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Go Citybreak

## Jewel in the fjords

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# Jewel in the fjords

As a mixture of natural beauty and striking modernity, Oslo is an ideal family citybreak destination, but bring a well-packed wallet, writes **Eleanor Fitzsimons**

**T**HE JUXTAPOSITION of a modern, vibrant city nestling alongside the untamed beauty of the Oslofjord and the wild woods and mountains of Nordmarka is the breathtaking sight that greeted us on first entering Oslo.

Despite the city's northerly latitude, the climate is comfortably moderate all year round, as the Gulf Stream carries warm water from the Gulf of Mexico right up the Norwegian coastline. In winter, temperatures don't fall far below zero degrees while in summer the sun shines and the entire population moves outdoors for the duration.

The discovery of North Sea oil has ensured that Oslo's inhabitants enjoy one of the highest available standards of living and we certainly found this reflected in the prices charged for everything.

We visited with our two little boys, aged eight and four, during wintertime, when the city benefits from the kind of unfathomably deep, pristine, Christmas-card snow that puts our light smattering to shame. It was this snow that enticed us there in the first place – that and the simple fact that we'd never travelled so far North before. The boys certainly spent much of their time gleefully tobogganing down the snow-covered steps of the Royal Palace and clambering up the towering drifts we encountered in Oslo's many picturesque parks.

Oslo's history is fascinating. Occupied for a considerable period, the city was renamed Kristiania by its Swedish king Christian IV in 1624, and only reverted back to Oslo in 1925. This cultured city, once home to playwright Henrik Ibsen, composer Edvard Grieg and artist Edvard Munch, has perhaps suffered in the shadows of its more vibrant Scandinavian neighbours, Stockholm and Copenhagen. Although thoughtfully planned and incorporating some architectural gems, such as the rotund Stortinget, the medieval Akershus Fortress and the imposing Royal palace, it lacks the visual impact of some other European capitals. Now, though, a stunning new opera house, a culture award at the 2008 World Architecture Festival and the inclusion of Oslo on the TripAdvisor list of eight cities that really made their mark in 2008 has allowed it to emerge and shine.

The centre of this diminutive capital, home to 575,000 citizens, is compact and easily negotiated by even the shortest legs. Everything centres on Karl Johan's Gate, which links the main railway station with the Royal Palace and encompasses pedestrian shopping zones and a pretty park with twin ice rinks. Several attractions are located just beyond the centre, so we really appreciated the superb network of public transport, which includes buses, trams, a public bicycle system (suspended during the winter months), an extensive metro system and, to the delight of the boys, some charming ferry crossings.

Oslo enjoys an extraordinary proliferation of museums. However, conscious of our children's low boredom threshold, we gave both the Munch Museet and the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design a miss and stayed outdoors to visit the stunning, sculpture-filled Vigeland Park, the precipitous Holmenkollen Ski Jump and the picture-postcard, quaint Norsk

Folkemuseum, before heading back to the centre.

It's just a short, scenic stroll along the harbourfront from the richly adorned ceremonial hall of the unsightly Modernist Radhuset, where the Nobel Peace Prize is presented annually, to Aker Brygge. This former shipyard, now transformed into a shopping, dining and residential amenity, has the highest concentration of restaurants in Oslo. Prices are high but quality is commensurably excellent.

The highlight for all of us was Oslo's maritime museums. From ancient Norse Vikings to intrepid polar explorer Roald Amundsen and adventurous ethnographer Thor Heyerdahl, scores of brave and inquisitive people have sailed from Oslo to explore the far reaches of the world beyond.

Nautical museums are clustered on the western peninsula of Bygdøy (bus 30) alongside delightful parks, forests and beaches. The Viking Ship Museum contains the best preserved ninth-century Viking burial ships in existence. The Frammuseet houses the indomitable polar ship the *Fram* and the shivers that passed down our spines as we walked in the footsteps of Amundsen, stopping to peer through the window of his cramped cabin, had little to do with the snow blanketing the landscape outside.

Our boys were enthralled by the astonishingly flimsy *Kon-Tiki* raft that carried Thor Heyerdahl and his crew across the vast reaches of the South Pacific to Polynesia.

A typically Scandinavian tolerance and willingness to include children in all aspects of daily life made Oslo the ideal destination for our family break. We found the attractions exceptionally appealing and accessible to all, our hotel accommodated all four of us with little fuss, and even the most upmarket of restaurants provided child-friendly menus, though vegetables are a rarity.

However, this is not a destination for those operating on a restrictive budget. Recently declared the world's most expensive city by the *Economist* Intelligence Unit, Oslo makes even dear old Dublin (ranked at number 20) seem like a relatively cut-price option.

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## **Go there**

SAS ([www.flysas.ie](http://www.flysas.ie)) flies to Oslo Airport, Gardermoen, in just under two hours from €87 one-way. An excellent, though pricey rail link takes you to the city's main railway station in just 20 minutes. Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies to the more distant Sandefjord Airport Torp.





**NORTHERN EXPOSURE** Folk dance at Gol Stave Church, Norwegian Folk Museum. Photograph: Anne Lise Reinsfelt

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