ÅLESUND, NORWAY The Juvet Landscape Hotel offers nature lovers rooms with breathtaking views – and the Norwegian Big Five.

Words by Oskar Hammarkrantz
Photographs by Erik Olsson
Very chance he got, math teacher and IT entrepreneur Knut Slinning would head for the hills, abandoning the schoolrooms and boardrooms of Ålesund on the west coast of Norway to go skiing or hiking in the mountains around Norddal, an hour inland, where he had a cabin.

A local farmer noticed that Slinning often took a shortcut past a ramshackle barn on an estate he owned as he headed down to the Valldøla rapids. The farmer planned to sell the land, and had received several offers – with a fast-flowing river through the middle of it and an untouched forest at the foot of Alstadfjellet, a 1,450 meter-high mountain, it attracted plenty of outdoor types with fat wallets – but there was something about the wiry, bearded man who came here so often.

“He asked me if I wanted to buy it because I seemed to love the place so much,” Slinning says. “It was an offer I couldn’t refuse. Something like this comes up maybe once in a lifetime. But I didn’t know what I would do with the farm.”

Just a few kilometers away, architecture firm Jensen og Skodvin had recently finished a job making the Gudbrandsjuvet ravine and waterfall more accessible by adding boardwalks and lookouts. The commission was part of the ongoing National Tourist Routes project, fixing up the most spectacular stretches of road in Norway and combining them with modern architecture. There are now 18 such tourist routes, with a few others waiting for a similar facelift.

But the architects wanted to do more in the region, so they got in contact with Slinning. The Juvet Landscape Hotel began to take shape. Planning started seven years ago, but it was only in June 2010 that Slinning opened the doors to his cabins, which are less than an hour east of Ålesund and five hours drive south from Trondheim on winding roads.

Juvet now comprises seven minimalist cabins...
in treated pine, seemingly scattered at random throughout the forest.

“The inspiration comes from military camps – the simplest possible protection from the weather. The idea is to be a part of nature, right in the heart of it, but you also have to be warm and comfortable,” Slinning says.

The neighbors were slightly suspicious at first, disturbed at the thought of putting up something ultramodern in a cultural landscape.

“They probably hoped for barns with turf roofs but the idea was not just to copy our ancestors, but to build something modern, something here and now.”

Every aspect of the design shows consideration for nature. The architects drew up the plans and Slinning made the timber frames himself. The cabins are situated so that each one could be built without having to cut down trees or blast out rocks. This is what gives them the appearance of just being scattered throughout the forest. They were also put up in winter, when the ground was covered by snow, to avoid damaging the undergrowth as much as possible. Work was done entirely without mechanical diggers, explosives or concrete foundations, and each cabin is built on 14 steel rods sunk 50cm into the rock.

“If we remove the cabins, there will be almost
‘We don’t want anything to compete with the view. Nobody has ever asked for drapes, and if they did, they wouldn’t get any’

Knut Slinning

Peak district: Bispevatnet Lake runs between Mounts Bispen and Kangen
no trace of a hotel,” Slinning says. “We didn’t want to disturb nature. We had some Japanese guests who wanted to know the name of the landscape architect who had planted the trees and bushes. When I tried to explain that it was like this, that it was all down to nature, they thought I was nuts.”

The walls of the cabins are a dark stained, almost black, Scotch pine. There is a simple futon in a bed alcove – and that’s it. No paintings, no iPhone docking station, no television, just an enormous panoramic window from floor to ceiling.

“We don’t want anything to compete with the view. If there are no distractions, it is completely natural to look out to the river and the mountains. Nobody has ever asked for drapes, and if they did, they wouldn’t get any.”

Peace and solitude can take some getting used to, however. The view is breathtaking for 10 minutes. The river and the mountains fill the entire screen, or window I should say, but after a while the calm actually begins to get to you. For someone from the big city, the lack of a TV, cell phone or even a small painting or brochure to browse through is stressful. It takes me a while to wind down, to really enjoy it and start recharging.

Juvet is definitely not a luxury hotel in the traditional sense. There is no champagne bar here, no bellhops to carry your bags, no designer products in the bathrooms. Yet for people who want to find tranquility and get as close as possible to nature while still having a roof over their heads, or enjoy a beer in an outdoor hot tub by a rushing river, Juvet is the ultimate in luxury.

Slinning wants Juvet to be a destination of its
own, a place where you can relax and be at one with nature. But the journey here isn’t too bad either. If you are coming from the north, from the small town of Åndalsnes, you first have to make your way up the magnificent Trollstigen trail, with 11 hairpin bends winding through the Ister Valley to the plateau at Stigröra, 850 meters above sea level. The road, which took eight years to build and opened in 1936, usually tops lists of the world’s most beautiful drives.

If you are coming from the south, you pass by the Unesco World Heritage site Geirangerfjord, so picturesque and dramatic that it could have been created specifically for postcards. And if you are looking for some action, Slinning and jack-of-all-trades/chef Erik Hildrestrand are more than happy to organize an adventure for you. Most guests book a package with half-board and some form of excursion. It is usually a trip to the mountains, and in winter often involves skiing, either cross-country or downhill. If you prefer rafting, kayaking or mountain climbing, Slinning and Hildrestrand can organize that too. Another popular choice is what the hotel calls the Norwegian Big Five: skiing, hiking, wilderness camping, rafting, and visiting a protected mountain farm.

Today, it’s mountain climbing. Watching Slinning and Hildrestrand scramble up the gray granite toward the summit of Bispen (the Bishop), you get the feeling that they are just as at home.
in the mountains as in the hotel reception or kitchen.

What was described as a “gentle morning stroll to work up an appetite” proves to be a grueling 1,460 meter ascent to the snow-clad peak.

Once back in the cabin, with weather-chapped face and a stretched cruciate ligament, it is easier to enjoy the solitude and panoramic views.

**THE GUESTS AT JUVET CAN BE** nature enthusiasts, outdoor types, fans of architecture, lovebirds, or singletons who just want to take it easy and be on their own for a while.

For dinner, there is no à la carte dining, no candelabras or starched white tablecloths. Instead you get Hildrestrand’s simple yet perfectly composed food. It is served when it is ready, which usually means sometime between 7pm and 9pm. It all depends on when guests get back from the mountains or other excursions and expeditions.

“This is no fancy restaurant, no fine dining,” Hildrestrand says. “This is real, local food, the sort you want after a day out on the mountain.”

Tonight’s menu features a local specialty, bacalao (salt cod), accompanied by a chili-infused tomato sauce, and Trollkräm, fresh berries and lingonberry in custard. Simple and unpretentious comfort food for mountain-weary legs.

Dinner, like breakfast, is served in an old barn that forms the heart of the hotel. Until a few years ago there were cows, horses and pigs living here. Tonight, we are sitting at a long dining table, with a rowdy group of friends gathered from across western Norway: a middle-aged cod millionaire, a female soccer player, a man selling heavy machinery in the Siberian tundra, an heir to a sweater empire, a health-care inspector, a cod buyer and a baby carriage designer. There’s also a Dutch artificial turf installer and his girlfriend, who both seem a little surprised by the noisy Norwegians.

The jokes come fast and furious, and voices are raised, as everything from the Norwegian pension system to electric cars, sleazy bars in Paris, skiing and nightlife in Shanghai is argued over. What happens in Juvet, stays in Juvet, someone says. A heated yet friendly discussion about how you
should dry salt cod breaks out between Hildrestrand and the cod millionaire, before the latter starts negotiating prices with the cod buyer. “Hundred kilos? Thousand kilos? No problem.” Slimming’s impressive collection of Rioja is starting to near its end, as are the photographer and I. So when it’s time for the others to wander down to the outdoor hot tub at the river’s edge, where they can pop some Ringnes beers in the moonlight and finally reach agreement on the salt cod, we decide to leave them to it. And to wake up refreshed and at peace in the middle of a picture postcard.

THE FACT SHEET
Juvet Landscape Hotel
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Tel: +47 950 32 010.
Double room including breakfast and one of the Norwegian Big Five, $345pp.
www.juvet.com

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