

NORWAY'S ENCHANTING

With Art Nouveau architecture, glorious nature and endless attractions, Ålesund emerges as a new favorite destination.

CITY



BY CARTER G. WALKER

In the early morning hours of Jan. 23, 1904, as hurricane-force gales battered the coastal city of Ålesund, a fire in a local factory spilled onto the streets and, over the course of the next 16 hours, devoured 850 of Ålesund's 1,080 buildings, and left some 10,000 people homeless. An important fishing port, and the *klippfisk* (dried cod) capital of Norway from 1750 onward, Ålesund turned the blaze from a crippling blow to a boon.

Within three years of the fire, a sizable group of young, patriotic architects in Norway—inspired by their country's independence from Sweden in 1905 and their shared desire to create identifiably Norwegian architecture—had built more than 600 buildings in ornate Art Nouveau style. Constructed of stone, rather than traditional Norwegian wood, and incorporating the architectural ornamentation associated with the style that was sweeping through

Europe around the turn of the 20th century, the rebuilt city of Ålesund flourished and became a symbol for Norway's unique blend of nationalistic pride and international flair.

Today, Ålesund is a member of Europe's "Reseau Art Nouveau Network"—alongside Copenhagen, Barcelona and Riga—which celebrates the architectural style and encourages its preservation. Its architecture—colorful, elegant, even fairytale-like—is but one of

the elements that make Ålesund such a charming city and increasingly popular with tourists.

Geographically blessed

Known as the gateway to the fjords, Ålesund spreads from the mainland to several islands that stretch into the North Sea on Norway's west coast. The Sunnmøre Alps soar skyward around the city, providing unrivaled scenery. Ålesund is at once a coastal town and a mountain town, offering all

manner of adventures. Renowned destinations including Geirangerfjord, Hjørundfjord, Trollstigen, the Atlantic Road and the island of Runde, a bird-watcher's paradise, are within a few hours' drive—or boat trip—from Ålesund.

To get a sense of the remarkable geography and an unparalleled overview of the city, a walk up the 418 steps of Mt. Aksla—or a train ride to the summit—is an excellent place to start any visit to Ålesund. The

winding staircase leaves from the Town Park, which is a lovely place for a picnic. Or save your appetite: The café at the top, Fjellstua, offers cakes and coffee, sandwiches and the well-worth-the-hike Norwegian soft ice cream with sprinkles. The view from the top will make it perfectly clear to visitors why Ålesund has twice been voted the most beautiful city in Norway, by the Norwegian people in 2007 and by Britain's *The Times* in 2009.

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Cultural treasures

A walk through Ålesund's quaint streets will lead visitors to a number of worthwhile museums. One of the oldest and

most interesting is the Fisheries Museum, built in 1861, and one of the few buildings that survived the 1904 inferno. Set on the water at the opening of Brosundet, Ålesund's picturesque harbor, the museum explores the city's role as one of Norway's most important fishing ports. Daring visitors can taste the town's well-known cod liver oil. Just a few minutes' walk away, another museum celebrating the town's colorful history is the Aalesunds

Museum, where artifacts, photos, paintings, and even a model of the city from 1898 reveal fascinating stories, from the fire to the fierce resistance during WWII that earned Ålesund the nickname "Little London."

Among Ålesund's newest and most popular attractions is the Atlantic Sea-Park, one of northern Europe's largest saltwater aquariums, beautifully built into its rocky coastal setting, just three kilometers west of the city center. Opened in 1998 by King Harald and Queen Sonja, the aquarium features massive indoor tanks, an interactive area where visitors can pet a starfish or fish for crabs, and an outdoor area with penguin feeding demonstrations—complete with a trainer in a tuxedo. With winding hiking trails, fishing stands and swimming spots, the area around the aquarium is an ideal place to enjoy the scenic shoreline.

Ålesund's Art Nouveau buildings are decorated with colorful ornamental details, towers and turrets.

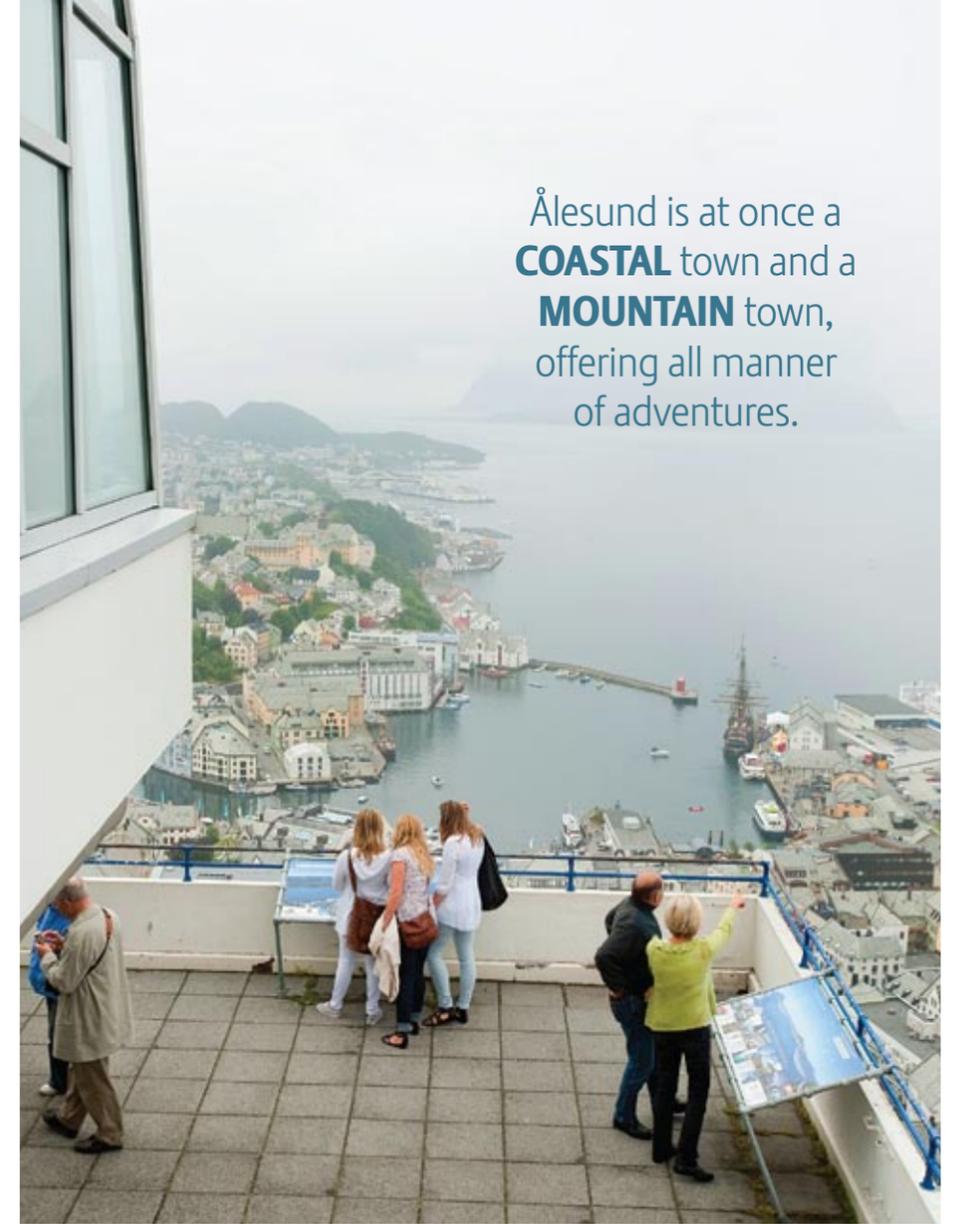


If ambling along Ålesund's streets isn't enough for architecture buffs, the Art Nouveau Center, housed in a magnificent old pharmacy, has three floors of exhibits devoted to the style which is known in Norway by its German name, *Jugendstil*. From jewelry to advertising, the center pays homage to Art Nouveau throughout Norway.

Just four kilometers east of the town center is the old trading community of Borgund-kaupangen, and a cluster of at-

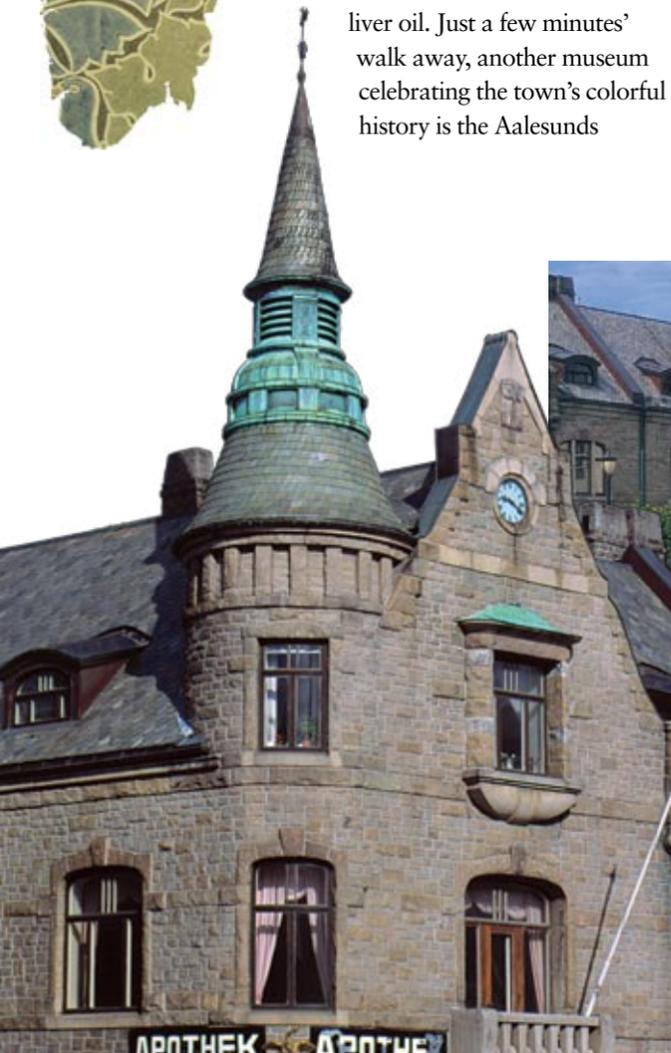
tractions that predate Ålesund's defining fire. The Sunnmøre Museum is an open-air museum with more than 50 restored houses, as well as an impressive collection of boats, including Viking ship replicas. Wednesdays during summer are an excellent time to visit, as numerous seasonal activities are offered. But the pastoral setting makes the area a wonderful place to wander anytime. Nearby, The Medieval Age Museum dates back even further, and showcases archeological excavation sites and the myriad artifacts that reveal a way of life more than 1,000 years old. Finally, don't miss the Romanesque Borgund Church and its intricate carvings. Although it was largely rebuilt after the 1904 fire, parts of the church—including a marvelous stone altar—were built in the 12th century.

(TOP) ROGER ENGWIK/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE (LEFT) TERJE RAKKE/NORDIC LIFE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE/FJORD NORWAY (BOTTOM RIGHT) ALFRED LUPHE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE (TOP) TERJE BORUD/WWW.VISITNORWAY.COM (LEFT) TERJE RAKKE/NORDIC LIFE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE/FJORD NORWAY (BOTTOM RIGHT) ALFRED LUPHE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE/FJORD NORWAY



Ålesund is at once a **COASTAL** town and a **MOUNTAIN** town, offering all manner of adventures.

ÅLESUND



Left: Ålesund's National Art Nouveau Centre, located in the old Svan Pharmacy. Above: Pharmacy Square.



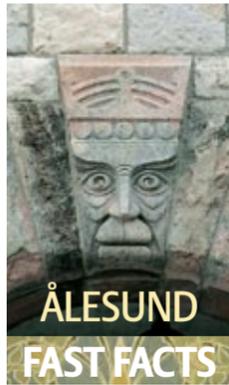
GETTING THERE



Despite its setting, Ålesund is quite easy to reach by air, land or sea. From the Ålesund Airport, Vigra, non-stop service is available daily to major

Norwegian cities as well as London and Copenhagen. By car, the network of bridges and subsea tunnels make driving in and out of town a great option. Norway's largest transport company, Nettbuss Møre AS, offers regular bus service in and out of Ålesund. The train comes as close as Åndalsnes, where there is connecting bus service (2.5 hours) to Ålesund. The Hurtigruten ferry also makes daily stops in Ålesund year-round. For more information, visit the city's official travel guide at visitaalesund-geiranger.com.

Englandsfarten monument in Ålesund's Skateflua peace park commemorates Norwegians' flight to Great Britain during WWII.



ÅLESUND FAST FACTS

County:
Møre og Romsdal

Area:
98.4 square
kilometers

Population:
43,700, making it
the largest city
between Bergen
and Trondheim

Growth rate:
1.2 percent annually

Cruise passengers
expected to visit
Ålesund in summer
2012: 150,000

Nearby attractions

Connected to Ålesund by one of its notable undersea tunnels are other small island communities that make fantastic outings, for the history, culture and coastal scenery. Giske, also known as “Little Denmark” for its flat-as-a-pancake topography, is a farming community with a significant history. Not only is it home to the first church in the area—the marble Giske Church dates back to 1150 and was built for one of Norway’s most powerful families—but the island also is considered to be the birthplace of the Viking Rollo, who conquered Normandy in 911 and was

the great-great-great grandfather of William the Conqueror, making him an ancestor to the modern day royal family in Great Britain. Clearly a seat of power during Viking times, Giske also houses an ancient burial mound

that dates back to the Bronze Age. Locals celebrate the island’s history in grand style, in odd-numbered years, with festivals and dramatic reenactments in a seaside, grass-covered amphitheatre.

Just one tunnel from Giske is the island of Godøy and the quaint fishing village of Alnes. The iconic red-and-white-striped lighthouse was built in 1876 and welcomes visitors to the galley and tower from May through October. A café in the old keeper’s house, as well as art exhibitions and a small historical museum, appeal to tourists. But the view from the top is reason enough to make the trip.

Food and lodging

If all of the exploration—or the fresh sea air—leaves travelers hungry and tired, the options for world-class food and comfortable, inventive lodging in Ålesund will not disappoint. One of Norway’s best-loved seafood restaurants is Sjøbua, tucked wharfside in a restored warehouse. Opened in 1986 by well-known restaurateur Ove Fjørtoft, Sjøbua serves fresh, simple and divine seafood in an elegant setting. The menu changes regularly to take advantage of the sea’s daily offerings, and although this will likely be the best baked lobster soup or fresh catch dinner you have ever tasted, the prices make Sjøbua a special occasion restaurant for most visitors.

For a more budget conscious but still supremely satisfying meal, head down to the wharf and buy boiled shrimp—just caught—from the string of fishing boats. A loaf of bread from a nearby grocery store and perhaps some Norwegian mayonnaise will put the finishing touches on this truly local and utterly delicious meal.

After filling your belly, it’s time to hang your hat. In addition to the standard and excellent chain hotels including Rica, Scandic, Clarion, Quality and Radisson Blu, there are a handful of boutique hotels that should not be overlooked. One such option is the waterfront Hotel Brosundet, an absolute gem. The building was a fish

warehouse 100 years ago, but it was artfully renovated by Norway’s prominent Snøhetta architectural firm in 2007. Intimate and sleek, the hotel has 47 rooms overlooking the water, many with operable floor-to-ceiling windows, a cozy lounge and an excellent restaurant. Breakfast lovers will delight in the gourmet buffet. And the hotel’s location on a quiet street in the center of town cannot be beat.

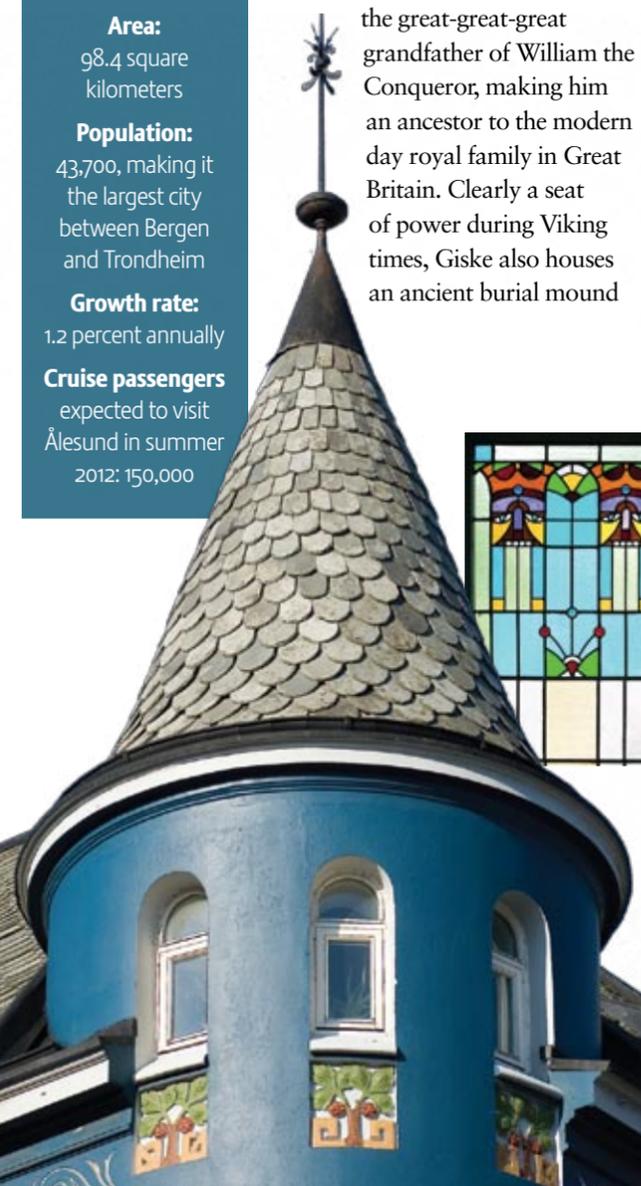
From its storied past and exquisite architecture to its abundant attractions and sublime natural setting, Ålesund is indeed an enchanting city. ☺

A CLEAN WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

For those who want more than just a room for the night, Ålesund offers some of the most unique accommodations in Norway. Room 47 of the Hotel Brosundet, for starters, is actually a 150-year-old converted lighthouse at the entrance to Brosundet. Only three meters in diameter, the accommodations are cozy, private and entirely unforgettable. brosundet.no.



Even more dramatic—and quite a bit more spacious with sleeping accommodations for 11—is Svinøy Lighthouse, on its own island which is accessible only by helicopter. Because of the storms and currents around this wild, rocky isle, visitors will marvel at how this beautiful structure was built and manned for 100 years, until 2005. A chef provides all of the meals for what is bound to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. 62nord.net.



(TOP) ALFRED LUPKE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE (BOTTOM MIDDLE) ALFRED LUPKE/DESTINATION ÅLESUND & SUNNMØRE (BOTTOM RIGHT) TERJE BORJUD/WWW.VISITNORWAY.COM



TERJE BORJUD/WWW.VISITNORWAY.COM

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF (TOP) HOTEL BROSUNDET (MIDDLE/BOTTOM) WWW.62NORD.NET

