

PART TWO

# THE ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH

The Marlow Explorer sails further north than ever before, but will the local police allow Thomas and Jutta to continue on their voyage?

Words & pictures Thomas Kittel

Someone must have been reading our anxious minds and wanting to wrap us up in comfort – the sky is blue and the sun is shining on us as we say goodbye to Oslo in front of the spectacular opera house. The next leg of our journey will at first lead us south again – through the well-protected Oslo fjord – then through the southern Norwegian archipelago. But once at the southernmost tip of Norway, near Lindesnes Fyr (also known as the South Cape), we correct the compass and slowly start to head in the right direction again: north.

It's here the archipelago comes to an end so ahead of us will be several open, unprotected days at sea, where the disruptive strong westerly winds can cause quite a bit of motion on the sea. Not every part of our cruise will be filed as 'coffee and cake cruising'...

But there are always two sides to every coin. While we are seeking shelter from those westerlies, we duck into Flekkefjord Harbour, which otherwise wouldn't have been on our list of destinations. At Flekkefjord, we find a small, pretty town with a strong Dutch influence in the middle of a striking mountain range. Being a railway fanatic, a particular highlight for me is the Flekkefjordbanen, a disused branch line that runs through 46 tunnels, many cut into the rock by hand. It closed in 1990 but hasn't been abandoned – the whole track can be travelled by rail bike, which especially in the pitch black and icy cold tunnels with water dripping from the ceilings, turns out to be a test of endurance.

In the oil metropolis of Stavanger, our next guests come on board. We believe Stavanger to be a vibrant city until we realise that the crowds are cruise ship passengers. Once the huge ocean liners – we count five in two days – depart, the city falls back into a deep sleep.



The perfectly sheltered harbour of Henningsvaer

## ABOUT THE CREW

We covered Thomas and Jutta Kittel's journey to Moscow in their Marlow 72E Azura last year; this year join us as we follow the adventurous couple on a four-part journey to the North Cape of Norway in the Arctic Circle



The lighthouse near Henningsvaer keeps watch over the Lofoten's archipelago

We skip our scheduled rest day and continue via Haugesund to Hardangerfjord. Within a day, the landscape has changed dramatically from relatively flat to mountainous. The summits hit between 1,200m and 1,600m, and are covered with still-falling snow.

It's enough to lure us on to a marvellous trip to the Folgefonna Glacier, which is covered with ice and snow. After a half-hour taxi ride from Jondal through 25ft-high walls of snow, we reach the foot of the glacier at 1,200m, where the ski lift is still running and snow is falling. In summer, athletes from all over Europe come here to train on the unique summer ski track but when we visit, we see only a bunch of young skilled Norwegian boys.

## UNDER THE WEATHER

The weather remains a hotchpotch of everything; if you want to take pretty pictures, you have to have your wits about you to catch the sun. The strong coastal winds don't disturb the world of the fjords so the motion of the water isn't an issue here at all, at least not for our Marlow Explorer 72. As we approach Bergen, our Danish friends tell us it rains there almost all the time and the children are said to be born with rubber boots on their feet. To corroborate this fairytale, Bergen welcomes us with a heavy rain shower, which later becomes permanent rainfall. The weather didn't have to do this – we believed the story anyway.

The old harbour of Bergen offers another surprise for us – it is completely crowded. After our recent experiences, we didn't expect this at all. We end up cruising around for nearly two hours, dock at the Clarion Hotel and get chased off, talk to the harbourmaster several times and finally end up at the rotten pier of an office

building. It's difficult to get on land and we have neither water nor electricity, but we do have the most spectacular view of the old town of Bergen. The historic Hanseatic wooden centre, Bryggen, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 and the whole town seems charming, cultured and vibrant to us, even in the rain.

The following day, the weather thankfully clears, so we take a trip on the mountain railway to Floyen, one of Bergen's surrounding mountains. From the top, we enjoy a spectacular view over the city and harbour and out to the North Sea, while being serenaded by a spontaneous jazz trio performing on the summit. We visit the art museums dominated by Edvard Munch and watch a sensational performance of the Canadian Cirque Éloize in the Grieg Hall. Norway's famous composer Edvard Grieg was born in Bergen and spent time conducting the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, which recently celebrated its 250th anniversary. Bergen is certainly a highlight so far and will be remembered fondly.

Our cruise along Norway's coast continues to be a mixture of fun and frustration with nature. Besides the windy, often cold and rainy weather, the Atlantic Ocean continues to demonstrate that it shouldn't be taken lightly – the rolling waves seldom match the wind direction and in those areas not protected by the Norwegian archipelago, this swell is significant enough to change the enjoyable atmosphere of cruising the fjords into something more unpleasant. We have a lot of respect for the elements and can understand why, in high season, the Norwegian search and rescue service offers a convoy service for pleasure boats through the most exposed areas.

Even the large and apparently unshakeable coastal cruisers of the Hurtigruten line stay in the harbour if the conditions become too

*The summits of the Lofoten Islands appear on the horizon, emerging majestically from the Norwegian Sea*



Taking to the bizarre but fun rail bikes on the track above Flekkefjord

rough, regardless of their timetable. So it's not a joke that Norway is planning to build the world's first tunnel for seagoing ships – at the most dangerous peninsula of Stadlandet, with the thinking that even freighters and the Hurtigruten liners will pass through this gigantic construction. The plan is that it will be a huge hole drilled through the rocks, about a mile long by 90ft wide, 40ft deep and 120ft high. Construction is supposed to start in 2018 and the cost is estimated to be \$150 million (approx £105 million).

We have already passed successfully through this section once, but will have to navigate it again on our return.

Nevertheless, we have a reason to celebrate – we have crossed the polar circle at 66°33'55"N for the first time. To put that into English, Scotland, the Shetlands, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and even Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, are now lying south of us. We are on the same latitude as Alaska and Siberia and have never been so far north, either in *Azura* or otherwise.

The growing distance from home is showing in several ways. We are approaching the edge of the ASTRA footprint, a European television satellite. In harbours surrounded by high buildings or in the fjords with steep mountains, we don't receive a signal anymore. Also, our barometer, which receives the time automatically from Frankfurt, has started to show strange numbers. It's not the battery, as we thought – we're out of range of the radio transmitter.

In addition, the depth-sounder is showing that we're no longer cruising the shallow Baltic Sea but are instead crossing extremely deep fjords with depths of more than 2,500ft. Although Raymarine only guarantees correct data up to around 600ft, the instrument is doing a good job and has shown depths of more than 2,000ft already – and according to the sea chart, it's correct.

The further north we travel, the more dramatic the tide becomes. In southern Norway, like in northern Denmark, there's almost no



Rainy conditions approach in the lonely Holandsfjord

tide, but at this latitude there is a tidal range of 7ft, which rises to about 10ft around North Cape. Docking the boat still isn't a problem since most of the harbours offer floating pontoons but in some of the narrow fjords, the tide can cause strong currents and swirls.

South-east of Bodø we find the Saltstraumen, the world's strongest tidal stream. Every six hours, at a speed of up to 20 knots, more than 4,000 million cubic feet of water is pressed through a sea gate between Saltenfjord and Skjerstadtfjord measuring 2 miles long and only 500ft wide. The fast-flowing waters and huge swirls are understandably a paradise for anglers hoping for quick success.

Meanwhile, we're hoping for a change in the weather, which has already been forecasted several times. According to the latest report, we can expect better weather in the Lofoten with temperatures of about 12°C. Fantastic – that would be twice as warm as we are currently experiencing.

## SOAKING UP THE SCENERY

Indeed, our new crew from Bodø brings better weather on board with them. We leave the harbour with the wind still somewhat fresh but under a blue sky and beaming sunshine. As soon as we round the island of Landegode, the welcome summits of the Lofoten islands appear on the horizon. Grouped in a semicircle, they lie in front of us and with our growing proximity,

they emerge majestically from the Norwegian Sea as if somebody had spread the Alps across the sea ahead of us.

For almost six hours, we enjoy this marvellous scenery before we reach our next destination, Henningsvaer. This small group of islands just off the coast and dominated by dried cod is billed as the Venice of the north (local marketing seems to have its own rules). But the small fishing village is very cute and besides some shops still open on a late afternoon, it hosts a sensational fish restaurant comparable with the best metropolitan offerings. If you like fish soup, reindeer carpaccio, whale steak (which is counted as a meat) or bacalao (dried salt cod), you certainly get your money's worth.

We can't help but learn a lot about dried cod while we're here – for instance, many global expeditions and victorious armies of old would not have been successful without dried cod. In the days before refrigeration and canning, they would simply have starved if it wasn't for the salty sustenance. Due to the rapidly declining cod population, it's become rather expensive and is no longer seen as a poor man's food. In today's restaurants, dried cod is offered as a delicate starter or a main dish – it passed our taste tests with flying colours.

## UNCHARTERED WATERS

Germans from my generation will never forget June 17, which for decades was the national holiday of Western Germany, but now the crew and captain of *Azura* have another reason never to forget the date. It starts as one of those days where everything seems to come together naturally and fall into place – the promised improvement in the weather has finally arrived and we leave our small fishing village with the sun shining and reach Svolvær, the administrative centre of the Lofoten, under a clear blue sky. After six weeks of cruising, this is the first day that feels like summer. Svolvær is on the Hurtigruten route so like many midsize Norwegian towns it belongs squarely in the function over form category, but on the other hand, with the Lofoten mountains as a backdrop and a gorgeous view on to the sea and the opposite coastline, Svolvær is absolutely spectacular.

For the first time since leaving Germany, we use our flybridge for a relaxing coffee break. Just as we're ready to leave the harbour, two customs officials appear out of the blue and ask to come on board and check our boat and documents. Any Russian checks last year were a complete joke compared to this, and the gentlemen convivially explain to us that after entering Norway we should have contacted immigration and customs as Norway isn't part of the EU. We did indeed skip this process, mainly because we arrived during the Norwegian national holiday, and now that minor indiscretion is coming back to bite us. The two officers have to report back to their boss and will return. Until then, we are not allowed to leave the harbour.

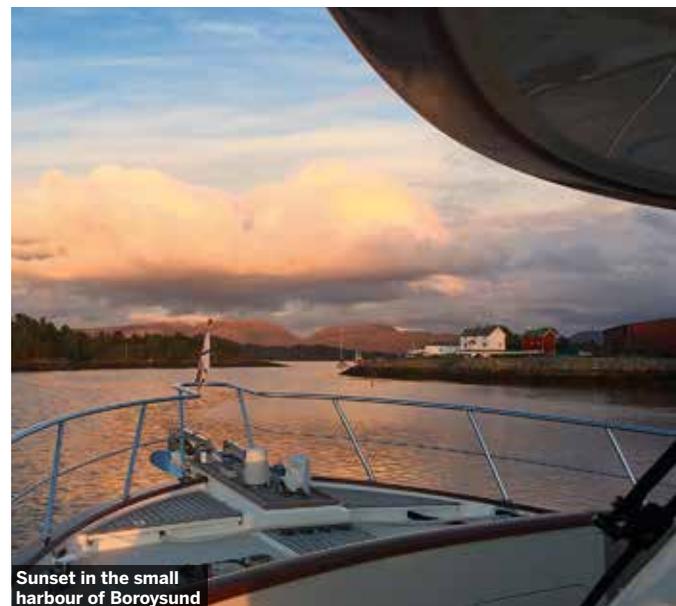
After an hour, they return with two others – not a good sign. Their main concern is the alcoholic beverages we have on board. Norway is a rich country due to its oil fields in the North Sea and has the highest prices in all of Europe, which is the main reason for the very strict rules regarding importing beverages and food. The officers ask us to put all our alcoholic beverages in a pile, which makes for quite a considerable heap. It's certainly not like any other we've seen before – wow... We are allowed to keep the open bottles and the small quota for five people on board, and



Typical wooden houses sit in front of the striking Lofoten mountains



In the old harbour of beautiful Alesund



Sunset in the small harbour of Boroy Sund



Crystal-clear water in Stamsund, Lofoten

*Around 150 bottles of very decent wine are taken away from us by customs officials*

the rest of it is confiscated and will be destroyed. Around 150 bottles of very decent wine are taken away from us, which was meant to be our supply for the entire five months hosting about 25 visiting guests during that time. The only silver lining is that we had much more wine at the beginning of our trip so at least we've had an excellent time over the past few weeks!

When the customs officials leave, they ask us to wait for the police. Based on the customs report, we will be charged a penalty fee. Until then, again, we are not allowed to leave the harbour. All four officers say goodbye with a firm handshake, thank us for our understanding and apologise for not being able to treat us differently to others. By 'others', they mean mobile home or boat owners who load their vehicles or vessels up to the limit and use the alcohol as a currency to pay for all sorts of things.

In the late morning the following day, two friendly gentlemen in uniforms arrive, ask about our journey so far, admire our ship – and hand us a legal document in Norwegian. The key figure is printed in bold, easy to find and doesn't need any translations: Nkr18,000 (approx £1,500). After paying it at the local police station in Svolvær, we will be free people again and allowed to continue our voyage. I ask if payment is possible by credit card and the two smiling custodians of the law nod in affirmation, but unbeknownst to me at the time is just how tricky the payment process would turn out to be. But that's another story... **IMBY**

Next month The Kittels join the Royal North Cape Club