Scattered in the North Sea 6km off Schleswig-Holstein are the **North Frisian islands**. For centuries these storm-battered, separate worlds eked out a living from farming and fishing, their thatched villages hunkered down behind sand dunes in defence against waves that occasionally washed away whole communities. Tourism replaced agriculture as the premier source of income decades ago, yet even on Sylt the scenery is overwhelmingly bucolic-seaside. There are the same dune seas of marrum grass and vast skies – blue and brooding by turns – that captivated artists in the early 1900s; the same thatched villages, even if many house boutiques and restaurants rather than fisherfolk; and there are the same colonies of sea birds and seals in the coastal Nationalpark Schleswig-Holsteinisches Wattenmeer (literally “shallow sea”), added to Unesco’s World Heritage list in 2009. This may be Germany’s coastal playground, but it is more Martha’s Vineyard than St Tropez. **Sylt** is the most popular and developed of the islands, centred on main town **Westerland** and chic village-resort **Kampen**. **Föhr** and especially **Amrum** are peaceful rural islands of homespun charm with little to do except stroll or cycle – not just good options to get around but sometimes your only ones.

Just bear in mind the weather. The islands are on the same latitude as Newcastle in northeast England or the southern tip of Alaska. Statistics tell their own story of changeable conditions as weather fronts barrel across the North Sea: although only fifteen days a year are free of prevailing westerly winds that can blow gale-force even in summer, the islands bask in 1750 hours of sunshine a year.