

The Faroes

by Geoff Bell



Welcome to the Faroes. The Harbour Tórshavn.

Photo Geoff Bell

‘Why did you come to the Faroes?’ Mary and I were sat on a bench in the afternoon sunshine by the colourful busy harbour in Tórshavn, the Faroese capital. We had just finished our lunch, when four students from the local college appeared and asked if they could video an interview with us. My answer, that we wanted somewhere different, seemed to satisfy them, as did the rest of the session. This was rather more successful than my last such occasion. I was on one of Peter Shortt’s bike trips to see the Tour de France, and a French television crew asked me what I thought of their three times winner Louison Bobet. I replied that he was OK, but my hero was his great friend and rival Il Campionissimo Fausto Coppi. End of interview. But I digress. Why did we go to the Faroes? I have usually tried to bring some degree of originality to my meets, but the President’s Meet last year at High Moss was rather conventional. I resolved to be different next time.

Maybe it was reading about their football team impressing in Europe, maybe it was listening to the shipping forecasts, maybe Whatever, the Faroes suddenly seemed worth investigating. In 1998, I had bought the



The northern islands of the Faroes.

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Lonely Planet guide to Iceland for a cycle camping holiday with Mary. It also covered Greenland and the Faroes. Greenland is often visited by Rucksackers – you guys get everywhere, but as far as I could ascertain, only Roger Booth had been to the Faroes in 1977 for a brief two-day foray. A read of the relevant chapters confirmed that here was somewhere different, not too far away, a manageable size, good transport systems, some English spoken, and with dodgy North Atlantic weather. So, a bare two weeks later at the beginning of June, I committed to the pages of Meetstaff my intention.

The 1:100,000 map of the island group published by Kort og Matrikelstyrelsen was purchased and pored over, together with all the tourist information and timetables that I could get, as well as the invaluable but now dated, Lonely Planet. More information came from Tom Waghorn who said that he had been bird-watching there for a few days and had stayed at the upmarket Hotel Norð. The net result of my lengthy deliberations was that there was a lot to see and do, but the challenge was to put together the best package for us all. The climate ruled out camping, there were few places to rent outside Tórshavn, but the seven Youth Hostels dotted around the islands fitted in with my aim of keeping cost to a minimum. Only Klaksvík, the ‘capital’ of the Northern Islands was, I thought a suitable centre for a week’s wanderings, so this was chosen. It would have been very



Northern Viðoy.

Photo Geoff Bell

pleasant to sail from Aberdeen via the Shetlands to Tórshavn, but overall this would have taken four days from our ‘holiday’, so the sixty-five minute flight from Dyce to Vágur it would be.

Having sorted out the essential logistics, I became obsessed with the possibility that a school party or other group could fill the hostel and since I could think of no Plan B, foul things up. By now it was mid November. I circulated my plans and exhorted members to make a commitment and book early. A miracle occurred. By mid-December, thirteen of us had booked – we had a viable meet.

Meanwhile, Boece Cardus had clandestinely contacted me, sworn me to secrecy, and said that he fancied the idea of sailing there. A few days before our departure I had an e-mail from him. ‘..... tight time table weather is going to be crucial my commander is beginning to say it is going to be a lot of hard work just for a Rucksack meet tick. Don’t hold your breath.’ I did.

Monday 19th July. Goodbye to the friendly and obliging Wardens at Aberdeen Youth Hostel, who let us leave our cars tightly corralled in the corner of their car park for no charge and onto a bus on the opposite side of the road which took us straight to the terminal buildings of Dyce airport, some half an hour away. We were soon very efficiently processed – too efficiently for Ted Dance, who had his nail scissors confiscated from his hand baggage. ‘Can I cut my nails before you take them away?’ ‘No, it would be



Left - Old Tórshavn and right - Aboard the Post Boat.

Photos Geoff Bell

unhygienic.' 'Ted lost that one', Kath told us. On the tarmac, we were joined by a boys' football team returning home proudly bearing a large silver cup that they had just won. They all spoke very good English, which augured well, as the Faroese language, which they are so proud of, is not at all easy to pick up. An uneventful flight followed in the chunky Atlantic Airways BAE146 to a damp Vágar airport, where we were rapidly reunited with our luggage.

Soon we were aboard the luxury coach which passes for a bus in these parts and buying our half price pensioner's tickets through to Klaksvík, two islands and a ferry away. Past the inland lake Sørvágsvatn and through the 5 km tunnel, opened in 2002, to the main island of Streymoy where we were abandoned at a lonely bus shelter and told that we would be picked up in 10 minutes. On time, another bus emerged from a tunnel in the direction of Tórshavn and took us on its meandering way round fjords, through mountains, over causeways, past lush green fields, and colourful villages - mostly with tin roofs and attractive churches. The mountains, with their layered rock bands, looked decidedly inaccessible. As I looked around the party, faces showed a mixture of 'Where have we come to' and broad grins at the prospect of finding out. A final tunnel brought us to the outskirts of Leirvík, where the driver stopped at the petrol station for some shopping. Most of us stayed on, but Wade Cooper and Mary Howie bought ice creams. They were only slightly dismayed to be firmly told that they would have to walk with their purchases to the ferry, which was now in, ready to take us on the spectacular half hour sail round the southern headland of Kalsoy and through the gap between the equally imposing southern end of Kunoy and the cliffs of Klakkur, which guard the sheltered haven of Klaksvík harbour. We learned later that a 7 km tunnel is already under construction to soullessly replace it.

The journey had all gone too smoothly so it was strangely reassuring when we arrived at the hostel, seemingly half way up the mountainside, to find it locked up. My credibility was restored somewhat when a phone call soon brought Maria, the ebullient Warden, and her more sombre husband, Crispin, to settle us in. Crispin had sold his boat to enable them to buy the hostel last year and he was still wondering whether he had done the right thing. I asked him about the chances of getting fresh fish from down at the harbour. None, but he could get us a box of freshly packed fish from the processing factory. 'How about whalemeat?' After being reassured that I was not a member of Greenpeace and that my interest was purely culinary, he said that he would do his best.

Later in the afternoon, Roger Booth and Don Smithies arrived in Roger's campervan, having already spent a week on the main islands of Eysturoy and Streymoy, where they had attempted all the major peaks.

They had enjoyed mixed weather and mixed success on the mountains, which they assured us were to be treated with great respect.

Most of us were content to have a wander round Klaksvík, and make the acquaintance of the food shops: the small supermarket, the butchers, and the superb bakery. Down by the harbour we were just in time to see the tail end of a noisy boat race training session in which they were apparently practicing their starts. As much energy seemed to go into the shout which accompanied each pull on the oars, as into the rowing itself. Boat racing ties with football as the Faroese national sport and in it heavy looking boats crewed by upwards of four men or women compete against crews from other villages. The highlight of their year is Ólavsvøka – the Faroese National Day, two days of rock concerts, chain dancing, sporting events, feasting and drinking, which start on 27th July. This is the day after we get back, but next time perhaps? Janet Sutcliffe, not content with shopping, took herself up the local hill Klakkur (413m), a walk shared with many locals – it is known as the Ástarbreytin (the Love path). On her return, she enthused about the large flock of arctic terns and the views.

Tuesday. The best day for weeks, we were told, and not to be wasted. Most of us took the bus to Viðareiði near the North end of Viðoy, a speedy journey thanks to a tunnel under the mountain and a causeway across Hvannasund. At the Hotel Norð, we left behind Mary Howie, Marjorie Talbot, and Judith Wilson to engage in relatively gentle pursuits, while the rest of us (Johns Muskett and Richardson, Wade, Don Talbot, Janet, Mary and myself) made our way up the increasingly steep south ridge of Villingadalur (841m). Also staying at the hostel, were a group of Danish geology students from Copenhagen University. About half way up, we came across these comely lasses wielding enormous sledgehammers – not the usual precise geologist's tools. At the summit, big views to the west took in the top end of Borðoy, Kunoy with its backbone ridge cleft by a massive gash north of Middagsfjall, and beyond, the north tip of Kalsoy – the flute island, so named because of its elongated shape and the number of tunnels through it. An easy line lured us downwards and onwards towards the Enniberg cliffs – at 750m, the highest sheer cliffs in Europe, until our progress was halted by a cleft in the ridge with the tantalising appearance of a trod below leading to the end. We couldn't see the way down, so we retreated back to the summit where we met the independent travel party. Roger, Don, John Farrow and Derek McWilliam subsequently did find the way down, some 200m before the cleft. Grrrr.

Back down, we had an hour before the bus back, so seated on the patio of the Hotel Norð, we sampled the local beer (Føroya Bjór – brewed in Klaksvík). The Faroese are slowly coming out of their long era of

prohibition and alcoholic drinks are only for sale in hotels, seamen's missions, and a few official shops. At 4.6% alcohol – up from the 2.8% fizzy drink mentioned in my 1997 Lonely Planet, it went down well. Ice creams also went down well for some, but these were not the delicious monster soft cones that we bought, usually, from garages. These were elegant creations served on white china plates, topped with a strawberry, and eaten with a silver spoon. No more than you would expect for 55fkr (£5).

Wednesday. Yesterday had been near perfect, but today we awoke to heavy rain, which, over breakfast, showed no signs of diminishing. What are your plans Geoff? Set in, it was, so I played my only wet-weather trump card, Tórshavn, the capital. On arrival we scattered in ones and twos in all directions and between us, explored the town pretty thoroughly. The bookshops, the cafés, the statuary, the wooded park (Janet), the old town with its roofs of meadow grass and flowers, the Natural History Museum – where Don Talbot sated his quest for geological knowledge and the busy harbour on that sunny afternoon, colourful like a super Tobermory.

Back in Klaksvík, our fish had arrived, 4.5 kg of it, enough for a splendid communal meal with wine that we had thoughtfully brought with us. Ted's Old Pulteney whisky finished off the day very nicely. Displayed fairly prominently in the hostel was a notice in English to the effect that wine and spirits should not be consumed. We did not query this with Maria, but quietly ignored it. That seemed OK by her, not even a raised eyebrow when she looked in that night.

Thursday. Another wet morning. Still, it had brightened up yesterday and I had used up my wet weather option, so the post boat it must be. This tough little boat supplies the inhabitants of Svínøy and Fugloy with all their needs as well as their post. Nowadays, there is the back up of a thrice-weekly helicopter – but not on a Thursday. On the bus prompt at 8.30 to take us to Hvannasund where the boat sails from, but with only one seat left on the minibus, there were still about half a dozen people to get on – including Don Talbot. 'No problem', the driver said. 'I will get another bus'. Ten minutes later, we were back at the bus stop to pick up Don and the others, having gone back to the bus station and been transferred, along with the post and packages, to a larger bus. The post boat was still loading when we arrived, but we sailed on time at 9.15. It was still raining. The bow section was taken up with cargo, so most of us were in the stern where there was some cover. The cramped cabin was warmer, but with no experience of the weather and the views outside. Post and cargo were transhipped onto the small wharf on Svínøy and at Kirkja on Fugloy, and then on to Hattarvík where, with the boat rising and falling at least a metre, we were helped off by very strong sure hands. It was at this stage that we realised that Don was

very ill. In fact he was barely conscious. Judith and Janet helped him up to the boat rail from where, a now blinking, Don was delivered to us on the jetty. Supported either side by the two ex-nurses, he was walked up the steep road to the village where we were given a talk in excellent English by a lady in the village church, the inside of which was dominated by a very modern altarpiece. She told us how the old altarpiece, which was a rather dour wooden affair with Faroese writing on it (which could be hidden behind doors) had been made by a minister in the late 19th century before Faroese again became a permitted language. Only Danish was permitted at that time. A few years ago the church was renovated for its centenary and they sought to brighten up its interior. This lady and her husband had attended a college exhibition in Tórshavn, where one of the students had displayed his final year project – an altarpiece, which just happened to fit the wall of the newly decorated church.

It was still raining outside, but Don was a little better, and with another five hours to go before the boat returned for us, we decided to set off up the one road on the island towards Kirkja, 5 km away. Past the (no use to us) helipad to the high point on the road, where we had planned to strike off and explore, but the weather had not improved, so we ate our butties instead. All



No sunset over Kalsoy.

Photo Geoff Bell

the fresh air had brought Don round and he walked unaided down to Kirkja where the clag was now down to sea level. Another church, this with its own polished wood and chandeliered charm and with model boats in its rafters. Not much else to see or do, so back to Hattarvik where our lady, who had been its last teacher, had opened up the schoolroom for us in case we needed shelter. We did, and thankful we were for its central heating and hard wooden seats at old-fashioned desks surrounded, Marie Celeste like, by text and workbooks – and computers, awaiting, hopefully, some new pupils. Don, now recovered, had taken one of Mary's seasickness pills and 'enjoyed' his return voyage. On re-entering the harbour a school of porpoises played near us before heading off at high speed back to the open sea. The bus waited while we, engines off, watched them.

That evening, Maria and Crispin called in for payment. Not bad at 100 fkr per person per night. They brought with them her mother and father. He had been a fisherman, and consequently spoke good English. Asked about the whales, he said that so far this summer only three had been killed and they were all on the western islands – so no whale steaks for me.

Friday. We took the early 8.30 ferry to Húsar near the southern end of Kalsoy. Since this was nominally a cargo trip there was no bus to meet us and take us the 15km to Trøllanes in the north. Our plan was to go up onto the ridge (which was accessible from here), head north along it to Miðardalur and return in time to catch the bus which met the later ferry about five hours later. The ridge, with the clag down, did not look inviting so we headed off on foot along the road. Roger, determined in his peak bagging, set off up the hill alone. Fortunately we had enough torches between us for the 4 km of tunnels, and fortunately it was not a busy road – only two vehicles passed us. The final tunnel was the most atmospheric. From the back, as we approached the tunnel exit, those in front took on the appearance of shambling zombies wreathed in eerie mists. I tried a photograph, but the result was poor. Another scene committed to my memory bank alone.

Out into glorious sunshine with clear views out to the east of Kunoy and the northern tip of Viðoy where we had been on Monday. At the hairpin bend above Trøllanes we contoured round and up to the Kallur lighthouse on the northwest tip of the island. Here we stayed for a couple of hours watching the seabirds and admiring the rugged northern cliffs of Eysturoy. Some of us had a snooze. Don Smithies alone had the courage to venture along a narrow grassy ridge down and across to a further viewpoint. On the way back, we again passed the pair of great skuas patrolling their territory and the whimbrels with their characteristic call, both of which protested at our intrusion. It is always good to have an ornithologist in the party. John

Farrow was ours. In the week, he ‘noted 32 different kinds of birds, all of which we might well find in Britain, but with a different balance.’

Roger, after his adventures, rejoined us in Trøllanes where we had an hour before the bus. Round the corner from where we were sat on a wall relaxing after our exertions we became aware of a young man, placing decoy puffins on a narrow grassy ledge on the sea cliff and then an intermittent waving out of a net on the end of a long pole as he attempted to catch real ones that came within reach. Before we departed he walked surely up the grassy ledges with a sack slung over his shoulder. He was on the ferry back, and I asked him how many he had caught. ‘Forty-three’, but the manner of his brief reply did not encourage me to question him further.

Rain again and a choppy return into Klaksvík harbour. Ahead and to port a small yacht was making slow progress. ‘It might be Boece’ I said hopefully. No one really believed that it could be. Only when we could, with the aid of John’s binoculars, make out VEMBER on the stern could we be sure. Boece and his crew had made it – the challenging sail from Loch Leven via Stornoway to Klaksvík at 62° 14’ North. We waved and cheered like mad. The other passengers, not initially knowing what it was all about but not wanting to be left out, joined in. Boece and his crew were at first bemused by all this attention until they realised that it was us. They had joined the meet and got their tick. I had, with some difficulty, managed to keep Boece’s secret, but it’s a small world and one of his relatives knew indirectly a ‘Wednesday Walker’, so that when, on Wednesday evening, Derek rang Ann in Buxton, it was a secret no more. Perhaps it wasn’t the surprise that it might have been, but the relief and pure pleasure of seeing them was immense. Later, Boece and Kate, with their crew of Alex Ratcliffe and Owen Smith joined us for a well-earned steak dinner on dry land. To ward off scurvy, Judith prepared for them a salad starter.

Saturday. Our sailors had work to do for their return journey. Provisions had to be replenished, and the heads needed some fettling, but Boece was able to let Owen ashore with us for the day. My own head was beginning to feel ‘done in’ by the responsibilities of leadership and grappling with the Ferðætlan (the bus and ferry timetable), so JR organised today’s outing to Fuglafjørður on Eysturoy. Here, a very helpful chap in the Tourist Office directed us the best way up the hill Rustarkambur (483m). From here, we had big views all round, arguably the best being to the North across the fjord to Oyndarfjørður – a view that was rapidly transformed a few minutes later by a rainbow. Taking a slightly different descent line we came to a col where an obviously still in use track wound its clever way down through the usually impenetrable rock bands down to the grazing at Góðidalur far below.

Our last night in Klaksvík. Mary and I determined to climb Klakkur to see the sunset. Up past the smallholdings on the outskirts of town with the grass for winter fodder cut and drying on the fences, and up through the cloud of arctic terns wheeling noisily around our heads. Wade caught us up and we were soon on top. Earlier in the week in the confines of the harbour we had had some good sunset skies, but tonight, high up and better positioned, nothing. Wade, fed up of waiting, left us to our vigil. At 10 o'clock we abandoned and came back down. As we looked up the sky to the south-east was bright, whereas out to the northwest where we had been looking was dark and gloomy. Very confusing, that was until I read in one of the Tourist Board leaflets – 'On summer nights when the sun is skimming the horizon and seems unsure whether it is rising or setting'. The kids were still happily chatting in the streets as we walked back through the town, while others were playing football on the Astroturf – all making the most of the long summer days. Back at the hostel, Boece and Kate had come up and all were ready for bed.

Sunday. I had decided on a leisurely start with the 10am ferry to Leirvík, but JR, who by now had mastered the Ferðaætlan, apologetically pointed out to me that this was Sunday and there was no connecting bus to Vágur. The 7.30am ferry and connecting bus got us to the Youth Hostel at Sandavágur for 9.30. Niels the Warden was undismayed by our early arrival, and soon had us installed. Here there were no hang-ups about alcohol, beer was available from the fridge – money in the box.

Niels advised on a modest walk for the afternoon to where the outflow of the lake Sörvágsvatn, after a mere thirty metres, plunges into the sea. During the last war when the British were stationed here they built the airstrip at Sörvágur on the only bit of flat land on the islands. All the construction materials were brought in by flying boats that 'landed' on the lake and offloaded their cargo at the northern end, where the concrete ramps remain. The Faroese have made good use of that airstrip ever since. Beyond there, again on Niel's advice, we climbed a small hillock where we sat watching the puffins just below us and enjoying the view along the cliffs to the north. Eventually we dragged ourselves away, back past the lone red-breasted merganser bobbing about near the outfall, past the colourful rowing boats used for trout fishing and back via the village shop for a last ice cream.

Monday. Check in just half an hour before flight departure at 8.30am was ample. An uneventful flight and a long wait for the bus back to the hostel in Aberdeen. We were back to reality.