



UP HELLY AA: SCOTLAND, VIKINGS AND TORCHES... OH MY!

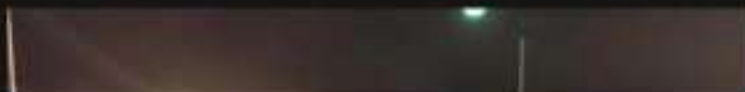
by CLAIRE GOARDS

Ten years ago I saw a picture of men dressed as Vikings walking down a street with fire blazing torches. They were walking down the street to the community square where they would sing songs and throw their torches into a wooden boat that would be set afire, and everyone would watch it burn. This is Up Helly Aa! Up Helly Aa is the largest fire festival in Europe held in the Shetland Islands of Scotland every January.



My obsession with fire made me very curious about the festival. That coupled with the fact that in several travel groups with lots of thousands of people almost no one had been. In fact, only a few people said they knew someone who knew someone. So ten years ago I put it on my list, and for the last two years, I've faithfully attended.

Up Helly Aa is a tradition that dates back to the 1800s and has been an annual festival held in the Shetland Islands for over a century. Every year the festival is the last Tuesday in January. During the year they build two wooden boats that are burned at the processions. In order to participate in Up Helly Aa in the Shetland Islands, you have to be born in Shetland and be a male. While other fire festivals have allowed women, Shetland still does not allow women to participate. The young men form squads in their youth and every year they march with the same squad. Every year there is one Jarl Squad. The Jarl Squad is the only squad that dresses up in the authentic Viking costumes, and everyone else has a theme and dresses up in any other costume. The Jarl Squad is responsible for making their own costume, and this starts two years out, and each year the designs change. The Jarl Squad rotates, and my friend from the Shetland Islands said he had been in the Jarl Squad two times in his life. He comes home every year to participate in Up Helly Aa.





Up Helly Aa is a full day of activity so you need to be well rested. The morning starts with a parade around town in costumes where they pick up the boat and bring it to the water's edge to be displayed. After the parade, it is followed by two processions starting at sunset and later in the evening. At the processions, they march to Hii Head to light the torches that have been soaking in fuel since the day prior. They have a ceremony to light the torches then they march around the town square a couple of times and end in King George V field where they sing a few songs, yell "Up Helly Aa tharay" and one by one they follow the lead jet and throw their torches into the boat and watch it burn. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen.

Each time I've attended Up Helly Aa I get butterflies when the Jet Squad walks past me with their uniforms singing and marching with their torches shining brightly. When you see the boat that was made it's very magical, it's bright, and you can smell the fuel burning. It's dark outside, but the entire place lights up from all the torches. In fact, when they start the ceremony to light the torches it gets so bright up the hill that from down the hill you can see a huge glow like a gigantic flashlight.



The first procession is for the young boys and second procession for the men. After the processions, the town hosts multiple events where each squad comes to and performs a dance routine. It reminded me of a Step Show. The routines are fairly long and creative. The squads perform at all the Hells and hide around drinking and performing. Witnessing this is tons of fun as I've seen routines from "Let's get Physical" to the theme from "Star Trek".

On my first Up Helly Aa experience, I arrived a few days early and met some amazing locals who invited us to a ship party. I'd never been to a ship party, the gentleman who hosted it owned a mega ship and that night we drank whiskey, ate chicken tenders, sang songs with a whisky, and laughed with our new friends. One memory that sticks out is singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." A song I learned in Girl Scouts decades ago would be a song I sang with my new Scottish friends. Cray Cray!





Wrote by Helly Aa 2011, 'Wey Black' CCBY 2.0

How to Experience Up Helly Aa

Getting to the Shetland Islands is not for the faint of heart. I estimate its almost 20 hours of travel to the Shetland Islands. I flew to London (LHR) then bought a ticket to Aberdeen. From Aberdeen, you can fly to Shetland or take a ferry. My first time I chose to take the ferry (12 hours overnight) and it included a private cabin where I ate dinner had drinks, enjoyed the band on the boat, and went to sleep. I woke in Shetland and walked to my Airbnb apartment, Chertside Cottage.

For lodging, its best to book early and Airbnb and booking.com have options for properties. They fill up fast so I would book soon. The Lerwick hotel is very nice to eat and stay, but its rather pricey that weekend.

For more information on Up Helly Aa visit www.uphellyaa.org

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"Treating off and apparently speaking in tongues, the evangelist then resumed her prayer in English: "For angels have even dispatched from Africa right now, Africa right now, Africa right now, From Africa right now."



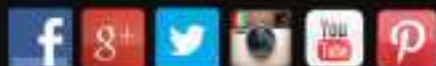
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Black History | A Change is Gonna Come | Sam Cooke

A few months before, Cooke has made a reservation for his wife and band at a motel in Louisiana, but when they arrived there they were abruptly asked to leave since that was a "whites only" place.



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MU 03 - Sam Cooke, *Brother of Time*, Ricki, Creative Commons



May 2010

It was February 7, 1964, when his song *Change is Gonna Come* was first performed by singer and songwriter Sam Cooke and quickly became one of the American civil rights movement anthems. It's easy to understand why, even before hearing the lyrics. The title says it all: change is what humans have been looking for since the beginning.