

60 years in the making

A gondola and a world record

By Hans R. Holdener



It only took almost 60 years to make it happen...



On 17 September 2016 my cousin Mindor and I went on a hike. We had no idea that the hike would end up changing Åndalsnes, the birthplace of my mother, forever—a change 57 years in the making.

Åndalsnes had long thrived as a small, vibrant village. As a child, I thought of it as my dream place.

But over the years, people moved away, businesses shut

down, and shops closed. Åndalsnes had changed from a dream place into a ghost town.

What had made Åndalsnes, in Norway's breathtaking Romsdal mountains, so special? For me, looking out at Mount Nesaksla from my grandmother's house, it was the dream of having a gondola that would one day take me to the top and down again.

Dream Place... Or “Shit” Place?

It turned out that having a gondola on Mount Nesaksla had been talked about for more than 60 years. The steep steps to the summit and the long, difficult path down meant the Romsdalseggen hike was possible only for fit hikers—this prevented many people, especially the elderly, from enjoying the views. Over the years, lots of people had been injured. Including me! The need for a gondola seemed obvious.

In 2016, during that hike on the Romsdalseggen with my cousin, I twisted my knee going down from Nesaksla to Åndalsnes center.

I was in pain—and really angry. So I called a journalist from the local newspaper, Åndalsnes Avis, and told him that this “shit place” had destroyed my knee and that I would never come back!

“And I will tell every person I know not to take this hike because it’s so dangerous,” I told him. “Unless there is a gondola—it’s the only solution.”

The journalist wrote my story and it ended up on the front page. He had asked if I could raise the money to build a gondola.

“If the politicians deal with the legal issues and get the necessary permits, I will likely get the financing,” I said. I really didn’t know what I was getting myself into.





A Vision, A Task Force... But No Financing

Since that day in 2016, the Gondola cable car has been a top news item. I continued to be very involved—and continued to make provocative statements. Trying to raise support for my cause, I reached out to Oddbjørn Vassli, a former local politician. “Let’s do it,” I urged. “Now is the right time!” To my surprise—and relief—he agreed, and we had soon pulled together a small “gondola task force”: Oddbjørn Vassli, Lars Olav Hustad and me. I was feeling optimistic at last and told Vassli that if he formed a company, the rest would follow. So he did: Romsdalen AS was

born mid-2018, with myself as one of the shareholders. We had energy, passion and a vision—but no money.

At a 2018 event sponsored by ABG Sundal Collier, the leading investment bank in Oslo, I met Hans Tindlund, a partner at Longship, a private equity firm. I shared with him my vision of having a cable car in Åndalsnes center. “It’s a no-brainer,” I said. “I’m sure it will become a cash machine.” And in the middle of 2018, I organized a meeting for Oddbjørn Vassli and myself with Kjetil Ødven, from ABG Sundal Collier, to pitch the project.

Ødven liked our idea and committed himself to it on the spot. “Well, Hans,” Oddbjørn Vassli said to me after the meeting, “It seems that we now have the money, as you promised. But that was the easy part. I guess now it’s up to me to do my part and get the local politicians and the landowners on board with the project.”

One Step Forward...

One year later, in August 2019, our project was back on the front page of the local newspaper:

“Emigrated local invests in the gondola—has faith in tourism.”



...And Two Steps Back

But just as our project—the fourth attempt since 1964—seemed to be getting off the ground, we hit a wall: after more than 60 years, local opposition remained strong enough to nearly block the project once more.

Some local leaders continued to oppose the gondola for various political reasons, and new concerns over financing only deepened as the Corona virus pandemic hit the economy in March 2020, resulting in a full lockdown. Not only did this impact the financial markets far more than the earlier financial crisis, but all travel-related industry came to a halt. All travel-related stocks tumbled while the Swiss currency soared against the Norwegian krone. Pretty soon we were looking at 25% price increase in projected costs. A growing number of bankruptcies devastated the travel industries—even the major global players were brought to their knees.

Our little company was left wondering if our main investor, Longship, would stay or go. But Oddbjørn Vassli and Lars Olav Hustad managed to secure the support of local people and poli-



ticians and, eventually, thanks to them all, history would be made. Kjetil Ødven, the banker at ABG Sunndal, also played a key role, motivated by his passion for the region. Yet even with this support, challenges remained—and I had to admit that prospects didn't look good.

60 Years in the Making – and Worth the Wait

With so much still up in the air (but not our gondola!), I became desperate. I reached out to the Swiss supplier Garaventa Cable Car and begged for a discount to save the project. They didn't agree, as they had reached their limit. But Bernt Østhus, partner and owner

at Longship, decided to continue. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

The Gondola project was now officially underway. Pål R. Amundsen was hired as managing director, and formed a professional team that took the project from the order date through the launch date, 28 May 2021: only 15 months away! This was not only an amazing achievement on Pål's behalf, the project set a world record, because the infrastructure was actually built inside the mountain by the Swiss Firm Schenk AG. We were very grateful to the local shareholders who were such strong ambassadors for the project, contributing both capital and determination.

Finally, after more than 60 years of waiting—success! The gondola cable officially opened at the beginning of July 2021. As the Visit Norway website promises: “The Romsdal gondola, a state-of-the-art electric cable car, takes you 1679 metres up the mountainside from the fjord. This is also Norway’s first gondola built on sustainability principles.”

With the completion of construction, people have started to move back to Åndalsnes and new residents have arrived, ready to start a new life. Shops have opened and new businesses are starting up. And our long-awaited gondola is now national news.

Many Hands, One Goal

My Swiss and Norwegian background helped to connect people and companies over the course of this project. But the gondola dream could have been realized only with the dedication and focus of local political leaders such as Oddbjørn Vassli, Lars Olav Hustad and many others, especially Pål R. Amundsen and his team, and all of the people who worked day and night to make this seemingly impossible achievement come true.

Of course, nothing could have happened without the “money guys”: Kjetil Ødven at ABG



The task force from left Oddbjørn, Bernt, Kjetil, Hans and Lars Olav.

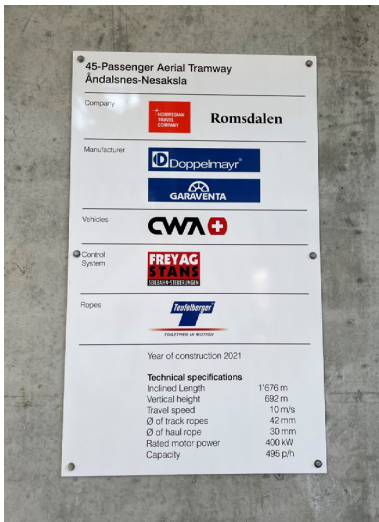
Sundal Collier, and main investors Bernt Østhus and Longship. They believed in the project not only enough to open their wallets, but enough to hang in there through countless meetings and negotiations. As an indication of their continued belief in the commercial importance of the gondola, Bernt Østhus and Longship will invest up to 1bn NOK in the region going forward.

The gondola car itself was built by the Swiss Garaventa company from Goldau (ironically, the town where I began my kitchen apprenticeship so many years ago).

If You Can Dream It, You Can Achieve It

Over the years, Kjetil, Oddbjørn, Lars Olav, Bernt and I never stopped visualizing the goal in our heads. I had no idea how hard it would be to make it happen. More than a few times, I was tempted to just give up. But focus and dedication—along with a strong streak of stubbornness—kept the project going.

I promise you that the views from the new gondola are just amazing—and so is the story that began it all: a long history marked by many attempts and many challenges. In December 1964, Romsdal Alpebane A/S was established in Åndalsnes by Arne Barmann, a local who had emigrated to the US with the sole purpose of launching the cable car from Åndalsnes to Nesaksla. But strong political opposition killed the project. The second attempt was stopped due to lack of financing. The third attempt was prevented by local landowners. And now, at long last, the fourth attempt has made it happen.



The Romsdal Gondola at Åndalsnes

Many thanks to world class Swiss engineering companies like Garaventa, CWA, Frey AG, Schenk AG and the Austrian company Teufelberger history was written in Åndalsnes.

But foremost, thanks to so many who believed in this project, this will be a game changer for Åndalsnes and Romsdalen.

