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TRAVEL

The port town of Ålesund is a treasure trove of art nouveau architecture. MICHAEL MILNE

Forging beyond the fjords

Norway's breathtaking scenery attracts millions, but visitors can also experience the country's preserved heritage.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

There were so many baby goats surrounding farmer Petter Melchior, he was practically submerged. Having heard his call, the kids had scrambled down the craggy mountainside to be fed. Oblivious to the scenery, which included a stunning waterfall, they were rooting in every nook, cranny, and pocket in search of breakfast.

This was at the end of the road in Norddal, Norway, a no-stoplight hamlet in the midst of the country's famed Fjordland region. Millions of people flock to Norway annually for its breathtaking scenery, yet there are more subtle sights that warrant exploration: those preserving Norwegian heritage. Visitors who venture just a bit beyond the busiest fjords are rewarded with experiences that provide insight into the traditional Norwegian way of life.

Twenty years ago, Norddal, perched at the base of a fjord bear-

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Farmer Petter Melchior feeds his kids, who are oblivious to the gorgeous scenery in Norddal. LARISSA MILNE

Older fishing boats are berthed alongside newer sailing craft on the peaceful Hjorundfjord in the village of Saebo. LARISSA MILNE

Seeking out Norway's scenery, heritage

NORWAY from N1

ing the same name, was at a dead end — literally and figuratively. The village, accessible by only a single road leading in and out, was losing population — and businesses — as old folks died off and the younger generation moved to the big cities. Even the retirement home was closing.

But the town refused to go quietly. When the Petrines retirement home — a grand old Victorian building — went up for sale, the town became a "municipal entrepreneur," forming a cooperative to buy it and renovate it into a hotel. Today, Petrines Gjestgiveri (guesthouse) serves as both the mascot and focal point of Norddal's sustainable tourism organization. Susanne Moen Ouff, manager at Petrines, said the the town named its venture "The Happy End" as a conscious opposite of the "dead end" location. The venture includes traditional businesses throughout the village and its adjacent valley.

In addition to outdoor activities such as cycling and kayaking, visitors to Norddal can explore a variety of heritage trades, such as block printing and cheese making. In the summer season, the town features a different activity each day of the week. Petter Melchior takes visitors on a "goat safari," searching for his herd in the mountain pastures. As the chattering kids come rushing for breakfast, the retired teacher, who returned to this home and farm of his ancestors, shakes his head with wonder: "People come and pay to see what we just do normally every day."

In the adjacent valley, dairy farmer Jostein Sande is working with mama goats, converting their milk into delectable cheeses. The atmosphere at his Heraldsetra farm could easily have been the same a century or two earlier: an alpine meadow with a few low-slung wooden structures capped by Norway's signature earthen roofs with weeds and colorful wildflowers sprouting every which way.

"Here, we are using the old ways," he says, "it tastes better." He heads into a hut where brunost, the country's signature brown cheese made from goat's milk, is cooked in an iron cauldron over an open birchwood fire.

"The sugars in the milk caramelize slowly, giving the cheese its sweet flavor and brown color." The rich, tangy end product, which tastes like a marriage of cream cheese and dulce de leche, is Norwegian comfort food, but it would be at home on breakfast tables anywhere.

Farther west, where the steep mountains and narrow-walled valleys of the fjords soften into the rounded hills and wider bays approaching the coast, the port town of Ålesund is preserving heritage of a different sort. This unlikely spot midway up the Norwegian coast is a treasure trove of art nouveau architecture, owing to a century-old tragedy that reformed the face of the city.

In 1904, fire ravaged Ålesund, destroying most of its wooden structures in less than 24 hours and displacing 10,000 inhabitants. The fire coincided with a slow economy in Norway and the burgeoning art nouveau movement. Architects and workers rushed north, and much of the city was rebuilt within three years — all with fire-resistant materials and the signature flourishes and ornamentation of the art nouveau style.

Signature earthen-roofed huts dot the valleys in Norway's Fjordland region. LARISSA MILNE

Today, Ålesund is a virtual open-air art nouveau architectural museum, with a fairy tale appearance that is uniquely Norwegian. Among the few buildings that escaped the fire was one of the city's fish storage warehouses, which today is a museum of fishing — historically one of the prime sources of local commerce.

Fishing has been big business in Norway for centuries, and this stretch of coast is cod territory. In the days before refrigeration, salting was the preferred method of preserving fish, producing *klippfisk* (literally, "cliff fish"), cod that was traditionally laid out on rocky cliffs to dry. The salt cod is featured in cuisines throughout Europe and parts of South America. The region surrounding the port cities of Ålesund and Kristiansund, some 100 miles to the north, has historically boasted production of 80 percent of the world's salt cod, also known as *bacalao*.

Two boys head out to fish on Grip Island. The former fishing community no longer has permanent residents. LARISSA MILNE

Fishermen typically lived in pocket-size villages dotting the Atlantic coast, but the harsh Nordic winters and more modern fishing techniques eventually resulted in the abandonment of these areas. Fortunately, these remote villages are enjoying a new life as vacation destinations. Many of the buildings and old fishing stations have been converted into hotels with rustic yet comfortable accommodations that preserve the atmosphere of days gone by. Some are on islands accessible only by ferry, or, in one case, a replica Viking ship, leaving cars behind on the mainland.

Ona Island has a population of 16. The former fishing village is now a popular vacation destination. MICHAEL MILNE

"When you come here, your shoulders drop," says Stein Lystad, who manages fishing-villages-turned-hotels on the islands of Ona and Finnoy. "Your cares melt away as you become part of a simpler time." The hotels focus on local cuisine, including secret-recipe fish cakes made by Mrs. Iverson Brelvik, one of the 16 remaining permanent residents of Ona. "We don't dare ask her how she makes them," says Lystad, "we're just happy that she's willing to do it."

There are no hotels on the islet of Grip, a speck of land seven miles off the coast that is part of the city of Kristiansund. The last permanent residents moved to the mainland in 1974, and today, Grip is a reminder of the region's rich fishing heritage. Although North Atlantic storms have repeatedly washed away much of the island's buildings, a diminutive stave church dating from the late 1400s miraculously remains intact. A votive ship suspended from the chandelier near the altar gives further testimony to the importance of the sea to the community.

In Kristiansund, the rocky cliffs surrounding the harbor are still white from years of having cod salted on them. Today's *klippfisk* is made in heated warehouses, but the Klippfisk Museum recalls the hard grind of olden days, when men caught the fish while women and children spent painstaking hours laying them on the cliffs to dry. In the center of historical *klippfisk* country, the Suria Fiskerestaurant still features it on the menu. Chefs Olav and Stian explain that the fish is dried and salted for 10 days before they acquire it, at which point they reconstitute and drain it for five more days. It sounds sort of like the culinary version of quilting, in which fabric is cut into pieces only to be sewn back together. We tried it alongside its natural source, fresh cod (just off the boat and delectable). The effect was … well, it might be one of those things you have to grow up with. Those sitting around us in the restaurant obviously had, as they dug into their *klippfisk* with abandon. And a small piece of Norway's heritage is preserved (in this case, literally) once again.

Philadelphia natives Larissa and Michael Milne have been global nomads since 2011. Follow their journey at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.

IF YOU GO:

- **Petrines Guesthouse:** http://www.petrines.com/
- **The Happy End:** (activities in Norddal): http://www.norddal.com/
- **Ålesund:** http://www.visitalesund-geiranger.com/en/The-art-nouveau-town-of-Alesund/
- **Hotels in former fishing villages**: http://www.classicnorway.com/
- **Kristiansund (& Grip Island):** http://www.visitkristiansund.com/en/