

Summer in Scotland & Norway

If, as I said in an earlier newsletter, yellow is the color of Caithness in springtime.....then purple is the color of Caithness in summer.



There is also a lot of white in the peatlands, where the bog cotton can sometimes be so thick, that from a distance it looks like snow on the ground.



This summer we went to a rather unique place for lunch. We jokingly say that we are not living at the edge of the world....but on a clear day you can see it from here. Well.....with Thurso as a starting point, we drove two and a half hours on narrow one-track roads, frequently contending with free range sheep.



Then a 15 minute voyage in a small, open ferry.



Where we boarded a small mini-bus for an eleven mile (hour long) ride, very slowly traversing the roughest road I have ever been on.

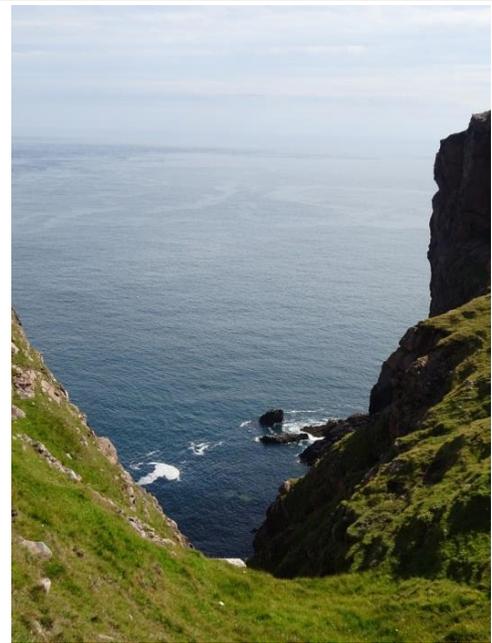




The views are quite nice.



Crossing a Ministry of Defense missile range.



To reach Cape Wrath Lighthouse, where a lunch of soup and sandwiches can be purchased at the Ozone Café (open 7 days a week, 24 hours a day – anyone who can get there will be served any time)





We also stopped at Smoo Cave, a sea cave with some spectacular openings that let the light in to illuminate the mysteries inside.



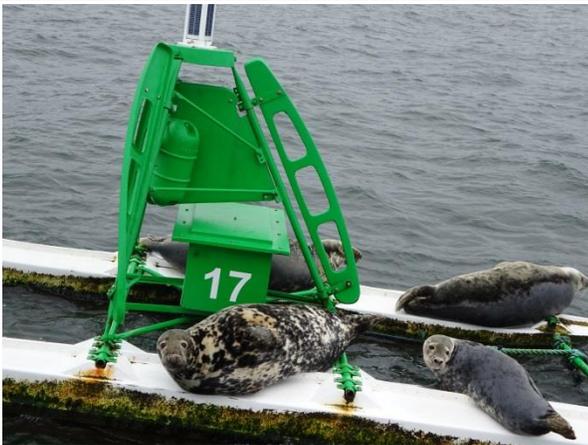
We saw stag deer (about a dozen) and nesting puffins and oyster catchers in our travels.



As well as colorful slower moving wee beasties.



On a visit to Fife, we took a ferry across the Firth of Forth, past its three history making bridges, and the ruins of the prison on an island (reminded us of Alcatraz back in the USA). We also passed Ship Island, which was the home of defensive bunkers in World War 2. Note that the buildings were constructed to make the island resemble the shape of a ship. This was to fool German submarines if they came into the Firth looking to torpedo a British destroyer. There were also some lazy seals hitching a ride on a buoy.



The purpose of the ferry ride was to visit Incholm Island and the ruins of Incholm Abbey. The abbey made the island a center of religious activity since the 12th century when King Alexander I of Scotland funded its construction after he found shelter on the island by a fierce storm. Incholm became known as the Iona of the east.....compared to the Isle of Iona on Scotland's west coast, where St. Columba established

the first Christian settlement in Scotland. Today the abbey is still popular as a site for weddings.



Perhaps the most striking feature is the tower.



Which can still be climbed, if you are willing to squeeze up an extremely tight triple spiral staircase, followed by yet another narrow, straight staircase.



The island has been the home of military defensive fortifications through both World Wars and all the way back to the Napoleonic Wars. Its strategic location could protect both the shipyards at Rosyth and the railway bridge over the firth, connecting the Highlands and the north of Scotland with the south.



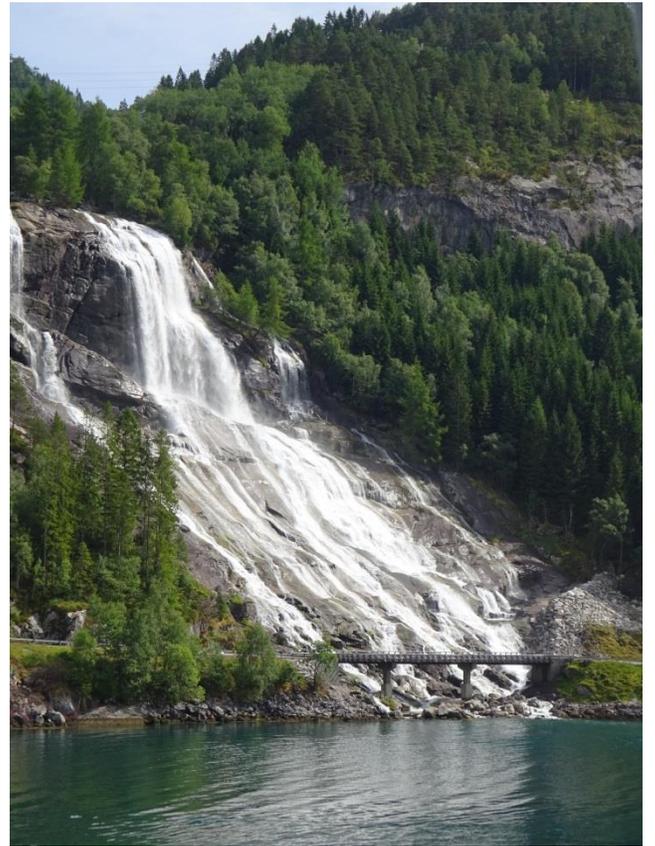
It is home to thousands of seagulls during nesting season, and they seem quite unbothered by humans walking within mere feet of their nests.



Our summer trip was to visit Norway again. Norway is home to some amazing civil engineering feats as the roads and tunnels connect the various islands and mountain villages.



The fjord region is home to some spectacular waterfalls, which are shown here in a number of photos.





It is said that if you watch closely, you can sometimes see Huldra, the elusive and beautiful blonde haired forest spirit from Norse mythology, who wanders the forests in her red cape, singing songs of enchantment. According to local folklore, she lures men into the woods to seduce them.





As the sunlight passes through the waterfall mist, rainbows appear.



The one below is one of the most unique things I have ever experienced. The mist from the falls was drifting across the hiking path, and the sun was shining bright. I suddenly realized that there was a 360 degree complete circle rainbow visible in the mist about a foot above the ground, and I was standing within its circumference. Pretty cool !



The roads in Norway are pretty astonishing as they climb from a village on one fjord, across a mountain, and down to a village on the other fjord.



With some pretty steep inclines.



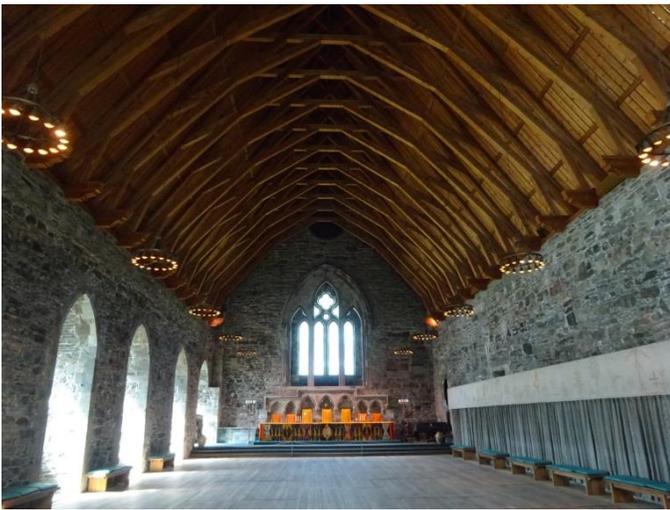
The hiking paths can be pretty steep too. I felt like this one went straight up the side of a mountain. As in Scotland, the paths through the dense woods are a thousand different shades of green leaves, ferns and moss. Norway's troll maidens, hide in the ferns just like Scotland's fairies.....but not nearly as attractive.



There are wee cottages in some pretty out-of-the way places.



Bergen is the only large city we visited, and it is great for tourists with hundreds of shops and pubs and a fantastic fresh seafood market. Here is the great hall in the restored 13th century castle known as Hakom's Hall.

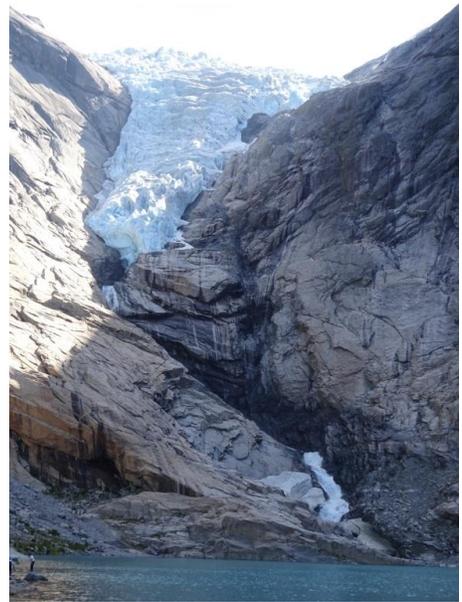


Adjacent to it is the only slightly newer Rosenkrantz Tower, which is under renovation – so no pictures....except of me trying on some period battle gear. Which way to the Crusades ?



One of my favorite parts of the trip was the hike up to Northern Europe's largest glacier....40 miles in length....this photo shows only a small tongue of it that can be reached on foot. The glacier is much smaller today than it was in the past, as proved by photos across the years. It is melting rapidly in the warming climate.

My other favorite thing was scholbrod. I love these Norwegian pastries.



The summer color for Norway appears to be purple, just like back in Caithness.



The historic churches of Norway are beautiful. Here are several wooden churches, mostly built about 150-200 years ago.



But most amazing are the 13th-14th century stave churches. There are only 29 remaining in the world, and Norway is proud to have preserved 28 of them. It was believed that there were once well over 1000. We visited this one at Kvernes. Everything is made from wood, including all the beautifully intricate carving inside.



Hanging in the middle of the sanctuary was the “votive ship” or “church ship” meant to symbolize the journey of life. Traditionally these were constructed and donated to the church by seamen seeking God’s protection, and are fairly common in Scandinavia. The one in the Kvernes stave church is quite impressive.



This church is only used for a few yearly services or special occasions such as weddings. Normal services are held in the newer church next door.



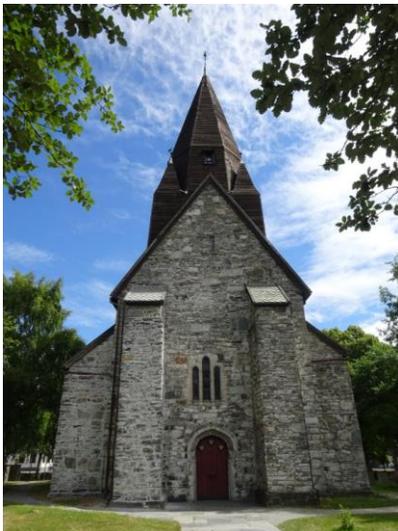
Its interior is also beautifully decorated. And also has a church ship.



There are also stone churches which are from the centuries following the stave churches.



And this unique 12th century church in Voss is stone below, but has a steeple that looks like it belongs on a stave church.



That's about it for this summer's travels, except for a wee quiz. Can you find the troll in this picture? My friend Dave says that the troll is obviously the one with the gray hair.



Time to head back home to the Highlands of Scotland.



"Did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I would choose to end my days in."

Benjamin Franklin