

ICELAND OVERLAND—2019

The colour blue. Iceland has it in abundance. Perhaps it's a crystal clear blue sky, an ice cold glacial pool, the deep cobalt blue waters of the open sea, the aqua marine of a hidden bay or the plunging emerald slopes of a fjord. We saw it all in a four thousand mile overland round trip to Iceland and back in our Land Rover 'Wolf' Ambulance camper. Our ambition was to experience some of the variety of landscapes of Iceland, and especially some of the bird life.

We took the ferry from Denmark to the delightful port of Seydisfjordur, on one of the Eastern fjords, with its brightly painted houses, some with characteristic turf roofs.

Iceland's interior consists of high, mountainous plateaus, volcanoes and vast tracts of arctic desert, fringed by the coast road, Route 1. We hoped to take advantage of our 4x4 capability to explore some of the tracks in and around the interior, as well as routes that are clearly marked as only being suitable for 4x4, due to the rough terrain and likelihood of driving through flowing water.

How to describe our first impressions of Iceland? It is an assault on the senses! A landscape with contrasting palettes, ranging from vibrant green moss to grey/black sandy beaches. The slopes of the fjords were lush with lower arctic alpine plants abundant in the summer months.

Iceland claims to have two seasons; winter and summer, however it felt like spring, with birds nesting and young ducklings and sea birds. In particular, on more than one occasion we experienced the wrath of Arctic Terns fiercely protecting their nesting ground. Travelling in summer we were fortunate to have average temperatures ranging between 12 and 20 degrees and, apart from regular mist hugging the fjords which resulted, frustratingly, in little or no visibility at times, we mostly had dry days.

In the south of Iceland Vatnajökull is the largest glacier in Europe. The National Park boasts glacial tongues, ice caves and lagoons of floating icebergs, some of which are

within easy reach of Route 1. On the southern shores are black sand beaches, as a result of the glacier grinding down its bedrock, and heavily eroded volcanic rock, and the surreal sight of icebergs on the beach, that have been carried down to the sea by currents, wind and tide. Beside Route 1 is the glacial lagoon, Jokulsarlon, breathtakingly beautiful with intense powder blue icebergs of incredible shapes, serenely and eerily drifting. The unique opportunity to stand beside the chilly lake and walk across the beach, which also has a



The 'Wolf' in a barren 'moonscape'

seal colony, is exceptional. It is other-worldly, except for the coach loads of tourists, making us all too aware of the impact of tourism and global warming!

We included a visit to the key tourist attractions accessible from Reykjavik,

including the thirty metre spout from Geysir, gushing from an orange mud thermal pool, with the ubiquitous stench of rotten eggs! Then to the thundering waterfalls of Gullfoss. Most notable was a visit to the Thingvellir National Park and its rift valley, which marks where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates are physically tearing apart. Geologically fascinating, with stacks of cathedral-sized columns of basalt rock, like ranks of organ pipes. We spent a night at one of the



National Park campsites, where I was able to use their excellent washing and drying machines—keeping clean is always a challenge when away for any length of time!

Next, we drove into the barren expanses of the Icelandic interior, climbing to around two thousand feet, across vast grey/red earth, scattered with rocky boulders, at times stretching out into the distance with haunting monotony, silhouettes of prehistoric peaks on the horizon, following a meandering dirt track, which took us past four glaciers including the Porisjokull ice cap. We stopped at one of the emergency huts, which we discovered was well equipped with a bunk for sleeping and food rations, should you become stranded. Then, before descending to the village of Husafell, we took a detour to ‘base camp’ beside Iceland’s second largest ice cap, Langjokull (Long Glacier). From here you can take a tour, not just onto, but inside the glacier—if you’re happy to spend well over a hundred pounds. Not for us, this time! The drive had been all the more atmospheric beneath moody black clouds. It had taken a couple of hours and we saw just two other vehicles.

A new driving route in the north of Iceland, the Arctic Coast Way, opened in June 2019. We soon discovered what it was like to drive in poor- and zero-visibility, winding our way along the dirt tracks, consistently clouded in mist, that edge these northern mesomorphic fingers of land, just below the Arctic Circle.

When the mists cleared, our eyes were free to observe, and to imagine how hard it must be to make a living in these bleak outcrops. Today, the main sources of income are from sheep, Icelandic horses—a hardy breed, unique to Iceland, and gathering and processing eider down. There was plenty of opportunity for birding, including spotting Greylag geese and Great Northern Divers. On the down side, Angus had become highly indignant at the lack of courtesy when stopping on single track roads to allow a car to pass. No smile or wave. He was determined to be over-courteous and took to saluting!



(To be continued)

Kate Cameron

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(continued from Bosham Life, January 2020, pp12-13)

As part of our 'tourist' experience, we enjoyed our first dip in a hot spring pool known as Grettislaug, beside the sea, with views across to the rocky island of Drangey, now a bird sanctuary with kittiwakes, puffins and guillemots. The water was a steaming thirty-nine to forty-two degrees centigrade! The changing facilities were somewhat basic, but it was very worthwhile, stepping cautiously down into the clear pool, to about waist deep. The basalt rock beneath was disconcertingly slimy, but this was compensated by the blissful, soft water! Subsequently, we did experience other hot springs on our journey, but this remained our favourite.

Undoubtedly, after driving part way around the Troll Peninsula, including an 11km-long road tunnel through a mountain, the highlight was the town of Siglufjordur, beside a fjord that was once Iceland's herring boomtown. Known as Siglo, it boasts brightly coloured harbour-side houses, the luxury Siglo Hotel and the Herring Era Museum, which expertly and imaginatively traces the history of the herring industry and the life of the town. The town's population would swell threefold to over ten thousand with casual labour, during a good season. The fish oil was used for familiar products such as Brylcreem, Nivea face cream and Lux soap. But, in 1969 the herring failed to appear. In the Museum's words: 'The responsibility for over exploiting the once great Norwegian-Icelandic herring stock clearly lies with the largest herring-fishing nations of the time: Norway, Iceland and Russia'.

At the most northerly point of Iceland, close to the Arctic Circle, is the 'Stonehenge of the north'. Still under construction, the ambitious 'Arctic Henge' is around fifty metres in diameter, laid out in the shape of a sundial, with six metre high stone gates. The principle of capturing the sun's rays and casting shadows is similar to the original Stonehenge, but its position in almost the most isolated point of Iceland is somewhat of a disadvantage!

On the Langanes peninsula, the most north easterly point of Iceland, is a long finger of land stretching out into the Atlantic. The abundant bird life—gannets, auks and puffins—can be viewed from an amazing promontory platform constructed to hang out from the cliff face. Beside the shore and in inland pools we viewed whooper swans, almost Jurassic with their elegant long thin necks and bright yellow beaks, and also eider ducks, black throated divers, loons (remember *On Golden Pond?*) and many other shoreline birds. We stopped at a house, open as a museum, which held a fascinating collection of home and farm artefacts. The student running it—an artist on his third summer there—made us pancakes, eaten with rhubarb jam and cream, and I also sampled the Icelandic speciality of dried fish with butter (*Hardifiskur*)—actually surprisingly palatable!

Finally, our last up-close and personal meeting with puffins was at Borgarfjordur Eystri, another isolated coastal village in the bowl of a range of mountains to the



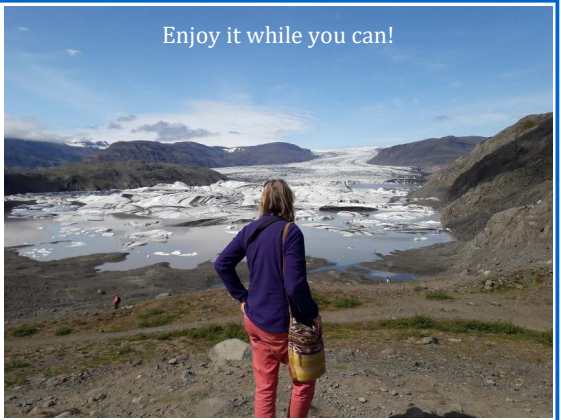
The Arctic Henge

north-east of Iceland. The highlight for me was the privilege of seeing the hundreds of puffins and nesting seabirds on the nearby headland. Like Frankie Howerd, the puffins can be heard to exclaim ‘awwww’ in a low questioning tone, from their comical portly bodies, dressed in black tailcoats and orange leggings! They are the most unlikely creatures in flight, but fearless and enchanting.

We were sad to be leaving Iceland. We’d met many fellow travellers who have been captivated by Iceland’s

diverse and inspiring landscape and the freedom to adventure overland; many have returned two or three times and more. We enjoyed testing the vehicle, driving across rivers and over some challenging 4x4 routes, particularly the day we went into the Interior to Laugerfell, driving across the lunar-like landscape (NASA used Iceland to train astronauts before the moon landings). It can’t be denied that Iceland is expensive—it’s even expensive for those who live there! We discovered that the best strategy was to find the locals’ shop or café, usually the hub of the community and best value for a coffee and homemade cake! The campsites didn’t cost any more than the UK. We met no other British road travellers, but enjoyed the companionship of many fellow travellers along the way. We found the Icelandic people are very proud of their culture. Although at first they don’t always appear friendly, Angus’ passion for the Wolf often helped to break the ice. There are many automotive/mechanical enthusiasts; and we definitely met a few Viking ancestors along the way.

There are now almost two and a half million tourists flocking to Iceland each year, although visitor numbers from the UK are one of the lowest. We feel privileged to have taken this trip, but it’s difficult to avoid the clear and stark reminders of global warming in a land where the ice caps are melting. As I write this article, news of a photography project by a team of photographers from Scotland and Iceland has highlighted the extent of ice loss from Iceland’s glaciers. Based on images taken on the



Enjoy it while you can!



The ‘Wolf’ in its element!

south side of the Vatnajokull ice cap, an area we visited, it reported that the country’s glaciers have retreated by a total of about 750 sq km since 2000, and are losing an average of 40 sq km each year. In a short online video the reporter ended: ‘unless something changes soon, seeing and experiencing Iceland’s iconic glaciers is a privilege that few further generations will have the chance to enjoy’.

Kate Cameron