The elfish gene

Folklore, traditionally a way for people to come to terms with the inexplicable things that happened around them, is alive and well in Iceland, a country where magic and mysticism are still part of daily life. Rufus Purdy goes away with the fairies

During a brief, sixth-form phase in which I got heavily into 'traditional' music – and thought nothing of spending my Friday nights watching fiddlers and squeezebox players in half-empty village halls – I remember a friend of mine bemoaning the death of English folklore. 'When all those songs were written, the country was teeming with wolves and bears,' she said. 'What have we got now? Squirrels.'

She was right. Traditional English music comes from a time when most people eked out a hard and uncertain life in farming or fishing, and is full of stories of crops being cursed or butter being spoiled by mischievous supernatural beings. Hunger and death were everywhere, and, as my friend pointed out, the animals were a lot more dangerous, too. Folk tales allowed people to come to terms with what surrounded them, and attempt to explain the inexplicable.

That environment may no longer exist here, but up on the northern fringes of Europe it's a different story. Iceland may not be full of ferocious beasts – bar the occasional polar bear that drifts over on ice floes from Greenland – but its dramatic landscape certainly lends itself to superstition. In a recent survey, 10 per cent of Icelanders claimed to believe wholeheartedly in elves, while another 80 per cent said that they 'might exist'. But this is a country of well-educated, cultured people. So why this belief in what has become, in other cultures, nothing more than fairytales and children's stories?

I was given a big clue the moment that my plane broke through the soupy clouds over the country's Reykjanes peninsula, and began its descent to Keflavik airport. Disorientated enough by not having a sight of land for three hours, I looked through the window at what appeared to be a lunar landscape. A flat plain of black volcanic rock, serrated edges softened by clumps of metallic-looking moss, extended as far as I could see, dotted with pools of milky water that had collected in its hollows. Steam rose eerily from the ground, plumes drifting along like Will o' the Wisp in the coppery half-light that I was soon to learn was typical of the short Icelandic winter day.

Geographically as large as England, Iceland is home to just 283,000 people – about the population of Doncaster – most of which snuggle into the Reykjavik area in its south-western corner. To leave the capital behind is to enter an untamed netherworld – other than the occasional haphazard collection of corrugated-iron houses and the roads you are on, often little more than a gravel track, human impact on the landscape is negligible. The barren vistas of empty plains and dark, foreboding mountains seem almost prehistoric, and, further into the country's interior, glaciers the size of Yorkshire and volcanoes that gurgle ominously are still carving out their marks on the wilderness. Add to this the Aurora Borealis – an ever-changing display of green and red light that regularly illuminates the winter sky – and you're left with an extremely unearthly environment indeed.

IN A RECENT SURVEY, 10 PER CENT OF ICELANDERS CLAIMED ELVES DID EXIST

This otherworldliness is exactly why Iceland has become one of the hottest – or should that be coolest? – destinations on the planet. Even tiny Reykjavik has a stylish reputation that far outstrips its size. Its thriving bar and club scene is famed, and in summer planeloads of revellers fly in from all over the world to enjoy the strange experience of dancing all night and then emerging onto the streets to enjoy the midnight sun. Even on the Wednesday night I spent there, Reykjavik was buzzing. The streets were filled with groups in woolly jumpers and bobble hats, clutching bottles and shouting to each other. The city's main shopping street was backed up with cars, blasting out everything

Left: **the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights, which illuminate Iceland's skies on clear winter nights. *Below:* drifting clouds of sulphurous steam at Geysir in the country's wild interior**

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; RUFUS PURDY

from techno to the Spice Girls through unwound windows. Nobody seemed in any hurry to get indoors – and in a city where bars proudly display signs announcing that a small bottle of beer will only set you back about £6, who can blame them?

Iceland is situated at the point where two of the earth's tectonic plates meet, and the friction between them brings about regular earthquakes and small-scale volcanic eruptions. Subterranean geothermal activity, which provides most Icelanders with free power and hot water, spills out onto the surface in several places, most notably at the famous Blue Lagoon, where locals and tourists alike jostle for space in warm, mineral-rich waters. Geysir, the site that has given its name to explosive columns of boiling water the world over, is perhaps a rawer vision of what lies beneath, offering a series of geysers, blowholes, hot springs and mudpots. I saw clouds of steam from the road long before I arrived at the spot, and the unmistakeable smell of sulphur started creeping into the car a good few minutes before I reached its visitors' centre.

It is still possible to see just how terrifying this landscape must have been to the first people to come across it. Viking settlers, who came to Iceland from the ninth century onwards, arrived with their own fully formed Norse mythology, but even they must have been at a loss to explain why here, in this spot where steam swirls in the air and a sound like boiling custard drowns out conversation, the earth saw fit to spew boiling water up to 70 metres into the air. Geysir itself has not erupted for around 40 years, but Strokkur, right next door, obliges onlookers by dramatically sending a 30-metre plume of water into the sky every few minutes. Watching the boiling water swell in its tiny caldera, retreat and then swell again, before expanding into a perfect turquoise dome prior to eruption is something I could have done all day, had frostbite not threatened the relationship between my nose and my face.

'I AM CONVINCED THERE ARE TWO NATIONS LIVING SIDE BY SIDE IN ICELAND'

When faced with a landscape such as this, it is not hard to see why Icelanders came up with the idea of their land being full of spirits. But this doesn't explain why so many of them persist with such beliefs. Could the answer be that they actually do exist? 'I have met and talked to more than 700 Icelanders who have seen and interacted with elves, dwarves, gnomes and hidden people,' says Magnús Skarphédinsson, a Reykjavik-based academic, who has devoted his life to finding evidence of parallel societies in his country. 'I am convinced that there are two nations living side by side in Iceland.'

Skarphédinsson's fascination began when he was a boy living out in the countryside, and his grandmother's sister would regularly talk about the hidden people that lived at the bottom of their garden. 'I never saw them myself, but I was sure that she wasn't lying,' he tells me. 'And it's the same with everyone I've spoken to – I have always been certain their stories were genuine.'

Most of the testimonies that Skarphédinsson has collected involve the hidden people, an invisible race of humans who live out in the country's rocky highlands. They are not the same as elves – which are 'humanoid, but not human' – but live out a peaceful agrarian existence more or less undisturbed by other Icelanders. They tend to appear, according to Skarphédinsson, when human beings are in need of help.

'Tryggvi Emilsson, the late leader of the Icelandic Communist party, risked the ridicule of his comrades by revealing his encounter with the hidden people to me,' Skarphédinsson tells me. 'When he was 17, Tryggvi worked on a farm, and his master sent him out in the middle of winter to look for a lost ewe and its lamb. He eventually found them on top of a steep cliff, but the lamb had somehow managed to get onto a ledge a couple of metres down. Tryggvi descended to fetch it but, even though he managed to lift the lamb back up to its mother, he ended up completely stranded. It was cold and dark, and Tryggvi started to call out, but after four hours of shouting he resigned himself to death. Suddenly a girl of about his own age appeared at the top of the cliff and breezily said, "What on earth are you doing down there?"

'Tryggvi was very surprised because he knew that there was no farm for miles around. But the girl told him that her name was Stephania and that she came from a farm nearby. Tryggvi must have looked very perplexed because she smiled and said, "Oh, I am one of what you call the hidden people." She then leant down and offered Tryggvi her arm, which he gripped gratefully.

'He told me,' says Skarphédinsson, 'that he was convinced he was going to grab only fresh air, but that Stephania's arm felt just like his own. He felt blood pumping in her veins and sweat on her arm from the exertion of pulling him up from the ledge. Once she'd helped him to safety, he heard someone in the distance call her name and she turned

Left: **the endless volcanic plain of the Reykjanes peninsula, a supposed home to Iceland's hidden people.** ***Below:*** **Reykjavik, where most of the country's population reside**

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; RUFUS PURDY

Above: **Strokkur geyser, where boiling water is forced up 30 metres into the air from volcanic streams below the surface**

Iceland travel notes

HOW TO GET TO ICELAND

Icelandair (0870 787 4020; www.icelandair.co.uk) flies daily from London Heathrow to Keflavik, from £166 return in January. The airport is around 50 kilometres from Reykjavik, so you will either need to hire a car, or take a bus or taxi into the capital.

WHERE TO STAY

Nordica Hotel (00 354 444 5000; www.icehotels.is) makes for a comfortable and stylish base just outside the centre of Reykjavik. Ask for a room overlooking the bay. Doubles from about £155. **101 Hotel** (00 800 3746 8357; www.designhotels.com), one of ultra-trendy Design Hotels' latest openings, is the cool option in Reykjavik. Intimate (just 38 rooms) and chic, it is located right in the centre. Doubles from about £225.

WHERE TO EAT

VOX (00 354 444 5050; www.voxrestaurant.com), at the Nordica Hotel, is the place to go for Icelandic cuisine with a modern twist. Chef Hákon Már Örvarsson serves up delicious dishes such as thyme-cured puffin breast, carpaccio of reindeer and Nordic bacalão. **Seafood Cellar** (00 354 511 1212; www. sjavarkjallarinn.is), situated close to Reykjavik's docks, offers the not-quite-as-strange-as-it-sounds concept of Icelandic-Asian fusion. Although a mite pretentious – my starter came in a lab sample jar – its philosophy of taking fresh North Atlantic seafood and serving it with oriental spices raises it above most of the city's establishments.

to him and said goodbye. He watched her run off and, after five paces, she vanished in front of his eyes.'

Many of Skarphédinsson's tales run along similar lines, and I spent a pleasant morning in his office, listening to him recount them. He told me of Icelanders being invited into the homes of hidden people for tea and pancakes – 'their flour is of a better quality than ours' – and of women being approached to help deliver babies, a recurrent story in Icelandic folk tales. He seems less sure, though, when talking about the other beings that inhabit the country. Even though he gives me a clear breakdown of elf sizes – 'they go from flower elves, which are about seven or eight centimetres tall, right up to more than one metre' – his witnesses have supplied him with no more information than that they are 'difficult to communicate with'. When I ask him about dwarves and gnomes, he tells me that they feature in only a fraction of the testimonies he's collected, and that his witnesses merely asked them how long they'd lived in that particular part of Iceland. I suppress an urge to ask him about Moomins.

The strangest thing I experienced in Iceland, though, was the sound of the traffic. Here, cars move about on thick, soft, deeply lined tyres, and the noise they produce as they flatten against the roughly surfaced roads is like that of a rubber ball rolling through treacle. One day, when heading into the interior, I naively took a road that climbed up straight into the mountains. Within minutes, I found myself wrapped in a dense mist, inside the low-hanging layer of cloud that beds down and clings to Iceland's hills like a blanket. I couldn't see the sides of the road, was unaware of oncoming traffic until it was about to pass and had no idea of what lay ahead. In this strange and unearthly environment, in which everything outside the window ceases to exist, there is surely nothing more reassuring than being able to hear the wheels beneath you greedily grip the damp road and remind you that you're not going to slip away into oblivion. Well, a couple of hidden people with a steaming pot of tea and a pile of warm pancakes might have done just as well, I suppose. ■

THE SMELL OF SULPHUR CREPT INTO THE CAR AS GEYSIR GOT NEARER

PHOTOGRAPH: PICTURES COLOR LIBRARY. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ICELAND, CONTACT THE ICELANDIC TOURIST BOARD (00 354 535 5500; WWW.ICETOURIST.IS)