BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

800 Years and Counting

Opposite an ice-cream stand and a pizza shop, on a steep granite-cobbled street that leads into the forests cloaking the Karkonosze mountains that form the Polish-Czech border in Silesia stands an usual wooden church. I was instantly drawn to the "stave" (Norwegian word for "post") structure. Except for a few copper flashings and gutters, a small domed copper roof jutting off one end, and elaborately forged wrought-iron door hinges, the church—which rises 50 feet to the top of its central tower and 35 feet to the ridge of its imposing 16:12-pitch main roof—is entirely wood. As in, no metal fasteners whatsoever. All those wall shingles (which I heard others comparing to dragon scales and the surface of pine cones, both of which were probably intended) and the cascades of wood roof shingles are doweled in place.

The building was originally built in Vang, Norway, around 1200. By 1831, it stood in disrepair and the local parishioners wanted to tear it down and build a new and larger church. Johan Christian Dahl, a prominent Romantic-era landscape painter, campaigned to save the weather-beaten building and, after a number of failed attempts to relocate it, finally managed to interest the king of Prussia in moving it to Berlin. The building was dismantled, packed in crates, and put onboard a ship to sail across the Baltic Sea to present-day Szczecin, Poland. Plans changed again, this time at the urging of a Prussian countess, and the package was floated on barges down the Oder River and carted overland to the mountain-side town of Krummhübel, Prussia, present-day Karpacz, Poland, where the building was erected anew in 1844.

Stave construction seems to be a uniquely Viking technology that evolved from methods the forest-and-fjord dwellers devised for building ships. Essentially, it's a post-and-beam structure formed from all-heart Norway spruce and Scots pine that the builders prepared by lopping off the branches of living trees in early spring so the trees would bleed sap and concentrate resins in the heartwood. Once frost-hardened, the trees were felled in early winter, yielding a pitch-infused, extra-rot-resistant wood. Walls were formed from thick vertical boards that were "fish-joined" (an arrow-and-groove-type edge joint) to each other, and the ends dovetailed into horizontal sills that rested high and dry on gravel beds and granite footings.

Though they had never seen such a building, the local builders, also forest dwellers, were no strangers to building timber structures with the same four essential tools—ax, chisel, auger, and drawknife—that the original builders had used. Using the weatherworn parts as templates, they fashioned most of the building from local woods and kept only the pitch-soaked posts, sills, and trussed rafters, which, to this day, remarkably still give off a scent of tree pitch.

The Kościół Wang, as it is locally known today, is a Norwegian "stave" church dating from around 1200 that was moved in 1842 to Karpacz, Poland. There are no metal fasteners except in the domed copper roof, gutters, and some flashings. Even the wall and roof shingles are doweled in place.

Photos by Clayton DeKorne