

# THE WILD SIDE OF THE LAND

Not quite European, not quite American, **Iceland** is its own unique mixture of extremes, from the landscape to the people to the light. Sandra Carpenter travels to this weirdly intoxicating volcanic island near the Arctic Circle to discover the makeup of this unique paradise.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ROBERT CORKERY**

Along the Reykjanes Peninsula lies Gunnuhver and a volcanic landscape that can only be described as fantastically otherworldly. After taking a whiff of the distinctive smell of sulfur, you get the idea that the boiling hot water is not for swimming in.



The geyser Strokkur puts on a spectacular display by shooting a fountain of boiling water into the air every five minutes or so.

**A**brutal, relentless wind whips at me as I stand in the sandy gulley, one foot in America, the other in Europe. I like contemplating the idea that I am literally in two worlds here, just outside of Reykjavík on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the oceanic plates are created. Perhaps I like it because I am an American living in Europe, and I feel weirdly satisfied at this meeting of the two worlds. Or perhaps I like it because it's exciting to know that the rift valley that I'm in is widening two to three centimeters annually thanks to all the plate tectonics. Somehow it feels just a little bit dangerous to be in this bizarrely barren land, like I might fall through the Earth's crust, never to be seen again.

Much like this spot in which the Earth is splitting apart, Iceland itself is a land of extremes. Almost total daylight in summer contrasts with almost daylong darkness in winter, but it's brightened with dramatic bursts of color when the northern lights occur. It's a young land geologically speaking but the home of the oldest democracy in the world. And the land itself echoes these extremes.

Since landing in Reykjavík, I have had the strange feeling that I am somewhere far, far away. Dark volcanic rocks and a green moss blanket this moonlike landscape composed of basalt, but no trees dot the horizon. Instead rock cairns periodically punctuate the land like sentinels. It feels as if a fire has swept through and gotten rid of every tree and shrub, stripping the landscape to its core and leaving behind a rubble of rocks. But it's also beautiful somehow: removing the excess detail lets you see the essence of the land.

**AND WHAT A LAND** it is. It's a geologist's dream landscape, hence the reason I am here with my husband. As both the daughter and wife of geologists, I wanted to travel here to see what my husband Robert describes as the "primordial soup of evolution." Iceland is a country in the making, a growing island where you can see how the earth itself was formed. NASA staff come here to research life in extreme environments, much like those they might find in space.

Stuff leaps out of the ground at you here. The landscape demands attention. This small country in the Atlantic Ocean between Greenland and Scotland has it all, geographically speaking. Glaciers, deserts, cliffs, waterfalls, geysers, volcanoes, mountains, hills, beaches, pastures – all are within 100 kilometers of Reykjavík. This gives us a fantastic amount of terrain to look at. And since it's summer, we have long days of light to do just that.

Together with the barren landscape, the first, most obvious aspect of the land is that contrary to its name, Iceland is not covered in ice. Or at least not in the summer. Only 11 percent of the country is covered by glacier, in fact. Approximately three-quarters of the island is barren of vegetation, and plant life consists mainly of grassland. And also in

spite of its name, the country has a temperate climate. In fact, as we drive along on our first day, it's sunny and 20 degrees Celsius.

I've traveled here expecting a pristine, wild landscape. And it seems I am not the only one. At the airport baggage claim, I see more backpacks, bicycles, tents and fishing gear tumble along the conveyor than what I've ever seen in any mountain town in Colorado. And I soon learn that all this gear is just a precursor to what we will see over the next few days as this is what's known as *Verslunarmannahelgi*, a three-day holiday weekend akin to Labor Day that everyone simply calls the camping weekend. The holiday is an annual celebration where everyone pitches a tent, consumes large amounts of alcohol, goes to music festivals, dances around bonfires and in general makes merry.

Why is everyone going to camp, I ask one local. "I don't know. It's just what everybody does. And of course, we drink a lot."

Maybe that explains why I see tents pitched directly beside the road and even in the middle of a grass-filled volcanic crater.

**HISSING, GURLING, BELCHING**, boiling, bubbling. The earth is active here in all sorts of unusual ways. There is turquoise blue water and gray opaque sludge. As we check out the hot springs and mud pots around Gunnuhver, I still have the vaguely uneasy feeling I could disappear into a sinkhole or quicksand. But as the dense, sulfur-laden steam from the hot springs wraps around my body, I somehow feel comforted as well. It's wonderful, wild and somewhat disconcerting as I can't see my hand in front of my face at times. It's so surreal, I feel like I am on a movie set.

Geysir in the Haukadalur valley is the geyser for which all geysers get their name. This erupting, boiling hot spring is the oldest known geyser in the world and is right up there with Old Faithful in terms of putting on a spectacular display. Eruptions can shoot as high as 60 meters in the air, but Geysir is quiet while we are there, though, and apparently has been for some time. Earthquakes are the most typical trigger for Geysir's eruptions.

As we sadly survey Geysir, both of us secretly hoping for just a very small earthquake to cause an eruption, a French photographer with a fancy camera tells us how eruptions were instigated for a while by adding soap into Geysir during the 1980s. This practice has stopped, and Geysir just percolates below the surface. For now.

Luckily the nearby geyser Strokkur does not disappoint. As we approach it, the boiling cauldron fantastically blows its lid, shooting water 20 meters

**Stuff leaps out of the ground at you here. The landscape demands attention.**



The author braves the shifting plate tectonics at the bridge between two continents on the Reykjanes Peninsula.

## THE LAND

**NATURAL BRIDGE** Reykjanes is the meeting place of two continents, two tectonic plates.

**HOT STUFF** The average temperature of the rocks surrounding the geyser Strokkur is 200 degrees Celsius.

**ORIGINS** The Icelandic meaning of the word geyser is "to gush."

**As we check out the hot springs and mud pots, I have the vaguely uneasy feeling I could disappear into a sinkhole or quicksand of some sort.**

---



The steamy landscape around Geysir in the Haukadalur valley is filled with geysers and hot springs-



**Top:** Not all of Iceland is a desolate moonscape. Driving west out of Reykjavík, you will find farmland. The grassy area by the waterfall at Skógafoss provides many a camping spot.

into the air. I jump, yell and run simultaneously, surprised by the force of the eruption. In fact, Strokkur erupts every five minutes or so, much to all the gathered photographers' delight, and I manage to not jump every time. Standing next to the bubbling hot spring, I watch as the water gradually starts belching, then overflowing its brim, before it shoots into the sky, time and time again.

Fascinated, we watch eruption after magnificent eruption and then drive a few kilometers down the road to the next stop on the famous Golden Circle tourist trail, the Gullfoss waterfall. The wind has picked up, clouds are heavy, and rain is threatening as we reach Gullfoss, which literally translated means Golden Falls. Shivering from the damp air, I check out the most powerful waterfall in Europe, which is actually two separate waterfalls. From the upper falls, I look down into a dizzying chasm of madly churning water, happy to be on somewhat dry land. I have one of those split-second involuntary reactions where I contemplate how quickly someone – not me – would die if he fell in. Then I carefully inch away from the cliff edge.

All these dynamic land movements are put to good use in Iceland: geothermal energy is often used for heating and producing electricity, as well

as warming greenhouses that provide year-round produce in spite of the northern location. Almost every building on the island is heated with geothermal steam flowing through a few thousand kilometers of underground pipe in Reykjavík. Thus residents have cheap hot water and heat. In fact, Iceland has more energy than it can use.

**BUT BY FAR** one of the most seductive aspects of all this energy for me is the Blue Lagoon. Wonderful, magical and weird all at once, the Blue Lagoon is my vision of what a spa might look like on Mars. And although it looks just like all the other strange natural phenomena in Iceland, it's actually created from the runoff of the Svartsengi power plant. The plant pumps up the geothermally heated water from below the surface to generate heat and electricity, and the clean excess flows into the lagoon. It's a huge hot tub tucked in the black lava between the airport and Reykjavík, with a geothermal plant hidden in the background.

As I step into the warm, milky turquoise water, I immediately feel pulled into a lazy state of complete lethargy, no doubt brought on by the curative powers of the mineral water and being surrounded by perhaps 100 other people in the same state. We float in the 40 degrees Celsius water until our hands are wrinkled beyond use, relax with a beer and hot dog on land, and then get in again, over and over.

Lounging in my robe poolside, I can't help but feel rather decadent. I have heard rumors of this being a spot for romance, and as I look around, it does seem like everyone is floating around with a silly smile. Warm wafts of steam drift by, and I watch countless bathers slather their faces with the silica mud, which also has various restorative and cleansing powers, that settles on the bottom.

**BEFORE TRAVELING TO ICELAND**, I was warned about the locals. "They believe in ghosts there, you know," says my friend Jaakko with an arch of his eyebrow. "There are ghosts marked on the maps. You'll see."

While I did see ghosts marked on my tour maps and read about the Ghost Museum, I did not see

## Magical and weird, the Blue Lagoon is my vision of what a spa might look like on Mars.

any real live ones. Several locals tell me that they believe in them, however. Maybe because of this, combined with such other assorted Icelandic bits of knowledge I've accrued, I suppose I did have a few strange preconceptions about Icelanders. But in spite of the genetic studies and the homogenous society, the eating of rotten shark, and the rather unique taste in clothes by the most known Icelandic Björk, the singer with the hauntingly beautiful voice, I find that the natives are wonderfully open and willing to talk, curious to find out why we are there and what we think of their country.

**TO EXPLORE THE FAMOUS MUSIC SCENE** in Reykjavík, we hang out with the locals for a few hours at 12 Tónar record store, sipping wine, listening to the fantastic collection of Icelandic music, and also watching a few bands play live in the small space. In short order, we hear hip-hop from the Forgotten Lores and techno-party-vocals from FM Belfast. No one tries to kick us out as we listen to CD after CD in the lounge area; instead we are offered advice on what else to try and more wine. When I ask one employee why there is so much good music in this small city, his reply is simple: "What else is there to do here in the winter?"

Later that night, I overhear one traveler say to his companion: "I could get myself in a lot of trouble here. It's wild and it's without barriers." Indeed Reykjavík does know how to have a good time. When we venture out to the bars at 11 pm, they are empty. Not until I am doing things really start to happen.

Moving somewhat slowly, we drive west to Ólafsvík the next day to go shoot some whales, just like the locals. By that, I mean we go to photograph them from a whale-watching boat. The scenery along the way is spectacular, mountainous and pastoral all at once, with Icelandic horses, sheep and cattle grazing. We learn that the horses are often incorrectly called ponies because of their smaller size. But what really distinguishes them from other horses is their gait. While most horses have three gaits – walk, trot and canter – the Icelandic horse has five, including the *tölt* and pace as well. The *tölt* is a four-beat gait that lets the rider travel at a fairly smooth and high speed, while the pace is where the horse moves both legs on one side at the same time. Curious to see these horses more closely, we stop at a farm along the way. Within minutes, a horse slowly saunters up to check us out, soon followed by several others, including two foals. They are eager to be in our company and have their heads scratched, and when we finally walk away, they

follow along behind us like loyal dogs.

The sun is shining brightly as we board the whale-watching boat in the harbor. After motoring into the Atlantic for only about 20 minutes, the captain spots and announces minke whales at three o'clock, and we eagerly move to the right side of the boat to see them. Just as quickly, two, three and then 10 white-beaked dolphins appear, putting on a show worthy of Sea World as they swim along beside us, gracefully arcing to the surface of the water in unison and then diving down again.

But then the star of the show makes his long-awaited appearance: a huge humpback whale, immediately recognizable thanks to his long flippers, surfaces along with the dolphins. His size and bulk dwarfs the dolphins, but they all now playfully swim together. We follow the 30-ton whale for a good hour or more, the captain counting and announcing the minutes underwater so that we are ready for his next appearance after five to seven minutes. Too soon, we have to leave the dolphins and whales behind.

**ON THE DRIVE BACK** to Reykjavík, we pass through Snæfellsjökull. Thousands upon thousands of birds are swarming, swooping, chattering and diving all around the car. We watch a pair of hikers walk down the road, sticks held high for the birds to swoop instead of their heads. I feel like I am in a Hitchcock movie, and with visions of being knocked down and pecked to death by the dive-bombing birds, which are also nesting and feeling protective, I rather cowardly refuse to leave the car when Robert gets out to take pictures.

As we drive on a dirt road without any sign or landmark as to where we are, Robert mutters under his breath, "I guess you have to know where you're going here." But I decide it doesn't really matter. We got to see what we came for: one of the last unspoiled, dramatic and wild places on earth. □

**SANDRA CARPENTER** is the editor in chief of *Scanorama*. Despite having a horror movie-induced fear of swarming birds, she found exploring the volcanoes and hot springs of Iceland to be an adventure worth repeating.



**Top:** Bathing in the good-for-you water of the Blue Lagoon. **Below:** A curious Icelandic horse stops to check things out.

**Below:** Dolphins swim next to us on our whale-watching trip from Ólafsvík.



### THE LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

**POPULATION** People: 300,000. Humpback whales: 1,500–1,800.

**LANGUAGE** Icelandic is a Scandinavian language, reputed to be most closely related to original Norse, the language of the Vikings. Icelanders learn Danish and English from youth.

**MUSIC** The Sugarcubes and singers Björk and Sigur Rós are the best-known exports, but also of note are Múm, Reykjavík! and Ragnheiður Gröndal.

**FIRE** Iceland has 20 active volcanoes.

**ICE** Only 11 percent of the country is covered by glacier.

**FISHY BUSINESS** The fishing industry is still the lifeblood of the Icelandic economy. And yes, Icelanders do eat a putrefied shark meat called Hákarl.

**TRAVEL FACTS** SAS flies into Keflavik International Airport, 50 kilometers from Reykjavík. [www.flysas.com](http://www.flysas.com)



ILLUSTRATION: LOU-LOU PETERSSON