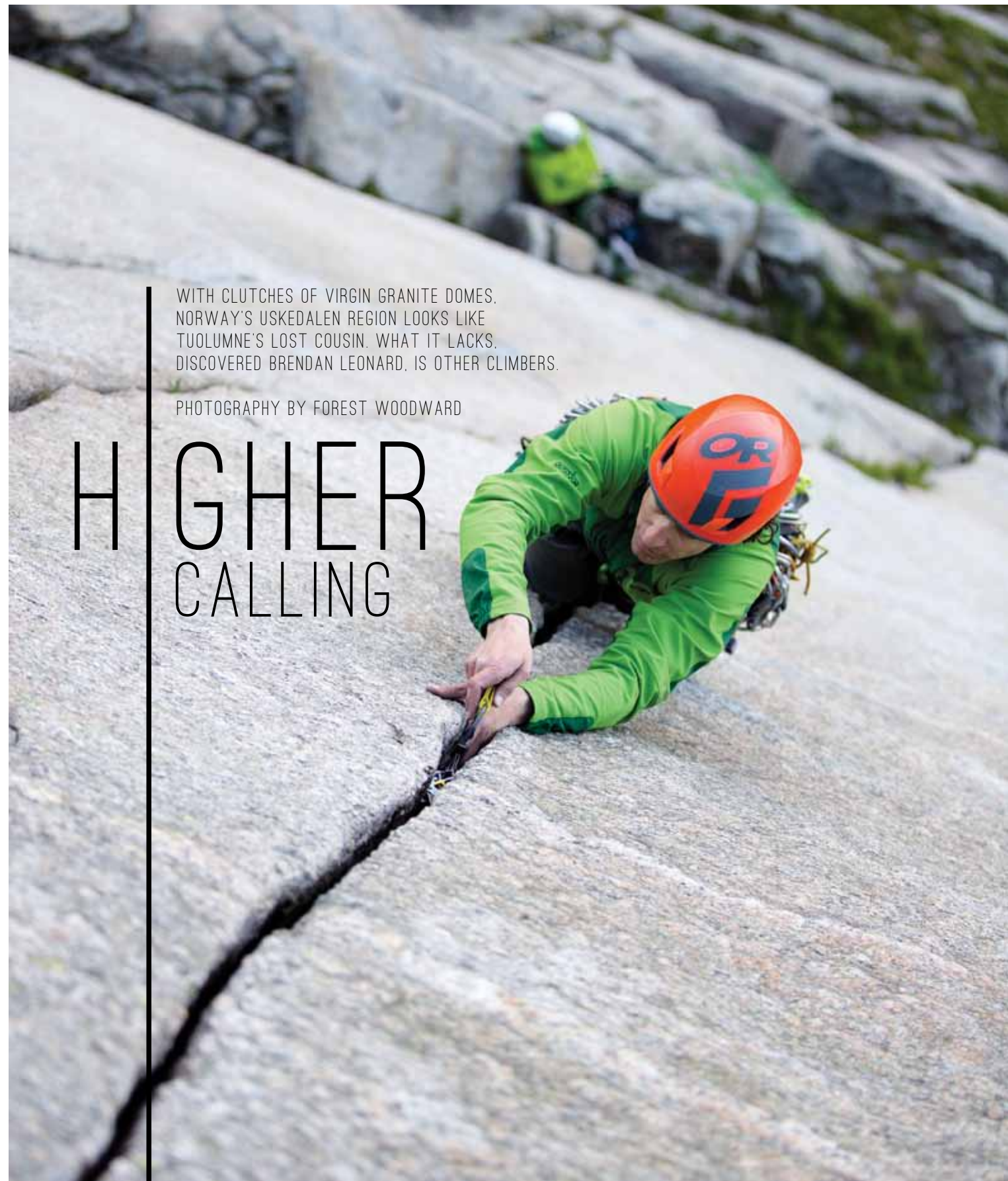


WITH CLUTCHES OF VIRGIN GRANITE DOMES, NORWAY'S USKEDALEN REGION LOOKS LIKE TUOLUMNE'S LOST COUSIN. WHAT IT LACKS, DISCOVERED BRENDAN LEONARD, IS OTHER CLIMBERS.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FOREST WOODWARD

HIGHER CALLING



ON our second day of climbing in Uskedalen, three of us huddled under the first pitch of *En Midsommernattsdrøm* (“Midsummer Night’s Dream”). We peered skyward as Chris, 80 feet above us, delicately picked his way up a thin slab with another 1,200 feet of gently sloping granite ahead. Forest paid out slack as I chatted with Odd Magne Øgreid, the area’s guidebook author, and tried to tuck myself into the dihedral to escape a persistent chilly breeze. The pitch was supposed to fall between 5.9 and 5.10a. Chris, comfortable on 5.10 traditional climbs, was moving slowly but calmly.

“I think you keep going left,” Odd yelled up to Chris for the third time in 10 minutes, as Chris continued to head straight up instead. *Wait, Odd isn’t sure where the route goes? I thought. When your partner is that far away from you, you hope he does three things: stays cool-headed, places adequate gear, and doesn’t fall. Eighty feet away, Chris was doing only two of those.*

Imagine your *ultimate climbing adventure*, I told friends when talking about Uskedalen, a valley in southeastern Norway. I had scrutinized photos of immense granite walls for months, dubious there could be something on our diminishing planet so huge and accessible, but still so unexplored. Sprawled two miles along the northeast slopes of the 4,000-foot Ulvanosa massif are four colossal faces, up to 2,800 feet tall: Øktertind, Akslo, Geitadal, and Vetletind. I wondered why, when only 10 minutes from the nearest town, there were only 60 established routes. Most of the rock is untouched, and even on existing routes, a legion of variations is possible.

If you’ve heard about climbing in Norway, it probably hasn’t been Uskedalen. Usually, attention is directed up north, on the intimidating, 4,000-foot-tall Troll Wall in the Romsdalen Valley; the remote Lofoten Islands; or Adam Ondra’s 5.15c route *Change* in the Flatanger Cave.

In 1987, Per Vigerust, a Bergen local known for first ascents on the Troll Wall and a few notable Himalayan expeditions, established Uskedalen’s first route after years of visiting the area. Later that year, he brought two friends, Knut Bjerke and Jostein Bønes, to the valley to lay siege on the walls, and the result was the 5.7 *Ville Okser* (“The Wild Bull”), which climbs big dihedrals and chimneys for four pitches to the shoulder of the northeast ridge on Akslo. It’s still the only route in the half-mile-wide hanging valley between two of Uskedalen’s large walls.

A month later, two more Bergen climbers, Otto Bårholm and Ketil Strømme, arrived to follow a dihedral system all the way to the top of 3,091-foot Vetletind, calling their route *Uskedalsdiederet*, or “Uskedal’s Dihedral,” a 13-pitch 5.9. Soon, whispers of big walls, short approaches, and virgin rock began to fly. In June 1988, the Bergen Climbing Club held its spring gathering in Uskedalen, and more than a dozen participants camped in the valley below Vetletindveggen, the main wall on Vetletind. Ten-pitch routes went up on the main wall as other parties surveyed shorter features. By the end of a long weekend, more than 80

new pitches had been established.

Development continued throughout the summer, and Uskedalen soon had its most well-known route, *En Midsommernattsdrøm* (5.10c/d), shooting straight up the face of Øktertind. In spring 1990, the Bergen Climbing Club published a small guidebook, including 18 routes. New route development slowed but remained steady in the 1990s, and in 1995, Audun Igesund published an expanded guidebook with 40 routes.

Since 2000, 16 new routes have been documented at Uskedalen, and Odd Magne Øgreid’s name is on half of them. Odd, a youthful, jovial 43-year-old, first started coming here about 10 years ago, after learning to climb in Bergen. “We drove into the valley, and we saw these immense rock faces, and I felt really small,” he says. “I thought, ‘Am I really going up there?’ I have never done anything like it.” He and a partner climbed *Uskedalsdiederet*, and with a few route-finding issues, topped out just before midnight to watch the sunset from the top of Vetletind. They caught a couple hours of sleep before descending. He’s come back every summer since, drawn both by the granite and its height—big multi-pitches like Uskedalen’s are hard to find near Bergen. During my visit, he admitted that he could probably find more lucrative work in the private sector, but he loves his job as University of Bergen physics professor. It allows him more time in the mountains.

Because Odd has climbed more routes at Uskedalen than almost anyone, he was a fitting choice to put





TK captions for photos on this spread.

together a guidebook published by the Bergen Climbing Club. Out this past May, the book is indispensable, with hand-drawn topos and black-and-white photos of all 60 routes (and a dictionary translating Norwegian climbing terms into English). Route development isn't exactly progressing at a lightning pace; Odd says most Norwegians would rather sport climb, but if Uskedalen's full potential was tapped, at least 150 more routes could go up.

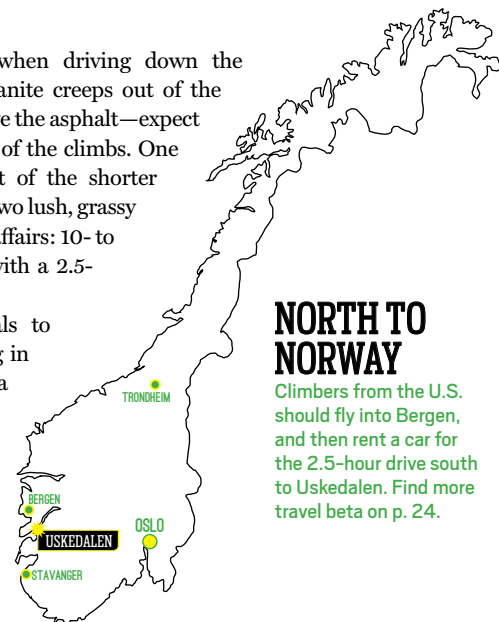
"Most people tend to climb whatever's been established," Odd says. "They're not so adventurous anymore. But there is enough adventure for years to come."

You'll pass curious farmers, sheep, and cows when driving down the narrow valley's single-lane asphalt road. The granite creeps out of the mountainside just a few hundred vertical feet above the asphalt—expect a 30-minute to one-hour bushwhack to the base of the climbs. One wall, Vetletindpillaren on Vetletind, holds most of the shorter routes, which end two to five pitches up on one of two lush, grassy ledges. The rest of the walls are more committing affairs: 10- to 18-pitch climbs that reach the summit, ending with a 2.5-hour walk off the backside of the mountain.

The climbing on Uskedalen's granite appeals to every style of climbing: stemming and laybacking in dihedrals, slab climbing, flaring cracks, and even a few splitters. You can count on a lifetime of rock, some iffy route-finding, and an alpine feel (the sun goes behind the mountain from about 3 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. in June, providing shade but not darkness)—though you can still hear the bells on the sheep grazing at the bottom of the valley when you're five pitches up. In Norway,

a law called *Allemannsretten*, or "all men's right," means hikers can walk anywhere they want—with consideration for landowners, farmers, other users, and the environment. It also means although the rock faces of Uskedalen are privately owned by the farmers below, we can climb wherever we want. The farmers have the right to ban bolts, but fixed hardware is few and far between: a handful of rap stations, some bolted slabs, and a couple bolted slab climbs. The ethic here is ground-up trad.

When it doesn't rain, Uskedalen has long days—we had 20 hours of daylight in June. While walking to the car at 9 p.m., our running joke was, "Better hurry before it gets dim!" Ample daylight tricks you into thinking you'll be motivated to climb for 20 hours, but it actually makes it harder to get started early in the morning, and harder to stop drinking coffee at night. The Golden Hour (dawn and dusk when soft light makes for gorgeous photos) lasts for two and a half hours here.



NORTH TO NORWAY

Climbers from the U.S. should fly into Bergen, and then rent a car for the 2.5-hour drive south to Uskedalen. Find more travel beta on p. 24.

ODD'S LIST DON'T MISS THESE 10 FAVORITES

Kolkyjereryggen (5.4), Akslo

Solo the first couple thousand feet of easy fifth-class rock, walk the middle section, and then rope up for five or six pitches of exposed 5.4 to the 4,094-foot summit.

Silkeveien (5.7-), 6 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

A good first Uskedalen experience: Consistent 5.7- that follows a crack for 800 feet—with hardly any crack climbing.

Bob Roger (5.7), 3 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

The first ascensionists' friend wanted to name his newborn son after his two heroes, Bob Dylan and Roger Moore. His wife didn't agree. This is a mellow hand crack with thoughtful moves.

Apenbaringen (5.7+), 6 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

This 1,000-footer tackles a dihedral with "very delicate moves," but good feet.

Uskedalsdiederet (5.9), 13 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

One of the first routes put up in Uskedalen, the name of this one translates to "Uskedal's Dihedral." It's 2,500 feet of 5.7 and easier climbing up a huge dihedral, with a 100-foot pitch of 5.9.

Dronning Maud Land (5.10), 2 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

This short but sweet route has varied climbing up a dihedral and a slab, before launching into one of the best finger cracks in Uskedalen.

Postscript rett I offset (5.10b), 14 pitches, Akslo

Start with the crux—a runout slab, and then continue for 2,100 feet up dihedrals and overhangs, with a bit of route-finding on the final pitches.

Alkymisten (5.10b), 5 pitches, Vetletindpillaren

Odd put up "The Alchemist" with his girlfriend Caroline in summer 2012, and then added a bolt to protect the face climbing on the crux pitch. The rest of the route is 5.8 or easier.

En Midtsommernattsdrøm (5.10c/d), 12 pitches, Øktertindveggen

"One endless crack that continues all the way to the top." If there is an area classic, this is it.

Taramarabyen (5.11), 5 pitches, Øktertindveggen

The 5.11 crux pitch—delicate climbing above small, but good, gear—makes this one of Odd's favorite climbs.



Tk captions for photos on this page

Odd estimates that 200 climbers visit Uskedalen annually. Compare this to the thousands who frequent Yosemite Valley, or, hell, even the hundreds that dot the granite of my local crag weekly. Locals here hike plenty in the nearby mountains and the 78-square-mile Folgefonna Glacier, but they don't have much of an interest in rock climbing—it's a short season, and the nearby fishing is much more tempting. But you will run into farmers, whose goats often get stuck up on the rock slabs. They get the animals down with an old technique called the "goat glissade": holding them between your knees and stepping down the slab as the skittish goat pushes back, effectively applying the brakes for both of you. Though they don't share this particular interest, climbers and farmers get along. As Uskedalen climber Jo Gjedrem says, "They each appreciate that it is not only stuck goats or insanity that make people climb mountains."

Chris finally punched through the slab on *En Midtsommernattsdrøm*, gaining a ledge and letting out a "Woot!" The three of us collectively sighed in relief. Only two marginal nuts had protected stout 5.10 moves. When we all met at the next belay, we joked about calling his new variation "The American Dream." Then we all climbed through the crack we had seen in photos, the third-pitch splitter: 60 feet of perfect fists, then hands, and then finger jams and locks. True to Uskedalen's style, it petered out into a slabby traverse on tiny gear. Chris once again took the sharp end, followed by Forest; then it was my turn to lead, and I cursed the final funky dihedral that led to the belay.

During my brief visit, I came to understand Uskedalen for what it is—interesting and wild, a secret stash in an unexpected place. You won't find cracks polished by thousands of jams, or holds greased with 30 years of shoe rubber and chalk. Instead, you'll stem, smear, jam, layback, stand on tiny crystals, run it out, ration your gear, and follow your nose. They've got something special in that little valley in Norway, and it might just stay that way.

USKEDALEN LOGISTICS

WHEN TO GO: Late May through September are the driest, warmest months, with June and July having the most stable weather (and longest daylight hours).

GUIDEBOOK: The Bergen Climbing Club's book, *Klatrefører for Uskedalen*, is essential. Buy online at ffshop.no (\$72 including shipping to U.S.) or buy it at Rabben Camping in Uskedalen or the Kvinnherad tourist information center in Rosendal (\$48).

LODGING: Rabben Camping in the village of Uskedalen (10 minutes from climbing) has sites with Wi-Fi and showers for \$24/night, or cabins starting at \$72/night. Find free camping at the end of the road beneath the Uskedalen walls in Fjellandsbø—if you don't mind sharing it with some cows. Rooms are also available at the Dønhaug Guest Farm, overlooking the Hardangerfjord and 10 minutes from the climbing, starting at \$96 per night (donhaug.com).

GETTING THERE: Fly into Bergen. It's easiest to rent a car, as Uskedalen is a 2.5-hour drive from Bergen. Or take an express ferry to Rosendal (\$56 each way, leaves Bergen twice daily, rodne.no) and then hop on the bus to Uskedalen (\$5, skysse.no).

FOOD AND DRINK: Uskedalen has one small café and a Thai cart. The grocery store, Spar, is open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. (8 p.m. on Sundays) and sells beer until 8 p.m. (7 p.m. Sundays).

REST DAYS: Rent sea kayaks and mountain bikes and get local beta on both from Wilderness Norway (wilderness-norway.no) in Rosendal. Find hiking and other information at the Kvinnherad tourist information center in Rosendal (20 minutes north) or at visitsunnhordland.no.



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