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Norway's grand prize

Think you know Oslo? Think again. Known for its Nobel ceremony, skiing and 'Scream,' it's a cosmopolitan city of contradictions.

ALL in all, these are good times in this Scandinavian capital.
By Beverly Beyette, Times Staff Writer, November 26, 2006

Holmenkollen Ski Jump,Oslo, Norway

"The Scream," Norway's best-known painting — stolen in 2004 — is back home in the Munch Museum. In two weeks, the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony will take place at City Hall. And thanks to oil, which was discovered in the North Sea in the 1970s, Norway projects a state budget surplus of $59 billion for next year.

On a recent visit to Oslo, I found a vibrant city of interesting contradictions and surprises. For instance, it's a mistake to think of it as a homogenous city of blond, blue-eyed Nordics. Immigrants make up almost a quarter of its 540,000 population. The once-seedy area of Grunerlokka is being revitalized with ethnic markets and cafes. When I was there, about 100 Afghan refugees seeking asylum had pitched tents outside Oslo Cathedral, staging a hunger strike to protest deportation.

It's the capital of a socially progressive constitutional monarchy, and its people are devoted to its royal family, which is pretty progressive itself. In 2001, Crown Prince Haakon, heir to the throne, married Mette-Marit Tjessem Hoiby, a single mother with a son born out of wedlock.

As oil spews kroner into the Norwegian economy, most Oslo residents enjoy an enviable quality of life in one of the world's most expensive cities.

Sticker shock may hit first on the $95-or-more cab ride from Gardermoen Airport to the city center. Still, I found ways to save. The Flytoget express train whisks passengers between the airport and the central station in 20 minutes for $25 each way. The widely available Oslo Pass, which saves money on museums and sightseeing tours, is useful because the city has plenty of art and history to mine.

Families flock to Vigeland Park, an 80-acre, in-city oasis with an outdoor museum of 192 granite and bronze sculptures by countryman Gustav Vigeland. The artist, who died in 1943, bequeathed his works to the city. The statues, with more than 600 life-sized nude figures of men, women and children, portray a range of emotions and stages of life. The most appealing is "The Little

Hothead," a small boy throwing a tantrum.

I also made a point of visiting the Munch Museum, which had just reopened with added security following the heist of its star attraction two years ago. There, I picked up some pretty interesting information about Edvard Munch (pronounced Monk), a troubled soul who battled alcoholism, suffered a nervous breakdown and was shot in his left, palette-holding, hand during a lovers' quarrel.

To me, the surprise of the museum was the diversity of the artist's works, the hauntingly dark nude "Madonna" and the charming and cheerful "Girls on the Bridge."

I also saw a pastel version of "The Scream" — one of four created by the artist. The stolen "Scream," an 1893 oil that had been ripped from the museum wall in a brazen armed robbery, was recovered in August, after my June visit.

Munch's study in human angst can also be found on mugs, T-shirts and inflatable dolls. And if that is not enough Munch for you, don't miss City Hall.

Ceremonial hall

WITH its dark brick facade and square twin towers, City Hall's exterior isn't as pretty as its interior. Upstairs is the tapestry-adorned Festival Gallery and the Munch Room, which houses "Life," an oil of his confiscated by the Germans during World War II, later bought at auction by a collector and ultimately acquired by the city of Oslo.

The ceremonial hall holds huge murals depicting facets of modern Norwegian life. The building, which was under construction when the Germans occupied the capital in 1940, wasn't completed until 1950. Several of the muralists, interned during the war, returned at its end to finish their paintings. One, Alf Rolfsen, who'd lost a son in the war, scrapped his plan to paint a landscape and instead created a dramatic frieze depicting occupation, resistance and liberation.

The 16,000-square-foot ceremonial hall will be the setting for the Peace Prize ceremony on Dec. 10. Wanting to learn more about the award, I booked the Peace City Tour, and found I had guide Carola all to myself.

We began at the Nobel Peace Center, which opened last year. Here, visitors can watch televised speeches of all Peace Prize winners since 1960.

There's a room devoted to the prize's founder, Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite and stipulated in his will — which relatives contested vigorously — that his fortune fund five prizes to reward those who had "conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" through chemistry, medicine, physics, literature or by promoting peace. The economics prize, funded by the Bank of Sweden, was established in 1968 in Nobel's honor.

Although born in Stockholm, Nobel directed that a Norwegian committee select the Peace Prize laureate and that the ceremony be held in Oslo. No one is sure why he chose Oslo. One theory is he wished to keep it immune from the politics that might have come into play in more powerful, more political Sweden.

In the tradition-rich ceremony, this year being held on the 110th anniversary of Nobel's death,

Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist and "Banker to the Poor," will be honored in Oslo. He shares the prize with the Grameen Bank, which he founded to fight rural poverty through collateral-free loans to small businesses. The other five laureates will be honored in Stockholm the same day.

Carola, my guide, had keys to Villa Grande, a 46-room mansion on the verdant Bygdoy Peninsula to the west. Bygdoy, reachable by a 10-minute ferry ride from the quay near City Hall or by bus No. 30 from the central station, is a bucolic suburb with large, lovely homes. More important, it is home to some of Oslo's most intriguing museums.

Villa Grande contains the recently opened Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities. In 1940, the mansion was confiscated by Vidkun Quisling, a Nazi sympathizer who was briefly prime minister during the German occupation. From his former study, I noticed a fine view across the harbor to Akershus Fortress, where, in 1945, Quisling was executed as a traitor.

He was an ignominious part of its history, but Norway is plenty proud of its explorers, who were a hardy lot.

The Kon-Tiki Museum on Bygdoy is home to the balsa wood raft from Thor Heyerdahl's 1947 expedition. A bit the worse for wear, it is amazingly primitive, fashioned after rafts of pre-Columbian Indians of South America. Heyerdahl's nearly 5,000-mile voyage, with a crew of five, took 101 days, drew worldwide interest, spawning a book and a film and proving the plausibility of Heyerdahl's theory that the Polynesian Islands were settled by people from Peru.

Nearby is the wonderful Viking Ship Museum, which displays three excavated wooden craft that were hauled ashore centuries ago for use as burial chambers. The centerpiece is the reconstructed 72-foot-long Oseberg, a dragon ship excavated in 1904 about 50 miles south of Oslo. The ship is thought to be the grave of a queen and her servant, part of the richest Viking burial mound ever found, with a trove of wood, metal and leather objects now displayed in the museum. (The grave had been robbed and the royal jewelry stolen.)

The Norwegian Vikings, who roamed the seas from 800 to 1050, were legendary — but were they violent, plundering brigands or peaceful traders and colonizers? Probably a bit of both.

The Fram Museum, also on Bygdoy, pays tribute to Fridtjof Nansen and the crew of the Fram, the wooden sailing ship on which they attempted to sail from Bergen, on Norway's southwestern coast, to the North Pole in 1893.

The plan was to get the ship trapped in ice so it could drift with the floe to the pole. When that didn't work, Nansen and a colleague set off for the pole on skis but ran short of supplies and had to turn back. Unable to find the Fram, they holed up for the winter in a stone hut, then sailed down the coast in two kayaks lashed together and were picked up by an English ship and returned to Norway. Roald Amundsen sailed the Fram on his celebrated 1910-1911 flag-raising expedition to the South Pole.

It was fun to walk the ship's decks and peer into the cramped cabins and into cases holding artifacts from Amundsen's voyage, including an Emperor penguin egg.

Nearby, the open-air Norwegian Museum of Cultural History has 155 buildings dating from the Middle Ages to modern times. The jewel is the Stave Church, its 13th century interior pretty much

original. Norway has 28 of these churches, which take their name from the staves, or posts, supporting their pagoda-like interlocking roofs.

Outdoor lovers

NORWAY'S cold winters don't keep people indoors. Situated at the head of Oslo Fiord, Oslo has water and green space aplenty, and Norwegians love the outdoors and skiing. One day, I drove up to woodsy Holmenkollen with Ann Farden, an Oslo psychiatrist who'd been a Fulbright scholar at UCLA, to see one of the country's top tourist attractions, the Holmenkollen ski jump. For visitors wishing to experience the thrill without the risk, there's a jump simulator — or they can just take in the view from the top of the 200-foot jump tower.

The adjacent Holmenkollen Ski Museum has gear that belonged to the late King Olaf V, father of the current monarch, Harald V. Olaf was a jumper who hit the slopes well into his 80s.

Back down the hill one sunny day, I joined families promenading on the broad Karl Johans Gate, where buskers, balloon vendors and street artists plied their trades, then headed to the Hotel Continental for lunch at the grand Theater Café. Here, the elite have met to eat for more than a century.

Another vintage beauty is the Grand Café at the Grand Hotel, across from parliament, where Henrik Ibsen, Norway's most celebrated writer, is said to have dined daily.

The room is lovely, with dark wood, potted palms and globe chandeliers, but I had a disappointing and pricey dinner. It's a better idea to go there for a drink or for the Sunday jazz brunch at $35.

Cheap food in Oslo pretty much means ethnic cafes — the city has 54 Indian restaurants, for instance — or a $2.30 hot dog from a street vendor. Breakfast is usually included at hotels, and it's a good idea to eat heartily and skip lunch. At Hotel Bristol, for one, room rates include a bountiful buffet that will see you through until dinner.

Browsing one day in a boutique near City Hall, I noticed that a blouse I liked was made in Denmark. It was designed in Norway but not made in the country, explained the clerk. Since the nation became oil-rich, "we don't do anything for ourselves anymore," she said.

As those North Sea rigs keep pumping, Norwegians are enjoying the good life.

beverly.beyette@latimes.com

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