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The Nordnorge passes through the Trollfjord, a passage 1¼ miles long and 328 feet wide and named for the magical trolls who lived there. Cod (right) dry in a Sami village on Norway's Finnmark Island.

Cargo ship offers comforts for cruising Norway's west coast

By Patricia Arrigoni
COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

Sailing on a cargo ship can be a special experience that combines the elements of a working vessel with the luxurious touches of a modern cruise ship.

The MS Nordnorge, along with 11 other cargo ships, is owned by Norwegian Coastal Voyage Inc. These modern descendants of the old Norwegian steamships were built between 1994 and 2003 and ply the waters along the western fjords of Norway. They offer lifelines along this scenic but sparsely populated coast, servicing 34 ports between Bergen and Kirkenes, carrying freight, cargo and passengers.

I boarded the Nordnorge in Kirkenes, high up in the Arctic Circle above Finland and Sweden. It was August, and we were fortunate to experience warm weather, plus the sun shone almost all night.

My cabin, called a "large standard with sofa/berth," measured a roomy 107 square feet, and my bed was on a frame attached to the wall. Other furniture included a red sofa (the second bed), a desk, cabinets, shelves, a table and telephone that could be used only for calls on the ship.

The lighting was good, with a small, built-in light above the bed, a fluorescent tube over the desk, three spots in the ceiling and two wall fixtures. The bathroom had a heated floor, miniature shower, toilet and sink with potable water and cabinets.

The Nordnorge (meaning Northern Norway) was built in 1997 and contains 464 berths and space for 50 vehicles. Some people board just for a day. The ship offers passengers a dining room, cafeteria, bar, library, children's playroom, sauna, small gym, panorama lounges and conference rooms.

The food aboard the Nordnorge consisted of a tasty breakfast and lunch served as a buffet and a fixed-menu dinner featuring such selections as chicken, venison, pork and fish.

Breakfast included eggs, sausages, bacon, potatoes and cereal. There also were sliced cold cuts of cheeses, salads, fruit, salami, prosciutto, ham, liver pate, tubes of Norwegian caviar, and breads, rolls, coffee and tea.

Lunch offered passengers delicious fresh or smoked salmon, halibut and other fish, plus salads, fruits and cooked dishes such as lamb or meat patties. Additional selections included potato salad, oven-roasted potatoes,

reindeer stew, lamb chops, ham and pate. Desserts included puddings, cake and other treats.

The ship departed Kirkenes at 1:30 p.m., and our first stop was four hours later in Vardo, where passengers explored the town and the 1737 Vardohus Fort. Everyone was given an identification card and was expected to make it back on time. If you did not, the ship would leave without you.

On the second day, several large buses picked up passengers at 6 a.m. for a long excursion to the town of Honningsvag and the North Cape, Europe's northernmost point. After seeing this, we toured the island of Finnmark, home of Norway's Sami, or native population. Sami translates as "children of the sun."

At a Sami village, native people dressed in their costumes and posed for photographs. Later we saw large herds of reindeer feeding freely on a vast

range, part of some 210,000 protected animals that live here in the summer.

On the third day, our ship arrived in Harstad at 8 a.m., and we disembarked to take a 4½-hour tour of the Vesteralen Islands. Harstad, a town of wooden houses, celebrated its 100th birthday last year.

Though it is situated 155 miles above the Arctic Circle, the temperatures remained quite pleasant, in the 70s, partly because the Norwegian coast is warmed by the Gulf Stream, which keeps it from freezing, even in winter.

Beyond Harstad, we saw green farms with crops of strawberries, large stands of birch trees and wheat fields already harvested. This was followed by a 20-minute ferry from Refsnes across the Andsfjord.

The weather remained perfect in the afternoon as we enjoyed a stunning sail through a narrow area called the Trollfjord, a passage a mile and a quar-

ter long and 328 feet wide named for the magical trolls who lived there.

On an evening excursion of the Lofoten Islands, we stopped in the little fishing village of Henningsvaer, where we were able to take photographs, even after 9 p.m.

The fourth day was spent sailing along the Nordland coast in the Arctic Circle, then stopping in the afternoon in Sandnessjoen, another small fishing village.

The sun came out, and we lounged high up on the seventh deck enjoying the spectacular scenery of mountains and sea, including the Seven Sisters Peaks.

The ship docked on the fifth day in Trondheim, an old viking settlement and the first capital of Norway. We saw the royal residence, built in 1770, which functions as a museum in the summer, and old wooden houses that are considered national treasures. A tour of the

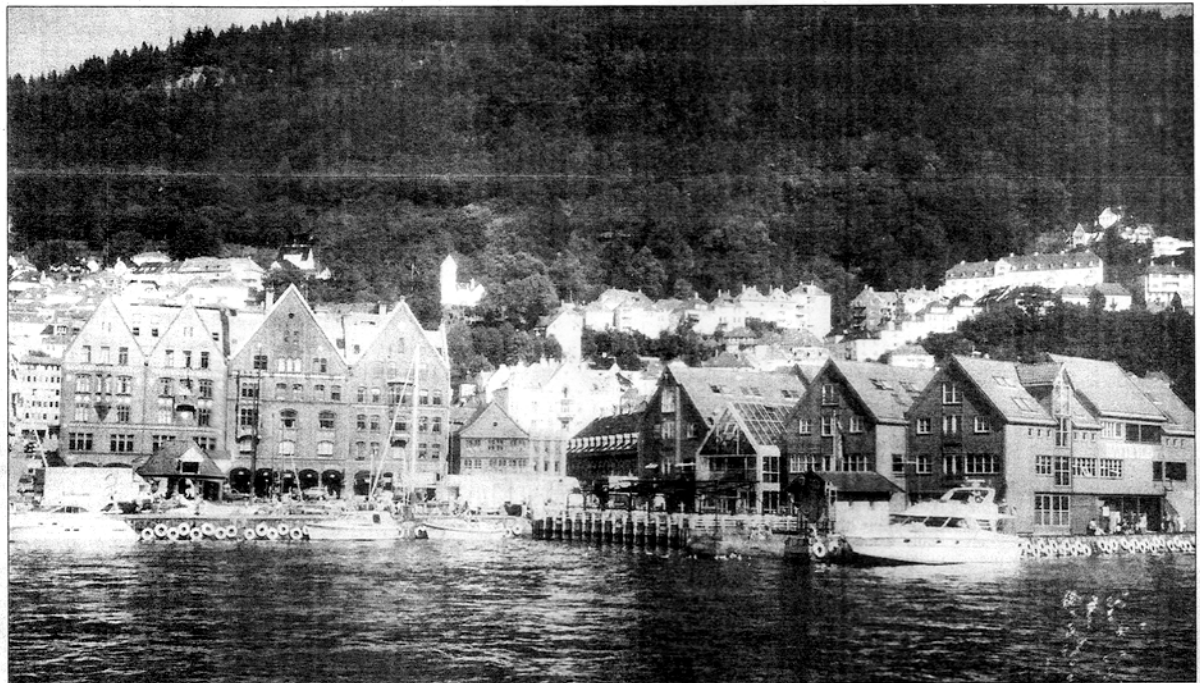
1,000-year-old Nidaros Cathedral completed our visit.

On our last day, we cruised south to Bergen, arriving at 2:30 p.m.

Passengers aboard Norwegian Coastal Voyage ships can book a variety of programs, including six-, seven- or 12-day cruise-only trips, or 12- and 18-day air-inclusive independent or escorted programs combining land explorations with the voyage. My cabin for six days cost \$1,303 per person and included three meals daily, taxes and port charges.

The company offers senior savings on most sailings and AARP discounts and has three cabins for handicapped passengers on most ships.

For more information: www.norwegiancoastalvoyage.us; 800/323-7436; fax, 212/319-1390. Brochure orders: 800/666-2374 or 405 Park Ave., Suite 904, New York, NY 10022.



The tidy town of Bergen is one of the 34 ports along the fjords in western Norway that receive cargo and passengers from Norwegian Coastal Voyage ships.