



ICELAND'S FISHERMEN

THERE ARE THREE SORTS OF MEN, ARISTOTLE SAID: THE LIVING, THE DEAD AND THOSE WHO GO OUT TO SEA. SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME, THE SHALLOWS AROUND THE PENINSULAR OF SNAEFELLSNES, ON THE WEST COAST OF ICELAND, HAVE ATTRACTED THEIR SHOALS OF COD AND CAPELINS. SOME DETERMINED MEN STILL GO OUT TO THE OPEN SEA TO CAPTURE THEM.

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It is three in the morning and the windscreen wipers on Petur's van squeak under the freezing rain. The darkness obscures the haunting procession of the dotted line and there in the distance the flickering lights of Grundarfjörður harbour, with no one in the streets. Only an Icelandic fisherman would get up at this hour and in such weather. Petur has a small trawler, but a fire at the warehouse has just ruined all

his bottom lines and he was not insured. "It is fate," he says. On one of his forearms the tattoo, which says, "born to lose," framed with skulls, sums up the trials and tribulations of a sailor's life. Today, he will be part of the crew for his friend Maggi, captain of a 12m fishing boat, a man with forthright ideas and a strong body, with enormous hands made to kill oxen rather than cod. The 24 baskets

each with a 500m line and 500 hooks are already attached, and it is time to cast off. In the darkness we are engulfed by the sound of purring piston rods. On the bridge which is already unsteady, Petur finishes thawing the bait that is already attached to the hooks with a jet of water. Tasty slices of squid are an irresistible feast for any haddock or cod. "All the lines must be wet before sun-



rise. When you fish, you soon learn to sleep only three or four hours a night." Some 30km from the coast, Maggi, installed in the cockpit, in front of several computer screens, decides to lower the lines to a depth of 20m. The boat's trajectory registers on the flat screen in a pink fluorescent coil. The horizon starts to show colour again and reveals a succession of wild coasts hemmed in with mountains, streaming with waterfalls. Everywhere there are mossy lava fields and fissured volcanic slopes, and full south, the lugubrious and frightening Snaefellsjökull cone, the glacier from where Jules Verne made his heroes start their "Journey to the centre of the earth". Several coffees later, as the day finally seems to be starting, the big manoeuvre of hauling in the lines begins. Standing in front of the winch, Maggi surveys the raising of the precious catch, which emerges in glistening, wriggling clusters. The winch line drops the first fish onto a belt, before they are taken into a bottleneck, which rips the hooks from their mouths. At the end of the belt, Petur has already started to cut their throats with the dexterity of a neurological surgeon. The yellow of the oilskins disappears progressively under the cinnabar of the haemoglobin. Capelins, haddock, cod fly above the bridge and land heavily in their coffin of crushed ice. During this time, a squadron of shameless gulls scavenge to the rear of the boat, on the lookout for a bit of regurgitated squid or some bloody entrails. Four hours later, ▶

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the lines have all been wound back in. There are now five tonnes of fish in the hold. At 1 p.m., Maggi moors his boat alongside the quay, as easily as if it were a bike on the pavement. "You see, we finish earlier than the offices!", he says with a light-hearted tone. As captain, he receives 12 % of the sales of the fish, the crew half of that and the rest goes into the pockets of the shipowners. The next day, once the fish have been sold, he can look on the Internet to find out the exact amount of his pay.

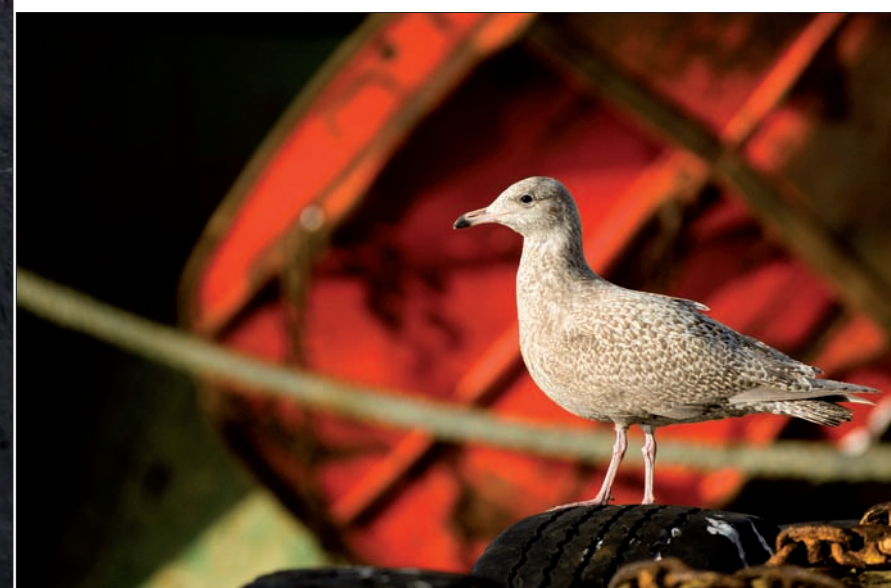
The ultramodern Haukabergr purseiner is a wonderful incarnation of the new Icelandic fishing method. At seven a.m. sharp, this more than 30m-long boat leaves

44 Grundarfjörður quay with only five men on board. In the overheated cockpit, captain Gunnar Hjalmarsson is wearing socks and sipping a hot chocolate, as he stands before a battery of screens and instruments. The entire navigation is done with a computer mouse. The wheel is now used as a coat hanger. This is a far cry from the long rowing sessions in the icy drizzle. "Before we used to stick our finger in the air to know where the fish were, he said. Now everything can be seen: the sonar indicates the position and depth of the shoals, the detectors indicate the quantity of fish in the trawl and the opening of the net is controlled perfectly. But you have to know what you are doing. The fish have always had their share of mystery. Sometimes they disappear. Fishing colleagues telephone each



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other all around Iceland. Nothing, and then the next day they are back." In the crew area, seated on a wooden bench, the sailors wearing helmets resemble a team of gladiators getting ready to enter the arena. They won't take long to haul in their net. Less than two years ago, these men were snubbed by the new financial aristocracy, when the banking fever was at its heights. It was even asserted that working in finance was the only guarantee for the future of the country and that fishing could be forgotten. Today, Iceland has sent its bankers to their drawing boards and is once again celebrating its longstanding heroes, the fishermen. ■

CHRISTOPHE MIGEONS



Ancrées à l'entrée du canal du Mozambique, dans un bleu violent ourlé de petits moutons blancs, voici les Comores, fruit d'une activité volcanique ininterrompue depuis dix millions d'années. Les quatre îles ont surgi de l'océan les unes après les autres. La dernière, la bien nommée Grande Comore, est encore toute boursoufflée par son volcan toujours actif, le Karthala. L'ascension de ce géant permet d'accéder à un monde lunaire et fantasque.

Pour le dompter, on peut partir de M'Vouni, où un sentier quitte, sans regret, le village et ses champs de bananiers pour s'enfiler entre les murets de pierres ponces. De vilains arbustes, goyaviers rouges, framboisiers et roundas, tentent de retenir le marcheur de leurs feuilles grasses et humides. Une diffuse sensation d'oppression grandit à chaque pas, tout ce vert, tout ce végétal qui retombe, dégoutte, suinte, respire...

Entre les frondaisons piquetées d'orchidées, on aperçoit au loin, sur la côte houpillée par une houle écumeuse, la capitale Moroni, le blanc de sa grande mosquée, le bleu pétrole de son port. Vers 1100 m, des fougères arborescentes étalent sans complexe leur panache, les troncs jaillissent à 30-40 m de hauteur, s'enveloppent de mousses et de lianes, les branches se laissent pousser de longues barbichettes de lichens...

La jungle, ainsi que la chape de nuages, s'éclaircit vers 1500 m. On croise alors des paysans, le chapeau de paille fatigué et le visage zébré de sueur, précédés de zébus timides qui viennent flairer l'étranger de leurs naseaux frémissants. Le sommet, à 2300 m, se fait désirer. Une lande de bruyères vert tendre finit d'accompagner le marcheur jusqu'aux lèvres de la caldeira, 4 km de diamètre, l'une des plus grandes du monde.

C'est un monde étrange, où le végétal et l'animal n'ont plus leur place, mornes étendues de cendres et de graviers, semées de gros blocs rocheux tombés sans doute de la poche d'un géant. Un terrain d'entraînement idéal pour les missions Apollo. Mais aussi un paysage trop lymphatique pour être honnête... Au fond du cratère principal, de légères fumerolles, vite dissipées par un vent soufflé des enfers, trahissent les dangereux borborygmes contenus par le géant.

Le coupe-vent gonflé comme une voile sous la bourrasque, Hamidi Soulé, responsable de

l'observatoire volcanologique du Karthala, rappelle que, depuis le XIX^e siècle, une vingtaine d'éruptions seulement ont fait trembler la montagne. Pourtant, depuis environ trois ans, le Karthala semble saisi d'une inquiétante fièvre tellurique et joue les agités. Le dernier soubresaut en date est survenu le 13 janvier 2007. Au X^e siècle, lorsque les navigateurs arabes découvrent l'île principale, ils sont suffisamment impressionnés par ces reliefs décharnés et les fumées qui s'en dégagent pour nommer l'archipel en référence à notre satellite: K'm'r, trois consonnes qui partent du fond de la gorge et s'achèvent dans un souffle, «la Lune» en arabe médiéval. Depuis, Grande Comore a vu débarquer sur ses côtes une succession de peuples – Bantous, Arabes, Portugais, Indiens et Français – à

l'origine d'une société originale et plurielle, une société arc-en-ciel.

Leurs descendants ont appris à vivre en bonne intelligence avec ce voisin ombrageux, capable de semer la mort comme la vie le long de ses pentes fertiles. Les esprits, empreints de crainte et de respect après des siècles passés à subir les incartades du géant, ont tissé un écheveau de contes et de légendes. Ce monde lunaire ne pouvait être que le royaume des djinns, ces génies plus ou moins malfaisants, créés par Allah à partir du feu. Ces facétieux, qui, décidément, ne respectent rien, auraient jeté le trône de la reine de Saba au fond du cratère. Une autre légende raconte que la célèbre souveraine est venue en voyage de nocce avec son époux, le roi Salomon. Eperdument amoureux, les tourtereaux auraient escaladé le Karthala, avant que la reine ne jette sa bague dans le cratère, promettant de revenir un jour en ce lieu enchanteur. Les Comoriens l'attendent encore. ■

COMORES: LE KARTHALA, VOLCAN DE LA LUNE