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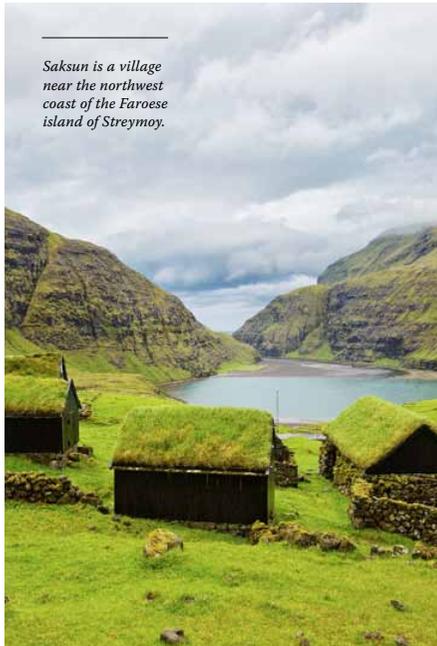
Back to business in the

Faroe Islands

Tucked away in a remote corner of the Atlantic, the Faroe Islands struggle with population decline. But that's about to change now that a bold group of creative entrepreneurs are bringing their business back to the archipelago.

RETURN TO PARADISE

TEXT BY JOHAN AUGUSTIN PHOTOS BY KARINE AIGNER



Saksun is a village near the northwest coast of the Faroese island of Streymoy.

Most people who come to the Faroes remember the 18 islands for their breathtaking landscapes – scenes of waterfalls plummeting into the clean Atlantic Ocean, bright-beaked puffins nesting on the cliffs, and the fresh air filling their lungs. You almost expect the soundtrack of *The Lord of the Rings* to be playing in the background – and, as it happens, “mysterious and elflike” is an apt description of the local music scene, which is synonymous with the name of a recent returnee, **Jónas Bloch Danielsen**.

He meets us at “Bloch,” a studio located in a converted 125-year-old factory, combining rough-edged charm with modern technology and design. Equally inspiring is the location by the water’s edge in the picturesque harbour of the capital, Tórshavn.

The 39-year-old music producer was raised in the Faroes, but has lived, produced music and worked with artists in Denmark, Australia and USA since the late ’80s. Two years ago, he decided to move back to the islands. Since then, artists such as Eivør, Mezzoforte and The Holmes Brothers have worked in the Bloch Studio, which Bloch Danielsen and his companions see as a place where they can get together far away from it all.

“The tradition of storytelling is very strong in the Faroes. We take our music seriously,



Jónas Bloch Danielsen



Clothing designer Gudrun Ludvig of Gudrun & Gudrun, which has become a major local employer.

but it’s still at the grassroots level. We have no government backing,” he says.

Being constantly on the move, he rarely has time for anything else but work. But with a wife and two small children, that too has changed in the last three years. “I want my family to call this place home,” he says.

Besides the inspirational setting, the advantage of having the studio in a small capital with only 20,000 inhabitants means the cost of living is much lower.

“Plus it’s just a two-hour flight from Copenhagen. Imagine what a studio in London would cost! Here I can concentrate fully on work and breathe fresh air, far away from the rat race.”

His most fervent wish is that a certain British band will knock on his door one day. “My dream is to work with The Rolling Stones!”

FAR-FLUNG FASHION

If you have ever watched the hit TV series *The Killing*, you may have noticed that the main character, Detective Sarah Lund, wears a jumper by the local Faroese brand Gudrun & Gudrun.

“We’ve had a lot of feedback through the series,” says **Gudrun Ludvig**. The



45-year-old fashion designer meets us in her clothing store on the main shopping drag in Tórshavn.

Ludvig was born and raised on the southernmost island, Suðuroy, but like many islanders, she left the Faroes to study and work in fashion design in Copenhagen.

The wool of the 70,000 sheep that roam the islands was once highly valued, but when prices plummeted in the late ’90s, many sheep owners burned the wool instead of selling it.

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FAROE FACTS

The 18 Faroe Islands have a combined coastline of 1,100 kilometres and 48,000 residents. The islands have been an autonomous region of Denmark since 1948. The Faroese parliament has legislative power in areas such as fisheries, trade, environmental policy, transport, communication, culture, education and research.



Faroese chef Gutti Winther holds up blue mussels found in Saksun lake.

That's when **Gudrun Rogvadottir** – the other half of Gudrun & Gudrun, also born in the Faroes – decided to capitalise on the situation by creating a Faroes-based business together with Ludvig. After quitting their jobs in 2007, they turned their focus to their new careers.

"Investing in something means letting the world know you exist," Ludvig says. The duo drummed up publicity by inviting

movers and shakers in the fashion industry to a fashion show in Tórshavn.

"We showed nothing but handmade knitwear and people still talk about the event!"

The 200- to 300-euro price tag doesn't seem to deter customers from buying their own Sarah Lund knits. Today Gudrun & Gudrun has an annual turnover of 1.5 million euros, and the business is growing. It's also a major local employer: around 40 women (many of them friends and family) knit for Gudrun & Gudrun across the islands, with another 30 in Peru producing alpaca jumpers. Many other brands have tried to copy the distinctive snowflake and seaman pattern that has become synonymous with Gudrun & Gudrun.

"We need to get a patent on the pattern... but we welcome the competition," says Ludvig.

The two women seem a perfect match; Ludvig designs and Rogvadottir organises the sales from Denmark, where she lives part of the time.

With many people leaving the islands for work or study, never to return, the Faroes long seemed to face a bleak future. Bold entrepreneurs like Gudrun & Gudrun are reversing that trend.



"Now young people are saying that they want to return to their roots and move back here. That's a good sign," says Ludvig.

ONE GIANT PANTRY

The Faroese "last-minute mentality" becomes apparent when **Gutti Winther** all of a sudden decides to get us some fresh lobster from a local fisherman in Tórshavn. We are on our way north to the island of Streymoy and the tiny village of Saksun. Winther is taking us on a tour of his favourite Faroese places. He returns with a bag in each hand.

"You have to try these," he says. The 35-year-old chef worked abroad for many years before he decided to return to the Faroes one year ago.

"I know everybody here, so it's great for networking," he says, wading out in the shallow bay that narrows in through sharp cliffs separating this calm lake oasis from the rough Atlantic Ocean.

On arrival in Saksun, he reaches into the water and raises a bushel of larger-than-life blue mussels from the lake. Only minutes later, steam rises from a pan stashed in his Land Rover; he's cooking the seafood on a Sterno in the trunk of his car.

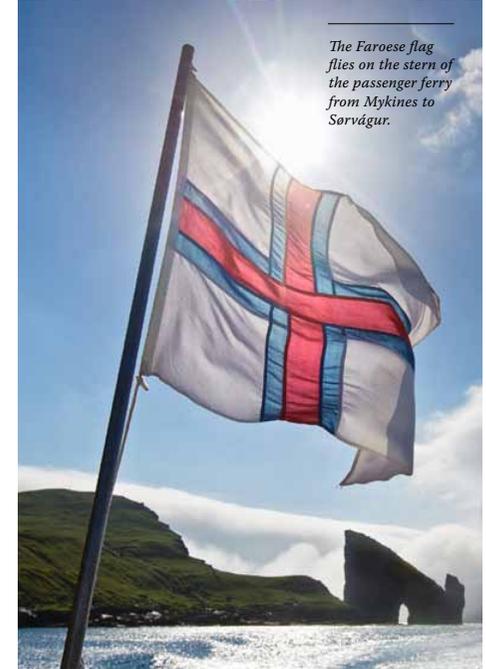
The mouth-watering lunch is evidence of why Gutti is a big celebrity in the Faroes. Not only is he a renowned chef, he has also recorded three seasons of *Spískamarið*, a TV show documenting his travels throughout the islands and their various food cultures.

"Our food is seasonal. One day we kill gannet chicks and the next we shoot hare," he says.

In fact, the islands are a huge living pantry of great local foods including fresh and dried mutton, fish, birds, and the more controversial meat of migrating pilot whales. Everything is seasoned with fresh herbs such as wild sorrel or angelica, which we stop to pick in some secret spots along the roadside.

Winther has plans to open a restaurant in the Faroes, and he claims there is no better place to start a family than in the archipelago.

"I'm proud of the islands. I think our strong culture will survive here." ●



The Faroese flag flies on the stern of the passenger ferry from Mykines to Sørvágur.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Johan Augustin & Karine Aigner

Johan Augustin is a Stockholm-based freelance journalist, who covers environmental issues and travel stories. Karine Aigner is a Washington D.C.-based award-winning freelance photographer and former *National Geographic* picture editor. Johan and Karine were both blown away by the pristine beauty of the Faroe Islands.

