

Scandinavia Journal 2016

The last international trip Jim, Carol, Laveta & I had taken together was to China in 2010, so it was well past time we set out on another...

Saturday, 20 August: Business class (SAGA class) on Iceland air was really something, starting with the SEA Club Lounge at SEATAC. Our 757 had a beautiful new interior- and the food and service was just outstanding. It will be hard to get the girls to fly coach class again!

Sunday, 21 August (Day 1): The first leg of our flight took a little over seven hours. We landed in Reykjavík, Iceland with only one hour to change planes for the final three hour leg of our journey. Arriving in Copenhagen, we found a very crowded and confusing airport but After a 2 1/2 hour wait managed to find our tour director and bus transportation to the *Copenhagen Marriott*, an upscale waterfront hotel just a 13-minute walk from the *Tivoli Gardens* amusement park- which we could see from our room.

Our travel director, Jacqui Stark was a bright, knowledgeable, talkative and very pretty Australian. Giving us a couple hours to freshen up, she whisked us off on a short, initial bus tour of the downtown Copenhagen. Weather was really nice 70°F. The city reminded me of Amsterdam- with lots of waterways and bicycles. We passed by the entrance to the *Christiana* settlement, which is like *Ashbury Heights* (used to be) in San Francisco. We also stopped by the new modern and very large waterfront opera house before returning to our hotel. Later that evening Trafalgar put on a light dinner (with lots of wine) and Jacqui passed on information we would need to know for our tour. It was the end of a very long day.

Monday, 22 August (Day 2): Well- we were up early and had breakfast at 6:30, a wonderful buffet style breakfast- actually one of the best buffet

breakfasts ever, before boarding our bus at 08:00 for a tour of Copenhagen. The city's buildings are both old and new, with artsy things everywhere. It's a very busy place with walkers, bicycles and cars all going helter-skelter. The people are mostly young and beautiful. Amazing! We did a walking tour around *Amalienborg Palace*, home of the Danish royal family, and to our surprise we saw the royal children being walked to school by their royal nanny. Security was discrete.

We made the obligatory stop by the Langelinie Promenade to see Copenhagen's famous *Little Mermaid*, her bronze body posing on the same rock pedestal since 1918.

Later that afternoon, we took a cruise along the harbor and canals for a waterfront view of the city. It was most enjoyable. There were many live-in yachts lining the waterways and beautiful old buildings mixed in with modern ones. The city's residents were out enjoying the last few weeks of summer, walking, eating, drinking and lounging around the waterfront. For me it was a real highlight of the tour and I took a lot of people pictures.

Re-boarding our bus we headed out of town about 12 km, to the fairytale village of *Dragor*. It's located on a working harbor with many of the original 17th century dwellings having thatched roofs- A very beautiful place. Our group walked over to the *Strandhotel* for a dinner of local "open face sandwiches" which were really great. We returned to the Copenhagen Marriott around 20:00.

Tuesday, 23 August (Day 3): Pulling out at the next morning at 08:30 we motored through farmland and over two bridges to the Jutland peninsula. The first bridge was very, very long and beautiful. Stopping at the village of *Odense*, we saw the

birthplace of *Hans Christian Andersen*- walked over to his house and took a photo of Laveta & Carol knocking on his door- then stopping by the Museum gift shop before walking around town, which was bustling with eateries and stores. We visited the Gothic *St. Canute's Cathedral* rebuilt in 1300. It has a beautiful white interior and absolutely stunning gold leaf altar- then stopped by *St. Alpan Kirke* built in 1636.

After a couple of hours we re-boarded our bus and continued to the town of *Aalborg* on the only fjord in Denmark. We stayed at *The First Hotel Aalborg* with its flying elephant logo. Walking through town on our own, we spotted what seemed to be a good place for dinner- *The Wine* cellar (Vin Handel) where we had of all things- Wiener schnitzel. This turned out to be a good meal at a neat place. After walking back through town we had some drinks in our hotel bar.

Wednesday, 24 August (Day 4): Leaving Aalborg at 8:45 for *Hirthsals*, we boarded a very large *ColorLine* ferry for the 3 hr+ voyage to *Kristiansand* Norway, where we made a comfort stop in *Moi* at the *Moi Hotel*. Finally at Stavanger, we stopped downtown to take some pictures, before driving about 15 minutes to our hotel, the *Scandic Forum Stavanger*. Our room was on the 17th floor but had dinner on the top 21st floor in a restaurant with wraparound views.

Thursday, 25 August (Day 5): This was day of ferries, bridges and tunnels- working our way northward from Stavanger through beautiful countryside. Our hotel the *Clarion Hotel Admiral Bergen* was downtown, right on the water. Bergen is Norway's second largest and I think most beautiful city. It has a wet climate, like Seattle- only with double the amount of rainfall! After checking in to the hotel, we drove along the fjord to *Troldhøyen* and the museum, villa and home of the famous com-

poser *Edvard Grieg* and also attended a short piano performance of a few of his famous compositions.

We were then whisked off to old Bryggen, a series of *Hanseatic league* commercial buildings lining the eastern side of the *Vågen harbour*. They're filled with shops- as they were in the 17th century. Then walking over to the funicular, we enjoyed a 300m (1000 ft) ride up the hillside of *Mt. Floyen* for fabulous views of the city and harbor. Walking back to the hotel we stopped at the outdoor fish market for dinner.

Friday, 26 August (Day 6): Slept in today! Later that afternoon, Laveta, Carol and I walked downtown to see the 900 year old *St. Mary Church*, the oldest building in Bergen. We were charged an entry fee but then sadly, were not allowed to take pictures. Graves and tombstones were clustered all around the church... like they wanted to come inside. One 18th century stone had an hourglass with wings engraved on one side. There were two words written above "WEC EITFIKEIT". I've not been able to translate it but Carol figured it meant "Time Flies". Walking slowly through Bryggen, the girls shopped and shopped all the way back to our hotel.

At 17:00 we drove out of town to *Øvre-Eide Gård* for dinner. The farm is run by its 5th generation owners, who met at our bus and showed us around the farm property- including introducing us to the animals. An hour or so later we all sat down for dinner with wine and song. A really great evening!

Saturday, 27 August (Day 7): Today proved to be a day of trains, tunnels and waterfalls! Leaving Bergen by bus, we motored northeast to the ski resort of Voss boarded a train, later changing trains to the *Flambana* (Flam train) which climbed a thousand meters for a picturesque ride past tunnels, waterfalls and valleys. The train made a stop near the

end of a tunnel so we could go out to see a large waterfall up close. Very wet with all that spray! Reboarding our bus, we continued to the village of *Undredal*, where we boarded the motor ship *Lady Elisabeth* for a cruise up and down the *Naroyfjord*. Wow- Breathtaking scenery!

Back in our bus we headed north through more tunnels, one of them, the *Lærdal Tunnel* is the longest roadway tunnel in Europe (24.5 km) It took a good 20 minutes driving time. The tunnel is so long that they excavated large caverns every 5 of 6 km so that in an emergency or blockage even large trucks can turn around. They lighted these turn around caverns with blue lighting to keep people alert. Our bus pulled over in one of them so we could go outside and take some photos.

A few kilometers later we went through a tunnel under the *Sognefjord* before arriving at the *Sognefjord Hotel* in the town of *Leikanger*. Laveta & I had a *great* corner room with views of the fjord and the town. The hotel itself was like a museum with many items from the early 20th century.

Sunday, 28 August: Monday 29 August (Day 8, 9):

We had a wonderful drive this morning through high meadows alongside *Innvikfjorden* with a stop in *Stryn* for shopping and then for lunch. Continuing, we gained and lost elevation through some of the most beautiful country of the trip. Stopping at *Djupvandshytta* for an hour or so- we proceeded up Route-63 through beautiful, high, empty and glaciated country before descending steeply into *Geiranger* village and *Hotel Geiranger*, at the end of the fjord. Beautiful world class setting! The view from our deck was truly awesome! I could have stayed here a month.

The next morning, the cruise ship *Costa Favolosa* tied up just 200 yards away. Later, Laveta and I walked up the road to an old church (which was

locked) but there were fantastic views. We also walked to a waterfall pouring loudly through town. What a neat place. Spent the rest of the day resting, looking at maps and figuring out all the places we'd been.

Tuesday, 30 August (Day 10)

Bags out at 07:00, then breakfast- our Bus left at 08:00, traveling south on route 63 then east on route 15 to the little town of *Lom* and its famous *Stave Church*. The church (dedicated to Mary) is made of wood (tarred on the outside like a ship's hull) and is around 900 years old. Very Viking, with dragon heads on the roof's four corners. It's the pride of *Lom* and still a working church. Continuing east to the town of *Otta*, we swung southeast following the river to the town of *Lillehammer* where we stopped for the night.

We had dinner in our hotel- the *Lillehammer Hotel* followed by two glasses of wine and a gin & tonic. Some of our bus mates went for a tour of the winter Olympic site. We just elected to relax and take some time off.

Wednesday, 31 August (Day 11):

Drove today to *Oslo* past rivers and lakes- The trees are different now, larger and leafy and the countryside is turning to low hills- nearly flat. But still there's lots of water- it's just not falling over cliffs. Good farm country and beautiful homes.

Traffic increased as we reached the city. A quick checked in at the *Scandic Vulkan Hotel* and find that this time- Laveta and I have a miniature room! Then we're back out on our bus for a tour with a local guide. First stop is the *Oslo city hall* with its Art Deco interior. It's absolutely beautiful in every way, with gorgeous artwork filling the walls with Norwegian mythology, history, struggle, darkness... and salvation. We then motor on to views of *Akershus*- a medieval fortress. We stopped for

photos of the beautiful new *Opera House* which is very large and right on the water's edge- much like the *Opera House* in Copenhagen.

Motoring onward, we arrived at the *Vigeland Sculpture Park* which is one weird, beautiful place-lined with bronze and granite statues of naked people dealing with life from birth to death. The park gets over a million visitors a year. I can see why- It's quite extraordinary and there's nothing else like it.

We then motored to the *Viking Ship Museum*. Main attraction is the *Oseberg Ship*. The Viking age display includes sledges, beds, a horse cart, wood carving, tent components, buckets and other grave goods. The Oseberg ship and its contents, constitutes the largest known ship burial in the world. The Vikings really thought you could take it with you. This is wonderful place to learn from the past (that you can't really take it with you).

Then we were off again to the *Fram Polar Ship Museum*. Norway has a long history of arctic and Antarctic exploration with the likes of *Fridtjof Nansen*, *Otto Sverdrup* and *Roald Amundsen*. This wooden ship, the *Fram* was built to be frozen in the icepack and survive (which it did more than once).

We returned to our hotel and crashed!

September 1st (Day12): We crossed the border into Sweden today and took a rest stop to exchange currencies, then proceeded on E-18 to the city of *Karlstads*, known for its university. The central park has a large bronze woman on a pedestal with one foot on a soldier's helmeted head. In one hand she carries a club- in the other a sword. Wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley! But the square was nice so we sat down and ate lunch sandwiches that we had made/saved from breakfast. After the break we continued on our way to Stockholm.

After checking into our rooms at the *Clarion Hotel Stockholm* we were off again to the famed Stockholm city hall that's used for presenting Nobel Prizes (except for the peace prize that's presented in Oslo). The building is similar to the city hall in Oslo but much larger and even more ornate. It's an absolutely magnificent building! Driving to *Kaknas* panoramic tower: 155m (509ft) and the tallest structure in Stockholm, we had grand views of the city in all directions. We then drove to- then and walked through a old and colorful part of town with an absolutely beautiful town square next to the Nobel Prize Museum.

Walking some more we came to *Restaurang Kaffe-gillet*, were our group had dinner. We then walked and rode back to our hotel.

September 1st (Day 13): Today we went to the Storkyrkan, Riddarholm Church and Drottningholm royal palace and grounds before boarding a tour boat that took us back to the middle of town- wonderful views of the city... and thence to our hotel.

We then explored the VASA ship museum dedicated to the 17th century warship that sank right after launching and recovered in 1961 in very good condition. It was wonderfully preserved!

Then this evening a goodbye dinner for the whole group, our driver and travel director.

September 2st (Day 14): We had transportation to Stockholm AP. But was it confusing- same with changing planes in Iceland. But we landed home (SEATAC) on time safe and sound.

Afterthoughts:

The three countries we visited have much in common, yet like siblings, each has its own personality. Denmark, reminds me of the Netherlands. Norway, low in population but rich in natural resources and natural beauty, has invested heavily in infrastructure. Sweden seems like the older brother of the three, more industrialized, with more world class schools and businesses.

All three countries invest a lot in their citizens, making them great places to live. And all three have more socialized forms of government than we do here in America. Yet it seemed to be working well; perhaps due to a society more homogenous than our own. Yes- there can be downsides, as well as upsides to diversity in race, religion, and culture. In any case, immigration is increasing and diversity is coming- so in time we'll see if their social experiment remains successful.

Like other parts of Europe there are many walkers and bicyclists, though I'm not sure how well that works in winter. All that physical activity must be doing something because obesity is rare and folks seem healthy. All three countries seem populated with well-dressed, beautiful people- who would never be seen wearing pajama bottoms, or men, wearing their pants below (nearly falling off) their hips.... But I digress. It seemed everyone spoke English, not just passably- but fluently. Indeed the English language seems everywhere in advertising, entertainment and business.

Of all three countries, Norway was the standout for natural beauty. In the US, of course, we invented national parks, but regarding- Norway the whole country could be national park. We must have seen a thousand waterfalls! The small towns and villages are picture-postcard pretty as are country homes, barns and fields.

A local interaction in Bergen was particularly illustrative of Norwegian courtesy and manners. We were nearly last in boarding the funicular to *Mt. Floyen* and there were few remaining seats. A mother seated with her daughter promptly got up and cheerfully offered Laveta & Carol both her *and her daughter's seats*. We thanked them both. It's been awhile since I've seen that sort of generosity and upbringing here in the US.

Our itinerary covered major tourist destinations and optional side-trips and were for the most part very well selected. *Jacqui Stark*, our tour guide did a great job and looked after us like a mother hen. She was very knowledgeable about the places we visited including their underlying history- all of which enhanced our appreciation. *Laszlo Torma*, our driver was friendly, good natured and proved to be a skilled driver- something we very much appreciated on crowded city streets or windy mountain roads.

We learned a great deal and had a wonderful time.

Chuck-
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