

TRAVEL

Cruising the Norwegian fjords: size is everything

Make the most of these magnificent Scandinavian waterways — choose either boutique ship or behemoth. *By Olly Beckett*

There's never been as much choice for Norwegian fjord cruises, with ships large and small sailing into popular ports such as Bergen and Flåm. From boutique expedition ships to 4,000-passenger behemoths, here's a size guide for your fjord planning.

Budget
As a general rule, cruise lines with larger ships tend to be more affordable. Next year Ambassador, MSC Cruises and NCL all have sailings to Norway's fjords, making cruising a relatively low-cost way to visit what can be an expensive country. Bear in mind, though, that excursions will be an additional expense with these lines, and so costs will add up if you're keen to try every activity going.
There are exceptions. Hurtigruten's MS Vesterålen (max 510 passengers) is a good Norwegian fjord choice for those on more of a budget. Fred Olsen's mid-sized ships also have more budget-friendly offerings, with 2027 prices starting at £849.
On the pricier expedition ships much more is included, including excursions, drinks and use of kayaks.

Excursions
In the fjords there are often opportunities to kayak beneath the cliffs. HX Expeditions will take you kayaking for no extra cost, and their smaller vessels allow you to launch directly from the ship. Larger ships' kayak tours usually begin on land.
Some people assume smaller ships mean no crowds but bear in mind that, even if you do cruise on a more petite vessel, you may dock in a port shared with larger ones, and so you could still be visiting museums with more people than you were expecting.
However, when arriving in smaller stops such as Flåm, it's rare for more than one cruise ship to be docked so, when taking the famous Flåm Railway, arriving on a small ship means you'll be sharing it with a few hundred people rather than a few thousand. When it comes to taking

tenders to shore, I've not noticed any advantages to being on big or small ships (the number of tenders reflects the number of passengers). However, smaller ships are more likely to moor at the dock, thereby avoiding tendering altogether.
On-board experience
In Norway's immense fjords it doesn't really matter if you're gazing at the tops of mountains from deck 4 or 14.
Sailing down Langfjorden, for example, you may spot 1,848-metre Skåla, a mountain that will dwarf your ship no matter its size.
With larger ships comes larger choice, and in the Norwegian fjords you'll receive the usual variety of on-board entertainment and restaurant options, plus location-specific lectures.
Expedition cruise ships tend to fall into the "small-to-medium size" category and, while you may not get theatrical shows, these cruises offer more enriching activities such as lectures



LEAGUES AHEAD
MS Nordnorge sailing through Hjørundfjord



FLOATING THEIR BOATS
Kayaking with HX Expeditions

schedules can also be more unusual. HX Expeditions, for example, sails to Lyngenfjord, a rarely visited waterway set beneath the Lyngen Alps.
Havila Voyages operates the historic Norwegian Coastal Express route, which stops at tiny ports, but only for 10-45 minutes (longer stops are made in cities). Popular destinations such as Flåm or Olden — or fjords such as Geirangerfjord — are popular for a reason and are visited by cruise ships of all sizes.
I'm a fan of thoroughly immersing myself in a destination, which is easier on a smaller ship with fewer passengers. I'm also a fan of juxtaposing the luxuries of cruising with wild landscapes, and nothing provides these contrasts better than the bigger ships. I'd therefore recommend deciding your budget, then considering whether to stick with more popular ports, or to slip into the quieter locations only small ships can go.

MY FIVE FJORD CRUISE RECOMMENDATIONS

Iona (P&O Cruises)
Seven nights, £699 from Southampton. Classic big ship fjords journey, returning to Southampton. Passengers: **5,206**
pocruiises.com

Havila Capella (Havila Voyages)
Eleven nights, £720 from Bergen. Historic coastal route on a modern ship, 34 ports of call. Passengers: **640**
havilavoyages.com

MSC Preziosa (MSC Cruises)
Seven nights, £738 from Hamburg. Calls in at four Norwegian ports, including Måløy. Passengers: **4,345**
msccruises.co.uk

MS Vesterålen (Hurtigruten)
Eleven nights, £1,499 from Bergen. Even smaller ship version of the Coastal Express. Passengers: **516** (including day travellers)
hurtigruten.com

MS Spitsbergen (HX Expeditions)
Seven nights, £3,565 from Tromsø. Immersive and very high standard expedition cruise in the Arctic Circle. Passengers: **150**
travelhx.com

“I’ve often found myself in seclusion gawping at the view”

from scientists and researchers, which can even take place in on-board laboratories.
On expedition ships you may also meet lecturers, scientists or researchers on deck studying the sky, sea or scenery.
They're also there to enthusiastically talk about what they're doing, which is much easier when there are fewer passengers.
Although the experience may be less personal on larger ships, you can still get announcements when, for example, some particularly exciting wildlife is spotted.

Comfort
Unless you suffer from motion sickness, there isn't a huge amount of difference in comfort between small or large ships. Fjords are often as flat as a lake, with waves maybe becoming noticeable when skipping between fjords (or if crossing the North Sea, in which case you may appreciate the stability of a larger vessel).
Big cruise ships tend to follow the sun, and so it's rarer to find them in the fjords outside of summer. However, off-season is a wonderful time to be in Norway. November, for example, is the best month for spotting orcas, and in winter you've the best chance of seeing the Northern Lights.
On big ships you've a richer choice of places from which to gaze at the scenery from the warm side of the window, but I've often found myself in seclusion gawping at the view on small ships. Some, such as HX Expeditions' MS Spitsbergen, even have saunas facing out onto the fabulous fjords.

Places visited
Few large ships sail beyond Trondheim (again there's exceptions, such as MSC's Preziosa), but there's also only a handful of small or mid-sized ships (eg the Azamara Journey) calling in at more northerly fjords. It's where big or small ships can fit that makes the most difference.
Hurtigruten claims its smaller ships are "just the right size to slip into narrow fjords and tiny ports of call". Being on a smaller ship means there could be opportunities to take unscheduled diversions into places larger ships simply cannot squeeze. Smaller ships'



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The marina at Haugesund

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