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A KIND OF



MAGIC

Strung across the North Atlantic, the 18 islands that form the Faroes are rich in folklore — this is a land where trolls lie buried beneath the sea, elfin people lurk in the hills and shapeshifters lure their victims to watery lairs

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THE HORSE & THE HIDDEN PEOPLE

In the shallows of Lake Sørvágsvatn stands a horse. A brisk wind has sent ranks of tight little waves across the water and they slap at his flanks with monotonous persistence. Behind him, the hills are smothered by dark clouds, the weakest hint of sunlight struggling to break out beneath them. Perhaps in protest at the weather, the horse has reared up, forelegs raised, head pulled back.

But all is not what it seems. Drawing closer, ambling down the pebble beach towards the shore, I find not the flesh and bones of a disgruntled stallion, but a jumble of rocks and earth packed within a steel, horse-shaped frame. A sign chiselled into a moss-flecked boulder tells me that this is the Nix — a creature that emerges on to land in search of victims to enchant. Should he trick you into touching him, he'll carry you off to the bottom of the lake, and there you shall stay forever.

There is, however, a chance of salvation — if you're quick enough. "With the Nix, if you say his name before you're in the water, he'll disappear," Elin Hentze tells me, as we stand braced against a particularly vigorous gust. "The spell is broken, he loses his force."

We're on Vágar, one of 18 islands that make up the Faroes, a self-governing region of Denmark that lies geographically closer to Iceland than the European continent — and in looks is closer to the fantasy lands of *The Hobbit* or *Game of Thrones*. It's a place where dark, towering cliffs rise out of the frothing Atlantic; where meadows sweep up and up to end at shard-like pinnacles of rock; and where waterfalls tumble sideways, caught on the wind.

If ever folk tales were to take root then, it's here, in this mysterious archipelago at the far reaches of Europe. With Elin as my guide, I'm in the Faroes to unearth some of its stories, crisscrossing between islands in search of the giants, spirits and trolls that are said to dwell on them.

Sørvágsvatn proves rich hunting ground. Leaving the Nix to its damp stake-out, we skirt the lake, passing little plots of land divided by dry-stone walls. Behind them, the Faroes' particularly straggly breed of sheep chew determinedly on the buttercups. Abandoning the car, we take a muddy path along the shoreline, hopping across shallow streams that bubble down from the surrounding slopes, and stopping to pick tiny blueberries that grow by the track. Elin — encased in waterproof hiking gear, long hair tucked beneath a bobble hat — tells me, "*Huldufolk* are said to live in this area, under the rocks and in the grass. They come out to dance; there are many stories about men who are too curious about them and are taken."

The Faroes share the idea of *huldufolk* (hidden folk; nebulous creatures that are neither human nor elf) with Iceland. The tales likely came over with Norse settlers who arrived in both regions in the ninth century, and traded with wool, furs and fish over a millennium. The ocean that brought them here is soon revealed as the path climbs upwards, disappearing into dense fog, before we emerge at the top of the Trælanípan Cliff. The furious surf of the Atlantic thrashes against the rock 460ft below, grey-winged fulmars coming into land at barely perceptible ledges in the basalt.

Behind us, Lake Sørvágsvatn seems separated from the ocean by the slimmest sliver of land, creating an optical

From left: The statue of the shapeshifting Nix on the shores of Lake Sørvágsvatn on Vágar; Múlafossur Waterfall, also on Vágar, with the tiny village of Gásadalur in the background. Previous pages: The view over Funningsfjørður on Eysturoy island





illusion that it floats above it. Absorbed by the spectacle in every direction, we watch as clouds churn and froth across the sky, creating shifting patterns of sunlight on the water, and the wind threatens to throw us to the waves. “Long ago, so many people were lost at sea and in nature in the Faroes,” Elin says. “Perhaps that’s why they needed to believe in myths — you feel that there’s a force bigger than you here and you need some explanation for it.”

Proving the adage that truth is often stranger than fiction, however, she tells of the Viking-owned slaves who were thrown to their deaths at Trælanípan when they were too old or sick to be useful, and of a woman who hiked here with her husband more recently, and was never seen again.

THE SEAL WOMAN & THE SPY

Humans are thought to have lived on the Faroe Islands for well over two millennia. It’s only in recent years that they’ve begun to tame them. Where tiny settlements of turf-roofed houses were once only accessible by boat or by a long, treacherous yomp over wild landscapes, tunnels now burrow under the sea and carve through mountains to connect them. One — the 6.8-mile Eysturoy Tunnel — even has a roundabout in it, 620ft beneath the waves.

The following morning, I zip between islands through these underwater passageways on the drive north. Before leaving Vágur, I stop at Trøllkonufingur, a column of basalt

as tall as the Eiffel Tower. Legend has it that Iceland sent a troll witch to steal the Faroes — but, before she had a chance to get to work, she was turned to stone by the rising sun and sank beneath the sea, with just a single finger remaining above the water, pointing upwards.

Ignoring her directions, I head downwards, taking tunnels for as long as I can before they run out — four island-hops later — at the town of Klaksvík on Borðoy. Here, the ferry takes over. A light drizzle falls as the vessel creaks out of the harbour and steers north east through the mist to Kalsoy. Passengers greet one another as old friends, sitting at formica-topped tables to chat over cups of coffee. “The ferry was always the meeting place for everyone — you miss that when it’s gone,” Elin tells me with a shrug when I ask if locals feel more connected now it’s so easy to travel between islands. “In the old days, when people came to a place, they stayed for a week. Now there are roads and tunnels, they just pass through.”

Linked to its neighbours by a moderately infrequent ferry service, the pencil-shaped island of Kalsoy retains that out-of-time feel. A single road runs north to south, and sheep and geese are the most conspicuous users of it. We take it to its furthest point, swooping down the mountains in a series of hairpin bends to end at Trøllanes. “It means Troll Peninsula,” Elin says as we stroll past the village’s stone houses, home to just 13 residents. “It’s said it was visited every 12th night by trolls who lived in the surrounding mountains, and the villagers would run away as they drank and partied.” Their torment ended one night when an old woman who was too weak to run called out for Christ in fear — the trolls left and never came back.

Sat in the bowl of a valley, with mountains looming on all sides and giant boulders littered across the slopes, Trøllanes is fertile ground for a tall tale — I’m almost convinced an unseen menace waits and watches above the village, ready to rush in under cover of nightfall. “It can be so impressive and overwhelming here, particularly in winter,” Elin says. “It makes it easy to believe in dark stories.”

We leave the vanquished trolls of Trøllanes to climb up and over a ridge north of the village, following a faint trail

Clockwise from top left: A dish of salt cod served at Fiskastykkið restaurant on Vágur; the working lighthouse on Kalsoy, with James Bond’s burial site beyond; one of the Faroe Islands’ 70,000 sheep; guide Elin Hentze with a map of the archipelago; a traditional turf-roofed house on Kalsoy

“IT’S SAID THE VILLAGE WAS VISITED EVERY 12TH NIGHT BY TROLLS WHO LIVED IN THE SURROUNDING MOUNTAINS”

as it weaves through the hills and around patches of bog. After an hour, the land abruptly runs out and, it seems, we find ourselves at the very edge of the world — with nothing but wheeling sea birds and the dark, rolling ocean between us and the North Pole. Just visible to the east are two sea stacks: the remnants, it's said, of a witch and a giant who, like the troll witch, came to steal the islands and were turned to stone in the dawn light. The narrowest thread of a path tacks along the cliff edge in their direction, ending at a red-and-white stone lighthouse. It's a balancing act to follow it, with the wind primed to whip me off into oblivion at the slightest misstep.

I wouldn't be the first to meet an unpleasant end here. A little beyond the lighthouse, up a slope that eventually spears skywards and requires some puff to tackle, lies a modest basalt headstone. 'In memory of James Bond,' it reads. '1962-2021.' Actor Daniel Craig might never have set foot on Kalsoy — filming his scenes on green screen instead — but this hard-to-reach patch of land formed the backdrop to the spy's final moments, courtesy of a missile strike, in *No Time To Die*.

This very modern fable is the reason many visitors make their way to Kalsoy these days, but the island has a long association with another tale with a violent ending: the Kópakonan. Having paid my respects to 007, I meet her down on the shore in Mikladagur, a village south along the coast from Trøllanes. She stands 9ft tall with her back to the sea, has a distinctly blue pallor and is half-naked — with what look like skin and flippers draped over the rock beneath her.

"This is one of the best-known tales in the Faroe Islands," Elin explains as we admire the bronze statue. She tells me that, once a year long ago, seals would come out of the water and shed their skins on the beach, taking human form for a night of revelry. During one of these gatherings, a villager stole a seal woman's skin and she was forced to stay with him and bear his children. She was eventually able to reclaim her skin and flee back to the sea, falling in love with a bull seal and raising pups. In a jealous rage, the man killed her family; consumed with grief, she set a curse

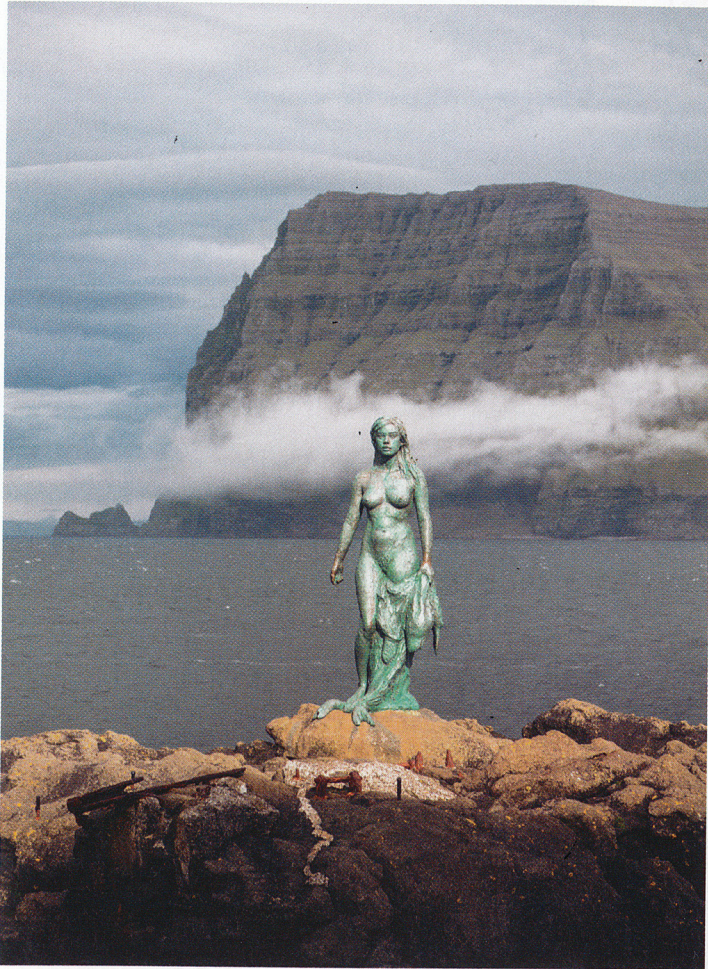
on him and his progeny for all eternity. "Still today, if a man from the village drowns or falls from the cliffs," Elin says, "it's blamed on the curse."

There are versions of the seal woman's story across the North Atlantic, from the Orkneys to Greenland — likely evidence that the tales were carried back and forth by fishermen and traders. But it has a particular resonance in the Faroes, where it's known by every local, and it holds special value in Mikladagur. Rumour has it that some villagers even have webbed hands. Up steep concrete stairs above the Kópakonan, Café Eðge has prime views of the statue and the seals that bob near it come autumn — the perfect setting to recount the haunting story. Actor, playwright and artist Eyð Matras did just that, performing her drama, *The Seal Woman*, at the cafe throughout the summer of 2021.

Catching the last ferry back to Klaksvík, I call in on her at her home, a handsome wooden house overlooking the harbour, built by her grandfather in 1899. With her little dog Vanya snuffling at our feet, the candles lit and a spread of local breads and cheeses on the table, we sit down to chat. "When we tell oral stories like the seal woman, it's first for entertainment — it's for gathering around the fireplace, keeping the darkness of the night at bay," Eyð explains, pouring the coffee. "But it's to protect people, too. It's to keep people away from the sea and off the cliff edge. It's a warning."

Clockwise from top left: The bronze statue of the seal woman in Mikladagur; Tórshavn harbour; artist Heiðrik with pages from his book on folklore; a Highland cow on Vágur island; the cobbled streets and wooden houses of Tórshavn's old town

"WHEN WE TELL STORIES, IT'S FIRST FOR ENTERTAINMENT — IT'S FOR GATHERING AROUND THE FIREPLACE, KEEPING THE DARKNESS AT BAY"





She fetches some of the costume pieces she wore for *The Seal Woman*, including a woollen cape with dark threads coming out of it like seaweed and red shoes to represent blood. Her modern adaptation is a monologue set to music, and she recites some lines for me, her voice rising and falling in a steady, captivating rhythm. “I think, nowadays, we see Kópakonán as a political story about women, self-realisation and having ownership over your own life,” she says, finishing her performance to my enthusiastic applause. “But it’s also about the wildness in her and in nature. That’s not only for women but everyone — we should listen to the wildness inside ourselves. We come from it.”

THE ARTIST & THE FARMER

The Faroese appear particularly well-attuned to listening to the wildness within, and expressing that wildness through every medium possible; storytelling, it seems, is in their blood. The following morning, I make my way through the streets of Tórshavn to join another artist adding a new layer to the islands’ timeworn tales.

The capital’s old town is quiet, with just the odd dog-walker out and about on its cobbled alleys. It’s a pretty muddle of black-tarred wooden buildings, some with turf roofs, most with candlesticks in the windows. The Faroese government still has its parliament here, on a peninsula jutting out into the Atlantic, as it has for 1,200 years. On a whitewashed wall curving around a winding lane sweeps

a giant mural — of flying squid, tusk fish, whelks and a bounty of other sea creatures found off the islands’ coast.

I meet the man responsible for it, Heiðrikur á Heygum (or simply Heiðrik), in a cafe overlooking the boat masts of Tórshavn’s harbour. Dressed in black, with delicate tattoos of native flora running up his arms, Heiðrik opens a portfolio case to reveal page after page of watercolours — there’s a sinister elfin figure perched on a rock in the moonlight; a lone horse with a serpent’s tail and glowing eyes standing in the water; a long-haired man with a tall crown and peevish expression sitting on a throne. They’re all part of the artist’s latest project — an illustrated book of the Faroes Islands’ myths and folklore.

“Writing down the stories is new,” Heiðrik says, leafing through the work. “Traditionally, they were shared through song, and an oral story is like Chinese whispers — it changes every time you tell it. I’m just another reteller, the latest link in the chain.”

The plan is to publish the collection at the end of the year, with versions in Faroese, Danish and English bringing the tales to a new audience. Until then, visitors must make do with reading the stories in the landscapes that inspired them. “Anywhere there’s nature and the sea,” says Heiðrik, carefully putting away the pages, “that’s where you’ll find legends in the Faroe Islands.”

I spend my last evening discovering that the tradition of oral story-telling Heiðrik is magicking into print is still very much in rude health. The sun is just starting to set

Above: Walkers on Kalsoy island in the north east of the Faroes, with wisps of mist forming a ‘sea bridge’ between it and the neighbouring island of Kunoy



when Anna and Óli Rubeksen invite me into their home in the tiny village of Velbastaður, 15 minutes' drive from Tórshavn. Enormous picture windows line one side of the farmhouse, opening to views of grassland tumbling down to the pearly waters of Hestfjord and, beyond, to the tiny island of Hestur (population 15). "Come, sit," says Óli, gesturing to a long table, "and I'll tell you our story."

Ninth-generation sheep farmers, the Rubeksens have been running supper clubs here since 2014, opening their house to up to 30 guests at a time. "We try to be like a cultural exchange," says Óli as sheep dog Mia leaps on to his lap. "The magic for us is when everyone interacts with each other." Named for *heimabliðni*, a Faroese tradition of 'home hospitality', the dinners are a crash course in local ingredients and cooking, with dish after dish appearing on the table over the course of several hours: rye bread with salted mutton; carrot and vegetable soup; roast lamb with caramelised potatoes and red cabbage. With candles lit against the gathering gloom, conversation flows, leaping from the Norse language to rhubarb, sheepdog-training to Viking hygiene.

Our attention is continually pulled towards the window, even when there's nothing to see but our own reflections staring back at us. "You can understand in the old days when there was no electricity," says Anna, peering out, "you would sit and imagine so many things out there."

For now, feasting and company have tamed the Faroe Islands. But soon I must take my leave and head back out into the night, and everything looks different in the dark. ▣

Above: Óli Rubeksen, with working dog Mia on his lap; runs supper clubs with his wife Anna at their home on Streymoy island



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Atlantic Airways flies direct from Gatwick to Vágar twice weekly from the end of May to the end of August; and from Edinburgh twice weekly from March to December. The rest of the year, fly via Copenhagen with Atlantic Airways or SAS. atlanticairways.com flysas.com

Average flight time: 2hr10m (Gatwick); 1hr35m (Edinburgh)

A hire car is your best bet for travelling around the islands, and there are rental desks at the airport. It's a 45-minute drive from there to the capital Tórshavn.

WHEN TO GO

June, July and August see the warmest temperatures (around 13C) and longest hours of daylight (up to 20 hours), but also the most visitors; locations with few facilities can get booked up fast. September is a good choice, with temperatures around 12C and 13 hours of daylight. The weather is changeable year-round, with rain and mist a possibility any time. While temperatures are fairly mild in winter (about 7C), many hotels shut for the season. Puffins arrive to nest in April, and usually stay until the end of August.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Vágar, Vágar island. From DKK800 (£90). hotelvagar.fo
 Hotel Føroyar, Tórshavn. From DKK840 (£95). hotelforoyar.com

MORE INFO

visitfaroeislands.com

HOW TO DO IT

Nordic travel specialist Where the Wild Is offers several itineraries. The eight-night Classic Circle Self-Drive covers multiple islands and includes visits to Lake Sørvágsvatn and Kalsoy; from £1,700, including hotels and car hire, excluding flights. The four-night Summer Puffin Adventure takes in Tórshavn and the puffin-nesting island of Mykines, from £1,250. wherethewildis.co.uk

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER