

An aerial photograph of Alesund, Norway, showing a dense cluster of colorful buildings (yellow, red, white) along the waterfront. The harbor is filled with boats, and a bridge is visible in the distance. The city is surrounded by mountains and a body of water. The sun is low in the sky, creating a soft glow.

ALESUND

Art Nouveau City of the North

It was the night that changed everything. At 2 a.m., two men sat drinking in a warehouse. After a careless movement, an oil lamp tipped over, fell to the floor and started a fire. Abetted by a strong gale that had blown in from the southeast, the fire spread. At the end of the day, the whole town had burned to the ground. Only one person died, but nearly 800 buildings were destroyed, and 10,000 residents were left without shelter. The name of the town: Ålesund. The date: January 28, 1904.



It was a horrible thing to have happened, but out of the ashes rose, in just a few years, one of Norway's most beautiful cities. Generous aid was provided from within Norway and from abroad (beginning with the German Emperor Wilhelm II, who happened to be in the neighborhood, and, on learning of the calamity, immediately sent four warships with building material to help build temporary housing).

Soon, a string of highly motivated Norwegian architects and designers with a singular vision set out to rebuild Ålesund. Many of them were students, and all of them committed to the Jugend style, or Art Nouveau, that prevailed in the early 1900s.

Ålesund now boasts one of the world's finest concentrations of Art Nouveau architecture. Everywhere you walk, you see beautiful buildings, often topped with turrets or spires, and richly decorated with floral-inspired motifs. Adornments abound: graceful curlicues, unexpected touches of color, and – a concession to Norse heritage – the occasional sculpted head of a Viking, meshed with decorative swirls or perched on top of an arched doorway.

Above all, there's the location. Ålesund sits at the edge of the Norwegian Sea, surrounded by fjords, islands and towering mountains. For an unbeatable combination of culture and nature, the setting could not have been more propitious.

More culture presented itself at Jugendstil Senteret, the Art Noveau Centre of Norway, situated close to our hotel, next to the Hurtigruten quay. There, in an exhibition called "The Beauty of Art Noveau," we admired the works of famous artists of the period, such as Macintosh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Edvard Munch, Josef Hoffmann and others.

A pharmacy from 1907, and the pharmacist's dining room, reflected the era with sweeping curves and soft, rich colors. And, in a multimedia program, "From Ashes to Art Noveau," history was restated.

In Brunholmen, Ålesund's art district, we met with Kjellborn Tusvik, owner and manager of Gallery Cylindra, where we were introduced to a small collection of works by Norwegian artist Peter Opsvik: wood glued together in the shape of cylinders, creating highly original pieces of furniture. A twist of the hand, and a circular shelf would convert into two circular shelves or reveal a cleverly designed bar.



“BYGGE STEIN FOR STEIN”

Some of our sightseeing was done under the auspices of Ronny Brunvoll, a representative of Destination Ålesund. At one point we also met with Sidsel, a veteran tour guide who showed us the stone church, and whose obvious love for her hometown was quite infectious.

As for Ronny, he spoke proudly of Ålesund's entrepreneurial spirit. “In this region,” he said, “You don't wait for someone else to do the hard work. We've got an expression ‘å bygge stein for stein,’ which as you may know from Swedish, means to build ‘brick by brick.’ It says something about how you do business in a long time perspective.” The region, he pointed out, is among the most internationalized in Norway. “This is why companies like STX from Korea and Rolls Royce from UK invest heavily here. Rolls Royce now even built their main European education center in Ålesund, which says everything – they obviously go to where competence is the highest, not where accessibility is easy or cost is low.”

Because of waterways and canals, Ålesund (like Stockholm, Amsterdam and St. Petersburg) has sometimes been called the Venice of the North. Looking across the Brosundet canal to Sjøbua restaurant, where we were about to have dinner, I thought there may be validity to the notion of buildings rising directly out of the canal, doorways suspended above the water, and, on one of the facades, an oval sign with the name Sjøbua.

Hailed as a first-rate fish restaurant in a town where fishing has been a major industry throughout its existence, Sjøbua seemed like a good idea, and did not disappoint. The catch of the day was haddock, served with a delicious mussel sauce.

No visit to Ålesund would be complete without a trip to Aksla, the nearby mountain with the ultimate postcard view of the city. To get there you can join an organized sightseeing trip, book a taxi, or choose an upper walkway of 418 steps. Ronny, who was joining me, not unexpectedly suggested we do the climb. Bring up the subject of a hike, no matter how long and steep, and any Norwegian true to character will react with alacrity. So up we went. It was well worth the exertion. Each time we turned around, a new angle presented itself, and with every step the panorama widened. The top opened up to a spectacular view: To the west stretched the Atlantic Ocean with a multitude of islands, to the east soared the Alps of Sunnmore, with peaks rising straight out of the fjord, and right before us lay the entire Ålesund in all its Art Nouveau splendor.

Then, as we sat down at the Fjellstua outdoor restaurant, a couple good Norwegian beers arrived, Hansa Premium Lager, or pils, as they're called in Norway.

Ice cold, they hit the spot.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY BO ZAUNDERS

