



011104 Flånbana

The scenery from the Signature train as we glided from Oslo to Bergen was beautiful. The route takes you almost due east from Oslo, over and through the mountains and then down to Bergen on the east coast. The scenery was periodically blocked by the numerous tunnels that we passed through. The views were not of sweeping forests, but of a landscape that was almost bare of trees. The ground was covered with grass and punctuated with rocky outcroppings, lakes and numerous waterfalls. Here and there would be groups of brightly colored houses in little villages. The Norwegians seem to favor bright yellows and reds, maybe to counter the bleakness of the long, dark winters. But mostly, the scenery was uninterrupted plains and crags as few people seem to want to call the mountains their home.

Bergen, on the other hand was a cluster of numerous homes and businesses. Of the cities that we visited, Bergen is my favorite. It is situated in a valley where it descends into one of the fjords. There are hills on either side of the city that stretch backwards away from the fjord. Looking from the fjord towards the city, one can see houses perched on the left hill, adding bright patches of yellow and red. At the top of the left hill is an observatory which you can hike up to or take the funicular. The downtown is a maze of little streets that cut through the pleasant rows of houses and businesses. The tallest building is probably five stories tall which gives the city a nice feel.

The water front is home to numerous fishing vessels as well as a row of old, wooden warehouses that are the signature of Bergen. You see their image on postcards and on brochures of Bergen. Behind the warehouses are more three story, wooden houses and buildings. Jeanette and Mary Anna told us to look closely at these buildings. The front of the buildings are painted mostly in red hues. However, to save money, the sides and backs are not painted since most people don't see them from these angles.

The fjord juts into the city to form a little harbor. On one of the docks, a fish market is set up each morning where people can come to buy salmon, eels and other goodies. The salesmen claim to be able to speak dozens of languages and so our group put them to the test. The salesmen were happy to speak with everyone and even gave Luca a discount because he could speak Italian. Across the harbor from the wooden warehouses are nice looking hotels and businesses to cater to the tourists which undoubtedly come in large numbers to delight in the city and the easy access that it offers to the fjords. From Bergen, you can catch ferries through the fjords (all closed after August). The best ferry ride would be one that takes you along the whole east coast of Norway, pushing far up into the arctic circle. The trip makes stops along the way at all of the little cities and villages and takes around 2 weeks to complete. Maybe after I graduate...

Micah and I had been responsible for booking all of our accommodations for the trip and in Bergen we took a chance on a place where we could rent apartments and scored. The group stayed in a place where we rented two apartments that were big enough for all of us to have a bed. The furnished apartments were beautiful with kitchens, living areas and a second floor for the bedrooms. The owner showed us our rooms and told us the low

price for the two nights that we would stay. We kept waiting for him to wander off and for the real owner to come to ask us what we were doing there. The places were so nice that we couldn't believe how inexpensive they were. So, we were sure to get a receipt, but it was the real deal. We would use the kitchens to cook big dinners each night and it was very pleasant to relax and hang out with the group.

Over the course of our trip, the places that we stayed kept getting nicer and less expensive. Micah joked that if we could only stay another week, we would be staying in the best place ever for free if the trend continued.

We arrived in Bergen on Tuesday and Kat, Alzbeta and I went to the train station that night so that we could book a passage on the Norway in a Nutshell Tour. Only the three of us would go on Wednesday because the group would soon split up because people had to leave to return to Copenhagen on different days.

One thing that was present throughout our trip was the predominance of gambling in Norway. There are video gambling machines that are even present in the fast food restaurants such as McDonalds (do you want tokens with your burger?) There were also signs outside of every store for Norsk Tipping which I assume is some sort of lottery. But, we preferred to think it was more like cow tipping, but that you tipped sleeping Norwegians instead of cows.

Kat, Alzbeta and I left the next morning to catch our train to Voss where we would then board a bus. The whole Norway in a Nutshell tour is basically a combined ticket for a train, bus and boat tour. The bus wound us through the Nærøy valley and up to scenic vistas where we were your typical shutterbugs. However the best part of the trip was the boat ride. We arrived in Gudvangen where we boarded a ferry ride that would take us through the Aurlandsfjord and the Nærøyfjord which is the longest and deepest of the fjords. During the two hour long cruise, we saw little villages at the side of the fjord and often reachable only by boat due to the mountains that rose behind them. The villages had quaint, bright, little houses. The shear drop from the mountains down into the fjord reminded me of the Three Gorges in China. Some of the massive peaks were snow covered and waterfalls abounded. It was just such a perfect day as the sun shone and warmed us which our hats, gloves, coats and coffee could not do in the shade.

The cruise regrettably drew to a close when we anchored at the town of Flåm where we would catch the Flåmsbana train. The Flåmsbana climbs 866 meters up through the Flåm valley to the town of Myrdal. Our compartment was not full, the others and I raced from one side to the other to take in the beautiful views of mountains, thundering waterfalls and green pastures as the train slowly climbed. There was even one point where the train stopped so that we could take pictures of the Kjosfossen Waterfall (with a name like that, it has to be big).

Once we arrived in Myrdal, we would catch a regular train back to Bergen. The next day, I would leave for Germany, Kat and Alzbeta would leave to return to Copenhagen and the others would start the Nutshell tour, stopping in Flåm for a few days of hiking.

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