

GÓÐA FERÐ

Travel
Issue

(New) Iceland

Visitors need to look beneath the surface



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Reykjavík, Iceland

The fundamental basis for each tour I have worked on for INL-Iceland is always the history of Icelandic immigrants in North America. I have held short seminars for each group in an effort not only to give a historical account, but also to prepare them for what awaits them.

Far too often have I heard here in Iceland the negative remarks of Icelanders, who visited one community or another or attended a celebration or function and didn't find it "Icelandic" enough. It is almost as if such people expect to find the settlements in conditions similar to those they were in over one hundred years ago, or as described by novelists in recent years.

Icelanders visiting Icelandic communities in Canada or the US shouldn't expect to be stepping back in time and experiencing something similar to what the Icelandic settlers did more than one hundred years ago. The Canadian prairie may not have changed all that much, or the weather. It still gets just as warm in the summer with thunderstorms and occasional hail, or drops well below zero as the settlers described in their letters. But the communities have obviously changed, particularly the inhabitants.

In Iceland, when I discuss the history of Icelanders in North America, I always bring up the issue of assimilation. As stated above, Icelanders have

Over the past five years **Jónas Þór** has been instrumental in organizing tours to Icelandic communities in North America on behalf of INL-Iceland. A key component for an enriching visit is preparation — and that goes for people looking for their roots in Iceland, too

sometimes returned from visits to a North American Icelandic community suggesting that the descendants of the Icelandic immigrants have "failed" in preserving Icelandic heritage in North America, insisting that there is no difference between Icelandic and non-Icelandic communities on the prairie.

This is true if people only look at farm buildings and agricultural methods. The train tracks are the same, as are the gravel roads. But if the visitor does not bother to stop and chat with local people, visit their museums, businesses, churches or cemeteries, he will never find the difference.

But back to the issue of assimilation.

After the disastrous years in New Iceland, the only exclusive Icelandic settlement in North America, the dream of establishing such a colony faded away. The Rev. Jon Bjarnason, who more than anybody else promoted the foundation of New Iceland and its ideals, completely changed his views on settlements in North America after serving four congregations in the colony. He claimed, in a remarkable article in *Framfari*, that the only way forward for Icelandic immigrants in North America was to accept their role as future citizens of the North American community.

This very same advice is now given to every immigrant to Iceland wherever he or she may come from. The psychological experience, the mental torment, that immigrants go through in any part of history is always the

same. The reasons for immigration are similar; the immigrants want to improve their standard of living and are prepared to leave their homeland and settle in a different society, often utterly different from their own.

In recent years, Iceland has seen thousands of people from Vietnam, Thailand, Poland and other Eastern European countries arrive, planning to make Iceland their new homeland. We encourage every immigrant to become part of the Icelandic society by learning the language, accepting our customs and traditions, becoming Icelandic citizens.

When this is compared to the adjustment of Icelandic immigrants in North America over a century ago, people understand much better why Icelandic communities are so similar to the non-Icelandic ones.

Tours to Iceland

Wherever we have stopped and met local people of Icelandic origin and had a chance to spend some time in their company, we often hear stories which have lived on in the family from the days of immigration. The storyteller may never have been to Iceland, but in his mind is this picture of the old country which his ancestors left.

The Icelandic immigrants strove to preserve their heritage and used every means to do so. Much was written down, but more often oral descriptions of 19th-century Iceland sufficed, especially when the younger generations' ability to read Ice-

landic became less. The younger generations were thus given a picture of the rural community their Icelandic ancestors left. Descriptions of 19th-century life in rural Iceland are invaluable for the younger generations in the North American Icelandic society — yet they do not reflect modern Iceland.

Just as the Icelandic visitor in an Icelandic community on the prairies is disappointed in finding very little "Icelandic" about the place, the North American of Icelandic descent is often shocked, driving through the old district in northeast Iceland or wherever his roots may lie, to not find anything resembling the picture he has had in his mind from the stories.

He would undoubtedly be equally surprised to drive through Reykjavík and see how modern the city is.

The above obviously only applies to those who do not bother familiarizing themselves with modern Iceland.

In recent years, tourism has become one of Iceland's main industries. Millions of people have discovered this "best-kept secret" and travel great distances to see the waterfalls, lavafields, glaciers and so forth. Numerous travel agencies offer all sorts of tours to these most spectacular spots.

The North American of Icelandic descent is just as impressed with the landscape — but he has something more on his mind. He is searching for his roots, the place from which his ancestors came and his remaining family in Iceland. His visit to Iceland is different and so his preparations likewise must be different.

Modern technology helps every tourist prepare his visit to any foreign country but the North American of Icelandic descent may not find any of his roots on the Internet or in available printed matter.

Icelanders had not been long in America before they felt the need to change their names. The need to abandon Icelandic spelling was obvious, and in order for the new family name to sound better when pronounced by the English-speaking majority, further changes were made. In many cases the original family name may now be lost. This makes the task of finding relatives in Iceland all the more difficult.

Anyone intending to travel to Iceland to track down relatives should make preparations beforehand. It is very frustrating for a person to come here, only having a week or two, and not knowing where to start.

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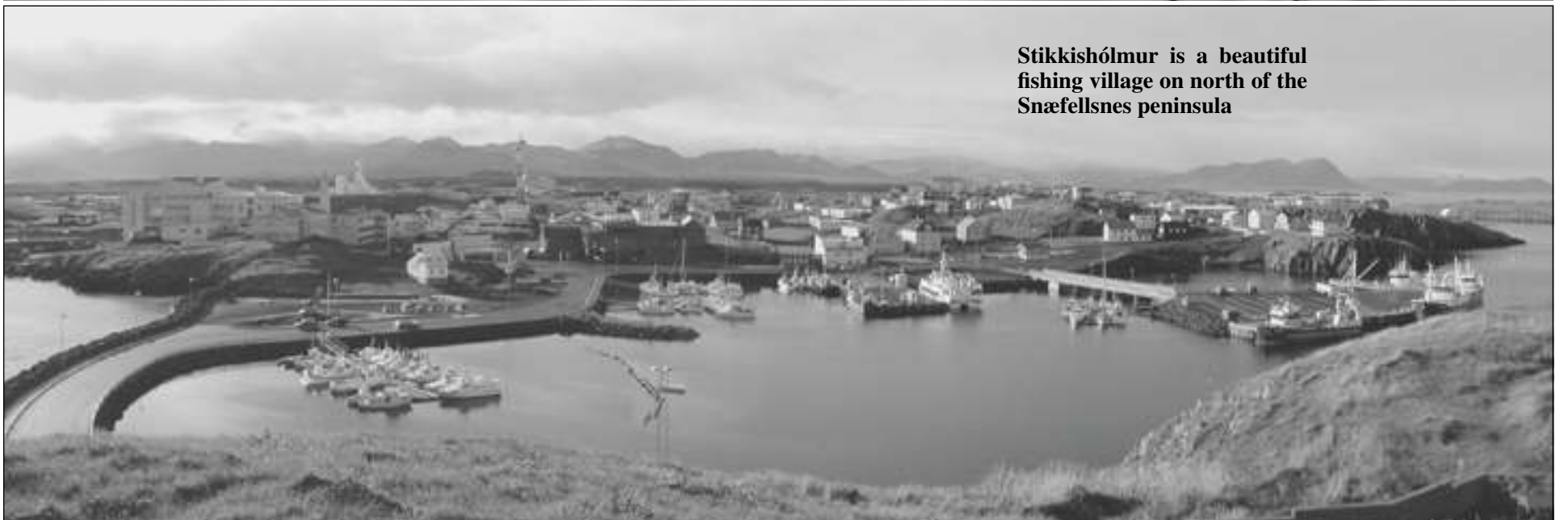
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Stikkishólmur is a beautiful fishing village on north of the Snæfellsnes peninsula

PHOTO: KENT LÁRUS BJÖRNSSON

menu (*pylsur*, Coke) and held up my finger, “one *pylsa*, please.”

In earnest, the woman inside prepared my mid-morning meal. Taped to the window of the stand was a black-and-white photo of Bill Clinton enjoying a *pylsur* at this very spot. It has been reported that the former US president ate at Bæjarins Beztu just weeks before his 2004 bypass surgery. Another famous visitor to Bæjarins Beztu was James Hetfield of Metallica, but on this day, it was just me and the *pylsur* lady.

As I enjoyed my *pylsa*, I commented on the unseasonably cold weather, punctuated by snowflakes dancing in the wind, and told the woman inside I was from Hawaii. She remarked that her husband’s choir had just performed some Hawaiian songs and now here she was speaking with someone from Hawaii.

This chance encounter was probably as odd for her as it was for me to be standing in the freezing cold, eating a hot dog beside the Reykjavík pier.

After my last bite, I paid the woman 250 *krónur* (a little over \$3 US) and shuffled off into the cold spring morning.

As we travelled around Iceland by car (I was with my wife and 20-month-old son), we invariably ran into more places serving *pylsur*, and before long, we were searching them out, although we didn’t have to look very hard.

Driving north of Reykjavík, we stopped for gas at a Shell station in Borgarnes where we

sampled other Icelandic treats — rolled ribbons of oil-slick-black licorice, chocolate-covered Draumur licorice bars and blueberry-flavoured *skyr*, an Icelandic dairy food reminiscent of yoghurt. Oh yes, and we had a couple of *pylsur* — with the works.

At Þingvellir National Park, site of the first meeting of the Alþingi (Iceland’s general assembly) around 930 AD, we enjoyed *pylsur*. A few days later, after a welcome, long hot soak in the Blue Lagoon hot springs south of Reykjavík, more *pylsur*, and again on the road to Gulfoss waterfall, *pylsur*.

This pattern of conspicuous *pylsur* consumption continued as we ventured further into the wilds of Iceland. Outside the small port of Stykkishólmur on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, I stopped to fill the gas tank and couldn’t resist another late afternoon *pylsa*.

In the small town of Selfoss, we stayed in a curious guesthouse with Siamese décor to match the Thai restaurant below, and forsook tom yum soup and a viking-themed restaurant for Hrói Höttur, which our guide book described as a “licensed” pizzeria. Seated in the small crowded pizza parlour amongst families with small children and bubbly teens slurping bottles of Coke, we had fine Icelandic pizzas and discovered what modern Icelanders eat when they aren’t eating *pylsur*.

During our stay, we also

tried Icelandic versions of doner kebab, fish and chips and, at a rather posh sandwich shop in central Reykjavík, traditional Danish open-faced sandwiches. Two half-sandwiches (fried plaice with caviar and shrimp and smoked salmon, scrambled egg and dill) at this shop cost us a neat 3,400 *krónur* (about \$48 US). It just may be the most expensive fast food on the planet and guarantees no one will ever utter the words, “Iceland — what a bargain!”

In remote Reykholt, a village near Langjökull glacier, we stopped for a snack at an Esso station which lamentably had no *pylsur* and so we settled for *skyr* and licorice. Here I eyed the amazing varieties of licorice which the Icelanders marketed with captivating names like Salt Bomber, Risa Opal, Nizza and Sambo. Licorice was sold in every conceivable form — rope, ribbon, vines, sticks, plugs, balls, twists, throat lozenges and apparently most popular, bars dipped in chocolate.

One thing I never did find, however, was a *pylsa* with licorice. Maybe some things are better left undiscovered.

Jon Lettman is a freelance writer in Lihue, Hawaii.

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Valuable time is wasted digging through sources which may in the end not help at all. To know one’s original district — east, west, north or south — naturally helps, not to mention the original family or farm name.

The ideal visit for the average North American of Icelandic descent should start at home. If you don’t have any records, look for someone who might know your background or have proper sources. A fam-

ily name or the name of the farm and/or district goes a long way. Once such information is available, help can be found here in Iceland.

The main reason for the founding of The Icelandic National League in North America and INL-Iceland was to strengthen the ties between the North Americans of Icelandic descent and their cousins in Iceland. It is therefore the responsibility of INL-Iceland to help anyone in North America find his roots and relatives. We will assist in any way we can.



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