

Scandinavia Railways Society Swedish Pages

This Article predates the use of E17 locomotives and loco-hailed coaching stock

Flåm: A Viking Dartford Loop By Mike Clark

There are problems with being too judgmental about the Flåm Family tourist ticket. True, NOK 350 (£35.77) is a bit steep for a couple of hours in an uninspired, suburban type EMU, with poor visibility, unsympathetic seating, and half the train reserved for season ticket holders. But the engineering is impressive, and the line is a crucial (long to be continued?) link between the Oslo - Bergen main line and various fjord and coastal services. Whether it warrants the Sognefjorden Tourist Info. guide's claim to be a 'World famous attraction', ...the most exciting railway line in Scandinavia' is a matter of opinion, but its 865 metres climb over 20 km is certainly out of the ordinary.

Flåm itself is a major tourist destination, largely it seems because of the opportunity to ride the railway. And as far as the landscape is concerned, everything is so aesthetically pleasing or amazing that I found myself resenting the Flåm line's numerous, ever so clever, tunnels. One catches tantalising glimpses of magnificent waterfalls, the steep valley and great cliffs, and is only vaguely aware of the skill necessary to bring a full scale, conventional (non-rack and pinion) railway through such an exaggerated, vertical landscape.

What one should not admit to railway enthusiasts is that the line itself is unimpressive when compared with the scale and audacity of the roads into and out of Flåm. I suspect these contribute many of the line's summer customers, and account for the scale of the tourist related development in Flåm itself: a railway museum, 'craft' type tourist shops, restaurant, well organised campsite, bike rental, etc.

The minor road from Oslo and the east (route 50) combines breathtaking scenery with kilometres long, unlit, unlined, often winding, wet and quite steeply sloping tunnels that hurt your eyes after the glare of a high mountain road, above snow patches, on a sunny day in early August. Beware the final long, steep tunnel. About a kilometre from the Flåm end of this there is a sharpish left hand downward spiralling corner. As we saw the lights and heard the sound of a big camper van labouring up hill,

still out of sight, I realised my F' reg. Toyota Corolla 4WD estate's brakes were less effective than usual. I'd got out of the habit of letting the engine do the braking, or perhaps that gradient had just been a little too steep to rely on this for miles on end. It's remarkable how fast Norwegians drive inside their mountains, and the habit's catching.

Anyway, trying to stop the car plus too much camping gear, a couple of canoes and the usual excess baggage gave me an adrenaline boost. I did manage to miss the oncoming traffic and tunnel wall, just.

We escaped the dark, fast tunnel, had an uncomfortably quick decent on suspect, smelly brakes and an over-rewing engine (it would have been worse without the extra drag of 4WD), but eventually found a lay-by, let the brakes cool, and picked succulent wild raspberries to go with the excellent small strawberries bought earlier in the day opposite the main line station at Geilo. This out of season ski resort is the last town before the Oslo - Bergen line parts company from route 7 and becomes a high (1599 metres) wilderness railway running within a few miles of the Hardanger Jokulen ice cap. This is probably the best approach to the Flåm railway, though the return day trip requires a fairly early start, and would mean staying in or near the modern (aesthetically challenged?) resort.

Flåm itself is dominated by the railway, and is remarkably busy and noisy considering its position in the middle of a great chunk of wilderness. If you camp, expect to be awakened about 4am by the early train, and to be cold during the long evening in shadow, and until the sun climbs over the mountains in the morning.

You can also admire a full range of (in our case, superior) modes of camping - nice new caravans, sensible VW campervans, great big luxurious campers, expensive little mountain tents, and lots of fellow campers who realised, as we hadn't, that you can't get big Camping Gas refills in Norway or Sweden (you should be able to, but we couldn't).

Three weeks of cooking on a single burner is gastronomically challenging (it would have been impossible without a pressure cooker), and might explain my loss of half a stone (as might Scandinavian roads, beer prices, canoeing and swimming opportunities, the really good funfair in Gothenburg, or the weather, but not the saunas - the only one I found was on the Newcastle - Bergen ferry).

Our way home, towards Bergen, was on a superior, less exciting, newly built mountain road (route 50 which becomes the E16 after Gudvangen, on the exceptionally pretty Naeroyfjord). Again the tunnels are remarkably long, though these are full width and lit. In places you get a tantalising glimpse of a secret valley, open for a few seconds between several kilometres of tunnel: rather like life in the current inter-glacial warm spell, or Flåm's railhead, Myrdal, on the mainline as it does its heroic bit between Voss and Geilo.

Lessons of it all: do Flåm as part of some larger venture, not as a destination in its own right. Geilo looks a good base for a day trip, or make the journey longer and use the ferries or fast boats on Sognefjorden (but remember just how long this fjord is (200km), and set aside enough time and money to enjoy the trip).

If you like glaciers but are without a car, the ferry up the narrow Balestrand fjord will take you quite near the southern end of the great Jostedalesbreen ice cap (biggest in Europe, where the background to the snow walker scene from the second Star Wars film was shot).

Ordinary ferries are reasonably priced, or at least are less pricey than the one over the Clyde at Dunoon, and provide spectacular views. If you are most interested in the Flåm line itself, you might take or hire bikes and explore the track via the lineside path - though this is not an insignificant undertaking, even if you only do it (as recommended) downhill. Norwegian Railways seem to positively encourage bicycles.

The railway's real function is to link the Oslo line with fjord shipping, but there is so much investment in roads that it must be doubted if this will be viable for much longer. I hope it is, and that the hotel en route will continue to ship its laundry, fridges, etc. by train.

It would be good if more of its passengers were on proper tickets, going somewhere, and not on overpriced tourist special offers. If you can stop (me) grumbling about the fare, Flåm is really a remarkable achievement. We could do with some Norwegian imaginative transportation thinking - make more use of our railways, let the road engineers go through or under the scenery where it is feasible and useful, and on the same basis, provide ferry services or bridges. I don't think Lancashire's Viking forebears would let Lytham and Southport, or Fleetwood and Barrow, lack some direct form of communication. Nor would they let the Moorland Association (an organisation representing landowners) block public access to the uplands - but that is another issue.

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