

HEADFIRST INTO THE MAELSTROM

These are the most powerful waters in the world, and not to be taken lightly. LARS KIRKEGAARD samples current diving beyond the Arctic Circle, and reckons Saltstraumen is hard to beat for sheer exuberance



CAN'T WE JUST JUMP IN THE WATER from the jetties, here, close to the centre?" I asked the dive leader naively. The two boat jetties in front of us seemed the obvious choice for our check-dive.

"Have you actually looked at the water?" came the dry response.

Making my way onto the jetty for a closer inspection, I realised what the problem was. Even the small bay where the centre was based offered no protection from the large eddies being pulled all the way in towards us by the strong current.

It didn't look particularly powerful right now, but it was clear that the water was being thrown in all directions within a small area. The current would have carried me away immediately had I jumped straight in, resulting in a very long walk back along the water's edge.

Luckily for us, calmer waters were close by at the end of the pier, which is where we climbed down a ladder for our check-dive.

This was the first of many lessons in extreme-current diving during my week-long visit to Saltstraumen and the

world's strongest tidal current. There were many more to come.

WHAT A GREY DAY!

Grey cloud spread slowly across the fjord sky, and the last flecks of snow were scattered across the mountains around me. I walked over to the café and was pleasantly surprised to see a huge breakfast table laid before a panoramic view of the fjord. Grey weather or not, my spirits lifted instantly, and the meal set me up for the day's diving.

The dive spot was nicely placed between two mountains, with excellent accessibility. I had already warned the two girls with whom I had been buddied that I might slow them down, if I found anything interesting to photograph. The sun came out from behind the clouds just as we slid into the water, in visibility of about 20m.

The bright sunlight brought out the colours of the teeming underwater life. I tried to take in this beautiful sight in a composed manner, past experiences having taught me not to rush things.

Descending slowly, I let my search for

animal life govern my speed. The bottom consisted of rock shelves and boulders, mixed with areas of sand and vegetation. I was scanning the open areas for flatfish, but the first thing that caught my eye was a monkfish camouflaged against some rocks – one of my favourite fish.

I signalled, asking the girls to stick around while I got the camera out. It felt like only minutes later when I realised I was out of bottom time. How time flies!

Above: Steaming current at Saltstraumen.

Below left: It all looks placid enough from the air...





fine-tune our buoyancy before surrendering to nature, as the current began to dictate our direction.

This was the beginning of the wettest visit to the woods I have ever had, huge kelp forests flanking us on either side during our bird-like flight. The scenery changed constantly every time we turned a corner.

Unfortunately, the afternoon had turned cloudy, and the colours rapidly lost their intensity. But even with nature toning down the colours a little, this dive was certainly good enough to make it into my top 10.

When we swam through a cliff-wall corridor, I looked up to find both walls overgrown with fungi. The coverage was so dense that they seemed to be wrapped in mature Swiss cheese.

Further on, as we moved into the curvature of one of the walls, the space reminded me of a huge, old-fashioned cheese bell.

Then the current, without further ado, carried us onwards through this otherworldly underwater landscape.

WORLD BEATER

Saltstraumen is a unique natural phenomenon. It's a narrow passage between two islands, Knaplundøya and Straumøya, and in effect between the outer and inner Saltenfjord. Nearly 2 miles long, at its narrowest it is 150m wide and 31m deep.

IT FELT AS IF A HUGE MAGNET HAD SWITCHED ON INSIDE ME

Inner Saltenfjord has several points where depths reach more than 500m, allowing space for 372 million cubic metres of water to run through the passage every sixth hour.

The narrow point of Saltstraumen creates such pressure on the water that it pushes through at speeds of up to

25mph, making it the strongest tidal current in the world.

It is only during a couple of hours between high and low tide that boats can negotiate the passage, when the eddies are less than 10m wide.

WASHING MACHINE

Later in the week, the owner of the dive centre offered to take me on a special current dive on which guests are not normally allowed, for safety reasons. So, after a short boat ride, I threw myself excitedly into the wildest waters I have ever seen.

We practically had to tiptoe our way down a cliff wall, hiding in every crevice. But we soon reached the first special feature: a vast basin-hole in the wall, shaped, as before, in the Ice Age.

As the security of the cliff wall was replaced by this gaping hole, maintaining control became near-impossible.

Whipping my fins up and down with all my might, I just made it to the opposite end of the vertical basin. But I didn't stay there long.

Within seconds, the current had carried me into the centre of this amazing circular space, 4-6m wide and divided in half by a rock column that continued down the cliff wall on the outside to end 20-25m further down.

Every inch of wall space around me was covered in sea anemones, obviously

THE CHEESE BELL

That afternoon, it was time for a dip in the current. We sailed out to where a bridge connected the narrowest part of the fjord. I thought about the ingenuity the engineers must have required to build in waters of such extreme force.

We anchored in a small inlet and waited for the moment to enter. Our instructions were to descend to 20m as fast as possible and stick with the group.

There would be a dive guide behind and one in front, but regrettably there would no stopping, unless the whole group stopped.

It is, of course, difficult to take photographs on a fast drift dive, but I was assisted by being buddied up with a woman who had a lot of experience as an underwater model.

At our maximum depth, I discovered an underwater landscape sculpted by Ice Age ice and extremely strong currents.

Below me, a hole a couple of metres wide bore a striking resemblance to a huge cooking pot. Next to it was the beginning of a large rock cleft, providing us with a natural pathway.

Pairing up, we only just managed to

Top left: Two seastars get together to secure the next generation.

Top right: Some of the anglerfish don't mind divers getting close.



It may not have looked pretty, but I used it to my advantage, and crawled that vertical wall like a fly until I reached the point from which Tore had disappeared.

With one final hop I was back in the current, and being sucked in his direction.

Tore was sitting in the next basin, waiting for me. I headed for the farthest basin area, as I was supposed to, and the current led me directly into the “eye of the storm”. Fantastic!

The whole floor and wall were carpeted and wallpapered with small, bright red sea anemones. The plants here never grow to more than a few centimetres, or they would be torn off the wall by the powerful water, but they were present in great numbers.

After a bit more than half an hour in the cold spring water, the current started to grow stronger and we headed up.

LIGHT EFFECTS

We had another incredible dive later on the outgoing current in the same area. This time all the divers at the centre participated.

Over time, the water masses have created long channels parallel to the actual channel, and because of the light and oxygen conditions in the water, the vegetation is incredibly beautiful.

Huge kelp plants dance dramatically in the unrestful waters, underlining the force running through them.

As the current turned and the dive started, the guide signalled us into a cleft. The situation was one of pleasure/pain for me, as I enjoyed looking at everything but was agonised about being unable to stop for photos.

However, being weightless, I was able

to turn, drift backwards and take a shot of my buddy. It felt weird taking pictures this way round, but the current kept me in place and within the group.

Our guide, Ove, had briefed us that the current would calm down, so when this happened we swam up along the cliff and found another crevice where it flowed in the other direction.

We made it back along our first route until we saw another little hollow. We knew what to do – throw ourselves into the current and let it send us on at break-neck speed.

My turn came. I gripped my camera, looked my buddy in the eye and nodded. We went over the edge, and the feeling was fantastic. It was not uncomfortable or frightening, and the water didn't throw us around as I had feared. It was fast, but not out of control.

Suddenly, it was all over. The current had led us back to our starting point, where the rest of our group were waiting. How cool!

We repeated the ride a few more times, the current gaining strength each time. It was one of the most fun dives I have done in a long time.

BIG CAT

The high north of Norway has exceptional nature and biodiversity on offer. Sea eagles patrolled the skies at most of our mountainside dive spots, and there was plenty of macro life under water.

On one of many dives I lay in shallow bay waters on a horizontal rock face, playing with my macro lens. That the rock surfaces were all red must have had an effect on local animal life. Shrimps, bullheads and other life all seemed to be red, too.

felt, back on the outside of the wall, as if an enormous loudspeaker was sending bass vibrations towards us from somewhere out in the blue.

Sticking close together, we swam on until we reached the next big basin. Its entrance was bigger than the last, but we repeated our last move, and headed straight for the opposite end.

On our way there Tore, my buddy, exhaled. Instead of floating upwards, the bubbles split into a million mini-bubbles that spread across the entire room. It felt as if conventional forces of nature had been put out of play.

Just as we were about to regain our course, the current split in two, sucking Tore around the corner. I watched him disappear as I was pulled several metres towards the bottom, away from the wall.

I swam as hard as I could, trying to make it back to the wall, but a mere 2m away it still felt as if a huge hand was pushing me away from it.

Finally, I managed to reach out and grab hold of a crevice edge. I pulled myself against the wall, at which point it felt as if a huge magnet had switched on inside me.

Instead of being torn away from the wall, I was now pressed hard against it.

Above: The kelp forest is quite typical for Norway.

Below: A moment's respite during one of the fast drift-dives.





I glanced out lazily into the big black nothingness, a huge backdrop for a school of pollack snapping up the nourishment carried by the current.

I was shocked to find what I at first assumed to be a seal lying on the rock-shelf below. Closer inspection proved it to be the biggest wolf-fish I have seen.

It eyed me up, as if surprised to find a diver so close. There I was, camera in hand – with a 105mm macro lens fitted to it. Aargh! The wolf-fish – known here as a catfish – added insult to injury by raising its dorsal fin to warn me off.

This species is not known to attack, but I didn't fancy my chances. Its jaws looked as if they could crush an arm, given the chance.

I focused on the fish, even though it was 3-4m away, and got a couple of shots, to prove that I had found it. It filled the frame, and I estimated it to be as much as 1.4m long from tail-end to underslung jaw.

After we had stared at each other for a while I tried get a little closer, but

Grumpy had had enough, and his dorsal fin grew menacingly.

The huge fish finally propelled itself away with a graceful tail flick. I realised that I had either broken a record or suffered from the exaggeration sickness of anglers when I reported on my experience back on land. I was told that the biggest wolf-fish ever caught in Norwegian waters had been 1.24m long.

VIKING BATH

The week passed quickly, and dive days merged into one long row of great nature experiences. It was still early spring, and we had many mornings of waking up to a fine layer of snow cover, which disappeared as the day grew older.

The last couple of days I was there, a small blizzard came in from the Arctic areas, bringing heavy snow.

This prompted the dive-centre chef to arrange a barbecue in a cabin designed for the purpose. It had room for 20-25 people and a big barbecue area in the




Above: Norwegians love the outdoor *badestompen*, especially good in winter.

Above left: Saltstraumen has no shortage of material for macro photography. The life may not be large, but there is a lot of it.

Below left: Is this wolf-fish a record-breaker?

centre. It was a brilliant party, with the *badestompen*, a huge Viking-type bath, fired up outside.

The water was heated to 42°C, and we spent most of the night boiling in it under snowstorm skies. This was a special experience, particularly when the snow suddenly turned to hail and we had to submerge everything but our noses to avoid getting bruised.

It was the perfect finish to a week full of extraordinary dive experiences. 

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Scandinavian Airlines and Norwegian fly to Bodø from London. The dive centre can arrange transfers to Saltstraumen, about 18 miles away.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Saltstraumen Dive Centre is a new PADI 5* centre, www.saltstraumendykkesenter.com. It is located at the Fiskecampen resort in the middle of Saltstraumen, which has 18 apartments and rooms that can take up to 70 divers, and a pub/cafe/terrace. A PADI Saltstraumen Speciality Course developed by local divers is offered at the centre. Other centres are Saltstraumen Under Vann, www.under-vann.no; and Polardykk i Bodø, www.polardykk.no

WHEN TO GO ▶ Bodø is a little north of the Arctic Circle, so its winters are long. The Gulf Stream runs along the Norwegian west coast, so it is only in the farthest north that the fjords freeze over. Because of melting snow and ice from the mountains, the waters don't heat until late summer, but they stay warm until mid- to late autumn. Drysuits are a must.

PRICING ▶ Return flights to Bodø start at £350, transfers £60, and accommodation costs from £50 per room (two share) or £90 per apartment (five share) per night. Dives cost around £45 each, plus £6 for air fills.

TOURIST INFORMATION ▶ www.norwaydiving.net, 020 7839 6255

