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Tuesday, April 21, 2009

## Oslo, Norway

Capital of "the best country in the world", Oslo's got it all, says Anne-Sophie Redisch



Since 2001, the United Nations has consistently ranked Norway at the top of its Human Development Index (measuring life expectancy, literacy, GDP per capita, etc). The locals are very aware that they're living in "the best country in the world". Lukewarm towards the EU and reluctant to enter the Euro zone, Norway's currency is kroner (meaning crowns). In February 2009, 1 GBP was 10 kroner.

Formerly a Viking capital, according to Norse sagas Oslo was founded by King Harald Hardrade around 1049 AD. The city is surrounded by fjords, hills and mountains and these are where locals go at every opportunity. Be prepared for long, cold, white winter nights and sunny summer evenings, as the sun may set at 3pm in December and 11pm in midsummer. On May 17, the national day, the streets of Oslo are jam-packed with people dressed in national costume, and the city's children parade along Oslo's main street, Karl

Johan. A good day for royalty-spotting; the king and his family wave from the palace balcony for hours.

### Where to stay

**In style:** Oslo's first boutique hotel, Grims Grenka (Kongens gate 5, +47 2310 7200, [firsthotels.com](http://firsthotels.com)) opened in 2008 to rave reviews. In the historic district by Akershus Fortress and five minutes from the Central Station, its rooms range in size up to 750 square feet.

Nobel Peace Prize winners stay at the venerable Grand Hotel (Karl Johans gate 31, +47 2321 2000, [grand.no](http://grand.no)). This fabulous Louis XIV-style building has been around since 1874 and has a designated 'Ladies Floor', with rooms named after Norwegian women entrepreneurs, sport stars and artists, such as Åsne Seierstad, author of *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

For self-caterers, Slottsparken Apartments by the Royal Palace, (Wergelandsveien 5, +47 2325 6600, [thonhotels.com](http://thonhotels.com)) has single rooms and two-bed suites with kitchenettes.

### **On a budget**

Near the Central Station, the Copenhagen ferry and Oslo's historic district, Hotel Bastion (Skippergaten 7, +47 2247 7700, [hotelbastion.no](http://hotelbastion.no)) is an urban gem. Rooms are decorated by Anemone Våge, the interior designer responsible for private apartments in the Royal Palace.

Anker Hotel (Storgata 55, +47 22 99 75 00, [anker-hotel.no](http://anker-hotel.no)) is near the Central Station, the Oslo Opera House and the Munch Museum.

For a more nautical experience, take a berth at M/S Innvik (Langkaia at the Bjørvika Docks, +47 2241 9500, [msinnvik.no](http://msinnvik.no)) a B&B ship in Oslo harbour, near the Opera House.

### **Where to eat**

In style The Christiania Bohemians gathered at Grand Café (Karl Johans gate 31, +47 2321 2000, [grand.no](http://grand.no)), whose large back wall painting depicts the 19th-century band of artists, including Henrik Ibsen. During the 1890s, he sat at his own table by the window every day. The dinner menu includes hare and elk. Lunch includes several tempting varieties of open sandwiches.

The century-old Viennese-style Theatercaféen (Stortingsgaten 24/26, +47 2282 4050, [theatercafeen.no](http://theatercafeen.no)) is among the ten most famous cafés in the world, according to the *New York Times*. Over the road from the National Theatre, it's a good place for celebrity-spotting. The daily special might include veal liver, seafood casserole or Wiener schnitzel.

The maximalist Café Christiania, across the street from parliament (+47 2201 0510, [cafechristiania.no](http://cafechristiania.no)), offers a lunch buffet or afternoon tea.

### **On a budget**

Next door to Grand Café, Ett Glass (+47 2233 4079, [ettglass.no](http://ettglass.no)) provides hot lunches, while Café Habibi (Storgata 14, +47 2217 0201) offers Palestinian dishes (and throws in belly dancing on weekends). Café Albertine (motto: "If you have no money, you must at

least eat well...") at Aker Brygge (+47 2102 3630, [cafealbertine.no](http://cafealbertine.no)) has light meals.

In the Bohemian Grünerløkka district, Sult emphasises natural ingredients and creative cookery.

### Doing business

Norwegians are informal and rarely use surnames. Titles are even rarer. Introduce yourself at the beginning of a telephone conversation; it's impolite not to. Time is valued and punctuality is important. Call even if you'll be just ten minutes late. Shake hands on arrival. Norwegians are direct and usually get straight to the point. Most companies have strict policies on receiving gifts, so be careful. Boasting will get you nowhere and interrupting is considered impolite.

For most people, lunch is 30 minutes and often consists of open sandwiches. However, international guests are usually offered hot lunches. Alcohol is rarely served with lunch, but business dinners include wine, and saying "Skål" is expected.

The working day is from 8 to 3.30pm and it's acceptable for men or women to leave early to pick up children from day care.

### Downtime

#### **Keeping Fit**

Oslo is about nature. Hop on the Holmenkollen tram and walk in the fresh air while enjoying magnificent views of the fjord. Vestkantbadet (Solli Plass) offers massage and spa treatments, including 85 minutes of 'Soft landing & Vitamins'.

#### **Lunch hour**

At Bare Jazz in the city centre (Grensen 8, +47 2233 2080, [barejazz.no](http://barejazz.no)), you can have coffee and cake while browsing the cool jazz shop.

Or if you'd rather stretch your legs, the best place to walk is the astonishing and unmissable Vigeland Sculpture Park, which covers an area of 80 acres. It features 212 full-sized bronze and granite sculptures created by Gustav Vigeland between 1907 to 1943, including the Monolith and Sinnataggen or, "the Little Angry Boy". There are cafés and plenty of places to picnic.

#### **Overnight stop**

In 2004, Norway banned indoor smoking in public places. Restaurateurs got creative, expanded their outdoor sections and provided heating lamps and colourful blankets. Today, smokers and non-smokers alike enjoy outdoor eating, even on chilly winter days. In a nautical mood? Bygdøy pensinsula is home to 8th-century Viking ships, the polar ship Fram (used by Amundsen to get to Antarctica for the 1911 race to the South Pole), Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki raft and much more. In summer, everyone gathers at Aker Brygge (formerly a shipyard) for after-work beers.

#### **Weekend**

River city Drammen is 35 minutes by train from Oslo. Stretch out on one of four city beaches or enjoy the riverside promenade. Look out for the River Harp, a cool sound

sculpture by the pedestrian bridge Ypsilon, reflecting variations in water flow and bridge oscillations.

Amble along Bragernes Torg, Scandinavia's largest market square, where you can munch on sweet strawberries and watch busy fruit sellers. Lunch at Glass Restaurant by the fast-flowing river. During summer, if you feel energetic, don waterproofs and climb Kjøsterudjuvet Gorge.

For a taste of Norway's mountains and fjords, do 'Norway in a Nutshell' (norway nutshell.com), which includes a journey on Northern Europe's highest-altitude railway line alongside cascading waterfalls, a boat trip to Unesco-listed Nærøyfjord, and a bus ride up the hair-raisingly steep mountain road Stalheimskleiva.

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## Anne-Sophie Redisch

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## Quintessentially Oslo

### Opera

Norwegians have never been fusty sorts and their openness is reflected in the architectural achievement that is the new £415m Oslo Opera House. Designed by Snøhetta, architects of Alexandria Library fame, the ice-floe-like building opened a year ago. Even the bathrooms, designed by Icelandic artist Olaf Eliasson, are cutting-edge. Each month sees a pioneering opera, ballet or musical performance. Kirsten Flagstads plass 1, +47 2142 2100, oslooperahouse.com.

### Hotel

Only an hour from Oslo, the newly opened 188-room Farris Bad spa hotel in Larvik is in an area renowned for centuries for its thermal springs. Hence the spa has a 2,100m2 area offering thalassotherapy, steambaths, laconium, caldarium and all sorts of relaxing Scandinavian contraptions. Fritzøe Brygge 2, +47 3319 6000, farrisbad.no.

### Art

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Upon his death in 1944, Edvard Munch, the Expressionist painter famous for *The Scream*, bequeathed the remaining works in his personal collection to the city of Oslo. The Munch Museum holds a definitive selection of the painter's work as he experimented with different artistic styles. Tøyengata 53, +47 2349 3500, [munch.museum.no](http://munch.museum.no).

### **Cocktails**

For the view, head to the 21st floor at the Summit Bar at Radisson SAS, which has 180° views of Oslo and the fjord. Take a friend or two for a sunset aperitif. Norwegians make a great mojito. Holbergsgate 30, +47 23 29 30 00, [radissonsas.com](http://radissonsas.com).

### **Books**

As one of the oldest bookstores in Norway, Damms Antikvariat is a treasure trove for those looking for quirky travel guides, old maps, manuscripts and rare books. Though most of the titles are in Norwegian, you might stumble upon a first-edition English novel. It's like being at the *Nachstmarkt* in Vienna — you never know what you'll find. Christiania Torv, Akersgaten 2, +47 2241 0402, [damms.no](http://damms.no).

### **Dining**

Bagatelle in Frogner is one of the country's top restaurants, and specialises in Norwegian-French cuisine. Chef Eyvind Hellstrøm's use of local ingredients and freshly caught fish has garnered him one Michelin star. The "Grand Menu" features creations such as crab cappuccino and wild mushroom fricassee and the interior is more akin to a contemporary art gallery than a gastronomic mecca. Bygdøy Alle 3, +47 2212 1440, [bagatelle.no](http://bagatelle.no).

### **Shopping**

Fin, Norway's ethical fashion label, has a fan base that includes Keira Knightley and Kate Bosworth. Head to Koma or Steen & Strøm to try on this

“eco-lux” womenswear made from organic cotton and baby alpaca following Fairtrade principles in India and Peru where the clothes are produced. Steen & Strøm, Nedre Slottsgate 8; Koma, Hegdehaugsveien 34; finoslo.com.

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*City transport  
The frequent Airport Express train takes you from Oslo Airport, Gardermoen, to the city centre in 19 minutes. NSB, the national rail service, is less frequent and takes longer but costs less.*

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