

FREYA's NORDIC ODYSSEY (PART 1)

"Terribly sorry, but your yacht is not big enough" came the reply from the Royal Naval Sailing Association office in response to my request for a blue ensign permit. Perhaps I should have taken this as a hint and abandoned what many would consider a crazy project to sail our Shrimper "Freya" from Plymouth to Norway during the summer of 2003, and then sail the entire length of Norway the following year.



Cruising through the Dutch Canals

However, I was not ready to give up on a dream that had been quietly gestating since it was first conceived on a 2 week cruise in a Shrimper from Kristiansand to Oslo back in 1984. It was the first time I had sailed a Shrimper and I left Norway that summer having fallen in love with both the country and the yacht. I vowed to come back one day and repeat the experience. Whilst I have returned to Norway many times since that first visit, it was almost 20 years before I could afford to buy a Shrimper and be in a position to realise the second part of the dream.

In the intervening years the dream had evolved to the point where it not only involved sailing the entire Norwegian coast but also skiing the length of the mountains that form the backbone of the country. The "Nordic Odyssey" expedition is an attempt to finally put this dream to rest, before it gets completely out of hand and turns into something that really would be unrealisable!



Morning chores!

In simple terms, the aim is to start at Dalen, in the heart of Norway's Telemark region, and ski over 2,000km northwards through the mountains to reach Lakselv, some 500 km north of the arctic circle in the remote Finnmark region of Norway. From there we will embark in "Freya" and sail round Nordkapp, Norway's most northerly point, before completing the circumnavigation, returning via Norway's ruggedly beautiful and fjord dominated western coastline. The final leg of the trip will involve sailing back into the heart of the Norwegian mountains via the

Telemark canal to the starting point at Dalen.

With the concept finalized, the only remaining question was how to get "Freya" to Norway. The easy answer would have been to put her on her trailer and tow her up there.

However, we had not got anything planned for the summer of 2003 and over the preceding winter I floated the idea to my wife Francesca that it would be a great idea for us to sail the boat from Plymouth to Norway. Perhaps fearful that I would come up with an even more outlandish idea if she did not agree, her assent was forthcoming and planning for the trip started.



Our objective for this summer was to get the boat as far as Oslo. Although a seemingly massive journey for such a small boat, I knew that much of it could be completed in relatively sheltered waters. Our planned route would take us up the south coast of England to Dover, before crossing to Calais and continuing along the French and Belgian coasts to Vlissingen in southern Holland. This would potentially be the most exposed leg of the cruise.



Small boat – big lock- Kiel Canal!

From Vlissingen there were a number of options. We could either continue up the Dutch North sea coast to the Frisian Islands, or take a more sheltered inland route via the Schelde Delta, the Dutch canals and the Isjelsee. On reaching northern Holland we planned to remain in sheltered waters, sailing eastwards through the Waddenzee inside both the Dutch and German Frisian islands. There would then be another short exposed leg from the Jade estuary to the Elbe before gaining the shelter of the Kiel Canal.

Having traversed the canal, the intention was to work our way through the Danish Baltic islands to Copenhagen before crossing the Sound to Sweden and continuing up the west Swedish coast to Gothenburg and finally on to Oslo. The leg from Halsingborg to Gothenburg contained some relatively barren and exposed stretches, but once north of Gothenburg we would enjoy the shelter of the *sjogard*, a chain of thousands of small islands lining the coast up to Oslo Fjord.



Waiting for the tide in the Waddenzee

With the route planned, it was time to turn our attention to the boat and readying her for the journey. However, any further preparations were brought to a rude halt in March when an official brown envelope came through the letter box informing me that I had been recalled to the Navy and was

to spend the next 3 months serving in Basrah. Having been told that I would be returning from Iraq at the "beginning of July", a departure date was set for the last week in July which I reckoned would give me enough time to prepare the boat. In the end I actually got back to the UK a mere 5 days before our planned departure date. Postponing the departure was not a realistic option, since by then we were already short on time and would be pushed to complete the passage before the onset of autumn and the possibility of bad weather.

Somehow, in those 5 days we managed to get the boat re-launched and fitted out for the trip, although it was a close run were still putting the various bits boat back together as we finally from Plymouth Yacht Haven on However, if the preparations for had been less than ideal, then the forecast was even worse. The long term synopsis charts for the showed a string of depressions up in the Atlantic threatening to more rain and strong winds than a Shrimper needs!



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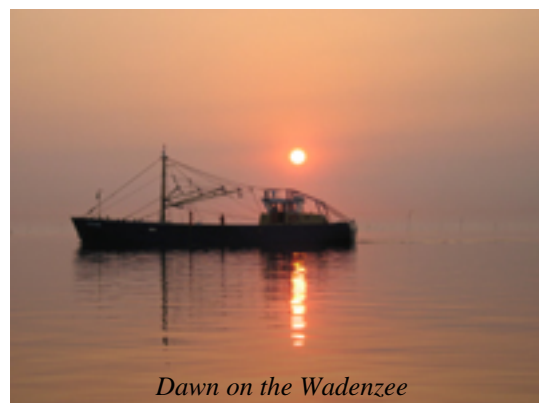
As we sailed out of Plymouth Sound we feared that we might get no further than Cawsand Bay by the end of the week; hardly an auspicious start to the trip. Fortunately the depressions tracked further north than predicted and there were enough lulls between the gales to allow us to make progress up the south coast.

54 days and 1,500 miles later we faced similar weather, with the Norwegian Navtex forecast promising us “gales or storms in all areas”, as we sailed up Oslo Fjord towards our final destination, the Royal Norwegian Yacht Club.

Stowaways

However, in the intervening period we enjoyed one of the driest and hottest summers in recent memory and with it some truly fantastic sailing. In a short article such as this, it is impossible to describe or do justice to a trip which took us through 8 European countries, visited 3 capital cities, and encompassed some of the best cruising grounds in Northern Europe. Writing up the fair log for the trip is still a “work in progress” and will keep me occupied for many more evenings yet!

Suffice to say that the journey was completed very much as planned. It took us just 9 days to sail the first 375 miles to Vlissingen, with 2



Dawn on the Wadenzee

overnight passages en route. Once we had reached the shelter of Holland, the pace relaxed and we were able to enjoy some great cruising through the Schelde delta and Zeeland, before exiting at Hook of Holland and taking the outside route up to Amsterdam. The Isjelmeer and the Frisian Islands offered equally fantastic cruising, with “*Freya*” coming into her own in the shallow tidal waters of the Wadenzee. We were literally able to go places other boats couldn’t go and get across the many *wantij* (watersheds) earlier on the tide than anyone else.

With autumn approaching fast we did not have time to linger in the Baltic and could not really do justice to the many cruising opportunities in the area. However, the best was saved to last, with the leg from Gothenburg to Oslo offering what must be Europe’s best kept cruising secret. The myriad of sheltered islands and intricate passages are blessed with an abundance of scenic sheltered anchorages and picturesque unspoilt traditional fishing harbours making this a Shrimper sailor’s dream. It would take a lifetime to explore this particular 150 mile stretch of coastline and my only regret is that we were unable to spend longer in the area (but we will be back one day!).

Picking out highlights from the trip is almost an impossible task since there were so many of them. Simply completing the journey was a source of great satisfaction and has given us confidence that what we are attempting next year is achievable. It was also fascinating to see the reactions of people en route as our little boat sailed into places that don’t normally expect to see red ensigns, let alone ones flown from a boat of our size. However, perhaps the most enjoyable aspect was that we were able to share the experience with many good friends. 6 of them flew out and joined us for various legs of the trip and went away enthusing about the joys of cruising “Shrimper” style; an erstwhile RNSA RC(O) even brought his 12 year old son along so perhaps somewhere we may even have sown the seeds for another “odyssey” in 20 years time?!