

ICELAND 2009

Friday 12th June: Getting there

Rumbling down the footpath to Riding Mill Station for the 1353 and a pleasant~enough train journey; only change at Newcastle (where PFR trotted to Jessops to buy a basic 'spare' digicamera to find 10 mgp is now the entry-level norm). Manchester airport by 1830, which is much like any other big airport (but even more like Ikea the way they make you wind through glittery places selling things en route to the airlock system that eventually vomits you forth into the sky. Actually, to our surprise we left ten minutes early (2155), into the grey of a late cloudy dusk; the plane slanted skyward through a brief



stratum of murk to emerge in a clear skyscape and set its nose north-north-east. After half an hour the lights of a city twinkled up through the cloud – was it Belfast? - and then there was nothing to see except for the strange phenomenon of the orange line on the northern horizon brightening as the evening wore on, until, bizarrely, the sun came up! It had been trying to set but we had caught it up; a gentle touch down at Keflavik at 2330 (Iceland time, 0030 ours). Thus we abandoned the chase and saw our solar quarry, mopping his fiery brow, slip with relief behind distant line of jagged mountains. He doesn't get much sleep here, this time of year. An hour or so

of baggage and queues, then we were on the Flybus and 50 km of dual carriageway to Reykjavik, already visible as a pincushion of tiny lights in the north. Arrived, and changed to a smaller bus to be delivered to the Salvation Army guesthouse in the very centre of the city. Friendly guy signed us in and insisted of carrying our cases, but clearly not a REAL Salvationist as he was sitting smoking on the steps when we arrived – unless the rules have changed and there is an Icelandic tobacco exemption as there is a wine one for the bibulous French. Our room was on the second floor at the back, which was a relief as the city centre does not quieten down after dark, probably because there is no dark. Even so there were screams and shouts, a few Viking berserkers lost in time. Comfortable but basic room; notice on wall threatens instant exclusion for drug or alcohol use; felt deeply guilty about the bottle of wine in my rucksack. Being brought up in the SA leaves its legacy.

Saturday 13th June A Rainy Day in Reykjavik

Turn on the tap and that instant smell of sulphur; we are back in Iceland.

Breakfast and then morning prayers with a Norwegian SA officer and two German girls, pleasantly informal; a hint of the Day Of Pentecost but a bit lacking as regards the gift of interpretation. Then sallied forth into Reykjavik, which is not looking its happiest; the tower of Hallsgrímkirkja, the spectacular mid-20th century concrete church central to every view, is just a great block of scaffolding. It seems to be business as usual in most places, although the coffee house where we met a hairy and metalwork-festooned American evangelist last year was now just an empty space, and there are a few other blank windows as well, perhaps a visible expression of the recent collapse of



the banks. People are blaming the financial woes on the mismanagement – some say criminality – of a rich minority. Banking is neo-sorcery anyway, a few people with hidden knowledge do mysterious things that affect the uncomprehending majority, and sometimes get it badly wrong. This seems to be one of those places (like the North East of England) where the same fifty middle-aged men run everything. In Old Testament days God suggested usury was a bad idea, but it takes us a while to get round to learning that. Maybe capitalism has been found wanting. Perhaps one of the reasons the locals here have started whaling again (despite international opinion, and the fact that no-one will buy dead whales off them anymore) is that they are not allowed to harpoon bankers.

Bought some expensive but beautiful books dealing with Iceland's natural wonders. Icelandic food is less wonderful; had tea in what proclaimed itself as a fish-and-chip restaurant; paid the equivalent of £8 for a 10" x 4" ceramic rectangle bearing a few small halved potatoes and four or five battered fragments of 'monkfish', although this one had barely entered the novitiate. Sweet was for me what turned out to be a splodge of yoghurt masking two cherries, and for Elaine a tiny crumbling biscuit, the ingredients of which we were told included local moss. Set out to walk this off (which took around twenty metres) and continued along the coast, and briefly enjoyed fine views out to sea before the rain, which had been on-and-off all day, returned. Plodged wetly back along miles of eroding concrete pavements, seriously soggy by the time we eventually found our guest house again; rain stopped and sun reappeared as we did so.

Sunday 14th June Horsing on the Sabbath

Awoke long after the dawn (which of course never was); after breakfast PFR sallied forth with sketchpad but of course rain came lashing down ere he had barely set pencil to paper. Then morning prayer again (sang 'Blessed Assurance' and 'This is the Day', just like yesterday) this time with Mrs Major – there are no corps officers here, she and her husband head up SA work in Iceland. Then five minutes walk to the National Museum, a horrible pebble-dashed box without but holding fine exhibitions within. These include some remarkable medieval carved woodwork; one 12th century door, with a pair of big carved roundels, is an absolutely stunning piece. The museum's iconic artefact, a little bronze figure with a pyramidal hat, interpreted both as Christ holding a cross and Thor holding his hammer, sums it the religious syncretism that still seems to be around in the established church here, although today the old gods have given way to what people define as 'culture'.

Lunchtime back to the guest house, and into the kitchen to make our sarnies, but a shock! A German girl was in there EATING A WHALE!¹. It was dreadful; we squeezed in between its shining bulk and the wall, slithering in the blubber and blood, trying to avoid its mighty flukes, which were still thrashing wildly. 'Be careful' we cried, but it was already too late; she had swallowed a mouthful without chewing, and never saw the harpoon...

Then it was our turn to be typical Icelandic tourists; we had signed up for a 'Heritage trip' with 'Volcano Horses' horse rental, although it was a minibus that arrived to ferry us 40 km east to the farm that profitably combined equinism with vulcanicity. The landscape on the way was impressively volcanic, if one can shake off the impression that volcanic landscapes tend to look a bit like industrial wastelands, dotted with slagheaps on a grand scale. Crossing a ridge the road hairpinned down to a broad green coastal plain from which, we were told, the sea had been driven back by lava around a

1 Actually some small cubes thereof, so the next bit is a bit over-dramatised. She said it tasted somewhere between liver and beef. I won't be trying it. I don't eat rabbit because I think of cuddly furry bunnies, and whales are, well, sort of the same

thousand years ago. Here was our farm. PFR was issued a middle-aged white and somewhat threadbare horse called something that sounded like 'Growfi', although when, to try and initiate a relationship, he whispered this in its ear it showed no recognition. There were around twenty of us; a quick crash course followed 'this is a saddle, these are reins' and we scrambled aboard and processed nose-to-tail twice around a paddock, then it was out into the open.

When the horse shambles slowly along it is OK; one gets used to looking down from what seems a worrying height, but reins are a poor substitute for handlebars. Don't hang on too tight, or you might be in for a nose dive when a determined horse sights a juicy dandelion. I was just getting used to wobbling slowly along at the back of the line when the horses, all pre-programmed (they do this at least twice a day) assumed what is technically known as the 'toit' gait, said to be characteristic of Icelandic horses. What this feels like, to those who happen to be superimposed on such horses, is that the beast starts to pogo violently. It is exceedingly uncomfortable; tender parts are pounded into to pulp, nausea rises, one hangs on for grim death to what little there is to hang on to. To cap it all (as it were) my riding helmet had been designed for a circular Icelandic head, so it was too tight fore and aft but wide open and draughty on each side. A headache was already developing, and having ones brains shaken to jelly did not help. Shouting 'help I want to get off' would firstly be letting England down (as usual in Iceland, we were in a distinctly multinational group) and would secondly draw ones concentration from the essential task of hanging on. In addition some spiky part of the metal dangly-loop thing you put your foot through was sticking agonisingly into my ankle, but again I dare not be distracted into doing anything about it. What does a horse do if you are sick over it? I was deeply unhappy.

Oddly, the worst passed; we walked and then pogoed, walked and then pogoed again. Like hitting oneself over the head with a hammer, one eventually gets used to the strangest activities. Maybe we once all rode horses, but the bulk of us have evolved out of it. On the last leg of our seven or eight kilometre horseabout I even noticed some wildflowers and birds (including a gingery-brown one with a long spiky beak), then, thankfully, we were back at the ranch. Dismounting was a worry; kick your feet out of the dangly whatnots, hang on to front of saddle and throw your body over the horse to land, hopefully on your feet, on the ground alongside. Oh it hurt! We said goodbye to our horses (mine seemed completely unmoved), and then, because we had signed up for the 'Heritage' ride (at one point the leader had apparently turned and informed those nearby that we were on a lava flow) and had paid extra we were despatched to a nearby hotel for a quick coffee, swallowed as the minibus driver herded us back onto his vehicle for redelivery to Reykjavik.

Going to the Meeting

Sunday evening it was go-to-the-meeting and experience Salvation Army worship. PFR was brought up in this tradition, and the shock (or comfort) was that, yes the language was Icelandic (and thus almost totally incomprehensible) but otherwise this could have been England fifty years ago, right down to the layout of the hall and the style of the texts painted on the walls 'Island fyr Krist'. Cheerful, quite a bit of banter, 'Amens' and 'Allelulias' throughout, just the odd strangeness (a few lads wore hats), nothing posh or pious; these were ordinary local folk. We were certainly welcomed, and very publicly at that, in fact PFR sang a song (lined out first, in the usual SA manner, with an Icelandic translator....). The Lord's Prayer (recognised that!) was used as the benediction, upon which the coffee urns were trundled in and all gathered around broken chocolate cake.

Monday 15th June A Day of Watery Wonders

Early breakfast and goodbye to Reykjavik, driving north in our hired Mazda (yesterday the hire company had telephoned us to say we were getting a Toyota but nevermind). Turned off the main road to Þingvellir onto dirt roads and for an hour did not see another vehicle; wide green valleys, Bayko houses with whitewalls and red roofs, basalt ramparts to the valley sides, back in rural Iceland. Our destination was Glymur, said to be the highest waterfall in the country; at the east end of the sea loch Hvalföður, it is a couple of miles of rough road to a car park with a noticeboard showing aerial photographs and lists of GPS coordinates (quite useless; oh for a Wainwright-style drawing!) and a warning that there were dangers ahead and whoever had erected the board would not be responsible its consultants' fate.

A man with a can of yellow paint had helpfully dripped his way up the footpath. The first mile or so were an easy rubbly trek amongst the lupins up the valley side, and then we arrived on top of a bluff, adorned by a big cairn. Far was below a foaming river; Mr Yellow Splodge had it seemed enthusiastically splattered his way straight over the edge of the cliff. A cautious investigation showed the waymarked path in fact dropped down a little scree and vanished into a cave; the bluff was in fact riddled with holes, and a dimly-lit subterranean scramble took us down to an exit just above the river. There followed a labyrinth of little paths in head-high birch scrub, and then came a bridge – of sorts. The raging torrent was spanned by what looked like a telegraph pole, with a single wire forming a



handline. As if this were not excitement enough, the river then emerged from a deep gorge, a huge slot gouged into the mountain side, and the only way on – and up – was up steep scree and earth to meandering paths winding round gullies high on the side of the main gorge. We passed a big group of Germans being coaxed by their guide along tiny ledges to a dizzying eyrie which allowed a glimpse up the gorge to the fall itself. Here the main river – and several smaller streams on either side – plunge around 200 m. We scaled the gorge side almost to the level of the waterfall top, and found a good viewpoint, although, as often with these big Icelandic falls-into-gorges one cannot appreciate the full height, the lower part being hidden either by spray or, as here, a twist in the canyon walls. A girl we had met lower down told us the fall was 'pretty'; the adjective perhaps better applies to the limited nature of her command of English. Terrifying, dreadful, awesome, perhaps. One glance down and the head spins; kittiwakes circle below, their thin metallic cries² cutting above the ever-present roar of falling water. Hello, hello, I'm at a place called Vertigo.....

Then more miles, west and north again, to the broad east-west valley of Reykholt. Just before turning off the main road rising steam – not a rare sight hereabouts- marks the hot spring of Deildartunguhver, modestly proclaiming itself the largest in the world. All round the base of a natural hillock water spurts,

² simulated exactly by the effect of a tin opener on a can of Jellymeat Whiskas

boils and bubbles; big chrome pipes lead it away towards distant baths and showers and washing machines. What the first settlers thought, stumbling across places like this, one can only surmise. but they quickly made pragmatic use of them. Reykholt was the home of Snorri Sturlson (1179-1241), chieftain and poet (and very much Iceland's Chaucer), who loved to tell stories whilst steeping in his own open-air hot tub – which still survives. A conduit brought in water from a local hot spring, another took steam to heat his adjacent house. He dabbled in power politics but fell out with the King of Norway who sent a hit squad to dispose of him. There is a museum in his honour in the basement of a fine modern church, which has some remarkable new stained glass windows which change colour under different lighting conditions; the museum proprietor (wife of the local Lutheran priest) had a contagious enthusiasm for all things Snorri. There is also a late-19th century church, and a whole series of earlier ones have been excavated; if a church lasts a century here it's doing well..



A few km west and we came to Hraunfossar. Having just seen the most powerful hot spring in the world, this must be the widest cold one! A full kilometre of valley side has a continuous outflow pouring forth from the base of a lava bed and dropping 10 m or so to the main river, virtually a non-stop tracery of cascading rivulets and a wonderful spectacle. At the end of all this is a short gorge on the main river where the twisting maelstrom of tortured blue-white water at one point bursts under a natural arch; apparently a further arch was destroyed after two children fell to their deaths from it, an incident which gave the falls their name, Barnafoss (think Geordie 'Bairn').

So the valley has hot and cold running water to excess; our chalet at Húsafell did not, turning out to be a wooden structure a little like a garden shed with two bunks and nothing more; nevermind, it is cheap, and so for once was the meal we had at the site restaurant, a half bottle of wine for a mere 760 kr (£3.80) – English prices for once. The sleeping sheds circle a fine kitchen/common room, where we chatted to two German bikers about technical subjects like the measurement of atmospheric pressure, a bit too much of a challenge for the intellect at this hour perhaps, whilst a pair of little girls, maybe ten or twelve, roared round and round the campsite on a quad bike. At length to our shed; PFR aching and hayfever-snuffly; ELR, er, snorri.

Tuesday 16 6 09 Beneath the Lava.

Possibly the best known cave – that is, lava tube – in Iceland lies 14 km north-east of of as well Húsafell. It is best known as Surtshellir, although most guidebooks refer to a Stefánshellir as well, and we had been told of an Íshellir. Surtshellir is well signed, but the last 7km are a rough gravel track at about the limit of what even Icelanders expect of an ordinary car. The caves are formed in the huge Hallmundarhraun lava flow, from the foot of which the Hraunfossar falls, which we saw yesterday, emerge. It was erupted around 1200 years ago.

Driving north-west in exceeding bleak scenery, eventually a solitary signpost in the wilderness points to both Surtshellir and Íshellir, both, it is claimed, 300 m distant. Both arms point in the same direction, so either sign-swivellers have struck or, more likely, it gets awful windy hereabouts. The signpost did

line up with a few cairns, and a slight path, which brought us to Íshellir, a sudden crater in the lava; an easy scramble down on the far side led to a col between boulder slopes dropping both north-east and south-west into great gloomy tunnels. We took the latter first, its floor was studded with ice stalagmites, and found it levelled out into a handsome gallery even more liberally decorated. There must be some freezing/thawing going on as at one point there was an ice shelf with mites growing above and tites hanging below. Frustratingly, the air was full of some fine dust or perhaps pollen, which completely ruined any flash-on-the-camera photographs.³ Conditions underfoot – heaped angular boulders or ice - were distinctly treacherous, so we turned back after 100 m or so (not wishing to damage either ourselves or the formations) with the passage bending r. but still ongoing. A posse of tourists arrived, floundering around with one tiny light between them; we could see why the iciclemites, at least those within range of daylight, had taken something of a battering.

Back to the open crater, and north-east; the boulder slope thankfully gave way to a level floor of crunchy lava gravel, and we made good progress along a gallery 10-15 m square, caving at its easiest. After a few hundred metres daylight appeared ahead, and we emerged, up boulders and then kicking steps in a snowdrift, into another crater where a further tube came in on the right. The edge of the hole overhung all round, the only escape to the surface would have entailed climbing a boulder slope and then ascending a pillar of rocks someone had built; if one balanced on the top, the edge was just in reach with a good pull-up. Didn't fancy it. So it was down boulders again as the cave went on north-east, both as the main gallery and as a loop that rapidly rejoined it. These slopes of big lava boulders,



the odd one loose, require care and three-point travel – three appendages constantly in contact with hopefully stable objects. More easy passage, as big as a railway tunnel, and then, with daylight still in view behind us, it appeared again far ahead. Before we got there the passage became extremely interesting; the walls had parallel horizontal striations and then, perhaps 50 m before the next skylight, there were ledges and side passages on either side perhaps 5 m up, although as the boulder floor rose these became easily accessible. Those on the right were comfortable walking-height tubes, but their floors had

been partly cleared of loose debris, and stone walls built, outlining first a small chamber full of bone (whalebone?) fragments, and then a larger one with what looked like a fireplace at one end. Is this ancient archaeology, either remarkably preserved or painstakingly restored?⁴ The roof lowered to a very short crawl, then lifted again, and there were more big stones that had obviously been rearranged,

³ Very odd; in the other segments of cave there was no problem. Both this, and the growth of ice formations, may suggest that the bit of cave is blind, rather than running through to another entrance???

⁴ Surtshellir figures in history (and, it is thought, in some of Snorri's writings) as the abode of robbers

and in the middle of them a slender timber post set upright, which was clearly quite recent. What exactly is going on here? the place suddenly felt rather creepy.

Emerging in the second skylight, sunlight reflected dazzlingly off a big snowdrift; once again there was no way out, the enclosing walls of no great height but all vertical or overhanging. The big tunnel continued north-east, towards another glimmer of daylight. All the time the lava roof seemed to be getting thinner. After another hundred metres or so of easy passage, a boulder sloped up into a low domed chamber illuminated by a tiny overhead opening (covered by a metal grille) showing that the roof was only a few cm thick. Then we emerged beneath the sky for a third time, but this was Surtshellir proper (it had an official metal sign) and we could scramble back up to the surface with ease. Sticky from underground exertions, a bitter wind chased us back to the car, following cairns and passing the two skylights. The guidebook tells us Surtshellir is 1970 m long; if this includes Íshellir then we probably saw most of it; not sure where Stefánshellir is – it is said to be part of the same system (and to take the overall length to 3.1 km); the map suggests it is south-west of Surtshellir so is it another name for Íshellir?.

Went on a brief search for Viðgelmir, another lava cave said to have fine formations, but to be gated and requiring a guide from a local farm (which we had e-mailed a couple of times, without reply; tourist information told us they would now only take large trips). The cave was signposted, but the track was wired off, and the 'heritage' sign nearby had been taped over. Prospects of a visit did not look good, so we gave up and returned to Hùsafell.

ELR went and hot-tubbed, PFR departed with sketchbook, first to Hùsafell church, thinking it might be picturesque. Most of these little Icelandic churches are, but this one wasn't; in addition it was surrounded by some sort of sculpture garden, in which small-scale versions of prehistoric megalithic monuments were created (which of course don't belong here, as Iceland has no human prehistory). It was all a bit odd, and a grotesque grinning stone head built into the wall directly beneath the east end of the church didn't help. Went off up the hill to draw the strange-shaped-cloud-over-the-icecap and listen to our new Sigur Ros CD on the car stereo, so felt very Icelandic.

Wednesday 17th June West to Snaefellsnes

A restless second night in the shed; its windows have no curtains; consulted watch roughly hourly to see how much I wasn't sleeping. Finally got to sleep, dreamed that it was dark, then opened my eyes to find that it wasn't.

It was time for a fairly long drive. To put it not very technically, at this point we were about half way up the left (west) side of the main body of Iceland, and about 30 km in from the coast. This holiday we are planning to visit the two sticky-out bits on this side, first the Snaefellsness peninsula that goes off due west, and then the North-West Fjords which extend, as their name suggests, to the north-west. So first we headed west and a bit south-west across green lowland with distant mountains, down to Borganes, and had a coffee at the posh hotel by the heritage centre, where we had last year. This time the candles in the toilets were unlit, and I wondered whether they had suffered the methane explosion I had feared on our previous visit. Then north-west across more lowland, dramatic mountains rising a few km to the right and the sea a few to the left, then it was west along the south coast of the peninsula, again along a low-lying strip with the odd lake and scattered farms, whilst a continuous rampart of impressive spiky mountains rose to the north. Stopped at Lýsuhóll for ELR to go a-wallowing whilst PFR walked a little way up a mountain and back again, then to Búðir with a simple little wooden church said to date from 1703, but sadly locked. A noticeboard here indicated a track across the local

lava field to Bùdahellir, a cave just to the north-west of a prominent volcanic cone. Set out enthusiastically; the lava is riddled with holes. The avid collector of small lava caves would go out of his head here – but we plodded along the meandering footpath, in, out, up and down, and 2 km later came to our destination. A broad ogee-arched entrance led past a few minor stone walls – humans have clearly had dealings with this cave – for 50 or 60 m and then it just ended, with a draughting chimney up which looked to end in choke. A walk on the surface confirmed that this was a major collapse; the tube looks to go on beyond, but would take a little digging to enter. The fact that no-one had dug it suggests cavers are few on the ground hereabouts. Probably, he said (dangerously) no more than half an hours work with a good pair of gloves and maybe a crowbar. Set out back towards the car and the weather, which had been on-and-off threatening all day, suddenly let rip; fierce driving rain from the north. An unpleasant forty minutes or so ensued, then a struggle in a steaming-up car over the last mountain pass to Ólafsvik and our hotel.

Ólafsvik is a little fishing port, not really touricised. The hotel is a hotel of two halves – or rather, two adjacent blocks, the new one with the expensive ensuite rooms and the old one (where we were) which is smart at the front and ruinous at the back; loo door does not lock, loo window tied up with string to stop the glass falling out of its rotted frame. The hotel restaurant served expensive fishy things, so ate at the 'Hobbitinn' across the road. Did JRR ever envisage that he would be naming Icelandic fast-food outlets (Frodoburger anyone? a strip of dried orc?).

Thursday 18th 2009 All around Snaefell

The mountain mass of Snaefell sits in the centre of the west end of the peninsula; about 10 km across, it is topped by a gently-swelling icefield (Snasesfellsjokull) sprouting occasional white peaklets, the highest of which reaches 1446m; all around are a ring of lower ragged and jagged peaks of bare rock. It is quite a special place; the route to the Centre of the Earth in Jules Verne's famous story, and thought of by New Agers as one of nine global power points⁵ We circumnavigated all this by the new coastal road, going west from Ólafsvik and then south and the back east again, although not as far as the pass which brought us in yesterday.

First stop was Rif, a fishing hamlet where one is attacked by Arctic terns if one ventures out of the car; a roadside memorial celebrates a couple who seem to have run the place for most of the 20th century, and who loved their terns, which must have taken some doing. Then came Hellissandur with a little fishing museum illustrating the pretty desperate existence folk had round here for many years, with open eight-oar boats and a reconstructed twin-gabled turf-walled cottage, one part the workshop/kitchen, the other boarded round with a raised bedroom over a low basement/store.

Moved on to Gufuskáalar where a short walk on the inland side of the road, and a little wander through a lava field, brought us to one of a series of remarkable lava rubble buildings. It looked like a big cairn but crawling in a low doorway brought one into a chamber perhaps 5 m by 1.5 m, with light coming in everywhere between the irregular lumps of stone that looked precariously balanced together – yet it is claimed this and similar nearby structures (many more ruinous) are 15th or 16th century. Surely they were heaped round with turf to keep the weather out? They may have been houses, or fish stores, although some have linked them to earlier Irish hermit monks.

Then we were bold and took a brown road (ie a rough track) up Snaefell; it wound its way up the E valley, passing the pretty Klukkufoss framed by tilted basalt columns and eventually ending in a bleak

⁵ English three-square-pin plugs did not fit, however. Adapters may be available.

landscape of grey moraine rubble at the edge of the snows, just above the emergence of the river from a deep snow-filled ravine. All above was drifting cloud; we were at about 800m.

Back down to the coastal plain, studded with miniature volcanic craters. At Dritvik a minor road drops to the coast, and an inlet spanned by remarkable wall-like dykes and, on the beach below, a series of four rounded boulders, 'lifting stones' the fishermen used in weight-lifting contests. Then looked for a cave the lady in the information centre at Hellisandur had told us about; on the east of the road is a volcanic cone, and just beyond it a big depression, more like a huge shakehole than a volcanic crater, perhaps 300 m across and 100 m deep, with lava crags in places. PFR puffed and panted up and down but found nothing other than an irate snow bunting. Eventually discovered the cave a few hundred metres south, just beyond a cairned footpath, and quite close to the road, it was a typical collapse into a lava tube. North was a vertical drop of 5 m or so, equipped with a knotted rope, but felt old and cowardly; south easy walking passage for 50 m or so, then a short crawl to a few more metres of smaller stuff which then closed down completely.

In view on the coast ahead were the twin rock columns of Lònðrangar, a bit like seastacks but towering above the coastal plain. They are apparently volcanic necks; it is a pleasant walk of 1 km or so from the car park to the east of them; around them are ruined buildings a bit like those at Gufuskáalar.

We eventually arrived at Hellnar, beneath the spiky Stapafell, a south-eastern spur of the Snæfellsnúi massif. This is a delectable spot, with a picturesque corrugated iron church (for once open, with a working harmonium), a hotel and a seashore Kaffihúss; the foreshore had igneous geology running amok, caves and natural arches. Coffied and sketched, then to the hotel for a very pleasant meal. The sky cleared and the mountain's dazzling white dome appeared, to tempt us to find somewhere to watch the sunset.

Sunset is late of course, so first a brief diversion to Songhellir ('Singing Cave') partway up another minor road that climbs high onto the massif at the north end of Stapafell. It is not much of a cave, just a small arch into a circular chamber with sonorous acoustics and lots of graffiti going back to the early 18th century. There are other cave entrances nearby, but nothing to really get you out of daylight, although certainly enough to offer travellers a welcome shelter in a wild place. Down again to the little harbour of Arnarstapi to watch a fishing boat being launched; not sure whether the launchees liked being watched. The boat had Playboy bunny badges; perhaps they were really smuggling cannabis.

Then back round the coast road again, and up our morning route onto the mountain, as far as a picnic spot where there is a footbridge over the meltwater river, and we had spotted a track leading up onto Hreggasi. Sat in the car until 11.10 pm listening to Sigur Ros (and realising that howling wind noises were real, not on the CD), then sallied forth following the red-topped sticks. Hreggasi looks scary from most angles; its face to the valley is a huge overhanging wall of rock, but the waymarked route is a simple uphill slog over grass and rubble, keeping well back from the edge of empty space. The summit is a neat little ridge with a big cairn, with dramatic views down the tortured pinnacled arete of the north ridge. The sun was by now (11.40) hovering low over the sea, and the peak cast a huge spike of shadow back on the parent mountain; strangely, the howling wind in the valley (cold air flowing down from the icecap?) gave way to a gentle breeze. Headed back down, pausing to glance at a hole right beside the track, with a signboard 'Eyvindarhola'; would really need a rope, but looked interesting. By 12.45 (quarter of an hour short of true Icelandic midnight) the sun was just a chink of light on the horizon, although the ice cap was still brightly lit; is there no sunset at this altitude?

Hotel still noisy, people about the streets.



*Midnight (Icelandic)
on the mountain; the
shadow is that of
Hregassi, the peak we
are descending from,
the great white dome of
Snaefellsjokull rises
beyond*

Friday 19th June East again

Left our hotel with a blessing – their computer could not cope with us having stayed two nights so they only charged us for one!. Headed east along the north coast of Snaefellsnes and enjoyed some splendid scenery, with one last glimpse back of the icecap still clear of cloud. Stopped at Stykkishólmur, a clean and tidy little port with a spectacular new church and a just-opened volcano museum which was really excellent; it is being set up by a renowned Icelandic vulcanologist who displays his collection of volcano paintings from all over the world here; watched a documentary of his researching a massive 1816 eruption in Java that outdid Krakatoa and affected the climate all over the world. Emerged with relief to a clear sunny sky, uninspiring fast feed in local garage and then east again, now along dirt roads in wild lonely places, the landscape bleak rather than beautiful. The odd 4x4 (and one huge articulated lorry) tore past in a hail of dust and stones; they don't make you want to love them any more than they do in England.

The drive was becoming wearisome by the time we emerged on a tarmac road again just south of Búðardalur; diverted up a side road through a valley with a remarkably green lake to visit Eiríksstaðir, where Eirík the Red lived for a while, apparently an unpleasant soul who periodically fell out with his neighbours, killed a few of them and then had to move on; he then compounded his anti-social traits by finding America⁶. His hall has been excavated but is now just a grassed-over rectangle, but a reconstruction of it has been built beside the road, and a friendly Viking lady shows you round the dim firelit interior. PFR thought its doors should have been harr hung, but neo-Vikings don't seem to know about such things. On the way up to Eiríksstaðir we had had to crawl behind a lorry spreading gravel who was just too wide to get past; an hour later he was on his way back down the road gravelling the other side.....,

⁶ But at least he managed to lose it again, unlike Columbus.

North up the main road Bùðardalur, to find the Edda hotel supposed to be here was in fact about 15 km further on, at Laugar, another place steeped in early history, with hot springs; These now feed a swimming pool; ELR of course wallowed, PFR went to look for the supposed remains of the ancient bath-house, but everything was behind barbed wire. Of course were we captive as regards finding somewhere to eat, but took the vegetarian option and had a slice of Swede Pie which was not as bad as it might have been. Lots of Icelandic folk were having a family gathering here, and they were noisy – not heavy metal or rowdy drunk noisy, but cheerful chatter and squealy kids noisy, the sort of noise one feels guilty about resenting but one resents nevertheless, especially when it is midnight and one dearly wants to get to sleep

Saturday 20th June. Up and down the Fjords

A strange day's driving; a little over 300 km in all, but had one been a crow, one could have reduced the last 150 km to no more than 30; for six successive fjords one must first go down the east side and then back up the west, until at last we reach our goal of Isafjörður.

But to begin at the beginning, the first 50 km or so was straightforward, north through unspectacular hill country, passing the odd place with a big name on the map (eg Krokksfjardarnes) that sound as if they might be a minor cathedral city and turn out to be two chalets and a closed-down garage. Then came 20 km on a brown road that was just a ribbon of dirt track in an immense expanse of gravel and rubble dotted with ponds and snow patches, with far-distant mountains on the skyline but, bar the track and its line of yellow posts, no hint of human presence. Then the fjord trek began, and a roadside map seriously misled us, presenting us with a map showing a new bridge over the first one; hurrah, 40 km less to drive, we could afford to relax. Dropped in at Reykjanes, a hotel with a faint end-of-the-universe feel but with an outdoor hot pool for ELR to wallow in; then reached our bridge to find it had not been finished yet, so we had c 30 km to drive down and up Mjóifjörður before we got to the other side of it. As one goes west, the fjords become more impressive, their sides taller and craggier, with knife-edged ridges of bare rock and waterfall after waterfall cascading down gullies. At one point a whole row of waterfalls emerged from springs, presumably on the base of one particular lava bed. Roadside rock exposures often showed vivid brick-red horizons, perhaps old soil beds?



Some Icelandic roads are quite alarming; not quite two full lanes wide, they have been constructed with steep gravel embankments on each side, often continuing straight down as precipitous mountain side, sea cliff or into a raging river. It feels like driving along the top of a wall; an inadvertent wheel over the edge and that would be that..

At last we rounded one more sharp headland (-nes, think 'ness' names on the English coast) and there, across our seventh fjord, was Isafjörður, a city of 3,000, largely sited on a level spit, but backed by stupendous mountain walls riven by an endless repetition of vertical gullies and occasionally scooped back into the most perfect examples of hanging corries one might find inside or outside a geomorphology textbook. Interestingly, the higher cliffs are on the south (well, south-east) side of the



fjord; on the north the lower two-thirds of the mountainside is blanketed in scree. Is this due to differential weathering and the fact that the sunny (northern) side is subject to more has more freeze-thaw cycles, and thus faster break-down of exposed rock faces? This explains why the stonework of some old buildings in England (eg Hexham Abbey) is often better preserved on the north than the south.

The centre of the town contains what is claimed to be the oldest group of buildings in Iceland, mostly fairly humble wooden houses clad in corrugated iron,

cheerfully painted red, blue or yellow and proudly wearing their dates, many in the 1880s. It was the weekend of a music festival, and there were lots of young folk around, all looking like, well, Classical musicians.

Dull drizzly evening, quite the darkest we have had here. After tea drive round the coast north to Hnifsdalur and then Bolungarvik; a new tunnel is being driven to avoid the present route at the foot of towering basalt cliffs which clearly rain down debris at frequent intervals.

Sunday 21st June

Clean and tidy guesthouse, but not a good night. PFR lay with his head, he later calculated, 30cm from the toilet bowl in the adjacent washroom (although the rooms were separated by a wall, of cardboard or perhaps plywood). The pairs of shoes lined up in the porch showed that there were twelve guests in residence, and each visited the lavatory three times in the night, so the inter-relationship between his auditory and their bowel functions occasioned thirty six awakenings..

A Hitchcockian Apocalypse

Sunday morning went to church, the local Lutheran, ie Church-of-Iceland. This is another of the country's avant-garde recent church buildings; the basic design is reminiscent of a toaster or series of toasters, the angles adorned with the metallic fins of an old Ford Zodiac, and the panels between made of yellow sandpaper. Inside the end wall has a stunning tableau of a great flight of orange ceramic birds; doves would perhaps be explicable, but this was more a thousand-strong force of attacking terns. Quite a lot of smartly-dressed people, one suspects a lot more than the usual congregation, because the

young musicians were very much in evidence; a fairly conventional string quartet, a double-bass player and percussionist/xylophonist, up there amongst the crosses and candles, and equipped with a remarkable range of things to bang. There was also a glamorous blonde-haired girl in a tight leather corset who played the organ. A priest did priestly things and preached a sermon, all in Icelandic except that at one point he broke into song 'Money makes the world go round' in English, to polite laughter. In one interlude the double-bass player bowed and plucked and made all sorts of wondrous squeaks and groans; he and the percussionist also broke in (or burst out) during a Bible reading (perhaps providing a soundtrack to part of the Book of Revelation?). Finally, during the sermon, the church was filled with screaming seabird noises⁷. Thought of terns again, and a Hitchcockian version of the Apocalypse; things were getting a bit scary. Then, quite suddenly, the congregation grew restive; the organist on her high stool swung round to face us and very publically struggled into thigh-length boots, the priest, still in mid-intone, took the hint and processed out, and it was over. Phew! that was, err, different....



(Musings

Thoughts prompted by the contrast between last week's Salvation Army meeting (for PFR a return to his roots) and this week's Luthernism (the Established Church here, and very much the equivalent of our present Anglicanism⁸). How dare one attempt a critique on the basis of two brief experiences of something expressed in an incomprehensible language? Well, we are told not to judge, but at the same time to be as wise as serpents, so what follows is an attempt at a little slithery wisdom, not a pointing-the-finger condemnation.

The basic *raison d'être* of a church is that it should be a place where people meet/relate to/interface with God. And of course, no-one can really judge whether that is happening, except the person, and God. The passer-by cannot see into hearts, but

does gain an impression; maybe, in some strange way if one does not understand the lingo one can gain a clearer impression (like listening to Sigur Ros' music and not knowing Icelandic – although locals say their lyrics really are incomprehensible).

The Salvation Army is traditionally low-brow, working class, There is no high art; Major played his electronic keyboard well enough ,and Mrs Major was a proficient guitar strummer, their music was singalong, almost country-and-western. There were one or two depictions of Jesus around the place as the usual bearded-and-robed Westernised figure, in one case appearing as a ghostly presence in the clouds above a young man at the steering wheel of a ship. All a bit obvious. In the meeting people laughed, smiled, shouted out 'hallelujah' and 'amen' or were solemn, and some cried. All very heart-on-

7 An assistant flicked a switch to produce this; it is obviously part and parcel of the flock-of-birds installation. Does every sermon have to have avian references? Do they use it with songs like 'Tern, tern, tern (to everything there is a season), 'Skua my ear', 'Kittiwake my soul ', 'Albatross albatross where I first saw the light' etc

8 The Anglican and Lutheran churches are linked by something called the Porvoo Agreement, which means they recognise each other a basically OK, the same sort of thing, us, family.... On the strength of this experience,..Pour vous, peut etre, pour moi, non...

the-sleeve. Meeting God? I guess if you had questioned the participants quite a few would have said they had. Oh, and they certainly gave the impression of meeting each other as well; there was no sacrament as such, but certainly a meeting together over the coffee and cake that came in at the end. This was probably the only Salvation Army service in Iceland; once, in 1880s London, more folk were attending SA meetings than those of all the other churches put together, seriously worrying the Anglican establishment.

The Lutherans are into art, culture and beauty, and their country's history. They have the State and, it appears (at least until very recently) a lot of money behind them. Their services are all liturgy and sacrament, virtually absent in the Salvation Army (at least in an overt form). I loved the stained glass windows at Reykholt, the huge Madonna and Child reredos at Stykkisholmur, and particularly the paintings on Flatey Island, showing Christ in an Icelandic sweater blessing two kneeling fisherman. But there is a problem here, in that one feels there can be a central loss of focus; at a simplistic level it may go like this. God is good (of course, we have all been told that), Art (usually high brow, classical) is good as well (true, say the people who like it); we are not too sure about God (can be controversial, might ask us awkward questions), so let's do Art instead. You can buy, own and sponsor Art, you can be proud of it, it can bolster your nationalistic feelings. But Art is not God. At the service in Isafjörður. Art had been the prime focus; it was clear that people were not interested in the bits the priest did, especially at the end. People did not meet each other either; at the end everyone hurriedly left (had to, as a proper musical concert, without any religious stuff, was scheduled to take place at 12.00). The high-tech attempts to provoke awe and wonder, the switch-on seagull noises and birdflock reredos actually just felt bizarre; interesting yes, entertaining maybe, touching-the-other, sorry, no.

The Uninhabited Lands

Afternoon boat trip out to Hesteryi, about 30 km north. The North-Western Fjords really fall into two parts, the larger southern area including Isafjordur, and a northern area with wider fjords and lower less rugged hills, from which man has now effectively retreated. Most of it has no road access at all. We were on a guided visit to Hesteryi, a village founded by the first settlers; in the later 19th century the 'Normans' (Norwegians) established a whaling factory there, and then, after they had moved on, its economy shifted to herring. However the herring then moved on as well and the last of the locals, unwilling to return to subsistence farming, gave up and moved to the fleshpots of the south. That was in 1952. A few tidied-up houses remain, inhabited only in the summer, when conservationists and hikers come. The Arctic foxes, never threatened by man, are apparently quite tame; we did not meet any but bought a postcard of one, the next best thing. A peaceful and pretty place, with lots of wild flowers, but snow still lying low even in late June. We were given coffee and cakes in the 'Doctor's House', built in 1901; the doctor was removed for service elsewhere by the Government in 1946, as was the church 15 years later, leaving only a little stone construction holding a bell dated '1679' amongst a scatter of graveyard monuments. Great coastscapes from the boat, friendly guides, the whole enterprise on a small enough scale for one to feel more like a guest than a tourist, and welcomed rather than processed.

Ended up in the local Edda Hotel – as usual a school doubling up as a hotel in the summer vacation. We asked for sleeping bag accommodation – and got a pair of couches in a large classroom with maps of France round the walls, a bit surreal.

Monday 11 June South to Patreksfjörður.

A bewildering up-hill and down-fjord route, around 180 km in all, and too long-winded to describe in detail. Several passes, to around 600 m, some on dirt roads, but nothing too hairy, although some of the

highlands were impressively bleak. Early on was an impressive 6km or so of tunnel, the first part two-lane, the second (after a junction) single-lane with passing alcoves.



Most impressive sight was Dynjandi, a tremendous waterfall. You see it from miles away at the head of its fjord, a wide white swathe of cascading water; when you arrive, the car park is at the foot of a whole series of smaller falls beneath it, and these are of the usual type, maelstroms of thrashing water in narrow gorges. The main fall, of perhaps 60 m, is different in that the stream spreads and cascades successively off each of the superimposed lava beds so that it is maybe 5 m wide at the top and 20 m at the bottom. Oddly there is little spray; you can stand right by the bottom and look up. Other Icelandic

waterfalls are raw, elemental, frightening, this one is, well, not pretty, but a little airier and more delicate.

Then more highland rock desert, before down to crawling in and out of fjords. In Reykjjarflördur, as the 'Reyk' ('steamy') element of its name suggests, there was an open-air hot pool, but it had leaked and only had a few inches of warm water in it, so even ELR did not fancy a quick steep. The road wound on, past the odd active farm (and more abandoned ones) and even at one point ran along the foreshore, where the car was attacked by nesting terns. Bildudalur, where we sat out a passing rainstorm, had an air strip and a tea shop, then it was only 29 km – and two more mountain passes - to our destination, Patreksfjörður, an unassuming little town with a scatter of industrial buildings huddled on a spit in the fjord. We were too early – when phoned the landlady of our guest house was 'an hour and a half away' so ELR had her wallow in the local pool and PFR sketched.

Westest

ELR made an excellent curry for tea, and then we set out on a bolder expedition than the main day's travel, to visit the lighthouse at Bjargtangar, the furthest west point in Europe. This was 60 km away, but the most taxing 60 m we had yet driven, although the first 12 km, south-east along the fjord, was easy. Then, passing a picturesque beached trawler at Skápadalur (claimed as the old all-iron ship in Iceland, but now increasingly iron oxide), it was back north-west on the other side of the fjord on a potholed dirt road, so three quarters of an hour after setting out we were looking back at the white houses Patreksfjörður a couple of km away across the water. On this side of the fjord there were sand dunes – proper sandy-coloured (ie whitish) sand, which is unusual here. The track then climbed and wriggled its way around an alarming ledge on a huge cliff, thankfully provided with a few metres of crash barrier at the worst points, before turning inland up a valley and passing a little museum with

more beached boats and even a couple of disintegrating grounded aircraft. Then it was up and over bleak moorland until the track dropped again towards a bay and behold! a row of flags and a posh hotel, at Breiðavík; Iceland has this habit of juxtaposing nature at its bleakest with what we class as civilisation, and often expensive civilisation at that. A bit further along at Hvallátur was a pleasant beach and campsite, and even some archaeology – grassy foundations of fishermans' huts of uncertain antiquity, and a posh campsite with comfortable snyrting facilities⁹. Up and over the final hill and there was the lighthouse, bizarrely adorned with a large sign 'SLICELAND' and a board proclaiming it 'THE WESTEST PIZZA IN EUROPE'; this facility was however only open in the afternoons. About a dozen people stood, or lay down, at the edge of the dizzying cliffs; closer inspection revealed that they were photographing or communing with puffins, which waddled along the brink of two hundred metres of empty space, unphased by either the puffin-viewers or gravity. Vertigo only affects those of us without wings. Several of the bird enthusiasts had cameras, on tripods, with enormous lenses that reached to within a few cm of their subjects; what joy to know that you can accurately record the interior of a puffinic left nostril!



So this is the westest point in Europe; it has been said that you can see Greenland's Icy Mountains from here, but this is apparently a myth; what you do see sometimes is apparently the reflections of their snows in the sky. Tonight we had hoped to watch the sunset (if one actually happened) but there was a constant layer of cloud on the horizon, so we gave up and wound our way cautiously over the slow and bumpy kilometres through the Icelandic dusk. Weary.

Tuesday 23rd June South across the Sea

Slept better than usual, so there was little time to hang around before bidding farewell to Patrecksfjord and driving south-east for an hour to the ferry at Brjánslækur; the latter part of the drive along a typical coastal plain, terraced basalt crags rising into the cloud on the left, odd active farms alternating with derelict ones. Steady rain set in, but we arrived in good time for the ferry. This heads south across 30 km or so of island-dotted sea to link the North-Western Fjords with Stikkisholmur in Snaefellsness, but we were breaking out journey midway for six-and-a-half hours on Flatey Island.

Flatey, as its name suggests, is almost flat, as are all the myriad islands around here; lot of ice has done a lot of grinding down, once. It is also a place of departed consequence; it once a leading cultural

⁹ Icelandic for toilet, a good word ([I'll](#) just have to stop for a quick snyrt...')

centre, and had one of Iceland's handful of monasteries. Now it has two farms, a scatter of holiday homes and lots and lots of birds. It sounds idyllic; six-and-a-half hours in heaven. However, many of the footpaths (and the monastery site, although this seems to be no more than a few hummocks) were closed to allow the birds to breed. So, in an hour or so (in continuing drizzle) one can visit to all the permissible parts of the island, and get round them twice if you are quick.

Most people come here for the birds. It is probably time for a bit of ruthless honesty about birds, from a rational normal person rather than the species today referred to as 'twitchers' or 'birders'. Some birds are cute – the mummy and daddy ducks with their tiny flotillas of offspring bobbing behind: many are inoffensive – the little sharp-beaked things with chestnut necks that dart around your feet: some are a pain – the bigger ones with fluorescent orange legs and beaks that follow you and make noises like demented smoke alarms¹⁰: - and some, namely the terns, are plain evil. Terns on Flatey spend much of their time attacking the local sheep, which have adapted themselves to completely ignore them (although we did see one lamb roll on its back and have a quick thrash with a hoof at its tormentor).



They also attack any human in sight; even PFR's hat did not protect him from minor cranial damage. his attempted counter-attack on the swooping demons using ELR's rolled umbrella was thwarted by age and slowing reaction times, very much a case of playing a stroke after the ball was already nestling in the keeper's gloves. Oh for the satisfaction of making contact with one thunderous square cut! Splat! and just a few floating feathers.... Seriously, though, anything less than a global species cull is an inadequate response.

There are good things on Flatey as well. The village of late 19th and early 20th

century houses, all now very tidy and colourfully painted. The church, a 1920s version of the standard Icelandic box-with-a-west-tower – has a remarkable series of painting by a Catalan artist, including a reredos of Christ wearing an Icelandic sweater blessing two local fishermen, and ceiling paintings of scenes from local life and history. Gastronomically we were captives of the single local hotel, but the meal we had there was our best in the country, fresh Flatey cod, then rhubarb pie, at a price which gave us warm consciences feeling that we had personally reinflated the collapsing economy, and purchased sufficient scaffolding to prop up the odd bank. The sun came out as well, as we boarded the ferry. Arriving we had walked out on a horizontal gangplank to a jetty about 8 m above the sea; departing, the tide had come in, and from a jetty barely above sea level we had to scramble up steeply to gain even a lower deck.

Beautiful light and distant mountain views as we pulled into Stikkisholmur, its amazing modern church glaring white in the late sun, the neat little houses of the town clustering around the orderly harbour, all as if taken straight from a work by some charming but slightly primitive artist, what a tidy place! Reunited with the car (which had gone on before us – no cars on Flatey) and two minutes to our comfortable little hotel. Sallied forth for a walk (and quick sketch of the church) just before midnight;

10 Redshanks. successfully identified these using the chart on the hotel wall.

the sun had slipped behind clouds for the quick siesta.

Wednesday 25th June Changing Landscapes

A happy moment at the Stikkisholmur garage as we left; the one book published on Icelandic Caves ('Hellahandbókin'), last year only in hardback for £100 plus, was there on the counter as a paperback at a tenth that price! PFR Happy. It is in Icelandic, but has lovely pictures.

The Holy Mountain

A few km south of Stikkisholmur and a little east of the main 5oad is Helgafell, no more than a rocky knoll around 70 m high, but an eminence that draws the eye in the flat lands thereabout. In Pre-Christian days it was regarded as holy – the place folk went when they died – and the local religious authorities decreed that no-one must relieve themselves in sight of it. Difficult; it can be seen from a very wide area. Then along came another bunch of settlers who decided no-one was going to tell them where to snyrt... the result, as usual, slaughter and long-lasting blood feuds. Later on after the place got Christianised a chapel was built on top of the hill, and in the 12th century the Augustinian monastery from Flatey island was transferred to the bottom.

Very oddly, when one arrives at the foot of the hill – a five minute climb – the tiny car park is provided with a public convenience, where one would never expect one. An echo of an ancient controversy, to show who won? On top of the hill the lower walls of the tiny 13th century chapel survive, a real rarity here; just a tiny rectangle with a door at the west end of the south side, with no architectural features. Was it vaulted? the walls seem thick enough.

Then it was south through the mountains – an easy pass – and back along the south side of the Snaefellsnes peninsula, turning north onto the dirt road of route 55 for a few km to visit the Gullbragarhraun caves mentioned in the 'Rough Guide'. Sure enough, found a footpath sign pointing west to ' Gullborgarhellarr', so parked in a picnic site 200 m further south and set off, following a line of cairns across the lava field towards a prominent volcanic crater. This was a lava field with plenty of holes – including lots of little arched conduits just under the surface, with their domed roofs only a few cm thick forming winding ridges. After a kilometre or so, just north-west of the crater, found some larger holes, including a big collapse (easy scramble down on west side) into a large passage heading north. This offered perhaps two hundred metres of fairly comfortable going, with a bit of the usual scrambling over boulders; about 50 m in a substantial man-made wall of boulders closed off two-thirds of the width of the passage, so people have obviously been in here before. The passage was around 5 m wide, and from 2m to 5 m high; the higher parts had high-level tubes coming and going, but none one could easily get into. At last daylight appeared, but it was from a small and inaccessible opening 6 or 7 m above; another 20 m or so beyond the passage lowered and then abruptly closed down to nothing.



Back on the surface, scaled the nearby cone and gazed down around 100m into the depths of the crater, with rocky sides exposing beds dipping in all directions; all very impressive. On the west side were a whole series of open pits; PFR climbed down one, but found the big descending passage closed right down, although there was an impressive ice column at the bottom. Lots of other open holes hereabouts, but it would take a proper expedition to explore them. Instead we threaded our way back south and east around the base of the cone, and then spotted a flat-floored valley-like feature in the lava heading back in the general direction of the car, so followed it – easy walking for a while but we ended up clambering over moss-covered lava wasteland before, with relief, regaining the road.

A couple of km back down the road, spotted an obvious open cave beside a track signed to This turned out to be a spacious but short tube, floored with cindery scree and ending after 20 m in a choke with a loose scramble up to a roof-level exit. There could well have been more holes further up the hillside but we did not have time,

Then it was down to Borgarnes again, to find a computer shop selling SD cards for my camera – a relief, mine was almost full with over 400 pics. Then a meandering route east and south-east, largely on dirt roads, up a long long green valley with scattered farms (one called 'England', now abandoned...), to eventually work our way onto elevated wasteland and join a forbidden 4 by 4 track coming down from Husafell; route 52, heading south, was a much better track, with an odd sideways-step through a ridge between two valleys before descending to Þingvellir and its remarkable rifts, where continental plates are splitting apart. Turned left here, onto more dirt roads, and, after a brief inspection ofhellir (a couple of artificial caves, inhabited until the early 20th century but also with elf stories) eventually made our Edda Hotel at Laughervatn at around 2000 hours.

Edda food (sweet was a postage-sized piece of chocolate cake accompanied by an inch-diameter ice cream sphere) but comfortable room. Late evening trip up to Geysir (which we first visited last year), photographed a few spoutings and chatted to local teenagers, then drove back at 11.45 watching the last rose-pink sunlight slipping up to the crest of snowy Hecla, and thought about its ten-year eruption cycle; last as in 2000.

Thursday 25th June. On a Bus to The Back of Beyond

Descended to breakfast and gazed out, half expecting (hoping?) to see a towering eruption cloud over Hekla, but no, all was quiet, but there had been an earthquake in Reykjavik yesterday. Last time it erupted, in 2000, they had the biggest rescue crisis in Icelandic history as over a thousand people raced to the volcano for the show, and got cut off by a heavy snow fall.

Iceland is one of those places with an Exterior and an Interior. Mankind has confined his activities to parts of the outer rim; the Interior remains virtually untouched, largely desert, lava field and ice cap, with the odd track. Trekkers and hard people go there, either on foot or driving expensive macho vehicles; everywhere there are warnings of what might happen to ordinary mortals who venture unprepared into this great inner space. It is so wild that it has been used by US astronauts for moon practice. So how to see it? The surprising answer is that there is a very good bus service, in fact one can get one of those conceptual transport maps, made famous by the London Tube, showing the regular services which (admittedly only in the summer) link interior wildness to exterior civilisation.

The Clapham Junction of the Interior must be Landmannalaugar, though it is really no more than 50 km from the south coast; it lies due east of Hekla, and north of the Mýrdalsjökull icecap. There is a daily

return bus service from Reykjavik, which we picked up at Leirubekki, a farm with a small but admirable centre explaining the nearby volcano, and at about the limit ordinary cars are supposed to go. Return fare from here was c £30.00 each, and the bus ride a little under two hours, with a two-and-a-half hour stop at our destination. The bus was packed (we got the last two seats, although we had been assured there was not need to book) and just seemed to be a normal large coach, with no modifications for a near-extra-terrestrial environment. The dirt track wound its way across plateaux, up and over ridges, and occasionally through rivers; though the rain-splashed windows (the weather had turned fairly miserable) we could see the whole range of wasteland types; sandy plans, gravelly plains, plains dotted with piles-of-stones-that-look-remarkably-like-cairns¹¹. Eventually we arrived, and were greeted by officialdom in the form of the warden, who boarded the bus to read us some rules, and that there was a further fee to pay for the privilege of being there. The whole place was an odd combination of the-wilderness-meets-the-institution, doubtless forced on the authorities by the number of people who want to go there. There were rows of parked 4x4s, several neat modern wooden buildings, boardwalks laid out across soggy ground, footpaths with built flights of steps (and lots of red-topped posts) radiating out, changing rooms and snyrting facilities for wallowers in the inevitable hot springs. The natural backdrop to all this is rather strange; flat grassland with steaming pools at the foot of the towering face of a lava flow (mid-15th century, this one, so again geology meets history), surrounding mountains, mostly rounded but with the odd outbreaks of spikes and pinnacles, but with scree and earth slopes in a variety of yellows, pinks and browns. To one side a river emerged from a gorge between the lava flow and the mountainside; the bus had ploughed through this with ease but few other drivers had



chosen discretion here and parked on the far bank including, PFR noted with pride, an Octavia.

ELR wallowed whilst PFR sat under a shelter and sketched the available prospect, and then managed a

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1. 11 There seems to be a fetish for cairn building here; in addition to necessary waymarks (although these are being supplanted by the ubiquitous official little-sticks-with-red-tops) there are droves of the things where one would not expect them or is it (dare one raise the question) elves?

half hour walk up onto the lava, frustrated by meeting an endless crocodile of English school children who were loudly bored as only English school children can be, even in the face of the most amazing and diverting of environments. The lava was partly black shiny obsidian, from tiny flakes of which our forefathers painstakingly fashioned tiny arrow points and scrapers, enabling them to shoot (and scrape things) and survive. PFR gathered samples (and then found himself sitting on them in the cramped conditions of the bus, which was excruciatingly painful).

There was a mass rush to pile back on the bus quarter of an hour before it left; this was all a bit chaotic, as new people were catching the bus here and there wasn't really room for them; half a dozen ended up sitting on the floor. Paused briefly on finding an upside-down car beside the road, which hadn't been there on the way up, but no sign of any occupants. Disembarked at the farm just as the rain stopped, then followed the bus, bouncing and swaying, and like most people here paying little regard to the speed limit, back down to the main road

Keldur

Back east on the main ring road, and then inland again, this time towards the southern slopes of Hekla, to Keldur Farm, The farm takes its name from big springs which emerge from the lava here (In the English Northern Pennines 'keld' is the standard term for a spring) . The old house has thick stone walls and a timber frame inside, with round-section driftwood posts carrying the roof, and partitions with adzed and moulded timbers and arched doorheads, said to resemble Scandinavian 'stave' construction. There has obviously been a lot of repair and reconstruction – bearing in mind its proximity to the volcano, the place has done well to survive at all. The friendly curator, who had been showing a big group of locals around, thinks the basic post structure, and an intriguing underfloor 'escape tunnel' that debouches on the stream bank about 30m from the house, may go right back to Saga days, while the Rough Guide suggests 13th century. There is a scratched '1641' date on one timber; even this would make the house the oldest in the country.

Seljalandsfoss

Further east still, through driving rain, to see a big waterfall, visible for miles if you are travelling in this direction. A sizeable stream (rather than a big river) drops about 50 m over lava cliff), and the fall is easily approached, and appreciated, from below. The speciality here is that there is an easy path right round behind the falls; you only get a bit damp from spray.

Wound up at the Thai restaurant in Selfoss for a decent meal, then the final half hour back up to the hotel, a dull grey evening.

Friday 26 June. And so Homeward

Last day, lots of compressing things into cases. Then drove (over two hours) through steamy volcanic landscapes to the Blue Lagoon in the middle of the largely-lava Reykjanes peninsula, which forms the south-western tip of Iceland. Blue skies and the white dome of Snaesfellsjokull visible on the northern horizon, far distant but oddly compelling. We have holy mountains in our genes.

ELR went for a birthday-present four-hour wallow (her seventh), whilst PFR had a rather anteclimatic wander around minor roads in the district. He started by finding one of the caves mentioned in the 'Hellarhandbokin', simply because there was a photo of its entrance, adjacent to an easily-identifiable roadside layby. It is called Dollan; the entrance is the usual collapse into a tube, but with a flight of

wooden steps kindly installed by some authority. East (back under the road) shuts down after a few metres, but west lowers to a short crawl into a little comfortable passage, two chambers with a short stoop between, before the roof drops to an arched flat-out crawl perhaps 50 m from the entrance, clean, dry but horribly sharp; it may continue but this was far enough - these caves need gloves, elbow and kneepads. Cast around a bit but could find no more open caves, at least respectable-sized ones. The guidebook shows quite a few nearby, but the map is on a small scale and any further directions are buried in the incomprehensibly Icelandic text¹²

A signboard in the layby advertised 'The Rift', a geology exhibition, which sounded thoroughly appetising, in somewhere called 'The Elborg'. A location map was not very helpful, but a roadside 'heritage' sign pointed to 'The Elborg' being within the nearby power station. Drove in, searched, then drove back to the road and double checked, then in again; eventually found a human who just said 'Closed'. No explanation. Unhappy.

Then almost got run off the road by an articulated lorry, blaring his horn as he overtook at way over the 90 kph limit. This is probably the place for a diatribe against Icelandic drivers. Lots of folk have 4x4s here, and to be honest have a better excuse for owning the things than do the English. but they do drive badly. On unsurfaced roads you usually meet such a vehicle coming at you, fast, right in the middle of the road, trailing a kilometre-long cloud of dust. Thus confronted we always pulled as far in to the right as possible, stopped and cowered. Perhaps one in four drivers acknowledged our acquiescence with a nod or flap of the hand; the others just sneered and shot past. Is there something in the male driver's ego here, a bit of the unreconstructed Viking, that always scorns as a weakling the one who gives way? Perhaps one should just line up head on with the approaching vehicle, accelerate and see who flinches first. Then you will both be real men and gain each others undying respect, albeit very very briefly. The Saga writers would applaud you both 'they were brave men but they did not have the best of luck.....'

Then explored the coast west down to the lighthouse at R, the south-western tip of the country. Here you wind through the environs of another big power plant, belching steam, and find beyond it a hillock with a lighthouse, some odd chunky cliffs, and a big guano-streaked stack offshore. Birdwatchers in evidence (and, inevitably, birds). A little to the north found 'The Bridge between Two Continents', just a modern footbridge spanning one of a series of Þingvellir-like rifts and a signboard explaining 'The Theory of Continental Drift'; is it still theoretical?

Collected ELR post-wallow (white, wrinkled, skin hanging off), and potted down to Keflavik, filling up (and washing) the car, which survived pretty well. Twelve days hire had cost around £1,000 which is expensive, but to be honest 2340 km on Icelandic roads must take a slice of an automobile's life, you know, lava dust in the big ends, things like that. Arrived at airport at 1650 thinking check in was 1730 and flight 1930, but ELR had misread and flight was 1730... Sweaty rush, PFR deeply resentful of having to ditch undrunk half a bottle of red wine which we had bought in Newcastle on the way out and carefully carried round all holiday, with the intention of its accompanying a leisurely airport meal, and serving the therapeutic purpose of calming his flightnerves. Then tin-box-in-the-sky time, and a rather protracted descent through cloud (would we run out of fuel? had the radar failed?) into a gloomy Manchester airport. Hordes of people; more than the population of Iceland, were waiting for their bags

12 It is interesting how so many of the caves in the guidebook lie immediately adjacent to roads. This could be because these are the ones most obvious to cavers, who have not searched further afield yet. But a more intriguing explanation suggests itself. What about the hidden people, the elves, who are reputed to live in such places; are they not consulted by local authorities before roads are planned? Surely they are aware that real estate values rise when a proper access is provided.

on the carousel. We were booked in at an airport hotel, but had to phone and then wait for a minibus to take us the few hundred metres to its door; ate late, a Cajun chicken sandwich and onion rings, not a wise choice for this late at night.

Saturday 27th June Home at last

Getting up difficult; forwent hotel breakfast, but at station bought 'Breakfast Bun', bread encasing a sedimentary construction not unlike an Icelandic cliff face with its superimposed lavas, and indeed almost as recent in geological terms; the deposits included grey sausages, brownish bacon, and yellowish dry stuff that could have been either egg or maybe potato, sandwiched together, aged and metamorphosed. Ate it, which is what I think one is supposed to do, but it was not a rewarding experience. Cooped up in train with loudly-clucking Halifax females en route to hen night in Newcastle. Best part of an hour to wait at Newcastle before final westward trundle, and towed suitcases (through canine excrement; don't we all love doggies?) up footpath to home. All four cats awaiting, well-tended by Emma next door but desperately glad to see us back (cannot go across the road without felines at heels).

Need a holiday now to recover.



