

*Small Steps
Across
a Foreign
Land 1*



Small Steps Across a Foreign Land 1, December 2020, is an occasional travelzine produced by Perry Middlemiss, 32 Elphin Grove, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122. Produced for whoever asks or is unlucky enough to receive it. (Cover illustration by H. Seldon. It dates from 1922. I'm running with the idea that it is out of copyright. If it isn't I'll remove it.) E: perry@middlemiss.org

9 Days in Iceland

INTRODUCTION

This trip report began as a series of daily blog posts on a travel blog I maintain. Those daily dispatches were written quickly, generally a few days after the events depicted and, frankly, should really only be considered as a first draft. This is the second, with more photographs, more background information where appropriate and, hopefully, with the grammar fixed.

That travel blog for this trip (<http://perryandrobbytravelblog.blogspot.com/>) starts with some notes about the planning for this 2019 European trip in a post dated 8 August 2019. It then proceeds to describe our holiday in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland before we arrive in Iceland. But I didn't want to cover all of that ground again here, so what follows is a general introduction to the trip overall, with some specific details about our arrival in Iceland. I hope it all makes sense. As much as anything I put together can.



Robyn and I had always wanted to go to Iceland. We're not entirely sure why. We'd read about it in a few series of detective novels, it was, almost, exactly halfway around the globe, and it was a complete change from the land we knew in Australia. It seemed exotic, and a long way away. Maybe too far.

Then things started to fall into place in the early to mid 2010s when I heard that the World Science Fiction Convention might be going to Dublin. Close to Iceland, I thought. I wanted to go to a Worldcon in Dublin, but I needed a way to sell the trip to Robyn. That small island to the far north might just be the way to do it.

2017 and we were in Helsinki at the Worldcon there when we learned that Dublin had been successful in its bid for the 2019 World Science Fiction Convention. I'd already dropped a few hints about wanting to go to Ireland, and a few more hints about the proximity of Iceland. "We'll probably never get that close again," I said. "I don't know," she replied. "I'll think about it." I generally take this as code for being on the right track and within a month we had the first draft of itinerary figured out involving Ireland, Iceland and France. That itinerary went through three or four drafts before we were happy enough with it to start booking hotels, flights, tours, etc.

But the best laid plans are always subject to flight availabilities, and Iceland was not the easiest place to get to from Belfast, our immediate prior airport. There were flights, just not

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on the exact day we wanted to fly in to Reykjavik. I did a bit of searching and came up with a flight via Edinburgh in Scotland; short layover and we'd be on our way. Flights booked, all forgotten.

Until late March of 2019 when I read that WOW Air, an Icelandic low-cost carrier we were using for the second leg of our flight had gone bust. We cancelled our booking and got most of our money back. Checking flights from Edinburgh to Iceland showed that we would have to spend a day in Scotland before we could get a suitable flight to our destination. Oh well, we thought, we had some old friends living in Edinburgh that we could catch up with, and if we stayed out by the airport we could catch the early morning flight through to Iceland without a lot of trouble. So replacement flights from Edinburgh to Reykjavik were booked and we moved on to other tours, other hotels.

About six weeks or so before we were due to fly out to Europe in mid-August of 2019 I was getting the paperwork together for the trip, making sure I had a printed copy, a soft copy on my laptop and one in my Dropbox folder. Paranoia reigns, but being prepared for the worst certainly makes you feel a bit better.

All of the flights and tour and hotel bookings seemed to be in place, except I couldn't find an email confirming our flight from Belfast to Edinburgh. I searched all over the place – maybe I'd printed off the confirmation and filed the email in a directory and had, effectively, lost it. No such luck. Couldn't find it anywhere.

So it was back in contact with our original booking agency. "Oh, when you cancelled the WOW flight you cancelled your whole flight, including Belfast to Edinburgh." Ah, so we could get from Edinburgh to Iceland but were stuck in Belfast unless I moved quickly. Light panic. And sometimes your luck is in, the flight was available, and now at a lower cost. Seats booked and disaster averted.

It was only later that I realised that by changing the days we were flying we really could have flown directly from Belfast to Reykjavik, skipping Edinburgh completely. But then we would have missed one of the highlights of our trip, catching up with Julian and Lucy during the day for a pint, and then Malcolm and Morag in the evening for dinner and a few more pints. A day we greatly enjoyed.

To bring this preamble to end then, we have our intrepid travellers safely ensconced in a hotel near the Edinburgh airport all ready for the trip of a lifetime. You'd hope that all their worries would be behind them.

They should have worried more.

Day 1 : Sunday 25th August, 2019

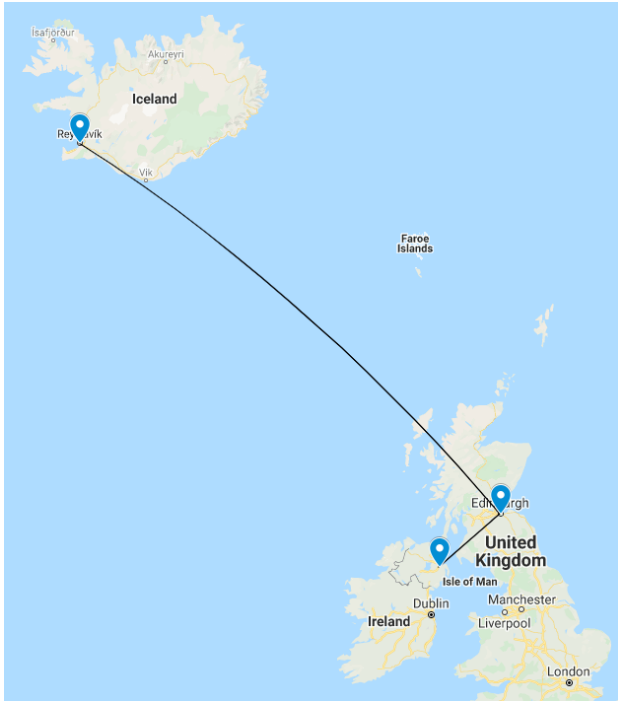
It really helps if you read the ticket.

Both Robyn and I had it in our heads that the flight from Edinburgh to Reykjavik left at 7:25am. We were both positive it was that time. Until we were checking out of our hotel, with

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our boarding passes in my hand and I noticed that departure time was actually 7:05.

More than a little panic started to set in.



The airport was only a couple of minutes away, and the cab had been booked but you never know what level of security is going to be in place, how many flights are taking off around your time and how overly officious the airline will be in regards to shutting the gate.

The trip to the airport was fine, we found the check-in line and realised we had to weigh our own bags. The first machine didn't work. The second one did but we didn't understand the answer we got from it so called over the bag attendant. "You're 2 kilos overweight. You'll need to move something into your carry-on bags." So we started to shuffle. Problem was the major extra weight was in the form of two bottles of wine and one of Irish Whisky, and they certainly couldn't go into the cabin bags. Shuffle, shuffle, stuff, stuff, underwear bags,

and shoes moving from one suitcase to day-pack, more weighing, more shuffling, and we finally made the weight.

First hurdle overcome. Then into security where we found a sign that said average wait time was 10 minutes. Emphasis on "average". Knowing our luck I assumed we would be at the far right-hand end of the wait-time bell curve. I didn't think we'd make it to the plane at this point. But they had accepted our luggage so I supposed they'd hold things for a bit. Airlines aren't too keen on transporting luggage without the accompanying warm bodies.

I made it all the way through security only to find I got called out of line to be wanded and then patted down. Must make sure in future that I don't wear my new trousers with all the zips.

Then we had a problem with the scanned carry-ons. Seems we needed to separate the laptop into a tub of its own – only got told to take it out of our bags. It got checked for explosives, then had to go back through the scanner. At least this gave me a little time to put the belt and shoes back on. Things seemed to be moving in slow motion but I kept my mouth shut. Rob tried to say something and got told off. There didn't seem to be any indication of speed here even though the crowds were backing up.

Through security and the gate was closing according to the flight boards. And of course it was the furthest from security. I raced off to try to make sure they let us on. Got to the gate out of breath but finding six or so people still waiting to board. Rob made it and we were last on the flight, sweaty, stressed, but aboard.

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After all that the flight was uneventful. We landed at Reykjavik, got through customs and security in no time at all and found our transfer car driver.

The Reykjavik airport is situated at Keflavik, on the site of an old American Air Force base – probably abandoned, or ceded back to Iceland at the end of the cold war. As such it is approximately 50 kilometres outside the city; a private transfer threatened to cost us an arm and a leg. We always have lots of discussions about airport transfers during our holiday planning phases. They have the advantage of taking you directly from the airport to your hotel alleviating the hassle of negotiating one or more legs public transport before a taxi to get to the right spot. They have the disadvantage of costing a lot. We did our research and determined it was about a 50% premium. We figured we could afford it.



Our first sight of Iceland



We then had some difficulty identifying which hotel we were supposed to be staying at. We'd been of the view that it was best to stay in the hotel where the tour was leaving from. The extra day in Reykjavik (that disappeared along with WOW airlines) was supposed to be spent there as well. We'd be trying for ages to get the tour company to confirm the location of the hotel. They had originally told us one name, saying that was the normal hotel, but then changed their minds about a week prior to our arrival and had booked us into the Hotel Orkin. The transfer car driver, who had our booking showing the original hotel, looked at me peculiarly as if I should really have known where I was going, and then proceeded to take us to the new hotel anyway. Give or take half a kilometre it was the same distance as far as he was concerned.

Bags dropped off, we headed into the city centre as we had a walking tour booked for 11:30am. The hotel was located about 1.5 kilometres from the centre of town, so the walk to tour pickup point was rather easy, flat and through some main shopping streets which were rather devoid of either cars or pedestrians. It gave us a chance to check out a few of the shops – not a pastime I generally engage in – and scope out any restaurants in the immediate vicinity of the hotel, much more to my liking.

The bulk of Iceland's population lives in Reykjavik though that only amounts to about 220,000 out of a total of 360,000. Consequently Reykjavik is the biggest city on the island, home to the Parliament and all the major museums and Government buildings. So it's a small city, the capital of a country, and only a little bigger than Geelong in Victoria. The walking tour

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took us around the centre of the city pointing out the highlights for a couple of hours. The day had started off cool and overcast and then the drizzle started to set in, and then the wind, and the rain picked up so it was coming in sideways by the time we finished the tour and queued for the famous Icelandic hot dog.

Supposedly Bill Clinton had inhaled a couple of these when he visited as serving President. Then again he seems to have tucked into more than his fair share of food items during his foreign travels. There used to be a Vietnamese restaurant in Swanston Street in Melbourne which specialised in Vietnamese rice noodle soup. It claimed, via a notice in its window, that old Bill had consumed two such bowls. And then wondered how many you might get through. Just the one I reckon – they are huge.

Post hot dog we wandered over to the Harpa conference and concert centre to while away most of an hour. We were waiting for a bus to take us to Perlan, Iceland's planetarium and physical sciences museum. By this time the rain was teeming down so staying inside, followed by a quick run to the bus, a couple of hours at Perlan (the planetarium film on the northern lights was extremely

good) and a short walk back to the hotel was a good way to keep out of the weather.

A major display in the museum showed how the Iceland glaciers have been receding over the past 50-100 years and also showed that they would be all gone within 150 years. The display required you to tab forward through the future years by pressing a button. Trouble was the local kids thought it was great fun to hog the display and keep on pressing the button in rapid succession. I was interested in seeing the gradual change. It was obvious our separate ambitions would not both be met. I watched it a couple of times and left.

The subject of climate change would be a recurring theme of conversations over the next week.

By the time we got back to the hotel we were cold and tired, and slightly damp. We'd been wise enough to

bring along a couple of bottle of wine, for Robyn, and a bottle of Irish whiskey for me. So a pre-dinner drink and we headed out to a nearby restaurant we had noted earlier in the day. Dinner achieved we were in bed early – as usual.



Gay pride street decoration

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Day 2 : Monday 26th August, 2019

The hotel booking confusion mentioned yesterday popped up again on Monday morning. The tour was due to begin with tour members being picked up from their respective hotels, transferred to a central point in Reykjavik, assigned to their correct buses and then being sent on their way. Fairly simple really. So long as the tour company knows where you are.



Tour bus with trailer

Waiting in the lobby of our hotel we got to talking to another guest, Sue, who we soon discovered was on the same tour as us, and another couple who were doing something else.

One bus from our tour company turned up only to find that the people to be picked up had not yet surfaced for breakfast – seems there was confusion as to whether the correct time was 8am or 9am – and then Sue was collected. There

was no mention of us on the guide's pick-up list. We asked, they didn't know anything about us.

Twenty minutes later and I was starting to contemplate ringing the company to find out what was going on when another bus arrived and our names were called and all was well in the world again. It seems that one part of the tour company had us listed as being at a particular hotel (not the one we were in, nor the original proposed location) and there was some scrambling at HQ to determine where we were, even though our new tour buddy Sue let them know exactly what was going on.

By 9am the whole group of 19 had been assembled and we'd been introduced to our guide, Sindri, who then commenced a 7-day comedy routine while acting as driver and loader of luggage. The bus wasn't that big so suitcases were carried in a trailer behind the main van and small day packs could fit into the main bus in overhead racks.

The tour group consisted of five couples, six singles and one family group of three. There were four Australians (the two of us, and two single women); the trio from Canada; singles from Italy, France (though originally from Taiwan), and Scotland (originally from China); with the rest from the US. Ages ranged from 20 to mid-sixties. A fair mix, and all of them looked fitter than us, as would later prove to be the case.



Sindri explains and Robyn listens

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Prior to the trip we'd decided that we didn't want to lug extra weight in the form of hiking boots and waterproof trousers around with us for a month when we only needed them for



less than a week, so had decided to rent them from the tour company. Rob's boots and trousers fitted okay, though the trousers were of a rubber-like material which didn't breathe much and made her sweat up a lot. My boots were fine but they had provided me with the same size trousers as Robyn which had no hope of fitting me. I pointed this out to Sindri who promised to get the problem fixed the next day when we got to the glacier.

Robyn and I had both recently read *Sagaland* by Richard Fielder and Kari Gislason, by way of background to the country. That book details Fielder's investigation of a country that he was fascinated by, and Gislason's journey back to his homeland in search of his heritage. It gave us a basic understanding of the country's myths and history and interest in family relationships, which proved helpful over the days ahead.

The tour schedule called for us to travel around Iceland in an anti-clockwise direction, generally staying close to the coast, with some diversions inland. The weather from the previous day was still hanging around though it did seem to be getting a little better. Still overcast, with a slight wind and some drizzle but not the sideways sleet of the day before.

Our first stop is at Thingvellir, some 40km northeast of the capital, set in a valley caused by the Mid-Atlantic rift, and site of the original Icelandic Parliament, first established in 930AD. It's possible here to stand on both



Gullfoss

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the European and North American tectonic plates at the same time, which felt rather like straddling the equator.

Next stop was Gullfoss, literally “Golden Falls”, though only if the sun was shining through the waterfall mist. As no sun was visible the name here didn’t seem overly applicable. We would get to see quite a lot of waterfalls over the coming week. Without the waterproofs I got wet pretty quickly so didn’t hang around the viewing spot for very long.



Lunch found us at Geysir, site of a few geysers (from the Icelandic word “geysa”, meaning “to gush”) including Strokkur which erupts every 5-7 minutes. It was rather cold with the temperature sitting at or just below 10C and the wind chill factor dropping that by a few degrees. And it was still technically summer.

Seljalandsfoss followed lunch. By now you’ll be seeing the use of the “foss” suffix on these names. It basically means “waterfall” in Icelandic, and, to my ear at least, seems appropriate. This waterfall has its source in the glacier on the volcano Eyjafjallajökull, which you may recall caused massive air-traffic havoc in 2010 all over Europe. The wind blew the ash and dust from that eruption high into the atmosphere to the east so the Icelanders weren’t bothered by it at all. Their major amusement was a result of the chaos caused to other countries and by the amusing attempts by non-Icelandic news commentators trying to pronounce the volcano’s name. We’d been taught an



English-sounding cheat phrase, that closely approximated the true Icelandic pronunciation, on our Reykjavik walking tour. Can’t tell you what it is though as it’s a trade secret.



A geysir at Geysir

Seljalandsfoss drops over an escarpment over 60m high and allows visitors to walk behind the falling water into a cave carved out of the cliff face. Robyn trekked off to see it but I stayed back on the paved path across the face as I didn’t want to get saturated by the falling water.

Skogafoss followed before we headed to Reynisfjara Black Sand Beach. Here the waves on the south coast ripped across the smooth black sand forming what are called “sneaker waves” – basically waves that travel much faster and further than

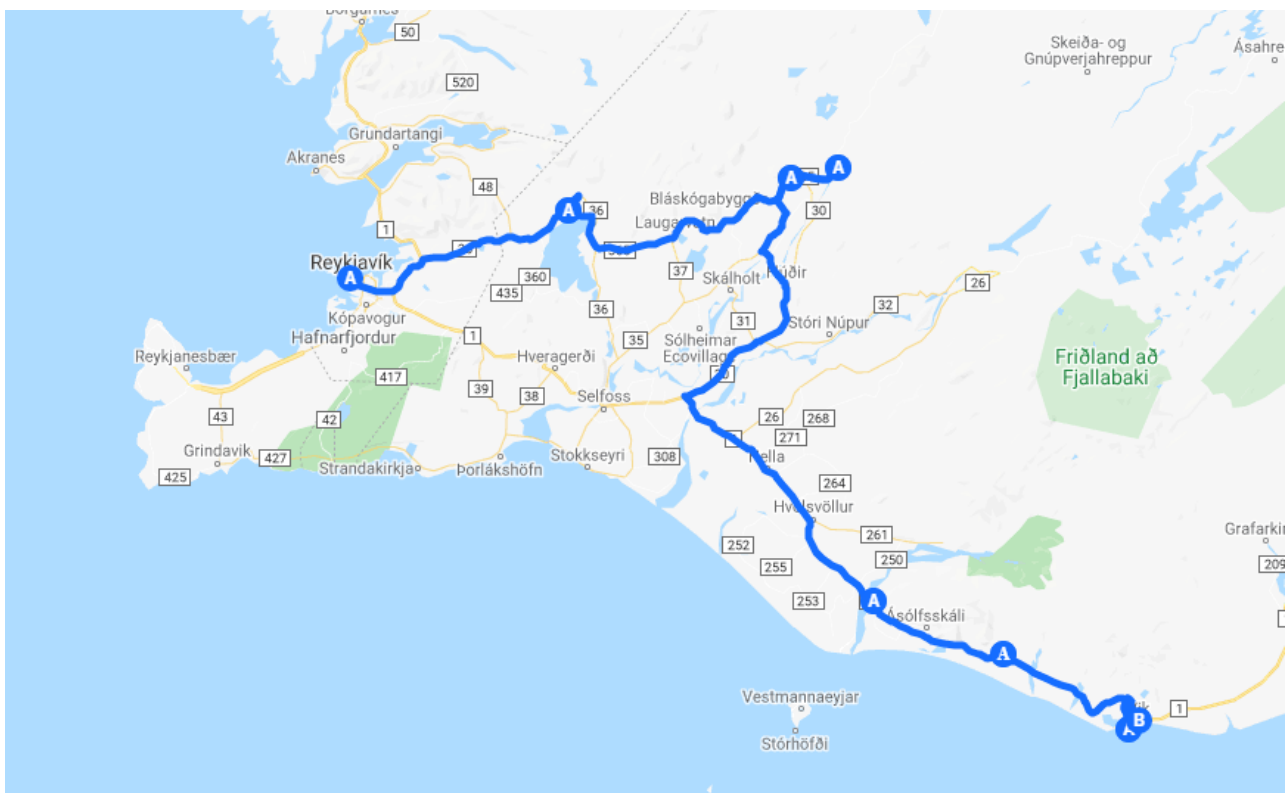
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people realise causing waterlogged shoes and drenched trousers. We had a quick look and headed back to the bus.



We made it to our hotel in the countryside, after driving through the coastal town of Vik, not long before 7pm. I was able to have a small glass of Irish whiskey and Robyn a glass of pinot grigio before dinner; we'd taken the precaution of bringing in a few bottles duty free. Which was a good move as both alcohol and food were expensive by Australian standards.

We were exhausted by the time we got to bed. It had been a very long day and the rest of the trip promised more of the same.



Day 1 driving route

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Day 3 : Tuesday 27th August, 2019

An early morning start with the alarm going off at 6am, breakfast at 7am and departure at 8am. With some of the clothes from the previous day being damp we'd spread stuff all over the bedroom with the heaters on. That meant that getting the two of us moving, checking the overnight emails, mostly packing our bags and getting down to breakfast, took the best part of an hour. This was to become a bit of a ritual for us each morning of this tour. But when you are on a group tour, such as this one, you are really dependant on everyone else being ready to get out the door on time. Luckily enough we had a group that thought along similar lines and, while we had a few instances where people were 5 minutes late, it wasn't a big problem.



The main item on the agenda for today was the glacier hike. Vatnajökull glacier is the largest glacier in Iceland, covering some 8% of the island's land area. We were going to one of the glacier tongues that fed off the main ice cap.



Our tour company, Arctic Adventures, had a company hut in the car park of the glacier visitors' centre where we were to be fitted out with our spiked crampons and ice axe. It also provided me with the opportunity to trade-in my undersized waterproof trousers for a bigger and better pair. The company had a number of tours running over our allotted period so we

had to time our arrival for a certain slot to be able to be fitted out, and to connect with our specialised glacier tour guide. All was successful. We had another couple of people added to our bigger group which meant we were separated into two teams. Crampons fitted, adjusted, and then removed to be carried, we headed out.

The glacier has retreated quite a lot over the past decade or so since the Visitors' centre was built so we had a bit over a kilometre to walk before getting to the "interesting" part. That gave us a good view of the glacier we would be tackling but, like all ice, the devil was going to be in the surface detail.



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First obstacle was a wood and rope bridge across the run-off river, easily traversed though it



could only safely hold two at a time. Then the slight climb up to the edge of the ice, crampons fitted, and a stern lecture from our guide: "If you drop your phone, do NOT rush after it. Tell me and I'll get it if I can. If I can't get it then it's gone." "Do not move sideways suddenly. If you fall down one of the crevices then that's probably it. If you are lucky you'll break something, if not we WON'T be able to get you out."

So, safely encouraged, we headed off. A quick lesson in how to walk on the ice ("Put your feet

down flat and straight, not sideways, and not driving forward so the toes hit the ice first.") and we followed in a straight line behind the guide. The weather had been a bit drizzly when we set out but by the time we got to the glacier the wind had dropped and the sun was trying to peek through the clouds. And so it stayed for the hour and a half we were on the ice. It's an experience not to be forgotten, especially the deep sky blue of the old ice in the deep crevices.



We didn't travel very far, nor climb very high on the glacier. We all did the right thing, following the guide, paying attention, slipping a little but not too much, and generally enjoying ourselves.



Our time came to an end and we headed back just as the weather started to turn again. We had been lucky in that regard and no-one had dropped anything or gotten into trouble. Equipment dropped off, a meeting time agreed and it was time for a break. Lunch back at the Visitors' centre was a few sandwiches. I was trying not to keep track of the costs at this time, as there didn't seem much point: you either ate or you went hungry, and hungry wasn't very appealing. Robyn seemed to be writing everything down, mostly with a shake of the head or a frown. I didn't dare look.

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Back on the bus we headed off to Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon and Diamond Beach, which is on the edge of Vatnajökull national park and which is fed by meltwater from the larger icecap. And

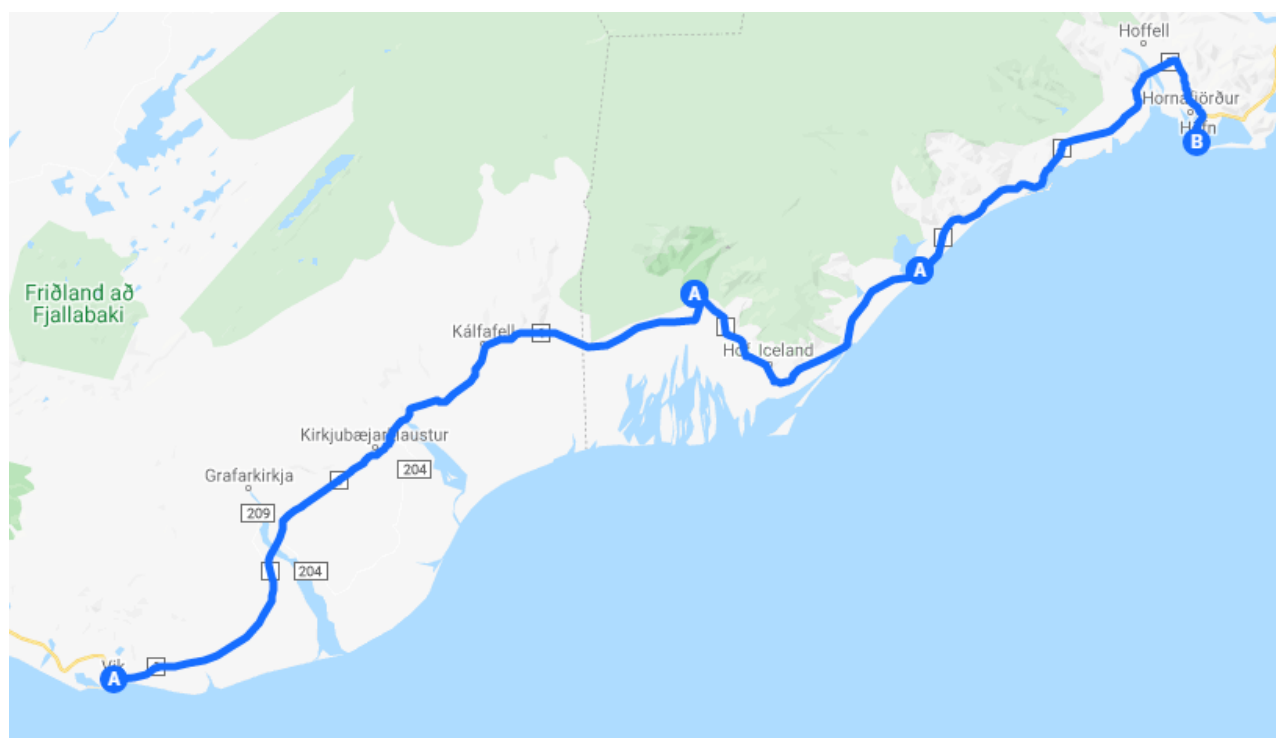


Höfn hotel

this melt-water also contains icebergs, some of which get stuck in the lagoon outlet and languish there for a time as they slowly melt.

Then onward towards our hotel for the night located in the town of Höfn.

I dozed off in the bus a couple of times during the afternoon. I don't think I was the only one.



Day 2 driving route

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Day 4 : Wednesday 28th August, 2019

As mentioned previously, we've been travelling around Iceland in an anti-clockwise direction generally following Route 1, otherwise known as the Ring Road. This was only completed in 1974 (to mark the 1,100 year anniversary of the country's settlement) with the building of the final bridge in the southeast. The road is pretty good, one lane each way, and well-maintained with a maximum speed limit of 90kph, which seems about right for the landscape and the distances. A number of the bridges in the south of the island are single-lanes which seem to confuse some tourist drivers. Our driver tended to steer clear of these vehicles as best he could while carrying on an amusing commentary, usually of a derogatory nature, about their driving skills. There may have been a few sections of the ring road that were unpaved but I might have gotten a bit confused when our driver took short cuts to save time.



The tour Australians

First stop of the morning was at Stokksnes, about 30 minutes outside Hofn. It's another black sand beach where it's possible to imagine you are walking on water. The beach is a wide flat expanse with a very, very slight gradient that lets a small amount of water sit on the sand and, if you stand in the right place, seems to blend sea and sky so it appears that you are walking on the water.



A short time later we stopped off at an imitation Viking village along the coast. This had originally been built for a film or TV series that had never been completed. Not sure about its level of accuracy. An amusing interlude before the driving part of the day.

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We were now on the east coast of Iceland and the bulk of the morning was spent driving to our main destination of the day. The countryside here is marked by a large number of fjords (the “lovely crinkly edges”) along the coast. There was the odd stop here and there, but not for



long. Just looking out the bus window was enough.

Lunch was in the small east coast fishing village of Djúpvogur. Probably soup again. Not that's there's anything wrong with that.



Djúpvogur harbour

the first one and then see how we felt. There was only one way up and one way back, and we could keep the parking area in sight at all times so we weren't worried. Added to that the sun was trying to come out. The climb looked hard, we found a nice resting spot and as expected we made it up to the first waterfall level and decided to just sit and take in the view. It was worth it. The day was warm, or at least warm for Iceland, and the views up and down the valley were spectacular. And, frankly, it was a pleasure just to sit and soak in the scenery.

The main item on the day's agenda was a long hike to a couple of waterfalls, Hengifoss and Litlanesfoss. These fall off a high plateau above a long glacial valley. The tour website quotes this as being a three-hour hike (mostly uphill) though our guide stated that he hadn't ever had a group who did it in more than two and a quarter. Robyn and I decided to aim to get to



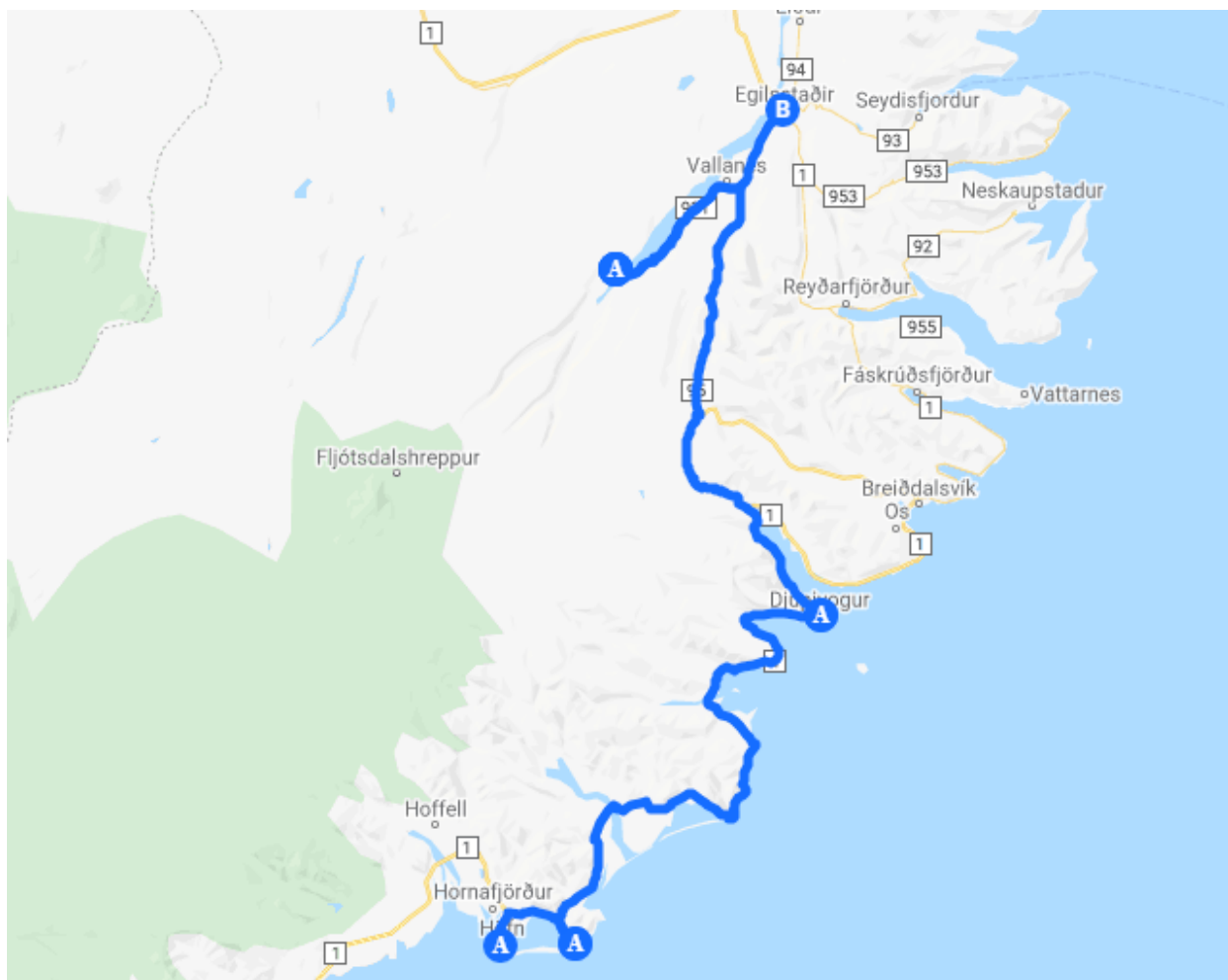
The climb up from the car park

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Everyone dribbled back in and we set off down the valley to visit Gunnar Gunnarsson's house. Gunnarsson was one of Iceland's most successful authors though he mainly wrote in Danish. He was nominated for a Nobel Prize for Literature a number of times without being successful.

And then it was off to Egilsstaðir for the night.



Day 3 driving route

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Day 5 : Thursday 29th August, 2019

If you had asked me before I went there this year I would have guessed that Iceland was about the size of Tasmania, some 68,000 sq km. Given the amount of driving we had been doing I had come to the conclusion it was bigger than that. I asked our guide Sindri if he had any idea of its actual size and he mentioned it being similar to England (not the UK combined but England only). Well, not quite. England is 130,000 sq km, and Iceland 103,000. So let's say halfway between Tasmania and England. In any event it was bigger than I expected. Note to self: do a bit more research before you leave home.



Our day in the front passenger seat

We were heading towards the thermal bath part of the tour today but had a few stops along the way. Möðrudalur is Iceland's highest farm at 469m above sea level, and possibly one of the most deserted. It's rather strategically located just off the main road between the eastern and northern parts of Iceland so appears to be a standard stopping



off point for tourists. The farmer here seems to have built up quite a business with a farm shop, cafe and self-built church. The landscape is bare and it must be extremely bleak in winter.

After a brief interlude admiring an Arctic fox and home-made Icelandic sweaters we continued on our way to Dettifoss, reputed to be the most powerful waterfall in Europe. This is



fed from another run-off river from the Vatnajökull glacier along with other smaller streams across a large area of northern Iceland. The walk from the car park to the viewing area took us through a classic Icelandic landscape – solidified lava flows,

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boulders small and large, and only mosses and low grass. There was not a tree to be seen anywhere.



We continued on our way to the geothermal area around Námaskarð. It's all flat, bare landscapes with sulphur-tainted springs and boiling mud pools. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge cuts through the area, hence the extensive geothermal activity.

The run-off silt from the glacier gives the river a greyish-white look. It is certainly impressive and the waterproofs were a welcome addition.



one episode.

During the earlier part of our trip in Northern Ireland we'd come across a number of tourist sites publicising that they had been used in a scene from the *Games of Thrones* television series and it appears that this site featured in



Each guide appears to like to add in a few extras during the drive. Sindri was a fan of the



Yule Lads, an Icelandic Christmas tradition. These mythical creatures leave gifts for children, over the last 13 days leading up to Christmas, in shoes they leave on their windowsills. Needless to say, naughty children get eaten, as they do. We stopped for a short time at a spot from where they were supposed to have originated. As I was the only one in the group who looked even vaguely like the depictions I posed in their cave.

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Not far down the road lay the Myvatn Nature Baths where we were booked in for a long soak in the hot mineral-rich alkaline water. Robyn is a real fan of these so we soaked in there for a while until I thought I'd lost the top two or three layers of skin and my finger pads started to look like prunes. It was getting late in the day and I needed lunch.

After we'd been fed and were back on the bus it was over to yet another waterfall, Goðafoss. You could be forgiven for starting to get a little jaded with waterfalls by this time. There are probably thousands in the country and we were hitting the high points only the route. They all had their specific attractions though I was beginning to notice that the amount of time the group spent at each spot was starting to diminish a little.



This was

turning out to be a long day and was looking like being even longer. The hotel we'd been booked into for the night was in the small town of Dalvik. We had an early start in the morning to go whale watching and our tour guide was required to have at least an eleven hour break between driving stints. That meant we needed to be as near to our morning spot as we could overnight. Unfortunately Dalvik didn't have a restaurant so it was off to Akureyri or dinner.



Perry acts the idiot.

Akureyri is the largest town in northern Iceland with a population of 18,000 or so. It is situated on a deep fjord and is a favoured stopping off port for cruise ships. These ships generally flood the Myvatn Nature Baths with visitors when in town so we'd been lucky to get a soak between arrivals.

At this point we were only about 100km from the Arctic Circle but the town was situated in a relatively warm spot and looked rather prosperous. A small idiosyncratic note was the use of love hearts instead of circles in some of their traffic red lights. Our guide wasn't sure why but it just added to our view that Icelanders are generally pretty friendly.



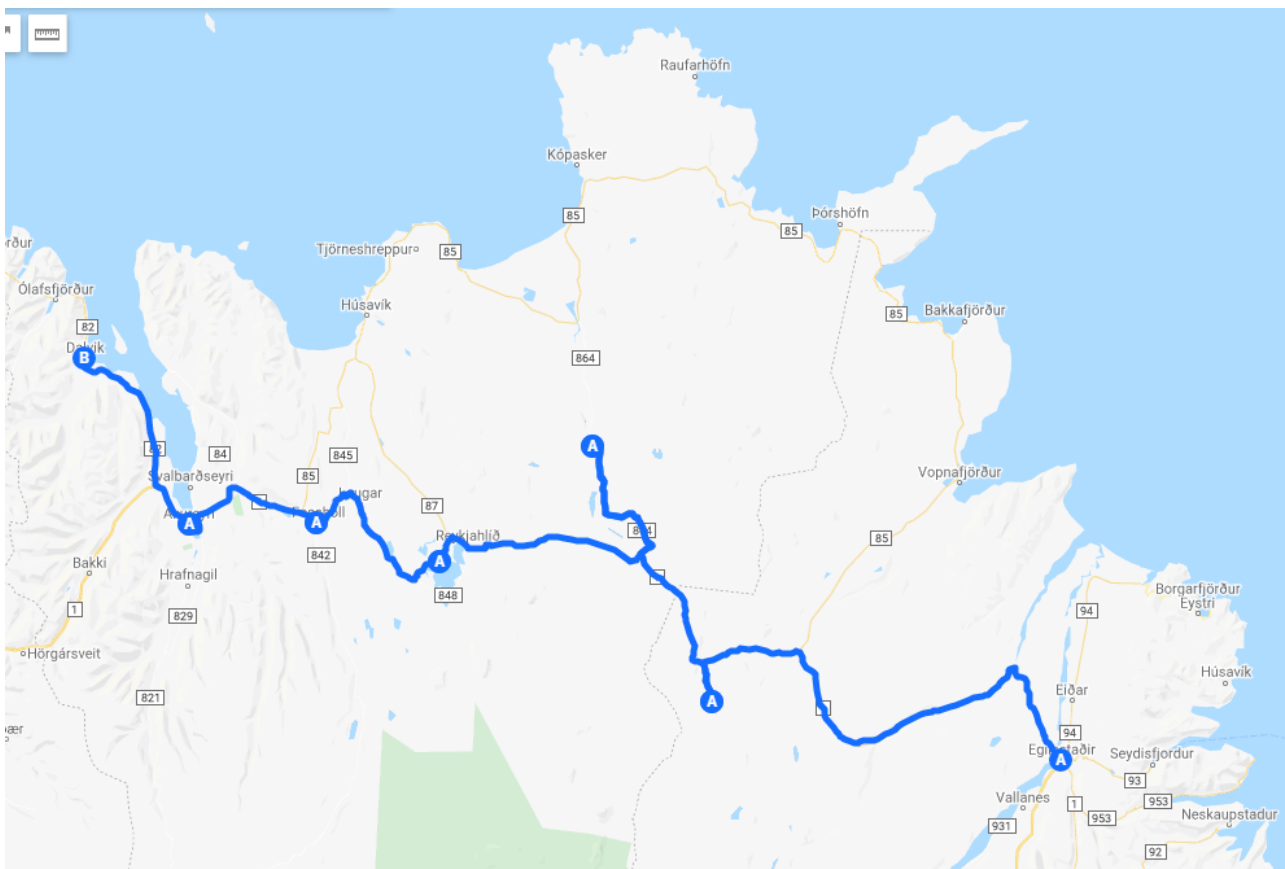
Local residents

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Sindri had driven us around the centre of town pointing out the various restaurants and warning us off one place because they had treated his sister very badly when she worked there. This was sort of like a very personal TripAdvisor site with added barbed commentary.

Robyn and I couldn't decide on anything straight off so the two of us just went for a wander around town, checking out the local shops in the pedestrian mall, and finding strange troll puppets outside a tourist shop. **We finally decided** to hit a local backpackers for dinner – anything other than soup – and I was able to get a few cheapish beers in during their happy hour. Which I was happy about as the Irish Whiskey had been finished by this time.

A couple of beers, a hamburger and it was time to meet up with the others for the final run of the day. I have a feeling we may have spent a bit long at one set of traffic lights while everyone took the obligatory photo. We made our hotel at Dalvík at around 9pm. This had certainly been our longest day so far.



Day 4 driving route

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Day 6 : Friday 30th August, 2019

About ten or twelve years ago Robyn and I took the family (including Rob's mother) to Hervey Bay in Queensland. This was partly for Robyn and her mother to re-live the long driving holidays they used to take back in the 60s and 70s. And it was also partly for us to go whale watching on a half-day cruise in the waters between Fraser Island and the mainland. On that occasion we were lucky to get some close-up views of a couple of humpback whales who are regular visitors to the area.

So when the itinerary for this trip included a whale watching cruise we were quite interested. So interested that Robyn decided to upgrade us to the speedboat, suspecting that this would give us a greater opportunity for sightings. Unfortunately it didn't turn out that way.

As noted in the previous blog entry we had stayed in a small hotel in Darvik overnight as we had an early start and we all needed to be fitted out with wet weather body suits which also act as full flotation devices. Suitably outfitted Robyn and I clamoured onto the speedboat with about six others while the rest of the group stayed with the main bigger vessel.



Speedboat



was good and the seas calm for the most part so the trip was enjoyable, just not quite what we hoped.

As an aside, Iceland still undertakes some commercial whaling. Our guide Sindri told us that the basic Icелander doesn't eat whale meat and that the bulk of any sold is sold to tourists. This seemed a little disingenuous to me. The solution to the problem was very simple. If you take it off the menu then tourists won't eat it,

For the next three hours we belted around all over the Eyjafjörður fjord, catching a glimpse of one whale breaching in the distance four or five times. We had been hoping to see any or all of humpback or minke whales, or white-beaked dolphins, but it wasn't our day. The weather



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won't know about it and in a few years will have forgotten it was ever available. It just takes a bit of nerve and conviction.

The larger vessel group had had the opportunity to fish on their way back to port and the whale watching tour company put on a small barbeque of the catch when the tour was over. This was the



which didn't disappoint.



appetiser for lunch, which we took at a small restaurant a few hundred metres down the street. Sindri had recommended the fish soup

The weather had started to turn as we headed off north towards Siglufjörður. Robyn in particular was interested in this town as it is the setting for the *Dark Iceland* series of crime novels by Ragnar Jonasson, one of her current favourites. There isn't much to the town so most buses just keep driving straight through. But Sindri knew of Iceland's only chocolatier who had opened a small café there and an excellent little sojourn was had by all. The interior



decoration was certainly different. The toilet has a designated selfie spot on the floor in front of the mirror. Everyone takes a photo there.



By now the weather had turned to rain and sleet as we headed north through tunnels and around fjords until we hit a spot where Robyn and I had asked Sindri to stop, it being the furthest point from home we had ever been. Not that we stayed out in the weather very long. The rest of the day was a long drive across the northern parts of Iceland, skirting fjords and mountains until we reached our overnight hotel in the small university-centred community of Bifröst.

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Day 5 driving route

Day 7 : Saturday 31st August, 2019

This was to be our last driving day of the tour. We had by now entered the west of Iceland and were heading for our hotel drop-offs later in the day in Reykjavik.



Our standard early morning departure was followed by a visit to Grábrók, a volcano crater surrounded by a lava-flow landscape. The climb up to the crater rim from the car park was helped by the installation of a wooden walkway and steps, with some very well-placed stopping points along the way. We didn't stay overly long, and it was windy up there.

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A brief stop at the Glanni waterfall was followed by Deildartunguhver Thermal Spring, the most powerful hot spring in Europe. The water from this spring is used to heat houses up to 60 kilometres away.



Children's Falls

The Hraunfossar cascade and Barnafoss waterfall were next but by this time we were starting to get more than a little jaded with waterfalls. Even the tragic story behind the naming of these as the “Children's Falls” didn't really help.



Snorri Sturluson

And we were really waiting for the next stop, which was the former home of Snorri Sturluson, who lived in this region some 850 years ago. Robyn and I had both gained a liking for Snorri from the stories about him told in *Sagaland*. He certainly seemed to have had a huge impact on Icelandic history, being a historian, poet and politician. He has been credited with being the author of the Prose Edda, and a number of other works which are considered to be the basis for most of the Icelandic sagas. He was also involved in setting up the original Icelandic parliament, becoming the lawspeaker of the Althing, possibly the most important public position in all of Iceland. But he was really his own worst enemy, being more than a little

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arrogant. He met his end in 1241 when, during a siege of his property, he left his inner enclave to visit his hot spring pool for a bath. For whatever reason he hadn't extended his fort's walls to surround his spot and his enemies were waiting for him there.



Snorri's pool (maybe)

Our final official stop of the tour was at Sturlureykir Horse Farm. Here we got a chance to get up close to some Icelandic horses and learnt a bit about the history of the breed. No horses have been imported into Iceland in a thousand years, so the Icelandic variety has become a very weird strain all of its own. They can't mix readily with any other breeds as they have no immunity to even minor equine

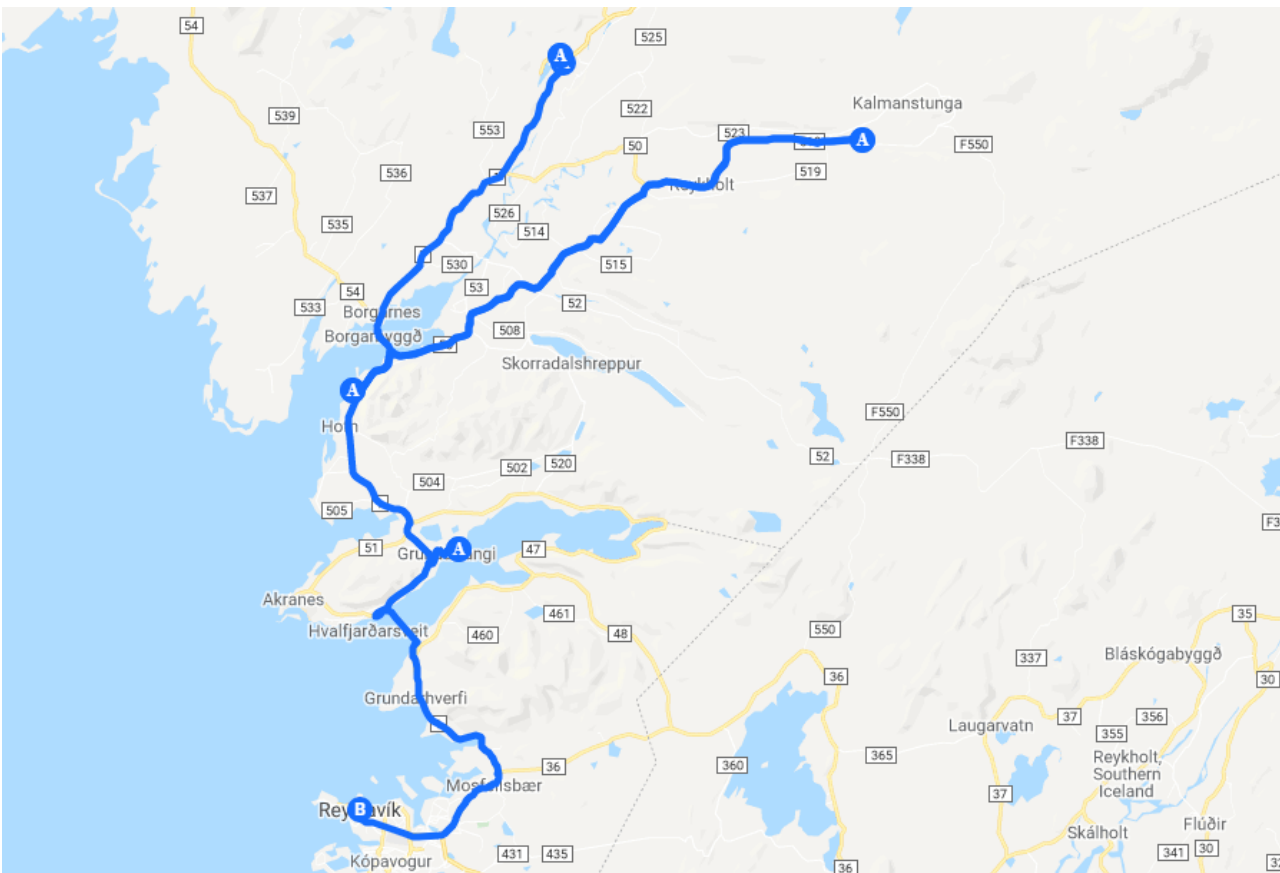


Robyn's new friend




Final tour group shot

viruses, hence the ban. This farm told us the story of one of their favourite stallions who was taken to Germany for an exhibition and was then not allowed to return. I can't understand why they would have done that.



Day 6 driving route

After the flat-out driving and walking tour of Iceland we'd just completed neither Robyn nor I wanted an overly busy last day in Reykjavik. We'd booked in for a food walking tour around lunch time and had a one-day pass for the Hop On Hop Off bus which we intended to use extensively.



Other than that the major issue of concern was the early morning flight the next day to Paris. As I mentioned at the start of this Icelandic section, the main airport at Kevlavik is about 50 kilometres out of town, Our flight in the morning was leaving around 7:15am. Way too early to consider getting there form the centre of the city, so we had booked our last night in an



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airport hotel. We figured a transfer to that hotel late in the afternoon was going to be preferable to a 4am start the next day.



Once we'd breakfasted, checked out of our hotel and had the transfer all sorted out for 5pm, we headed off for a walk into the city. The main aim for the morning was to get to our tour meeting point at the Harpa building by 11. So we took it easy, strolling along in the fine sunny weather looking in a few shops and stopping to check out a few places we'd seen on our original walking tour on day 1.

A brief trip on the Hop-on Hop-Off bus, during which we saw on the street two groups of

people from our bus tour, and we made it to Harpa with plenty of time to spare.



Magnus, our guide, took us past a few familiar spots but quickly turned off to some of the smaller side streets in the city. First stop was at a small bar to try Icelandic meat soup (not that novel to us as we'd had plenty of this over the

previous week), dried fish, a white ale and some fermented shark. We'd been looking forward to having a shot at this fermented shark ever since seeing Rick Stein try it out on one of his programs. The major sensation you get when you first bring this one-centimetre cube towards our face is that someone must think you've fainted. The ammonia smell cuts right through to the back of the throat. Some in our group really struggled at this point but we weren't to be deterred and stuffed it in as quickly as we could. The shark is actually quite creamy in texture, without a lot of strong flavours. Which comes as a bit of a shock after the smell. The beer was a welcome cleanser. Even more so as Robyn hates the stuff and I just couldn't leave a full glass behind on the table.



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Over the next few stops we tried smoked trout and cottage cheese on rye bread, smoked lamb on flat bread (must try smoking lamb over the coming summer), and rye bread ice cream at Cafe Loki, and Arctic char at Messinn. This last is a fish in the salmon family native to arctic and sub-arctic waters. Excellent eating and we were sorry we hadn't tried this previously on our trip.



By this time we'd completed a loop around the centre of Reykjavik and found ourselves back at the famous (or infamous) hot dog stand.

Coffee and cakes followed for desert at a nearby cafe and we found we'd been out and about for close on three hours. An excellent little tour with a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide.

After the food and the walking Robyn wanted to find some Icelandic wool and a knitting pattern. That took a while. All the shops had completed items. Luckily we remembered



our tour guide had mentioned a shop in the main street run by some older women that proved to have what she was looking for.



Hot dog waiting

After that we decided the only thing to do was to head off towards the nearest bus stop back at Harpa. We've used these Hop On Hop Off buses in a number of other cities, and while we probably don't utilise them to their greatest extent we find we get our money's worth out of them. A couple of hours sitting up top at the front and you get to see parts of a city that you'd normally just skip.

The transfer to that night's hotel was completed with little fanfare and we were starting to be sorry to be leaving Iceland. It had been a good trip, though probably not one we'd ever repeat. The distances are just too much.

Day 9 : Monday 2nd September, 2019

When Robyn and I first started to plan this trip we had three major sections in mind: Ireland

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(for the Worldcon and Rob's family history); Iceland (because we always wanted to go); and France (to visit some of the World War I battlefields and memorials and to visit our friends Eve and John Harvey). We were now heading to this third portion of the holiday.

Our 5am taxi was there as ordered and we made the airport with plenty of time to spare for our flight to Paris. Neither of us wanted a repeat of our Belfast rush.

Security at Kevlavik was vastly different to Belfast as well. Whereas the people in Northern Ireland went through everything, the Icelanders were way more laid-back. No hassles with laptops, no shoes to be removed, personnel being friendly and joking rather than stern and fraught. Seemed like old times all over again. We were sorry to be leaving.

Final impressions

We came for the landscape, the desolation and the ice, the rocky beauty and the windswept coastlines. And we got all of that. And we also got an impression of a friendly, proud, resourceful people full of their history and love of their land.

Couldn't really ask for more than that.



Our last view of Iceland

