

→ ICELAND

Independence days

While visitors throng to Reykjavík, free-spirited Icelanders head north for their own adventures. Paul Bloomfield joins the locals aboard the clipper *Aurora* to sail the magical Westfjords

Photographs by Paul Bloomfield

It was about 4am when the whole ghost thing started to add up.

I'd given up trying to sleep.

A pale but insistent light had been soaking through the wide skylight above my bunk all that sub-Arctic midsummer night – and the three nights before – tickling my retinas through tightly clamped eyelids. I call it night – how is it night if there's no darkness? Resigned to wakefulness, I crept on deck.

Gently rocking aboard the *Aurora*, the 60-foot clipper that was my home for a week, the idea that I was surrounded by magical creatures capering among the glaciers and misshapen rocks seemed not just plausible but entirely

probable. If the map of Iceland resembles a deformed duck, the Westfjords is the strangely ragged head on its spindly neck. It's an extremely isolated region in a lonely land, and in Hornstrandir nature reserve, the Westfjord's yet-more remote northern zone – no permanent human population, no roads – logic and common sense were fighting a losing battle with imagination and legend.

Icelanders, one Reykjavíker told me, see ghosts. I don't mean they're always clapping eyes on sheeted spooks; it's more that they aren't prepared to deny the existence of *huldufólk* or 'hidden people'. According to the tourist board, 80% of them believe in elves.

At the time I'd thought my Reykjavík friend a bit of a loon; now, with the wind making the radio antenna hum with the wail of a mournful spectre, I wasn't so sure.

But that's the thing about Icelanders: they won't be told what to believe or not believe. They choose for themselves what things to like, and do, and eat. And a few days exploring Hornstrandir's peaceful wilderness aboard the *Aurora* with a bunch of locals is the ideal way to find out what those things are, and why. Like the superstitions, once immersed in Iceland's remote north-west, those things mostly made a lot more sense. >





◀ Ship's log

MONDAY EVENING: flying clowns

We spent a fair bit of the voyage from Ísafjörður harbour laughing at puffins.

I know, it's cruel to point and snigger. But, truthfully, they're deserving of a bit of a tease; ungainly in the air, positively catastrophic when landing and with an out-of-proportion, rainbow-striped beak seemingly fallen from a cheap Christmas cracker, puffins are the clowns of the avian world. And they like an audience. As we rounded the headland that separates the Westfjord's settled southerly regions from the emptiness of Hornstrandir, we were greeted by a screeching fanfare: the circus was in town.

The Big Top was a vertiginous seacliff, barnacled with puffins and guillemots – tens or even hundreds of thousands of them – occasionally dropping off and joining the mobs of skuas, Arctic terns and fulmars turning the sky dark above us. Ropes hung from the rocks, reminders of the bravery (or

foolhardiness) of men who scale the cliffs each spring to collect eggs.

Steering east, we sailed past a craggy double rock arch and into Jökulfirðir, accompanied by dolphins porpoising alongside and more puffins bobbing comically, tossed about by the choppy waves.

"You know that puffins can't take off if they can't see water?" observed Páll. "Sometimes scores of them land in the streets and can't take off again because their view of the sea is blocked – kids carry them down to the harbour to release them."

Or back to the kitchen to cook them, I thought but didn't like to say. After all, we'd only just met.

Páll (pronounced, approximately, 'Pow-kull'), a seemingly inexhaustible source of yarns and tidbits, was one of my ten companions aboard the *Aurora*, along with his wife Ásta (say 'Ow-ster'), friends Guðrun ('Guth-roon'), Dagny (oh, work it out for yourselves), Finnur and three fellow limeys, Andrea,

Margaret and Tim. Skipper Siggi gave the safety briefing as guide/first mate Rúnar prepared to drop anchor.

"Remember the golden rules. First, don't fall in. Second, if someone does, scream and point at them; that usually does the trick."

He pointed out the life rafts with an attempt at reassurance. "The *Aurora* is a really safe boat, with a six-compartment hull – it's actually quite difficult to sink. But," Siggi smiled dryly, "as we know from history, it's possible to sink anything if you really try."

That night, as music drifted from the ship's speakers across the millpond waters of the fjord, I began to learn how almost-continuous daylight messes with your internal clock; we practised salsa dancing on deck into the small hours, stopping only to slurp wine and collapse into hysterics as a seal turned away in disgust at our slapdash mambos. With no closing time or darkness, it's hard to know when to call it a night. Literally. >

Previous spread: Few people live amid the dramatic landscapes of the Westfjords
Above: The *Aurora* – less a boat, more a 'floating mountain hut'
Opposite: The lives of Hornstrandir's inhabitants – human, avian and mammalian – are best understood on foot, under sail or by paddle



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‘You won’t find trees here, or even much growing over a metre tall. A local joke runs: What do you do if you get lost in a forest? Stand up’

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Above: Heading up the valley towards the Drangajökull Glacier, the 'paths' are light trails through orchid-strewn meadows

◀ **TUESDAY: glacial beauty**

The lapping of water against the hull merged with the munching of muesli and muffled “*Góðan daginn*” (good mornings) as we rubbed the sleep from our eyes.

Apart from a wispy tablecloth trailing over the ridge to the south, the sky was near cloudless; Drangajökull glacier glistened to the east, cascades striping the rock walls across Leirufjörður. As the inflatable ferried us to shore, I dipped my hand in the dappled water: bone-chillingly cold, and murky from glacial runoff (Leirufjörður means ‘silt fjord’).

Our party all ashore, Siggí led us east alongside the fjord towards the glacier. A family of eider ducks paddled by; Siggí picked up a football-sized clump of down from the grass and handed it to me.

“That’s worth a lot of money – collect a kilo and you’ll have maybe 160,000

króna [almost £1,000]. Eiders have been protected here for 200 years; farmers make nesting spots for them, collecting the down for duvets and pillows.”

I put it down carefully; holding a grand made me nervous. I know it’s hard to break feathers, but I’m good at breaking expensive things that don’t belong to me.

The landscape in the Westfjords is extraordinary, even by Icelandic standards. In the other bits of the country I’d seen, barren beauty was the norm – lunar rather than luminous. Here, the flat-topped peninsulas and the valleys’ sweeping expanses dazzle with greens; I’d never imagined there could be so many variations on that one colour.

Hornstrandir is a sheep-free zone, so the whole region is a sanctuary for native flora. In common with most of Iceland, you won’t find trees here, or even much growing over a metre tall;

a local joke runs: ‘What do you do if you get lost in a forest? Stand up.’”

Instead, we tramped through meadows speckled with purple seathrift, orchids, buttercups and cottongrass, stopping to nibble ‘sweetcups’ – baby blueberries, more like flowers than fruit – and bitter wild sorrel. The path, such as it was, was a springy pavement variegated with countless hues of moss and trailing azalea. Some mosses were so lush and spongy that my feet vanished into a calf-deep bog when I unwisely trod on them. Others were grey and crisp, the texture of burnt paper.

Drangajökull, when we reached it, was dusted with icy couscous – Siggí called it “spring corn snow”, a result of continual cycles of thawing and re-freezing. Climbing the glacier was like walking on a steep, very slippery carpet of Crunchies. If you’ve never walked on a carpet of Crunchies, I assure you it’s

not easy; breathless, our chatter soon tailed off, replaced by the rustle of footsteps and the gurgle of streams, reaching our ears through countless crevasses spidering the ice.

Two hours' Crunching brought us to the top, some 900m up and with vistas to match – snowy outcrops to the north-west, a sea of cloud to the north-east, and the valley curving beneath us back west to the *Aurora*. Seeing her moored there, patiently waiting for us, warmed the cockles (which, on the glacier, were getting rather chilly).

WEDNESDAY: past times, distant lives

Cloud had closed in during the night, cloaking the peaks above our new anchorage at Hesteyri, emphasising the Brigadoon ambience. This tiny settlement, like the others in Hornstrandir, is a ghost town for most of the year. It's over half a century since the last permanent residents abandoned fishing and subsistence farming for a less arduous life in Ísafjörður; now the families of the original inhabitants occupy the tiny tin-and-clapboard houses for just a few months each summer. Understandable, really – you could imagine conversations between those tough old crofters in the so-long, so-dark winters:

“What’s for dinner, Helga?”

“Salted fish. Again.”

“Ahhh... When do the birds arrive?”

I could really go a fried egg.”

“April, Jón. Same as last year. Same as every year.”

“And now it’s...?”

“December. How’d you want your fish?”

The land behind the wooden jetty was tufty with angelica, like a forest of Brobdingnagian cow parsley; its scent blended with that of wild thyme underfoot. We followed a path tracing the shoreline around to the lichen-rusty ruins of a Norwegian whaling station, deserted even longer than the village. En route, Páll and Finnur chatted in an accent that sounded strangely familiar; with gentle cadences and rrrrolled Rs, it feels more Welsh than Scandinavian.

“Perhaps that’s not a coincidence,” Páll chuckled. “Many Icelanders would claim descent from Celtic slaves brought by the Norse settlers – maybe the accents came along for the ride.”

But surely they’d rather be Vikings than slaves?

Both men erupted into hoots of laughter.

“You have to understand,” explained Finnur, “that Icelanders are all obsessed with independence, after centuries of rule by Norway and then Denmark.”

We wandered among the tumbledown relics of the whaling station: huge vats for rendering the flensed blubber, squared chimney for the furnaces. The cries of the seabirds were muted and eerie among the dead buildings, and I was glad to return to the village’s makeshift café for coffee and traditional pancakes, rustled up in a doll’s-house kitchen that could hardly have changed since those whalers last flensed and rendered. Thank god they’d got decent coffee in the meantime.

FRIDAY: brushes with nature

It’s a blessed day on which you meet more seals than people. Moored on

mulled: half of our party would paddle out to make the seals’ acquaintance; another four of us went ashore, to fish, walk and, in my case, snooze. I’d intended to hike over the ridge, but only a few hundred paces from the inlet I’d been overwhelmed by the silence, soporific as a roaring fire. Finding a sheltered hollow lined with springy moss, I opened my book.

I jolted awake to find a column of midges swirling above my head, and wondered what had disturbed my snooze – there was no noise, just the distant rush of the stream. Then I glanced down: a young Arctic fox stared at me from ten steps away, rounded ears standing to attention, plump tail extended. For a few seconds he measured me up before zigzagging off up the valley, springing over rivulets and stopping every few seconds to check I wasn’t following him.

Interesting role reversal: makes a change to be watched by wildlife.

‘It’s a blessed day on which you meet more seals than people – they came to investigate, dark eyes inspecting us’

Lónafjörður, far from any settlement, we launched our kayaks into a mist-muffled morning; Siggí headed for shore to pick mussels and set a gill net, while four of us paddled around the bay to say hello to the neighbours.

In a secluded cove we spotted a haul-out, a dozen common seals dozing on the rocks; they plopped into the water at our approach. I expected them to vanish, but no: they came to investigate, shining dark eyes inspecting us intently. Like a fairground game of ‘mallet the moles’, heads bobbed up randomly around our kayaks, then disappeared back under the surface with an aqueous burp.

Shoulders aching pleasantly, we clambered back aboard the *Aurora*, lured by a tantalising garlic aroma: Siggí had come up trumps with the mussels, as well as a couple of Arctic char, dished up with wild rocket plucked from the shore. Plans for the afternoon were

SATURDAY: to harbour

The clowns joined us again as we steered back towards Ísafjörður – to curtains that block the midnight light, to a shower and a bed that didn’t roll. Just before the harbour came into sight, a minke whale breached, tossing us a jaunty wave with his broad fluke. I wished him a long, flense-free life.

That goodbye wave brought on my end-of-trip blues. I gazed around the *Aurora*, trying to see her with an Icelander’s eyes: who is she? For her passengers, she’s freedom to explore the Westfjords as and how they wish. To Siggí and Rúnar, she’s the office, the fishing boat, the excuse to never again have a boss.

“She’s not a luxury yacht,” said Siggí, fondly. “She’s like a mobile mountain hut that we can take to our favourite places.” And that nails it, really. She’s the Icelandic dream: 60 feet of independence in fibreglass, sailcloth and rope. ■



Iceland footnotes

How and when to navigate the Westfjords, plus tips on planning a longer trip to the island

ONLINE FEATURES

For more on Iceland, including horse-riding across the interior, see www.wanderlust.co.uk/destinations

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Reykjavík; the Westfjords' main town is Ísafjörður
Population: 305,000 (Westfjords: 7,300)
Language: Icelandic; English is almost universally spoken
Time: GMT
International dialling code: +354
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Icelandic króna (Ikr), currently around 1kr170 to the UK£

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- Summer: long, warm days, almost 24-hour light, crowds at tourist sites
- Also pleasant, though some accommodation may not be open
- Winter: cold, dark, many hotels closed, but the chance of seeing the northern lights; cool capital Reykjavík is a good city-break destination year round
- Skiing popular in the Westfjords

Health & safety

Weather can change rapidly even in summer, so be prepared for all conditions: pack warm layers, hat and gloves as well as sunscreen and sunglasses. If you're prone to seasickness, take preventative measures (tablets, ginger biscuits, acupressure bands).

You'd be hard-pressed to catch anything worse than a cold in Iceland – or a hangover: in summer, there's no significant change in daylight until well into the small hours, and it's all too easy to lose track of time in a convivial bar.

Further reading

- *Iceland* (Bradt, 2008)
- *Iceland* (Rough Guides, 2007)
- *Iceland* (Lonely Planet, 2007)
- *Independent People* (Vintage Classics, 2008; first published 1946) by Halldór Laxness, a fascinating novel offering an insight into the Icelandic psyche.

Further information

- www.visiticeland.com Iceland Tourist Board
- www.westfjords.is Westfjords Tourist Bureau
- www.icelandgourmetguide.com Information about the country's very finest foods

THE TRIP

The author sailed with Borea Adventures (+354 869 7557, www.boreaadventures.com) on a five-night summer *Multi Adventure* aboard the *Aurora*, including hiking, glacier walks and kayaking; whales, dolphins, seals, puffins, guillemots and Arctic fox are commonly spotted. There are eight sailings from Ísafjörður between June and September 2009; trips cost €1,430 (£1,400), excluding international and domestic flights. Other Borea trips include backcountry skiing and voyages to Greenland, Svalbard or Jan Mayen. Accommodation on the *Aurora* is simple but comfy, with bunks in open cabins and plenty of hearty food. There are two pump-action loos and a cramped shower (of sorts), though nobody showered during our trip.

Getting there

Icelandair (0870 787 4044, www.icelandair.co.uk) flies twice daily from Heathrow to Keflavík (48km west of Reykjavík) and twice a week from Manchester in the summer. Return fares start from around £212; flight time is three hours.

Getting around

Air Iceland (+354 570 3030, www.airiceland.is) flies twice daily from Reykjavík Airport, in the centre of the city, to Ísafjörður; return fares for the 40-minute flight start from 1kr9,980 (£60). Other domestic destinations include Egilsstaðir (for the far east) and Akureyri, near Lake Mývatn. Comfortable buses operated by members of the consortium BSÍ (www.bsi.is) serve main towns in summer; from September to May, services are sparse. Car hire is pricey; lowest off-season rates are about £35 per day.

Cost of travel

Iceland currently provides much better value for British travellers than it has for many years, though it's still not bargain cheap; however, apart from a chance to try traditional pancakes at the café at Hesteyri you won't spend anything on the trip (if you want booze, buy some before you board).

Elsewhere you can save on accommodation by bringing a sleeping bag, which can knock about 30% off room prices in some guesthouses.

Accommodation

CenterHotel Thingholt (+354 595 8530, www.centerhotels.com) A stylish design hotel in the heart of Reykjavík. Doubles start from 1kr25,000 (around £135).

Gamla Guesthouse (+354 456 4146, www.gistihus.is) A simple, cosy Ísafjörður B&B. Twins cost 1kr10,500 (£63) in summer.

Food & drink

Siggi rustles up surprisingly tasty meals in the *Aurora*'s small galley, often featuring fish and herbs collected during the trip. Elsewhere, lamb and seafood are excellent, while *skyr* – a thick, fruity yoghurt-like treat – is everywhere. Alcohol is pricey, particularly wine; amazingly, beer was illegal until just 20 years ago. Brennivín, a potent schnapps flavoured with caraway seeds, warms the cockles on chilly nights, but avoid Gammel Dansk, another spirit popular with Icelanders, unless you relish the taste of furniture polish.

If you're lucky enough to be in Ísafjörður during one of the four saltfish festivals held each summer in the museum, try to join in – a range of delicacies concocted using salt cod are dished up to the soundtrack of a lively local jazz band; it's a hit with locals, and the dancing gets pretty lively after a couple of drinks.

ICELAND IN...

ONE WEEK: Capital & cruise

Borea's summer cruises run Monday-Saturday; explore Reykjavík over the first weekend, and allow a night to relax in Ísafjörður at the end.



TWO WEEKS: Sailing & sights

Expand your Reykjavík experience to include the steaming Blue Lagoon, Gullfoss waterfall and the original Geysir, plus whalewatching, the glacier and mountains of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and possibly the Westmann Islands.

THREE WEEKS: Grand tour

Combine your cruise with a circuit of the Ring Road in a hire car: take in the birdlife-rich Lake Mývatn, the vast Vatnajökull glacier and multicoloured rhyolite hills of Landmannalaugar.

