SATURDAY AGE

Traveller

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Far from the madding crowd

Why hard-to-reach places are more irresistible than ever





ISLANDS | NORWAY

Harbour ambitions

A remote village with just 19 residents has suddenly become a tourist magnet, writes Megan Murray.

The Lofoten Islands form a near-mythical archipelago at the top of Norway, where dramatic mountains plunge into white-sand beaches and turquoise water. For centuries, fishing had been the region's lifeblood, but as technology advanced, many of its independent villages were left behind.

Nusfjord might have followed, were it not for investment from a Norwegian family who found ways to connect modern travellers with this traditional way of life. Old storehouses were transformed into galleries and dining spaces, traditional fisherman's cabins became stylish accommodation. Today, the tiny village is home to a blend of remaining locals, international staff and a steady stream of visitors.

After nearly two days of travel, I arrived bleary-eyed from the midnight ferry, crossing the narrow wooden harbour to reach my accommodation and a first taste of fisherman's life: a traditional *rorbu*.

These cabins were once shared by up to 20 men sleeping in bunk-beds, sometimes without even a mattress – folklore warned that those who got too comfortable on land might pay for it when back at sea. Thankfully for me, they've been luxuriously reimagined.

Behind their dark red facades they now offer walk-in showers, generous beds and a clean, Scandinavian aesthetic, though traces of their past remain. Exposed beams, uneven walls patched with rope and old fishing equipment provide plenty of character, while storage crates have been repurposed as tables and sideboards.

By morning, the same harbour looked transformed. Sunlight bounced off snow-capped peaks into glass-clear water as gulls circled overhead. I started the day with a quick walk around the village, revealing 25 *rorbu* cabins, three restaurants, an art gallery and a new collaboration with photography museum Fotografiska, as well as several other museums and an open-air spa behind the harbour that quickly attracted my attention.

Wooden decking fans out over the water's edge, with two embedded hot tubs and a traditional wood-fired sauna that has views of the horizon. You could be lucky enough to spot an orca while enjoying a soak and – if you're brave enough – jump from the platform into the Arctic Sea for a natural cold plunge experience.

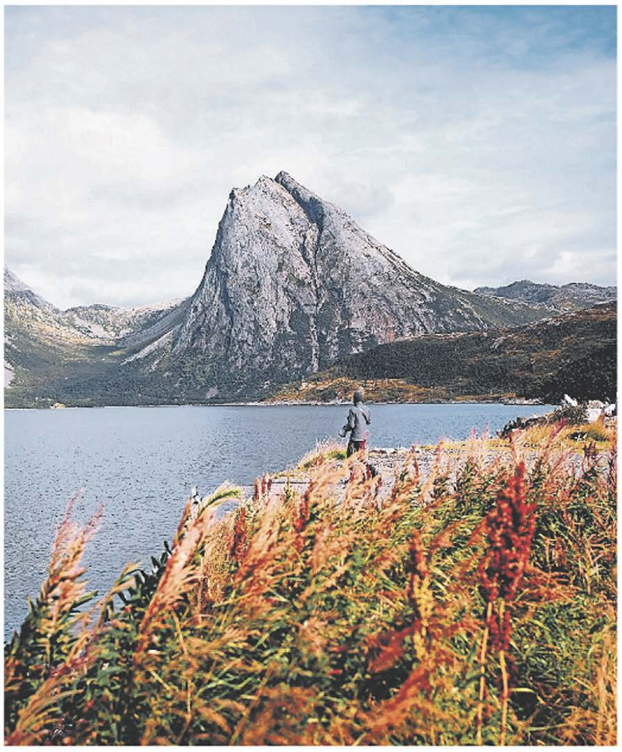
Much of Nusfjord honours its past through reuse. Its golden age was the late-19th century, when businessman Hans Dahl inherited part of the village and was later granted ownership by royal decree after revealing his plans to turn Nusfjord into a thriving hub for not just industry, but community, too. Today much of his work still stands but has been reinterpreted for a contemporary audience; the grand, five-bedroom town house built for his family, for example, can be rented as luxury accommodation for large groups. Its interiors include a bathtub in the master bedroom, a pink-hued games room and views over the water from the dining table.

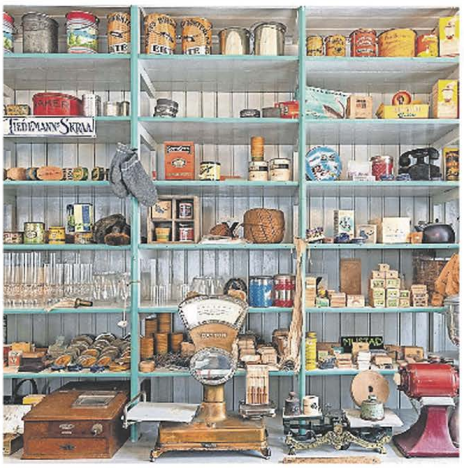
What was once Mr Dahl's office and the general store is now the Landhandleriet Cafe – a stylish place to try homemade cakes and fish soup, still preserved with creaking floorboards and shelves of old scales, cash registers and printing equipment. It feels like a working archive. It was here I met operations manager Svein-Roar Pettersen, whose family have lived in the area for generations.

"We didn't even have roads here until the 1970s," he told me, describing how his grandfather, who was a fisherman, would climb a mountain before rowing across to the nearest church each Sunday – a three-hour journey each way.

Later, Pettersen took me to the village of Flakstad to see the 13th-century church (reconstructed in the 1700s). His grandparents are buried in a nearby graveyard.

"He was the last Viking," he said with a smile, remembering how as a boy he'd marvel at his grandfather's strength. "His hands were twice the size of a normal man!" Pettersen continued, recalling how villagers





Clockwise from main: Nusfjord's harbour is at the heart of local life; big skies are a feature; Nusfjord general store; there's no rush; the next generation remains involved in the fishing industry. **Photos: Alamy, iStock**





would ask for his help busting open a faulty door or opening a crooked tin.

Along the way, we passed beaches lined with racks of drying cod heads. It was *skrei* season, when Arctic cod migrate to the islands, and Pettersen explained that the fish are big business owing to their rich oils. As a boy, he helped hang them out to dry, which he told me is a generational rite of passage – albeit a pungent one.

While only 19 elderly residents still live in Nusfjord, the next generation remains involved in the fishing industry – Pettersen's teenage daughters are both studying the trade. Visitors, meanwhile, are invited to engage with it through fishing trips and Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) tours.

As I pulled on a safety suit before a boat trip to see salmon farms and sea eagles, I asked whether tourism had become a nuisance. The answer, repeated by several staff members, was a firm no. Without it, the village could not survive. That said, limits have been introduced. In summer, the population of the Lofoten Islands as a whole swells from around 25,000 people to more than 700,000, bringing traffic, accidents and daily surges of visitors to Nusfjord. Entry fees and restricted areas aim to ease the pressure, alongside efforts to promote off-season travel and a tourism tax.

There are different kinds of tourists, too. While I hesitated at the edge of the RIB, one Norwegian visitor had already taken her three young children out sailing. Later, I watched them gut a fish on the deck as she explained that though she's never been this far north before, it's normal for her family to get out on the water and catch fish.

At that moment, an eight-year-old held up a glistening prize, just hacked from the gigantic cod, shouting: "It's an eye!" I couldn't help but laugh and admire how unsqueamish they were, a marked contrast to the day-trippers passing through with cameras in hand, one of whom I'd earlier witnessed dropping her selfie stick through the harbour's wooden planks.

Seeing the islands from the water was exhilarating as the RIB reached 100km/h. But, between bird watching and admiring the scenery, my favourite moment was seeing the most isolated cabins perched on a sliver of rock about 10 minutes' ride from the village. These cabins were originally built for Hans Dahl's family and are as remote as it gets, without water or electricity and no one else around for miles. Guests are brought by boat and once you're in, there's no way to back to the mainland. But what an experience it would be, with champagne on arrival, an outdoor fireplace on your private terrace and huge bathtubs looking out to the horizon.

After being soaked by the waves for nearly two hours, there was only one way to get a full-circle appreciation for Nusfjord: sampling the *skrei* myself. Restaurant Karoline offers a selection of menus including à la carte and set courses that reflect a taste of the region. The "Four Flavours from the Sea" menu delivers four meticulous dishes to the table, each presented on a pedestal. Steigen salmon "sashimi" is finished with Icelandic wasabi, white soy and apple gel, while raw Lyngen shrimp float in creamy Kosho sauce with lemongrass and leek oil.

After three days at Nusfjord, it's hard not to develop a deep admiration for Norwegian culture. Time seems to pass more slowly here and the connection to nature is irresistible. I asked Pettersen whether that sense of calm endures, or whether it was simply a visitor's illusion.

"If you're from Lofoten, you might leave in your 20s," he said. "But this is why most people come back. There's no rush. The air is clean. There are short commutes, school is five minutes away. In winter, we watch the Northern Lights; in summer, we're outside with friends under the midnight sun."

He paused, then added: "We feel lucky to be from here."

The Telegraph, London

The writer travelled as a guest of Nusfjord Village, which has rooms from about 3200 kr ($470) a night

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