



ARCTIC ROLLER



Jan Bergrath joins a Volvo drawbar hauling fish from the north of Norway to Hamburg

Sties Termotransport from Oslo is the biggest and most prominent Norwegian company for refrigerated transport. Every Monday its 150 trucks are delivering fresh fish almost everywhere in Europe. I travelled 250 miles north of the Arctic circle to join driver Bjorn Tuveng for a typical trip from the Lofoten islands to Hamburg fish market.



DAY ONE

The 70 salmon farms in the Norwegian region of Nordland, off the beautiful Lofoten islands, are just a small part of an industry which is enjoying major boom, much to the distress of Scottish and other fish farms spread across the EC.

Whatever the politics of the government subsidies that have allowed the Norwegians their competitive edge, the thousands of tonnes of cheap salmon coming onto the market means lots of work for hauliers.

After being harvested from the massive sea pens by fishing boat at 4am, 900 boxes of gutted, frozen salmon, weighing 29 tonnes were loaded onto our truck by 3pm.

Thursday is fishing day in Norway. The fish has to be delivered to the most important European markets on Monday

morning (evening in Spain and France) so fishermen and factories have to work backwards from the transport schedule. Fish is Norway's most important export, and Sties has 13 depots along the Norwegian coastline.

Sties, founded in 1957 by Oysten Sties and now part of the big shipping company NOR-Cargo, controls 60% of fish exports. With 100 of its own trucks (now mainly Volvo and MAN) and another 150 sub-contractors, the company is able to treat the delicate load like groupage.

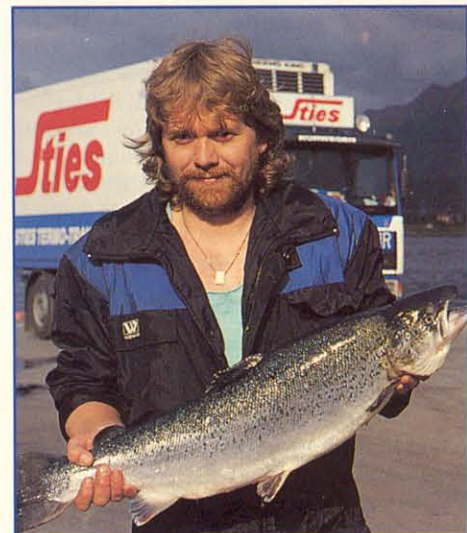
Most of the national trucks deliver on Friday to the big warehouse in Oslo, where the fish is collected and redistributed. The trucks for Spain and Italy leave on Friday, the others on Saturday. Sties has a partner in every country to handle national distribution - in England it's Seagull of Grimsby - so it can guarantee delivery times while sticking to driving hours.

Bjorn Tuveng has worked for Sties for the past four years. The 30-year-old driver comes from Oslo, started his career 10 years ago on a milk tanker in Mid-Norway, and worked for four years on international container transport.

This week he arrived at Thursday lunchtime at the Sties depot in Sortland, the capital of the Lofoten Islands, to load the fish that had been collected from all

over the island. With a total length of 19.50 metres and a gross weight of 50 tonnes, his F12 truck and trailer is geared up for Scandinavian transport, where the weight limits are more generous.

Most of the time Bjorn does weekly trips from Oslo to the far north of the country, but every now and then he drives to the European mainland. If necessary he can shorten the truck to 18.5 metres.



Bjorn Tuveng has worked for Sties for four years



The farmed salmon are netted from their seawater ponds

When we left Sortland at 9pm, it was still light and almost 20degC. Some 250 miles north of the Arctic circle the sun doesn't go down for three months: 'It makes driving at night quite enjoyable,' said Bjorn.

'Sties is the best company in Norway,' he said. 'The work, the trucks and the money are good.' It's not too lonely, either; every 20 minutes the mobile phone rang in his cab, and quite often it was a female voice on the other line. 'My friends only talk to me over the phone,' Bjorn smiled. 'I spent most of my time in the truck. Last month I had three days at home.'

Norwegian roads are scenic, no doubt, but very difficult for 50-tonners such as Bjorn's truck. Some bridges are only rated for 39 tonnes, sometimes the main routes involve ferries. So all drivers try to get across into Sweden as soon as possible. Near Narvik, Bjorn took the turn towards Kiruna across the lonely Swedish-Norwegian mountains.

'It's almost like a holiday in the summer,' Bjorn said, 'but it's a real adventure in winter.' Bjorn often has to put on seven snow chains half a dozen times - per day.



DAY TWO

The friendly customs officer came out specially, because the border is closed after 11pm. Bjorn had rung him up to tell him his arrival time, though of course Sties has to pay for that extra service. Bjorn sorted his T1 form, filled in the form for the Swedish road tax and stamped yet another for the Norwegian road tax register in the hub of his truck axle. This measures every kilometre he drives outside Norway.

It's funny though; while all European countries are discussing methods of road pricing, Norway and Sweden have just agreed to stop their system of bilateral charges next year. The bureaucracy is just far too expensive.

For the first couple of hours on the Swedish highland road we were the only ones on it. The only major town was Kiruna where the Swedes try to keep the 'traffic' rolling at night: 'Whenever you see a red light, just press on,' explained Bjorn at full



The drawbar truck can carry 29 tonnes of boxed salmon

speed. 'It turns green as soon as you arrive.' Luckily he was proved right.

At 3am Bjorn stopped for his break: 'The European system for driving hours is crazy. On long-distance trips you should be allowed to drive 10 to 12 hours per day, as long as you can prove that you have slept for eight hours. In Norway they take away your licence for three months at least, if you have less than five hours rest on your disc.' That said, he went straight to bed.

The morning found us having breakfast out of the huge fridge under the chassis. Bjorn prefers to cook his own meals; the food in truckstops in the North is quite expensive, as is life in general.

At 11am we set off again along one of the most boring roads in Europe - the E4 from Haparanda at the Finnish border, down to Stockholm. The most interesting bits, apart from roadworks, were the stop at a filling station, Bjorn's numerous phone conversations and the warning signs for elk.

'We will stop tonight at 11pm at the famous truckstop in Docksta,' said Bjorn. And that's exactly what we did.



Loading in the Sortland depot during the brief turnaround



The sun stays up for three months during the Arctic winter



DAY THREE

Same procedure as the day before, apart from a nice indoor breakfast. Boredom: 'You have to be careful not to drive faster than 83kph,' Bjorn muttered. 'The Swedish police are very strict. And sometimes Swedish truck drivers ring the police if we overtake them; they don't like us very much.'

Towards Gothenburg we saw our first 'European' trucks. There's tough competition between Scandinavian and EC hauliers. Stop me if you've heard it before, but everybody says the others cut the rates.

Bjorn also explained the wage system in his company. Basically he works for 20% of the freight rates. Fish is a good payload and with 18-20,000km per month he earns an average of 28 - 30,000 Norwegian kroner (£2500-2700) a month. He is paid Nkr300 (£27) a day as expenses, and has to pay 38% tax on the rest, which leaves him with Nkr21,000 (£1900) net. Sounds a lot, but a pint of very bad lager costs nearly £4.

Two hours away from Gothenburg harbour, Bjorn stopped to help a colleague who had broken down; most Norwegian drivers still do that. But since the poor chap



The Sties drawbar is a Norwegian-spec 50-tonner and normally runs at 19.5 metres. It can squeeze down to 18.5 if needed



Paperwork includes a tax on kilometres driven in Sweden

had lost both wheels on the front axle of his trailer - 'they just overtook me' - there was nothing we could do. We finished the day at the ferry pier after 1773 kilometres on Swedish roads, which had cost us 1239Skr (£120) in mileage tax.



DAY FOUR

At 6.30am we were allowed on board the Stena ferry. Time enough for breakfast, a shower and a change of clothes. Sties gives travelling bags and towels to its drivers and even hands out nice underwear with a Sties truck going through a tunnel on them.

The ferry arrived in Fredrikshaven at 10.30am. Since Denmark is the outer border of the EC, Bjorn had to stop at the customs for paperwork and veterinary control - or at least the right stamp. Nobody was really interested, and since there were hardly any trucks it was all done quickly.

It was raining cats and dogs as we drove through Denmark. We stopped at Bjorn's favourite truckstop at Vejle for a coffee, and headed straight to the Sties depot in Padburg at the German border. It's a strategic point in the company network - on Saturday all loads to Italy are finished off



The ferry takes the truck from Sweden to Denmark

here with fish from Denmark and Holland.

Bjorn trans-shipped 10 tonnes of salmon onto trucks bound for trucks to Holland and France, which allowed him to enter Germany with a legal gross weight.

The most striking fact was that at all Sties depots the drivers are treated in a very friendly way. We headed south, and by evening arrived in Hamburg, put the truck in the parking bay and went for a beer.



DAY FIVE

The day started early on Monday. At 2am Bjorn had to deliver to his first customer, and when he finished off-loading at 10am, he had visited five more. One of our salmon ended on a plate in a posh restaurant on the river Elbe - at least he was not simply smoked like most of his compatriots.

Bjorn is a regular in Hamburg, and knows all the customers, as he has been to Hamburg many times. We had a coffee in



Job done, Bjorn waits for a fresh set of paperwork



one of the tiny pubs in the fish market then went to the Euroshell truckstop for breakfast with two other Sties drivers, to clean the fridge and wait for instructions from Oslo. At midday we were sent to the Freihafen to pick up a load of bananas: 'That's not a good paying load,' Bjorn said, 'but at least I get home early.'

As he said goodbye he outlined the rest of his trip. He would take the 24-hour ferry from Kiel to Oslo on Tuesday lunchtime and off-load in Oslo on Wednesday. Then he would take two days off to check the mail, do the laundry and see the friends he had spoken to on the phone.

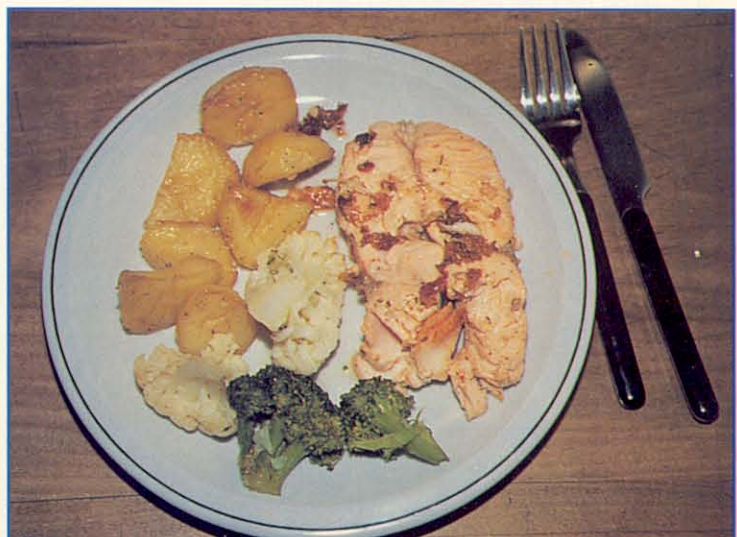
On Friday he would be back on his normal weekly run, with frozen goods right up north to a place called Vardo, just about 2500km through the lonely Arctic landscape. A modest trip, just about the same distance as Oslo to Rome. 🚚



The F12 is a proven tool for this type of long-distance work



The journey through Sweden is very long and dull and only enlivened by wandering elk



Journey's end for one Norwegian salmon. A tasty dish, unless you are a Scottish producer