

HORIZON NEWS #72

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

To Iceland or Not to Iceland?

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In July, my wife and I took a wonderful one week tour along the southern stretch of Iceland's coastal ring road. It was a hiking and biking trip so I didn't spend much time taking pictures, but I did come away with a photographer's sense of the place. If you're considering a photo trip to Iceland, here are my thoughts.

For landscape photographers in search of dramatic and unusual topography, Iceland is sure to get your adrenaline flowing. Rugged mountains, colossal (ever-shrinking) glaciers, dramatic rocky coastline, hot springs, thunderous waterfalls, volcanic cones, and (in season) ice caves and the aurora borealis. Plus, lava in an astonishing variety: smoothish to wickedly sharp... blackish to grayish...heavyish to lightish...craggy, undulating, ropey and otherwise...from fine ash to boulders... unadorned or covered with grass or spongy moss. Iceland is lava nirvana.

It's easy to see why Iceland has become such a popular photography destination. But before you book your reservations, I would offer a few reservations.

- The entire country has far fewer than half a million people, yet tourist attractions are seriously crowded, which is generally not conducive to serious photography. On the bright side, Iceland doesn't cordon people off behind protective barriers so you're generally free to climb all over the glaciers, waterfalls, whatever, to get good angles.

- We had a perfect mix of weather, including three days of sun, but that's highly unusual. Expect lots of overcast skies and some rain.

- Iceland is terribly expensive. Cab fare from Reykjavik to the airport was \$130 (bus is much cheaper).

- Thumbs down on the food. With three times more sheep than people in Iceland, you'd expect that at least they'd have mastered how to cook lamb. Alas, no. (My wife, more of a seafood lover than I, liked the food more.)

- The Icelandic language uses familiar Roman letters



Glaciers are covered with volcanic dust...and scads of tourists, who climb around excitedly using crampons. [above] The weather offers little opportunity for sunbathing, but I was able to get some rays atop a barn roof beside Lake Pinvallavatn.



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(mostly), but words are unpronounceable and unreadable. (I have mastered only two Icelandic words: “Icelandair” and “Reykjavik.”) I would never explore off the beaten track without a guide.

Some miscellaneous things about Iceland that surprised and pleased me: 1. They don't believe in tipping, which simplifies the number of currency calculations (and makes the high prices somewhat more bearable). 2. When you exit some establishments, there are buttons you can hit to express your level of satisfaction—or dissatisfaction—with your experience (see photo on last page from a bank we went to). 3. Icelanders welcome the frequent, and often massive, volcanic eruptions that occur, despite the dangers. “Bring ‘em on, we can take it,” seems to be their attitude, in contrast to American's, “It won't happen while I'm living here... after that, not my problem.” (They seem to worry more about earthquakes, with Iceland is at the junction of two massive and shifting tectonic plates.) 4. Iceland was hit harder than any other country by the 2007-8 economic crisis. They decided not to bail out the banks...and some bankers were sent to jail. Eight years later, their economy is growing, inflation is low, unemployment is 4%, construction sites are everywhere, and boarded-up shops are rare. Makes you wonder about the road not taken in the U.S.



This waterfall (name not recorded) would be a major attraction in most countries, but in Iceland it doesn't even stand out. They all seem to be overflowing with glacial melt in July. (We did not get to visit some of the country's most spectacular waterfalls.)



If you're on a budget, don't expect to find Icelandic versions of Holiday Inn, at least not when you get outside Reykjavick (the only real city). In the hinterland, you can expect high end hotels, like this Foss Hotel, which sports a dramatic lobby.



[Clockwise from top left]

- Visitors climb over the waterfalls; some strike striking poses.
- Lava in every variety covers the landscape, creating some rugged, otherworldly vistas.
- Iceland has 269 named glaciers, covering about 11% of the country. I found these masses of ice mesmerizing.
- The “mini-icebergs” we saw were nothing like the massive ones of Antarctica or Greenland, but they’re quicker, easier and cheaper to get to. [Note: that black stuff is volcanic ash.]
- Everyone in our group was given an ice ax for our glacier walk; we never needed them, but they made great photo props.





[Clockwise from top left]

- The hot springs and mudpots I saw were no match for Yellowstone's, but there were no restriction on walking around them and few tourists getting in the way.
- In Iceland, it was fun to offer our instant feedback.
- There aren't many roads in Iceland, yet a roadmap can look like the diagram of a complex football play. Pronounce three words correctly on the map and win a prize.
- The Icelandic language doesn't seem to like short words. "Keep it complicated" seems to be their linguistic tradition.

