



Take my fins and pass the pa

The *Seattle* is just the most famous of the many wrecks accessible from Kristiansand, and this southern Norwegian idyll is just a ferry ride away from the UK, says Lars Stenholt Kirkegaard

WHILE WE'VE BEEN BELOW, the surface conditions have become rather choppy. I first notice this when I spot the ladder going up and down with annoying irregularity. I have to concentrate: I need to co-ordinate my arms and legs before attempting the climb on board. Fins and hands have to find their proper place on the ladder in perfect synchronisation and at exactly the right moment, when the boat is in the trough of the waves, and the ladder at its lowest.

Moments later, I feel as if I've tried to jump onto a train at full speed: I'm yanked upwards with terrible force, only to be pushed back down just as brutally seconds later.

Hanging on for dear life, I'm trying to remember whether I strapped the camera to my body or not. If I did, I might be able to climb the unruly ladder and pull myself up the last bit over the gunwale.

I manage to climb far enough to get my head out of the water. A hand reaches down to grab my tank-valve, while another relieves me of my camera.

Moonwalk

Now all I need to do is concentrate on shuffling my fins onto the deck. I achieve something vaguely reminiscent of a moonwalk towards the seats, where my tank elegantly slides into the purpose-designed holder. I can relax.

There's a huge grin on my face – the dive was outstanding. The Norwegian archipelago has appeared at its best, with fantastic visibility to top things off.

We have just been to see the wreck of the *Tom B*. At only 20m, we were able to spend 45 minutes at a nice slow tempo. The wreck shows the ravages of time, the area littered with pieces of twisted metal that provide plenty of hiding places for fish.

Numerous burrows and tunnels create the illusion of real wreck penetration, but in fact the swim-throughs are easy enough for almost any diver to attempt.

There have been four pairs of divers in the water but the wreck is big enough that we never feel crowded. Once in a while, we stop to get our bearings, as the twisted scrap metal looks the same all over the wreck, but I know that the dive-boat is right above us. The wreck lies next to the drop-off, and the massive rock wall means there's no risk of losing our way.

Pasta con pesto

Back on deck I've wriggled out of my BC. Nature calls, and I'm considering how much of the suit I need to remove. The boat's cramped head rules out a visit while wearing a drysuit.

Thankfully, I have had the foresight to install a convenience zip, so I make for the rail to relieve the pressure. But I don't get that far, as I am confronted by a sight I've never before seen on a dive boat.

The bowl of steaming pasta covered with pesto and grated cheese rests in the hands of a smiling Carlo. "Eat, eat, eat!" he urges, and the call of nature is silenced as if by magic. I grab the hot bowl and tuck in. Amazing! This is an incredibly good idea. Cold divers get warm, tired divers are energised, and disappointed divers smile again.

And the choice of food is spot on; no risk of flatulence or heartburn on the next dive. Why did I never think to put pasta in my dive lunchbox?

Soon, two rows of divers are seated aft, busily guzzling. The talk is all about the recent dive, and Carlo is the centre of attention. He couldn't hide his Italian ancestry if he wanted to. By a long and tortuous road, he has ended up in southern Norway, and through

sta



This page: Diving the wrecks of Norway requires a good torch. Often the best marine life is hidden in holes and gaps of the wreck. This is the *Tom B*

considerable effort has managed to get a decent dive shop going.

He is energetic, and only ever silent long enough to do justice to a mouthful of pasta. No one objects, what with the stories – more or less truthful – he has to tell. That’s an excellent characteristic in a dive-boat skipper.

Rough and smooth

It takes only 16 hours to reach Kristiansand on the newish ferry service from Newcastle upon Tyne that continues on to Sweden. That’s 16 hours to reach the southern town Norwegians call “the Gateway to Europe”, and top-notch diving for the dedicated wreck-diver.

The diving is full of variety. Accommodation is available at varying price levels and degrees of luxury. One option, for example, is a campsite at Dvergnes Tange where the owners have answered the needs of divers by offering rinsing and drying facilities. Some divers bring their own RIBs and rent a mooring at one of the many small jetties at the larger campsites.

Norway offers the right of public access to privately owned land, so others on small budgets choose to pass the night in sleeping-bags under a tarpaulin in lay-bys along the main roads.

At one time I would visit Norway from my home in Denmark four or five times a year, for a weekend or a whole week, and I might have slept like that. These days a trip is as much about relaxing and enjoying life as about diving, so this time we’ve booked at an established dive centre. It’s about 20m from its rental apartment to the dive boat.



Lots of iron

The best-known wreck in Kristiansand is the *Seattle*. The huge German freighter was sunk in crossfire when the Germans invaded Norway during World War Two.

It’s a breathtaking wreck, and a first dive in great viz leaves you hungry for more. The hull is 460ft long, and broken in three sections. The shallowest part of the wreck lies at 20m, but for the more experienced the adventure goes on all the way down to 72m.

My first dive on the site was 15 years ago. We were only a few divers, with 12 litre tanks and pony bottles, out in a tiny rubber dinghy moored to one of two permanent marker buoys. The day was calm and overcast, and in the early morning there was only a light haze over the water, and fog on the hillsides.

The quiet surface and the gloom made me feel that something big was about to happen. Leaving one man on the surface, we carefully entered the dark, unbelievably clear water.

Leaving our dive lights off allowed us to see well in the darkness. As a matter of fact, I didn’t have a dive light, and even if I had, I would almost certainly have forgotten to turn it on.

With the hairs on my neck standing out like bristles on a scrubbing-brush, we reached the big capstan to which the buoy-line was attached. My wreck-diving experience was very limited, and I remember the feeling of intense joy the first time all my expectations were met. This was what a real wreck-dive was supposed to be like – great viz and lots of iron!

The *Seattle*’s stern lies on a steep slope, but as you go deeper it levels off. We reached our maximum depth of 30m

fairly quickly and moved in line into open water over the sloping deck. Soon we were hovering above the enormous hull, quietly taking in the wealth of detail on the deck.

There was (and still is!) a whole battery of well-preserved gas cylinders connected together. The gas must have leaked out long ago, but they made me feel a bit uneasy all the same. I even moved away. What if they, against all odds, exploded – a ridiculous idea, but at 30m your thought processes aren’t always entirely rational.

Black hole

We were about 10m above one of the cargo holds, hanging there trying to look into the black hole, when it suddenly dawned on the other divers that they could use their dive lights. They brought them out and turned them on. I must have had goose bumps all over my body – the effect was staggering!

Down in the hold, hundreds of coalfish were lazing around. I’ve seen shoals of at least that size since, even in my local waters, but have never come close to that first experience.

That dive ended on a panicky note. I realised I had accidentally exceeded the maximum depth by almost 2m for a short while. I didn’t have the dive tables memorised then, and was convinced I would have the bends when I surfaced. I didn’t, but I kept careful watch the rest of the day.

I never told my buddies. In my mind, I had made a spectacular blunder, one that would cause uproar, get me grounded and probably mean some kind of unspecified punishment.

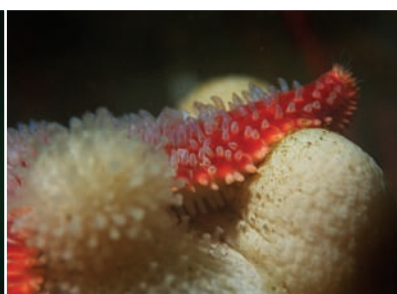
And I didn’t want to lose face by



Above: There are small islands all around the Norwegian coast.

Below left: Most of the layout of the *Seattle* wreck is intact

Below: Steep walls hosting plentiful wildlife is the essence of Norwegian diving



admitting that I hadn't managed to stay within the specified depth.

Since then I've returned to the *Seattle* several times. The depth makes the wreck perfect for trimix. The site is close to land, and visibility often very good.

A short distance from the Kjevik airstrip, further up the Kristiansand fjord, lies the old wreck of a Dornier 24.

The aircraft has broken into several pieces, and is beginning to deteriorate, but it's only a short surface swim from the shore, and the depth ranges from 30-35m. Visibility is not very good this far up the fjord, but the experience is nevertheless worthwhile.

The two scheduled dives of the day done, we return to the OneOcean dive centre. It's only 2pm, so we decide to try the local diving. We feel a little spoilt as we get changed in the store-room and make the short walk to the waterfront.

Kristiansand is a confusion of coves and inlets, with glassy water sheltered from the wind around every corner.

Mark Knopfler

On a small rocky beach we find an inviting ladder which we decide to use as our entry point. The dive route will be out around the point and away past the local marina.

It's off-season, and there is not a boat in the water, but the mooring lines are all still attached to the pontoon buoys. A gigantic spider's web of lines reaches down to the big slabs of concrete on the bottom, and the bright rays of the sun create an intense green light.

The bottom is littered with things that



the yachties have dropped overboard. We recover nine golf balls, a wallet with credit cards, fishing-rods, fishing-nets, hats, umbrellas – and a Mark Knopfler CD. Later, we clean the disc and put it in the CD-player to see if it works. It does!

It's a peaceful dive. Finally we come across a small glass-fibre wreck. The hull is standing upright, abandoned in 20m of water, completely stripped except for a big lump of inboard engine.

Next to the boat we find a bathtub. How it got here is anyone's guess.

A bunch of crabs have decided to try out the new bath, but have been unable to climb back up the smooth sides and have starved to death. The stench of rotting crab carcasses has attracted more crabs, and the bottom of the tub is a mess of them. Not very pleasant – we can feel the taste of it in our regulators and decide to end the dive.

You never get tired of exploring Norway, though it does take a good

while to get from A to B. The beauty of Kristiansand is that it offers plenty of varied dive sites within a short distance. That's true of many towns on Norway's south coast but they don't enjoy the same international ferry connections. ✎

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: DFDS Seaways runs a twice-weekly ferry service between Newcastle and Kristiansand, usually overnight, and continuing to Sweden. 08705 333111, www.dfdsseaways.co.uk

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION: The OneOcean in the Korsvik Marina is a small dive shop with rental apartments and cabins. It runs daily boat trips all year round and offers 24-hour self-service air filling after the staff have checked your tanks and briefed you on the procedure (www.oneocean.no).

Dvergnestangen Senter is a fully equipped campsite that also offers cabins and apartments for divers on Dvergnestangen Tange, a large peninsula outside Kristiansand (www.dvergnestangen.no)

WHEN TO GO: The winter months are October to April, but between March and September the sun sets very late at night and rises early in the small hours, giving only around four hours of darkness a day. So night dives could be a problem!

MONEY: Kroner.

PRICES: A ferry with DFDS Seaways will cost around £167 per person for a return ticket to Kristiansand. Accommodation at OneOcean starts from £65 per day and accommodation at the Dvergnestangen Senter campsite from £12 per day. A two-dive package at OneOcean will set you back around £50, excluding equipment rental.

TOURIST INFORMATION:
0207 839 6255,
www.visitnorway.com

Above right: A quiet day at Kjevik harbour.
Below: The *Tom B* is easy to penetrate as it is both shallow and open

