Telemark: “Independent and Stubborn”

A Case Study: Sense of Place. Being local is not enough - you have to be good.

“VisitTelemark: Enjoy the diversity in nature and culture that Telemark represents; from the beautiful coastline in the south to the mountain plateau in the north. One destination. Thousand opportunities.”

Erasmus+

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Introduction

Our case study group had been assigned ‘Sense of Place’ whilst on the Encore ‘Exploring Nordic Culture: an Original Rural Experience 21/22 - 28 September 2017’. We visited a wide variety of food and drink providers, visitor attractions, farm shops, restaurants and stayed in self-catering cabins and hotel accommodation in the Telemark region.

This case study has not reviewed each product and place visited: it is not our intention to make specific comments about each, but our aim is to look at the concept of sense of place, and how it has been reflected or applied within the Telemark region and where appropriate, the wider country. We hope the opportunities included will be useful for the local tourism businesses, trade bodies and suppliers into the tourism economy.

We have included visitor statistics, spend, the industry and organisations, and marketing communications, with each team members' response to what we have experienced and our professional interaction with the people, places and products including:

- Marketing and Visitor Information
- Produce and industry
- Cultural Heritage

What is Sense of Place?

Local distinctiveness, is what makes one place different from another. It is the combination of aspects that makes each place special. It is the essential details, large and small, natural and man-made which combine to create a sense of place. Sometimes we take these features for granted because they are small or everyday things and we simply fail to notice them.

Major landmarks and famous sights can mark one place out against another but it’s not just big features that are important. Our impressions are formed through so many other aspects of an area’s character and include:

Heritage, culture, traditions – people, events, festivals
Produce and industry – food, drink, farming, textiles and crafts
Words, dialect, local sayings, jokes and quirky anecdotes
Natural features such as the landscape, flora, fauna
Man-made features - buildings, reservoirs and sculpture

Local distinctiveness can be experienced and enjoyed with all the senses. Each person will appreciate something different whether it’s drinking beer in a cosy pub, learning something new about a destination, hearing birdsong in a hidden valley, learning a new craft or the nostalgic feeling of cobbles underfoot.

Tourism Development

The Norwegian tourism industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world.

Figures from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) show that 2016 was the sixth year in a row in which tourism was an important contributor to the global economy. While global GDP grew by 2.5% in 2016, the tourism industry grew by 3.1%. With its contribution of USD 7,600 billion, the industry represents 10.1% of global GDP.

In 2016, Europe was the continent that saw the weakest growth at 2%. Nevertheless, Europe is the most visited continent and more than half of all international tourism trips were made to a European country. Inbound tourism trips in Europe were not evenly distributed and Western Europe and Southern Europe in particular saw weak growth. In contrast, inbound tourism trips to Northern Europe rose by 6%, thanks in large part to the 12% increase in inbound tourism trips to Norway, more than in the rest of the world, which means that for the second year Norway took a larger share of international tourism.

Norway Tourism Characteristics

The tourism industry in Norway is largely seasonal, with more than half of all overnight stays in the summer months of May to August. Some regions can experience periods

when there are too many tourists, while others would welcome more. In 2016, the number of commercial overnight stays rose by 5%, with 65% of this increase in the summer.

More tourists to Norway

Overnight stays rose by 2% (reflecting the European average), while foreign overnight stays rose by 10%. At the same time, foreign arrivals at hotels increased by 12%.

Norway's growth in inbound visits has been fuelled by three key factors: it is regarded as one of the safest locations in the world; secondly, although it is still relatively expensive, the weaker Kroner has helped make Norway appear cheaper, especially for Eurozone and US visitors; thirdly, the lower cost of oil has enabled budget carriers to extend their routes to new locations and Norwegian Airlines has been a leader in this growth with new routes into major Norwegian cities.

The number of Norwegians who holiday in Norway is still greater than the number of foreigners. The ratio in 2016 was 71% Norwegian and 29% foreign, measured in terms of overnight stays. Source: Statistics Norway

Reasons to visit:

The typical tourist in Norway wants to have fun, recharge batteries and experience the landscape with its fjords and mountains, visit historic buildings and places, experience culture and the local way of life, and taste local food and beverages. The family audience is important, especially for Scandinavian visitors. Even though there may be regional differences, the vast majority come to Norway to experience the landscape and outdoor activities and these key themes are reflected in the marketing approach of Visit Norway.

Key high expenditure activities amongst overseas visitors include: amusement parks; festivals; eating in restaurants; experiencing local history and legends; eating local food and drink. In terms of spend, experiencing wildlife, walking and cycling scored low.
Source: Innovation Norway

Opportunity: Time sensitivity and the rise of short breaks over longer stays (also fuelled by budget carriers and flight-plus-hotel options), might be something that could help a region such as Midt-Telemark- the reason to visit might be to experience more than one aspect of Norway in a single place and as an alternative to a city-break.

Perceptions

The strongest association that most people have to Norway is fjords. Many people associate Norway with nature, fjords, mountains, cold and the northern lights. Many people also think of Norway as being a good place to pursue outdoor activities.

At the same time, the Innovation Norway survey shows that more people will visit if they think that a holiday offers something more. The fact that a holiday in Norway can also offer exciting city life, culture and history, good food and local specialities is a plus.

Opportunity: During the last two years, more people have agreed with the statement that Norway is a suitable place for good food and local specialities, exciting city life and stimulating culture and history. In the same period, Norway has also strengthened its position as a country with good opportunities for cycling, hiking in the countryside and winter activities such as skiing and snowboarding.

However access to good food and local specialities has some way to go:

Norwegians, Danes, Germans, Brits, the French and the Dutch had higher expectations concerning good food and local specialities than the visitors experienced. Only the Swedes were pleasantly surprised during their visit, because they had lower expectations prior to visiting.

Our Experience

Norwegians have a very strong sense of place; traditions, pride and cultural heritage are evident in the language used by the businesses' owners and tourism specialists we met, which meant we initially struggled with identifying the local use of the 'sense of place' concept. Unlike the UK tourism market, Norwegian 'sense of place' is in fact inherent in so much of what is said and done; it is not an awkward added layer of complex marketing, or concepts not used nor understood by local businesses, but is integral to the offer. However, it is not necessarily communicated as such.

"The visitor might experience a very localised cultural offer but without the interaction of local people to explain or to interpret that experience."

A major problem in determining the concept from an external (non-Norwegian), perspective is that one encounters what sociologists term as an *ethnomethodological* problem. To understand how local people make sense of their environment and how they regard their 'destination' is based on their own experiences and social order. This can be particularly significant in the early stages of place development and where markets are moving from regional to national or to international and where the local interaction with inbound markets is more limited. It can therefore be difficult from a visitor perspective to understand how the local concept of an apple festival or of a 'fruit culture' translates into a wider experience that can be marketed as part of a vibrant visitor programme. Further problems might also arise where there is under-employment and a reliance on an external workforce to fill tourism or service roles. The visitor might thus experience a very localised cultural offer but without the interaction of local people to explain or to interpret that experience. This might be especially important where food and drink offers are concerned and where local knowledge and understanding of the cultural significance of such products adds to their appeal.

Sense of place and the Telemark region

The relative and historic isolation of the Telemark* region (even though it is only a two hour train journey from Oslo), presents an obstacle to agencies or organisations responsible for promoting the area. The high reliance on domestic tourism currently presents an economic challenge to the regional tourism bodies as it means that they are missing out on the huge growth in international arrivals experienced more widely in northern Europe and more particularly in Norway as reported above. (*Telemark fits within Oslo & Akershus region for the purposes of the 2016 Tourism Survey Innovation Norway.)

Opportunity: Whilst acknowledging the fact that Telemark, and especially the Midt-Telemark region, remains a largely domestic tourism destination and that this is unlikely to change dramatically, the potential for increasing inbound visits from the key markets of Germany, the UK and the low-countries must be something that the tourism agencies need to consider. The drive to increase inbound visits could also be extended to the US market if product and accommodation provision can be improved. Sweden and Denmark, naturally also remain as key markets, but their proximity to and familiarity with Norway make the factors for international promotion somewhat different. Domestic tourism has been growing, be it at a slower rate of 2% pa (based on overnight stays) but because of its overall volume, domestic tourism spend exceeds the value of overseas visitors.

"Food tourism alone in its present form will not be enough to attract new audiences but it can complement the offer very well."

Opportunity: Food tourism alone in its present form will not be enough to attract new audiences but it can be a great complement to the offer especially if linked to the regional strengths of the holiday market. Amongst the key activities suitable for mid-Telemark for domestic visitors and which might link to a food tourism experience are such elements as experiencing culture and ways of life; experiencing traditions and national celebrations; experiencing local history and legends; and experiencing wildlife. Walking and cycling, although key attractors for the region both generate relatively low levels of expenditure with visitors less likely to eat out. Visiting amusement parks (key for the Bo area) results in low direct visitor expenditure beyond the park although there will be numerous indirect benefits through employment and secondary expenditure.

Opportunity: The concept of the Telemark region offering 'Norway in Miniature' or all experience types in one region is an appealing one for helping to increase international visits. Whilst the region may not have the highest mountains or the most spectacular fjords (when compared to the west coast), the landscape is nevertheless outstanding for most visitors. Telemark offers a typical Norway experience with regard to their perceptions of the place and again, the food and drink offer can complement this but it is

important that it doesn't get diluted and can retain a degree of authenticity. We saw many examples where authenticity was key. A real experience, offered by real local people is hard to beat, but it is not something that is easy to develop for a mass market and how the region achieves this combination with a sense of place is a key challenge.

A: Communication of Sense of Place

The lakes, canals, farmsteads, tree-lined peaks and gentle rolling Telemark mountains and valleys are visually distinctive with traditional red, yellow and and white buildings, storage barns and churches, demonstrating a distinctive architectural vernacular.

In their communications, 'tone of voice' tends to be factual, with few nuances that allude to those small details that make a destination distinctive. There are some exceptions however, including this paragraph from the Vest Telemark free information map;

"Welcome to West Telemark, home of the stubborn and independent!

"Telemark was once uncharted territory on the Norwegian map, none of the kings men dared enter this region as rumours told of savage locals who killed priests, bailiffs and other official representatives. So, the local farmers were left in splendid isolation for a century or two, with generated some remarkable side effects: witches were not burned in Telemark." These all hint of a great tradition and culture, including story telling, music, folk art and crafts, but is not accessible, unless you are prepared to dig deep and search.

We have looked specifically at how the provision of information for visitors has contributed to providing a sense of place in the region. All visitors need information - it is in fact the means through which visitors 'buy' the destination product. The sense of place is developed at various points along the visitor journey and specifically:

- At the inspiration stage – encouraging a potential visitor to select a destination based on its unique characteristics and what makes it different from 'home'.
- At the planning stage – when the visitor is selecting where to stay, which attractions to visit, which activities to undertake
- On arrival in the destination – how to get further insights into the local area - for example in identifying where to eat and drink, where to explore, walks and car routes, where to buy local specialities and souvenirs

- Via a visitor's online and traditional 'footprint'. What is said about the destination on social media? What images are uploaded to Instagram and Facebook? What reviews appear on online booking and review sites (such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com)

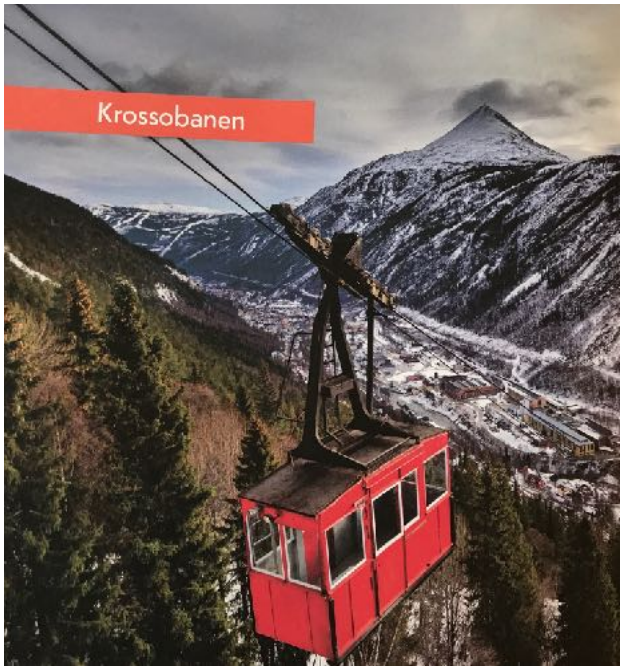
We have included a brief review of online content relating to the destinations visited.

Online information: 'Google' Telemark presents the experiences available in the region including; hiking, cycling, canal trips, local food and drink (festivals). It is focused on seasonal opportunities – for visitors planning a trip in the near future – but also has links for skiing. The information provided is comprehensive with accommodation booking options. The Bo Facebook page is in Norwegian, but this is probably appropriate for local engagement. The MidtTelemark website has strong appealing images and focuses on available experiences and also how to plan a trip including cruise timetable and lists of restaurants adjacent to the canal. A search on TripAdvisor for MidtTelemark leads to a couple of reviews of Bo Tourist Information Centre. **There is an opportunity to 'claim' this listing to help visitors with their travel choices.**

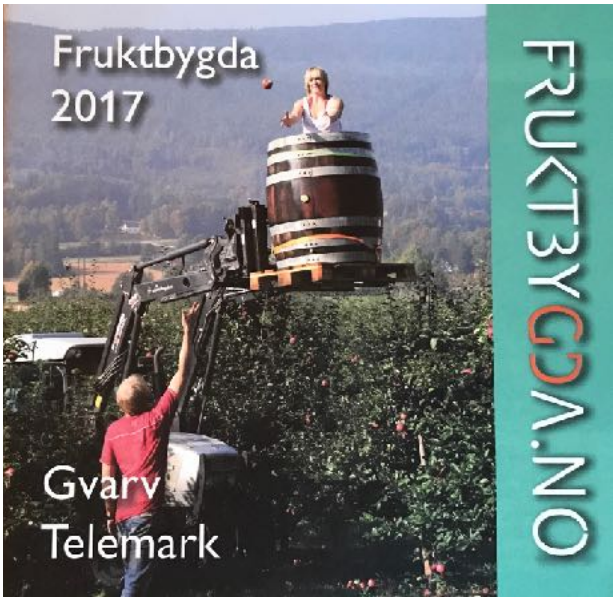
Printed information and interpretation within the destinations: At Beveroya Cabins there was a limited range of printed material – all in Norwegian - but not the Telemark map and guide which would be most useful for guests. There was no information in the cabins for visitors to browse to enhance the sense of place; which could encourage further exploration, repeat visits or increased spend in the area. The Telemark map and guide leaflet was available at the Bo Hotel in the reception area. It provides a very useful map and list of places to visit and accommodation and restaurant lists – and suggested 7 day and 14 day itineraries. This was not on display at the Norsjo Hotel and on requesting a map of the immediate area at the hotel reception desk (for a walk or run) only the Fruktbygda brochure was offered. Close to the hotel are signs for 'Visitor Information' and on following these there is some limited (damaged) interpretation next to the lake.

The main Telemark Brochure (Thousand Opportunities) and Bo, Nome og Sauherad (Summer guide) were provided by the tourism representatives to our group, but were not visible in other locations apart from the TIC at Oslo. The Fruktbygda 2017 brochure provides a very useful compendium of available experiences in the area on the fruit theme – together with a useful map. This is a useful tool for exploring the area and combining different experiences. Mainly in Norwegian, it contains some English sections. This was distributed by those partners featured in the guide.

The Hardangervidda National Park Centre was a very good example of providing information via maps and leaflets that would enable visitors to enjoy their time and take away ideas for walks and activities for future visits. A range of leaflets suggested walks of different distances with themes and insights into points of interest. The interpretation available was an excellent example of telling the natural and human stories of the area and provided a very strong sense of being in a very special place.



Similarly at the top of the **Krossobanen** there was a good range of leaflets on walks and activities available from the summit, together with good information on times of local buses for combining with walks. There were also good maps and interpretative displays, explaining the story of the sun mirror for example. At Evju Bygdetun we were given a leaflet explaining more about each building and the crafts and knife collections on display – but this did not act as a strong 'souvenir' of the experience of the day for reminding or passing on. The information contained in the **Fruktbygda** leaflet was more inspirational and could help share memories. The individuals hosting our visit were an outstanding example of creating sense of place with their dress, storytelling and welcome.



Ulefoss had several good examples of information provision that added to the sense of place via interpretation and practical information on opportunities for activities in the area (hiking, biking and skiing) and the Beaver trail. The tour guide was adept at telling the stories of the area and the town and creating a strong sense of place. In the heritage village there was very good interpretation on each building, including some QR codes.

<u>Opportunities</u>

- Linkages between hotels and experiences were not evident – for example a weekend package or welcome pack of information available to guests. [If Norway is outside the European Package Travel Directive, this could be a USP to offer over EU rivals.]
- Destination knowledge by hospitality staff helps spread visits, spend and seasonality.
- Information on local songs and music did not appear to be available for visitors.
- Postcards were rarely available – and these can provide inspiration on other places to visit in the area as well as souvenirs and word of mouth recommendations.

- Information on the culinary experiences we enjoyed was scarce in most locations with the notable exceptions of Evju Bygdetun and Spiseriet Ovre Verket – where insights into food were provided directly by our hosts.
- The Rough Guide to Norway makes reference to Telemark in the context of Central Norway whilst Bo is not mentioned.
- Review sites such as TripAdvisor provide opportunities to 'own' destination pages and thus provide images and content to ensure accuracy and inspiration

B: Produce and Industry

If, as they say, there is no love sincerer then the love of food then it is perhaps fair to say there is no sincerer expression of cultural identity than that expressed through food.

"For many in the UK, due to a changing demographic and urban lifestyles, the food tradition handed down through the generations has largely been lost."

For many in the UK, due to a changing demographic and urban lifestyles, the food tradition handed down through the generations has largely been lost. But increasingly, consumers are seeking to regain lost skills, traditions and a way of life that does not involve a multinational supermarket chain!

Champion traditional cuisine: Authenticity and quality are the two main elements of determining a positive impression when visiting an area or embedding a recognised tradition with residents. Whilst traditional recipes maybe commonplace, being prepared using local ingredients will give the authenticity which resonates with visitors and residents alike.

Our experiences in the Telemark region have demonstrated that there are many local products (apples, plums, cherries, honey, trout, dairy products, flour and game, amongst others), and these are available as ingredients as well as in traditional recipes. A largely rural population appears to have passed on recipes and skills through generations and there is an appreciation of these amongst some of the population. There is the possibility that they may not recognise the importance that the food and drink has on the visitors' experience or that these foods and recipes are what make an area unique.

There is therefore, a great opportunity to signpost the best of the region as we saw it done in a very slick way, off-site, at the Oslo Food Market alongside plenty of opportunities to indulge in food gifting, which every food tourist loves. There is enormous potential to celebrate and signpost traditional food within Telemark. We have been in hotels and more casual restaurants that may not deal exclusively in traditional Norwegian food but may feature certain traditional dishes on a menu (the traditional soup we sampled at Rjuken, Tjukklefse at Hardangervidda).

Opportunities:

There is a resurgence in authentic, locally sourced products and some customer segments recognise the importance of heritage in food and drink and are valuing these products by not putting the cost as the primary determining factor. There is the opportunity to use food and drink to create positive, unique visitor experience.

- Recognise the appeal of traditional cuisine and consider options to increase the offering
- Identify regional cuisine with a menu mark, or flag for example. This easily understood signposting does not require any marketing spend.
- Train staff (who may not themselves be Norwegian) to know something of the cultural history of food and the traditional dishes.
- Ensure a good level of English language food vocabulary so questions can be answered and information shared
- Visitors who are interested in food, love to try and cook the dishes they have eaten whilst on holiday. Extend the experience and build their loyalty by sharing English language recipes, including online.

"What seems like second nature to a Norwegian, is not necessarily so for visitors and holds massive appeal to visiting foodies."

Celebrate natural produce and wild food: Telemark is a diverse region of over 15,000km2 and running from sea level to nearly 2,000m and the variety in produce is similarly varied: fish and seafood from the coast; through the historic fruit county of Gvarv and the meats and wild produce in higher areas. In an incredibly short amount of time, we identified a mass of wild food at Stunet and were presented with a beautifully prepared tasting at Hardangervidda National Park of trout roe and cloudberries. We have come to appreciate that there is an abundant wild food larder and using it is an authentic lifestyle tradition in Norway which is further being kept alive as part of the school curriculum. What seems like second nature to a Norwegian, is not necessarily so for visitors and holds massive appeal to visiting foodies.

Several farms have diversified in order to survive a declining local market for produce. This decline is mainly understood to be due to the increasingly exacting standard imposed by supermarkets for uniform and perfect produce. The juice production has therefore increased and has offered a valuable asset to the area.

Whilst the September 'Eplefest' is primarily a local celebration of the apple harvest, it has the potential to become more than this. It has several essential elements already and with stronger emphasis on local products, this event could attract visitors from further afield. Currently, the location isn't very conducive to a family day out and has little in terms of emphasising the areas apple growing heritage.

Opportunities:

- Re-locate festivals to areas that have a greater aesthetic appeal for visitors (such as the river park at Gvarv
- Highlight the best of regional produce with a food map that shows itineraries of varying distances and duration; Fish/foraged food/game/beer and cider
- Signpost on menus when local produce is used and if possible, who has produced it.
- Everyone likes to take a break from their physical activity, so incorporate food trails that supplement existing activity routes by signposting food options en route
- One major obstacle for Telemark to become a food destination is that the summer season is relatively short. There is, however an opportunity for the summer visitor to be exposed to a greater range of traditional recipes and produce with more appreciation by the local residents of their authentic food and drink experiences which would enhance the visitors experience and endorse a 'Sense of Place'.
- There are several successful UK Apple Festivals which could be a useful template for 'Eplefest' to build on including;
  - National Apple Festival
  - English Heritage
  - Beningbrough Apple Celebration Week
  - An example of a typical English apple fayre

Celebrate tradition: Evju Bygdetun is the most brilliant example of a living museum. Utterly rooted in the food and agricultural traditions of the region, and brought to life by the extraordinary talent and personal history of our host. It is hard to imagine a more authentic sense of place, celebrated through food, culture and music and made into a unique visitor experience.

Opportunities:

- Provide souvenir recipes
- Offer opportunities for individuals/smaller groups and families.
- Improve English language content on website
- An example of food heritage workshop for those wanting to explore new approaches, draw new audiences and infuse new meanings into their interpretation projects.

Celebrate contemporary models and diversification: If, at Evju Bygdetun, we saw the perfect example of a living museum, then Lindheim microbrewery might be the perfect example of a contemporary food and drink success story. A newly created business, grown out of a family farm dating back generations within a region where large scale apple farms are struggling. Our host gave a thoroughly engaging and fascinating insight into the history of the farm and how she and her husband have diversified from (on its own) unprofitable fruit farming, into establishing a thriving micro brewery. She says they don't engage in marketing but the branding is exquisite (labels drawn by their 3 year old daughter, or derived from the traditional labels of the old style apple crates, with others inspired by family members), is clear, clever, stylish and effective.

This premium product rises above the craft beer frenzy with a sense of authenticity and knowledge you are convinced will see it continue to grow and become ever more established.

Opportunities

- Share business successes with local and regional industry as examples of best practice

C: The Contribution of Culture

The longer you spend in Telemark the more a strong and unique sense of culture emerges. It has to be searched for however, and relies on the (potential) visitor digging and taking the initiative. We put a deep and meaningful question to Ingrid Hamberg as we asked her what it means to 'be Norwegian'. **Link to YouTube video**

A UK google search for Telemark brings up hundreds of skiing images which chimes with how Visit Telemark promotes the outdoor activity offer above all else, with strong imagery featuring families and young people enjoying the outdoors. The home page features a mountain safety video: important, but hardly inspiring. 'History and heritage' has a page with the introduction 'Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations' which is a statement that could apply to anywhere. It would be easy here to feature some unique imagery of the special buildings, food or legends, and to introduce stories that influence life today. The website currently does a great job of attracting people excited by outdoor activities, wanting to experience a unique culture isn't mutually exclusive from this and could encourage people to choose Telemark over other areas also boasting impressive landscapes.

"'Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations': is a statement that could apply to anywhere."

The Vest-Telemark brochure does better. There is a start at articulating what it means to be from here: 'Welcome to Vest Telemark. "Home of the stubborn and Independent!'. Imagery includes food and Telemark cattle as well as outdoor shots. The brochure hints at a unique culture that impacts on today stating that 'songs, music and stories had been passed from parents to children and so had methods for building, hunting and fishing'. It also states that the 'people are friendly, welcoming and modern, but take pride in their cultural heritage.

The opportunity: to not make the visitor work to find this information. The experience of being welcomed by Jorid at Evju Bygdetun was a perfect example of how to get it right: traditional culture explained and demonstrated. **We strongly recommended a cookbook be published including amongst others, Jorid's traditional recipes.** The hotels we stayed in missed many opportunities to tell local stories and even when we were served Norwegian foods there was little explanation of their provenance or history. It doesn't have to always be demonstrations of how things have remained constant over time. Ingeborg and her family at Lindheim Olkompani has used inspiration from their ancestors and the traditional industry of the area to create products and experiences that are new and exciting and in demand around the world.

"A destination should not be afraid to speak using a local voice."

A very clear sense of pride in the unique stories of this area can be found if you dig a little deeper or are lucky enough to meet people like Jorid or Ingeborg. The challenge for those tasked with presenting Telemark to outsiders is to create a brand that defines and communicates this uniqueness in a way that encourages all tourism businesses to pass on their own pride by telling their own stories. This isn't an easy task. A destination management plan helps by rallying partners towards a common goal and providing inspiration. Of course a destination should also not be afraid to speak using a local voice. This is done well by destinations such as The Lake District, where stunning imagery is complemented by an explanation of the areas 'key themes' in the Englands Lake District and Australia. They use imagery to demonstrate the breadth of experiences available including aquatic and coastal experiences, unique nature and wildlife and food and wine. The tone is informal and videos include locals' recommendations.

The Forest of Bowland, an English 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' has developed a 'sense of place' toolkit for their businesses, to help them articulate and communicate the special features of the area, which many smaller destinations could find useful.

Opportunities:

- Let unique aspects of Telemark culture come through in marketing to complement the information about outdoor activities
- Convey the sense of pride that is obvious from individuals
- Consider developing a 'sense of place toolkit' for partner businesses.

SWOC Analysis for Telemark as identified by 'Sense of Place' Working Group

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Challenges
Undiscovered Cultural Heritage Varied landscape National park Outdoor activities Good access Languages spoken Food and produce University Safe destination Canal and cycling Air transport Visitor welcome Wifi & digital speeds	Lack of interpretation and visitor information Under-investment in accommodation Pricing and availability of alcohol Branding Public transport Seasonality	Food and Drink Climate Change Visiting Friends & Relatives Seasonal activities Events and festivals Heritage and culture Interpretation Visitor information	Multilingual tourist guides Delivery customer experience Capacity - can they cope with increased numbers? Developing the F&D sector to cater for the visitor economy (Digital) marketing vs the actual visitor experience

Summary

The Telemark region faces similar challenges to many inland rural destinations; its product is dispersed and with one or two exceptions, small scale in nature. Telemark is a beautiful and diverse region but it has to compete with other Norwegian destinations that are more accessible and often more dramatic in terms of physical geography. What it can offer and where it can excel is in presenting international visitors with a totally authentic 'Norwegian' experience based on its landscape, heritage and its home-produced food and drink offer. For domestic visitors, it has a strong regional identity providing a truly rural experience for city dwellers, well connected by road, rail and canal from major urban settlements and offering an insight into how life for many Norwegians used to be. The product based on food trails, exploring coast-to-mountain and discovering the past can be complementary to both markets.

The boom in Norwegian tourism can help sustain rural communities and presents many routes to new markets. For local agricultural producers there is an opportunity for them to diversify and to generate secondary sources of income from secondary products. We saw how the greater pressure for apple 'conformity' has created a new opportunity for juicing;

how use of redundant agricultural buildings can provide space for new industries such as brewing or even story-telling; how farmers can attract passing trade by selling apple products from jams and preserves to skincare products, and how interpretation of industrial and domestic heritage can be linked to other travel itineraries bringing visitors to a former industrial habitation.

Like many developing destinations or places that are undergoing a redefinition, the product is often immature and in need of professionalising. At the same time, Telemark needs to recognise that whilst elements of what they are providing to the visitor may be under-developed, they can also be appealing for that very reason and add the much needed air of authenticity. Being a little 'rough at the edges' with such agricultural outputs not being mass-produced or homogenised, means that they feel real and unique and become part of the overall visitor experience and satisfaction.

With high salaries and a shortage of local workers, it might be problematic for Telemark's visitor economy to be able to impart the necessary human element - the story telling, the interpretation through experience, the unique local knowledge and personal heritage that visitors crave but the human factor is critical in defining a true sense of place. Some of the best experiences enjoyed by us, did not involve highly expensive or technical exhibitions - it was about real people - real Telemark people speaking to us and relating to us. This is something that can be achieved in a rural area and which can sustain local employment because it is about local people. If there is a need to also introduce typical Norwegian themes - trolls and folk lore for example, that can all act as a supplement, but in Telemark it is principally about telling the story of the place.

Team Profiles

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