

Loch Tress monster attacks in Skaggerak

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

When one thinks of Norwegian fjords, the mental picture is usually the tall, glacial, wooded earth-gashes that Kirk Douglas and the Vikings sailed.

However, there is another type of fjord that is low and flat, almost like some of the Channel Islands of California. Low and flat, with sea water of about the same temperature and visibility.

The Skagerrak is such a fjord, one that separates Norway from Denmark and which serves as a major route for ships of the world. From the Norwegian coastal towns of Arendal, Kristiansand, Grimstad or Lillesand, huge Norwegian tankers can be seen plowing their way out to sea from the busy port of Oslo. The gigantic ships first navigate through the Oslo fjord which empties into the Skagerrak.

One recent summer I went to Arendal, a colorful little harbor town nestled in a Skagerrak cove, to visit the sister of my friend Billy Graham. Betty and her Norwegian husband, Ivar Floistad, spent every summer at their wonderfully Norwegian-styled home on the water, and it was my good fortune to be invited to stay indefinitely. For

me, that's about a month.

Ivar, I soon learned, was a very happy-go-lucky man about town whose ancestors were among the first settlers of Arendal. He played the accordion and with this original instrument he had the habit of singing bawdy songs in Norwegian to his refined mother-in-law, who thought the songs were great because she didn't know what it was he was singing.

He was also a part-time crab fisherman — that is, he put out crab pots as a hobby and fed his family all summer long with the proceeds.

The crabs interested me, particularly when Billy's other sister, Alice Berg, came down from Oslo for a visit, bringing with her a carload of scuba diving gear so that she, Billy and I could make a dive in the Skagerrak.

I soon learned that the Norwegians are the hardiest bunch in the world. They wear scuba tanks that are nearly as huge as the air banks used in America to fill such tanks, and they wear two of them at one time.

That is because they don't have the proliferation of filling stations that we have in the U.S., and they want to make sure that they always have enough air.

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DIVING FOR CRABS

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Those tanks are heavy. At one point Billy slipped on the rocks with one of the things on his back and for a while I thought he would lie there forever, like a turtle waiting for someone to turn him over.

For our first dive, we went right off the dock at Ivar's. We were told that there were a million good-eating crabs down there, and in fact Ivar was about to set out traps for a few of them.

The first thing I realized, submerging into the Skagerrak, was that the water was full of jellyfish — something that happens every summer — and these jellyfish are big ones with dark tentacles that can reach across an entire bay.

When I got to about 15 or 20 feet the thermocline was so pronounced that I could barely see through it (the water in the Skagerrak warms up tremendously in summer), but further on down it became colder and the visibility cleared. Finally, when I saw what was going on at 80 feet, I couldn't believe my eyes.

There were crabs on top of crabs. They walked sideways all over each other, spilled out from the rocks, and in the dark green water they lumbered along, side by side, in their ten-legged cases.

I am not a big game diver, and I usually spend my time underwater looking around. However, when I saw

the crabs I was seized with that hunting instinct that is supposed to be so basic in man, and I began stuffing crabs into my sack left and right.

In about five minutes, I couldn't push another crab into my bag and so I turned around for shore, walking instead of swimming because of the weight of my catch.

Suddenly I felt a horrible sting across my mouth and around my face, and when I turned to see what it was I looked smack into the dark-tentacled umbrella of a jellyfish. I promptly jumped with fright, set off across the bottom in the opposite direction, and then, with face afire, proceeded again toward shore.

The sack of crabs got heavier and heavier, but I was finally at about 30 feet and nearly home.

Then it happened again. Several strands of dark brown tentacles washed across my mask.

The previous experience had made me so jumpy that this time I dropped the sack. But, as half the crabs escaped I noticed that the dark brown tentacles were attached to my head. They were in fact my hair.

I grabbed the sack of remaining crabs and continued my walk back to shore, and that night, as we all feasted on the crabs from the Skagerrak, I laughed to myself about the monster tentacles and I never let anyone know that we would have had twice as much to eat had I worn a ponytail.