

## 8 – AKUREYRI AND BACK TO REYKJAVÍK

Sunday, 31 August

A horribly grey and wet morning. We were up by half past six; after washing, dressing, then quickly eating some breakfast, we rushed out of the hostel and arrived at the bus station at eight o'clock. When we bought our tickets for the bus to Reykjavík, we discovered that it would leave at 9.30 – not the time that I had been told when we had arrived on the previous day. In order to kill time, we walked around the empty streets of the town, stopping occasionally to look at shop windows or admire a garden full of flowers in front of a house. The locals were very tidy people; in one street we encountered some young girls sweeping a pavement very thoroughly. We guessed that they were students and were doing this as a summer job, although the holiday season had come to an end today. This explained why all the flights had been booked, for everyone was returning home from the countryside, either to work or to go back to school.



*Akureyri*

We then walked down the pier to admire the view of the fjord, and returned to the bus station. Here we collected our luggage, which we had left in an office. The same coach, driver and courier as yesterday turned up and, having paid the young lady for our tickets, we set off sharp at half past nine. There were more people travelling on the bus today.

Under such a grey sky the scenery now appeared bleak and uninteresting. An elderly man with a cheerless expression blew clouds of smoke from a pipe; the courier opened a ventilator in the roof, but the air remained stuffy. I soon fell asleep, but woke to the strains of a harpsichord playing Handel's famous piece known as *The Harmonious Blacksmith*, which was coming from the radio. Colm had moved to the seat behind me so that he could chat to Chris.

The green wilderness outside rolled by; I quickly tired of it, for I had seen it all before and under better conditions. I continued to doze on and off until we stopped at Varmahlíð and a young boy with a shock of red hair and freckles was put sitting beside me because of the lack of space now in the coach. Like all the other children that I had seen so far, he was well dressed in fashionable clothes, and looked very clean and tidy. He sat in his seat very quietly and either looked at me with a most melancholy expression or stared out of the window.

I asked the young lad if he spoke English and was surprised when he said that he did. Did he learn English at school? No. Did he speak it at home? No. How did he learn it? He explained that his dad was Canadian, that he worked in the airport near Reykjavík, and that he had brought the family to Canada a few times. I now realized that the lad was speaking with a Canadian accent.

The boy, who (I discovered) was eleven years old (though he looked younger), punctuated his rather slow and deliberate speech with long pauses, as if he were searching for words. Curious, I now engaged him in conversation, but found it very difficult as the lad was so cautious, unsure about himself, and apparently interested in nothing. What did he like doing best? He did not know. Did he like school? It was OK. What was his favourite subject? He did not know. Did he read much? Sometimes. Did he play sport? Yes. Did he like it? It was OK. Did he watch television or go to films? Sometimes. What film did he like? 'Star Wars'. Was it in English? Yes, with Icelandic subtitles. Did he have many friends? Some. What was his favourite food? Some meats. What did he want to do when he grew up? He did not know.

The young boy seemed to be quite remote, alone and bored. I learned from him that he had been staying on a farm during his holidays. I wondered if all Icelandic children were like him. With the exceptions of our guides and drivers on the safari tour, I had found most adults here to be surly and humourless.

When I took my map of Iceland out of my bag, the boy cheered up a little and began pointing out the places in which he had been. He asked me about our tour and then spent some time asking me if I had visited various places that he pointed to on the map, though he was not interested in me telling him about the route that we had taken. He told me that if I had difficulty in communicating in English while in the airport, I should contact his father, whose name he gave me. I thanked him, but forgot his name instantly.

When he had tired of map reading, he rooted about in his schoolbag and produced some long strings of liquorice, which he began to unravel carefully. He broke off a couple of pieces and solemnly offered one to me. Although I didn't

particularly want it, I accepted it. This cemented our friendship further and the boy began to open up a little more. He then produced some sheets of blank paper and began to show me how to make boats, aeroplanes and spaceships by folding sheets in various different ways. When he had finished his demonstration, he then handed me the creased paper and demanded that I try to reproduce what he had done. I followed his instructions and duly produced the same results. The whole demonstration was a quite a serious affair, conducted with the solemnity and correctness of a school lesson. The boy then began to amuse himself with his paper creations and our conversation petered out. He offered me some more liquorice, which I accepted. I then started to doze.

When we clambered aboard the coach after our short stop at Blönduós, it was packed, and Carl and Chris's seats had been taken. They had to find a seat elsewhere. My young companion, however, had kindly kept my seat. We spent the next part of the journey, until we stopped near Brú for lunch, chatting a little more. He offered me some more liquorice, but this time I refused his offer as I had eaten enough.

We spent most of the thirty minutes given to us for lunch queuing in the restaurant as there were so many people in it. Today I chose a salad dish with prawns, which was quite tasty. When we set off again, the boy was asked to sit with his two companions and another person sat beside me. Shortly afterwards I fell asleep for a while.

The weather began to brighten up when we drove round the Hvalfjörður for the third time. We had certainly got to know this part of Iceland! At the shop where we stopped for our 'technical pause' I used the telephone and made an attempt to book flights to and from the Westman Islands, for we would now go to any lengths to avoid staying in Reykjavík! Once again it was to no avail, for all the flights were fully booked. We gave up. At least we had tried!

Afterwards we leafed through the telephone directory and were amused to discover that all the people's first names were listed alphabetically, with the patronymics ending in *-son* or *-dottir* following; there were no surnames. We guessed that it must be difficult finding a person's number for, as so many people had the same first name and patronymic, one would have to be sure of the person's address. As only 220,000 people lived in the country, the directory was not very thick.

We finally reached Reykjavík by seven o'clock and were glad to get off the coach. We stretched our legs by walking through the deserted park by the lake, stopping to examine the unusual statues and to look through the windows of what appeared to be a bandstand.

Back at the familiar school, we found our room empty. All the rooms had been restored to classrooms and were ready to be used by students when they returned from their summer break on the following morning. We found the warden; as he had saved beds for us, he now brought us upstairs. Colm was put in a room that had one bed to spare and where he found two German girls resting. I was put in another, which also just had one bed to spare, with a group of girls from our safari tour who greeted me with a welcoming cheer. Chris was put in a third room.

As the girls wanted to know how we had got on, I told them how most of our plans had come to nothing. I then asked them if they had enjoyed the Westman

Islands. They told me that the journey had been an outrageous rip-off. They had seen nothing from the plane because of cloud; on Heimaey Island, where there was little to see as it was so small, they had been transferred to a coach and whisked around the island in an hour. Their guide had been quite obscene, constantly telling them filthy jokes and making sarcastic remarks about the troubles in Northern Ireland. They were then whisked back to Reykjavík. The tour, which had cost £37, had lasted barely three hours. Everyone who had gone on the trip had been bitterly disappointed by it. By now I was glad that our plans to visit the islands had gone astray. The girls were also disappointed by the absence of shops or restaurants on the island.

When Colm, Chris and I were ready, we walked to the nearby restaurant, where we joined Barbara and another girl from the safari group for a meal. The girl told us that she was interested in archaeology, a subject that she had studied in university, though she currently had an office job. She said that she and her boyfriend would like to live and study in Iceland for a year, though she realized that she would have to bring a large supply of books with her to keep her entertained!

We dallied here for some time, chatting, then moved off. As it was our last evening together, we decided to go somewhere. The young people wanted to stay out late but our warden, who normally closed the doors at eleven o'clock, demanded a fee of 4,000 krónur per hour to keep them open. Disgusted, we sought out Maura, who was staying in a guest house nearby. When we got there, we discovered that she had gone out and so we began to write a note of complaint. She then returned and we discussed the matter with her. We were wasting our time, for there was little that she could do. This problem had occurred on the previous evening and she had agreed to pay, but she could not continue to so.

We now headed for the university, where a jazz session was in progress. Neither Colm or Chris were enthusiastic about this as they both disliked jazz, but I reasoned that it would probably would not be as noisy as the disco, which was the other alternative. Eventually we all decided to go as there was nothing else to do.

As it began to rain, we quickened our step. We soon arrived at the venue and tried to get into the bar, but found it closed. We therefore entered the hall, which was very modern and well designed. We paid for a ticket: a token fee of 10 krónur. Inside it was packed, noisy and warm, and a haze of cigarette smoke hung over everything. The sound of a jazz band, to which nobody seemed to be listening, deafened us and Colm plugged his ears with pieces of paper tissue.

We managed to find a few chairs and sat down to join some members of our group. Conversation was almost impossible while the band was playing, and we had to shout at each other when the music stopped. I was surrounded by a crowd of girls from Cork; it turned out that none of them were interested in jazz. Like us, they had come here simply because there was nowhere else to go. Chris bought us drinks; I sipped a large glass of almost alcohol-free beer, which I found quite refreshing. We noticed that all the young Icelandic people, mostly students, were extremely well dressed in the latest of fashions, and that there was a general air of prosperity. They all appeared to be very serious.

A little later we were joined by Miriam and Adrienne, who had brought along an American lad whom they had met in the youth hostel. We stayed put until midnight, then decided to join the gang and go to the disco in order to finish up the evening.

From here we walked to the city centre in the rain, some of us sheltering under the American chap's umbrella. We finally arrived at a place called the Oðal, where we had to pay an entrance fee of 1,000 krónur. It was very plush inside; upstairs we found a bar with tables and chairs placed in cosy little compartments, all bathed in dull red light; the walls were decorated with reproductions of some of the old Dutch masters. The dance floor, which was tiny, was illuminated by flashing lights. The disc jockey was a young, well-built man who wore a red and black t-shirt; his equipment delivered good quality sound, free of distortion.

There were very few people here, which was just as well; I was informed that the place had been packed over the previous two evenings. The grinning disc jockey recognized many members of our party and played a record of a jazzed-up Scottish jig, to which we all danced in a frenzied manner. I whirled Barbara round and round; Colm, who had never done anything like this before in his life, joined in the fun and performed his own version of disco dancing which resembled weight-lifting exercises. It was fun to watch him!

It was quite noisy here, but I did not mind. I danced until I was worn out, then sat down with some of my companions and watched bouncers stopping a drunken brawl that had started. The local youngsters, who only seemed to be interested in drinking, looked thoroughly miserable and unsteady; it was depressing to watch them.

The music stopped at 1 a.m. on the dot and we left, exhausted but in high spirits. Together we all returned to the school, where we went to the kitchen to make drinks of hot soup, tea and coffee. I accepted a large bowl of scorching hot soup with too much salt in it, accompanied by a couple of slices of brown bread. Shortly afterwards, one of the fellows stood up, noisily rapped the table with a spoon, and announced that he was going to organize a sing-song. Most of us did not take kindly to being treated like children and ignored him. Colm and I left immediately and crept up to our rooms in the dark. Most of the girls in my room were already fast asleep. I was very happy to climb into bed and close my eyes.

Monday, 1 September

Our last day in Iceland. I woke at nine o'clock after an excellent sleep. Barbara, who had been in the bed beside me, told me that she had not slept well; I feared that I had possibly kept her awake by snoring. I met Colm outside, who had bought a carton of milk. I breakfasted with him and Chris, finishing our provisions. The three of us ate large bowls of muesli in order to finish the packet.

Afterwards we went out into the streets to do some shopping. At last the place had come to life! The city centre was quite busy, with lots of people and cars. During the morning we met Bobo and the girl who had been on the bus to Akureyri. Colm and I were on the lookout for souvenirs; in particular I wanted to buy a doll in traditional dress for my mother. After looking in a couple of shops, I finally selected one with the help of some of my female companions, and bought it.

In another shop, which specialized in woollens, Colm bought some scarves and gloves. We then wandered around the streets; Colm was now on the lookout for newspapers, which his brother was interested to acquire, and visited an art shop, also on his brother's behalf. His brother wanted to know if it would be possible for him to mount an exhibition of some of his modern art here. The girl in the art shop

recommended that we go to the City Art Gallery – the one that we had visited on our first full day here.

We were surprised at the lack of newspapers to be seen in the shops; Colm later discovered that a particular newspaper was published on a Monday only, another on a Tuesday and so on, so that only one newspaper was available on each day of the week.

We met many of our companions walking around with large plastic bags containing Icelandic jumpers and other woollen ware. They were obviously using up their money! Although I was tempted to buy one of these fine jumpers, I desisted and just purchased a pair of warm mittens for about 2,000 krónur.

We eventually returned to the restaurant and had an enjoyable lunch there with Chris, Barbara and the archaeology student; we stayed put after we had eaten and chatted with them.

Afterwards Colm and I walked quickly to the City Art Gallery, arriving there by two o'clock when it opened. Colm was introduced to the lady in charge and brought into her office. When we met later, Colm reported that he had got on very well with the lady, who was interested in his brother's proposal of an exhibition. All in all, Colm was very satisfied with the outcome.

It was now time for us to return to the school, for we were to be collected at three o'clock and driven by bus to Keflavík airport. When we arrived back, we found our group gathered around in the yard and in the storeroom, getting themselves ready. I packed away my purchases and brought my bags outside. A large and luxurious coach soon appeared and we bundled ourselves and our luggage inside. We then collected the rest of the party from the nearby youth hostel and drove out of the city to the wild countryside, leaving Reykjavík behind.

So ended our enjoyable ten-day holiday in Iceland, the highlight of which had been the rough and tumble six-day safari tour. It had been a fascinating adventure during which we had savoured the wild scenery and enjoyed the fresh air, the open spaces and the luxurious outdoor hot baths.