

Eider and the Isles

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 Skjærvær.

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 Skjærvær, 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 so 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 cosy. 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 someone 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



NORDLAND:
Torghatten Mountain, which has a giant hole through its mid section



SAILS:
An eider duck and, below, Nirvana in harbour

GETTING THERE

A six-day trip with **Sail Norway** with accommodation and meals costs about €900pp; see sailnorway.com or call +47 4809 0506. SAS fly to Brønnøysund, via Copenhagen or Oslo, from Dublin. Fares to Oslo from €77 one way, incl. taxes and charges and from Oslo to Brønnøysund with Widerøe from €79 one way, see flysas.ie and wideroe.no. Hurtigruten ships call at Brønnøysund daily, see hurtigruten.co.uk. For more on Helgeland, see visithelgeland.com.



AT HOME:
Yvonne at one of the island's eider duck houses, used by the birds in breeding season. Visitors are not allowed on the islands during the season

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 pontoons. 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 centre. We walk right down into the hole, which is 75m high in parts, and through to the other side of the mountain, where

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

we can see down over hundreds of small islands.

Later that day we sail to the Muddværet Islands, passing the island of Vega itself, its mountain rising 800m out of the sea, topped by a single cloud like a pudding with a dollop of cream. At Muddværet, we enter a sound beside Vannoeya and a man comes out in his dinghy to greet us. They don't get much passing traffic in these parts.

The sailboat behind us, Palander, then gets stuck on the bottom. There's nothing to do but wait a few hours for the tide to turn, so we invite our new friend, Arnt Nilsen, to join us for pancakes on deck while we admire the surroundings and wait for Palander to unstuck – there is nothing hurried about sailing around here.

The last family left Muddværet in 1969, when eider production ceased, but the industry has since been 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 downs, eider has hooks that form links, like a zip. In winter it absorbs heat and in summer it grows to allow cooler air in. It takes 1kg of down from 60 or 70 nests to fill one duvet, which costs around €5,500. We spend the next few days anchoring in quiet sounds and inlets, visiting islands like Ylvingen, which has a Word War II fort, and testing the boat's kayaks. We see wild moose on one island and I meet an otter on another. At night, we talk, drink and dance in Nirvana's galley. As paying crew, guests take turns to sail, cook, wash dishes – and even catch fish for dinner.

When we arrive back at Brønnøysund, I'm sad to bid farewell to Nirvana. I'm leaving on the Hurtigruten ship, heading north to cross the Arctic Circle on the coastal express. Cruising past islands, fjords and mountains, with postcard-perfect images, I feel lucky to have experienced a unique glimpse into this magical world.