

Fjord escort

The epic landscapes of Norway are tailor-made for two go-anywhere Flemings and an early season cruise in company

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My first cruise in the 2012 season is a trip to Scandinavia, ostensibly to move *Venture II* from her winter storage in Marstrand, Sweden, to Stavanger in Norway for the local boat show. But, truthfully, it is the trip itself that really intrigues me.

Even as the founder of Fleming Yachts, I have rarely been on a voyage with two Fleming boats in such magnificent waters, which will no doubt throw all sorts of our sturdy vessels. *Venture II* is travelling in company with a late-model, Norwegian-owned Fleming 55 named *Sito*. Along for the adventure are my daughter Nicky, Simon from Fleming Yachts and Peter Johanssen, the Fleming representative for Scandinavia.

We arrive in the pleasant town of Marstrand to find both boats tied up in the shadow of the 17th Century fortress which dominates the small island. There is ample dock space this early in the season, but during the short Scandinavian boating season in July and August these same docks and harbour will be a hive of frenetic activity and

space will be at a premium. Two additional Swedish crew members, Spike and Mona, are already on board when we arrive and our trip starts with a convivial dinner aboard. Things kick off in fine style with home-brewed schnapps courtesy of Spike followed by roast ell and all the trimmings.

As dawn breaks we cast off and set a course for Skagen on the northern tip of Denmark. The seas are a little rough but nothing compared to those we experienced during our trip around Iceland a couple of years ago. On arrival at Skagen, the marina is almost deserted, so we leave payment in a box on the door to the office and dine at the restaurant just a few yards from the dock.

ALL THE FUN OF THE FJORDS

The next morning the radio reports that Scotland is getting hammered by winds of over 50 knots but here they are in the low 20s and, more importantly, from aft so we have a comfortable ride late in the afternoon, threading our way through the offshore islands to Mandal on the south coast of Norway. Another port brings another restaurant, this one called Provianten. The owner brews his own

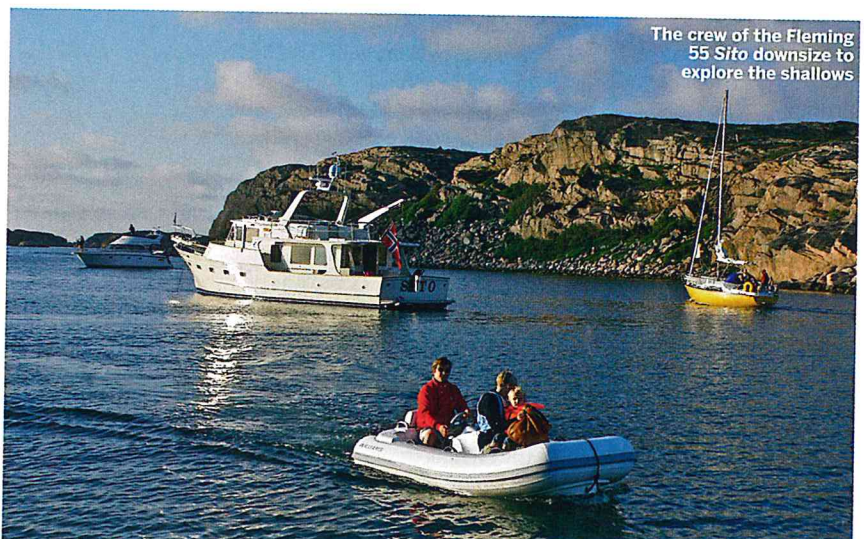


beers, so it seems churlish not to try some. They slip down a treat until we are told about the penalty for drink-driving in Norway. The limit is so low that you could still be over the limit the morning after the night before, and upon conviction you face forfeiture of your licence for two years, a fine equal to one month's salary, and 21 days in the clink! We opt for a long lie-in the next day.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

On leaving Mandal we pass houses with boathouses instead of garages, some almost the size of the house itself. We thread our way through a maze of islands and narrow channels before we round the southern tip of Norway past the country's oldest and most southerly lighthouse at Lindesnes. First lit in 1655, it has been a beacon to mariners in the tempestuous waters where the Skagerrak meets the North Sea for over 350 years.

The waves are substantial when we pass but, with the wind now offshore and on the beam, the stabilisers are at their most effective. *Sito* plunges through the water and it is exhilarating to watch one of our boats shoulder the waves.



The crew of the Fleming 55 *Sito* downsize to explore the shallows



Rafting magic: the two Flemings enjoy the peace and beauty of Josenfjorden

Our next port of call is Egersund. We tie up in the centre of town adjacent to a small park, a lovely spot until the next morning when a mini road sweeper showers *Venture II* with dirt and gravel as it cleans the roads. We did wonder why the crew on the 55 suddenly seemed in such a hurry to leave the dock!

WATER DEEP, MOUNTAIN HIGH

The coast between here and Stavanger offers no inside passage or protected waters but with the winds still from the east we enjoy a comfortable passage north. Stavanger is the centre for Norwegian North Sea oil operations and we pass two large oil rigs on our way into the harbour, where large supply vessels tower over three-storey buildings on the wharfs.

With a couple of days before the show we tour the nearby fjords which penetrate the surrounding mountains. The first of these, Hoegsfjorden, leads into the 42km-long Lysefjord, known for a rock promontory called Preikestolen (Pulpit Rock). From its flat surface, cliffs plummet 604m into the fjord. The scale of this landscape is epic and the 55 looks minuscule against the towering cliffs. Yet even here we see isolated houses, blending into the rocks often with a small boathouse on the water providing their only means of access.

The fjord is 400m deep at the base of the cliffs and we move right up to them to find goats grazing a patch of grass. We are almost within touching distance when a cloud of squawking gulls descend hoping for a handout. A few yards further down the fjord, a cleft in the cliffs reveals a minuscule human figure – some adventurous soul with a sense of humour has placed a scarecrow on one of the rocks.

ISOLATED IDYLLS

We head out to the offshore islands, passing first through the narrow channels on the island of Kvitsoy and then out to Skudeneshavn on the island of Karmoy. This is considered one of the best-preserved towns in Europe and it could certainly vie for the most picturesque too. Clusters of immaculate white wooden houses topped by red roofs line the peaceful waterfront. There's plenty of space to raft up on the wharf on our visit, but in summer, when the tiny harbour is crammed with boats, reservations are essential.

We take a leisurely stroll in the early evening through the cobbled streets in the old town. It's impossibly pretty and many of the houses here have been passed down through the same family for generations. As we wander past what is billed as the smallest

restaurant in the world we see a free table and snap it up. Fortunately for us, the proprietor of this dining spot is also a font of local knowledge and we take his advice to visit a few stunning spots in the coming days. Stavanger is one of those areas where you could spend half a lifetime cruising without ever running out of places to visit. Although most of the cruising destinations are in protected waters these deep fjords can be subject to vicious *katabatic* winds.

EVENING MAGIC

Our next destination is the head of Josenfjorden. Again, massive walls of rock rise from the water and we lose GPS and cellphone coverage as we approach the head of the fjord. So, it's something of a surprise to see an industrial-sized wharf where electric power is available. We raft up and enjoy the peace of this place in spring. The air is virginally clear and crisp. The buds of silver birch are just beginning to break free of their protective sheaths and in a few more days their green foliage will stand in exquisite contrast to the black rocks.

The view down the fjord is gorgeous in the evening light and the silence total except for the soft hiss of a waterfall nearby. A small brown and white animal skitters from one spot to another without stopping in any for more than a split-second. A stoat, I conclude, midway between shedding its all-white winter coat (more commonly known as ermine) for its chestnut-coloured summer attire.

On our way back to Stavanger we stop at a summerhouse owned by a colleague of the owner of the 55. Moments after we arrive, he expertly pilots his Robinson helicopter down onto a floating dock alongside the boats. We climb aboard and take off in sparkling weather to fly back to Lysefjord for an aerial view of the fjords. Tiny specks on Pulpit Rock turn out to be hikers and huge, building block mountains string out to the horizon, punctuating the carpet of glinting blue-black water. There is a wealth of cruising north of here:

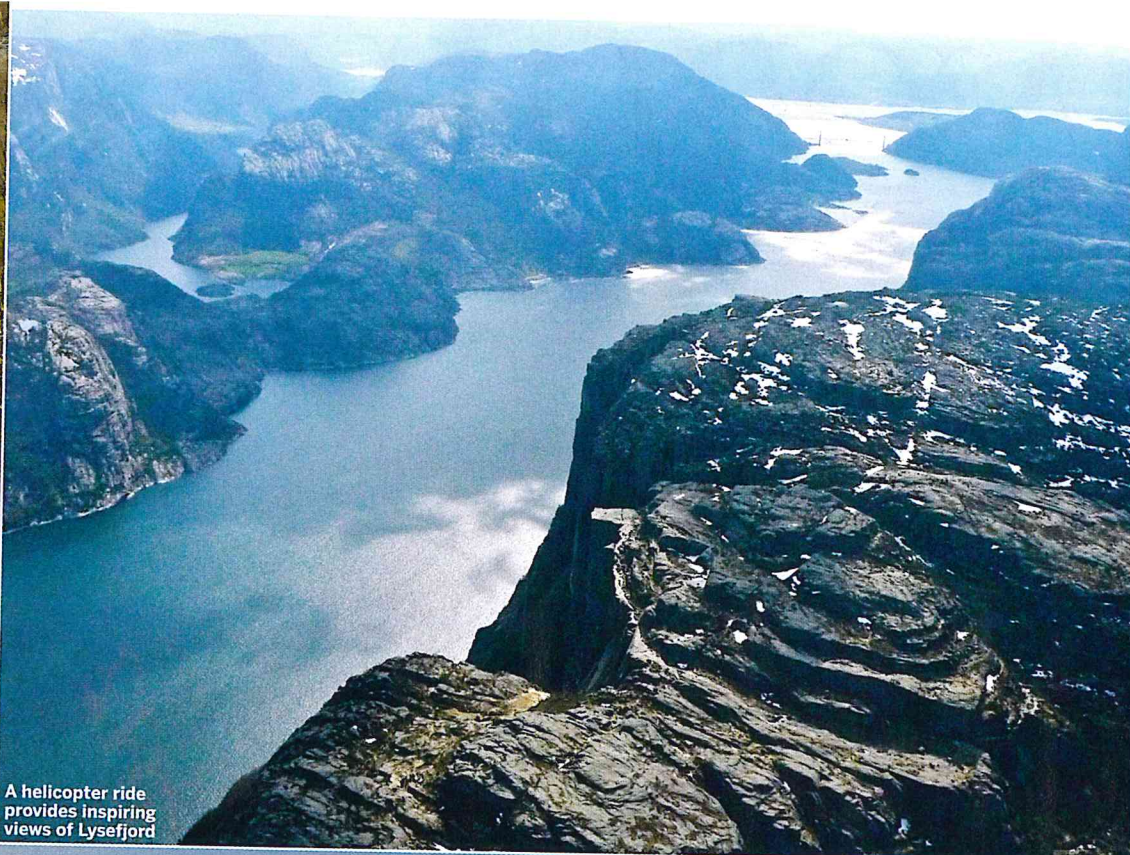
Bergen, Sognefjord, Aalesund and, north of the Arctic Circle, Tromso and the magical Lofoten Islands. I have been fortunate to visit all these and more in previous years, so it seemed a pity not to be heading farther north on this occasion, but that's what next year is for! It may take some effort to reach the west coast of Norway but, given the right boat, it offers wonderful opportunities for those ready and able to grasp them. **IMBY**

With 400m depth in Lysefjord even the goats are within reach

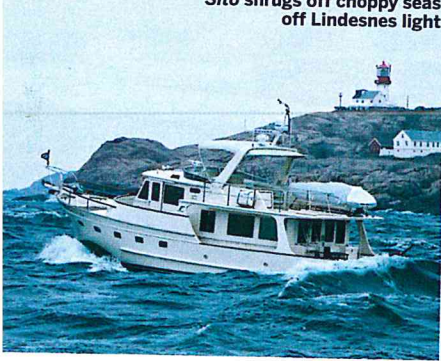




Sito shrugs off choppy seas off Lindesnes light



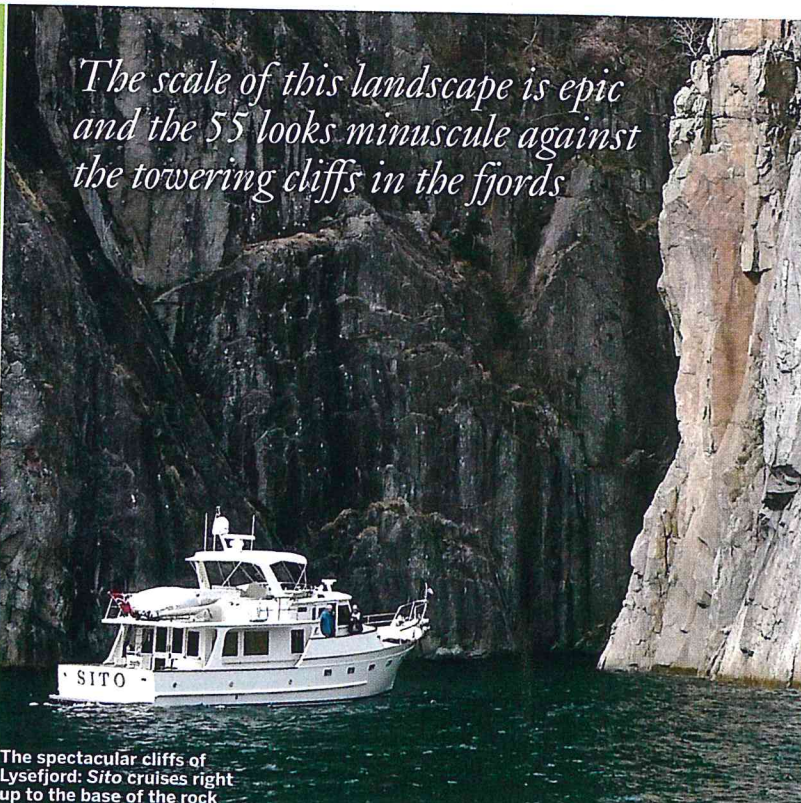
A helicopter ride provides inspiring views of Lysefjord



Busy in season, pretty Skudeneshavn is quiet in spring



Venture II at her home port of Marstrand



The scale of this landscape is epic and the 55 looks minuscule against the towering cliffs in the fjords

The spectacular cliffs of Lysefjord: Sito cruises right up to the base of the rock