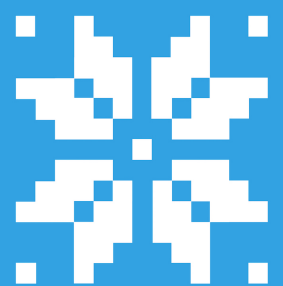


# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

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Photo: Katherine Griswold



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Foggy condensation filled the windshield on the inside of the bus while on the outside cold sheets of rain hammered the glass. Undaunted and wiper-less in Reykjavik on a dark, stormy and wildly windy January morning Friðrik was silent and concentrated on one goal; to follow the visible light to Keflavik Airport and pick up fourteen more passengers, and an indomitable tour guide, for a five-day tour.

"Velkomin heim. Welcome to Iceland." he said.

I was there. It was a Thursday. Friðrik and his bus arrived at our guesthouse in Seltjarnarnes, Iceland to pick up six passengers at five in the morning. Icelandic weather is legendary for its fickle five-minute changeability and unforgivable fierce winds. Regular warnings are issued to not drive at all when winds are high. People, cars, buses and even pavement have been reported to blow completely off the roads. Perhaps it was just a bit of fleeting wind and driving rain that tore the bus door off the hinges along with a front windshield wiper as we were loading the bus. It wasn't too serious.

I hoped it was true. It was apparent that Friðrik also hoped, or knew it was transitory. He repositioned the bus relative to the wind to reattach the door and, we proceeded to pick up three more rain-soaked passengers at Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavik.

As we left the city for Keflavik the other windshield wiper was blown off. Friðrik pulled the bus over, checked it out and made the decision to continue to drive. And so did we, as we checked out our own internal position on the matter, and humbled ourselves into his care. We hadn't had coffee yet.

My friend and tour guide Gerri began leading her 49th Icelandic Tour with her own white knuckle harrowing drive to the airport in the rain that day. Friðrik and Gerri have been working together for over ten years. They know Iceland in every season and are infinitely prepared to deal with the imaginable, and the unimaginable too, as does happen. They are prepared and flexible, ready to make the best of it, and accept that many good plans are blown a little bit sideways in Iceland. Who else would lead a January winter tour in Iceland but these puzzling, sturdy and spirited creatures?

Apparently only zany unspoiled nature loving, ready-to-be-blown-sideways, northern lights seeking, skyr, chocolate, lamb and plokkið fiskur questing, sweater-wearing Icelandic enthusiasts would sign up for it. We were a great fit.

And then the bus wouldn't start. 'Yes, we have a little problem with the bus.' Said Friðrik. 'Oh Crap.' Said Gerri. 'We'll be drinking Icelandic Kaffi and eating a beautiful breakfast before you know it. Then on to Reykjavik for a stroll, and then to our cosy house in Borgarnes.'

And with that exchange suddenly every jet lagged, rain-soaked, sleep deprived guest shifted from high alert to the equivalent of a nicely stowed piece of luggage. And even the bus that refused to start was remedied with a good cell phone signal, a black sense of humour and unwavering dogged perseverance that is typical of Icelanders.

In no time we were back on the road and the wind and rain were kind to us. And my suitcase with a treat of Vinarterta was safe and dry too. It was almost idyllic, and certainly saga worthy.

# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

I was the only Canadian in this group and the only so-called Western Icelander. Four generations of my family were born in Canada, but three generations before them were born in Iceland and emigrated in the 1870s to New Iceland. Friðrik is an Icelandic native and six times cousin. That means six generations ago we have the same ancestor.

According to the Icelandic Roots genealogical data checked so far many of the Icelandic people I met on this journey are cousins including the owner of the guesthouse, the botanist textile artist, the goat farmer, the ceramic artist, the lighthouse keeper, and three of the musicians. We are removed by five to nine generations of direct ancestors.

The pioneer ancestor who connects me to Friðrik is Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir who left Iceland for New Iceland in Manitoba, Canada with her third husband Sigmundur 'Ýngri' Þorgriímsson in 1879 at the age of 59. A son Sigurjón from her first marriage also came to Canada and settled in Minnesota, US. A son from her second marriage, Benedikt with his first wife, Hólmfriður and four-year-old son settled also settled in New Iceland.

Her most important son of all, however, my two times great Afi, Hálfðan Sigmundsson and his wife Solveig Árnadóttir and their daughter Anna Sigríður Hálfðanardóttir had already emigrated in 1876. By 1878 they had a son Valdimar who was named after Hálfðan's brother who had drowned in a sailing accident on Lake Winnipeg the year before. Hálfðan and Solveig later had a daughter they named Jóhanna.

Jóhanna the Canadian pioneer was the youngest of five children in Iceland. Her oldest sister came to Canada with a son at the age of 67. A cousin came with a son who is the two times great Afi of another friend.

Many families came together, but many others were separated forever by immigration. By the time Jóhanna came to Canada her parents and grandparents had all died in Iceland. Many members of the extended family had died also due to age and hardship. Jóhanna's first cousin, Olöf Hrólfsdóttir had given birth to a daughter Gudrun Jónsdóttir. She was to be Friðrik's two times great Amma. None of Olöf's 12 children emigrated to North America in their generation.

Jóhanna had three husbands and ten children all born in Iceland. Five of her ten children came to Canada. Three children died at a young age. Two sons drowned in Lake Winnipeg in separate accidents. One daughter went to Saskatchewan, one son went to Minnesota, and two sons settled in Riverton, Manitoba. Jóhanna and Sigmundur followed them into a new age for Icelandic people as Western Icelanders. Those who left Iceland, and those who remained, remembered and longed for each other. They remember and long for each other still, or are at least curious.

We arrived for this adventure as Icelanders were recovering from New Year's revelry, fireworks and bonfires. The country was shrouded in the rain and cloud created by an unseasonably warm eight degrees. After our momentous trip thus far we were greeted at Hjörleifur and Anna's historic fishing lodge country guesthouse as the sun was going down in Borgarnes. It was evident there was something very special about everything about to unfold for the group of twenty-two.

We were shepherded by an undaunted, unafraid, quiet spoken, light-hearted, experienced driver and tour interpreter. The tour itinerary, unlike any other, was created and led by a much loved, effervescent, outrageously gifted, passionate American calling Iceland her second home.



# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

. We were to connect with the Icelandic landscape, people and culture in a very intimate way. We swam in the local pool and hot pots before dinner and then tucked into delicious roast lamb in the comfy house filled with a great gang of new friends. Exceptionally lucky were we.

The next morning we loaded the bus for some adventuring around the Snaefellnes Peninsula. 'Today,' Friðrik said, 'You will have many things to see under the fog and the rain. Yes, I think you'll see them.' There was Kirkjufell Church Mountain's iconic spiralling conical form somewhere hidden in the fog. But we could only see the feet of the charcoal coloured mountain covered with golden tarnished grasses, gravel, sheep tracks and Fjallkona like veils of low white clouds. No snow, the white only in the clouds and the ocean waves.

At Árnarstapi volcanic columns rose as dark silhouettes from the sea. Foam elevated into the air by the rolling surf swooshed against black basalt rocks and landed softly on the sod tufts of the cliffs above. Golden tobacco coloured grasses with undertones of mossy green carpeted the land around hazy trails leading to the edge of cliffs. And there beyond was the blue-grey ocean highway of the Norse.

A mysterious translucent layer seemed to cover everything, characteristic of other-world-ish Iceland at Buðir. The sky was blue but entirely cloudy. People and buildings were only black forms defining the place between the sky and the waving, folding, flopping and randomly texture grasslands. The simple black form of the Buðir Church is design perfection in this landscape. There were tumbled black rocks, tipsy graveyard crosses decorated with lights and footprints to follow in the yellow grass studded sand dune trails.

The black and golden sand beach was littered with black seaweed, black pebbles, stones and ancient lava forms looking like the remains of very large charcoal briquettes.

At the Buðir dining room, the yellow carrot ginger soup with cream foam on top was reminiscent of the land and the surf around. The whipped butter on a black rock was for spreading on soft fluffy bread and all served beautifully on white china, white linen and embroidered cutwork tablecloths. Never was hot chocolate more divine. Until the next day.

Back at the lodge Hjörleifur hummed, sang and chatted with his assistant Eyvindur in the kitchen as they roasted salmon, and made mushroom barley porridge, salad with grated turnip, and rhubarb jam and cream filled pönnukökur for dessert. Mýrra Rós and Júlíus came to sing for us. And later Friðrik and Mýrra Rós played the guitar and sang sad stories and Old Icelandic lullabies into the night.

On day three we set out into the land of Egill Skallagrímsson aboard the bus. And Friðrik said 'This is your driver speaking. Today I will tell you about what happened here a long time ago. I think it was a Tuesday. Yes, it was.'

And so he spun stories as we wound our way between mountains to visit Hespúhúsið's intriguing entrepreneurial botanist and author Guðrún Bjarnadóttir. She dyes Icelandic wool yarn with handmade Icelandic plant dyes. It was a dye pot textural technicolour dream space. Everyone aspired to knit. Maybe a few of them are right now.

The moving landscape around us as we drove was still yellow, black, rainy and foggy. The water at Hraunfossar was milky grey and churning.

# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

Our visit to Jóhanna's Háafell Goat Farm was filled with many moments touching all the senses. The goat soup, sausages, and goat cheeses flavoured with roses and herbs were accompanied by hugs with goats and a gift of handknitted headbands.

The sky cleared a little there and a blue glow covered the farm including the colourful Icelandic chickens, the white, black and grey goats and sheep grazing in the snowless golden pastures. The warmish but cold damp air defined the need for Icelandic sweaters, the uniform of choice. Blue and red roofs against white sidewalls are such great colours for farm buildings and houses. And Jóhanna recalled meeting one of my sons the previous summer, and how like one of her sons he was.

And on this night we drank Brennivín, ate the best ever smoked Hangikjöt, Plokkfiskur, Green Apple Salad and Rye Bread. It was a perfect time for the Vínarterta I created for the culinary and cultural experience part of Gerri's program. Svavar Knútur taught his infamous Icelandic Swearing Class and served up stories and songs wonderfully composed and resonant. Harmonies from the group floated and floated for hours. And finished with Gerri's Rum laced hot chocolate.

On Þrettándinn, the Icelandic Thirteenth Day of Christmas, we boarded the bus and Friðrik said 'There will be light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain today.'

We visited the renowned ceramic artist Kolbrún Kjarval at her captivating studio home in Akranes. There were clay fish with human heads, pots with holes, birds, and faces, and paper cutouts in the windows, candles and tea. The sky and ground outside were so grey with cold yet spring primulas were blooming in the garden likely warmed by the

radiated energy of the artist herself, or maybe the elves. According to legend, elves make themselves visible on that calendar day.

Beyond the grey monolithic quiet of Akranes, the overcast grey-blue ocean was rolling out continuous sets of waves below the lighthouses. The sky was drenched in monochromatic watercolour clouds bleeding grey and moving softly against the harsh rough horizontal lines of whitecaps in the cold same palette ocean. The horizontal planks of the lava coloured boardwalk path led to the lighthouse. Akranesvíti is a duo of iconic concrete masses of architectural excellence. In the lighthouse waiting for us to explore and listen was Iceland's most famous guitarist Björn Thoroddsen. It was an acoustic multi-levelled experience. And the crowd sang too. And we drank Appelsín and Malt in bottles as we admired the North Atlantic.

'And these are the Vínarterta Mountains.' Said Friðrik. 'See their layers.'

If they are not really called that, they could be. Suddenly it was as he had predicted. The rain had stopped and under the light sun, we could see the mountains and the distant vistas. Here there was winter white frost on the ancient lava layered peaks. The snow missed the guesthouse on the salmon river where there was still rain and bare ground. We had soup and then a visit to Hjörleifur and Anna's farm to connect with the horses, sheep, storytelling, music and dessert. The river was so wide and shallow looking there, and the snow-covered sharp mountains in the distance were stark against the grey cloud sky painted above the gold-green fields. Sheep ran en masse, on a whim.

At Krauma Spa we soaked in the hot and cold pots and enjoyed a Hamburger Bash with musicians

# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

Lay Low and Agnes Erna performing. It was our last night, and we never wanted it to end, so back at our dear old fishing lodge cocoon, Friðrik played the guitar. We all sang songs to harmonize with. Then slowly every unique and magnificent member of our new family drifted to their rooms to pack for departure. It was a beautiful, sweet day.

Iceland has a way of taking over my mind. On our last day, I realized I had totally forgotten about home, past and future. I had delightfully found myself in appreciation of the present moment, the weather, the colours, textures, and forms of the landscape and in pure enjoyment of people, places and things. I was enthralled by a reinforced connection to the land of my ancestors and enlivened by the discovery of the many relatives who still live there. Iceland is a home for my soul.

The immigration story is not easy, but surviving in Iceland has not been easy either. It's an exceptional story of championing the good and making the best of everything while preserving the integral authenticity of culture. As I reflected I thought about how much striving and thriving in both Canada and Iceland had depended on knowing how to manage the weather as much as having a goal in mind. Know where you want to go and that there will be 'light sun, a bit of frost, and lots of rain'. On the surface there seems to be no simple guide to creating an extraordinary life in this digital world built on ancient knowledge. Would that it could be gathered from the old stories of the Icelanders, their knowledge of the land, how they read and work with weather, and follow the compass of their soul. Or maybe it can be, and it is that simple.

I was struck from just this limited visit to Iceland by how many hints of the Icelanders who left over 140 years ago are present in the fabric of Iceland and New Iceland today. Little details like drinking coffee

through a sugar cube, drinking lots of coffee, hot chocolate with real chocolate, eating smoked lamb and fish, mashed potatoes with fish, pönnukökur, and vínarterta, the use of snuff, knitting, writing and reading books, the same old stories and songs, believing in dreams, the seen and the unseen, creativity, curiosity, optimism, quiet confidence, dry humour and caring about family.

I thought about Jóhanna's son Hálfðan and wife Solveig, founding pioneers in New Iceland. They had travelled by ship across the ocean and then by land to the shores of a great prairie ocean-like lake one hundred and thirty-seven kilometres north of Winnipeg. Not yet part of Canada, New Iceland became a thriving community with their own government, schools, churches, newspapers, farming, fishing, lumbering and boat building. Those who made it achieved significant goals regardless of the weather. By the time Iceland was established as a Republic 100 years ago New Iceland was part of Canada.

My great great Afi Hálfðan was an active athletic man known to run long distances to get a doctor and to transport the mail. A story from the history of Riverton is that "The trips were often very treacherous owing to lack of roads, bad blizzards and very few landmarks. He wrote an account of one of these trips during a blinding snowstorm. Travelling on the ice of Lake Winnipeg he might have missed Gimli, except for a faint light visible where there was a postal representative. There were four such places mentioned along with the route which was a one hundred and ninety-three-kilometre round trip and took three or four days on foot."

Modern day Vikings are reflections of their ancestral counterparts. Acts like driving a bus in the pouring rain and high winds through a dark lava landscape without windshield wipers, restricted vision and

# Winter in Iceland: Light sun with a bit of frost and a lot of rain

limited landmarks demonstrate an encompassing knowledge of place, confidence and grace. And like Hálfdan, Friðrik the Icelandic bus driver, guide, musician, and storyteller's global positioning system is tuned to the faintest of visible light with eternal optimism. Or maybe the wind cleared the view completely.

'This is your driver speaking.' Said Friðrik. 'No, it doesn't look like it's raining.' We all laughed. On our final trip back to Reykjavík we were feeling melancholic as we shifted out of our stowed luggage state on the way to the airport. He and Gerri told more stories including a comical recount of getting a flock of travellers out of a crazy maze-like lava field. Navigating under any circumstance is his genius, so of course, it was easy for him. And it was a Monday. No more windshield wipers or doors were lost on that trip. But if it were there to be dealt with Friðrik would be letting us know the forecast.

"Goða ferð. Safe travels." he said.

## About this trip:

Tour arranged by Gerri Griswold, Krummi Travel, LLC  
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