

The Faroe Islands – an Adventurous Hideaway



Elin Brimheim Heinesen

Do you want to step aside from your usual routines, slow down and get away from a world that spins faster and faster? Do you want to trigger your imagination and creativity? Do you want to travel to the perfect place for coming to your senses and feeling alive? Then – go to the Faroe Islands! According to National Geographic Traveler, the Faroe Islands are the most unspoilt islands in the world. Elin Heinesen, the managing director of the Faroese Tourist Board and Trade Council, reflects on future tourism development in the Faroe Islands.

What others say about us

When one of the worlds leading experts in nation branding, Simon Anholt, was asked by an editor from Bradt Travel Guides to contribute to a Travel Guide to Shangri La, a place of fiction, he said: "I consider the Faroe Islands to be the Shangri La of the 21st century!" It is not unusual to hear statements like this and like the one journalist Eric Campbell from the Australian TV-show 'Foreign Correspondent' said: "Remote and intriguing, they look like something out of a Norse fairy tale." He also said: "The Faroe Islands could very well be the world's next country!". In a New York Times article in 2007 with the headline: "Into the Mystical Unreal Reality of the Faroe Islands", the Faroe Islands were described as "the most curious place left on earth" and the journalist Stephen Metcalf described his impression such: "The Faroes are easily the most moodily

beautiful place I have ever been". Other expressions often heard are: "otherworldly" or "the Lord of the Rings Country" or even "the Grand Canyon of the North Atlantic".

Rated best islands in the world

Although the Faroe Islands obviously are astonishingly beautiful to many, we still do not see our country included in too many travel catalogues. This is probably all about to change now that the Faroe Islands were rated in the National Geographic Traveler as the best and most appealing island destination out of a shortlist of 111 island communities in the world – ahead of the Azores, Bahamas, Hawaii, Iceland and a lot of other fantastic islands – something that has given the Faroe Islands priceless publicity. The result was reached by a panel of 522 travel experts in November 2007. Another survey will not take place for many years to come so we still hold the position. (See <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/features/islandsrated0711/islands.html>)

Our goal: an eco-friendly sustainable tourism industry

At the Faroese Tourist Board we are definitely not interested in mass-tourism, though. We would rather attract appropriate amounts of money-spending people that want the perfect hideaway. It is our hope that our tourism industry will develop into a profitable, and at the same time sustainable, eco-friendly industry that does not destroy the wonderful nature and culture of these islands, but rather helps us preserve what we love the most. This is a very small country with a very small population and very limited economic resources; that is the main reason why we are not very well known yet. We do, however, have very rich natural and cultural resources.

Dangers we might face

Even if we have, you might say, challenging weather, we should not underestimate our attraction potential. I myself – as well as many people outside of the Faroes – think that the Faroe Islands have tremendous tourism potential, but the islands could also be very vulnerable to tourism overkill. We might ruin our chances of realising this great potential if we start to sell out too much

too soon. That is why we should try our utmost to avoid mistakes, because the mistakes we make today could very quickly lead us to lose the very qualities that make us so special and attractive right now.

What's the attraction?

To once again illustrate the attraction of these islands and why I think that the number of tourists here in the Faroes might increase significantly in the future – here is how a group of surfers describe the Faroes: "Deserted beaches. Stunning scenery. Perfect waves. This is every surfers dream... Two years ago a group of surfers travelled north to the Faroe Islands. What they discovered stunned them: hundreds of miles of pristine, unexplored coastline; eighteen-hour-long surf days; a consistent flow of waves pushing in from the arctic. The stunning photographs Ouhilal returned with showed the Faroes as a kind of Hawaiian paradise in reverse where sand beaches were replaced by verdant grass, resort hotels were replaced by hundred-year-old cottages, and the only crowds were those of grazing sheep."

Carelessness could destroy us

This is all good – and surfers might not be the worst tourists to attract. However, if influential audiences like surfers have become aware of our unique qualities, I'm sure others will notice us too. The buzz may be starting and we could soon see the beginnings of something resembling an invasion – not only of surfers, but others too. We don't know for sure, but the present situation could change – even dramatically, like it did in Iceland some years ago.

Tourism is not a very lucrative industry in the Faroes yet. This makes it difficult to convince people in the tourism industry that we must be cautious. I'm afraid some people might be prepared to sell out to attract just anyone to achieve short-term profits. But this could backfire seriously in the long run. People are, of course, 'hungry' with the threat of an economic crisis hanging over their heads and this could make them careless.

Long term strategy

While I understand the urge and desire from some sections of the tourism industry, I

believe we must take the necessary time to prepare, to make sure that we are doing the right things.

We at SamVit are trying to help the tourism industry in making long term strategies that will help people in the business attract the right tourists, so they can build businesses that are both lucrative and economically and environmentally sustainable. We are trying to spread the word by building strong networks with key persons all over the world – mostly tour operators and people from the media – that could help us as advisers and collaborators and help us appeal to and attract the right tourists. Tourism is, after all, the second largest industry in the Faroes even if it only accounts for 4% of the GDP; so we are also hoping that these people can help us in our efforts to get the public in the Faroes – ordinary people, politicians and the industry – to understand how important it is to develop tourism in the wisest and most responsible way possible.

How do we preserve our best qualities?

We need to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of tourism – the sooner the better. And we must do what we can to build up the most appropriate and stable form of tourism, develop the appropriate offers and attract not just any tourists, but the right tourists. By that I mean tourists who really appreciate our special qualities – our beautiful nature, our traditions and our distinctive culture – and are willing to spend their money here which we could invest in preserving our best attractions. We need to make sure that tourism will not take away from us the unique qualities we have right now, but instead add to what we already have in a way that helps us prosper while strengthening our best qualities and our integrity as a people.

Why isn't tourism in the Faroes big already?

You might ask: But if these islands are so wonderful - why isn't there a lucrative tourism industry here already? The Faroe Islands are actually one of the least 'touristy' destinations left on earth. Although the Faroe Islands are not far from the European mainland (just a 2-hour flight from Copenhagen or London), this destination has until now been considered a little too

remote for most people because the islands were not very accessible in the past. It is risky business for the transportation companies to open new or more frequent routes because so few live on the islands (only around 50,000). They cannot afford to wait for customers and so therefore only routes that are able to turn over a profit quickly are likely to be kept open. That has made it difficult to build up a more extensive tourism industry. This has, on the other hand, helped us keep our islands unspoiled – until now at least. And this might just turn out to be our best advantage, as it is.

New opportunities

Most travellers have also, until this day, mostly preferred to travel to places in the south, where they can lounge in the sun – but global travel trends now indicate that adventure travel is becoming increasingly popular. More and more people also want to travel up north to experience the beautiful and unspoiled nature and interesting culture that can be found there. People also travel further than they ever did before. It is also possible for us today, with new communication channels like the internet, to reach audiences we could not reach before. That means that our islands have suddenly become much more visible and interesting as a travel destination. And boy do we have nature and culture here that is worth travelling far for!

The perfect destination for adventurers

Now that the Faroe Islands have been discovered by the National Geographic Traveler and by surfers and others alike – and now that the islands have become more accessible than they ever were before – we can expect to see a lot more interest from travellers, especially if we use the right momentums and are effective in our marketing. There is great potential in attracting adventurous travellers interested in unspoilt authentic destinations right now – and fortunately, that is exactly what the Faroe Islands genuinely are.

Elin Brimheim Heinesen, Managing Director of SamVit, the Faroese Tourist Board and Trade Council

Get an impression

See the video presentation: "Where Nature Rules" which was awarded 3rd prize in the international film competition "Golden City Gate" at the ITB Tourist Fair in Berlin 12 March 2009: http://www.samvit.fo/media/Where_Nature_Rules_The_Faroe_Islands.wmv

See a very interesting Australian TV programme "Foreign Correspondent" about the Faroe Islands: http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2007/faroe_islands_200k.asx. Read the synopsis here: <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2007/s2050734.htm>

Read a very well-written article about the Faroe Islands in the New York Times here: <http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/travel/tmagazine/03well.faroese.t.html>