

## A SUMMER IN SHETLAND

*The Shetland Islands promise dramatic scenery, Norse history, fantastic wildlife, great music and wonderful, enterprising people. Leon Shulz meets a few of them as he cruises in the wake of the Vikings*



An abundant birdlife is one of the attractions of Shetland. Top: puffins on a headland on Unst and, above, a gannet. Far right: the author aboard his Hallberg-Rassy

The Vikings regarded the North Sea as their own inland waters. Under good conditions, fast longships easily sailed over to Shetland in no more than a day and a night. For 500 years the islands were under Norse government and even today locals feel as much of a connection to Norway as to Scotland 150 miles to the south-west.

With modern sailing yachts, Norwegians can hop over for a summer cruise, although the Vikings of today seem to sail here predominantly to take advantage of the low cost of provisioning – and by this I mean liquid provisions! – and are often to be found in Lerwick, the principal town in Shetland.

Coming from the south, cruisers can reach Shetland in a few short hops from mainland Scotland

via Orkney and Fair Isle, so we were surprised to find so few boats actually make their way to the Shetland archipelago, leaving the group of 117 islands almost as untouched as the Vikings must have found them.

Approaching in fog, which severely challenged our navigational skills, we could appreciate how occasionally the Vikings must have become disorientated, missed their landfall and continued westward to discover new lands beyond!

Once you reach the Shetland Islands you are rewarded by dramatic scenery, Norse history, fantastic wildlife, wonderful people and great music. The cruising ground itself is not too challenging. Unlike Orkney and the rest of Scotland, for instance, you do not need to take tidal currents into account

on Shetland. There are tides, of course, but they are generally only a hazard around the north and south capes and in Yell Sound. In other words, navigation is easy, but preferably done during daylight, which is no problem in summer at this high latitude.

While there are anchorages and the town of Scalloway on the west coast, the easiest to cruise is the eastern side of Shetland. With prevailing winds from the west, this means better shelter, especially considering that weather can change rapidly.

The sailing directions claim it rains less on Shetland than in western Scotland or in Bergen in Norway – unsurprising, as Bergen holds the European rainfall record. Moreover, its reputation for very high winds mainly applies in winter. During



### Shetland facts

Position	060°N, 001°W
Number of islands in the archipelago	100
Number of inhabited islands	15
Population	approx 21,000
Part of	Scotland (UK)
Total area	566 square miles (1,466 km <sup>2</sup> )
Largest island (Mainland)	374 square miles (967 km <sup>2</sup> )
Average temperature coldest month	4.9°C (February)
Average temperature warmest month	14°C (August)
Number of days with air frost	33
Annual precipitation	1,037mm
Number of days a year with snowfall	60
Number of days a year with rain or showers	285

D. Tripling/Alamy



L. Shulz



# SHETLAND CRUISE



tbkmedia.de/Alamy



Above: great skua and puffin. Right: Scalloway is the second town of Shetland after Lerwick and boasts a true marina. Below: the author's yacht *Regina* in Lerwick



P. Dieudonne/Corbis

summer average wind speed is Force 3-4 with only three days of gales. We must have picked all three during our stay, and there are said to be 11 days of fog, of which we picked two!

To encourage cruising boats to visit the islands, 'marinas' are being built, but most southern visitors might not recognise them as such. The marinas of Shetland reflect the number of visiting yachts, so in Lerwick the marina is a floating pontoon along Victoria Quay and on the northernmost island of Unst, the pontoon is no longer than a boatlength.

When we arrived, it was already 'full' with one Dutch boat that had just arrived from Iceland via the Faeroes. Soon after, a Swedish boat tied alongside as well, raising the number of visiting boats to three.

This the local people of Unst regarded as being exceptionally crowded and we became the attraction of the island as inhabitants flocked to the port to look at the three invading vessels.

On a small island on the edge of an ocean bordered

by the Faeroes, Iceland, Greenland and Norway, you might expect a sleepy community with no more entrepreneurial activity than sheep and salmon farming. Indeed, these are two major local industries, as is offshore oil drilling, but there is more to these industrious people than meets the eye.

## Unst entrepreneurs

On borrowed bikes, we cycled to a chocolate factory run by a couple who moved to Unst some years ago. Aaron and Cassie Foord, who had come from suburban West Sussex in search of a place in the country to run their own business, decided to manufacture luxury hand-made chocolate. They knew nothing about making chocolate and there was no one on Shetland who could help them, so they decided to learn it as a handicraft and began to experiment. Today, they make 4,000 chocolates a week, with personal love and care.

The Foords are modest about their achievements. "This is nothing special," they said. "You should talk to Sonny." And immediately picked up the phone to call Sonny Priest to arrange for an appointment.

We jumped back on our bikes in freezing rain and pedalled over to the other side of the island where Sonny and Sylvia Priest run Valhalla Brewery. This enterprise – claimed to be the most northerly brewery in the United Kingdom – started in 1997 producing Auld Rock beer (a reference to a nickname for Shetland) and is now a booming brewery producing six different beers with mystic names such as Old Scatness, White Wife and Simmer Dim.

Sonny Priest had worked at the local airport on Unst and when it closed down he was made redundant together with a number of his former



L. Shultz



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Top: fisherman's cottage in Lerwick. Above right: excavating a Viking longhouse on Unst. Above: the Shetland Fiddle is a great companion to a pint of Auld Rock

colleagues. "When the last plane had taken off, I went to the local pub with my friends for some beers," he says. "None of us knew what we would be doing.

"One of my colleagues tripped over the doorstep and fell out of the pub into the street. I remember turning to him and saying: 'Now I know what I'll be doing! I'll start brewing beer to keep you guys going!' And so it was. Priest would become the first brewer in Shetland, even though at that time he knew nothing about beer other than how to drink it.

The following night we were invited to a party after the local regatta. We met some of our new Shetland friends, except for Sonny Priest.

"Where is Sonny?" I asked.

"Oh, he is out searching for an overdue sailing boat from the Faeroes," I was told.

This was a Danish-built white vessel with a blue stripe, which looked just like many other boats, including our own Hallberg-Rassy. While Priest was searching on the north side of Unst, a helicopter took off from the airport at the southern tip of Shetland and we were circled several times to check if we could possibly be the overdue vessel.

Eventually the yacht was spotted far out at sea to the north. Where else would every white boat with a blue stripe be checked so carefully?

## Excavations

With such a fascinating history, Shetland is a magnet for archaeologists and there is a fair chance you will stumble over one of the numerous excavations.

We climbed a ridge and found a dozen or so archaeologists working on what promised to be one of the largest Viking longhouses found on Shetland.

Dr Zoe Outram from the North Atlantic Research Unit (NARU) of the University of Bradford explained: "We don't know yet what kind of settlement this was, since we have so far only found two houses and one of them is so much bigger than anything we know of."

This huge longhouse would have been one of the

first things Viking visitors would have seen as they approached over the sea from the east. "Most likely, this was the first stop for the Vikings coming from their home country," Dr Outram said. "The Vikings had more or less regular boat traffic in all directions on the North Sea, almost like the ferry links of today."

## Press gangs

In later centuries Shetlanders, skilful at handling small open boats in rough seas, were highly prized by the Royal Navy searching for able-bodied men to crew their ships. The press-gangs were much feared and preparations for evading them were always in hand. The best place to hide away were the Outskerries, the off-lying islands to the east, where isolated landing points and secret caves were perfect hideouts from press gang as well as for smugglers.

The days of hiding away on the Outskerries are long gone, but there are still hidden treasures to be found in these waters, which are littered with wrecks as numerous as the stories about sunken gold.

Shetland is home to an abundance of wildlife. We found it overwhelming to sit quietly and watch the elegant diving of kittiwakes, the take-off and landing of gannets and the guillemots bobbing on the waves. We loved the majestic flight of the bonxis, but our favourites were the puffins, the parrots of the sea.

After a long day's hike in the refreshing air – average temperature in July is just 12°C in and out of the water – it feels good to retire to one of many cosy pubs. Despite our new warming sweaters, hand-made to ancient knitting traditions out of Shetland wool, we all agreed that Shetland is, indeed, cool – literally!

We followed the music into the Douglas Arms in Lerwick. No visit to Shetland is complete without a traditional music night. The music is swinging and very special, since it has not been influenced by any Celtic traditions and hence lacks both the harp and the bagpipe. We decided the Shetland Fiddle is a great companion to a pint of Auld Rock ale.

## Pilots

Clyde Cruising Club Part 6:  
Shetland Islands  
Imray's *Shetland Islands*  
Pilot by Gordon Buchanan

## Websites

[www.visitshetland.com](http://www.visitshetland.com)  
[www.foordschocolates.com](http://www.foordschocolates.com)  
[www.valhallabrewery.co.uk](http://www.valhallabrewery.co.uk)  
[www.vikingshetland.com](http://www.vikingshetland.com)