

Macro life abounds. LEFT: Most of the rockfaces are well covered with a variety of marine life. These soft corals are quite common in nordic waters.



Wet'n wild at the Arctic circle Saltstraumen

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The current grabs you as soon as you enter the water. Your first thought, this is going to be a wild one! The adrenaline is flowing as fast in your veins as the currents is flowing past kelp covered rocks. Diving the strongest malstroem on the planet is not for the faint-hearted. It is extremely fun though!

The excitement is felt already on the plane as we fly north an hour and half from Oslo, the capital of Norway. Passing over our final destination on-route, clear blue skies gives us the first glimpses of our divesites in the days to come. We can see the white waters rushing through narrow sounds as the tide drags the ocean into the deep fjords. A few minutes later we are landing in Bodø, the regional capital in northern Norway, just north of the Arctic circle. Our accomodation and the divesites are about a 30-minute drive from the airport. The scenery on

There are numerous divesites in the Saltstraumen area, most reachable only by boat, but there are also some shoredives

our drive to Saltstraumen, which basically is a bridge and a few houses, is nothing but spectacular with snow-covered mountains raising out of the fjord.

Tidal current

The difference between high tide and low tide in the area around Saltstraumen can be as much as three metres. The currents force about 400 cubicmetres of water through a sound, which is barely 150 metres wide and three kilometres long. The

force of gravity creates enormous forces, which the water transforms into one of nature's many wonders—the malstroem, or whirlpools. The current sweeping through the sound creates the malstroem, which makes the water boil. They appear as sudden as they vanish—huge sucking whirlpools, with a diameter of up to 10-12 metres, sucking in water just like a black hole sucks in surrounding stars.

A lot of stories circulate about boats that have vanished in Saltstraumen. And when you person-





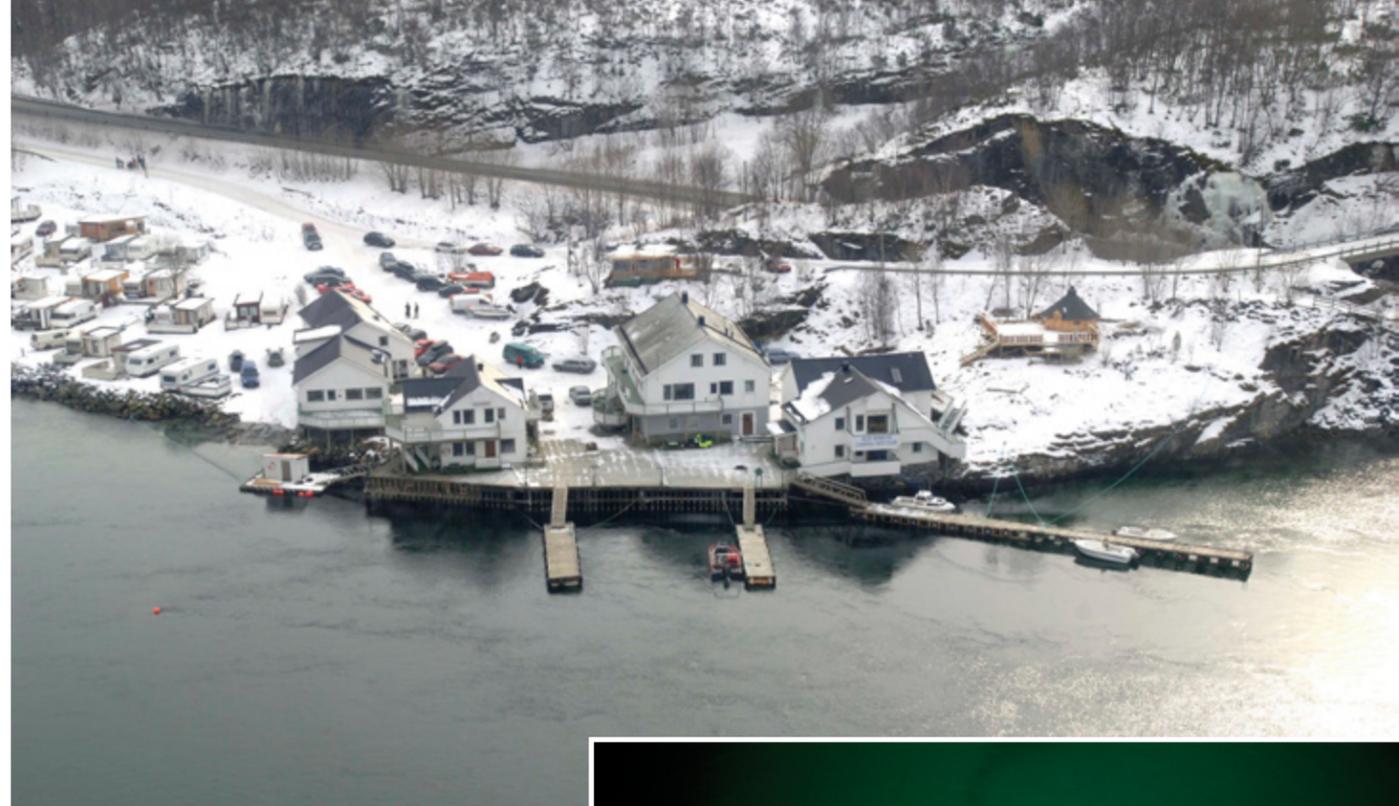
Saltstraumen Dive Center conveniently situated just a few minutes boat ride from most dive sites

ally encounter the raw forces of this mighty natural phenomenon, it is not hard to understand and respect the awe and fascination it inspires in any person. Although flying many hundreds of metres above sea level, we could clearly observe the awesome forces in play. My dive buddy and I gave each other an awe-filled glance. This is where we were going to be diving over the next few days.

The drive east from Bodø took just about half an hour. We hardly had time enough to unpack and put our equipment together before it was announced that the dive boat was ready to depart. As the excitement had already built up a great amount of adrenalin in both of us, we were quick to respond. In no time, we were both suited up in drysuits. The dive boat always leaves on time. Not just because the dive captain is well organized, but also because you have to dive precisely between the low and high tides when there is no current, and it is safe to dive. If you miss the window of opportunity, the currents get way too strong, and you have to wait for the next chance, which will be six hours later.

In a squeeze

The boat maneuvered through the cur-

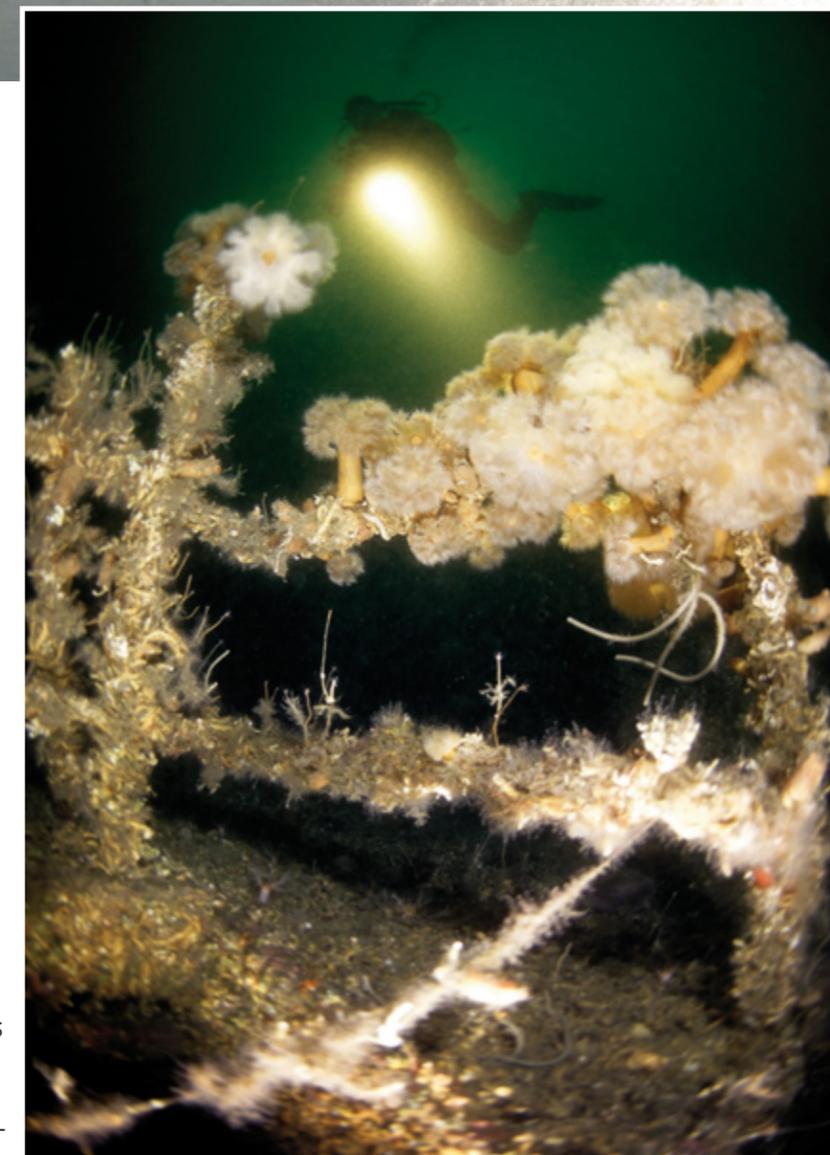


rent, which was still going strong. Not to worry, as our guides knew exactly where to go. They gave us a thorough briefing about the first dive site—the tunnel! We were told what to expect from the current, what we could expect to see and also where to shelter from the current to get good photo-ops. The casual conversation slowly died down, and we waited for the signal to role into the water. As we quickly descended to a depth of 20 metres, the visibility got better the deeper we got.

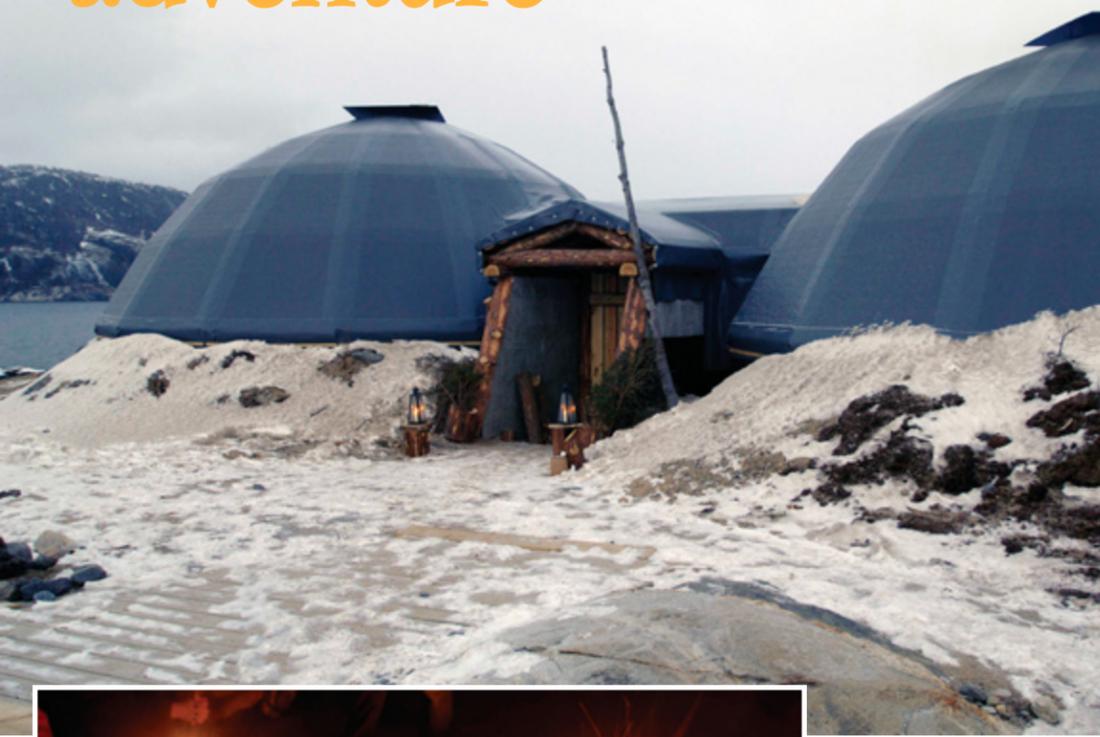
When we approached the bottom, it became very clear which direction we had to swim: *with* the current. The other direction was simply not an option. We adjusted our positions and floated along with the current and concentrated on avoiding crashing into rocks or other divers.

The marine life was incredible. We observed wolffish resting on the stony seafloor and long leaves of kelp waiving in the current. Turning our eyes to the blue water, we could see schools of coalfish turned against the current and standing so tightly together that the mass of fish looked like a massive steel object.

Sometimes, we found calm waters behind some rock formations, which ena-



ABOVE: Seen clearly from a helicopter, the current rips past the small island in the middle of Saltstraumen creating whirlpools dangerous for even ship traffic



Saltstraumen



a pothole. We swam through and came out a few metres deeper. The tunnel was just wide enough for a diver to squeeze through. What an experience this dive turned out to be!

Night dive in the coffee pot

bled us to take some pictures, but most of the time, we cruised along with the mighty forces of nature.

When we started the dive, just before the tides were turning, the current had become weaker. Eventually, it stopped completely. After a short break, the current started to pick up slowly in the opposite direction.

We were on our way to the rock-formation which gave name to the dive site: the Tunnel. Over thousands of years, ice and water had carved its way through the rock and made

The evening was spent reliving the past day's events in conversation and preparing our night diving equipment. A dive during the day in Saltstraumen is an unforgettable experience; we were therefore full of expectation for the upcoming night dive.

It was calm and dark since we were diving in the month of March. The summers here are dominated by the midnight sun, hence real night diving is restricted to the rest of the year.

The captain dropped us off

in a small bay by the name of *Kaffekjelen*, which is Norwegian for coffepot. As we descended, we went through several metres of red algae, which actually resembled coffee grounds! Fortunately, the visibility improved greatly, as we sank deeper into the fjord.

Sweeping our dive lights across the bottom revealed a spectacular array of marine life. An amaz-



A small hermit crab clings to a kelp leaf

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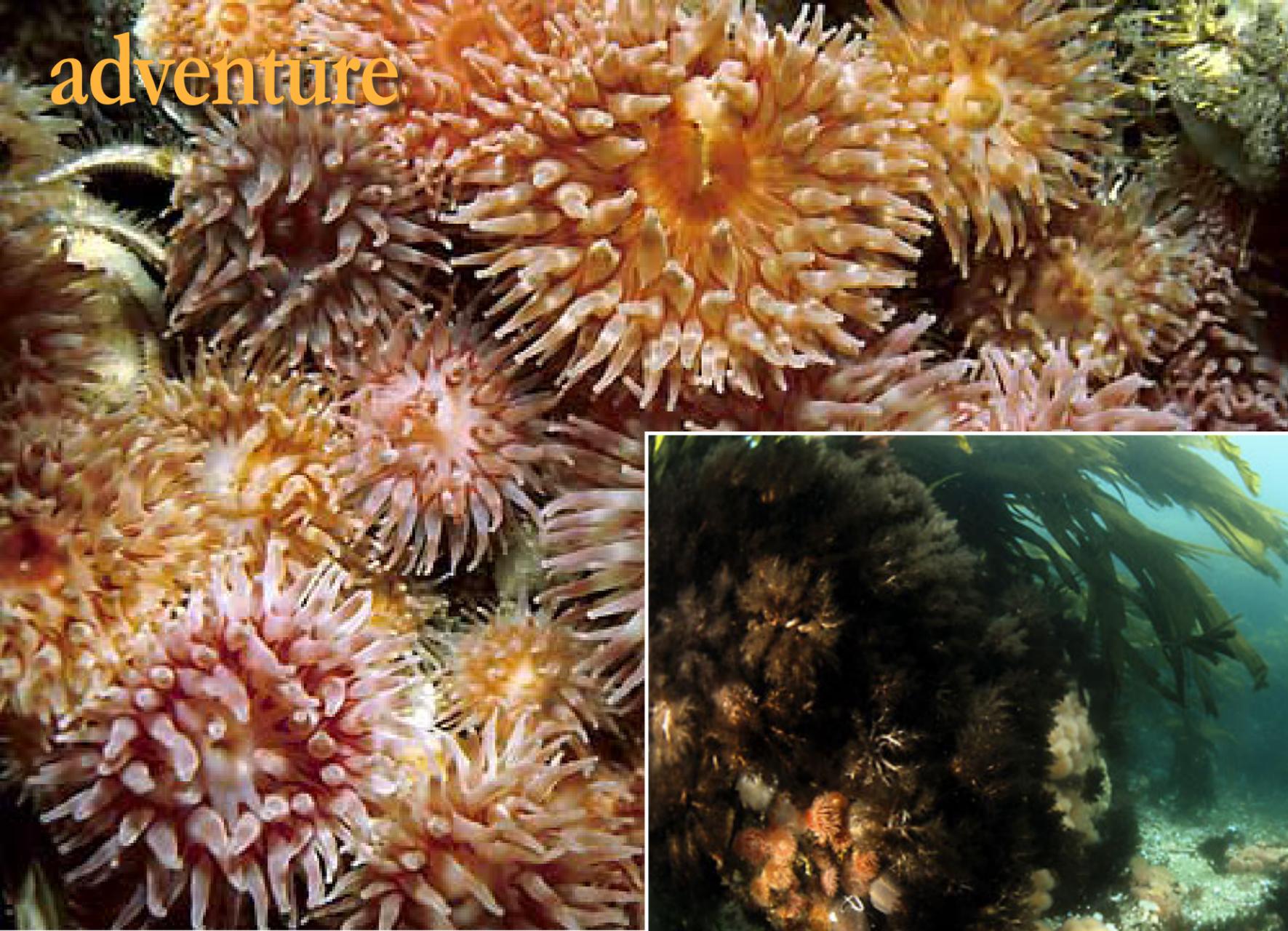


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Saltstraumen



Sundstraumen to the left, and Saltstraumen to the right. The huge exchange of water provides excellent conditions for the marine life, and especially anemones thrive here

brother, and the tidal currents are as strong, if not stronger, and make the dive site resemble a river. The diving conditions are not as unpredictable as in the Saltstraumen as the seafloor is less wild.

The boat ride there gives you a combined experience of nature and history. If you look carefully, you can see the notch made by the viking king, Olav Tryggvason, when he threw his axe into the sound in anger because the strong currents prevented him from entering the calm waters inside.

Olav Tryggvason was on his way to Christianize another viking chief-of-tribe, Raud den Rame. He was believed to control the forces of wind and weather. As Olav Tryggvason's men were not strong enough to row his ship through the sound, he summoned bishop Sigurd to break the magic of Raud den Rame. With the bishop standing at the stem wearing his chasuble, and with the help of holy water and God's strength, they forced their way through the strong current. The story further cites that the tribal chief did not allow himself to be Christianized, so Olav Tryggvason cut it short, killed the tribal chief and stole his ship.

The mighty viking chief turned out to be as self-willed and unpredictable as the currents where he resided. That is a fantastic story to accompany a fantastic dive.

High velocity diving

Sundstraumen can be dived from both ends. We started our dive as the currents were travelling into the fjord. We rolled into the fjord and descended down a steep wall, which was completely covered with colourful anemones. In the begin-

ing diversity of animals and corals of different colours past through our beams of light. Now and again, some fishes crossed our path as well. And we could sense, if not always see, that there were many more out there in the dark waters. The dive went on without any big surprises, and we took a lot of photographs to save the memories.

The land of the Vikings

The next day we headed for some new dive sites in Sundstraumen. This sound is on the south side of the Saltstraumen. Sundstraumen is more narrow than its bigger

You may stumble over Wolf fish (*Anarhichas lupus*) in Saltstraumen





Saltstraumen



The bridge gives you a great vantage point to study your divesite before the dives. Saltstraumen is situated in Northern Norway above the Polar Circle, hence dry-suits are required all year

TOP RIGHT: Saltstraumen is a fisherman's paradise, so you will find a lot of fishing hooks

ning of the dive, when the currents were rather weak, we could take our time and observe the many small creatures, which made their living amongst the anemones. At first, the current led us slowly along the wall, but after some time, it started to pick up. What started out to be a quiet drift became a much wilder ride. We just went along with it, for what turned out to be an awesome drift dive. Near the end of the dive, the marine life just swept past us in a foggy blur of colours.

We managed to find ourselves into a quiet backwater, where we did our safety stop. When we arrived at the surface, the dive boat was waiting for us. In the diveboat, we realised what a great distance we had drifted during our dive. Still, we had to go another kilometer further into the fjord to pick up the other two divers. These guys were locals and knew how to get the most out of the dive.

Safe & fun diving

It might seem a bit fool-hardy to dive currents like Saltstraumen and Sundstraumen. On the other hand, it can be made safely. The dive operators in the area have a long history of experience and know where and when to dive safely. These are amongst some of the best dive sites in Norway, and possibly in the world. As always in dealing with strong currents, dive with people who know the area and have a reputa-

tion for good safety. A safe dive in Saltstraumen and Sundstraumen comes down to knowing the tide table, safe entry- and exit points both for shore- and boatdiving. This will ensure you a lifetime experience, submerged as well as onshore.

