

AN INTRODUCTION TO DIVING NORWAY

Over the last few years there has been consistently good feedback regarding the quality of diving in Norway. However, reports also indicated that traveling to and diving in Norway from the UK to be an expensive luxury.

I decided to find out for myself. I had wanted to dive Norway for some time and set about researching the types of diving available and the likely cost.

There are dive centres in Norway that can cater for visiting divers, but I also discovered that at least three Scottish hard boats with liveaboard facilities base themselves in Norway for the summer season. The idea of a UK registered liveaboard that was familiar with the ways and expectations of British divers seemed to be the obvious introduction to diving Norway.



The Best Time to Visit Norway

The Norwegian summer is surprisingly pleasant but short. Therefore the UK operators operating out of Bergen only spend a few weeks of the summer on the Norwegian side of the North Sea. I decided to visit during the first week of July. There were a few cloudy days and some light rain in the early morning on some of the days, but overall, the weather was better than experienced back in the UK.

Diving Conditions

Divers to whom I had previously spoken to had made the decision to visit Norway to go wreck diving. The vast majority of the wrecks are casualties of World War 2. There are some other wrecks that sank in peace time, the most recent wreck being the Server which sank in January 2007.

Many of the dive sites are in sheltered inlets/ fjords. Water temperature was 11 degrees C on the surface and dropped to 8 degrees C at about 30-60 metres. This variation created some of the most dramatic thermoclines I have ever seen and meant that visibility in the shallows had a noticeable milky quality with turbidity that did not lend itself to wide angle photography. Below 20 metres and as the temperature dropped, the visibility improved and viz of 10-15 metres was not uncommon.

As the dive sites were in sheltered locations away from the open North Sea, surface conditions were calm every day and I never noticed any sea state above about force 1. Another pleasant surprise was that the waters are not particularly tidal. We started the week on spring tides but the tidal range never seemed to be more than 1 to 1.5 metres. This meant that synchronizing our diving to slack water was never crucial to the days dive planning.

Wreck Diving Versus Marine Life

Marine life is very varied and diverse. Don't expect large shoals of fish and copious quantities of conger eels on the wrecks. Many of the wrecks I dived seemed to be lacking in marine life compared to UK wrecks. Some might argue that fish just get in the way of the wreck anyway.

Personally, I like diversity in my diving, so I was interested to find out where the marine life hung out.

I think part of the reason there was a lack of fish life was that we were diving in waters that were not particularly tidal and therefore the water was not laden with a steady supply of nutrients.



Lions mane jelly fish



Coral growth near the wreck of the Macbeth

As the week progressed I noticed that some of the dive sites seemed to have marine life micro-environments. I was able to note several species, including nudibranchs and pipe fish on one reef above the Ferndale wreck.

Bob Jones, the skipper of the Gaelic Rose said that there were some wall/reef dives with good examples of marine life. However, the general consensus of the other divers on board was that wreck diving was the prime reason we were in Norway and I never got to dive a wall.

The Choice of Hard boat

I booked a week on the Gaelic Rose whose home port is Oban, but during the summer operates out of Bergen as a liveaboard. The Gaelic Rose is a converted trawler with a on-board compressor for tank filling with a good selection of 7, 12 and 15 litre tanks and plenty of lead weights. Nitrox is also available and there is an oxygen analyzer on board. Tri mix and re-breather divers are also catered for by prior arrangement.

Accommodation is below decks with an open bunk area and three private cabins. There are also two head/shower rooms off the accommodation area. The price for the week also included three meals a day and tea/coffee after each dive. The galley is operated by Lee who is by trade, a professional chef and therefore the quality of the meals is very good. Both Bob the skipper and Lee were excellent hosts for the week, operating the Gaelic Rose in the best traditions of a UK dive boat. (That's diver-speak for remembering to pack your sense of humour)

The Gaelic Rose left Bergen late on Saturday afternoon and set a course for the first dive on Sunday morning. We moored up for the night in a small village, only 10 minutes away from our first dive site. This was to be the way the trip was structured for the rest of the week. We moored up at a different location each evening, gradually working our way up to the town of Florø at just over 62 degrees north before heading south again and diving our way back to Bergen by late afternoon on the Friday.



The choice of dive sites is manifold and varied. There is a wealth of dive site information on board and with the experienced help of the skipper, sites can be selected to suit the experience and depth requirements of all divers. Wrecks can be dived as shallow as 10 metres whilst others are at 50 metres and deeper.



It should be noted that there are two dives scheduled each day. A long surface interval was also purposely planned between dives in the interests of safety as some sites are deep and 50m + dives are not uncommon.

We moored up each evening at anything from an isolated jetty to harbours in small villages. On two occasions we spent the evenings exploring some of the extensive remains of the network of German WW2 command/control points and gun placements constructed at strategic locations overlooking the waterways and fjords.

Safety

There is a hyperbaric chamber in Bergen. Travel insurance is recommended but hyperbaric treatment (at the time of writing) based on a reciprocal agreement with the NHS and their Norwegian equivalent. Evacuation to the chamber is normally by high speed boat.



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The Diving

Spring

Located near Ramsøy
Norwegian fishing boat
64 metres long
10 metre beam
900 ton
Built Tyneside 1883
8-48 metres depth

This dive was reminiscent of diving the Rondo in the sound of Mull, but with many more features. Minimal marine life other than some flat fish and edible crabs. The 4 blade propeller and the rudder are still intact at the deepest point of the dive. There is a monument to the disaster and those who lost their life in the nearby village of Ramsøy

Server

Located near the Hellisøy light house
Freighter
180 metres long
33,000 ton

This ship sank in January 2007 after running aground on rocks near the Hellisøy light house and sits in a maximum depth of 25 metres. The main mast array rises about 6 metres out of the water. This is not a complete wreck. The bow section was towed to safe waters for decommissioning about 20 nautical miles to the south. The amount of marine growth on this wreck after 6 months is unusually advanced if comparisons are made to marine life development over the same period on HMS Scylla near Plymouth.



21st century wreckage



Main mast

Frankenwald

Located to the east side of Ytre Sula
German cargo ship
122 metres long
17 metre beam
5,000 ton

The Frankenwald ran aground on rocks in January 1940. The wreck sits upright with a maximum depth of 42 metres to the sea bed. Again, not much marine life on this wreck



Deck Winch

Havda

Located west of Lutelanset
Coastal Steamer
55 metres long
8 metre beam
677 ton
Built in Scotland in 1881



Intact facilities

The Havda was sold to a Norwegian operator and commandeered by the Germans in WW2 and was sunk during a British air attack in 1944.

The wreck lies to port and the deck section is quite broken up. The first examples of a diverse marine environment of the trip were encountered on this wreck. To the rear of the wreck (keel-side) there is a sandy gulley. Here I found gurnards, butter fish and edible crabs. To the deck side of the wreck, two large docile lump sucker fish were in residence. There was also a good selection of dead men's fingers and kelp growth to the top of the wreck.



Lumpsucker

Tyrifjord

Located near Askvol
Traveling from Germany to collect Iron ore
Built in Newcastle in 1919

Tyrifjord was sunk by the RAF in 1944
Maximum depth on this dive was 34 metres



Auxiliary Steering Wheel

Ingertere

Located east of Askrova
This wreck lies about 15 metres away from a wall
The stern is badly broken up but as you swim along the wreck the features get more interesting.
One of the steam boilers are exposed and the bow section is intact and prominent. There was not much marine life around this wreck, other than some edible crabs and anemones



Steam Boiler

Welheim

Located near Florø
126 metres long
18 metre beam
5,455 ton
Built in Germany, 1939

This large wreck lies on a slope with the stern at 70 metres.
There is a large bridge area and two intact gun mounts near the stern.

This wreck is in tidal waters and probably the only dive of the trip where there was any noticeable current. I decided to leave the camera on the boat for this dive.



The wreck is so large it is hard to take in all the features on the first dive. I feel I would need to dive this wreck 4-5 times and explore different sections before I had a true appreciation of all the Welheim has to offer.

Ferndale

Requisitioned by the Germans
Located in Krakhella Sund
116 metres long
16 metre beam
Sank 15 December 1944 by RAF Mosquitoes

This large wreck lies against the Seglesteinen and on a slope. This is a very diverse dive site. The bow rests on a reef section just below the Seglesteinen and is very broken up. The reef is a fantastic haven for marine life and about the best example I dived. Here there were pipe fish, nudibranch, cuckoo wrasse, sun stars, star fish, cone shells and various other fish types. I suspect this reef is served by a current at certain times.



The Ferndale lies in about 8 metres at the bow and to a depth of 45 metres at the stern. The wreck is reasonably intact and penetration into the holds and engine room is possible. There is also a swim-through between the keel and the slope at about 28 metres.

There is another treat in store for divers who venture down to the stern end- sitting just behind the Ferndale is another wreck known as the Parat. I dived the Ferndale twice over two days.

Nudibranch

Parat

Norwegian ship commandeered by the Germans as a support vessel

Located just behind the stern of the Ferndale

42 metres long

8 metre beam

Sank 16 December 1944 by RAF Mosquitoes

The Parat was a support vessel that came to the assistance of the Ferndale the day after it was hit and slowly started to sink. The RAF returned to the Ferndale and sunk the Parat.

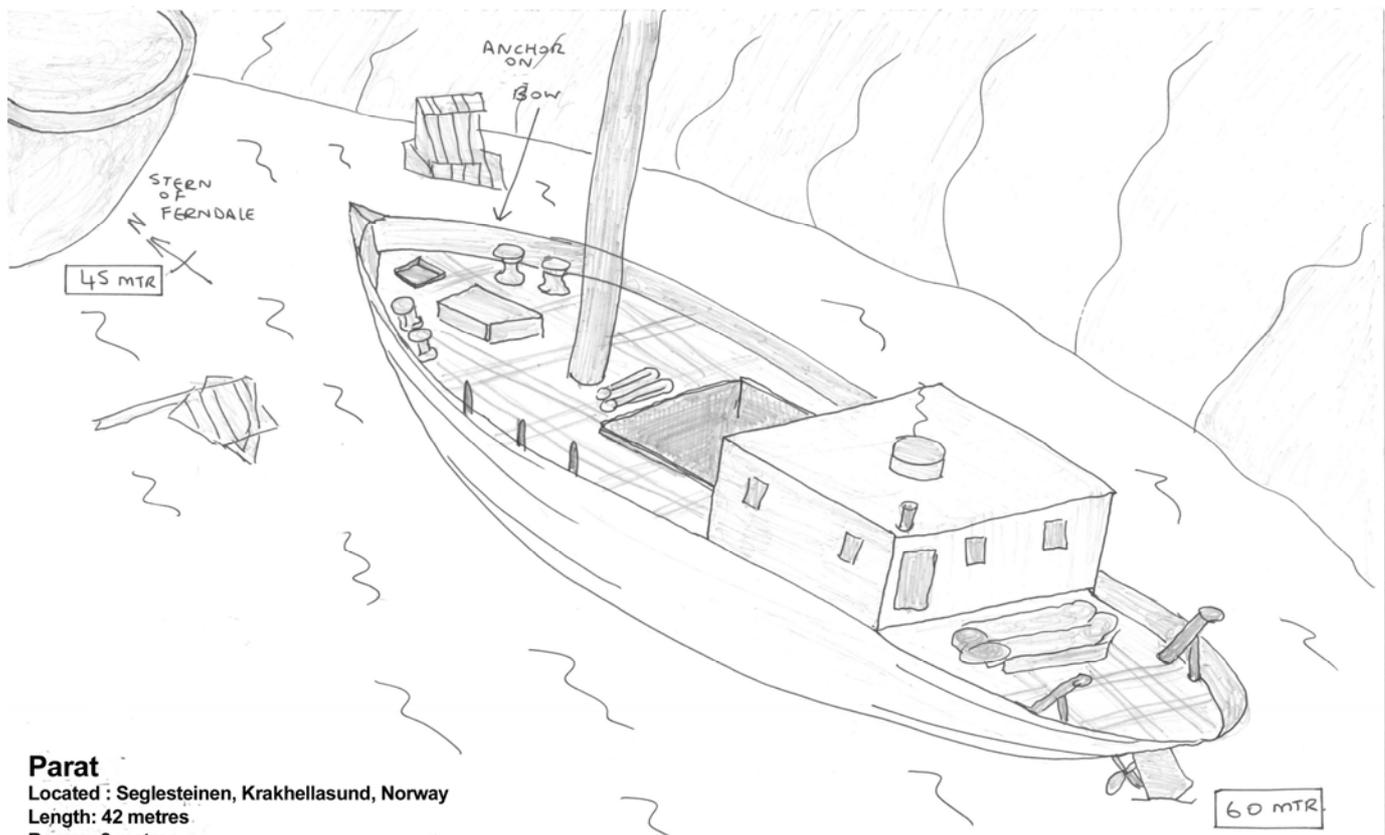
The rudder and propeller are intact on the wreck as are quite a few of the deck features as well as the anchor to the starboard bow. Maximum depth at the stern is 60 metres.



Stern of Parat

There are what could be two gun assemblies lying on the sea bed either side of the bow. At first it would appear that these guns came from the deck of the Parat. However, I could see no obvious deck space or location to support this theory and think the guns may have come away from the stern of the Ferndale which is just metres away.

I dived the Parat twice over two days.



Parat

Located : Seglesteinen, Krakhellasund, Norway

Length: 42 metres

Beam: 8 metres

A Norwegian vessel commandeered by the Germans in WW2 and used as a support vessel. The Parat went to the assistance of the Ferndale (already bombed by RAF Mosquitos). The RAF returned to the scene on 16 December 1944 and bombed the Parat

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Solvang 2

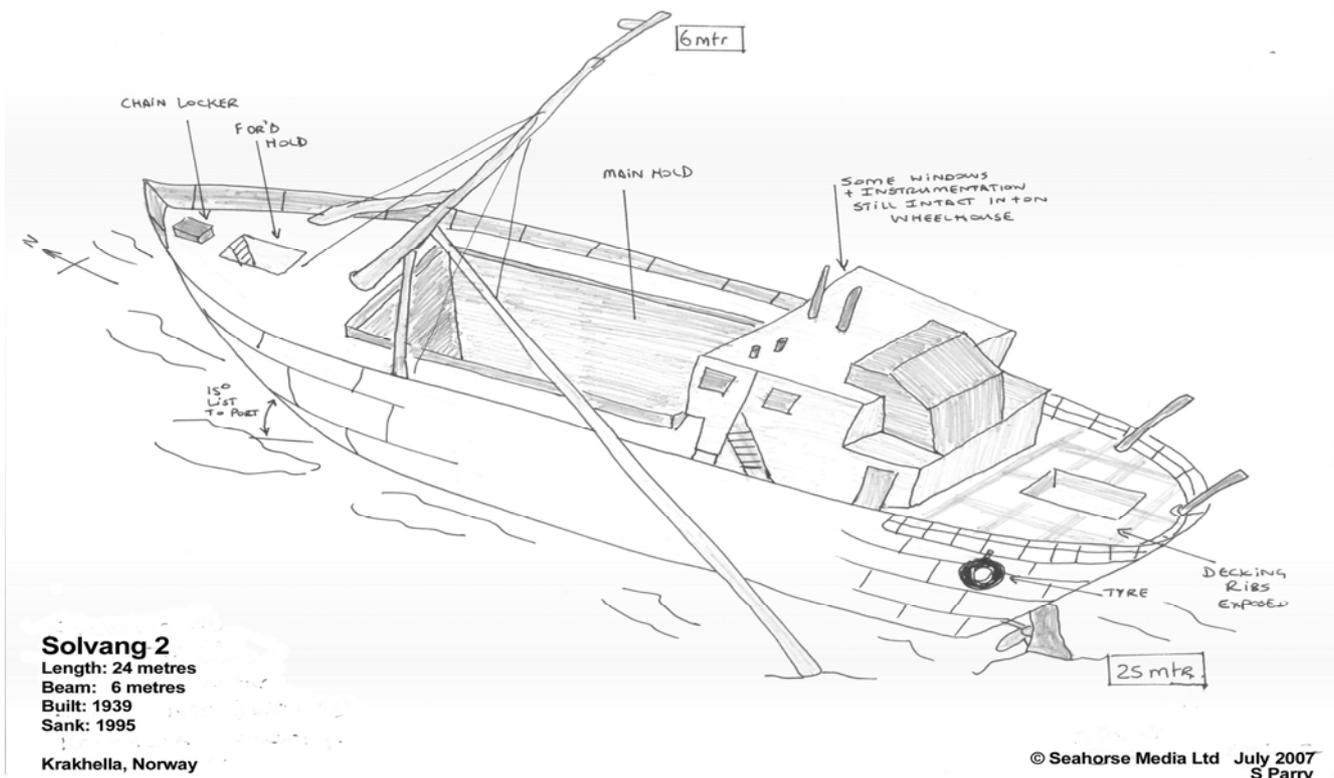
Located near Krakhella
Norwegian coaster sank in 1995
24 metres long
6 metre beam
Built 1939

This is a relatively new wreck and sits upright with a slight list to port.
Maximum depth to the sea bed at the stern was 25 metres.

The wreck is intact with all main features easily identifiable including the propeller and rudder. One of the mast booms has fallen over the port side. Even the glass in some of the wheel house windows and bridge instrumentation is intact. This wreck sits in a narrow channel and there was a slight current that reduced visibility.



Propeller & rudder



Solvang 2
Length: 24 metres
Beam: 6 metres
Built: 1939
Sank: 1995

Krakhella, Norway

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Budget for the Trip

1 week on Gaelic Rose including 3 meals per day, tea/coffee after diving, air fills, tanks & lead	£600.00*
Return Airfare with Norwegian.no from Stanstead to Bergen inclusive of 40 kg baggage allowance and 15 kg of hand luggage	£95.00
Airport transfer from/to Bergen Airport using Flybussen to/from Bergen Fish market (40 min each way)	£15.00
Spending money for the week (some snacks, a few beers and a meal on the Friday night)	£100.00

	£810.00p

* Gaelic Rose prices for 2007. May be subject to increase in 2008

Another group of 6 divers on the trip opted to travel by ferry and brought over 1 van collectively carrying the equipment and personal baggage. The ferry crossing is 24 hours from Tyneside and costs were averaged out at about £150 per person in the group. Another £50 should be budgeted for, to park up a vehicle in Bergen for the week.

Links

www.norwegian.no www.gaelicrose.com

Conclusions

The quality of wreck diving was second to none and well worth the journey. I had the added bonus of being able to make the dives in the time-honoured British way (no guides or group exploring) and as extended range dives, often with my camera. Although the dive depths could be configured to suit most levels of experience, I would suggest that in order to gain maximum enjoyment from the trip divers should be familiar with wreck diving and consider extended range diving to maximize the potential to explore the wrecks. If you are not already familiar with wreck layouts and key feature recognition, the good viz in Norway will quickly enable you to learn how to find your way around a wreck. From a safety aspect I strongly recommend you dive with a buddy who is an experienced wreck diver if you are new to the concept of safe wreck diving practices.

There were never any other dive boats jostling for a position on the same dive site. Towards the end of the week, a strange sense of deja-vu was felt. Norway increasingly reminded me of diving in Egypt before it became Europe's favorite dive destination..... ah well nothing remains a well-kept secret for ever, I would recommend that anyone with the diving ability and means should take a trip to Norway before the rest of the diving world realises what lies beneath the waves on the far side of the North Sea.

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