

## 011027 Travels – Part 1

I had a great holiday that was followed by a monstrously busy week that left me worn out and sick which is why this email has taken so long to write. It turns out that the holiday that we had was the harvest holiday. Schools all over Denmark were closed for the week so that in the days of the family farm, the students could go home to help with the harvest. It is the continuation of a tradition that definitely works for me. This email and the next few that will follow will be about my trip to Norway and Germany. I have a lot to write, so I expect that the details will be over several emails so as not to put you to sleep. (sorry Michele, you will just have to be patient).

Norway is amazing. Amazingly expensive that is. So much so that it made living in Copenhagen look inexpensive. To put it into perspective, an “extra value” meal at Burger King of a whopper, fries and a coke costs 95 Kroner, or \$9.50 US. One of the reasons for the high prices is the high taxes which are applied. And, the tax rate is not consistent across all products. For example, if you go to a fast food restaurant or a coffee shop, you will see two prices on the menu. The first price is for the food if you get it to go. The tax on takeout is at one rate because the restaurant is only providing a product. However, if you eat in, the restaurant is providing a service and therefore another tax is applied. Depending on how much you have ordered, you could be paying several dollars more for the same food just because you wanted to eat it in the restaurant.

The multiple levels of the tax rate are even applied to disc jockeys. If a DJ plays music in a club, he is taxed at one tax rate. However, if the DJ scratches, what he is doing is considered art and is therefore taxed at a lower tax rate.

Beer and liquor are highly taxed. The motive behind these taxes is to limit alcohol consumption. Norway had a prohibition in the 1930’s that was ended with the compromise that the taxes would be so high that people could not afford to go out to get drunk.

All of the tax schemes will be changed if Norway ever decided to join the EU. The taxes will have to be reduced to fall in line with the other EU states. Micah and I sat next to two Norwegian women for most of our train ride from Copenhagen to Oslo. Mary Anna and Jeanette were extremely familiar with their political system and were never shy with their progressive opinions. A lot of what I am writing here came from their descriptions of the tax and political systems of Norway.

According to Mary Anna and Jeanette, Norwegians don’t want to join the EU because they fear losing their sovereignty. Probably much like the fears of the original 13 colonies 225 years ago.

Norway currently has a political system much like Britain or Denmark in that there is a king, a prime minister and a parliament. Actually, the crown prince just got married about 2 months ago in a wedding that was also broadcast in Denmark. There are currently six political parties in Norway with the leading party capturing only 35% of the

vote in the last election. Therefore, there no one party has a majority of the popular vote causing some Norwegians to envy the US system where there are only 2 main political parties. (The grass is always greener on the other side).

Norway was once part of Denmark in a union that ended in 1814 when Norway was taken by Sweden. All of the Scandinavian countries seemed to be at war with each other through the centuries in a chorus that included Norway belonging to first one country and then another. Fortunately for us, the union with Denmark led to a similarity in languages. Jeanette and Marry Anna said that they could understand Danish, but that the Danes had a difficult time understanding Norwegian. The written languages are almost identical. Fortunately, English is spoken everywhere.

I had some apprehensions going into the trip with nine people. I was afraid that so many people would cause decision making to be a complex process and that everyone would want to do different things. However, my fears were unfounded with this group and we got along very well. Everyone was pretty open to doing most anything and it was with sadness that I left the group in the end. Once more, my traveling companions were:

Karin from Austria  
Kat from Australia  
Alzbeta from the Czech Republic  
Micah from the US  
Tobi from Germany  
Uli also from Germany  
Luca from Italy  
Thomas from Switzerland

The whole trip was really a great experience for me. I have always regretting not studying abroad while at university in the US. I never did the backpack around Europe thing and so this was almost like being given a second chance. For that I am very thankful.

Oslo – Saturday

Our train left Copenhagen around 13:00 and it took us across the bridge between Denmark and Sweden and then up the coast of Sweden into Norway. The entire ride took only about 8 hours and in one day I bagged two new countries!

We arrived late Friday night and hiked to our hotel which was the least expensive that we could find when calling ahead. The group of us wound up having a big meeting at 1AM to finally plan our trip. We had met several times prior to our departure, but we had mostly decided on general areas that we wanted to visit and now we were to decided definite routes. We laid a complex scheme of travel that ended with three groups eventually splitting off as the week progressed. And all of our good planning was for nothing.

We returned to the Oslo train station the next morning after throwing our big backpacks into left luggage so that we would not be encumbered by them during the day. At the ticket office, we heard the chorus that would plague us for the rest of our trip. Rails closed due to construction, trains fully booked. We wound up quickly preplanning our trip only to find that the new plan was again plagued by these problems. OK, one more time and this time there was a train. We planned to leave Saturday evening on the night train to Trondheim so that we would not have to splurge for another night in Oslo. Fortunately, we had all purchased Scanrail passes in Copenhagen which allowed us 5 days of travel in Scandinavia within a 15 day period. The passes allowed us the flexibility of not having to limit our travels by the cost of point to point tickets. The only bad part was figure out how to jam all of our travels into the 5 days, but we succeeded by using night trains. Now that our plan was set, I could also buy my plane ticket to Frankfurt. Fortunately, the student travel services are all over Europe and the price is the same if you buy one day in advance or three weeks in advance.

We finally set out from the train station after spending hours camped out there. During the rest of our trip we would joke about just how much time we spent at the train station. We would eventually wind up in the Oslo train station 4 times since all of the rails in Norway seem to go through the city. It was if we were naturally drawn there and we had to make a great effort to escape from the pull of the station.

Fortunately, we had been fortified for our day by a great complimentary breakfast at the hotel. We had all tried to eat our weight since we knew that eating in Oslo would be very difficult on our budgets. We had all packed food that we had bought in Copenhagen in hopes of having picnics or cooking in hostels. We would wind up eating out of our backpacks for the entire trip which was a lot of fun. We had a cookout with a fire at a site in the woods overlooking the fjord in Trondheim, we cleaned out bakeries on some of our hikes and we had huge pasta dinners overseen by Luca our Italian expert.

It was very interesting watching my companions eat. For example, at breakfast in Oslo, I had a bowl of Musli with milk, some bread with jam and coffee (first time up). I just put everything on my plate and began to eat. But, Alzbeta sat down with a plate of cheese neatly arranged around pieces of bread and a bowl of Musli with yogurt. I eventually tried the Musli with yogurt with Michele and it is really good, although a bit like eating candy. Generally, I think that I was struck by how slowly and meticulously the Europeans ate as compared to myself (of course with both a fork and a knife.) And Luca kept adding more instant coffee to the coffee to try to make it into the sludge that they drink in Italy.

It is a bit difficult to describe Oslo because I was only there for a few hours and most of that time was spent in the hotel or the train station. There is a pedestrian mall that extends from the train station to the palace of the royal family. Along the street are nice buildings of stone with neon and bustling stores. The street was full of people as we walked it. There are a few tall building in Oslo, but most of the buildings are under 5 stories high. Of the three major cities that we saw in Norway, Oslo is my third favorite.

We set out to find the Edvard Munch museum (the Scream) which I was very excited to see. I had the privilege to see a Munch exhibit at Boston College last spring and I truly enjoy his works. We arrived at the museum to find that our luck from the train station had followed us. A brand new, huge, exciting exhibit was about to open, but we were one day too early. Therefore, what was open the day that we went was a fraction of the museum and only a few of his works that I recognized. The museum was interesting nonetheless, but a bit of a disappointment.

After the museum, we wandered around the city and up past the royal palace towards a sculpture park. Our walk took us past the US embassy. Why do the US embassies always look like squat, modern buildings that don't fit into the local architecture? But on this night, the scene was particularly sad. The building was dark and deserted with the black stone of the building furthering this impression. Concrete barricades had been set up around the building and there were police all about it. As we walked past I had the sensation of a country under siege and cowering, even here in Norway. It was depressing.

We arrived at the Vigeland Sculpture Park just as the sun was setting. If you ever get the chance to see the park, I highly recommend it. Vigeland gave the works shown in the park to the city in exchange for favors received in the shape of a studio and apartment in the years 1921 to 1930. Vigeland died in 1943 and was still working on the park at the time. You enter the park along a walkway that takes you into a world of frowning, fighting and posing bronze human figures. The works are fantastic and I really hope that my pictures come out so that you can see them. Some of the figures are playing, some are hugging, others are covered with children that they are trying to shake off. It is really difficult to explain. The center of the beautiful park is an obelisk surrounded by more marble figures. The figures show Vigeland's impression of the cycle of humanity: teaching, playing, fighting, loving, eating and sleeping. You really have to see this place.

Eventually after stopping to get coffee, we would wander back to the hotel where we would collect our packs and head back to the train station. Our train left at about 23:30 and our reservations were for seats, which is where we spent the night. The chairs were plush and comfortable, but we all dug into our packs for our earplugs due to one passenger who snored as if trying to wake the sleeping populations of the towns that we slid through during our 8 hours of travel due north to Trondheim.

End of Part 1

Coming soon: Trondheim, Bergen, Flan, the fjords and Frankfurt!

Luca while in Bergen on the frustration of trying to buy tickets to travel in Norway. (said with an Italian accent)

“We tried to buy you a bus ticket, but no, this is Scandinavia. You can not buy bus tickets at the bus station.”

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