

Iceland – a land of contrasts



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Gjain Canyon, like a fairyland with multiple waterfalls. Jane Mundy

I'm on a guided tour with 15 strangers and not once in eight days does anyone say, "that reminds me of," or "that's just like," because there's nothing that compares with Iceland. With its geysers and glaciers, volcanoes and waterfalls surrounded by

beautifully barren icefields, Iceland is the closest you'll get to being on another planet without leaving this one.

Little differences set this island apart. For instance, Keflavik airport has a duty-free shop for *arrivals* where Icelanders stock up on beer and spirits; McDonalds came and went; and at thermal pools you have to shower *before* putting on your bathing suit.

Its otherworldliness has inspired writers and composers, poets and photographers. The Viking's sagas, Tolkien's Middle Earth, Jules Verne's center of the earth, Wagner's *Ring*, Auden's *Letters from Iceland*. Lurking around every bend another spectacular scene from *Game of Thrones* comes to mind, along with clichés like awesome and amazing, jaw-dropping and breathtaking. Everything is Einstök—unique.



The Mountains of Western Iceland. Jane Mundy

Iceland rocks, in more ways than one. Before joining the group I spend a day in Reykjavik, which from the top of the Hallgrímskirkja church steeple looks like Legoland, with the exception of Harpa, the new concert hall and Reykjavik's cultural hub. Go for the architecture alone. Reykjavik is known as the hippest city in Europe. Vinyl and vintage shops line cobblestone streets and cool coffee shops abound. There are shops selling Icelandic wool sweaters, shops selling books and sweaters, and shops selling history books about sweaters. But only the tourists wear woollen sweaters—Icelanders wear layers of trendy designer gear.

I try to eat local whenever and wherever possible, so when Óskar Guðjónsson, Director of Exodus Travels Iceland, and his wife Ragnheidur suggests we try traditional delicacies at 3 Frakkar—the oldest restaurant in town— I'm all in. Óskar orders the appetizers: smoked puffin, hakarl (putrified Greenland shark), minke whale sashimi, fin whale cured in herbs, pickled herring and reindeer pate.

The puffin is smoked with birch—about the only tree that grows here—and in the olden days sheep dung. It looks like liver and tastes too gamey for a second bite. The shark is an acquired taste and likely only acquired by Icelanders over a certain age. Oskar says it used to get buried in the ground about six weeks to ferment then hung to dry, which breaks down the ammonia. Now



Skógafoss Waterfall flanked by black basalt columns. Jane Mundy

it's stored in air-tight tanks. It tastes like stinky old cheese with an ammonia aftertaste and not even washing it down with Brennivin, the local schnapps, helps. Anthony Bourdain said it is the “single worst, most disgusting and terrible tasting thing.” I agree. But Ragnheidur was in heaven—she ate the lot. Fortunately there is no longer a demand for whale and most millennials want it banned. (The whaling issue in Iceland is complicated...) I could pass on all but the herring.

We don't starve—our ling cod entrée is perfect. Oskar opts for whale steak and Ragnheidur tucks into Guillemot breast, even gamier than puffin. Thankfully our meals for the next week are edible *and* sustainable, usually ending with delicious Skyr—a thick yoghurt— and berries. We tuck into dessert at midnight. It's shadowy light outside and there's dancing in the streets...

Wanting to explore the southern half of Iceland—lots of ground to cover—we booked a group tour with Exodus Travel Company. This is the first time I've chosen a guided tour and it won't be the last. (Most of the group are repeat customers.) After one day in the bus— designed to cope with most types of terrain— I realize it would be difficult to cover the less-traveled gravel roads any other way. However, you can circumnavigate Iceland on the 800-mile long Ring Road, which takes about a week to leisurely stop at all the scenic spots.

Going it alone, accommodation and meals would be challenging. One night we stay at a hotel that's booked two years in advance. Many farmers' homes are converted to guest houses, their fields now golf courses. Apparently the best homes have their own thermal springs.

And restaurants outside of towns and villages are scarce, although some gas stations offer fast food. (We have picnic lunches each day, usually near a stellar waterfall.)



There is 1 horse to 4 people in Iceland. Jane Mundy

Tourism has skyrocketed. In 2010 Iceland had 488,000 visitors and this year they expect 1.73 million people—Iceland's population is 350,000. They are rushing to supply the demand. For instance, we stay and dine one night in a boarding school for lack of hotels and restaurants. But no complaints: after a full day of hiking and sightseeing, clean sheets on a comfy bed suffice. And I've never slept better than after a dip in hot springs. From the boarding school we stroll to geothermal baths at Fontana. Next day we're in a natural hot spring surrounded by mountains, washing away sore muscles from hours of hiking. No wonder these pools are supposed to be key to Icelandic well-being.

Iceland is surreal. Hiking to the extinct volcanic crater of Eldborg we can't help ourselves say "this reminds me of" *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where Richard Dreyfus' character builds a mountain so the spaceship can land. Jules Verne was ahead of his time.

Iceland is also a land of contrasts. The Gjain Canyon is like the Garden of Eden filled with Angelica in bloom, heather and tiny ice plants and little waterfalls. Next day we drive across the Fjallakac Nature Reserve: Tolkien's Mordor must look like this, with nothing but volcanic deserts and explosive craters.

Our guide, Höskuldur Jónsson, a.k.a Husky is a geology buff – added bonus. Like every Icelander under the age of 50, he is fluent in English and Viking. We learn that Iceland has twice as many sheep and one *horse* for every four humans; definitely more puffins (adorable, shouldn't have eaten it) than people and probably more waterfalls. And he always thinks ahead. Before driving to Glacier Lagoon, Husky checks weather conditions. There isn't much ice so we ditch the optional boat tour and instead stop at two lagoons. At the small lagoon an iceberg breaks and we're grappling for words to

describe the immense power. Like Iceland's landscape, icebergs are mesmerizing.

On the way to the airport we stop at the Blue Lagoon (book ahead), where Valkyries—female deities in Norse mythology—turned into swans and visited hot springs for their restorative powers. We settle for a silica mud face mask, slowly swim up to the bar for cocktails and for the next few hours wallow in the milky opaque water, simmering with silica, algae and minerals.



Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon, Iceland's most popular filming location. Jane Mundy

Icelanders have a way of looking at things, as did their Viking ancestors. Like bizarre boulders created by cooled lava. Understandable how the elves and trolls came to live in these formations. I ask Husky if he's a believer. He just smiles, knowingly. Iceland is also where myth melds with reality. It's magical.

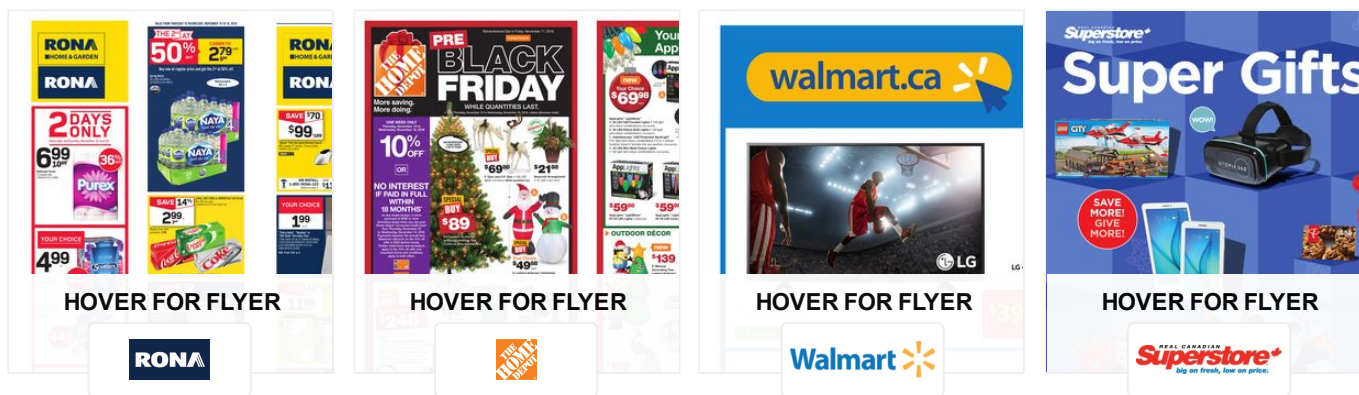
The writer was a guest of Exodus Travel, which neither reviewed nor approved this article before publication.

If You Go

Exodus Travels offers several trips to Iceland. [Exodustravels.com](http://www.exodustravels.com/)
(<http://www.exodustravels.com/>)

Icelandair flies direct from Vancouver. As for the weather, July and August is optimal but you could still experience Guggaveður (translation: Window-weather) meaning it's nice to look at through a window, but not nice to be out in. It pretty much describes Icelandic weather year round so bring raingear and a puffy coat. You don't need insect repellent (we were surrounded in one place by black flies and not one bite and there are no mosquitoes) and it's Zika-free.

Vancouver Flyers



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