La Donaira landscape
© La Donaira

Back to the Land

Six beautiful settings that allow guests to reconnect with nature.

by Clara Le Fort

People are turning their backs on cities and finding new meaning in a life lived on the land. We look at six examples of hospitality projects that embrace the permaculture principles of organic farming and gorgeous fresh produce.

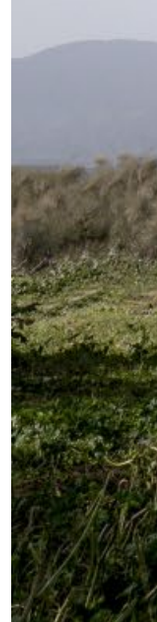
Finca La Donaira, Andalucía, Spain
Set on 1,730 acres of land in the middle of the dramatic Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park in Andalusia, Finca La Donaira is a great example of luxury agricultural hospitality: a movement that celebrates farm-to-table food and authenticity. It is built in an old Spanish farmhouse tucked between protected oak forests and a biodynamic farm.

Although a rustic vibe pervades the house — think worn brown-leather seats; wreathes of dried flowers; trough-like sinks; and beamed ceilings — the style is very much country living for the finely tuned design eye. Local craftspeople painstakingly restored this traditional cortijo ('farmhouse') over many years using traditional methods; its architecture and interiors celebrate natural materials, ranging from stone floors and lime-plastered walls to tiled roof, leather, wood and copper.

La Donaira is ahead of the sustainable curve. The biodynamic farm is based on the principles of Rudolf Steiner: "Our approach to farming is open and experimental: a mix of tradition and innovation but based on permaculture design principles," the owners explain. It also provides guests with gorgeous meals, olive oil and wines. All dishes are based on ingredients that have been grown or foraged on the property, supplemented by local produce sourced from a network of small artisan producers.

La Donaira has it all: ancient oak trees; olive and almond groves hidden deep in green valleys; organic vegetable plots; and a vineyard. The lodge also keeps sheep, goats, rare-breed cattle, hens, and bees, and the owners breed Lusitano horses (the world's oldest saddle horse) according to natural horsemanship principles. With the method known as horse whispering, the 70 noble horses are trained without stress or fear.

To stay at the cutting edge, La Donaira hosts interesting thinkers from all walks of life; depending on the event, natural beekeepers, rammed earth architects, bird nest designers, influential farmers and artists will gather around a communal table and discuss.



Clockwise from left: La Donaira provides guests with gorgeous local cooking and wines. A rough-hewn swimming pool © Anna-Maria. The resort breeds and trains Lusitano horses according to traditional horse-whispering methods © Anna-Maria.

"There is a saying I love. You look after vineyards for yourself, grow olive trees for your children and cork oaks for your grandchildren. That is my vision of a sustainable future." — José António Uva, owner of São Lourenço do Barrocal

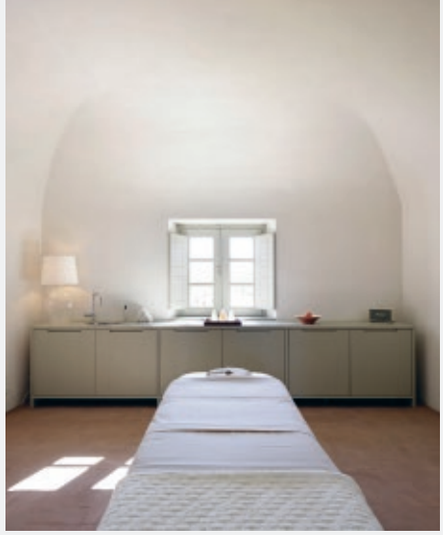
São Lourenço do Barrocal, Alentejo, Portugal
José António Uva, owner of São Lourenço do Barrocal in a remote part of Monsaraz, Portugal, has brought his 1820 family farm back to life, turning it into an elegant retreat that sits among century-old olive trees and cork oaks. "Here, there is a saying I love," Uva explains. "You look after vineyards for yourself, grow olive trees for your children and cork oaks for your grandchildren. That is my vision of a sustainable future." In applying these principles, Uva created a 'slow luxury' retreat geared to future generations.

Everything is vast in the Alentejo: endless vineyards, fields of olive trees, and century-old cork oak trees form a landscape that has not changed for centuries. To a certain extent, there is something almost biblical about the region. Uva returned to his home country in 2002 and decided to move into a small farm building on the property to see if, and how, he could fix it up; it had fallen into utter disrepair during Salazar's dictatorship.

Uva soon realised that when it came to measuring and assessing sustainable solutions, people always get it wrong: "Sustainability can't be reduced to certifications, checklists, and consulting firms that follow protocols using set variables. Following a much more pragmatic approach in this arid part of the country, I found that sustainability is what endures from generation to generation. This sustains life on a broader timeline and brings actual longevity," he explains, while admitting that no banker could ever think like that. The plan, therefore, had to be as vast as the land.

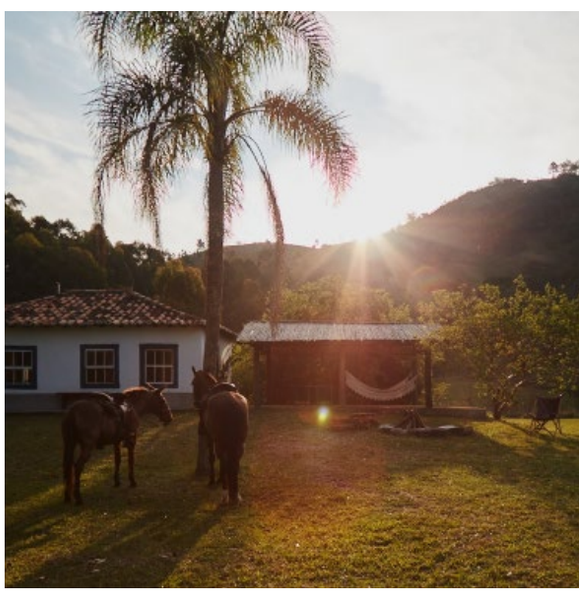
Uva opted for a vernacular architecture (using local materials and knowledge), which was designed by local architect (and Pritzker Prize winner) Eduardo Souto de Moura. Uva also adopted a completely organic approach to farming, including the estate's olive oil, cork, and wine production. With these actions, Uva has set a very high bar for luxury, sustainable hotels.

Uva's wife Ana Anahory, a successful interior architect, worked on the interiors. A palette of muted colours, ceramics designed in collaboration with Caldas da Rainha, and pots of field flowers, hand-crafted furniture created with young carpenter Tomas Viana, all create an atmosphere that exudes quiet luxury and attention to detail. Anahory also reclaimed the old doors and beams to turn them into coffee tables. Unique to the property, the organic vegetable garden thrives in every season, while the 6,000-year-old menhir seems to not even notice years, decades, and centuries that go by.



Clockwise from top: The spa at São Lourenço do Barrocal © Nelson Garrido. Spa details © Rory Wylie. The Meadow Cottages, inside and out © Rory Wylie.

Clockwise from top left: Different flours (manioc, corn, buckwheat) are homemade at Fazenda Catuçaba. Eight Amazonian Indians from the Mehinakus tribe built a local oca in three weeks: it can sleep up to 20 people in hammocks. Animals roam freely in from the Fazenda, an old plantation house: horses, peacocks, sheep and hens. A sculptural 'door' created by Bielorussian artist Pasha Radetzki out of hard Amazonian wood. Trees are sacred on the domain and never cut.



Fazenda Catuçaba, Brazil
In southern Brazil, Fazenda Catuçaba is much more than a hotel: set on the edges of the Serra do Mar State Park, it is the doorway to understanding the awe-inspiring power and fragility of nature.

Set up by Frenchman Emmanuel Rengade, this 19th century plantation has been converted into a unique luxury resort. Given that Catuçaba means 'good land' in the local Tupi-Guarani language, one can't help but notice that nature thrives on the grounds of the estate. Everywhere you look, there are chickens, cows, ducks, horses and dogs. Abundance also comes to the kitchen, where fresh produce collected from the estate's permaculture vegetable garden arrives twice daily.

At Fazenda Catuçaba, Rengade takes it a step further. Art, design, architecture and sustainable agriculture are also used to build environmental awareness. Inside the old building, guestrooms are decorated with local crafts and Brazilian-designed furniture. On top of a hill sits Bamboo Cathedral, a landscape project by designers Humberto and Fernando Campana. A serene ring of towering bamboo, the project was conceived to allow visitors to reconnect with nature without any added thrills. Similarly, Geneviève Maquinay's sculptures, crafted from recycled local materials, blend into their natural surroundings.

These initiatives naturally led to another architectural experiment with Brazilian-Uruguayan firm MAPA, the makers of Minimods: high-quality, fully sustainable prefabricated homes (or, in this case, hotel lodgings) that collect their own water and electricity, effectively taking them off the grid. Such an approach resonates well with the village's proximity to the Mata Atlantica rainforest, a unique ecosystem, part of which is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Since its conservation is essential for the future of the planet, Fazenda Catuçaba makes sure to apply and promote environmentally friendly practices on an everyday basis. Waste and compost are managed on the property and the hotel uses only biodegradable products.

Moreover, social accountability is a reality in Catuçaba. Most of the hotel employees are locals from the village who have been trained by the hotel and are paid more than the average local wage, leading to a trickle-down of wealth in the region.

Babylonstoren, Cape Town

East of Cape Town, Babylonstoren is a unique kind of farm. Spread over 200 hectares, it welcomes countless alleys of fruit trees, a magnificent greenhouse reminiscent of London's Crystal Palace (on a smaller scale) and a Cape Dutch style manor dating back to 1777. Babylonstoren is one of those timeless gems. The garden takes its cue from the Company's Garden of Cape Town, which supplied passing ships to the Cape with food in the 1600s.

Commissioned to plan the layout of the garden, French architect Patrice Taravella imagined 15 clusters spanning vegetable areas, stone and pome fruits, nuts, citrus, berries, bees, herbs, ducks and chickens, a prickly pear maze, and more. Gravity feeds water from a stream by rills into the garden, flowing through ponds planted with edible lotus, nymphaea lilies and waterblommetjies. Every one of the 300-plus varieties of plants in the garden is edible or has medicinal value. They are also grown as organically as possible and in a biologically sustainable manner. The fruit and vegetables from the garden are harvested all year round for use in two farm-to-fork restaurants. Along the edge of the garden, a natural stream flows from the Simonsberg Mountain to the Berg River, creating a space for indigenous wild olives to flourish. Head gardener Liesl van der Walt and her team tend the plants, turning the property into a botanical haven one can learn so much from.

At night, fresh produce packed in crisp linen is hand delivered to the doorstep of every cottage ('farmers' houses'); every family is invited to prepare its own dinner in the beautifully appointed kitchen, facing the garden; sharing, learning and cooking rather than ordering from a menu. In the greenhouse, the freshly picked vegetables are set out on rough granite tables: purplish red onions, cabbage that seems too green to be real, and leeks with their flowers still in bloom. This is an ideal retreat for city dwellers who long for the authenticity of the country and children that are eager to learn. Guests are further invited to activities such as fruit picking and gardening classes, in between organic-chic meals featuring new varieties of vegetables.

Castello di Vicarello, Tuscany

Set in the heart of Tuscany, Castello di Vicarello is a 12th century castle built by the Republic of Siena, some 900 years ago. When Carlo and Aurora Baccheschi Berti came across the property in the 1980s, it was in a dilapidated state. Beautifully restored since by the duo of aesthetes, the Castello sits in a sanctuary where uncontaminated nature prevails. Protecting both the historical and fertile nature of the land, the stylish couple brought it back to its former glory. Investing, from the early days, in a sustainable approach, the estate is rich with home-grown products. A dedicated team of gardeners grows over 50 varieties of vegetables and 30 aromatic herbs in its vegetable garden, also looking after olive groves and an award-winning vineyard.

Running this 'earth-to-table' approach are the owners' three sons, Neri, Brando and Corso. They not only run nine individually designed suites (and are presently adding another six) but also looking into restoring the 11th century church, providing guests with unique, flavourful Tuscan dinners, and constantly improving the celebrated wines. With seven hectares of high-density, organically grown vineyards, the estate produces four varieties of organic wines. The ancient soil is rich in clay minerals, marine deposits and calcium.

Playing in the grounds of the Fynbos Family House at Babylonstoren. Castello di Vicarello is a restored 12th century castle in Tuscany.

Details at Ebbio in Tusany, run as a self-sustained farm © Romain Ricard

Ebbio, Tuscany
Also nested in the heart of Tuscany, Ebbio is the story of two women, a mother and a daughter, who turned a 13th century farmhouse in ruins into a healing destination surrounded by 17 acres of rustic countryside. “When my mother Francesca Bevilacqua bought the place in 1989, she was fleeing urban life. She wanted to live in harmony with nature, respect the seasons, and live sustainably. And to be surrounded by people who felt the same,” explains Sibilla de Vuono, who remembers her mother being ‘different’ when she was a child, imagining Ebbio as a place to heal and gather, reconnect with oneself and disconnect, long before cellphones even existed.

Thirty years in the making, the wellness retreat remains unique and ahead of its time. Run as a self-sustained farm, Ebbio lives by the words ‘ripe, fresh, in season, straight from the tree.’ It produces all the fruits and vegetables used in the kitchen. Foraging brings additional surprises such as porcini mushrooms, chanterelles, asparagus or stinging nettles in season. Recipes are creative and traditions honoured. From cooking workshops to food preservation, nothing goes to waste. ◇

For those looking to discover more conscious places, Clara Le Fort’s book Bon Voyage by Gestalten, is out now.
https://gestalten.com/products/bon-voyage

Hotel Union Øye, a hotel in the Sunnmøre Alps dating from 1891 © Jonas Bendiksen

The Norwegian Way

A deep commitment to sustainability is the story behind a Norwegian travel company.

by Clara Le Fort

Knut Flakk, founder of experiential travel company 62°Nord, is passionate about social initiatives, eco-travel and protecting the environment. Over the years, Flakk has built a number of new businesses and enterprises. All are run according to a 'triple-bottom-line' theory: planet, people, and profit, in that order. Since its inception, 62°Nord has generated more than 150 jobs and the group has contributed close to US$10 million to the local economy (salaries, purchases from local suppliers and profits).

The 35km-long Hjørundfjord © Fjord Norway

"As I started to appreciate the values of nature, I wanted to protect it. I was conscious of that long before it became the key focus in running a business."
— Knut Flakk, founder of 62°Nord

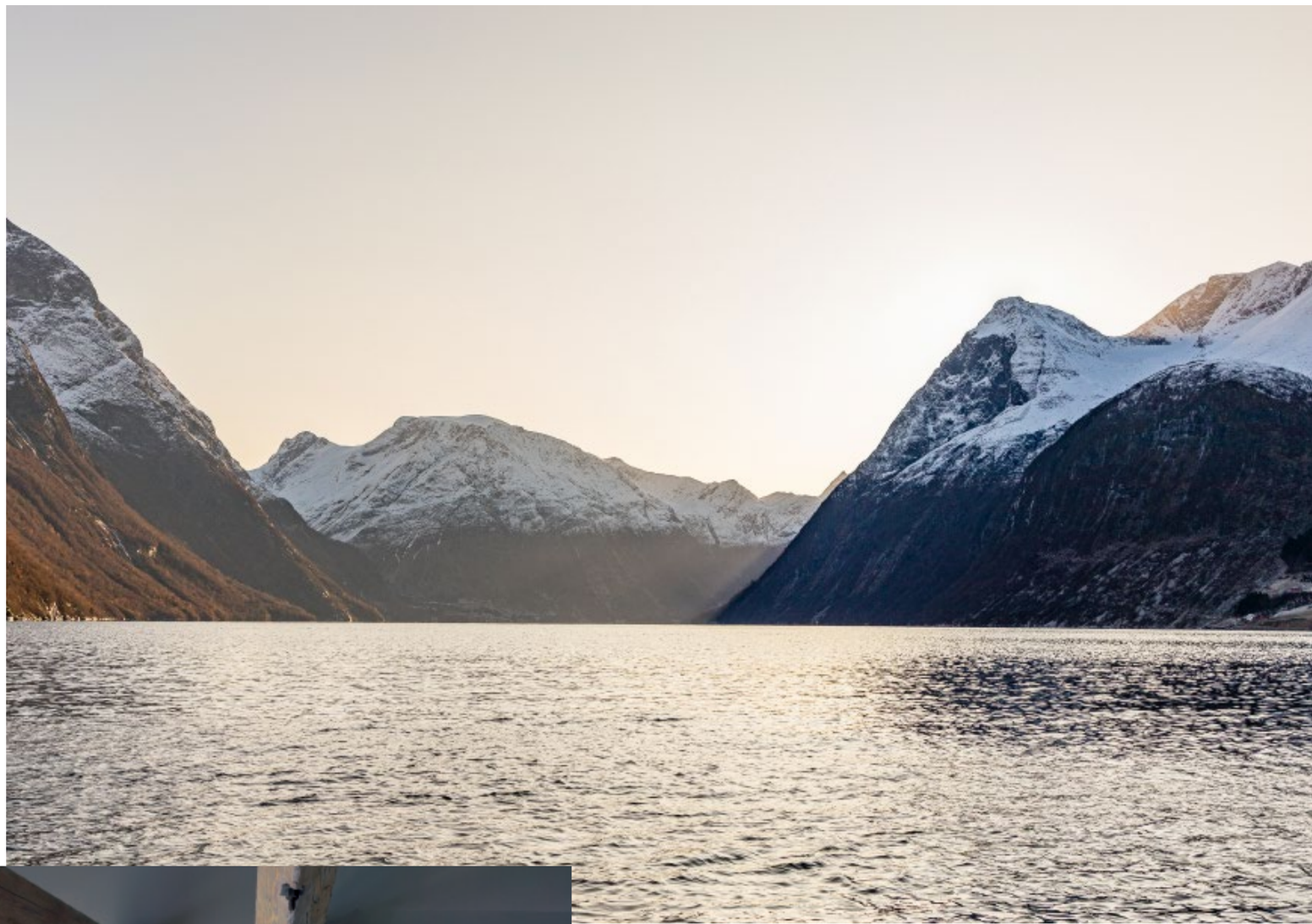
We sat down to talk with Knut Flakk, a visionary entrepreneur who has sustainability and social initiatives at heart.

Was there a trigger for you focusing on sustainable travels?
It's hard to pinpoint what the trigger was. Both my parents grew up on a farm and I was raised close to nature, where the scenery, rugged coastline and fjords are splendid. I was also a Boy Scout, which meant I was outside for all seasons of the year. As I started to appreciate the values of nature, I wanted to protect it. I was conscious of that long before it became the key focus in running a business.

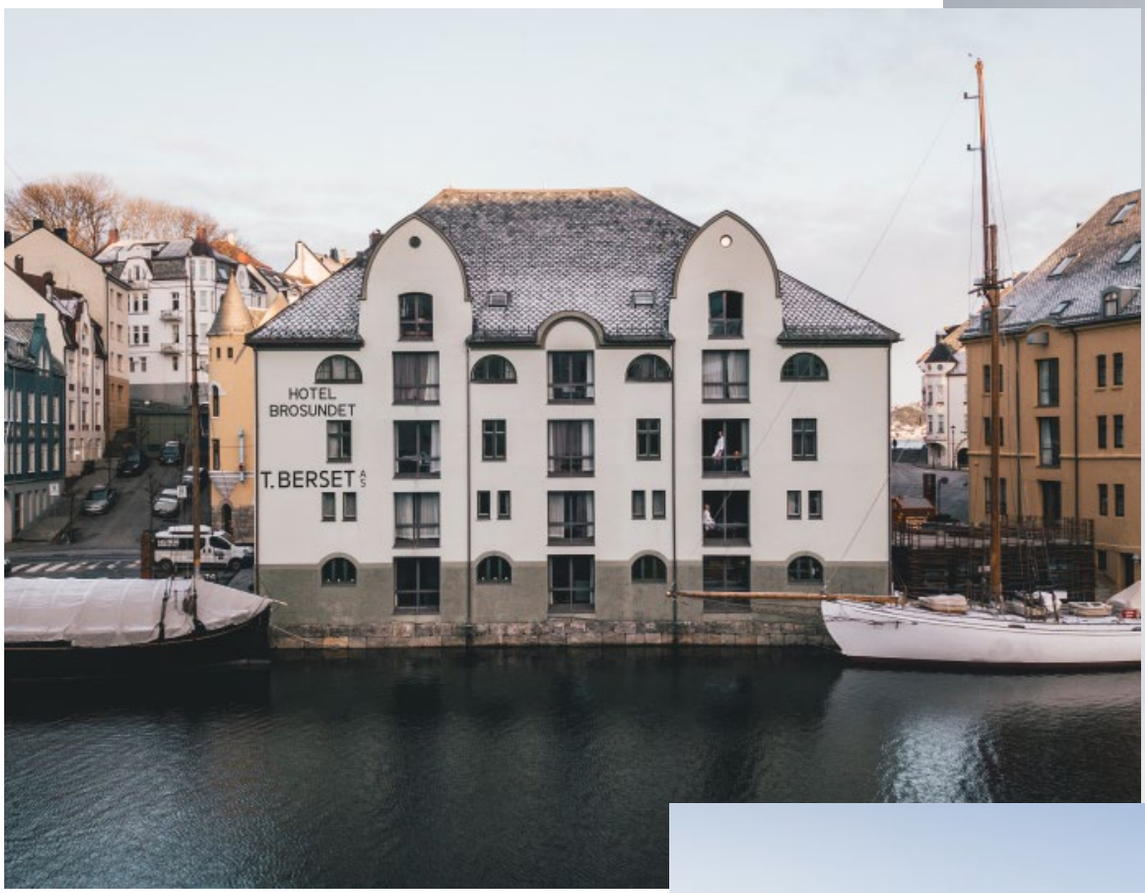
How does running a wool business relate to developing a high-end experiential travel company?
We acquired the Devold textile business 30 years ago, in 1989. It was the oldest textile company in Norway still in operation. It took us 10 years to turn it around and make it work. Today, it is the leading wool brand in Norway. I was 29 back then, but, with experience, I can now see how the wool business and 62°Nord share the same values. On the one hand, there is a unique fibre that is natural, sustainable and renewable. On the other, a high-end experiential travel company, which is built around protecting the land, the people and Norwegian culture. At Devold, we work directly with farmers who are adamant about animal welfare; buying from them year after year means we can trace back every yarn. At 62°Nord we build the same trust with people, buildings and places. To care and protect is very much part of our philosophy.

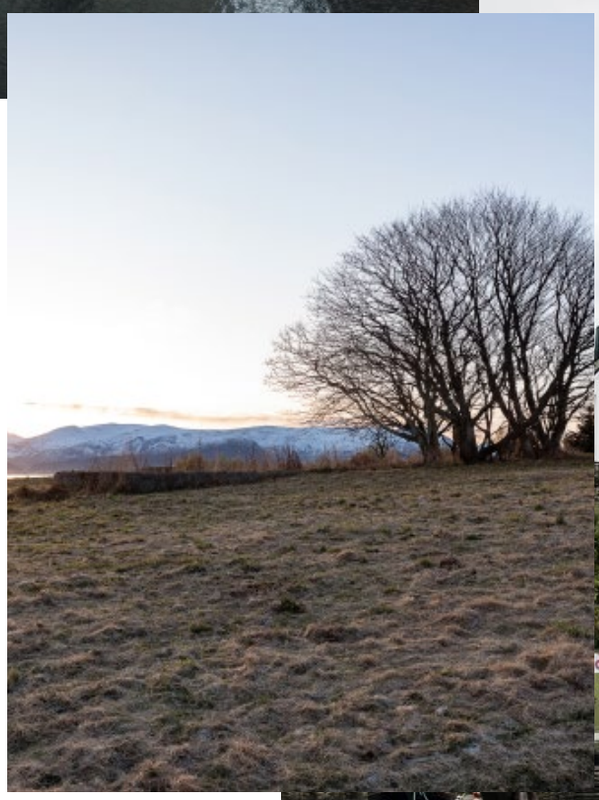
How did 62°Nord begin?
In 2003, faced with the rise of labour costs, we had to close down Devold's Norwegian operations and transfer them to Lithuania. We had no other means to survive in the long run. It was a difficult decision to take. The Devold factory had been running for 150 years. How could we then create jobs that would be sustainable in the long run? As an avid skier and hiker, I always wanted to share the Norwegian mountains and fjords with the world. What if we could develop it in a way that positively impacted people? What kind of sustainable and competitive business could we build in the long run? As hospitality was new to us it took us some time to understand how this would work.

You believe in a 'triple bottom line', including planet, people and profit. Can you please explain this theory and its application?
Our goal is to achieve maximum return in capital, while preserving the environment and enhancing social welfare. Making money is important but should not be seen as the end



From top: A Fjord © Ingallsphoto. Suite in Hotel Brosundet © Hotel Brosundet. Bathroom in Hotel Union Øye © Silje Midtgård


HOTEL
BROSUNDET
T. BERSET AS



Clockwise from top: Exterior view of Hotel Brosundet © Frederik Bye. The charming Molja Lighthouse, a unique hotel room that is part of Hotel Brosundet © Kristin Stoylen. Owners Cabin at Staurneset © Ingallsphoto. A suite in Hotel Brosundet © Kristin Stoylen.

Winter fjord © Christian Remøy

"There is a growing awareness of the need to protect nature and, as a businessman, I can contribute. Our philosophy is providing luxury in the Norwegian way, preserving culture, empowering people and protecting nature." — Knut Flakk

game; it is an instrument that enables us to care for people and the planet. And that gives you so much more purpose at the end of the day. To improve people's lives and take care of nature, in a better way than previous generations, is what we are dedicated to. You can only apply it by taking your time. If you become greedy when developing, you will destroy your product and the planet. It also makes sense to focus on the high-end market. Not only is the footprint lower, but visitors engage more and make a higher contribution to protecting the wild once they've experienced it.

How did the acquisition of Hotel Union Øye help protect Norwegian culture and traditions?
Sitting at the end of the Hjørundfjord, Hotel Union Øye was built in 1881. It is one of Norway's historic hotels. Two decades ago, it was run down with hardly any activity. It was bought by a trio of investors who started to renovate it. In 2008, we took over, acquired the hotel, and have continued to restore it in a traditional way to convey local culture and traditions. At the end of the 19th century, it became an important spot for climbers, especially British ones. It was important for us to expand the hotel in its original style, to bring visitors back in time. It's challenging on a day-to-day basis but can be done if you are willing to spend a little more and money. By staying true to the history of the hotel, we are adding value to it in the long run; we will even be developing an 1890s-style British garden around the hotel.

You are also involved in creating a hydrogen hub to bring transport emissions in the fjord to zero. Can you tell us more?
Hydrogen will be needed as an energy carrier in the sustainable revolution. Hydrogen is an efficient way to store renewable energy. A UNESCO-listed heritage site, the Geirangerfjord is accessible by ferry from Ålesund, where a surplus of electricity is produced. The aim is to create a hydrogen infrastructure capable of providing the local ferries with hydrogen-powered engines. We are completing the planning and regulatory paperwork at the moment and intend for this new energy hub to be running by the end of 2022. As this project unfolds, we are hoping to develop many hubs in other parts of the country.

What is your vision for the future of 62°Nord?
There is a growing awareness of the need to protect nature and, as a businessman, I can contribute. As for the near future, there are many projects, but all will be in line with our philosophy: providing luxury in the Norwegian way, preserving culture, empowering people and protecting nature. ◇

https://www.62.no/en/hotels/

Noma's Arca Console table made
from 92 percent recycled marble
© Studio Swissmiss

Waste Not

Nine designers pioneering waste in design.

by Clara Le Fort

Aware of a growing demand for sustainable products, designers are increasingly viewing waste as a quarry for new materials. We list nine designers who are pioneering the use of waste in design.

Noma: Recycled materials into furniture

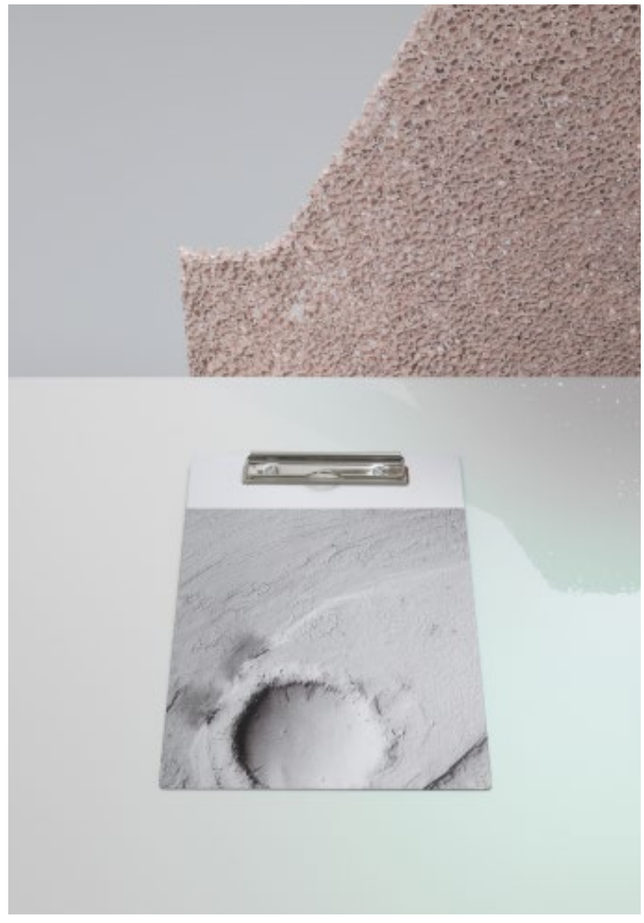
For two decades, Guillaume Galloy, a production engineer, and Bruce Ribay, an architect, designed and oversaw the construction of high-end projects for global luxury brands. In 2019, they founded Noma, a brand that manufactures high-quality furniture and everyday objects, conceived by leading designers using discarded materials. "One of our priorities was to concentrate on recycled materials: we believe that, today, they are the noblest," the founders explain. The first collection showcases only sustainable and virtuous pieces: a candleholder carved out of a crystallised slab of marble waste by Sam Baron; recycled plastics turned into an armchair or side table by Charlotte Juillard; and a stool by Martino Gamper.

HÅG: snowplough markers into chairs
Norwegian design brand HÅG has made 200 Capisco Puls chairs from recycled snowplough markers. This limited edition is in a beautifully unique auburn colour, a result of the mixed recycled plastics. Used to line roads in Norway's often snowy mountain roads, the luminous markers indicate the curbside. Made of a tough plastic mix capable of enduring harsh environmental conditions, thousands of damaged and tired snow poles are collected and discarded each year. Snowplough markers are now in short supply as the Norwegian road administration has identified their environmental impact and is replacing them with sustainable Norwegian pine and Danish willow wooden alternatives.

Kaffeeform: Coffee grounds into cups
It all started as an experiment with coffee grounds. Product-designer Julian Lechner was intrigued by the idea of creating something new and lasting out of supposed waste. In 2018 he discovered a unique formula: recycled coffee grounds and renewable raw materials such as starch, cellulose, wood and natural resins could be transformed into a durable, robust material. Kaffeeform was born. The search to gather sufficient quantities of coffee waste then began. Today, a bicycle courier collective gathers used coffee grounds from selected cafes and roasteries in Berlin. The grounds are then dried and preserved in a social workshop before the material is compounded and shaped into coffee cups in small plants across Germany.

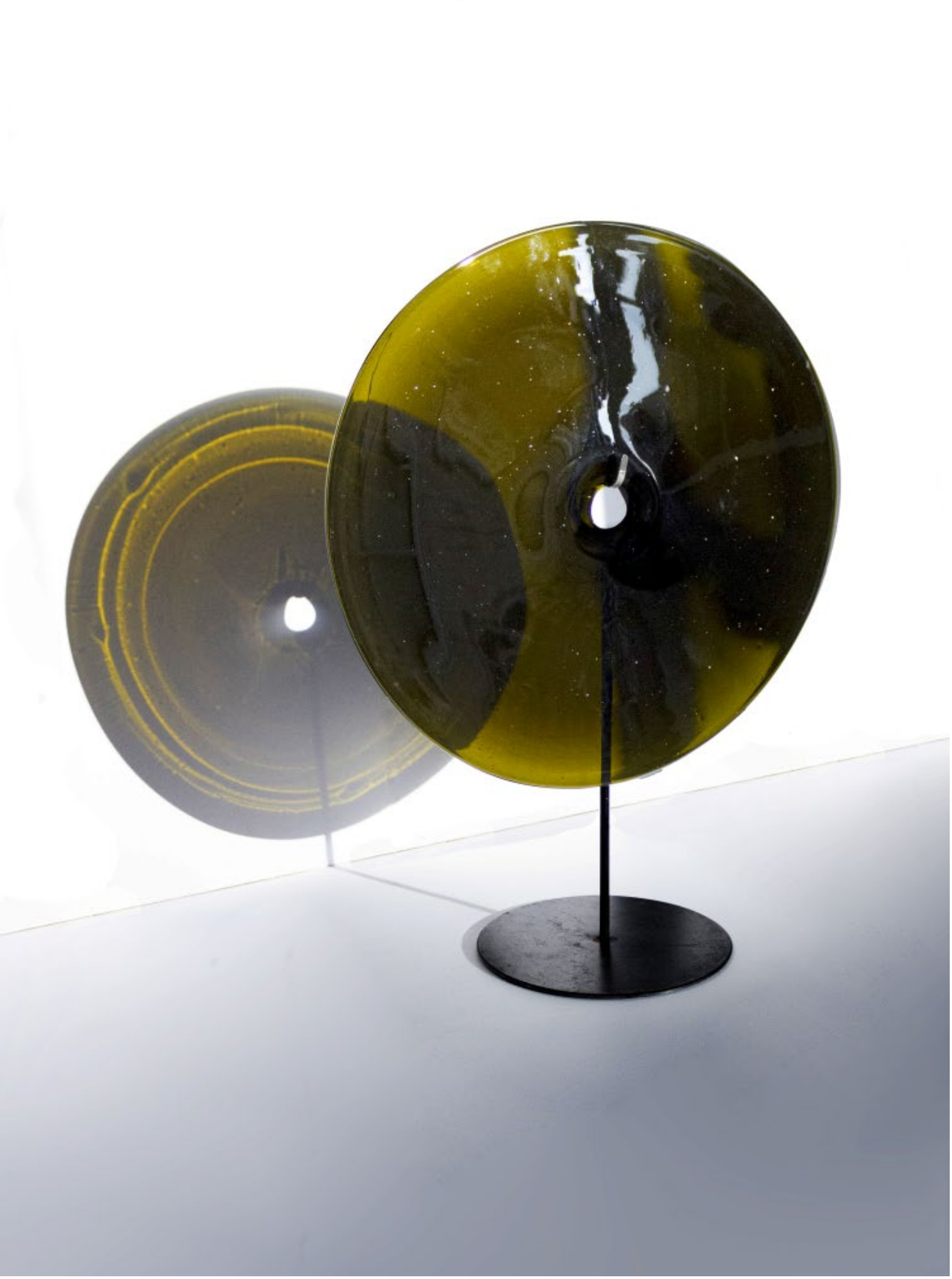
Left: Kaffeeform's cappuccino cups. Centre and right: HÅG turns snowplough markers into Capisco Puls chairs

Left and right: Ore Streams, a project to upcycle electronic waste into furniture and cubicles by Formafantasma.



Formafantasma: Electronic waste into furniture

Design duo Formafantasma are leading the charge on how we look at electronic waste, and how design, as a whole, could be an important agent for more responsible use of resources. By 2080, the most significant metal reserves will not be underground but above the surface. Today, discarded hardware is everywhere; no one really considers electronics are the world's fastest-growing waste stream. Only 30 percent of the West's e-waste makes its way to appropriate recycling facilities and efforts to recycle it remain experimental, uncharted, and contentious. The office furniture created for the Ore Streams project invites more in-depth exploration of how design can transform waste into desirable products. The furniture is constructed out of recycled iron, aluminium, dead stock of computer cases, and recycled electronic components.



Powdered seashells and microalgae
can be turned into glass.

Ostraco: Seashells into marine glass

We rarely consider the shells once we've eaten an oyster or a seafood platter. But designer and head of research Lucile Viaud found a way, back in 2015, to re-evaluate the potential of seafood waste. She imagined a marine glass named 'Glaz': composed of micro-algae and oyster shell powder, which can be endlessly recycled. Winner of the Paris Design Prize in the emerging design category, Viaud also worked with Michelin-star chef Hugo Roellinger to create a collection of glass containers from abalone shells; the same abalones are cooked by the chef and presented on one of her dishes. Viaud believes designers play a very important role in the conservation of our environment, but also of our resources and traditions.

Snøhetta's chairs made from fishing nets.

Snøhetta: Recycled fish nets into furniture
Leading architecture firm Snøhetta researched how to use recycled plastic as a valuable resource, employed in new ways. Together with furniture manufacturer Nordic Comfort Products, Snøhetta developed a chair that has one of the lowest carbon footprints: its body is made from 100 percent recycled plastic collected from the local fish-farming industry in northern Norway, and a subframe made from recycled steel. The process is simple: once the worn-out fish nets, ropes and pipes are collected, they are processed and ground into a granulate that can be injected into formwork, generating endless possibilities for developing new objects.

Maximum: Industrial waste into furniture

Based in Ivry, near Paris, Maximum turns industrial waste into furniture. Co-founder Armand Bernoud explains: "Every working factory is faced with an unwanted production: scrap pieces, prototypes, pre-series, downgraded pieces: a good chunk of the production is often rejected and discarded as waste. In France, we are looking at 65,000 tons a day." Faced with such an abundant resource, Maximum decided to scout France to find standardised products that could easily be re-used. The Gravêne chair, for example, is made using plastic waste, rejected for its imperfect colouring; transformed into liquid plastic by Maximum, the recovered material is moulded into a chair and finished by hand. The legs are made from century-old oak, left over from the wine-barrel industry.

Kristen Wang: Coffee grounds into furniture

Another project made from locally collected coffee-ground waste and other coffee waste, Melbourne-based designer Kristen Wang designed the Re-Bean stool: 100 percent biodegradable, it has won many prizes. It has a coffee smell and tactile feel. The coffee grounds are collected, processed and transformed locally, using a mold that can be endlessly reused, without any use of chemicals.

Studio Swine: Waste into various projects

Design duo Azusa Murakami and Alexander Groves, founders of Studio Swine, first created their Sea Chair, made from ocean plastic, in 2012. Together with local fishermen, they collect plastic recovered from the oceans, creating a Stool at Sea. They have worked with locals to rethink design in all corners of the world: for example, they use fish skin from the Amazon in Brazil to make fine fish-leather cushions for a chair. ◇

Kristen Wang's coffee bean 'Re-bean' stool.