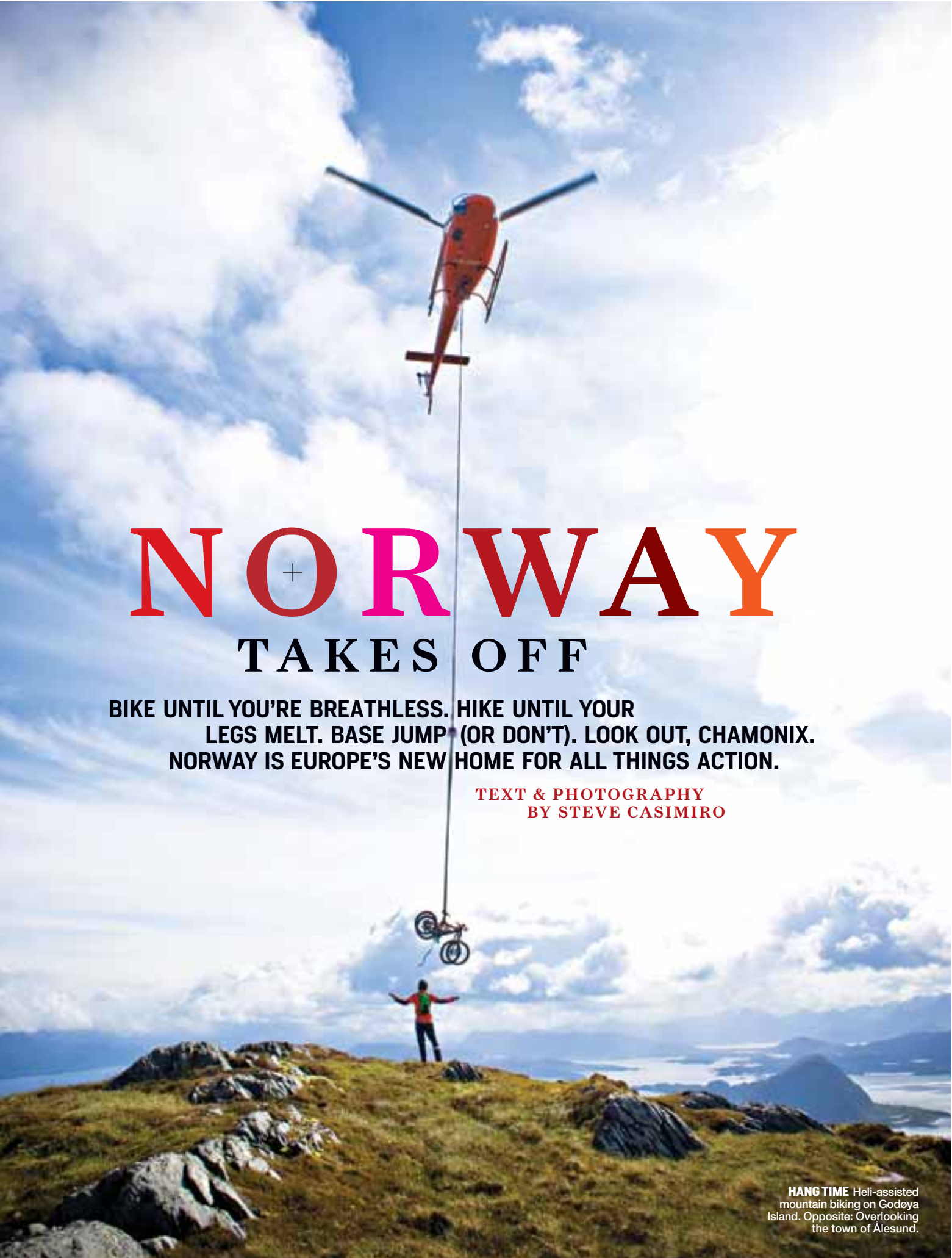
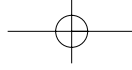


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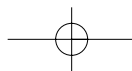
NORWAY

TAKES OFF

BIKE UNTIL YOU'RE BREATHLESS. HIKE UNTIL YOUR LEGS MELT. BASE JUMP (OR DON'T). LOOK OUT, CHAMONIX. NORWAY IS EUROPE'S NEW HOME FOR ALL THINGS ACTION.

**TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY STEVE CASIMIRO**

HANG TIME Helicopter-assisted mountain biking on Godøya Island. Opposite: Overlooking the town of Alesund.



BEST NEW TRIPS // EUROPE // NORWAY

CLAD IN A FULL-FACE

helmet and plastic armor, Arild Eidset raced his freeride mountain bike along the high spine of Norway's Godøya Island as if being chased. /// An ocean storm was welling up off the coast, edging out the early summer sunshine. Dark shadows

spilled across the surface of the North Atlantic like ink over a tablecloth.

Godøya is three tunnels and a bridge from Ålesund, a town of 45,000 in southern Norway ("southern" being relative for a city farther north than Moscow, Helsinki, and Anchorage). And its high point is a short helicopter ride from the multicolor villages and lighthouses along its shore. That's how Eidset and I got there at least, heading up in a chopper that would shuttle us from one screaming descent to the next.

The first blast of storm hit with a roar, but Eidset barely slowed. He didn't care about the rain: Like many in Norway's booming action sports scene, he just wanted to go fast. The trail was treacherous in places—razor-edged boulders, big drops, off-camber fall-away turns—but Eidset's skills were sharp, honed on the ramps, elevated pathways, and other stunt-filled trails that he and friends have built nearby, inspired by the chutes and ladders of Vancouver Island's North Shore.

I did my best to keep up, powering into the turns and trying to stay rubber-side down on the rain-slicked rocks. Still, there were moments—plenty of them—when my heart leapt into my throat. It was a feeling not typically associated with Norway, home of geriatric fjord cruises and luxury sailing packages. But then, I wasn't here for typical Norway.

The torrent proved only a minor tantrum, and clouds quickly yielded to sun. Near the bottom of the trail, we stopped to shed layers. It was June, but the air was cool enough that steam rose from my body as I packed away my jacket. Unexpectedly, a group of 30 teenagers approached us on the trail; most were dressed more for school than hiking. In the States these kids would likely be planted in front of their iPhones or running circles in a musty gymnasium, but here in Norway the priorities are different.

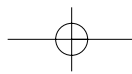
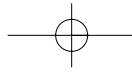
"What's this, recess?" I joked. Eidset queried one of the kids and replied, "No, it's gym class."

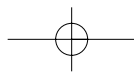
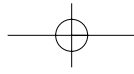
A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO, playwright Henrik Ibsen first put into words a concept now integral to the Norwegian identity: "Well, then come! In wind and rainstorm, 'cross the highland's rolling heather! He who wants may take the church road: I will not, for I am free! In the lonely seter-corner, my abundant catch I take. There's a hearth, and a table and *friluftsliv* for my thoughts."

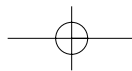
OK, it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, but the idea of *friluftsliv*, literally translated as "open-air life," has come to signify a simple commune with nature, a responsibility to be outside, and to do so with humility. And it is fundamental to being Norwegian (to the point that it's taught in school and dissected in academic papers).

Traditionally, *friluftsliv* is experienced through pensive hikes in the woods, sometimes through biking or skiing. But Norway is changing. The teenage hikers were certainly indulging in a bit of *friluftsliv* as they trooped up the trail. But so was Eidset as he tore down it. In fact, Eidset and his brothers-in-armor most likely represent the future of Norwegian recreation.

Over the past half decade or so, a new generation of homegrown athletes has made its own kind of life in Norway's outdoors, one centered on speed and energy and adrenaline. Across the country, whether on Oslo's miles of mountain bike trails, the coast's scores of kayak routes, or the Arctic's seemingly endless backcountry ski lines, you'll find







BEST NEW TRIPS // EUROPE // NORWAY

nothing less than an action sports revolution. Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg spends his summers hiking in the mountains, while Crown Prince Haakon, heir to the throne, goes surfing. These days if you see a blue hair in Norway, it's just as likely to be a mohawked snowboarder as an octogenarian cruise ship refugee.

BECAUSE NORWAY'S ADVENTURE scene is relatively new, there is no single hub. There is no Chamonix, no Moab. But two areas come close: the western fjordlands near the towns of Molde and Ålesund, known as Fjord Norway, and Tromsø, the de facto capital of the country's Arctic region. Both are coalescing around a small but growing network of outfitters and upstart adventurers, but each has its own distinctive vibe.

In Fjord Norway, the draw is action sports. The moment I stepped off the small commuter flight from Oslo I understood why: the land. There are mountains to hike, ski, and bike. There are sheer rock faces to climb up or—Thor help you—jump off (southeast of Molde the 3,608-foot Troll Wall is a longtime, though now illegal, hot spot for BASE jumpers). And there are deep fjords to kayak, waterfalls to play in, and crystal clear waters to dive; Norwegian scuba diving is surprisingly good, if unsurprisingly chilly.

Before I arrived, I'd arranged to meet up with Didrick Ose in Molde. Ose, I was told, is the resident action sports impresario of Fjord Norway. Not only does he lead hiking, biking, paddling, and skiing trips all over the region, Ose knows most everyone in the area. He is also a true believer, a man who hardly lets a day go by without getting outside at least once. In the 30 miles between the airport, where Ose met me, and my bed for the night, we stopped to mountain bike once and kayak twice.

Our destination was Yelling Hill, a sprawling private house that occasionally takes guests. Built into a hillside, the grass-roofed structure is a case study in the Scandinavian aesthetic—an almost obsessively thought-out blend of cutting-edge design and traditional decor. The United Nations put Norway at the top of its Human Development Index for six years straight, calling its standard of living the highest in the world. That night, as we dined on a six-course meal crowned by fresh halibut and a fruit sorbet blended with wine, I thought that sounded about right.

Over the next few days Ose ran me through Fjord Norway. We paddled rolling North Atlantic swells to a private island off the coast. We biked the peaks above

If Fjord Norway is all knobby tires and surfboards, Tromsø is big-wall mountaineering, dogsledding, remote kayaking, **WILDERNESS** hiking.

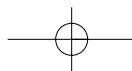
Molde, hiked fjords, noodled along rivers below the Troll Wall, and drove tiny ribbons of blacktop so precarious you had to wonder how they kept from slipping into the valley below. When Ose wasn't in motion, he was bent over a map, pointing out all that we had to do on my next visit.

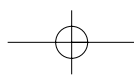
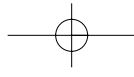
Within an hour of Molde, there are some 300 mountains ripe for skiing or climbing. Drive an hour more, depending on the ferries, and you're in Ålesund and the Sunnmøre Alps, which contain some of Norway's best backcountry, the BC-style mountain bike scene, and a couple of great adventure gear shops (indeed, my rental bike was as good as any you can buy). Even in Geirangerfjord, a UNESCO World Heritage site and perennial favorite of the cruising set, it's not uncommon for ships to offer climbing walls.

Then, of course, there's Hoddevika, where Ose's friend Torkild Strandvik runs Stad Surfing. Yes, surfing. In Norway. At the end of a narrow valley filled with nothing but small farms, his slate-roofed house stands out: There's a blue surfboard-shaped sign above the door and wetsuits on the fish-drying racks outside.

When I stopped in, the house was being gutted. Strandvik was installing radiant heating pipes beneath the floors and new bunks for visiting surfers, who pay about \$60 a night for a bed and stove. Despite the construction, some girls from Bergen were calmly brewing post-surfing tea in the basement kitchen, and as I paddled down to the beach in

NEW AND OLD Clockwise from top left: Sea kayaking off the Atlantic Highway; a Viking-style bathroom; café culture in Ålesund; outside Tromsø; pre-surf in Hoddevika; armor in Geirangerfjord.





BEST NEW TRIPS // EUROPE // NORWAY

booties and a thick five-millimeter wet-suit, a longboard under my arm, a group of guys from Oslo rolled up with shortboards lashed to their roof.

For a country with a remarkably rocky coast, the half-moon beach at Hoddevika is as rare as it is beautiful, and angled perfectly to catch North Sea swells. That day, the waves weren't quite as epic as the midwinter tubes, but they were head-high and consistent. The last thing I heard before I pulled on my insulating hood and strode into the foam was the sound of surf in one ear and banging hammers in the other.

IF FJORD NORWAY is the Scandinavian version of Lake Tahoe, then the region around Tromsø is its Alaska—big and ends-of-the-Earth wild. The city has been called both the Paris of the North and the gateway to the Arctic. While the former seems wishful (although nightclub capacity is 20,000 in a city of 66,000), the latter is spot-on: Instead of knobby tires and surfboards, Tromsø is big-wall mountaineering, dogsledding, remote kayaking, wilderness hiking.

It's also where you go if you want to catch a little midnight sun. When I got there, clouds hung low in the sky, but rather than glooming the landscape, the diffuse light draped the mountains and fjords in a twilight of suspended animation. It could have been noon or 3 a.m.

And when darkness isn't an issue, the clock is no longer in charge: At 9 p.m., I met Roar Nyheim, a Sami reindeer herder who recently launched a guiding business, to begin a four-hour hike.

Summer might have been in full swing in the south, but here at nearly 70° north, spring was still trying to nose out winter. Dogsledding season was over, but there was still too much snow to strap on crampons and walk one of the many glaciers outside of Tromsø. Instead, Nyheim took me hiking near the Lyngen Peninsula, about an hour away. The hike began up a road that's slowly being reclaimed by a budding birch forest, and as we walked, Nyheim pointed to signs of recent moose passings and described the history of the trail.

"This was known as the Blood Road," he said. "It was built by Russians who were prisoners of the Germans at the end of World War II. The Germans wanted to put a gun overlooking the fjord. Many people died building [this road]. My grandmother lived across the fjord, and she used to sneak through the forest to bring food to the starving Russians."

By 11 p.m. we'd climbed a few miles, sometimes scrambling hand over hand through snow, and settled into a stone hut where the Germans had planned to put their big gun. Across the fjord, the snowcapped Lyngen Alps stretched out like dragon's teeth. While Nyheim cooked fresh-caught salmon over a tiny camp stove, he talked about what it's like to be a Sami. If a Sami disappears into the mountains and doesn't come home for days, he said, no one worries. Weeks, no one worries. Months, maybe they worry, but probably not. It sure seemed a lot like *friluftsliv*, but without the poetic fuss.

I asked him about his guide service. He told me it's still small and the reindeer still pay the bills, but he's happy with his decision. It was, he says, the right time. Apparently the Norwegian government feels the same. Down in Molde, Ose started his outfit four years ago with a five-figure government grant. This year the crown, still flush with oil money

ADVENTURE GUIDE

NORWAY'S
NEXT LEVEL

MOLDE

A Fjord Norway hub, Molde is a five-minute town: Kayaking, hiking, mountain biking, and skiing are all five minutes away. The Rica Hotel is Molde's most modern accommodation (doubles from \$220; rica-hotels.com). DID Adventure, Didrick Ose's company, guides custom trips that include biking, sea kayaking, climbing, and more (from \$400 a day; didadventure.no).

ÅLESUND

Spread over seven islands, the town is a great launchpad for boat trips. Outfitter 62 Nord arranges coastal excursions in souped-up Zodiacs (two hours, \$115) or helicopter tours (30 minutes, \$590; 62.no). Ålesund is also at the heart of Norway's freeride mountain bike scene, with trails beginning outside of town and spreading to the nearby



SUNNMØRE ALPS

Shop Sykkel Specialisten rents top-of-the-line mountain bikes and provides beta (\$25 a day; sykkelspecialisten.com). Thon Hotel's bright, comfortable rooms are a two-minute walk from the main ferry terminal, where most day trips begin and end (doubles from \$230; thonhotels.com).

GEIRANGERFJORD

Arguably the most beautiful fjord in Norway (and the most popular with cruise ships), this area offers spectacular hiking and kayaking. For boat shuttles to the best hikes, and a guide if you like, check out Geiranger Fjordservice AS (prices vary by trip; geirangerfjord.no). Hotel Union is the primary game in town for lodging and food (doubles from \$265; hotel-union.no).



TROMSØ

The gateway to Norway's Arctic, Tromsø is a must for those who crave wilderness, big walls, long hikes, and untracked ski descents. Rica Ishavshotel is within walking distance of several outfitters (doubles from \$305; rica.no). Lyngsfjord Adventure, Roar Nyheim's company, leads hikes, glacier walks, and more but specializes in Sami cultural trips (lyngsfjord.com). You won't want to leave the kennels with the dogsled puppies, but Tromsø Villmarkssenter can guide technical climbing, sea kayaking, and glacier walks (villmarkssenter.no). Lyngen Lodge, at the foot of the Lyngen Alps, is a cushy base for trips farther north, or if the season's right, Norway's best backcountry skiing (doubles from \$300; lyngnelodge.com). —s.c.

and seemingly impervious to the Great Recession, plans to dole out some \$10 million to adventure travel-related companies. We've all heard about Norway's free health care and education, but subsidized adventure? That has to be a first.

After midnight, Nyheim and I abandoned the hut and headed down to our truck, grabbing hunks of reindeer moss off the ground for dessert. (Taste: curiously like romaine lettuce. Consistency: curiously like dried parsley.) Somewhere between one and two in the morning, we exited the forest along the shore of Lyngenfjord. As we said our goodbyes, Nyheim handed me his card, which features an abstract, V-shaped logo. I asked him if it was designed to represent the antlers of the reindeer so precious to his people.

"It could be," he says. "It could also be the handles of a snowmobile. It can be whatever you want."

Sounded an awful lot like today's Norway: Old and new, side by side, take your pick. ▲