

Norway - In Search of the Northern Lights

By – Phil Swartz

March 17-18, 2017: from one Capitol to another - Tallahassee to Oslo

OK, so maybe one is a state capitol and one is national capitol. One is around 70 degrees and one is around freezing. One you are showered by sunshine and the other snow. One has a slight southern drawl and the other has a strong Nordic accent. You get the idea. Kids, we are not in Tallahassee anymore.



We flew into Oslo just after noon. The airport is 35 miles north of town and our hotel for the next couple of nights is downtown, so to get there we took the high speed train - 35 miles in 19 minutes. I love the trains in Europe. Always on time, quiet, smooth and a very efficient way to get around.

As is our custom to fight jet lag, after checking into our hotel, we immediately hit the streets to see the sights. We find that after a red-eye flight, the best way to get on the local time is to stay up until bedtime (or close to it anyway). We also like to experience a city on foot to get the real feel for it. We headed down Karl Johans Gate - it's the main pedestrian street in downtown Oslo. It runs from the Palace to the train station, so I guess it was built as the get-away route for the King and Queen in case of invasion.



To finish the evening, we were tired and wanted a great culinary experience to end our day. So where did we head? To the train station, of course! Actually, in Europe you can find all sorts of things in the train station - including some surprisingly good restaurants. This was one of those times. We ate at the , a local joint with some good food.

March 19, 2017: A Day in Oslo, Norway

We wanted today to be a nice, relaxing day. And it was. After getting up and having a good breakfast at the hotel (yes, Phil had his beans for breakfast), we headed out to see some of the sights in Oslo. In particular, we wanted to see a couple of the museums related to Norway's Viking heritage.



We first headed to the Kon-Tiki Museum. The museum was originally built to house the Kon-Tiki, a raft of balsa wood of pre-Columbian model that Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl sailed from Peru to Polynesia in 1947. Heyerdahl believed that people from South America could have settled Polynesia in pre-Columbian times. His aim in mounting the Kon-Tiki was to show, by using only the materials and technologies available to those people at the time, that there were no technical reasons to prevent them from having done so.

The poor guy spent years raising money for the expedition since most people thought he was nuts. But it turns out, in the end he proved his theory to be correct.

Another boat in the museum is a vessel built of reeds according to Heyerdahl's perception of an ancient Egyptian seagoing boat; Heyerdahl sailed from North Africa to the Caribbean after a previous attempt with the reed boat.

From there it was on to the Fram Polar Museum which houses a couple of the vessels first used to reach the Antarctic region. It was interesting to see the history of the seafaring Norwegians in the early days and what all they needed to contend with. They were certainly a determined bunch and tended to press on even when all reason would say STOP! The Fram Museum is centered principally on the original exploration vessel Fram. The original interior was intact so we could go inside the ship to view it.



Finally we visited the Viking Ship Museum where they have three OLD, OLD Viking ships dating back to the 700's AD. These were dug up from peat swamps where the old wood was well preserved. Again, it's just very interesting to see how people lived back then. The detail carvings on some of the items shown here is amazing.



After all the museums we were ready for some time outdoors, so we walked to the fortress and did some exploring. After walking around the old buildings and grounds, we were headed out when we rounded a corner and saw a bride and groom on the hillside. Well, this just didn't quite fit the setting until we realized they were there getting their wedding pictures taken.

After heading back to the hotel, we again were ready to finish our day with another great culinary experience, so where did we go? You guessed it - the train station! Believe it or not, there's a great little Italian restaurant in the station that Nat, Francis, Carol and I thoroughly enjoyed.

March 21, 2017: Heading from the North to the FAR North, Oslo to Kirkenes

Today is a day filled with activity. It's up early for breakfast and our flight to Kirkenes. We stayed at the Radisson Blu Oslo airport hotel last night and this makes it very convenient for our flight this morning. After breakfast, we simply walk across the street and into the airport terminal for the flight. We got our boarding passes and luggage tags last night, so there is nothing to do but drop our luggage and head to the gate.

Now to give you a little perspective on where we went, let's compare it to Alaska, a place you may be familiar with. Oslo is about the same latitude as Anchorage and we often go north in Alaska from Anchorage to Fairbanks. Well, Kirkenes is about three times farther north from Oslo than Fairbanks is from Anchorage.

After arriving at Kirkenes and checking into our hotel, we were ready for our first snow adventure - dog sledding. For this we went out to the Snow Hotel (more on this later) where they keep 172 sled dogs, every one of which can't wait to run. This is what they live for and when they see us coming they go wild with anticipation.



Our sled had eight dogs pulling it, and after meeting our musher and getting settled into the sled, we set off through the snow and ice. Over the hills and by the trees, the dogs loved to run and pull the sled. When we would stop for a minute or two to take a picture, the dogs would go to the side of the trail and roll in the powdery snow, or if they were thirsty, they would eat the snow. When it was time to get back on the trail, it was one simple vocal command from our musher and all the dogs jumped back in line ready to go. Then we headed out over the frozen fjord, flat as a pancake with nothing around but wide open space for the dogs to run.

And run they did!

Later this evening, we loaded into a motorcoach and went back to the Snow Hotel for a guided tour. Now the Snow Hotel looks like it's made from ice, but it's actually made from highly packed snow. We enter the front doors of the hotel and start our tour at the Ice Bar where they serve up a drink made from the local berries and our guide tells us about the creation of the Snow Hotel. It has about 20 Rooms that you can actually stay in sleeping on an ice bed with everything in the room being of ice. They provide sleeping bags for you and he claims most people think it's actually too warm!



After the hotel visit, our guide suggests that we head farther out in the wilderness, since it's now about 10 pm and we may be able to see the Northern Lights. So we drove for a while and then pull off to a parking spot and shut off all the motor coach lights... and stare at the black sky. So, here we are, a bunch of people from Tallahassee, sitting in the middle of nowhere in Northern Norway, quietly staring at a black, blank sky and wondering exactly why we're doing this. But thankfully, our guide has patience, and as we watch and wait, the sky starts to change. A green glow starts to show itself off to our right. And it grows, and moves, and shoots higher up twisting and turning. After while we see something happening on our left. But when we ask the guide, "No, there's no town over there. That's the glow of Northern Lights". And sure enough, suddenly, the sky on the left of us came alive with dancing and shooting Northern Lights.

March 22, 2017: The first time snowmobiling in the middle of the night.

This morning we are boarding our ship, but first, Phil needs to run to the airport and pick up some of our group that missed their trans-Atlantic flight due to the Delta computer going down. There were eight people and they all made it to Kirkenes for Phil to pick them up and make it to the ship before it sailed.

On the way back from the airport, just outside of Kirkenes, I saw what looked like a giant circular race course laid out in the snow. It must have been about a mile long, so I asked the driver what it was. Well, it's a giant circular race course... for reindeer racing. The native people of this area are the Sami and they are the only people allowed to own reindeer. Once a year, they have reindeer races here in Kirkenes and next weekend is the big event. I asked if they rode the reindeer or had a sled behind them. Neither! The driver is on skis being pulled by the reindeer. OK, so here instead of reindeer pulling Santa in a sleigh, we have reindeer pulling Sami on skis.



After boarding the ship, settling into our cabins and having dinner, we made a short visit to a port and watched them load and unload goods from the ship. Again this evening, the Northern Lights were out and could be seen from the ship. It was pretty cold outside, but worth going out on deck to see the lights.

This night we signed up to go snowmobiling. What? Snowmobiling from 12:45 to 3:15 am? Yes, we were driven to a shed in the middle of nowhere where we got heavy gear, boots and helmets for this wild excursion. After our training on how to drive, we're off. Carol is third in line and trying to stay up with the 20-30 mph. rate set by the leader. After about 20 minutes, the guide stops the convoy and tells Carol she's not driving fast enough. "OK, I'll try". It goes better after that. Stay in the tracks, keep a relaxed body, keep a close distance, stay the speed limit, oh my. After about an hour of snowmobiling we came to a place where the van picks us up and we go to a different shed and take off the gear. The ship is waiting for us at the next port. It's 3:45 AM. Time to go to bed.

March 23, 2017: Hammerfest—The Northernmost City in the World

Today was our first full day on the voyage and given that we are on a working ship, we made numerous stops at small ports to drop off and pick up all kinds of goods, cars and people. Most stops were just fifteen minutes, but the shortest was Oksfjord where we stopped for five minutes. If you are leaving from there, you better be ready to jump on when that ship comes in. Beside Oksfjord, other short stops included Mehamn, Kjollerfjord, Hommingsvay, Havoysund, and Skjervoy.



We also stopped at Hammerfest for a couple of hours. Long enough to do some exploring. Hammerfest is the northernmost town in the world, situated at 70 degrees north and it is also the oldest town in Northern-Norway, established July 17, 1789. The old Hammerfest was burned to the ground during the second world war and rebuilt in the following years. With less than ten thousand people, Hammerfest is a rather small town

One of the major problems in Hammerfest is reindeer wandering into town and eating the gardens at people's homes. To combat this, they have built fences around the town to keep the reindeer out. But sometimes they still get into it. If one is busy eating at your garden in the backyard, you call the mayor on his cell phone and he'll come right out on his pink scooter and chase them back out of town. Now that is something I would love to see... a reindeer running down the street being chased by the mayor on his pink motor scooter!



Later this evening we stopped at the town of Tromsø. We arrived a little before midnight and then went ashore to the Arctic Cathedral for a Midnight Concert. The acoustics were amazing and as the candle light flickered, this elegant church was filled with the sounds of the most beautiful Norwegian folk songs as well as some classical and sacred selections. All produced by three people - a soprano vocalist, a keyboardist and a cellist. It was 1:30 AM when we got back and it was time for bed.

March 24, 2017: Vesteralen & Lofoten Islands

Today was a great day for sightseeing. The weather, while cool, was bright and sunny. We started by visiting the port of Narvik and the Trondenes Church. This sits right on the water and with the snow covering the ground, it was magical.



But, some history. Remember that in WWII, Norway was invaded by Germany and this area became one of the battlegrounds. While the Germans occupied this area in 1942, work began on the construction of Trondenes Fortress and its gigantic Adolf Gun, which was intended to secure the northern sea approach to Narvik. The heavy labor was done by captured Soviet soldiers, in complete contravention of international law, of course. Flimsy plywood huts were built for these prisoners in 1943, and they were put to work under the most horrendous conditions. This was all happening on the ground adjacent to the Trondenes Church, so we got to hear all of this history.



One of the prisoners brought to the camp in 1943, upon seeing the dirty, cold and cramped huts, he wrote 'now is clear to me that we have been brought here to die'. And die he did. But his diary survived the war and lets us know what things were like there. Just outside the graveyard wall, north of the Church, is a monument to those who died. It commemorates the 800 men who lost their lives.

March 25, 2017: Crossing the Arctic Circle

A few days ago we flew from Oslo to Kirkenes to board our ship in the far north of Norway. We are now sailing south and today we will cross the Arctic Circle (from the north, of course). There is a very special ceremony on board to celebrate this event. You get to down a spoonful of Castor Oil as you cross the Arctic Circle. You don't often get to see that many sour faces at one time!



But let me tell you about an experience from yesterday. A couple of us from the group decided to join in an evening horseback ride. Now, when I say evening, remember that as far north as we are 'evening' means 'after dark'. So, in fact, we were going horseback riding in the dark. We left the ship in one port and headed down a fjord to get to our horses. When we arrived, we found the horses to be wonderful Icelandic Horses. These are stocky horses (think small Clydesdales) with thick, long hair. They love being outside even in the harsh weather conditions in Iceland. Running around at 40 degrees below zero does not bother them at all, so last night's temperature of 28 degrees is very mild for them, but not for us. Fortunately, we were dressed for the occasion and were not a bit cold.



We did a trail ride in the dark except for the moon and stars for a little over an hour. Along the beach, then up the hill through the rocks and snow. Across three foot wide bridges and alone narrow trails with six foot drop offs. It was fantastic. The sounds of quiet, the smell of the cold, fresh air, the view of the countryside fresh with snow under the moonlight, the sound of the horses hooves crunching through the snow and the bouncing of the strong, sure-footed horse under you all added up to a wonderful evening spent in a very unusual way.



March 26, 2017: Trondheim—Quaint wooden homes and a mighty Cathedral

The third largest city of Norway, Trondheim has 36,000 students that study at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). King Olav was buried on the banks of the river here in Trondheim and this was the future site of now Nidaros Cathedral. Later, his grave was moved and it was discovered that his hair and nails continued to grow. This led him to be canonized to Saint Olav.



Now while the Nidaros Cathedral was being build, there was one small problem. The architect was very afraid of heights. Not a good thing when you are building something reaching hundreds of feet into the air. So what did he do? Sent his wife up the ladders to measure things for him. But he was nice in that when designing the statues to adorn the front of the outside, he carved his wife climbing a ladder into one of the images. The Cathedral is huge. It has 3 pipe organs! The largest one is moveable; not the pipes, of course. We didn't get to hear those pipes but one can only imagine great organists coming here to play this monstrous thing. Also, the fact that it could be moved into the audience for all to see hands and feet playing is quite nice.



A little known fact is that Trondheim was the capital of Norway from 1030 to 1217. This old city with its narrow alleys and streets is one of the typical wooden cities of Europe. The houses along the water front are brightly painted and set the scene for the typical Norwegian town. This university town is both youthful and historical.

March 27, 2017: Bergen - "Gateway to the Fjords"

This morning we were sailing toward Bergen in the southeast of Norway. As we have progressed south along the coast, it has gradually become warmer, not only from being farther south, but also the influence of the Gulf Stream. Here in the southern part of Norway, the ocean current flowing up the eastern coast of North America and coming across the north Atlantic, warms the coastal areas of Norway so as to keep the ports ice-free throughout the winter. So this morning I was out on deck in my shirt sleeves instead of being bundled up against the northern wind and snow.



We passed a lot of beautiful scenes along the fjords this morning including a number of fish farms. These are portable farms that are located at one place for a year and then moved somewhere else to let the area recover. I guess if you have tens of thousands of fish in a small area for a year, it needs to recover from the fish poop!

One of the most notable things about Bergen is the history of the Hanseatic Quarter. These are German merchants and traders from the medieval times who had stores. One can just smell the baked breads, dried and spiced meats as you walk on the wood floors that now creak and groan with history. And what about the fine embroidered items the women made for the home? These Germans stuck together in one area and sold their items. The merchants controlled Bergen's trade from 1370-1754. It seems odd that the Germans had trade control for 350 years in Norway!



A very interesting fact is-the most popular surname in Bergen is the German name Hansen, "son of Hans". Be sure to see tomorrow's blog about our chance meeting with a "Hans".

March 28, 2017: Bergen - Meeting a very unusual guy



Today we did a walk-about through Bergen starting with the fish market along the harbor and then working over to the old German district. Along the way we wandered through some of the neighborhoods to see how the people of Bergen live. We also visited a silver workshop where the craftsmen were making silverware, rings, goblets and many other items from the silver -very interesting to watch.

We then took the Fleibanen funicular to the top of Mount Floyen, high above the city of Bergen. We made a few stops along the way since people got on and off, sometimes with their shopping bags. We passed homes and apartments so presumably they were going back home. It is interesting to note (pun intended) that Bergen is home to Norway's greatest composer, Edvard Grieg. Reading the music, you'll be sure to recognize his familiar tune he wrote.



After the funicular, we made our way to the Bergenhus Fortress protecting the harbor. Now the only time this fortress was ever involved in a battle was by mistake. The time was August, 1665 and there was a large fleet of Dutch ships that had sought refuge in the neutral port of Bergen. Well, it seems the cargo on board the ships was 36 Gold tons worth of spices, ivory and diamonds from Indonesia.



The English naval force attempted to capture the fleet and attacked the harbor. It seems that the Danish-Norwegian King Frederik III had approved the capture, in order to share the booty with King Charles II of England. Well, it seems the agreement between the two kings did not reach Bergen in time and the Bergenhus Fortress therefore had no choice than to defend Bergen's neutrality by giving a good thrashing to the attacking English forces and driving them back to the sea.

As we rounded a corner of one of the buildings we saw some sort of military type ceremony going on across the way. We watched for a few minutes and then I saw a gentleman standing back a little way apart from the group, so I approached him and merely asked if he knew what the ceremony was about. Well we ended up spending the next hour with him. He first told us about the ceremony - it was honoring the Norwegian men who went into Germany after WWII to help rebuild Germany. He pointed out that most of the people in attendance were in their upper 80s or over 90 years old.

The gentleman's name is Hans Jacob Derntsen and he gave me a copy of the program for the day (in Norwegian, of course). As we talked more, we learned that Hans was in the Norwegian military for many years and was also a long distance runner. In fact, he is known as 'the Iron Man' in Bergen as he would sometimes run Iron Man races and triathlons. He ran 300 marathons in his lifetime, but now he has had to quit as he was diagnosed with cancer. He is now 75 years old, but ran his 300th marathon at age 72 with an implanted defibrillator. An amazing man! When the ceremony was over the group of elderly men moved on into the building to the "Great Hall" for a luncheon. The building was closed to the public for this occasion, but Hans said he could probably sneak us in for a quick look at the Great Hall on the 3rd floor.

With that, he took off and said for us to follow him. Up until now, we had been standing in one place talking and I thought when we moved, it would be slowly. After all, this was a 75 year old guy with an implanted defibrillator who had just showed me the port in his chest used for his cancer treatment. But slow is not in this guy's blood. He turned and



off we, had to step lively to keep up with him. Up three floors we went, with Hans chatting with various people along the way and quietly motioning behind his back for us to come along and follow him. So we



did - us in our street cloths, coats, cameras and bags amongst all these sharp guys dressed to the nines in their best military uniforms. After a quick look at the Great Hall and a couple of pictures snapped, we did not want to overstay our welcome, so we harried on out.

March 29, 2017: From Bergen to Oslo

Today was the last day for this trip and oh, what a scenic day. We took the with a side trip to Flam. This train ride is rated one of the top five scenic train trips in the world, and now I know why. Rivers cut through deep ravines waterfalls cascade down the side of steep, snow-capped mountains, and mountain farms cling dizzily to sheer slopes. It just seems that with every turn you would see even more spectacular mountains and streams and



cliffs and... well, you get the idea.