

INTO THE WILD

Tucked away on a remote mountainside in the heart of the west Norwegian fjords is a hotel out of the ordinary — an unexpected twist in the form of minimalist glass-fronted cabins set against the backdrop of a 16th century farmstead. This peaceful retreat by the name Juvet attracted its current owner to the area more than thirty years ago and over the past decade his willingness to share the view has gotten attention from filmmakers and chefs, as well as travellers looking for the perfect place to disappear.

TEXT JULIE VITTO PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS TONNESEN

My plane descends on the port of Ålesund, an hour and a half west of Valldal, where mountains emerge from the sea like giant whale heads rising up to greet me. Ålesund is the hometown of Knut Slinning, owner of the Juvet Landscape Hotel. The town, known for its unique concentration of Art Nouveau buildings, is also where the hotel’s head chef, Christopher Schönefeld, and resident jack-of-all-trades, Erik Hildestrand, grew up. With the UNESCO-protected west Norwegian fjords ever present in the distance and the promise of mid-summer filled with the world’s best-tasting strawberries, it is not hard to see the appeal of escaping into the mountains for ten months of the year to run the quiet nature retreat that is Juvet. It is my final stop on a night-time journey through mountain tunnels along a 110 kilometre fjord I do not even realize is there.

Tall, fair, and full of information, chef Christopher Schönefeld has a van waiting to give me a lift from Valldal’s gas station bus stop to the hotel. It is clear that everyone here helps with what they can. Schönefeld came to work at Juvet in April 2015 after approaching Knut Slinning with some ideas for the kitchen’s future. Now the hotel’s first formally trained chef is giving its countless guests, including the rising star of Nordic cooking chef Magnus Nilsson, another reason to visit.

A former cowshed has been restored to function as the hotel’s cosy, red dining hall and lodge. Red because, as Christopher Schönefeld tells me, it was traditionally the cheapest colour of paint. Removed from the glare of city lights, the sky is brimming with stars. The remoteness of Juvet is sinking in. It is calm. Quiet, except for the sound of running water at the foot of the hill. I can sense the mountains around me, hidden in the dark.

The 36-year-old chef is, however, done chasing stars now and is more interested in good, local food. He feels at home foraging for herbs, wild-flowers, and berries in the area around the hotel using what he finds for oils, sorbets, pickling, and garnishing. He envisions building a greenhouse on the grounds and doing more with fermenting as the seasons change. But what he enjoys the most is the element of surprise.

“I like going to a restaurant where you don’t expect much, and then getting wowed by the food,” he says.

“I remember being impressed by the simplicity of a dish of no more than five ingredients. It was the surprise of how good something so simple can be.”

The dream of Juvet began by chance in 1986 when Knut Slinning, a math teacher and IT entrepreneur, bought a holiday cabin at the 16th century farmstead of Burtigarden. In 2005 the farm’s owner offered to sell the land to Slinning while Norway’s National Tourist Routes project brought Oslo-based architects Jensen & Skodvin to the area to build an ultramodern, scenic rest stop just down the road. The architects presented him with the idea of wooden tents for a campsite, and those evolved into the modular, wood and glass-walled cabins for what would be called Europe’s first landscape hotel.

“The development of the landscape rooms was more like a joint venture between the two of us,” he tells me, in which Jensen & Skodvin created the look and Slinning the functionality. He even had a hand in cutting planks and laying the foundations for the cabins, each held in place by steel rods embedded deep into the rock below. No blasting or clear cutting was done in the making of Juvet.

The cabin experience at Juvet is equally simple and respectful towards the natural surroundings but – make no mistake – luxurious

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Inside the antique-furnished lodge, a simple, flavourful meal of cod, roasted vegetables, and potato is ready. Comfort food. As is the beer from the local Troll Brewery, which, from the label design, looks like it was brewed in Middle-earth. After my 12 hours of travelling, Schönefeld could tell me that is where we are, and I would readily believe it.

Over coffee I learn how he honed his cooking skills at a young age in the kitchens of Europe, eventually working his way up to a position as head chef in Zurich, where he earned his restaurant a Michelin star.

“The way Michelin works,” he humbly explains, “is they come in and have a meal without anyone knowing. Then they thank you, give you their card before leaving, and you don’t hear anything until the guide is published.”

where it counts. Everything serves a purpose in the minimally lit room constructed of dark wood, durable carpeting, and a massive glass window. On the sides of the bed alcove are small wooden slats that slide open to let in the sound of the rushing river. In the cocoon of the down-filled duvet it is almost hard to fall asleep. Not because of the coffee I just drank, but from anticipating the view.

When day finally breaks I gaze down upon a forest of birch and pine from my vantage point where the window meets the carpet. I watch a river run by at my feet as if someone upstream has tipped over a giant bottle of Bombay Sapphire. The mountains slope down toward the valley on other side of this glass box and I recall being told the hotel is out of the path of landslides and avalanches.



Later the same day I take more pictures of birch trees and mountain peaks than anyone back home will ever care to see. I had originally assumed the area was a designer playground for the world’s wealthiest outdoor types and that I would be content to sit inside my cabin, use the free Wi-Fi, and read. But these notions are pleasantly obliterated as I am caught off guard by the sound of a roaring river below the bridge of a public rest stop. I approach and begin to look at things differently. This moment costs nothing and belongs to everyone. Including the staff who are lucky enough to live here, like Erik Hildestrand. “My family is originally from France,” he tells me back at the lodge. “They moved to Ålesund and that’s where I am from.” Hildestrand and Knut Slinning have known each other for a long time. They would go skiing together before he started working at Juvet in 2011 and served as the primary cook before Christopher Schönefeld

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arrived. Now the two work together to prepare meals that represent the best ingredients in the area, or anywhere for that matter. The tall outdoorsman likes to hunt in the surrounding mountains, occasionally bringing back what he catches to the kitchen. He will also go along as a guide for guests interested in outdoor activities like hiking, rafting, or skiing. He shows me a video on his phone of a windsurfing excursion he took one summer. The sleepy sound of an accordion is heard playing over the waves, painting an unexpected picture of a fearless adventurer with the casual coolness of a café dweller. I am amazed. “You’ve never seen windsurfing before?”

Juvet was used for the setting of Alex Garland’s 2015 freaky sci-fi film, *Ex Machina*. The film is set in the wilds of Alaska, but filming took place here in Norway’s Valldal valley where scenes were shot using parts of different buildings, a sound stage in London, and then spliced together to look like the action had taken place in one big dream house. The film tells the tale of a wealthy, reclusive programmer secretly building artificial intelligence in the form of beautiful fembots. Things get a little crazy and – without giving too much away – there is a little blood.

“I’ll have to think twice next time someone wants to shoot a movie here,” says Knut Slinning. The tall (everybody out here is tall) 65-year-old man explains that the quiet nature retreat was a little overwhelmed by the activity that lasted 19 days back in 2013. The campsite has nine cabins, each positioned with its own private view, a spa, conference centre, and a few farm-houses for staff. Ideally, he would prefer to have a maximum of 20 guests at a time. The 80-person film crew had to be put up in local hotels.

As it turns out, Garland’s sci-fi is not the only amazing tale taking place here and in the scenic area around the hotel. Juvet, meaning ‘gorge’, gets its name from the famous *Gudbrandsjuvet* through which the Valdøla River flows. Gudbrand was a 15th century outlaw who lived farther up the mountain. According to the legend, he was a daring and athletic man who leapt over the gorge

at its narrowest point when escaping from local authorities with his bride-to-be. Knut Slinning knows all the folklore and history of the area. Ask him anything over dinner while he holds Lucifer the cat, offers you another glass of wine, and mentions that we are drinking and bathing in holy water from the local *Olavskjelda*, or Olav’s well. Known as St. Olav, King Olav, and Olav the Thick, the 11th century Norwegian figure is said to have blessed the nearby spring from which he once drank. And it is honestly the best glass of water you’ll ever taste. Tested four times a year, the water from a melting glacier is filtered through gravel on its way down the mountain and produces a natural thirst-quencher superior to any city water filtered and treated to within an inch of its life. Communal dinners at Juvet are served in the lodge at 8pm.

In addition to great food and wine, there is the opportunity to make new business acquaintances or perhaps learn about another part of the world from your tablemates. The evening’s meal begins with the house smoked trout with marinated Brussels sprouts, baked romaine lettuce, and mustard seeds. Next is a shot of carrot soup with ginger and cumin. It makes everyone smile. The main course is lamb from the surrounding mountains with rutabaga, celery, Jerusalem artichokes, and brown butter. Dessert is yogurt with honey, crunchy meringue spiced with cinnamon, and raspberry sorbet. Knut Slinning asks if I know any Norwegian history. I mention Vikings, the default subject in connection with Scandinavia of old. “Vikings,” he smiles, “that’s not so interesting,” and proceeds to tell more stories until the wine bottles are empty and we eventually scatter in the night to our private cabins.

Because I have got to catch the bus, chef Christopher Schönefeld makes sure I try the smoked whale meat at breakfast a little earlier than the others. One last treat before departure. The dark, paper-thin strips roll up easily and taste surprisingly like a salami, not at all fishy. As I get my last look from the gravel lot, it is hard to pull away. I ask Knut what it is like running a hotel on the site of what was originally meant to be a private escape. “Hard to describe,” he says, “but it is a lot of meaningful work, taking care of people and sending them away with nice memories.” On the road back to the airport, I ask the bus driver if that is a fjord we are looking at out the window. He says this is all a fjord, as if I were blind, and then motions for me to run out and take one last picture before we continue on our journey.

Juvet Landscape Hotel
Alstad
6210 Valldal
[Juvet.com](http://juvet.com)

