

FACTS ABOUT VESTERÅLEN

Vesterålen is a cluster of remarkable islands, located 200 km within the Arctic Circle. 35.000 people live in this archipelago of unspoiled beauty. Westwards, facing the Norwegian sea; a ragged alpine landscape of needle-sharp peaks. To the east; the waterways of the coastal express steamer, bordered by wide beaches and small communities huddled closely together. In the centre of the islands are vast areas of marsh with creeks and ponds. Vesterålen offers a distinct flora, rich birdlife, plentiful deep-sea and fresh-water fishing, beautiful scenery and picturesque fishing hamlets.

Communications

Coastal express steamers call daily at Risøyhamn, Sortland and Stokmarknes. 5 bridges link the islands together and connect them with the mainland. Several daily flights to the airports at Andenes and Stokmarknes, and Evenes airport is also within reach. The bus services are frequent within the region, and there are direct connections to the railway stations at Narvik and Fauske as well. It's easy to drive to Vesterålen from Narvik, (connection to E-6). The new road to Kiruna means a regular route to Sweden. However, travellers coming on the E-6 from the south will find the ferry Bognes-Lødingen the easiest route. The ferry connection Melbu-Fiskebøl takes you to Lofoten.

In the old days...

We still know fairly little about the oldest history of Vesterålen, but continuous excavations bring new knowledge. The oldest known traces of settlements in Vesterålen date back to 5.000 years B. C. The first islanders lived by fishing and hunting, and migrated seasonally. Cultivation of grain and cattle breeding were known as far back as 1400 B. C. Traces are found of settlements recognizable as farms; i.e. dwellinghouses and barns encircling a yard, dating back to the beginning of the Christian era. The houses were made of timber, and the insulation and roofing material were clay and stone.

During the first thousand years A. D. there was a tremendous increase in the number of settlements in Vesterålen. Not only the good agricultural areas became more densely populated, but also outlying areas such as Gaukværøy in Bø. During the Viking Age (800-1050) fixed settlements became more common. This is seen today from the farm mounds where house remnants and refuse are deposited in thick layers. During the 12th



Tinden in Øksnes

and 13th centuries the stockfish trade with Bergen started, and caused a transition to money-based economy. One of the consequences was a change in the population pattern, increasing the number of people in the fishing districts. The later Middle Ages was a period of growth, caused by the stockfish trade with the Hanseatic League. At this time people started to settle in villages, such as Andenes and Langenes. Ecclesiastical art from Holland and Northern Germany is partly preserved from this period. The altarpiece of Hadsel church (1520) is particularly noteworthy. The Stockfish trade made Vesterålen dependent upon the European trade cycles. The falling price of fish and the rising price of grain during the 16th and 17th centuries led to considerable poverty. But the centuries experienced growth periods, and mobility of the population. Every summer and autumn small cargo boats sailed to Bergen, loaded with stockfish and cod liver oil, salt, beer, clothes and commodities. This trade ensured regular contact with the outside world. Merchants from Bergen and Trondheim had a monopoly of trade in the northern part of Norway. But gradually, independent trade activities started due to the innkeeper (trading and conveyance) licenses of the 1770s. Successful herring fisheries from 1861 meant that the district prospered, and led to the establishment of many seine fishing stations and several steamship companies. There was a considerable migration from the southern parts of Norway. The population grew from 8.670 in 1855, to 22.460 in 1900. In 1893 Vesterålen Steamship Company (OVDS) initiated the first weekly coastal «express», steamer between Trondheim and Hammerfest.

Style of building

The old dwellings in Vesterålen resembled peat-huts. The loghouse became common during the 17th century. The ground floor of the earlier loghouses had 2-3 rooms. One could walk upright on the ground floor only in the loft, the windows were on the short sides of the house, squeezed in between the rafters and the floor, and one could walk upright only below the ridge pole. The entrance was located on the leeward side, and led directly into the kitchen. Until the end of the 19th century, practically all houses were roofed with peat. Even the loghouses of the upper class were relatively modest, and rarely with 2 full storeys. The majority of houses were long and narrow, seldom more than 5 meters wide. Until about 1850 there were few houses of international design in Vesterålen. The shape of the house was more often determined by climate, accessible building material and social needs, than by style. An exception is the Melbu Manor, in Empire style. In this period, national romantic style of building became more common in Vesterålen. The change in architectural styles was a result of the industrialisation which emerged in Norway, and obliterated or veiled local characteristics.

Mountains and Landscape

The majority of mountains of Vesterålen are Bedrock, i.e more than 600 mill.

years old. A dark mineral, resembling Gabbro is found at Åsanfjorden in the Bø municipality, dated back some 3500 mill. years. More recent minerals (400-600 mill. years) are found on Andøya, between Dverberg and Skogvollvatn, and a narrow zone of even younger minerals (100-150 mill years) between Ramså and Hagnes, the latter the most recent mineral found ashore in Norway. Rich deposits of fossils, oil and coal are found in the same area. The landscape in Vesterålen was shaped over the last 2 million years (Quaternary Period). The high mountain areas often have a plain or slightly rippled surface, e.g. Staveheia on Andøya and Langøya mountains give a craggy and ragged impression. The Mt. Reka northwest of Eidsfjord, and the mountains between Stave and Bleik are typical examples. Between the mountain plateau and the beach there is a steep slope. The coastal plains, the slopes and many of the valleys were shaped by glaciers, while the mountain plateaus only partly were formed by the icecaps. Some mountains on the coastal plains are remnants of the erosion, e.g. Bleiksøya and Gaukværøy. The highest watermarks in the west are 20-25 meters above sea-level, and in Hadsselfjord, Sortlandsund and Risøysund 30-40 meters above the sea-level. After the last glacial epoch about 15-20.000 years ago, many moraines were deposited on Andøya, Langøya and the northern part of Hinnøya.

Flora and vegetation

Demanding vegetation is not common in Vesterålen because hard and acid rocks together with steep and shady landscape occur in most places. The valley bottoms and the steep hillsides are often covered with birches. Black crowberry and dwarf corner grow on the woodland floor. Hillsides have rich fern vegetation. Heathberry, Bilberry, Matgrass and Mountain Lady's Mantle are common on the treeless plateaus. Near Ramheia and Røyken (400 m) on the northern edge of Andøya there are large concentrations of various mountain-plants. The drift-sand areas near Bleik (on Andøya) and near Bø (on Langøya) are particularly worth seeing. At the end of July all the meadows are completely covered in white Burnet Saxifrage, and you may find herbs and beautiful wild flowers, such as Harebell and Wild Betony. Near the beach a belt of bluish green lyme grass grow among Yellow Lady's Slippers, etc. The occurrence of Kobresia Myosuroides in the drib sand areas near Bleik, is perhaps a remnant of the glacial epoch, when Andøya supposedly had icefree areas. The only place in Scandinavia where it is possible to study the 20.000 year history of vegetation is from the bottom deposits of Lake Endletvatn and Ærásvatn (Andøya). The pasture land contributing to the green and fertile appearance along Risøysundet, Sortlandsundet and Hadsselfjorden, have pine and larch trees. The vegetation is kept low and open by the sheep. Climatically demanding plants grow here. Vast march-land and moss characterise the landscape. Desposits of peat give the marsh an arched surface, very poor of nutrition. Near Dverberg there is a remarkable area of concentric marsh-

land. From the mountains at Sellevoll you may see how the mounds form a pattern looking like a flat cone-shaped cake. The Bog-Ashpodel with beautiful yellow flowers grow on the poor marshland. The common trees in Vesterålen are Birch, Roan and Willow. European Bird Cherry and Grey-Alder are relatively rare, and pines are planted in parts of the region. Sigerfjord is famous for the beautiful villa gardens, where foreign trees grow, indicating a favourable local climate. The rectory garden in Hadsel was earlier known for its collection of rare species of primula.

Birdlife

The northern location and the varied nature of Vesterålen ensure rich bird-life. The sea around the islands is very rich and plentiful, providing a feeding place for the large colonies of birds. Amongst these Arctic Seahorse and Gannet are well represented. Nykan near Bø, and the Bleiksøya are the most famous rookeries. During the winter there are good hibernating areas for Auk and Sea-Ducks, and the rare White-Billed Diver is a common sight in the sounds between the islands. In Vesterålen all the common sea-birds at this latitude can be found. Visitors from the South may find the mountain areas, the birch woods and the vast marshland areas most interesting, especially on Andøya. The Black-tailed



Puffin

Godwit, common in the southern parts of Europe, is rare in Norway, and only nests on Andøya. The White-tailed eagle lives in the mountain areas and by the coast. Some parts of Vesterålen are frequently visited by migrating geese, both Barnacle Geese and Pink-Footed Geese breed in Vesterålen. Invasions of birds from the east, e.g. Woodpie and Waxwings, are often observed in Vesterålen.

Life in the ocean

All the common fishes in Northern Norway are found in Vesterålen, such as Cod, Haddock, Pollack, Tusk, Ling Rosefish, Halibut, Herring and Salmon. The in-shore fishing is very good. The approach of the cod in the spawning season during the winter is of considerable importance. The winter-fisheries in Lofoten are well-known to most people, but the fact is that nearly the same amount of fish is caught in Vesterålen. The relatively mild climate along the Norwegian coast is caused by the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream brings warm currents - as well as fish and other marine animals common in more tropical wa-



Trollfjorden in Hadsel

ters. Rare fish to be found in the waters are: Arctic Skate, Scabbard Fish and Black Scabbard Fish. The Scabbard Fish is found nowhere else along the Norwegian coast. More rare are: Blackfish, Bass, Congereel and the Thick- and Thin-lipped Grey Mullet. The two last mentioned fishes are very palatable, and in tropical and temperate zones they are of economic importance. If you catch a rare fish, kindly inform the museum in Tromsø. The occurrence of these tropical species is both interesting and gives information about marine conditions. Vesterålen is excellent for divers. Near Vesterålen is the northern border of the crustaceans: Crabs and Lobster. The sea bottom is full of delicacies such as Icelandic Scallop, Horse Mussel and other clams. It is not even necessary to dive for mussels because you may pick them at ebb-tide where the rivers and creeks run into the sea. It is fun to watch the Lumpfish swim just below the zone, in between seaweed and sea tangle. Interesting experiences are the kelp jungle, steep slopes covered with Seaanemone, Sponge and Sea squirt, and the overhangs covered with the big soft coral: Dead Mans's Fingers. It is 5 1/2 hours between ebb and flow tide, and 2

meters difference between the top of the tide and the ebb. The currents in the sounds and fjords vary with the tide. There are good fishing opportunities in the lakes and rivers as well. Just remember to obtain a fishing license for freshwater fishing!

Food traditions

In the past the staple diet was herring and potatoes, milk and porridge, and fish and potatoes. Both herring and porridge belong to the traditional Norwegian diet, and ancient mythology tells of herring and oatmeal as food fit for gods. The potato became a main course at the beginning of the 19th century, a godsend because Vesterålen had a very meagre grain production. The diet was relatively wholesome in those days. Fresh fish was accessible in most places the whole year round. In old writings, the bad coffee was mentioned as a problem. The coffee merchants not only thinned out the coffee by adding chicory, but they actually forged it. Today, the diet in Vesterålen does not differ very much from that of the rest of Norway. Fresh fish is still important, and vegetables are also fairly common, although expensive. During the winterfishing the traditional «mølja» is eaten. It consists of fresh «skrei» (cod in spawning period), liver, roe, and flatbread (thin, crisp unleavened bread).

«Rav» and «rekling», a traditional delicacy, is made from halibut. The fines and the outer flesh plus a little of the fishmeat is cut loose so that the dorsal- and ventral fins are kept together by the tail. This is covered with salt and hung up to dry. «Rekling» with the fattest fins was called «rav» and considered a delicacy.

Economic life

Vesterålen's economy is varied and industries of different kinds are represented; the fishing and fishprocessing industries, construction and timber-processing industries, firms of contractors, transport and shipping, printing, tourism and hotel business, agriculture and the processing of agricultural products, construction and plastic processing. A considerable number of people are employed by the authorities and the armed forces, trade and service business employ its share of this labour. The firms of Vesterålen must be characterized as small or medium sized compared to companies of other parts of Norway, the sizes varying from 1 to 250 employees. The fishing industry is the main industry of the region and approx 95.000 tons of fish are landed annually. Fishing is a fulltime occupation for the majority of the fishermen, the traditional combination farming/fishing has nearly died out. The combination of crofting with another occupation still exists in some areas. Lack of full-time jobs is one of the main reasons for not having one full-time occupation. Some of the best known companies in the district should be mentioned: Vesteraalens Steamship Company (OVDS) started the first coastal express and still keeps up the tradition by operating 6 of the 11 ships in this service. Vesterålen Canning Company produces Vesterålen Fish balls, a product known all over Norway. Fish breeding from roe and small fry is also developing rapidly. Salmon and trout are most common, and other species are on the increase.

Cultural activities

Song and music activities have long traditions in Vesterålen; brass-bands, sym-

phony orchestra, folk song and rock groups, you name it.

Football, cycling and skiing are popular sports. There are several sports halls with swimmingpools.

Climate and seasons

The warm Gulf Stream flows past Vesterålen and brings mild weather the year round. The warmest months are July and August with average temperatures of 12–14°C (54–58°). The max. temperature measured is 30,8°C (87°F). July is the driest month. The rain comes mainly in August–December, and most of it actually in October. Usually the snow comes in January, February and March. The average temperature during the periods ±1 to ±2°C (29–31°F). The mid-night sun is visible in Vesterålen from approx. May 20th till July 24th. As a contrast to the «light season» the sun is never above the horizon between the end of November till mid-January. Take your time and enjoy the glimmering Northern Lights on the sky during the winter.

Camping in Vesterålen

The people who lives in Vesterålen are proud of the magnificent natural surroundings in which they live. Recreational use of the area, however leads to wear and tear, pollution, littering and imbalance in flora and fauna. We wish, of course, to avoid these harms, and therefore we appeal to all visitors in our area to show the utmost respect for nature. Most municipalities have recommended places for emptying of garbage and septic tanks for buses, recreational vehicles and personal automobiles. Inquire at various tourist information offices.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL TOURS

Andøya roundtrip

Expected timeschedule: 5–6 hrs incl. lunch.

From Sortland you follow the road along Sortlandssund to Risphamn and further on to the place Dverberg. Some worthwhile stops to make along the way: A visit to Dverberg church, an octagonal timber church from 1843, distinctive in its character, and Ramsåfeltet, where you can find remains from ancient animals (lizards). Local sights are: the old light-house with its 153 steps to the top, the Polar museum and the whale centre. The trip continues around the island to the novel fishing town of Bleik, and perhaps a walk along Bleiksstranda beach, one of Norway's longest, sandy shores. Right off the coast lies Bleiksoy Island – one of the country's most famous and easily accessible nesting colonies.

Hadsel roundtrip

Expected timeschedule: 4 hours incl. lunch.

Following route 19 to Stokmarknes you visit the Coastal Express museum and then take the road around the westside of the island of Hadsel. It's a beautiful scenic route and you will have a wonderful view to the Lofoten and the island Gaukværøy. In the village Melbu visit the Melbu manor with its restored buildings from the 19th century and also the Vesterålen museum (or the Norwegian Museum for the Fishing Industry). Melbu is also famous for its cultural events du-

ring summertime, known as «Sommer-Melbu» and participants are both from Norway and abroad. The beach Taen is a popular look-out point for the midnight sun.

Øksnes

Expected timeschedule: 5–6 hours.

This tour leads you to the idyllic village of Nyksund. Many years the base in the search for the gold of the sea – cod. Now the village is vacated but Nyksund gives still an impression of the lively fishing village it once was. You should also visit the fishing village Stø with a number of motives for your camera, especially if you want to take pictures of the midnight sun. In Alsvåg you may stop and have a look at the Alsvåg manor, once residence of the sheriffs and ship-owners. Its main buildings are back to 1671.

Jennestad og Bø

Expected Timeschedule: 5 hours incl. lunch.

Jennestad was one of the important trading centres in Nordland in the beginning of this century. It has existed for more than one hundred years. The spirit of the past is kept alive in the buildings and the atmosphere. Today it represents a living memory of the trading centres of Hamsun's fiction. Continue to the municipality Bø with its small, lively fishing villages like Nykvåg and Hovden. Nykvåg is one of the oldest fishing villa-

ges in the «exterior» and it has also its «own» birdcliff right in the middle of the village. Thousands of kittiwakes are nesting here. Nice look-outpoint for the midnightsun at Hovden.

Boat trips in Øksnes Vestbygd

Expected timeschedule: 5 hours.

Take the local boat from Myre on a round trip in beautiful surroundings in Øksnes Vestbygd. The trip will bring you into close contact with the island culture, and you will see how people lived here at the time when the ocean was the main communication artery. The boat stops at many nice places before returning to the point of departure. One of these places is Tinden trading centre, with a real North-Norwegian shop dating from the last century, still in operation. The grading centre is a cultural monument worthy of preservation. No advance booking.

Lofoten

Expected timeschedule: 11-12 hrs incl. lunch.

You take the ferry from Melbu to Fiskebøl and head for Svolvær and Kabelvåg. Here you must visit the Lofoten aquarium and the Lofoten museum. After this break drive through the breathtaking landscape of the Lofoten down to the village with the shortest name in the world – Å. Visit the local museum and you might also take a walk in

this picturesque village. You will have enough opportunities to choose from, so don't forget your camera!

Day trip with the coastal steamer

Duration: 14 hours.

Embark the coastal steamer at 1300 in Sortland. A visit to the Hurtigrutemuseet (Coastal Steamer Museum) in Stokmarknes is recommended. The steamer sails through the narrow and idyllic Raftsundet sound and into the famous Trollfjorden. The steamer arrives in Svolvær at about 1800, where there will be time for a stroll in «the capital of Lofoten» before returning by north-bound steamer. (Arrives in Svolvær 2100, departure 2200). Returning by coastal steamer, you can enjoy the surroundings by night as well.

Guided Tour to mt. Møysalen

Duration: 9 hours by boat.

Point of departure: Hennes mole
Price: Abt. NOK 150,- for adults
Abt. NOK 75,- for children under 14 yrs.
Season: Saturdays and some Sundays from 17 June–30 September
Time: 09.00

Guided tours to Møysalen, 1,262 m above sea level. Accommodation. Food served, boat hire, fishing trips and horseback riding. Individual trips organised on request.