



Capitalising on **Culture**

As cities in Estonia, Austria and Norway gear up for their year in the spotlight as European Capitals of Culture, we look at why they offer hope to us all

Words **Emma Thomson**





When Hegert Leidsalu, of the Tartu City Government office, woke up on a cold and snowy Wednesday morning, he'd only expected to be doing a little driving. Sixty minutes later, I, a complete stranger, was massaging ash into his pert naked buttocks, as if basting him for the oven. Were we mortified? Most definitely. But at least we could blame our pinkening cheeks on the heat as we sweated politely inside a traditional smoke sauna in Haanja.

This tiny village falls under one of 19 municipalities in southern Estonia that join the city of Tartu in celebrating its European Capital of Culture title in 2024. Nor are they alone. This year, the accolade is also being shared with two other cities: Bad Ischl in Austria and Bodø in northern Norway.

Draw lines between these three places and you have an almost perfect triangle spanning the length and breadth of Europe. Thousands of kilometres separate them, and yet, often unknowingly, common threads and themes tie them together. For example, none of

“In a sauna, everyone is naked – the same. It’s an equaliser. Whether you’re the mayor or a citizen, you come together”

the cities have kept the title for themselves. Instead, they’ve all included the surrounding towns and villages in sharing the ripples of change that are often brought about by the interest that the celebrations typically bring.

I spent three weeks visiting each one for their opening ceremony to see what lies in store for travellers, and what titles like this actually hope to achieve. If the aim of the European Commission grant is about seeing people and places in a new light, then basting Hegert’s bum had been an illuminating start.

GETTING ALL STEAMED UP

One inarguable thread connecting these three destinations is their sauna culture. In the heart of the Austrian town of Bad Ischl,

I found myself in the thermal spa Eurothermen, where I was joined by Marcus, a local man aiming to alleviate his arthritis.

“The sauna ceremony is deep in our culture,” he told me as a hefty gentleman swirled a towel around our heads, wafting blasts of hot air in our faces.

“Us Brits tend to err on the shy side of nudity,” I replied, flinching with the heat.

“No, no. You need to be completely naked to get everything out,” he rebuked, and I felt that there was a deeper meaning to his words, perhaps about the layers that we all wear.

Bad Ischl, south-east of Salzburg, is part of Austria’s Salzkammergut, a lake-studded ‘salt domain’ as seductive as anything in *The Sound of Music*. This spans the regions of Salzburg, Upper Austria and Steiermark, and was the private property of the Habsburgs for 650 years. Back then, nobody was allowed to enter or leave without a special permit or passport, and the dynasty used the nearby 7,000-year-old salt mine (the world’s oldest) at Hallstatt as their personal piggy bank. Because salt was the only means of preserving food back



then, this ‘white gold’ lined the Habsburg coffers until their demise in 1918.

The family was impossibly rich but had been plagued by misfortune. Sophie, the wife of Archduke Franz Karl Joseph, had suffered several miscarriages. So, when the desperate Archduke was told by doctors looking after the miners that inhaling the region’s salts was healing, he sent his wife to bathe in its waters. Whether it had an effect or not, she gave birth to the first of four sons, Franz Joseph, in 1830. He was nicknamed the ‘Salt Prince’, and Bad Ischl’s spa reputation was born.

Franz Joseph and his wife, Elizabeth, also later took up regular summer residence in Bad Ischl, at the Kaiservilla. Their influence attracted the great musicians, composers and artists of the day, transforming a rural town into a flamboyant beauty and noted spa escape. It’s this history that the artist Simone Barlian drew on when building Plateau Blo, a floating sauna that will rove around Lake Traunsee – Austria’s deepest – during the year-long Capital of Culture celebrations.

“Lakes link the region, so I wanted both a physical and metaphorical platform where the public could share open dialogue,” she said while standing next to the pewter-coloured water. “In a sauna, everyone is naked – the same. It’s an equaliser. And whether you’re the mayor or a citizen, you can come together and discuss the future.”

The idea of sauna as a meeting place had also been drilled into me at the UNESCO-listed smoke sauna that I’d shared with

Hegert in Estonia. There, on Mooska Farm, owner Eda Veeroja had told me: “In a sauna, the conscious world of understanding ends and the in-between world begins.” Immediately afterwards, she’d opened the door of the alder-wood cabin to reveal its innards, shadowed with soot, where I would be scrubbed with salt, ash and a gloop of local honey before being patted with birch branches.

“Here, it’s possible to come into contact with our ancestors and their wisdom,” Eda whispered. “They are a liminal space between the forest and the farmhouse – a place for healing, magic and communication. The country grannies and grandpas are bearers of these Indigenous ways of life.”

FROM ANCESTORS TO ALLIUMS

A day after my Estonian smoke sauna, I found myself tracing the frozen outline of nearby Lake Peipus, 40km from Tartu, on the border with Russia. Huddled along its shoreline are the communities of Varnja, Kasepää and Kolkja, whose clapboard houses, painted in weathered shades of green and yellow, are home to the Old Believers. These are the descendants of Orthodox Christians exiled from Russia in the 1600s after the Tsar unified the church and instilled traditions such as switching from two to three fingers when making the sign of the cross. The Old Believers refused to change, so were cast out.

In the 1930s, some 10,000 lived in Estonia; today, around 600 call these three villages home. They mostly keep to ►



In hot water (clockwise from far left) Hallstatt is such a beautiful town that China made an exact replica of it in Luoyang; Bad Ischl’s wealth of historical architecture comes from when this tiny spa town was a summer residence of the Habsburgs; sauna culture unites all of this year’s European Capitals of Culture; one of the tunnels that the prisoners of Austria’s Ebensee Concentration Camp were forced to dig; bundles of birch, known as *vihta*, are used to pat the bodies of visitors to Estonia’s Mooska Farm sauna; (previous spread) Tartu’s Town Hall Square readies for the celebrations to come

themselves, except when selling onions. These they cultivate in half-a-metre-high beds to be especially pungent and delicious.

“At the end of August and in early September, these lanes are lined with stalls selling their onions,” said my guide, Kristiina Tammets, as we drove towards the just-refurbished Museum of Old Believers in Kolkja.

Historically, these exiles lived side by side with Baltic Germans and rural Estonians. To honour this heritage, a special ‘Onion Route’ has been created to introduce visitors to the area’s traditional foods, churches, farms and crafts, as well as the local castle, Alatskivi, which was modelled on the UK’s Balmoral.

Lilli Tarakanov, manager of the Kolkja museum, met us at her workplace just as the snow started flurrying. She offered us homemade lumps of spice-infused sugar to stow in our cheeks as we sipped the unsweetened tea that she dispensed from a samovar. Between sips, I asked her whether the culture of the Old Believers was in danger of being lost, given how few were left. She shook her head knowingly.

“The people who grew up here have already received our traditions, such as religious classes in school and learning the old Russian alphabet,” she told me.

The museum rooms were laid out like a home and were minimalist to look at, yet every sofa and table was covered in lace.

“For us, it’s important that when you step in the house, it feels just washed – very white,” Lilli said, “We don’t have a traditional national costume, but embroidering with lace gives us our own style.”

Far more flamboyantly dressed are Estonia’s Indigenous Seto people, famed for their folk-style red embroidery, chunky silver necklaces and UNESCO-listed polyphonic ‘leelo’ singing. In Tartu, I met Setomaa guide, Helen Külvik, who explained how things had changed.

“Nowadays our Seto heritage is something to be proud of, but it hasn’t always been so,” she told me. “Until recently, it was considered shameful to be Seto, but in the last 20 years this has turned around. Now people are looking for their Seto roots.”

In some ways, the story of the Seto is similar to that of Norway’s Sámi, in that there are attempts now being made to reintegrate both their cultures. In the city of Bodø, I sat in on a rehearsal of *Giedtine* (*Who Owns the Wind?*), a Sámi-language play that touches on the true story of the illegal Fosen wind farms that were built on their reindeer pastures.

Relations between the Sámi, the Indigenous Peoples of Sápmi (Lapland) – a region spanning the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland – and the Norwegians hasn’t always been easy. For over a century, up until the 1960s, Sámi language and dress were forbidden in Norway under the government’s ‘Norwegianization’ programme.

“I have seen how it has affected my mother, my grandmother, all my friends and their families. It’s a story that is very hard. You feel in 2024 that we should be able to take space, have rights, and that it should be the norm,” said Emma Rustad, an actor in *Giedtine*.

It would’ve been easy to gloss over these tensions; instead, the Capital of Culture win has been used as a banner that everyone can



The mysteries of southern Estonia (left–right) Women in traditional Estonian dress prepare for Tartu’s opening ceremony as a Capital of Culture – though the title extends far beyond the city’s fringes and takes in the surrounding southern region, including villages of Old Believers and communities of Indigenous Seto people; taking a dip in the freezing waters of Tartu’s Anne Canal in the winter might seem like an act of madness, but this is just one of a number of platforms used by the local ‘penguins’ (aka winter swimmers) of the city. Those who don’t fancy its frigid waters are gladly excused

“Until the 1960s, Sámi language and dress were forbidden in Norway by the government”

gather under. The opening week was deliberately chosen to coincide with ‘Sámi Week’, a yearly festival celebrating this heritage.

“Traditionally, Bodø forgot Sámi culture; now we’re melting together,” explained Kristoffer Dolmen, senior curator at Bodø’s Nordland Museum, which hosts a year-long exhibition of Sámi artefacts.

The finale of Bodø’s opening ceremony was performed by Sámi activist Ella Marie, who sang a hauntingly beautiful *joik* (a traditional form of Sámi song). As it drew to a close, she opened her coat to reveal the words ‘This is Sami Land’ sewn into the lining. It was a powerful moment.

A DIFFICULT PAST

In Estonia, Tartu’s Old Town architecture brought to my mind images of peach-and-pink iced cupcakes framed with frosting.

“Tartu is seen as a safe, cute uni town,” said Kalle Paas, illustrator, designer and part of the original Tartu 2024 bidding team. Estonia’s second-biggest city is the oldest in the Baltic states. It published the country’s first newspaper, has green spaces larger than New York’s Central Park, and is home to a university established in 1632 that spawned Karl Ernst von Baer, the man who discovered the female egg, and Professor Nikolai Pirogov, who pioneered the use of anaesthesia in surgery. If nothing else, we should all be particularly thankful for the latter.

For the city’s Capital of Culture 2024 tagline, it decided on the ‘Arts of Survival’ as a theme – a stark contrast to its cutesy appearance. It was summed up by local philosopher Valdur Mikita as ‘resilience’, in reference to the threat posed by Russia both today and in the country’s recent past.

“What the Russians are doing to Ukraine, they did to us, Latvia and Lithuania,” said a concerned Martin Jaigma, manager of the KGB Cells Museum in the centre of Tartu.

Kalle and I met him at the bottom of a short flight of stairs in a townhouse basement. In 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied Estonia, the Soviet Secret Police (a precursor to the KGB) seized this house from its owners, deported them to the Siberian gulags and created a pre-trial space in the cellar away from watching eyes.

“There were 13 cells and three isolation boxes. Prisoners were convicted under the deliberately vague Article 58 penal code and confessions were forced through torture ►



Need to know: *Tartu, Estonia*



When to go

Tartu doesn’t suffer from Tallinn’s summer crowds, but it does rain frequently during this time (Jun–Aug). We’d advise visiting in the drier shoulder seasons (Mar–May; Sep–Oct). Winters can be very cold (-20°C).



Getting there & around

Air Baltic (airbaltic.com), **Wizz Air** (wizzair.com) and **Ryanair** (ryanair.com) fly direct to Tallinn from London Gatwick, Luton and Stansted respectively. Returns cost from £70 and take three hours. To get from Tallinn to Tartu, **Lux Express** buses – fitted with TVs and wifi – run regular departures from Tallinn Central Bus Station and take 2.5 hours (£12; luxexpress.eu). Car rental is available in town at **Sixt** or **Europcar** from £11 per day.



Carbon offset

A return flight from London to Tallinn produces 276kg of carbon per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel.



Visa & currency

Visa: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 90 days. **Currency:** Euro (EUR), currently around €1.17 to the UK£.



Where to stay

Hotel Dorpat goes by Tartu’s historical name and is a short walk from the Old Town. It has a restaurant and spa. Doubles from £66pn. dorpat.ee
Hotel Tartu lies in the city centre and has an on-site sauna, a gym, and a hostel wing for those on a budget. Doubles from £63pn. tartuhotell.ee



Food & drink

Aparaaditehas Creative City (aparaaditehas.ee) is a former umbrella factory repurposed as a hip quadrangle of cafés, restaurants,

bars and pop-up concert venues; try brunch spot **Cruffin** for its croissants and **Koim Tilli** for its street food. Elsewhere, **TOKO** (tokoresto.ee) is a riverfront fusion restaurant well worth a punt – try the scallops with truffle.

In the hamlet of Haanja, **Suur Muna** (suurmuna.ee) is a family-run café of great charm that sells locally smoked hams and ‘wild meats’ (beaver, boar).



Don’t miss

Estonian National Museum,

Tartu, plays host to a series of special CofC events and exhibitions, including concert *Forgotten Peoples*, a homage to Indigenous Estonians. erm.ee

KGB Cells Museum is set in a Tartu basement that was used as an NKVD/KGB pre-trial prison in the 1940s and ‘50s. It’s an important history that needs to be heard. muuseum.tartu.ee

Kissing Tartu is a ‘snogathon’ aimed at breaking down prejudice. It takes place around the city’s *Kissing Students* statue on 17 and 18 May.

Mooska, Haanja, is a smoke sauna on a farm in the south. You’ll spend three hours being whisked, bathed and slathered in honey. mooska.eu

The Onion Route is an ideal day trip from Tartu and traces the shores of Lake Peipus, passing villages inhabited by Russian Old Believers. sibulatee.ee

In winter, try your hand at ice fishing, a *karakatitsa* safari and sledging. **Mesi Tare** (mesitare.ee) can arrange tours.



Further information

Tartu2024.ee – Festival site
Visitvoru.ee – Tourist board website

The trip

The author was a guest of **Regent Holidays** (regent-holidays.co.uk; 01174 535 461), which offers a new six-day Tallinn and Tartu twin-centre city break from £865 per person based on two adults sharing, including return flights, transfers, B&B accommodation and return train or bus tickets.



Need to know: *Bad Ischl, Austria*



When to go

In summer, the Salzkammergut lake district region is a joy, but it is also busy. Spring (May–Jun) and autumn (Sep–Oct) see the hiking routes and lakes empty. Winter is skiing season.



Getting there & around

The nearest airport to Bad Ischl is Salzburg. **British Airways** (ba.com) is one of many airlines to fly direct from the UK. Returns from London Gatwick cost from £84 and take 2 hours. There is no direct train from Salzburg to Bad Ischl, so take bus 150 from Salzburg train station (€13). Trains depart Bad Ischl for Bad Goisern and Hallstatt.



Carbon offset

A return flight from London to Salzburg produces 222kg of carbon per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel.



Visa & currency

Visa: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 90 days.
Currency: Euro (EUR), currently around €1.17 to the UK£.



Where to stay

Stadthotel Goldenes Schiff, Bad Ischl, is stylish without being stuffy and has a well-stocked spa. Doubles from £95pn. goldenes-schiff.at

Goiserer Mühle, Bad Goisern, is a family-style hotel ten minutes' drive from Bad Ischl. Doubles from £178pn. hotel-goiserermuehle.at

Hallstatt Hideaway, Hallstatt, is among a handful of adults-only private suites with alpine views and access to a pine sauna. Doubles from £256pn. hallstatt-hideaway.com



Food & drink

In Bad Ischl, **Cafe Konditorei Zauner** (zauner.at) is a legendary cake

shop – try the house speciality *kipferl* biscuits. **Restaurant Elizabeth** (restauration-elisabeth.at) is the city's most elegant historical restaurant, while **Café Ramsauer** (Kaiser-Franz-Josef-Straße 8) was once a favourite of composer Johann Strauss. Look out too for **Tavern Culture Reloaded**, a lively CofC pop-up inside Bad Ischl train station that is run by TV chef Christoph 'Krauli' Held and his group of apprentice chefs (25–28 Apr, 14–16 Jun, 27–30 Jul, 25–28 Sep; 4–9pm); also try his restaurant **SiriusKogl** (siriuskogl.at).



Don't miss

The Sudhaus is hosting **Art with Salt and Water**, an exhibition that explores the region's relationship with salt. It is one of the main CofC exhibitions. salzkammergut-2024.at

Kaiservilla was the summer residence of Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph and his wife Elizabeth ('Sisi'). Don't miss seeing the desk at which he signed the declaration of war on Serbia, which escalated into the First World War. kaiservilla.at

Ebensee concentration camp was destroyed after Austria's liberation, but the tunnels that prisoners were forced to dig still exist. memorial-ebensee.at

Hand.Werk.Haus in Bad Goisern has a shop downstairs selling artisanal pottery, gin and clothes; upstairs is a museum on traditional crafts. It has a host of workshops and exhibitions during the CofC. handwerkhaus.at

The village of **Hallstatt** is so impossibly pretty that China made an exact replica of it. It has shaped the identity of the Salzkammergut region, thanks to its 7,000-year-old salt mines.



Further information

Salzkammergut tourist board's **KulturCard** costs £42 and offers discounts at museums, concerts and exhibitions in the CofC programme. salzkammergut-2024.at – Festival site
austria.info/en – Tourist board site

and interrogation," explained Martin, pointing to a preserved electric chair.

Conditions were grim. Prisoners had no mattresses or blankets, and the middle plank of the bed was intentionally raised higher so that those interned here could never truly rest. Around me, the museum walls echoed with the recorded sound of men tapping on metal doors. "Prisoners used Morse code to communicate because they'd be punished for talking," explained Martin.

It made for uneasy and difficult listening, but this museum is an important place of remembrance. "It was the idea of those who survived Siberia, so we'd never forget," added Martin. Meanwhile, Kalle and I climbed back up the stairs and into the light.

In the story of Tartu's KGB cells, I had found dark echoes of the history of Austria, whose wartime past hangs as heavy as the frozen mists in the forest of Ebensee. This green slice of rural Austria lies a 15 minute-drive north-east of Bad Ischl. Its name means 'the plains on the shore of the lake', which is a serene moniker for a region home to the country's largest salt-processing plant. But hidden behind the pines was also a former Nazi concentration camp.

"Ebensee was one of Mauthausen [concentration camp's] 50 subcamps," explained Wolfgang Quatember, director of Ebensee War Museum. The barracks were demolished after liberation following the Second World War, but the tunnels that prisoners were forced to dig for the purpose of researching, constructing and storing missiles remain.

As we walked through residential streets to reach it, sunlight glinted on last night's freshly fallen snow. "It might look beautiful to us, but it was hell for the prisoners, who wore only coarse shirts and trousers and wooden shoes," commented Wolfgang as we entered the cold, damp jaws of a tunnel.

More than 27,000 people were imprisoned here; 8,300 died, mostly from starvation and



“The museum was the idea of those who survived Siberia, so we’d never forget”

cold. That’s the entire population of Ebensee today, eradicated within 18 months.

“Until 1985, we Austrians denied the war – claimed it was not our fault. Only in 1991 did we start to take responsibility,” Walter told me. “It’s important to link our present to the past, so it never happens again.”

AN ARTISTIC STREAK

I encountered echoes of the Second World War in Bodø, too, which had been completely flattened in bombing raids by the Luftwaffe in May 1940. More than 1,000 civilians were killed and half the town was made homeless.

You can see more on this period at Bodø’s Norwegian Aviation Museum, which also covers the town’s role during the Cold War as a launchpad for U-2 spyplane missions into Soviet airspace. But this past is also stamped across the city. After the bombing, the Swedish Red Cross built relief homes; now this congregation of red, blue, green and white houses forms the trendy neighbourhood of Svenskebyen (the Swedish Quarter).

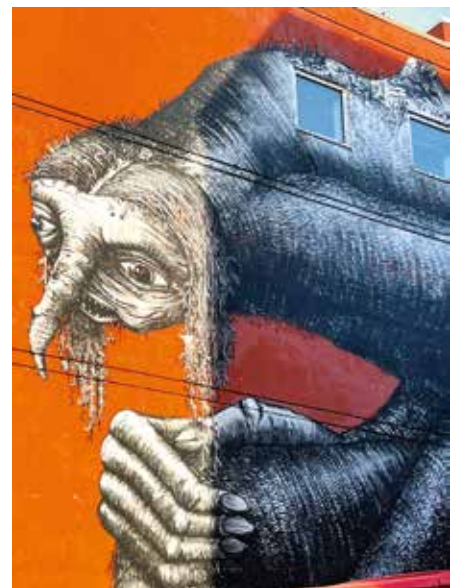
Of the three cities I visited, Bodø was definitely the wild card. This fishing town, couched inside a crescent of snow-blanketed mountains, was previously dismissed as ‘Boring Bodø’, on account of its military air base, and visitors have tended to use it only as a gateway to the Lofoten Islands.

Indeed, Bodø town officials were actively asked not to apply for the Capital of Culture title by the Norwegian Minister for Culture. In typical feisty northern fashion, they ignored the request and succeeded anyway, becoming the first city above the Arctic Circle to win. They did so because of its sense of entrepreneurialism and a bohemian spirit that is reflected in its eclectic street art.

Hidden among the town’s grid-pattern streets, on the sides of post-Second World War buildings that seem to crouch against the cold, you’ll find murals of eagles and butterflies created by international artists when Bodø hosted the UpNorth street art festival in 2016. Look for ‘Insomnia’ (Havnegata) by Italian artist Millo, who captures the dazed mindset brought on by the midnight sun, and the black-and-white ‘Troll’ (Sjøgata 18) by Sheffield-based muralist Phlegm. ▶



Cultural encounters (this page; clockwise from top) Estonia’s 1885-built Alatskivi Castle takes its architectural inspiration from Balmoral in the Scottish Highlands’, and it has been used as everything from a school to a cinema, though now welcomes visitors; traditional Sami boots are made from reindeer skin; a typical Old Believer’s living room in the Museum of Old Believers in Kolkja, Estonia; museum manager Lilli Tarakanov extends a warm welcome; a hand-carved Sámi drinking bowl, known as a *kuksa*; (left page) handmade Sámi crafts are on display during Bodø’s opening ceremony for its year as a Capital of Culture



A capital idea (this page; clockwise from top left) Árran 360° showcases five films by Sámi directors inside a lavvu (traditional Sami tent) as part of Bodø's 2024 celebrations; master Sámi craftsman Johnsen Sløyd meets Queen Sonja of Norway; 'Troll' by Sheffield-based muralist Phlegm is one of many works of street art found across Bodø; the Gothic-style Bodø Cathedral was one of the first churches in Norway to have a detached steeple; the interrogation room at KGB Cells Museum, Tartu, is a sobering glimpse of Soviet Estonia; 'Insomnia' by Italian artist Millo, Bodø; (right page) Bodø's 'Cosmos with No Borders' by Spanish artist Deih

Alamy, Emma Thorsen



By comparison, graffiti in Estonia is still technically illegal, and yet street art in Tartu has gone from being maligned to rivalling that found in Berlin – as long as it's on agreed upon walls. 'Galleries' have popped up under two of the city's seven bridges: the night-time-lit Vabadussild and the bow-shaped Kaarsild. To the side of the latter, you'll find 'The Many Faces of President Päts' by artist Edward von Lõngus, and on a nearby electricity box lies a work by Tartu's most-famous artist, Kairi Kliimand (aka Kairo).

"The murals are always changing; they've created a dialogue through art," explained my guide, Kalle. The city also hosts 'Stencibility' (4–7 July), one of the oldest street arts festivals in Europe. It's led by a Tartu-based female collective who have gathered 25,000 stickers from worldwide artists and plastered them on a public bus running to and from the Estonian National Museum. It proves 'a gallery can also be a city bus'.

Also asking people to think in new ways about art is Bad Ischl's *Art with Salt and Water* exhibition at the Sudhaus. Artists from around the world were invited to interpret the Salzkammergut region's relationship with salt. I entered the raw warehouse and was drawn to a metal fence erected around a piece of card with a QR code on it. I held up my phone, downloaded the app and watched as the floor opened up and words of poetry poured like salt into an imaginary hole.

The digital artist and architect Valerie Messini explained the work to me: "When we came to see the space, there was still a physical hole in the floor, but they closed it for safety. We decided to keep the memory of that space and add it back into the digital world," she said. "It mixes places – real and digital – to expand how we think, see and perceive."

I asked Valerie about people's reactions to her work: "Those that come with ►



Need to know: *Bodø, Norway*



When to go

Deep winter sets in between November and March, when daylight hours are short and temperatures can drop to -10°C, but it's a great time to see the aurora. Between June and July, the midnight sun barely sets and conditions (20°C) are ideal for hiking.



Getting there & around

Norwegian Air (norwegian.com) operates direct flights to Oslo from London Gatwick, Manchester and Edinburgh from around £80 return and take two hours. From Oslo, **Norwegian Air** and **SAS** fly seven times a day to Bodø (1.5 hours; £70 return). The airport is five minutes from town by bus (£4.40 one way).



Carbon offset

A return flight from London to Bodø via Oslo produces 382kg of carbon per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel.



Visa & currency

Visa: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 90 days.
Currency Norwegian Kroner (NOK), currently around NOK13.39 to the UK£.



Where to stay

Quality Hotel Ramsalt is a 250-room three-star that punches well above its rating thanks to the superb 'The Social' restaurant and bar. Doubles from £118pn. strawberryhotels.com

Wood Hotel is a brand-new wooden hotel on the outskirts of Bodø that has a focus on wellness and is scheduled to open in summer 2024. woodbodo.com



Food & drink

Lövolds Kafeteria (lovoldskafeteria.no) is a beloved no-frills granny café that happens to be the best place to try the local

cod. **Dama-Di** (Sjøgata 18) promises 'art, chaos and a bar' – and it doesn't disappoint on either front. Harbourside **Txaba** (txaba.no) is currently billed as the best eatery in town, pairing fine tapas with a quaffable wine list.



Don't miss

Sami culture. Check the online calendar (bodo2024.no) for a host of Indigenous music, theatre, film and workshops, including 200+ Sami artefacts inside Stormen Library.

Nōua is a contemporary photography and art space that hosts rotating shows in the town's post-war dance hall. noua.no

The 1903 **Nordland Museum**, with its distinctive mustard-hued exterior, is being upgraded to host a year-long spotlight on Sami art and culture.

nordlandsmuseet.no

Saltstraumen is a small strait on the outskirts of town. Operators can arrange sea-eagle safaris and Arctic coastal walks. exploresalten.no

Go swimming in the Arctic Ocean at **Pust Bodø**, a harbourside sauna with steps into the very cold sea. pust.no

The world's first **cave concert** takes place at Plura Cave. While only qualified cave divers can attend on the day, the event will also be live streamed (Mar 29).



Further information

bodo2024.no – Festival site
visitbodo.com – Tourist board site

The trip

The author was a guest of **Sunvil** (sunvil.co.uk; 020 8568 4499), which can arrange a seven-night stay at the Quality Hotel Ramsalt from £1,099 per person, including return flights from London, based on two sharing. Bodø can be incorporated into multi-centre itineraries, including combinations with the Lofoten Islands, Trondheim and the fjords, and the cities of Tromsø, Kirkenes, Bergen and Oslo.



Everything at once (this page; clockwise from top left) Pust sauna in Bodø is shaped like a traditional cod-drying rack; 'Butterfly' by Martin Watson in Bodø; tunnels dug by prisoners at Ebensee; Tartu's main square gets in the mood; 'Labyrinth' by artist Motoi Yamamoto at the Sudhaus in Bad Ischl; Elizabeth Kontmayr works at Bad Ischl's zero-waste pop-up in the train station; scenic Bad Ischl; Norway gears up for the world's first underwater cave concert; (right page; clockwise from top left) the rooftops of Bodø; the Nordland Museum is hosting a year-long Sami exhibition in 2024; Bodø harbour; the author hangs out with Estonian TV chef 'Krauli'



“It has the potential to change the minds of those who feel art is too serious because it’s so playful”

conservative expectations of art often refuse to engage with it; on the other hand, it has the potential to change the minds of those who feel art is too serious because it’s so playful,” she smiled.

In Bodø, I met another creative with big dreams. Saxophonist Håkon Skog Erlandsen’s desire to challenge his audience goes beyond the usual. Nicknamed the ‘Jazzathlete’, in the past he has climbed the world’s Seven Summits while composing symphonies, then – when most people need oxygen to breathe – played them at the top. For Bodø’s Capital of Culture, he will team up with diving school Visit Plura to host the first underwater cave concert, near the hamlet of Mo i Rana, with an audience of fifty divers.

“Most people assume cave diving is an adrenalin-fuelled sport, but it’s actually so

silent that you can hear your heart, hear the blood in your veins. It’s not extreme, it’s beautiful because of the silence,” Håkon told me.

THE FUTURE

“Our gastronomy scene is dead,” declared Christoph ‘Krauli’ Held, an Austrian TV chef known for his dreadlocks and tattoo-clad forearms. “Restaurants have grown used to serving food for convenience. We need fresh, uncomplicated soul food made with love,” he enthused, sweeping his arm toward the kitchen where a clutch of students from Bad Ischl’s Tourism School for Cooking smeared arcs of white-asparagus purée onto plates.

Krauli owns a restaurant in nearby Bad Goisern but has helped the students set up a pop-up zero-waste restaurant inside Bad Ischl train station as part of a Capital of Culture ‘foodie lab’. I snagged one to the students, 17-year-old Elizabeth Kontmayr, while she was ferrying plates to tables to ask what she thought. “As young people, it’s such a special thing to be trusted to work alone,” she said.

Last September, the school flew to Tartu and cooked for students there using ingre-

dients they’d brought with them. “They cried when we left,” beamed Krauli. “Look! Here’s our future. We must give our young a place in the city and listen to them.”

It’s perhaps this focus on the future that unites the three cities the most. The Capital of Culture title isn’t a frivolous year of festivals, nor is it an empty PR scheme designed to boost economies and tourism. It’s about legacy; it can redefine how a town sees itself.

“After Capital of Culture, locals will no longer be the same. They’ll be more united and open; they will have acquired new knowledge and innovative solutions,” said my Estonian guide, Kristiina Tammets.

That might mean a young female chef that goes on to revitalise Bad Ischl’s restaurant scene, a Tartu street artist painting a new vision or a young Sámi actress in Bodø promoting her almost-lost language through theatre. They prove, in a period when many countries are pitched against each other, that far from being an after-thought, culture can act as a powerful glue to unite, birth hope and create real change. And basting Heggert’s bum is optional. █