

Oslo's Norsk Folkemuseum

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A microcosm of the Norway's history, class structure, urban and rural settings



Photo: Haakon Harriss / Norsk Folkemuseum

The Old Town, Enerhaugen, is filled with charm with its old wooden buildings painted in bright colors.

ERIC STAVNEY
Mukilteo, Wash.

In October 2019, my wife, Dana, and I walked with pent-up excitement through the entrance of the [Norwegian Museum of Culture History](#), better known as the Norsk Folkemuseum, in Norway's capital, Oslo. We were there to interview Inger Jensen, a senior curator, and Siv Ringdal, another head curator, and then walk through the museum. Let me take you on our walk through this delightful open-air museum, informed by our meeting with the curators that day.

Historical background

First, some history. The idea of an open-air museum originated with King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway, who from 1891 to 1894 had four historic farm buildings taken apart and rebuilt in what was then Kristiania, as well as rebuilding a stave church from the town of Gol, in the Hallingdal area. King Oscar's idea was to preserve historic architecture and history in an easily accessible place—Norway's capital. This humble collection of buildings constituted the first open-air museum in the world.

The late 1800s was a time of great change in Europe, as industrialization was replacing many of the historic occupations and customs. Old buildings—some hundreds of years old—were torn down to make way for the new. But many felt that old farmhouses, barns, and stave churches

deserved to be preserved as important reminders of the past. In Stockholm, the open-air museum Skansen opened to the public in 1891, and today it boasts a full replica of an “average” 1800s town, complete with craftspeople, musicians, and performers, all in traditional dress and demonstrating their occupations. You could even see rare breeds of farm livestock.



Photo: Eric Stavney

Stepping through the portal of the Gol Stave Church with its intricate wood carvings is like stepping into another time and place.

Not to be outdone, Hans Aall established the Norsk Folkemuseum in 1894 to show “how our fathers lived and toiled, how they battled with the unforgiving land and harsh conditions, cultivated the soil, brought home their catch, traded, carried out their craft, lived and dressed, brought up their children ... and how their spiritual life was affected by the changing times, what they thought and what they believed.”

The Folk Museum started with a number of reconstructed rural buildings, but soon incorporated the collection of King Oscar II as well. They officially opened their doors to the public in 1902.

Now 127 years since it was formally established, the museum has grown to include 160 buildings showing how people lived in Norway from the 1500s to the present; how life was like then and now. In addition to the buildings, there are large collections of folk art, knitting, Sámi culture, folk dress costumes, and church art.

A day tour through time

After meeting with curators Inger and Siv, we began our walk around the museum in a counterclockwise direction. It became immediately apparent that the museum was much bigger than I remembered. This was my third visit and yet it was obvious I would still have to come back many more times to take it all in. It was also obvious that the museum had changed substantially in the 30 years since my last visit and continues to change to remain relevant to today's world.



*Photo: Morten Brun Norsk Folkemuseum
Wooden structures from the Hardanger
region.*

The museum is laid out with collections of buildings and farmsteads taken from districts all around Norway. The map we carried showed that the first area was Finnmark, the northernmost district of Norway. We passed through farmland and buildings that looked to be from the early 1900s and were stopped short by exhibits in two houses that described the history of the area during and after World War II.

Inger had told us about the withdrawal of Nazi forces in 1944, as the Russians began to drive them south. They burned buildings, crops, boats, and sabotaged local infrastructure as they withdrew and forced 45,000 civilians to evacuate to the south. That included Norwegians, Sámi, and Kven people, among others who had lived there for hundreds of years. This Nazi scorched-earth policy in 1945 was new to us and reminded us of how little we knew of Norwegian history, let alone our own history.

We passed by a small Sámi settlement with turf-sod buildings and tents and made a silent promise to return to see the large indoor Sámi collection. In addition to artifacts of traditional Sámi livelihoods like trapping, fishing, farming, and herding, the indoor collection includes audio of the Sámi singing artform of the joik. Inger stressed that the Sámi collection is on loan, to be returned to the Indigenous people of Norway (and Sweden, Finland, and a part of Russia) when the exhibition ends. The opportunity for visitors to learn about the Sámi while in Oslo is unique, since many folks will never get to the Sámi museums in the far north, and historically their culture has been marginalized.

Stave church crown jewel

The crown jewel of the museum, in my opinion, is the Gol stave church or stavkirke. This building was rescued from destruction during a time when many stave churches were being replaced with larger, more modern log buildings to make room for larger congregations. The Gol stave church in the museum is a reconstruction of some wood saved from the original church of 1205 but is mostly new construction from the late 1800s up to the modern day, modeled after the



*Photo: Anne-Lise Reinsfelt / VisitNorway
The reconstructed Gol Stave Church.*



Photo: Anne-Lise Reinsfelt / VisitNorway
 Women and girls show off their traditional Norwegian folk costume year-round at the Norsk Folkemuseum.

best-preserved Norwegian stave church at Borgund. Ironically, the museum's hybrid stave church has since been copied, with replicas built in the town of Gol and in Minot, N.D. A 4/5 size replica is in Walt Disney World in Florida.

To get a feeling for the time period in the 1800s when stave churches were being dismantled, combined with a picture of rural village life, romance, and tragedy, check out Lars Mytting's excellent historically accurate novel, *The Bell in the Lake*.

When we arrived at the church, we stepped into the dark interior, lit only by a single candle and a small skylight. A faded mural of "The Last Supper" was painted on the apse behind the altar. The staves, or log support pillars, pointed upward into the dark, where the uppermost room was dimly visible. While a docent dressed in a man's Hallingdal bunad (where Gol is located) was available for questions, Dana and I, together with a handful of other visitors, remained silent in awe. It was just that kind of space. Though built in 1200, it was still a church, and it demanded humbleness and reverence. Eventually, my wife managed to pull me out to continue our walk.

Slices of society

The next stop was the Norwegian Trekking Association (Den Norske Turistforening or DNT) cabin, which fittingly required a short hike to the top of a knoll. Such untended cabins and larger staffed lodges are found all over the Norwegian wilderness, ready to accommodate hikers overnight with basic facilities. At this one, you can even get a cup of "coarse ground" coffee from the DNT volunteers who staff it. I was amused that they had to specify the grind, as if everyone is used to espresso these days. But not me – I still use the hand-cranked coffee mill my grandparents used.

On the far side of the knoll, we walked down the hill through a Sør-Trøndelag crofter or tenant (husmann) farm of log buildings in a small, fenced-in area. A tenant farmer rented the buildings and worked the land, perhaps owning a single cow. This was the kind of farm my own ancestors came from in Sør-Trøndelag, near Trondheim.

I remembered Inger telling us that the museum not only showed change through time but also the differences between classes and differences in wealth. Siv had told us the museum has a program that shows schoolchildren that life in the old days wasn't such a rosy, romantic time. She said, "We will tell the story about disease and death [back then] ... about all the



Photo: Eric Stavney
 Stabburs and lofts were used to store food for the long winter months, as well as clothing.

difficult things, like dirt. Almost everything was worse back in the old days.”

The next stop was a relatively modern Trøndelag farm set up like in the 1950s. We marveled at the chickens and livestock, as well as the house with an interior we remembered from our own old days. The chickens I saw were Norwegian Jærhøns, the only breed today that originated in Norway.

We were surprised to hear the high notes of a seljefløyte nearby, and found a young fellow (in a bunad, of course) playing this old folk instrument, the willow flute.

Scenes of living history

We discovered other small scenes of living history, too: a young woman making lefse over a hearth and a someone shearing a sheep, whose wool undoubtedly was subsequently carded, sorted, spun, and woven. When we walked into an area of old town Oslo, we found ourselves walking cobbled streets with houses laid out, and museum “hosts” in period costumes walking these streets, staffing a small grocery, a newsstand “kiosk.” Folk dancers also frequently perform in costume in the open areas to fiddle music, often with Norway’s national instrument, the hardanger fiddle.

You’d be hard pressed, short of a 17th of May celebration, to find all the national costumes of Norway on display or being worn as they were then and now. There is an entire indoor exhibit on Norwegian folk dress.

About 20 years ago, the museum moved an entire apartment building, known by its old address, “Vesselsgate 15,” to the museum. This was originally built in 1865 but was typical middle-class residential quarters in old Oslo into the late 1900s. In awed wonder at the labor it must have taken to build it, we walked up to the top floor and worked our way down.

Here, we found a reconstruction of Torvald and Nora Helmer’s bourgeois apartment from 1879, with period furniture. I loved this—the Helmers are characters in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. There were also examples of apartments of residents from 1935, 1950, 1965, and a Pakistani home from 2002. Wow. They show slices through time of differing social classes, wealth, and the stories that go with them.

Cross-cultural experiences

You can tell from looking at the museum map that we barely scratched the surface of this amazing place on our visit. As Inger and Siv reminded us, each setting is a recreation of historically accurate people and their stories throughout time in Norway and how they interacted with their physical environment and society.

But they haven’t limited cultural influences just to Norway. Siv has written several books on the cultural transfer of Norwegian ideas to America and how American ideas were brought back to Norway—recipes, fashion, costumes, and music, among other things. She has focused



*Photo: Eric Stavney
A vintage Volkswagen is parked at a
old-style gas station from the same era.*

especially on the role of women in Norwegian (and American) society.

Of all the open-air museums I've visited, from medieval villages to seaports, farms, military forts, mills, and those on Indigenous cultures, none that I know of attempt to show both old and recent history. This is what makes the Norwegian Folk Museum unique. In her many years as curator before retirement, Inger strove to keep the museum relevant to today's visitors. Two of her last presentations before she retired were on "What does it mean to be a national museum in a globalized world?" and "What remains of the present? Collecting from contemporary life in museums of societies."

The Norsk Folkemuseum is an ongoing gift to the world, for our past is rich and worth reflecting on so that we may understand who we are today. If you can't get to Norway, visit an open-air museum near you. They're all over the world now, and they are worth your attention—but remember, Norway was first.

To hear Eric Stavney's interview with Inger Jensen and Siv Ringdal in 2019, listen to the podcast "Velkommen til Norsk Folkemuseum" at nordicontap.com.

You can view an excellent video by travel expert Rick Steves at classroom.ricksteves.com/videos/norwegian-folk-museum.

Finally, you might enjoy the article called "[The Mystery of Stave Churches](#)," The Norwegian American, Nov. 1, 2019.

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*Photo: Morten Brun / Norsk Folkemuseum
The customs of the olden days, including leifse baking, are demonstrated at the Norsk Folkemuseum.*