

Wild Thyme and Smoked Puffin in Iceland

A General But Hiking-Focused Trip Across Southern Island: Hofn to Reykjavik



Left to Right: (top) Hallgrímskirkja, Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn, rhyolite en route to Ketillaugarfjall; (middle) DELICIOUS puffin, me at Jokulsarlon, pear skyr - even MORE delicious; (bottom) trek from Skogafoss under Eyjafjallajökull, am I in Yellowstone?

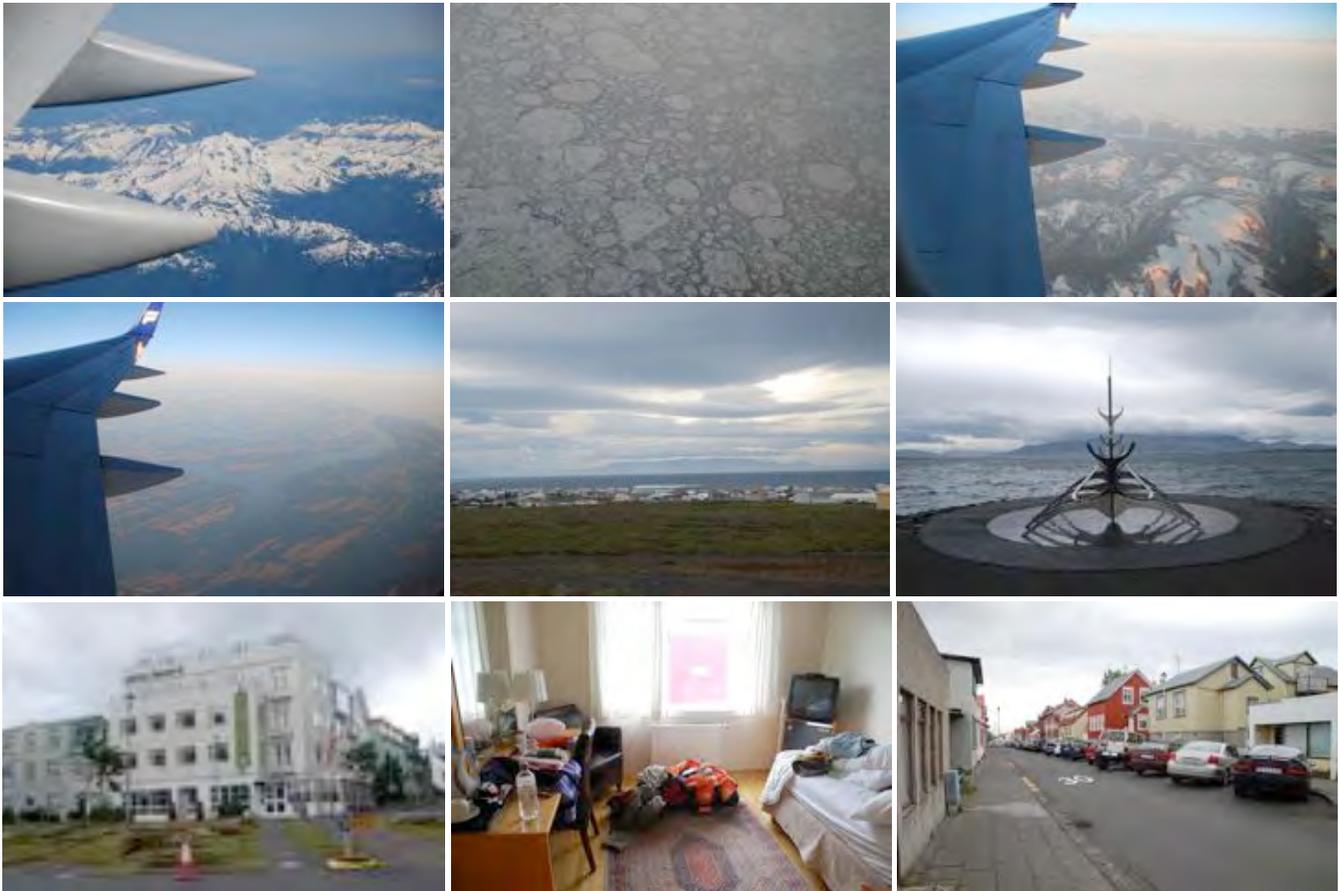
Introduction

Although Iceland has been on my mind for several years, the decision to go this year was last-minute. For most of the year, I was to do a big Alps trip with Wilderness Travel (WT) – but this failed to fill. Instead of canceling, I traded in for their trips to Glacier Bay (see separate report) and this trip to Iceland. I cannot recall if I signed up right before the volcano or right after... but it was close – although I was never concerned about it. As with several trips the last few years, Iceland is a place my dad had longed to visit – but never got to before he passed away. He would have loved Iceland, I think. I went in more skeptical, though: concerned it was overhyped and overdeveloped, not looking forward to the weather. Despite some brushes with Iceland hot spring microbiology via my research, my greatest impressions about the place were probably derived from Anthony Bourdain's especially surly visit there during some January. When I first saw his show, I was, like: that looks TERRIBLE... not going there after all. Meanwhile, Allison's take on the episode was that it was HILARIOUS and I should interpret Bourdain's seeming lack of amusement in stride... plus, anything HAS to be better than going there in January. And in the end, I'm glad I did – because I loved Iceland... it was constantly interesting and strangely different from anywhere I've been before (even though, taken separately, many individual pieces of the place were very familiar).

July 6-7, 2010 – Getting to Reykjavik

Although Iceland doesn't involve a totally hideous flight from the northwest (basically, 7 hours), the time difference is bad (7 hours ahead). Knowing my issues with jetlag, I flew to Reykjavik 2 full days before the WT hiking trip was to begin. This meant leaving Seattle around 4:30 p.m. and landing 6:30 a.m. their time – via Icelandair, probably the only option. This carrier was fine but I'm not jumping up and down with excitement over any kind of exceptional service... and, frankly, I was disappointed because none of their mileage programs match mine (this is said to be changing, of course). Even though Iceland is an international flight, there was no free food service; thankfully, I'd figured that out in advance, stuffing my face appropriately at Sea-Tac. There were decent personal video screens with good entertainment options on the planes – but if you didn't have appropriate earphones, you had to pay \$5 to borrow a set and enjoy the movies, etc. But, honestly, I'm more crabby than usual about the flight because I flew coach - my last trip across the Atlantic having been in business class (having spent my mileage wad flying to Spain). And it was because my neighbor was this girl who NEVER used the bathroom – meaning I had to wake her up and ask her to move 3 times. And it was because there were THE MOST (per capita) SCREAMING babies on this flight ever... and I'm not talking a few yelps here or there – we're talking regular fits the ENTIRE 7 hours. THIS is why I knew I'd need a couple days to recover... but enough about the usual irritations associated with air travel. Good things during the flight: enjoying my window seat to see Mt. Rainier, Glacier Peak, and all the North Cascades. Between the Canadian border and Hudson Bay, I did catch a few fleeting Z's. Unable to sustain sleep, though, I then enjoyed the kaleidoscopic patterns of sea ice breaking up across the northern sections of Hudson Bay, followed by dramatic, icy views of Baffin Island and most of Greenland. Although the first half of the Greenland icefield was visible, the second half was thick in clouds. Frighteningly, an incredible number of crystal-blue bodies of water (lakes, ponds, streams, sinkholes...) covered major parts of Greenland's icefield. None of

eastern Greenland was visible and the North Atlantic was COVERED in massive complex stacks of gray-dark blue clouds. Our ultimate landing was a slow descent towards the island of Iceland – as opposed to some kind of spiraling down, meaning we didn't see much of the land before dropping to the runway. Nonetheless, I was able to see that the landscape looked almost all lava, with some obvious thermal features steaming plumes variously. International flights land at Keflavik airport, which is at the tip of a southern peninsula relative to Reykjavik – 40-50 miles north on the mainland. Reading, say, the Lonely Planet (LP, which occasionally proved to be the "Lying Planet"), one has the impression there is not much at/near Keflavik. Given that 6:30 a.m. landing (which is typical), I had stewed about what to do – ultimately paying for a full extra night (i.e. as though I was arriving the day before) at the WT-recommended hotel in Reykjavik just so I show up, drop my bags, and go straight to bed for awhile. In retrospect, I should have internet-searched a little more, noting several places right by Keflavik. Who knows if they were cheaper? Of course, being in Reykjavik ultimately had its advantages too... but I am getting ahead of myself.



Left to Right: (top) Glacier Peak, pack ice breaking up north of Hudson Bay, eastern Baffin island; (middle) western Greenland, driving to Reykjavik, Sun-Craft along North Atlantic; (bottom) my hotel, room, typical block/street

Keflavik, a former American military base (operational into the 1990's), was a pretty, modern, small airport. To get to the main terminal, we rode a little bus across the tarmac. Customs was simple, as was the process of getting my luggage. As with my experience in Norway, Iceland has a Flybus system - which, for about \$20, takes you to a common station in Reykjavik (from here, there are smaller vans to many hotels, including mine). Pre-trip literature suggested that a private cab ride would run you over \$100 – and so I thought it highly prudent to take the Flybus. At Keflavik, I waited 20 minutes for them to sufficiently fill the bus I was on (even then, it was hardly full). The drive into Reykjavik took maybe an hour – nearly the entire way through lava fields that (were it not for the adjacent ocean) would have reminded me of McKenzie Pass, Oregon. We also passed at least 3 seaside villages/towns en route – not to mention MANY highway exchange points with confusing-sounding destinations that I could not pronounce. Indeed, Iceland is the first European place (that uses a familiar alphabet) where I gave up trying to master any part of the language. It frankly says a lot that I don't think anyone in our group could correctly pronounce all our guides' names, much less the places we visited. Language aside, Reykjavik was a modern, metallic, industrial-looking city and, from the highway, I can't say I was very taken with it. Even though it was modern, there were – thankfully – hardly any memorable American corporations (e.g. no familiar hotel or mall strips). In fact, the only American fast food I recall seeing was a lone KFC in an especially industrial part of town – McDonalds having left Iceland because people didn't accept it. The central station for the Flybus was a shabby parking lot next to a shabby building. There, I was briefly confused about what to do next (largely because I was exhausted and STARVING) but I did find my way onto the right shuttle van. But I absolutely did not "hear" the way I would have pronounced my hotel's name (Odinsve) when the driver yelled it. Fortunately, he linked me with the name and plucked me from the van with my luggage so fast that I had no time to ponder what just happened. Since I invoked Norway earlier (and Iceland's roots are largely Norwegian), I will say that my hotel in Iceland was better than the one I stayed at in Bergen. After returning home, I had to re-watch the aforementioned Bourdain episode – and I was surprised to see he also stayed here... the halls, rooms, and restaurant all familiar. Of course, some people might be surprised to see the prominent hotel sign about how whale is served in their restaurant (which I noticed in a few other places around town). In retrospect, I'm surprised Bourdain didn't eat (or really mention) whale. During this trip, I never ate any – despite the obvious opportunity here at Odinsve. Being that I was more hungry (but not for whale) than I was tired, I dragged my bags upstairs (not noticing the elevator that first day) and immediately returned to the

breakfast buffet (about \$15, not included in the room rate). It was about 9 a.m. at the time. The buffet was fine: very basic, European style. As usual, I pocketed a couple croissants, a pear, and a hard-boiled egg so I could eat them for lunch. And then it was back to the room for a shower and a 4-hour nap. Of course, Odinsve (like many hotels) featured little in the way of window covering. During my entire stay in Iceland, it was light ALL THE TIME. Although I came prepared with this cool new neoprene mask (textured so there was space over the eyes), I did get used to sleeping in light to the point that it was a little hard to return to the dark Pacific Northwest.



Left to Right: (top) Hallgrímskirkja church with Leif Erikson statue; waterfront (over?)-development and Sun-Craft, City Hall by the “pond,” Frikirkjan church by pond (the whole thing was made of corrugated metal – roof and all)

By around 3, I was awake and ready for a stroll. Reykjavik is, by far, the European city I have ever dealt with, whether in terms of feeling safe or being able to navigate. If lost, the best thing to do was find the Hallgrímskirkja church (one of the high, recognizable landmarks) and learn to navigate relative to this point. In my case – as I quickly discovered – said church was less than a block left and then a couple blocks right (with a grocery store en route). As a big fan of both old/stave and new/modern Norwegian churches (e.g. the Arctic Cathedral in Tromsø), I LOVED the Hallgrímskirkja because it definitely fit into the latter category. Inside, I did not – as the LP authors did – find the organ to be weapon-like... and I did not have the patience to wait for the elevator up the tower. After exhausting the church grounds, I wandered down one of the big streets to the waterfront (from the church, there are several spoke-like streets, each worth wandering). Although most of the city was clean and interesting, I was put off by the high amount of graffiti (some of the highest per capita that I have ever seen). Later, I discussed this with one of our guides and he was surprised by my shock, justifying it as unoffensive freedom of speech and/or art to younger Icelanders. On the way to the waterfront, I walked down one of the major shopping and bar scene streets... although I found nothing very interesting. Between said street and the waterfront was a sort of weird area where it seemed like there was a lot of condo-like construction (potentially arrested development, thanks to the shitty economy)... sort of like arctic Miami. At the water's edge, the weather was definitely blustery – waves crashing over the rock barrier and onto the bike/walking path. At some point, I came to the Sun-Craft, an – in my opinion – sculptural play on a Viking Ship. From here, I worked my way back into the downtown and THOUGHT I was near my hotel. But no – I'd managed to find the “pond” and government area. Given that it was starting to rain, I ducked into City Hall – which seemed more like a fancy visitor center: a current photography display featuring the northern lights, a big relief map of the whole country, and a little café. I then strolled along the pond to this fascinating corrugated metal white church with a green roof. Indeed, LOTS of buildings in Reykjavik are metal – albeit light, bright colors. After a little more wandering, I found an ATM (one of my original aims) and was (as usual) confused by my inability to do math regarding the conversion rate (this time – too little). I then found the right street toward the hotel and stopped at the aforementioned grocery. There, I bought my “Easter Island-esque” dinner (see that report): yogurt (both a pear “drink” and skyr – a strained Greek-like product that became a food obsession on this trip), fruit, nuts, and what seemed like pre-packaged but very fresh pancakes. The latter were one of several varieties of flat bread for sale... other varieties were thinner, chewier, more savory. But my choice pancakes were lightly sweet and absolutely delicious. Walking back to the hotel, I was drawn into a couple of expensive-looking galleries – one featuring this local female painter (I will forever regret not buying some of her work) and the other featuring these beautiful felted local wool sculptures – everything from dolls to puffins. Fortunately, the wool art stuff was not as insanely priced as the paintings (although I did not buy them immediately/today). I don't remember what time I got back to my room – but, like I said, it was light out all the time. I know I showered again, watched some TV, ate, read (I've been on a Michael Pollan kick) and went to bed by 10.

July 8, 2010 – Relaxing in Reykjavik

When I originally planned this trip, I had all kinds of visions of doing any number of crazy things today given the HUGE number of “one-day-tours” (everything from horseback riding and heli-volcano touring to whitewater rafting and glacier trips via jeep, snowmobile, or dogsled) that one can easily find advertised. Indeed, this “crazy-high-impact” obsession that Iceland's tourism industry seems to embrace is one of the reasons that I did go into this trip a little concerned. Ultimately, though, I decided I wanted to relax and do things on my own at a slower pace. After reading the LP, I had earmarked a number of destinations that seemed doable. The first was the Reykjavik Botanic Gardens, which were said to be 45 minutes away by foot – specifically by Laugardalur, this complex that includes a big park, the zoo, some kind of recreational facility, and what used to be the main thermal pool and hot water source for the city. Given that the weather was so-so during breakfast, I decided to cab it to the gardens. My first driver was this very gruff Russian who did not seem interested in working with the public. Nevertheless, I got there by 10 a.m. for about \$12. I attempted to ask him to pick me up in

90 minutes but was never sure if he understand the request (well – not until another cab/driver did, in fact, show up). Anyway – it sprinkled on me a few times as I made my way around the impressive grounds (which LP claimed was home to over 5000 different specimens). Having said that, the native area was small and featured mostly things I'd just seen in Alaska (this would be the case pretty much all over the country). They did have some of the coolest delphinium varieties I've ever seen... and I got to see lady slippers (after Alaska failed to produce!). There was an interesting greenhouse café (called Café Flora) and was said to have waffles but somehow I did manage to resist.



Left to Right: Reykjavik Botanic Gardens – only lower/right is “native”

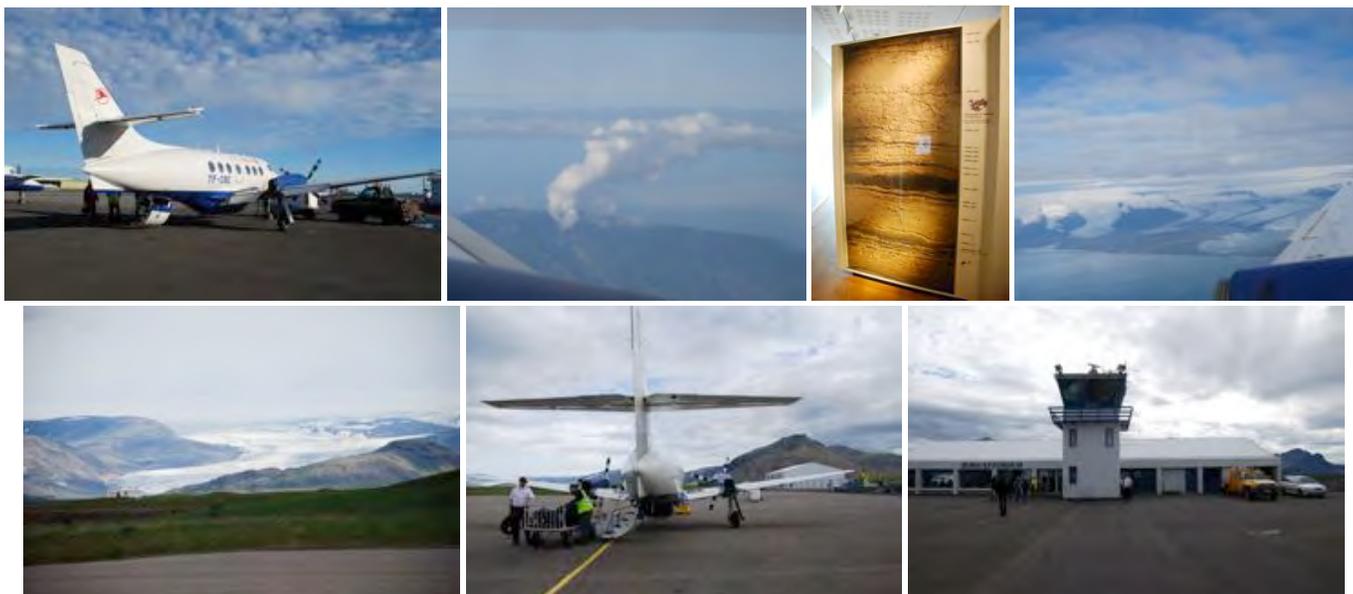
My pick-up ride was right on time but was not gruff-Russian; rather, Thor was this extremely friendly Icelander who had a lot of good advice and commentary about Reykjavik. He took me over to the National Museum, which is in the university complex near the pond. Given that the weather had improved dramatically, I walked the rest of the day and did not get to visit Thor again. In contrast with the Botanic Gardens, the museum cost money to enter (about \$8 – typical at most of the rest of the places I visited). Although it was a little too religion-dominated (perhaps because that's the way history's antiquities are in Iceland), I enjoyed the museum. It was small and had a nice walking layout that progressed through time. There were lots of interactive things - the funniest being the children's dress-up room with Viking outfits and other period clothes... plus all these funny drawings on the walls. Unfortunately, I did not photograph the second funniest display: a history of the beard and beard maintenance in Iceland. The museum also had a GREAT gift shop where I bought some excellent books and postcards, including an incredible plant guide.



Left to Right: (top) National Museum, original house, national costume, children's play-dress-up area and wall drawing related to Vikings; (bottom) Reykjavik 871 ±2 exhibition – pithouse, digital images, walking back to the hotel under beautiful skies

From the National Museum, I strolled slowly – under sunny skies – to and then around the pond. Near City Hall was a weird-sounding museum called “Reykjavik 871 ±2.” Touted as the city's newest exhibition, 871 is in the basement/foundation of a contemporary building (i.e. you enter from the street and go underground). Apparently when this building was constructed, they found this fairly large 10th century Viking pithouse-equivalent (indeed, it looked strikingly similar to pithouses all over the Desert SW). And so it was left in

place and a museum excavated around it. Even though 871 was small and focused only on this one place/thing, this was actually one of my favorite sites all day. The idea was that you walked around the large, oval pithouse. On the walls was this wrap-around lit-up picture of what the area looked like – and, embedded into the image at various intervals, were motion-activated video screens. Short videos showed re-creations of Viking activities (figures portrayed as white, ghostly shadows): fishing, killing sea birds, foraging, etc. In the center of the pithouse, a digital projection of a fire was cast onto a barely-visible plastic-glass? plate. Everything was informative and tasteful. Indeed, one of the places I explicitly chose NOT to visit was Perlan and the Saga Museum – which LP accurately says looks like Barbarella's bra from a distance (I saw it en route to the Botanic Gardens). My impression of this place – based on LP's description and some brief glimpses about it on TV – was that this was, like, the Ripley's/Wax Museum of Iceland... tasteful not being a word that comes to mind, despite its aim to realistically and bloodthirstily portray Viking life (LARP-ily and in silica). Anyway, I can heartily say that my chosen venues for reviewing Icelandic history were quiet, interesting, and I would go back to them any day. After 871, I headed back around the pond. Next to the aforementioned corrugated metal church was one of several National Galleries (this one called Listasafn Islands) and so I went in there (about \$8). A small current showing of Munch was the main attraction – along with this weirdly captivating American photographer. Although there was another gallery, I cannot recall a single thing there... despite LP's description seeming interesting and substantial in terms of Icelandic artists. A light and airy café was VERY tempting but I resisted again because I wanted a real meal... not pastries and tea. Easily finding the right way back towards my hotel, I stopped at this Asian Noodle place for a bowl of chicken udon. Although it was good, the cook used this Allspice, sweet-toned spice mixture that seemed slightly weird to me. By the time I got back to the hotel, it was after 2 and time for 90-minute nap. And then it was time for another walk – this time shopping, including getting my felted wool Icelandic doll and puffin. A month before this trip, one of the WT group members had emailed everyone about meeting for an early dinner tonight. I had been the only one to respond and so Margie and I – plus this woman from REI's Iceland trip (who Margie met while checking in) – all met in the lobby around 6. They had been told that THE place to eat in Reykjavik was seafood-y Vid Tjornina, down by City Hall – although LP said this place was famous for serving more than seafood, with specialties including puffin and guillemot. Tonight, though, their non-fish option was lamb... and it truly was the best lamb I have ever eaten. We all went in on the UNGODLY EXPENSIVE fixed plate menu – which featured salad, fish or meat, and an rich chocolate dessert. The place felt like a little French country inn – with 3-4 little dining rooms and wallpaper covered with the same virus-striped tulips I was reading about in Botany of Desire, a strange moment of coincidence. Across from our table (there were 3 tables in our dining room) was this DDG Canadian guy who'd just been camping all over Iceland (mostly in the North) – and we all chatted away most of the meal. About 10 minutes into our conversation, a woman from an adjacent dining room joined us – identifying herself as Susan, also from our WT group. And so there we were: a bunch of 40-50-something professional women (all of whom had definitely traveled the world) and the gorgeous young science teacher from the Northwest Territories. I wrote home to my friends that night: who knew there were cougars in Iceland? Being that dinner was a slow affair, I wasn't back to my hotel room until 9:30... and it was definitely time for bed because tomorrow's wake-up was EARLY.



Left to Right: (top) plane, Eyjafjallajökull, ash-laden sediment sample at National Museum, flying over Vatnajökull (note lagoon) near Hofn; (bottom) views from the tarmac of the Hofn airport

July 9, 2010 – Tour Day 1: To Hofn

The next morning, we departed the hotel around 7. We didn't need to eat because breakfast would be waiting for us in Hofn. It was also the first time we met our guides – not to mention the whole of the group. Our leader, Gunnar, grew up farming in southern Iceland and reminded me of my Norwegian grandfather's family. Our second guide, Kjartan (my spelling could be off), was in his early 20's, socially outgoing and comfortable, blond, skinny, and tall. Relatively speaking, Gunnar was 15-20 years older, darker-haired but balding, and less skinny, particularly in beer-associated areas. Gunnar also seemed much more reserved – which means I gravitated more towards Kjartan. As for our group, we could be divided into the "4-part family unit" (60-something mother/boyfriend, her 20-something son/wife) and the "4 unrelated sola women" (Margie, Susan, me, and Shauna). The 10 of us met in the lobby and boarded a small bus that took us to the domestic airport – 5 minutes away. It was shockingly quiet, reminding me of the Moab airport where Ellen and I went flight-seeing back in March. The morning weather was good across most of Iceland's southern coast – over which we basically flew. Given how many goofy, small, prop planes I have flown in the last 15 years, I was surprised at the tin can we flew in across Iceland: loud, cramped, all our gear stuffed at our feet or in our lap (no rules to the contrary). The 2+1 seats were assigned – with all clients assigned to pair seats such that half of us (including me) had no direct window views. I did manage to hand my camera

to people with seats – shooting notorious, steaming Eyjafjallajokull and Europe’s largest icefield - Vatnajokull. Jokull, one of the words I knew prior to this trip (from geology, in reference to glacial outbursts), means glacier/icefield – and so both Eyjafjalla - and Vatna- are the names of glaciers/icefields. Thus, Eyjafjallajokull is not the name of a mountain per se... it is a volcanic eruption under the Eyjafjalla-glacier/icefield. Hofn is at the far eastern end of the Vatnajokull and so we began descending over this dramatic area - massive glacial tongues pouring off the MASSIVE icefield. Looking down at Hofn, the place seemed like Tromso, Norway mixed with Haines, Alaska. Right before the airport, we flew over HUGE sandy beaches that seemed to go on and on and on (presumably glacial outwash?). Stepping off the plane, one could see: the ocean, the glaciers/icefield, these rugged rocky peaks and capes, and green farmlands. From here, we met our bus/driver for the next week (to this day, I cannot say or spell his name) and drove 10 minutes to our hotel in Hofn proper. Although there had been some question about whether we’d be able to check in/put our luggage in our rooms, we did – because most tourists were Germans on these crazy bus tours that hit the road by 9 a.m. (i.e. when we arrived). Nevertheless, the breakfast buffet was still CRAZY... lots of Russian accents. This was one of only a couple hotels where we stayed 2 consecutive nights – which I prefer because then I don’t feel like I am on some crazy busy tour. After stuffing our faces, we had an hour to put together our daypacks and pack a light lunch (from materials the guides purchased at grocery stores along the way). Today’s hike (about 5 miles, 300 feet) was on an official track (based on LP maps/descriptions) around the cape formed by Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn. We drove maybe 20 minutes toward Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn, then cut inland/behind the cape, and then proceeded down a dirt side-road along a big bay of mirror-like water called Papafjordur (more rocky points and peaks in the distance).



Left to Right: (top) all the thyme in the world (seriously – EVERYWHERE), across the Papafjordur, starting to round the cape via black-sand beaches; (bottom) more Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn points, lunch spot, “scrambling” from lunch

Although a road-like track continued a little ways, there was an actual trail sign and another car parked where we stopped. Were it not for these familiar things, you probably couldn’t have convinced me this was a legitimate hiking trail. Indeed, my impression of Iceland’s hiking trails (and approach to trails/wilderness) is that it’s a little schizophrenic: sometimes the trails are great but often they seem more like jeep/ATV roads (which I suspect are allowed to use them). Hopefully, Iceland will make a stronger commitment to preserving what we define as wilderness because lots of places we saw seem on the edge of becoming jeep/ATV tourist crazy. Today, like many of my impressions of Iceland, was understatedly beautiful... and I probably cannot explain that other than to say that some places just have a feeling to them whether or not they are over-the-top stunning in some traditional sense. While some of Iceland is definitely over-the-top stunning, an equal portion (in terms of my impressions) is just stark... but in a beautiful way. Most representative of such understated beauty: the fine, small, colorful plants even in the stark places – almost everywhere, if you looked. Anyway – we hiked above the Papafjordur side of the cape – sometimes in rocks, sometimes in boggy grass/moss, usually on some kind of faint track. Perhaps I missed something Gunnar said – but, in reading about this area after the fact, it appears as though we distantly passed an abandoned settlement (Papos) used by Irish monks prior to the Vikings’ arrival in the 9th Century. We then began rounding in front of the cape proper – walking in beautiful black sand right along the North Atlantic. Above, the Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn towered – a HUGE swath of dark talus sliding into the ocean. Although the pre-trip literature implied a lot of scrambling, I cannot say that anything on this route was challenging... certainly, it may offend some people used to highly groomed trails. After some pleasant beach walking, we climbed above the surf and made our way through HUGE boulders amidst and comprising the main talus field under Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn – stopping in the middle of this (and on a big rock) for our lunch break. Even though it never rained, the sky was white and overcast – but, considering our latitude, not cold (indeed, I think most of us felt Iceland was – throughout this trip – surprisingly warm... even on the less-than-perfect weather days). My only mistake today was not packing or eating enough food – because, as with Spain last summer, dinners were not until 7:30 or after (which meant that I was FAMISHED).

Following lunch, we continued on the roughest terrain of the day – minding our footing on this little goat-track in the rocks and, later, the grass. I can’t say it lasted more than 15 minutes, though. And then we were basically on the other side of the cape, passing some leftover foundations from the war and then dropping through grass to this long boggy section. Given all kinds of standing water (it had apparently been POURING here the prior week), though, there were some pretty reflection shots to be taken. Although some jeep tracks appeared for awhile, we eventually had to cut across this substantial bog (thoroughly wetting my boots) before hitting a different and more substantial set of jeep tracks. Here a legitimate ruin was situated next to a recently-used movie set (empty) that we weren’t supposed to photograph. Nevertheless, we walked through the Viking village replica before making our way down the obviously-used

dirt road to our waiting bus. From here, we drove down some pretty awful dirt roads – passing quite the radio tower/satellite complex (supposedly no longer in use???) – and winding up near this rocky point where a seal colony could barely be seen on a distant rock in the ocean. I was more interested in shooting the beautiful plant-life, particularly against the Vesturhorn/Brunnhorn, which looked especially ragged from this perspective. Being 15 minutes from Hofn, we arrived back at our hotel at just before 4 p.m. Like I said, dinner was relatively late – following an hour debrief/preview of tomorrow. Although I didn't record all our dinners, I remember this one because it was DELICIOUS baked chicken breast (everyone else ate fish). On this trip (as compared with the Glacier Bay trip I'd just done), there wasn't nearly the confusion or frustration with interpreting my eating habits; Gunnar typically gave me a couple options in advance and everything was easily accomplished; in fact, one of the other women also changed from fish to meat mid-way through this trip. As with pretty much all nights, I was back to my room between 9-10, and sleeping shortly thereafter.



Left to Right: (top) oysterleaf, war leftovers, bog trail, ruins; (bottom) reflections, wild thyme near seal point, hotel/room - clean

July 10, 2010 – Tour Day 2: Gee, It Sure Can Rain In Hofn

The next morning, we got a later start because the guides kept hoping the rain would taper off. Although it wasn't as hideous as it could have been, it was a wet day and summit goals were not met. Today's hike is not mentioned as an official track in LP – although nearby landmarks can be found on some maps. All in rain, we drove a little out of Hofn and then took some dirt road up 5 minutes. Our "trailhead," in the valley of Laxardalur, was inland from the cape we'd hiked yesterday – but still in the same range of hills. The goal was to climb up to some pass, attempt to climb the highest point in the area (Ketillaugarfjall, in LP) and then continue over the other side to the lowlands of Nes where the bus would pick us up. During the climb, the views to the Vatnajokull were said to be STUPENDOUS (on a clear day, of course).



Left to Right: (top) day 2 hike area shot day 1, actual hike – RAINING; (bottom) climbing to rhyolite, more climbing, great talus

We set out hiking around 11. Perhaps to the embarrassment of the guides, I donned my new umbrella (alas, pimp daddy leopard-skin broke in Alaska and I found a new version: gay rainbow leopard-skin!) - and, worse, taught Margie the merits of hiking with her gaudy, floral umbrella. Following a steep, rough jeep road about 15 minutes, we began a rather relentless climb on a faint track. Given recent

rain, EVERYTHING was brilliant green – although, for the next hour, it mostly stopped raining. Halfway up, the green hillside across the way eroded into fantastic oranges and white: this trip's BEST display of multi-colored rhyolite. When I first showed said pictures to my mother, she thought this must have been a LOVELY hike (WHAT - are you kidding me?). Consequently, I probably appreciate this hike more after the fact, not to mention from the comfort of my home. Proceeding along the rhyolite section, we had to cross a number of draws and talus slopes – the most frightening-looking of which is shown in the bottom row above (yet surprisingly easy once you got on it). Beyond the rhyolite section, we climbed more through grass/moss – eventually reaching the pass. All the while, we genuinely thought things were improving... but then, during lunch, the clouds lowered in all directions (having never lifted from the target summit), the winds whipped up, and things began to decay. We briefly climbed to a nondescript place on the summit hillside, but then Gunnar decided we would be heading down (notably as it began to drizzle). And DOWN it was: STEEP – at first on the thickest spongy moss I've ever experienced (great on the knees). But then down dicey wet rocky stuff that had to be carefully negotiated - zigzagging with respect to this interesting stream interspersed with cool waterfalls, all cut into ragged gullies of columnar basalt. And all the while, the blue-green spot that was our bus grew larger! It was just after 2 when we arrived at the bus, after walking through a tall-grass field - the owners curtain-twitchingly watching (CRAZY TOURISTS!) from inside their farm home. Total distance: ~5 miles and 1500 feet.



Left to Right: (top) Joklasýning's walk-thru glacier model, mountaineering history exhibit; (bottom) Hofn from top of museum/visitor center, church and elusive Ketillaugarfjall (shot next morning), Vatnajökull/Hoffellsjökull from Hofn (shot next morning)

We arrived back at the hotel around 2:30, meaning an INSANE amount of downtime. Somewhat surprising to me (given WT's usual itineraries and back-up options), Gunnar mentioned some options we could pursue on our own but then we were turned loose. Left to my own devices, I pursued a shower, a nap, and then – slightly bored, but with weather improving – I set out to visit Hofn's Glacier Museum (officially - Joklasýning, located at the tourist office). Although we were told it would take 10 minutes to walk to the museum (and it did), it felt farther. Visiting the museum cost \$5, which was fine... and I enjoyed the 2-story exhibit, which included a glacier simulation you could walk through. Leave it to those Scandinavians and their models and dioramas. From the museum/visitor center, I proceeded to a so-called rock/mineral museum but quickly figured out this wasn't going to be worth it (a personal collection pretty much in someone's house). When I entered the building, I made up some half-truth about how I was looking for an ATM (knowing full well knew there was one at the grocery, which I'd just passed). I then went back to the grocery – both for more money and because I was FAMISHED again. Today began my slightly repetitive habit of eating a giant chocolate glazed donut (further covered with chocolate sprinkles)... plus some kind of beverage (today - another pear-yogurt drink). I carried these items out onto the waterfront walkway/bike-path that I knew would take me on a more scenic route back to the hotel. I don't remember what time I got back – only that I still had at least another hour before our nightly debrief/preview and dinner. For the latter, we enjoyed a DELICIOUS lamb-roast.



Left to Right: Hoffellsjökull, I'm lichen it!

July 11, 2010 – Tour Day 3: Glaciers, Glaciers, Glaciers, and more Glaciers

Today will be remembered as the trip's BEST because of the astoundingly good weather – and the fact that we saw typically-elusive things like Iceland's highest mountain (Hvannadalshnúkur on the Oraefajökull – 7,000 feet). As a special treat (i.e. not in the original itinerary), our first stop was 30 minutes away – at the end of a rough dirt side road: a quiet, more peaceful glacier lagoon (relative to

the BIG one we'd visit next) at the foot of Hoffellsjokull (I believe, based on my interpretation of LP's maps). After driving across a lunar plateau of glacial outwash, we parked at the base of an old terminal moraine and then walked up the rocky ridge. Gunnar gave a talk but, as usual, I was running around shooting flora and ice reflections. And then we were back on the bus heading west. Within the hour, we arrived at the Glacier Lagoon/Jokulsarlon, where the Breidamerkursandur glacier tumbles into a HUGE freshwater lagoon... and icebergs collect. Film buffs will know this place from Die Another Day and Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (I only saw the latter). While Jokulsarlon is outrageously gorgeous (especially given our weather), the main visitor area is crazy (in a rednecky way). Having said that, we began by agreeing that we should pay a little extra (~\$20-ish) to get in an amphibious vehicle (presumably the same ones used in Lara Croft...) and ride around in the lagoon for 30 minutes. Now if that's not rednecky, I don't know what is. But there was no way I was not going to NOT do that – just to write home and tell everyone I got to ride in an amphibious vehicle with icebergs.



Left to Right: (top) Jokulsarlon, visitor area, land portion of the tour; (middle) approaching the water, in the water, our enthusiastic blond guide and her ice; (bottom) Hvannadalshnukur, disembarking, whew – I need a chocolate-glazed donut after that!

We waited maybe 15 minutes for the next tour – and then CRAMMED onto the amphibious vehicle with ~20 other people. Some of my male friends have asked me if the Icelandic girls are as cute as they (who?) say... and my answer: the only Icelandic girl I thought was cute was our blond guide on the amphibious vehicle, particularly when she scooped up a piece of ice and handed out pieces of it to eat. In a manner that was not too goofy, she also gave a decent talk about the glacier lagoon. Meanwhile, these Bond-like guys in zodiacs zipped about – clearing ice and monitoring safety issues in a way that seemed WAY too officious (I mean: has there been some kind of deadly accident on one of these tours?). Anyway – we motored through the icebergs, snapping pictures like there was no tomorrow. And then we returned to a remarkably cleared-out visitor area.



Left to Right: glassy ice, cool oceanside ice, walking the black sand beach with Hvannadalshnukur in view! skua

Of course, the gift shop/cafe had chocolate-glazed donuts (with chocolate sprinkles) and hot cocoa – so a little break in front of the lagoon was in order. From the visitor area, we drove over the excurrent lagoon “river” and parked just on the other side – watching the icebergs make their way a few hundred feet to the ocean... plus some seals playing in the current. At the time, I was so overstimulated

that I wasn't clear on the game-plan... but that didn't matter. We basically spent the next 90 minutes walking this big loop that encompassed down the short river to the ocean (where variously-sized pieces of ice begged to be photographed), along the black sand ocean beach, back up across the glacial debris field (angry skua dive-bombing us because they were nesting and/or rearing young on the flats), crossing the highway, and then climbing up and along the terminal moraine – definitely the BEST and most peaceful place from which to enjoy the lagoon. En route, I was surprised to see a few unofficial campsites – people basically just rolling up and pitching their tents (in general, we saw a lot of this kind of thing throughout Iceland). We returned to the bus and a lunch buffet was set up; I think it was the first lunch where I ate myself silly and wasn't hungry before dinner.



Left to Right: (top) my favorite iceberg/reflection, Hvannadalshnukur and reflection, crazy camp; (bottom) one more shot of the lagoon, lunch by the "river," impressive icefall on Oraefajokull near Hvannadalshnukur (shot during drive)

After lunch, we drove just under an hour to our hotel for the next 2 nights - near the main visitor center for Skaftafell National Park. En route, we drove effectively under Hvannadalshnukur/Oraefajokull – which were gorgeously clear from the east... but then became progressively cloud-ridden as we rounded to their western side. But it was hard to get heart-broken about the diminishing views given the gift we'd been given all day up to this point. My recollection is that we arrived at our hotel around 2 p.m. and were given about an hour to get ready for a ~3-hour walk to and on a nearby glacier (1 of at least 5 we could see from the hotel environs). Although the main lounge and dining area of this hotel were good, the actual rooms here were pretty basic. In addition to the rooms looking and feeling like a small dorm room, some of us were surprised that the hot water situation was limited (you basically had to push a button to get hot water for about 1 minute... and then keep pushing every minute thereafter). However, this was the only place we stayed at with legitimate window coverings that could almost achieve complete darkness at night.



Left to Right: (top) hotel room/cabin, walk-on glacier, Gunnar; (bottom) on the glacier, leaving the glacier, pretty rainbow

To this day, I am not 100% on which glacier we walked because the LP maps for this area are too low resolution (I am certain we were not on the Skaftafellsjokull, which was one valley over). Anyway – for our hike, we met out back and proceeded straight up from the hotel grounds. Although there were clouds obscuring much of the sky, you definitely had the sense that there were big rugged

mountains all around. We hiked up a rocky trail/jeep road for about 30-40 minutes – western views opening onto several massive glaciers (including Skaftafellsjökull) farther to the west. Gunnar pointed out tomorrow’s monster hike in Skaftafell proper: this big loop up and around an obvious high, ridge-y plateau, including an optional summit of some cloud-obscured pointy massif in the center/back. We then dropped through rubble to “our” glacier – the end of which was covered in debris and mud, including lots of ruddy iron. After sliding through the muddy interface between rock and ice, we easily walked on the fairly dirty ice surface for about 45 minutes. Where I would have loved to make more distance, the men seemed more interested in finding scary holes and cracks - then dropping rocks into them. Anyway – I always LOVE walking on glaciers and was thrilled regardless. We then returned to the hotel, the skies threatening greatly. In the distance, rain was clearly falling down nearer to the ocean – to the point we were greeted with a pretty rainbow. That night, I enjoyed a big, very welcome bowl of pasta with a simple marinara sauce. It was PERFECT.



Left to Right: (top) arriving at Skaftafell – recently expanded to the name in the second image, more crazy names; (bottom) hitting the trail, along the lush river, Svartifoss – foss=waterfall, columnar basalt detail

July 12, 2010 – Tour Day 4: Skaftafellsheidi Loop With A Little Bit of Everything... Including Some Funk

I came into this trip thinking that today’s hike was going to be this multi-colored rhyolite canyon trek that I’d seen in Backpacker Magazine a few years ago. But, alas, THAT area is called Landmannalaugar (more west and inland) and, sadly, we never visited it. So I’m not going to lie – today was a bit of a let down... not to mention that the weather wasn’t great (although it could have been worse). Today’s hike was also a haul. Our itinerary said 8 miles and 2200 feet (the optional summit added 3.5 more miles and another 1000 feet). Members of the aforementioned REI group, also staying at our hotel, claimed it was more (based on GPS data) – which I THOROUGHLY believe. Anyway – after arriving at the visitor center, we proceeded through the tent-camping area and started up a labeled, bona fide trail... along with lots of people (and 20 minutes behind REI). For the first mile, the route was through lush birch forest – sometimes along a river cut into lava. Eventually, we came to Svartifoss waterfall, set in a pretty cirque of columnar basalt.



Left to Right: views out over the Morsardalur/jökull, last clear-ish view of Krisinartindar massif

From Svartifoss, we began climbing – eventually breaking into open heath: a high plateau tilting up to this rugged massif that comprised Krisinartindar, the summit option I did not partake in. After a break to catch everyone up, we continued up what (at least from a distance) didn’t look very steep – until you started noticing how slowly REI was moving. Indeed, we huffed up at least 4 rises – all exhausting (largely because, by this point, the nice switchback construction had de-evolved into straight-up shit that did not amuse me, speaking as a west coast hiker). Eventually, we began zigzagging into these cliffy edges that looked down into the Morsardalur, a big valley with a braided glacial river. The views here could have been worse... but they also could have been better. The “top” (in terms of how far the trail went up along this cliffy area) consisted of a final overlook where the trail cut into red-orange rock. The views of the Morsardalur and -jökull (actually, many hanging glaciers at the valley headwall) were alright but mist and low clouds obscured good definition. From here, the route headed east, contouring under Krisinartindar, which had been looking a little more promising but then become clouded up for good. Oh well - it was lunch and bathroom time. For the former, we found a wind-protected creek draw where we spread out our things and ate. For the latter, it was every man/woman for him/herself. In the draw, the flora was especially beautiful: several kinds of flowers and this insane day-glow moss that held these perfect droplets of water (photo below). After lunch,

everyone had to make their decision about the summit option. During last night's preview of today's hike, I was the only one who said I had no intention of attempting Krisinartindar – because it was freaky exposed. Initially, three others (2 other sola women and the mother in the family subgroup) also bowed out – and we set off with Kjartan, whose job it was to deal with the wimps (which I'm not afraid to call myself when it comes to scrambling crazy shit). Within 10 minutes, the one remaining sola woman scrambler pulled out because she felt the pace being set was too demanding. Like I said to her at the time, I wished she hadn't done that because she was unbelievably fit and the set pace was unnecessarily fast. Indeed, if my issue hadn't been fear of heights, I would have been up there slowing them all down. Having done plenty of WAY more challenging trips (e.g. the John Muir Trail) with guides who knew how to maintain an acceptable pace for groups with broader abilities than ours, I was honestly disappointed with the outcome of what I saw with the summit option today. Of course, the best response was someone else's entirely: you should have gone because you paid just as much as everyone else. The next morning, I ate breakfast with the REI woman we'd met/dined with back in Reykjavik. Having watched our group much of the morning yesterday, she was SHOCKED that hardly any of us pursued the scramble – and so I HAD to express my thoughts on the matter. According to her, the entire REI team started up towards Krisinartindar (i.e. went about a mile up from where I did) but a few chose not to do the final exposed area (which would have been a nice option for us, in my opinion). It was her impression that their guides were more responsive to a broader range of abilities - and, if things got too fast for her, she simply stopped to catch her breath and hung out at the end of the line (because she had no qualms doing that, felt it was her right as a client, and felt it wasn't an issue in their group). Anyway – you can make what you will of that story.



Left to Right: (top) cool lunch moss, first view of Skaftafellsjokull, weird rocky landscape; (bottom) Skaftafellsjokull with is "seismograph lines," more Skaftafellsjokull, Susan enjoying our moment of sun with a glimpse of Hvannadalshnukur from west

Within 20 minutes of re-forming, the wimps arrived at this Whitney-esque overlook above the MASSIVE Skaftafellsjokull. Despite some negative feelings about today's hike, the Skaftafellsjokull was a memorable highlight - even under the low ceiling of clouds. As with the climb up on the west side of the plateau, we zigzagged down the east side – intermittently coming to these cliffy overlooks above the Skaftafellsjokull. By now, though, we were in a squall (hence the umbrella) that seemed to repeat 3 more times before the hike was over. This made for some slippery mud sections as we transitioned from high rocky slate back into green meadow. The hike down felt ENDLESS, far more substantial than the hike up. Eventually, we arrived at the last/lowest cliffy overlook where several dozen people were amassed (likely the easiest dayhike to get a view of the Skaftafellsjokull). Not surprisingly, we also started regularly running into people all the way back to the visitor center. There, the wimps dispersed – to shop, to snack (me), to look at the park information, and to use the restroom (me). By the time we all found our way back to the bus, it was just after 5 and – not surprisingly – the scramblers were in sight. Back at the hotel (10 minutes away), Gunnar called a meeting at 6:30 in the bar (I assumed it would be the usual debrief/preview) but the actual assumption/plan was that we were all going to watch (and want to watch) the final match of the World Cup. Being that I have zero interest in this kind of stuff, I asked when dinner was and returned to my room to back-up my pictures and clean/re-organize my gear (now in complete disarray). For the record, I was not the only one who left to do other things. Alas – dinner was sort of awkward because the World Cup runneth over... even though we had to eat downstairs on the kitchen's schedule; consequently, some folks had to walk away from the game... the upstairs bar roaring from time to time as if to tease them. Perhaps not surprisingly, REI had arranged to have dinner served to them IN the bar; while I'm sure some people were envious of this, I was thankful we enjoyed a mostly quiet meal – mine being this delicious curried vegetable pie with a lovely salad.

July 13, 2010 – Tour Day 5: Cliffs, Cliffs, and More Cliffs... and Some Waterfalls

Today's drive began with the crossing of the ominous Skeidararsandur, said to be the largest "sandur" (gigantic glacial outwash) in the world (specifically from the Skeidararjokull arm of the Vatnajokull). As recently as 1996, glacial outbursts destroyed bridges in this area, resulting in the construction of repetitive dikes across the wash... not to mention redesigning section-able bridges that can be more easily replaced in the likely event of future glacial outbursts. After about an hour, we left the main road for Fjadrargljufur, a remarkable little lava/tufa canyon (with a pretty blue river) that seemed almost invisible against the rolling green hills... that is until you were right upon it. A 10-minute walk over the gloriously green hillocks took us to that edge. Of course, REI had also come and gone before us (our last encounter with them before they enviously headed up to Landmannalaugar for a couple nights of camping and hiking). Although there was a mildly interesting waterfall at the head of Fjadrargljufur, I didn't include any photographs... because it was just so-so. As we walked along the canyon (heading down-river), I actually found a moonwort – the most unusual plant I saw during the

Glacier Bay trip (notably said to make one invisible). Of course, neither of our guides knew this plant (also the case in Alaska). Walking down the canyon, we were presented with several opportunities to make these highly precarious jaunts out onto the tips of the tufa... marking the start of today's cliffs, cliffs, cliffs. I nervously did a couple... but found the others downright dangerous. As we walked, we descended – until we ultimately were at the canyon bottom and river's edge... where the bus was waiting.



Left to Right: (top) across Skeidararsandur and flood-control dikes, Fjadrargljufur, lovely moonwort; (bottom) lunch stop in the crazy lava fields below Katla and Myrdalsjokull, Vik from the beach

Returning to the bus, we continued driving for less than an hour before we stopped for a picnic lunch in the middle of weird old lava fields. A couple of signs indicated that Myrdalsjokull (a different/new icefield relative to Vatnajokull) and Katla (a noteworthy volcano named after a witch with magic breeches) were in the distance (only some of the icefield was visible). Although the scenery was pleasant, the flies were INSANE to the point that you pretty much had to eat face-into-the-wind to avoid being swarmed. Remarkably, we were told that Iceland has ZERO mosquitoes... which I question, honestly (given all the farm animals!). After a filling lunch (having discovered apricots and tangerines), we headed back on the bus for a short drive to Vik – a scenic coastal town where we were basically given 90 minutes on our own (with some options). What I chose to do was visit the local wool shop (as this town is a famous wool hub) and take a little walk out to the beach. The former (which LP calls a major “coach tour hit” represented a major booty-bag: books, souvenirs, and several wool hats for the sisters and I). The latter provided some interesting flora – plus a nice view (albeit straight into the sun and challenging to shoot) of the Reynisdrangur sea stacks... a cluster of rocks that reminded me of a bunch of owls. I don't know what others did – although, in reading about Vik now, it seems as though the little red-roofed white church on the hill might have been an interesting stop. I'm also not sure what the guides were up to... groceries?



Left to Right: all Dyrholaey/southernmost point = lighthouse, arch, sea cliffs & Reynisdrangur, and... mmm, I want to eat you!

From Vik, the highway could not go right along the ocean (as it had been). Owing to monstrous black cliffs that dropped straight into the ocean west of Vik, we cut inland, climbing up and then back down through green hills and farms (near, I believe, where Gunnar had grown up). In the distance, we could see our goal: Dyrholaey – a stand-alone butte along the ocean, providing lots of cliffs to scare me

good. Leaving the highway, we bounced across bumpy dirt roads to make our way first out to the base of Dyrholaey and then UP to the top. Dyrholaey, the southernmost tip of mainland Iceland, is home to lots of sea birds, including puffins (although the majority are supposedly found in Vestmannaeyjar, tiny islands south of the mainland). From the top of Dyrholaey, we walked down to the bottom over the course of the next couple hours. Already spooked from Fjadrargljufur, I was NOT into the 400-foot cliffs here... the extreme openness of the landscape, the fact that you could see down and out into the nothingness of the ocean. Of course, there was a pretty lighthouse, which I got to know well because I hovered around there while the rest of the group made their way right along the edge. We then dropped to this intermediate area where a big arch came into view: THE southernmost tip of Iceland. Although many people were venturing out there, I would not get near the thing because most (including the narrow entry) had exposure on both sides. After regrouping, we made our way down a steep grass slope (no trail) basically to the bottom (there was a lower level - the actual beach - but we didn't drop all the way to the water). Above said beach, a substantial parking lot with a surprising number of buses and cars was an eyesore... even worse: the throngs of people hovering just beyond at the puffin cliffs. Skeptical (for many reasons), I went over there and – even though the puffins were still fairly distant – they were somewhat habituated to gawking people (i.e. they didn't fly immediately away) and they were close enough to (sort of) shoot with my camera. Compared with puffin sightings/attempts in Norway and Alaska, Iceland owns my current prize for best puffin photos. Of course, that I managed such shots is ironic given that I was overhead saying, "I want to eat you!" to the cute (but delicious) little birds.



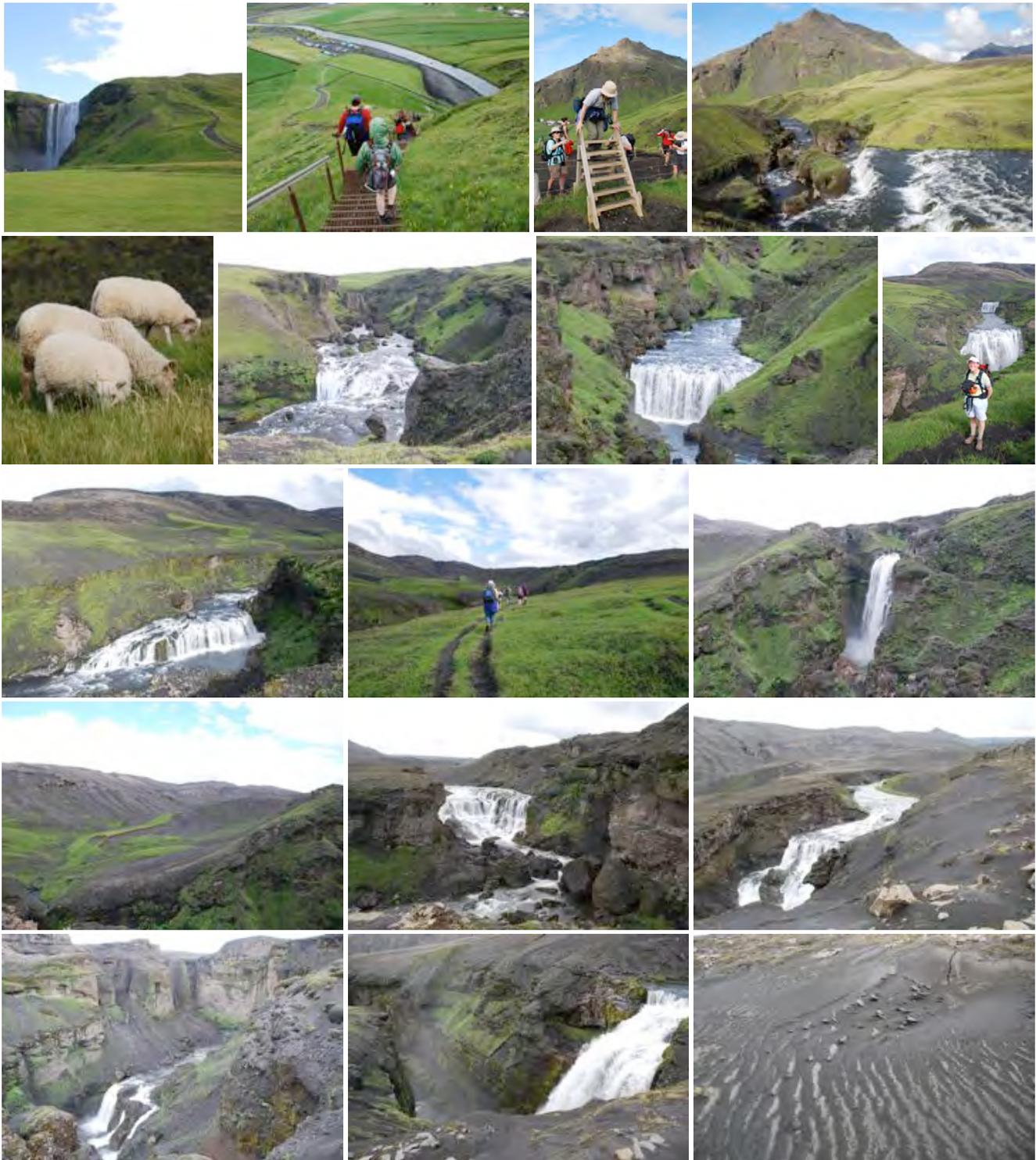
Left to Right: (top) Skogar hotel; (bottom) Skogafoss, Eyjafjallajokull – shot FROM my hotel room the next morning

After the harrowing hike down Dyrholaey, we drove less than half an hour to Skogar – a village RIGHT under Eyjafjallajokull. Our hotel, 5 minutes from the visitor center and Skogafoss/waterfall, had been closed until July 5 – their website (which I checked just before this trip) reporting that ash from Eyjafjallajokull was gone from the lowlands and people should visit. Given that this was a key area that had been COVERED in ash during said eruptions, it was shocking how green everything was down. It wasn't until tomorrow's hike that we saw evidence of the recent eruptions. Although the hotel had a sort of gritty, arctic exterior, the inside was gorgeous... although a few of us wound up with less exciting downstairs rooms (upstairs rooms seemed more quaint... with rumors of bathtubs!?!). I did have a view of the volcano and part of the waterfall, however. After unpacking a few things, several of the sola women walked to Skogafoss before dinner given that the weather was gorgeous (who knew what tomorrow would bring?). The walk was quick and painless, taking us through a couple fields and by this grassy tent camping area where a variety of people displayed various levels of dress (and undress). As we neared the massive waterfall, a group of very white boyz (late teens or early 20's) ran by in what looked like skivvies. Half had long hair and for a second I actually thought some were topless girls... because of their man-boobies (which I was told later were called "moobs"). They tried their darnedest to swim as close to the waterfall as possible – and can be seen ruining my otherwise perfect double rainbow shot above, retreating – moobs and all. After returning and showering, we endured a chilly outdoor debrief/preview – and then ate dinner in the LOVELY dining room. Although the salad was spectacular, my chicken was only so-so. After several nights of sleeping in twin beds, the excitement of sleeping in a regular bed was too much - to the point I didn't sleep well... either that or Eyjafjallajokull was subconsciously making me anxious.

July 14, 2010 – Tour Day 6: Hiking in the Shadow of Eyjafjallajokull

Contrary to popular belief, today's hike was NOT something specially planned just because of the recent Eyjafjallajokull eruptions. The hike from Skogafoss into the highlands – passing by Eyjafjallajokull - is apparently one of the most popular in all of Iceland, extending all the way to Landmannalaugar (about 40 miles, one-way). Of course, we would only be doing the first 4 miles... but they were SPECTACULAR! Leaving directly from the hotel at around 9, several of the sola women (i.e. typically at the end of the line) were chomping at the bit because we knew that we had to immediately climb this obviously steep trail, including several lengths of stairs, next to Skogafoss... plus: we were ready and others seemed behind. Eventually, we sort of got permission to head up – given that we'd already been there and it was pretty clear we weren't going to get very far before others caught up (although we did manage to make it fully up the stairs before everyone else arrived). After climbing over this awkward ladder (a means to cross the sheep fence), we headed up through remarkably green meadows, always along the Skogar river. In contrast with other sheep we'd seen earlier in this trip, the groupings of sheep along the Skogar did not immediately run away when people with cameras tried to shoot them. Although Gunnar presented this trip as a "flat hike" once you ascended the steps along the Skogafoss, I would not call it a flat hike – because obviously you were climbing UP river... and a river with some 20 waterfalls (none named on any LP maps) - most beautiful

colonnades formed from fault drops down the landscape. Indeed, today reminded me just a little of the classic hike down Yellowstone's Bechler Canyon, where similar geology creates similarly amazing waterfalls. In contrast with the Bechler, though, today's landscape was open, austere, and (at least down low) totally green meadow against a stark lava riverbed. As is hopefully obvious in the picture series below (displayed in order – going up), the landscape CLEARLY darkened as we climbed and got nearer to the volcano: ash from the Eyjafjallajokull eruptions... some sections completely covered with this concrete-like surface of it. Eerie and amazing.



Left to Right: trek from Skogafoss – in order from bottom to ash-covered top... normally, the WHOLE thing would be green

Today's hike also saw the most backpackers – en route through what appears to be an elaborate system of huts leading to Landmannalaugar (we never hiked high enough to see any huts – most being right over some distant pass). The weather was, at times, very pretty – but generally felt like it degraded during the hike (e.g. during breakfast, we had more or less seen Eyjafjallajokull – but, by the time we were at our highest point – 5 miles as the crow flies from the volcano – clouds had consumed most of the sky). Nevertheless, it never rained while we were hiking. After lunch in the ash, we took a little off-trail meander and then hiked down, arriving back at the bus by around 2. The other big draw at Skogar – which we next headed to – is the Skogar Folk Museum, a (for Iceland) substantial complex that reminded me of a mini-backwater Smithsonian, mixed in with the Norwegian folk museums I visited in

Oslo back in 2008. Apparently begun by a private citizen (Thordur Tomasson – now in his early 90's) who started his collection well over 70 years ago, the Skogar Folk Museum is well-reviewed in the LP and definitely seemed to be a popular stop on the bus route. The museum is roughly divided into 3 parts: the original building housing Tomasson's collection of folk objects from the 1800-1900's, an outdoor collection of folk buildings that you can walk in (most are completely furnished, despite being open to the throes of the Icelandic climate), and a new building devoted to the national history of transportation and communication. Our group was given a formal tour by an excellent Icelandic man with an amazing singing voice – which he showed us while viewing the collection of sagas and bibles. Amazingly, Tomasson himself then showed up to serenade us while playing some kind of stringed instrument (the name of which I cannot recall). We were then turned loose – which meant I went outside to enjoy the walk-through buildings, visited the transportation complex, and dropped some money in the well-stocked gift shop.



Left to Right: (top) Tomasson, fishing history stuff, beautiful needlepoint of Iceland; (bottom) walk-in church, house, more needlepoint

Leaving Skogar around 4, we started driving – only to be hit by this MASSIVE downpour (the worst encountered on this whole trip). Within 20 minutes, the rain still coming down, we stopped at what I believe (but am not 100% certain) was Seljalandsfoss – a skinnier waterfall than Skogafoss... but which offered the opportunity to hike around and under the actual falls. Although this sounded appealing last night during the preview discussion, it was not interesting in the rain. Indeed, I was completely soaked after 5 minutes outside the bus – and the winds were sufficient to render my umbrella useless. Less than half the group managed to hike under and around the falls – but I retreated, primarily because the river of rain and mud running down the rocky scrambling trail was not something I was interested in tackling (particularly in glasses I could barely see through).



Left to Right: Seljalandsfoss (I believe), hotel at Ranga – room, Jacuzzi tub, sitting deck outside room

Fortunately, our hotel was less than 20 minutes away – and it was GORGEOUS, reminiscent of the places we stayed in Patagonia on my last trip. Plus, we arrived there sufficiently early that we actually got to enjoy the in-room Jacuzzi tub. Of course, an absolute highlight of this trip was the fact that they served me smoked puffin salad for dinner – and it was TOTALLY delicious... like the best beef jerky imaginable – only softer. Much as I LOVED the hotel, though, I remain at a loss to actually locate it on any of my LP maps. Thinking back, the place actually seemed more like some kind of estancia or dude ranch in the middle of nowhere (minus the dudes, the horses, or the cattle)... our views over vast flat fields, occasional, distant farms – and with a Montana-esque river meandering through the scenery. As we learned many times on this trip - fishing in Iceland requires a lot of bureaucracy and even more money. Gunnar said there were rivers –including this one – that cost hundreds (close to a thousand) dollars a day to fish.

July 15, 2010 – Tour Day 7: Am I In Yellowstone?

After a delicious breakfast, we (sadly, in my opinion) left the estancia-like lodge. Driving north, we were supposed to see all kinds of volcanoes (including HUGE Hekla – one of the most likely to next erupt catastrophically) en route. But the low clouds to the east prevented any views. Fortunately, the weather to the west and north was better – and that's where we were generally heading: first to Gulfoss and then to Geysir. LP regards Gulfoss as Iceland's most famous waterfall and it is definitely MASSIVE. Prior to this trip, the waterfall in Iceland I most wanted to see was Detifoss (largest, hydraulically) but that is located in the northeast corner of the country –

WAY off the beaten track. Much as I still want to see Detifoss, I was completely enthralled by Gulfoss. Even from the parking lot, we could definitely see the Gulfoss spray rising from the canyon – even though most of us did not head over to the falls immediately – but, rather, were drawn to the pen of Icelandic horses with their cute puffy hair. After playing with them for awhile, we headed to the falls – first hiking to various upper viewpoints and then hiking down to this crazy spot where you were right between the upper falls and the lower falls, the latter pouring into this deep canyon of columnar basalt. Although there were some ropes to keep you from stumbling over the deep canyon cliff where the second falls fell, there was NOTHING between you and the class VI+ water pouring over the upper falls, RIGHT next to you. Detifoss is said to offer the same kind of thrilling proximity.



Left to Right: (top) Icelandic horses; the rest – Gulfoss

After an hour at Gulfoss, we headed 15 minutes away (by vehicle) to the Geysir/Geothermal fields area – Iceland’s MUCH smaller version of Yellowstone’s Upper Geyser Basin. Indeed, the fields are home to 2 geysers: Great Geysir (which no longer regularly erupts, thanks to human impact) and Strokkur (which regularly erupts about every 7 minutes). There was no formal tour, though – we were just turned loose to explore on our own for maybe 45 minutes. After reviewing a map/sign of the area, I began by walking over to this less popular area: what I hoped would be some alkaline pools reminiscent of the sites I’ve worked at in Yellowstone. Entirely uninteresting. Behind me, Strokkur then blew – which was VERY interesting... and so I headed back to said feature, and then climbed toward this low red hilltop viewing area (but never fully ascended it). Higher up, I became distracted by several pools (one loaded with coins... shame on tourists!) and the fact that Great Geysir started acting up. Given that it has been purported to shoot 300 feet into the air sporadically still, everyone started heading over there, hoping for another big show. And of course – then it settled down.



Left to Right: Geothermal fields – boardwalk, 2 views of Strokkur, Great Geysir comes to life (a little), picnic area

After exhausting the boardwalks/trails, we regrouped at the bus and headed 20 minutes down moderately rough and obscure dirt roads into what seemed to be a managed evergreen forest – the only such place we saw during this trip (frankly, the only evergreen trees too). The area was reminiscent of national forest land in the US, complete with car-camping and/or picnic facilities. At one such place (featuring a developed mini-cabin with a restroom and kitchen-like sink/counter), we stopped for lunch in the especially glorious sun.

Nearby, a wild little river cascaded through the strikingly green meadows and trees. In general, today's afternoon was a departure from the pre-trip literature; originally, the plan had been to have lunch in the hothouse town of Hveragerði, hike in the Reykjadalur Valley, and then somehow get in sightseeing at Thingvellir National Park. After lunching in the woods, we headed to the Reykjadalur Valley (which does NOT appear anywhere in LP) via REALLY rough roads and under especially ominous skies. The bus dropped us off at this other-worldly place in the lava (minus the insanely large power-line towers) and we hiked 7 miles down this valley dotted with all kinds of gorgeous wild thermal features – acid, alkaline, pools, vents. After exploring several fumaroles hissing sulfur from various hillocks, we headed toward the green valley we would ultimately descend. Today was the only day I had been given permission to wear my Alaska X-tra Tuf boots – because the route was said to be on an easy trail and there was a river crossing. Of course, my agenda (ultimately fulfilled) was that I figured there would be a couple interesting thermal features worth exploration... and, knowing Yellowstone, I figured (accurately) there would be marshy bogs, if not outright smaller creeks to negotiate. But my reward was at the bottom of a LONG, rocky descent that I actually cannot say I enjoyed in my squishy boots. Although the valley looked non-descript, there were steam plumes everywhere – each some kind of a thermal feature... which means Iceland might very well be competitive with Yellowstone, just more spread out.



Left to Right: (top) fumaroles near trailhead, descending valley, coolest set of microbial mats; (middle) the soaking area, more thermal areas down-valley, fields of cottongrass, looking back up-valley from lower trailhead, hotel near Thingvellir

At the bottom of the valley, the occasionally marshy trail passed by some VERY promising features that reminded me VERY much of Yellowstone (particularly – again - the Bechler/Three Forks region). Consequently, I asked to proceed off-trail – and Kjartan obliged. Given that some folks seemed interested in following, I was somewhat surprised Gunnar clearly continued – but he did. Kjartan and I headed across a buoyant field of cottongrass to this classic alkaline pool spilling gently over the edge of this three/four-foot drop to a warm/hot creek below (the one that got bigger and bigger as the valley dropped, ultimately forming the soaking areas where everyone was heading). Thankfully, however, the creek here was maybe four feet wide, fairly shallow (i.e. crossable in boots), and visually pristine... as were the glorious mats. Much as I wanted to cut into them, I could tell just by looking at them that they were CLASSIC photosynthetic communities – probably with a complete red layer (a la what I work on in Yellowstone). Although Kjartan offered to do more exploring, I had seen plenty and didn't want to dally. Of course, I also figured that if we did find more and more great stuff, then I might get upset that I couldn't easily study here... and so it was better not to know, while still being satisfied with having seen and enjoyed the great mat that we did. Returning to the trail, we headed down to the soaking site – 10 minutes away and in the process of being vacated. Downstream, there were at least two more parties in other soaking areas. Each area had been impacted by some basic engineering: some damming with rocks and probably some widening to create pools. Although I came fully prepared to enjoy my soak, the unfortunate truth was that that creek-river was HOT... hotter than anything I was used to. In contrast with Yellowstone's few legal soaking areas (which are few in number and all involve a spring feeding into a cold river), this area was a river MADE OF thermal water... easily 110-20° F. Only the guides were able to fully get in there for any serious length of time. I didn't get in above the boobs and, even then, couldn't last more than 5 minutes. Of course, the other thing the guides brought out that most of us couldn't tolerate was the rotten Greenland shark and hint-of-caraway hard liquor accompaniment (otherwise known as hakarl and Brennivin). Believe it or not (and after the very positive puffin experience), I actually went into the shark experiment with an open mind. Perhaps not surprisingly, though, both were appalling to me. I think I got the shark piece (half an inch square) six inches from my nose when I

began to physically gag. And I only got two tiny sips of the Brennivin's down before I no longer had sensation in the back of my throat from the burn. Wicked stuff, wicked stuff. Only a third of our party managed to get the shark down. After the festivities, we got dressed as discretely as possible (mind you – there were ZERO in the way of plants other than low grasses, and no major topography in the valley). Fortunately thanks to rafting, I am very skilled at fully changing under a sarong. The hike out was MUCH longer and more involved than I was expecting – although the river crossing was simple. After climbing briefly, we made this MASSIVE descent down this occasionally-edgy trail above a deep valley... the river now huge, falling through cascading waterfalls en route. In the distance, we could see the final big valley we were heading down into – mountains of green dotted with even more plumes of steam/thermal features across the way. As we came to the bottom, there was a fair bit of mud to deal with (and I was thankful for the boots). My recollection was that we didn't get to the bus until some time after 4. Although Gunnar asked if we wanted to get out and briefly walk around indeed-hothouse-laden Hveragerdi (15 minutes later) everyone seemed tired, wanting to get to the hotel and settle in for the night. The drive to the hotel, though, also seemed to take forever. Eventually, we came to Thingvallavatn – this HUGE lake – and started seeing lots of waterfront vacation homes and small-scale resorts... and so I assumed we would, like, be at one of these places. After driving probably 50% around the lake, though, we started veering off and up this side-valley where a steamy power plant was situated... and – lo and behold – there was our weird little hotel (no lake or mountain views to speak of). Ironically, of course, the power in my room was out... and went out a couple more times after supposedly fixing it. But the beds were comfortable, there was some BBC programming on the TV, and the dinner was delicious (more lamb!). Having arrived there well after six, though, there was definitely NO time for visiting nearby Thingviller – as stated in our pre-trip literature.



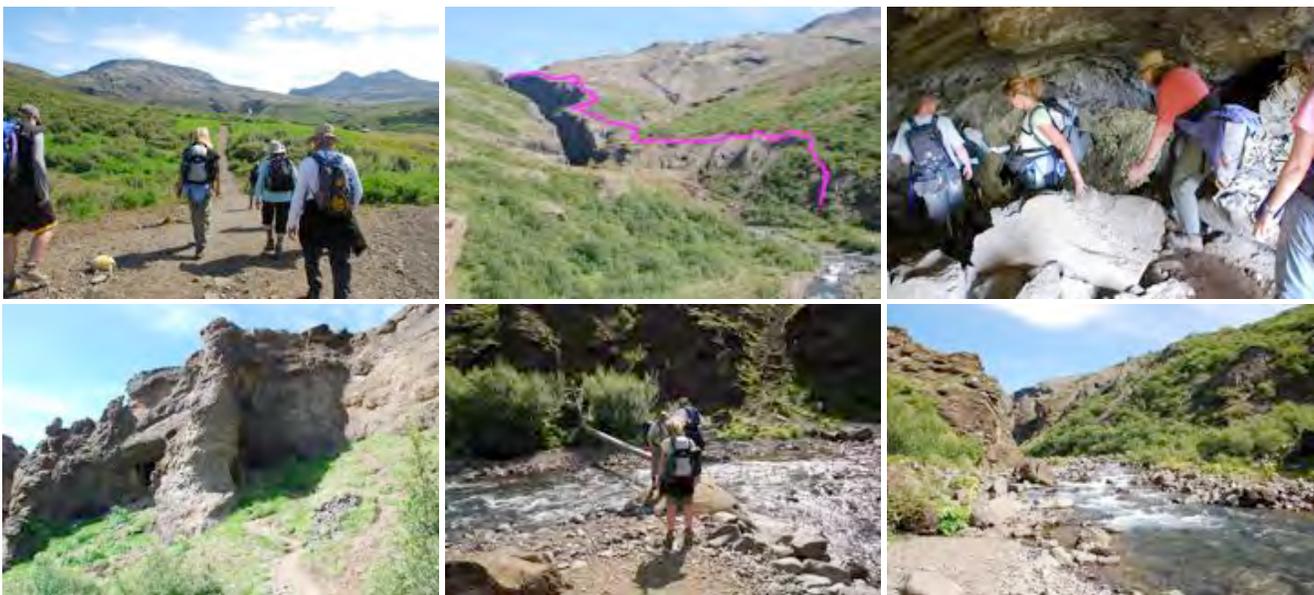
Left to Right: all Thingvellir - Thingvallavatn and various shots of Great Rift, Drowning Lady Lake, could that be pa-hoy-hoy?

July 16, 2010 – Tour Day 8: Thingvellir and the Great Rift... and a GREAT Hike to Glymur (Tallest Waterfall in Iceland!)

After a delicious breakfast, we packed up and headed less than an hour away: to lakeside Thingvellir, Iceland's first national park and a Unesco World Heritage site. Although the primary reason for both designations has to do with this being the apparent site of the world's (yes, the WORLD's) first democratic parliament (the Althing, established in AD 930), the area is also gloriously rich with beautifully stark geology: specifically, a vast rift valley representing the separating North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Indeed, the entire Althing meeting place was basically between and among all these crazy walls of lava. Unfortunately, these impressive little canyons did not, like, represent each of the respective tectonic plates. Before going into this trip, I had this crazy idea I could be standing in a 100-foot wide canyon – the North American plate representing one wall, the Eurasian the other. In fact, the other plate – we were told – was WAY over in the distance across the valley... where we never visited. So much for rock collecting. Indeed – where my primary interest in this place was geology, Gunnar (and perhaps all of Iceland) is more interested in government/political history. After strolling down to the actual site of the first parliament (i.e. where Iceland's many tribal representatives basically agreed to meet once a year and define and/or execute law), we listened to about an hour of Gunnar talking about this history. As usual, I was more interested in the rocks, the sky, and the vast sound of the wind. We then proceeded down more boardwalks, passing this ominous, less-Unesco-friendly site called "Drowning Lady Lake" – where, as you can imagine, the parliament made decisions about drowning offensive women. Interestingly, one of the more common offenses women were drowned for was incest. Perhaps this should not be a surprise given how small and fundamentally inbred Iceland is – not to mention cold and dark. Indeed, I would think that – at some point – it gets hard not to mate with your close relatives in Iceland. In any event, the otherwise beautiful but weirdly mystical clear spring-like pond was eerie; they apparently tied the women up (and presumably to heavy objects) on this big obvious rock promontory and then a rope was strung across the pond where, from the other shore, they yanked her in. Although I know Gunnar talked about how they killed offensive males, it was apparently less impressive to me than "Drowning Lady Lake" - because I don't remember anything more about that. We then continued across this HUGE, shallow, riverine valley – passing lots of lava uplifts and more mystically clear blue ponds (one filled with coins) – and met up with our bus.

From Thingvellir, we drove – sometimes on interesting dirt roads – to the west coast of Iceland: specifically emerging after an hour along the austere but scenic Whale Fjord. Driving a cliffy, curving road along the ocean, we headed to the Glymer trailhead – basically at the end of the fjord, and inland 10 minutes. Given that Glymer represents Iceland's longest/tallest waterfall, I was frankly stunned with how out-there remote this place felt... reminding me more of the Little Wildhorse Canyon trailhead in Utah during the 1990's before the graffiti-destroying crowds moved in. After a lovely picnic lunch, we started up the valley – the landscape before us basically this

cracking upthrust of land (where the waterfall lay was anyone's guess). En route, I enjoyed eating lots of huckleberry-like fruit along the otherwise flat, dry trail. Eventually, we came to this weird little lava formation that wound up being a bona fide cave through which we climbed – emerging from the other side along the river that came from the waterfall - albeit still very hidden up some seemingly narrow fissure in the crust of the earth. This – we crossed on an interesting log, using a very flaccid rope handrail.



Left to Right: (top) trailhead, looking up the Glymer Fissure (our approximate route indicated), in the cave; (bottom) looking back at cave, crossing the Glymer-originating river

At this point, the flatness and decency of the trail stopped and we scrambled outright up this strange little side-creek bed, sometimes on what seemed like solid bedrock. The next phase of scrambling involved a short section through low beech trees, following a very rudimentary path. Eventually, we emerged on what would continue to be a largely-cliff-hanging trail that flipped me out repeatedly throughout the afternoon... because, as should be evident in the annotated picture above, the higher we climbed, the steeper the relative drop into the fissure canyon. A few spots on the trail were actually worse for me than the sea cliffs at Dyrholaey... but I LOVED this trail greatly, despite its challenges: it was interesting, intellectually challenging, wild, and peaceful in the sense of few people nearby. Plus – it was the first day that everyone was closest to hiking at the same pace (or far more closely than we'd been). Halfway up, we came to our first viewpoint of the falls – which were, not surprisingly, tucked WAY into the fissure - to the point you had to be pretty much hanging off the cliff edge to take a reasonable shot (which I wasn't about to do).



Left to Right: (top) scramble up creek bed, first views, along edge; (middle) mellow mid-section, more cliff views... best falls view

We then continued up a more mellow mid-section, thankfully veering more inland relative to the cliff/fissure edge. Here, we crossed a few scenic draws with little side-waterfalls, and then ambled up through outright meadows of heather and broken lava. Of course, then we crept back out for a finale of SERIOUS cliff-walking – one section freaking me out the point I had to make my own inland route. The BEST view of the falls was enjoyed partway through this – and they were spectacular: falling 600 feet in this half-sunny chasm of lava, mist, and greenery. Thankfully, we soon arrived at the high plateau above the falls – where the wide, shallow riverbed seemed to run over a Sierra-like plane of gorgeous bedrock. Taking off our boots and donning sandals, we easily forded the river and promptly

enjoyed a sunny lunch on the other side – knowing there were no more cliffs to traverse on the different route down. Indeed, the route down was shockingly non-stressful from a cliff-edge perspective; during the climb up, we had seen some crazy people making their way up an even MORE cliffy-edge on the opposite side of the fissure (the side we were on now). Gunnar said there was, in fact, some kind of social trail on this side – but it was very dangerous... to the point that some people had fallen over edges and died. In his opinions, our route (on the other side) was the only safe way up – provided you knew how to find it.



Left to Right: placid upper river pre-falls, well – a little whitewater, near and at ford; (bottom) lunch, heading DOWN, amusing sign

But our descent was not wholly painless: we basically followed this unending and insanely rocky old road, all the while in howling, Patagonia-esque winds. For much of the way, I desperately had to go to the bathroom but there was not a THING to hide behind... and so I trailed in the back until folks were far enough ahead to just drop my pants. I don't remember when we finally arrived back at the bus but it was probably around 2 – given that we were just over an hour from Reykjavik and we arrived back at the hotel around 3:30. I don't remember much about our final night – except that we walked 10 minutes down to this busy square that I'd somehow managed to miss during my previous stay in the city. The restaurant we ate at was very good (of course, I don't remember the name) – but, given that it was insanely warm out and nobody has A/C in Iceland, it was SWELTERING for much of the meal. For the first time on this trip, I ate beef – Icelandic, grass-fed... and, needless to say, it was DELICIOUS. Although the younger folks on this trip bar-hopped (a VERY popular thing to do in Reykjavik) most of the night with Kjartan, the older folks largely returned to the hotel to pack and build up sleep for the somewhat long flight home.

July 17, 2010 – Blue Lagoon, Going Home, and Closing Thoughts

The next morning, we were given another good chunk of time on our own – which meant a leisurely breakfast and some more shopping: specifically, Allison and I (who'd been exchanging emails – given Iceland's EXTENSIVE free internet at pretty much all our hotels) decided we SHOULD buy this offensive T-shirt that read (full-on): "Don't Fuck With Iceland – We May Not Have Cash, But We Have Ash" (and featured a schematic of Eyjafjallajökull). At the time, we figured we could either blacken out "fuck" or use fabric paint to somehow turn it into some euro-looking "föck." Anyway – to date, the shirts haven't been doctored and I believe Allison's boyfriend (Marshall) actually wore it during his law school bar exam. Meanwhile, I've been told (by one of my professional mentors, no less) that I should also wear it if my new duties as department head become too big and annoying. I'll be thinking about that one.



Left to Right: Blue Lagoon – TOTALLY IN the lava fields, endless pool, spa etc. facilities

Anyway – at around 11, we all headed onto the bus with our luggage. For better or worse, the Blue Lagoon is about 40 minutes south of Reykjavik and on the way to the airport (20 minutes from that). Although I was skeptical about getting in there, having only an hour, and then pretty much getting right on a plane, I have to say that it was an appropriate way to the end the trip... plus, the Blue Lagoon is crazy enough that I really wasn't into staying in there much longer than the 40 minutes I did. But I am getting ahead of myself: leaving Reykjavik, we headed into the lava fields – which only seemed to get bigger and more weird (LP says "tortured" – which is a good way to put it) the closer we got to the Blue Lagoon – which was 10 miles off the main highway heading east (relative to the airport/route).

The Blue Lagoon did not begin as such; it was (and still is) a power plant first, built (I believe) in the 1980's (sadly, LP has no

history/dates). Because it generates excess geothermal water – lava-filtered ocean water that somehow comes in through the deep underground boreholes (about half-strength sea salt – but lots of other ground/rock minerals) – an accidental, man-made hot pool formed outside the plant. Over time, locals (and then tourists) began to use the pool – which is obviously light blue-white in color, thanks to lots of dissolved silica and other minerals. At some point, however, at least one person died when they got too near the source (i.e. boiling water) and so, instead of shutting down access, the Icelanders decided to capitalize on the situation. At this point, there is a spa, a clinic, and a full-on hotel on site. When we visited the Blue Lagoon, it was (like I said) insane – and I suspect it is ALWAYS insane... although, honestly, the locker rooms felt the most nuts. Thankfully, EVERY conceivable body type was represented – and there was no shame anywhere that I could tell (probably because half the people were very old – to the point they didn't care what anyone thought). Once you got out in the MASSIVE, multi-lobed soaking pool, there were some pockets of beautiful people (mostly at the in-water bar) who might have frowned on the rest of us with irregularly normal bodies. I should also say that the locker system, while slightly confusing, was cool: you were given a wrist-band with some kind of sensor that locked and then unlocked whichever locker you chose. Although LP said everyone needed to take a naked pre-pool shower, I didn't see any of that... folks were showering in suits and heading out (which was what I did). The soaking pools were relaxing and cool to be in – and, thankfully, not overwhelmingly hot (like the crazy wild thermal area we hiked to). I basically walked/floated a lap around the extensive facilities, took pictures for this pair of Japanese girls, and – by then – 40 minutes were up and I wanted to get out. Howsoever impressed I was with my wrist-band locker system, it failed during check-out (i.e. you turned in your band as you left but mine kept saying my locker door was still locked... which it definitely was not as I'd left it wide open). Oh well. The reason I got out a little early, too, was that I wanted to buy Allison some spa products at the gift shop – which sold everything from silica cream (apparently from the pool) to the shampoo dispensed in the locker room showers. Who knows... it was all very spendy, that's all I can say for sure.

After regrouping, we all headed to the airport and largely dispersed – with only Shauna and I on a common flight. Despite having eaten one last pear skry and one last package of those great Icelandic pancakes before taking my dip in the Blue Lagoon, I was famished after the hour-long line-ups at the ticket counter and then through security - and so I spent a small fortune on some kind of vegetarian salad, hummus-y bread thing and carrot juice. It should be noted that – while passing through security - I followed this family with 4 small boys, the father full-on wearing the “Don't Fuck With Iceland...” T-shirt. Although my first thought was, “definitely Seattle,” I then heard them say something about Minnesota. Anyway - to avoid the crowds, I also ducked into some tourist agency-sponsored movie theatre and watched a short film about Iceland – that, honestly, did not impress me much because it was too focused on crowded places in the Reykjavik area. Although our flight was on time, there was something of a clusterfuck getting on board... although it was funny because Icelandair made ZERO effort to sort anyone anyway (i.e. there was no deference given to business class or families with small children or even people in need of some kind of assistance). Rather, it was a big cattle line – largely based on who had chosen to sit where in the VERY tiny gate area. Once on board, I was VERY satisfied with my window seat (notably in front of the wing/engine) – but then, OF COURSE, some crazy man immediately was IN MY FACE about how I HAD TO switch with him (or his neighbor?) so he could sit with his wife. Seriously – this is, like, the third time this has happened to me. Given that we were seriously about to take off, I said we could discuss it after we had reached cruising altitude. I think we were at maybe 20K (the plane clearly at an upward angle still) – and this dude is out of his seat IN MY FACE AGAIN. Turns out: he was this type A Danish dentist who was bringing his whole family (4 kids, ages ranging from 8-13) to Seattle where they were going to rent an RV and travel up through British Columbia and then back through eastern Washington and the North Cascades. I know this because I actually wound up sitting (with a window) next to him and his wife (their kids in front and to the side) farther back in the plane (lord knows how this guy engineered such a complex trade – but it involved a very happy young Japanese couple). Of course, I was both upset and concerned things were going to get awkward sitting next to them for 8 hours (having assumed I was never going to see them again once the trade was transacted)... but crazy man – once he got his way - turned out to be a fairly friendly and talkative guy. I just wish I knew how their crazy vacation turned out – as I kept emphasizing how LONG his intended driving days were going to be. We landed in Seattle between 5 and 6 – and, as usual, me and my bags were yanked out of line for “special screening” (another thing that has happened during 5/8 of my most recent trips, begging the question: what am I putting out there?). Fortunately, the screener was immediately put off by the stuff sack containing my wet and slightly stinky swimming suit – which was right on the top of all kinds of other nasty articles of clothing. SO - how is it that the Minnesota “Don't Fuck With Iceland...” guy just waltzes through security no questions asked... and how did HE fare in customs?

As for closing thoughts, I would – again – repeat: I LOVED Iceland and definitely plan to go back there to explore more. For such a small country, it has SO many interesting things and I felt like we could have seen SO many more areas (having not visited the northwest, north, east, southeast – or center, which has all sorts of crazy volcanic stuff). Although I loved this trip format as a first-time introduction, I strongly suspect my next time is going to be either self-led (because it seems VERY easy to do that) or a combination of self-led plus some kind of an organized mini-tour (many of which are available for back-country hiking or climbing enthusiasts) that includes more remote camping – particularly in the central and Landmannalaugar areas.