

Bergen STOCK

From city to sea, Norway is a surprising hit for escorted touring, finds Mary Novakovich

Norway doesn't pull any punches with its inexhaustible beauty. As soon as you clap eyes on its landscapes of jagged fjords, you're hooked – and that's before you get to know its historic cities and fjord-hugging towns.

A taster of a new escorted tour of Norway by Inghams introduced me to its second city, Bergen, as well as the natural wonders of Hardangerfjord. The tour also includes the capital, Oslo, before finishing in the underrated city of Stavanger.

What links all of these destinations are the otherworldly, dramatic landscapes, which you can glimpse from the leisurely vantage point of either boats or trains.

► CITY SPLENDOURS: BERGEN

The red peaks of the Hanseatic-era wooden buildings along Bergen's waterfront are among the most distinctive sights of Norway. But they merely whet the appetite for holidaymakers exploring this city, which was built on seven hills and has an alluring mix of nature and culture.

Behind the waterfront warehouses is a maze of cobbled lanes lined with a mix of medieval buildings and wooden clapboard houses. It's pure enchantment.

For insights into the life and fascinating history of the city, clients can join a food-and-walking tour with Bergen Base Camp.

A visit to the Dr Wiesener pub, which

dates from 1899, revealed how it was used as a public bathhouse as recently as 1982 when the district, Sandviken, was still one of the poorest in the city. Today it's an agreeable area full of attractive wooden cottages, and the pub – now owned communally by locals – is a pleasant spot to fill up on fresh shellfish including giant prawns and langoustines.

To get a sense of Bergen's glorious natural setting, clients can ride the Floibanen funicular up to Mount Floyen, which shows off views of the city as it sprawls across the harbour and along the fjord, hugged by forested hillsides.

Floyen is an excellent starting point for guided hikes along the marked trails that wind

through the hills. There's also the option of taking the cable car at Torget, near the fish market, up to Bergen's highest mountain, Ulriken, for more superb views and hiking trails.

Bergen's cultural life is as ravishing as its natural setting. Summertime brings two of Norway's most important cultural festivals: Bergen Jazz Festival and Bergen International Festival. The latter is a celebration of classical music, dance, opera and theatre, and is held in various venues around the city.

One of the most delightful is the lakeside summer retreat in Trolldhaugen, which once belonged to the composer Edvard Grieg. This handsome 19th-century house is now



Bryggen waterfront, Bergen

RIGHT:
Troidhaugen,
home of
composer
Edvard Grieg

FAR RIGHT:
Torget fish
market

BOTTOM:
Bergen, from
Mount Floyen



PICTURE: SIRKO TRENTSCH/NORDLANDBLOG.COM



ASK THE EXPERT



Jess Howell,
Inghams product
manager for
Norway

Norway has become a staple on many travellers' bucket lists because of its dramatic fjords, unspoilt nature and staggering scenery, combined with good cuisine and a welcoming culture. Our popular escorted tours offer a hassle-free way to tick off the highlights, with a pleasant combination of ferry, rail and road travel, and a knowledgeable guide. Sales for summer 2019 escorted tours are up on last year, and guests are advised to book early to secure their place.

→ a living museum, and it's part of a complex that includes a glass-walled concert hall that overlooks the little lakeside hut in which Grieg composed some of his best-known music. Guided tours of the house can include lunchtime concerts as well as coach transport to the venue, which is five miles from the city centre.

Clients who want to stay in central Bergen will find cultural offerings that are just as enticing. Clustering around the pretty Lille Lungegardsvannet lake you'll find the Bergen Kunsthall and Kode 2, both of which showcase contemporary art. Neighbouring Kode 4 focuses on Norwegian painters including Edvard Munch, along with artists such as Pablo Picasso.

For an introduction to Bergen's culinary heritage, holidaymakers are drawn like magnets to the Torget indoor fish market beside the harbour. It's been running since the 13th century, with mouthwatering displays



Against the vivid blue waters of the spectacular Hardangerfjord, forested mountains rise to their snow-capped peaks

of fresh fish and seafood – especially Norwegian salmon and cod – along with fresh fruit and vegetables. In the summer months, the market spreads to outdoor stalls, and there's also an inviting collection of seafood restaurants and stalls.

► PHENOMENAL FJORDS: ULVIK

One activity that shouldn't be missed is a ferry cruise through the fjords of western Norway. Among the many options departing from the Bergen

region is a dreamy cruise through Hardangerfjord, one of the longest in the world and one of the most spectacular too.

Against the vivid blue waters of the fjord, forested mountains rise to their snow-capped peaks. What appear at first glance to resemble vineyards turn out to be hill after hill of orchards, mostly apple trees planted in neat rows. This is the fruit basket of Norway, as clients will discover once they see all of the wonderful produce available at the end of the fjord in Ulvik.

But before then, there's a detour worth taking to Eidfjord, which has one of the most beautiful approaches when arriving by boat. It's also home to the splendid Voringfossen waterfall, one of the most popular sights in Norway. A network of platforms and steps makes it easy to get close to the spectacle and see the rainbow hovering over the rushing waters.

Once clients arrive in Ulvik, →



PICTURES: BERGEN TOURIST BOARD/DAG FOSSE; SVERRE HJORNEVIK

ESCORTED TOURS DESTINATIONS



ABOVE: Hotel Brakanes, Ulvik

→ they're greeted by the graceful sight of the 19th-century Hotel Brakanes, which has an enviable spot right on the waterfront and is one of the accommodation providers on the tour. In this lyrical landscape, holidaymakers soon find the pace of life changes to pleasingly slow. The fastest-moving objects are the kayakers rowing across the water.

Orchards rise gently from the shores of the fjord, leading to the many cider farms in the village. A guided tour offers clients not only the chance to taste superb juices and ciders, but also to discover the history of apple production in the region. Syse Gard is a three-generational family-run cider and sheep farm that serves lunches and sells its own produce in the farm shop. The views from their cafe of the fjord and the surrounding mountains are utterly captivating.

This bucolic beauty is a constant companion throughout the tour, one of the highlights of which is the excursion on the Bergen Railway from Oslo to Voss, near Ulvik. If clients haven't fallen under Norway's spell by now, the journey along this mesmerising route through the mountains and along the fjords will certainly clinch it.



The pace of life is pleasingly slow – the fastest-moving objects are kayakers rowing across the water

Book it: Inghams' 10-night Capital to Coast on the Great Bergen Railway group escorted tour starts at £1,649 per person including flights, transfers, accommodation on a B&B or half-board basis in three and four-star properties, and the services of a guide. It also includes a trip on the Bergen Railway (with lunch), a guided walk in Ulvik and a cruise transfer from Bergen to Stavanger (with dinner). The price is for selected departure dates from June to August 2019.

Inghams' 12-day Highlights of the Fjords escorted tour takes in Bergen, Alesund, Balestrand and Loen. Prices start at £1,739 and include flights, B&B accommodation, selected meals and scenic transfers. Departures run from June to August 2019.

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