

Bumbling in Norway by Robin & Gillie Whittle

14th July – 11th August 2015

It was unfortunate that this summer, when we decided to spend a month exploring the Norwegian fjords, was described by many people in Norway as the worst summer they could remember for many years. Unusually, snow still clung to the lower slopes of the mountains and the rain and cold persisted during July and August. But in spite of the fact that it was cold and wet quite a lot of the time, it was still an amazing and memorable trip.

Our original plan was to base ourselves at Bergen and spend half our time exploring fjords to the south of the city, and half those to the north. When we started our serious planning for the trip it became obvious that with the large distances involved, we were being over-optimistic. So planning concentrated on Sognefjord to the north of Bergen, and its 150-mile length was going to provide us with plenty of exploration for our three weeks sailing. Thought was given to the high costs of food and drink in Norway, and our bilges were well stocked with both. Our leisure times were catered for by our usual selection of Black Jack, Crepette and Scrabble!



Getting ready to launch at Mangersnes



Five days of our month away were going to be spent travelling to and from Bergen towing *Bumble Chugger* (124), and taking the ferry to Hook and Oslo. This is where we had hoped to launch but it proved impossible to find a suitable slipway and parking space for the car and trailer. The whole town was seething with tourists enjoying the sunshine and holiday atmosphere. We moved on 40 miles north to Mangersnes, where we found a small

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boatyard/marina that was peaceful and quiet, and we set about rigging. In the late evening, when the water was high enough for us to launch, the rain started.

Our first day's sailing was not a good introduction to Norway. The first stop was to be at Gulen 40 miles away, not far from Sognefjord. Our trip started fairly gently and was only slightly wet as we set off through a maze of islands, but the wind increased to Force 6 with very fierce gusts of Force 7 and the rain became torrential. The islands and mountains were often completely obscured by grey mist and murk, and when we could see the mountains they looked black, ominous and forbidding. The journey was through a bleak landscape, deserted apart from a few fish farms, a large oil refinery, one gannet and a couple of large tankers.

It was wonderful to finally tie up at the Gulen pontoon - a couple of drowned rats, soaked through to the skin. The tent went up, we stripped and dried off, and slowly warmed up with new dry clothes and a tot of whisky, listening to the rain beating down and gusts of wind whistling through. Our tent turned out to be a godsend for the whole of our trip.

The following day things improved slightly but we were not relishing the thought of our return journey in three weeks' time. This set us into a new pattern of thought for the trip; we only wanted to sail one way along Sognefjord, so on particularly bad weather days we planned to move the car and trailer eastwards. The fast, efficient ferries along the fjord helped us carry this out.



Sailing from Mangersnes to Gulen



On the pontoon at Gulen - spot the Shrimper!

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From Mangersnes we moved the car to Gulen, and from there to Vik. The scenery was breathtaking on our drive to Vik. The mountains were sometimes fairly benign, sometimes sheer vertical cliffs with the road tunnelling through them. We left the main road, taking a smaller, winding road that climbed and climbed, soon above the tree line and then above the snow line, with walls of snow on either side where deep drifts had been carved out for the road. All the time the light was fading but it never got completely dark, making everything look ethereal and a real moonscape. For most of the journey it continued to rain, sometimes torrentially.

We descended into Vik via a series of switchback hairpin bends and we realised that our aged RAV4 was going to have trouble pulling the boat out over the mountains, so we set off again the next day in the rain driving on to Aurland which was likely to be the end of our journey and which was on the main E16 road to Oslo, and there we left the car and trailer. Another high speed ferry back to Vik and from then we could concentrate on the sailing part of our holiday.



The car and trailer left at Aurland



Arrival of high speed ferry

We had been unable to get hold of charts of Sognefjord, so we relied on our road map and our very good Pilot of Norway, which marked towns and villages along the fjord that were suitable for visiting, detailing mooring and facilities available. From Gulen we stopped at a deserted jetty in a bay at Rutledal, then a long cold slog for 28 miles to Bjordal. Here they were not set up for yachts, let alone Shrimpers, and we had to tie up on the main ferry quay protected by huge tyres,

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which were difficult to climb up, and difficult to moor against with the rise and fall of tide. Arriving at Vik was much easier as there was a newly built marina, though rather overrun by seagulls and oyster catchers.



Moored at Vik



Stave church at Vik built about 1130

We stayed here three nights and between our trips over the mountains, we visited the Stave church, the oldest of the 28 remaining Stave churches left from the 1000 originally built. The churches were usually built straight onto the soil, and the wood of the churches slowly rotted away. Those churches built on rock survived.

It was a beautiful, atmospheric place and very peaceful sitting in the half dark on the benches that ran around the inside of the church, hearing the bells tinkling from the grazing sheep outside. It was definitely the church we admired the most of the Stave churches we visited, though we noticed that all the churchyards were immaculately tended and nearly every grave was colourful with fresh flowers. Everywhere we went the roadside verges were smothered with wild flowers.

Eastwards from Vik the weather slowly improved. There was still rain, but not so frequent or heavy, the wind was not so strong, though very cold, and we even had sun and blue skies! We crossed to the north side of the fjord, passing an

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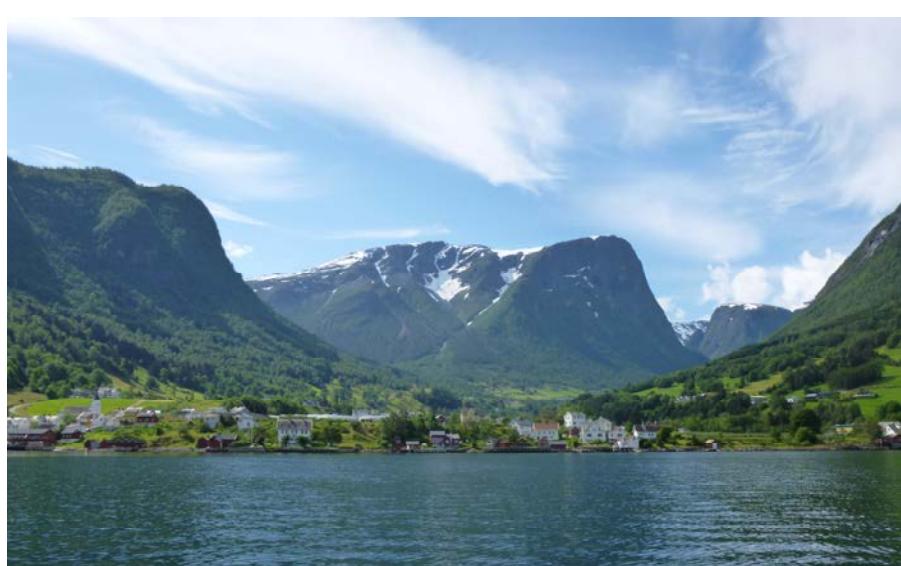
impressive 26m high statue of Fridtjof Nansen on Vangsnes Point - a gift from Emperor Wilhelm II in 1913 - and tied up on a pontoon in Balestrand - a busy place for outdoor activities. From here we took a ferry and coach up Fjaerlandsfjord to an arm of the Jostedal glacier system. Robin had hoped to be able to sail up to the foot of the glacier, but in fact a rocky, rushing river flowed down from it before joining the fjord after several miles.



Nearing Balestrand

The scenery all along the fjords had been quite magnificent, with towering tree-clad mountains on either side, and bare rocky outcrops which were too steep for even the fir trees to cling to. We saw huge rock and scree falls down their faces with many trees toppled. Silver threads of waterfalls showed everywhere, interspersed with cascades of roaring water. And in the distance, craggy snow-capped mountains. Where the trees had

been cleared for cultivation, the grass appeared in brilliant emerald green patches. When the grass is cut it is stored in cylindrical air-tight white polythene rolls, and these were scattered on the fields all through Norway.



Fresvik

Staying on the north side of Sognefjord, we sailed 20 miles on to Sogndal, not a yacht-friendly place. We were not impressed by the town so didn't linger, and next day crossed to Fresvik on the south shore - a very picturesque village nestled into a wide green valley surrounded by mountains.

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Fresvik

We had moved into the fruit-growing area of Sognefjord, and along the banks there are many apple and cherry orchards and fields full of raspberries and strawberries. The quay was a busy meeting place and there was much activity there until well into the evening. We found the Norwegians extremely friendly and interested in the Shrimper, and most speak excellent English. We were asked, as often before, if we had sailed across from England!

Back to the north shore to Kaupanger, to a marina tucked in against a pine-covered hillside, where we were to return two days later. Sadly it was almost completely filled with motor boats - during our whole trip we saw only half a dozen sailing boats on the fjords, and only two of those had their sails up. A very fine ketch was moored close to us, and we got talking to the South African owner. He had built the ketch himself and had had some amazing adventures in her, including surviving a hurricane.

From Kaupanger we sailed into Lustrafjorden, and so completed our voyage to the easternmost end of Sognefjord. We visited Ornes and its Stave church and Solvorn with its winding walkways between the houses and well-stocked shop. From there we sailed into Laerdalsford crossing the junction with Ardalsfjorden and Sognefjord, where the water was quite rough and the wind seemed to whistle down in all directions keeping Robin on his toes! We spent a night in the marina at Laerdal, and explored the historic old part of the town.

The final places we visited were all on the south side of the fjord. We entered Aurlandsfjord where the mountains were close together towering over us. The fjord split and we took the eastern branch where the lower slopes of the mountains were draped with green grass and grazed by large herds of goats. Undredal, where we spent the next night, is famed for its goats' cheese and goats' stew. It was an uncomfortable stay on the pontoon there as every passing ferry and pleasure boat set us rocking around crazily.

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Aurlandsfjord (left)

Undredal (above)

It quietened down overnight but we left early in the morning and motor sailed up Naeroyfjord, where it was rather too damp and misty to appreciate the stunning vistas of the mountains.

Our four-mile trip to Aurland was cold and unpleasant in heavy rain, but the little harbour that we'd found quite by chance with the car and trailer was perfect to moor up in, well sheltered from the wash of ferries passing to and from Flam. The morning was very misty with low cloud over the bottom of the mountains and fjord. Mournful sounds of a fog horn echoed off the cliffs as a huge 4,000 passenger liner made its way towards Flam. It was rather wet and we did a couple of trips by car, one up to the Stegastein viewpoint, 2,000 ft up with a viewing platform built out over the edge of the mountain.



Aurlandsfjord from Stegastein viewpoint

Our last day afloat arrived and our last sail, which was 3½ miles to Flam and its railway to Myrdal. We took a breathtaking train journey with wonderful views down the valleys as we climbed higher and higher, and past thundering waterfalls. On our return we hurried back to BC and back down the fjord to our little harbour - we needed to catch the tide while it was still quite high.

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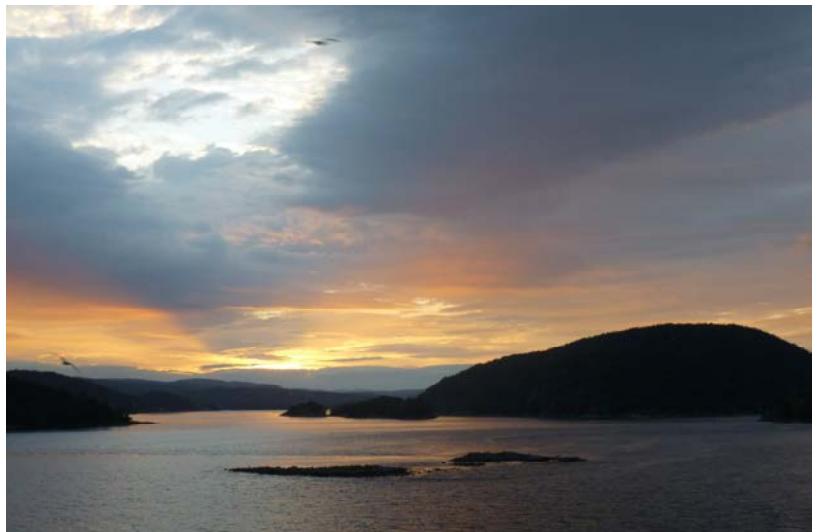


From the Flam railway

BC was successfully retrieved and parked at the side of the road. The morning was wet, so derigging was slow as we dodged in and out of the car, but by early afternoon we were set to go and saying a wet, cold farewell to Sognefjord. Soon we entered the Aurland-Laerdal tunnel, which at 25km is the longest road tunnel in the world. As we headed south towards Oslo, the clouds slowly lifted and the sun came out and we felt really warm for the first time in three weeks!

The mountains gave way to steep tree-covered hills and we drove beside large, very beautiful lakes, the trees and ochre and dark red-painted houses reflected in the still water. We had one more night aboard before reaching Oslo, and turning off the main road we were lucky to find an isolated lay-by amongst pine trees on the edge of a lovely lake.

We had a day and a half exploring Oslo, visiting the cathedral and City Hall, and the Maritime, Fram and KonTiki Museums; our last morning we spent in the Vogeland Park, which is full of beautiful flowers, avenues of sycamore trees and amazing sculptures. Late in the afternoon it was time to board our ferry to Frederikshavn at the start of our long tedious drive home. Our last view of Norway was of a spectacular sunset as we left Oslo and threaded our way out through the islands. We had sailed 200 miles and driven 2000 miles.



Gillie and Robin Whittle - Bumble Chugger (124)