps were no longer surprising, but this was the first roundabout we encountered, which was the lead up onto the Hardanger Bridge.

your fellow travellers are nervously standing on it.

On Day 7, after an extremely twisty mountain top road littered with large round boulders as far as the eye could see, only separated by small mountain lakes, we began a 32 km descent through 27 switchbacks from the top of Lysefjord to the bottom at Lysebotn, a drop of 640 metres. Some of the road has a 16 per cent grade and is single lane, including inside an 11 km tunnel, which also has a switchback inside it. There are pullouts to allow oncoming vehicles to pass, but traffic was minimal. At the bottom is a ferry dock but that wasn't part of our plan, so we turned around and tackled this masterpiece of roadway back up to the top. It isn't for the faint of heart, or for those who suffer from vertigo.

I should mention that if you're not fond of heights, then maybe Norway isn't in your best interest, as there are many times you'll be riding at the outside edge of a road with steep drop-offs. But there are guardrails — most of the time.

Norway is a Boring Nation

And I don't mean for a second that it isn't exciting. Another unique aspect of Norway is that it's a nation of tunnel-builders. Why go over or around a mountain when you can simply go through it? To be fair, two thirds of Norway's landscape is mountains, many of which are impassable. Or, why take a ferry across a fjord when tunneling under the water to the other side is an option?

My first experience with tunnels was when the airport shuttle into Alesund entered one. I didn't think much of it at first, but it was obvious we were descending a steep grade, then we levelled out and immediately began to climb back to daylight.

The Alesund area comprises seven islands, and the airport is on one of them. Alesund, of course, is on another island. The first of two tunnels I experienced actually went under the ocean and exited on another island. While this was my first experience with Norwegian tunnels, it certainly wouldn't be the last.

I would soon learn that tunnels would be as common on a day's ride as switchbacks. In fact, fellow rider Trudi

lost count at 33 tunnels that we passed through in one day. The tunnels we rode through ranged from 100 metres to over 11 km long.

Luckily, we didn't see any free-range goats, sheep or cows in a single tunnel, unlike most everywhere else we rode. Fortunately, they aren't skittish of vehicles and never caused a problem, except for when three sheep ran through some trees and down a bank onto the road right in front of me and Kristine. Hard on the brakes averted disaster.

Weather Permitting, I'll Take the Mountain

Depending on weather, part of Day 3 was to go through the 24.5-km Laerdal



The quaint Fjaerland Fjordstove Hotel. This small village of Fjaerland dates back to the Viking Era.

tunnel — the longest road tunnel in the world — but the weather was on our side so we forfeited the tunnel for a 50 km ride over the mountains, riding past barren rock and tundra vegetation and spectacular views. I'd rather ride over a mountain than be stuck in a crazy-long tunnel like a gopher any day. In saying that, at 1,300 metres above sea level, there was still plenty of snow on the ground and we would have been at the mercy of the weather gods as the top of the mountain was wide open to Mother Nature if the weather decided to change.

While I didn't see the sign, Chris got a glimpse of one at the bottom of a tunnel going under Stavanger that indicated we were 230 metres below sea level. Apparently in the near future that won't seem so deep, as a new one is under construction



At 1,380 metres long, the Hardanger Bridge is the longest suspension bridge in Norway. You enter and exit each side via tunnels into the adjoining mountains.

that is 392 metres below sea level, complete with a 3.7 km spiral-shaped tunnel with a rise of 250 metres that is scheduled to open in 2026.

For a lengthy stretch, we were riding along a mountaintop ridge with massively deep valleys on each side so steep we couldn't see the slope, which

rose up again to a ridged mountain on each side. The world around us was so vast, making it impossible to fathom the distance between mountain tops, but it reminded me of standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon knowing it's several kilometres to the next ridge but feeling as if you almost reach



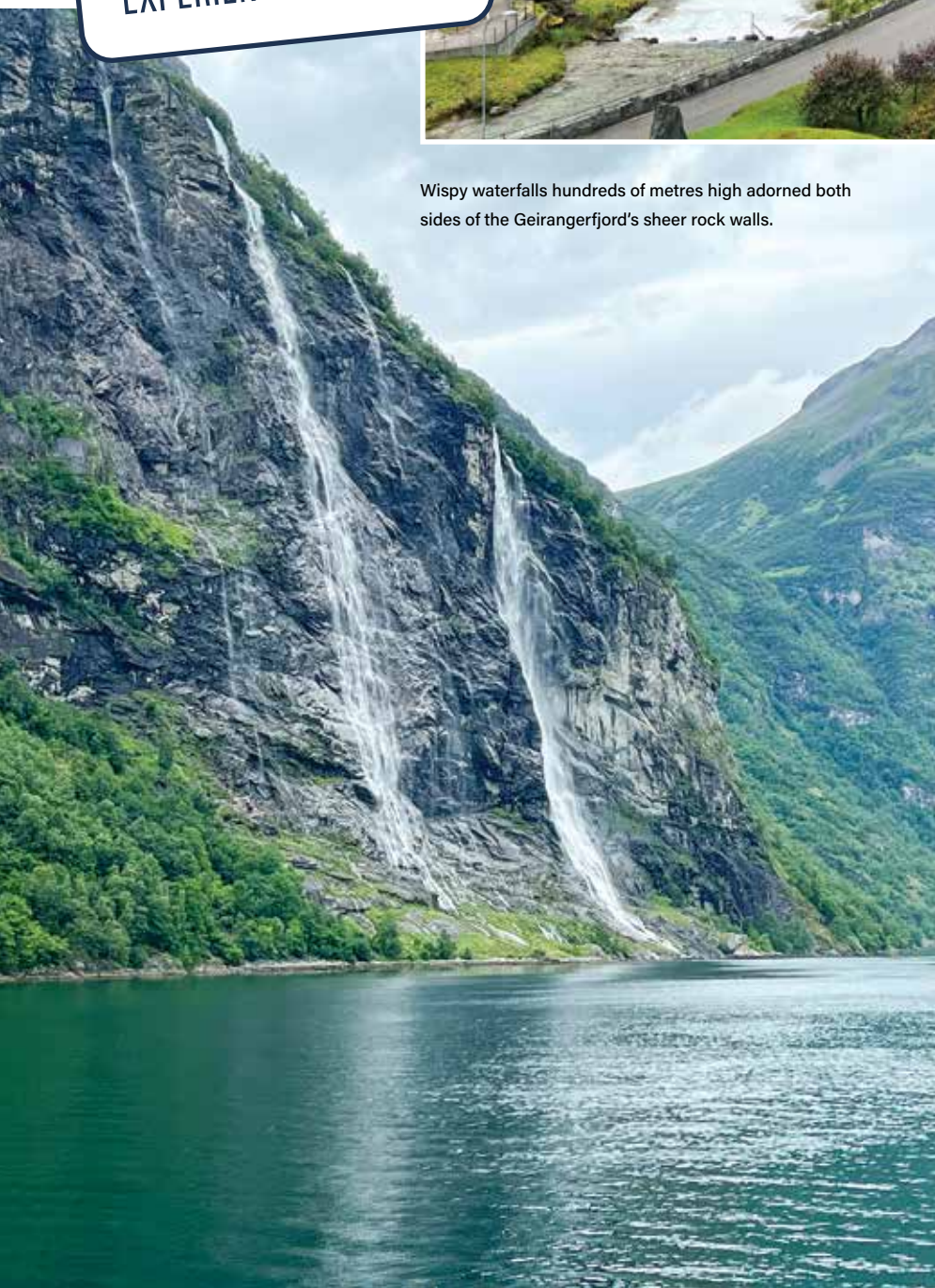
The restored storage houses on the Bergen wharf. The city was founded in 1070 but trading may have started as early as 1020. Bergen was once the capital of Norway in the 13th century and was a bureau city of the Hanseatic League, which was a medieval commercial and defensive confederation of merchant guilds and market towns in Central and Northern Europe.



“SHEER ROCK WALLS 260 METRES HIGH ON BOTH SIDES AND COUNTLESS WATERFALLS MAKE THIS ONE OF THE REASONS I WANTED TO EXPERIENCE NORWAY”



Wispy waterfalls hundreds of metres high adorned both sides of the Geirangerfjord's sheer rock walls.



out and touch it. I had nothing in my memory bank that I could relate the sheer vastness to. It was all very surreal.

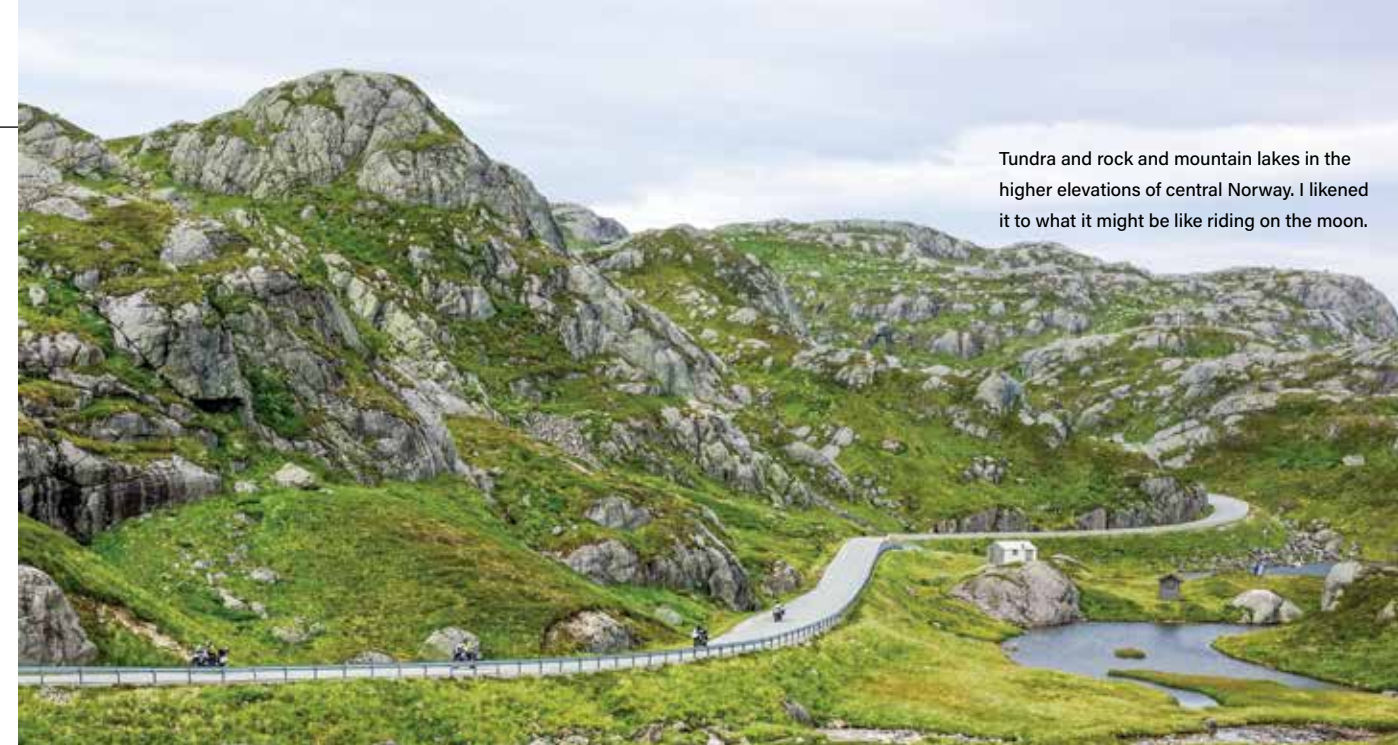
The Most Bizarre Tunnel So Far

After a while it wasn't a surprise anymore to see on- and off-ramps in tunnels, but Day 5 threw us a curveball. The craziest tunnel so far appeared when we were heading to the Hardanger Bridge. At 1,380 metres long, the bridge is the longest suspension bridge in Norway, and the tenth longest in the world, as it crosses the Hardangerfjord.

A fjord depth of more than 500 metres prevented any supports in the water and therefore the support towers had to be built on the fjord walls. To make it even more unique, there isn't any visible road at each end of the bridge. You enter the bridge from a tunnel and exit into a tunnel — both of which you access from a roundabout inside the mountain on each side of the fjord. It's simply unbelievable.

Rest Days

This 10-day tour consisted of two rest days, which allowed tour participants to relax any way they chose. Our first rest day was in the 1,000-year-old port city of Bergen. Bergen is the second-largest city in Norway, and while I am not a city person, I was expecting a large city and wasn't looking forward to riding into the heart of it. But it was



Tundra and rock and mountain lakes in the higher elevations of central Norway. I likened it to what it might be like riding on the moon.

like riding into a big town and getting to our downtown hotel was extremely easy. This UNESCO World Heritage Site dates back to the year 1070, and today, the colourful Hanseatic wharf is a beautifully vibrant remnant from when Bergen was a key centre for trade between Norway and Europe.

The wharf houses, which were once storage buildings, are now museums, shops, galleries, and restaurants, and are a focal point of the town's harbour. While some buildings were being restored, others were slanted and

crooked and looked pretty sketchy, but through previous restoration were solid and safe — I think. Just be prepared to walk on slanted, creaking floors and crooked stairways.

Just two days later was our second rest day at the Sola Strand Hotel, located right on Sola beach. Arild, who is Norwegian, told us that beaches in Norway are few and far between and this beach is probably the nicest in the country, so it shouldn't have come as a shock that the locals and every tourist in a wide surrounding area would

visit, plugging up every inch of roadway and parking lot, making the traffic jams beyond ridiculous. Another good reason to be on a motorcycle.

Rest Day Options

During the Sola rest day we had options: We could participate in a very strenuous, uphill four-kilometre hike to the top of Preikestolen, and one of the most famous lookoffs in the whole country. Being as it was a beautiful Sunday, Arild, who was hosting the hike, said it was likely to be very busy. Most of the crew chose this option and confirmed it was quite busy, with a massive line up at the top in order to snap a selfie with no one in the background.

David apparently didn't get the memo about the line up and walked past everyone, sat on the edge of the sheer rock wall at 604 metres above the Lysefjord and took a photo while people behind him in the line up yelled at him saying they waited for an hour and half to reach this special photo spot.

Having a beach day was an option, as was heading into Stavanger, Norway's fourth largest city, to shop. I don't think anyone took either of these.

The Best Option

While the hike up to Preikestolen sounded appealing, the option that appealed most to me and Kristine, and Jeff and Deb was to go for a day's ride with Angela. Just three bikes in



Kristine and I and the Africa Twin taking a break on Day 2 of the Viking Experience Edelweiss tour.



Built in the early 19th century, the Terland Klopp is a 60-metre-long dry-set stone slab bridge with 21 arches and is the longest and best preserved stone slab bridge in the Nordic countries. It was decommissioned in 1977.

the group, and following Angela was such a treat. Professionally trained by Edelweiss' own training centre, her favourite roads are in her backyard of the Alps. Combining all of this with 13 years of Edelweiss guiding experience all over the world makes her an amazingly competent rider.

While leaving Sola, the landscape along the oceanfront flattened out

and presented cash crop and livestock farms, but Angela soon found roads that rivalled anything we had been on to that point, albeit without ascending and descending sheer rock faces of mountains and fjords. Many of the roads we experienced were single lane (with pullouts for oncoming vehicles), bi-directional roads carved out of solid rock cliffs that rise out of the ocean



The road with 27 switchbacks, including one inside a tunnel, ends at the town of Lysebotn way down below.

“TAKE DAY 3 FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN WE RODE 13 HAIRPINS WITH A 20 PER CENT GRADE IN JUST 2.5 KM”

creating tight, blind corners — on one side of the road is water and the other side is a rock face.

It was exhilarating riding following Angela. I must say: I think this was my favourite day of the whole trip, but with the slow speeds and constant concentration, it was hot riding, with temps in the mid- to high-20s.

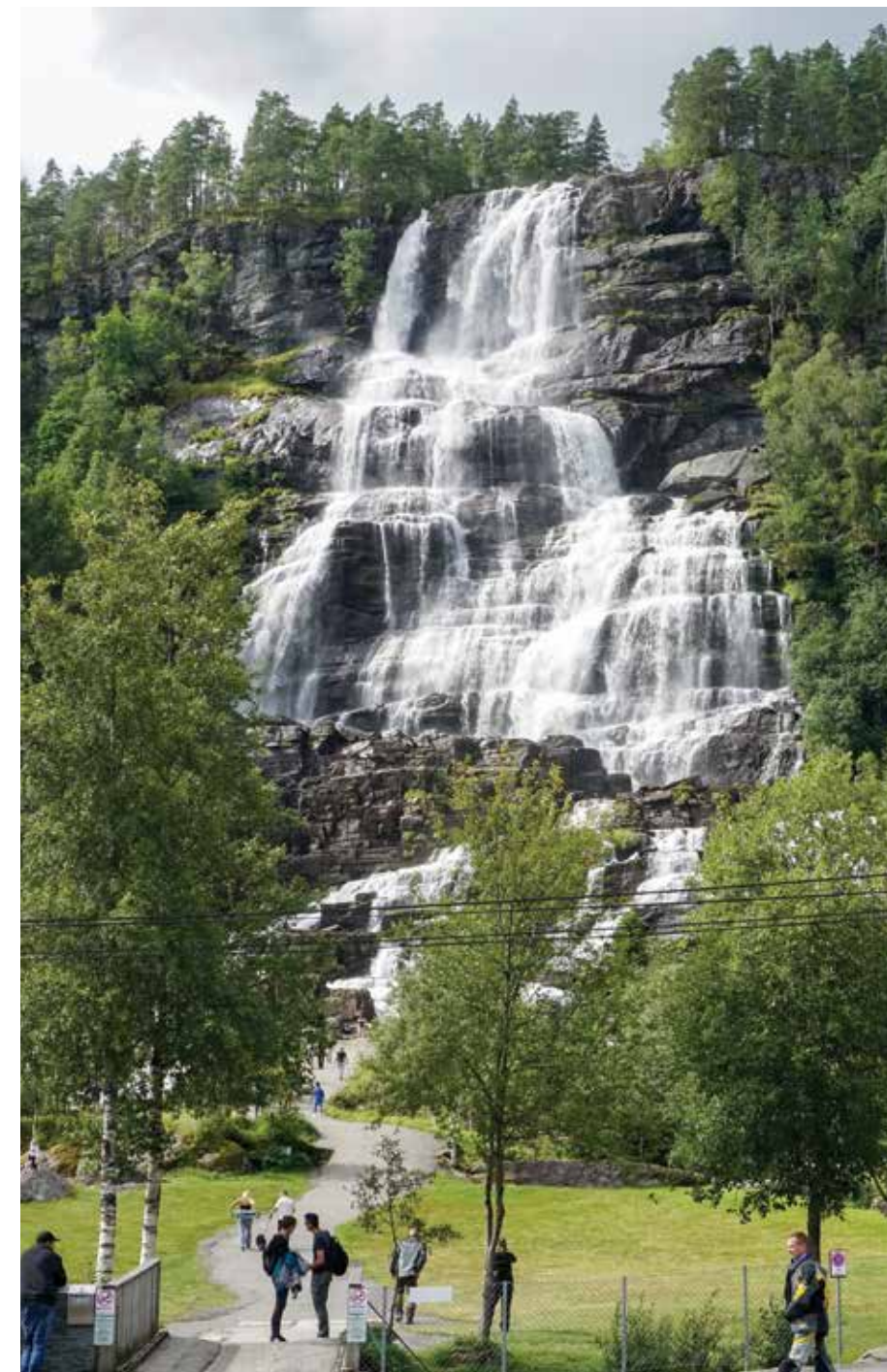
Moderated Temperatures

Considering the areas of Hardanger and Telemark that we were riding in is the same latitude as the southern borders of Yukon and NWT, it was surprising to see so many mountain valleys host to fruit orchards growing apples, pears, plums and cherries, and more. The Vikings apparently grew apples but a few hundred years later the Norwegians branched out (no pun intended) to grow a wide variety of fruit.

Norway's coastline is warmed by the gulf stream which provides a climate with dry and cold winters and comfortably warm summers. This might explain why almost all of the roads we were on were in pretty good condition when compared to Ontario's and Quebec's crumbling and potholed tarmac.

The city of Bergen records rain a whopping 265 days per year. We got lucky as our rest day there was just

overcast, but our luck ran out on the last day of the tour. We started the day leaving Vradal in the Telemark region on our way into Oslo in pouring rain, and it didn't let up the whole day, making the riding, and especially the switchbacks quite slow. Halfway through the day it was by a unanimous decision to give up the regular tour's scheduled ride and make tracks for our final destination of Oslo.



Magnificent waterfalls are everywhere in Norway, some of which are the tallest in the world.

The Benefits of an Organized Tour

Of course, food is a major highlight on any tour and it was all great, but in my humble opinion, the best food on this tour also coincided with the most unique place we stayed. The second night of the tour our accommodation was a quaint, old, waterfront hotel called Fjaerland Fjordstove in the small village of Fjaerland. Its food is all locally grown or caught, and the hotel's thin walls, creaky wooden floors and original skeleton keys just added to the charm along with its picturesque setting — I could see a glacier from my room's window.

Almost at the very end of an upper branch of the Sognefjord, which is the largest and deepest fjord in Norway, this small, out-of-the-way village, which has been settled since the Viking Age, is just one of the many reasons why an organized tour is beneficial to the occasional traveller.

Chances are you would never find little hidden gems like this on your own, or the roads we travelled on during the Viking Tour without the legwork of an organization willing to spend the time and effort researching and exploring for the benefit of its customers. You just have to show up with your riding gear and let the guides show you the best that an area has to offer.

There were so many experiences every day on this tour making it impossible to record everything in these pages. I've gathered just a few of the most memorable in these words and photos. I can only hope I've done the trip justice.

Norway is such an amazing place and, as mentioned before, the scenery and the riding so outstanding that I hope to one day return for a repeat visit. Would I book with Edelweiss again? — in a heartbeat. The tour company and its guides, Angela and Arild, were top notch, efficient, informative, and very organized. My only complaint was that the tour ended far too soon — there are so many more roads to explore. Check out edelweissbike.com for other tours. A 2024 *Mojo* tour is being planned. **MM**

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS OF NORWAY

VISIT: MOTORCYCLEMOJO.COM