

CRUISING THROUGH THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

July-August 2023

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THE PLAN

Around the middle of June 2021 Covid-19 was marching its merry way through Australia, by which time State governments had implemented restrictions on public and personal life that were near unique internationally. But most international travel companies and agencies took the optimistic view that sooner or later the influence of the disease would retreat, and were advertising deals for holiday and cruise packages that should be open within a year or two.

Flicking through these offers we came across a cruise that appeared highly attractive. Our cruise experience had been limited to a couple of short voyages to New Caledonia, but what we were now looking at would be more demanding. The Viking shipping company was offering a month-long cruise of Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea that would cover many attractions for us: a return to England and Scotland, voyaging along the coast and fjords of Norway as far up as North Cape, and visits to many Baltic ports including St Petersburg. The cruise would leave London in July 2023, then in two years' time, and we were optimistic that the Covid shackles would have been unlocked by then.

However, Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and Viking understandably decided to modify itineraries scheduled for Russia, including St Petersburg, which was a considerable but inevitable disappointment. Their option was to replace Helsinki, St Petersburg and Tallinn with Oslo, Bornholm and Mariehamn, and we accepted that.

UNITED KINGDOM

On Sunday 16 July we were picked up around mid-day by our Omnicar driver for an easy run to Sydney airport. We were early, but the three-hour wait was a relaxed one. The Malaysian Airlines flight to Kuala Lumpur was fine, and we could look down on the epic expanse of outback north-west Australia. For the second leg in a bigger plane we scored economy seats that were probably once premium economy, with a lot more legroom. All the meals were good. We would fly with them again.





We had arranged to spend some time with my sister Katie before taking off on the cruise, and booked a rental car for getting to Herefordshire and back. After landing at Heathrow we rode an Avis shuttle bus to their base where, after a bit of upselling, we ended up with a Citroen-based DS3 compact SUV. This was a rather weird car, basically an upmarket Citroen, with some unusual looks, features and electronics, typical of the make. We got no help from Avis in getting the gadgetry and navigation to work, but we used my phone for Google map directions and found the other hidden buttons as we drove. After a few delays we got to Katie's house in Clehonger a little later than expected, but all in one piece after a long and complicated trip.

We had a surprisingly good night and sleep, and much enjoyed an excellent light lunch out at the Loughpool pub near Hoarwithy. Katie's local knowledge made short work of the complicated route. The weather to this point had been very pleasant, but there was light rain later. The next day we simply relaxed.

We then took the DS3 for a very interesting visit to the Morgan car company and Experience Centre in Malvern, which Katie had arranged for us. This must be one of the most unusual – by modern standards – vehicle manufacturing companies in the world.



We were first given a talk on the history of the Morgan family and their vehicles and shown around the factory by a cheerful guide and enthusiast. We were then shown a selection of the most important classic examples of the marque, some built only in tiny numbers, including a one-off coupe looking a bit like a Lotus Elite. Along the production lines, more or less in order of manufacture, we were then shown the semi-monocoque bonded aluminium chassis, the assembly and finishing sites, and the pre-delivery checks and testing hall. Memorable were the ways they cut, press and shape the aluminium bodywork, as well as the wooden frames around which the aluminium parts are formed. Currently they are making two pleasantly classic-looking two-seat sports cars, which are attractive but very expensive. They now also build a new variant of their old and famous three-wheeler, with memories of where the company started. Talk about an anachronism! When asked whether we had any questions, I was tempted each time to ask, "who on earth would want to buy a three-wheel sports car these days?" The answer would have been "many enthusiasts!" They are turning them out of the factory in their hundreds, including exports to many countries in left-hand drive configuration.

We returned along a complicated series of narrow roads through the lovely countryside of the Malvern hills. There was a lot of traffic.

For evening drinks Katie had invited her local friends Roger and Alison Judd, whom we had met years ago on one of our visits in the camper. Roger is a professional musician, for a long time the organist for St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. The pair are great company, sharing wide interests including travel by campervan, so we had a very good time.

Later in the week we went out for lunch at the Kilbeck Inn, another splendid pub. The food was pretty good, but we thought expensive by Australian standards, rather typical of a restaurant popular with the prosperous gentry of the region. However, they presented "scallops" that were tasty but not the real deal.

Sadly, we left Katie for a great visit that we hope to repeat before too long. After days of really good weather the rain had returned, and we faced a rotten and stressful drive back in heavy traffic to Heathrow and the Avis base. We asked for a cab to take us to London, and were rather surprised to be presented by a Mercedes limousine. The driver was a pleasant man, born in Pakistan but with an interesting history in worldwide business. We had a very slow drive due east through central London, seeing a few familiar places such as Earl's Court as well as many parts of eastern London that were completely new to us.



The driver had some difficulty getting close to the Viking reception marquee at the very busy Greenwich Pier, but we finally got checked in for the cruise by friendly staff of the cruise line. We were then shepherded down a ramp to a tender – actually a contracted river ferry – that took us to the good ship Viking Venus. The ship was moored in the Thames close nearby, tied up to a permanently moored landing barge.

Aboard, we made our way to our stateroom, near the forward port side of the ship. (Viking call this a "small ship", but on close approach it sure didn't look like it!) The inevitable safety briefing followed, and featured the most cumbersome – but hopefully functional – lifejackets we have ever seen.

We went to an evening talk by one of the cruise's expert speakers, who spoke about J S Bach's time in London and of other composers who had worked or performed there. We dined at the ship's main restaurant, sharing a table with two other couples, good company and excellent food. All a good start.

On Sunday 23 July the ship was to stay put for the day, so after rising early we had a light buffet breakfast and went ashore along with many others who had booked various tours ("excursions", in cruise-speak). We were booked on the only tour that was included in the voyage price, but that was just a walk round Greenwich, so we went our own way as usual. Once ashore we decided to visit the quite recently re-restored clipper, the Cutty Sark.

We arrived at its entrance just as it opened for a quiet start to our visit.



Cutty Sark is a beautiful clipper that was built on the River Leven, Dumbarton, Scotland in 1869. She was one of the last tea clippers to be built and one of the fastest before steamships took over their routes. She was named after the short shirt of the fictional witch in Robert Burns' poem Tam o' Shanter, first published in 1791. The ship has been damaged by fire twice in recent years, first on 21 May 2007 while undergoing extensive conservation work. In 2014 she was damaged again in a smaller fire, and was finally reopened to the public in 2012.



This was all very interesting, and the history of the ship and its stories were well presented. We were impressed how much cargo this slim and fast ship could manage to carry, and watched a few young tourists climbing the rigging.

Afterwards, we sauntered around the downtown Greenwich precinct. It was very busy by mid-day on this sunny Sunday, with colourful international food stalls and a traditional carousel.



Back aboard we started exploring the ship. We first looked for the library that was given a special mention in the promotional material, but after looking around for a while we realised that the ship *is* the library. A large number and variety of books sit on shelves in all the public spaces and lounges, a selection that we were told is curated by a respected bookseller. It was an outstanding collection, most for reading or browsing aboard, but there was also a good swap-book section. When wondering how many books we should take with us on the trip, we should not have been worried about running out of reading matter during our four weeks aboard.



That day the ship was planned to slip her moorings at 4:30pm, near high tide – but not quite high enough at that time. It soon became apparent that we were stuck in the Thames mud. We waited nearly an hour while a big tug kept the strain on a line from the bow to pull us into deeper water. We had a great view of Greenwich Palace to starboard as we left.

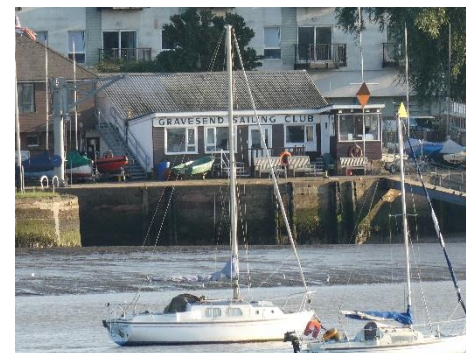


We motored slowly down the Thames past several famous sights including the Thames Barrier, which the ship passed slowly through, with little spare space between the gates. We were well remembering bringing Cera up the river through the barrier in 1984 before wintering aboard in St Katharine's Dock near Tower Bridge, and leaving on a cold spring morning the next year.



There are now of course multiple huge commercial and residential developments along the river that were new to us, some very attractive and others not.

Memories particularly arose as we passed the Gravesend Sailing Club, where we anchored for the night on our way up the river. There are moorings now, where we anchored, but the sticky mud we had to cross to get to the little clubhouse is much the same. Except that the club is now backed by a huge apartment block.



We were at sea that night and all the next day. The seas built up a bit off East Anglia, but the ship was obviously well stabilised and there was little motion to be felt. At dawn under grey skies we passed scores of oil rigs along the shores. Further up the coast we saw countless wind turbines well offshore of us, and we pondered the problems people will face when they deteriorate to an extent they require repair or replacement.



The following morning we drifted up the outer reaches of the Firth of Forth and anchored off Newhaven Harbour within sight of the famous pair of bridges. After doing another round of the ship's bookshelves we took a tender – one of the 200+ person capacity lifeboats – into the enclosed little fishing harbour to be met by my cousin (on holiday in Menorca) Libby's close friend Brian Hughes.

He took us to his splendid little house, a new offshoot of a Georgian mansion in Murrayfield. We had a long and very pleasant wine-fuelled lunch before returning to the quay and a tender ride back to the ship. We were aweigh by 6:00pm under low grey skies.

ORKNEY ISLANDS



We enjoyed a very calm and gentle sail up past the eastern cape of Peterhead and lightly north-east to the Orkney Islands and their capital, the port of Kirkwall. The early morning featured clear blue skies (not that they stayed that way). It was a pleasantly scenic approach through between islands and a turn south into the big bay where Kirkwall stands at its head. At the northern end of the bay is the big Hatston pier, constructed to deal with the increasing demands of the cruise ships and commercial shipping that engages the islands.

We took a shuttle bus into the town, and first entered a little museum of radio equipment from wartime days, the Orkney Wireless Museum. It houses a packed

collection of domestic and military wireless equipment from a private collection and marks the importance of wireless communications in Orkney during World War II. It is manned by volunteers.

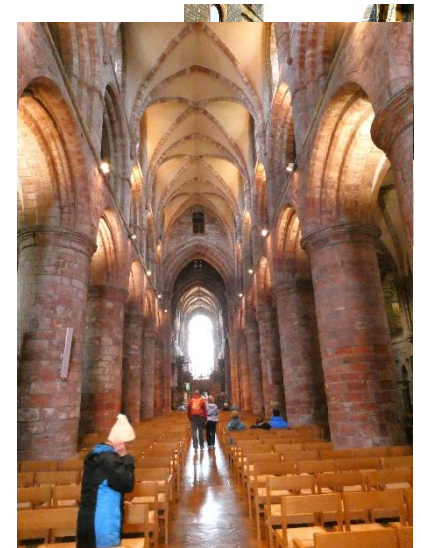


The displays and photographic archive demonstrate the strategic and military importance of Orkney during the war. In the collection there is much reference to the Home Fleet in Scapa Flow, Orkney. The museum demonstrates the importance of wireless communications and radar to the civilian and military populations.

The museum has an extensive collection of early domestic radio and wartime communications equipment. Most of the equipment was built in the UK and US. The museum also houses early advertising and posters. An archive of photographs depicts wartime forces and includes coverage of the building of the Churchill Barriers which were built primarily as naval defences to protect the anchorage at Scapa Flow. The collected equipment played a vital part in the Battle of the Atlantic and North Sea, and has all seen active service.



We then strolled round the dock areas, waterfront dwellings and along the pedestrian-only central shopping street. At the end of that street was a highlight of the visit, the magnificent St Magnus cathedral, named after Orkney's patron saint. It dominates the skyline of Kirkwall. It is the oldest cathedral in Scotland, owned not by the church, but by the burgh of Kirkwall as a result of an act of King James III of Scotland following Orkney's annexation by the Scottish Crown in 1468. Today, it is a parish church of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and therefore technically no longer a cathedral. Construction began in 1137, and it was added to over the next 300 years. The Romanesque cathedral has many fine examples of Norman architecture, attributed to English masons who may have worked on Durham Cathedral. The masonry uses red sandstone quarried near Kirkwall and yellow sandstone from the island of Eday to the north, often in alternating layers or in a chequerboard pattern to give a polychrome effect. The soft sandstone has weathered in a way that creates a beautiful sculptured effect.



Saint Magnus had a reputation for piety and gentleness. King Eystein II of Norway granted him a share of the earldom of Orkney held by his cousin Håkon, but they fell out, and in battle Magnus was captured. Chieftains insisted that one earl must die. Håkon's cook was ordered to kill Magnus with an axe. Magnus' last words were "Take heart, poor fellow, and don't be afraid. I've prayed to God to grant you his mercy".



We wandered around the nave and transepts while the church's organist was practising for the evening's concert, which was a special treat. A guide described the extent to which the church benefited the poor of the archipelago, and emphasised that no specific religion of cult had a special place in the use of its premises or their worship.

Restoration and renovation work on the building is continuing, with increased urgency since it was discovered in the 1970s that the west end of the cathedral was in danger of collapsing away from the remainder of the structure. Other work has progressed further, and to celebrate its 850th anniversary in 1987 Queen Elizabeth II unveiled a magnificent new west window. St. Magnus is the only wholly mediaeval Scottish cathedral, and one of the best-preserved buildings of the era in Britain.

In the afternoon we took our first "excursion" of the trip, a bus tour of the highlights of the largest island in the Orkney archipelago, Mainland.

Orkney is one of the 32 council areas of Scotland. The islands have been inhabited for at least 8,500 years, originally occupied by Mesolithic and Neolithic tribes and then by the Picts. It was colonized and later annexed by the Kingdom of Norway in 875 and settled by the Norsemen. In 1472, the Parliament of Scotland absorbed the Earldom of Orkney into the Kingdom of Scotland.

We were told by the enthusiastic guide that the climate is relatively mild but the winters cold (as we thought it was that day!). Most of the land is farmed, and agriculture is the most important sector of the economy. The wind and tidal energy resources are of growing importance; the amount of electricity that Orkney generates annually from renewable energy sources exceeds its demand, and some of the excess is wired down to Scotland.

The local people are delightfully known as Orcadians; they speak a distinctive dialect of the Gaelic and have a folklore of their own.



greatest of such sites.

Our first stop of the tour was at the little fishing village of Stromness, a typically Highlands town, with stone-faced facades of a solidity that is also a feature of the people who live here.



We were on our way to some of the oldest and best-preserved Neolithic sites in Europe. A group of these sites, the "Heart of Neolithic Orkney" is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, designated in 1999. The biggest and best known is the Ring of Brodgar. This is a Neolithic henge and stone circle, the only major henge and stone circle in Britain that is an almost perfect circle. Most henges do not contain stone circles; Brodgar is a striking exception, ranking with Avebury and Stonehenge among the



It is generally thought to have been erected between 2500 BC and 2000 BC, and was, therefore, the last of the great Neolithic monuments built here.



The stone circle is 104 metres in diameter, and the third largest in the British Isles. The ring originally comprised up to 60 stones, of which only 27 remained standing at the end of the 20th century. The stones are set within a circular ditch up to 3 metres deep, 9 metres wide and 380 metres in circumference that was carved out of the solid sandstone bedrock.

We walked round the henge, on top of a rise that presented marvellous views over the surrounding islands, islets and waterways.

The major waterway in the archipelago is, of course, Scapa Flow. This is the body of water protected by a circle of islands including Mainland. It is one of the great natural harbours and anchorages of the world, with an area of over 300 square kilometres. The anchorage has a shallow sandy bottom, not deeper than 60 metres. Most of it is about 30 metres deep.

Vikings anchored their longships in Scapa Flow more than a thousand years ago. In 1904, in response to the build-up of the German Kaiserliche Marine's high seas Fleet, Britain decided that a northern base was needed to control the

entrances to the North Sea, and Scapa Flow was chosen for the main base of the British Grand Fleet. Over sixty blockships were sunk in the many entrance channels between the southern islands to enable the use of submarine nets and booms.

Following the German defeat, 74 ships of the Imperial German Navy's High Seas Fleet were interned in Gutter Sound at Scapa Flow pending a decision on their future in the peace Treaty of Versailles. In June 1919, after seven months of waiting, German Rear Admiral Ludwig von Reuter made the decision to scuttle the fleet because



the negotiation period for the treaty had lapsed with no word of a settlement. The Royal Navy managed to beach 22 of the sunken German warships, but 53 ships, the vast bulk of the fleet, were sunk. Nine German sailors died when British forces opened fire as they attempted to scuttle the ships, reputedly the last casualties of the war.

The sunken ships presented a navigational hazard within the anchorage, and a huge and unprecedented salvage operation was embarked on in 1922. The chosen salvage and scrap metal

company successfully raised 45 of the 52 scuttled ships over a period of eight years. The last, the massive *Derfflinger*, was raised from a record depth of 45 metres just before work was suspended with the start of the Second World War, before being towed to Rosyth where it was broken up in 1946.



Primarily because of its great distance from German airfields, Scapa Flow was again selected as the main British naval base during the Second World War. However, the strong defences built during the First World War had fallen into disrepair. On 14 October 1939, The German submarine U-47 penetrated Scapa Flow and sank the First World War-era battleship HMS *Royal Oak*, which flooded and quickly capsized. Of the 1,400-man crew, 833 were lost. The wreck is now a protected war grave.



New blockships were sunk, booms and mines were placed over the main entrances, coast defence and anti-aircraft batteries were installed at crucial points, and Winston Churchill ordered the construction of a series of causeways to block the eastern approaches to Scapa Flow. These "Churchill Barriers" now provide road access island to island around the anchorage, but block maritime traffic except from the south.

Oil tankers now anchor in Scapa Flow, which is one of the transfer and processing points for North Sea oil. One was anchored there when we drove past.

This was an enjoyable little tour, enthusiastically guided, taking in sites of great historical interest and significance.

The next step for the Viking Venus was another calm sail to the archipelago of Shetland, about 100 nautical miles to the north – indicating a slow passage of about 5 knots.

SHETLAND ISLANDS

We drifted slowly up the sound between two big islands of Mainland and Bressay to the anchorage off the port of Lerwick, the main town and capital of Shetland. There were a few neat sheep and cattle farms to be seen on both sides along the way, and as we came to anchor we could see that the town could hardly be seen



behind the mass of masts of tall ships, a colourful sight indeed. Another Viking ship, the Venus Mars (each ship in the fleet is named for a planet), was berthed alongside the town.



The lifeboats were launched and we rode ashore to have a look round the town by ourselves before going off on a tour. We were taken to the pier where the Mars was berthed and rode a free shuttle bus into the town. We were intending to visit the local museum first, but that was shut throughout the morning, we were told because of all that was going on. We thought that opening would have helped business, but who knows.



We walked down to the dock where the tall ships were tied, and boarded the SV Tenacious. She was launched in 2000 and at 65 metres long she is the biggest wooden ship built in the UK for over 100 years. She is the only tall ship in the world designed, built and sailed by a mixed ability crew. It is all managed by the Jubilee Sailing Trust. They have lifts from deck to deck for those who cannot deal with steep stairs and harnesses and other gadgets to allow anyone to climb the rigging to manage the sails. We found the whole project most impressive and moving.

We walked up to Fort Charlotte, completed in 1665 to protect the Sound of Bressay from the Dutch, in the Second Dutch War, and then took the shuttle back to the ship.



Then it was off on a lovely little tour of nearby parts of Mainland. Along good but sometimes narrow roads we drove through fairly typical northern Highlands countryside. We went north up through the Tingwall Valley, which we were told had a Norse heritage, and then through a landscape of green peat and blue heather, dotted with freshwater lochs. All very picturesque.



We took a roadside stop at the farm of breeders of Shetland ponies. They told us of the 2,000-year history of these tough and hardy little animals as we stood next to a group of them.

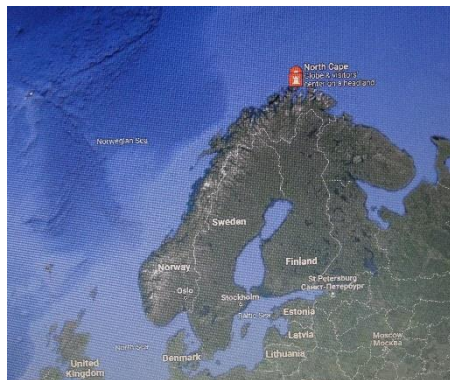
Finally, from a prominent viewpoint, we looked down on the port of Scalloway, a major centre for fishing for hundreds of years. It was the capital of Shetland until the 18th century. It is now important as an educational centre for seamanship, fishery and aquaculture development. At its centre sits Scalloway castle, built in 1599 for Sir Patrick Stewart. He treated the locals harshly and few missed him when he was executed for treason in Edinburgh in 1615.



A memorial stands in honour of the “Shetland Bus”. At the onset of World War II, the British drew plans to mine Norwegian waters and prevent Axis ships from transiting these waters, but Germany invaded and occupied the country in 1940. Shetland is the closest point between the United Kingdom and Norway, and thus became the centrepiece of British defence efforts in the North Sea. The Norwegian people started organising resistance movements.

The Bus was a crucial connection for the resistance, which relied mainly on Norwegian fishing boats – latterly armed after suffering several early losses – making trips between Norway and Shetland communities. Most runs were in winter under heavy North Sea conditions. Scalloway became the main base for the Bus from 1942 onwards. A memorial is located on a plinth of rocks taken from the birthplaces of 44 Norwegian crewmembers that died during the operation of the Bus.

NORWAY: HONNINGSVAG



For two days and three nights we sailed up the Norwegian Sea from Lerwick to the town of Honningsvåg, passing the Arctic Circle and rounding North Cape on the way.

Ever since booking this cruise years ago we assumed that this passage would be cold, windy and rough. In practice we experienced generally benign conditions, with certainly no high winds or seas. However, after enjoying beautiful weather conditions through the Orkney and Shetland archipelagos, when we turned into the bay in which Honningsvåg lies we could see little of the land under a blanket of fog, in a drizzle of rain.



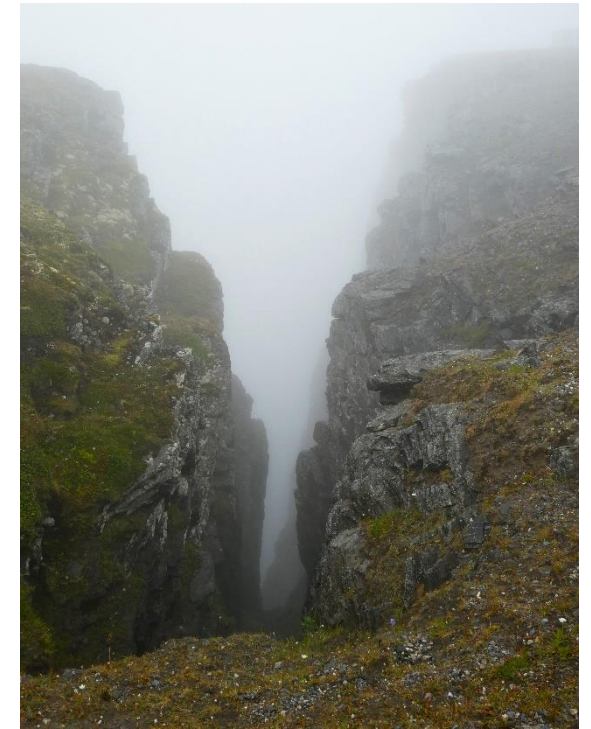
Honningsvåg is the northernmost city in mainland Norway, and thus in Europe. It is set in a bay on the south-eastern side of the large island of Magerøya, while North Cape and its visitor centre are on the northern side of the same island. The ocean here (the southwestern part of the Barents Sea) is free of ice through the influence of the tail end of the Gulf Stream. It is a port of call for the Hurtigruten Coastal Express and several cruise ships, especially in summer.

A bus took us on an hour's drive over Magerøya Island, climbing a pass over its centre and through bleak green landscapes under steep, dark and rocky cliffs. The weather did not improve, and when we arrived at the North Cape precinct we could see only a few tens of metres through the fog. This is not unusual, because here the customary cloud base is lower than the cliffs.





Having passed through the modern tourist centre we walked carefully down to the fencing at the tops of the 307-metre cliffs, and then stood by the skeletal globe feature, there only as a place for tourists to take photos of each other. It is not actually the northernmost land in the country – there is a small peninsula just along to the west that is about four kilometres closer to the North Pole.



We watched an AV film in the tourist centre, which depicted features of the location and its weather and seasons. We also had to admire an excellent display of (stuffed) birds of the region



It was a slightly less foggy return run back to Honningsvåg. On the way we passed a display of Sami dwellings, including a grass-covered roof. The conical tents and more solid buildings were said to be similar to, and have some

cultural connection to, the tipis of the American Indians.

It was a grey and gloomy departure at about 6:00pm, gliding away from the harbour in the now well-established fog. The ship sailed back over North Cape and began the series of passages that would take us back down the Norwegian coast, and later beyond the Arctic Circle.

TROMSO



It was a calm, clear and sunny morning as we weaved our way through the outer parts of a network of fjords between the innumerable islands and islets that protect the city of Tromsø. Patches of snow topped the mountains that ringed the horizon. We were now about 300km, or 150 nautical miles, down the north-west coast of Norway from North Cape.

We passed under a huge bridge, then hooked around the south of the island of Tromsøya and up into the port at Tromsø. Before settling into our berth, the captain and crew did a great job of spinning the vessel in its own length within a compact basin alongside the city.



Tromsø, the “gateway to the Arctic”, is a very large city for this vast rural northern part of Norway and the northernmost in the world with a population exceeding 20,000. It is the largest urban area and cultural centre in northern Norway and the third largest city north of the Arctic Circle anywhere in the world (after Murmansk and Norilsk). It has a university and other polar educational institutes, and an important fishing industry.

The city is generally warmer than most other places located on the same latitude, owing to the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. Tromsø is even milder than places much farther south of it elsewhere in the world, such as on the Hudson Bay and in Far East Russia, with the warm-water current allowing for both relatively mild winters and tree growth in spite of its very high latitude.



The city centre of Tromsø contains the highest number of old wooden houses in Northern Norway, the oldest house dating from 1789. Wood construction was banned in 1904 for fear of fire.



We walked around the attractive city centre, with its wooden and modern buildings intermingled, and admired the 1861 wooden cathedral in the central square.

Nearby was an impressive statue of Roald Amundsen. There were several small craft, some of a historic nature, berthed in the city marina and fishing-boat base. Down in the wharves here is set several old – and now protected – wooden buildings, commercial in period.



We were then off for a short bus tour of the highlights. These included the Arctic Cathedral, built as a sloping series of white triangular arches. It has been compared with the Sydney Opera House; but we think there is some confusion here, because it is the Bibliotek in the city centre that has more in common with the Sydney icon.

There were great views of the city from its hilly surroundings. We left the city by way of one of the graceful, high bridges that leave room for all but the biggest ships.

We returned by the undersea tunnel, which is 3.5 kilometres long and served by 15 other shorter tunnels. They meet at a series of roundabouts: 102 metres deep!



After returning, we walked back to the city docks to visit the Polar Museum, an 1830s warehouse on the dock's waterfront.

Following its establishment as the gateway to the Arctic in the late 19th century, Tromsø became a base for many polar expeditions. The Polar Museum preserves and conveys stories related to this aspect of the history of Tromsø and the Arctic. The Polar Museum's permanent exhibitions deal with sealing, overwintering, trapping, and the expeditions of Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen.

Unfortunately nearly all the exhibits were explained in Norwegian, so it was difficult to work out the significance of the several displays of stuffed animals, such as reindeers, seals, foxes and such; not to speak of the stories of the expeditioners.

Fridtjof Nansen (1861 –1930) was a Norwegian polymath and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He gained prominence at various points in his life as an explorer, scientist, diplomat and humanitarian.



He led the team that made the first crossing of the Greenland interior in 1888, traversing the island on cross-country skis. He won international fame after reaching a record northern latitude of 86°14' during his Fram expedition of 1893–1896. This was an attempt by the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen to reach the geographical North Pole by harnessing the natural east–west current of the Arctic Ocean. In the face of much discouragement from other polar explorers, Nansen took his ship Fram (designed by the Scottish-Norwegian Colin Archer) to the New Siberian Islands in the eastern Arctic Ocean, froze her into the pack ice, and waited for the drift to carry her towards the pole.



Impatient with the slow speed and erratic character of the drift, after 18 months Nansen and a chosen companion, Hjalmar Johansen, left the ship with a team of Samoyed dogs and sledges and made for a walk to the pole. They did not reach it, but they achieved a record farthest north latitude of 86°13.6'N before a long retreat over ice and water to reach safety in Franz Josef Land. Meanwhile, Fram continued to drift westward, finally emerging at Spitzbergen in the Barents Sea.

Although he retired from exploration after his return to Norway, his techniques of polar travel and his innovations in equipment and clothing influenced a generation of subsequent Arctic and Antarctic expeditions. (We were to learn more about the Fram and its expedition history later in the trip.)

Roald Amundsen (1872–1928) was another Norwegian explorer of polar regions, during the period of heroic expeditions. He began his career as a polar explorer as first mate on a Belgian Antarctic Expedition of 1897–1899. From 1903 to 1906, he led the first expedition to successfully traverse the Northwest Passage on the sloop Gjøa. In 1909, he began planning for a South Pole expedition. He left Norway in June 1910 on the Fram and reached Antarctica in January 1911. His party established a camp at the Bay of Whales and a series of supply depots on the Barrier (now known as the Ross Ice Shelf) before setting out for the pole in October. The party of five, led by Amundsen, became the first to successfully reach the South Pole on 14 December 1911.

Following a failed attempt in 1918 to reach the North Pole by traversing the Northeast Passage on the ship Maud, Amundsen began planning for an aerial expedition instead. On 12 May 1926, Amundsen and 15 other men in the airship Norge became the first explorers verified to have reached the North Pole. Amundsen disappeared in June 1928 while flying on a rescue mission for the airship Italia in the Arctic.

Walking back to the ship, along the pier we came across several wooden buildings with prominent lintels and horizontal mesh gutter to moderate snow slipping. These had been taken over by squabbling seagulls, their nests and their young. And what a noise they were making!





It was a beautiful sight in the sunset as we sailed away through the network of wide fjords on our way to the open sea.

From Tromsø it was then a short overnight sail down to Leknes harbour in the Lofoten archipelago. We were able to tie up along a dock again, while another cruise ship (much bigger) stayed out at anchor.

The Lofoten islands are a closely-linked chain extending as a peninsula about 250 kilometres south-west into the Norwegian Sea. Leknes harbour is on the southern side of Vestvagoy, one of the larger islands out towards the end of the group. The archipelago features jagged peaks, wide green valleys, protected bays and a temperate summer climate. The setting was ideal for Norse settlements in the early Viking age. Cod is the primary fishery, as they are harvested when they come here to spawn. Traditional *rorbust* fishermen's cottages hover on stilts over the water.



We had a slow and peaceful sail up the short, wide fjord, speckled with countless rocky islets. We rode a free shuttle bus into the nearby (only) town, but didn't stay long there because there was little to see or do; just an outback commercial centre. On return, I scrambled up a steep little hill to take a picture of our ship on the dock. The



traditional way of drying fish was simulated on the dockside.

In the afternoon we had a boat cruise up the coast, and a bus trip back. The boat was a rather weird



catamaran tourist vessel, very crowded; but we fluked a pair of interior seats that faced forward, good for photos.

And there was much to photograph. The whole coast is a mass of yet more rocky islets in the water, with towering cliffs up behind them. There



were a few little fishing villages to be seen. We were a bit disappointed that the boat was not taken nearer the shore in the big bays we passed, as the details were hard to see. On the promontories were mounted neat little lighthouses.

We made it to the quite picturesque village of Henningsvaer, lying in a narrow inlet, and climbed into another bus to take us back. There was both flat and high scenery, very green.

A village that we'd hoped to see is one of the most picturesque in the country, Hamnøy, but it was further up the archipelago. (Thanks to Flickr and Google for the photo.)

The highlight of at least the first part of the coach ride back was seeing the vast number of campervans and motorhomes (and a few very wary caravans). We've never experienced such a horde of RVs. They were trying to find free camp sites in tiny gaps between the bushes and parked cars, ending in a shambolic scrum. Camping anywhere is permitted and free in Norway, but we could see some merit in restrictions for the short northern summer – not that anyone would follow them. Scores of vans were parked in spaces clearly marked “No Camping”.

There were lots of pretty freshwater lakes along the way, each side of the narrow roads.



As we sailed away, we were able to share the captain's view from the bridge, displayed as one of the many options available on the large television screen in the cabin. The various lectures and destination descriptions to be seen live in the ship's main theatre could

all be watched live or later on the screen, while we relaxed with a tot of the duty-free whisky that we were welcome to take on board.

The next morning we were at sea, still sailing south, quite close to the coast, as the hills grew gradually lower. For some periods during the day we navigated very narrow channels between the islands, giving us a good view of both tall and low hills, small harbours and salmon farms. We came across a substantial number of yachts, and commented again how good a cruising ground this could be, depending on weather and other conditions.



By this time our routine aboard had become a buffet breakfast at the World Café, a light lunch at the same place, and dinner at the posher main restaurant. We would often wander round the ship, scanning the multitude of books in all the several lounge places, and sometimes attend talks on ports and local culture and world history (many about Vikings!). Because we usually met interesting people over





dinner, we seldom had time to do more than that before going to bed. Sleep was still a little hard because it was daylight outside most of the night.

After a day and two nights at sea we awakened to find ourselves already anchored at the head of the Geirangerfjord, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Cloud base was along the tops of the near-vertical cliffs fringing the fjord, the temperature around 17C. The ship looked like she had little room at either end as she swung at anchor, but the wind and tidal stream were light.

The fjord is a 15-kilometre-long branch off the Sunnysfjord, which is a branch off the Storfjord (Great Fjord). The small village of Geiranger is located at the end of the fjord where the Geirangelva river empties into it. Wikipedia was pleased to tell us that the fjord *“is under constant threat from the mountain Åkerneset, which is about to erode into the fjord. A collapse would produce a tsunami, hitting several nearby towns including Geiranger and Hellesylt in about ten minutes”*.

In the morning, from our cabin balcony we simply viewed the locality, seeing compact dwellings scattered over the sloping lower shores, singly and in small groups, and a few farmlets. Charter yachts and ferries were busy.

The afternoon tour took us to some of the most popular viewpoints in this dramatically beautiful part of the world. First, we climbed up to the south, very steeply to start with, with some intimidating hairpins. The first sight of interest was a pretty little octagonal church, built in 1842 (as everything was, here) of wood. It was the third known to have been built on this site. Further up, passing several waterfalls and lots of motorhomes coming down the narrow road, we came to one of the most famous viewpoints, the Flydalsjuvet.

This presents a splendid view down the length of the final straight of the fjord before Geiranger, showing our ship at anchor and a much bigger German yacht on the wharf. (The Viking Venus was carrying about 880 passengers; the German ship, about 4,000. How any small community can manage these kinds of numbers is a real problem.)





We went on up the wide Flyda valley, backed by steep craggy sides, to the high mountain plateau at the Djupvatn lake. The whole way, mountain streams were running down from the remaining patches of melting snow. A few lowering black clouds were bringing drizzle by this time, but it didn't last for long.

We drove back down the meandering road through the lovely green valley. Several farms had been cutting the grass to feed the animals through the long winter, balled up in white plastic for storage. It's the only "crop" in these parts.

Nearing our return to Geiranger village, we remained astonished at the number of motorhomes, and the camp sites were packed. So were all the free camps!



The next stage was to drive through the village and up to the north along the route we could see clearly from the ship, a marvellous series of hairpin turns through cleared land. White goats watched us pass



by – slowly, because the amount of traffic ascending and descending, all having to make way for opposing traffic at the hairpins.

Up at the main Eagle's Bend viewpoint there was a complete traffic jam, and it took a considerable time to sort out the buses, motorhomes and cars from the interlock.

However, there was a staggering view of Geiranger village, the fjord, the ships, the final bend in the fjord and some high waterfalls from the viewpoint: surely one of the world's best scenes.

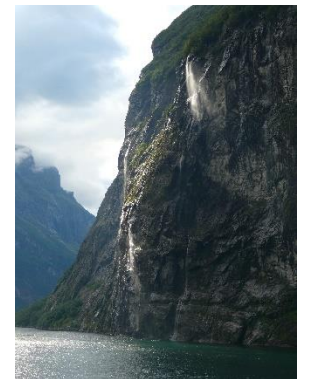




We sailed out as the dusk fell very slowly, watching again the steep fjord walls and the brilliantly high waterfalls, with spray blowing from them in the wind. Six of the best-known seven sisters waterfall group were contributing to the majestic scene. Some waterfalls were blown out before they reached the water. There was a ferocious headwind along some stretches of the fjord. High on the face of the cliff were somehow perched a very few tiny dwellings.

BERGEN

It was a relatively short run down to Bergen, with most of the passage being the long way out of the Geiranger fjord and the others. Sailing south when we reached the ocean, and as had been



his common practice, the captain sailed quite close to the coast, allowing us to see the many islands and inlets and a few collections of domestic and commercial buildings.



It was not as long approach to Bergen Harbour as it had been to Geiranger, but we still had to weave our way between islands on our way to the town. The ship was turned around on final approach, and we moved slowly astern to sit along the cruise ship wharf in Vågen, the inner harbour in a natural bay.

A fuel barge soon came alongside. We could see immediately that this was the outer part of the inner harbour, and only a short distance to the city centre.

We had a bus tour scheduled for the afternoon, so stayed aboard in the morning. An hour or two before lunch there was a knock on our cabin door. Our delightful cabin attendant Udita and another crew member presented me with a chocolate cake and bottle of champagne (two glasses) for my birthday! This was a delightful surprise.



In the afternoon we took a coach tour around "panoramic Bergen" as part of the cruise package. The guide was not one of the best we'd had, but she was one of the city's guides and was doing several tours a day, so it's not surprising she sounded a bit formulaic.

Bergen is the second-largest city in Norway after the national capital, Oslo. The city centre and northern neighbourhoods are around Byfjorden, "the city fjord". The city is surrounded by mountains, and thus known as the "city of seven mountains". Many of the outer suburbs are on islands.

Bergen emerged as Norway's main town in the Middle Ages along the shores of Vågen. We were first driven through one of the older parts of the city, viewing some of the countless wooden buildings big and small. Most are painted white, with dark red roofs, so typical of the country. We passed by the nearby and beautiful Mariakirken (St Mary's church), one of the oldest buildings in Bergen, built between 1140 and 1250.



We continued past the back of the Bryggen precinct to the inner end of the Vagen and to the fish “market” which, of course, it isn’t – but it was still a busy and interesting display of fish and shellfish for sale.

We went on round the southern side of the inner harbour for our first panoramic view of the line-up of old warehouses that is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. This is Bryggen (the German or Hanseatic wharf) on the east shore of Vågen, fronting the historical centre.

Behind Bryggen, Mt. Fløyen rises steeply. The slopes of Mt. Fløyen are dominated by wooden residential buildings, some among the finest and most expensive in town.



We stopped for a photo opportunity of course, and then walked along some of the docks where old commercial vessels were berthed. Nearby was the Nykirken (literally “The New Church”), built in 1621. It was given its name because it was the youngest of the city’s parish churches when erected. It has since gone through major changes following the numerous great fires Bergen has endured. It was known for being one of the most modern buildings in the early 1800s. In the church, a massive carved angel descends from the ceiling during baptism ceremonies. Further along the western side of the Vagen lies the Nordnes Peninsula, with more massed white wooden buildings. After driving round the peninsula we headed back to the city centre and passed the National Theatre, with an imposing statue outside.



This was a statue of Henrik Ibsen, the famous and controversial playwright who started his career in Bergen and is described as the father of realism. His face as depicted on the statue is cartoonish, featuring a pair of wild round eyes.





That took us on to the opera theatre, which at the time was hosting a major concert featuring many heavy metal bands, with the signs outside promising “4 Days of Darkness in the Heart of Bergen”. Both the program and some of the players we saw around the town were less than attractive. Around 2000, a number of artists from the popular music scene in Bergen gained international fame. This became known as the Bergen Wave. Artists to have played here have included Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen. A statue of Norway’s major composer, Edward Grieg, reminded us of the more serious music composed in Norway.



Finally, inevitably, we walked along the famous Bryggen waterfront and its colourful warehouses, shops and cafes.

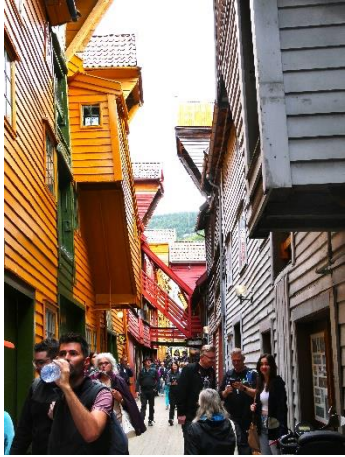
In the evening we went to a concert in the ship’s main theatre, featuring an acclaimed Norwegian violinist, Tor Jaran Apold. He presented his own arrangements of Nordic music of his childhood. It was an impressive performance by a brilliant artist, but we found the traditional Nordic music on the dark side – a bit like the northern winters in the country.

We had already planned to spend time exploring the nearer sights on our own, as we were to be moored for two free days on the dock, near the city centre. We took a good casual walk back through the Bryggen district, exploring the front, back and insides of this extraordinary area. There were several interesting yachts to be seen berthed along the wharves that front the old buildings.

Bergen was established before 1070 AD. One of the earliest pier constructions has been dated to around 1100, but the existing buildings are of a much later date. Around 1350, an office of the Hanseatic League was established in Bryggen. The warehouses were used to store goods, particularly dried fish (stockfish) from northern Norway, and cereal from Europe.

In 1702, the buildings belonging to the Hanseatic League were damaged by fire but rebuilt. In 1754, the Hanseatic operations in Bryggen ended, and all the properties were transferred to Norwegian citizens. Parts of Bryggen were again destroyed in a fire in 1955. A thirteen-year archaeological excavation followed, revealing runic inscriptions known as the Bryggen inscriptions. The Bryggen museum was built in 1976 on part of the site cleared by the fire.





The precinct was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. Its official criterion was that *"It is a type of northern "fondaco", unequalled in the world, where the structures have remained within the cityscape and perpetuate the memory of one of the oldest large trading ports of Northern Europe"*.

Many little stores and curio shops are tucked away in the back streets between the wooden walls. The latter are under substantial renovation nowadays, some being literally lifted up to their original levels.

We spent the next morning exploring the Bergenhus fortress (*Bergenhus festning*), just a short walk from our ship's berth. The castle and its walled precinct is a collection of one of the oldest and best-preserved stone fortifications in Norway.

We started with the fortress museum, a small voluntary but rather jumbled collection of stories and (mostly military) history. Walking through, it starts with a discussion on women's contribution to the country's armed forces through history up to the present. This transitioned to stories about the civilian and military resistance during the turbulent times of 1940 to 1945. It showed how a civilian campaign was organised against the Nazi party's attempts to Nazify Norwegian society, and also how the military resistance developed from scattered, isolated groups to a large organisation with ties to London. The German occupation force used extensive resources to stop the resistance work. Many civilians were tortured before being executed or sent to concentration camps. The resistance movement grew steadily stronger until the liberation, and its history is quite well presented through photos, weapons, espionage equipment, sabotage material, and film.

The fortress contains buildings dating as far back as the 1240s, as well as later constructions built as recently as World War 2. Of the medieval buildings, a medieval hall and a defensive tower remain.



We walked to the defensive tower first, the Rosenkrantz Tower, which derives its name from the governor of the fortress in the mid-16th century. The oldest part of the building was built in the 1270s as part of the royal castle in Bergen.

The keep was slightly modified around 1520, then extensively modified and expanded in the 1560s by Scottish stonemasons and architects. Rosenkrantz' building contained dungeons on the ground floor, residential rooms for the governor higher up, and positions for cannons on the top floor.



I walked up the steep circular staircase to the top, with a nice view of the fortress surroundings and our ship.



We moved on to Haakon's Hall, a medieval stone hall also located within the fortress. It was constructed in the middle of the 13th century, during the reign of King Håkon Håkonsson (1217–1263). In medieval times, it was the largest building of the royal palace in Bergen.

The hall is built in Gothic style. In addition to the great hall, there were two more levels, a cellar and a middle floor.

The hall's similarity to English structures of the same time, and the fact that monumental stone building was relatively uncommon in Norway at the time, has led to an assumption that the hall was designed by English

architects, possibly the court architect of King Henry III of England, with whom King Håkon was on friendly terms.

The hall has been hit by several fires, the first one as early as 1266. Over following years the royal castle in Bergen gradually fell into decay, and the old royal residence was transformed into a purely military fortress. The hall was finally restored in the 1890s, and in the 1910s it was decorated with frescos and stained-glass windows. More fires and restorations followed, and with the Roenkrantz Tower it is now part of the Bergen City Museum. It is well presented and an impressive building.



We sailed out from Bergen in the late afternoon in continuing beautiful weather, enjoying the scenery throughout the extensive fjord system that took us out to sea.

We awoke on the berth at Eidfjord, at the head of the eponymous fjord. We were then about 100 kilometres due east of Bergen, but had reached here through a tortuous series of legs through islands and fjords, first sailing south for about 80km as the sun dipped down, and then north-east via a linked series of fjords overnight. (Not that any nights in these latitudes last for long.)



In the morning drizzle we mounted a coach for the start of a long excursion (and the first we had paid extra for) that would include a ride on the famous Flam railway.

We first drove north, crossing the big bridge over the Hardangerfjord and along the eastern side of the pretty Granvins lake. We then drove through wide green pastureland and scenic passes, all dotted with the ubiquitous dark red and white country cottages. We stopped for a photo opportunity at the 150-metre Tvinde waterfall (*Tvindefossen*) just near the town of Voss. It's a lovely and popular fall over a wide rock face. There were some spectacular views over deep, narrow valleys but, as ever, in a moving tourist bus there isn't much opportunity to choose and frame landscape photos.

We got the best view from our lunch stop at the large Stalheim Hotel, sitting high in the hills with a wide panoramic outlook. With passengers in at least four coaches pouring into the restaurant,



the buffet was a bit shambolic, but understandably so. The food, as usual, was voraciously devoured by our American cruise passengers, but we had a simpler meal with a couple of Australians.

The next stop was at Flam, where we boarded the heritage carriages of the railway. The Flåm Line is a 20.2-kilometre railway line between Flåm and Myrdal in Vestland county, Norway. It runs through the valley of Flåmsdalen and connects the main rail line with Sognefjord. The line's elevation difference is 866 meters, rising from near sea level at Flam to Myrdal in the mountains.



It has ten stations, twenty tunnels and one bridge. The maximum gradient is 5.5 percent (1:18), making it one of the world's steepest railways.

Travelling at only 40 km/h we took about an hour passing through some lovely, mountainous, heavily wooded countryside.



As we made the climb, we saw several waterfalls and rivers. One thin waterfall was prominently doubled with a long, steep zig-zag roadway. On the way back by coach, we were taken to see the most impressive of falls, the 225 metre Kjosfossen Falls, which we had seen about mid-way up from the train and which we now viewed from the bottom.

This had been an excursion of seven and a half hours, with a fair bit of walking about, but it was worth it despite the lowering skies and persistent drizzle. A great trip.



The following morning we woke as the ship was moving slowly past some islands and then out to sea, leading to our next programmed port, Stavanger. We were warned the night before that today would still be wet, and could get a little windy.

There was in practice clearly more than a stiff breeze, and it was building from the north-west. For the next intended destination, Stavanger, we had booked a trip up the fjords in a small local boat, but it became increasingly obvious that this was going to be impossible in these conditions. The weather page on our stateroom television gave the wind-speed as 25 to 30 knots, and in the approaches to the town we watched the pilot boat approach our ship, battling a stiff steep chop. We wondered how the captain would manage docking in this wind.

Well, the answer was that he didn't. There was soon an announcement that we were going to give Stavanger a miss and go on down to Oslo. We were going to be only half a day in Stavanger anyway, so that wasn't much of a loss.



The wind continued to build and by mid-day was a full gale, with the captain reporting 40 knots, gusting 45. The seas and swell became pretty impressive, even as seen from up in our cabin, with the swells breaking and the wind blowing spume off the wave tops. However, the north-west wind was on our starboard quarter, and the ship's motion was a slowish roll. We commented that the Viking Venus did appear to be a particularly well-stabilised ship.

We also commented on the fact that we were in the southwest quarter of a typical North Atlantic depression, of exactly the same nature that we encountered at about the same time of year on our long passage from Bermuda to Ireland in June 1985.

As we turned gradually round the southern coast of Norway the wind and seas eased, and by the time we berthed in Oslo Harbour in the early morning, there were nothing but light airs. From our cabin on the port side of the vessel we could see well down the Oslo fjord, peppered as usual by islands, rocks and navigational aids.

Oslo is the capital and most populous city of Norway. It was founded by a Norseman, King Harald III, at the end of the Viking Age in 1040 under the name Ánslo, and later, Kristiania. After being destroyed by a fire in 1624, during the reign



of King Christian IV, a new city was built closer to Akershus Fortress. The city functioned as the capital of Norway during the 1814–1905 union with Norway. In 1925, the city, was renamed Oslo. In 1948 Oslo merged with Aker, a municipality which surrounded the capital and which was 27 times larger, thus creating the modern, much larger Oslo municipality.

Oslo is the economic and governmental centre of Norway, and the hub of Norwegian trade, banking, industry and shipping. In 2013 Oslo tied with Melbourne as the fourth most expensive city in the world. Its population is growing rapidly, for the most part from international immigration and related high birth rates, but also from intra-national migration.



We had a morning “included” tour, a sightseeing coach ride of Oslo highlights and the famous Vigeland Park.

We started by passing the ferry docks opposite City Hall and then drove round the medieval Akershus fortress, built in the late 1290s by Norse king Hakon V. The fortress has successfully survived all sieges, primarily by Swedish forces, including those by forces led by Charles XII in 1716. The castle has also been used as a military base, a prison and is currently the temporary office of the Prime Minister of Norway.

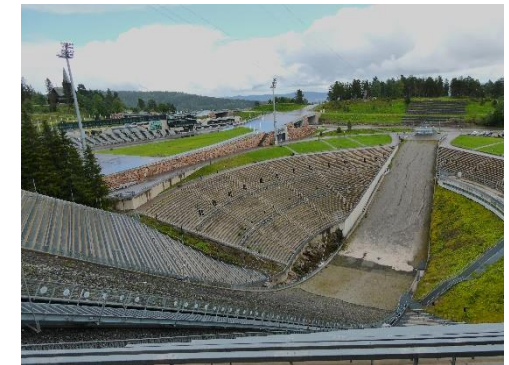


The nearby Oslo City Hall was constructed in red brick between 1931 and 1950, with an interruption during the Second World War. Various events and ceremonies take place in the building, notably the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, which takes place every December. To our eyes it was an ugly building, out of character among both the old and modern buildings of the city.



We then ran up to the Holmenkollen district, the site of a famous ski jump. It has hosted the 1952 Winter Olympics and other international and Nordic winter events. The hill has been rebuilt 19 times, and between 2008 and 2010 the entire structure was demolished and rebuilt. The jump is lined with a stainless steel mesh and rises 58 metres into the air. Its cantilevered 69 meters makes it the longest of its kind. The hill record is held by Robert Johansson at 144.0 metres. The hill is the newest in the world and amazingly, it is now the most popular tourist attraction in Norway, with about a million visitors each year.

Its extraordinary attraction is the way the jump seems to soar gracefully and endlessly into the air, dissimilar to jumps usually built into the hillsides. Otherwise, to see there is only a tatty collection of tourist gift shops about at the level where the jumpers lift off and fly.



The final sight in the tour was the Vigeland Sculpture Park, which lies within the Frogner Park, a public park in the borough of Frogner. It is the largest sculpture park by a single artist in the world, with more than 200 sculptures in bronze, granite and cast iron by the acclaimed Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland. Vigeland was also responsible for the design and architectural outline of the park. Amusingly, it is also claimed to be one of Norway's top tourist attractions. As it's free to enter, there may be some guesses in this claim, but there were certainly hundreds of people there on our day.



The central totem is a genuine monolith, being fabricated from one piece of solid stone. In the autumn of 1927 a block of granite weighing several hundred tons was delivered to the park from a quarry in Halden. Vigeland's model in plaster was erected next to it for reference. Transferring the design began in 1929 and took three masons 14 years to accomplish. The Monolith towers 14.12 metres high and is composed of 121 human figures climbing all over and around each other to reach towards the sky. There are men and women of different ages, and the top of the Monolith is crowned with clamouring children. The sculpture has been interpreted as a kind of vision of resurrection, and a longing and striving for spirituality.

The next major feature in the park displays the Vigeland statues in bronze, granite and cast iron, including the so-called Angry Boy and the Wheel of Life.



The sculptures and statues are among the weirdest and most fascinating in the world. They are wonderfully formed, but it would take a library textbook to make sense of most of them, regardless of their touristic names. The meaning of the intimate relationships



shown between men, women and children in each sculpture is thought-creating and not immediately clear. However, as a whole, the story is of the whole of complex life from the cradle to the grave in a sequence, good things and bad. Vigeland chose to sculpt all the figures nude in order to render them timeless.

At the end of the installation's axis is the Wheel of Life stone sculpture, carved 1933–1934. The wheel depicts four adults, a child and a baby. It continues the theme of the journey-of-life motif prevalent in the rest of the park. It represents the complex personal relationships through eternity, with the four human figures and a baby locked in a circle, floating in harmony.



We had another full day in Oslo, and took ourselves over to a set of maritime museums on a nearby island. It is possible to get there by bus, but we preferred a walk along the waterfront to the ferry wharves, from where it was easy to identify the appropriate vessel. It was a compact craft but took a lot of people, and during the day the pair of them must have transported hundreds of local and overseas tourists. We did ask ourselves, how come so many Oslo people are out and about? One reason would have been that the long school holiday is coming to its end, and another that it was a spectacularly pleasant day by Norwegian standards; and lots of pleasure craft were out on the waters too.

In the Polar Museum in Tromsø, as we described earlier in this account, we had read good discussions of the lives and expeditions of Amundsen and Nansen, and descriptions and models of the amazing transpolar and bipolar sailing vessel the Fram. In the Oslo Fram Museum, the actual vessel has its own building, triangular to cover its mighty mast. The ship looked much bigger than we had expected.

The theory of an east-west current over the Arctic Ocean had been put forward in 1884. Remains of the American expedition ship Jeannette had been found by the Greenland coast that year after the ship had been crushed in the ice and sunk near the New Siberian Islands in 1881. Fridtjof Nansen read and noted this and related it to the driftwood and earth from Siberia that he had found in the ice off Greenland in 1882.



There was a great deal in its museum about the design and construction of the Fram. Forcing ships through the arctic ice to reach the North Pole had been tried and had failed many times already. Nansen conceived the plan of building a ship “so small and so strong as possible ... that it was improbable that it could be destroyed by the ice”. With such a ship he could drift with and thereby prove the theory of the current, and at the same time hopefully drift over or very near to the North Pole.



Nansen’s closest adviser on the project was Otto Sverdrup, while the building work was entrusted to Colin Archer. Nansen wanted a ship which, though small and light, would be strong enough to withstand the tremendous pressure of the pack ice, a ship with a hull designed to ensure that it would be lifted up by the ice and not forced under. Moreover, it had to provide a crew who might spend several years on board. In the event, the ship proved bigger than Nansen had envisaged. It had a displacement of 800 tons loaded, measured 39 metres from stem to stern, was 11m in the beam, and had a draft of 5m. The wide beam to length ratio made it better able to deal with the pressure of ice in the ice, but also made the Fram roll most uncomfortably in the open sea.

The ship was designed as a three-masted schooner, with the standing rigging of steel wire and the running rigging of hemp. A windmill was included on board, which ran a generator to provide electric power for lighting by electric arc lamps. A triple expansion steam engine of 220 hp gave a speed of 6-7 knots in calm seas.

She has been beautifully restored (rescued, really), complete with details such as the wind turbine. We wandered around, over and through the ship, viewing the well-planned features that made its adventures, and those of its crews, so historic.



Between the World Wars she fell into poor condition but in 1935 she was towed to Oslo and hauled ashore, where her home in this museum complex was built over her.



The other major exhibit in this part of the museum was the sloop Gjøa. In 1901 Amundsen bought the vessel, which was then the first ship to be sailed through the entire Northwest Passage. Roald Amundsen and his six companions accomplished this in 1903-06. She later survived a turbulent time as a display ship in San Francisco, and then bought by the Fram Museum. An extension in the museum to house the ship was opened in 2013.

We walked around and within the Gjøa, another magnificent exploration ship of its time, much smaller than the Fram but nearly as impressive.

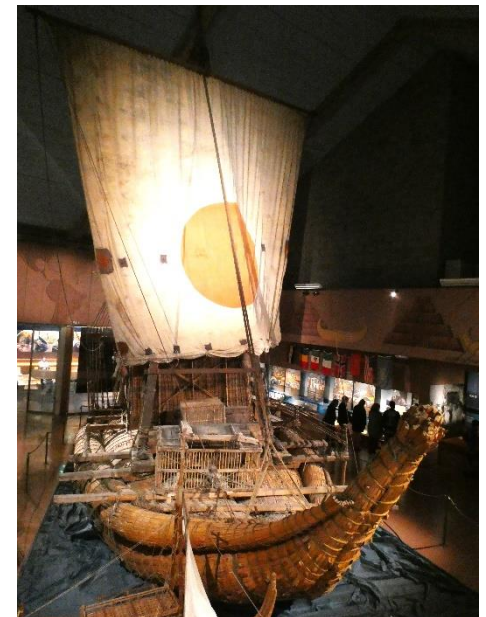
We then walked over to the Kon-Tiki museum nearby. Thor Heyerdahl is one of history's most famous explorers. In 1947 he crossed the Pacific Ocean on the balsawood raft Kon-Tiki. This was his first expedition to be captured on film, and his fame was boosted by Academy Award for best documentary in 1951. He later completed similar voyages with the reed boats Ra, Ra II and Tigris, through which he championed his deep involvement for both the environment and world peace. The Kon-Tiki museum exhibits objects from Heyerdahl's

expeditions, the original Kon-Tiki raft, and the papyrus boat Ra II.

Without for a moment decrying Heyerdahl's successes, it seems to me that the stories of his voyages have a degree of hype, designed to raise funds for his environmental and social missions. The museum's presentations suggest (as told in Heyerdahl's own book on the voyage) that most academics had thought that sailing west to Polynesia in the south-eastern Pacific was impossible, and that what he proposed was not only original but also dangerous. But these sceptics were primarily land-borne academics, with little knowledge of oceanic currents and prevailing winds. Further, they believed that the South Americans had no suitable boats for such a long voyage. Heyerdahl knew that the Humboldt current turned west from north near northern Peru, and that the trade winds in those latitude were mostly south-east and reliable. He built a much bigger balsa raft than the Peruvians were using for coastal passages, and if they had chosen to do so, they could have done the same passage. He simply wanted to prove that it was possible.

Having read his own account of his action-packed voyage while I was at school in about 1951, it was very interesting to see replicas of the vessels he built and used in his travels.

The "Maritime Museum" was the third of our visits to the complex of museum buildings, although Norma chose to sit it out in the sun. A good choice as it turned out, because that museum was not as impressive as the others. It displayed mostly ship models, stories on the walls, and a video of a well-known passage around



Cape Horn. And it was terribly difficult to navigate sensibly through the museum, a fault also apparent in the others too. There were few places we hadn't visited twice this day, while finding our way around!



Finally, we enjoyed a nice little ride back in the crowded ferry, and then a walk through massive new modernistic dwellings and business centres along the waterfront.

Oslo presents as a rich, rapidly developing modern city, with just a few monuments and memories of ancient times. Hard to feel friendly about it, but we're sure the residents love it and thrive in it.

The Viking Venus left Oslo early, at 6:00pm, so we watched the shores as the ship glided down the long fjord, with island speckled with attractive dwellings and marinas. Most of the Oslo we saw was new, but we of course realised that other suburbs would be a lot less rich. A guide did stress that government taxes in Norway covered the cost of public housing, schools, health care and other social facilities so that no-one should be poor.



There were other little difficulties and anomalies that made us smile. Finland boasts that its environment policies will get them to net zero by 2050 or earlier. They are hugely dependant on electricity for heating and most other services, and the streets are swarming with Teslas and other electric cars. But Norway is exceptionally favoured by hydro power. Because it doesn't have a big need for fossil-based products, Norway is the world's 5th largest oil exporter and 3rd largest natural gas exporter, selling products which other nations can burn for energy and be belittled by climate activists.

While we couldn't claim that we are now experts on Norway, visiting the country was hugely enjoyable and instructive. In many ways, it's a lovely country with smiling and friendly people. It would be a great place to live – setting aside the government's control of practically everything personal – if it wasn't for the weather!

DENMARK: ALBORG



And so to another country, Denmark. The port of Alborg (or Aalborg) is a city in a gorgeous setting nearly in the centre of the Jutland region of Denmark. Alborg was founded by Vikings in the late 900s and is known for its revitalised waterfront on the Limfjord, the body of water that cuts through Jutland. It is the third most populated municipality in the country.

The earliest settlements date to around 700 AD. Aalborg's position at the narrowest point on the Limfjord made it an important harbour during the Middle Ages, and later a large industrial centre.

As an important trading post, the wealth that poured into the merchants' accounts helped to build many of the half-timbered mansions that still stand today. Aalborg is now an important cultural hub, a city in transition from a working-class industrial area to a knowledge-based community. The city's major university is one of the biggest in the country, and there are many

other educational and scientific bodies based here.



We docked at a new wharf, part of this modern revitalisation, with a great view over the town – and after dawn, the clouds cleared and the sun shone. Backing the cruise ship wharves sat hypermodern new buildings such as the Utzon Centre, the last building to be designed by Jørn Utzon, the architect for the Sydney Opera House. The building was completed in 2008, the year Utzon died.

We had already decided that the included "walking tour" we could easily do by ourselves without a





guide, and that worked out fine. A helpful tourist map suggested a walking route, and we worked our way down through a modern commercial centre to the old parts of the town. The shops did yield an important purpose: we were running out of whisky for our evening aperitif, and Norway makes buying spirits as difficult and expensive as possible. Denmark does not share such conservative views (but has a drinking problem, we were told), so we easily filled the space in the fridge. (Unlike other cruise lines, Viking has no problem with people bringing their own alcohol aboard.)

We could see part of the Aalborghus Castle from the ship. It is a half-timbered building with red-painted woodwork and whitewashed wall panels. It was built in the mid-16th century by King Christian III for his vassals who collected taxes and is the only remaining example of its kind in the country.



Aalborg's old city hall was built in 1762. It is now only used for ceremonial and representative purposes. The yellow-washed façade is decorated with white pilasters and a frontispiece featuring the Danish coat of arms and a bust of King Frederick V.

Jens Bang's house is one of Denmark's best examples of 17th-century domestic architecture. Built in 1624 by the Aalborg merchant Jens Bang in the Dutch Renaissance style, the four-story sandstone building is noted for its rising gables and window decorations. For over 300 years, it has housed the city's oldest pharmacy.

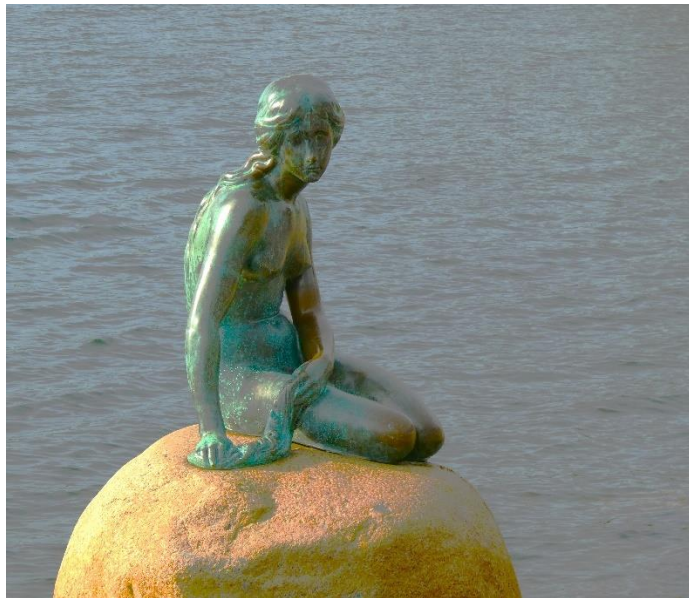
Jørgen Olufsen's house is Denmark's best preserved merchant's mansion in the Renaissance style. Built mainly of sandstone in 1616, it also has a half-timbered section. The style is reminiscent of similar buildings in the north of Germany and in the Netherlands. Olufsen, Jens Bang's half-brother, was not only a successful merchant but also mayor of Aalborg. When it was built, the residence with its integrated warehouse was on an inlet from the sound with access for barges.



That was a great little visit, with its termination being a complete spin in her own length by our ship the Venus, so that she could return to the sea by the way she came in. Moving back down the fjord we saw several large industrial areas including what looked like gas, oil and concrete facilities, consistent with its history but backed by incongruous wind turbine farms. On the other side of the waterway were several massive residential blocks. The place seemed to be booming.

COPENHAGEN

It was only about 100 nautical miles from Aalborg to our next port of call, the capital of Denmark, Copenhagen. We were docked a way out from the city centre, and we were booked for another “panoramic” tour of the city. The weather was dry, but still cool.



The famous statue of the Little Mermaid is quite near the docks area, so that was where we went first. It is a bronze statue by Edvard Eriksen, depicting a mermaid becoming human, displayed on a rock by the waterside. It's based on the 1837 fairy tale of the same name by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, is a Copenhagen icon and has always been a major tourist attraction since its unveiling in 1913. There were crowds of people sharing the shoreline with us quite early in the day, all competing for good photo spots.

Its lifetime challenge has been that it has become a popular target for defacement by vandals and political activists. What with its head being stolen more than once just as an example, it is actually now a replica of the original. Anyway, it's a pretty little piece and it's sad it has become such a target for haters.



We were able to take a glance at the nearby remains of a 17th century fortress, with its ramparts now grassed over. A bronze fountain depicting a Norse goddess driving a cart pulled by bulls was obviously tougher to vandalise than the little mermaid.

We then bussed in to the centre of the city. Copenhagen is the capital and most populous city of Denmark, with a population of around 1.4 million in the urban area and more than 2 million in the wider Copenhagen metropolitan area. The city is on the islands of Zealand and Amager, and is split in two by an inlet that passes through it.

Originally a Viking fishing village established in the 10th century, Copenhagen became the capital of Denmark in the early 15th century and a regional centre of power with its institutions, defences, and armed forces. The city flourished as the cultural and economic centre of Scandinavia under the union of Sweden and Norway for over 120 years, from the 15th century until the early 16th century when Sweden



left the union following a rebellion. After disasters in the early 19th century, when Horatio Nelson attacked the Danish-Norwegian fleet and bombarded the city, rebuilding during the Danish Golden Age brought a neoclassical look to Copenhagen's architecture.



Most recently, Copenhagen has become the cultural, economic and governmental centre of Denmark; the Copenhagen Stock Exchange is one of the major financial centres of Northern Europe. Since the completion of the huge Øresund Bridge to Sweden, Copenhagen has increasingly integrated with the adjacent Swedish province. During our motorhome days we once debated whether to cross this bridge, which was then very new, but the ferry was cheaper.

Our first significant visit was to the City Hall Square and the impressive building that dominates the plaza. There were some disorientating mirrored features on display in the centre.

Moving on, we passed by the Tivoli Gardens playground and the Christiansborg Palace, seat of the Danish government, and crossed the waterway to Holmen Island and Copenhagen's new Opera House.



This is the national opera house of Denmark, and among the most modern opera houses in the world. It is also probably one of the most expensive opera houses ever built, at a cost of about 370 million USD. For our eyes, it is also one of the ugliest. Funding was heavily supported by the Maersk shipping company, and it opened in 2005.

Across the harbour from the opera house we could see (from a distance) the Amalienborg Palace, the official residence for the Danish royal family. Queen Margrethe II resides in the palace during winter and autumn. Our guide described four identical classical palace façades with rococo interiors around an octagonal courtyard; in the centre of

the square is a monumental equestrian statue of Amalienborg's founder, King Frederick V.

Back in town we took a stop at the Danish theatre, beribboned by rainbow pride wraps. Denmark is one of the wokest nations in the world! There were architectural jokes scattered round the square, and I photographed myself photographing myself from a different angle, which was confusing but fun. Copenhagen is also a bicycle city, with many of the bikes being the heavy-duty situp-and-beg style, like the Dutch use, which can carry big people, shopping and children as well.



We passed an intriguing "suburb" where freedom-lovers can live for little or no money, in tents, shacks and cottages covered with splodges of street art. An example of how the woke must bend to tolerance to be consistent. Another area was a super-sized allotment, where the shacks are customarily used as holiday homes.

A feature we could only see from a distance (the photo here is from TripAdvisor) was the line of colourful dwellings with classic sailing craft lined along them in the Nyhavn canal, a scene regarded as iconic in the city. Here lived Hans Christian Anderson.

It was a busy little trip, but we again concluded that it is impossible to get even a slippery grip of a big and important city like Copenhagen in a single day, mostly through passing by sights and features in a bus, with descriptions supported by a stream of facts rapidly expounded by a guide. It's not our style. But as a means of suggesting that such a city might justify a return trip one fine day, such a rocket visit can of course be justified.



ROSTOCK, GERMANY

Overnight, as usual, we drifted about 90 nautical miles south to the port of Warnemünde, in Germany. As a component of the Viking cruise overall, the stop at this port in north Germany was mainly for access to a train for Berlin. We have of course toured Berlin quite extensively in our motorhoming days, and did not think that a long return train ride that would take a major part of the day could really be justified. A simple walking tour round the nearby and attractive town of Rostock, of which Warnemünde port is a part, seemed to be a good idea. It was an included part of the trip.

Rostock is the largest city in the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. It is the third-largest city on the German Baltic coast after Kiel and Lübeck, and was the largest coastal and most important port city in East Germany. It is the fourth largest port in Germany after the North Sea ports of Hamburg, Bremen and Wilhelmshaven, and the largest port on the German Baltic coast. The city centre lies on the river Warnow upstream from Warnemünde.



In 1251, the city became a member of the Hanseatic League. In the 14th century it was a powerful seaport town with 12,000 inhabitants and the largest city in Mecklenburg. Ships for sailing the Baltic Sea were constructed in Rostock. The formerly independent fishing village of Warnemünde on the Baltic Sea became a part of Rostock in 1323, to secure the city's access to the sea. In 1419, the University of Rostock was founded, the oldest university in continental northern Europe and the Baltic Sea area and one of the oldest universities in the world.

During World War II, Rostock was subjected by the RAF to heavy bombing attacks. Targets included aircraft factories and the shipyard, but churches and other historic structures in the city centre were also heavily damaged. The city was eventually captured by the Soviet forces in 1945 and became East Germany's largest seaport.



The bus dropped us in the city near the car-free New Market square, overseen by its strikingly pink 13th century Town Hall. This was originally built in the Gothic

style, but was transformed in the 18th century by the addition of a baroque façade and banquet hall. We were also right by the rather brutal-looking Gothic St Mary's church. It has an impressive astronomical clock inside, which we had seen on our previous visit but missed this time.



The square is surrounded by patricians' homes painted and decorated to look almost like cakes.

We walked up to the University Square and the terra-cotta Hauptgebaude, the university's main building. At the top of the university square we enjoyed watching children playing in the fountain, which is ringed by bronze statues of animals and human beings in bizarre postures.



By this time, having seen lots of colourful signs, we realised that we had been here precisely 11 years ago, when on the same weekend there had been the annual gathering of tall ships, the Hanse Sail festival. From the ship in the morning we had already seen a few masts in the offing, and sure enough when we returned to the Venus several vessels were sailing and motoring past us to the open ocean.

We spent a very happy afternoon watching all the spectacle and related activities, waving and waving as the (usually) packed vessels passed by our cabin balcony.

The channel to the sea was at times an incredible mass mixture of watercraft, from large international ferries, commercial freighters and military craft to small local cross-channel car ferries, scores of sailing yachts and powerboats, and the occasional brave crews in rubber duckies.

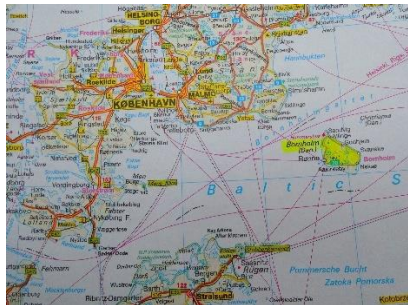




Later, of course, the whole affair was reversed as they all returned, including the bigger sailing ships that had ventured a long way out to sea.

The weather was perfect, with a light sailing breeze and lightly clouded skies, a great scene. It was an easy, most enjoyable day.

DENMARK AGAIN: BORNHOLM ISLAND



It was quite a short overnight sail to the Danish island of Bornholm. This lies in the Baltic Sea to the east of the rest of Denmark and south of Sweden, an obviously strategically influential position. It has therefore been fought over for centuries. It has usually been ruled by Denmark, but also by Sweden and by Lübeck at times.

The island was pawned to Lübeck for 50 years starting in 1525. Swedish forces conquered the island in 1645, but returned the island to Denmark in the following peace settlement. After the war in 1658, Denmark ceded the island to Sweden and it was occupied by Swedish forces. A revolt broke out the same year, and a deputation of islanders presented the island as a gift to King Frederick III of Denmark on the condition that the island would never again be ceded.

The island was captured by Nazi Germany on 10 April 1940, and served as a lookout post and listening station during the war, as it was an important part of the Eastern Front. The island's perfect position in the entrance to the Baltic Sea meant that it was a natural fortress between Germany and Sweden. In the end, immediately after the end of the war Bornholm became entangled in intricate international diplomacy, which makes an interesting tale from many angles.

After Berlin fell to Soviet forces on 30 April 1945, a race ensued to take over Danish soil. The Germans in Finland surrendered on 4 May, and the country was ultimately liberated by the Americans in Greenland and the British on the mainland. Bornholm, however, remained occupied by German forces. Soviet troops advanced by sea to the island, which was far enough east to allow Stalin to claim it for Russia.

A German regiment of approximately 800 men was tasked with defending the island while the remaining Germans escaped. The Danes urged surrender but the Germans stood fast, wanting to surrender only to the British. The Soviets took to relentless bombing of military targets and domestic infrastructure on Bornholm, which was undertaken as the rest of Denmark celebrated liberation and destroyed many towns.

General Eisenhower made it clear that Bornholm had the same status as the rest of Denmark and if the Danes requested troops on the island, they would be deployed. Soviet planes dropped leaflets urging the Germans to stop their resistance.

In the spring of 1945, Soviet forces 'liberated' Bornholm from German occupation and remained there for 11 months after the German surrender. The islanders and their occupiers seemed to have found a way of living together, as days of Soviet residency became weeks. There were parties and dances and some sports events. The Danish royals visited. Danish, British and US politicians all doubted that the Russians would withdraw from the island without considerable diplomatic and perhaps military pressure.

Under agreements following the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Bornholm was ultimately returned to Denmark as a deal for promises that foreign military bases would not be permitted on its soil. To that end, Soviet forces peacefully withdrew, while the Baltic States were to remain under Russian influence. The Soviet Union was exhausted and Bornholm was just a bridge too far.



The island has quite a simple harbour at Ronne, on its western shore. As we docked there, the main sight was masses of kits for the assembly of enormous offshore wind turbines.

The island is known as "sunshine island" because of its weather, and "rock island" because of its geology, which consists mostly of granite. The island's topography consists of widespread rock formations in the north, sloping down towards pine and deciduous forests, farmland in the middle

and sandy beaches in the south.

Basically, we were taken for a bus ride around much of the coast, with a cut through the middle. It is about 40km from north to south, and 30km across. We had an excellent local guide, who was very enthusiastic about the lifestyle here: "everyone knows everyone and trusts everyone". We left Ronne along cobbled streets with terraced red wooden houses in narrow





streets each side. We were soon in gently rolling countryside, green or brown depending on whether the grass – for winter fodder – had been harvested or not. Wind turbines dotted some of the hilltops, doing little for the bucolic outlook.

On the northernmost slopes of the west coast we came to the impressive ruins of the medieval Hammershus castle. Hammershus was Scandinavia's largest medieval fortification and is one of the largest medieval fortifications in Northern Europe. It was erected in the 13th century and features a mantel tower and perimeter wall. In 1658 the castle was occupied by Swedish forces, but a rebellion on the island terminated the Swedish rule and the island was returned to the king of Denmark. In 1743 Hammershus was abandoned as a stronghold.

We just had time for a brisk walk up to the castle's outposts and to see great views of the walls, the granite cliffs and the sea. A few motorhomes were camped on a beach behind a small cove below us. Moving on, we passed a few little fishing villages with fish-drying towers, little used now, we understood. There were conventional-looking stone churches, but we also saw one of the four remaining circular white churches of Bornholm. The round churches were built as a combination of a church and a defensive structure and each of them has its own characteristics.





We drove through the island's central forest, Almindingen. At the end of the 18th century, hardly any forestation was left in the area, and in 1822, a forest supervisor Hans Rømer was hired to replant the forest. This was a huge effort, including the building of stone walls to try to keep deer outside the new plantings. It is now one of the largest forests in Denmark, and it was a pleasure to drive through the many kinds of trees with rays of sun shining through the green leaves.

Back on the ship, the Venus backed out of the harbour, and we sailed round the north of the island before heading south-east for Gdansk. Early on the way we spotted a tiny island with a fortress on it, which we identified as Store Tarn

and Kongens bastion. It was built in 1684, and the tower is the base for its 100-year-old lighthouse. We read that after major restoration work, the tower reopened in June 2017 to the public with new exhibits on local history and birdlife. What a huge number of tiny islands there are in the Baltic Sea!



GDANSK, POLAND

After another peacefully smooth overnight passage we moved slowly into the outer harbour of Gdansk, passed the Westerplatte on the north side and docked alongside at Nowy Port. We had booked an included tour, a guided walk of the city, but pulled out of that because we felt familiar with the parts of the city we had visited in our motorhome days and a free shuttle bus could take us in anyway.

We were looking forward to making a return visit to Gdansk, Poland's principal seaport and the country's fourth-largest metropolitan area. In the account of our visit in 2012, I wrote:

Even by Polish standards, Gdansk has a complicated history. Originally a fishing village in the 9th century, it was taken over by the Teutonic Order in 1308 and their Polish occupants slaughtered. Over the next 200 years or so the Polish people recovered the city and developed the port into a fortified and highly influential member of the Hanseatic trading league. It withstood the 17th century Swedish onslaught and annexation by Prussia in the First Partition of 1772, but Prussia took over the surrounding lands and eventually the city in the Second Partition. It was briefly taken by Napoleon in 1807 but he lost it again following his retreat from Moscow. After WW1 the Treaty of Versailles gave Poland a strip of land down the Vistula valley to Torun, the Polish Corridor, but that lasted only until Hitler's power increased. The first shots in WW2 were fired on 1 September 1939 by a German dreadnought on the fort at Westerplatte, a peninsula at the entrance to the port. In the last year of the war the city was flattened by the attacking ('liberating'!) Russian armies. The German population fled, and were replaced by Poles from the east whose territories were lost to the Soviets.

Following the severe wartime damage to the city's buildings, they were miraculously rebuilt in the 1950s and 1960s. Its rebuild since near-extinction is truly remarkable, even by the standards of Dresden and Warsaw, with meticulous reconstruction of its appearance in the 16th century. It is now among the most visited cities in Poland. Apparently Gdańsk has high world rankings for quality of life, safety and living standards, and its historic city centre has been listed as one of Poland's national monuments.



The shuttle bus dropped us off by the Novotel, and it was a short walk across the Motława waterway that runs down through the city from the ports. We then strolled slowly along the Długi Targ, or Long Market, entering through the Green Gate, a former royal residence and passing the Town Hall with its high tower on the way.



At the western end we walked through the Golden Gate to the Prison Tower, and sat to listen to a Viking guide talking about some of the historical details. We passed the Armory, with its beautiful façade, and on the way back down the Long Market we stopped to enjoy huge iced coffees, covered in cream that rather surprisingly had no effect on Norma's milk allergy.

We then came to St Mary's Basilica. We had heard some music coming from the church and entered its shining white interior, trimmed with fringes of gold. A small orchestra was tuning up, so we sat

to see what was going to happen – there was no indication that there was soon to be a concert.





What was going to happen was a Mass, and we were pretty much in the middle of the congregation. It seemed to be a mass for the dead or disabled, because several of the congregation were in tears, and at the height of the service a severely disabled young man in a wheelchair was rolled up to the altar and the many priests there. As the drama appeared to settle



down a bit, we made our quiet excuses and left.



Down at the Motława we turned north, and walked slowly amid hordes of locals and tourists along to the famous medieval twin-treadwheel crane. The crowding was largely because it was a public holiday and the weather was clear and hot, which all combined to make a visit to this lovely old part of the city particularly popular.

That was about all we could take on this sunny day, so we took the shuttle bus back to the ship and its cool interior. On the way to and fro we had commented on the enormous piles of coal on the dock areas. Coal is a very important contributor to energy in Poland. It turns out that while Poland has its own coal mines, it imports a substantial quantity of coal, much of it being shipped in following an embargo on Russian coal. Poland also relies on natural gas and oil, with wind and solar being a tiny proportion of the mix. As we sailed out of the harbour and away under the setting sun, we came across dozens of freighters lying offshore, many no doubt carrying more coal.

On the boat, we were not customarily going to the shows at the ship's theatre each evening. The music genre was not generally to our taste, and we came to prefer a relaxed and often long dinner at the main restaurant, which in our opinion was serving very good food every night. But this night we did go to the concert, which was a one man show; the one man being the Cruise Director, Andre Gaffney. He has a solid CV in musical theatre and an early background in serious opera. We thoroughly enjoyed the show, enjoying the music and his presentation, which was solidly professional and impressive.

All the next day, August 16, we were at sea, sailing close to true north up the Baltic Sea the 320 or so nautical miles to Mariehamn in the Åland Islands. On the way we did more wandering round the lounges, pools (open and closed) and several eating places round the ship, all furnished in clean Nordic style. It was a beautiful and relaxing environment in which to live for a month. As heavily promoted by Viking, their vessels are free from distractions such as children, casinos and pop music

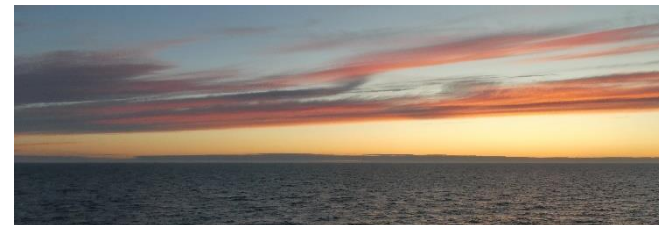
piped round the ship. In the evenings the music in the atrium was popular classic either by a single pianist or a violin/cello duo. Some photos will indicate the vibe. (In the interest of their privacy, I avoided taking pictures of other passengers.)



MARIEHAMN, ÅLAND ISLANDS

Once again after a golden dawn, we were under clear blue skies as we pulled into the south-facing inlet that is the harbour of Mariehamn. We docked within a stone's throw of the Pommern, the fabulous P-Line grain clipper, another sight with memories of our touring in the Baltic all those years ago.

Mariehamn is the capital of the Åland archipelago and its only town, lying on the island of Hammarland. It is the seat of the Government and Parliament of Åland. The Åland group lies between Sweden and Finland at the southern end of the Gulf of Bothnia, which branches north from the Baltic Sea. The group is an autonomous territory under Finnish sovereignty and 40% of the population of Åland live in the city. The group is solely Swedish-speaking.



Mariehamn was founded in 1861, while Åland and Finland formed part of the Russian Empire. Maria, consort of Tsar Alexander II of Russia, gave the town her name: Mariehamn is Swedish for Maria's harbour.

During the Russian times seafaring expanded from shipping local goods to Stockholm to global trade. Between the world wars Gustaf Erikson became famous by gradually buying most of the tall sailing ships still left in the world, and successfully operating them. He thus became the owner of the world's largest merchant sailing-ship fleet, up to 1940. One of the former German P-liners acquired by him, Pommern, has become a symbol of Mariehamn. Shipping still contributes considerably to the wealth of the town, now of course bolstered by global tourism.



We took a simple bus tour round the city and its environs. The Russian heritage is mainly responsible for the layout of the town. It follows the same basic guidelines as can be found in many Russian cities: large avenues with promenades in the middle of the street typically lined with linden trees. Sure enough, among the first sights were linden trees lining the wider boulevards, brilliantly green. All the leaves drop in the winter, and we thought about the size of clearing up the dead ones. A distinctive feature is the Esplanade, an avenue of lime (linden) trees stretching from west to east, from harbour to harbour across the Mariehamn peninsula.



There are some lovely old wooden houses and villas along the wider roads, many of the larger of which were built by shipowners, including the one owned by Captain Gustaf Erikson. We then went on to meander through the beautiful countryside, combining many water views in the linked islands of Lemland and Lumparland.



At least 100 medieval stone churches in Finland were built between the 13th and 16th century, mainly located in the western and southern parts of the country. We visited the medieval stone church of St. Olaf in Jomala. It is possibly the oldest Christian church in Finland, and was extended in the 19th century. It is constructed of local red granite and limestone and dedicated to King Olaf II of Norway, patron saint of the Åland Islands.

We were taken up to a “high point” of a 50-metre hill with a water tower at the top and from which we could see the Venus and the Pommern through the trees.





Back in Marienhamn we took a break at the Maritime Quarter, a collection of wooden buildings on a stretch of the western harbour. They hold craftsmen's workshops aimed at classic craft, a small boat-building museum, and pictures of the days where bigger sailing ships were built here.



After returning to the Venus we went off on our own for a revisit of our neighbouring ship, the Pommern. What an incredible vessel this is, as were all the P-Line grain clippers.

Pommern is an iron-hulled four-masted barque that was built in 1903 in Glasgow. She was one of the Flying P-Liners, the famous sailing ships of the German shipping company F. Laeisz. In 1923 she was acquired by Gustaf Erikson, who used her to carry grain from the Spencer Gulf in Australia to harbours in England and Ireland until the start of World War II.



Great Grain Race twice, in 1930 and 1937. She is now one of the most popular landmarks of Åland, and is visited by thousands of visitors annually.

After World War II, Pommern was donated to the town of Mariehamn as a museum ship. She has the reputation of being a lucky ship. She survived both world wars unscathed, lost only four crew members at sea on her world-girdling journeys, and won the



Wandering around this extraordinary vessel we couldn't possibly fathom how she was sailed by about 25 crew. All the machinery and sail-handling gear is massive, let alone necessities such as 2.5-ton anchors. There was a steam engine to help things along, but the work would have been back-breaking.



In the late afternoon we made our way out of Mariehamn and sailed the long and beautiful passage through the dozens of small islands bordering the archipelago.



Island after island passed by our window, getting generally bigger from piles of rock to larger ones with some luxurious-looking dwellings and private landings. Many of the rocky shores were faced by dugout caves or tunnels, as such storage places here date back centuries.



The whole process took more than an hour. Amazing. We reached the open sea after passing by the outermost lighthouse, the Kobbå Klintar, and continued overnight to Stockholm, the final destination of our cruise.

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN



The approach to Stockholm from Mariehamn is a long winding series of channels through myriad islands, islets and rocks, about 90 kilometres from open sea to the city and two-thirds of the total distance between the ports. We awakened early

to watch as the ship slowly wound her way along the passage, passing amazingly close to many of the rocky shores in a long and shady dawn.



It was Friday August 18 and our last full day and night on the ship. We docked at the Viking cruise wharf, from where a shuttle bus took us into the city.

Stockholm, it turned out, was building up to a cultural festival this weekend, which explained the already busy streets and pavements. They got a lot busier during the morning.



We were already generally familiar with Stockholm, having visited in our campervan in 2014. We had camped in a waterfront parking place, visited the amazing Vasa Museum and walked through the old and modern parts of the city. Our overview was that it was a splendid place to be. On this visit we did not have time to see again the sailing warship Vasa, which sank in the harbour in 1628 on her very first trial at sea. She was recovered in 1961 and underwent an extraordinary restoration.



We did, instead, undergo a self-guided tour on our own, generally our favourite way to tour. We were dropped off at the Grand Hotel, and walked through the crowded streets and bridges to the Strandvagen. This runs along part of the waterfront, where scores of vessels – traditional and modern – are moored. Things have changed a bit since we camped there for a few days, it being clear that the strip is no longer open for motorhomes, just cars. No surprisingly, really.



As ever, all the waterways were humming with tourist craft big and small. All around were also classic sailing and power vessels in every straight and corner of the city's waterways. We can't think of any city we know of that has as much interest in, and activity on, the water.

Stockholm is the most populous city in Sweden as well as the largest urban area in the Nordic countries. Nearly a million people live in the municipality, and 2.4 million in the metropolitan area. The city features fourteen islands, plus the island chain of the Stockholm archipelago we had just sailed through. The area has been settled since the Stone Age, in the 6th millennium BC, and was founded as a city in 1252 by Swedish statesman Birger Jarl.



Stockholm is among the top 10 regions in Europe by GDP per capita, and everything there expresses this. The city boasts some of Europe's top-ranking universities and hosts the annual Nobel Prize ceremonies. It is the seat of the Swedish government and most of its agencies, and the official residencies of the Swedish monarch and the Prime Minister. The brutally massive Stockholm Palace is the official residence and principal workplace of the Swedish monarch; but is not an attractive building by Swedish standards, we agreed, as we walked around its walls.

Behind the palace we walked around the 13th century Gamla Stan, or Old City, which was new to us. It was a typical jumble of narrow cobbled pavement and – as often these days – lots of tatty tourist souvenir shops. Its central square was attractive and busy.





The weather was clearing from cool and humid to hot as the sun came out and we returned by bus to the ship for a restful afternoon – except for the packing! We had to get the suitcases out of the room by 10:00 in the evening.

The next morning we had to disembark at 9:00 am. The whole process was well managed. On our suitcases were labels defining our disembarkation group and time, so that we could be sorted into particular buses or other transport depending where we were going.

A bus duly took us for the long ride out to Stockholm airport, where there was quite a schemozzle. The driver was having great difficulty getting us to our terminal building, being stopped by armed police with a lot of firm discussion. He finally had to take us to another terminal, from where we had to take a fairly long walk back to the one for which we were destined. It turned out that in the airport precinct, near our terminal, the police had arrested a man with a gun and many of the airport roads were shut.

Still, we got checked in with Thai Airways with no further bother, and finally flew out on schedule at 1:50 pm. We arrived back in Sydney on schedule at 8:30 pm after a long and wearisome couple of flight legs via Kuala Lumpur, and driven home in a Tesla limo.

This had been a long trip, at five weeks, tiring at times but very rewarding. We enjoyed the cruise very much, and considered Viking easily the best line we had experienced – not that our experience is great in these matters. Many, if not most, of the other passengers in the Venus had already experienced a cruise or several more in the line. The comforts of the ship were exceptional, and the food and all staff superb. The ambience was supported by the line's adult-only policy, and with no razzamatazz, casinos or the like.

If we ever embark on another cruise, it is likely it would be with Viking again.

