

Bright lights, little city

Sitting north of the Arctic Circle, the sun won't now set on Bodø until mid-July. **Kia-Elise Green** visits next year's compact European Capital of Culture and discovers a land of outlandish natural beauty

Around 50 miles north of the Arctic Circle, I am clinging to a sheer cliff, looking out over the Norwegian Sea, more than a little surprised by the heat. It is 27°C and I have erred far too heavily on the side of caution by packing four jumpers for the trip. All around are the brightest shades of blue, green and snow-dusted peaks, illuminated by a sun that hasn't set for weeks.

The summer solstice may fall on 21 June, but in Norway midsummer is marked with public bonfires on the evening of 23 June, St John's Eve. I am in the "mini metropolis" of Bodø in the land of the midnight sun, where visitors' body clocks, like mine, can get seriously confused. The sun will remain a permanent fixture here until mid-July.

I am attempting Bratten Via Ferrata, the newest attraction in one of Norway's fastest-growing cities. It is the world's northernmost via ferrata – routes that use metal rails bolted into mountainsides – and one of the only ones that allows climbers to walk out over the open sea.

"Not many people make the climb," instructor Svein Inge Sjobu tells me when we reach the second stop and clip our harness to the mountain and hang to admire the clear water of Vestfjord below. A new, parallel hiking route to the top of the cliff has so far proved particularly popular.

I am joined by Julie Abelsen from the tourist office, who – along with Sjobu – grew up in Bodø, lived and studied elsewhere and then returned to settle down.

"Many people come back so their children can have the same experiences we did," she tells me. The sense of community here is strong, from the bustling restaurants and bars to the serene atmosphere you feel when walking around Bodø.

Though small, with a population of around 55,000, Bodø will be a European

Capital of Culture next year, focusing its activities on the nature and raw elements that surround it. There are no direct flights from the UK, but I'd arrived on a one-stop route with Finnair, via Helsinki.

From an opening week celebration of Sámi culture in February to concerts in caves, the creative team is aiming to host the most environmentally friendly Capital of Culture tenure Europe has seen.

In a similar vein, the restaurants around the main square champion local produce – fish and reindeer feature heavily at elegant places like Bryggerikaia and Lyst På. For such a remote city, the food scene is diverse and blossoming, with a range of high-end options and global cuisine, such as pan-Asian at OhMa.

Craig Alibone is one of Bodø's only chocolatiers, having arrived in the city from Leicester via France – his Pâtisserie and Champagneria is a local hot spot. Since tourist numbers are relatively low, "we have to appeal to the same audience", he explains while we taste his homemade chocolate and macarons.

While the craftsmanship of his confectionery, such as his popular Saltstraumen salted caramel truffles (named after something I'd soon experience), is unexpected, the beauty of the midnight sun is not.

A prime spot to witness the phenomenon is the rooftop Top 13 Bar at the Radisson Blu hotel, which overlooks town houses, the train station – terminus of the Nordland Railway, Norway's longest train route – and Keiservaden mountain.

There is something about knowing the darkness will not come that gives the city an especially tranquil summer glow. In the distance, two houses stand alone on a hill, mountains still topped with the remaining snow of winter behind them and a sky still full of colour and bright enough to make me believe it could still be the afternoon – yet the

streets are quiet enough to reassure me that it is the early hours of the morning and indeed, time for bed.

I can understand why admiring the midnight sun while hiking or on the water – after months of darkness – is deeply appreciated here.

The next morning, I board a RIB from the harbour to cross Saltenfjorden to the world's strongest maelstrom, the Saltstraumen. As we cross the water, Abelsen and captain Esten chat about the strength of the whirlpool being stronger because of the new moon.

Eagles fly past the boat, eating fish thrown out by Esten, some so close they swoop right over our heads, their wingspan looking bigger than the boat itself. Back on land, fishermen sit together looking out to sea in front of colourful, timber houses.

The water is calm, but Esten cautions us to keep our feet planted wide in case big waves come our way.

As we approach Saltstraumen, the water around the pool is smooth, almost like a sheet of thin ice. The water spins in small circles then bigger ones, with the pull on the boat becoming stronger as we approach, multiple whirlpools circulating with each other.


When the tide turns and flows in and out between Saltenfjorden and Skjerstadfjorden, 400 million cubic metres of water cross the 150m strait, creating this force of nature four times a day. The ideal time to visit is during a full or new moon, so the conditions are perfect – and the sound is immense. The spectacle has even been live-streamed on national TV.

Like the red sand beach of Mjelle and nearby Hovdsundet – whose narrow beach is lapped by emerald-green water on two sides – both half-an-hour north of the city, the maelstrom is yet another eye-opening experience. Bodø might be small, but its natural beauty is extraordi-

nary. And the midnight sun only serves to help visitors see it at its best.

Bodø



HOW TO GET THERE

 **Finnair** is the only airline with scheduled international flights to Bodø, with connections from Heathrow via Helsinki, and also to Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø, finnair.com.


WHERE TO STAY

 **Radisson Blu Bodo** has doubles from £75, radissonhotels.com.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

 OhMa, ohma-asian.no
 LystPå, lystpa.no
Bryggerikaia, bryggerikaia.no
Kjerringøy Quayside hotel, kjerringoybryggehotell.no
Craig Alibone Pâtisserie & Champagneria, craigalibone.com/no
Roast, facebook.com/roastbodo?sk=info

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

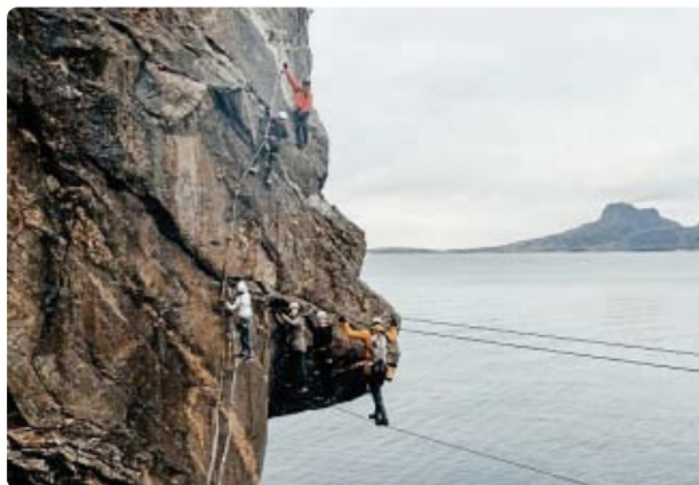
 Bratten Via Ferrata, climbsnkr990 (£73), brattenviaferrata.no
RIB boat trip to Saltstraumen costs Nkr1,095 (£81), exploresalten.no
Kjerringøy Trading Post, nordlandsmuseet.no/en/kjerringoy-handelssted

MORE INFORMATION

bodo2024.no, visitbodo.com



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From top: the colourfully inviting Bodø harbour; Bratten Via Ferrata; the world's strongest maelstrom GETTY

