

July 2003

We are back from retracing the Saga of the Vikings across the North Atlantic. Except, instead of open boats without so much as a compass, we used modern airplanes. Over three weeks we visited the Faeroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland. This follows the path originally taken by the Vikings over a thousand years ago when they "discovered" America. Check your globe and you'll see that these are stepping-stones a few hundred miles apart on the way west.

Chapter One - The Faeroe Islands; or "What do you do with a drunken sailor?"

The Faeroe Islands are a 40-mile wide chain of 19 islands located midway between Norway and Iceland. Lots of globes, including some sold there overlook their existence. They hold 50,000 people who seem fairly happy with their anonymity. They assert independence, but are heavily dependent on Danish handouts. We met some Danish people who see the islands as "children" who need to be taken care of; albeit middle-aged children still living at home and dependent on generosity from the mainland. The islands are covered with beautiful waterfalls, green mountains and high cliffs which are home to many birds.

Prices are high. A hotel room equivalent to a Motel 6 is \$140. A beer is \$6. Hot dogs are \$4 at street kiosks. There is not much tourism, and the locals were intrigued by our presence. One hotel manager told us that we were his first American guests, ever. Everybody was pleasant, but kept asking us, "Why are you here?".

We spent the week riding the busses and ferries. On the mail boat to Kalsoy, we met the Mayor of Klaksvik. With a population of 5000, Klaksvik is the second largest town in the islands. There weren't many trails, but we did a lot of hiking through pastures. We particularly enjoyed a walk on a sunny day along a cliff to a lighthouse. There was nobody within sight for miles except for some sheep. On another day we took a boat ride at the base of the cliffs to see the birds and navigated through some natural arches.

The system of government in the Faeroes seems to border on socialism. Maybe even quasi-communism. The taxes are high, but the government takes care of everybody thanks to the 200-mile fishing limit and the generous contributions from the Danish. The roads are excellent. There are long tunnels through dozens of mountains. There seem to be plenty of cushy, well-paying jobs. Most everybody has a big house, a new car and a cell phone, and nobody is working particularly hard. This is unlike any fishing economy we've ever seen.

We spent one evening in a pub with the crew of a 300 foot fishing ship which had just arrived after two months at sea. They told a story of the ancient Vikings who captured slaves, male and female, and rowed their boats to the beat of drums on their journey westward. The story is that they dropped the lazy ones off in the Faeroes. The American technicians from the boat were frustrated with the work ethic, but the law said that they had to have a certain percentage of Faeroese crew. Cheryll was quite an attraction in the bar. Any time I left the table for a minute, two or three drunken fishermen were working on her. Come to think of it, one drunken fisherman even tried to pick me up.

It was difficult to make anyone smile. Everyone looked straight ahead; as if they were on a mission. Until the weekend. We spent the last evening at a town which was hosting the annual inter-island rowing competition. On Friday the Faeroese let their hair down. It was quite a drunk and rowdy crowd. Things were normally quite controlled, but this was graduation time and the police were looking the other way.

Chapter Two - Iceland; or "No, an \$8 beer doesn't need to be cold, the glass doesn't have to be completely full, and we won't bring it to your table."

We spent the longest day of the year in Iceland. We were just below the Arctic Circle, so the sun set after midnight, dipped a few degrees below the horizon, and rose before 3 AM, but it was never dark for the entire trip. The highs averaged in the fifties, but the weather changed every ten minutes or so. Greenland and the Faeroes have few visitors, but tourism has become a major portion of the Icelandic economy. Iceland has been independent from Denmark since WWII, but people flying to Copenhagen don't have to go through customs for some reason. Prices are a third higher than the Faeroes. The flow of the people from the countryside to the city has been slowed by the recent discovery that tourists will pay \$170 per night for a room with breakfast at a farmhouse. Cabins and guesthouses are popping up everywhere. Iceland has gone from being one of the poorest to one of the richest places in the world. It was the most expensive place that we've ever visited; even higher than Japan.

We rented a car for nine days and drove over 1500 miles around the island. Two-thirds of Iceland's 280,000 inhabitants live in the capital of Reykjavik. We visited some excellent museums and stayed up late, as the nightclubs don't even open until midnight. Reykjavik is heated by geothermal springs. It's amazing to see what happens when two continents collide and tectonic plates grind against each other. At one spot we straddled both the European and the American plates. We hiked through gorgeous mountains amongst several geysers, mud pools and foul-smelling steaming vents. There were countless waterfalls, fjords, glaciers, fishing villages and sheep farms dotted by white plastic wrapped hay bales. The rooms were impeccably clean, the air and the water were pure and there was next to no litter. Crime is minimal.

We stopped at a golf course and were assaulted by birds intent on keeping us from their nests in the rough. It must be difficult being a bird in a treeless place and these were the most aggressive birds we've ever encountered. If you get anywhere close to their nests, they swoop down from behind you and hit you on the top of the head. Some golfers put their umbrellas up for protection before entering the rough. Cheryll thought it was just like a scene from Hitchcock's classic film "The Birds".

Chapter Three - Greenland; or "If Iceland is mostly green, why is Greenland mostly ice?"

Erick the Red lived in Iceland and had a problem with his temper. He killed a few of his neighbors and since this was in the days before anyone had invented Anger Management

Training, he was banished. He set sail westward and found a green patch along a beautiful fjord and set up a town. His son Leif later sailed to Newfoundland and the locals are very emphatic that this constitutes "Discovering America" and don't want to hear about the Native Americans or Christopher Columbus or discuss whether the island of Newfoundland is "America". During WWII the Americans built a base across the fjord in Narsarsuaq. Currently, Greenland is still a Danish colony and half of the economy is handouts from Copenhagen. The Danish are happy to provide patrol vessels to protect the fishing rights within the 200-mile limit. They also build and staff the schools, maintain the roads, etc. The prices are subsidized to be the same as Denmark, even in the isolated villages. Greenland is easily the poorest of the three North Atlantic "Countries".

It was a two-hour flight from Reykjavik, Iceland to Narsarsuaq, Greenland. Our room was in a pre-fabricated building at the former US Air Base. We spent one day hiking to the face of a glacier. In one particularly steep section, Cheryl was able to polish up her rope climbing skills. The next day we took a boat to visit the remains of Erick the Red's village at Qassarsiuk. We hiked across a pass and found another fjord absolutely full of icebergs cracking and popping and slowly melting in the sun. The picnic we had at the edge of the water was the highlight of the trip.

We don't feel compelled to return to Iceland or the Faeroes, but Greenland deserves another look. The lack of tourists made us feel like we were in Alaska 50 years ago, long before the cruise ships started coming. There is an intriguing three-day hike and a ferry that runs up the coast calling on the villages that we'd like to ride.

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