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JIM GREGSON

# Jotunheimen: the Rough and the Smooth

Summer and winter in Norway's mountains



The smooth days of winter. Ski group on Skautflya below the north side of Leirhøe. (*Jim Gregson*)



Skiing towards Kyrkjeglupen, with Kyrkja on the right. (Jim Gregson)

*Enten ru eller glatt, men fremfor alt, Jotunheimen.*<sup>1</sup>

*Norwegian proverb*

The Jotunheimen mountains of Norway hold the country's greatest concentration of peaks and summits that overtop the enticing altitude of 2,000m. If you choose a height difference of at least 100m between the nearest col and a summit, there are more than one hundred 2,000m peaks and at least the same number of secondary tops in the Jotunheimen region. More recent Norwegian mountain literature, which uses a much lower height differential, produces an even greater total of over 340 peaks and tops. And just as with 'Munro bagging' here in Britain, many Norwegian climbers and walkers follow their own quest to climb them all.

There are 2,000ers in other parts of Norway, but the largest cluster of higher summits lies in the area referred to on old maps as the Jotunfjeldene, a name was supplanted by that of Jotunheimen, the 'home of the giants', by the enthusiasm of poet Aasmund Olavsson Vinje, who in the late 1860s established first a rough stone shelter and then with friends a small wooden cabin at the western end of the large lake called Bygdin. Vinje coined the name 'Eidsbugarden' for this location and his cabin plus the ruins of the stone shelter can still be visited. In his distinctive verse Vinje extolled the virtues of the Jotunheimen landscape.

1. 'Either rough or smooth, but above all, Jotunheimen.'



South-west Jotunheimen panorama. Left to right: Hjelledalstind, Falketind and Stolsnøstind. (*Jim Gregson*)

In 1865 the so-called Golden Age of first ascents of major peaks of the Alps was coming to a close, but apart from ascents of a relatively few prominent peaks, such as Falketind in 1820, the mountains of Norway were little visited and largely unclimbed. Things began to change with the arrival of British visitors who hunted and fished, as related in the classic comic story by James A Lees and Walter J Clutterbuck *Three in Norway (by two of them)*, a book that inspired Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. (Forgotten in Britain, it is still in print in Norway under the title *Tre i Norge ved to av dem*.)

More importantly the Norwegians themselves began to frequent their own mountains. In 1868 the banker Thomas Heftye and several of his city friends founded the Norwegian Hiking Association, better known as Den Norske Turistforening (DNT), which now has many thousands of members across many nationalities. The DNT began to promote and champion *fri-luftsliv*, the open-air life, as a philosophy, a movement that continues today as an important feature in the Norwegian attitude to landscape and nature.

Although early tourists had been able to find accommodation at scattered farmsteads and *sæters* (summer upland grazing locations) the development of hotels had followed more slowly. The DNT began a programme of acquisition and building of huts starting with the purchase of property at the



From left to right: Olavsbunuten and Mjølkedalstinden. (Jim Gregson)

west end of Gjende lake in 1870. Gjendeboden, now known as Gjendebu, is still one of DNT's most popular lodges. As more visitors – hunters, anglers, geologists and artists – began to frequent the mountains of Jotunheimen, the number of privately-owned huts and hotels increased and nowadays DNT itself operates a splendid network of more than 450 huts and lodges across Norway, all of them open to members and non-members alike. Thus Jotunheimen with its clutch of higher mountains and good accommodation grew in popularity.

Climbers and alpinists, certainly of Norwegian or Scandinavian origin, were slower to appear so more technical mountaineering was more of a later development than it had been in the Alps. Guides too, were not at first so evident but things would change. A catalyst was needed. Enter one William Cecil Slingsby, born 1849 into a family of Yorkshire textile factory owners. He explored his local hills as a youth but began to look higher and further afield after the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 and the 1871 publication of Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*. In 1872 Slingsby made his first visit to Norway. With one companion he set out to 'journey to the midnight sun' by ship, coastal ferries and overland. The impressive peaks of Romsdal captivated him and after reaching the city of Trondheim Slingsby and his friend turned inland and eventually reached Jotunheimen where he was even more impressed by the striking array of alpine mountains he saw, particularly in the Horungtinder group: modern Hurrungane.

After setting eyes on the very imposing Store Skagastølstind, thought unclimbable by many locals, Slingsby boldly declared that one day he would climb it. 'Storen', 'the big one', as it is familiarly known, was by some thought to be Norway's highest peak although later surveys proved it ranked at number three.

Ambition ignited, Slingsby returned to Norway in 1874 when he made the ascent of his first virgin summit, Vestre Memurutind. He also met the enthusiastic and experienced Norwegian mountaineer Emanuel Mohn with whom he was to share many more adventures in years to come. Linking up with Mohn again in 1876, Slingsby travelled to Bygdin in the south-west of Jotunheimen, guided by Knut Lykken. This particular trip 'lit the blue touch-paper' of Norwegian mountaineering with the completion of six very important first ascents, achieved over just six days with long and complex approaches over unexplored terrain.

On 21 July 1876, Slingsby, Mohn and Lykken left Vormeli and eventually reached the south-east side of Store Skagastølstind where they found a way up tortuous glacier slopes, at times following the fresh footprints of a bear through crevassed ground. They arrived, after a crevasse incident, at the high col later to be named as 'Mohns skard': here Mohn declared the mountain to be 'perfectly impossible'. Slingsby was not one for defeatism and continued alone with Yorkshire boldness: '... a tough piece of work... Three times I was all but beaten... I scraped away the ice and bit by bit got higher... a knife-edged affair ... an overhang ... a loose rocky ledge ... in a few strides ... I gained the unsullied crown of the peerless Skagastølstind.' He erected a small cairn and wedged into it his handkerchief.

This historic solo first ascent was the vanguard for a wave of interest in the mountains of Norway by Norwegian and foreign mountaineers in the years following. Slingsby, smitten with these northerly peaks, made many more visits to Jotunheimen and to many other parts of Norway, succeeding in many more first ascents and repeats. He climbed with some of the best local guides and some prominent Norwegians, among them Ola Berge and Johannes Vigdal, and his parties included other British friends and often his wife. Another female companion was Therese Bertheau who in 1894 was the first woman to climb Storen, which she repeated with Slingsby in 1900. Slingsby himself climbed Storen a third time at the age of 59 via the long, exposed and complex ridge system running north to south. In 1921 he made his final 21st visit to his beloved Norway.

In 1904 Slingsby's classic, important book *Norway: the Northern Playground* was published, written after he had made fifteen visits. This work cemented his reputation as the father of Norwegian mountaineering bestowed on him by the Norsk Tinde Klub. It is still a good read today. His fame in Norway far outstrips any recognition he received at home, despite his participation in some important feats in the Alps and some contributions to British climbing. He was one of the first British mountaineers to develop any proficiency on skis, but regarded some Norwegians as less skilled in dealing with glaciers and ice, although he thought that there were very capable cragsmen among his companions.

Notwithstanding Slingsby's role in the development of mountaineering in Norway, more contemporary British climbers resort to places like Rjukan for winter ice-climbing, Lofoten for high-standard rock climbing or Lyngen for dramatic ski mountaineering. Despite the surge of interest in Roms-



The rough days of summer. Store Skagastølstind, aka Soren, Slingsby's most famous first ascent, climbed in 1876 after a July snowfall. (*Jim Gregson*)



Below the rappel from Midtre Tverratinden. (*Jim Gregson*)

dal after the ascents of the Troll Wall it is probably true to say that only a minority of British mountaineers pay much attention to the alpine climbing available across the North Sea, and particularly the store of very attractive mountains in the various ranges of Jotunheimen. The very names of the peaks should act like a magnet: Falketind, Glittertind, Galdhøpiggen, Stolsnøstinden, Mjølkedalstinden, Store Skagastølstinden and on, many of them first climbed by Slingsby. Don't care for crowds? Avoid the Alps in high season and try Norway.

As well as having climbed extensively across the Alps and on many expeditions to the Arctic in Greenland, my wife Sandra and I have over many years developed our skills as telemark ski mountaineers, and we have made numerous winter visits to the mountains of Jotunheimen where we have made ascents and fabulous running descents of many of the peaks which form Slingsby's legacy. This would be the 'smooth' of my title, for winter's mantle of snow transforms these peaks into glittering castles. Travel in winter, with the rhythms of uphill skinning, and sometimes a finish with crampons and ice axe, is easier and wins the reward of superb swooping downhill runs: off-piste skiing at its best, and most elegant when conditions favour the telemark turn. We remember the sharpness of Norwegian cold, try to forget the ferocity of Norwegian wind, recall the vagaries of Norwegian sastrugi and steer clear of immense Norwegian cornices. Our photographs help us to relive some of those glorious days as we recall a

catalogue of ascents. Our skis have carried us to a host of high tops: Galdhøpiggen and Glittertind, rivals for crowning the height list, Storebjørn with its distinctive shape and steep glacier descent, Surtningssui famous for its panoramic summit outlook, the shark-fins of the Veotindane, the narrow crests of the Hellstugutindane, Trollsteineggje projecting like a spine from the surrounding glaciers, Uranostind and its satellite Slingsbytinden glittering with ice, the great bulk of Galdebergstinden glowing golden in sunset light, Bukkehøe protected by huge cornices and beetling cliffs. All of these we have done in the 'smooth, accommodating blanket of winter's snows.

In recent times we have travelled to Jotunheimen either in September or July, to further track Slingsby's footsteps. These trips have provided by contrast, experiences in the 'rough', for then the Jotunheimen wear a different garb. Approaches are longer and slower than on skiing days. River crossings are at times problematic. Gentle grassy paths are conspicuous by their paucity. Boulder fields and boilerplate rock slabs abound. Rock quality varies, from grippy gabbro to crumbling gravel. The ice ages and long winter frosts have left their mark. There is much and varied lichen growth. So-called *kartlav*, 'map lichen', makes for attractive green, black-speckled colouring. Less welcome is *skorpelav*, 'crust lichen', which grows profusely on certain rock types forming mats of jet-black encrustation. When damp or wet it becomes like soap and security of footing is lost. When it is fully dry it curls up and becomes very uncomfortable and prickly to handle, so expect sore fingertips after hours of rock climbing or scrambling.

Despite these factors, for general summer alpine mountaineering Jotunheimen has much to offer. You can choose from extensive scrambling above generally benign glaciers to awe-inducing exposure on traverses along airy arêtes and ridges. You have all the opportunities you want to bring into play the whole range of alpine climbing skills. Summertime daylight in Norway is so lengthy that starts and finishes in the dark are not usually part of the plan.

Peaks we have stared at over the course of many winters and decided that they would make better summer targets despite the vagaries of the 'rough' and have subsequently fallen under our boots have numbered among them lofty Mjølkedalstinden, the tricky 'ugly height' of Styggehøe in Visdalen, the intriguing and exposed Søregega south ridge of Uranostind, the narrow and airy scramble to get to Store Urdadalstind where groups of reindeer ran away from our descent line, the tiny summit rocks of Store Smorstabbtinden overlooking its neighbour Kniven, the crests of Store Austanbotntinden like camel humps, and the arduous rock and steep abseils needed to traverse the Tverråtindane, the complex and trying approaches needed to climb to Falketind, Hjelledalstind and Koldedalstind. We were, however, thwarted in our wish to attempt to repeat Slingsby's *bonne bouche* – just as we planned to try to climb Store Skagastølstind the weather dealt us a poor hand by plastering the peak with a lot of midsummer snow putting it firmly out of condition for the time we had available. This gives us a good reason to go back at least once more to the Hurrungane, Jotunheimen's most alpine massif.



The south ridge of Uranostind Søregga. (*Jim Gregson*)

The pictures help to tell the story. You want the smooth? Try winter, but don't be fooled by the lack of real altitude. Learn to ski, travel the mountains. Find out about the recently developed Høgruta i Jotunheimen, the Jotunheimen haute route, certainly not a pushover. Don't mind the rough? Use Slingsby as a signpost and buy a good map. Enjoy quiet days away from the masses. Get yourself onto high skylines and airy crests. Come down tired but safe. Delight in less-trodden ways. Jotunheimen awaits.

### Further reading

J Baxter, *Hurrungane*, Scandinavian Publishing, Edinburgh, 2005.

W Clutterbuck, & J Lees, *Three in Norway (by two of them)*, London, 1882. (This is available in Norway in both English and Norwegian.)

A Dyer, J Baddeley & I Robertson, *Walks and Scrambles in Norway*, Ripping Yarns.com, 2006.

M and J Helgesen, *Norges Fjelltopper over 2000 Meter*, Glittertind Forlag, 2013.

S Hagen, *Høgruta i Jotunheimen*, Fri Flyt AS, 2015.

W Slingsby, *Norway: The Northern Playground*, Edinburgh, 1904.

*Klatrefører for Jotunheimen*, Norsk Tinde Klub, 2015.

### Useful websites

Comprehensive coverage of 2,000m tops: [www.peakbook.org](http://www.peakbook.org).

DNT hut system and membership: [www.dntoslo.no](http://www.dntoslo.no).

The Norwegian haute route and maps: [www.hogrutajotunheimen.no](http://www.hogrutajotunheimen.no).

