



AN ARCTIC ODYSSEY

Chris Bertram takes three planes, a train and an automobile to get to Lofoten Links.
To describe it as the journey of a lifetime may not be an over exaggeration.

The words of Bjørge Lillelien came to mind as I stood on the 14th tee of Lofoten Links. It was the Norwegian sports commentator who famously taunted notable English figures after his country had defeated the England football team in 1981. "Lord Nelson, Lord Beaverbrook, Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, Henry Cooper, Lady Diana, Maggie Thatcher... your boys took a hell of a beating!"

As I drank in the scene at the midway point of the back nine of this course on Gimsøysand – an island in Norway's Lofoten archipelago – I thought 'Turnberry, Neyfn, Cape Kidknappers, Bro Hof, Old Head of Kinsale and Kiawah Island, your location has just taken one hell of a beating'.

I have been to all six of those feted courses – and many others with spectacular settings – and it's true each one sits in a breathtaking location. But none can match Lofoten.

It is archetypal seaside beauty, with a rugged strand; as if Glen Coe has been transported to the coast. There are

towering mountains in the foreground and snow-capped peaks on the horizon beyond, their voluminous nature exaggerated by being surrounded by gently undulating but remarkably flat linksland. The ripples of the Norwegian Sea stretch uninhibited as far as the eye can see – which is towards the North Pole – and its waves lightly kiss the white-sand shoreline. Yet for all those handsome elements, it is the hundreds of rocks and boulders on the beach, lining fairways and cuddling greens that dominate the eye.

Adding to the romance of the scene is the fact it is officially in the Arctic Circle. Pretty cool (literally obviously, although the area is warmed by the Gulf Stream) just to be there, but in practical terms it means that while there is no sunrise for a month from early December, from a month across May and June the sun doesn't set at all and it is light all night until the start of August.

I visited in July, allowing me to play golf at any time I wanted. I finished twice at 2.30am. Crazy, but brilliant.

And what was just as nuts was that I never felt tired despite the subsequent lack of sleep. One soaks up a strange sort of energy when it never gets dark. And the **▶**



course is at its captivating best at the three-quarters light it is so often bathed in in those early hours of the day.

Inevitably, to get to such a prime location takes a bit effort. It reminded me a little of getting to Machrihanish on the Kintyre peninsula in Scotland; lots of different ways, none of them particularly straightforward.

To get to Lofoten, you can fly to Harstad/Narvik airport on the mainland, then make what is surely a spectacular three-hour drive through constantly Insta-worthy scenery.

Or you can do as I did and fly in to the tiny airport of Svolvær in a propeller plane from Bodo, which you reach from Oslo. From the pretty harbour town of Svolvær – the island's capital and now very popular with tourists – you make a 45-minute drive to Hov along twisting roads set into the foot of the mountains that hug the fjords. It truly is as idyllic as I have hopefully managed to convey.

A golf course has not waited at the end of this road for very long, but the family who owns it has.

Lofoten Links sits on Frode Hov's land, land his family have owned for four centuries. Frode's father and a friend dreamt up the idea for a course and although he died before work began, his grandfather agreed it could continue. "As long as it makes money," was his only stipulation," says Frode. "He was a fisherman – he knew what was important."

It has turned into a labour of love for Frode, who studied tourism at Lillehammer then in St Andrews, where his love for the game was naturally enhanced.

'Is it crazy golf, a curiosity but ultimately a pretty gimmick? I don't think so'

Lofoten began in 1998 as six holes and was extended to nine in 2010 before the development to 18 began in 2012. It was completed in 2015 but has been constantly and significantly altered since then.

Sweden-based Englishman Jeremy Turner has been the architect for the duration of the project, but all that suggests this has been a slick, seamless operation. It really hasn't been, relying on skill, goodwill and energy.

Very little golf course construction equipment was involved in the initial build and since then it has been continually refined by Turner, Hov and greenkeeper Jerry Mulvihill. Mulvihill is a native of Ballybunion and, along with the expertise provided by Lofoten being a member of Troon Golf, brings vital know-how to the developing course.

Yet despite this wide-ranging expertise, Lofoten Links remains golf as it used to be, the kind of course the game began on in earnest in the 1800s.

It's all the better for that. I've got the Strokesaver to my left hand as I write this, and I guarantee I am looking at it now for reference far more often than I did when I played there. Playing Lofoten is all about feel and judgement. Distance measuring devices ought to be banned here.

The first experience of it will likely bewilder you. The second did too for me. By the third round, I knew where to miss and also when to not even bother to follow the ball flight if it was off line as it was a hopeless cause. It's not that the rough is horrendously thick everywhere; sometimes it is, and there's also heather and peaty expanses for it to sink into. But when tees are stuck out on promontories, when fairways are lined by boulders and when Postage Stamp greens are literally centimetres from rocks, white sand and water, you just have to accept at times there is basically zero forgiveness.

Is it too much? Is it crazy golf, a curiosity but ultimately a pretty gimmick? I don't think so. At least half the course

Take a moment at the 14th to truly appreciate the stunning location.



THE SIGNATURE HOLE

A TRUE TEST OF DRIVING & IRON PLAY

Architect Jeremy Turner on Lofoten's 11th.

To select and write about my 'favourite hole' is not really a term by which an architect thinks.

But I will draw attention to the perhaps less spectacular holes at Lofoten. These holes are relics of the earlier course: the 4th, to a certain extent the 5th, the 7th and the 17th. The upgrading of these will increase their playability and lift their contribution to the course in its entirety. Then there is the long par-4 11th, which starts the backbone of the homeward stretch. Much has been written about the seaside holes but this inland hole is a true test of driving and iron play. From the tee a panoramic view over the course and landscape opens up.

The fairway is bunkered right and left, placing a premium on a well-positioned drive.

Wind will dictate whether you face a mid or long iron shot into a generous green angled right to left. A pair of deep bunkers guard the left edge and a menacing bunker lurks along the right edge. Subtle breaks await once aboard.



11TH
PAR 4,
419 YARDS

The short 6th green sits in an amphitheatre of boulders.



offers seriously good golf holes, with another four excellent ones and even the less impressive remainder have inevitable artistic merit.

If you make the odyssey to Lofoten you'll surely plan two days here (Hov has built fabulous on-site chalets) so we know you'll easily fit in six rounds. You'll likely lose lots of balls on the first two but don't be surprised if you play later rounds with the same one.

This is the kind of course where no-one agrees on the best holes. Here are a few of mine, so you can disagree with my selection when you take three planes, a train and an automobile to play it for yourself. The 1st is one. It sets the tone perfectly, a dog-leg around a rocky cove. I've tackled it six times and I'm still not sure what to hit off the tee to cut enough off the corner and not run out of fairway yet leave a short enough club on the best angle into a small green between rocks and the water. It encapsulates the fun, craziness, aesthetic perfection and challenge of the holes that follow.

The 2nd is an obvious choice, one of the most picturesque holes

there is. It plays from an elevated tee to a small green in a huddle of rocks and sand. It looks computer-generated or Photoshopped. Trust me, what you see on the images is what you get. But I might prefer the short 6th even more; no bunkers, no water, no coastal views... but a gorgeous green site in an amphitheatre of boulders.

The awesome 244-yard 12th is another fine short hole. It's followed by a hole that returns you to the water's edge, and after the strong 13th you play what I think is my favourite here.

A slither of fairway snakes in an S-shape between rocks on either side. Snow-capped mountains reach into the sky beyond, and waves wash in from your right. You want to be cautious with your tee shot because it is so tight, but you can't afford to be, because your second plays across the edge of the water to a funky green.

It is just one of Lofoten's jaw-dropping, nerve-shredding moments. Turnberry and co all have theirs too. But not as many hit such heights as consistently as the course I think offers the best setting in Europe in which to play the game. **GW**

HOW WE RANKED LOFOTEN LINKS

