

Expats lives | UK to Norway

Angling for a new challenge

Keen fisherman Richard Lamont left Wiltshire to be head of an international school near a remote fiord. By Kathini Cameron

The sudden descent on to the local airstrip is heart-stopping. Wing tips almost brush the sides of the two snow-capped mountains, which rise above the fiord below. We are flying into what looks like a scene shot “north of the wall” in *Game of Thrones*.

It is a journey my husband Richard Lamont knows well. Four years ago, we swapped the Victorian surroundings of Marlborough College, Wiltshire, where Richard was head of upper school, for the frozen wilds of Flekke in western Norway, a village of only a few hundred people, 150km north of Bergen. Richard took up the post of rector at UWC Red Cross Nordic, a sixth-form college affiliated to the Norwegian Red Cross.

Here the Nordic students, drawn from an area stretching from western Greenland to eastern Finland, study alongside

scholarship students from underprivileged, conflict and post-conflict backgrounds. The college is in one of the most beautiful places on the planet – but also one of the more remote.

“Flekke felt like a one-horse town,” Richard says of his first impressions. “It has one shop. It’s a kind of half Co-op, half Tardis.”

When we first came to this part of Norway, I wondered if we would struggle. Neither of us spoke Norwegian, and we had a newborn baby daughter, Poppy. Daylight drops to about six hours in December. But the reality was easier than we expected.

“Friends tease me about living in ‘the land of eternal darkness’ but, actually, it’s not too dissimilar from Britain,” says Richard. “In midwinter in southern England, you go to work when it’s dark, and when you leave work it’s dark.”

In the winter months, Norwegians like to be *koselig* (loosely translated as cosy). Candles are lit at breakfast, at *barnehage* (nursery school) and in work meetings. At Richard’s school, the arrival of snow and the northern lights herald a welcome antidote to the darkness. “When the first snow falls, it lifts the atmosphere of the college,” he says. “We have snowball fights and sledging, and we teach all the students to cross-country ski.”

For some it is their first time on the slopes. The 200 young people at the college come from 95 countries; they include students on scholarships as part of the Survivors of Conflict programme.

“We have an absolutely inspirational El Salvadoran student currently on the programme who is paralysed from the chest down. He was shot by a gang while swimming,” says Richard. “He is the most remarkable artist. He paints these incredible murals across our walls at the college, and his friends help him up on the scaffolding to paint. He’s also a great



Richard Lamont and his whippets, Ibsen and Harefossen, on a fishing trip near Flekke, western Norway — David Zadig

mimic as an artist — he can reproduce a Salvador Dali painting.”

A handful of places each year are set aside for students on the Survivors of Conflict programme, drawn from countries including Iraq, Colombia and Ethiopia. All students live five to a room. “Part of the model is that we want them to interact,” Richard says. “We want a Nordic to share with a Brit to share with someone from Western Sahara.”

While the dark winters can be tough on the students, the long, light summer days can be worse. At first you feel invincible as the days lengthen, but you must learn to be disciplined and get enough sleep. For Richard, this means limiting his time fishing on the Flekke river. Salmon fishing is a passion for my husband. He even managed to negotiate a few hours on the morning of our wedding day.

“Norwegian fishermen are particularly friendly,” Richard says, “and they don’t have the snobbery that you get

back home.” On British rivers there tends to be a hierarchy: the fly-fishers don’t mix with the coarse anglers or the spinners. Not so here. “A Norwegian just wants to catch a salmon. On the front of the car they have these rod carriers with their fly rod, their spinning rod, their worming rod. They’re just enjoying being out on the river.”

Most people Richard meets on the river can, at least, speak broken English. And there is a novelty in being one of the few English fishermen the locals have ever met. But he’s not the first. Richard was once invited into the home of a farmer who owns part of the river. “He told me an English doctor used to fish here in the early 20th century,” he says. “And sure enough, there in the middle of this cabinet among all his Norwegian books was a line of John Buchan novels.”

Friluftsliv (literally, free outdoor life) is the heartbeat of Norway, despite the rain, which can be of biblical proportions. Everyone seems to live according

to the belief that there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing. One of our presents on arrival from a colleague was a set of *sydvester* (sou’westers). Prams are pushed outside in -10C, and the staff at Poppy’s *barnehage* have babies wrapped in wool and deerskin.

Poppy, now four and a half, operates fluently in the local village dialect, and acts as translator for her parents when called on. “It’s a curious family structure,” says Richard. For my husband, his lack of Norwegian is a cause for embarrassment, but it’s not something that limits him professionally.

Home for us is on campus, at the rector’s house. It was designed, along with the rest of the college, by a local architect, Olav Hovland, and reflects the traditional fiord style: simple, wooden, much like an Alpine chalet.

In this part of Norway, wooden houses perch on hillsides and are scattered across the landscape. Some have a barn or an extra outbuilding, but nothing at

BUYING GUIDE

Property tax

Stamp duty (*dokumentavgift*) is a flat rate of 2.5 per cent but municipalities can also charge a tax on the market value of a property. Different municipalities charge different rates (Oslo, for example, has no tax), but in general, the tax is between 0.2 and 0.7 per cent of 60 to 70 per cent of the market price

In Fjaler, Flekke’s municipality, the present rate is 0.45 per cent. For a new house costing Nkr4m (\$485,000), the tax is Nkr18,000 (\$2,200) a year; for an old house costing Nkr1.5m, the tax will be Nkr6,750 a year

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all ostentatious. Then there are the *hytter* (cabins) — one or two rooms, always a fireplace and rarely electricity. Often Norwegian families have two: a winter one for cross-country skiing and hiking, and a summer one by a fiord’s edge for fishing and water sports.

Our house is also home to two whippets, Ibsen — for obvious reasons — and Harefossen, who is named after a nearby waterfall. Locals like their rules and they like to live by them: dogs on leads at all times; not a sip of alcohol if you’re driving; winter tyres off by April; and absolutely no outdoor fires in summer without permission.

Norwegians take very seriously their Constitution Day on May 17, with celebrations across the country. Participation in the procession held in Flekke is expected and essential. The local brass band march out in front, followed by flag-waving schoolchildren and adults in their *busnads*, richly coloured and embroidered regional costumes.

We have made our home in this beautiful region, and hate the thought of leaving it one day. “It’s a great place for Poppy to grow up in,” Richard says. “But you can’t stay in the same institution forever. I only hope I’ll know the signs when it’s time to move on.”

Kathini Cameron is the events co-ordinator at UWC Red Cross Nordic

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

Lamont’s favourite places . . .

Einingsfjell — a hilltop overlooking the mountainous island of Alden, where there is a good chance of spotting a *havorn* (sea eagle)

Amot Operagard — an opera house in the village of Bygstad, with a restaurant serving locally sourced delicacies

Jomfruland — a small island off the coast of Telemark in south-eastern Norway, where my wife and I became engaged

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