

# RISØR



**Bruce Stannard** visits the famous Trebåtfestival at Risør on Norway's Sørlandet coast to report on the passions that underpin one of the world's best wooden boat festivals. Photography by **Kraig Carlström**.

*Alfred Mylne's magnificent gaff topsail schooner Eileen II was by far the biggest and grandest vessel at Risør.*

At 59 degrees North Latitude, the sub-Arctic dawn throws an ethereal golden glow over the mirror surface of the Skagerrak, gradually illuminating the countless skerries and small islands that lie like ships at anchor along Norway's deeply indented south-eastern coast. Seen from the heights of the grey granite cliffs that rise sheer above it, the beautiful little port of Risør nestles in the safety of its own snug inner-harbour.

The handsome white-painted timber merchants and sea captains' houses that line the quay remind us that, in the 17th and 18th centuries, Risør was one of the busiest and most important seaports in all of Norway. Vast quantities of Baltic Pine passed through here to help meet the insatiable demand from the busy shipyards of the Netherlands.

It is early August, and in this high summer month, the intimate little harbour that runs right up into the heart of Risør is crammed (as it is at this time every year), with a fleet of 150 beautiful Norwegian wooden boats of every conceivable shape and size.

Over 12,000 visitors, mostly Scandinavians, come for the three-day festival which is reckoned to be one of the best in northern Europe and is undoubtedly one of the best in the world.



Bright varnished Snekkers, the traditional double-ended Norwegian fishing boats, formed an impressive display.

The visitors pay a small entry fee and many of them stay on as we did to enjoy the sea chanties, the music of wandering accordionists and fiddlers and to taste the freshly caught shrimp and other seafood, bread, cheeses and olives on offer from the rows of white canvas tents lining the quays.

There are shipwrights' tents, blacksmiths' shops, men selling hand-

tools, braided blonde women building a traditional lapstrake færing and unsupervised kids messing about in their dinghies.

The entire event is run by scores of cheerful and helpful volunteers. There are no subsidies and only a handful of modest sponsorships from municipal government, local shops and businesses. And yet the



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*The romance of gaff-rig: Close-up of the main boom and gaff aboard the 1896 Rescue Vessel, Colin Archer.*

festival, which has been one of Norway's leading maritime cultural events for more than 30 years, makes a modest amount of money and goes from strength to strength, year after year.

There is an unmistakable buzz at Risør, a delightfully pleasant sense that here we are among kindred spirits, seafaring people who know their boats well and are only too willing to display their profound sense of pride in them.

On many of the boats, hand-chalked signs proclaiming: "Velkommen ombord" need no translation. The Norwegians are extremely friendly people and without exception they were eager to show us their boats and explain their special historical significance.

It seems that everyone in Norway either has a boat or has access to a boat and for the Norwegians this is not so much a reflection of their personal wealth as it is a simple matter of their birthright. As the descendants of the Vikings who were once the world's greatest seafarers, they possess not just the knowledge of traditional boats but the all-important passion that brings them to life.

This is a national characteristic shared naturally by men and women, boys and girls and people of every rank from the King on down. Not for nothing is the country's reigning monarch, King Harald V, known affectionately as "the Sailor King."

Beyond the harbour, in deep water, tucked in behind the protective arm of the outlying skerries, the white-hulled Royal Yacht Norge lay to a bow anchor with the



*Colin Archer's Master, Captain Knut von Trepka, welcomed us aboard the iconic double-ender.*



*Among the classic yachts was the blue-hulled Finnish 8 Metre Luna.*



*The Royal Yacht, Norge, lies to her anchor with King Harald's 8 metre Sira secured on booms off the port side.*



*Budding beauties: three Norwegian sisters soaking up the sub-Arctic sunshine.*

King's famous racing yacht, the forest green eight metre *Sira* moored off booms racing against a small fleet of eights at Risør and then go on to compete in the 8 Metre World Championships at Hankø Island near Fredrikstad.

The King had brought *Sira* down from Oslo to race against a small fleet of eights at Risør and then go on to compete in the 8 Metre World Championships at Hankø Island near Fredrikstad. There are hotly contested races among a variety of classes at Risør including some lovely old wooden 12 metres. The beautifully restored *Vim*, which played a role as trial horse in Australia's first two America's Cup campaigns in 1962 and 1967, was competing at Risør under the US flag.

From the moment I set out to wander through Risør's ancient lanes, winding down past the old town's elegant white weatherboard houses to the harbour, I was gripped by a powerful, almost overwhelming sense of *joie de vivre*, the kind of elation bordering on euphoria that spiritual devotees have for centuries felt at the end of a long and hazardous pilgrimage.

I had voyaged 20,500 nautical miles to be there and for the three wonderful days of the wooden boat festival, that sense of deep delight never left me. The wooden boat festival at Risør may not be the biggest maritime event in the world but it is, I think, the most delightful.

The Norwegians have managed to capture what for me is the essential ingredient: the sense of passion that is embodied not only in their seafaring DNA but in the way in which each and every vessel is presented as she is: not over-cooked by any means but just-so. Families were living aboard and all of them were truly enjoying their boats.

Although Alfred Mylne's magnificent gaff topsail schooner *Eileen II* was by far the biggest and grandest vessel at Risør, my



*Red coated Marines in 18th century uniforms display their colours as they march through Risør with life and drum.*



*The Wooden Boat Festival at Risør is not simply a static display. Hotly contested short-course races in classic wooden boats is one of the major attractors.*

heart went out to the beautiful little snekkers, the varnished lapstrake double-ended fishing boats with the unmistakable chug-chug-chug of their single-cylinder petrol engines.

I was smitten also by the handsome double-ended Rescue Vessels, the gaff-rigged ketches, designed and built by the immortal Colin Archer in the late 19th century and each one maintained in AI order as befits their status as Norwegian cultural icons.




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Photographer Kraig Carlstrom risked life and limb to climb to the top of the cliffs above Risør in pre-dawn darkness. There he waited until dawn to take this breathtaking image of the festival fleet moored cheek by varnished jowl around the majestic schooner Eileen II.

Captain Knut von Trepka, master of the most famous of them all, RSI *Colin Archer*, invited me aboard. It was a great privilege to go below and sit in the spartan but spacious saloon while the skipper explained her illustrious history.

She was designed and built by Colin Archer in 1893 and for 40 years between 1893 and 1933 she had rescued from certain death 237 seafarers, mostly fishermen. She had towed 1,522 fishing boats to safety and rescued a total of 4,500 fishermen.

With a crew of only four men aboard and no auxiliary power and no communications equipment whatsoever, she had stayed with the Norwegian fishing fleet for eight months at a time as they hand-lined for cod from their frail little færinges.

Although she is now one of the most treasured vessels in Norway's National Maritime Museum, she continues to voyage around the coast manned by a volunteer crew under Captain von Trepka. Her arrival in any Norwegian port is always a source of rejoicing because she is the living embodiment of the deep sense of pride in the nation's seafaring heritage. It was worth going all the way to Risør just to see her. ⚓

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