

California Dreamin'

San Francisco, California

6-7 October 2022

Welcome
to
America

Angels above

San Francisco Bay





Boys behind bars

Alcatraz Island
San Francisco Bay

Welcome to America

This just-completed visit from our Norwegian friend Hanne Hovden and her sons, Per, 9, and Olav, 7, was a spur-of-the-moment opportunity. But it followed a couple of years of Covid frustrations and an extra-work opportunity for Hanne that further disrupted family life for more than half that time.

On September 12, I awakened to a message from across the pond reading: “I found affordable plane tickets from Oslo to San Francisco. ...” A bit more than three weeks later, Emily and I were at SFO to greet her and the boys. Per rhymes with pear; “Ooo-lav, Jody,” Hanne once told me. “Oh-lav is the German pronunciation.”

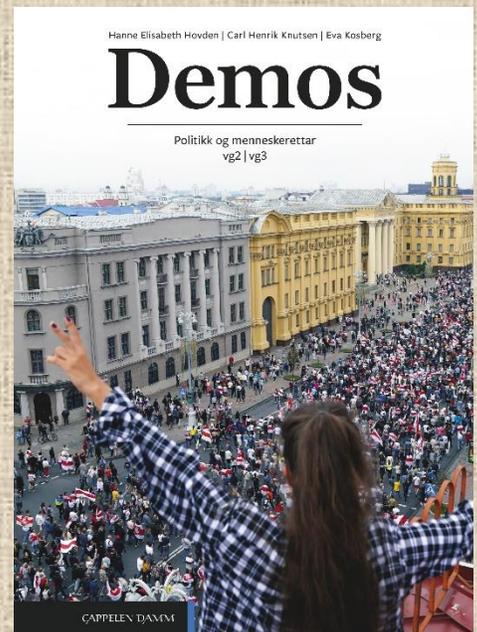
It was just after lunch for us at SFO. But it was nearly midnight back in Norway, where they’d awakened before 06.00 to begin a travel day that included 12 hours of flying and a connection in Copenhagen. “We discussed it on the plane,” said Hanne — an inveterate traveler with six U.S. visits among her dozens of foreign trips. “Let’s go straight to your house.” Per and Olav were in bed before dark.

So began 10 days of cultural and culinary collisions, long car rides, lines with more people than live in entire Norwegian counties, “huge trees” and Disneyland. In every excess — from thundering jet fighters to back-seat car slumber amid snack crumbs and Star Wars souvenirs — it was 100% American road trip.

Being from a country with fewer people than the Bay Area, Norwegians long ago accepted that successfully interacting with the outside world requires their learning others’ languages. Hanne is working on her fourth. English is a required course almost from the start of 13 grades of public school. But, as here in the USA, students stayed home during worst months of Covid, which set the brothers back from where Hanne’s English proficiency was at their age. Visiting us would be a total immersion in (southern American) English.

It would be the boys’ first time to live in a foreign culture — beach resort visits in Turkey and Cape Verde couldn’t provide that — and in an American culture that, through news and entertainment media, they were already acquainted with. It would help make up for family time lost during 2021 and ’22, when Hanne, a high school teacher in political science and German, was taking weekends, school breaks and summer to work on the country’s new high school politics and human rights textbook, for which she was one of three co-authors.

As well, the trip would scratch the travel itch Hanne was born with, an itch perhaps inherited from family on two continents. A Minnesota-born relative on her mother’s side of the family, [Parker Borg](#), was the first Peace Corps volunteer to be named a U.S. ambassador, serving in Mali and Iceland. He was an inspiration for Hanne’s interest in international diplomacy, which led her to field work in Azerbaijan for a master’s degree and an internship with the Norwegian mission to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. This and the next few newsletters will cover their visit.



Cover of Hanne’s politics and human rights textbook “Demos,” for grades 12 and 13.

- [Read the newsletter](#) from my family’s 2017 European trip describing how I met Hanne and Eli Beate Presthus Nilsen, Norwegian exchange students in my home county in North Carolina in 2003-04.
- [Read the newsletter](#) from my 2019 visit with Hanne and her family in Åsa, Norway.



Sea lion watchers
Pier 39
San Francisco



The Rock

Alcatraz Island
San Francisco Bay



Michigan Avenue

United States Penitentiary, Alcatraz Island
San Francisco Bay

Notes on photos

Angels above — [San Francisco Fleet Week](#) began in 1981 and became the model for similar events in other port cities where the U.S. Navy wanted to shape and magnify its public presence. Fleet Week celebrates the Navy's ships and aircraft through concerts, ship parades, demonstrations and — particularly — precision flying by aviators and jet fighters of the Navy's [Blue Angels](#) over the huge natural amphitheater that is San Francisco Bay. This photo and **Blue Diamond** on the next page were shot during our ferry ride back to the mainland from Alcatraz Island, which was the first tourist spot for us to visit on our Norwegian guests' first full day in California. You can get an idea what Fleet Week is like from this [Navy-produced YouTube](#) from previous years.

Boys behind bars — Olav (left) and Per were fascinated by the cramped cells of what once was considered the United States' most secure — and now is considered the country's most brutal — federal prison. Most fascinating, it seemed, was the famous escape by three inmates: Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin. They had met while serving sentences at other prisons and were missing from their cells at the daily bed check on the morning of June 12, 1962. The plaster heads they'd made to make it appear they were still asleep in their bunks are on display at Alcatraz. Remnants were quickly found washed up on San Francisco Bay beaches of life jackets and a rubber raft they'd made from stolen raincoats. The men were never found. The FBI's account of its 17-year investigation is [here](#), and the U.S. Marshal's Service investigation file is still open. We watched the 1979 Clint Eastwood flick, "Escape from Alcatraz," which was filmed in the prison, after our visit.

Sea lion watchers — Hanne, Emily, Olav and Per (L-R) watch [California sea lions argue, play and sunbathe](#) on the now mostly abandoned floating piers of the marina at Pier 39. The biggest of these beasts weigh about 850 pounds / 385 kilos, and they began arriving at the marina shortly after the 1989 World Series earthquake. Within months, boat owners decided to find other harbors, and the sea lions became part of the tourist-trap pier's attractions. Last July, a 1,300-pound / 650-kilo walrus somehow wandered far from its native Arctic territory to visit marinas in Oslo, Norway's national capital, not far from Hanne's home in Åsa. The walrus slithered over and snoozed on boats (see this [NBC News YouTube](#)), scaring some people and delighting others, who named her Freya, after the Norse goddess of love, beauty and war. In a highly controversial move, the [Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries killed her the night of Aug. 13-14](#).

The Rock — One of the reasons prison officials could plausibly claim no one ever made it to freedom escaping from Alcatraz was the treacherous tidal currents in San Francisco Bay that surround the island. One of the reasons there remains plenty of public skepticism about that boast is the annual [Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon](#), which begins with a 1.5-mile / 2.4-kilometer swim from the island to San Francisco's St. Francis Yacht Club, followed by an 18-mile / 29-kilometer bike ride and 8-mile / 12.9-kilometer run. About 2,000 athletes do it every year — trained athletes rather than confined prisoners, to be sure — but the Bay isn't the ultimate wall of isolation that prison officials made it out to be.

Michigan Avenue — The three-level cell blocks on the main floor of Alcatraz prison faced corridors named for famous American streets: Park Avenue (New York), Broadway (New York) and Michigan Avenue (Chicago). In this [floor plan](#), you can see that the wall at the back of each cell abutted a dark gray "utility corridor," which was open space all the way to the roof. Morris and the Anglin brothers enlarged air vents in their cell walls that opened into this corridor, then climbed pipes up to roof air vents, where they made their escape to the outside.

Blue diamond — Four [Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornets](#) of the Blue Angels fly directly over the ferry bringing us back to the mainland from Alcatraz Island. The dark line trailing from the tail of each plane is a tailhook, which is designed to snag one of four heavy steel arresting wires stretched across the flight deck of an aircraft carrier so the plane can land and stop within the short distance of the deck. So we rented Tom Cruise's "Top Gun: Maverick," to get the inside perspective. The [first tailhook landing](#) was accomplished in 1911 by stunt pilot Eugene Ely on the *USS Pennsylvania* in San Francisco Bay. The Navy requisitioned its first tailhook-equipped airplane within four months.



Blue diamond

U.S. Navy Blue Angels
San Francisco Bay