

NORTHERN DELIGHTS

As a new museum designed by Shard architect Renzo Piano opens in Oslo, **York Membery** discovers Norway's compact cultural capital

THE Shard is history – well, at least in the eyes of the man behind London's newest landmark skyscraper, Renzo Piano.

The renowned Italian architect has turned his gaze northwards, and his latest eye-catching development, the €90 million (£71 million) Astrup Fearnley Museum, opened with a fanfare in Oslo last week.

Among the highlights at the opening night party on Friday was a performance by Coldplay bassist Guy Berryman's Scandi-Brit part-time supergroup Apparatick (which also features a member of Norway's A-ha).

City chiefs are hoping that the museum, home to a collection of contemporary art by, among others, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons (who attended the party along with Piano himself), will help make Oslo one of the world's art capitals, even if nowadays the city is just as well-known for being the setting for Norwegian crime writer Jo Nesbø's best-selling novels.

But you don't have to be a fan of the Shard – a building you either love or hate – to take the two-hour flight to the Norwegian capital to see Piano's museum.

Architecturally, the two are chalk and cheese. Where the Shard reaches for the sky, the Astrup – housed in adjacent wood and glass buildings split by a waterway at the end of a small peninsula along the waterfront – is a low-rise structure with a sloping glass roof and Aspen walls, designed to flood the interior with natural light, while blending into the surroundings in Tjuvholmen, Oslo's newly redeveloped harbour area. In a way, it's the "anti-Shard", and arguably more aesthetically pleasing.

As it happens, Oslo – a compact, handsome, culturally rich city at the head of the Oslo Fjord – is not exactly short of museums. My city guidebook listed 30-odd museums, art galleries and cultural centres: not bad going for a city with a population of around 600,000.

Of course, you can't visit them all, but there are a few must-sees, such as the National Gallery, with its Munch Room, featuring his 1893 masterpiece *The Scream* (another version of which, incidentally, sold for \$120 million earlier this year).

You've also got to visit, or at least climb the roof of, Oslo's Opera House, which is designed to look like a floating glacier, and remains the city's most important contemporary architectural building, Piano's latest structure not withstanding.



High culture: Astrup Fearnley Museum

Even the city's parks feature impressive art works. The Vigeland Park (named after the sculptor Gustav Vigeland) displays statues of more than 200 naked people, the most famous probably being the "Crying Baby" statue.

All that culture appears to have rubbed off on the locals too, and might explain why the graffiti – I spotted the words "Einstein was dyslexic too" scrawled in Norwegian on one building site hoarding – tend to be a cut above the average, if not always accurate (Einstein may not have been dyslexic).

However, for all the museums, art works and culture that abounds, a visit to Oslo for me is above all about its proximity to the water and the effect this has had on the city geographically, culturally and, yes, gastronomically too.

The busy, working harbour is dotted with tall ships, pleasure boats and ferries small and large taking people to and from Oslo's satellite communities or further afield (be it to Kiel or Copenhagen).

Furthermore, all the city's best viewpoints – be it the walls of Akershus Fortress, the Opera House roof, or the new "Sneak-Peak" viewing tower next to the Astrup Fearnley Museum – take in the harbour, the fjord and the wooded hills beyond.

Indeed, you've to get out on the water if you want to make the most of your visit. So take the hop-on, hop-off ferry across the harbour from the City Hall even if you don't want to visit the (fascinating) Viking Ship and Kon-Tiki museums.

The city's cuisine, with its emphasis on seafood, is also heavily influenced by Oslo's proximity to the water.

Leading hotels such as the 1900s-era Hotel Continental, where I stayed, are likely to serve pickled, mustard and tomato her- ring, as well as the usual eggs and bacon, for breakfast.

So it goes without saying that if you dine out, you're best off going for the seafood.



NIC LEHOIX

Try the creamy fish and shellfish soup (a popular Norwegian dish) at new harbourside restaurant, the Edge. Or Atlantic pollock at the city's legendary Viennese-style Theatercaféen, where everyone from Bill Clinton to Robbie Williams has dined.



New arrivals: above, the Astrup waterway. Left, Jeff Koons's Michael Jackson and Bubbles; below, Oslo Opera House

In some ways, Oslo surprised me, in other ways it didn't. Yes, every other woman really is a blonde. And yes, it's a pretty liberal town; no-one batted an eyelid when a young man in a leather jacket, miniskirt and knee-length leather boots walked down a street one afternoon. On the other hand, the Norwegian capital is far more multicultural than I expected.

The one downside to Oslo is that it ain't cheap. "But it's a quality for money experience," observed a Norwegian friend, putting the best possible spin on things, as I supped my £7 beer.

The nights might be closing in now, but come spring, if you like a bit of culture, are not averse to seafood and have a few quid to spare, think about following in Renzo Piano's footsteps and heading north for Oslo's bright Scandinavian lights.

DETAILS: OSLO

Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) has return fares from Heathrow to Oslo from £176, flysas.co.uk
The Hotel Continental has doubles from £182 room only, Hotelcontinental.no
Astrup Fearnley Museum, <http://afmuseet.no/>
 ■ Visitnorway.co.uk
 ■ Visitoslo.com