

## 7 – THE SAFARI: DAY 6, THEN TO AKUREYRI



Friday, 29 August

The last day of our safari tour and the end of the fun. Nobody was looking forward to spending the weekend in Reykjavik; we would have relished another six days travelling around the island!

It was cloudy and inclined to rain this morning. I rose shortly after seven and dressed, trying not to disturb the snoring sleepers. I then made my way to the ladies' room (the gents' was locked!) where I washed using icy cold water. I strolled around until eight o'clock, then discovered that breakfast would not be served until nine. To fill in the time I once again climbed the hill behind the hut to admire the fine view.

Over breakfast I heard reports of the previous evening's party: it had turned into a drunken orgy, with our Icelandic hosts chasing the girls into their tents. Some of the more elderly ladies were shocked by what was going on. It appeared that they had eventually got the bonfire blazing properly after I had gone to bed.

After breakfast I washed up, moved my belongings back to the coach and paid for the night's accommodation, which cost 1,500 krónur. We then drove away, once again crossing the treacherous rivers in the valley, and stopped at the narrow gorge that we had passed on the previous day. We now got out and walked along it. It was a rather gloomy place with high sides and a stream running beside a winding path. The gorge twisted and turned, then eventually narrowed. Everyone looked tired this morning and showed little or no interest in their surroundings.

The gorge finally came to an end and we found ourselves at a tall narrow opening in the rock. We crossed the little stream by jumping from stone to stone, climbed up a wooden ladder and squeezed into the opening. We now found ourselves in a dark and gloomy cavern, though it was open to the sky far above our heads. We climbed

to the top of a rock in the centre and saw a narrow waterfall trickling down one of the sides. The place reeked of dampness, and green soggy moss clung to the rocks.

Having seen the place, we clambered out and returned to the bus. We now drove down the valley, retracing the previous day's route and, at the southern end, turned westwards, crossing over the Markarfljót. The weather now began to brighten up as we approached Gunnar's farm, Hlíðarendi. We stopped at a pretty waterfall known as Gluggafoss (Window Falls), which flowed down the green mountainside, and took some photographs of each other. It was a very pleasant spot; as we were all feeling lazy, we lounged around.



*Geiri, the two drivers and Arthur at Gluggafoss*



*The view from Gluggafoss, with the Westman Islands in the distance*

We then set off westwards again, in the direction of Reykjavík, passing the few uninteresting modern buildings that made up Hlíðarendi. The countryside stayed much the same for the rest of our journey: pleasantly green and fertile here and there, though rather bleak. We stopped in the small featureless town of Hella and in the bank I changed some travellers' cheques into the local currency. Just outside the

town we stopped to look at Mount Hekla, which lay beyond the fields. We could see it a little better today and could just about make out a second peak that had been formed during the recent eruption. A cloud of steam or smoke was escaping from the crater. Arthur told us that the road had been jammed with traffic for the whole of its distance when people came to view the eruption on the previous Sunday. The police had tried to keep them at a safe distance away from the volcano, but many had endangered themselves by ignoring the police and getting too close to it. For all our time here, the volcano had remained dormant.

Once again we crossed the Þjórsá, then another river, the Olfusá, passed Ingólfssjall (Ingólf's Mountain), and stopped in the town of Hveragerði (Garden of Hot Springs). This is an agricultural centre, where natural hot water is harnessed to grow fruit and vegetables, notably tomatoes and bananas, in large glasshouses that are dotted about the place. We pulled up beside the kitchen van, which was parked in a field that overlooked a wide, fertile valley. This would be our last meal together; as Arthur told us to finish up the stock of food and not waste it, we tucked in. I had hoped to salvage some leftovers in a bag afterwards, especially some slices of the delicious rye bread, but there was nothing left. However, I managed to pocket an orange.

When we had finished, we drove through the town and stopped to visit a large greenhouse that turned out to be a tourist trap, for as well as selling plants they also had a large selection of gimmicky souvenirs, cheap crockery and expensive Icelandic woollen clothing. I noticed that a roll of Kodachrome slide film cost over £11 here.

I soon tired of the place, went outside and asked Arthur if he recommended travelling northwards to the town of Akureyri over the weekend. He told me that a trip to the town would be well worth doing as the scenery was very pleasant in that part of the country.

We soon left Hveragerði and began the last leg of the return journey to Reykjavík. We became sentimental and started to sing songs – mostly nostalgic or patriotic – and asked Arthur to sing also. Once again he sang one that we had already heard many times, and then sang some others. We sang our national anthem and asked Arthur to sing his but he declined, saying that it was too difficult. He then got some of the people in the bus to sing an Icelandic song with him; I discovered that he had taught it to them on Wednesday evening when the bus was being towed back to Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

On our way to Reykjavík we saw groups of people looking for something in the fields. Arthur told us that they were out picking blueberries with a special type of fork that looked more like a comb, and which was attached to a bag. One simply pushed this device under the berries, which grew close to the ground, thereby plucking them and firing them into the bag. Simple, yet effective! Arthur also said that a favourite Icelandic speciality was *skýr* (yogurt) with blueberries, which he recommended that we try in a restaurant.

We eventually reached Reykjavík at about five o'clock and joined the rush-hour traffic, which was quite heavy. It felt strange to be back on smooth roads in a city and to be stopped every so often by traffic lights. We were all very sorry that our safari tour was coming to its end. Having first dropped off the quiet English family in a narrow street, we then returned to the familiar but unwelcoming school. Before we got off the coach, we presented Arthur and Bobo with money that had been

surreptitiously collected and placed in my new hat. We then hauled our luggage out of the hatches and finally thanked Arthur, Geiri, Bobo and the other driver, shaking hands with them or hugging them. (We had already said goodbye to the kitchen staff when we had left them at Hveragerði.)

Inside the school, the rooms in which we were to sleep had all been changed. The old warden now brought us to a quieter room downstairs; after our rough and tumble accommodation over the previous six days, the mattresses on the floor did not seem so uncomfortable! As the ones in this room were double the normal width, Colm and I decided to share one.

After we had settled ourselves in, I walked to the little tourist booth before it closed at six o'clock and managed to obtain a good deal of information about going to Akureyri and the Westman Islands. As before, the young lady was very helpful. Afterwards I went to the nearby shops and bought some food. When I arrived back at the school, Colm and I set off with our towels and washing gear to the youth hostel, where several members of our group were now staying. We followed three girls to the hostel where, we had been told, we would be able to use the showers. When we arrived, only two people were using them. As the water was wonderfully hot and refreshing, we emerged afterwards feeling a good deal cleaner and more civilized!

The youth hostel was a small but tall building and it was full of young people. While we were there Maura, our courier from Dublin, telephoned to find out how we had fared. Phyl, whom we had met in the hall, spoke to her first, then Colm; both of them told her that we had had a marvellous time.

Back at the school we saw a group of cheerful and colourfully-dressed Eskimo children in the yard, who presumably were from Greenland. They jumped about, laughing and chatting, then smiled and waved at us. We went down to the dreadful basement kitchen with its notice, 'Please hold this kitchen as clean as you would wish to find it' and prepared a simple meal of bread and cheese. This was all we needed as we had eaten well at lunchtime.

As there was nothing else to do, we sauntered out afterwards with another fellow in our group and walked along the darkening streets in search of a cinema, but there was nothing showing that appealed to us. Other entertainments were too touristy for our liking. We met Chris, Adrienne, her friend Miriam and some others who were walking around the streets in search of a disco and looking very lost. As we had no idea where the disco was, we were unable to help them. They tried to drag us along, but Colm and I managed to escape and make our way back to the school. En route we saw gangs of young people hanging around or driving their big cars. It was obvious that they were all drunk.

As soon as Colm and I returned to the school, we retired to bed for we would have to get up early in the morning to catch the bus to Akureyri. We had decided not to bother about the overrated Westman Islands and to concentrate instead on the north of the country.

Saturday, 30 August

It was a fine morning; I was up by half past six. I packed my small shoulder bag, then shaved, washed and breakfasted with Colm and Chris. The three of us left at half past seven for the central bus station, where we bought bus tickets for Akureyri

for 15,700 krónur (about £15.70). This was quite expensive, but the trip would take about nine and a half hours and we reckoned that we would see some scenery that promised to be good. As we were planning to stay in Akureyri tomorrow and do some touring around, then fly back on the Monday morning to avoid another long bus journey, we decided that we should now telephone the airport and book a flight.

The lady at the cash desk kindly supplied me with the telephone number and directed me to a nearby telephone booth. As it would cost 50 krónur (5p) to make a call, I accepted a coin that Chris gave me. When I dialled the number and got through, I asked a lady if I could book a flight and was transferred to another department. However, as it was too early in the morning, nobody answered.

I explained what had happened, then walked with the two lads to a large comfortable coach, which by now was parked nearby. Very few people boarded it and most of them were surly Icelanders. We made the mistake of sitting opposite a group of noisy American tourists – the first that we had seen here.

We set off shortly after eight o'clock. We drove around the Hringbraut (Ring Road) and started our journey northwards along the west coast of the island by following the same route that we had taken at the beginning of the safari tour, up the Hvalfjörður. As we had not seen it under ideal conditions on that first day, it was good to see it now in bright sunshine. Although quite beautiful, it lacked the impact of some of the extraordinary sights that we had seen over the past few days.

Once again we drove all round the fjord, passing Whale Mountain, the familiar whaling station with its obnoxious smell, then stopped for a fifteen-minute 'technical pause' at the petrol station nearby. Here we walked around in order to stretch our legs, then returned to the coach.

We then entered new territory, keeping to the main road that encircles the entire island. We headed for Akranes, but swept round a peninsula and skirted the next fjord, the Borgarfjörður. This was quite similar to the previous one in that it was large and surrounded by pleasant mountains, but it had a recently-built bridge (not marked on my map) over which we crossed to the little town of Borgarnes, where we stopped to pick up some more passengers.

We then headed inland across some pleasant scenery in a north-easterly direction. We passed meadows and hills; in the distance we could see the peaks of some high mountains. Various rivers, many of them picturesque, watered the valleys; on our way we passed small brightly-painted farms or an occasional church. The scenery was expansive, wild and unspoilt, neither inhospitable nor very intimate. The area looked like a very lonely place in which to live.

By way of entertainment we had music from a radio station played quietly over the loudspeakers. We heard a mixture of different types of music, from Icelandic compositions to familiar European pieces. At one stage we heard a small choir of men singing a medley of old English songs in Icelandic, including 'Auld Lang Syne'.

The seats in the coach were comfortable and conducive to resting, which suited most of the people on board. We stopped every so often to let people off and collect more. When we would set off again, a girl with a rather expressionless face would slowly amble up and down the coach, lethargically collecting money and issuing tickets, which she took from a folder and tore in half.

The local people seldom spoke to each other; when they did, they spoke quietly and politely. The Americans, on the other hand, joked, laughed, made idiotic

comments and wondered how long it would be until lunchtime. At one point they had a long and tedious discussion as whether they should eat some peanut butter sandwiches that they had brought with them, and as to when they might have an opportunity to eat them. Colm and I made faces at each other.

Our stop for lunch came at about one o'clock just outside the little village of Brú (The Bridge) at the bottom of the Hrútafjörður on the north coast. We were given thirty-five minutes to eat in a small restaurant with a shop attached. As we thought it best to get our flight back to Reykjavík sorted out as soon as possible, I spent a good deal of time on the telephone trying to book seats. We were given the number of the airport in Akureyri; after my third attempt to get through (using a large supply of coins in the process), I was told that all the flights over the weekend were booked and that nothing would be available until the beginning of September! When I explained this to Colm and Chris, Chris thought that we might get a flight in a small aircraft run by some local company in Akureyri. We then went into the restaurant and ordered something simple that we could eat quickly. After we had finished, we returned to the coach.

I was surprised by the uniformity of the countryside here; unlike the south of the island where there was an extraordinary variety of dramatic scenery, here there were rolling hills, mountains and vast expanses of greenery. Once again we headed inland, returning to the coast at Blönduós in the Húnafljörður, where we got out and wandered around for fifteen minutes. Blönduós was a pleasantly situated little town with a hotel perched on a hillside and a fine view of the wide fjord. The sun was still shining brightly and it was warm.

Our next stop was at Varmahlið, where we tried to make another phone call in a shop, but to no avail as the telephone was not working properly. There was little of interest here. Included with the people who boarded the coach was a little boy who sat behind us and sniffed continuously for the rest of the journey. I then got chatting to a young English couple who sat opposite us and who hardly spoke to each other. They were experienced hikers and planned to camp near Akureyri and neighbouring regions for a few days. The young lady lent me their guide book, in which there was a map of Akureyri. I studied this, taking note of where the youth hostel was, and read some of the information.



*The Eyjafjörður*

We now drove down a long narrow valley, surrounded by high mountains, and followed a river that flowed through it. We finally emerged from this area and approached a long, deep blue fjord, the Eyjafjörður, at the end of which the little town of Akureyri (Meadow Banks) was situated. This was the second biggest town in Iceland. Down by the water's edge we turned southwards and approached our destination, which was nestled at the foot of some high mountains and now basking in the early evening sunshine. It looked like a place depicted in a picture postcard and turned out to be like a miniature version of Reykjavík. A harbour had been built far out into the fjord.



*Akureyri*

We arrived here just before six o'clock, having driven through some nondescript modern suburbs, and stopped in a small square at the centre of the city. I was not surprised to discover that the place was lifeless. We immediately made tracks for the tourist information bureau and were annoyed to find it closed. We asked somebody about the departure time of the bus on the following morning, double checked as to where we needed to go in order to find the youth hostel, then walked off to find it.

We walked for about ten or fifteen minutes into the suburbs and arrived at an old stone building hidden behind a garden full of trees. One of the lads in our safari tour had once stayed in the hostel and had told me that it was excellent. To get to the office we had to go around the back of the building and climb up steps to a door, where we saw a colourful painted sign that requested us to remove our shoes. We now found ourselves in a private house, the front room of which had been converted into an office. Here an elderly lady greeted us and spoke to us in a mixture of English and German. We filled in the standard youth hostel cards and paid a small fee to stay for one night. A young boy then led us round to the front of the building, where we were brought inside to a cosy room containing four beds, a loo and a wash-hand basin, all of which we had to ourselves. Outside was a shower and a tiny kitchen. We thanked the boy and he left.

As soon as we had settled in, we returned to the office and asked the lady's husband, who spoke good English, if we could use the telephone. Chris rang the Arnaflug air company to see if they had any flights back to Reykjavík on Monday

morning, but they did not. The only option that the official could suggest was a standby booking for a flight from Husavík, which was a distance away and not on a regular bus route. I suggested that we forget about flying and return by bus tomorrow morning. However Chris was still determined; he suggested that we walk to the nearby airport this evening to see if we could find somebody who would be willing to fly us back in a private plane.

As we were now in need of some provisions, we left and walked to a nearby supermarket, where we found a couple of girls serving customers through a hatch in the door. However, as the girls could not understand what we were saying, they let us go inside to choose what we wanted. We bought breakfast cereal, a packet of soup, butter, sardines and a few other things, paid at the cash desk and left. We returned to the hostel, where we left our purchases and chatted to an American chap who was staying there. We then left for the airport, which was situated at the other end of the town.

Passing through the town centre we saw many brightly-painted buildings made of corrugated iron. As we found a modern church perched on a hill, overlooking the bay, we climbed up steps to look at the church and admire the view. We then walked to the harbour, where we discovered that houses and buildings had been built along the whole length of the pier. The presence of the nearby mountains gave the little town great charm.

From here we walked down a long road that lacked a proper surface; it ran parallel to a motorway and was lined with private houses with neat and colourful gardens. The galvanized iron on some of the houses had been painted so that the houses appeared to have been made of bricks.

The airport, which was small and very basic, turned out to be farther away than we had imagined. When we finally arrived, we wandered on to the runway without anybody stopping us. As there was nobody around, we sauntered over to a hangar, where we found two men cleaning a small plane. The first man we spoke to was very cautious and was reluctant to give us any information. The other one, older and obviously a shrewd businessman, told us that a friend of his would gladly fly us to Reykjavík on Monday morning for 34,000 krónur per hour. As it would take about an hour and a half to complete the journey, we worked it out and realized that, at £17 each, it was much cheaper than an Icelandair flight at over £23 each, and not that much more expensive than the bus, which would cost £15.70.

We were delighted to hear this, though I was rather dubious about the whole arrangement. The man told us that his friend would telephone us on the following morning. We explained that we would need to hear from him this evening for, if he could not fly us back, we would have to catch the bus early on the following morning. The man said that he would see what he could do; he noted Chris's name and wrote down the telephone number of the youth hostel, which I had brought with me.

We then left and footed it back to the town, hoping that we would hear from the pilot this evening, though I doubted that we would. As the light was now fading and it was becoming chilly, we walked quickly. We eventually arrived back, tired and hungry. Chris spoke to the owners and told them that we were expecting a phone call, and I peeped into the kitchen. Some Germans were busy cooking themselves a meal. When they had finished, they let me use one of their saucepans to heat up the

soup and even gave me a hand. When they had finished eating, they offered us some macaroni and leftover vegetables that they did not want.

We finally sat down to an unusual meal of hot soup, bread and sardines, followed by bread and cheese. We then ate the macaroni and vegetables, and finished with an orange and a cup of tea. We chatted to a girl from Düsseldorf, thanked her and the others, washed up and prepared to go to bed. As Colm and I had not brought sleeping bags and as the room was quite warm, Colm simply threw a towel over himself. I used my anorak as a bed cover and folded up my jeans to serve as a pillow. As no telephone call had come by midnight, we knew that we would have to travel back to Reykjavík on the following morning by bus.