

# Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

North Atlantic: a fascinating journey through  
the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland



## Chapter 20

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## The Faroe Islands: unknown jewels

When we decided to travel to the [Faroe Islands](#), we were aware that we couldn't count on good weather conditions at all. Ironically, the voucher for the only accommodation we booked ahead arrived wet and hardly readable at our address in Switzerland. We decided to spend a fortnight, in the hope to get at least some days with reasonable weather.

The 18 islands of the Faroese Group lay in the North Atlantic, surrounded by the Gulf Stream, about halfway between Scotland and Iceland. Their total landmass measures almost 1'400 km<sup>2</sup> and the population of 49'000 inhabitants spreads over 17 of these islands, with the majority (19'500) living in Torshavn. An additional 20'000 Faroese live in Denmark.

The archipelago is roughly 113 km long and 75km wide. The volcanic islands are separated by very narrow sounds and fjords and no point in the Faroese is further than 5 km from the sea. By consulting several guide-books, three words crystallized as typical for the climate: wild wet and windy! Although in winter the average temperature is a moderate 3°C thanks to the Gulf Stream, in summer the average is no higher than 11°C.



As far as historians believe, Celtic monks settled the uninhabited islands in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Around 800 AD the first Vikings; Norse farmers arrived. Their independence was overthrown by the often forceful imposition of Christianity and in its wake the territory became part of the Kingdom of Norway in 1035. In 1380 Norway fell to Denmark and only in 1814 the Danish-Norwegian union terminated and Norway came under the rule of the King of Sweden, while the Faroe Islands together with Iceland and Greenland remained possessions of Denmark. Apart from a short period of English occupation during WWII, the Faroese remained with Denmark and today enjoy the status of a self-governing community within the Kingdom. The currency is the Danish Krona with notes in Danish and Faroese designs.

## First impressions of Torshavn

Thirty hours after leaving Hanstholm in Denmark, we arrived in the [Faroe Islands](#) on July 15<sup>th</sup> 2009 on board the big car-ferry Norröna that feels more like a cruise liner. We disembarked with our car and were right in the capital [Torshavn](#) where we soon found our B&B overlooking town. We got a friendly welcome and a lucky start as the fog lifted just after our arrival. Torshavn is superbly situated on a hillside above the harbour, so if weather allows, most “city folks” have a nice view.

As Brigitte was afraid this might be our only slot of good weather and that a diluvia could come any time, we had to rush down to explore Torshavn. There was still time before dinner and lots again afterwards, as it remained bright almost all night. Eye-catching were the modern snug and colourful houses. Some old traditional houses, as well as some fancy new ones had a grass roof, which means they had turf (bricks) on their roof, on which grass and moss was growing.

The government quarters Lögting consist of traditional restored buildings and almost all of them have a grass roof. For the small size of this town, we were surprised how much traffic was constantly winding through the small lanes.

Torshavn has many restaurants and lots of them are rather expensive. After looking at various menu cards, we were surprised how full those places were. There was a Sushi Bar with a dinner platter that cost 750 DKK (~100 Euros) but the waiter regretfully informed us that they are already fully booked that Wednesday night... We could still find another place where we got excellent pizza and pasta for around 100 DKK. The Faroe Islands are certainly not a cheap destination but not only prices, also standards are very high. This applies to everything including accommodation and meals.

The price somehow just reflects the high living standard the Faroese people enjoy, despite having gone through economical crisis during the nineties. Although sheep farming can be seen everywhere when driving around the islands, the Faroese economy is totally depending on fishing and fish farming (95% of exports and 50% of GDP). When Denmark joined the EU the Faroese refused to follow to protect their 200 mile exclusive fisheries zone from EU competition.

## Birds on Mykines Island

On our second day, the sun was shining again and there was no sign of a diluvia as yet. So we decided to visit the island of Mykines, famous for its bird colonies. First we chose the scenic route over the mountain road that allowed first spectacular views of the layer cake hills that are so typical for the Faroese Islands. Many surrounding islands could be seen in the blue sea.

We had to take the sub-sea tunnel that connects the islands of Streymoy and Vágur. On the other side, there was again a nice scenic drive to the harbour at Sørvágur. Here we parked our car and unloaded the few things we needed on this traffic free island. The passenger-ferry was more or less a speed-boat that sailed past most spectacular cliffs and tall rock formations.

The harbour of [Mykines](#) was beneath a high rock face where many birds were nesting, filling the air with a strong smell and loud screams. We climbed up the steep stairs and checked in to the basic hostel. The village has a few dozen colourful houses but only 5 permanent residents. Now it was not that quiet however, as many local families spent their holidays in inherited houses. Those were very well maintained and many had grass growing on the roof. The site of the village is on a green hill overlooking the west coast, which at the same time is also the most westerly point in the Faroese. Most of the few tourists come here for a day trip only, but as we stayed overnight, we didn't go unnoticed and many of the 'locals' stopped to talk to us.



We didn't need to go far to see the first Puffins, as they like to have their burrows in the grass on top of high cliffs behind the village. These cute birds are not very shy and usually let people approach to within a few metres before they fly away. This makes them easy preys and they are supplementing the nutrition of the Faroese people for centuries. Even small children can catch them. The Puffins with their colourful beaks are very cute to watch and the favourite of tourists. There are also many other sea birds nesting on Mykines: storm petrels, northern gannets, great skuas, kittiwakes and others of the seagull family just to mention the most common ones but there are actually more than 30 species.

It was mystical to see how quick fog could appear out of nowhere and then suddenly disappear again. We could observe this nature-phenomena several times and it was just magical but then we were also glad we didn't need to experience the very thick fog in which you cannot even see your shoes.

For such a sparsely populated island, Mykines is very well connected by public transport. Obviously, there is no scheduled bus but apart from the boat there are also scheduled helicopter flights, as to all Faroese islands. Due to government subsidies they are rather cheap. The only trouble is: if the sea is too rough, the boat cannot safely go ashore and if there is fog the helicopter cannot land.

After dinner we hiked up the steep grass slope to the bird cliffs again. The sun had set and we admired a very colourful sky until well past midnight. We stood above a sea of fog and could only hear how the waves crushed on the cliffs far below us but we never saw the sea. Before getting real dark, the sky got brighter again.



On the next morning, the weather was just perfect and the locals talked about tropical temperatures, now as they reached respectable 18 °C. This might not last and Brigitte wanted to discover as much as possible before the diluvia. We raised early visiting Puffins again before breakfast. Surely we "couldn't" stay any longer, so we took the morning ferry back to Sørvágur in order to continue sight-seeing on **Vágur Island**. We appreciated that the captain sailed past the sea stacks on the other side this time, which afforded different spectacular views of them again.



## Visiting Vagar and Streymoy

Back in the car, we explored [Vagar's](#) villages of Bøur and Miðvágur, both with colourful neat houses. After crossing the sub-sea tunnel to [Streymoy](#) again, we paid the road-toll on a nearby petrol station. There are two such tunnels and the fee for both crossings has to be paid, just as the fee for car-ferries only on the way back.



Along the eastern Sund Sundini we drove from Hvalvik into the green valley of Saksunurdalur. The drive along a small river on a newly tarred one-lane road was already very rewarding. At its northern end we found the tiny village Saksun. The wooden houses have white window frames and sometimes a white painted basement. According to old tradition the walls are blackened with tar that serves as coat and paint at the same time. A grass roof completes the contrasty picture. The grass on the hills was of the intense green that reminded us of young rice fields. Saksun's church was outside the village guarding over a beautiful lagoon. On its mouth there was a narrow exit to the sea, which looked almost like a river would flow through a gorge burrowing its way through a sandbar. However it was a tidal lagoon and at high tide the bright green algae that looked so colourful now, might disappear.

Back in Hvalvik we took the next turn north and followed the coastline along the sound which offered good views to Eysturoy Island only a few hundred metres away. Here, fog started to come in again but it hung on the surrounding hills, sometimes letting the sun still through which gave our drive a mystical touch. At the end of the road lies Tjørnuvik. The village is nicely sitting between intensely green mountains and a black sand beach. Here the houses are rather modern but people still hang their fish out to dry (perfuming the air). To gain some hay, they had to mow the steep mountain slopes and now the grass was drying on special racks just as we know it from the Swiss Alps (smells nice!).

## Five days on Suðuroy

Now we headed on the quickest way south to Torshavn. Here we boarded the car-ferry Smyril for the two hour sailing to Tvøroyri on the country's southernmost **island [Suðuroy](#)**. We couldn't believe how many other cars and people lined up for this trip to an island with only 4'600 inhabitants. We were already surprised how big this boat is. It can float up to 200 cars but still sails three to four times daily. The vessel is 135 metres long and 20 metres wide and has several lounges, a big restaurant and a kiosk selling the ever so popular soft ice.

The ride was very calm but in the meantime it looked as if the diluvia would build up. That meant we were able to take some very mystical pictures instead of seeing the famous rock-islands of Litla Dimun and Stora Dimun along the way.

We booked in to a very comfortable guesthouse that set us back 500 DKK a night (65 Euros). That's about the standard price we paid for budget accommodation but the standard is really above budget standard. What we learned now, was that you shouldn't just arrive without reservation in the Faroese. Many guesthouses don't have a reception and the caretaker will only be there to meet arriving guests. This time we were lucky, as a local family that arrived with the same boat had booked a room and the owner was there to show them in. On the next day it rained a bit, too little for a diluvia but it was wet and windy at least. So we bought some of the good bread that is available everywhere on the Faroese islands and stayed inside. Then we unpacked our Italian Espresso



machine and enjoyed a tasty coffee. As soon as the guesthouse owner saw this, he wanted to buy this coffee machine, but we wouldn't let it go.

Already the next afternoon it cleared up and we immediately pulled up our socks and set off to explore Suðuroy's north. There were some challenges added to the road; we had to pass the first two unlit one-lane tunnels – the first of many more to come. We were often impressed by the high standard of the Faroese road network and it's even more impressive how villages with barely more than a handful of people were made accessible by road-tunnels.

Danes apparently made jokes about how the Faroese wanted to make an Emmental cheese of their islands on the peak of their economic rise. Their ambitions to drill so many tunnels brought them close to bankruptcy after an economic downturn. As soon as the worst was over, they continued drilling, making more tiny villages accessible. Ironically there was not only one case where the last inhabitants moved away as soon as the relocation-lorry was able to move through the new tunnel. On Kalsoy there is even one tunnel built only to drive sheep to the other side of a mountain for grazing!

As there is very little traffic, it is understandable that even 3 km long tunnels are usually built with one lane only. Traffic in one direction has priority and oncoming cars have to wait in passing-bays. The surface of the rock is neither smoothed nor painted, so they are really pitch black holes. Often they are dead straight so you see at least the light at the end of the tunnel if there is no other car approaching. If there is, it is very hard to judge how close it is, even locals get caught and then you either wait for ages in a passing bay or you might have to reverse in the dark hole. In most tunnels we didn't even meet another vehicle, but tourists on bicycles are definitely discouraged from using any.

Sandvik was the village at the end of this road and the name explains; it's on a sandy bay. Behind the village we hiked to a view point to get a glimpse of Glyvraberg, a sea-stack beneath the cliffs. There were also some more points where we could access the west coast and later it got even sunny. So Brigitte proposed we could take advantage and drive to the southern part of Suðuroy as well. Not a problem, from north to south it is only 53 km. To save time we had a fast-food lunch; we went to the next petrol station and had some French hot dogs plus a soft ice, as all the locals.

## High cliffs in southern Suðuroy

Now we continued over a small passroad hoping to catch some good views of the steep cliffs but the fog hung on to the top and we were glad to find at least the road in front of the car. As we descended to Sumba we drove out of the blanket and by the time we visited the lighthouse at Akraberg, we had again unlimited views out to the sea.

As common as the bright green grass on the hills, is also the sheep browsing on it. Faroese sheep are very sturdy and they grow very thick wool which protects them in the harsh climate. We heard that if they get caught by snow the whole flock will gather at the same sheltered point. Their body heat will melt the snow on their wool and create an ice cap above them, so they can survive up to two weeks under the snow cave. We have mainly seen sheep that hadn't been sheared and now in summer, they lost the old fur as new thick wool grew. The old wool hung shaggy on the animals, making them look like sheep with dread locks! Also long-haired goats could often be seen grazing along (funky) sheep.



As the sun persisted we re-visited those parts of Suðuroy we hadn't seen the day before. This time we took the coastal road to Vágur the second largest village. It offered beautiful views to the surroundings: from fish farms in the bay to the peaks of the mountains. Almost each time we stopped some birds were flying off. They were either Whimbrel who make a chortling noise or Oystercatchers of which we didn't know that they like to be on the grass high above the sea. There was also thick moss and tiny flowers, lots of grey or brown rocks (theoleiitic) basalt and lava.

Thanks to a tip from Vágur's Tourist Information we found a steep road to a fantastic look-out over the Kamarit Cliffs.

Those are just as impressive as the famous Beinisvørð Cliffs towering 476m above the sea. Even though the wind wasn't very strong, we hardly trusted to stick our noses out over the abyss as there were so many cracks along the rim. Imagine us stretching out the camera, closing the eyes, push with the finger and check what picture was captured... But no! We didn't want to stretch out on the belly because there was so much sheep shit everywhere.

We didn't see enough yet, we still wanted to see more of those steep cliffs. So we took once more the mountain road that had been covered in thick fog the other day. This time visibility was much better but there was still a blanket holding on to the highest peaks but at least we could catch a glimpse of those unbelievably high, almost vertically dropping Beinivørð Cliffs.

On our way back we made side trips; first to the lonely bay at Vikarfjorður and another one over a pass to Famjin, a beautiful little West coast village famous for colourful sunsets. We stopped at a sign praising that village because it had won a "Clean and Green" award in 2006. For us this was beyond belief! We have never seen a country cleaner, greener and tidier than the unspoilt Faroese Islands (sorry New Zealand). How could they distinguish one spot that should be even better than another? It was as good as any other!

Apart from seeing another very pretty village on a superb location, we got the best Waffles we have had north of Belgium. And after the wonderful smell came also nice coffee and even a small bill.

On our last day on Suðuroy, we just walked around Tvøroyri, which is with 1'800 inhabitants the biggest village on the island. There is a big church that was built in Norway and shipped over in pieces. It was donated by a local merchant family. Behind that church and also in many other places, we saw basalt columns and out of town farmers could be seen cutting grass and putting it on wooden racks. Then they covered it with nets which we believe was to prevent the wind from blowing the hay away.

On the opposite side of the fjord was the ferry landing and the sea looked very quiet to us. But when we watched the big ferry Smyril leaving the fjord, we were puzzled to see how much she bobbed up and down in the waves. Luckily, the next morning when we took the same boat back to Torshavn, it was much calmer even though it was rainy. Heinz slept through the entire journey as he had taken two sea-sickness pills, just in case.

## Touring around Eysturoy

From the ferry we drove to [Eysturoy Island](#) in the Northeast. On the way we stopped at the village of Eiði. Right behind are two famous sea stacks with a legend attached to them.

As we checked in to our (reserved) guesthouse, the [Gjaargardur](#) in **Gjógv**, we were shown to our "Viking style alcove". Hugh, that was tiny! Every Japanese Capsule Hotel Box is bigger. It consisted of a double mattress squeezed in between a wall and the roof side with a window in your face (in the roof) to see the midnight sun. There was no space at all to stand up and only the one next to the sliding door of that pigeonry could sit up.

Well... that's what you get if you can't just come and see the room first. In stark contrast to this tiny private "double-coffin" the common rooms were lavishly generous. Brigitte couldn't understand why the architect hadn't given 2 metres of that space to the "rooms". Well she was moaning a lot and watched in disbelief how mainly older couples moved into the other pigeonries – if at least everyone would have gotten one for himself. You get what you pay for and of course we didn't want to pay for two "rooms" or double for the big luxury rooms.

To smoothen the temper the restaurant served decent food. The place was heated much more than necessary as everywhere in the country. We were told that no one ever switches the heater off, not even in a warm summer as this one. The Faroese moan about high costs for heating but wherever we stayed it was normally too warm in the house. Brigitte wondered whether she suddenly suffered hot rushes with every cup of coffee even though she only wore a singlet indoors. Also Heinz unzipped his removable trousers legs as soon as we went through a Faroese door.

The drive out to Gjógv is quite spectacular as well as the setting of the small village. It sits at a cleft that functions as their natural harbour. Some bird cliffs are within walking distance, though with not that many Puffins or other birds.

Normally it's very quiet in Gjógv except on days when cruise liners arrive in Torshavn 70 km away. Then the entire boat load is being bussed up here and then the business conscious locals sell postcards at 2 Euros and overpriced microwave Waffles.





From here we explored all of the island of Eysturoy during the next two days. Most hills rise to between 500 – 800 Metres and appear like almost Alpine mountains. The road leads regularly over very spectacular pass roads from the shores of one fjord to another. The intense green of the mountain slopes was the typical colour of all islands and also here sheep were grazing everywhere.

There were not many villages in the fjordlands but all were very neat, colourful and clean. To us, the most appealing villages were Funnigur, Funnigsfjørður, Elduvík and Hellur. At the south-eastern end of Eysturoy, some villages seemed to melt together and the landscape was rather flat. In the very south near Aeduvik, we could see over to Nolsoy Island and even to Torshavn's surroundings. There were only a few wind-generators but with so much wind in abundance, one would think this is a good idea. However in the Faroese Islands the wind is often too strong and therefore wind-generators have to be switched off regularly. Even construction-site containers have to be tied to heavy concrete foundations; otherwise the wind would blow them away.

During our stay on Eysturoy the annual rock festival was held (near Gøtugjógv), which was simply called: G! As in the rest of the world, it's probably more about getting drunk than about music, although they try to present international singers each year. When we passed there for the first time, a big tent city popped up but when we passed again after it was over, we saw mainly rubbish and the last few drunks laying around or sliding on their belly down on cars front screens.

## Impressive Northern Islands

On July 24, 2009 we took the country's second sub-sea tunnel to Klaksvík on Bordoy Island. With ~4'600 inhabitants it's the Faroese' second largest town and to us it was an ideal base to explore the [north-eastern islands](#). There are two fjords that would almost join but Klaksvík sits in the middle and stretches out to both hillsides of the northern fjord which is used as their harbour. We were glad that the tourist board started operating a Youth Hostel as otherwise there was only one expensive hotel. This hostel was quite basic and a bit of a "Villa Kunterbunt or Villa Villekulla" with a young receptionist that run off to the G! Festival, abandoning her guests of which some didn't even manage to get keys to their pre-paid room...



At first we intended to visit the neighbouring island Kalsoy, but whilst waiting for the ferry Brigitte read in the travel guide about a great hike up to the light house. Heinz figured out that we wouldn't have enough time to catch the last ferry back. So we decided to postpone this trip at the moment when we were just due to board the ferry.

Instead we opted to visit the island of Viðoy first. To get there, we had to pass two unlit single lane tunnels. In contrast to all other Faroese single-lane tunnels we had used, those two had to cope with lots of traffic. During the two times two kilometres crossings, we had to wait more than twenty times in the passing bays and in one case even a truck had to reverse because there was too much oncoming traffic to fit into one bay. Those were two horror tunnels. Later the locals told us that these were among the first tunnels drilled in the

Faroese Islands and nobody expected traffic to increase so much when they were constructed in 1965. Anyway; there was light at the end of the tunnel and at the end of the road we were rewarded with the very beautiful village Viðareiði. As most other villages, it looked as if it was bigger than the official number of inhabitants suggested. We often got the impression that there are many empty houses but they were never neglected. The explanation we got was that many Faroese stay in Torshavn during the week to work and go back to their first residence during weekends only.

Also here we got to chat to some locals, as everywhere. People were very open for a small talk and their command of English was in general excellent, which we appreciated very much. Unfortunately we know Faroese and their second language Danish, only by name. Although we had memorized the sentence: "do you speak English" in Faroese – we never managed to pronounce it the way the locals understood and they immediately asked in good English: "sorry, what do you mean? Can you speak English?" Well, well, we got by!

From Viðareiði we walked in different directions and had vast views eastwards to Fugloy and Svínoy islands. Westwards we saw the islands Borðoy, Kunoy and Kalsoy. Hey; what was that? On the furthest island, the highest of the three, fog had built up and the light-house we had initially intended to visit was wrapped. Well then, we were very lucky not to go today!

Because the weather was so nice everywhere else still, we also wanted to visit the abandoned settlement of Múli. It is only about two kilometres away on the neighbouring island of Borðoy, just across the sound. To get there, we had to drive 20 km on the road, as we had to drive halfway down the island before we could cross over. Most of the Faroese Islands are situated very close to each other and it was easy to build bridges to inter-connect them.

The same applied to Kunoy, the island we visited next. To get to the only settlement at the west-coast we had to cross a 3km long unlit tunnel, which we had all to ourselves. The village was also called Kunoy and it had a spectacular setting with amphitheatre-like mountains as a backdrop. As we walked out from the village, we saw a ram literally rammed up with its horns in the fence. As we couldn't help the poor bugger, we knocked on the next farmer's house and explained the dilemma – this time in sign language as this old couple didn't speak English. Brigitte mounted "horns" and went down to the fence... just to show... to make things clear(er) Heinz simply showed a picture on our digital camera...

## Awesome views

Early next morning, we definitely attempted the journey out to Kallur light house, after being told that visibility was as good as it can be, which is only happening a few times every year. And so it was! We got on the car-ferry to Kalsoy and headed to the tiny village Trøllanes on its northern tip. Although it is a popular hike that was enjoyed by at least 10 other people that day – locals and tourists alike, there was neither a walking track nor any sign. We had to make our own way up through steep sheep meadows. It took almost one hour until we finally spied the light-house in the distance and were assured of being "on the right track". It is one of many walks on the Faroese Islands that is very enjoyable in good weather but very dangerous if dense fog comes in, as one might get lost near high cliffs.

However, it was our day and the weather remained clear, so we could enjoy truly spectacular views over the cliffs to many surrounding islands to the East and West. On the way back to the ferry we passed again the four road tunnels that gave the long but narrow island the nick-name "the flute". We stopped in each of the three tiny villages, where we marvelled once more at the colourful or black tarred houses with or without grass-roofs.

In the evening we went for dinner to "THE Hotel" where the guests from that hotel mingled with those from our hostel. Even though Klaksvik is the second biggest town (pop. 4'600) it's gastronomic scene is the opposite of Torshavn's. Apart from a closed restaurant (no option) and some fast food options (ditto), there was no other place to eat in town.

There are so few tourists visiting the Faroese Islands, you regularly bump into the few others again and again. Somehow you soon know them and so we often got to talk to other tourists on view points or in pretty villages. Most other visitors we met came from Scandinavia – mostly from (the motherland) Denmark. Those are probably the people that are not afraid about bad weather.

By the way; the weather we experienced was much better than we had hoped for. After so many sunny days, Brigitte has long forgotten her fear of the diluvia but it's a matter of good luck and you'd miss out so much great scenery if it's foggy.

Many Faroese don't seem to mind if it's wet, they don't even put their hood up when it rains. Umbrellas are usually of no protection for long as there is always a gale coming up rather sooner than later. Several times we have seen children with rubber boots playing in the water along the beach. Of course they didn't give much attention and if they were running after whatever, they got knee deep into the water and later simply turned their rubber boots upside down. On the other hand, people mostly wore very warm clothes, even if it was quite warm. Although women quite often wore thongs, they usually had a giggle when they saw Heinz in shorts.





## Back in Torshavn

We drove back to Torshavn and stayed for our last three nights again at the same B&B where we had spent our first night. For such a small place we were amazed how many shopping centres Torshavn has. Here, as everywhere, we noticed the many young parents with quite a lot of children. When we asked somebody whether our impression is right, they mentioned that the average woman bears [2.6 children](#).

People give a very happy impression (at least in summer) and those we talked to confirmed this. Faroese like to look at their nation as a big family. Abortions, divorces and suicide rates are the lowest among the Scandinavian countries. Most Faroese realize that total independence from Denmark wouldn't be sensible, even though the biggest party in parliament is in favour of it. The smaller parties form a coalition to keep the biggest one out of the government. Our landlord put it frankly: "the opposition party is good at talking. No wonder: it's a populist party but they are useless; they don't even know where the money comes..."

## National Day Ólavsøka

On July 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, our last days in Torshavn, we had the chance to witness the celebrations for [Ólavsøka](#), the Faroese National Day. Everyone dressed up and most wore [traditional costumes](#). People gathered in the centre of town to see the parade and hear some speeches. There were competitions with rowing boat teams from all islands and a big fun-fare afterwards.

Especially women's dresses, called Stakkur are very colourful and vary according to their village of origin. At first they



were mostly covered under big black capes as it was drizzling a bit but the sun soon had them reveal their beautiful costumes. Women's dresses have embroidery on the bust and a shoulder scarf and apron is matching the colour of the dress. Gent's costumes called Sjóstúka are of black jackets with red gilets, together with knickerbocker-like trousers and traditional shoes. As they wear them normally only once a year, they often cause blisters and logically on the second day, most men opted for casual dress, sometimes only keeping the cap on (Stavnhetta).

Very cute were also the many little children in their finery.

The fun-fair, which was held on those two days, offered mainly amusements for little children. To us it was quite impressive to see how simple the equipment had to be as they cannot bring big "merry go round" and "roller coasters" to these small islands. Instead they had lots of inflated castle bounce houses, a motor-scooter race course set-up with old tyres and little go-cart cars. Then there were big overalls made heavy with lead in which the little buggars could hardly move but had to try to run each other over.

## Last impressions from the giant ferry

The national day proper was celebrated with the prime minister opening the new session of parliament, church attendance and choir singing, which we didn't attend. Instead we packed up and prepared to leave as we were booked on the Norröna car-ferry to Iceland. Again we managed to squeeze our entire luggage, including tent- and kitchen equipment, bedding, summer and winter clothing, our espresso machine and a printer completely into our Dacia's boot. As always, the passenger compartment remained completely empty.

It was rather grey and drizzly but soon after the boat left Torshavn, the sun reappeared again through the clouds. To our big surprise, the captain didn't choose the shortest way out to



sea but instead, followed all along most impressive cliffs between the islands. We couldn't believe how close this giant boat sailed to the cliffs that could be several hundred metres high. In front of them, even this big ship seemed small. For us it was a perfect farewell from the Faroese Islands. Most other passengers had just stopped in the harbour of Torshavn on their way to Iceland and they now got to realize that the Faroese Islands are a very worthwhile destination as well. The boat was full to its capacity of 1'482 people and virtually everyone was standing on deck smitten by the beauty of this amazing landscape that was passing before our eyes for almost two hours. These cliffs are so enormously high, dropping vertically, rugged and rutted by gorges. The icing on the cake were small sea-stacks standing in the water at the foot of the cliffs every now and then. Unique – such a farewell from such a unique island world!

[Smyril Line](#), the operator of the *Norröna* Ferry is a Faroese Company with one of the major shareholders being the government. Built in Germany and in service since 2003 she measures 165 metres in length and is 30 metres wide. She is 9 storeys high and can carry about 800 cars or piles of cargo. Lots of luxury is available to entertain the up to 1'482 passengers during the 2–2½ days sailing between Denmark and Iceland. You find swimming pool, sauna and gym on board. A crew of 118 keep everything operating, including three restaurants, several small bars and the inevitable duty-free shop. Contrary to our concerns, prices for food and drink were not inflated but similar to average Danish/Faroese prices.

Just as on our first leg on this ferry, we were lucky again and the sea was very calm most of the time. Even if the sea is rough, stabilisators help the *Norröna* to be calmer than most cruise liners.

A bunk bed in alcoves of 6 or 9 beds is included even with the cheapest ticket but those are incredibly cramped, much worse still than the pigeonry! Above the top bed of the triple-bunk in the 9-bed dorms there is barely half a metre space – claustrophobic! There are of course also nice cabins, for those willing to pay an extra fee. Especially during off season, an own cabin is worth considering (don't even hope to be in an empty boat by then).

## Briefly through Iceland

On July 30<sup>th</sup> 2009 we disembarked in Seyðisfjörður, a small village on Iceland's east coast. Although weather was not always perfect in the beginning of our journey through Iceland, it was still very fascinating. We were glad to know that we will come back later after visiting Greenland and in order to tell all our impressions about Iceland at once, we will also describe it later.

At the moment we only want to tell you that we drove along Iceland's south coast to Reykjavík, where we boarded a plane to Greenland.

## Greenland: warm Arctic summer weeks around Disko Bay

To some people [Greenland](#) is a harsh cold country with a hostile environment that can only be reached with an



expedition. To others it's senseless going there because there is nothing but ice and almost no population or tourism. To others it's THE ultimate cruise-liner destination and to others it's just a dream: too expensive and too far to reach.

When we arrived on August 8, 2009 with Air Iceland on board a 37-seater plane to Greenland's west coast, we were already smitten while descending to **Ilulissat**. The view over the vast icecap with the glacier tongues and the broken off icebergs floating between the rocky fjords was just astonishing. Steel-blue lakes could be seen on gargantuan icebergs. Sometimes there were so many icebergs on the water, we couldn't tell them apart. What a picture perfect welcome to a fascinating country!



Greenland is with 2'166'086 m<sup>2</sup> the world's largest non-continental island. About 85% of the landmass is covered with an icecap up to 3km thick. If it would melt, the entire sea level would rise by 7m. With only 57'000 inhabitants Greenland is also the world's most sparsely populated country and has only 12 settlements of more than 1'000 inhabitants.

Greenlanders call their island "Kalaallit Nunaat" (land of the people) and it is an autonomous constituent country within the Kingdom of Denmark using Danish currency. Because 90% of its exports are based on fishery, Greenland has left the EU to protect its fishing zone. Greenland relies still heavily on Danish subsidies which translate in figures to about 633 Million USD or \$ 11'300 per capita annually.

## Stepping into a postcard

As we stepped out of the airport we sort of felt like stepping into a postcard. All the houses in Ilulissat are very colourful; real gaudy and the town's setting on the icefjord is just spectacular! Many icebergs were floating in the stark blue water with lots of small boats between. We checked in to the Youth Hostel, which was basic, though not cheap. It has rather small twin bunk rooms only, but Uli the friendly caretaker compensates for the lack of comfort. Compensating is also the unique environment, so we rather enjoyed those benefits and postponed cosy accommodation to countries where standards are higher but landscapes rather ordinary in comparison to Greenland. We didn't wait long until we ventured out to see the unique environment just on our doorstep.



## Ilulissat Kangerlua: the mother of gargantuan icebergs

The village of Ilulissat is already a big attraction in itself, but it's outclassed by the region's star attraction just around the corner: Ilulissat Kangerlua a giant icefjord. That's why we came here to spend all that money! From the rocks you see down to the fjord that looks as if it was a river full of gargantuan icebergs. It's an awe inspiring site but even from high above you cannot manage to see that the fjord is 7km wide and 65km long. Small icebergs were gently flowing towards the sea, the big ones were stuck.

All these icebergs are coming from Sermeq Kujalleq, the biggest glacier in the northern hemisphere and consequently the inland ice's biggest outflow. Every year 20 Billion tonnes (or 35km<sup>3</sup>) break off at the (receding) glacier. That's in average every day the annual water consumption of New York City. The glacier calves only about every two weeks and then it sounds as if thunder was filling the air. The quantity of ice that breaks off at the 7 km wide edge of the glacier is so huge;

scientists calculate that in theory it flows at a speed of 40 metres per day. It can take 2 years until newly calved icebergs, which might break apart many times, reach the mouth of the fjord at Ilulissat, 65 km downstream.

Icebergs can weigh up to 7 million tons and most get stranded for up to another year on the underwater moraine that lies across the mouth of the fjord. Here, the waters depth is only about 200-300 metres, too little for most of the icy giants! The 50 metres or more they raise above the water line is only the legendary tip of the iceberg, as 87% of their mass lays hidden under water. No wonder, they get stuck on the moraine and have to wait until they break further apart or a spring tide lifts them out to Disco Bay. Depending on wind and currents, they float then at first in different directions, but finally most pass the east coast of Canada.





## Ilulissat: the tourist-magnet

Thanks to the moraine, the mouth of the icefjord is always packed with icebergs, making Ilulissat Greenland's tourist-capital. Consequently, it is well set up for travellers, but on days when cruise liners call in, the village gets overwhelmed by some 600 additional tourists for a few hours. After they leave the place gets quiet again and is not over-touristy at all.

We happen to know four of those cruise-tourists booked this summer to Ilulissat. Two came only later but the relatives of Brigitte were due during our stay. Although we noticed the cruise liner when it moored outside the harbour, it was by default rather than by design that we bumped into them. That day we made one of the longer hikes and among one of the many groups that passed us, we suddenly recognized these two Swiss: Mia & Hansrudi. They just exclaimed: "until now we didn't have the impression Greenland is such a small place!" There was only time for a small chat before they rushed on to join their group that was surrounded by mosquitoes. As we were late in season, we hardly had to bear mosquitoes. Surprisingly, the few ones that were still left swarmed mainly around the groups of cruise-line passengers. Luckily for us, the perfumes worn by some attracted those nasty mossies more than our sweat.



Daily we made some hikes on the well marked tracks that are between two and eight kilometres long. They lead along the rocky hills offering spectacular views to the icefjord. Every time, we got rewarded with a different vista of the icebergs. Someday, the panorama looked only slightly different than the day before, but most days the icebergs assembled in a totally new order. Sometimes, we could watch how an iceberg lost a corner or split up. A few times we could watch a whale frolicking between the bergs. We were even lucky to see a rare polar fox twice. Both times, the young (still dark) furry cutie was as curious to see us, as we were curious to see it!



## Greenlandic transport: from dog-sleds to helicopters



One time a young, obviously lost dog followed us for two kilometres back to the village, where it looked for its pack among the six thousand sled-dogs that live in Ilulissat. They are neither pets nor wary watch-dogs but working-dogs and never bark at passers-by. However, when they get fed, their howling is ear-shattering! During summer, all adult sled-dogs are chained in groups but during the winter (October to May) they provide a mean of transport, making it easier for the locals so swarm out to the surroundings.

During summer, there is only transport by boats, planes and helicopters, as the Greenlandic settlements are not interconnected by road. The villages are few and far between, although spanning a bridge (over a fjord) that still allows icebergs the size of small towns to pass or drilling a tunnel through the inland ice would be a real engineering marvel! Roads in Greenland are limited to settlements only and for many locals, cruising in a car or in a taxi around their village is certainly a favourite pastime, but also jogging and hiking are very popular.

Those who think Greenlanders live in ice cold igloos are certainly wrong, the contrary is the case: People live in very well heated wooden houses and are rather wasteful with energy. The heating is commonly regulated by opening the windows and car owners keep the engine running (but lock the doors) while shopping. The houses in Ilulissat are all very neat and colourful, even the numerous apartment-blocks. Some houses stand on stilts; others are built directly on the rocky grounds. Often there are no proper tracks between houses, only trails. Those who have a car, just park it somewhere. It's very unusual that somebody has a fence or a garden but very often you can see boats, snow cats, dog-sleds or racks for drying fish around their (sometimes untidy) premises.



## Inuit between traditional and modern life

The importance of old traditions and live style vanishes very quickly for modern Inuit. The Western lifestyle in heated dwellings reduces the dependence on nature, on which their ancestors still relied. The modern world has influenced Inuit greatly and through interrelationship many other genes have blended in. To us it was almost impossible to tell them apart



from Asian immigrants and in fact Archaeologists trace the roots of some Eskimo-tribes to Asia. Indigenous languages translate the word “Eskimo” as “eaters of raw meat” whereas “Inuit” just stands for “people”. In most parts of Greenland and also in Canada the locals (first nations) find it insulting to be called “Eskimo” and prefer the term “Inuit”, whereas in Alaska, Siberia and one area of north-eastern Greenland people have no problem to identify themselves as Eskimos.

Anyway the picture book “Eskimo” we hoped for in our romantic illusions is hard to find nowadays. They wear cloths just as modern as in any other European city. Seeing Inuit people wearing traditional cloths is a big exception; they are only worn for special occasions. On our first day in Greenland, we were lucky to meet a couple wearing traditional clothing because their child got baptised on that day.

On their first school day, most children wear traditional costumes. Although this is a big event also in Greenland, about 20% of the children listed for enrolment didn’t pop up that day! This is accepted as in line with local customs; many children are not disciplined for their misbehaving. The Inuit believe that children inherit the name and the name-soul of their ancestors, so disciplining a child shows disrespect for the deceased elder. Children are expected to learn from the repercussions of their mistakes, not from the anger of their parents. Consequently, children of any age can be seen playing and straying at any given time, be it day or night.

The Greenlandic language with its mostly long words is very complex and difficult. It has several dialects, all related to Canadian and Russian Eskimo-Aleut-languages. For instance the Inuit word for Tourist office is: “takornarissanut allaffik”. But there are also some (short) Greenlandic words that were adopted around the globe: igloo (iglu) and kayak (Qajaq). Kayaks traditionally were hunting boats made of a whale bone frame covered with tightly stretched seal skin and water proofed with animal fat. In Arctic water the paddler has to know exactly what he is doing and to master the Eskimo Roll is vital. If not; bad luck! It only takes a few minutes in the icy water (0°C to 4°C) and your organs fail because of hypothermia. However if someone likes a thrill; there are trips offered to dive under the icebergs.

Here in Ilulissat it was very obvious that most businesses are owned and operated by foreigners or sometimes by some very well (Danish) blended locals. Even the drivers of tourist-buses are more often than not expats. Inuit people live very much the moment which is a spiritual gift, but rarely an advantage in a capitalist economy. “If there is cash, let’s spend it” is a common Inuit mindset. On payday, too much of the desperately awaited money is spent on booze, with all the ugly consequences caused by extensive alcohol consumption. Some children probably don’t go home all night to avoid being beaten by their parents who drowned their traditions’ in alcohol. Western lifestyle had been introduced too quickly and its natural that many Inuit still have problems coping with it. Broken beer-bottles can be seen wherever civilisation came through, even on lonely hikes above the icefjord, hours away from the village.





## Sailing between the icebergs



To see the stream of icebergs is a most amazing natural spectacle, we couldn't get enough of it. Although the icebergs don't look that small from the shore, we were always puzzled when a huge cargo-vessel or an impressively big cruise-liner disappeared behind a berg as if it was a small toy! To get a fair impression about the real size of the icebergs, it's best to fly over them or better still; to sail between them on a boat.

Initially we had planned to join a sight-seeing trip between the icebergs in the icefjord, but our trip with the scheduled boat from Ilulissat to Qasigiannuguit was so superb, we don't think that a tour with a sight-seeing boat would have been even better. The small boat of Disko Line sailed for almost ten kilometres between and very close to the icebergs as it crossed the mouth of the icefjord on its route southwards (twice-weekly). The views from below and along the

gargantuan "bergs" that reflected in the clear blue water were truly spectacular, indeed just breath-taking. The chilling from the ice could be felt down to the bones, but we were smitten by the awesome surroundings and it was most imposing to look 50 metres up a white wall!

After the boat had passed the area with the biggest concentration of icy giants, we could take our caps and gloves off again. But "the show" was far from over: huge icebergs are dotted all around Disko Bay as if the sea was an oversized sculpture garden. Sometimes they floated a few kilometres apart and sometimes there were a few together. They have any size and shape – some look simply like a giant ice-cube or a pillar and it's not unusual to see big floating arches. Others can look like a castle, a Thai temple, a flying swan or like the biggest and coolest Toblerone chocolate bar in the world.

After a few hours we reached the small village of Qasigiannuguit. As all other Greenlandic settlements, it has very colourful houses and a big ugly fuel depot at its harbour entrance. We didn't disembark here as we had not found reasonably priced accommodation and the only hotel asks for € 170 a night. We just continued with the boat to Aasiaat. On the way we passed many more icebergs and we were also lucky to spot two whales and some seals.



## Aasiaat, an authentic and charming village



At nine P.M. when we entered the harbour of Aasiaat the colourful houses were shimmering even more colourful than usually in the setting sun. It was the middle of August now and still didn't get entirely dark all night long. Being almost 70° north, the Disko Bay lies almost at the same height as Tromsø in northern Norway. Therefore the midnight sun is up between the middle of May till the end of July. In the meantime the sun was disappearing just a bit below the horizon, creating most beautiful sunset colours that lasted several hours, presently from sunset continuously into sunrise. Despite the long daylight hours the arctic sun never rises very high above the horizon, creating a special light that can be challenging for photographers.



The town of Aasiaat is a very rewarding authentic place to visit and not touristy at all. We had booked a room at the Seaman's home by the harbour. Entering the room almost felt like entering a sauna. We had heard that locals like it hot but we didn't expect it to be more than 30°C. As not all radiators could be switched off, also we ended up using the sophisticated Greenlandic heating regulation system: open windows...

When we ventured out to discover the village, we were regularly greeted by people, even by teenagers. There were not many icebergs floating around Aasiaat's shoreline but it's famous for whale spotting. As we didn't see any, we pointed our camera at the neat colourful houses and sometimes watched the sled dogs. Surprisingly there were better roads and more space for pedestrians but less traffic than in Ilulissat. With about 3'300 inhabitants the fishing village of Aasiaat is the fourth largest community after Ilulissat with 5'000 (only Sisimiut and the capital Nuuk are bigger).

## Dependent or independent?

By talking to some locals and also to some Danish immigrants we learned how people live, how they like to spend their spare time, what the Greenlanders think about independence and how the country functions. Despite the heavy dependence on Danish subsidies and know-how, a populist movement managed to convince the majority of Greenlanders to vote for independence. Most of the better educated Greenlanders realize that this is not a very smart move considering the vast land and the small population with all its social problems. They know it takes more to run a country than just national pride.

Today health-care service, education and police are run by the (Royal) Danish government and most companies are either owned by foreigners or by the Greenlandic Home Rule Government (like the fish and seafood company "Royal Greenland").

Greenland suffers a big lack of qualified Inuit personnel. Presently all but a few doctors and nurses are Danish nationals and even ground schools often have to resort to Danish teachers although they usually don't speak Greenlandic. We met two Danish Psychologists who told us they work with translators as many patients don't speak Danish.

Presently, only basic education is widely offered. Because not many Greenlanders are interested in studying, most students who seek higher education have to travel to Denmark. Sadly for Greenland, graduates often stay in Denmark, tempted by higher salaries. The few who do come back usually stick to the capital Nuuk (pop.16'200) and don't want to live in small isolated villages. To change this, efforts are under way to offer higher education in Greenland's bigger villages. Aasiaat is getting a new high school presently still staffed by Danish teachers only.



On Saturday evening we ate at a very good restaurant but we were the only guests. We felt pity for the host but he explained that the locals follow a different rhythm during summer days. Now almost everybody goes out with the boat for the weekend fishing and camping. Only during the week people come to have dinner at the restaurant. During the colder 9 months it's another story: then most guests will pop in on weekends.

## Disko-Island: where remoteness starts



After two days we continued on the boat to Disko Island (=disc) passing many more solitary icebergs. After three hours we reached the settlement of Qeqertarsuaq that has only about 1'000 inhabitants and many more dogs. Kangerluk with its 20 houses is the only other permanent settlement on this island that measures about 120x120km (8'600km<sup>2</sup>). Also Disko Island has an icecap and a galloping glacier that moves 100 metres a day. There are about 2'000 so called hot springs recognizable by bright green plants in their flow. They didn't tempt us for a dip as most are only 2° to 5°C warm. Even though they appeared cool now, this temperature becomes "hot" when everything around is frozen.

Qeqertarsuaq is a rather sleepy fishing village that isn't spoiled by Tourism except on the few days when cruise liners come in. Life was a bit more basic than in the previous places we had visited but the houses were still colourful and there was a big power plant and fuel depot too. There were fewer cars but there was always some traffic as they used every vehicle available for joy rides: the post delivery van, the fire engine and even the ambulance. Just two days prior our arrival, they had certainly been on stand-by as a big event was held in that small fishing village: the Greenlandic soccer championship. The perimeter advertising boards were still in place. They were quite different to those the world is used to, as the advertisements were handwritten on coloured cardboard. Then they were put up on wooden boards around the dusty lot that was the site of the championship by the sea.

## Icebergs on the move

Qeqertarsuaq harbour side is rocky but behind the village there is a long black sand beach. Helped by currents, many big icebergs wash ashore here. It was fascinating to watch how parts fell off or how they fell apart entirely, leaving several huge bergs instead of just one giant. Sometimes they just turned in the current, creating a different picture every few hours.

Contrary to common belief, icebergs don't just melt away. They crack due to tensions because compressed air is expanding in warmer water or air, thus causing them almost to "explode". This sounds almost like a gun salute but when they break apart, it sounds like thunder. Unless it's a very big iceberg the spectacle is usually over by the time you figure out where the noise came from and it is certainly too late to unpack your camera.

If you're lucky however, a small part breaks off at first with more pieces following. Then everything looks like turning and tumbling in slow motion resembling a heavy whale jumping. A few waves and shattered ice on the water surface are proof of the action and then everything goes back to silence until the next auspicious crackling sound.



The icebergs washed ashore here have only travelled 100 kilometres from the mouth of the icefjord. Most will go on a much longer trip usually north at first. By the time they realize it's a dead end, they get trapped and frozen in the pack ice. As spring releases them the Labrador Current moves them gently south along the east coast of Baffin Island towards Davis Straits. By then they freeze again in the pack ice north of Labrador and only next spring their journey ends in Newfoundland when they get washed ashore on the coast that is nick named Iceberg Alley. Only very few hardy ones get past St. John but melt quickly as they reach the Gulf Stream.

## Adjusting to conditions

During our week at Qeqertarsuaq, we stayed at Napasunguit Hostel, a blue wooden house in typical Greenlandic style. It was located above a lonely bay outside the village from where we could see the icebergs from the kitchen window. As romantic as this all was, inside it was pretty basic. An English couple made the sarcastic remark upon inspecting the house: "Hmm...looks all very interesting...and this Hostel should be better than the hotel, our travel agent told us?" Most accommodation in Greenland is not very good value for (usually big) money. It has a price to be in such a great and remote country. At DKK 450 (Euro 60) this was the lowest price we paid for a room in Greenland and we don't want to moan because most of the time we had the house all to ourselves.



At the hostel in Qeqertarsuaq we experienced what every household north of Ilulissat has to cope with: a dry closet. In a country where the rocky ground is frozen for 8-9 months a year it's difficult to deal with water- and sewage pipes. Therefore, in northern Greenland, not only household garbage, but also the peoples "droppings" are regularly collected in special yellow bags deposited in front of the colourful houses!

Everywhere we have come across water-pipes with thick insulation and cables for heating them. Newer houses are now connected to town-water supply but many still have their own water tank with a red and green light on the façade that indicates the driver of the water delivery truck when a refill is due.

Contrary to the previous villages, there was only one modern supermarket in Qeqertarsuaq. Considering that it was catering to 1'000 people only, it was neither small nor limited in selection. The food section was at least 2'000 m<sup>2</sup> big but the turn-over seems not to be that big, as we found several products in the deep-freezer that had expired more than a year ago. What do you want in such an isolated location? It's either that or nothing! However the selection was impressive and there was also fresh fruit and vegetables at reasonable prices, contrary to what we had heard from quite recent reports.



On the other hand the situation on the bread counter was very deceptive. Already one hour after the supermarket opened, the shelf was near empty and the staff was happily waiting for the next 8 hours behind the counter until they could go home. Apparently it didn't occur to them to put any of the dough visible in the freezer behind them into the oven.

Near the supermarket was the Agency that manages the hostel where we stayed. Although the office was supposed to be open daily for some eight hours, we had to check several times until finally somebody was on duty to collect our money. Funnily the daily cleaning service stopped as soon as we had paid the bill... The working morale is not all that high and the locals have always groundbreaking new ideas how to reduce their workload even further. Like those guys from Disko Line, the operator of the scheduled boat: if someone wants to buy a ticket in their well staffed office, they immediately recommend buying the ticket on the internet. If you insist to buy at the office, they tell you about the hefty booking fee (~€ 10) for each of their rather expensive tickets. The same applies to tickets sold directly on the boat. When booking a boat trip on the internet, the fee is € 4 for as many tickets (and trips) as you book at the same time. There was no way around and we really wanted to travel by boat as the sailings between the icebergs are just marvellous!

On the way back there was much more ice just in front of Ilulissat than on the way out. We peeped into the radar in the wheelhouse that detected every iceberg and admired how well the captain navigated in careful zig zag around the many big and small bergs. Disko Line Boats have very experienced captains and the boats are very reliable too. So we safely arrived back in Ilulissat even though the sea in the Disko Bay had been exceptionally rough. When checking-in at the Youth Hostel again, we were assured that rough seas are very rare during summer.

## Sun drenched Disko Bay

During our three August weeks in Greenland (8.-29.), the weather was really good except on 3 days with some rain on Disko Island. As there is a 1'000 metre high mountain-plateau, it's just natural that clouds get stuck there. Otherwise we had sun throughout with almost no wind. Temperatures were in general between 6-12°C but it felt much warmer because of the clean dry air and the calm conditions. When hiking, shorts and T-shirts were enough. Those who wore more, were sweating after the first ascent and soon carried whatever they could take off, around their waist or squeezed it above the spare jumpers onto their daypacks.

Due to the clean and thin air, sunrays come almost unfiltered through the atmosphere. For the same reason visibility is much better and tourists misjudge distances frequently. We fell into the trap as well: we estimated the distance from Ilulissat to Disko Island of which the icecap is clearly visible, as 5 kilometres only - but in fact it's 50!





Several locals confirmed that sunny and calm weather dominates Disko Bay from mid June to the end of August. With such a pleasant summer climate, it would be feasible to open a [nudist resort in Greenland](#). It would probably get lots of media coverage but almost no guests, as no one would believe it to be warm enough. Those who would bare it would likely get completely sun burned soon. The reputation for cold being synonym with Greenland is so established, that some people would hardly believe how warm it can feel here. Three times we had met men whose girl-friends refused to come along as they feared to freeze to dead. Greenlanders know how to enjoy the warm summer days. Sun loungers, sunshades and BBQ's are a common sight on balconies and indeed more widespread than in Switzerland.

We spent 6 more days in Ilulissat and went for hikes many times. We admired the ever changing assembly of icebergs in the Icefjord Ilulissat Kangerlua, as well as in front of the village. Surely we burned lots of energy and so were always hungry when we came back in the evening.

## Greenlandic delicacies

As tourism is well established, Ilulissat has a good selection of nice restaurants. Surprisingly there is no GST levied and therefore Greenlandic restaurants are about 25% cheaper than in Denmark. The quality is high and the price is reasonable for what you get.

The three biggest hotels all offer twice weekly Greenlandic buffets for 250 DKK (€ 33) during the summer months. We were recommended to try the one at Hotel Hvide Falk. Already the presentation with Asian style carvings made from fruit and vegetables was outstanding. Flowers and birds, dragons and pagodas decorated the wide selection of superbly prepared delicacies. There were several fish and meat dishes we had never tasted before, like arctic char, seal, wale, Muskoxen or Caribou, only the polar bear had been eaten away the week before we attended the buffet the first time. Also Lamb, Reindeer, Salmon, Atlantic Halibut, Shrimp, King Crab and the like were prepared into edible sensations. They were offered raw, graved, smoked or dried but also pickled, prepared as salads or cocktails and exceptionally just cooked and always accompanied by a nice sauce. We couldn't resist enjoying this culinary sensation for a second time just before we left the country. We had not been able to really try everything, as the selection was just too big, but now we knew that dried fish is not to our liking whereas dried meat and wale was sooo delicious! We also didn't need any more Mattak as we knew we would still be chewing on that wale skin now. Many say Mattak is the most typical Inuit dish, but there are many others.



Because Inuit have been hunting seals and whales for millennia to survive during their subsistence culture we didn't need to have a bad conscience about consuming it too. After all it was European commercial whaling that decimated some species almost to extinction but Inuit didn't harm the eco balance. Modern Inuit still eat whale and seal meat but these days it may also swim in a Thai Curry.

As the Greenlandic Buffet is only offered because of tourists, it was now the last of this season. For Inuit this buffet contains too much "smoked, marinated and cooked" in short: it's too westernized. During wintertime many hotels offer Thai buffets, which locals are very fond of but then again; the manager confided to us that they inuitize it a bit to adapt to local taste buds.

Finding authentic Thai cuisine isn't a big problem in Greenland either, be it summer or winter, as there is a surprising number of Thai expats living in the Arctic. In Ilulissat at least 4 restaurants employ Thais and they are the artists who created the carved decorations for the buffets. Also on days with à la carte menu, it was most delightful to eat in the restaurants of the hotels Icefiord and Hvide Falk. Both have dining rooms just above the water with icebergs at your feet. We don't know how the view is during the time of the midnight sun but in August, dinner was always delightfully accompanied by a most colourful sunset. Even at the end of our visit it still felt like sitting "in a postcard", as we watched how the iceberg-dotted sea and the sky changed colours from blue to orange. To absorb more of this majestic atmosphere we often went for an after-dinner walk in this unique environment. Only on our last days, the glooming vanished around midnight and thereafter a proper night fell and it got cold.



## Final thoughts

Too soon our three weeks were over although we had allowed ourselves more time than most tourists. In the meantime we got a fair bit of an impression how life is around Disko Bay; it's much more hospitable than we had hoped for and certainly very tempting to return. It is a place we really grew to love. It's a place where the remoteness and the beauty of nature as well as the friendliness of the people are very pleasing. Charm is above everything.



Our flight back to Iceland on Aug. 29, 2009 (the last direct flight for the season) was a picture perfect farewell from Greenland and a scenic flight as well. The pilot made a loop northwards along the rocky coast with many green lakes. After crossing Ilulissat Kangerlua icefjord we soon reached the inland ice. It is so vast, that we couldn't make out where the ice melded with the white clouds on the horizon. Only one and a half hours later the east coast with some more impressive glaciers came into sight. No colourful houses though but high spiky mountains and icebergs that were just as big as those we had seen up close. Greenland is so mighty impressive! It was a fantastic trip to an overwhelming country!

## Iceland: diverse by nature

As we had 8 days in [Iceland](#) before we flew to Greenland, we go back in time to the morning of July 30, 2009 when we disembarked with our car from the big ferry Norröna in the East of the country. But first some background information: With a landmass of 103'000 km<sup>2</sup> and 320'000 inhabitants, Iceland is still a pleasantly empty land, especially as only about 36% of the population live outside greater Reykjavik, mostly along the coast.

Settled by Norwegian and Celtic (Scottish and Irish) immigrants in the late 9th century A.D., Iceland boasts the world's first democratic parliament, the Althing, established in 930. Independent for over 300 years, Iceland was subsequently ruled by Norway from 1262 to 1918 and later by Denmark who granted complete independence in 1944. Today Danish is still taught in ground schools.

With its many volcanic activities, Iceland is somehow still a country in the making. Since it got settled, people have always been subjected to the powers of nature. The islands interior consists of high mountains, icecaps, volcanoes, vast ash plains and sandy deserts criss-crossed by creeks and rivers. It's certainly a rough beauty even if it's hostile, arid and barren. Nobody lives there.

In the interior there are no proper roads, only a few 4-WD tracks without bridges. To some adventurers this is exactly what they are looking for and every summer hordes of "Conquistadores" go out there with their sophisticated vehicles to meet the challenge and the loneliness of the relentless land.

Along the coastal belt, the well maintained Ringroad leads through fertile and sparsely inhabited land. Most of the country's very diverse and fascinating sights are accessible along this 1'300 km long road (number 1), which is in most places still very lonely by European standards. Additionally, there are many gravel roads suitable for two-wheel-drive vehicles, such as our Dacia Logan. Such unsealed roads lead out to the scenic fjords in the East, North and West, or to additional sights further inland.





## Arrival in Iceland

Already when the ferry *Norröna* entered the 17 km long fjord *Seyðisfjörður*, the country started to reveal its beauty as the fog lifted. Countless little waterfalls fell down the very green mountainsides. While disembarking, traffic got stuck as 20 Italian Campervans assembled just outside the harbour waiting for their leading vehicle to start their tour in a convoy around Iceland!



The village of *Seyðisfjörður* is at its liveliest while the *Norröna* is in the harbour. Within one hour up to 800 adventure vehicles, campervans and cars are popping out off its hold. As most of them immediately started a rat race around Iceland, the 740 soul's village was quiet again, by the time we had checked into the Youth Hostel and had had breakfast. After looking around the village, we took the steep pass road leading to *Egilsstaðir*. The intense green of the landscape was only interrupted by white snow patches that still hadn't melted, despite being just a few hundred metres above sea level. Up here we could enjoy spectacular views and saw the first powerful waterfalls.

Now we continued along the shores of the artificial lake *Lagarfljót* southwards. The water was generally pretty murky but behind some sandbars it hadn't mixed with the water coming from the glaciers and was therefore shimmering bright blue. We crossed the lake on the bridge that led directly to the *Hengifoss* carpark. From here a well worn hiking track led up to two very spectacular waterfalls: *Lítlanes-* and *Hengifoss*. The first impresses with vertical basalt columns and *Hengifoss* is, with its drop of 120m Iceland's third highest waterfall. Its dark brown wall with striking red layers is as unique as the basalt in the lower falls. Both were incredibly impressive - what a great introduction!

Back at the carpark we felt hungry and followed the tourist office's recommendation by driving to the nearby *Klausturkaffi* situated in the former *Skriðuklaustur* Monastery that nowadays serves as a museum. A wonderful coffee- and cake buffet that also included some savoury items like salads and gratins was offered for ISK 1'500 (€ 9). We're usually not that much into museums but should they all have such great Coffee shops, we'd probably become museums-freaks! Later we found out that indeed many Icelandic museums have a Coffee shop that could be enjoyed without obligation to visit the museum as well.

Back in *Seyðisfjörður* we checked in the evening whether the quality of Icelandic cuisine matches its reputation and again: we were not disappointed!

On the next day, the weather was not boring at all; it was wet, windy and foggy. As our flight to Greenland was booked, we had to go on, whether we liked it or not. During our drive southwards along the eastern fjords, the fog revealed only glimpses of craggy mountain peaks. Overnight we stayed at *Djúpivogur* a village with only 360 people, picturesquely situated around a fishing harbour. There was only one Hotel but it offered various types of accommodation including budget rooms and a good but not too expensive restaurant.

## Accommodation in Iceland

In Iceland, not only Youth Hostels but also many Hotels, Guesthouses and Farmstays offer so called "sleeping bag accommodation". That means the guests bring their own bedding. Sometimes pillows and blankets (without cases) are provided, sometimes not. The bathroom is usually in the corridor but often shared kitchen facilities are available though mostly basic. Rooms can be the same as those rented out with fully made up beds but at a substantially cheaper rate. Travel Agents hardly "want to know" about it but by arranging accommodation by ourselves we paid between ISK 4'400 and 7'000 for "sleeping bag double rooms". In 2009 this was equivalent to 24 and 44 Euros (including a 10% fluctuation in the currency).

Most establishments who do offer "sleeping bag accommodation" do it year round, a few only in off-season. Rooms are mostly small, regardless of the price. As elsewhere in the world, in the capital cost of accommodation is substantially higher and rooms are hard to find if you book on short notice. In Reykjavik we paid around € 55 which was a bargain, if you consider that the down-town Youth Hostel charges around 90 Euros for a sleeping bag double.

Before we left *Djúpivogur* on the next morning, we enthusiastically used one of the free carwash facilities available in many petrol stations around Iceland. The car had been very dirty because we had driven over wet gravel roads the

previous day. At the time we wasted our time with car-washing, we didn't know that only a few kilometres down the road more of the same was waiting for us. As soon as our car was "cemented" again, the weather cleared up.

As a long weekend was approaching, the traffic was quite dense as many locals towed either a caravan or a trailer with camping equipment.

During the first hours, there was still some mist wafting mysteriously around the mountains and near the coast billows hovered between boulders, some of which looked almost like manmade stonewalls. Soon the fog lifted and we got to admire the blue sea to our left and steep mountain slopes to our right. Near Lon we passed a bridge over a giant black "Sandur" (a glacial outwash plain formed of sediments deposited by meltwater at the terminus of a glacier). Not far from the coastline several black sand spits lay parallel to the beach, some of them twenty or forty kilometres long.

## Calving glaciers and icebergs

After a pit stop in Höfn we soon saw the first glacierarms flowing out of Vatnajökull, the world's third largest icecap after Greenland and the Antarctica. Today's star-attraction was [Jökulsárlón](#) the iceberg filled lagoon. The many icebergs were very impressive and really beautiful to watch. Not even 15% of their mass lay above the water surface. Mainly Bergy Bits (1-5m above the water) and Growlers (up to 1m out of the water) can be seen, rarely also a "real" iceberg (5m plus). They thrilled us with their shapes and colours; often in blue or dark layers.

Because it rained nearby, the light was very mystical making the ice almost shine in the green lagoon. All those icebergs come from the huge glacier Breiðamerkur-jökull, visible in the background. They spend up to 5 years in the 17 km<sup>2</sup>, 600m deep lagoon before they get washed out to the open sea passing under the bridge of road number 1. The waves clash with them and throw some back onto the black sandy beach. It was strewn with melting ice sculptures of which the oldest ones had become completely transparent.

Although it looks as if Jökulsárlón icelagoon had been here for ages, it has only formed in the nineteen-thirties. Until then the glacier reached the ring road but it's now retreating rapidly and consequently the lagoon is growing further.



The next two nights we stayed at Litla Hof in Öraefi, one of many farms providing tourist accommodation. We chose this place because of its location near Jökulsárlón and Skaftafell National Park, which we visited the next day in beautiful sunshine. We thought we (too) had to hike up to Svartifoss \*star of a hundred postcards\*. First we had to go up in a bee line with all the tourists bussed up there. What came into sight was just a mini-version of lesser known but to us much more impressive Litlanesfoss – we were quite disappointed! On the way back we wanted to make a detour that promised superb views over the icecap but somehow couldn't find the turnoff.

We gave up and left the national park to find a hiking path of our own. Good Luck was on our side and after parking near Fosshotel Skaftafell, where we had had a very nice dinner the night before, we found this gravel road that led us to the terminus of Svinafell glacier. On the rocky ground along the way was nothing but thick moss interspersed with tiny flowers. The glacier came down as a white wall facing us and we were just separated by a small lake. With its brown ice tips the glacier almost looked as if it had dipped its fingers in chocolate. Such an awesome sight!

This afternoon we saw many more glaciers, all offshoots of Vatnajökull. Later we went back to the ice lagoon. This time Jökulsárlón presented itself in totally different light and in different assembly. There were not as many bergy bits as the day before and none on the beach. They must all have been washed out to sea during the night. Instead we sighted many Arctic terns flying overhead and a few seals swimming in the lagoon and in the stream leading to the ocean.

Would you believe it? Splendid weather persisted and we went back one more time to see how the ice lagoon changed the next day. Before getting there we also checked out some lesser known siblings. Firstly we stopped at the foot of the glacier Kviarjökulskambar that seems to be retreating. Its terminus looks like coated with chocolate powder but the big pieces that broke apart are shining like opals in the sun. It's flanked by a volcanic mountain with rather unusual forms.

Most impressive was also the next place: Fjallsarlón Glacier terminus with Breidarlón ice lagoon. A wide glacier sloping down the mountainside can be seen calving into its lake, producing icy bits like those in the more famous Jökulsárlón, just



a few kilometres to the east. Here the icebergs are fewer and the lagoon is smaller but it's less touristy and possible to be very close to the wide escarpment. It's another awe inspiring site on a bumpy gravel road just a bit off the mainroad!

This is not the only glacier in view; just next is yet another one and another one... but by now it was definitely time for us to go on, as our guide-book listed lots more "must-see's" along our way.

## Living with active volcanoes

Only a short drive westwards the road crossed Skeiðarársandur, with 1'300 km<sup>2</sup> the largest Sandur in the world and in fact the name Sandur is derived from this one. When the ringroad was constructed it was the main obstacle and the "gap" could only be closed in 1974. Already 1996 the ringroad was cut-off again here by force of nature. Some twisted steel girders of a bridge that was swept away, stand as a memorial near the new road. Huge floods and icequakes are caused by regular eruptions of [Grímsvötn](#) volcano situated underneath Vatnajökull icecap. Those eruptions cause the ice to melt and as soon as an icebarrier breaks, huge quantities of meltwater and icebergs rush down to the coast and everything in the way is just washed away like matchsticks. Following the 1996 eruption, up to 50'000 m<sup>3</sup> water per second thundered down the valley. The subsequent 2004 eruption didn't cause a flood, as the icebarrier hadn't been closed by then and water could gradually drain. This time only air traffic was hindered by a giant cloud of ash.



Since the country had been settled, the life of Icelanders has always been ruled by forceful powers of nature. In 1783 the eruption of Laki volcano caused not only a famine that eliminated a quarter of the population, it also caused dust clouds and haze to appear over most of Europe and parts of Asia and Africa for several months. Fallout from the eruption of Askja volcano in 1875 devastated so much of Iceland that 20% of the population emigrated, mostly to North America. Iceland is a young island still in the making and several volcanoes are over-due to erupt.

Our drive over the black Sandur wasn't dreary at all! The predominant colours around here were black from the sand and blue from the water; but next to one dam there was a colourful area where algae, grass and moss had been able to take foot. Sand was regularly swept over the road that was often leading over a dam or a bridge. As everywhere in the country, even long bridges are often "single lane" only, but not a problem with so little traffic.

On the other edge of the sandplain an old turf-roofed farm is preserved at Núpsstaður. Buildings are half sunk into the ground, walls are piled up of stones, turf and grass and also the roof is covered by grass. Many such sheds and stables are still in use around Iceland but here an entire turf-farm was open to visitors with its turf-church the most prominent building. As it's not only quaintly overgrown but also tiny, it's a favourite among photographers. Inside, the year 1789 is inscribed but according to history it was mentioned as early as 1200. Just behind the farm bizarrely eroded volcanic mountains and a cave with hanging basalt columns were completing the beautiful picture.

After only 10 minutes driving, the mainroad led into the vast Eldhraun lava fields (~600 km<sup>2</sup>). On its rim the lava sculptures were still visible but after a while most of it was mystically covered by a thick carpet of moss. And thick means thick; 20cm maybe even more. The Woolly Fringe Moss (*Racomitrium lanuginosum*) covers the lava sculptures like a giant blanket, so you can't even guess their forms.

After all that sight-seeing we stopped at Kirkjubaejarklaustur, which is really just a tiny settlement with a big road house, snack-bars, campgrounds and a hotel. Afterwards we made a side-trip to nearby Fjaðrárgljúfur Canyon. It didn't start in a mountainous area but rather on a



green hillside suddenly cutting into the ground for about 2 km. The walls of this peculiar picturesque canyon are magically curved and twisted.

Half an hour before reaching Vik, we came along an area that was littered with small craters, all about 20-30 metres high. They were really special and we wanted to have a closer look. There was a view point but unfortunately the story on the information board was about some historic saga in another part of the country and didn't mention a word about the fascinating "craters of the moon" around us.

Overnight we stayed at the Youth Hostel in Vik. The village was like most settlements in Iceland's south: rather functional than charming. But Vik has a landmark just in front of the black sand beach: a cluster of sea stacks that are up to 66m tall above the water. At sunset, the 6 (or so) fingers looked particularly impressive.



## Lots of water

On the next day, the weather had changed completely and it was wet and very windy. So we didn't bother to get out of the car at the natural arch outside Vik, which is a look alike to the Australian "London Bridge" on the Great Ocean Road. The wind rattled our car and the brave ones that went out were completely drenched by the rain in a matter of seconds. We were yellow and drove on just to be rewarded by a rainbow and even sunshine soon thereafter. Apart from seeing some pretty turf huts and tidy farmsteads surrounded by fertile land, this became our day of the waterfalls. It started with the biggest and highest being first: Skógafoss where the water tumbles down 62m from a wide edge framed by green hills.



Only a few kilometres to the west (into road 249 towards Þórsmörk) was a waterfall that comes in handy to those who didn't arrive from Vik or didn't have time for their shower before setting off sight-seeing, because here they can walk behind the waterfall and take it now: Seljalandsfoss. It falls from horse-shoe shaped rock into a deep green pool.

On the parking to both of these famous waterfalls there were lots of tourist busses but the next two falls we could enjoy just to ourselves. Gljúfurfárfoss was only a few hundred metres down the same road. The waterfall was almost hidden in a narrow gorge. In fact it was so narrow some small rocks had been trapped between the walls of the gorge. There wasn't very much water burbling down but it looked really appealing.

The last waterfall had a very similar setting but was more of a giant tube carved out by the water with only a small opening in the rock face, so the buggar was hardly visible. There was no name sign, so this time we cannot ask you to perform another tongue twister, trying to pronounce it; we just know it was on road number 250 near Mulakot.

## Geothermal energy

This night we stayed in a cottage on a horse farm. The legendary Icelandic horses can be seen in big numbers everywhere around the country. Many farms offer horseback riding and probably most Icelanders are riding one of these gentle buggars once a while. Nearby Hveragerði with 2'000 inhabitants, was the biggest village we came through since we arrived in Iceland. Many of the folks around here work in thermal heated hot-houses growing mainly fruit and vegetables and also some flowers. Thanks to geothermal energy and horticulture, a big fraction of greenstuffs sold in Iceland is home-grown.

Eden hot-house is a "compulsory" stop for tour-bus drivers, hoping their clients would raid the souvenir shop. Our Lonely Planet guide book mentioned that it serves the sole purpose to "separate fools and money". Well, we had to see it and Brigitte hoped to get at least a small introduction into Icelandic fruit and vegetable nursing. It didn't take more than five minutes until we escaped; indeed, Eden is nothing more than a big tourist-trap! However, it's impressive to know that in the many "real" hot-houses, heating and often also electricity for the artificial lighting is derived from geothermal energy.





With 22 active volcanoes, 250 geothermal areas and 780 hot springs, [geothermal energy](#) is plentiful all around Iceland. Although it is being used in many ways, only a fraction is actually tapped. Many settlements have public swimming pools or hot pots. Some hot pools can also be found out in the nature and used for free but others, like the famous Blue Lagoon, are very commercialized and hyped.

About 87% of the population enjoy central heating and hot water by geothermal energy that is also used for electricity generation on a small but growing scale. Consequently people are rather wasteful with energy; annual electricity consumption per capita is with about 28'200 kWh second to none in the world! Heating is commonly regulated by opening windows.

In guesthouses we were often reminded that we can drink the tap water, as Icelandic water is very healthy. That's probably true but like medicine, it tastes rather unpleasant because it is often tapped straight from a hot spring.

For tourists steaming vents and mud pools are an exciting object-lesson of the energy delivered from the ground. Here in Hveragerði we came across our first geothermal fields in Iceland. Steam came out in various areas around the village and some were signposted and made accessible to tourists. Around the holes in the ground, colours varied from white to red, from grey to brown depending on the mineral content in the steam. Because the earth crust around such steaming holes is usually rather thin, it can be dangerous to pry into those infernal hot holes too close. Brigitte had a hard time finding the balance between curiosity and security but tried not to forget that running after a good picture could easily be regretted.

## The capital Reykjavik

We reached [Reykjavik](#) on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 and stayed at [Gardur Inn](#), which is a student home outside the summer holidays. With its central location the ISK 9'000 (€ 55 in 09) for a nice twin room including breakfast and made-up beds were a bargain for the capital. It also offered free car parking and was only a pleasant 5 minutes' stroll from the centre.

Unlike most other Icelandic settlements, Reykjavik has a recognizable heart and soul. In the centre many old and well restored wooden buildings could be seen. There was colour and warmth and a joyful lively atmosphere in the streets. In the basement of the modern town-hall, which stands "with its feet" in the small Tjörnin lake, we visited the big-size relief model of Iceland.



Reykjavik's main shopping street has large pavements and only a narrow driveway but the locals still squeeze through with their often oversized cars. With so many tourists, the street would easily have been filled up even if it had been closed for cars. The town was almost overwhelmed by tourists.

We enjoyed sight-seeing during these long summer nights and of course, the gastronomic delights. Soon we could enjoy even longer daylight hours, as we left for Greenland after 3 days (see our story above).

We paid ISK 8'000 (€ 45) to park our car for 3 weeks at Keflavik Airport. This was very convenient and even cheaper than two return tickets with the airport shuttle.

When we returned on August 29<sup>th</sup> the weather was still extremely warm for Reykjavik standard. With temperatures around 20°C it was even warmer than when we left.

In general Iceland is reputed for rather unpredictable weather. Never the less, average winter-temperatures in Reykjavik are above those of NY or Zurich. This is thanks to the Gulf Stream that surrounds the island. Without its impact Iceland would barely be inhabitable. As soon as you go inland, temperatures fall to about -35°C in winter but can also get uncomfortably cold in summer.

During our stay in August and September we experienced average temperatures of about 12°C along the coast. If it felt cold it was normally due to strong winds rather than to cold temperatures. As we didn't go too far away from the coastal belt we didn't experience the weather's moods to the extreme. We had foggy days and some with rain but sunny days outnumbered them by far, as September was unusually warm.

On the beginning of August when we explored the country's southern half we were on a rather tight schedule, whereas in Sept. we could experience Iceland's northern half with more time. Now we didn't pre-book any accommodation which gave us the additional freedom to wait for better weather conditions if once it wasn't to our liking.

This freedom turned the tables when we came back from Greenland on August 29<sup>th</sup>. Budget accommodation in Reykjavik was still solidly booked out and it took us ages to arrange a reasonable room. Finally we managed to book into [Bláklukka](#) Guesthouse some 5km out of the city centre. We were lucky and got a beautiful studio where we tuned ourselves in for the second part of our journey through Iceland.

On Sept. 1<sup>st</sup> we set off to discover Iceland's highest rated attractions. Just a short while after leaving the capital we stopped to picture some weird looking rocks, not knowing that a herd of Icelandic horses was to become our shooting stars. We're not sure whether these guys have already had their breakfast but all of them were funnily yawning.



## Amazing Landmannalaugar

Now we continued to [Landmannalaugar](#), checking in to the Youth Hostel Árnes on our way. As the weather forecast predicted a diluvia to come to the highlands soon, we headed for it even though it wasn't sunny. On a tarred road we drove to 40km before the destination, but the remainder was very rough gravel. It was barely suitable for our small car but



with careful driving we got through. There was a river crossing about 200 metres before the information centre. A parking lot was provided for two-wheel drive vehicles but the 4-WD's crossing the river were getting attention from curious onlookers.

We wondered a bit about the remarks of an unnerved German Tourist: "I would never drive up here with my own car, but with a rental car I don't mind". He probably hasn't read the fine print of his rental-contract. Normally 2 WD rental vehicles don't have insurance cover on this road and while crossing rivers, not even 4x4 are insured. Whereas with our own car, we knew we had insurance cover. Up to this point road number 208 is officially suitable for 2-wheel drive cars. After this parking it turns into an "F-road" (F208) meaning: 4-WD only.

We were surrounded by the most amazing rhyolite mountains shining in unbelievable colours. Not similar colours; but an entire artist's pallet, in rocks and pebbles and different again in every direction! It's really hard to describe but believe us: it's stunning to the power of ten!

We wonder if it could really be more fascinating if it was sunny. As the night was closing in, we had to be content with a small two-hour's loop stumbling past lava sculptures and fuming hotspots. Already on the way in, we had made several stops and each was equally rewarding.

Landmannalaugar made us feel the power of nature and to us it's still unbelievable how volcanic activity can shape such a vast landscape. We spent about 4 hours in this weird scenery that was awesome as far as we could see and we really wanted to come back on the next morning. But then rain was already pouring down behind Hekla volcano whereas it looked clear to the east where the next natural wonders were awaiting us.





## The golden circle

So we went on to visit Bruarhlöt Canyon where the brown rocks had been carved by water into rounded shapes with some pinnacles left standing. It was fed by Hvitá, the same river that thunders through the impressive Gullfoss waterfall some kilometres upstream.



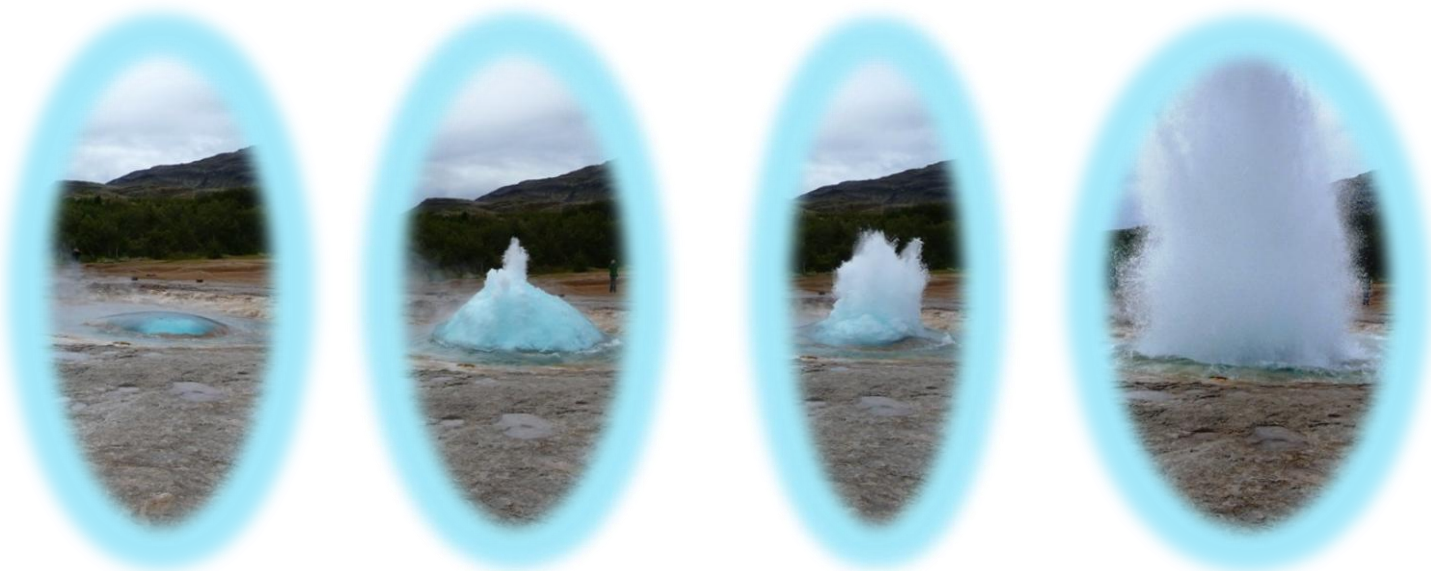
Very soon we stood atop this mighty waterfall. Gullfoss is a spectacular double cascade that creates a huge curtain of spray while it drops down 32 metres. Interestingly the spray got less the closer we were to the falls but we reached the lee side only after we got wet. At first an impressively wide wall of water tumbles over a few steps before thundering down the second cascade. The flow is quicker than the eye can follow and the water rushes away through a narrow ravine below.

High above Gullfoss was a big souvenir and coffee shop where we enjoyed our mid-afternoon sugar fix up.

Only 9 km on, the mother of all Geysers awaited us. This spewing water fountain was named Geysir by Icelanders and as the rest of the world didn't come up with a better word, it was

adopted and now they all are "Geysirs". In fact these days it's a bit decrepit and mostly dormant (because 1950 silly tourists threw rocks into the spring). Luckily it has trained an apprentice and today it's Strokkur who pleases tourists with its outbursts of hot water. Its plume isn't nearly as high as Geysir's: only around 15-30 metres versus 40-80 metres Geysir did in its heydays.

Tourists are still happy with Strokkur as it bursts out every few minutes anew. It is quite fascinating to look into what appears at first like a giant plug-hole. Then it starts boiling and a bit of water appears sometimes moving up and down again. Then a giant blue water bubble builds up before it bursts and shoots up into the air. The steamy plume quickly cools off in the air and falls back down the drain but sometimes repeats the show within a few seconds only. Geysers eruptions occurs when boiling water within the geyser, trapped by cooler water above it, explodes, forcing its way to the surface. It's addictive to watch this process again and again.



Those two geysers are part of a geothermal area with some more worthwhile sights. Also clear hotsprings, steaming vents and colourful deposits could be seen. Also here, tracks and boardwalks were erected, info-boards were placed and where necessary, barriers mounted. Despite all the efforts to make nature easy accessible to humans, nobody asks for an entrance fee to any of Iceland's great Nature parks! In Contrary; even parking lots are provided for free. Only near the touristiest sights, as here along the Golden Circle, souvenir-shops and cafeterias were available for Tourists to spend at least some money...

## The world is rifting apart

Now we continued to the Golden Circle's twofold attraction: Þingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park. Historically it has importance, because that's where Iceland's first large landowners became chieftains and established already in the year 930 an annual assembly. It voted in the style of a democratic congress and is recorded as the world's first democratic parliament; the Alþing.

This parliament might have bonded Icelanders together but at the same site, the world is indeed tearing apart. Geologically [Þingvellir](#) is one of only two places on earth where the movement of tectonic plates can be studied on land (also in Rift Valley systems East Africa). The crustal plates of North America and Eurasia are continuously rifting apart, relentlessly dividing Iceland into three pieces (the North American plate splits in a main- and sub-plate right here). Normally the plates drift apart slowly (7mm/year) but an earthquake can move it several metres at any one time. The [movement of the tectonic plates](#) over millions of years is astonishing. Scientists believe that Europe and Africa had been in today's Antarctica, whereas Down Under used to be up over.

Geographically most Icelanders and all Greenlanders belong to North America, no arguing about that! To illustrate the tectonic rift, a sunken walking path leading to a visitors centre was laid at Thingvellir. It gives you the illusion to be with one leg on the European and with the other on the American continent but the graben floor is actually 10-25 km wide. Seeing the valley formed by the rift does not mean you see down into the magma chambers, it looks rather ordinary: a wide flat plain with rivers, lakes and meadows framed by cliff-like walls, but knowing what's going on here makes you awestricken.

Soon we were near Reykjavik again, thus completing the Golden Circle. By the evening we passed a little cottage near Akranes and spontaneously decided to stay there.

Like most Icelanders, also our Landlords were fluent in English, which makes travelling much easier, as we found Icelandic is quite hard to learn. Shopping at supermarkets was easy, as many products were labelled in various languages, sometimes omitting Icelandic.

That evening we didn't feel like cooking but couldn't find a cosy restaurant either, so we ended up at Quiznos Sub's. The price for a sandwich seemed a bit inflated but as we felt really hungry, we ordered a "set" containing two subs and a drink. Oh my Gosh! We have never ever seen such giant sandwiches! The left-overs easily lasted for another meal, as did the 2 litre soft drink.

The next day we moved north towards [Snæfellsnes Peninsula](#). At first the road followed the coastline but this highway had much more traffic than we were used to in Iceland. Therefore we had to concentrate more on the road than on the landscape. After Borganes the traffic eased and we passed through pastoral landscapes with solitary farms again. Just 500m off the main road we reached an unusual wall of basalt columns named Gerðuberg. It was about 2 km long and had a respectable height. Further along the same gravel road we reached the small volcano crater Raudhals. It was possible to walk up to its 100m high rim stumbling over red volcanic gravel and coming back through tick moss next to it that was now almost covered by black crowberries. When we continued further west we passed the picturesque settlement of Staðastaður that glowed beautifully in the sun behind a lake.



## Ramshackle houses and swanky cars

Soon it was time to look for accommodation and so we asked at the golf resort for sleeping bag accommodation. You might think we got funny looks but the "Hippie guy" behind the reception desk referred us to his sister's place. She had just renovated an old ramshackle building and now offered some 15 beds as backpacker's rooms. She told us that she has not advertised at all so far, but her guesthouse filled up every night during summer; with guest that got there the same way we did. From the inside the guesthouse was top notch with very charming and tastefully decorated big rooms. There was a generous common area with a big kitchen. From the outside you wouldn't believe it's the same building. The cracks in the wall were not even buffed up with paint – because it had gone a long time ago! This was maybe the most extreme example, but in Iceland we often stayed in houses that looked neat and snug inside but rather ramshackle from the outside. It seems the locals attach more importance to the coziness of their house's interior, rather than to the looks of its exterior.





If it comes to cars, it seems to be vice versa rather. Icelanders love big swanky cars. Big foot (cars with really oversize wheels) are widespread and what's commonly referred to as "normal car" is a 4x4 and not a simple 2-wheel drive. Big foots might be an advantage to cross deep rivers up in the highlands but along most gravel roads we had seen, there were big signs forbidding off road driving to protect the fragile environment but we heard the locals get suddenly blind, when encountering such note boards. Crossing a big foot often meant we had to drive to the side as their tyres hardly had space on one lane and their drivers don't like to slow down.

More about the weird driving habits of Icelandic big foot pilots can be found in the Wall Street Journal Article below: [http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB120967501403860475-0B7pYr2MpFE8NTWomYanD6CGHfI\\_20080601.html](http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB120967501403860475-0B7pYr2MpFE8NTWomYanD6CGHfI_20080601.html) unless you own such a vehicle yourself, it's very amusing reading stuff.

## Snæfellsnes Peninsula

There were many sights waiting near our cosy villa ramshackle, but it's been raining in the morning and so we stayed a second night. Our landlady had given us some good tips, so we first looked for the gap in the mountain Raudfeldsgja. She hadn't exaggerated: we really had to enter through a crack; it was barely 1 metre wide. The two cliff walls were that much engulfed, we couldn't see all the way up to the sky. It was so narrow we had to clamber over rocks in a rivulet, as there was no space for a path. The gap must have been formed by a very powerful waterfall that was now absent. We were amazed by this sight but by another fact as well: many birds (probably Kittiwakes) breed in the vertical cliff face around this chasm and several birds perched here, obviously fallen down. How can this be? They had broken legs or wings but tried to defend themselves when we marginalized them while passing in the narrow gorge.

After seeing a glimpse of the red sand beach near Budavik and passing some lava sculptures of Stapafell volcano we had Coffee and Cake at the little seaside Café in Hellnar. The rocky beach below was full of round stones in grey and black, with some spectacular rock formations towering above them. Arches, caves and basalt columns were all formed by a dramatic lava flow. Away from the beach, the lava was covered in a velvety layer of thick moss.

Several small wooden churches could be seen around Snæfellsnes Peninsula. When our Landlady told us that regular worships are held in all of them, we thought she must be kidding. We know that Icelanders are very religious and many small settlements have a church, but in these isolated surroundings we thought, it must be near empty still, even if everybody does go to church. She then explained that the priest and the church choir congregate every Sunday in another community.

The pretty little church by the sea where she got married could be seen in the distance through our window. Right next to it was Hotel Búðir but they were the only two buildings for miles. What a fortunate coincidence; its restaurant is reputed to be "THE place to be"! Our guide-book mentioned that "if you're going to splash out at any point on your trip, this is the place to do it"! And so we did! We enjoyed an excellent 5 course dinner (8'100 ISK; €48.-) in a gourmet restaurant, which was full to the rim indeed.

More rocky attractions could be viewed along the coast. The natural harbour of Arnarstapi was partly sheltered with fascinating volcanic rock formations that had been integrated into the man made jetty. All the way to nearby Hellnar the coastline was dotted with caves and arches, blow holes and unique lava formations. Just off the coast, the moods of Mother Nature created basalt columns that are arranged vertically or horizontally in a way that they look like "pallets with bricks" or "stacks of logs". Seabirds were nesting anywhere on the cliffs, although most had left by now and only white droppings marked where their nests had been.



Further west on Páfubjarg (Thufuberg) there are remnants of crater Lóndrangar, which has been eroded by the sea. Today two columns are left, of which the higher one is 75m tall.

Before we left the southern part of Snæfellsnes Peninsula the clouds were lifting giving us a glimpse of the icecap that covers Snæfellsjökull volcano.

On the western tip were two small volcanoes of which the first: Holaholar, is a drive-in and the second: Saxhöll, a climb-up crater.

Along the north coast the road was still flanked by high volcanic mountain ranges. It was very scenic but as it was rainy now, we didn't stop very often except for lunch and some shopping in Grundarfjörður. Overnight we stayed in Stykkisholmur which is one of the prettier villages in the country.

## Eating in Iceland

Generally speaking, we ate very well in Iceland! Even something simple is normally well prepared. Lunch or snacks can easily be found in most settlements of a certain size, though there can be quite some kilometres between them. Most petrol stations offer not only fast-food but also a “meal of the day” normally for below ISK 1’500 (€ 9). This can be a buffet or a plate of good traditional fare and is generally available for dinner as well. Everything is normally freshly prepared. A grilled sandwich stuffed with cheese, freshly stir-fried bacon and salad is a real fast-food treat. Even self-caterers can eat in style while on the run. Many grocery stores provide a sitting area where customers are welcome to consume on the premises.

Finding a gourmet meal is easy in Iceland. It’s not cheap but since the collapse of the Krona it’s become also affordable to commoners from abroad. Quality and preparation are fanciful and innovative. Just as with guesthouses also gourmet temples don’t always look that inviting from the outside. Some fancy restaurants are situated in rather nondescript sheds of industrial estates but still cook superb and offer a cosy atmosphere inside.



## Westfjords

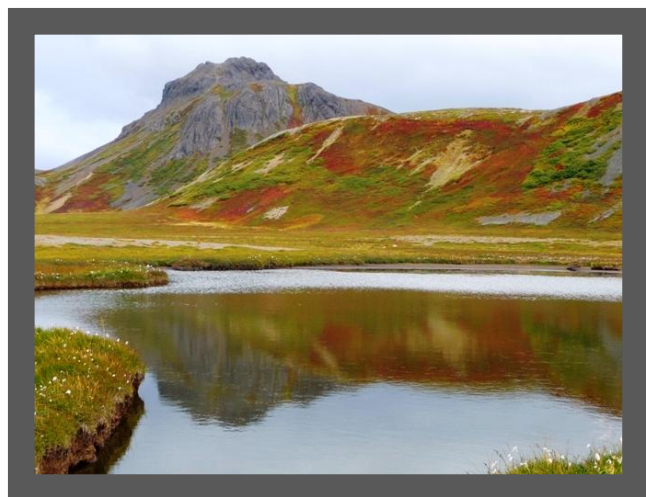
On September 6<sup>th</sup> we continued to explore the [Westfjords](#) and the road skirted fjords as soon as we approached them. Along Breidafjörður the hills were covered in the first autumn colours. On wind protected hills blueberries and dwarf birch of half a metre height were getting yellow and red. Here we saw people pick berries but all over Iceland, tons of blueberries must be remaining on the bush. For most mountainous areas moss and lichen were the only things growing well but they don’t manage to cover the stonily ground.



Stony are also many of the roads in the Westfjords, like the narrow road down to Rauðisandur. This beach is famous for its reddish sand backed by a blue lagoon. As we arrived late in the afternoon and during low tide the colour of the sand didn’t seem that reddish. On the other hand, the peaks of the mountains that were getting befogged were shimmering majestically. So we drove to the end of the road and enjoyed the mystical scenery. Due to the arising mist and also because the birds, namely Puffins, had left their nests, we didn’t go to the famous bird cliffs at Látrabjarg.

In Patreksfjörður we spent the night in another top notch guest house that looked rather run down from the outside. We were often amazed how many modern churches we came across. Iceland is probably the only country where such an old institution as the church has such modern buildings.

Contrary to the forecast, the weather was still beautiful on the next day and so we continued northwards to Ísafjörður. This part of the fjordlands was dominated by narrow gravel roads but we were rewarded with most spectacular views all the way. The approach to Bíldudalur was as pretty as a picture. Colourful mosses and sometimes blueberry shrubs could be seen around the steel blue fjords. Often the opposite shore was only a couple of kilometres away but it was always a long beautiful drive around a fjord-arm to get there. Driving in the Westfjords certainly requires time but it’s worth it indeed. Volcanic mountains were reflecting in the water along our way. After descending from a high plateau suddenly Dynjandifoss, a picturesque waterfall came into sight. We now realized that we had been driving over the river that feeds it just above the escarpment where the water starts to thunder down. It plunges over the entire mountain side in several steps. In early summer this wide waterfall must be even more powerful than now. Sometimes the road was cut into very steep slopes in the mountain and it was so narrow and bended that we just hoped no other car would approach in a blind curve. Shortly before Ísafjörður the road was sealed again, flat but also wet, as it started to rain.





With 3'500 inhabitants, Ísafjörður is the biggest settlement in the Westfjords. We enjoyed walking down the streets lined with old houses, of which many had decorated windows, just like in Scandinavia. In the newly beautified centre there were shops and even the luxury of two bakeries to choose from. Most Icelandic villages are too small for a bakery and sometimes fresh bread is airlifted in on scheduled flights from the capital. Until this bread arrives it's usually even too late for OUR breakfast, despite we hardly ever rise early!

On the next morning we had a quick look at the grass roofed sheds of the (closed) fish museum in Bolungarvík where fish hangs to dry. Then we had a long day zig-zagging out of the fjords back to the ringroad. It was raining on and off but sometimes the landscape was glooming very intensely in the few sunrays that made it through the clouds.

## Vatsnes Peninsula

After a night in a cottage belonging to a Youth hostel in the middle of nowhere, we left the ringroad again and set off to explore Vatsnes Peninsula, as we couldn't be without gravel roads anymore. The first thing we stopped for was the tidy sheep gathering place at Hvammarsrett. The wooden fence looked like an egg-shaped section of an orange and its location above the sea was very scenic. It was deserted but soon the sheep will be gathered from the mountains where they graze freely during summer.

Soon we saw the first signs hinting there might be seals on the beach. However there were none. What a disappointment; proper signposting but no seals! Otherwise it's rather vice versa in Iceland: superb sites but no signposting. If there is a sign, it's often in Icelandic only.



Iceland is as diverse as the world and therefore tourists would like to stop every few hundred metres.

Unfortunately this is not always that easy, unless you insolently stop in the middle of the road. The carriageway is often raised with no, or very soft shoulders and turnoffs to small side roads are often very narrow and it is very difficult to see them in advance. With a small car as ours it's barely possible to turn off to one of those small side roads but with a bigger vehicle, like a camper van, you can't even think about it.

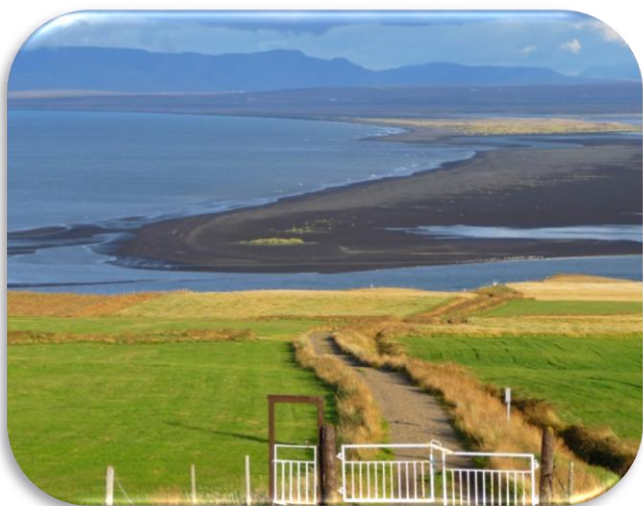
Soon there was another "seal spot" and there we were lucky, albeit we had to endure a shower. At Ilugastadir the Farmer has opened his land to the public and laid out a path down to a spot where seals often laze. A small camping and kiosk give him some income in summer. To watch the seals is for free and there were quite a lot of them. About 20 seals could be seen on a sandbar and on rocks some twenty metres off shore. Every now and then one would swim past in the water below us.

In Iceland not only the landscape, also the weather is everything else than boring; in the meantime the sun was shining again. Around the tip of the peninsula we found the 15 metres high sea-stack Hvitserkur. With its two

arches it looks almost like a giant freestanding M in the water but at low tide the rock can be reached from the beach. Walking from here for a few hundred metres southwards, another seal colony could be seen. Though the sandbar where they laze was further away, there were much more animals and often they swam very close along the beach.



As we loved this spot and the Osar Youth Hostel happened to be only a few hundred metres away, we decided to stay overnight, although we had only driven 50 km today. A vast black sandbar that stretched for miles was a stark contrast to the golden corn fields and green meadows glooming in the evening sun. This sandbar stretched all the way to the next big peninsula: Skagi.



## Discovering the North coast

Next day we visited Sauðárkrókur where fishing and fish drying was big business. By the harbour was a vast area with wooden racks, about 4 metres high that were used to dry fish. Bodies and heads were hanging on different racks, the latter neatly arranged on strings. We had already heard that Icelanders eat sheep head and we had met several tourists who had seen them peering out of supermarket freezers, but we wonder: who's gonna eat dried fish head?

Tröllaskagi Peninsula was next along our route. It's a maze of craggy mountains rather than the gentle hills that are typical for northern Iceland. As everywhere with chances of heavy snow and harsh road conditions during winter, there were tiny emergency huts situated near the saddles. They all connect by radio to a rescue service and have heaters. Shortly before we reached the tip of the peninsula a bright orange light house that looked a bit like a small castle was dominating a prominent cliff.



The small village Siglufjörður at the end of the road has a big history. It was founded by Norwegians after big herring stocks were found at the end of the nineteenth century. The herring caused a “gold rush”, workers streamed in and the population inflated to 10'000 during its heydays in the fifties. Icelanders despised herring and would not even call it fish, even less eat it - but making business with it, was another story! The ever more sophisticated methods to catch the fish finally backfired and stocks diminished. By 1969 no schools of herring returned at all.

Nowadays Siglufjörður is a charming place with about 1'300 people remaining. Sometimes Mother Nature is not very kind to them and mud slides and avalanches have killed people in the past. To prevent further incidents an avalanche control structure has been put in place, designed by WSL, the “Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research”.

Today we noticed people rounding up sheep everywhere. Mid afternoon we passed a sheep auction where the furry beasts were bleating and the people were enjoying the gathering. It was very interesting watching for a while. Even though it was certainly still 10°C warm, many women wore knitted Icelandic pullovers. They are very popular among locals and tourists alike.

In the evening we arrived in [Akureyri](#), the country's second largest “city”. With 17'000 inhabitants it is still a small place but after travelling through the remote places further west it felt like being back in real civilisation again. We enjoyed the shopping street in the centre, plus there were a number of bigger shops at the outskirts. In comparison to European cities, the selection was not that outstanding but for Iceland it was quite diverse.

Although there were more shops here than anywhere else outside Reykjavik, the number of different supermarkets was limited to two, so Icelanders have very little choice of different brands. It's not that the selection was poor but there was really just Bónus or Samkaup. Of course, on a sparsely populated island with only 300'000 inhabitants, you cannot expect the same competitive choice as on a densely populated continent. Not long ago, before the Icelandic Krona collapsed, people used to fly out for shopping trips but meanwhile this has become unaffordable to most.

## Country in the crisis

As you certainly have heard Iceland is de facto bankrupt since autumn 2008. It happened just a few weeks after we had decided to go there. To our big surprise we didn't notice anything of it, once we were there. The exchange rate, which was now much more favourable, was congenial to us; no complaints about that! We got twice as many Kroners for our Swiss Franc than if we would have been here two years earlier. Iceland was still not a “cheap country” to travel but it was now slightly more economical than France or Spain.

The Icelanders we talked to about it were mainly working in tourism and didn't have any reason to complain either; tourism boomed this year. Hotels were happy as guests consumed much more in their restaurants. Tourists visited in much bigger numbers (they doubled according to a tourist office employee). They arrived earlier but left later in the season. In previous years, tourist accommodations had been near empty after August 12<sup>th</sup> but now, hostels still filled up to the rim even late September.





We were told that, in previous years most visitors had saved and arranged for their trip long in advance, fulfilling an eagerly awaited dream, whereas in 2009 a different bunch of people flocked to Iceland. Much more young people arrived and they usually came on short notice. Also different nations were coming strong. Especially French, Italian and even more Spanish came in much bigger numbers. During August you could enter almost any restaurant and you would hear Spanish. In fact, we probably spoke to more Spaniards here in Iceland than during our year in Andalusia. Contrary to their habits at home, they mostly went for dinner early – much earlier than we did.

Icelanders complained that prices of imported goods rose dramatically - but we could tell them that many of those (luxury) products were still cheaper in their shelves than in the country of origin. We shouldn't talk about Spanish oranges again but in Iceland they cost like 300 ISK per kilo which is €1.80.

At the end of 2009, the Krona was still not freely convertible, which restricts locals to buy hard currency but tourists can buy as many Kroner's as they like. We didn't need much cash anyway, as really everyone pays everything by credit card, even small items. To take Kroner's out of the country isn't advisable at all, as they will hardly have any value elsewhere.

We couldn't figure out how the exchange rate is set and locals don't seem to worry about it. Somehow they don't worry about the crisis too much anyway. Hardest hit are those who had their mortgage in a foreign currency to avoid Iceland's high interest rates. Their debt tripled within a few months. As foreign debts are currently frozen they don't worry too much how to re-pay. They just go ahead, increase their credit-card bills even further and wait for better times to come... The upmarket shopping centre Kringlan in Reykjavik was very busy by all means. On the other hand, car sales have plummeted dramatically but then we've heard about cunning foreigners, ordering new cars in Iceland and bringing them on the car-ferry (back) to the European continent.

In Iceland literacy, longevity and social cohesion are first-rate by world standards. The country has also the highest rate of internet users (66%) and therefore internet access was usually available for free even in budget accommodation.

## Hotspot Krafla

When we left Akureyri the weather was in a good mood and we enjoyed our drive along the deep blue fjord. By lunchtime we arrived in Reykjahlíð where we got a room in a guesthouse. With only 200 permanent inhabitants this settlement functions as the tourist capital of the Mývatn area. Mývatn translates to midge water or simply: Mosquito Lake. In summer swarms of these essential food sources for fish (eating their larvae) and ducks (eating them alive) are driving tourists insane. Due to the predominantly strong winds we didn't get bothered even by the last of these blood suckers around. On the other hand, this wind was often so strong it was almost impossible to take pictures that were in focus as we couldn't hold the camera still.



The Mývatn region is a star attraction on any tourist itinerary and everything is somehow related to volcanic activity. Our drive to Krafla Volcano was fascinating all the way, so we stopped many times. First we passed a small lake with intensive turquoise blue colour, embedded in a brownish but mysteriously also colourful landscape. A little above it was a mountain that has been torn or blown apart, reminding us of Mt. Tarrawera in New Zealand. In the background Hverfell Volcano dominated with its classical ring of loose lava gravel.

Near the old villain Krafla, people make use of its power by tapping the steam at Köflustöð geothermal power station. The construction didn't go as smooth as planned. At first engineers were a bit too ambitious; one borehole should be enough to power the entire station

but when they hit the steam chamber it exploded and left a giant crater, later named “manmade hell” (Sjálfskpar Viti). Now the same work is done by 17 boreholes and the landscape is dotted with aluminium-igloos that cover them.

It is possible to hike around Krafla’s main-crater’s rim with a diameter of 320m and a deep lake in its centre. Behind the crater is an area of mudpools, steaming vents and colourful ponds.

Krafla is not a typical cone shaped volcano but a largely level system of fissures underplayed by a huge magma chamber that has erupted several times in the past, often adding a new crater to the Krafla area. A series of destructive outbursts of lava started in 1724. Until 1729 there were several new triggers, some of which lasted up to two years. Presently the ground surface is raising, indicating future activities.

Another section; Leirhnjúkur was made accessible to tourists with a circular hiking track. Standing on its highest point, we had vast views over several solidified lava flows back to the main crater we had just visited. From Gjastykki some 20km north, an outflow from a fissure has sent a river of molten lava down to and also over Myvatn Lake in 1724. Around here it was overlaid in places by recent outflows from 1975 and again from between 1981 - 1984.

The path at Leirhnjúkur led directly into solidified lava flows with intertwined tubes and burst bubbles of which exposed layers often appeared reddish. As it was fuming in certain parts, it looked as if the lava was only just cooling. This created a mystical picture, as if mist was hovering above the uneven black surface. In some parts, moss was already taking over the lava which was another indicator how old the lava flow was.



## Sights around Myvatn



On the next day we first visited Hverir geothermal area below Námafjall ridge. Large boiling mud pools, colourful sulphur deposits and fumaroles (steaming volcanic holes) dominated the fascinating landscape.

Following the tourist flow, we drove to Dimmuborgir lava field that looks like a huge natural sculpture park. There were weird looking pinnacles, high arches and other fascinating sculptures. The star attraction was called “kirkjan” a dome-like lavatunnel of about 6 metres high.

The site was wind sheltered and so we could enjoy the temperatures that had risen to 17°C again. As it was so protected, lots of trees and bushes were growing, which is rare in otherwise almost treeless Iceland. They were now spoiling us with the nicest autumn colours though it was only September 13<sup>th</sup>. This was Heinz’ 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and so we went for a second time during our week at Myvatn Lake to enjoy a nice meal at Hotel Reyhlið’s restaurant. At around ISK 4’600 (€ 27), they offer some excellent set dinners serving local specialities as lamb or salmon.

Some more deciduous and coniferous trees in beautiful autumn colours awaited us on the south-eastern shores of Mývatn at the nature park Höfði. Apart from the pleasant forest there were some interesting lava pillars rising from the water.

Along the southern shore we visited the pseudocraters at Skútustaðagígar near Skútustaðir. Got it? Well, we wouldn’t wonder if Icelanders have problems pronouncing these words as well. At least they make it simpler with their own names. Unlike in Austria where old people ask newcomers the awkward question: “whom do you belong to?” the same question in Iceland would be an innocent “[what’s your name?](#)” Gunnar Einarsson reveals that Gunnar is the son of Einar and his sister Brynhildur would be Brynhildur Einarasdóttir, it’s simple as that! In practice Icelanders don’t bother with their second names, everybody calls each other by first names, be it strangers or even the president. Consequently the phonebook is sorted by first names.

Well, we got off the track as we wanted to describe pseudocraters. Although they look like perfect little volcano cones, they never had a lava outflow. They were the valves through which trapped water escaped when molten lava flowed over the lake. There are dozens of them standing around Myvatn with the biggest measuring 300m in diameter





and the smallest ones only a couple of metres. Dotted around green meadows with cattle grazing, those pseudocraters contrasted nicely with their brown, almost dry grass on the black volcanic gravel.



Along Myvatns north shores, we had seen many spots where smooth lavafloes had been uplifted and cracked like giant egg shells. We assume that if the gas explosions below would have built up more pressure, this would have resulted in some additional pseudocraters.

In 1729 a lava flow threatened to swallow the village of Reykjahlíð after it already destroyed some farms. Everybody was terrified and gathered in the church. They must have prayed really fervently; the lava stopped just at the church yard.

As most places where we stayed, also Guesthouse Eldá still filled up every night, even though it is quite large. Now in September, it was at least possible to get a room without prior reservation, as long as you arrived quite early. In the beginning of August this wouldn't have been possible, but luckily then we had bookings. Eldá had a small communal kitchen, so we got together with the other guests. One night somebody burst into the house and shouted: "Northern Lights! Northern Lights can be seen; common everybody out!" About 20 people rushed out, gazing at this natural spectacle until they got cold.

## Jökulsárgljúfur National Park

Next on our agenda was Jökulsárgljúfur, a National Park famous for its spectacular waterfalls and the mighty 30km long gorge carved out by the river Jökulsá á Fjöllum. Floodings from volcanic eruptions beneath Vatnajökull icecap formed the canyon to an impressive average width of 500m and depth of 100m.

Dettifoss's spray welcomes visitors already at the carpark but once you're at the edge where the water thunders down, it's dry again – but you are not. The plume of spray is carried up by the wind and can be seen from far away. In average an impressive 193 m<sup>3</sup> of water are thundering down the 44 metres every second, making Dettifoss the most powerful waterfall in Europe. As the sun came out, a beautiful rainbow appeared above the fall making it even more dramatic. Selfoss is another impressive waterfall just 1.5 km upriver. It is very scenic, much broader and framed by basalt columns though it drops only 11 metres.



Back at the carpark we decided to walk also in the other direction as there was more to be admired still. Hiking paths abound but they were unfortunately not always that well marked in Iceland. For instance above this canyon, a nice walking path led to a viewpoint above Hafragilsfoss only 2 km away but it was not signposted at all. If tourists knew they can either walk from the Dettifoss carpark for half an hour or drive for at least 6 km, many would probably hike instead of taking the car.

This walk along the rim of the canyon offered spectacular views to the river framed by reddish-yellow moss and yet another foss: Hafragilsfoss. In a natural alcove below the falls, black sand had accumulated to a bar that looked like an eye blinking in the murky grey water. It prevented the fluvial sediments to enter the alcove thus keeping the water in the farthest part of the alcove shining in an unbelievable array of blue shades.

Road 864 traverses Jökulsárgljúfur National Park and was of the roughest gravel roads we experienced so far. However, this can change quickly if a capable grader operator is upgrading the road. Only 3 hours later 10km of the same road had become "smooth as silk".



We spared the northern section of this National Park for the day after, when we left the Myvatn area. From the guide-book we knew that a horseshoe shaped canyon lay ahead of us and expected to be on top of its rim soon. We were puzzled to find ourselves driving (on a small sealed road) towards 100m high cliff walls. Only now we realized that we were actually led into the dead-end of Ásbyrgi canyon. As the horseshoe provided windshelter, birch up to 8m high grew here and presented themselves in splendid autumn colours. A nice walking path led to Botnstjörn, a pond at the very end. It had crystal clear water and everything around reflected magically on its surface.

## Along the far North-Eastern coast

Now we continued along the north east coast starting at Melrakkaslétta peninsula with its rather low hills and boggy meadows. The grass is only nice and green where it's regularly being mowed but the other sections are rather rampant and not even suitable for grazing. The lonely farms were connected by gravel roads (with some sealed sections) and lots of sheep promenading on them. The first of the few villages along our way was Kópaskr where we stopped for lunch.

After driving round the peninsula, we stayed the night in Þórshövn. This place is off the beaten tourist track and the two guesthouses were deserted. in either house. After a door to one was open and with a note how to contact nobody answered. As it is everyone knows everyone restaurant to ask. Here we „always at home“ and they why this should be back to the guesthouse and were lucky and she that she is quite unlikely to she trusted us and let us leave the money on the sleep we left the house on



Nobody answered the doorbell while we found out that the as we entered we saw a phone the caretaker. However, a small village, we assumed and headed for the local were told that the landlady is couldn't think of any reason different today. So we went phoned again. This time we answered the phone but told us come home tonight. At least have a room. We arranged to table and after a good night's its own the next morning.

This was just proof how safe Iceland is. Nobody mistrusts others and many guesthouses don't lock their doors. Crime is very rare and most dangers threatening tourists would come from unpredictable weather and other powers of nature only, if locals weren't often driving like criminals...

As we had rounded the northernmost point yesterday, our coastal-drive led us now southwards. The hills were higher again and snow patches could be seen that remained in shady spots on the mountains all summer long. In and shortly after the village Vopnafjörður rock formations of all kinds appeared. Some looked like giant walls covering hillsides, others like pinnacles or arches and were standing in the surf off shore.

Although fog was suddenly chasing us, we attempted road 917 over Hellisheiði Pass, despite the brochure's warning that its soft gravel surface might be impassable if wet. The path climbed up a volcanic mountain in a series of switchbacks and hairpin bends. Shortly after the summit we left the fog behind and a truly spectacular view opened to the other side. The milky-blue waters of Heradsfloi Bay contrasted with the black Herads-Sandur. There were more hairpins all the way down to the valley that was covered in brown-green moss. No pictures could do justice to this striking scenery!



Once down by the river, it was only a quick drive on a sealed road to Egilsstaðir, near the port where we had arrived 7 weeks ago. Here we had completed our circle around Iceland. Reason to celebrate!

We headed back to the splendid cake-buffet at the southern end of the lake after assuring ourselves that it was still open. Klausturkaffi's landlady confirmed that she has had a very good summer season, though she complained that August was much wetter than usually - then we were in sunny Greenland, luckily.



## The Eastern Fjords again

With 4 nights left, we could comfortably wait out the rainy days at a guesthouse in Egilsstaðir. As soon as the sun



reappeared we set out again and drove along the Eastern fjords to see what the fog had not revealed to us at the end of July. This time everything was presented in the best light! Wow! Even after 5 weeks travelling around Iceland, this fantastic country still opens up some new exciting vistas and in the autumn sun it looks even more beautiful.

Past the controversial Aluminium smelter in Reyðarfjörður the road had disappeared last time under the fog already at the first ascent but now it was pleasant to drive to the very end of this road. After rising up to 632m and passing a small single lane tunnel, it swung down the valley to Neskaupstaður. The views up to the mountain tops and down to the blue fjords were nothing short of breath-taking. We're so glad we came again. After this side trip we turned off to the gravel road along Faskrúdsfjörður where we enjoyed the really craggy mountains towering above the road. Different layers were visible and every now and then pinnacles were alternating with small gorges formed by creeks.

A huge sand bar was visible along the shore which we couldn't see at all last time due to bad weather. So we happily stopped where ever we wanted or could and drove to within 50km of Höfn before turning back.

We returned to Djúpvogur where we stayed again at Hotel Framtið (progress) and had another great meal. Meanwhile it was much quieter and the harbour was dominated by fishing vessels rather than the sight-seeing boats that used to venture out with tourists keen to see the birds at Papey Island.

The next day we chose the inland route over Öxipass, another narrow gravel road. Of course we expected the scenery to be totally different from the fjordlands but we were puzzled to see fresh snow on the surrounding mountain peaks. Big digital displays could regularly be seen along the roads, indicating the temperature on the coldest spot along the way ahead but here there was none!



Before reaching Egilsstaðir again, we decided to drive out to the new hydro power project where the huge Karahnjúkar dam has been completed to supply the new aluminium smelter. We came up to a high plateau that was only about 600m above sea level, the road was dry but the landscape was covered in a fresh layer of powdery snow. Looking over the snow covered highlands, we enjoyed fantastic views all the way to Vatnajökull icecap. The dramatic landscape made the drive out to the dam absolutely worthwhile and the snow only added more magic to it.



Now we drove back to Seyðisfjörður where we spent our last night in Iceland at the Youth Hostel on the fjord. It was probably the best time to leave as the pass road from Egilsstaðir had to be closed for a few hours in the early morning due to fresh snow and ice. So we were glad to be already near the port from where we enjoyed the view to freshly powdered snow peaks framing the stark blue fjord in the sunshine.

On September 25, 2009 we drove our car one last time into the hub of the big car-ferry Norröna, which sailed us back to Denmark. After a calm journey, we arrived 64 hours later back in Jutland, this time in Esbjerg.

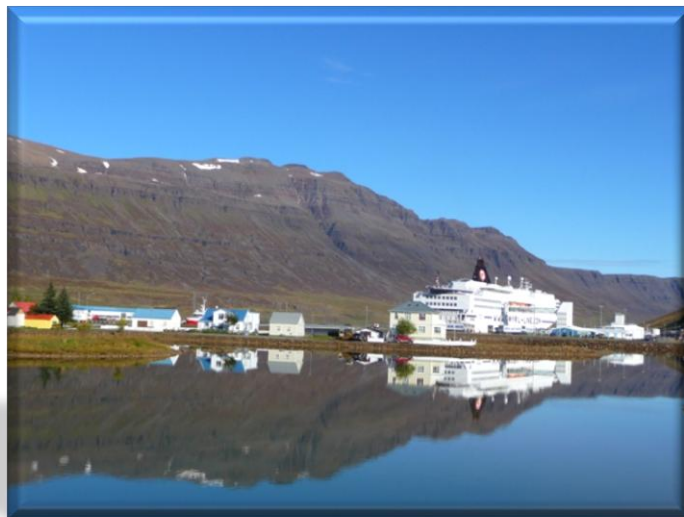
Knowing that this was the second last sailing for this season, we expected the boat to be near empty. However, it was quite full as clever marketing managed to sell so-called "Mini-Cruises" allowing passengers to take their car along. As ridiculous as it sounds (to us anyway...) this one-week cruise departing from Denmark included 6 nights at sea plus a 7<sup>th</sup> on the boat moored in the harbour in Iceland. For sight-seeing, the participants had the unique possibility for shore leave

with their own car or with an optional bus-tour at the Faroese Islands for 6 hours on the way out and again for 4 hours on the way back, plus a generous 30 hours in Iceland. Well: 30 hours in Iceland? They probably all kick themselves in the ass for not allowing more time, once they saw how beautiful it is. Might be, they were “lucky” and the weather was that bad, that they didn’t even realize what they missed. We heard the sea has been so rough on the way in, the buffet had to be cancelled. So, what do you have of such a “Mini-Cruise” apart from wasting money, brains and time?

## Final thoughts

We had the privilege to spend altogether 5 weeks on Iceland, during which we drove 5’500km. Thinking back we wouldn’t recommend anybody to visit for less than three weeks; better 4. We never ever had been to a country that offers such diversity. Sometimes every few kilometres the landscape looks totally different but spectacular again. Where else in the world can you see all this and in such proximity to each other: amazing coastline, calving glaciers, icecaps, icebergs, lava deserts, active volcanoes, steaming geothermal areas, green vegetation, just name it and you’re likely to find it. Iceland is nature at its purest and even with a 2-WD vehicle there is much more to see than your time will allow. It’s a sparsely populated country but nevertheless has excellent infrastructure making the rough nature accessible to visitors. You figure it out: we have become absolutely fond of Iceland, it’s just awesome!

Brigitte & Heinz



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