

My Trip To Iceland

Bardarbunga? When I first heard the word I thought they were joking. The name sounded more like some gnarly surfer move than a menacing sub glacial stratovolcano ready to blow its top. But as my trip to Iceland drew near, this lava-churning mound – buried deep within the Vatnajokull ice cap in the central region of the country – became a serious concern. Beginning on August 16th of this year, geologists recorded more than 1,600 earthquakes within a 48-hour period underneath the ice covering Bardarbunga, indicating lava was beginning to flow. By all accounts, an eruption was most certainly imminent. How this would affect the region, air travel in general, and my upcoming tour *specifically* depended on several factors: if an eruption did occur, which way would the ash blow and what sections of the country would be flooded by the rapidly melting ice? I followed the news updates daily for three anxious weeks wondering if my trip would be canceled. Bardarbunga's name no longer amused me. In fact, it proved to be its only redeeming quality, being a heck of a lot easier to pronounce than *Eyjafjallajokull*, the Iceland volcano that wrecked havoc with Europe's air space back in 2010.

I was traveling with three companions I met two years earlier on a trip to the Balkans; DanaMarie Trunfio from Washington, DC, and Ron and Anke Wilckens from Mahwah, New Jersey. During the Balkans tour – en route to Bulgaria – the Wilckens and I were stranded in Germany due to an airline union strike and the ordeal forged a bond between us, creating a lasting friendship. I so wanted to travel with them again that when they suggested Iceland – a very cold destination for a Miami boy like me – I wholeheartedly agreed. DanaMarie and I had also been communicating since our Balkans tour and I convinced her to tag along. The duration of the trip was only nine days, but we felt our itinerary (we booked with Gate 1 Travel) was sufficient enough to afford us a fair sampling of the country. At an average of \$365 per day (not including additional meals), this turned out to be one of the most expensive tours I've ever booked. Iceland is not cheap, and for a number of reasons I will explain shortly in this journal.

Currently, there are no vaccinations or visa requirements for Iceland if you're an American citizen. The only thing I had to secure was warm clothing, a seemingly simple task that proved to be quite frustrating. If you've ever tried to buy a winter coat in Miami during the middle of August you'll know what I mean. Burlington Coat Factory is one of the few places in South Florida selling winter wear, but the two stores near my home did not have an adequate selection because it was still summer. Eventually, I nixed the heavy coat. I decided to use an oversized hoodie I purchased for my trip to China a few years earlier and simply 'layer-up' underneath it. Anke suggested I buy a fleece vest; I ordered a nice one from Cabela's online. I also scoured my closet for every long-sleeved shirt I owned, no matter how outdated. The mean temperatures in Iceland for September ranged between 50 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and roughly 40 degrees at night. This did not take into account the wind, which can routinely exceed gale force strength, causing the temperatures to plummet unexpectedly. According to our tour guide, the only place on earth windier than Iceland is the Falkland Islands.

As usual, I registered online with the State Department's S.T.E.P. program so my government would know I would be in Iceland in case of an emergency. Once registered, the State Department sends travel advisories via email warning of any potential dangers. In the case of Iceland, none were issued. This is one of the safest places in the world to visit. That is, as long as a volcano doesn't erupt in your vicinity. On August 23rd, on news that lava had reached the surface and an eruption was beginning, Bardarbunga was upgraded from a code orange to a code red, the highest threat level the international geological survey agencies can give. My heart sank. But the following morning the code red was retracted because lava activity had slowed considerably. My heart soared. Over the coming days, aerial observations revealed several fissure eruptions to the northeast of the Vatnajökull ice cap stemming from Bardarbunga, and while lava was flowing outwardly, this apparently didn't pose a threat to the section of Iceland we would be visiting. Our trip proceeded without a hitch.

For the purpose of clarity, I will use the Anglo spelling of Icelandic terms and locations in this journal. Only about 320,000 people worldwide speak Icelandic, which is originally a Northern Germanic language with strong similarities to the Old Norse language used by the Viking settlers. I believe there are 32 letters in their alphabet – they officially abolished the letter z in 1973 – and some contain unusual diacritic glyphs (or accents) that I have no idea how to type on my keyboard. As for pronunciation? *Fuggedaboutit!* It would be easier for me to recite Shakespeare in reverse with my mouth full of marbles than to speak Icelandic. Whenever I asked our tour guide for the name of a particular landmark, her answer always invoked the same response from me: I would stare back at her, pen and small notebook in hand, with a befuddled look on my face. Nothing that rolled off her tongue (in Icelandic) even *remotely* resembled the words or spellings I was familiar with. It got to the point where she would simply jot it down for me.

On Sunday, September 7th – hopeful that I had packed enough warm clothing in my burgeoning suitcase – I took a taxi to Miami International Airport to begin my Icelandic adventure...

Days One and Two

I had scheduled an airport taxi pick-up for 10:30am. My American Airlines flight to JFK was scheduled to depart at 12:30pm. I use the word 'scheduled' loosely here; in four of my last five outings with American Airlines, flights have either been cancelled or delayed. The only reason I even bother to travel with this company is because I have racked up thousands of air miles and would hate to lose them. In fact, my round-trip from Miami to New York City was courtesy of my frequent flier miles. I had checked-in online

the previous evening – a first for me – and expected to breeze through to my departure gate. Ha! I had to first log onto a machine that scanned my computer-printed boarding pass, spitting out a tag for my suitcase and charging my credit card the onerous \$25 fee. Then I had to wait on line to hand my luggage over to a counter representative who didn't lift a finger to help me. I not only had to put my suitcase on the weighing scale, I also had to lug it over and place it on the conveyor belt behind the counter while an AA porter looked on. The only assistance the counter rep provided was to make sure I was booked for the flight... and to hand me a *new* boarding pass, negating not only the boarding pass I carefully printed on my computer, but the whole concept behind online check-in. *What had I gained?* I couldn't help thinking it would have been easier to just use the curbside check-in when my taxi pulled up to the terminal building.

I went through security and arrived at my departure gate... *just in time to hear the announcement that my flight was delayed.* Apparently, our plane hadn't made it to Miami and we were being re-assigned another aircraft at a different gate, which of course was located at the *other* end of the terminal. You have to say this about American Airlines, at least they're consistent. Our new flight took off at 1:30pm, an hour behind schedule. When we finally reached JFK International Airport we had to idle for an additional 15 minutes while an arrival gate became available. Getting my luggage took another frustrating 45 minutes. I wearily made my way to JFK's Airtrain, getting off at Terminal 7 and queuing up at one of Icelandair's check-in counters. In the line in front of me were none other than Ron and Anke Wilckens. We had not seen each other in two years and we hugged warmly and laughed and quickly brought each other up to speed.

After our check-in, we cleared security and headed over to one of the many restaurants in the departure area to have an early dinner. Icelandair does not provide an in-flight meal (the first time I've experienced this on an international flight) and so we decided to eat before our 8:40pm departure. We ordered terrific Cuban sandwiches at Sammy's Beach Bar and Grill and spent the next hour and a half catching up on old times. Ron and Anke looked great, neither one seemed to have aged since the last time I saw them. By 8:10pm, Icelandair began their boarding process. All three of us had selected aisle seats (me, because of my claustrophobia). The flight itself was very comfortable. This was an Airbus plane, which allows for more legroom in coach. In addition, the plane was not fully booked and nobody sat in the middle seat next to me, so I was really able to stretch out. I normally bring a prescription of Ambien to help me sleep on the plane and ward off jet lag, but I had forgotten to ask my doctor for a refill. I didn't really need it, though; the flight to Reykjavik lasted only five and a half hours, and about thirty minutes into the trip I fell asleep for the duration.

We arrived at Keflavik International Airport at 6:10am (their time), about twenty minutes ahead of schedule. I've never experienced an immigration process as easy as the one at Keflavik International Airport. Being an American citizen I didn't even have to fill out an immigration card. I simply handed over my passport to an agent who briefly glanced up to make sure it was me in the picture and then stamped the visa, welcoming me to Iceland. The whole procedure took less than ten seconds. On my way to the luggage carousel I lost track of Anke and Ron when I stopped to use the bathroom. They

had entered a duty-free shop to pick up some liquor and we became separated. I met up with them again at the baggage claim area. We also ran into DanaMarie who had just arrived on a flight from Washington, DC. Another round of laughing and hugging ensued. DanaMarie looked marvelous, she'd been exercising regularly and had lost quite a few pounds. Her affable nature and infectious laughter made her so much fun to be around. Initially – because the four of us had only met on a previous tour – I was a little apprehensive about how our 'group dynamic' would unfold. But standing in the baggage claim area I sensed almost immediately we were a good mix, and that regardless of how the tour went I knew we would have a wonderful time together.

After retrieving our luggage, we headed over to the exit and found our tour guide, Elizabet, waiting for us with a Gate 1 sign. She greeted us and led us to a small coffee stand nearby, telling us to relax while she rounded up the rest of our tour group members. While we waited I had one of the best tasting cups of coffee in my life. All throughout our trip I was impressed with the quality of the java, wondering where the heck do Icelanders get their beans from? There were several ATM machines next to the coffee stand and I withdrew 20,000 Icelandic kronur – (the plural of krona) – or approximately \$170 dollars worth. This seemed like a lot of money to me...*until I began spending it*. Coffee was 400 kronur. A simple lunch of soup and bread usually cost 2500 to 3000 kronur. Dinner in a nice restaurant easily went for upwards of 6000 kronur. Wool clothing, especially sweaters for which Iceland is famous, set one back *tens of thousands* of kronur. Heck, souvenir kitchen magnets went for 1000 kronur (almost ten bucks!). As a result, many of my family and friends back home received black lava rocks as souvenirs. I picked them up along the coast. The cost? *Zero* kronur. (Hee-hee-hee).

A half-hour later, joined by the rest of the tour members who arrived that morning, we trekked outside the airport terminal to an awaiting bus. The sky was gray and foggy, the weather chilly and rainy. It looked quite depressing. Even the photos I took on the way to the hotel came out dark and bleak. Keflavik International Airport is situated 50 kilometers southwest of Reykjavik, what should have been an hour ride took us nearly thirty minutes longer due to early morning traffic. With such a small population, Iceland's roads are mostly of the two-lane variety (one coming, one going). Reykjavik, the capital, and its surrounding suburbs contain roughly two thirds of the entire country's population (of roughly 320,000), so 'rush hour' jams occur, although nothing like back home. Our delay was due more to the fact there was only one lane into the city.

We arrived at our hotel, the Reykjavik Natura, just after 8:30am. The reviews online described this hotel as a throwback to the 1970's. When I first saw it, the glass and green panel façade reminded me of my old middle school. Despite its retro look, the hotel was actually very nice and comfortable. Inside the lobby were several bizarre wooden statues of people (one was sitting in front of the main desk with his legs crossed; I actually said 'good morning' to it, momentarily confusing it for a real person). The rest of that day was free to explore on our own. Our little gang agreed to meet at 11:30am in the lobby and visit the City Center section of Reykjavik. I took a long, hot shower and changed into warmer clothing, and sorted out my luggage for the next two days. I also made a cup of

coffee in my room and wrote in my journal. At 11:30am, bundled warmly in my new fleece vest, over-sized hoodie, scarf and cap, I went down to the lobby.

The Reykjavik Natura is a good thirty-minute walk from the downtown City Center area; fortunately, a local transportation bus (the #19 bus) passed in front of our hotel twice an hour. The last stop was the Hlemmur Station downtown. Guests of the hotel are given free passes and a bus schedule. This turned out to be quite convenient, as the buses were very punctual and ran until midnight, allowing us to plan our outings into the City Center with no problems. The four of us walked in a light drizzle to the main road in front of the hotel and caught the #19 at 11:50am. Three stops later we reached the Hlemmur Station on *Snorrabraut* (a major avenue in the downtown area).

Reykjavik is located on the Seltjarnarnes Peninsula in the southwest section of the country, but expands far out to the south and east, making the Greater Reykjavik area a collection of low-density suburbs and outer residential communities with most homes widely set apart. These communities are further separated by barren spaces and are connected to each other by main traffic arteries. As a result, Reykjavik does not have the feel of a big city. Situated along the southern shore of Faxaflói Bay, it resembles a large picturesque town surrounded in the distance by mountain chains, volcanoes, coves, straits and islands. The city has ten districts, the most popular being the *Midborg*, also known as the City Center. This district includes six neighborhoods which form the central part of the capital. Most of the administrative buildings are located here, along with many of the city's key landmarks. The City Center is also home to Reykjavik's celebrated nightlife, containing the best restaurants and bars along Bankastraeti (Bank Street) and Austurstraeti (East Street).

We slowly made our way west for a couple of blocks on the popular Laugavegur Street, stopping occasionally to do a little window shopping in the small boutiques and stores lining the sidewalks. The streets of Reykjavik were very clean, something we observed throughout our entire stay in Iceland. We asked a local how to get to the Hallgrímskirkja Church. He instructed us to make a left on Vitastigur, the next street over, and follow that for several blocks. Ten minutes later we came upon the back side of the famous Lutheran structure. Named after Hallgrímur Petursson, a famous poet and clergyman from the 1600's, the Hallgrímskirkja Church is the tallest religious structure in Iceland, and clearly one of the most impressive buildings in Reykjavik. Construction began in 1945 and was officially completed in 1986. Normally, Lutheran churches are characterized by their plainness, but this tall building, towering 244 feet, is a stark exception. Its steeple is flanked by wings with ridges cut into the concrete facade to resemble the basalt lava flows that mark the country's landscape. On the very top is a relatively small cross. From the front, it looked like a gigantic upright missile ready to launch.

Ron and I took photographs of the church from the side and rear, and then our group walked around to the front entrance and went inside. The nave was a rather sacred-looking cavernous chamber, made all that more somber by the absence of religious decorations. Above the main entrance is a beautiful 25 ton pipe organ. The top of the

steeple has an observation tower and we purchased tickets in the bookstore to access it. We took the elevator up and were treated to a wonderful panoramic view of the city. Ron had one scary moment when he realized he'd left his camera in the bookstore. He quickly went back down and found it on the counter. Thank goodness we were in Iceland (and inside a church, no less!), or his camera might have vanished. We took some great photographs from the observation deck and then decided to find a place for lunch.

We exited the building and made our way towards Skolavordustigur (another major street lined with shops and restaurants), passing the statue of Leif Erickson, the Norse explorer who landed in North America 500 years before Columbus 'discovered' the continent. It's interesting to note that the statue, which stands at the front of the church, was a gift to Iceland from the United States back in 1930 (before Hallsgrimskirkja was even built) to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the country's parliament at *Thingvellir*. I will explain more about this parliament later in the journal. As we strolled down Skolavordustigur, trying to decide which of the many small restaurants in the area to have lunch, we reached a wool-clothing shop that Ron and Anke had ear-marked on their map. A sign in English above the shop read: The Hand-Knitting Association of Iceland. In 1982, Ron had visited Reyjavik on his way to the European mainland and had purchased a wool sweater from this very same store. It was a favorite garment of his, and with repeated use the wool knitting had unraveled in sections. Ron was so attached to this thing he didn't want to throw it away, and had actually brought it with him to Iceland to see if it could be mended. He was delighted the store was still in existence, and even more so when the clerk inside told him it was possible to repair the sweater. Ron left it with the clerk and picked it up on the last day of the tour. Later, when we were back in the States, he told me they did a very nice job patching the sweater, and it only cost him 1000 kronur (or just under \$10).

We decided to have lunch inside a cafe called the *Babalu* on Skolavordustigur, its orange facade covered with cartoonish paintings of steaming cups of coffee and slices of cake, making the establishment stick out amongst the adjacent eateries. Like many of the restaurants and bars in the City Center, the *Babalu* was situated in a small, converted two-story dwelling, with tables often packed close together in the limited space. It was filled with customers and we were lucky to find a table right next to the counter. We had a light fare. I ordered the tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich made on very thick pieces of full grain toast. Simple, but delicious. For dessert, DanaMarie shared her chocolate and banana crepes with us.

After lunch, we headed back east along Laugavegur – doing some more window-shopping in the process – and turned left on Snorrabraut. A few blocks later we hit Saebraut, the road that runs along Faxaflói Bay. We were searching for the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center building. When I was in India I met a couple (Ralph and Marilee Meuter) who later visited Iceland and recommended the 3:30pm daily tour of the Harpa Concert Hall. We had timed our visit to the City Center so we could catch the tour, but we misjudged the location of the building on our map and had to walk for nearly half a mile along a pedestrian path adjacent to the rocky seawall. We arrived at Harpa (as it is more commonly known) about twenty minutes before the scheduled tour was to

commence, purchasing the tour tickets (approximately \$15) in the lobby, and then immediately availing ourselves of the bathroom facilities downstairs. Throughout this trip I found I needed to use the restroom more often than usual; I don't know why, but middle-aged prostates and cold weather don't seem to agree with one another.

At 3:30pm, a small group of tourists gathered in front of the lobby counters for the tour. Our guide was a tall, elegant Icelandic woman named Elsa, who, in addition to being a staff member at the hall, was also an accomplished opera singer. She began the tour by giving us a brief history of Harpa. I will use this opportune moment to give a more detailed explanation of Iceland's economy, and how its more recent misfortunes tie into this beautiful concert hall:

Initial construction of Harpa began in 2007 and was completed in 2011. The building was originally part of a major redevelopment plan for the Old Harbour area of Reykjavik. During the early to mid 2000s, Iceland experienced a massive economic boom, its manufacturing base and real estate markets were soaring and unemployment was at a record low. This new-found prosperity quickly propelled Reykjavik to the top of the world's list of most richest cities (per capita) and gained for the country the new moniker of Nordic Tiger. But then came the world-wide economic collapse in the autumn of 2008. The Nordic Tiger was virtually de-fanged. Seemingly overnight, the country went from a thriving economic miracle to something akin to the modern day equivalent of a Dickensian nightmare. The housing market – fueled, like elsewhere, by greedy private banks – collapsed, over-burdening homeowners with unmanageable debt. Manufacturing orders dropped remarkably, plants closed or scaled back, and unemployment jumped to 10% in a country with just over 300,000 people. Social services, deeply affected by the loss of tax revenues, had to scale back, and the newly unemployed found themselves with almost no safety net. This created a move towards emigration, as a growing number of young Icelanders looked abroad for work. The nation's currency, the krona, was exceptionally hard hit, causing high inflation, a double-whammy in a country that boasted such a high standard of living not so long ago. These factors – increased personal debt, high unemployment and the reduced purchasing power of the krona – converging at the same time created the perfect economic shit storm. Many of the country's grand building schemes were either put on hold or simply abandoned. Such was the case with the redevelopment plans for the city's Old Harbour area. In 2008, construction of the half-built Harpa stopped due to funding issues. The government eventually stepped in (and rightly so) and completed this architectural marvel, something all Icelanders can be proud of. The adjacent lots, though, intended to house luxury hotels, apartment buildings and shops, remain undeveloped. And will probably stay this way until the country's economy turns around.

The Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center is situated right on the edge of the bay, overlooking the Old Harbour and the North Atlantic beyond. It was designed in collaboration with the Danish firm Henning Larsen Architects and two German engineering companies, and the famed Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who created the stunning steel and glass facade. Influenced by the country's dramatic natural settings, the structure is a gleaming tribute to the sky and harbour, with panes of clear and

colored glass surrounding a steel framework, its reflections creating a glimmering wall of multi-colored light in the evening. Inside there are four separate concert halls, including a large 1800-seat capacity theater decorated in bright red to symbolize the scorching hot energy beneath Iceland. The hall on the fourth floor serves a multifunctional purpose and can be used for banquets or private performances. We began our tour in the arrival/foyer area on the southside of the building, which also includes an exhibition section. Staring up from the foyer, the walls of three of its adjacent halls form a mountain-like massif representing the basalt rocks seen along the coastal areas. We took an elevator, and then the stairs, and spent 45 minutes visiting all four halls, including an observation deck on the roof that offered a stunning view of the harbour. Throughout the tour, we saw various lounges used for conferences or banquets, located on different levels surrounding the enormous foyer. We were taken to the backstage area and to the dressing rooms where artists prepare for their performances. Elsa, in one uniquely paneled hall, even sang an operatic ditty for us so we could hear the quality of the acoustics. It was all very impressive. The Harpa has been voted one of the ten most beautiful opera houses in the world. If you visit Reykjavik, include this tour on your itinerary.

From the Harpa we made our way back to Laugavegur, stopping in a bakery (I purchased a delicious baguette, sharing it with DanaMarie) and two grocery stores looking for snacks to take back to the hotel. We were not venturing out anymore that evening so we decided to pick up some munchies in case food was not offered at the orientation meeting. The first grocery store was packed with locals, and the lines at the cashier checkout were so long we opted to continue looking for another store. We found one near the Hlemmur bus station. I bought another baguette and some jalapeno-spiced cheese. By 5:40pm we caught the #19 bus back to the hotel, running into several other tour members who had also spent the day sight-seeing in the downtown area.

When I returned to my room I washed up quickly (and wolfed down some bread and cheese) and went downstairs to the conference room for our orientation meeting at 6:30pm. This was the first time I met the entire tour group. Besides Ron, Anke, DanaMarie and myself, the Classic Iceland Tour included Tom and Gigi Eagan from Long Island, NY; Jessie and Daniel Wu from Columbia, MD; Dave and Christy Preble and their son Jon from Seattle, WA; Phyllis Robertson from Canada; Roland and Diane Gooch from Dallas, TX; Denise Blohm from the San Francisco, CA area; Jafa and Herb Phillips from Arizona; Florence and Marty Gumer from Miami Beach, FL. Our tour guide was Elizabet Brand. (I apologize to my fellow travelers if I omitted anything or got your information wrong).

The orientation meeting was held in a small conference room next to the hotel's bar lounge. There was a nice selection of hors d'oeuvre made with smoked salmon and lamb, and free drinks. Our group settled in, sitting in a semi-circle facing Elizabet, who began the meeting by formally introducing herself and welcoming us to Iceland. It was difficult for me to place Elizabet's age. Like most Icelanders, she lived a healthy life and could just as easily been in her mid-fifties or early seventies. Her demeanor was somewhat reserved at first, which I think may have had something to do with her previous occupation as a school teacher, but as the trip unfolded she relaxed and bonded well with

the group. Her English was good, and she spoke it slowly, choosing her words carefully. Elizabet mentioned she had five grown sons and talked briefly about her previous teaching profession, her training as a geologist and her world travels. We then went around the room introducing ourselves one by one. Elizabet did not go into a detailed description of our tour itinerary beyond what we would be doing the following day. She would often reserve information about certain aspects of the trip until it was absolutely necessary, this sometimes included questions posed to her by the group. There was a lot of “I’ll talk about that later” with her, which was a little frustrating at times. But to her credit, she always remembered the questions and answered them when we were at a specific location and the topic seemed more appropriate to the surroundings.

After the orientation meeting many of the tour members gravitated towards the bar lounge area. Anke ordered coffee for us. It was during this time that I received my ‘special gifts’. DanaMarie gave me a small box of Starbuck’s instant coffee packets. I have a strong coffee addiction and need my cup of java first thing in the morning. (The coffee was awesome, by the way). It was Ron and Anke’s gifts, though, that caused the big laughs. During my emails to the Wilckens – prior to our trip – I had joked about how the cold weather in Iceland might affect my sensitive Miami *body parts*. This prompted Anke to knit me a small woolen pouch. Yes, everyone got a kick out of my new testicle warmers. And, believe me, I nearly wore them on our night in Borgarnes! They also gave me one of those surgical face masks in case Bardarbunga’s ashes blew our way. Ahhhh, Ron and Anke, those loveable Weizenheimers!

I stayed in the lounge until about 9:00pm, having an interesting conversation with Tom and Gigi about politics in the northeast (I’m originally from New Jersey) and the state of our educational system (Tom is a former school teacher). When I retired to my room I watched the BBC news broadcast until I fell asleep. It had been a very long day, and I slept soundly.

Day Three

I was awake by 5:00am, which is normal for me since I am an early riser back home. I immediately made a cup of instant coffee in my room and wrote in my journal for about forty-five minutes before shaving and showering. While dressing, I put on my bathing suit beneath my jeans, and placed some underwear and an extra T-shirt in my backpack. We were visiting the Blue Lagoon thermal pools later that afternoon and I didn’t want to strip naked in the locker room for the obligatory shower. During our orientation meeting,

Elizabet told us it is mandatory in her country to shower before entering a public pool or hot tub. I don't mean to sound like a prude, but I haven't showered in front of strangers since I was a teenager. At 53, it was bad enough I would be exposing my overflowing love-handles and fledgling man boobs in the thermal pools, I decided to draw the line on the *full monty*. I read in my guide book it was okay to shower in your bathing suit (I think a prudish American wrote that).

At 7:15am I went downstairs to the lounge area for the breakfast buffet. As I did each morning, I sat with Ron, Anke and DanaMarie; although, I was usually the first one there. Two hours later we boarded our bus for a day long tour of the Greater Reykjavik area. Before we departed, Elizabet introduced our driver, Johannes, to the group. He spoke little throughout the tour, but he was a great driver, very cordial and helpful whenever we needed assistance. We began our tour by visiting the Hallsgrimskirkja Church, passing the University Hospital along the way. Since we had already seen the church the previous day, Ron and I spent most of our time trying to get a better photograph of the front of the building with the statue of Leif Erickson in the foreground. The pictures we took the day before came out dark due to the perpetual cloud cover blanketing Iceland. Unfortunately, what little sunshine there was that morning came from *behind* the church, creating even darker images in front of the building. After a while we simply gave up and went inside to take some additional photos of the interior. For the record, Iceland is a beautiful country, with stunning natural sceneries, yet the absence of sun light can sometimes cast a bleak pall over everything. Granted, I might be a little prejudice coming from Florida – whose motto is 'The Sunshine State' – but Elizabet told us Iceland averages only fifty days of sunshine a year. *Whoa*. That is just not enough natural light for me. No wonder the suicide rate is relatively high here. There is a reason why the color gray is associated with depression. Because it *is* depressing.

From the Hallsgrimskirkja Church we continued west through the city, driving through the campus of the University of Iceland. Elizabet pointed out the simple home of Vigdis Finnbogadottir, Iceland's fourth president who served from 1980 until 1996. Ms. Finnbogadottir was not only Europe's first female president, but she also has the distinction of being the world's first *democratically* elected female head of state. When Elizabet was in college she took classes taught by the former president, and was quite fond of this pioneering woman who rose to become one of the most popular leaders in the country's history. It's interesting to note that in Iceland there is an absence of formality when referring to a person's title. According to Elizabet, Icelanders usually drop the title and surname, and address people simply by their given name. This applies even to heads of state. The current President of Iceland, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, is called Olafur by everyone, and not referred to as 'the president' outside of official functions. Another interesting thing about Iceland's politics is the continuity of their elected national officials. People here stick to their leaders through thick and thin. Since independence from Denmark in 1944, there have only been *five* elected presidents. To drive home this point, Olafur has been in office since 1996 even though he has presided over one of the worst economic downturns in Iceland's short history. Vigdis served 16 years before him, and the three presidents before her served a combined 35 years (of which the first president, Sveinn Bjornsson, only served seven years because he *died* in office).

We drove north along a street called Sudurgata, passing the National Museum of Iceland, and turned left on Hringbraut, going a few blocks before turning north again towards the Catholic Cathedral (*Landakotskirkja*). Gudjon Samuelsson, the state architect responsible for the Hallgrímskirkja Church, also designed the Catholic Cathedral. It was built in a Neo-Gothic style, although not as impressive as other cathedrals I've seen in my travels. The main tower is flat and rather unassuming, I guess in keeping with the country's more Lutheran tradition. Not that the cathedral has to wow anybody; there are only – as of this writing – 14,500 Catholics in the entire country.

We headed east now on Tungata, passing many of the foreign embassy buildings, and came to a stop in front of the Reykjavik City Hall nestled along Tjornin, a small lake in the center of the city. The lake is called The Pond (its official meaning in Icelandic), but the locals often jokingly refer to it as 'the largest bread soup in the world' because of the popular bird-feeding activities surrounding its shores. Elizabeth took us inside the City Hall building, to an exhibition hall containing an enormous relief map of Iceland. Using a red laser pointer, she spent the next fifteen minutes or so highlighting and discussing the areas on the map we would be visiting throughout our trip. She also showed us where Bardarbunga was located, including the massive sheets of ice in the volcano's path that could create a serious flooding situation in certain north-central parts of the country. The map gave us a good idea of Iceland's interesting (and challenging) terrain. Our tour would take us along the southern rim of this island country and then back towards the western peninsulas. Viewing the map, I could see why most land tours only cover this section of Iceland. The central, eastern and more northern regions of the country are either primarily barren or not heavily populated.

We exited the back of the City Hall building and walked across a long pedestrian bridge over The Pond, making our way to the Austurvöllur Square. This is a very popular public square in Reykjavik, surrounded by cafes on two sides. The center of the square contains the large statue of Jon Sigurðsson, a leader of Iceland's independence movement, and adjacent to the square – fronting this statue – is the *Althingi*, or Parliament House, built in 1881 of hewn stone. This is the seat of government. Whenever there are protest rallies in Reykjavik, they're usually held in Austurvöllur Square. Currently, the country is divided into six electoral constituencies (or districts) with a total of 63 delegates divided amongst the various political parties. The Progressive Party and the Independence Party are the two largest groups (at the moment). One of the problems facing parliament is the issue of representation. Because most of the population of Iceland – roughly two thirds – lives in the Greater Reykjavik area, parliament has to periodically amend the constitution and come up with a more equitable delegate representation system so that the folks in the rural areas won't be left out in the cold (pardon the pun). Next to the Parliament House is the Domkirkjan, the rather unspectacular-looking Lutheran Cathedral, built during the end of the 18th Century but restored many times since.

From the square we trekked back to the bus and drove to the Old Harbour area, driving north along Laekjargata, through one of the oldest neighborhoods in Reykjavik.

During our drive, and most of the entire tour, Elizabeth would point out interesting locales by using time references such as “if you look at two o’clock” or “just at eleven o’clock”. This became a little confusing at first because she used the word ‘house’ to describe any sort of building. She would say, “The house at four o’clock” and we would look in that direction but could only see a large building standing there. Eventually, we caught on to our guide’s linguistic nuances. When we reached the Old Harbour area, Johannes drove the bus along the main pier so we could see the various sailing vessels docked in the bay, many were either smaller fishing boats or whale watching ferries. We also saw a newly acquired Coast Guard ship in the harbour. Although a member of NATO, Iceland does not have a standing army; it relies mostly on its Coast Guard (which has a handful of ships and planes) and several smaller national defence agencies for its protection. Actually, it wouldn’t take much to invade Iceland, and I’m assuming its membership in NATO is probably the country’s biggest deterrence against an outside attack.

From the Old Harbour we headed east along Faxaflói Bay on Saebraut and stopped to take photographs of the Hofdi House where, in 1986, Reagan and Gorbachev conducted the famous Reykjavik Summit, a meeting some historians argue effectively led to the end of the Cold War. The Hofdi House was originally built in 1909 as the home of the French consul, and stands alone in an open field overlooking the bay. The house is steeped in local legend, reputedly haunted by – depending on who you talk to – either a young woman who died of suicide or drowning, or the dead spirits of Vikings buried nearby. The legend gathered some steam when the British diplomat who lived there in 1952 ordered that the house be sold due to ‘strange noises’ in the night. In 1958, the government of Iceland purchased the house and converted it into a formal reception center. I must confess, there is definitely something creepy about the place.

We continued driving east, along Borgartún, the street known as the financial center of Reykjavik. Three of Iceland’s largest banks are headquartered here, along with a 19-story skyscraper that towers over the residential area nearby. On the western end of Borgartún are numerous government buildings. Further to the east we came across the impressive Laugardalshöll National Stadium and drove by the Asmundarsafn Art Museum, housed in three uniquely-shaped buildings designed by Icelandic sculptor Asmundur Sveinsson, displaying a large exhibition of his work, including almost thirty sculptures in the yard surrounding the museum. This area of Reykjavik contained some of the wealthier neighborhoods in the city.

We now began driving south, to a small but growing municipality called Gardabaer in the Greater Reykjavik area, to visit the Presidential Residence and Chapel known as Bessastadir. As we left the main city behind, the landscape opened up. From Gardabaer we could see the majestic Mt. Esja (a volcanic mountain range) to the west, and had a splendid view of the capital from across the bay. To the south of us were the mountains of the Reykjanes Peninsula. Such beautiful scenery. Bessastadir was first settled during the 11th century and became the farming property of Snorri Sturluson, a famous poet, historian and chieftain from the 1200s. When Sturluson was murdered in 1241, his lands in *Bessastadir* came under the control of the kings of Norway and the area soon became the seat of power in Iceland, housing the Norwegian governors until the end of the 18th

century. In 1867, the property at Bessatadir reverted to a private residence again. Prior to Iceland's independence, the businessman who owned the property donated the historic site so that it could be used to house the country's future presidents.

When we arrived at the presidential estate we were not permitted to enter the actual 19th century house where President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson lives; although, it would have been easy to do so since there didn't appear to be any bodyguards in the area. In fact, I didn't see security of *any* kind. Elizabet told us that tourists routinely walk up to the president's house and peer in through the windows trying to take photographs of the inside. Amazing. What we *were* able to see was the historic chapel directly in front of the presidential residence. The grounds keeper, a rather stern-looking matronly type, was trying to lock the chapel doors when our bus pulled up. She was having difficulty with the lock and when Johannes offered his assistance she granted us a few minutes inside the church. We hurried inside to take a look at where the president of Iceland and his family attend worship. It was not very large, but elegant in that plain Protestant way. It is believed that a church has existed on this site since the year 1000. The present chapel was consecrated in 1796, and is one of the oldest buildings in Iceland made of cemented stone. It has a small steeple, and a short row of pews leading to a simple altar with a large painting of Jesus healing the sick. The nave is decorated with beautiful stained glass windows that were added to the chapel in 1956 to commemorate the 60th birthday of the second president of Iceland, Asgeir Asgeirsson. The Presidential Residence and Chapel are situated in an open landscape, next to a centuries-old cemetery. We were the only ones there, which I found odd. Try to imagine our own White House in an open, isolated field with no one else around. Let me tell you, these Icelanders are very trusting people.

We left Bessatadir and pushed further south towards the Blue Lagoon thermal pools, driving through the port town of Hafnarfjordur, Iceland's third largest municipality (current population: 27,000 and counting). Throughout its history, Hafnarfjordur was a coveted commercial center alternately controlled by the English, Germans and Danes. Today, besides its local port industries, Hafnarfjordur has an aluminium smelter just outside its border run by the multinational corporation Alcan. In recent years, Alcan petitioned the government to expand its production, wanting to create what would be the fourth largest smelter in Europe. And while the national and local governments signed on to the deal, the townfolk have been up in arms against the expansion, concerned about the environmental impact on the community. The town has an unusual number of roundabouts (or traffic circles) and Elizabet said the mayor is jokingly referred to as the "Lord of the Rings". Each year during the summer solstice a Viking Festival is held here that attracts thousands of enthusiasts from around the world who like to dress up in Viking garb and play with fake swords. Hafnarfjordur also claims to be the rock-in-roll capital of Iceland; about a dozen popular bands hail from the area.

But perhaps the most fascinating thing about this port town are the *Hidden People*. As we drove through its streets, observing the unusual tin-clad dwellings that make up the neighborhoods here, Elizabet told us Hafnarfjordur has a large concentration of "hidden people". At first, I thought she said *little* people (which, incidentally, would not have been a wrong assumption) and curiously looked out the window searching for a

community of dwarfs. And I wasn't the only one; several of my fellow tour members turned to one another and frowned. DanaMarie, seeing the look on my face, leaned forward in her seat and whispered, "I think she said *hidden* people." This didn't clear the air at all; I remember thinking: *What, are these people shy, do they hide inside their homes?* I mean, we didn't see a soul as we drove through the place. Elizabet would not elaborate until days later, so to spare my readers the suspense I will explain who the hidden or little people are:

The early Norse settlers, and their Irish slaves, brought with them superstitious beliefs which gave rise to the notion of *Huldufolk* (hidden people) in Iceland. The Norse believed in *altars* (from which the modern word for elves is derived) while the Irish slaves had the hill fairies. These two mythical groups were actually part of a similar folklore which seem to originate from biblical tales. In one of the folklores, Eve, ashamed of her unwashed children when God comes to visit, hides them from God, Who then declares that 'what man hides from God, God will hide from man'. In another popular folktale, the hidden people are fallen angels condemned to live between Heaven and Hell because of their neutrality when the Devil was cast out. Regardless of how these spirit folk came to be, or the names they're given – elves, gnomes, fairies, hidden people or little people – most Icelanders (whether they admit it or not) believe that their country is populated by them. In many Icelandic gardens you will find small wooden cut-outs of *alfhol* (elf houses) so that the spirits have a place to live, and along more isolated areas we came across stone cairns built to appease the hidden people. Hafnarfjordur rests on a 7,000 year old lava flow that some superstitious locals believe lies at the confluence of mystical lines of energy where a parallel elfin universe resides, which is why this town is supposedly rife with these creatures. In fact, construction of homes and roads in the area are only permitted if the site is free of little spirit folk. How they determine this I do not know, but we did see some unusual home configurations that Elizabet said were done to avoid the hidden people.

We continued driving southward towards the Blue Lagoon. After passing one of many large public swimming pools along our way, Elizabet explained her country's policy on swimming. Alarmed by the large number of drowning fatalities each year (especially amongst fishermen), the government began incorporating swimming as part of its school curriculum more than 60 years ago. Today, it is compulsory that all Icelanders learn how to swim. Graduating from public school requires passing a swimming test. Over the decades, swimming has become an obsession, and public pools have sprung up all over the country. There are numerous open-air geothermally heated pools in the Greater Reykjavik area, open year round (even when the temperature dips to freezing). In other parts of the country, where geothermal heat is not available, the pools are usually built indoors. Regardless of the pool – or where it is located – they're always filled with locals. Icelanders LOVE the water.

Thirty minutes later we reached the Blue Lagoon Thermal Spa, located roughly four kilometers from the fishing port town of Grindavik on the Reykjanes Peninsula. The facility was built in the middle of a lava field, and driving into it's parking lot was almost surreal. The landscape consisted mostly of black volcanic rock covered by green moss

with streams of milky blue heated seawater meandering through it. This place is one of Reykjavik's most popular tourist attractions, and no visit to Iceland would be complete unless you spend some time soaking in this mineral rich man-made pool. How this facility came about is an interesting story. Nearby is the Svartsengi Geothermal Power Station, which utilizes superheated underground water (mixed with seawater) from a lava flow to produce electricity and provide local communities with hot water. In 1976, a pool began to form from the power station's waste water. This water, pushed up through underground geological layers, is rich in minerals like silica and sulphur, and cannot be recycled. The power station dumped the waste water in the lava fields nearby, but its high mineral content – which gives it that milky blue color – created a deposit that became impermeable over time, forming a large pond. In 1981, locals began bathing in the pond when they discovered it had healing properties for skin conditions like psoriasis. By 1992, the Blue Lagoon Thermal Spa officially opened to the public and has been drawing record crowds ever since.

We arrived at the facility around noon. Admission was included with the tour so we proceeded through the turnstiles and picked up our towels and key-bracelets and went upstairs to the separate shower and locker rooms for men and women. The bracelets activated the locking mechanisms on the lockers. I found an empty one and put my wallet, clothes and backpack inside and then headed over to the shower section in my bathing suit. Icelanders are not a shy people, and I inadvertently saw more old, wrinkled penises than a man is supposed to see in his lifetime. Thankfully, they had several enclosed shower stalls (my prudish sense of dignity remained intact). Afterwards, I made my way downstairs – I had lost contact with everyone in my group – and headed to the thermal pool. It was very cold outside so I opted to enter the water from a wading pool inside the facility, slowly making my way outdoors through a short stream connecting to the lagoon. The water produced a lot of steam, but surprisingly was not *very* hot. In the mist I ran into Dave and his son, Jon. We chatted for a while and then I continued searching for DanaMarie and Anke (Ron had elected not to take a soak). I found them forming a line in the water near an outdoor bar by the edge of the pool. Anke got me a bottled water; they each had wine spritzers. With drinks in hand we waded over to the side where vents kept pushing heated water into the middle of the man-made lagoon. It felt wonderful. Many tourists covered their faces with the sand-like mineral deposits, like a mud pack. But we were warned to avoid putting the white stuff too close to our eyes because it could sting. The silica deposit also wrecks havoc with one's hair, drying it out and making it clump together in spikes. Women were cautioned to put extra conditioner in their hair. As for me, I shave my head, so the only thing I had to worry about were pointy eyebrows.

We spent almost an hour soaking in the water. I left the ladies and made my way back to the locker room for a hot shower. Later, we all met in the lobby, together with Ron, and had lunch inside the facility's cafeteria where I ate the most expensive panini sandwich in the world. Diane and Roland joined us at our table. Around 3:30pm we were on the bus heading back to Reykjavik. The soothing effects of the thermal pool put many of us in a sleepy mood, and heads were nodding off throughout the drive. We reached our hotel at 4:15pm. Anke and DanaMarie wanted to take another shower and relax in their

rooms before dinner. Ron asked me if I would join him on a hike to the nearby Perlan Building to take some panoramic photos of the city.

The Perlan (or Pearl) Building was built atop a hill in central Reykjavik called *Oskjuhllo*. This hill was a short walking distance from our hotel. We found a path leading up to the top and spent about ten minutes climbing, stopping periodically to catch our breath and to take wonderful photographs of the Old Harbour section of the city. Ironically, the best pictures I took of the Hallsgrímskirkja Church were from this angle using my zoom lens. When we reached the top of the hill our first glimpse of the Perlan Building made us stop dead in our tracks. *What an unusual sight!* The building was designed by Icelandic architect Ingimundur Sveinsson and completed in 1991. It is essentially a dome-shaped, glass and steel structure resting on top of six enormous water tanks (four of which are used to store and distribute heated water from the various boreholes throughout Reykjavik). To me, it did not resemble a pearl so much as a blue diamond cut in half and propped up by six gigantic marshmallows! We approached the rear of the building and slowly made our way to the front entrance, all the while assaulted by strong, very cold winds.

Inside the Perlan one experiences an almost overwhelming feeling of space within its six floors due to the high clearance of the building; its entire layout – from the support structure, the central stairway, the elevators, and the leveled restaurant, shops and cafeteria ringing the different floors – was all designed to amplify this feeling of space and height. Downstairs in the basement there is a modern library and conference room, and an art exhibition along the walls. On the roof is a revolving restaurant. Ron and I took the stairs and headed up to the cafeteria to access the hexagonal veranda surrounding the building along the top of the water tanks. This probably offers the best view of Reykjavik in the entire city. It was pretty cold, though, and we quickly took our photos and reentered the cafeteria, browsing in their gift shop. I purchased a small statue of a funny-looking Viking for my souvenir shelf back home. Ron bought a slice of carrot cake for Anke (her favorite) in the cafeteria's dessert section. It was their 19th wedding anniversary, and on the styrofoam cake container he scribbled the words "Happy Anniversary, love Willy". I'm a curious fellow by nature, so I silently debated whether or not to ask him who 'Willy' was...but then I thought, *maybe this is information I don't really need to know.*

We got back to the hotel by 5:30pm. I took another long hot shower (scrubbing hard to get the salt and minerals off my skin) and put on one of my 'nicer' shirts for dinner. An hour later I met DanaMarie and the Wilckens downstairs in the lobby. We were heading in to town to celebrate Ron and Anke's wedding anniversary. We took the #19 bus downtown and walked west towards Bankastraeti, to a popular three-story corner restaurant called *Caruso*, specializing in Italian and Icelandic dishes. I believe Ron was the one who spotted this place yesterday, and suggested we go there for dinner. It turned out to be an excellent choice. The place was mobbed (always a good sign when choosing a restaurant!) and there were no immediate tables available, so we went up to the bar section on the second floor to wait for one. DanaMarie purchased a bottle of wine to toast the Wilckens' anniversary (I do not drink alcohol, so I toasted with water). Twenty

minutes later the hostess came to fetch us. We sat at a table on the first floor near the side fronting Bankastraeti. The food was great. Ron and DanaMarie each had the *absolutely* superb rack of lamb, I had a chicken breast stuffed with prosciutto and mozzarella, and Anke had the salmon. DanaMarie shared some of her lamb with me; it was soooooo delicious! We spent hours in the restaurant, a very memorable evening. Our waitress Edna was so nice that we tipped her generously, promising to return to *Caruso* on our last night in Iceland.

It was getting late, and for dessert we decided to walk down the street to a convenience store before heading back to the bus station. I purchased some chocolate biscuits. We returned to the hotel by 11:30pm. Ron and Anke retired to their rooms but I stayed with DanaMarie in the lobby; we ordered coffee and ate our biscuits and chatted until almost 12:30am. Exhausted, I went to bed as soon as I reached my room.

Day Four

I awoke just before 5:30am and made myself several cups of coffee. If you're wondering why I get up so early let me explain. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines during the 1980's. My first year there I served as an assistant to a midwife in a rural village where *everyone* had roosters. Twenty minutes before sunrise – roughly 5:40 in the morning since the island was close to the Equator – the roosters would begin cock-a-doodling, one right after the other. I lived in a small wooden 'house' with a tin roof that offered almost no insulation from this predawn cacophony; I would jolt up on my sleeping mat each morning at the same time. Eventually, my internal clock got jammed in this position...and twenty seven years later I'm still waking up to those imaginary roosters.

After writing in my journal for forty minutes I hopped in the shower. By 7:00am I went downstairs for breakfast. An hour later I returned to my room and put my luggage outside my door for the porters to collect. We would spend the entire day traveling to a small town called Vik, situated along the southern coastline, in an area more commonly referred to as the South Shore of Iceland. On our way we made several interesting stops. We left Reykjavik at 8:45am, heading southeast on Route 1, also known as the Ring Road, the main two-lane 'highway' that circumnavigates the entire country. Less than an hour into our trip we stopped to tour the Hellisheidi Geothermal Station, the second largest geothermal power plant in the world.

Built next to the Hengill Volcano in the western volcanic zone of the country, Hellisheidi is one of two geothermal plants in the area, the Nesjavellir Geothermal Station is only 11 kilometers away. These two stations produce the largest supply of electricity and hot water to the southern part of the country. The source of this energy is the still-active Hengill, a palagonite tuff volcano reaching a peak of 800 meters above sea level that last erupted 2000 years ago. As we approached the power station – constructed in a clearing surrounded by an old, moss-covered lava field – we could observe concentrated plumes of steam rising from the ground from various hot springs and fumaroles. The power station is relatively new, its two initial high pressure 45 Megawatts turbines were started up in 2006. Over the ensuing five years several more turbines were added, and with the combined steam from the Stora-Skardsmyrarfjall Mountain nearby, the electrical output at Hellisheidi today exceeds 300 Megawatts of electricity and up to 400 Megawatts of thermal energy. Hot water production began in 2010.

We spent an hour touring the facility. A company guide showed us a short video presentation on how geothermal energy is harvested. Approximately 30 wells (or boreholes), each 2000-3000 meters deep, have been dug into the ground, tapping into Hengill's energy source. Super-heated steam rises up through the various piping systems – designed to separate steam and mist – and charge the massive turbines, which then produce electrical energy. We were taken to a glass-enclosed observation deck to witness these giant turbines, and then led to an outdoor section above a series of tanks and pumps partially obscured by steam venting up from the ground. The power station has an interesting exhibition section, with several viewing rooms for instructional videos and documentaries on the country's geology and geothermal energy production.

When we left Hellisheidi, Elizabet received permission for us to take the company road through the facility. We drove over hilly terrain in back of the power plant, passing a number of steaming boreholes with connecting pumps and piping systems, extracting energy from deep within the earth. There was a series of smaller pipes, as well, which pumped cold water into the boreholes to cool down the burrowing equipment (temperatures often exceed 650 degrees Fahrenheit). When we reached Route 1 we continued our southeasterly journey towards the coastline.

A short while later we made a brief stop in the town of Hveragerdi, a place known for its numerous hot springs (and one of the few areas I saw with an abundance of trees; although hardly a forest by our definition). In 2008, a powerful earthquake – measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale – struck the south coast of Iceland, its epicenter just 2 kilometers from Hveragerdi. Damage was extensive in certain parts of the town, and several large fissures opened up along the ground. Inside the municipality's Sunnumork Shopping Centre is an earthquake exhibition which includes a simulator that allows visitors to 'experience' a 6.0 quake. Tom tried it out and said it was pretty cool. Elizabet showed us an actual fissure that cracked open inside the shopping center. It is now covered with a glass floor and is part of the exhibit. Hveragerdi is also famous for its geothermal park where the locals bake their famous black bread using a hole in the geothermal ground as an oven.

When we continued down Route 1, Elizabet talked about the unique geology of Iceland. As far as island masses go, Iceland is but a mere baby on the geologic calendar, having only emerged from the North Atlantic Ocean 16 to 18 million years ago. And like most babies, it often displays unpredictable and sometimes disruptive behavior. The country lies on the Mid-Altantic Ridge, a divergent boundary between the Euroasian and North American tectonic plates which are slowly pulling away from one another. As a result, each year the country is believed to be stretching 2 centimeters. This might not sound like much, but on a cosmic level, where time is measured in millions of years, this adds up to quite a few hundred kilometers. How does this happen? The incredible heat source within the earth's mantle – underneath these two tectonic plates – allows for materials to push up through the lithosphere (the outermost rigid shell of our rocky planet), causing rock within the asthenosphere (upper earth's mantle) to melt and form large flood basalt or lava flows within the rift areas. Rifts (or faults) are formed when two opposing plates spread apart, creating a crustal extension between highlands or mountain ranges (what we call valleys). In a nutshell, lava rises to the surface within these rifts, creating new territory that slowly pushes outward, spreading the rift further apart. Iceland has quite a few impressive rift valleys. We got to see some incredible ones towards the end of the trip.

Iceland sits atop a very active hotspot, known as the Iceland plume, which geologists believe originates deep within the mantle, close to the core, forcing a steady upwelling of hot rock. In many respects, the country is like a giant pressure cooker. The incredible energy churning underneath its divergent boundary creates geologic upheavals on a near constant basis (in terms of geological time). There are well over one hundred volcano mountains on this island, of which 35 or so are active. These volcanoes are grouped by zones. At any given time, one of these zones can be quite busy, and eruptions (both large and small) can occur. During the mid-1960s, continuous eruptions from a volcano *underneath* the sea formed a new island called Surtsey, just off the coast of the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago on the South Shore. We could see it on our way to Vik.

Icelanders are used to smaller eruptions, but results can be deadly whenever a big one hits. The massive eruption of the *Lakagigar* (or Laki) Volcano – in the southern part of Iceland (between 1783 and 1784) – spewed such heavy concentrations of poisonous gases that more than 50% of the country's livestock died, leading to a general famine that claimed almost one quarter of the population and led to a mass exodus. Many Canadian and American citizens of Icelandic origin can trace their roots back to this episode. The Laki eruption created a worldwide crisis, as well; the amount of sulfur dioxide spewed into the Northern Hemisphere caused a drop in global temperatures leading to crop failures in Europe and possibly drought conditions in India. Historians believe as many as six million people may have perished as a result of the Laki eruption, making this the most devastating volcano in human history. Throughout our entire stay in Iceland we saw numerous lava fields, most covered with thick, green moss, the remnants of these powerful eruptions which have shaped and reshaped this landscape over the millennia.

The next major town we passed was Selfoss, situated along the banks of the Olfusa River. With just over 6,500 residents, this 'thriving' community makes up the largest

municipal district and commercial center within the region of South Iceland. In my research, I read that one of the major industries here is salmon fishing associated with the Olfusa River. Following the economic collapse of 2008, people from Reykjavik began settling in Selfoss due to its lower property prices and relatively stable economy. The town also boasts the second largest college in the country, *Fjolbrautaskoli Suourlands*, or FSU for short...(I can only imagine what their alma mater song sounds like!) Most of what we saw in Selfoss was farming country. As we drove by one idyllic section, Elizabet pointed out a small church in the distance where the body of world chess champion Bobby Fischer is buried. He became an Icelandic citizen in 2005 following some legal problems with the State Department over a 1992 rematch with Russian chess master Boris Spassky in Yugoslavia. At the time, the U.S. had restrictions against Americans participating in Yugoslavian events. To avoid prosecution, Fischer never returned home, electing to reside in Iceland. He died in 2008. (Interesting aside: Elizabet told us she knew Boris Spassky personally; although, I can't recall the story on how or why they met).

We continued southward, towards the coast, passing the rural towns of Hella and Hvolsvollur. Just to the north of us was the nearly 1,500 meter tall Hekla, Iceland's most active volcano, having erupted more than 20 times since the Middle Ages, and covering much of the island with volcanic material at one time or another. Europeans once referred to it as the 'Gateway to Hell'. Below Hekla is another volcano called Tindfjallajokull, which hasn't erupted in tens of thousands of years. It's last major eruption (roughly 54,000 years ago) was a doozy, though, forming a 5 kilometer-wide caldera at its peak. The northwest rim of this caldera is topped by the Tindfjallajokull icecap. As we neared the coast, we stopped to visit the Seljalandsfoss waterfall, situated south of the famous Eyjafjallajokull volcano (the one that erupted in 2010, shutting down Europe's airspace for an entire week). As we approached the waterfall Elizabet told us the area was completely flooded when Eyjafjallajokull erupted (due to its melting icecap).

The Seljalandsfoss waterfall has a relatively thin cascade of water – stemming from the Seljalandsa River – dropping 60 meters over a rather long, dramatic cliff that once formed a coastal boundary before continued geologic activity added more terrain to the shore line. Personally, I thought the imposing cliff was more impressive than the actual waterfall. We spent about twenty minutes here taking photos. A very unique feature of Seljalandsfoss is the footpath one can take at the bottom that leads directly behind the waterfall. Because of the cold spray of the water I opted not to take the footpath.

We were now driving alongside the mighty North Atlantic Ocean, and in the distance we could see the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*), an archipelago off the south coast of Iceland (with the newly created island of Surtsey nearby). On our left were isolated farms, the homes built close to the mountains and cliffs. Sheep were grazing everywhere. In fact, there were very few places in Iceland where we didn't come across sheep. Farmers release their flocks in the summer to graze, and these woolly creatures spend the next several months roaming the countryside. Before the fall, they are rounded up in a ritual I will explain later in this journal. What amazed me about the sheep was how high they climbed to graze. Iceland has an abundance of flat terrain, but these simple-minded

animals would often venture high up into the hills, perching themselves precariously on slopes. Even when we traveled through isolated mountainous valleys we could spot them, high up on the hillsides. It made me wonder how far from home do these animals stray...*and how in the heck do the farmers find them later on?*

Our next stop was about twenty or so minutes away in the village of Skogar. The name literally means ‘forests’ in Icelandic, but you would be hard-pressed to find one in this area. There were some scattered fields with small trees along the hillsides surrounding Skogar, but basically this village – with a population listed as under 30 – was nothing more than a tiny collection of dwellings, most of which serve as historical displays. We had an all-you-can-slurp soup and bread lunch, followed by coffee or tea, inside their restaurant/exhibition hall/giftshop. At first, the idea of serving only soup for lunch (especially to a busload of hungry, um, *robust* North Americans) seemed disappointing, but the soups were outstanding; two varieties with mounds of delicious bread. I consumed two bowls and a nice mug of coffee. Very satisfying.

After lunch, we did a brief tour of their museum next door with a local guide who was quite entertaining. All of the historical exhibits pertained to the lifestyle of the region. There was a large fishing-rowboat once used by the local fishermen, and an entire wall dedicated to the gear, nets and other equipment used by these sturdy men to fish the harsh waters of the North Atlantic. The museum contained old photographs, clothing, farming equipment and tools, samples of the furniture and outdated home appliances from an earlier time. Elizabeth told us that Iceland was pretty much a backward country when it gained its independence from Denmark in the 1940s. It’s conceivable that much of what we were witnessing in the museum was still in use back then, or even much later.

After the tour of the museum we were given forty minutes to roam around the outdoor Folk Village Museum, a group of restored dwellings and farms. A few were peat-covered mounds with doorways, resembling the lair of some giant Alice in Wonderland rabbit. Inside these crowded two and three room dwellings the wooden ceilings were very low. Basically, the homes consisted of a living/dining room area and bedrooms, all decorated with period furniture. The church in Skogar – consecrated by the Lutheran bishop in 1998 – is a replica of the old-style country churches of Iceland, and decorated with artifacts taken from bygone churches in the region. The structure of this church is very simple, and could easily be mistaken for a small house, with just a few pews to accommodate the village’s population.

My favorite building was the large restored 1878 driftwood-paneled home of the original magistrate, known as the Holt house. This was the first wooden home in the district. Eighteen people once lived in this house, which appears a lot bigger than it really is due to the number of windows. DanaMarie and I went through it taking photos of everything: the old-style kitchen, the outdated fuse box (from when electricity was first introduced in the area), the dining and sitting rooms, the incredibly narrow staircase leading to the bedrooms and attic. When we left Skogar, I had a much better understanding of the lives of these early Icelanders, and the difficulties they faced on a daily basis.

Near the village of Skogar is the famous Skogafoss waterfall, we stopped here next. Situated on the Skoga River, the Skogafoss is one of the widest waterfalls in Iceland (more than 80 feet across) cascading over a 60 meter-high cliff that once formed the coastline of the country. There are stairs leading to the top of the waterfall (some 300 steps) but most of us elected not to do the climb because it would have been time-consuming and our visit was not a long one. The constant spray of the falling water creates up to two stunning rainbows at a time. When we were there, a remarkable rainbow formed a giant ribbon across the front of the waterfall. From here, we continued along Route 1, entering the Myrdalur County area. Much of what we saw beyond this point was pretty desolate, with some isolated farms near the base of the mountains to our left and dark alluvial plains to our right. We made a thirty minute stop along the shoreline to see the 120 meter-high *Dyrholaery*, a small promontory just along the coast near the village of Vik that was once part of a volcanic island. The name means ‘door hole’ in Icelandic and refers to the large opening formed in the center of this enormous bluff by sea erosion. Elizabet led us along the black sand and pebble beach (voted one of the ten most beautiful beaches in the world in 1991 by Islands Magazine) to witness the amazing basalt columns near the water. It was as if they had been chiseled into place, extending all the way up the cliff walls. Most of us climbed a portion of the columns to have our pictures taken. It was very chilly and windy, the frigid waters pounding the shoreline unmercilessly.

Fifteen minutes later (around 5:15pm) we reached the Hotel Katla Hofdabrekka on the outskirts of Vik, the southernmost village in Iceland, located just off Route 1. Vik’s population is roughly 450, making it one of the largest villages this far from Reykjavik, but we did not see the main population center, just an occasional farmhouse set back from the road. I’m assuming the village itself must be a cluster of homes situated somewhere within the valley. Vik is a popular tourist attraction for those who want to experience the natural wonders of Iceland. This place is a bird watchers paradise, as there are colonies on both sides of the village where one can see (depending on the season) the popular puffins, fulmars, arctic terns, guillemots, kittiwakes and a host of other species. Vik is also a great place for hiking, both along its black sandy beaches and the nearby Myrdalsjokull glacier and mountains. The village offers sea tours, trout fishing and horse back riding activities. Again, from our hotel – which stood in an isolated clearing surrounded by cliffs and mountains – I couldn’t tell anything existed here. But in the hotel lobby one could easily book more than a dozen interesting tours and activities to enjoy and explore the area.

The Hotel Katla is a countryside hotel complex consisting of several one-level red-roofed buildings spread out over a sprawling piece of flat terrain that includes an outdoor key hole-shaped geothermal hot tub. The family-owned facility seemed fairly new, decorated with wood panels that smelled (wonderfully) as if they had just been cut down. The rooms were large and comfortable, and heated by geothermal energy via pipes in the floor. The water in the bathroom came from the nearby glacier, perhaps the purest, most refreshing thing I’ve ever drank. Although isolated from the village, the Hotel Katla did offer a splendid view of the green, moss-covered hillsides and the beautiful black beaches

and rocky outcrops along the shores of the North Atlantic. It was incredibly peaceful here...and as night fell, *very* cold.

Around 6:00pm, after putting my luggage away, I joined DanaMarie in the Wilckens' hotel room where they invited us to a 'happy hour', mixing drinks with the liquor they purchased at the airport. (I stuck to coffee). Anke showed us the packing cubes she uses to organize their suitcases. Each cube was collapsible and contained items grouped by shirts, pants, underwear, and so forth, zipped and packed neatly on top of one another in a method that minimizes wrinkling and allows for easy access. I was completely blown away; the Wilckens' luggage was better organized than my own closets back home. I made a mental note to buy some of these packing cubes online for future trips.

Thirty minutes later we trekked to the hotel restaurant for a delicious buffet (the first included dinner of the tour). I ate like a condemned man. Roasted pork and lamb, meatballs, haddock, smoked salmon and ham, horsemeat (hey, don't knock it till you've tried it), salads, rice and potatoes. For dessert they had brownie-like pastries and creamy *skyr*, a thousand year old cultured dairy product similar to strained yogurt (but tastes a heck of a lot better). There was a tart rhubarb sauce you could ladle over the *skyr*. What a feast! We waddled back to our hotel rooms to bundle up and then proceeded to take an hour-long stroll in the small valley next to the hotel, alongside a wide stream. It was windy and very chilly. And extremely dark in the absence of any artificial city lights (we brought along flashlights to illuminate our way). It felt great to walk around this open area, breathing in that wonderful cold sea air. We followed a path around the hills towards a cluster of homes in the distance, and then decided to turn around and head back to the hotel once the cold got the better of us. Other than a passing car, we saw nobody during our walk.

I was back in my hotel room by 9:15pm, thoroughly exhausted. I tried to stay up to watch the BBC newscast on TV, but soon fell asleep.

Day Five

I slept soundly throughout the night and felt very energized when I awoke at 5:30am. After making my obligatory 'gallon of coffee' (a term I borrowed from Anke, who also has a wicked morning caffeine addiction), I shaved, showered and wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast.

By 8:45am we were on the bus for another day-long trip to visit the Vatnajökull National Park, Europe's largest ice cap. We traveled east along Route 1, across the vast

Myrdalssandur alluvial plains, a black lava sand flat that extends along the coastline for some 700 square kilometers, creating a rather bleak desert landscape known as an outwash. Locals think this area is haunted. It definitely looked barren and creepy. This dark alluvial plain was formed by materials ‘washed out’ from underneath the nearby Myrdalsjokoll glacier during eruptions of the Katla volcano (which is buried beneath the glacier). Katla is quite active, erupting every 40-80 years, adding more and more sediment to these plains with each eruption, expanding them further outward. But the volcano has been silent for almost 100 years now, and the locals fear that when it spews again it could wipe out the village of Vik. Imagine going to bed with *that* thought every night.

As we drove over this no-man’s land of black sandy terrain – across a multitude of small bridges that have been erected in these parts of Iceland almost as quickly as they are washed away by glacial floods – Elizabet lectured us on the local wildlife. She said the only indigenous animal is the arctic fox, all others were introduced by settlers, including the reindeer (during the 1700s) and the mink (early 1900s). Mice and rats were likely stowaways on ships. It is hard to imagine *any* species of animal thriving on this moss-covered volcanic rock without some aid or assistance from humans, with the possible exception of birds, who flock here by the millions. To prove this point, the relatively small fox and mink have no natural enemies, making them the proverbial ‘top of the food chain’ as far as Iceland’s animal kingdom goes. Elizabet mentioned that while the fox kills only for food, the mink does so for food *and* fun. In the southern parts of Iceland, one of the most prominent bird species tend to be the *great skua*, a streaked greyish brown bird with a wingspan that can exceed 50 inches. This large seabird preys on fish and smaller mammals (including other birds). Another large predatory bird in this region is the *gyrfalcon*, and on the western side of the country is the massive *white-tailed eagle*. The most popular bird in Iceland, without a doubt, is the *puffin*, a small, adorable seabird that looks like a cross between a miniature penguin and a toucan. There are an estimated ten million or more of these sea-diving creatures in the country, with the world’s largest colony of Atlantic puffins nesting on the Westman Islands just off the southern shores.

Elizabet also talked about the horses of Iceland, passing around a scrap book with photos of the different varieties. These gentle horses are small, not much bigger than ponies, and come in over thirty different colors and patterns. They are extremely popular in the country – Elizabet herself once owned a few – and are used in racing competitions and outings (they are particularly agile over ice and rivers). The Icelandic horse is also prized internationally and is bred for export. They are unique in that they have five separate gaits: walk, trot, gallop, pace and *tolt* (which is an exclusive gait of the Icelandic horse). Like sheep and goats, they’re often let loose to graze in the countryside; we saw many of them throughout our visit. Besides leisure riding and competition, these horses are also used as work animals on rural farms and are bred for their meat.

Elizabet then launched into a brief lecture on the surrounding vegetation. Most of the five hundred or so plant species that have thrived in Iceland since the last Ice Age originated from Europe. But there are some notable North American exceptions, like the

Arctic river-beauty plant, a member of the evening primrose family, which grows along riverbanks. Another North American transplant is the Lyngbye's Sedge which thrives in wet mires and bogs. But of the few North American plant species in Iceland, perhaps the most beautiful – and sometimes controversial – is the voracious Alaskan lupine, first introduced in 1945 to the lowland sections as a means of boosting nitrogen to the soil and as an anchor for other organic matter (in an effort to ease soil erosion). This purple-flowered plant spread quickly throughout all of Iceland, and we saw many lavender fields on our drive along the South Shore. Iceland's lack of trees and unique rain and wind conditions naturally induce soil erosion and create sand barriers (especially on the eastern side of the island) that can interfere with road conditions. The Alaskan lupine was brought in to help thwart this, allowing for a richer soil and thicker vegetation. To this end it has been successful, sandstorms are less severe now in the eastern regions, and the richer soil has permitted other vegetation to flourish where nobody thought it was possible to grow anything. The downside is that the Alaskan lupine towers over native plant and grass species, and in the areas affected by over-grazing the lupine's shade makes it more difficult for these species to recover. Sheep and goats do not feed on lupine flowers due to their bitter alkaloids, so botanists are trying to create a sweeter lupine hybrid the animals will eat, thus solving their problem with this invasive North American plant.

As for trees, we did not see many of those. It is estimated that less than two percent of the country is covered by them. What is surprising, though, is that at one point in its history, prior to the first settlers arriving more than a thousand years ago, over a third of the country is believed to have been covered by birch trees. To be sure, there are several natural factors which hinder the growth of trees here, notably volcanic activity and the incredibly strong winds, but the settlement of humans definitely led to the massive deforestation one sees throughout the country. And while Icelanders today are among the world's best conservationists, I do not know if this tree pattern can be significantly reversed. The natural challenges in Iceland are formidable, and conditions can change suddenly with each new geological episode.

Our first stop that day was in the middle of a lava field. About forty-five minutes into our drive Elizabeth instructed Johannes to pull the bus off the road and onto a dirt path that cut across the extensive lava fields of the deadly *Lakagigar* (Laki) eruption (1783-4). It was an incredible sight, a vast area of bumpy black volcanic rock covered in thick green moss extending for miles towards the mountains in the distance. We walked along the dirt road and climbed atop the rocks to take it all in. It resembled the surface of some alien planet. Up close, the woolly moss (scientific name: *acomitrium lanuginosum*) was actually a green-grayish color and is referred to by locals as gray moss. This spongy plant grows wild in the southern parts of Iceland, and is usually the first vegetation to colonize newly run lava, spreading patiently across the sharp-edged black rocky surface, covering it in a soft gray-green carpet. Over time, it binds the soil and allows for more finicky grasses and ferns to settle in.

We continued eastward along Route 1, passing the village of (hold onto your lips!) Kirkjubæjarklaustur. The name in Icelandic means 'church farm cluster' – which pretty

much describes this village of less than 150 people. According to my research, Kirkjubaejarklaustur is the only place between here and Hofn – the next ‘major’ town center situated more than 130 kilometers away – that offers basic services like a fueling station, bank, post office or supermarket. Again, as in Vik, none of this was evident from the roadway, all we saw were a collection of farmhouses in the distance near the base of the mountains. Kirkjubaejarklaustur is steeped in local legend and folktale, most of it surrounding a famous convent of Benedictine nuns that was abolished during the 1500s following the Reformation. Two nuns were burned at the stake here, one accused of selling her soul to the Devil and having sex with the local men, and the other for uttering blasphemous things about the pope. Later, the second nun was exonerated. Another legend claims that a mysterious golden ring sometimes appears in the lake (above the village) where the nuns used to bathe, anyone who grabs the ring is believed to be sucked under the water and drowned. Very close to the village is a small waterfall called *Systrafoss* (‘the waterfall of the sisters’) named after the nuns of the abbey.

During this portion of the drive, Elizabet touched upon some socio-political aspects of her country. She told us the current tax rate is 38%, a high number, but that Icelanders get many free services, such as medical care, pensions and schooling all the way through to the university level. The country has an interesting policy towards immigration. While the government welcomes tourists and other visitors, they do not encourage immigration for a number of reasons. First, the resources of the country are limited. Secondly, living in Iceland can be tough for a foreigner. The language is extremely difficult to learn, and getting accustomed to the natural environment is not easy; besides the cold and wind, the lack of sun leaves many people feeling depressed, perhaps the biggest factor in the nation’s relatively high suicide rate.

As we continued eastward, we entered the skeidararsandur outwash, an even larger alluvial plain of black volcanic sand more than 1,000 square kilometers in size. This is the largest body of sand on the planet, but do not think of it as a traditional desert or beach. Created by eruptions from beneath the Vatnajokull ice cap, which melts the ice along its various frozen valleys and washes tons of sediment towards the ocean, this seemingly endless black desert is carved up by numerous glacial rivers and streams meandering in every direction. It was quite a dramatic view, especially with the glacier mountains to our right, a stunning contrast of scenery.

Roughly forty kilometers later we did a short hike through the Skaftafell National Park – a part of the larger Vatnajokull National Park system – to see the Svartifoss waterfall. We stopped at the visitor’s center first; Johannes was able to get permission to drive the bus up the one-lane dirt road to a portion of the park overlooking the vast skeidararsandur outwash (saving us the task of having to climb up there on foot). From here, we dismounted the bus and trekked further up the hillside. We now had a commanding view of the black alluvial plains below us, and of the surrounding mountains and even a section of the Vatnajokull ice cap. We reached a clearing on top of a small cliff not far from the waterfall, and as we waited for Elizabet, who was busy rounding up the rest of the tour members still hiking up the hill, I joined Denise and we climbed down a rocky pathway to a suspension bridge directly in front of the waterfall. The Svartifoss is famous

for the basalt columns that flank it. From our closer vantage point I was able to take some nice pictures before we climbed back up and re-joined the group. Afterwards, we returned to the bus and continued our journey eastward, driving through an area known as the 'wasteland' where few Icelanders live. Most of the tightly-knit 'communities' here are nothing more than settlements consisting of three or four farm dwellings, the families relying heavily on one another in their isolation.

We stopped to visit the church in one of these tiny hamlets, in a place called Hof. The church was even smaller than the one we'd seen at Skogar the previous day. This one had a turf roof, and the peat covered almost the entire structure making it seem as if the building had somehow sprung up from the ground during harvest season. Adjacent to the church was an elevated cemetery. In winter, the earth is so frozen it is impossible to dig graves so the bodies are entombed above ground. The grave site was also covered with an insulating layer of peat. Apparently, even the corpses get cold around here.

The Hof church represented a typical 'turf house' design, a standard architectural feature used for more than 1,000 years in this country. The typical Icelandic turf house has a foundation laid with flat stones, on top of which a wooden frame would be built to hold the weight of the peat turf. This turf is fastened around the entire house and anchored by blocks. An additional layer of peat was sometimes added for more insulation. The only externally visible wooden construction would be the facade of the house or the doorway (usually very decorative). The overall impression, quite frankly, was that you were entering a mound of earth. But inside, it looked like a typical old house; you step first into a hall with a large fireplace and then into a main family room with adjacent bedrooms. Simple, but cozy. In the case of the Hof church, the inside was a single room divided by a plain altar with a congregation section marked by five short rows of pews. I imagined it could get very crowded during services, especially in the bitter cold of winter when barn animals are sometimes allowed inside to help keep the place warm.

As we drove further east along the coast we passed several smaller glaciers – stemming from the Vatnajokull ice cap – separated by mountains and rocky hillsides and ridges. The Vatnajokull ice cap incorporates thirteen percent of the country's land mass. It averages a thickness of 400-600 meters, but has areas that are 950 meters deep. For those of you metrically-challenged, just multiply those numbers by 3.2 to get the amount of feet...yes, *that is a lot of ice cubes!* This frozen body is so huge it covers 8,100 square kilometers of territory, concealing within its icy mass entire mountains, valleys, plateaus and several active volcanoes (including Bardarbunga). The highest peak of Vatnajokull reaches 2000 meters above sea level, with its lowest point just 300 meters *below* sea level. The amount of precipitation here is very great, producing more rain and glacial waters (along the south side of Vatnajokull) than just about anywhere else in the country. And the amount of water stored within this glacier is mind-boggling. In my research, I read it would take 200 years for the *Olfusa* River, Iceland's greatest river flow, to drain all of the water from Vatnajokull out to the sea. *Two hundred years!* Whoa. This is why every time there is a volcanic eruption beneath the ice, flood waters ravage the countryside.

The Vatnajökull ice cap is one gigantic glacier, but it produces several smaller, subsidiary glaciers (or glacier tongues) that slowly move outward away from the center of the main ice cap. Try to imagine a huge hand with fingers poking out of it in all directions, these fingers each represent a smaller glacier. The glaciers are constantly moving (from the sheer weight of the ice). In fact, along the southern part of Vatnajökull the glaciers are slowly making their way towards the ocean. If you stand close enough to them, you can actually hear the ice walls cracking and straining as they break and inch their way closer to the Atlantic. We had the opportunity to witness this later that day on our drive back to Vik. As we continued eastward, we passed several of these glaciers on our right hand side: *Skeidararjökull*, *Oraefajökull*, *Breidamerkurjökull* and *Skalafellsjökull*. (If you haven't figured it out by now, *jökull* means 'glacier' in Icelandic; it is pronounced something like *yogurt*). In between these glaciers we saw stunning chocolate-colored hillsides and ridges called *moraines*, which are formed from sediment and rock deposited by the glaciers as they move the earth out of their way. Some of these were very tall and I mistook them for mountains.

Around 1:00pm we reached the Jökulsárlón Glacial Lagoon along the southeastern edge of the Vatnajökull National Park, one of the day's highlights, but continued past it for about fifteen more minutes to have lunch in a small rural center called Hali, not far from the fishing town of Hofn. It had turned into a beautiful day, the dark gray cloud cover had lifted and the sun was shining brightly, making the waters of the Atlantic glisten. I don't know how to describe Hali, because it wasn't really a town or village. It appeared to be a privately owned property along Route 1 (one of about a dozen or so between Jökulsárlón and Hofn that offered accommodations and tourist services). This is the place where Þorbergur Þórðarson, perhaps Iceland's most famous writer, was born. Hali serves as a cultural center in this sparsely populated region, with a unique museum dedicated exclusively to the writer's life and accomplishments. The side of the museum is cleverly decorated as a series of book binders featuring the published works of Þorbergur.

Adjacent to the museum is a cafe-restaurant where we had lunch. We sat down at various tables (mine included Ron, Anke, DanaMarie, Marty and his wife, Florence) and were served by the family that owned the property. This was an included meal, and most of us braced ourselves for more soup and bread. Sure enough, they placed bowls of a tomato-based soup in front of each of us. Some of us groaned, not because the soup was bad (it was delicious), but because we thought this was *all* we were getting. The staff kept coming around offering us more soup and bread. Marty, who was pretty hungry, got up after consuming two bowls and said he was going to check out the bakery section for something else to eat. No sooner than he left, the kitchen doors swung open and the staff brought out plates of baked Alaskan char (a tasty fish common in these waters) accompanied by roasted potatoes and veggies. Thinking that our meal was going to end with the soup – we were scarfing bowl after bowl and getting ready to join Marty at the bakery – our group found this very funny. DanaMarie was the first to start laughing, and soon our table was guffawing loudly to the surprise of the kitchen staff who thought something was wrong. We apologized and tried to explain. This lunch turned out to be

one of the best meals we had while in Iceland. I'm not one for fish, but let me tell you, *Alaskan char is excellent!*

After lunch we were given thirty minutes to visit the museum. It was not very large and we had more than enough time to walk through it. I had never heard of Porbergur before, but reading about this man's life I became very fascinated. Born in this 'hamlet' in 1888, Porbergur was raised on a farm and his most endearing works are semi-fictional autobiographies about his life in rural Iceland during the early twentieth century. His creative use of the Icelandic language, his varying writing styles, his wit and description of the country's rural culture has won him fans across five generations. He was a real maverick, too, embracing yoga, Esperanto and astronomy, and tackling controversial social issues of his day (he published a scathing letter in the 1930s condemning the Nazi's anti-semitism). Even today, forty years after his death, the writer enjoys a growing fan base. The museum showcased the often rugged life he led as a young man, with both relics and replicas of his home, photographs of the writer both in Iceland and abroad, and excerpts from his many published works. I made a mental note to get an English version of one of his books when I got home.

From here, we drove back to the Jokulsarlon Glacial Lagoon, one of Iceland's most popular tourist attractions. This glacial lake was formed at the head of the Breidamerkurjokull glacier (a part of the larger Vatnajokull ice cap) as it began to recede from the Atlantic Ocean. Inside this glacial lagoon are dozens of beautiful blue and black sediment-streaked icebergs (large and small) which have broken off from the main glacier and are floating around in the water. Since the 1970s the lake has grown tremendously, owing mostly to rising global temperatures and the melting of the ice caps. Currently, it is less than a mile from the edge of the ocean, connected by a widening headwater current that slowly floats smaller icebergs out to sea.

We boarded an amphibious boat to take a forty minute tour of the lagoon. We had to don life vests and sit down along the edges of the vessel as the captain first drove it to the edge of the lake and then slowly eased us into the water. It was chilly and windy, but also remarkably clear and sunny, a perfect day for iceberg watching. The accompanying guide on the boat explained the geology of the area, and following us for safety was a Zodiac dinghy with another crew member (who displayed a remarkable sense of balance, for he stood upright holding onto nothing the entire time as if daring the wind and currents to toss him over the side). At one point, the young man on the dinghy took off and returned with a large chunk of clear ice which he handed over to our boat guide who then proceeded to break off pieces of it so we could all sample what 1,000 year old glacial ice tastes like. *How refreshing!* The icebergs had unique and unusual colors and shapes. The size of the bergs depended on how they calved (or broke off) from the glacier, some extended hundreds of meters beneath the lake even though we could only see the jagged upper outlines of their icy bodies. They were either milky white or bright blue. According to our guide, the color depended on the amount of air inside the iceberg and the interplay between sunlight and ice crystals. Many had unique streaks of black sediment picked up over the centuries as the glaciers moved across the valleys.

After our boat ride we spent some time taking photographs of the lake and the enormous glacier behind it, and then followed Elizabet along the short river leading to the ocean. Many of the larger icebergs sink to the bottom of the lagoon, which is currently more than 800 feet deep, but smaller sections break off and are swept by the wind current down this water channel and into the Atlantic Ocean where they wither and eventually disappear. As we were walking towards the beach we witnessed a section of one iceberg break off and crash noisily into the water, the current quickly taking it down towards the ocean's edge. Along the black sandy beach we found several tiny remnants of icebergs washed ashore by the ocean's tide. I found this a little sad; to think, these were once part of a mighty glacier, now melting away as tiny, disfigured ice orphans on this desolate beach. How ignoble an end!

By 4:10pm we started our long drive back to Vik. It became cloudy and bleak again, with periods of light rain. An hour later we stopped to see the Svinafellsjokull, a subsidiary glacier jutting out of the Vatnajokull ice cap. This was one of Elizabet's favorite glaciers. She led us to a rocky ridge overlooking this enormous valley of solid ice. What an awe-inspiring view! Many people back home have actually seen this, as well; Elizabet told us this scenery has been used in HBO's production of *Game of Thrones* to depict the 'northside of the Wall'. A small lake has formed at the glacier's base (I assume in the same manner of the Jokulsarlon Glacial Lagoon), and large sections would periodically break off from the massive ice walls and plunge into the water. Svinafellsjokull is popular for hiking and camping. Although, not without its dangers. As we hiked to the ridge above the valley we passed a sign commemorating two young German men who vanished while camping out on the ice in 2007; it is believed they fell and were trapped within the glacial crevices. Their bodies have never been found.

Climbing over the rocky terrain to get a better view of the glacier below was slow-going. Elizabet cautioned us not to get too close to the ledge. Securing one's footing was not easy, and the strong cold winds and light rain didn't help matters at all. Denise went out the furthest, she wanted to hear the cracking of the ice below and had ventured out onto a rocky perch that I found too scary to maneuver. I decided to stay put with DanaMarie on a more secure clearing. We took turns photographing each other with the glacier in the background, but most of the pictures came out gray due to the thick cloud cover. On our way back to the bus, we snapped some wonderful shots of a solitary beam of sunlight breaking through a hole in the clouds, illuminating the lake.

We continued our drive westward back to Vik, making a forty-five minute stop at the Vatnajokull National Park visitor's center to see a fascinating film on the geology of the park, which also included recent footage of the on-going fissure eruptions emanating from the Bardarbunga volcano. It became apparent to me that while Icelanders have grown accustomed to the violent natural rumblings of their country, and appear to take them in stride, they are nonetheless worried about the aftermaths. Elizabet echoed this concern when she shared her country's anxiousness over not knowing just exactly what region would be flooded from the ongoing Bardarbunga eruptions. In general, geologists think the barren lands to the north of Vatnajokull will sustain the most flooding from the

rapidly melting ice, which would be a best-case scenario. But nothing is certain when it comes to Mother Nature.

It took us another hour and a half to reach Vik. Elizabet had called the hotel staff on her cell phone and they had agreed to keep the buffet open until we arrived. When we pulled into the parking lot it was night time, and still raining lightly. Most of us headed straight to the restaurant from the bus. The fare was the same as the night before. Marty and Florence joined our little group and we had a pleasant dinner. By 9:00 pm we split up for the night, DanaMarie and I repeating the invigorating walk from the previous evening around the small valley next to the hotel, wanting to burn a few extra calories before bedtime. She had brought along a flashlight so we could see in the dark. I was back in my room by 10:00pm and watched an interesting public debate on the BBC concerning the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence. It seems we Americans aren't the only ones bitterly divided over partisan politics. I fell asleep by the end of the debate, the Scottish accents lulling me into a deep slumber.

Day Six

I awoke at 5:00am and immediately made several cups of coffee. I spent the next hour writing in my journal, trying to sort out the previous day's activities, jotting down the tidbits of information that serve as my guidelines for when I write the full-length travelogue back home. I then showered, dressed and repacked my suitcase, placing it in the hallway for the porter to pick up. By 7:30am I joined the gang in the restaurant for breakfast. At 8:45am we boarded the bus for the long ride to Borgarnes, a small town on the western side of the country where we would be spending the night. The temperature was very cold, and the sky was completely gray with cloud cover, a shroud of early morning fog obscuring the Atlantic coastline. It rained during the first part of our journey that day; a typical Icelandic rainfall, shifting from a misty spray to a pelting downpour back to a light drizzle, and then...*nothing*, just gray, bleak clouds again. Johannes turned the heater on to defog the windows and soon the coach felt like the thermal pools back at the Blue Lagoon. We began shedding our jackets and sweaters. As we left Vik on Route 1 we passed a nearby mountain used by the U.S. military for NATO surveillance purposes. If this is supposed to be a secret, it is a poorly kept one since everyone in the area knows about the installation.

During our drive that morning Elizabet got on the mike and began lecturing about the educational system in Iceland. Like other Nordic countries, there are four levels of education. The first is *playschool*, which is non-compulsory for children under the age of six and functions much as our own pre-school, introducing children into the school system. The second level is *compulsory* education, beginning at age six and includes both *primary* and *lower secondary* education (akin to our elementary, middle and junior high

school). This level is usually held in the same institution, and the size of these schools vary greatly. In the Reykjavik area the compulsory schools can have over a thousand students, while in the rural areas there might be less than a dozen. At age ten, students are taught English; at age thirteen, Danish. Compulsory education lasts ten years, from age six to sixteen, and is followed by *upper secondary*, or what we call senior high school. Strangely, this level is not compulsory in Iceland, although any student who completes the lower secondary level is automatically accepted into the upper secondary. Roughly 97% of the student population continues on to this level, which usually last four years (from age sixteen to twenty), but the drop out rate can be high. From what I gathered, assessments and examinations are used to decide a student's educational pathway from this point forward, determining whether they will pursue a vocational course of training or a more strenuous academic curriculum to prepare them for the next stage, known as *higher education*, or the university level. As of this writing there are eight such institutions of higher learning in the country, most run by the state, of which the University of Iceland is the main educational center. I don't recall what else Elizabet said on the subject because I dozed off at this point. Between the heating system, the dreary weather, the rolling sensation of the bus and our guide's soft, soothing voice I was soon snoring louder than a person with a bad case of sleep apnea.

Shortly after 10:00am I awoke as our bus pulled into a gasoline station in Hella for a much needed pitstop. We used the restrooms and then spent about twenty minutes inside the cafe-giftshop. I was able to buy an amusing souvenir cap for one of my neices (it had a woolly sheep on the front). We continued westward for a few more kilometers before turning north onto Route 30, an even narrower road than Route 1. Once we began using the inner access routes it was nearly impossible to tell exactly what roadway we were using – at least from the tourist map Elizabet handed out on Day Three. Even when I inquired, Elizabet usually had to ask Johannes. Because of the limited highway system here, I got the impression that Icelanders don't put as much emphasis on travel directions as we do back home.

The further we moved away from the coast, the more the landscape changed. We were heading north towards Gullfoss, one of Iceland's most impressive waterfalls, passing farmlands and areas with generally greener rolling hills and clusters of thin trees (what typically constitutes as a forest here). Surrounding us were several glacial rivers, among them the mighty Hvita and the Thjorsa (Iceland's longest waterway), and not far to our left was Hestvatn, a deep freshwater lake famous for its char and brown trout. In the distance to our right was the Hekla volcano. During this portion of our drive Elizabet went into a more detailed explanation of Iceland's geology, focusing on some of the difficulties confronting the island. She told us sixty-five percent of the country is uninhabitable, and that severe fluctuations in both high and low pressure wind cycles often produce sudden and drastic changes in the weather, especially between September and April, increasing the country's erosion problems as powerful, frigid winds sweep across the landscape. The winds are so strong here they can sometimes overturn windmills and uproot roadways.

We passed the town of Fludir, a small inland hamlet famous for its camping grounds (there is even a trailer park community here). The Stora-Laxa, a salmon river, runs through Fludir providing excellent fishing opportunities. The region is thermally active, and the town offers a heated pool and many hot tub facilities. Among the major industries in Fludir are the numerous geothermal greenhouses, cultivating many different species of plants, trees and mushrooms year round. This particular region was one of the more greener places we saw while in Iceland, some sections of the road were lined with Alaskan populus trees. Further north we came across a glacial river with a strong current popular for rafting. Beyond this point, Route 30 gave way to a bumpy, potholed one-lane country road. We were now driving exclusively through open pastures where animals grazed in the light rain. Dotting the fields were giant stacks of hay bundled and rolled in what look like white plastic.

By 11:30am we reached the Gullfoss waterfall, voted one of the top ten most beautiful waterfalls in the world by Lonely Planet. The visitor's parking lot was packed with tourist buses, underscoring the enormous popularity of this site. The Gullfoss is one of the three more highly touted locations along what is known as the Golden Circle, a tourist route in South Iceland that extends from Reykjavik to the central part of the country. The first impressive aspect of this waterfall is actually an illusion. As you approach the wide Hvita River it appears to simply vanish into the earth. It isn't until you reach the edges of the falls that you see how this 'trick' is created. The Hvita River takes a sudden right turn, disappearing from sight over a three-tiered rocky formation before plunging in a dramatic cascade into a deep crevice which runs perpendicular to the flow of the river. The water continues down this crevice for another 2.5 kilometers before disappearing into the valley.

There are several areas from which to view this spectacular waterfall. Most of us took the stairs down to the edge of the natural three-level 'staircase' where the river makes its first drop. There is a chaotic rush of water as it collides and crashes among the three separate ledges before falling into the crevice, producing a neverending misty spray that hovers over the mini-canyon like a fog. We took turns photographing each other next to the cascading water before heading back up the stairs to see Gullfoss from its highest point. On the way up we passed the stone memorial of Sigridur Tomasdottir, the stern-looking daughter of one of the original owners of the lands surrounding the waterfall, who – as legend goes – threatened to throw herself into the falls if the state went ahead with plans to build a hydroelectric plant at Gullfoss, which would have forever changed the flow of the Hvita River. Eventually, the government decided against the idea for both economic and conservation reasons – and not because of Sigridur's posturing, although her folktale has grown and she is widely believed to be the 'savior' of the falls. Gullfoss today is a protected natural site.

Shortly after 12:00pm we gathered inside the visitor's center for an included lunch. Adjacent to the giftshop was a large cafeteria-style area where tourists were seated by groups. We were no longer surprised that our lunch consisted only of soup and bread (in this case a piece of chocolate cake was thrown in for dessert). Our server informed us the soup was 'lamb with vegetables', but after several chewy spoonfuls, Anke renamed it

gristle soup. I found it edible, albeit by dipping many chunks of bread into it. The chocolate cake was delicious.

By 1:00pm we boarded our bus and continued north for several kilometers through the Haukadalur valley to our next stop, the Geysir geothermal area, another natural wonder within the Golden Circle. In the distance we could see the southern tip of the Langjokull glacier. As we drove through the pastures within the valley we witnessed a most adorable sight. Traffic on both sides of the road was momentarily stopped as an enormous herd of sheep was led across the roadway by a small group of farmers. This is a centuries-old Icelandic sheep round-up ritual known as *rettir*, usually held in September after the animals have spent three months roaming and grazing the countryside. Farmers invite their family, friends, neighbors and even tourists to help in this annual tradition. Mostly, it entails a lot of walking (or horseback riding) to search out the sheep and coax them back to the large circular round-up pens called *shindigs* or *Rettaball*. Following the round-up there is an evening of celebration with traditional singing and dancing. Later, the sheep are shaved of their wool and many are selected for slaughter. Over the coming months, you'll notice a lot of organic lamb meat being offered in supermarkets and restaurants, and other traditional lamb food products such as black pudding and *lifrapylsa*, a liver sausage. At that moment, though, the last thing on our minds was the fate of these poor creatures. We had seen countless sheep throughout our travels and the idea of getting close-up photographs was too enticing. Several of us got off the bus and walked to the section of the road where the herd was crossing. They were so adorable, bulked up in their woolly overcoats. As I stepped closer, one of the more possessive rams took exception and began bleating wildly, moving in a defensive posture towards me as I pointed my camera. This seemed to piss off the local farmers, too, who started shouting at me to get away from the animals. At that moment I felt like the poster child for the *Ugly American*. Sheepishly (pardon the pun) I waved an apology and returned to the bus (*but not before I got my photos...hee-hee-hee*).

Once we continued on our way it took us less than thirty minutes to reach the Geysir geothermal area. Located within the earthquake-prone Haukadalur Valley, Geysir is now a public park which sits atop a giant boiling cauldron. As you walk through it, you will encounter hissing steam vents, both hot and cold springs, unusual plant life and mud pots belching sulphur. The main attraction at this site used to be the *Stori-Geysir* (or Great Geysir), an 18-meter wide hot spring (with a 20-meter deep chamber) that once routinely sprouted superheated water in loud, thunderous eruptions as high as 60-80 meters into the air. The Great Geysir was the first glimpse modern Europeans ever had of such a phenomenon, and the English word for 'geyser' derives from the Icelandic name for this hot spring (which means 'to gush'). Scientists are not sure when the Great Geysir was created, although they theorize it may have its origins following severe earthquake activity in the valley during the late 13th century, which was followed by the devastating eruption of Mt. Hekla. For centuries, the Great Geysir would sprout every three hours or so, but then suddenly stopped in 1916 for some unknown reason. Since that year forward, its eruptions have been very infrequent. Icelanders widely believe that visitors throwing rocks and foreign objects into the opening over the centuries caused it to become blocked; scientists, though, are not so sure if this is the only reason for its dormancy.

Luckily, there are numerous smaller, more active hot springs in the area. The most popular is the *Strokkur* ('the churn') geyser, located just 100 meters to the south of the Great Geysir.

Elizabet took us around the park, explaining the geothermal activity underfoot, and why these hot springs suddenly explode hot water into the air. I'll spare you the geology lesson and just say that its due to geothermal pressure building up beneath the earth which pushes hot water upwards, like a pressure cooker. We waited patiently by the Strokkur geyser – it erupts every so many minutes – and watched as the churning, boiling water slowly formed into a gigantic bubble, finally bursting its superheated liquid 20 meters into the air in a loud whooshing sound. We were able to experience several of these eruptions (trying to take the perfect photograph!) and it was exciting and exhilarating each time. From the park, we crossed the street and walked to the Geysir Center complex. Inside was a huge mall-like giftshop, an equally large restaurant and cafeteria area, and an audio-visual exhibition center about geysers, earthquakes and volcanoes. We spent thirty minutes here. Besides using the bathroom facilities, most of us took this opportunity to shop for souvenirs. They had a large selection of beautiful wool clothing and accessories.

Around 2:20pm we departed Geysir and began heading west towards Thingvellir National Park, rounding out our visit to the three most popular sites within the Golden Circle. I'm not sure what roadway we were on now, but it led us straight to Thingvallavatn, Iceland's largest natural lake, which lies within the Thingvellir National Park. We drove north along its eastern shore, stopping in one spot to see the large fissures that mark the landscape within the park. This entire region is an important rift valley that marks the crest of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the continental drift between the North American and Euroasian tectonic plates are pulling away from each other, causing Iceland to stretch by 2 cm each year. The pulling away of these plates has created enormous fissures and dauntingly high canyon walls within the valley. We stopped at a section of the lake called *Nikulasargja* ('the money gorge') to witness one of the main faults within the Thingvellir National Park, a large fissure known as the Silfra rift that runs through the area. In 1907, a bridge was built over this gorge and people began tossing coins (for good luck wishes) into the incredibly clear water below, hence the name of the site. The scuba diving here must be phenomenal, as you can literally dive into crevices that divide the North American and Euroasian plates.

We continued to the northernmost regions of the lake to visit the Interpretive Centre at Thingvellir, a multimedia center which explains the history and nature of the park. It sits atop the immense *Almannagja* rift and offers panoramic views of the valley from a small boardwalk built along the edge of the canyon. The Almannagja is one impressive gorge, its massive wall running almost eight kilometers long, with a width that extends up to 64 kilometers in parts, marking the eastern boundary of the North American plate. Throughout the valley floor are numerous smaller – but just as impressive – fissures. At the bottom of the Almannagja rift wall is a flag commemorating the spot where the *Althingi*, Iceland's national parliament, was first established in 930AD. This historical clearing is the site of what has become the oldest, *still-existing* democratically elected

parliamentary institution in the world. To Icelanders, Thingvellir National Park is not just a unique and beautiful eco-system, it is also the historical heart and soul of the country.

Many of the early Vikings who settled in Iceland did so because of problems with royalty back in Scandinavia, choosing to live freer lives in this harsh environment without the suffocating yolk of kings to impede them. To keep law and order, they established local *things* (assemblies) which settled disputes and dispensed justice. But as the country's villages and clans grew, it became apparent that a national assembly was needed to keep the island from falling into chaos. Eventually, in 930AD, the most powerful chieftains decided to hold a general outdoor assembly (known as the *Althingi*, or 'all things') in the plains of Blaskogur – which later became Thingvellir ('the Thing fields') – at a crossroads near the fish-filled Thingvallavatn lake, an area with sufficient trees for firewood and building, and with a dramatic canyon backdrop that would give solemn purpose to even the most boring of orators.

This general assembly, held annually, would bring together the island's top leaders who would then decide on legislation, square away disputes and mete out justice to law breakers. All free men were invited to attend, and the assembly gathering soon turned into the social event of the year, drawing large crowds who set up temporary campsites along the fields. These important and often festive annual gatherings brought Icelanders together – traders, craftsmen, storytellers and entertainers – and permitted a collective culture and identity to form amongst the various groups of early settlers. Almost everything concerning Iceland was argued and decided on these plains: new laws, marriage contracts, political and civil disputes, even religious matters. The center of the assembly was a rocky outcrop called the *Logberg* (or Law Rock) and was presided over by the Lawspeaker, who recited the current laws of the land and made sure procedural protocol was adhered to. From this early assembly, in the open plains just below us, an entire parliamentary system was eventually created, with district representation and a judicial system.

Over the ensuing centuries, though, escalating violence between the country's most powerful groups led to a complete breakdown of law and order, and the governance of the island was surrendered to the Norwegian king by the end of the 13th century. In 1271, the Althingi was stripped of its legislative function and became merely a courtroom dispensing justice until even *that* responsibility was terminated in 1798 and the assembly was dissolved altogether. A royal decree later re-established the Althingi in 1843, and the new members decided to move the assembly to Reykjavik where it has remained ever since. In 2004, Thingvellir was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status for its historical significance.

After taking in the view of the valley from the top of the Almannagja rift many of us ventured down a wooden ramp built between a large fissure leading to a pathway that goes directly to the plains below. Staring up at the walls of this giant crevice you get a better understanding of the tremendous forces at play here; you're literally standing in between a mountain of rock split in two by Mother Nature. *Whoa*. By 2:20pm we re-

grouped near the Interpretive Centre; Elizabet suggested we use the bathroom facilities here (whether we needed to or not) because we wouldn't be stopping for several hours.

From Thingvellir National Park we continued north until we reach the famous *Kaldidalur Road* (or Route 550), the shortest of the three main routes that traverse the interior of Iceland from south to north. Kaldidalur means 'cold valley' in Icelandic, and aptly named due to the extremely frigid winds and heavy snow conditions that form across this valley each winter. The road meanders through an incredible landscape between the *Ok* mountain and the *Langjokull* Glacier. This was a much traveled route in the past, as many farmers from the northwest used it to reach the parliament assembly at Thingvellir and to connect with settlers in the south. In 1830, it became one of the first permanent roads in the country, although you'd be hard-pressed to even imagine this: much of it is unpaved till this day and is only passable (by most vehicles) for three to five months out of the year because of the heavy winter snow. We crossed it with about three to four weeks to spare. Due to severe flooding in the area every stream or river crossing, no matter how shallow, is bridged. The road is so rough that even during the summer months rental companies will not permit anything but four-wheel drive vehicles on it. Case in point, our 40-kilometer 'shortcut' through the Cold Valley took us over three hours!

As we began our journey through the Kaldidalur, Johannes received a radio message that one of the bridges along the road may have been compromised due to heavy glacial flooding. I was sitting in the seat right in back of the driver, and although I could not understand the frantic Icelandic being exchanged between Elizabet, Johannes and whoever he was now communicating with over his cell phone, it appeared as if they were very concerned that Route 550 might be impassible at some point, necessitating a turn-around. We continued onward nonetheless through this barren valley until we reached a section of the road which was entirely unpaved, from this point forward we saw no more than four or five other vehicles as we dissected the Kaldidalur. Johannes stopped one of the oncoming vehicles and asked about the road conditions ahead and was told the bridges were all intact. Relieved, we pressed forward.

Route 550 is a highland road, the second highest pass in all of Iceland, and stretches through this volcanic valley from Thingvellir to a sprawling farm and church estate called Husafell, the innermost farm in the Borgarfjordur (a western fjord) area. Spreading out from the road is nothing but vast empty plains and fields of rocks; in the distance we were surrounded by rifts, subglacial craters, hills and volcanoes, some of which have been dormant for millions of years. Now I understand why NASA used Iceland to help train and prepare the Apollo 11 astronauts for their lunar walk; parts of this valley, like other areas just north of Vantnajokull, could easily be mistaken for the surface of the moon. In fact, when Neil Armstrong was asked to describe the moon, he said it resembled Iceland!

About half-way through the drive we stopped alongside a large pyramid-shaped cairn. Superstitious Icelanders place stones on the pile to appease the Hidden People. I think it has something to do with not throwing the stones, which may harm these 'invisible folk',

so to show respect – and garner some good luck in the process – the locals *harmlessly* place rocks on the pile. Over the years this cairn has grown considerably. When we stepped off the bus to add our own stones to the pile the high winds were so cold my testicles receded immediately. We took shivering pictures of ourselves placing rocks onto the cairn and then quickly retreated to the warm sanctuary of the bus. One thing I found absolutely amazing is that along this barren track we could see cattle gates (fences used to corral livestock). Elizabeth told us sheep actually make it all the way out here to graze. What incredibly dumb animals!

We continued through the Cold Valley, passing the snowcapped *Ok* mountain on our left and the small *Thorisjokull* glacier volcano on our right. Further north we saw the majestic ice walls of the Langjokull glacier (Iceland's second largest ice cap) creeping through the mountains in the east. As we approached the end of the Kaldidalur road we crossed several glacial rivers and streams before entering a patch of shrubland near Husafell. From here we turned west, leaving the Kaldidalur behind, taking Route 518. Six kilometers later we reached the Hraunfossar waterfalls.

Hraunfossar means 'lava falls'. Geologists believe that around 800AD, shortly before the first Viking settlers arrived in Iceland, a volcanic eruption occurred underneath the Langjokull ice cap, creating a large lava field known today as the *Hallmundarhraun*. Over the centuries, streams of surface water and melting glacial ice have formed, passing through this lava field and filtering into the Hvita River, resulting in a series of waterfalls that extend for about one kilometer, cascading over the rocky ledges and birchwood scrublands above the river. We spent thirty minutes here, slowly making our way along a trail on the opposite side of the Hvita River, which offers a viewing platform across from the waterfalls rendering a panoramic view of the Hraunfossar area. Because of the way the waterfalls stretch downstream it was difficult to capture the whole thing in a single photograph. Many of us took the trail further upstream where we came upon a smaller, more violently churning waterfall called Barnafoss, another lava fall, with a small footbridge that extended over the water. The name Barnafoss means 'the children's waterfall' and refers to a tragic accident that claimed the lives of two small children here a long, long time ago. A group of us crossed the footbridge onto a rocky lava formation just above the fall line. We could see almost the entire length of the Hraunfossar from here. It was a beautiful sight, a combination of jagged crevices widening into the Hvita below, flanked by the Hraunfossar waterfalls on one side and a backdrop of seemingly endless green-yellowish scrublands surrounding the hillsides.

Approximately 20 kilometers away we stopped briefly to visit the – (hold onto your lips, again!) – *Deildartunguhver* thermal spring, located near the historic village of Reykholt. This thermal spring has the highest flow rate of any hot spring in Europe, roughly 180 liters per second, and gushes water that exceeds 200 degrees Fahrenheit. A facility on the site pipes this scalding water to the towns of Borgarnes and Akranes – some 34 to 64 kilometers away, respectively – where it is used for heating purposes. We saw huge, specially-insulated metal pipes extending into the river valley below that transports this super-heated water. Ponds and man-made vents in the ground billowed hot mist into the air, fogging the place like an out-of-control steam room. Near the open hot

spring the steamy vapor made everything invisible. Elizabet cautioned us not to get too close to the splashing water. I couldn't help but be impressed by this collaboration between Mother Nature and humans. Icelanders take full advantage of what their natural resources provide without destroying the environment in the process. I have been to so many developing countries where just the opposite is true. *Kudos*, Iceland!

From here we continued straight to the town of Borgarnes, located on a peninsula along the shore of the western fjord known as Borgarfjordur. As we left the thermal spring, Elizabet mentioned that the small village of Reykholt nearby was the former home of Snorri Sturluson, one of Iceland's most important historical figures. He was a 13th century poet and politician, whose records of Icelandic mythology and of the Old Norse language has proven invaluable to modern scholars. At one point in its history, Reykholt became an intellectual center boasting one of the most important schools in the country. Today, this tiny village has less than 100 people. One can visit the preserved farm of Snorri Sturluson here, but Reykholt is now more famous for the surrounding hot springs and water falls.

By 7:30pm we finally reached the Hotel Hamar, a modern establishment built on the grounds of a new golf course about five minutes from the town of Borgarnes. This was a very nice facility, with each room having its own private access outdoors. We were famished, and after putting our luggage away we gathered in the hotel's restaurant for an included sit-down dinner. The staff served us an appetizer of smoked lamb followed by a main course of ling fish (a cod-like fish common in this part of the Atlantic) in a tomato sauce with veggies. For dessert I believe we had some type of custard pie. It was a good meal. Our big surprise came after dinner. Elizabet announced that the conditions for seeing the Northern Lights from our hotel were quite good, especially since we were in a natural setting outside the actual town of Borgarnes and not encumbered by artificial city lights. After dinner, I excitedly withdrew to my room to put on my hoodie (and grab my camera) and then joined Ron and some of the others in the parking lot. They were already staring up at the night sky in awe.

The aurora borealis (more commonly referred to in this part of the world as the Northern Lights) is a fascinating natural phenomenon that occurs when charged particles (electrons and protons) enter our atmosphere due to solar winds, creating a geomagnetic storm, a temporary disturbance in the Earth's magnetosphere. In short, storms on the sun blow these particles our way and when they interact with our atmosphere the result is a spectacular light show in the magnetic band over the North (or South) Pole known as the auroral oval. We were very fortunate that on this particular evening conditions were perfect for viewing this phenomenon. The sky was lit up in a green, almost glowing light, that appeared in waves resembling giant worms slowly wiggling through the atmosphere or emerald sheets rustling in the wind. Ron was trying to focus his camera on the lights but could not see anything in his view finder. Likewise for all of us. Elizabet had earlier told us it was tricky to photograph the Northern Lights, and suggested we just steady our cameras and click away. She was right. I was able to capture several good shots of the aurora borealis by simply pointing my camera upward and not focusing on anything. After about fifteen minutes or so, the waves of green vanished temporarily, and I took

this moment to go back to my room and put on another lighter hoodie beneath the one I was wearing. It was very cold, and I couldn't stop shaking. I also donned my gloves and put on my wool cap, pulling it down over my ears. By the time I went outside again I looked like the Michelin Man.

Unfortunately, the Northern Lights were nowhere to be seen. Ron and I walked over to the opposite side of the hotel to visit Anke and DanaMarie, who were soaking in one of the hotel's outdoor hot tubs together with a group of other tourists. I couldn't believe these two women had walked from the hotel to the hot tub in their bathing suits. *It was freezing!* They were having a blast, though; the water was nice and hot (and they were chatting it up with some young guy named Shaheen who DanaMarie seemed to have an instant crush on). If I wasn't so sensitive to the cold it would have been an idyllic situation: lounging in a hot tub gazing up at the Northern Lights. It doesn't get any better than that! I waited with Ron for about twenty more minutes to see if this greenish phenomenon would return, but it was so cold I retired to the warmth of my room and called it a night. It had been a *very* long day and I fell into a deep sleep.

Day Seven

I was awake by 5:00am. I made coffee and wrote in my journal for nearly an hour before hopping in the shower. I was dressed and repacked by 7:15am and headed to the hotel restaurant for breakfast; the others did not show up until I was done eating. Anke and DanaMarie were positively glowing, they both looked refreshed and relaxed after a night of hot tub soaking. By 9:15am we were on the bus for our day-long tour through the famous Snaefellsnes Peninsula on the western coast. Once again, the weather was dreadful; heavy gray clouds, with cold, strong winds.

Our first stop that morning was in Borgarnes to visit a museum called the Settlement Center. The village of Borgarnes is fairly large (as far as villages in Iceland go) with just under 2,000 inhabitants, making it one of the bigger towns in the Western Region. It is situated on the Ring Road (Route 1) along the shore of the Borgarfjordur (fjord), and primarily serves as a center of commerce for this area of western Iceland. Surprisingly, the economy is not based on fishing, but rather commercial services provided to the local farmers and Icelanders who own summer homes here, and to tourists traveling from Reykjavik on their way along the western coastline northward. There are some industries in Borgarnes, which manufacture construction materials or process meats and salmon, but

basically this is the supermarket and goods depot for the region. As we drove by its neat, clean streets and well-maintained homes – with brightly painted corrugated metal roofs and panels to prevent rusting from the ocean environment – it resembled a quaint seaside town. One thing that puzzled me about most of the places we saw or visited was the absence of people. Outside of Reykjavik we seldom encountered large groups of locals, and in some villages I don't recall seeing anybody at all. I'm assuming it's because most of these smaller towns developed around a cluster of farms or homes and do not possess a town square like one would see in a larger urban setting, a place where people gather for social activity. We drove through the quiet streets of Borgarnes and parked in front of the Settlement Center.

The Settlement Center is an interesting museum. It is housed in a restored warehouse near the harbour (in what are two of the oldest buildings in Borgarnes) and details the history of Iceland's early settlement. There are two major exhibits here, and you have to pay separately for each (although they give you a price break if you want to see both). The first exhibit explains how the Viking sailors crossed the Atlantic and how they eventually settled this harsh land leading up to the Althingi parliament in Thingvellir (in 930AD). This exhibit uses multi-media and theatrical techniques to give the visitor an idea of what it was like to sail aboard a Viking vessel, and includes detailed relief maps which show how the settlements developed throughout the island, and what the conditions and vegetation was like back then.

The second exhibit is dedicated to the saga of Egil Skallagrimsson (904 – 995AD) one of the earliest, most colorful Viking settlers in Iceland who, it would seem, was equal parts warrior, farmer and poet. This tough-as-nails and larger-than-life Viking was the basis of *Egil's Saga*, a tale written (many historians believe) by Snorri Sturluson around the middle of the 12th century, chronicling the exploits of Egil. Although there are obvious exaggerations and incredible superstitious claims (as all sagas contain), this document nonetheless is regarded as an important historical record into the lives and development of the early settlers. *Egil's Saga* covers a very long period, dating back to Egil's grandfather in 850's Norway, and outlines how this family fled to Iceland after a break with the Norwegian king. The saga then focuses on the legend of Egil, and everything he did up until his death, much of his exploits are punctuated by great battles. I cannot tell you more because we were given a choice of viewing only *one* of the two exhibits (each 30 minutes long) and I – along with everyone else – opted to see the Settlement exhibit. For the tour, we were provided with an audio guide in English. It was an informative half-hour, detailing the hardships the early settlers encountered, and how they made it from their original homes in Ireland, Scotland and Scandinavia and slowly spread out over the island.

From Borgarnes we traveled north on Route 54 through the moors of the Myrar district, a grassy marshland area with numerous rivers and streams running through it. We passed on our left – standing in the middle of this empty landscape – the Eldborg crater, towering more than 60 meters above its surroundings. Inactive for thousands of years, the Eldborg crater is the most symmetrical and perhaps one of the most beautiful of all the cinder cone volcanoes of Iceland. Extending out from this crater is an enormous

moss-filled lava field, the by-product of its last eruption. A short distance later we pulled off the road to see an amazing escarpment of hexagonal basalt columns at Gerduberg. We got off the bus and many of us climbed the short hillside to where the columns jut straight up into the air (some 10-14 meters high) forming a massive wall of grey crystal-like formations. Basalt columns are created from flowing lava, and this particular group constitutes one of the longest belts in Iceland. Near the foot of these basalt columns is a farm which we passed on the dirt road going in, with several horses roaming the wide-open fields.

We continued our journey, hugging the coastline now on the southside of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula, the rough waters of the Faxafloi Bay to our left. As we traveled west along the bottom of the peninsula we passed the sandy beaches of Breioavik, and the small fishing village of Arnarstapi and stopped to eat lunch in the even smaller village of Hellnar (which, at one point in its history, was a major fishing port; today, though, it has been reduced to just a cluster of homes along the coastline). The restaurant where we ate – the *Fjorushusid* – was rather unique. It was situated in an isolated cove surrounded by volcanic rock on three sides and had a wooden terrace overlooking the bay. The building was once a fishermen's storage shed and is quite small, containing only about seven or eight tables in a tightly quartered central dining area. The specialty here was a seafood soup made with freshly-caught local fish and shrimp, served with lots of homemade bread and traditional Icelandic butter. But no matter how delicious Elizabet said it was, I was tired of soup for lunch and wanted something more substantial. The only other thing they offered at the restaurant (at least on the day we were there) was a vegetable quiche. I opted for that...*and it was delicious!*

I sat with Ron, Anke and DanaMarie at a small corner table, and as I waited for my quiche I noticed the various framed drawings lining the walls of that section of the restaurant. These, too, were unique. They featured what appeared to be alien-like creatures who had the body of men but the heads of insects. What was even more bizarre was that the aliens were naked and endowed with incredibly long penises. I'm not an art connoisseur, by any means, but I felt this was an extremely bold choice for such a folksy establishment. And to be honest, I'm not sure what I found more disconcerting: the images of insect heads inside a restaurant...or staring up from my meal to see a collection of gigantic schlongs.

After lunch, we had about fifteen minutes to walk around the cove and take pictures of the scenery before heading over to the Hellnar Visitor's Center to see a small exhibit about local fishermen. From here, we backtracked briefly to visit the nearby natural harbour of Arnarstapi, which connects to Hellnar via a hiking trail. Arnarstapi was also a major fishing port at one time, and is still a busy dock area catering to private fishing and recreational vessels in the summertime. Most of the homes in the area today are summer cottages. We spent some time here hiking along the coastline, taking in the dramatic cliffs and coves abundant with seabirds – arctic tern, kittiwakes, razorbills and fulmars. The village is situated at the bottom of the low Mt. Stapafell, a tall mountain providing a beautiful backdrop to the wide-open surrounding landscape.

The Snaefellsnes Peninsula juts out into the Atlantic, the southern and northern coasts divided by a chain of mountains that run down the middle of the peninsula and culminates in the magnificent Snaefellsjokull, a glacier that towers over the westernmost point. Due to the fertile lands on the north side and the natural harbours dotting the coastline, Snaefellsnes has always attracted settlers, and is probably the most densely populated area outside of Reykjavik. The churning Arctic waters along its shores, the mystical bogs and marshes, and the majestic mountain peaks of Snaefellsnes lend itself to folklore and the stuff of legends. In Arnastapi you will find nods to local saga and fantasy. In the 1864 science fiction classic *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne, the protagonists descend into the earth through passages in the nearby Snaefellsjokull volcano. A recently erected monument at Arnastapi pays tribute to Verne's fantasy tale. And as you walk the hiking trail along the coastline you'll come across a large statue of *Bardar* – a troll-like creature – made entirely of stones. The legend of Bardar stems from an *Icelandic saga* (prose histories that became a literary phenomenon during the 13th and 14th centuries, detailing – in often exaggerated form – the events of the early settlers). Bardar – whose mother was human and father was a half-giant, half troll – is considered a guardian spirit on Snaefellsnes. Each year in this area, people come from all over the globe to tap into the mystical energies supposedly generated by Snaefellsjokull, and if you get close enough to Mt. Stapafell you can see miniature house gables painted onto the rocks in honor of the Hidden or Little People who reside on this mountain. The Snaefellsnes peninsula, it would seem, is one superstitious place!

We boarded the bus and drove a short distance to the southern tip of the peninsula to witness the Longrangar basalt cliffs near Malariff. These two sharp-edged cliffs, known also as volcano plugs, were shaped by sea erosion over the centuries, and are all that remain of an ancient volcanic crater. They rise majestically out of the ocean almost like sentinel towers, their craggy formations (and the twisting jagged coastline adjacent to them) a popular nesting spot for birds. From this area we could see the rocket-shaped outline of the Malariff lighthouse further down the coast. A large moss-covered lava field extends to the edge of the cliffs. Local farmers do not grow hay in the hills leading to Longrangar because they believe this area is inhabited by elves, and folklore in the region has it that at the bottom of these cliffs, at the base of the Pufubjar rocks, Icelandic poet Kolbeinn Joklaskald (1619 – 1688) had an encounter with the Devil and beat him in a verse-making contest. Apparently, ole Satan is not much of a rapper. *Go figure!*

We continued along the Snaefellsnes coastline for several more kilometers and stopped atop the bluffs overlooking Djupalonssandur, a bay with a long stretch of black sandy beaches. This area was once a major fishing port, but has now been abandoned and is uninhabited save for the tourists who hike through here. We followed a dirt path through some unusual lava formations – carved by sea and wind erosion – down to the section of the beach known as Dritvik. At the entrance of the beach we found several 'lifting stones': large, smooth rocks of varying weight used to determine a sailor's strength in bygone times. According to a nearby sign, the smallest weighed 23kg while the largest was a hefty 154kg. Each was named in accordance to its difficulty: from Full Strong to Weakling. In order to be eligible as an oarsman one had to be able to lift at least

the 54kg stone onto a platform. A few of us tried our hand at lifting ‘the Weakling’, but after a few attempts we decided a sprained back wasn’t the kind of souvenir we wanted to bring home from Iceland!

Scattered all over the black sand were the rusting remains of an English trawler named Epine, which shipwrecked just east of Dritvik on the night of May 13, 1948. Only five of the nineteen man crew survived, and the wreckage that washed ashore now serves as an eerie memorial to those who perished. In a strange way, the wreckage sets the tone for this isolated, somber-looking beach cove of black sand and small black rocks smashed repeatedly by the harsh tide. Surrounding it were craggy lava cliffs which seemed to part in the middle, showcasing the majestic Snaefellsjokul glacier in the distance. The sky was a mottled gray, the air cold with a biting wind, and the frigid waters crashed unmercilessly against the shoreline... not the most inviting beach setting I’ve ever witnessed. We took turns posing in groups along the shoreline, and after a brief exploration we made our way back up the hillside to the bus and proceeded to our next destination.

A short drive took us to an area known as *Holaholar*, a group of ancient volcanic craters on the southwestern edge of the peninsula. The area is named after an abandoned farm, and there is a dirt road that goes into the *Berudalur* crater. This was pretty cool. Our bus actually parked inside the (now-filled) Berudalur volcanic cone and we spent twenty minutes climbing the ridges of this crater taking photographs from all angles. It was like standing inside a mini natural amphitheatre, complete with echo. And, in keeping with local legend, the crater is believed to be inhabited by elves.

From *Holaholar*, we rounded the tip of the Snaefellsnes peninsula, reaching the Hotel Hellissandur by 5:00pm. After checking in I spent the next hour writing in my journal and trying to make a cup of instant coffee in my room. Prior to the trip, Anke suggested I purchase a water emersion heater to boil water. She told me to buy two since they have a tendency to burn-out unexpectedly. I purchased them online. The Hotel Hellissandur did not provide coffeemakers in their rooms, so this was the ideal time to test out one of my new water heaters. I placed the metal coil section into a plastic cup of water, plugging the electrical cord into a socket inside the bathroom. I then waited patiently for it to boil. And it did – a few minutes later – cooking the electrical cord in the process. It began giving off a telltale burning smell and once the white smoke appeared I quickly unplugged my now defunct emersion heater, cursing the company in China that made the darn thing. I did manage to drink a lukewarm cup of coffee, though. And for the record, the other emersion heater worked fine the following morning (I’m keeping my fingers crossed it will last a few more trips).

At 6:30pm I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for what turned out to be our ‘farewell’ dinner. Even though we still had a full day of sightseeing tomorrow, this would be our last time having dinner together as a group. I sat with Ron, Anke and DanaMarie. Joining us at our table was Gigi, Christy, Dave and Jon. The first course was a soup made with scallops, this was followed by a main course of roasted lamb (piled high) with a sweet potato mash and veggies on the side. For dessert they served some kind of

caramel creme brulee. I thought the meal was very satisfying, although some in our group were not fond of lamb and were upset they didn't offer an alternative main dish. From what I could tell during my one week stay in Iceland, if you did not enjoy fish or lamb (or soup) you better stock up on snacks...or be prepared to pay handsomely for whatever it is you *do* want to eat. Restaurants here are very expensive.

We had a great dinner conversation, sharing stories of our travels (and the funny 'travails' that often accompany them). Dave and his son both worked for the same international valve company (Dave is now retired, I think) and he told us some interesting stories about the 'exotic' places around the globe he's been to trouble-shoot problems for his company's clients. From what I gathered, Dave, Christy and their son have done quite a bit of traveling, and have seen some pretty unusual sites. In fact, once we returned to Reykjavik the three of them were spending some additional time in Iceland, having booked an aircraft tour that would take them over the lava eruptions of the Bardarbunga volcano.

Shortly after dinner (around 8:00pm), DanaMarie and I donned our heaviest clothing, bundling up warmly, and braced the cold night air for a one hour and fifteen minute stroll around the streets of Hellissandur. This was a typical seaside community of several hundred people along the northwestern coastline of the Snaefellsnes (the windier side of the peninsula, I might add!). The streets adjacent to the hotel in all directions were completely deserted. We walked block after block of neat little homes, spread out on streets just barely lit by tall thin lampposts. On many front lawns were various types of ship anchors, ornaments denoting the village's fishing past. We came across a public school and some kind of government center, but basically this tiny town resembled a spotless cookie-cutter 1950's American-style suburb. The only persons we saw during our trek were two adorable little Nordic girls who seemed just as excited as we were to encounter other people outdoors. They were riding their small bikes and came right up to us issuing greetings in Icelandic. Unfortunately, we had no way of communicating with them other than to smile and wave. We walked in a large circle around the area, reaching the edges of the coastline and then backtracked into the heart of the village. We saw not a soul anywhere except those two little girls. Not even a passing car. How unusual. But, then again, it was very cold out, and perhaps the locals were inside their warm, comfortable homes looking out their windows, saying to each other, "*Look, Freyja, more insane Americans walking around in the cold dead of night...may the elves have mercy on them!*"

I wearily reached my hotel room shortly after 9:30pm and re-packed my suitcase before going to bed. That night, I dreamt I was the only person in Iceland...

Day Eight

I awoke just before 5:00am. The wind was howling, creating weird noises that reverberated throughout the hotel. I took one look out the window and even in the dark I could tell the weather had taken a turn for the worse. A hellish storm was pounding Hellissandur. I was able to make two cups of instant coffee with my remaining water immersion heater. After shaving, showering and dressing, I wrote in my journal and watched the BBC news broadcast until it was time for breakfast. By 8:30am we made our way to the bus, the skies a more ominous gray than I'd seen all week, with intermittent gusts of strong winds and rain. When we left Hellissandur it was almost as dark as when we arrived the previous evening. *Gosh, how I missed the Florida sunshine!*

As we drove onto the main coastal road (Route 54) the storm began to worsen. At one point, the bus was gently swaying from the force of the winds blowing in from the southwest. Elizabeth reminded us to fasten our seat belts. The rain was pelting our windows so hard now I could barely make out the angry, churning waters of the Breidafjodur fjord to our left. We were traveling on the north side of the Snaefellsnes peninsula, heading to the fishing village of Stykkisholmur where many of us were booked to take what should have been a pleasant hour and a half boat trip around the tiny islands ringing the Breidafjodur Bay, but the weather was so bad, and the waters so rough, Elizabeth was in constant contact via cell phone with the boat's operators. It didn't take long for them to cancel the boat excursion. In fact, once we passed the nearby town of Rif, the winds were so fierce the police issued an advisory for all vehicles traveling along the northern coast of Snaefellsnes to detour through the interior mountains. Johannes turned right onto a one-lane road called *Frodarheidi* which cut across the peninsula back to its southern coastline. Supposedly, this detour would allow us to avoid the high winds, but the road was essentially a poorly-paved mountain pass, and as we ascended the first hill – with precipitous drops on both sides, I might add – the winds made the bus rock back and forth even harder. I took one nervous glance down the aisles of the bus and out the driver's window; a thickening fog had reduced visibility to, at best, ten meters and closing fast. I could almost envision us driving off a cliff in this blinding haze. (Um, at that moment I began praying to all the 'little people' I could think of: dwarfs, elves, fairies, Tinkerbell, the Munchkins from the Wizard of Oz, *Tom Cruise*). As usual, though, my worries were for naught. No sooner had we cleared the first set of hills than the winds died down. Eventually the rain let up, as well.

We reached the southside of the peninsula and backtracked east, stopping at a farm in Olkelda to sample the mineral water. The farm was surrounded by empty fields, and while we could see tractors, bundles of hay and a large storage building at the end of a dirt path, there were no signs of people anywhere. Johannes pulled the bus over by the side of the dirt road and checked out a faucet protruding from the ground. A small pool of reddish-looking water seeped out of the earth around the faucet. Actually, the water itself

was not red, just the interaction of the minerals with the dirt. Even still, my first impression was that perhaps this was not the safest water to drink. Our driver, though, was of a different opinion; he quickly filled a plastic container with fresh mineral water and quaffed it like it was fine wine. Before I knew it, he was handing out paper cups and were we all standing in this open field guzzling down this unknown farmer's water supply. It was like drinking a warm seltzer with a strong mineral aftertaste. A sign by the side of the road stated that the mineral spring in this area was first discovered in 1754, and has been used by the farmers here ever since. A portion of the sign even listed the mineral contents of the Olkelda water as compared to ordinary tap water. No wonder these Icelanders live such long lives, everything they consume is pure and simple, whatever 'processing' that goes on is done by Mother Nature herself. Hmmm, it made me doubt the effectiveness of my Brita filter back home.

We continued east for about ten more kilometers before turning left onto another rural road (Route 56) at Rjukandi-Vegamot. Once again, we cut across the Snaefellsnes *back* to the northside, passing isolated farmlands and mountains along the way. Shortly after 10:00am we reached the Bjarnarhofn Farm and Shark Museum nestled halfway between the towns of Grundarfjordur and Stykkisholmur, not far from the northeastern edge of the Berserkjahraun, an ancient lava field. I'm not sure what they farm at Bjarnarhofn, but the place is famous for being the region's leading producer of *hakarl* – putrid shark meat – a traditional delicacy in Iceland. I had to brace myself for this visit; they offered samples of this cured rotton shark meat to all tourists, and eating a small cubed portion of it is almost like a rite of passage. *Gulp*.

We entered the museum and were met by the star attraction: Hildibrandur Bjarnason, the man who, together with his family, owns the Bjarnarhofn farmstead. Known simply as Hildibrandur by the locals, he is often referred to as the "shark man" of Iceland. His family has been fishing in the western fjords for generations. In fact, the family's fishing boat – built in the 1860's and used throughout much of the 20th century – is now a central exhibit inside the museum. I couldn't tell how old Hildibrandur was, he'd been curing *hakarl* for decades so I guess he must have been *at least* in his late seventies, but the man had more spry than most folks half his age. He wore a flannel shirt with jeans held up by suspenders, his hair the color of snow and his constantly smiling ruddy face nearly wrinkle-free beneath a set of pronounced arching eyebrows. To be honest, he reminded me of a retired Boston cop. He did not speak English, so Elizabet interpreted for us. This jovial man welcomed us warmly to his farm, and then spoke briefly about his family's shark business and the exhibits within the museum. On display – inside what looked like a miniature hangar with parts of the floorspace covered by small stones – were many of the tools and fishing gear used by Hildibrandur's family throughout the years. There was also an extensive collection of stuffed native birds and shells, and one corner section featured early 20th century gadgets and appliances (like an ancient Singer sewing machine and a gramophone) once used inside the Bjarnason home. I thought this place was cool. I love museums, particularly these *homegrown* ones.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the museum – and what draws most tourists here – is the section dedicated to the history and explanation of processing *hakarl*, a

hardcore Viking food that has been around since the earliest settlers. The harsh landscape and the long, cold winters meant that the Norsemen who came to live in Iceland had to preserve their food in order to survive. Many traditional Nordic foods – whether from the sea or animal life – are dried, smoked or salted. But *hakarl* takes this to another level. Hildibrandur showed us a video that his family filmed at the farm explaining how putrid shark meat is made. Believe me, for the uninitiated, nothing about this delicacy – from its name to its creation – is even *remotely* pleasant.

While watching the video, Hildibrandur told us that his family no longer does any actual fishing, they simply buy their sharks from the commercial fishermen in the area. The species normally used in making *hakarl* is the Greenland shark, native to this part of the world. Sometimes sleeper sharks are used, as well. Greenland sharks are among the largest predators in the sea, they can grow to a length of 24 feet and reach weights of 2,000-3,000 pounds. They swim at depths of about 1 kilometer, and are found between the Arctic waters of Iceland and Greenland. According to Hildibrandur, he believes these enormous fish do not have much of a brain, and move through impulses running up and down their spine. He said that when he used to fish Greenland sharks, they would first hook them through the nose and then sever the spine to stop them from thrashing around on the boat. But looking at the family vessel on display inside the museum, which resembled an outsize rowboat to me, it was difficult to imagine how they could possibly haul one of these monsters out of the water without sinking themselves in the process. I mean, there were numerous pictures along the walls of the museum of gigantic Greenland sharks – fished out of the Arctic by commercial trawlers– and *all* of them had to be hoisted up on heavy cranes!

Greenland sharks have no kidneys, and contain large levels of urea and trimethylamine oxide, which are toxic to humans if consumed. In order to neutralize these compounds the shark meat must undergo a fermentation and drying process. The shark is first beheaded and gutted. It is then stored in a shallow hole and covered with sand and gravel and allowed to ferment for 6 to 12 weeks. During this fermentation process, bacteria forms within the shark's tissue which converts the toxic compounds into ammonia. Ironically, this ammonia then kills off the bacteria responsible for rotting, so the term 'rotted shark meat' to describe *hakarl* is a misnomer since the meat does not actually rot. After the fermentation has taken place the shark is cut into strips and hung to dry for a couple of months to further remove the bacteria and release the ammonia. *You can only imagine the smell!* A brown crust develops around these strips as they are drying, which is cut away before the finished product is served or packaged. And how exactly is this whitish-looking delicacy served? Well, small cubes of *hakarl* are arranged on a plate with toothpicks protruding from them, next to it is usually a plate of Icelandic black bread also cut into small squares. What makes this edible is a shot glass of clear, strong unsweetened local schnapps called Brennivin. The trick is to dip the *hakarl* into the schnapps, put it on a piece of black bread and eat it (quickly, I might add) and then down the shot glass. But hold onto your nose, because the *hakarl* has a strong ammonia smell to it.

On a table in the center of the museum, members of Hildibrandur's family set out plates of cubed *hakarl* and black bread, in front of a row of shot glasses filled with Brennivin, for us to sample. It was the moment of truth. Our group members kept staring back and forth at one another, asking the same question: "Are you gonna try it?" Poor DanaMarie had to retreat to the bus because the lingering fish-ammonia smell inside the museum was too much for her sensitive olfactory system. I decided to give it a whirl, invoking some concern from Anke and Ron. They knew that I was a recovering alcoholic (with many years of sobriety under my belt) and were worried about the schnapps. I assured them I had no intention of drinking it...but I was still going to dip this foul-smelling blob of shark meat into the liquor in order to kill the smell. I picked up one of the toothpicks, dipped the *hakarl* in the Brennivin, placed it on a tiny square of black bread and popped it into my mouth. I think I chewed twice before swallowing, the drop of schnapps burning all the way down but luckily masking the flavor, which – truth be told – was not as bad as I had envisioned. It definitely smelled worse than it tasted. Norsemen, not known for their sensitive nature, associated eating *hakarl* with strength and hardiness. *It's definitely an acquired taste.* Well-known British chef Gordon Ramsay supposedly tried a piece on his TV show and promptly vomited, and popular American chef Anthony Bourdain once stated that *hakarl* was the single most disgusting thing he'd ever eaten, this from a guy who has consumed sheep testicles and Warthog rectums! Under the circumstances, I was proud of myself for having tried it.

We spent more than an hour at the Bjarnarhofn Museum. If the weather conditions had been better we would have also toured the farm, visiting the area where the sharks undergo fermentation and the shed where the strips of meat are hung to dry. But the rain and high winds had picked up again. We thanked Hildibrandur for an interesting and very informative time, boarding our bus and continuing further east along the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. It took us less than thirty minutes before we reached the harbour village of Stykkisholmur. We arrived shortly before noon and had lunch at a very popular local restaurant called the *Narfeyrarstofa* just up the hill from the pier. Built in a converted old house, the owners include an award winning internationally-renowned chef. The bottom floor is a cafe (where we ate) and on the second floor is an elegant fine-dining restaurant called *Sjavarloftid*, acclaimed for its unique seafood dishes, with large windows that overlook the Breidafjordur Bay. Unlike many of the others in our group, who indulged in the restaurant's signature menu items, our gang decided to just have coffee and dessert, saving our appetite (and kronur) for our final meal later that evening in Reykjavik. I ordered a slice of pecan pie, Ron had the caramel apple pie and the ladies each had ice cream, all of it homemade. It was good, but not as tantalizing as the seafood plates the waiters kept parading from the kitchen to the tables of our fellow travelers. My stomach grumbled (in more ways than one) all the way back to Reykjavik!

With our boat tour of the bay cancelled, we had time to walk around and explore. Stykkisholmur is the largest town on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula, although you couldn't tell that from strolling the streets of this quaint coastal municipality. Like most Icelandic towns, the buildings tend to be spread out. Stykkisholmur is situated around a natural harbour within the Breidafjordur Bay, and protected by a basalt island called Sugandisey that lies just off the ferry terminal. It serves as a gateway into the Hvammsfjordur, a

smaller fjord to the east. Just to the south of Stykkisholmur is a small but very popular mountain called Helgafell, more commonly referred to as the Holy Mountain. Considered a mythical site by early Icelandic settlers, it was believed that the god Odin would grant three wishes to any first time climber who could ascend the mountain in silence and come back down on its eastern slope without looking back. Today, countless tourists make the pleasant climb hoping to cash in on Odin's promise.

Stykkisholmur was primarily a fishing village, but during the 1980's a sailing company converted one of the older homes into its office building, offering tours around the islands within the Breidafjordur fjord. This kicked off a transformation period, and many of the older 19th and 20th century homes within the town were renovated. In fact, the center of Stykkisholmur has become a living museum, with a very colorful collection of preserved houses (some of which are 150 years old). Others have been converted into shops, museums or restaurants.

One can also catch the Baldur ferry from Stykkisholmur for a two hour and fifteen minute ride across the Breidafjordur Bay to the Westfjord Region of Iceland. The ferry makes a stop on the island of Flatey, near the center of the bay. At only two kilometers wide, Flatey's relatively flat surface (it's meaning in Icelandic) constitutes the largest of the islands and islets within the bay. This unassuming little island of roughly 40 seasonal homes is nonetheless a big historical site in Iceland. Flatey was once a thriving cultural and commercial center, containing a monastery founded in 1172 (which no longer exists) that made it a beacon for learning and the arts. Later on, the island became a commercial shipping hub for the Danish crown in the northwest, and continued to grow well into the last century when social and economic conditions changed and people began to settle elsewhere. Supposedly, the oldest – and smallest – library in Iceland is located here. This library once housed the *Flatey Book*, the largest medieval manuscript of Icelandic sagas.

Although no longer raining, it was incredibly windy in Stykkisholmur. A group of us walked down the street from the restaurant to take photographs of the pier. The Breidafjordur Bay was filled with wave after wave of whitecaps, and we saw only one ship, a fishing trawler, braving the rough waters. There were several recommended museums in the area and I joined a few other members of our group at the *Eldfjallasafn* (also known as the Volcano Museum), the brainchild of vulcanologist Hiraldur Sigurdsson, built inside the town's former cinema. It features both art and artifacts centering around the devastating effects of volcanic eruptions. I was charged 600 kronur the moment I walked through the door by the museum's guide, the only other person inside the building besides my tour group. I thought Ron, Anke and DanaMarie were right in back of me, but they disappeared, electing to browse in a nearby gift shop, instead. We listened to the guide explain some of the exhibits and the history of the place and then followed him upstairs (to what used to be the cinema's balcony) where we saw a documentary on the Eyjafjallajokull eruption of 2010. About forty minutes later we rendezvoused with the rest of the group back at the bus.

Elizabet instructed Johannes to do a quick drive around the streets near the pier. There is a very unique church – consecrated in 1980 – that sits atop a promontory overlooking

the town. Simply called the Stykkisholmur Church, it was built in a white, modernistic design (like many of the newer churches in Iceland) and seemed so out-of-place within the old-fashioned setting of this harbour village. Our bus stopped near the pier area, at the bottom of a bluff that had a commanding view of the Breidafjodur Bay. There was a stairway leading to the top but the winds were very, very strong here and Elizabet urged us to be cautious if we used the stairs. No one in my 'gang' wanted to go up there, so I joined Denise, Christy and Jon and we began our ascent. *Holy Wind Tunnel!* It took us much longer than the amount of stairs would indicate to reach the top; the high winds were so powerful you had to grip the railing to steady yourself with each gust. At the same moment, a small group of tourists were making their way down as we were going up, and passing them proved difficult because nobody wanted to yield their piece of the railing. Once we cleared the stairs, the force of the wind was even stronger, and with nothing to hold onto we found ourselves darting to and fro uncontrollably like infants who had just learned to walk but hadn't mastered the technique of stopping yet. A black sandy path, between a section of tall swaying grass, led up another hill to the edge of the bluff. We waited until there was a momentary lull in the air current before venturing to the top (I was praying we didn't get blown off the hillside). Unfortunately, the view was not as inspiring as I had hoped, dominated by the choppy waters of the Breidafjodur Bay and several small basalt islands in the distance. *Oh, well.* We braced ourselves and made our way back to the bus.

By 1:30pm we were heading back to Reykjavik, our tour of Iceland officially over. We cut across the Snaefellsnes Peninsula for the *third* time that day, using the same Route 56. To our left, we passed the Baularvallavatn lake. At Rjukandi-Vegamot we connected with Route 54 and took that all the way to Borgarnes where we made a pit stop at a local gasoline station, availing ourselves of its giftshop and cafe. I was able to find some souvenir magnets which didn't cost me a 'handlegg og fotlegg' (er, arm and leg in Icelandic). From Borgarnes we crossed the Borgarfjodur fjord and hooked up with Route 1, taking that directly to the capital. Along the way we passed the mountains of Skardsheidi and Akrafjall, and the majestic mountain chain known as Esja. I would love to tell you more about the drive, but the skies were so gloomy with heavy rain clouds that I dozed on and off throughout much of the trip. We reached the Reykjavik Natura (the same hotel we stayed on our first two nights) just after 5:00pm. Most of us were leaving the following day so this was our last chance to see Elizabet and Johannes. Our farewell was quite a chaotic scene for me since I had left the tip money envelopes in my luggage and had to go through it like a maniac while Elizabet was going around hugging and saying 'goodbye' to everyone in the lobby. I thanked her and our driver for their wonderful service, handing them their envelopes, and then, just like that, everyone scattered to their separate rooms. It felt like such an abrupt and awkward way to end our tour.

The room I was given was much smaller than the previous one. My window faced the runway of the local airport adjacent to our hotel – only several hundred yards away – and I was able to see a private plane taking off as I entered my room. I quickly put my luggage away and freshened up before joining Ron, Anke and DanaMarie in the lobby. We had promised Edna (the waitress from *Caruso* who had taken such good care of us on

our second night in Reykjavik) that we would return to her restaurant for our final dinner in Iceland. Anke had the front desk make a reservation for us, requesting that we be seated in Edna's section. By 5:30pm we set out for the City Center, taking the trusty #19 bus in front of our hotel. Once again, we slowly made our way down Laugavegur and Bankastraeti Street, checking out some of the local shops before reaching *Caruso*. Edna – it turned out – was working in a supervisory role that evening, and when we arrived she was delighted to see us, immediately sitting us at a great table next to the windows facing Bankastraeti. She asked us if we had enjoyed our tour of Iceland, and generally fussed over us throughout our meal. To toast the tour, Ron, Anke and DanaMarie shared a bottle of South African wine. I ordered the superb rack of lamb with fries, veggies and a large side salad (accompanied by a delicious sweet vinaigrette dressing). It was a great dinner, we talked and laughed for hours. A perfect end to our stay in Iceland. When Edna asked us what we wanted for dessert, we were so stuffed we declined, but she refused to allow us to leave without sampling the house's dessert specialties, and surprised us by bringing to the table – free of charge – a creme brulee and a fruit-topped custard dish for us to share. When it was time to leave, we tipped our new waitress well and thanked Edna profusely, having our picture taken with her at the table.

On our way back to the bus station we stopped in a few stores for some last-minute shopping. DanaMarie collects Christmas tree ornaments and was looking for something unique to buy. We entered one gift shop where I fell in love with one of the songs playing over the sound system. I inquired who the artists were and the clerk informed me they were a popular local Icelandic band named Kaleo. I purchased their CD, and although it set me back thirty dollars it was a good investment: I listened to the disc in my car for three straight months when I got back home. Check them out. Kaleo. *They're awesome.*

We arrived at the Reykjavik Natura by 11:00pm. And now the hard part began. *Saying goodbye.* We had different departure times the following day; DanaMarie and I were leaving early in the morning so this was my final time with the Wilckens. It had been two years since I last traveled with Ron and Anke, and I had no idea when we would be reunited again. We all hugged (Anke tearing up), promising to take another trip together in the future. I returned to my room and re-packed, setting aside my clothes for the trip home. I went to bed shortly thereafter.

Day Nine

I seldom sleep well the night before a big trip. I had requested a 4:30am wake-up call from the front desk but was already awake before the phone rang. I went through my

usual routine: coffee, shower, and some journal-writing. By 7:15am I joined DanaMarie, Tom, Gigi, Marty, Florence, Daniel and Jessie in the lobby. Our airport shuttle was scheduled to arrive in fifteen minutes. It never showed. By 7:45am we called the telephone number of the shuttle service (which Elizabet gave us the day before). No answer. We then called Elizabet. No answer. By 8:00am anxiety set in and tempers began to flare. Our flights were scheduled to leave at 10:30am and we still had to make the long ride to the airport. I think someone at the front desk was finally able to get through to the transfer people; apparently there was a monumental mix-up, for they were not aware of a pick-up call. Some of us (me included) were quite upset.

The transfer company immediately called a local taxi service and a van pulled up to the hotel ten minutes later. We were so anxious to make it to the airport terminal on time that we formed an assembly line and literally loaded our own luggage into the back of the van and then hopped in, making it incumbent upon our poor unsuspecting driver that we needed to haul ass. I sat in front next to the driver, who was quiet for most of the trip. He kept looking up into the rearview mirror whenever someone made a comment about how late we were. Frowning, he asked me when our flight was departing. I told him 10:30am. He grinned, and said, "*Relax, you have plenty of time.*" And he wasn't kidding, either. We made it to the airport in forty minutes and discovered that it was nearly empty. There were no lines at check-in and we breezed through to our departure gate. In fact, we had almost an hour and a half to kill before boarding time. DanaMarie and I bought some coffee and snacks and sat together in the lounge until it was time to leave. She was taking a different flight than the rest of us (I don't remember what airport she was flying into, but I do know she was on her way to visit her brother before heading back to Washington, DC). She later told me that on her return trip the young man sitting next to her on the plane was none other than Shaheen, the guy her and Anke met in the hot tub in Borgarnes. *What a small world!* When they announced my flight was boarding, we said 'goodbye' and hugged one final time.

Our Icelandair flight to JFK Airport in New York City lasted only six hours. I couldn't sleep on the plane (probably because I had just woken up a few hours earlier). To pass the time, I watched a mildly amusing action movie and then saw an interesting documentary on Reykjavik's electronic music revolution of the 1990's. We landed in New York City by 12:45pm. After going through immigration and customs, I collected my luggage and bid goodbye to Tom, Gigi, Marty and Florence, telling them I would keep in touch. I headed over to the American Airlines terminal and waited until 5:00pm for my flight to Miami. Three and a half hours later I was opening the front door to my apartment. It felt great to be home. The following day I was up bright and early to feel that glorious morning sunshine on my face...*ahhhhh*.

My final thoughts on Iceland? Regardless of the gray, often gloomy weather, I really enjoyed this tour. Iceland offers such an interesting mix of bizarre and beautiful landscapes, scenery one seldom sees back home. The seemingly endless volcanoes, the hot springs and geysers, the alluvial plains, the lava fields, the glaciers...all of it makes for one truly memorable experience. Reykjavik is a fun city, and even the small villages and towns we visited were elegant in that quaint, down-with-nature sort of way. The

people were very friendly. Heck, I even enjoyed the food (for the most part). Another good thing about visiting Iceland is that it can be seen in a relatively short period of time. One can visit Reykjavik, the Southern Shore, the sights within the Golden Circle and the western peninsulas in a week. Of course, if you're into nature adventures like hiking, mountain and glacier climbing, or scuba diving, you'd probably want to plan a longer trip. The only drawback is the cost. Iceland is very expensive, which makes the one week tour so attractive, really. I would like to go back one day and explore other areas of the country, and possibly do some hiking excursions (especially to the glaciers). Overall, I loved this trip, and I think most world travelers would, too.

My tour isn't officially over until I'm finished with the journal. Now that I've completed it, I can close this chapter of my life. I would like to thank Ron, Anke and DanaMarie for their *wonderful* companionship. I so hope we can travel again in the future. It is my custom to send a copy of my journal to each of my fellow travelers as a way of showing my gratitude. After all, it's the people who make the tour, and this group was a lot of fun. So thank you Elizabet, Johannes, and the rest of the tour members for a fantastic time in Iceland. In closing, may your travels take you where you wish to go...*but, for gosh sakes, watch out for the Hidden People!*

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My tour of Iceland occurred on September 7th to September 15th, 2014)

