

ROOM AT THE INN

Ship-shape in Oslo



Amerikalinjen in Oslo, left; hotel lobby, above; Vista Room, right; guestroom, below left



JOHN BORTHWICK

You know you're in sensible, secular Scandinavia when your hotel room "bible" turns out not to be a tome from the Gideons or any god squad. I discover instead a slim copy of that noble road map to our better angels, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Gideon — to quote The Beatles — has checked out, in this case from Oslo's new, five-star hotel, the Amerikalinjen. It faces a central square that's alive with pedestrians, trams by the minute and folk of all stripes zipping past on stand-up electric scooters. And no cars. You can sit in the sun, unassailed by exhaust fumes at the hotel's street-front tables and, with coffee or some berry concoction at hand, plan your Oslo day: arts, fjord trip, history? Try the lot.

The 122-room Amerikalinjen itself is living history, with the name tilting its cap to the Norwegian America Line shipping company that was long headquartered in this century-old building. The transatlantic line's last ships sailed in 1980, after which this imposing neo-baroque landmark slipped into a dime store-and-kebab shop decline.

Several years ago the local Nordic Hotels



& Resorts group came to the rescue with a total refurbishment, pouring heritage experts, cool designers and Scandinavian smarts into the project. The result is a pleasure at every level, from its tessellated wood tiles to the casual hangout lobby with bar, and then up through the guestroom floors.

I'm in a large, uncluttered Fortuna suite, formerly a corner office, with parquet flooring and double-glazed windows that block the sounds but not the vision of Jernbanetorget Square. The bed is a virtual cloud of well-

dressed duvet and pillows. A classic black and white tiled bathroom, with roomy tub and local Sprekenhus amenities, has been cleverly designed without violating the heritage-protected walls and vaulted ceiling.

The room's central desk with universal power and USB ports, plus a 1980s-style telephone, provides an efficient workspace, if needed. In lieu of a spa and swimming pool (due to heritage restraints) there's a terrific basement sauna area with heated, tiled recliners for post-sauna relaxing, along with a compact gym and quality TechnoGym equipment.

And then you're ready to hit the Atlas Brasserie & Cafe, where the breakfast buffet isn't a thousand-item cornucopia. Instead you find healthy, Scandi stuff — salads, grainy breads, cheese, bagels, eggs, berries, muesli, juices and even a quinoa parfait, plus a la carte offerings. At any time of day, while tucking into local fare such as Norwegian waffles, layrom roe or skagen prawns, you can people-watch across the busy square through the cafe's floor-to-ceiling windows.

Many diners at the street-level Atlas are not Amerikalinjen guests but walk-in locals and visitors, which is part of the hotel's "people in motion" vision. Petter Stordalen, boss of Nordic Hotels & Resorts, was determined to bring life back into the historic building and make it a place "not just for guests, but for everyone". So far, so good.

Amerikalinjen's classic cocktail bar, Pier 42, honours the first point of entry to New York for transatlantic visitors and immigrants. Harking back to those days of steamer trunks (and passengers attired properly for dinner), the champagne glasses are copies of the line's 1919 originals, as made by the same firm of local glassblowers. Meanwhile, downstairs in the Gustav Jazz Club, Friday night is about letting off steam with local and international acts.

Oslo has been aptly described as "the blue, the green and the city in between". With trams and trains at the hotel front door, it's easy to explore beyond the city centre. Take a ferry ride, for instance, across to leafy Bygdøy Peninsula with its three historic maritime museums.

After a day of rambling you're welcomed back to your hotel haven in suitably nautical style by two sculpted, Neptune-like sea gods who loom protectively above Amerikalinjen's main entrance.

John Borthwick was a guest of hotel Amerikalinjen.

CHECKLIST

Amerikalinjen

Jernbanetorget 2, central Oslo; amerikalinjen.com

Tariff Online room rate, including VAT, from 2531 krone (\$404) a night, including breakfast.

Getting there Fly to Oslo with Thai, Qantas codeshare or others. The 20-minute train trip from Gardermoen airport to Oslo Central costs 98 krone; it's then a four-minute walk to the hotel.

Bedtime reading Many of Norwegian novelist Jo Nesbo's bestselling Nordic noir works featuring his alcoholic antihero cop, Harry Hole, are set in Oslo. More challenging is the multi-volume family biography *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgaard. Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel *Hunger* is outright depressing, although he later lightened up and won the 1920 Nobel prize for literature.

Stepping out Stroll to the stunning, new, harbour-front Opera House. Using an Oslo Pass (from about \$65 a day), catch the harbour ferry to Bygdøy's maritime museums featuring a Viking boat, Roald Amundsen's *Fram* and Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*. Oslo art is far more than one famous painting (Munch's much-parodied *The Scream*); check out other collections such as the classy, modern Astrup Fearnley Museet.

Brickbats There's little to complain about beyond the absence of BBC World on guestroom televisions.

Bouquets A non-smoking hotel with good disability access; retains its heritage with taste and a light touch; smart, conversational staff.

Also try Novotel Paris Les Halles; Hotel Zurich Langstrasse; Hotel Columbus, Monaco.



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