



900 ÅR
STAVANGER
2025

900 years –

STAVANGER

through the AGES

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Above
The monument "Swords in Rock" in Stavanger, commemorating the ninth-century Battle of Hafrsfjord, whose victor Harald Haarfagre united Norway under his crown. Photo by Shutterstock



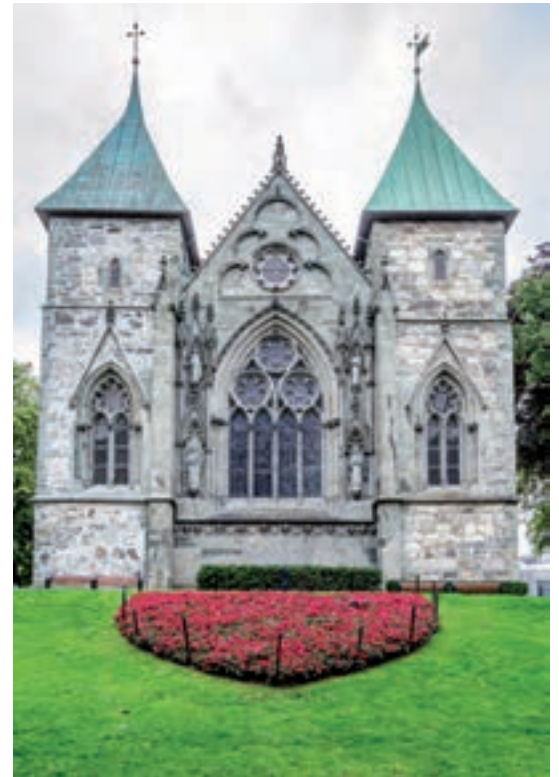
THE KINGDOM OF NORWAY graciously hosts NATO's Joint Warfare Centre in a breathtakingly beautiful part of the country, the city of Stavanger in Rogaland. The landscape here boasts the very features that

attract visitors to Norway from all over the globe: mountains, fjords and a rugged coastline with countless islands.

Humans have populated the modern-day county of Rogaland in southwestern Norway since the end of the last ice age, some

10,000 years ago. The region became a significant power centre throughout the Bronze and Viking Ages (c. 3200 BCE to 1066 CE), evidenced by the burial mounds, cairns, ruins, rock carvings and other relics that litter Rogaland. However, the history of the county's capital, the city of Stavanger, begins at the end of the Viking Age: around 1100, construction began on a cathedral that stands to this day as Norway's oldest and best preserved. 1125, a sort of halfway point to the cathedral's completion in c. 1150, is considered the official birth year of Stavanger.





Above, from left

A view of downtown Stavanger and the recently renovated Stavanger Cathedral, Norway's oldest and best-preserved cathedral, completed in c. 1150, photos by Shutterstock

And so, 2025 marks Stavanger's 900-year anniversary. A momentous occasion celebrated with museum exhibits, art installations, festivals and more. This article, too, aims to celebrate Stavanger by sharing some of its fascinating history with the readers of *The Three Swords*.

The name of this publication, along with the crest of the JWC, is a reference to the monument that is the symbol of Stavanger: three 10-metre-tall swords of bronze embedded in a rock at the Møllebukta bay in the inner part of the Hafrsfjord, in the Madla area of Stavanger. The swords recall the Battle of Hafrsfjord, an unprecedented naval battle that took place here at some point between 872 and 900 CE. King Harald Hårfagre, or "Fairhair," emerged victorious and incorporated several petty kingdoms into his realm. He is regarded as the first ruler of a united Norway, though the country had not taken its present-day shape at this time. The monument erected in 1983 reminds residents that they are walking in the footsteps of Vikings, and that the history of this region is far longer and shrouded in greater mystery than the city's documented origins.

IN THE 12th and 13th centuries, Stavanger thrived primarily as a significant religious centre. By the dawn of the 14th century, around 800 inhabitants enjoyed a wide array of trades, crafts and services. The town even had its own hospital. Calamity struck Stavanger along with the rest of Europe in 1349, when the bubonic plague decimated its population. According to some estimates, the Black Death may have left no more than 250 inhabitants alive. Agriculture and industry suffered; houses stood abandoned.

More waves of the plague kept the townsfolk struggling for decades before Stavanger began to recover from its brush with extinction. In 1425, it received the status of market town, bestowed by King Eric of Pomerania, who ruled the Kalmar Union (a 126-year union of Norway, Sweden and Denmark under one monarch). Nevertheless, Stavanger was rather a poor town. Most of all, it had been the Catholic clergy in whose coffers wealth had accumulated.

In 1536–1537, Lutheranism became the official faith in Denmark-Norway under its new king, Christian III. Catholic icons and relics were stripped from the churches and

the Pope had to relinquish his property in the kingdom, ceding it to the Danish crown. As the Protestant Reformation reshaped Europe, Scandinavia saw an influx of skilled artisans from the continent, who were fleeing religious persecution and the bloodshed of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1638). Locally, this resulted in the Stavanger Renaissance, during which Baroque religious art flourished throughout the south and west of Norway. One of the leading artists was prolific German painter Peter Reimers, whose works grace many churches in Stavanger, including the Cathedral.

A number of merchant families accumulated significant wealth in the 18th century through their involvement in shipping, shipbuilding and trade. Luxury goods such as fine textiles became available and lavish houses and villas transformed the town's appearance. Not all residents were fortunate, though; many suffered hardship due to bad harvests and disease.

Four major fires destroyed well over 200 houses throughout the 1700s (after two fires had already devastated the town in the previous century). And then there was the Great



Northern War: between 1700 and 1721, Russia led a coalition with Denmark-Norway and Saxony-Poland-Lithuania (joined later by others) to reconquer territories from Sweden and challenge its supremacy.

While Rogaland was not the scene of any battles, the people of Stavanger felt the effects of increased taxation and the costly war along with the rest of Norway.

DURING THE 19TH CENTURY Stavanger, now a Norwegian leader in shipping and herring fishing, grew at an unprecedented pace. The population rose from around 2,500 to 30,000 throughout the 1800s. Infrastructure to cope with Stavanger's population explosion was sorely missing. Epidemics spread and infant mortality rose. Outside of the herring fishing season, many were unemployed and struggled to make ends meet. In 1860, the Great Fire of Stavanger consumed 250 houses in one night. After its dense clusters of wooden buildings had been laid to ashes in so many conflagrations, the city now opted to build wider streets and constructed a waterworks and a gasworks. In 1878, a train line opened to Egersund in the south, connecting the Stavanger peninsula with towns and villages along the coast.

Despite such progress, times were hard in Stavanger, as in all of Norway during the 19th century. More than 800,000 people — approximately one in three Norwegians — chose to emigrate during this time, including many residents of Stavanger. Most of them left



Mount Jättå, the future home of NATO's Joint Warfare Centre in 1951, photo by Widerøe

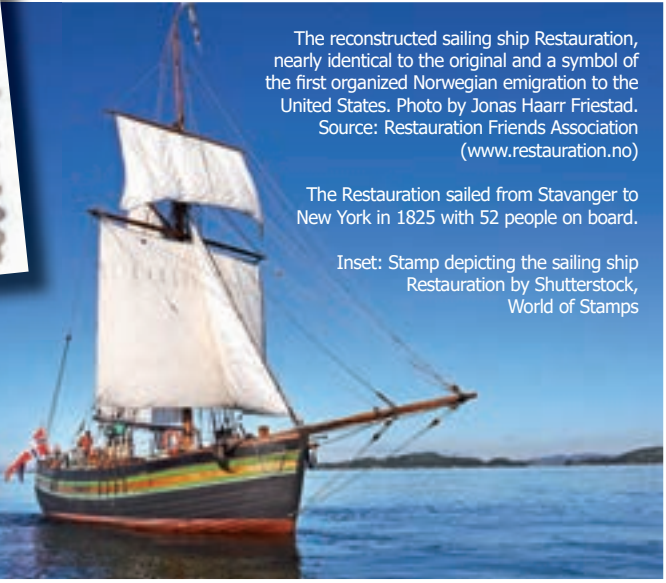
for the United States; only the Irish flocked to America in greater numbers during this period. As a result, millions of Americans have preserved Norwegian traditions in a large diaspora centred in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The very first organized migration of Norwegians to the U.S. departed from Stavanger in 1825. To commemorate this event 200 years later as part of Stavanger's 900-year festivities, His Majesty the King Harald V and the Norwegian Royal Family visited the city on July 4, 2025. They saw off the *Restauration*,

a reconstruction of the sloop that carried 52 emigrants in 1825, as it set sail to retrace that first voyage to New York.

THE 20TH CENTURY brought further modernization to Stavanger. While a thriving canning industry and associated businesses had already emerged in the late 1800s, the work had largely been carried out manually. Now, local inventions enabled more automation, vastly increasing the number of goods produced and sold. Locals founded canning factories, cooperatives and labour unions; companies abroad clamoured for machines built in Stavanger. This led to ample job opportunities, particularly also for women. In 1909, electric power coursed through the city for the first time.

During the German occupation of Norway (1940–1945), the Stavanger peninsula was of strategic importance due to its airport, harbour and location. The area was to become *Festung Stavanger* (Stavanger Fortress), a German stronghold full of fortifications such as bunkers, coastal artillery and anti-aircraft batteries. Throughout the war, Stavanger residents such as Otto Olsen and Solveig Bergslien risked their lives (and perished in Gestapo custody, in Bergslien's case) to resist the occupation. Volumes could be — and have been — written on the Second World War in Stavanger, even though it was merely a five-year period in a history spanning a millennium.



The reconstructed sailing ship *Restauration*, nearly identical to the original and a symbol of the first organized Norwegian emigration to the United States. Photo by Jonas Haarr Friestad. Source: *Restauration* Friends Association (www.restauration.no)

The *Restauration* sailed from Stavanger to New York in 1825 with 52 people on board.

Inset: Stamp depicting the sailing ship *Restauration* by Shutterstock, World of Stamps





The "colour street" in Stavanger, photo by Travel Faery, Shutterstock



Old Stavanger with its 173 wooden buildings, photo by Charles HHuang, Shutterstock

Prosperity returned to Stavanger in the post-war period. Modern amenities such as washing machines and television sets became commonplace. The general wealth of the city was still modest, however, before one event changed Stavanger and all of Norway forever: the discovery of the vast Ekofisk oil field on the Norwegian continental shelf in 1969.

From the 1970s onwards, the development of hydrocarbon resources rendered Norway one of the world's foremost oil and gas exporters. The country opted for a mixed model of commercial and state-controlled activity; to this day, the Norwegian state remains the majority shareholder in the now privatized company Equinor, formerly Statoil, the biggest

player in the Norwegian petroleum industry.

In 1990, Norway founded the Petroleum Fund, later known as the Government Pension Fund Global, to invest the surplus generated by the industry. It is the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, currently valued at approximately 2 trillion U.S. dollars. Norway would not be the country it is today without prudent investments derived from its natural resources — and Stavanger, the "Oil Capital of Norway," is the city at the centre of the staggering wealth that supports the welfare of the country's residents, native and immigrant alike.

FROM THE HOME of Bronze Age chieftains to Viking-Age birthplace of national identity, from a struggling fishing town to the cosmopolitan heart of Norway's prosperity, and from occupied theatre of the Second World War to host of a strong, close-knit alliance. The past has been an awe-inspiring journey for Stavanger, and the staff members of the Joint Warfare Centre are proud to be a part of that history — as well as the chapters that are yet to come. ✦



Oil Museum in Stavanger, photo by Shutterstock

Inset: Balloons at the Port of Stavanger, near the Oil Museum, photo by JWC PAO

