

For many years, Norway was not good enough. Now operators are gearing up to welcome the ultra-rich tourists.

A small part of the Norwegian tourism industry is catering to tourists with unlimited holiday budgets. But to succeed, there is still some work to be done.

The ultra-rich tourists do not holiday like most people.

- Guests come from the US, the UK, Australia and some other countries, says Stig Sletten.

He runs Wolf Lodge in Bardu, about 80 kilometres north of Narvik. Hardly any Norwegians have ever checked in. Instead, the wolf lodge is a magnet for rich foreigners who don't want to be seen by anyone other than the hosts, nature and some very special animals.

The owners describe the cabin, or "lodge" as it is called, as "one of the most exclusive, sought-after experiences in the entire Nordic region, and priced accordingly".

They offer snow and northern lights, but the main attraction of the place is the polar park that the lodge is part of.

The lodge is located inside an 18-acre wolf enclosure. The predators literally walk right outside the bedroom window. "The lodge is connected to the outside world through an underground tunnel.

The park also contains bears, moose, lynx, arctic foxes and other animals.

- And the price? I don't usually say much about it, but it is several hundred thousand kroner for three days, says Sletten.

This is how it is among the wolves in Bardu:

(wolf lodge images)

Standard price from around 100,000 and up

In tourism, this is known as the 'high end' market. It is the one per cent of the world's population that has the ability - and willingness - to pay for the very best that tourism has to offer.

In this market, attractions and services are not priced as the hotel industry does. Part of the purpose of the price is to keep out those who can't really afford to stay there. There are plenty of those who are just curious.

Hotel owner Stig Fische says that when he launched Villa Støtvig a few weeks ago, he made a guess. He ended up with a daily rate of NOK 100,000.

Mr Fische has invested NOK 75 million in a brand new six-bedroom villa south of Moss. It will be rented out to rich tourists and management meetings in large companies.

- "But I am patient and prepared for the fact that it will take time to incorporate such a product," says Stig Fische.

Now only one thing remains: Getting a helicopter landing pad in place.

- It will be used as a putting green for golf when there is no helicopter there.

This is the new Villa Støtvig

(photos)

Should we carry their luggage for them?

Norway has long fallen short in this market. Norwegian hotels have improved, but much of the rest - not least the service and food - has been too poor for the ultra-rich to head for Norway.

Much of the reason, according to people in the industry, has been that we here up North think what we have is good enough. Or it should be good enough.

Norwegians are often practical, they emphasise. Therefore, we also make decisions on behalf of our guests. Here are two examples:

- People complain that hotel rooms are too small and lack sufficiently large wardrobes. Norwegians reply: - Don't pack so much.
- Many foreign tourists expect their luggage to be carried up to the room. Norwegians reply: "They have to carry their luggage themselves. We do that when we are travelling.

We are used to thinking that what is good enough for us must be good enough for those who visit us. We also take pride in treating everyone equally.

So says Gro Linn Gamst. She runs the company Nordfolk Travel and specialises in tailor-made holiday experiences in Norway for guests in this market.

Standing out from the rest of the tourism industry

Gamst has seen a change in attitude in recent years. More people in the tourism industry recognise the opportunities and try to reach out to these tourists.

But even if everything is in order: No Norwegian player enters this market via traditional booking channels.

The gateway is agents who work for the world's rich to plan their holidays.

There are thought to be around 500-600 of these. Many of them can be met at annual travel fairs for this market. The most famous one is organised in Marrakech, and two other venues are fairs in Cannes and Miami.

To have a chance of attracting these guests, Norwegian landlords rely on being recommended by Norwegian agents - such as Gro Linn Gamst - who are invited to these fairs.

- It can be a tight squeeze. Good relationships with buyers are therefore important," she says.

A day in Oslo? 180,000 kroner, please.

The daily rate for the villa south of Moss may face competition from those who want to swap sea views for city life. When it is completed in April, a mansion in Oslo will compete with the Wolf Lodge to be Norway's most expensive accommodation.

- "We expect several target groups to stay here, but artists and families from the Middle East and the US are two important segments," says Jarle Moen.

He is the director of the hotel Sommerro. In two months, the hotel will open its most exclusive offer, the neighbouring Villa Inkognito, built in 1870 by architect Thøger Binneballe.

It has been a private residence, an office building for Oslo Lysverker and an embassy for Algeria. Now the villa has been converted into a luxury residence with 11 rooms and suites, each with its own bathroom.

Those wishing to rent the property can expect to pay up to NOK 180,000 a day.

However, services such as a private chef, butler and driver are included in the price.

- These guests are less price-sensitive than regular hotel guests," Moen explains.

This is what Oslo's exclusive rental property will look like:

(photos)

One trend in the market: Renting the entire hotel

Before Oslo gets its fashionable villa, two regions in Norway have been at the forefront of the race for the ultra-rich: Northern Norway and Western Norway.

There are several players here, and not all of them want attention. However, Knut Slinning is clear that he wants to focus on this market.

He has been running Juvet Landskapshotell for 13 years. The hotel consists of seven small cubes on stilts, with glass walls that give guests a view down the Valldalen valley in Sunnmøre. But he has to make changes to attract the richest tourists.

- "We 'block out' 12-15 periods a year where we make it possible for one family or group to rent the entire hotel - without other guests.

This is known in the trade as a 'buy out'. The price will depend on the nature of the request, but guests must in any case expect to pay NOK 70,000 per day.

- In this group of tourists, we have to organise everything to a much greater extent. This applies to transport, guiding and everything else that may be requested. In addition, the food must be of the highest quality," he says.

A white spot on the map

From his base in Antwerp, Norwegian Stig Egard has been in this market for many years. His company, A2D World, organises everything from private holidays to professional trips for large international companies.

So far, most of the trips have been to everywhere but Norway.

- The nature is there, but there has been a crying need to raise the standard. Norway has had a reputation for not delivering on quality, he says - and points to two factors:
Difficult to find accommodation that meets expected standards. Little understanding of how to raise the level of service in Norwegian tourism companies.
- "But now I have become more confident in presenting Norway to this market," he says.

And it has paid off. Later this year, Egard is sending 150 people from a large international company to Norway. The programme includes accommodation and experiences in Oslo, Bergen and Ålesund.

- "During these six days, they will spend at least NOK 7.5 million in Norway," he says.

Must put aside the Norwegian mindset

Gro Linn Gamst is keen for Norwegian tourism to understand this market better. In plain language, this means the following: "We must put aside the Norwegian attitude and provide what these tourists expect.

What we Norwegians may perceive as a hassle, they regard as good service. They expect everything to be organised 24 hours a day. But they pay well for it.

- It's not about treating people differently, but doing the best you can for someone who is willing to pay well for the services," says Gamst.