

The Arctic Beckons

Is Iceland worth a visit? Yes, perhaps. And perhaps not

The confluence of the sun near the peak of its eleven-year cycle, high season for Aurora Borealis and Alberto's birthday was the time to realise his ambition to see the northern lights. A sleeper train from Bergen to Tromsø would be nice were there one. Instead, there are three and a bus: 38 hours altogether. Add in inevitable delays on freezing platforms and that begins to look less like a birthday present than an endurance test. A 12-day, round-trip cruise obviates the freezing platforms and includes accommodation and all meals - plus you get to see the fabled fjords. Fortunately, budget and the recollection of my last (ever) cruise in, 1977, 14 days on the MV Fedor Shalyapin from Hong Kong to Sydney, did for that idea

Now, we've all heard about how *fascinating* Iceland is. Just finding it on the map is an adventure, and sitting on the Arctic Circle, must put it in prime position for the Aurora Borealis. So, with hotel and flights booked, off we went, on Tuesday, 25 February.

Following an hour's delay due to ice - in Iceland - our Iceland Air flight landed without incident and, as soon as a friendly local summoned him, our chauffer arrived to "meet and greet" us.

His cheerful answers to our questions about Iceland also introduced us to the Icelandic love of myth, starting with the one about restaurants closing at 20.00 or 20.30. We did learn, however, that the surprising distance between town and airport is explained by the WWII military bases there. Heathrow is inconveniently situated for similar reasons.



It wasn't very cold; in fact, the weather was remarkably clement and even sunny during our visit, as the photos attest.

But Iceland is insanely expensive, even taking into account its remoteness and the cost of importing most things. The cheapest round-trip from the airport is a bus, at €52 per person, which, with taxi transfers from bus station to the hotel, would come to €144, making our €168 pick-up service direct to the hotel seem cheap.

I had been looking forward to using the hotel sauna, but an extra €20 to do so seemed a bit mean for €276 a night, including a buffet breakfast, for what is in effect pretty spartan three-star accommodation - despite its four-star label.

Of Iceland's 400,000 people, 250,000 live in or near Reykjavik, which, partly due to the bland, ubiquitous architecture mandated by Iceland's constant seismic activity, reminds one of Stevenage, a non-descript, middle-class, post-WWII commuter

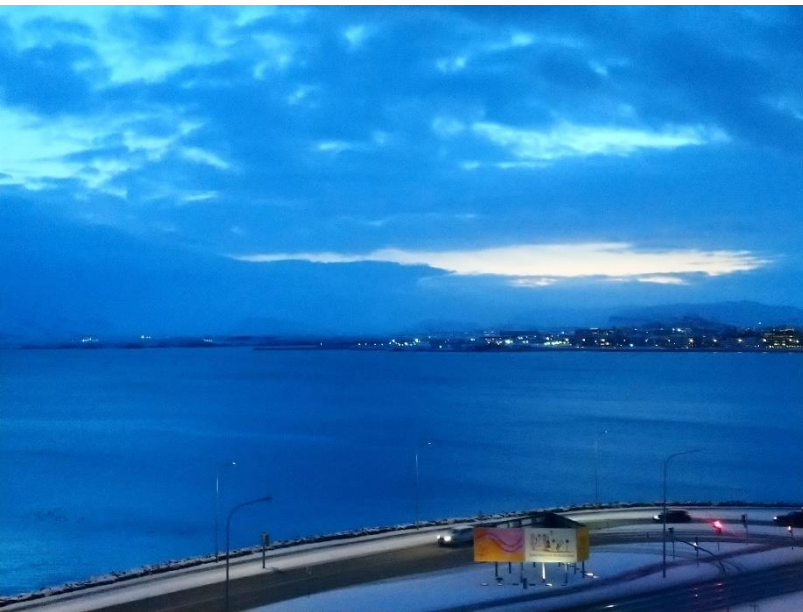


suburb north of London. A pleasant surprise, therefore, was the stylish restaurant, perhaps the only one in Reykjavik that didn't serve pizza, pasta, burgers and/or sushi. Instead, it offered excellent nouvelle-cuisine with friendly and efficient service. We returned the following evening, but on the third, they had resorted to that nasty electronic noise that passes for music these days, reducing us to a pizza-pasta place.

Our all-day bus tours started early, so breakfast was at the hotel at 7.30, with the day breaking over the bay. "Coffee" was

dispensed from a vacuum flask. Espresso could be had for a cheeky €4.00.

At 8.45, we joined a forlorn huddle on a bleak curb to wait for our 9.00 Golden Circle & Blue Lagoon



tour. Successive tour busses came, gathered up some bodies, shook their heads at us and disappeared. We were abandoning hope when our turn came shortly after 9.30.

With few words, we were delivered to a bigger group under the tutelage of Tom. Icelandic born and bred, he professed, Tom spoke English with a distinct western Scottish accent.



We trundled through the moonscape (any group of more than five trees counts as a forest in Iceland), while Tom recounted stories, some perhaps true; all were entertaining.



We were told, for example, that it was Scots and Irish who first colonised Iceland, and not the brave Vikings from Norway - although Tom, with his Celtic accent, seems to be the only adherent - at least in Iceland - to that theory. We later learned that, while historians do accept that Vikings came from Scotland and Ireland, the Norse Vikings are thought to have got there first. Old Norse has no written form, so what is known comes presumably from DNA and linguistic analyses. Tom also says that Icelandic is as close to Old Norse as 21st century English is to the language of Shakespeare, and that Icelandic speakers, alone amongst Nordic-language speakers, can make sense of it.



What Tom seemed reluctant to recount was anything about the day's programme. On the other hand, he had excellent taste in music, especially if you enjoy American rock from the eras of Chuck Berry to Bruce Springsteen.

To everyone's, er, relief, each stop on both days featured well-appointed toilets. By contrast, a land of glaciers does not run to drinking fountains, obliging you to buy nasty plastic bottles of water, the environment be damned. You'd think that Iceland's *raison d'être* is to separate people from their money.



Our first stop took us through a sort of ravine. Tom explained that we were walking between the North American and Eurasian continents, which are drifting two centimetres apart every year. Wikipedia confirms this: "*Thingvellir (or, in Icelandic, Þingvellir) is the only place in the world where you can stand between two continental plates, in a distinctive geological landscape that changes every year.*" So, you could go back next year to see how much it has changed. If you wanted to.

Apart from its unique geological feature, *Pingvellir* boasts an historic one: it is where the world's first ever parliament was, having been established by the Vikings a very long time ago. A flag, lifeless on this delightfully windless day, marks the spot.

Next stop was Selfoss, a waterfall. Impressive, unless you've seen Iguazu, of course.

We walked around *Príhnúkagígur* "Three peak crater", a volcano that last erupted 4,500 years ago, but which now has a lake frozen in its middle, and which, with successive thawing, evaporating and freezing, has sunk below sea-level. You might say it froze to Death. Ha ha.



By now I was cursing that I'd left my snow boots in Paris, having been duped by the weather forecast. "Less than a centimetre" of snow turned out to be ankle deep and very slippery in my town boots. I think everyone in our group went arse over tit at least once. Except Tom, who stayed in the bus.

Next on the check-list was Geysir, which, very considerably shoots every four to six minutes, so you don't have to wait long. Curiously, a pretty blue bubble forms as the steam builds up, popping to spurt water up to thirty metres in the air, leaving the pool boiling for a few moments. Wow! There are also some bubbling hot mud pools.

To stress how dangerous Iceland can be, Tom drove us through a real-life ghost town. A perfectly normal community, with neat, single-story bungalows, a shopping mall, school church - everything you'd expect except people. The town had been emptied of its comfortable residents because it is deemed far too dangerous, with the ground about to spew molten lava



everywhere at any moment. To help us savour the moment of living dangerously, we received, on cue, a warning by SMS: *Grindavik is a volcanic area! Increased activity is observed, eruption may be possible. Stay alerted and prepared for evacuation. Info at www.safetravel.is.*

Last stop for the day was the fabled Blue Lagoon, with its silvery blue, silica-infused water, a more delicate hue than in the photos. That, and its startling entry price: for a mere €115 per person, you can bathe in the warm water, slather €1,000-a-litre white silica cream all over you and drink a beer or a fizzy drink (wine is extra) all at the same time. You get to wear a white towelling robe to the showers. If that doesn't appeal, as it didn't to us, there is a smart restaurant and bar, where you can still shed money.



What was not on offer was any way to avoid idling there for two hours. Alberto and I were anxious to get back to Reykjavik before the restaurant kitchen closed at 21.00. To salve our angst, we shed some of our money on a little bottle of Moët and a slice of black bread with a half slice of smoked salmon and some capers on it. It was, after all, his birthday.

A member of our group emerged from the lagoon early and I asked him if it had been worth £100. Nah, he said, before correcting himself: Yeah, I suppose so.

According to Tom, the Blue lagoon is in fact not natural hot springs, but a tailings pond from the nearby thermal power plant, which extracts heat from the ground and deposits surplus water onto hot mud ponds.

Tom got us back to our hotel with ten minutes to spare. Phew.

The second day, Thursday, the Full-Day South Coast, Black Beach & Waterfalls Tour actually set off at 9.00 from a bus station a short taxi-ride from our hotel. Answering our remark about his car, our taxi driver said that he had switched from Teslas, to a Chinese marque, which he said he preferred, as it is quieter.

Our guide began with a summary of the day's programme, including where toilets would be and when we would stop for lunch. He did not speak with a Celtic accent.



First stop for the day was Morsárfoss, a 228-metre waterfall formed from the retreat of Morsárjökull that is now Iceland's tallest. Apparently, on a good day, you can walk behind it, but this was not, apparently, a good day.

Reynisfjara is the famous the black lava-sand beach, where the waves are so treacherous that you are warned never to turn your back to them, lest one creeps up and swallows you.



Most impressive were the crystalline basalt

rock formations. A rock protruding from the sea is said to resemble the wife of one of the many trolls, or giants, they have in Iceland.



Next, we trekked along a half-frozen stream to a half-frozen lake and the mouth of a glacier. The lake marks how far the glacier has receded in ten years due to climate change.



The glacier was covered in snow, but some ice is visible at its base as it melts into the lake.

Last stop was Seljalandsfoss, another waterfall. The temperature was now rising and the snow receding, as per the weather forecasts.

Although the tour was advertised as ten and a half hours, it had been an exhausting couple of days and we did not complain about getting back to the hotel at 18.30 instead of 19.30.

Doubtless, Iceland offers many other wonders, but seeing them entails camping and trekking, which is not our idea of a holiday. So, having seen all that is easily seeable in day-trips from Reykjavik, it was time to go home. But our adventure was not yet over.



Our flight to Paris was due to leave at 7.00 on Friday morning, and, as they advise you to get to the airport three hours ahead (which I believe is aimed mainly at inducing you to spend yet more money), we ordered our car for 5.00. This time, all went to plan. Phew.

Iceland's eight million visitors and a good part of its permanent population were all trying to get through airport security that morning. An artificial shortage of the plastic trays you're expected to put your things in gave rise to a Quick-and-the-Dead grab-fest: the Quick grabbed trays and the non-Quick missed their flights.

I had retrieved some pastries from the previous day's breakfast, so we needed coffee and somewhere to sit. A monumental queue and a hopelessly overwhelmed barista looked to be the only option, but I spied another bar, with proper chairs, a couple of very bored-looking baristas and no queue. There was a reason for that.

A young woman at the bar told me that I could have coffee in a cup and not one of those nasty plastic things, but I had to order at a touch-screen nearby. The screen demanded a scan my boarding pass (and my personal data). Far from user-friendly, another customer fortuitously worked it out for me. Next was to choose from three images of junk food, none of which resembled a coffee. I tapped randomly and was taken to a dead-end. The young woman at the bar told me I had chosen the wrong restaurant, at which point I noticed three near identical fast-food places, side by side, all bereft of customers. She deftly navigated to the coffees page, but all were apparently Not Available. I was starting to understand the lack of queue. She disappeared into the crowds, presumably to find a de-bugger nerd - or a savvy passenger. Back at the bar, her idling colleague asked me for my order number. I said I didn't think I had one, so he asked what I wanted: two espressos, please, he prepared, and I paid for them. Just like in the olden days.

Now it was time to find the gate lounge, a toilet and a water fountain. Two long queues included both men and women. That's because neither was for the toilet: one was for the sole water fountain in all of Reykjavik, indeed in all of Iceland. Icelanders were the ones filling several bottles.

Alberto joined the other queue, which was for our flight, although it had yet to be called. In Reykjavik, there are no gate lounges, and passengers were strewn across the floor, understandably keen to leave.

We learned a lot in our three-day sojourn. Norse mythology, for example. We knew already that Thursday is Thor's day, the god of thunder. But Odin is also Wotan, who features in the Ring Cycle, and his day is Wednesday, Wotan's day. Freia (Friday) is the Norse goddess of love, just as Venus (vendredi, venerdì, viernes) is the Roman goddess of love. Trolls are omnipresent: nobody has ever seen one; but everyone knows what they look like. I now strongly suspect that the Aurora Borealis is also a Nordic myth. Certainly, the only evidence of it during our trip were, like the troll dolls, photos in every souvenir shop and tourist brochure.

Along with the stories of the Viking kings and how they came to Iceland, we also know, presumably from DNA analysis, that, while Iceland has many native birds and fish, its only native mammal is the arctic fox. Settlers later brought sheep, cows and horses. The latter, which can survive outside all year round, resemble Shetland ponies, though apparently, they are a bit bigger, so qualify as horses, not ponies. Like the sheep and cows, they are destined for dining tables.

Iceland is unique in the world also in that its entire population has had their DNA recorded.

Alberto tried some Kjötsupa, or lamb soup, which he found to be excellent. He also realised another ambition: of tasting porridge, which was on offer at the hotel breakfast. Observing that it is what is normally fed to horses, his verdict is that it's OK if you put enough sugary jam with it. Neither of us tried the Borramatur, an Icelandic version of haggis, made with shark fin, sheep testicles, seal flippers, liver sausage, sheep head and whale fat. A bit like an English Christmas pudding.

Iceland is largely self-sufficient in energy, from geo-thermal and hydro-electric, but imports oil and gas. Greenhouses dotting the moon-scape produce vegetables, while fruit is mostly imported. It seems that bananas are hard to grow in the Arctic....

Perhaps the most important lesson from our trip is that a great way to save money, without necessarily prejudicing your chances of seeing the Aurora Borealis is not to go to Iceland.