




FJORD EXPLORER

Even a windbag
guide couldn't
spoil this kayak
trip through
the magnificent
waters of Norway.

By Todd Pitock



In the saddle:
Aurlandsfjord
is part of the
18-mile route.

EARLY LAST JUNE, three Frenchmen, a British couple and I paired off and slinked into bright-yellow two-man kayaks for a paddle trip in Norway's fjord country.

- We started in a subsidiary channel of the Sognefjord, a waterway of almost bewildering beauty that flows from the Norwegian Sea on the west coast for 126 miles into the interior. Ahead of us lay a three-day, 18-mile route through two waterways, the Aurlandsfjord and the Naerøyfjord, that meet in a wishbone and connect the villages of Flâm and Gudvangen.

- The Frenchmen, three buddies who met working as dishwashers in Normandy, had spent a month eating hot dogs and plain spaghetti as they traveled to and from the Arctic Circle, a couple hundred miles north of here. They had the most kayaking experience. The previous week, they'd been out for two hours. The Brits and I had none, but the only other way to be on the fjord is by ferry or cruise ship. One seemed too quick and pedestrian; the other too large and loud. The kayak provided a slower pace, an opportunity to drift for days, with the only noise being the kiss of the paddle on the face of the water. That sounded just right.
- We had a guide. Call him Trevor.

- "If you ask me something I don't know," he told us as we pushed off the beach in Flâm, "I'm not afraid to say, 'I don't know.'"
- "What happens if we fall in, Trevor?" asked Louise,

whose boyfriend, Chris, had recently introduced her to wilderness camping, including bedding down in gale-force winds, sleeping in wet clothes, hiking to exhaustion and other satisfying joys of the great outdoors. Lately she had taken to asking relevant questions early in the ordeal.

- "After I finish laughing my ass off," Trevor told her, "I'll come over and get you out."

- This was oddly reassuring. You'd think falling into ice water could get you on the wrong pages of your alumni magazine. ("Remember that guy?" "No, not really.") But Trevor's cheeriness left you thinking that the worst thing that could happen was no biggie.
- And the kayaks *were* stable. Personally I felt secure the moment I settled into mine. But then, it seems almost a truism on a journey such as this that the hazards you encounter are often not the ones you expect.

- "Is there anything we need to do or know, Trevor?" I asked. I was looking for paddling tricks from the master regarding speed or efficiency of movement.
- He split his time wayfaring between Norway, Tibet and Nepal, picking up guiding gigs where he could. His hair was tied into a ponytail and he had the faraway gaze of

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HAKAN STENLUND

someone adrift in his own thoughts, a thin Buddha who had acquired the wisdom of remaining unbound to people, places or things. He had once stayed in a five-star hotel and once flown business class, and his sneering contempt for both made me feel apologetic and shallow for preferring such comforts.

The outfitter, Njord, had hired him specially for our trip, since the season hadn't really started yet and everyone else was off attending some kayaking conference.

"Always stay to the left," he said. "The boats and ferries come up on the right. Don't get too close to the sides. People get killed by falling rocks. Apart from that," he said, inhaling the glory, "just enjoy it. Just enjoy the silence and the beauty. You don't find many places in the world like this."

Chris, a six-foot-four entrepreneur with a taste for beer and zest for the outdoors, shouted out a big amen. "Oh, my God," he said. "It's absolutely *mental*."

Indeed. Through 20 ice ages and over three million years, glaciers had fashioned a paradisaical wilderness of soaring granite and limestone mountains fitted with forest, boulders, moss, wildflower-

MY JOURNEY HAD BEGUN IN OSLO, THE CAPITAL, which I had a day to explore. Along the promenade of Karl Johans Gate I chewed salty licorice that street vendors sell by the foot and wandered up to the parliament building, passing the National Theater with crowds in the public gardens and its statue of Henrik Ibsen, the national playwright, and then past the Grand Café, which Knut Hamsun, the great Norwegian novelist, frequented.

I had been revisiting Hamsun's novels, and as reproachable as the man was—he declared Hitler wasn't half-bad when the Nazis invaded in 1940—I especially admired *Wayfarers*, which takes place all over Norway, and *Hunger*, which is set in Oslo (then Christiania) and is about an obdurate and starving freelance writer.

When Hamsun was writing—he published *Hunger* in 1890—Norway was dirt-poor. If people wanted meat, they rowed out in schooners looking for whales to harpoon. The bleak situation explained why so many of the offspring of Norwegians became Americans. In the 1960s some Norwegian Jed Clampett hit

KAYAKS PROVIDED A SLOWER PACE,

ers and fields of scree; we saw herds of mountain goats forage, then break into sudden flight, dislodging rocks that tapped and echoed as they toppled. It was not an unpopulated landscape. Small farmsteads lay on flat shelves hundreds of feet up; there was also an occasional village with the steeple of a stave church. I had endured a week of nickel-plated clouds in Stockholm and Oslo, but here the skies were scrubbed blue, and the still water reflected colors that were somehow more intense than the actual landscape and sky.

My partner, Manu, spoke the best English of the three French musketeers. We happened to be wearing matching Adidas pants, a sort of uniform that made our pairing seem preordained.

"We are the Franco-American team!"

"Shampy-oh-ness!"

"Huh?"

"Shampy-oh-ness!"

"Ah, yes—champions!"

We were well-matched, at least insofar as we were always out of sync in the same way. He aspired to own a farm and make goat cheese. I aspired to eat it. Abbott and Costello.

Right out of the gate, the others pulled ahead of us. We weren't going to be shampy-oh-ness, but this wasn't a race. The point was to commune with the Norwegian universe. I can *be* with the best of them, especially in a spot like this—and anyway, we had 20 hours of good light so there wasn't any hurry.

Trevor paddled back. He looked put out. "You guys are falling behind," he shouted. "Come on, you're holding everyone up!"

black gold, and Europe's poor country cousin to the north became one of the world's richest nations.

Today you pay lobster prices for whale. Or so the receptionist at the hotel told me when I asked for dinner recommendations.

"People still eat whale? Does the United Nations know about this?"

"My parents' generation used to eat a lot of it, but back then it was considered peasant food. Now it's only the trendy places that serve it, and my parents laugh at the prices people pay."

She pointed me to an area called Grünerløkka, where I found a restaurant called *Sult*—or "hunger" in English, in honor of Hamsun's novel. I took one of three bar stools in a corner.

"I hear you serve a nice cut of whale."

"We recommend it medium-rare."

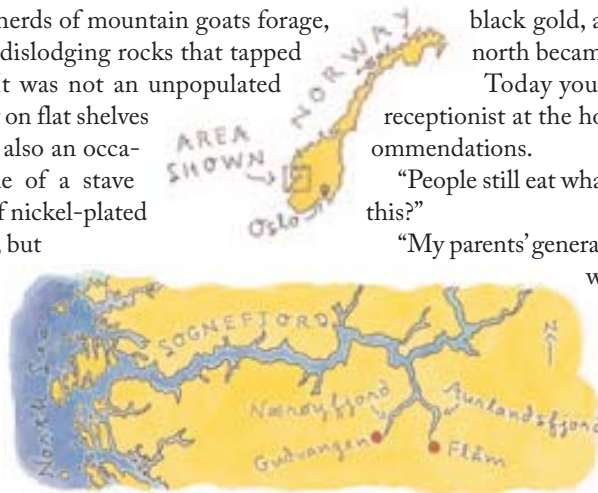
It was like a cross between tuna and venison. I expected a bigger portion, it being whale, but there were just two strips, like flank steaks. If they put me in the dock at the Hague, I'll have to confess that I also liked it and would eat it again.

The waitress loved Hamsun's novels.

"What do you think?" I asked her. "Could the character in *Hunger* afford to eat here? It's a good name for a restaurant, but it seems paradoxical."

"The novel was set in this neighborhood."

She regretted seeing the way the area was heading uphill. A global urban story: Shabby district brimming with character attracts young chefs and prematurely world-weary, terribly good-looking servers who describe in loving detail the art of the meal, regional and seasonal, of course, with drizzles, reductions and finishes; then come the artisan boutiques and sidewalk cafés with





AN OPPORTUNITY TO DRIFT.

awnings and French names; global retailers start horning in, rents rise and the people who made the place hip can't afford it anymore.

"We're a modest people," she said. "But we're losing our values. We got too rich too quickly."

The Norway State Railway train to fjord country didn't go too quickly at first, but the train was full of people brimming with anticipation. A British woman was taking a day trip, five hours in each direction, just because it was something she wanted to have experienced in her life. A Texas woman was making her fifth trip in seven years; she became almost giddy describing the light.

I didn't have quite as powerful a revelation, but as the train climbed above the tree line—almost 4,300 feet at its peak—earth and sky blended, so that it was hard to tell if you were looking at clouds hovering above a glacial plain or slopes rising to meet them.

At Myrdal, a remote junction, passengers switched to the Flåm Railway. Built as a supply line to farmers in the valley, it was an engineering marvel when it was started in the 1920s; now one of Norway's top attractions, it plunges down a lush 12-mile, 3,000-foot valley of falls and farms, paddocks and mountains encrusted by black stone until you arrive in Flåm.

The village exists to traffic tourists, who come by rail, coach buses and (mostly) cruise ship; they're processed like herrings onto the Flåm Railway depot, then returned to flop around in souvenir shops staffed by Poles that sell things like horned Viking hats. (Note: Real Vikings never wore them.)

It's a good place to check e-mail. The food offerings during



my visit, however, were scarce. At the larger of the two hotels, a battalion of Chinese had overwhelmed the buffet. The smaller one had a cafeteria with hamburgers and fries, and wedges of pie under plastic wrap.

I consulted a woman from the tourist office regarding my culinary desires. She told me the area is famous for its goat cheese.

"They make it in a village called Undredal," she said.

"Where can I get it?"

"In Undredal. I'm sorry, but not in Flåm."

"How about some fish?" I asked.

"Oh, yes! We have wonderful salmon. Wonderful fish!"

"Perfect. Where can I get that?"

"In the river."

UNDREDAL WAS A STOP ON THE KAYAK TRIP. WE found its tiny church, est. 1147, and had a brief, fruitful negotiation to get a shopkeeper to open and give us samples of the famed goat cheese—a caramelized whey with a gritty texture.

We pitched our tents a couple hundred yards farther up the fjord. Trevor made a tasty bowl of "Mexican soup," and we sat on big rocks as the summer light faded into a vespertine glow. Shadows gathered in the hollows of mountains, and the wide lane of the fjord glimmered with pale pink hues.

"*Magnifique!*" said Jean-Yves, kissing his fingertips. Although he didn't speak English, he managed to convey his fascination

with Cherokees; at some point he'd found a feather and attached it to the back of his head. He wanted to know if I could hook him up with work on a reservation back in the States.

Meantime, we discussed the plan.

"We can get up at nine and start at ten," Trevor said. We suggested that an hour earlier would be preferable. "Whatever you want," Trevor said. "Just enjoy it. I love to sleep. If you get up and I'm still sleeping, just give me a kick."

He meant it humorously, but as the following day proceeded—ten o'clock start—we regretted the missed opportunity.

We paddled for an hour. Kayaking is a great core workout, but it's not cardiovascular. For that, we tied the kayaks up at a dock and went hiking,



tered two skiers carrying their telemarking skis; they'd hiked up in the morning to another, higher peak, and skied down. It seemed the very definition of the word *Nordic*. It also looked forbidding. Snow set distant mountains aglow.

At the top, about 2,300 feet up, we could see the Aurlandsfjord and Naerøfjord join in their wishbone formation. A massive waterfall, the Laegdafossen, cascaded down, filing the mountainside. We took turns hanging our heads over the edge. A morbid thrill, a rush to supplement the high. Manu and Cedric, the third Frenchman, posed for a picture, rather close to the edge, and Jean-Yves ordered them to step forward.

We ran into three German hikers. One worked for a local conservation group, and she commented that the lookout point was more than a view; it was also a window in the issue of sustainable development and environmen-

Above: taking a breather at an Aurlandsfjord beach; **below,** digs in Flåm.



“I’M VERY TIRED,” MANU SAID.

ascending a steep switchback with signs warning visitors not to look down.

At about 1,200 feet we arrived at a small farm. It had a well, a small structure with turf roof and a house without electricity. The owner runs a guest house which is full all season just from word-of-mouth business.

"I am from Missouri," he told me. His thick Norwegian accent led me to think his parents must have brought him to the country as a child.

"How old were you when you came here?"

"Twenty-three."

Farther up we came to a shack. Along the trail we encoun-

tal tourism. In 2005, the Naerøfjord was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's a mixed blessing. On one hand, the designation requires the area to conserve its pristine environment and limits any development. At the same time, it is marketing magic, a great big kosher stamp that invites the world to come and visit. It's an unresolved paradox.

"The region needs more individual tourism but it's geared toward mass tourism," she said. As if to reinforce the point, a cruise ship passed below trailing some pollutant as it motored along the Aurlandsfjord toward Flåm. (Only ferries, no cruise ships, enter the Naerøfjord.) With such narrow, tall walls, smog gets trapped; indeed, as we had seen just a campfire made a dark

cloud gather and linger over the water like the irate spirit of some Viking. “They haven’t figured it out yet, but they have to develop,” she said.

“Bhutan doesn’t have a gross national product,” Trevor said. “It has a gross national happiness product.” Once he got Asia on his mind, it wouldn’t come off.

“It’s incredible here,” I said.

“It’s mental,” Chris added.

Everyone agreed. Except Trevor. “I guess it’s all right,” he allowed, “if you’ve never been to Nepal.”

AT SIX O’CLOCK WE WERE ALMOST BACK AT THE kayaks when Trevor announced that he needed a sandwich. We had a choice of two areas to make camp. One was a 15-minute paddle away, the other 45. But he wanted a sandwich now. An hour later, we pushed off. He preferred the farther camp. We agreed.

After 45 minutes we asked how much longer.

“About 45 minutes,” Trevor said.

“You said that 45 minutes ago.”

“I said ‘about.’”

We turned around the bend into the Naerøyfjord, the deepest fjord. Forty-five minutes later, the proposed campsite still looked far away. So did Trevor. We could see his white kayak as a speck in the distance. Although the sky was light, we paddled in the crepuscular shadow of a mountain.

“I’m very tired,” Manu said.

This was not a good sign. Manu was 25 years old and in well-above-average physical condition. I kept my own weariness at bay by not thinking about it.

My splash deck, the seal that covers the seat, was leaking somewhere, and I was soaked. The temperature was dropping.

At about ten o’clock we reached the beachhead. Trevor was there, as relaxed as a statue. It hadn’t occurred to him to start a fire or dinner. I would have raised an admonishing finger, and not the pointer, only the chill made it hard to move my hands and when I tried to speak my jaw wasn’t cooperating. Seeing signs of hypothermia, he pulled out fleece, helped guide my limbs into dry clothes and got me wrapped up. He wore a certain, stumped Dubya-like expression.

provided by the outfitter. I decided to go and take a walk. Standing up didn’t help things. I tried jumping up and down and running in place. It activated my GI tract. By five o’clock I looked at the lumpy sleeping bag on the ground that contained Trevor and decided to give it a kick. He came to quickly and got up to make me tea and find another blanket for me. As the sun rose, I hoped my world would get right side up again.

Then I felt a quiver in my jaw, my mouth, and, assisted by last night’s dinner, I barked out an inarticulate wake-up call across camp.

From within tents came speculation of whether someone had been sick. By a quick process of elimination they ascertained it was me, a fact that I duly confirmed with a fresh bout of retching.

Jean-Yves, the French Cherokee who still had the feather in his hair, looked at me sadly, as if I was going to the gods, and he dispatched Manu and Cedric to gather kindling for a campfire, or perhaps a bier.

Trevor’s concern was almost enough to win my forgiveness, until he started trying to diagnose me.

“You probably drank too much last night,” he decided.

“I’m not a doctor, Trevor,” I said in a hoarse voice, “but I suspect that 12 hours of hiking and paddling, an evening of hypothermia and a sleepless night lying in a threadbare sleeping bag on a wafer-thin pad over cold, wet earth might have had more to do with it than a thimble of vodka after dinner.”

He shrugged as if there was probably no point in arguing.

They discussed sending me out on a ferry.

Then a funny thing happened: I got sleepy, had a glorious *shluff* for an hour or so and woke no worse off than if it had just been a dream.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go.”

The last morning involved just a couple of hours of paddling. Along the way we stopped in a tiny village and explored the little stave church and the graveyard, full of artwork and photos of 150 years of church leaders, their facial hair tracking regional fashions. We opened a bottle of Chilean red wine and toasted the journey, which had taken us through arguably the most beautiful place any of us had ever been. The Frenchmen sniffed the bouquet with disapproval, though they drank it anyway.

We could see the town, Gudvangen, which marked the end. In the morning light the water was emerald along the shore and

THIS WAS NOT A GOOD SIGN.

“I didn’t realize it was so far or that we’d be paddling against the current.”

These seemed things a guide would know.

“I messed up,” he said.

I held steaming tea in both hands as my core temperature came back to normal. We ate, probably more than we should have, though hours of exercise had primed our hunger; then Chris took out a fifth of vodka and poured half a dram in my second cup of tea.

Around three, I treaded to the surface of consciousness to discover that my body heat had once again slipped off for a holiday somewhere else, and I started to shiver in the flimsy sleeping bag

translucent blue and ivory at the center.

Trevor had one more thing he wanted to do with everyone, but I’d had enough, and besides, Manu and I had finally gotten in sync. We were power-paddling now, and while Trevor delayed the others—he convinced them to stand up in their kayaks in the middle of the fjord and pose for a perilously pointless picture—we paddled on, and beached our kayak at full throttle. We experienced an immediate feeling of completion, a buoyant surge of joy.

“You know what?” Manu said, putting out a hand. “In the end, we were the *shampy-ob-ness*.” •

See www.visitnorway.com for information on fjord country.