

*Bjørsvika Bridge, part
of Oslo's Barcode
development project*



CHRISTIAN BÄCK/HUBER/ISTOCK PHOTO

SCANDINAVIAN MODERN

This year is Oslo's time to shine,
as contemporary art, architecture
and a burgeoning food scene
give the Norwegian capital
a vibrant new edge.

By
JAMES STEWART

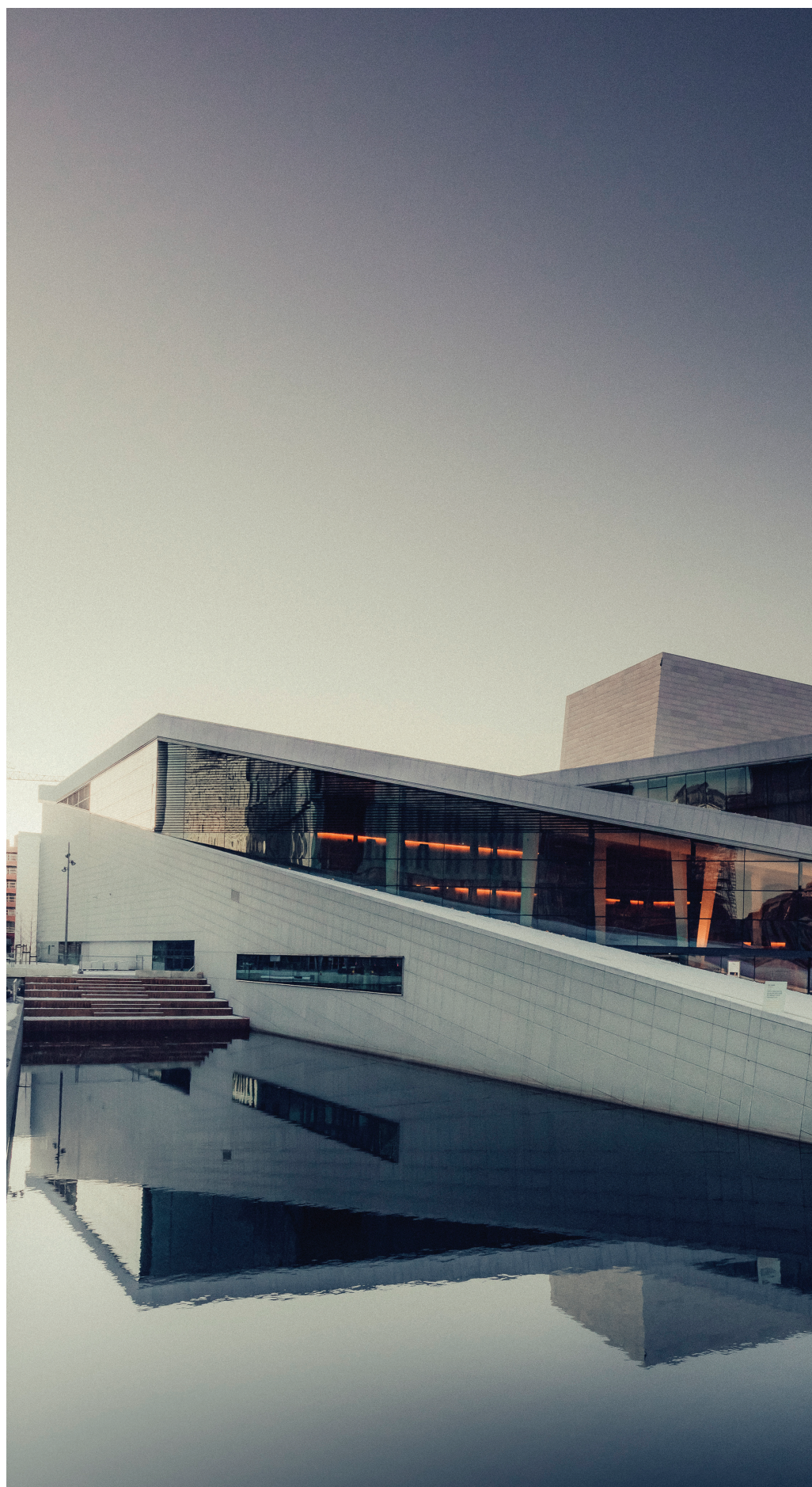


From a dock at Bjørvika in central Oslo, a man rows into the fjord, following a ribbon of silver water as sunset flames the clouds. His wooden boat is naggingly familiar to anyone from northern Europe: high, pinched bow and stern; as slippery as a fish. In such designs, from this very fjord, the Vikings conquered and traded from Constantinople to Newfoundland.

What's extraordinary about this image, though, is what's behind him. The dock bristles with a panoply of double-take architecture. There's the glass-skinned Deichman Bjørvika public library, its upper story fanned out at an implausible angle. Jostling for space behind is a design book's worth of office and apartment blocks: cubes, cantilevered rectangles, ziggurats. There's also the Opera House I'm standing on, beside a young family having a picnic, gaggles of teenagers and tourists taking selfies. The roof slants all the way down to the broad plaza, doubling as a ramp. Around 100 of us are gathered at the top on this chill late-winter dusk to experience one of the finest viewpoints in the city.

And what really astounds about this cutting-edge cityscape is that 20 years ago, the docks of Bjørvika housed nothing more exciting than shipping containers.

There are three things you need to know about Oslo. One is that the Norwegian capital, with a population of 700,000 people, is a pipsqueak by European standards. The second is that Norwegians are no enthusiasts of change. Things aren't as good as they were, they grumble happily. And third, keep in mind that until 1969, this was a nation of fishermen and farmers.





MAURIZIO RELLINI/SIME/ESTOCK PHOTO

Oslo Opera House, designed by homegrown architectural firm Snøhetta

What changed everything was the discovery of offshore oil. Norway's trick over the past half-century has been to team its economic bonanza with technological innovation and a highly educated society, a combination that could define liberal democracy.

But in terms of travel, 2022 marks the year when Oslo finally comes of age. Copenhagen and Stockholm are already Scandinavian must-sees. Now the Norwegian capital is out to claim its spot as the most interesting destination in the Nordics.

If any single project supports that claim, it is the National Museum. When it opens on June 11, after 19 years of planning, the institution—four previously distinct museums of art and applied arts united in one organization—will house the largest display of arts in the Nordic region. Those with skin in the game like to point out it will be larger than the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the Frank Gehry–designed outpost of the New York icon that turned the off-the-radar Spanish city into an essential stop on a European art tour.

The museum represents the latest element of the ongoing Fjordbyen (Fjord City) urban-renewal scheme launched in the 1980s. There's no faulting its harborside location. Ferries thrum to nearby islands. Walkers promenade in the sunshine. The light has that sparkling luminescence of the coast. Here you are in the heart of a European capital, yet the mood evokes seaside holidays. It's rather lovely.

But, gosh, the museum's big. Clad in gray-green slate (German architectural firm Kleihues + Schuwerk aimed to have a dialogue with both a 14th-century fortress across the harbor and the nearby city hall), its imposing 587,000-square-foot slab walls in one side of the water's plaza. Illuminated on the roof, a marble-skinned exhibition space will glow at night like a latter-day Acropolis.

"It will make Oslo a real center for arts and culture in North Europe," marketing director Tord Krogtuft tells *Robb Report*, adding that it may be the only big national museum to open this year. "It is world news." He considers a moment, then adds with a smile, "It's quite *unorskt* [un-Norwegian], actually."

Installation of art in the 87 rooms, spread between two floors, is underway. Some of the works, such as an eye-popping mural of rainbow starbursts by American conceptual artist Sol LeWitt—certain to be catnip to Insta influencers—are exuberant, but the decor is restrained. Limestone floors, rich oak doors and window frames of burnished brass lend a patina of age to lofty spaces. Occasionally, sound art—plainchant, say, or bird-song—soundtracks spaces. In all, about 5,000 items will be on display, from paintings to furniture, design and fashion to religious art, most of it Norwegian.

As impressive is that the state coughed up every one of the 6 billion kroner, or roughly \$635.8 million, it cost to build. "It's an issue of culture and ambition as much as money," Krogtuft says. "Oslo has changed so much in 20 years. Everything has got better and better: music, dining, art, everything. So while this museum says, 'Here we are,' in Europe, it also gives people here the culture they should have."

So egalitarian. Rather Norwegian after all, then.

Oslo's other hot museum ticket is Munch. Opened in Bjørvika last year, the world's largest collection of artist Edvard Munch—and one of the largest museums devoted to any individual artist—is not an easy building to love. Osloites joke that it resembles a shipping container standing on end. Architecture critics have more generously opined that the 13-story structure, designed by Spaniard Juan Herreros, aptly embodies Munch's psychologically tortured work. Inside, where curators have a collection of nearly 28,000 works to play with, the expressionist art is stellar, and a bar on the top floor provides unrivaled fjord views. Yes, two versions of *The Scream* are on-site. The third is at the National Museum, and American financier Leon Black



FROM TOP:
Fish soup at
Festningen; the
dining room at
Amerikalinjen, a
hotel in the
namesake shipping
line's onetime
headquarters.
ABOVE RIGHT: The
outdoor terrace
of Sorgenfri.



was reported to be the winning bidder on the fourth at Sotheby's for nearly \$120 million in 2012.

The aforementioned adjacent Opera House, erected in 2008, offers a manifestly different vibe. It's not just that acclaimed homegrown architecture firm Snøhetta has dared to evoke an iceberg: glass cliff faces, roofs that shelve into dark water, a mountain's worth of white marble. It's also that the roofscape is conceived as an inviting public park.

The vibrant scene in Bjørvika is only part of what's making Oslo a hugely appealing capital to visit. Having introduced higher tolls and congestion pricing for all but electric cars, the neoclassical center is so calm, so devoid of traffic and hurly-burly, you never quite get used to it. The city is also compact enough that nothing is more than 20 minutes away by metro or tram. Ride for 30 minutes and you're in pine forest.

Walk west of the train station—down shopping high street Karl Johans Gate, through a park where guards march stiffly before the royal palace—and you reach Frogner, the city's most



FESTNINGEN: STIAN BROCH; AMERIKALINJEN: FRANCISCO NOGUEIRA

fashionable residential area. Among the borough's elegant pastel mansions, Sommerro is set to open in September. It's been hailed as the first neighborhood hotel in Oslo, but such plaudits actually undersell it—Sommerro is one of Scandinavia's most interesting launches in years.

Robb Report is the first publication inside its landmark pile, a fusion of Art Deco and functionalist red brick. Dating from 1931, it was previously owned by city-electricity provider Oslo Lysverker, serving as company headquarters but also including a pool and bathhouse in the basement for public use (a typically community-minded Scandinavian gesture). The lobby atrium now features a spectacular Art Deco chandelier that dangles six stories through the center of a wrought-iron spiral staircase. In what will be a brasserie in the former payment hall (one of four dining spaces), the renovation preserved a 1930s mural by Norwegian artist Per Krohg, a pal of Matisse's whose work also adorns the United Nations Security Council building in New York.

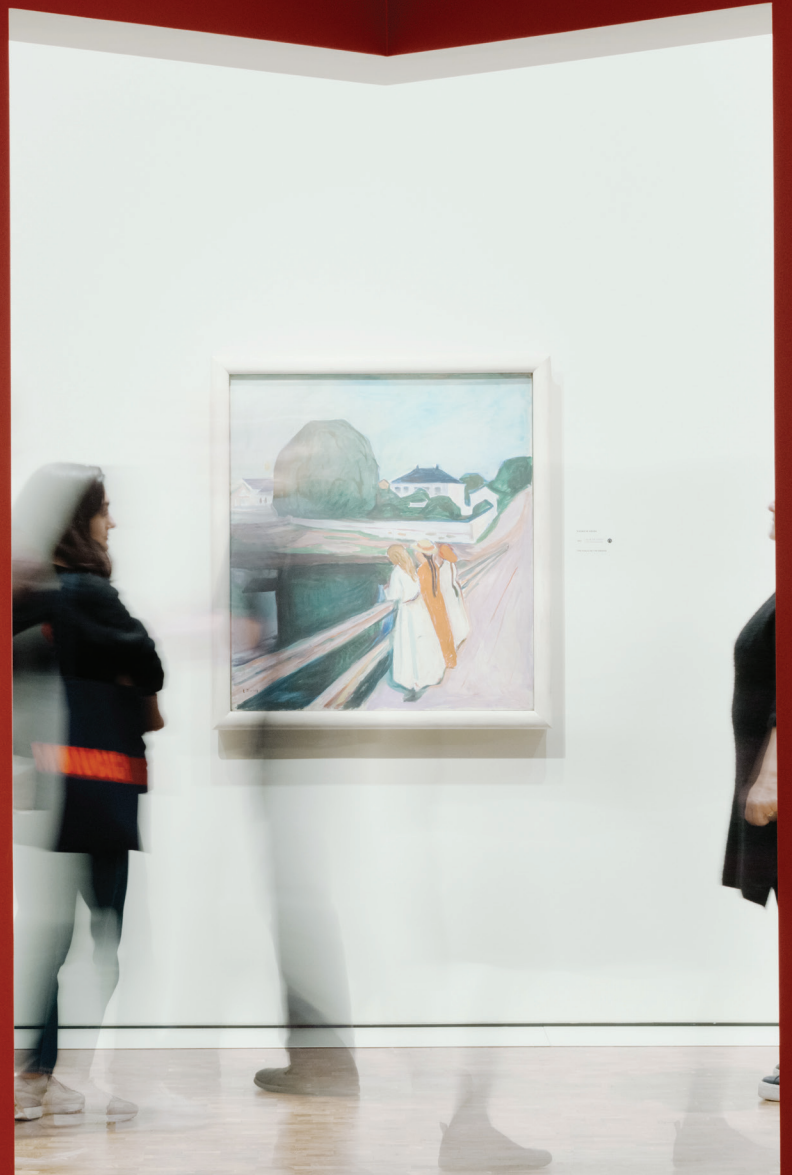
Nordic Hotels & Resorts is in top form here. The company,

known for creating luxury properties, including the Icehotel in Sweden and Denmark's Villa Copenhagen, pioneered art hotels in Oslo with the Thief in 2013 (the unusual name references the area's past as both hideout and execution site for smugglers and other rascallions), followed six years later by Amerikalinjen. The latter, occupying the eponymous shipping line's neobaroque headquarters, in which emigrants once booked passage across the Atlantic, is pure Jazz Age glamour.

In candid moments, managers admit the 231-room Sommerro has been as much of a hassle as you'd expect of a project that has required around 100 meetings with a municipal conservation team since 2019. "It would have been easier to tear down and build from new," brand director Siri Løining says. Cheaper, too: The project cost about \$288 million. "But," she continues, "it's much more interesting to keep the stories of the building, its DNA. This is a cultural-heritage project."

GrecoDeco, the New York- and London-based design firm behind Soho House, has handled styling. The model rooms

“I think there’s a move to make everywhere an aesthetic experience. That’s not a crazy recipe for a city, is it?”



are an interplay of texture and pattern, Art Deco chic and folksy Nordic touches. So there are walls paneled with cherry-stained ash, stepped ceiling moldings, tapestry headboards and rose-marble bathrooms. But bespoke hand-knotted rugs have images of storks, and colors are russet and moss, taupe and dusky pink. Superior rooms feature Murano-glass chandeliers. One luxury suite occupies what was once the paneled office of the utility company's director.

In the basement, in what will be Scandinavia's largest city-hotel wellness area—"It's not a spa. This is more for health and mindfulness," Løining notes—guests will change in restored wooden booths and swim beneath a playful Krohg mosaic that Sommerro has safeguarded. Oslo's first rooftop pool will be open year-round. (Don't worry, it's beside a sauna for winter.) Though Osloites' use of the rooftop amenities will be limited to the off-season (October through April), they will be welcome to book appointments to the below-ground facilities and join the gym all year. Løining explains: "A lot of developers don't think about where they are. We're embracing this building's unique history, its unique experiences and how it has served local communities."

While the vintage Krohgs celebrate Norway's artistic legacy, Sommerro is also looking to the contemporary artists and designers invigorating Oslo's scene today. The hotel commissioned Kaja Dahl to envision a stone drinking fountain that once stood in the wellness area and to fashion vases in granite-like porphyry for the guest suites. Her work blurs sculpture and nature, art and craft. In her exhibitions at nearby QB Gallery in Frogner, a ribbon of wood unspools into the air. Polished marble reveals a crystalline core. It's all somehow unmistakably Scandinavian.

QB manager Mikaela Aschim talks of a growing international clientele for the gallery's roster. There's huge investment potential for buyers, she says, because a small national base of collectors keeps prices attractive. A few commercial art galleries, such as Standard (Oslo), Galleri Golsa and OSL Contemporary, have penetrated the international scene, while Galleri Format focuses on contemporary craft and design. Kunstneres Hus, meanwhile, has been artist-run since 1930 and features exhibitions as well as independent films.

At QB I meet Dahl, who leads me through the backstreets of Frogner: cool corner cafés on beautiful fin de siècle terraces (the area emerged as a summer retreat for Oslo's elite), cobbles, the fjord winking below. At one point we head into Frogner Park, where over 200 bronze, iron and granite figures by sculptor Gustav Vigeland are on permanent display. Vigeland, who lived and worked nearby in what is now his namesake museum, spent almost 20 years installing the works before his death in 1943. "I love these," says Dahl. "They're so soft but in granite."

Dahl attributes the explosion of Oslo's art scene to prosperity. "Artists are infiltrating everywhere in Oslo right now," she says. "It's a sign of a society that has real luxury, that has the time and wealth to create." Holding art in high esteem starts at the very top: Norway's Queen Sonja is a longtime photographer and printmaker who established the Queen Sonja Print Award, a biannual international prize funded by sales of her work.

As is the case in other cities, cool restaurants and cafés are close by the galleries. Sorgenfri, on the elegant street Sorgenfrigaten (the name translates roughly as "No Problems Street"), is a dual-purpose space: polished concrete and pink-marble bar above, gallery and art-fashion boutique below. It's the sort of madly creative joint every traveler yearns to discover. Outside are two hunks of raw larvikite stone polished into seats—a commission by Dahl.

She believes Oslo's rise is just beginning. "I think there's a



move to make everywhere an aesthetic experience," she says. "That's not a crazy recipe for a city, is it?"

The dining scene is also showing off a new sophistication. Ask why Oslo is awash with visionary small restaurants preparing New Nordic cuisine and chefs such as Hanne Rutgersen, a bright 30-year-old who apprenticed in a Michelin-star venue, will tell you about stellar Norwegian ingredients, a moneyed, cultured clientele, the ease of a small city. It's an unbeatable combination. Rutgersen recommends Hot Shop, a neighborhood bistro in a former sex shop that offers no-menu seasonal dining of real depth and refinement. I can vouch for Festningen, serving classic-modern dishes in the harbor fortress.

At her own brasserie, Kastellet, Rutgersen sends out a procession of dazzling small plates: scallop mousse with rhubarb pickle; skrei (Bering Sea cod) with black truffle and white asparagus; duck with cherries and grapefruit. It's Nordic but bolder, more international, more interesting. Anything but traditional.

Back at Bjørvika, I visit Kok saunas. Fifteen years or so ago, when the fjord was toxic sludge, these floating saunas would have been madness. Now, after a municipal clean-up, you can flit between sauna and seawater, which flirts with 2 degrees Celsius, or about 36 degrees Fahrenheit. Norwegians can't get enough of this sort of thing, incidentally. It taps into a concept of *friluftsliv*—strong mental health through outdoor living.

I sit in a tiny superheated cabin among jovial Osloites. We yarn, crack jokes. At intervals we emerge from steaming to plunge into the fjord. Opposite, the Opera House shimmers with a magical glacial beauty. It is a hugely life-affirming experience.

Not bad for a nation of farmers and fishermen. ●

LEFT: *Edvard Munch, Inheritance, 1897-99 (left), and Girls on the Bridge, 1927, at the Munch.*
ABOVE RIGHT: *A junior suite at Sommerro, due to open in September.*