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Elfschool is in session

Take a seat, learn about Iceland's trolls and other supernatural creatures

STORY AND PHOTOS
By RICH WARREN
Chicago Tribune

REYKJAVIK, Iceland — Little elves are a big deal in Iceland, where surveys and polls over the years have famously proclaimed that more than half of the population is at least open to the idea that these supernatural creatures exist.

In this quirky Nordic nation, it's not unheard of for highways to be diverted around rocks where it's believed elves live. Even a member of the country's parliament swears his life was saved by a family of elves whose boulder home stopped his vehicle's fall down the side of a cliff.

You can learn all this and more at The Elfschool in Reykjavik. Over the course of about four hours Friday afternoons, students get a comprehensive overview of the elves of Iceland — and come away with a cool souvenir in the form of an elf school diploma.

The school, at Sidumuli 31 on the east side of the city, has operated year-round for three decades. Behind its front door, a rabbit warren of rooms is flanked by a hallway stacked high with



Elfschool graduates get a comprehensive overview of Iceland's elves.

Dole Banana boxes and other random objects: sewing machine, saddle, sled. Little parlors with fringed lamps, doliies and cross-stitch artwork line the hallway. The classroom itself, with no desks or chalkboard, is more like a library, its bookshelves populated with ceramic figurines. Students from all over the world, including yours truly, who

couldn't resist, sit here in a circle to discuss all things elfin. Classes are held in English and cost about \$63 a person.

Headmaster Magnus Skarphedinsson is a big bear of a man with short hair, a closely cropped, graying beard, wire-rim glasses and a mischievous sense of humor. Though he acknowledges he's never actually seen an

elf — apparently only 2 to 3 percent of humans have that ability — he firmly believes in them. Over the years he's collected oral histories from more than 1,300 people who say they've interacted with elves. Skarphedinsson asks that you think of him as an elf historian.

He started off class by telling us, a mix of mostly American and German students, that there are 13 different kinds of elves, five kinds of *huldufolk* (hidden people) and any number of gnomes, dwarfs and trolls roaming the hauntingly beautiful volcanic landscape of Iceland. (Thankfully, there's no final exam.)

According to Skarphedinsson, elves range from 2 to 47 inches in height, although the "hidden people" can be closer to human size. There are no pointy hats. No curly shoes. Besides their diminutive stature, it's their colorful, old-fashioned manner of dress that tips you off you're in the presence of an elf.

Elves share this world with us but live in another dimension, Skarphedinsson explained. They reside in rocks, so people can't pass through their homes and disturb them. While they're

mostly friendly and even helpful to humans, they can turn nasty when their homes are threatened. Plentiful stories exist of construction equipment breaking and workers being injured when road or housing projects disturbed elves' rocky abodes.

A natural-born storyteller, Skarphedinsson regales his students with tales like the one about a farmer whose cow was borrowed by the elves for six weeks in the winter, then returned with no trace of footprints in the snow surrounding the barn. Other stories tell of a man taken in by elves during a blizzard, a businessman who consults elves on contractual issues and numerous people who've received gifts from elves. Skarphedinsson's own grandmother told him she played with elves as a child.

Halfway through the class, we were treated to a delicious buffet of cream-filled Icelandic pancakes. Once we'd had our fill — of pancakes and elf education — our class received official diplomas, proudly declaring our status as graduates of The Elfschool of Reykjavik.

Rich Warren is a freelance writer.

On the hunt for elves in Iceland

For a potential elf encounter of your own, head to Hafnarfjörður, a pretty, Icelandic seaside town a few miles south of Reykjavik.

This reputed home of the Elf





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On the hunt for elves in Iceland

For a potential elf encounter of your own, head to Hafnarfjörður, a pretty, Icelandic seaside town a few miles south of Reykjavik.

This reputed home of the Elf King and Queen is where you can take an "elf walk" led by the delightful Sigurbjörg Karlsdóttir (go ahead and call her Sibba). She's full of stories about local elves and the 13 "Yule Lads" — think mischievous Santa Clauses — said to come down from the mountains at Christmas to play pranks.

Sibba's walking route goes through the enchanting and otherworldly Hellsisgerdi Park, whose lava rocks are twisted into bizarre shapes and covered with multicolored mosses. Elves supposedly live here by the hundreds, along with a number of friendly cats. Sibba will point out the troll who turned to rock when the morning sun hit him; you can easily make out his nose and mouth.

From there, you'll walk toward the seaside cliff of Hamarinn, the purported residence of the elfin royal court. Legend has it that occasional cracks appear in the cliff's face with beautiful music emanating from within. (Enter at your own risk, because if the crack closes up, you're stuck forever.) A top Hamarinn is a beautiful view



A highlight of Sibba Karlsdóttir's Elf Walks is a trip to Hellsisgerdi Park, a frozen lava flow with many twisted rocks.

RICH WARREN PHOTOS

of Iceland's western coast, as well as a school, where elf children are said to attend alongside their human counterparts.

While I thoroughly enjoyed my two-hour stroll with Sibba, I did not spot one of Iceland's famed elves. But Sibba did give me a tip to bolster my chances should I return: Stand at a crossroads during the summer solstice (June 21), because that's when elves are on the move.

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Backyard "elf houses" in Hafnarfjörður beckon elves to take residence.

If you go

Sigurbjörg Karlsdóttir's Elf Walks cost about \$41 a person and take place at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday and Friday, or at other times by request. Reserve a spot by emailing Sibba at sibbak@simnet.is. The town of Hafnarfjörður is about a 20-minute drive south of Reykjavik and reachable by bus from the capital's city center.