

THE LEGACY OF

SETRE

Norway's mountain farms
are ingrained into the culture and
changing with the times.

BY CARTER G. WALKER

As a lifelong farmer and a strong believer in the value of grazing his animals in the mountains far above his valley farm, Kai Valbjør manages to honor the past while preparing for a decidedly different future. His

seter, or mountain farm, was established in the 1600s and has been in his family ever since. He uses the seter from June through September in order to graze and milk his goats. Sixty-two kilometers from his farm in Vågå, the seter is just an hour



OPPOSITE PAGE: *"Budeier"* (milkmaids) and goats at Herdalssetra in Norddal, Norway, in 1924. **THIS PAGE:** A mix of modern and historic life on the seter.

away by car these days. In the old days, he says, it was two days' walk.

Valbjør is a traditional farmer with very modern ideas. "I know that grazing animals in the pasture has to do with biodiversity, which becomes more and more important to care about," he says. "I also know that the pasture in Norway is a huge resource in food production. We run our farm organically, and I think this will be of greater value in the future."

Valbjør can be sentimental too, when he tells of his life on the seter. "I think the best part about running a seter is the way of life for both the people and the animals," he says. "We all calm down when we come to the seter."

Cultural Roots

Setre traditionally consist of summer pasture, rustic living quarters and animal barns. They've been an integral part of Norwegian agriculture as far back as the seventh century, according to information based on archaeological finds. Laws pertaining to summer farming were on the books (*Gulatingslova*, or Old Norwegian law) as early as the 12th century. In fact, farmers who did not take their animals to summer pasture were liable to face charges of "grass robbery."

As Norway's population grew, so too did the agricultural demands on the land. More people meant more animals, and more animals needed more land on which to graze. Since the arable land around the lowland farms was being used to grow crops for the swelling population, the farmers took their animals to high mountain pastures that could not be otherwise cultivated or harvested.

Most farms had a seter that could be reached within a few days' walk. Typically, the farmer's family would stay on

the seter all summer to tend and milk the grazing animals. Often two-thirds of a cow's annual production occurred during the summer; so preparing food for winter storage and consumption was important work. Setre were critical to the farmers' productivity, but they proved to have meaningful cultural ramifications as well.

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"Setre or stølen have always had a strong and positive position in Norwegian society," says Jostein Sande, a farmer, historian and the former chairman of Norsk Seterkultur, an organization dedicated to preserving the heritage and securing the future of setre. They provided "the first real job for nearly all women born and raised in rural areas — and also in many towns and cities until 1945," explains Sande. They gave roots to Norwegian outdoor recreation; they gave rise to a timeless architectural style, and they certainly inspired some extraordinary music and theater. Think Edvard Grieg, Ole Bull and Henrik Ibsen.

"This is our national romance," seconds Stein Brubæk, himself a farmer, specialty dairy producer and the chairman of the board of Norsk Seterkultur.

From Agriculture to Industry

Setre hit their stride just as the Norwegian population peaked in the mid-1800s. According to Sande, there were as many as 150,000 setre nationwide in 1875. With a decline in population, due in part to emigration and, more importantly, a push toward more efficient dairy production, the use of setre

waned. By 1939, there were roughly 27,000 working setre. Reflecting a national trend away from small, family-run farms, by 2006, the number of setre in operation had dwindled to a mere 1,150, plus 200 that were operated cooperatively.

The reasons for the movement away from the setre are plentiful, according to Brubæk and Sande. Economy is first and foremost. As Norway moved from an agricultural society to a more industrialized one, efficiency was paramount. Transporting milk from high mountain setre to centralized dairy factories was impractical, as most setre were not accessible by vehicle.

In addition, emphasis on creating a modern, efficient cow led to animals unfit for the Norwegian wilderness. Starting in the early 20th century, cows were bred to produce more milk, explains Brubæk. As such, their udders grew continuously, making it impossible for the animals to navigate the overgrown mountainous terrain. Additionally, says Brubæk, it became cheaper to import grain for animals on the lowland farms than to graze them in the mountains.

A way of life, and a cornerstone of Norwegian culture, seemed poised on the brink of extinction.

The Eco-Future is Bright

As the rest of the world moved forward with the "bigger is better" approach to farming, some Norwegians began to reconsider. "During the last 10 years,



SEE FOR YOURSELF

The setre across Norway are as diverse as the locales in which they are rooted, and as unique as the dialect words used to name them: seter, sæter, setra, stølen. A visit to a seter is a wonderful way to visit the past and celebrate the future of Norway. For a list of setre across Norway that welcome visitors throughout the summer, visit www.seterkultur.no and click on "Til Seters." Here are two of our favorites:

Herdalssetra Mountain Summer Farm

Located amid a World Heritage Site in the West Norwegian Fjords, Herdalssetra (at left) is a summer farm that has been operating continuously for 300 years. There are goats, cows, sheep and fjord horses on the farm, along with 30 buildings where you can taste locally made delicacies like brown cheese and goat's milk caramels. Sumptuously fresh meals and comfortable accommodations are available. www.herdalssetra.no; +47-70-25-91-08

Selstali Seter

At the foot of southern Norway's highest mountain, Gaustatoppen, is Selstali Seter, a traditional and beautiful mountain farm. Two recreational cabins are available for rent where, without power, you can enjoy candlelit dinners, evenings by the fire and an array of fresh dairy products and delicious traditional foods. With 10 to 12 cows, two piglets and two sheep, the farm is indeed small and quaint, but lovely enough that King Harald V and Queen Sonja have visited! www.selstali.com; +47-90-75-11-16



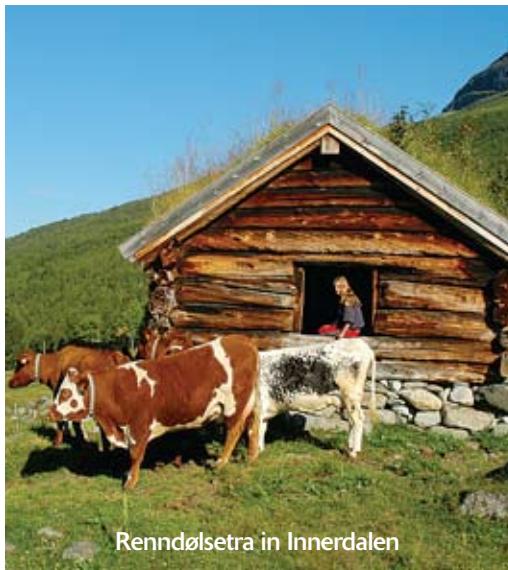
we have seen that this development toward more efficient farming has not given us the answer we need to lack of income," explains Brubæk. Small, family-operated farms have always been the backbone of Norwegian agriculture. The average dairy farm in Norway today has just under 20 cows. In the 1980s, that number hovered at eight to 10 cows.

In 1999, Norsk Seterkultur was founded with a host of goals toward protecting and promoting setre, along with the concept of valuing quality over quantity. Small, independent farmers needed new ways of producing, Brubæk explained. According to Brubæk, the three main types of seter owners today are traditional milk producers; small, specialty manufacturers of cheese, butter and cream; and those who utilize their seter as tourist destinations. Often the three are combined in an effort to maximize income. Those that are no longer used agriculturally and are not hopelessly dilapidated are often rented out as recreational cabins.

"Some farmers started summer farming — setring — again because they believe in it as a part of a long-term sustainable farming," says Sande. He goes on to explain the focus on local food, the trend toward organic farming, and even the "slow food"

movement, which espouses high-quality food that is environmentally sustainable and socially just.

As oil prices continue to rise and global food production slows, the importance of local resources becomes obvious. "I'm very optimistic about



the future," he says. Both for Norway, with its guaranteed production of high-quality food, and for setre, which are enjoying something of a renaissance among farmers and tourists alike. "Most people want to support summer farming," says Brubæk.

The experience of being on a seter lends itself perfectly to tourists, both Norwegian and international,

agree Sande and Brubæk. "Tourists want to taste, to see, to smell, to touch," says Brubæk. "They want to take part in what is real. And summer farms can give them that experience," he says.

Sande's seter, Herdalssetra (see box), has been in operation for some 300 years. Amid spectacular mountains and plunging waterfalls, he and his wife raise and milk their 130 goats and manufacture several types of cheese and other dairy products, all while welcoming tourists from around the world on a daily basis. It is clear that he loves what he does, and a lifetime of summers at the seter have given Sande perspective, looking backward and forward, about the role of setre in Norwegian culture. "With its long traditions, setre have a future ... and there are many positive things happening," he says.

For now, at least, there is value in these places and this way of life. Grounded in the past, Norwegian setre seem braced for the future. □

Carter G. Walker is the managing editor of Western Art & Architecture and a frequent contributor to Viking. Six years ago, she got engaged at a seter in Grimsdalen above the Gudbrandsdal Valley. She and her husband have dreams of raising their two daughters on a farm with a seter.