

Capital charms

OSLO IS THE PERFECT PLACE TO COMBINE BUSINESS AND PLEASURE - THOUGH IT COVERS ONE OF THE LARGEST AREAS OF ANY CAPITAL CITY IN THE WORLD, A LOW POPULATION DENSITY, PARKLANDS AND FORESTS APLENTY MAKES IT ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST PLEASANT CITIES. **JULIANNA BARNABY** REPORTS

Relaxed, friendly, clean - these are words that are often associated with Oslo. While Norway's capital and largest city lacks the frenetic pace common to many European hubs it maintains a wealth of cultural, sightseeing and entertainment options for visitors to discover. Excellent transportation options and five-star facilities also make Oslo the perfect location for business travellers.

Ever since it was founded by Harald Hardråde in the 1048, Oslo has played a major part in Norwegian history. Today it's the country's demographic, business and commercial centre, with a population of 550,000. If you are travelling to Norway on business, chances are you'll find yourself in Oslo for the majority of your trip. With one of the highest GDPs in Europe, Norway is an economic powerhouse with Oslo at its epicentre.

The city's profile as a business destination is changing as its important history is blended with an increasingly cosmopolitan present. But it's not all business and no pleasure: Oslo is home to a number of sights and diversions to keep visitors entertained irrespective of whether it's their first or their fiftieth time in the city.

Sights for sore eyes

The Opera House is one of the city's main attractions - its exterior pays testament to Scandinavia's cutting edge architecture and design. The building is shaped like a glacier, seemingly floating on the Bjørvika inlet next to which it is located. The inside is equally impressive and hosts a diverse array of performances throughout the year. Address: Kirsten Flagstads plass 1, 815 444 88, www.operaen.no

No visit to Oslo is complete without a trip to the Royal Palace. Situated on the city's arterial Karl Johans gate, the palace is an imposing building that dominates the area's landscape. Tours are available on weekdays throughout the summer, though tickets for these sell out very quickly, if possible, buy in advance from one of the post offices. (Henrik Ibsens gate 1, 815 33 133, www.kongehuset.no)

Although Oslo's Cathedral isn't the most impressive edifice, it's currently undergoing refurbishment, which, when finished next year, will restore it to its former glory dominating the downtown skyline. Kirkeristen, the old bazaar surrounding the church, is now used by



artisans and craftsmen, and holds a couple of cafes and restaurants.

The home of the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo's City Hall stages the annual presentation of the prize as well as houses a number of historical collector's pieces and impressive murals depicting socialist themes. (Rådhuset) (T-Nationaltheateret, tram 12 to Rådhusplassen, bus 70-74 to Vika). Much better for information about the history of the prize and its winners is the Nobel Peace Centre, which has some unflinching and truthful exhibitions in addition to those on the winners of the prize. (Brynjulf Bulls plass 2, Aker Brygge, 48 30 10 00, www.nobelpeacecenter.org).

As most of the city's original buildings were destroyed in the 17th century visitors should take the opportunity to see the Akershus festning. A medieval castle built in 1299, the festning is one of the better preserved remnants of the original city.

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After exploring the winding passages, take some time to take in the excellent views of the surrounding areas afforded by the festning, including views of the Oslofjord. Those interested in Norwegian military history should also look at the two museums located at the festning. (Akershus festning, 23 09 35 53, www.akershusfestning.no)

When it comes to museums, visitors are spoilt for choice. Start off at the museum of one of the country's best loved authors and playwrights: the Henrik Ibsen museum pays tribute to the works of the internationally-famed author with an interactive and enjoyable experience. (Arbins gate 1, Centrum, 22 12 35, www.ibsenmuseet.no)

Those wanting to find out more about the history of Norwegian art should visit the National Gallery which features work by Norwegian artists predominantly from the romantic period. There are also several pieces by well-known international artists.

(Universitetsgata 13, Centrum, 22 20 04 04, www.nasjonalmuseet.no) If this has whetted your appetite, delve into the world of the Norwegian painter Edward Munch at the Munch Museum (Tøyengata 53, Tøyen, 23 24 14 00, www.munch.museum.no). Though you might not recognize his name, you'll almost certainly recognize his most famous work 'The Scream' and shouldn't miss this chance to find out more about the artist and his works.

The Viegeland Sculpture Park in the vast Frogner Park is one of Norway's most visited attractions - and no wonder. The park features hundreds of sculptures by Norwegian Gustav Viegeland - though veering towards the moribund, the statues are undoubtedly impressive.

Lesser well-known, Vigeland's brother Emanuel's works can also be seen at the fascinating Emanuel Vigeland Museum. This weird and wacky enterprise features a number of the artist's pieces including »

» the 800sq m "Vita" fresco, which explores the progression of human life between birth and death. (Grimelundsveien 8, Skøyen, 22 14 57 88, www.emanuelvigeland.museum.no)

If you're in town for a short period of time, consider buying the Oslo Pass, which includes free entry to most of the museums and free travel on public transport within the city. The pass is available for 24, 48 or 72 hours, prices vary.

Diversions

Though it maintains its status as the country's capital, one of the main attractions of Oslo is how rural it has managed to stay. Venture out from the downtown city centre and you'll discover places a world away from the usual hustle and bustle of a city. The wooden houses in Kampen, Vålerenga, Rodeløkka and Telthusbakken are an example of what makes this city so special. Narrowly avoiding destruction in the seventies, the houses are not commonly visited by tourists but are an essential part of Oslo's Norwegian identity.

As we move into the colder months, Oslo's sporting repertoire leans towards the winter sports afforded by plenty of snow but pleasant temperatures. Cross-country skiing is a popular option, especially around the Holmenkollen area - sledges and sleighs can be rented for a true alpine adventure. Though the Holmenkollen jump is currently being renovated for the 2011 Alpine Competition, there are still plenty of skiing options in the area.

Shopping in Norway is sometimes cheaper than elsewhere, but most international brands are the same price as they would be in the UK. Still, if you want to pick up a few things, Karl Johans Gate is a good place to start. Oslo City shopping centre and Byporten are two of the city's biggest shopping centres and have a huge variety of wares for visitors to splash their cash on.

Culinary fusion

With a large immigrant population from destinations all over the globe (over 20% of the population is from abroad), Oslo is a multicultural melting pot with a diverse dining and entertainment scene. Oslo's gastronomic scene is as remarkable as it is varied. Everyone should try one of the stomach-busting 19NOK hotdogs available at stands throughout the city.

For something with a little more sophistication there are plenty of options to tempt all palates, as you'd expect from the world's 6th most expensive city. The coastal area of Aker Brygge is a whirlwind of restaurants, bars and cafes - many of which offer al fresco eating in the summer months. It's also one of the most exclusive areas and home to many of the city's best restaurants such as Lofoten Fish Restaurant (Stranden 75, 22 83 08 08, www.lofoten-fiskerestaurant.no).

For those looking to impress, Bagatelle is widely recognized as the best restaurant in Norway and has two Michelin stars to prove it (Skovveien). Equally extravagant, the one Michelin-starred Feinschmecker is the place to go for a feast of epic proportions and flavours (Balchens gate 5).

Midrange options abound for those looking for an enjoyable meal without the hefty price tag - you'll see where the international community comes into full force - this is one city where you can dine around



the world in the course of a week without ever leaving its boundaries.

Mucho Mas, a Cal-Mex restaurant with vast portions and excellent quality is a continuing favourite, as it Olympen, one of the largest places to eat in Oslo. Affectionately known as Lompa by the locals, this venue encompasses a beer hall, restaurant and nightclub under the same roof and serves up excellent Norwegian dishes for those uninitiated to this unique cuisine (Grønlandsleiret 15, 24 10 19 99, www.olympen.no)

Sleeping

Finding somewhere to bed down for the night is no problem, the city has a number of mid-range to top end hotels to suit the demands of the business traveller. The Radisson SAS Plaza Hotel (Sonja Henies Plass 3, <http://www.radissonblu.com/plazahotel-oslo>) has 37 floors and is the country's tallest hotel. The bar on the 37th floor offers stunning views over the city and the Oslo Fjord, and is a particularly good choice for sunset and after dark. If money's no issue, the Thon Hotel Bristol is a haven of tradition in the midst of all the action of downtown and has been since 1920. Or, do as the Nobel Prize winners do and stay in the Grand Hotel Oslo (Karl Johans gate 31, 23 21 20 00, www.grand.no). ●

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