



A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

On a trip to Norway, **ANNIE DALY** finds a wellness culture that prizes casual, everyday encounters with nature—no pricey gear or hard-charging adventures required.

“DON’T YOU WANT to put on your raincoat?” my new Norwegian friend Marie asked me with a puzzled look on her face.

We had just finished a lakeside picnic lunch with some of her friends in Sogndal, a small university town in western Norway, and it had started to drizzle. I’d begun packing my bag to head back to the car, but as I was securing the top on my water bottle, I looked around and realized that no one else was making moves to go home. Undeterred by the weather, they had all thrown on windbreakers and rain pants in a matter of minutes, ready to continue

chilling outside for hours more. There was no discussion, none of the “should we stay or should we go” rigamarole that often accompanies inclement weather in the States. The matter was not up for debate.

This approach was precisely why I’d come to Norway. This was the *friluftsliv* way.

Friluftsliv—which translates to “the free air life”—is a word for the distinctly Norwegian idea that humans are happiest outside, no matter the conditions. My friend Andrea, who grew up in Bergen, introduced me to the concept over dinner in Brooklyn one night, and I was hooked. Like many Americans, I’d become familiar with the charmingly specific Scandinavian vocabulary for emotions and cravings—*hygge* for a mood of coziness; *lagom* for the art of balanced living—and I was happy to add *friluftsliv* (pronounced free-loofts-liv) to my

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lexicon. Andrea described it as an inescapable longing to be in nature. “We just don’t feel like our best selves until we’ve gotten a bit of a rosy glow in our cheeks,” she explained. Despite Norway’s often-frigid temperatures, the country has devoted itself to the *friluftsliv* cause, with outdoor schools and organizations—even entire university departments—dedicated to promoting the philosophy.

After more than a decade as a health journalist in New York City, I’d grown disillusioned with the industry’s \$80 quartz-crystal water bottles and \$120 “bio-frequency” healing stickers. I wanted a new definition of wellness, one that wasn’t reserved for the wealthy few, and I couldn’t get Andrea’s talk of rosy cheeks and fresh air out of my head. I decided to set out on a global search for more meaningful ideas of well-being—which is how I found myself on a mountain in Norway, eating reindeer meat in the rain in the name of *friluftsliv*.

In the days leading up to that drizzly picnic, I’d spent more time outdoors than I had in years.

I’d hiked along bold-turquoise fjords that made me question why I live in a concrete jungle. I’d strolled the waterfront in Bergen, where I fell in love with the colorful row houses and narrow alleyways behind them. I’d even foraged for wild mushrooms with Marie and her friends, zigzagging through mossy, pine-scented forests so quiet we could hear every twig crack.

But each time I told a local about my wellness quest, I would hear whispers of another place: Øytun. In Norway’s remote north, this school for young adults is dedicated entirely to *friluftsliv*, with classes on nature photography, rock climbing, backcountry skiing, even dog-sledding. “You cannot write about this idea without visiting Øytun,” Andrea’s sister, Signy, had told me, “because Øytun IS *friluftsliv*—it’s the epicenter of the entire philosophy.”

My first morning in Øytun, I awoke to a sky that was clear and blue, and I could see mountains in the distance that stretched on for miles. The headmaster had arranged for me to accompany a group of students on a weekend expedition to photograph the northern lights. To reach our camping spot, we hiked through the Finnmark Plateau, a vast, marshy area with gentle hills, serene rivers and lakes, and fields dotted red and orange with wildflowers. It was a gorgeous off-grid journey, a true deep-nature experience. That night, I used my camera lens to see bright-green glimpses of the aurora, invisible to the naked eye.

In the end, though, it was the afternoon before the midnight viewing session that taught me the most about *friluftsliv*. I had long associated nature with being an Outdoor Person—the kind who lives for adrenaline-fueled, GoPro-worthy adventures. But my Norwegian companions knew that simply spending time outside, regardless of fancy equipment or athletic ability, is good for the soul. All you need is a willingness to treat Mother Nature like the healer she is.

We set up our tents, then plopped ourselves on a grassy hill and proceeded to do a whole bunch of nothing. A couple of the students built a campfire, and we toasted gooey cheese sandwiches over the flames. Then it was back to stretching out on the ground, gazing up at the wide-open sky, breathing the crisp Norwegian air. My cheeks had never been rosier. 🌲

Annie Daly’s Destination Wellness will be published in April by Chronicle Books.