

words & pictures  
CRAIG BILLINGHAM



# Norway DIY Diving

**When Craig Billingham fancied a trip to Norway he decided to do it the hard way and make all the arrangements himself. But with the help of a Bergen-based pal he made it happen. Here's Craig's story ...**

ASK A group of divers who have been to Norway what they remember about their trip and they will tell you of fantastic visibility, intact wrecks, beautiful scenery and the hard boat they used. Now don't get me wrong I don't have anything against hard boats, I occasionally use them myself, but nothing can beat the satisfaction of organising and locating your own dive sites. Granted it takes more planning and more effort on the day, but the anticipation of diving a new site which you know nothing about other than what you have seen on the screen of an echo sounder, more than makes up for it.

The area I had chosen was Sognefjord. This is the world's longest fjord, which extends more than 200km inland, is over 1.3km at its deepest, and has over 1,700 islands. This has given rise to a huge area of water with many shipping losses, and a fearsome reputation with the Norwegian mariners. Despite all this, the nature of the fjord, meant that we had a wide choice of foul weather sites if we needed them.

I was surprised how easily I convinced a group of like-minded divers that dragging a RIB all the way to Norway would be worth the effort. All I then had to do was convince someone who owned a RIB! Did I neglect to



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**THE TEAM** Craig Billingham *UK* ; Matt Duke *UK/Norway* ; Bruce Clague *UK* ; Graeme Bruce *UK* ; Gareth Coope *UK* ; Bjarte Kylling *Norway* ; David Kyte *Norway*.

mention I don't own one?! So, after promising to organise everything, and I do mean everything, Graeme Bruce agreed to bring his RIB, providing all he had to do was tow it to the launch site. So, that was it, the trip was on and I had to get some organising done.

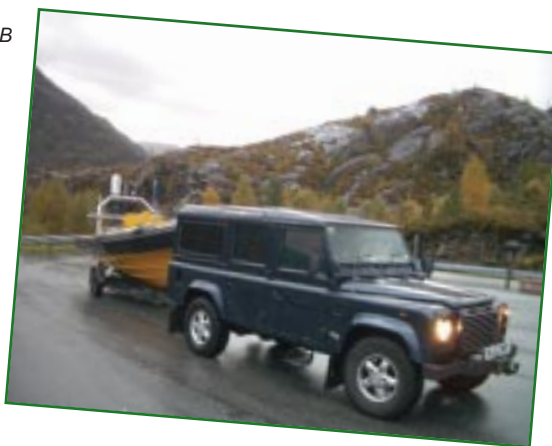
So how do you get a RIB to Norway? Well, after toying for a few minutes with the idea of going via the Shetlands and making a dash across to Sognefjord I got sensible and booked the ferry from Newcastle to Bergen with Fjordline. It took a while to convince the booking office that we weren't importing the RIB and yes we

did want to bring it back! So the dates were set and all I had to do was organise the rest.

Fortunately, whilst at college I met Matt Duke. Matt has subsequently moved to Bergen and now lives there with his Norwegian wife and daughter. His website [www.diving-in-norway.com](http://www.diving-in-norway.com) is a fantastic source of information for visiting divers, and was invaluable in helping to organise the logistics in Norway. Matt also pointed me in the direction of a dive centre which had recently been opened by some friends.

*continued on P.19*

*transporting the RIB*



*we dived with scooters*

*arctic anemone*



*there were colourful bibs on the wrecks*

*red king crabs*



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the Gulen Dive Centre

The Gulen Dive Centre (Gulendykkesenter) is in the village of Nyborg and named after the region of Gulen. It is right in the middle of the region we wanted to dive, and would make an ideal base. (The fact some of us are from the North East of England, and Nyborg is Norwegian for Newcastle, was just fate!). The dive centre provided us with self catering accommodation, which has to rank as some of the best diving accommodation I have stayed in. To help keep the cost down I decided to bring all the food we would need from the UK.

For the less adventurous, Orjan and Monica can also provide a complete holiday package. These can include diving from one of their boats. A more helpful couple, who love their diving, you will be hard pressed to find and I can't praise them highly enough for their help. Details are available from their website.

Oxygen and helium were bought in Norway via one of Matt's contacts, but be warned, the Norwegians use a different bullnose connection for helium, so getting the right adapters sorted is essential if you are planning on using trimix. Sofnolime for the rebreathers was brought with us from the UK, although it could have been shipped directly to the dive centre, but would have been expensive as Import duty would have to have been paid. We used the newly installed compressor and blending panel at the dive centre for air, nitrox and trimix. The dive centre also kindly agreed to move their rib onto a mooring so that we could use the pontoon for the week we were there. Fuel was purchased at Eivindvik jetty 2 miles away.

The final piece of the logistics was the diving. The initial problem we faced was that the Hydrographic Office could not supply charts with a large enough scale for our purposes. This was solved with the help of the internet and a £39.95 weekend break to Bergen (well I needed the brownie points with my wife, if I was going to be coming back for 12 nights in the summer!). Whilst in Bergen I bought the two Norwegian charts we needed. These were subsequently digitised and geo-referenced, (a posh way of saying I put them onto my Ipaq) and this enabled me to hook up with a Bluetooth GPS and use them for navigation.

For those of you who have used Bluetooth you will know how reliable it is, so I also took a paper copy of everything! Fortunately, the Bluetooth worked about 50% of the time. This was at the start of the week so it helped us familiarise ourselves with the surroundings, and the routes we required. It further enabled us to get reliable marks into the boats GPS. Before leaving the UK, I also paid the Hydrographic Office for a circular search. This gave us the approximate position of the wrecks that we intended to dive, some which Matt and I had never heard of.

News of our trip was spreading through the Bergen diving community, mainly thanks to Matt, and we started getting requests to join us from some Norwegians. Since it would help spread the cost, and we had space, we were more than happy to accommodate them.

So what was the diving like? We located and dived four well known wrecks.

*M.V Solvang II* – A MV of 32.0m in length which capsized in 1995. As a recent wreck she is very intact and still has recognisable features. The average depth of this dive is 20m and visibility is normally good which made it an excellent second dive.

*M/S Ferndale* – A large wreck at 4,300 tonnes. She hit a rock in Krakellasund during the night of December 15, 1944. She was eventually sunk by Mosquito planes from the RAF on the following day. The salvage vessel *Parat* who was in attendance was also sunk. The wreck is on a steep slope with the broken bow, in approximately 10m, resting against the rock into which it had collided, and stern resting directly down slope in 40-45m. The *Parat* can normally be seen from the stern. Due to its location this is normally a dark dive, but due its unusual status of diving two wrecks in one, well worth the effort.

*D/S Parat* – 135 ton salvage vessel, sank assisting the *Ferndale*. She lies upright with the deepest part of the wreck in 65-70m although the mast comes almost level with the stern of the *Ferndale*. An interesting wreck with the pumping gear and several interesting features still visible.

*D/S Frankenwald* – A large wreck of 5,000 tonnes. She sank in January 1940 after hitting a rock in the passage next to Ytre Sula. A large intact wreck with the deepest part of the dive the bottom of the bow in 45m and the shallowest being one of the masts which reaches to within 7metres of the surface. Spending most of the dive on the decks at 25-30m makes for an extremely enjoyable dive, especially if using nitrox or a rebreather. Carrying out your decompression stops whilst swimming up a life-encrusted mast makes this a superb dive, and one not to be missed.

We spent two days searching for a Motor Torpedo Boat, and a tanker, initially just with the echosounder and then on the second day with a side scan sonar. Unfortunately due to the challenging topography we didn't find either. However at the sites where we looked for these wrecks we had stunning dives; to say that the life is prolific in these areas was an understatement. It was at one of these sites on a wall that we found cold water coral (*Lophelia*) in a little over 35m. - quite shallow for *Lophelia* I'm told.

We averaged 30nm per day in a RIB, and for those out there who have done long distances in RIBs you will know we mainly had good weather! We completed over 100 man dives which ranged from 20m to 70m max depth, without incident, with a mixture of both Open and Closed circuit divers.

So would I take a RIB to Norway again? Definitely.

#### USEFUL WEBSITES

[www.diving-in-norway.co.uk](http://www.diving-in-norway.co.uk)  
<http://gulendykkesenter.no>  
[www.fjordline.co.uk](http://www.fjordline.co.uk)



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