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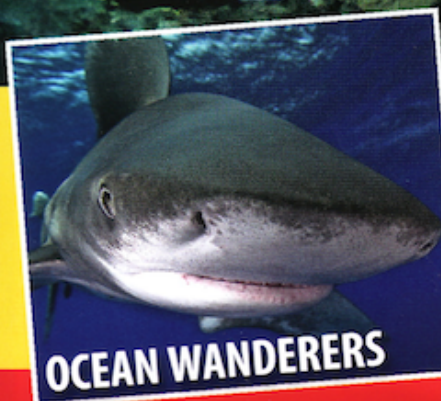
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AWAY FROM THE GRIND



Divers may have been put off visiting the Faroe Islands by tales of its regular slaughter of pilot whales, but journalist JO CAIRD wanted to experience this north

Atlantic outpost and make up her own mind.

Photos by STEVE PRETTY

I T WAS ONLY THAT EVENING, when I was sitting in the comfort of Gepetto, a small restaurant in downtown Klaksvík, that I understood why Janus Joensen of Faroe Dive had been so keen to take us to Viðareði.

The first dive of our visit to this windswept North Sea archipelago had been an underwhelming and exhausting experience, but the first taste of the dish in front of me, made with the enormous blue mussels that Janus had gathered

that morning, made it all worth it.

I tucked in with gusto, the richness of the mussels cooked in butter, cream and herbs and cheese restoring my strength after a day diving in one of the most remote coldwater destinations in Europe.

Pretty much anywhere you go in the Faroes feels wild and lonesome – it was rare to see more than a handful of people at once anywhere on the islands, including the capital, Torshavn, and

Pictured: Diver in kelp at Elduvík.

there's something about the treeless landscape and steely grey skies that lends the place an air of bleakness I've rarely felt anywhere else.

Viðareði, however, is in a league of its own, the most northerly settlement in the archipelago, a tiny village at the end of a narrow road that carves through mountain tunnels and crosses an ancient fjord.

Janus had picked me and my photographer buddy up from our

Klaksvík hotel after breakfast that morning, driving to the dive centre for a planning session before setting off to Viðareiði on the island of Viðoy.

Twenty breathtaking, hair-raising minutes later, we pulled up in a deserted village overlooking a mist-enshrouded bay, the stark magnificence of Mount Villingdalsfjall – all 844m of it – towering above us.

The gorgeousness of the location was soon forgotten, however, as we began the task of getting our gear from the car-park to the shoreline, down 300m of slippery sloping rock covered with seaweed, barnacles and the occasional rusting iron remnant of a long-gone jetty.

The entry into the 8° water was, thankfully, simple, but what should have been an easy and enjoyable 40 minutes on a lively wall at a depth of around 8-10m was marred by unexpectedly poor visibility.

Huge green raindrop-shaped blobs of blooming algae were suspended in the water all around us, obscuring my view of everything but the bull kelp waving in the gentle swell. With my face right up to the wall I spotted leafy red kelp crawling with tiny spidery crabs, and the long, pink, stripy tentacles of seastars wriggling between cracks in the rock.

Fingernail-sized, heart-shaped pink barnacles grew on the kelp in little

clumps, while their larger cousins, the mussels Janus was gathering for our supper, lay out of sight among the holdfasts at the base of the wall.

On the exhausting walk back up to the car – a heavy bag of mussels only adding to the load – Janus was full of apologies for the vis. He had never seen Viðareiði like that, he said, reporting that only a couple of days previously the water there had been crystal-clear.

We drank some hot coffee from the flask Janus had brought with him and put it all down to experience – you can't win them all.

OUR AFTERNOON EXCURSION was considerably more successful. The plan was to head to Kallur, at the northern tip of Kalsoy island, to dive at a site called Klaksvík. First, however, Janus wanted to take us snorkelling through an impressive cave nearby, at the foot of a tall sea-cliff topped by a lighthouse.

Janus doesn't keep a boat – there's not enough demand for it, he says, even though his is the only dive centre on the 18 islands that make up the Faroes. So this hugely experienced and personable divemaster sticks to shore-diving for the most part, working with various local skippers as and when boat-dives are requested, and the unpredictable weather



Above: Diver enters the water at Gjogv.

prevailing halfway between Norway and Iceland is good enough to make a go of it.

(He also trains the legions of commercial divers who work at the fish-farms, but that's another story.)

The craft we found waiting for us at the jetty in Klaksvík was not your classic dive-boat. It was co-owned by a group of local guys who use it for weekend fishing trips – as well as for the *grind*, the traditional slaughter of long-finned pilot whales practised here since these islands were settled by the Norse people in the 10th century.

It's a complex and emotive issue, and one that Janus and our skipper were happy to talk to me about as we made our way out of Klaksvík, past huge commercial salmon farms, the highest sea-cliffs in Europe, and flocks of clownish puffins, flying ineptly just above the waves.

While critics of the *grind* denounce it as a brutal abuse of animal rights, unjustifiable in this age of economic prosperity and readily available protein, defenders cite its importance in Faroese culinary and social history, as well as its role in community cohesion.



Left: Two bright white nudibranchs.

Below: Snorkelling at the mouth of the cave at Klaksvík.





The slaughter isn't commercial – the meat and blubber is divided up between the people who take part and those living in the bay where the *grindadráp*, or killing, occurs – and it all happens by serendipity rather than design.

A *grindadráp* takes place only when a pod of whales happens to be passing, you see. At the time of my visit, the Klaksvík community hadn't taken part in a whale slaughter for going on two years.

Furthermore, long-finned pilot whales are not endangered and the harvest, averaging out at 850 per year, is "sustainable", according to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.

THE FAROESE SAY THAT THE WHALES are killed quickly once they have been driven up onto the beach, their spinal cords and associated major blood vessels severed by trained, government-licensed individuals using knives specially designed for the purpose.

It looks brutal, they say, because of the way that the whale-blood stains the water, but is actually not much different to other forms of hunting or fishing.

While I don't think I'll ever get over my squeamishness at the idea of eating whale meat (a hypocritical position, I should add, given that I eat both meat and fish, hunted and farmed), I came home erring on the side of respecting the *grind* as an expression of Faroese cultural heritage.

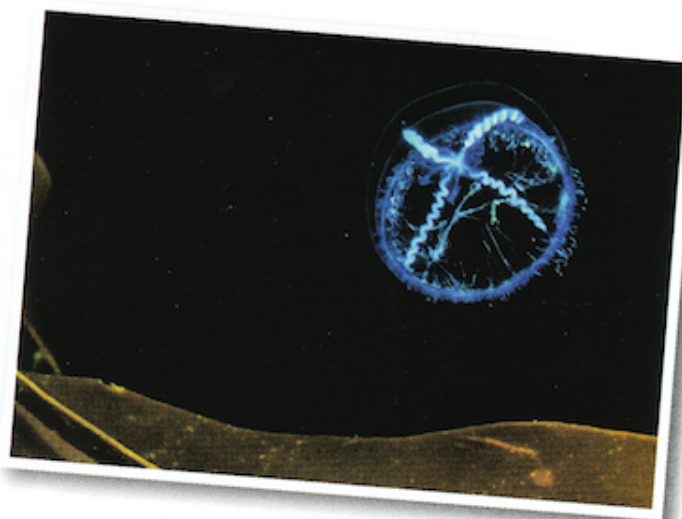
If the whales were endangered, or the hunt took place for sport rather than sustenance, that would be another matter – but with the situation as it stands, I'm not going to condemn a practice that brings communities together and dates back 1000 years.

THE BOAT JOURNEY to Kallur took an hour, but so stark and beautiful was the landscape – the island of Kalsoy on one side, the island of Kunoy on the other, all steep grazing land and jagged peaks – that I wished it had been longer.

The screech of kittiwakes in our ears, we suited up for snorkelling and rolled in off the high side of the fishing-boat.

Passing beneath the colony of kittiwakes and into the mouth of the cathedral-like cave, we let the current whisk us into the darkness and out again into the light on the other side of the headland, careful not to stray too close to the entrance of another tunnel that cuts at least 300m straight into the rock.

There was nothing much to see under



Above: A tiny jellyfish the size of a fingernail drifts above some kelp.

Below: Kelp drifts below the cliffs of Gjogv.

the water – but what we got at the surface was a truly exhilarating ride.

We were the first people ever to snorkel through the cave, and I would jump at the chance to do it again.

By the time we got back to the boat, which had sailed around to meet us, it was already 7pm, too late to fit in the dive Janus had planned if we wanted to make it home for dinner.

The sky was still as light as it had been all afternoon, but we opted to trust our stomachs rather than our eyes, and called it a day. Tasting the mussels at Gepetto a little while later, I knew we'd made the right decision.

ANOTHER DAY, another spectacular drive, this time to Elduvík, a tiny village on Eysturoy, one of the larger islands in the archipelago.

I was nervous about another shore-dive following our experience the previous day, but the entry couldn't have been easier: a short boat-ramp with a hand-rail to secure against slipperiness.

We stayed shallow, making our way slowly out into the bay through a thick forest of bull kelp at a depth of no more than 2m before heading down to explore at around 6m. Taking advantage of excellent visibility, I alternated between



looking for macro stuff among the holdfasts on the seabed and coming up above the level of the kelp to get my bearings and check on the whereabouts of my buddy, his bubbles the only clue to his location.

Tiny white seastars and white and yellow molluscs covered the bull kelp, while hermit crabs scuttled among the red leafy kelp growing closer to the seabed.

I spotted delicate-looking Faroese nudibranchs too, vivid against the red of the kelp and the smears of bright pink lichen-like marine life on the basalt of the sea-floor.

With the sun lighting up the remarkably blue water of the bay, it was easy to lose myself in this macro paradise, interrupted only by the sudden arrival of a shoal of several hundred coley moving quickly through the water at the end of the dive.

AS THE CROW FLIES, it's under three miles from Elduvik to Gjogv, the site of our final dive in the Faroes, but the drive around the fjord took us nearly an hour.

Unlike almost everywhere else we'd been that week, the village was busy with tourists when we arrived in the car park to set up our gear at the top of a jetty descending steeply into a deep gorge in the rock.

It was 8pm when we entered the water, but I would have sworn it was mid-afternoon, so warm and bright was the sunshine at this dramatic location.

I fanned out over dozens of species of kelp, from pink stuff that resembled the



Top: Exiting the cave at Klaksvik with the cliffs towering above.

Right: Elduvik.



tulle on a child's ballerina outfit to an iridescent blue and purple variety shaped like cactus leaves, all of it so bright and pretty that you'd be forgiven for thinking you were diving on a coral reef in tropical water.

I hit the southern wall of the gorge a

few minutes later and followed it deeper, marvelling at how the overhangs and cracks in the rock take exactly the same form as those on the wall above the water.

Crabs – tiny red ones, huge grey ones and plenty of species in between – went about their business, dodging a rash of tiny anemones along the way.

The vis suddenly worsened at around 10m down, but not enough for me to miss an orange Atlantic octopus sitting calmly on the sandy seabed. I stayed with it for a long time, watching as it gradually moved off to hide under a rock, all its tentacles tucked under its body at if attempting to attract as little attention as possible.

The octopus hidden from view, I headed to shore, delighted to get another glimpse of that beautiful kelp garden on the way.

It was a long way back up to the village from down in the gorge, but the combination of the spectacular surroundings and Janus's passion and expertise made it all worth it.

The diving, I thought to myself as I huffed and puffed up a concrete boat ramp and 60 steep steps, is very enjoyable – no doubt about that. But diving in the Faroes is about more than just bubbles and bottom time: it's about the mood of this remote archipelago, the awesome landscapes, the welcoming spirit of Janus and his team, and the chance to see places that so few others have visited.

I'll be going back as soon as I can. █

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Atlantic Airways (www.atlantic.fo) flies from Edinburgh to Vágur twice a week, or twice-daily from Copenhagen (SAS offers connecting flights from Heathrow, www.flysas.com). Hertz and Avis hire cars once there but regular, inexpensive bus and ferry travel around the islands is available (www.ssl.fo).

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Faroë Dive, www.faroedive.fo. Hotel Klaksvik is a short walk from the dive centre, www.hotelklaksvik.fo

WHEN TO GO ▶ Faroë Dive operates all year round. Visibility is at its best in autumn and winter, but the weather is most predictable in spring and summertime.

MONEY ▶ Faroese *kroner*, but Danish *kroner* widely accepted (it doesn't work the other way around, though Danish banks will exchange your Faroese currency for free). Credit cards accepted almost everywhere.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from London from £250. Faroë Dive offers transfers from the capital, Torshavn, for £50. Hotel Klaksvik charges £100 per night for a double room including breakfast (two sharing). A day with two guided shore dives including full gear hire and transfers from Faroë Dive costs from £150. Chartering a boat costs an additional £200 a day.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.visitfaroeislands.com

