

The land where there is always room at the inn

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I sailed from Tyne Commission Quay on a beautiful afternoon in late July 1974. My fears of sea-sickness were thus allayed and I enjoyed a restful dinner with a boisterous Norwegian nurse and a gentle English lady for company. We gossiped until midnight over our after-dinner brandies. Margaret Acors, who had travelled by train and plane from Wales, met me in Bergen at noon, after I had passed through customs, and we ate a large lunch in an upstairs restaurant overlooking a very busy main street.

We had decided to spend a walking holiday in the Jotunheimen. Margaret had planned a route so that we could stay overnight at manned mountain huts. We carried warm sleeping bags, for emergency use, and enough food to provide ourselves with several packed lunches. We both knew, from experience of previous trips to Norway, that money did not buy as much there as it did in Britain. Packed lunches could be bought at the manned huts and chocolate, fruit and postcards were usually on sale at the reception desks. We expected rain and were fully equipped to endure many wet days. My 'load' was 13 kilos and we never ceased to be amazed at how expert the Scandinavians were at travelling light. Their ladies' loads very seldom exceeded 9 kilos. I decided not to tempt the 'Weather Trolls' and carried only fifty-six transparencies. As a result we enjoyed 14 days of blue skies with bright sunshine reflecting off the high snows and, by the second day, I had used one complete film of thirty-six exposures. Our combined films were rationed from then on!

After lunch we left Bergen. In Norway the connections connect! We travelled by train to Voss then by bus - ferry - bus - fast boat and bus to reach Eidsbugarden by noon the next day. There we shouldered our loads and walked all afternoon, in a light drizzle, to Gjendebu. That night we were fortunate to have a double bunk room for ourselves but were on the second sitting for dinner. By the time the beautiful waitresses, dressed in national costume, had cleared and re-set the tables, we would have eaten the piping hot soup, succulent lamb and sweetest of sweets standing up in the reception area, but the civilising atmosphere provided by the coffee round the log fire with the paraffin lamps lit was well worth the wait. This hut received its supplies by boat, from the far end of the lake.

Next morning the weather had cleared, after a fresh fall of snow – just a dusting on the tops – and we set off determined to dine early. The Mamurubu hut accommodates about forty people. After our high plateau walk, with views of hanging glaciers, we arrived at 4.0 pm. In spite of our efforts we were on the third dinner sitting and were told we would be sleeping on the lounge floor!

The tiny dining room was separated from an even tinier lounge by painted sliding doors. The painted doors depicted scenes of travel in the Jotunheimen. As these doors opened, during the second sitting, we could see lapskans then rømmegrøt being served. We ate all four courses including second helpings of the two main ones. At 10.30 pm we were ushered into the miniature hallway. A tractor arrived in the darkness, and our mattresses – thick foam rubber – were tossed through the open lounge windows. The costumed girls arranged them on the floor, then we were ordered to remove our shoes and allowed to enter. Twenty tired walkers prepared for slumber. Margaret and I chose to use the hearth step of the fireplace as our pillow. A huge, young, bearded, teddy-bear of a Norwegian had the same idea and in seconds had tucked his lower half into his sleeping bag, lain down on his back, crossed his arms on his massive chest, and gone to sleep next to us. I thought wryly, 'He will snore all night and if he turns over I will be rolled flat'. At 6.30 am the painted doors opened and a waitress shouted 'WAK-OOP'. The teddy bear had neither snored nor moved. He blinked his blue eyes and was first up. The tractor arrived again, and the mattresses went as they had come. The twenty travellers who had slept together were at the first breakfast sitting because the teddy bear completely filled the door-way to the lounge which was the only access to the dining room.

On our way to Glitterheim next day, in the bright sunshine, our Scandinavian fellow travellers spent hours, on the route, sunbathing near patches of snow to ensure the utmost concentration of tanning rays. They lounged behind boulders on the well-marked track with their faces turned to the skies and their eyes tightly shut. We marched determinedly on. We would beat them all! We made good speed in a lather of perspiration – or was it sweat? At 4.30 pm, 8 kilometres from home, all the bronzed, long-legged giants and giantesses, dressed in bathing costumes, unhurriedly strode past us and disappeared along the track. We had a four-bunk room and the second sitting that night in a hut with beds for over 100, but at least we were not on the floor. We passed the hungry hour before our meal wallowing in a hot shower and washing our sticky clothes.

We pottered round the hut next morning, but, inspired by the gorgeous weather, we set out to climb Glittertind. By 3.0 pm we were triumphantly on top of the 10 metres of snow which caps this friendly mountain whose height varies with the snowfall of the current year. The view, from the top, of the snow-covered rolling mountains, had to be lingered over.

Next day, feeling very fit, we strode along the track through the now familiar rocky scenery to Spiterstulen. This hut was at the end of a dirt road and accessible by car. Grey-suited, elderly gentlemen and perfectly coiffured elegant ladies mingled contentedly with the walkers dressed in breeches and jerseys. They could probably have out-walked us if they had changed their footwear. There were no beds available. Very slowly and carefully the receptionist explained to us that they always kept one or two spare rooms for family groups or elderly people who came in late, but they would let us know. At 9.30 pm we had a bed. We were not a family group nor did we consider ourselves elderly. Perhaps these friendly people were being courteous to visitors from abroad!

Guides were available, in the morning, to take parties across the glaciers and on to the top of Galdhöppigen. We hired instep crampons and signed on. Apart from one tough-looking wiry gentleman, the group were all 20 years younger than we were, but the two guides roped up our party of twenty, and we climbed through and over the glacier. The wiry gentleman translated the guide's story for us once he recognised my Scottish voice. He had spent part of the war years training on Rannoch Moor. We had an anchor man on our rope who spent the climb using a cine-camera. Unfortunately for our waists, he was always facing down-hill as we stepped forwards.

The roped part of the climb was not as gruelling as I expected, but the steep climb from the glacier-filled valley floor to the mountain top was. The boulders were too large for my short legs, but I made good use of my knees. 'Tomaas', the guide, was most conscientious, always climbing up and down, up and down, to check that I was still coming. On one such visit he confidentially explained to me that I would tire myself if I hurried but I had no spare breath to explain confidentially to *him* that it was physically impossible for me to hurry. I was last on the top, and he again consoled me by pointing out that I could now boast that I had climbed the highest mountain in Northern Europe. A snowstorm was raging at the time, and as it cleared my breath went again. The view was magnificent! We glissaded down using our feet as skis. Coming down a mountain in this manner,

on soft snow, is fast and exhilarating. We celebrated that night with a bottle of wine, because the huts do not sell spirits.

We then made our way to Leirvassbu where a homesick waitress – a Ross-shire student – enjoyed chatting with us between courses. Filled with the usual mammoth Norwegian breakfast from the groaning table of food provided each morning, we spent a day visiting Olavsbu – an unmanned hut – and the following day made our way downwards, through pine and birch woods to the Skogadalsbøen hut. It had been built on a natural promontory and commanded picturesque views both up and down the wooded valley – a nice change from rocks, lakes and snow. Here the custodian brewed and sold his own home-made beer which tasted like cider and could be quaffed a litre at a time. His home-baked bread was also worth sampling and was a packed lunch in itself – the filling was superfluous. His coffee was also fortifying. We chose the less-frequented route back to Eidsbugarden, meeting only one person that day. A Norwegian girl was walking on her own in the opposite direction. She too was complaining about the many 'stein'. Now we knew why it was the less popular track!

We completed our stay with a few rest days at Eidsbugarden, but how we wished that we were back on the high tops in such perfect weather. We opted for a change of route home which included travelling part of the way by coastal steamer down the Sogne Fjord. It rained all the way, and we sat and stared at dripping cliff walls across water peppered with rain. The tourists on board all seemed to be complaining about something – the prices; the food; the weather. We were stunned into silence. Had we come from another world? The bus from the boat at Newcastle would have missed the train connection north by ten minutes, but the train had been delayed forty minutes at York, so I caught it – I was home among British connections!

