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FINDING FJORD NORWAY

by **Joseph Pedro**

“The sons of Bor carried Ymir to the middle of Ginnungagap and made the world from him. From his blood they made the sea and the lakes; from his flesh the earth; from his hair the trees; and from his bones the mountains. They made rocks and pebbles from his teeth and jaws and those bones that were broken...From Ymir's skull the sons of Bor made the sky and set it over the earth with its four sides. Under each corner they put a dwarf, whose names are East, West, North, and South. The sons of Bor flung Ymir's brains into the air, and they became the clouds.”

—The Prose-Edda



Photo: Javarman

Geirangerfjord

My bare feet are trying to solidly cling to a cold wooden dock. The snowcapped-mountain wind whips through the fjord as if the mountains are collectively sighing, and the gale hits my pale skin turning it cheek-pinked pink. I clutch the hand of my friend, Laura, creating such pressure it's as if we're gripping a knuckleball. Moody dark skies serve as the backdrop to floating ghost-like clouds that shield the mountaintops as their shadows dance against the uneven terrain. "We can do this," Laura utters. A circus-crowd gasp is heard from a group of onlookers. "Ready?" I ask looking out at the foreboding scene as we take a step toward the ice-cold water. Another collective gasp gives us that extra push off the dock.

Like taking a terrible tumble, time slows down: I see the sun burst through layers of cloud coverage and light up the choppy waters that begin to glisten like a tear. And then, I hit the water and a sharp, needle-like cold shoots through my body faster than panic. Underwater quiet is quickly interrupted by above-water fighting for breath. It's as if I've stepped into a million too cold showers. "Ahhh," we yell as tourists snap photos from their balconies at the **Hotel Ulensvang** in Lofthus. After moments of prickly numbness, a beautiful calm overcomes us both. It's no longer panic, it's no longer fear, it's no longer just a silly I-bet-you-can't-jump-in-the-water dare; it's a connection and a sense of belonging. The wind gusts bob the waves that gently rock my warming body, and I admire the soft clouds that hug the mountains blanket their rough edges. We dove in and became part of the Hardangerfjord, part of Lofthus, and part of Norway. Like the creation myth, we're every bit as much a part of the world as the world is a part of us.

It's a symbiosis that Norwegians have with the earth, with one another, with their towns, and with their country that creates a balance and beauty seen in the preservation of its nature, in day-to-day interactions, in its collectivism, and in the perpetuation of its unique heritage. Because of this, finding a sense of place and belonging is easy throughout its cities and throughout the countryside. And as I learn journeying Fjord Norway in the southwestern part of the country from Stavanger to Bergen, finding this sense of place sometimes just takes a small dive.



Lofthus in Hardanger

Image: Fjord Norway

I arrive on an early morning (like most flights from the US to Scandinavia) via Copenhagen to the enchanting city of **Stavanger**. Here, stock-image-like backpackers compete with curious vacationers for seats on the affordable **Stavanger Airport Bus**. Stavanger is a jumping-off point to **Fjord Norway**, a massive region consisting of four districts. It is in Stavanger where you'll encounter the various tourists beginning their (land-based) explorations. Adventure seekers will find boating, biking, hiking, and camping. For those looking for a more relaxed affair: luxury hotels, cruises, and bus tours. And, for those who are like me: a mix of both.

I'm met by a gleeful guide, Gunhild Vevik, who picks me up at the **Radisson Blu Royal Hotel Stavanger**. It's a short walk through rolling hills that lead us through a storybook village of wooden houses. The fully restored homes, which were built in the late 18th century and early 19th century, were once an object of contention in the city as many felt they needed to be razed in order for the city to fully move toward the future. But community activists saw their potential and importance and demanded they be protected. After many years of transition, the area has gained world notoriety (helping Stavanger become the European Capital of Culture in 2008). The winding road that leads down toward the Kartblad waterfront is so picturesque in June, that I think my jet lag is playing tricks on me. A great deal of time is spent discreetly peeking into windows and gardens speckled with pink cross-leaved heaths that pop against the freshly painted white.

As it turns out, demolishing wooden houses wasn't going to modernize Stavanger, but the oil industry would. The area, now one of the wealthiest in the nation (in one of the wealthiest nations in the world), relies heavily on the oil industry. It's an aspect of modern-day Norwegian society that evokes many contradictory emotions—it is because of oil that the nation lifted itself from an economic runt into a world powerhouse, but it's also an export that's a necessary environmental evil. These conflicting emotions are only heightened by the fact that Norway is often ranked as one of the greenest countries in the world (with one of the heaviest CO2 taxes anywhere, and one of the highest percentages renewable energy sources). It is also because of these high green standards that the oil industry has "...invest[ed] heavily in new technologies in the hope of reducing their CO2 emissions," according to the *Guardian*.

The city center has a creative vibe that's visible through the street art and funky stores. **Fair Play** is a must-visit fair trade store, but walking farther from the water, you'll encounter gorgeous, unique street art (check out the troll mural on Bakkegata) and snap a shot of the hair salon **you're gorgeous, what's with the hair?** You'll also pass a rainbow flag waving from the gay café that turns into a gay bar at night called **MaMi Open Mind**. I refresh with a coffee at the hillside **Café Sting** where a gay-friendly crowd is already enjoying beers and chatter. June is still quite cold here, so to better prepare myself for the rest of my journey I purchase a beautiful knit sweater from the only-in-Norway brand **Dale of Norway** and then discover **Oleana** that sells Norwegian women's fashions.

After stopping for fish soup (so fresh and delicious) at a small restaurant in Vagen Harbour called **Fisketorget**, we're excited to check out the nightlife. Despite the late hour, the sun is happily still up, and Stavanger's population is gleefully enjoying beers while looking out at the harbor. I'm on a mission to find a gay bar, and ask a police officer who points Laura and me to a place called **Hot Open Mind**. It's a huge cover charge (\$16), and we're disappointed by the lack of people in the neon-lit basement. The rainbow lights entice us to grab more drinks, and we're surprised when we look around and see that the club is now nearly full. Mustering up some courage, Laura and I chat with the young crowd. Many offer to buy us drinks, and we eagerly accept (the Norwegian Krona is expensive and drinks in Norway are

Marilyn Monroe Statue in Haugesund



Image: Tor Andre Johannessen

Adventure seekers will find boating, biking, hiking, and camping. For those looking for a more relaxed affair: luxury hotels, cruises, and bus tours. And, for those who are like me: a mix of both.

notoriously pricey), a bartender who is wearing a mustached-patterned suit hands us our drinks and smiles. Our friendliness then gets us invited to an after-party or *nachtspiel*, but we're scheduled for an 8 A.M. hike, and, of course, we go anyway. (Sometimes you just have to dive in.)

I'm not afraid of much, but I am afraid of heights. Going against my instincts, instead of taking a leisurely fjord cruise to look up at the cliff, I choose to climb up to **Preikestolen** (Pulpit Rock), a cliff that protrudes over 1,900 feet above Lysefjorden. Armed with my new knit sweater, a Gatorade, an Advil, and bread and cheese, we leave for the hike, which is just a short ferry and bus ride away from Stavanger. "Early morning is the best time to go," our guide says as we rub our still-tired party eyes.

"The trail tends to become more congested by late afternoon," he adds. "How long is the hike?" we ask. "With you guys, I expect it should only take about two hours each way," our guide says. "For the less fit or older, it can take three hours," he matter-of-factly says as we give one another an oh-my-God look when the flat wooden pathway slowly starts up into a 60-degree rock wall. Our excitement turns to nervous laughter and jokes, which then turns to silence, which ultimately, after another hour, turns into fear. "We'll rest here for a second," we say. "Can we have one of those oranges?" we ask pointing to his pack filled with snacks. "Already?" he laughs in disbelief. We sit on a rock as older Norwegian women zip past and offer a wave, and we're perfectly content looking at what we've already accomplished. "Let's just call

this Pulpit Rock," we say. "No, let's go!" he demands. As we go higher, the vegetation begins to thin, and we cross small ponds where little kids jump in the cold waters. "How in the world did they get up here?" I say, rolling my eyes at my own exhaustion.

The climb begins to feel real as we follow a curved wooden path that hugs a rock guarded only by wooden sticks and rope. My back is so close to the rock I have scrapes on my neck and hands. Exhaustion is no longer an issue as I spot Pulpit Rock up ahead and see people scattering all over it like ants on a Milk Dud. As we take our final steps to Pulpit Rock, we witness tourists dangling their legs above the fjord. Just looking at it gives me vertigo.

My fear isn't so much about the rock collapsing; it's the sporadic nature of the visitors that I'm most concerned about. One small bump, and I could freefall. I find a quiet space in front of a sizeable boulder and take in the otherworldly view. A mountaintop breeze fills my lungs and reminds me of those first autumn days when the cold is empowering and refreshing. Below is turquoise water speckled with tiny boats of tourists admiring the rock from below, and across from me are craggy mountains. It's hard to imagine that a glacier once formed this. Its majesty is more easily explained through divinity.

When it's time to make our return trek, we're like salmon going against the current. "This is what I tried to tell you," our guide says pointing to the hordes of people walking up to the rock. "How is this our fault?" we ask "It took you guys over three hours to get up here," he says. Feeling like com-



Photo: Paul Smith/IMAGO

plete failures, we put our heads down in shame. “At least we did it,” I say my head now up. Defiantly proud of our accomplishments: “Three hours is nothing compared to what I’ll take away from this.” “And what’s that?” he asks. “In three hours, I saw a whole new world,” I sing back.

After my adventure, I’m ready to unwind, relax, and soak in the fjords. We stop in the delightfully small town of **Haugesund**. The town claims to be the home of Marilyn Monroe’s father and a statue of the late-actress sits next to the waterfront **Hotel Rica**. The **Nordvegen History Centre and Viking Settlement** in Avaldsnes, just a short drive away, is the site where the first united Viking kingdom was seated. A brand-new historical center is the perfect introduction to Viking history and Norse mythology. The progressive town, which hosts a world-famous jazz festival and film festival, also has a fairly active gay scene with two popular bars **Sampson** and **Zenza**. The day’s adventure, though, doesn’t call for a night on the town but for a relaxing meal and a long night’s sleep. I eat a fantastic dinner at **Lothes Mat and Vinhus**, where we grab a table in the attic of a waterfront building. The cozy meal includes local fish, like in the delicious langoustine salad and the halibut risotto.

Nature surrounds the fjord, and my eyes begin to blur together the green trees and blue water as we snake along the coast by bus. A few power lines, a road, and a ferry crossing the fjord help me not lose all sense of modern day. We briefly stop in a charming town called **Utne**, where we wait for a ferry. Discovering the **Hardanger Folk Museum** makes the wait time go quickly. I can’t help but try to justify purchasing every little hand-made item. Upstairs is a surprising display of government-sponsored equality posters for a campaign called “The Country of Equality 2013” that contains targeted messages for women’s rights, for native Sami people’s rights, and for gay and lesbian rights. Norway has had marriage equality (or gen-

der neutral) marriage since 2009, but has recognized same-sex unions as early as 1993.

Our half-day’s journey ultimately leads us to a stunning fjord-side property called **Hotel Ullensvang**. Here, the old-world style isn’t lost in their super-modern rooms that are complete with an epic shower and a heated toilet seat. The cream colors are purposely calm and not distracting, as the star of the room is the view that overlooks the fjord and the wraparound swimming pool. I step out onto the balcony and pour a cup of coffee and gaze at the slight mist over the fjord that refracts the late-night sun adding a layer of enchantment to the vista.

The hotel has been welcoming well-to-do travelers since 1846, including world-renowned Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, who frequented a cottage on the property to draw inspiration for his music. For LGBT travelers, sometimes staying in a secluded, historic, family-owned hotel can be concerning, but one owner, Barbara Zanoni Utne, tells me: “Hotel Ullensvang welcomes guests from all over the world, regardless of race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.” The service, the amenities, and the food consistently impress me, but it’s also the surrounding area filled with lush orchards, which I am told light up the countryside in rainbow colors in May, trails, and waterfalls that steals my heart. It’s the perfect, most extravagant place to get married I think to myself walking the edge of the indoor/outdoor pool. “In 2013, two US ladies did just that, and they had an amazing experience!” Utne says. “One of our key staff [members] has the qualifications to perform wedding ceremonies, both in Norwegian and English. This applies to both pro forma ceremonies, but also Human Ethical weddings (this requires one of the couple to be a member of this organization),” Utne excitedly shares.

It is also here that Laura and I make our fjord jump. As we stand soaking wet in the lobby, the owner walks over to us, and although we are expecting to get yelled at for dripping, he gives us both a high-five. “You’re real Vikings now!” he laughs.

Pulpit Rock



Photo: Brykaylo Yurly

We take a train from Voss to Flam to board the historic **Flam Railway** to a ferry to ultimately arrive at the idyllic town of Balestrand. Located along the Sognefjord (nicknamed the King of the Fjords) and nestled between the snow-peaked Gaularfjellet Mountains, Balestrand effortlessly inspires. The **Kviknes Hotel**, which first opened its doors in 1752, sits like an elaborate cream wedding cake on the green landscape. The Kvikne family has operated the hotel for over five generations and has welcomed esteemed guests including Kaiser Wilhelm II (a salon has a seat commemorating where the Kaiser once sat on July 25, 1914, the very evening World War I began). Throughout the hotel, masterful landscape pictures showcase artists' works including Hans Dahl, Hans Gude, and Alfred Heaton Cooper who painted the surrounding area. Book a room in the historic building as the "modern" wing (built in the 1960s) takes away from the true grandeur of staying here.

Excitement is abuzz in Balestrand as the town prepares for the arrival of a ship that's filled with the crew of a national television station. The station, NRK, journeys to over 30 Norwegian ports to showcase what makes each town special in a program called the *Sommeråpent Voyage*. We walk through the crowds who are waiting to spot the ship as we make our way to the **Ciderhuset** (the cider house). The quiet town is almost spooky, with a morning fog and silent streets. We pass small houses and a gorgeous wooden church (built for the original owner's English wife), but up a small hill is a gorgeous Swiss-style building that houses the drink of choice in Balestrand, cider. We take a short tour learning about the production of this alcoholic treat (the sparkling is king here). Unfortunately, because of Norwegian law, it is illegal to sell alcohol in a non-government-sponsored store, so enjoy it here.

It's the Fourth of July too, and we're nestled in the lobby ready to watch the program with a good three-dozen people. The hotel staff recognizes our lust for Americana and gives us a huge American-flag cake. It's just one of the many testaments to Norwegian kindness that makes us feel like we were in the right place.

Norway's second-largest city, Bergen, is a nearly four-hour ferry ride away from Balestrand, and a must-visit for gay travelers thanks to its impressive museums, important place in world culture, its creative and edgy shops, and its vibrant and young nightlife. The urban environment is also a welcome way to finish a fjord journey. I check into the **Hanseatic Hotel**, a stunning, expertly designed property that easily blends the building's history with modern amenities. Located near the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Bryggen, the old wharf of Bergen, the hotel pays homage to the German architecture that characterizes the multi-colored Hanseatic League wooden row houses that line the waterway. A tour of the nearby **Hanseatic Museum** reveals that behind these colorful exteriors, young boys who were sold into servitude faced unimaginable horrors and dreadful conditions working for the important kontor (trade outpost). Today, the houses along the water (although not the originals, those were lost in fires) are chock-full of fun shops and restaurants.

Bergen's city center boasts pedestrian-only boulevards that are surrounded by name-brand stores like H&M and Moods of Norway, but it's the smaller side streets that are a treasure trove of only-in-Norway goods that gay and lesbian travelers will particularly enjoy. I head to a small street called Skostredet where independent shops line a cobblestoned street. A young lesbian couple holds hands as



Kviknes Hoitel



Bergen Harbour

Photo by: Bergen Tourist Board/Willy Haraldsen

they walk past a bustling outdoor café, and I gleefully walk into a store called **Made in Bergen** that sells items from various local artists, like earrings made from Norwegian coins, artwork, and silkscreen canvas bags. Nearby is a small vintage boutique called **Kleskapet** where I'm impressed by the carefully curated men's and women's clothing, as well as travel bags. Across the street is **Robotbutikken**, which has Norwegian shirts, books, and music. I am drawn in by a shirt in the window that says "Love is a Human Right." Dispersed between the shops are little cafés where fashionable people sip beers outdoors surrounded by impressive graffiti.

A short walk away, I stumble upon, what I believe to be just an interesting (albeit creepy) gray building, that turns out to be the **Bymuseet i Bergen** or the Leprosy Hospital Museum. It was here that the largest concentration of lepers in Europe was housed. The museum is closing, but I'm allowed to take a quick walkthrough. I'm the only one left besides the staff, and I walk from room to room and take in the eerie vibes. Unfortunately, all the signs are in Norwegian and a translated guide is near impossible to synch-up with the signs, but the museum's surreal layout is worth a visit.

At night, I find myself walking around lake **Lille Lungegårdsvanet**, and I'm entertained by the late-evening excitement where families are still happily enjoying the sun, gay couples are picnicking, and street performers are vying for attention. Around the lake is the **Bergen Museum of Art**, which houses the world's largest collection of Paul Klee paintings, and it's also home to one of the most exciting culinary experiences in Norway. **Lysverket** features the cuisine of Executive Chef Christopher Haatuft, who has worked at both Per Se in New York and Le Chateaubriand in Paris. His work shines because of the locally sourced products he uses and his talent and creativity with food. You can choose from three different set menus (including a vegetarian-friendly one). I nearly die and go to heaven when I eat the lake trout with a quail egg and a thick slice of bacon.

On my last night in Norway, I'm determined to make the most of it. I print out directions to a couple of gay and gay-friendly bars I find online. My first stop is a bar called **Kaos**, where a hipster crowd packs a horseshoe-shaped bar and indie hits play. The scene is cool, but next-door is the gay bar **Fincken** that I've been told about. A rush of awkwardness comes over me as I swing the door open and realize that I'm one of three people in the entire place at 10:30 P.M. But it's too late to turn back so I walk in and get glares from the we've-been-here-all-day crowd. The young, attractive bartender senses my out-of-place vibe and calls me over. "Where are you from?" he asks. "That obvious, huh?" I ask. "Ha, well most out-of-towners always show up too early," he says cleaning off a glass with a towel. "Brooklyn," I say. "What time do people come here?" I question. "Around 1," he smirks. "Oh well, I guess I will wait around. I'll have a Skol (beer)," I say gesturing to the bottle and counting my sad last handful of coins hoping that I have enough. "You know, this one's on me," he says as he pops open the bottle. I sit down and wish I had shelled out the extra money for a data plan on my cell phone as I pretend to sift through texts.

As my glass nears empty, a group of boys plows into the room, and they walk up to the bar and speak to the bartender. The bartender points to me, and they walk over. "I'm from Brooklyn, one of them says to me, I moved here two years ago," he says. "And these are my friends." Apparently, the bartender called them to make sure I have a good time. Soon enough, I'm at their apartment, and we're listening to Norwegian heavy-metal bands, drinking, and comparing our lives. The boys take me back to the bar (where there are now a lot of people), and then to an after-hours party at a nearby gay-heavy hangout called **Opera**. As I'm surrounded by a new group of friends, I ask the Brooklyn boy why he decided to stay in Norway. "Sometimes you just find your place in the world," he says matter of factly. ■

INFORMATION

Fjord Norway is a great resource about where to stay, what to do, what to see, tours, and transportation. www.fjordnorway.com

Innovation Norway is the official tourist board for the country, and they have a Rolodex of suggestions for restaurants, excursions, tour operators, etc. www.visitnorway.com

SLEEP

Det Hanseatiske Hotel, Finnegårdsgaten 2. Tel: +47-5530-4800. This converted property is the perfect blend of Bergen history and chic, modern design that makes it a must-stay. Rooms from \$290. www.dethanseatiskehotel.no

Hotel Ullensvang, 5787 Lofthus. Tel: +47-5367-0000. A historic gay-friendly hotel located on the Hardangerfjord that has world-class amenities including an indoor/outdoor pool. Rooms from \$320. www.hotel-ullensvang.no

Kviknes Hotel, Kviknevegen 8, Balestrand. Tel: +47-5769-4200. This historic property has history teeming from its walls. Rooms from \$290. www.kviknes.com

Radisson Blu Royal Hotel Stavanger, Løkkeveien 26 PO Box 307, Stavanger. Tel: +47-5176-6000. This hotel (around \$250) near the historic center of Stavanger has free Wi-Fi, free breakfast, and an indoor pool. www.radissonblu.com

Rica Maritim Hotel, Åsbygata 3, 5528 Haugesund. Tel: +47-5286-3000. This modern hotel located on the sound in Haugesund has wonderful views and cozy accommodations. Rooms from \$350. www.rica.no

TRANSPORT

Flam Railway. This historic railway offers some breathtaking views and makes stops along the way so you can really immerse yourself in the environment. www.visitflam.com

OssBuss can provide chauffeured car service for your trip, if you don't feel comfortable driving the often-con-



fusing (and disconnected) fjord roads. Our driver, Kjell, was our own personal guide along the way, too. www.ossbuss.no

Stavanger Airport Bus is a cheap way (\$18) to get into the city of Stavanger and avoid the pricey cabs. www.flybussen.no

SHOP

Dale of Norway, Skagen 4, Stavanger. Tel: +47-916-31905. Widely considered to have the best Norwegian sweaters. www.dale.no

Fair Play, Østervåg 37, Stavanger. +47-479-17400. A fair-trade design shop. www.fairplaydesign.com

Oleana, Kirkegata 31, Stavanger. Tel: +47-5189-4804. A beautiful women's clothing store. www.oleana.com

Robotbutikken, Skostredet 11, Bergen. Find col-

lections of Norwegian shirts, music, gifts, and books. www.robotbutikken.no

Kleskapet, Skostredet 12, Bergen. A beautifully curated men's and women's vintage clothing store. www.facebook.com/kleskapet

BARS/CAFÉS

Café Opera, Engen 18, Bergen. Tel: +47-5523-0315. A bar/café where the young set and gays like to congregate after some of the bars close. www.cafeopera.org

Café Sting, Valbergjet 3. Tel: +47-5189-1525. A gay-friendly café by day and a nice bar at night. www.cafe-sting.no

Fincken, Nygårdsgaten 2A. Bergen. Tel: +47-5532-1316. One of the only gay bars in Bergen that gets busy later at night. **Facebook.com: Fincken**

Hot Open Mind, Skagen 25/27, Stavanger. The only gay club in Stavanger gets crowded much later in the night and the friendly crowd and bar staff will ensure a good time. www.hotstavanger/hot

MaMi Open Mind Bakkegata 16, Stavanger. A gay and straight-friendly café that has more of a bar vibe at night. www.hotstavanger.no/mami

Samson Bar and Café, Strandgata 130, Haugesund. Tel: +52-72-2215. This predominantly gay, chic café is the perfect place to have a cocktail at night. www.samsonbar.no

Zensa, 5525 Haugesund. Tel: 986-37-000. This two-floor nightclub is a big gay hangout, though not completely gay, and the 25 age minimum ensures a more adult time. www.inventum.no

EAT

Lothes Mat and Vinhus, Skippergata 4, Haugesund. Tel: +47-52-7722 01. Located in a cozy building along the sound, this restaurant dishes out some excellent fresh fish. www.lothesmat.no

Lysverket, Rasmus Meyers allé 9, Bergen. Tel: 55-603-100. Redefining Norwegian cuisine with hyper-local products and jam-packed flavor. www.lysverket.no

SEE

Ciderhuset, Sjøtunsvegen 32, Balestrand. Tel: +47-9083-5673. A cider house that produces both edible products and alcoholic drinks in Balestrand. www.ciderhuset.no

Hanseatic Museum, Finnegården 1A, Bergen. Tel: +47-5554-4690. Learn about the conditions that young boys lived in while working for the Northern Europe trade organization. www.museumvest.no

Hardanger Folk Museum, 5778 Utne. Tel: +47-5367-0040. Learn about the people who live on the fjords and enjoy their music, art, and unique culture. www.hardangerfolkkeblad.no

The Leprosy Museum, Kong Oscars Gate 59, Bergen. Tel: 47-555-30-8030. This chilling old hospital was once the site of the largest concentration of leprosy in Europe. www.bymuseet.no

Nordvegen History Centre and Viking Settlement, 4262 Avaldsnes. Tel: +47-5281-2400. Located at the site of the first unified Viking kingdom, the newly built center explains Viking history and lore. www.tellus.no



Photo: Terje Rakkke

Region Stavanger