

It all started during a chat over a pint...

The discussion went somewhere along the lines of, “Where do you fancy going next on the bike?” and the general consensus was either Northern Spain or Norway. I’d actually been to Northern Spain a couple of years earlier and whilst I can highly recommend it I was looking for more of a challenge. So that was it, Norway or bust!

Thereafter nothing very much happened, but in October of last year it was time to either do something about it or forget it altogether. Broadly the plan was to cross the North Sea by ferry and then either ride to Nord Cap (North Cape), the most northerly point in Europe and then return by ferry to Southern Norway, or vice versa. However it soon became clear that the coastal ferry service which runs the length of Norway’s west coast was going to be an expensive option. Equally clear was the fact that if we were to ride the bikes the entire distance, both north and south it was going to take quite some time given the distances involved and the relatively low speed limits in Norway. Enter plan ‘B’, don’t ride to Nord Cap, but settle for the Lofoten Islands, which sit just off Norway’s west coast, but still north of the Arctic Circle. All things considered this seemed to be the better option, still plenty of miles, but at least some prospect of actually seeing some of the scenery on offer as well.

If you’re not already aware Norway has a reputation for being hideously expensive, so fiscal prudence became the order of the day. Accommodation was undoubtedly going to be the biggest expense, but Daryl had a cunning plan - Youth Hostels. With nought but a few strokes of the keyboard Daryl had booked our return ferry crossing and our first & last nights hostels. We were now committed. Our trip which would last for the best part of three weeks was timed to coincide with the summer solstice, so we would experience the land of the midnight sun. From here on in it was just a matter of deciding which route we would follow and what kit we should take.

Tuesday 17th June, the day was upon us. Daryl and I meet at Exeter Services and after a quick chat we set off north on the M5 for the long haul to Newcastle. The plan, based upon Daryl’s fuel range was to do the journey in three legs. The first took us to Strensham, the second to Wolley Edge near Wakefield where we meet a couple from Truro riding a BMW 1200 Adventure. It transpired they were off to Norway too, but their GPS has gone belly up, so we offered them the option of following us. We arrived at the ferry port of North Shields in the late afternoon and we spent our time prior to boarding chatting to Dawn and John from Truro. Both of them were regular visitors to Norway and they imparted one or two useful tips, like how to avoid getting caught for speeding. The Norwegian ‘Old Bill’ have a nasty habit of taking your bike off you and then offering to return it to you 24 hours later in exchange for a Kings Ransom. After an hour or so we boarded the *Queen of Scandinavia* for the crossing to Stavanger. The ship was comfortable enough if a little tired, but hey as long as it got us there that’s all that mattered. We soon discovered the really good thing about Scandinavian ships is the food. That evening Daryl and I set about demolishing the buffet before retiring to bed with indigestion.

We whiled away the following morning drinking coffee and wandering 'round the ship. By early afternoon we made our first sighting of land, the offshore islands which make up much of the fragmented Norwegian coast. As we got closer to Stavanger we took up position just below the bridge and watched the world go by. The closer we got to our destination the more leaden the skies became, an omen of things to come. Once disembarked, we decided to find the nearest café and from there get our bearings. The café we chose was on the waterfront and had a large awning; just as well. We had no sooner sat down than the heavens opened. Once we'd sussed out where we needed to be we set off in the pouring rain and after a little difficulty with the GPS (they don't work too well in towns) we eventually found our hostel for the night, plain and simple, but above all dry. Once settled in we returned to the waterfront area to find something to eat. At a restaurant called *Phileas Fogg's* we consumed the best part of half a pig each washed down with half a litre of *Coke*. Norwegian prices made themselves evident; the *Coke* was £3.70 a glass. Ouch!

The following morning we awoke to a change in the weather, the rain had got even heavier overnight and showed no sign of abating. After breakfast we set forth into the teeth of the gale to find the local ferry which would take us across the harbour to the town of Tau. Once back upon dry land and I use the term 'dry' advisedly, we continued north on route 13, essentially towards our next night's stopover. At one point as we climbed over a mountain pass and the temperature noticeably dropped, although we did get some respite from the cold and wet as we travelled through the road tunnels, which pass beneath many of the mountains in Norway.

Later in the day we refuelled prior to the last leg of our journey and discovered what was to later become part of our staple diet, the Norwegian hotdog. Every service station in Norway seemed to be equipped with a fast food counter and the big seller was the hotdog. Available plain, or wrapped in bacon and accompanied by a cup of hot chocolate these were at times life savers. A nutritionist might well question their nourishment value, but when you reached a point where you felt it was difficult to go on, they proved to be both warming and a morale booster. Yes I am talking about high summer, but as my friend Daryl said, "Norway does rain and cold with some enthusiasm",

By late afternoon we had reached our destination, the small village of Lofthus, which sits against the shoreline of the Hardangerfjord. Our accommodation was a boarding school, which during the holidays is used as a hostel and very nice it was too. That evening we dined at the local Thai restaurant, where Daryl enjoyed a small glass of the local cider, or at least he did until he found out it was 8 quid a bottle!

The following morning we awoke to a rainbow over the fjord, an absolutely stunning vista. After breakfast we continued north towards Flam and its famous mountain railway. On our way we passed through a steep sided valley with towering cliffs on either side. It was the height of the snow melt and at every turn we saw yet another magnificent waterfall. We reached Flam in the early afternoon and after yet another hotdog we boarded the train which travels up through the valley to meet the main line near the top of the mountain. This line is one of the steepest in the world and climbs nearly 900 metres in

just 20 Km. Many people like us make the journey on the *Flamsbana* simply to travel the branch line to the top and back, and whilst I'm no railway buff I could certainly appreciate the breathtaking views from the train.

From Flam we pressed on towards our overnight stop at Sogndal and on the way we passed through the Laerdal Tunnel, which at 24.5 Km (15.2 miles) is the world's longest road tunnel. During the two days we'd been in Norway the wet weather had got to the electrics on my bike, in particular the indicators, which would suddenly burst into life of their own accord, sometimes the right, sometimes the left, or even the hazard lights, and most often in the tunnels. It was completely random, bloody annoying and at times potentially dangerous. Daryl wondered what music I was playing on my MP3 player to trigger the *Disco Effect*. Later we covered the lights with gaffer tape and I had to rely upon arm signals. At Sogndal we again found ourselves staying at the local *Folkehogskule* (boarding school). That evening we travelled to dinner on Daryl's *VFR*, I'd had enough of the *Disco Effect* for one day.

The following morning it was still raining, but not quite as heavily as the previous days. I checked my hands and I swear I was beginning to get webs between my fingers like Patrick Duffy in the *Man from Atlantis*. I also had a blinding headache, which I put down to a lack of alcohol. The journey towards the Polar Circle continued and it took us through a road tunnel beneath the Jostedalsglacier, Europe's largest ice sheet, which is in places over 400m thick. I've travelled over a glacier before, but I never imagined I would ride underneath one.

Beyond the glacier we reached the village of Geiranger lying at the furthest end of the Geirangerfjord, which is reckoned to be the most picturesque in Norway. The sides of the fjord are in some places completely sheer and something in the order of 2,000 feet high and despite being quite some distance from the open sea the fjord can accommodate vessels at least the size of the QE2. 'Impressive' doesn't begin to explain how good the views were. Much like the road in, the road out, known as the *Eagles Way* was a never ending series of hairpin bends, some of which we stopped at for the obligatory photo calls. At the top of the climb the weather deteriorated, the rain got heavier, the temperature noticeably dropped, 5°C Daryl said. We were well above the snow line, but thankfully the roads were clear. In places there was still a good two meters of snow beside the road, enough for grown men to play snowballs!

The next stop was the *Trollstigen*, or Trolls Ladder, a largely single track road which descends almost two and half thousand feet, a good deal of which was hairpin bends. The decent exercised both our riding and photographic skills to the full. By the time we reached our destination, the hostel at Andalsnes it was 8 o'clock in the evening. Following a quick trip to the supermarket we are able to add *Savoury Mince Masala*, accompanied by peas and bread rolls to our list of international cuisine. Conspicuously absent from the feast was beer – shops in Norway are forbidden to sell liquor after six in the evening.

Once settled in at the hostel I realised I'd missed a call from home and I also had a text message to ring Jane. Even before I rang I knew what the message was about. During the past couple of months *Pip*, our Jack Russell of almost 18 years was showing her age and the call, when I made it confirmed she had taken a turn for the worse. I urged Jane to do the right thing and not let her suffer. The following morning the clouds had lifted and the sun shone, it was a beautiful day. As I spoke to Jane on my mobile I watched a pair of Oyster Catchers feeding their young in a nest on the roof of the hostel. As I sensed one life coming to an end I watched new life beginning. Later that morning I got the call from Jane, which confirmed *Pip's* suffering had come to an end. At that very moment I needed to be elsewhere and I knew I was unlikely to be very good company for Daryl for the remainder of the day.

We now headed back toward the coast, where our journey was punctuated by spectacular bridge & ferry crossings and tunnels beneath fjords. Our final destination for the day was Trondhiem, Norway's third largest city. That evening we strolled down to the waterfront, where we had an Italian meal and a couple of beers. I couldn't even drown my sorrows at seven and a half quid a pint! At eleven o'clock we walked back to the hostel in broad daylight. This was the first time we had really appreciated how long it stays light the closer you get to the Arctic Circle. The plan at Trondhiem was to see if we could get a couple of cheap berths on one of the coastal ferries going north, which would give us a rest from riding and allow us to take in more of the costal scenery. To cut a long story short this was going to be both problematic and expensive. Back to plan 'A', the long road to Bodo, from where we could get a local ferry to the Lofoten Islands. The E6 is a bit like the A1 *Great North Road* here in the UK, full of heavies & speed cameras, and goes on for ever.

Over the next two days we spent a lot of time in the saddle, we had too to cover the distances involved. Our hostel on the first night was probably the best yet, more like a hotel than a hostel. The following day saw the return of the cold & wet, which on long journeys can really sap the morale. By lunch time we had reached the Polar Circle, which on this particular road sat high on a mountain plateau. The fact it WAS the Arctic Circle was reinforced by the strong wind and freezing rain sweeping across the Tundra. Following the obligatory photos and T-shirts from the gift shop, we cracked on, keen to get to Bodo by the end of the day.

By the time we reached our camp site on the outskirts of Bodo I was fit to drop. I was cold & wet and I needed a hot shower, hot food and a warm bed. Our host pointed us in the direction of *Hut 27*. We opened the door, "#@\$%", I thought we'd arrived on the set of *The Great Escape*. It was cold, damp and the facilities were minimal. Off to the local supermarket to forage. At the fish counter we looked in awe at what transpired to be a huge Monkfish. Daryl explained in his best English (*the type we all reserve for speaking to foreigners*), that back home we only tend to use Monkfish tails rather than the whole fish. "I known..." said the fishmonger in a broad Welsh accent, "...that's where I come from". One of life's priceless moments.

Back at the hut I knocked up our evening meal while Daryl sorted his *Scotoiler* and then it was off to bed. The next morning we had to be at the ferry port by 6:00 am. For both Daryl and I *Hut 27*, or as it had then become known *Stalag 27* was the low point. From here on in things could only get better, couldn't they?

I could hear an alarm ringing somewhere. It was four o'clock in the morning, time to get up and squared away before we set off for the docks and the ferry to Lofoten. Outside it was broad daylight, overcast and a little on the cold side. By 5:00 am we were packed and ready to roll. Key in the ignition, watch the warning lights go out, thumb the starter and CLICK. I try again, CLICK. It was one of those *Victor Meldrew* moments - I don't bloody well believe it! A quick inspection revealed that some dick had left the GPS on since the previous evening and surprise, surprise the battery was as flat as a witch's tit. After several abortive attempts at bump starting with Daryl pushing like a good 'un we gave up - it takes a lot to fire up 1200cc twin from cold. Daryl did the sensible thing and returned to bed whilst I rang the *Carole Nash European Breakdown Line*. I could tell when I spoke to Alistair back in Blighty how thrilled he was to chat to me at what was for him 4:30 am. With the minimum of fuss he took my details and said someone should be with me within the hour. For an hour and a half I waited outside the main gate of the campsite until the recovery unit arrived, but time was not the issue. Within a matter of minutes of his arrival new life had been breathed into the monster and we were back in business, but by now of course we had missed the boat, literally.

With Daryl roused from his slumbers it was off to the docks. Once there Daryl explained to the nice man at the ferry office that we were only late because of the 'half wit' who let his battery run flat. Fair play to Daryl it worked, the nice man allowed us to board the next ferry without a booking and at no extra cost. So now we were off to the Lofoten Islands, which I guess are to Norway what the Hebrides are to Scotland. Two or three hours later we arrived at the tiny port of Sorvagen, which in reality is little more than a cluster of houses and fishing cottages perched on the seashore. By now the skies had lightened and there was even a hint of sunshine, but it wasn't to last. We had no sooner set off than the rain started.

Our first objective was to find some accommodation for that night. Lofoten is littered with old fishermen's cottages, (that's old cottages, not old fishermen), which once housed a large population of fishermen's families who supported the local cod fishing industry. Most of these cottages have now been converted into holiday homes & lets and despite the poor weather were in high demand as we approached the summer peak. Once again Daryl's negotiating skills came to the fore and after a couple of abortive attempts he managed to secure us a top notch cottage at half price. The cottage had clearly been recently refurbished and to a very high standard. It was everything that *Stalag 27* wasn't - warm, dry, comfortable and the facilities were first class. After a ride up the coast and a visit to the local supermarket in Reine we returned to our cottage, where we ate like lords. That night I slept in the biggest bed I'd ever seen, *Stalag 27* was now a distant memory.

After a relaxing breakfast the following morning we set off towards the village of A (pronounced O). During the journey I had noticed my bike was making an intermittent

squeaking sound from somewhere near the back wheel. A quick inspection confirmed my fears; the rear brake pads were shot. Whilst it was still possible to ride the bike and rely upon the still serviceable front brake, with a 'linked' system every time I applied the front brake the metal back plates on the rear pads would bite into the disc causing ever more damage. Just what you need on an offshore island north of the Arctic Circle. As sure as hell there were going to be no spares on Lofoten, but the question was how far away the nearest ones were? The crazy thing is the bike had only just been serviced before we left, but as I was to later discover the standard brake pads on a GS are relatively soft and wear out quickly.

On our arrival at A we checked into our hostel for the night, an old and very grand wooden building in which Daryl and I shared the attic room. There we met a couple of young lady doctors from Hamburg who were in the process of backpacking they're way around Scandinavia. Once settled in we set off to explore the village and in particular the Stockfish Museum. The Lofoten Islands were once the epicentre of Cod fishing in Norwegian waters and the term 'stockfish' which means stick fish in English refers to the way the fish were dried on huge outdoor wooden racks. Dried Cod was once part of the staple diet for Norwegians, but with a sharp decline in the Cod fishing industry the majority of the remaining stockfish are now exported to Italy and Nigeria. The guy who showed us around the museum (*Doctor Codhead*) clearly knew his stuff, but he seemed to have a rather unhealthy relationship with fish for my liking. Back at the hostel we engaged in debate with the German doctors on all subjects under the sun, Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, the war in Iraq, the Falklands War, football, cricket, etc, etc. I even mentioned the war once, but I think I got away with it! That evening we dined on fish in the local restaurant, what else? At midnight I retired to bed leaving Daryl to continue the debate with the doctors. As I looked out of our attic window I could see our bikes parked a short distance away, their number plates still clearly readable in the constant daylight.

The following morning we were up bright and early, showered, bikes packed and off to Sorvagen to catch the return ferry to Bodo. Once onboard we found some seats next to some teenagers who then set about the age old process of annoying the tits off any adults within earshot. Having left Daryl to their clutches I retired to the boat deck to watch the world go by and contemplate the problem of the Beemer's brakes.

By mid-afternoon we had arrived back in Bodo and the hunt was on. A guy at our hotel said there was a bike dealer near the docks and better than that he thought it might even be a BMW dealer. Could this be true? The Beemer and I were hot foot down to the docks with Daryl in tow and there above the door of *Arctic Motorcycles* was the blue & white propeller trade mark of BMW. A quick inspection confirmed that not only were the pads worn out, but the disc was scored as well. The good news was that half an hour and 120 quid later I had a rear brake again. Whilst it didn't much look like good news at the time it could have been much worse, the next nearest BMW *Motorrad* dealership was hundreds of miles further south in Trondheim. Now a much happier chap we returned to our hotel and changed before finding a pavement bar where we sat drinking beer in the glorious sunshine, enough excitement for one day? Well, perhaps not.

On the opposite side of the street was a clothes shop and outside were some hanging rails with clothes for sale. The next thing I saw was a couple of youngsters grab a jacket and run off. Old habits die hard, the next thing I was up and running, but the guy from the shop got to them first, (only just). The young man & girl were sent off with a flea in their ears and the jacket was returned to the shop. Not more than half an hour later the young girl was back pulling the same stunt. Again I took off after her, but again I was beaten by the guy from the shop. This time there was no flea in the ear, she had her collar felt by the 'Old Bill' and it was off to the local nick for her.

For those of you who don't know I'm a bit of an anorak when it comes to aircraft and in particular the *de Havilland Mosquito*, a World War II aircraft which saw service in many different roles and theatres across the world. To my knowledge there are sadly none of these marvellous aircraft still airworthy, but there are a number of preserved *Mosquito*'s around the world, one being in the Norwegian Air Force Museum in Bodo. You guessed it, that's where we spent the following morning looking at this and many other interesting exhibits. In the afternoon our return journey south began in some of the best weather we had experienced so far. It was an absolute joy to watch the countryside drift by as we headed south towards our overnight stay at the hostel near Mosjoen. This time our passage over the Polar Circle was a lot more 'user friendly'. Again we stopped and took the obligatory photos before continuing south to arrive at our hostel at eight o'clock in the evening, just in time for the rain to start again.

The following day, Sunday 29th June, we planned as a travelling day. We were still well north of our departure port of Bergen and once we had refuelled we set off on what was to be a journey of about 440 miles. Throughout the day the weather proved to be a mixed bag. One minute it would be fine & sunny and next it was heavy rain, but we pressed on. The closer we got to Trondheim the more frequent the speed cameras were and the denser the traffic became, making us work harder for overtakes. By about 9:00 pm we finally reached the town of Andalsnes. It had been a long day and we both needed a decent meal and our beds. Our choice of a venue for an evening meal was somewhat limited, but we settled on a pizzeria in the centre of town. There we tried the speciality of the house, the *Manchester United Special*, presumably eaten by a certain Mr Rooney, or thrown at that nice Mr Beckham by Alex Ferguson, who knows? We spent that night at the hostel with the Oyster Catchers for company.

Our journey south was very much a re-run of the journey north and we worked on the basis of *If it ain't broke don't fix it*. The next morning we set off to tackle the *Trollstigen* again. As we travelled along the lower approach road we were passed by four Ducati's giving it beans, but by the time we got to Trolls Ladder proper we'd caught them up and also a huge six-wheeler coach. As the coach negotiated the hairpins the rearmost of its back axles was overhanging the edge of the road and driving nothing more than fresh air, a sight that filled me with a sense of foreboding. On the next short straight I was down a cog and going for it - all four Ducati's and the coach before the next hairpin. I checked my mirrors and Daryl was in hot pursuit. For the first time ever I'd left four Ducati's standing driven largely by fear and at least some advanced riding skills. Continuing south we crossed over the Norddalsfjord by ferry and followed route 63 towards the Geirangerfjord.

At Geiranger we stopped for lunch. Two posh sandwiches and a couple of soft drinks, that'll be £25 Sir. An absolute bargain I say! In fairness they were very nice sandwiches and the location was indeed the puppy's private. Our next stop was at the top of a mountain called Dalsnibba, which was accessed via a toll road and once at the top it provided panoramic views for miles and miles. Tour ships anchored in the Geirangerfjord far below looked like tiny toy boats. Onwards toward Stryn and Skei, more tunnels and more mountain passes before reaching the hostel at Sogndal. Creatures of habit, it was back to the 'China Garden' again.

By committing ourselves to a long ride the previous day we were now in a position to spend the extra day we had gained exploring the Jostedalsglacier National Park and part of the glacier itself known as the Nigardsbreen finger. The journey into the National Park took us along a scenic minor road for 50 or so miles until we reached a car park near the foot of the glacier. From here we travelled the remaining mile or so by a combination of small boat and by climbing over the boulder strewn area directly beneath the glacier. We took the usual photographs and then stood in wonder as we watched small chunks of ice from the toe of the glacier melt in our hands. When this ice had originally fallen as snow the concept of Christianity was completely unknown. For a moment or so it gave us an entirely different perspective of the world.

We returned to the bikes and keen to explore further we climbed higher into the mountains and towards the upper end of the valley. Our journey took us well above the snowline and eventually we were defeated by drifts of snow across the road. This was a strange almost silent world where the only sound was the gentle trickle of water from the snow melt. The air here was so clear and free from moisture & pollution that we had no sense of distance. Looking at the boulders on the far side of the valley it was difficult to judge their size, they could have been 5 foot high or 25 feet high for all we knew. In our normal world the further objects are from our viewpoint then the more they lose their colour and clarity, but here close to the top of this mountain and miles from human contact the world around us was absolutely crystal clear and with no loss of colour. It truly was an amazing place to be. In the late afternoon we enjoyed a relaxed ride back down the valley to Sogndal. That evening we followed the advice given in the *Lonely Planet* guide and went for dinner at the *Dr Hagen Café*, which was actually a rather classy restaurant. Don't tell the kids, but we both had 'Rudolph' accompanied by seasonal vegetables and very nice he was too.

The following day saw our last full day on Norwegian soil. Our journey started as we rode alongside the upper reaches of the Sognefjord to Hella and then by ferry to Vangsnes. Then it was back up into the high country, more tunnels, mountain passes and frozen lakes, we even came across some skiers at one point. The weather was the best yet with bright sunshine and wall to wall blue skies all the way to Bergen. During an enforced stoppage at road works we met a German couple riding a Honda Goldwing, who were returning home from Nord Cap (North Cape). The 'Wing' had been fitted with a very professional boot extension, which in all made the bike something over 9 feet in length. I swear this thing had everything including the kitchen sink.

Instead of the usual hot dogs & hot chocolate at our next fuel stop we opted instead for ice lollies and cold drinks, Daryl told me the temperature was up to 27°C - bring it on I said. By late afternoon we had arrived at our hostel set high above the city of Bergen. Once unpacked and showered we decided to walk to the city centre, a gentle downhill stroll of 2 or 3 miles. At the *Bryggen* (wharf) we had fish & chips and watched the world go by. It also happened to be the local bike night, which was dominated by Harley Davidson's. The Norwegians do seem to like their HD's. Once we'd eaten we took another stroll around the old town and settled at one on the pavement bars on the *Bryggen*. Despite the price of alcohol in Norway we were hard pressed to find any seats, but we did manage to squeeze ourselves onto one of the tables already occupied by a couple. *Thor* and the other Norse Gods were clearly looking after us, the couple we happened sit with were the owners of the bar & hotel in question. They seemed happy to extend the hand of Norwegian friendship and it would have seemed rude refuse it. It was a fitting end to our trip to Norway, good company, good beer, great location and brilliant sunshine, all at eleven o'clock at night. Finally we bid our hosts good night and then caught a bus back to the hostel.

The next morning we were up bright and early, this was a ferry we couldn't afford to miss. By about 10:00 am we boarded and ready to sail. As we watched the last of the passengers board we chatted to members of the *MG Owners Club*, who like us had enjoyed a fortnight touring Norway. Our journey back to Blighty was very pleasant, but in truth uneventful. We arrived back at North Shields at about mid-morning the following day and once disembarked we set off for home at a 'progressive' pace. This was the first time for more than two weeks that Daryl and I had sustained these sorts of speeds punctuated only by the necessary pits stops on the way back to Devon. By 6:30 pm I was at home telling my tales of 'daring do' and it was all over.

Well there you have it, warts an' all. Does it rain a lot in Norway? - Yes it does. Does it get very cold in Norway? - Yes it does, even in high summer. Is Norway very expensive? - You bet. Is Norway as beautiful as they say? - Yes, astonishingly so. Are the natives friendly? - Yes, without doubt. And most importantly would I go again? - YES without question. So if you've not been before and it appeals to you, best you start saving now.

As a final word I would just like to express my most sincere thanks to Daryl Youe who was responsible for by far and away the lion's share of the planning for this trip, for his support on days when I needed it, for his patience & understanding and above all his friendship. Daryl, thank you.

Photographs by Daryl Youé

Words by Robin Foster