

Bragg's Iceland Trip July 12-22, 2013

Iceland Air started direct service from Denver to Reykjavik in May 2012 and it wasn't long afterwards that we signed up for a 10-day "Hiking Iceland's Mountains & Fjords" trip with Mountain Travel Sobek. We especially appreciated getting to our destination in a single, 6.5 hour flight after the multi-flight, multi-day travels associated with our trip earlier this year to Yap & Palau. And so, after a very pleasant and relatively short flight, we arrived in Keflavik International Airport about 6:30am -- while our body clocks said it was just after midnight and thus bedtime, our first day in Iceland was just beginning.

Helgi, our lead guide for the trip, met us and several others in our group at the airport for a 45min ride into Reykjavik's City Center. Our hotel room would not be available until noon so we stored our bags and headed off to have some breakfast and began getting to know some of the 13 other folks in the group: Linda & Brian from Denver, Alida and Gerald from Calif Bay Area, Becky and Ted from the Houston area, Axel and Bruce from the



Head Guide Helgi



Iceland's Cathedral

Chicago area, Lori from the Calif Bay Area, Nancy from western MA, Tori from Cincinnati, Amy from St. Louis, and Rena from the Boston area. After breakfast the group split up to do some sightseeing/shopping. Steve and I checked out the main shopping street, Laugavegur, and then toured Iceland's cement cathedral, Hallgrímskirkja – an elevator takes you to the top for a 360 degree view of the City. After a bite of lunch at the Laundromat Café (yes, you could do laundry in the basement) we were more than ready for a hot shower and a nap. As Reykjavik is the world's most northern capital it enjoys nearly 24 hour sunlight during the summer months; all hotels are well equipped with blackout curtains!

The group gathered for dinner that first night and we met our assistant guide Jon, who we discovered on our walk to the restaurant is a model for the Icelandic yogurt company "Skr" (it's very good yogurt).



Jon & Lori with Ad for Skyr Yogurt

The next morning we had a short trip to Reykjavik's domestic airport (no worries about security checks, 3oz liquid limits, etc.) where we boarded a twin prop plane for an hour hop over the island's highlands to the eastern town of Egilsstaðir. From here it was an hour's drive or so



Steve boarding plane to Egilsstaðir

to the village of Lodmundarfjordu, the starting point of our 4 day trek among the fjords of the north-east corner of Iceland. During the drive, we saw several



spectacular waterfalls; a sight repeated over and over during the trip (we heard there are something near 12,000 waterfalls).



A brief lesson on Iceland: it is an island nation located at the confluence of the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It lies on the geologic rift between the Eurasian plate and the North American plates above a hotspot called the Iceland plume which is believed to have formed the island itself with its surface first appearing over the ocean surface 16 to 18 million years ago. Its volcanic and geothermal geology continue to play a significant role in the island today ... you may remember when its Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted in 2010 and disrupted air travel in many European countries for several days.



Vikings settled in Iceland in the late 800's and had a varied political history with significant Nordic influence. After WWI it gained its independence from Denmark as the "Kingdom of Iceland" (sharing the Danish monarchy); in 1944 it became the "Republic of Iceland." At approx. 40,000 sq. miles, roughly the size of the state of Kentucky, it has a total population around 320,000; approx. 1 in 8 of whom are non-native Icelanders (by contrast Kentucky's population is approx. 4.4 million).

Our 4-day, 3-night trek involved the following:

- The north-east corner of Iceland is a mix of green mountains, stone peaks, countless streams and waterfalls, and fjords along the North Atlantic. The weather varied from sunny to foggy to rainy – about the only constant was that it was usually windy. Most of the time the temperature was in the mid-50's ... great hiking weather.
- Hiking 9 to 10 miles daily over a variety of trail conditions: heath, gravel, snow, fording streams, etc. The following table shows our daily miles, altitude gains/loss, etc. (group member Bruce carried a GPS system)



Date	Description	Distance (km)	Distance (mi)	Alt. + (m)	Alt. + (ft)	Alt - (m)	Alt - (ft)	High (m)	Low (m)
July 14	Seydisfjörður to Lodmundarfjörður	15.1	9.4	900	2953	969	3179	703	8
July 15	Lodmundarfjörður to Húsavík	15.1	9.4	765	2510	656	2152	456	13
July 16	Húsavík to Breidavík	15.4	9.6	587	1926	684	2244	525	58
July 17	Breidavík to Bakkagreiði	16.7	10.4	957	3140	988	3242	443	0

- While the daily mileage wasn't overly taxing, our feet did get quite a workout as much of the hiking was done on very spongy heath – each step involved lots of foot movement within the boots – a recipe for certain production of blisters without the diligent application of moleskin!
- We carried only day packs with water, rain gear/variety of clothes for changing weather conditions, sandals for stream crossings (cold water!!!), cameras, the occasional package of cookies/dried fruit as part of the day's "lunch" provisions, etc.



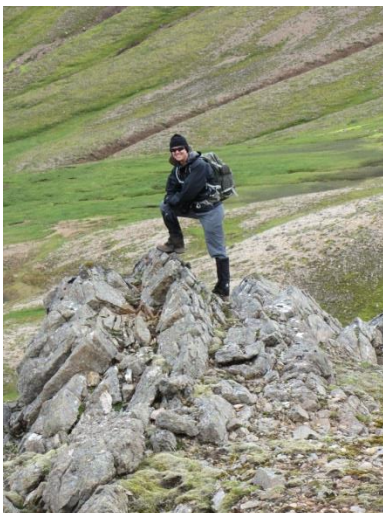
- The rest of our gear and common provisions traveled from hut to hut via a 4-wheel drive vehicle manned by our “Magician” (he obtained our personal inventories of wine, beer, liquor, sodas on a Sunday when alcoholic beverages are not sold in stores; turns out he also runs a restaurant and bar so he has access to its inventory)
- Our destination for each of the 3 nights was a series of huts, basically carbon copies of each other: central kitchen/common room on ground floor and communal sleeping loft above. Outbuildings housed flush toilets, gas-heated hot showers (much appreciated after each day’s hike), and an equipment drying room (wet socks and hiking boots plus heat = smelly!). Instead of sleeping inside the huts (I don’t do well when folks are snoring, and several apparently did), we chose to sleep in a two-person tent outside (tent and pads provided; we brought our own sleeping bags). With nighttime temps in the upper 40’s it was great sleeping weather so Steve and I both slept quite well!
- We ate quite well with our guides Helgi and Jon as our chefs and the group split into teams taking turns at meal clean-ups:
 - Breakfasts included oatmeal (the real stuff), yogurt, hearty and delicious bread/toast with real butter and jam, eggs, etc. We both ate more bread on the trip than either of us had in a long time it was just so fresh and good!
 - Lunches were fixed and eaten on the trail – a variety of sandwich makings, hot tea, coffee & hot chocolate, dried fruits, cookies, packaged cakes, and candies – the Icelandic chocolate-covered licorice candy quickly became a favorite!
 - BYOB happy hours in the huts with sliced meats, cheese, crackers, etc.
 - Not surprisingly fish was on the dinner menu 2 of 3 hut nights (a couple of us non-fish folks instead were served yummy veggie patties instead) along with soup, salad, potatoes or rice and some sort of dessert involving heavy cream !



Inside hut's common room



Lunch on the trail - what a view!



Notice Steve's various head gear – changed frequently with the weather!

- Only on our last day of trekking did we actually encounter anyone else on the trail; while there were a few other folks staying at the same huts, we never actually saw them along the trail. We did, however, see a fair number of sheep. Sheep were brought to Iceland by the Vikings, thus they have been bred for a thousand years in a very harsh environment; they are very efficient herbivores. We also heard and saw several birds, primarily Artic Terns (they “summer” in Iceland and then summer again in Antarctica) and European Golden Plovers
- We were happy to have guides along with us who were quite familiar with the trails. While the trails were “marked” with stakes or rock cairns, they weren’t particularly easy to spot; especially with the sometimes foggy conditions and/or snowfields over streams that needed to be crossed.
- Besides lots of green, there were many other colors of flora – you just had to often look closely as most alpine flowers are quite small and close to the ground to help ensure their survival.



The trekking portion of the trip ended in the charming seaside village of Bakkagredi where our guides Helgi and Jon took a pre-dinner swim in the North Atlantic – the rest of us settled for hot showers and a cold beverage. A group dinner ended with the opportunity to try the delicacy of fermented shark – we both declined. We overnighted in a newly opened guest house – private rooms, shared bathrooms – and slept soundly under lofty down duvets (a welcome staple in Iceland).



Church in Bakkegredi



Sod House in Bakkegredi

Day 6 of the trip began with a visit to the harbor area of Bakkagerdi where some of Iceland's over 3 million breeding pairs of Atlantic Puffins breed and nest during the summer – they winter out at sea.



We then headed out for a 7+ mile cross country hike up to the area of the "Dark Valley." It should be pointed out that in Iceland the public has the right to hike on both public and private lands so this hike involved hiking through at least one farmer's land. The hike had us crossing snow bridges above rushing streams and enjoying a variety of alpine flora and fauna. Following the hike, a not-too-long van ride had us in the town of Egilsstadir (where we had flown in 5 days earlier) by mid-afternoon. We stopped at the 60 head dairy farm of Helgi's grandfather (still active at 90) and enjoyed some skyr and blueberry pie at the café run by his aunt (we also just happened to run into Jon's mother in the café who was vacationing in the area). Properly nourished, we headed to the only hotel "in the forest" in Iceland.



A word about forests in Iceland ... Iceland is one of the most deforested countries in Europe. At the time of settlement (9th century) an estimated 25% of the country was covered by birch woodlands, whereas today forests only cover a little over 1%. The deforestation is mostly attributed to human impacts (clear cut for agricultural use, sheep grazing which prevented cut areas to regenerate, wood as fuel, etc.) with some deforestation resulting from cooler temperatures associated with glaciation, and the impact of past volcanic activity. In the early part of the 20th century, the government began a planting program which continues today (at current rates it takes about 70 years to plant 1% of land). As one travels around Iceland, every once in a while you see the occasional "forest" – a usually small, very densely planted area. Near Lake Lagarfljot is Iceland's largest forest. It is a very popular camping spot in the summers (think wall-to-wall tents and RV's in every shape and size). It is also home to the Hotel Hallormsstadur, the accommodations for our 6th night.



Hotel Hallormsstadur is known for its extensive dinner buffet which offers such meats as horse, minke whale (Steve declared it was delicious), goose, various fish, lamb, pork, beef,



chicken, etc. As part of its breakfast buffet, a bottle of cod liver oil was set out (a traditional part of an Icelandic breakfast) – I believe only our guides partook. Following breakfast, we took a short forest hike in an area decorated with forest art.

After the forest hike, we headed across the lake to the Hengifoss Waterfall, at 387 feet, one of the tallest in Iceland. It is a round trip hike of about 3 miles from the parking lot to the bottom of the falls. Along the way are great views of the columnar jointed basalt formations lining the walls and another smaller waterfall. These hexagonal formations are formed as a result of cooling lava and are found all over Iceland. Once Hengifoss Falls are reached you can see distinct red lines in the rock behind the falls – a result of centuries of the layering of volcanic ash & lava with soil/clay.



Hengifoss Falls



Basalt formations en route to Hengifoss Falls

The eastern shore of Iceland via a scenic mountain pass was our next destination – with countless gorgeous waterfalls along the way. A picnic lunch at a scenic spot revived us. While eating lunch, a couple of vehicles set up as very simple rental “campers” caught our attention. During the summer, the “ring” road encircling Iceland is filled with a wide assortment of RV’s and campers from folks all over Europe (many of whom bring their RV’s over via the 2-day ferry ride from Norway; others rent theirs in Iceland).



We spent the afternoon cruising along the edge of the eastern coastline (i.e., along North Atlantic) where we stopped at the charming seaside village of Djupivogur to view a granite bird “egg” art installation, check out the harbor, and do a bit of souvenir shopping. At one point along the ocean, the Lonsvik Lagoon, we saw thousands of immature Whooper Swans – a bit of an unexpected sight – swans on the North Atlantic! They summer in Iceland and then head to the UK/Ireland for the winter. Our accommodations that evening was the Arnanes Country Hotel (part of the *Icelandic Farm Holidays* group; all of our non-Reykjavik hotels were part of this group) where we had a delicious lamb dinner.



Abutting the hotel property was a field with several Icelandic horses (we were informed to never call them “ponies”!). Although these beautiful animals may be on the smaller size they are hardy and long-lived.



Icelandic law prevents horses of any kind from being imported into the country and once exported, Icelandic horses are not allowed to return. Horses were first brought to Iceland by the first Viking settlers during the years 874 - 930. As their boats were small, only a few of the very best horses were brought along. Very early in Iceland’s history, the import of farm animals was forbidden; consequently horses have not been brought into the country for over nine centuries.



Day 8 had us traveling along the southern coastline ... the Jökulsárlón Lagoon was our first stop of the day. This lagoon is where the immense Oraefajökull glacier meets the sea. There, we enjoyed a “cool” ride among the icebergs. The ice we saw is 1000 years old; the black/grey streaks in the ice are volcanic ash.



Skaftafell National Park (aka Vatnajökull National Park) was up next with a nearly 4 mile hike up to Svartifoss, the “Black Waterfall” – named for the dark basaltic columns ringing the gorge’s walls. As part of the hike we toured some restored early 20thth century sod houses.



The national park lies in an oasis between two glaciers. Surrounding them is miles of “black desert” – a lava fields from the catastrophic Laki volcanic eruption in 1783-84. Over an eight-month period, an estimated 3.4 cubic miles of basalt lava and clouds of poisonous hydrofluoric acid and sulfur dioxide compounds were emitted that killed over 50% of Iceland's livestock population, leading to a famine that killed approximately 25% of the island's human population. Globally, the eruption caused a drop in global temperatures, as sulfur dioxide was spewed into the Northern Hemisphere. This caused crop failures in Europe and may have caused droughts in India. The eruption has been estimated to have killed over six million people globally making the eruption the deadliest in historical times. In North America, the winter of 1784 was the longest and one of the coldest on record. It was the longest period of below-zero temperatures in New England, with the largest accumulation of snow in New Jersey and the longest freezing over of the Chesapeake Bay. A huge snowstorm hit the south, the Mississippi River froze at New Orleans and there was ice in the Gulf of Mexico.



Black desert in distance



Black desert

A walk on the black “sand” beaches near the town of Vik started off our Day 9. We got an up close and personal look at basalt column formations and took a group photo.



Beach 'sand'



Guides Jon and Helgi on basalt columns

The impressive 82' wide and 190' high Skogafoss waterfall was our next destination. We climbed to the top of the ridge alongside the falls for a top-down view as well.

Just a short distance away was the fascinating Skogar Folk Museum which includes several restored buildings and sod houses that were brought to the site from all over Iceland as well as more traditional museum buildings which house various artifacts from Icelandic culture. We had a tour of the museum's church building personally conducted by the museum's 92 year old founder (and continuing leader), Thordur Tomasson, including a short recital on the church's organ. Definitely worth the visit!



Skogafoss Waterfall



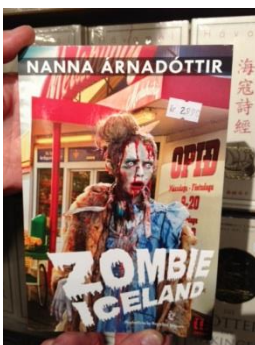
Thordur Tomasson



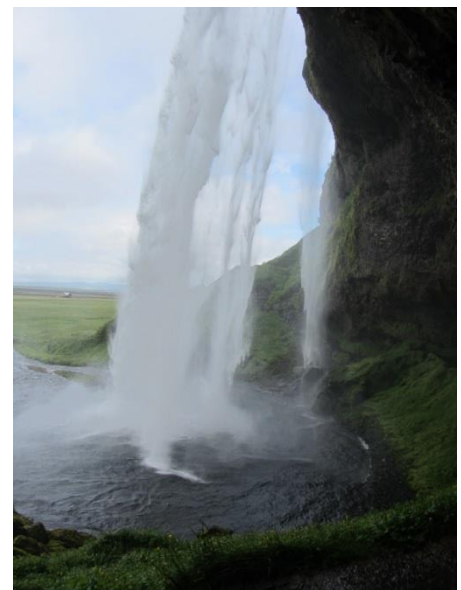
Inside farmhouse at Skogar Museum

The Seljalandsfoss waterfall was our last stop before a van ride returned us to Reykjavik. This waterfall is a bit unique in that you can walk completely behind it! You get a bit wet, so a rain jacket is recommended.

We arrived back in Reykjavik on a gorgeous summer's afternoon in plenty of time for some strolling and window shopping. We stopped by one of the local bookshops – considered the one below but in the end decided not to buy it.



Pansies adorn a doorway in Reykjavik



Seljalandsfoss Waterfal

Speaking of Icelandic literature, I would be remiss not to make a note regarding the Icelandic *Sagas*. The Sagas, written mainly by unknown persons in the 13th and 14th centuries are histories of events that took place in the 10th and early 11th centuries. They reflect the struggle and conflict that arose within the societies of the second and third generations of Icelandic settlers and focus on the genealogical and family history of this group. Helgi read some snippets of the Sagas to our group during some of our van rides. Since the modern day Icelandic language is relatively close to the "Old Norse" language the Sagas were written in, most Icelanders can read the Sagas in their original form. It is said that J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc., borrowed heavily from the Sagas for inspiration of his writings.

A note on the Icelandic language: it is a Northern Germanic language and is often considered “difficult and complicated.” Most of our group certainly thought so – as native English speakers (i.e., “American” speakers), the inflectional quality of the language did not mesh well with our habits. One of Lori’s goals of the trip was to learn how to pronounce “Eyjafjallajökull” (name of 2010 eruption), I don’t think she ever did – it’s *AY-yah-fyad-layer-kuh-tel* if you’d like to try!

We enjoyed a final group dinner in Reykjavik at one of the top fish restaurants – I had delicious lamb– as a conclusion to trip Day 9. There we said goodbye to our van driver (a very nice young man in his early 20’s who just didn’t understand why we’d pay to go “hiking”).



The next morning Steve and I checked out Reykjavik’s absolutely stunning Harpa Concert Hall. Its glass façade is representative of the hexagonal basalt columns seen throughout Iceland ... pictures just don’t do it justice. We’re hopeful that during our next trip to Iceland we’ll be able to actually attend a concert there.



Harpa Concert Hall

As a final stop before heading to the airport and our flights home, the group headed to *The Blue Lagoon* – a geothermal “spa” and one of Iceland’s most visited attractions. The warm waters are rich in minerals like silica and sulfur; The water temperature in the bathing and swimming area of the lagoon averages 37–39 °C (98–102 °F). The lagoon is manmade and is fed from the nearby geothermal plant. Five major geothermal power plants exist in Iceland, which produce nearly 30% of the nation's energy. In addition, geothermal heating meets the heating and hot water requirements of approximately 87% of all buildings in Iceland. Apart from geothermal energy, 73.8% of the nation’s electricity is generated by hydro power (all those waterfalls are put to use), and 0.1% from fossil fuels.



Blue Lagoon

We enjoyed a relaxing soak in the Blue Lagoon and applied some of its special “mud” to our skin. It was then off to the airport where we said our goodbyes to our terrific guides Helgi and Jon, and our great group of fellow trekkers. During the flight back to Denver we got some fantastic views of Greenland ... perhaps a place to add to our travel list?



The map shows the general areas we visited during our trip. As you can see, there is lots more of Iceland for us to see on another trip!