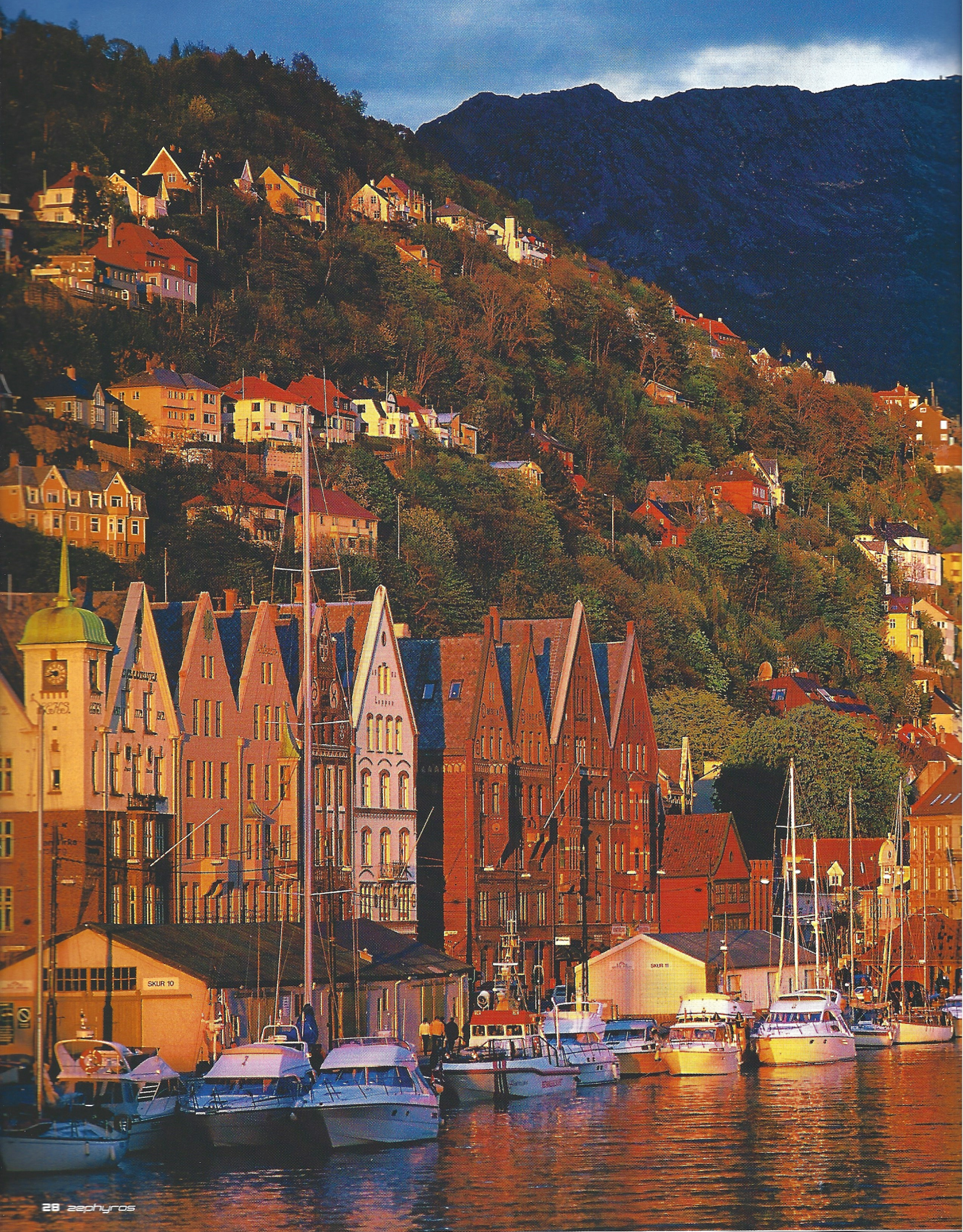




City of codfish and kings

**a medieval jewel
surrounded by
mountains,
bergen is a perfect
tourist destination
- especially if you
visit by boat**

words sean nelson

A tourist once asked a local boy in Bergen if it ever stopped raining. "I don't know," said the boy. "I'm only twelve." Okay, maybe the city has a reputation for damp weather, and it's certainly true that Norwegians refer to the place as the Seattle of Europe. But despite its northerly latitude, Bergen enjoys surprisingly mild year-round conditions – although this inevitably leads those same cynics to point out that you're as likely to enjoy balmy, ten-degree days in January as you are to endure freezing, ten-degree days in July. And you thought the British were preoccupied with the weather. ➡

Bergen's old
Bryggen waterfront
in the low light of a
summer sunset.

Vagen, the city-centre harbour, is popular with waterborne visitors.



with its deep water, thousands of off-lying islands and mild climate, bergen is the unchallenged boating capital of norway's west coast

Bergen is a jewel of a city. Built around a superb natural harbour and surrounded by mountains, it owes its prosperity to the sea. At first it was fish – some bemused crusaders passing through in the 12th century reported that there was so much stockfish being traded in Bergen that it couldn't be measured or counted – but now it is ferries, cruise ships and oil which keep the port busy. For all three sectors, Bergen is the main hub on the west coast of Norway. In the harbourside market you can still find the wind-dried cod, or stockfish, on which the entire economy of western Norway was once built – together with fat prawns, fresh trout and whalemeat – and alongside the old wharf, known as Bryggen, stand the long wooden merchants' houses that helped put Bergen on the map.

WOODEN WALLS

These ones date from the early 18th century – old wooden towns always had a tendency to burn down, and Norway's ancient capital was no exception – but they were built in imitation of their predecessors, so the city's old waterfront still has an intact medieval skyline. Unesco has designated the entire area a World Heritage Site. For nearly a thousand years, traders from as far afield as England and Iceland have come here to do business.

The 'houses' are in fact tenements comprising several dwellings, and they lead well back from the water in a long, wooden warren of narrow alleys and covered upper walkways. Hidden among its depths is the Theta Museum, documenting the city's WW2 resistance movement and housed up



In the city's excellent maritime museum. Right: in summer, evenings go on for hours.



The 18th-century merchants' houses of Bryggen.



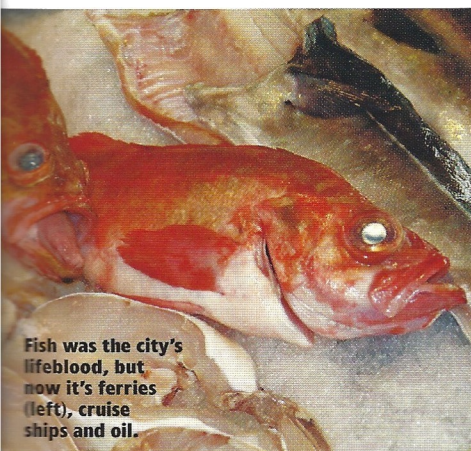
a set of narrow stairways in a genuine secret hideaway. It is difficult enough to find if you're following the signs, so it's hardly surprising that the occupying troops never chanced upon it.

At the eastern end of the row of tenements is another of Bergen's many must-see museums, which tells the story of the Hansa merchants in a house that dates from 1702. It owes its preservation to a far-sighted businessman named Olsen, who owned the house and founded the museum there in 1872. Thanks to the old custom of selling houses along with their inventories, he already had quite a collection of material and fixtures dating back to Hanseatic times, but he made a point of amassing as many additional artefacts and documents as he could. The town bought the museum in 1916.

HEART OF STONE

Down at the seaward end of Bryggen lies Bergen's ancient, stone-built core. The town was founded in 1070 by King Olav Kyrre, who immediately commissioned a stone cathedral, Christ Church, the only remnant of which now is a memorial in the castle grounds. This was the central administrative area for the city, and then for the whole of Norway, as the kings took up residence in Bergen and made it the country's capital.

This end of the harbour is dominated today by the Rosenkrantz Tower, a 16th-century residence built upon much older fortifications. Nearby is Håkon's Hall. This imposing building was the centre of court life when it was completed as a royal banqueting hall by King Håkon Håkonsson. Its first big day was the wedding of the ➔



Fish was the city's lifeblood, but now it's ferries (left), cruise ships and oil.



Winding wooden streets behind the old waterfront.

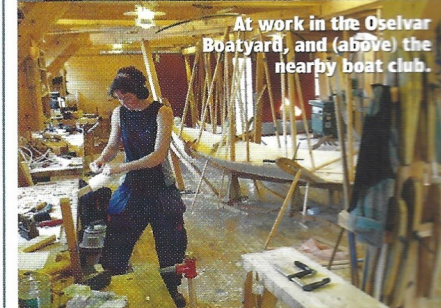
the oselvar boat

The ninth-century Gokstad longship, an iconic Viking relic excavated in 1880 and now preserved at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, was found to contain three small boats. "Western Norwegian traditionally built utility boats are still very similar to these," noted the historian Arne Emil Christensen. "Forty generations have seen no need for any great changes."

Most eminent among the western designs is the Oselvar *faering*, which hails from Os, just south of Bergen. With its distinctive, upwardly curved stem and stern, and three strakes each side, it has a simple yet supremely functional form, and is equally happy powered by oar or sail. It was these sailing qualities which have helped ensure its survival, as the type lies at the heart of an active local boat club, which has held annual regattas since its inception in 1894.

The Oselvar Boatyard was set up in 1997, when the last two traditional local shipwrights were hired to pass on their skills to a new generation. The boats are built in much the same way as they were 1,000 years ago – entirely by eye, with no plans, and sized according to the ancient *alen* measurement of 21 Norwegian inches.

Although supported by funding from the town



At work in the Oselvar Boatyard, and (above) the nearby boat club.

and county councils – such is the respect nowadays accorded to Norway's ancient boatbuilding traditions – the boatyard has to operate on commercial principles. The most popular size is the four-oared *faering* of between nine and 11 *alen* (about 4.9m–6m, or 16ft–20ft), with a ten-*alen* boat priced at around NOK110,000 (c. €13,000). Bigger six- and eight-oared versions can also be constructed.

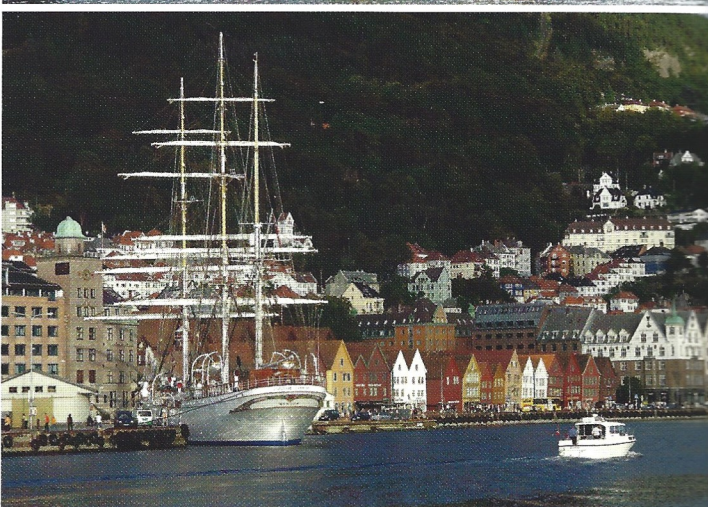
As modern Norwegians learn more about their Viking past, demand for the Oselvar boat has never been greater. Two new apprentices have recently started work in the yellow waterside boatshed, to learn the secrets of this living relic – one of the most practical, capable and graceful small craft designs ever conceived.



A waterfront provisions store in nearby Røtinga. Left: Bergen.



The square-rigged training ship Statsraad Lehmkuhl is based in Bergen.



look out for the local lady on the intricately-carved baroque pulpit.

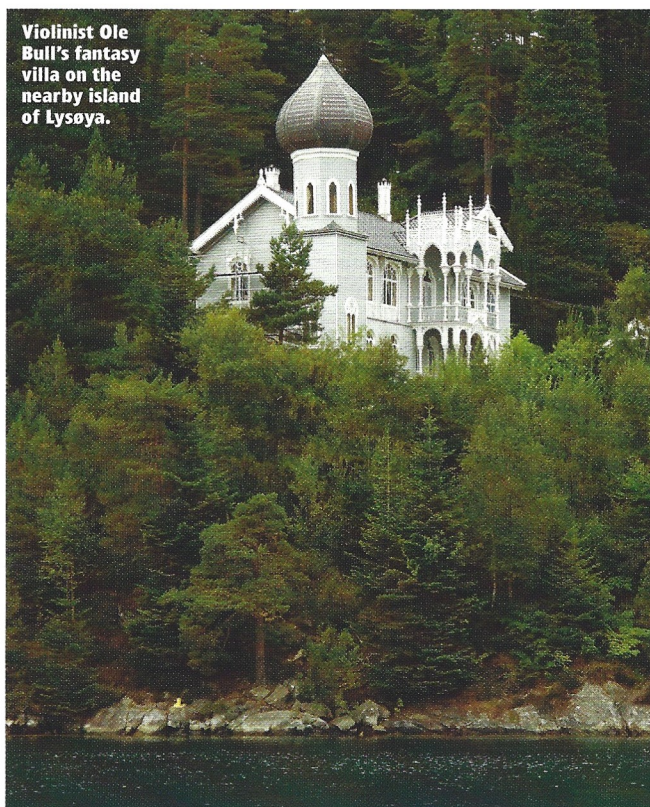
the hanseatic league

Although there were more than 200 Hanseatic member towns, the German merchants of the League only set up four permanent foreign trading posts – the others were in London, Novgorod and Bruges. They established the German Office in Bergen in 1360, after the Black Death had ravaged Norway's economy, and business just wasn't what it was. The Hanseatic League already controlled the grain trade, and demand for stockfish across northern Europe was huge. The town only allowed them to settle along the wharf on the harbour's eastern side – the area now known as Bryggen – but from here they ran the region's trade for 400 years.

They were an ascetic lot. Apprentices had to share beds, the only heating was in the communal canteen, and mixing with the local girls was strictly forbidden. Self-contained and industrious, they were also rather – well, German. Norwegian fishermen produced just two types of dried cod, or stockfish – whole, and cut. But by the 18th century the German merchants in Bergen had categorised these two basic commodities into no fewer than 23 different quality levels.

Perhaps they needed to get out more.

Violinist Ole Bull's fantasy villa on the nearby island of Lysøya.



king's son to a Danish princess in 1261, when 2,000 guests were invited. It is still used today on royal and state occasions.

In 1944, during the German occupation, a Dutch cargo ship loaded with munitions blew up nearby, killing over 150 people and causing great devastation on shore – including significant damage to the tower and to the hall. Both have been extensively restored. Bergen was also bombed occasionally during the war by the RAF, and naval fighter-bombers sank a German warship in the harbour in 1940 – but compared with the accidental catastrophe of the ammunition ship, the British caused relatively little damage.

The Royal Navy had been to Bergen before, of course, in pursuit of a Dutch treasure fleet moored in the harbour. In what became known as the Battle of Vågen in 1665 they were eventually driven off, but not before leaving a cannonball embedded in one of the towers of the church of St Mary's, or Mariakirken. This is the oldest building in the city, dating from the 12th century. Inside, the magnificent gilded triptych altarpiece is almost as old. Look out too for the local lady on the intricately-carved baroque pulpit. You can tell she's local, because she's holding a fish.



There are spectacular views from Fløyen, reached by funicular railway.



city of jazz

Bergen's annual jazz festival, Nattjazz – 'night jazz' – earned its name as a rebellious youth. "It was started in 1972 as a sort of protest against a classical festival," explains its director Jon Skjerdal. Back then, jazz was anything but mainstream. "It was mainly a student event, based on the university campus, and the music started late at night, so that people could come after the classical music had finished."

Although the festival has long since graduated and moved into the USF arts centre, an old sardine processing plant on the south side of the city's Nordnes peninsula, it remains true to its early musical idealism, being primarily concerned with modern jazz – which Skjerdal defines as 'jazz written since the last festival'. If that sounds like open season for atonal meanderings from the outer fringes, Skjerdal insists that the music doesn't have to be difficult or obscure. "Our profile can be anything from a female vocalist to free improvisation. If they do interesting things, they are welcome here." Recent overseas hits include Finnish accordionist Kaimmo Pojolan, Soweto Kinch from the UK (which Skjerdal defines as "kind of hip-hop, but with jazz traditions"), the New York trio Two-Foot Yard ("cello, violin and samples – not your typical American jazz group") and another British outfit, Polar Bear.

Ten years ago big names were a common sight on the Nattjazz billboards, to help get people through the gates, but now the event's reputation has grown to the point where audiences will come even though they have little clue what to expect. "Most people say the best acts they see here are the ones they didn't already know," says Skjerdal. "It's kind of our mission."

And how about 2007's headliners? "It's too early to say," Skjerdal admits with a smile. "We don't settle anything until November, and we're still booking in March." Which is just two months before the curtain goes up. You might say they like their jazz fresh in Bergen – appropriate, perhaps, for a festival based in an old fish factory.

Nattjazz 2007 will be held from 23 May to 2 June. www.nattjazz.no

you can tell she's local, because she's holding a fish

ON THE WATERFRONT

With its deep water, thousands of off-lying islands and mild (if wet) climate, Bergen is the unchallenged boating capital of Norway's west coast.

The North Sea is out there, and at higher than 60°N it is not to be trifled with – gale-lashed Shetland is just 180 miles away – but it's possible to cruise for hours in Bergen's local waters without even seeing open ocean, let alone having to venture onto it. Not for nothing has the city been given the (slightly Pythonesque) title by the cruise ship operators of 'gateway to the fjords'.

I joined Thomas Iversen, service manager at Norsk Båtsenter, for a tour of the area aboard a brand new Windy 32 Grand Tornado. From the narrow confines of the marina at Dolviken, a few miles south of the city, we shot out into Grimstadfjord past the naval base, and turned south between the islands of Lerøyna and Bjelkarøyna. Now 30, Thomas has known these waters since he was a boy, a fact I was increasingly having to take on trust as we whizzed among tortuous, rocky, and, as far as I could tell, almost totally unmarked channels. In Lysefjorden we slowed down to tickover to enter the deep lagoon around the back of Lysøya, the island once owned



by the 19th century violin virtuoso Ole Bull. He built a fantasy summer villa there, with an exotic onion-dome and Moorish detailing. Then there was just time to call in at Os, home of the legendary Oselvar faering (see p31) before turning for home.

As we whisked at high speed back towards Dolviken in our sleek, open 32, we passed a more prosaic-looking cruiser plodding along contentedly in the opposite direction. Thomas laughed. "Typical west coast boat," he said. "It has a hard-top and a door." It rains a lot in Bergen, apparently. 

Inside the Mariakirken, the oldest building in Bergen.