

## ***Sentenced to Serving the Good Life in Norway***

**by William Lee Adams**

The seagulls begin squawking at 6 in the morning and the cigarettes cost too much, but Lars, 41, knows there are worse places to call home. On Bastoy, an island 46 miles south of Oslo, he and 124 other residents live in brightly colored wooden chalets, spread over one square mile of forest and gently sloping hills. Besides enjoying views of the surrounding fjord, they go horseback riding and throw barbecues, and have access to a movie theater, tanning bed and, during winter, two ski jumps. Lars's neighbors often conceal the reasons they are there, but, as in any small community, word gets around. "I try to be as nice to the pedophiles as I am to the drug dealers," he says. Despite all its trappings, Bastoy isn't an exclusive resort: it's a prison.

Arne Kvernvik Nilsen, Bastoy's governor and a practicing psychotherapist, describes it as the world's first human-ecological prison – a place where inmates learn to take responsibility for their actions by caring for the environment. Prisoners grow their own organic vegetables, turn their garbage into compost and tend to chickens, cows, horses and sheep. They also operate the ferry that shuttles a number of them to school and jobs on the mainland, make their own dinner (they're allowed to use knives) and chop wood (using axes and chainsaws). Although authorities carry out routine drug tests, the prison generally emphasizes trust and self-regulation: Bastoy has no fences, the windows have no bars, and only five guards remain on the island after 3pm and on weekends. "They are among the worst criminals in Norway. They are murderers, they are rapists, they are Hell's Angels," says Nilsen. "But they keep the whole society alive and running."

In an age when countries from Britain to the United States cope with exploding prison populations by building ever larger – and, many would say, ever harsher – prisons, Bastoy seems like an unorthodox, even bizarre, departure. But Norwegians see the island as the embodiment of their country's long-standing penal philosophy: that traditional, repressive prisons do not work, and that treating prisoners humanely boosts their chances of reintegrating into society. "People in other countries say that what Norway does is wrong," says Lars, who is serving a 16-year sentence for serious drug offenses. "But why does Norway have the world's lowest murder rate? Maybe we're doing something that really works."

Countries track recidivism rates differently, but even an imperfect comparison suggests that Norway's system produces overwhelmingly positive results. Within two years of their release, 20% of Norway's prisoners end up back in jail. In the United Kingdom and the United States, the figure hovers between 50% and 60%. Of course, Norway's low level of criminality gives it a massive advantage. Its prison roll lists a mere 3,300 inmates, a rate of 70 per 100,000 people, compared with 2.3 million in the United States, or 753 per 100,000 – the highest rate in the world.

John Pratt, a professor of criminology at New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington and an authority on Scandinavian prisons, believes that the secret to the low crime levels in Norway and its Nordic counterparts is strong welfare systems that reduce poverty and inequality – key drivers of criminality. Studies show that countries and states investing more in education, health and social security typically spend less on their prison systems. Last year, California spent 11% of its state budget on its prisons – more than it put into higher education. "For marginalized populations in Anglo countries, the prison increasingly acts as a kind of surrogate welfare state," says Pratt. "That's

not only much more expensive than running a welfare state, it's also brutalizing and often degrading – and that has negative consequences for everyone.”

### **It Takes a Village**

Thirty-six percent of prison places in Norway, including all of those at Bastoy, are classified as low-security. With perks like unlimited phone calls and up to four days of leave per month, they act as inducements for good behavior elsewhere: inmates at high-security prisons can apply for transfer at any time, and authorities are legally obliged to consider transferring them during the final year of their sentence. And while the conditions at Norway's 52 prisons vary, even the strictest facilities stress rehabilitation over retribution. The maximum sentence, even for murder, is just 21 years. “At some point in the future, these men will live in the community,” says Knut Storberget, Minister of Justice and the Police. “If you want to reduce crime, you have to do something other than putting them in prison and locking the door.”

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Norway took that strategy to a new level by inaugurating Halden, a maximum-security prison ten years and about \$230 million in the making, situated in southeastern Norway. With a capacity of 252 inmates, it's the country's second largest facility – and its most secure. Security guards use a system of underground tunnels to get around the prison, and a twenty-foot concrete-and-steel wall surrounds the perimeter. But, following guidance from the ruling Labor Party, the harsh signs of incarceration end there. According to a 2008 government-issued white paper, “the smaller the difference between life inside and outside the prison, the easier the transition from prison to freedom.”

With that in mind, architects designed Halden to mimic a small village as a way to remind prisoners they are still part of society. Hans Henrik Hoilund, one of Halden's architects, describes the prison as “an iron fist wrapped in a silk glove.” To avoid an institutional feel, exteriors are made not of concrete but brick, galvanized steel and larch. Trees obscure the wall, which is rounded at the top, Hoilund says, “so it isn't too hostile.” Inside, the cells rival well-appointed college dorm rooms, with their flat-screen TVs and mini-fridges. Designers chose long vertical windows for the rooms because they let in more sunlight. And every ten to twelve cells share a living room and kitchen, which resemble Ikea showrooms. “Many of the prisoners come from bad homes, so we wanted to create a sense of family,” says architect Per Hojgaard Nielsen. To preserve the important bonds of an inmate's real family and to reduce tension, the prison has a two-bedroom house where inmates can host guests overnight.

“The punishment is to be in prison, not to lose your rights as a citizen,” says Terje Moland Pedersen, the Deputy Minister of Justice. Building on its so-called “normalization principle,” the prison expects inmates to spend most of their day out of their cells. From 8am until 8pm, the authorities organize activities on jogging trails and in a soccer field, a woodshop, a professional training kitchen and a recording studio. “When prisoners arrive, many of them are in bad shape,” says Are Hoidal, Halden's governor. “We want to build them up, give them confidence through education and work and have them leave as better people.”

Strong relationships between prisoners and guards also help with rehabilitation. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom, who are sometimes seen as little more than turnkeys, Norway's prison guards enjoy an elevated status. They undergo a year of theoretical

training and a year of practical training at an officers' academy. They don't carry guns – which create unnecessary social distance and intimidation – and they call prisoners by their first names and play sports and eat meals with them. The respect they get from prisoners stems, for the most part, from appreciation, not fear. “Twenty percent of them shouldn't work with people – or animals,” says Lars, the inmate at Bastoy. “But the other 80% think it's their mission in life to help people. I believe most of them.”

### **Shared Values**

Criticism of Halden has been muted, but it does exist. At the moment, foreigners account for 32% of Norway's prison population, and Per Sandberg, deputy leader of the conservative Progress Party, worries that Halden's high standard will lure more organized crime to the country. “Foreign criminals are coming to Norway because they know there are good facilities for them and shorter sentences compared to those in Romania or Bulgaria,” he says. While he's not thrilled that the government spent \$1 million outfitting Halden with art, his main complaint is that foreigners shouldn't exploit the welfare system: “Halden should only be for Norwegian criminals.”

But in general, Norway's cultural values and attitudes toward crime mean the public sees no need to push for tougher penalties or harsher prisons. In Halden, the local community sees the prison as an opportunity for jobs, not as something to fear. The majority of Norwegian prisoners don't pose a serious threat to society. Nearly three-fourths of those released in 2009 had spent less than ninety days in jail for crimes such as drunk driving and petty theft, and that same year police investigated just twenty-nine murders in a country of 4.8 million people. Bastoy's policy on escapees demonstrates how little people worry about criminals out in the community. Nilsen, the governor, makes a deal with inmates when they arrive. “If you run away, please telephone us as soon as possible so we know you are OK and won't need to make use of helicopters,” he says, noting there have been just three incidents in the past two years. “They always ring and say, ‘I'm all right. I'm safe.’”

The national media's portrayal of crime also helps foster tolerance for Norway's prison system. Newspapers rely on subscriptions rather than newsstand sales, so they don't depend on sensational headlines. And the writing style is less emotional, more pragmatic, than in other countries. In his book *When Children Kill Children: Penal Populism and Political Culture*, American criminologist David Green compares the British media's reaction to a murder case in which children tortured and killed a child with a similar case in Norway. The British newspapers, he writes, portrayed the murder as “alarmingly symptomatic of deep-seated moral decline in Britain.” The Norwegian papers, however, presented their case as “a tragic one-off, requiring expert intervention to facilitate the speedy reintegration of the boys responsible.” In Norway, acts of extreme violence are seen as aberrant events, not symptoms of national decay.

### **Beyond the Walls**

Despite the exceptional conditions in Norway's prisons, it's still a challenge for someone who's incarcerated to learn how to live in freedom. Thomas Mathiesen, co-founder of the Norwegian Association of Penal Reform and professor emeritus at the University of Oslo, says amenities shouldn't blind people to that reality. “If you consider the possibility of spending three months or

three years in a hotel like the Continental in Oslo with guards all around, you can [see how] even the most humane prisons present a series of problems.”

The government agrees. Although it has no plans to shut down its prisons completely, there is momentum to expand alternative sanctions like an electronic-monitoring program, which currently allows around a hundred criminals sentenced to four months or less to serve their time at home, limiting disruption to their families’ lives.

The government is also keen to set up more so-called “open prisons” like the Sandaker facility in downtown Oslo. Situated on the ground floor of a residential apartment building, Sandaker houses 16 inmates who work in the city during the day and return to the apartment in the evening. In order to be released, residents (they’re not called inmates) must first secure employment. Lars Oster, Sandaker’s head, says that allowing convicts to spend the last stretch of their sentences at the facility helps ease their transition from imprisonment to freedom. Residents pay rent, clean their own clothes, take out cell-phone contracts and have access to the Internet – many for the first time in their lives. “Prisons are like bubbles. They’re safe, you always have food, you know what to expect,” Oster says. “Here, you have to face reality and prepare yourself mentally and practically for life on the outside.”

Back on Bastoy, Lars has been thinking about life on the outside for nine years – the first eight in a high-security prison, and the past year on the island. Despite the idyllic scenes – farm, fjord, fresh air – Bastoy punishes him every day. Sure, he now knows that cows are more affectionate than horses, but that doesn’t make up for having to watch his four children grow up from afar. “It makes you tired,” he says, pointing out that he has to be counted by guards four times a day, submit to random drug tests and return to his chalet by 11pm every night. “I’m grown up now,” he says. “I’m too old for this.”

But he still has two years to go before parole. In the meantime, he runs a bicycle-repair shop in a converted shed and organizes group sessions for prisoners who want to become better fathers. He’s active in the community, but says he won’t miss it. “I don’t know if I’ll commit crime or do drugs again,” he says taking a drag on a cigarette. “I hope not. I don’t want to visit this place again.” If Norway’s prisons fulfill their promise, he won’t have to.