

The cycling forecast

Coastal breezes, hilly unspoiled scenery, long summer days. **Pete Marshall** took a ferry half way to Iceland to tour the Faroe Islands



South gale 8 to storm 10, occasionally violent storm 11, veering west 6 to gale 8 later. Very rough or high, occasionally very high at first. Rain then wintry showers. Moderate or good, occasionally poor.

Listen to Radio 4 and the Faroes are never far away, thanks to the soothing mantra that is the Shipping Forecast, which describes the wind, sea state, weather, and visibility in the seas around Britain. Physically the Faroe Islands are closer than many of our European neighbours – under 200 miles from the Scottish mainland – but they sit in a wide expanse of the North Atlantic just outside of the Arctic Circle.

In the middle of a summer night, at a campsite on the far northern tip of the Faroes, I listened not to the radio but to the evening song of thousands of birds. It blended seamlessly into the dawn chorus of thousands more. It was beautiful.

GETTING ACCLIMATISED

When planning my visit to the Faroes I consulted the works of that doyenne of cycle touring, Josie Dew. Unfortunately Ms Dew dismisses them in a couple of sentences in *Wind in my Wheels*. 'They claim

it rains for 363 days of the year. I believe them.'

Weather has always been a fascination to me. As a cyclist and a climber I have spent many a night tucked up in my sleeping bag, camped out in some remote place listening to the Shipping Forecast. My knowledge of the Faroes was limited to their mention in that, usually with a dire warning of gales and poor visibility. It's true that the Faroes have 280 days of rain a year, mostly in the autumn and winter. During the long summer days from June to August what rain there is falls in short showers, and between the showers there is bright sunshine and the clearest air in Europe.

Not to say that a summer in the Faroes is a time for Mediterranean style weather. Swimming in the North Atlantic could never be described as a relaxing experience, despite what climatologists describe as the 'warm' North Atlantic drift, and a quick dip on one of the islands' hundreds of deserted beaches was enough to convince me to keep out. But the effect of the Gulf Stream, as we usually call the North Atlantic drift, gives the Faroes its unique and highly changeable climate.

You're never far from the sea in the Faroes. Boats and tunnels join the islands which, even in summer, aren't exactly warm

The group of eighteen islands rise, like the volcanoes they once were, straight from the sea. Along the north and west coasts of most of the islands huge sea cliffs tower to 725 vertical metres, home only to a massive population of sea birds. Along the east coasts small settlements called 'bydir' cling to the



coastline. These are mountainous islands. Although the highest (Slaettartindur on Esturoy) is only 882m, the average height of the islands is 300m. If you enjoy cycle touring on flat sunlit boulevards, littered with comfortable cafés serving fresh coffee and cheap red wine, then the Faroes are certainly not for you!

Getting there is the first challenge.

"Like a huge dinosaur, the islands loomed out of the sea, the tops of the mountains covered by cloud"

You can fly directly from Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Shetland, but being a 'heavyweight' tourist, equipped with bike, tent and everything I needed for a month's camping, travelling by ferry was a better option. My first sight of the islands was from about 20 miles away. Like a huge dinosaur the islands loomed out of the sea, the tops of the mountains covered by cloud, which got worryingly lower until, by the time the boat got into port, it covered all the islands.

The ferry arrives at the capital city of the Faroes, Torshavn, which is home to 18,000 of the 47,000 Faroese. A bustling town centre surrounded by (for the Faroes) a large number of houses, Torshavn is an ideal introduction to cycling in the Faroes: everywhere is uphill! A short ride leads to the one campsite. It is very busy when the ferry is in, sitting next to what is almost – for the Faroes – a congested road.

However, the views across the bay to the small island of Nolsoy are fantastic.

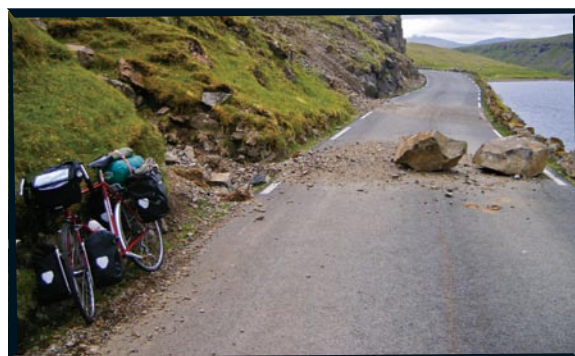
Nolsoy is the home of Jens-Kjeld Jensen, the Faroes' official puffin stuffer and ornithologist. I had read about Jens in *The Guardian* a few weeks before departing so his workshop was my first place of call the next day. Jens welcomes visitors to take a look at his magnificent

stuffed bird collection and also leads night time walks on Nolsoy to view the world's largest colony of storm petrels – an experience not to be missed.

CYCLING UNDER THE SEA

During June and July it is never really dark anywhere on the islands. Despite this lack of night time I was told by locals that the most important accessory for my bike on the Faroes would be a good set of lights. The reason soon becomes apparent on the first trip made away from Torshavn.

Once the islands were all connected by ferries and mountain roads crossed each island. The mountain roads remain, although many can now be avoided by tunnels under the mountains. Many of the inter-island ferries have been replaced by undersea tunnels. These are tremendous works of engineering – but often terrifying for unsuspecting cyclists! Some of the tunnels are single track and unlit. Cycling is very dangerous in these and is forbidden. A first-rate bus service links everywhere in the

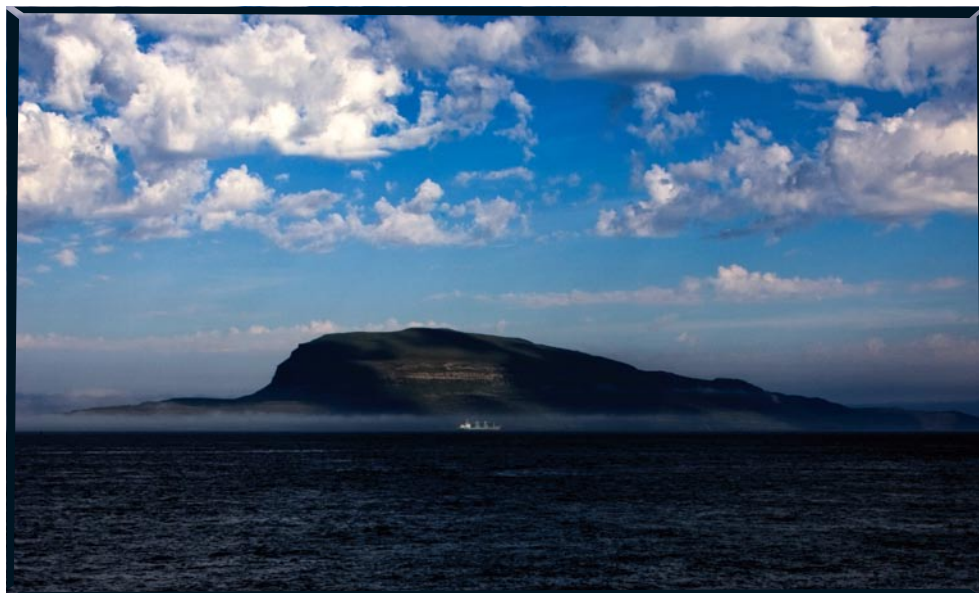


Ferry beats flying with a laden bike (top)
The Faroes are volcanic rock – some of it loose

Mist and rain is common, but between showers the Faroes have the brightest, clearest air in Europe

islands and to avoid cycling you can time your arrival at tunnels to coincide with the arrival of a bus. Buses are well equipped to carry several bikes and all your equipment. Remember to remove the panniers in advance or locals will quickly start grumbling at a cyclist clumsily removing half a ton of gear before boarding the bus.

Many of the under-mountain tunnels can be avoided by cycling over the top. On a clear day the mountain roads are tremendous. They're steep enough to require the lowest gears, but short enough to avoid pushing even when fully loaded. One great mountain road runs directly into Torshavn itself. The final downhill section is a challenge to man and machine, particularly the first time I cycled it: despite the weather being clear when I set off, the top and most of the descent were in the middle of a cloud, the road was wet and the visibility was around three metres. (Make sure you have waterproofs



because even if it is clear and dry on the coast you may find the mountain road runs straight through a rain cloud.) Some of the smaller roads around tunnels have been closed to cars because of rock fall. They can be navigated by bike, with a brisk approach and a wary eye out for falling boulders!

The newest undersea tunnels have two lanes and are well lit. These are safe to cycle through as long as you are lit up like a Christmas tree – the locals are not used to cyclists. The tunnel from Stremoy to Vagar, which is on the way to one of the great treats of the islands, Mykines, is four miles long. The first two miles are a downhill fairground ride all the way, whooshing you and your bike to the lowest part of the tunnel, but then comes the uphill slog. Granny-gearing your way through the gloom of a tunnel deep under the Atlantic

"Granny-gearing your way through the gloom of a tunnel deep under the Atlantic is a strange experience"

Ocean is a strange experience.

Finally I burst out into bright daylight and a massive climb up another steep mountain road that took me over a spectacular headland on the island of Vagur. At the top of the climb I took a break that became an increasingly long lunch. I camped later at Sandavagur. With 22 hours of daylight in summer, rushing around isn't required on the Faroes.

LATE NIGHT SUN

I spent a lot of my time in the late evening sun. Miles of near empty roads, wonderful mountain passes and spectacular sea cliffs surround you. As well as cycling, I strolled deserted cliff tops, accompanied only by the sound of birds, sea and wind. It is easy to think you are on some remote and lonely island, yet you are never more than a few miles from a pretty 'bydir', with a post office, a small supermarket, a quality bakery, and a hotel with a very expensive bar – alcohol is taxed at a Norwegian rate rather than Danish despite the fact that the Faroes are part of Denmark.

Campsites are more thinly spread.

Wild camping is officially forbidden and would be difficult anyway because flat land is at a premium on the islands. Anywhere flat enough for a campsite has a house built on it. However, towns with sites (usually attached to hostels or small hotels) are spread about the islands so can always be reached in a day's cycling.

My visit to Mykines was the highlight of my stay on the islands. This is a truly magical place. There is a 'campsite' near the hostel – actually it's just a field between two streams above the island's tiny village. To get to Mykines means either a helicopter or boat from Vagar. I took the boat, which was spectacular and also allowed me to take my bike – not that there's anywhere to ride it on Mykines.

The boat goes straight down the long fjord from Sorvgur, through an arched sea stack, Drangarmik, and past the incredible uninhabited island of Tindholmur. Once on Mykines I was constantly surrounded by sea birds. Puffins followed every move. Apparently they're unafraid of people despite the regular puffin hunts carried out by Jens-Kjeld Jensen with his 'puffin net' to supply him with birds to stuff and local cooks with meat for puffin pie.

The best camping spot of all is in the tiny *bydir* of Gjogv (the 'cleft', named after the village's natural harbour) right on the northern tip of the island of Esturoy. I cycled to Gjogv by travelling over the mountain road from Eioi. The road is one of the highest in the Faroes, reaching 392m below the mountain of Slattaratundur before a spectacular descent to the coast and Gjogv. It must be one of the best roads in Europe for cycling. It's only about 10 miles but is steep enough to require serious effort on the way up and even more serious concentration on the way down.

There are tremendous views, a great road surface, hardly any traffic, and fortunately there was nobody about to see me going so slowly. Little oystercatchers running alongside were able to overtake me.

A great road deserves a great place at the end of it and Gjogv is certainly that. This is a place to savour, with long walks on the hills and bird-watching opportunities along the cliffs. The campsite is part of the friendly hostel, Gjaargarour.

The Faroe Islands are a place for the cyclist looking for somewhere a little different and I shall certainly be going back.



Total population of the Faroes is just 47,000, split between the capital, Torshavn, and smaller settlements

FACT FILE: THE FAROE ISLANDS

WHERE: 62 degrees north, half way between Scotland and Iceland. The 18 islands are 70 miles long and 47 miles wide.

CONDITIONS: averages 11°C in summer, 3°C in winter. Highest recorded temperature: 22°C. May to June have the longest days (almost no night-time in June) and best average weather although September is usually the driest month. It is always windy!

LANGUAGE: Faroese and Danish. English is widely spoken.

GETTING THERE: ferry from Scotland and Shetland throughout summer, and from Shetland only during the rest of the year. See their website for prices: www.smyril-line.com. Unfortunately cycles are presently charged as motorbikes. Flights from Aberdeen and Stansted airports throughout the year: www.atlantic fo. UK citizens require no visa.

ACCOMMODATION: wild camping is forbidden. There are campsites dotted around the islands. All are basic. There are hostels on the islands including some that are members of the IYHA (your YHA card also gets discount at some of the campsites). See www.farhostel fo. Hotels and B&Bs are in most towns and villages.

FOOD: stock up in Torshavn. Small villages may have a shop, but don't count on it. Larger towns will have small supermarkets. Fresh produce is of high quality but often short supply outside of the main centres. Alcohol is very expensive.

CURRENCY: Faroese and Danish krona both accepted. The Faroese krona is not exchangeable in the UK so change any you have into Sterling, Euros or Danish krona before leaving.

MAPS: the best map is the 'Foyroy Topografiskt Atlas' 1:100,000 by the Danish Cartographical Institute. It's widely available on the Faroes and also from specialist map shops in the UK.

MORE INFORMATION: Faroes Tourist Board www.tourist fo

BOOKS: The Faroe Isles by Liv Kjorsvik Schei and Faroe Islands (The Bradt Travel Guide) by James Proctor.