

# Balestrand, Norway

WHERE THE WILD AND MILD BLEND



A Swiss-style villa decorated with the typical dragon heads inspired from Viking ship prows; a thick, blue ice cap of the Supphellebreen, a branch of Jostedal glacier; a variety of hiking routes start just beyond Balestrand.

article & photos by Richard Zahra

Balestrand is a small, remote town located on the shores of Sognefjord, the world's longest fjord. At first glance, it might appear plain and unassuming but after a quick 360-degree gaze, you'll realize that Balestrand's uniqueness lies in its setting. All nature's elements—the sparkling waters of the fjords, the clear blue summer sky etched with multi-patterned clouds, the soaring, tree-draped mountains capped by white, glassy sheets—sublimely blend together to create an idyllic terrain that makes Balestrand an artists' haunt. It is the perfect retreat

where you can escape from noisy crowds and immerse yourself in a soothing interlude, chasing the ghosts of bygone travelers and enjoying nature at its best.

The basic amenities in Balestrand—the tourist office, the two mini-markets, and virtually all the eateries are concentrated in the quay area. The express ferry (Fylkesbaatane) operates daily all along Sognefjord linking Balestrand to the city of Bergen on the western coast. The ferry is the hub of life for this little community. It delivers visitors in summer and is the only lifeline between the town

and the outside world during the harsh Norwegian winters, when all the roads are blocked by snow.

Armed with a Heritage Trail Map that can be obtained from the tourist office, you can explore the historic locations of Balestrand in a day or so. Visit the aquarium to get a glimpse of the diversity of marine life of the fjord. The use of the rowboat is included in the entry fee, so why not grab a pair of oars and boat along the calm waters of Esecfjord? Meet local anglers and boatmen who are sure to tell you a tale or two about the fjord. This small branch of Sognefjord is almost completely engulfed by mountains and valleys. The clear, reflective waters of Esecfjord produce vivid, colorful impressions of the surrounding scenery, giving you the feeling that you are floating over an enormous artist's canvas.

Plunge yourself into Balestrand's history by strolling along the peaceful road that flanks the fjord. Saint Olaf's church, with its Burgundy paintwork and yellow trimmings is a striking landmark. Constructed in 1897, at the height of Victorian romanticism, to resemble a Norwegian stave church, it was intended as a place of worship for the Anglican community. Wander inside to admire the simple but exquisite pine-carved interiors.

The two large mounds further up the road are a legacy from the Viking Age. The remains of a man and a woman were excavated, together with fragments of a boat, jewelry, and weapons. One of the mounds is crowned with an imposing bronze statue representing King Bele, a

central character in the saga on Fridtjof. The statue was commissioned in 1913 by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany as a gift to the community. He was a frequent visitor to Balestrand and also an avid reader of Norse sagas.

Further along the way you will find villas decorated in "Swiss style." These villas date from the 1890s and their drag-on-head décor was inspired by medieval Norwegian stave churches.

Jostedalsbreen glacier, the largest in Europe, is within easy reach of Balestrand. The ticket for an organized day trip to the glacier can be bought at the tourist office. It includes a ferry ride along the green-watered Fjaerlandsfjord, entry to the informative Glacier museum, and guided excursions to two of the glacier arms.

The hiking trails of Balestrand offer the opportunity to wander amid dramatic Norwegian scenery. Marked trails of varying difficulty are available. Rambling is a way of life to Norwegians, making them extremely fit people who rarely look as old as they are. The almost 1000-meter ascent takes you to the tip of Mount Raudmelen, one of the most imposing peaks in the commune. In good weather, Raudmelen's peak is the perfect place to feast your eyes on the stunning panoramas of Sognefjord. Only from that lofty height did I realize the gargantuan dimensions of the fjord, with its many branches, myriads of peaks, and the odd settlement here and there dotting the shores.

Since the 19th century, Balestrand has attracted artists seeking to capture the drama of the surrounding land and seascapes. Multi-talented Bjorg Bjoberg has kept this artistic tradition alive through her watercolors. She owns the tastefully renovated building by the quay, which she converted to Art Gallery and Norwegian Artefact museum. Bjorg is a key figure in the Balestrand community as she is also a local historian and a talented religious chanter. She finds inspiration in both the wild and the mild aspects of nature and transmits her feelings to others through her paintings. In her calm, welcoming manner, Bjorg epitomizes the hospitality of the Balestrand community. ■

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## FOR MORE INFO

**Traveling to Balestrand:** The best route to Balestrand from Oslo is to take the train to Myrdal mountain station (approx. 5 hours), then embark on the Flåmsbana, a wonderful train journey that takes you down the scenic Flåmsdale to Flåm (approx. 1 hour). At Flåm you can embark on the Express Ferry (approx. 2 hours) that will cruise you along Auralandsfjord to Balestrand. If you want to split the journey you can book a night or two at Flåm. The other option is to rent a car, but be prepared for very long drives.

[www.nsb.no/internet/en](http://www.nsb.no/internet/en) (schedules and prices for Oslo-Myrdal trains), [www.flamsbana.no/eng](http://www.flamsbana.no/eng) (schedules, prices, and information for Flåmsbana train), [www.fjord1.no/fylkesbaatane\\_en](http://www.fjord1.no/fylkesbaatane_en) (schedules and prices for Flåm-Balestrand ferry).

**Lodging in Balestrand:** Kviknes Hotel (Historic timber hotel built in a stunning location; expensive, [www.kviknes.no/go.cfm?id=81738](http://www.kviknes.no/go.cfm?id=81738)). Balestrand Hotel (Small, middle-of-the-range hotel; family run and friendly atmosphere, [www.balestrand.net](http://www.balestrand.net)). Kringsjå Hotel and vandrerheim (Budget prices, excellent breakfast, nice views. Kitchen available for residents' use. Owned by the same company that owns the aquarium [www.kringsja.no/ehotell.htm](http://www.kringsja.no/ehotell.htm)).

**Organized excursions from Balestrand:** Practically all tickets for ferries and excursions can be purchased from the Balestrand Tourist Office near the quay. [www.midsogn.com](http://www.midsogn.com) (tourist information about excursions, activities and round trips starting from Balestrand).

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