

Scandi Rock

Dominic Oughton



The Author at Oppdal.

Photo Natasha Oughton

In case you haven't noticed; Scandinavia is 'IN'. From the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo to The Hundred-Year-Old Man and The Bridge, the quirky, moody, sexy and slightly dark antics of our Viking friends is one of the great media trends. Scandinavian climbing has also had a makeover. Since the 60s, climbing in Scandinavia had been synonymous with The Troll Wall, and not

much else. We've been there and can report that it is a very atmospheric and scary place, in a state of continuous falling down. Then, about 15 years ago, rumours of a magical land of granite spires and walls, where the sun never set, began to circulate; and the Lofoten Islands were on the map. We've made a couple of trips there too, see the Journal (2005:56), and it is every bit as good as the propaganda. We also loved the whole scene of helpful, friendly people; endless daylight; great weather and unrestricted access to the outdoors, so we started looking for the next excuse to go back.

In 2012 Adam Ondra climbed the world's first 9b+: Change, at a little-known crag in Norway near the village of Flatanger. Whilst clearly the actual route was of no interest to us, except for rubbernecking, it did prompt some web surfing to see what else was new in those lands – the result was the itinerary for our 2014 summer holidays, and here are three of the best climbing areas we discovered along the way.

Bohuslän, Sweden

We took the ferry from Harwich to Esbjerg in Denmark as they've sadly stopped the brilliant Newcastle to Bergen service. This still leaves a long drive to Norway, so I started investigating potential stop-offs to break the journey. I came across a newly developed area near Gothenburg which sounded like it might be worth dropping in. The Bohuslän climbing area sits on a relatively low-lying peninsula and the crags are easy to spot as granite humps rising above the surrounding flatlands. The scale and nature of the climbing is really quite like the gritstone of the Peak District; picture a granite version of Hen Cloud and you've got a pretty good idea. There are almost a hundred crags with a couple of thousand routes spread over them. Of these, perhaps a dozen or so are major venues with routes up to 50m; rising from a flat grassy base like a mini half-dome. Guided only by a few brief, but positive, words on UKClimbing.com we just headed towards the crag with the most routes on and started exploring.

Our pot-luck approach paid dividends as we made the five-minute approach to Hallinden. There were a few other climbers there and so I opened with my usual 'Have you got a topo?' gambit; a key phrase we've mastered in half a dozen languages, but English suffices in these parts. 'Sorry, I haven't brought it', was the reply from the tall, blond young lady, 'but I'd be happy to point out a few routes for you'. This kind offer turned into a tour of the crag, and it soon became apparent that this wasn't a random local. 'Where can we get a copy of the guide?' I asked. 'If you drop past my house later on you can buy one', said Hanna Restorp; the guidebook author! Hanna's recommendations turned out to be an excellent introduction to the crag and to Bohuslän climbing – following strong natural lines up corners and cracks on heavily-featured and rough-textured granite. There's a strong anti-bolt ethic, again much like British grit (though with a bit more flexibility; blank sections sporting the occasional fixed gear) but generally opportunities for natural gear abound. Highlight of the day was the grand classic of Hallinden – Prismaster, a 55m 6- which translates into about E1 5b. Simply outstanding!

We duly popped around to pick up a guide the next day. Hanna and her husband Petter have just published a 'Best of' interim mini-guide whilst they work on a complete update to the definitive guide, which covers six of the best crags. However, Sweden was basking in a heatwave and we were seeking shade, so Hannah recommended a seventh crag – Skälefjäll and proceeded to hand-draw a topo of the best bits. Armed with this excellent beta we had a great day, the highlight of which was Granitbiten, 7-, (about E3 5c), a classic left-trending crack up a steep wall, reminiscent of routes on Millstone. Our final day in the area was a visit to another of the classic crags – Galgeberget, offering 40m cracks and grooves on steep slabs, with great jamming and friction moves and the occasional uge. Palimpset (5+), DNA (6-) and Bagatell (6+) are all highly recommended, and would make it into Classic Rock, Hard Rock and Extreme Rock respectively if they were in Britain.

Flatanger, Norway

Flatanger is a small village on a rocky peninsular of the same name; a couple of hours drive north of Trondheim. The 'main event' here is Hanshelleren; a really big cave, 50m high and overhanging by more than 80m. This is where the super-routes, including Change, are; monster

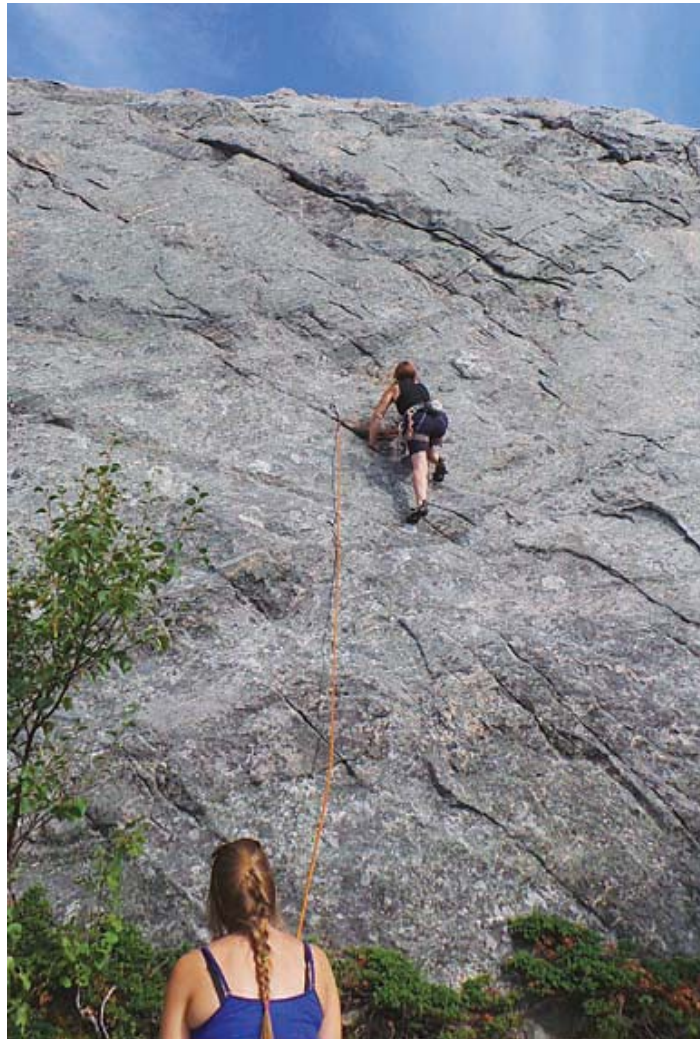
Flatanger Panorama. Photo Dominic Oughton



endurance tests of 50m and more, taking the near-horizontal roof of the cave, and requiring some complicated rope shenanigans as well as huge reserves of stamina. Watching one of Britain's strongest climbers, Alan Cassidy, working Nordic Flower, an 8c+, over successive days; gradually extending his high-point but ultimately plopping off in frustration, was a real lesson in perseverance and commitment (he managed his ascent a week after we left after about three weeks' work!)

What is most remarkable about Hanshellern is that, adjacent to the cave, and even inside it, there are a couple of dozen really quite amenable routes in the 6a to 7a bracket, with even a couple of 5s thrown in for good measure. On any other equivalent crag these would either be crumbly choss or the crag 'warm ups' and therefore polished to destruction. Here they are simply excellent. Again, the rock is granite, with a profusion of cracks but also square-cut edges and even pockets. The routes are well-bolted and can be enjoyed in relative safety. Perhaps the highpoint of the trip for me was the route Kakestykket, 7a, which finds a line of weakness via a vertical step in the roof to cover about 30m horizontally out into space. I was delighted to clip the chain and lower off, but for the strong lads this is just the first half of Iron Curtain, a 60m 9b!





Helen Oughton on Gorillaglass at Hanshallern.

Photo Dominic Oughton

Also spread around the area are half a dozen further crags; not quite so spectacular but providing enough climbing for a week or two's visit for mere mortals. The surroundings are beautiful, with sea, rock and sky combining in fractal patterns and peppered with fisherman's houses and idyllic beaches. Whilst there can be storms in summer, the weather is generally pretty settled and temperatures in the mid-teens are ideal for climbing. The 'scene' is pretty welcoming too, with a really international group of climbers camping in a farmer's field beneath the crags – the guy who owns it has a vision of Flatanger as the next Ceuse, a Mecca for climbers from around the world. I'm not sure if the logistics make this a likelihood, but the rock, routes and situation are certainly worthy of inclusion in any list of 'Destination Crags'.

Setesdal, Norway

Setesdal, in southern Norway, runs for about 100km down towards Kristiansand on the south coast. The upper half of this beautiful and tranquil valley, between Flataland and Bygland (no, I haven't made them up!), is populated with about a dozen crags. It doesn't take much of a geographer to spot the classic glaciated valley, and sure enough the predominant climbing style is smooth and slabby, with routes from one to ten pitches and



The Author on Kakestykket, 7a.

Photo Jake Oughton

up to 500m in length on superb, solid granite. There's a mix of trad and bolted climbing, but I'd hesitate to call it 'sport climbing' as the bolting is generally quite run-out. The most similar areas I can think of would be Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite, or closer to home Etive Slabs (but with the occasional bolt!).

Our first encounter was somewhat chastening. Having been climbing steadily at Norwegian grade 7+/8- (about French 7a) in Flatanger I was full of confidence, but conscious that Setesdal would present a different kind of challenge. Restefjell seemed a good, sensible starting point to get tuned in, described as the area with the most sports-climbing, and having easy access. A few wet streaks limited our options but we settled on Quarzerei, a Grade 5+ as a warm-up. The fact that it only had 5 bolts in 35m didn't really



Jake Oughton, Flattanger.

Photo Dominic Oughton

register — not until I was 20m up and gripped. I really didn't have my friction-climbing head on. A few more frighteners later and I was starting to wonder whether we should have stayed in Flatanger! The following day Helen and I set our sights even lower, and Sector Plaisir on Løefjell offered 'Many excellent well-bolted children's routes that can also be climbed by mum and dad'. Whether we were more tuned in, or the more featured nature of the rock played to our strengths, we found this more amenable, with Lost Hanger VI+ and Rockwaves VI- both being fully deserving of their 3-star status.

That left us back at the campsite at about 2pm with a long sunny afternoon ahead and a forecast of showers for the next couple of days, so I announced my cunning plan for a speedy ascent of East of Easy on the Bigwall sector of Løefjell. Jake took the bait and by 3pm we were racked and ready at the bottom of this ten-pitch mega route: 'The best 7- in Setesdal, the **** rating isn't a misprint'; quite a write-up in a system where the maximum is three stars. The first three pitches and 150m went quickly,



Big Wall, Setesdal.

Photo Dominic Oughton

largely because there was no gear to place. The climbing wasn't desperate, but felt quite spicy, and was only supposed to be Grade 5. I started to wonder what the higher pitches would bring. Years of mountain craft had prompted me to engineer Jake's lead of the crux 7- pitch, but that still left me with a 35m 6+ to do with only a single bolt. Happily this proved to be outstanding but reasonably straightforward climbing, and whilst Jake's pitch was tougher, so is he. We were soon topping out, having managed 400m of climbing in a little over three hours, with just a series of tedious abseils between us and a celebratory beer.

At the southern end of the valley is Urdviki, where somehow the glacier must have sneaked round the corner leaving a completely different style of crag. Steep to seriously overhanging, with fully-bolted routes of 35m to 40m, this is more like the Malham of Setesdal. The climbing is on positive edges and crimps and climbs like limestone, though it is actually granite again. Hanemarsjen, 8, was the pick of a bunch of great routes and a fitting end to our visit to this great spot.

Other Highlights

As well as these three major venues we also stumbled across a couple of other spots that it would be well worth seeking out on a similar itinerary.

The traverse of the Besseggen ridge is rumoured to be the most popular mountain walk in Norway, with about 30,000 people making the trip each year. The route starts with a 20 minute boat trip from Gjendesheim to Memurubu, which is a scenically spectacular mini-adventure in its own right.



Natasha Oughton on the Besseggen Ridge.

Photo Dominic Oughton

The route then leads over the high point of the ridge, Veslfjellet (1,743m), with a few interesting rock-steps; described as ‘chest-high’ and requiring climbing skills in the Lonely Planet guide, they are of course nothing of the sort. The views are spectacular, down to lakes either side of the ridge: The higher Bessvatnet is a deep blue colour typical of other lakes, whilst Gjende, which is 400m lower, has a distinct green colour due to glacier runoff.

Oppdal lies about halfway between Trondheim and Lillehammer and is a fairly unremarkable town. It does, however, host a very attractive little climbing spot just 20km to the west. The riverside cliffs of Litjhelvet offer some steep, juggy climbing in a stunning setting, with a cooling dip readily available at the foot of the routes. Add to this the no-hassle free-camping available in the parking area, thanks to Norway’s *Allemannsrett* (which translates to ‘the everyman’s right’), and you have the perfect stopover.