

From *sublime* to *spectacular*

Their reputation precedes them but, where the Norwegian Fjords are concerned, you can certainly believe the hype, says **JOHN MALATHRONAS**

When Slartibartfast, the sage in Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, boasts that he's received a galactic award for designing the coastline of Norway, the giggle from the reader is a mark of the reputation of the Norwegian Fjords – for just about everyone knows of their supposed beauty and magnificence.

So when I finally made it there, I loaded up on superlatives in anticipation – a dangerous business in my book, since all too often a hyped-up experience falls way short of expectations. Sometimes it is not even the fault of the destination itself: perhaps an ill-timed bus load of revellers has converted that postcard of a beach into a beer garden; a late monsoon has confined you to your room for days; or a stolen passport has turned your whole trip into a nightmare. I needn't have worried. A cruise to the Fjords – and I do believe that it is only from the water that the spectacle can be fully appreciated – always comes up trumps.

Whatever the cliché, the panorama of the Norwegian Fjords manages to rise above it and nothing, but nothing, can spoil your experience. This is a landscape that gains as much from undiluted sunshine as it does from rain and fog, when the Norse gods themselves appear to have descended upon the glaciated peaks, cloaking themselves in misty invisibility. The inaccessible, avalanche-prone fjord slopes will never host a fast food joint or the obligatory Irish pub. And, as far as your passport is concerned, Norway is one of the safest countries on the planet. It sounds like tempting fate, but a cruise to the Fjords may just be the perfect holiday. ►





PREVIOUS PAGE the spectacular, small but sublime, Geirangerfjord ABOVE the tumbling Seven Sisters, who legend states were wooed by the rough Suitor, opposite ABOVE RIGHT taking a scenic ride on the famous Flaam railway OPPOSITE the 1,200-metre-high Briksdal glacier, near Olden

I can assure you that the popular image of a fjord – a vast ice-carved valley rather than a sea-scoured shore, with steep inclines coloured in the deepest greens of fir and birch, royal blue waters and views of the odd, snowpeaked faraway mountain – is indeed accurate. But it was the little details that I hadn't reckoned on. For example, each fjord is quite different. The northern ones are somehow rounded and smooth, whereas the southern ones are rockier and barer.

Perhaps the Western Fjords, dotted roughly between Trondheim and Bergen, correspond most with the traditional image. Of these, the most spectacular are the small but sublime Geirangerfjord, which is but an arm of the longer Storfjord; the serene and atmospheric Nordfjord; and the seemingly never-ending Sognefjord – at 205km, the longest and, at 1,308m, the deepest fjord in Scandinavia.

Be prepared for a stiff neck in the Geirangerfjord. I was constantly craning since the view is almost always vertical, as the ship twisted and turned in a zigzag of a route, expertly negotiating coastal hairpin bends that I felt would try a sports car, let alone a superliner.

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Perpendicularly plunging waterfalls, including the ethereal Bridal Veil, sprayed everyone on deck. There was hardly any place to hide as we passed between two cascades, one on either side: the spidery Seven Sisters tumble opposite the brusque, rough Suitor, which, according to lore, is trying to woo the sisters with its flashy shenanigans.

No one had told me that the village of Geiranger itself, with a population of just 300 and green hills rising gently behind every farmhouse, was such a gem. Flydalsjuvet, a hanging rock about 4km away, has two viewing platforms that offer absolutely astonishing views over the village and its fjord.

After the short transit through the Geirangerfjord, the 110km of the Nordfjord provides an opportunity to really take in what the area has to offer – you could be forgiven for thinking you have stepped right into a nature documentary. The Western Fjords have remarkable biodiversity for such northern latitudes; they contain 50 per cent of Norway's mountain flora and all four of the country's native deer species (reindeer, elk, red deer and roe deer), as well as arctic foxes, bears and over 100 different types of birds.

As for marine life, you might be lucky enough to spot native seals, white-beaked dolphins or sperm and minke whales. And, although you might not see them, know that beneath those icy waters are some of the world's largest coral reefs, only discovered in 2000. Above water, the Nordfjord is home to many fishing villages that crouch prudently in safe, tranquil coves – like sleepy Olden, the gateway to the nearby Jostedalbreen National Park: a bus leaves regularly for Briksdal, where a 45-minute walk will bring you to the edge of its eponymous 1,200-metre-high glacier.

Everyone has a favourite, and mine is the majestic Sognefjord. Unlike other fjords, its length means your eyes can at last focus on the distance to admire the scenery horizontally, as well as vertically. It was marvellous to inhale deep breaths of the freshest air, and observe how Scots Pine woods alternated with birch forests, and how grey alder hung perilously to the rocky edges, all the way down to the North Sea.

Don't miss your chance to experience the Flaam railway either, an absolute marvel of locomotive engineering. With jaw dropping gradients (the steepest being 1:18), 20 tunnels and several stops (one simply to marvel at a miniature waterfall through a naturally framing rock fissure) it's more of a fairground ride than a train journey.

So, there is my case: peace and serenity, nature at its most sublime and action and adventure. If all that doesn't make for a perfect holiday, what does?

