

# Chasing the Lights: Auroric Expectations

It seemed like a good idea. We decided that our Christmas present to each other should be a package-deal mini-holiday to Iceland, to see the Northern Lights, that mysterious epitome of all things Northern. They were on offer at a bit under £300, including flights and four nights hotel accommodation in Reykjavik.. We had been to Iceland before, twice, but only in the summer, when it does is not dark enough to see the Lights; in fact, it does not get dark at all. This seemed an opportunity to make good something we had missed out on.

In early February it gets does dark in Iceland, for quite a long time. We arrived there on Saturday afternoon, to find night falling at about 17.00 (just as at home) but the next morning it was inky-black until just before 10.00. It was also raining; that evening's Northern Lights tour had been cancelled – still we had three more opportunities. The hotel was clean and modern – but its rooms were miniscule, and its corridors adorned by the usual large abstract canvasses one sees everywhere in this country, seemingly produced by enthusiastic sixth formers. The staff wore uniforms labelled 'Hotel Orc', which seemed a little ominous. Elsewhere we were reminded that Tolkien sought inspiration on an Icelandic holiday before penning his epic volumes. Perhaps he came here.

Outside, there was weather. Rapidly-changing, but mostly bad. Sleet, rain, snow, then five minutes dry, the only constant a biting wind. Just occasionally there were wonderful glimpses of skyscape, and the surrounding mountains, but never for more than a minute or two. Inside, where you needed to be to escape the said weather, was expense. A plate of fish and chips is £14 for instance, a coffee about £3.50. A few places are free; a coin museum, for instance, in a huge and opulent building that houses the Central Bank but which, for some reason, is now completely anonymous externally... Hallgrimskirkja, a spectacular concrete church, completed in 1986 and Perlen, another fine modern building based on six former water tanks, containing a fountain that simulates a geyser and a roof-level terrace offering superb views over the city and its peninsula.

We had three full days, and had to get out of town on at least one of them, So on Monday we hired a car and set out west with the intent of seeing the volcano (Eyjafjallajökull, since you asked) that made so much news last year, or at least some of its effects. One organised trip offered a jeep ride to do just this; we thought the cost of c£250 might be OK if split with two or three other couples, but then found the figure was per head, not for the vehicle. So we went ourselves. The weather was diabolical; horizontal rain became a snow blizzard, and (at times) total whiteout on a suicidally busy main road. On the lower ground beyond Selfoss things were not so bad, but it rained and rained. We got to see a few rivers clogged with black ash, but that was about it; above us snowy slopes rose into murk. Waterfalls tumbled over cliffs but never made it to the bottom – the wind was that strong. We drove up one valley (towards the outlet glacier from the mountain) but soon reached the inevitable sign, 4x4s only; going further in our Polo would have invalidated our insurance. That was it. At Skogafoss – just a distant glimpse of the mighty waterfall through the driving rain – we gathered a sample of soggy ash, and turned back west. At Hveragerdi, just beyond Selfoss, hot springs enable bananas (not a native part of Icelandic flora) to be grown in greenhouses; we called in at a gardening centre and bought an expensive book on the eruption.

So, finally, to the Northern Lights. We had signed up for a trip on our last night, Tuesday; the weather was easing slightly. Everything for tourists here is well organised. A coach called at our hotel at 20.30 to collect around forty of us and take us to the bus station, where a whole row of big buses were filling up. The long convoy left town, and after ten miles or so, with the city lights behind us, we actually saw them!.... a dim line of radiance, like the moon catching the edge of thin high cloud. We pulled into a layby, and disembarked. The technocrats set up their SLRs on tripods –

but their time exposures were promptly ruined as the happy snappers wandered in front of them firing their flashguns (totally ineffectual of course) this way and that. People shouted at each other,. Acrimony grew. We were also constantly swept by headlights; the road was a crocodile of coaches, cars and 4x4s. Icelandic organisation had brought us all to the same place. We drove on, and a green radiance on the northern horizon briefly flared brighter, but we could not stop – every layby and parking space was full. When we finally halted by a 'restroom', it was too late, clouds had swept in and the lights had gone. Our longest stop was here, waiting for a group of Spaniards who in the end it transpired had gone back on another bus. Then back to our hotel, for midnight.

Up at four next morning, to a blizzard; nevertheless, our coach got us to the airport, and the plane took off more or less on time. The joy of the return flight was stopping at Manchester – where we had to disembark and be security checked all over again, because the UK does not trust anyone else's checks – before eventually being delivered back to Glasgow, into yet more horizontal rain.

Worth it? Probably not. We saw a far more impressive display of the Lights here at home in Northumberland a few years ago. If you could guarantee both clear skies and a decent level of solar activity, it would be a good idea going, but Iceland is suffering the same climatic unpredictabilities as the rest of us. Maybe it would be better to go a little later in the year, when daylight and dark balance out a bit more – and find a place where you can escape both the city lights and the crowds of Lights Chasers.

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Success, we saw them!