

NORSE COURSE

THE BEAR CHECKS OUT THE LANDS OF HIS ANCESTORS WORDS/PHOTOS THE BEAR

“ Kine die, kinfolk die,
and last of all yourself.
This I know that never dies:
How dead men’s
deeds are deemed. ”
Elder Edda

In some places the incline is so steep that road builders had to include loops. This one has been bypassed, but remains as a photo backdrop for motorcyclists...



Pretty serious stuff. And we've only just started on the major Eddas, haven't even got to Beowulf. Surely there is a more light-hearted way of dealing with Scandinavia?

It certainly seems like it as I roll through southern Sweden from Göteborg along the E45 towards Trollhättan (Sweden's Hollywood, if

there can be such a thing) and further north, among bright, sunny fields that could hardly be more green and lush. Why would anyone be mad enough to go viking (yes, it's a verb too) when his home acres looked like this and promised such an ample harvest?







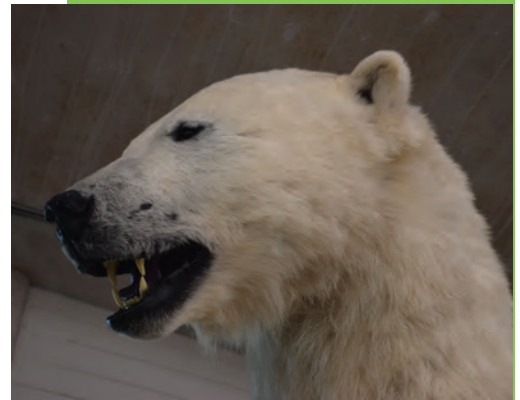


We follow the shores of the huge lake Vänern for a while and then cut across country to the Norwegian border. The signposting of the border is somewhat less noticeable than the littering signs – just a small board that says “Norway”. Ah, the very place we were looking for!

It’s mainly freeway (or rather tollway, but bikes are free) from here to Oslo, and once we’ve had a look at the futuristic-looking ski jump left over from some Olympics or other we slip over to our hotel, which is (partly) an historic wooden building, high over the city. Dinner that night is a buffet, as most of them turn out to be, and is wonderful. But then I am very fond of gravlax and various types of pickled herring; my ancestry is asserting itself.

“Pay attention; I will say this just once...” beer is staggeringly expensive at nearly \$15 a half litre. I will not mention this again; it still gives me stomach cramps.

The next day is a rest day, and I take the opportunity to visit the wonderful cross-shaped Viking Ship Museum which I could see far below from the front veranda of the hotel. It isn’t cross-shaped because it has any Christian relevance; the shape accommodates the four longships it holds, along with various paraphernalia. It’s a remarkable place, not least for the fact that the curatorial staff is quite prepared to



“Bears on bike tours? Ridiculous!”

Bring the Bearalong

My ancestry on my Father’s side is Scandinavian, which gave this a bit of an extra thrill. Getting to Norway is not especially difficult, or especially expensive. You can fly with SAS, for example, which offers joint services with other airlines (linking to its network outside Australia) and will take you to Göteborg via Copenhagen. I flew Qantas to London and then SAS to Göteborg. Australians do not need visas for Norway, and in my experience an Australian motorcycle license is sufficient. Make sure that your travel insurance covers riding large-capacity bikes; I use Travel Insurance Direct. I rode the Viking Experience tour as a guest of Edelweiss.

admit that the ships were originally preserved in an inferior way, and they are now deteriorating. One of the main purposes of the museum is to find a better way – fast. I believe they have also laser scanned everything for 3D reproduction.

In the car park there’s provision for motorcycle parking – and it’s free, unlike the car parking. I could get used to Norway, except for the price of the be... the bee... aargh. Oh, and the blood alcohol level for road users, which is zero.

I ride around the peninsula which holds the museum, and I can smell the money. You know how you can always tell when you’re in a wealthy suburb? Most of Oslo feels that way. And why not; the country has \$US800 billion in its sovereign fund. That’s enough for how many b... bee... aargh.



Clockwise from top left: Alesund, showing some of the art nouveau buildings – but sadly also some of the others. / Riding across a waterfall can easily soak you like a shower of rain. / Our hotel in Oslo was a beautiful old wooden building high over the city. / Your life or your lupins! The weir in the background holds water for the Telemark Canal. / Looking down from the amazingly steep Stahlheim road into one of the fjords. / Hearty fish paella is only one of the tasty dishes available at the open air market in Bergen. / Many motorcycle tourers visit Norway, both on solos and outfits or trikes.

That evening I'm sitting on the hotel veranda sipping an oddly flat Ringnes Lager and familiarising myself with the others on the tour. The second guide is an ex-military Dutchman called Ted, and the life of the party is a Canadian, Norm, who's on the tour with his American mate John. Sebastian is German, Fabio and Fatima are Brazilian and Izi is from Turkey. He confides to me that he has an R 1200 GS back home in Istanbul because that will get him out of the city when the next earthquake strikes, when a car wouldn't. Hard to argue with that!

COOL TO BE A CAT

As I sit there with my beer, checking out all the old Hueys (they're actually Bell 412s) fluttering around in the air above Oslo (they were there last time, too) I keep thinking – what a shame that I don't have a few more lives, like a cat. There are so many places left to ride...

We are warned about the heavy traffic next morning, heading south on the motorway. Hmm. Maybe the meaning of the word "heavy" changes as you get closer to the Pole, but in fact we slip through the moderately busy multi-lane road to Drammen, where we turn off towards Telemark and Numedal. In many countries this would be a transport stage, but there are few of those in Norway. There is always something to see and admire, even if it's just another transport medium – like, in this case, the Telemark Canal. Built effectively by hand, with the use of a minimum of machines, the canal connects Dalen on the North Sea with Skien on the Skagerrak, south of Oslo – with the judicious use of lakes along the way, and 18 locks.

This is picture book country, popular with the locals for summer holidays, but I manage to ruffle one bloke's feathers when I suggest that the comic book characters the Moomintrolls might pop out of the undergrowth at any moment.

"Moomintrolls are Finnish," he (almost) snaps at me.

"No, I saw them in the newspaper at the hotel," I say, misunderstanding.

"Not finished; from Finland," he corrects me and shakes his head. This is about as aggressive as Norwegians seem to get. Mind you, they hold a grudge.

Take one of the major attractions in Bergen, which we will reach in a couple of days: the funicular railway to the top of the hill overlooking the town. It was built after the First World War, and the train carriages were ordered from Germany in a deal written in German Reichsmark. Then mega-inflation hit Germany – but the factory stayed true to the contract and delivered the carriages for an amount that would literally (sic) not even have bought a box of matches. Fast forward to WW2: the Germans invaded Norway and put some anti-aircraft guns on top of that hill. Naturally they used the funicular to move troops and supplies up and down.

Without buying tickets, it seems. The outrage lingers today. But we're not in Bergen yet.

The weather shifts a bit as we cross the immensely scenic spine of the Norwegian peninsula, and the sky darkens. But we nevertheless enjoy the often stark and powerful scenery. We follow the Lysefjord, one of Norway's major fjords, and tackle its kilometre-high wall with 27 hairpin bends on the near vertical cliff.

Daily rides will prove to be quite long, and that's partly because there is a lot to see along the way. The afternoon of this day is just about the only exception; the ride out to our hotel just south of Stavanger on the coast is a bit of a transport stage. Mind you, the nautical Straand hotel makes up for a lot; my bedroom is just like a ship's cabin and the whole place is relatively small and cosy and right on the beach. Even though you can't see it. I cross the dunes and surprisingly find several people mucking about on the sand in the heavy fog. There are others sitting outside on the hotel veranda wrapped in blankets.

A query to one of the hotel staff – "Are they enjoying the fog?" yields a serious answer. "They are enjoying that there is no rain." Ah. It does apparently rain for 265 days a year – almost like

Strahan in Tasmania – so I suppose that's reasonable enough.

TO BERGEN, UNDERGROUND

Rain greets us in the morning, although it's not terribly heavy. We pass Stavanger, Norway's fourth-largest city with a population of 122,000 and made prosperous first by tinned herrings and then by offshore oil. You can get an idea of the relative population density by the fact that Perth, Australia's fourth-largest city, has a population of more than two million. Norway has just over five million people all up, in a total area of 385,000 square kilometres. Roughly the same number of people as Greater Sydney, in an area about half as big again as Victoria. You might think that there would be people everywhere, but in fact large stretches of Norway are just about empty – and that makes them all the more beautiful.

We saw plenty of that beauty on this day's ride; the intermittent rain didn't matter much because it did little if anything to hide the views. A lot of the time you're out of the rain anyway because you're in a tunnel. The Norwegian government has not stinted on road funding, and there are tunnels everywhere. The tunnel that leads to the spectacular new Hardanger Bridge boasts two roundabouts, right in the belly of the mountains and lit the same eerie blue that Australian public toilets



Clockwise from top: Izi passes one of the unfortunately almost endless lines of Armco fencing. / It seems to have shrunk considerably, but we can still see the remnants of this great glacier. / Fully equipped to go skiing, this scooter was "parked" in the Oslo hotel's lobby. / The power of water is never as obvious as in a waterfall; there are plenty of examples. ? Um – hello? The fog got even thicker than this on our way across one of the ranges.





use to make it impossible for addicts to find veins. I cannot imagine that that was what the Norwegian road builders had in mind!

I can't help taking the piss out of our serious and ever-helpful guides. "Not much further to Bergen," Manuel says at one stage. "Maybe an hour." I pop up with, "Is any of it above ground?" He's not quite sure how to take that; sorry, Manuel, it was a joke...

When we arrive, we put the bikes in a gigantic and brand-new underground (of course) parking garage. Manuel has told us that the hotel is directly across the street from the garage exit, so it comes as something of a surprise that he then conducts us on a pretty extensive walking tour of Bergen. He's got himself turned around, and left by the wrong exit. This is one of the very

few times when anybody complains, as a rebellious voice mutters, "It seems that 'right across the road' means 'nowhere bloody near' in Italian..."

Bergen is a very pretty place that suffers from too much tourist exposure, mainly by cruise ships. While the people in the open air market are clearly locals – both buying and selling – the staff in the restaurants and bars appears to be almost entirely sourced from backpackers. Backpackers who come from Melbourne. That can be quite charming when you can chat with your waitress about the Cats' chances for the pennant this year, but it's less so when people don't know their jobs. I ordered a bratwurst at one restaurant that arrived so undercooked that it resembled sausage meat in a condom.

While I'm getting over this culinary marvel, I notice that a small fishing boat called "Heineken" is delivering cases to the fish market across the water. So they catch it at sea, eh? Bet you, like me, thought they made it in a brewery.

The old Hanseatic quarter, consisting of a dozen or so wooden buildings, is terrific. The front shops sell the usual tourist crap, but as you penetrate further you start to find artists and artisans who are selling things they have made themselves. I bought a beautiful pair of silver and copper earrings for Mrs Bear, from the artist herself.

All in all, Bergen is worth visiting. Just don't expect too much of an authentic experience. And by all means take the funicular railway,



but make sure you buy a ticket – and don't talk with a German accent. And stay away from the bratwurst.

NO-PANTS BEAR AND THE LOCAL BREW

So, having dumped on Bergen, let's see what the rest of Norway has to offer. This is a wonderful day's ride, even including some more tunnels, and we end up in a small hotel in Fjaerland with which everyone immediately falls in love. They have their own beer, brewed for them at a craft brewery down the valley, but – get this – made with their own water, transported down to the brewery. That's style. Sadly, I am not able to equal the hotel's stylishness.

Our van, with our luggage, has been delayed and we only have our

Clockwise from top left: Bergen's Hanseatic quarter from across the busy harbour. / It isn't just Trollstigen that offers seemingly endless hairpins, a boon for bikes. / The late thaw meant that more snow and ice remained than usual. / See what I mean about Armco fencing? At least it does end some time!

motorcycle clothing to wear. Much as I like my BMW suit, I draw the line at that and press one of the hotel's towels into use as a kilt. Well, it were kilt according to me... I didn't really notice, but it appears that I scandalised a few other, older (?) guests. In vain I maintain that I am a Blank Scotsman, wearing my white clan tartan. Some of my fellow riders are introduced to akvavit that evening, and regret it in the morning, I suspect.



The Straand Hotel's figurehead appears to be La Stupenda, Dame Joan Sutherland.

Edelweiss Bike Travel

Based in Austria, Edelweiss Bike Travel claims to be the largest motorcycle tour operator in the world. I have no reason to doubt them; their range of tours is phenomenal. There are two different kinds of guided motorcycle tours: those conducted by the owners (like Beach's, GAMT and Ferris Wheels) and those run by hired help (like Compass and Edelweiss). Each of course covers different types of terrain, too. For the kinds of routes it covers, I think Edelweiss is the best. I have found the company to be highly customer-focused and well organised, with professional and helpful guides. Among other things, the key to your room is waiting for you when you arrive at the hotel, and your luggage is in your room. After a hot/cold/wet/dry day on the road, that is a welcome treat.

One of the other advantages of travelling with an organised tour is that you have pre-paid most things, and can therefore stay in classy and nice hotels without worrying what it's costing you! With Edelweiss, the bike, hotels and most meals are included in the tour price; the main expense that isn't, is fuel.

This tour costs approximately US\$6500; in my opinion, its value and the value of other Edelweiss tours is high. Of course the bastard Australian dollar makes everything more expensive than it was. Edelweiss Bike Travel is at Sportplatzweg 14, 6414 Mieming, Austria. +43 5264 5690, worldtours@edelweissbike.com, www.edelweissbike.com .



Love both the Glacier Centre and the little pub in Fjaerland; if you find yourself in the area, you can't miss either of them: the former has full-sized mammoths out front and the latter is the only pub in town. Don't forget to try that "local" beer; you can try drinking some of the water as a direct comparison!

One of the absolute highlights of the entire trip is on the following day: the short diversion to the hotel at Stahlheim. It seems that it took seven years from 1842 to build the six mile road with its 13 hairpins and 20 per cent grade. The view from the top, and from the road on the way down, is spectacular.

You might think that all the tunnels would make the ride less interesting, and in fact we did bypass the 24.5

kilometre Laerdale road tunnel (the longest in the world) by taking the route across the top of the range, on the original road. Riding through snow that's piled up at twice the height of you and your bike can be a sobering experience, especially when the air above the road is filled with fog – or rather cloud! The Edelweiss route notes describe it as "tundra and barren rocks; Arctic Norway on a small and twisty road." It is a huge amount of fun, especially when we stop for a snowball fight and a few snow angels by the side of the road.

Our guides seem to have an unerring instinct for choosing between the alternatives, above or below ground. The tunnels often add to the interest; disappearing into one solid rock wall and then emerging from another into

Clockwise from left: Yes, there is a rider in this photo – you can pick him by his safety jacket. / Many old roads, superseded by tunnels or highways, are still open. / There must be hundreds and hundreds of hairpins in Norway, but they're all different. / An iron chandelier in the famous tiny bur spectacularly beautiful Rose Church.

a different valley is quite a surprising experience. The weather quite often changes, too. That's good in this case, as it picks up noticeably after one of our underground excursions. We stop for coffee, and to admire the varying scenery. The small roadside cafés are mainly staffed by teenage girls who are every bit as competent and confident as teenage girls seem to be around the world.

RELEASE THE WATERWORKS!

It seems that the thaw is late and therefore particularly violent this year. There is still ice in high lakes that are usually open by this time of year, and waterfalls are particularly powerful. We see that in more than a few places, with water often spraying more than a hundred metres across and along the roads. Streams are running bankers, but there is no obvious sign of flooding so things can't be all that unusual. It looks spectacular – there is nothing quite like a giant waterfall, especially when you can ride practically inside it.

Just incidentally, my choice of the BMW F 700 GS has justified itself again. The bike is steady in all conditions, even mud, and manageable everywhere. I take a photo of one of the other riders at the beginning of a 15km section of thin mud (the only stretch without tar on the tour), pack the camera, pass him, take his photo again, repack the camera and pass him again before the end. I'm usually the careful one being passed... Maybe I'll have to buy one of these BMWs, one day. When (if?) I can afford it. I liked my G 650 GS.

Although it's hard to believe that this is possible, the scenery keeps getting more rugged and grand. Glacial landscapes tend to be quite huge anyway, and when you get high enough so that there are no trees or even bushes or grass to distract you from the view, they become almost overpowering. "Beauty" isn't really the word any more; perhaps "grandiosity" is better. You need to see this kind of thing to understand just how powerful landscapes can be.

He, he. There was a cruise ship tied up at one of the little ports we passed today, called the "Costa Fortuna". Hardly anyone got the joke. You get it, don't you? Good. That makes me feel better.

So, Geiranger tonight, among some of the most spectacular scenery on the planet. And tomorrow, the road I have been trying to get onto for several years: Trollstigen. But not until we have sampled Norway's best strawberry cake at café Jodaerstova.

AS EAGLES FLY (OR RIDE)

And even before the strawberry cake, there's Ørnesvingen, or the "Eagles' Road" which takes us up above Geiranger with 11 hairpins and many other turns. A new viewing platform has been built, much more sophisticated than the one I recall from my last visit, and you can walk out over the vertical drop on glass. Um. Okay. Instead of going back down to catch the ferry, we carry on; riding is too much fun.

And then we're in the wide open valley which produces most of the strawberries in Norway, and the café Jodaerstova is right in the middle of it. I will say no more for fear of incriminating myself, but Norwegian strawberries are a revelation to anyone used to our relatively bland ones.

Trollstigen, the "troll's ladder" is next. It is not immediately obvious what the ugly little critters would do with this 2500 foot high road with its elaborate, snake-like and elegant turns. The lookout at the top gives you an opportunity to see practically the entire road, and to marvel at the way many tourist drivers are all over it as they admire the views. A timely warning for motorcyclists. More on Trollstigen at another time.

We also get a look at Trollveggen, the Troll's Wall – at 6000 foot the tallest vertical cliff in Europe. Norway's trolls, by the way, are nothing like the Billygoats Gruff or Lord of the Rings kind of trolls. They're pretty peaceable, if occasionally mischievous, and they're unlikely to turn anyone to stone. If you see one you have probably overindulged in akvavit and forgotten Norway's zero alcohol limit on the road.

One of the wonders of the Norwegian countryside is the contrast between the lush and green fields on the floors of the fjords (where they're not covered by water) and the bleak, imposing stone walls that surround them – and then the rugged country at the top of those walls with its stunted pines and scrubby undergrowth. There is beauty here wherever you look, and Edelweiss has done a good job in finding some of the most spectacular examples.

We now follow Romsdalsfjord, and then cut across country to Alesund, and the end of our tour. Manuel takes us up to the lookout above the town to show us why it's renowned as an art nouveau showpiece; it burned down in the '20s and was rebuilt in the then popular style. It does look good, but unfortunately a lot of less attractive modern buildings are interspersed among the architectural gems. I ask Manuel where our hotel is.

"There," he sadly says, pointing. "The really ugly one..."

But it's comfortable, the way all of our hotels have been, and well located near the pedestrian zone. Handing back the bike keys later that day is a bit of a wrench.

There is so much more of Norway to explore. ●

