

ACROSS THE ARCTIC CIRCLE



NORWAY IS A POPULAR DESTINATION FOR MANY SEA KAYAKERS, WHO TEND TO HEAD TO THE FJORD AREA IN THE SOUTH, OR LOFOTEN IN THE FAR NORTH. BETWEEN THEM LIES AN AREA THE LOCALS HAVE, PERHAPS, BEEN KEEPING FOR THEMSELVES. ON THE ADVICE OF NORWEGIAN FRIENDS, LIZ AND SIMON WILLIS WENT TO HELGELAND AND FOUND WHAT COULD BE EUROPE'S NEXT BIG KAYAK DESTINATION.

By SIMON WILLIS





Sixty-six, thirty-three, thirty-eight... My mind was drifting, as it often does on a long paddle, and now it was contemplating these numbers, trying to picture what someone would look like if their vital statistics matched those measurements. Suddenly a shadow passed across my kayak, something that shouldn't happen on the open sea off Norway. I looked up to see the sudden eclipse had been created by a pair of gigantic wings, the size of a couple of ragged surfboards. The inquisitive raptor circled a couple of times, and then glided off ahead, its white tail beckoning us to follow. I glanced down at the GPS and saw the numbers click into place - sixty-six degrees, thirty-three minutes and thirty-eight seconds of latitude. A sea eagle had welcomed us across the Arctic Circle.

One glance at the chart for this area and you can predict almost perfect sea kayaking. The myriad of islands, thousands of streaks of yellow ink on the chart, look like someone hit a Crunchie bar with a mallet. There are fifteen thousand, some separated by only a few metres of sea, creating an aquatic maze which would take weeks to fully explore. The question is where to start, and for that, you need local knowledge.

Two friends in Norway independently recommended the Helgeland area and it fit our criteria perfectly. Liz and I are experienced backpackers, having spent five months hiking a

2,600-mile wilderness trail through the United States. But we'd never lived from a kayak for an extended period. Before we organised our own expedition to somewhere really remote, like Alaska, Greenland or Patagonia, we wanted a practice paddle, what Americans call a "shake-down" trip. But where? We wanted to be fully self-supported and organise all the logistics ourselves, but it had to be a holiday, not an expedition. We hoped to use our own boats but didn't want to mess around with airfreight. We planned to camp well away from habitation, but couldn't face the hassle of grizzly or polar bears. And it all had to fit within the constraints of a two-week holiday. Strict criteria, but Helgeland fitted perfectly.

In fact, I'd go so far to say it's the ideal choice for intermediate paddlers wanting to organise their first, overseas multi-day mini-expedition. The scattered islands and mountainous panorama are similar to what we might find in British waters, but bigger, bolder, and more dramatic. It's like Scotland on steroids! I sense Helgeland could become a very popular destination for British kayakers. This article is not meant to describe the perfect route through the islands, it's just the one we picked, but it does set out all the information I wished I'd known at the start.

GETTING THERE

The glory days of air travel are long gone.

An evil combination of budget airlines and barmy terrorists has turned flying into an environmentally crippling version of purgatory. By contrast, the Queen of Scandinavia is delightful, even if she looks a little elderly now. We drove into her cavernous belly (you've worked out she's a ship, haven't you?) near Newcastle and, twenty-six hours later, emerged onto the quayside at Bergen. That's a long time on a ship but we approached this much as we would a climb over ten thousand feet; it was acclimatisation. It's not lack of oxygen but cash, which will leave you gasping in Norway. The country has the highest GDP per capita in Europe and by comparison we're the poor relations. The DFDS vessel runs on Norwegian currency and prices, and while forty-six pounds for dinner for two initially sounds expensive, it's relatively cheap compared to what would lie ahead.

As we drove north, two coffees and a kit-kat in a small roadside café cost £6. Supermarkets were generally fifty percent more expensive than at home. This is another reason to favour the DFDS car ferry over flying. Not only could we use our own boats and equipment, we took almost all our food for the two weeks. And if you're considering this way of travel, believe me, it's worth the extra few quid to book a cabin with a window because, in rough weather, it helps to be able to see the horizon, even if it's moving up and down.

The downside is the drive. The almost one thousand two hundred kilometres of windy Norwegian roads, where strictly enforced speed limits rarely exceed 55mph, take about eighteen hours to complete. Sharing the driving we did it in one long evening and one long day, catching just five hours sleep in the back of the car when we pulled into one of the many picnic places along the route. The scenery in the southern fjord area and through the mountains of the Jotunheimen is breathtaking, but elsewhere it was just trees and rock, apart from the twenty minutes we spent inside a mountain driving the world's longest car tunnel. The trolls have clearly been active. There are a lot of tunnels in Norway.

OUR ROUTE

We planned the route using Google Earth, although "planned," suggests a sense of organisation we didn't really have. We'd decided where to start and finish, and picked three or four key places to visit. Solvær was top of our list.

If you've paddled the scattering of skerries off Arisaig on Scotland's west coast, try to imagine something like that, only much bigger, as if someone had cut and pasted the islands from OS sheet 40 over and over again. The vast majority appear far too small to be inhabited; yet wooden cabins crop up in the most unlikely places, usually with a small boat bobbing about on the water in front. Paddling these narrow channels felt like following nature's corridors, and we never knew what was around the next turn. Sometimes it was a community; once or twice it was a fishing boat travelling at a fair pace. One particularly narrow corridor had been bridged by hefty planks of wood, which left a gap of only a few feet above the water. With perfect timing, a Norwegian family, laden with picnic hamper, strolled across the bridge just as we were attempting to kayak-limbo underneath. They stared at our contortions but remained silent.

It was precisely because we wanted to visit these islands that we chose to start our paddle in the mainland town of Nesna. What's more, Nesna is a daily stop for the famous Hurtigruten coastal ships, eleven of which continually travel Norway's coast and which, in years gone by, were the main link between thirty-four remote



communities, all the way from Bergen to Kirkenes. Nowadays, the Hurtigruten is a triumph of marketing. The old working steamers, crammed with Norwegian fishermen heading home, have been replaced by cruise ships and dollar toting tourists, drawn by the promise of experiencing the 'world's most beautiful voyage'. Our route would take us between two Hurtigruten ports, Nesna and Ornes, so we could use this famous boat to return to our start. It was only later I discovered that many, many more options were open to us, as this entire coast is criss-crossed with big "ferries" and "fast boats" all of which take sea kayakers.

Lovund was another island we were keen to visit, partly because it sits on the outside edge of the Solvær chain of islands, but mainly because it's home to a huge puffin colony. Giant cliffs towered over our campsite and, high in the sky, squadrons of the small missile-like birds flew sorties out to sea and back to their ledges. Puffin burrows surrounded our tent, but they were empty. August was too late in the season to catch most of the birds at home, as they'd

already headed out to sea, where they spend the winter. The ones we saw heading to and from the cliffs were only stragglers.

Surprisingly, the wildlife was scarce. We saw a few fins, later identified as small dolphins, found regularly in these waters, and one or two minke. But the biggest puzzle was the almost total lack of seals. With such physical similarity to Arisaig, we'd expected the water to be buzzing with their curious faces, yet in two weeks we didn't see any. I was told later that local authorities encourage people to shoot seals by offering a £50 bounty for every jaw bone returned as evidence. Fishing has long been the dominant industry in these parts and, as in the UK, fishermen believe the seals eat too many fish. It's quite normal to own high power rifles (people are encouraged to sign up for Norway's own 'home guard' and keep a rifle at home, even in cities) so shooting seals is considered both a sport and a potentially lucrative side-line.

Over the next few days we hopped north from island to island. To our east, the coastline presented a ragged panorama of

SEA NOMADS

An old wooden fish-farm food warehouse is being converted into a kayaker's bunk-house, bar and expedition centre on the island of Brasoy. The locals thought Bent and Inge Skauen were insane when they bought the huge building two years ago, but the pair are confident they've made a wise investment. "Prices have risen hugely in the last couple of years", says Inge, "and more kayakers are starting to realise what a wonderful area this is". Her day job is as the local family doctor, her patch extending to several islands where she holds surgeries on different days of the week. Meanwhile Bent is hard at work constructing the two, three and four bed rooms, as well as the dormitory and kitchen in the upstairs of the warehouse. The downstairs bar, or "pub" as they call it, is already open and many neighbours have become regulars, even at £5.50 a pint.

They call the place Havnomaden, a play on words joining Sea to Nomads. "We want this to become a hang out for sea kayakers", Bent told me, "the place where they'll start their expedition, whether it's a one, two or three week paddle, and we'll do all we can to help them". The four of us spend a couple of hours paddling together to a nearby cluster of islands, chatting all the way. Bent was a gardener in southern Norway until a back injury forced him to quit. He decided to turn his passion into his business, and after looking around Norway decided Helegland was the perfect spot.

He's an accomplished photographer and artist who also makes his own kayaks which sell for around £4,500. It sounds expensive, until you appreciate the work which goes into them. Each piece of wood is individually cut and shaped, then epoxy is put on-top and behind. The result is a light, strong boat which looks like it's made entirely of wood.

"We also have normal kayaks here which people can rent, and we hope to run courses from the bunkhouse", Bent explained as we paddled. "These waters are particularly suited to beginners".





soaring peaks. Lurking behind them, the vast ice-cap of Norway's second largest glacier, Svartisen, continued to sculpt the landscape. Its various snouts hanging between the folds of the mountain range like cooled candle wax. When the wind blew from the east, across this permanent snow, the temperature dropped five degrees. To our west, distant islands beckoned, tempting us into big crossings. We resisted and pressed northward.

The water was astonishingly clear and, another surprise, incredibly shallow. Part way across a five kilometre crossing I could clearly see the sea bed. It felt like I could get out and walk. "This is our own Great Barrier Reef", I was later told by a local with whom we stayed. "It starts far out at sea, and it protects the islands through which you've been paddling. It's what makes this area special". For early fishermen the reef was both a blessing and a curse. It sheltered the inner islands, but before the days of powered vessels,

meant a long row out to sea to reach deep water. Some built homes on the outer islands but during a big storm in 1901, more than thirty people were killed. Huge waves rolled in from the North Sea, hit the shallow reef and reared up into what today we might call a tsunami. It crashed onto the offshore community and people were drowned in their own homes. When fishing boats gained engines and could travel further and faster, many families sought shelter, quite literally moving home by loading it onto a boat, and erecting it on a new island.

Today, many of the cabins on the islands are holiday homes. This isn't the preserve of a wealthy few, it's quite common for Norwegians to have a "summer home", either in the mountains or on the coast, to which they'll retreat at weekends, and for the long summer holiday many take from June to August. As in the UK, there is a tension between the people who live and work permanently in the island communities

and those who visit only occasionally, yet have pushed house prices beyond local reach.

Autumn was in the air, even in August. We had three hot days when we paddled flat calm water wearing just a thermal top. After that, cloud hung over the mountains and a steady cooling breeze created the perfect temperature to switch into our dry suits. Although beaches were relatively scarce, we never struggled to find a good campsite. We'd taken a huge tent, a three person Vango geodesic dome, in case we had to sit out bad weather or pitch on rock or sand where we couldn't rely on pegs to hold the tent upright. No matter that it needed two tapered dry bags and filled the noses of both kayaks; it was a luxury well worth the space. Liz had home dehydrated all our dinners, so we ate well.

Our only contact with locals along the route was when we called into a harbour for water. I found a hose lying on a pontoon and managed to fill our five, 10ltr water bags, without getting

out of the boat. It was belting down with rain, the sort of deluge in which the rain drops actually bounce back off the surface for a second go. We were well protected in our dry suits and large rain hats, and Liz fancied some bread and milk, so we decided to check out the shop. Clearly the sixteen year old lad behind the counter wasn't expecting any customers to brave this downpour, let alone two English folk in bright orange jump-suits. "Snakker du Engelsk", I asked, using my only Norwegian. "Err, a little" came the bemused reply. Two minutes later we walked out with a frozen loaf and a carton of milk, my wallet £2.80 lighter for the privilege, leaving the young man still in a state of disbelief at who, or what, he'd just served.

This is an area full of myths and legends. All are associated with the dramatic landforms amongst which we were paddling. One tale tells of a beautiful female Ogre who lived with her six sisters. A giant Troll called Hestemannen liked her, but the attraction was not reciprocated and the seven girls ran south to avoid him. He galloped after her on his horse, but the sun was rising, so he fired an arrow at her, but instead hit a Troll called Torghatten. The sun rose and they were all turned to stone. You can still see their shapes; the Seven Sisters mountain range, the island of Hestemona, which looks creepily like a hooded man on a horse, and, most amazing of all, the island of Torghatten, whose mountain has a big hole right through it.

We only had one tricky moment, when wind and tide combined to raise some clapotis at the north end of Rodoy Island. We couldn't be certain this was localised, and since we were about to tackle a seven kilometre crossing, decided to

pitch camp and wait a few hours for the sea to calm down. Later that night we crossed back to the mainland and slipped into our first fjord. We'd planned to spend three days exploring the inter-connecting fjords, but low cloud limited the views and frankly, after such superb and varied paddling, amongst fascinating islands, the fjord was boring by comparison.

Industry and so-called civilisation was beginning to intrude. Steam rose from a factory at the head of the fjord, and I could smell it made food for fish farms. We cut short our exploration, headed for the nearest port on the "fast-boat" schedule, and by that evening we were back in Nesna. It wasn't the end of our journey by any means. Instead, we headed out to yet another cluster of islands, this one a UNESCO world heritage site, where we spent another four days.

A unique set of features makes Helgeland a special place to sea kayak. Sheltered waters, protected from the worst of what the prevailing westerly's can produce; a series of archipelagos stretching up the coast in which kayakers can find peace, quiet and isolated campsites; larger, mountainous islands with dramatic plunging cliffs and weird tortured rock shapes and all set against a rugged backdrop of grey mountains fringed with permanent Arctic snow. This is the place Norwegian and Swedish sea kayakers have been coming to for years, leaving us Brits to drive further north to Lofoten and Nordkapp. Perhaps it wasn't a deliberate attempt to keep it to themselves. Perhaps they just saw no reason to shout about it. Whatever the reason, the secret is out and I'm convinced Helgeland could be the next big sea kayak destination.

HOW TO DO IT

You'll find all this information and more from the Links page of SeaKayakRoutes.com

ORGANISED PACKAGES
Roope Roine: mountain and kayak guide
www.rooperoine.com

Coastal Odyssey: paddle almost the same route we tackled.
www.coastalodyssey.com

Crossing Latitudes: Outdoor adventures in Scandinavia. www.crossinglatitudes.com

Magne Steiro: Nesna based kayak guide who rents boats www.havogfritid.no

Bent & Inge Skauen: Setting up kayak bunkhouse on Brasoy, rent kayaks and will offer courses www.havnomaden.no

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL
DFDS Seaways: Newcastle to Bergen ferry www.dfds.co.uk
Hurtigruten: Extensive coastal ferry www.dfds.co.uk

Local ferries: www.177nordland.no Look for route 23-731 Fast boat.

KAYAK RENTAL
Magne Steiro: Nesna based kayak guide who rents boats www.havogfritid.no
Bent & Inge Skauen: www.havnomaden.no

APPROXIMATE COSTS
DFDS Seaways ferry cost £446 for car (additional height due to kayaks) and two passengers. Fuel and occasional food in Norway totalled £400.

