



Riding Norway's
BLOOD ROAD
Across the Arctic Circle



The 2005 marketing campaign for the BMW R1200RT caught my eye. It featured a blood-red RT ridden through some truly amazing mountainous scenery.

Neither traffic nor a straight road was in sight—just radiant sunshine, trees, water, and glaciers. The country was Norway. The promotional video on the BMW web site was titled “If you don’t want a BMW R1200RT after watching this video, you might not be a motorcyclist.” Given my Norwegian heritage, it was inevitable that a 2007 RT found lodging in my garage. Then a curious email from Edelweiss Bike Travel invited me on a scouting tour to Nordkapp, Norway. The tour would start well up Norway’s coastal spine in Trondheim, cross the Arctic Circle, and wend its way 2,000 miles to the northernmost point of continental Europe—Nordkapp (North Cape). Our route would cover ten days through some of the most isolated and sparsely populated wilderness in all Europe.

Trondheim, an inter-coastal city situated against the verdant hills of Sor-Trondelag, was the historic capital of medieval Norway, but is now home to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Our touring group of 10 experienced riders from four continents was booked into the Royal Garden Hotel, which was as understatedly elegant as its name would suggest. Our room overlooked a picturesque marina with sapphire blue water reflecting a cloudless sky. On the opposite side of the marina stood rows of shipping warehouses now gentrified into ultramodern condos.

We were very fortunate that our July arrival was in the midst of Trondheim’s most important celebration—St. Olav’s festival. The event is held in the courtyard of the Archbishop’s palace and replicates a medieval fair, with vendors of sheepskins, reindeer, and fox pelts; replicas of antique swords, shields, and other weaponry; Viking helmets (sans horns); and costumed jugglers, minstrels, and sculptors crafting cathedral gargoyles, as well as ironsmiths plying their ancient craft. All this occurred in brilliant sunshine and temperatures in the upper 70s. Even better, the long-term forecast indicated fair skies and warm weather over north Norway.

By Scott Keimig #71042

After a generous buffet breakfast, our lead guide, Claus, met us sporting his weathered BMW Ralleye jacket. I saddled up on an RT and we departed Trondheim on Rte 715 in weather that was overcast and in the mid 60s. Ten miles out of the city we boarded the first ferry of dozens on our trip. A 20-minute ride carried us across Trondheim Fjord to the forested highlands of the Fosen peninsula. The route consisted of an endless sequence of sweepers with minimal traffic. The posted speed was deceptively low at 80 kph, but the curves required downshifts to as low as 40 kph.

Norwegian speed limits are not guidelines—police vigilantly enforce traffic regulations, even in remote areas. The use of speed cameras is rampant but well-marked.

After a couple hours we stopped at a coffee shop, and several of us decided to add a polar fleece under our riding jackets as we reached 500 m elevation. Midday found us on the coast of the Norwegian Sea and a welcomed breaking up of the overcast sky. We pulled off Rte 715 at Vingsand Kroa, a “summer only” restaurant with a huge window overlooking the sea. The special of the day was fiskesuppe, traditional cream chowder of five fishes.

Invigorated by our meal, we paralleled the Steindals River until at Fossliia we joined Rte 17. There we headed north along Namsfjord to reach Namsos city, where the surrounding cliffs were honeycombed with gun emplacements during the Nazi occupation. At Namsos, Rte 17 vectored east to parallel the River Namsen—a famous wild salmon fishery—to reach Overhalla Hotel, a family-run, sportsmen’s hotel. Public areas

of the hotel featured impressive taxidermy displays—arm-span length salmon and a variety of game, all harvested locally. This hotel, like many in rural Norway, can arrange for salmon fishing if one has the free time and cash.

For our second day of riding we were briefed by our alternate guide, Markus. After the conventional Norwegian breakfast buffet of cheese, eggs, salami, yoghurt and breads, we headed into the interior with mountains on one side and a series of lakes on the other. We soon left Trondelag commune and entered the southernmost portion of Nordland known as Helgeland—an area virtually untouched by tourism. Our initial weather was the familiar dry overcast, but the elevation soon carried us into a cloud bank sufficiently dense that one could see only the riders immediately ahead. After three hours we descended into the borough of Bindal. Here the fog lifted to reveal cloudless skies with temperatures in the mid 60s. This now-perfect weather accompanied us for many days.

After Bindal, curve following curve braided around sheer granite mountains bordered by dense forests of aspens and spruces lining the banks of Bindalsfjord. Here Rte 17 takes the name of Kystriksveien





—the Coastal Route. That a road this sporting and beautiful was nearly devoid of traffic would be remarkable, but the Kystriksveien is anything but straight. We lunched on exceedingly good pizza 6 km north of Brønnøysund at a settlement called Tilrem Farm. In addition to being the northernmost vineyard of Europe, the area surrounding Tilrem abounds in archeological evidence of Viking and pre-Viking habitation for the past 2,500 years. Regrettably, we lacked sufficient time to explore Tilrem, as the remaining day's riding was to include three ferry trips and our first tunnel.

Norway has more than 900 roadway tunnels, with 265 longer than 1000 meters. At 1.5 km, our first tunnel was puny by Norwegian standards. But it was challenging nonetheless, with a narrow, curved and unlighted path devoid of center-line striping, craggy out-hangings of rock, and oncoming truck traffic. Through sheer repetition, over time I fell in sync with riding tunnels, as we generally rode 6 to 8 a day. Riding the longer tunnels was less demanding as generally they were wider, had smooth walls, were illuminated, had painted center and fog lines, and often were ventilated to remove vehicle exhaust.



Top Left: The “No Parking” sign didn’t say anything about no stickers. Photo by Claus Lazik **Bottom Left:** One of the larger, modern tunnels with full striping and illumination. **Top Right:** Two Germans followed by a Yank rolling north on the Arctic Highway. Photo by Claus Lazik **Bottom Right:** Coffee shop built using turf roof construction.



However, as we rode farther north, we faced additional tunnel hazards including reduced traction on surfaces wet from snow melt and reindeer congregating at tunnel entrances for shelter from the wind.

Our ride on the Kystriksveien presented equally dramatic views of the sea and mountains. It ended in Sandnessjøen, where the Seven Sisters mountain ridge loomed over Hotel Rica. Here we enjoyed the most authentic Norwegian buffet of the trip. The dining hall was packed with locals, and the quality and variety of food justified their presence. Later that evening, fellow rider Udo from Köln and I amused ourselves in a conversation with a Norwegian couple on the balcony bar of the hotel. They stated that Norwegian roads are dreadful because they aren't constructed to US or German standards – too many curves and elevation changes for their taste. We couldn't disagree with their technical observation, but we differed considerably in our preference.

Departing Sandnessjøen, we mounted the curved causeway approach onto the most imposing bridge I have traveled, the Helgeland Bridge. From there the Kystriksveien followed the coast of Leirfjord into the industrial town of Mosjøen until we reached Leir Mountain and the lake-like Vesfn Fjord. Here we left the Kystriksveien to join the E-6, and



encountered a dramatic change of scenery. The E-6 carried us away from the fjords across the rocky Toven peninsula as it climbed and descended mountains via a chain of countless blind corners. Two hours upon the E-6 we encountered the first mega tunnel of the journey, Korgfjell Tunnel (8568 m.). Exiting the tunnel, we found ourselves alongside the glistening shores of Sor Fjord and then Ran Fjord, traversing the most picturesque scenery to date.

The scenery changed immediately past Mo i Rana when the E6 headed toward Sweden, coursing the Rana River through the sprawling and desolate Dunderlands Valley. Here the E6 takes on the name Arctic Highway. Near the Ovre waterfall we started our climb above the tree line onto the bleak tundra plateau flanking the snow-topped Saldfjellet mountain range, one of the principal mountain ranges of Norway. In the distance we saw a gathering of vehicles in the gravel parking lot of an odd, dome-like structure with a high cupola. It was the Norse Polarsirkelsenteret (Arctic Circle Center), a key objective of our tour at latitude 66°33"N. Although cautioned that some might find the Polarsirkelsenteret tacky, I had no objections packing away pins, patches, and decals commemorating my visit. It was also my first opportunity to buy a lunch of lefse (potato flour flat bread



Top Left: A typical scene – many of our roads hugged the shore of a fjord. Photo by Claus Lazik
Bottom Left: The stunning Helgeland Bridge crosses Leir Fjord at Sandnessjøen town. **Top Right:** Scott proving that Norway can color one's vision. **Bottom Right:** Udo and Joern watch over the bikes at a pull-out on the Blodvei.



destroyed by incendiary bombing in 1940, during the Cold War Bodø served as an air base for CIA spy flights, and indeed was the planned landing site for Francis Gary Powers' ill-fated U2 flight over the Soviet Union in 1960. After a very long day of riding, our 1800 arrival was too late to take in the National Aviation Museum.

This final day of the first leg of the tour offered remarkably sparse traffic, even though the E-6 is the principal road of north Norway. For many of our group it was a milestone day as it was their first time to cross the Arctic Circle. The remainder of the trip would entail six additional days of riding, all of it north of the Polarsirkel. The ride in northern Norway would rank as some of the most enjoyable riding I have done in forty years. The roads, and particularly the weather, presented greater challenges the closer we approached Nordkapp, but that's a story for another time.



spread with butter and cinnamon sugar) – Norwegian soul food from an impoverished time when my maternal ancestors emigrated from Norway (and still popular in Norwegian communities throughout North America). Our weather here was perfect – sunny and upper 60s – although the Polarsirkelsenteret in winter was surrounded by snowdrifts 15 feet deep, thus explaining the necessity of the cupola.

Here our trip acquired a focus that hovered ever in the background during the remainder of the ride to Nordkapp—the profound consequences that Nazi occupation inflicted on northern Norway. This section of the Arctic Highway, and the rail line running parallel, are infamous for

being built by slave labor. The German command compelled 84,000 Soviet POWs and 13,000 Yugoslav convict laborers to construct a transport infrastructure to support supply lines for its occupation force. More than 7,000 died from starvation, beatings, executions, exposure, and exhaustion. In 1995, the Norwegian government officially recognized the brutal origins of the Saltdal section of the Arctic Highway, naming it the Blodvei (Blood Way). A museum at Rognan – the Blodveimuseet, documents the inhumanity of this construction project.

Continuing on the Arctic Highway, we had an evening arrival in the militarily important coastal city of Bodø. Essentially

Scott Keimig is a third generation motorcyclist—paradoxically for a BMW rider his motorcycling ancestors were on the Norwegian side of his family tree and not the Bavarian side. He has been an MSF instructor for 12 years and recently began teaching Total Control Advanced Rider Clinics in Maryland. He has been employed in environmental health as a researcher and administrator since receiving his PhD in Industrial Hygiene in 1982.



Left: Scott at 66°33"N – This wooden edifice marks the Arctic Circle. **Left:** David modeling Viking ATGATT—chain mail is even heavier than it looks. **Top Right:** The Polarsirkelsenteret sits on the lunar-like landscape of the Saltfjellet mountain range with the Blodvei in the background. **Bottom Right:** Small cairns erected by travelers surround a central cairn commemorating those who died constructing the Blodvei.