

# ICELAND



OUR CHRISTMAS BOLTHOLE

## REYKJANE'S PENINSULA



Looking out from the cabin the snow appeared very white as it glistened against the black lava formations under a full moon. Here daylight would last for only four hours but inside our bolthole it was warm, cosy and festive and a very magical

place in which to spend a family Christmas.

We had selected our house on line and it met all our requirements and we were not disappointed. Admittedly we had not envisaged such an isolated wilderness with just a few houses scattered on a peninsula which jutted into the ocean. Especially as we were only half an hour from the capital of Reykjavik and just a few miles from the airport and the blue lagoon!

Here according to Icelandic folklore the elves and trolls are said to live among the many crags and lava formations which litter the landscape Grýla the Christmas troll and her 13 yule lads amongst them. If you were on her 'naughty list' in the past it is

said that she would appear and take you back to her cave and pop you in her stew pot but in recent years she and her lads have mellowed and now focus on leaving gifts for those on her 'good list' in any shoes left on window sills on Christmas Eve. Outside the waves could be heard crashing on the shore and further along the coast a light house blinked to warn fisherman of dangerous rocks. When the temperature fell the track, which led to a slightly wider road, took on the feel of an ice truckers encounter but the well equipped 4 by 4 made light work of it.

The greatest advantage of our location was the darkness. With just the twinkling lights from other cabins it was our greatest asset. Here we watched from our own cabin





the beauty of the northern lights as they danced and pulsed in giant green ribbon across the night sky. We needed to take no excursion. We watched from the windows, the porch, the balcony and even the hot tub!

### **PUTREFIED SKATE**

The 23rd of December is the day of St Thorlak Thorhallsson, Iceland's patron saint and the day when Icelanders feast on their traditional putrefied skate. Stefan Sigurosson and his wife Brynhildur Kristjansdottir invited us to Vitinn- their seafood restaurant in Sandgeroi to try it for ourselves. A more welcoming couple you would be hard to find. Non Icelanders regard the famous dish as smelly and rotten but theirs was actually fermented and cured for several months and it is this which gave it a pungent taste. With a traditional ladle of lamb fat poured over it was smooth and velvety and not that bad when eaten with a traditional helping of potatoes! Other offerings on the fish buffet that day included fish stew, salted cod, prawns marinated herrings and even fish curry. Afters was rice pudding with a sprinkling of sugar and cinnamon.

The restaurant is akin to an English pub with plenty of antique fishing paraphernalia hanging from the ceiling but it is the panoramic tanks full of crustaceans that singles it



THE NORTHERN LIGHTS ABOVE THE CABIN

PUTREFIED SKATE

STEPHAN AND HIS WIFE



out. Unlike lobsters with their claws tied and waiting to make a hurried exit onto a plate, here the crabs and lobsters fight, play and generally seem to be enjoying life. Perhaps that's because 'dinner' is housed in live holding tanks outside where sea water is drawn up from below. The speciality of the house is the Rock crab but I could not believe the size of the mussels- they resembled specimens on steroids!

The salt obtained from the water makes its own contribution to the flavour of the dishes. The sea water is boiled slowly for four days to produce the whitest and purest condiment. The locals used to buy it from our hosts but now Brynhildur draws off the water and the locals do their own evaporation!

### THE BLUE LAGOON

In the early morning the landscape took on a blue hue and as the sun rose just above the horizon it was tinged with pink and yellow. In fact at times the snow appeared almost the same colour as the blue lagoon where we spent Christmas morning. Although it was still dark when we slipped into the silky hot water there was still a blue hue to the lagoon which intensified as dawn rose and chased away the stars. We celebrated in style with a glass of champagne and laughed at our icy eyebrows and snow covered hair as we drank our champagne from the swim up bar. When we eventually climbed out it seemed extremely cold although the temperature was hovering just around freezing.



THE BLUE LAGOON



VIEW FROM THE PERLAN

### REYKJAVIK

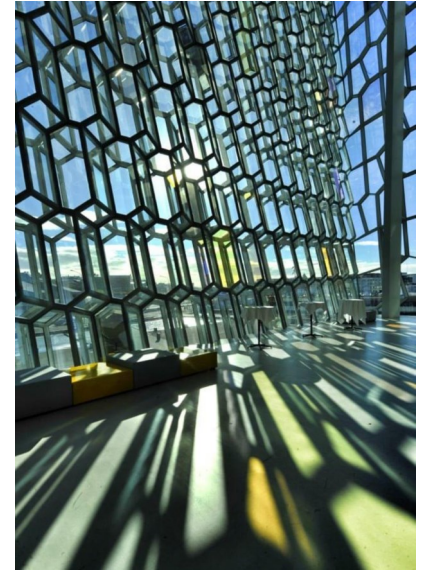
We visited the nearby capital of Reykjavik several times. It has grown in recent years but it still contains plenty of interesting small shops, great restaurants and interesting places to visit. Being the festive season there was an ice rink in the centre square surrounded by wooden cabins selling mostly food and hot drinks with a few crafts. It was small but packed and filled with laughter and excited Icelanders.

The town is dominated by the cathedral which stands on the top of the hill. It is rather plain but

well worth a visit. It is possible to climb the tower but the best views are from the Perlan.. This consists of a giant dome which sits on 5 enormous water towers. It is however not just the views which bring visitors flocking. They also come to visit the interior, eat in the cafe and dine in the amazing revolving 5 star restaurant.

The old harbour has been reclaimed by restaurants and little shops and it is here that the whale boats take visitors out into





THE CONCERT HALL EXTERNAL AND INTERIOR PERSPECTIVES



SUN VOYAGER

BLUE LAGOON CREATED BY POWER STATION

the icy waters to catch a glimpse of these giant creatures.

Here the most dominant building is Harpa - the concert hall and conference centre designed by Olafur Eliasson. The architecture inside is even more spectacular and there is plenty to see whether you have tickets for a performance or not. A guided tour is enlightening and there is a great visual 360 degree presentation highlighting Iceland's natural beauty.

Nearby stands a massive steel sculpture by Jon Gunnar Arnason known as the Sun Voyager. It de-

picts the skeleton of an old Viking boat. With the ocean as its backdrop and with an ever changing sky its simplistic natural beauty attracts visitors all day long. When darkness falls, a shaft of light reaches skywards from the Imagine Peace tower on Viðey Island. Conceived by Yoko Ono it commemorates the life of John Lennon.

### ICELAND'S GEOTHERMAL POWER

Most visitors are unaware that the storage tanks at the Perlan provide all of the capitals heat

and power. It is generated by a state of the art hydro electric plant at Hellisheiði, 25 miles away. A trip to this facility made this even more enlightening and revealed that it costs each family only £80 annually for all their energy costs. Hot water and steam are drawn up from the fiery heat in the volcanic regions around around Hellisheiði and delivered to the tanks by a pipe line, The heat is also used to warm the streets keeping them free from ice and snow! It fuels the brilliant lights which





burn bright yellow in the giant greenhouses which provide most of Iceland's food as there is no arable farming. Over 90% is devoured by a giant aluminium smelting plant but there is still enough to create a warm area of sea water on a manmade beach to satisfy Icelanders who hunger after foreign climes. The only ingredient missing being the palm trees!

### **GEYSIR AND GULFROSS**

We decided to take the standard Golden circle route in reverse. This way we arrived in the mountains above Selfross in the half light. Eerie and magical they appeared an intoxicating

blue. Then as the sun set on our return journey it was in front of us. It took a good hour for it to finally disappear below the horizon -all the while creating an amazing band of pink and yellow against an ever darkening sky above.

We stopped briefly at Kerid to take a look at the volcanic crater. Usually filled with green water it was icy and snowy and after a short snow ball throwing interlude it was on to Geysir.

Ahh the smell of sulphur. It tells you that there is plenty of geo-thermal activity around. Wisps of smoke drifted across the black

### **ICY CLIMB UP SEJALANDSFOSS WATERFALL**

### **GULFROSS WATERFALL**

### **THE DUSKY LANDSCAPE**

and white landscape. Water boiled and small geysers bubbles all around. In places the heat melted the snow and revealed ribbons of hot swirling water below while here and there minerals deposits colour the ground emerald green. Affectionally known as Strokkur the main geyser was on top form, erupting to a good height every few minutes.





Next stop was Gulfross waterfall. Despite some great ice formations around some areas the mighty waters still fell with considerable fury against a white backdrop of snow. Near us a lesbian couple had decided to use the location for their wedding pictures. When the camera rolled they shed their warm outer garments to reveal scanty summer dresses! They looked very cold but as temperatures here often fall to minus 30 - today was a lucky break!



## THE ROAD TO VIK

There are two great waterfalls which demand a visit on the road to Vik. The first is the 130 foot high Seljalandsfoss where in Summer it is possible to walk behind the giant cascade of water. In Winter the splashing water makes the ground icy and dangerous but this does not stop some folk from trying but few succeed! Equally as dramatic is Skogafoss. For those with the stamina steps have been added to take visitors to a viewing platform at the top but most are content to soak up its awesome cascading water from ground level. When the sun shines its creates the most amazing rainbows



After a brief stop at the volcanic spot where Eyjafjallajökull caused so much damage in 2010 we resumed the road to Vik . Ever mindful that we have only a few hours of daylight. Most people come to walk in the deep soft sandy black beach and view the basalt rock formations that jut out to sea and the basalt stack at the base of the cliff but the whole region is of outstanding natural beauty.

There is no landmass between here and Antarctica and the Atlantic rollers break on the shore with great force. It is wild and wind-swept. We make our last stop four miles down an icy track, back drained towards the ocean. Here rests the degrading carcass of a Douglas Super DC3 which crash landed in 1973. The crew survived but recovering the plane was impractical. In the eerie light as darkness fell all colour was drained from the



scene and several photographers were there trying to capture the unique atmospheric light

### THE ICELANDIC HORSE

Educational and informative the Horse Theatre at the state of the art facility at Fákbasel will tell you all you need to know about these endearing animals. They are all descents of the horses brought by the first settlers from Norway and extremely well adapted to Icelandic conditions. In order to preserve the pureness of the breed no horse which leaves the island can return. The presentation highlights their natural friendly disposition, their importance to the Icelanders and their fifth gait. A unique characteristic in which all four feet leave the ground at the same time. It makes them extremely easy to ride. We also enjoyed a tour of the stables where their 80 horses are kept and loved their dining alcoves and gift shop. It is well worth a visit.

### I AM AURORA

While we were at Fákbasel we were privileged to see their new northern light presentation. On their giant panoramic screen we learnt how the aurora is formed, went onboard the space station for a look from space and saw footage from our own planet of this great natural phenomenon. It is something you will not want to miss whether you are lucky or not to see them for yourself.



### MATUR OG DRYKKUR

It was round about the 6<sup>th</sup> course on the Christmas tasting menu at Matur og Drykkur, close to Reykjavik harbour, that the Reindeer 'balls' arrived. Coated with a rich sauce, blue cheese, jam and glistening red currants they were delicious. Like all the eleven courses it was an artistic master piece and made even more appealing by the description offered by our knowledgeable cheery cloth capped waiter. He told us about the reindeer herds on the east of the island. He elaborated on the fact that only a certain number of licenses to

shoot them are offered each year in a lottery and how sadly this year they had missed out. However a friend had come to their rescue and provided them with a fine specimen for their festive creations.

The restaurant itself was simple and the setting was unpretentious with dark wood chairs and polished wooden tables. The ceiling was high, the walls white and it had a very Icelandic feel about it. On the wall a giant black and white image showed the woman salting fish at the turn of the last century and as we looked beyond them to the



## MATUR OG DRYKKUR

harbour side setting in which they worked we realised that we were in the same place! Now with new windows, great authentic lighting and a counter on which our food was cooked by a trio of chefs to order it was both practical and in keeping with its theme. The crockery was sourced from old thrift stores and as our hosts pointed out was meant to replicate the feeling of eating at Grandma's. However I struggle to see Grandma plating such intricate and artistic delights as we were served. Any contender on Master Chef would struggle to create better.

## TIME TO GO HOME

Every season in Iceland has its own appeal. For some it is the warmth of Summer and the mid night sun but for us Winter time was perfect. The warm water of the blue lagoon on Christmas morning, the atmospheric setting sun on the snow covered horizon and those dancing iridescent northern lights are things we will always remember. Forget the naughty list, I think the troll Grýla had put us at the top of the 'good list' because we had a magical time.

## MAKE IT HAPPEN

### Getting there

Located only a two and a half hour flight from the UK Iceland welcomes tourists and many airlines now fly there. After the collapse of their banking system it is now their most valuable asset and they work hard to ensure everyone has a great time. The international airport is small and easy to negotiate but it is a 40 mile drive from Reykjavik. Transport is available but it makes sense to hire a car at the airport.

### Getting about

They drive on the right and driving is easy with only one main route around the island. Reykjavik is more challenging without a sat nav. The roads are heated in Reykjavik but rental cars are well equipped for the weather conditions further a field. If you wish to visit the glaziers etc or do not wish to drive, coach tours are available, but they are costly. There is no charge at any of Iceland's natural attractions

### Making yourself understood.

English is spoken and understood by all the Icelanders at their main attractions. There are many tourist information centres and the Icelanders are warm and welcoming.

### Accommodation

There is a wide range of accommodation from hotels to guest houses and hostels. In recent years a wide selection of rental properties are available - From apartments in town to remote cabins in the great outdoors. The standard every where is excellent.

### Crime

There is almost no crime in Iceland. It is a very safe place to visit. Our key was left at the front door under the Christmas elf!

### Keeping in touch

Free Wi fi is available everywhere. O2 roaming cost just £1.99 a day and the whole family used my hot spot as well all day long!

### Cost of living

The cost of food and fuel are not dissimilar to the UK. Eating out is more expensive but always first class. More and more fast food outlets are becoming available, The Islanders love hot dogs!

### Top tips

- \* Before you leave buy some spikes to pull onto your boots. They are readily available. It makes walking on the ice trouble free!
- \*. The northern lights are elusive and on a three night trip you will be very lucky if you get to see them The 'I am Aurora' presentation at Fákbasel Is the next best thing.















