

The NORTHERN Playground

WORDS AND PICTURES SQUASH FALCONER

Squash Falconer heads north to enjoy some superb hiking and via ferrata in Norway's fjordlands...

Hiking down the steep final few hundred metres of Hoven Mountain, my legs felt like jelly. My toes jammed the end of my boots each time I placed my feet surefootedly and deliberately downward. I was thinking about my friend Jason. It's funny to think there's a technique to hiking down slopes that makes all the difference. I was 19 and Jason was my teammate during the first endurance adventure race I did. He had said to "be surefooted – decide where to put your feet and confidently do it, facing downwards in the direction that you are going and put all your weight and trust in your feet. Then you won't slip."

It is advice that has served me well over the years and now I was on new ground in a

country that I have wanted to visit since I first set eyes on the iconic images of the distinctly dramatic mountains that disappear into the deep mesmerising blue waters of the fjords below. I was in Norway, breathtakingly stunning Norway, and our first excursion would prove to be quite spectacular.

IRON ROADS

Hoven is a 1010m peak that towers above Loen, a small village in the Stryn municipality. The via ferrata on Hoven boasts one of the longest via ferrata bridges in Europe, and it's a great day out. The warm-up hike to the start point at 440m, if you're keen, can easily be reached in little over half an hour, but allowing for a more gentle pace and time to enjoy the views of the fjord that you have from very low

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down means you could just as easily take an hour or even two. The via ferrata itself requires over 400m of climbing and – there’s no getting away from it – it’s seriously steep and exposed. Coming from the Italian for ‘iron road’, a via ferrata is a protected climbing route, typically a steel cable which runs along the route and is periodically (every 3 to 10m) fixed to the rock. Using a via ferrata set, you can secure yourself to the cable, limiting any fall.

Our group ranged from experienced climbers to people who had never been in the mountains before. The great thing about via ferrata is that it appeals to all, no previous experience is required and the buzz of adrenaline from the dizzying, exposed heights wrapped in the comfort of the fixed wire that you are attached to at all times means you can feel the danger and get the thrill, but all in a very safe way.

As I began to climb I couldn’t get into a rhythm or find a pace. The incredible view of the fjords behind me, which got better and better the higher I went, meant that I couldn’t resist stopping every few minutes to both stare

out at and to awkwardly keep getting my camera out for just one more photo. I finally made it to the bridge which is almost at the top of the via ferrata. It reminded me of the wire suspension bridges that famously aid the way to Everest Base Camp in Nepal. Only this was different; there were no prayer flags flying, I could attach myself safely to this bridge and it looked a lot more secure!

Despite being attached my heartbeat did increase somewhat when I took my hands off the wire for the obligatory photograph from the middle of it. A viewing platform is perfectly located just after the bridge – it’s like a reward for getting across, somewhere to perch and devour your lunch which, by the way, was made from the breakfast buffet of the hotel I was staying in. And not craftily smuggled out, wrapped in serviettes avoiding the hotel staff after trying to make it look perfectly normal that you should have six slices of bread, two yoghurts, several pieces of fruit, cereal and lots of nuts and cheese just for breakfast! In fact this became one of my favorite things about Norwegian hotels and their hospitality - they



The longest via ferrata bridge in Europe (120m long) at Loen

anticipate you making up your lunch from the breakfast buffet so there’s not only plenty of selection they even have sandwich bags laid out too. Very sensible!

Via ferrata is hungry work, and I was happy to have crossed the bridge and reached the magnificent lunch spot. Our team had climbed at different paces so we re-grouped here, exchanged with excitement our individual experiences from the previous two hours and continued to the summit of Hoven. Just a short section of via ferrata remained before finally the mountain levelled out to a gentle incline leading to the summit.

WAY DOWN

I didn’t spend long at the top; having now found my pace I hiked down enjoying the sound of just my feet one foot in front of the other, rhythmically thudding onto the soft earth below. It was a fairly steep decent, totally exposed on top and then disappearing into the pine trees with their distinct alpine aromas, before coming out back on the road at the edge of the fjord. It was late afternoon by the

ON THE MAP

North Fjordland

Key locations in the northern fjords

■ ALESUND

The gateway to the northern fjords. With direct flights from London Gatwick, this is the natural starting point for adventures in the northern fjord region. The city is a striking art nouveau city, rebuilt after a great fire a century ago with much support from the German Emperor Wilhelm, whom spent numerous summers in Ålesund and the surrounding fjords.

■ HELLESTYLT

Hellestylt is a small village and an important hub for visitors travelling to and from the Geirangerfjord and Ålesund.

■ LOEN

The small village is located in the idyllic Nordfjord region. The area is popular for its recreational Alexandra Hotel with spa facilities, as well as being the home of some of Norway’s most spectacular hikes and the Via Ferrata Loen, with Europe’s longest suspension bridge.

■ GEIRANGER

The UNESCO world heritage Geiranger Fjord is the icing on the cake in the region. The fjord is strikingly narrow and lush, and a popular destination for cruise ships as well as adventurers whom wish to explore the area either by kayak or hiking.



Norway



“The classic book on climbing in Norway, ‘The Northern Playground’, was republished in March this year and is still considered a worthy read for those mountaineering in Norway.”

time we were all down and I was ready for a cup of tea. The Norwegians do English tea very well, not surprisingly really since it's a country that's been visited frequently by descendants of our Royal family, as well as being put on the climbing world map by British climber William Cecil Slingsby.

THE NORTHERN PLAYGROUND

Slingsby, who first visited Norway in 1872, fell in love with the country and its mountains, and I can understand why. His classic book on climbing in Norway, ‘The Northern Playground’, first published in 1904, was republished in March this year and is still considered a worthy read for those mountaineering in Norway.

Just a few days before I had flown into Alesund airport on the north west coast. The partial cloud cover and mountaintops that were just visible had created a beautiful canvas and

had whet my appetite for what lay ahead. Despite the light it was almost nighttime when we reached the hotel in Andalsnes. I slept in a bed that night on a mattress made locally and aptly called ‘Wonderland’.

If you are going to go to Norway to see the fjords, then what better way to discover them than to hike onto a ridge and view them from on high. The famous Romsdalseggen hike is billed as ‘the most beautiful and easily accessible hike in Norway’. There's a choice of shorter hikes or you can go for a full days hike along the mighty ridge.

We set off early and as we headed into the clouds and rain, with grass, mud, a few rocks underfoot and the odd stream to cross I said to myself “this could be North Wales”. However, the cloud curtain lifted as we reached the top of the Romsdalseggen ridge and I was stopped in my tracks by the spectacular view that lay before me. I've been lucky enough to stand up high on mountains before, taking in incredible

views, but this time it was different. There's something so unique about the vertical mountains that plunge into the deep, dark blue, cold, still waters of the fjords that meander beneath them. I felt a different type of energy – calm and strong – and with a sense of peace.

We stayed on the ridge for an hour. It's a fantastic viewing arena with views over the Romsdal Mountains, with the Trollveggen wall (or just Troll wall to climbers), Romsdalshorn and Vengetindene as the most distinctive peaks. You can gaze all the way to the town of Molde and the Norwegian Sea. Rumour has it that there is a small garden at the top of the Romsdalshorn planted with vegetables and potatoes by Norwegian climber Arne Randers Heen, known for several first ascents and his many ascents of Romsdalshorn, including the first winter climb of the mountain.

The descent from the ridge back to Andalsnes is short but steep. Recently added steps make the journey much easier and the



Looking down to the Geirangerfjord



“A team of Sherpas were brought over from Nepal to both teach their skilled craft and also to make the steps down to the town”

prayer flags strung above the metal viewing platform over the town below gives a clue to who was responsible for the superbly-made steps. A team of Sherpas were brought over to Norway from Nepal to both teach their skilled craft and also to make the steps down to the town. Despite the new steps, my knees certainly felt the descent!

GETTING AROUND

There is excellent public transport in Norway, with lots of short ferry links to get you across the fjords, however the limited frequency and limited choice of destinations mean that car hire is by far the best way to get around. That evening we drove to Geirangerford via one of the many famous national tourist routes in Norway - an exceptional driving experience along a route steeped in tradition, through spectacular scenery of deep fjords and lush

valleys. The historic Trollstigen road, with its 11 hairpin bends, was opened in 1936, and in 2005 the Geirangerfjord was included on UNESCO's World Heritage List. In 1934, Geirangerford was devastated when one of the mountains fractured and an almighty chunk of rock plunged into the fjord creating a 67m wave. All the buildings were smashed and 40 people were killed. You wouldn't know it today, however – rebuilt and the gateway to many hikes, the town is small but bustling and vibrant. From here there are lots of multi-day hikes using Norway's DNT cabins. DNT member associations now have a total of 460 cabins across the country, and of these, over 400 have lodgings – the remaining cabins are eating places, rest stops or emergency shelters. There are three types of cabins with lodgings: staffed lodges, self-service cabins and no-service cabins.

The famous Seven Sisters Waterfall, the 39th tallest waterfall in Norway, is located just along the fjord from Geirangerford. The waterfall consists of seven separate streams, the tallest with a freefall of 250m. Opposite the waterfall, across the fjord, is the renovated historic mountain farm, Skagefla. The farm is perched on the steep mountainside, 250m above the fjord – the location chosen for its rich fertile soils, these days makes for a spectacular lunch spot. To reach the start point of the hike to the farm, and to make it a circular route, we took kayaks from Geirangerford and steadily paddled a few kilometers along the fjord via the mighty Seven Sisters Waterfall to the base of the short, steep hike to the farm.

Norway is a place filled with mythology of trolls and fantasy. It is the country that inspired Disney's hugely successful animated film, 'Frozen'. Every place I visited had its own stories and tales. As soon as we began paddling the kayaks our guide told us to look up at the steep mountain in front of us where a huge and intimidating face in the rock was easily

Hiking up the Romsdalen Ridge



made out.

From the water it took less than an hour to reach the farm, and seeing the open flattish land come abruptly to the sheer edges I fully believed the story that the farmers used to tie ropes around their children to stop them falling off to certain death! The farmers used ladders to climb the steep banks up to the farm and it is also said that when the sheriff came to collect the taxes, the ladders would have mysteriously disappeared. From the farm there is an easy 2-4 hour hike back down to the town.

LUX LODGINGS

Depending on your taste and budget there is a fvaried mix of accommodation available in Norway. You are free to wild camp as long as you are 150m away from buildings and have permission from the landowner where necessary. There are larger, more luxurious hotels in the towns, complete with spa facilities,

or smaller family run hotels that can easily be booked.

The small Norangdal hotel 9km from the town of Hellesylt, situated at the base of Kvitegga Mountain, is owned and run by two sisters whose great grandfathers built it in 1885. Queen Vil Helmina, the Norweigian royal family, Nelsangle Brekke and the emperor of Germany are among the impressive list of guests known to have stayed in the hotel. The hotel was sold out of the family when the brothers died, but in 1998 the granddaughter of the original owner bought it back and over the following few years renovated and restored it until it's become the unique hotel it is today.

Fuelled on hikes by the delicious Norwegian chocolate (try the Kvikk Lunsj!) and nourished by the fresh fish, caramel cheese and delicious cuisine, it's easy to understand why everyone around you looks so healthy and well. After the intense miles of hiking up and down during my

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stay in Norway and many moments of looking at the mesmerising waters of the fjords, it will come as little surprise that the morning of the day I left it seemed only fitting to leap into the deep blue depths and submerge my body in the icy coldness. It took my breath away and at the same time ignited an inferno of burning heat inside my body, leaving me feeling energised and on a high.

Just before I got on my flight to Norway, a text from a friend came through to my phone; “Norway is beautiful, clean, fresh and the people are lovely,” the message said. “I’ve always wanted a hut on the edge of a fjord.” I thought now how perfectly accurate that text had proved to be, and how I now totally understood that dream. In fact, my short visit to Norway had lived up to every expectation I had had – the only problem with my trip was that it was over too soon.

Norway has something for everyone. You can enjoy the fjords from the luxury of a cruise liner, or you might prefer to kayak in the deep blue waters, ski in the mountains or even base jump off precipitous cliffs. For me though, seeing the fjords by foot is the most rewarding option, and I fully intend to return in the future to enjoy some more hikes in this sublime Northern Playground. ■ **T&M**

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THE KNOWLEDGE

North Fjordland

Essential info to know before you go

■ WHEN TO GO

The best time to go is between June and August. May to September is possible, but some roads may still be closed due to snow in May and there may be snow already falling in some parts of the mountains in September.

■ HOW TO GET THERE

Ålesund is the natural arrival point – stay a day in the Art Nouveau city

either on arrival or departure. Hire a rental car at Ålesund Vigra Airport – the destinations we visited were all within a two-hour reach from the airport. Alternative: go with organised tour buses. Norwegian flies directly from London Gatwick to Ålesund (www.norwegian.com) or you could fly to Bergen and hire a car from there.

■ WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at the Grand Hotel Bellevue (www.grandhotel.no), Hotel Union (www.hotelunion.no), Hotel Alexandra (www.alexandra.no), Villa Norangdal (www.norangdal.com), Hotel Union Øye (www.unionoye.no)

■ HOW HARD

The hikes in the area are very accessible, but they can be as long and tough as you want. The via

ferratas are challenging but an option for anyone who has a head for heights.

■ WHO TO GO WITH

This is the perfect destination to visit independently, and you can find more info for planning your trip at Visit Norway (www.visitnorway.com) and Fjordland (www.fjordnorway.com).