

The Damekor in Norway

On the afternoon of May 10, 2007 the Bellingham Damekor headed off to Norway on our long-awaited concert tour – dreamed about, planned and finally real. The chorus is a small group of seventeen singers so to implement such a large undertaking meant a lot of work by everyone – bake sales, craft sales and performances to raise the needed funds. The Daughters of Norway Nellie Gerdrum Lodge #41 gave us a huge boost with a substantial grant, and the Sons Of Norway Foundation also awarded a cultural grant to the Damekor for this cross-cultural program. After literally years of preparation at last we found ourselves on SAS flight #938 bound for Norway, eager and full of enthusiasm. We traveled with eleven singers, a guest soloist, our director, several Daughters Of Norway members, family and friends.

Our transfer in Copenhagen required track shoes and a great rush across the airport to barely make our connection on to Oslo. No trip is without problems and for three people whose luggage did not arrive in Oslo with us, there were some worried moments, but it was located and delivered a few hours later.

Eager to get out and walk a bit and see the city many of us ventured down to the Oslo waterfront, just a few blocks from our hotel, and browsed the Aker Brygge, a newly renovated area of shops and restaurants. There we enjoyed an open-air dinner while watching the boat traffic on the Oslo Harbour.

Saturday was a free day for everyone. I joined a group on a walking tour led by Karin Zamarripa and her Oslo friends, Odd Erik and Gerd Bergman, who guided us to the Royal Palace, down Karl Johans gate and to lots of specialty gift shops and department stores. What fun to see Norwegian sweaters and all the other traditional Norwegian gift items as well as stores with bunad supplies – fabrics and trims galore, authentic bunad jewelry and even custom made bunads.

Our tour began in earnest Sunday with a tour of the city ending at Frogner Park. After a guided tour of the park we met with Svein Erik Sandberg who took us to the Frognerpark Café where the Damekor was scheduled to give an outdoor performance. A group of people gathered for lunch and to hear us sing – all of who seemed to know our songs! We had worried that our

Norwegian pronunciation would not be exact, but we got lots of positive comments about that. They were surprised that most of our group does not speak Norwegian. We had prepared some “mini-banners” with our Damekor logo and a group photo of the chorus in a presentation folder to give to people along the way. These were presented to Mr Sandberg and Terje Pederson, café owner, in appreciation of their invitation to sing at the restaurant. They served us lunch and we relaxed enjoying an exciting start to our tour.

Monday morning we boarded *our bus* and headed out of Oslo along the Tyrifjord lined with blossoming apple trees, lilacs, tulips and early spring colors. Traveling through Hallingdal, we soon began to climb and see snow along the roads. As we crossed the Hargangervidda the snow beside the roads was higher than our tour bus. By late afternoon, we approached our destination of Lofthus; we were again at sea level and surrounded by flowering fruit trees. Our hotel was nestled on the waterfront of the Sorfjord in an unbelievably beautiful setting. We were served a lovely buffet dinner, one of many to come. The dinners were an array of authentic fare – “Did you try this...I haven’t had this in years...This is to die for...What is this?” From the herring (offered in several styles), the selection of wonderful breads to the variety of luscious cakes, puddings and fruits, and all the specialty dishes in between, each new buffet was an exciting culinary experience.

On the 15th of May we left Lofthus driving again along the narrow one lane road, which seemed to be the standard in Norway. Unless you were in a city or on a major road, the roads were one lane with occasional turnouts for passing traffic. It made for some interesting moments on our big tour bus. Our driver, Arvid, was the Best! We were very appreciative of his skill and confidence.

After a short ferry crossing we arrived in Bergen, got settled into our new rooms, and enjoyed a quick lunch. Then we were off on a city tour ending at the museum and home of Edvard Grieg. The house was undergoing an exterior renovation and was covered in plastic and scaffolding, but we were welcomed and given an informative tour of Edvard and Nina Grieg’s Bergen home by Michael, who is from Brazil and goes to school in Alaska. (We are indeed talking about a cross-cultural experience.) Following the tour we went over to the beautiful Troidhaugen concert hall where we had the privilege of performing. The concert the Damekor presented there was one

of the special highlights of the trip. It included Edvard Grieg's "Våren" with guest soloist, Susanne Snortland, a few traditional Norwegian songs – then, as usual, (we were learning) a group of American songs that were always the audience favorites! We sang "Come Go With Me", "My Prayer" with solo by our director, Steve Jensen, and "Special Angel". While we were singing the sun broke through the clouds and came streaming through the wall of windows at the back of the stage. This was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity for me.

Now, our day in Bergen was just getting started because we had the rare opportunity to meet with the Bergen women's chorus, Toneveld. They invited our entire group to an evening of music, friends and food. About 40 Toneveld ladies and their director, Olaug Karin Borge, welcomed us. (Will we ever have that many voices in our Damekor?) They served a lovely smorgasbord dinner. We sang, they sang, and together we shared an evening of music and friendship that was perfectly delightful. The bonus was a special connection in Birgit Grimsmo's sister, Grethe, who is a member of the Bergen chorus. It was hard to leave, but after lots of fond goodbyes and promises to stay in touch we were escorted, in the rain (it's Bergen after all), on the city bus back to our hotel.

Everyone wished for more time in Bergen, but we were on our way again. This day took us to Voss with its historic hotel, stone church built in 1277 A.D., and, as always, the gift shops and specialty stores to explore – and never enough time. Ellen and Ted Hinds did manage a visit with Felicia Bauer, our friend from Blue Ice. From Voss we boarded the Bergen-Oslo train to Myrdal and rode the world famous Flåm Railway down to the village of Flåm. Then we had another ferry ride on the "King of the Fjords", the Sognefjord to Sogndal, where we met again with our driver, Arvid, and *our bus*. As we drove on to Loen (our stop for tonight) our tour director, Jeffery, regaled us with his fascinating array of stories, facts and legends about the country we were seeing. The hotel at Loen was on the water (what else?), this time the Nordfjord, and provided us with another memorable buffet dinner.

The 17th of May festivities here in Loen didn't begin until after noon, but as we drove out through the valley flags began to appear at each farm. The sun was shining and the incredible weather, which had followed us throughout our trip, was still with us. Norwegian fjord horses were grazing in the fields, and at the end of the valley we arrived at the staging area for a visit to

Europe's largest glacier, the Briksdal Glacier. Here we rode the next 2K on a small tractor driven cart, then finally an uphill climb to the base of the glacier where Jeffery rewarded us with a taste of aquavit. Then it was back to the hotel and on our way to meet another ferry.

As we left Loen on May 17th, Jeffery said he would start the day with "Ja vi Elsker" (on the sound system on the bus), and, of course, our group all joined in to sing it – in harmony. He stood up to look at us and said that was a FIRST for him; a group that spontaneously sang along, in harmony, and KNEW THE WORDS! So we sang it again. En route we came upon the small town of Grotås, in the midst of their Syttende Mai Celebration. We stopped to share in the parade and festivities – the two little girls leading the parade cheering "Hip Hip Hooray, Syttende Mai!" The band played; there was the first grade, the second grade, the third grade...all the children and adults in their finest traditional dress. Soon we were all back on *our bus* and found ourselves following the parade down the only road out of town. Now Jeffery had timed this morning's departure to meet a ferry so seeing our dilemma he called the ferry and asked them to wait for us! The ferry waited, and we enjoyed a beautiful trip up the mighty Geiranger Fjord to the village of Geiranger. Here we stayed at yet another wonderful hotel on the water. And another bonus: we were met by Birgit's second sister, Randi, and her fiancée, dressed in their holiday finery. Since this was early in the tour season, we had the hotel to ourselves, and had the top floor lounge for our very own Syttende Mai party. So in our "Vatkåm Bunads" and music in hand, all our fellow travelers, guests, and the entire hotel staff made a night of it in Norway on the 17th of May, 2007.

Next morning, after our celebration/performance, with lots of audience participation, we were on the road again – via water – up the Geiranger Fjord. The road we were scheduled to take was snowed in. There was so much snow I questioned if the road would open at all this year. (I was assured it would.) So we traveled the long way around via ferry and on to Lom where we were given a tour of one of the few historic Stave Churches still in use and still in its original location. After lunch in Lom we drove on through more magnificent scenery, through the Gudbrandsdal Valley to Lillehammer. We arrived just in time to quickly change into concert dress for our performance at the Lillehammer Kommune's senior residence, Horsters Minde. We were welcomed with enthusiastic applause from all the residents and by Director, Anne Karin Botheim. Again Susanne wowed our audience with her presentation of Greig's "Våren" (this time with the chorus

and piano), and Steve's "My Prayer" led to a special audience request for more American music! Birgit's mother-in-law, Eli Eriksen lives here; she reported that everyone was so happy to have us come. They had looked forward to our visit and prepared for our performance with posters, banners and press releases. It was such a pleasure to sing for them.

This was our last day on the road. Lillehammer left us wishing we'd had more time to do exploring there too. There was a brief stop at Hamar to see the "Upside down Viking Ship", then on to Eidsvoll, the site of the signing of the constitution. There we met Mr and Mrs Ernst Granly. Mr Granly, the Sons of Norway International Director for Norway, came to Eidsvoll especially to meet us, see us, hear us sing...so we did a short performance for him concluding with "Ja vi Elsker".

That concluded our performances – sometimes in logo jackets outdoors, sometimes in concert dress onstage. It was interesting to see the audience response when we performed. A small chorus of women's voices does not command interest or respect, but when we performed the response was always – Wow! Our audiences were very enthusiastic and appreciative, which was the perfect reward for each of us. Our tour ended with a goodbye dinner at Holmenkollen in Oslo.

For me, the best part of this tour was the singing and the people. Another "best moment" was when a member of our group said she felt that traveling with the chorus had provided a theme that tied the day-to-day events together, and helped to make the trip more meaningful. Our tour director, Jeffery, said, "I will never forget this group of Norwegians; you know who you are, why you are here, and you accomplished your purpose." I also want to say thank you to all the people who helped to make this trip possible – whether by buying bake sale cookies and cakes, attending concerts, donating money, or by giving us your kind thoughts and prayers. After a long trip home we are now sorting photos, recording memories and treasuring a truly remarkable cross cultural experience ~ the Bellingham Damekor in Norway. Ya – Ho!

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