

An old world of water near Art Nouveau

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gers of water left behind by retreating glaciers. But instead of a traditional cruise that would leave us shipbound, we decided to take day cruises from several small villages with interesting histories. That way we could drink in Norway's natural beauty and still have time to meet the hardy people — descendants of Vikings, we were reminded more than once — who inhabit this landscape that seems as much water as terra firma.

The train ride hadn't been high on our radar, but it turned out to be a stunner. In about 90 minutes the red and silver coaches descend 969 feet through the mountains to sea level. The journey started out innocently as we spied sheep grazing in gentle Vermont-like pastures. But soon the rounded hills gave way to steep, rocky peaks as the train followed a fast-moving river before twisting through a series of hairpin turns carved into the mountainsides. Scenery to the right, scenery to the left: We hardly knew where to look.

"Come back in the winter when you can see moonlight on the snow," the conductor told us as we said goodbye and toted our bags to the bus that would deliver us to the port of Alesund. The quirky town mixes a marine air (most of Norway's salt cod exports pass through here) with a surprising Art Nouveau grace. Spread across three islands, it's a perfect jumping-off point for cruising the fiords.

The full-day adventure from Alesund organized by 62° NORD was our hands-down favorite. We snapped photos to our hearts' content as we traveled through two fiords. We even had time to linger in the tiny village where one of the fiords begins its journey to the sea.

As soon as we boarded the sleek excursion boat, we followed the lead of our fellow passengers and grabbed chairs on the sunny deck. But we didn't sit long. Once we entered the Hjørundfjord, which cuts through a mountain range, we jumped up to prowl the ship for the best views of the peaks and valleys. Powerful families were said to have lived here during the Viking age, but tourists didn't arrive until the first hotel was built in the 1880s. The fiord remains remote. Boat sheds stand at the water's edge and small farms, many abandoned, claim the few flat spots. Our ship clipped



PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

along as the fiord drew us in and held us close.

Speed seemed to be the order of the day. When we arrived at the dock in Oye about 75 minutes later, a bus was waiting to take us overland to the car ferry that traverses the Geirangerfjord. Our speedy ship had arrived a few minutes late and the bus driver warned us that he would have to make haste along the winding road. He was visibly relieved as we reached our destination and scrambled onto the ferry as it was about to depart.

The Geirangerfjord is one of the two West Norwegian fiords named to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2005. The 10-mile-long, S-shaped fiord is one of the longest, deepest, and narrowest in the world. The trip on the Hjørundfjord had been an exhilarating rush, but this big and lumbering ferry set a more stately pace. Hypnotic folk music issued from loudspeakers as we waved to kayakers and scanned the steep mountainsides for farms. The story goes that one farmer had to reach his fields by ladder and tethered his children when they went out to play so that they wouldn't tumble into the deep blue fiord.

Fortunately, we were standing at the prow of the ship when we passed the Seven Sisters on our left. This group of seven 820-foot-high waterfalls plunges straight into the fiord. Opposing them on the right was the lonely Sutor, a shorter but equally dramatic single waterfall that splits in-

The Hjørundfjord, which cuts through a mountain range and where powerful families were said to have lived during the Viking age, remains remote. At water's edge are boat sheds and small farms, many now abandoned.

to two streams along a rocky outcrop.

The fiord peters out at the tiny settlement of Geiranger where the year-round population of about 250 can swell to 8,000 during the summer cruising season. The practical folks of Geiranger take their visitors in stride. We ate open-faced shrimp sandwiches in a restaurant located in the former Post Office and perused shops in former boat houses. To escape the cruise crowds we hiked to a small church above town where a couple from Oslo was tending to family graves. We had only to hike a little farther to reach — no surprise — a waterfall.

From the ferry, we had spotted the so-called "eagle's road" that twists its way from Geiranger into the mountains. We experienced it first-hand on

the bus ride back to Alesund. As the driver pulled the steering wheel hard at each tight turn we were alternately fascinated and horrified at our eagle's-eye view of the steep drop-off into the water far, far below.

The town of Alesund proved the wisdom of our decision to base ourselves on land. Almost completely destroyed by fire in 1904, it was rebuilt in three years in the Art Nouveau style then in vogue. The architects gave the buildings a twist by incorporating distinctly Norwegian motifs into the design. The Art Nouveau Centre of Norway, housed in an old pharmacy building, tells the story. It's equally illuminating to simply stroll the streets — one of the world's largest concentrations of Art Nouveau buildings — to look for images of fish, owls, and Norse gods that peer down from doorways and chimneys.

The open-air Sunnmore Museum offers a look at pre-Art Nouveau Alesund. The 50-acre site has gathered old buildings and boats to chronicle the coastal lifestyle. Amid the sturdy wooden homes, schoolhouse, and boat sheds — most with sod roofs in flower — we discovered a few small "church houses," where fiord dwellers would pause to eat and change their clothes after rowing into town.

On our final afternoon in Alesund, we made our way to the red-and-white striped Alnes Lighthouse, built of iron in 1936. At the cafe in the keeper's house we drank tea and ate cake from

IF YOU GO ...

Where to stay
Quality Hotel Waterfront
Nedre Strandgate 25-27
Alesund, Norway
011-47-70-111-900
www.qualityinn.com/hotel-alesund-norway-NO120
Fresh and modern hotel on the water within easy walking distance of the town center. Doubles from \$209.

Where to eat
Sjobua Brunholmen
Brunholmgtatt 1A, Alesund
011-47-70-127-100
www.sjobua.no
Cozy restaurant in an old wharf-side restaurant is known for seafood delivered fresh daily. Entrees \$52-\$60.
Brasserie Posten
Docks side, Geiranger
011-47-93-044-914
www.brasserieposten.no
Outdoor tables are especially popular in this casual restaurant in the former Post Office. Entrees \$19-\$38.

What to do
Rauma Railway
From the town of Dombas to Andalsnes
011-47-81-500-888
www.nsb.no/raumarailway
One-way fare \$39.
62° NORD
Dronning Sonjas Plass, Alesund
011-47-96-901-819
www.62.no
Fiord Experience \$162.
Art Nouveau Centre of Norway
Apotekergata 16, Alesund
011-47-70-104-970
www.jugendstilsenteret.no
Open June-August daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m., September-May Tue-Sun 11-4. Adults \$11.50, children and students \$5.75.

Sunnmore Museum
Museumvegen 1, Alesund
011-47-70-174-000
www.sunnmore.museum.no
May-September Mon-Fri 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sun noon-4, July only Sat noon-4, October-April Tue-Fri 11-3, Sun noon-4. Adults \$13, children \$5.
Alnes Lighthouse
Northwest tip of Godoy Island
011-47-70-185-090
Cafe in Keeper's Cottage open June-August daily noon-6 p.m.; April, May, September, and October open weekends only.

the recipes of the former caretaker's wife. Then we climbed to the top of the tower for a sweeping view of land and sea. We scanned the horizon in all directions — and there wasn't a waterfall in sight.

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