

THE NEXT GRAND ADVENTURE

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I was not looking up at the stars - I was among them. The Big Dipper was directly in front of me out the window and stayed there so long it seemed as though the plane was suspended motionless like a mobile in midair. Only when the pink glow of dawn appeared on the horizon beyond could I tell we were in motion. As a small finger of land came into view below some clouds, I caught my breath knowing that I was at the top of the world, far away from everything familiar to me.

Busyness and life issues had been all-consuming, leaving little time for dreaming. Money saved for travel after retirement was staring at me and saying, "So?" So.....after much research and planning, in September 2007, I flew East to visit Baltimore relatives. Then, onward.

Descending through clouds and light rain, we touched down on a shrouded runway. I made my way through the deserted airport (Saturday, and off-peak for tourists), and passport checkpoints to the car rental agency. After being blown by an energetic, chilly wind through the parking lot, I spotted my Toyota Avensis, sporting suspiciously unhealthy looking tires. Back in the terminal, I politely insisted that someone come out and inspect them. "Oh, they look fine and should take you anywhere you want to go," said the twenty-something young man. I would live to rue the faith I put in those words.

Iceland. The seeming beginning and end of everywhere. The "land of fire and ice" and Viking lore. Pristine, haunting beauty. No pollution. Spotlessly clean. Thirty-plus years prior I had seen pictures that ignited my imagination, and decided then that some day I would see this place.

Maps and detailed itinerary in the passenger's seat, I finally found the road to Reykjavik. The earth around me was littered with countless black heaps of all shapes and sizes covered with green moss. Back in Colorado I carefully nurture little patches of it between my flagstones. Here it was growing with abandon on what I learned were the results of many volcanic eruptions spewed across the landscape. Soon I became profoundly lost in this lovely, Scandinavian San Francisco-like capital, where 3/5's of the country's 300,000 residents live. Icelandic, the complex language of the Vikings, dominates, though most Icelanders know at least a little English, and some are fluent. However, they must have been sitting in their warm houses that day. After numerous attempts to get directions out of town, finally I got comprehensible information in fragments. A few more wrong turns, and I was on my way. But, not before stopping at the famed Hallgrímskirkja, an immense sculpted concrete church where I took an elevator to the top of the towering spire and saw Reykjavik full circle with its setting on the sea. Crayon colors paint the lively intensity of many of their homes and buildings.

Sporting my Viking brand rain gear and in jet lag, off I went for the long day ahead brimming with a marvel of undulating, treeless landscapes and mountains. Very few people stood near as I viewed my first of countless waterfalls over ten days - this one rivaling Niagara Falls and violently crashing over black volcanic chasms surrounded by lava walls covered with moss and fall vegetation. Here at Þingvellir National Park the Vikings established the world's first democratic ruling body. Its lonely, wildly colorful and severe beauty displayed other less dramatic but still spell-binding waterfalls and a vast prehistoric lake, where I stood alone and felt for the first of many times that I had left Planet Earth without aid of a space ship. Geysir is an example of their abundant gushing thermal energy, and after which all other hot water spouts in the world are named. On the way there, looming above me were tall, dark, brooding mountains with alternating gouged swaths of deep green moss and long fingers of what looked like black velvet, and as though clawed by some huge, invisible creature. At any moment I expected to hear the strains of "In the Hall of the Mountain King." Only occasional signs of life other than myself heightened the mystery of what my eyes beheld.

That night I snuggled into a warm bed on a horse farm and prayed for sun the next day. Thankfully, it came beaming through the curtains in the morning as I dressed for my first Icelandic breakfast, which did not disappoint. Oh, their marvelous fresh cheeses, jams, eggs, butter, milk products and bread! I was full and ready to leave anything but scattered spots of civilization that lay ahead.

Often my only "companions" were the abundant livestock. The variously colored sheep were full bodied and supported by four thin legs. Cows stared at me from brilliantly green pastures and returned to grazing. It was the Icelandic horse, though, that captured my heart - this pure breed with its ancestry tracing back to its Viking riders. They were at the base of tall mountains, in pastures, looking over fences, meandering on roads, by waterfalls and rivers, racing up hillsides in columns, and silhouetted against dark blue seascapes. These voluptuous creatures came in all colors, with those marvelous, thick cascading manes and tails, and hair falling over their large, soft, dark eyes.

The southern coast was astounding. Live and extinct volcanoes dotted the landscape, revealing the aftermath of violent eruptions softened over the years by abundant, verdant moss and vegetative growth. Waterfalls like bridal veils or in thundering volume cascaded off high, rugged, black precipices. The road played touch and go with the sea, interrupted by immense plains of glacial and volcanic residue. Dream-like pastoral scenes at the base of jagged mountains scraping the sky contrasted the treeless terrain. Evidence was everywhere of a land forged by energetic, combustible activity. Standing against the harsh wind at one remote edge of the sea far off the main road, I saw tortured rock shapes out in the forbidding waters whose force had carved out arches. Glaciers crept down from their heights causing chilling wonder of what was behind them in the interior - off-limits to one alone. The little town of Vik welcomed me to a charming café, where I devoured bowls of asparagus soup, fresh bread and a dessert that will surely be served in Heaven.

After hiking close to the intimidating foot of the world's largest glacier outside of the Poles and burdening all of my available pockets with multi-colored volcanic rocks for my gardens, I traveled on, and found my Shangri-la. Jokulsarlon. A lagoon, home to small/medium blue and white icebergs calved from numerous glaciers which were slowly making their way out to open sea. Seals jumped and posed for the few of us beholding them, and arctic birds flew overhead. An intense storm in the area was clearing, and I fought against the fierce wind as I stood in awe watching the sun slowly pierce through the troubled clouds and brilliantly color the sky, earth and water. Dramatic shapes appeared behind the lagoon, as mountains and glaciers emerged. I climbed a hill and stood mesmerized as I watched the changing scene. And, cold tears streamed down my face.

The Eastfjords are little visited, and monumental in beauty. Pastel shaded rugged mountains slope down to the arctic waters, with the debris of geologic events pebbled at their feet. Taking pictures off-road, I dislodged a rock which damaged the underneath of the car. Dragging uphill, the Toyota struggled. In this vast scene, I was alone. A desperate prayer brought a car approaching far in the distance. A beautiful couple stopped at seeing my flailing arms, put some parts back in place and warned in faltering English that I needed professional help. Many slow miles later around the bend of a dramatic fjord, a man in an idyllic fishing village directed me on to another finger of land jutting into the ocean, where I found my tall Viking savior. Two hours later the car was healed. As darkness fell and after going through a black tunnel under a big, brooding mountain, I slept in a guesthouse at the end of a peninsula protruding into the depths of a fjord.

Traveling northeast I encountered their first winter storm - on balding summer tires. The wind was gale force, and the road quickly became iced and deep in snow. A snow plow made little difference

and left me in its cloud. Three SUV's passed me, and visibility became almost nonexistent. I'm a veteran Colorado blizzard driver, but this was quite different. The road was narrow, and often I could not determine the terrain, except to know it was steep and I was on my brakes way too much. The dash lights warned I was slipping and weaving even at 10 mph. In the distance behind me I saw lights, and a large vehicle soon appeared. "Lord, please don't let them leave me alone out here!" They did not. A long time later after I had struggled through the storm, the SUV carrying two men (or angels?) passed me and was out of sight in seconds.

Though veiled in snow, I was still able to see the intense colors, shapes and blue steaming waters of the Lake Myvatn area, similar to our Yellowstone. Traveling west the next day, after passing out in a youth hostel, revealed high mountain and valley grandeur, with clearing skies as I drove onto a gentle peninsula pointing toward the Artic Circle. At a spotlessly clean, solitary youth hostel and dairy farm, I had a "Room With a View" looking over the sea and across to a range of now whitened peaks, with a famous seal sanctuary nearby. The delightful host filled me for hours the next morning with tales of Iceland and the history of his thirty-third generation family. And, I drank fresh milk from his cows.

The Westfjords are the most remote part of the country - unpaved and wild. I gasped at the sights, AND the horrific rock-strewn, rutted and rugged high mountain roads. How I longed for my trusted Subaru with its lower gears! Praying often, I traversed this forbidding territory and was rescued once by a young couple who drove in front of me over what has to be one of the world's worst, most dangerous mountain roads. Near the bottom, I arrived at the horse farm where I ate fabulous food, and slept well. The night was cold and clear with countless stars so close that it seemed I could reach up and catch a handful. Pressing my nose against the window at this northern-most place I would be staying, I strained my eyes to see if the Northern Lights would appear. At the glimmer of something out in the vast sky, I burst through the door of my room into the darkness, and the show began. At the horizon long fingers of light began traveling across the sky like writhing snakes. I bent backwards until I nearly fell over while they danced slowly across the sky, which seemed to laugh and say, "See what I can do?!?" A cold Coloradoan in her nightgown was an ecstatic audience of one exulting with delight like a child who had just received exactly the right Christmas present from under the tree.

"The Alps of the West" were stunning, and the roads almost nonnegotiable for my Toyota the next day. The sea came in to interrupt the land, and only an approaching storm in the distance obscured the perfection. A roller coaster final stretch of mountains, hair-raising rough roads and other-worldly sights later, I stopped short of my destination at a lonely place with beds. Rest at last.

My final night was spent on the edge of a picture-perfect fjord in a room where the cows had been milked in years gone by on this dairy farm. The owners' home sported a sod roof that was reminiscent of the turf-roofed historic farm with all its outbuildings which I had seen days before in a remote location on the southern coast. I still have small jars of luscious jam made there.

Iceland bade me farewell with the same weather accompanying its greeting. The storm I'd mercifully escaped in the Westfjords followed me to the airport. Lifting into the clouds and above to the sun, I vowed that I would return - the next time renting an SUV!

There is an innocence and a mystery about this land of such terrifying, devastating beauty where so few human footprints can be found. For weeks after returning home, my dreams were disoriented and wild. I was still immersed in a place of incomparably vast, stark majesty and haunting loveliness.

Often I think back on this journey and feel that surely I have been to the foyer of Heaven.