

An appreciation of Norway before Alaska

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Now that my wife Joanne and I are doing the final preparations for our trip to Alaska next week, I can't help thinking about cold places. The Canadian Rockies, which we visited in 1998, remains the no.1 natural wonder in our mind, simply breath-taking. Incidentally, the photo of mine you see on my homepage right now was taken by Joanne on a pile of moraine on the side of a lake there. Drive a car, and postcards are everywhere on your rear and side mirrors, not to say what's ahead of you.

During the past decade, we have had the fortune of travelling to many destinations (over 20 of the "50 places of a life time" listed by National Geographic). So we might be in a position to do some ranking of our limited experience.

To us, a close second is the fjord-plenty Norway, which we toured in 1999. Not as majestic as the Canadian Rockies, but there is enough contrasting and wonderful landscape (the previous photo of mine on the homepage was taken in a Norwegian fjord---now you know), and human kindness makes up a lot. We checked into a hotel at 6:30 pm for two nights, and were charged only one and half-day's prices, because the owner thought we didn't enjoy a full day's stay at the beginning! Hilton and Sheraton please take note.

And in Loen, a town of 3,000 residents, we were surprised to find that the windows were opened in our ground-floor room when we returned in the evening. It appeared that the maids decided to let enough fresh air in. We had a dinner in a restaurant at the sister hotel nearby. Electricity went out, and the computer didn't work. The waiter simply wrote us a bill, and asked us to pay at our own hotel. Well, I do hope trust were so prevailing over the world. It would be a much, much better world.

But don't think that everything is peaceful in Norway. The very narrow "roads" (perhaps a misnomer) throughout the countryside provide ultra excitement for firebrands or F1 fans like me. To be fair, this element, most likely a subjective bias of an outsider, is in complete contrast to the mood of the nation; where many people drive in the most civilized manner that one can imagine.

I was pumping our car hard up a cliff along a "road" of less than ten feet wide, which allowed two-way traffic, but we were on the wrong (cliff) side! Ten minutes later,

Joanne panicked and asked me to backtrack. I explained to her that there's no way to make a U-turn, and the risk of driving backward for half a mile in such a geographical setting was astronomical. Both of us being economists, we decided to soldier on. And every time there was a car on the opposite direction, it always, always, voluntarily slumped itself onto the side of the "road" and let us pass safely before retrieving, no matter with how much difficulties. Thank you, folks!

In any case, the westward journey from Voss back to Bergen during an evening, where I had to pass over 20 poorly lit (if at all) tunnels only to immediately face the horizontally glaring sun, with the protection of my fragile "dark" glasses, along inch-perfect and winding paths, must be **the** driving achievement of my life time so far. (I've to confess I had quite a bit of white wine at dinner----but it should have been below the legal limit when I later started the car.)

I am not looking forward to another driving adventure like that anywhere else, hopefully not in Alaska, although the sun sets even later there.