



Journey north to the land of giants

Situated in the north Atlantic Ocean, the Faroe Islands contain all the ingredients for a wintry weekend in the company of nature at its most raw. You will also find some of the best drives you could possibly wish for, as Neil Barrett describes

I WILL NEVER forget the look: confusion and bewilderment, with a hint of respect. Such was the expression on the face of the suited man ahead of me in the passport queue at Vágar Airport when I told him that I wasn't there for business – it was a holiday, in December. The signs that Tim (my travel buddy for this trip) and I were adventuring 'off-piste' were there: the check-in assistant telling us when we asked for window seats that there was no one at all in the ten rows ahead of us or nine rows behind us, plus the number of people in the passport queue from the entire flight (one of only two per week from the UK) being in single figures.

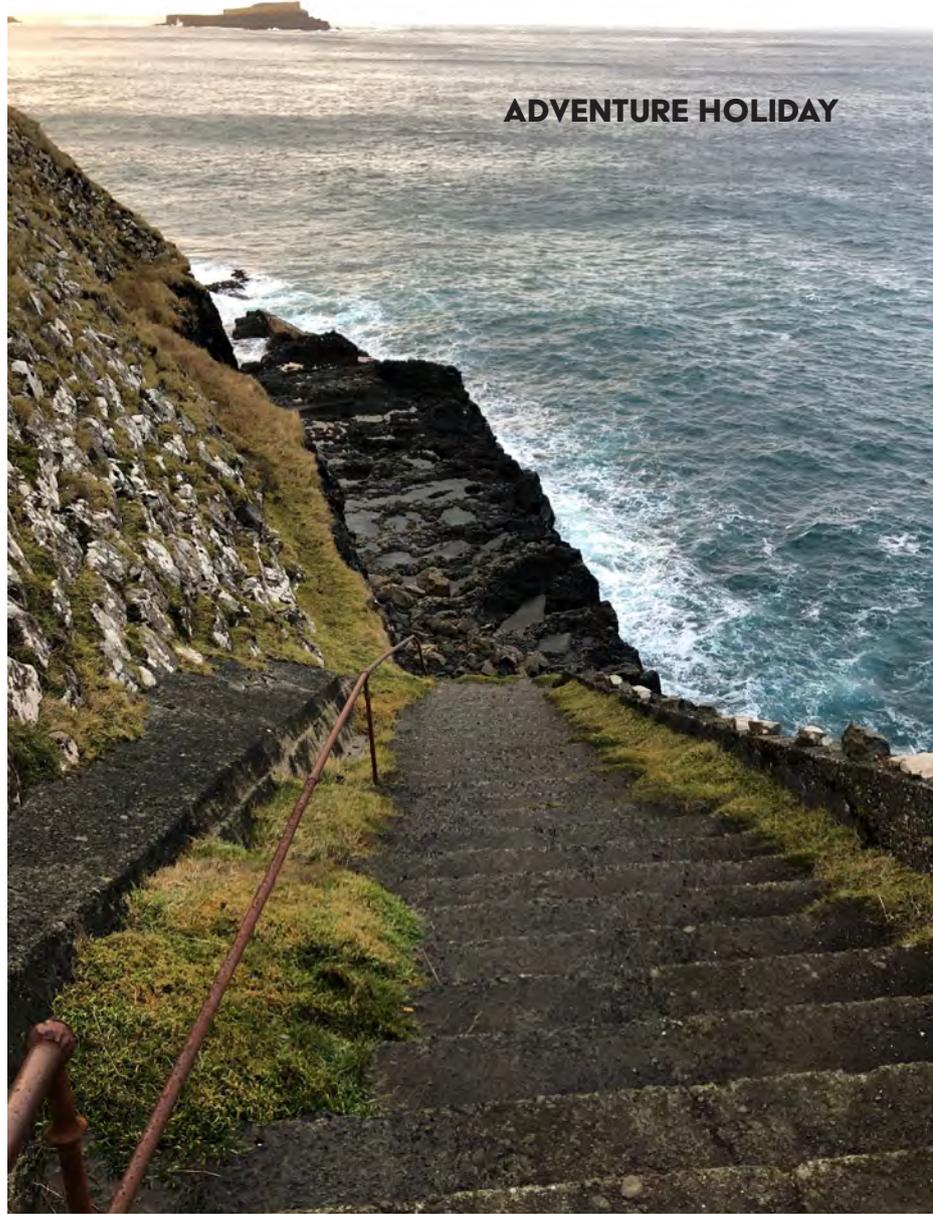
The ability to feel even more like you are off the beaten track, coupled with the majesty of perpetual twilight and – in my view – excellent driving conditions, make the choice of a winter visit pay off.

For the uninitiated, the Faroe Islands are an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, located roughly half-way between

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Iceland and Shetland. Thanks to some impressive tunnels and bridges built in recent decades, six of the Faroes' main islands - including the ones which are home to the airport and capital city - are connected by road, giving you plenty of freedom to roam and get lost in much of this rugged archipelago, from the comfort of your car. A side note: should you wish to explore further, ferries are available but not all of them run all year round – and there are helicopters to the most remote parts of the islands but these trips can be cancelled at short notice because the helicopters in question are also used for search and rescue missions. With that unpredictability, the car becomes a safety net for an expedition like this.

The general road quality is great across the six islands... but don't expect an easy ride. Your sense of motoring adventure will be fulfilled by narrow, long single-track tunnels through some of the islands' mountains, as well as breathtakingly steep climbs and passes on



others. Conquering these features certainly gets the adrenaline pumping, with a post-drive sense of achievement that is only matched by the view from wherever you end up (plus, perhaps, the relief of getting there in one piece).

Our trip here turned out to be a long weekend of two halves. Saturday was dry, the low winter sun was visible through the clouds and the driving conditions were similar to what we experience at home. Then there was a dramatic overnight transformation into the bracing conditions that such a near-Arctic latitude would suggest at that time of year. Snow was continually dumped in great quantities on already blanketed roads, set against thick grey skies covering a low sun, increasing the sense of adventure on the high-altitude climbs.

We were relieved that our Renault Kadjar was up to the job of tackling both days effortlessly, with the safety features ensuring we were in control the whole time. The natural attractions should be your top choice as driving destinations. Whether it's the sheer power of the Múlafossur waterfall, the expansive lake Sørvágsvatn or the beautiful desolation viewed from the 'end of the road' at the northernmost settlement of Vidareidi, there are so many examples of the elements at their most powerful that you're never more than a minute or two away from the next gasp of awe. Officially it's about two hours' drive from end to end of the main linked islands, with most main routes being coastal or near-coastal. That said, with surprises around virtually every corner that you'll want to stop and see, you would be well advised to treble any estimate.

Facing page: the red roofs of Tinganes, part of the capital, Tórshavn.

This page (from top left): the Faroes' location means sightings of the Northern Lights are common when the weather conditions permit; staircase directly down to the Atlantic Ocean; Gjógv, picturesque village in the north of Eysturoy; Neil's Renault rental; a chilly winter landscape - the weather can change in the blink of an eye.



ADVENTURE HOLIDAY

>> one of the waterfalls, after a drive which didn't disappoint, through a narrow mountain tunnel and down to the top of the cliffs. Coming up an old set of steps which didn't seem to lead from anywhere except the Atlantic, an impressively bearded figure with a super-long coat and well-worn shepherd's crook appeared. A tourist from Argentina, he was spending a couple of months hiking around the islands with no set-in-stone itinerary – just taking each day of the journey as it came.

Ten minutes and a mixed language chat later, he was gone, slowly making his way up the mountain to the tunnel we would find ourselves driving back through a short while later. It was just one of those chance meetings which added to the surreal feeling we had from being so isolated on these tiny bits of land in the middle of the ocean, although I still need some comforts on this sort of adventure, so I remain glad I went with the car although, clearly, other options are available.

No visit to the Faroes would be complete without spending time in the capital Tórshavn, home to a population of around

20,000. There is plenty to experience in this small city, from ice skating in the town square, to shopping for local clothes and crafts, to peering in through the windows to watch the national parliament in action, to tasting some great local cuisine.

Tim and I tried the lamb and seafood restaurant Áarstova, which is the name of the building (the house by the brook) and is steeped in history. A wonderful experience from start to finish. We also tried the Irish pub - yes, there's one here too - which has some great views over the harbour. It's a good idea to stay in a hotel in the capital, not further afield, if you want what counts as urban life in the Faroes to be on your doorstep.

Tórshavn is a must-see city - with its remoteness and size completing its charm - but it's the non-stop jaw-dropping views of nature at its finest that you get from the open road on these islands – and the sheer sense of adventure involved in reaching some of the remotest parts of them - that are the main reason why I offer this simple recommendation: book a long weekend in the Faroes, hire a car and see where the road takes you.

GETTING THERE: Atlantic Airways (atlanticairways.com) operates twice per week from Edinburgh to the Faroes. Prices from £208 return. Car hire should be booked in advance to ensure vehicle and staff availability. We recommend you buy a pre-paid SIM from the mobile phone store at the airport on arrival to use mapping and other mobile data services on the move.



Above: the church at Vidareidi, the northernmost settlement of the Faroe Islands; big waves at Gásadalur, on the west side of Vágar. **Below:** Tórshavn with a sprinkling of snow.

