

## Norway's Fjords

Why did TRAVELER panelists rate this place in better shape than 114 others surveyed?

By Jonathan B. **Tourtellot**

THE MAN CLEARLY HAS an agenda. "What do you think of this?" He thrusts a composite picture in front of me: a graceful suspension bridge superimposed over one of Norway's scores of gorgeous fjords. Apparently the bridge doesn't exist—at least, not yet. He looks at me expectantly.

We are on a break at a conference in Hardanger, Norway. I'd gladly accepted an invitation to speak here, eager to see Norway's fjord country. To see if it really deserved to be ranked in the best shape of all US places around the world surveyed last year on TRAVELER's first Destination Scorecard.

My impression: Yes, it probably does. Exhibit One is the man in front of me. It seems a local controversy has been raging over whether to build this particular bridge. Those in favor say it will ease travel and help visitors. Opponents such as my interrogator and his allies have issues: Would the bridge spoil the cherished look of the fjord? Isn't the existing ferry more in keeping with Norwegian tradition?

In short, the sort of

questions raised by people who care about a place. For the rest of the day I plead ignorance as various people ask me to take sides in the bridge dispute. But the vigorous debate bespeaks an alert, involved citizenry. Good caretakers.

Of course, lucky geography accounts in part for the fjords' high score. They're beautiful. Their ruggedness and cool climate protect them from the mass tourism that has overwhelmed many Mediterranean coasts. So do Norway's high costs.

But people account for more: tight environmental care, tidy landscapes and neatly painted houses, lots of on-site information for visitors. (See [www.fjordnorway.com](http://www.fjordnorway.com) to get started.)

Still, the fjords fell short of a perfect score (90 or higher). Cruise ship pollution is an issue, as is salmon farming, which degrades wild stocks. Coastal fishing villages combat an exodus of young people.

Our conference is part of the creative response. Before the Age of Globalization, each isolated fjord had its own food and folkways. Conferees are seeking ways for agriculture and tourism to reinvigorate this eroding heritage, to help keep coastal communities thriving. The fjords offer more than scenery, and a cuisine that's more than fish and potatoes. At Hardanger Fjord I sample Hardanger cherries and local cheeses. I tipple sparkling Hardanger

hard cider. I listen to Hardanger tunes played on a beautifully crafted Hardanger fiddle.

The instinct for maintaining sense of place helped Norway obtain World Heritage status this year for two of its fjords, Geiranger and Naeroy, by protecting both as natural wonders.

The bridge? I truly don't know if it's a bad idea. But I know the final decision will have been well considered.