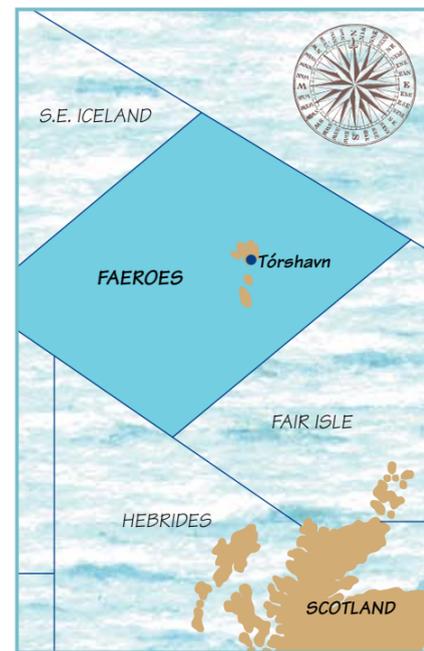


FAEROES

I had done my homework as usual. Mid-way between Scotland and Iceland are 18 islands covering 540 square miles, 70 miles from north to south, population 43,400 with about a third of them living in Tórshavn, Europe's smallest capital.

I was as prepared as anyone could be. I knew where to go if I needed to stock up with the essentials; postcards, a fresh sketchbook, more film, soap, dried cod, some good chocolate. It was all very useful information but I still sailed innocently into the Faeroes experience.

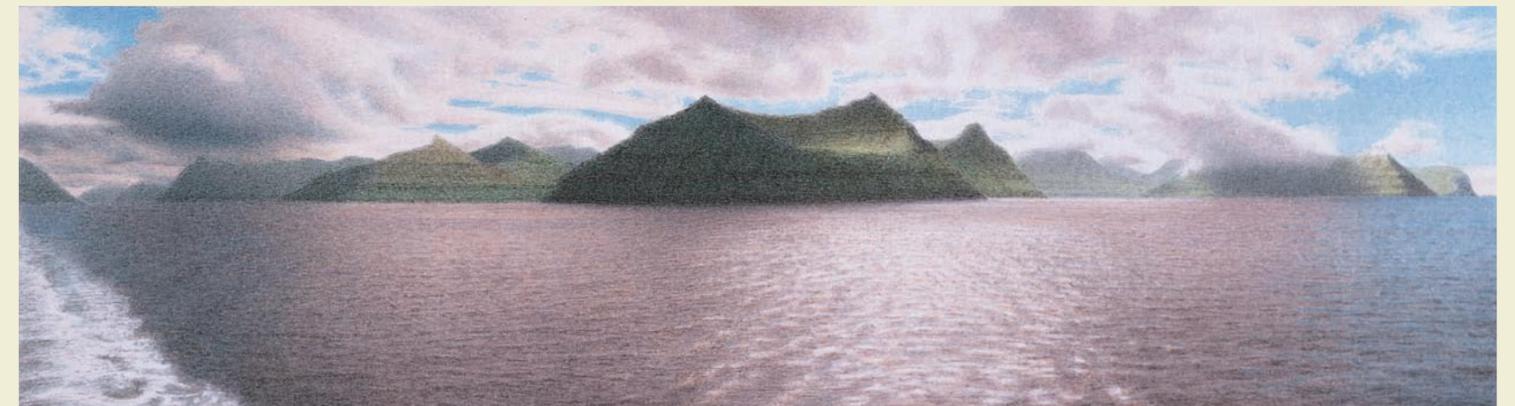
The weather was overcast, with the higher ground shrouded in low cloud. I felt I already had some good visual material from our approach to Tórshavn. I imagined painting what Whistler might have called a symphony in grey. Therefore I felt unusually relaxed and allowed myself the



luxury of enjoying my short stop-over. There was even time for a reassuring pinch; I'm really here.

Knowing what to wear at these northern extremities can be a bit of a problem. According to the information booklet I picked up on board the ferry, warm clothing is recommended and a light raincoat *will* prove useful. I was intrigued by the certainty of that. As I was to discover later, weather, good or bad, can be very localised. The climate is typically maritime, that is, changeable, but not as cold as one might think for somewhere

so far north, thanks to the influence of the Gulf Stream. However, whereas in parts of Scotland one might occasionally experience a whole week's weather in a single day, they claim in the Faeroes it is possible to encounter all four seasons in that one day.



Faeroes
Southerly 6 or 7 decreasing 4.
Occasional rain.
Moderate or poor.

There is a Hebridean feel about the place. Tórshavn has the look of a frontier town, remote and temporary. Buildings are often a ground floor of concrete blocks with an upper floor of painted corrugated iron topped with felt roofs. Older houses are timber, with turfed roofs. Colours are strong, windows large. This is not the place for those who thrive on the little inconsequential luxuries of life;

pathological shopaholics would soon come out in a cold sweat.

Fishing is the mainstay of life, then marine engineering.

Over a glass of *Föroya Bjór*, the excellent local beer, I got chatting to a couple of young lads who work a small farm with their father, a minority occupation as only seven per cent of the land

can be cultivated. Nearly all of the islands' produce is imported. Even now a main meal will consist mostly of just meat with plenty of potatoes, so what of their diet before the days of refrigerator ships and cargo flights from mainland Europe?

'Lots of fish, fresh and dry salted... and puffins,' said Kjell.

Oh, how could they? Those cuddly little clowns of the sky with their technicolour beaks and fluffy white faces. I'll confess now, I have eaten braised puffin. And just in case you are interested here are the details: first, you must catch your puffins, one per person.



Old Tórshavn

This is best done in November when this year's young are lovely and tender, the puffin equivalent of spring lamb.

The Faeroese use nets on long poles, or something somewhat resembling a lacrosse stick. The net can be dropped over the bird while it is on the ground – they are very gregarious – or used to swat them out of the sky. Alternatively you can abseil down a 300m cliff and take them out of their burrows in the cliff face. Harvesting is strictly controlled in order to maintain a viable population as the birds lay only one egg each June.

Kill your puffin by wringing its neck, then pluck and gut it. If you require an anaesthetic at this stage *Föroya Bjór* has an alcohol content of 5.8%.

Traditionally the bird would be salted for keeping. A dry salted puffin would be stuffed with a cake made of breadcrumbs, dried fruit, seasoning and a pinch of sugar and then boiled. Nowadays they are usually frozen. Fresh or defrosted puffin can be very gently fried in butter and served with the juices from the pan to which some fresh single cream has been added.

The meat is dark, a little 'gamey', like duck, with a dense firm texture similar to pigeon, not tough or chewy. Apart from the fine membranes which remained between the layers of flesh after cooking, I found my first experience of puffin to be delicious.

Leaving Tórshavn and heading for Iceland we sailed at first north-easterly.

For 3pm in early July it was very dull indeed. Cloud was still low but had started to break with bright patches appearing to the north. After about 12 miles we turned sharply to port and began to pass down a long fjord open to the sea at both ends. To the left was Eysturoy, one of the two largest islands, to the right Kalsoy, one of the six small northernmost islands.

There followed the most stunning scenery I have ever encountered anywhere; the most dramatic combination of landscape and weather imaginable. Large breaks in the cloud revealed patches of blue as the sun streamed through in dazzling shafts, which fell in pools of the brightest emerald on a chain of dark pyramidal mountains rising steeply out of the sea.

I stood on the port deck for two unforgettable hours and watched as this awesome panorama of breathtaking beauty passed by. As we cleared the islands I raced to the rear deck, not wanting the excitement to end. There was hardly a free centimetre of handrail to be found. I had obviously been part of a mass jaw dropping. As if hypnotised by the grandeur we had witnessed, we all stood and watched in silence as the fabulous prospect slipped slowly over the horizon.