



AVAR MIKKO / ALAMY

Vigeland Park features 212 Gustav Vigeland sculptures representing different stages of human life.

# Naturally Norwegian

*Oslo features Viking artifacts, contemporary art and year-round sports*

By Leslie Forsberg

**It's a warm summer day**, perfect for a group of flaxen-haired preschoolers thigh-high in a 40-foot-wide fountain at Oslo's Vigeland Sculpture Park. The Norwegian kids are having a ball, splashing and chasing each other as if they were at a subtropical water park. ■ But they're not. This is Scandinavia, after all, land of stone, mountains and mythical beings, all of which are represented at this fountain. Six granite giants

strain to hold aloft a mighty cauldron of rushing water, and bronze trees ringing the fountain teem with sculpted people, signifying different stages of life: Chubby babies are cradled in nooks of branches; young kids climb and play peek-a-boo in the foliage; the middle-aged recline peacefully on branches; and elders perch pensively, life's cares etched on their faces. The real kids splash blithely, oblivious to their

bronze counterparts mere steps away.

Although the scale of the stone sculptures reflects the mythical, bigger-than-life Norway, the kids gamboling about reflect the real nature of Oslo. One of my favorite European capitals, this lively city of nearly 600,000 is embraced by low, forested hills and fronted by the sparkling bay known as Oslo Fjord. A compact, walkable city, Oslo is filled with museums. If there is a unify-

ing theme here, it is water, which surrounds Norway's numerous islands and flows into the stunning seawater inlets along the country's coastline.

**WITH A SLIGHT BREEZE, THE MIST** from the tumbling water tickles my arms and face, breaking my reverie. I stroll to the highest point of the park, where a monolith formed of 121 intertwined figures rises nearly 60 feet high.

The grand sweep of park—80 acres in size—stands as a testament to the lifework of 20th century sculptor Gustav Vigeland. In 1921, the city of Oslo partnered with the master sculptor, providing him with housing and a studio in exchange for all of his

works produced from that time. The result is the world's largest sculpture park dedicated to a single artist, with 212 statues clustered in several sections along about a half-mile path.

While Vigeland crafted emotive three-dimensional forms, his famous contemporary, Edvard Munch, recorded human emotions in vivid color. At Oslo's Munch Museum, his iconic and immensely famous work *The Scream* is every bit as intense as you might expect, nearly jumping off the canvas. Yet Munch also produced more subtle pieces, including sketches of female nudes and character studies—gentle works that whisper, rather than scream.

Oslo's atmosphere is friendly, and it's the laughter and chatting of families and couples strolling along Karl Johans Gate that draws me into the flow along the grand promenade that begins at the Central Train Station and proceeds to the Royal Palace, about 10 blocks away. Along the way, I step into boutiques filled with Norwegian sweaters and jewelry, and near the palace, I visit the National Gallery for a look at the country's largest collection of Norwegian and international art.

Viking art and history intrigue me most—perhaps because my ancestors came from Scandinavia. At the Viking Ship Museum, on Oslo's Bygdøy Peninsula, I survey the finely crafted *Oseberg*, a graceful, 60-foot ship with a bow like an unfurl-



The Viking ship *Oseberg* at the Viking Ship Museum.

ing fern. I imagine 30 Vikings heaving on the oars, their vessel bound for faraway lands. Such wayfarers, among them Leif Eriksson, were the first Europeans in North America, about 1,000 years ago.

The *Oseberg* itself was likely a ceremonial vessel rather than a ship used for long-distance travel and it became a burial chamber more than 1,000 years ago for two women, one in her 20s or 30s, the other in her 60s. Found near the town of Tønsberg in 1904, the ship was remarkably well-preserved—and filled with riches. Linen and silk tapestries, elaborately carved wooden sleds, and numerous articles of clothing and household items found onboard were all intricately designed. A wooden cart decorated with several walnut-size carved heads shows good Viking grooming: Each unique face has a carefully combed beard. I wonder if these were carved to resemble actual men.

Who the women were is another mystery. However, there is a tantalizing clue: Historians note that a burial with trappings as extravagant as these suggests a member of the royal house of the Vestfold region, whose lone female mentioned in literature is Queen Åsa—pronounced similarly to the “Ose” in *Oseberg*, where the ship was found. Was it the queen's ship?

## LODGING AND DINING

### LODGING

Color and form take center stage at **FIRST HOTEL GRIMS GRENKA**, a sleek, contemporary accommodation with 50 generously sized rooms, designed with simple, clean lines and bright colors. The hotel opened in 2008 next to the city's historic Akershus Fortress. Grims Grenka's rooftop lounge features expansive fjord views. Kongens Gate 5; 23-10-72-00; [www.firsthotels.com](http://www.firsthotels.com).

Just a couple of blocks from the Royal Palace and across from the National Theatre, **HOTEL CONTINENTAL** offers luxury lodging in a historic building with 155 rooms and suites. No two rooms are furnished alike, with decor ranging from classic to contemporary. The hotel's Theatercaféen restaurant, with an arching ceiling and chandeliers, has been a prestigious gathering spot for more than a century. Stortingsgate 24/26; 22-82-40-00; [www.hotel-continental.no](http://www.hotel-continental.no).

**THON HOTEL OSLO PANORAMA** is a midrange hotel with 118 bright, spacious rooms. The Panorama's breakfast buffet is a lavish spread ranging from cold cuts, cheeses, yogurt and fruits to eggs, sausages and make-it-yourself waffles. A popular choice for Norwegians is a thick slice of rye bread with cold meats, thinly sliced tomatoes and cucumbers. Rådhusgaten 7b; 23-31-08-00; [www.thonhotels.com](http://www.thonhotels.com).

### DINING

**EKEBERG RESTAURANTEN** is equally well-known for its architecture (it's housed in a grand 1929 building), its setting on a forested hillside above the fjord and its fine dining. The seasonal menu features pike with asparagus, apple crème, capers and lobster vinaigrette, and an entrecôte of lamb with pearl onions and caraway jus. Cold fruit soup is a typical Norwegian dessert, and Ekeberg

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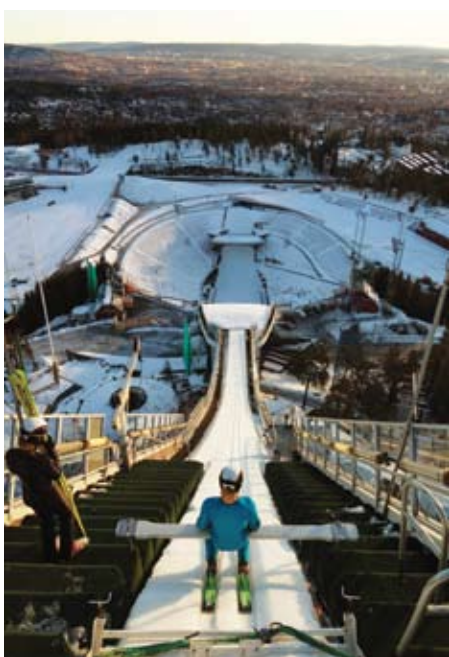




PHILIPPE DAMONVILLE / ALAMY

Who knows? But an ancient royal ship found near Oslo Fjord is a delightful parallel to Norway's modern-day seagoing royal family. Like many Norwegians, Norway's King Harald V is an avid sailor. He has even competed in the Olympics, in an 18-foot yacht, and in world championships, sailing a 52-foot yacht.

Bygdøy is Oslo's museum district, and there are numerous amazing things to see here, such as a Viking-era stave church, its steep-pitched roofs decorated with dragon heads, at the Norwegian Museum of Cul-



ANDREY ARTYKOV / ALAMY

Above: The sloping rooftop of the Oslo Opera House doubles as an inviting public space.

Below: A ski jumper practices at the newly renovated Holmenkollen ski jump.

tural History; the raft used by Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl on his 1947 expedition from South America to Polynesia, at the Kon-Tiki Museum; and the famed 1892 ship *Fram*, which carried polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen from 1893 to 1896 on his attempt to reach the North Pole, at the Fram Museum.

The most enjoyable way to reach this point of land is by ferry from downtown. A more leisurely option is to take a vintage wooden-boat tour of Bygdøy. Several boat operators provide fresh-caught-prawn dinners, enjoyed during evening cruises. If you haven't tried prawns in Norway, you're in for a treat—they're large, succulent and served steamed in their shells, sometimes with melted butter. They're the sweetest you're likely to taste.

**WHILE OSLO'S WATERFRONT SETTING** offers boating opportunities, its surrounding forest is beloved by residents, who enjoy about 120 miles of hiking trails in the summer and about 290 miles of marked Nordic ski trails in the winter. Cross-country skiing is *CONTINUED ON PAGE 114*

*FROM PAGE 109* presents a strawberry soup with a cardamom crisp and lemon-grass ice cream. Kongsveien 15; 23-24-23-00; www.ekebergrestauranten.no.

**ENGBRET CAFÉ** is the city's best-known purveyor of traditional Norwegian cuisine. This venerable establishment—it's been in operation for more than 150 years—is housed in a historic landmark building. The lunch menu includes Norwegian *smørbrød*—open-faced sandwiches starring salmon, roast beef or shrimp, artfully garnished with tomatoes, cucumber, dill and lemon. In the fall, the cafe serves traditional Norwegian lute-fisk: dried cod, whose careful preparations include soaking in a lye-and-water solution before cooking. Bankplassen 1; 22-82-25-25; www.engebret-cafe.no.

**ICE BAR OSLO**, which opened in November 2009, offers a surreal wintertime Norway experience, year-round. This is the third ice bar by Icehotel. The cold portion of the bar is maintained at a constant temperature of 23 degrees, and lit with changing colorful lights reminiscent of the northern lights. It was fashioned from 60 tons of Torne River ice. Cocktails feature aquavit and vodka concoctions, such as the *slørete bondepiker*: aquavit, spice syrup and apple, or the Skandinavia: vodka, rhubarb, lemon and cinnamon. Among the appetizers are cured moose with goat cheese terrine, sauna-smoked reindeer with pumpkin puree, and orange gravlax (salt-cured salmon) with soy jelly. Kristian IV's Gate 12; 22-42-66-61; www.ice-baroslo.no.

**LOFOTEN FISKERESTAURANT**, located at the harborside restaurant-and-retail center Aker Brygge, specializes in shellfish during the summer. Norwegian lobster is served with horseradish yogurt, aioli and salsa romesco. Stranden 75; 22-83-08-08; www.lofoten-fiskerestaurant.no. —L.F.

*FROM PAGE 111* thought to have originated about 4,000 years ago in Scandinavia. The sport is so popular that a few years ago when a local news story announced the results of a poll showing that 36 percent of Norwegians don't ski, it resulted in an uproar, as indignant Norwegians refused to believe such a statistic.

Ski jumping also originated in Norway, and it's tremendously popular in Oslo. The city's massive Holmenkollen ski jump and arena complex has been at the center of wintertime spectator sports since it opened in 1892, and its importance to the Norwegian psyche can't be understated; it's a national symbol. Upgraded many times over the years, Holmenkollen hosts the annual International Ski Federation World Cup ski competitions, and it has hosted three previous world ski championships, as well as the 1952 Winter Olympics.

The ski jump reopened in May after a nearly complete renovation to bring it up to modern standards and prepare it for the 2011 Nordic World Ski Championships.

Standing in the Holmenkollen tower, I'm almost 200 feet above the outrun and grandstands. The steepness of the pitch and the incredible height of the run make it hard to imagine that people willingly launch themselves into space from here. I want to gain a sense of what that feels like, so I enter the Holmenkollen ski simulator.

I strap myself into a seat and, through the marvels of modern technology, I become a ski jumper, preparing to launch. A movie, shot from a helmet camera, lends a sense of realism, which is enhanced by the movements of the simulator. Reaching the end of the slippery track, I launch skyward and soar effortlessly, quietly. I near the grandstand, and the audience seems to be holding its collective breath as I stretch out the landing, seeking every last inch aloft, soaring beyond the 100-meter mark. Of course, I enjoy a perfect landing, and the adulation of thousands of cheering spectators.

Widespread enthusiasm also greeted the new Opera House, which opened to broad acclaim in early 2008. This snow-white marble beauty rises from Oslo Fjord

like an iceberg above the waves—the building is partially submerged in the water. The sloping planes of the rooftop flow seamlessly down to the water's edge, anchored by enormous glass panes at the center that are actually high windows inside; atop the central structure is an observation deck. The building's low angles resemble skateboard ramps. I can't attest to whether skateboarders try their tricks here, but anyone can climb on the edifice, which I do, walking up to a high point to take in the cityscape. It's an exhilarating feeling, and somewhat of a guilty pleasure, to wander around atop a spectacular architectural monument, especially one that appears to float. By the bemused looks on the faces of a gaggle of skinny-jean-and-black-shirt-garbed teenagers exploring this new dimension, I know I'm not the only one with this sensation.

While Oslo has much to be proud of, its biggest moment on the world stage comes every December with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize—an international prize named for Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite—in the city's splendid, mural-filled City Hall. Since few can attend this grand affair, the Nobel Peace Center, in a nearby historic train station, offers a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the extraordinary men and women who have been awarded the prestigious prize.

It's ironic that what was once the home of combative Vikings is now a center for world peace. With the city's huge number of arts institutions and cultural offerings, and its gorgeous outdoor parks, Oslo is one of the world's great cities. ▲

*Leslie Forsberg writes from Seattle.*

#### GETTING THERE



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