



Bergen - Norway's Capital of the Fjords

A Travel Feature by Richard Zahra

The city of Bergen, on Norway's western coast, is a big city with a small town feeling about it. It lies on a peninsula amidst fjord inlets, cradled by hills and mountains. Bergen is a thriving city with a cosmopolitan attitude, combining a dramatic setting with a bustling night life. It makes an excellent destination for travellers who want easy access to the western fjords of Norway and at the same time wish to indulge in active city life.

This unique city has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. It was founded by the Viking King, Olav Kyrre in 1070. During the thirteenth century, Bergen became the first capital of a united Norway and a great ecclesiastical centre.

In 1360 a group of German Hanseatic merchants set up an import/export business in Bergen, in the area known as Bryggen, on the north side of the Vågen harbour. As their business flourished, they dominated trade for 400 years and have been a major influence on the development of the city.

Bergen is also a city of heroes. During the German occupation of the 1940s, many young Bergensere defied the invaders and embarked on the dangerous sea route to Scotland. There they trained as resistance fighters to be smuggled back to Norway as members of sabotage groups. Strong feelings about those unhappy years still run high amongst the older generations.

Bergen city centre is very compact and can easily be explored on foot. The city's main historic attractions all lie within a fifteen-minute walk from the mouth of Vågen. I got a first glimpse of the imposing Håkon's Hall from the ferry as it eased its way through the harbour. Built between 1247 and 1261 by King Håkon Håkonsson, it was one of the largest and grandest stone buildings in Norway. When the monarchy left Bergen, the hall lost its stately function and was used throughout the ages as a store. Its historic value was rediscovered in the late 1800s when it was restored and richly decorated. In 1944, tragedy struck, when a Dutch-German ammunition ship blew up in the harbour below the hall. The hall's roof was blown into the air but after the war it was restored. The hall is now used for stately ceremonies.

Rosenkrantz tower, next to the hall, evolved from an earlier medieval tower – *the Keep by the Sea*. When Norway was ruled from Denmark, a series of governors entrenched themselves within the tower, fearing attack from the sea and also from the often troublesome Hanseatic merchants. Entry tickets to the place include a very informative guided tour of both the hall and the tower. From the top of the tower, you can get a sprawling view of the harbour area and the hills sheltering the city.

Bryggen, the wharf where the Hanseatic merchants had their offices and warehouses, still has the appeal of a medieval town. Walking along the dark, narrow alleys between the colourful wooden buildings, it is easy to step back five hundred years in time. The sturdy buildings have refused to retire, and still retain a commercial function as trendy shops and stylish nightclubs. If you want to delve further into Bryggen's history, a visit to the museum is a must. You will be able to see the foundations of the oldest buildings, dating from the twelfth century and artefacts illustrating the commercial activities of the merchants. Mariakirken, St Mary's Romanesque church, is one of Bergen's oldest buildings still in use. It was the merchants' church and is the natural sequel to the Bryggen museum.

Bergen teems with historic exhibits, so if you are a glutton, you'll satisfy your hunger. There's also a great Aquarium if you're a marine lover. If you are not too keen on museums and prefer outdoor activities, I suggest you rush to the Floibanen funicular. It will take you on a seven minute ride to the top of Mount Floyen, an ascent of 320 metres. From up there, you'll get the most spectacular vistas of the city and its harbours. You can then indulge in a hearty meal at the restaurant or take a coffee to recharge your batteries. If you have the stamina, you can then set out along one of the marked paths through the wooded uplands.

If you are on the lookout for city life, Bergen is definitely your place. While walking along Torget, my wife and I got caught up in the charming market atmosphere. Fruit, vegetables, flowers and souvenirs can all be bought at this bustling market, but rightly enough, its greatest attraction are the fish stalls. All kinds of fresh sea food, from salmon to giant prawns, are on sale. The pervading smell of fish has a historic quality, for it has lingered around the place for over 300 years! Try the traditional Norwegian snack that consists of a bread bun stuffed with freshly boiled shrimps and garnished with lemon and salad cream. For the less adventurous tastes, there are also stalls selling the all-time favourite – fish and chips!

During the evening, Torget will empty of its market stalls to give way to street entertainers. We had the luck to stumble upon a show by a juggler/comedian who was a carbon copy of Robin Williams. He spoke perfect English so we could laugh our hearts out at his jokes, with a vengeance! He also had the good taste of mocking himself before making fun of others.

Promenading along Vågen in the evening, you will notice that many of the crowded cafés that you saw in the morning will have transformed into trendy nightclubs, where music and expensive drink mix together in a merry cocktail. If you're out to have fun, that's the right time to be around!

Some must-visit attractions lie outside the city centre, but are easily accessible by bus. Troidhaugen, once the home of Norway's most famous composer, Edvard Grieg, is today a museum dedicated to him. The charming villa and gardens are superbly sited by the shore of picturesque Lake Nordås. Our visit to the museum was garnished by an old lady tourist guide, who delighted us with snapshots of Edvard Grieg's life. Grieg and his wife Nina enjoyed great fame. Both were very short, hence the name Troidhaugen – *the hill of the trolls*. The ashes of Grieg and his wife lie in the rock-face beneath the villa, overlooking the lake. It had been Grieg's wish to be buried where he could see the colourful sunset. Today, concerts are still being played at Troidhaugen, sometimes on Grieg's own piano!

Fantoft stave church can be reached by catching the same bus for Troidhaugen. It was originally built in Fortun-on-Sognefjord in 1150, but was moved to Fantoft in 1883. The present building was reconstructed after a fire completely destroyed the old building in 1992. Stave churches are unique to Norway. They were built in the middle ages, after the conversion from Nordic paganism to Christianity. Their dragon-scale roofs and dragonhead decorations are reminiscent of the Norway's Viking past.

Returning to the music theme, a visit to Ole Bull's villa on Lysoen Island is a worthwhile experience. Bull was a violin virtuoso, often referred to as Norway's Paganini. He had a beautiful summer residence built in 1873 and often got other artists and fellow musicians to join him. Bull's villa was decorated in eastern Moorish style and a wooded park, where guests could stroll at leisure, was planted around it. Today, you can still be Bull's guest and enjoy a nice trip to his island retreat. With a bit of imagination, you might even hear his violin playing faintly across the water.

If you've made up your mind to visit Bergen, a few practicalities would be in place. To reach Bergen from Oslo, there are basically two options. The first is to go directly by train. The second is to take the train from Oslo to Myrdal mountain station, go down to Flåm aboard the dramatic Flåmsbana train, and then take the express ferry that takes you along the 200-kilometre Sognefjord to Bergen. The second option takes longer but it allows you to tuck in some of the most breathtaking scenery in the world, from mountain-cradled fjords to rugged, weather-beaten islands. You could slice up the trip by spending a few days visiting quaint spots like Flåm and Balestrand on the way to Bergen – an exhilarating experience! The ferry leaves Flåm daily so transport to Bergen will always be readily available.

Once in Bergen, the best thing to do is to hop into the graceful, old building that is the Tourist information office, just opposite the Torget fish market. It is very well-run and there you can obtain information and free leaflets about all the city's attractions. All kinds of entry and transport tickets are sold there, together with the very useful, cost-effective *Bergen Card* that allows you unlimited transport and free entry to most of Bergen's attractions. Be sure to take a copy of the Bergen city plan and the latest Bergen Guide before you leave the place! As I said before, Bergen's centre is compact enough to be explored by foot but if you hate walking, buses are efficient and easy to use.

Centuries of international trade have made of Bergen a cosmopolitan and visitor-friendly city. The few days we have spent in Bergen were marked by a scorching sun. However, I was warned, Bergen is notorious for rainy weather, so we must have seen Bergen at its best! Don't be daunted though; you are sure to get a warm welcome from the outgoing and quick-witted Bergensere that will make up for any whims of the weather! In rain or shine, Bergen will provide a rich blend of past and present to send you back home happily satisfied.

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