

# Explorer Roald Amundsen: Polar Vessel GJØA & The Airship Norge

## The Roald Amundsen and Polar Vessel GJØA Centennial Celebration

The Gjøa was the first vessel to successfully navigate the Northwest Passage. With a crew of six, Roald Amundsen traversed the passage in a three year journey, finishing in 1906 in Nome, Alaska.

The 70ft square-sterned 48 ton sloop was built by Kurt Johannesson Skaale in Rosendal, Norway in 1872, the same year Amundsen was born. She was named Gjøa after her owner's wife. For the next 28 years she served as a herring fishing boat, before Amundsen bought her in 1900 for his expedition through the Northwest Passage. The Gjøa was much smaller than vessels used by other arctic expeditions, but Amundsen intended to live off the limited resources of the land and sea through which he was to travel, and reasoned that the land could sustain only a tiny crew. Her shallow draught would help her traverse the shoals of the arctic straights.

Amundsen had little experience in arctic sailing, and so decided to undertake a training expedition before braving the Canadian ice. He engaged Hans Christian Johannsen, her previous owner, and a small crew, and sailed from Tromsø in April of 1901. The next five months were spent sealing on the pack ice of the Barents Sea. Following their return to Tromsø in September, Amundsen set about remedying the deficiencies in Gjøa that the trip had exposed. He had a 13 horsepower single-screw marine paraffin motor installed to supplement her sails. Amundsen knew the ship would spend several winters iced-in so her ice sheathing was upgraded.

In the spring of 1902, her refit complete, Amundsen sailed her to Christiania (later called Oslo), the capital of Norway. At this time Norway was still in an unhappy union with Sweden, and Amundsen hoped the nationalistic spirit which was sweeping the country would attract sponsors willing to underwrite the expedition's growing costs. After much wrangling, and a donation from King Oscar, he succeeded. By the time Amundsen returned Norway had gained its independence and he and his crew were among the new country's first national heroes.

Amundsen served as the expedition leader and Gjøa's master. His crew were Godfred Hansen,(a Danish naval lieutenant, Gjøa's first officer), Helmer Hanssen (the second officer, an experienced ice pilot, Anton Lund (an experienced sealing captain), Peder Ristvedt (the engineer), Gustav Juel Wiik (the second engineer, a gunner in the Norwegian navy), and Adolf Henrik Lindstrøm (the cook).

Gjøa left the Oslofjord on June 16, 1903, and made for the Labrador Sea west of Greenland. From there she crossed Baffin Bay and navigated the narrow, icy straights of the Arctic Archipelago. By late September Gjøa was west of the Boothia Peninsula and began to encounter worsening weather and sea ice. Amundsen put her into a natural harbor on the south shore of King William Island; by October 3 she was iced in. There she remained for nearly two years, with her crew undertaking sledge journeys to make measurements determine the location of the magnetic north pole, and learning from the local Inuit people.

Gjøa left this area on August 13, 1905, and motored through the treacherous straights south of Victoria Island, and from there west into the Beaufort Sea. By October Gjøa was again iced-in, this time near Herschel Island in the Yukon. Amundsen left his men onboard and spent much of the winter skiing 500 miles south to Eagle City, Alaska to telegraph news of the expedition's success. He returned in March, but Gjøa remained icebound until July 11. Gjøa reached Nome, Alaska on August 31, 1906. She sailed on to earthquake ravaged San Francisco where the expedition was met with a hero's welcome on October 19.

Rather than sail round the horn back to Norway, the Californian Norwegian-American community prevailed on Amundsen to sell her to them, and she was put on display in the city's Golden Gate Park. Over the following decades Gjøa slowly deteriorated, and by 1939 she was in poor condition. Refurbishment was delayed by World War II, and repairs were not completed until 1949. In 1972, Gjøa was returned to Norway, and is now displayed in the Norwegian Maritime Museum in Bygdøy, Oslo. A bauta, also known as a memorial pillar, now stands at Gjøa's former home in San Francisco. The Gjøa was also featured as a filming location in the 2006 documentary, Arctic Passage, in which Kare Conradi played Amundsen.

*From "The Last Place on Earth" by Roland Huntford & Houghton Mifflin's Ships of the World*

*Information provided by the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum  
Nome, Alaska*

## The Great Flying Seal

In 1926, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, American financier Lincoln Ellsworth and Italian aeronautical engineer Umberto Nobile were responsible for one of the most remarkable air flights ever witnessed in the far north. These men with a crew of 13 made a pioneering flight over the North Pole in a semi-rigid dirigible designed by Nobile.

These courageous adventurers made the first crossing of the Arctic in the airship Norge (pronounced Nor-geh). They left Spitzbergen, Norway on May 11, 1926 and landed in Alaska two days later. The average speed of the dirigible was 40 mph. The three previous claims to have arrived at the North Pole – by Frederick Cook in 1908, Robert Peary in 1909, and Richard E. Byrd in 1926 are all disputed, as being either of dubious accuracy or outright fraud. Some of those disputing these earlier claims therefore consider the crew of the Norge to be the first verified explorers to have reached the North Pole.

Fifteen hours after leaving Spitzbergen, the Norge dropped U.S., Italian, and Norwegian flags over the North Pole from a height of 600 feet. Soon heavy freezing fog was creating ice particles that the ship's propellers were flinging into the hull at great force. Throughout the trip the crew could see vast wastes of rough, frozen ocean. A much-relieved crew finally sighted the dark coastline of Alaska after 45 hours of flying. The Norge's goal was Nome, but worsening weather and winds forced the ship to head west, and after dodging mountain peaks in fog, the Norge eventually made Teller located 75 miles west of Nome. Amundsen was forced to make a landing on the harbor there. While the crew safely debarked, most of the Norge was wrecked by high winds. The residents of Teller helped to dismantle the huge, ominous looking airship.

The landing of the Norge on Norwegian Independence Day in May 1926 must have been an incredible sight to the people of Teller. The residents called the strange looking vessel, "The Great Flying Seal". Those who witnessed the landing still have a vivid recollection of the event. Some of the salvage was used by the Eskimos. The rubberized outer skin of the Norge was transformed by diligent mothers into rainproof parkas while some of the small metal parts were used as children's toys and kitchen utensils.

*Information provided by the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Nome, Alaska  
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