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FOR THE MEETINGS AND EVENTS INDUSTRY

## FAROE ISLANDS

*Small states can make a difference*



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# Meetings<sup>®</sup>

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# Homecoming IS A NEW BUSINESS MODEL

**MANY PEOPLE** around the world have been educated abroad and want to return to their country of birth. Homecoming is a fundamental question in many people's heart. While working in the Faroe Islands with this report, we learned that about 400 well-educated Faroese people are staying in Denmark but want to move back home.

If the jobs had been there, they would have taken their families back. We also learned that before the rise of the Faroese economy up to 1,600 people left the country to get a better education abroad. Today, there are many well-educated doctors, specialist nurses, chemists, biologists, physicists and people with other professions living outside the Faroes, humans with knowledge which could be of great help back home. Many of them have good positions in Denmark because there are no similar jobs at home. Not yet anyhow.

Another reason to return to your home country can be that a person wants to contribute to society, to leave a legacy. The idea of leaving a legacy is the need or the desire to be

remembered for what you have added to the world. In some cases, that contribution could be so special that the universe is unalterably changed. But most of us mere mortals will not leave behind anything like a world-changing legacy, just a lasting footprint that will be remembered by those whose lives we touched.

Legacy is also about the knowledge that is handed down from one generation to the next. Some people claim that the three previous generations influence our personalities. What should every one of us leave behind that will make our work memorable? Which of our actions and decisions create better conditions for the generations to come?

Maybe it's time to create an accelerator programme in the Faroe Islands. One way is to take some money from the fishing fund and merely create new conditions for research and development and thus social development. Accelerator programmes are available in more and more countries. In, for example, Dubai, it is a real tool for developing the whole society. Dubai Future

Accelerators facilitates partnerships between entrepreneurs, private sector organisations, and government entities to co-create solutions.

The Faroe Islands have every prerequisite for expanding their society and creating more opportunities for more homecoming people, and thus taking the whole of society to the next level of development. More and more people around the world are following the development of this little nation in the North Atlantic. Homecoming is a new business model.



PHOTO Magnus Malmberg

Swedish-Indonesian **ATTI SOENARSO** has worked as a journalist for close to 40 years. She has worked for Scandinavia's largest daily newspaper, was TV4's first travel editor, has written for many Swedish travel magazines and has had several international clients. She has travelled the length and breadth of the world and written about destinations, people and meetings.





## Every Meeting That Comes to the Faroe Islands **BRINGS IN NEW KNOWLEDGE**

“**THE FAROE ISLANDS** is an exceptional destination for smaller to medium meetings. What we can offer at this stage is perhaps limited, but it is also a limited place, so we have to be realistic. This is not a world hub, you have to decide to travel here,” says Johannes Jensen, Chairman of Visit Faroe Islands. He is also an entrepreneur and the owner of three hotels and 12 restaurants, among them Koks, probably the world’s most remote two-star Michelin restaurant.

As with many Faroese inhabitants, Johannes Jensen has several different kinds of professions. He has been the Chairman of Visit Faroe Islands since 2011 and started working on a strategic marketing plan together with the CEO Guðrið Højgaard. With a marketing plan that should bring in a three-time turnover figure of tourism in the next eight years, up to 2020, the politicians gave the two visionaries a second budget and the conquering of the world began. Not only the Faroese people have seen the vital development of the variety of meetings, events and incentives increase. Today the little nation in the North Atlantic sea is a small star beginning to rise, and the world’s leading media comes and writes articles about nature, culture, the people and the food scene.

Johannes Jensen says the primary objective and challenge is to increase the number of meetings and event guests to the Faroe Islands and for all the companies, not only for his company.

Many improvements have been made at Visit Faroe Islands since 2012. For instance, the statistics have improved, there are lots of bigger, better and several new venues, and there are restaurants significant for the meetings and event industry segment. The back-up from the people in the parliament is better as they have understood that tourism and business events are an essential part of the Faroe Islands economy and future, with, for example, a lot of employment.

It is the winds of change that blow over the little nation. The Faroese government was first to understand the transformation, now the Mayor is saying, “let’s do this and that.” The politicians in the city and the government have realised that this is an industry that needs both development and management.

“The tourist income is centralised in the capital city of Tórshavn. It affects the whole way of thinking because the politicians have to plan everything into this, which includes the road system. All have to be taken

into consideration when you are talking about the infrastructure. Let me take one example. If we are going to build a swimming pool with international competitions, this might also affect tourism and the meetings and events segment. And Visit Faroe Islands is not only a tourist office. What we do affects a lot of other things. It is about the whole activity in Tórshavn and the attractiveness of the city as well.”

“What politicians should understand is that every business meeting coming to the Faroe Islands is bringing in new knowledge to our society. There are many spin-offs of having high-level congresses, conferences and business events, and there are a lot of other advantages for a small destination like this. The challenge is to increase this segment with balanced growth. I believe this is what the islanders wanted in general. They are not so fond of getting many tourists in the summer.”

It is close at hand to compare the Faroe Islands with their neighbour Iceland, but, according to Johannes Jensen, the Faroese have by far not come to the same position. He believes it is smarter to focus on meetings and events in the broadest term and for many reasons. But it is challenging because it is a prolonged

**“We are in the situation where it’s time for us to dare take the risk of making investments”**

and long-haul process. Furthermore, it does not fit with the islander’s mentality where you always have a quick-fix. It has a lot to do with time perception.

“You go out and hunt, get successful, or you get nothing so the next day you try it differently. That’s not the way it works with business meetings. The pipeline is usually, but not always, tremendously long. Moreover, this is a contrast to our behaviour, ‘maybe tomorrow’. We are not entirely planned, it’s a part of our way of living. Everything is un-exact because we have the weather, and we are isolated here in the Nordic.”

The regularity in time perception on the Faroe Islands has improved dramatically. Johannes Jensen says that there have been many small improvements which have changed the game. Today, the nation is at the beginning of that change. It has started, and one can, for example, see a dramatic increase in activity at the airport. It was said to be big enough for a long time, but now it is too small which proves that things develop a bit faster than expected. The significant potential is the increase in the airline connections to the Faroe Islands.

Johannes Jensen’s Hotel Føroya is so far still the most prominent

hotel in the Faroe Islands. The latest increase gave the hotel 23 new rooms. The next step will be an expansion with up to 200 rooms in 2020.

“We are in the situation where it’s time for us to dare take the risk of making investments. We know that other competitors are coming. The Ferry company Smyril Lines are building a hotel with 126 rooms, and our airline Atlantic Airways are building a Hilton hotel with 130 rooms which means that we get approximately 250 rooms added.”

Johannes Jensen believes it will be difficult in wintertime with the occupancy but is not too pessimistic about the summertime. It should not be a problem for Tórshavn to have 600–800 rooms. In 2021, when all these hotels have expanded there will be around 750 rooms. The number of Airbnb beds is vast, and there are about 1,300 rooms. Last summer for one month more people were staying in Airbnb than in all the hotels together.

In October last year, a delegation of nine Faroese people participated in the ICCA World Congress in Dubai. They were there to learn, network and to expand their knowledge on the international meetings and event

industry. Mayor Annika Olsen was one of them.

“Now it’s vital that all of us will be working as one unit in this particular segment. It’s crucial. I don’t believe that we should have one convention bureau in Tórshavn and one in Klaksvik, that doesn’t make sense. But you never know with politicians, they have a different agenda, and it’s not always the logical and most intelligent decisions that are taken.”

The University of Faroe Islands and the National Hospital are essential drivers of meetings and events. But Johannes Jensen believes that they do not understand how important they are. He says that Visit Faroe Islands has been doing excellent lobby work with the ambassador network and has changed the perception of many employees around both private companies and institutions. Especially in institutions like the hospital, but also in the environmental and health ministry.

“They are participating in many Nordic meetings and conferences, and we can see in the dialogue that a lot is going on there. Last year we had a lot of business events, by far the best year, and not only with locals but people travelling here. Twenty per cent were locals and the

**“Maybe we are a little bit crazy sometimes, but we have been successful so far”**

rest international guests. They had a meeting, stayed here, spent money and hopefully had a nice experience and a great conference.”

The work that Visit Faroe Islands has done so far is the reason for the increase of passengers flying to the archipelago. Johannes Jensen means that everything goes together.

“We are an infrastructure. It is complicated, and everything is linked together in a process. The Faroe Islands has understood the context, and we have understood the context and try to develop things. Maybe we are a little bit crazy sometimes, but we have been successful so far.”

“However, when it comes to the meeting part, the venues, we need to improve quality and to educate employees, not to be leisure focused. In a small place like this everybody is an expert in everything. Therefore, we are having difficulties in getting the focus on keeping these people focused on business meetings and not leisure.”

An increasing number of people are coming from abroad to live in the Faroe Islands, and they are getting married to Faroese men and women. There are also people coming to study. An American man is studying at the university and is also the

manager of one of Johannes Jensen’s bars. Between ten to fifteen per cent of the workforce are not Faroese, Danish or Scandinavian. They are coming from, for example, India, the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Israel and Portugal.

“This is great and creates stability. These people come with a lot of new ideas, they are an outstanding workforce, and in most cases have a very positive effect on the rest of the company. It creates a great atmosphere to have people from different nations working in one place. Especially in a small destination like this.”



# Wild Living Natural Resources

## THE BASIS FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

**THE FAROE ISLANDS** have a multi-party system, with numerous parties in which none seldom has a chance of gaining power alone. The parties must work with each other to form coalition governments. There are two major ideological cleavages in Faroese politics. In addition to the left-right spectrum, parties are also divided between those that want to maintain the Faroes' place within the Danish Realm (unionists) and those that want independence (separatists).

Høgni Hoydal from the Republican Party is Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture, one of the most challenging posts as it is very influential. The party he represents is a left-wing party committed to Faroese independence. The Government that he is a part of is a coalition between the Social Democratic Party, the Republican Party and the Progress Party. One of their main objectives was to make a fisheries reform.

The politicians knew that it would be a challenging task, and they have received massive criticism from many parts of society. According to Høgni Hoydal himself, he is maybe the

most unpopular minister ever in the country.

"We have made some radical changes in the fisheries management and the whole legislation around fisheries which has not been popular. Especially the parts of the country where it has actually been seen as an 'attack' on some of the fisheries' communities. The Faroe Islands is a tiny nation with a small population, and we have all the same characterisations as they have in other countries."

There are regional policies which are very strong depending on access to fisheries. But in the end, Høgni Hoydal hopes that even though this reform has been so unpopular, it will also be a reform that will unite them in a few years.

"That's the main experience with the Faroese reforms. They can be very unpopular when they are in the making during the decision period. But, if we partly succeed, I believe everybody will feel ownership of it."

Høgni Hoydal states that the Faroe Islands shall be a pioneering country in the sustainable use of marine resources and create a welfare

solidarity society based upon said resources. These are crucial for the Faroese people because they are living in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean and are very dependent on these resources. These assets can be the basis for prosperity and for the equal rights for the people in years to come.

"The main vision is that this 'property' of wild living resources in our oceans is the property of the Faroese people and can never be private property. That's one pillar of our vision. The next is to be a pioneering company in managing our marine assets sustainably also concerning climate change, and all the challenges that the oceans face today. The value of these resources can be very much higher than they are today. There is 'extraordinary' profit in fishing today, because of the restrictions to fishing and in the future there will also be added value."

"It shall also be returned to the society so that the people of the Faroe Islands get this 'extra' profit, which is created from the access to limited, natural resources. This shall not be

private property as we have seen for many years, not only in the Faroe Islands but in other countries where natural resources have become privatised. The value of getting this access to natural resources has been going to powerful capital interests and huge companies. We are now trying to say: This is the property of the people, and this should be the basis for a better society in the Faroe Islands for years to come.”

“Until now a large part of the fish has gone to waste, being thrown back into the ocean. From now on you have to use every part of these valuable assets. Basically, it is the management system. It’s the access, and it adds value.”

At the moment, the Faroe Islands is a prosperous country. Høgni Hoydal explains that their economy is based upon the wild living natural resources of the sea. The historical

vision is that in the future it will be the interest of this fund that can be the property of the coming generations. But it will take a while until the vision is fulfilled.

“We have made a system where we will put aside revenue from fisheries during the good years to stabilise our economy. But also, to increase the welfare of our people for the years when there will be reductions.”

Much of the Faroe economy has been based on these wild living natural resources and an increase in volume and quantity of the “catch” fish. To get an impression of why fisheries are so crucial for the country and why it can be so profitable: Last year the Faroe Islands fished 700,000 tons of fish (compared to the total global fisheries of approximately 80 million tons), and that equals approximately 10 to 11 tons per capita per year. Again, that equals 40 kilos of fish per day for every Faroese. That’s a considerable amount. But it is an amount that they cannot rely on. The amount will vary, and that’s the challenge for the future.

“What we are saying with the fishery reform is that we will not only focus on the quantity. In the future we will focus on the quality and the value-adding of the marine resources. That will also stabilise the economy. We have so many people saying that ‘fish is fish’. But no, for the fisheries industry fish is not only fish. It is a massive range of different species, and we fish not only in our waters but with a bilateral agreement with Norway, Iceland, Russia, Greenland and the EU.”

“When one fish stock is up, another one is down. We can have a more diversified economy if we manage to get more value out of every kilogram of fish. It is a huge challenge for the future, not only for us but also for the world and the sustainable

experience has been that they have gone through strong roller coaster economic waves. In the last five or six years, and especially in the previous three years, they have had huge profits in fisheries.

“This is mainly because we also have had high quotas because of the changes in the ecological system and the migration of fish stocks. Already now we can see that there are challenges, some of these quotas will be reduced in the coming years. Unfortunately, the vessels are still oil-based and haven’t yet managed to get that many solutions to where we can drive a fishing fleet without oil. The oil price, which is going up at the moment, is also a challenge for our fishing industry; the environmental energy challenge for our fishing fleet will be huge.”

One way to avoid the roller coaster economy is to create an economic fund primarily formed like the Norwegian Oil Fund where the revenues, also from fisheries, will be placed. The

# “We are the pumping heart of the whole ecosystem of the North Atlantic and the Arctic”

Høgni Hoydal was educated in Denmark and has a masters in history and communications. He entered politics 20 years ago when he became the leader of the Republican Party. As a politician, he has been in several governments in the Faroe Islands. His first service was as Independence Minister, followed by the work as Minister of Education, Research & Culture, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade & Nordic Affairs. He has also worked as Minister of Judicial Affairs. Today, he is also deputy prime minister.

The main challenge for the fishing system or fisheries industry today in the Faroe Islands are to develop the best science-based sustainable system of wild living resources. The second is creating access to these resources through a democratic system, where it’s possible for people and companies to get access to this industry. The third main challenge is to create this value-adding of marine resources.

# “It’s important that we do our part in arranging meetings and research here in the Faroe Islands”

goals of the UN. We shall create more value out of our wild living natural resources and sustainably manage them and not overexploit them.”

Høgni Hoydal’s vision is to take the fishing issues into the traditional academic sectors in the Faroe Islands University. He says there is no consensus yet on that, but they have to work with, for example, economics, law, medicine, very much based upon where the nation is situated in the world.

“We are in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean so much of the traditional academic disciplines can also be related to questions concerning the sustainable use of natural resources. I hope that within five years our university is cooperating with other international universities developing new disciplines and sub-disciplines regarding these issues. It’s important that we can get into the world to debate and address these issues from a Faroese perspective.”

He emphasises that one thing they are very proud of is the research on the Gulf Stream, climate change and the ecosystem in the North Atlantic.

“We see ourselves as ‘the pumping heart of the Arctic’ because all the hot and cold waters have to mix here and

go through the Faroe Islands. We are the pumping heart of the whole ecosystem of the North Atlantic and the Arctic. I also put a massive emphasis on strengthening all our international cooperation in these questions.”

Last year, Høgni Hoydal participated in the international meetings “Fish Crime” in Copenhagen and “Our Oceans” on Malta. The symposium in Denmark was attended by over 250 participants from across the globe, generating discussions on cooperative action required to address transnational organised fisheries crime.

Work is in progress to try to arrange a big meeting in the Faroe Islands with the name “Large Ocean Nations Conference Number 2.” The purpose is to gather as many of these “large ocean nations” to address the management of sea resources, adding value and also the so-called Blue Bioeconomy.

“We aim to say that what today is waste in the fisheries, where you throw out heads, bones and skins of fish, this can perhaps be the most valuable protein of marine resources in the future. It’s important that we do our part in arranging conferences,

meetings and research here in the Faroe Islands.”

Høgni Hoydal says they are working on addressing these questions to the United Nations and the Fisheries & Aquaculture Organization of the UN. They are also trying to work better with the Commonwealth because they have many of these large ocean nations, and the Faroe Islands will also join some of the European organisations.

“We are trying to choose that path to focus on and hope that this will also involve our universities, research institutions and a strong Nordic presentation. It should be a priority in the Nordic Council where we have some Nordic ministers coming as well.”

“My sincere hope is that the Faroe Islands in the future will be even more connected to our neighbours. And that we will be able to address all the global issues of today seen from this part of the world. I think that will be our wish for the future.”





PHOTO Roger Kellerman

## With the Research Activities, **THE CONFERENCES WILL COME**

**DR PÁL WEIHE** is the chief physician at the Department of Occupational and Public Health in the Faroese Hospital System. He studied epidemiology and occupational medicine in Denmark for 20 years before returning to his native Faroe Islands, where he spent the next 20 years studying the effects of mercury, a result of the Faroese tradition of eating whale meat.

With profound cultural implications, his research brought a significant change to the Faroese diet. Until he started the investigations, the pilot whale had been a diet staple. During the 1980s baby-boom, he found that the babies had high levels of mercury in their blood, and that was correlated with the amount of pilot whale their mothers had eaten. The mercury was shown to affect the children's brain negatively. His campaign to reduce whale consumption has made him unpopular at times, but it has been successful.

Pál Weihe has had a life-long career in academia and has been also been working internationally at the same time. The international part of his work predominates and has been a regular part of his working day.

"It has been fantastic to live in a remote place like the Faroes and still be a close colleague

in the international academic environment."

He has also worked in the social administration of health questions for 30 years.

"My knowledge about our society is quite extensive after all these years, and I have seen many people with problems of different kinds. Today the Faroe Islands is a wealthy nation, that's true, and I guess if you calculate our GDP per capita, it will exceed the Danish. But our economy is vulnerable because it is based on natural resources."

"If you take this pelagic fish, which is an essential part of our present wealth, then it is entirely possible that the mackerel and the herring will swim away and there will be an 'empty space' where they left nothing to fish."

Fish farming is another industry that the Faroes wealth is founded on. Pál Weihe says that last autumn, 600–700 salmon died overnight in one fish farming station, and no one could explain why. Perhaps it had something to do with algae or nutrition by fertiliser on land. It was a big question mark over what was going on.

"If it can happen for one farming station, it could theoretically happen to all of them, and there would

be a big empty hole here. With both the mackerel and herring swimming away, and with some disastrous infection disease in the fish farming industry, then we would be poor again. It will be an implosion of the society."

The Faroe Islands has a highly advanced domestic transportation infrastructure. Paved roads connect all the inhabited villages, and 17 land tunnels connect the populated areas. Two underwater tunnels link the various islands, in addition to three bridges and seven ferry lines. The transportation links between the different regions in the Faroes are of great importance to, for example, local businesses.

"Therefore, I have said in public and in private to whoever will listen, that using €300–400 million in making an extra connection via underwater tunnel to the island Streymoy and one to the isle of Sandøy is suboptimal use of money."

"I would use these three, four billion kroná that the tunnel will cost to create an alternative knowledge-based export industry. We already have the most precious thing that, for instance, Saudi Arabia do not have. We have educated people sitting in a waiting position in a neighbouring country, wanting to come home to do

good things. The Saudis have to buy everything, even the educated people, and they recruit doctors from everywhere. We have 120 doctors in the pipeline right now.”

Pál Weihe says that there are about 400 people of Faroese origin that are living abroad, mainly in the Copenhagen area. Most of them are highly educated, i.e. in economics and engineering. Many of them have been waiting for a regular job in the Faroe

are rich today that it’s an uncertain economy. It can go wrong. We have already used much money to educate these people up to an academic level. They are virtually sitting in a waiting position out there. It is a waste of good money and good people from a nation-building perspective.”

Pál Weihe, who is the Chairman of the Doctors Union as well, claims the money spent on the infrastructure project with the underwater tunnels

system that the academics would be in the position to teach as well. And then the great symbiosis would start. The research work at the university related to Health Care will give something back, so these two sectors would unite.

“From my narrow perspective in Health Care and academia, I have said that I want 50 specialists more. And that is something because a specialist with assisting staff would cost around two million per capita.”

Pál Weihe says that if he had the power he would concentrate on creating alternative knowledge-based activities. They should be based on two things. Firstly, they could take a leading position in marine oils. The Faroe Islands have a biomass marine oil of more than half a million tons per day.

“Marine oil today is well known. It is a brand. We could make sure that they were detailed, what quality they have in different seasons of the year, how they are composed, from which fish, and we could detoxify it. We could extract the toxins, which are everywhere in the oceans today, and produce a clean, very well-defined marine oil, both for retail and also the producers in the pharmaceutical industry. It would be a perfect project for the academia and the private industry to do that, to build up an expertise in marine oils which we have such easy access to.”

One of Pál Weihe’s challenges in his position as the head of the Department of Occupational and Public Health is the lack of 400 million kroná for projects. The interest in the Health Care sector within his obligation is that he needs a substantial inflow of money to contribute. He will invite all the specialists who are working in other countries to aim for a position in the Faroes. He would spend the money to expand the

## “His research brought a significant change to the Faroese diet”

Islands now when they are married, and the children are at school, etcetera. But it is not easy to rip the roots up and move the family to the Faroes.

“They want a relevant job. These people don’t want to be just an administrator, and they don’t want only to be a teacher at school. ‘If I could have a job in, for example, the development of fish oils or something for export, that would be perfect for me as a Faroese.’”

“Let’s have all these educated people back. Let’s expand that even in the Health Care sector. All their activities will create other activities because knowledge is the most precious thing we have. What we have today with the mackerel and the herring is ‘gold’, but it is unstable gold unless we transform them into some sophisticated oil products or fractions instead of just catching them, exporting them as they are. That is really in the science of what our developing country can do.”

“The reason I am saying this and my point is that even though we

could be spent more wisely. Stop the construction work which is booming now and use all the money to get educated people to come back. Some of the money could also be spent on Health Care.

“We have calculated that we need 300 million DKK more per year. Nowadays, we use 1.1 billion, and I think we should be on 1.4–1.5 billion DKK to have that expansion. It would give us the opportunity to take some of the treatment from Denmark home to the Faroe Islands, and use the money here with all the spin-off effects this would have.”

“If I could have that budget for the Health Care sector, we could have a strong relation to our University. And all the academic people coming to the Health Care system could teach at the University as well. At the same time, they would have an opportunity to create a small, very modern IT-based education as Medical Doctors.”

However, he says, the demands are that you have to expand the medical capacity so much in the Health Care

## “Our economy is vulnerable because it is based on natural resources”

Health Care system, to be big enough to nourish academia as well, and then maybe doubling with feeding the Health Care system.

The second challenge is the expansion of the University for research activities. Pál Weihe would like the University and the Academic College to have some more money to intensify the research work. He says there are excellent people, but they use almost all their time teaching, and that is not good enough. If you claim that you are at a University, you have to use half your time for free research. Otherwise, you are not a free educator. Instead, you are just a person repeating what the textbook says.

“The definition of a University is that freedom. I am talking as a researcher, and I doubt everything. Otherwise you are just a school, college or high school. With the research activities, the conferences will come because you can do ‘real’ research. What I call real research at least in science and in medicine, is research which is published in international journals.”

“You can always write internal reports, but that is not proper science. If you do that, you can’t do that without international collaboration. And with the collaboration, the

conferences will come as a natural part because the college would like to go to you and have a meeting. And then the meeting could expand and become a congress. Putting the money in the University sector to enhance the research work activities would be very good.”

Pál Weihe’s general concern is also the third challenge.

“We are producing many academics for export. We have not managed to give them creative and knowledge-based jobs where they can use their skills. Let’s bring them home.”





PHOTO Miriam & Janus Photography

# The Unusual Approach IS BORN OF NECESSITY

**POLITICO** is considered one of the world’s leading political media outlets. Every year they make a list called Politico 28, where they select 28 people from 28 countries, who “are shaping, shaking and stirring the future of Europe” and who one should keep a particular eye on in the coming year, in this case – 2019. Most of the names are usually leading politicians, but there are also some people from business, culture, and journalism. Former people who made the cut include René Redzepi, founder of Noma, Daniel Ek, founder of Spotify and Michael O’Leary, founder of Ryanair.

“O’Leary was the only one from the tourism industry who has been on the list, so it feels unreal to come directly after him – the man who has shaken the entire European tourism sector. I am the first Faroese to be on the list, so there has been a lot of attention around it,” says Guðrið Højgaard, director of Visit Faroe Islands and a member of *Politico*’s Class of 2019.

Other names on the list for 2019 include Niklas Zennström, founder of Skype, Jeremy Corbin, Labour (UK),

Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister (Italy), Pedro Sánchez, Prime Minister (Spain), Mary Lou McDonald, Sinn Féin (Ireland) and Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide, Minister for Foreign Affairs (Norway).

*Politico* visited the Faroe Islands twice and inspected Guðrið Højgaard’s work up close. They saw that her challenge had been particularly great because she first had to get her country on the map before she could start selling the destination – and all the while only using modest means.

In their justification for including her in the list *Politico* write that for two years running Visit Faroe Islands has managed to run clever initiatives – i.e. Google Sheep View and Faroe Islands Translate – which have won a wide range of awards, including Cannes Lions two years in a row. Cannes Lion awards are widely considered as the Oscars of the advertising world.

*The New York Times* wrote the following about the Faroe Islands: “The Next Great Scandinavian Destination: Wild, windswept, but yet surprisingly chic!” And about Guðrið Højgaard: “As director of the Faroe Islands’

tourism board, Guðrið Højgaard is both wildly creative and engaging with visitors and locals alike.”

*Politico*: “The country is so far-flung that as of 2016 Google hadn’t bothered visiting the island to create street-view images. So that year, Guðrið Højgaard’s team launched Sheep View, strapping cameras to, well, sheep. Google’s cameras showed up next year, but the tech giant didn’t include Faroese among its translate options. In 2017, Guðrið Højgaard launched Faroe Islands Translate, using local volunteers to provide live, custom translations. In less than two months, 41 per cent of the population pitched in to translate 1.3 million sentences.

“The unusual approach is born of necessity. With little money for media buys, Højgaard’s team had to find unusual ways of grabbing attention. “It was a risky project,” she says. “We couldn’t guarantee any visibility.” Her team spent several days inundated with interview requests, from as far away as Australia. Indeed, providing a twist on the predictable could well be a national theme. You won’t find an amusement park or street

**“We have hundreds of kilometres to our nearest neighbour, that’s what makes us special”**

signs written in English on the Faroe Islands. Tourists are instead invited into living rooms, or boats or caves, for concerts by local musicians, to dinner tables showcasing *distinctively* fermented local proteins or into workshops to learn from families who have perfected the national craft for generations.

Guðrið Højgaard grew up on the islands but then left to study in Copenhagen. She worked in marketing in both Denmark and Stockholm before returning home with her Swedish husband and two children.

Young people leaving the Faroes has long been a trend, but it’s one that’s starting to reverse, thanks in some part to Guðrið Højgaard’s efforts to rebrand the islands as a Nordic jewel. “We hear from young people that one of the reasons they want to come back is that we have made the Faroe Islands cool,” she says. “When you make a destination more interesting for tourists, you also make it more interesting for the locals.”

“I started here in 2012 and have built up the organisation since then. We got to the meetings and events part in 2014 with Annleyp Lamhauge coming in. I began to let go of most of the team. We were six people when

I started, and after three weeks we were three people. One went into retirement, so it was just one of the old ones who was left. We two drove it alone for more than a year. I started recruiting again. We needed to do so because the Tourist Board in the Faroe Islands had been through a lot of turbulence for several years. You got a new organisation every time a new minister was appointed. However, back in 2011/2012, they rebuilt the Tourist Board. It was then that Johannes Jensen was appointed the chairman of the board and I was set as the head,” says Guðrið Højgaard.

“Now we have a meetings and events department, but thankfully since 2012 we have had a complete work atmosphere – since then we have been able to work in peace and have had complete support from politicians.”

“When I first started in May 2012, I used the holiday, or the whole summer vacation, to write the marketing strategy. I submitted it in early August and in September we already found out that we got the second budget from January 1, 2013. When you get more money, you also get more power and more people who are interested in working with you. More qualified applicants and more

talented employees who do a good job. And even if you think that it is not huge money, we went from 6 to 13 million DKK. A world of difference.”

“But we have been fortunate, we have succeeded in getting very talented employees, succeeded in getting incredibly talented partners, our advertising agencies, one Faroese and one Danish. For me, it was essential to both have the local leg plus to have the appearance from abroad. They did an incredibly good job with the whole branding of the Faroe Islands which has proven to last in the long run as well. I do not know how many awards we have won for it – but somewhere around 80?”

“When we won in Cannes in 2017, three lions actually, it was the first time the Faroe Islands had won in such a context. And we have won again in 2018. Personally, I think that the experiences I had received from Sweden – I worked first with Visit Denmark first and then at Visit Stockholm for seven years – helped me during this process. It meant that before we started, I had a clear picture of what we were supposed to do and achieve.”

“In 2012, young people still did not think that it was cool to be here. Too little happened, and it is the big

**“We have succeeded in getting very talented employees and partners”**

cities that drew them. There was even a book called *Exit the Faroe Islands*. We asked the question: What should we do to get back the young people? I remember I was asked in one of the first interviews if I saw it as a marketing process – that the branding process was going to be a means to get back some of the youth? However, you do not go around and think that it will have that effect too, but in retrospect, it has proved that it has contributed very much positively to it. Firstly, the Faroe Islands became more interesting both here in the Faroe Islands, but the outside world began to cover us in every possible international press. We started from under 50 journalists in 2012 to, in recent years, having between 250 to 270 journalists coming to write about us. They are all coordinated from our office.”

“There has been fantastic work done by our PR team. Then I hired our digital guy who is very good – he was an award-winning Faroese photographer in Denmark for 20 years, who chose to come back home. We have been fortunate to have recruited super-talented employees.”

“Now we have a new minister since a few years back. He has supported what he has seen we have created, so

that the politicians decided last year, with his backing, to put money in a domestic development department from this year onwards. I have hired two new employees, who started in April 2018. They have a development task ahead, and they work with the locals.”

“The meetings and events business has been an important piece in extending the season. At the same time, we still have minimal resources in that area. Our players are still small, and it has taken some time to get Tórshavn’s municipality onboard. Though it seems to be succeeding now, so we will speed up it, and we will manage to get more money so that we can invest more systematically and long-term in that way. It is very exciting.”

“So, there are some challenges, but I still see them as a positive, a natural part of the process. Meetings and events are an important part for us, and that is so awesome. I’m so grateful that we have a special destination. Because I’ve seen cases from towns in America, small villages, or regions of Poland, or in Latvia or Scotland or everywhere trying to ‘stand out’ and how do you do it? There I think we are very lucky to have a destination that makes us special and very visual.

That we are a small group of islands located in a sea desert, that we have hundreds of kilometres to our nearest neighbour, that’s what makes us special. What you are is where you are. So that’s what we will discuss in the future, to tell the stories that create you. You know all these boards like Google who have been here. French designers, and various companies like the creator of Netflix, who ended up fixing a better server for us. Some companies have also started coming here, and they come here because they feel that – oh no one has been.”





PHOTO Beinta á Torkilshegg

## There Are Still Many Things **TO LEARN FROM HISTORY**

**KOKS IS PROBABLY** one of the most remote foodie destinations in the world. The restaurant opened in April 2011, launched by Johannes Jensen, a Faroese entrepreneur who today owns twelve restaurants. At first, Koks occupied the dining room in the Føroyar, the fanciest hotel in the capital, Tórshavn, also held by Johannes Jensen. Today Koks is located by the lake Leynavatn in a turf-roofed farmhouse built in 1741. The road leading there is more like a rocky pathway, which adds to the authentic Faroese experience.

Koks means a flirt in Faroese or someone who fusses over something in the chase for perfection. The courses at the restaurant are made up almost exclusively of foods that are raised or cultivated on the Faroes or found in local waters. Among the

ingredients are fish, shellfish, seaweed, lamb and such root vegetables as turnips and potatoes.

Poul Andrias Ziska started as a trainee and was one of the first employees, but today he has been the head chef of the two-star restaurant since 2014. The initial Michelin citation in 2017 led to a surge in reservations, especially from international gastronomes.

On the question of the next step forward for Koks, Poul Andrias Ziska answers that there are a lot of aspects. It's an ongoing process.

"We have an idea of what the ultimate dining experience should be, and that's what we are going for. I'm focusing a lot on the creative process behind everything to make time for digging in the food culture that we have, the produce we have. There



## “I am especially proud of being the first Michelin star restaurant on the Faroe Islands”

are still many things we can learn from our history. There are a lot of things that haven't been discovered yet regarding the ingredients we have around us, both in the sea and on the land. There are also different techniques to play with when it comes to the potential of the flavour of these ingredients.”

The dream for Poul Andrias Ziska and his team is to have something in-between a farm and a garden where they can cultivate herbs, berries, mushrooms, and bushes. To be able to have easier access to the source of the Faroese ingredients would make it much easier.

“We don't have any people or any place where we can buy these things. We have to get them ourselves. It's not an issue, but it's time-consuming. It is something that I want to work on and then trying to improve the team, the work standards. There are a lot of things that we can evolve,” says Poul Andrias Ziska.

He adds that the location in Leynavatn, a twenty minutes drive from Tórshavn, is not 100 per cent permanent. Sometime in the future, they are planning to build a new, functional restaurant where every detail is taken care of. But some questions are

waiting for answers before that will happen.

“Shall we wait with the farm, or should we start to farm the land around the restaurant in collaboration with the farmers around. There are some questions that we need to get the answers for before we set up a new restaurant.”

Poul Andrias Ziska claims that the success of Koks is not about the location – their new setting is not the most important thing for their achievements of today. It's not about being in the centre or being outside the city.

“It's more about what we want our guests to be a part of, and definitely when you are out in nature, it adds to the experience. We are delighted to do that. The new restaurant will be somewhere where you can genuinely feel the nature around you.”

The first Michelin star for a restaurant anywhere in the world is a very happy moment. Koks has been a rising star for a long time, and the attention has been increasing every year. Receiving the first Michelin star was a ‘wow’ moment for Poul Andrias Ziska personally.

“In all the things you achieve personally, in ten or 15 years you can look back and say: ‘Wow, I achieved this’. I

am especially proud of being the first Michelin star restaurant on the Faroe Islands. The star is something no one ever can take away from you, nor the restaurant.”

Thanks to the star Koks received even more attention, i.e. international media, guests and bloggers. Also, chefs were applying to work there. There was a huge amount of interest from everywhere. Poul Andrias Ziska believes it can be of more importance to have a Michelin star restaurant in Paris or London. It does not have the same effect in the Faroe Islands because Koks is the only Michelin star restaurant in the archipelago.

“We are doing something that's not typical for Michelin star restaurants. Our main attraction is the fact that we are working locally, and with the special circumstances that we have here.”

The success of Koks must be significant for the marketing of the Faroe Islands as a destination, even if there are some other very good restaurants. Of course, nature is a big advantage as well.

“I think it's vital. After we received the Michelin star, we got a lot of bookings. We calculated how much we made financially from that. And then we tried to look at what other people





PHOTO Beinta á Torkishaygi

## “One of the most remote foodie destinations in the world”

benefit from this. For example, the local airline, Atlantic Airways, sold for more than a million only in people flying back and forth to come to our restaurant. Several local companies gained advantages from the attention we received.”

A destination like Koks is a driver to the local economy. The guests have to fly to the Faroe Islands, and they have to sleep and eat somewhere else, too. The still rising interest in the two-star restaurant creates a lot of economic impact to the society. It also drives a lot of knowledge sharing. For example, the chefs working at Koks come from nine different countries, and they share their skills.

Another aspect Poul Andrias Ziska highlights, is the fact that Koks uses local, sustainable produce.

“I can imagine it also affects the value on the market of fish exported from here. It is not just thanks to us, but when you have a lot of positive things said about your product, it will increase value.”

When it comes to future challenges, Poul Andrias Ziska says that there are some small ones for Koks’ continuing success.

“In winter we close for January, February and March. That’s a challenge regarding keeping the staff and

trying to make a financially sustainable business. We have a season, and we have to work with that. In the future, when we have a permanent address, we are planning not to close down during the winter. That would be a challenge because we have to find other ways to activate our staff. That’s something we have to consider because it is a bit complicated to start every year with a new team.”

Something else Poul Andrias Ziska and his team needs to work on is the upcoming farm or garden.

“We need products to work with, time to find new things and time to work with it. That’s a technical challenge. But, also, the problem of having the right team, having the proper knowledge in such a small place as the Faroe Islands. The people we want and that can help us, they don’t grow on trees.”

*In-between meeting with Poul Andrias Ziska for this interview and the time of publication, Koks was awarded a second Michelin star.*



# Hoyma Concerts

## TAKE PLACE IN PRIVATE HOMES

**THE FAROE** Islanders' winter tradition of throwing their doors open to neighbours has inspired a music festival, Hoyma. Ten villagers will open their homes for this anti-festival, and their home is the scene. It is an authentic experience with no stage, no lighting, no amps and no security.

Ten leading Faroese artists play 20 gigs in the living rooms of varying family homes in Gøta, close to the beach where the "G! Festival" takes place every summer. Jón Tyril is the founder of the anti-festival, as he calls Hoyma, and developed the concept in 2013. But the idea for this event started back in 2007 after the rock festival went bankrupt. At the time Jón Tyril was exhausted from struggling with the significant work behind the scenes: the budgeting, sound and light systems, stages and security, etcetera.

"All this machinery also creates a huge distance between the performer and the audience. I realised that many of my most powerful music experiences had been in small and humble circumstances."

Jón Tyril decided to get back to basics and get rid of the technology and set the stage in the home of the spectator. Initially, the working title for the event was Anti Festival. Then the festival got the name Heimafestival which means Home Festival. In the end, the final name was decided – Hoyma. It is a derivation from the Faroese word for home, 'heima', but spelt incorrectly, according to how it is pronounced in the local Gøta dialect. To get people to come to the

smaller concerts, Jón Tyril used Facebook and volunteers.

The "G! Festival" is still a rock festival. It started in 2000 and was the first outdoor festival in the Faroe Islands. The stage is on the beach, in a barn or old houses. Jón Tyril explains that it was a massive set up like festivals in other places. It was tiresome to organise the event with the artists, the lights and security.

"The Hoyma concept is inexpensive with few risks. The booking of artists can be made in one day. It is so easy. Last year we started Hoyma Bit with only one artist. The concert takes place in one house, and we serve fresh homemade traditional food, it is included in the ticket price. Our target audience is tourists coming to the Faroe Islands, and we can welcome 400 visitors."

Jón Tyril is not a fan of having a vision of Hoyma.

"Often, the vision can take over, and you can get detached from your real life. You just run for something you see in the horizon until you wake up one day. I believe I had the luck to get bankrupt in 2007. My thoughts are more in the direction to make something sustainable, which can work without too much effort, and add something that gives a purpose to people. I love music, and I feel much more joy hearing Teitúr playing in the living room than listening to U2 in a stadium."

Hoyma is an open source concept, which means anybody can use the idea. It has happened, so far, twice in Iceland, once in Denmark and

two times in the Faroe Islands. The concept is easy to adapt, and there is so little risk to copy it.

"I am doing what I find interesting right now, and that's what I have always done. I have finished the festival project, and it is in better hands now. I am focusing on smaller projects. If people get bored and there is no excitement left, then I could do my concerts at home."

One of the drivers for Jón Tyril is to make something that children can enjoy.

"It is nice when kids grow up and can see all these artists, there were no concerts when I was a kid. When I was a young musician the most powerful and inspiring concerts were the ones in small venues where you could see exactly what the band was doing. It is a trip to the basics to be in a living room together with the performer. The identification and connection are much stronger and gives inspiration to other musicians and also the community."

Hoyma is a flexible concept that suits meetings, conferences and events. The delegates experience authentic Faroese music, food, hospitality and social life.

"It is easy to scale up and down. You can be in one house, or you can be in ten homes with 20 or 200 people. We have not done ten homes on demand for a conference yet, but it would be easy to do it, and it is a part of our offer. If you like it is possible to add something extra, like the sauna or hot tubs on the beach," says Jón Tyril.





## In a Small Nation, YOU HAVE TO BE PRAGMATIC

**THE FAROE ISLANDS** is a self-governing nation with a high degree of autonomy encompassed by the external sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark. The Faroese political system is a variation of the Scandinavian-type parliamentary democracy, with its own democratically elected legislative assembly, and an executive government headed by the Prime Minister.

The origin of the Faroese Parliament can be traced back more than one thousand years. It consists of 33 members serving for four years. They are elected by popular vote, and the Faroe Islands vote as a single constituency. Additionally, two Faroese representatives are elected to the Danish Parliament in Copenhagen.

Since 1948, the legislative assembly has had legislative power as regards to the areas which have been taken over as separate jurisdiction by the Home Rule Act. The Faroese Government has the executive power within these areas, and the Faroese court system is under the jurisdiction of the high courts in Denmark.

“The political system in the Faroe Islands is very much like the political system everywhere else in the world. Besides the question of left-right in politics, the Faroese also have to consider the issue of the relations to Denmark in the Faroese political system; if you are a unionist or a separatist. That gives the Faroese politics another dimension. We also have a

situation with Denmark being a part of the European Union, while we are outside. Denmark has a lot of European legislation as a part of the EU that’s not applied to the Faroe Islands. Working both in this political system and as a lawyer, managing with this jungle of different laws is interesting,” says Jonhard Klettheyggj.

He is the Director of the Faroese parliament with a staff of 12 employees. In the Faroe Islands, with its population of 50,000 inhabitants, they have to do things differently compared to many other countries in the world. Usually, you can have a specialist working in a specific area, and they get specialised. In a small nation, you have to be pragmatic. If the population is small then most likely there is a lack of specialists in some fields.

“We don’t have enough people to have that many specialists. Instead we have generalists. They are very good at what they are doing and become experts in working in several different fields. Here in the administration of the parliament, I have only two lawyers working with me. We have to cover all the areas the parliament has to take care of. They have a lot of different tasks.”

Jonhard Klettheyggj studied law in Copenhagen during the ‘90s. But he grew up in Sandvik, a small town on the southernmost island in the Faroese archipelago, with only 150 residents when he left back in 1992.

“I had never been to Copenhagen before, so it was quite a cultural experience. But I always wanted to get back home so that I could be a part of this society and do something for the nation as well.”

When Jonhard Klettheyggj came back from Copenhagen, he started as a lawyer with the Ministry of Social Affairs. After that, he worked in a new institution together with the country’s first parliamentary ombudsman.

The institution of the ombudsman follows the Scandinavian tradition of good governance. The ombudsman is a neutral party appointed by the Faroese Parliament, and his role is to monitor the central and local government authorities and to protect the rights of the citizens. The ombudsman is elected for five years, and Jonhard Klettheyggj applied for the job as the ombudsman’s assistant.

“It was inspiring both starting this institution, but also working as an assistant together with this experienced retired judge. I stayed there for over seven years, and then I became the chief legal adviser for the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health. I worked for both those ministries from 2008 until I started here three years ago.”

The Faroe Islands may be a small society with around 50,000 inhabitants, but the interest in politics is very high. About 95 per cent of the people entitled to vote take part in the elections.

“Everybody that has any interest in politics could put a name to the photo of every single parliamentarian, and also know what party they represent. Every meeting of the parliament is broadcast on national TV and Internet radio.”

“Faroese people have a lot of interest in society, and we know that many people are following what is happening in the political system.

way it should be and if it complies with the Constitution.”

The parliament year starts on St Olaf’s day, 29 July, and continues for a whole year. They have approximately 120 meetings a year. For the seven standing committees, they have committee meetings on finance, foreign affairs, fishery and industries, welfare, culture, judicial affairs and governmental affairs.

parliament co-operation. They are a form of regional co-operation and attended by Nordic politicians, chosen as members of the Council by their country’s parliament, and Nordic government ministers. They all take part in the debates on important issues for Nordic co-operation, but the right to vote is limited to the parliamentary members. Usually, all of the Nordic prime ministers attend and take part in the later debate with the politicians.

The Faroese people are privileged when it comes to languages. They have Faroese as their mother-tongue, which is very close to Icelandic.

“We can read and understand Icelandic. If they lower the speed while speaking, many of us will also understand what they are saying or get the meaning of it. We have Danish at school from the third grade and English from the fourth. But having Faroese and learning Danish gives us the key to crack both Norwegian and Swedish. We understand everything in both languages,” says Jonhard Klettheyggj.

“If the parliamentarian works with the official authorities, they are allowed to have a part-time job, but if they work privately, they can do whatever they want, i.e. having their own company.”

There are also meetings held between the parliaments in the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland, and the speakers from the three parliaments meet every year with the administration as well.

“Then the presidency of the parliament of the Faroe Islands meets with the presidency of the Danish parliament. There is also the Nordic Council Session, where all the parliament speakers from the Nordic countries meet. We also meet with all the parliament speakers from all the Nordic countries during the Nordic Council Session.”

The Sessions are forums in which Nordic politicians discuss Nordic issues with the prime ministers and other ministers of the Nordic countries. The Sessions are the supreme decision-making body for the Nordic

Some people are even asking whether we will broadcast the meetings in the parliament on a radio station, so they don’t have to sit in front of the computer or TV. Instead, they might listen to the politicians while driving the car or are gone fishing.”

In 2012, it was decided to make the Parliament paperless. Instead, every politician got an iPad where they have all their cases. Any information they need for doing their duty is on the iPad, and all matters that they need to handle – as committee members – will also be on the device.

“We are not politicians in any way, and we don’t care if the politicians decide this or that as long as it goes by the book. That’s our job. Our challenge is to make everything go as smooth as possible. We have to go by the rules that apply to the parliament and how things should be done here, whenever there is a bill that comes into the parliament that’s meant to be a law at the other end. We look into the words to check whether there are any faults or anything that’s not the



PHOTO Beinta á Torkisheyggi

# Raest

## AUTHENTICALLY FAROESE

IN MAY 2016, the Faroe Islands saw the opening of what might be the world’s first “fermented” restaurant. Raest is entirely dedicated to traditional Faroese fermented foods. It is the only restaurant outside of Japan with a menu consisting of nothing but fermented dishes.

“Raest” means fermented in Faroese. Unlike the wet fermenting process for yoghurt and pickled herring, the Faroes’ salty, brisk air creates ideal conditions for air-drying meat and fish. It is a process done in “hjallur”, food-drying sheds scattered across the islands.

The restaurant is located in a creaky 400-year-old house in Tórshavn, the capital. The narrow dining room’s floors, walls and ceilings are built of salvaged driftwood. The standard table seats 27 guests and is made from the reclaimed Douglas pine of an old schooner’s mast.

The menu is an interesting read. Every dish is fermented: lamb soup with turnips, cod and lamb intestines, colon on sauerkraut, rhubarb

porridge with cream of burned rosemary. For dessert: waffles, jam and milk. The dishes are not too big but filled with lots of flavours. The chefs serve the food themselves, including the drinks. The menu at our visit also provided a small language lesson:

- Grind og spik/Pilot whale and blubber.
- Ræstur fiskur, eplaskúm og purra/Fermented cod, potato foam and leek.
- Lambslivur, bygg og soppar/Lamb’s liver, barley and mushrooms.
- Ræst kjøt og røtur eftir árstíðini/Fermented lamb and seasonal roots.
- Fermenteraðar rabarbur, villarurtur og lavrberblaðisur/Fermented rhubarbs, wild herbs and bay leaf ice cream.

The drink list offers, for example, white wine from Slovenia, Manzanilla sherry from Spain, and red Spanish wine. There is also a selection of local beer, aquavit and French cider. If you

prefer something else the restaurant offers a widely-reviewed and appreciated juice menu.

A full tasting menu, including drinks, costs almost 200 Euro, and is, to say the least, a different experience. Maybe you get used to the smells of a fermented environment during an evening. It is interesting to take part in the ancient Faroese fermented tradition in such an authentic house.

Raest is one part of the Faroese entrepreneur Johannes Jensen’s growing restaurant empire. If you like fermented food, this is probably one of the world’s best restaurants of its kind. It does not compete with Koks, another Faroese restaurant which has two stars in the Michelin Guide. But if we speak of genuine Faroese food tradition Raest is as authentically Faroese as it gets.





PHOTO Beinta á Torkishveggi

## The Meeting Industry IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR US

**THE MAGAZINE** *National Geographic Traveler* has named the Faroe Islands one of the world's most fascinating places. Mainly because this barren island group offers natural and cultural experiences beyond the ordinary. But the Faroe Islands are also a paradise for craftsmen, not least wool and yarn.

The Faroe Islands are still genuine, untouched and authentic. Its history dates back to the 500s when Irish monks discovered the islands. The oldest evidence for Faroese knitting is found in Norwegian legal documents from the late 16th century. The royal monopoly trade bought socks for the soldiers and it was the most important export item from the Faroe Islands in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Sweaters became an increasingly important commodity during the 19th century, which accounted for half of the export from the Faroe Islands at the time when the monopoly trade was replaced by free trade, in 1856. Tradition and craftsmanship have since continued. Synthetic material has since the 1970s replaced

much of the wool, not only in the Faroe Islands – but in recent years it has again become popular to knit and nature-related products have an increasingly larger market.

Gudrun and Gudrun attracted international attention through Sarah Lund – in the Danish television series *Brottet* – wearing the sweater they created. When the series was shown in England, great interest was raised in the fashion magazines. *British Vogue* stated that the sweater was “to die for”, and Prince Charles’ wife, Camilla, got one as present when she visited the recordings.

“We met already in 2000 and building a big business was not the first reason for me to knock on her door. I had been living abroad for many years and I had a completely different career. I studied political science and was a partner in a consultancy in Denmark, working with European Union projects in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. But I was always at home a lot in the Faroes. And coming here in the summer and seeing all the bonfires

with the wool was really heartbreaking because suddenly when we met in 2000, it's like in the 90s everybody was looking away from home. They were looking at Gore-Tex and new materials and if it was new it was good. If it was foreign, it was good. We really didn't treasure what we had back home. It was the wool in the summers and in the slaughtering time in the autumn it was all the lamb skins. All the lamb skins were destroyed and burned, it was almost like they couldn't get rid of all the skins. For many years before that we didn't really use the skins for anything precious – we sold it to the Soviet Union to make ‘nappa’ of, and actually it is too good for that. And nobody used it at the time for that, and for many, many years there was a small producer, a tannery, that made small sleeping bags for babies, but not more than that,” says Gudrun Rógvadóttir.

“That is why I knocked on her door. I didn't know about the other goods. I had read an article about Gudrun Ludvig, that she was a

## “Sweaters became an increasingly important commodity”

designer and that she had returned, and she had made something with Faroese materials and then I thought, well, I’ll knock on her door and see what happens.”

“And it’s really interesting because from day one she had the creative thing and needed a partner to take care of the other part of it. I had the idea and I really needed somebody to create all this. For the first years we didn’t even sit down at all. We were stealing time from everybody. From everything. From our families. When I came to her the first time, I was pregnant with my second child, and we were stealing time, all the time. During the weekends, during my holidays, when I was travelling when we started the company. I was always doing the tax papers before twelve o’clock on a fax machine in Slovenia or somewhere else, so for many years it was like that.”

They started their first business with lamb skins and first sold it locally and in 2002 they entered their first fashion fair in Denmark. Gudrun Rógvadóttir took some of the hand knitted sweaters because they didn’t have so many styles of the lamb skins. Gudrun Ludvig worked for a designer in Denmark and also for Sabine Poupinel and she said:

You should focus on knitting because that’s where your niche could be. Two very interesting things happened, the Japanese found it very appealing and it was the hand knit that people really looked for more than the lamb skin. Since then they have focussed much more on the hand knit.

**Both of you have got the passion and the mission, but what is your vision?**

“Our vision is to create clothing for conscious consumers that care about each other, the environment and the natural resources. That must be the vision, not the mission. The mission is selling and the way to do that.”

**Where does designer Gudrun Ludvig find her inspiration?**

“I think that if you locked her in a black box she would still create. Some people are just born creative and she is. Sometimes if you are on the Faroe Islands and you talk about fashion, it can be like being in a black box, so you need to be even creative to find the inspiration to create. Creation comes from everywhere, from Faroese life, from old stories, from faded pictures and from nature – and she says – how can I not be inspired? Walking from home to my office every day you see a new painting with new colours, and it’ll change ten times. And we do a lot of travelling, but she

cannot go travelling a lot because she can’t absorb it all and says – let me come home, so it gets too much for her. Thus, I’m the one travelling much more, and she comes along sometimes when she feels she has the energy to take it all in.”

“In the start it was always like Gudrun Ludvig’s mother was knitting and all of our friends. Jorun was the first one we employed – she was a good friend of Gudrun. I remember when Jorun started and she was a very good knitter and now my daughter is employed with us as well and it’s like friends and family. My sister-in-law is a very good knitter, so we never applied for knitters in the Faroes. Everybody is knocking on our door so we always have enough knitters here but of course we sooner or later found that we needed to have knitters from abroad also because on the Faroe Islands you could not have that as a full-time job. It’s like in the evenings and weekends you can knit because we can pay per piece, we cannot pay an hourly wage for it.”

**You have got interesting knitting projects in Jordan, Peru and Syria. How did this happen?**

“We still know all the faces of our knitters both in Jordan and in Peru. During my former job I was stationed

## “Seeing all the bonfires with the wool was really heartbreaking”

in Jordan for half a year, that’s why it’s Jordan. There’s a big Circassian community in Jordan and traditionally they are very good knitters. Initially, it was very much this Circassian community but now we also have a lot of Syrian refugees working for us.”

“In Peru we got an invitation because we used a lot of alpaca and it was more sustainable to make it there. Also, because they have the knowledge about the wool. It’s also a beautiful community, beautiful people and stories that go way back. Every time we go to Peru, we insist on going to the knitters’ places and we go to this place south of Lima, a poor neighbourhood and coming into their houses, they will shout down the street – now they are all here. We will tell them what’s happening in the company and they serve us food and they show us – look at this wall, we made it from the money we had last year, like building the house bit by bit every year. Also, in Jordan it’s fantastic to come to the place and have workshops and they come with their plastic bags with their wool and sweaters in buses from the suburbs, and as soon as they come inside and we close the doors they take off their scarves, they smoke cigarettes and

they tell dirty jokes and they are transformed completely.”

**There is a lot of talk about sustainability these days. How does this effect you and your work?**

“Some of those hardcore sustainability people will try to trap you. They try and try to ask you, and I say we are not trying to claim that we are 100 per cent right in what we are doing but we are trying to do our very best. That is the important thing – for example, we tried to get rid of plastic. Every one of those sweaters would have a polybag, we bundle them in different colours and sizes. For example, when we have goods from Jordan, and we have one big box we need to have one big plastic bag and have all the sweaters in that. And yes, that’s plastic but with the humidity in Jordan if we don’t do that it will be destroyed. But instead of having 30 bags we have one, that must be better than having 30. It’s more like using common sense not like being hysterical. We try to do the best we can.”

**How important are exhibitions for your market plan?**

“We would like it to be one third shop, one third online and one third wholesale. But the shop has more than 30 per cent of the business now and e-commerce is a bit more than

wholesale. But e-commerce is very easy, you just have your website, but if you really want to make it big in e-commerce you would also have to work with different platforms and so on. It’s not just enough to have gudrunandgudrun.com. You will have to work on some of the big platforms and that’s like a whole different story. You need a lot of people, and in most companies the most expensive people are the e-commerce people. We don’t have money for that kind of e-commerce people, so we have people doing digital marketing for us and I think they are developing all the time.”

“But also, the meeting industry on the Faroe Islands is very, very important for us, that part, apart from the business part, is why we want to be here the most. We feel that every time we have big conferences here, they bring the buyers.”





PHOTO Amy Hansen

# The Faroese Economy FACES THREE MAIN CHALLENGES

**THE FAROE ISLANDS** is a small open economy where the fishing industry has for decades been a significant driver. The business sector is gradually becoming more and more diversified. Important and promising areas include financial services, petroleum-related businesses, shipping, maritime services, civil aviation, IT and telecommunications, tourism and creative industries. Some are already well established, while others are up-and-coming.

Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that the Faroese are a seafaring people. The areas of expertise are still the ocean and associated fields of knowledge – fisheries, shipping, navigation, aquaculture, oceanography, marine biology and biotech, as well as marine-related engineering and physics. The ongoing work within these fields in the Faroe Islands is recurrently pioneering.

Fishing and its related industries account for around 20 per cent of the gross value added to the Faroese economy, and the fish industry employs approximately 15 per cent of the labour force.

The Faroe Islands have a well-established financial sector constituted by four banks, two insurance companies, two life insurance companies and some public funds. The banks are under the supervision of The Danish Financial Supervisory Authority. The currency is the Faroese króna, issued by the Danish National Bank, and with the same value as the Danish Krona.

The Faroe Islands is ranked among the wealthiest economies in the world based on GDP per capita. From 1998 to 2015 the Faroese GDP has more than doubled from 7.4 billion DDK to 16.7 billion DDK.

Fluctuations in growth rates between years is a typical feature of the economy due to both its limited size and the high dependency on the exports of fish goods, accounting for between 90 and 95 per cent of total export goods value.

What is happening with the Faroese economy in the long and midterm horizon? Today this small nation has a rising and booming economy, mainly driven by large public investments in infrastructure but also some private investments.

“It was to some extent a meltdown in the early ‘90s, but then the society was completely different. Today we have much better infrastructure, both economic and real infrastructure. The economy is way better off in taking a slowdown in activity. Back in the ‘90s, there were no public subsidies for people getting unemployed, and it was just like no pay. And a lot of people didn’t have any pension savings either, but all that has been rectified in the last decades,” says Rune Nørregaard, head of finance and credit, Bank Nordik in Tórshavn.

“We are dependent on living resources in the sea, and the world market prices on fish and fish products. To the extent that the resources will vary, and the prices fluctuate, we can look forward to more flat

growth rates than we have seen in the past. The economy should be able to absorb it.”

Rune Nørregaard says that the signs from the politicians and the government show they are aware that the Faroe Islands has a booming economy. They are aware that their investments are boosting it, and also claim they would like to hold back and save finances for a worse time.

“We have a reasonably well-developed economy although we are heavily exposed to the world market prices and the availability of fish resources. From my perspective as a banker we will see increased activity in the economy this year and 2020, it will not slow down. It would be preferable for the Faroese economy to get a ‘second leg’ to stand on, the best bet would be tourism as we see it.”

According to Rune Nørregaard, the Faroese economy faces three main challenges.

“The main challenge is being able to control the boom, and not over-investing the boom and thereby increasing the downside when the growth rates wear off.”

“The runner up challenge is providing the fishing industry, which along with salmon farming is our primary industry, with a clearer legal framework, both in respect of taxes and regulations in general, than the one in effect today.”

The housing market has not been that well diversified on the Faroe Islands. Something has to be done to



be able to accommodate all classes of society in respect of housing and thereby be able to supply workforce to those kinds of jobs that the future economy will require.

“Also, the tourism industry will come with the lower paid jobs more than any other sector. That’s good because these kinds of jobs have been disappearing from the factories because they are getting more effi-

and the company has a reasonably significant market share on the Faroe Islands.

“We don’t see any real opportunity to grow more here. Our focus on growth and increased revenue is coming from abroad. Our primary strategic task at management level is creating a bank and a financial institution able to efficiently run our foreign branches. We have done that

international bank and financial institute, and also to manage and develop the bank’s activities on the Faroe Islands, but mainly abroad.

“Our main focus is to grow overseas, but the work is executed from the Faroe Islands.”

“Moreover, we see that tourism is excellent for the Faroese economy. The tourism industry may be able to create some of the missing jobs for the lower-educated part of the workforce. We can create jobs for the more educated. Many of the Faroese people take master’s degrees abroad, and there are not necessarily so many of that kind of jobs available here.”

During the years there has been a lot of foreign investments in the primary businesses of the fisheries. Rune Nørregaard says there is generally a positive view of foreign investors because people know by experience that the investors bring a lot of knowledge, experience and know-how into the economy. On the other hand, and on the political side, lately, when it comes to the fisheries, there has been some protectionism showing and putting up a zero-for-foreign-ownership regime in respect of fishing rights.

“There has been quite a debate on that, and we have tried to fight it. We believe it is good to have foreign investors because they come with knowledge, and also risk capital. However, for now, there is a standstill. The foreign investors that are on the Faroe Islands are allowed to be here, but they will have to exit within the next four or five years. I assume the last word is not said in that debate.”

for quite some years. It’s been a long process where we have consulted on many activities here on the Faroe Islands.”

Rune Nørregaard explains that Bank Nordik is ‘one’ bank in three different markets. All back-office work is done from the Faroe Islands, and more or less all management. Being more digital, the bank has created a lean and effective setup of international activities and making them even more profitable. Today Bank Nordik is much better equipped to meet the future.

“The Danish banking market is very competitive, and we learn a lot there. However, we have to be on our toes not to be beaten by our competition. That’s our main focus. We create a lot of jobs here on that account. In this building, approximately 40 jobs are dependent on our foreign activities.”

Bank Nordik has created many workplaces on the Faroe Islands, and Rune Nørregaard claims they will keep doing so as they grow their activities abroad. The main focus is not to create a local bank but an



PHOTO Sara Appelgren

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# How the Faroe Islands CAN BECOME NUMBER ONE IN THE ICCA STATISTICS

**THE INTERNATIONAL** Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) has around 1,000 members from all over the world. Mostly convention bureaus from significant business events cities such as Barcelona, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, Singapore, Madrid, Prague, Lisbon, and Seoul – to mention the ten destinations that were on top of the statistic billboard in 2017. For example, Barcelona had 195 congresses.

When it comes to countries, the USA is number one with 941 congresses. Sweden is number 15 with 255; Denmark holds number 20 with 203. Finland and Norway are number 29 with 156 meetings each, and Iceland is number 55 with 40. This means that Scandinavia is in position number two in the world when it comes to international conferences, with a total of 810. It is fantastic!

The USA has 330 million inhabitants, and Germany, which has 83 million inhabitants, was placed number two in the rankings with 682 congresses during 2017. It’s an amazing figure. It is even more amazing if we consider the inhabitants in the figures Iceland shows, with its population

of 350,000 people. It’s one meeting per 9,560 inhabitants. The USA has, as a comparison, one meeting per 350,000 people. If the USA had as many conferences per inhabitant as Iceland, they should have had 33,000 business meetings instead of 941.

But there are only something like 15,000 congresses and conventions every year in the world, that is what we have to keep in mind. This means that if the Faroe Islands had six ICCA meetings (the ICCA statistics are built upon at least 50 participants from at least three countries in meetings that are on a rolling basis at least every second year), it would translate into one meeting per 8,333 inhabitants and, voilà, the Faroes would become number one in the world. In the statistics for countries, it would read number 107 with nations such as Lebanon (6 million people), Mongolia (3 million), and Namibia (2.2 million). That is impressive.

I guess that the Faroe Islands can aim for at least ten ICCA congresses per year. It means an international meeting per every 5,000 inhabitants in the country.

Looking at the economic side of the Scandinavian countries they seem like tiny countries in terms of population. Altogether we’re talking about approximately 27 million people. But if you put all the Scandinavian countries together, they’re the fourth biggest economy in the world. Small states can make a difference.

Looking at the fishing industry in the Faroe Islands, landing 700,000 tons of fish in 2017, we do understand that the fishery industry needs to have at least one international fishery meeting in the Faroe Islands every year. And why not take the initiative, creating a global conference on marine natural resources and the International Blue Bioeconomy Congress.

Welcome to the new world of international meetings. The Faroe Islands is already there, and this is only the beginning.

## “It would be preferable for the Faroese economy to get a ‘second leg’ to stand on”

cient. As the fishing vessels are getting more efficient and don’t require the same kind of labour force, it’s a good thing that another industry can make room for this part of the workforce. However, they still have to live somewhere.”

“Usually you own your house in the Faroe Islands. There are no apartments for rent, and that is an issue that has to be dealt with to create a stable workforce.”

Rune Nørregaard says the third challenge is quite challenging. A foreman in the fishing industry is talking about zero-foreign-ownership percentage which is not fully implemented yet.

“Our economy would greatly benefit in just getting clarity on what are the regulations in respect of fisheries and fish resources going forward, and also, tax-wise, the debate on how to tax it. We would benefit in making clear what the investors and the businesses have to navigate under.”

Bank Nordik is an international company, and half of their top line business is from abroad. The revenue comes from Denmark and Greenland,



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