

COMPASS

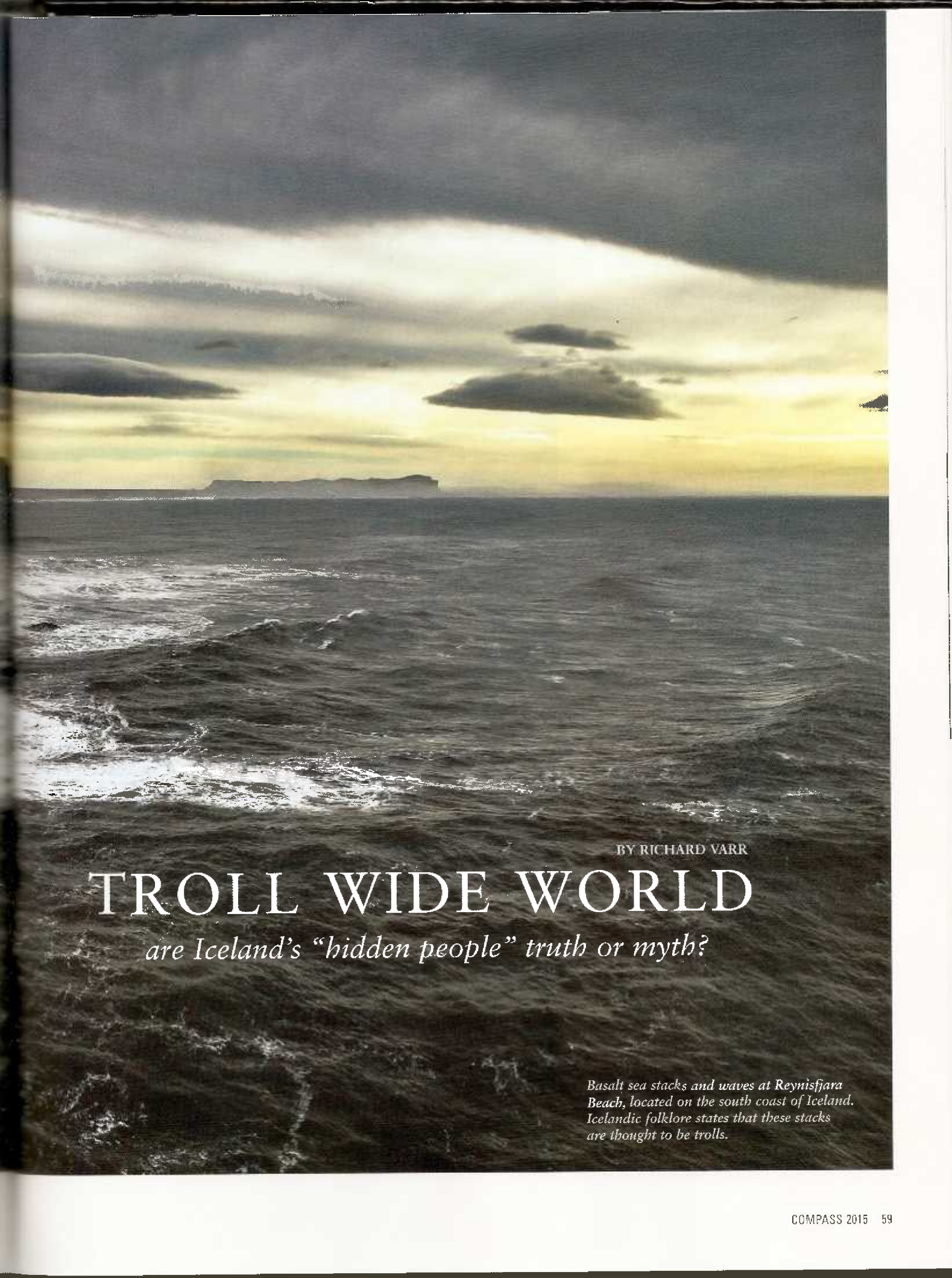
the onboard magazine of
Holland America Line



Holland America Line

A Signature of Excellence





BY RICHARD VARR

TROLL WIDE WORLD

are Iceland's "hidden people" truth or myth?

Basalt sea stacks and waves at Reynisfjara Beach, located on the south coast of Iceland. Icelandic folklore states that these stacks are thought to be trolls.

In the sleepy fishing village of Drangsnes stands a massive rock — craggy and pocked — that has sparked the imagination for generations. To the visitor's eye, it may look like just an enormous rock stack. But every Icelander likely knows — as legend has it — the amorphous slab is in fact a petrified troll.

As the story goes, the troll was one of three digging a channel by night to separate the West Fjords from the rest of Iceland. They apparently lost track of time and couldn't escape the rising sun that turns trolls into stone, this one standing alone within a grassy field just steps away from a stretch of Iceland's rugged northwestern shoreline.

And a closer look at this rock called Kerling, or "The Old Woman," reveals — with some imagination — a face with shrouded eyes, a contorted nose and a puckered mouth.

Cave-dwelling and beastly trolls are just a part of this island nation's folklore that also includes the "hidden people," or *huldufólk* — elves, gnomes, fairies, dwarves and even mountain spirits. When considering Iceland's harsh moonscape with ash-belching volcanoes, rocky lava fields, icy glaciers and crevices, spurting geysers, torrent waterfalls and meandering green swashes of glowing Northern Lights, it's no wonder that such superstitions have come to life. This landscape and the long cold winters created the perfect cauldron to stir the imagination and concoct wild tales to tell through days with up to 20 hours of darkness.

"The stories are old, coming into existence when nearly everyone lived on farms in the countryside," says longtime Iceland tour guide Stefan Helgi Valsson. "Today, most people live in the capital area or in towns and villages."

Sometimes having a human-like form, Icelandic trolls are large, ugly creatures with incredible strength. Folklore pegs them as human-devouring monsters traveling only at night to avoid the sun.



Kerling and Karl

Female trolls would cast love spells on Icelandic men and eventually marry them, with their children becoming “half trolls” and looking very human.

Nowadays, trolls take on the form of colorful and amusingly grotesque caricatures and figures with their bulging noses, distorted faces and mischievous smiles on Iceland sidewalks, or seen on poster boards within businesses and attractions.

One of the more popular tales involves the trolls known as the Icelandic Yule Lads, or *Jólasveinar*, who supposedly make their way into homes around Christmastime. There are 13 of them, sons of the ogress *Grýla* who lives in the mountains with the boys, her lazy third husband and a black cat. With such names as the milk-stealing *Giljagaur* (or Gully Gawk), sausage-swiping *Bjúgnakrækir* and *Hurðaskellir* the door-slammer, a different lad arrives on each of the 13 days leading up to Christmas.

Iceland has no Santa Claus, and thus it's the Yule Lads who deliver presents and goodies. Children leave a shoe in their bedroom window each night, and the Lads fill it with candy and gifts or, depending on the child's behavior the day before, a raw or rotting potato. The Lads' monstrous feline called *Jólakötturinn*, the Yule Cat, will devour any child or adult who does not receive a new piece of clothing during the holiday.



Little girls playing in a large cauldron with the statue of Grýla

Tales of trolls, elves and hidden people are all folklore, right? Well, maybe not. As national polls indicate, many Icelanders still believe the invisible hidden people may very well exist. A 2006–2007 University of Iceland study revealed that eight percent of those polled believe they are real, while only 13 percent said they positively are not, with the remaining somewhat skeptical agreeing to categories of unlikely, possible or probable.

“Only some people allegedly can see the hidden people,” surmises Valsson. “I haven't, but I believe my great-grandmother saw such things, and therefore I don't exclude the possibility that they exist.”

Unlike the short, pointed-ear elves of popular fairy tales, Icelandic elves behave and look very much like humans, but they can be smaller. Popular folklore claims they're usually invisible but can appear only if they so choose. Elves are not bothersome if left alone and can be helpful and courteous to those they like. But crossing an elf will result in vengeance. This particularly happens, according to local superstition, when construction projects protrude into the elves' rock-filled and hilly terrain. That's when freak accidents and equipment breakdowns occur, often resulting in costly delays.

Valsson says building a part of the island's Ring Road in Reykjavik would have disturbed a rock where hidden people live. “Various accidents took place, and it was eventually decided to swing the road around the rock,” he explains. Another example is a road just outside the capital named *Álfhólsvegur*, or Elf Hill Road, which narrows into a single lane past a hill that's supposedly another home of the hidden people.

Whether truth or fiction, *huldufólk* are very much alive — at least in Icelandic culture. “I enjoy the tradition and love telling my guests about the hidden people, trolls and other supernatural beings,” says Valsson. “The stories are quirky and fun to listen to — if told well!”