


MÉNAGE À TROIS

Oslo's delights cater to all walks of life, from the culture vulture to the nature lover to the gourmand. But where to begin? *Atlantica* staff writer **Eliza Reid** visited Norway's capital to experience the holy trinity of the perfect escape: satisfying mind, body and soul.



SLEEPING BEAUTY

 I have been instructed to ask for Stella when I arrive at Oslo's eye-catching new opera house to watch a Friday evening performance of the Tchaikovsky ballet *Sleeping Beauty*. I'll be able to spot Stella because "she's tall and blonde."

By my initial estimation, about 70 percent of the females in the crowd are Stellas, possibly more if one counts the legion of well-dressed, well-behaved "mini-Stellas" eagerly waiting to watch one of their favorite fairytales brought to life on stage.

The real Stella makes an appearance a few minutes later as I'm loitering by the box office, and escorts me to a balcony seat from where I will watch 30-year-old Icelandic dancer Kári Freyr Björnsson and 70 of

his co-stars in the Norwegian Opera and Ballet (DNO&B) perform.

"Oslo has really come into its own," Björnsson, who has been living in the capital for eight years, told me over coffee earlier. Hours later, as I gaze at the details of the 11,400-cubic-meter auditorium, where even the chandelier—the largest, heaviest, and most expensive in Norway—has been designed with acoustics in mind, I think that this new building must be one of the most striking visual proofs of Björnsson's take on the city.

The opera house is the Norwegian capital's latest "signature of the city," according to Maria Børja, Press Officer for the DNO&B. And the response to this new kid on the block, she says, has been "overwhelming." Since its opening in April, the structure has hosted more than

PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON



half a million visitors, and Børja has escorted press from over 39 countries around its auditorium and rehearsal rooms.

Designed by Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, the new building is a Scandinavian ripple from the “Sydney effect,” referring to building an opera house on a harbor to inject new life into an area of a city that has seen better days (watch out for Reykjavík’s own version, scheduled to open in the fall of 2009). Rising out of the Oslo Fjord like a giant iceberg, the structure’s outer marble slabs create a roof on which anyone can walk—right down to the water itself.

It’s all about making opera and ballet more accessible, Børja explains. “People who have never set foot *in* an opera house are now setting foot *on* an opera house. The people of Oslo have embraced it.” Even the production rooms haven’t been buried deep inside the building but rather look out over the city and the fjord, also allowing passers-by to peek in and see rehearsals in progress and costumes being made.

The opera house is a showcase for various forms of art on the outside, as well as on the inside. One point five percent of the total cost of constructing the opera house was allocated to “art projects.” The eight projects include more than 33,000 individual stones which comprise the

roof of the building, an award-winning stage curtain which appears to be a huge sheet of aluminum foil but which is actually made of matte cotton, and Icelandic-Danish conceptual artist Ólafur Elíasson’s “Wardrobe Volumes”—three illuminated slanted-roof cubes which house the foyer’s bathrooms.

“It’s become a really important place,” says Björnsson. “It’s fun to see people walking *on* the building.”

Demystifying the arts was only one purpose behind the city’s new icon. A grand regeneration scheme is now in progress to rejuvenate the traditionally less-prosperous east side of Oslo where the opera house is located. A tunnel will divert traffic under the fjord rather than along an ugly highway. A new museum and library, along with housing developments and commercial high rises, are all planned for the coming decade.

“It’s building something between nature and the city,” says Børja. “It’s part of the landscape.”

At the intermission of *Sleeping Beauty*, I watch clusters of excited mini-Stellas twirl around the foyer, no doubt anticipating their big debut in a decade’s time. It’s good to know that this building will be a part of both the landscape and the psyche of Osloers for decades to come.



FEED YOUR MIND

Dancer Kári Freyr Björnsson spends seven days a week rehearsing, but for those who have a little more time for cultural activities he suggests visiting the **National Gallery** (nationalmuseum.no) for its “nice atmosphere, nice building and good collection.” During his time off, he might also be visiting:

Munch Museum: Munch’s famous *Scream* and *Madonna* paintings made headlines in 2004 when they were seized in a robbery at the museum. Now found and returned, they will be on display from late January 2009 onward, along with more of Munch’s finest paintings. munch.museum.no

Vigeland Park: This large park in the posh west end of the city is a showcase for dozens of famed sculptor Gustav Vigeland’s lifelike human statues. The nearby museum gives detailed information about this renowned citizen of Oslo. vigeland.museum.no

operaen.no


Dancer Kári Freyr Björnsson outside the opera house. The Icelander is wearing a black belt with silver studs that spell “Reykjavík Rocks!”



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GOD OF SMALL THINGS

 Twenty-four hours after the sumptuousness of the ballet, I sit huddled in a drab rowboat. There is nothing graceful about my performance fumbling with the unwieldy oars. How did I get here? Well, Morten Minde, angler, philosopher, and construction worker, is a welcoming fellow.

I called him late one morning to ask if I could join him on a fishing expedition north of Oslo. Cheerfully agreeing that I could tag along with him and his American friend, Geoff, Minde directed me to follow Route 4 north for about 60 kilometers and to call him when I reached the roundabout outside the village of Noa.

Several hours later, Minde met me there and I followed his silver Toyota Yaris along winding country lanes and finally across a hilly field that was recently cleared of hay, until I was just above the banks of Vassjø lake, which is naturally rich with trout.

It's possible to go fishing year-round in Norway, although the type of angling depends on the season. I arrived around the end of the fly fishing season, which, as the weather grows colder, will be replaced by reel (or fly) fishing from shore and eventually by ice fishing.

Minde's grandfather was a fisherman and that's where he gets his passion for the sport. The one-man organization he started ten years ago, Scandinavian Sport Fishing and Wildlife, is a hobby as much as a job. He takes out small groups from around the world, from novices to experts, and treats each participant like a fishing

buddy who has been trawling the lake with him for years.

On the shore of the lake is a pine cabin that Minde and his friends built this year for warming up after a day floating around on the lake's cool water. The 34-year-old Minde is dressed in a chunky cream-colored knit turtleneck and high waders held up by suspenders. His feet sport thick waterproof fishing boots and his curly blond hair is stuffed under a baseball cap.

Minde and I climb into a rowboat to go out on the water to meet Geoff, who has been fishing for several hours already. According to Minde, Vassjø lake is one of only about 15 lakes in the world—all in the region of Norway called Hadeland—that has the furry *krans* algae which are only found in particularly alkaline lakes. This is mostly a region of fertile farms, but the tall thin trees so symbolic of Norway are also in abundance.

We row out to a shallow reeded area where Minde climbs out of the boat and into his "belly boat," a sort of inflatable chair into which he is strapped and which has zippered compartments on either side to store the day's indispensable items: coffee, chocolate, a camera, and the technical paraphernalia required by serious anglers. Using flippers attached to his feet, he can glide gently around the lake without disturbing his aquatic prey.

I'm handed the oars of the rowboat and gently told to keep a bit of a distance so I don't scare the fish. I feel like I've been inducted into some secret anglers' underworld.

FEED YOUR BODY

Morten Minde likes fishing, but for those who have no inner angler he recommends the following winter activities in the capital and beyond:

Go cross country skiing in the Nordmarka forest north of Oslo.

visitoslo.com/en/nordmarka-forest.77637.en.html

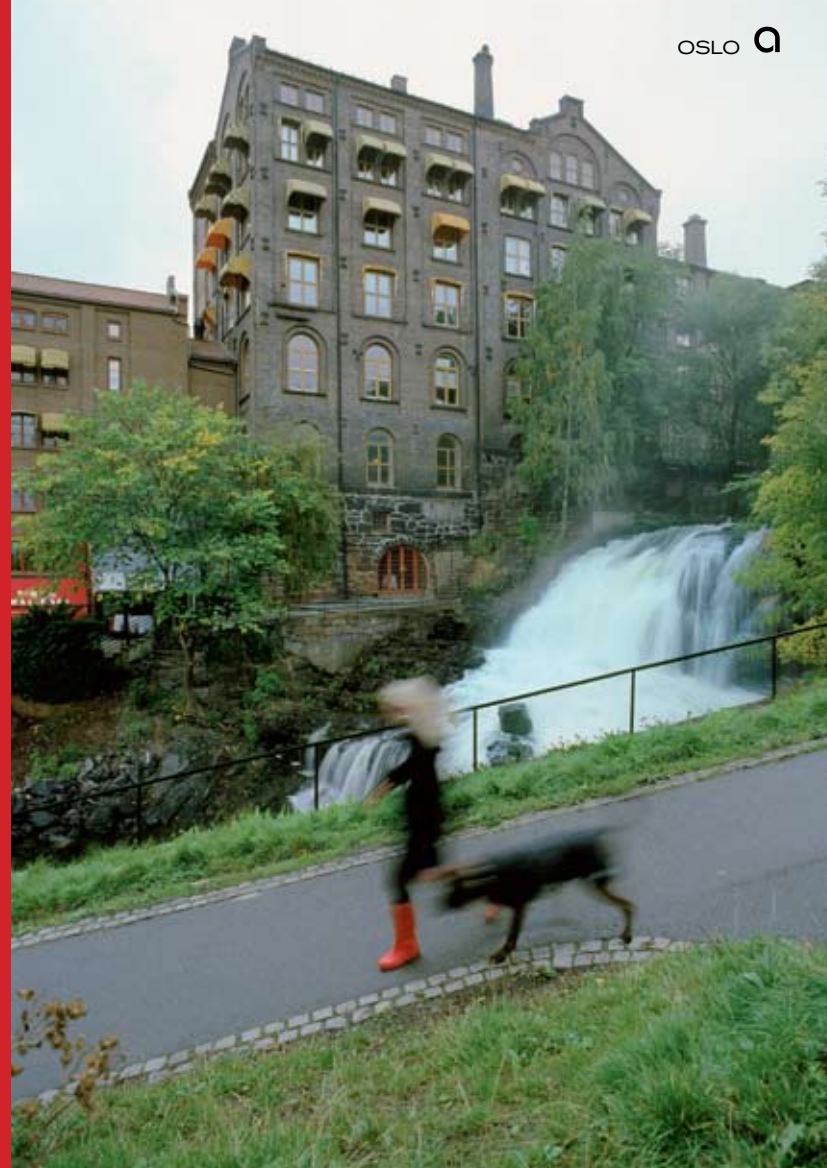
Try alpine skiing in Hemsedal, a town 220 kilometers from Oslo. hemsedal.com

For a rainy day, the Hadeland Glass factory, Norway's oldest industrial company, is an interesting place to pick up a one-of-a-kind souvenir. hadelandglassverk.no

Find Minde at ssw.no.



Morten Minde enjoys the peace and quiet from his belly boat.



"Anyone can fish," Minde tells me. "But you need patience in order to enjoy the nature. Otherwise it's boring."

Now the waiting begins.

I quickly learn that an afternoon of "fishing" has very little to do with catching fish. In fact, most of what is caught is simply measured, perhaps photographed squirming and gasping, and then released into the lake.

"Anyone can fish," Minde tells me, using his flippers to gently circle around in his belly boat. "But you need patience in order to enjoy the nature. Otherwise it's boring."

Norway's lakes and nearby ocean offer plenty of opportunities for all types of angling, but the popularity of the sport has been declining in recent years. "The average young person is just on PlayStation or watching television," Minde tells me ruefully.

Suddenly Minde gets a tug on his line. He

reels his catch in slowly, its silver body writhing and mouth gaping, and gets out his ruler to take a quick measurement. This one is 39 centimeters, not a bad size, but not as big as some that can weigh in at four or five kilograms.

After this excitement, the waiting begins again. Minde waxes philosophical about the benefits of being in nature. "Fishing isn't just fishing," he tells me. "It's quiet and it's relaxing, looking at the birds and what is beautiful in the small things. Most people are stressed and they don't see the small things."

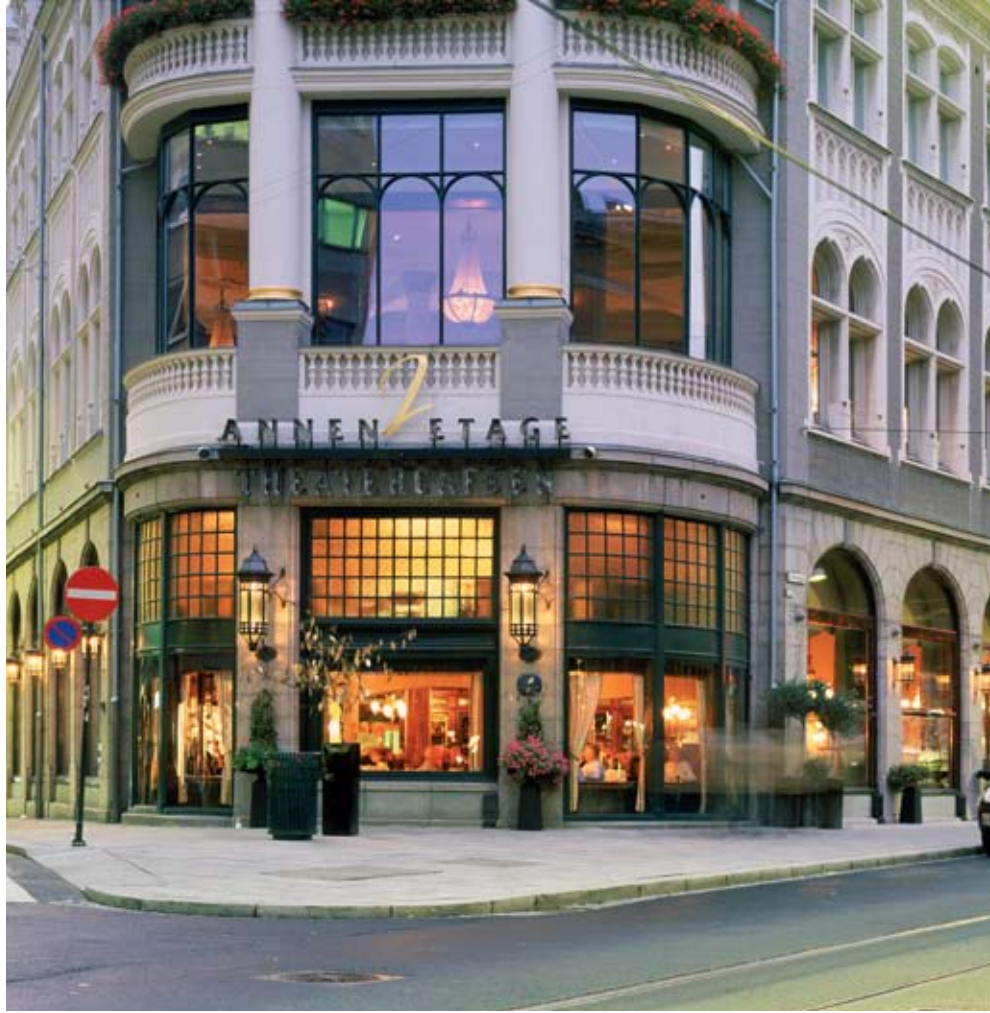
I'm beginning to agree. All you can hear are the ducks, the bugs and the swishing of the rods as Minde and Geoff cast off.

Before we leave the lake two hours later,

Minde tells me a cautionary tale about a tense man he once took out on Vassjø. "I told him he'd have a heart attack if he didn't relax. 'Is that what you want?' I said to him. I took him out for four or five hours and at the end of it he said he didn't want to go to shore yet."

Minde speaks in clichés that are fitting and idealistic. "The more money people have the more they want. They can't say enough's enough," Minde states. "We have one life." And I believe him; maybe more of mine should be spent floating through calm waters in the middle of nowhere.

Minde rows me back to shore and shakes my hand. "It's good that you've come fishing," he says. "But it's most important that you've had a good time."



Smia Galleri is also a blacksmith's workshop, one of only two left in all of Norway. For the first years of the business, the blacksmith studio next door was what brought in the most money.

SOUL FOOD



If it weren't for the temperature, I could be in a brasserie in southern France. Surprisingly sweet grapes hang from vines that climb up the ochre walls. In the center of a little courtyard is a small fountain with an iron sculpture of a sunflower, and the ground is tiled with well-worn cobblestone. This is Smia Galleri, a cozy French-inspired restaurant in Oslo's gentrified Vålerenga neighborhood.

Actually it's even more than that: Smia Galleri is also a blacksmith's workshop, one of only two left in all of Norway. Owned by couple Petter Hamli and Merete Nilsen Bua, who live in a charming loft above the restaurant, this structure was a bakery from the late 19th-century until the 1960s when it was closed and fell into disrepair. Seven years ago, Petter and Merete, in their ambitious search for a building which could be a restaurant, blacksmith's workshop *and* apartment, bought and, over the course of two years, converted it into what is now a

lucrative business, cherished by the local community.

When I meet them they're unloading duffel bags from their grey station wagon. Looking like an ad for Norwegian outdoorsmen, they're "just back from the mountains," a five-hour drive to the north near Trondheim, where they've been hiking for two days.

What is meant to be a brief chat about Oslo over supper turns into a delightful six-hour evening of good food, drink and conversation.

"We eat here all the time," Merete says, uncurling a long napkin cone and placing it on her lap. Regulars stop by to chat with them throughout the evening; one who wants to be on the mailing list for the weekly jazz nights, another who Petter congratulates on becoming a father.

Most of the patrons here tonight will choose the set menu of the day, created earlier that morning by one of the chefs. Tonight's special includes clams in a fennel cream sauce, halibut

with pumpkin chutney, entrecote of moose with artichokes and lentils and a mushroom ragout, finished with a pear tarte tatin.

Merete suggests I try some of her favorites: a foie gras starter, wild duck breast from Scotland, and plum cobbler ("like my grandmother used to make it") with homemade cinnamon ice cream.

The meal is wonderful.

What's remarkable about Smia Galleri, however, is not only the food and atmosphere, but the fact that Petter and Merete aren't exclusively restaurateurs. She's a blacksmith and artist and he's a roof builder and blacksmith. For the first years of the business, the blacksmith studio next door was what brought in the most money.

Not that the income matters particularly. "We don't think about making money all the time," she answers when asked what sets their restaurant apart. Merete tells people she's a blacksmith and artist first, owner of a popular restaurant second.



FEED YOUR SOUL

If you can tear yourself away from the fare at Smia Galleri (Opplandsgata 19, tel. 22 19 59 20, smiagalleri.no), owners Petter and Merete recommend the following cafés and eateries:

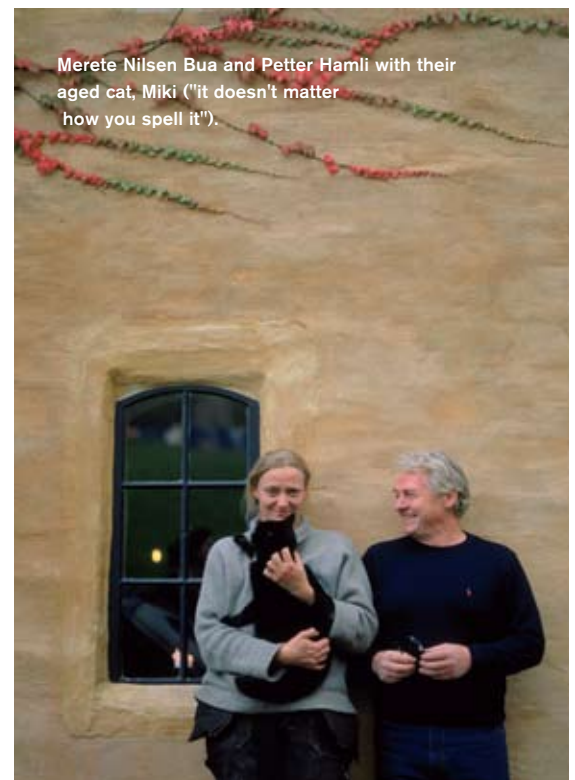
Lompa: This restaurant in east Oslo is really called Olympen, but according to Merete, everyone knows it as Lompa. It's in an old building from 1900, "like an old German beer hall." Grønlandsleiret 15, tel. 24 10 19 99. olympen.no

Kafe Celsius: This is a "beautiful, laid-back" café in the oldest part of Oslo. The best place to enjoy your latté is outside behind the gate in the "rustic" yard. Rådhus gate 19, tel. 22 42 45 39. kafecelsius.no

Victor: "Very nice food." Grefsenveien 6, tel. 22 22 17 70. restaurantvictor.no

Klosteret: Situated inside some old catacombs, this cozy place has "lots of candles and good food." Fredensborgveien 13, tel. 23 35 49 00. klosteret.no

Merete Nilsen Bua and Petter Hamli with their aged cat, Miki ("it doesn't matter how you spell it").



After dessert, Petter and Merete show me around: the former stables, now a sort of enclave for groups, and their workshop, with an old fireplace, a bed headboard someone forgot to pick up (“we’re going to use that ourselves maybe”) and a giant oak barrel, a souvenir from the recent trip to the mountains—to “polish up” and use in the restaurant.

This blend of hobby and passion is fine for them, and Norwegians know when to take it easy. “Okay, you work 36 hours a week and you pay a lot of taxes, but you have a good life,” Merete says.

Even later, as we sip some local lager, I spread my free tourist map across the table and it quickly becomes graffitied with circles of what to see and where to go: “The season’s best modern art is here”, “That’s just full of tourists”, “We love the views from there”, “Merete’s best statue is in this park”.

So part artist, part restaurateur, part travel advisor—it’s all in a day’s work. They agree. Yes, running Smia Galleri is a 365-day a year job, but really, says Petter contentedly, “it’s a lifestyle.”

SMIA GALLERI'S CLODBERRY CRÈME BRÛLÉE

12 egg yolks
150 g sugar
1 vanilla pod
500 ml cream
500 ml sour cream
100 g cloudberry

Heat the cream, sugar and vanilla pod to boiling. Stir in the egg yolks and gently heat until the mixture starts to become creamy. Remove from the heat and cool, then stir in the sour cream. Fill some cups with cloudberry and pour the crème brûlée liquid on top. Poach the cups in a bain-marie for 40 minutes at 95°C.

Icelandair flies to Oslo nine times a week.