By Sydney Loney —— Photos by Katherine Holland

How history, nature and folklore are hopelessly — and wonderfully — intertwined on this one-of-a-kind isle in the North Atlantic.

In Search of Iceland's Hidden People

For many of the mysteries of the universe, we have science. Like the recent discovery of galaxy-wide gravitational waves that spread light-years across space and wash up here on Earth. Scientists suspect they may hold the secret to the origins of our planet and, although we can't see these cosmic ripples, we've been pretty sure for decades that they exist. Now, we know.

For other mysteries, we rely on stories. Long before labs and observatories, we crafted elaborate tales for things we couldn't explain. Strange coincidences. Sudden movements caught from the corners of our eyes. Faint sounds of laughter in an otherwise empty forest. Or simply the nagging feeling that we are not all there is. Icelandic culture is rife with these wondrous stories — and they have everything to do with elves.

Magnus Skarphedinsson has spent decades trying to apply some scientific rigor to the question "Do elves really exist?" He has personally interviewed 900 Icelanders who report having seen the country's *huldufólk*, or "hidden people." "It's almost impossible to do scientific research on elves, so finding all the witnesses is our main source of information," he says. "We collect as many stories as we can to get a sense of how big this really is, and is it true or is it nonsense? We have a preliminary conclusion: It is very, very likely that elves do exist."

Magnus — who, if you were to picture him in a red suit carrying a sack, would closely resemble everyone's favorite jolly old elf — studied history and folklore at the University of Iceland and has served as headmaster of Iceland's Elfschool for the past 35 years. He has delivered lectures on elves to roughly 11,000 students, from local enthusiasts to curious world travelers. (A typical class at the Elfschool includes a 70-page textbook accompanied by coffee and pancakes topped with jam and whipped cream.)

OPENING PHOTO
The view from inside Loftsalahellir cave overlooking the Dyrhólaey peninsula — just one of Iceland's more than 25 caves.

ABOVE
Elf houses built by inhabitants of Hafnarfjörður, a seaside town and the country's unofficial elf capital; Magnus Skarphedinsson, headmaster of Reykjavik's Elfschool.

ABOVE
"The world's loneliest house," as it's widely known across the Internet, is an old hunting lodge solitarily situated in the middle of Elliðaey Island, just off the southern coast of Iceland.

Whether you believe in them or you don't — and, Magnus says, 54 percent of the country's residents *do* believe in them — Iceland's geography is conducive to the existence of supernatural beings. Many of its surrounding islands (Skessuhorn, or "Troll Woman's Peak," Tröllaskarð, or "Troll's Pass") are said to be curled into the shapes of ancient trolls petrified by the rays of the sun. Elves, meanwhile, make their homes in enchanted rocks, cliffs and caves, inhabiting a hidden plane of existence as tangible as gravitational waves in a landscape that is itself otherworldly, marked by centuries of raging glacial rivers, violent storms and volcanic eruptions.

For Iceland's human inhabitants, stories of the hidden people, which have been recorded from as early as the 12th century, are both entertaining and cautionary — as much about surviving in an unforgiving and unpredictable environment as about passing the time on long, dark winter nights. And in Iceland, more than anywhere else in the world, not only do these stories persist, they also shape the beliefs, actions and even infrastructure of modern-day life.

"This is a beautiful part of our past," says Magnus. "Friendship with the elves is one of the most sacred things in Iceland. If a politician were to stand up here and say, 'Elves, that's ridiculous!' he or she would likely never be reelected." Evidence of Icelanders' reverence for the hidden people is everywhere. Across the country, fences, roadways and even buildings bend and shift to accommodate large, craggy lava rocks identified as belonging to the elves. In 2014, construction of a road through an ancient lava field stopped, then detoured to bypass an elfin community. Occasionally, a building or roadway expansion is simply halted indefinitely.

Still, it's not all elves all the time, says Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir, a folklorist and teacher at the University of Iceland who doesn't want people to assume that

OPPOSITE PAGE
Rútshellir is Iceland's oldest man-made cave. According to legend, its namesake, Rutur, was either a murderous chieftain or a troll.

ABOVE
María Rós Friðriksdóttir (left) in Heimaey tells the story of a local politician who had an elf rock (right) relocated to outside his home — he believed its inhabitants saved his life after a car accident.

Icelanders spend every waking moment preoccupied with creatures they can't see. As they were for most people, stories of the supernatural were a routine part of her childhood, passed down from her grandmother and cropping up in her school curriculum. "I grew up in one of the more rural parts of Iceland, in the Westfjords region, which is a land that's very connected to folklore," she says. "But when I was younger, I was *way* more interested in ghosts, because they were much creepier and more exciting than elves."

When Icelandic children learn about their history, culture and language (one of the world's oldest), stories of the supernatural are intertwined. "As a folklorist, whether or not there are elves in Iceland isn't important," Dagrún says. "What *is* important is that people continue to tell these stories, and what these stories tell us about the lives and ideologies of the people who live here."

She recalls her grandmother's accounts of hearing hidden people singing from inside the rocks, and when Dagrún was a child herding sheep for her grandfather in the mountains, she imagined what it would be like to run into an elf, or to hear their songs for herself as she clambered with the sheep over the cliffs. "These stories create a certain magic and give the landscape an added dimension," Dagrún says. "I think in Iceland and elsewhere, stories can both make places, and places can make stories. When you travel around the country and see a big rock appear out of nowhere, you immediately think back to all the stories you've heard about the hidden people. It sparks your imagination."

Dagrún's professional interest in elves was sparked by her father, a fellow folklorist. In 2013, they created an exhibition near Hólmavik, a small fishing town, of 100 enchanted spots based on conversations with local people and the stories they

ABOVE
Fumaroles vent plumes of volcanic steam throughout the Reykjanes peninsula, a geothermal region renowned for its scenic hikes and hot springs.

shared. One of her favorites features the elves that live in the rocks of Brúarhlíð.

When an Icelander tells you a story, it begins with a lengthy pause, a palpable collecting of thoughts, followed by a subtle shift in tone, in cadence. Suddenly, it's like you've been transported back to your childhood bedroom, letting the rhythmic lyricism of a fairy tale wash over you. Dagrún pauses, then begins her tale of the elves in Brúarhlíð.

There's a big, big rock with a hill beneath it. And the story is that there is a hidden woman who lives in the rock. And you cannot remove stones from the rock or grasses from the hill. Elves are very similar to Icelanders of the past; they are farmers, and they need the grass from the hill to feed their sheep.

But, one time, the human farmers wanted to build a home for their sheep next to the hill using the stones from the rock. They built all day. And they had done quite a lot when the evening came, and in the evening they went to sleep. During the night, they heard a very loud rumbling from outside. But they did not dare go out to see what was happening.

The next morning, when they went outside, everything they had built had crumbled back down. And they were so certain it was because they had taken the rocks from the elves' home, that they tried to return every rock to where it had been. They put the elves' home back to how it was — and they didn't disturb it again.

"In Iceland, even if you don't have a story of your own, almost everyone knows someone who has one of this kind," Dagrún says. "I always enjoy these stories — this one is from the 20th century — because even though some people don't want to say that they believe in the hidden people, they will still go to the trouble of returning all the rocks."

Dagrún says the themes of the stories have evolved

OPPOSITE PAGE
Icelandic horses, descended from original Viking stock, grazing on Heimaey island.

ABOVE
Elf houses at the entrance to Hellisgerði park, a frozen lava flow in Hafnarfjörður featuring guided elf walks; follow the Elf Circle signs near the park to tour the top hidden-people hot spots around town.

over time. Where once they might be about elves saving the lives of fishermen during a storm, now they're related to environmental issues and the importance of protecting the natural world. "Today the stories teach us to be respectful of nature, and of our neighbors, because that's what the hidden people are in these stories — our neighbors, living close by in the rocks and the hills."

Many of these stories are preserved in volumes dedicated to Icelandic folklore, but the best way to experience them is to hear them from a local source. María Rós Friðriksdóttir, a teacher on Iceland's Heimaey island — known for its large puffin colony today and its terrifying pirate raids from the past — is just one of many locals willing to share a story or even lead an impromptu tour of famous elf sites.

Here, history and folklore overlap, and the island is dotted with plaques devoted to just some of the tales that María shares with inquisitive visitors. Near the 12th hole of Vestmannaeyjar golf course, which is tucked into the crater of an extinct volcano, is a sunken cave with a plaque that tells of the Cave of the Hundred. In 1627, 100 people hid in the cave to (unsuccessfully) avoid capture by pirates. Then, there's the story about the origin of the island itself. "I was told that trolls lived on the south side of Iceland and they threw a rock out to sea — and that rock is our island," María says. "*All* of these stories are a big part of our culture and the community that we live in. I tell the stories to my kids, and my parents told them to me."

Just as science helps us understand our place in the wider universe, the stories we tell help us understand our place in the world. They carry important messages and meaning, says Dagrún, and that's why they're still relevant. "Places become a lot more interesting when we know that there is a story connected to them." ✦