It’s a world of downy ducks and sailing for Yvonne Gordon in Norway’s Vega Islands

This is the most difficult lane.’ Our skipper Emil is guiding us through a narrow channel between two long, flat islands. We’re sailing through the Hysvær islands, in the Vega Archipelago just below the Arctic Circle in Norway, on our way to Skjærva.

There are so many islands and shallow channels, we have to watch the chart carefully to make sure we don’t run aground. Locals call the area ‘boots bottom’ because you can walk between the islands in your boots.

As we finally glide safely into the harbour at Skjærva, a row of red wooden fishing cabins lining the waterside comes into view. ‘This is the furthest you can get,’ says Emil. It’s so remote, I feel like we have sailed to the edge of the Earth. We didn’t pass any other boats on the way and Emil says that’s because it is far out and because navigating these waters is so challenging. ‘Most people look at the chart and don’t want to come,’ he says.

It’s a shame – but I am also glad, because we have the island to ourselves. The houses and barns on the island are empty and silent. Nobody lives on the islands year-round now – the last family left in 1978. The wooden cabins once served as shelters for the fishermen, who stopped here at night as it was too far to go home. Each cabin is on stilts, with a platform for unloading fish. Now the fishermen have engines to take them home, and the cabins are used only for summer holidays.

But the most important residents here are the birds rather than people. They’re the eider ducks, and locals organise their lives to look after the birds, in return for their valuable down.

The island is scattered with eider duck houses – small wooden boxes for nesting ducks during the breeding season from April to July (when it is forbidden to visit the islands). The locals build the shelters from driftwood and make nests from dried seaweed.

During breeding season, the locals come out to live on the islands to protect the ducks and eggs from predators. The female duck lines the seaweed nest with down to keep her and the eggs nice and cozy. When the ducks and their chicks leave at the end of the season, the islanders collect the down from the nests to fill quilts.

We’re sailing around some of the 6,500 islands in the Vega Archipelago. With settlements here going back to the Stone Age, the archipelago is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some of the islands and islets we pass are long, thin strips on the horizon, mirrored so perfectly in the water that it’s as if some artist had put a strip of green paint in the scene, folded it in half and opened it up again.

The larger islands have a scattering of red and yellow wooden houses; the smaller islets are inhabited only by sea birds, but plenty of them – this is the most important wintering area for seabirds in the Nordic region.

Our home for five days is Nirvana, a Bavaria 44-foot yacht, and this is where we eat, sleep, swim from and sail for five days, enjoying the scenery and learning about the area. We started our sailing trip in Brønnøysund, on Norway’s Helgeland coast. Nine of us – two skippers and seven guests – are split between two yachts, Nirvana and Palander, a Farr 40.

On our first evening, we set off at sunset for Torghatten, eight nautical miles south, and tie up at the pontoon. We tuck into Norwegian meatballs and everyone gets to know each other over a few shots of aquavit, the local spirit. Next morning we climb Torghatten Mountain, famous for a large hole through its mid section.

We watch, mesmerised, as the lights dance in the night sky.

The last family left Mudværret in 1969, when eider production was revived. Arnt and his wife, Erna, live on the island from May to July. Erna gathers the birds’ down – it’s traditionally gathered and cleaned by the women.

That night we sail to Nes Harbour on Vega, where a pale green light develops in the sky to the west. The Northern Lights. I hadn’t expected to see them here but we watch them dance across the sky for hours, mesmerised. We all feel surprisingly emotional – it’s a first even for some of the Norwegians.

We visit E-House Museum to see how eider duck down is harvested and cleaned. Unlike other ducks, eider has long downy feathers, and a man comes out in his dimly lit workshop to greet us. They don’t get much passing traffic in these parts.

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