

Celebrating Edvard Grieg

Norway's Jubilee 1993 echoes the genius of the composer and the works of other artists

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty

OSLO—The questions were coming hot and heavy, and Elsa, young, blond and pert, a guide at the Maihaugen outdoor museum, was ready with answers.

"Yes, Edvard Grieg often visited Lillehammer for summer holidays," she assured her audience in careful English, smoothing her red-and-green embroidered skirt to pose for a photograph beside one of the park's 18th Century log houses. She smiled. A dozen cameras clicked in unison.

"Both Lillehammer and the Gudbrandsdalen Valley were an important influence on his life and music."

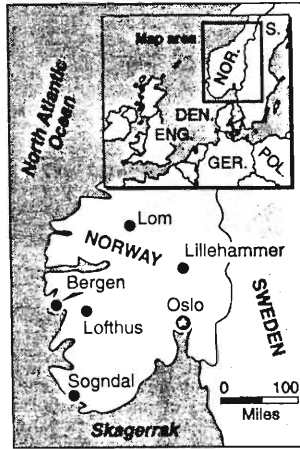
Well, maybe. Elsa could be forgiven for wishful thinking. But as Norway's Grieg Jubilee 1993 festival gains momentum, speeding toward summer and the culmination of the 150th birthday celebration honoring composer Edvard Grieg, every Norwegian village with the mere hint of an anecdote to retell is claiming the great man as its own.

To find out for yourself, consider driving through Norway. The roads are good, and the traffic is light. You can poke along country roads in a rented car, lunch on bread and cheese at scenic overlooks and linger at 800-year-old stave churches. You'll cross tundra, ferry across the world's deepest fjords and shop for souvenir-store trolls and handknit sweaters.

And you may decide that the inspiration behind Grieg's genius—and the wellspring of Norway's most haunting music, art and literature—was born in the land itself.

And what a land it is. Westward, the rough, rugged coastline climbs out of the cold North Sea like a polar bear on the hunt; solitary fjords, glassy and still, probe the cliffs like hoary fingers. In the mountains, icy peaks and snow-fed rivers sweep the tundra. To the east, green meadows and tidy barns dot the landscape.

The Grieg Jubilee 1993, a year-long celebration with events planned in all the larger towns, highlights the life and work of the



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puckish Grieg, a tiny man who had to sit on a volume of Beethoven's collected works to reach his desk—and perhaps for inspiration. But the Jubilee also honors Grieg's fellow artists and their era, the late 19th Century, and the flowering of nationalism.

This summer, concerts, recitals, theater productions, museum exhibits and guided tours will recognize Grieg, born in Bergen (1843-1907); playwright Henrik Ibsen, also from Bergen (1828-1906), and expressionist painter Edvard Munch (pronounced Munk), born near Oslo (1863-1944).

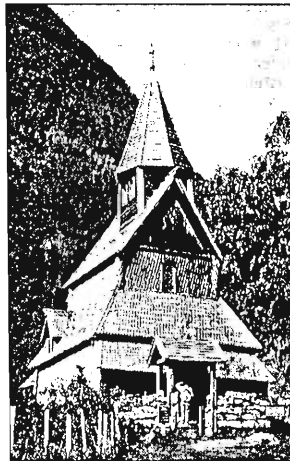
Norway's secondary artists also have earned their place in the midnight sun. Most Americans think of Lillehammer as the site of the 1994 Winter Olympics, but Norwegians know the town as the home of Sigrid Undset, novelist and Nobel Prize winner, best known in America for her novel, "Kristin Lavransdatter." Undset's home will be open to visitors.

Less familiar outside Scandinavia are author Bjornstjerne Bjornson; sculptor Gustav Vigeland, whose sculpture fills Oslo's Frogner Park; sculptor Ingebrig Vik, whose bronze figure of Grieg graces city parks in Oslo and Bergen; and virtuoso violinist Ole Bull, who recognized and encouraged the young Grieg. Bull's home, on a wooded islet a short



Photos by Steve Haggerty

The waterfront and harbor area of downtown Bergen, Norway, birthplace of Edvard Grieg.



A small stave church on a hill in Urnes, above Norway's mightiest fjord, the Sognefjord.

ferry ride from Bergen, is open for visits.

One possible itinerary—with time out for detours—travels from east to west, starting in Oslo, the capital.

Drive first to Lillehammer (there's a brand new road, built for next winter's Olympics), continue to Lom in the mountains, cross the summit, descend to Sogndal and Lofthus in fjord country and end in Bergen, Norway's historic seafaring port.

During the 19th Century, most aspiring artists flocked to Oslo's Grand Hotel Cafe, the place to see and be seen sipping tea on a rainy



The Steindalsfoss Waterfall—typical of Norway's rugged beauty—near Bergen.

afternoon. Grieg and Ibsen would meet there. So to meet the Norwegian literati, start your pilgrimage at the Cafe, beneath a wall-sized mural of its famous patrons.

Art surrounds you in Oslo, a reminder of the strange connection between cold, dark days and the creative force. Frogner Park is a stage for Vigeland's works, hundreds of monumental granite and bronze figures. The Munch Museum displays a large collection of Munch's paintings and sketches. Ibsen's apartment near the royal palace is now a memorabilia museum. The lobby of the National

How to get around

More about Norway: Getting there: Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and Delta Airlines fly to Oslo from the United States. Other airlines connect from Copenhagen. Ferry service is available from Denmark and Sweden.

Getting around: Hertz, Avis and Budget have rental offices in Oslo and Bergen; reserve a car before you leave home. Norway requires an international drivers' license (available through an auto club).

Joining a tour: Package tours are an easy and affordable way to see Norway. A Norwegian Masters tour is offered by Scantours, Santa Monica, Calif. 800-223-SCAN, and by Holiday Tours of America, New York City, 800-677-6454.

Tickets and events: Hotels and tourist information offices in the larger towns have Grieg Jubilee 1993 event listings. In most cases you can buy tickets on the day of the performance.

Where to stay: In Oslo, the Grand Hotel, on Karljohans Gate, is the city's finest and most expensive hotel. The Munch Hotel, on Munchsgate, is clean, serviceable and inexpensive. Both are near the city center.

In Lom, the Fossheim Hotel, a historic log lodge on the main road through town, is rustic, bright and moderately priced.

In Sogndal, the Sogndal Hotel, near the town center, caters to tour groups. Expect moderate prices, cafeteria-style food.

In Bergen, the luxurious Norge Hotel, in the center on Ole Bulls' Plaza, is tops and priced accordingly. The Augustin Hotel, on Sundts Gate near the harbor, is clean, small and priced moderately.

Further information is available from the Norwegian Tourist Board, 655 3rd Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; 212-949-2333.

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way's highest peak. From the base, a 3,000-foot-long lift, open all summer, tows skiers up the glacier.

Members of the U.S. Women's Ski Team were on the slopes the third week of August, training for the Olympics.

"We're here because this is the best August snow in Europe," one said as they knocked the snow off their boots and trooped inside for lunch.

West of the mountains and south, a primitive small stave church stands sentinel on a hill in Urnes, above Norway's mightiest fjord, the Sognefjord, 112 miles long and 4,000 feet deep. You can reach Urnes on a narrow road beside the fjord or catch a ferry from Sogndal, a 15-minute ride.

Though Grieg is reputed to have slept in a good many Norwegian towns, Lofthus on the Hardanger Fjord honestly can say that he did. Here at the Ullensvang Hotel, the composer lived for a year and vacationed for several summers, alternating hiking trips into the

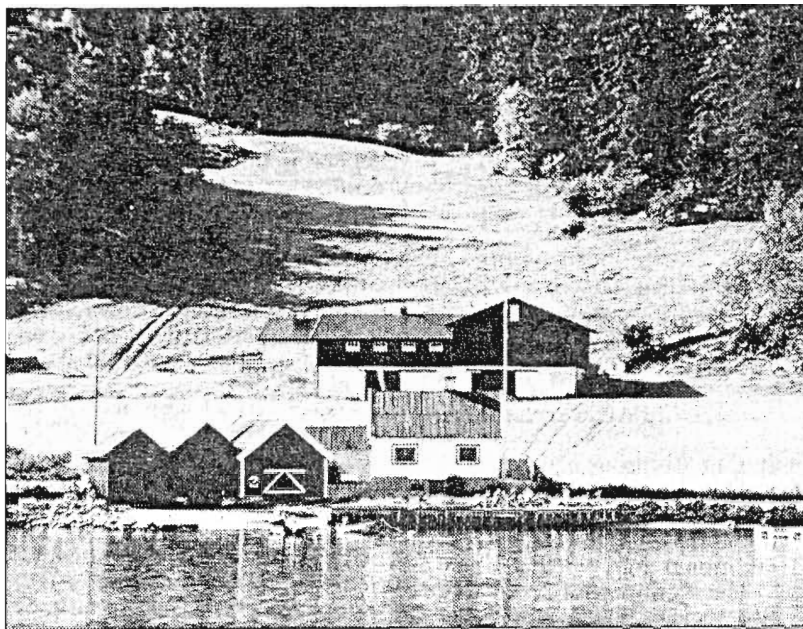


Photo by Steve Haggerty

Green meadows and tidy farms dot the landscape in the mountainous fjord country of Norway.

mountains with solitary work sessions in a primitive one-room hut, where he wove the folk tunes he heard around him into lyrical piano pieces.

The hut stands in the hotel garden overlooking the fjord, repaired and repainted by the hotel's

owner, Mr. Utne, great great-son of the Utne who opened the hotel in 1846 and befriended Grieg.

In Bergen, where Grieg spent the last 21 years of his life, his presence is tangible, even today. But to understand the Bergeners, "a different breed," according to Oslo

residents, be sure to include more than musical events on your agenda.

Don't miss the Berghus Fortress and King Hakon's Hall, a relic from the mid 1200s. The Municipal Art Museum's 19th and 20th Century Norwegian and European paintings are worth seeing, and a fine collection of paintings by Munch, whose dark, brooding vision seems more contemporary than ever, are found in the Rasmus Meyer Museum.

For a glimpse of early Bergen, visit the Bryggen Museum, built above the excavated foundations of the town's first waterfront settlement. The Bryggen tour starts in the exhibits, then visits the 16th Century row houses where the Hanseatic merchants lived and worked. Rain is no excuse to miss this one as the tour guides hand out umbrellas.

Make your last pilgrimage to Trolldhaugen ("Trolls' House"), Grieg's home where he lived with his wife, an accomplished singer. The house, looking over a lake outside Bergen, is open daily for public tours.

There is no doubt that Grieg slept in this spacious country retreat: The original furnishings—kitchenware, books, music and photographs—are in their familiar places. His piano, which he played when the couple entertained friends, is kept tuned for private recitals.

A large, airy hall for public recitals and chamber concerts was built recently over a ravine near the house, taking advantage of a natural slope. Musical performances are held here daily, a fitting end to any search for the meaning in Grieg's music.

Eventually, you'll find yourself at the Grieghallen, Bergen's main concert hall in the city center, which is booked year-round with symphony, opera and jazz concerts; Norwegians are faithful music lovers. This summer, of course, the focus will be on Grieg. ●