

Bergen



FINDING HOME, ABROAD

A trip across western Norway reveals strikingly Northwest sensibilities.

BY GREG FREITAS AND NATALIE COMPAGNO



A few months ago, we randomly walked into Wallingford's Fat Cat Records.

Greeting us, face-out by the cash register, was not Nirvana, not Soundgarden, but Peer Gynt Suite, by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. Was this a Norse omen, a mischievous prank from Loki? For us, two Seattleites with a trip to Norway on the books, it felt like a sign.

There's a reason Norway feels familiar to Seattleites—and not just because half of Ballard flies the flag every May 17 in celebration of Norwegian Constitution Day. Early immigrants from the country stitched their heritage into the Pacific Northwest, bringing skilled shipwrights, a fondness for salted fish, dry wit, and glacial stoicism. Call it parallel evolution shaped by water, weather, and a shared talent for looking dapper in Gore-Tex.

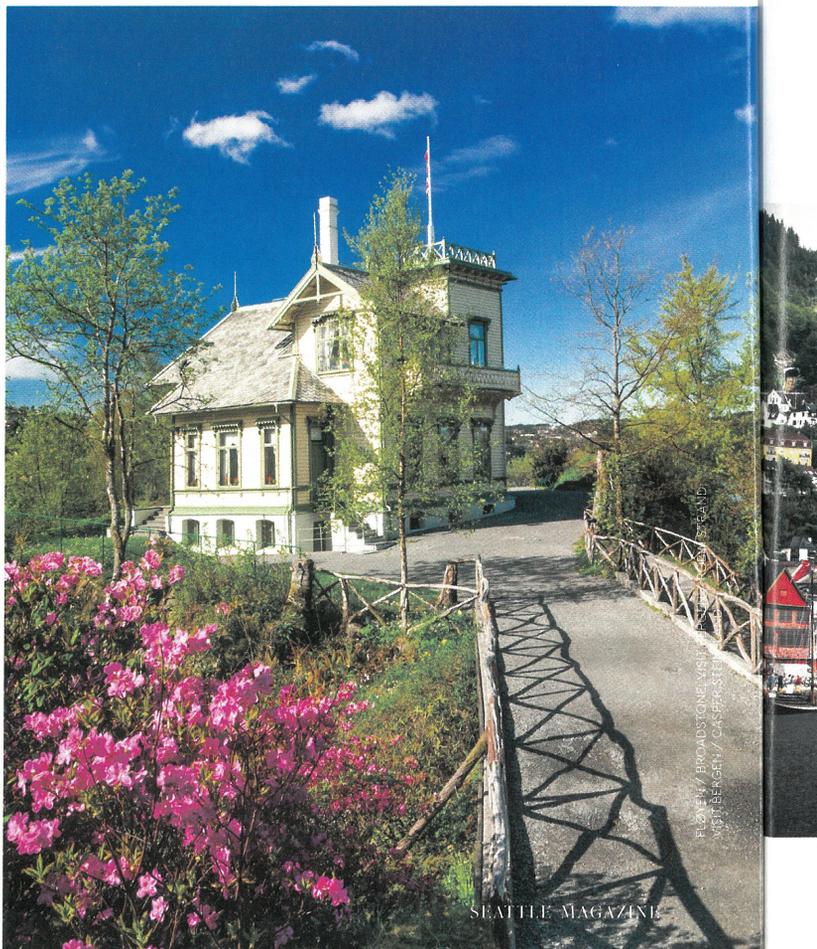
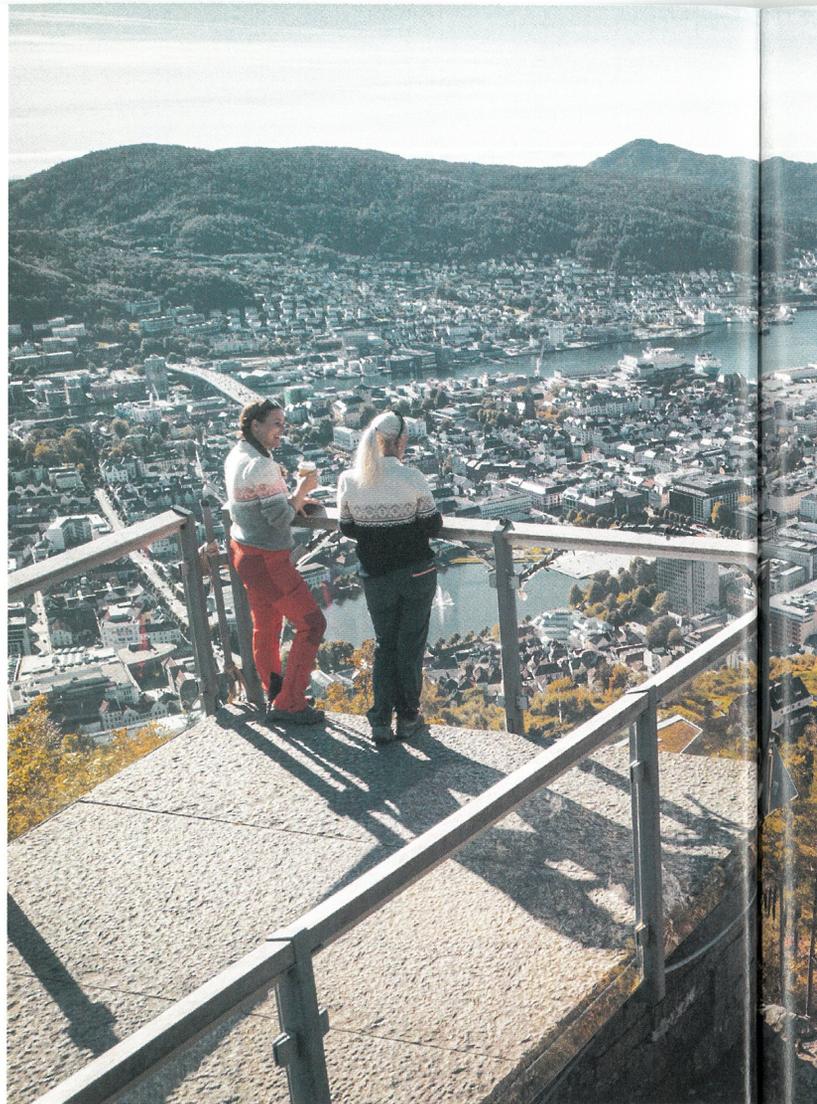
During our trip, we explored West Norway—Bergen, the Hardangerfjord, and the Sognefjord—where the landscape felt less like a revelation than a mirror, uncanny in its resemblance to home.

What's striking isn't just the grandeur of the landscape—it's how accessible it all is. Backed by oil wealth and a deeply pragmatic government, Norway doesn't hesitate to punch tunnels through mountains or suspend bridges across glacial inlets in places where most engineers would politely suggest turning back.

If there were a nonstop from Seattle to Bergen, we'd be first in line. Until that glorious day arrives, the next best thing is hopping on the new Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) nonstop flight from Seattle to Copenhagen—a sleek, Nordic gateway to the fjords beyond. SAS's business class is everything you'd hope for: elegant, efficient, and serene, with lie-flat seats, real cutlery, and the quiet reassurance that makes 35,000 feet feel grounded. We arrived rested, well-fed, and just a short hop from Norway.

RAIN, REVELRY, AND NORDIC NUANCE

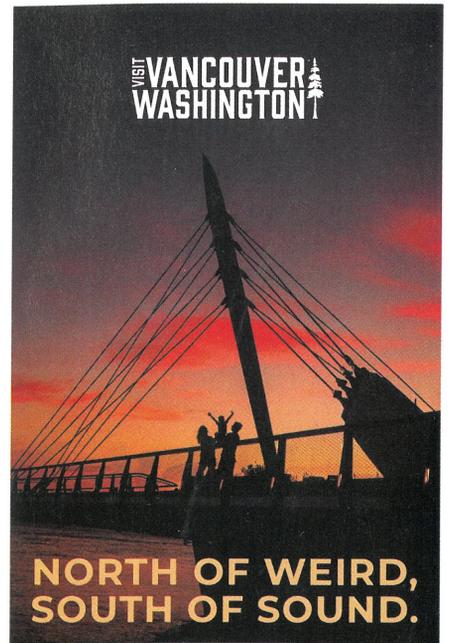
We began in Bergen, a city ringed by seven hills and frequently immersed in rain. Bergensers resemble Seattleites in that they talk about rain obsessively—missing it, cursing it, but always with reverence. The city is also a classic Nordic paradox, where nature crashes into a hip urban core. After a brisk check-in at the stylish Hotel Norge—a crisp blend of classic design and functional hospitality—we stepped into a city alive with culture. Our arrival coincided with the Bergen International Festival, an annual springtime explosion of music, dance, and drama.



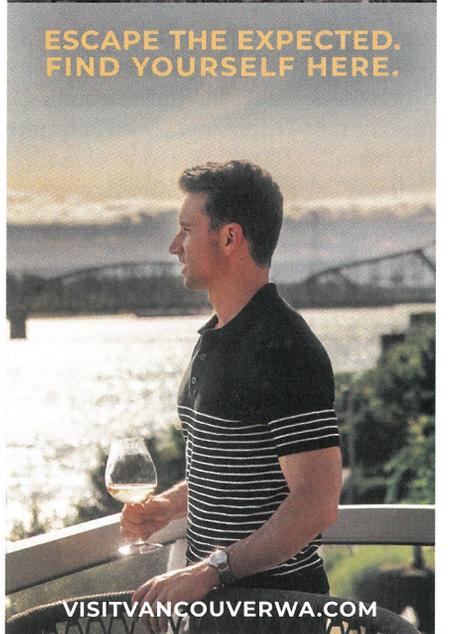


NORSE NOSTALGIA

The Fløibanen funicular on its way up Mount Fløyen, just northeast of Bergen. Nineteenth-century composer Edvard Grieg's home at Trolldhaugen; Bergen, with a Fjord Cruise boat ready to take passengers sightseeing.



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Our first stop was the KODE Art Museums, where the Rasmus Meyer collection offers a moody immersion into Edvard Munch's restless genius, minus *The Scream*, which resides in Oslo. Freed from the gravitational pull of his most iconic work, the museum avoids the Louvre-style bottleneck, allowing Munch's brilliance to unfold in quieter, more haunting ways. Later, we ascended Mount Fløyen via the Fløybanen funicular, where locals lounged on benches and grassy slopes, soaking in sunset views like a high-altitude Gasworks Park.

Dinner that evening was at Lysverket, Bergen's only Michelin-starred restaurant and a dynamic example of what chef and owner Christopher Haatuft terms "neo-fjordic" cuisine. Think roasted scallops with kimchi tortellini or grilled langoustine with fermented chili sauce, arranged with the precision of a Grieg symphony. Staff who greeted us had been trained in Seattle, at Canlis and the Thompson. Chef Haatuft is a Nordic cuisine legend—and a total character. If he stops by your table, brace for a wildly entertaining punk rock soliloquy.

The next morning, we traded Bergen's bustle for the orchards and waterfalls of Hardangerfjord. Along the way, we took a necessary detour to Troidhaugen, the hilltop home of Edvard Grieg. Peering into his lakeside composing hut, which still holds his piano, we felt the tug of history. It's one thing to pick up the Peer Gynt Suite on vinyl on Stone Way North; it's another to stand where it was born.

DRINKING THE GLACIER, CRISP CIDER, AND HIGH SPEED THRILLS

Hardanger is known as "Norway's orchard," and while the apple blossoms had already made their seasonal exit, their spirit lingered in the air—and the cider. It's a curious coincidence that two far-flung fjordlands, Hardanger and Washington, both pinned their agricultural pride on apples.

After a bracing walk behind the roaring veil of Steinsdalsfossen waterfall, we set out on a Zodiac tour with Hardangerfjord

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Spring Day on Karl Johan (1890) by Edvard Munch, a piece in the Rasmus Meyer collection at Bergen's KODE Art Museum. Roasted cod with Brussels sprouts and black garlic at Lysverket, Bergen's only Michelin-starred restaurant.



Adventure. The stories unspooled like a Nordic saga at 40 knots: a cottage that served as a speakeasy; a mostly abandoned village turned summer fun spot; a family farm up a cliff, maintained for generations. We pulled close to a burbling waterfall to drink glacier-fed water of immaculate purity.

At Spildegarden in Øystese, an award-winning family-run apple farm, we learned that the cider aficionados in Hardanger are competitive and opinionated. Lunch was excellent: cheese, charcuterie, potato salad, and an apple pie so fresh it tasted like it had just dropped from the oven to the plate. Later, we moved the party to a local's home whose yard practically melted into the fjord. The light in Øystese is so spectacular that artist James Turrell chose it as the location for one of his infamous Skyspace installations.

After a day full of laughter—courtesy of the cider, and our host's sparkling personality—we stayed the night at Thon Hotel Sandven, which felt like the kind of place where explorer Roald Amundsen might have sipped aquavit before heading into the wild. The rooms charmed us with hidden nooks and wallpapered beams, and we watched the evening slip away with the sunset glowing on the fjord.

FROZEN FJORDS AND FIERY CONCERTS

Onward to Balestrand, a village seemingly sketched by a watercolorist. We visited St. Olaf's Church, the tiny stave masterpiece that inspired Disney's *Frozen*. At Heit Sauna Balestrand, we jumped into the fjord, which proved an icy catharsis after a long, hot sauna. That night, we dined and stayed at the historic Kviknes Hotel, a

handsome 1857 lakefront property from Norway's golden age of tourism. Family-owned and passed down through generations, the hotel felt majestic. Kaiser Wilhelm II summered at the property in July 1914, as he had for the 20 years prior, right as Europe edged toward war. The night we stayed, the owner was on site and gave a gripping retelling of the goings-on at the hotel leading up to the historic event.

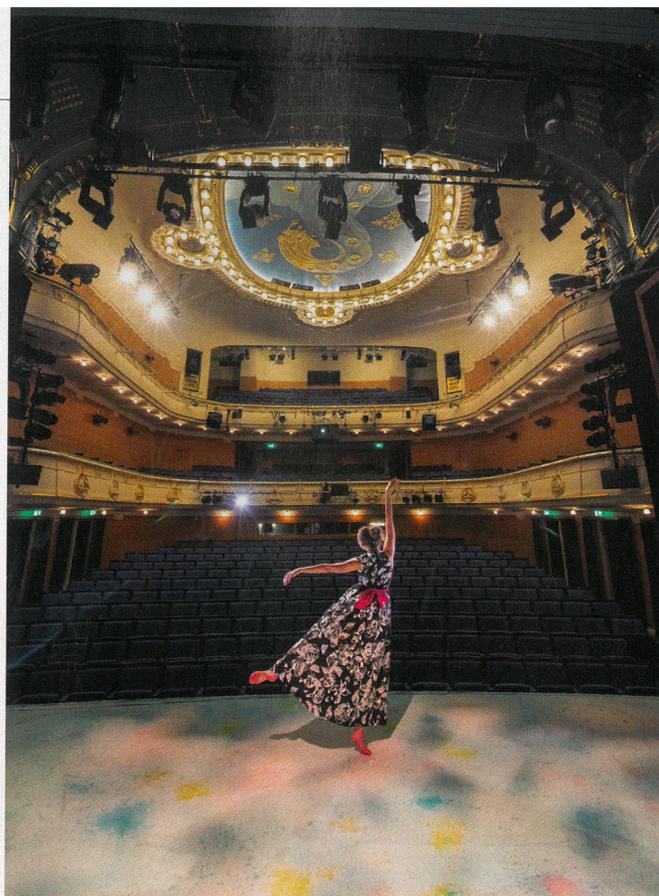
Morning brought another Zodiac expedition on Sognefjord, the "King of Fjords." The captain brought us to his favorite spot, Finnabotnen, to enjoy the sounds of water, birds, and mostly—silence. Lunch was at Larsgarden Tunhotell, a cozy farmhouse inn above the fjord, surrounded by berry bushes and fruit trees. The proprietors, sisters Janne and Heidi, took immense pride and skill in revamping their 12th-generation property and turning it into a boutique inn. A famous interior designer created the divine rooms, but we most appreciated the personal touches: a painted family wood chest, a small flower bouquet from the garden. We didn't stay the night, but we were jealous of those who did.

That evening, we checked into the refined Hotel Opus XVI, a historic property with roots in Bergen's cultural scene (run by descendants of Edvard Grieg, naturally). Dinner was at Enhjørningen, a storied fish restaurant, tucked inside a centuries-old building in Bryggen, Bergen's UNESCO-listed harbor district. The former Hanseatic outpost still bustles with fish market energy, and the cod tastes just as good.

As the final crescendo to our journey, we attended a performance

HISTORIC HALLS

A dancer performing at Den Nationale Scene, one of the oldest theaters in Norway. Håkon's Hall, one of Norway's oldest castles, was built between 1247 and 1261 by King Håkon Håkonsson as a residence and banquet hall.



by the avant-garde BIT20 Ensemble inside Bergen's Håkonshallen, and to call it a concert would be like calling a Viking longship a raft. It was a full-bodied, stone-vaulted, multi-sensory experience. The venue alone makes the heart race. Built in the 13th century as the ceremonial hall of King Håkon Håkonsson—who hosted a royal wedding so medieval it would've made the Lannisters blush—Håkonshallen oozes ancient gravitas.

And then came the show. At the helm was conductor Bjarni Bjarnason, resplendent in a full-length black gown. The composer was Icelandic musician Bára Gísladóttir, waif-like and watchful near the back, seemingly uncertain whether to take a bow or cast a spell. The music began harshly—bowed metal, groaning strings, bleating brass like snowstorm sirens. Rhythm fragmented. A percussionist brandished a power sander and applied it to an oil drum, its mechanical shriek slicing through the hall like a sonic guillotine. Absurd. Irreverent. And eventually, strangely moving.

It was funny, too—sly Nordic humor in the form of sonic chaos. Somewhere between the power tool ballet and the musical saw, we found ourselves grinning. Sitting inside a 750-year-old royal hall listening to Icelandic noise while admiring the conductor's couture—it was one of those moments that remind you why you travel. And only in Bergen could it all make poetic sense.

Norway didn't coddle us with postcard clichés. It challenged, it layered, it defied tradition. We saw a country in full command of its contradictions. And as Seattle's skyline reappeared outside the airplane window—glass and steel rising where forests once stood—it felt less like returning from a trip than from a very long and familiar walk home. **✎**



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