

Colonial Norway

IF YOU THINK OF THE SHETLAND ISLANDS AS UTTERLY BRITISH, THINK AGAIN. TO THOSE WHO KNOW THEIR HISTORY, THESE RUGGED NORTHERN OUTPOSTS ARE AS NORWEGIAN AS BROWN CHEESE. VIVIENNE CROW WENT LOOKING FOR SIGNS OF THEIR SCANDINAVIAN ANCESTRY

W

ir closer to Norway as we ir to Scotland, du kers," says Neil, one of my kayaking companions and a native of these islands, as we paddle almost effortlessly across the tranquil waters of the loch toward the open sea.

It's a phrase I've heard often since arriving in Shetland. Roughly translated, it means: "We're closer to Norway than we are to Scotland, you know."

Physically, the bulk of this 100-plus island archipelago lies about halfway between Scotland and Norway; spiritually and culturally, though... well, that's why I've endured a choppy 14-hour ferry journey from Aberdeen to these most northerly of British islands — to find out just how much of Shetland's Norse heritage survives.

Neil, who works in a shop in Shetland's capital Lerwick, is passionate about Shetland's history: "You know, these islands don't even belong to Britain," he says. Or at least that's how I translate it as I try to tune in to that unmistakable Scandinavian lilt juxtaposed, as it is, with the accent of Scotland's far north. A kind of Abba meets Sean Connery to my English ears.

He explains that the Norsemen first came to these islands in their longboats in the 8th century. Shetland was ruled by the Norwegians and the Danes until the 15th century when it was effectively pawned to enable the Scandinavians to pay a wedding dowry to the Scots. Although the money was eventually raised and offered to Scottish monarchs, they refused to give the islands back.

Interestingly, the Scandinavians have never formally recognized Scotland's 1472 annexation of Shetland. In fact, as recently as 2002, a group of Norwegian nationalists laying claim to both Orkney and Shetland called on their government to open negotiations with the Scottish Executive. Professor Arnevd Neulvåne, an expert in medieval economy at the university of Oslo, calculated the modern-day value of the original debt and suggested that it could be settled by Norway giving the British 28,000 head of cattle.

As we make our way around the tiny island of Muckie Roe in our kayaks, I can almost picture the scene as hundreds of longboats weighed down with lowing cows make their way across the turbulent North Sea to deposit their smelly, noisy load in the bustling port of Aberdeen.

I TURN TO NEIL AND SMILE, BOTH AMUSED AND CONTENTED. It seems that Aegir, the Norse god of the sea, is being kind to us today. Other than our two kayaks and that of our guide, Tom Smith, there is nothing to break the sparkling, mirror-like calm of the surface but the occasional curious seal, poking its head up to see what is going on, and a shy otter, which plunges into the water from some rocks just ahead of us.

We follow as Tom enters a cave. A startled shag comes rushing out, almost flying into my face. Others watch uneasily from the ledges, barking at us as we prepare to defend their messy nests.

The tunnel takes us almost 200 meters under the cliffs and into



a large chamber, from where, as we look back, a tiny speck of daylight is framed by the jagged teeth of the cave mouth.

The back of the chamber is filled with mysterious sounds. Is it the call of the shags echoing off the cliff walls? The sea gurgling through invisible passages? Was this from where the Norsemen derived their myths about gods and monsters?

Our torches pick out other passageways leading away from this gloomy hollow. We enter one, pulling our paddles in and using our hands on the cold, limpet-encrusted walls to edge the kayaks through. It twists and turns. It only by our torches.

How many people have been here before us? Did the early Norwegians have vessels small enough to access the caves or would these superstitious sailors have steered clear of sinister places such as this?

Eventually, we see the blue of the sky again and are soon back out on the open sea.

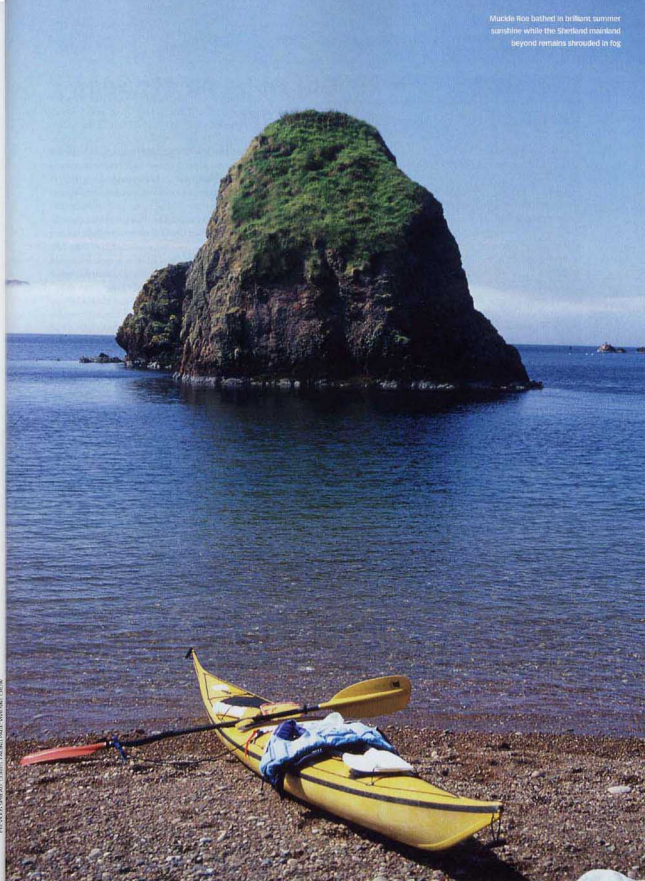
In the distance, we can see Da Dronges, a group of offshore granite stacks.

"If you let your eyes go out of focus and turn your head to one side, they look a bit like a Viking longboat," Neil says, pointing to the weird rock formations.

I've heard this story before and have tried to see this resemblance from land, but the image defies me. I try again — for Neil's sake. I steady my kayak and squint. I tilt my head one way and then the other — but the longboat fails to materialize. Maybe it would be easier if I had just a hint of that Norse blood running through my veins ...

THREE DAYS LATER, HOWEVER, SOME OF SHETLAND'S more tangible Nordic heritage does materialize in front of my eyes. On my first day on Unst, Britain's most northerly inhabited island, I take advantage of the long summer twilight — known locally as "summer dim" — to enjoy an evening stroll along the cliffs. I reach Sandwick, a long, white, lonely beach, where I sit and watch an otter, floating on its back in the bay, tuck into a fish supper. Right now, it seems to be the only thing lying between me and the west coast of Norway.

As I slowly relax, I notice, out of the corner of my eye, an information board further down the beach. I approach it as a shroud-like mist slowly descends on the bay. It explains that this area was once a Norse settlement. It refers, repeatedly, to the "Viking house" as if it still exists. I look around, baffled, until I realize that the stone



Muckie Roe bathed in brilliant summer sunshine while the Shetland mainland beyond remains shrouded in fog

The accent is a kind of Abba meets Sean Connery to my English ears

walls at my feet, partially hidden by sand, are not those of an abandoned 18th-century croft as I'd originally thought, but belong to a 900-year-old home.

Two short ferry hops later and a drive along empty, single-track roads across the bleak, peaty landscape of Yell and down the entire length of Mainland, I reach the other end of the island chain and the jewel in Shetland's historical crown. Jarlshof is one of the most complex archaeological sites in the whole of the UK.

I climb to what remains of the first floor of a 16th-century building to look down on a 4,000-year-old hut, an Iron Age broch and wheelhouse and a large Norse village—layer upon layer of history all built on top of each other, buried by the sand and then exposed to the modern world by a violent storm in 1905.

Although the Scandinavians weren't the first to build here, it is the area's Norse heritage that seems to have had the most lasting impact. Even the name Jarlshof or "court of Jarl"—although first coined by Sir Walter Scott in his 19th-century novel *The Pirate*—harks back to these 8th-century invaders.

RETURNING TO LERWICK AT THE END OF MY TRIP, I meet up with Peter Fraser, who is in the final months of his preparations to don Viking helmet and kirtle and lead a thousand-strong horde of lood, bearded men through the town on a cold, January night and then set fire to a longboat.

This is the island's Up Helly-Aa festival, descended from the Norse festival of Yule. When the Christians came, Yule became Christmas and the Norsemen weren't allowed to hold their celebrations until 24 days later, after the Christian holy period ended. This time of feasting, drinking and bonfires became known as "Uphalldag", the end of the holidays.

Today, the islanders still feel the almost pagan need to fight up the seemingly endless winter night with fire. Locals, dressed as Norsemen and carrying flaming torches, march through the streets of Lerwick until they reach the harbor where they set fire to a nine-meter replica of a Viking longboat. They are led by Guizer Jarl, a character from a Norse saga, this year played by Fraser.

"Being Guizer Jarl is a great honor. I've been preparing for this

for 13 years," he says. I was skeptical when I first heard about the festival—on paper, it looks like a cynical bid to pull in tourists during the off-season. But talking to Fraser, I realize it genuinely holds a lot of meaning for Shetlanders. "Our Norse ancestry is important to us and our contacts with Norway are very strong. We appreciate that we are part of Scotland, but we don't have much to do with the whole kilts and bagpipes thing."

As I've driven round the islands, I've been constantly aware of this gulf between Shetland and Scottish culture. The buildings look different from those on the Scottish mainland; place names are full of Norwegian influences and Shetlanders even have their own flag, proudly displayed at every opportunity.

I ask Fraser about the Norwegian nationalists' claim to the islands. He laughs. "Well, we wouldn't want to become Norwegian—beer prices would go through the roof!"

I'm reminded of something that Neil said while we were kayaking. "We're not Scottish, but we're not Norwegian either: we're Shetlanders." @

VIVIANNE CROW

is a freelance travel/outdoors journalist who owes her fascination with all things Scandinavian to the fact that she was an Abba fan in a former life (but please don't tell anyone).
viviancrow@hotmail.com

The Shetlands

SIZE | 1,408 square kilometers, divided between more than 100 islands

POPULATION | 23,000 humans, 330,000 sheep and more than a million seabirds

CAPITAL | Lerwick (population 7,000)

LOCATION | The northern tip of Ulst is about 430 kilometers north of Aberdeen and 360 kilometers west of Bergen

GETTING THERE | Widerøe flies to Shetland (Sumburgh airport) from Oslo (summer only), and British Airways flies from Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness and Kirkwall

INTER-ISLAND TRAVEL | Inter-island ferries and flights serve the inhabited 15 islands. To visit one of the uninhabited islands, try a boat tour, fishing trip or boat charter

INTERNATIONAL DATE LINE | As you'd expect, watches should be set to Greenwich Mean Time or British Summer Time while visiting Shetland, but you'll have to reset the date, too, if you visit Foula. The 30-odd inhabitants of this island still work to the pre-Gregorian calendar, celebrating Christmas Day on January 6 and New Year on January 13

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Jarlshof, a three-acre complex with a Bronze Age village; at the bottom, an Iron Age layer, an entire Viking settlement, and a 17th-century house site to top it off



The Up-Helly-Aa festival harks back to the Norse celebrations of Yule



Scalloway, the former capital of Shetland, derives its name from the Norse *Skaða Voe*, meaning "huts on the bay"

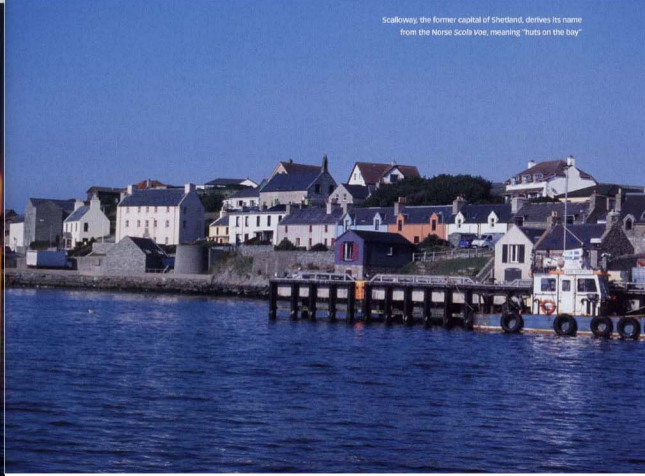


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