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Like a local: Oslo

Cosmopolitan, arty, cool: Nordic Oslo is often under-sung. Explore thousands of years of maritime history, take a bite out of its thriving contemporary food culture and discover a bright new breed of young designers and quirky drinking dens in the gentrified working class neighbourhood of Grünerløkka

IMAGE: SLAWEK KOZDRAS



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 By Anne-Sophie Redisch

Nature is what defines this Scandinavian capital. With the Oslo fjord on one side and the forested hills of the Marka region on all others, this is a great destination for people who love the outdoors — which accounts for most of the city's 600,000 residents. And if you stay in the hotels of the leafy Holmenkollen district, the city's outdoors playground, don't be surprised if you find yourself hiking, biking or, weather permitting, cross-country skiing before dinner.

Just 15 minutes from this verdant outer borough by metro, the city centre boasts a 1,000-year history, museums and galleries, world-class restaurants and energetic nightlife. Frogner Park, at the centre, is where locals promenade, skateboard, walk their dogs, sunbathe and play among the 212 life-size nude statues by Gustav Vigeland.

But for the best impression of Oslo, you must experience this former Viking capital from the water. Catch the hop-on, hop-off old wooden sailboat that plies the harbour. This two-hour trip takes in City Hall (home to the annual Nobel Peace Prize awards) and Aker Brygge, Oslo Opera House and the Bygdøy peninsula, and Akershus Fortress along the way.

Another waterfront architectural icon, Oslo's opera house has a magnetic draw. Shaped like an ice floe receding steadily into the fjord, the roof is littered with walkers at all hours of the day. The city's contemporary sheen is complemented by a rough and briny maritime history. At Bygdøy, you'll find the excellent outdoor Museum of Cultural History with an original Viking-era stave church. The Viking Ship Museum houses two very well-preserved 9th-century ships and artefacts. Then there's the polar ship Fram, used by Arctic and Antarctic explorers, including Roald Amundsen.

The Kon-Tiki Museum exhibits two of environmentalist Thor Heyerdahl's precarious ocean-going vessels, including Kon-Tiki, the balsa raft he sailed from Peru to Polynesia. The peninsula also features great nature walks and Oslo's best beaches. What better way to enjoy a Scandi summer?

Food glorious food

For a small population, Norway has produced quite a few world-class chefs, including six gold medal winners of the prestigious Bocuse d'Or at the world chef championship. One of them is Bent Stiansen, who runs Statholdergaarden. Other gourmet restaurants in the city centre include Eik, Oro and Maaemo, the only Nordic restaurant to receive two Michelin stars at the first attempt.

Grand Café serves classic Norwegian *smørbrød* (open sandwiches); prawn mayonnaise is a perennial favourite. Have a look at the large mural on the back wall, portraying the Christiania Bohemians, an eclectic group of artist patrons in the late 1800s. You might recognise playwright Henrik Ibsen, who came to Grand Café twice daily to enjoy a beer and read the papers. Across the street from the National Theatre, the turn-of-the-century Viennese-style Theatercafeen is probably Oslo's most popular lunch spot.

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The Grünerløkka area has offbeat cafes and restaurants, including Noah's Ark, Villa Paradiso and Mucho Mas, where you can get homemade Mexican food. Budget options can be found in the eastern parts of the city centre and in Grønland, where African and Asian eateries abound. The Vietnamese Hai Cafe is a local favourite.

Frognerseteren is where locals on their ubiquitous Sunday hike take a well-earned break for coffee, waffles with sweet, brown goat's cheese, and panoramic views. Aker Brygge, the renovated ship yard and next to it, Tjuvholmen (Thief Island), Oslo's newest neighbourhood, overflows with pubs and bars. On sunny summer days, you'll find people munching on prawns right off the boat and enjoying after-work beers.

Food picks

Statholdergaarden: Rådhusgaten 11. statholdergaarden.no
 Maaemo: Schweigaardsgate 15. maaemo.no
 Theatercafeen: Stortingsgaten 24-26. theatercafeen.no
 Grand Café: Karl Johansgate 31. grand.no/en/restaurants-bars/grand-cafe
 Frognerseteren: Holmenkollveien 200. frognerseteren.no
 Villa Paradiso: Olaf Ryes Plass 8. villaparadiso.no
 Mucho Mas: Thorvald Meyersgate 36. muchomas.no
 Hai Cafe: Calmeyersgate 6.

Piles of style

Grünerløkka offers an eclectic mix of unconventional little shops, such as feminine vintage clothing and accessories at Frøken Dianas Salonger, odd T-shirts at Probat, and all sorts of fun and absurd little gifts and home products at Liebling. Mathallen, an indoor food hall, has gourmet coffees, breads, cheeses, fish and meat, including local peculiarities such as smoked sheep's head. Cooking courses for children are offered for free here, usually focusing on fish. Friends Fair Trade, meanwhile, has Scandinavia's largest selection of fair trade products: clothes, gifts, food, music and much more.

Nearby, Grønland has the city's best assortment of fruit and vegetables, as well as colourful textiles at bargain prices. Independent bookshop Tronsmo is a literary jewel, covering everything from politics to design, with an extensive comic book collection in the basement.

High-end couture can be found at Eger on Egertorvet Square, at Paleet on main street Karl Johan, at GlasMagasinet, and various boutiques in Bogstadeveien and Aker Brygge. For men's fashion, don't miss Moods of Norway — there are three shops in central Oslo. Sporting goods chain XXL offers anything you would ever want in athletic and outdoor gear.

If you're interested in arts and crafts, several artisans have workshops and sell their wares at Norsk Folkemuseum (Museum of Cultural History) at Bygdøy. In the city centre, behind the cathedral, the distinctive bazaar halls house more art and handicraft studios. For antique and vintage oddities, have a look at Butikk Brocante. Heimen Husflid sells the classic Norwegian sweaters and blankets. For more contemporary work, Expo Arte Jewellery Design and Norway Designs sell clothes and jewellery by European artists.

A little out of town, Bærums Verk, an ironworks from the early 1600s, is well worth the effort. Highlights include unusual little shops, restaurants, art galleries, artisans' workshops and workers' cottages — it's a gorgeous day out.

Shop picks

Norway Designs: Stortingsgaten 28. norwaydesigns.no
 XXL: Storgata 2. xxl.no
 Moods of Norway: Stortorvet 3. moodsofnorway.com/en
 Frøken Dianas Salonger: Markveien 33. frokendianassalonger.no
 Liebling: Øvre Foss 4. liebling.no
 Mathallen Oslo: Maridalsveien 17. mathallenoslo.no
 Tronsmo: Kr. Augustsgt. 19. tronsmo.no
 Heimen Husflid: Rosenkrantzgate 8. heimen.net

Party people

If dancing is what you're after, you'll have ample opportunity at the weekend. Nivou is Oslo's largest nightclub, while Baroque Bygdøy Allé is abuzz with funky house until the early hours. The Villa has electronica, and Rasputine is deliciously decadent.

For alternative evening entertainment, the multi-functional Litteraturhuset (House of Literature) is home to a restaurant, cafe, bookshop, televised debates(!), and best of all, a place to just sit and read. At Underwater Pub, you'll feel like you're inside an aquarium; professional opera singers and students entertain on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And Oslo Opera House has daily performances in the coolest building in town.

Norwegians drink more coffee than anyone in the world, so naturally Oslo has a teeming cafe scene, with numerous independent coffee shops. Many double as cocktail bars at night, including LaWo, Café Con Bar, and Fuglen, where the vintage furniture is for sale.

Also in the city centre, Bare Jazz is a lovely backyard cafe and speciality jazz record shop. London Pub & Club has been a popular gay venue since the 1970s. Near the Royal Palace, Lorry is perhaps the best-loved pub in town, serving 129 different types of beer in the chaotically maximalist but comfortable interior.

In summer, many bars take the action outdoors, providing drinks and hosting concerts in intimate backyards. If you prefer wine bars, Enoteca is a popular choice. And at 34 SkyBar, atop Northern Europe's tallest hotel — the Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel — you can drink in the views along with some very creative cocktails.

In the former working class neighbourhood of Grünerløkka, you'll find quirky and fun cafes/pubs/bars/clubs, including the tiny 1950s-style Bar Boca (for fabulous mojitos in summer), Bar Vulkan, Café Kaos, Fru Hagen, and not least, the riverside club Blå.

Alcohol is expensive in Norway, but you can get the cheapest beer (40 kroner/£4) if you wander across the Akerselva river to Grønland. In contrast — and perhaps appropriately — Thief Island is very pricey, from around £6 for a beer.

Nightlife picks

Underwater Pub: Dalsbergstien 4. underwaterpub.no
 London Pub & Club: CJ Hambros plass 5. londonpub.no
 Enoteca: Bygdøy Allé 59c. enoteca.no
 Fuglen: Universitetsgaten 2. fuglen.no
 Litteraturhuset: Wergelandsveien 29. litteraturhuset.no
 Bare Jazz: Grensen 8. barejazz.no
 Blå: Brenneriveien 9c. blaoslo.no
 Bar Boca: Thorvald Meyersgate 30. facebook.com/pages/Bar-Boca

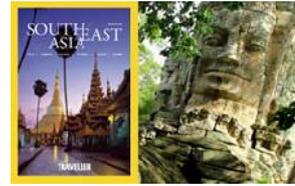
Top 10 local tips

01 Interested in Scandinavian crime noir? Join a Harry Hole's Oslo tour (Jo Nesbø's protagonist), which includes a stop at Hole's favourite pub, Schrøder.

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- 02 At Tjuvholmen, the new Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art is stunning both inside and out. afmuseet.no
- 03 Wander the paths along the medieval Akershus Fortress.
- 04 Stroll around the colourful Grønland area.
- 05 Check out the unique shops, cafes and Sunday markets at lively Grünerløkka.
- 06 Kids love climbing on Vigeland's wonderful sculptures in Frogner Park.
- 07 Walk on the deck of the polar ship Fram, and pretend you're an explorer from the golden era of maritime history.
- 08 Take the metro to Marka and join locals in their favourite pastime: cross-country skiing in winter and hiking the rest of the year.
- 09 Feel the thrill of setting out of the ski jump at the simulator in Holmenkollen.
- 10 Watch from one of the many outdoor cafes along Karl Johan, locally known as the catwalk.

More info

On screen: *It's All About Love* (2003); *Me, My Friend And I* (2001); *Max Manus* (2008); *Kon-Tiki* (2012) and *Kon-Tiki* (1950), which won Oscar for best documentary in 1951.

Books: *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun (1890); *The Redbreast*, *The Devil's Star* and several others by Jo Nesbø

Online: visitoslo.no

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