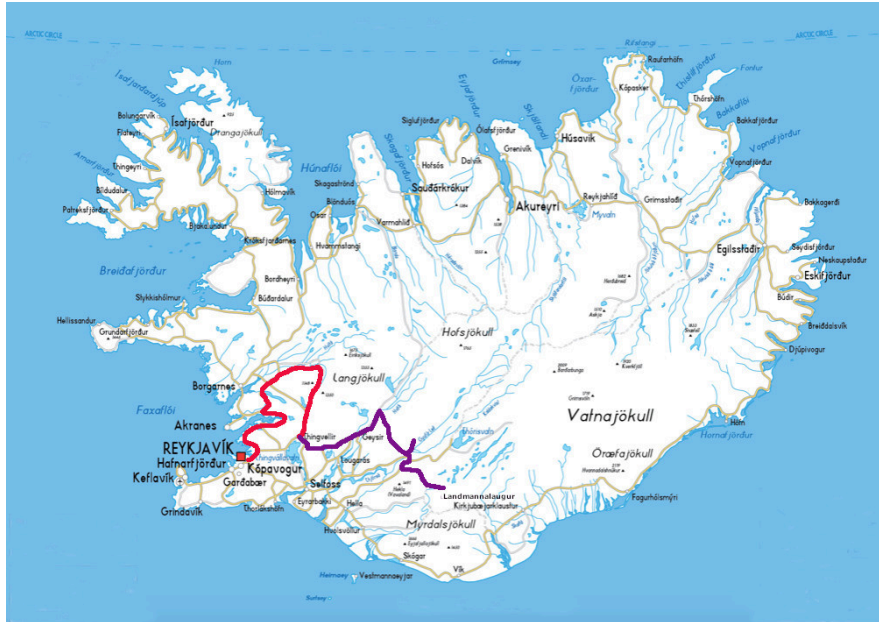


3 – THE SAFARI: DAY 2



Monday, 25 August

I woke at six o'clock, dressed, crept out of the tent into drizzling rain, and went off for an hour's walk. The sky was grey and the stark surroundings of rock and moss-covered lava looked eerie in the dull morning light; distant craggy mountains loomed out of the mist. I returned soon after seven o'clock and sat down to write my diary. At eight I joined the gang for a hearty breakfast. Afterwards I walked over to the facilities building, but found it locked.

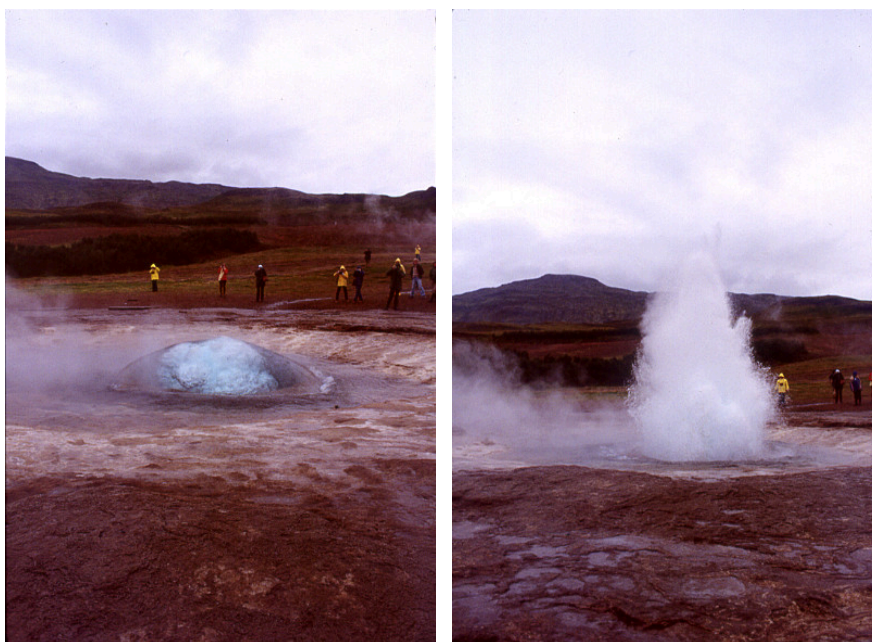
When Colm and I boarded the coach, we discovered that our seats had been taken by a couple of girls who had sat by the door during the previous day. We were now glad to take their seats, for there were less smokers up at the front, there was more fresh air and we had a good view through the front and side window. Opposite us sat a stocky chap with shoulder-length blond hair and a beard, whose name was Peadar. He sat beside his young wife, Anne. Peadar divided his time between smoking cigarettes, reading, and looking out of the window. Behind Peadar and Anne were Mary and her companion Amber who came from Australia. In front of us sat a pleasant English family who kept very much to themselves: mum, dad and their two teenage daughters.

Before we drove away from Pingvellir, we stopped in front of the facilities building, which had finally been opened. I made quick use of the washroom and returned to the bus.

Our first destination this morning was the site of the famous Icelandic geysers; we were told that the word came from the Icelandic word for 'gusher'. To get to where these geysers were, we now travelled through some flat green countryside, passing farms and pastureland.

We soon arrived at a desolate area where the air was full of steam, and stopped. We were now in a rocky valley surrounded by mountains. Within a fenced-off area, which we entered through a gate, we could see several small craters full of boiling water that emitted clouds of steam. Arthur asked us to follow him and the routes marked by white stones, and not to deviate from them; as this was a geothermal region, it was dangerous to cross certain areas because of unexpected volcanic activity.

We got out of the coach and Arthur opened the gate for us. We then walked to Stori Geysir (Great Gusher), which had at one time thrown its tower of steam a hundred feet into the air. Unfortunately it no longer did so thanks to people clogging it up with pebbles and rubbish in order to stimulate it. It was now just a large circular basin of boiling water that continuously bubbled and stank of sulphur. We stood beside it for a while in a light drizzle of rain, watching and dipping our fingers into the water.



Strokkur Geysir

The second geyser that we stopped to look at was also dormant, but the third one, Strokkur (The Churn, known as the 'little brother' of Stori Geysir), was active and erupted every six minutes or so. Out came the cameras and we positioned ourselves, waiting. The water boiled, began to churn and belch, then suddenly rose, forming itself into a huge, blue bubble and then, with a loud hiss, it burst into a tall jet of hot steam. It was difficult to snap a picture of the bubble, for it only lasted for a second or two; I missed it on my first attempt. I stayed to watch it erupt a few more times before I left, walking across an area where jets of steam were escaping from small holes. It looked as though energy was being harnessed from one of these hot springs, for I saw pipes leading to some sort of a contraption made of concrete. Although it was an unusual place, I soon tired of it, for it had not been as spectacular as I had been led to believe. I now joined my companions in a local souvenir shop, where I sent off some more postcards.



Gullfoss

We left shortly afterwards and continued to Gullfoss, the Golden Falls: a huge and very spectacular waterfall on the Fossá. When we reached it, we climbed down muddy banks to the white icy water's edge, where we were deafened by the mighty roar of the cascading water. This could have provided an unlimited source of power for a hydroelectric plant; the government had already considered the possibility of building one but as the scheme was so fiercely opposed by the locals and one lady in particular because of the ugliness of such an intrusion, the plan had been abandoned. Unfortunately it was still gloomy and inclined to rain; under ideal conditions the waterfall's three mighty cataracts must have appeared very dramatic and splendid. One could get very close to the water's edge by scrambling about the rocks, though it was easy to get drenched from the spray.

From here we drove southwards to the Þjósa (Ship's Beak River) and stopped on the bank, beside the kitchen van, for lunch. Once again we had an excellent selection of food, though I did not eat too much this time.



Hvalparfoss

After I had used water from the river to wash my teeth and then my hands, we set off again. We followed the course of the wide river, then turned northwards. We then stopped at a small waterfall named Hjalparfoss on the Fossá. We were now in the Þjórsárdalur (Valley of the Ship's Beak River), which was of great interest to geologists because of its strange mountains of tuff, breccia and basalt, and the valley floor made of hardened lava, said to be 3,500 years old. Arthur told us much about the place, though most of the information went in through one ear and out of the other, for this type of information reminded me too much of the boring geography lessons that we had endured at school!



Þjórsárdalur

From Hjalparfoss, which paled in comparison with Gullfoss and left little or no impression on me, we made our way to the tiny but historical farm of Stöng, the only remaining one in what had once been a flourishing community of farmsteads that had been mentioned in the Sagas. Gaukur Trandilsson, a great hero of the tenth century, had once lived here. However, after Mount Hekla had erupted in 1104 and had laid the land waste, the area was never inhabited again.



Stöng

We now rounded a grassy knoll, on top of which was perched a cottage made of turf, with a bright green grass roof; behind it could be seen a magnificent backdrop consisting of the side of a mountain and a small waterfall. This farmhouse had been reconstructed, based on its ruins, by Scandinavian archaeologists in 1939. It now served as an example of what a typical medieval Icelandic or Norse farm must have looked like.

We drove up to the farmhouse along a narrow road on the other side of the hill. The doorway was made of black wood; inside it was very dark, the only light shining through the narrow chimneys in the roof. It was unbelievably warm in here as the walls had been made of such thick blocks of peat. The spartan furniture was crude and made of plain wood that had been hewn with an axe; in the main room were long benches that served as seats and beds, running lengthwise. Also in the main room were upright wooden pillars and cross members, the master's bed (which looked more like a cupboard), a large storage box and a primitive loom. Fires would have been lit in a central depression, the smoke drifting about the room to choke its occupants before eventually escaping through the chimney above. Three smaller rooms led off this main room: the women's room for sewing and weaving (that was how they were expected to put in the time throughout the bleak winters), the dairy containing large wooden vats to hold the *skýr* (a concoction of sour milk and other ingredients much loved by the Icelanders), and the loo: a small chamber with pits dug at the base of the walls. Geiri demonstrated how they were used by squatting over one of them!

Meals at this time had been simple: bread and butter, meat and fish roasted on the fire, and large bowls of *skýr*. Although there was not much to see here, I was glad to have seen the house because of its historical importance. The farmhouse had been very well reconstructed.

Leaving this valley, we then drove to Búrfell to see a hydroelectric station. Up until now, Arthur had been promising us sights that we probably had not seen at home in Ireland. When he asked us if we had hydroelectric stations in Ireland and we all shouted 'Yes!', he laughed and from then the whole thing became something of a joke. During the rest of the tour he would tell us about various extraordinary things and sights that we would see which, he would add, we probably had already seen in Ireland. As expected, the hydroelectric station was of little interest to us. The main hall, where the machinery was located, was very noisy; I collected a leaflet about the place and left.

Afterwards we headed towards the south of the island and Mount Hekla, making our way from the rivers and lakes to a vast black wilderness. At one time this had been pastureland and now was covered in a thick layer of ash from the previous Sunday's eruption. We stopped at a river with a view of Mount Hekla barely visible through a thick mist, and clambered down a slope to collect plastic bagfuls of the clean ash. We romped about and crossed over to a river, our feet sinking into the soft, newly-formed surface. It was a novel experience, for the blackness of the landscape added a most unusual touch to the otherwise unremarkable view.

Back in the bus once again, we now headed eastwards, rounding Mount Hekla (the Cowled Cloak) and arrived at another hydroelectric power station which, we were told, would be our last outpost of civilization for three days, during which we would be travelling in uninhabited parts of the interior. We laughed; surely the

places we had already been in were uninhabited? However, many of us decided to take no chances and returned to the coach from a local shop laden with bottles of booze, Coca-Cola, biscuits, sweets and bars of chocolate in an effort to stock up for the next little while. Some people immediately sampled the local beer and pronounced it to be vile stuff. As we moved off, a party started at the back of the coach. Sweet papers rustled and soon empty bottles began rolling about the floor.

The road now disintegrated into just a hint of a track as we made our way across a large, empty lava desert with occasional black hills and mountains topped with dazzling white snow. Here and there were blue lakes and innumerable rushing streams that crossed our path, which meant that we splashed through them regularly. Although the surface was stony and it was rough going, it was marvellous fun. It was as if we had landed on another planet, for I had never seen anything like this before. If there had been no noisy coach and no laughing Irish people, the area would have been engulfed in an eerie silence.



Lava desert (top) and the Ugly Red Crater (bottom)

The scenery now became even more spectacular as we rose in altitude and veered off the main route to an infrequently visited region. We now climbed up a hill covered in loose black volcanic ash and stones – how Bobo drove up it without the coach slipping backwards amazed me – and stopped at the edge of the Ugly Red

Crater. This was the wide mouth of a dormant volcano with dull red sides that were almost vertical. Within the caldera was now a lake. It was a very dramatic sight in the fading evening light; above us hung threatening grey and white clouds. Far below could be seen the region through which we had travelled: an extensive panorama of lakes and dark mountains. In front could be seen more mountains, though of a different kind, which were brown or sandy coloured. Up here there was a stiff breeze. We walked around, chatting and taking photographs, then climbed back into the coaches.

We now drove down to our next destination: Landmannalaugur ('Hot Springs of the Land Men'), where we were to spend the night. We were told that there was a spring of boiling hot water a short distance from our campsite, which flowed into a cool stream in which we could bathe. We were all looking forward to this and had brought swimsuits. On our way to Landmannalaugur we passed an unusual sandy-coloured mountain with a rock formation at the top that resembled a bishop's head. Here the scenery became more fantastic and extraordinary, for the mountains, made of a mixture of different types of rocks, were of varying colours. Overall they were either light brown or sandy coloured, but had streaks of dark brown, grey, red, purple, green and other colours. There was very little vegetation hereabouts.



Landmannalaugur

We soon arrived in Landmannalaugur: a large valley surrounded by these strange mountains, some of them topped with snow. The floor of the valley was flat, sandy, and crossed by a number of meandering, powerful streams. We drove in and out of some of these as we neared our destination, and eventually arrived at a patch of green dotted with white marsh cotton plants, where we found the familiar kitchen van, some tents and a little wooden building with a bright green corrugated iron roof. This was the tourist hut where, for a fee of 1,000 kronur, we could sleep during the night if we did not feel like putting up a tent.

As it was cold and wet here, most of us decided to wallow in a little bit of luxury and sleep indoors this evening. When the doors of our coach were opened, Colm and I bounded out first, walked into the spotlessly clean hut with its Scandinavian-style furnishings, removed our shoes, entered the dormitory and marked two of the bunk

beds for ourselves. The cosy room was heated by the local hot water supply and the views from the little windows were quite picturesque.

When the others came in to claim beds, we wandered back to the hall, where we said hello to the girl who looked after the place, peeped into a spotless kitchen, then climbed a wooden ladder to the attic, where we found mattresses laid out on the floor. We were lucky to have chosen a bunk bed! There was a pleasantly restful atmosphere about the place.

We then returned to the coach, collected our luggage and brought it inside. By now the dormitory was full; those who had not managed to get a bed for themselves were now laying mattresses on the floor. We took out our sleeping bags and then went outside to investigate the naturally-heated pool.



Landmannalaugur

As the ground was so marshy and soggy, we walked along a wooden gangway to the stream. Steps led down into the water, which was warm and steaming. As we had spare time before dinner, we decided to have our dip now. Back in the hut I changed into my swimming togs and put on my rain gear, which I reckoned would keep me warm enough for the short walk to the stream and back. I then ran out along the gangway, threw off the rain gear and plunged into the water, which only came up to my chest. It was wonderful! I crouched down, as instructed, until the warm water came up to my neck, and crawled about. The temperature changed from one place to another. There were hot spots here and there that were clearly indicated by bubbles in the water. When one waded over them, the water became scalding hot.

Some of our companions came to look and then joined us in the water. A French man was swimming naked; shortly afterwards a French lady appeared, stripped off completely and got into the water. A few of us expressed surprise, though by now anything seemed possible here. Sighing with satisfaction, we dallied in the warm water for some time, relaxing and enjoying our unusual surroundings, which included the surrounding greenery and ice-topped mountains in the distance. Colm tried to teach me to swim, but made very little progress.

Eventually I emerged from the warm water into the cold evening air, threw on my rain gear, ran back to the hut as quickly as possible, dried myself and changed back into my clothes. We were all amazed at how quickly we had managed to dry off.

We then queued in front of the kitchen van for a good dinner of smoked lamb (an Icelandic speciality) with onion, potatoes and delicious soup. I was given one huge potato, about three or four inches long. The lamb tasted more of smoke than lamb, though I did enjoy it.

Colm and I took a quick walk afterwards in order to walk down the food, then returned to the hut, which was pleasantly warm inside after the cool mountain air. Our dormitory was now lit by an oil lamp and a candle. I took out my diary and began to write today's entry, sitting by the candle.

Bottles of booze were then produced and a party got under full swing, complete with patriotic Irish songs and ballads. It was a pleasantly intimate scene: about thirty young people, either sitting on the bunk beds or the floor in the dimly lit wooden room. It was good fun; we felt uninhibited and sang lustily. Outside we could hear a guitar being strummed: the Icelanders were having their own get-together in the kitchen van. Colm and I joined in, singing or just listening to our companions enjoying themselves. I was surprised that Colm was able to sing along with some of the songs, knowing that he, like me, was a connoisseur of classical music. Although he did retire to bed early, it certainly was not possible for him to go asleep.

Eventually, as the night wore on, the singing became more unsteady as the drink began to take its effect and the party began to disintegrate as people chatted and larked about. By now it became late and those who were not so enthusiastic began to make a move for bed. Somebody came in and announced that there was a 'disco on the bus', which had the desired effect of shifting out the young people who wanted to continue with the fun. They went outside, leaving us to undress and retire to bed.

Despite the heat in the dormitory, I now felt a little shivery, as if I was catching a cold. This may have been caused by the changes of temperature that we had experienced today. In an attempt to sweat out the oncoming cold I helped myself to a tincture of whiskey from somebody's bottle, which had been left on the floor, and jumped into bed in a sort of daze. Looking across to the other side of the dormitory I feasted my eyes on the curves of a girl's body; she was sleeping naked with the side of her sleeping bag unzipped because of the heat in the room. However, the alcohol soon exercised its desired effect and soon I dropped off into a deep sleep, dead to the world.