

# TOURISM AND CULTURE GO HAND IN HAND

KARINE HAGEN INTERVIEWED BY CHRISTINA SKREIBERG

**When travelling with Viking Cruises, crowned the best cruise company in the world for the second year running, tourism, culture and art experiences go hand in hand. We spoke with Karine Hagen, the company's knowledgeable Senior Vice President, to talk about her relationship with both Edvard Munch and art in general and about what travelling means to her.**

**You are what could be called a global citizen. What does travelling and experiencing the world mean to you?**

"I belong nowhere and everywhere" is what I often reply when people ask where I come from. My genes are Norwegian, my education is English and American, and a part of my soul is probably Russian after having lived and worked there for so many years. I have travelled quite a lot in my life and have lived in many places. Of course, this is a reason why I feel comfortable in different places and with many different types of people, something I have benefitted from both professionally and personally. For me, travelling means not just observing the world, but interacting and engaging with it. Travelling is about sharing, learning and teaching. It's about absorbing from the cultures you are traveling to, and imparting something to them as well. I feel that the more often you travel and come into direct contact with strangers, the more understanding the world becomes – perhaps even more peaceful. When I allow myself to think this way, I really feel a tremendous job satisfaction and know that what we do can affect the world in a very positive way.

**Along with your father you run the world's premier cruise line. As a company, you set yourself apart from what is commonly associated with going on a cruise – there are no casinos, no children, no climbing walls, no umbrella cocktails. What would you say about the travelling experiences that Viking Cruises do offer?**

My father was recently quoted as saying that we are "the thinking person's cruise, not the drinking person's cruise".

Our promise to our guests is that we will inspire them and give them the opportunity to learn more about the world and about different cultures, when and where they themselves want to. This includes things we show and do on board, for example with our Viking Resident Historians – historians who sail with the ship, hold lectures and make themselves available to our guests at any given time in order to put the destinations in a historical context. Understanding history helps us better understand our present age and perhaps also better predict the future. Another example is our Guest Lecturers, who are experts within art, architecture, science or other disciplines and who lecture within their fields of expertise. Guests can also attend our Ted Talks, or enjoy *Munch Moments*, which is a unique programme for both Viking and the Munch Museum.

On land the purpose is always to let the guests come as close as possible to the local culture. When developing experiences for travellers, I always first imagine how I would want to share a certain place with my friends or family. This involves delivering an experience beyond what is expected – we call this the Viking Way, featuring what we call Local Life, Working World and Privileged Access experiences. This applies just as much to our guests who sail around the world on ocean cruises as it does to those travelling on river cruises in Europe, Russia, China and Vietnam.

We largely cater to adult, well-educated Americans and Brits who travel in order to explore and experience the world. Some of them are highly interested in art, others less so. But what all our guests have in common is that they are curious and like to learn.

**Do the guests get a little taste of Norway on board?**

They get a big taste of Norway! We are proud of our heritage and make an effort to promote Norway and both Norwegian and Nordic culture and history. This shines through in the ships' interior decoration. Our interior architect is American, with little prior knowledge of Norway, so when he was about to get to work, I gave him a four-page brief on what Nordic heritage is about – you know, rosemaling, the northern lights, folk costume embroidery, Norse mythology, the Vigeland Park. He used this inspiration very discreetly and with an elegant twist, for instance, the bar in each ship's Living Room includes barstools with embroidered folk costume roses, though in other colours than the traditional ones. We feel that our designers have managed to include a good deal of Nordic cosiness – of Nordic *hygge*.

On all our ships we have opted to complement our Nordic-inspired interiors with Nordic art by well-known artists and promising newcomers alike within a variety of genres, whether digital art, classical oil paintings, fine art photography, prints, sculptures or ceramics.

Around thirty different Nordic artists are represented on our Viking Ocean ships. Our collection includes Edvard Munch, Queen Sonja, Thorvald Erichsen, Kåre Tveter, Jakob Weidemann, Nico Widerberg, Odd Nerdrum, Magne Furuholmen, Ørnulf Opdahl and many others, as well as up-and-coming artists such as Hedevig Anker and Marianne Wiig Storaas. The ships therefore represent a broad array of the foremost Nordic artists. Of course, Munch tops the list of Norwegian artists for any collector, I would think. We are fortunate enough to own a few original Munch lithographs, and we have chosen to display these in each ships' Living Room, which has been inspired by the cosy Dagligstuen lobby bar at the Hotel Continental in Oslo.

We also show pictures of Norwegian nature photographed by Alastair Miller, we have specially designed Dale Viking jumpers in our Nordicshop, and we serve waffles with *brunost* [Norwegian brown cheese] at Mamsens –

which is a room on the ship featuring the best views, named for my dear paternal grandmother. The waffles are served on traditional Figgjo plates, (coincidentally name Tor Viking) just like my grandmother did.

**In 2016 you began collaborating with the Munch Museum. What were you looking for in such a venture?**

Both Viking as a company and our guests are very interested in art and culture, and we therefore like to support cultural institutions that mean something to us, to Norway, to our destinations or to the countries our guests come from, mainly England and the US. We cooperate with many cultural organisations around the world but given our Norwegian heritage, we were of course very keen to work with the Munch Museum, not only to promote Munch's art, but because we believe this is a cultural organisation we can develop some innovative ideas with.

**In fact, on your four ocean-going cruise ships, you do show Munch in a very exciting and innovative way. You briefly mentioned the *Munch Moments* programme – could you talk more about that?**

Well, along with the Munch Museum we have set up an exhibition based on a digital Munch collection, where we use new technology to promote art appreciation and knowledge. Every evening, at sunset, we have what we call a *Munch Moment* in the ship's Living Room. That's when we show works by Munch on a giant screen, accompanied by live classical music, where our trio plays Ole Bull or Edvard Grieg. Such moments give our guests the opportunity to learn more about the work being shown, through a little book that describes each work in detail.

A well-known American journalist was recently on board *Viking Sea*, and afterwards she said, "I danced a little dance when I saw *Munch Moments*." She thought it was such an exceptional way to show art and music with Norway as a leitmotif, and appreciated getting so close to the pictures and see each brushstroke, thanks to the very high screen resolution.

**What do you enjoy the most about your job?**

There are many things, but I have two great joys above all. The first is to introduce foreign cultures to one another, to dispel entrenched myths about other cultures, to see our guests understand that many of the things they believed about these cultures for years, are in fact quite different in reality.

The second is to work with colleagues who think that what we're doing together is both important and fun, where the atmosphere is one where we all feel that we're more family than colleagues. This includes the privilege of being close to my father and his vision and work ethic. He has a degree in physics from the Norwegian Institute of Technology and an MBA from Harvard Business School, and he has an uncanny knack for predicting trends, whether in finance, politics or the tourism sector. As a leader, he is very democratic and makes decisions along with, and not on top of, our management team. As a father, his only expectation has been that I do my best. That has probably been my motivation in life, because you know that you can always do things a little bit better.



Photo of Karine Hagen