

● A family travels to Norway with the ultimate tour guide: a Richfield man who was so struck by the country's beauty, he had to share it with others.

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A cool drizzle was falling as the little green train completed its ascent of the Flam Valley and creaked to a halt in the village of Myrdal. My wife, two kids and I stepped down from the carriage, crossed the railway platform and peered into the gorge below. I'd heard Norway called one of the world's most scenic destinations; finally, on day four of a family vacation there, I was convinced.

Sheer granite walls plunged 1,000 feet to a foaming river on the valley floor. Tufts of cloud drifted along the rocky walls, curling and uncurling among the stands of pine. Every turn in the zig-zag gravel path we followed back down the valley opened some spectacular new vista: a towering waterfall or a herd of goats with tinkling bells and curious faces. Our son and daughter, both fans of J.R.R. Tolkien, said it was as if we had stepped into a chapter from "Lord of the Rings."

That afternoon I understood why people who love the outdoors flock to Norway. I also understood that, even for travelers who are not intent on visiting the land of their ancestors, Norway has unforgettable attractions: enchanting villages, invigorating trails and mountain views that can stop you in your tracks.

That evening, dining on reindeer and salmon in Flam's Fretheim Hotel, my fellow hikers and I complained about the long descent and our tired legs. But by the time dessert appeared everyone was asking: "Where are we hiking tomorrow?"

Norway continues on G6 ►



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Mountains rise straight from the water along the Sognefjord, Norway's longest, deepest fjord and an endless source of scenic views.

NORWAY

ON FOOT AND FJORD



Northern Europe once had scores of medieval stave churches like this one, near Vik.



Marv Kaiser of Richfield has been leading Americans on Norway hiking tours for more than 20 years.



Kaiser's tours take advantage of invigorating trails and mountain views.

NORWAY, ON FOOT AND FJORD

◀ NORWAY FROM G1

We began discussing a trip to Scandinavia in 2004, when our son Sam was 10 and began Norwegian lessons at Mind-ekirken, the steadfast little Lutheran church in south Minneapolis. After several months he proved so diligent that my wife finally told him that he'd earned a trip to Norway.

Six years rolled by before the stars aligned themselves and we began planning in earnest — and then we were suddenly intimidated. We didn't really know where to go. Only Sam spoke the language. And what about Norway's daunting prices? Modest hotel rooms fetch \$250 a night and a simple lunch can cost \$40.

A few days later my brother mentioned that he and his wife had taken a great hiking trip in Norway some years earlier with a Richfield tour leader named Marv Kaiser. The next thing we knew, we had put down a deposit with Scandinavia America Travel and were attending Kaiser's pre-trip planning class.

Kaiser first traveled to Norway in 1985, chaperoning his son's Boy Scout troop. When he stood atop the Flam Valley, taking in the very vista that had so moved me, he told himself, "This is so beautiful, I have to bring people back."

Kaiser's group tour is not cheap: \$4,400 per person for 10 days in Norway and three in Iceland. But it included the essentials on our list: fjord country, Bergen, Oslo and the Jostedalsglacier fields. And after pricing airfare, meals and hotels, we knew we couldn't assemble a similar package for that price.

Kaiser has tweaked the itinerary since he and his wife, Jan, took their maiden voyage as tour guides — a rustic hiking adventure modeled on the Boy Scout trip. After returning to Minnesota, they asked their customers for feedback.

"Outdoor biffies, I think, were complaint No. 1," he recalls. "Americans like indoor plumbing."

A shopping coup in Bergen

Our trip started and ended in four-star hotels with distinguished pedigrees and groaning buffets. On the days when we had to cover more kilometers than hiking boots could handle, a chartered motor-coach carried our group of 30.

But the tour retains a home-grown and unpretentious feel, with a relaxed approach to the major sites and plenty of discoveries off the beaten path.

Our first full day, for example, found us high on a mountainside overlooking the village of Geilo, sheltering in a rock cleft, sweaty and winded from the brisk morning climb, enjoying a picnic lunch of goat cheese and rye bread while taking in the lovely valley below us.

In the winter, Geilo is Norway's equivalent of Vail, a popular ski resort in the mountain plateau between



The snow-custed moraines of southern Norway's higher elevations are crisscrossed by trails and footbridges.

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The beauty of the Flam Valley inspired Marv Kaiser to start group tours to Norway.

Bergen and Oslo. In the summer, its grassy peaks attract hikers with windswept moors, heather bogs and pine copses — all traversed with trails maintained by the Norwegian Mountain Touring Association.

Two days later we were steaming up the Sognefjord — Norway's longest, deepest fjord — on a local ferry from Flam to Aurland. Standing at the boat's iron railing, you can pick out tiny farms that cling to the steep hillsides and bright red fishing boats bobbing on the steely chop — all the while marveling at the way mountains can rise straight from water.

An hour later we arrived at Undredal, a little village that claims to be the goat cheese capital of Norway. If you've

never heard of Undredal, don't worry: Like many farming towns tucked back in the remote crannies of fjord country, it wasn't connected by road to the outside world until the 1980s.

At a little quayside café, we dipped our toes in the cobalt water before sampling four varieties of gjetost and warming up with homemade apple cake.

Our itinerary gave us just one day in Bergen, and we would happily have stayed longer. Not because there's so much to do there — Bergen is a modest city with a few good museums and a bustling 16th-century waterfront — but because it's the sort of inviting small European enclave where you want linger in the narrow lanes, quaint cafes

and elegant plazas.

Bergen was also the scene of our great retail coup. The grail of Norway tourist shopping is a hand-knit sweater — those beefy snowflake-and-reindeer pullovers made famous by generations of cross-country skiers. A tourist of Scandinavian descent feels disloyal without buying one, but at \$200-plus, they compel a hard-headed question: "Would I actually wear this back home?"

But one of the advantages of traveling with a group is that your companions become specialists — one finds the best local tavern, another masters the hotel Wi-Fi — and you can pool your intelligence. Our group included a team of intrepid shoppers who picked up an invaluable tip: Fine sec-



Martha Haegstad, a Bergen schoolteacher, serves as a trail guide and sometime troubadour with Marv Kaiser's summer groups.

ondhand sweaters often turn up in Norway's Salvation Army shops ("Frelsesarmeen"). There are two in central Bergen, one near the fish market and one near the art museum. Luck was with us, and for about \$40 my wife found a beautiful black-and-white cardigan that a native assured us would sell for \$300 new.

Norway's familiar traits

In Oslo, too, we had just one day and longed for more. It lacks the Old World charm of Bergen, but it's an immensely walkable city, with a fine imperial esplanade that descends from the royal palace to the harbor. The highlight was Bygdoy Peninsula, a stately residential precinct that houses several fine small museums — one with preserved Viking ships, one devoted to Thor Heyerdahl, and one that re-creates Norwegian village life from the 14th century, with farmhouses, craft shops and a lovely little stave church.

We had been warned that Norway might not be what we expected. After all, the place has changed since our ancestors left 150 years ago with their *rosemaling* trunks and *lefse* recipes. But we were surprised to find it so familiar — and not only because of all the blond women and taciturn men.

Frankly, I wasn't interested in Norway's past so much as its present — what sort of society my people had built with their oil wealth and socialist ideals. The answer? A green, efficient, cosmopolitan country full of polite and literate people — not so different from the state they helped build when they reached the New World.

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IF YOU GO

Marv Kaiser's Scandinavia America Travel Inc. can be reached at www.scandinavia-america.com or 952-893-6915.