

The Autistic Traveller's Guide to Europe:
Excerpts

By Maria Clark

3.

Aurland

It was only on the bus - careening its way across a tiny, fjord-side road – that I saw Aurlandsfjord for the first time. It was a brief glimpse, and I definitely didn't comprehend the gravity of my surroundings until later, but for a first peek, it was enough. A dark, crimped surface of water, with the mountains shouldering each other like schoolboys ready to dive into the depths below.

A fjord is a deep body of water sat in a U-shaped valley with mountains on either side. These valleys were carved by glaciers millions of years ago, and when the glaciers retreated, the fjords filled with seawater. Now, they contain both seawater from the North Sea and freshwater melted from mountain snow. In the winter – when saltwater predominates – the water is much clearer, and it's worth going then just to see the fjord covered in white.

If you can survive the cold, of course.

The bus took us through Aurland and along the winding road to Skaim, where our Airbnb was located. This took the form of a cluster of tiny, wooden cabins set on the banks of a river and enveloped in the serenity of the mountain valley around. My favourite view was from the steps of the toilet block – a thin Norwegian flag fluttering against the grey and purple sky; the sombre, snow-tipped mountains sweeping around to the left, where the opening to Aurlandsfjord gleamed in the sun. The gush of the river, clattering over rocks, and the red-

roofed houses looking like stepping stones across the border to Heaven.

The inside of the cabin was simple – a set of two bunk beds, a table and a small kitchen unit – but the woody yellow perfume and warm light made it the perfect hideaway. The toilet facilities were nice, too: pink-doored toilets and a shower producing hot water at 10kr apiece.

“Like camping,” I said.

“I thought you didn’t like camping?”

“I don’t. Normally.” I looked up at the mountains, inhaling the sweet scent of calm. “But I think I would here.”

*

This is the walk to Aurland.

A forty-minute walk with which we became so familiar that we even started to talk about running down it. Wanting to beat our footprints into the surroundings, hearing our breath echo off the mountain walls.

Turn left out of the cabins and walk along the grey road. No pavement here. Cross the bridge stretching along the curve of the river, while an eagle statue and flag make a little shrine on the rocky outcrop opposite.

Down the road, past the yellow houses and the apple farm; past Lunde camping and the field on the right with the fjord horses. Cross the road here to a temporary pavement (bikes and pedestrians combined, in one messy foot-wheel pattern) – and then follow this under the tunnel to Sognaporten petrol station, where families gather for their Sunday meal.

Pass the white high school on the right, the black nursery on the left and the red middle school just beyond. Take the pedestrian crossing and then follow the

pavement to the edge of Aurland town. Aurland, where the opening night of *Thor: Love and Thunder* was playing in a Norwegian cinema.

It was a small town, reminiscent of the English Lakes. After getting sweets from Spar, we sat on the little bench bobbing up and down on the jetty. That's when it hit, I think – that I was there, actually there, on a Norwegian fjord.

By that time, the night's only flickers of darkness dipped the water in ink, and the mountains became one indistinguishable mass of silk. The silence, fluidity and stillness were breath-taking. Smelling faintly of the sea but not too much, with the cold wind disappearing beneath my awe.

*

Woke up at eight. It was light outside, the same colour it had been when we went to bed. I showered in my flipflops, feet sliding down the mud bank back to our cabin.

We began our hike to Flåm. Down the Aurland way, past the Spar where I purchased a sticky cinnamon roll and then across the bridge. On our bus ride the previous day, I'd thought there had been a path tracing the fjord's edge, yet it didn't appear until the last leg of our hike.

Instead, we bumped our knees and grazed our shins against the metal reservation barrier of the solitary road; hearing the cars and tractors growl past, with the faint exhaust fumes the only interruption in the pure air. Lydia sped ahead, heeding her dad's advice to get off the road as quickly as possible, yet I dawdled along the edge of civilisation, taking hundreds of photos. And not one would ever encapsulate the beauty of that place.

Aurlandsfjord was a place of dreams. My dream, my waking dream, but also the unidentified place where others go when they walk the path of unconsciousness. The voluptuous green-blue mountains slouched against the shore, with ripples of dark-blue water falling into sapphire swathes. The shoreline curved, hiding rock promontories and ancient Viking graves beneath the pines. And the houses – how red gave a touch of magic to the scene! It’s the colour of beginnings and endings, of rawness and purity and the deep reality of this harsh Nordic clime. In the winter, you can envisage a world of white – but there, poking out like a miniature mountaintop, lies the roof of the little red cabin, protecting centuries of secrets beneath its wooden walls.

We reached Flåm. Expressing disgust at the cruise ships – great, soulless monstrosities with more windows than Heaven, which merely amplified the shark’s glare of the stern. We scorned the hordes piling onto the shore and shook our heads at those still *on* the ship. Was Norway not good enough for them?

“Why come at all?” Lydia said, stomping along. “Why come if you’re not going to explore?”

That’s why we were there, after all. The verb *explore* comes from the prefix ‘ex’, meaning ‘out’, and the Latin *plorare*: ‘to weep, or cry’. Exploring means to cry out; to express emotion or meaning or awe. And as we walked past the enormous liner and glimpsed the fjord’s glassy smile once more, I couldn’t help wanting to scream. To throw my voice across the mountains, and let my wonder bounce to life.

*

“You’re not from the cruise ship, are you?”

Jon, the kayaking guide, looked at us suspiciously. Lydia and I snorted.

“Us? God no.”

“And you?”

The American couple behind us shook their heads vehemently. “No way.”

A pause. “Excellent.”

Jon’s face split into a smile as he threw dry bags in our direction. “Here. We’re all friends now.”

It felt like we’d passed a test. As we dragged the kayaks down to the beach, Lydia and I voiced our opinion on the cruise liner.

“It’s awful! And so *big*, too.”

“A monstrosity,” I said, staring at it with dislike.

“How is it allowed here?”

Jon shrugged. “I wish I knew. You’d think they’d want to protect Aurlandsfjord, right? But you’ve seen Flåm. That’s all the tourists want.”

“Not us,” I said under my breath. “*Definitely* not us.”

We were put in a double kayak. I confidently volunteered to sit in the back, without realising the responsibility of routing the rudder. Knees bent, bruised against the side, with my feet turning the rudder in the right direction while the oars paddled to their alternative rhythm. Right was both right and left, and for someone who can’t do their lefts and rights, it was all wrong.

(That’s an autistic thing too, by the way. I almost think I should get L and R tattooed on my hands).

No matter. Because kayaking on that fjord – letting the paddle slip into the milk-bottle green depths; knowing that we weren’t even one water droplet in this majestic valley’s history – was completely overwhelming.

We paddled past string-thin waterfalls and tumbling burial grounds, overlooked by ancient trees perched on the black rock above. Tasting the salt hidden beneath the fjord's freshwater layer; feeling the wind ruffling our borrowed blue waterproofs. Paddling back the way we walked, once again in a two-tone rhythm, but now seeing how small and quiet the cars really were against the smothering embrace of the mountains.

"They're not *really* mountains," Lydia said, adopting her ski-expert eyes, but she was only thinking about height. She wasn't thinking about the solemn song that sat in their heart, or the way the greys and greens and blues shifted like a patchwork quilt. She couldn't see the sublime: that elusive, semi-other ether drifting across the rounded tops and sending light into the sky. You didn't have to be religious to see it – but to open your eyes and stomach to the overwhelming beauty around and *feel* it. That sweet, ambrosial flicker inside.

*

On the way back, Jon told us about an Estonian shipwreck in the fjord, sunk by the Norwegian resistance during the war as a move to stop the Luftwaffe from bombing Flåm. The ship sits 30m below the water, and on frozen winter days, you can see its head tilted up like a flower reaching for the sun.

"The Norwegians invited the Estonians for a party," Jon said. "And *boom!*"

My gaze latched upon the cruise ship, gently swelling in Flåm's dock. Why do people go on cruises, when they're as far away from the sea as you can get? Staring at the water from your fourteenth-floor porthole is almost as bad as watching it on a screen. Up there, you're safe.

Untouched by the ocean's breath even as you glide across its back. But with kayaking...

I leant over and dipped my hand in the water. Gasping a little, the warmth seeping from my fingers in seconds, but knowing that no *Queen of the Ocean* or *Sea Princess* passengers would ever come close to this.

Solboller for lunch – thick cinnamon rolls with a custard sun snatched from the sky. We waited for the bus and walked home to black bean fajitas, and, in a spontaneous move, clambering across waterfalls in the evening light.

4. Nærøfjord

There's only one cruise I've ever wanted to do, and it doesn't involve staying overnight. The Nærøfjord cruise: a two-hour wishbone-shaped circuit heading from Aurlandsfjord into the main Sognefjord channel, and then into neighbouring Nærøfjord.

Lydia grinned at me as the boat slunk into Aurland's harbour. "Are you ready?"

I was so excited I could barely respond.

I had been waiting and wanting to do this for years. Ever since writing about Norway in one of my early novels, this country and its fjords represented my first flicker of wanderlust. And now – walking from the Aurlandsfjord jetty onto the sleek monochrome boat – I felt a sort of a realignment inside. My autism diagnosis had thrown my identity into disarray, and I was still struggling to pick up the pieces - but being there, on the fjord, had somehow provoked a recognition of who I was. I might have discovered I was autistic, but many parts of me were still the same. And the traveller – the adventurous spirit; the girl who had always wanted to sail across a fjord – was one of them.

*

Searing cold, dagger wind, silver slaps against my face and hands and shins. The boat cut through the water like a guillotine – swift, smooth, with the wind even sharper than ice. I knew it was there; I knew I could feel it – yet it just melted onto my skin and opened my eyes and made me feel more alive than I've ever felt before. Because after

having stared at a photo of this on my desktop screen for so many years, I knew I was home.

Fernweh. Homesickness for a place I'd never been – yet now I have, it truly does feel like a piece has slotted into place. And I know it's not merely a coincidence, either, that this came after this particular year. Finding out about my autism; moving abroad. I knew, that if I'd come to Norway before, I wouldn't have been able to open myself up to all the emotion and magic this country gave me.

Moving beyond Aurlandsfjord into a silver sliver of a channel, I soon realised it was merely an overture for the icy power of the Sognefjord itself. The water turned darker, choppier, and the mountains swelled until they headbutted the clouds and ended up with clumps of snowy shampoo clinging to their locks. The waterfalls turned blinding white, spilling down in miniscule rivulets, and the landscape was so wide that I could barely see it in my full vision. But I knew, even if I had Odin's power and sage-eyes, I still wouldn't have been able to comprehend all that I saw. The vast nothingness of water and wind and gleaming rock stretching into the distance, where you could easily believe that the earth ended by falling off an enormous waterfall. Looking left and right, up and down, to where white glided towards the horizon.

*

We turned left, moving away from the Sognefjord and into the fairy glen of Nærøyfjord. The mountains were a mossier green, with swathes cut back to produce curving hillside and tiny villages dotted across the grass. Perhaps four or five houses, whispering across the fjord to their cousins on the other side. Did they treat these cruise ships

as buses, I wondered? Norwegian hitch-hiking, hopping on any boat that came their way?

After a brief stop at a hamlet, we continued around the corner. The landscape widened there, the mountains an unbreachable wall of green ahead, with a snow-tipped basin carved out the top like the crack on Humpty Dumpty's head. The sun fell over it, moving across like a lighthouse beam, and as we moved around the corner – turning late, a final *ta-dah!* – it blared like a spotlight.

I didn't smell much. Not outside – where air was taken up with the sheer particles of looking, and the fjord sucked everything into its depths. But it wasn't scary. Perhaps it was the embrace of the mountains, or knowing that Fate dropped part of my soul there for me to retrieve, but I wasn't scared. (It's not horror, as Ann Radcliffe said, but terror – the psychological terror of *what if*, what if I fell into these indigo waters?) Yet although the brutality of the landscape could easily provoke this fear, it doesn't.

You're just sucked into the soft siren's song of the fjord, where nothing else matters. Tucked away from the world, tucked *into* a place provoking so much emotion that you could give away the world's riches and never complain again.

This, to me, was wealth. A landscape so desolate, so untouched, as if it fell straight from the past, that humans are drawn to its colossal wilderness again and again. And not, as some might think, to control it. To stand there and *breathe*, really breathe, and taste the ancient world we stole and lost.

[chapters excluded]

11. Kotor

There was only one place left on our list in Kotor. San Giovanni's fortress, cut sharply from the mountainside above the Old Town and connected to it by hundreds of slippery steps.

"Don't worry," I'd said to Lydia, back when we were planning the itinerary. "We'll go *down* the steps. To go up, on the other hand..."

The problem with planning excursions in an unknown place is that you only have the faintest idea of what you're actually signing up to. For us, that meant getting up at six o'clock on our last morning in Kotor, and stumbling through the streets of the new town until we found the entrance to our path. The Ladder of Kotor: a crumbling, rocky track crisscrossing up the mountain and continuing to Krstac Pass.

"Are you sure about this?"

Lydia looked at the corrugated fence, blocking the edge of the river, and then to the shrub-filled cliff face above.

"Positive," I said. "All the reviews say it's much better. Just don't stray off the path."

"Why?"

"Well, they *did* mention snakes. But let's not think about that, shall we?"

I led the way to the trail. As we crossed the river – a faint trickle, blocked by a dam – the Ladder of Kotor came into view.

“It’s not that bad,” I said, nodding at a couple walking ahead of us. “And we’re not the only mad ones here, either.”

The sun was already beating on the back of our necks as we started the climb. We’d worn our bikinis under our clothes so we could go swimming after, and it took approximately four minutes before I started dreaming about the deliciously cool water. What do people do in hot countries, without access to the sea? I couldn’t bear it.

The path itself only had a mild incline, and once I’d got used to the switchbacks, it went rather quickly. Halfway up, we reached the local cheese shop and café, which had beautiful views across the zigzagging path below. I checked the time.

“It’s too early for cheese, right?”

Past the ruined church; past the rocks tumbling off the yellowing grass and spindly plants. When we reached the main entrance to the fortress, we both stopped, stared and laughed.

“Oh, the irony.”

The only way into San Giovanni’s fortress from the Ladder of Kotor, it appeared, was a tiny, wooden ladder propped up against one of the old fortress windows. A woman appeared from the inside and clambered down, before jumping off.

“It’s totally safe,” I said. Whether I was trying to convince myself or Lydia, I couldn’t say. “After you!”

We climbed through, trying not to think about the drop below. Lydia was waiting for me on the other side, gazing at the view. My breath caught. “Oh, wow.”

The sun crept slowly over the western mountains, with the Bay of Kotor a serene mass of blue beneath the rounded hills. Directly below us, still sleeping in the shadows, was the triangular fortification of the Old Town. New Kotor stretched to the left, Dobrota spilling to the right, and ahead sat the endless harmony of the bay.

“Magical,” I said, breathing deeply. “Just magical.”

We made our way to the top of the fortress and then down the medieval steps: huge, uneven stumbling blocks, giving us ample time to pause and take in the scenery below.

“Shall we take a picture here?”

We weren’t the only ones. People were starting to come up the steps, forcing us to hop onto the flat surface and pray that we wouldn’t fall. Normally, I’d have avoided them completely – yet I found myself drawn in by that great, inexplicable sound of words rushing together in multiple tongues. Languages.

*

I *love* languages. All the intricacies of grammar; the musical leaps of intonation and cadence and breath. Words, so many words, meaning so many beautiful things.

One of the things that pains me the most about being British is the arrogance with which we use our language. With its universal dominance originating from Britain’s colonial past, many native speakers assume that, just because other people speak English, they themselves

don't even need to try. Other languages, for them, mean nothing.

Languages are hard. I'll be the first to admit that. They require effort and perseverance, and they slip away in an instant if you don't put in the practice. Particularly if you haven't been learning since birth or a young age, it's even more difficult to perfect them, but when travelling, nobody's asking for that. Learning a few phrases – *please, thank you, goodbye* – is a mark of respect for the culture and community you've entered. And, even if you know far less than in your mother tongue, this simple act of courtesy will get you further in many ways.

“Il fait chaud, hein? Je sue.”

My ears pricked up when I heard the French couple behind us. When we next all paused at the corner, whipping out our phones and cameras, I found myself turning to them without a second thought.

“Voulez-vous me prendre une photo de vous ?”

They beamed in surprise and nodded. After taking the photo, and Lydia and I moved on, I felt a swirl of satisfaction inside.

“What was that all about?”

“What?”

There was a Dutch couple coming towards us, and we did a dance on the stairs. I smiled, feeling nostalgia for Utrecht, and told them to watch out for the steps near the top.

“Er zijn daar veel mensen. Veel geluk!”

Lydia coughed. “That. Since when do you talk to strangers?”

I paused, frowning. “Good question.”

Since when *did* I talk to strangers? In the UK, I avoided them as much as possible, knowing that any conversation I had would be stilted and insincere. But I felt an easy confidence here, drawing upon the languages I'd studied in the past, and the triumph I felt after making successful conversation was unparalleled. Perhaps, as a writer, I was saving all my English words for the page?

At the bottom of the steps, we skipped through the payment turnstile with glee. Only people going *up* have to pay the fortress entry fee – not down.

“See?” I grinned at Lydia. “Told you it was worth it.”

We went to the beach. Stripping off and plunging into the water, the sweat washing off our shoulders and aching legs. As I lay there, floating on my back, I thought more about languages. Was there a reason I had always been attracted to them? Was it some kind of autistic curse – loving and learning new tongues, but forever not being able to properly use my own?

No, I thought, wiggling my toes, not a curse. A *gift*. For learning a new language could only ever be that – a chance to learn new meanings, new cultures and a new form of perception. Being able to talk to people was only the very tip of that, but it was *something I could do*. Not very well, of course, but something all the same. And anyone should be proud of that.

I rolled over, feeling the waves rock us into a sense of lullaby peace.