

ICELAND

I have never, ever, visited a country where everyone WITHOUT EXCEPTION is so friendly, warm and genuinely welcoming. Everyone we encountered is friendly and chatty and focussed on ensuring their guests have the best time possible. I'm not sure why I am so surprised but it highlights the fact there is some very ordinary service elsewhere.

Iceland is a beautiful and curious place and worthy of further exploration. Will we be back? Possibly not but there is so much more to see so we definitely should consider it for a future trip. We discussed if we came back would we come in summer or winter..... Dave said summer, I said winter. Yin, yang.

Either way it is a place with further exploration. Stunning scenery, great food, wonderful people. The only downside is everything is SO exxy. If you get out of dinner for less than AUD \$200 you have done well.

MONDAY – DAY 1

We land at Keflavik airport, slightly sideways and the right wheel hits the tarmac well after the left. The cross wind is fierce.

We line up to collect our Budget (Avis) rental car and the queue is looong. Takes a good hour to get to the front of it and, by that time, the queue is four times as long. The girl on the desk tells us that flights were cancelled for 3d due to storms, hence everyone has arrived today. Also an explanation for the sideways landing.

We get our Hyundai i10 and tootle off, Reykjavik bound. The area around the airport looks like we've landed on the moon... barren, brown, windswept.

We are at the **Alda Hotel** - great choice right in the middle of town. We have a nice room, out the back (#306) but it is very minimalist. The shower 'folds out'... you could never fit in the bathroom otherwise.



We walk down through the town - the weather is cold but not raining. The houses and shops are quite unique, Norwegian in style, and brightly coloured. The town has a lovely feel about it and there are quite a few people around.



We have a 7:30pm booking at the **Lobster House**, renowned for its Langoustine (Icelandic Lobster). The restaurant is lovely and we are greeted warmly. We have a table next to the window.

The menu is very seafood oriented with a taste of horse. We both order Lobster Soup, with cream, green basil(?) and burnt seaweed. It is unbelievably good. We have a French white accompanying and it goes perfectly with the lobster.

Our grilled Langoustine arrives - about 10 perfectly cooked (quite small) tails, with some greens and potato, a bit like rosti. The Langoustine is melt in your mouth.... the combination with the salad is perfect. The wine a great match. The cost.... exorbitant. The soup is 2,900 and the Langoustine 7,900. The wine 6,900. Total around 28,800+ or around USD \$260. But what a meal it was and well worth it.



The sun sets at 9pm so lots of daylight hours to enjoy.

On turning on the TV back in our room we see the huge fire in Notre Dame, where we visited only last week. So sad to see one of the world's greatest monuments with flames leaping skyward. What a tragedy.

TUESDAY – DAY 2

We walk through town and up to the church, which is magnificent. We have brekkie at **Cafe Loki**, which is directly across the road, and share Smoked Trout on Rye.... they really know how to smoke up this way. Divine. The weather is overcast, showery and windy.

We check out the inside of the church and it is magnificent. A beautiful construction with a HUGE organ.





We drive around Reykjavik, following the Red Bus route, ie hop on, hop off, without needing to do either. . Reykjavik has a charming city centre but the rest of the city isn't too inspiring. The rain is light but constant.

We head for **Stykkishólmur**, our destination for tonight.

The drive is interesting and the roads quiet. The scenery is fascinating - huge snow capped mountains and not a tree to be seen.

We arrive around 1pm and check into **Hotel Egilsen**. Our room is ready and we drop our things before hitting the road again, to drive around the **Snaefellsnes** peninsula.



The scenery is exceptionally beautiful and the feature is waterfalls. About half way the weather turns fierce. The already blustery day turns gale force.

We come across the mountain that is famous in Games of Thrones, as I understand it. Don't watch it so don't know but it's clearly worth taking a photo of as there are many people here. It is all about the angle and the light, etc, etc, none of which I'm across.



We get out of the car at **Djupalonassandur** to take in a view point and the wind literally blows us sideways. There is a walk down to a very black beach but we give it a miss and view it from the top.



We stop at the cave walk and it's closed for the day. Continue on. We stop at **Budir** so I can photograph the prettiest church ever - it is black with white features with the imposing mountains in the background.



We head for home and get back not long after 6pm. Dinner is at 7pm and the restaurant is just across the road. Our host recommends the mussels, telling us the owner farms them daily.

The **Sjavarpakkhúsid** restaurant is small and quaint with not a lot of tables. We order mussels to share and they are fantastic. Small but fresh and tender. We both have the Seafood Stew, which is in a white wine broth. Sensational meal!



The restaurant, the view, the service and the quality of food remind us so much of Morro Bay (in California, our big find on our West Coast trip – more on that in another episode), the Icelandic equivalent.

The wind is rattling around when we go to bed and there is a storm brewing.

WED – DAY 3

A wild night of wind and rain but a super cosy and comfortable bed.

Breakfast is lovely with fresh fruit, fruit bread, smoked salmon, cheese, etc.

We are on the road by 9:15, destination **Selfoss**.

Rain, rain, rain... all the way. We arrive at **360° Hotel**, plonked beautifully right in the middle of nowhere, about 10km the other side of Selfoss.

We are greeted warmly by Anna and given access to our room. The hotel is something out of the box.... boutique, new (AUG 2018), Icelandic industrial design with a warmth to it.

Our room is stunning with a glass wall providing endless views. It's all in the name! The bathroom is the nicest you'd see.... large, double basin, large open shower. I love it on sight.



We set out to seek the local highlights. **Gullfoss Falls** is the first, about an hour away, and the rain is constantly heavy. We trudge down to the viewing platform, take photos, have a look and trudge back. It's miserable. The falls are expansive, as are the crowds. We drive down to the lower viewing path but don't exit the car.



We drive to the Geyser. The rain continues. The geyser spurts every 8-10 mins and just as I'm saying it will go off while I'm safely (and dryly) in the car, up she goes. Got the picture, let's go. I have no intention of getting sodden just to see a geyser. Seen plenty of them in Rotorua and this area is very small by comparison.



We drive to the **Fontana Geothermal Pools**, thinking this could be a good place to spend a bit of time at. Unfortunately it looks a bit like the local council swimming pool and there are far too many teenagers to make us think it's a good idea.



Back home for some R&R where the lovely Anna is cooking our dinner tonight. The dining tables are long community tables and the views are magic. We can see **Eyjafjallajökull** in the distance, just.

Anna serves Pumpkin soup for starter with the best home made bread ever. She gives me the recipe for the bread! Main is lamb shank baked with dates and garlic served with mushrooms and polenta. Wow! I can't finish mine and pass off to Dave. Dessert (noooooo) is crushed gingerbread, with Icelandic ice cream specialty and pomegranate. I can't finish this either. A sensational meal.... yet again provided by a small operator. There is a theme here.



We chat with Anna for a bit before retiring.

We retire for a peaceful night's sleep. The bedding is divine, like floating on a cloud.

THURSDAY – DAY 4

We have a lovely breakfast, again with views. It is quiet and enjoyable. The peaceful surrounds are a real highlight here and I feel soooo relaxed.

We have a chat to Anna and say farewell. 360 is a place you could settle in for a few days and really enjoy the location and quite environment. Alas, we are off again on another adventure. Anna gives us tips of where to stop on the way to Vik.

Note: Anna told us the temperature in summer is 15 degrees. If it gets to 20, it's a heat wave, they close the streets in Reykjavik and people come out to enjoy the heat of summer.

First stop is **Urriofoss Falls**, less than 10min from our accommodation. We pull into an empty car park... always a good sign! The falls are the largest, by water content, in Iceland. They are wide, more than high, and thundering down across the Pjorsa River, the longest in Iceland.



Next stop is the mighty **Seljalandsfoss Falls**. For some reason, that I may never understand, we decide to walk behind the falls. We can see saturated people everywhere and yet we still think it's a good idea.





On we trek... by the time we are a few minutes in we are held up by people who stop in the middle of the path to take photos. The exit on the other side is steep but thankfully not slippery. Stupidest thing I've done in a long time! My legs are saturated and really cold, my new gloves are filthy where I've grabbed at rocks for balance and my jacket soaked. My jacket is not waterproof, just water resistant.

But back to the falls.... they are quite magnificent and thumping down from a great height.

We get to **Vik** and get an early check in at the **Icelandair Hotel**. Check in is again so welcoming. We book for dinner and are also informed the happy hour is 4-6pm, half price beer (which is recommended) and wine.

We strip off our wet gear in our room. My legs are awfully cold! I put on dry jeans and my thermal. I use the hair dryer to dry my coat, hat and scarf. My coat is drenched, the other stuff not so much. Off again to explore. It is exceptionally pretty around Vik, with lots of black hills and velvet green grass.



The view from the hill when exiting Vik is vast.... a very flat plain, with water channels cutting through, hills in the background, charming houses dotted on the green pastures. A really intriguing sight.

We go to **Skogafoss Falls** and work our way back. The falls are impressive and this time we keep our distance! No walking behind, up to close, etc. I don't need to get sprayed all over to appreciate the might of nature.



Next stop, **Solheimjokull Glacier**. Now THIS is impressive. We walk along the lake which has glacier ice floating in it. The interesting thing is the mixture of the glacier blue ice with the black basalt, quite bizarre. It is cold but reasonably calm and it's not raining. Hooray! There are walking tours into the glacier which seem quite popular.



The light is fading quite a bit and it feels like sunset rather than 3:30pm. As we depart, the cloud lifts on Eyjafjallajökull, which is very close by. She looks quiet enough at the moment. Anna was telling us yesterday that there are comprehensive plans in place in the event that a pending eruption is detected and people in the area practice their evacuation plan about once a year.



Then the rain starts again. We abandon plans to visit Dyrholaey (the fabulous rock outcrops) and Reynisdrangar (the Black Beach) and hope the weather might give us a break in the morning.

Vik is quite a lovely looking little town but when we drive through the 'CBD' it is as dead as a dodo and a bit uninspiring. We visit the Iceland Wear shop which is massive and has tons of excellent cold weather gear. The woollen products are lovely if we lived in a climate that required such snug clothes I'd make a purchase but it would be a waste of money....as much as I'd love one of the beautiful woollen capes!

We adjourn to the bar for happy hour. There is something quite lovely about sitting in a cosy lounge, looking out to the cold and miserable weather outside.

We have dinner in the restaurant starting with a celeriac soup which is lovely. I have Arctic Char with vege and mash - the char is similar to Ocean Trout and I'm surprised to find it is a fresh water fish. Absolutely delish! Dave has lamb rack with roast veges and it is also very good. We have a glass of the average red to accompany. The restaurant is quite busy and we have a really enjoyable evening.

The doona is thick so we open the window to make sure the room chills down. It does and it make for a very solid sleep.

FRIDAY – DAY 5

I open the curtains to find rain. We have brekkie and leave our stuff in the room to go visit Black Beach , etc. It is belting down rain, visibility is rubbish and I have no desire to get out of the car.

We go back to the hotel, collect our gear and are on the road about 10:20, destination Foss Lagoon Hotel. The rain is still pelting down. I'm over it. Quite clearly I've reached my threshold for rubbish weather. Spoils the views and my photos and is just downright miserable. While I wish it would stop just for a while the prediction is for 100% rain all day.

Driving north of Vik is like a moonscape, followed by a moonscape with moss. The landscape is flat for miles with the occasional hill popping up. The view then changes into gentle, rolling lumps with tussocky grass.

Temperature 8 degrees which has been fairly consistent every day.

What I find to be extremely weird is that hotels and guesthouse don't have covered porticos. 100% of the time you walk up to the front door in whatever weather is prevailing. No cover to park, unpack and get into the hotel without getting saturated. Even weirder is that the petrol stations are the same in the middle of nowhere, by themselves. The thought process seems to be that everyone is wet all the time so why would you bother putting any cover anywhere. Same with shops.... no cover, verandahs, etc just a front door. Shop one side, weather the other.

We've been on the coastal road for an hour and a half and it is absolutely teeming rain.... still.

We arrive at the **Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon**, built in traditional fashion and painted traditional black. The hotel is out on its own.... good plan for capturing your clients. Our room is available and we check into a large and comfortable room. We have a panoramic window with views across the vast plains to the sea. The mix of green/yellow grass, with patches of reddish/brown shrubbery and the grey skies is mesmerising.

We drive 20min up the road to the **Glacier Lagoon**. Large pieces of ice have calved off the glacier and are floating in the lagoon. The tide is moving out quickly and chunks of ice make their way to the mouth of the lagoon before they are washed up in **Diamond Beach**. Quite a phenomenon with the crystal clear ice on the black basalt beach.



It is pouring rain but we hop out and get some photos. We sit and watch from the car.

We drive to the beach, literally across the highway and in the other side. Still pouring.

Eventually the rain subsides to a light sprinkle. We decide we've come all the way so we must see the bergs on the beach. Out we get - it's a few hundred metres to the beach, the rain gets heavier and the wind (onshore naturally) is whipping our faces.

It is really worth seeing the huge chunks of ice lying like beached whales on the black basalt. A few of the pieces are the clearest crystal blue..... absolutely glistening, even with no sun.

This is a real natural phenomenon I could stand there for ages watched the waves crash over the ice but the weather determines otherwise and we retreat.

We drive to the other side of the lagoon for a different perspective. Then it's back to the hotel.



The hotel has a happy hour as well as lots games in the lounge, eg board games, chess, Jenga, etc. We grab a beer and settle in for some Jenga fun. We do a bit of reading as well.

Our 7pm dinner in the restaurant upstairs sees us seated against the window with more panoramic views.

We share starters - Salmon smoked with coffee and vanilla and smoked lamb carpaccio. You can really taste the coffee in the salmon and it gives it a most unusual flavour. The lamb is fantastic with a real smoky taste. I might go as far as to say that smoked lamb carpaccio is way better than the usual beef version.

I have wolffish with crab for main... there are a lot of elements on the dish and they all go together brilliantly. Dave has torched cod, also another great meal. We have a glass of Californian Zin which is a lovely drop.

We return to the room and out of our panoramic window the full moon is breaking through in the distance. It appears long enough to snap a few photos then disappears behind the clouds, never to be seen again. That was pretty special and just the luck of our timing.



We have a small window at head level which we can open and do. The air is nicely chilled.

SATURDAY – DAY 6

We sit at the same table as last night for breakfast. There is some parting in the clouds and patches of sun glimpse through. The weather in the distance isn't too encouraging though.

We pack and depart 9:10, direction Reykjavik. Our stay at the Fosshotel has been highlighted by the wonderful sense of welcome and warmth from the staff.

The sun is breaking through at points and we see a whole new Iceland that was shrouded in cloud yesterday.

We stop off at **Katla Geo Park** where the rocks are covered with a bright green moss which takes 70 years to grow. There is the most beautiful, glacier blue lagoon in the midst of all the moss..... extraordinary. Katla is a large area with mossy rocks to one side and gigantic glaciers to the other.



As we get to Vik the rain is still pouring down, yet out the other side of the town the sun bursts through again. We pull into **Reynisdrangar (Black Beach)** and find another exceptional experience. The beach as black as night, vertical pillars of stone up the cliff and the two pillars rising from the sea. Magic!



The formations are the remains of large and imposing sea cliffs, made up of basalt, that serve as a vital part of the area's allure; they shoot dramatically out of the ocean under the looming cliffs of **Mount Reynisfjall**, Apparently they feature in Season 7 of Game of Thrones!



We stop off and take pics along the way and I get to photograph some Icelandic horses, which has been my major goal of this trip. They are friendly and come to the fence when I call them. They are extremely cute and sturdy horses, with thick coats and long manes.



We get to the Alda and are upgraded to a room at the front of the hotel. Hopefully, it's a quiet Saturday night. The same young lad that checked us in on Monday does so again and he enquires as to how we enjoyed our trip.

We ask about Blue Lagoon as the website says that pre booking is mandatory. He thinks it should be ok to just turn up as it's a very quiet time of year. Computer says they still have availability the 5:00pm session onwards.

We dump our gear and immediately head off to BL. It's about a 45 minute drive from town. We arrive and they have availability. Of course they do!!

The **Blue Lagoon** is 70% seawater piped from 2km underground. Constant temperature of 38 degrees. A drink is included at the 'swim up' bar so we have a Gull. The lagoon is incredibly good fun and we are in the water for nearly 2hrs. The facilities are excellent and the whole experience worth the krn 22,400 in total. When I checked online the price was krn 9,900 (AUD \$89) so they hit you up big time when you just rock up. What a fabulous way to spend a few hours relaxing.



We have dinner at the **Old Iceland Inn**, which is 44m from our hotel. It's 8:45 by the time we are seated late for us! It is a warm and intimate little restaurant with an interesting menu. I have Cream of Seafood soup and Dave has Lamb and Vege soup.... both delish. For main I have Lamb Fillet & Lamb Shoulder with roast veges.... a really enjoyable meal. Dave has Slow Cooked Beef, another great choice. We taste an Argentinian Shiraz and it's really tart so we opt for a Chilean Cab Sauv which is much more palatable.



We have a really enjoyable evening and a very short walk home. Our last dinner in Iceland in a week that has been constant dining delights.

SUNDAY – DAY 7

I sleep well but am disturbed at various times of the night by passing traffic and general street rabble. Note to self: rooms at the back are quieter!

We wake to news of the bombings in Colombo and surrounds. Another day of disaster on one of the most important days of the Christian calendar (Easter Sunday). Horrific doesn't begin to describe it.

We go to brekkie at the **Sandholt Bakery & Cafe**, only a couple of blocks up the street. It's packed when we get thereseems to be the place to be on a Sunday morning. They have super looking bread and pastries that look fantastic, if you're into that sort of thing this early in the day.



We are seated quickly and decide on a sourdough toasted sandwich with ham & cheese..... perfect!

We return, pack and head to the airport. We fill the i10 guzzler again boy, it literally inhales petrol. Our return is easy and the young fellow who greets us is polite and efficient. We are shuttled the few hundred metres to the airport which is deathly quiet. There are two lots of people at check in and about a dozen counters open.

We get to the gate easily and there are only a few people there. Looking good for a quiet flight. Until a gaggle is school kids turn up and, as excited teens can be, they are noisy.

We board and are on our way to London. We leave Reykjavik on a 6 degree day and fly into a 24 degree London.

Iceland has been brilliant – a stunningly beautiful, refreshing, windy place with the most extraordinary scenery and warm locals.