



NORWAY

Norway's Fjords

Royal Luxury at the Geirangerfjord

An Interview with **Kristian B. Jørgensen**,
Managing Director, Fjord Norway Tourist Board

An Interview with
Sindre Mjelva, Managing Director, Hotel Union



Kristian B. Jørgensen

EDITORS' NOTE Before working with Fjord Norway, Kristian Jørgensen was responsible for marketing Norway to international customers since 1992. For three years, he worked with the Norwegian Tourist Board putting together large international marketing campaigns; from 1997 to 2000 he was Director of Marketing for the organization that planned and carried out the European Capital of Culture Year 2000 in Bergen; and, for three years, he was CEO for the Historic Hotels and Restaurants of Norway. In addition, he served as Vice President for the Historic Hotels of Europe.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF In 2004, The National Geographic Traveler's panel of specialists rated Fjord Norway (fjordnorway.com) the world's most attractive, unspoiled travel destination. In 2005, UNESCO included the fjords of Norway, exemplified by two of them – Geirangerfjord and Nærøysfjord – on its World Heritage List. Soon after, in 2006, The National Geographic Traveler's panel of specialists rated Fjord Norway the best cared for UNESCO World Heritage Site in the world. Today, the region is positioning itself as one of the new and most spectacular adventure destinations in the world, offering a year-round range of everything from the most extreme adventure products you can find to soft adventure products with the fjord landscape as a backdrop. The Fjord Norway Tourist Board has been nominated the best destination marketing company in Europe and has seen a 25 percent growth of tourism over the past four years.

How did the fjords come to be?

Fjords were created by glaciers cutting into mountains. Before it was a flat piece of mountain sticking out into the ocean, and glaciers cut into it and formed these deep waterways, where basically seawater pours into the country. It runs into the mountains on the other side.

Are all fjords pretty much the same or do they differ?

Lysefjord is dramatic – it is rough and tough; Hardanger is a beautiful place where people live, but it's not as dramatic; Sognefjord is the longest in the world; and we have the famous Geirangerfjord, which is an UNESCO fjord. It has waterfalls splashing into the water, steep mountains rising up, and a lush green color.

You have a wonderful story about a Norwegian named Ole Bull, who discovered Grieg and Ibsen. Did these things happen in Bergen?

Absolutely. He was the Michael Jackson of the 1800s – a really good violin player; he traveled around the world and played for czars and presidents. He played his Stradivarius violin.

He found Edvard Grieg as a small boy and paid for his tuition to study in Leipzig. He built the free national theater in Bergen with his own money. The first director he found there was Henrik Ibsen, and he wrote his first theater play in Bergen.

This was a guy who found talent and also put his footprint, not just on Bergen, but on all of Norway, including on the fjord landscape.

What seasons are the best for visiting the fjords?

In May, the colors are lush green, waterfalls are splashing because the snow is melting, and the colors are amazing. In summertime, you get light going up until 12 or 1 in the evening so it's amazing being out. In the fall, the whole countryside turns into fire as the leaves turn. I love winter because it is more quiet, but also the light changes and it's a great time to see the fjords. ●



Sindre Mjelva

EDITORS' NOTE Sindre Mjelva has held his current post since 2001. Prior to this, he was the Managing Director for Rica Hotels from August 1996 and served as an accounting advisor for KPMG Norway from August 1994. He was educated at the École hôtelière de Lausanne.

PROPERTY BRIEF Based in Geiranger, Norway, Hotel Union (hotelunion.no) was built in 1891 by A. Shieldrop of Ålesund. The building was originally constructed of wood, inspired by the Swiss or dragon-head style, closely linked to Art Nouveau and Jugend architecture, and identical to the timber-built hotel at Øye. In 1899, the hotel was purchased by Julie and Karl Mjelva. The Mjelvas were extremely enterprising, opening an automobile manufacturing plant, a power station, and a cooker factory all on the same site.

Would you say that the Mjelva family owns the biggest and best hotel in town?

That's up to visitors to evaluate, but it's a hotel that has been in our family for four generations. We have hosted Kings and Queens, VIPs, and ordinary tourists for four centuries. I'm the fourth generation.

Doesn't the Queen stay here in the spa suite?

Yes, she loves hiking in the mountains – she's in her 70s but very fit, and when she visits, she enjoys the spa and hotel.

We made a special room for her with large windows and a Jacuzzi tub, and direct access to the spa.

The rooms all have beautiful views. Living here must seem to be a fairy-tale existence that you can't find anywhere else.

We're happy to be here. It's an honor to greet people to our village and give them not only the hotel but the taste of nature. We emphasize local food from the area in the buffet and the courses we serve in the hotel.

Don't you also offer hiking and boating?

It's very popular now to go kayaking to the fjord, and go ashore and hike up to one of the mountain farms.

You also have a collection of old Buicks from the 1930s, which is in a museum here.

We have a vintage car museum, which has been growing for the past 20 years. We now have 12 vehicles.

What funny stories might you share from your time in this hotel?

Recently, we had the Sheikh of Qatar visiting. He was going to land in the nearest airport, but his jumbo jet was too big so he had to land in Bergen, which is quite a distance from here. He wanted to see the hotel and the fjord so he came up with his helicopter to visit. We let him drive one of the old Buicks; he was a good driver. He managed the trip well and in the city center, he stopped to buy some chocolates. We have our own chocolate factory in the city center.

Does it get so cold in the wintertime that tourism suffers?

No. We only go down to -5 or -10 degrees celcius. Our climate is good from the fjord so it doesn't get really cold here.

You can go wilderness skiing or alpine skiing, or cross country. ●