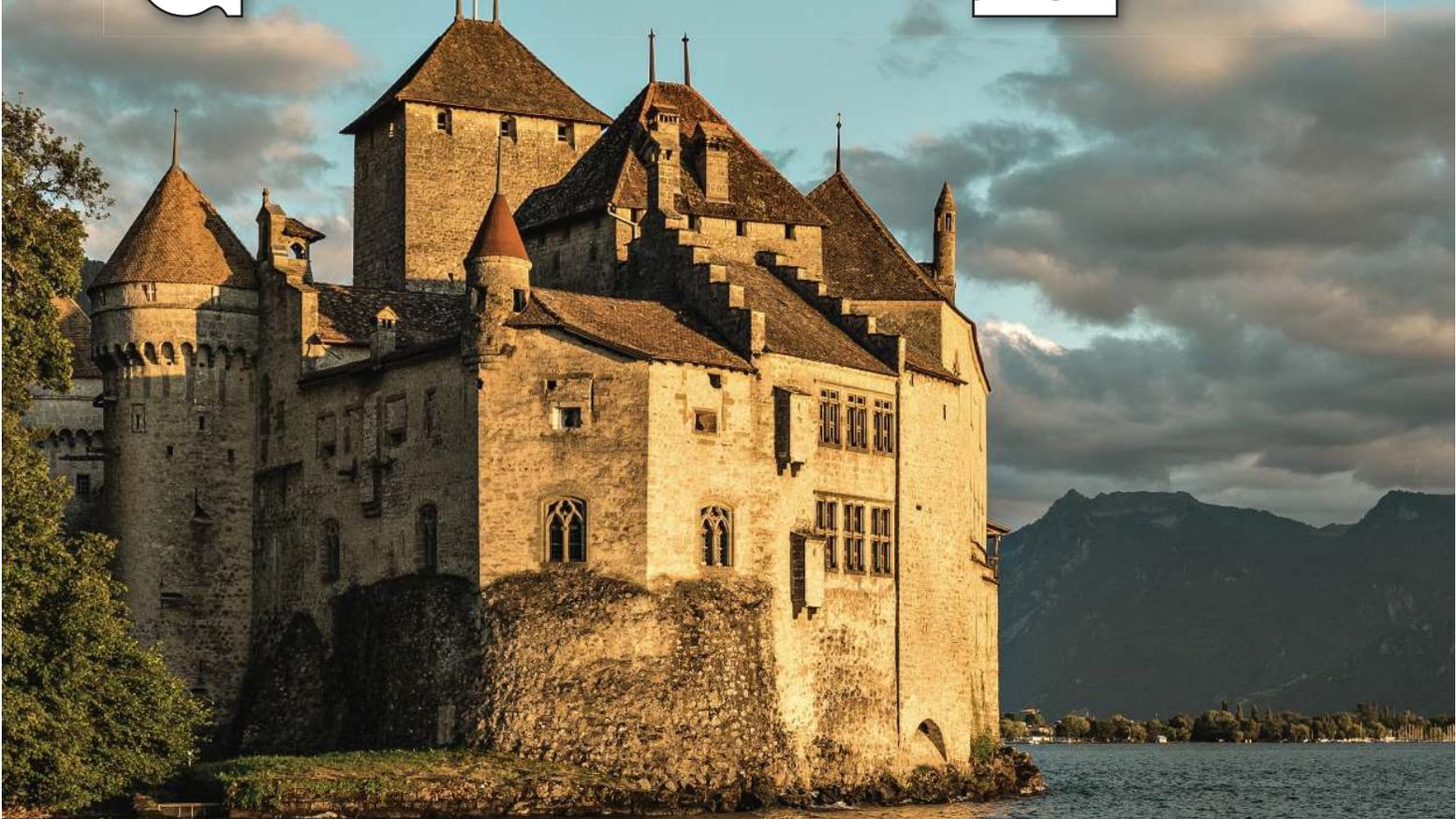


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LAND OF THE EXTREMES— HALLIG HOOGE

BY WIBKE CARTER

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY WIBKE CARTER

Precariously perched atop nine man-made hills, a handful of Germans challenge the elements and the Wadden Sea.

It is a cool and foggy morning when I board the *MS Hauke Haien* to make my way from the island of Föhr to one of Germany's most remote locations: the Hallig Hooge. The boat is on its way to deliver day tourists to the second largest of the North Frisian Halligen islands which are famous for being exposed to the elements without protective dikes in Germany's Wadden Sea.

The name Halligen comes from the Celtic word *hal* which means salt, referencing the fact that the low-lying islands get flooded with saltwater multiple times a year by the tides. Old maps show that a greater number of Halligen existed in the past, but frequent floods, storm tide erosion, and poor coastal protection led to the current



BUSINESSES SUCH AS THIS GALLERY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE INFLUX OF TOURISTS WHO VISIT HALLIG HOOGE.

existence of ten islands.

Currently only six of the Halligen are permanently inhabited. Südfall, Norderoog, and Habel are bird sanctuaries. Less than 300 people live spread across the ten islands and their occupations are mainly based on tourism, hospitality, coastal protection, and raising cattle or sheep. Süderoog houses two inhabitants, a couple who is active in coastal protection and looks after the preservation of the island.

My destination, the Hallig Hooge, officially had 109 residents at the last census in 2012 who live on nine populated *Warften*, several feet-high, man-made hills to guard against storm tides. There is a school with four pu-



THE KÖNIGSPESEL (KING'S ROOM) IS HALLIG HOOGE'S BIGGEST ATTRACTION AND NORTHERN GERMANY'S OLDEST PRIVATE MUSEUM.

pils and one teacher, a church, and Germany's smallest supermarket. I am told, that if a doctor is needed, a helicopter has to be called in or the coast guard, and the mail box states in writing what is true for the life on the Hallig: "*tideabhängig*" (depending on the tides).

On arrival, I am greeted by staff from the tourism office who help with orientation but also collect the Hallig-Taler, a 1 Euro (\$1.30) fee which was introduced in April 2011 to help reduce the debt of the island and to secure the survival of necessities such as the first aid station. "With this fee we wanted to improve the quality of amenities on the island," says mayor Matthias Piepgras. So far the public toilets were upgraded, new public benches installed, and a mobility chair for disabled visitors purchased. Around 100,000 day tourists visit Hallig Hooge annually.

Getting around is easy. Horse drawn carriages wait on the pier and there are several bike rentals on the island. Due to the lack of elevation, I opt for a comfortable 20 minute (1 mile) walk from the boat landing to the Hanswarft, the main center of Hooge. Here the city council, restaurants, the island museum and the fire department are located.

My first stop for the day is the "Sturmflutkino" (Storm Surge cinema). A fifteen minute movie shows footage from one of the two to five storm surges which happen annually in the fall and winter. It is scary to see how the water surges, finally conquering the 4-foot high dike and with every passing minute gaining more and more ground: the paddocks, the streets, the children's playground. Where hours before one found the Hallig, now one finds the North Sea. The Warften are becoming islands, trapping their inhabitants inside.

Also on the Hanswarft is Hallig Hooge's biggest attraction: the Königspesel (king's room) named so because the Danish King Friedrich VI stayed here on July 2, 1825 as a storm surge made his departure to the mainland impossible. The Königspesel is not only northern Germany's oldest private museum, but also houses a rare European collection of antiques and commodities. These were compiled by Captain Tade Hans Bandiks, collector and architect of the Pesel, in the 18th century. Worth mentioning



THE KIRCHSWARFT AND ST JOHANNIS CHURCH IS THE RELIGIOUS CENTER OF HALLIG HOOGE.



TRAVELERS WALKING FROM THE FERRY TO HANSWARFT.



DAY-TRIPPERS TRAVEL ABOARD THE MS HAUKE HAIEN FROM THE ISLAND OF FÖHR TO REMOTE HALLIG HOOGE.

are two plates from the 11th century depicting the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the over 350 biblical wall tiles, all of which are original.

From the main wharf, I walk to another attraction: the Kirchswarft (closed on Monday). This wharf and with it St Johannis Church and rectory are the religious center of Hallig Hooge as well as favored photo motif. The church was consecrated in 1637, while the organ, found in the back part of the building, was built in the winter of 1959. Because the sea was frozen on the delivery date, the instrument was flown in by helicopter. Worshipping, often in the Low German dialect, takes place every Sunday as well as on public holidays. Also part of the Kirchswarft is the local cemetery which holds a humble wooden cross marking an area where non-identified beach corpses were buried over the years.

Life on the Hallig is a life of extremes. There are the forces of nature, but also the solitude. The tightness of a community where everybody knows everybody and survival can depend on a neighbor's help. The summer months are driven by generating income seven days a week and winter means catching up on office and administrative duties. Not many people are cut out for a life like this and so Hallig Hooge kept losing inhabitants. That is until 2009, when the "Hand for Kojé" project (hand

for bed) started. The idea is to have volunteers live for free in some of the community-owned apartments on the Hallig in exchange for work. "There is lots to do like gardening, painting benches, repairing fences—especially in summer," says resident Erco Jacobsen. Nearly 250 people have participated in the project so far, one as old as 80 years. Interested parties have to officially apply and agree to stay for at least two weeks on the island. The community is happy with the project and the fact that four new residents could be won so far.

After three hours it is time for me and the other day trippers to return to Föhr which, after the solitude of Hallig Hooge, suddenly feels as crowded as Frankfurt airport in comparison. **GL**