

6 – THE SAFARI: DAY 5



Thursday, 28 August

I woke this morning at a quarter past seven, warm and comfortable, though with a dry throat and the feeling that I had caught a cold. This had probably been brought on by the extremes of temperature and possibly the effects of the central heating. Colm was up before me and had gone off to wash; as few people were about, we both took our time and treated ourselves to lots of the endless hot water!

We were also among the first to help ourselves to breakfast when it was served at eight o'clock. By now both the kitchen van and our coach had been fixed; we were told that the men had been working on the vehicles for most of the night.

As we gathered up our things and assembled to board our coaches, several of my companions thanked me for the previous evening's entertainment. I apologized, hoping that I had not kept anybody awake, and was told that I had not, for much of the music that I had played was relaxing.

The weather today had taken a slight turn for the worse; it was now rather cloudy and rather dismal. We soon set off, heading westwards and covering some of the ground that we had crossed on the previous day. Once again we passed the Three Sisters Rock and drove over the Eldhraun lava flow. Arthur entertained us with a story that was supposed to have happened in the convent of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. It was a familiar-sounding story of the Reverend Mother who had scolded a young nun for having had a man in her room, for she had been found wearing a pair of men's underpants on her head instead of a nightcap.

Having left Eldhraun behind us, we now drove through a pretty area that included green fields, mountains and small farms. Not long afterwards we stopped for a

technical pause. In the shop I bought a good map of Iceland and found points for an electric razor in the gents' room. I therefore treated myself to a decent shave, which I was badly in need of by now.

We then set off westwards again, running parallel to the south coast. We crossed the Hólmsá (Islet River) and approached the Mýrdalsjökull (Moor Dale Glacier), which we had seen in the distance on the previous day. The nearest peak to us was Katla (the Kettle), a subglacial volcano that had erupted violently thirteen times since the first settlement on the island. It last erupted in 1918 and was expected to erupt again in 1973, but then the volcano on Heimaey exploded and wiped out the town.

The eruptions of Katla had created another desert of ash twenty-two miles long, which we now crossed. Although it was desolate and empty, it did not look as dramatic as the deserts that we had seen on the previous day. The grey clouds overhead made the area look rather gloomy. Arthur then began to tell us a legend about Katla, which was thought to be the name of a kitchen maid who lived a long time ago in a nearby monastery. Katla owned a pair of magic pants; when she wore them, she could jump to any place that she wished, in one bound. One day, when she was not in the monastery, a young monk found the pants, put them on, and entertained himself by jumping about all over the place. When the maid returned, she found the pants missing, found the guilty monk and killed him in her anger. She pushed him into a large pot, jumped into the crevice of the mountain now known as Katla, and left the pot there. When she jumped out, she caused the first eruption. As a result, when the Icelanders wait for one of Katla's predictable eruptions, it is said that they are waiting for Katla to jump.

On our left now, down by the sea, was a rectangular rock, right in the middle of nowhere, called Hjörleifshöði (Hjörleif's Headland). This had been named after a Norse settler named Hjörleif Hrodmarrson, who had arrived in Iceland in 875 with his brother Ingolf Arnarson. At that time there had been no black desert but a fjord. The rock, which was then in the sea, had been a safe haven and Hjörleif and his Irish slaves, known as West Men (for they had come from a country west of Scandinavia), settled down there. He treated his slaves badly and they murdered him, fleeing farther west to some islands now known as the Vestmannæyjar (Westman Islands). The main one is Heimæy, where the eruption of its volcano Helgafell took place in 1973, causing great destruction but killing nobody. The most southern of the group is Surtsey (the Island of Surtur, the Fire Giant), which came into being in 1963.

There was talk of going on a short tour to these Westman Islands by plane on Saturday, which Maura would be organizing, but Colm and I had not yet made up our minds as whether we would go or not; at £36, we thought it a little expensive. We were toying with the idea of going there by bus and boat, which would cost us about £18 return, and staying overnight in a local youth hostel. This would mean that we could see a little more of the country at our own speed.

A short while afterwards we left the desert (named Mýrdalssandur or Moor Dale Sands) and drove to the south coast, where we stopped in a bleak and uninteresting town by the name of Vík (The Bay). Desolate and extremely windy, it was said to have the most rain. We were in luck today as it was dry, though it looked as though it might rain at any minute. This is where most of the famous Icelandic woollen garments are made. We were supposed to visit a woollen goods factory here, but it was closed. Instead we were brought to a shop, where I found a very warm fur hat

with earmuffs that had been made here, for 13,215 krónur – a little over £13. I tried it on and it fitted me. With the idea of wearing it when cycling in the winter, I decided to buy it and noticed that the price I was charged was 12,215 krónur.

Colm and I then walked along the bitterly cold street to the nearby post office, where we chatted to Arthur and asked his advice about travelling to the Westman Islands and perhaps to Greenland, which many of us wanted to see. Although one could go to Greenland on an expensive day trip by plane, I wanted to know if it was possible to do the journey by boat. Arthur's answer was simple and short: no! Our chief aim was to fill in our final two and a half days, which we were supposed to spend in Reykjavík, and which nobody wanted to do.

Colm and I then climbed up a nearby hill to examine a tiny yellow church made of corrugated iron. Although there was little of interest to see, the climb afforded a bit of exercise. I wore my new hat as it was so cold. We ran down the hill to the coach, which had stopped briefly at a garage, and we drove out of the shanty town.

On we travelled, skirting the Mýrdalsjökull, which lay to our right. We drove through more desert and passed Dyrhólæy (Island with a Door in the Hill): a curious rock with an opening on one side. It featured in Njal's saga, for Njal's son-in-law Kari had a farm at the top of this strange 'island', which is not located in the sea but in the desert. From here, looking south-west, we could make out the shapes of Vestmannæjar, the Westman Islands.



The Eyjafjallajökull glacier (top) and the Skógafoss waterfall (bottom)

The weather finally began to brighten up as we neared the next glacier, the Eyjafjallajökull or Island Mountain Glacier. We stopped in the middle of the desert to take photographs of this as it was quite impressive.

Shortly afterwards we stopped again, this time for lunch, at the base of the Eyjafjallajökull by a beautiful waterfall named the Skógafoss (Woodland Falls): a wide, straight ribbon of white water with a bright rainbow shining at the bottom left-hand side. We were all enchanted by this marvellous rainbow, which seemed to constantly shift its position and shape, coming and going with the sunshine. We grabbed our cameras and ran to it, snapping pictures. Colm and I had often remarked that our guides must have thought that we were quite mad!

As there was some free time before lunch, I followed some of the others and climbed up a steep hill beside the waterfall to obtain an even more dramatic view of it, looking down from a ledge. The spray hit us full force up here. Below, a totally different and much larger rainbow shone brightly in the sunshine; it extended from the very bottom of the waterfall to the top. Here it was very warm facing the sun; some of the girls had taken off their jackets and were lying on the grassy slopes.

I then scrambled down to the kitchen van and queued for lunch which, like yesterday, we ate sitting on the grass. Afterwards I took a cup of clear water from the stream that flowed from the waterfall and used it to wash my teeth and hands. Before we left, I tramped across a large field to a farm, meeting a couple of sturdy horses on the way. I had to return quickly, for Bobo was hooting the horn of the coach. We left soon after half past two.

We now passed more green and pleasant pastureland. One little farm was called Steinar (Stones), so named because of an avalanche of stones that had once rolled down the mountainside. We were told that the modern Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness had written about this place in his book *Paradise Reclaimed*.

We then turned northwards, skirting the Eyjafjallajökull. We were now approaching the Markarfljót (Border River) and looking across a wide stony valley to Hliðarendi (Farm at the End of the Hillside), which nested in the folds of the gently rolling green mountains. This countryside is described in Njal's Saga; one of its heroes, Gunnar Hamundarson, had a farm here. The saga relates how Gunnar was prosecuted and sent into exile for his misdeeds. As he rode down towards the Markarfljót, his horse stumbled and he had to leap from the saddle. From the ground he glanced back to his homeland and the slopes of Hliðarendi, uttering the words believed by Icelanders to be the most poignant in all their literature: 'How lovely are the slopes – more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before: golden cornfields and new-mown hay. I am going back home and I will not go away.' He returned and was killed by his enemies.

Nearby, on this side of the valley, were two small waterfalls; although insignificant by comparison to the other cataracts that we had seen, they were pleasing in their own way. We stopped at the second one and climbed up the nearby hillside, where we enjoyed a dramatic view of the water cascading down. This waterfall was unusual in that the lower half could be viewed through a hole in a rock.

Back in the coach again, we dropped down towards the spectacular valley. It had once been the site of a great flow of lava, but now was strewn with grey rocks and stones around which flowed hundreds of tiny streams, all tributaries of the treacherous Markarfljót. Arthur told us that later, on our way to our campsite at

Þorsmörk (Thor's Forest), we would cross thirty-three rivers without the use of bridges, thus spending more time in the water than on the land!

We now crossed the main flow of the Markarfljót using a wooden bridge, then headed northwards along the valley floor, bumping crazily about on the rough stones and splashing in and out of the clear rivers. This was surely the bumpiest ride that we had experienced so far; the bus heaved to and fro, throwing us and our belongings about. When really taken by surprise, we yelled. The farther we drove up this wild valley, the more rugged it became. On each side were tall mountains; on our right, great tongues of ice from the Eyjafjallajökull swept down from on high.



A lake near the Eyjafjallajökull glacier

At one point we drove through an extra wide and deep muddy river, then stopped at the other side to view a fine glacial lake, where a few miniature icebergs could be seen floating in the water. With the afternoon sunshine beating down upon it, the scene was very spectacular. We got out to take some photos and Bobo drove the coach back and forth in the river so that it could be photographed. Once again we were mystified as to how Bobo and the other driver knew which way to go, for there was hardly any indication of what route to take.

We slowly made our way up the valley, swinging around Eyjafjallajökull until we were turning north-eastwards, towards the Mýrdalsjökull, which now appeared at the end of the valley. Once again we had entered a spot that was quite resembled Alpine scenery, although there were no fir trees or meadows to be seen. However there were patches of wild grass or moss. When we passed a narrow gorge on our right, Arthur told us we would visit it on the following morning, as well as a rock with a cavernous opening that looked like a stage carved out by nature.



The campsite and hut at Þorsmörk, near the Eyjafjallajökull

By now we were not very far away from the end of the valley and our campsite. When we had crossed the final river, the widest and deepest of them all, we gave Bobo a cheer and a loud round of applause. Before us now was where we would spend the night: a picturesque patch of greenery between the mountains in a tiny valley. Here we found three little buildings made of bright yellow corrugated iron topped with red roofs, all basking in the late afternoon sunshine. One was a hut where we could stay for the night if we wished, the second one was a ‘facilities’ building, and the third was a shop, which was now closed. Nearby, a wooden bridge spanned a narrow glacial stream. From here was a wonderful vista of the stony valley floor sweeping around in a gentle curve and the high snow-topped rugged mountains. The air here was cool, fresh and invigorating.

As we were told that it would be bitterly cold here at night time, most of us headed for the well-heated hut, which was built of wood indoors – very much like the one we had stayed in at Landmannalaugur. Colm and I were once again lucky; being among the first in, we nabbed a bunk bed in the downstairs dormitory, an attractive room with superb views from the windows. Like Landmannalaugur, the hut had an excellent modern kitchen, and there were mattresses on the floor in the upper storey. However, no hot water was available here, although the central heating radiators were on. As before, we had gas lamps. The place was looked after by a tall, slim young lady dressed in jeans who wore large modern spectacles; she greeted our guides kindly.

When I brought in my bag and suitcase, I discovered that I had mislaid the key of the suitcase. After I had failed to open it with a hairpin, I went out to the coach and

eventually found it wedged in a crevice below my seat. For safety's sake I now tied the key to my jeans, so that it hung into one of the pockets. Back in the hut I made myself a cup of tea in the kitchen, for by now my throat felt dry and raw.



Views from a hill near the campsite at Þorsmörk

Arthur had promised us that he would take us out for a walk up a nearby hill. As I was not quite ready, I was one of the last to leave. I went with Phyl, Anne and Geiri. As it was a steep climb and the girls were tired, we took it easy. As we ascended, a magnificent view of the extraordinary terrain, lit by the late afternoon sunshine, opened up below us. It was really breathtaking and became even more so when we reached the top, from where I took a couple of photos. Far beneath us was the twisting valley floor with its innumerable rivers flowing in various directions, creating a fascinating and intricate pattern that immediately took Geiri's fancy. He was amazed by it all and, like us, stood gazing at it for some considerable time, enduring the stiff breeze. Fortunately I had brought my warm anorak, which I had taken off halfway up the hill because of the heat!

We then descended by a different route, which now took us through some gentle scenery consisting of mossy rolling hills, small meadows full of tough high grass,

forests of tiny stunted trees that looked more like bushes, and narrow winding valleys. The others went ahead quickly and we followed, though once or twice we thought that we were lost as we could see nobody around. We eventually arrived at a little stream that turned out to be the one that flowed past our hut.

Back again at our base, I took a photo from the hut looking towards the Eyjafjalla-jökull and then joined the rest of the gang for dinner at the kitchen van. Once again we appreciated our simple food after walking in the sharp mountain air. This, in fact, would be our last hot meal together as a group, for our safari tour would end on the following evening. We now demolished helpings of smoked ham, potatoes and beetroot; the meal was topped with an unusual sauce, then washed down with soup and orange juice. Afterwards I helped clean up, thereby satisfying Amber, the Australian girl, who had been complaining that not enough men were doing this job. The reason for this was that we men were outnumbered by the women in the group!

Afterwards I returned to the hut, where I made myself another cup of tea, ladling out the boiling water from a huge pot, then sat down at a wooden table in the comfortable hall to write my diary. When I had finished, I put pen and paper away and went outside to take a stroll in the fading evening light. I went down to a stretch of sand near the hut, where the coaches were parked, and began to walk up the rocky valley to a spot where the snows of Mýrdalsjökull could be seen at the top of the mountains. The only sounds that I could hear were the bleating of a few sheep somewhere in the distance, the lone cry of a bird far above, and the rushing of water in the nearby streams. I then picked my way across one or two of the streams, having found convenient stepping stones. On the way I met Colm and some of the others, who were now walking back to the hut. I continued until I came in sight of a curious-looking building, which later I learned was a set for a film. I then turned back, facing the setting sun, and arrived back at the hut as twilight descended.

I now met a very well-dressed lady with grey hair who was on our safari tour and who always managed to keep herself looking elegant despite our rough and tough existence. Her name was Myrtle; she had a great sense of humour and was often the life and soul of the party thanks to her fondness for singing. I now fell into conversation with her and discovered that she had reared a very musical family. One of her daughters was studying the organ and it turned out that she knew many of my parents' musical friends. She told me that she sang in a choir.

Eventually I returned to the hut, where I discovered a German fellow trying to light the gas lamps. Somebody went off to investigate and discovered that the gas had not been turned on. When at last the lamps were lit, everyone cheered.

Shortly afterwards Bobo entered and told us that a bonfire had been started outside and hot chocolate was being served to us all. Whooping with joy we ran down to where a pile of branches had been set alight. This, Arthur explained, was to celebrate our last night together. It had turned very chilly by now and the bonfire did little to warm us up as the branches did not blaze up well; either the wood was too fresh or damp, or the air was too thin. However, we heated ourselves up with cupfuls of the sweetened hot chocolate and helped ourselves to biscuits from a tin.

Standing around the blaze that was encouraged every now and then with a drop of petrol, we listened to and sang more songs. Arthur accompanied us on a different guitar, for somebody had sat on the neck of his instrument and had cracked it. By now we had exhausted our repertoire and sang the same old songs over again.

As soon as the hot chocolate had been finished, the booze appeared: bottles of whiskey and 'Black Death' were opened. The feeble fire began to belch smoke, now in one direction and then in another; it was quickly saved from going out by another dash of petrol. I eventually left, feeling cold, and returned to the warmth of the hut, which was almost empty. I finished writing my diary under one of the gas lights, washed my teeth and clambered into bed for another night's sleep.