

## **ICELAND & GREENLAND ADVENTURE**

June 22 – July 5 2013

Welcome to Iceland: Mike and I were inspired to take a trip to Iceland and Greenland several years ago when my brother Richard suggested the destinations. When the trip my brother was considering was cancelled by the tour company Mike and I still kept those countries on our bucket list of adventures.

One of my friends went on a trip with Odysseys Unlimited, offering a small group travel experience; she recommended the outfit to me. As I glanced in their catalog of trips for 2013 the price for Iceland looked reasonable and it offered many sights that we found interesting. We signed up for Exploring Iceland and were put on the waiting list for the extension to Greenland. When we found out that we could go on the extension to Greenland we confirmed our trip with Odyssey.

About Iceland: An island nation in the northern Atlantic Ocean, the Republic of Iceland sits between Greenland and Great Britain, northwest of the Faroe Islands. From the late 9<sup>th</sup> through the mid 11<sup>th</sup> centuries – Iceland's Age of Settlement – Norwegians and Celts came in increasing numbers, eventually populating the distant, hard-scrabble land and establishing in 930 what today is the world's oldest parliament. After 300 years of independence, the country was overtaken first by Norway, then by Denmark which granted limited home rule in 1874, then protectorate-like status in 1918. In 1944 Iceland proclaimed its independence and the modern-day Republic was founded.

Between early May and early August, Iceland never experiences complete darkness – the natural phenomenon known as the Midnight Sun. I experience the same kind of phenomenon when on vacation in Alaska and it did not bother me at all. It was kind of nice that you could explore more places as it never got dark. It never got very cold, layering is definitely the way to go here. I took a light weight jacket and also my long down-filled coat. It got pretty windy at some areas and some light rain. We were very fortunate to have excellent weather when hiking and exploring.

Iceland's currency is the Krona. We used our credit card at most places. Food and souvenirs were expensive compared to U.S.A. Considering that Iceland is remote the selections were plentiful.

Iceland's unspoilt, varied landscapes held many natural treasures. Everywhere we went your eyes were delighted to see mountains covered with snow, spectacular waterfalls like out of a fairy tale and fields of Alaskan Lupines covering the open areas. Massive glaciers and rumbling volcanoes, bubbling mud holes, thermal areas and lava fields were at every turn. We had a geologist in our group and he educated us about the formations of the rocks.

Most nights we had a choice of meat or fish. The meat was usually lamb and the fish was a choice of trout, cod, salmon and the catch of the day. Potatoes were usually served and

some kind of vegetables and or salad. Breakfast was served buffet style with lots of choices. I liked to fill my plate with a slice of ham, assorted cheeses, pastries and a hard boiled egg. A bottle of cod liver oil was always present on the buffet table...Mike liked that. I enjoyed their cultured dairy product called Skyr similar to strained yogurt. I did not try the traditional Icelandic foods such as: putrefied shark meat, singed sheep's head, sheep's blood pudding and broiled puffin. You could drink the water straight from the tap and it was pure and delicious.

Our adventure began upon our early morning arrival in Iceland's capital in Reykjavik. Our afternoon excursion was to the thermal areas of Deildartunguhver and also to Hraunfossar Falls. From there we visited the Reyholt Cultural Center, a historic site based on the life and residence of saga writer Snorri Sturluson, a famous medieval historian, politician and chieftain who settled in Reyhholt in 1206 and was killed there in 1241. The most distinctive antiquity in Reyholt is the pool of Snorri Sturluson, called Snorralaugh. The pool and the water conduit, leading water from a nearby hot spring, date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century and are maybe the oldest preserved construction in Iceland. I was impressed by the simple pool and its history. I purchased a silver charm fashioned after the pool in the gift shop. After a tour of the museum we visited the old church with its beautiful stained glass windows. A local guide entertained us with historic tales about the area and its people.

The next morning our local guide Steingrímur "Steini" Gunnarsson and driver Peter took our group of 22 to see the stupendous scenery of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. We began on the south shore where we took a hike along the sand beach at Budir, surrounded by a vast lava field and the rugged shore at Arnarstapi, site of thousands of nesting cliff birds. We stopped at a rustic oceanfront restaurant for a bowl of traditional fresh seafood soup along with a basket of bread. Most of the time lunch consisted of a bowl of soup and a basket of hot bread or rolls. We walked through an open area of tall grass by the ocean's edge to a tiny parish church with a local cemetery behind it. On our way back to the hotel Hamar we stopped at a very unusual museum filled with stuffed birds, fish and seafaring relics. A sampling table of putrified shark tidbits was in the middle of the room. This local farmer still processes this former Viking delicacy himself. You would dip your shark tidbit in some schnapps and hold your nose and eat it. I did not try the shark but drank the schnapps. The farmer was waiting outside when we left the building and directed Mike and I to the back of the museum. Inside an open sided barn were chunks of Hakari shark meat hanging on hooks to dry for four or five months. The farmer took our group to a small family church on his property and told us about his ancestors. He was proud to unveil a very old painting hidden behind two shutters. It was a painting in the style of Rembrandt depicting Jesus sitting at a table facing two men. An usual effect was that the eyes of Jesus seemed to follow you as you examined the painting from different angles.

We left Borgarnes this morning, traveling towards the northeast countryside across highlands, dales, and fjords, through varying landscapes ranging from cattle farms to lava fields, to the volcanic region surrounding Lake Myvatn. Along the way sheep and horses dotted the landscape. Our first stop was to Guaksmýri Horse Farm to see Icelandic

horses, a unique variety that has been bred only with other Icelandic horses since first brought here by the Vikings in 800 CE, then to the still-operating 17<sup>th</sup> century Vidimyri church constructed of sod and drift wood that came from Siberia. Inside the small church were tiny hardwood benches. The right side was for the women and the left side for the men. The front had one bench where a woman would sit who had been accused of a sin. I came in last of the group so I was assigned to sit in that seat and the local farmer told the group I had an affair with a man and was being subjected to sit in the hot seat.

Mid-afternoon we reached Akureyri, capital of Iceland's north region and visited the botanical gardens and Akureyrarkirkja church with its unusual interior. This church was on top of the hill next to our hotel. It had a lot of steps to climb to get to the door of the church. Inside the church was a large pipe organ and the walls were framed with huge stained glass windows. The sun was shining the day Mike and I went inside the church and the stained glass windows were glowing.

Mike did some research on Trip Advisor and found a local seafood restaurant called Noa. Mike ordered the cod tongue and I ordered the cod fillet. It came sizzling in its own skillet with sauté small red potatoes, onions and vegetables. It was excellent. We found a knit shop that had wooden and pewter buttons made from local sources for sale.

The next night we dined at a Thai restaurant called Krua Siam. I thought the food was excellent. I had spring rolls and sweet and sour chicken served with crisp vegetables and white rice. Mike had a spicy dish and a local beer.

The bookstore had the book I had been looking for about the Yule Lads who are figures from Icelandic folklore who in modern times have become the Icelandic version of Santa Claus. They are the children of the most loathsome and hideous ogress of all, the giant troll, Gryla. Apart from looking hideous, she has, it seems, a real craving for stewed child. Not just any old child though – it has to be a naughty, lazy or rude one. Gryla was married several times. Her first husband was the troll Gryal that expired after living thousands of years. Gryla then married Gustur and when he died Gryal ate him! The third husband is the father of the Yule Lads and goes by the name of Leppaluoí. The Yule Lads number has varied throughout the ages, but currently they are considered to be thirteen. They put rewards or punishments into shoes placed by children in window sills during the last thirteen nights before Christmas Eve. Every night, one Yuletide lad visits each child, leaving gifts or rotting potatoes depending on the child's behavior throughout the year. Early on their numbers and depictions varied greatly depending on location with each individual Lad ranging from mere pranksters to homicidal monsters who eat children. The Lads names were: The Sheep Worrier, Gully Gawk, Stubby, Spoon Licker, Pot Licker, Bowl Licker, Door Slammer, Skyr Glutton, Sausage Stealer, Window Peeper, Door Sniffer, Meat Hook & Candle Beggar. And there is the Yule Cat, a grossly overgrown house cat turned feral, it is cold, mean and ravenous. Instead of hunting mice like a normal-sized feline, it preys upon children – but not just any children. The Yule Cat is quite discerning, choosing only those who haven't recently been given something new to wear. These days every good Icelandic parent still makes sure that at the very least there is a new pair of socks or gloves for the kids at Christmas time – just in case!

Our tour continues the next morning traveling to beautiful Lake Myvatn. One of the world's natural wonders. Lake Myvatn and its environs of bubbling mud flats, lava fields, and volcanic craters. We made a stop at Godafoss, the "waterfalls of the gods" named for the carvings of Norse gods tossed into the water when the country was declared Christian (and paganism forbidden) a thousand years ago. We continued our bus trip to the active volcano areas of the lake. We took a walk up to the fascinating Hverfjall crater, a local landmark. We stopped at a local farm where the farmer had constructed a cinema and gift shop. Inside we watched an amazing film about the Eyjafjalla-jokull glacier eruption in April 2010. The eruption caused serious damage in the area and caused many families to lose their farms. The farm featured in the film suffered much damage but with the strong will of the family the farm was rebuilt and stands today as a labor of love and perseverance. Our coach stopped at a wonderful geothermal lagoon swimming resort. Mike and I and most of our group paid to enjoy a relaxing swim in the waters rich with silica, sulfur, and other minerals. When you enter the lagoon it never gets deeper than chest high and if you stand in certain areas the water can get very very hot. If you swish your arms around the water it feels not as hot for awhile...but it can sneak up on you again. It was a great experience! Everyone was having some fun. After our swim we went to the cafeteria for a nice lunch of cauliflower soup and bread and a piece of apple cake. We felt so smooth and soft after the swim. And the place was much cheaper than the well-known Blue Lagoon in Reykjavik.

The next day we visited the Glacial River Canyon National Park where we walked to the jaw-dropping Dettifoss, Europe's most powerful waterfall and Iceland's "Niagara." We walked around Hljodaklettar, the labyrinth of "echoing rocks" created by the spiral basalt formations of arches and canyons here. Then we hiked in Asbyrgi, also in the National Park, a huge canyon enveloped by towering walls in the middle of the partially wooded canyon where a huge hoof-shaped rock called "The Island" sits. Our afternoon excursion was to Puffin Island on a bird cruise. Over 30,000 puffins call it home. Their multicolored beak has caused people to give them nicknames like sea parrot and clown of the sea. The cliffs of the island is also a bird refuge for guillemots, and fulmars. We had a good day to view the birds and we moved around on the boat trying to catch a glimpse of the puffins. Mike got a few good photos but I found it difficult as the birds were so busy fishing and flying around that it was not easy to snap a shot during the activity. I tried to focus on a flock with my binoculars and get a good look. The boat did not go very near the island so if the birds got close to the boat you could get a peek. The swarms of puffins created a black cloud in the sky with a swirling effect, with some diving into the water to catch fish. Scientists have been able to count up to 60 fish (albeit small ones) in a hungry Puffin's mouth. To keep from getting cold, jump suits were provided that gave protection from the elements and added to the fun of the excursion.

Today we had a transfer to the airport for a flight to Reykjavik, where upon arrival we boarded a coach for the drive to Thingvellir National Park. Revered for its historical importance – this is where Iceland's Althing, or national assembly, met in open-air sessions from 930 CE to 1798. Thingvellir also sits on an active volcanic site at the spot where the fissure between the geological plates of North Atlantic and Europe is most

evident in Iceland. We learned about Iceland's historic parliament and walked along a gorge into the rift valley itself. After lunch of Icelandic Astarþungar – Love Balls (similar to our donut holes, but much bigger), we were heading for Great Geysir, the most famous of Iceland's geysers. It was a big area with several geysers. The Great Geysir went off quite frequently. I was trying to get a spot for a photo in a line of many tourists. My first attempt at a photo resulted in being a little too close to the action and getting sprayed with water. I backed up further down the line for the next eruption and got a better photo and view. It started to rain and we all ran for the bus. The weather changes by the minute and the rain stopped as soon as we left. We stopped at Gullfoss, Iceland's popular "golden" waterfall with a spectacular two-tiered cliff. You could get very close but it was not worth getting myself soaked to the bone and my lens fogged. Just watching the rainbows appear in front of the falls when the sun was at its brightest was thrilling enough.

Our adventure this morning was a walk on the black-sand beach at Reynisfjara and then we visited picturesque Seljalandsfoss, Iceland's most photographed waterfall. From here we walked to Skogafoss waterfall, and had a great time seeing the falls and the rainbows created by the sunny day. We then left for a short hike to the stunning Solheimajokull glacier, often called the "sliding glacier" for its rapid advance in the 1990s. It was nice to get up close to the glacier and feel it and take in the sights. Along the way we made a stop at a geothermal station and learned how Icelanders generate 99% of their electricity using renewable resources.

After a good night's sleep we were driven back to Reykjavik passing through "saga" country, the setting of one of the country's famous medieval stories – Njal's saga. After a nice city tour we walked to our hotel with our group and then...time on our own to explore Reykjavik. Mike and I went to the History Museum and then visited a few stores. We found a nice place for dinner and rested up at our hotel.

Today was our last day and night in Reykjavik with time on our own. Mike and I decided to book a whale watching trip with Elding Whale Watching Company that included a Puffin nesting island. We had a great time on this boat. We saw Puffins up close and got several good photos of them fishing, flying and sitting around on the island. Several humpback whales came close to our boat and two Minke whales. We saw a group of white nose dolphins and lots of different Gulls and a few Gannets.

Tonight was our farewell dinner .... we said good bye to several people in our group. Ten of our original group were continuing on to visit Greenland.

Welcome to Greenland:

This morning we took the two-hour Air Iceland flight from Reykjavik's domestic airport to the international airport outside of Kulusuk, Greenland.

Upon our arrival in Kulusuk we were transferred to the town of Ammassalik by helicopter. The helicopter ride took about ten minutes and we flew over many majestic ice-capped mountains and icebergs.

As soon as we arrived at our hotel we signed up for the excursion to visit Mittivakkat Glacier by helicopter. Because the helicopters are also used as taxis to get visitors and residents to and from the airport the glacier excursion was put on hold till the operators of the helicopters had the time to conduct the glacier excursion. In the meantime we signed up with our group for an iceberg cruise. It was a nice introduction to the waters surrounding the area.

No sooner did we get back from the boat cruise when the helicopter operators gave the message that they would take the group of eight to the Mittivakkat Glacier. The operators flew us very close to the tops of the snow-capped mountains and over many areas of icebergs. The icebergs were so beautiful to see from the air...the different colors of pure blue could be seen at the bottom of the icebergs. The helicopter landed on a solid rock area and we got to get out and walk around. It was great to be so high up in the mountains and right on top of the glacier and not have to hike to get there. Me and another person from our group balled up a few snowballs to throw at each other ... just like kids. We liked exploring the rocks glistening in the sun....it was a beautiful clear sunny day. We felt like we were on top of the world!

Ammassalik is a quaint town with more than 2,000 Greenlanders living in this district, earning their living by fishing and seal hunting. Our hotel was situated on top of a hill where you could view the village below. The homes were painted a rainbow of colors making the view like something out of the past. I watched from my bedroom window the happy children enjoying the summer weather playing soccer in a large field at the bottom of the hill. I scanned with my binoculars around the village and saw three young girls having fun playing on their trampoline. Many village people were out and about pushing strollers and walking around the town. We visited the post office and a local grocery store. When our group was taken to a church I took a side trip to the local school yard playground. I had fun photographing the children playing in the playground. We then were taken to a local museum in town to gain some insight into life and history of the Inuits (native Greenlanders) and their interesting culture, arts and crafts.

Our guide took us for a walk into the Valley of Flowers – a scenic walk into a green valley where the local cemetery was located. We walked past fields of snow and green grass. We only saw a few wild growing flowers but later a very quaint waterfall. The trail continued on .... but our group turned around at the waterfall and headed back to town. All of our meals were hearty and delicious at our hotel. It was nice to have some time to relax in our rooms. After dinner we found out the local workshop of the locals was open. A few of us went to see what they were making. We met several native Greenlanders and talked to them...mostly by hand motions as we could not speak a word of their language. They had a few items for sale....most of their crafts were for sale in the museum we visited earlier. Mike had purchased a nice carving at the museum and we were surprised when I showed it to the men in the shop and one man said he was the

artist. Then I purchased a small carved charm from one of the men who said he was the artist. Everyone was very nice and liked getting their picture taken.

Our visit to Greenland was short and sweet. At breakfast one of our group had a photo of some men on a ice patch in the port doing some kind of butchering. We found out from the desk that the men had caught a seal and was cutting it up for meat. Mike went for a walk down to the docks and got a picture of the men still on the ice with the seal. I was packing when I got a knock on my door saying a meeting was being held for our group in the lobby. We were told that the helicopter was broken and that we had to get packed and be ready to board a boat that would take us to Kulusuk for our return flight to Reykjavik. That news was interesting enough...taking a boat through the waters full of icebergs and ice back to the airport! And then we heard that a POLAR BEAR was sighted near the town!! Where was Mike? Mike had gone out for a walk. At the moment he came through the hotel door, I said, "We have to get ready to leave soon and we are going by boat...and did you hear that the locals saw a polar bear"? "Yes" he said "I heard that, I hope we get to see it".

Our group and guide Steini boarded the same boat that we had been on for our excursion earlier in the week. One of the girls from the crew proudly showed me her picture of the polar bear that was sighted on a ice flow near the shore. Mike and I were holding our breath that we might also get a peek at the polar bear. We missed seeing the polar bear in Alaska on Barter Island and so our hopes were up to see this one. Since this trip on the boat was not a sightseeing or nature viewing excursion the polar bear was not the focus of the trip but to get us back to Kulusuk. As we left the port we saw several boats grouped up in one area near some ice bergs. Sure enough that was where the polar bear was. Mike got a few photos of the bear as best as he could. I finally spotted him but for only a few minutes walking on the iceberg and then sitting down and with his head and nose up sniffing the air. In the short time I saw him it was magical. During the summer the chances of seeing a polar bear are slim to none. You could tell it was a very unusual event as the locals were just as excited about the polar bear's appearance as we were. The boat continued to make its way to Kulusuk...the trip taking about three hours. At times we wondered if we might have to turn back if the ice blocked our way to the airport. We had a very good Captain and crew in charge of the boat. It was a wonderful clear, sunny day and the water was very smooth. The mountains were reflected in perfect form in the water. Our guide Steini was having a wonderful day enjoying the boat ride, he was one of the nicest guides we had ever had on a trip. We kept looking through our binoculars to see if we could spot the airport...finally we did and I went inside to tell everyone we were going to make it.

It was a long day but a day I will remember for a long time. Our group finally got to the hotel and had a final farewell dinner. We toasted to our guide Steini and toasted to our successful return to Reykjavik. After a nice dinner I loaded up on wonderful creamy desserts and made my way to bed.

Early this morning it was the mad dash to the airport and our journey home. I will always remember Iceland for its waterfalls, mountains, Alaska Lupine flowers and the

wonderful birds and animals. I loved seeing the beautiful horses running in the fields and the experience of meeting some nice folks in the towns. It was a once in a lifetime adventure to visit Greenland and Ammassalik and best of all to finally see a POLAR BEAR in the wild.

Good bye Iceland and Greenland. We would love to return to Iceland someday to see the Aurora Borealis (Northern lights).

Audrey and Mike Lambert 2013