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Silversands

Naguib Sawiris and AW² bring a new level of luxury to Grenada befitting of the island's natural beauty

Petter Stordalen

The 'rock star' hotelier talks prioritising people and pushing boundaries at Nordic Choice Hotels

L'Oscar

Jacques Garcia transforms a former London Baptist church into a hedonistic hideaway





MEETING

Petter Stordalen

Following his showstopping acceptance speech at AHEAD Europe, the founder of Nordic Choice Hotels talks strawberry selling, pushing boundaries and crash-landing at a hotel launch on his jet ski.

Words: Lauren Ho | Photography: Courtesy of Nordic Choice Hotels (unless otherwise stated)

It's late morning on a Monday at the Oslo headquarters of Nordic Choice Hotels. The offices are humming with post-weekend activity as staff members dart in and out of the art-filled, wood-pannelled rooms of the stately building that was the former home of Ivar An Christensen, a Norwegian ship owner.

We are sitting on the mezzanine level in an open-plan space that looks down onto the bustling lobby and Petter Stordalen, the company's owner, is enthusiastically talking about his sidekick, Öbbe, a huge German Shepherd with inquisitive eyes, who looks eager to come and greet me. "I have someone in Sweden who trains my dogs for the first year of their lives; Öbbe is not allowed to greet people without my permission and I can activate him in a split second," he says, snapping his fingers as he shoots Öbbe a look that sends him skulking back to sit at his master's feet.

In an entirely befitting all-black ensemble of a low-cut t-shirt, skinny jeans and steel-tipped boots, his hair casually flopping over his forehead, in person, Stordalen is exactly as expected. Dubbed the rock star of the hotel industry thanks to a number of headlining antics – one of which involved descending in a giant disco ball while playing the drums at the opening of Gothenburg's Clarion Hotel

Post – the billionaire hotelier, environmentalist, philanthropist and all-round businessman is, well, energetic to say the least. After all, it's not often a hotel owner arrives thundering – and subsequently crashing – on a jet ski, wearing a flash handmade Balmain jacket, for his new hotel launch.

No doubt, it's this freewheeling spirit that has resulted in Stordalen's success as the owner and president of one of Scandinavia's largest hotel chains, now with over 190 hotels in its portfolio serviced by 16,000 employees, and which at one point grew so fast, it is said 50 people were added to the payroll every 10 days. "People nearly fell of their chairs laughing when I said I was going

to build the largest hotel chain in Scandinavia," chuckles Stordalen.

A man from much humbler beginnings, Stordalen grew up in the city of Porsgrunn, about an hour or so south of Oslo. The son of a grocer, his business nous became apparent when, at the tender age of 12, he began selling strawberries at the local market. As the story goes, Stordalen, envious of the other sellers who had fresher, larger berries, was told by his father to 'sell the berries you have, because they are the only berries you can sell.' On this advice, by the age of 24, he had graduated to running and then owning shopping

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Above: At Six in Stockholm forms part of Nordic Hotels & Resorts, a collection of independent properties across Scandinavia

centres. Some 30 years later, the simple strawberry has become a symbol for a lucrative empire – called Strawberry – that, along with hotels, comprises 11 companies, that span across real estate, finance and art. “My father’s quote became the ‘Strawberry Philosophy,’” says Stordalen emphatically. “Today the berry symbolises more than the legacy of my father. It represents the people and companies, that with their bold ideas and determination, have created my business universe – Strawberry.”

As for his foray into hospitality, Stordalen admits it happened by chance. “It was a bit of a coincidence that I invested in hotels,” he reveals. “I was intrigued by the combination of people, property and operations and, for me, the hotel industry represents everything I love: people, culture and food.”

This ‘coincidence’ began in 1996, when – after leaving his position as CEO of the real estate company Steen & Strøm Invest – Stordalen and his business partner at the time became the majority shareholders of the Scandinavian operations of Choice Hotels, the American hospitality company behind the brands, Comfort, Quality and Clarion. From there, over a three-year period, it is said they

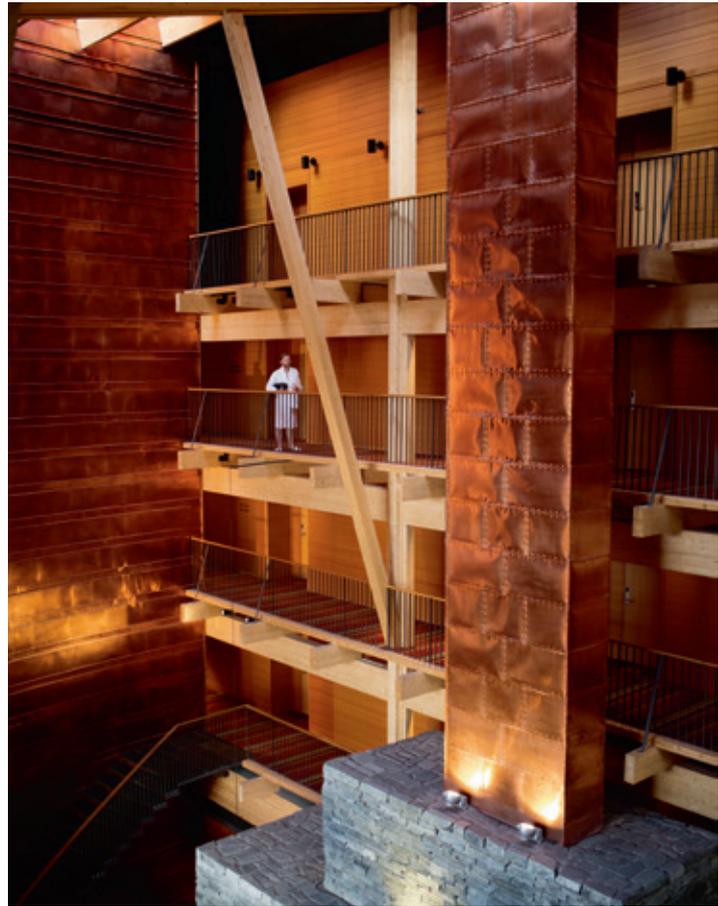
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snapped up, on average, a new hotel every other week across Norway, Sweden and Denmark, resulting in a collection that rivals global chains like Hilton and Sheraton as the go-to brand within Scandinavia.

Of course, not one to sit on his laurels, Stordalen then used his hospitality know-how to explore the industry further, and in 1999, he launched his first independent hotel, Stenungsbaden Yacht Club, a laid-back property on a marina, just half an hour north of Gothenburg. This was followed by

Yasuragi, a Japanese-inspired spa hotel on the island of Värmdö in Sweden’s Stockholm archipelago, and now includes 26 hotels that sit under a separate arm called Nordic Hotels & Resorts. Art-centric The Thief in Oslo, as well as Stockholm’s At Six and Hobo – adjacent properties designed by Universal Design Studio and Studio Aisslinger respectively – also form part of the collection.

“Our ambition has always been to be pioneers; we are constantly looking for opportunities to evolve, change and grow,” explains Stordalen. “Our independent hotels allow us to push the boundaries in terms of service and standard, and allow us to create destinations with a strong identity, with variety and personality.”



Above: Hobo in Stockholm and Copperhill Montain Lodge in Åre showcase the variety and personality across the portfolio

But despite the earlier authoritarian performance with his dog, Stordalen, surprisingly, doesn't micro-manage, preferring instead to let his team get on with doing what they do best. "My only job is to put together the right people and give them the freedom to create something," he says graciously. "If you think a 50-something-year-old man is the one that creates new hotels, you're wrong. Even though I think I am young and that I completely understand the next generation, I don't. So, it's important for me to bring on board people who do."

This is most apparent with Amerikalinjen, the group's newest hotel in downtown Oslo, which Stordalen's crack team have, in a first for the city, successfully transformed into a thrumming hub with a series of restaurants and bars that are sure to be packed with locals and visitors from the moment the first early morning plate of eggs are served, to last orders at night. "I wanted this to be a hotel not only for guests, but for everyone," explains Stordalen. Located on Jernbantorget Square, adjacent to Oslo Central Station, the hotel occupies a listed Neo-Baroque pile originally built in 1919 by Norwegian architects Andreas Bjercke and Georg Eliassen for Norwegian America Line, the now expired cruise company that

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transported the many hopeful Norwegians to the The Land of Opportunity.

A grand international statement at the time, on the outside, the building is adorned with maritime-themed copper and stone reliefs, decorative carvings, figurines and sculptures, while interiors are characterised by high vaulted ceilings, ornate mouldings and magnificent staircases. Here, both the concept and the décor of the hotel take their cues from the building's history, with a subtle adventure theme and references to New York. For example, the hotel's brand colours are inspired by the blue and red on both countries' flags, the green of the Statue of Liberty and the pink hues of the early morning sky as you first sail into the Big Apple; and Pier 42 – the cocktail bar named for the first point of entry once given the nod to enter the United States – has a menu that shows a stylised drawing of the original building's steel-framed arched windows. Meanwhile, in the 122 guestrooms, Helsinki-based firm Puroplan has created a contemporary canvas to highlight the classic Norwegian furnishings – including the Veng armchair by Torbjørn Bekken and the modernist Birdy table lamp by Birger Dahl – that have been reproduced by local companies Eikund and Northern.



Above: The Thief in Oslo features a standout lithograph of the Marlboro Man by Richard Prince **Opposite:** Due to open in March, Amerikalinjen sees the transformation of a listed Neo-Baroque pile into a thrumming hub with a series of restaurants and bars

Of course, this would not be a Stordalen hotel without a strong modern art angle. Unlike the grand statements at The Thief with its standout lithograph of the Marlboro Man by Richard Prince, or the giant marble head by artist Jaume Plensa at Stockholm's At Six, the company's go-to art guy, Sune Nordgren has taken a subtler approach, instead choosing to layer the public spaces with artist Alex Katz's distinct colourful portraits. But then again, with the biggest art collection in Scandinavia, both private and business, Stordalen's hotels are like one collective gallery, which Nordgren – the former director of Norway's National Museum – has the freedom to curate and adjust accordingly. “The art is something you remember at our hotels,” says Stordalen. “Interior architects often want something to fit in with the colours, but I like to have a contrast and for Sune to curate something that stands out.”

Up next will be the opening of Sommerro, a neighbourhood hotel in Oslo, housed in an Art Deco building that used to be the headquarters for Norway's Electric Company. But, ever the pioneer,

“Our independent hotels allow us to push the boundaries in terms of service and standard, and allow us to create destinations with a strong identity, with variety and personality.”

Stordalen's wider vision is to create the most sustainable hotel brand in Europe, which is not surprising given his personal environmental activism, which includes breaking into a UK nuclear plant and chaining himself to the bridge for nine hours in protest of discharging radioactive waste into the sea. Philanthropically, he has also donated large amounts of money to various charitable organisations – particularly within environmental and climate change or scientific research – through The Stordalen Foundation, which he set up with his wife Gunhild, a doctor and environmentalist. Further proof, then, that this self-made businessman – who recently won the gong for Outstanding Contribution at the AHEAD Europe awards – might be unconventional, but he is certainly a force to be reckoned with. “We are as eager to grow today as we were when we first started,” emphasises Stordalen. “Our recipe is simple: people! The right people with the right attitude, and the diversity in our company is the reason why we are successful. This, along with our values: energy, courage and enthusiasm.” Enthusiastic, indeed.

