

CRUISING NORWAY

WILDE WIDES



NESS IN CREEN

In the Storfjord en route to Geiranger, the scenery was breathtaking and we motored between steep hills without seeing a soul

An iffy forecast put paid to a summer cruise to the Arctic, so Ruth Gerritse turned *Thalassa II* towards the Norwegian mainland. With empty anchorages in steep fjords and endless possibilities for discovery, there is no more beautiful cruising ground

Photographs by Mark van 't Woud



Four years after our circumnavigation the urge to get out there again was being answered. With 12 weeks set aside in summer, we left our home-port in the Netherlands in mid-May and set sail, longing for the rhythm of a cruising life. The planned destination was Svalbard, an Arctic archipelago between Norway and the North Pole. But sailing plans are rubbery things. Relentless northerly winds forced us to save the ice of the North for later. We decided on mainland Norway instead.

After a lovely sail from Lerwick in the Shetland Isles we arrived in Ålesund. The decision to let go of Svalbard caused a 180° change in more than our course. Instead of having to worry about an ever-tighter schedule, we now had two full months ahead of us to discover the wild coasts of Norway.

The charts and pilots for this new adventure were already on board. We had brought them 'just in case' and were very glad too. On a midsummer evening we made a toast to empty schedules and endless possibilities.

As soon as we left Ålesund and entered the Storfjord we were in a land of loneliness. The landscape was breathtaking

and having it all to ourselves added an extra bit of magic. For hours and hours we motored beneath steep hills through a maze of waterways without seeing another soul.

The engine had to do all the work – this turned out to be the case in the days to come – but the lack of wind could not spoil the fun. At the end of the day we dropped anchor in a beautiful bay called Klubben. The sun was as bright as it was around noon – time for a walk ashore.

In the early morning we continued; mile after mile further inland, swallowed by scenery that became ever more extreme. The granite walls grew steeper, the vistas more awe-inspiring. Every now and then we spotted a house on a seemingly inaccessible mountainside. 'How on earth...?!' There is no road to these remote places and traditional farms can only be reached by boat, requiring a tough climb from the shore. Electricity never made it this far. Tales from earlier generations mention long ropes to prevent children from disappearing for good.

The noise of the first waterfall in the Geiranger fjord silenced us. Excited, we slowly manoeuvred *Thalassa* towards its vertical river. When the icy water hit the deck, we switched the engine to neutral and took a deep breath. The expression on Mark's face was worth a thousand words.

Travelling by boat is about more than just sailing. It's about

MAKING IT UP AS WE GO ALONG!



◀ Left: Seven Sisters fall in Geiranger fjord – beyond reach except by boat. Top: spectacular backdrop to an afternoon's relaxation. Above: lighthouse on a rock near Florø

room to move about, being able to reach places that are beyond reach in any other way. Floating near the wet feet of the Seven Sisters fall we both realised this was one of those places, and one of those moments that matter.

The untouched wilderness of the fjord seemed a world away when we reached the small village at the end. Two cruise ships were already there when we arrived in late afternoon. A third appeared shortly afterwards. Geiranger, a tiny town of 250 people, is flooded with 600,000 tourists a year. Through binoculars we saw the quay was an endless line of wooden trolls and fluffy elks. We passed on a visit.

All options open

We very much enjoyed being nomads once again – all options were open and the Norwegian coast offered a limitless number of possibilities. But Statlandet is one of the few places where there is only one way to go. To get round this headland, we had to leave the shelter of the fjords. As with other infamous capes around the world, it is a catalyst for weather systems.

The RCC guide warns: 'The Statlandet peninsula protrudes like an angrily clenched fist, creating the west coast's most notorious offshore passage... Stat can create its own bad weather even when conditions in the sounds to its south are

gentle.' So we waited for a weather window in the port of Bringsinghaug. The docks were as deserted as the village seemed. We paid our dues in an honesty box and read books while keeping an eye open for a weather window.

In the end, the passage was uneventful and as soon as we were south of the cape, we realised the importance of Statlandet. Because North Atlantic depressions hardly ever make it beyond the finger of Stat, the climate to the south is milder. The temperature is higher, the landscape softer and the vegetation a brighter green. Hills replace mountains as the rough edges of the North disappear.

Being more accessible, this region is also more populated. North of Statlandet we often cruised for hours without seeing another soul. Now we always spotted a few boats – fishermen, freighters or just Norwegian housewives on their way to the supermarket. In the land of fjords a boat is the only way to go.

But it was not all plain sailing. Nudging into a bay, I called back from the bow: 'Let's turn around; fish farms all over the place!'

We were trying to find a place for the

THE AUTHORS



Ruth Gerritse, 41, and Mark van't Woud, 55, live in Holland, where they work in the TV industry; Mark as a cameraman, Ruth as an editor-in-chief and a freelance journalist. They sailed round the world from 2002 to 2008, their highlight a long stay in Patagonia.



night, armed with two cruising guides and a digital chart that showed every bay, buoy and rock. Many sheltered bays were full of salmon pens and those inlets that weren't either had electricity cables on the bottom or private pontoons for the motor boats that are part of Norwegian life. This search for an anchorage became a daily rite, but that day it was taking hours.

We took turns studying the chart, looking for a dent that might offer shelter. Despite a temptation to 'just go here' sometimes, we have a golden rule that we both must feel confident

about an anchorage. Our patience was finally rewarded after another hour and we anchored behind a tiny islet in the Fåfjord and enjoyed the magnificent view and silence.

Bergen is known for its wet climate; it holds a record for 87 days of consecutive rain in 2000. But we were ready for some city life after weeks in the fjords. In fact, the old centre, Bryggen, revealed old wooden houses and a fishmarket that has been there for over eight centuries. The alleys have drawn crews for just as long and dozens of yachts were rafted along the quay. So this was where everybody was hiding! The sun was shining and we had the nicest, driest five days in three months.

“ Many sheltered bays were full of salmon pens or had electricity cables or private pontoons. The search for an anchorage became a daily rite ”

The rain we expected in Bergen came shortly after we left the city. In foulweather gear, we headed south on busy waterways. Houses lined every shore, oil industry supply vessels were constantly moving and helicopters buzzed above. Suddenly, Bergen felt busy.

Uninhabited bays are almost non-existent in this region yet we spent less and less time seeking a place for the night. We tried to avoid harbours, but there were other options when anchoring was impossible. In Godøysund we used the dock of a deserted hotel, in Vattedal the pontoon of an old gas station and just south of Haugesund the community hall maintained a quay for visitors.

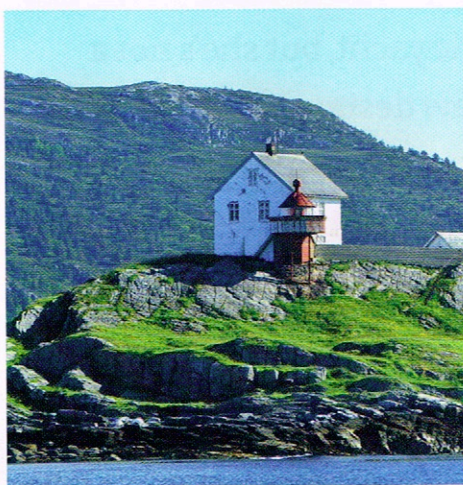
Fewer dangers

Navigating the fjords also became easier. The first time we looked at a chart of the fjord region, we were terrified by the thousands of rocks and hidden dangers. A few weeks and few hundred miles changed all that. Sure, there are plenty of dangers, but there are also thousands of well-maintained beacons.

Stavanger is a popular stop for cruiseliners and it was now high season. Although the third city of Norway was as charming as Bergen, the number of tourists here was overwhelming. We didn't feel comfortable being moored metres from the stern of one ship and went below for drinks. Time to head out.



◀ **Left:** Bergen, a welcome change from the wild. Above: market selling reindeer hides. Right: leaving Stavangar heading for Holland in *Thalassa II*



▲ **Above:** leaving the shelter of the fjords near Klubben for Stattlandet peninsula. Right: *Thalassa II* tied to the dock of a deserted hotel in Godøysund



As the water got deeper, the waves lost their stiffness. It was wonderful to be at sea again, with a good north-westerly wind and an open horizon after the granite walls of recent weeks. A pod of dolphins was the cherry on the cake.

The fun was over when we saw the weatherfax the next morning. The easy forecast had been replaced by a nasty low heading straight for us. Avoiding it was impossible. As the barometer started to fall and the wind veered slowly to the east-south-east, we discussed strategies. We decided to head west for as long as possible, thereby avoiding the cluster of oilrigs that could complicate things once the storm hit. It would also take us away from a perilous lee shore near Denmark.

The Navtex and GRIB files reported Force 6-7, but the barometer was suggesting something else. In less than 12 hours it dropped from 1011hPa to 998hPa. We got ready for battle. Mark checked the rigging and hatches and secured the anchor. I filled the thermos flasks with hot water and cooked a meal now that we could still easily have one. The sea was becoming rougher and the wind continued to veer and increase.

Every hour we wrote the pressure and our position in the log and marked the paper chart. In fair weather we love electronic navigation, but when the going gets rough, electronics can break down. Better safe than sorry.

Exactly 24 hours after the initial decline the barometer

reached 994hPa – the centre of the low. The tail-end carried the venom as usual. We got a few hours of Force 9, creating very rough seas in the shallow North Sea. *Thalassa II* did a great job; it seemed no effort at all to manoeuvre herself through waves of 6-8m.

During the bad hours one of us was always in the cockpit, keeping an eye on the ocean, sniffing the wind, judging our course and the conditions. When the wind fell to 35 knots we felt relieved. 'Nice and quiet once again,' we noted in the logbook.

Some 36 hours later we entered the port of Oudeschild on the Wadden Island of Texel. We had left Holland 67 days before and had sailed 1,863 miles. Spitsbergen turned out to be beyond reach for this year, but we would not have missed the journey that replaced it. Norway is stunning.

And we rediscovered what we already knew. Cruising for us is more about the journey than the destination. It is about new experiences, freedom, meeting Nature up close, emptying agendas and filling pages in



PILOT GUIDES

The *Norwegian Cruising Guide* by Armitage & Brackenbury and the Royal Cruising Club's *Cruising Guide for Norway* are valuable reference books with excellent chapters on weather in Norway, routes, safety and regulations. We found their lists of suggested anchorages less useful as the authors of both books have yachts of approximately 30ft (*Thalassa II* is 48ft) – we have different requirements. But finding the perfect spot for you is just part of the joy of cruising.