

Sea stacks and islets are scattered around the 18 main islands that make up the Faroes

MIDDLE EARTH...

IN THE FAR NORTH

In an isolated archipelago bereft of trees and exposed to the harsh elements, Mavis Teo finds magic and bliss in its green isles and imaginative cuisine.



It is probably surprising that the mythical Middle Earth can be found in a cluster of 18 islands in the windy North Atlantic Ocean. The Faroe Islands (or the Faroes, as the locals call them) are a cluster of colossal volcanic basalt rocks formed millions of years ago. The top surfaces of these undersea mountains are swathed in heather green and turf. Within their rugged peaks and jagged cliffs lie hidden lakes, small and stoic horses with windswept manes, and a hardy people.

Geographically, the islands are between Norway and Iceland. Politically, they are an autonomous protectorate of Denmark. But locals will tell you that genealogically, they are closer to the Vikings who settled there in the 9th century, while culturally, they are uniquely Faroese with their own traditions and a language that is closer to Icelandic.

To a frazzled city girl, the Faroes with its natural scenic beauty hold the promise of a refuge from urbanisation and a retreat in peaceful nature. The vast space between the sky and sea and the open land gives the place a sense of magic, and me, a sense of liberation. Not all of the land is lush grass. Much of the landscape is scarred by spurs of exposed rock; vast slabs streaked with streams that glisten like molten silver. I skip over them during my hikes like a child, imagining trolls and elves blending into the landscape during the day and emerging only when humans have retired for the night.

These fairy-tale creatures are woven into the tapestry of local folklore. On the island of Kalsoy is the statue of Kópakonan, a seal woman who tragically turned into a troll and cursed the men of Mikladalur village. Near the charming village of Tjørnuvík on Streymoy (the main island) are two sea stacks known as Risin “the giant” and Kellingin “the witch”. Legend has it that the pair were turned into stone as the sun crept up on them while they were travelling to Iceland from Norway.

UNLIKE ANY OTHER

For all its rich greenery, the land of Faroes is quite barren. Only root vegetables like potatoes and radishes thrive here. Therefore, sheep – at 80,000 – outnumber the humans by 2:1 and are the main source of meat. Before modern refrigeration, the Faroese cured their meat by air-drying or fermentation without salt (because sunlight here isn’t strong enough to evaporate seawater into salt). This tradition has continued. So has the controversial Faroese tradition of hunting pilot whales for food. “People didn’t have enough to eat in the old days,” explains Elin Hentze, my local guide. (For food, the Faroese also hunt seabirds although adorable puffins that can be seen on the island of Mykines in summer are now protected.)

Faroese cuisine is therefore borne out of a need for survival, not gastronomic variety. Foodies will surely be curious to taste what the Faroes’ first and only Michelin-starred restaurant serves. KOKS, located in the territory’s capital and largest city Tórshavn, is a destination upon itself. I made my reservation first then worked my itinerary around it. In addition to the freshest local harvests, the two-Michelin-starred restaurant also boasts an interesting way to introduce a more gentrified version of Faroese cuisine to visitors.

Guests are first invited to a shepherd’s cabin, where they are served an amuse-bouche of pilot whale jerky and blubber with

Above, from left: The Havgrím Seaside Hotel 1948 offers front-row access to the wind-swept beauty of the North Atlantic Ocean; a sheep in winter coat. **Opposite:** Traditional turf-roof houses are still aplenty in the Faroes



From left: Sea urchins harvested locally are sweet and plump; a Faroese girl in traditional costume at Ólavssøka, the biggest summer festival in the Faroe Islands; raw queen scallop served in its shell at the two-Michelin-starred KOKS

Opposite: In the distance is the island of Koltur, where a family of two lives

cold potato slices, and dried fibrous codfish with brown butter, before being driven to the restaurant. Despite the scarcity of ingredients, Chef Poul Andrias Ziska (the restaurant was founded by his mentor Leif Sørensen who created the New Nordic Cuisine concept here before he left) dishes out 20 courses celebrating local ingredients.

The highlight for my palate is the tender, freshly caught langoustine sprinkled with dried seaweed, washed down with refreshing turnip juice (they excel in the cold, apparently) that smells of the sweetest of pears. The seafood is sumptuous, as you would expect for lands locked by endless ocean, but it is ironic that chefs have to fight for supply with much of the local catch earmarked for export.

For those who cannot get enough of the North Atlantic's haul, there's Etika, a Japanese sushi restaurant. International food critics have proclaimed it to be one of the best in the world. Located on Tórshavn's most famous food street, its neighbours are Ræst, a specialist in fermented foods; Áarstova, which serves Faroese cooking; and Barbara Fish House. Out of these, I only have time for Etika and Áarstova, because I can't possibly pass on the chance to experience *Heimablidni*, which translates as "home hospitality" in Faroese and refers to authentic, intimate meals in local homes.

Upon hearing how I love to eat raw sea urchins, Elin recalls a seafood exporter contact she has and scores an invitation to his house. Although ruddy-cheeked Marni Gunnar Simonsen is not the most chatty person (unless the conversation is about seafood), he is hospitable and very generous. I have never been so gorged on just langoustine and sea urchin which we eat in all cooking styles: sautéed, boiled, blanched, raw and even live. For tourists who are not so lucky to be invited to a seafood exporter's home, the local tourism board, named Visit Faroe Islands, has a listing for *Heimablidni* dinners.

FAR AND AWAY

Interaction with the locals during one's travels usually results in the most memorable events of any trip. Especially if they are serendipitous. While walking along the port of Tórshavn, Elin and I run into Birgir Enni. Ebullient and full of hearty laughter, the captain of *Norolysio* invites me on his schooner the next day.

We set sail for the island of Streymoy, then beyond to Nólsoy where concerts are held in caves in the height of summer. Yet, further on, we reach Hestur, an island encircled by marine birds such as kittiwakes and fulmars. To see more birds, visit the Vestmanna bird cliffs that rise nearly 700 metres above the Atlantic waters on the opposite end of Streymoy. Thousands of birds nest here through the summer. Fortunately, most of the islands are connected by a good network of sea tunnels and roads, or regular ferry services. A public helicopter service also takes people to the further-flung islands a few times a week during the high season when the weather is fair.

In the years preceding 2020, the Faroe Islands have seen double-digit year-on-year growth in tourism. Many of the tens of thousands of tourists check into Airbnb accommodation as there are less than 1,000 hotel rooms on the islands. However, for uninterrupted views of the ocean and a 10-minute walk to the heart of Tórshavn, my pick is the Havgrím Seaside Hotel 1948.

A new Hilton Garden Inn, which is the first international brand to launch in the Faroes, is slated to open in the coming months, while a modern and eco-friendly four-star hotel called Hotel Brandan has just opened. An uptick in tourist numbers is expected when enough travel restrictions are lifted and the pandemic is under control. The islands in peak summer season could seem less magical to those who have come looking for peace and solitude, so go before late June or after end-August. If your goal is to chase the Northern Lights, you'd be glad to know that the winters here are surprisingly mild for a Nordic country, with temperatures rarely dropping below zero. 

The islands in peak summer season might seem less magical to those who have come looking for wide, open spaces and solitude, so go before late June or after end-August.



The Faroe Islands have reopened to visitors from certain EU member countries if they meet strict requirements for tests pre-arrival and during their trip. The number of infected cases at the time of printing is fewer than 500. Check the status updates at corona.fo, or explore visitfaroeislands.com for tourism information.