



FJORD FIESTA

TOURING IN THE LAND OF TROLLS, TUNNELS, FERRIES AND \$15 BEERS

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They were absolutely right, I think as I pop another juicy red orb into my mouth. We're sitting around red-painted picnic tables behind a strawberry-shaped kiosk in Norway's Valdalen valley, eating sun-sweetened fruit plucked from the plant minutes before with 14 other like-minded motorcyclists from America, Germany and Venezuela. We just finished climbing the majestic, 5500-foot Trollstigen pass. With 11 toe-scraping hairpins, the "Troll's Ladder" is as demanding as Stelvio or any of Europe's other more famous passes, and the view from the summit, out over Isfjorden and Andalsnes, is even more scenic. It appears Edelweiss Bike Travel (www.edelweissbike.com) was right all along: Norway might be the best place in the world to ride a motorcycle.

No one has more experience with motorcycle touring than Werner Wachter and his

crew. Now entering its fourth decade guiding intrepid moto-adventurers around the globe, Edelweiss offers tours from the Alps to Africa, Tunisia to Tibet, and almost everywhere in between. So when you ask them where to find the best riding, you anticipate a spectacular response. Russia's Road of Bones? The French Alps? Maybe our own crown jewel, California's Highway 1?

You certainly don't expect the answer— instant and unequivocal—to be Norway. Really? The land known for darkness, death-metal music and *lutefisk*—caustic, lye-soaked

cod disguised as a delicacy? It seemed more like a dare than an invitation, but my wife Emily and I accepted the challenge and signed up for Edelweiss' five-day Norwegian tour.

The endorsement wasn't exaggerated, and proved completely counter to our ignorant expectations. We set off in early July, a season when the sun doesn't kiss the horizon until almost midnight. The seafood is always fresh and non-toxic and the riding was—as advertised—among the best we've ever experienced. Imagine sinking the Alps into the sea and you'll have an idea of what Norway's west



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Base camp for Edelweiss' Norwegian tour is the city of Alesund, a historic fishing village crowded on a narrow peninsula on Norway's west coast.



Don't forget to pack quality raingear—an essential item for riding in Norway. It rained about half the time during our five-day visit.



High in the hills above Bud we explored the remains of a World War II German military outpost, part of Hitler's Festung Norwegen defense.



A visit to the Norsk folk museum is redundant. Small fishing villages like Bud still look the same as they did 100 years ago.



Ferry crossings are an everyday occurrence in Norway. Mile-high hairpins were nothing compared to negotiating the rain-slicked metal decks.



There's not much to do but pray when the sun doesn't rise for weeks on end. Religious graffiti dating back 300 years covered the interior walls.

coast looks like. Craggy, glacier-cut peaks plunge straight down into deep, narrow fjords. If you're not climbing a ridge, you're racing along thin ribbons of road that wind between rock and water. There is no in-between, and on the rugged, sparsely populated islands, isthmuses and peninsulas that compose this Wild West, there is little traffic and certainly no interstate.

Our guide, Marcus Hellrigl, who has been leading tours for 17 years, underlined what makes riding in Norway so great: the people. "The Greece of the North" is Hellrigl's description of the place, inspired by the friendly, laid-

back manner of the Norwegians, whom he claims are more like life-loving Mediterranean folk than anyone on the Continent. Bash the left-leaning Scandinavian welfare model if you must, but universal health care, subsidized higher education and comprehensive social security seem to keep most Norwegians uncommonly content. Not coincidentally, Norway was ranked highest of all countries in human development for eight of the last nine years, and also the most peaceful country in the world in 2007 by the Global Peace Index. In other words, it's a good place to relax.

Base-camp for our adventure was the village of Alesund, pronounced like most Norwegian words by swallowing, then burping up the vowels until you get something sounding like *uh-lay-zund*. The city center is cut with narrow canals and channels, suggesting a herring-scented Venice. This is a Touring Center tour, which in Edelweiss-speak means you return to the same hotel each evening, so you don't have to constantly pack and unpack your gear. Accommodations are the Scandic-Alesund, a charming hotel that so typifies the

Scandinavian design aesthetic that even the magnetic room keys are made from elegant, renewable balsa wood. The hotel is cantilevered over the Alesund harbor, an active shipping port that's home to one of Norway's busiest fishing fleets. A welcome dinner at the famous Sjobuya (fish house) restaurant, located in a converted seafood warehouse where the fish are off-loaded straight through a kitchen window, underscores Alesund's close connection to the sea.

Our first day's destination was Runde, a

rocky outcrop south of town that's home to the Runde Environmental Center, the third-largest seabird rookery in the world. The island has a human population of just 90, but during summer it's home to more than a half-million puffins, terns and other subarctic sea birds. We ride for less than 30 minutes before encountering the first of many ferry docks. Ferries are an essential, inescapable part of life in Norway's Fjordland, and they run as dependably as a German railway. The other constant is bridges and the last one

leading to Runde is especially impressive, stretching almost a kilometer.

The route is reminiscent of the Florida Keys, only with more turns, less traffic and less sun. The first riding day was also our introduction to another ever-present reality in Norway: *regn*. North Atlantic weather systems meeting steep coastal peaks means the weather is frequently changeable, and frequently wet. When every restaurant has an umbrella rack at the door and even the *uber-trendy* H&M outlet stocks rain suits, you know that precipitation is part of life. It rained probably half the time we were riding, though seldom harder than a steady drizzle. The



"Base camp was in Alesund, pronounced like most Norwegian words by swallowing, then burping up the vowels."



Troll crossing: Trollstigen, a.k.a. the "Troll's Ladder," encompasses 11 hairpin turns draped over a gaping crevasse cut by the Stigfossen waterfall.



Our guide, Marcus Hellrigl, alters the route with an eye toward avoiding rain. You can follow the guide or plan your own ride. Edelweiss lets you choose.



Ours was a multi-national, multi-generational group, coming from as far away as Venezuela to explore the best of Norway's 15,000-plus miles of coastline.

perfectly maintained tarmac stayed grippy even when wet, however, and our supplied BMW R1200RT was equipped with heated handgrips and a big windscreen. Dressed like Norwegian fishermen, we managed to stay comfortable.

In an attempt to avoid moisture in the mountains, Hellrigl juggled our schedule and stuck to sea level on the second day, leading us on a *fjast* and *fjurious* blast up Norway's famous Atlantic Road. The harsh coastline resembled a rocky moonscape, interrupted only occasionally by small, scrubby brush. It's

a stark, beautiful, altogether inhospitable-looking landscape that illuminates the Viking character—tough people bred in a tough land. We stopped for lunch at a harborside restaurant in Bud where whale was the special of the day, then explored the hilltop remains of a shuttered Nazi bunker. The German military occupied Norway during World War II and the hills surrounding the fishing village were a key part of Hitler's Festung Norwegen (Fortress Norway), hiding anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery intended to fend off an Allied invasion.

On the third day the weather broke and we ventured inland to make our assault on Trollstigen, the spectacular mountain pass that connects the towns of Andalsnes and Sylte. The only trolls we see are woodcarvings outside the gift shop at the mile-high summit, though to be fair, we were mostly concentrating on the road. With an average grade of nine percent and 11 hairpin bends lined with precipitous drop-offs, the Troll's Ladder is one of Europe's most extreme mountain passes. It's also one of the most enjoyable to ride. There's no shortage of tourists in Norway,



The oversized rib bone arcing over the window foreshadowed the lunchtime special: whale filet. The German contingent gave the chef's preparation two thumbs up.



Trollstigen Pass climbs high above the cloud line, terminating at this viewing deck cantilevered some 1000-odd feet over Stigfossen falls. Norway's natural beauty is unsurpassed



Right, left, right, left ... With its series of toe-scraping switchbacks, Trollstigen is as demanding as any of Europe's other more famous passes, and the view is even more scenic.

especially in the summer, but they're mostly corralled on cruise ships in the fjords below, leaving Norway's roads significantly less crowded with slow-moving RVs and lumbering tour buses than, say, the Alps.

On the fourth day we tasted the tourist's life with an hour-long ferry ride through the heart of Geiranger Fjord, a distinguished UNESCO World Heritage Site. Sheer, thousand-foot black granite cliffs, cut by the occasional waterfall or menacing rock form, reflect sinister patterns on the calm, inky-black surface below. The day's real highlight, however, was the road out of Geiranger and up to the 4843-foot summit of Mount Dalsnibba. Called "Eagle's Pass," this epic climb once again begins with a fast, flat section squeezed between fjord and bluff, then climbs rapidly through a succession of a dozen-odd peg-dragging hairpins that take us above

the snowline, over the summit and into cold, desolate alpine meadows. No wonder locals have nicknamed this the "Summer to Winter" road.

The tour finishes on day five with "Fjordland," a 250-mile loop south of Alesund that rings around 14 different fjords. The riding is epic, and proves what a great place Norway is to ride a motorcycle. The roads are universally excellent—another benefit of the quasi-socialist state—characterized by endless miles of smooth, grippy tarmac laid over gentle, rolling sweepers. The Fjordland loop takes us far off the tourist path, through quaint and quiet fishing villages, rustic farmland and the occasional medieval stave church. Taking off our helmets after the final day, we appreciate just how unspoiled and unfranchised Norway is. It feels like riding 50 years back in time.

Technically demanding roads and ample sightseeing opportunities—not to mention the countless ferry crossings—held our daily

totals to a manageable 250-mile average. Our Edelweiss guides did a fine job of keeping us safe and entertained, and were very accommodating to those who decided to head off on their own or alter a day's itinerary for more or less riding. Lodging, bike rental and most meals were included in the package price, but you're still responsible for gas and other incidentals—which can be shockingly expensive in Norway. Despite the country's massive oil reserves (it's the world's fifth-largest oil exporter) gas was more than \$6 per gallon, and—more disturbing—beer was as much as \$15 a pint! Hey, someone's got to pay for all those perfect roads and public health care...

Sky-high sin taxes almost seem like a fair deal to us, though, if the tradeoff is such perfect roads, agreeable people and stunning scenery. No doubt it's a different story in January, when the sun never rises and the snow piles 6 feet deep, but during the summer it's difficult to imagine a better riding destination than Norway. Edelweiss was exactly right. **MC**

