

Luxury Norway

Oslo's coolest new neighbourhood hotel

A huge spa, rooftop pool and cinema: no wonder this venture is a hit with locals as well as guests, says **Alicia Miller**

They say that in our darkest moments, we are forced to grow. My moment took place in the thermal suite of the Sommerro hotel's Vestkantbadet spa. It and a half minutes into a 12-minute aufguss, or sauna ritual. Aided by waving birch branches, twirling towels and wailing music, sauna master Maren delivered waves of pine-scented heat across the room, driving up the thermostat until my sweat ran in torrents and my cheeks cheered like St Nick's. By the time the clock ran out, I was a literal hot mess, but my former apprehension had evaporated.

I darted fearlessly out of the sauna door, into the spa area and towards the once-dreaded plunge pool — and delicious relief.

Hot. Cool. Choose your preferred adjective, but really there's just one way to describe Sommerro: Norway's most exciting hotel opening in years. Half a decade in the making, it is the first five-star in Oslo's up-market Frogner neighbourhood, near the royal palace, in a building that was once the offices of Oslo Lysverker, the city's electric company.

The hotel opened in September, followed in November by the 1,400 sq m subterranean Vestkantbadet spa, which has cemented its position as a must-visit spot in the city.

The space was formerly a public bathhouse that was opened in 1932 by the electric company for citizens and employees who lacked such facilities at home. It remained in use by the community right up until 2016 and now, meticulously restored, is looking better than ever.

If the idea of visiting the old offices of the city electric company doesn't exactly spark your enthusiasm, remember this is design-minded Oslo. Spectacular historic treasures like the austere brick postwar Radhuset city hall and the vast 1920s Posthallen — the former post office, now filled with apartments and trendy bars — sit alongside newer landmark buildings such as the new Munch museum and a futuristic opera house.

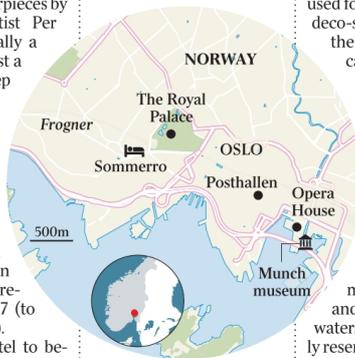
Designed by the prolific Norwegian ar-

chitects Andreas Bjercke and Georg Eliassen, and built over a prolonged period between 1917 and 1930, the hotel's building is, to use the official architectural term, a stunner. There is terrazzo, parquet, neoclassical bas-reliefs, swirling wrought-iron staircases, polished wood and geometric light fittings. There are three museum-worthy mural and mosaic masterpieces by the celebrated Norwegian artist Per Krohg. This building is practically a national monument — or at least a city gem — and being able to sleep in it is a treat.

It helps when you have a passionate and wealthy hotelier at the helm of such a transformation. Petter Stordalen — owner of the 200-property Nordic Choice Hotels group and Oslo boutique hotel the Amerikalinjen, located in another Bjercke and Eliassen masterpiece from 1919 — started redeveloping the property in 2017 (to the tune of around £215 million).

Stordalen's aim is for the hotel to become a community hub for locals, and with the spa extended to include new treatment rooms and a flashy gym it's bound to appeal to them as much as to hotel guests. Even the loveliest new spas have a habit of being a bit Zen-samey, but Vestkantbadet has a sense of place right up there with the finest old hammams of Istanbul or onsens of Japan, with an added dose of modern pampering.

After my atmospheric sauna ritual with



Maren I am gently led to a row of polished wooden booths (repurposed changing cabinets) for a skilful massage that magics away my perpetual shoulder tension. Afterwards, I wander through the spa reception, furnished with an original 1930s ticket window, and the Wes Anderson-esque old baths changing cubicles (now used for manicures), then drift into the art deco-style spa extension. This is where the "techy" wellness happens; in my case, a Dr Dennis Gross vitamin C facial featuring tingly acids, LED lights, buzzy firming wands and warm creams. I leave with skin as dewy as a Kardashian's — an effect that lasts several days, despite the moisture-zapping Oslo winter.

Finally, I swim. The beauty of Vestkantbadet arguably reaches its peak with the 12.5m indoor pool, fringed with a huge original mosaic by Per Krohg of his wife Lucy and some walrus. I glide in 32C waters with a cultured smugness normally reserved for gallery visits. But why brave the winter cold outside to visit a busy museum when I can gaze at a masterpiece right here?

While many of the building's original features have been preserved, it has also been expanded, with Sommerro's footprint growing from 12,000 sq m to 30,000 sq m, incorporating 56 new residential apartments, a cinema, library, events spaces and (most fabulous of all) a rooftop pool and sauna overlooking the city.

GrecoDeco, the designers behind the Ned in London, were hired to bring a maximalist look with bespoke furniture, lighting and textural wall coverings. Bedrooms are period-fabulous with rounded corners, rich fabrics, chequerboard inlay headboards and glass chandeliers.

On a Friday night in early December, the atmosphere in the hotel is electric. Staff tell me Stordalen hoped 70 per cent of guests would be Oslovian, and by my measure that night it is more: I see chic office Christmas parties, groups of sequined friends sipping fizz, a brigade of designer bags parading across the lobby tiling. By filling its public spaces with seven restaurants, Sommerro is attracting what every cool new city hotel needs to stay cool long-term: a steady stream of fashionable local customers.

I'm not able to snag a table at the 17-seater experimental Thai restaurant Plah — the most coveted in-house ticket, helmed by the chef Terje Ommundsen — as it's fully booked until nearly February. I had eaten lunch to tinkling festive jazz in the cavernous ground-floor Ekspedisjonshallen with its New York-style grandeur, polished bar and, framed by Christmas trees,

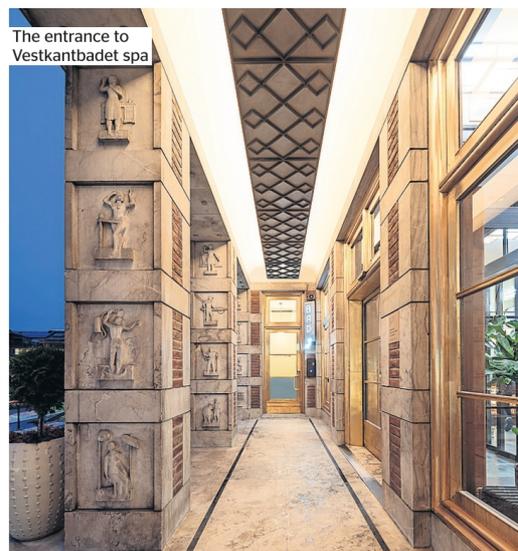


another large-scale Krohg mural. So instead I head upstairs to Sommerro's window-lined rooftop extension, home to sister restaurants Tak, specialising in "Norwegian-Japanese", and Izakaya — both imports from the Stockholm chef Frida Ronge.

Kicking back in a leathery chair in buzzy Izakaya, where the decor is inspired by neo-romantic Harald Sohlberg paintings but the vibe is clubby, I work my way through a series of Japanese-inspired snacks: a sashimi platter served in a bowl made from ice, tender halibut tatakai, tempura tofu with avocado, pickled kumquat and puffed rice. The saké is flowing, the DJ is playing, the people-watching score is ten out of ten.

"Some hotel projects change areas," Stordalen says. "Some projects change neighbourhoods. And a few projects are changing cities. This is such a project. Sommerro will be a meeting place that everyone will talk about and visit."

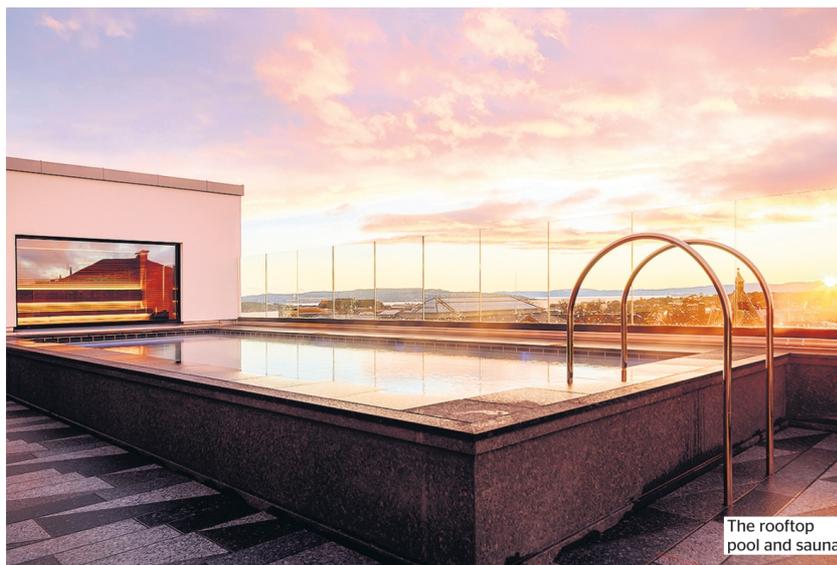
That remains to be seen. To become a city icon — a destination that is as meaningful to locals as it is to visitors — well, that's what every urban hotelier dreams of, isn't it? Few places ever truly manage to achieve it though, and it's a rather big ask from Stordalen. But looking around that animated rooftop, with all of Oslo laid out below, the great and the good of the city seated at the tables around me, it does feel as if his wish might be granted.



The entrance to Vestkantbadet spa



The hotel's To Søstre restaurant



The rooftop pool and sauna



Sommerro, formerly the offices of Oslo Lysverker

Need to know

Alicia Miller was a guest of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts Legend Collection, of which Sommerro is a member, and Visit Norway (visitnorway.com). B&B doubles from £225 (sommerro-house.com). Fly to Oslo

Oslo mini guide: where else to stay, what to eat, drink and do

Where else to stay

Amerikalinjen

This boutique hotel is another transformation overseen by Petter Stordalen, in the former headquarters of the Norwegian America Line shipping company. Slick rooms have monochrome bathrooms with Crittall-style showers, framed maps and photography. The NYC-inspired ground-floor bar turns out fabulous cocktails — order the Bjorvika with aquavit, rhubarb, watermelon and aquafaba — while the basement jazz club oozes golden-era atmosphere. **Details** B&B doubles from £221 (amerikalinjen.com)

The Well

Get a full immersion in Nordic spa culture at this hotel, a 20-minute drive outside the city centre. With more than a dozen thermal spaces — including a northern lights-inspired laconium, a Finnish

sauna and a humid tropical sauna soundtracked by birdsong — you could easily fill a pampering weekend here without straying into the city (note: the spa follows continental sauna traditions, so swimsuits are not allowed, apart from on Tuesdays). Rooms have pops of mustard and blue, and there are two restaurants, one, called Mori, serving Asian fusion tasting menus (five courses from £70). **Details** B&B doubles from £255 (thewell.no)

Where to eat and drink

Hyde

Wolverhampton-born Matthew North turns out a succinct tasting menu of simple but impactful dishes in this low-lit, intimate space: pork with Szechuan pepper; celeriac with chicken butter sauce; cod with crisp pommes anna (aka the best-ever fish and chips).

Natural wines hit the mark perfectly too, and old-school hip-hop pours from the speakers. He bagged a well-deserved Michelin star this year (five-course tasting menu £92pp; restauranthyde.no)

Mon Oncle

Launched early this year, the sister restaurant to the city's three-Michelin-starred Maaemo does French fine dining with an Oslo twist. The design — all Scandi minimalist creams and curvaceous booths — is as delicious as the rose-hued Norwegian beef wellington, plated like a piece of fine art. The signature caviar starter, laced with egg and crunchy breadcrumbs, is the same dish they sell at Maaemo. The brief by-the-glass wine list is a winner too (mains from £46; mononcle.no).

Svanen

Its atmospheric setting inside a beautifully preserved

neoclassical pharmacy on shopping drag Karl Johans gate is only one of the reasons to visit this cocktail bar. The owner Yunus Yildiz's cool drinks set a high standard too. Order a gin-based tomato & strawberry — topped with a black peppery crisp — or negroni amaro with aquavit, cocoa butter and rose vermouth. Don't miss the Irish coffee topped with a lid of whipped cream from the Norwegian dairy capital Roros, either. Yildiz also owns a tropical-themed bar in the new Posthallen Drinkhub — the bar equivalent to a street food hall, housed in the grand old downtown post office (cocktails from £15; svanenoslo.no).

What to do

Munch

This new museum dedicated to Norway's most celebrated artist, Edvard Munch, opened at the tail end of 2021 on the

waterfront next to the angular silhouette of the Oslo Opera House. Its scale is as impressive as the art pieces found inside, which include three of the world's four renditions of *The Scream*, shown on hourly rotation. Save time for the pop-up exhibits by contemporary artists, some as memorable as Munch's century-old works (£13; munchmuseet.no).

Kok

Get a cool taste of Nordic sweat-out culture at Kok, a collection of floating saunas strung along the waterfront in the neighbourhoods of Aker Brygge and Bjorvika. Steam during a private or group session in one of the wooden huts that overlook the water, then jump straight into the harbour when it's time to cool off. Beware though: tourists love to snap these photogenic huts, so you're more than likely to show up on someone's social media (from £26; koknorge.no).