

## Further Afield »

# In the Home of Giants

## Trekking through Norway's Jotunheimen National Park



**Lake Langvatnet, (Day 8). Photo by Jean Wahlstrom.**

**J**otunheimen National Park in south-central Norway offers spectacular hiking through high, open, lake-strewn country. Here reside the highest peaks of Europe north of the Alps. Mountain hotels spaced a day's walk apart make the trek all the more enjoyable. With these "hotels" providing beds and all meals, one can go "hut-hopping" with a light pack. Everyone seems to speak English, so there is no language barrier.

Thirty years ago, my wife, Cecile, and I hiked the standard Jotunheimen loop together. This past summer, we returned with six friends (Gary, Jack, Jean, Rebecca, Shane and Steve), retracing many of our earlier steps during the second week of July. This article will describe both the basic loop and the logistics for doing this trip, to enable U.S. hikers to enjoy this exciting area.

The basic Jotunheimen loop starts at Lake Gjende, a long, narrow lake running east to west; at its eastern end is Gjendesheim, where the hiking starts. Halfway down the lake, on its north side, is Memurubu, and at its western end is Gjendesbu; all of these hotels are linked by early morning and late afternoon ferry service. A day's hike north of Lake Gjende are three other hotels, each a day's hike from each other: Glitterheim, Spiterstulen, and Leirvassbu, running east to west. The basic loop runs counterclockwise: Gjendesheim, Memurubu, Glitterheim, Spiterstulen, Leirvassbu, and Gjendesbu. Also, from Glitterheim and Spiterstulen are walk-ups of the two highest peaks in Europe north of the Alps: Glittertinden and Galdhøpiggen respectively.

## Dave Jette

"Mountain Man Dave" Jette Ph.D., carries out research on improving cancer treatment and has been leading group backpacking trips for friends for forty years.

Jotunheimen translates as "Home of the Giants" and, indeed, many glacier-topped mountains define this stark country. Our nine-day trek included five hut-hopping days and four layover days for hiking.

**Day 1.** After arriving at Gjendesheim by bus the previous afternoon, take an early morning ferry to Memurubu (984 meters) for the Besseggen Ridge hike back to Gjendesheim. As the most popular day hike in Norway, Gjendesheim Besseggen sees between 500 to 1,000 hikers, from small children to elderly adults, every day. It is far from easy, however. The map gives the hiking time as six hours, but those, it seems, are "Norwegian hours" and must be longer in the same way that meters are longer than feet. It took the fastest members of our party eight hours. This hike also includes a bit of scrambling, best done going uphill by starting at Memurubu rather than Gjendesheim. The route first climbs high (1,518 meters) on the ridge and then drops down to Besseggen (1,375 meters), a great narrowing of the ridge with Lake Bessvatnet touchable on one side and Lake Gjende far

below on the other. Dramatist Henrik Ibsen immortalized Besseggen when he described Peer Gynt's wild ride on the reindeer across the ridge. After scrambling up to the ridge's high point (1,740 meters), one finally descends to Gjendesheim (984 meters).

**Day 2.** Take the early-morning ferry to Memurubu (984 meters) again, but this time do a loop hike on the ridge to its southwest. After an initial steep climb, the ridge's high point (1,480 meters) is soon crossed and it is then a long, easy walk past small lakes to a junction at 1,400 meters. Here you double back to the right and descend to the Muru River (Memurudalen Valley) to return to Memurubu. This is a fairly easy hike, but on our first trip Cecile and I continued on past the junction, staying high to finally descend to the Storádalen valley northwest of Gjendebu. This time I made the gross error of doing this long hike in reverse, and it took us ten exhausting hours exacerbated by intermittent rain and the sharp final descent. (That was actually the first day of this year's trip, and we took the next day off.)

**Day 3.** It is time to head north. From Memurubu, we first climb the ridge as in Day 1, but we cross it (1,410 meters) and continue down to skirt part of very long Lake Russvatnet (1,175 meters). There follows a long climb to a barren pass at 1,685 meters and finally a lengthy descent to Glitterheim (1,330 meters). This is quite a long day: the seven hours listed on map took us nine. (For some reason, hiking in Norway seemed much harder for Cecile and me this time than it did thirty years ago!)

**Day 4.** Climb of Glittertinden. At 2,470 meters (8,104 feet), the rounded top of Glittertinden is the highest point in northern Europe. However, this height is only because of its snowcap, and the highest peak in northern Europe is actually Galdhøpiggen, one meter lower. The climb of 1,140 meters is mostly a snow walk, and I did it the first time I went there. However, due to a combination of poor weather and tiredness our group took the next day off, with some of us going partway up Glittertinden. Glitterheim was an especially nice place to stay, with private showers in our two-person rooms and a lounge in our dormitory where we could play games.

**Day 5.** We now head west to Spiterstulen (1,104 meters). This is a straightforward day, first climbing slowly to a pass (1,680 meters) and then descending very slowly through wide, flat terrain dotted with a great many small rocks, and finally more steeply to Spiterstulen. This whole stretch is open and beautiful, especially the lakes in the pass area. However, the boulder fields in the pass area do make for rather slow going. The map time is five hours—about seven for us—and there is also an

alternate route from Glitterheim to Spiterstulen over Glitterheim. (That route is seven hours map time—beware!).

**Day 6.** Climb of Galdhøpiggen (2,469 meters / 8,101 feet).

Cecile and I did this climb of 1,365 meters on our first trip, but because of poor weather we all skipped it this time. It's



definitely harder than the climb of Glitterheim, with a map time of four hours up and two and a half hours down. From the top of this highest peak north of the Alps, you look out over a sea of peaks and glaciers—an incredible view!

**Day 7.** Our route now takes us southwest to Leirvassbu, right on large, deep blue Lake Leirvatnet. Most of the way is a long, slow ascent to a pass area (1,460 meters), past another string of beautiful lakes, and then a short descent to Leirvassbu (1,410 meters). This is easy going, and we didn't take much longer than the map time of five hours.

**Day 8.** From Leirvassbu, we head southwest, first climbing 110 meters and then following a long series of lakes and finally a broad valley down to Gjendebu. Near the end of long Lake Langvatnet, we faced a major stream crossing, the only one where we had to take our boots off to keep them dry. Despite being mostly level or downhill and often with surprisingly good trail, this was actually a fairly long day. So much for meeting the map time!

**Veio River valley, starting out from Glitterheim (Day 5). Photo by Cecile Disenhouse.**

**Map courtesy of Wandern in Jotunheimen.**

**Day 9.** If you've lost a day due to bad weather, you'll be ferrying back to Gjendesheim to catch the morning bus. If you didn't lose a day, you can hike southeast from Gjendebu (984 meters) to cross a pass at 1,500 meters and descend to Torfinnsbu on Lake Bygdin. From here, you catch the early afternoon ferry to Bygdin and can then bus a short way north to Gjendesheim. Cecile and I did this on our first trip, and we must have made the map time of five hours in order to have caught the ferry. If you go this route, be sure that you can keep up with "Norwegian hours." ♦



**On the way to Leirvassbu (Day 7). Photo by Jean Wahlstrom.**

“From the top of this highest peak north of the Alps, you look out over a sea of peaks and glaciers—an incredible view!”

### Oslo Travel Tips

- From Oslo Airport, opt for the “local train” into town. It’s half the price as the “express train” and takes only five minutes longer.
  - Oslo’s Anker Hostel (<http://www.ankerhostel.no/>) provides two-bed rooms with a private bathroom and shower for about \$90 per person per night. You can cook onsite and there is a supermarket nearby. This place is popular, so be sure to book early.
  - The bus to Gjendesheim leaves at 9:30 a.m. from Oslo’s main bus terminal just north of the train station and arrives at 2:20 p.m. The bus company is Nor-Way and their office is on the right as you walk through the bus terminal.
- ### Norway Trekking Association
- Be sure to join to join the Norway Trekking Association (DNT – Den Norske Turistforening), preferably before arriving in Norway. DNT membership gives you discounted rates at any of the mountain hotels they operate, as well as room preference if the hotel fills up. (While they never turn people away from these hotels, it may be necessary to sleep on mats on the floor.)
  - Their website is <http://www.turistforeningen.no/english/> and offices are located in Oslo and Bergen.

### The Mountain Hotels

- DNT runs hotels at Gjendesheim, Spiterstulen, and Gjendebu; the others are privately owned. The non-DNT hotels tend to be a bit fancier than the DNT ones and to cost somewhat more, although the one at Leirvassbu gave a 5 percent discount to DNT members. Be sure to ask for it.
- All of these hotels have showers. Bring your own soap and towel, as well as a washcloth (which seems never to be supplied in Norway).
- All have rooms with bunk beds for two or four persons, and dormitories costing considerably less. Mattresses and blankets are supplied. Bring your own sleeping sack (a large sheet doubled over and sewn at the bottom and partway up) and pillowcase.
- These hotels serve excellent meals, including a packed lunch that you pack at breakfast time.
- The DNT prices are available online at <http://www.turistforeningen.no/english/>. You can figure on spending about \$100 per day per person on this trek. (Fairly costly for hiking, but inexpensive for traveling in Europe.)

### Maps and Conversions

- Plasticized topographic 1:50,000 maps for the Jotunheimen region are available at DNT offices or can be requested by mail. (I was able to get a topographic map through DNT by simply asking for it—with the map they sent a sheet explaining how to pay for it with a credit card.)
- The Cappelens Kart CK45 Jotunheimen map also features a 1:100,000 map of the larger area, useful for nearby travels in the region. This is a shaded relief map that’s not quite as pretty as the two maps published by DNT.
- *Jotunheimen Aust* and *Jotunheimen Vest*—the east and west halves—are both needed for the basic loop.
- These maps identify the various mountain hotels and give the hiking times in terms of “Norwegian hours.”
- The maps have contour intervals of 20 meters. For those inexperienced in thinking in terms of meters rather than feet, you’ll have to get over it. The exact conversion factor is 1 meter equals 3.281 feet.
- Converting meters to feet while hiking can be fairly simple by if you round a bit.
- Think of 300 meters as practically 1,000 feet. (300 meters equals 984 feet, and 1,000 feet equals 305 meters.)
- Consider 5 meters as roughly 16 feet. That makes 50 meters about 160 feet and 100 meters about 330 feet.