

CLASSIC *FAST* FERRIES



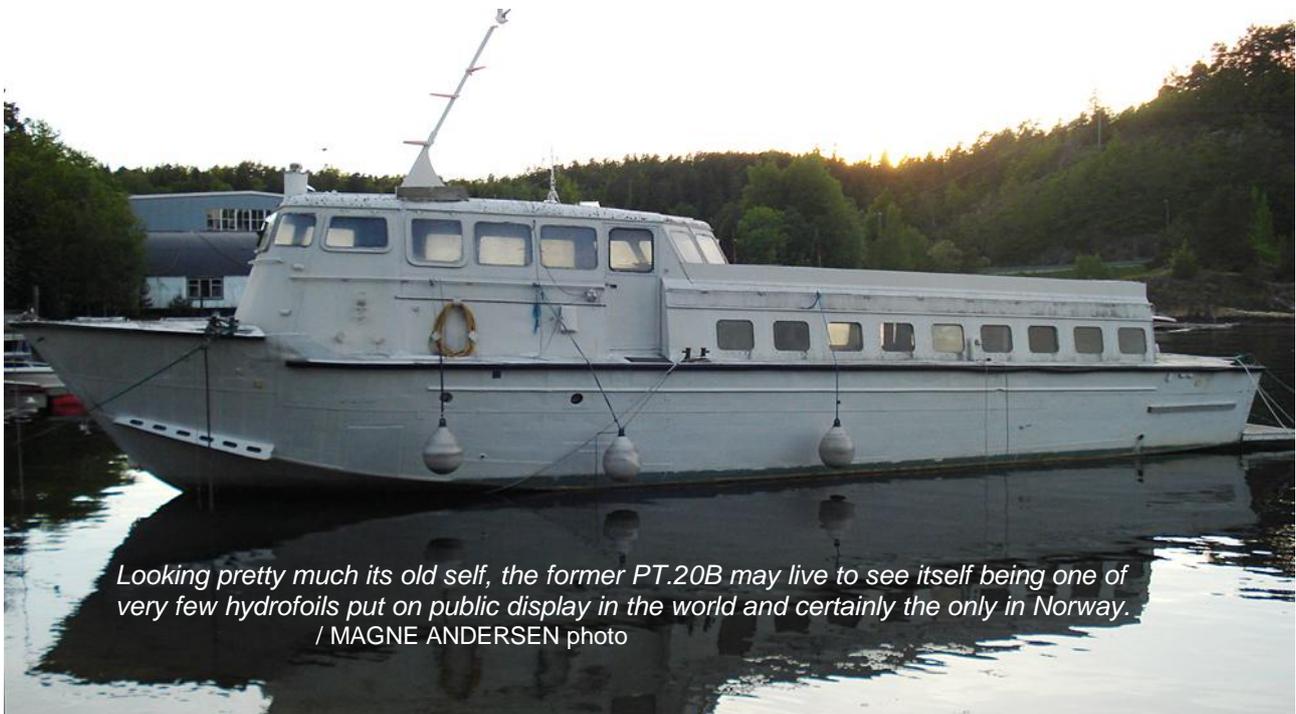
/ MAGNE ANDERSEN photo

Norwegian hydrofoil may be preserved

Tim Timoleon

A 51-year old PT.20B hydrofoil may be preserved and put on display in Norway. The vessel, ex-*Ekspressen*, is the sole former hydrofoil still in the country.

Outside Italy, the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland marched at the head of the hydrofoil idea in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some twenty-five hydrofoils of various size and shape, the majority of them being Supramar designs, saw regular service (i.e. not counting promotional guest appearances) in or between the countries from 1960 to 1987. All of these craft, except *Ekspressen*, were either sold abroad or scrapped following their withdrawal which puts the Norwegian PT.20B in a very unique position.



Looking pretty much its old self, the former PT.20B may live to see itself being one of very few hydrofoils put on public display in the world and certainly the only in Norway.
/ MAGNE ANDERSEN photo

Ekspressen

Ekspressen was not the first hydrofoil to enter service in Norway however and it was not the last to go either. Delivered in August 1961 by Italian pioneering hydrofoil builder Leopoldo Rodriquez to Det Stavangerske D/S, it followed close on the heels of a pair of the Messina yard's larger PT.50 type which had entered service in the summer 1960 and spring 1961 on the 109-nautical mile coastal route between Stavanger and Bergen. The PT.20B was acquired to link Stavanger and the smaller communities on the Ryfylke fiords.

Sharing the main particulars with the standard Supramar PT.20 design, the PT.20B features a forward rather than centrally located wheelhouse. This arrangement makes it possible to have one large, unbroken saloon, with additional seating in an area behind the raised wheelhouse, rather than three relatively small compartments as on the standard version. As a result, the engine on the PT.20B is positioned in the fore half of the hull as opposed to amidships on the original PT.20.

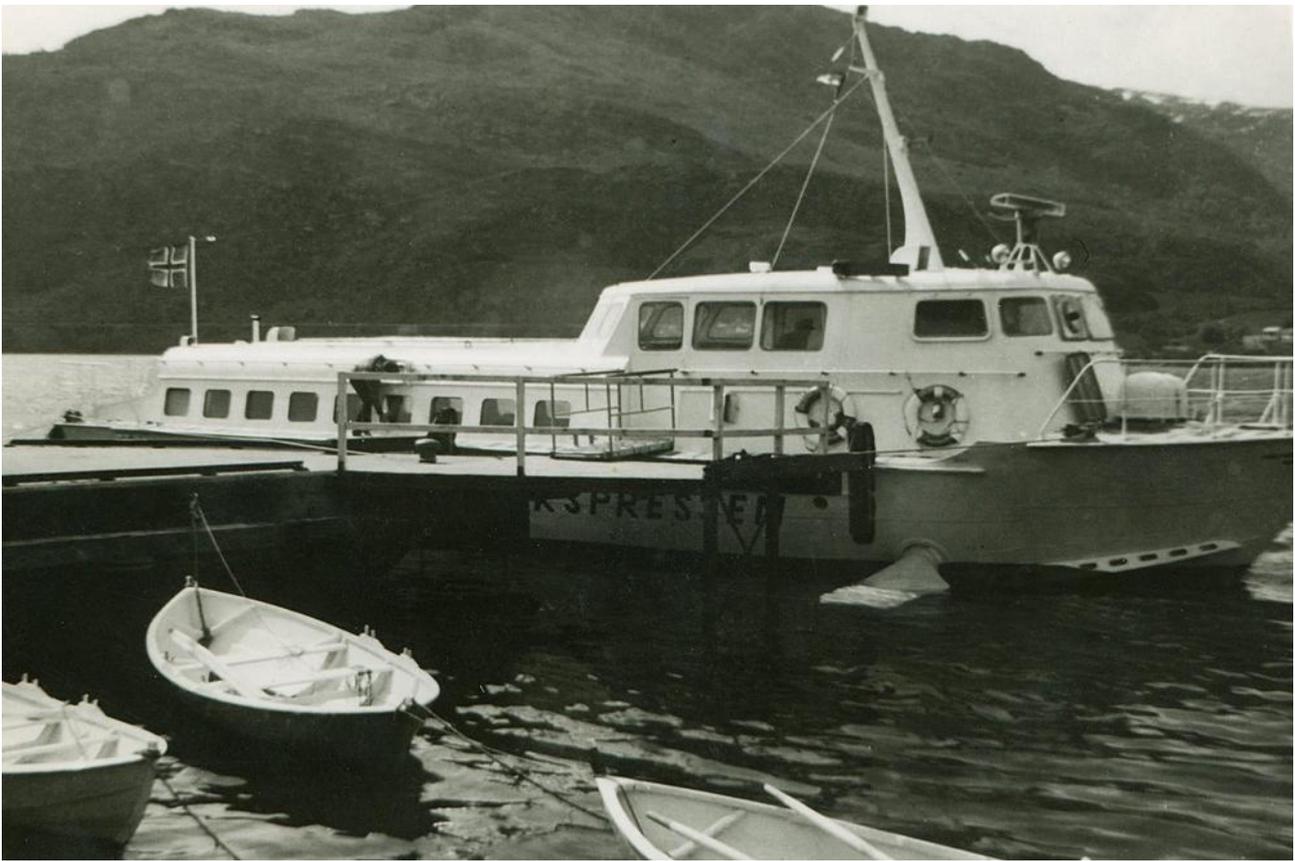
Ekspressen was fitted out for 75 passengers, 65 of which would be seated in the main saloon and the remaining ten, all facing aft, in the raised cabin, through which you would also embark/disembark, aft of the bridge. A toilet and coat rack were placed at the rear of the main saloon.

The vessel served successfully with Stavangerske for 14 years. Not a remarkably long time when compared to many other vessels and operators. For instance, currently a number of hydrofoils built in the 1970s and in some cases earlier still continue to being in service, including in Hong Kong, the Mediterranean and Russia.

P l e a s u r e b o a t

Ekspressen was withdrawn from service and laid up in 1975. It was sold in south-eastern Norway three years later, in Decemer 1978, to a private individual who planned to convert the vessel into a pleasure boat. The foils and other vital parts had already been removed prior to being shipped to Sarpsborg.

But the transformation came to a halt when, reportedly, the new owner passed away. Still stored on dry land, it was subsequently acquired by another individual with the intention of using the vessel as a house boat. Something which appears to have also never materialized. At some point, probably around the millennium, the vessel was relocated west, to Arendal, where it remains to this day sitting in the water. The vessel looks more or less its old self and appears to be in quite decent condition, at least from the water line up, considering its age and wanderings.



*Ekspressen idling alongside on a quiet day in 1965.
One of the crew is cleaning the cabin windows while the rowboats bob up and down.
/ HARALD SÆTRE photo*

Preservation plans

More recently serious interest has been shown in saving the former *Ekspressen* for historical reasons. After all, the hydrofoil, as a means of transport, was the beginning of the fast ferry success story in Norway. A fact that has been far too neglected for far too long, and not only in Norway.

While still to be confirmed, according to reports preserving *Ekspressen* would involve bringing the vessel back home to Stavanger, restore it, at least to a degree, and put it on static display at the Stavanger Maritime Museum or somewhere else suited. It can be done and it ought to be done. But not without butts and a great deal of effort, obviously.

One well-known ever-present obstacle is the financing of such a project, even though the intention is not to get the hydrofoil back in working order. Another, which indeed falls in under the funding, is the fact that the foils are since long gone and need replacing – if initially only by replicas (for instance made of wood) until a proper set can hopefully be located and imported. Without the foils it's not much of a hydrofoil and even though only a selected few have indeed seen more than just the top fraction of the forward foil above the surface on a foillborne craft, in the public eye this is how you remember these vessels and thus what make them familiar and fascinating and different from the rest.

Little interest elsewhere

Only relatively few hydrofoils, of any design, have been considered worth saving following their retirement from service anywhere. Indeed, some are known to have been put on display on land, for instance in Canada, South Korea and Russia. There are also examples on private initiative rescuing and restoring actions in New Zealand and Australia, the latter of which we have reported on in earlier issues of *CFF*.

Then a larger number is no doubt sitting on quays and in ship repair yards etc., more or less intact, waiting for a buyer or the cutting torch (or both). This certainly seems to be the case in Greece and Italy. Particularly disturbing where Italy is concerned is that the first PT.20 completed by the Rodriguez yard, in 1956, has not been preserved, contrary to intentions, but was scrapped years back. To the best of our knowledge, no other serious plans for keeping for the posterity any of the old hydrofoils presently wasting away on the beach in Messina and elsewhere are in the brewing. Which has to be a frustrating thought to the Norwegians – everything is right there on your doorstep. All you have to do is move the vessel a few hundred meters to a location more attractive to the public.

Operating it of course takes a little longer. **CFF** (*Published October 2012*)

Ekspresen in its prime. While not likely to fly again, a static tribute to the hydrofoil era would be better than no tribute at all.
/ LARS HELGE ISDAHL photo



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