

NORWAY

I don't blame the Vikings for venturing south from their harsh northern homeland. A southern climate would be warmer, their long ships would be easy to row downhill, and eventually there would be good money on offer starring in a television series. But I can also understand why many stayed in Norway, captivated by it's stunning scenery and it's demanding yet rewarding lifestyle.

Andrew was the instigator of this trip, but ultimately was unable to get away from commitments at home in Canada, leaving Kurt and myself to fly the flag for USA and Australia respectively. We spent several days in Norway's capital Oslo before catching a train to Sandefjord on the south coast where bike hire had been arranged from Speed Motorcenter, Kurt's an R1250RT and mine an R1250GS.



Kurt can't wait to get moving

After a later than anticipated start, we set off in glorious conditions along the E18 main route. Sannidal was a convenient lunch stop, and the fine weather held as we encountered our first and only traffic jam at Kristiansand. Anxious to escape the chaos while crawling through a traffic-filled tunnel, and with the GPS struggling to find a signal, I mis-read a traffic sign (in the tunnel) and ended up on winding backroad 461 with little traffic and lots of bends. An unexpected bonus.

Despite the onset of drizzle during a fuel stop in Konsmo, we continued along the enjoyable country roads before joining the E39 en route to our first night stop at Sogndalstrand, a pleasant old fishing village now re-inventing itself as a popular tourist resort. By this time, fog and cold accompanied the drizzle, so photo opportunities were limited.



Sogndalstrand

Patches of blue sky appeared next morning so we back-tracked to see a tourist attraction at Hellenen, two old cottages dating back to the 1800's and sheltered under a massive cliff overhang. From there we rode along "Jaeren", one of eighteen Scenic Routes promoted by the official Innovation Norway website. It is identified as a coastal route but had only short ocean sections along an unremarkable rocky coastline, the remainder being lush farmland with constantly changing speed limits.



the Hellenen cottages



one of the first and probably the shortest tunnel we encountered



saying "Bon Voyage" to cruise tourists in Stavanger

Stavanger was an old whaling town but is now the main port servicing off-shore oil and gas platforms as well as cruise liners. This would be a 2 night stop, the "rest day" giving an opportunity to do a 2 hour ferry cruise along Lysefjord, passing under the iconic Preikestolen (Pulpit Rock) before tackling the 27 hairpin bends up Lysebotnveien, ranked #13 in the Top Roads of Europe website. After lunch in Kjerag Restaurant overlooking the road, we returned to Stavanger across the mountain tops in cold and drizzle, a bleak and challenging ride in the conditions, yet exhilarating at the same time.



Preikestolen (Pulpit Rock)



Lysebotnveien Road viewed from Kjerag Restaurant

Unexpected sights on this ride were stray sheep grazing along the side of the road, their dirty fleece providing good camouflage amid the grey rocky landscape, and many small rock cairns. I'm sure the cairns weren't sheep, as we would see more of both in the days to come.



patches of ice on the mountain plateau between Kjerag and Sinnes

The ride to Bergen was primarily along the E39 major route, including 2 ferries and numerous tunnels and bridges, and a frustrating 80kph limit. We intended to refuel after leaving Stavanger but found no servos on the E39 so enlisted the GPS to find one. The detour took us into yet another long tunnel where the GPS again clocked off, and I made the wrong call at a roundabout **within** the tunnel. Eventually this was sorted and we found the servo with several km still in the tanks.



Ferries were similar in design but varied in capacity

The road system in Norway is quite good considering the topography, mainly restricted to 80kph for what would typically be 100kph in Australia, but fuel is expensive and many roads have tolls. Fortunately the bikes were quite frugal at the moderate speeds and exempt from road tolls, and the ferry fares were not unreasonable. Ferries ran every 20 minutes or so, fares were collected on board, bikes could be left on the side stand in gear, and all ferries had shelter, seating, café and toilet facilities. All very civilized.



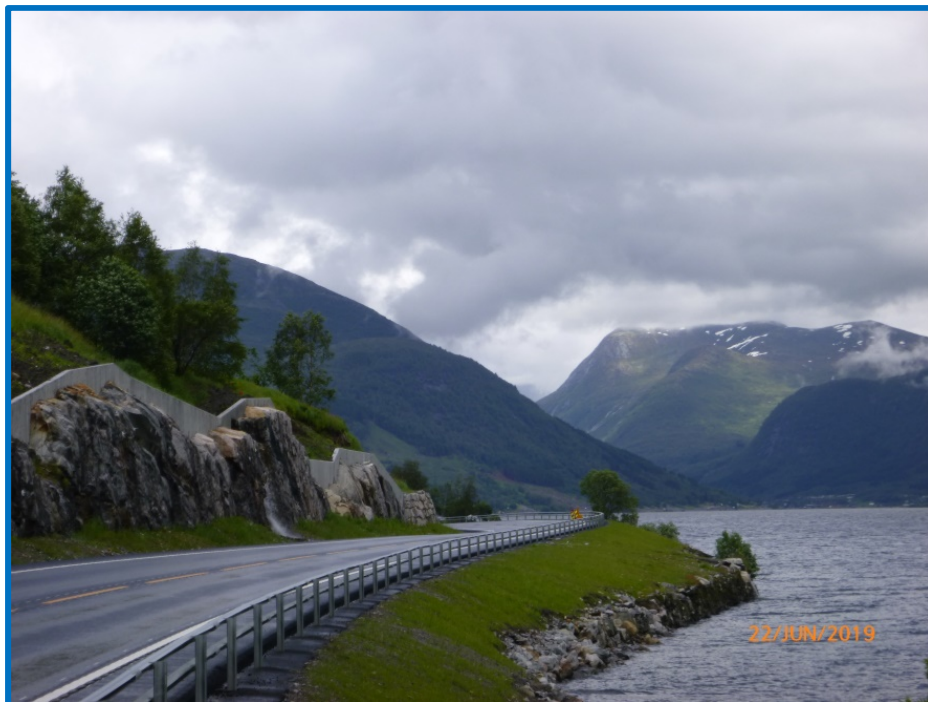
feeling at home in Bergen



the delightful village of Nautnes

Bergen is another attractive coastal city, the second most populous after Oslo, and also a 2 night stop on this trip. The “rest day” was to provide the opportunity to ride Top Road #57 to Nautnes and Top Road #75 along the Hardangerfjord. On the first ride, we continued beyond Nautnes to the end of the archipelago, but after encountering heavy rain on the return journey, the second ride was abandoned in favour of borrowed umbrellas and a short walk to the nearest pub.

Next day’s ride to Geiranger promised some great riding, but drizzle, local traffic and multiple speed limits along the E39 leaving Bergen didn’t generate much enthusiasm. Even a number of long tunnels provided only temporary shelter from the drizzle, and several options for a coffee stop were either closed or had disappeared completely from the face of the earth.



Jolstravatnet Lake before Sande

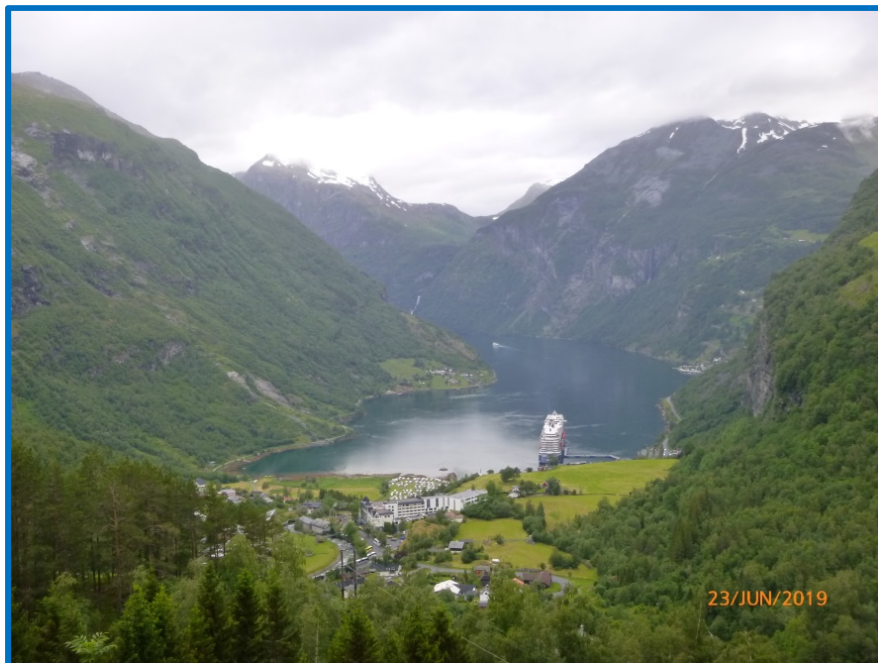
Conditions improved after a coffee at Sande, and we left the E39 at Byrkjelo to follow Top Road #68 skirting Innvik Fjord and Oppstryn Lake towards Geiranger, with a lunch stop at Olden. This was much more enjoyable riding. We seemed to be gaining elevation while passing through the 4km Oppljos tunnel, and emerged on the other side to bleaker weather and strong gusty winds.

The cold feeling was reinforced by the sight of sufficient ice on Djupvatnet Lake to sink the Titanic, so we by-passed the Geiranger Skywalk on Mount Dalsnibba and dropped elevation through a series of tight bends before arriving at our hotel. Hotel Utsikten (Hotel the View) was our accommodation for the next 2 nights and as well as spectacular views had a reasonably priced offer for 3 beers from a sampler selection. Out of curiosity, my choice with dinner included their chocolate stout.



feeling the cold at Djupvatnet Lake

Geiranger is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Norway, and although approximately 80km from the coastline it can host cruise liners via a series of deep fjords connecting it to the Norwegian Sea. Unfortunately due to the weather, my photos don't do it justice. Check it out on Google.



the view towards Geiranger from Hotel Utsikten



and the ride down to town

The plan for this “rest day” was a ride to Alesund and return, and included 3 ferries each way as well as numerous tunnels and bridges. Rain suits were required as we set off, but the drizzle was intermittent and disappeared before we arrived in Alesund. This coastal city is promoted as “Art Nouveau” and is quite charming, encouraging us to try the self proclaimed “Probably the Best Fish & Chips in the World” for lunch. I thought Scandinavians were more reserved than that.



“Art Nouveau” Alesund

The return ride was equally pleasant in fine weather, and we continued past our hotel to Mount Dalsnibba which we had by-passed the previous day. There is a private toll road to the spectacular Geiranger Skywalk and it was definitely worth the extra ride (and the toll), despite the temperature dropping to 3°C. In celebration, I enjoyed another chocolate stout at the hotel that evening.



Djupvatnet Lake viewed from Mount Dalsnibba road



cameras at 40 paces descending Mount Dalsnibba



the winding road to Geiranger below the Skywalk viewing platform

Next morning the sun was shining for one of the most anticipated days of this trip. Trollstigen is rated #5 Top Road of Europe and features in numerous motoring stories. Along with many other bikes, cars, motorhomes and tourist buses, we stopped at the tourist café before the descent, and again at the waterfall view point part way down. The combination of hairpin bends, mountain setting and waterfall certainly make it a special place, but all the traffic called for a subdued ride.



getting excited about Trollstigen



Trollstigen



even the Trolls ride here

After Trollstigen we stopped at Molde for lunch and to refuel, then on to the Atlantic Road, rated #40 Top Road and #7 Scenic Route “Atlanterhavsvegen”. These accolades were somewhat over-rated apart from the spectacular Atlantic Road Bridge which stars in many travel features and looks particularly scary in photos taken during stormy weather. I was content to ride over it while the weather was good.



Atlantic Road Bridge



no helmets for man's best friends ?

Kristiansund, our stop for the night, is built on a series of low islands and claims to be the klippfish capital of the world. Strange then that the coat-of-arms depicts a salmon jumping up a waterfall. One explanation suggests government officials celebrated too hard at the award ceremony and handed over the wrong shield. We celebrated by having klippfish for dinner. Not bad either.



7:00pm in Kristiansund and no waterfalls in sight

The ride to Trondheim next day was relatively short and uneventful, and no drizzle despite wet roads and overcast conditions. Trondheim is Norway's third largest city, and we got to see a lot of it riding around trying to find somewhere to park the bikes near our hotel. The many free parking zones for bikes were full, so we parked in the street outside the hotel and paid for parking even though this is a no-no for bikes. Sometimes you have to be prepared to plead ignorance.



along Vinjefjorden on the way to Trondheim

Trondheim to Mo I Rana was a long ride, made more tedious by lots of motorhomes and lots of roadworks. The road surface had deteriorated after Nomsskogan so it was a mixture of new roads, old roads, marginal detours and one-lane sections controlled by traffic lights, and the corresponding variations in speed limits. Even the GPS couldn't be trusted to show the correct limit.

In addition, many secondary roads don't have centre line marking, presumably to allow opposing traffic to sort out their passing clearances. I soon learned not to defend "my" side of the road.

The country was very scenic, with lots of snow-capped mountains, trees, streams and lakes, and the traffic regularly treated the speed limits as suggestions only. Prior to this, motorists had generally kept below the limit, so I formed the impression we were now travelling the "wild west" of Norway.



Lunch at Namsskogan – four separate groups of bikers dining inside

Next day was a relatively short ride to the Arctic Circle Centre and return. I did see a modest arch over the road identifying (I think) Nordland County but didn't realise until later that this was probably the Arctic Circle marker. Apparently the Earth's tilt causes the Arctic Circle to move northwards by about 15m every year, so I suppose a more impressive marker doesn't make a lot of sense.

Another indication was a gradual change from trees and fields to sparse vegetation and larger ice patches. The car park at the Arctic Circle Centre held more bikes and motorhomes than cars, with a scattering of tourist buses. Six of Norway's eighteen Scenic Routes are above the Arctic Circle, but I suspect that, like us, not many visitors would be venturing further north.



The Arctic Circle Centre



rock cairns at the Arctic Circle Centre

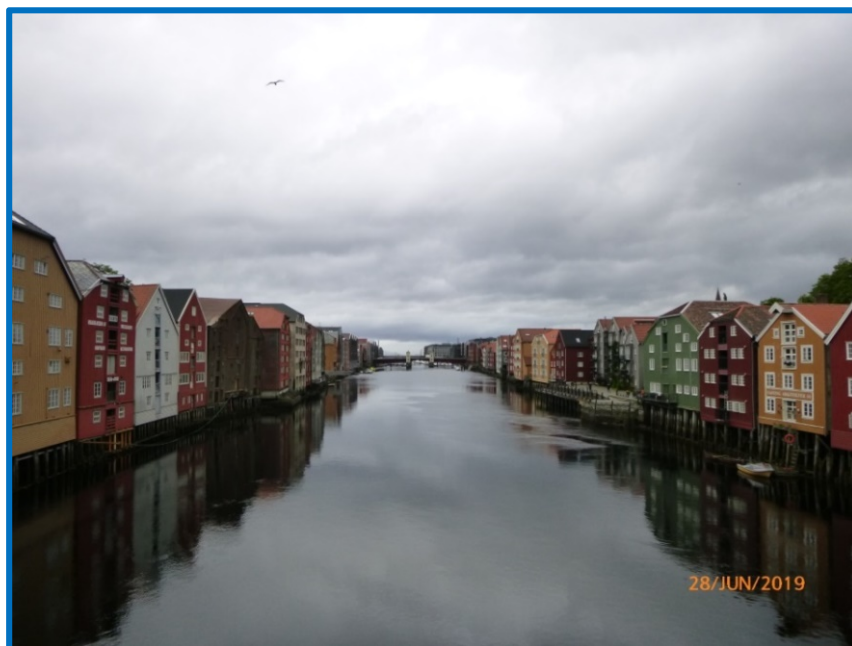
There were plenty of rock cairns at the Arctic Circle Centre, but no sign of sheep. Cairns are usually used to mark a trail or historical point, but maybe the locals are just obsessive compulsive housekeepers.

The Arctic Circle is an unlikely location for a motorcycle museum, but nothing surprises in Norway. The museum is modest in size and content but we couldn't resist stopping for a look.



1952 BSA M33 – guess the modification for the Norwegian Army

We decided to make the most of the good weather and continued south to Mosjean for the night rather than the planned stop at Mo I Rana. This turned out to be a good call, as rain and drizzle returned to impair the long return ride to Trondheim the following day.



back in Trondheim

More drizzle next morning meant full rain gear again, but this gradually eased. Scenic Route #12 was pleasant but not out of the ordinary for this wonderful country, but the afternoon ride along Scenic Route #13 more than compensated. Although this trip had been planned for some time, winter snow meant Google Maps didn't show this road open until late May, so I wasn't sure what to expect.



Svane River near Oppdal on Scenic Route #12



stave (wooden) church near our lunch stop in Lom

Scenic Route #13 (Sognefjellet) between Lom and Sogndalsfjora is a magnificent ride, enhanced by the fact the drizzle had stopped, the scenery changed from farms, fields and trees to mountains, lakes, streams and more patches of ice, and getting caught up in a cycle race only added to the atmosphere. We passed some groups of cyclists several times as we stopped to take photos along the route.



2:27pm and the scenic viewpoint at Lierdalsvegen turn-off



2:53pm looking back and still gaining elevation along Sognefjell Road



3:09pm and my guess for where the road is closed in winter



3:31pm and some were happy to be going downhill again

Kurt and I agreed this was the best riding day of the trip. The fact it doesn't feature in the Top Roads of Europe website demonstrates the subjective nature of these listings.



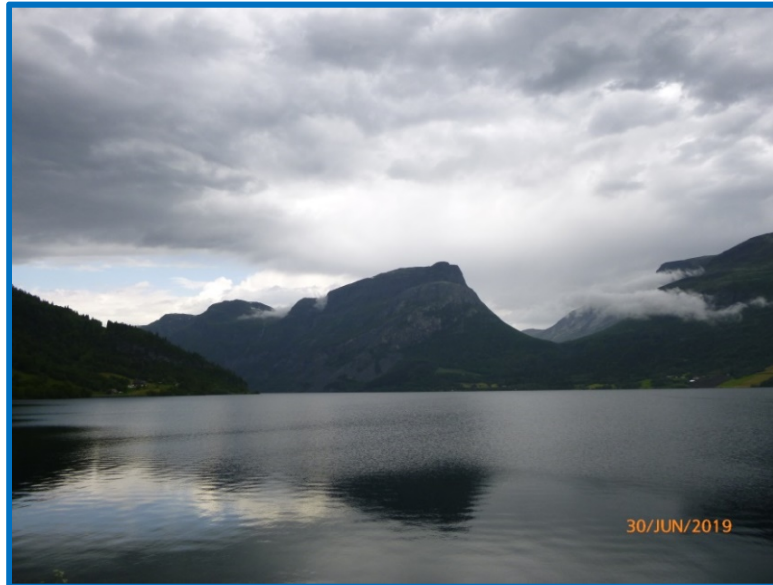
4:00pm at a viewpoint turned into a First Aid station for the cyclists

Rain returned that night, and next day we again set out in full rain gear. The 3km tunnel leading to the ferry gave some relief, as did the 6km tunnel further on, but it drizzled for most of the morning. It was disappointing to know that some fantastic scenery was being hidden by the mist on the mountains.



Laerdalselvi River near Jutlamannen Troll Rock

We stopped at a scenic marker highlighting a rock on the clifftop which legend says was the troll Jutlamannen. Apparently King Olav the Sacred turned Jutlamannen and his wife Gygra into rocks in 1023 because they laughed at him shoeing his horse. Gygra's rock had collapsed in the 1800's. It's a good story if you like rocks but I think the Laerdalselvi River rapids present a more attractive photo.



Vangsmjose Lake at Vang

After a coffee stop at Vang, we decided to skip lunch and continue on to Lillehammer to warm up and dry out. Vang overlooks Vangsmjose Lake and another local legend says a raw ham lowered into the deepest part of the lake will be boiled when it is pulled out. Perhaps this explains why 98% of Norway's electrical power is hydro generated. Certainly all accommodation had a welcome hot shower.



typical country church and grounds

Norway also had the highest proportion of electric cars I have seen, particularly Teslas, and charging stations were everywhere. Quite ironic that 50% of their export income is derived from oil and gas.

After turning off Highway 33 at Dokka, the rain intensified and was joined by thunder, lightning and fog on a poorly surfaced mountain pass. I had overtaken several motorhomes which were finding it hard going, but was content to tuck in behind a string of cars and let them lead the way through the fog. Quite an anti-climax after such a great ride the previous day.

The rain eased for the final 10km into Lillehammer and we were able to find our accommodation without drama. The motel was located near 2 ski jump ramps dominating the adjacent mountainside and gave the impression it may have been athlete's accommodation for the 1994 Winter Olympics.

Fortunately, as with much accommodation in Norway, the motel bathroom featured a heated floor and was ideal to dry out gloves, helmet, boots etc. After we had warmed up, we found a late lunch in the much fancier Scandic Lillehammer Hotel nearby. I presume the Olympic officials stayed there.



overlooking Tyrifjorden Lake outside Sundvollen

The final day returning to Sandefjord had some pleasant riding along Mjosa, Norway's largest lake, and a short detour through the countryside around Raufoss presented some good winding roads, but it was mainly on the E16 and E18 through populated areas with the usual restrictive speed limits until a final 100kph section. We had travelled a total of 4,161km on a combination of spectacular roads and mountain scenery, beautiful lakes, fjords and streams, and met with many friendly locals.

Norway is not a cheap country to travel and the weather can be inconsistent and unpredictable, but the scenery and the mountain roads are among the best I have encountered anywhere.

Geoff Roberts

References:

Top Roads of Europe: www.motorbikeeurope.com/en/routes-category/top100

Scenic Routes: www.visitnorway.com/plan-your-trip/travel-tips-a-z/norwegian-scenic-routes/

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Map 2 – Lysebotn to Kjerag Restaurant



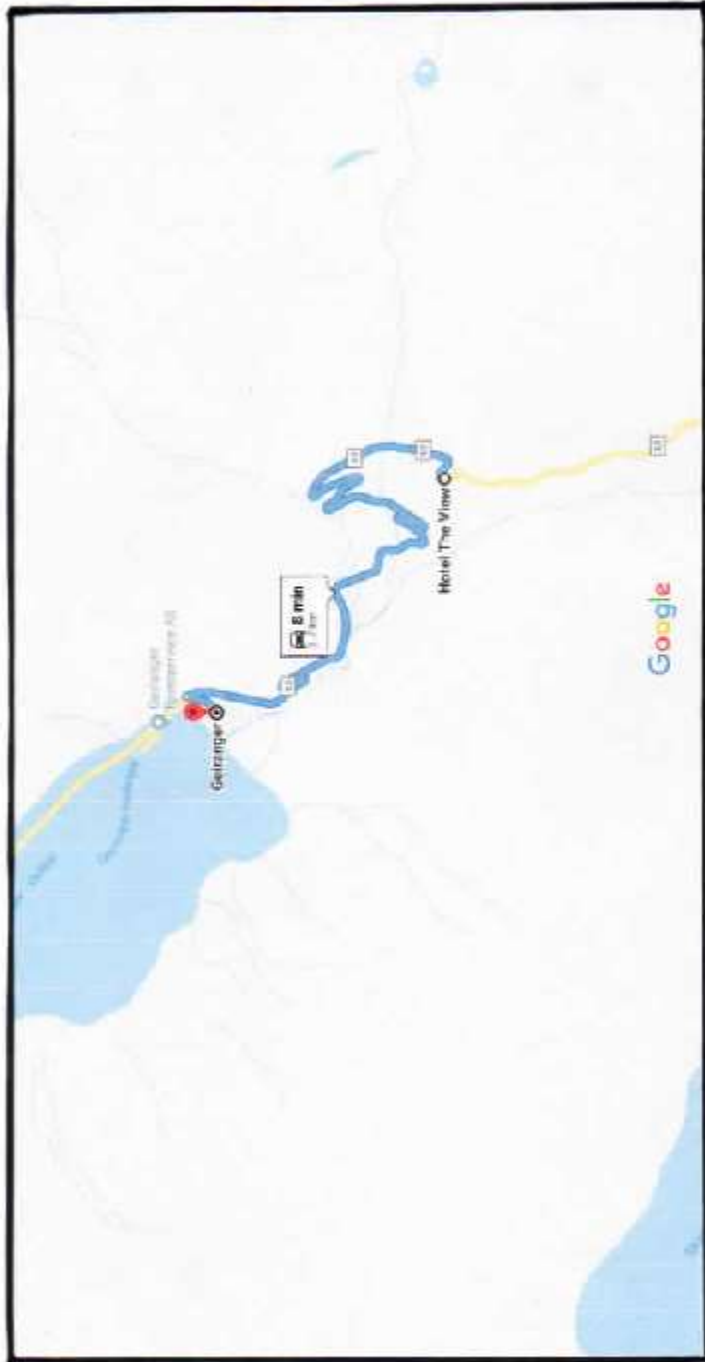
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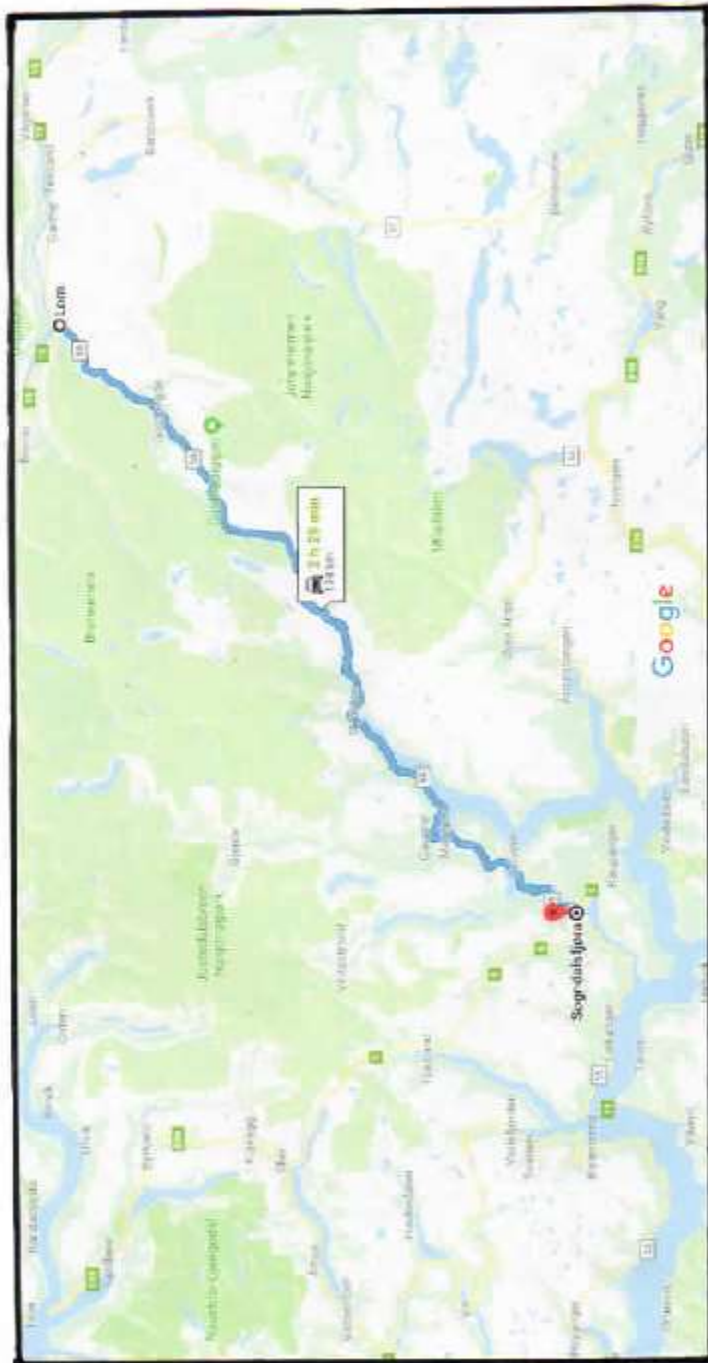
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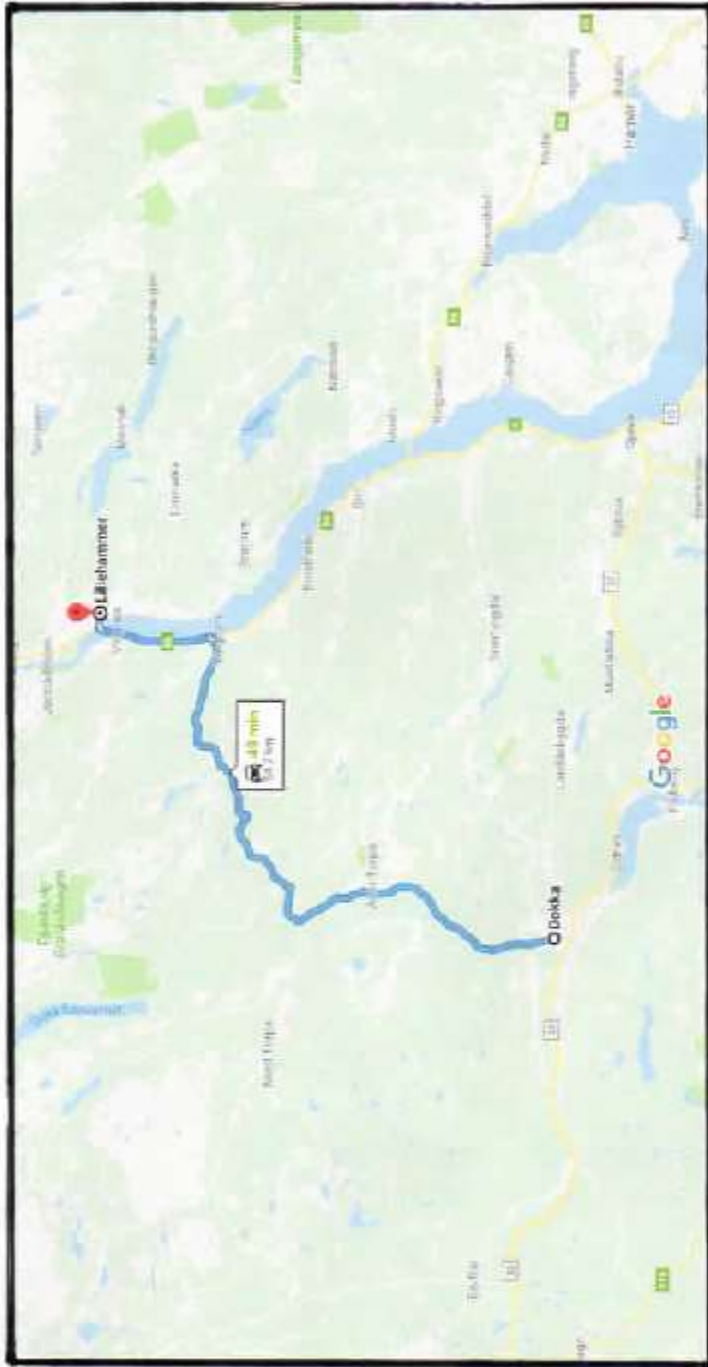
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