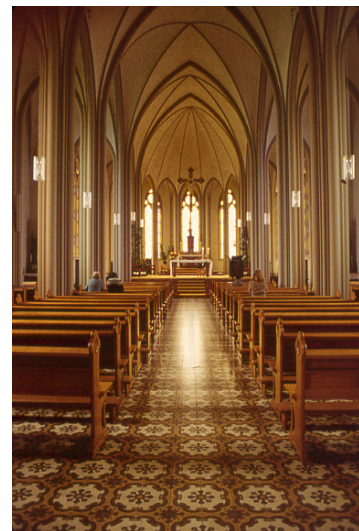


2 – THE SAFARI: DAY ONE

Sunday, 24 August

I rose at 7.30 this morning, washed, shaved and went with Colm and Chris to Mass in the nearby Landakotskirkja: the Church of Christ the King, which we had passed on the previous day during our peregrinations around the city. The church was situated in a large open space on a hill, in the middle of nowhere. Inside, the church was modern and well designed. Hardly a dozen Icelanders were present; most of the small congregation consisted of members from our tour group. The Mass, which lasted just half an hour, was said by three elderly priests, assisted by three very serious-looking altar boys. Afterwards, a representative of the Legion of Mary approached and spoke to Colm and Chris while I photographed the church interior and went outside.



Landakotskirkja: the Catholic church in Reykjavík

On our way back to the school, Chris told us that on the previous day he had flown over Mount Hekla and then down to the Vestmannæjar (Westman Islands). Although Hekla was still dormant, the scenery had been quite spectacular. However, he doubted that the trip had been worth the £38 that he had paid.

There was great activity back at the school yard, for the three Úlfar Jacobsen vehicles had arrived (two very sturdily-built coaches and a kitchen van) and breakfast was being prepared for us by the crew. We collected the luggage from our room, threw it into one of the side hatches, then joined the others.

There was now a general air of excitement; as the safari tour promised to be good and we would soon leave this dreary place, our spirits were considerably raised. Some members of the group had been out sampling the nightlife during the previous evening; they reported that it had been wild. Many of them had been shocked to see

such riotous behaviour in the streets, young people driving around in cars until the early hours of the morning, the drunkenness, and the smashing of bottles all over the place. Our tour operator Maura had told us that the young people had been holding a demonstration, but we all guessed that this so-called 'demonstration' took place every weekend.

Long rough-looking wooden tables were now taken down from the roof of the kitchen van, were set up in the school yard, and piles of food were placed upon them. We queued up, took cutlery and plastic trays, and helped ourselves to as much food as we wanted. There was a large selection of breads, from very dark to white; I selected a couple of slices of chewy dark rye bread and some small slices of brown. As a topping there was a choice of cheese, marmalade or jam; I chose cheese and some slices of tomato and cucumber. The main attraction was a large cauldron of piping hot porridge. I ladled out a generous helping, added some raisins and a sprinkling of bran, and topped it all with a big dollop of *súrmjólk* – a creamy type of sour milk or yogurt. Cornflakes were also available for those who wanted them. I washed this excellent breakfast down with a cup of tea; also on offer was coffee and orange juice.

Although it now began to rain slightly, nobody cared. The whole concept of this safari tour, the prospect of eating, camping and roughing it like this for six days was quite a novelty for me, and already I was beginning to enjoy the experience.

As soon as we had finished eating, big plastic basins full of hot water and suds were produced, and we did our own washing up. When everything was stacked away in the kitchen van – how on earth did they fit everything in? – Colm and I selected seats on the better of the two coaches and we finally set off at about 10.30 a.m.



Our coach was quite comfortable and had good, large windows. However, there was not enough space between the seats for those with long legs. All of the buses were equipped with two-way radios (necessary for keeping in touch when we reached the uninhabited wildernesses) and ordinary radios. Each bus had a huge

aerial with a thick cylinder in the middle (for two-way communication) and a small ordinary one (for conventional radio). We soon noticed that all the jeeps and large vehicles that we passed had similar large aerials.

Our guide now introduced himself over the loudspeaker system; his name was Arthur Bogasson. He was tall and ruddy, with blond hair and a beard. Although he was only in his late twenties, he was a university professor who taught German and philosophy. We learned later that he had visited Berlin and London, that he had married a German girl, had been divorced, and then had married an Icelandic girl, with whom he had one child. This was obviously his summer job. Although he spoke English fluently, he was inclined to make occasional mistakes that often caused a roar of laughter in the bus.

Arthur introduced us to the driver, whose nickname was Bobo. Bobo, explained Arthur, would be driving us through many miles of rough terrain – a job that needed much skill and experience. Bobo, who also had a blond beard but a rougher complexion, wore spectacles and sported a warm Icelandic sweater. Although he kept his attention on the road before him, he constantly laughed and joked with Arthur; I was fascinated to hear the sounds of the Icelandic language with its rolled Rs and Welsh LLs.

Arthur turned out to be a most intelligent and informative chap; he kept up a non-stop commentary on everything around us that was nearly always interesting to listen to. He also had a great sense of humour. It was obvious that he liked us, and we immediately took a liking to him.

He now gave us a rough outline of our itinerary and explained how everything would be organized. He told us that every so often we would stop for what he politely called a 'technical pause' or 'T.P.', where we would be able to use the supplied 'facilities'. He also told us that in the evenings we would sometimes be stopping at huts where, for a small fee, we could enjoy comfortable sleeping accommodation if we did not feel like putting up a tent.

We drove quickly through the uninteresting suburbs of Reykjavík and crossed a bridge over a river, where one could fish for 'syle-mons' (as Arthur pronounced the word 'salmon') at a high price. We now found ourselves in empty and rather barren countryside, heading northwards. We soon drove around Mount Esja; the name, according to Arthur, had rather dubious and obscure Irish connections.

We then entered the wide and expansive Hvalfjörður or Whale Fjord, so called because of the whales that at one time used to be found here. Despite the lack of blue sky and sunshine, the area looked quite picturesque, with tall green mountains sweeping down to the calm water.

Arthur now began to tell us a long, intricate tale from one of the old sagas of how a local hero had once led a whale up the fjord; as I now began to feel drowsy from the stuffiness of the bus and the amount of cigarette smoke in the air, I was unable to follow what he was saying. However, I was soon woken by the jolting of the coach over rough stones, due to the sudden disappearance of the tarmac road. This, explained Arthur, would be what most routes would be like in the interior of the island. No wonder the coaches were so sturdily constructed and had radio contact!

The tarmac road reappeared for a short stretch, but soon ended; it turned out that this was something of an experiment. On we jolted, with the engine roaring.

Behind Colm and me sat Chris with another fellow; opposite, on our right, sat two girls who smoked like chimneys. Behind them sat a small plump fellow with spectacles who smoked cigars. Colm stood up to open the skylight window, for there were no others to open.



The Laxá (Salmon River)

We were relieved when we eventually stopped at the Laxá (Salmon River): a delightfully clear wide stream with a small waterfall. We jumped out of the bus, scrambled along the banks to the waterfall, enjoying the fresh, invigorating air and sampling the icy-cool water. After about ten minutes we were happy to return to the bus, feeling a good deal fresher and ready for more adventure. As I had stopped to look at the mountains through somebody's binoculars, I was last in and was teased by some of my companions.



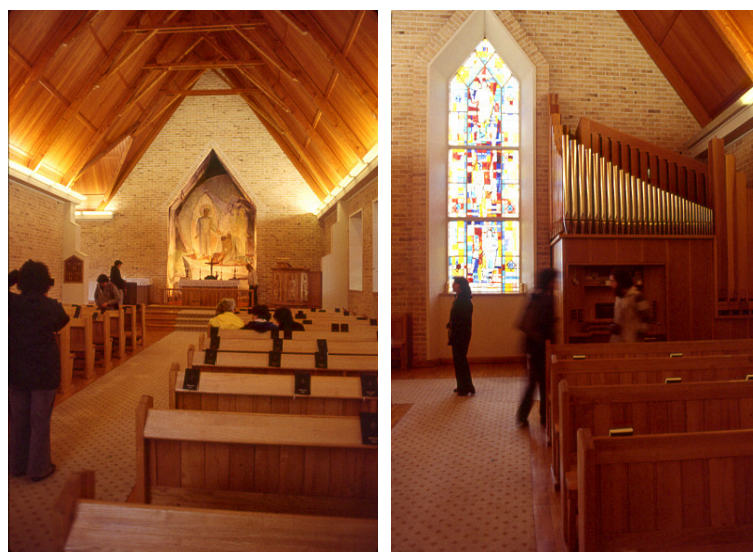
Whaling station, Hvalfjörður

Off we bumped again, driving towards the end of the Hvalfjörður fjord and passing a derelict American military base on the way; this had been used by the Allies during WW II. All that could be seen were the remains of a harbour and a few ruined buildings. At the end of the fjord we passed the picturesque Whale Mountain,

then drove along the other side of the inlet. Here we came to a whaling station, where we stopped to take a look. A foul smell greeted us when we clambered out of the coach; the odour was coming from huge cooking pots here and there. We climbed up to a platform to watch some workers cutting up a whale, which looked quite gruesome. We were told that this was the place where the whales caught around Iceland and Greenland were cut up and cooked, mainly for animal food, and exported. We were told that the number of whales caught annually was strictly controlled.

We were very glad to leave this place, but not too pleased when we discovered that our first 'technical pause' would be just down the road. This was a small petrol station that included a shop, a restaurant and public loos. Carl, Chris and I stretched our legs by taking a ten-minute walk up and down the road.

We set off once again and drove along the fjord towards the sea, then stopped at a little modern church. We were told that it had been built to commemorate the much admired seventeenth-century poet and hymnist Hallgrímur Petursson (to whom the church in Reykjavík had been dedicated). We were also informed that people still sing his Passion Hymns, and that his beautiful meditation 'On the Uncertain Hour of Death' is spoken over the dead.



Church commemorating Hallgrímur Petursson, Hvalfjörður

We went in to have a look. The interior was simple, yet attractively designed; much use was made of plain, varnished wood. At the back was a fine pipe organ, possibly voiced in the Baroque manner, which Colm and I would have loved to have heard. On the altar facsimiles of early printed editions of Halgrímur's poetry and hymns were displayed. Smaller hymnals had the texts translated into various European languages, including English. There was a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere in the little church. Beside it and facing the fjord was a small graveyard.

From Saurbær, the name of this district, we now left the road, travelling northwards and inland through some fine scenery, and passing holiday cottages that looked like miniature Swiss chalets, though with roofs that swept right down to the ground. They were made of wood and looked very attractive.

We then came to a stop by a long, narrow lake named Skorradalvatn and pulled up behind the kitchen van, which had driven on ahead of us. It was now time for lunch. We went outside, where it was drizzling rain, looked inside a farmer's hut, then helped ourselves to the food that had been laid upon the long wooden tables. The same selection of breads that we had enjoyed for breakfast now awaited us, along with cheese, cooked meats, various types of tinned fish, and salad. We washed this down with either milk, tea, coffee or orange juice. Most of us went into the empty hut to escape the rain, eat our lunch and chat. Afterwards, some of us attempted to walk by the lake but were called back to the coach, for we were due to leave immediately.



Snake River

As we drove off, heading inland, I became drowsy and began to doze. I woke when we stopped in a huge, expansive flat valley with a view of a river that meandered across it in crazy S-shape patterns; it had been appropriately named the Snake River. As this was one of Arthur's many 'interesting phenomena', we eagerly jumped out of the coach in order to take photographs. The area was desolate: not a sign of life could be seen.

We now drove along the banks of the gushing Hvítá or White River; the water was really white due to the minerals in the icy water. This route would bring us to

Reykholt ('Smoky Copse'), an area in which hot springs had sent steam up through woodland that now no longer existed. Reykholt was once the home of Iceland's greatest and most famous saga writers, Snorri Sturluson, about whom Arthur now spoke.

Snorri ('sharp-witted') lived from 1179 to 1241. He was a scholar, historian, teacher and Christian priest. He was well versed in classical history, and was able to read both Latin and Greek. He wrote down the various legends that he had heard, his most famous work being the Prose Edda. Other works of his are 'The Beguiling of Gylfi', 'Disc of the Earth', a history of Norway up to 1177, and various sagas, probably including 'Egilssaga'. However, during his life he was a much-hated man, for he was known to be quarrelsome and unpleasant. Being rich and powerful, he was twice elected as Law Speaker at the annual Alping ('Congress'). He built himself a magnificent house in Reykholt and was one of the first people to use the local hot water for his home-made bath and also for cooking. He plotted to kill King Haakon of Norway, but his plan was discovered and an emissary sent by the king found and murdered him in a cellar.

We soon arrived at Reykholt, an unremarkable modern village surrounded by green pastureland, and tumbled out of the coach. Here we were shown a small circular hot pool, the type once used by Snorri Sturluson, and an opening in the side of a hill that was reputed to be the cellar in which Snorri was murdered. We all dipped our hands into the water in order to sample the temperature, which was quite hot, then went to see a modern statue of the hero that had been placed in front of a nearby school. There was little else to see here apart from a souvenir shop.



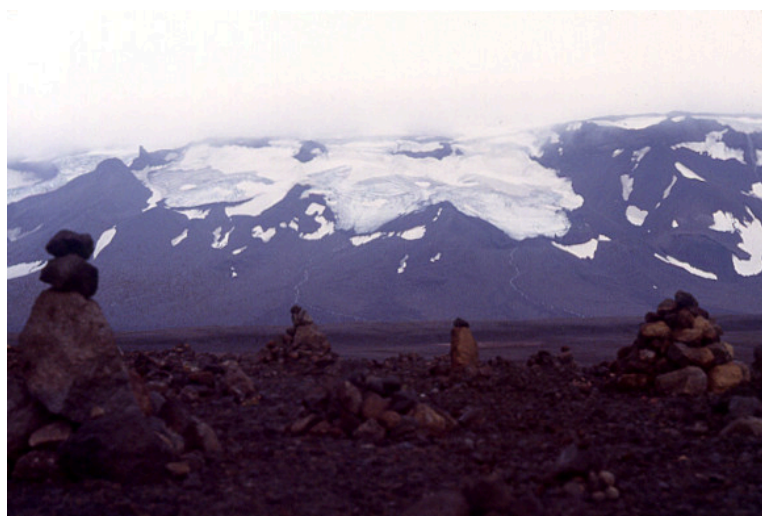
The Hvítá river at Hraunfossar

After we had used the local facilities during another 'technical pause', we set off again and followed the mighty Hvítá to Hraunfossar, where we jumped out to view some impressive waterfalls along the river. At one point we were able to admire a series of waterfalls that sprang from underground streams and gushed down the steep banks into the river. Farther along was a more conventional waterfall. One of

the lads in our group slipped on some wet rocks and fell into some water, drenching his jeans in the process; fortunately he was able to change into another pair.

When we had finished exploring the area, we clambered aboard our coaches and set off again, driving now through picturesque green valleys including the Swine Valley, where a group of people had revived the ancient Norse religion and its customs, despite the dire warnings of the local bishop. We passed more cute chalets, farmsteads, and a few tiny brightly-painted churches that, as Colm put it, looked like toys.

We continued to Húsafell, the last and highest farm in the region, then turned southwards, climbing steep, black though snow-capped mountains on the way to Kaldidalur ('Cold Dale'): a wild and desolate mountain pass. The scenery changed dramatically as we left the green pastureland behind. The road now disintegrated into a track that was barely discernible in the black volcanic ash. The motor roared as Bobo changed down the gears, and we bumped about ferociously as we struggled up the steep hills and then slid down the other sides with the brakes heavily applied. The wheels churned up loose dust and a thick black film quickly settled on the windows.



Kaldidalur

We eventually made it up to the bleak mountain pass and gasped when we looked out at the magnificent scene before us: two mighty glacier-topped peaks to the left and right, Eiríksjökull and Þorísjökull (Erik and Thor's Glaciers), and in front the gradual appearance of a huge, flat and dazzling white glacier, the Langjökull. Several times I wished that we could have stopped to take photographs of this amazing view; when I eventually did ask for a 'photo stop', Arthur told me that we would be stopping at the highest point and so I left it until then. We soon arrived at the spot, but gone were the dramatic scenes that I had spotted earlier, in which great tongues of ice had swept down the mountainsides. We jumped out of the bus into the cold air and wasted little time taking photographs. On the roadside were hundreds of small piles of stones in the shape of cones, which people had placed there over the years, presumably following an old custom.

We then stopped a second time to take more photos and fool around with the snow. We all clambered down a cliff to a large patch of ice just below the road, where we romped about, throwing snowballs at each other and laughing boisterously. The scene from the bus looked interesting in the viewfinder of my camera: an elongated strip of ice on a black surface, with colourfully-dressed people walking along it. (The photograph that I took can be seen on the cover of this travelogue.) By now the cold air had woken me up and it was pleasant to return to the relative warmth of the coach. Arthur informed us that the reason why the road was in such good condition here was because it had recently been used for a car rally.

We now rounded another glacier-topped mountain and gradually began to drop in altitude, passing a long wire fence running north to south, thereby dividing the island in two. The purpose of this was to prevent wild sheep spreading disease in neighbouring regions. At certain places there were gates that could to be opened.

At one point we whizzed past a cairn where travellers were supposed to comply with local custom by stopping to write a rhyme on a piece of paper and place it under a stone. As we were now short of time, we skipped this and continued driving towards the famous Þingvellir, situated south of the Kaldidalur pass.



Pingvallavatn

Eventually the 'Assembly Plains' appeared before us: an expansive, flat, brown rocky area containing a huge lake (the Pingvallavatn), surrounded by distant, rugged mountains. It bore a vague resemblance to the Grand Canyon in its colouring and terrain; the failing light and grey clouds now gave it all a rather spooky atmosphere. Here and there the valley floor had split into rifts, where the two continental plates had parted and molten lava had risen to the surface, thereby widening the island in the process.

It was an extraordinary place, devoid of life and eternally silent. Yet it was here that the people, local farmers, *góðar* (priest-chieftains) and *þingmen* (members of parliament) assembled for two weeks in late June to attend the Alþing (Congress) and listen to the Law Speaker, who recited the codes of law in verse which, before the twelfth century, had to be learned by heart as nothing was written down. The Law Speaker (elected once every three years) was also consulted about various matters concerning the law. Judges were chosen by the *góðar* and courts of law were established. The Alþing was always a great social occasion, during which everyone settled their personal affairs.

Not only does the valley widen due to the drifting apart of the tectonic plates, but it also sinks. The rocks of the resulting fissure, which have jagged edges, stick up like cliffs on both sides. At the opening of this natural corridor is the Law Speaker's Rock, where he stood to address the multitude before him.

We got out of the bus here, climbed up the rock and looked out over the weird landscape. It was unlike anything that we had seen before. Below us, by a lake, were a few buildings; Arthur told us that some of the buildings had recently been constructed for a film that was being shot here.



The Almannagjá

We now walked along the rather forbidding Almannagjá (Rift Rock of the People), walled in both sides by steep rocks that had once been joined together many thousands of years previously. As it was now getting darker, we walked quickly. A little stream of clear water ran along the bottom of the rift. Near the end, a few of us

stopped to talk to the other guide, whom we had not met properly until now. His name was Sigurgeir Þorbjörnsson, shortened to Geiri and already changed to Gerry. He was younger than Arthur, and not so tall, with fair hair and a beard like his companion. Geiri had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes and was known to be more humorous and friendly than Arthur. He had been sitting beside everyone in his coach, chatting to them and encouraging them to sing, though he did point out all the interesting sights and explain things just as Arthur had done.

He now told us more about the plain and the geological formations. Although his English was not as good as Arthur's, he was able to make himself understood. (Later I learned that he taught deaf adults to speak.)

We now hurried to the bus, clambered aboard and drove along a bumpy road to our kitchen van, which had stopped at a camping site that had a 'facilities' building not far away. We were all ready for our dinner by now, and queued to be served helpings of halibut, potatoes boiled in their skins, a tasty sauce and salad, all washed down with what our guides called soup, but which tasted like watery marmalade containing plums.

Afterwards I used the excellent facilities centre to clean my teeth and wash. I then helped Colm put up our tent, which he had collected from the kitchen van. Neither he or nor I had ever erected a tent before and therefore we had to watch the others, who were busily at work. Fortunately Geiri came along to check that everything was in order, and so we soon had our tent up. We then borrowed a pump to blow up our air mattresses; as Colm's was punctured, he had to take a second sleeping bag in lieu of it. Many of our companions, who obviously were not used to air mattresses, pumped them up too much until they backfired, groaning mournfully like sick animals. It was most amusing to hear these odd noises from inside our tent while we organized our belongings.

Before settling down for the night, we were offered cups of tea or coffee. I took neither, but sipped a small helping of milk. Colm and I then zipped ourselves into our tent, undressed and snuggled into our sleeping bags. We chatted for a while, then fell silent, listening to conversations that wafted from other tents, and raindrops that began to fall on our own. Lulled by the rhythmical drumming of the rain, I soon drifted off asleep, thus ending a most unusual and interesting, day.