

# ICELANDIC INTERLUDE

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## 48 hours on Iceland

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16, 2006

It looked like the perfect location for a sci-fi movie.

We were only fifteen minutes out of Keflavik Airport, and already encountering some of the strangeness of Iceland – dark, treeless, moss-covered lava fields, stretching as far as the eye could see. Of course, this should come as no surprise, not to me anyway, who had visited the island before, and knew a little about its unique geology.

To begin with, Iceland sits astride the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It is the place where Europe and North America slowly but inexorably glide apart – albeit at the not too alarming annual rate of one or two centimeters. Iceland is also at the junction of the Greenland-Iceland-Faeroes Ridge, all in all making it a hotbed of tectonic plate activity.

In the distance, we saw steam rising from geothermal wells. A few more minutes and we would be at the Blue Lagoon, a pool of six million liters of hot, healing geothermal water, and, arguably, Iceland's most popular tourist attraction.

Even fifteen years ago, when I first came here, the Blue Lagoon was a success. Created by the run-off of a geothermal plant, it was visited

by large numbers of people who not only found the water pleurably soothing, but also had discovered that it was good for the skin. Since then, the Blue Lagoon had expanded greatly, and turned a lot more commercial.

As we entered this Icelandic Mecca, ready to – as the website put it – promote harmony between body, mind and spirit and soak away the stresses of modern life – I did so with some trepidation, fearful that much of the lagoon's original charm might be gone.

Not so. Though now partially enclosed within a modern building complex, it seemed essentially the same: a lot of people having a great time relaxing in steamy, eerily turquoise water, amidst black rocks. As we readied ourselves for an hour or two of immersion, we learned that the lagoon's millions of liters of geothermal seawater is a mix of salt and fresh water, which is channeled from a depth of 6,000 feet, and renewed every 40 hours, and kept at a temperature of between 98 and 102 degrees Fahrenheit.

Lingering in the Lagoon, I was impressed by the almost hypnotic calm that seeped into me. Could it have something to do with the



composition of the mineral-rich water, the mud or the blue-green algae? Many of the guests applied “Natural Blue Lagoon silica mud” to their faces, a procedure said to “cleanse, exfoliate and revitalize the skin, leaving it silky smooth.” Be that as it may, it gave me some good photo ops, before we showered, dressed – and took off for Reykjavik.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17

From a brochure given to us yesterday, I realize to my chagrin that we missed out on the lagoon’s famous blue cocktail, which, to those still luxuriating in the water, can be served on a floating table. Small matter. We have awakened well rested to a beautiful morning in Loftidir, a hotel next to Reykjavik’s local airfield, and are ready for some serious sightseeing.

Last evening, a walk in the capital took us to the Leif Ericsson statue and the city’s most distinguished landmark, the Hallgrim’s Church. It stands on a hill and overlooks the oldest part of Reykjavik, rising above all other buildings. Built in the 1930’s, the church is named after a 17th century poet and boasts a modern, controversial design, which is quite beautiful.

Leaving Reykjavik – the world’s most northern capital – we now drove east, heading for Thingvellir, the site of the old Icelandic legislative assembly, the Althing.

The setting proved dramatic: steep rocks and, below, Thingvallvatn, Iceland’s largest lake. As we walked around, we eventually found Lögberg (the Law Rock), from which, beginning in 930 AD, laws were proclaimed, charges made, and verdicts announced. A flagpole and a plaque marked the spot. It was from here, we learned, that the so-called “law-speaker” made his annual appearance, reciting the laws of the land from memory, before they were recorded in writing.

Next stop: the Great Geysir area of Haukadalur, some 10 miles east of Thingvellir.

A faint sulfurous smell wafted through the open car window as we pulled into the parking lot. We noticed a couple of tour buses, and then a scattering of people in a nearby field. Suddenly, plumes of steam shot straight up into the clear blue sky. Tumbling out of the car, we found ourselves in what was obviously a very active landscape, steam percolating in any number of places. The geyser that greeted us had now subsided. On the site was a circle of spectators, waiting for the



*(this page, top to bottom) On the road to Hverigerdi we saw lots of horses – the special breed that has been kept pure since the days of the Vikings.*

*Gullfoss (the Golden Fall) is Europe’s most powerful waterfall by far, and has been described as one of the world’s most spectacular sights.*

*(opposite page) Created by the run-off of a geothermal plant, the Blue Lagoon is now a mecca for everyone wishing to soak away the stresses of modern life.*

next eruption. A few minutes passed. Tension rose. Then whoosh! Up it went, and everybody was happy. These eruptions occur regularly, but the timing is not that precise, leaving room for what Roxie called “the seductiveness of unpredictability.” She was fascinated, and said she could have stayed there forever. But after a third eruption we pressed on – to the next natural phenomenon – the Gullfoss waterfall.

Gullfoss proved elusive. We had arrived at a big parking lot, but nowhere did we see the country’s most famous waterfall. We then noticed some people walking off to one end. Following them, we came to a wooden stairway, which led to a large platform below. And there it was, right in front of us, a great amphitheater of cascading water!

Down on the platform, we encountered plenty of spray, and were greeted to a magnificent rainbow, spanning the falls from one end to the other.

On the road again. Our destination was Hveragerdi, a market town not far from the coast, where we had reservations at a guesthouse named Frost og Funi (Frost & Fire). As the land turned more fertile, Icelandic horses began showing up along the roadside. Emblematic of the country, they looked sturdy, yet very graceful. I particularly noticed one horse. With its long blonde mane blowing in the wind, it seemed to exemplify the pure Nordic strain of the breed, a breed kept pure since the days of the Vikings. In vain, I waited for it to take off in an elegant tölt, the flowing four-beat gait, distinctive to the Icelandic horse.

Frost og Funi, at the outskirts of Hveragerdi, first struck us as rather spare and utilitarian, with its row of small cabins built with gray industrial siding. The setting, however, was splendid. Poised next to a river bubbling with hot springs, it opened to a vista of mountains, waterfalls, and, in the far distance, a glistening white glacier. The guesthouse abounded in bathing facilities: a large swimming pool, geothermal sauna, outdoor shower, and a couple of “hot pot” Jacuzzis – small circular tubs, perfect, according to the owner, for sitting in “on a cold, starry winter’s night.”

Stepping into the breakfast room, you could tell that this relatively new establishment was the creation of someone who loved modern art. A huge, highly unconventional painting depicting The Last Supper covered almost an entire wall, and in the hallway outside hung a relief from which protruded a coffee cup and a fried egg. Special tableware by artist Margret Jonsdottir included a ceramic plate with a melancholy Icelandic poem from the 13th century, about a man about to be executed:

*...here your life shall depart.  
Be not downcast, though rain  
falls on your balding crown.  
Maids loved you in your day,  
Some time each man shall die.*

Art also decorated the walls of all the guest rooms. Each cabin, in fact, was named after an acclaimed 20th century Icelandic artist, whose original work was inside, along with a short biographical note.

The owner and the man responsible for this was Knutur Bruun, who, not surprisingly, turned out to have spent most of his life as a prominent Reykjavik art dealer. Telling him how much Frost og Funi had grown on us, we weren’t just being polite. Roxie, at that point, was busily planning for us to come back in a few months – she felt it would be the perfect retreat for working on a creative project.

Now for dinner: in New York we had heard good things about a restaurant referred to as the “lobster shack,” located in the seaside vil-

lage of Stokkseyri, only a few miles from where we were staying. Their lobster soup, it was said, was the best in the entire country.

Whoever said so was surely right. The soup served to us had been absolutely delicious, and arrived with homemade bread and three superior dips, specialty of the house. However, the name wasn't the lobster shack, it was Fjorubordid or, in English, "At the Seashore." And certainly, this was not a shack in the sense of small and casual. It boasted three well-appointed eateries, "Heaven," "The Tent," and "The Ocean," and waited upon some 35,000 guests every year. Lots of cars and a few tour buses were parked outside, indicating the popularity of the place. Though overwhelmingly focused on lobster – 12 tons is served annually – Fjorubordid keeps a few other dishes on the menu, such as lamb, beef carpaccio, and chicken nuggets with chips.

As for us, we sat – literally and figuratively – in "Heaven," gorging ourselves on Lobster grilled in garlic butter.

#### FRIDAY, 18 AUGUST

Late last evening, before going to bed, we had taken a leisurely dip in one of the hot pots. Though it was not a starry cold winter's night, we could feel the magic. Plumes of white steam wafted across the darkened river, and in the far distance rose the mountain with the glacier.

This was our last day in Iceland. Our flight out of Keflavik was at 5 PM, which meant that there would be time for a leisurely drive back and – as if we hadn't had enough of healing waters – a short stop at the Laugar Health & Spa resort, just outside Reykjavik.

Laugar came highly recommended. Covering some 60,000 square feet, it is notably large-scale, and includes amenities not normally found in spas, such as botanical gardens, a family zoo, and an activity park. Most remarkable was the gym. Not only is it top notch in terms of state-of-the-art fitness equipment, it is the second largest of its kind in all Europe, which, considering that this is a country of about 300,000 inhabitants, is impressive indeed.

Everything about Laugar felt new and high tech, even the way you gained entrance by placing your eye in front of a machine for pupil identification. Taking a quick tour through the various facilities, we noted that there were seven saunas and steam rooms, each one offering a different theme, or a different "aquatic haven" as Laugar put it. These themes included sounds of nature and various aromas. The café, not surprisingly, offered a large selection of protein drinks, along with freshly made fruit and vegetable juices. The children's facilities were truly impressive – playroom, gymnasium, even a cinema – just what one would expect in child-friendly Scandinavia.

Driving to Keflavik, we talked about how young and fresh Iceland had seemed to us. Viking heritage notwithstanding, nothing appeared to be more than a hundred years old. Even the churches looked young. The art was all modern and vigorous, unconnected, it seemed, to centuries past. For all we knew, it sprung – like one of those geysers – directly out of the land.

A terrorist plot to down airplanes had just been unraveled in London, and every airport in Europe and the US was on high alert. For us it meant an extra hour of waiting, which we spent browsing at a newsstand. Leafing through some Icelandic books, I was reminded of my previous visit to Iceland, during which I had had the luck to meet briefly with Haldor Laxness, Iceland's Nobel Laureate in literature. Then, as now, I was struck by how extraordinary it was that a language spoken by less than half a million people should have such literary distinction. I recalled a comment made by a young Icelander at the time. "In this country," he said, "there's no gift you can give more precious than a book." ■■

*(this page, clockwise) To the South, just below the site of the old Icelandic legislative assembly, lies Thinvallvatn, the country's largest lake.*

*The children's playroom at Laugar, the Health and Spa Resort just outside Reykjavik.*

*The lobster bisque at Fjorubordid (At the Seashore) was absolutely delicious – said to be the best in the entire country.*

*(opposite page) "Last Supper for breakfast." The breakfast room at Frost & Fire.*

