ARCTIC ADVENTURE

Waterfalls, glaciers and rotten shark: Traveling Iceland's famed Ring Road

Text and photos by Rebecca L. Rhoades

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"Do you want the sand and ash protection?"

I am filling out paperwork at the small Hertz rental agency near my hotel, mapping out my itinerary in my head, when his question brings me back to reality.

He continues. "What about the windshield insurance?"

I look at the scenery outside. Lush, manicured lawns frame a well-paved system of roads, and only a few clouds punctuate the bright blue sky. I almost have a hard time taking his questions seriously.

Yes, I'll take them both," I respond.

You see, just one week earlier, a colleague had taken the same route on which I was about to embark. "Get the extra insurance," she warned me afterward. "The roads up north are terrible. It was really windy, and our car was hit by some flying rocks. It cost us $1,200!" I wonder what I am getting myself into.

I am in Iceland: the mythical world of fire and ice, where volcanoes roar and glaciers give way to steaming valleys. A country settled by Vikings and inhabited by elves and trolls, where horses and sheep outnumber humans. A place where the night sky radiates with striking shades of green and pink. The land of the midnight sun.

Slightly more than 300,000 people live in Iceland. One-third of them reside in the country's capital city, Reykjavik. As a destination, Reykjavik ranges from expensive—typical meals, sans alcohol, average $50 per person—to underwhelming—its architecture is squat, unadorned and, frankly, quite bland—to downright bizarre. Just about every traveler I meet wants to see one or both of the city's most well-known attractions: Lebowski Bar, a theme bar honoring the 1998 cult film *The Big Lebowski,* and The Icelandic *Phallological* Museum. I visit both.

But I'm not here to tour Reykjavik. I'm here to see Iceland's natural beauty, the wild landscapes and geological phenomenon that attract visitors from around the world. And what better way to do so than by driving around the entire island.

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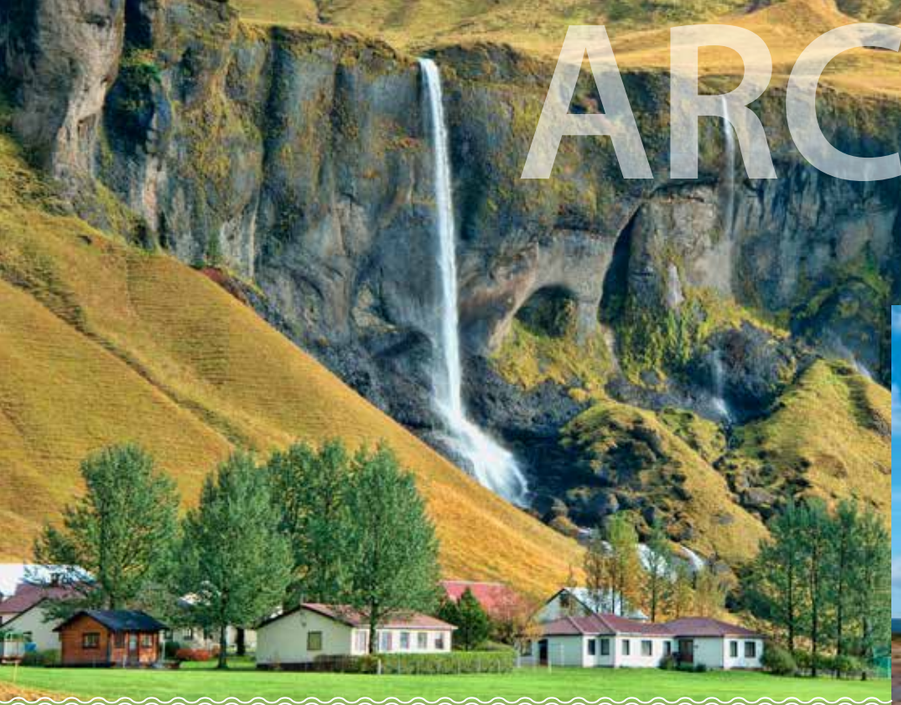

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RING AROUND THE COUNTRY

I head south (counterclockwise) on Route 1, better known as the Ring Road. Route 1 is an 830-mile road that circles the entire island country, connecting its more populated regions and allowing people to travel and goods to be delivered throughout the year. It was completed in 1971.

Today, some stretches of the road remain unpaved. On the northeast coast, the flat pavement spins into steep, white-knuckle drives along rocky cliffs. Blind curves and a frequent lack of guardrails combine for an adrenaline-pumping ride that is not for the faint of heart. Gas stations—and other vehicles—are few and far between, and the only traffic jams found along the way are ones caused by herds of sheep or reindeer crossing the road. But it's this same isolation that makes it easy to pull over, whether it's to explore a waterfall, to photograph some horses, to inspect an ancient turf house or to test out the sponginess of a moss-covered lava field.

The most popular starting point for those who want to get out of Reykjavik is the Golden Circle. This 186-mile loop takes travelers into central Iceland and then connects back to the Ring Road about 60 miles south of the capital. The entire route can easily be covered in a single day.

A number of world-renowned natural attractions are found on this touristic route, including the multilevel Gullfoss (foss is Icelandic for waterfall) and the bubbling hot springs and faithfully spurting Strokkur geyser of Geysir, which along with puffins, the aurora borealis and the Blue Lagoon, are also some of the island's most photographed subjects. And while not as in-your-face exciting, Thingvellir National Park, also part of the Golden Circle, offers a geological grandeur normally found miles beneath the ocean.

Iceland was formed by aggressive volcanic activity along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the meeting point between the European and North American tectonic plates. The island, no larger than Kentucky, has 100 volcanoes, 30 of which are considered active. In addition to the occasional eruption, they provide the island with geothermal energy and jaw-dropping sightseeing. In Thingvellir, a portion of the seam between the tectonic plates appears above ground, giving the appearance of the island breaking in half.

While it didn't cause the earth to split, the eruption in 2010 of Eyjafjallajökull did focus the world's attention on Iceland's volcanic activity, mainly by plunging international travel into chaos. Additional volcanic activity at Bárdarbunga and Holuhraun began in August 2014 and continues to this day, making it the longest-lasting seismic crisis on the island in more than 100 years.

About two-and-a-half hours east of Thingvellir on Route 1 is the Eyjafjallajökull Visitor Centre. Housed in a former garage in the shadow of the famous crater, the center tells the story, through a film and displays, of the Þorvaldseyri dairy farm, which sits at the base of the volcano.

"People can drive through here today without even realizing that anything happened," says owner Guðný Valberg. "If they come [to the Visitor Centre], they can see the movie and know what we went through."

Of course, there's also another reason to stop by.

"Visitors always ask 'how do you pronounce it?'" says Guðný's daughter Inga. "They really love to try to pronounce it."

The sun is starting to set as I make my way to the small village of Kirkjubæjarklaustur and my hotel. After a day spent tripping over such tongue-tying words such as Eyjafjallajökull, Seljalandsfoss and Hveragerði, I laugh as my GPS decides that it's had enough of the complicated language as well. It blurts out, "Turn left at K. I. R. K. J. …."

GO WITH THE FLOE

A highlight of any trip to Iceland is a visit to Jökulsárlón glacial lagoon on the eastern coast of the island. While easily viewed by car—a small suspension bridge carries Route 1 directly over the mouth of the lagoon—the frozen waterscape beckons for a closer look. Here, where the massive Vatnajökull glacier runs into the Atlantic Ocean, giant chunks of inestimable blue ice that have calved from the glacier's edge drift slowly toward the open sea. The lagoon's serene and ghostly beauty has become a national identifier, appearing on numerous magazine covers, on a stamp and in such Hollywood blockbusters as A View to a Kill and Batman Begins.

Tours take visitors through the towering ice on amphibious vehicles. I opt for the longer—and more adventurous—Zodiac tour. For one hour, we zoom through the icebergs, getting so close that we can actually touch and taste them. A pod of fur seals frolics in the ultramarine waters.

On the road to the small fishing town of Höfn, made famous recently for its portrayal of the Greenland airport in the Ben Stiller movie The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, I notice a number of cars parked on the shoulder. I grumble to myself, "Don't tell me that there's been an accident." Then I notice them.

To my left, just a few hundred feet from the road, are reindeer. Dozens of reindeer. I quickly pull over and grab my camera. Seeing wild reindeer is high on my Iceland wish list.

As the Ring Road circles up around the island's northern coast, the terrain becomes even wilder and more desolate. Tiny villages cleave to the bottom of glacial fjords. The skeletal remains of abandoned farms dot the roadside. Even the ever-present sheep have disappeared. Waterfalls cascade down hills and through canyons. On either side of Lake Myvatn and Námafjall, a barren geothermal area filled with steam vents and bubbling mud pools, are Detifoss—the most powerful waterfall in Europe, featured in the opening scenes of Ridley Scott's Prometheus—and Godafoss—the Waterfall of the Gods. According to legend, in the year 1000, after Iceland's acceptance of Christianity, the pagan chieftain Thorgeir threw his Norse idols into the falls.

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I take a break from the Ring Road and head further north toward the coast, traveling through such picturesque whaling villages as Hüsavik, Dalvik and Ólafsfjördur.

I am thankful for clear weather as the narrow road curves along the precipitous coastal cliffs. A gas station attendant in Akureyi warns me of three upcoming tunnels. I understand why as I pass through the massive iron doors of the first tunnel. The road tapers to a single lane. For almost three miles, I slowly creep along, keeping an eye out for the pull-off areas in case oncoming traffic approaches.

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A JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

There are two more things on my Iceland wish list left to complete as I turn back south along the West coast toward Reykjavik: sampling the notorious Icelandic specialty hákarl and taking a dip in the Blue Lagoon.

At the Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum, about 20 minutes west of Stykkishólmur on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, which getting to from the Ring Road requires a 20-plus mile drive across a packed gravel road, I cross off the first. Hákarl, simply put, is fermented and rotten shark.

"This is the Greenland shark," says "Shark Man" Hildibrandur Bjarnason, whose family shark-fishing business dates back more than 400 years. "We can't eat this shark fresh. It's toxic fresh."

To prepare hákarl, Hildibrandur first buries the freshly butchered shark meat in large containers for about six weeks. As the meat decomposes, it oozes toxic ammonia. Afterward, it is hung in an outdoor drying shed for about four to six months to complete the breakdown process.

It is time to taste the dish that chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain called "the single worst, most disgusting and terrible tasting thing" he's ever eaten. The smell is strong, like urine. Luckily, to me, the smell is much worse than the flavor. The shark is chewy and fishy, with a strange, rather unpleasant, ammonia aftertaste. I wash it down with a shot of Brennivin, a traditional aquavit known as The Black Death.

Located just 20 minutes from Keflavík International Airport, the Blue Lagoon is usually a tourist's first or last stop (and typically part of Golden Circle tours). It's also one of the country's most visited attractions, and it's easy to see why. The man-made lagoon, actually runoff from a nearby geothermal power plant, is known for its mineral-rich, aqua-blue waters. The first dip into the warm, milky water is sublime. I slather my face with white silica mud and relax as a gentle rain begins to fall. For those wanting an even more immersive experience, massages, steam rooms and even alcoholic beverages are available.

As I say bless (goodbye in Icelandic) to the fire and ice, and thankful that I never had to use that extra insurance, I am reminded of the words of Icelandic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson. "Comely and fair is the country, crested with snow-covered glaciers," he wrote in 1835. "Azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright."