

A magnificent musical experience in Shetland

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Shetland isn't the kind of place you go to half-heartedly or by mistake. I mean you wouldn't just 'pop in' there on the way to somewhere else because, unless you're a seafarer, it's not en route to anywhere. Shetland is actually part of Scotland, so far up in the North Sea that it doesn't even feature on the main atlas map of Scotland – only a little inset map shows its location.

To get to these remote isles, you can fly or take a ferry from Scotland, Scandinavia or Iceland. But I discovered the best way to get there is to take the Aberdeen-to-Lerwick overnight ferry that arrived in time for the annual Shetland Folk Festival.

I set off from Aberdeen, with a pack on my back and a pennywhistle in my pocket, and was thrilled to find myself on board with musicians who were on their way to play at the folk festival.

The captain of the *Hrossey* announced 'Force 3' sailing conditions, and this meant that those of us with a poor disposition at sea were saved – there would be more swaying by the musicians than the North Sea itself. So I whipped off my anti-seasick wristband, averted my gaze from the horizon and turned my attention to the fiddlers, accordion-players, drummers, guitarists, mandolin- and banjo-players around me.

Imagine my surprise when a 'session' started up in the bar-cum-lounge area of the ferry! The musicians could

well have been members of the same band in the way they played so comfortably, and musically, together, but in fact most of them had never met, their music spontaneous and unrehearsed. This is what defines a 'session' in the Celtic tradition and, realising I was out of my depths, I hid my pennywhistle away for fear someone would ask me to play it. But I didn't get out of it completely – a bluesman from New York insisted on teaching me three chords on his five-string mandolin and then said, 'Sister, there aint nothin' gonna hold you back'. The overnight voyage flew by and I wasn't the only one humming a tune when we arrived 12 hours later in the port of Shetland's capital, Lerwick.

For 25 years musicians and music-lovers have been arriving in this way for four days of traditional folk music – it's one of the defining features of Shetland, whose musical heritage is probably due to its relative isolation in geographical terms and its equidistance to the influences of Norway and Scotland. Also, because Shetland lies in the heart of the North Sea, on Atlantic shipping routes and fishing grounds, seafarers have visited and settled here for centuries, bringing with them musical elements from their own cultures. So you can hear hints of Scottish, Nordic, European and American influences in the music of Shetland.

What I loved most about the Shetland Folk Festival was that it was an authentic



Bluesman Guy Davis plays his five-string mandolin shortly before departure from Aberdeen.

Pictures: Mary Duncan

Shetland experience – 90 percent of the people attending and more than half of the performing musicians were Shetlanders.

Most of the concert venues were small and intimate, with about 250 people sitting around tables that were swirling with ales and other 'wee drams'. While the local musicians played traditional

tunes on all kinds of instruments from fiddles and accordions to bagpipes and bodhrans (drums), the visiting musicians played a variety of Scottish and Irish jigs, reels and Gaelic songs, American country, bluegrass and old-timey tunes, as well as gypsy jazz and even African rhythms from Madagascar.

One of my favourites was Scottish singer-songwriter Eddi Reader – of Fairground Attraction fame and the hit song 'Perfect' – whose exquisite voice and stage presence wowed me and everyone else. I also loved the skilled comedy act of the Old Rope String Band who threw – and I mean really threw – their fiddles about the stage with alarming ease, and bluesman Guy Davis, who's one-man act was outstanding.

One of the biggest concerts was one I didn't actually go to as I'd heard mention of AC/DC type music, and had fled to the isle of Yell for a concert there. As it turned out, a group of visiting musicians from Appalachia USA played AC/DC tunes on hillbilly instruments and called themselves Hayseed Dixie (get it?). Over a thousand people went, and everyone I spoke to raved about it. But the six-act concert on Yell was brilliant, complete with a bus-ride back to Lerwick singing Scottish songs with musicians who'd had a 'dram' too many.

The festival wasn't only about musical acts in concert venues. There were tunes all over the place. As soon as each evening concert finished I found myself caught up in the rush to the

Festival Club, which is the general meeting spot for the duration of the festival and held in a hundred-year-old former school building in the centre of Lerwick. Here, more ales went down and lively sessions happened in the rooms, on the staircases and in every possible corner of the building. Nobody seemed vaguely conscious of the time...

Which brings me to what a lovely old man, whom I met in the Aberdeen Art Gallery, said to me on hearing I was going to the festival: 'You'll go on holiday and come back a wreck lass – jus let yurself go'. And he said it with that fabulously charming accent that they have in 'Ubberdeen'.

One of the most memorable events for me happened on the way back to Aberdeen. On board the ferry everyone braved the chilly wind on deck to take one last look at Shetland. I stood there considering the folk who had opened their hearts and home to me, and the soulful music that reflects the spirit of this faraway place. And then, as if to soften the departure from Lerwick, the musicians amongst us took out their fiddles, accordions, pipes and banjos – and played with all their hearts once more.

As the ferry pulled away, there stood the Shetlanders on the shore, flashing their lights, blowing their hooters and waving their arms at the session that was just beginning on the North Sea.

Visit www.shetlandfolkfestival.com



Island countryside: A Shetland pony.