



The Western Fjords

Includes »

Flåm.....	199
Gudvangen & Nærøfjord.....	203
Lærdal.....	205
Balestrand.....	207
Sogndal.....	208
Urnes.....	211
Fjærland.....	212
Jostedal & Nigardsbreen.....	214
Stryn.....	218
Åndalsnes.....	223
Geiranger.....	227
Ålesund.....	230
Molde.....	236
Kristiansund.....	239

Why Go?

In 2009, readers of *National Geographic Traveler* magazine elected the fjords of western Norway as the best-preserved attraction on Unesco's World Heritage list.

Scoured and gouged by glaciers, ancient and modern, these deep, sea-drowned valleys are pinched by steep, rugged terrain. They offer myriad things to see and do: in the water, up the mountains or just plain on the level.

Ferries are fun. These reliable workhorses lop off huge detours around a fjord, but they're also an enjoyable part of the journey in their own right, offering staggering and otherwise inaccessible panoramas of the coastline around you.

The western fjords are great hiking country too, whether following one of the many signed trails or lumbering along in a guided glacier-walking group. And if, after so much fresh air and wide-open space, you crave some small-town sophistication, drop into the bijou art nouveau settlement of Ålesund.

Best Places to Eat

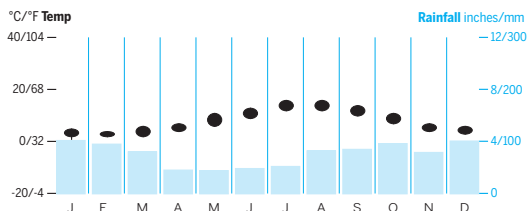
- » Maki (p233)
- » Smia Fiskerestaurant (p242)
- » Restaurant Arven (p202)
- » Ciderhuset (p208)
- » Bryggja (p218)

Best Places to Stay

- » Hotel Mundal (p213)
- » Visnes Hotel (p218)
- » Hotel Union (p229)
- » Hotel Brosundet (p231)

When to Go

Ålesund



Early July Norsk Fjellfestival in Åndalsnes, a folk and outdoor jamboree.

Mid-July Molde rocks all the way from Monday to Saturday during Moldejazz.

Late August Savour Ålesund at its best during the town's Norwegian Food Festival.

SOGNEFJORDEN

Sognefjorden, the world's second-longest (203km) and Norway's deepest (1308m) fjord, cuts a deep slash across the map of western Norway. In places, sheer walls rise more than 1000m above the water, while elsewhere a gentler shoreline supports farms, orchards and villages. The broad, main waterway is impressive but by cruising into its narrower arms, such as the deep and lovely Nærøfjord to Gudvangen, you'll see idyllic views of abrupt cliff faces and cascading waterfalls.

i Getting There & Away

Fjord1 (57 75 70 00; www.fjord1.no, in Norwegian) operates a daily express boat between Bergen and both Flåm (Nkr665, 5½ hours) and Sogndal (Nkr570, 4¾ hours), stopping along the way at 10 small towns including Vik (Nkr450, 3½ hours) and Balestrand (Nkr485, 3¾ hours). Several local ferries also link Sognefjord towns, and there's an extensive, if infrequent, bus network.

Flåm

POP 550

Flåm, at the head of Aurlandsfjorden, sits in a truly spectacular setting. As a stop on the popular 'Norway in a Nutshell' tour, this tiny village receives over 500,000 visitors every year. It has its charm but its tacky side too: should you so wish, you can pick up a pair of panties decorated with the Norwegian flag or a set of plastic elk antlers.

The **tourist office** (☎57 63 33 13; www.alr.no; ☎8.30am-4pm & 4.30-8pm Jun-Aug, shorter hr rest of yr) is within the train station, where you'll also find four internet terminals.

👁 Sights

Flåmsbana Railway CLASSIC RAIL JOURNEY (www.flaamsbana.no; adult/child one-way Nkr240/115, return Nkr340/230) This 20km-long engineering wonder hauls itself up 864m of altitude gain through 20 tunnels. At a gradient of 1:18, it's the world's steepest railway that runs without cable or rack wheels. It takes a full 45 minutes to climb to Myrdal on the bleak, treeless Hardangervidda plateau, past thundering waterfalls (there's a photo stop at awesome Kjosfossen). The railway runs year-round, with up to 10 departures daily in summer.

FREE Flåmsbana Museum MUSEUM (www.flaamsbana-museet.no; ☎9am-5pm May-Sep, 1-30-3pm rest of year) To prepare yourself for your rail journey, browse this little

NORWAY IN A NUTSHELL

Although most visitors do the classic 'Norway in a Nutshell' tour from either Oslo or Bergen (see p445), you also can do a mini version (adult/child Nkr650/340). This circular route from Flåm – boat to Gudvangen, bus to Voss, train to Myrdal, then train again down the spectacular Flåmsbana railway to Flåm – is truly the kernel within the nutshell and takes in all the most dramatic elements. The Gudvangen boat leaves Flåm at 9am and the Flåmsbana train brings you home at 4.55pm.

museum right beside the train platform. It's not just about railways; there are fascinating photos of construction gangs and life in and around Flåm before the car era.

🚶 Activities

To simply pedal along the shoreline or for something more strenuous, rent a bike from the tourist office (Nkr50/250 per hour/day). The tourist office also has six easy-to-interpret free sheets describing local walks, varying from 45 minutes to five hours, with routes superimposed upon aerial photos.

Rallarvegen

BIKE DESCENT

(www.rallarvegen.com) Cyclists can descend the Rallarvegen, the service road originally used by the navvies who constructed the railway, for 83km from Haugastøl (1000m) or an easier 56km from Finse. You can rent bicycles in Haugastøl (two days weekday/weekend Nkr480/580, including return transport from Flåm) and the company also offers packages that include accommodation. For more information on the Rallarvegen, see the boxed text, p152.

Njord

KAYAKING

(www.kajak.com) Njord operates from Flåm's handkerchief of a beach. It offers a two-hour sea-kayaking induction (Nkr350), three-hour gentle fjord paddle (Nkr450) and four-hour paddle and hike trips (Nkr590), plus multiday kayaking, hiking and camping trips.

Fjord Safari

BOAT TRIP

(www.fjordsafari.com) Bounce along in a Zodiac/RIB inflatable to see more of the fjord in less time. The team supplies full-length waterproof kit – you'll need it for this exhilarating scoot across the waters. Trips, with stops,