

One Cool Trip

1,000 km around south-west Iceland by car Text and photos by Jon Letman



GETTING THERE:

Icelandair flies Mondays from Helsinki to Keflavik (near Reykjavik), connecting Finland with 21 cities in Europe and North America with stopovers up to seven nights at no extra cost. www.icelandair.fi

HIRING A CAR:

Valid driver's licenses from many countries, including Finland, the U.S. and Canada, may be used in Iceland. Car hire companies abound, for example:

National www.holdur.is

Atak www.atak.is

Europcar www.europcar.is

BEFORE YOU GO:

Umferðarstofa (Road Traffic Directorate) has produced an excellent 10-page pamphlet with a detailed road map, Icelandic road signs, and a short video on safe driving in Iceland. Also visit the Vegagerðin (Icelandic Road Administration) website which has updated maps, weather and road conditions, and emergency contact information.

www.us.is/page/english

www.vegagerdin.is/english/

It was just outside Reykjavik, Iceland's ultra-cool, super expensive capital, only fifteen minutes into a five-day drive, when raging spring winds threatened to blow us into the North Atlantic.

That's when I realized we'd hired the wrong car. We were in a boxy little VW Polo when we should have gotten a Hummer. As our car shuddered along the ribbon of asphalt which my map depicted as a thick red line marked "Route 1," it became clear that Iceland *truly was wild*, with rugged mountains, plunging waterfalls, erupting volcanoes, smoke and steam rising from ancient fissures in the earth.

It was late last spring, during what were said to be the coldest May temperatures in 100 years. My wife and I were on our first European road trip with our 20-month-old son, who was bundled into a baby seat. Coming from our home in Hawaii, we felt like we'd been seized by winter's icy grip, although the nights never grew completely dark, unlike mid-winter which sees less than five hours of light a day.

On the road

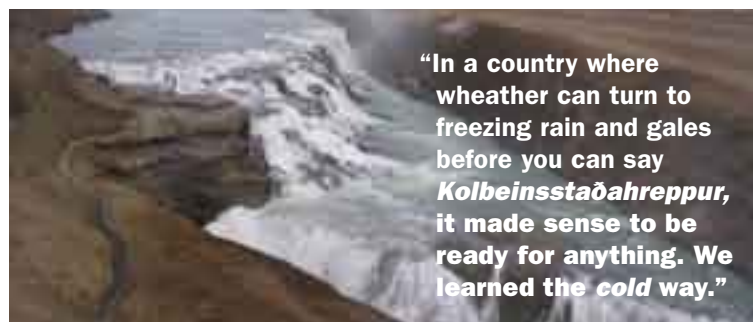
Before flying to Iceland, I had plotted a route that would take us north to Snæfellsnes peninsula, a cold rocky finger of land poking into the Denmark Strait and home to Snæfellsjökull, the volcanic crater which was the starting point for Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Looking out of the window, it was easy to see why – it was, in a word, otherworldly.

Dark fang-like mountains jutted into the sky below low clouds heavy with snow. I had imagined Iceland to be a land of bright green moss and black lava, but here the earth was blanketed in scruffy drab olive grasses.

Rough road conditions, along with scenic splendour, meant that we covered distances far slower than expected. I'd been told Reykjavik to Stykkisholmur was a five-hour drive, but it took us nearly double that.

No small island

Although Iceland is less than one-third the size of Finland, geographic size is irrelevant when traversing barren lava fields, deep fjords and weaving coastal roads wedged between



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the sea and steep mountains. Iceland felt vast, remote and endless.

As this country of 300,000 people, of which 60% live in or near the capital, is largely unpopulated, ours was the only car on the road, sometimes for hours at a time. Road signs were infrequent, traffic lights unimaginable and the scale of the land was at times as intimidating as it was stark and beautiful.

Sitting atop the convergence of the North American and Eurasian plates, it was easy to envision the whole island convulsing with tremors and eruptions. Iceland has Europe's largest glaciers with more than a dozen named ice caps; 11% of the country is covered by frozen white stuff. Owing to its northern latitude and volcanic history, trees were rare. Whenever we saw one, we pointed and shouted, "look, trees!"

On our first day, an undetected fork in the road took us over a mountain pass near the Snæfellsjökull glacier. We emerged on the north coast of the peninsula, driving beside steely blue churning seas and frozen waterfalls between the isolated fishing villages of Olafsvik and Grundarfjörður.

An Icelandic joke goes, "If you don't like the weather, wait ten minutes and it will get worse." By our third day in Iceland, we had come to appreciate the importance of being prepared for extreme weather, even in the summer. In a country where fair skies and 12°C can turn to freezing rain and gales before you can say *Kolbeinsstaðahreppur*, it made sense to be ready for anything. We learned the cold way.

Car breaks down

Attempting to get a head start on the next day's long drive, we departed Stykkisholmur at 11:30 p.m. and drove all night, stopping for occasional roadside catnaps. As the extended twilight turned to a silent blue dawn, we ascended Route

60, unaware that we were climbing toward a pass covered in freshly fallen snow.

As we climbed, I said to my wife that this would be a very bad place to break down. Ten minutes later, the car came to a sudden halt. "No, this is not happening," I thought as I jumped out of the car to find the tyres half buried in snow. We were stuck on a snowy pass with our young son at four in the morning.

I immediately started digging frantically with my bare hands to clear a path. We hadn't seen another car for hours and were nowhere near any town or settlement.

My sense of being alone and in danger was only heightened by the biting winds and dancing snow flurries. As I attempted to push the car from behind, smoke started rising from the hood of the car, accompanied by my wife's question: "which one is the clutch?"

I recalled the warnings I'd read against travelling in Iceland without adequate supplies. Of course by then, it was too late. Fortunately, we managed to free the car from the snow and continued driving down the mountain, escaping with only numb, red hands, and a deeper respect for Iceland's wilderness and capricious weather. A day later, eager to avoid running out of gas alongside the Langjökull glacier, I drove an hour out of my way to fill the tank.

I told myself that each gas station we passed was probably the last one for a long time and stopped at every opportunity. At 125 kronur/litre (about 1.43 €), gasoline was not cheap, but without it there would have been no road trip.

A welcome soak

Iceland's gas stations double as eateries which, in rural areas, may be the best or only place to eat. They also serve as windows



into the local culture, offering a chance to taste the food of ordinary Icelanders – Draumur brand chocolate covered liquorice bars, berry-flavoured drinking *skyr* (Icelandic yogurt), and the ubiquitous *pylsur* (hot dog) steamed hot and crisp with deep fried onions, mustard and remoulade sauce.

After a welcome soak in Iceland's famous Blue Lagoon hot springs, we returned to Reykjavik through a landscape of barren black lava fields with nothing to indicate that we were nearing the population centre

of the country.

When we reached Reykjavik, I breathed a sigh of relief, for our little blue VW Polo had developed new ticks and pops, having been pushed to its limit. We had journeyed into a primeval wilderness where summer's sky never darkens and the sea never warms, seeing our planet as it was before man came along, or perhaps, how it will be after we are gone.

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