

Norway - Bergen to Svalgard, My People, Rectifying the Nutcracker Curse

From Bergen to Longyearbyen by Ship, Oslo to Bergen With the Viking Bear and His Fabulous Wife



Left to Right: (top) Bergen's Bryggen, Fantolf Stave Church – rebuilt after burned down by a satanic cult, wake-up view in Nordfjord; (middle) dilapidated buildings on Vaeroy/Lofoten, me and Karin at Trollfjord/Lofoten around midnight, parking in the ice along east Spitzbergen, glacier face at Krossfjorden/Spitzbergen; (bottom) home of the Viking Bear and his fabulous wife; view from my grandmother's childhood livingroom

Introduction

In the late 1920's, my mother's parents emigrated from Norway, each leaving behind several siblings in the Samnanger region south of Bergen. Forty years ago, my parents took me to Norway to visit many of these relatives. In the 1970's, each of my maternal grandparents visited respective families in Norway, and - a few years later - several of my grandfather's relatives visited our family in Washington. One of these individuals was my grandfather's nephew, who then hosted my middle sister (Ellen) when she traveled to Norway seven years ago. Given that my dad's side of the family is limited and/or unknown, I fervently cling to my Norwegian heritage - "my people." Thus, it was inevitable that I would make the pilgrimage.



Left to Right: Besta (grandmother) and grandfather and wedding picture, Besta and my uncle and mom (riding goat) in then-rural Tacoma; my mother and I in Samnanger (1968), my mother and I (in homemade bunad) at Daughters of Norway, Ellen and her troll

2008 represents my first professional sabbatical after 11 years working in academics. Consequently, I knew I wanted to take a couple longer vacations that I could not enjoy given my usual teaching schedule. Had you asked me 5 years ago what these might be, I would have answered: Antarctica/South Georgia Island and Everest Base Camp - east/Tibet side. Over the last 2 years, however, both ideas shifted: Antarctica became this Norway trip because I could not wrap my desire or passion around such long boat travel in such rough seas (this concern was exacerbated after visiting the Galapagos in 2007). In coming to the decision about Antarctica vs. Norway, I also decided that Lindblad (who partners with National Geographic - and will henceforth be known as LNG) seemed to be well-reviewed for so-called adventure cruising. They also did the most comprehensive trip of Norway and Svalbard, not covered by my usual trekking companies. Nonetheless, doing either of these destinations means traveling with a minimum of 100 other client/passengers, which also

remained hard for me to fathom given that my usual group size has been 10-20. But, I kept reminding myself, 100 was SO SMALL compared with the typical cruise ship (1000-2000 people). LNG's Norway/Svalbard and Antarctica also both require a HUGE and comparable expense, easily the most I've spent on any trip... clearly a once-in-a-lifetime deal. In February, however, I found myself innocently gardening in my front yard. Specifically, I was laying bark in my rockery when I stepped fifteen inches down from a raised terrace. The ground was uneven, covered with large bark pieces, and slightly wet. My ankle rolled and I fell completely down upon it - actively feeling this grinding sensation. For 10 minutes, I actually cried - unable to get up because it hurt so bad. Given that none of my neighbors were rushing to my assistance (which is not an unreasonable expectation given where I live), I dragged myself into my house and put a bag of ice on the swelling mess while I called several friends and my clinic (30 minutes away by car) for advice. In the end, I wound up driving myself - given that my best friend in town was sick with a 104°F fever. Fortunately, my usual orthopedic surgeon was on duty. Although she suspected it was a bad sprain, she put me in a boot-cast (big velcro beast) and ordered me to buy and use crutches for a week while we waited for the swelling to go down enough to take more conclusive X-rays. Three weeks later, however, the pain and bruising had not gone down much and, following an MRI, it was determined I had chipped the cuboidal bone (an injury commonly called the "nutcracker" - with the cuboidal representing the nut). Thus, my DR decided I needed another 6 weeks in the boot-cast, which fully flipped me out given this trip departed May 24. Consequently, my stress level rose a great deal - exacerbated by difficult research that was taking twice the time as had been planned.



Left to Right: Bergen - harbors as seen from Floyen, front of Bryggen, fish market

May 22-23, 2008 - Getting to Bergen

Nonetheless, I was ready to leave the country when mid-May rolled around. After visiting my mother and sisters (all amassed in Tacoma for the summer), I flew to Bergen on May 23-4. Of course, my first moments on the SAS flight were not pleasant: this rude man with some kind of German accent was sitting in my seat. When I asked him to move, he argued about how he and his new wife (this silent Asian woman who made me wonder what kinds of deals had been cut to arrange this marriage) were returning from some extended honeymoon... how could ** deprive him of this beautiful woman? Of course, his correct seat was still beside her - just separated by the aisle. His posse of friends then joined in, arguing about how I didn't need the window because there was nothing to see. I coolly replied: I want to see Greenland... and then I took my chair. Needless to say, the first hour of flight was tense - but soon he fell asleep and she, for some reason, seemed content with the outcome. Later, I learned that increasing numbers of Scandinavian men have been seeking marriages to subservient Asian women, causing me to speculate that this guy was on his way home from such a transaction. Pathetic. Anyway - there were some views of the Washington Cascades, but most of Canada was shrouded under clouds. By the time sea ice in the vicinity of Baffin Island came into view, the flight attendants were insistently closing all windows so people could sleep, which was - for me - a major disappointment. I can't say I slept much during the flight. I also can't say I was thrilled with SAS; I did enjoy their individual seat video monitors, which featured real-time cameras in front and under the plane. About 90 minutes before landing (when we were allowed to open our windows), Norway's rocky outer islands came into view... seeming strangely devoid of greenery. We then crossed southern Norway - the fjords striking and the interior mountains covered with snow. Although the landscape was beautiful, the mountains were not as dramatic as, say, the Alps... rather, they seemed like this gently humped but fundamentally plateau-like slab of granite that had been variously polished, scratched, and scarred by eons of ice.

After taking off around 6 p.m. Seattle time, we landed in Copenhagen, Denmark around noon (i.e. ten hours in the air). Although somewhat easy to navigate, both the Copenhagen and Oslo airports featured these insanely huge malls where it seemed as though significant numbers of the general public were rolling around carts and shopping tax-free. The former even seemed to have a gigantic grocery store. Given a nearly three-hour layover, I rested in this sunny plaza as far away from the stores as possible - before making my way to my final domestic gate, this too-small seating area in this non-glitzy lower floor area. Indeed, from here, we walked out on the tarmac and boarded our plane directly. This time, I was seated next to a quiet, dark-haired Norwegian 20-something guy wearing a dark, frumpy suit. For better or worse (probably better, given my history), visions of DDG blond Scandinavian men (or women) were seldom borne out on this trip. The Bergen airport was about the size of that at Santiago - and almost as nice. I was astounded at the lack of security, however, in terms of any form of customs processing. I pretty much grabbed my bag and left the building; nobody checked my passport or luggage. The main lobby was busy but I readily found an ATM and took out 1000 krone (about \$200, which lasted 14 hours), and hailed a cab. Outside, the landscape looked exactly like that in western Washington. In contrast with the recommended LNG itinerary (which catered only to east coast people), I arrived in Bergen a day early, having made my own hotel reservations. Not surprisingly, I would do things differently if I were to visit Bergen again. First off, Norway is INSANELY expensive. I THOUGHT things were bad last year in Venice... but Bergen made Venice look CHEAP. I paid \$250 equivalent per night for my room at the Best Western affiliate, although this did include a good free breakfast buffet, a discount at their dining room, and free internet. Although the room was smaller than my boat cabin, I appreciated all the exquisite bedding (i.e. copious pillows, amazing down quilts). The more frustrating expense, though, was the travel fare between the airport (40 minutes by car) and the city. I, as stated, opted for a taxi because I was tired after 22 hours of airports and flying - but this, seriously, ran \$80. The better option (had I booked a different hotel) would have been the SAS Flybus, which costs \$10; you are riding with 40 others, and it only takes you to the SAS hotel (tomorrow's meeting place for the LNG trip and next to the Bryggen - the World Heritage Site with all the Hanseatic warehouses). In contrast, my hotel was across Bergen's small harbor from the Bryggen. Although I could readily walk to the Bryggen in 10 minutes,

hauling luggage across all the cobbled stones was challenging when it came time to do so (although I made the trip in 20 minutes). Given how small my hotel room was, I would probably use the SAS hotel given what I know now. In any event, I arrived at my hotel at 6 p.m. Although I was tired, I decided I should eat a good meal and walk around outside until at least 9. Keep in mind that Bergen is comparable in latitude to Yakutat, Alaska (significantly north of Juneau); this meant it was light out just past 11 p.m., with visible daylight starting to appear around 3 a.m. After unpacking and taking my mandatory post-flight shower, I headed to the nearly empty hotel restaurant where I paid \$25 for a decent meal: half a roast chicken, a fresh green salad, and some limp French fries. Then I proceeded around the easy-to-navigate harbor to the pretty Bryggen area. Although Bergen cannot hold a candle to Venice, the Bryggen was scenic and had an old, maze-like feel. My first destination was actually the Bergenhus, this green hill beyond the Bryggen with a stone tower (1200's) and ceremonial hall (1500's). Some kind of art exposition or contest using simple lumber pieces was going on in the extensive park. Oddly, all the trees had been trimmed down to basically one central trunk, small bushy knobs of early leaves just beginning to emerge (reminding me of my grandmother's pruning practices). I then returned to the main Bryggen area where the buying began. Although I came to this country thinking I was going to buy big ticket items like knit sweaters or bunad (traditional regional costumes) components, said items were TOO MUCH (sweaters \$500, bunads \$3000-5000) and so I found myself drawn to smaller items. I also found Allison a modest bunad pin, something Ellen and I had both been given when we were little... but had escaped Allison (being that she was an accident). While shopping, I discovered there was more to the Bryggen than just the front shops; serpentine walkways penetrated the many front buildings, providing access to the inner Bryggen where you could climb stairwells and walk decks away from the waterfront crowds. After exploring the heart of the Bryggen, I was back to my hotel by 9 and fast asleep within the hour - waking briefly around 3 (given the light). Beyond that, though, I really didn't have any jetlag.



Left to Right: Bergen hotel (pretty much \$250/night), first view of Bryggen, Bergenhus

May 24, 2008 - Bergen

The next morning, I decided to portage all my things to the SAS hotel on foot. Said luggage amounted to a giant rolling duffel, my big daypack, and an over-the-shoulder handbag. Come morning, the fish market (which also includes fresh produce, flowers, and souvenirs) was in full swing near my hotel. Although there were many photo opportunities, I don't like to shoot people without their permission and so my sparing pictures were done from afar and as surreptitiously as possible. My only serious regret: I should have taken better shots of the many live tanks with all kinds of crazy marine life. Arriving at the SAS hotel just before eleven, I turned over my luggage to an LNG representative and proceeded back to the Bryggen for some diary writing. By noon, I was expecting a formal welcome before the buffet lunch... but there was none. Indeed, I felt hard-pressed to know where I was supposed to be in the crowded lobby given 2 amassing wedding receptions. But off in the back area of the hotel restaurant, about 100 LNG nametag-bearing individuals were lining up. Determined to socialize, I joined and was warmly welcomed by two couples from the east coast who seemed impressed that I had the gumption to take such a big trip on my own. Looking out at the crowd, I noted that it was definitely older (i.e. 10% were 40's or younger) than that which my usual trekking companies attracted... and there were several (10-20%) significantly overweight to outright obese people who were actively challenged by walking a couple hours in the city. Oh well, I attempted to rationalize: less people on the hiking activities, right? After lunch, things were not clear to a lot of people. I only had an inkling because I'd thought to ask the LGN representative about the pending Bergen tours. Indeed, by 2 p.m. (the stated tour time), said representative was no longer at the desk. After watching 2 chaotically-formed HUGE (30-40 people) subgroups each leave with a local guide, I decided to wait until the last tour - fortunate, as there were only 8 total in our party. Although LNG provided adequate local guides in Bergen for smaller groups (if you waited), this was not the case with other towns on this trip. Given that it was a walking tour, though, we only viewed the Bryggen proper, including the Hanseatic Museum - inside one of the only buildings that has retained its original interior/exterior. Even though I enjoyed today's tour, I hoped (to little avail over time) that someone was going cover more about actual Norwegians and their history. The Hanseatic League, in fact, was mostly a bunch of German and Danish merchants who set up their fishing-based trade center in Bergen. Also, when Ellen toured the Bryggen on her trip, she heard a lot more information about various communicable diseases that plagued the Bryggen - and thus I (being a microbiologist) expected to hear more about that stuff as well. By around 4, we were back at the hotel, boarding buses for a 5-minute ride to the Endeavor. As childhood fans of the Love Boat (yes, it is true), Ellen and I often staged cruises with our toys (not that we fully understood the more explicit overtones of that show). Thus, seeing the Endeavour was weirdly nostalgic for me because it was a big, gorgeous ship... and suddenly 100 people all lining up to board the gangway on this sunny day was exactly the way I imagined it would and should be. Knowing my grandparents left Bergen and crossed the Atlantic, too, I also could not help but feel a distant connection to what that must have been like for them. Ship staff (in my case, the woman who cleaned my cabin) escorted each of us to our respective rooms. Given how tiny my hotel room had been (not to mention Allison and my miniscule cabin from the Galapagos), my jaw dropped when I saw my spacious and perfect room (complete with a twin-sized bed, an armchair, a desk, a nice bathroom/shower, and a full wardrobe... plenty of space for gear/booty, hanging sink-washed laundry). Indeed, one of the other major reasons I chose this ship and company was because they - unlike a lot of groups - offered single cabins for solo travelers (albeit for BIG bucks!). Before I continue, though, I have to say - emphatically - that the Endeavour and the on-ship crew (the vast majority from the Philippines) was amazing and it was a complete and worthwhile privilege to experience her. In many ways, the perfection and service level achieved by the on-ship staff, the beauty of the boat, and the extreme comfort of my cabin probably did - in conjunction with LNG's reputation - establish exceedingly high expectations for other parts of the trip that were not, in my opinion, comparably met. Within the hour, our trip leader's voice sounded over the in-room intercom system,

startling me slightly. Over time, I couldn't help but think about the intercom announcements in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" every time her strangely calm and repetitively slow voice filled my room. We were asked to review the safety card in preparation for a safety drill; this included learning the meaning of the various alarms, putting on our lift vests (stored in our rooms), and eventually going to the lifeboats (but not fully getting on). Mind you, it was tempting to take this all lightly - but Endeavour's oldest sister (also formerly owned/run by LNG) happened to be that ship that went down in Antarctica this last winter... and we were going to be farther north than one sails south on commercial Antarctic cruises.



Left to Right: ship, the cabin where I lived for 13 days – there was actually a desk area too (not shown!)

An hour after this exercise, we amassed in the main lounge area (staffed with 2 bartenders) and the "hotel manager" made various introductions. It was at this point that our expedition leader (a slight woman in her early- to mid-30's), announced that we would not be setting sail until midnight, owing to some miscalculation regarding a new bow thruster that was in the process of being installed. We then proceeded to a major buffet dinner. In contrast with the big, open lounge area, the dining room felt smaller – and you could readily find private nooks for quiet solitude or small-group socializing. Although I didn't know it at the time, I had dinner that night with Karin (among others), my best-friend-to-be on this trip. Like me, Karin was having a difficult time dealing with this many people on one ship - although she'd done, like, seven previous LNG trips involving smaller (30-50 people) vessels. Karin, also traveling alone, was in her late 60's, extremely fit, and had retired from many decades of UN service. Originally from Austria (with a lot of Italian), she had the greatest accent... despite residing in New Jersey (Bon Jovi was a complete mystery to her... although she sort of knew of Springsteen). As with most nights, I retired to my room around 9:30 p.m. Every night during dinner, a document appeared in each of our cabin doors, detailing tomorrow's planned events. After brushing my teeth and climbing into bed, I was reviewing this document just as our leader's voice announced that the bow thruster situation still was not going well - to the point we would be spending a whole extra day in Bergen (touring options to appear in our doors later). She added that we would not be losing any cruise time because we would be sacrificing our "bad weather" day - factored in during the open-ocean crossing between Tromso (on continental Norway) and tiny bear island (midway to Spitzbergen). Given that original trip literature suggested this day (if not used for emergencies) was used for "exploring" the northern reaches of continental Norway, I had fantasized we might use it to visit legendary Nordkapp, the northernmost point in Europe. Oh well - that clearly wasn't going to happen now. And so I enjoyed a motionless night of sleep, all the while anchored to the moorage.

May 25, 2008 - Bergen (Again)

As with nearly all mornings, breakfast (always buffet style) encompassed a 90-minute window between 7:30 and 9 a.m. This was good for me because I, like Ellen on her last trip, suffered from some of the WORST constipation I've ever experienced. Indeed, many of my diary entries from this trip begin with a blatant report as to whether my bowels were cooperative (and, if so, to what extent). Honestly, it took 10 days of suffering, fussing with laxatives, and upping my prune intake from 2 to 10. Other ship amenities I could have indulged in the mornings (but didn't, thanks to sitting on the can) included free stretching/yoga sessions and working out in the always-open gym (i.e. 10 machines and a sauna). There were also beverages and early morning pastries in the ship library and, over time, I increasingly went there to mix my own Earl Grey Tea - which, along with many other caffeinated products, helped with the constipation. Every morning, I pretty much enjoyed the same thing: a baguette slice with butter, fresh fruit (watermelon and pineapples), a couple tablespoons of scrambled eggs, a slice of bacon, and a slurry composed of granola, stewed prunes, and yogurt. After today's breakfast, we moved up to the lounge for an introduction to our expedition staff and an overview of today's activity options. Said staff consisted of our aforementioned leader, a similar assistant leader, 2 photography guides (as much of this trip had been targeted towards wannabe photographers), 5 naturalists (all of whom drove zodiacs and guided land activities), and 1 diver (who worked only with zodiacs and kayaks, and provided fantastic footage every few nights after diving with a \$20K camera). Although 10 guides sounds like it should split 100 people into comfortable 10-person activity groupings, the reality was that - at any one time – 3-4 guides had to be running zodiac shuttles and the leader/assistant leader only coordinated – they never guided, per se. Consequently, nearly all activities were either completely overrun (e.g. 30-40 clients/leader) or they had to be run in shifts (e.g. kayaking or zodiac touring), meaning a couple hours of downtime per day for folks who chose said options. Anyway - after these introductions, many people left the ship to walk less than a mile to the entrance for the Floibanen funicular (taxis were provided if walking that far was asking too much). Of course, some people had already visited this site and departed to other destinations on their own. The funicular climbs about 1000 feet up (at a 26° angle) Mt. Floyen, offering exceptional views over the city and surrounding waterways. It had been a place I was interested in seeing and so I was pleased to do it now. At the top, many trails fanned out across the rolling forest terrain... a few rocky outcrops and ponds here and there. People had the choice of walking various places, the only deal being that if you wanted lunch, you had to be back at the ship by between 12-1:30. Karin and I had discussed our interest in doing the longest (i.e. one-mile) guided loop and then walking down the Floyen on our own. After gawking at and photographing the big view, slight confusion ensued about how people would be split for the guided walk (there were 3 guides for 50-60 interested people). In what seemed like another frustrating trend, pretty much all the guides walked too slow and stopped to talk too often: e.g. today - walking 300 feet and then stopping to talk for 5-10 minutes about every nuance of foliage, geological object, or bird. Although it was nice to get out and stretch the legs, the terrain and its inhabitants were not astounding; indeed, most was highly impacted, both historically (i.e. forestry) and in terms of a LOT of hikers, runners, bikers, and strollers. Of course, today also happened to be some annual race that involved climbing all seven of Bergen's surrounding hills/mountains, perhaps explaining the particularly large numbers of people. A quarter mile before returning to the

funicular, Karin and I broke off from the main group and headed down on our own. At the time, it was 11 a.m. and Karin and I, heading down at a good clip arrived just in time for lunch. Even though the trail down felt more like a wide old road, it was quiet and cool - trees all around until the last hundred vertical feet, at which point we made our way through pretty neighborhoods. Unfortunately, my ankle wasn't thrilled at the end of the day - and Karin's desire to scramble down a few boot-beaten chutes challenged my foot a great deal. Indeed, it constantly astounded me that Karin (who is as old as my mother) was so nimble and fit... TOTALLY kicking my ass on everything: pace, agility, and pluck.



Left to Right: funicular station and ride to Floyen, Grieg statue, house, tomb

At 1:30, most people re-boarded buses for the afternoon outing to the farther reaches of Bergen where we visited Grieg's cottage home (Troidhaugan) and a rebuilt stave church (Fantoft). As discovered during the drive, just over the hill from the Bryggen-containing harbor is where the real downtown Bergen lies: a much more modern, urban area with gigantic parking garages and bus terminals. Beyond that, the residential areas began to mix with small farms - and then Troidhaugan. Karin, of course, will be disappointed to hear that I only own 2 classical music CD's - but Grieg happens to be one of them: Peer Gynt, which features the ever-popular "In the Hall of the Mountain King." Admittedly, half the reason I own it is because he is Norwegian... or so I thought. In fact, I learned during this trip that he is half-Scottish. Oh well - I also learned on this trip that my heritage contains a fair bit of Swedish ancestry, owing to some interesting circumstances (but that's a later story). At only a hair over 5 feet tall, Grieg - whose statue resembles Mark Twain - was married to his similarly-sized first cousin. Consequently, their colorful house seemed tiny and reminded me more of something you'd see in the southern U.S. More impressive, the extensive grounds (most wild and hilly forest) and rocky beaches were enchanting, unlandscaped except for rustic paths. Near the water, Grieg and his wife's ashes have been interred within this giant rock tomb. Other modern site structures now include a fascinating music performance hall that is built into this rocky hillside, and an airy museum.



Left to Right: more views of Fantoft Stabkirke - note Viking-style dragons and what seemed like a Celtic cat (for Jenn)

After an hour or so, we moved on to another suburban site 20 minutes away by car: the Fantoft Stabkirke. Originally built in the famous Sognefjord (the largest and most popular of Norway's fjords, just north of Bergen) in the 12th century, Fantoft was moved to Bergen in 1884. Despite hosting a fair number of churches, Norwegians are not what I would call a church-going culture (thank god). Indeed, Norway's Viking history illustrates a rather fierce disdain for organized religion... perhaps manifest by some of its ongoing subculture: e.g. infamous Norwegian Death Metal and a variety of dark cults. I mention that because Satanists burnt down the original Fantoft in 1992 - after which the church was reconstructed with an amazing attention to detail... although, given all the black tar that is used to stain the all-wood exterior and the Viking-inspired dragon-like filigrees, I have to say that the church had an oddly devilish look about it. As a result of the arson, the church was also surrounded by an imposing fence and is now monitored by high-mounted security cameras. When we first arrived, entrance was prohibited because there was a christening going on inside. Indeed, about 20 people - half wearing traditional bunads - emerged shortly. We then made our way inside - the interior tiny and made of all light wood, smelling like freshly hewn fir with a hint of creosote. We then made our way back to the ship, arriving just before five as the diving crew (who had been installing the new bow thruster) was tearing down their operations. Like most others, I was out on deck during the first hour we sailed from Bergen. Virtually everywhere we looked was developed, including what seemed like the most inhospitable and uneven rock. I (and others I spoke with) seemed to be waiting for some moment when it was finally going to feel like we were truly out to sea... but this never came to pass (at least today or for much of the first week) because, for the most part, we were sailing various inland passages. Indeed, I would be lying if I said I was jumping up and down with enthusiasm over the scenery... largely because I didn't have any sense of wilderness. At 6:30, we all regrouped in the lounge for an official welcome from the captain. Tonight's cocktail hour also featured free alcoholic drinks (which obviously cost \$\$\$ at other times). Given said generosity, I think the hold-up in Bergen frustrated the captain more than it had us, honestly. Although I can't say I ever got to know the captain or said anything more than hello, I thought he and his crew were fantastic... particularly once we started navigating sea ice in Svalbard. As with most evenings, dinner was served at 7:30 - and it was done sit-down style with a menu. Although I initially questioned the necessity of such service, I came to love this style more than buffet; it simply was more calm and quiet, even if some nights involved some longer waits (albeit never past 9:30). Initially, too, I was concerned that some portions were small - but, over time, I found them perfect after all the giant morning and afternoon buffets. Given a 6 a.m. wake-up call the next day, I was asleep by 10.



Left to Right: my "shit, man" morning view of Olden, Olden church, long freshwater lake up from Olden, detail of glacier

May 26, 2008 - Nordfjord and the Briksdal Glacier

After a perfect and long night of sleep, I awoke just before the intercom announcement and opened my curtains. Looking out, I audibly said, "shit, man" when I saw traditional red wooden fishing cabins along this pier, snow-covered mountains, and a classic U-shaped valley continuing up from the waterway: quintessential Norway. This was the small, popular town of Olden at the end of Nordfjord. Olden is said to receive 3-4 gigantic cruise ships a day in high season; for this reason, LNG always arrived early, beating everyone else on the subsequent standard activities: taking buses up the valley to near the glacier terminus, and then facilitating hikes or rides even closer. After another fine breakfast, we headed down the gangway to 3 waiting buses. Given that the weather was foggy, I didn't have high expectations about whether we'd see the glacier or have a rain-free walk. After all, this was why I had chosen ship travel as my venue for oft-rainy Norway. Anyway, the drive up the valley seemed to pass by quickly. There were a couple large freshwater lakes, each surrounded by high walls laced with immense white waterfalls. Along many areas, there were mostly empty tourist accommodations: small lodges, cabins, campgrounds. We stopped at the end of one lake for pictures up the valley: glacier arms and waterfalls descending from the dynamic mist. We then stopped for good at Briksdal proper. Here, several big structures (a gift shop, restaurant, and lodgings/cabins) stood, alongside what seemed like some kind of survivalist camp featuring a rappelling tower, shooting targets, and various rope-crossing or climbing stations. Karin and I were quickly out of the bus and - as our reputation would become - powering up the wide dirt road that served as the trail. Indeed, strange motorized carts were provided for anyone who didn't want to walk - although they stopped well short of the final lake. Given the simplistic description of the walk that we'd been provided, I was impressed that the ascent provided a decent workout. Of course, others would disagree (i.e. that they felt it was WAY harder than it had been sold). As Karin and I climbed, there were glorious moments of sunbursts - illuminating adjacent mountains and waterfalls. After 20 minutes, we reached the end of the road and followed a real trail a quarter of a mile along a Yosemite-like streambed. I'd hoped we would be able to touch or climb a little on the ice - but, alas, there were signs and ropes guarding the last 100 meters of talus before the steep ice face began. Indeed, the Briksdal represented this high-angle, crumbling river of blue ice - a small arm of the giant ice-sheet known as Jostedalbreen, which comprises the national park of the same name and is mainland Norway's largest area of ice. Olden and the Briksdal are one of many access points, most others along the Sognefjord. Karin and I hung out by the ropes for 15 minutes as the crowds finally began pouring in. Given the steep nature of the glacier, it was not surprising that a chunk of ice near the top broke off and fell in this waterfall-like apron - first over this big flank of rock and then onto the lower portion of the glacier itself. Shockingly, I shot nearly the whole thing, the sound deafening.



Left to Right: park sign, views during hike to glacier, glacier and icefall, milky tea and DESSERT!

Shortly thereafter, Karin and I headed back down. Today, my ankle felt stronger and I enjoyed the trail - although, once again, I could hardly dance down those rocks like Karin. As we descended, so did the fog, fully shrouding the high peaks and the top of the glacial arm. Near the compound of buildings by the parking lot, it even began to spit a little rain. Given that LNG had arranged free desserts and hot beverages, we sat down for - in my case: tea, lefse (crepe-like things that are rolled up with butter and sugar), and this glorious chocolate ice cream log slice that had the consistency of mousse. We then shopped for souvenirs - including what remains my favorite lithograph from the trip. Finally, we stood outside, waiting an hour for everyone else to return. The drive back went quickly, with no formal stops - albeit a slightly longer route through Olden, where I was lucky to have shot the town church and cemetery (given that the bus did not stop). After boarding the ship again, we ate lunch as the crew set sail back down the long fjord. In contrast with the itinerary we'd been given the night before, we would - once again - be changing things up this afternoon. Instead of planned on-board lectures (digital photography and glaciology), we would only hear the former (I skipped so as to enjoy a nap) and then they wanted to get people out in the zodiacs. Indeed, I had the sense some people were antsy... what with the delay in Bergen and much of today riding (yet again) in tour buses. Although I'd love to say that the antsy folks actually wanted to get out and walk, my stronger sense was that the majority of trip participants were Antarctica veterans who were expecting this trip to be just like that one. After conversing with many of "them," I also came to the strong conclusion that Antarctica was neither a hiking trip nor something I would enjoy much. Anyway - all all-ship zodiac touring had to be done in 2 shifts that were split according to odd vs. even cabin numbering. Today, even cabins went first... which meant I would wait an hour for my turn. In contrast with veteran client predictions made over lunch, strong

efforts were made to keep the zodiac-boarding situation as orderly as possible. Indeed, several people spoke of rude, free-for-all they had experienced on other trips (again, most Antarctica), particularly when wildlife was involved. With minor exception, there were no free-for-all on this trip. In terms of zodiac line-up's, I showed up 5 minutes early, usually being among the first 5 people. Things were generally on time, the zodiac staff efficient (staff included, like, 5 people - given that 2 crewmembers physically escorted you between the main ship and the bouncy zodiac). What I did NOT like, however, was that some staff photographers (who CLAIMED they did not have special privileges) seemed to often show up and cut into the beginning of lines, giving them choice seating. Today's activity went fine given that it was our first zodiac trip. Another slight frustration today (and often beyond) was that I had no clue where we were. Indeed, as the trip progressed north and became more "expedition" in nature, we seemed to do more and more last-minute things that were not described aside from last-minute, poorly-detailed intercom announcements. As with comparable future moments, what I know about today's zodiac tour was gleaned after the activity and based on my Lonely Planet guidebook. Today, we basically buzzed around a small island called Selje, which featured lots of gneiss, kelp beds, gulls and oystercatchers, and the ruins from a medieval monastery called Sunneva Kloster. Amusingly, several of us (each having traveled with a different guide) compared notes over dinner, discovering that we all got fairly different stories about the history of the monastery, which (as compiled based on said discussion) had been built in the wake of some bride-to-be who went into hiding and then had religious visions. After pleasant panga tours in the Galapagos (no fussy line-up, quiet and peaceful, and only slightly harrowing), I thought LNG's zodiac activities were a little crazy. Most drivers went WAY faster than I would have gone and the rides were bumpier and wetter than they needed to be - which seemed odd given the kid-glove mentality with which the staff approached all other activities. Thankfully, though, the guides were not as longwinded as they had been during the Bergen walk. Today's ride lasted just under an hour, = sufficient for satisfying whatever disquiet had generated its need. After slow but good dinner service that saw our first motion (we hit some open ocean), I went to bed and downed a meclizine (the only motion sickness drug that cured me post-Galapagos) that - along with the roast turkey - knocked me out good.



Left to Right: sailing to Svesfjord... impact, impact: windmill and fish farm, first zodiac ride, Selje (monastery ruins visible on shore)

May 27, 2008 - Svesfjord and Sandvika

Come morning, all rocking sensations had subsided - which was good because the ship rolled a fair bit throughout the night. My diary entry says I ate a TON of breakfast, which probably means the usual plus the evil pastry of the day. There were no off-ship activities until after lunch, which meant a fair bit of downtime punctuated by presentations. Looking at my map, I estimate that we had sailed 250 miles from Selje... which, given our average 12 knot speed, explains the 17 hour transit time. Bypassed areas include Trondheim, Alesund, and Kristiansund. Immediately after breakfast, there was a brief but mandatory (if you wanted to kayak), kayak presentation in the lounge. Although I only kayaked once on this trip, I was impressed with the quality of the kayaks, the safety features, and the fact that LNG has developed this ingenious deployment system given their variably able clientele. Basically, they have this 8X8 foot metal flooring that is suspended between 2 zodiacs just under the water. This watery floor can be walked upon by the guides as they work with the boats and passengers - and it provides enough water to slide loaded kayaks around. In contrast with kayaking in the Galapagos (done from a moving boat), there was little chance of you sliding into open water or rolling. LNG also outfitted each kayaker with an emergency beacon that could be pressed if there was a problem - and which was water-activated if you fell in. However, kayaking - like zodiac touring - was done in hour-long shifts. This, combined with what I didn't consider to be mind-blowing scenery so far, was a key reason I refrained from kayaking until we hit the ice. An hour after this presentation, I attended yesterday's planned glaciology lecture. Alas, I remain disappointed that lectures were too general - nothing about Norwegian history, Vikings, Sami, etc. While LNG attempted to use local guides to facilitate some of these topics during town-based activities, most involved too-large groups where it was a struggle to fit everyone into a given space, much less hear the presentation.



Left to Right: Sandvika harbor and delta, rocky river along hike, birch forest hiking

As we approached our activity destination, we navigated many small islands - all developed with structures. Eventually, we entered a small fjord (Svesfjord) and arrived at Sandvika bay, dropping anchor for a few hours. Sandvika represented a typical full-range activity stop: long and short walks, a photography group, kayaking, and zodiac touring (the latter two, again, done in shifts). For all activity stops, I chose the long walk. Most long walks took the entire activity time (typically between 1:30 and 4:30), with us being the first ones off and the last ones on. Initially, the long walkers were the smallest group (12-15 people). Even with my ankle injury, the pace on

most long walks was slower than I was used to (e.g. 3-5 miles over 3 hours). When we were on mainland Norway, people could move at their own paces because we followed trails or farm roads. In contrast with yesterday, today was not in a national park. As with most stops, today's zodiac ride to the shore was a wet landing. Given the ankle situation, I carried real hiking boots in my pack... even though I ultimately never used them. The X-tra Tuf neoprene boots (Alaska specials, purchased/used for hikes along the arctic Hulahula River) proved fine for all walks on this trip. Incidentally, everyone was required to pack their own rubber boots for off-ship stuff. The walkers were just getting started as the next wave of zodiac groups arrived. We never saw most of the other groups until we were returning. Our walk set out along farmland, slopping through a bog of mossy grass and buttercups before traversing a small knoll and meeting up with a rudimentary cart path. Bell-bearing sheep dispersed into the surrounding birch forest as we rounded a bend into what was a narrow, briefly open valley. And then we just meandered, mostly in variably thick birch forest and along a rocky creek. Although there were obvious taller hills above us, there were no dramatic mountains - nor was there any particular viewpoint or goal. After climbing gently for 40 minutes to a fork, Karin and I were (once again) way ahead: straight was through a stock gate, right was straight up this steep and rocky path. Karin decided the latter had to be the way and powered up without me, not interested in waiting for our longwinded guide (which partially explained how we had gotten so far ahead). But I was not interested in wasting energy on false paths - and so I waited 10 minutes for everyone else to arrive. Surprisingly, right was the way. Climbing, the way opened into a slightly less forested valley... but, again, there was no stunning mountains or grand views. After half an hour, we stopped at what seemed to be a highpoint. Our guided called this the stopping point, but insisted we attempt some bushwhacking through adjacent muskeg. While Karin (uninterested) proceeded back down the trail on her own, I decided to partake; after 15 minutes, though, the guide was going on about flora and I decided I should head down as well, enjoying my solitude as much as possible. Unfortunately, my attempt to communicate this decision to the guide was lost and party members subsequently gave me a hard time about the trouble I apparently caused (i.e. the team spending some time calling out and searching for me). Returning to the beach, I estimated our total mileage to be 4, with 700 feet gained/lost. Arriving back on the ship at around 5, I enjoyed a shower and some down time writing before the evening recap and dinner. Tonight's recap was noteworthy because it represented the first diver presentation. When I originally read that the ship featured dive reports about underwater flora and fauna, I thought, "that sounds hokey - like it's designed to serve a bunch of people who don't want to leave the ship to DO things." Although I won't fully retract those sentiments, I will say that - as a biologist - I was impressed with the diver and his reports. And it was more than his expensive camera: they guy was not afraid to be technical but clear, and the things he captured (including microscopic beasts) were fascinating. From that point forward, I was always excited when the nightly recap included a diving report. Sadly, though, the diver had a lot of other duties - driving zodiacs and managing kayaks - and so I think we only had, like, 4 reports from him. Dinner, one of my favorites, included Argentine beef and this insanely delicious mango-passion fruit tart.

May 28, 2008 - At the Arctic Circle

This morning, we awoke to what looked like an oceanic, partially submerged Cirque of the Towers; unfortunately, the weather was coming in, the clouds descending fast. Later, when I arrived at my relatives' home and explained this location, I was firmly told the name we had been given (a second Nordfjord) was incorrect. Alas, this place is not labeled on my map or guidebook. However, near the Arctic Circle, you will see a prominent Y-shaped fjord called Melfjord - and that is the more accurate name, specifically in the northern arm of the Y. Where we hiked in the morning was also a region of Svartisen (or Black Ice) National Park. Although Svartisen is said to contain Europe's most low-lying glacier (accessible only by an inland route), we never got anywhere near the ice.



Left to Right: north arm of Melfjord, highpoint of crazy hike, great lichen

Today's morning hike seemed to be a complete surprise to our guide, one of many first-timers on this trip. Alas, Karin elected not to do this hike because she thought kayaking sounded more appealing... which was a shame because our hike was epic and insane, one of the few times I did not feel the guide was coddling us. After another wet landing, the hiking team assembled on the kelp-covered shore - almost the same group as yesterday. Even though we were in a national park, there were zero trails. From the ship, the hiking area looked friendlier than it was: meandering, braided glacial streams through birch, all down a wide valley surrounded by soaring granite walls... many with snow and waterfalls. In reality, it was a classic northwest bushwhack - minus (thankfully) thorny devil's club. Heading out, I had the sense that the guide had no idea where he was supposed to go. But he did his best, leading us first up the right sidewall in an effort to avoid brush and to get some views. Said ascent involved outright scrambling over huge boulders covered in, like, six inches of moss - and then a brief snow-climb up this steep chute that lacked any safe runoff were one to fall. I was freaking out because the chance of falling or re-twisting my ankle was high - and my ankle was hurting when we were climbing the moss-rocks. Unfortunately, by the time we got to the highpoint, most of the views were gone and what had been a light drizzle was now a heavy sprinkle. For many reasons, I - for the first time since buying the big camera - had to put it in my backpack. From the highpoint, it was clear that what had looked like this short jaunt up to the head of the valley was no such thing. Even though it felt like we'd come a long way, we were - at best - a fifth of the way up. From here, we shot down this crazy rocky stream-cut chute. Although it seemed like we hadn't come very far (based on the view from the top), we were all stunned with how long it took to bushwhack down the middle of the stream/birch forest area. Of course, the stream had at least 2 main braids... plus several more little ones. When we came to one of the main braids, there was a logjam about what to do. Half of us (wearing rubber boots) readily found a route across; of course, then there was Pete, a 72-year old retired geologist who wore blue jeans and sneakers on this and every hike, and was as sure-footed as Karin. River-savvy folks waited 30 minutes for the guide to help river-freaky folks search for an easier upstream crossing. We then

bushwhacked awhile before hitting another crossing... and this repeated 2 more times before me and this different geologist (indeed, there were a LOT of geologists!) decided we weren't going to wait anymore... and just slogged back at our leisure. By the end, I would say that I crossed rivers or streams 15-20 times, half fierce and/or dicey affairs. And, of course, we were late. I only had time to change out of my wet clothes for lunch, which was in progress when we returned. Of course, that I looked (and smelled) dirty and crazy was good: we needed to keep scaring people off the long walks so we could enjoy our small party as long as possible!



Left to Right: Lovund fishing cabin, cod-heads, primary school (Norway just celebrated Independence Day), rock trolls windowsill

The rest of the afternoon was called "expedition," which meant we had no specific plans. An hour after lunch, our leader announced that we would be making a stop at some of the offshore islands on the Arctic Circle, which we'd already crossed to get to Melfjord. At this point, only a stop at tiny Lovund, home to one of the largest regional fish farm and processing center, was certain; the leader hoped to move to a more remote island for our first night of midnight sun. For our Lovund stop, there were 2 choices: going ashore for a walk around the town or going zodiac cruising around the harbor. Not surprisingly, I did the first and with Karin, who - after hearing tales of the morning hike - seemed surprisingly satisfied she didn't come along. Riding ashore on the first or second zodiac, Karin and I took about an hour to explore the small and picturesque town. At the time, my morning gear hadn't even dried and so I had broken into my spares (i.e. things I'd hoped to save for Svalbard). Lovund represented our first chance to see, smell, and photograph racks of drying cod, something we'd see plenty more of in the Lofoten Islands. I also enjoyed the many homes, most with crazy yard art that reminded me of things my grandmother used to decorate with. We also enjoyed talking with this very pregnant Swedish woman who'd nonchalantly followed her sister here for summer work, fallen in love with a Norwegian fisherman, and stayed.



Left to Right: (top) Lovund homes/decorations, church; (bottom) puffin hill and views from the climb

After returning to the ship for dinner, we were informed that the crew decided it was not worth our while to move the ship elsewhere by midnight - particularly because puffins were purportedly returning to their nests at this rocky hillside adjacent to Lovund. According to my guidebook, Lovund is home to 200,000 puffins... but don't get your hopes up for any great shots of puffins; indeed, the leader did accurately stress that getting anywhere near puffins would require a mile-long walk through town followed by a rope-assisted climb to the so-called nesting cliffs. With that, many of us (me included) finished eating and put back on all our gear so we could go ashore again. Not surprisingly, the walk through town was repetitive; we then headed down this obscure road which terminated at a cemetery. Here, the climbing began: up big boulders and assisted with ropes that looked fixed. Oddly, LGN guides were NOT out there helping people on the ropes, which surprised me given that almost EVERYONE turned out - hoping to see up-close puffins. Meanwhile, I waltzed by many struggling people, not holding any of the ropes. And 500 feet in the air, this bat-like swarm of puffins grew visible and audible - none landing anywhere near our loud crowd. Although I was disappointed by the puffin component of this outing, the view over Lovund and the surrounding islands was worth the effort. Nonetheless, I felt sorry for all the people who were WAY beyond their capabilities - all thinking they were going to be as close to the puffins as they, no doubt, had been to penguins in Antarctica. I spent 5 minutes at the "top" and then returned to the ship, receiving a welcome cup of hot chocolate mixed with mint schnapps as I boarded the zodiac. Despite all the created whoopla about the midnight sun, I pulled down all the substantial cabin window-coverings and went to bed in a reasonably dark room.

May 29, 2008 - Lofoten Islands

Although the seas were still when I went to bed, I woke up rolling because we'd made a big, undulating open-water crossing to Vaeroy, the second most southern of the Lofoten Islands. Fortunately, I took more medicine and lost this sensation over the next 12 hours. Nevertheless, today was often spent finding my bearings given that the land seemed to be moving. More than anything on this trip, I wanted to see the Lofoten Islands under sunny conditions. But based on the downward spiral the weather had been taking, this hope was not to be. Although we spent a whole day covering 4 different Lofoten regions, all our visits seemed superficial. But we saw more than I was expecting, given the weather. For example, I hadn't been expecting to make a landing at Vaeroy; I figured we'd spend more time at Reina, said to be the most beautiful town in Norway. After studying my guidebook, I'm pleased we made this first stop. Although Vaeroy does have some inhabited towns, it is only accessible by boat (in contrast with most other islands in the chain). We landed at the desolate ghost town of Mastad, a former Vaeroy settlement built by post-war funding. Once home to about 200 people, there is still a rock dock and 20 run-down buildings that were said to be sometimes occupied in the summer. Aforementioned war money also paid for what seems like an elaborate road-like trail that winds up from the settlement, hugs a sea cliff, and continues on to the main ferry-accessible town (which we never saw). Exploring part of said trail over this gap to the other side of the island comprised the long morning walk. In contrast with my hopes (based on yesterday's insane bushwhack), the long walk was totally thronged by, like, 40 people... WAY too many for a single guide to manage (shape of things to come). Given that the walk was easier than both previous long walks and I was still dock-rocking, I enjoyed the pace, hanging back in the LONG line. Unfortunately, too many people came away from today's walk thinking this was what a hard, long hike was all about; consequently, they started appearing in greater numbers over time. Exacerbating the situation, the guiding was not consistent: not only did the leader fail to accurately present things about activity difficulty, they also did not convey consistent standards to the rest of the guides. Today, for example, should have been called an easy walk (both because of the nature of the trail and the pace the guide chose to walk) where yesterday should have been called a difficult trail-less hike. Given that LGN provides ZERO ratings for their trips, they need to do some serious consulting with "real" hiking companies if they want to attract people like me. Another issue noted today regarded my theory about why all these people suddenly appeared: the photography wannabe's were bored and/or frustrated with their sessions - not only because there were too many people on them (again, 30-40 with 1-2 guides) but also because I think most thought they were going to be running around shooting sexy animals. In contrast, the photography experts - to their credit - insisted the wannabe's stick to a small area and focus on basic skills while shooting simple things like rocks or washed-up seaweed. Although I have immense respect for photographers like Rowell and Wolff, I am not a fan of wannabe's that do not embrace the notion of being fit enough to hike to serious targets, and finding beauty with simple subjects. Indeed, one of the reasons it has taken me 20 years to buy a "real" camera is that I cringe at the notion of becoming one of "those" people. Even though we had some of "those" people in the Galapagos, our small party reduced their impact on my personal satisfaction. I cannot say the same for LNG, particularly given their lack of guides and consistent guiding standards.



Left to Right: (top) beginning, middle, endpoint of Vaeroy hike; (bottom) Vaeroy flora and artsy red paint

But, as usual, I have digressed. After gaining the rock dock, the gigantic walking group amassed among some shanty buildings in the grass. Eventually, we took off down this obvious road-like trail that lay between these old rock walls that seemed to define now-defunct plots for grazing sheep. Above, sea birds swirled about the high cliffs. Mostly flat for the first half-mile, the way began a gentle climb as it started pinching off, eventually becoming this vertigo-inspiring cliff edge 100 feet above the sea. We walked the cliff edge another half-mile before dropping to this gap, around which northerly winds HOWLED. Even though our immediate views were good, there were no distant views of, say, the rest of the Lofoten. We then dropped over to the north side, almost down to the water's edge. Because the guide had stopped too many times along the cliffy edge, I decided to turn around before everyone else so I could deal with things on my own and faster. I also had the opportunity to take some artsy-fartsy pictures of crazy slugs, weird succulents, and pretty purple saxifrage. Despite my dalliances, I was back on board the ship with enough time to enjoy a shower before lunch. During lunch, we sailed to A, actually an A with a circle above it, pronounced sort of like Oh, but with a brief Ah sound just at the start before you make your mouth into the long, deep Oh. By now, I was totally relying on my Lonely Planet guidebook to get what I felt was the best information about most stops. A was the birthplace of cod liver oil and one of the main "stockfish" sites in the Lofoten, stockfish being the dried version of cod that was readily exported (including the heads, a delicacy in Africa). A key reason I started relying on my guidebook more was because, as strongly evidenced today, land tours were frustrating. In A, we were divided into 2 parties (that's 50

people per party, each group with 1 local guide). A is home to 2 major museums, the Fishing Village and the Stockfish Museum, and the idea was that we had to split up in order to not overwhelm these places. Fifty people, I can assure you, did not fit into most rooms in either museum. Needless to say, I did not feel I was getting my money's worth. Many times that day, I thought about all the care that Wilderness Travel took when executing our comparable group in Bolzano: specifically, when we visited Otzi - even then, the guide-to-client ratio never exceeded 1:15.



Left to Right: all A - (top) Stockfish Museum, drying cod, crude liver oil, pressing funnel; (bottom) various boathouse shots

Probably for better, I was in the group that visited the Fishing Village first. After straightening out who was going with whom at the crowded pier, our local guide said the exhibits could be explored on our own, that he would only be talking about 2/10 of the historical buildings, and that getting all of us even in said buildings would be challenging. Given that all 3 points were true, I – like MANY others - went exploring on my own. Of immediate interest were the thousands of cod drying all over the place; then, I visited the old bakery and stopped at the gift shop. While it was tempting to bring home a bottle of A cod liver oil, I did not relish the chance it would explode in my luggage and/or attract drug-sniffing dogs. After visiting this period home, which reminded me of my grandparents' place, I took a walk through the boathouse (now that everyone was gone) before making my way to the cod liver oil processing building, where the group was just finishing up (including an optional tasting of the product... which I did NOT try). We were told that we were lucky it was cool today... otherwise, the smell would have been overwhelming. Indeed, they had vats of oil at various refinement stages and most were NASTY. All wood was permeated with the smell of cod, including this 2-story funnel that was loaded with partially-pulverized cod livers and mechanically forced/pressed down until just unrefined oil came out at the bottom. We had 15 minutes to switch tours - and so I walked across the tiny harbor to the Stockfish Museum. Housed in one building, I could tell immediately that this was going to be worse than the first place in terms of trying to hear and see what was being discussed. All display items were also labeled, including in English... and I decided there wasn't much more I needed to learn about cod this afternoon. Enough people (including myself) showed up at the zodiac station early... to the point we probably disappointed our leader, who drove us back to the ship.



Left to Right: Reina - bridge to town, main harbor, local houses drying cod on clothesline and fence, alpine scenery at Trollfjord

We then sailed to Reina, where - based on last night's provided itinerary - we were only supposed to do some brief zodiac tours (i.e. no landings). But I suspect a lot of passengers requested the chance to go ashore... because, suddenly, there we were. Even under gray skies, you could tell Reina was STUNNING... but not seeing it under blue skies was heartbreaking. The other bittersweet thing was that we arrived after pretty much everything closed, meaning the only thing to do was walk around. Karin and I did stumble into this art gallery where I bought some postcards that showed paintings of the Lofoten by local artists... but the place (and its staff) seemed cold. In some ways, walking around Reina reminded me of walking around Arctic Village in Alaska: I had this sense that townspeople weren't interested in after-hours tourists, that we were unwelcome. While my expectations of Reina as this inviting place was dashed by the context of our visit, A definitely charmed my heart. After returning to the ship, I washed up for dinner, having been invited to the NG rep's table. Although both the captain and the trip leader held nightly invitation-only tables, I was never called to one of their events - not surprising given my LNG virgin status. The only thing I will report about dinner was that we learned NG has suffered a multi-million-level drop-off in subscriptions over the last decade. But I don't think they are going to generate interest with a more active

population (i.e. like me) if they continue to run high-end but fundamentally basic cruises like this. Given that our leader had been going on about our late stop for the night (Trollfjord, which we'd be reaching around 11 p.m.), I decided to make an effort to go to bed right after dinner and then wake up again. Remarkably, I slept the entire time between dinner and Trollfjord, a splendid tiny fjord on the eastern side of the Lofoten. When I awoke, we were already at the end of the short fjord, actively turning around with rugged peaks in all directions (albeit still emerging from this rising mist). The captain's next goal was to nose up to this big waterfall so that his wife (who stood over 6 feet tall) could grab a leaf from one of the adjacent trees. Karin and I then had several pictures taken of us as we sailed back out the narrowest portion (300 feet wide), after which I went back to bed, falling asleep immediately.



Left to Right: Hellmoboten from first plateau, craggy peaks during sail between Hellmoboten and Stetind, shown last

May 30, 2008 - Tysfjord's Hellmoboten and Stetind

This morning, we awoke in Tysfjorden, one of the closest fjords to the Swedish border. Although LNG wants to instill this notion that they are serious about trying to hike into Sweden (saying, with a certain foreknowledge: this has yet to be done in 10 years!), I think they know full well that they have willfully not designed the trip to accommodate this feat. First of all, it would encompass a 16-mile roundtrip with 3000 feet gained. Given that they did not amend the standard schedule - e.g. lunch on board at the usual time - you would have to be stupid to think we had a decent shot. Incidentally, the head chef's fit wife was given special privileges (i.e. taken to the shore privately around 7 a.m. and allowed to hike fully by herself) and still couldn't make it. If LNG wants to offer this hike (for real), it has to spend at least 8 hours and provide packed lunches. Otherwise, it needs to stop putting on airs that it honestly offers this goal. Having said that, what we did was a great hike. Fortunately, too, the leader properly sold the hike as long and challenging, which meant we were back to our smaller crew. As always, we were the first ones on the shore - specifically at Hellmoboten, a small Sami community dominated by a small timber operation. As the medium walkers arrived, we were climbing steeply up this big shelf. We were told that some kind of windstorm had recently leveled all the trees here. In the distance, a gigantic waterfall fell from an even higher, rocky plateau... but we headed away from it. Eventually, we came to a beautiful river with a well-built bridge. After crossing it, our guide was confused about which way to go, having not been on this trip in 15 years; studying a rudimentary hand-drawn map, he insisted the right way should go straight back into the woods. But there were no obvious trails that way - and so we started walking upriver. After 5 minutes, he decided we'd made a mistake - and we headed back down but, again, there were no obvious paths... and so it was back upriver. After 10 minutes, he decided again we'd made a mistake; by now, the medium walkers were catching up and people in our party had spread out into the forest, looking for a path. Between them and talking with the medium walk guide, we finally located this obvious path and continued on for real - all members of our party finally convinced we would not be hiking to Sweden (until that moment, a few people were silly enough to believe LNG). Although some clients were upset about the guide's inability to find this trail, I wasn't terrifically offended... although, honestly, it is a serious faux pas given LNG's reputation. Anyway - we hiked along this rocky path (giant rocks embedded everywhere in the earth), heading toward this low-angle waterfall, which looked more like a white ribbon flowing down the middle of this huge granite face that was only about 15 degrees. I have as-yet neglected to mention that one of our regular long walkers/hikers was the ship's doctor and his wife, who looked like a more granola version of Suze Orman. On many days, we exchanged pleasantries that centered around what her financial advice for the day was. They, in addition to Karin and Pete, comprised my favorite people on this trip... although I did joke with the doctor about whether he was on all the long walks because he thought they were dangerous (i.e. one of us was going to seriously injure ourselves or drop dead). No, no - he assured me - he and his wife were real hikers. Anyway, we then started climbing seriously, zigzagging up this cleft in the otherwise solid rock. A surprising amount of trees and deadfall were thriving. After 30 minutes, we broke out into and onto open granite that was VERY Sierra-like. Although it was beautiful, the landscape had this fall-like brownness to it, dulling the happiness I had been deriving from the pleasant greenery we'd experienced down south.



Left to Right: setting out on morning hike, BIG waterfall we didn't get nearer to, hiking (erroneously) upriver

Views out across the high plateaus grew, although there were no towering mountains... only a few minor bumps, the whiteness of the higher snows giving away the relative altitude. At some point, we hiked alongside this cable barrier. Although I'm sure there were some edgy things, I didn't encounter anything that bothered me. After some long zigzags, we started walking on more areas of mucky mud and golden grass. It was here that the chef's wife, carrying nothing, passed us on her way back. She'd made it about 2 additional

miles but then hit a lot of snow. In the distance, we could see the route climbing up this rocky headwall with many waterfalls. But we couldn't see above or past the dark stone to get a sense of the actual plateau where the Swedish border lay. Here, our guide said, we were only going 10 more minutes. Given that there was no clear or tempting goal, I decided to turn around and enjoy my solitude and my own pace on the way down. And so I did... all the way to the top of the final shelf - at which point Karin caught up and we hiked to the ship together. Despite all the hype about this hike, I thought it was easy and my ankle felt stronger than ever.



Left to Right: (top) Hellmoboten - waterfall, cables, me fjord, higher peaks; (bottom) Stetind - hairy riverside hike, Stetind, cirque

During lunch, we sailed down a truly gorgeous waterway surrounded by many snowy, craggy peaks. Given that our itinerary called the afternoon another open-ended "expedition," I had to figure out where we ultimately stopped from my guidebook after the fact. Basically, we pulled up alongside the trailhead for Stetind, Norway's most beloved peak (confirmed by my relatives). Stetind looks like a much smaller and sheerer version of the Matterhorn, offering more of a vertical rock climb. While many people just rested on the boat, a fair number of kayakers (including Karin) played around in the little bay. Meanwhile, 12 of us headed out for another long walk around 4 p.m. After a short zodiac ride to the shore, we clamored up to a 2-lane highway (which we crossed), walked through a car-camping area with some unfriendly climbers, and headed straight up this crazy trail that involved hugging this mound of mossy rock while you stepped along this narrow ledge... all the while, a whitewater stream rushing by on the other side. For better, the beginning of the hike was so tricky that it weeded out a couple newcomers. Mind you, there was only 15 feet of scrambling... but it was enough to spook our wannabe's. After this bottleneck, the trail was gorgeous and pleasant - minus a few muddy bogs. As with Hellmoboten, the landscape was autumnal - but there was a slight hint of bright green birch leaves emerging, all against this unfolding cirque that included Stetind. Even though we never fully climbed out of the trees to naked rock and soaring ice, this was such a peaceful hike and the open forest had a lightness and glow that was beautiful. There were also a lot of crazy boulders on the forest floor, all half-covered by hoods of moss... we all agreed that this was why the Norwegians were obsessed with trolls. As with the morning hike, I turned around 5 minutes before the others and enjoyed a peaceful descent. Not surprisingly, we were the last ones on the boat - coming in just after 5:30. Almost immediately, we were sailing again - continuing down the lovely waterway. Dinner featured my only all vegetarian meal - a spectacular corn fritter with avocados and this insanely delicious poached pear with white truffle cheesecake dessert. Not surprisingly, my intestines thanked me for all the fiber the next morning.

May 31, 2008 - Tromso

Tromso (60,000) is the largest city in Norway's northern reaches. Most people (e.g. Ellen, during her trip) who intend to visit places like Nordkapp (the northernmost point in mainland Norway and Europe) fly into Tromso because it is the major airport hub. I had been looking forward to Tromso because Ellen - despite a 4-hour layover there - was very taken by the city. I would best describe Tromso as a prettier version of Fairbanks, Alaska. It had a modern feel - and the university was the spitting image of the University of Alaska. Of course, on the day we visited Tromso, it was unseasonably warm - and all the surrounding mountains were snow-white and sparkling. As with our visit to A, we were split into groups... but this time - 3, which meant it didn't feel quite as crazy (but it was still pretty crazy). When we set out, we were told we'd be visiting 3 places: Polarmuseet (Polar Museum), Arctic Cathedral, and Tromso Museum, which was affiliated with the university. At 10:30, we were told, we'd be dropped off in the middle of downtown for some free time - with shuttles going back to the ship at 11:30 and 12:30. In actuality, we also went to Botanisk Hage, the northernmost botanical gardens in the world (which even impressed friend/botany colleague Bryan) but didn't arrive downtown until 11:30, meaning there was really only one shuttle option. So you can do the math: like Ellen, I only enjoyed 4 hours in Tromso... albeit fully shepherded to several major sites. Anyway - my group went to the Polar Museum first, which involved a 5-minute drive from the ship's mooring. Our guide was a young Polish linguistics student, which my relatives later said was typical for Tromso University as it had one of the highest populations of international students - most from eastern Europe or Africa. At the museum, a fair number of people seemed offended by what they perceived as blatantly violent displays. But I have to say that I respect my crazy people for their blunt honesty and lack of political correctness when it comes to showing what humans have done to survive and exploit the arctic. Indeed, the first things you see when you pull up to the museum are a series of missile-like things that are whale-harpoon launching devices. Once inside, the life-sized dioramas (which used taxidermy animals and funny-weird human mannequins) on the first floor feature hunters preparing to butcher a reindeer, a scary-looking dude about to beat some seals, and rooms of all major seal species hunted... each featuring a taxidermy specimen and a flat pelt, with various uses and killing weaponry of choice. Within 10 minutes, I gave up trying to hear the guide; as

usual, you couldn't fit all our group into a given room or display area. And so I went wandering off (as did 10 others). On the second floor, mostly devoted to human exploration, was the most chilling display - located off in this side-room that the guide notably avoided: this graphic and bloody set of images showing major steps of a polar bear dissection leading to the harvest of the heart. Below the giant images, two preserved hearts in jars were set behind glass; I was so disturbed by the images that I honestly didn't read the text in terms of the point of this harvest... although I would speculate that it had something to do with some insane Chinese medical practice. Most other second floor displays (i.e. the ones the guide focused on) involved Amundsen, the first man to reach magnetic north and fly over North Pole in a balloon - among many other Arctic and Antarctic feats. After some shopping in the strategically-place gift shop - the first and last place you walked through - we were off again... less than one hour after arriving.



Left to Right: (top) Polar Museum harpoons, Amundsen, reindeer butchering, polar bear cub; (bottom) seal exploits, musk ox

We then drove over this big bridge and pulled up to the Arctic Cathedral. Although impressive, there were 3 other big groups there and - aside from gawking - there wasn't much to do here. We spent no more than 20 minutes on the premises. Getting to the Tromsø Museum involved a longer drive that went out beyond the waterfront and downtown area. Given that it was sunny, there were a lot of people out - running, walking, biking, or using funky rolling pseudo-skis on a prominent bike path. As we neared the museum, we passed several university structures. As with the Polar Museum, I quickly gave up following the guide - particularly because of several technical failures during a northern lights video presentation. Although my guidebook says this museum is famous for its cultural and archaeological specimens and presentations (most Sami), I could not find much in the way of natural history. Nevertheless, I was impressed with the Sami clothing and the well-done social history section. Not surprisingly, I did the most budget damage at this gift store of almost anywhere on this trip - most impressively, a Sami brooch. Of course, they didn't have what I was most after: a Sami hat.



Left to Right: Arctic Cathedral - stained glass, Viking Ship-inspired organ, profile; northernmost botanical gardens in world, flowers

Thinking we were immediately heading back into town for some time on our own, we piled back into the bus but, as mentioned, were then taken on this quick drive/tour of the main campus before being dumped at Botanisk Hage for a 15-minute walk around the gardens. Given that it took me about that time to walk all uphill/rocky paths, it should be no surprise that some members of our party

had a difficult time just making it to the first/lowest beds. And then we began running behind trying to gather up folks who were not watching the clock. After leaving the gardens, we passed the Polaria (meant to look like glacial ice calving, it looked more like white dominoes falling). Given the incredible description of this place in my guidebook, I regret that no time had been made to visit this facility. At around 11:30, we arrived at the main downtown bus terminal. Given the time (and the exhaustion factor), a number of people stayed on the bus and immediately returned to the ship. The rest of us, me included, left for 1 hour on our own. Owing to the sunny day, the main street was insanely crowded - people enjoying quite the promenade, motorcycle groups roaring everywhere. Local bars were even setting up outdoor barbecue grills in the main grassy park in front of this prominent traditional-looking church (Tromsø Domkirke). I hit this tacky-looking place called something like "The Best souvenir Shop in Norway," which had some great target items - including the aforementioned Sami hat, flag, and this woodcarving of a Sami girl skiing. Deciding that I needed some legitimate fiber, I then wandered the main street until I found some never-fail mango beverage at a convenience store. I also visited a grocery store - because I like to see such regional places. Having now exhausted my desire to shop, I returned to this sunny little park in front of the bus terminal where we were to meet our shuttles. Of course, the adjacent tourist information center caught my eye and I had to buy a few more postcards. By then time I was done, the shuttle buses were arriving and I was soon back on the ship eating lunch (that, given 2 days of minimal activity, was now accumulating as body fat!).



Left to Right: downtown Tromsø Domkirke church, lounging on deck, typical view most of afternoon, last close land

Setting sail around 1 p.m., we were now entering a 26-hour sail to Bear Island - most with no sight of land. This would represent the first time I - at least as an adult - had ever been in the open ocean as such, which felt unnerving. Although this sounds like a tedious amount of time, I can't say it was frustrating... although my feelings were built on the incorrect assumption that, once we hit Svalbard, we would be doing a couple hikes a day again. After lunch, I enjoyed some sunny deck time and a lecture about cetaceans. The latter included the legendary poem about the usik, the bony penis of the walrus... not to mention some other scandalous topics and images that took a few people by surprise. Meanwhile, the photography guides were amassing client pictures for some slideshow during the cocktail hour... but I did not participate in these activities. After a fine dinner featuring grilled duck and peach crème brûlée, I took my meclizine (anticipating a wild ride... that never bore out) and went to bed. As of that time (9:30 p.m.), we were still seeing some hazy land and mountains in the distance.



Left to Right: sailing the open ocean, dolphins, first land, cliffside birdwatching at south Bear Island

June 1, 2008 - At Sea and a Brief Trip to Bear Island

Given that we wouldn't reach tiny Bear Island until after lunch, there aren't any off-ship activities to report - although we did spot and follow a small pod of dolphins. I also attended a lecture about cold adaptations and then everyone had to attend a briefing about special rules for off-ship activities in Svalbard. Most of the latter regarded what seemed to be a completely overblown response to polar bears, explaining why the guides were about to don rifles (required by the government in this area). Indeed, if I thought we were being handled with kid gloves in terms of everything before, the polar bear response was downright freaky. Most distressing was all the whoopla about rifles: how all the guides had attended some NRA course right before the trip, how they would be doing target practice on Bear Island that evening. After my trip down the arctic Hulahula (on which our 2 guides carried 3 guns) I was, like: those guys NEVER went on and on about their guns... and yet I KNEW both, being long-term Alaska residents who clearly readily handled weapons (as gun experience seems to be a prerequisite for living in that state), would be able to shoot well it came to that. Don't even get me started on how many times I've had to lead teams of students in Yellowstone's grizzly country with no guns whatsoever. On this trip, I felt like I was watching a bunch of new policemen - all hyped up with their new toys - when I listened to or saw some of the LNG guides marching around with their rifles; I certainly didn't have the sense that any of them dealt with weapons as part of their usual lives. And what made all this fuss so ridiculous was that all our ultimate off-ship parties were SO massive and loud - not to mention, the loud ship engines. The other big take-home messages from the briefing regarded how kayaking would be more limited and how hiking groups needed to always stay together - between a front and back guide (both, of course, wielding guns). Even though the guides tried to pitch that there still would be walks of different lengths and thus it was even more important that clients self-assess before choosing walks, I had the sense - from overhearing several photography-oriented clients - that their response to everything (and the possibility of seeing wildlife farther inland) was going to be to knowingly go on the longest walks possible because they knew the

guides would HAVE to slow down and wait for them. My diary entry from this afternoon reads, "It will be VERY interesting to see if guides have the BALLS to kick people off trips if they, say, repeat offend because I think most will." Of course, in the end, there were never any long walks that took us anywhere near real tundra or higher plateaus. BUT at least two guides did have some balls when it came to these issues... but those stories are for later. Shortly after lunch, we reached the southern end of Bear Island. It was completely foggy - so soaked in that, at times, you could barely see the land from our anchorage. Although our original itinerary suggested the possibility of walks or zodiac cruises, only the latter was available. Given that zodiac trips - as usual - had to be run in two giant shifts, I waited another hour and a half for my turn... but that was fine because I can't say I was excited about this activity. When the time came, it was pretty much an hour of motoring along these geologically interesting, guano- and algae-stained cliffs with thousands of kittiwakes and guillemots. Although I liked the birds in the Galapagos, this was NOT the Galapagos. But, to my surprise, it wasn't nearly as cold as I thought it would be. After returning to the ship, we sailed 2 hours to the north end of the island. During dinner, the guides went ashore for aforementioned target practice by this little meteorological station (which we would later visit).



Left to Right: north Bear Island - station, chained guard dogs, worldwide sign, zodiac wet landing

Unfortunately, that it was foggy caused the guides to decide that it was too unsafe to walk beyond the station. All we would be able to do was go ashore for a mini-shopping spree (i.e. island postcards, pins, patches) at this gift booth in the main building - notably run by a butch young woman wearing a shirt that read, "Good girls go to heaven, the rest go to Lapland." If we wanted, we also could get our passports stamped with some official government insignia from the island. While ashore, no attempt to explain any of the structures or regional history was made and so, as usual, I am sitting here reading my guidebook: wow, I didn't know that. I also learned there was a museum (which we were never shown) and some historical pigsty from the early 1800's - the oldest surviving building in the Svalbard archipelago. We also saw some sad-looking huskies chained to shanty huts (bear warning devices... we were told) and an interesting signpost with worldwide destinations/mileages. We also said hello to this very John-like (at least when he was in his early twenties) guy in military fatigues. As we re-boarded our zodiac, he and a couple others (male and female) showed up on the beach with towels wrapped around their privates: about to take a ritual plunge. After goading them, we left for the ship and they lost the towels and briefly got in the water - ultimately running back up the hill to some sauna. And, no, I didn't take pictures of naked John-dude and company. After returning to the ship, I retired immediately - accurately predicting that future nights were going to be later and more interrupted.



Left to Right: the pack ice, me and first hazy land in distance, frequently-observed polar bear tracks in ice

June 2-3, 2008 - Cruising East Spitsbergen

So, I have mixed feelings about these days – ALL EXCEPT ONE HOUR spent on the ship. On one hand, sailing through the pack ice was cool. On the other hand, sitting on a ship all day was not what I was expecting from this company - especially after doing nothing much for the last 3 days. And, like others, I WAS expecting to see more wildlife - and, no, not polar bears (which WAY too many others expected to see at MUCH closer range)... but seals, walrus, and reindeer. Although the Galapagos have spoiled me forever with regards to in-your-face wildlife (as Antarctica has spoiled most other clients on this trip), I saw more wildlife per unit time on my other trips to Alaska. In any event, here goes my brief synopsis of these 2 days in the pack ice east of Spitsbergen. It was just after breakfast that the ice was first spotted. Although it had been foggy up until that point, the sky began to miraculously clear within the hour - and would only get clearer and more insanely sunny as the remainder of this leg of the trip progressed. Within the hour, southern Spitsbergen also came into view - an obvious line of snowy mountains. Once we hit the ice, we were on deck all day looking for stuff. The Endeavor can navigate pack ice up to about 70% coverage, including breaking through short sections. Today, much of the sea between Spitsbergen and neighboring Edgeoya (to the east) was 70% covered; when we left the area (late tomorrow), it was already down to 30-40%. We spent most of today cruising in a northerly direction along the eastern coastline of Spitsbergen, the captain focused on land-associated "fast ice." Getting near the coastline required several hours of cruising through pack ice. While it was impressive how many polar bear tracks crisscrossed the white polygons of broken ice, we saw no bears while approaching the coastline – perhaps not surprising given the lack of seals. Indeed, we saw 2 seals: one larger/longer and all gray and the other smaller/fatter with more light tones and spots. After dinner, the warm sunny skies turned icily windy... as bad as Patagonia. Mind you, it was still light out – but there were long shadows and a more golden tone to the mountains and snow... because we were still 400 miles from the north pole. Anyway, I was just about to retire when an announcement came over the intercom that a polar bear had

been spotted. Well, I put on all my outdoor layers over my PJ's and headed out. There, it seemed that no one (including most guides) knew where the bear was. Indeed, it had been the captain himself who, so far, had been the only one to see it. I would say that it took 20 minutes - all the while, heading closer to the land - for any one else to confirm the sighting. But there it was: this tiny spot with an obvious shape walking along the fast ice. Initially (from a mile away), it didn't appear to acknowledge us. To make a long story short, the determined captain spent half an hour ramming closer to the shore. Not surprisingly, the bear eventually took notice of us and ambled away. Throughout this time, as many people as possible crammed into the bridge to escape the freezing winds. Although my picture of this bear is not very impressive, there is no doubt what it is (i.e. even my mother could identify it without prompting) and I was satisfied. Based on listening to a lot of other vocal people, most clients would NOT have said the same thing - having clearly had their expectations raised by unrealistic catalog pictures, seeing insane wildlife in Antarctica, and too many NG magazine stories by people who spent far more serious time and effort waiting (and suffering) to capture real images.



Left to Right: first seal distant and close, craziness on the bridge watching polar bear

The next day largely involved the same views. After lunch, a dozen or more seals were spotted on a large ice sheet. Later, another more golden polar bear was spotted in the middle of some pressure-ridged ice. Although many people thought it was more vivid, my pictures were less impressive - and so I didn't include any. There were 2 lectures that day: an excellent but too-long presentation about bears, and a too-conservative and ambiguous presentation about climate change. Of course, even though most of our crowd found humor in one public jab at Bush during a recap session, I can't blame the presenter for trying to walk the political fence. In the afternoon, there was an oddly-timed zodiac activity. This exercise seemed thrown out only to pull us from the monotony of being on the ship fruitlessly searching for animals. Indeed, as the ship began sailing on a steadfast course south, I think most people finally accepted that there probably weren't going to be any more bear sightings (and there weren't!). Coincidentally, my dinner selection that night was the only bad choice I made on the trip: braised pork belly (YUCK!). The other option was fresh cod - caught by the captain himself (although several of us noted that a few choice clients had also gone out fishing with him, causing us to wonder how much of a bribe - ahem, donation - that cost). Rounding out this overall frustrating day, I also caved and spent \$20 on a 30-minute internet card. So as not to belabor this story (which involves buying another card to send a total of 2 emails), I cannot recommend that anyone spend ANY money on what is slow and spotty internet. Correctly anticipating the night's sail would be rough, I downed my meclizine and enjoyed a so-so night of sleep.



Left to Right: (top) "shit, man" view, walrus frenzy, checkin' ammo; (bottom) gravesites, bay from saddle, crazy-big team, my man Pete

June 4, 2008 - Hornsund, West Spitsbergen

As with my "shit, man" response to Olden, the morning view at Hornsund was spectacular. I didn't record whether we saw the above walrus before or after breakfast - but there was, as with all charismatic megafauna, quite the frenzy. Sadly, but as was often the case, we drifted closer and closer to the mammal - until he/she had enough and swam away. Our other morning ruckus regarded an older client who'd taken a misstep on deck yesterday, tearing knee ligaments. While some people were stunned that a single step caused such an injury, I could empathize given my gardening accident. Anyway, after stabilizing him, the plan this morning was to transport him and his wife to this nearby Polish research station so a helicopter could carry them to Longyearbyen's real airport. It also came out

that another couple had left us in Tromso because a family member had died unexpectedly. Given all the cabin fever – and the lack of zodiac or kayaking options, today's announced morning walk resulted in ~40 people strung between 2 guides. In listening to Svalbard veterans talk about how long LNG's overland trips here used to be, I was at a loss to explain why this trip was sucking so much. Over time, though, I did learn that LNG had been spooked a few years ago when a polar bear ambled over some knoll, stumbling into a group. Mind you, they never admitted this outright to us (in fact, they had us believing we would be walking far up on the tundra plateau during the aforementioned Svalbard safety briefing. I think it's sort of like the whole hiking-into-Sweden-thing: they talk about offering it but they don't actually facilitate it. Over time, I also came to the conclusions that the guides did not trust themselves with the responsibility of this many people or with the guns. And that's a sad statement for me to make, after working with so many spectacular guides. Indeed, I would say that the guides' insecurity and frustration was palpable.



Left to Right: (top) Karin and her magnificent boots, polar bear shit, crazy climb; (bottom) more Karin, heart-rock, cabin, Hornsund

Anyway, we anchored in this pretty bay under this amazing rock (Hornsund) that was screaming with kittiwakes. On the shore was a 1970's era hunting cabin. Originally, the walk was to head up and over this obvious saddle. After some quick reconnaissance, though, it was decided the saddle would be as far as we went. Mind you, this took MAYBE a quarter mile to walk. After scrambling up a short snow-bank between the beach and the first plateau where the cabin was, all 40 of us all assembled for another repetitive fear-of-god talk. And then our army headed up this broad, shallow snowfield - single file... reaching the saddle within 5 minutes. There, we watched this arctic fox dashing across high talus fields (too small and fast for my camera). On the other side, there was nothing but snow - which partially explained why we were not going farther. Indeed, people who want to hike Svalbard should wait until July - and look into any number of land-specific outfitters. Rumbings then started up about adding another guide and breaking the group up for a harder hike UP toward the fox. But first (while waiting for said third guide), everyone hiked down to this mini-bay where there were some nondescript gravesites. As we climbed back up to the saddle, our confident rear guide (the same one who guided the crazy scramble back at Melfjord) sold this added climb as too easy - thus explaining why hardly anyone bowed out. And, of course, when he promptly started hauling ass up the steep hill, pretty much only the regular long-walkers maintained interest... meaning chaos and straggling bodies everywhere down the big hill, breaking safety rules, and leaving the other guides frustrated. As we climbed, I overheard one of the non-hikers grouching about how this was too difficult, that it was only being done to appease a few serious hikers - that "we" should be content to just get on the ship treadmill more often (as opposed to inconveniencing other people who had no choice in the matter of doing this hike... yeah right). Everything was ridiculously stupid: all this fuss, wasted energy, kid glove treatment, and dissatisfaction. In the end, everyone made it down in their own way... albeit spread out from here to kingdom come. We then lined up and waited to go inside the hunting cabin, which - not surprisingly - struck me as very Kaktovik (see Hulahula report).



Left to Right: kayaking platform, me on the placid waters, distant kayakers and massive gorgeous mountain

And then we returned to the ship for a sailing lunch to our next destination, 30 minutes away. There, we signed up for either zodiac tours or 1 of 2 kayaking shifts. Knowing this was probably our last chance to kayak and given the extraordinary scenery and weather, I decided it was time to get on the water. Although Karin was - by far - my best friend on this trip, she refused to get in a kayak with me (or anyone, for that matter). Thus, I tapped the second youngest passenger on the ship - this 20-something son traveling with his

parents; he and his dad were typically on the long hikes and so I did vaguely know them. Thankfully, we had the sense to sign up for the later kayak shift - not only because it allowed me to enjoy a nap but also because it was not completely full. When the time came, all of us headed out to the kayaking loading platform, were outfitted with our safety gear, and turned loose for an hour (which seemed strangely ironic given all the freakiness this morning). I did carry my camera in its pelican case and trusted the astoundingly stable kayak enough to pull it out a few times. Amusingly (after all the kid glove bullshit this morning), someone from the ship came around in a zodiac handing out whiskey shots; although I appreciated it, I was like: crazy rafting companies don't even let you drink while actively on the water. Just after we returned, some zodiac group arrived with news of a walrus just across the bay - which caused the leader to decide that the ship should move closer to it and then re-offer zodiac tours to go right up to it. Given that I wasn't interested in thronging another wild animal, I elected to stay on board... unable, nevertheless, to NOT watch half a dozen zodiacs surround the lone cetacean. I think it was at that moment that I honestly questioned whether I could stomach Antarctica... if, that is, this is what it was all about. After a great dinner that, in my case, featured venison, I popped some meclizine and went to bed... noting, of course, that my period had begun (which probably explained some portion of the bitchiness I'd been feeling about the last several days).



Left to Right: Krossfjorden - glacier face, arctic terns, saxifrage, me and my Sami hat

June 5, 2008 - Krossfjorden, West Spitsbergen

On this, our final full day in Svalbard, we awoke in this northwestern fjord complex that includes Kongsfjorden and Krossfjorden. Today would be the closest we sailed to any full-on glacier faces - and, consequently, it was a very scenic day. After breakfast, the day began with 2 hour-long shifts of zodiac tours. Unfortunately, I was on the second round - and, at least today, that meant that several interesting wildlife finds (reindeer on the coastline and puffins) were scared by the first batch of onlookers. But the arctic terns were pretty and the lone seal resting on an iceberg was scenic against the blue face of ice. My only gripe about today's zodiac trip was the high level of camera-wielding testosterone. Given the aforementioned issues with some staff photographers cutting in line and grabbing choice seats, at least one male client actively challenged the situation today (and I know this because I overheard him tell his wife that he wasn't going to let the front of the boat go this time). Consequently, it was almost amusing to watch the funny usik-displays (manifest, of course, by the gigantic phallic camera lenses). But, honestly, neither I - nor a few others - appreciated having either of these men blocking our views or moving around/rocking the boat. Indeed, the staff photographer's response to the client threat was to stand in the middle of the zodiac the whole time, freely moving around and getting in everyone's space. Given, again, the kid glove mentality about safety, I found it STUNNING that this guy (or any of us) were allowed to stand up so much in zodiacs. But, alas, the day was only going to get worse before it got better. After lunch, the long walk was improperly explained because 50 people turned out; the leader had over-emphasized that it was flat - plus we could see the whole flat-looking beach-line from the ship. As I've said about most beach hikes in other reports, they are not as easy as they look - and today's hike was rocky, mucky, mushy, icy, rugged, and bumpy... with irregular footing the whole way. Although the leader did attempt to emphasize that the goal would be to reach the face of the glacier (one mile up the beach), the MOST (quantitatively and qualitatively) unfit people turned out for this long walk. Of course, LGN did appropriate 4 guides, running 2 groups of between 20-30. Karin, Pete, and I all were in the first party - which was good because we had slightly fewer people. We rode in zodiacs to the single common walk station, positioned a mile from the glacier face - a narrow beach of snow, ice, and rocks between. Above, colorful and ruggedly crumbling mountains provided a dramatic cliff-like wall. Slogging up the beach, our guide maintained a moderate but constant pace, seldom stopping. Within 10 minutes, a few of the least fit newbie participants actively started to complain: the guide was going too fast and not stopping to talk about all the minutia they clearly expected from short walks. To their horror, the guide explained - in no uncertain terms - that this was the long walk and this was what long walks were about: keeping a pace to reach a goal, in this case the glacier. Thus, the walk turned into (for them) a deathmarch... the hikers upset such a conflict arose in the first place, the walkers that their short walk expectations weren't being met. At some point, the guide even muttered that there was no satisfying anyone today. Indeed.



Left to Right: typical icy beach terrain, glacier face, kittiwakes, start of ice

Despite everything, the blue face of the glacier was even more beautiful by the afternoon light. Within the hour, we arrived at this whiter glacial face where it met the adjacent beach and mountainside. And here is where the day suddenly became thrillingly worth it. Our guide announced he was going up and those of us who thought we were hearty enough should follow (he didn't say those exact words -

but they were polite, given frowns from the disgruntled short walkers). Not surprisingly only 6 of us took him up on it - 3 men and 3 women (including Karin and Pete). While it wasn't a long trip, we postholed up crazy shit (the most dangerous being the snow just before the actual ice). Mind you, we were in our rubber boots - no ropes... just like on the Alsek. We ascended 30 vertical feet, climbing 2 impressive mounds of ice - and looking out over the rolling surface of the glacier. Perhaps mild karmic payback, a small middle section of the glacier calved; while we couldn't see it (we did hear it), the folks on the beach had a great show. Oh well. As we started down, the second group of long walkers arrived - some members (i.e. friends from the usual long walk groups) despondent because they assumed they were, given the late hour, not going to get the chance to do this climb. To my surprise, they started up just as we arrived on terra firma. Fifteen minutes after our party started hiking back, zodiac crews began setting up a new pick-up station pretty much by the base of the glacier - meaning that the second group didn't have to do the return part of the walk.



Left to Right: view down glacier, teensy glacier team, rolling upper surface of glacier, approaching Lilliehookbreen

After returning to the ship (it was 5 p.m.), I spent the next hour packing in earnest... after all, we were leaving the ship for good tomorrow. Within an hour, we were called to the front deck because we were arriving at the northernmost point on this trip (79°) - in front of the 4-mile-wide face of the Lilliehookbreen Glacier. While I'm sure some of the glaciers I saw in Patagonia had similar faces, this one seemed like the biggest thing I've ever seen... probably because the ship slowly approached it to within a quarter mile. As we did so, the rumbling engine likely caused about 6 calving events to occur. Standing at the front of the ship, there were 180° of ice in view (well beyond what my camera could capture in a single shot), distant snowy peaks above and all around. After enjoying the Lilliehookbreen for an hour, there was a later-than-normal cocktail hour, all drinks on the house because it was the captain's farewell bash. I enjoyed at least 2 Cosmo's, which also happened to be Pete's favorite mixed drink. Of course, I did tease him about how this WAS the "Sex and the City" drink. Fortunately, Pete - being a highly secure old male hippie from southern California - was not phased. My final dinner featured (shame, shame) a foie gras terrine appetizer and another Argentine steak in a morel sauce. The former was not that good, much to my surprise. The morel sauce, however, was amazing. With a satisfied belly, I was asleep by 10 p.m., excited by the prospect of starting the next leg of my journey.

June 6, 2008 - Longyearbyen, West Spitsbergen to Oslo

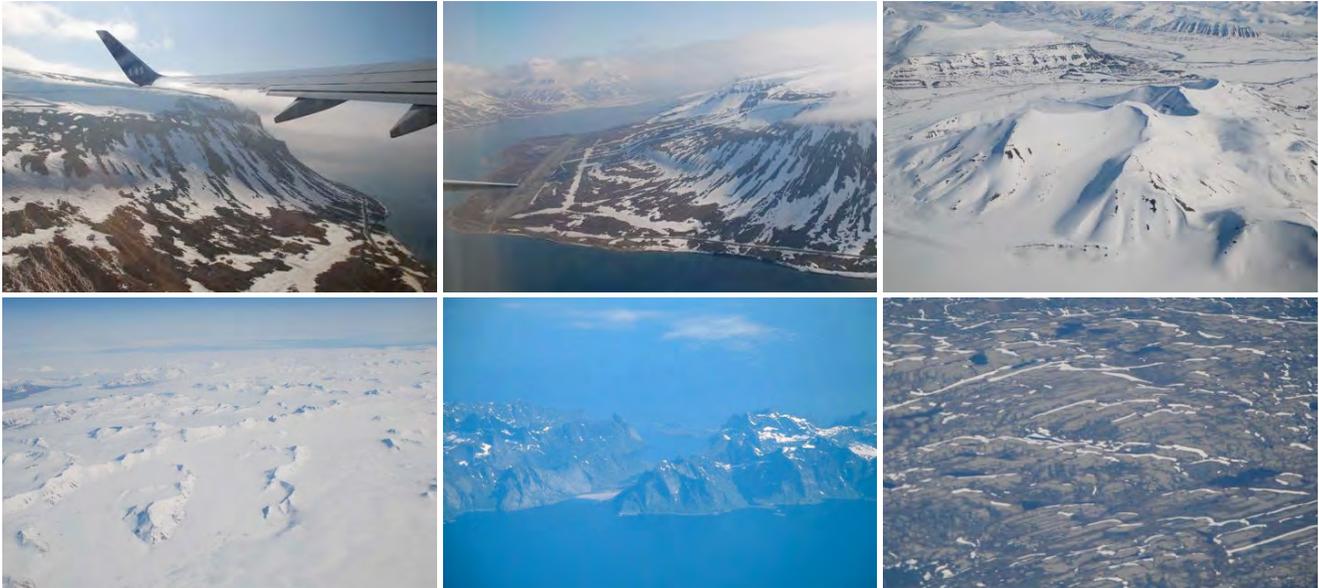
We arrived in Longyearbyen, the largest establishment in Svalbard, around 7:30 a.m., the same time our luggage was to be placed outside our cabin door. Although I'd been looking forward to time in this noteworthy place, I could tell - by the time we got our itinerary - I was not going to enjoy today much... because everything, as usual, was going to be rush, rush, rush and done, yet again, in too-large groups. And it was. Amusingly, we were not the only cruise ship in the harbor - meaning we could not even pull up to the main pier. That meant, yes, lining up for one last zodiac trip to some smaller pier after breakfast. Once again, 3 tour buses were waiting - although this time everyone was following the same path, meaning HUGE groups at the 2 target destinations: Svalbard Museum and Svalbard Gallery. As with the Tromsø Museum, I enjoyed the Svalbard Museum; indeed, it has recently won some prestigious European museum award - seamlessly integrating social and natural history using plenty of dioramas and taxidermy specimens... without being freaky morbid like the Polar Museum. Given that we had been allotted less than an hour here, though, it was a hasty trip.



Left to Right: Longyearbyen - church, coal-mining, museum display, streets, reindeer, last view of ship

We then drove 5 minutes up a snowy valley to an uninteresting gallery (which says a lot, given how much I had been enjoying art on this trip). After even less time at the gallery, we were driven back down to this odd hotel that was halfway between the gallery and the museum. Here, there were supposed to be refreshments and a place to sit and wait an hour before heading to the airport. By comparison with all other food on this trip, said refreshments were pathetic - placed in this tiny room with seats for 20 people max. Why LNG picked this spot is beyond me; we should have gone to the museum second and just hung out there. To quote several fellow passengers on the underwhelming service: clearly, the company doesn't care about us once we leave the ship. I was surprised to hear such sentiments uttered so frankly, frankly; so many people seemed like such die-hard LNG fans... and now to be saying such things? While waiting, I was initially obsessed with checking my email on the free hotel computer near the front desk - but that didn't work... and then I just felt unmotivated. Eventually, our buses showed up and we made the 10-minute drive to the airport. Amusingly, about half a dozen reindeer were grazing along the golden grass near the airstrip... and all I could think was: we spent how many days

looking in the most pristine places for these things and here they are at the airport? Sufficed to say, a short stop was made for obligatory photographs. I also took my last picture of the Endeavor - as we all wondered where the next group of passengers was, whether we would see them at the airport, what their trip (just focused on circumnavigating Svalbard) would be like. Not surprisingly, we overwhelmed the airport - although 5 agents/lines opened up on our behalf (more than I've experienced in most larger airports). Karin and I waited 20 minutes in line, my stomach growling. We then passed through a single security line to the one and only gate, which was light and pleasant. I purchased and enjoyed a great slice boiled egg sandwich on grainy bread, not knowing that our chartered flight would feature a hot lunch. We learned within half an hour that our plane was running 30 minutes late because of back-ups at other airports. After an hour, we were turned loose on the tarmac where the plane was being loaded from front and back stairwells. Although this was a charter flight for our group, some airport/airline staff joined me as passengers near the back of the plane. Indeed, I had an entire row to myself and moved to the left side of the plane, which I correctly guessed would have the best views. As we taxied toward take-off, our captain announced that the flight over Spitzbergen was fantastically clear and so we should all pay attention to the views. The just under 3-hour-flight back to Oslo was extremely scenic during the first and last hours - with the Lofoten Islands, including obvious Reina, making a brief appearance during the over-sea section. Although there was still some snow on Norway's high plateau of inland mountains, it was dramatic how much had vanished in three weeks.



Left to Right: (top) illegal use of electronic device during take-off, over Spitzbergen; (bottom) more over Spitzbergen, over Reina/Lofoten, abstract over Norway's mountain plateaus

The Oslo airport, located 30 miles north of said city, is surrounded by farmlands and low hills. Upon landing, we exited via front or back doors - with each set of passengers following a different route. In my case, we boarded a bus that dumped us in a customs line where some official checked and stamped my passport (the first time any airport did anything official in this country). Front plane folks entered the airport directly and never had to do anything with customs. After retrieving my luggage, I easily found my way to the SAS Radisson across the street. In contrast, a number of self-professed world travelers in this group seemed utterly incapable of doing anything without a guide (some SHOCKED I just walked off on my own). It's fucking Oslo, man - it's not like we are in some third world country. Disturbingly, too, our 4 most obese clients demanded wheelchair assistance to the hotel. There, Karin seemed disappointed I wasn't going to join her whirlwind tour of Oslo (that involved taking some fast train into town) that evening. But I was exhausted and I wanted to be alone - particularly given that I was going to see Oslo in the coming days, AND be thrown into a different social milieu... possibly more high-scrutiny and interactive than this one. Although my hotel room was nice, the internet was down and I begged to use some special staff terminal because I needed to contact with my relatives about tomorrow's pick-up. For dinner, I ate an Asian style noodle dish in the outdoor area of the hotel's restaurant, in the midst of WAY too many smokers. Indeed, smoking levels in Norway's urban areas was higher than I'm used to - despite amazingly blatant death warnings on all cigarette boxes. And then it was off to bed.

June 7-9, 2008 – Oslo Area

Being that I'd lost my head from 2 weeks of not having to plan my daily activities, I failed to process my relatives' last email - which clearly stated that I was to call them when I was ready to be picked up (for some reason, I got it in my head that he was coming at 7 a.m., confusing the time with today's date). Thus, I was all packed and sitting in the lobby at that hour... waiting a whole hour before Karin showed up and I figured out my mistake. But at least we got to enjoy a final breakfast together before she left for good. So - I've done a lot of thinking about how much I want to say about my extended Norwegian family (virtually all of whom represent second cousins or beyond). And the answer is that I'm not going to say a lot because these are not people I know well (and vice versa)... plus, it's not like you can come to a lot of conclusions about people after a couple of hours. The slight exceptions to this rule are my hosts, Asbjorn (which means Viking bear) and his fabulous wife, Gro. As mentioned in the introduction, each of my maternal grandparents visited respective families in Norway during the early 1970's, and - a few years later - several of my grandfather's relatives (including Asbjorn) visited us in Washington. Asbjorn, my grandfather's nephew, then hosted Ellen when she traveled to Norway 7 years ago. Although my mom, my dad (when he was alive), and my uncle have kept up with Asbjorn over the years (including hosting them when they visited us again in 1997), I have been delinquent in my communications. But, Ellen assured me: so had she prior to planning her trip. Thus, my family elders may keep in more regular contact - but the offspring actually GO to Norway. Although I can't say I had a well-formed memory or impression of Asbjorn from his visit during the 1970's, I developed a fairly accurate image based on my

extensive conversations with Ellen while planning this trip. Consequently, there was ZERO mistaking Asbjorn when he showed up. Asbjorn, now in his late 60's, has a legendary family status because he has been the king-appointed chief librarian in Norway. Asbjorn is also a meticulous planner, a type A personality, and very energetic – all traits I easily identify with. Of course, after a few days together, Asbjorn teased me that Gro and I seemed like more kindred spirits (which is also true). Indeed, while I am meticulous, type A, and energetic - being with Gro and enjoying their peaceful country lifestyle, I seemed to drift more to my relaxing vacation alter ego. Although Asbjorn and Gro used to maintain full-time jobs in Oslo, they live on and manage a 50-acre farm near Klofta, 20 miles north of the city. They used to farm the entire area, including raising animals, but - over the last decade - they have handed over most work to Asbjorn's nephews and nieces (as they don't have kids). Of course, this remains an astounding concept to me: trying to maintain professional careers AND farm 50 acres on the side... but it seemed as though a lot of Norwegians do it. And Asbjorn maintained that it was the healthiest way for him to leave his work-work and just relax (i.e. by working on the farm). Alas, I have felt inadequate since coming home to my tiny house and its unkempt yard... knowing the relative amount of work Asbjorn and Gro are able to keep on top of.



Left to Right: road to... Asbjorn and Gro's house/farm, room where I stayed now and 40 years ago, Asbjorn in his Oslo library office

Anyway - Asbjorn picked me up around 9 a.m., driving a Camry that reminded me of my dad's. Even though Norway represents my mother's side of the family, my dad would have loved EVERYTHING he saw and I saw a lot of my dad in my mom's relatives, including Asbjorn (e.g. my dad's quietness, objectivity, and drive) and the tax specialists and accountants on my grandfather's side of the family. Both my mother's parents came from south of Bergen, an area that looks like coastal Alaska. When both of them immigrated - during a national depression - their families were all involved in farming. Carving farmlands out of thick forests on thin soil layers above pretty much bedrock, however, is challenging - which explains why much of my grandfather's side of the family moved to more arable eastern Norway. There, most developed a broader array of career interests while, in many cases, still maintaining small farms (e.g. Asbjorn). While Asbjorn readily identified himself and his brothers as farmers, Gro's family was from Oslo and she considered herself a city girl. Against this backdrop, I felt a little schizophrenic. When I was little, I wanted to be a chicken farmer and so I did identify with Asbjorn. Obviously, though, I'm not a farmer - but, as I said to Asbjorn: I live in a rural area of Oregon that looks like eastern Norway and I LOVE working my land/yard (despite current appearances). We drove 20 minutes to Asbjorn and Gro's home, up this final dirt road that terminated in a cluster of 4 homes surrounded by respective farmland parcels. Such was the layout of all the farming areas we traveled through in eastern Norway. Nearby Klofta (population 10,000), 10 minutes away, had more stores than where I live - despite being the same size and home to a university. In what remains one of the weirdly memorable things in the area (invoking an aforementioned flight event), we also passed this interesting building: gold horns protruding off the roof apices. At the time, I asked if those were Viking because they looked like some of the embellishments on Bergen's stave church. No, no, no - this was an actual Buddhist temple, Norway's largest... less than 5 minutes from Asbjorn and Gro's home. In attempting to explain this oddity, Asbjorn said that this had been a decade-old trend: men (particularly farmers) unable to find wives... so they went to places like Thailand and found suitable partners (who, in many cases, brought their extended families). His exact sentence, though, went something like: Norwegian women nowadays are too liberated for these kinds of men. Asbjorn (more than Gro) enjoyed the temple - particularly given that they had recently held some open house with free Thai food... plenty of docile women waiting on everyone hand and foot. I think it is fair to say that Gro and I - despite doting on Asbjorn - considered ourselves highly liberated and left few conversational topics unturned when it came to women's issues. Clearly, our common gender and out-there personalities were key reasons we felt as kindred spirits.



Left to Right: Viking Museum exterior, interior - refurbished and un-refurbished ships; Kon Tiki at said museum

For the first couple of hours at Asbjorn and Gro's, we talked, ate (breakfasts and lunches involve self-assembled open-face sandwiches), and I unpacked gear in my upstairs room, the room where I stayed 40 years ago – which felt familiar because it was really similar to my first childhood room. By noon, Asbjorn (but not Gro) took me into Oslo for the day, driving first to the National Library where he worked and then on to several museums on the Bygdoy peninsula, which juts out from mainland Oslo. I actually don't think he'd planned to stop at the former – but I needed to pee. Indeed, from this point on, I had to pee every hour because Norwegians drink so much caffeine: 2-3 cups of something caffeinated and sugary with every meal, including well into the evening. Of course, over time, my ability to sleep suffered - which meant that my state was either crazy-hyper or on the verge of toppling over... and needing to pee. One of my later diary entries says: all my relatives probably think I'm insane, sick, or uninterested in them because I'm so tired and

constantly looking for a bathroom. Anyway, the Bygdoy peninsula was home to affluent neighborhoods bursting with lilac trees (one of my grandmother's favorites), marinas, and our target museums for the day: Viking Ship (Vikingshipshuset), Kon-Tiki/Thor Heyerdahl, and the Norwegian Folk (Norsk Folkemuseum). Although you could park in one place and walk to all these places, Asbjorn moved the car 3 times - paying \$3-10 to park in private lots. He also insisted on covering the \$10-30 entrance fees for all museums. Our first stop was the Viking Ship Museum. I wished I'd read up on this stuff more in advance, particularly given how insufficiently LNG had prepared my Norwegian history. Basically, 3-4 Viking Ships had been unearthed near Oslo over the last 100 years - each about 1000 years old. Like Egyptian pyramids, Vikings buried their nobility inside these ships, which were hauled on shore and packed with things for the afterlife. Each of the ships had been given its own beautiful annex; some were refurbished and others were barebones, representing how they were found buried in the clay. Although I'd seen pictures of the impressive hulls of these ships before, I hadn't seen their fascinating interiors: rain-barrels for drinking water, protected huts, places for storage and animals. Associated items were also displayed, including luxury items (e.g. jewelry), basic house-wares, and sleigh-like things. We then made a fast run through the Kon-Tiki Museum, mostly because Asbjorn figured out that I had been impressed by this story as a child. Although I enjoyed the museum and always knew Thor Heyerdahl was Norwegian, it felt weirdly out of place. Like other Norwegian museums, the Kon-Tiki made fascinating use of dioramas as it presented several floating vessels Heyerdahl used. Given that I remain endlessly fascinated by Easter Island, I also was surprised to learn how involved he was in a lot of the first serious anthropological excavations there.



Left to Right: (top) Folk Museum, Vigeland Park statues; (bottom) more Vigeland Park, Holmenkollen ski jump and Norway's largest Buddhist Temple – down the road from Asbjorn and Gro's

Our next stop, the Folk Museum, was much more significant than I was expecting. The goal of this park-like establishment was to relocate representative period structures from all over the country - private homes, barns, churches... including live examples of historic animal farm breeds. There was also a living history element to the museum, with people in period costumes doing tasks. We walked just over a mile - and even then, we didn't see everything. Because it was extremely hot, we ducked into one of the museum buildings to catch some shade - looking at traditional toys and an impressive collection of bunads. And finally, we went back to the main entrance hall for some cold drinks. We then drove back to the mainland and did a few roundabouts trying to find parking by Vigeland Park, which was VERY crowded. In contrast with what I'd seen in terms of the rest of Norway, Oslo's population was more ethnically diverse - with many people from Africa and Pakistan (most having immigrated in the 1980's - BEFORE Norway started clamping down on access). My goal, though, was to see Vigeland's statues (i.e. the tower of naked people). I was surprised to learn how old the statues were (pre-1940). I always assumed they were more modern, reflecting a backlash to communist/fascist depictions of mankind. Asbjorn, however, said Vigeland was actually inspired by such superhuman images - albeit in a more free-spirited manner. Indeed. In addition to a busload of camera-wielding Japanese tourists thronging the main plaza, this insane group of young women involved in a bridal shower were performing pseudo-sexual acts on the anatomically-correct male statues - the bride-to-be wearing a black veil and a shrinking white tube top. I think Asbjorn might have been a little embarrassed by this - but I thought it was HILARIOUS. Although I figured we'd now be heading home, Asbjorn said I needed to see the infamous Holmenkollen Ski Jump, located high on this prominent hill covered with expensive homes. Although there were several activities here that one could pay to do (e.g. visit a ski museum and ride a skiing simulator), we settled on a brief, free walk about the grounds - before heading back to the farm. There, after some light snacks and more conversation, we enjoyed a fine steak and potatoes dinner in the fabulous outdoor dining nook.

Owing to Gro and my non-morning tendencies, we got a late start the next day. Today was all about visiting the extended families of two of Asbjorn's brothers, both of whom lived southwest of Oslo. Our first stop - timed for lunch - was at his youngest brother's dairy farm. Thankfully, it was a light meal, consisting of this fantastic smooth creamed wheat with sugar and melted butter... something my grandmother made for me when I was little. Four of Asbjorn's nieces and nephews, ranging in age from 14-30, were also there. Surprisingly, few spoke English - which made my interactions challenging. Indeed, I felt bad that I had to rely on Asbjorn or Gro so much for translation. As would also often be the case, everyone I met was in some kind of coupled state (all pregnant or with little kids) - so I was quite the enigma... even more because I had such a different career and the concept of a sabbatical seemed lost on people who spent most of their time farming. Of course, these differences represented key reasons I felt closest to Asbjorn and Gro: their profession, lack of kids, experience and affinity with international travel. Although couples seemed the norm, the divorce rate also seemed extremely high... with nearly every couple I met containing at least one divorced person. After a brief walk to visit the cows

(grazing in open woods near where there were said to be Viking graves), we then drove north about 30 minutes, enjoying some snacks at the home of one of Asbjorn's older brothers. This man (and his wife) lived in an extremely affluent home - his fortune tied to timber holdings, something Norway has encouraged and subsidized (i.e. converting deciduous forests to fir-based timberlands). This brother was most vivid in Ellen's memory because he was quite the trophy hunter - his home displaying many animal heads and, most amusingly, mounted fish that he actually shot. We then moved on to his daughter's home, about 30 minutes away in the city of Horten. His daughter, basically my age, had visited us in the 1970's, and I remembered her the best. She spoke excellent English and it was enjoyable to catch up and talk with her. I also didn't feel I came across quite as strange to her - probably because we both enjoyed city careers (she and her husband were tax specialists). Their beautiful home overlooked the Oslo fjord and we all enjoyed a fine dinner on the balcony. Of course, I felt bad because I didn't eat a lot - still feeling full from yesterday's all-day eating fest. At around 9 p.m., we headed back home, arriving there around eleven given the long drive.



Left to Right: (top) Oslo - opera house, Oslo's Stortinget/Parliament; (bottom) palace, national theatre, As university, beautiful sunset

The next morning, we enjoyed another late start - before heading into Oslo. First on the agenda was the brand new iceberg-like opera house, designed by the same group who won the rights to work on the ground zero memorial project. We climbed to the top of the structure via long marble ramps - "use at your own risk" signs everywhere about how careful you had to be just walking on the slick surface. We also ventured inside - as far as you can go without paying additional fees. We then drove to the downtown area, walking the long, tree-lined promenade between the palace and the parliament, passing the national theatre and university law school buildings en route. Asbjorn then insisted we visit one of his favorite downtown restaurants for lunch. Before leaving the city, I was taken to a store who specializes in bunads and related fabric/notions. Unfortunately, buying anything have blown my annual budget for my entire sabbatical year. We then headed southeast of Oslo, stopping at the university campus in the pleasantly rural city of As before continuing to Asbjorn's final brother's extended family. Today, a few more people spoke some English but, as with yesterday, everyone seemed focused on farming and children. I was impressed that today's kids were learning English in school and interested in trying to converse. One young girl even shared her school lesson book with me and I was shocked how detailed it was - beyond anything I learned at that age in comparable Spanish or French classes. Food highlights today included pear cider and this insanely good rhubarb juice. The other highlight was the girls' blue-eyed, smiling white cat... the living embodiment of my favorite childhood pet, Christopher - owned by my grandmother. It was good to see Christopher had been reincarnated in Norway and was just as sweet as I remember him. By around 9 p.m., we hit the road. We took a scenic route home - although the air was thick with smoke from a forest fire. Asbjorn seemed disappointed that - when we arrived at this big lake - it was too dark to see much of anything. Even though we arrived back home at 11:30, we stayed up another hour talking and eating luscious watermelon in the sunroom.



Left to Right: Hardangervidda National Park, end of the plateau in distance, gorge at Voringfossen, looking down double falls

June 10-12, 2008 - Back to Bergen Via Hardanger and Samnanger

Owing to our late night and our need to pack, we got an even later start today. Shockingly, we had no reservations for the night and Asbjorn wasn't sure where we'd be staying. The goal was to get to somewhere near the Folgefonn, a high icefield above this narrow fjord adjacent to the larger and more popular Hardangerfjord. Getting there, we would drive what has been called one of the great

roads in the world (running parallel - much of the way - to the equally famous railway): crossing the high plateau encompassing Hardangervidda National Park and then dropping into the massive gorge that ultimately leads to Hardangerfjord. Unfortunately, the weather DID NOT cooperate today... and, had we gone one day earlier or one day later, it would have been spectacular. But I didn't care... I was exhausted and a day of just riding in a car was pleasant. After an hour of driving through farmlands, we started making our way along this curvy lake - the winds ferocious. We stopped at this pleasant restaurant for lunch, Asbjorn ordering us all moose steaks with potatoes and carrots. Unfortunately, my diary says, "I think it was here that Asbjorn started to understand I simply could not eat THAT much big food." We continued another 2 hours, the road climbing. Even so, there were small towns, ski resorts, and development pretty much everywhere. And there were never any towering mountains - because this higher elevation region is more like a giant plateau of bedrock, everything equally high. Eventually, we did enter a more pristine area of high alpine flatness - corresponding to Hardangervidda National Park. Although snow and ice dominated the landscape, there were signs of meadows and half-frozen lakes. Asbjorn pointed out that ill-equipped people died every year trying to hike in this area because weather changed quickly, fog obliterating all sense of direction. Eventually, we began to see the obvious edge of the plateau in the distance. Indeed, we began dropping dramatically into this narrow lush green valley where, within 20 minutes, we arrived at Voringsfossen. Fossen means falls - and falls there were... probably 10 visible from this official viewpoint, including the most dramatic: a pair of equally massive falls coming down either side of the gorge. Given the rain, all the falls were robust. Looking down the gorge, however, it seemed impossible to imagine how we were going to get down those sheer walls. But leave it to the troll-like Norwegians: they burrowed this spiraling tunnel inside the rock. Of course, that meant pretty few views during the drive down. After emerging from the tunnel, we continued 30 minutes, passing a big inland freshwater lake and the city of Eidfjord before arriving at the sea-scented true fjord (a northern arm of Hardangerfjorden). Given that it was 6 p.m., we began seriously debating where to stay for the night - since Asbjorn was aiming for anywhere between Eidfjord and a town called Odda (gateway to the Folgefonn). Of course, it began to spit rain as we headed off the main drag (i.e. the traditional route traveled between Oslo and Bergen). Heading down the narrow southern arm of the fjord, the steep landscape was dominated by fruit orchards - as this area provides the majority of Norway's cherries, apples, and berries. After passing the town of Kinsarvik, we ended up staying in Lofthus, a smaller establishment with beautiful views across the fjord to the Folgefonn: foggy high snow/ice descending steeply over forest and rock covered with waterfalls, various small buildings and an obvious road hugging the waterway. Given that it was after seven when we booked our rooms, we were mostly concerned with eating dinner - which we did at the inn. My single room cost about \$100; while this did not include a private bathroom, it did include a modest European style continental breakfast spread in the morning.



Left to Right: Lofthus and inn, room, crazy river by inn, views across to the Folgefonn

The owners of the inn, continuing a theme on this trip, were a Norwegian man and his Thai wife - plus her extended family. The inn's menu included local Norwegian fare as well as Thai selections. Regrettably, I didn't choose the latter - even though I REALLY wanted a light meal. Instead, I ordered regional Hardanger lamb. Unfortunately, my meal was MASSIVE - featuring chops, sausages, and root vegetables in HUGE proportions. I barely finished half of it - partly because the flavor was too gamy and oddly seasoned. But the beer was excellent. After dinner, the rain let up and so I enjoyed a short walk by myself, visiting a church, taking some pictures of this swollen whitewater river, and exploring the neighborhood by the inn. The views across the Folgefonn were slightly better than earlier in the day, including more of the icefield and what seemed like a wall of waterfalls cascading down this high shelf of bare rock. Within the hour, I was in bed - early (10 p.m.) for the first time in a long time.



Left to Right: historic power plant at Tyssedal, tunnel under the Folgefonn, riverside waterfall heading to Rosendal

The next morning, we were up around 8 a.m. After breakfast, we made what seemed like a short drive to Tyssedal at the head of the narrow fjord. Here, what was (at one time) one of Norway's and the world's largest power plants did - as suggested by my guidebook - resemble Lhasa's Potala Palace. Unfortunately, while the building itself was pretty (for a power plant, that is), the giant water diversion pipes that were visibly fixed to the mountainside - bolted into naked rock - were unsightly and spoke of things to come. Indeed, while Norway clearly has a lot of beautiful waterways, they have amazing levels of hydroelectric power - sometimes, as was the case here, very ugly and obvious. Newer pipe systems have been tunneled invisibly into the mountainsides, the only evidence of missing water being low bedrock riverbed that tourists may or may not ever see. Speaking of burrowing into mountainsides, we briefly passed

through Odda (where I paid to pee at a gas station bathroom) before heading into the 10-mile long tunnel that took us under the Folgefonn. This tunnel, though, seemed to pass by quickly. On the other side, the weather seemed worse. We first headed south to Rosendal, which Asbjorn seemed especially fond of. Even so, it was not even featured in my guidebook. What I gathered about Rosendal is that it is one of only a few royal dwellings left in Norway. In the early 1800's, royalty was banished from Norway, with all holdings turned over to the state and/or university system. While Rosendal currently seems focused on historical tours/tourism and a venue for weddings, it was officially handed over as a place for university faculty to take sabbaticals and/or retire. Hence, Asbjorn's interest in my seeing where I COULD be taking a sabbatical in Norway. The several hundred-year-old grounds at Rosendal were well-kept and pretty, featuring gardens and arboretum facilities, one main manor that is open for guided tours, several smaller buildings, and - way down from the touristy stuff - a couple buildings where the professors, indeed, live. Given active rain, we retreated to the manor gift shop where we signed up for a tour departing in 20 minutes and then enjoyed some tea. Of course, I was the only English-only speaker in the group (the rest being Norwegians and Germans). Consequently, the friendly guide (who did speak English) handed me his hard-copy English speech to read while he gave dual presentations in the aforementioned languages.



Left to Right: Rosendal manor

The tour lasted under an hour and covered 6 main rooms. Probably the most impressive thing about the house was the artwork (another theme on this trip) because one of the featured Norwegian artists was Hans Gude, who (I learned) painted a picture (loosely translated as the Hardanger Wedding) that my grandmother owned in the form of a large reproduction and kept displayed in her home. At Rosendal, most of Gude's works were amazing mountain and river landscapes that were vividly evocative, even though they seemed very different than my grandmother's more nostalgic picture. Consequently, I purchased several small books and postcards of his work. We also enjoyed the best true potato lefsa on this trip - spread with butter and sugar... as good as my grandmother's. And then, given that the rain had let up again, we enjoyed a stroll through the gardens before hitting the road again. Within 15 minutes of backtracking north up the fjord, we arrived at a ferry terminal - JUST as the final gate was about to pull down. But we made it, enjoying a 20-minute ride across Hardangerfjorden proper - despite gray skies.



Left to Right: crazy mostly one-lane roads en route to Samnanger, my grandfather's childhood farm/home, the "love trail"

On the other side, we headed north on what seemed like dwindling roads: one-lane tracks with infrequent wide spots for passing... all along winding slopes. Of course, it was getting late in the day - meaning traffic (particularly oncoming) was, at times, very bad. Our ultimate goal was this tiny town called Bjorkheim, part of the region called Samnanger - the latter being what I have always associated with where my grandparents came from. Asbjorn had already booked rooms at the only inn there, and when we arrived several relatives were waiting. I felt bad because Asbjorn told me that Johannes (my grandmother's nephew) and his wife had spent 2 days driving here from near Trondheim. Although I later learned it was also his birthday (i.e. he was also visiting relatives in the area), I still felt bad because - between the language barrier and my exhaustion - I didn't see myself as worthy of all that effort. Johannes was also this wisely, soulful man who seemed to be trying to connect with me - and so I also felt I somehow disappointed him. Of course, I hesitate to admit this but - when I first saw him - my first response was: shit, man - it's old Jay (i.e. first love, redhead, former hiking partner...). As 74, Johannes didn't look a day over 50 and still had this great, colorful shock of red hair. Like Jay, Johannes was an avid and lifelong hiker (indeed, after his birthday he was going off to Jotunheimen, Norway's most famous and visited national park) and had spent most of his life as a likely-wanderlust-filled bachelor (although, unlike, Jay, he eventually married... this notably gorgeous woman who was significantly younger). In addition to Johannes and his wife, we were also greeted by Johannes' sister and several distant cousins of mine. We then proceeded up some more crazy roads, heading above Bjorkheim into the heavily forested hills - to this narrow valley that defines my grandfather's last name: langeland (long land or long valley). Unfortunately, one of the sad things that seemed to take some wind out of today's visit was that we began driving along this empty, bare-rock stream that used to be this huge whitewater river. As in Tyssedal, this was the effect of hydroelectric projects that started around the time my grandfather was leaving. As we would see tomorrow, there were at least half a dozen HUGE dam(n)s on just this river, creating reservoirs higher up - and choking the river into nothingness. As a river person, these negative images weighed on me terribly... and, perhaps for the first time, I could understand why my grandfather felt the need to leave what seemed like an otherwise beautiful place: because it was vanishing. When we arrived at my grandfather's childhood home/farm, Johannes and Asbjorn explained how those construction crews

made camp right across the valley as they dynamited huge tunnels into the rock - how the locals (including my grandparents' families) ran little businesses out of their homes, selling homemade/grown food and beverages. But mostly, Asbjorn felt, my grandfather left Norway because he knew - as a non-first-born son - that he stood to inherit nothing of the farm. That, in conjunction with the depression and what was a challenging lifestyle, sent him to the United States. To my eyes, though, my grandfather's childhood home seemed relatively upscale... not the shanty, one-roomed shack I imagined as a child, based on my grandmother's stories. Since my grandfather left, Johannes and his relatives had taken advantage of the aforementioned government timber subsidies - with Johannes estimating that he planted well over a 150,000 trees in his younger days (including clearing the native deciduous forests to do so). Between timber and energy development, langeland seemed highly prosperous. Today, the house is home to a 40-something bachelor (and very distant cousin) who has done a fair bit of remodeling inside (e.g. note large satellite dish in picture) and still keeps up some farming while doing construction jobs in Bergen.



Left to Right: my grandmother's farm, sunnier Samnanger fjord, Bjorkheim church

Immediately above my grandfather's childhood home - i.e. up a 200-foot high wall-like hill - is the Tveit area (indeed, high resolution maps of this area indicate "langeland" and "tveit"), my grandmother's maiden name and the site of her childhood home. Although you could walk a more safe/sane route between these two houses by heading down-valley and then climbing a more shallow hill (i.e. where the road now goes), I learned that my grandfather did not waste his time on that. Even today, you can still see this crazy boot-beaten trail that seems to claw straight up the 50° slope between their homes. Oddly, I didn't have the sense that Johannes or Asbjorn knew what I knew about my grandparents as teenagers - and thus seemed to shyly beat around some obvious facts as they pointed out how close the two homes were. When I said I was quite aware that my grandparents were legendary lovers, Johannes cracked me up by saying: yes, there was "much lovin' in the hills." Hence, the wild path became even funnier - evoking how desperately grandpa was to run back and forth for much lovin' in the hills. Sadly, however, I admitted that - although I'd heard all these stories - my grandparents were never affectionate in my recollection (e.g. they slept on different floors of their house); and so we agreed that they must have used up all their love in the hills too fast. My grandmother's childhood home was not occupied and seemed to have a more preserved, timeless interior that featured many family pictures (including my grandparents' wedding) and woodcarvings made by my now-deceased great uncle (similar objects of which are among my mother's heirlooms back home). After spending less than 20 minutes here, we proceeded back into Bjorkheim for a large family gathering at Johannes' sister's house. Thankfully, it was a wonderfully simple meal of bread, soup, and great desserts - including this sweet curdled goat milk thing that was fabulous. After several hours, Asbjorn, Gro, and I made our way back to our hotel - which cost the same as the place in Lofthus, but provided private bathrooms.

The first part of the next day was spent only with Johannes, Asbjorn, and Gro; we drove as far as we could up into the mountains where my grandparents spent much of their summers in high cabins, tending animals. While many of the views were stunning, the immediate terrain by which we drove was awash with hydroelectric impact: reservoirs, power lines, empty bedrock streams. And most sad of all: we had to stop at this gate where private landowners now control access to places my grandfather used to love to visit. Granted, there were signs about how to buy permits (most aimed at fishermen)... but, for us, it was the end of the line. At the end of this report are two pictures relevant to this morning excursion. The first, taken on this trip by me, is the reservoir where we had to stop. After I returned home, I revisited this box of old pictures that I inherited after my grandmother died. In it was the second picture that shows my grandfather during his last visit to Norway (1974). Although I'd seen the image before, I finally understood where it was: high above the reservoir where we stopped - him sitting and looking across at the granite highlands, where Johannes said he most loved to walk. Sadly, my grandfather suffered a massive stroke shortly after his last trip to Norway and was never the same. Given that I was only 11 at the time, I don't have many pre-stroke impressions of him. In many ways, I went into this trip wondering more about how I was going to respond to my families' homeland, my distant relatives... but, in speaking with Asbjorn, I came to appreciate how close he was to my grandfather - and that he was also going to have responses to me, my impressions. Consequently, I think it was sad for him to realize that I never knew the vibrant, youthful, strong man who visited Norway in 1974, and had impressed him so much. Likewise, I also think it saddened him (representing my grandfather's family) that I clearly felt closer to my grandmother growing up. And then there were the questions about how my grandfather ultimately died - because it was abrupt: falling down the stairs from his second-story bedroom, being sent home from the hospital too early, spending his last weeks in my grandmother's bedroom (after, as I said, decades of living apart). I remember my grandmother calling our home, completely panicked... how, when I arrived, the paramedics were there, unsuccessfully applying defibrillators to his body. It was my first and most tangible encounter with death. Even though I didn't quite sense my grandfather's spirit while walking around the area by the gated road and the reservoir, I did feel it in Asbjorn's clear adoration of the man, which - like I said - was personified more than ever in my rediscovery of the photo from 1974.

After returning to the hotel, Johannes went on his way as the rest of us headed on to Bergen, just over an hour away. Of course, we did make a few detours, including unsuccessfully looking for food at this suburban mall and then getting lost as we neared Bergen proper. In the end, though, we proceeded first to my hotel, unloaded my luggage, and then walked across the harbor to this busy Red Robin-style restaurant near the Bryggen. There, Gro and I (sort of) disappointed Asbjorn by crying - and we're not talking about a short little bout of tears... we sobbed in between our conversation for a good 30 minutes, laughing about how pathetically emotional we were. The funniest moment, though, came when I asked if Ellen cried before she left; Asbjorn (in his perfect monotone and very Germanic-

sounding accent) replied: no, she was a good girl. We hugged and parted ways shortly thereafter - mostly because Asbjorn and Gro were going to drive all the way back to Oslo that day (which they did by midnight)... but also because we knew that we'd just sit and work ourselves into more needless crying if we prolonged the inevitable. And so I headed up into the shopping complex behind the Bryggen area - my goal being something I'd seen the day we'd went up the Floyen: one of the antique hand-carved wooden troll nutcrackers in the window. My mother inherited such a nutcracker made by her uncle (the aforementioned man who carved many wood pieces in my grandmother's childhood home). Although nutcrackers are widespread in Norway, all of my sisters and I have always loved the one our great uncle made. Anyway, when our father passed away in 2006, we had to revisit the will because it was evident that the things we were ultimately going to fight about were not monetary but sentimental - and, of course, the number one item we all wanted was the nutcracker troll. In the end, I think Ellen wound up with it. When I saw the nutcracker trolls in the shop window, I knew I needed to buy myself my own; it was only after I returned and started writing this that I further saw the ironic connection between my nutcracker injury from February, said purchase, and how well my ankle performed during this trip. Anyway, there were many different nutcracker styles at the shop - and none precisely matched our family nutcracker's worn smile. In the end, I picked a more modern-looking troll with this devilish grin that definitely has my personality. And then I went back to the hotel and repacked for the 10th time on this trip, enjoying a light dinner of salad and lefsa at the hotel restaurant. The next morning, I was riding in my peaceful private cab (paying another ungodly fare) - my DDG blond driver representing the FIRST mainland Norwegian who I'd met on this trip who'd ever made the journey to Spitzbergen. Needless to say, I tipped him well - particularly given that he found a faster route than the first cabbie from the beginning of this trip. Once at the airport, I paid \$7 for what was - by a long shot - the finest fruit beverage I've ever tasted: the best raspberries on the planet, pressed through a mill, and sieved directly into my cup. My flights home took me first to Oslo, then to Copenhagen, and then back to Seattle. Although there were no fights with any newlyweds, I was taken aback by my seat neighbor, this antsy Russian man who seemed upset I had the window seat and kept invading my personal space to peer outside. That I watched almost 4 movies seemed to agitate him as well. Oh well.

Closing Thoughts:

Well, this is going to come in 2 parts. As for the cruise... tough call. Looking up at this world map that I keep above my desk (pins poked in all the places I've visited), the cruise part of this trip - from a geo-spatial point of view - garnered the most impressive collection of pins in a single shot. Having said that, though, I remain troubled with how superficial and rushed most stops felt. Granted, I would have HATED a traditional cruise. The Endeavor was a fantastic ship and represents some of the finest service I've ever received. But the off-ship activities did not live up to my expectations - or to the level of service provided on-ship. While I admit that some of these feelings come from the fact that a lot of Norway is not as amazing as other places I've seen (yes - I know some people will be aghast that I said that... but it's sort of true - particularly given all the development and resource exploitation), the sad reality is that most of these feelings derive from leadership, management, and clientele issues (i.e. my impression that LNG caters to a retiree crowd of armchair adventurers). And, yes, I did state all these things clearly in my trip evaluation - which earned me a nice apology letter and a future discount should I choose to travel with LNG again. But the truth is, I probably won't... unless I find the need to do Antarctica.

As for my family-oriented travels... I think it was exactly what I expected in terms of both very good and challenging. I expected to thoroughly love Asbjorn and Gro, and I did... more than I could have imagined. We discussed things about Norway that I wasn't expecting to talk about, and they - especially Asbjorn - made me think about how I spend my time and what I prioritize more than I have done in awhile. In terms of the former point, I didn't describe a lot of these conversations... but I will briefly say that I discovered there were a fair number of things I actually didn't like about Norway's liberal social democracy: e.g. (1) although medical care is mostly covered, dental and experimental medical treatments are not; (2) with minor exception, you are required to retire at 65; (3) there were many offensive rules regarding having children, including a national ban on things like surrogate mothers or sperm banks, a ban on adoption by people over 45, and a ban on adoption by single parents (and gay couples). Nevertheless, I generally appreciated Norway's generous support for having families (e.g. monetary payment and a guaranteed year off work for the mother, 6 weeks for the father) - and you cannot beat minimum wage (about \$30 an hour). As for my thoughts about meeting other extended relatives, I expected there would be people I really bonded with and others I felt less connection with... although, surprisingly, all of us agreed on one thing: Clinton should have been the nominee. Going into this trip, I was not naive enough to think I would realize some kind of family utopia, although I was surprised at how prevalent divorce seemed to be. Although Ellen had indicated to me that English was a problem, I assumed that that would only encompass remote Samnanger... but it was a generally widespread issue beyond Oslo. I remain disappointed that the elder members of my family in the US don't visit Norway and - equally - that so many Norwegian relatives have never made the visit here - and neither group seems to have a fundamental interest in doing so. Most importantly, however, I now feel almost as close to my grandfather as I do my grandmother because of spending time with Asbjorn and seeing the things he wanted me to see - with an emphasis on his experience with and impressions of him.



Left to Right: goodye to Asbjorn and Gro, reservoir above langeland; my grandfather looking over reservoir in 1974, Sarah's nutcracker