





Boarding the Trollfjord

*This is a story of an
idyllic (almost too
idyllic) cruise
through the fjords of
Norway*

Alexis

MY JOURNAL

TROLLING ON THE TROLLFJORD



Heaven is a Norwegian fjord trip.

My husband and I were aboard the MS Trollfjord, a 647-passenger ship that also doubles as a passenger and cargo ferry. It was built in 2002 to provide these twin purposes. There are spaces for 674 cars but our activities were centered on the four top decks that provided luxurious space for the cruise passengers. The space was well designed and comfortable; large windows let in light and allowed practically unobstructed views of the scenery. Even the elevators were made out of glass.



Art created by Norwegian artists depicting folk tales and other historical tableau decorated the public spaces turning them into meccas, luxurious in a quiet, tasteful way.





The MS Trollfjord is a member of the Hurtigruten Line, which literally means “Express Route” but is sometimes referred to as the Norwegian Coastal Express. Hurtigruten (almost unpronounceable at first and then it rolls off your tongue when you finally get it) is a Norwegian passenger and freight line that has been in existence since the late 1880s. The ships of this line sail every day along Norway’s western and northern coasts, almost the entire length of the country. The roundtrip journey takes eleven days and Paul and I were there for the duration. This trip had been a dream of my husband’s for the last three decades. I did not share this passion, but became a convert this very first day.

The cruise began in Bergen, the bustling capital of Norway's fjord district. Bergen was first established by the Viking King Olav over nine hundred years ago. It began and remains a center of vibrant commercial trade. The staple of trade was dried cod, which was traded with northern Europe and Great Britain. An industry relying on salted cod seemed a little unlikely but the Hanseatic Museum, located on the waterfront in a building dating back to 1704, provided insight into the attractions of that foodstuff. This was, of course, in the days before refrigeration. The fish storage room pressed and processed over a million pounds of fish a month. The fiskerkrue, or fish press, pressed fish into barrels, so the cod became a staple that was easily transported and stored.



The day was overcast but the view was still spectacular as the City spread out showing its extensive waterfront facilities with hundreds of commercial boats still making Bergen a hive of activity.





We boarded the Trollfjord in the evening and by morning we awoke to a pristine and isolated beauty. The waters surrounding us were absolutely calm, no waves disturbed the surface. At shore's edge craggy, snow covered peaks popped into view. The blue sky, dotted with fluffy white clouds, seemed an extension of the mountains. It was untouched, not a hint of the messiness that man and his civilization brings. One day I marveled: "Outside there are trees, there are mountains, there is snow, there are picturesque farms with green fields, there are waterfalls AND believe it or not they are often all there at once. It is pretty incredible. "

We seemed to glide through unspoiled beauty. The literature said that the Trollfjord could travel at a speed of 30 knots (whatever that may mean) but the pace seemed very slow. This fit my preconceived perceptions about heaven..

A feeling of tranquility was induced by the motion of the boat. It was so soothing. Imagine being on a cloud, being rocked, massaged, and cradled. I speculated the lulling motion was in part due to the depth of the fjord, the proximity to shore and the resultant lack of wave action. But whatever the reason it was heaven. Another attribute that seemed heavenly was the charming, solicitous, efficient, attractive, and intelligent crew members there to meet everyone's needs. They resembled angels. Multi-lingual angels at that, as they are quite content to converse in anyone's language of choice. This feeling of tranquility was enhanced because cruise passengers were cut off from the bustle of everyday life. There were televisions but they were tuned onto sports events, tennis, soccer and the like. This cruise was taken in the hectic days prior to the 2008 elections but one would have never known, mercifully the names of Bush, McCain, Obama and Clinton were virtually unknown. The crew gave lip service to the notion that we were still in the world by posting "newspapers" informing of the events of yesterday and the day before. There was one in German, one in French, one in Norwegian, one in Spanish, one in Italian, one in English for the United Kingdom passengers and one in English for the Americans. I think it would be safe to say that the news is at least two days old. The isolation was enhanced by an extremely unreliable internet connection but it proved a blessing, it was wonderful to be disconnected. These pleasures are subtle, rather understated. A fjord trip is neither brazen nor self-satisfied. The souvenir mugs and trinkets described this trip as the World's Most Beautiful Sea Journey, this is more factual than boastful.



The feeling of suspended animation was enhanced by our sleeping quarters. Our cabin resembled a well lit womb. The combined effects of the latitude and time of year resulted in constant daylight, but not the bright dazzling California sunshine we are accustomed to. Each day was grey, not brooding gray, but rather a pale gray – a hopeful, not depressing grey. My husband preferred to live out his dream voyage within the confines of the well lit womb. He contentedly never appeared ship-side before noon and then contentedly sat in the library with a book. He took few shore excursions and appeared to be in his own ecstasy.

I, on the other hand, remained caught up in the moment, slow-moving as they proved to be. I tried to pay particular attention to the announcements. These were polite, informative and delivered information in three languages: Norwegian first, English second and then German. The announcements spoke of entrances to fjords, names of small villages along the shore and when sights were rare even the names of lighthouses that would pop up unexpectedly. Occasionally the announcements threw in a little history. Once, lost in reverie, I caught only the tail end of the English announcement: 'then she was beheaded'. It then veered off in German so I will never know who lost her head or why.



On the third day we reached a passenger stop, Trondheim. Trondheim is Norway's third largest and the most northerly community that can merit the title "city". It was Norway's first capital, rich in history. I eagerly scrambled ashore and strode through the modern city with its wharf side restaurants, bars and shops. I headed for the Cathedral, Norway's most sacred building. This Gothic cathedral, constructed in the late eleventh century, is Norway's largest medieval church. The altar of the church sits over the grave of King Olav, the Viking king who replaced the Nordic pagan religion with Christianity. After Olav's martyrdom in battle, he was canonized and Trondheim became a center of pilgrimage. The resultant bishopric extended through Norway, Greenland, Iceland, and the Isle of Man. The cathedral, its crypt and the adjacent, reconstructed Archbishop's Palace told of the immense power and wealth held by this bishopric lasting until the Reformation. It was not until I read a detailed account of this decline of power did I realize that royalty had an incentive in promoting Luther's faith. The Catholic Church had immense holdings, influence, wealth and power, often rivaling if not surpassing, that held by the gentry. If the Church was abolished, royalty had an opportunity to consolidate and enhance its power and wealth. Indeed that is what happened here when Norway came under the Lutheran bishopric. I was so intent in mulling over this that I almost missed the boat's sailing.





The Trollfjord in harbor



, A slightly lesser boat in harbor, I am glad I went with the big guy.



Climbing onboard clad in Miramecko raincoat



A lifeboat, fortunately we did not need this!

The opportunities for shore excursions diminished as we headed northward. The villages were small, not at all architecturally interesting, no interesting churches or public buildings. The reason was another lesson in history that had escaped me. Although the Norwegian people had a tradition of neutrality for over one hundred years the Germans invaded the country in April of 1939. This invasion took place before the country was able either to negotiate a position of neutrality or mobilize to affectively reverse



disarmament. The Allied forces, at that point, lacked a defensive strategy and Norway's reliance on the British Navy to keep the Germans out was in vain. So after very limited resistance Norway succumbed after less than a week. Fortunately the resistance provided enabled the King and his family to flee to England thus providing a figure in freedom that inspired the hopes and dreams of the resistance movement.

The people suffered under the Occupation under the twin pressures of economic exploitation and political subjugation. The resistance movement grew and is a source of pride with small villages in the tiny villages of northern Norway,

Their heroism is also recounted in the literature. One children's story called The Snow Treasure tells the true story of a group of school children that carried gold bullion on their sleds under the watchful eyes of the Nazi Occupational Force. They were able to smuggle the gold out of the country using a boat that was hidden in one of the many fjords. The book is still in publication and is used extensively in school classes throughout the world to illustrate the bravery of the Norwegian people under oppression. When first published, during the years of WWII, it was purported to be a true story, camouflaging the town and its inhabitants to escape reprisals from the Nazis. There is now discussion that the book was entirely fictional.

When a German defeat appeared imminent the Germans developed a strategy of scorched-earth policy and devastated northern Norway destroying every building that could offer shelter, burning whole villages and towns. These drastic measures, accompanied by forced emigration of the inhabitants of the region was an attempt to slow the advance of Soviet troops. Although the area was left in utter ruin it was largely restored by 1949.



The excursions were further limited by the consistently overcast and rather gloomy weather. Our cheery tour director was in a sense of denial. Her mantra was: "There is no such thing as bad weather, there is only bad clothes." She was repeating this "mood elevator" on an almost daily basis. But I was not fooled. I had the clothes and the weather was still pretty bad. I came prepared and then, when faced with constant drizzle, indulged myself with a new rubber Marimecko raincoat, another umbrella, a yellow rain cap, and a baseball cap. I was stylish but still sodden.



I am not sure exactly when the heavenly pace began to wear on me but anything can be too much of a good thing, even scenery. Perhaps it was the sameness of the days, the lack of stimulation and challenge, everything was being done for us, no effort was required. Heaven became a kind of hell, the dreaminess became nightmarish. Henry Southwell Allen used the phrase "a bone-ache disquietude of life" to describe the American hell found in Edward Hopper's paintings. That phrase perfectly describes my state of mind at that time.

I was not alone in my disquietude. We were crossing the Arctic Circle. I was very disappointed that there wasn't a line, or something physical, like there are on globes. Yet the ship provided some merriment to mark the crossing into the Arctic.

The majority of my fellow passengers were on the Ninth Deck, in the great out-of doors, participating in a ritual that is variously called a blessing, a Christening. News of this ritual had spread far and wide. I learned of it before boarding the ship while we were still in Bergen. British tourists had explained the ritual to me fresh from a similar trip operated by the Hurtigruten shipping line.

The first warning that this ritual was about to occur came from the loudspeaker system announcing that King Neptune would be visiting the boat. The announcement urged all passengers to join him and participate in a ritual that would familiarize them with the North and make them one of a select group. I knew better. I was no fool! I refrained to rush but slowly sauntered to the upper deck to see if what I heard was actually true, and if so, to document it on film and the written word. It was actually factual. The center of attention was this guy with a mask, fringed by long curly hair hat was truly not his own. He looked faintly royal standing there in front of dozens, if not hundreds, of his loyal subjects with a huge ladle in his hand. The subjects, apparently of sound mind and body, knelt before him and then he ceremoniously poured cold water over their heads. To inflict further injury other crew members, recognizable because they were not wearing masks or phony hair, carefully lifted up collars and shoved ice cubes down their shirt and jacket backs. People stood in line, aware of what was going on, but waiting to have a go of it. Were they mad? Should this cruise be near the Equator it might be understandable but this was North Pole territory. The temperature was quite frigid, clouded over, with either heavy mist or light rain (depending on your level of optimism). It was definitely not a day for a baptism of cold water mixed with ice cubes.



The always-affable Brits had advised me to place a towel under my shirt. The towel would soak up the cold water and prevent the cubes from careening down into my underwear. I decided to do one better: I did not join in the frivolity.

The subjects who submitted themselves to this form of water torture were rewarded by receiving some liquid in a shot glass. I suspected that it was liquor but even the promise of schnapps at 11:30 in the morning did not tempt me. One man went bare-chested to his fate but rather than appreciate his wily ways they triple dosed him with water and ice cubes.

What can I say? Perhaps such a ritual was welcomed as relief against ordinary boredom.

Another sign of possible boredom was that two German ladies came to blows; happily there were no fatalities. This story was circulated: One German woman thought a table in the dining room was free and made an assertion of ownership. But she was mistaken; the prior inhabitant of the table returned to find the usurper. Then, rather than seek mediation, file for an action in injunctive relief or say, "Excuse me?" (if such a phrase exists in the German language) a screaming match ensued and the dispossessor came out swinging.

Our tour guide spoke of this encounter with great amusement. But later, I heard her confront the German's tourist guide. Our tour guide, in an uppity tone, asked of the German guide: "What kind of people do you have with you? One of your passengers hit another one! They can't behave like that!" The German tour guide replied defensively: "They weren't Germans. They were Austrians!"

I guess that explains everything. Our tour director provided us with a long list of dos and don'ts saying that if we transgressed, she would get the blame. She did not mention punching out a fellow passenger, but I guess she didn't have to – none of us were Austrians.

But violence was not the norm. More typically we would find a young Norwegian, traveling with his grandfather playing an impromptu concert of classical music on the piano in a public area. The beautiful strains of Chopin ideally emphasized the snow-covered fjords, the seldom-seen sun reflecting off the water and snow. It was an experience that never could be duplicated. The quality of the music equalled that found in a concert hall but instead of confining walls beautiful scenery surrounded us.

Later, the Norwegian pianist, Dave, a recent high school graduate, told us that he would be attending a special school in autumn, a music college in northern Norway where they would spend the year not being graded, but, performing. After this year of performing he would enter university to begin studies in his chosen profession. This highly refined, sophisticated, yearlong “summer camp” is provided by government funds for its citizens who are transitioning from secondary to college. These “hobby” schools, scattered across Norway, provide a fluency in music and other arts that is cherished throughout a lifetime serving as a source of friends, creativity and inspiration.

Another passenger, one from our particular tour group, was sketching a picture of the grandfather during the performance. After the performance she shared her sketch with the pianist and the grandfather; and then showed us all of the sketches she had done throughout the trip.



Nidaros Cathedral - Trondheim

6-25

Photographs were taken, email addresses exchanged and we continued on our journey. Norway is such a civilized country, except for their unfortunate fascination with King Neptune.

We made our way back to Bergen without further incident. When I look back on the trip now it does seem like heaven. The hell of boredom just a little blimp. But then again the trip was only twelve days. I don't think I could endure an eternity of it.





On the way to Bergen, umbrella in hand