Norway Notes - 8
August 30 -
On board the MS Richard With

Life on the Hurtigruten is so practical. Instead of packing and moving to a hotel in another place every day or two, we unpack, relax, and let the hotel move us from place to place. And there's not the constant stress of having to decide where to eat. We're definitely getting spoiled.

This Hurtigruten shipping line is not a cruise thing. It's also not a ferry; the explainer at the introductory talk made that very clear. The official line is that it's a working ship that happens to also carry passengers, sort of like the legendary freighters of old, but more so. This boat's maximum passenger capacity is 590. The P&O Line's Azura, a moderate size cruise ship, docked in Flam when we were there, carries in excess of 3,000, and an even larger cruise monster that we saw at anchor off Geiranger is said to hold 5,000. Geirangen, by the way, is a village of 290. As our guide said, when a cruise ship stops in Geiranger, the village undergoes interesting changes in demographics. Our friend Mike S in Oslo says that some Norwegians along the cruise routes have taken to standing on the shore naked as a form of free speech commentary on the cruise industry, all of which is foreign owned.

Hurtigruten, by contrast, is deep dyed Norwegian. Richard With, the founder, operated the first steamship service up the Norwegian coast, serving dozens of isolated villages. When sailing ships were the only water transport, it could take months for mail from the north to get to the cities in the south. With the steamer, it was suddenly faster. Hurtig = fast, hurry. Ruten = routes. Sort of like the Pony Express on water.

We spent most of this day navigating fjords, turning this way and that to reach the Geirangerfjord, a terminal branch famed for its natural beauty. This was strictly for the tourists; no cargo changed places.



Some of the passages reminded me of boating the Colorado River just before the Grand Canyon, or walking Yosemite Valley, except on water. Steep rock walls on both sides. Most of them, here, heavily wooded.





Lots of waterfalls, some thin as needles, others broad with branches.







Patches of snow on some of the heights.

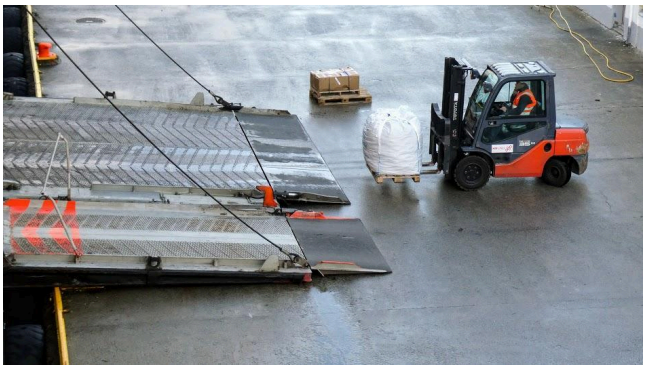


The occasional slanted patch of grass with a farmhouse and a barn way up a slope, with no sign of a road nor a pier. Tiny villages clinging to aprons of land.





We're stopping at 34 ports on our way up north. The first stop was at a town whose name I didn't catch. It had a lush meadow at the waterfront with black and white sheep. A forklift downloaded one box and uploaded four skids of cargo. One young man with a backpack got on. Fifteen minutes after docking, we were gone again. Passengers weren't allowed to get off at this one.





The next stop, at Alesund, lasted half an hour and we were allowed off. You show your boat ID card (which also serves as your meal ticket and cabin key) as you get off, and then again when you return. I spent fifteen rather nervous minutes walking around downtown Alesund. I also got photos of the boat, bow and stern.





I took no chances and got back on the boat with ten minutes to spare. The boat doesn't wait. Alesund impressed me for its clean modern but not boring architecture. I wasn't aware at the time that this short stop in Alesund was only a preview of a second and longer stop the same evening. The day's ship journey led us up the Geiranger fjord, which is of course a dead end. The ship turned around in early afternoon and retraced the route back out of the fjord, leading us back to Alesund. This time both Sheila and I stepped on land and took a bit longer walk on its waterfront. The architectural freshness and consistency of the town arose in response to the massive fire of 1904. Whipped by gale-force winds, the conflagration destroyed virtually every structure in town and left ten thousand people homeless overnight. The reconstruction effort leaned heavily on the Art Nouveau style, which was popular at the time. You can read more about it on Wikipedia. Good to know also is that Alesund was a center of the anti-Nazi resistance in World War II, earning it the title of "Little London." Here are some photos, the first two from the morning visit, the rest from the evening:









The ship today seems about half English speakers, half Germans. There's a group of Swedes, a handful of Asians, and a Norwegian or two. Official announcements and info meetings are in Norwegian, English, and German. Among the English speakers, Americans are clearly in the minority. Most are Brits. Also some Australians. Everyone seems friendly. Average age, up there. A popular activity seems to be sitting in comfortable chairs indoors, drinking, talking, reading, and occasionally glancing out the big picture windows.

There's a hardy few who hang out at the bow on Deck 5 in the open air, braving wind and rain, taking photographs and videos. I've spent most of my day there since before sunrise.



My reward was the longest rainbow I've ever seen. I can't recall the last time I saw both ends of a rainbow. Here it was, clear and solid and complete. It even developed a faint double. That's how the photographic day started. Thanks to the chaotic cloud play, moments of dramatic illumination developed, like this one:



We had some hours of sun, some minutes of rain, some passages when the headwind was so strong it made people stagger, other times of bland calm. Temperatures in the fifties, not bad at all. Some of the Norwegians wore shorts and t-shirts, considering it summer.

Well, I hadn't planned to post a blog about just one day on the ship, but it turned out that way. Tomorrow, who knows.


RICHARD WITH


POST