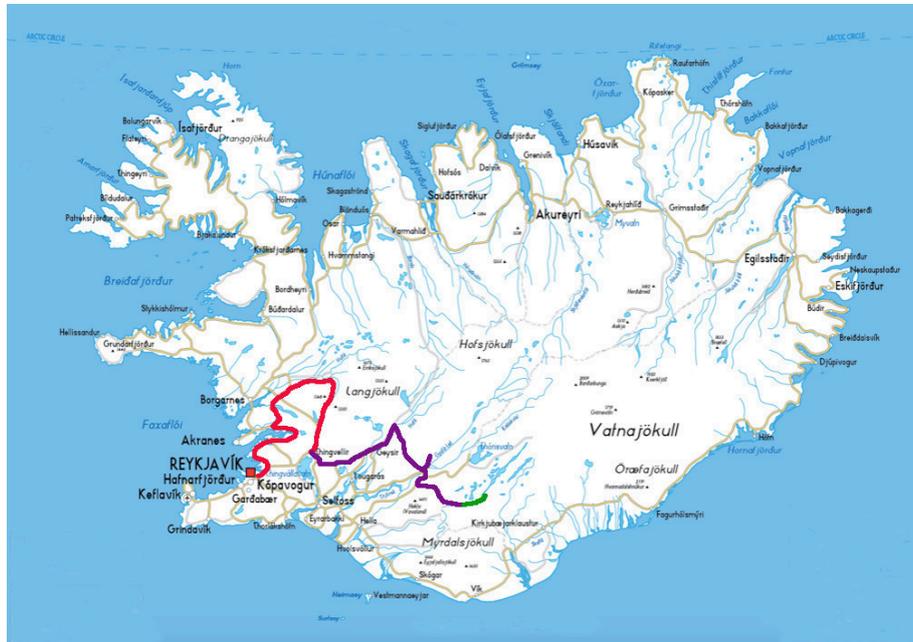


4 – THE SAFARI: DAY 3



Tuesday, 26 August

I woke at about seven o'clock this morning, feeling warm and cosy in my sleeping bag. It was fine outside; it had stopped raining and there was a hint of sunshine. Various people now rose, changed into swimwear and tiptoed out in order to have an early morning dip before breakfast. I followed suit at half past seven and joined Colm in the stream for a long, relaxing bathe. The French man was there again, naked, and later our guide Geiri appeared and swam around in the nude.

After another unsuccessful swimming lesson given to me by Colm, we climbed out of the water and walked to a hotter pool. Although the water was muddier, it was even better, though the hot spots were a little too much for me. Nearby was another pool, marked by a signpost displaying an exclamation mark. A member of our group reported that he could not get into the water as it was so hot. Colm and I finished our morning dip by returning to the first stream and washing off the mud. Just before breakfast was served we ran back to the hut, where we dried ourselves and dressed.

At nine o'clock we queued at the kitchen van for a welcome breakfast. As we were due to climb up a low mountain nearby, I tucked in and helped myself to plenty of cheese.

At about half past ten, Arthur called us all together and set off with Colm, a girl named Barbara and me behind him. We walked through this wonderful valley, turned right, followed a stream that splashed over rocks, and then began the ascent of Brennisteinsalda, the Sulphur Well. The going was quite easy as there was a path that we could follow. However, at one point it vanished and Arthur helped us over

some rocks until it was possible to continue unaided. Barbara and I went ahead, chatting, and eventually stopped to let the others catch up with us. Barbara was a pleasant girl and a good mountaineer. She wore climbing boots with studs, whereas I wore ordinary shoes, though they were tough and had a good grip.

We now clambered over some rugged lava and then found ourselves ascending a wide sandy slope, where we picked up tiny black obsidian stones formed by cooling lava. The number of rock formations and their colours here were truly amazing. We stopped at this point to admire the fine view of mountains and valleys. Beside us now was the sulphur spring that gave the mountain its name: a crater on top of a mound that emitted steam and an obnoxious odour. We climbed up the side of the mound and looked inside; there was little to be seen apart from yellow-encrusted rocks and thick steam. When we walked down a little into the steam, it became quite hot. Those of us who stood in the steam for too long became covered in fine yellow dust. When Barbara emerged, she looked as though she had suddenly grown a beard! I did not stay long here as the smell was too unpleasant. Instead, I sat on a rock at the edge of the mound, admiring the scenery. By now the sky was clearing and we all began to feel a good deal warmer.

After a while we continued on our way and climbed upwards, passing more sulphur springs. This part of the track now became muddy and slippery. We then approached the top of the mountain, which looked like a big conical mound of sand with a large black rock protruding from one side. This proved a little difficult to ascend as it was slippery, but it was worth the effort as the view of glaciers, mountains and valleys from the top was quite breathtaking.

Here we rested for a while, breathing in the fresh morning air and wallowing in the beauty of the scenery around us. Arthur and Barbara then went scampering off another way in an effort to find a quicker route down, but soon returned and reported that they could not find a path. We therefore made our way down the same way that we had climbed the mountain. Being a poor mountaineer, I found this difficult and lagged behind as I was terrified of slipping. As a result all the others dashed down ahead of me and I was left with Chris and a pleasant girl named Phyl. She normally stayed with her companion Anne, but was now on her own. Both she and Chris made sure that I was safe.

From the evil-smelling sulphur spring we followed the others along a different path, from which we could enjoy more fine scenery. This was proving to be quite an exhilarating experience for us all and made a great change from sitting in the coach. Clambering over rocks, lava and soft moss, we eventually found ourselves back in the Landmannalaugur valley at a stream by our wooden hut. We stopped at a bridge, washed our boots in the stream underneath it, then joined the queue for a good lunch, which was now very welcome. Today we enjoyed some tasty fish and finished up with slices of blood orange.

After eating, I helped to wash up while some of the others cleaned up the mess they had made in the hut, removing their empty bottles and cigarette butts. I was glad to see that they left the place as they had found it. I collected my wet clothing off the radiators, organized my luggage, put it in the coach, and went walking with Colm while the others got themselves ready. When we returned to the coach, we discovered that the money for the overnight stay had been collected in our absence and that seemingly nobody had noticed that we were missing!

We had not far to travel before reaching our next stop, Eldgjá (the Fire Gorge), but we had been warned that the going would be rough. We set off across Landmannalaugur valley, crossing the streams, then made our way eastwards through some wonderful scenery. Shortly afterwards we stopped at a small mountain named Barmur (the Breast) where, we were told, we would find larger chunks of obsidian than we had seen before.



Views from Barmur

Barmur turned out to be nothing more than a hill consisting mostly of rocks and soft moss. We soon found the obsidian, which was in lumps the size of a fist. As the scenery was so beautiful here, Geiri, some members of our group and I continued climbing to the top, where we looked down over a breathtaking panorama. The large blue lake near our coaches now looked tiny. By gazing in the opposite direction we could see where we had been this morning. Geiri was enchanted by the scenery and took many photographs using his high-class Japanese camera. Although he was an Icelander, he admitted to being constantly amazed by the beauty of his country. He told us that he always saw something new when he returned to the same places.

On our way downhill, he told us something about how he taught deaf adults. It was obvious that he was an excellent teacher, thanks to his pleasant manner, his

engaging smile, and the fact that he spoke very precisely and carefully. Yet, like a true Icelander, he obviously knew how to get drunk and chase after the women!

We ran the last stretch to the coaches, jumped inside and set off immediately. We now continued travelling eastwards, bumping over stones and splashing in and out of streams, until the scenery suddenly changed into a desolate black area in which unusual folds in the mountains and hills had been caused by glacial movement. All about us were pitch black mountains, some of which were topped with snow, sparkling lakes and tiny streams that rushed over the rock-strewn valley floors. We stopped at a picturesque spot right in the middle of nowhere, where a lone signpost rose from a stream. We all tumbled out of the coaches to gaze at the wilderness and take photographs. As I was wearing wellington boots, I was obliged to wade into the water in order to take photos of people standing by the signpost. As my companions had obviously noticed that I generally took my time about composing my photos, many of them now handed me their cameras in order to take photos of them! As I had only brought three rolls of film with me, I now realized that I would have to go easy on my film and only photograph what was absolutely necessary. It would now be necessary for me to look for more in the shops when we got back to Reykjavík, even though I knew that film would be expensive here.



A signpost in a river (top) and a valley near Eldgjá (bottom)

Back in the coach again, we drove up a mountainside and looked back to where we had been, which now appeared even more spectacular than before. I called for a 'photostop' (using Arthur's terminology) and got it. Several others followed me out of the coach and took shots.



Moss near Eldgjá

We then tumbled down the other side of the mountain into yet another amazing valley containing lakes, streams, green moss and black rocky ground. This also warranted a photostop but, remembering my dwindling amount of film, I kept silent. However, we did stop in the valley to examine a patch of very bright green – almost fluorescent – moss that was soft and spongy to the touch. I decided that it was worth taking a picture of this.

We then continued our journey, twisting around mountains and splashing through so many streams that it began to feel like some sort of crazy boat trip. How Bobo knew where to go or at what point to cross a river puzzled us all, for there was little or nothing to indicate the way. He must have known the terrain like the back of his hand, for he often told Arthur how things had changed since he had been here last. Arthur usually translated what Bobo had said to him. The bus got quite a battering today and unintelligible voices from the other two vehicles squawked from the loudspeaker of the communications radio. Reception from a local radio station came and went, supplying an occasional burst of piped music.

Despite the ubiquity of wild scenery, which I never tired of, and the bumping and swaying of the bus, many people in the group continued to read novels as we drove along. We stopped again to view a wide valley from a high point; although it was impressive, it lacked colour in comparison to what we had seen previously.

We soon dropped down to a large green and empty wilderness in which Eldgjá, the Fire Gorge, was situated. The landscape seemed to stretch to the horizon all around us. Eldgjá was another widening fissure caused by continental drift. In the failing evening light it appeared as a dark, brooding gorge, with high sloping sides covered in moss that had once been joined together. Streams ran along the lava and rock-strewn floor, where new volcanic material was constantly being pushed up

from deep down under the earth. Here and there were lumps of hardened red lava, some pieces of which I picked up and stuffed into my pocket.



The gorge at Eldgjá and the Ofærufoss waterfall

We were scheduled to have an hour's walk here and to look at a waterfall. The gorge was a gloomy place, silent but for the sound of water splashing in nearby streams. I picked my way across the moss-covered lumps of lava and eventually came to a large and impressive waterfall, the Ofærufoss, which tumbled down in two cataracts, one of which flowed under a naturally formed stone bridge, which the water had probably carved out. Having taken a photograph of it, I crossed the valley floor and joined my companions, who by now had climbed up to the stone bridge. I now crossed it, pausing to look down at the raging torrent of white water and foam

beneath me. Surprisingly, one of the younger and wilder girls was scared of walking across this narrow bridge without sides, which surprised me.

It was a tricky a job to get back down to the valley floor from here, for the ground had become very muddy from the spray of the waterfall. However we soon returned to the eerie gorge and made our way back to the bus. It had been thrilling to set eyes upon the waterfall, which many of us had seen before in photographs.

We now drove to a nearby campsite that was situated in a picturesque spot, surrounded by grassland and green mossy hills. Here we found another 'hut', though not as cosy or elaborate as the previous one. It was a plain, shapeless building made of corrugated iron that had been painted yellow. There was a cowshed on the ground floor and upstairs were a couple of damp, unheated dormitories. Colm and I chose a bunk bed in the smaller of the two and then, quite by accident, Colm discovered a tiny storeroom that contained a bunk bed and a dilapidated second one. We quickly secured the good bunk bed and shut the door! Off the main dormitory was a wash room and toilet, both of which lacked water. It seemed that we were too far away from anywhere to have hot water and heating. Fortunately nobody seemed to care about this by now.

As we were told that it might be cold here tonight, only a few hardy people pitched their tents on the tough ground outside. Those of us who had not managed to secure a bed were now pumping up their air mattresses and placing them on the bare timber floor of the main dormitory, leaving just a long table and a few benches in the middle of the room.

When we had finished doing this, we went outside to have a good dinner, for everyone was hungry by now. This evening we were treated to a main course of fish, potatoes, tomatoes and cucumber, washed down afterwards with more of the sweet 'soup', which was hot and tasty. After our meal, Colm and I ambled up a little hill to the left of the hut, and stopped to look over the wide panorama of rolling hills covered in moss, as well as an unusual circular valley containing concentric streams that flowed over black volcanic earth. We then walked a little farther and came to a waterfall that had been nicknamed 'Little Gullfoss', no doubt because it bore a resemblance to its more famous brother. We looked down to this from above; the waterfall plunged down a great depth, sending up a mighty cloud of spray into the air.

We wandered around here a little and returned to the hut, where I wrote my diary in the growing dusk. I eventually had to go outside and sit on the steps to catch the last of the light. When I finished and entered the hut again, a party had started. The main dormitory, now illuminated by a couple of candles, was full of people sitting on the benches and beds. The Icelanders had now joined us; Arthur strummed his guitar noisily and tunelessly, singing Icelandic and European pop songs in a loud, lusty voice. Bottles of booze were produced and the drinking began.

At first Colm and I could find nowhere to sit and stood by, listening. The Irish contingent then began to sing some songs and ballads. I fetched a plastic descant recorder that I had brought with me and, when there was a pause, began to play some Irish airs. Everyone suddenly became quiet and listened, which made me a little nervous. I got through what I had to offer, was loudly applauded and asked to play again a little while later. My sober offerings must have sounded strange by contrast to the bellowing of the Icelanders and the others when they joined in.

I then crossed over to the other side of the room, sat down at the end of a bench beside some girls and entered into the spirit of the party, singing the songs and swaying in time to the music. A cupful of something was handed to me and I took a swig. When Arthur put down his guitar, I took it, tuned it (breaking a string in the process), then played and sang some songs that I had not performed for many years. I found the guitar difficult to play: it was a twelve-string instrument with steel strings.

By now our Icelandic friends were becoming more merry from the 'Black Death' that they were knocking back in capfuls: a foul-tasting black brew equivalent to Irish poteen. The driver of the other coach passed some round and I took a small amount out of curiosity; it seemed to have a rather nondescript taste. I had been told that it acted on one quickly, without one being aware of it.

The singing and general merriment carried on long into the night until the repertoire was used up and some of the songs had to be repeated. The more inebriated everyone became, the noisier it got. A hiker, who was the only other person staying here this evening, sat on his bed alone, looking rather bewildered. Later I moved over to Anne and Phyl, who were sitting on the beds that they had made on the floor, and chatted to them for a while. Through the window I could see a bright full moon shining from a clear sky. Colm approached me and suggested that I go outside, climb the nearby hill and take a look at the moonlit scene.

I followed his advice; as he had told me, it was magnificent. The moon lit up the surrounding countryside and the concentric streams in the valley gleamed brightly. Far above could be seen the stars twinkling in the heavens. As it had now turned bitterly cold I returned quickly to the hut and suggested to Phyl and Anne that they go outside to see the view.

I now fetched a cup and sat down beside one of the lads who had a bottle of Paddy whiskey, which he was drinking and offering it to anyone who wanted a helping. Just as I predicted, he offered me some and I readily accepted a small amount in my cup, hoping that it might rid me of a threatening cold and ensure that I sleep soundly, despite the noise, during the night. After chatting to him for a while I then retired to bed; Colm was already in his. I quickly undressed and snuggled into my sleeping bag, falling asleep almost immediately despite the racket in the main room.

I woke during the night due to the coldness of the room, pulled on my jumper and got back into bed, where once again I fell into a deep sleep.