



NORWAY'S *ever-changing* MOODS

Edelweiss Bike Travel's Touring Center Norway

STORY & PHOTOS BY GREG DREVENSTEDT

First came bone-chilling rain. Then came strong, erratic wind, followed by thick fog that swallowed our conga line of BMWs as we chugged our way up the steep, rough, single-lane road to Vestkapp. Knuckles white, we negotiated around a car coming down with just inches to spare and dodged piles of sheep scat as if they were landmines. With visibility near zero and sleet bouncing off our face shields, we followed our tour guide's hi-viz Schuberth helmet like Santa following Rudolph's red nose. At the rocky, 1,600-foot summit, cold, wet and nerve-wracked, we hooted and

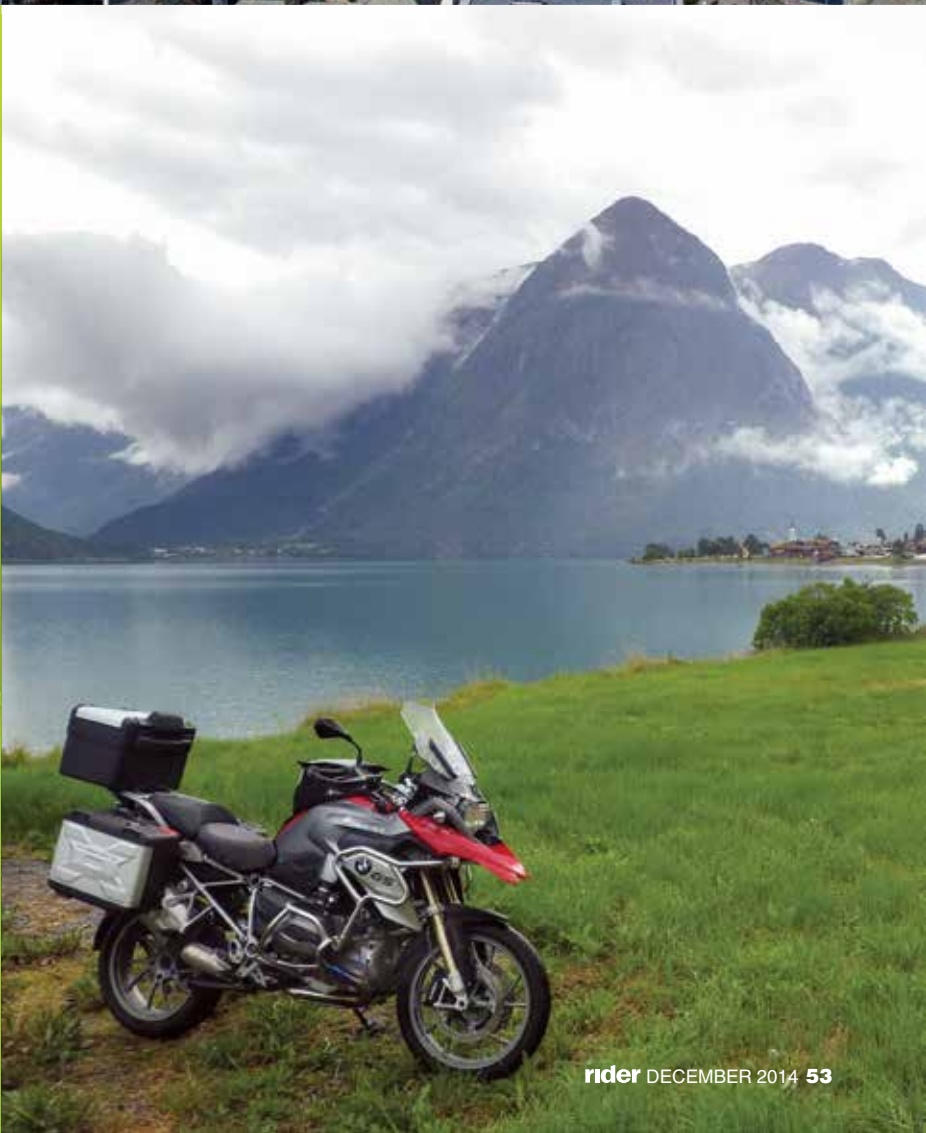


Top, left: Savoring blue skies and empty roads on Norway's western coast. Top, right: Our tour was based in the picturesque city of Ålesund. Bottom: BMW's liquid-cooled R 1200 GS was the perfect bike for carving around fjords and lakes.

hollered with triumphant relief, high-fiving in our squishy, sodden gloves.

Welcome to Norway, a place where, as Forrest Gump's momma said about life, you never know what you're going to get. On the previous week's tour, those who rode out to Vestkapp—one of Norway's westernmost points—were treated to clear skies and expansive views of rocky bluffs and blue seas. We got stiffed on the scenery but went home with bragging rights. Norway is one of the wettest places in Europe, so rain is a matter of when, not if. And when it isn't raining, the constant interaction of wind, mountains and sea creates a moody, ever-changing mix of clouds and fog. Summer days are long at northern latitudes, and when the sun comes out it bathes the craggy landscape in a warm, vibrant glow.

My wife, Carrie, and I, along with 17 others from North America, Australia and the U.K., had signed up for Edelweiss Bike Travel's weeklong Touring Center Norway, one of three touring centers in the company's catalog—the other two being in the Alps (*Rider*, February 2013) and the Dolomites (December 2003). Rather than a city-hopping circuit tour, a touring center is based at one hotel and the riding consists of five consecutive day loops in different



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PHOTO BY PETER SCHMOLL

Above: Taking a moment to admire the rugged landscape on the old Stryn mountain road. Right: The road to Dalsnibba is full of hairpins and glacier views.

directions. Our tour was based in Ålesund (*ool-e-zund*), a small, charming city full of Art Nouveau buildings and fishing boats that occupies seven islands on Norway's western coast, about halfway between Trondheim and Bergen. We spent six nights at the Scandic Ålesund, a stylish, modern hotel overlooking the harbor and Aksla, a mountaintop viewpoint with sweeping vistas of the city and surrounding islands. The hotel staff was friendly and spoke excellent English, the rooms were clean and comfortable, and the full-service restaurant served tasty food that's compatible with American palates, such as seafood, steaks, burgers and pasta.

Rugged, mysterious and oil-rich, Norway is like the Alaska of Europe, but with trolls instead of grizzlies. The long, skinny country reaches high above the Arctic Circle, shares most of its eastern boundary with Sweden and claims 52,000 miles of convoluted coastline, plus another 36,000 miles around its more than 50,000 islands. During the last ice age, Norway was covered in a massive ice sheet several miles thick. As the ice began to thaw, glaciers dug out long, deep valleys that filled with seawater, creating nearly 1,200 fjords.

Connecting Norway's many islands and irregularly shaped landmasses is an impressive network of ferries, bridges and tunnels, the latter of which bore through mountains for up to 15 miles or burrow deep under the sea, including one connecting Ålesund with a neighboring island that corkscrews 360 degrees down into the earth before passing under the channel. Norway resurfaces nearly all of its roads every year or two, so they're almost universally smooth and grippy, and—best of all—most are delightfully devoid of traffic. On our first day's route, which included 28 bridges, 10 tunnels and two ferries, we chased the sun north to Bud, a quaint coastal town where a former Nazi bunker is preserved as a museum. We continued hugging the rocky coast on our way to Atlanterhavsveien (Atlantic Road),



PHOTO BY SERHAN YENGULALP



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which crosses an archipelago via causeways and bridges, the longest of which is Storseisundet, known as the “bridge to nowhere” because of the optical illusion created by its unusual side-to-side arc.

Trolls feature prominently in Norse mythology, and in every Norwegian tourist shop. Depicted as ugly, dim-witted creatures that dwell in caves, legend has it that trolls turn to stone when exposed to sunlight. Science would have us believe that Norway’s most famous rock formations are comprised of granite and gneiss, but really they’re made of trolls who tried to get a tan. On our second day, we rode to the base of Trollveggen (Troll Wall), a 3,600-foot vertical rock face that’s the tallest in Europe, and then we switchbacked our way up 11 hairpins on Trollstigen (Trolls’ Path) to the 2,800-foot pass. Viewing platforms at the top cantilever out into the air, high above Stigfossen waterfall, which plunges more than 1,000 feet to the valley below. After lunch, we escaped the foggy lair of trolls and blasted down a series of fast sweepers into a lush, sun-drenched valley, stopping to sample wild strawberries along the way.

Edelweiss’ guides—Manuel, the veteran from Italy, and Peter, the rookie from Germany—were friendly, knowledgeable and accommodating. Both were excellent ride leaders, and they kept everything running smoothly and on schedule, in part because both had an uncanny knack for getting us to ferry ports just as the ferries pulled in. Routes were chosen to ramp up the wow factor, leading to the highlight of the tour on the

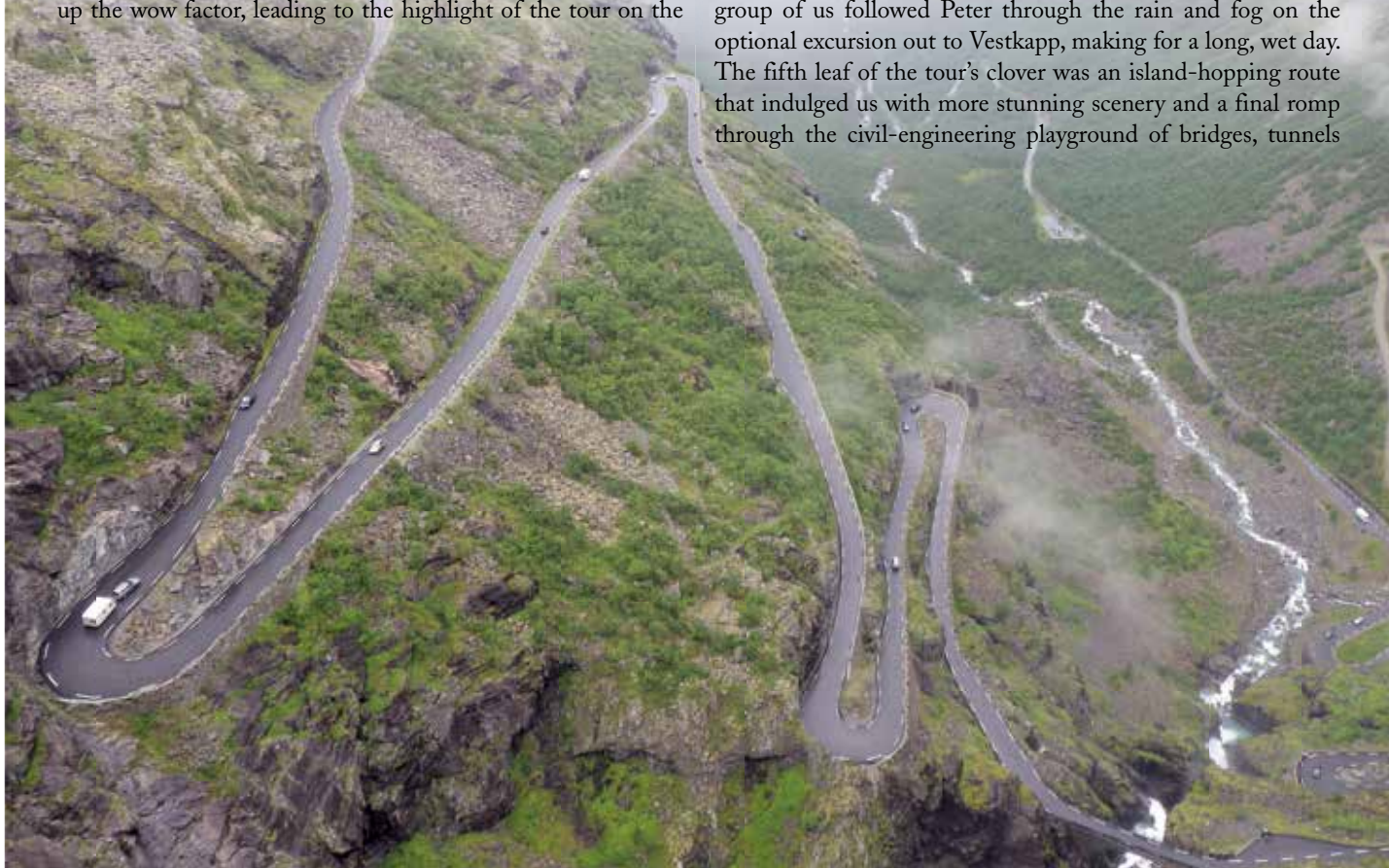


PHOTO BY PETER SCHMOLL

Above: Woohoo, we made it! We conquered rain, wind, fog and sleet on our way to Vestkapp. Below: Trolls may be short and brutish, but Trollstigen is long, elegant and spellbindingly beautiful.

third day: Geirangerfjord, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because it is “among the world’s longest and deepest” fjords and “the most scenically outstanding anywhere.” After riding through valleys and tunnels and along the edges of lakes and fjords in the morning, we approached Geirangerfjord from the south, getting our first glimpse from atop Dalsnibba, a 4,843-foot mountain with 360-degree vistas of glacier-topped ridges and the deep, yawning valley that leads down to the water. A dramatic ride down to the bottom was followed by a scenic ferry ride that ran the length of Geirangerfjord, where dark granite walls plunge deep into the blue finger of seawater, and rivers and melting snow create dramatic waterfalls.

On our fourth day, we ferried over and rode around a smorgasbord of 14 different fjords. That afternoon, a small group of us followed Peter through the rain and fog on the optional excursion out to Vestkapp, making for a long, wet day. The fifth leaf of the tour’s clover was an island-hopping route that indulged us with more stunning scenery and a final romp through the civil-engineering playground of bridges, tunnels



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Right: Our group poses with one of the namesakes of Trollveggen, the highest vertical rock face in Europe. Below: Long, winding Geirangerfjord digs deeply into the Scandinavian Mountains, which run the length of Norway. We snaked our way down to the water's edge from Dalsnibba, the peak in the top center of the photo.

PHOTO BY MANUEL MARABESE



“Touring Norway is a guaranteed adventure, one that is sure to be a highlight of your motorcycling career.”

and ferries. We packed 1,000 miles of riding into five days, with hardly a mile that went by that was flat, straight or lacking in views worthy of a travel brochure.

Touring Norway is a guaranteed adventure, one that is sure to be a highlight of your motorcycling career. It is heart-breakingly beautiful, but also remarkably expensive. Our first meal, two cheeseburgers with fries and two beers at an outdoor café, cost us a whopping \$95! Edelweiss has done a good job of keeping the tour prices reasonable: \$3,170-\$4,530 per person, depending on motorcycle choice and single versus double room occupancy. A generous breakfast buffet and group dinners for three of the six nights are included, but all lunches, three dinners, gas, ferries, incidentals and gratuity must be paid for separately. Budget accordingly, and don't forget your raingear.

The Touring Center Norway is scheduled to run twice in late July 2015. For more information, visit edelweissbike.com 