

The many faces of Iceland



Figure 1. Canyon of River Jökulsá Á Fjöllum in Northern Iceland - Source: Santiago Rodríguez, 2009

Nataliia Maiboroda (EGEA KIEV) and Santiago Rodriguez Ruiz (EGEA VALENCIA)

I was asking myself, where can I find the most diverse and surprising landscapes in Europe? Just in three seconds I could answer without any hesitation. Of course, it has to be Iceland!

The Surprising Variety of an Arctic Destination

Iceland is a place, where in just five minutes weather conditions change from an extremely bright sunshine to a dark storm with wild winds. It is the country, where sheep can eat brand new green grass, facing white glaciers on the background; where under tones of ice there are hundreds of volcanoes waiting for their awakening hour.

Lately, people all over Europe are starting to hate this Nordic country, which paralysed the air traffic in Europe. That is why I would like to take the role of Iceland's advocate and I will try to project that Iceland is the most amazing country, with which most visitors fall helplessly in love.

Speaking about Iceland, I would use the word "most" without a doubt, because this island with the size of Hungary (103 125 km²) has a lot of world records. First of all, the city of Reykjavik is the northernmost capital in the world. Secondly, the oldest parliament as we know them today was created precisely in Iceland. Thirdly, it is the country considered to be the holder of the world's largest glacier (if not taking into account the polar ice caps). Also Iceland babbles the most powerful waterfall in Europe, which is called Dettifoss. To conclude this list, I recently learned that the authoritative British edition of Lonely Planet was rating the most attractive countries for travelling in 2010. And which country do you think was in the top spot? Of course Iceland!

I got a chance to visit this country last year, just after the global economic crisis, when the prices were high but not astronomically unreachable, like they were on previous years. Three weeks were enough to discover a great natural diversity, as I could not get in one full year before.

I prefer to start my story from the oldest

part of this young island, geologically speaking, which is located on the west and it is called Westfjords. They say that this is the real Iceland, as Icelandic people view their own country – isolated, wild, cold and incredibly beautiful. Here is where you can find cliffs of heights up to 500 meters, that shelter millions of birds and their nests. The Cape of Látrabjarg is not only one of the largest bird colonies in the world, but also it is the westernmost point of Europe. There is only one building here that spoils the ideal image of a bird kingdom – a pizzeria with a banner offering "The westest pizza in Europe", with typos in English language included. But walking a bit southwards on the cliff's edge will make anyone forget that humans ever came to this place, and concentrate on the many species of birds and the picturesque look of puffins and their clumsy flying abilities.

Icelandic cuisine, the art of survival
Talking about food, Icelandic cuisine it's quite an interesting topic in itself to discuss. One may better know about it before actually trying it. Historically, the Vikings (first settlers) ate everything which was edible as harsh climate and the constant cold were the main enemies in the struggle for survival. So it came to the tradition to eat fish in any form – raw, cooked or rotten. A well-known dish is 'hákarl', which is shark from Greenland fermented and hung to dry during 5 months, with a particular ammonia-rich smell and taste. So you can imagine the power of that smell. Another traditional dish called «svith». Svith is the head of a lamb half boiled, supplied entirely (with the eyes, tongue, brains, etc.).

But for less bizarre meals, to me it was just enough to try real whale meat. Hunting whales was strictly prohibited throughout the world since 1986. However, Iceland, Japan and Norway were never too keen on following this international law. While it is possible to buy meat in markets, it is certainly a bit more difficult to find someone who can actu-



Figure 2. Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula Artica*) in Látrabjarg cliffs, a mecca for nature lovers and birdwatchers - Source: Nataliia Maiboroda, 2009



Figure 3. Climbing a cliff with a view to Hekla, the gateway to hell - Source: Santiago Rodriguez, 2009.

ally cook it, or find a restaurant having it in the menu. I tried the whale meat in two forms, raw with spices and grilled, and in both cases the texture reminds of beef but with a distinctive fishy taste. The reason for hunting whales, as locals say, is not only to eat them. Actually the meat market for whales is not very productive, but every part of their body is used in some way, and together with the «hunting for scientific purposes» of keeping track of populations and studying their biology, it is an important input in some Icelandic industries. Nevertheless, commercial whaling is not even as profitable as letting the whales roving around the bays and charging tourists

for a tour around in boats seeking 10 minutes of glorious whale watching. It is possible to spot real whales and other cetaceans in many places of the Icelandic coast, but nowhere better than outside the north western town of Husavik. The adjacent Skjálfandi Bay keeps the status of «the whale capital» of Iceland due to its natural conditions with a deep basin and a good water circulation that allows for oxygenation in different levels, which attracts twelve species of whales.

The Land of Fire, the Many Icelandic Volcanoes

It is scary to think that such a small

island can influence Europe by its “sign of passion”. I mean, warm and irresistible volcanic hugs. In the 1960's the entire world press followed the large-scale eruption on the southern shores of the country that created the island of Surtsey, which is now a fragile UNESCO World Heritage Site not expected to last more than one century. Another famous eruption, started in 1996, destroyed a part of the national road and its two largest bridges. The volcano Grímsvötn started its activity under the thick glacier and melted 3000 billion cubic litres of water. Just imagine pieces of icebergs of three-storey height floating down the river of lava and ash – a unique catastrophic phenomenon! Now traces of volcanic ash, of lava and moraines (products of the geomorphological activity of glaciers) can be seen along the route from the national park Skaftafell towards the town of Vik. Some locals say that in cases of extreme wind, which are not too rare for Iceland, your car could be left without paint as a result of the polishing by volcanic sand.

Another well-known Icelandic volcano is Laki, which erupted in 1783 and was playing its tricks for 5 years, releasing a large amount of volcanic ash. The ash cloud reached Europe and diminished the amount of sunshine in the continent, which paid the price by a colder climate and a decreased productivity in agriculture during those years which in fact led to the French Revolution. Knowing these precedents, one can't avoid being curious of the outcome of the aggressive eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, it will be interesting to see how the situation develops.

But in Iceland there is no volcano that has caught more attention than Hekla, which was called “the gateway to hell” in the Middle Ages, being active 1104 times. It became active in 2000 for the last time. Knowing the cycle of Hekla, which is of 8 years, the busy Icelandic geologists are still checking its movements every day. Actually it should have erupted in 2008, but still has not shown up and that is a bit of concern for the inhabitants of Iceland.



Figure 4. Boiling mud pots of Hverir area, in the vicinity of Mývatn lake - Source: Nataliia Maiboroda, 2009



Figure 5. Jökulsárlón iceberg lake, result of the retreat of Vatnajökull glacier in the last decades - Source: Nataliia Maiboroda, 2009

They say that in Iceland you can find almost all types of volcanoes that are found on earth. The evidence of recent volcanism can be found in the region of Myvatn, where you can see the heated steam coming from the soil, where there are also the popular boiling mud pots of Hverir, which smell like rotten egg and let out a large amount of heat but are less dangerous to walk around and smaller in size than regular lava volcanoes. It is interesting to note that the power of the earth is well used in Iceland, since they inject water to the underground and as a result of the recent volcanic activity it comes back up really warm. These outputs are used

as hot water in the homes of Icelanders, the same as the water of the large number of swimming pools all over the country and the greenhouses. So don't be surprised if you get bananas easily in Iceland – as they are really being grown there.

The Land of Ice, Vatnajökull National Park

The east of Iceland is extremely versatile, from the fjords and cosy sea coves, to Europe's largest glacier, waterfalls and lakes with icebergs. The Europe's largest glacier called Vatnajökull with an area of 8300 km², occupies 8% of the country and weighs up to 3000 billion

tons. Under this great glacier there are the highest and lowest points of the country: 2119 m (Hvannadalshnukur) and the basin of the lake Jökulsárlón is -146 m. The glacier is so powerful that it normally influences the weather in Europe by disturbing the Icelandic low in the middle of the northern Atlantic.

A great example of the global warming is visible in the new lake Jökulsárlón, which was created due to melting and retreat of the glacier. It is probably one of the most famous travel destinations in Iceland, and its stunning landscape with evolving configurations of icebergs in different forms attracts not only tourists. This lake was used as a film setting for James Bond (2002) and Lara Croft (2001) movies.

Iceland in a nutshell, The Golden Circle

The south of Iceland is the most inhabited part, for obvious climatic conditions, and it is also the most visited by tourists, since there is the well-known "Golden Circle": Valley of the Geysers, Waterfalls Gullfoss (literally – the Golden Falls) and the National Park Thingvellir. The oldest known Geyser in the world is here, as well as the famous Strokkur. The English word for referring to this kind of phenomenon comes from the old Geysir, and it is said to be the only Icelandic word to have entered the English language vocabulary. Every 5-10 minutes tourists have a show of hot stream water eruption, rising up to 20-30 meters. This is truly a unique and exciting phenomenon. Because of the earth movements affect the activity of geysers, nowadays only Strokkur is making a show, while eruptions of the old Geysir are rare. Very lucky visitors can enjoy such, but just don't wait for long hoping to get a glimpse at what the old Geysir used to be.

There is only one place that can beat the Geyser Valley by its importance in the Golden Circle. This is a National Park called Thingvellir – the national pride of Icelanders and an extremely unique place in historical and geological sense. Just imagine that the first Parliament of the world was established here. And this event happened in 930, when Vikings



Figure 6. Tourist enjoying a view to one of the main attractions of the Golden Circle, Gullfoss waterfall with a rainbow - Source: Santiago Rodriguez, 2009

gathered an Althing (the gathering of Authority) on the rock Lögberg (literally “the law rock”). The most important events of Iceland were always held here – such as the adoption of Christianity in 1000 and the proclamation of the independence from Denmark in 1944. Also this national park is well-known due to the fact that Thingvellir lies on lithospheres plate junction. Accordingly North American and Eurasian tectonic plates are moving away from each other by 2 mm every year. It is a strange feeling, to realize that in a matter of 10 minutes you can drive from America to Europe.

Neverending Summer Afternoons, Partying In The Sunshine

Reykjavik, or the “bay of smoke” as the first Vikings who arrived here called it seeing the traces of the geological activity so evidently in the wind, makes the one and only city of Iceland, by any European standards. And it doesn’t even feel like a city, especially in the city centre. By its colourful wooden houses that are at most two storeys high, no one would notice the difference between this and any Norwegian small town, if it wasn’t because there are many small houses together. But it’s not a unique thing that it looks like a small town. Everyone spots celebrities and locals know where they live, people greet each other on the streets like in any small town and

despite all this, it is a town which is very well known for its nightlife. A night that during the summer months feels like a very long early evening, since the sun doesn’t really set. Nightlife of pubs and cafes, where dancing is free of charge at pubs and the most dangerous foe you will find is the price of the alcoholic drinks.



Figure 7. Strokkur geyser erupts every 6 minutes, expelling water up to 20 metres - Source: Nataliia Maiboroda, 2009

Iceland keeps the atmosphere of an undiscovered land, a mysterious treasure which by its isolation and its conditions is not readily available to everyone. Most of the visitors never venture in the wild centre of the island where there are no human settlements whatsoever,

no roads, no bridges on the wide rivers, hardly any vegetation; it’s just the dominion of four wheel drive cars and some adventurous souls ready to see this country with a different perspective.

The Value of the Heritage

Also the local people do a lot to preserve a halo of mysticism and the millenary traditions of the Vikings. Icelanders are the only Nordic people still able to understand sagas, the history and stories written in Old Norse, with the sole knowledge of their own language. These are paragraphs of descriptions of trips, fights, vendettas, discoveries and even superstitions. Most of the inhabitants of Iceland will not acknowledge, but Iceland is a country also populated by spirits, gods, trolls, elves and hidden people, mostly in their minds. It is easy to spot trolls, wherever there is a pile of stones by a road that would be in fact a troll hit by the morning sunshine, and thus petrified forever. The presence of the rest of supernatural forces requires the help of some kinds of shamanic rituals, a bit of belief, or perhaps they are better left alone. Humans should not disturb hidden people as in a country like Iceland there is space for everyone to live in peace and enjoy it. And friend-

ly Icelanders and hot springs dispel the stereotype that the country has to be cold, as suggested by its name.