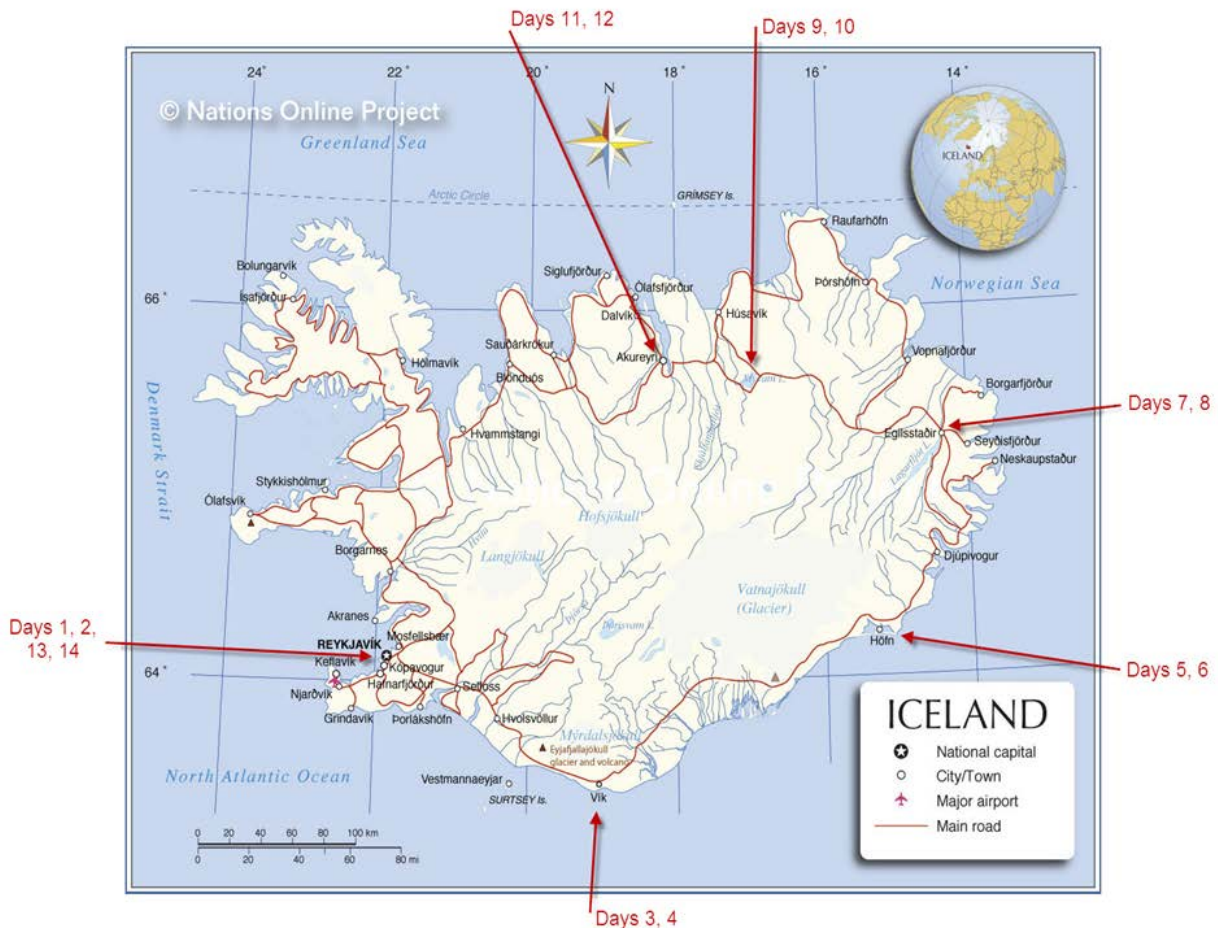


Travels in Iceland

Maxine and Peter
June 2016



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Peter Aitken and Maxine Okazaki

In June 2016 we took a two-week vacation in Iceland and this is our photo journal. The photos here are from both of us except for bird photos, which are Maxine's.

Why Iceland? We are both more interested in the "nature" vacation than the "city" vacation. Don't get us wrong, we have had great times visiting some very interesting cities—London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, Madrid, Sydney, Chicago, Kyoto, and Venice, to name a few—but as we get older we find that we would rather be

tromping through a canyon or forest than a crowded street or museum. Plus, good friends had visited there recently and reported a great experience.

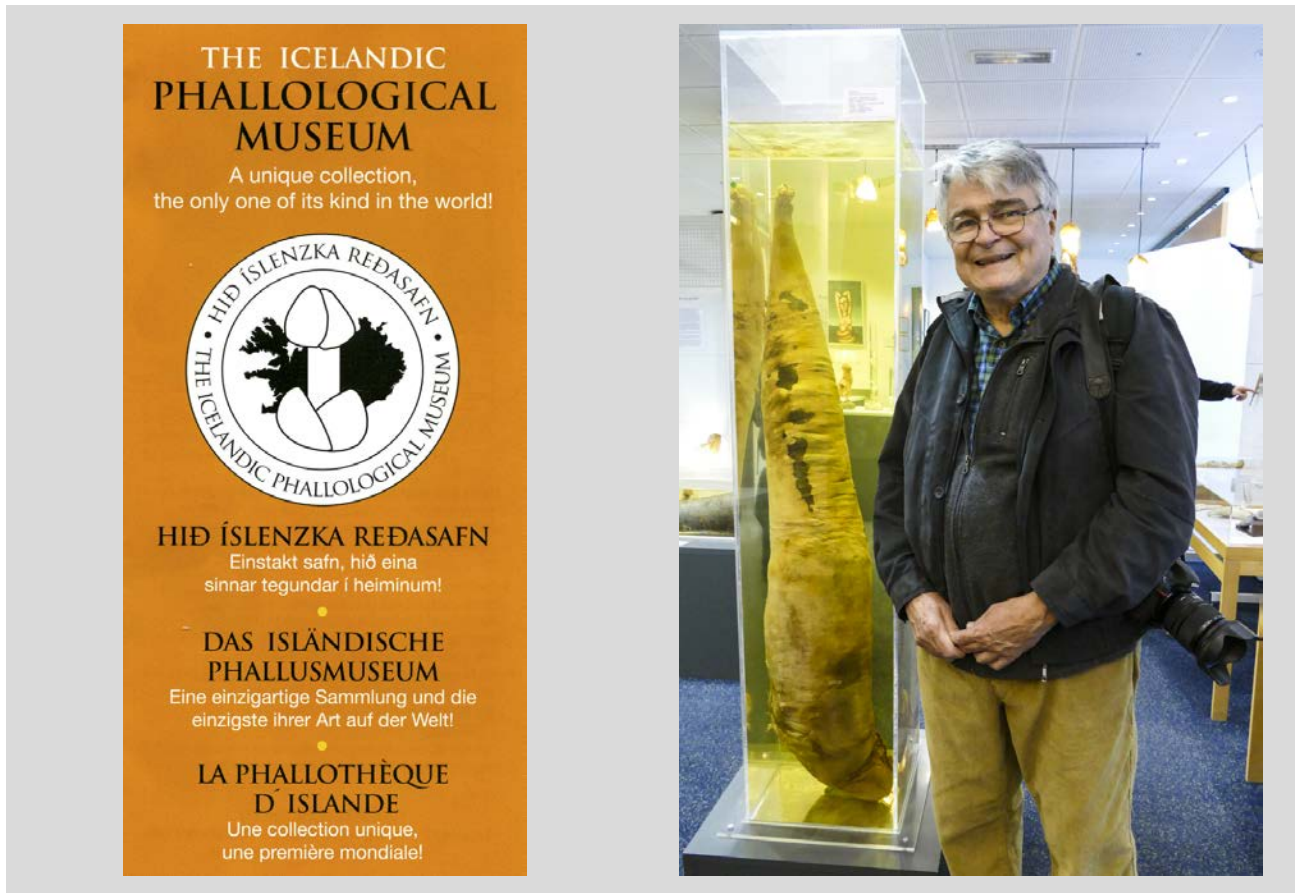
Not wanting to be herded with 50 other people on a bus, we did a drive-yourself tour where a rental car and hotel reservations are provided by a tour company. This allowed us to go where we wanted, stay as long as we wanted, and choose our restaurants. We used IcelandTours.is and were very happy with the service.

June 12:

We left Chapel Hill the morning of June 11th and by the time we flew to Iceland and got to our hotel in Reykjavik it was 1:30 AM local time on June 12th (they are 4 hours later than us). But it was not dark, mind you, at this time of year the sun sets at about 11:55 PM and rises at about 3:00 AM, so it's never actually dark. We felt like it was 9:30 PM so we were fine but famished. Of course all the regular restaurants were long closed, but fortunately there was an N1 gas station across the street that served passable burgers so we did not starve.

In the morning we did our best to get up early to help reset our clocks. The first stop, a few blocks from our hotel, was the Phallogological Museum. Yes, you read that right, it is the Penis Museum. Unique to Iceland, this small place has on display the preserved penises of all the land and sea mammals found in Iceland, from whales and polar bears to cats and mice. They even persuaded the Icelandic National Handball Team to have their members cast in bronze for display. They also have a collection of penis-themed knick-knacks, such as corkscrews, salt and pepper sets, and ashtrays, and a truly unique gift shop. The photo below shows Peter with a sperm whale penis. Learn more at www.phallus.is.





The rest of our day was spent walking around this relatively small town—and, if we are honest, not all that interesting town. Plenty of shops and restaurants, a few architecturally interesting buildings, a small port with whale tours and other touristy stuff, a beautiful symphony hall/convention center (which at “night” is beautifully illuminated), and a large flea market which was uninteresting except for the food section, which was full of traditional Icelandic foods. We could not resist buying some *hardfiskur*, a favorite snack that we had read about in an Iceland-based mystery that we both enjoyed (written by Arnaldur Indriðason). Hardfiskur is simply made by drying the fillets of cod or any other non-fatty fish and then, once they are completely dry and hard, pounding them into shreds with a wooden mallet. It can be used in soups and other dishes but is most commonly eaten, dipped in butter, as a snack. We are pleased to report that it tastes exactly like fish-flavored cardboard, but not quite as tasty.



Our further walks took us to a fairly uninteresting harbor, a nice “fish and chips” place for lunch (try to get wolf fish anywhere else but Iceland!), and along the waterfront where there’s a modernistic sculpture symbolizing the ships the original Viking settlers used. Then we took a taxi to pick up our rental car—and were happy to realize that after 15 years of automatic transmissions we had not forgotten how to drive a stick (although we did stall a few times).

Dinner was at, of all things, a tapas restaurant that was highly recommended by the hotel staff. It was excellent, with a fusion of traditional tapas items that would not have been out of place in Spain and other dishes that melded the “small plate” idea with local ingredients.



Reykjavik's symphony hall and convention center



Commemorating the Viking settlers



Statue of cellist at symphony hall

June 13:

This was the day to drive to Vik, our next stay over. Believe me, “Vik” is a record for short Icelandic place names, with tongue twisters like Kirkjubaejarklauster and Hraunhafnartangi more the norm. On the way to Vik, we drove part of the Golden Circle, a popular day trip from Reykjavik. First stop, Þingvellir National Park (the Icelandic “þ” character is pronounced “th”).

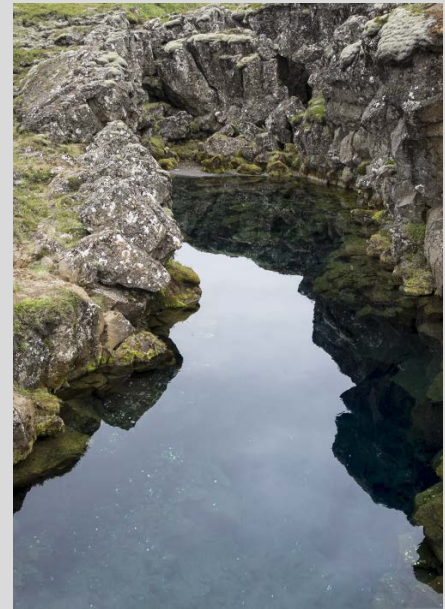
This park is especially meaningful to Icelanders because their Parliament first met there in the year 930. It is home to the beautiful lake Þingvallavatn (the “vatn” suffix denotes a lake). We saw quite a few people preparing to scuba dive in the lake. We asked and learned that this lake has the clearest water of any natural lake anywhere, with fantastic visibility, and a good assortment of interesting geological formations. It was a fairly gray day so unfortunately our photos really do not do justice to this lovely lake.



Pingvallavatn

Þingvellir also has some beautiful waterfalls, streams, and—as most everywhere in Iceland—interesting volcanic rocks. We were there during springtime so there was usually an abundance of wildflowers. The park is also known for its fissures, large cracks in the rock caused by past volcanic activity. Many of the fissures are filled with the clearest water and/or lined with greenery.





Near the waterfall in Þingvellir we found a portion of a historic Icelandic village that has been restored. We were particularly taken by the small church, with its very limited seating capacity, giving some idea of the size of the original community.



The next popular attraction on the Golden Circle was Geysir where there are, you guessed it, a couple of geysers. The English word in fact derives from the old Norse word *geysa* which means simply to spout or gush. This geyser is very irregular and it has stopped completely for years at a time. A nearby smaller geyser is more predictable. We gave this attraction a pass because we heard that is highly commercialized and very crowded.

Next up was Gullfoss, a truly spectacular waterfall on the Hvítá river. You can view it from an overlook and also from a vantage point right beside the cascade where, depending on the wind, you may get soaked by the spray. We were fortunate to have a full rainbow on display during our visit. The thunder of the water was most impressive. At this time of year (late June) the snow is still melting off the mountains and the rivers are full.



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After Gullfoss we headed southeast to our next destination, the town of Vik on the south coast. It is the most southerly town in Iceland and also gets the most rain, although we were fortunately spared. While Vik is on the coast, it is not a fishing village. Our “hotel” was more of a guest house, having only seven rooms. It is a renovated elementary school that was attended by the two brothers who built and run the guest house. There’s a certain charm to looking out the window and seeing sheep grazing!

Vik is not exactly a culinary hotspot, but we were pleasantly surprised by dinner at an unlikely “bar and bistro” tucked away behind the town’s one gas station. In addition to the more mundane fare, they had some traditional Icelandic fare and it was very good. Maxine had broiled arctic char and I had a sampler that included smoked char and cured lamb.

The restaurant was only about ¼ mile from the beach so after dinner we wandered down. We had our first close encounter with the lupines, beautiful purple flowers that grow seemingly everywhere in Iceland. They are an invasive species, having been imported years ago to help control the erosion that results from sheep grazing. It’s quite impressive, you’ll see entire fields and mountainsides covered with them.

We also walked on our first black sand beach and saw the *Reynisdrangar*, basalt sea stacks that stand just off the coast. In Icelandic lore, the Reynisdrangar are trolls who were dragging their troll ship to shore when they were caught by the morning sun and turned into stone.



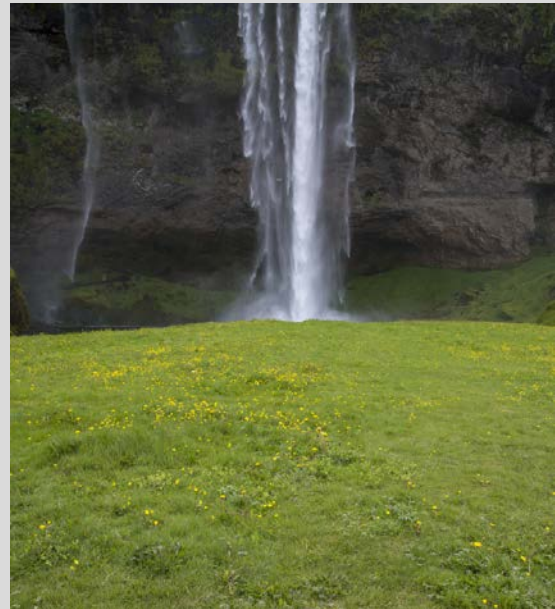
June 14:

We backtracked a bit from Vik to see a few things we did not have time for yesterday. First stops were the waterfalls Skógafoss and Seljalandsfoss. Skógafoss is a large and powerful fall that plunges 60 meters into a verdant valley, but basically it is just a lot of water going over a cliff—there's little if any grace or delicacy to it. As with pretty much all waterfalls, the area near the base is kept constantly moist by the spray and is very lush and green. There were seabirds (fulmars) nesting on the cliffs near the falls (it is only a few miles from the ocean).



Skögefoss

Seljalandsfoss was more interesting, we thought. It's the same height as Skögefoss, 60 meters, and there's not as much water, but it has a more interesting structure and surroundings. You can actually walk into a cave behind the falls, which we did not do because you get soaked. The immediate area has a few smaller falls, lovely streams, lots of flowers, and nesting birds, and we could see why it is one of the most loved waterfalls in Iceland.



Driving back toward Vik, we stopped at the small Eyjafjallajökull visitor center and museum, which is devoted to the 2010 eruption of the nearby volcano of the same name that made so many headlines due to the huge number of flights that had to be cancelled. The eruption caused relatively little problem in Iceland itself because it is located near the ocean and the prevailing winds carried all the smoke and ash to the southeast—toward continental Europe. It was an interesting display but unfortunately a tour bus arrived just as we did so it was very crowded and unpleasant, and we headed back toward Vik.

A few miles west of Vik is the black sand beach that most tourists see because it has parking and facilities. Fact is, almost all of the beaches in this part of Iceland are black and, to be honest, this one was not as interesting as the one we saw yesterday near the restaurant, which was actual sand as opposed to sand mixed with gravel and larger stones. We were impressed by the beach's other attraction, the basalt column cliffs. When the cliffs were formed by volcanic activity, the molten lava solidified into these strange geometric columns.

We also got another view of the Reynisdrangur, or "frozen trolls," which we had seen from the other side last night.





On the drive back to Vik we had to stop to photograph this ewe who had decided it was a good idea to climb up on this boulder. We saw this more than once in Iceland, and it's a puzzle why they would prefer to be up on a foodless rock than down in the lush meadow. Well, they are sheep!



Back in Vik, we visited an old church that perches on a hill overlooking the town. It was not open, but the classic, simple, Scandinavian architecture was appealing. Like so many things here, it was surrounded by blooming lupines.



June 15:

We left Vik and headed east to Höfn. On our left side (inland) was the wall of cliffs that we had been more or less following for the past couple of days. This used to be the coastline, and the coastal plain that exists now is the result of millions of years of glacial erosion grinding up the mountains and washing sand and rocks down the rivers. This is usually a gradual process but throughout geological and human history there have been some devastating floods. These happen when glacial melt, sometimes exacerbated by volcanic activity, is trapped by ice and does not run off gradually. When the ice finally gives way, a massive torrent of water, ice, and sediment is released and destroys all in its path. The aftermath of these floods is mile after mile of *sandur*, or sand flats, that are extremely desolate and barren.

It has been a challenge for the Icelandic government to keep the one “highway” and its bridges open. I say “highway” because, despite being Iceland’s main road (The Ring Road), we are talking about a 2 lane road with occasional single-lane bridges and gravel sections. The photos below show the remnants of a destroyed bridge and an overview of one of the flood-scoured areas.



For many kilometers the road was flanked by these lunar-looking fields of strange-looking bumps. These are the *mossy rocks*, wide expanses of volcanic rocks where nothing much grown except moss. It literally blankets the rocks and when the weather has been wet everything is a bright emerald green. We visited during a dry spell so we saw this much less interesting color, but it was still quite a sight.



After leaving the mossy rocks we continued east on the Ring Road and then took a gravel side road (a so-called F-road, apparently because they are so effing bumpy) to Fjaðrargljúfur canyon. This is a beautiful, narrow canyon that cuts through a mountainside before flowing into a wide valley. We wanted to hike up the river and into the canyon, but that would have required wading, which we were not equipped for (and we were not about to go barefoot in that icy snow melt). So instead we took a trail that climbed along the rim and gave some great views into the canyon.



We next stopped at two glacial lagoons. These sometimes form at the foot of a glacier that does not reach the sea, and they can best be described as lakes where melt water and calved ice from the glacier collect for a while before heading downstream. The first lagoon, Fjallsarlon, is at the end of the small glacier Fjallsjokull. This is a small and relatively uninteresting lagoon. A few miles down the Ring Road is the much larger Breidamerkfjall that calves into Jokulsarlon lagoon, a truly impressive sight. It is quite large and much of the ice floating in it has that blue tint characteristic of glacial ice (caused when immense pressure inside the glacier presses every last bit of air out of the ice). This so-called Blue Lagoon is one of Iceland's best known attractions. We were lucky that the sun came out while we were there, showing the blue ice off beautifully. There were lots of birds, including an arctic tern colony and ducks with ducklings, and also a couple of seals.





We continued the drive to Höfn seeing many mountains, waterfalls, and glaciers on the north side of the road. We checked into our hotel and had dinner at their very nice restaurant. Peter tried Icelandic beef for the first time. It is less common than lamb and more expensive, and is, as far as we know, all grass-fed. Excellent!! It was very pleasant dining with a view of distant mountains and glaciers.

June 16:

After breakfast we headed into the town of Höfn. It is still an active fishing village. They have a nicely done info center with a small museum detailing the history of the region. There's also a maritime and fishing museum that presents history and artifacts from the fishing industry, something that both of us find interesting. The info center directed us to a walk on the Osland promontory just south of town, an undeveloped area with lots of seabirds and a memorial to the town's fishermen.



Maxine photographing birds near Höfn



Arctic terns - sitting on nest and bringing a fish back to the nest.



Male eider duck and female eider duck with ducklings



The Fisherman's Memorial in Höfn

We drove a few miles east of Höfn to Lon (which simply means *lagoon*), a scenic (you guessed it) lagoon, Iceland's largest, that is said to be guarded by the spirits of the two mountains Eystrahorn and Vestrahorn that

overlook the water. We ate a simple lunch in the car. Given the weather, which was getting more unpleasant by the minute, Maxine's developing migraine, and Peter's sore ankle, we decided to head back to the hotel for an afternoon of rest.

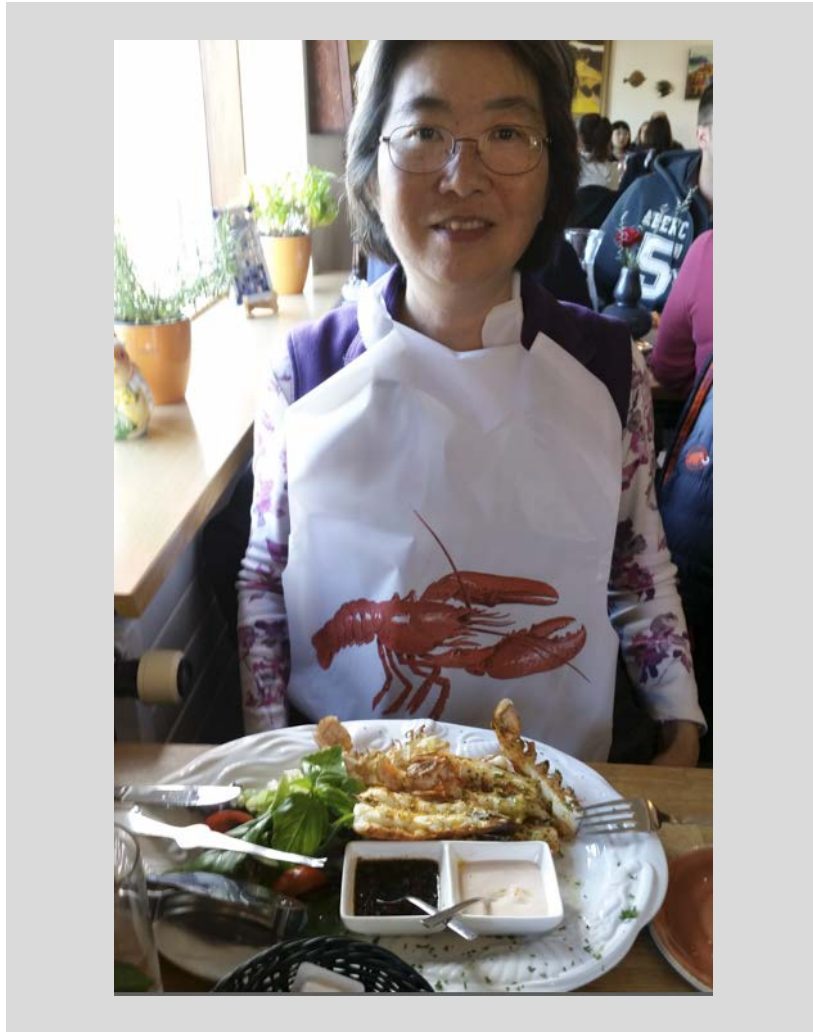


Lon and its attendant guardian mountains

On the way back to the hotel we spotted this reindeer grazing by the side of the road. We actually saw reindeer more than once but this is the only one we got photos of. They are not indigenous to Iceland (the only “native” mammal is the Arctic Fox), but were introduced by settlers as a source of meat. This handsome fellow was keeping a close eye on us and a few other people who had stopped on the road—they seem quite skittish of humans.



As a fishing village, Höfn is best known for its langoustines, which have variously been described as large shrimp or small lobsters. Having seen the Humarhofnin restaurant in Höfn advertising *Gastronomie Langoustine*, we knew where we were having dinner—and an excellent choice it was, too. Langoustines were not the only thing on the menu, but they sure had the place of honor. Langoustine tails, whole Langoustine, Langoustine soup, Langoustine pizza, Langoustine sandwiches. We started with a shared saltfish gratin and then, after being issued bibs, we were served steaming platters of broiled tails, which did not take long to demolish. For dessert, Peter had an Icelandic blue cheese with black currant jam and biscuits. This was one of the most memorable meals of the trip.



June 17:

We packed a lunch to eat in the car and then drove north and east from Höfn to the Laekjavik coast, a stretch of shoreline noted for rugged dark rock formations, black beaches, and cliff. We stopped several times to gawk and take photos. One amazing sight was a huge raft of birds bobbing along just off the beach, there must have been at least a thousand, mostly eider, but also some harlequin ducks, black guillemots (*Cephus grylie*), and some all-black birds (too far away to identify).



Along the Laekjavik coast



Part of the "duck raft" with eiders in the background and harlequin ducks in the front



Surf splashing on the rocks



Raft of Eider ducks

Drove on to the town of Djúpeyvogur where we saw the fishing harbor and ate a quick lunch in the car. Continued on, stopping now and then to enjoy and photograph the ever interesting scenery. We eventually reached the East Fjords, with their breathtaking scenery. Part of the drive was through an almost 4 mile long, 2-lane tunnel between Faskrudsfjorður and Reydarfjorður. As if those town names aren't enough, the tunnel itself is called Faskrudsfjarðargöng! After exiting the tunnel it was drizzling and we were treated to a complete rainbow just off the road—stunning! But, like many Icelandic roads, there was no shoulder where we could pull over so we could only photograph the rainbow from the moving car. We drove through Faskrudsfjarðargöng and past the Alcoa aluminum smelter (which caused quite a row between environmentalists and developers a while back) and then onward to Eskifjorður.



On the road in the East Fjords



The harbor at Djupevogur



Fish farming



The Fjarðaál aluminum smelter at Reydarfjorður



Rainbow near the Faskruðsfjarðargöng tunnel.

It turned out that Eskifjorður was not as interesting as we had hoped. There was a promising maritime/history museum but all the exhibit descriptions were in Icelandic with little if any English translation. We retraced our route to Reydarfjorður and then continued on to Egilstadur, our next stay.

The Hallormstaður hotel, 25 km south of Egilstadur, is in a beautiful setting, in one of Iceland's few forests, and is near the shore of a very long and lovely lake (Lagarfljot) that is rumored to be home to at least one monster. Despite its lovely setting, it is miles away from anything and is really aimed at the tour bus trade, not individual couples. But, it is justly famed for its dinner buffet. It is really a carnivore's paradise with, in addition to more conventional offerings, also had roast horse, beef cheeks, smoked lamb, dried and salted mutton, and smoked ox tongue.



June 18

This morning we drove east to the coast at Borgurfjordur, a small coastal town where you can get up close to cliffs where puffins, fulmars, and kittiwakes nest. And we mean close—5 to 6 feet away. Some of the kittiwakes were feeding young in their nests, while puffins were bringing beaks-full of small fish for their young (they nest in burrows so we could not see the babies). It's quite a sight, not the huge colonies that the nature programs show, but perhaps a few thousand birds.



Fulmar sitting on nest



Kittiwake with chick



Puffins returning from a successful fishing trip



After seeing the bird cliffs we visited a restaurant in town called Alfacafé. Like so many restaurants here, they have a kettle of homemade soup ready at all times. This was a fish soup made with tusk (also called cusk, *Brosme brosme*, a North Atlantic cod-like fish in the ling family)—excellent—a firm white fish, and the broth had a hint of coconut and curry. We were the only customers and sat at a large stone slab table. There were racks of dried fish heads behind the cafe.



Next we drove to Seydisfjörður. The drive took us over a mountain range and for about 10 km at the top we were totally “in the clouds” and we could barely see 30 meters. On the way back things had cleared up and we were treated to many fine views. This turned out to be a rather boring village that was supposedly an “artist colony” but in actuality had only a couple of dull galleries, a potentially interesting museum that was closed, and a café that was out of desserts. There was an attractive old church, the Blue Church (Bláa Kirkjan). On the way out of town we had a gorgeous view of a mountain peeking from between the clouds.



The Blue Church in Seydisfjordur



Fishing boats in Seydisfjordur



Mountain peeking through clouds

June 19

This morning we left Egilsstadur and headed west for Myvatn. Our first stop was the Rjúkandi waterfall (yes, another waterfall!). This comprises two waterfalls very close together. The water drops a total of 305 feet in two large steps—the first is 109 feet in a veiling horsetail style drop and then another 196 feet in a leap which begins as two channels sliding over bedrock before free-falling for the majority of its descent. A short distance downstream is a small lower fall which drops about 15 ft. Quite a sight.



The next stop was Dettifoss. This is one of Iceland's most famous waterfalls, and it was here that a tour bus did us an unintended favor. The falls can be viewed from the east or west side. The east side provides better views and less crowding, but requires a 30 km drive off the ring road on a gravel road that has been described as "potentially difficult." We decided to play it safe and go to the west side. Because we were coming from the east we reached the east side turnoff first, and lo and behold there was a tour bus turning off. If a bus can navigate the road surely we can! We went without any problems and were rewarded by some magnificent sights. The road to the falls was through some of the most desolate landscapes. Yet we saw a caterpillar crawling along the ground—what does it eat?



On the road to Dettifoss

Dettifoss was a truly astounding sight. A wide river, Jökulsá á Fjöllum, tumbles over a high cliff that is 100 meters wide and 45 meters tall. It falls into a beautiful canyon. The noise, the mist—quite an experience. There was some arduous hiking involved to get near the falls, well worth it.



Maxine walked 1.2 km further upriver to see Selfoss. It is not a high waterfall, about 11 meters, but is quite wide with a partial horseshoe section and lots of interesting rock structures.



Two views of Selfoss



Rock formations along the river

After seeing Dettifoss we continued west toward Myvatn. We came to the Hvirir (“hv” is pronounced “k”) geothermal area, where underground heat near the surface results in bubbling mud pots, hissing steam vents, and an occasional geyser. The whole area smells of the sulfur coming up from the depths. Quite an experience.





We then went on to see Grjotagja, a natural cave with a geothermally heated pool. It was a letdown, being very small and dark (too dark for photos). But, one can imagine that the Icelanders of the past would love a heated pool to soak in.

Thanks to the fellow at the information center, we were directed to a sheephold. Sheep are ubiquitous in Iceland, you will see sheep roaming just about everywhere, including on the roads. They wander freely over huge expanses of meadow, stop traffic once in a while, and are left to their own devices all summer. In the spring and summer they typically travel in threes, mom and her two lambs. I wondered how on earth the farmers gathered their sheep at the end of the season given that they are scattered over such a large area and mixed with sheep from other farms.

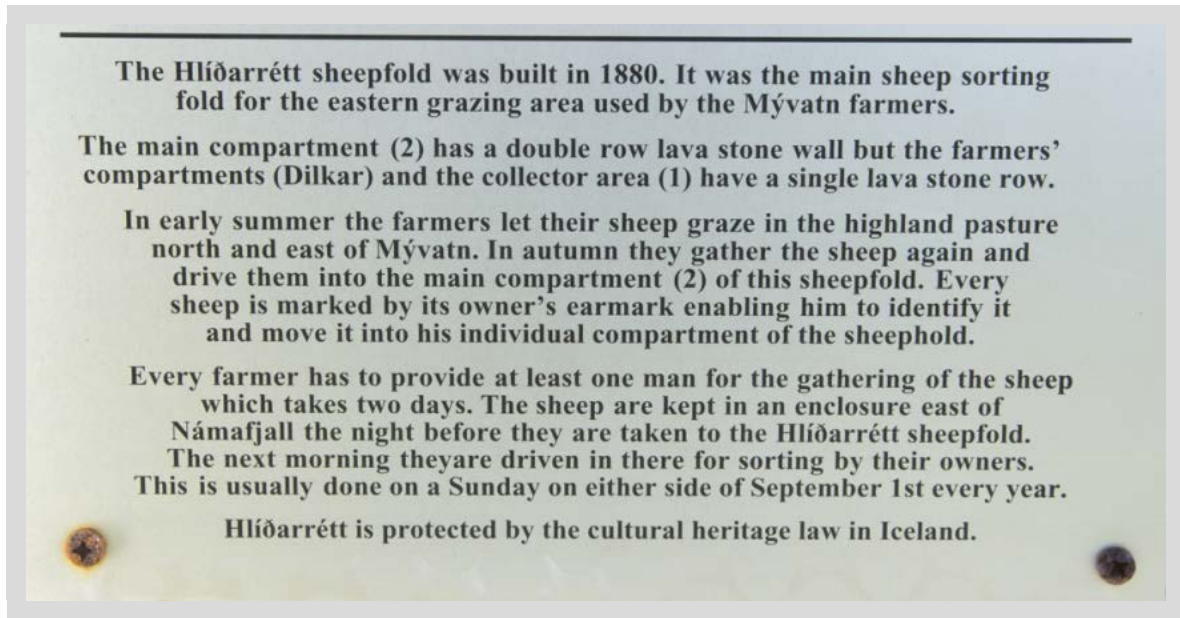
What happens that is the farmers in an region decide on a sheep-gathering date. Each farm must contribute one or more men to this effort. Each “sheephand” is assigned an area and their job is to gather all the sheep in that area and herd them to a central location and into a sheephold, a multi-compartment corral where the sheep are sorted, based on ear tags, according to the farm they belong to. The herders use whatever means are appropriate for the terrain—horseback, ATVs, motorcycles, or on foot—and sheepdogs play an important role.

Most sheepholds that we saw are completely utilitarian, being made out of modern materials, but one we encountered near Lake Myvatn was almost a work of art. It was made in 1880 and is constructed almost entirely from volcanic stones. Being filled with yellow flowers at this time of year, it was quite a sight.



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Thanks again to the information center fellow, we went to the Cow Shed restaurant for dinner. Talk about “farm to table,” this is “table at farm!” Located on a dairy farm, the restaurant is actually attached to the cow shed. You might think it would be smelly but it was not. There were windows where the diners could see the cows being milked and cared for. And the food was heavenly! As you might imagine, the dairy dishes (made using milk from the cows) were exceptional—best cottage cheese and yogurt (skyr in Iceland) ever, wonderful ice cream, plus a good variety of traditional Icelandic food—pan-fried arctic char, lamb shanks, raw smoked lamb, and geyser bread (raw bread dough is placed in sealed pans which are then put in underground ovens that are heated by geothermal activity, and cooked for 24 hours). We liked this place so much we came back for a second dinner the next night.



A happy Maxine with her lamb shanks



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View thru the window to the cow shed

June 20

We drove around the south end of Myvatn (a lake, the “vatn” suffix means “lake”). Our first stop was the pseudocraters (Skutustadagigar) near the hamlet of Skutustadir. These are volcanic but not the kind of crater where lava erupts. They are formed when hot, molten lava flows over water or swamps and the resulting steam blows up through the lava to form the craters. To be honest, they are not all that interesting from ground level,

although aerial photos (which we do not have, of course) are better. It was chilly and VERY windy, in fact Peter was almost blown down a flight of stairs by the wind.



We continued around the lake to the east shore and stopped at a parking area just south of Hofði. There were interesting lava rock formations along the lakeshore (along with a tour bus full of people). We saw lots of water birds (Barrow's Goldeneyes, Mallard ducks, European tufted ducks, scaups [*Aythya marila*], and a white wagtail trying to return to its nest on the rocks with a beak full of insects).



Male and female Barrow's goldeneye



European tufted duck

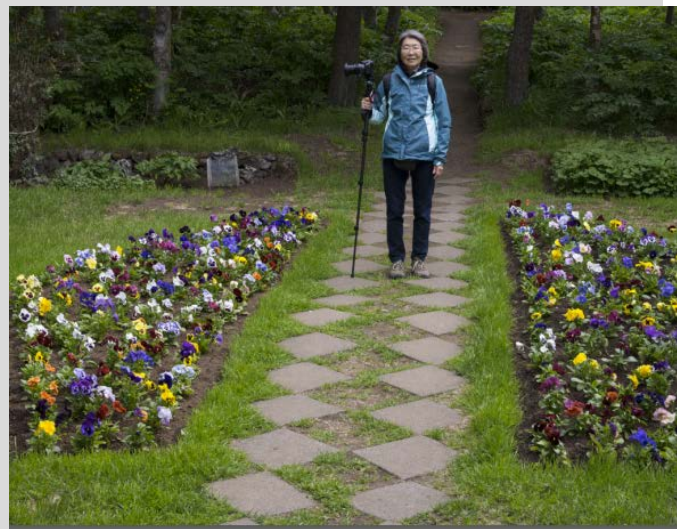
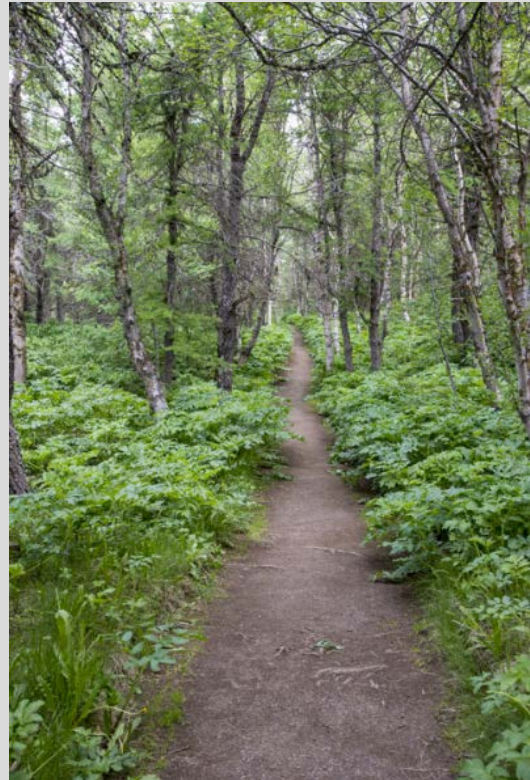


White wagtail with a beak full of insects



Slavonian (horned) grebe pair

We continued north along the lakeshore to Hofði and hiked the wooded lakeside trail to the sea stacks (or “lake stacks” in this case). It was refreshing to walk in the woods, The stacks were quite interesting and one of them even looked a bit like the trolls they are supposedly formed from. And it was a surprise to come across a neatly tended flower garden halfway through the walk. Saw more water birds (common mergansers [Mergus merganser], Barrow’s Goldeneyes, widgeon [Anas penelope], and European tufted ducks).



We next stopped at the Dimmuborgir lava fields, a large area of volcanic “excretions” that is quite an unusual landscape, acre after acre of craggy rocks. But, it was pretty repetitive, we saw the same sort of thing over and over—and no interesting birds. We stopped for lunch at Kaffi Borgir, a small family-run restaurant at Dimmuborgir and had a very tasty meal. American influence was shown on the menu by a burger with “Jack Daniels BBQ Sauce.” It was crowded so we ended up sharing our table with a young Dutch couple. They spoke very good English and we had an interesting chat.

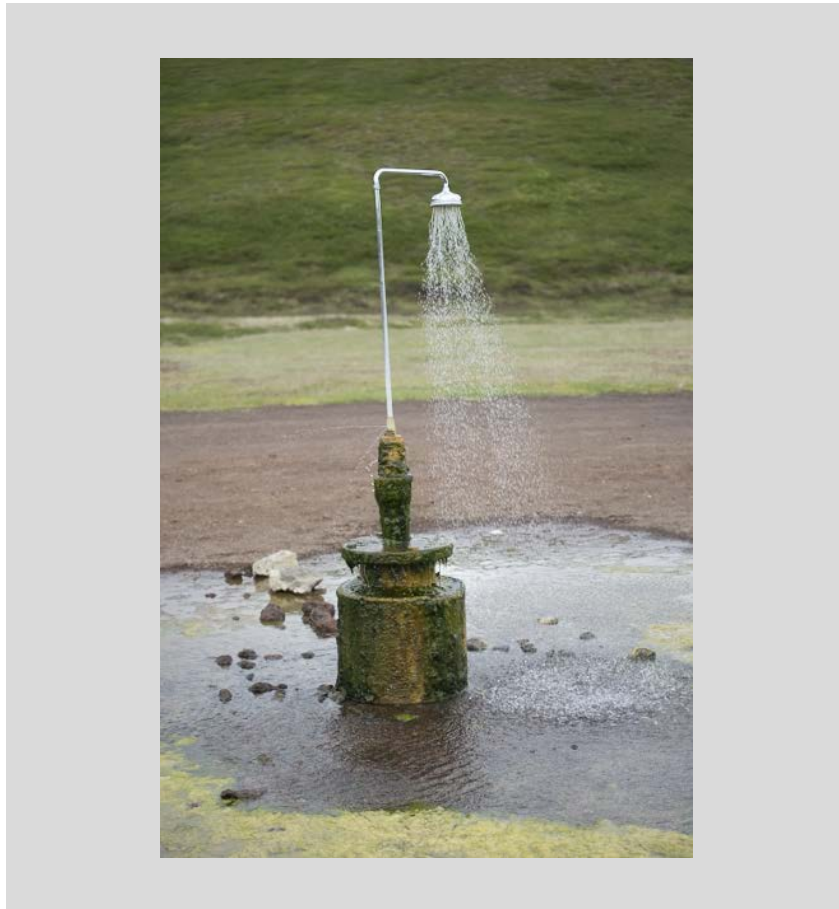


We drove to the northwest shore of Myvatn and Sigurgeir's bird museum. We had heard a lot about this museum but it turned out to be nothing but hundreds of stuffed birds. There was also a museum about Lake Myvatn behind the bird museum—with a boat imported from Norway in the early 20th century used for fishing and transportation around the lake. It was, if we recall correctly, the first power boat on the lake and the owner used it for passengers and freight. Given the poor quality (or absence of) roads back then, it's amazing how much of a difference this one boat made for the local people.

We backtracked a bit on the Ring Road and went to the Krafla geothermal power plant and saw the exhibit on geothermal energy. Steam is collected from wells over a fairly wide area and piped to the plant where it generates electricity, all without fuel costs or global warming emissions. This is possible in areas where the hot volcanic rocks are relatively close to the surface (a few thousand feet). Iceland gets about one-quarter of its electricity from geothermal and essentially all of the remainder from hydroelectric. In many places, geothermal sources are also used to heating buildings and provide hot water.



On the drive back from the power plant, we stopped at a roadside area where some wag has installed a perpetually running hot shower. The water was just the right temperature, too!



We returned to Reykjahlið and parked near the lake to take a shore trail in hopes of seeing more birds. We saw lots of birds in the field as we walked to the lake: redwing and a redshank flying overhead and calling. On the lake, we saw: Barrow's goldeneyes, mallards, female ducks with ducklings, Slavonian (tufted) grebes, red-necked phalaropes, scaups, widgeons, European tufted ducks, and possible gadwall (*Anas strepera*). We stopped our walk when it started spitting. After another fantastic dinner at the CowShed we called it a day.

June 21

Today, the longest day of the year, we drove from Myvatn to Akureyri (how cool to be in north Iceland on the longest day of the year—sunset at 12:45 AM and sunrise at 1:35 AM). Along the way we stopped at Godafoss—Waterfall of the Gods. This is not the biggest or most spectacular foss in Iceland, but it may be the most famous. There's an interesting story behind its name. Iceland was settled by Nordic peoples and of course they followed the Nordic gods (Odin, for example). Christianity was introduced during the 10th century and it fell to the Icelandic parliament or Alþingi (the Icelandic þ character is pronounced "th" and we will write it that way from now on) to decide whether the island should officially become Christian. A chieftain named Thorgeir Ljosvetningagodi Thorkelsson was head of the Althingi and, despite being a devout follower of the old gods, he decided that Christianity would be better for Iceland (although the old religion would still be permitted). He himself converted, and upon returning home he realized he could no longer keep all his Nordic god idols and images. So, he took them all to the falls and threw them in—hence, Waterfall of the Gods.



We arrived in Akureyri late morning, way too early to go to our hotel. So, we drove west on the Ring Road for about 90 km thru a very scenic valley, stopping here and there for photos and enjoying the scenery. Our plan was to have lunch in the town of Varmahlid and then return to Akureyri. And here's where a tour bus did us the second unintended favor. Varmahlid is a "one horse town" or, more to the point, a "one restaurant town." The restaurant did not look terribly inviting, with steam-table cafeteria style food, but more to the point there were 2 tour busses parked outside and the place was jammed, with every seat taken and dozens of people in line for food. Ugh. So we asked at the info desk and were directed to the town of Sardakrokur about 25 km north and a delightful eatery called Krokur Café where we had an excellent (and peaceful) meal of a shrimp and lobster sandwich, fish and chips, and homemade rhubarb cake. And as a bonus, on the way back from this unplanned side-excursion we found the Icelandic Turf House museum!

Homes have been made from turf for centuries here and were in use until the early 20th century. Turf is free, an excellent insulator, and in a country with scarce lumber it may be the only choice. Even the roofs are turf, supported by planks or, in the past, driftwood. When it rains enough, the roofs turn green and grow!





We drove to our hotel in Akureyri (Hotel Nordurland). Akureyri is considered the “big city” in north Iceland (population 18,000) at the head of Iceland’s longest fjord—60 km (Eyjafjorður). We went to Strikid restaurant for dinner (based on Lonely Planet recommendation) and sat outside on the 5th floor deck overlooking the fjord—a great setting. We shared a sushi appetizer and then Maxine had the Ocean Plate (slightly salted cod, salmon, and langoustine with various preserved root vegetables—beets, parsnips, and fresh tomatoes and baby greens). Peter had seafood pasta with mussels, langoustine, and shrimp. The wind picked up and the sun shifted, so it got quite chilly by the end of dinner.

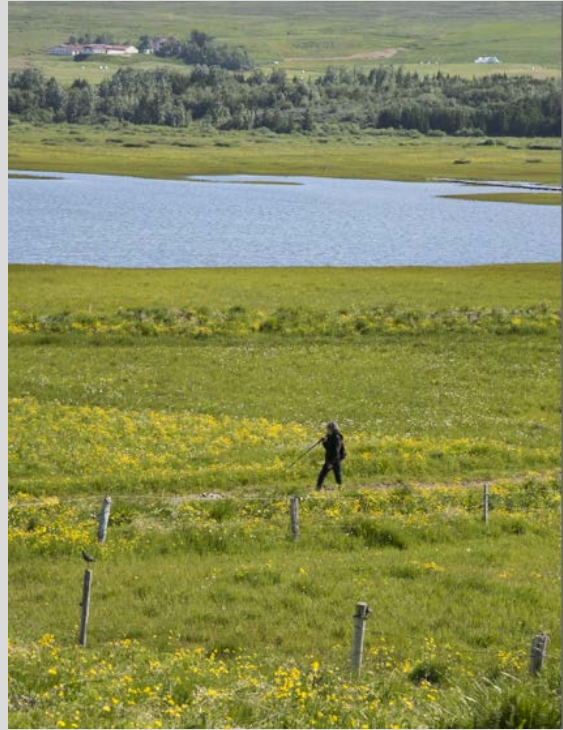
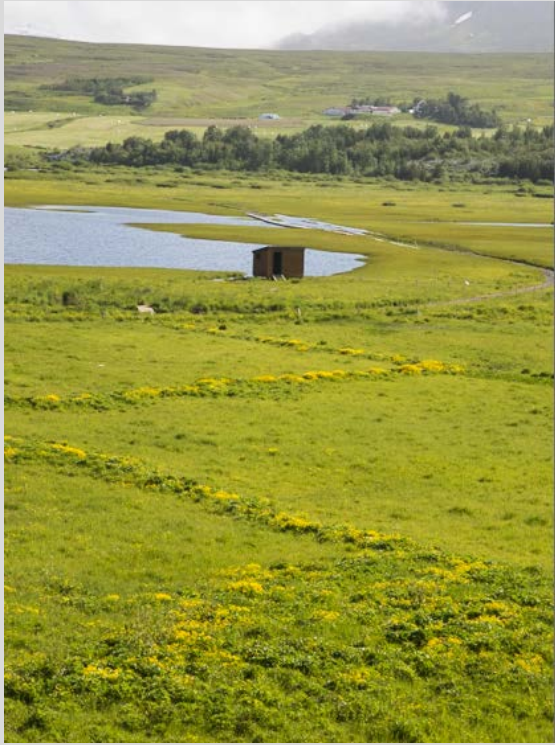
June 22

Our tour itinerary did not have anything specific for us today, so we decided to drive around the Troll Peninsula (Trollaskagi). The very name itself is appealing! Left at 8:30 AM and drove around the peninsula counterclockwise. We never saw a troll, which may be just as well because they eat people.

We went on Route 82 toward Dalvik. We stopped to take pictures around Dalvik of the mountains, lifting fog, the fjord, and we saw some redshanks complaining. I think the nest was in the high grass near the sideroad and they were not happy. We continued down the sideroad to Hjalteyri, a former small fishing village, that is now a place with nice summer homes. At one stop we noticed how many insect carcasses our car had collected.



We drove to the Birdland museum just 5 km outside of Dalvik on Route 805. Unfortunately the museum didn't open until noon, so we walked part of the bird trail, through the fields and part of the wetlands (including the floating boardwalk). Lots of redshanks, whimbrel, black-tailed godwits, meadow pipit, whooper swan, red-necked phalarope, and graylag geese.



Meadow pipit



Redshank



Black-tailed godwit



Black-tailed godwit in flight

We drove towards Olafsfjorður. Just south of Olafsfjorður, there was a single-lane tunnel (Mulagong) that is 3.4 km (2.1 miles) long. Yes, single lane! One must pay attention for oncoming cars, it is startling to see oncoming headlines in a single-lane tunnel. There were short turnouts where the westbound traffic (our direction) could get out of the way. There was not much traffic, thankfully.

We continued on to Siglufjorður and there was a modern 2-lane tunnel (Heðinsfjarðargong) in 2 sections between Olafsfjorður and Siglufjorður—completed in 2010 and 11.0 km (6.83 miles) long. The more eastern part is 7.1 km (4.4 miles) and opens at Heðinsfjörður, then continues another 3.9 km (2.4 miles) to Siglufjorður. Where we had lunch at Kaffi Raudka. After lunch we looked around the harbor and saw some fishermen unloading cod, sorting them by size.



We went to the Herring Era Museum. This is a very well done and fascinating museum that is housed in three restored buildings from the era of the herring trade, which was vital to this large town (and indeed all of Iceland). Tens of thousands of tons of herring were caught, perhaps millions, and while some were used for food the vast majority were mechanically processed for oil, fertilizer, and animal feed. The museum showed us how the fish were caught, the lives of the fishermen, and the processing techniques.

We drove back towards Sauðarkrókur to visit the Tannery Visitor Center. On the way we saw the islands in the fjord (Drangey, Malmey, and Þorðarhofði [the latter is not really an island, but looks like one]). Drangey is where thousands of birds nest. We crossed over the delta at the head of the fjord.

We got to the Tannery Visitor Center at 4:30, but they were closed; the sign said they're open until 4 PM (although their webpage and the Lonely Planet guide says they're open until 6 PM). Argh.

On the drive back we stopped to photograph some pink hay bales—the bale wraps are usually white or blue and the pink really stands out! We also saw a beautiful fog bank suspended over the fjord and hills.

Back in Akureyri, we had dinner at Bryggjan, which was recommended by the hotel desk clerk. Maxine had a hamburger and fries, and Peter had fish, langoustine, and scallops on rice with salad.



June 23

Today was the long drive to Reykjavik, so we left early. On the way we took another try at the tannery museum in Sauðarkrokur, which was open but the tour times had changed (with no notice on their web page) so we had

no tour but only a visit to the shop. Their specialty is tanning fish skins, which can be attractive, but other than huge piles of tanned skins the shop did not offer much. We bought a long wolf fish skin and a perch skin.



Tanned wolf fish skin, about 2-1/2 feet long.

We went to see Hvitserkur, a 15 meter high sea stack that is unusual for standing on 3 legs (a frozen 3-legged troll?). Hvit means white, which is from the excrement from all the fulmars nesting on it. It was very striking! From the overlook on the cliff, we could see many birds on and around Hvitserkur: fulmars on nests and flying about, female eiders with ducklings, and black guillemots.



Maxine decided to walk down the cliff to the beach. On the way she wandered too close to an arctic tern colony (they nest in large groups on the ground) and, aggressive birds that they are, she was attacked—the birds would hover and swoop over her head, with shrieking cries. They actually made contact with her hat! She had to hold her monopod over her head to keep them at a distance! And then when she got back to the car we noticed that the terns had dropped a few “presents” on her! And really, the poop of birds that eat fish does not smell like roses.



Maxine's "gift" from an Arctic tern.



Black guillimot



Fulmar in flight

June 24

Our last full day in Iceland! We drove out past the airport to the town of drive to Garður, at the tip of the Reykjanes peninsula. It was very cloudy and very windy, and a fine, misty rain soon started to fall. At Garður we saw the two lighthouses (one older and smaller and the other newer and larger). We saw lots of female eider

ducks with ducklings and some immature male eiders along the waterfront. They also had an old fishing trawler on display.



The lighthouses at Garður

Given the gloomy and rainy day we decided to go back to Reykjavik to do indoor things. Our first stop was the Saga Museum. In Iceland, “The Sagas” refer to stories, mostly historical, of events between the first settlements in ~870 and the introduction of Christianity in ~1056. They are fascinating stories, and of course the recorded events focus on battles and feuds and the like—plenty of head-chopping and ax-swinging. It was a well-done museum with English translations. And, they had an excellent café where we had lunch.



At the Saga Museum

We walked to the whale museum nearby. It is quite impressive, they display life-size models of all the whales that are found near Iceland, and that's a lot of whales. It is very humbling to stand next to a life-sized model of a blue or sperm whale.

We walked around looking for a dinner place. Most restaurants were either uninteresting or crowded, with a wait, so we ended up at (of all things) at a Moroccan place. We had passable food and were sorry to see our trip coming to an end—while also looking forward to home.

Food in Iceland

We ate very well in Iceland. Anyone who tells you the food here is bad is full of malarkey. Of course, as in any country, you must pay attention to local products and specialties and not try to reproduce the diet you are used to at home. And, of course, be open to new tastes and textures!

In Iceland this means, first and foremost, seafood. There's quite a variety here, all spanking fresh, and prepared every which way. For example, Arctic char is a fish that we rarely, if ever, see in the States, and if you like salmon and rainbow trout you will like this. Cusk and wolf fish are two other delicious fish that were new to us. There's plenty of cod, needless to say, and cod stew is a traditional dish that is delicious and hearty. Fish soup can be had in many varieties, often using fish that we have never heard of. Langoustines, best described as small lobsters, are available in fishing towns and elsewhere—delicious! Fish is often smoked, pickled, or cured and the results can be wonderful. We have developed a fondness for pickled herring on dark bread at breakfast.

Lamb is the other Icelandic specialty. They raise many, many sheep here, some for wool but mostly for meat. Icelandic sheep are a distinct breed and, to their credit, they slaughter them very young so the chops and other cuts are noticeably smaller than what we are used to in the. So if you like lamb—and if you don't, tisk tisk! – it's a good bet off any menu in Iceland.

They also raise some beef here, which I tried a couple of times and found to be very good. It's all grass-fed, as far as I know, and tends to be expensive.

It is interesting that chicken was totally absent, with one singular exception, from all of the menus we saw.

Where the food in Iceland falls somewhat short is with vegetables and fruit. There are plenty of them but there's an emphasis on root vegetables and greenhouse-grown lettuce, tomatoes, cukes, etc. There are huge geothermally-heated greenhouses where produce is grown, and most or all fruit is imported, but you cannot expect the huge abundance of high-quality produce that we get in the States.

The Icelanders love their coffee and I while it varies in quality we didn't have a bad cup even once. They apparently have never heard of decaf! Tea is usually available, and hotel rooms usually have a selection of tea and a kettle.

If you are staying at hotels you will probably be having your breakfasts at the ubiquitous buffets. There's always coffee, tea, and fruit juice, and ever present is a platter of sliced cold cuts and cheese, an assortment of breads and/or rolls, a plate of sliced tomatoes and cucumber, cereals/granola, milk, yogurt (the Icelandic yogurt called skyr is wonderful), fresh fruit, some sweetbreads/pastries, and hard cooked eggs. Larger hotels have more elaborate offerings and will add pickled and/or smoked fish, liver pate, scrambled eggs, sausage, home fries, and some other things we have forgotten.

As an example of the Icelandic attitude toward food, which is distinctly European (and why not, as Iceland is part of Europe), consider the Dimmurborgir lava field, a popular tourist destination. There is a small restaurant there, as there would be at many tourist locations in the US. In the US it would likely be a McDonald's or other commercial chain serving junky fast food, premade sandwiches, and the like. At Dimmuborgir it is a family-run place that serves lamb from the family farm, beef from the neighbor's farm, 3 kinds of homemade soup, homemade bread, and so on.

Money in Iceland

Credit cards rule. You'll need a "chip" card, which pretty much all US banks are issuing now. You'll also want your PIN. In theory, all card purchases here require the PIN, but in our experience the system "knows" when you are using a US-issued card and does not require the PIN—EXCEPT when buying gas, when we have always been asked for the PIN.

Note that when you use a card to buy gas they put a \$200 hold on the card. Then after your purchase they release the hold and charge the actual amount.

There is no tipping in Iceland. The credit card receipts do not even have a line to enter the tip.

You still should have some cash—kronur (100 kronur = US \$0.82 as of this writing). You can always exchange dollars at the airport, but if you have a AAA (the auto club) membership you can get a better exchange rate by charging it to a credit card—they will send you the cash by Fed Ex (with free shipping for exchanges of \$1,000 or more).