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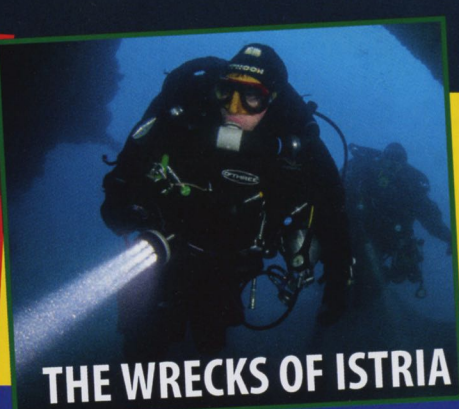
DIVERS WHO LIE TO THE DOCTOR



NORWAY TO GO



UNTAGGED: STEPHEN MARTIN SPEAKS OUT



THE WRECKS OF ISTRIA

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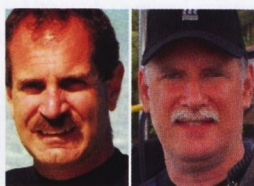
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Clockwise from top left: The dive-site looks formidable; a diver battles the swift river currents to photograph salmon; ... that display an irrepressible urge to spawn in the rivers of Norway.



TRUE NORTH



Diving with wild salmon, the Aston Villa (in its own relegation zone), medusas and ghost sharks – northern Norway is full of underwater surprises, say **MICHAEL SALVAREZZA & CHRISTOPHER WEAVER**

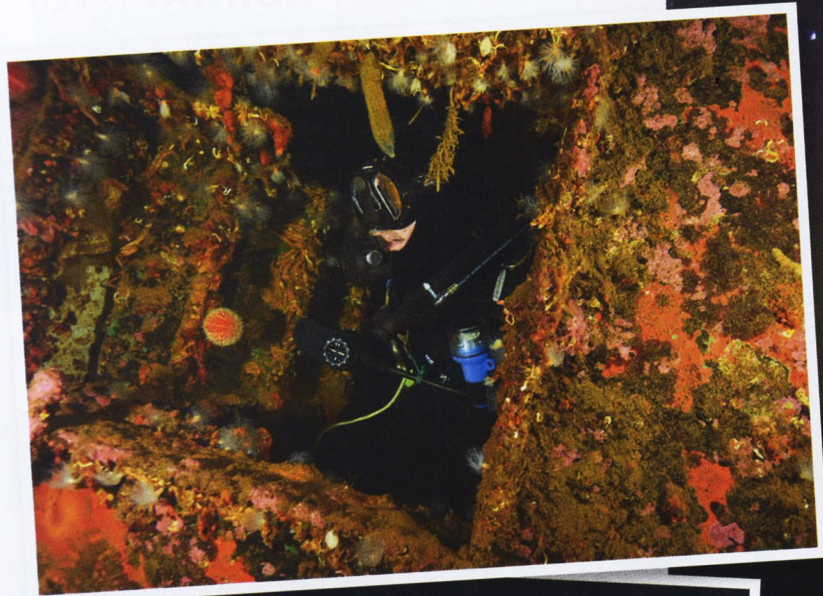
I T WAS QUITE A JOURNEY to get to this spot. A five-hour drive into Nordland from Trondheim, a half-mile trek through the forest to get the divers, dive-gear and camera equipment to the site, and a rope rappel down a 9m mud and rock slope to the river's edge. And we were not yet in the water.

As we looked over the tumultuous waters of the river rapids, we wondered if we really were going to dive in this roiling maelstrom. But that's where the salmon were, and our best opportunity

to photograph them as they marched upstream to spawn was right below the whitewater rapids, in a shallow pool where we hoped to catch a glimpse, and snatch some images.

So, after attaching a safety rope to prevent us being whisked downstream, we dropped below the surface current to a relatively calm pocket of water and began to search for these remarkable fish.

Above us the water tumbled at rocket speed, but descending just a few feet below the surface got us out of the



SVEN GUST

journey to the land where Vikings once ruled took us to the north to search for salmon, and deep into some of the fjords along the coast to explore historic shipwrecks, lush gardens of kelp and unique geological features.

Along the way, we searched for rare, little-understood deepwater organisms. Visitors are often impressed by the beautiful countryside, the warm and welcoming culture of the Norwegians and, if they are fortunate, the dazzling Northern Lights. But it is under water where some of Norway's true treasures, and best-kept secrets, can be found.

From the forest wilderness we arrived at Namsen Fjord, a picturesque fjord along the western coast of Norway 100 miles north of the city of Trondheim.

Here we explored the sunken wreck of the *Hamo*, a freighter sunk in a local harbour in 21m.

The wreck is covered with organisms and offers terrific photo-opportunities in an easy setting. In reality, however, diving the *Hamo* is just a tune-up for a

dive on the wreck of HMT *Aston Villa*.

The *Aston Villa*, launched as a trawler, was requisitioned in September 1939 to serve as an anti-submarine vessel. She came under heavy fire off the Norwegian coast in May 1940 from German forces, and suffered significant damage.

Considered unable to cross the North Sea to reach safety and repair, she was then intentionally sunk alongside the steep wall of the fjord to keep her out of enemy hands.

Today, a dive on this wreck represents a descent into a little-known aspect of Norwegian history. It lies at a sharp downward angle, its mangled stern section reachable in relatively shallow water at 18m and its intact bow at 29m, pointing to deeper water.

AFTER EXPLORING these wrecks, we turned our attention to the mouth of the fjord, where it reaches the open Norwegian Sea. Here, along a rocky coast strewn with boulders and small islands, we prepared to dive lush gardens of kelp in search of wolf-fish, anglerfish and other endemic creatures.

Descending into 18m of clear, cold North Atlantic water, we swayed gently in the surge while we explored cracks and fissures, photographing invertebrates and small fish.

This area of Norway is little-explored under water. Virtually any spot along the coast could represent a compelling dive-site, and more are being discovered all the time.

Unlike other established destinations, few divers have seen the dive-sites here, and they are so new and unexplored that they don't even have names.

Our journey into Norway's underwater frontier continued in the Trondheimsfjord. Here, in a dramatic setting alongside quaint cottages and rural sheep farms, we began our search for rarely seen and photographed deepwater organisms.

Although the fjord appears relatively narrow, the sharp walls of the



surrounding landmass drop precipitously to the depths just a short distance from shore. It is here, in certain current-swept waters, that divers have the opportunity to encounter deepwater medusas, deep and coldwater corals and even the mysterious ghost sharks in depths attainable by divers.

Our first dive here started on a cold and rainy day. As we descended, however, the dreary surface weather receded from our minds, and we began our search for the big medusas.

Swimming along a silty, rocky bottom we passed over brittlestars, colourful coldwater anemones and various invertebrates before reaching a depth of about 27m.

Suddenly, like an apparition in the

Above: A diver prepares to explore a fjord.

Top left: Alien-looking deepwater Medusas emerge at night in the Trondheimsfjord.

Above left: Atlantic wolf-fish look fearsome but are harmless.

Below from left: Coldwater anemone; nudibranch; longspined anglerfish.

night, the deep red bulbous bell of a medusa, a full half-metre in diameter, appeared out of the dim edge of visibility. On closer inspection, we observed the strange tentacles and pulsating underbelly as the weird creature drifted by in the current.

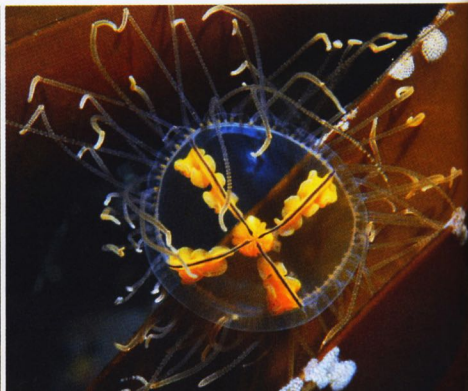
Then, as our eyes quickly adjusted to the low light, we spotted another medusa – and another! We photographed a number of these fascinating creatures, of various sizes and all drifting languidly in the current from the unlit depths to destinations unknown.

current. Using large boulders and rocks to shield us from the furious flow, we pushed forward, and before long spotted our quarry – stocky Norwegian salmon swimming furiously against the downstream current.

After attempting unsuccessfully to leap up a small waterfall slightly upstream from this spot, many of them were now resting in this pocket of water. This was our photographic opportunity.

Still, this was no an easy task. Pushing the cameras through the force of the rapids, locking the focus onto the subject and squeezing off the desired shots took all our effort. This was diving the frontier of Norway – and our expedition had only just begun.

FOR DIVERS, NORWAY offers quite a palette of fascinating opportunities. Our





SVEN GUST



GHOST SHARKS, often referred to as chimeras, are deepwater cartilaginous fish related to sharks and rays. They are often found in waters as deep as 2.5km or more. Ranging in length from 65cm to 2m, they are characterised by large eyes, two dorsal fins and a long, tapering, slender tail.

There are 28 species worldwide, but the ones we sought in Norway are known to rise to diveable depths only in a few select areas of the fjords. They emerge at night, presumably in search of food, which consists of shellfish and small fish.

Because of the treacherous tidal movement in the fjord, our dive had to be timed to slack water after high tide – which meant that it was not until 11:30 on a rainy night that we hiked down a steep slope through the shoreline woods to the entry-point.

Once in the dark water, we began a 20-minute swim at 27m before we suddenly spotted a silvery flash in our lights. Local experience has established that ghost sharks tend to hunt alone, with divers encountering one at a time along the sandy slope of the fjord.

Individual sharks are often separated

Top: Ghost sharks are rarely seen by divers but in Norway there are chances to encounter them in 30m.

Above left: Diving on a wreck inside a fjord.

Above right: Christopher Weaver explores the kelp gardens.

Right: A diver treks to the river dive-site in search of migrating salmon.

by some distance, but that evening something new was observed. Here, way below the surface of the darkened fjord, we found a veritable shoal of ghost sharks.

About a dozen individuals were congregating in the same area of the fjord, and the reason for this gathering is really subject to speculation. Perhaps

they were mating. Perhaps they were exhibiting some other behaviour. Regardless of why, this dive was sure to add to the general knowledge base of these strange spectres of the deep!

Walking down a country lane after our final dive, the approach of winter was evident in the air.

The wind was blowing forcefully through the birch and evergreen trees and the howling rush of

cold air was a harbinger of tougher weather to come.

But as the residents of Norway were beginning to prepare for the long Arctic night, under water in the fjords and rivers life went on, marching to a timeless rhythm that is the same today as it was in the days of the Vikings. There is much to explore and discover still in these waters. This is the frontier. ❏



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Most visitors fly into Oslo or Bergen. Domestic flights to Trondheim and other destinations bring divers closer to remote northern sites.

DIVING ▶ Northern Explorers can arrange specialised dive expeditions to the north of Norway, Svalbard and Greenland, www.northern-explorers.com

ACCOMMODATION ▶ This is typically in comfortable cabins located near dive-sites.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Because of the Gulf Stream, Norway enjoys a surprisingly temperate climate. The warmest temperatures are generally in July and August and the coldest December-March. Be prepared for sudden weather changes, however.

MONEY ▶ Norwegian kroner (NOK).

HEALTH ▶ Oslo has a recompression chamber.

PRICES ▶ The cost of the expedition described was 2450 euros pp, including all accommodation and diving and two meals a day. Return flights to Trondheim from London from £108.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.norway.com

