

THE NORWEGIAN FJORDS AND ARCTIC RUSSIA

Bergen – Hellesylt, Geiranger - Harstad, Lofoten islands – Tromsø –
Honningsvåg – Archangel – Murmansk – Kristiansund - Haugansund

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Text by John Biggs © 2015

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Bergen

Norway has a population of only 5.1 million, 1.1 million in the capital Oslo. Bergen is the next largest city has 270,000 inhabitants spread over a huge area connected by road, light rail, or boat.

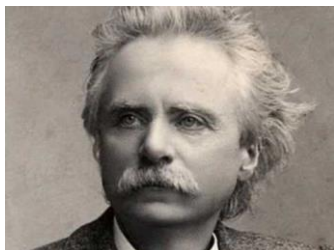
Norway split from Sweden in 1905 and for many years was the poor relation in Scandinavia. But then North Sea oil flowed voluminously late last century, and now it is the richest country per capita in the world, so we were told. If fossil fuels were dropped tomorrow Norway would be right because it invested a huge amount of oil and gas profits in a Futures Fund current value \$900 billion, which will see Norway through any foreseeable financial crisis. Scandinavian reason asserts itself once again. Norway is like the other Scandinavian countries a social democracy and very sensitive to climate change issues: electric cars aren't taxed or registered and they can use bus lanes, but the government is now finding they can't afford these generous concessions for much longer.



Bergen and its suburbs are situated inland on a network of fjords that must make it one of the most beautiful places on earth. The fjords are created by giant slow moving glaciers that gouge out deep valleys that are then flooded by the sea. Thus fjords have access to the ocean, are very deep and have high mountain walls whereas bays are shallow and not created by glaciers.

Although Bergen is further north than Stockholm it is grateful to be under the influence of the Gulf Stream. It never gets below zero and never above 25 degrees. It is a warm low twenties for us. We drove around the main sights in the morning taking photos of typical buildings and sights as best we could in a moving bus. Housing now conforms to the "Norwegian style", mostly wooden and painted the traditional red with cream trimmings (cheap) or white houses (expensive).

Bergenites are very proud of their composer Edvard Grieg. We are taken to his house *Troldhaugen* and his composing annex where there is also a Grieg museum. His annex has a grass roof which controlled temperature very effectively: we saw grass roofs on many older houses throughout Norway. In the country their animals graze on them. Grieg watches as we walk down to the beautiful scene at the fjord. We hear a piano playing inside Grieg's special room – but



not a ghost, we see him through the window. Unfortunately no photos are allowed inside Grieg's house. That Grieg chose this miraculous spot in woods, glades, rocks and water gives a great insight into Grieg's composing as he sat listening to the sounds of nature. He so loved the place he ordered he and his wife Nina be buried in a rock overlooking the fjord. Grieg was a tiny man under 5 ft., otherwise the Grieg template could be taken by an American for Mark Twain, by a German for Einstein but by a Norwegian only for Edward Grieg.

Here is a Viking Church: the Chinese-looking trimming are actually Viking. This particular building is quite recent, several churches on from the original which was built about 800 years ago. All were built entirely of wood, no nails and burned down. Here is the surviving piece of the church before this one, about one hundred years ago.

Downtown Bergen has an excellent market beside the harbour. An old sector has been lovingly restored with boutique shops, the buildings with pointed or stepped gables is the Hanseatic style.



One house is now a museum for the League. We are taken through a very dark three storied house, where the big deals were done. A room for apprentices slept two to a bed. The beds were very short as at that time it was believed unhealthy to assume the supine position of death in order to sleep so many slept sitting up. It also meant you could fit more sleepers into a room. The apprentices worked 12 hours on and 12 off, so one bed did two people. There was a punishment

gown for apprentices in need of discipline: a coat sewn on the inside with sharp nails.

Little shops and cafes were built up narrow passages behind the shopfront, and a tribute to the generous salmon. We were interested in Norwegian sweaters but at around \$300 we thought them a bit expensive. They'll be cheaper further north I surmised, and indeed they were: half the price so we got a his- and-hers.



A major sight in Bergen is a short funicular ride to Mt Floyen overlooking the city. Bergen was a surprise, with its fine climate and sheer beauty. No wonder Grieg wanted to be buried in a cave beside his fjord.

Hellesylt and Geiranger Fjords



Hellesylt and Geiranger are towns on two fjords an hour's sailing from each other but overland nearly a day over a mountain range, which is how we get there. We travel up a fjord to Hellesylt, a small town split by a large waterfall, and board the bus. We wind up and away through some pleasant country, typical of western Norway, mountains on either side stream of rivers and farms.

We lunch at a pleasant hotel on a lakeside, steep mountains rearing up around us. But despite the promise of yesterday it was cloudy and no sun. What follows is depressing. We climb steeply past a frantic waterfall into snow-covered tundra country up a privatised road to the top of the mountain to see the view. As no-one lived up this high the government refused to extend the road to the summit on the grounds that providing roads for private enterprise was not their business. However a private firm saw there was a couple of bob in a road, so they extended the road to the summit themselves. Although it is closed for 8 months of the year, it is in very good order so presumably it was a good commercial deal. From this vantage point, 1,500 m above sea level, our pre-trip bump told us "we would enjoy spectacular views of Geirangerfjord and mountains peaks all around." And here they are.

We descend rapidly beneath the fog, stopping to photograph from on high the famous Geirangerfjordland and our boat and a bigger cruise ship. Fifteen minutes later we are boarding.



At 6.40 pm we crossed the Arctic Circle. To celebrate, next day one of our number suggested the swimming pool be emptied of its tepid water and filled directly from the ocean. For good measure, ice was added till the temperature of the water was 3 degrees. Then about dozen people, mostly from our party, jumped in. Catherine and I prefer to watch.

Harstad and Lofoten Islands

Harstad is the first port entirely within the Arctic Circle and is on an island. First settled in the bronze Age, today Harstad has a population of 24,000. The herring industry exploded about 200 years ago, and today the main industry is fishing: herring, cod, especially dried cod or stockfish cod that is the



basis of many cuisines, such as bacalhau which we had come across in the Portuguese colony of Macau. Stockfish should not be confused with klipfisch which is salted and dried. Stockfisch is simply fresh cod gutted and dried soon after catching and laid out on fish racks for months during the cooler season. A

bacterial process similar to the fermenting of cheese takes place leaving a very nutritious product with the consistency of wood. In more humid and warmer climates that process won't work so cod is salted to preserve it. Norwegian wild salmon is world famous, and now they produce farmed salmon worth \$20 million pa. But note Tassal, the Norwegians are very aware of the pollution farming at sea causes and so they are now using tanks on dry land and disposing of the pollutants on shore.

Harstad played a key role in WW2 as it was the gateway to the passage to the Russian ports of Murmansk, which the Gulf Stream keeps free of ice all year round, and Archangel, both of which we visit later. The Allies sent armaments and supplies to both ports for the beleaguered Russians. The Germans were determined to stop that. They themselves got more than 50% of their armaments front manufacturer Krupp's, who depended on the export of high quality Swedish iron from the port of Narvik, 50 kms from Harstad. The Swedes were officially neutral, but well they were open for business. The Germans placed super cannons at Harstad to protect Narvik. The cannons have since been dismantled but one remains for the record: "Adolf's Cannon" which fired one ton shells over the 50 km distance.

When the Germans left Norway they adopted a scorched earth policy, destroying anything in the way of buildings and infrastructure that might be of value to the coming Soviets. The devastation across Northern Norway was immense, the indigenous Sami being left with nothing at all.

Our cheery guide Thorsten kept us entertained for 6 hours flat extolling the beauties of N. Norway: how he loves to cycle and climb mountains and walk. A pity about today, 10 degrees overcast and a wild wind blowing, he admitted, but Harstad and the surrounding Lofoten Islands are usually clear and sunny, with highs in the low twenties for summer. At this latitude, further east the climate is harsh sometimes reaching minus 70s but the Gulf Stream keeps the western side of Norway relatively warm. Relatively, I stress. Tourists from all over Europe stream into northern Norway with their camper vans, and they can legally camp wherever they like free of charge, even for one night on private property, but after that they need to negotiate with the owner.



The government's line is that "the nature" belongs to everyone and they are entitled to access nature if they so wish, according to the doctrine of all men's rights. Thus, inhabitants of remote areas are considered to have the same rights as people in the cities, so that roads, transport and infrastructure, post and telephone services, are provided even to small towns of a few hundred people. Thus people in Harstad with a population of only 24,000, and beyond in the Lofoten islands of which Harstad is a part, are entitled to hugely expensive bridges and tunnels necessary to traverse the high mountain ranges and deep, flooded valleys that make the fjords. The doctrine of all men's right used to be the case in outback Australia too but today neoliberal governments examine the business case first and last. No business case, no amenities: tough beans for aboriginal and remote communities.



Speaking of indigenous issues, the native Sami or Laplanders of unknown racial origin speak a Finno-Ugric language that include Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian amongst others. The Sami used to be treated as noncitizens: up to the 1960s the policy was assimilate, or norwegianise as they put it. In the protest movement of the 1960s, however, young people stood up for indigenous rights and the political scene changed. Traditional clothing, songs, traditions and language were revived and in 1989 the Sami were given their own Parliament, such that any legislation affecting native rights and access to land had to be agreed to by the Sami Parliament. Our bus driver was a Sami and he sung us a traditional song but it was very short and finished by the time I had my camera to record it.



Such enlightened policies shame our treatment of indigenous Australians. Our solution is simply to throw money at the problem, which only lubricates the problems if nothing else is done to change their causes. Our policies allow mining companies to destroy traditional lands, as also happens in Canada where mining the Alberta tar sands has laid waste the sacred lands and reservations of Cree and Inuit peoples.

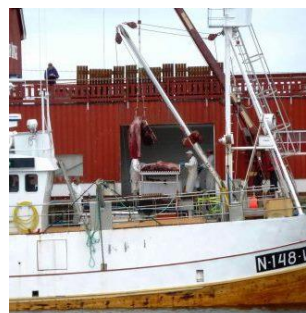
But to happier things. Many centuries ago a Portuguese ship was in deep trouble and the Norwegians took the ship-wrecked sailors into their homes, offering them every facility including sharing the bed with their wives. We are told this accounts for the fact that some Norwegians around these parts have brown eyes and curly brown hair. When the lucky sailors returned home they brought stockfish with them thus bacalhau entered Portuguese cuisine.

We visited a fishing village Svolvær for lunch and to look at their ice museum: beautifully done but we'd had enough of the cold and zipped out pretty quickly to buy beautifully thick Norwegian sweaters for half the price in Bergen. We then visit the proprietor of a stockfish factory, introduced by our guide Thorsten. The stockfish needs to be hammered energetically to make it edible or it can be reconstituted, sort of, by soaking it in water. We had some on a biscuit to find it very distinguishable from fresh cod. Stockfish is however highly nutritious and indestructible, which allowed the Vikings to last long distances at sea and to discover N America 500 years before Columbus did. And if it got wet,



they simply ate it straight away.

Across the bay, we see a ship unloading whale meat. So what is it about the otherwise enlightened Norwegians and whaling, a practice they still continue? There is a disjunct here because several guides have drawn our attention to the tourism value of whale *watching*, which they describe with as much love and emotion as we do: they love their whales not only because they eat them. Our guide tells us that Minke whales are voracious eaters of the smaller fish lower down the food chain. If left to themselves, they would devastate fish stocks and therefore need to be culled. Ironically, this is the argument we use against super-trawlers, precisely because they take enormous chunks out of the food chain devastating stocks higher up. Norwegian marine scientists calculate the numbers needed to be culled to preserve a sustainable balance between whales and pelagic fish. But are whales really as destructive as super-trawlers? The Norwegians seem to be sincere about whaling practices, unlike the Japanese who simply tell lies about doing research. In super-trawling there is no issue about sustainability as the nations off the west coast of Africa have found to their cost. The tragedy is that because Norway in their view need to cull Minke whales, they vote to continue whaling thus supporting Japan who don't whale for anything like environmental reasons.



Pity about the weather we struck. Thorsten told us we must come return later in summer and see "the nature" for how beautiful it is. If we don't come in summer then we must come in midwinter, for that is when Aurora Borealis flaunts her beauty so shamelessly.



Tromso

Tromso population 70,000 is an important base for arctic research, fishing, and the northernmost university with a worldwide reputation for arctic studies. Tromso had a traffic problem, particular in winter when the roads are iced, so apart from the usual infrastructure of roads, free education and health, as in the usual Scandinavian social democracies, they built an underground network of roads



like a metro, with several exits and underground interchanges. I was reminded of Hobart's traffic problems and Max Darcy's proposal for a traffic tunnel, which he modestly called the Darcy Tunnel, in order to leave the city and the waterfront connected. Pie in the sky, way too expensive, the critics scoffed. Well, Tromsø is one quarter the size of Hobart yet they finance a much more ambitious scheme very simply: every litre of petrol scores a surcharge of half a kroner, or roughly 10c, to the enormous benefit of the whole community. Problem solved. Remember Bergen, two thirds the size of Hobart, which has light rail and ferries and roads and bridges crossing over and under fjords, far more difficult terrain than the level shores of the simple Derwent.

But back to the chilly Arctic. Again a cold overcast day of a depressing 8 degrees. We drive past houses but are cheered to pass a house and garden full of flowers. The owner, a Dane, clears his garden of snow in April, before it clears by itself in May, and plants his seeds early in order to get a colourful outburst by throughout summer. I snatch a photo as we pass.

Next stop is a place where a Norwegian woman, Trove, trains racing huskies. As we step off the bus, 300 huskies give voice to our arrival. Trove is a feisty character who started with nothing but her love for the nature and for dogs. She comes dressed in shorts, saying that as it was officially summer she was wearing shorts and that was that, while we huddled into our parkas and woollies. Her speciality is racing dogs. She entered the famous Anchorage to Nome race of 1,800 kms in 2006, but on arrival she accidentally blinded herself in one eye and also lost her all-important leading dog. After much deliberation Tove went ahead with the race against all advice, minus her prize lead dog and blind in one eye, which was risky as her depth perception was lost. Six days later she rode into Nome, 22nd out of 70 odd entrants, and 2nd for first entrants. She has raced every year since. She now supplies dog sleds for tourists in winter.

Her dogs are bitzers, comprising bits of Siberian huskies, some with their brown eye and blue eye, malamutes, samoyeds, greyhound, all bred for strength and/or speed. All seemed to be gurgling and slushing with the milk of canine kindness as PG Wodehouse would put it– they loved each other and they loved humans as far as we could see, as humans loved them.



On the way back we pass a reindeer and a Sami tent very like a wigwam. It is easily packed and transported as the Sami followed the migration of the reindeer. In winter they have underground



houses like this, the earth and grass conserving heat within the hut. The reindeer supplied almost all their needs: meat (which everyone kept telling us was very nutritious and delicious), skins for clothing and footwear, antlers for tools and ornaments, milk very rich in fat. Now, instead of following the reindeer for a thousand or more kms on foot, they follow the reindeer from their homes by computer. All their own flock are tagged and when they

want a particular one the leap aboard a snowmobile and are back home with a reindeer in a couple of hours.

The Polaris museum exhibits the results of polar and fisheries research. We see a splendid wide vision documentary of the wildlife in the region. On the way back a couple of shots of the landscape.

Over a high bridge from Tromso centre is the Arctic Cathedral built in the 1960s in the shape of a Sami tent. It was designed with open glass East and West windows so that the congregation could feel part of the nature as they worshipped but when snow was on the ground the glare was so terrible that the congregation wore sunglasses. The clergy thought this inappropriate so an East End window was designed to cut the glare. The Cathedral's organ is the finest organ in north Norway. An organist was practising while we were there, adding to the atmosphere.



There is a market square near the ship that Catherine is keen to look at but I return to the ship to nurse my travel bronchitis. She explores the town to find an older church than the cathedral but still impressive; the market is disappointing with only two stalls, some fine statues, one commemorating one Norwegian activity with a bad name.

As we leave we have a final glimpse of industrial Tromsø: an interestingly gloomy farewell.

Honningsvåg, North Cape

Honningsvåg (pop. 2,415) is the northernmost town of Europe, 20km from North Cape, the northernmost point in Europe at 71°10'21 latitude. Our attractive and ebullient guide tells us there are two must-see items in Honningsvåg, the dog and the troll. Here they are. Trolls are very ugly and very dumb creatures and have only four fingers and toes.



Adding to these treasures, she tells us Honningsvåg has *everything*. Tourists and warmth in summer (it is now summer and the temperature is 8 degrees although admittedly the sun comes out briefly and we bask in ten degrees); and in winter, from November to May it is virtual darkness. But never fear, the bright moon and stars play on the snow giving a beautiful light, and then there is the incomparable aurora! Winter life is a mad social whirl: the bridge club, the book club, the wine club became so popular there is a red wine club and a white wine club, and every second Saturday there is a huge party. 'Life is never dull in Honningsvåg!' she enthused unconvincingly.



The road to North Cape is over tundra, ideal cropping grounds for reindeer of which we saw a lot, fjords and mountains, checkered with snow. North Cape became popular when King Oscar of Norway in 1870 went there to plant this monument: "Not as a transitory adornment, but as a solemn sign that the Kingdom of Norway reaches hither therefore I have erected this monument at the outermost point of the north. King Oscar II, North Cape 2 July 1873." This started a tourist rush which continues to this day, the

neighbouring caravan park full. However we find North Cape bitterly cold, but we dutifully pose for a group photo before the symbolic globe. There is an interesting international monument for children, the story of which I have forgotten and couldn't Google. We see a film showing the natural seasons at North Cape, with a thunderous sound track, the sun rising to massive drum rolls that seems totally incongruous with the mood of the place. I fear contemporary film composers take Kipling's "and the sun rose up like thunder" rather too seriously. On our return to Honningsvåg we stop for dramatic photos of the far north and an uninviting tourist hotel.

The Battle of North Cape December 1943 was about the Germans trying to stop the flow of supplies from the Western Allies to the Soviet Union. The German battleship *Scharnhorst* and its cruisers were assigned this task. They attacked a supply convoy of some 20 transports heading toward the Soviet Union. Unbeknown to the Germans, the British used Alan Turing's Enigma code breaker to read the radio transmissions between *Scharnhorst* and the Fleet Command, so they were always there to meet the surprised Germans. The British sunk the *Scharnhorst* in December 1943. Of the crew of 1,968 officers and enlisted men, only 36 men survived.



Archangel

In the 2nd half of the 16th Century, Ivan the Terrible established Archangel near the Monastery of the Archangel Michael, hence the name of the city. In 1693, Peter the Great established a ship building industry which is one of the major industries today, along with fishing and timber and paper processing. At last, an appropriate place for a pulp mill! In the 18th century Archangel, being the gateway to the Arctic, became a major centre for trading and for exploration. It was a base for many expeditions to find the NW Passage, a breakthrough literally made in 1932 by a Soviet icebreaker. Archangel's population today is just over 350,000.

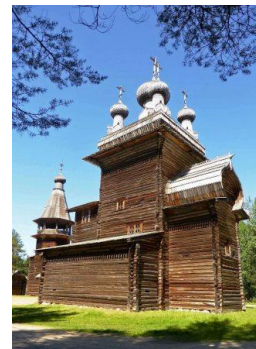
We have been cruising within the Arctic Circle and are 1100 km north of Moscow and out of the influence of the Gulf Stream yet we bask in warm sunshine, 20 hours a day of it, had we so wanted. But our hours of sunshine were curtailed by 1½ hours because of Russian bureaucracy. Despite Russia being the only country requiring us to purchase visas at \$250 a pop, Russian ports were the



slowest in allowing us to disembark. In St Petersburg, we had to yield our passports for them to be stamped and approved by Russian immigration, which they did prior to disembarking, and when we had left the ship we had to go through immigration and line up with our passports at the right page showing our visas, and our passport photos checked against the real us by suspicious immigration officers. At Archangel they don't start processing our passports until we are due to

leave the ship, while we hang around on board fuming, waiting for our tour group to be called. Our tour leader Denise asked if this was usual at Archangel and was told no this was the first time. "Why this time?" she asked. "Putin's Orders," came the po-faced reply. I think that is an example of Russian humour. I wondered not for the first time: are the Russians officers playing power games or are they simply incompetent?

After we had finally boarded our bus, we drove to the historic village of Malye Korely twenty kms down a badly rutted road that kept the bus down to a 20 kph crawl. Our guide spoke in a hesitant monotone for all the world like a beginner reading from a difficult script. Occasionally she lost herself in translation and simply stopped what she was saying to continue on a different topic. She explained that the condition of the road was due to Archangel being built on swampy ground and this being early summer and the thaw, the pavement was sinking. Not the full story I think. Malye Korely comprises houses, a church, barns, and windmills all made from wood in the traditional way, no nails. They were staffed by ladies dressed in traditional 18/19th century clothes. Our guide here was an exception to the other guides: she was fluent and informative. Parts of the complex were quite beautiful, with art students sitting around sketching the old buildings.



Archangel was an important centre for the White Army from 1917 to 1921 with British and US support, but they were defeated by the Bolshevik Red Army. The British and US support was at the request of the alternative government but politically correct Soviets still call it the Foreign Intervention. The British dead are buried in the British Cemetery to which we were taken presumably on the assumption we Australians could find

something interesting in a British cemetery in Archangel. I think the guides had run short of things to show us. The British kindly donated a tank (WW1 style) to the city where it was left outside a civic building but people clambering over it damaged it so the civic authorities put it under glass where it resides now.

More interesting was a pedestrian street comprising the classic wooden houses and several statues of poets and writers. This one didn't exist – it was a pen name adopted by 3 different writers – but the sculptor must have been a G&S fan: it looks remarkably like the usual depictions of Algernon Bunthorne from *Patience*.



The Church of St Mary is quite modern design but traditional inside. The screen has the traditional three layers: the Virgin Mary and saints, then Christ with further icons, and then God the Father. Across the road from the church is Murmansk's beach and marina, and a sailing ship which keeps in the background.

The history museum is a 16th century building being lovingly repaired and equally lovingly described by a guide who went into immense detail. Some items seem quite interesting, including voyages to get to the east via the NW passage, but the poor woman just kept rambling on to people roaming around obviously not interested, until finally she was told we had to go. She was clearly upset. A little audience awareness could have saved her embarrassment. As all written descriptions of exhibits were in Russian we got little out of the visit.



A visit to Peter the Great, then back to the ship, beside which a new Cathedral is being built. After dinner, a magic calm crept over Archangel: brilliant sun and hours more to come, brought people down to the wharf to photograph the ship, yachts and powerboats various cruising and bucketing along the Dvina river.

Murmansk

Murmansk (pop 300,000) was the last city founded by the Tsars in 1916 to become the headquarters of the White Army and of the alternative anti-communist government. The British established a base there for their North Russian squadron. They were defeated by the Bolsheviks in 1921, the British dead buried in the cemetery in Archangel.

Fishing was originally the main industry but that is mostly gone now and Murmansk is mainly a military industrial port, helped by huge deposits of most metals crucial to industry and armaments. Murmansk's position as a year round ice free port at the gateway to Russia and only 200 km from Norway and Finland, made Murmansk important for allowing Allied support and resources to Russia. In 1942 Murmansk was bombed to the ground by German bombers operating from Finland.

Almost all Murmansk has been rebuilt from the 50s. Cheap 5-story "Khrushchev" apartments, two rooms of 18 sq m total are still in use, later apartments date from the 70s but are still small by our standards. Divorce rates are very high – inevitable with 3 generations living in cramped quarters. The flats are centrally heated – literally. In the centre of town there is a massive furnace which heats a water supply that is piped to all flats. It is switched off on 1 May and back on



again on 1 September when children start school. Khrushchev apartments also have built-in refrigeration: a cupboard under the kitchen sink opens to the elements all winter long.

With more people owning cars, rows and rows of small garages are built as near as possible to apartment buildings, which in some cases is still kilometres away. But that doesn't matter as people park their cars anywhere near the apartments they can. The carless garages form a much more important function: they are used for male bonding, no women allowed. That suits the women as they can then have a clear run in tending to the apartment. So everyone is happy our female guide Vera assured us. Just like Australian shed culture.

Which raises the question of the status of women. Low, in a word. The medical profession including nurses is 90% female but no senior medical directors are female; likewise teaching is predominantly female but all principals are male, and while there are a female lawyers, there are no female judges. However women get the last laugh. Their life expectancy is 73, that of men 60. That is because Vera said millions of young men died in wars and purges and not many women. I asked: "Surely by now a generation later, numbers of men and women have equalised?" "Up to the age of 40," she replied, "after that men die like flies." "What's the reason for that," I asked. The short answer was vodka.



When Vera first met us she warned: "Murmansk is not a tourist destination. Definitely Not." We quickly saw that she was right. Murmansk is drab with very few nice buildings. We do the rounds of the monuments. One to Kirov, founder of the city marked with a cross. Kirov very nearly was elected instead of Stalin. Next is to the unknown warrior: a typical brutalesque Russian style, breathing power and testosterone. It overlooks the city and harbour, a favourite place for men and their dogs to chat about old times.

There's not much to do in Murmansk itself Vera admitted but the men love to hunt and fish. The Kola Peninsula on which Murmansk is situated is huge, with all sorts of wildlife: bears, wolves, wolverine, foxes, elks, lynx and of course much reindeer and ten thousand lakes teeming with fish. A hunter's paradise but fortunately the Russian army owns much of that and it is forbidden to anyone else to enter. The bizarre outcome is that in the south thanks to the Army there is still untouched wilderness.

We saw monument after monument of soldiers, explorers, politicians and only one woman; a sailor's wife looking out to sea for husband to return. One sad monument is to the 118 victims of the *Kursk* nuclear submarine disaster which took place during a naval exercise in the Barents Sea on 12 August 2000. The cause was probably due to nuclear meltdown, the explosion powerful enough to register on seismographs as far away as Alaska. Following salvage operations, analysts concluded that 23 sailors had survived the initial explosions for more than six hours, but rescuers were completely unprepared to respond to the disaster. After the submarine was raised from the sea a few years later and was then lost. Someone years later found the conning tower on a rubbish dump resulting in a huge public outcry. This monument is the result. There are lists of dozens of peace time sinking of nuclear submarines. The neighbouring Aloysha monument in the shape of a lighthouse is dedicated to the Russian soldiers sailors and airmen lost in WW2.



We visit the nearby Saviour-on-the-Waters cathedral with a service in progress. Only a few people present at a Mass but the singing by a hidden choir was superb: it sounded like a solo quartet of professional voices with that wonderful Russian tone. Beside the church, I am surprised to see a monument for the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide that Turkey keeps denying ever took place – perhaps a connection to the Armenian and Russian orthodox churches.



We end up at the Natural History museum which shows the history of mining, of the early settlers and what a tough life they had, and a display of wilderness and animals. Murmansk borders the taiga forests and the tundra, so there are the animals to suit both ecosystems.

Murmansk is a graceless town of dull soviet architecture and few amenities, which actually make it an interesting contrast to prosperous Norway just around the corner. Also interesting was another taste of Soviet bureaucracy. While we got off the ship in time in Murmansk, unlike in Archangel, our refuelling lighter is two hours late in arriving. But when refuelling is completed, the Captain announces that the Russian navy are conducting exercises in the Barents Seas at the mouth of the bay, and sorry, they couldn't give us a time when we could get a clearance in order to set sail. Meantime the gangway has been lifted and we are prisoners. We have to cancel our next stop at Alta in Norway in order to make up the time. So that crack about "Putin's orders" by the Archangel immigration officer may not have been a joke after all. Could it be a deliberate policy to harass Western tourists in Russian ports in order to freeze the cold war a few degrees colder? A tug takes us into open water 9½ hours late at 11.30 pm in brilliant sunshine.

Honningsvag may be the town furthest north, Tromso the city furthest north, and Murmansk the largest city within the Arctic circle. All are welcome to those claims to fame. Frankly, I'll settle for the Australian city that is furthest south.

Kristiansund

We are now back in midNorway after two days at sea having bypassed our next scheduled destination, Alta, to gain lost time; thank you Mr not-yet-shirt-fronted Putin.

Kristiansund, current population 30,000, is situated on three separate islands built on the lee side of islands facing the mainland so the waters are sheltered and calm while a howling gale might be raging westwards to sea. The cod industry as elsewhere in Norway was the making of Kristiansund, particularly the stockfish that became its mainstay until recently when other centres became too competitive.

When North Sea oil took off, the canny Kristiansund burghers saw to it that their city became the base for the industry, suppling the oil rigs out in the North Sea with food and supplies, carrying out repairs and so on. Although relatively small, Kristiansund is wealthy; most young people own their own homes – and prices aren't too bad, a 3 bedroom apartment being about \$500,000. What is totally astonishing is the infrastructure, the islands are connected with superb bridges and three major tunnels. The latest tunnel is 250 m under the water level and 5.8 km long built in 2003; this has quite an expensive toll, our bus was



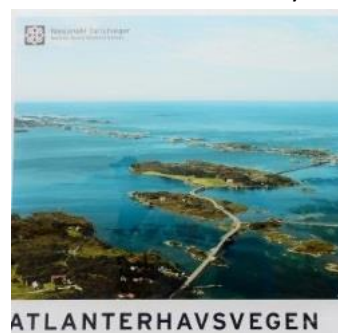
charged \$200 one way, so it was no surprise that we return on the landward side of the fjord. Most amazing of all is the Atlantic Highway, like Florida's Key West, a 20 km of roads and bridges hopping over 8 islands. All this major top class engineering serves a population less than Launceston's.

Kristiansen naturally became a German target in WW2. They bombed the place into the ground in April 1942, demolishing virtually all the buildings in the CBD although miraculously, only 6 people were killed. We docked in the CBD to see traditional Norway buildings. The canny Norwegians ordered that buildings be rebuilt in the old Norwegian style so that you would never guess that it was rubble 70 years ago. The ship's tour director enthused about how wonderful it was to dock in the CBD, but hey, you can dock in the CBD in Hobart! However the stylistic



hash of buildings you see when you dock here is another matter especially when you reach Macquarie St.

We drive through the tunnels and over bridges along what is called the Atlantic Highway to a little place called Bud. On the way we stopped at a place where a track had been built round an island giving as views of the lovely scenery: a pity it was dull and overcast.



The Germans focused on the coastline near Bud because it was facing the open sea. They built a massive fortress and in order to get a view out to sea they clear felled 38 houses that stood in the way. They also had a concentration camp for Polish and Russian prisoners of war. They were so starved that the people of Bud at severe risk to themselves fed them. We sampled what those good people possibly gave to the prisoners: a superb fish soup, the best I have ever tasted, thick and flavoursome full of all sorts of fish, with bread and butter to fill the gaps.



Opposite the restaurant is a cliff on the face of which various seabirds nest. At the top are remnants of the German installations, while underneath is a hollowed out fortress..

We returned by a scenic inland road beside the main fjord. This was very rich farmland supporting about 1,000 mixed farms, a lot of dairy feeding the Jarlsberg factory. Our guide was astonished that we in Australia had Jarlsberg cheese. She said it was ideal for covering fish when oven baked.

We see a salmon farm, big deal for Tasmanians, but I was astonished to hear that farmed salmon exports particularly to France, gather nearly as much revenue as oil itself. However the Norwegians are concerned that salmon farms on water pollute badly and as I mentioned earlier they are moving salmon farms onshore and dispose of wastes on land.

On returning to Kristiansund we were gobsmacked by a large suspension bridge that led us to the first of the three tunnels made in the area, this one only 130 m below sea level and 5.1 km long – and no toll. This was built so that the commuters from the other islands could conveniently get to work in Kristiansund.

On the way in our guide insisted we see the base for storage, repairs and all those things that oil rigs need, a major industry here. Driving slowly through old streets to the town centre we passed several

neat wooden houses, one about 300 years old, a rare remnant from the bombings but hardly distinguishable from modern houses.. We get off the bus in the CBD to have a look around: a fountain commemorating the bicentenary of Kristiansund, their prize modern cathedral, which looks nothing like a cathedral, some beautiful parks with quirky statues, then back to the waterfront.



Kristiansund was beautiful, well designed with remnants of the old and the new blending perfectly with the old.



Haugansund

Haugansund is an attractive city of 40,000 in the south of Norway. Like Kristiansund it is situated on the lee side of islands affording a calm passage for ships whatever the weather in the North Sea. When we dock we are greeted by an excellent jazz band.

Our visit is short and we concentrate on Viking history at the Nordvegen History Centre. We learn that the Vikings have been in Scandinavian countries for 10,000 years but it wasn't until 872 AD that Harald Fairhair united Norway and became the first king. The Vikings spoke Old Norse and that is the basis of modern Scandinavian. Harald lived near Haugansund, which became the trade route to the



North, so Harald called his united country the Nordvegen, the Way to the North: that is, Norway. The water was 2 m. higher then that it is now and these islands wouldn't exist, nor would these pastures. Harald was particularly interested in the north for that is where he met his wife, a Mongolian princess. They had twin boys but they were dark-skinned after her. She thought that Viking heirs to the throne should be blond and blue eyed so she arranged a swap with a servant, trading her two boys with the servant's blond boy. Unfortunately the boy turned out to be rather stupid, which made Harald realise the child couldn't be his. He found out what had happened and sent the blond boy back to the servant and got his own boys back, who went on to become leaders, one became the ruler of Iceland.

Apart from the twins, Harald had many other children, estimates range from 11 to 23, one of whom rejoiced in the name of Erik Bloodsword.

The History Centre gave us a lecture and an interactive exhibition telling us in fine detail what the Vikings wore, what they ate, their religion and myths of creation, the ins and outs of Harald's unification of Norway. It was terrific for Norwegian school children eager to know their heritage, and there were several there absorbing this like mother's milk, but to us without any background, 15 centuries in 20 minutes was all a bit too much.

Next door was St Olov's church built by King Hakan Hakanson in 1250 AD. He probably used an English architect because it is in English style with a Gothic tower, which Norwegian churches didn't have. St Olov's has been much restored, inside the East end being a 19th century add on. Legend has it that this long pillar is a knitting needle dropped by the Virgin Mary and if it ever touches the church it will bring about the day of judgement. I am greatly relieved to see that it isn't touching the wall of the church yet.



The Germans occupied the area during WW2 and to prevent the church being attacked the locals covered it with a wooden structure to resemble a mountain. However, the British strafed the seeming mountain and at the west front there are numerous bullet marks. The Scotch gunner later visited the church, saw the damage he'd done and muttered, "I am deeply ashamed".

The bus takes us back to town. We get off, and walk around the town, where an iron man competition is being held. A fog is gathering, as it usually does at the end of the day at this time of year when warm air with high humidity meets the cold sea. So we cross the bridge over the bridge to return to the ship, taking photos on the way.



We sail out to a fine view of sea and fog.

Some reflections

There were two observations that really stood out. In all the Scandinavian countries we visited:

1. The infrastructure of public transport, roads, tunnels and bridges was expensive and lavish even for small and remote communities. Health and education to tertiary level are free.
2. I saw absolutely no obese children. Not one.

I attribute all this to governmental policy. Sweden, Denmark and Norway have multi-party social democracies whereas the UK US and Australia have neo-liberal governments operating with an adversarial two party system.

Several surveys have shown that the wellbeing and happiness, and trust of politicians, is far higher in the Scandinavian countries than in UK, US and Australia. Two party systems (with usually ineffectual minor parties) tend to put party interest first, which is aligned to corporate interest by the system of party donations, not to the interest of the people. Where there are several parties with none having an absolute majority, decisions have to be made through discussion and negotiation with parties which certainly improves decision-making. The architecture helps: in Scandinavian parliaments the seating is a semi-circle thus encouraging discussion and negotiation, whereas in Westminster systems the two parties face each other across a divide that surely fosters confrontation. Another bonus at least in Denmark is that electioneering is limited to three weeks, saving millions on electioneering. None of this would work in Australia. I read in the ship's news bulletin, oddly enough, a recent survey which found that Australian politicians know they are despised but in their arrogance and considering their perks, they couldn't care less. A cheery reminder of our home politics. Whereas neoliberal governments rely on small government and deregulation, Scandinavian countries regulate markets and whatever needs regulating in the interests of the people. Thus, unregulated fast food chains, with advertising in prime time, it is inevitable that people will eat junk. Hence the obesity issue I mentioned.

The downside of course is that taxes are higher than ours. The highest bracket of income tax is 50% of income (I can remember 60% in Australia in the 70s) and VAT is between 20 and 25%, with no tax breaks for the well-off such as superannuation, capital gains tax and negative gearing. But isn't higher tax worth all the other benefits: free health and education, and liveable pensions? The Scandinavians most definitely think so. Higher taxes (but not too high) and higher government regulation offers the greatest good to the greatest number of people, as long as you trust your

politicians. On every count that I can think of: personal happiness and well-being, political stability, absence of corruption, even economic well-being, the European social democracies are doing far better than Australia. I elaborate on all of this in an article in the online *Tasmanian Times*.

Shipboard life

A month at sea seems like a brilliant idea, you see new places, your comfortable hotel accompanies you so no packing and unpacking. Most companies now charge everything up front, everything including alcohol, shore excursions and tips, so once paid you have the illusory feeling that all those drinks and things are free. So when a waiter says, some more wine sir?, you tend to do a Colonel Chinstrap: I don't mind if I do. But there are downsides.

One is health. This is the third time in a row that I have had serious bronchial problems after two sea trips and one long train trip. Large numbers of people in a confined space is a certain health hazard.

Then you eat too much. You don't have to of course but the fact is you do. Cooked breakfasts were abandoned after only a few days. You are then faced with multicourse lunches but as a matter of routine you finally settle for soup and bit of something else – but the wine waiter hovers and you have to be firm (after the first glass). Dinners are the real hazard with starters such as crab and caviar, sorbet (that's lo cal so that's ok), the exotic main courses often with an Italian flavour. "And what for dessert Sir?" "No thanks – but as there's red wine still in my glass, I'll sample the extensive



cheese board." Or perhaps: "Dessert tonight then Sir? You must try our Chateau Cadillac sauternes or perhaps this Italian limoncello?" So dessert it is now and again, with that terrific sauternes. Many of the serving staff, including our butler, are Filipinos, no doubt specially selected for their smiles and charm. You stagger from the restaurant feeling like an unexploded Mr Creosote after being force-fed by John Cleese, in that infamous Monty Python episode. You return to your cabin, or suite they insist on calling it, and as there's nothing to do at night, reading being much too strenuous by this stage, you just go to bed and sleep for 9 – 10 hours.

Then there is lack of exercise. 10 laps of the deck and you cover one mile – but in Arctic winds who is going to do that? There is a gym, but somehow you just don't feel like it. The best you can do is to promise yourself a highly active Spartan regimen on return in an attempt to reverse what feels like a speeded up aging process.

A curious practice in the restaurant at night; the waiter seizes the arm of the woman of party and escorts her slowly to the table while the husband is left trailing behind looking lost. We complained about the practice calling it over the top. Many in our party of Australians agree, but Americans love it, one American woman insisting she be escorted *out* of the restaurant at the conclusion of her meal as well. The Americans loved the formality, such as it was, and always overdressed on even semiformal dining occasions, with bow ties, strange coloured tuxedos, and proudly swelling stomachs.

We have found over several tours that a tour is rather like a classroom. There is usually someone who is first in boarding the bus to bag a front seat, in getting to dinner, in asking questions. They

enter the restaurant talking loudly to announce their presence, assuming that all will be pleased to see and especially to hear them. Often an alpha male assumes the role of head prefect, while a junior prefect takes on minor posts of authority. Then there is the class teacher, who gives lectures when asked a simple question and even when not asked a question. The class comedian is happily less frequent, but he (it usually is a he) can spoil any holiday.

Emirates

We were at first impressed by the attractive uniforms and the glitzy trappings of Emirates staff at first. However we were swiftly disillusioned.

The seats and aisles in the cabin were narrow because the seating complex was built for looks not



function. The seating furniture was rounded and bulky so that the ailing and elderly had nothing to grab hold of to help ease their frail bodies up to standing position. There was no place even to put a book let alone other accoutrements except in a small overflowing pouch. Space was also taken up with two TV screens: one in front of you and a smaller one at your side just in case

you wanted to watch TV while cuddling the screen in your hand. Or maybe they thought we would like to see two movies at the same time.

There were occasionally charming and helpful cabin stewards, most female, but too many appeared surly. Perhaps that was because the logistics of serving lacked logic. Passengers are assigned a hostess who assured us she was ours to serve us as best she may. Illogical tactics made that difficult. The hostesses took orders from their assigned passengers for food and drink, pattering up and down the aisles as busy as blowflies, but this strange procedure, relying as it did on memory, made service long and unreliable. The food was mediocre anyway, hardly worth waiting for. Separate red and wine waiters carried a little basket of bottles to serve you but sometimes they do the rounds once only so if you want to start with white and finish with red you have to buzz for it. Every other airline I know serves from a trolley down the aisles, all are served in due order and the wine trolley does both red and white and a lot else besides. For those preferring to bypass the steward with his basket of bottles, Emirates does have a bar at the back of the plane, which seems more waste of space.

They thoughtfully supply little pockets in your seating area to place your shoes in, which we duly did. Come take off, our hostess said: "Please place your shoes in the overhead locker." "My shoes are in the place provided for them," I smiled. "No, for take-off and landing they must go in the overhead locker." "Then what are the shoe pockets for?" Things got a little heated, especially when she insisted my sweater and newspaper temporarily on the floor must go up in the locker too. "Ah, I see," I said à la Basil Fawlty, "Is that because someone might be injured by a flying newspaper?" Sullenly she grabbed everything on the floor and put it in the overhead locker.

But it was the same next flight, and with a much nicer hostess who made the same point. So it was Emirates *policy* to insist on trivia not just one officious employee. Why then provide places for shoes where they are perfectly safe, but you can't use them? This was but a symptom: at check ins and generally we found Emirates to be inefficient and bureaucratic.

To be fair, however, I must mention ICE Emirates inflight entertainment. It is vast that along with Hollywood and Bollywood tosh, The classical music option includes David Hansen singing the arias dedicated to the fabulous Farinelli, Ian Bostridge singing several Benjamin Britten song cycles and a series of a talks with illustrations of various periods of classical music from renaissance to contemporary. So Emirates isn't all bad.

Flying out of Dubai at night I had a window seat. Far below were what look like roads and town houses way out to sea: it was that chain of manmade islands. I missed the grotesque twisted super sky scrapers in the CBD that had made me shudder on seeing their photos. All built at deliberately maximum expense from oil royalties that now are in decline. So many buildings aren't finished and those workers that survived their semi construction, and many didn't, haven't been paid.

Just so, Emirates Airline is all show and little well thought out substance. Except for the inflight entertainment

