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TRAVEL: On backroads and byways, exploring inspirational villages

ANNE Z. COOKE | McClatchy-Tribune News Service • Published July 29, 2012
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LILLEHAMMER, Norway – The visitors touring Maihaugen Heritage Village were itching with curiosity. They'd wandered the site's narrow lanes and peered inside the 200-year-old log cabins. They'd explored the craft shops and traditional hand-hewn barns brought from far-flung farms and forests and reassembled here, under the trees. Now they wanted to know if any of Norway's leading figures – statesmen, filmmakers, painters or artists – had their roots in these humble huts.

"What about Thor Heyerdahl, the anthropologist, who wrote 'Kon-Tiki?'" asked a bearded man in a brown sweater. "Is there a connection with Henrik Ibsen or Edvard Grieg?" said a woman with two teenagers.

Elsa, our guide, tall and blonde, paused to think. A frown flitted across her brow. Then she brightened, remembering. "Grieg was here!" she told us. "He vacationed in Lillehammer in summer. The Gudbrandsdalen Valley folk tunes were an important influence on his music." She adjusted her red-and-blue embroidered skirt and smiled.

Elsa could be forgiven for wishful thinking. With Norway's tourist season at hand, every rural hamlet with a legendary anecdote claims one of Norway's native sons. From creators to cranks, Norway's finest are familiar to most of us: the

controversial playwright Henrik Ibsen; Edvard Munch, the eccentric painter, novelist and Nobel Prize-winning author Sigrid Undset, whose edgy themes still are current. But most often the halo spins over composer Edvard Grieg, whose plaintive melodies were born in these northern forests.

Plainly, deconstructing Norway was the key to the fertile genius of so many moody and eccentric prodigies. So we rented a car for 10 days and, after touring Oslo, headed north from the capital city through sunny farm country, eventually turning west across Norway's mountain spine. Descending beside blue-green fiords, we ended our trip in Bergen, on the coast.

Along the way, as time allowed, we followed each beckoning back road in search of wood-timbered stave churches, lakeside villages and botanical gardens. Lunch, often bread, cheese and reindeer sausage, never tasted as good as when we picnicked in a wide spot with a view.

And what a land it is. Dark and brooding in winter, Norway awakens to the midnight sun. Snow-clad peaks feed rushing rivers. Swollen waterfalls careen over spongy tundra and trickle down steep ravines. Roses bloom. To the west, the coastline climbs out of the North Sea like a polar bear on the hunt, cold fiords probing the cliffs with slippery fingers.

And from May through September, Norwegians – and visitors – take to the outdoors, to pick berries, lie in the sun, tour manor houses and gardens, visit art exhibits and take in outdoor concerts, music recitals and craft fairs.

In Oslo (visitoslo.com/en), we strolled through Frogner Park to see sculptor Gustav Vigeland's modernist sculptures, more than 200 in the one park. Oversized, physical and stolid, they are arranged in a formal garden setting that creates a perfect contrast to their sense of free space. Several miles away was the Edvard Munch Museum, where not just one version of the painter's famous work, the "Scream," but many versions, a subject that obsessed the eccentric Munch.

These and their contemporaries in the late 19th and other early 20th centuries were frequent patrons of the Grand Hotel Café, where they met for morning coffee or in the evening, for conversation and beer. And the cafe still is popular, packed with residents and tourists. You won't have to ask who's who among the crowded faces painted onto a wall-length mural behind the tables. Norway's best and brightest, they are identified by name and position on the back of the menu.

Heading north to Lillehammer we stopped briefly to see the "long jump" facility, where Olympic-bound skiers practice during the winter. But we spent most of the day at Maihaugen, exploring its more than 140 timbered houses, barns, craft shops and even a stave church. To the northwest, we stopped in Lom to tour another stave church, this one a 12th-century relic, and like its kin, built entirely of wood. The gloomy nave and massive beams left a frisson of darker days; fierce dragon heads topped a half dozen peaked, wood-shingled gables.

Beyond Lom, a sign on a dirt road pointed the way to the Juvvreen Glacier and the summit of 8,148-foot Galdhopiggen, a mystery we couldn't miss. Icebound year around, the mountain is the site of the SkiCenter, a summer host for Olympic skiers in training.

Crossing over Norway's snowy spine, (the roads are plowed), we paused to snap photos, then continued down windings twists and turns, on the last leg to Bergen. The road skirted some fiords and crossed others, via daily car ferry service. Eventually we reached the mighty Sognefjord, 112 miles long and 4,000 feet at its deepest point.

Though many a far-flung village boasts that Grieg ate there, slept there or taught lessons there, the town of Lofthus, on the Hardanger Fjord, makes an honest claim to his presence. The composer spent several vacations here, staying in the Ullensvang Hotel, breathing the fresh air and hiking the mountain trails. Later he stayed for a year to compose, retiring to a hut on the hotel grounds in search of the inspiration that so often failed to come. The hotel owner, Mr. Utne,

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the great-great-grandson of the first Mr. Utne to befriend the composer, guided us through the cabin.

As they say in Oslo, "Bergeners are a different breed," and so they are. Bergen, (visitbergen.com/en) historically separated from eastern Norway by the mountains, is a waterfront town, built by Hanseatic traders and shipping merchants. To learn more about its origins, we joined a tour at the Bryggen Museum, built above the excavated foundations of the town's first waterfront dwellings. Stay for both portions of the tour. The second half, the most interesting, we thought, goes through the excavated portions of the town's 16th century row houses to show how the merchants lived and worked.

Don't miss the other attractions: the waterside fish and vegetable market, the restored Berghus Fortress and King Haakon's Hall, with relics dating from about 1250; and the waterfront houses and shops. If a half-day tour includes a ride up the mountain for an aerial view of the town and bay, jump on it.

We saved time for a farewell pilgrimage to Troidhaugen ("the Trolls House"), Grieg's country retreat. This spacious house, where he and his wife, a singer, spent their last years, overlooks a lake outside Bergen, surrounded by a green lawn and quiet garden. The piano, which Grieg played when the couple entertained, is touted as the highlight of the tour.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Fly direct from New York to Oslo on Continental Airlines or SAS (Scandinavian Airlines). Other airlines connect through Copenhagen, London, Zurich, Frankfurt, Rome and most large European cities. Ferry service is available from Denmark and Sweden.

Touring by car: Reserve a car with Hertz, Avis or Budget before you leave home. All have offices in Oslo and Bergen. Norway requires an international driver's license, usually available through your auto club.

Travel information: For this summer's events, festivals, tickets and discounts, contact the Norway Tourism Board, 6553rd Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017. Call 212-885-9751, or see visitorsnorway.com.

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