

THE BEST OF NORWAY IN A DAY

See the fjords on a budget

TAKING a cruise is a great way to see the fjords of Norway, but for people tight on time or budget, the luxury of a fjord cruise is not always an option.

The Norway in a Nutshell rail and boat trip is a great way to see the fjords and you can even do the whole trip in a day, starting out from either the capital Oslo, or Bergen on the coast (there are direct flights from Dublin to both).

The journey starts on the Oslo-Bergen railway — the highest mainline railway in Europe and has some of Norway's most spectacular scenery.

The railway weaves its way through the Hardangervidda mountain range at heights of 1,301m above sea level, running alongside fjords and through mountain tunnels, passing unspoiled valleys, forests and lakes.

Boat

It's no surprise that it is regularly voted one of the most beautiful railway journeys in the world.

The Nutshell trip includes a train journey, a bus and a boat through two fjords.

I started the journey in the old Hanseatic city of Bergen on the coast, boarding the 8.40am train for Voss.

It wasn't long before the first fjord came into view — a gap in the tunnel giving a tantalising glimpse of the magnificent Osterfjorden fjord.

The track wound its way along the

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miles of fjord, passing still rivers and lakes, waterside cabins and boats, houses in the hills and rocky mountain slabs.

The train hooted before every tunnel and stopped off at sleepy little towns like Vaksdal, in valleys so deep, the smoke rose vertically from chimney pots.

The scenery became more dramatic as we went along. Water rushed angrily through narrow spaces in the valley floor as we raced through lush forests.

Silent

We arrived in Voss at 10am, transferring to a bus which took us into the mountains,

past fields of horses, wooden houses and the impressive 152m-high Tvinnefossen waterfall.

At Stalheimskleiva, we encountered a stretch of road that twists its way down into the valley around 13 sharp hairpin bends.

At a gradient of 20 per cent, it's one of the steepest stretches of road in Northern Europe.

The driver told everyone to stay in their seats as we navigated the steep bends, everyone silent — praying that the brakes were in good condition.

We passed two more waterfalls before travelling across the valley to Gudvangen, at the head of the Nærøyfjord. Here we

transferred to a boat for the next part of the journey through the two fjords, Nærøyfjord and Aurlandsfjord.

We were soon gliding through the water with a steep mountain face on either side, the work of ancient glaciers in evidence with waterfalls, rugged peaks and hanging valleys — school geography made real.

The Nærøyfjord is 17km long and the mountains reach up to 1,660m.

Every so often we passed a waterside settlement in a sheltered valley and at Stigen, we saw moun-

tain farms perched on impossibly steep ledges, reached by the inhabitants by ladders (which were raised when the tax man came calling).

At the end of Aurlandsfjord is the small village of Flåm with walking trails through the fjord valley and a museum about its famous railway.

The railway runs at an altitude of 866m, with its 1:18 gradient making it Northern Europe's steepest.

Seats

We took the late afternoon train which offered views of valleys, trees, and waterfalls.

The train stopped at the Kjosfossen Waterfall so we could get out and have a look.

When we reached the station at the mountain plateau at Myrdal, we got back onto a train to Oslo, arriving in Oslo later that night exhilarated after a fascinating one-day adventure.



★ GETTING THERE ★

- ★ ● Norway in a Nutshell can be taken from Oslo, Voss or Bergen and costs €186. For more information, see www.fjordtours.no.
- ★ ● The train from Oslo to Bergen costs €100, but if you book early you can get tickets from €26 — see www.nsb.no.
- ★ ● Another great way to see Norway is to buy a rail pass, which starts at €181 for any three days in one month, see www.interrailnet.com.
- ★ ● Fares on SAS flights from Dublin to Oslo start at €75 one way and Dublin to Bergen from €97 one way, including taxes and charges, see www.flysas.ie.

NATURAL BEAUTY: The trip goes along the Nærøyfjord by boat



RAIL: The Oslo-Bergen railway is one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world

