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## A city guide to Oslo – hot dogs, harbour regeneration and Nordic fjord life

Urban regeneration, fjord life and *friluftsliv* – the concept of celebrating outdoor living regardless of the weather – make Norway's capital an appealing summer getaway. And this underappreciated city is having its moment in the sun.

Designed by celebrated Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta, the Oslo Opera House almost looks like a glacier rising from the harbour and has a walkway rising from street level to the rooftop.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

BY LAUREN HO



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In Oslo, one of the first things you notice is the smell of hot dogs. Just as Istanbul is fragrant with cinnamon and saffron, and Malaysia is associated with the pungent whiff of durian, the reassuring smell of hot dogs – *polse*, in Norwegian – lingers in the air of Norway's capital, wafting from convenience stores all over the city. Served the traditional way in a thin flatbread, this humble snack holds a lot of cultural significance in Norway; it's said that around 450 million of them are eaten in the country each year. But this unassuming city has come a long way since hot dogs were its main culinary claim. With thriving neighbourhood coffee shops, innovative fusion cuisine and, in 2022, the addition of three new Michelin-starred restaurants, Oslo's food scene is having a moment.

Sitting at the head of Oslofjord, an inlet along the country's southern coast, Oslo has flown quietly under the radar for years, often overlooked in favour of Copenhagen or Stockholm. Yet the city has just as much design, culinary and architectural punch as its Scandinavian neighbours. The fact it's not so firmly on the tourist map just means it doesn't feel as busy — an added bonus.

"Oslo is such an underrated city," says Curtis Rojak, the founder of Viking Biking & Hiking, as we pedal along a newly developed 5.5-mile promenade. The path connects a series of neighbourhoods that have been created from 560 acres of former industrial land.

As Curtis chats about the city's reinvention, we pass the Oslo Opera House, the newly minted Munch Museum, and the series of 12 high-rise buildings collectively called Barcode — an architectural project erected in the old docklands, which is home to offices and residential blocks. Our end point is Sørenga Sjøbad, an urban waterfront beach and seawater pool that sums up what Curtis describes as *friluftsliv*. "*Friluftsliv* is a philosophy, a way of life," he says. "It's the Norwegian's commitment to celebrate time outdoors, regardless of the weather conditions." Indeed, Oslo was named the European Green Capital in 2019 by the European Commission, partly thanks to its car-free streets and 70% tree coverage.

Later, we cycle uphill along the banks of the Akerselva river, which cuts through the city, cascading via a series of waterfalls down to Oslofjord. "It's great to watch the salmon run during season," says Curtis, as we sit munching on waffles smothered in Norway's tangy, nutty *brunost* (brown cheese), the sun warming our shoulders. There's a lot to like about Oslo, a city that's clearly on the rise.

## Things to do

### Munch Museum

One of the largest single-artist museums in the world, the Munch Museum, which opened in October 2021, unfolds over 13 floors and is home to 26,000 works by Edvard Munch — Norway's most celebrated artist — including three versions of *The Scream*. There's also Bistro Tolvte — which serves a menu of international favourites — on the 12th level. If coming for dinner, first make your way to Kranen, the top-floor cocktail bar, where you'll be rewarded with a bird's-eye view of Oslofjord.

### National Museum of Norway

Originally founded in 2003 but reopened in June 2022, the National Museum of Norway's striking new home is in the Aker Brygge area, on Oslo's waterfront. It's the largest museum in the Nordic region, it holds more than 400,000 objects covering everything from Norwegian design and crafts to modern art. Taking nearly eight years to complete at a cost of £500 million, the space also exhibits work from artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh and Matisse, alongside a whole room filled with pieces by Munch.



**Left:** Making the most of Oslo's waterside setting, kayaking against the backdrop of the Munch Museum and *The Mother*, a Tracey Emin sculpture.

**Right:** The Royal Palace in Oslo is one of the stops on the city cycling tour with Viking Biking & Hiking, which also explores a series of neighbourhoods built on former industrial land.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

## **Grønland**

This area — the streets of which are filled with the aromas from restaurants serving Pakistani food, Turkish kebabs and more — is home to a large number of first- and second-generation immigrants. A wander around the streets is an immersion in the diversity of a local Oslo neighbourhood. Drop by the Intercultural Museum and take a look at the landmark Grønland Church — one of the largest in Oslo — along with the Central Jam-e-Mosque, with its facade beautifully decorated in Spanish and Iranian tiles.

## **Ekebergparken**

Just a 10-minute tram ride from Oslo Central Station, Ekebergparken originally opened in 1889 as a recreational space for locals. Today, the 155-acre wooded area has been transformed into a sculpture park with 37 installations by celebrated international artists such as Louise Bourgeois and James Turrell. The park is also home to rock carvings and ruins dating back to the Stone Age, and has breathtaking views of Oslofjord.

## **Oslofjord**

Swimming in Oslofjord is a year-round activity for Oslovians and a must for visitors. Purchase a picnic basket from Deli & Kafé on the ground floor of the Munch Museum and head to Opera Beach just out front, or dive off the board from Sørenga Sjøbad. Visitors can also rent one of the floating saunas that line the edge of the fjord. KOK Oslo's sauna rafts can hold up to 10 people. When the water is free of ice, you can also join a two-hour scenic raft tour of the fjord.



Views of the Oslofjord during a floating sauna cruise with KOK Oslo – a laidback alternative to swimming in the fjord.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

### Oslo Opera House

This landmark building anchors Bjørvika, a former industrial area that's been transformed into the city's new cultural quarter. Designed by celebrated local architecture firm Snøhetta, the white granite and Italian marble structure seems to rise from the Oslofjord like a giant glacier. Its roof slopes upwards from the pavement so that visitors can stroll along the slanted walkway to the rooftop and enjoy views over the city. It's a popular recreational area and far more than just a theatre for opera or ballet.

## Where to eat

### Mathallen

On the banks of the Akerselva river in the vibrant Vulkan district — another former industrial area — Mathallen is Oslo's original food hall. It houses more than 40 speciality stores and places to eat. Try Vulkanfisk, which sells the freshest Norwegian fish, or Helt Vilt, which serves a menu of Norwegian dishes including a *brunost* moose burger, using ingredients from the forest and mountains. Pick and choose whatever you fancy and perch yourself at any of the communal tables for a great people-watching session. Be prepared for crowds during peak lunch and dinner times.

### The Little Pickle

Amid the mellow cafes, dance clubs and bars in the hip Grünerløkka district, and a 20-minute stroll from Oslo's city centre, The Little Pickle is a cosy, laid-back neighbourhood restaurant worth the trip. Book a window seat and tuck into the menu of hearty, comfort food. It uses seasonal, local and organic produce to create modern European dishes — such as free-range pork terrine with pickled celery and house-made mustard.



**Left:** Grønland is one of central Oslo's most diverse neighbourhoods, home to the Intercultural Museum and cafes serving delicious immigrant food.

**Right:** Spätzle — German egg noodle pasta with a chewy dumpling-like texture, with greens and cheese.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

## **Restaurant Einer**

Founded by chef Svein Trandem and his partner in wine, Sara Johansson — both of whom previously worked at Oslo's three-Michelin-star Maaemo restaurant — Einer is a celebration of seasonal Nordic ingredients. Using techniques such as smoking, fermenting, curing and pickling, it serves dishes such as monkfish with beets, bone marrow and truffle, washed down with natural wines. There's also an on-site winebar, called Einbar.

## **Like a local**

### **Krokskogen trail**

Surrounded by lush forests, mountains and picture-perfect lakes, and with hiking trails to suit all abilities, it's well worth exploring beyond Oslo's city boundaries. You could climb to Vettakollen's peak, overlooking Oslofjord, but for something challenging try the Krokskogen trail. It's a round-trip 15.5-mile, eight-hour hike that starts at the spectacular Mørkgonga nature reserve, winding through the forests of Krokskogen and up Gyrihaugen mountain. It takes around two hours to get to the trailhead by bus from central Oslo, with more than one bus change, but the views over the fjord and the mountains make it worth the effort.



The view of Oslofjord from Vettakollen's peak — one of many nature trails surrounding the Norwegian capital.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

## **Akerselva River**

Flowing from lake Maridalsvannet, north of Oslo, through the city centre right into Oslofjord, this five-mile walk will take you through the capital's industrial history. Start at Ankerbrua — better known as 'the fairytale bridge' — and follow the river northwards. Along the way, you'll come across around 20 waterfalls that once powered all of Oslo's industry. Have a bite at Café Månefisker — once a laundry facility for the army's uniforms — which serves international dishes. Nearly a mile further you'll find Søndagsmarked — a year-round Sunday market selling jewellery, vintage clothing and more.

## **Hovedøya**

One of several islands off the coast of Oslo, and the closest to the city centre, Hovedøya is where Osloivians go to escape. No more than 2,625 feet across in any direction, it's a postage stamp of land cloaked in thick green forests and circled by shingle beaches. If it's too cold for a dip, there are some great hiking trails and the ruins of a Cistercian monastery founded in 1147.

## **Where to shop**

### **Holzweiler**

Starting life in Oslo in 2012 as a luxury scarves brand, Holzweiler has grown to become one of the city's best-loved, ready-to-wear fashion brands. There are seven stores scattered around Norway and Copenhagen, but the best one to visit is Oslo's Holzweiler Platz, the brand's flagship store. It also has a restaurant that serves up a modern European and Japanese-inspired, all-day menu of dishes such as miso-glazed aubergine with grilled chilli dressing and shiso.

### **Hasla Jewelry**

A family enterprise headed by sisters Anne and Gunnhild Hasla, this Norwegian jewellery brand takes its inspiration from an eclectic range of sources including the organic shapes of the Norwegian mountains and Picasso's cubist works of art. The result is highly unique pieces that make great souvenirs, made using only recycled silver.



## Norway Designs

Established in 1957, this lifestyle store flies the flag for Scandinavian design with a strong focus on Norwegian brands such as Røros Tweed — which makes high-quality wool throws, blankets and cushions — and Heymat, known for its decorative doormats. Spread over several floors, the shop covers everything from beauty products and furniture to clothing and accessories, including beautiful jewellery pieces from designers such as Kaja Gjedebo and Linn Sigrid Bratland.



Pick up souvenirs by local designers at shops such as Norway Designs, which focuses on interiors and homeware from across Scandinavia.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH

## **Where to stay**

### Citybox

There's no daily housekeeping, no restaurant and you check in and out yourself via the kiosks, but don't let Citybox's no-frills concept deter you. The guest rooms are comfortable — each has its own bathroom — and range in size from single rooms to junior suites. The common areas include a co-working space and a communal kitchen, and the location is excellent, just a five-minute stroll from Oslo Central Station.

## **Clarion Hotel Oslo**

Art takes centre stage at the 255-room Clarion Hotel Oslo, where a permanent collection is complemented by exhibitions and events. Located in Bjørvika, just steps away from the Opera House, the light-filled rooms are a haven of clean Scandinavian design. The hotel's Kitchen & Table Fishery restaurant is a destination in itself, but there are plenty of other excellent bar and restaurant options just outside.

## **Sommerro**

Occupying the former 1930s headquarters of Oslo Lysverker — the city's electrical company — Sommerro's ground floor is anchored by seven lively restaurants and bars. There are 231 rooms and a sprawling subterranean wellness space that used to be the neighbourhood's public baths. This hotel also has the city's first rooftop pool and a terrace with views overlooking leafy Frogner, Oslo's oldest and most elegant neighbourhood.

## **Oslo after hours**

### **Amerikalinjen**

One of Oslo's hippest hotels, Amerikalinjen has a buzzing curbside restaurant and bar on its ground floor, with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto Central Station. In the basement is Gustav, an intimate jazz bar with a programme of sessions with the likes of US trumpet virtuoso Benny Benack III, curated by artistic director of the Norwegian Jazz Orchestra, Felix Peikli. For more information on upcoming concerts, head to the hotel's website, where you can also book tickets.

### **Svanen**

Housed in a former apothecary dating from 1896, Svanen serves classic cocktails with an inventive twist. With a backdrop of the original mahogany and marble interiors, watch staff shake and stir at the bar (the former drug counter) or ensconce yourself in one of the alcoves and sip on libations like the Watermelon Highball or Smørbukk, a delicious concoction of Bulleit Bourbon, burnt butter and Angostura bitters.

## **The Dangerous Club**

Dangerous by name and certainly dangerous by nature, this tiny late-night bar and club is open from 6pm on weekends, but only really gets going after midnight. It calls itself a 'listening bar' and is home to an epic high-end sound system from which a roster of DJs pump out everything from bossa nova to soul, jazz and city pop, against a backdrop of cool retro interiors.

## **Getting there & around**

British Airways offers direct flights from Heathrow daily. Norwegian Air also operates a number of daily flights from Gatwick.

**Average flight time:** 2h15m. Oslo's urban core can easily be explored by foot or combined with a cycling tour with Viking Biking & Hiking for an insightful guided experience. Taxis are expensive, but the city has an excellent public transport system. All city and regional buses, trams, Metro, local trains and most ferries are included in one ticket, which can be managed by an app called Ruter.

## **When to go**

The best time to visit Oslo is from May to August, when the temperatures are warmer and the days are longer. Mid-summer temperatures are generally still mild, with average daytime highs of around 21C in July. Expect rain or snow in winter; average daytime temperatures in December hover around -2C to -7C.

**More Info:** visitoslo.com

## **How to do it**

TUI offers a four-night city break from £441 per person based on two people sharing, including flights from Heathrow or Manchester and accommodation on a B&B basis. Airport transfers are not included but can be arranged at an extra cost; some hotels can accommodate families.

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