

Our Iceland Journey

by Lorraine Wieskamp, edited

Our journey to Iceland is underway. Our flight to Reykjavik had us arriving on a very bleak, overcast day. After breakfast and a brief nap we met our group for lunch and a tour of Old Town. This included a stop at the Hallgrímskirkja Lutheran Cathedral with its 210-foot tower with an incredible pipe organ inside. We then proceeded to the National Museum for a tour and later, headed to our ship for boarding. **And we are constantly reminded that we are not on a “cruise” but on an “expedition”!**

Day 2 - Our first zodiac ride and “wet” landing! A wet landing is when you actually climb off the zodiacs into the water of anything from about six inches to 12 inches deep. Our wetsuits and mud boots definitely were essential! Our destination was Flatey, one of the largest of the thousands of islands in Breidafjörður, and an important trading post during the Middle Ages. A monastery, founded in 1172, made Flatey the center of culture and education in Iceland until the middle of the 19th century. Even after it was moved to Helgafell the cultural influence of Flatey did not diminish. On Flatey we trekked to the old Freezer House for an entertaining musical performance by a Russian musician. He tells the story of Iceland through ballads and stories of love, tragedy, sadness, and redemption in a harsh and hostile climate. A beautiful church built in 1926 features a wonderful mural by the Spanish artist Baltasar. The hamlet which developed on the island is mostly intact. The remaining houses have been renovated and are occupied by their owners and families during the summer. Hiking anywhere on Flatey can be quite hazardous – there are nesting Arctic Terns – they nest in the ground and are very protective of their nests, dive bombing you if you get too close. A few of our groups experienced their dive bombing first hand!

Now sailing north, we pass the famous Latrabjarg cliffs. Latrabjarg is a 14km long, spectacular sheer cliff on the northern coastline of Iceland’s second largest bay, Breidafjörður. Bjargtangar, in the westernmost part of Iceland, is Europe’s largest bird cliff. At 14km long and up to 440m high, it provides nesting sites for millions of birds including approximately 40% of the world’s population of razorbills. For centuries, brave men roped down the cliffs during breeding season to collect eggs, which were a regular part of their diet, along with the birds themselves. At times as many as 40,000 eggs and 36,000 birds were taken.

Day 3 - Dynjandi Waterfall and Vigur Island. Dynjandi, meaning “thunderous or resounding” is an impressive waterfall located deep in the remote Westfjords of Iceland. It is also known as Fallofs, the jewel of the Westfjords as it cascades some 100 Mts (330 ft) looking exactly like a bridal veil. On the top, it is 30m (90+ ft) wide and is 30km long and widens up to 60m (180+ ft) at the bottom. It has been preserved as a natural monument since 1981. The fjord is 30km long and 5-10km wide and is considered one

of the biggest fjords in the Westfjords. Once again, we had to dodge diving/nesting birds.

Next up – Vigur Island. The zodiac crossing was very, very choppy with quite a swell – and the return trip even more so. We weren't wearing our wetsuits and got soaked, especially our behinds from sitting on the wet sides of the zodiac. Vigur is the second largest island of the Isafjordur Bay at about 2km long and 400m wide. The single-family inhabiting the island bases its livelihood on the fisheries, the collection of eggs, eiderdown, bird catching puffins which are quite destructive, and farming. We were given a very interesting talk/demo on the raising of the eider ducks, the collection of the eiderdown, its' cleaning and processing. The cleaned, ready to be sold product is absolutely the softest thing you will ever touch! We then walked back along the path to a little cafe for refreshments, courtesy of the island owners. Getting there brought more attacks from the arctic terns – this time I got “bombed” and while Gene was cleaning my jacket, he too got “bombed.” The island also has a large colony of puffins, which are also “harvested” and provide food for the islanders. The island also has the only surviving windmill.

Day 4 Isafjordur, Westfjords the Valagil Hike and Arctic Fox Center. Isafjordur, meaning ice fjord, is a town in the northwest of Iceland with a population of about 2,600. The harbor serves ferries to nearby settlements as well as larger cruise ships. Tourism is a growing industry. Despite its isolation and small population, it has a school of music, a hospital, and a cultural center. Just outside the town, is an Arctic Fox Museum, where there are two young foxes. I was amazed at how small the foxes are, and being raised in captivity they were quite friendly.

Valgil is a spectacular ravine, complete with a mighty waterfall made from layer upon layer of ancient lava. Avalanches are a constant hazard in the winter and much of the road and villages along the way have steel barriers to protect the inhabitants.

Early in the afternoon, after sailing from Isafjordur, we had our first sightings of whales – hard, at least for me, to capture them in a photo as they breached, but I did try!

Later in the day, we went for a zodiac ride around a very quiet and beautiful area. We watched puffins diving for food and sometimes coming up with too much in their mouths to get airborne. We also saw seals as well as many, many other birds.

Day 5 - Akureyri & Siglufjordur

Akureyri is the second city of Iceland. It was the city from where we took a long bus ride to eventually go horseback riding – no photos though. We were too busy trying to stay on our horses and keep them under control.

Back in town, later in the day, we were taken to an old herring processing factory no longer in production. There we were entertained by the “Herring Ladies” and then toured the old, restored factory. On the way back to our ship, we passed a quaint old

house with a grass roof.

Our Next Destination— We visited the unforgettable Godafoss – or Waterfall of the Gods and Lake Myvatn – which is at the center of one of the most geologically active and stunningly beautiful areas in Iceland. Bubbling mud pools, lunaresque volcanic craters, newborn lava fields and grassy shoals teeming with waterfowl are among the attractions of this area. The lake was declared a national conservation area in 1974. Its name means “Midge Lake” after the hordes of gnats that breed in the shallow waters. The pesky insects – perfect food to fish – support the best trout and salmon fishing in Iceland. There are also more species of duck here than anywhere in Europe, 15 in all. Heavy volcanic activity over the last few thousand years accounts for the region’s extraordinary landforms and geology. Dimmuborgir, on the east side of the lake, is a badlands of lava pillars, some of which reach 65 feet in height. One of the most bizarre attractions in the region are the mud pits of Hverarond, which are so hot that they actually boil. Another unforgettable sight near Myvatn is Eldhraun (“fire lava”), a barren lava field where the Apollo 11 crew came in the late 60s to train for their impending moonwalks.

At Hverarond, we saw more incredible, bizarre bubbling mud pools. This is a high-temperature geothermal area with fumaroles and mud pots. At a depth of 1000m, the temperature is above 200 degrees celsius (392 degrees fahrenheit) Along with the steam comes fumarole gas, such as hydrogen sulfide which is responsible for the characteristic hot spring smell in these areas. The hot springs produce considerable sulfur deposits.

Day 8 – Exploring Northeast Iceland – Seyiusfhiriy

Saydisfjordur is a town of 665 people in the northeast of Iceland nestled amongst towering cliffs. Though the modern town was founded in the 19th century, the area itself has been inhabited since the earliest days of the 9th century. Like many Icelandic ports, it once relied on fisheries to support its economy, but the emphasis has now shifted to tourism. The port was significant as a base for allied forces during World War II and served as a landfall site for the first telegraph cable to connect to Europe in 1906. Today it still features many of the beautiful wooden buildings from the town’s earliest days. The wild countryside surrounding the town is home to grazing sheep and numerous shorebirds, while the cliffs at the entrance to the fjord roar with the calls of the auks, kittiwakes, and fulmars.

Day 9 – Djupivogur

Djupivogur (Deep Harbor) is one of the best natural harbors on the southeast coast of Iceland, giving the town a long history of trading and fishing since 1589. Langubud, the oldest house in Djupivogur, is made of logs and was originally built in 1790.

Vatnajokull (Lake Glacier) is the largest glacier in Iceland, located in the southeast of the island covers more than 8% of the country. With a size of 8,100 km

(5034 miles), it is also the largest glacier in Europe in volume and the second largest (after Austfonna on Nordaustlandet, Svalbard) in area. The average thickness of the ice is 1200 feet, with a maximum thickness of 3,000 feet. Iceland's highest mountain, Oraefajokull (2,100m) is located in the southern periphery of Vatnajokull, near Skafafell National Park. It is classified as an ice cap glacier. Under the glacier, as under many of the glaciers of Iceland, there are several valances. The volcanic lakes, Grimscotn for example, were the sources of a large glacier run in 1996. The volcano under these lakes also caused a considerable but short eruption at the beginning of November 2004. Vajnajokull has been shrinking for some years now, possibly because of climatic changes and recent volcanic activity.

Jokulsarlon (Glacier River Lagoon), with a small river mouth flowing into the ocean, is full of icebergs that have calved from the nearby glacier. This is where we took our amphibious vehicle (duck boat) into the lake itself, admiring the deep blue and sediment striated ice up close.

Day 10 – Westmann Islands

Heimaey is the largest island (13.4 km – 8.3 miles) in the Vestmannaeyiar (Westmann Islands – named after Irish slaves, or “West Men), approximately 4 nautical miles off the south coast of Iceland. It is the one island in Vestmannaeyiar that is populated, currently numbering around 4,500 inhabitants. On 23 January 1973, a volcanic eruption of the mountain Eldfell began on Heimaey. The encroaching lava flow threatened to destroy the harbor that was the main source of livelihood for most of the town. However, by spraying the lava constantly with cold seawater some of it solidified and diverted the rest, saving the harbor from destruction.

Surtsey was formed in a volcanic eruption that began 130 meters below sea level, and reached the surface on 14 November 1963, although the eruption may have started a few days earlier. It lasted until 5 June 1967, when the island reached the maximum size of 2.7 km. The undersea vents that produced Surtsey are part of the Vestmannaeyiar submarine volcanic system, part of the Mid-Atlantic Range. The new island was named after the first giant Surtr from Norse mythology. It was intensively studied by volcanologists during its creation and, since the end of the eruption, has been of great interest to botanists and biologists as life has gradually colonized the originally barren island. Very few people are allowed on the island and those for purely scientific studies.

This segment of the journey was our last “expedition.” It certainly was unlike any cruise we’ve ever taken. We had a wonderful time, and would not hesitate to go on another such voyage!