

Tracing the Viking's Voyage to Faroe Islands



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

We used London as a stepping stone for our visit to Iceland. By "we" I mean my wife and I as well as my younger brother and his wife. We could have easily flown from London to Iceland in 2.5 hours, but we wanted to experience how the Vikings sailed across the North Atlantic Ocean from Norway to Iceland in the late 9th century AD, so we took a flight from London to Aalborg in northern Denmark to catch a ferry for Iceland from the port of Hirtshals 65km further north.

According to history, the sailors who risked their lives to cross vast oceans in long boats in search of new lands in the later part of the first millennium after Christ, were mainly Norwegians. There were also other Scandinavians. They were collectively known as the Vikings. Some of them did cause terror by raiding villages on their way, but most were peaceful people looking for new territories to start a new life. They eventually settled down in many different places, including Iceland and Faroe Islands.

Faroe Islands is an archipelago of 18 closely-packed rocky islands situated about midway between Scotland and Iceland. The islands are interconnected by bridges, causeways, undersea tunnels or ferries, and so it is pretty easy to travel to every nook and corner of the archipelago in a motor vehicle. With a small population of about 50,000 people, Faroe Islands is an autonomous region of the Kingdom of Denmark. It has its own laws.

I first got to know about Faroe Islands some years ago when my



attention was drawn to a piece of news about this tiny speck on the world map where scores of pilot whales were herded into a bay and killed, turning the sea red with the cetacean's blood. This apparently barbarous act, repeated several times a year in different parts of the islands and carried out year after year, is widely condemned by the international community, but the Faroese government describes whaling as a natural part of Faroese life and whale meat and blubber have always been a valued part of its people's diet.

I too condemned the killing of whales, but my curiosity was aroused and I wanted to visit Faroe Islands and to get to know its people. So I included Faroe Islands in the itinerary when I planned a trip to Iceland.

The four of us boarded the ferry, MS Norröna, at about 1p.m. on 19 May 2018. This ferry belongs to the Faroese ferry company, Smyril Line. It sails between Denmark and Iceland, with a stopover at Faroe Islands. Before the peak travel season starts on 10 June every year, Norröna makes the voyage from Hirtshals to Iceland and back once a week, so when we disembarked at Faroe Islands, we would have one week to explore the islands before hopping into the next ferry for Iceland.

MS Norröna was built in Germany and launched in 2003. It is 165m long, 30m wide and has 8 decks with a capacity for 1,482 passengers and 118 crew members. It can also carry 800 passenger cars or 130 cargo trailers. Other facilities include several restaurants, a small cinema, a fitness centre, a swimming pool, children's playroom, a gaming room and a shop. The four of us shared a tiny cabin with 6 couchettes in two levels.

The distance from Hirtshals to Torshavn, the capital of Faroe Islands, is 570 nautical miles or 1,056km. The ferry was scheduled to depart at 3p.m. on 19 May and arrive at Torshavn at 8a.m. on 21 May, both local time. As Denmark time was one hour ahead of Faroe time, the voyage was expected to take 42 hours; most of the time, the ferry would be sailing on the open sea. We spent a lot of time on the sundeck, hoping to catch sight of a passing whale or two, but it was quite windy and cold up there and we only saw northern fulmar, some gannets and a few occasional puffin.

What could the Viking explorers have seen in their slow boats? ■