

# The St Olav Way to Nidaros



## The Norwegian pilgrim trail from Oslo to Trondheim

A short and unofficial guide by Joly Braime,  
with photographs by David Tett



## Introduction

The medieval pilgrim route from Oslo to Nidaros (the old name for Trondheim) runs through over 640 kilometres of forests, fjords, fields and fells, threading its way past weathered stave churches, ancient burial grounds and old-fashioned, timbered and turf-roofed lodgings that have been welcoming footsore travellers for many hundreds of years.

You'll cross wide mountain plateaus, snack on sweet wild berries from the side of the path, and fill your water bottle from crisp woodland springs. Quite possibly you'll find yourself sitting drinking strong, black coffee in a Norwegian living room, sleeping at the head of a valley in an old open-fronted pilgrim shelter, or rinsing away the aches of the trail with a swim in a secluded forest pool.

It's Norway's answer to the famous Camino Francés, but unlike its Spanish counterpart, the pilgrim trail to Nidaros has remained relatively undiscovered, particularly in the English-speaking world. You've got all the benefits of well-maintained and waymarked trails, loads of great infrastructure in terms of accommodation and local services, and even a network of dedicated pilgrim offices along the way, yet much of the time you'll tramp all day without

encountering any other walkers. There's no racing for hostel places or jostling for the best picnic spot, and as you reach the many breathtaking viewpoints along the route, you'll find you rarely have to share them.

Above all, Norway is at its best when explored on foot. Much of the trail goes through places that are remote or inaccessible by road, the country has some of the most liberal access laws in Europe, and locals along the route are so friendly that you'll wonder why everyone bangs on about 'Nordic reserve'.

### Pilgrim centres

The friendly pilgrim centres tend to be hubs for a particular region, and they'll help you out with maps, advice, and usually a good chat over a pot of coffee. You can find them in:

**Oslo**  
**Granavollen**  
**Hamar**  
**Dale Gudbrands Gard**  
**Dovrefjell**  
**Trondheim**

## About the St Olav Ways

The St Olav Ways are a network of routes, all leading to Nidaros cathedral in modern-day Trondheim. When they talk about the pilgrim trail, most people will be referring to the journey from Oslo, but there are other routes coming down to Nidaros from the north, or across from Sweden.

The official website ([www.pilegrimsleden.no/en/](http://www.pilegrimsleden.no/en/)) breaks them down into six separate paths, but the most popular route, known as the Gudbrandsdalen route, stretches from Oslo to Trondheim, a distance of around 640 kilometres or 400 miles.

For the first third of the route, pilgrims get to choose whether they want to loop east or west to get to the Olympic city of Lillehammer. Both routes have their appeal, and if you're cunning you can do a bit of both by taking an old paddle steamer across the Mjøsa from Gjøvik to the majestic cathedral ruins at Hamar.

Some pilgrims choose to start by the sea at Son, taking the Follo path up to Oslo before joining the main route, while others extend the journey at the end by following the path up to the site of St Olav's death at Stiklestad.

## How long does it take?

Depends how easy you want to take it, and where you're staying. With the flexibility of tents, a group of reasonably fit campers walking the Gudbrandsdalen path (west route) can do it in 29 days.

The official website recommends leaving yourself 32 days, while some of the group walk schedules allow closer to 40. You'll know your own fitness level, but the main thing is to leave yourself more time than you think you need. Bits of bad luck like heavy weather or minor injuries can knock your daily mileage, and you want to be enjoying all the lovely places along the route, napping in quiet churchyards or paddling in cool rivers, rather than beasting yourself with back-to-back route marches in a desperate bid to make your flight home.

Obviously not everyone will be able to abandon their lives for a whole month, and the good news is that a lot of pilgrims don't. In fact most people you meet along the way are likely to be walking just a section of the path. Some come back for a week each summer, taking four or five years to complete the route, while others just pick a segment based on how much time they've got. For suggested stretches if you're short on time, see page 5.



## The history of St Olav

St Olav, or Olav Haraldsson II, was King of Norway from 1015 until his grisly death in battle at Stiklestad on 29 July 1030. He is famous as the man who brought Christianity to Norway, fighting a Christianising campaign up the central part of the country after his own conversion and baptism at Rouen in 1014.

Modern historians tend to be reasonably circumspect about Olav's conversion of Norway – noting that many Norwegians were already Christian by the 11th century, and also that Olav himself was a rather bloodthirsty and not altogether successful ruler – but in the middle ages he was widely regarded as one of the greatest saints of northern Europe. Pilgrims travelled in vast numbers to visit his remains in a silver reliquary at Nidaros Cathedral, and the site was regarded as the northern point of the medieval pilgrim's compass (with Rome in the south, Jerusalem in the east and Santiago de Compostela in the West).

Norway's religious reformation in the 16th century changed all that. Not only did the Danish king, Christian III (who at that time also ruled Norway) order a mass conversion to Lutheranism, but he also had Olav's silver reliquary melted down for coins,

### The pilgrim passport

Available at pilgrim centres, you can get them stamped at churches, lodgings and other pilgrim sites along the way. Show yours to the staff at the Trondheim pilgrim centre, and if you've walked over 100km they'll fill you out an official certificate.

and re-buried the saint's remains somewhere in the grounds of the cathedral. Today, no-one knows the precise location of Olav's resting place.

With the reformation, the pilgrim route gradually fell out of use. New roads and bridges on the valley floors, better suited to vehicles, replaced the old foot tracks that wound their way through the hills and forests, and the pilgrim lofts along the way turned into storehouses or fell into ruin. Until the mid-1990s, that is, when waymarking began on the trail again after hundreds of years.

The most well-known account of Olav's life is in the Icelandic saga *Heimskringla* by the poet, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). When the information boards along the route talk about 'Snorre', this is what they're referring to.



## When to walk the pilgrim trail

June, July and August are your main window of opportunity. Outside of these months, parts of the trail might still be accessible, but you're going to be making life a lot harder for yourself, particularly up in the mountains (where there can still be snow well into May). Norwegians are generally more prone to understating than overstating the risks of hiking, which seems a good argument for walking the route during the recommended season.

Unsurprisingly, the people of southern Norway like to get into the outdoors too, though in their case they tend to gravitate more towards mountains than the forests and fields that make up much of the pilgrim trail. This does mean that accommodation can sometimes be closed in July, while the owners are off at their cabins. If you haven't pre-booked your lodgings then it's worth calling ahead a day or two in advance just to make sure the places you're planning on staying are still open and have availability.

## In a group, or go it alone?

You'll find several organised groups on the route, usually in the latter stages. In keeping with the general demographic of Olav's pilgrims, most seem to be German, but there are some Norwegian groups as well. You can find details of upcoming group walks on the official website.

The benefits of walking in a big group are fairly self-evident. Most of the organisation is done for you, there's the chance to make new friends, and a knowledgeable guide is an enormous bonus on a route with so much interesting stuff by the wayside. A lot of them will also ferry your bags, meaning you can walk with just a day pack, to the envy of those slogging along in your wake with 70 litres of kit on their backs.

There's also a lot to be said for a bit of solitude. The route is safe and well waymarked, and being on your own or with just one or two other people gives you more flexibility where accommodation is concerned. Chances are you'll meet other people along the way, and when you do, you can stick together for a while or just exchange pleasantries and keep to your own pace. A lone backpacker is also a fairly unintimidating creature, and you might find local people are more likely to stop for a chat or invite you in for refreshment.

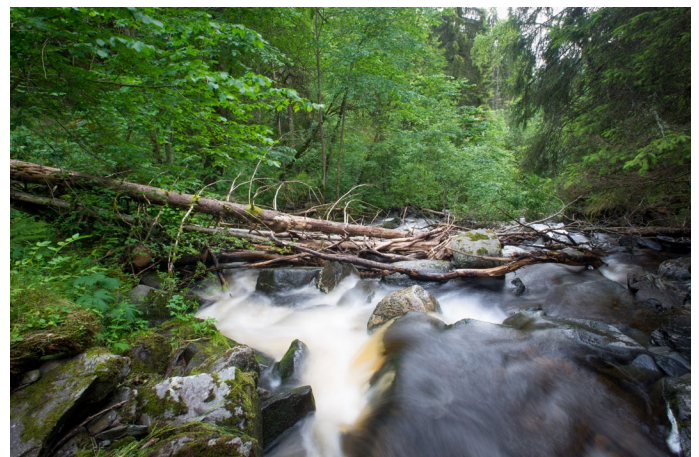
## Terrain

The bulk of the trail is made up of woodland tracks, small roads and field paths. Occasionally there'll be a short stretch on a busy road, but whoever devised the route had a laudable disregard for road walking, and you're more likely to get frustrated by zig-zagging around in the woods to avoid the road than you are by tramping along miles of tarmac.

Then of course you have the mountain stretch over Dovre. This has some steep bits, uncertain weather, and an intimidating reputation, but the excellent paths mean it's actually not as punishing on your legs as some other sections. Norway is a relentlessly undulating country anyway, so by the time you get to the mountains you'll be well used to steep inclines.

The bad news is that the trail can be very boggy underfoot in places. Usually there's duckboarding patching over the worst sections, but sooner or later wet feet are inevitable. If the waterproof lining in your boots has seen better days, now is the time to replace them.

Generally the tracks are very well-maintained, but over the course of 400 miles there are bound to be some exceptions. You might encounter bridges knackered by flooding, fallen trees blocking your way, flooded stretches and places where the paths have been destroyed by landslides, fires or forestry work. None of it is insurmountable, however, and there are a lot of people working very hard to keep the route open. Keep your eyes peeled for diversions, and if you come across an obstacle, note down exactly where it was and report it to the nearest pilgrim office. They're always keen for information on the state of the trail, and obstructions rarely last long.



## Signposting

Veterans of the Spanish camino will miss their yellow spray paint, but you will become very familiar with the red St Olav cross. This neat little symbol appears on signposts, lamp posts, stiles and fences. It's nailed to the sides of people's houses and stuck on street corners. Often you see it hanging from trees. It can take any form, from a thick wooden post to a sticker on a road sign, but you rarely go far without one.



Simple red-topped posts frequently indicate the route, but it's as well to be sceptical of pieces of red ribbon tied on fences or trees, since these are usually for winter skiers and can easily lead you astray. If you do lose your way, just retrace your steps to the last signpost and have a look at the map.

The route is so well waymarked that you won't need to splash out on detailed topographical maps of the area. The pilgrim office in Oslo can provide you with some grainy photocopies of the maps, and these should do you just fine. The official website lets you print off more detailed maps, and as of 2016, GPX files of the route will also be available.

Of course that's not to say there's no chance of going wrong. Some municipalities are more conscientious than others about maintaining the waymarking, and sod's law dictates that if a marker is missing then it will undoubtedly be at an ambiguous turn in the trail. Similarly, there are a few red herrings where a signpost has been knocked over then accidentally been stood back up facing the wrong way by a well-meaning passer-by. Generally, though, things like these tend to be fixed quite quickly, and if you do go off-piste then it's most likely to be because you were too busy talking or daydreaming and didn't spot a signpost. It happens.

## Where to stay

There's a range of accommodation to suit all tastes. Pilgrims can stay in reasonably nice hotels or sleep rough in the woods, and there are lots of in-between options like mountain lodges, hostels and cabins. You can find locations and full details for all the accommodation along the route by using the trip planner tool on the official St Olav Ways website.

If you're going to sleep indoors (and even hardened wild campers will probably want a roof and a shower once or twice a week), among the nicest forms of lodging are the pilgrim hostels, where families along the way rent a room or an annexe to passing walkers. These tend to be fairly basic, but they're often great value, and the owners will invariably give you a very warm welcome.

Being Norway, nothing comes cheap, but it also doesn't have to be ruinous. A standard lower-end place will probably set you back 200-250NOK, though self-catering cabins at campsites can sometimes be significantly cheaper than this. Hotels, on the other hand, can be a lot more, and for the nicer ones it'll cost you 750NOK at least.

If you plan to use any accommodation at the more budget end of the spectrum then you'll need to bring a sleeping bag. In the absence of one you can usually rent bed linen, but it can be quite expensive (normally 60-100NOK).

Many places offer a pilgrim discount, which can sometimes be quite substantial, and some will also give you extra little sweeteners like shower tokens, fresh milk or a bit of food.

### Recommended shorter stretches

**One week:** Dovre to Oppdal. The stand-out leg of the trail is the mountainous Dovrefjell stretch. Lodging can be more basic than elsewhere on the route, but it's worth it for the breathtaking vistas alone. It's roughly 100km, so allow five days.

**Two weeks:** Lillehammer to Berkåk. You'll still get to cross Dovrefjell, but you'll also get gorgeous views through Gudbrandsdalen, and visit the famous stave church at Ringeby. This is roughly 14 days walking at a fair pace, so if it seems a bit tight then you could finish at Oppdal instead.

## Camping out in Norway

In Norway, 'allemannsretten' ('every man's right') is enshrined in law. This essentially legalises wild camping (among other things), and their right to enjoy the outdoors is so ingrained in the Norwegian psyche that people will look at you with complete incomprehension when you try and explain that it's against the law back home.

There are exceptions, and the legalese of it is fairly lengthy and complicated (available online for anyone who's interested), but you should be all good so long as you're respectful and abide by the principles listed opposite.

While fires aren't always banned, in practice you'll mostly be bedding down in conifer woods, so it's worth thinking long and hard before starting one when you've got dense tree cover and the floor is thickly carpeted with dry spruce needles. Most camping stoves are unlikely to cause a problem, but campfires are probably best saved for proper fireplaces (which you'll come across now and then).

Some pilgrims fret that they'll have trouble finding suitable sites, and that they'll end up walking for miles at the end of every day looking for a place to

### Five golden rules for wild camping

'Allemannsretten' is based on simple principles. Be nice, be sensible and be discreet. In particular:

1. **Don't camp on cultivated land.**
2. **Don't camp near someone's house.**
3. **Don't stay more than a night if you can help it.**
4. **Don't damage anything (including trees).**
5. **Leave no trace.**

lay up. You won't. Occasionally the combination of houses, cultivated fields and roads might mean you have to search around a bit for a screen of trees, or take a site that's not ideal in some way or other, but so long as you're not too fussy you'll be fine.

Another option from time to time comes in the form of the lean-to shelters you find along the trail. Known locally as 'gapahuks', some of them are specifically for pilgrims, while others are for hunters. Most have fireplaces, while the more luxurious ones



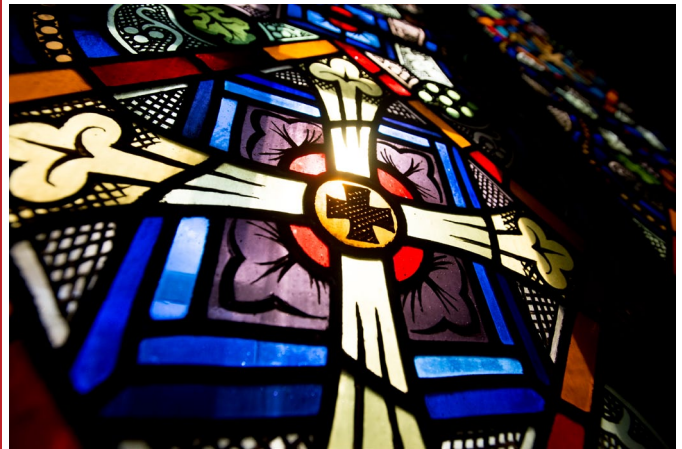
might have a few old sofa cushions and blankets, a tarp across the front to keep the rain out, or a diverting collection of 1990s magazines. So long as you leave them the way you found them, no-one will mind you spending the night at one of these, and they make nice spots to shelter from the rain.

You may have the right to camp, but whether you want to is a different matter. There are pros and cons. Sleeping outside is usually less comfortable than being in a bed, particularly if the weather's bad, and it means you'll need to pony around a lot more gear. On the other hand, you'll save a vast amount of money, and you'll have more flexibility, since having tents means you can walk as far as you like without worrying about ending up in a particular location for your accommodation.

Apart from anything else, camping out can be rather lovely, and the relative asceticism of it feels somehow appropriate to the pilgrim way. No doubt there'll be the odd night where you get wet or cold, the owls keep you awake with their screeching, or an elk scares the hell out of you, but there'll also be some great evenings sitting with your back against a spruce tree, drinking a bottle of beer that you've iced in the stream nearby, before retiring to sleep soundly on a cushion of bilberry bushes. Your call.

## Top three churches

The many beautiful churches along the route are worth exploring. They're often open, and make lovely places for shelter and contemplation.



**Ringebu:** The only traditional stave church along the route. It smells amazing.

**Hamar:** An iconic ruined cathedral intertwined with a modern glass edifice.

**Eystein:** A striking, modern haven for pilgrims, up on remote Dovrefjell.





## Eating

Norwegian food has a pretty bad rep, but as a hiker you'll struggle to see why. What a food reviewer might describe as 'stodgy' is exactly what you fancy after dragging a 15-kilo pack uphill for 20 kilometres. Main meals are frequently meaty stews served with mash, though there are also some tasty fish dishes, often made with dried or salted fish.

Many small towns or villages will also have a good bakery, and if you're passing through round lunch-time then it's always worth stopping for an open sandwich, preferably heaped high with 'gravet laks' (cured salmon), beetroot and sliced boiled egg. Places like these will generally serve a tempting array of sweet pastries too, and waffles are popular.

In terms of fast food, the most ubiquitous is the hot dog, and British pilgrims will be thoroughly overwhelmed by the range of different kinds available (the version wrapped in bacon is a winner). Most petrol stations do a decent one, and they're pretty much the only hot food you'll get anywhere for under 100NOK.

And therein lies the rub, because eating in Norway, like anything else, is expensive. Even supermarkets will crucify your wallet, and it's worth giving some fairly careful thought to how much food you want to bring with you from home. Packets of pasta with powdered sauce, instant mash, dried fruit and granola bars might not be the most enticing of diets, but when you can buy a week's worth of food like this back home for the price of a slicing sausage, a loaf of bread and a punnet of peaches in a Norwegian supermarket, it might start to sound more appealing. Ultimately it's a balancing act between your budget, the weight of your pack and your culinary standards, though you should definitely splash out on a restaurant meal at least once or twice.

If you're bringing your own camping stove to cook on, remember that you can't take fuel on the plane. There are plenty of outdoor shops around once you get to Oslo (and in several towns along the route), so as long as your gas canister is a reasonably common fitting, you should be fine. For spirit burners, note that the Norwegian equivalent of methylated spirit is red, not purple, and is known simply as 'rødsprit' ('red spirit'). It rarely shows up in outdoor shops but you can find it in hardware stores and sometimes in supermarkets.

## Living off the land

Norwegian law allows hikers to pick and eat the tempting berries that grow along the wayside.

### Alpine strawberries

These tiny, sweet treats are particularly abundant on the first couple of days out of Lillehammer.

### Wild raspberries

These turn up from time to time. Keep an eye out on the trail between Oppdal and Voll.



### Bilberries

You'll find plenty of bilberry bushes in the woods, especially further south. The season is short, so grab the tart little berries if you can.

### Cloudberries

Poisonous-looking and delicious, these are yellow when ripe. Reasonably hard to come by, but the marshy stretch round Skaun is a good bet.

### Redcurrants

Translucent red berries with lobed leaves, often seemingly found along the edge of train tracks.



## Drinking

Filter it if you feel safer, but the water in Norway is very clean, and you can drink straight from pretty much any stream without a problem (obviously the water should be running, and it's better to find the clearest source possible, away from fields and animals). Most Norwegians will also be more than happy to give you a refill, so you needn't be shy about knocking on a door if you're running low.

Closer to towns, you might come across fewer streams (and they might not be so savoury), but you can often find handy taps in churchyards.



The other thing you will drink lots of is coffee. Norwegians take it strong, black, and in such industrial quantities that it presumably doesn't matter that it never gets dark in summer because everyone's too wired to sleep anyway. Pilgrim centres and churches will usually offer you a cup, and sooner or later one of the friendly souls who stops to chat to you at the roadside is bound to ask you in for coffee. As pick-me-ups go, it's difficult to beat.

Finally, there is booze, something with which Norway has a complicated relationship. Without going into too much detail, only weaker beers are available from supermarkets, and only at restricted hours of the day. For everything else, you need to go to Vinmonopolet, the state monopoly store.

You may think you see beer on sale in other shops, but on closer inspection it is almost always non-alcoholic (the malty ones can actually be quite tasty). Occasionally in smaller stores you might strike lucky and find that something more to your tastes is available under the counter, but some folk can be rather sensitive about alcohol, so it's best to wait for the offer and not to ask for it outright.

Alcohol is very highly taxed, which makes it expensive even by Norwegian standards. For a little less than a pint, you're looking at around 80NOK. And they never fill it to the top.

The good news is that Norwegians have got very good at making their own beer, and several of these small-scale brewers, some using traditional farmhouse methods, have begun to emerge commercially with the arrival of the craft beer craze from the US. This is particularly true in the Trøndelag region, and Trondheim has some great bars serving really good beer, much of it Norwegian.

## Hazards and annoyances

Number one is the weather, which is famously capricious in Norway. The sun could beat down on you relentlessly or it could batter you with sheeting rain and thunderstorms. Chances are it will do both, quite possibly in the same afternoon.

At least you can plan for it. Make sure your boots and waterproofs are re-proofed, and replace them if they're not up to the job. Take waterproof trousers, and if you can get some with side zips so you can get them on and off quickly without removing your boots, all the better. Take a rucksack cover, and dry-bags for anything important (like your sleeping bag). The pilgrim offices recommend a warm hat and gloves for Dovrefjell, while similarly a sun hat and sun cream are essentials.

In terms of wildlife, the south of Norway has lots of wonderful creatures, but nothing dangerous. You wouldn't want to get too close to something big like an elk or a musk ox, but in reality you won't. In fact, the only wild animals likely to get aggressive with you are the odd lemming (seriously) and the diabolical swarms of mosquitoes. Take the most weapons-grade repellent you can get your hands on.

As for domestic animals, Norwegian farmers are a lot better than British ones about leaving loose dogs in farmyards or bulls in fields, apparently due to a justice system which is stricter about negligence on this score. Dogs are almost always chained up or fenced in, while bulls and larger bullocks are kept indoors. You will occasionally have to cross fields full of cows, and it's worth being reasonably careful of curious steers or mothers with calves. If they're getting a bit close for comfort then you can normally shift them by clapping loudly a few times.

## Further information

The official website at [pilegrimsleden.no/en/](http://pilegrimsleden.no/en/) is the best source for maps, accommodation information and up-to-date news and articles on the St Olav Ways. There's a trip-planning tool, along with details of suggested shorter routes and opportunities to book onto organised group walks.

The old Cicerone guide by Alison Raju is out of date and out of print, but her fully revised new version, entitled *The Pilgrim Road to Trondheim*, was released in summer 2015 by a Norwegian publisher called Museumsforlaget. You can buy it at pilgrim centres or from Amazon.

Before this was released, the pilgrim office in Oslo recommended a German-language guidebook, *Olavsweg* by Helfried and Renate Weyer. Weyer has been leading groups on the trail for years, and there's lots of useful stuff in the guide including maps, distances and directories of local amenities. The section on getting out of Oslo is very helpful, so long as you learn the German for 'left' and 'right'.

Staff in the pilgrim offices are always happy to answer any questions, either in person or via email at [post@pilegrimsleden.no](mailto:post@pilegrimsleden.no)

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