

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, MAY 14, 2009

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Wild swimming under the midnight sun in Norway

For wild swimming fans, there is nowhere more beautiful or dreamlike than Norway's fjords and lakes on a midsummer's evening

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

There is something about wild swimming, about cutting your hands through the water of rivers, lakes, seas, that a dip in even the sleekest of infinity pools can't match. It's the freedom, the swirling of currents on your skin. But most of all, it's the total immersion in a natural landscape, the feeling of being a continuous part of the elements — water, earth and sky.

Norway's landscapes must be some of the most aesthetically daring arrangements of water, rock and sky anywhere in the world. Swimming in its steep fjords and sweeping valley lakes is an experience that's practically operatic. In summer, not only are the water temperatures bearable, but the sun shines on late into the night and, in some places, never sets.

Bergen in July had taken on a strangely Mediterranean climate. My friend Christina and I were starting our trip with a few days there, staying in a boutique hotel called the Hanseatic, carved from a medieval warehouse on the Bryggen. This is the city's historical wharf, a warren of old storehouses, merchants' offices and fishermen's quarters. Baking heat rose from the cobbled streets that wound their way around the harbor just outside our windows. We wandered down there, past the market with its fish vendors speaking 16 languages fluently as they flicked knives through great swaths of marinated salmon, making up sandwiches in the shade of plastic awnings.

Traders were selling reindeer skins from the north. We carried on along the Nordnes promontory, between rows of sunlit clapboard houses. Good swimming spots include Helleneset and Gamle Bergen, but even in the city center the waters are crystal clear. On Nordnes, you can swim from the rocks behind the United Sardine

Factory, now an arts center, or, for a few kroner, dive from the boards high above the water on the western point. At a latitude several degrees north of chilly Aberdeen, on the east coast of Scotland, the granite was scented with suntan oil, laced with stretched-out nut-brown limbs: already the local Bergeners had taken up their favorite sunbathing spots. Blond kids ran and flipped, turning somersaults into the fjord.

From the end of the diving board, the view was entirely surreal. Ahead and to the west, the outlying islands shone like promised lands in the perfect afternoon, on a blue-bronze sea. Round to the east loomed a vast container ship in the fjord, so apart from everything else that it looked like a paperweight pinning down the separate poster of the landscape. I jumped. The deep cool waters sloughed off the day's heat in one clean sweep. We swam along the base of the cliffs, ducking under ropes and resting against floats. Young men were diving off rooftops into the water.

Soaking in the confines of my clawfoot bathtub that evening, underneath a huge old winching wheel, my skin was already a riot of sun-pricked freckles. Heading along the Bryggen, there are countless tables for drinking in the sun, and there is also the Enhjorningen, or Unicorn, one of the city's best restaurants. We ate angle fish and sweetly marinated blackberries in its wooden upstairs rooms, and then we made our way towards the funicular railway station in growing dusk. From the high plateau of Mount Floyen where the funicular ends, the night stretched slowly over the city lights below. We came back up here the next day to go fell-walking through the pine forests, then headed on, to the wilder waters of the north.

An air-pass with Wideroe, one of Norway's domestic airlines, took us up to Trondheim for a couple of days. A curious mixture of wild west film-set streets — all clapboard storefronts and jittering steps — a vast medieval cathedral, a baroque wooden palace and buzzing student cafes lends Trondheim its idiosyncratic charm. We admired the buildings, but really, we were more interested in the lakes that lay at the other end of the tramline. Having packed a picnic, we took a ride. The tram wound serenely through the streets and parks, past birch trees and fountains, climbing out through the wooden suburbs, through clouds of rosebay willowherb, into the hills and woods.

There are several lakes to explore along the tram route, but the loveliest is Kyvannet at Lian, right at the end of the line where the tram pulls up in a forest clearing. From here, it's a short walk down to the grassy lakeshore. By day, the banks are peppered with locals. At 10 o'clock at night, it was still light enough and warm enough to swim, and by then the place was deserted. At 11 o'clock, there was just the flickering of a distant campfire somewhere on the opposite shore, and the calling of birds in the dense pine woods, the purple skies reflected in the mirror-calm waters. Christina, who is a professional fine art photographer, set up her tripod and took her shots. Striking out for the floating wooden diving platform in the middle of the lake, flipping on to my back in this weirdly bright, jewel-like amethyst dusk, the air spiked with sweet pollen, I thought this was possibly the most beautiful place I had ever swum. To swim through the water was to swim inside the sunset itself, reflected — fingers carving through liquid clouds of violet and rosy streaks of light. We stayed there until close to midnight, swimming

and warming ourselves with a final round of picnicking, pulling on our Norwegian woollies and scrambling back to the clearing in time to catch the last tram home.

Our hostel, Pensjonat Jarlen, was basic but comfortable and clean. If you want to stay somewhere more luxurious, go to the Britannia, a stately Victorian-era pile. It's also worth checking out the program of open-air concerts on the local tourism Web site. We went to the cathedral graveyard one midnight (as one does) and were startled when angels started singing, until we realized it was a choir giving a late-night performance for a walled-off audience beyond the other end of the building. Luckily for us, the musicians had left the cathedral's side-door open, so we snuck in past the coats and instrument cases, hid in the dark behind a pillar and watched the choir from the back as they sang through the open main doors to the rows of listening faces outside. We tiptoed out, with the sound streaming into the half-light.

From Trondheim, we flew to Bodo, then onto Svolvaer in the Lofoten Islands inside the Arctic Circle. The twin propellers of the tiny Cessna carried us towards a landscape so beautiful, so perfect, that again it seemed quite dreamlike. Rising sheer from the turquoise sea, the high wall of Lofoten peaks loom in great whipped-up tufts of snow-capped rock, their milder sides a carpet of green. Everything appeared to be the ultimate of its kind: no green could have been greener, no blue bluer, no mountain could have looked more mountainous, nor any water purer.



Svolvaer, on the island of Austvagoy, is the Lofotens' main port. We picked up a hire car, enjoyed fish soup on sun-drenched decking at Bacalao, one of the many restaurants on the harbor and headed west, into the countryside. Causeways now connect the islands. One of Austvagoy's highlights is an ecologically responsible marine safari run by biologists. Flying out in a Rib across the Arctic waters, we saw sea eagles, eider ducks, Arctic terns and Arctic seals on far-flung rocks, before cutting the engine to drift silently in starfish coves studded with sea urchins, black-green water slapping softly against the banks of glittering copper seaweeds.

We spent most of our time on the westward islands of Vestvagoy, Flakstadoy, Sakrisoy and Moskenesoy. There is plenty to explore here: pretty wood villages, artists' studios and old Viking remains. Roads loop between sheets of vertiginous mountainside, around white sand bays, through fields thick with wild flowers. The gigantic skeletal frames of wooden fish drying racks dot the shores.

On Vestvagoy, we stayed at Mortsund, a relatively new collection of wooden cabins on



Clockwise from the top: The Rost Islands sit on the horizon in Lofoten, Norway; A row of wooden houses is reflected in the still waters of a fjord in western Norway; A local resident cleans the harbor on the north side of an island in the Oslofjord outside Horten, Norway; Dark clouds and the afternoon sun provide an almost magical view of the Oslofjord, Norway.

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stilts above the water. In the endless Arctic light I sat on our deck watching the circling birds until after one in the morning. The gulls cried "Error! Error!" in the glimmering shreds of the sunset, like they were taking issue with the dying of the day. Further along the island chain we stayed in a real *rorbu* — an old fisherman's cabin on stilts, converted for guests — on tiny, magical Sakrisoy. Water lapped below the floorboards and shone outside the tiny windows. Our beds were up in the loft, once more under a huge old winching wheel, and breakfast was over the road where Dagmar, the owner, cooked up waffles in an upstairs dining room carved out from her antique shop. We tucked into reindeer meat, eggs, bread and cloudberry jam, along with good strong coffee, and headed out with her son Michael in one of the boats.

Michael took us over to Bunesfjord, a tiny hamlet only reachable by water. We moored, and started our hike. Passing the handful of painted wooden houses, and the open-air tearoom — a platform in a meadow with desks and chairs from the old primary school — the grassy track led on through banks of scented meadowsweet, up and over the crest of a hill. A vast sweep of perfect white Arctic beach waited on the other side, littered with the shells of Kamchatka crabs and bleached Siberian tree-trunks, driftwood washed up in the storms. We pulled off our jeans in the buffeting wind and ran.

Great green waves sluiced over us. It was cold, the Arctic sea, but, being warmed by the Gulf Stream here, not debilitating. I'd say it's slightly warmer here in July than it is in the Atlantic off Scotland's west coast on New Year's Day, so euphoria should be tempered with caution. I struck out towards the mouth of the bay, dodging strands of kelp. Each time I flicked my head sideways to take a breath, mountain peaks and distant shepherds' huts framed themselves in the dripping arch of my arm. Somewhere further out in these same waters swam the whales and, in their season, orcas. If there is a place to forget which species you belong to, or where the landscape ends and you begin, this is it.

Since last summer, the Norwegian government has announced it is considering opening the Lofoten shelf for oil extraction.

Sophie Cooke is the author of 'The Glass House' and 'Under the Mountain,' published by Arrow Books.

