Icelandic Adventures

With the help of our K. J. Baker travel awards we were lucky enough to travel to Iceland in the late summer of 2017. We were both travelling to Iceland for the first time, and the country had a certain mystery and magic about it for both of us in our expectations. During our trip this mystery became fascinating knowledge and experiences, but the magic remained.

Our trip was planned as a camping and hiking holiday, which, bar one night in an apartment to settle in and a bit of rain stopping play, was fantastically realised. We arrived very early at Reykjavik Keflavik, a stunningly modern and sleek airport, set in the middle of nowhere - our first taste of the balance between modernity and timeless nature that we would see throughout the country. After a bit of a wobbly start driving on the right/wrong-hand side of the road we arrived in Reykjavik and spent a long, busy day getting all of our ‘touristing’ out of the way before setting off into the wilderness. The walk from our apartment to the centre of town took us on a breathtaking walk along the city’s coast, lined for miles with huge rocks and dotted with unique architecture - pictured to the right is the Sun Voyager by Jón Gunnar Árnason, based on the voyager ships of Iceland’s ancient history with a modern twist. We visited the Harpa concert hall and Hallgrímskirkja cathedral, both fascinating buildings, stark and almost brutal looking but so particular to what we had come to understand of Iceland in the short time we had been there. After a long day we bit the bullet and decided to see if everyone really was telling the truth when they said that Iceland was the most expensive country we would ever go to. Our evening meal was indeed far from budget, but it was absolutely worth it. With puffin, moss-smoked salmon and lobster hot-dogs amongst others things on the table it was hard to regret the price. We even shared a single beer!

We cherished our one night’s sleep in a real bed before setting off the next morning to our first destination, Hellisandur. It was the longest drive of the trip but an incredible way to start off. Driving for 3 hours up the west coast to the Snaefellsnes Peninsula we saw indescribable landscapes, dark jagged rocks taller than the clouds, vast icy oceans and, eventually, lava fields - a campsite in the latter of which would
be our home for the next day and night. After setting up camp we set off on our first hike, which involved a drive to a walk around Snaefellsjokull mountain. This drive took us up a dirt road - it was not an F road (the roads definitively only drivable on in a 4x4) but it might as well have been. Our little car barely made it, and we eventually had to admit defeat, leaving it parked at the side of the road to walk the short distance left. The hike around the mountain (pictured above) was exciting as we felt truly cut off from civilisation, having come so far from the main road. It was, however, the first time we had to learn the hard way that a lot of Iceland’s best sights are weather dependent - although literally walking through the clouds was incredible, it did mean that we could see barely any of Snaefellsjokull and none of its glacial peak. This became quite a pattern on some of our excursions. After a day’s hard walking we stopped for early dinner at the famous ‘Gamla Rif’, known for its only dish, fish soup (pictured left). Even if we hadn’t been as ravenous as we were, this would have been one of the best meal’s either of us has ever had. Back at our camp, after the first of what would be many incredible sunsets (and hence lack of cloud cover) we settled down to our first taste of just how cold it was going to be on this trip.

We learnt some lessons that first night and significantly increased the number of layers we wore to bed after that.

The next morning we set off early, driving round the other side of the peninsula and back down the west coast, not forgetting to stop at a few Game of Thrones filming locations (although some might call them ‘geographical marvels’) like Kirkjufell mountain, which stands out as it is shaped distinctly like an arrowhead, almost looking man-made (see left). Our next base camp was Pingvellir national park. We spent the day exploring the national park - this was admittedly very tourist heavy, but was absolutely fascinating and an indispensable part of the trip. As well as holding every type of flora and fauna you can imagine the park is set in a rift valley, with countless waterfalls, crystal clear lakes and quite a bit of human history too. It was by far the most beautiful place that we camped (pictured right), which is lucky as it presented more than a few logistical problems. As we put up our tent at sundown we were presented with more midges than you have ever seen in one place before. Even when these had cleared, we had to learn
the hard to way to not leave any food bags out of the car - a little mousey friend joined us for the night and even on our next car journey! Our friend made his way diligently through all of our bags, making sure to leave his mark. We hope that he is enjoying his new life in Geysir, which was our next destination.

Arriving in Geysir, we set up camp, in a campsite called ‘Hotel Geysir’. Icelandic tourism has wasted no time with this site - as well as the geysir itself and the campsite, this was a complex including hotel, restaurants and shopping mall. We were a little disappointed that we had to stay somewhere this built up in order to see the Geysir, but it was absolutely worth it. Besides, it’s impossible for anywhere to be that uninviting in Iceland (see left). Before going to look at the namesake of the place, we decided to take a long walk up the hill you can see pictured. We didn’t make it to the top, but nonetheless managed to get an incredible view of the geothermal landscape. It really resembles looking over rooftops at smoking chimneys, like the little ‘elf-houses’ we had seen in mounds of grass along the way. We visited the actual geysir twice - once before dinner and once after. The first time was of course awesome, but very busy with tourists bustling to get the best view. The real magic happened when we went back, just before sundown, when only a few dedicated photographers were left. The place was absolutely silent, under a pink sky. You could hear every bubble and pop, and almost feel it under your feet when it was about to blow. Every stage of the geysir’s eruption is incredible.

The following day we left Geysir and journeyed southwards towards Skogafoss. This was a gentle drive and so, on the route we had time to stop in Fudir and visit the Secret Lagoon, one of Iceland’s famous geothermal pools. The volcanic setting has made Fudir an important center in the Iceland geothermal farming movement, we drove past numerous of these steaming greenhouses as we arrived. The lagoon itself was a beautiful ancient stone pool surrounded by bubbling and erupting geysirs. Emerging from the changing rooms into the icy air made entering the perfectly hot water all the more memorable. After our nights of camping and days of exploring this was an amazing experience.

After many hours of floating in the steaming waters we drove on to Skogafoss. The coastal road meanders along sweeping views of the North Atlantic Ocean on one side and stunning vistas of the
dynamic cliffs carved by the powerful glacial rivers and waterfalls. However, despite these appetisers nothing prepared for arriving at our campsite nestled beneath Skogafoss, one of the largest waterfalls in Iceland. The water falls for over sixty metres and due to the volume of water the clouds of spray rising from the waterfall produces a faint rainbow.

From our camp at the base of Skogafoss we set out early in the morning to follow the trail leading up to the pass Fimmvörðuháls between the glaciers Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull. This route is the first step of the famous Laugavegur trail to Landmannalaugar. The route follows the river Skoga as it cuts through the landscape as a deep ravine between abundant crashing waterfalls. The path is a popular trekking route among locals and tourists alike, so it is clearly marked by coloured waypoints every hundred meters. As we arrived at the base of the glaciers and the foot of the surrounding volcanoes the visibility began to rapidly decrease to the extent that we were not able to see the waypoint ahead of us. Despite our desire to continue and complete our circular route around the base of the volcano we decided that the conditions were no longer safe. We carefully retraced our steps through the pouring rain until we were able to safely follow the waypoints back to Skogafoss.

The rain did not stop and continued throughout the evening, night and into the next day. We tried waiting for the rain to pass however, increasingly this seemed to be Iceland’s notorious weather finally catching up with us. Through the now torrential rain we drove east to Vik, hoping to find solace further along the coast, luck was not on our side. A short stroll along the black sand beaches was allow the weather would allow.

The gloomy soaking weather continued, however, it was a rather fitting accompaniment to our journey east across Iceland’s infamous Sandars. The Lonely Planet describes Sandars as “soul-destroyingly flat and empty regions sprawling along Iceland’s southeastern coast”. They are formed of the silt, dirt and sand carried and dumped by glacial rivers in large outwash plains. The drive was long and lonely, on a raised road looking through the thick heavy rain at the black sandy backdrop of the southeastern coast. Our destination was Skaftafell, a settlement on the southernmost border of the Vatnajokull national park. As we neared our destination we periodically emerged from the mist and rain and witnessed the enormity of Iceland’s largest glacier, as ice poured like rivers down the mountainsides looking over the coastal road.
The periodic nature of the torrential rain and storms meant our opportunities to venture into the Vatnajokull national park and explore the frozen landscape were either unsafe or too fleeting. We were however, able to explore the incredible landscape created at the borders of this glacial world, were the effects of periodic freezing, thawing and the extraordinary power of glacial rivers was most apparent. Once such location was the small, yet idiosyncratically beautiful waterfall Svartifoss. Hidden at the foot of two glaciers and up a ravine is a small waterfall surrounded by delicate hexagonal basalt columns. This unique rock formation occurs in only a few locations around the world, Giant’s Causeway in Ireland and Fingal’s Cave are other examples of these exquisite structures. The precise conditions of lava cooling at these locations has led to the creation of near perfect hexagonal columns, this truly was a sight to behold.

We spent the night in the Skaftafell national park campsite before starting our final journey east to see the Jökulsárlón glacial lake, an astounding location. From the southernmost point of the lake we could see a lagoon filled with icebergs and in the distance the ice cap of the glacier itself. The icebergs were not at all motionless, they crashed, flipped and broke apart in front of us. It was incredible to see such a dramatic site.

The next day we started the long drive back along the coastal road to Reykjavik. Thankfully we emerged from the rain that had been plaguing our trip into bright sunshine. We spent our final days enjoying the art, architecture and culinary treats that Reykjavik had to offer. On our final night we were able to join the Icelanders in celebrating their World Cup qualifying win over Ukraine, a fantastic end to the trip.