

Norway: Social Life & Customs

There is no class structure and no aristocracy apart from the royal family; the king can knight people for services to the state but they have no title. Norwegians tend to be easy-going and hospitable, but have great national pride. Elaborate national folk costumes (*bunader*) with about 200 regional variations are worn at weddings and other festive occasions. The long dark winters can be depressing, especially in the North, but summer is celebrated — work finishes mid-afternoon to make the most of the light evenings. Many enjoy the outdoor life in their spare time, spending weekends hiking, fishing or boating (14% of households own a boat; there are 400 000 leisure craft) in summer and skiing in winter. 20% of households own one of 418 000 holiday cabins in the countryside, which is unpolluted and litter-free. 35% of adults belong to a sports club.; 55% attend sports as spectators but less often than 10 years ago. Leisure time has increased for both men and women as time spent on housework, preparing and eating meals has reduced. Lifestyles are greatly influenced by the state welfare programme with paid holidays and guaranteed pensions. However, as in many western countries, lifestyles are changing, particularly with the young who are less active outdoors and more interested in the urban social and music scenes.

Etiquette: It is normal to shake hands when meeting someone for the first time. People are introduced by their job title rather than Mr/Mrs/Miss. eg *vaktmester* (caretaker) *Per Olsen*. In the south, it's considered polite to telephone before visiting but unannounced visits are completely acceptable in the north. Older people and strangers are addressed by the formal '*De*' (you); children and friends by the informal '*du*'. In homes, outdoor coats and shoes are removed in the entrance hall. Norwegians do not eat at restaurants as often as the British but they do invite friends to their homes much more often for a meal or a drink. Wait for your host to invite you to start eating and wait until the host makes the toast '*Skål*' before you touch your drink and return the toast. After a meal, thank the hostess with '*Takk for maten*' (thanks for the food). Norwegians don't drop litter; always dispose of your rubbish responsibly. Visitors are not expected to be formal and smart casual dress is the norm, even in business.

Religion: Norway is the least religious country in Western Europe in terms of practicing faith. There is religious freedom with several hundred registered religious organisations receiving financial support from the state. About 86% of Norwegians are nominally members of the official state Church of Norway (Evangelical Lutheran), but this is declining amongst the young. Over 70% of babies are baptised and over 60% of 14-year olds are confirmed; about 15% choose a civic confirmation after a citizenship course. Over one-third of marriages take place in civic registries rather than churches and over half of these are second or third marriages; 19% of marriages take place abroad. Civic registries also perform over 250 same sex partnership ceremonies annually. Over 95% have a church burial service. Only 13% take part in church activities with 3% attending services regularly. The King nominates church bishops who are appointed by the government. The first woman priest was appointed in 1961 and the first woman bishop in 1993.

Jews and Jesuits were banned from entering Norway since the Danish-Norwegian Lutheran reformation. In 1845, other christian denominations and atheism were permitted but the law prohibiting Jews was not abolished until 1851. Jews were persecuted during WW2 and in 1946 only 559 Jews were living in Norway. There is some anti-semitism today among nationalistic neo-nazi and extremist islamist movements, but it isn't common. In 1964 a constitutional amendment allowed freedom of religion, except that the royal family and at least half of the Government must belong to the state church. There is continuing debate about separating church and state.

There are about 51 000 Catholics in Oslo and other cities along with churches (*kirker*) of other denominations (about 153 000 other Protestants, including 40 000 Pentecostals). There are 80 000 humanists, 79 000 Muslims, 10 000 Buddhists and 1000 Baha'is. Eastern

Orthodox, Sikhs and Hindus are also present. Modern Sami are mostly Christian but some still follow traditional shamanistic beliefs. The local Tourist Information Office can tell you if there is a church or group of your faith in the area.

Family life and homes: Demographics are changing as the traditional rural society becomes urbanised (77% in 2009). As in all northern Europe countries, there is a decline in the marriage rate and a third of couples with children are unmarried, accounting for over 53% of children, mostly in Oslo and northern counties. The divorce/separation rate has increased from 10% in 1960 to about 45% with over 60% of these having children. Two-parent, two-children families are still the norm but 22% of children are in single parent families. Since 1970, the average child-bearing age for mothers has increased by 4 years to 30 but the legalisation of abortion in 1978 has led to nearly 3% of the 18-24 year age group having an abortion annually. The birthrate for teenage mothers has dropped by 75%, and the abortion rate has doubled, a net reduction in pregnancies. In 1970, 90% of adopted children were Norwegian, this dropped to 16% in 2001 but has since risen to 40%; most adopted children are now Chinese, South Korean or Colombian.

Since 1970, the number of one-person households has doubled to 39% of all households, common in inner cities and sparsely populated areas and in the youngest and oldest adult age groups. Some students at secondary level have to leave home to study in a large town or city (and many who don't, still choose to), so they become independent much earlier than in other countries. There has been a shift in the care of elderly relatives from the family to the state. The average life expectancy of 78.7 years (2007), an increase of 10 years since 1950, has implications for future social welfare provision.

Average household income is kr 527 700 (2006), 74% earned, 5% property and unearned income, 21% pensions and benefits. As in most western countries, the rich are becoming richer but 5.6% of households are below the official poverty level. Average household debt has soared since 2000 to kr 772 000 in 2006; 80% of households have debt; for 27%, debt is more than twice annual income, for 13% more than three times. Household expenditure has more than trebled in real terms since 1958. The average household spends 29% of its budget on housing, transport 18%, food 11%, clothing 5%, communications 2%, alcohol 2%. In the last 50 years, consumption of meat has remained constant; potatoes, fish, milk (with a shift to skimmed and semi-skimmed), fats, oils and sugar have fallen; alcohol, soft drinks, juices, fruit and vegetables have increased.

About 53% of households live in detached houses (with 64% of the population), 21% in semi-detached or terrace houses and 22% in flats or other accommodation. 70% of households have a garden. 76% are owner-occupiers (one of the highest levels in Europe), 17% are tenants but this proportion is higher in cities. 20% of households also own a holiday home, 145 own a boat. Average dwelling size is 114m², the highest in Europe, and 33% have two or more bath/shower rooms. The price of dwellings has risen more than 270% since 1992 (almost 500% in Greater Oslo).

Since 1946, the average daily travel distance has increased from 4km to 40km, mainly in the use of private cars and flying; rail and sea travel have remained constant. 80% of households own a car (total 2.2 million), more in rural areas; nearly 25% have two or more. 80% go on holiday each year for an average of 21 days, the second highest number in Europe after Germany. Women take holidays more often than men and for longer. The most popular destinations are Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, UK, Germany.

Sickness and deaths: The sickness absence rate from work is 8.5% for women and 5.5% for men. Since 1970, daily smokers have decreased from 52% to 21% for men and 30% to 22% for women; an additional 10% are occasional smokers. However there has been an increase to 10% of men taking snuff daily. Since the war, the number of deaths due to TB and other infectious diseases has declined while cancer and heart diseases remain significantly high. Diabetes and respiratory diseases have increased. Violent deaths have decreased for men due to fewer fishing and other marine accidents; an increase in deaths due to falls and traffic accidents is now declining.

Family occasions: Children's birthdays are celebrated annually, but later ones are usually celebrated only by immediate family. However, certain years, eg 18th, 21st, 50th, 60th, 65th, 70th, 80th, are marked by larger celebrations with friends as well as family, often a large dinner party. Other occasions, eg christenings, confirmations, weddings and funerals, may be rather formal with many speeches.

Public Holidays (*heiligdager*):

If a public holiday falls on a Sunday, the next day becomes a holiday. Public transport usually runs a Sunday service, except for Christmas and New Year where there is a very limited service or none.

1 Jan	New Year's Day	40th day after Easter	Ascension Day
March/April	Maundy Thursday- Easter Monday	8th Monday after Easter	Whit Monday
1 May	Labour Day	25 Dec	Christmas Day
17 May	Constitution Day	26 Dec	St Stephen's Day

Easter (*påske*) is popular as a skiing holiday. The Sami hold reindeer races, traditional chanting (*joik*) concerts and colourful festivities at Easter in Karasjok and Kautokeino.

Constitution Day (*Grunnlovsdagen*) has the biggest turnout with events everywhere; people wear traditional costume. It is a civic celebration without any government or military participation; in Oslo, schoolchildren and marching bands parade along Karl Johans gate to the Royal Palace (*Slottet*) to be greeted by the King. Bjørnson wrote a poem <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ja,_vi_elsker_dette_landet> for the 50th anniversary of the constitution in 1864, subsequently adopted as the national anthem. Music at: <[http://www.navyband.navy.mil/anthems/ANTHEMS/Norway%20\(National%20Anthem\).mp3](http://www.navyband.navy.mil/anthems/ANTHEMS/Norway%20(National%20Anthem).mp3)>. The day is also celebrated in Shetland and in immigrant communities in the USA and other countries.

On Midsummer's Eve (*Sankthanskvelden*), 23 June, shops and offices close early, small boats go out to islands for picnics and bonfires are lit on the beach with barbecues, parties, singing, dancing and fireworks until the early hours.

The industrial summer holiday is the last three weeks in July. School holidays are eight weeks from mid-June to mid-August, one week at end of September/beginning of October, two weeks at Christmas/New Year, one week at end of February and one week at Easter.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee awards the Nobel Peace Prize each year on 10 December.

St Lucia's Day, 13 December, is celebrated with a children's candlelit procession to church and a carol service. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Lucia_Day>

Christmas (*jul*) is celebrated with a tree in most homes; the family's main celebratory meal takes place on the evening of Christmas Eve (*juleaften*) after which gifts are exchanged. As in other countries, pre-Christian traditions have been incorporated. A bowl of porridge is left out for the gnome (*Jule-nissen*) who brings good fortune to farmers and is the equivalent of Santa Claus; in the country, an oat sheaf (*julenek*) is mounted on a pole and left out for birds. Traditional foods include sour cream porridge (*rømmegrøt*) or rice porridge (eaten for lunch), ptarmigan or grouse (*rupa*) in the north, glutinous cod soaked in lye (*lutefisk*) in the west, pork roast or ribs (*svineribber*) in the southeast, *rakfisk*, dried salted pork (*pinnekjøtt*) or mutton ribs (*pinneribbe*) steamed over birch or juniper twigs, minced pork sausages (*medisterpølser*), mashed rutabaga, sauerkraut and boiled potatoes, rice cream (*riskrem*) with raspberry sauce, raisin buns and biscuits (*strull* and *goro*), a small gingerbread house, seven traditional types of *julekaker*: ginger snaps (*pepperkaker*), doughnuts (*smultringer*), treacle snaps (*sirupssnipper*), sandcakes (*sandkaker*), griddle cake filled with butter, sugar and cinnamon icing (*lefsekling*), curl cakes (*krumkaker*) and brown sticks (*brune pinner*), grog (*gløgg*) made with cinnamon, raisins, almonds, ginger, cloves, cardamom, other spices and juice, raspberry or orange *julebrus*, strong dark holiday beer (*julaøl*), aquavit (*akvavit*). Between *juleaften* and New Year's Eve, children pay visits to neighbours to sing a carol or perform and are given candy, nuts and clementines (*julebukk*

or *nyttårsbukk*). In some areas, adults visit neighbours and are given drinks (*drammebukk*). Workplaces also serve a similar *julebord* for their staff around late November/early December.

New Year's Eve is celebrated with fireworks at midnight. A meal with turkey is common.

Books: Christmas Fireside Stories: Norwegian Folk & Fairy Tales, by P. C. Asbjornsen (2008, ISBN 978 140 979 486 8) £16.95

Dollar Road, by Kjartan Flagstad & N. Christensen (Louisiana State University Press 1989 ISBN 978 080 711 525 1) £17.49, portrays the transformation of rural Norway to an industrial society.