

NATURE ICELAND

SONGS OF ICE &

An active geyser
in the Geysir Hot
Spring Area in
Haukadalssvegur;
and (opposite
page) large
chunks of glacial
ice on a beach in
southern Iceland

x FIRE

ICELAND'S PRIMEVAL LANDSCAPE GIVES
ASHISH KOTHARI A GLIMPSE INTO A WORLD
WHERE THE ICE AGE STILL SHAPES THE LAND

ICELAND

Some scenes of *Game of Thrones* were shot here,” my host tells me casually. There is not a shred of disbelief in me as I look around; the area’s landscape is beyond anything any TV series can conjure up. Jagged rocky cliffs, vast plains made of volcanic lava criss-crossed by myriad streams, startling patches of rising steam, snow-topped peaks in the distance, furiously cascading waterfalls, and villages which are clearly just emerging from their ancient Viking past—all this is what Iceland is made of. George R.R. Martin’s epic tale of intrigue, power and romance in a fantastical alternate version of the Middle Ages could not have found a more apt site to be filmed in.

I was at Thingvellir National Park, and my host was Einer Saemundsen, the Interpretive Officer of the park. This is where Iceland’s earliest general assemblies were held in the early 10th century CE, large gatherings of men (yes, only men) from various parts of the island. Rules and edicts governing the conduct of all residents were decided on and announced here, and Iceland justifiably boasts of having amongst the earliest ‘parliaments’ in the world. For both cultural and natural reasons, Thingvellir is a Unesco World Heritage Site. It does have its dark side, as a site where harsh punishments were carried out; pools were pointed out to us where violators of rules (often women who did not adhere to norms set by men, or were blamed for being ‘witches’) were drowned.

There is, however, little else to cause depression to a visitor to this island. Arriving in Reykjavik, one immediately encounters brochures and posters and various other forms of information on the myriad travel options that Iceland offers. There is something here for all kinds of visitors: reasonably priced bus tours to exorbitant helicopter ones, trekking options that range from a day to several weeks, from the very easy to the exceptionally difficult, and accommodation ranging from dorms to ultra-luxury.

I was lucky to have been invited for a conference in Reykjavik, and decided to spend an extra few days exploring the island. An opportunity to get off the beaten track presented itself when, in response to

an email I’d sent in advance, I was offered a visit to Solheimar. This is an eco-village with about 100 people, a couple of hours from Reykjavik. Established in 1930 as an attempt to integrate ‘disabled’ and ‘normal’ people, quite against the norms in those days, about half the population here is differently abled. Solheimar

tries to follow principles of ecologically sustainable and inclusive living, growing a major part of its own food (organic, biodynamic), managing most of its waste, moving towards ecofriendly construction, and generating local livelihoods based on traditional and new craft skills. It still has a long way to go in energy self-sufficiency

STUART WESTMORLAND/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA



The famous Strokkur geyser in the Hot Spring Area; and (opposite page) the Thingvellir National Park

and in reducing individual household consumption (most use private cars, for instance). Still, it was an inspiration to visit Solheimar, and a big bonus came my way when my host Herdís Friðriksdóttir, after a delicious meal that included dessert made of wild berries, offered to take me to some of the surrounding attractions.

to stand and be a witness (well, kind of) to geological forces that have shaped the earth as we know it today, over which, fortunately, humans have no control. A huge lake below the Thingvellir cliffs, called Thingvallavatn, is placid enough to reassure visitors that there is not likely to be a sudden splitting apart of the earth,

attractions is Gullfoss ('Golden Falls'), the incredible waterfall on the river Hvita. Indeed if there is one symbol to be elected for representing Iceland, I would pick waterfalls. A combination of weird geology and plenty of water from snow-melt and rain, has dotted the country with falls of all sizes and heights. While Gullfoss is remarkable



ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

ICELAND IS MADE OF JAGGED CLIFFS, VAST PLAINS OF VOLCANIC LAVA, MYRIAD STREAMS, SNOW-TOPPED PEAKS AND CASCADING WATERFALLS

She told me these are part of the so-called Golden Circle, a popular tourist route with at least three major attractions.

One of these was Thingvellir, situated on the fault line between the American and the Eurasian continental plates; I was told that these massive rock masses are drifting apart a couple of centimetres a year. As this happens, slowly, very slowly, the land between them subsides, and at Thingvellir one can actually see this in the form of a wide canyon. It is a humbling experience

swallowing us whole.

Herdís next took me to Geysir. Here I learnt that the term 'geyser' originated in Iceland, after this site, which is full of spouts from where boiling hot water erupts into the air, every once in a while. It is an ethereal experience walking amongst these steamers, waiting for one of the holes to suddenly burst forth. We were careful not to get too close, as there are plenty of warnings about how deadly this can be!

The third of the Golden Circle's trio of

for the sheer amount of water that gushes off its wide cliffs down a 32-metre graded cliff, there is Skógafoss, one of the tallest at 60 metres, and then Seljalandsfoss, which one can actually walk behind and peer from the back! It is no wonder that all tourist publicity material prominently displays Iceland's fosses, for they are not to be missed. Full rainbows on the waterfalls are quite a common sight, and the islanders have believed them to be bridges to the gods since pre-Christian times.

At Gullfoss, I was also delighted to read about one of the earliest environmental activists of Iceland. In the early part of the 20th century, Sigríður Tómasdóttir, a local resident, was aghast to learn of a plan to tap the fall to generate hydro-electricity. She protested loud and clear, generating public support for the cause and filing a



Looking through the Seljalandsfoss waterfall

MELBA/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA

case. Though the legal challenge was unsuccessful, the plans were eventually shelved. A signboard above the fall highlights her role in safeguarding this wonder of nature.

On the higher slopes, it is no longer water, but ice. On the southern Iceland bus tour that I went on the next day, one of the stops was the Mýrdalsjökull glacier. Sadly, climate change has made this glacier retreat by several hundred metres, and large parts of it are just rocky moraine, but what remains is magnificent. Several tour operators offer a glacier walk; they outfit you with snowshoes and goggles, and hand you sharply pointed trekking poles, and take you out for a few hours of adventure. For anyone who has read Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, the Snæfellsjökull glacier, which is the inspiration for his classic novel, is a must-visit.

Talking about adventure, I was tempted to take what would have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience: a climb down a volcano. Alas, it was too expensive. But in the process I learnt more of Iceland's volcanic past, which explains its incredible geological formations as well as its plentiful hot water—Reykjavik's hot water supply is almost entirely from natural sources, no need for artificial heating! But volcanoes are also Iceland's present, with many of its 3,000 fiery vents still active. Just how active, was discovered by Europeans in 1010, when one of these, erupted sending a massive cloud of ash over northern Europe, shutting down airports in 20 countries for days. Ironically, because the wind direction was away from it, Reykjavik airport continued operating, as the bus tour guide Sigrun told us with a chuckle! Adding to the mortification of northern Europeans was that they could not even pronounce the volcano's name: Eyjafjallajökull.

On an average, there's an eruption somewhere on Iceland

ITS UNIQUE GEOLOGY AND PLENTY OF NATURAL WATER COMBINE TO DOT ICELAND WITH MANY MAJOR WATERWALLS, OR FOSSES

once every three years! But visitors need not worry overmuch, as most of these are very small, and scientists are continuously monitoring the active volcanoes on Iceland, so they can issue early warnings the next time one of them explodes. It kind of adds to the thrill of being there!

In case you'd rather not be too close to a volcano, there's plenty of sea around Iceland to go out into. Surrounded by the Greenland Sea, the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, one of the most popular tourist activities is whale-watching, for Iceland's waters abound in several species of these giants. Well-equipped and very stable vessels take you a kilometre or two out, and there are very high chances of spotting one or more of these whales. But of course nothing is 100% guaranteed; on my two trips I did not see a single one. Consolation: I have a free ticket for another trip (that's the deal if they can't show you a whale), so I guess I'll just have to go back and make use of it.

Other than Thingvellir, there are plenty of sites that take you back into Iceland's fascinating history. At Skógar near the Skógafoss falls, there are reproductions of traditional housing, including semi-underground structures that were used as a protection against storms and volcanic eruptions. The Folk Museum here has



A volcano off the shore at Reykjavik

ASHISH KOTHARI

over 16,000 artefacts and items of daily use dating back some centuries, and accounts of the history since the Vikings first arrived from Norway. Oh sorry, there actually is one more depressing thing one learns here: about 25% of Iceland was forested when the Vikings came, but today it is just 1%! Iceland's tree-less landscape is not because of the extreme cold (as one would assume), but the result of human folly. This also means that several species of wildlife have been lost. There are some attempts at bringing back the original vegetation, giving one a glimpse of what it must have been like. But the generally low height of the vegetation across most of the island has given rise to the following joke: What do you do when lost in an Icelandic forest? Just stand up!

Speaking of wildlife, another experience I had of Icelandic hospitality was on the first day after my arrival. I'd taken a chance and sent an email to Edward Rickson, a local birder whose website I'd come across. Edward arrived early in the morning to pick me up and take me for a day's birding to nearby coastal areas! Indeed, for bird enthusiasts, Iceland offers many opportunities. At Vík village, while on the bus tour, I was lucky to see colonies of puffins perched atop the amazing column-shaped cliffs, periodically launching themselves over a jet-black basalt sand beach to dive into the sea for fish. Gannets, gulls, terns, guillimots, skuas, fulmars and many other sea and coastal species are commonly seen.

Further inland, Canada geese and some duck species are plentiful, while the Barrow's goldeneye duck is endemic to Iceland; the sight of raptors like the occasional Gyr falcon is a treat.

If you're extremely lucky and somewhat charmed, you might even see other creatures that many Icelanders are convinced live among them: elves and trolls. The inflight magazine on the Wow-Air flight into Reykjavik had a story of a woman who claims to have seen and communicated with elves many times. And when you're told that the large round white haystacks dotting agricultural fields, are marshmallows to appease trolls, don't laugh, your informant may just take offence. And why not...who knows what inhabits such a magical land?

With more days (and money!) at hand, I could have done much more. There is so much more of history and culture to delve into; I got tantalising glimpses like when I found out that everyone's surname is basically their father's first name with the suffix 'sen' (son) or 'dóttir' (daughter) added to it. The western and northern parts of the island have their own unique landscapes and charm, including vast fjords and floodplains, taller mountains, more traditional villages. I'm saving up to go to these areas, and to afford the volcano descent, if and when I do manage to return! But I have to consider myself lucky to have had even the few days in this very special slice of our wondrous planet.



THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Aeroflot and British Airways run regular hopping flights from New Delhi to Reykjavik for approximately ₹86,000 return per person. Currency: Icelandic Krona (ISK) 1 = ₹0.49; €1 = ₹70.5

WHERE TO STAY

In Reykjavik, you can stay at the **Radisson Blu 1919 Hotel** (from €148 doubles; radissonblue.com) or at **Best Western Hótel Reykjavik** (from €128 doubles; hotelreykjavik.is). You could try guesthouses as well, like **Hotel Hilda**

(from €99 doubles; hotelhilda.is) and **Captain Reykjavik** (from €92; captainreykjavik.is).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

One of the cheapest and hassle-free ways to see the island is to take a guided bus tour from Reykjavik. **Reykjavik Excursions** (re.is) organises trips to the **Golden Circle** (ISK 10,500 per person) which includes the **Geysir Hot Spring Area**, the **Gullfoss waterfall**, the **Thingvellir National Park** and the **Friðheimar Greenhouse Cultivation Centre**. Other bus tours are the **Southern Shore Adventure**

(ISK 12,510 per person) which includes visits to **Vík**, the **Seljalandsfoss waterfall**, the **Skógafoss waterfall**, and the **Skógar Folk Museum**. They also arrange for **guided glacier walks** on the **Vatnajökull glacier** (ISK 26,300 per person) or to the **Langjökull ice cave**. There are popular **day hikes** like the one from **Skógar to Thorsmork** which passes between the **Eyjafjallajökull** and **Mýrdalsjökull** glaciers and across lava plains and the active **craters Magni and Móði**. **Elding Adventures** (elding.is) organises **whale watching**, **puffin watching**, **sea angling** and **northern lights cruises**.