

020829 The rain in Iceland falls mostly on the planes

Iceland is amazing. The landscape of this small country is unlike anything that I have ever seen before. I'll admit that I have probably said that about several places in these emails, but I guess that is part of the incentive to travel to remote places like Iceland. My visit to Iceland was short, only about 19 hours during a long layover on the way to Copenhagen via Iceland Air. I arrived in Iceland at 6:30 in the morning and took a shuttle from the airport into Reykjavik where I had already made arrangements to take a popular tour of some of the surrounding sites. Despite no little effort on my part, I could not leave my large backpack at the airport, but fortunately I was able to leave it at the left luggage office at the bus station so that I did not have to wander around with it all day. I had been warned that the island was chilly and so I had long pants and a fleece. However, I was not prepared for the 9 degrees Celsius temperature and the drizzle which greeted my arrival. Fortunately it warmed up during the day.

Iceland was a part of Denmark until 1944 when the island nation declared its independence. My Icelandic guide told us the date of the independence with some embarrassment since it was during the height of the Second World War. But, she quickly emphasized that the split had been in the making for a long time prior to the actual independence. Iceland had already been declared an independent state within the Danish realm in 1918, a situation similar to what Greenland and the Faeroe Islands have today.

Students in Iceland used to be required to learn Danish along with English because Icelandic is very different than Danish. Icelandic includes letters which are not found in English or Danish. A Danish friend of mine joked that when she visited the island, she noticed that Icelandic seemed to take Danish words and add an -er to the end of them. However, the pronunciation is different from Danish and so she could not understand when Icelandic people spoke with her. The Icelandic accent which you hear when Icelandic people speak English is distinct, but not always present. I know some Icelandic people who have learned the American accent.

Iceland is small with a land area of only 103000 square kilometers, (about the size of the state of Virginia), but with only 280,000 residents. Actually, the island is continually growing in land area due to volcanic eruptions which are constantly occurring and plate tectonics. Iceland sits on the divide between the North American and European plates and the plates are widening the island as they drift apart. You can actually see the continental divide in Þingvellir National Park. The edges of the plates are marked by jagged cliffs which are about 15 meters high. The land between the cliffs has sunk over time as the plates slowly drift apart.

Evidence of the fiery birth of the island can be seen everywhere. The soil is a blackish color and pumice can be found littering the ground. You can see the results of lava flows in rocky outcroppings from the ground and in the groves in the rocks where the lava has hardened. One volcano near Reykjavik erupted in 2000 and provided more of a spectacular show than causing any damage. My Danish friend visited a lava field which was created by the volcano, Eldfell on the Westman Islands. The volcano shocked the local residents when it unexpectedly erupted in 1973, covering the surrounding villages with ash and lava. My friend said that the rocks were still quite warm due to the lava still flowing close to the surface.

The wild rock outcroppings, the mountain ranges and the wide valleys make for a beautiful landscape. Where the land is not black, it is very green with grass. However, there are very few trees. The inhospitable conditions on the island are not conducive to the growth of trees and less than 10% of the island has any trees at all. There are trees scattered here and there, but mostly planted near houses. The lack of trees adds to the surreal landscape. Rivers plummet from the mountain heights and the mountains are beautiful. I occasionally even saw plummets of steam where hot water was escaping from the depths of the earth.

Iceland has made very good use of its geothermal resources. According to the CIA, as of 1999, 99.03% of the electricity consumed by the islands inhabitants came from hydro, geothermal or other renewable sources such as wind. Only 0.07% of the electricity came from fossil fuels. Hot water is provided by geothermal sources. The result is that the island is immaculately clean. The rivers run clean and the tap water is delicious. The tap water had no taste at all that I could detect. The air is clean and the horizon is clear of smog.

The city of Reykjavik is large, but as our tour bus left the city, there were only occasional, small, scattered houses which included mobile homes. The tour took us to a small church in the country side with no other building in sight. The lava flows in the area are called the Christ Lava fields because they were formed when Christianity came to the island around 1000 AD. Today, 96% of the inhabitants are Lutheran which is the state religion (same as Denmark). The tour also took us to the Þingvellir National Park where I saw the divide between the continental plates as well as the Alþing which is where the Icelanders began to meet to discuss matters of blood, money and justice in 930. The Alþing is actually just a small rock, but it marked the beginning of Icelandic parliamentary democracy and was the site of the 50th anniversary celebrations in 1994. The park is beautiful and is home to the largest lake in Iceland.

However, by far the most spectacular part of the trip was Gullfoss which is a large waterfall. The glacial river which feeds the falls has cut a narrow canyon into the surrounding plain so that unless you are standing above the plain, you can not see the river. The falls occur where the canyon drops 30 meters in two separate stages into the narrow depths. The water is very clear, but where it is churned by the rocks it becomes a baby blue due to the minerals and air in the water. The canyon below Gullfoss extends for some 2.5 kilometers and reaches a depth of 70 meters. Water pours over the falls at an average rate of 109 cubic meters per second, but can reach rates of 2000 cubic meters during glacial outbursts. The falls are beautiful, but what makes the scene spectacular is the backdrop of the mountain Kerlingarfjöll with its many peaks saddled by the glacier Hofsjökull, silhouetted against the sky. Icelandic horses roam the surrounding prairies with nothing else but plains, rivers and mountains for as far as the eye can see. The Icelandic horses are a special breed which are said to have a friendly temperament and fun to ride.

A few kilometers from the falls is the Geysir area. It is a rocky, rugged area littered with steaming pools of hot water every few meters. Most of the pools just bubble and gurgle with the boiling water and minerals. But, the energetic geyser named Stokkur erupts every few minutes with plumes reaching heights of up to 35 meters. The

eruption is amazing to watch. The crater is about 4 meters across and there is a constant flow of hot water and gas escaping. Every now and then the water level will rise momentarily. Then suddenly, the water forms a bubble that rises from the crater to a height of a few meters before the geyser pushes the water straight upwards to the delight of the surrounding tourists. The smell of sulfur hangs heavy in the air and signs warn naive tourists that the water is hot and not to be touched. Guide books warn that the way to see if springs are hot is not to use your hand, but undoubtedly many hikers learned this the hard way.

The tour lasted for eight hours and I think I enjoyed the ride through the remote scenery as much as the stops. That is, when I was awake to watch which became more problematic as the day wore on since sleep does not come easily to me on airplanes. One day in Iceland was not enough to do more than make me certain that I want to return with several weeks at my disposal to hike and discover the island's rugged beauty.

I returned to Reykjavik with several hours on my hands and so I wandered through the city. The Hallgrímskirkja (Hallgrímur's Church) is quick to catch your eye when you survey the city. The church is located at the highest point in the city and its white steeple dominates the skyline as it soars into the sky. The church is not a traditional design. The lines of the steeple begin 5 meters from the ground and curve upward as they move from the outside to the center of the church. Think of the notch at the top of the McDonalds M flipped upside down and you have the idea.

Reykjavik is not like Copenhagen with its old world charm. The center of Reykjavik is nice with some old buildings and interesting architecture. But, outside the city center, the pleasing lines break down with buildings and apartment dwellings that have a distinct "Icelandic look", but were born out of functionality rather than charm. The tallest building was four stories tall and outside of the city center, the buildings were all free standing. These buildings reminded me of somewhere that I had seen before, but I could not remember where. I had dinner and coffee in the city center and then struggled against the strong wind and drizzle to walk the several kilometers to the bus for the airport. My flight was not until 01:30 the next morning, but I was cold and quite tired and looked forward to finding a nice bench in the airport to take a nap.

I arrived in the small 25m x 10m bus waiting area to find lots of people waiting for the bus to the airport. I went to the ticket counter to discover that most flights for the night had been canceled due to the wind and rain. But, they told me to hang tight and wait to see what would happen with my flight. I sat down on one of the seats and looked around the room at my companions. With the exception of a few people who had (gasp), wheeled luggage, everyone there was a backpacker. Perhaps it was only the backpackers who couldn't afford to rent a car from the airport to the city and so took advantage of the bus (the new airport is 45 minutes outside of Reykjavik). Or, more likely it is that the late evening flights were most attractive to the backpacker crowd so that they could get a full day in without needing a hotel. I could feel that I am no longer twenty years old because being awake for so long was beginning to take its toll on me.

Several of the people in the room had bicycles which would be a great idea. Most were German and were waiting to hear about their flight to Frankfurt. One took his

propane stove outside to warm up water for tea. I broke open a MRE (thanks Sharon Dixon) and stressed about my options. I watched as one older couple called hotel after hotel on their mobile before taking a taxi so that they could wait till the flight in the morning. How would I afford a taxi in this super expensive country and how would I find a hotel? I worried for a time until I decided that seeing as others were breaking out sleeping bags to keep themselves warm, I would spend the night in the seat if need be until the morning flight. As odd as it sounds, the decision was actually quite freeing. I didn't need to worry about a hotel or taxis or any of that. I had my seat where I would stay until my flight was ready. So, I could just relax with my book and enjoy crowd watching.

Eventually at around 23:30 we were told that our flight was going to depart and so a bus would take us to the airport. During the long bus ride, I realized why the buildings in Reykjavik looked familiar. They reminded me of the buildings in Yantai, China. Cover the buildings with tiles and add soot from the coal fires in Yantai and you would have the same exact architecture. It was a very surreal realization.

We arrived at the airport and checked in under the warning that our flight would be delayed. The flight from Copenhagen had landed in Iceland, but at an airport in the east and so it would need to be brought to Reykjavik. I perused the duty free and was about to take a nap when an announcement came over the loudspeaker that passengers to Copenhagen would need to assemble in the ticketing area. It turned out that we were to be bussed right back to the bus station where we started. The station was next to the old Reykjavik airport and a plane was there waiting for us. Our original plane never made it to the Reykjavik airport, but there was a spare at the old airport. Rather than to bring the plane to us, we were piled into waiting busses for the 45 minute return trip. But, not before customs took back from everyone any duty free purchases that they had made. Despite the fact that we were going from one airport to another and we would not go through security again, we were leaving the airport and so any duty free items had to be confiscated to be returned later. It was so silly since the bags were taken and then piled on the floor of the bus. The bus left the airport only to be turned around by the guards at the airport gate. The airport staff had remembered to take the duty free bags, but had forgotten to put our luggage on the bus. So, back we went to get our bags. I think that even the airport staff were a bit tired by that point. In the end, my flight was able to take off and I arrived in Copenhagen a couple hours late, but none the worse for the wear.

I would definitely recommend a stop in Iceland to anyone who is thinking of flying to Europe. Iceland Air offers a free layover of up to three days and the airline is currently the least expensive carrier into Europe. It is a no frills airline, but why pay a couple hundred dollars more to get free drinks on the plane when instead you could spend the money in Reykjavik and Copenhagen?

 [Previous](#) | [Next](#)  | [Return to Main Page](#)
