

A trip to...

Scandinavia



Words and photography by
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Foreword

Welcome to my very first e-book! Ok, so that is actually a slight lie – I already have my name on one about ten times the length of this, but I was mostly acting as editor and my only original contribution was a single additional chapter. That, like much of my writing, was about technology though. This is something different.



I've been writing a blog on my website since 2003. The majority of the words in this book appeared first on my blog, where I wrote about my travels in Scandinavia both during and after the trip. I decided to collect them together, tidy the text up and weave some of my favourite photographs from the trip amongst them. I hope the result might make interesting reading, especially for anyone planning a trip to this part of the world.

I have also included the trip plan at the back of the e-book. It is complete with information on the places that I stayed and what transport I used, which should be helpful for anyone who wants to try and make it to any of the places I went on the trip to see it form themselves. That, generally, is something I highly recommend.

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Happy reading, happy travels and, to those whom it is appropriate, happy hacking!

Acknowledgements

A huge number of people made this trip an amazing experience in all kinds of ways. Many of them I can't name here because I don't remember or simply never knew their names. This category of people makes up most of those that I met on my travels, some of them locals and some of them fellow travellers.

I am greatly indebted to many people in the computing community, and especially the Perl community. I could name so many people here; special thanks go to Salve Nilsen, Stig Venaas and Erwan Lemonnier for organising get-togethers in Oslo, Trondheim and Stockholm respectively.

Many people offered hints, advice and other random bits of help in planning the trip. My thanks go to my mum (especially for the 1:00am collection from a railway station an hour away that I got stuck at on my return home), Tore Nestenius, Helen and Lydia Koelmans, Daniel Wilkins and the guy at Crag and Moor camping shop in Scarborough.

Last but not least, thanks to God for the great weather and general provision. :-)

A Trip Months In The Planning

There's a world of difference between booking an organized trip or a package holiday to somewhere and organizing a backpacking and hostelling trip spanning several countries and covering a few thousand kilometres overland in the process. In the first, you fly off with a case full of your things, have holiday reps to greet you and make sure everything is fine and are probably sticking to a relatively small area. In the second, everything you have to live with for the weeks you're away has to be compact and light enough that you can comfortably carry it for reasonable distances, you're entering unfamiliar places each day and there's no consistent company if you're travelling alone. Most of my trips before, with friends and family, fell into the first category. This trip was going to be something different. Before I went, I had no idea how it was going to turn out. My mum commented the day before I left that she was glad I was doing it and not her. The next day I stood on the platform at the local railway station to take the train to the airport and started to wonder just what I was letting myself in for.

There's more than one way to travel around and see places. The romantic approach is that of the traveller who picks where he or she is going to go next every step of the way, living day by day with some kind of general plan or direction but no particular schedule. I'm not romantic like that, though. You need a place to stay each night, and you can either find it when you are there, taking away time from seeing and doing what you really want to be doing, or you can sit in front of the computer on an evening or weekend in the weeks and months before you go and organize accommodation. Doing the second of these just made sense to me.

Therefore I arrived with a plan. I knew where I would be, when I would be there, and that I had a bed to sleep in on the night. Some people may find that rigid and uninteresting, but I found it liberating; I don't like having to make decisions or organize things, and this approach left me relatively free from having to do so as I travelled. I could spend my time soaking up the places, the scenery and the culture.

Copenhagen

My time in Denmark was actually pretty minimal and consisted of Copenhagen. It turned out that there was a Perl workshop happening just a couple of days before I had planned to originally arrive in Copenhagen, and soon I was signed up to attend and speak. This was not only a chance to indulge in the geek culture that I enjoy, but also a chance to make contacts: the workshop had many people from both Norway and Sweden in attendance. Therefore my first days in Copenhagen consisted of seeing the conference venue, restaurants and bars.



After the workshop, I had a day to explore Copenhagen. I had the morning to myself and arranged to meet with people I had met at the workshop in the afternoon for a



sightseeing boat trip. The morning brought bright and sunny t-shirt weather and I enjoyed a couple of hours walking around the city centre. Copenhagen is a city of amazing contrast: the city centre is totally bustling and packed with people, but sprinkled with wonderful parks where the background noise of the city becomes a hum that you barely notice. I can imagine that they make great places to chill out – I certainly felt relaxed as I slowly ambled around them.

I grabbed a hot dog for lunch, having been informed that the stand outside the railway station serves delicious ones. It turns out if you ask for everything on it, you really do get everything you could imagine putting on a hotdog, and the thing becomes really messy to eat. It certainly passed the taste test though – it turned out to be the best hotdog of the entire trip.

The afternoon came and I joined friends for the boat trip. This was a very peaceful way to see the city from another angle, and I saw many places I had not had chance to while walking around in the morning. After the trip several of us went to find a church we had seen on the trip that we had been led to believe you could climb to the top of for views over the city; unfortunately, we found it closed for restoration work.



I spent the evening enjoying a couple of beers with a friend who lives in Copenhagen though hadn't been at the workshop, then headed back to the hotel for sleep in preparation for the next day's journey north into Sweden.

Gothenburg



Gothenburg represented my first time in Sweden. The journey there from Copenhagen was, the big sea bridge between Denmark and Sweden aside, not particularly special in terms of the quality of the trains or the scenery. Happily, the reward for the uninteresting journey made it worthwhile: Gothenburg is a really quite pleasant city. The weather continued being beautiful, and after a surprise sunburning in Copenhagen the day before, the first place I went after finding the hotel was to buy some sun cream. The budget hotel I stayed at turned out to be really near to the port, which made for some quite nice photography

both by daylight and of the sunset in the evening - the cranes with the sun setting behind them was quite a nice sight.

I took a boat tour to see the city itself, which is plenty of fun since going under some of the bridges requires you to quite literally get down on the floor of the boat to avoid decapitation. After that I took a tram over to the base of the tallest hill in Copenhagen and, after getting lost in a housing estate, hiked to the top for a nice view over the city which made the getting lost and the climb worthwhile.



It turns out that this afternoon was also that of the first of May, a rather political day in Sweden and Norway. In Gothenburg I saw a huge number of people marching down the main street, some with placards. Then there were people giving speeches all over the town. I stayed well clear of it just in case any of it got nasty, but I think that didn't happen. I had dinner at a nice Mongolian restaurant by the port before watching and photographing the sunset.



The next day I had until just after midday in Gothenburg, and fancying something a bit different I went to the Maritima museum. A warning: if you are afraid of climbing down ladders into dark holes that you can not see the bottom of, are scared of being surrounded by weird machinery or are really fat, give this a miss. The delight of this museum is that they have done nothing to tone down the hard physical work of getting around a warship or submarine, both of which they have available to explore. They have some other boats too, which you can explore much more tamely, but those are way less exciting. The museum was wonderfully quiet, meaning I had a destroyer and submarine almost entirely to myself to explore! I now have a whole new level of respect for the people who work on these things - I was freaked out enough just climbing around thing while it was in dock and, in the case of the submarine, on the surface. Maybe I am just a wuss, though.



A quick dash back to the hotel, another dash to the station and a third to a hot dog stand, I just made it to my train to Oslo. This was a much nicer journey than the one to Gothenburg, featuring forests and lakes now and then. The train was also really comfortable - when I first got on, I thought I had walked into first class! It isn't often you see nice wooden panelling on any trains these days.

Oslo



By late afternoon I was up in Oslo and had met Salve, leader of the Oslo Perl group and the person who's apartment I would be staying at for my two nights in Oslo. I gave a talk for the Oslo Perl group in the early evening. Then came a very nice surprise: one of the guys at the meeting invited everyone at the talk to come for a beer or two on his own private boat in the marina as Oslo! This offer was, of course, taken up and soon I was narrowly avoiding falling

into the Oslo fjord complete with backpack as I scrambled onto the boat. It was a wonderful way to spend a first evening in Oslo.

The next day it was time to go exploring. Oslo is easy to get around in that there is loads of public transport, but figuring out what to use, or where you are, takes a little getting used to. Since I knew I would not have time to see the whole city by walking around it in a single day, I took the train 30 minutes out of the city up to a hill overlooking it. This is a really, really spectacular journey for what is the equivalent of a tube train in London! You



start at the heart of the city, and half an hour later you are in the wilderness. I took a nice walk to a TV tower that you used to be able to go up, but sadly you can no longer do so. It was still lovely walking though, and the view down over Oslo was nice. I stopped at a couple of the stations on the journey back towards the city for about 15 minutes each on the way back to the city to see what the view was like from there.



A hot dog for lunch later (you may be spotting a theme in my choice of lunch by this point), I took the tram to the harbour, took the boat over to one of the half-islands and spent a good hour looking at three Viking ships that had been recovered from burial sites. These really are quite something to see in the flesh; pictures don't convey the scale, detail and elegance that you get by seeing them with your own eyes.

A boat ride back to the city and a short walk found me at one entrance to the Oslo fortress. Finding the way I came in to get out of it again took quite a while, but I very happily whiled away an hour wondering around and having a small encounter involving a guard marching towards me on a bridge, stopping by me, stamping his foot, turning around and marching away again. I still have no idea what that was in aid of; the guards in Copenhagen had just said, "please step outside of the gate" when I accidentally wandered into Danish parliament instead of the park I was trying to find.



For dinner I met Salve, who knew of a great Thai restaurant where we greatly enjoyed our dinner. Then it was time for a nice walk by the river, followed by a couple of beers each (an expensive affair in Norway, but the least I could do the thank Salve for being such a great host), and finally back to Savle's place for sleep.

Towards The Fjords



I had initially planned to get more time in the Bergen area by travelling there and back on the overnight trains. I'm really glad that a friend suggested, as I was planning the trip, that I should do the journey by daylight in at least one direction, since the journey from Oslo to Myrdal is one of the most spectacular train journeys I have ever done. Even in May, a couple of hours into the journey you are starting to see snow, and then after another hour or so suddenly everything around you is white, apart from the gentle blue pools of melt water, the browns and greys of craggy rock faces and the occasional splash of green life somehow managing to exist amongst it all. Before you get that far it is still quite a treat, with large lakes almost perfectly reflecting the hills and towns surrounding them. I somewhat envy the people who get to do this journey as part of a regular commute!

A slightly concerning sight along the way was a train carriage lying just off the track. It didn't look to have been there for long, and the story quickly swept around the carriage: a little while back, it had been swept off the tracks by an avalanche! Sadly I didn't manage to get a photo of it.

Arriving at Myrdal, I deliberately missed the connecting train down to Flåm, choosing to hang around and enjoy the peace and quiet for a while. I did not have a ticket for

the Flåm bit at this point either (it is a private railway and therefore was not covered by my rail pass), so it would have been a huge rush. Since I was staying in Flåm, I did not need to do that.



Myrdal is a pretty tiny place, and at this time of year there is hardly anything to do there, since the snow covers everything beyond the station platforms and a small balcony looking down into the valley. Also, I misread the timetable, or more accurately read the summer one instead of the winter one that I should have been reading, so I got a longer wait in Myrdal than I had bargained for. The lack of anything to do besides sit and enjoy the quiet and the view, along with taking the time out to enjoy a hotdog and write a few postcards, was actually very enjoyable after the rushing around of the previous days, though.



Waiting for the train to Flåm from Myrdal, which I had been reliably informed was amazing, I ran into an American guy on the platform who was also doing the trip. We chatted idly on the platform for a while, both enjoying the views, while we waited for the train, which was delayed by about 30 minutes. The train from Oslo came by, which I expected to deposit a mass of visitors to Flåm, alas, it did not, and therefore about 50 people boarded a five carriage train! That meant that myself and my American partner in photographic crime had a large area of carriage to ourselves, complete with opening windows, so we were sure to get some great pictures. We did. It is a spectacular journey down the mountainside and with a stop at a highly impressive waterfall. You could at points see other parts of the train around the sharp curves, and looking back the avalanche protection scarring the mountainside where the railway ran.



Down in Flåm I said goodbye to the guy I had met, who was heading back up and then back to Myrdal and then Oslo, and set about finding my hostel. After wondering into the garden of someone who confusingly had a youth hostel sign on their fence, I found

where I was staying and got settled in. Then it was time to find some food. Thus began some fun. I walked around the area of the railway station, where nothing was open and some places were still being built. The station was by the fjord, so I had a little walk by that, and then walked back in the direction of the railway line, remembering I had passed the village centre on the way down. The map I had showed buildings, but what I wasn't to know was that they were all houses - no restaurants whatsoever! In the end, I went to the large hotel and ate there, which was expensive (the meal especially so, and beer is always expensive in Norway) but delicious. It was my first time eating reindeer, and it goes on the "mmm...tasty" list for sure.

With dinner eaten, it was time for a stroll. I walked along the fjord towards Aurland, the next town, waiting for the sun to set and hoping it would be pretty. However, it just got darker and darker, until I realized it was getting quite dark and I had to walk back to Flåm. I was probably at least half way to Aurland by this point! So, I walked back and was back just before darkness completely fell, though thankfully I'd had the foresight to take a torch so I could easily find my way back up the hostel steps and into bed for a good night's sleep after a wonderful day.



The Fjord Boat

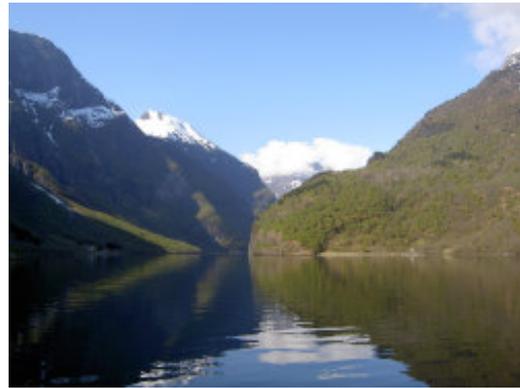
I woke the next morning to a partially cloudy sky and feared the worse. The weather had to give way at some point; it has been beautiful every day so far. After having a quick wash and pulling on some clothes, I wandered down to harbour and got my boat ticket for Gudvangen and the bus ticket from there to Voss. It was a chilly morning, but the breeze was happily clearing the sky somewhat. By the time I got on the boat, the sky was perfect: bright and sunny, with a few clouds to add interest to the skyline.



Here was the big win from staying in Flåm: it was too early for any of the people doing the boat trip as part of Norway in a Nutshell to have got down there from the common starting points like Bergen and Oslo. Therefore about 10-15 of us shared the boat. I got chatting with a lovely Chinese couple from Beijing, who were interested to learn that I was hoping to travel to China within the next year. I took photos of them together on the trip, and they took some of me too.



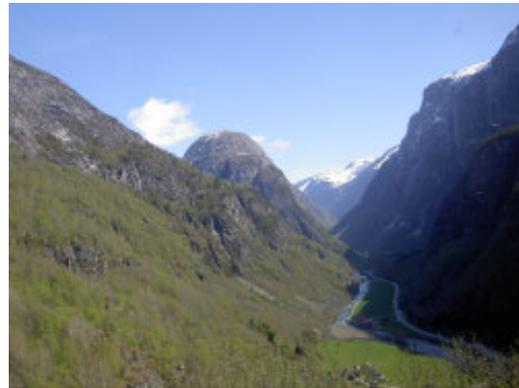
The journey took a couple of hours and brought thrill after thrill. Aurland was one of the most picturesque villages I have ever seen, especially when viewed from the water. All along the way there were steep, often nearly vertical rock faces rising up out of the water, many with snow scattered on the top. The reflections in the smooth water that the boat was yet to disturb were stunning and crystal clear - you could almost enjoy the view just as well by looking into the water and thinking upside down! Every so often you could see a farm in the remotest of places, and wonder who was crazy enough to think of farming there.



The Flåm fjord was beautiful, but the one leading to Gudvangen was perhaps even more beautiful. The village itself was tiny, but after leaving the boat there was a place to grab a quick hot dog and a drink before boarding the bus to Voss.

Bergen

The bus journey from Gudvagn to Voss was amazing, with long views down into the valley of Gudvagen and a scattering of gushing waterfalls. The journey contained a section of hairpin bends, where my life really was in the hands of the bus driver! Thankfully he did a good job, and I left the journey with my life intact and with a long last glance back at the Gudvagen valley as it slipped out of sight.



Voss looked like a nice town, though I did not spend much time there. I walked down to the lake by the railway station, but there was not time to take a walk to the church I had seen on the way into the village and still make the next train to Bergen, which I was quite keen to get. You can't spend time everywhere.

The train to Bergen turned out to be a replacement bus, as the line was closed for recovering the train that had been knocked off the track by an avalanche some weeks earlier. For some reason I felt tired and moody on the bus journey, and drifted off to sleep a little, though as we approached Bergen I found myself chatting with the Brazilian woman sat next to me, who was heading for an international psychology conference somewhere in Norway and doing a little sightseeing as part of the trip. My mood improved though, as I stepped off the bus to Bergen, grabbed my bag, collected

a map from the information office and walked out into the sunshine to try and find my hostel.

The hostel turned out to be quick and easy to find. I dropped off my stuff in the dorm and then went for a walk around the city. Just a couple of minutes away from my hotel I heard the sound of music and marching, looked up the street and noticed an entire marching band coming down the road my way – a very nice welcome! I stood and watched as they passed, then headed to a nearby park, where I sat for a while looking at the large fountain in the middle of the pond and the nice buildings surrounding the park. After that I continued my walk, going down to the harbour, which was full of boats. Over the one side I spotted some very brightly coloured quaint old buildings - the ones that feature in some of the most popular pictures of Bergen. I walked pretty much to the end of the harbour, spotting an old church and fortress over the other side of the water, then decided to go for dinner.



Dinner came in the form of some pretty nice Indian food. I asked for spicy, though what I got wasn't especially hot by my standards. Maybe that was a good thing for the guys in the same dorm as me, though.



After dinner I took the funicular railway up to the mountain above the town, then lost myself on the well signposted walking paths up there, before finding myself again so I could get back to the viewpoint over the town while the sun was setting. On the walk I found a small mountain lake that was nice to sit by for a while and watch the dark shadows of the trees surrounding it. I later accidentally found myself at a higher viewpoint over the same lake too.



The next day I was really pleased that I had taken the funicular up the mountain and enjoyed the view over the city on the previous evening, because I woke up on the Sunday to grey skies and rain. This is, a local told me, typical Bergen weather. So, I decided not to make the trip I had planned - taking the cable car up mount Ulvik - as

there would probably be little to no view. Knowing the Kunsthall - the modern art gallery - did not open until the afternoon, I went to the Bryggen museum in the morning. This covered the history of Bergen, and happily came with a booklet containing English translations of everything. It was interesting to get to know about the background of the place, which lay in trading of all kinds of goods.

I grabbed McDonalds for lunch, figuring it would be cheap and that I should eat something other than hotdogs. It turned out that even McDonalds in Norway is expensive, though! In the afternoon I headed for the Kunsthall, only to find it closed for renovation. The main art museum was nearby though, and it spanned three buildings and for the amount of stuff there was to see the entry fee was pretty cheap. There was something to be said for quantity vs. quality though - there was a lot of stuff, but I appreciated a lot less than half of it. That's art though, and the stuff I did appreciate was often really good. I also quickly learnt the Norwegian word *akt*, which means nude.

Some dinner and hanging around later, it was time to board the overnight train back to Oslo. I had not been able to get a bed, so instead ended up in a seat that reclined quite a long way. Despite that, I didn't manage all that much sleep - I really don't sleep well unless I am laid down.

North To Ålesund

I arrived at Oslo station around 6:30am, just two hours before my train towards Trondheim was due to leave. I wasn't actually heading from Trondheim, but instead was heading for Ålesund, which is on the west coast of Norway though some way further north than Bergen. There are no direct trains up the coast between the two, which made for the long but enjoyable detour.



On the train I found myself sat next to Norwegian woman, who kindly offered me the window seat she was sitting in rather than the aisle one I had been given so I could enjoy the views. She also pointed Lefse out to me on the menu, which is a type of Norwegian cake that consists of pancake-like material wrapped around with a mixture of butter and sugar in it - pretty tasty. The journey got increasingly scenic as we headed further north, and by the time the train pulled into Dombås, where I was changing train to head west, it had started to become quite wild and wilderness like.



The railway between Dombås and Åndalsnes is described as "wild and beautiful" on advertising posters, and it lives up to its description. The weather was far from the best - dry, but cloudy - but it was a spectacular journey all the same. The

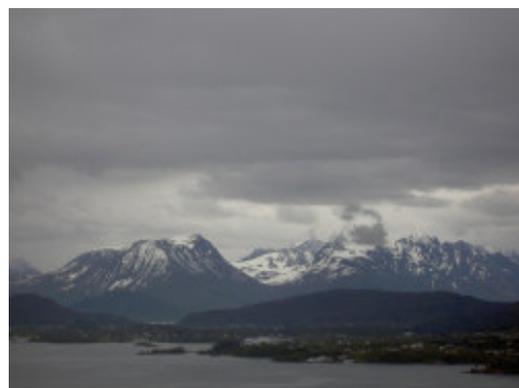
mountains about 10-15 minutes from Åndalsnes itself were especially impressive. On board, the very cheerful conductor handed out "coins" for the coffee machine on the train as well as sweets, which was a nice surprise though a little distraction from the views!

Arriving into Åndalsnes I wondered outside the station and hung around the area where I presumed other people were waiting for the bus to Ålesund. One showed up, which turned out not to be mine, followed by another, which was. The cloud continued to hang fairly low for most of the journey, though there was a wonderful point where the bus ascended a hill and, just as it peaked over the top of it, was faced with a beautiful expanse of clear blue sky. The views continued to be impressive, with gently curved snow-capped mountains and clear lakes all the way along the journey.

Arriving into Ålesund it looked like rain, but it held off for a while. At the bus stop I met a rather confused looking American woman who had not booked a place to stay and was shocked to discover that the tourist office had already closed by the time we arrived. After assuring her that something would work out, I had her follow me to the hostel I had booked where she found a room. We had dinner together later on in the evening; it was nice to have some company for a while.

Before dinner I walked up to the top of the hill, which provides 360-degree views of the city and the surrounding sea, which is scattered with islands. Distant mountains appeared to stretch up from the sea, though the low hanging cloud did little for the view, and it started raining, which didn't help either. It was still beautiful, and well worth the climb.

Dinner involved Mexican food, which was tasty. The American lady had also decided that she was going to follow my plans for the next day - visit and stay in Geiranger. She left for sleep just after dinner and I did some further walking around the town before heading back to the hostel for a relatively early night - I hadn't slept much on

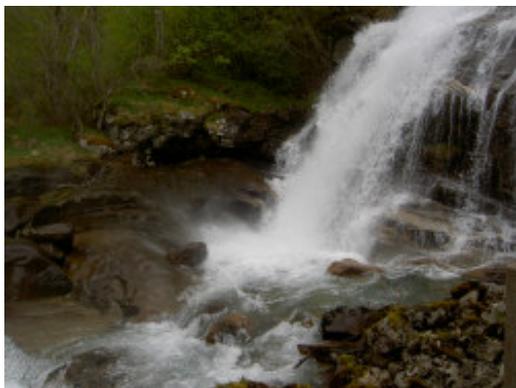


the train from Bergen to Oslo the night before, though the day's beautiful journey had made all of that a distant memory.

The Trip To Geiranger



I woke up in plenty of time to get the ferry, and wandered down to the port only to discover that I really was there in plenty of time, since it was running just over half an hour late. There was no sign of the American lady until the boat arrived, when we both commented that we thought the other wasn't going to make it! The journey was yet again incredibly beautiful, though with a good deal of cloud obstructing the views and preventing the sun lighting them up so their full glory could be revealed.



My hotel in Geiranger was the nearest one to the port, which was quite impressive given that it was the also cheapest one that I had been able to find. The rain started falling shortly after my arrival, so I put on my full set of waterproofs and went out for a walk. Two hours or so later I had walked a long way up the road that leads away from the village and, quite steeply, up into the mountains, eventually to pass over them.



Geiranger itself got increasingly tiny as I went up, and I discovered along the way the Fjordcenter - a museum about life around the fjords - and numerous waterfalls from the small to the loud and powerful. With the rain not giving up and my stomach telling me I had yet to have a proper meal that day, I walked back down the hill, which took somewhat less time than the walk up, both because it was less strenuous and I wasn't stopping to see things all the way.

The hotel served a nice buffet dinner and a relatively reasonable price, and then lent me (for free) a laptop so I could use the wifi. I uploaded some of the photos I had taken so far so friends and family could see at least part of the journey so far. They also washed and dried my clothes for a small fee, which was useful since I was running out of clean things to wear.

The morning didn't bring much improvement to the weather - it wasn't raining, but it constantly looked like it might. I went to the Fjordcenter, which gave a fascinating insight into life around the fjords. I had never even considered that rock falls into fjords could trigger devastating tsunamis that could - and in the past have - almost

wipe small villages on the fjord edge off the map. People also built farms in the craziest of places high up on the edges of the fjords, locating them carefully so as to try and avoid the rock avalanches.

By the time I had finished looking around the museum the weather was just starting to perk up a little, but it was also time to head back town to the hotel, grab my bag and go and wait for the ferry back to Ålesund. The ferry was on time, and soon I was onboard. It was a windy day, which on the one hand meant the cloud cleared from time to time so the views were often better than they had been on the way there, but on the other hand meant I feared I might get blown overboard



as I stood taking photos! I re-met the American lady, who had been staying in a different hotel to me, who said she was staying on the boat for a few more days and in doing so was actually going to be heading further north than I was going to. As we neared Ålesund she asked me if I was going to re-climb the hill with the good views over the town, to which I replied that it would take some really nice weather to make me do that.

A Beautiful Evening In Ålesund

After dropping my bag at the hostel it was time to find food again, which came in the form of a large and happily quite spicy pizza. Watching through the window as I ate, I noticed the weather gradually improving, and by the time I had finished it was looking really quite nice. Nice enough, in fact, to make it worthwhile taking another trip up the hill.



The climb was as tiring as I had remembered it, but this time it was a lot more rewarding. The sky that evening over Ålesund was one of the most beautiful I have ever had the pleasure of watching in amazement - and poking my camera at. I met a Korean guy up the top - a computer scientist like myself - who was enjoying the views, and we hung around up there for a good hour enjoying it. The most amazing part was that we saw rain in one direction and heading towards us. It hit, we got rained on for about 5 minutes, and then suddenly it stopped. Where the rain had been, it was clear and beautiful; in the opposite direction, which had been clear before, it was misted by the falling rain.





We walked down the steps together, discovered we were staying at the same hostel and then spent some time chatting together in his room. He shared a little Korean food with me, which was satisfyingly hot. Then, remembering I had a 7:05am bus to be on the next morning, I rested.

North To Trondheim



I rose early, packed up and headed for the bus stop, getting ever so slightly lost on the way and having to seek the help of a friendly local. The bus was pretty quiet from the centre of Ålesund, but got busier as the journey went on. The weather was vastly improved from the last time I had done the bus journey between Ålesund and Åndelsnes, so I had some really quite nice views to enjoy as I slowly woke up. At Åndelsnes the weather was still good, and the train journey from there to Dombås was incredible. The mountains that had been misted over proudly poked their rough edges into the lightly clouded sky, barren of life and dusted with snow. I was really happy to have done this journey two times and had really good weather for one of them.

At Dombås I had a bit of time to spare before taking the train to Trondheim, so I wandered down from the train station into the town, where I found a quite nice looking church and a place that would sell me a hot dog. With the hot dog consumed, I wandered back up the hill to the station and hopped on the train to Trondheim. I had no reservation, but found myself a window seat without trouble to enjoy the views. It was somewhat impossible to capture photographically, but this journey spends some time inside a kind of gorge or canyon, the high walls looking down on either side as the train and river winds their way through. The sense of wilderness increased the

further north I went, and in the hour approaching Trondheim there was only the odd farm building or small village here and there.

I arrived in Trondheim and met up with Stig, a local contact I had been given by the friend I stayed with in Oslo. He showed me around Trondheim, which is a very agreeable city with typical colourful wooden buildings and a smart and sophisticated area built where some old industrial docks used to lie. The cathedral in Trondheim is probably the most spectacular thing I saw, however. One wall of it features lines of statues - over 50 of them!

In return for my tour and company for the evening, I gave the same Parrot internals talk I had in Oslo to the people on Trondheim. I delivered it better this time, and it was very well received with a good degree of interest. After the talk, many of the people who had been there went along for dinner to a microbrewery, where I enjoyed a sampler plate featuring six of the beers that they brewed there. Later on we moved onto another nice place. Trondheim seems to do well for beer, the inevitable high cost aside.

My sleeper train left Trondheim shortly before midnight, was highly comfortable and provided me with a good night's sleep as I was whisked into the Arctic. Apparently the train whistles as it passes over the Arctic Circle, but I was sound asleep at that point. When I woke up we were well inside the circle and approaching Fauske, where I was leaving the train to change onto a bus to Narvik, the next city I was going to stay in.

Fauske To Narvik: An Arctic Journey

The train pulled into Fauske station at 8:25am and deposited me on the platform into the cool morning air. After noticing that I hadn't instantly frozen to death, I took my first steps over the arctic ground and tried to locate the bus that I was to leave on in 25 minutes time - a trivial task, since it was about 50 meters from where I had got off the train. I left my bag in the luggage hold

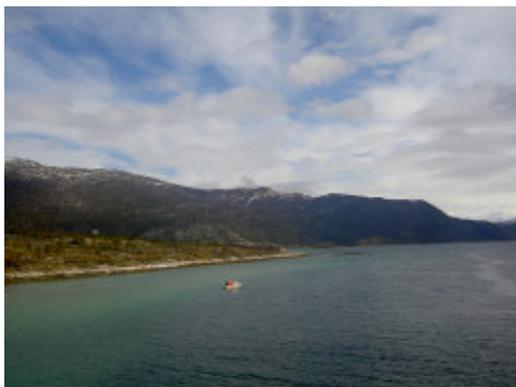


and wandered into the station building to grab some snacks and a drink for the 5-6 hour bus journey ahead.

Getting onto the bus I had a slight panic that perhaps I didn't have enough cash on me for the bus fare. You get used to cards being taken everywhere in Norway; it's entirely possible they were taken on the bus. Thankfully, it wasn't to be a problem: the Scanrail pass got me the journey at half price and I had money to spare. We set off right on time.



The road frequently ran by lakes, which were in liquid form. I suspected they may freeze over in winter. Snow was visible at any high point, and on the ground by the side of the road as we drove along some of the higher roads. Villages popped up from time to time, but there really wasn't any place of any size along the way. The bus journey was punctuated with a trip on a car ferry. This provided a nice opportunity to get off the bus and have a walk around for a while. I suspect the bus was mostly made up of locals, since when I went outside to enjoy the surrounding scenery I was mostly alone in doing so. While I did that, the queues died down, so when I went to claim my hot dog there was virtually no wait. The lake that the ferry was crossing was large and seemed to be almost surrounded by mountains. It was hard to gauge the distance and work out how high they were, but in one direction they appeared to be entirely covered in snow.



Back on the bus, the journey continued to wind through a range of scenery, including heather-like plants, lakes and hills and mountains dusted with snow, though often only lightly. I had certainly expected a lot more snow and ice than I saw. The scenery made the journey go quickly, and we were soon entering Narvik. The drive in made a good first impression: the town appeared to be set amongst mountains. We arrived; I

grabbed my bag and fished out my guidebook, flicked to the map and was happy to find it even had my hostel marked on it. After a climb up some stairs by the bus station (which I later discovered I could have saved myself by entering the shopping centre by the bus station and taking the lift), I was in the town centre and stood opposite the war museum.

Narvik

Narvik is a town that, on paper, wouldn't tend to appeal to me. The reason for its existence is to take iron ore, arriving by train from the mines at Kiruna, Sweden, and ship it off. The industrial docks are right at the heart of the town. Also, the town was flattened in the second world war and doesn't have much in the way of historical buildings - not that it's that old anyway, given the reason it came to exist. Somehow, though, it manages to be really quite likable. I think its being surrounded by mountains was one thing that won me over, but it's a nicely sized place and the locals seemed friendly: on the way to my hostel, while looking at the map, someone came to ask where I was going and point me in the right direction.

The hostel was actually a guesthouse, and despite the fact that parts of the building were having work done, it was a comfortable place to stay. As well as my bedroom, I had a sitting room virtually to myself if I wanted it. The top floor had a balcony with a wonderful view over the city down to the fjord, where later in the evening I was able to enjoy the sunset.

I spent the afternoon mostly wandering around. First I went down to the "beach", where I found a marina full of boats and, to my surprise, seaweed! I dipped my hand in the arctic sea, though didn't keep it there for long: it felt like it had frostbite after a few seconds of immersion! Narvik is also home to a rock showing a drawing from ancient, perhaps prehistoric times. It depicts what to my eyes appeared to be a reindeer, though only with the legs on one side of the body shown - a rather primitive drawing. The town centre has a park with a rather interesting sculpture: a triangle-based pyramid which is completely reflective. I had some fun messing about with it and photographing the reflection of myself taking a photograph. There is also a rather curious set of signposts that point the distance to a range of destinations. I especially noticed St Petersburg, where I was to be in a week's time, was some 1,363 kilometres



away, and that I was 1,933 kilometres from Copenhagen, where my journey had started.



Sadly, the cable car up to the mountain overlooking Narvik was closed until June, so I was unable to go on this. I had no trouble filling my day, though. I pondered staying up until midnight to see if the sun was still about at midnight, but was feeling exhausted and ended up taking an early night.

In the morning I headed for the war museum. It documented the occupation of Narvik during the Second World War, which was strategically important due to its iron ore docks. The railway was largely blown up by the Germans in the process, along with most of the city. The harbour became a ship graveyard, hundreds of lives were lost and the nearby mountains played host to many battles. Narvik as a city suffered bombings and its people were the target of all kinds of propaganda, much of it based upon blatant lies. Many Russian prisoners of war were also held in the region. It was a sobering reminder of how badly humans can treat each other.

After lunch and a little shopping, most of my Norwegian crowns were spent and I was at the train station waiting for the train that would take me east into Sweden and bring the Norwegian part of my journey to an end.

The Abisko National Park

The train from Narvik to Abisko was actually bound for Stockholm, a journey of about 18 hours. The carriages didn't look especially new, but the second class one I entered was plenty comfortable inside and, to my delight, had an opening window. The journey swept around what was either a large lake or fjord - I'm not entirely sure - with distant mountain views. After it had reached the end of one side of the water, it turned to follow it, giving a glimpse of the small scar across the landscape that the railway had made.





As the journey continued east, colours faded to white with snow lining both sides of the track and visible as far as the eye could see. At the various stops along the way people with skiing gear left and boarded the train, a sure indication of the activities that this amount of snow allowed for. However, it did not feel like we had gained a great deal of altitude - a clear indication of the difference that the Gulf Stream makes to the climate of northwest Norway!



As the train neared Abisko Turiststation - where I was leaving the train - a very large and beautiful frozen over lake came into view. It seemed not too far away from where I got off the train, and I hoped that I would be able to visit its shores at some point during my time there. Finding the place I was staying was a little fun since reception was closed on weekends during the low season. I found the key that had been left for me and, eventually, figured out

what building it was for and made it to my room. The information I had been given helpfully gave me instructions on how to walk to the village centre, some two kilometres away along the main road, which essentially follows the railway. A curious bit of trivia is that the road is less than twenty years old, with the railway providing the only access to the places lying along it for a long period of time.

Finding something to eat for dinner was my next priority; I had a few snacks with me, but really needed a proper meal. I did the walk to the village, which was mostly along a path just off the road, but the last 500m or so was along the (really very quiet) road. It was a cloudy day and somewhat chilly, but far from the chilled-to-the-bone levels I had been expecting. After wandering into the first open place I saw, which was just about to close and could only sell me a large bag of crisps and a drink, and then finding the supermarket had also closed just, I thought I was out of luck. Then I spotted a small building opposite the supermarket that claimed to be a cafe of some kind, pushed the door unrepentantly and...it opened. Inside I enjoyed filling reindeer stew with creamy mashed potatoes for a very reasonable price compared to what I had



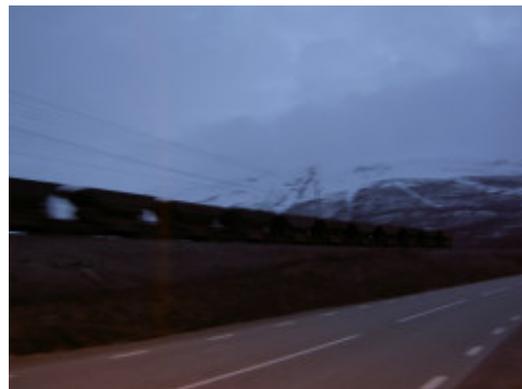
come to expect to pay in Norway. I also discovered a pinball machine at the back, and was unable to resist a couple of games.

With my hunger satisfied, I looked at the map I had been provided with and noticed that there was a road heading in the direction of the frozen lake near to the place I had just eaten. Interestingly, it looked to go all the way down to the shore. I soon found the road, which turned out to be less

of a road than a dirt track. It led me through the trees past a couple of farms and, happily, all the way down to the shore of the lake. It was as beautiful as I had imagined, even on that cloudy day. The area I was stood by was a harbour - at least, it would be once the lake thawed some time in June. Now it was just starting to thaw in a few places, and I certainly didn't dare to try walking on it even though I saw snowmobiles by the lakeside. I stayed down there for a while enjoying the tranquillity - I saw nobody else there at all - before wandering back up the path and back towards my hostel as the evening drew on.

Back at the hostel I took the time to call some friends and family back home to let them know what I'd been up to. I relaxed and read for a while until midnight approached, then wrapped up warm and went outside for a short walk. This time I followed the path the other side of the railway line, which led me to a bridge over a beautiful and noisily gushing canyon. Walking further, I found the cable car station, which appeared to be out of operation. I found out the next day that it would not be in operation until the summer. Walking back and standing by the bridge over the canyon again, I looked at my watch and saw midnight come and pass while the sky remained light. Unfortunately, it was too cloudy to actually see the sun, but I guessed this was as good a midnight sun experience as I was getting. It was really strange to be out in what looked like mid-evening levels of light, but knowing that soon it was just going to start getting lighter again. I can only imagine how it is in winter, when instead of constant light the land is plunged into constant darkness. The ski season in these parts doesn't start until February, when there is enough light to be able to see to ski for a worthwhile amount of the day!

Despite the light, I got a good night's sleep and woke up to a beautiful blue sky with the odd white cloud smeared here and there. Heading for the information centre, I found that guided tours were not being offered, but was given the map of the route of tour itself so that I could try it for myself. It led me towards the canyon, where I chose to diverge from the suggested route and walk along the wooden boards by the canyon edge. The views were stunning, with red heather decorating the rock faces, blue water with white foam gushing through the canyon down below and snowy mountains looking down on it all. A little walking later, a bridge over the canyon came into view, which turned out to be the same bridge





that was featured on a later part of the walk I was originally following. It turned out that I had made a good choice in following the route by the edge of the canyon, since the suggested path was quite caked in snow when I wandered back along it a little way to see if I'd missed much.



Over the bridge there was another wooden walkway, which I followed until it came to an end. This led further along the canyon towards the frozen lake, which was now not particularly far away. I then continued to follow the map, which led up away from the canyon and back towards where I was staying. Along the way I met a local lady out walking her dog and chatted with for a little while about life in the area.



I spent a few moments back inside to warm up again - even though it was a sunny day, the cold started to freeze you up after a little while - then headed back towards the village again. I took a detour on the way to a reconstruction of a Sami camp. The Sami are the indigenous nomadic people of north Sweden, with their own language and ways of life. The sort of constructions they made in part reminded me of when I studied the Native Americans at school.



I returned to the cafe I had eaten at the day before, this time enjoying a meaty beef burger and another game of pinball. With the weather being so nice, and having enjoyed my time by the frozen lake so much the day before, I decided to walk back down there. The sun and the lifted cloud made it all the more beautiful, and I spent quite a long while walking by the shore or just sitting on a bench looking over the harbour and at the derelict wooden hut, coloured in the standard industrial iron ore red, contrasting against the white purity of the snow and ice.

With a train to make, I took a long last glance at the lake from its shores and then walked back along the path towards the town, then along the main road again and back to the hostel to collect my bag. I dropped off the key and then headed for the train station to wait for my overnight train that would take me south, back out of the

Arctic Circle and away from the most tranquil day of the entire trip, promising myself that I'd return one day.

Two Wet Days In Östersund

The train rolled into Abisko station, I boarded and it carried me away from the tranquil paradise and back towards civilization. I got talking with one of the guys that I was sharing a compartment with; he had been skiing at one of the places just a couple of stops before Abisko. His work involved youth work related things, so we easily found some common ground. Later on I headed down to the dining car, where I grabbed some food and a couple of beers to enjoy while listening to music and reading. Then, somewhat tired from the day's walking, I slept. It was the best night's sleep I had on any of the sleeper trains.



Not long after seven I was off the train and waiting at Sundsvall station for the train to Östersund. It seemed to be mostly filled with commuters. The weather was a far cry from that of the previous day: grey, rainy and generally miserable. It hadn't improved much by the time I arrived in Östersund, so I figured it was a day to hit the museums. It would have been a great plan, apart from upon arriving at tourist information I was informed that one museum was closed for restoration and another because it was Monday, and they were unable to suggest much else for me to do.

With the rain having stopped for a while, I walked over the bridge to the island of Frösön and did a circular walk that went past the zoo, which I expected to be also closed (it was). It was quite a walk, but the stage beyond the zoo and back towards the town went through some quite pretty farmland and rolling hills, which was enjoyable. Getting back into the town, it was lunch time and I looked around on Frösön for a while for something to eat, though didn't find much. The rain that was slowly getting heavier, so I decided to wander back over the bridge to a place where I knew there were restaurants. In the end I found a pizza place that did a great lunchtime deal and ate there.



With the rain falling and little else to do, I went back to the station and hit the net cafe for an hour and a half. Then I set about finding my hostel, which involved a very easy, but fairly long walk through the town



centre and then onwards towards the Jamtli museum area. Between the net cafe, finding the hostel, reading for a while and taking a shower, dinnertime arrived. One thing Östersund does have going for it is some nice oriental restaurants. I ate at the Shanghai Wok, which was delicious and leisurely. I stayed for another drink and read for a bit before heading back to the hostel. I hung around with some other folks staying there for a while and then slept.

The next day I had planned to go to Åre, which is supposed to be scenic and beautiful. I woke up to the same miserable weather and was advised that it would be similar weather in Åre, but figured I could at least go along for the journey and not hang around for long if it was just as bad, then do the (open today) Jamtli museum in the afternoon. Arriving at the station, I discovered that the train I had planned to catch wasn't actually running beyond the end of April, something I'd failed to spot on the timetable. Things just weren't going my way in this city! I left my bag in a locker at the station and walked back pretty much where I'd just come from - the Jamtli museum.

I thought the sign said it was open at 10am, but it turned out to not open until 10:30am. The shop attached to the museum, however, was open, and the friendly lady who worked in there was keen to chat and keep me entertained until opening time. Ahead of me in the museum was a large school group on a guided tour, but it was a pretty big museum so it was no trouble to avoid them. The content of the museum was of great interest. It detailed the lives of people who lived in the region, including the Sami and the farming communities, and told of old legends. The highlight, however, is the three tapestries they have, woven a thousand years ago. They should no longer be in existence, but they very much are and they are amazing. They are also a mystery, since nobody can be sure what they mean, though there are a number of leading theories. One of them is that it is about Sweden being Christianised.

While the main part of the museum was certainly very child-friendly, what was upstairs was not so! I happily discovered an exhibition of modern art, some of which was quite good. The weirdest thing was a running video clip of a naked woman painting things, including, if I remember correctly, herself!

The museum entertained me into the afternoon, then I returned towards the station and the town centre and had another chunk of time online as the rain continued to fall, then hung about in a cafe for a drink. That brought me nicely to dinnertime, and with a variety of oriental restaurants on my hands the temptation to try another was too much to resist. I chose a Thai restaurant, which was deserted and at first sight seemed like it wasn't going to work out too well. However, once the food arrived I soon changed my mind - the spring rolls were nice and crispy and the spicy beef dish I had for my main course was also very enjoyable. The service was slow if you were in a hurry, but I was happy to kill some time so it was fine by me. By the time I had finished, it was time to go and get my overnight train that was heading towards Stockholm. Östersund was the least exciting part of the trip, but perhaps it was a good thing to have a less exciting bit - it was a chance to slow down for a while.

Stockholm

The number of people waiting for the overnight train to Stockholm seemed rather large, though that's probably because everyone had crowded into the station building to avoid the pouring rain. I hoped I would wake up to something a little better. The train came and, after finding my carriage - something not to get wrong, or I'd end up in Gothenburg - I boarded. This time I was in a 4-person compartment rather than a six-person one, but it turned out that there were only two of us. The guy I was sharing it with wanted to sleep right away, so I headed down to the restaurant car to avoid disturbing him while I stayed up for a bit. I acquired a beer and was soon chatting with a Swedish guy travelling to Stockholm on business about a whole range of topics.



The night came and went and I was woken up at 6:30. The train had arrived in Stockholm at 3:00, but we were allowed to stay on board until 7:00 to sleep. The sky was a wonderful shade of blue with barely a cloud to be seen. I dumped my bag in a locker and set about trying to find tourist information, knowing full well that it wouldn't be open yet, but intending to find a cafe nearby and enjoy some nice coffee to finish waking me up.



This was a nice plan, apart from I couldn't find the tourist information office for the life of me. Where it supposedly was I found a bible school – not quite the kind of guidance I was looking for at this point in time. I went and double-checked the map and I had certainly been at the correct junction. I figured this must mean that I was being stupid because of the early morning and needed coffee, so I headed for that. My coffee was delayed somewhat since I spotted a rather impressive looking building on the way to find some, which turned out to be the city hall, and went to take a good look at that.

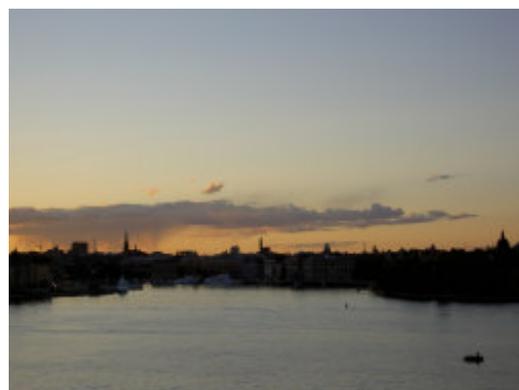


Some coffee later, it was certainly time for tourist information to be open, so I set about finding it again. I found myself once again at the same junction, and convinced myself I was where I was supposed to be, but tourist information just wasn't there. Along that street, I found a travel shop where (after I explained to them what tourist information was...yes, really) they gave me directions to a place a good ten minutes walk away. After making a mess of that, I eventually found it - tucked away in the

underground floor of a store. And thus concluded the longest time I've ever spent trying to find tourist information anywhere. At least it's a pleasant city to walk around, though.

I found a map and information and then sat by a nice water feature (that I saw again that next day but without the water...I swear I didn't pull the plug) and planned what I was going to get up to while in Stockholm. I had the rest of this day and most of the next. Given the weather was turning out to be so nice, I decided to do the outdoor things that day and the museums the next, when it may not be so good. I ate a hot dog, and then went to find the sightseeing boat tour. On it I met a nice young American lady who was coming to work in Sweden for the summer. The trip itself was interesting, with good commentary on all the sights. It's also the first boat tour I've been on that went through locks - namely between the Baltic Sea and the lake, which is a little higher. It was actually the first time going through locks in my life, which is somewhat interesting the first time you do it. Stockholm is a city made up on many islands, but the water between some of them freezes over during winter and they drive over it, do winter sports on it and so on. After the boat trip I went to find my hostel, which was actually on a boat. It was fairly basic for the money, but quite a different experience and very well positioned.

In the evening I was set to meet up with some Perl folks. It turned out to be academics from the Stockholm University as much as Perl people, and even more interestingly they were languages people, which made for some extremely interesting discussions. They also picked a very good place to eat at - a vegetarian restaurant with a beautiful view over the city, especially as the sun started to set. After getting over the initial "what no meat" moment, I discovered the food to be delicious and had a very enjoyable meal. We then tried to find a bar to have some after dinner drinks, which was easier said than done; it was a bank holiday the next day so many people were out



enjoying a drink. The intended place was packed out, as was the next place we tried, and we even tried the Vampire Bar (where someone actually got bit not long back, though just by some other overexcited person rather than a vampire), which was busy too. Eventually we found a place suitable for drinking and continuing conversation, where I ordered a beer in Swedish. Literally, you say, "big strong, please"; the beers they serve in many restaurants is quite weak. One of my friends translated it as, "give me a REAL beer".

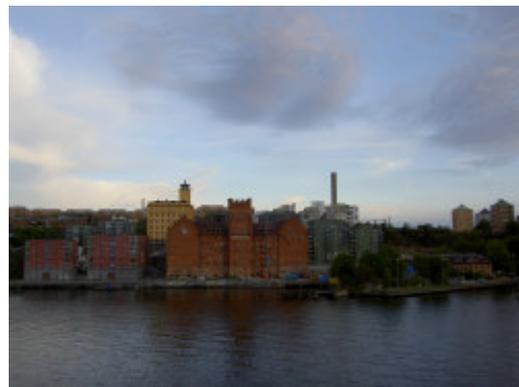
The next day dawned somewhat greyer, though still dry, making me glad I'd chosen to do the boat trip the previous day. First stop was the tram museum, which was actually a museum of the history of public transport in Stockholm. They had a book of English translations, which was helpful. On the way there I walked past the port where I was getting the boat to Finland that evening. I whiled away the morning at the museum and popped into the attached toy museum, which was included in the price, though never got to play on the rather old looking pinball machine they had. There was lots of model railway stuff, which I enjoyed looking at being an ex railway modeller.

In the afternoon I went to the Modern Art and Architecture museums, which are housed in the same building and a good walk from the tram museum. The Modern Art museum was certainly one of the better ones I've been to, and they had audio guides included in the price so I got to hear quite a bit about the paintings. I found a few bits of good surrealist stuff, which I enjoyed looking at. There were also some good sculptures along with pop art and the various forms that emerged as reactions to it. A random fact I noted was that at one time Russia was the only country in the world that recognized abstract art. The architecture section was also interesting, though I was getting quite tired by that point and don't remember so much of it. It wasn't huge, so I managed to get round and read a lot of the information there, which described some of the most impressive buildings in Sweden and had some great wooden models of them.

By the time I had finished at the museum it was only a couple of hours before the overnight boat to Turku in Finland was due to leave, so I didn't really have time to go and get a cooked meal. Instead, I grabbed a sandwich, crisps and a drink, having imagined (rightly) that the food onboard would not be so cheap. A detour back to the hostel to grab my bag and I was on my way. I made it to the terminal in good time, got checked in and, after a little wait in departures, boarded the boat.

Helsinki

Once onboard I quickly located my cabin. Despite the huge numbers of people getting onto the boat, they all disappeared amazingly quickly to their rooms. My cabin had four beds, and I wondered if I would be sharing with others, especially given what I had paid (less than some of the hostels I had stayed on the trip). I wandered out on deck, which mostly contained people smoking, and watched as we left Stockholm behind. After the city had slipped out of sight, though with still plenty of islands to see, I



popped inside to the warm to find a place to eat my food. Inside I ended up sitting near a Finnish lady, currently living in Stockholm, whom I was soon chatting with and getting tips on what to do in my day in Helsinki. She recommended meat-bread and that I visit the market, both of which turned out to be excellent recommendations.

With dinner done I took another wander outside as light started to slip away. We were still surrounded by islands, and it would be dark before we were really in open sea. Inside, the noisy karaoke had happily finished and the bar was somewhat quieter. I took advantage of the nice drinks prices to clear up some of my last Swedish crowns, and then got some sleep. I can only guess that the sea remained calm all night, or that if it didn't I never noticed, because I slept all the way through to the alarm that woke me up an hour before we were due to arrive.



I showered, pulled on clothes and went to see what the view was like outside. It was surprisingly similar to what it had been like when I left it the previous night: land lined either side of the channel we were passing through. Soon we were in Turku and had disembarked, and it was time to figure out how to take the train to Helsinki. This ended up being rather straightforward; there is a train station 2 minutes walk from the boat terminal with a service direct to Helsinki each day one hour after the arrival of the ferry. The train arrived, I easily found a place and soon we were on our way. I semi-slept for part of the journey, which was mostly trees with the odd lake or river. A couple of hours later, I arrived in Helsinki - the fourth capital city of the trip.

Before I could set about exploring Helsinki I had a couple of things to attend to. First was getting a train ticket for the journey to St Petersburg the following day, which was easily done. The lady who served me was amazingly patient and laid back, taking the time to make sure I had no more questions. Second was getting some Russian currency, which also proved easy. With that done, it was time for food, and I decided to check out the meat-bread that had been recommended to me. After describing what I was looking for to the very patient guy who was serving (by this stage I was really liking the Finnish people), I ended up with some soft hollowed out bread with minced meat in, plus some added mustard and gherkins. It was certainly tasty and very filling.

It was still some time before check-in at the hotel, so I dropped my bag off in a locker and went to see the city. I'd picked up a map on the ferry, which turned out to be highly useful. Outside the station I realized why one book I'd read had said it was an example of great architecture - it is pretty magnificent, with a large column reaching up into the sky. The square opposite the station had a nice statue that was just nice to sit and chill by for a while. Next came the





most impressive building in the city: the cathedral. It is magnificent to stand and look at in awe, and the large square before it provides a great place to do that. The steps leading up to it were packed with people sat enjoying the wonderful weather. I was lucky enough to be there at the time that a military band showed up and played a couple of pieces, along with various military-like formalities, while some other men paraded around on horses.



Having watched that, I wandered towards the market and where the sightseeing boats departed from. There I found quite an array of trips that could be done, and chose to do one that went out by various islands. In the time I waited for the boat I wandered to a nearby park and then walked around the market, where I picked up a box of raspberries. There was something of a good volume discount taking place: one box for four euros or two boxes for five. I wasn't convinced that I could eat two boxes worth, so just took the one, with the lady on the stall promising that if I changed my mind I could return later and take a second box for just one euro!



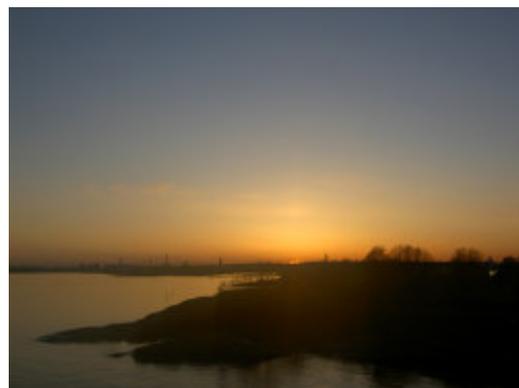
The tour was informative and showed numerous churches, islands and marinas. I hadn't realized that the sea around every one of Finland's ports froze over during the winter and icebreakers were required to keep shipping lanes open! We saw some ice breakers on the trip, currently docked and waiting for their next duties when the winter came. After the tour, my raspberries were gone and had been tasty; I decided to get a second box for the journey to St Petersburg the next day. The lady on the stand recognized me right away, smiled and said she knew I'd be back and handed me another box for a euro.



I found the hostel easily and found the staff to be wonderfully friendly. After some settling in, it was time to start thinking about dinner. I wandered around some shopping areas for a while - including an underground one with some good music shops, though I didn't buy anything - before eventually seeing a sign that pointed

towards Mexican food. I was soon enjoying a beer and tucking into a large beef burrito with all the trimmings.

For the evening, I decided to take the boat out to the fortress, which lies on a series of four islands. There are frequent boards with maps on and none of the islands are particularly big, meaning you can wander around without much of a plan without fearing that you might get lost. One island features a church that is one of just three in the world that doubles up as a lighthouse – talk about the light that saves! Another contains a few now disused cannons and an anti-aircraft gun. On a bridge between a couple of the islands, I spotted some very drunk Finns coming my way. I gave up trying to avoid them after it became obvious they were coming directly towards me, and after asking them to translate their Finnish rambling into English (which they spoke with perfect pronunciation but extremely slowly), discovered they were simply after cigarettes. The sun started to set, yellowing the sky, and I wandered to the final forth island that I had yet to see, found a nice cliff to perch on the edge of and watched the sun go down over Helsinki before ambling back to the harbour to get the boat back to the city. It had been a very enjoyable couple of hours.



Back in the city, I went to a pub with live music and had a final Scandinavian pint. I reflected that while the price of beer (and pretty much everything else) wasn't something I would miss as I left Scandinavia behind, there were many things that I would always look back on fondly: the stunning scenery, the glassy reflective lakes, the tranquillity away from the cities, my good luck with the weather, the midnight sun, the friendly and helpful people and how effortless it was to travel around. I'm sure if you go yourself, you too will return with many fond memories of your own.

Backpacking and hostelling turned out to be a lot easier than I expected, and the planning that had gone in before I went paid off hugely. English being very widely spoken to a high standard removed the worry of language problems. It is easy to underestimate the size of Scandinavia and the amount of time it can take to get from place to place; thankfully the process of getting from place to place is often a beautiful experience in itself and the public transport is of an excellent standard.

So, that's one great trip off my list. Where next?

The Trip Plan

Where I went, how I got there and where I stayed. I hope this is useful to anyone who wants to see any of the places that I went to for themselves.

Day 1: Copenhagen

- Hotel: CAB INN City
- Useful information at <http://www.visitcopenhagen.com/>

Day 2: Morning train to Gothenburg, afternoon and evening in the city.

- Travel: Approximately 4 hours by train from one city centre station to the other. Be aware that you may have to change train just over the Swedish border, or more confusingly that only part of the train might be going on to Gothenburg.
- Hotel: Comfort Hotel City Center
 - Address: Stora Badhusgatan 28 ,Gothenburg Sweden SE-41121, Sweden
 - Telephone: (+46) 31 17 40 50
- Useful information: <http://www.goteborg.com/>

Day 3: Gothenburg in the morning; travel to Oslo in the afternoon.

- Journey: Trains from Göteborg Central to Oslo, approximately 4 hours.

Day 4: Oslo

- Useful information: <http://www.visitoslo.com/>

Day 5: Travel to Myrdal, take the Flåm railway down to Flåm

- Journey: Train from around 8am, arrives before 1pm. The arrival time is probably arranged to fit in with a departure to Flåm. The journey to Flåm takes under an hour, and the train stops at Kjosfossen and waits for enough time for you to get off and see the large waterfall on the way down. Note that the Flåm railway is not covered by the Scanrail pass, though it does get you a discount.
 - Flåm railway: <http://www.flaamsbana.no/eng/>
- Hostel: Flåm Camping & Vandrarheim, N-5743 FLÅM
 - Located over the river, on the right hand side of the road walking in the direction heading away from the fjord. It's not far from the station, when you know where it is!
 - Phone: 57632121

Day 6: Flam to Bergen, via Gudvangen. A journey involving a beautiful ferry through the fjords, a bus journey and a train journey.

- Ferry: Flåm to Gudvangen
 - Journey time approximately two hours
 - Timetable available from <http://www.fjord1.no/>

- Bus: Gudvangen to Voss
 - Journey time approximately one hour
 - Busses appear to be timed to meet the ferry; since they are used for people doing the Norway in a Nutshell trip in a single day.
 - Information about Gudvangen: <http://www.gudvangen.com/>
- Train: Voss to Bergen
 - Journey time just over one hour
- Hostel: Dorm.no
 - Address: Kong Oscarsgt. 44, Bergen 5017, Norway
 - Located 300 meters away from the railway station; there was a sign pointing to it just over the road from the station, though I totally missed that when actually trying to find the place.

Day 7: Day in Bergen, overnight train to Oslo

- Journey time approximately seven and a half hours; when I was there, the train left around 11pm and was in Oslo by 6:30am.
- If you want a bed, book well ahead – this is a busy and popular line.

Day 8: Travel from Oslo to Ålesund.

- Journey: Take the train towards Trondheim. It reaches Dombås after approximately four hours of travel. There you connect to the train to Åndalsnes, a journey of about an hour and a quarter. This part is really scenic on a clear day. Finally, get the bus that leaves from directly outside Åndalsnes station to Ålesund; this is also a scenic journey and takes just over two hours.
- Hostel: HI Ålesund Youth Hostel
 - Address: Parkgata 14, Ålesund 6003, Norway
 - Telephone: 0047 70 11 58 30

Day 9: Ferry to Geiranger in the morning, afternoon and evening in Geiranger

- Journey: Hurtigruten passenger ferry for approximately four hours. Note that it does not go to Geiranger year round – be sure to check.
 - Hurtigruten Ferry Information: <http://www.hurtigruten.com/en/>
- Information on Geiranger including a map of the walks is available at <http://www.geiranger.no/>
- Hotel: Hotel Geiranger
 - Website: <http://www.hotel-geiranger.no/>
 - Phone: 0047 70 26 30 05

Day 10: Morning in Geiranger, ferry back to Ålesund

- Journey time: four hours
- Hostel: Same as two days ago

Day 11: Onwards to Trondheim, then take the overnight sleeper train to Fauske.

- Journey: Early morning bus to Åndalsnes (2 hours), train to Dombås (1:15 hours), train to Trondheim (1:30 hours). This lands you there early afternoon.

- The overnight sleeper train left at around 11:30pm for me and took nine hours to reach Fauske.

Day 12: Bus from Fauske to Narvik and stay in Narvik.

- Journey: The bus takes five and a half hours and leaves just by the station platform. The Scanrail pass provides a 50% discount.
 - Check the bus times at: <http://www.nor-way.no/>
- Hostel: Breidablikk Gjestehus
 - Tel: 76 94 14 18
 - Location: Tore Hunds Gate

Day 13: Train to and then day in Abisko national park, staying there.

- Journey: The train takes approximately two hours; depending on whether you want more time on Narvik or Abisko, there is one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Note that you want Abisko Tourist station if staying at the place below; Abisko is the village itself and some 2km away.
- Hostel: Abisko Touristlodge
 - Note that it is not fully open weekends in low season, which may not be when you think it is! Make sure you contact them in advance.
 - Information on the lodge and the Abisko national park can be found at <http://www.abisko.nu/vinter07/englishpages/index.asp>

Day 14: Day in Abisko (and optionally) Kiruna, overnight train to Ostersund

- Journey: The overnight train goes direct from Abisko all the way to Stockholm, a journey of 18 hours. When I was there, it left around 5pm and reached Sundsvall by 7:30am, where there was a connecting train to Ostersund that arrived by 9:30am. You can change earlier, at Bräcke, but you will have to leave the train at 5:30am and will arrive in Ostersund before much is open, if you are lucky enough to get the connection at that time from Bräcke. As always, times may change – this just gives an idea of the journey times.

Day 15: Day in Ostersund and sleep there

- Hostel: STF Jamtli Vandrarhem
 - Address: Sodra Grongatan 36 Tinsgatan 12, Ostersund
 - Telephone: +46 063-12 20 60
 - Web: <http://www.jamtli.com/restaurang/vandrarhem.htm>

Day 16: Ostersund, or perhaps visit Åre, then overnight train to Stockholm

- Åre is a ski resort in winter and is supposed to be beautiful walking in the summer. By train it is just over an hour. Be careful, as I wasn't, that you go for a train that actually runs at the time of year that you are there.
- The sleeper train calls at both Åre and Ostersund and goes to Stockholm and Gothenburg, depending which bit you board. If you're going to Stockholm, the train arrives in the early hours of the morning since it isn't that long a journey,

however they allow you to stay on the train to sleep until a later, though still quite early time.

Day 17: Spend day exploring Stockholm and sleep there.

- Hostel: Rygerfjord Hotel and Hostel
 - Address: Södermälärstrand, Kajplats 11-15 ,Stockholm 118 25, Sweden
 - Telephone: +46 (0)8 840830
 - A little way from Central Station – you'll want to use public transport to get there or splash out on a taxi.

Day 18: Day in Stockholm; overnight ferry to Turku in the evening

- Journey: Ferry with Viking Line. It is possible to walk there, but it will take at least half an hour from the old town (where the hostel I stayed the previous night is located). On the walk you get to cross what I think must be the world's most complicated intersection, with flyovers galore and some railway lines mixed in for good measure. You'll survive it, just don't expect to remember how you managed last time by the next time you try to do it, and allow a little time. There are busses too, but they apparently cost quite a bit.

Day 19: Day in Helsinki and sleep there.

- Journey: Take the train from right by the port at Turku to Helsinki. This takes just over two hours. Alternatively, trains go from the central railway station to Helsinki, but that is probably a good 30 minutes walk. There are probably busses available, or taxis.
- Hostel: Hostel Mekka
 - Address: Vuorikatu 8b ,Helsinki 00100, Finland
 - Telephone: +3589630265