



THE VIKINGS
ARE COMING!

The ship: experimental archaeology on a grand scale

The Dragon Harald Fairhair is a Viking longship – launched last year, in the largest project of its kind ever undertaken. Ahead of its arrival in Britain and the US, Astrid Kähler describes how it feels to be among the crew

“And roooow!” The captain’s word is law, so we pull with all our might and a whole set of – up till this very moment – unfamiliar muscles, willing the 35m-long, 8m-wide and 70-tonne replica Viking ship to succumb to our wishes.

It is not easy. Knuckles slam into the back of the person sitting in front of you. Oars tangle with 7m-long oars, the 25kg pieces of wood threatening to slip away into the water. Wannabe Vikings are toppled off their seats onto the unforgiving floorboards.

The high gunwale, a feature that seems clearly designed and scaled to hinder unwelcome guests, spears and arrows, effectively blocks the view for oars-men and -women alike. An occasional peek through the oar port-hole offers a glimpse of churning water, the fjord’s pristine mirror surface disrupted by 25 pairs of unwieldy oars and 100 perspiring rowers, striving unsuccessfully to stay in rhythm.

Finally, after much trial and a whole lot of error, we are beginning to see the light. Rowing in almost perfect, steady sync, our spirits rise, and as all our efforts merge into one, single, purposeful energy, we get a thrilling sensation of whizzing across the water.

Our captain informs us we are doing 4 knots (7.4km per hour, or less than 5mph). This is not enough to set anyone’s nerves on edge or dishevel hairdos. And it is nowhere near the boat’s cruising speed of 10 knots, let alone the sailing speed of 25 knots that the crews of some contemporary Viking ships are thought to have achieved. At our speed, to reach Lindisfarne on the east coast of England – where the abbey was savagely sacked in AD793 – we would need to row for a couple of weeks. And that does not allow for stopovers in the Shetlands or the Orkneys, or time for uncooperative weather.

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PHIL NAYLOR, PAUL MERCER/VIKING KINGS

*Her sleek design
allows her to make
good speed under
sail alone*

*The Dragon Harald
Fairhair has 50 large
oars, 25 on each side,
for a crew of 100*