



My 61st Country....Iceland

The Highlights:

Prettiest Place:	Snæfellsnes Peninsula
Best thing I ate:	Blue Ling and Barley dinner at Perlan
Best thing I drank:	Birch Wood schnapps
Favorite place I ate	Cliffside Picnic in Skanefouls
Worst thing I tasted:	Rotten fermented shark
Funniest Activity;	dog sledding...actually on a trolley.
Scariest moment:	Seeing myself in my bathing suit in the mirror.
Funniest moment	Being groped by extremely affectionate Icelandic horses
Most exciting moment	Seeing the northern lights.
Most used gear:	My awesome Keen hiking boots
Weirdest person	SkainThor (the name of our creepy northern lights guide)
Most Amazing View:	Snaefelljokul...the access point to the center of the earth
Worst View:	Seeing myself in my bathing suit in the mirror...
What I bought	A blue knit hat from Icelandic sheep wool.
Biggest Disappointment:	Not getting to eat/taste Puffin...it's out of season.

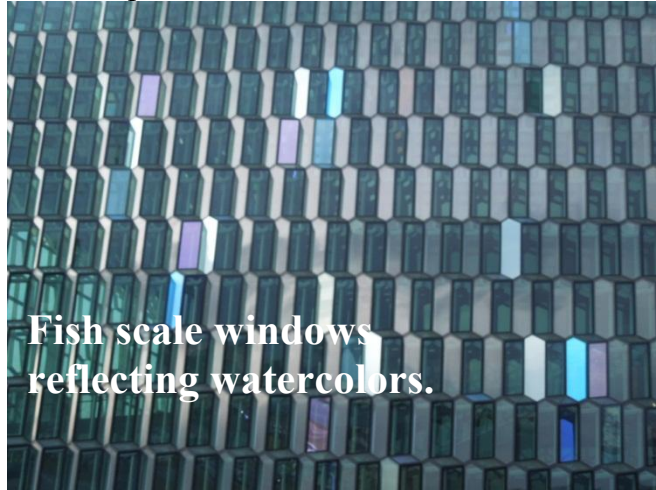
Iceland, a small country the size of Kentucky, only has a population of about 300,000 and relatively new geologically. Its volcano Eyjafjallajökull, is the one that disrupted air travel in 2010 and apparently has been showing some more recent activity.

My friend asked me: "why are you going to Iceland?" ...I replied, "for something fun to do" and she then said: "When I want something fun to do I go to Middletown." (for my non Sullivan county friends, Middletown is a city about 30 minutes away from me and has a mall). The truth is I really wanted to go to Alaska and go dogsledding. After looking at flights and seeing that a lot of Alaskan resorts are closed in March since it is off season, my friend Joanna suggested Iceland. When I thought of Reykjavik though in the winter you think of a party town....only a 5 hour flight from New York. But further research showed a really cool place with mountains, lakes, volcanoes, a rugged coast and lots opportunity for adventure. The plan was dogsledding, diving the continental divide, gazing the northern lights and visiting the warm waters of the Blue Lagoon.

We decided to rent an apartment which was the same price and just a few blocks down from the hotel we were considering. We arrived about 8am and had a seamless entry as there were no

immigration forms to fill out...(apparently not a lot of people dying to emigrate to Iceland, so just a quick stamp in the passport. Since the flight was so short we only got a couple of hours of sleep so after spotting a bakery for some breakfast we hit the pillows for a 2 hour nap...4 hours later we woke up!

Our first day we leisurely explored Reykjavik....a cute city nestled in winding roads along the water banks. Unlike the Scandinavian countries I visited last summer, Reykjavik, is quainter, not so modern or design centric with the exception of the new music center they built on the waterfront. The windows tilted at all angles to pick up the reflections of the water..it was really a beautiful piece of architecture.



Friday night we ventured around the corner to a local restaurant where we tried the traditional Icelandic fare...arctic char, salmon, langoustines and Minske Whale meat...on the plate it looks like a piece of steak. The first bite tastes like beef tenderloin grilled...but the after taste is really strong. I didn't like it at all. We also then tried some traditional Icelandic drinks: a wonderfully woody Birch tree bark liquor and Brennenvin, a caraway flavored schnapps that tasted like rye toast in a glass. Icelanders shoot this after eating the infamous Rotten Shark. Kæstur hákarl is a traditional Icelandic dish made from fermented shark. The Greenland shark is actually poisonous before being prepared, due to its high uric acid and trimethylamine oxide content which makes it smell like cleaning ammonia. In a lengthy and somewhat revolting process, Hákarl is prepared by first beheading a shark and burying it in the sand. Rocks are then placed above the sand to squeeze out all the fluid from the corpse. It is then left underground to ferment for 6-12 weeks, then dug up and cut into strips, which are hung out to dry for months. It tastes even worse than its disgusting smell...one bite...just for the challenge of it...was more than enough.

Icelandic food is nothing exotic or unique...the funny fact is that Icelanders' favorite food is hotdogs! There are hot dog stands all across the country. Much of the food however needs to be imported since the country not only lacks a long growing season, but the soil is extremely rocky and volcanic. Our tastiest meal was at Perlan. This is a revolving restaurant at the top of the dome of the huge geothermal water tanks that provide all of Reykjaviks hot water. It was mentioned in a book I gave Joanna called 100 restaurants around the world to eat in before you die or something like that. Since it was mentioned we felt obliged to hit it. We had an amazing meal there Saturday night. I had a fish similar to cod called Blue Ling and Joanna had the very

famous Icelandic lamb. The food, the view and the service we all great. An ironic point was that it was difficult to get ice for your drink...in yes, you get it, Iceland. I ordered a gin and tonic in one restaurant with a fully stocked bar...it came with no ice. When I asked for some I was told there was none. In another bar, we were told that the ice machine was out of order....funny...thereafter I decided to change the name of the country to NOICEland!



Birch Schnapps



Spinning around at Perlan

Sunday morning we rented a car and headed to the infamous Blue Lagoon. It is a warm geothermal pool lined with Silicon Mud. Bathing suit clad, it was a cold few steps out from the locker room into the below freezing air, but the water was bathtub warm. We slathered our faces with the Silicon Mud and soaked until we were pruny.



After all warm inside we headed out further into the countryside for our dogsledding adventure...we ran into a bit of a technical difficulty however....there was no snow! It had been an exceptionally warm winter in Iceland and a warm streak 2 weeks earlier had melted all the snow. The outfitters told us that they then were using a trolley for the dogs to pull instead of a sled, but we decided to go anyway. It was super fun and we learned a lot about a husky team hierarchy...such as put the females in the front so the dogs will chase after them and the strongest dogs go in the back and the smartest in the front (like I said females in the front lol!). While the dogs can be ferocious among themselves vying for pack leadership, with people they were total love buckets and there was licking galore...nothing better than fluffy husky kisses. They have wonderfully affectionate demeanors and are very eager to please. It was a lot of fun even with no snow.



Someone decided to take a break!



How about a ride while you take your bath!

We managed to successfully navigate home after our adventurous day. We made dinner in the apt that night with provisions from the local supermarket...a little pasta, prosciutto, smoked salmon, cheese and a fresh loaf of sourdough from the bakery across the street.

Monday we decided to explore the rugged western peninsula. The area called Snæfrefaouls is centered around a towering snow covered volcano called Snæfellsjökull. In Jules Verne's 1850 novel "Journey to the Center of the Earth" the crater of the volcano served as the point of entrance to the center of the earth. It is said to be a mystical place...and it certainly was magical one. We stopped at Basalt stacks, countryside churches and got acquainted with the extremely frisky Icelandic horses. We couldn't believe in such a remote place with so little human contact they were the most affectionate horses that constantly surrounded you and rubbed and nudged you.



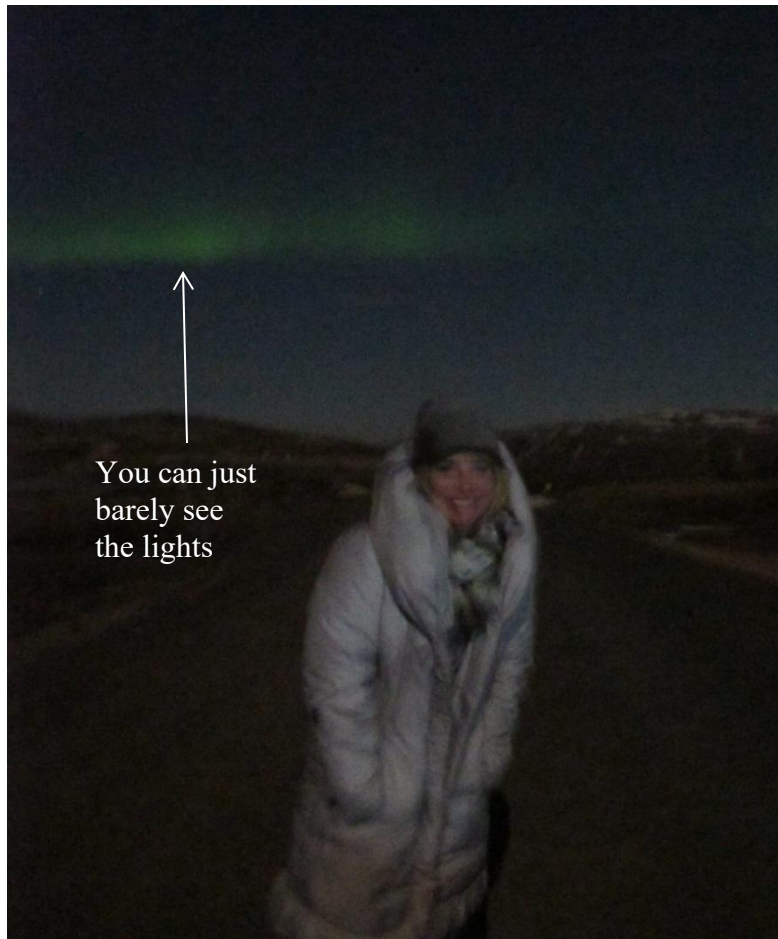
The highlight of the day was a 3 kilometer hike along the coastline. Absolutely breathtaking. And a spectacular picnic lunch view. Seagulls, rocks, mountains, volcanoes, snow, lava rocks, waves, sea mist, blue sky...all converging in one place.



The ride back around the peninsula was spectacular...we came upon lighthouses...a big rock outcropping that for some reason without any ropes I felt compelled to climb and little fishing villages.



Since there was practically a full moon and near the end of winter, our chances of seeing the Northern Lights were slim...but we got very lucky...after waiting patiently for about an hour in the middle of nowhere in subfreezing temperatures...they appeared for about 10 minutes...thank God Joanna had a great camera and could slow her shutter speed down enough to capture them.



Our final day we ventured a couple hours outside of town to the national park and took in the amazing waterfalls and the geyser...which was no old faithful, but still fun to see nonetheless. Overall Iceland was a fantastic place to visit in March...we were able to see snowcapped volcanoes but also got a glimpse of the moonlike landscape, the lava rocks without getting stuck in the snow or fighting the crowds. I would highly recommend it as a Spring Break destination as opposed to sitting on a beach!





Iconic Iceland

