

The Best of Norway

The “Land of the Midnight Sun” offers a truly unique experience. Norwegians view their scrub-covered islands, snow-crested peaks, and glacier-born fjords as symbols of a wilderness culture. The majestic scenery inspired the symphonies of Grieg, the plays of Ibsen, and the paintings of Munch. The landscape has also shaped the Norwegians’ view of themselves as pastoral dwellers in one of the world’s most splendid countrysides.

The name *Norway* (in Norwegian, *Norge* or *Noreg*) is derived from *Norvegr*, meaning “the way to the north.” The Vikings used the term more than 1,000 years ago to describe the shipping route along the west coast of Norway. Norwegians have been seafarers since the dawn of history, so it seems natural for the country to have a nautical name.

To the ancients, Norway was a mythical land. A journey held unspeakable perils. Writers called the mythical land “Ultima Thule” and feared that strange, barbaric, even fabulous creatures inhabited it. In the 4th century B.C., the Greek writer Pytheas thought the laws of nature did not apply there and said that everything—water and earth included—floated in midair. In what may have been an attempt to describe a snowstorm, Herodotus claimed that in Norway, feathers covered everything and constantly blew into one’s face.

Norway is a land of tradition, exemplified by its rustic stave churches and its folk dances. But Norway is also modern. This technologically advanced nation is rich in petroleum and hydroelectric energy. Norwegians also enjoy a well-developed national social insurance system that provides pensions, health insurance, unemployment insurance, and rehabilitation assistance. The system is financed by contributions from the insured, which makes Norway one of the most heavily taxed nations on earth.

One of the last great natural frontiers of the world, Norway invites exploration, with its steep and jagged fjords, salmon-filled rivers, glaciers, mountains, and meadows. In the winter, the shimmering aurora borealis (northern lights) are the lure, before giving way to the midnight sun of summer.

So you won’t have to exhaust yourself making difficult decisions, we’ve compiled the best deals and once-in-a-lifetime experiences in this chapter. What follows is the best of the best.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Enjoying Nature:** Norway is one of the last major countries of the world where you can experience a close encounter with nature in one of the last partially unspoiled wildernesses in the world. The country extends 1,770km (1,097 miles) from south to north (approximately the distance from New York to Miami). Norway is riddled with 20,000km (12,400

miles) of fjords, narrows, and straits. It's a land of contrasts, with soaring mountains, panoramic fjords, ice-blue glaciers, deep-green forests, fertile valleys, and rich pastures. The glowing red midnight sun and the northern lights have fired the imaginations of artists and craftspeople for centuries (see below).

- **Experiencing “Norway in a Nutshell”:** One of Europe's great train rides, this 12-hour excursion is Norway's most exciting. The route encompasses two arms of the Sognefjord, and the section from Myrdal to Flåm—a drop of 600m (1,968 ft.)—takes you past seemingly endless waterfalls. Tours leave from the Bergen train station. If you have limited time but want to see the country's most dramatic scenery, take this spectacular train trip. See “Flåm: Stopover on Europe's Most Scenic Train Ride” (p. 307).
- **Visiting the North Cape:** For many, a trip to one of the northernmost inhabited areas of the world will be the journey of a lifetime. Accessible by ship, car, or air, the North Cape fascinates travelers in a way that outweighs its bleakness. Ship tours started in 1879 and, except in wartime, have gone to the Cape ever since. Hammerfest, the world's northernmost town of significant size, is an important port of call for North Cape steamers. See p. 427.
- **Exploring the Fjord Country:** Stuningly serene and majestic, Norway's fjords are some of the world's most

awe-inspiring sights. The fjords are reason enough for a trip to Norway. Bergen can be your gateway; two of the country's most famous fjords, the Hardangerfjord and the Sognefjord, can easily be explored from here. If you have time for only one, our vote goes to the Sognefjord for its sheer, lofty walls rising to more than 1,000m (3,280 ft.) along its towering cliffs. Sheer cliff faces and cascading waterfalls create a kind of fantasy landscape. As Norway's longest fjord, the Sognefjord can be crossed by express steamer to Gudvangen. You can go on your own or take an organized tour, which will probably include the dramatic Folgefonn Glacier. See p. 292.

- **Seeing the Midnight Sun at the Arctic Circle:** This is one of the major reasons visitors go to Norway. The Arctic Circle marks the boundary of the midnight sun of the Arctic summer and the sunless winters of the north. The midnight sun can be seen from the middle of May until the end of July. The Arctic Circle cuts across Norway south of Bodø. Bus excursions from that city visit the circle. The adventurous few who arrive in the winter miss the midnight sun but are treated to a spectacular display of the aurora borealis, the flaming spectacle of the Arctic winter sky. In ancient times, when the aurora could be seen farther south, people thought it was an omen of disaster. See chapter 15.

2 The Best Scenic Towns & Villages

- **Fredrikstad:** Founded in 1567 at the mouth of the River Glomma, Fredrikstad preserved its Old Town, which had become a fortress by 1667. Today Fredrikstad (97km/60 miles

south of Oslo) offers a glimpse of what a Norwegian town looked like several hundred years ago. The old buildings in the historic district have been converted into studios for

craftspeople and artisans, while maintaining their architectural integrity. After a visit here, you can drive along Oldtidsveien (the “highway of the ancients”), the most concentrated collection of archaeological monuments in Norway. See “Fredrikstad: Norway’s Oldest Fortified Town” (p. 157).

- **Tønsberg:** On the western bank of the Oslofjord, this is Norway’s oldest town. It was founded in 872, a year before King Harald Fairhair united parts of Norway and the Viking town became a royal coronation site. Its hill fortress is sometimes called “the Acropolis of Norway.” Its ancient district, Nordbyen, is filled with well-preserved houses, and the folk museum houses a treasure trove of Viking-era artifacts. See “Tønsberg: The First Settlement” (p. 167).
- **Bergen:** The gateway to Norway’s fjord country, this town is even more scenic than the capital, Oslo. It was the capital of Norway for 6 centuries and a major outpost of the medieval Hanseatic merchants. The town’s biggest tourist event is the Bergen International Music Festival, but there are also many year-round attractions. Many visitors come to

explore Bergen’s museums (including Edvard Grieg’s former home) as well as its varied environs—especially fjords, mountains, and waterfalls. See p. 264.

- **Trondheim:** Norway’s third-largest city traces its history from 997, when the Vikings flourished. Norway’s kings are crowned at the ancient cathedral, Nidaros Cathedral. Scandinavia’s largest medieval building, the cathedral was erected over the grave of St. Olaf (also spelled Olav), the Viking king. Trondheim is the popular stopover for travelers from Oslo to destinations north of the Arctic Circle. See chapter 13.
- **Bodø:** Lying 1,305km (809 miles) north of Oslo, this far-northern seaport, the terminus of the Nordland railway, is the gateway to the Arctic Circle, which lies just south of this breezy town. Another excellent place to observe the midnight sun from June 1 to July 13, Bodø is the capital of Nordland. From the center, you can also explore the environs, filled with glaciers and “bird islands.” Bodø is also a gateway to the remote Lofoten Islands. See “Bodø: Gateway to the North” (p. 393).

3 The Best Festivals & Special Events

For more details on these events, see “Norway Calendar of Events” in chapter 2.

- **Bergen International Festival:** This European cultural highlight, which takes place in late May and early June, ranks in importance with the Edinburgh and Salzburg festivals. Major artists from all over the world descend on the small city to perform music, drama, opera, ballet, folkloric presentations, and more. The works of Bergen native Edvard Grieg dominate the festival, and daily concerts are held at his former home, Trolldhaugen.

Contemporary plays are also performed, but the major focus is on the works of Ibsen. See p. 25.

- **Molde International Jazz Festival:** In this “City of Roses,” Norway’s oldest jazz festival is held every summer, usually around mid-July. Some of the best jazz artists in the world wing in for this event. People stay up most of the night listening to music and drinking beer. Sometimes the best concerts are the impromptu jam sessions in smoky little clubs. See “Molde: City of Roses” (p. 331).

- **Holmenkollen Ski Festival:** This large ski festival takes place in March at the Holmenkollen Ski Jump, on the outskirts of Oslo. The agenda is

packed with everything from international ski-jumping competitions to Norway's largest cross-country race for amateurs. See p. 25.

4 The Best Active Vacations

- **Fishing:** The cold, clear waters of Norway's freshwater streams are renowned for their salmon and trout, and the storm-tossed seas off the coast have traditionally provided enough cod and mackerel to satisfy most of the nation's population. Serious anglers sometimes end up losing themselves in the majesty of the scenery. Tips on fishing in and around the Norwegian fjords are provided by the **Bergen Sportsfiskere (Bergen Angling Association)**, Fosswinckelsgate 37, Bergen (☎ 55-32-11-64), and the tourist information offices in Oslo and Bergen. Rural hotels throughout the nation can also give pointers on good spots. For a truly unusual fishing experience, **Borton Overseas** (☎ 800/843-0602; www.bortonoverseas.com) can arrange treks and accommodations in old-fashioned fishermen's cottages in the isolated Lofoten Islands. The rustic-looking, fully renovated cottages are adjacent to the sea. Rentals are for 3 days and include bed linens, maid service, boat rentals, and fishing equipment. For our favorite fishing hole recommendations, refer to "The Best Fishing," below.
- **Hiking:** The woods (*Marka*) around Oslo boast thousands of kilometers of trails, hundreds of which are lit for nighttime use. If you don't want to leave the city, Frogner Park also has many paths. Any Norwegian regional tourist bureau can advise you about

hiking. In Bergen, for example, refer to the **Bergen Touring Club** (p. 280), whose members have spent years hiking through the western fjord country and can advise about the best trails. For our favorite hikes, refer to "The Best Hikes," below.

- **Skiing:** This is the undisputed top winter sport in Norway, attracting top-notch skiers and neophytes from around the world. Norway is a pioneer in promoting skiing as a sport for persons with disabilities. Modern facilities comparable to those in Europe's alpine regions dot the landscape. If you're a serious skier, consider the best winter resorts, in Voss, Geilo, and Lillehammer (site of the 1994 Winter Olympics). See "Lillehammer of Olympic Glory" (p. 181) and "Voss: A Winter Playground" and "Geilo: A Winter Wonderland" (p. 299 and p. 309). For our choices for the best downhill skiing and the best cross-country skiing, see below.
- **Mountain Climbing:** Local tourist offices can offer advice. What we like best are guided hikes to the archaeological digs of the 8,000-year-old Stone Age settlements near the Hardangerjøkulen (Hardanger Glacier). The digs are about an hour's drive north of the mountain resort of Geilo. For information, contact the **Geilo Tourist Office** (☎ 32-09-59-00). See "Geilo: A Winter Wonderland" (p. 309).

5 The Best Hikes

- **Besseggen Ridge:** In the Jotunheimen Nasjonal Park, Norway's greatest park, you'll find a landscape of glaciers, mountains, lakes, and waterfalls, crowned by two towering peaks, Glittertind at 2,452m (8,043 ft.) and Galdhøpiggen at 2,469m (8,098 ft.), the highest peak in northern Europe. This park also boasts the country's most justifiably popular hike across Besseggen Ridge, towering over one of the country's most beautiful lakes, Gjende, which earned the praise of Henrik Ibsen, among others. The trail along the ridge links the remote mountain lodges of Memurubø and Gjendesheim. See p. 196.
- **Preikestolen:** Outside the city of Stavanger, on the western coast of Norway, you can take one of the most memorable hikes in this part of the world, through scenic fjord country with mountain landscapes as a backdrop. The ultimate goal is Pulpit Rock (its English name), with a vertical drop of 609m (1,998 ft.) over the stunningly blue Lysefjord. You can drive to a rock car park to begin a hike of 4km (2½ miles). The hike has a height difference of 350m (1,148 ft.); it begins steeply, climbing past rocky, even boggy sections before the final ascent. The cliffs are exposed

and extremely windy, but all this is part of the Norwegian experience. Despite an alarming crack in the rock, making it look as if you're about to plunge to your death in the fjord below, geologists claim it will take thousands of years for the rock to break apart. Once on the rock, looking down at the 42km (26-mile) fjord, you'll perhaps understand why poets have praised its "ethereal light." See p. 244.

- **Lofoten Fishing Villages:** The best hikes in Norway don't always have to be up steep mountains. In the remote Lofotens in the north of Norway, while based on the glaciated island of **Moskenesøy**, we like to hike along a seascape of little fishing villages stacked up one after the other like a string of pearls. The mountain peak of Hermansdalstind, rising to 1,029m (3,375 ft.), offers a scenic backdrop. Begin in the north at the little fishing village of Hamnøy, then hike southward to other quaint settlements at Sakrisøy, Reine, Moskenes, Sørvågen, and the curiously named Å. To extend the hike at Sørvågen for another 2 hours, you can hike inland along a signposted rambler's trail to get acquainted with the interior of a Lofoten island. See "The Lofoten Islands: The Soul of Norway" (p. 403).

6 The Best Downhill Skiing

- **Lillehammer:** It may not be Switzerland, but Norway has its own alpine skiing, a lot of it centered at Lillehammer. The skiing at Lillehammer, Norway's oldest ski resort, is so superb that the 1994 Olympic committee chose the resort as the site of its winter games. **Hafjell Alpine Center** lies 9.3km (5¾ miles) north of the center and was the main venue

for the Olympic alpine competitions, offering seven lifts and 20km (12 miles) of alpine slopes. The longest slope at Hafjell is 7km (4¼ miles) long, and there's a wide range of alpine slopes for different levels of skiing proficiency. The Lillehammer mountains lie 850m (2,788 ft.) above sea level. See "Lillehammer of Olympic Glory" (p. 181).

- **Geilo:** Superior to Voss but not an Olympic ski spectacle like Lillehammer, Geilo features five different ski centers. The best is the Geilo Skiheiser, with 24km (15 miles) of slopes, many as exciting as those in Gstaad, Switzerland. The area is also equipped with 18 lifts and a “ski-board” tunnel. Cable cars will take you to the top of the resort at 1,060m (3,477 ft.) above sea level. From that point, marked trails split off in many directions. See “Geilo: A Winter Wonderland” (p. 309).
- **Voss:** This winter resort is a virtual ski circus with eight chairlifts and an aerial cableway carrying passengers up to a peak of 788m (2,625 ft.). In all, there are 40km (25 miles) of alpine slopes that have been compared favorably to those in western Austria. One ski lift climbs 900m (2,952 ft.) from Traastolen to the top of the mountain of Slettafjell, with a wide and varied choice of downhill runs. See “Voss: A Winter Playground” (p. 299).

7 The Best Cross-Country Skiing

- **Lillehammer:** The Olympic resort in central Norway boasts 402km (249 miles) of prepared cross-country tracks, 6km (3¾ miles) of which are illuminated. From mid-December, cross-country skiers arrive from all over Europe and sometimes America to test out the well-groomed trails. The landscape is even more beautiful than that found in Geilo (see below), though it may be gross to some to compare one scenic landscape with another. However, Lillehammer is set in an area of Norway that contains its highest mountains and its best-known national parks, making it a cross-country-skiing paradise as you glide across the dramatic Hardangervidda Plateau. See “Lillehammer of Olympic Glory” (p. 181).
- **Peer Gynt Ski Area:** Consistently, Norwegian skiers rate this beautiful countryside as one of the best venues for cross-country skiing. Since it’s a part of the same region, the landscape encountered cross-country is virtually the same as for Lillehammer. This vast ski region in central Norway is most suitable for those skiers who’d like to combine cross-country skiing with alpinelike slopes. For cross-country skiers, there are 460km (285 miles) of well-prepared trails; in winter, floodlit trails in Espedalen and in Gålå make it possible to go cross-country skiing at night. A ski bus links all the main resorts, such as Espedalen, Fefor, and Gålå. See p. 192.
- **Geilo:** For more than a century, Geilo, in a central location in southern Norway, has excelled as a ski resort. At 800m (2,624 ft.) above sea level, it lies halfway between Bergen and Oslo, and is even more dramatically situated than Voss, its major competitor. The Hallingskarvet Mountain—frosted with several small glaciers—is its “backbone,” and it stands on the largest mountain plateau. Cross-country skiers will find a total of 220km (136 miles) of well-groomed and -marked trails through forests, hills, and moors. You’ll traverse the Hardangervidda National Park, which is 3,430 sq. km (1,334 sq. miles) in area. This is some of the most beautiful and protected tundra in Norway and home of Norway’s largest herds of wild reindeer, called caribou. See “Geilo: A Winter Wonderland” (p. 309).

8 The Best Fishing

- **Alta:** In the north of Norway, 1,989km (1,233 miles) north of Oslo, this frontier outpost is known for having the best salmon-fishing waters in the world. Hook up with **AKU**, Storengveien 26 (☎ **78-43-48-40**; www.aku-finnmark.no), which leads salmon-fishing trips. It also offers deep-sea fishing and can arrange outings for fishing below glaciers, along with boat rentals and fishing tackle. See p. 422.
- **Suldalslågen:** Lying to the north of the western port city of Stavanger, this is the longest salmon river in the west. No license is required if you're angling for saltwater fish. Founded more than a century ago, **Lindum** (☎ **52-79-91-61**) is the best fishing lodge in Norway. The salmon season here lasts from July to September. See p. 237.
- **Fjord Fishing:** Bergen and its environs lay claim to the best fjord fishing in the west. The area is known for its catches of haddock, coalfish, cod, and mackerel. You can fish in the sea without a permit, though fishing in freshwater streams and ponds requires a permit arranged through the **Bergen Angling Association** (p. 280). The best charter outfitter in the area is the **Rjfylke Fjord Tour** (☎ **91-15-90-48**), offering 2-hour fishing trips departing from Bergen twice daily. See p. 280.

9 The Most Scenic Boat Trips

- **Sognefjord:** If you take only one fjord trip in your life, make it that panoramic marvel known as Sognefjord in western Norway. Excursions leave from the harbor at Bergen (p. 286). As you sail along, it's like a fantasy look at Norway, with the deep blue fjord waters broken by many waterfalls. Sognefjord is the longest fjord in Norway, stretching for a distance of 205km (127 miles), until it reaches the mountains of the Jotunheimen National Park. But most fjord excursions end long before that happens. Along the banks of this fjord—best explored in the late spring and summer—are farms, 19th-century villages, and lush landscapes. In springtime plum, pear, apple, and cherry trees grow in profusion.
- **Oslofjord:** A web of cays, skerries, sandbars, and towering rocky banks parades before you when you take one of the Båtservice sightseeing boats that make summer trips from Oslo along this historic old fjord, the former stamping grounds of the Vikings. You'll sail aboard one of a trio of sloops with 19th-century rigging, one dating from 1892. Included in the cost are large buckets of Norwegian shrimp served buffet style. See p. 137.
- **Telemark Canal:** Norway's answer to the Panama Canal, the 1892 Telemark Canal carries boats from its gateway, the southern city of Skien. As you sail along, you'll penetrate deep into the panoramic countryside of Norway with its lakes, rivers, and dark forests that you just know are inhabited by trolls. You can also see some of the marvelous feats of engineering that made such a boat ride possible. See p. 216.
- **Coastal Steamer to the North Cape:** One of the sea voyages of a lifetime, the route along the west coast of Norway from Bergen to the remote northern frontier town of Kirkenes is

plied by elegantly comfortable coastal steamers. Passengers and cargo are carried to 34 ports. Along the way, ships sail through some of the lesser known but most beautiful fjords in the country. Passengers are allowed to

make excursions into the mountains and across glacier country. The highlight of the sea voyage—with the most evocative scenery—is a visit to Nordkapp (North Cape), at the top of Europe. See p. 430.

10 The Most Unforgettable Landscapes/Drives

- **Overland Route Oslo/Bergen:** The mountainous drive from Oslo to Bergen is one of the grand scenic trips of Europe. You'll go through mountain passes and even make a ferry crossing here and there. Along the way, you'll pass fjords and snow-capped mountains, along with waterfalls, fjord villages, and even an ancient stave church. The most memorable stopover is at the town of Flåm, which lies on the Aurlandsfjord, a tip of the Sognefjord, the most scenic fjord in Norway (p. 286). If time allows, we recommend that you allow at least 2 days for this memorable motor tour. Faced with a choice of the northern or southern route, we prefer the southern. See "Flåm: Stopover on Europe's Most Scenic Train Ride," for specific directions (p. 307).
- **Electric Train from Myrdal to Flåm:** In our view, there is no more scenic train ride in Europe—even in Switzerland—than the ride from Myrdal to the village of Flåm. There's no railway line of this adhesion type anywhere in the world steeper than this railway; the train and track were designed so that they would lock into each other with greater adhesion than smooth tracks. The trip is 19km (12 miles) long and takes 50 minutes. During that time you'll travel 883m (2,896 ft.) up a steep mountain gorge and down again. Picture 20 tunnels and spectacular waterfalls in what we'd rate as the most beautiful and lushest mountain scenery in Norway. See p. 307.
- **The Route to the North Cape:** If you're up for it—and we know our readers are hardy people—you can leave Bergen and drive to the Arctic Circle in a relatively relaxed 3 days. To push on, you can even drive from Bergen to the North Cape in 5 days. Locals call the route north The Arctic Highway. The road, which is well maintained, allows you to experience the majestic beauty of the far north of Norway as you move toward polar-bear country. Those who've driven in the far north of Alaska will roughly know what to expect. Fertile fields in the south in the fjord country give way to lakes and dark forests. In summer you'll be driving into the land of the midnight sun. The Arctic Highway is faster, but the Kystriksveien Coast Route allows the most dramatic views of the landscape and seascape. As for what to see and where to stop over along the route, see chapter 15 for suggestions.
- **Hardangerfjord:** For the best motoring along a fjord, we suggest the Hardangerfjord, centered in the town of Loftus, former retreat of composer Edvard Grieg and other well-known artists. You can take in the scenery of this fjord by either a boat ride or a motor trip along its shores. The fjord stretches a total distance of 179km (111 miles), and there are panoramic waterfalls on each of its banks. Along the way, you can take in views of the Folgefonna, Norway's third-largest glacier, stretching for 37km (23 miles). See (p. 292).

11 The Best Wildlife Viewing

- **Dovrefjell National Park:** In central Norway, Dovrefjell (p. 200) is one of Norway's great national parks. You can see reindeer in the park, and it's also a habitat for the wolverine and the arctic fox, but don't count on seeing these elusive creatures. Many visitors come here just for a glimpse of the musk ox. While this unusual species almost vanished during World War II, careful breeding has brought it back in very limited herds. To see the rare animal, which may not make it through the century, you need to go on one of the safaris conducted by **Moskus Safari Dovrefjell**. See p. 201.
- **Rondane Nasjonalpark:** Entered through the little town of Jeska, this national park was the first ever to open in Norway, having been created

in 1962. Peppered with little lakes and rivers, the park is famous throughout Norway for being inhabited by more than two dozen types of animals, including reindeer. Rondane is also home to some 125 different species of birds, making it a regular birder's Valhalla. See p. 200.

- **The Puffins of Vaerøy:** In the remote Lofoten Islands in the north of Norway, you'll come across one of Europe's great bird-watching retreats. The thinly populated island is the nesting place for more than 1.5 million seabirds, including sea eagles, auks, guillemots, kittiwakes, cormorants, the arctic tern, petrels, gulls, and other species, which breed from May to August. Many birders come here just to see the famous puffins at the seabird rookeries. See p. 419.

12 The Best Hotels

- **Grand Hotel** (Oslo; ☎ 800/223-5652 in the U.S., or 23-21-20-00; www.grand.no): This is Norway's premier hotel, the last of Oslo's classic old-world palaces. It opened in 1874 and is still going strong. Ibsen and Munch were regular visitors. Constant renovations keep the hotel up-to-date and in great shape. The opulent suites house the Nobel Peace Prize winner every year. See p. 81.
- **Hotel Bristol** (Oslo; ☎ 22-82-60-00; www.bristol.no): Inspired by Edwardian-era British taste, the interior design is the most lavish and ornate in Oslo. You'll enter a world of rich paneling, leather chairs, glittering chandeliers, and carved pillars. The most inviting area is the bar off the lobby, decorated in a library motif. The guest rooms boast painted classic furnishings and rich fabrics. See p. 85.
- **Skagen Brygge Hotell** (Stavanger; ☎ 51-85-00-00; www.Skagenbryggehotell.no): Southwestern Norway's most architecturally impressive hotel at the harborfront duplicates the look of a string of antique warehouses that used to stand here. Some of the preferred bedrooms are in the original 19th-century core. Accommodations in the newer section contain large windows and more modern furnishings. See p. 230.
- **Radisson SAS Hotel Norge** (Bergen; ☎ 800/333-3333 in the U.S., or 55-57-30-00; www.radissonsas.com): This grand hotel on Norway's west coast is sleek, modern, and cosmopolitan. The center of Bergen's major social events, the hotel is both traditional and handsomely up-to-date. It's also equipped with all the amenities guests expect in a deluxe hotel,

and highly professional service. See p. 255.

- **Solstrand Hotel & Bad** (Os, outside Bergen; ☎ 56-57-11-00; www.solstrand.com): This is the finest hotel in the fjord district around the city of Bergen. Dating back to 1896, the hotel evokes the nostalgia of the Belle Epoque era, and you'll be coddled in comfort in cheerfully decorated bedrooms. Come here for a vacation retreat instead of an overnight stopover. See p. 259.
- **Dr. Holms Hotel** (Geilo; ☎ 32-09-57-00; www.drholms.com): One of Norway's most famous resort hotels, this establishment was opened by Dr. Holms in 1909. It still stands for elegance, comfort, and tradition, all of which are especially evident during the winter ski season. The hotel offers beautifully furnished rooms with classic styling and two new wings

with a swimming complex. Famed musical artists often perform here. See p. 311.

- **Clarion Collection Hotel Grand Olav** (Trondheim; ☎ 73-80-80-80; www.choicehotels.no): This is the most stylish hotel in Norway's medieval capital, a tasteful enclave of comfort and good living. Located next to the city's concert house, the property is modern, filled with amenities, and imaginatively decorated. See p. 341.
- **Rica Ishavshotel** (Tromsø; ☎ 77-66-64-00; www.rica.no): Although chain-owned and -run, this is the best hotel in the chilly north of Norway. From its dramatic perch, the hotel provides views in all directions. Looking like a space-age yacht, it nicely houses guests near the pier where the coastal steamers stop. See p. 373.

13 The Most Charming Inns & Resorts

- **Dalen Hotel** (Dalen i Telemark; ☎ 35-07-70-00; www.dalenshotel.no): At the terminus of the Telemark Canal, the Dalen Hotel's architecture is studded with dragon heads and Viking-inspired gingerbread. Built in 1894 and still going strong, it has kept abreast of the times. It's the kind of nostalgic and evocative Norway that we like, filled with comforting but also whimsical architecture—including towers, turrets, and wide verandas. You'll be wine and dined royally here—after all, the King of Siam once was a guest. See p. 216.
- **Hotel Ullensvang** (Loftus i Harganger; ☎ 53-67-00-00; www.hotelullensvang.no): Our favorite inn within the fjord country, the Ullensvang from 1846 lies on the bank of the Hardangerfjord. Once it was the retreat of the composer

Edvard Grieg, whose piano is still in a cottage on the grounds. Expanded over the years, the hotel has been run by the same family for four generations. These family members extend a hearty Norwegian welcome to their guests, whom they feed and house most comfortably. See p. 292.

- **Fretheim Hotel** (Flåm; ☎ 57-63-63-00; www.fretheim-hotel.no). Set in the midst of an impressive scenery of mountains and waterfalls, this 1866 hotel opens onto a panoramic vista of fjord waters. Long renowned for its hospitality and now equipped with a modern annex, it houses you comfortably in attractive and well-maintained bedrooms. Salmon is the chef's specialty in the hotel's first-class restaurant. See p. 308.
- **Union Hotel** (Geiranger; ☎ 70-26-83-00; www.union-hotel.no): Located

at one of the most majestic fjords in Norway, the Geirangerfjord, this is a celebrated 1891 family-style hotel. Kings, queens, and kaisers have found lodgings here in the beautifully furnished bedrooms, many with private balconies opening onto the water. The hotel's restaurant is one of the best and most traditional in the area, featuring a classic Norwegian buffet of the groaning-table variety. See p. 322.

- **Hotel Mundal** (Fjaerland; ☎ 57-69-31-01): On the banks of the

Fjaerlandsfjord, a scenic branch of the greater Sognefjord, this hotel has been run by the same family since it opened its doors back in 1891. With its peaked roofs, wooden scrollwork, round tower, and cavernous dining room, it is one of Norway's most classic hotel examples of Victorian architecture. Modern improvements have ensured that it's still a wonderful choice to base yourself in one of the most scenic parts of the western fjord country. See p. 315.

14 The Best Restaurants

- **Bagatelle** (Oslo; ☎ 22-44-63-97): Owner-chef Eyvind Hellström has made a grand cuisine a great cuisine with his expertise in market-fresh ingredients. He still focuses on seafood, insisting on the best and freshest catch of the day. Anticipate a light, modern French and Continental cuisine, served with flair. See p. 104.
- **Oro** (Oslo; ☎ 23-01-02-40): A hyperstylish restaurant, Oro is as good as it gets in Norway's capital, ranking right up there with anything Norway has to offer. The Continental cuisine at this first-class dining citadel evokes the best of Paris's restaurants. See p. 93.
- **Statholderens Krostue** (Oslo; ☎ 22-41-88-00): Gourmets from all over Norway have flocked here to sample chef Bent Stiansen's interpretation of modern Norwegian cooking. Stiansen is almost fanatically tuned to what's best in any season, and he serves some of the capital's finest dishes. He uses great imagination and widely varied ingredients—everything from arctic char to a rare vanilla bean imported from Thailand. See p. 100.
- **Restaurant Julius Fritznér** (Oslo; ☎ 23-21-20-00): One of the most impressive dining establishments to

make its debut in Norway in the mid-1990s, this restaurant in the Grand Hotel is still getting rave reviews. The chef uses only the finest Scandinavian ingredients in contemporary and traditional dishes; the emphasis is on enhancing and balancing flavors rather than creating surprises. See p. 93.

- **Bilbao** (Stavanger; ☎ 51-53-33-00): A fine international and Spanish cuisine lures the oil barons of this rich city to this converted 1860 building. A product of a combined Norwegian and Basque partnership, the downstairs is an informal bodega, like a tavern in the Pyrenees, and upstairs is the more formal dining venue, featuring a cuisine that is both upscale and savory. See p. 233.
- **Finnegaardstuene** (Bergen; ☎ 55-55-03-00): In a converted Hanseatic League warehouse, this Norwegian-French restaurant is one of the finest in western Norway. The cuisine revolves around only the freshest ingredients, especially fish. The kitchen uses classical French preparation methods to create such delectable items as lime-marinated turbot in caviar sauce or breast of duck in lime-and-fig sauce. See p. 260.

- **Lucullus** (Bergen; ☎ 55-30-68-20): Quiet luxury and refinement mark this deluxe gourmet choice, serving an artful Continental cuisine in the Neptun Hotel. Dishes are prepared with such top-quality ingredients and with such flair that we wouldn't dream of criticizing them. Savor the latest offerings, including the namesake filet of beef Lucullus, our favorite. See p. 259.
- **Emma's Drømmekjøkken** (Tromsø; ☎ 77-63-77-30): Anne Brit, called "Emma," operates this dream kitchen and is the best-known culinary personality in the north of Norway. Although she uses mainly ingredients from the north, often fish from Arctic waters, she wanders the globe for her flavors, which might include everything from chile to wasabi. See p. 376.

15 The Best Museums

- **Viking Ship Museum** (Oslo): Three stunning burial vessels from the Viking era were excavated on the shores of the Oslofjord and are now displayed in Bygdøy, Oslo's "museum island." The most spectacular is the *Oseberg*, from the 9th century, a 20m (66-ft.) dragon ship with a wealth of ornaments. See p. 119.
- **Edvard Munch Museum** (Oslo): Here you'll find the most significant collection of the work of Edvard Munch (1863–1944), Scandinavia's most noted artist. The museum, his gift to the city, contains a staggering treasure trove: 1,100 paintings, 4,500 drawings, and about 18,000 prints. See p. 113.
- **Norwegian Folk Museum** (Oslo): Some 140 original buildings from all over Norway were shipped here and reassembled on 14 hectares (35 acres) at Bygdøy. Although Scandinavia is known for such open-air museums, this one is the best. The buildings range from a rare stave church constructed around 1200 to one of the oldest wooden buildings still standing in Norway. Old-time Norwegian life is captured here like nowhere else. See p. 117.
- **Vigelandsparken** (Oslo): This stunning park in western Oslo displays the lifetime work of Gustav Vigeland, the country's greatest sculptor. In 30-hectare (74-acre) Frogner Park, you can see more than 200 sculptures in granite, bronze, and iron, including *Angry Boy*, his most celebrated work. See p. 118.
- **Det Hanseatiske Museum** (Bergen): Depicting commercial life on the wharf in the early 18th century, this museum is housed in one of the city's best-preserved wooden buildings. German Hanseatic merchants lived in similar medieval houses near the harbor. See p. 269.

16 The Best Buys

Most of the products mentioned below are available at better shops in Oslo and Bergen; see "Shopping" in chapters 6 and 11.

- **Ceramics:** In the 1960s and 1970s, Norway earned a reputation among potters and stoneware enthusiasts for its chunky, utilitarian pottery. The trend today is to emulate the fragile, more decorative designs popular in France, England, and Germany, so Norwegian ceramists are producing thinner, more delicate, and more ornate forms. The best selection is

found at **Tibords Interiør Bergen Storsenter** (☎ 55-55-33-41) in Bergen. See p. 281.

- **Costumes:** Norway boasts more than 450 regional costumes, especially in the coastal communities. The original fishermen's sweater was knit of naturally colored wool (beige, brown, black, or off-white) in a deliberately large size and then washed in hot water so that it shrank. The tightly woven sweater could then resist water. Modern versions of these sweaters are known for their nubby texture, sophisticated patterns, and varying shades of single colors. The best purveyor of Norwegian costumes and folk dress from both north and south is **Heimen Husflid** in Oslo (☎ 22-41-40-50). See p. 145.
- **Crystal:** In Norway you can buy flawless crystal that's as clear as a Nordic iceberg. Norwegian tastes lean toward the clean, uncluttered look, stressing line, form, and harmony. Crystal is

sold at many stores, especially in Bergen and Oslo, but we've consistently been impressed with the selection on display at the prestigious **Norway Designs** (☎ 23-11-45-10) in Oslo. See p. 142.

- **Knitwear:** Many visitors eagerly seek Norwegian knitwear. Among the best buys are hand-knit or "half-handmade" garments. The latter, knit on electric looms, are so personalized and made in such small quantities that only an expert can tell that they aren't completely handmade. The tradition of women hand-knitting sweaters while rocking a cradle or tending a fire thrives in rural Norway, especially during the long winter. Beautifully made Norwegian knitwear is on sale at **Norway Designs** (☎ 23-11-45-10; p. 142) in Oslo, and there's an especially large selection at the **Oslo Sweater Shop** (☎ 22-42-42-45; p. 146), also in Oslo.

17 The Best Websites

- **Norwegian Tourist Board, www.visitnorway.com:** This is the official travel guide to Norway, welcoming you to this far-northern outpost with lots of tips on attractions and special interests, accommodations, dining, and entertainment, along with maps and notes on the weather.
- **Norway.com, www.norway.com:** This is a good website for Norway, covering all the major cities, not just Oslo and Bergen, but Ålesund, Tønsberg, Hamar, Kristiansand S, and Lillehammer, among others. Travel-planning data is highlighted, as are the best travel deals.
- **Explore Fjord Norway, www.fjordnorway.com:** This site focuses on one of Scandinavia's most visited attractions, the fjord country of western

Norway. It provides information on fjord trips and cruises, with details for the active vacationer on climbing, walking, and cycling, plus information about fjord culture.

- **Cruise Norway, www.cruisenorway.com:** This site previews the best itineraries for those who'd like to cruise the fjords of Norway or take various Scandinavian cruises in general. Independent vacation packages are highlighted.
- **Skiing Norway and Lillehammer, www.lillehammerturist.no:** This site is loaded with details about Norway's oldest sports resort and a venue for the winter Olympics in 1994. The skiing terrain is previewed, along with tips on activities, accommodations, and attractions.

- **Official Site Oslo Tourist Office, www.visitoslo.com:** This site promises “everything else you need to know about Oslo.” That is a bit of an exaggeration, but the site explores the city in detail, with tips on attractions, restaurants, activities, accommodations, and shopping.
- **Official Internet Site for Trondheim, www.trondheim.com/engelsk:** The first capital of Norway, today a modern university city, is explored in this databank, with pictures, useful information, a city map, and details about accommodations and attractions.
- **Bergen Guide, www.bergen-guide.com:** Norway’s second city is explored in some detail on this site, with a comprehensive database on maps, restaurants, shops, sports, sightseeing, transportation, accommodations, and other useful information.
- **Visit Flåm, www.visitflam.com:** This site offers information about charming Flåm in the heart of the Sognefjord district. It’s a major stop on the Flåm Railway, the world’s most spectacular and panoramic line.
- **European Travel & Tourism Bureau, www.alltravelnorway.com/Norway/Destination_Guides/cities/Stavanger.htm:** This site explores Norway’s oil capital of Stavanger, with tips on accommodations, attractions, bars, cafes, sights, and restaurants.
- **European Travel & Tourism Bureau, www.alltravelnorway.com/Norway/Destination_Guides/cities/Tromso.htm:** Like the site on Stavanger (see above), this site takes you to Norway’s small but spirited capital of the far north: the city of Tromsø.