TRIP REPORT

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ice diving norway february 2005

When we first mentioned about a trip to dive under the ice in Norway, we had either one of two responses.

Firstly – "Great, that sounds really interesting – I'd love to do that", or secondly – "You must be completely mad." No half measures or sitting on the fence there then.

Having returned from throwing ourselves through a hole cut in the ice, and being lashed to the end of a line, the guys in the first camp got it right – it was great, and contrary to popular belief, it wasn't that cold either.

• you're supposed to be under it …

That probably had something to do with Norway experiencing its warmest winter since 1913, and ice being at a bit of a premium.

Step into the fray, Øyvind Carlson, our ice diving instructor, and jolly, laid-back Norwegian bloke to boot. Øyvind knew where to find the ice, but first, we had a check-out dive to complete.

Having flown in from Heathrow the day before, and experiencing Norway's super efficient rail express to the centre of Oslo, we had gathered at Hydra Dive Centre on the Tuesday morning for the theory and kit-sorting out day.

We were issued with pony cylinders and Poseidon X-Stream regs. to go with our 15 litre single cylinders (how do the people manage with these god-awful cylinders? Really rolling back breakers.) Kit sorted, we were introduced to our two DM's who were assisting for the course – Trond and Bård (pronounced Bord), but call him Bob – it's easier. Needless to say, almost perfect English spoken by all.

With the van loaded up, we headed south out from Oslo to Hydra's open water site, about 40 minutes from the centre of the city, in a spot called Drøbak.

On the way, Øyvind stopped to check the ice in Oslofjord, one of the regular sites for ice diving. Up until the week before, there was no ice at all, but when we pulled up and investigated, ice there was. the question was, how thick was it?

The qualified ice divers amongst you will know that ice needs to be 8cm thick to support one person, 13cm will support several people evenly spread out, 15-20cm thick for safe ice diving, and 30cm will carry a car.

Drysuited up and with a look of faint trepidation on his face, Øyvind stepped out onto the ice – and was still there a few seconds later. It looked good and with a cold night ahead, we looked to be OK for the following day.

Off to the open water site, and with not a sliver of ice to be seen, we completed two check-out dives and had a practice with the safety lines.

Each pair of divers has a 30m line, which is attached to two ice screws fixed to the ice. One diver acts as the leader and communicator with the surface (by way of rope pulls) and the other just follows along like an obedient puppy.

Øyvind wanted to make sure that we were happy with the lines and so we all went in and spent the first dive just hooking and unhooking the line and making sure that we could swim as a buddy pair without getting all a-tangle.

• the site at Oslofjord

Hydra's open water site at Drøbak is ideal with a wooden deck and ladder to get in and out, and

platforms at 2 metres and 6 metres. Even better, there's a small wreck and a reef in about 12 metres, all with a ring of underwater lights, so you can always tell where you are and how to get back, notwithstanding the fact that the vis. was at least 12 metres.

• Colette with chainsaw …

Onward from the far side of the reef, the site deepens off to over 30 metres, so they can complete virtually all their course dives from this one location (lucky buggers!)

Satisfied with our performance on the first plop, Øyvind let us loose for the second dive, but did add a bit of spice to the proceedings.

The water temperature was 3 degrees at the surface, and about 5 degrees at depth, and with Matt and Nick diving with full face masks, Øyvind wanted them to practice free-flowing reg. drill by swapping to pony reg. and spare mask on the platform.

This was quite entertaining, and speaking from personal experience, like having your head hit with a sledgehammer.

Something you don't forget in a hurry; still, a useful skill to be able to complete in freezing water!

• Matt ready to go through the ice

Free flowing regs. are a real issue when ice diving, as the water temperature just under the ice can be 0 or even -1 degree celsius.

If the air temperature on the surface is at or below freezing, even one or two hard breaths on the reg. can induce free flows, and the "cold-zone" under the ice's surface further induces temperature drop in the regulator first stage. Deeper, where the water temperature never drops below 2 or 3 degrees, the problem is less pronounced (a common myth is that the water gets colder the deeper you go – it never gets below about 2 degrees wherever you dive.)

All checked out and ready to go ice diving, we retired to the dive centre and promptly the pub next door to complete the theory.

Now, Norway is not a cheap country; in fact it is one of the most expensive countries in the world in which to eat and drink out.

Here are a few price comparisons for you:-

Beer (0.5 litre)	£5.60
Restaurant starter	£9.00
Steak main course	£22.00

A meal out with a beer can cost you £50, so be warned (or rich) before you go to Norway. Having said that, the people are very laid back and very friendly, so that helps make up for the dented wallet. Also, they, as a nation, have no external debt, so that can't be a bad thing. Now we know how they manage that!

• getting out again is a right faff

Another tip; don't expect to sample typical Norwegian cuisine too often. No, they don't eat herring and elk, they mostly live on Ostpølse (cheese hotdogs) and pizza, but the strange fact is we didn't see a fat Norwegian the whole time we were there. They must burn off the calories in other ways.

Second day and the first of our ice dives. Jon had retired hurt for the day with a dose of the trots, so the remainder headed out to Oslofjord to prepare the site.

First job, clear a 5 metre circle of snow around the site of the hole.

Next, cut a triangular hole with a chainsaw, with each side about 3 metres long (the triangle is long and narrow which makes getting out again easier). It took three goes to complete this as the chain on the chainsaw kept breaking, but we got there in the end.

Then, clear 15 metre and 30 metre circles in the snow and clear 8 spokes out from the centre. This makes a clear landmark from under the ice and if, god forbid the line is lost, you can use the surface markings to navigate your way back to the hole. They are highly visible from under the ice too.

• mind your head – Nick under the ice

Ice screws are fixed to the surface (3 pairs), one set for the dive team, one pair for the safety divers (always ready kitted and clipped on to the line to respond in case of emergency) and a third pair for the instructor.

Then it's kitting up time, a waddle or shuffle to the hole and in.

The Oslofjord site is blessed with a 40 metre long wreck right under the hole, so there was plenty to look at, while making sure that the line doesn't get snagged around the superstructure of the wreck.

Two dives completed, and back to the pub for "traditional" Norwegian pizza.

The following day, we headed one and a half hours south to Halden, just 2 kilometres from the Swedish border.

Set in evergreen forest, the location of the fresh water lake was truly beautiful. The ice here was thicker too and being fresh water "steel ice", much stronger. None of the creaking and cracking of the previous day's ice was to be heard, which meant Matt didn't have to draw a circle around himself so no-one invaded his space!

• Steve in silhouette

The team swung into action and the site was prepared, hole cut and kit set up in two shakes of Steve's pee valve (did we mention that Steve has a pee valve?)

The site at Halden is a rocky slope with no fish life or wreck, but much clearer (and greener) water with the chance to mooch around right under the ice, and play silly games like underwater football or walking upside down on the ice.

Trond was very adept at the football lark, and the walking upside down is not as easy as you may think.

It involves getting to 2 metres depth and rolling forwards while inflating your drysuit. You have to be careful not to spin right over. To get back upright again, it's a simple matter of inflating your wing/BCD and then venting your suit.

Or, you do it Øyvind's way and pop out of the ice hole, legs akimbo and with the safety line all over the show.

All dives completed and paperwork done, Øyvind took our photos to the PADI Nordic office in Oslo, and had our PIC cards the next day – how good is that – drop in service!

Friday was a free day and so we took in a bit of culture and visited the Viking Longship museum, Norwegian Maritime Museum, "Fram" Museum and Kon-Tiki Museum.

• the Halden site

The Fram was the vessel used by Roald Amundsen in his dash to be the first to the south pole, narrowly beating Scott there.

Quite strange to see his cabin on the boat also the fact that the Fram was quipped with a piano – essential kit for the Antarctic explorer supposedly.

The Norwegians have a rich maritime heritage, with the fifth largest maritime fleet in the world. All of this in a country of less than 4 million people, and with one of the lowest population densities in Europe.

The Kon-Tiki Museum featured the balsa raft used by Thor Heyerdal to cross the Pacific ocean in 1947, demonstrating that ancient peoples had the means to travel vast distances.

• anyone for soccer?

It was incredible to look at this frail and vulnerable structure and think that it travelled thousands of miles of open ocean.

Interestingly, among the listed crew were the usual navigator, cook, doctor and then oddly, a knot specialist. Essential for a balsa raft in retrospect, but not that common on regular modes of transport.

Incidentally, Norway won it's only Oscar for the documentary about the 1947 expedition.

The Friday evening saw a gathering in the Scuba Bar to present the ice diving certification cards, with Jon having completed his requisite number of dives and catching up so that he could complete the course.

A liberal helping of pizza (and they were good pizzas too) and a few beers later, Øyvind's film of last year's ice diving seemed even more bizarre than it might otherwise.

The ice was 1.2 metres thick, and necessitated two goes with the chainsaw to get through it.

The first cut was made and the blocks removed and then, standing in the hole, a second cut was completed to get through to the water. The air temperature that year was 15 degrees below and with a brisk breeze, the wind-chill made the air temperature more like minus 25 or 30 – very much "free flow" territory.

• all aboard the "Fram"

Now that's ice diving!

Where next?

Perhaps Norway again, but the north for a change of scenery and some diving around the Lofoten Islands, or perhaps Canada – a lot cheaper when you get there and with some real ice conditions.

If you didn't come this time, you may well wish you had now!