

July 7-8, 2012

We left on the non-stop American flight from San Diego to New York. This was one of those times when rather than an old plane, we had a wonderful large plane with flat beds. Wouldn't you know it was early in the morning and we didn't need to sleep. Nevertheless, it was awfully comfortable. We landed in NY 30 minutes early and headed over to Terminal 7 for our next flight – which was 4 hours later. Luck was still with us as Icelandair shares a club with British Air, and while we had access to business via our seats on Icelandair, we had access to the first class club via my status on American. So we spent 4 quiet hours, eating, relaxing, reading and just waiting.

We boarded the Icelandair flight and as wonderful as the seats were on the first leg, now that we needed to sleep, these seats just did not make it. But Icelandair is a very nice airline with little sayings in Icelandic on the pillows, blankets, cups etc. That did not make up for not being able to get comfortable to sleep.

The flight from JFK to Iceland was only 5 hours so we slept just a bit. And it felt like we were flying from night to day. Well, literally, we were. But as we arrived in Iceland, the sun was shining and we knew we would not see it set until we were back in the States in one week. This time of year Iceland has light 24-hours a day.

As we neared land we were very anxious to see what Iceland would look like. At first the land was green and lush, but quickly it turned into dark, brown, dry mud. The International airport is tiny in comparison to what we are used to around the world. It took 15 minutes from when we deplaned to when we were sitting in the cab (and that was with waiting for luggage – yes we decided to send it through as we had cameras and computers to shlep).

And then it took about 40 minutes to get into town. The drive was interesting. The land seems very flat although in the distance one can see mountains. The houses were all very square, somewhat colorful, but really rather boring looking. No very interesting architecture. The roads were empty (it was 6:30 on a Sunday morning after all). The one bright spot was the carpets of purple flowers along the side of the road. We noticed stone sculptures that looked like people along the road as well. Turns out they were cairns (man-made pile or stack of stones) used as markers along the numerous single-file roads or paths that crisscrossed the island.

As we neared Reykjavik, the scene began to change. Narrow roads, small houses all different shapes and styles, and all different colors. The streets were still empty, but it was still early. We checked into our hotel (Radison Blu 1919) but of course could not get a room until 2:00pm. That gave us about 7 hours to wander around. We grabbed cameras and maps, got some advice from the front desk and headed out.

The guy at the front desk had suggested two cafes for breakfast that might be open, the Gray Cat and Café Paris. He pointed in the general direction of each and so off we went. We really had no feel for the city yet. We walked the streets and walked and walked. Clearly drinking is the main event on Saturday nights as there was broken glass on the ground and empty glasses (sometimes not so empty) everywhere. The city is full of sculptures and statues and many seemed to have beer glasses on them. Eventually, and probably by chance, we found the Gray Cat, but it was not open yet (now it was 8:00am). We walked some more. We headed over to the Hallgrimskirkja church (more on this later) to see the view from the top, but it was not open yet. So we wandered around some more still looking for Café Paris. Eventually we found a tourist information place and they directed us to the Café. We had walked past or around it several times, but somehow had missed it. We went in hoping for good black bread, maybe some herring, but got toast and cheese (was Poppa laughing at us?). And coffee. Really good coffee.

By now the city was waking up and the sun was shining brightly. We decided to head back to the hotel to get hats and found to our delight that our room was ready (it was now 10:00am). So we got to grab hats, drop off our luggage in the room and head out again.

We walked up Skolavordustigur street (don't even ask how to pronounce it – I think Icelandic is the hardest language in the world) which is an art and shopping street (alas, the shops were all still closed). This time we did make it back to Hallgrimskirkja church to take the elevator to the top to see the full 360 degree view of Reykjavik. Hallgrimskirkja church is Reykjavik's main landmark and its tower can be seen from almost everywhere in the city, It is a Lutheran (Church of Iceland). At 74.5 metres (244 ft), it is the largest church in

Iceland and the sixth tallest architectural structure in Iceland. The concrete building is meant to resemble volcanic basalt rock formations.

In front of the church is a statue of Iceland-born Leifur Eiriksson, aka 'Leif the Lucky', the first European to discover America around 1,000 A.D. Sadly he kind of forgot to tell anyone else where it was, so Christopher Columbus got to do it all over again five hundred years later. The statue is by Alexander Calder which actually predates its construction of the church and was a gift from the United States in honor of the 1930 Alþingi Millennium Festival, commemorating the 1000th anniversary of Iceland's parliament at Þingvellir in 930 AD.

The views from the top were spectacular and that, along with a good map, made it possible to begin to understand the city and how it is laid out. We could see the tops of all the houses (all brightly colored), we could see flowers everywhere, we could see the pond (a large water pond/park where the locals hang out to absorb the sun's rays), we could see the ocean and the mountains. It really was beautiful.

The church itself is characterized by light and simplicity. It is the most simple church I have ever seen. All white, no gold, very bright (as opposed to the darkness in the churches of Europe) and full of light.

We wandered around some more and made our way through neighborhoods to the pond. Turns out the pond is really Lake Tjornin (which means – you guess it – the pond). The pond is full of ducks and surrounded by museums and very colorful roofed houses. City Hall also sits on the pond.

Reykjavik City Hall is a very impressive building. Stark and modern, it is the neural center of Reykjavik, connecting nature, water and bird life to the center of town. In the lobby was a huge relief map of Iceland made of wood and paper.

At this point we were starting to fade, so we made it back to the hotel to rest a bit. Seemed like we had been walking for hours, but it was only noon. So I got to write this, Andy is sleeping and soon we will head back out.

A few other observations about the city: It is full of sculptures and statues and flowers. I love cities that are full of art. It is a small city and easy to walk. We spent only a few hours and saw everything a few times over. We have yet to walk by the harbor but there is not much else left. Of course we have to go swimming too. That is a big deal here as all the pools have natural hot spring water. The houses are mostly made of aluminum siding (aluminum is one of the major industries here), but they are colorful, often with brightly painted doors.

Oh – and today is our 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary. Not a bad way to celebrate it.

July 9, 2012

On Monday we took our first tour. We had the option of driving as my colleague Thorarinn Gisslason offered us his car. But we decided that we would rather have someone else do the driving so we could focus on the scenery and hear about the history. We read somewhere that seeing Iceland without a tour guide is like leaving your glasses at home. And that is just how we felt. We chose a small, family operated tour group called Iceland Guided Tours (IGT) run by a husband and wife team, Odinn and Addy. We ended up doing four day-long tours with them and loved them all.

We were picked up at 9:00 (NOTHING starts early here). Our scheduled driver/guide had gotten sick (Andy is convinced he was hung-over), and so instead, we got Odinn, the owner. We were a group of 14 (no one actually talked much to each other, but two of the women were from Canada. No idea about the rest) in a large van. Along the way, we learned much about Iceland and about what we were seeing.

For example, here are some of the more interesting things we learned:

Reykjavik means smoky bay because of the smoke rising from the geothermal zones around the city. Geothermal energy is used to provide hydropower for electricity, heat, and everything else. Iceland is the only country in the world that has renewable energy. The geothermal resources come from the volcanos, Iceland is covered with volcanos, most of which are dormant, but some are considered within the top 3 in the world that

are most active (a comforting thought...). There are 26 high-temperature geothermal fields and over 600 hot springs. There are 6 geothermal stations, although one alone could supply enough energy/power for the whole country. They harness the steam from the ground which moves the generators and which in simplified terms heats the water which then is piped to wherever it is needed. The pipes run along the roads and are at 90-degree angles, zigzagging across the country. Our guide said they are at right angles because they got a good deal on buying corners (ha ha). The real reason of course is because the pipes have to be able to expand and contract. In parts of the city, the pipes are enclosed in concrete and run along side the roads, thus heating the sidewalks and melting the snow.

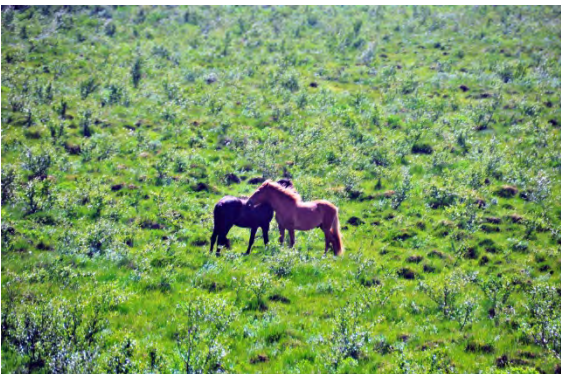
Iceland is also one of the few countries that have filling stations dispensing hydrogen fuel for cars powered by [fuel cells](#).

One might wonder how anything can grow when it is dark so much of the year. Well, the soil is very rich left over from the glaciers and during the summer the 24-hour light provides so much photosynthesis that they are indeed able to grow things quite well. But in the winter they use greenhouses. In fact, some communities are famous for using the geothermal energy to heat their greenhouses where they grow vegetables for themselves and for export to Europe. Driving around the country you often see greenhouses.

Icelandic names are different from other cultures. The naming system is patronymic (unless there is no father in the picture in which case it is matronymic). This means that the surnames reflect the immediate father (or mother) of the child. There is no historic family lineage. For example, our son David would be called David Andrewson and our daughter Sarah would be called Sarah Andrewdottir (daughter). My sister Annie and I would both be Nissandottir. When women marry, they keep their names. And their children would be named after their own father (for example, Thimble Jeremyson instead of Thimble Gimbel [note – I have to give credit to Andy – it was his joke]). So few people have the same surname and even if they do, it does not mean they are related. Although many Icelanders are related to each other. Everyone is called by their first names with no titles (staying with example from my family, not Dr. Gimbel (or actually Dr. Andrewdittor), just Sarah). In fact, it is rude to call someone by their surname (although they will forgive it in a foreigner doing it – after all, what do we know).

Iceland was once full of forests of birch trees and was described as forested from mountain to sea shore. During the ice age, the glaciers, as they moved forward, took the trees with them. When the ice receded, some trees started growing back. But the soil was not quite rich enough and most trees died. As usual, when humans settled the area, they chopped down the remaining trees for firewood and timber which disturbed the fragile ecosystem of thin volcanic soil. Today there is a movement to replant trees. Children aged 12-16 are employed during the summer to plant trees and flowers and garden. This teaches them a work ethic and gives them pocket money. So as you drive around Iceland, you see pockets of young trees but no forests and mostly land with no trees as far as the eye can see. In fact, about three quarters of Iceland is barren of all vegetation. Most plant life consists of grassland for grazing.

As we drove out of town, we got to see other areas of Reykjavik including residential neighborhoods filled with houses with colorful roofs. Most of the homes here are covered with aluminum siding in all colors which makes the city bright. I imagine this is especially true in winter when it is dark most of the 24-hour day. Aluminum was the number two industry here until recently when tourism moved it down one.



As we left the city and headed into the Highlands, we passed farms with sheep and horses (Icelandic horses). A note about the horses. The Icelandic horse was bred in Iceland and is smaller than other horses. In fact, we were told that all the animals here are smaller than the rest of the world since they have limited mates to breed with. These horses were originally brought as ponies by the Scandinavian settlers in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. I mention this because the only mammal indigenous to Iceland is the Arctic fox. All others were either brought here by settlers and came as stowaways on ships (like mice and rats).

We drove into the mountains which were in fact not just any mountains but part of the Great Continental Divide, with Europe on one side and North America on the other side (more on this later).



Figure 1 Kerio Crater

Our first stop was Kerio, a volcanic crater lake. The caldera is red volcanic rock, which makes it quite stunning. It is small in comparison to many others, being only (only???) 180 feet deep and 890 feet across. It is believed to be about 3000 years old, only half the age of the surrounding volcanoes. The water at the bottom is opaque and quite strikingly a vivid aquamarine color. The acoustics are so good, that Bjork once had a stage built on the water where she played a concert for the fans standing around on top.

Our next stop was a waterfall, Faxi (Fossin Faxi), on the River Tungufliot, which in itself was beautiful, not very high, but very wide. The water comes from the glaciers and many streams and heads south towards the sea. But the interesting part was that there is a salmon ladder on the side of the falls which allows the salmon to make their way upstream. Salmon fishing is a major sport in Iceland, but we were told over and over how expensive the fishing license is for Salmon fishing, so the common man fishes for Char instead (which we had for dinner one night in a restaurant called Café Rosenberg as well as for lunch the next day on the road and both times it was fabulously delicious.)



Figure 2 Faxi Falls. Note the salmon ladder on the left.

We drove some more past more farms and more horses. There are more sheep here supposedly (4 per person) but we only saw small clusters of sheep, surprisingly usually in groups of three. But we saw lots and lots of horses. The farms only grow hay for the animals, nothing else. But the hay fields add the color green into the landscape which otherwise would be just lava fields. It must be the hay cutting season and all the farms have huge bales of hay covered with white (or green or black, but mostly white) plastic. They look like large marshmallows dotting the fields (or spoiled marshmallows or burnt marshmallows).



The older lava is covered in Icelandic moss with the little flowers peeking out (in purple, yellow and white). The moss eventually breaks down the lava and the land becomes fertile, but don't expect to see that – it takes hundreds of years. But imagine driving along the road with green fields framed by large volcanic mountains topped with glaciers. It is breathtaking.



We finally made it one of the highpoints of the trip. The Gullfoss waterfall, meaning Golden falls, originates in the Langjokull glacier.



These falls are in the canyon of the river Hvita, which rushes south, turns left and flows down into a wide three-step "staircase" at the top of the falls and then plunges in two stages into a deep crevice below. When you first walk down the path, you can only see the river but you immediately feel the spray of the water on your face (and camera). And then the lower part of the falls comes into view and you stop as it takes your breath away. As you approach closer you begin to see the large lava boulders with the upper falls peaking above them. And you walk closer and closer, climb the boulders and there it is – the entire two step waterfall, powerful, loud, wet. When you see nature at

its best, it puts all of life in perspective.

Gullfoss is also famous for the rainbow that appears over it, particularly in the late afternoon, but of course we were there in the morning, so no rainbow.



After walking about a bit, we had lunch at the visitor's center. The most common lunch fare in Iceland is meat soup, traditionally made from lamb (yes, we know how the Ancoli girls feel about that...). We had the mushroom soup, which was delicious.

Then it was back to the bus to head on towards Geysir. The Icelandic geothermal energy results in geysirs all over the country. The most famous is Geysir (and thus the name for all other geysers). The word geyser means "to gush," an apt description. It has been active for over 10,000 years, since the last ice age, but each day it is different. In fact, it only spurts when there is an earthquake now. But right next to it is Strokkur which erupts every 5-10 minutes.

As you walk towards the Geysir you begin to smell the sulphur. The land is iridescent. You have to remember several things – 1. Don't touch the water or you will be burned; 2. Stand up stream of the Geysir or you will be wet; 3. Don't touch the water or you will be burned (yes that deserves to be said twice). Everyone stands around waiting for the water to shoot up. There is a small pool where the water is raising and falling. As the steam bubbles up towards the top, the cooler water drops below and eventually the pressure builds up and it "gushes" up, up, up into the air. As this action is building up, the pool gently pulsates up and down which makes you think it is about to erupt, but not so. It is only when the steam rising finally pushes the water up into the brilliant blue bubble that you know the steam is about to burst forth and expel the water into the sky. The area around is surrounded by carpets of little purple flowers and other steam vents.



We then headed to our last major stop which was Thingvellir (*Pingvellir*) where Iceland first began its road to independence. On the way we passed glacial lakes surrounded by volcanos, lava fields covered with Icelandic moss and little flowers everywhere. We drove along Lake Thingvall which is one of the largest lakes in Iceland and has crystal clear water, so clear that people go diving here. You can also see men standing in the water fishing for salmon and char.

Pingvellir is interesting for several reasons. Besides the historical context (more on this in a bit), it sits in a rift valley that marks the crest of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. We could see the cracks and faults as we drove towards there which are in fact the continental drift between the North American and Eurasian plates. The biggest one, Almannagjá, is a veritable canyon. It is the action of this continental divide shifting that causes the earthquakes in this area. At one point we were driving between the two continents in no-man's land. As we walked through the park, we could touch the edge of the North American ridge. Pretty cool!

Figure 3 Touching the North American ridge of the great divide



The second reason it is interesting is that the Icelandic Parliament was established at Pingvellir in 930 and remained there until 1789. It was where the laws were created. People

from all over would come there as it was also a social event where young adults met their mates, people learned about what was going on, and friends and family could visit. At the same time, it acted as a court of law.

As you enter the park, you pass over one of the rifts (*Nikulásargjá* or "coin fissure") which is full of incredibly clear water. The story goes that in 1907 when King Frederick VII of Denmark visited, he wanted to know how deep it was so he threw in a coin. Since then, everyone throws in coins. As you look down into the clear, clear water, the coins catch the sun and sparkle like diamonds.

We had a chance to just walk around by ourselves, touching the edge of the great divide, learning about the history and just marveling at the beauty.

Tuesday and Wednesday, July 10-11

These were work days for me, but Andy got to travel around and see more sights (for those of you in his play group – and you know who you are – you were missed). But I still have a bit to write about. Let me begin with the breakfast. As in many hotels, the breakfast buffet was something to behold. Not because of the quantity. Not because it was beautifully displayed. But because of what they offered. Yes, there was the usual cereals (Andy says in Iceland they make them with less sugar). Yes, there was cheese (really GOOD cheese) and meats (which we never eat). Yes, there was fruit and/or fruit salad. Yes there were cucumbers and tomatoes (from their hot houses as described in one of my other blogs). Yes, there were delicious jams (sorry – not in individual little jars...). Yes, there were the usual eggs – scrambled or omelets. But



Figure 4 Herring for lunch as well....

there were also hard boiled and soft-boiled eggs in egg cups. But that was not the exciting part. The exciting part was the black bread and herring. Two kinds of herring!!!! Being the creature of habit that I am, I

had my dark bread with butter and herring every morning. I was in herring heaven. I also had the cukes and tomatoes and cheese and eggs. But the herring. Oh my. Good thing I don't eat like this every day at home.

While we are on food, let's talk some more about it. Much of the cuisine is based on fish (fishing is the number 1 industry), lamb and dairy. The Icelanders also love eating shark (dried or cured which we hear tastes like eating rotten fish), whale and puffin. Their comfort food is mashed fish made of haddock, potatoes, onion and cheese (sort of like mac and cheese). We had it one night at a restaurant called Café Loki. Andy had the mashed fish casserole and I had mashed fish on black bread (along with herring on black bread –yes for dinner!!). The signature drink is Brennivin which means burning wine. It is a type of vodka made from distilled potatoes and flavored with either caraway seeds or angelica (an herb that grows in Iceland) and is very potent, also called Black Death. Andy tasted it and said it was like drinking turpentine.

Of the different meals we had, my favorite was the fresh char (I had it twice). It is often pan-fried and served with a small salad and a baked potato (which they serve by cutting off the ends and just serving the center portion). It tastes a bit like trout and literally was so fresh I am pretty sure they had just caught it. We also ate salmon which can be found in every river in Iceland. The first night I had it was in Reykjavik at Café Rosenberg. It was prepared with raisins and peanuts. It was one of the most delicious meals I had ever had. The Café was also very interesting with musical instruments hanging all around and live music every night. Unfortunately that night's music was not beginning until 10:00pm, and although it looks like it is only 3:00pm with the light, we were usually fast asleep by then. But the two guitarists were doing a sound check so we got to hear a few minutes of KK (pronounced Kao Kao) and Magnus Erikson. Seems that KK is a renowned guitarist/singer and Magnus Erikson is a top bluesman. They are a very famous duo having traveled the world playing Icelandic music. We bought their CD but haven't gotten to listen to it yet.



Figure 5 view from the Pearl

I should also mention the first dinner on Sunday night (our anniversary dinner) which was at the home of Erna and Hlynur (and their son Omer), along with Erla and Halfdan, and Rosa and Richard (note – no last names...read my section on names in Iceland). Erna,

Erla and Rosa all work with Thorarinn Gislasson and although he was out of town for the month, they generously invited us over for dinner. It was a lovely evening. They own their ground level apartment which has a small, but lovely private backyard area and a large communal area. The rooms were on the small side, but all had large windows and were very bright and very modern (sort of Danish modern). It was a delightful introduction to Icelandic hospitality. They were all gracious, intelligent, interesting and grounded. Their son, who is about 2, spoke no English (obviously) but managed to communicate with us and play and read books. If all children in Iceland are like him, then Iceland has a bright future.

On Wednesday night my colleagues took us to have dinner at The Pearl (Perlan). The Pearl is a remarkable building, built in 1988, and is considered unique in Iceland and probably in the whole world. On Oskjuhlid hill, atop the huge tanks in which natural hot water is stored for heating the city, a glass dome was constructed. Under the dome is a rotating restaurant serving elegant dinners and we got to eat there. During dinner, as we slowly rotated, we could see the panoramic 360 degree views of the city and its surroundings. The rest of the building is an art museum.



Figure 6 rotating restaurant at the Pearl



Figure 7 The Pearl at 730pm



Figure 8 the Pearl at 1030 pm

While I was busy working, Andy walked the city and took a two hour bike tour around town run by a husband and wife team. He has been highly recommending it to every tourist we met.

The first few nights we stayed at the Radison Blu 1919 which is right by the water. Our room was on the top floor of five, and was considered a deluxe room. It was large, but it had skylight windows only. So to see the fabulous view, you had to stand on the bed. A bit bizarre.

Part of the view was of the Concert Center/Opera House. We had visited the hall on Sunday when we first arrived, walking all around it outside and inside. It is officially called the Harpa Conference and concert hall and was completed in 2011. It is a magnificent building. It sits on the border between land and sea and stands out as a large, radiant sculpture. It is built almost like honey comb with each glass section at angles to the next.

After touring more of Iceland, Having seen more of Iceland, I now realize that it really represents the tops of the basalt rock which is common on the coast of Iceland with the halls forming a basalt mountain-like range. While most sections are clear, some are colored and from both the inside and out they reflect the sky and the harbor and the city. Once inside there is a wide open space 5 stories high with staircases angled through it. There are views in all directions, and the ceiling is mirrored in the same honey comb (basalt) design. We climbed up each level, marveling at the views through the glass. Photos of the building suggest that at night it becomes even more magical, but of course, we have no night now. The sun is always shining.



Figure 9 Inside with the different levels

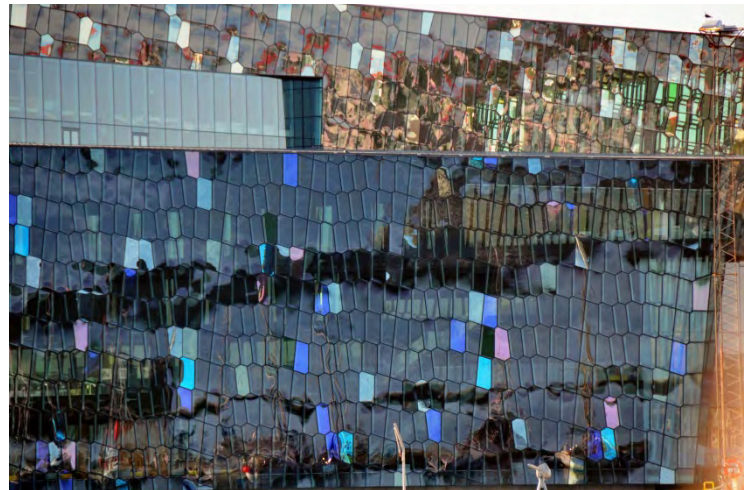


Figure 10 close up of the glass

After my meeting ended, we moved to the Hotel Holt which was also right in city center but closer to the pond. It is older with Icelandic art covering all the walls. But it still had my herring for breakfast.