

FABULOUS, WONDERFUL, OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD ICELAND  
OAT'S "UNTAMED ICELAND"-- JUNE 30 TO JULY 18,2014

Iceland will thrill you. Half the time I thought I was in the 22nd century. The other half I thought I was in 1945 and when I got to Greenland, it was 1845. This part of the world is a land of contrasts and OAT allows us to enjoy every second.

Some may remember that I was in Iceland in 2003. It was an Explore (UK) trip - centered on hiking and camping. Oh, those were the days. We didn't do that much cultural touring, but enjoyed beautiful national parks, ate lots of good, fresh foods, great fish and hiked some beautiful trails. Though I never was quite able to put up my tent myself (I still send good thoughts to Nick for helping me), it was the most outdoorsy thing I have ever done.

So here I am again. The land of tall, blond, athletic-looking people all wearing spandex. They are the nicest in the world - kind to strangers who come to enjoy their culture. Since there are only 350,000 people in the whole country, it wouldn't be wise to be a grump and burn your bridges.



Yes, its cold here. Here I am on the 4th of July wearing 5 layers of clothes, heavy gloves and earmuffs getting ready for a hike along the seashore.



We have a full group of 16 people, mostly from California. Being a native San Franciscan, I feel right at home with them. Our guide, Vilborg Bjornsdotter is amazing. Excellent with details, makes everyone feel special and good at coordinating the many activities and transfers we have. And she really had her plate full when we continued to Greenland as things don't always go as they should there.

Our tour-guide, leader, friend and entree into everything Icelandic -- Vilborg Bjornsdotter.

For me, the draw of this itinerary was a pre-trip to the Westman Islands and a post-trip to Greenland. But I enjoyed Iceland's colorful, Nordic villages, visiting the well-designed museums, doing some hiking, whale watching and bumping along the roads.



One of the first things you notice is that the sun never quite sets. I took this picture of the church in Stykkisholmur from my hotel window at midnight.

Reykjavik is a city of the future. As in the rest of the country, the natural thermal waters are harnessed providing heating for homes year around. And it is next to free for residents. This glacial water is so pure there is no need to buy bottled water. In fact, such a purchase is considered a silly waste of money.

Locals wear trendy technical clothes and beautiful woolens. Last time here, I liked the look of a label called 66° North - good looking outdoor gear for extreme conditions - rain, cold and snow. It is made in Iceland and I'm traveling home with a coat and 2 jackets (including one for Joe!). It was time to upgrade my winter outer-wear!



As an aside, 66° North is the latitude of the Arctic Circle, and at one point, we were only 26 miles away!

At first glance, prices are expensive. But..... their 25% VAT tax covers universal health care, education thru college, 6 months maternity leave for both mothers and fathers. and lots of other social benefits. This tax coupled with our extremely poor dollar, makes for sticker-shock. Some examples:

- lunch size salad at a fast-food place - \$20-\$22
- dinner at a sit-down, tablecloth restaurant -\$60+ (dinner salad, entree, dessert)
- Take-away coffee at a gas station/comfort stop-- \$4.50
- pint of strawberries at the supermarket-- \$10.
- package of 14 band-aids -- \$7.
- chocolate bar (larger size) - \$5 - \$8
- small tube of toothpaste -- \$5 (the size your dentist gives you for free)
- Toilet at Thingvellir National Park -- \$2.00 (!!!)

I have yet to discover average salaries here, but I've been told that as a general rule, both husband and wives work.

### We Break for Sheep

One thing we don't see here are traffic jams. But on our rides throughout the countryside (90% of Iceland) we run into lots of sheep. And they don't seem to be penned in so they wander around at will. So why do sheep cross the road? To slow down our bus, of course. Since there doesn't seem to be that many cars on the road our driver Simon zips along the country roads, stopping only for sheep crossing and an occasional tourist ambling along in a rental car trying to find the Ring Road.



At the separation of the North American and Eurasian plates. They are moving apart at the rate of 7mm per year

Eureka! I found him - in the picturesque town of Siglufjörður





**A Horse of a Different Color**  
Icelandic horses are beautiful. Short, stocky and all muscle. We visited a horse farm, saw a demonstration, then were invited into the barn to visit the rest of the horses. And here I found him a favorite -- we had the exact same color hair! He was beautiful!!!

### The Food -- Yum

I have never eaten as good on a trip as this one. Most of our food was gourmet or near-gourmet. Chefs flavor their butter (lemon/dill was my favorite) and salt (herb salt, lava salt, etc). I love fish and we enjoyed a nice variety in a myriad of ways: trout, salmon, shark, catfish, wolffish, halibut, cod, flounder and wonderful shellfish. In Greenland, we had Whale filet!

I especially liked their lake trout - thick and pink. Thankfully most of our meals on this trip are included. Otherwise I could have expected \$25 lunches and \$60 dinners (not including drinks or coffee!). In Reykjavik, we stayed at the Hilton Nordica and their restaurant, VOX, is considered one of the best in town. Both our welcome and farewell dinners were held there and we had the pleasure of breakfast there every day we were in Reykjavik.

### Greenland

A two hour flight from Reykjavik on a propeller plane transports you to about 1850. Our first stop was Kulusuk, a town with a population of 149 and 1/2 (one woman is pregnant). The hotel is walking distance from the airport and is the only one in town. There is a hostel and a few people rent rooms, but if you go to Kulusuk, this is the only game in town. Rooms are on the basic side, but if you are lucky you'll have a view of the mountains, the inlet and some icebergs.

The best part of the hotel was visiting with Anya and Nana - two Danish girls who spend the "season" here taking care of tourists. Bright, cheerful and ever-helpful. They could answer any question thrown at them. They did everything: reception, reservations, tours, serving and bussing tables, working the bar and the gift shop. It was as if they had a twin as they were everywhere.



Nana and Anya run the show at the Kulusuk Hotel. They are sure to go far as they have mastered the art of people-skills.



When the hotel needs ice, they send someone out on a boat to chip a block off an iceberg. It is as clear as glass.

It is about a 2 mile walk into town on a bit of a rough road and it just about did me in.

The next day our helicopter ride to Ammassalik (population 2,000) was grounded for hours due to fog. We all prayed the fog would lift quickly so we could continue our tour of southern Greenland.



“If There’s a Cloud in the Sky  
Greenland Air Doesn’t Fly”

Extreme fog created havoc with our Greenland itinerary, which included two helicopter flights. Our wonderful guide made sure we saw and did everything we were supposed to.

Arctic Wonderland Tours arranged all our activities. Though we needed flexibility, they came through and delivered everything they promised.



We finally flew over in two groups and soon found ourselves at the Hotel Ammassalik, which after the rather basic lodge-like Kulusuk Hotel, looked like the Ritz-Carlton.

All our services were provided by Arctic Wonderland Tours which is the largest incoming operator in east Greenland. They own hotels, tourist boats, provide all transportation and guiding services for just about everyone visiting this area.

Everybody on their staff does everything-- the same person may check you into your room, be your tour guide, bus your table after meals, drive the shuttle into town, and even make up rooms if the regular workers don't show up. The company is a very big frog in a very small pond. So if you contemplate traveling to east Greenland, this is the group you need to work with.

The primary work of the Inuit people of Tasiliq (the small town we are in) is hunting seals and whales, and fishing. In fact a whale had been harpooned the day we arrived and was sitting like a blimp, harpoon still protruding, in the harbor. It will provide about 1200 pounds of food for the family of the man who harpooned it, all his friends, and a lot will be sold. In fact, we did have whale filet the next night.....hmmm.



Local fishermen show off their harpoons. When whales are running, everything in town can stop as the men go out hunting. This can raise havoc with sightseeing plans as the locals will suddenly have other priorities.

Harpooned Orca brought into the harbor.



We did a short hike in “The Vally of the Flowers” to see carpets of yellow, purple and blue wildflowers which have sprouted next to a river. It was a good morning activity.

Thank goodness all our meals are included. Over the two days, I bought a cappuccino and two cokes - this cost \$14. I can't imagine what the dinners might have cost if we had to purchase them on our own.

I found a beautiful lava-stone and bone necklace at the museum gift shop - but it needed to be extended a bit in order to sit lower on my neck. Later that day our guide took us to an bone-carvers shop where I noticed a roll of cord. The carver didn't speak English, and couldn't understand why I needed it, so I showed him the necklace. I planned just to make a quick extender so I could wear it that night. He misunderstood and before I knew it, he had cut the necklace! The cord turned out to be too thick for the holes in the beads, so he began drilling new holes! Well, I thought it would work and let him go ahead. Unfortunately, later he came to the hotel and delivered all the beads in a baggie -- he had run out of time and the workshop needed to close. He forgot to bring the clap! Boo - hoo Plan B is to find the artisans who set up in the tourist area and see if I can have it re-strung.

I woke up on our departure day and looked out the window -- fog! Lots of it. We are supposed to helicopter to Kulusuk, then immediately connect for the two hour flight back to Reykjavik. Less fog a few days ago prevented the Kulusuk to Reykjavik flight from even landing. Our guide looked concerned.

But... we all made it and the 2 hour ride to Reykjavik was uneventful. So just an overnight at the Hilton Nordica then..... home!

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Special note: I wrote up day-by-day notes and shopping hints for friends doing this tour. I also submitted hotel reviews to tripadvisor.com Let me know if you'd like them, and I can send them to you.



The Icelandic Puffin has got to be the cutest bird in the universe. They are amazingly fun to watch. We were lucky in the Westman Islands to see them nesting on the steep cliffs.