

## Fjord Fiesta

**The ancient maritime city of Bergen is brought bang up to date, with its mountains and music combining with modern trams and 3D cinema**

Jacquetta Megarry

I stand on the promontory outside the composer's hut, drinking in the same view of Lake Nordas that had inspired Grieg's Peer Gynt suite. He used to retreat here from visitors to seek his muse, and his finest music was composed in this hut.

Troldhaugen was magical: the name means "small hill where the trolls live" but the appeal of this visit is human interest, not mythical creatures. We wander around Grieg's house, which still contains his personal belongings and photographs. The Steinway grand piano was a silver wedding present. Nina, Grieg's wife and first cousin, was a professional soprano and Edvard considered her the finest interpreter of his songs.

Edvard lived here for 22 years, from 1885 until his death aged 64, and Nina stayed on until 1919. The grounds are glorious, containing not only their house but also the composer's hut, tomb and the Troldsalen, a small concert hall.

In season, free buses run from the centre of Bergen to concerts here at weekends and in the evenings, with some private performances on Grieg's own Steinway.

We had landed at Bergen airport only half an hour ago, and were at Troldhaugen before exploring the city itself. The Scottish/Norwegian connections are strong: Grieg's great-grandfather, Alexander Greig, came from near Fraserburgh. As a Jacobite supporter, he travelled widely post-Culloden. When he settled in Norway about 1770, he wisely changed his surname to Grieg.

Bergen is an eye-opener. Norway's second city, its population is now over 250,000 and its separate identity is celebrated in number-plates that say "I am not from Norway, I am from Bergen".

They used to call it a city surrounded by seven mountains. Nowadays they joke it's seven mountains surrounded by a city. The highest is Ulriken at 2070ft, but the most accessible is Mount Fløyen. From its viewing platform there are tremendous wide-open views over the harbour 1300ft below.

The top is reached in a few minutes by the Fløibanen funicular, whose lower station is only 150 yards from the fish market and whose upper station leads to a fine range of hiking trails. We spent the evening lingering over a fish dinner in the Fløien Folkerestaurant, watching the slow-sinking sun sparkle over the harbour.

Bergen has always been a maritime city. By turnover, it is still one of the world's largest ports, and the medieval wharf area of Bryggen is still its historic and commercial heart.

Founded in 1070, it became Norway's capital in the 13th and 14th centuries, its harbour then at the hub of trade in salt and wheat. Bergen was the leading Norwegian member of the Hanseatic League, a German-based trading organisation which set up an office at Bryggen in 1360.

Bryggen is where Bergen began, and its wharf and timber warehouses are one of its greatest charms. This famous waterfront is virtually unchanged since 1702 when it was rebuilt after the last great fire reduced the city to ashes.

Unesco recognised Bryggen as a World Heritage site in 1979, and it's full of charm and history. Wandering around the timber buildings along narrow alleys with overhanging galleries and hoists for goods, I feel transported to an earlier century.

Bryggen's tourist attractions include a splendid range of restaurants, cafés and shops selling traditional crafts. Of the 60-odd original buildings, the Hanseatic Museum is the only one with its interiors preserved, so you get a real insight into the everyday life of these historic traders.

You can visit the fish market where Bergensers still buy their fresh fish. The aquarium has an amazing range of sea life in over 60 tanks and a surprising tropical section and cinema that shows 3D movies. And Bergen's modernity is underlined by its new tram system, opened by Queen Sonja in June this year.

For many, Bergen is the gateway to Norway's beautiful fjord country and it is closer than you think, with a latitude of over 60° North, slightly north of Lerwick. Now we have already had the longest day in Scotland and the nights are drawing in, head north for one of the few places we can go to to experience even longer hours of daylight. It even has trams that work.

## FACTFILE

Jacquetta Megarry flew with Norwegian airline Widerøe and was a guest of the tourist board of Bergen ([www.vistbergen.com](http://www.vistbergen.com)). Widerøe serves Bergen twice-daily from Aberdeen and until August 21 has direct twice-weekly flights from Edinburgh (Tuesdays and Saturdays).

Widerøe's *Explore Norway* ticket offers one or two weeks' unlimited travel to 35 destinations within Norway from £340 including free return flight from Scotland: **[www.wideroe.no/explorenorway](http://www.wideroe.no/explorenorway)**.