

Trekking the Trail of Norse Kings

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I couldn't believe what confronted me as I crested the rise. Two moose, a mother and her calf, blocked my pathway. Slowly I lowered my pack and attempted to free my camera. But before I could capture them on film, they set off on an ethereal lope into the surrounding pine forest.

Surprising, yes? But that incident was typical of the adventure and super-natural surprises I discovered on my recent 400-mile (643-kilometer) trek along the St. Olav's Way in Norway.

Stretching from Oslo, Norway's capital, to Trondheim nearly on its northwestern shore, St. Olav's Way offers an intriguing way to discover this country of natural superlatives.

Originating back in 1031AD, the trail traces the early Norse pilgrims route as they traveled to Nidaros to pay homage and pray for miracles at the grave of King Olav, who is credited with spreading Christianity in the country. For which, he was granted sainthood.



For nearly 500 years, the faithful followed this same rugged route along Lake Mjøsa, up into the pine-draped hills, through ancient Bronze Age settlements, across fog-cloaked valleys, up over the frigid tundra with its Stone Age reminders, and back down to the azure fjord. This they did (under certainly more difficult circumstances) in devotion, penance, or to seek miracles at the cathedral in Trondheim where St. Olav was reputedly interred.

However, in 1603 pilgrimages were banned. The trail fell into disuse until 1997 when the Norwegian government spent millions of kroner to map, clear and mark the pathway and reclaim a unique chapter of their heritage.

Today this trail, or *pilgrimsleden* as it is called, is being re-discovered by modern Norwegians, adventurous world trekkers, pilgrims, and those simply seeking solitude and peaceful contemplation.

St. Olav's Way is quite different from the Camino de Santiago, that classic pilgrimage trail across northern Spain. For all the culture that the Camino offers, it can be difficult to find privacy because of its well-deserved popularity. The Via Francigena, another premier route from Canterbury to Rome, offers an incomparable taste of Italy, Switzerland and eastern France. However, many travelers would be relieved to get off those small country roads and into the countryside.



This is where the Norwegian trail shines. As someone who recently trekked its length, I was surprised to find myself the only "pilgrim" along that path in August, Europe's most popular travel month. In fact, during my 25 days on the trail, I passed perhaps only seven others, mostly local hikers out for the afternoon. So, if you're looking for serenity, time away from the nagging drone of cell phones and clutter of everyday life, this trail should be at the top of your list—whether you trek all of it, or just a portion. The choice is yours.

Although there's no need to be in marathon condition, you should be in fairly good shape, as this trail is strenuous at times. Of course, you're free to set your own pace, stopping to gasp deep lungs-full of crisp Nordic air whenever you want. It's enough to clear any head. Pollution is refreshingly rare here and environmental consciousness is a cornerstone of the national character.

Each day, traveling with only a light backpack (no more than 25 pounds is necessary), many can easily walk 10-15 miles. Although with the longer summer days and more light, you could easily trek until nearly 10pm at night—if your body is willing to cooperate.



The terrain varies. For several days, beginning not far outside Oslo, you trace the edge of crystalline Lake Mjøsa, Norway's largest. After passing Lillehammer, site of the 1994 winter Olympics, you spend several days in picturesque Gudbrandsdal Valley, the setting for the famous literary trilogy about Kristen Lavransdatter and her family.

Written by Sigrid Unset, Norway's Nobel-prize winning author, it provides a revealing glimpse of 14th century life when pilgrimage was popular and the hardships were more severe than today.



One particularly interesting place to sleep along this trail is the rustic Jørundgard Middelaltersenter near Sel. This reconstructed 12-century farm was originally built in 1991 as a film set where they shot the story of Lavransdatter. Today it offers live stage performances in summer, an impressive outdoor museum and is an unforgettable setting for special events and weddings.

Its Bridal Suite is like something out of a fairy tale. Where else can you sleep on an authentic recreation of a 12-century bed draped in reindeer hides?

Leaving Sel, the trail continues to wend through fields of wheat, barley and rye, down ancient King's trails, through primeval pine forests dotted with wild mushrooms, and past holy healing wells. This is still the enchanted homeland of Peer Gynt. Up and down—and up again—you climb to mountaintops offering eagle-view panoramas. All the while you're surrounded by an abundance of wildlife, from the tiniest tundra wildflower, to wild raspberries the size of California strawberries, to wayward sheep and elusive deer, elk—and yes, even moose.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of this journey occurs after a cozy night's stay at Budsjord, a recreation of the 14th century bishop's farm. The Dovre plateau, or Dovrefjell, at nearly 3280-feet (1000-meters), stands in stark contrast to the bucolic valley below. Suddenly you're walking in another world, across a tundra-like landscape, vibrant with minute, delicate wildflowers, spongy lichen and the occasional musk ox.



Here the trail is marked with the now familiar St. Olav's Way crest. However, now it is painted onto slate grey slabs thrust into the earth, instead of the usual naturally faded (often hard to see) wooden poles.

You ford swollen rivers, hopping from stone to stone. At points where the trail becomes sponge-like and soaked, log bridges carry you across the bog high and dry. My LEKI walking sticks were especially handy, helping me ford streams, balance across those bridges, and preventing a near free-fall off a mountainside. Still, the weather is completely unpredictable and a force with which to be reckoned.

When I began the trail in early August, I was surprised to have three blistering days of nearly 90°F (30°C). This is rare in Norway, with a latitude similar to Alaska. Then two weeks later, on Dovrefjell, I was face-to-face with sleet and near-freezing winds. Snow already blanketed the surrounding cratered mountaintops and it felt like winter--in August.

Yet that is one of the beauties and challenges of this trek. You need to be prepared for almost anything--and improvisation is key to having a good time. Why? Much of this experience is slightly unpredictable.

If the trail maddeningly disappears (as it often does) because the path is overgrown or a snowplow has knocked over the signpost, you either do a little orienteering and create your own way across fields, thickets, bog or over fences--or simply find a local to set you on the right path. Thankfully, most speak very good English.



Also, Norwegian villages are unlike typical European towns with a café, pub, bank, bakery, market and hotel that you pass every few hours when walking. In Norway, a village is typically a collection of farms, or gårds, some absolutely huge, with a charming historic church. So besides the few mid-sized cities along the way, like Otta or Oppdal, it can be a long hike between stores. I learned to carry about three days of provisions with me at all times.

Still, even then, I ran out. On several occasions locals were kind enough to give me food or water. All I had to do was ask and everyone was anxious to help. Yes, they may more reserved than Americans are, but if you make the first move, they're friendly, gracious, curious and very trusting.

In fact, there were several instances when I phoned to make a reservation for the following evening and my host told me that they would be away--but I would find the key in the door.

Although August is the end of their season, folks were accommodating, and some even willing to negotiate their price. Between very affordable camping cabins (averaging \$25), more luxurious bed and breakfasts, some of the finest youth hostels you'll find anywhere, and stays in historic sites, farms or in free, rustic pilgrim's huts, you'll be covered. Just phone ahead at least a day in advance for reservations.



The "*Overnattingsguiden*," a lodging guide available from the Pilgrimskontoret (Pilgrim's Office) in Oslo is invaluable to finding those lodging gems along the way.

From Dovrefjell and Hjerkinnhø, the highest point at 3900 feet (1200 meters), it's nearly all downhill to the fjord and famed Nidarosdom in Trondheim. It has been the site of several churches over the centuries, dating back to 1031 when the first wooden chapel was constructed over St. Olav's grave. Today its stately gothic cathedral is Norway's "Westminster Abbey" where kings and queens are crowned.



As I arrived, weary after 25 days on the trail, an organ recital was held under the gaze of its 10,000-piece stained-glass rose window. However I was anxious to duck out of the rain, so I headed over to the pilgrim's office nearby where they presented me with a certificate for completing the journey. Then the Archbishop, eager to hear about my experiences, personally led me to their pilgrim's room for complimentary stew, hot coffee and a pastry.

Although it was just what I needed on a chilly, wet Norwegian day, nothing was quite as satisfying as traveling this way, one-step-at-a-time. It makes all the difference. You slow down and live all the nuances that you would otherwise miss along the way.

Plus, I like to think of walking as a "trampoline for the mind." After you place your body on "auto-pilot," your mind and soul are free to set off on travels of their own. You travel without-while traveling within. And, to me, that seems like one unbeatable companion fare.

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When to go:

May-August is the optimum trekking season, otherwise plan on snow, rain and shorter days. A popular time to walk the trail is late July when many arrive in Trondheim for "Olav Wake" and the cultural festivities that continue for a week afterward. For details visit: <http://www.nidarosdomen.no/english>

How to get there:

There are many flights from the US and Canada to London or Amsterdam, your easiest gateway cities. From London, you can catch a budget flight to Oslo on Norwegian Airlines or Ryan Air, or KLM from there or Amsterdam. Trains and buses leave frequently from Trondheim to Oslo for your return.

How long does it take:

23-30 days to trek it in one stretch. Or take as long as you wish

How much to budget:

Norway has one of the world's highest standards of living. At bare minimum, budget \$60 US a day. It may be less if you carry your own tent. You can camp anywhere outside city limits as long as you're at least 492 feet (150 meters) from a house, fence, or boundary and stay no more than two nights. But this will limit your chance of meeting locals.

For further information:

Pilgrim Road to Nidaros by Alison Raju, 2001, Cicerone Press, England
Pilegrimsleden Gjennom Eidsvoll by Tron Hummelvoll, 2003, and
Pilegrimsleden Gjennom Stange og Hamar by Tron Hummelvoll, 2004
are helpful 4-color guides in Norwegian for two sections of the trail with brief English summaries
Overnattingsguiden is an indispensable lodging guide; all available from the Pilgrim's Office in Oslo
Confraternity of St. James (Pilgrim's Office), Kirkegaten 34A, 0190 Oslo
phone: 22.33.03.11; email: pilegrim@pilegrim.no;
<http://www.pilegrim.no>

Brandon Wilson is a Lowell Thomas Award-winning author/photographer/explorer. He has walked ten long distance paths, including the Camino de Santiago (twice), the Via de la Plata, the Via Francigena from England to Rome, and the St. Olav's Way across Norway. In 1992, he and his wife Cheryl became the first Western couple to hike an ancient pilgrimage trail 650-miles across Tibet, as chronicled in his IPPY award-winning book, **Yak Butter Blues**. In 2006, he and a friend founded a pilgrim's path following the route of the First Crusades from France to Jerusalem, naming it the Templar Trail. Their adventure is told in Brandon's book, **Along the Templar Trail**, named 2009 Best Travel Book by the prestigious Society of American Travel Writers. His other books include: **Dead Men Don't Leave Tips: Adventures X Africa** and **Over the Top & Back Again: Hiking X the Alps**. They are available from Amazon.com or from your favorite bookstore. Visit <http://www.pilgrimstales.com> for a preview and more.