

THREE PERFECT DAYS

Hemispheres JULY 2015

WRITER **CHRIS WRIGHT**

PHOTOGRAPHER **ILJA C. HENDEL**





OSLO

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT A CITY'S GOLDEN AGE, they're generally referring to the past. Oslo, though, is hitting the heights right now. The Norwegian capital has always had its appeal—natural beauty, courteous citizens, cultural heritage—but it's never been considered a hotbed of excitement and innovation. Until now. Over the last few decades, Oslo has undergone a massively ambitious revitalization project, bankrolled by Norway's oil reserves and driven by a broad effort to forge a lasting national identity. The city today is bursting with groundbreaking architecture, art and cuisine, its citizens brimming with optimism and energy. People say this sort of thing all the time, but with Oslo it's true: There has never been a better time to be here.

DAY ONE

In which Chris attempts two difficult tasks: paddleboarding and understanding the Norwegian government

S O HERE I AM, IN OSLO.

Actually, that's not completely true. Strictly speaking, I'm a few feet offshore, up to my nostrils in fjord water. Nearby, a classical pianist named Aksel Kolstad is offering advice. "Grab the board!" he is hollering. He is also laughing, which doesn't seem right.

Kolstad, a keen paddleboarder, has taken me for a turn around Oslofjord, and I've gone in. "I'm going in," I'd announced earlier, a moment before I toppled into the clear, cold water. A small crowd has gathered to watch as I dig my fingernails into a boardwalk, unable to haul myself up, unwilling to let go.

How different it was a few hours ago. I woke up in a stylish hotel room nearby, amid puppy-soft pillows and dark wood finishes. Across from my bed was a sliding door and a balcony. After grappling for a while with the *Minority Report* coffee machine, I stood out there and gazed

dreamily across the water that is now claiming both my body temperature and my dignity.

Historically, high-end hospitality in Oslo has tended toward the Baroque—giltwood mirrors and looming chandeliers. The Thief, with its retro-futuristic décor, is the city's first true boutique hotel, set in the city's first boutique neighborhood: Tjuvholmen (Thief Island), a tiny peninsula that was a shabby port a decade ago but now bristles with oil-money architecture, including Renzo Piano's sweeping wood-and-glass Astrup Fearnley Museum.

If the local infatuation with Oslofjord is tied to *friluftsliv* (the Norwegian love of nature), then the Tjuvholmen development is part of a more recent proclivity. "We have endured a cultural ice age, and now we are starting to blossom," Kolstad says, sitting at a grand piano in his performance space near the Thief. "Oslo is a glass globe—you shake it, and it snows art."

Kolstad is not your everyday classical musician. "I'll be playing Mozart, and I'll suddenly flex my chest like this," he says, making his pectoral muscles jiggle. But the element of slapstick in his concerts is also part of a local tradition. "Oslo is a city of eccentrics; it's filled with characters."

Still damp, I set out on an exploratory stroll. Earlier, I plotted my course on a map: my first stop, Akershus Fortress, looked to be about a

←
Left: the Tjuvholmen district, on Oslofjord; above: a statue of King Karl Johan in front of the Royal Palace in Slottsparken

half hour away on foot. But Oslo is smaller than the maps suggest. The fort stands across the fjord—you could throw a comedic classical pianist and hit it from here. If it weren't for all the stuff to gawp at along the way—the jostling artworks, the shipyard shops at Aker Brygge, the islands dotting the fjord—I could easily slosh there in 10 minutes or less.

I reach the mainland and City Hall, a redbrick, twin-towered monolith that could be a Bronx housing project but for the mytho-heroic reliefs dotting its facade (and the fact that Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies are held within). I stand for a bit on the bustling waterfront, watching an elderly woman in Romany dress bashing a tambourine, then head for Akershus.

Inside, the fort is a tangle of undulant paths, soaring curtain walls and crumbling archways. Two spires stand above it all, part of a 17th-century reconstruction after old Oslo, razed by fire, was abandoned and the land around the fort settled. Over 700 years, various parts have been demolished, rebuilt and embellished, resulting in a helter-skelter of styles—today, it stands as a symbol of Norway's efforts to forge its own identity after centuries of subjugation.

I have more history in store a couple of blocks away at Engebret Café, whose regulars have included Edvard Grieg, Henrik Ibsen and Edvard Munch. I order the cured herring, which, owner Kay Johnsen says, should really be washed

down with an aquavit aperitif. “Herring and strong liquor. Very traditional.”

I ask if I can try the grilled whale. I've always imagined that whale was what sailors ate before they started on their crewmates—a second-to-last resort—but this (minke, culled for scientific purposes, I am told) is fantastic: gamy and tender, not a hint of blubber. As I exit, Johnsen shows me a framed letter from Munch, written after he'd been kicked out of the café for drunkenness. An apology? “No,” Johnsen says, laughing. “It's blaming everybody but himself.”

Luckily, my next stop is close by. Built in the 1690s, Oslo Cathedral isn't the grandest religious structure in the world, but it is impressive, its blocky clock tower looming over a busy flower market. There's an organ recital inside, so I take a pew and examine Hugo Lous Mohr's trippy ceiling art, which includes an image of a man battering a sad-looking dragon with an inverted crucifix.

Next, I waddle up pedestrianized Karl Johans Street, past H&M and Mango and out onto a broad promenade flanked by ornate 18th-century townhouses and a clutter of landmarks: the National Theater, the National Gallery, the Royal Palace. I stop to gaze at the stylistic mishmash of the Storting (parliament) building, then head inside to watch Norway's politicians debate the issues of the day. As I enter, a guard tells me that I need to empty my pockets into a tray.

Him: “The money we keep!”

Me: “No wonder Norway is so wealthy!”

Both: “Ha! Ha!”

Earlier, Kolstad told me there's a gloomy streak underlying a lot of Norwegian humor, but there's also what he described as “pillow comedy” (so called because “you want to put a pillow over your face”), an example of which would be a guy climbing a tree to retrieve his kid's kite and meeting the gaze of a woman, naked, sunbathing in the yard next door: “It's not what it seems!”

I don't understand what the politicians in the red-and-gold rotunda are saying, but their tone suggests it might be something pressing, like replacing the soap dispensers in the bathrooms. I sneak out and make my way back to Thief Island, heralded by City Hall's 49-bell carillon, which belts out a tune that drowns out the gulls and street performers.

After a quick nap, I sink into an armchair in the Thief's swish eatery Fru K, next to a Philippe Starck lamp shaped like an assault rifle, and receive a succession of dishes: salmon caviar with horseradish and lemon curd; turbot soup with Jerusalem artichoke; bleak roe with cabbage and popcorn crackling; steak tartare with oyster emulsion. It's a splendid meal, washed down with some splendid wine, all of which sets me up for my big night out: standing on my balcony, looking out at the Oslofjord, its surface burnished by the moon. Man, I think, taking a swig of beer, that water looks cold.

“THERE'S A LOT OF GREAT NEW ARCHITECTURE IN OSLO. BUT I'M HOPING WE DON'T TURN INTO DUBAI. SOMETIMES I THINK, YOU KNOW, ‘DUDE, HOW ABOUT PLANTING A LITTLE BIT OF GRASS?’”

AKSEL KOLSTAD
Classical pianist



→
Clockwise from top left: the Grand Hotel; Einar Holthe at Fuglen; the odd relocated houses of Bygdøy; Vigeland Sculpture Park



"OSLO HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VERY SAFE CITY. YOU CAN LEAVE A SUITCASE OF MONEY AT THE TRAIN STATION AND COME BACK AN HOUR LATER AND IT WILL HAVE BEEN MOVED TO THE SIDE, SO NOBODY TRIPS OVER IT."

CHRISTIAN RINGNES
Businessman and
founder, Ekeberg
Sculpture Park



DAY TWO

In which Chris sees Norway's finest artworks and eats its most artfully constructed food

BREAKFAST TODAY IS IN THE Grand Café, at the Grand Hotel. This may be the most famous room in Oslo, frequented by pretty much every notable person who ever set foot in the city (I pass Michael Moore on the way in). On one wall is a mural, circa 1928, depicting the café's former patrons, including Munch, who once made a scene here over an unpaid bill. I help myself to a healthy plate of salmon, salad and rustic bread, followed by a mountain of lardy bacon and sausage.

The Grand occupies the other end of the hipness scale from the Thief. Set in a stately building on Karl Johans Street, the

hotel opened in 1874 and remains resolutely old school. I've checked into a suite that is a paragon of gentility, exemplified by the French windows overlooking the street. It's all I can do to resist waving regally at the rabble below.

My goal this morning is to get to the National Gallery early, in order to beat the crowds. It works: I spend 20 minutes entirely alone in a hall of Munch masterpieces, including "The Scream." Nearby are his reclining "Madonna" and the inexplicably creepy "Girls on the Pier." Magic.

From here, I stroll through the Royal Palace grounds to the city's tony West End, then cut left onto Hegdehaugsveien Street, home to upscale retailers like Tara, where you can pick up a pair of graffiti-covered jeans for \$1,300. Soon, I enter Vigeland Sculpture Park, via a bridge bearing a procession of disconcertingly realistic bronze statues of naked people, wrestling, running or just standing arms akimbo. The most famous is a baby stamping his foot in petulant fury. Another depicts a man kicking a small child across the floor. Ah, um...

It took sculptor Gustav Vigeland 20 years to create the 200-plus works that make up this installation, which opened in the mid-1940s. The centerpiece is the 46-foot granite tower "Monolith," comprised of 121 squirming, heaped-up men, women and children, a work that is said to speak of divine inspiration but which to me seems fantastically sinister. Taxi!

My next stop is across town, at Ekeberg Sculpture Park, opened two years ago by billionaire Christian Ringnes. Set on a high hill (Munch got his inspiration for "The Scream" up here), the park is formed of 31 works scattered over 64 acres. I find Ringnes rummaging around in Salvador Dalí's "Venus de Milo with Drawers." "People put stuff in them," he says, pulling out a wooden crucifix: "A cross!"

Ekeberg has not been without its critics. It has been derided as a crass vanity project, a violation of the park's natural beauty; the overall theme is a celebration of women, which to some smacks of condescension. "We had a big fight to set this up," Ringnes says. "Now, people love it."

We set out on a tour of the sculptures, Ringnes striding effortlessly uphill as I wheeze pitifully behind. Even so, the place is a joy—there's something especially captivating about the union of natural splendor and artworks like "Peeing Woman," a bronze statue of a squatting figure, pants at half mast. "She should actually be peeing," says Ringnes, frowning. "We had a period where she was doing it too much. Right now, we're having a dry period."

As we make our way downhill, an elderly woman stops Ringnes to tell him she is "very happy with the park."

"Not the artworks?" he replies.

"Not the pornographic one," she says, referring to a video installation that includes a nude woman waving a flag. "Maybe you shouldn't have spent your money on that."

Ringnes doesn't seem to mind the criticism. "This park is part of something new," he says. "If you'd have come to Oslo 20 years ago, it was kind of boring. The city was clean and safe, but there wasn't



Bleak roe with popcorn crackling from Fru K



Built in 1200, the Norwegian Folk Museum's Gol Stave Church is littered with eerie carvings

much happening. We are living through some kind of heightened time.”

Another example of Oslo’s revival is Maaemo, the first two-Michelin-starred Nordic restaurant, located a short tram ride from Ekeberg, overlooking the Barcode Project, a strip of hypermodern commercial buildings. But people don’t come here for the view.

After I’ve been seated at one of the eatery’s eight tables, a waitress lays out the ground rules, which include a ban on any ingredients that cannot be found in Norway: “No pepper, no lemon or lime...” Then we’re off. I count 23 items on the set menu, starting with a single sprig of pickled salsify, served on a large bed of juniper branches. Just as I’m about to start nibbling one of the twigs, another course appears: a foil-thin sliver of wild duck, cured for seven months and served on a square of crumpled paper.

So it goes, a procession of dishes that fall somewhere between molecular gastronomy and an episode of “Survivor”: a smidgen of chicken liver and elderflower on a patch of lawn; nubs of frozen cheese and vendace roe on a rock; raw oyster emulsion atop a diorama of seashells. Of course, Michelin stars are not won on presentation alone—the tastes and textures here are inspired—but half the fun is anticipating what kind of madness will come next. The big showstopper is the langoustine, served on a pile of spruce above dry ice. The waiter introduces a pine infusion, and a pungent fog courses across the table, which is so delightful I yelp.

In terms of experiences, it’ll be hard to top sour milk sprinkled with dried reindeer heart, so I decide to wind down on a cruise of the fjord. To get to the dock, in front of City Hall, I make my way west along the waterfront, pausing to stroll up the sloping roof of the Opera House, a huge white structure that looks like a Cubist ocean liner, then watch a free modern ballet performance in its bright lobby.

The cruise is a good reminder of why locals love their fjord. We meander among scores of islands, some dotted



IRAM HAQ
Filmmaker

“IT’S DIFFICULT TO TALK ABOUT THE LOCAL CHARACTER, BECAUSE WE ARE TWO DIFFERENT PEOPLE: IN THE WINTER, WE ARE HUNCHED UP, IN THE SUMMER, WE SMILE.”

with tiny, colorful bathhouses, some with geese lazing among the trees, gray cliffs rising behind them. The sun is shining. Fishing boats sail by. This, I have decided, is the only way to experience these waters.

After a quick spritz at the Grand, I stroll into a nearby grid of streets, the hub of the city’s 17th-century revival. There are some lovely old buildings here, not least the 1640 pile housing Statholderens Mat & Vinkjeller, set in a vaulted cellar below its Michelin-starred counterpart, Statholdergaarden. I have a tapas plate to start, which includes a rich oxtail empanada, quail eggs with noodles, and shrimp with guacamole and pomegranate seeds, followed by a main course of tender lamb with deliciously nutty couscous.

I round off the night with a cocktail at Fuglen, a hip coffee shop/bar with mismatched vintage furniture that’s for sale.



SMALL WONDER
THE BIGGEST TINY
BOTTLE COLLECTION
IN THE WORLD

“If there’s ever a fire here, it’ll be really lively,” says Christian Ringnes of his Mini Bottle Gallery, which displays 12,500 bottles of the sort found on airplanes and in minibars, with 40,000 more in storage. It is, he says, the world’s largest collection of tiny bottles.

Ringnes—who also founded Ekeberg Sculpture Park—got his first bottle when he was six, given to him by his father,

who’d improvised after returning from a business trip without gifts. “That one is special,” he says. “I really love that one.”

He also loves the Bugs Bunny one, the Eiffel Tower-shaped one, the hand-blown one. He has one from 1894 (the oldest in his collection) and one that’s worth \$6,700 (the priciest).

Then there’s the presentation: the bordello, the

circus scene, the chamber of horrors (with cackling skeleton, accessed by slide), the Scotsman with the billowing kilt.

Ringnes opened his museum 11 years ago, with high expectations. “We had a grand opening, with red ropes and so on,” he says. “I looked outside and there were maybe five people. I guess mini bottle collecting is not that big a thing.”

Co-owner Einar Holthe shares his thoughts on Oslo while insisting I try every drink on the menu. Having gained independence from Sweden in 1905, he says, Norway is finally reclaiming its identity. "There's a sense that we belong to our culture now," he adds. "The streets are coming alive."

DAY THREE

In which Chris visits Oslo's hipster quarter and the city's famed cemetery

START THE DAY WITH A NICE long groan, followed by a few cups of strong coffee. I'm having brunch later at Mathallen, a food hall on the bank of the Akerselva River, so I roust myself from bed and head out into the glare.

On my way, I stop at Pentagon, an army surplus shop on Storgata, where I root around among the crossbows, knives and gladiator helmets for a bit before crossing the road to a ramshackle cluster of vintage shops, where I pick up a music poster from the 1950s, at 1970s prices.

Soon, I'm heading north along the river, which feels very rural but is also dotted with old industrial buildings

transformed into studios and galleries. Mathallen, set in a renovated railroad factory, offers everything from fresh seafood to stinky cheese. I have a beef and tomato pie from Hello Good Pie before heading out to explore Grünerløkka.

People call Grünerløkka Oslo's answer to Brooklyn, and you can see why—it is thick with boho bars, retro restaurants and indie fashion outlets. There is also a wonderful sense of anarchic energy. Heading back to the river for a drink at Blå, a trendy music venue, I pass a man carrying a large Styrofoam ear past a couple of punk-rock chicks standing below a junk-glass chandelier, ignoring the spectacle, a few feet away, of a ferret crossing the road.

I sit on Blå's graffitied riverside terrace for a while, nursing a Nøgne Ø pale ale and listening to the water rush by, then head back to Mathallen, where I'm having coffee with the filmmaker Iram Haq.

Described by *Variety* as "one of Europe's top emerging directors," Haq grew up in East Oslo's "Little Pakistan" neighborhood. Her shopkeeper parents were not enamored of her decision to pursue a career in the arts. "It was hard for them to accept," she says. "They didn't really understand what I was doing." It wasn't only the Pakistani community that would have frowned on her career choice. Before the discovery of oil in the late 1960s, Norway was relatively poor, and its people



Enjoying a pint on the riverside terrace at Blå



*Akershus
Fortress, a
700-year-old
architectural
hodgepodge*

made a virtue of austerity. Eating out was rare, foreign holidays were pretty much unheard of, and young women of Pakistani heritage did not go into the film business.

Things are different now, says Haq, but a few traditions remain, such as the age-old emphasis on consensus: "Everyone agrees, even when they don't."

Later, Haq offers to show me the nearby Vår Frelzers cemetery, which contains the graves of notables such as Ibsen and Munch. To get there, we walk up Telthusbakken, a steep, narrow street lined with the brightly colored wooden cottages that used to be everywhere here. At the top of the street is the austere 12th-century Old Aker Church, but Haq's attention is elsewhere. "Hello!" she says, pointing her cameraphone at a flat-faced, sunbathing cat.

The Vår Frelzers monuments seem oddly modest, given who's lying beneath them. But Norwegian society prizes humility, even among its more illustrious members. Haq recalls passing then-Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in a park: "He said, 'I read about you in the paper!' so I said, 'I read about you, too!' We laughed. He was normal."

I say goodbye to Haq and head for Damstredet, another cobbled clutter of too-cute-to-be-true wooden houses. But I can't stand around annoying the residents for too long—Einar Holthe has offered to take me to a must-see attraction on Bygdøy peninsula.

We meet in Gamle, a blue-collar eastside neighborhood that's being colonized by creative types. Our first stop is at Haralds Vaffel (motto: "Everyone Loves Waffles"), a hole in the wall where Harald himself serves us bacon-and-blue-cheese waffles followed by a traditional jam. Fortified, we jump in Einar's car and drive west, to one of Oslo's weirdest exhibitions.

Bygdøy is sometimes called Museum Island, on account of it having a bunch of museums, including the Kon-Tiki Museum, the Viking Ship Museum and the Norwegian Folk Museum. This last one is actually a small town, made up of buildings that have been dismantled and rebuilt here. There are 160 in all, ranging from medieval peasant huts to 19th-century townhouses, the rooms of which have been furnished to reflect the lifestyle of, say, a Victorian-era family, or a swinging bachelor circa 1975.

Most impressive is the Gol Stave Church, a pagoda-like wooden edifice built in 1200. Inside it is gloomy, with faded murals in the apse and tortured faces in the rafters. Restorations have revealed strange carvings on its walls, scripts and



symbols that, according to the elderly woman keeping watch, have yet to be deciphered. I ask her if she ever finds herself alone in here, and she says yes. "Spooky," I say, and she huffs. "I am not easily spooked."

Einar drops me off downtown, outside the Hotel Continental, where I'll be dining at Eik Annen Etage. The restaurant is low-lit, with classical columns and modern art. I sit next to a window overlooking the National Theater, and a friendly Swedish waitress brings me a golden menu. What the heck, I'll have the full-course: raw marinated halibut with grilled romaine lettuce and horseradish emulsion; smoked salmon with creamed morels; deep fried lamb sweetbreads with wild garlic; slow cooked pork. It's all good—but that *lettuce*. From now on, I'm grilling all my salads.

I end the night at Etoile, the Grand's rooftop bar, where you get a real sense of how lovely this city is. As I gaze at the flickering Freia sign next door, a seagull big as a dog lands on a neighboring rooftop and stares me down. For some reason, I'm reminded of a story someone told me earlier, about a local soccer pitch where children play, a field that once "ran with Swedish blood." There was no malice in the telling of this story, but there was a kind of appreciation. So, yes, Oslo is an unusually lovely city, but it's a little more complicated than that.

Hemispheres executive editor *Chris Wright* strongly recommends that people who fall into the Oslofjord change their damp trousers before going sightseeing, to avoid unpleasant chafage. **H**



Pickled vegetables from Maaemo



BOARDING PASS United offers daily summer flights from its New York hub at Newark Liberty to Oslo, with one-stop connections from destinations throughout the Americas. For more information, visit united.com.