



SO, WHAT ARE
THE FAROE ISLANDS?

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*Far away from other countries
– where mighty billows roll,
A tiny group of islands comes to sight.
With sloping meadows,
pastures green and mountains high
With grass that grows from mountain peaks
to valleys deep ...*

The poet Gulak Jacobsen sums it up quite nicely in his cherished homeland song. The Faroe Islands are an archipelago in the North Atlantic, halfway between Norway and Iceland. These eighteen islands are dominated by steep mountains, deep valleys and fiords, separated by treacherous straits. Rocky landscapes meet the eye alternating with tranquil havens of the kind that look picturesque on tourist posters and postcards.

The rugged west coast with its steep and inaccessible headlands stands in stark contrast to the slopes and fiords on the east coast. The northern islands with their young, edgy mountains differ from the ancient landscapes of the southern islands, craggy, eroded and rounded by unfathomable span of time.

This is where the Faroese make their home. They belong to one of several

Nordic tribes – descendants of Viking Era emigrants. A nation with its own language and culture, shaped and influenced by harsh landscapes, unpredictable weather and the mighty billows of the North Atlantic.

But the Faroes are more than that...

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The Faroes are the forlorn remains of intense volcanic activities that started about 60 million years ago, creating a huge plateau between the drifting land-masses of the Atlantic. Through millions of years of volcanic eruptions three layers of basalt were constructed in three stages.

Several times life tried to get a foothold on the islands but was annihilated by successive volcanic activities. Interestingly, the transition between the bottom and middle basalt layers indicates a prolonged break in volcanic activity where subtropical forests of prehistoric trees, ferns and plants grew.

But the volcanoes regained their devastating power moving into a pattern of steady eruptions, and over millions of years the forces of nature created new basalt layers.



The Faroese volcanoes became extinct several million years ago. The Faroese plateau slowly collapsed in an asymmetrical manner under its own weight. The rocky ground cooled down and cracked up while forces of erosion were at work. Ice ages came and went, and mighty

glaciers dug deep fiords and inlets. Finally, during the last ice age, only the topmost mountain peaks stood out of the icy inland surface.

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The Faroes were populated by Norse settlers seeking new homes following the Iron Age. We frequently refer to this period of migration as the Viking Age, but the settlers consisted mostly of farmers and hunters seeking fresh pastures from the overpopulated Scandinavian peasant countries.

Yet botanical and archaeological evidence suggests that the Faroes were settled twice before the arrival of the Norse settlers - initially in a period ranging from 300 to 500 AD, and later from 500 to late 700 AD. These settlements appear to have been of Celtic origin, but it is hard to tell where these people came from, and what became of them.

Whatever the case might be, the first Norse settlers were farmers seeking low-lying coastal lands for grain cultivation, mainly winter barley - and meadows where hay



for livestock could be harvested. They kept sheep, cattle and pigs for meat, milk and wool, horses as beasts of burden while also keeping and caring for dogs and cats. They survived by the fruits of their daily labour on land and at sea, hunting for birds, seals and whales, and engaging in coastal fishing in the rich waters around the islands. Excavations in the Faroes have unearthed a number of ornaments

made of glass, amber and precious metals, besides children's toys and board games that were used to pass the time.

Several excavations of Viking sites have been conducted in the Faroes, the two best known being "*Niðri á Toft*" in Kvívík and "*á Toftanesi*" in Leirvík.

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The Faroese is the stoic, snub-nosed ram, jealously guarding his flock. It is stubborn and unyielding, but ultimately prepared to butt until his legs give way and blood runs from his eyes.

The horned ram has been the Faroese heraldic symbol since the Middle Ages. It appears carved on the Kirkjubøur church chairs dating back to the early 15th century. It is found in seals dating to the 13th century. Today, the ram is depicted on the official Faroese coat of arms and it is also a part of the large Danish coat of arms.

It is therefore quite appropriate that the Faroe Islands' most famous and iconic postage stamp is Czesław Slania's ram portrait from 1979. It is an engraved masterpiece meticulously detailed, appearing almost three-dimensional. You can practically feel the animal's robust presence



- a melancholy look in its eyes – the very soul of the Faroe Islands.

The story has it that while Slania was at the time engaged in a major engraving assignment for one of Europe's princely families; he was unable to stay away from the fascinating ram. He constantly went

back to his work on the Faroese stamp, and the results meet all expectations: a timeless masterpiece in a miniature format.

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The Faroes is the old man's smile of recognition when he hears the first characteristic peeping "clip-clip" sound of the oystercatcher. Blurry eyes, worn by experiences of a lifetime, blink in the growing daylight - quite happy to once again witness the disappearance of winter's gloomy darkness.

The arrival of this national bird of the Faroes, around March 12, heralds the seasonal changes, gradual at first, then rapidly accelerating. Only in April the herring gulls arrive, and in early May the arctic tern report its arrival after a wild marathon flight all the way from Antarctica.

Trees begin to sprout in gardens which soon are bedecked with Easter and Pentecost lilies. Slowly but surely, the landscape starts to change, shedding its withered brown-yellowish robe of winter



and putting on the green garb of summer in its manifold permutations.

And so, in late April, the ultimate harbinger of spring arrives - the first lamb. This little ball of wool with its flailing legs, the movements of which it has not yet fully mastered, is the Faroes' absolute darling. Its fragile bleating and eagerly wriggling tail when gorging on its mother's

nutrient-rich milk – the sight of newborn lambs is so delightful it can cause traffic jams. Walking back to the car we are all smiles, driving confidently towards summer.

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The Faroes is a little girl who sits and makes garlands of bright yellow marigolds. It's her brother, who has climbed onto the roof of the barn to snap a picture on his smartphone. It's summer, ferns and dandelions, swaying cotton grass and the succulent grass in the infields, greener than anywhere else in the world, playful lambs, butterflies swarming in seemingly aimless flight, newly hatched mosquitoes hovering over the pond's still surface.

It's the time of reunion. Fresh, young students return home in droves from their studies in Denmark and other European countries. Their proud parents stuff them with Faroese delicacies not to be found in foreign lands. It's also the time of tourists, travelling to the Faroes in ever increasing numbers in order to experience the exotic nature and culture.



The nightlife grows more hectic, and town festivals begin with *"Norðoyastevna"*, the Northern Islands Festival, which is held in the beginning of June in Klaksvík. These town festivities end with *"Ólavsøka"*, which is the biggest summer festival, considered as the national holiday of the Faroes, held in the capital Tórshavn on July 28 and 29. There are rowing competitions in traditional Faroese boats, football matches and other sport events. Art exhibitions, concerts and religious gatherings

- and presently we are making our way downtown in the city to meet and greet people on the street. There is partying and dancing until the early hours in the morning - a little bit of sinning in the short summer night, shy glances and red faces the following day. In addition, the two music festivals are held annually in Gøta and Klaksvík - in summer the young Faroese do not experience any boredom.

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The Faroes are in *"boyna"* - the time in early August when farmers and small landowners start harvesting their fields. Soon the infields around the towns and villages look like patchwork with large patches of variegated yellowish colours in the midst of all the green. What is not being dried as hay is preserved as silage and used as winter feed for livestock.

At this time students return to their studies - and new students follow suit.

On August 24 at *"Bartalsmessa"* – the Day of St. Bartholomew – autumn begins. This is the time when the arctic tern starts its long journey back to Antarctica – undertaking perhaps the longest annual migration of any bird. A month later, herring gulls and oystercatchers leave the Faroese beaches.

Around October 1st sheep is rounded up in the mountains and gathered in

folds. Lambs destined for slaughter are separated from the rest of the sheep and handed over to their owners in villages with common grazing land in the outfields. Then the selected sheep are transported home to their owners' facilities for slaughter.

Slaughter is a painstaking process. There is to be as little waste as possible. The carcasses are hung to dry in special Faroese pantries called *"bjallur"*. The heads get singed and stripped of wool. Heart, liver and lungs will be hung to one side, stomachs and intestines cleaned and scrubbed for different uses. Even the caul fat surrounding the stomach will be set

aside for further processing, and turned into "tallow" to be used with several different Faroese dishes. An old proverb says that everything from the sheep can be used, except the bile and stomach contents – which sounds true enough.

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The Faroes is the first day of winter on November 23, when North Atlantic low pressure areas start giving rise to relentless storms raging between the mountains, driving rain and sleet in violent gusts over human habitations. The Faroes are also the mighty waves of the Atlantic Ocean crashing against rocky shores, furious and devastating. They are the hillside waterfalls "lifting their skirts", running upwards in fierce winds.

But the Faroes are also extremely robust houses and versatile people, able to adapt from one moment to the next. The Faroes is the captain of a fishing vessel deftly steering his ship into the wind - and the row of kindergarten children in brightly coloured raincoats waiting for the bus in pouring rain.

The warm Gulf Stream keeps winter temperatures close to freezing point, but rain



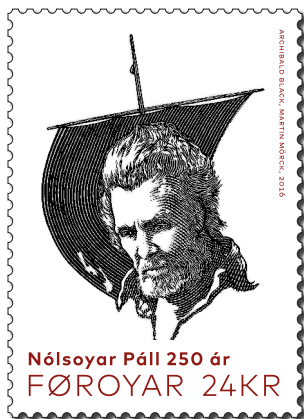
and wind are the prices to be paid for quiet frosty interludes. It feels delightful when periodic high atmospheric pressures push the frost into the Weather Clerks' capricious playgrounds. A strange silence reigns in the short days of December and the correspondingly long nights when children will take out their skates and toboggans, making the most of the short periods of frosty weather. Each year there are hopes for an anticyclone at

Christmas - and if nothing happens, we respond by shrugging our shoulders. The weather has no overlord.

This year has run its course - once again the time has come to listen for the peeping "clip-clip" of the oystercatcher.

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The Faroes is the echo of history. A country where a downpour can reveal the imprint of a leaf that fell from a gigantic subtropical tree 50 million years ago. A country where landscapes outside of human settlements remain virtually unchanged since the sheep of the Viking farmers cleaned out the scrub vegetation. A country where excavated Viking farms tell fragmented stories about our early ancestors - and the Viking

peasant's son played with the same kind of carved toy boats as today's children.

It is a country where the cathedral ruins in Kirkjubøur stand as a monument to the theocratic tendencies of the medieval Church, the power struggle between the Church on one hand, the Crown and the general populace on the other. A country where the people never gave up the Catholic Church's days of mass and where the orthodox Protestantism of the post-Renaissance has held ground right up to our own times.

The old quarter in Tórshavn, "*á Reyni*", is still a part of the rectory "*Reynagarður*" dating back to 1630, the residence of the renowned and rebellious clergyman Lucas Debes. A few hundred meters further in Reyni we find the old house "*Pæstastova*" with the renovated room where the Faroes' first real intellectual, Jens Chr. Svabo, spent his last years in poverty. On the other side



of Reyni, down in "*Vágshotnur*", we find a statue of the captain and the rebel Nólsoyar Páll who, just as Lucas Debes, was in constant conflict with more or less corrupt officials. Behind the statue we find the old Ryberg warehouse still standing. It was used in late 17th century as the centre of activities which produced the likes of Nólsoyar Páll - and ultimately lead to the fossilized society's development and modernization.

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The Faroe Islands is a country seeking its identity. A strange nation far away from other countries, with its own language and culture - and yet a part of the Danish Kingdom. In addition to the traditional right-left spectrum in politics, political life in the Faroes is marked by a secession versus union dimension. Today the Faroes are practically self-governing, but the ties to Denmark still give rise to friction.

It all started off so well. Fearing cultural and linguistic decline, culturally-minded personalities in the Faroes called a Christmas meeting in Tórshavn in 1888 with the aim of discussing Faroese identity factors. In the decades prior to this historic event the linguistically inclined pastor, V. U. Hammershaimb, had created a written Faroese language, partly inspired by Icelandic orthography.



The Christmas meeting resulted in the formation of the Faroese Association, "*Føringafelag*", the purpose of which was to promote Faroese culture and language. It also published the first Faroese newspaper "*Føringatíðindi*", which provided a platform for discussions of Faroese identity.

However, where two Faroese meet, three opinions prevail. It was not long before

conflict and disunity manifested themselves within the association. Political ambition, linguistic controversy, the egos of the cultural icons and much, much more created internal divisions in the national romantic dream.

The final split came in 1906, when union-oriented members of the Faroese parliament, *Løgting*, founded "*Sambandsflokkurin*", the Union Party. This led the remaining members of the *Føringafelag* to form *Sjálstýrisflokkurin*, the "Self-Government Party", officially founded in 1909. Since then several parties have been formed, and Faroese democracy works in the same way as in the other Nordic countries.

One thing, however, everyone can agree on - we are all Faroese!

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The Faroes are the storytellers' land - a land of interminable poems telling the stories of mythical or historical heroes, of human interaction with supernatural beings, the complications of romantic love and the lives of saints.

It is a colourful world of fairy tales where the hidden people, trolls and various supernatural beings live in outermost corners of mankind's imagination.

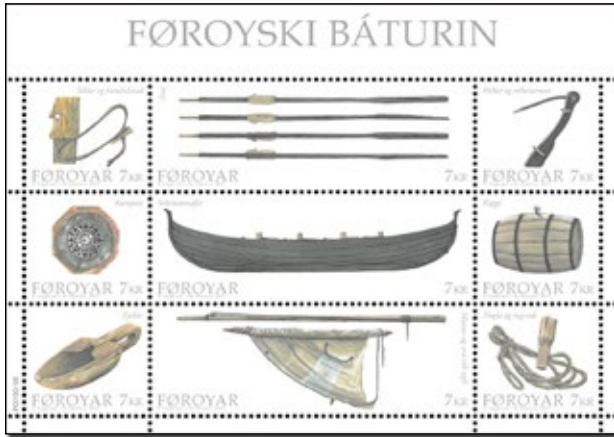
It is the universe of William Heinesen, where quirky characters are given soul and where the line between magic and reality becomes blurred and fluid. It is Janus Djurhuus's bombastic intellectual poetry and his younger brother's, Hans Andrias Djurhuus, bright and life-affirming poems.



It is the scene of the lost musicians – the domain of fiddlers and artists. A land where the wind sings, and where nature and weather paint monumental snapshots with a broad brush.

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The Faroese boat is the typical Faroese boat, a direct descendant of Viking ships and the lifeline of the Faroese throughout their history. It was the Faroese boat that built and maintained infrastructure through the centuries. It put food on the table for the folks on the islands, providing much needed and yet fluctuating supplies of fish, whales and birds.

The Faroese boat is found in varying sizes and lengths depending on how many rowers a village could muster, and it also symbolizes the harsh realities of life on the islands. The tragedies that unfolded when the sea took its toll on Faroese fishermen, both young and old, are heart-breaking. There are examples of

entire villages being abandoned because all the men fit for work perished with the village fishing boat. There are harrowing stories of desperate sea voyages for the purpose of getting medical aid for the sick or injured and heroic narratives of midwives, hardy and tough as nails, who had to be transported swiftly between

islands in stormy weathers to attend distressed women in labour.

The Faroese boat and the utter necessity of seafaring constitute the basis of the Faroe Islands' current wealth. Even the most modern fishing trawlers, cargo or passenger ships cast the shadow of the legendary rowing and sailing boats which cut effortlessly through the waves of the Atlantic. The training of boys and the toil of grown men was shaped and defined by the practical features of the Faroese boat of which the homeland reaped abundant benefits through the centuries.

Nowadays ever more fabricated fibreglass boats moor in the harbours of towns and villages, their curved lines and bold bows swaying proudly on the waves.

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The Faroes is a modern society with a touch of originality. It's a land where the IT-employee and the fisherman live side by side, grilling together at dusk. It is a country where the attorney keeps sheep, and the fish factory worker reads Homer in her spare time. It is the nightmarish existence of the alcoholic, and the religious zealot's portal to eternity.

The Faroes are modern villas painted in all the colours of the rainbow, where the car is parked in the driveway, and the refrigerator is driven by 60% alternative energy sources. It is a country where the anonymous office worker commutes to work from his village, where everyone knows everyone else. A small isolated society with amazingly well-travelled inhabitants, surrounded by the frothing Atlantic ocean.



The Faroes are shopping centres, kindergartens and retirement homes. It is the modern European society for better or worse - and yet ...

But the Faroes are more than that ...

SO, WHAT ARE THE FAROE ISLANDS?



*Out in the cold open sea, scattered lie these
Beautiful green islands, this land of ours.
Attractive, teasing, these are your distinct features,
Your allure and charms, your brazen attitude
Thus, we know you, Føroyar ...*

The second verse in poet-singer Steintór Rasmussen's song "Føroyar" pretty much sums up the Faroe Islands. The warmth and the mischief – the safe and the insecure – the Faroes is a land of contradictions to which the present leaflet cannot hope to do justice.

Like everyone else, we regard our country as the land of milk and honey in a hectic and uncertain world. But we are not blind to its perils and limitations. We

turn our heads upwards to the sun when it shines, bowing them when the storm comes upon us. And then we continue our daily chores.

Faroe Islands, the new-born baby's first cry and the old man's last breath - and all the confusion and turbulence in between.

But the Faroes are more than that. We have only had 40 years to tell the never-ending story - and we will continue doing so in good times and bad in the years to come.

Each stamp must tell a story and serve as a small window into
Faroese society, its nature and culture. We must always
ask ourselves: "What are the Faroe Islands?"

*Knud Wachter,
Head of Philately 1976-2006*

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