

TRAVEL

"The problem with driving around Iceland is that you're basically confronted by a new soul-enriching, breath-taking, life-affirming natural sight every five goddamn minutes. It's totally exhausting." - STEPHEN MARKLEY, TALES OF ICELAND



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KNEE-DEEP IN NICELAND (PART 1)

Island of fire, ice and beer



My 'Icelandic Pony', a Triumph Tiger 800 XCx. The bike was perfect for the conditions, as were the Heidenau tyres.

WORDS/PHOTOS THE BEAR

THE MOST COMMON nickname for Iceland is 'Niceland', and although they came up with it themselves, the locals resent it fiercely. To compensate, they have built up a public image of themselves as rumbustious badass drinking and fighting Vikings, complete with horned helmets (for sale in every tourist shop and even some convenience stores) and wild beards. This can't hide their essential niceness, which shines through despite all of their efforts to the contrary, but it still annoys more thoughtful Icelanders.

"The original settlers were tax-dodging peasants, not Vikings," said one stylish young lady with whom I had struck up a casual conversation in a Reykjavik bar. "Ingolfur Arnarson wasn't a Viking. Hardly any of them ever went viking. And not a single horned helmet has ever been found in all of Iceland." – "Or anywhere else," said her red-haired friend. "And see my hair? That comes from the Irish women slaves they brought with them. Probably the Norwegian

women were too smart to go." She then bought herself, her friend and me replacement half litres of Viking Classic and we went on to discuss other matters.

"Is it true that Icelanders eat puffins?" I asked. "Not really," the redhead responded scornfully. "That's for tourists, like the rotted shark and the Black Death."

Icelanders refer to their local spirit, Brennivin, as 'Black Death' from the skull and crossbones that used to adorn the label. That doesn't mean they don't drink it, though, and from 1933 to 1989 they mixed it with low-alcohol lager to make bjórtíki. This reputedly disgusting cocktail was called 'ghost beer' and was popular because full-strength beer was banned. Don't ask why; it's down to intra-Scandinavian politics, which are often impenetrable.

Beer was legalised on the 1st of March 1989, and this has become a national festival day. Naturally it is celebrated by going out and getting blind drunk, which is also popular on the other 364 days of the year. When I checked the statistics, I found that Icelanders actually drink less than other Scandinavians, but don't tell them.

There are quite a few craft

breweries in Iceland now which make decent beer, and even the standard Viking brand is not a bad brew. Watch that Black Death, though, especially because it is often offered in company with the rotted shark. As my redheaded friend pointed out, the locals do not touch this vile combination; it is reserved for tourists. Naturally I tried it, and found that the Brennivin is just a pleasant, strong, lightly-flavoured akvavit while the shark has almost no flavour and a texture like a sliver of bamboo covered on both sides in congealed, elastic pig fat. Yummy. Now pass the roasted puffin.

A Tale of Two Islands

To get Iceland into some sort of scale, let's compare it with Tasmania – a place already dear to Australian (and many overseas) riders.

Tassie has the larger population at more than half a million, while Iceland has about a third of a million. Iceland is roughly half as big again as Tassie, at 103,000 square kilometres as against 68,400.

The central plain is only accessible by gravel roads.



The roads that are tarred are usually in excellent condition.



EASY MONEY

Lufthansa never actually admitted that they had overbooked their flight from Frankfurt to Keflavik, Iceland's main airport. But they began offering 400 Euros to passengers who would volunteer for alternative flights, which was a dead giveaway. Then they announced that the weather in

Red hair almost always points to Celtic slave ancestry in Iceland.





Iceland was bad (which I would have thought was a given) and that they would have to fly a smaller aircraft than planned. Since we were already two hours past the scheduled takeoff time for our flight, had changed gates three times and the staff showed no signs of letting anybody board an aircraft, I thought it was probably time to consider the alternative.

"About this other flight..." I said to the ruffled gatekeeper.

"The Copenhagen flight is full, but there is one via Berlin."

"When?"

"At midnight," she said hopefully.

"Tell you what. Get me onto the Copenhagen flight and you're on."

An hour later I was in the air to Copenhagen, and a couple of hours after that I was sitting in Silver Saga Class on an Icelandair 757, drinking my first ever Viking Classic and soaring over the North Sea. I was also A\$600 better off, courtesy of Lufthansa. My beer fund was looking pretty healthy.

Reykjavik has its own airport right in the middle of town, rather as if



Sydney had a runway down along Martin Place, but it only takes small aircraft. Keflavik is an hour out of town at Icelandic legal speeds, and I was in bed at my hotel by 11pm. The sky was still light, and would remain so (as I discovered later) until 3.00 am. Sunrise would be at 4.30. Fortunately,

1. One of the many valley glacier which descend from the huge shield glacier Vatnajokull.

2. What Icelanders do eat a lot is delicious cod and chips, with delicious Viking Classic beer.



my medication enables me to sleep in bright sunlight.

Now I know what you're going to ask me. Not how beautiful the beautiful nature is, nor how smooth or curvy the roads are. No, you want to know if the Icelandic girls really proposition blokes in the bars (I gather they do, although it doesn't always work out) and if the place is really expensive. Until this trip my standard for 'expensive' was Norway, where a schooner of beer cost about A\$10. Well, in Iceland it costs about A\$14.

Our guides, Manuel and Pablo, were unloading the almost-new bikes with their brand-new Heidenau tyres outside our hotel,

the Icelandair Marina, when I checked in the morning. Oh, I should have mentioned that I was on an Edelweiss Bike Travel tour. Conducted entirely with Triumph Tiger and Explorer motorcycles. This was going to take me around the island in nine days. My bike was a Tiger 800XCx, as were most of the others, while the Explorers were mainly being used by couples. In case I forget to mention this later on, the 800cc Tigers were pretty much perfect for the trip except that a couple of things like my chain guard vibrated loose after lengthy gravel excursions, easily fixed by our mechanic Pablo. The high rate of

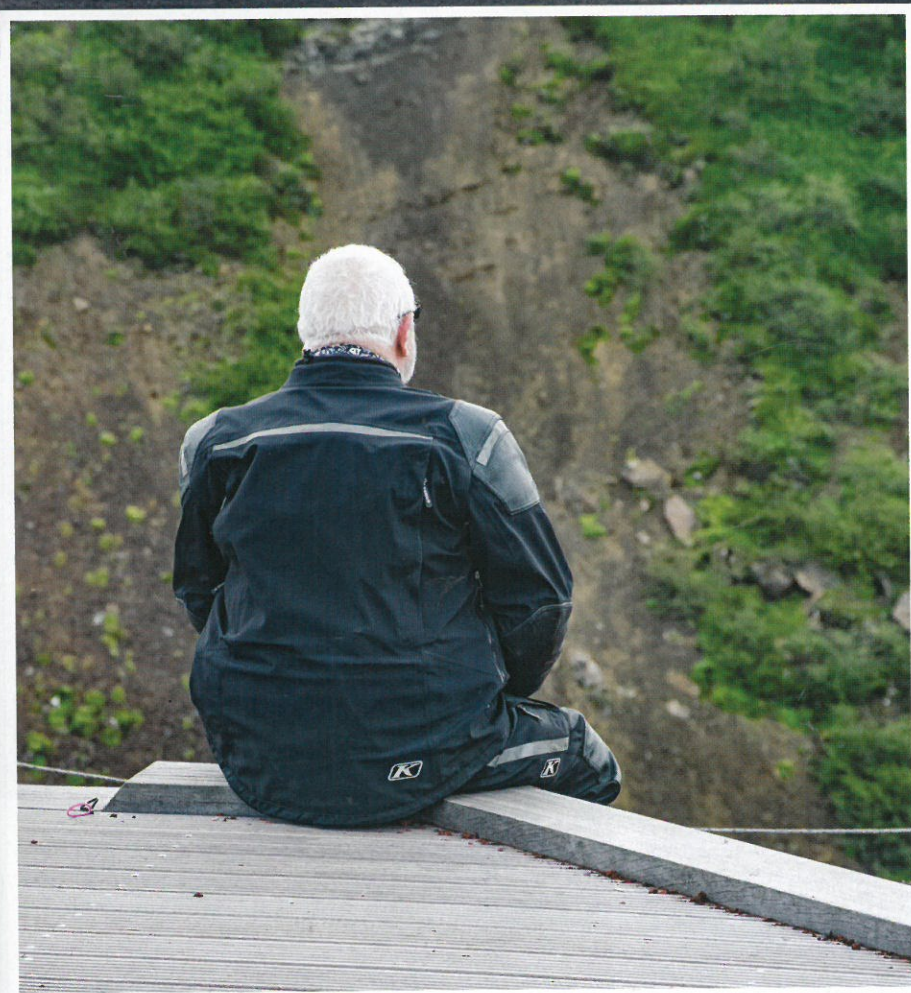
1. Volcanic scenery can be amazingly varied. This lake is known for its many islands.

2. Polar fox pups at play. They are hyperactive and almost impossibly cute.

fuel gauge failure was less easy to sort out, but the bikes had fuel warning lights as well and those kept working.

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Leaving Reykjavik is not a problem either in time or distance. Before



we knew it we were out of town and on our way down towards the opportunity of a lifetime: walking across a small bridge which links the American and European continental plates above a line that widens at the dizzying speed of 3mm a year. It might sound hokey, but it was a real buzz and there would be more opportunities along these lines (sorry) later.

Stop number two was the Blue Lagoon where you can bathe in the hot waste water of a power station... no, wait, that makes it sound a bit industrial. In fact it is quite stylish, although it's also expensive at well over A\$50 for a dip. There are many other opportunities to slip into hot volcanic waters (in this case after the power station has used some of their heat), and unlike the Blue Lagoon the others are free. Admittedly they lack the cool modern restaurant, which is the place our guides had selected for our lunch.

Maybe it's time to give you a bit of background on the tour company.

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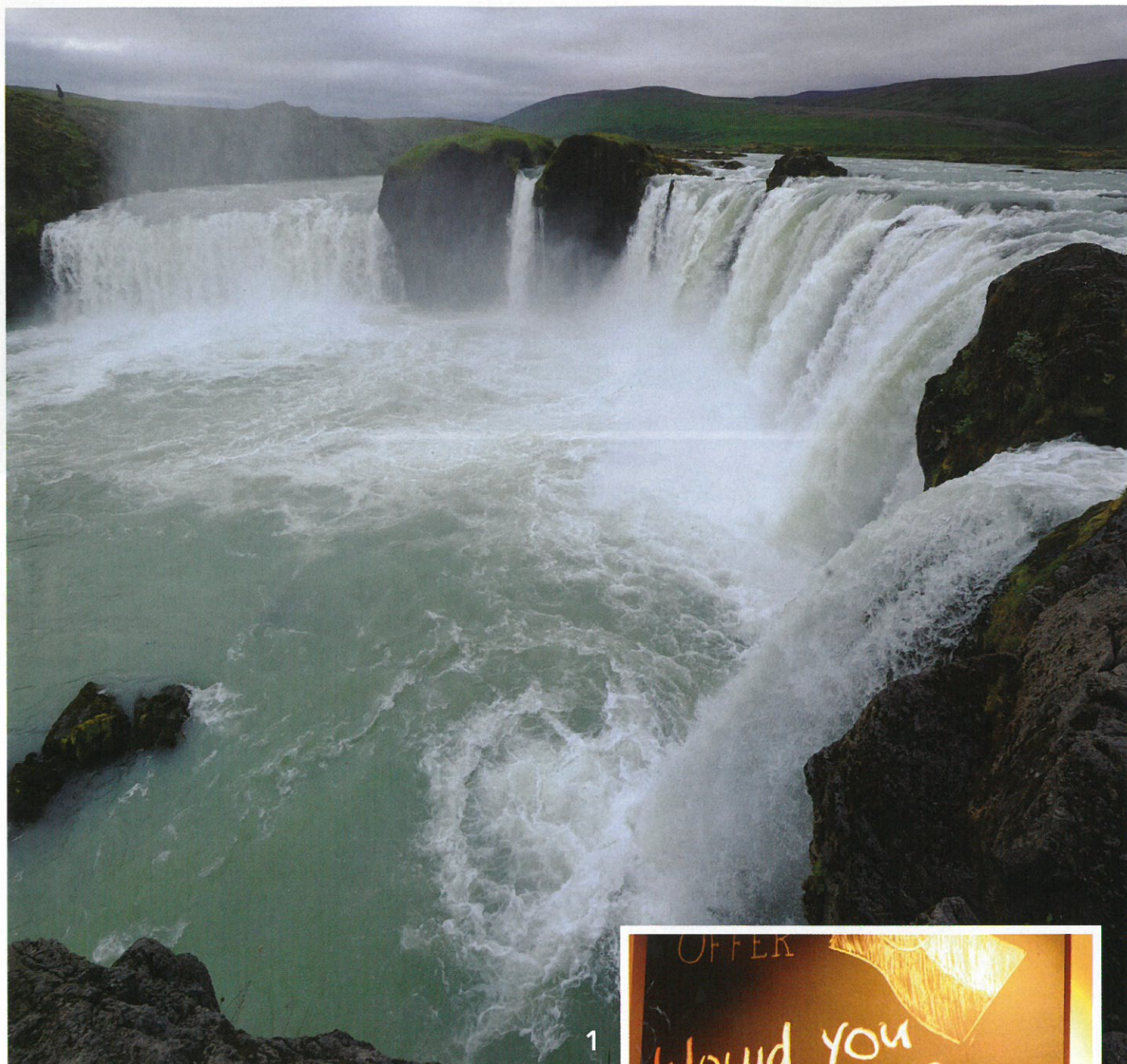
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EDELWEISS, EDELWEISS...

Yes, we've all seen The Sound of Music, although some of us have managed to forget its more saccharine moments. But that song does linger in the memory... doesn't it?

Edelweiss Bike Travel has been in business for more than three and a half decades. It operates from Mieming in Austria, a small alpine town, and runs tours all over the world. As a rule it uses its own motorcycle fleet, which means you get a well-cared for and new or near-new bike. The range of motorcycles is wide, from Ducati Scramblers to Ural outfits, and the bikes are matched to the style of the tour. On this one they

- 1. Iceland generates its power from volcanic heat and dammed-up water. All natural!
- 2. Don't believe them! Icelanders don't consume Black Death and rotted shark.

were, as I've mentioned, all Triumphs: Tigers and Explorers. Hotels are chosen carefully and I have yet to come up with



Wherever you go there is volcanic activity. Check roadside pools before sticking your hand into them; they might be really hot.



a complaint about any of them. All hotels on this tour had modern facilities, comfortable rooms and free wi-fi. There is a briefing every morning when one of the guides explains the day's ride with the aid of a large-scale map; you will be supplied with a copy of the same map and a route book. You can stick with the guide during the day, or you can choose your own route. All they really ask is to be informed where you're going. Oh, and that you get to the day's hotel in time for dinner!

Breakfast is included every day, while lunch is at your own expense and dinner is included on riding (not rest) days. There were no rest days on this tour, which is officially rated as an 'Adventure' tour and which ran over nine riding days. The 'Adventure' means that there are gravel roads, and there were. I've included contact details for Edelweiss at the end of this

story, and I suggest you take a Captain Cook at the website. Keep a hanky handy; you will probably be salivating freely by the time you've finished.

DIRTY DOINGS

I had a good night's sleep in my stylish pavilion room at the semi-rural Hotel Grimsborgir just out of Selfoss. Some of the others were not so lucky and jet lag caused a few bleary sets of eyes, with one bloke lamenting that he hadn't gone to sleep until 4.00am when it finally got dark. Fortunately, everyone had pretty much settled in by the next night. Nobody complained, anyway.

Our first attraction for the day was Geysir. No, not a geyser – this is the original one after which all the others are named. It's settled into well-earned retirement but its little brother Strokkur right next to it blows its top

every few minutes. To be brutally frank, it's not a patch on Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park but it's still fun. Gulfoss, the nearby 35 metre 'Golden Waterfall', also has a story: an Englishman wanted to dam it for a hydroelectric project, but the daughter of the owner fought this idea in court (must have made for a few interesting dinner conversations) and eventually lost – but by then the Englishman had run out of money. The government owns the waterfall now and has declared it a nature reserve.

And then it was on, a couple of hundred kilometres of gravel across the middle of the island between two of its biggest glaciers. Nobody fell off, which was impressive considering that the gravel ranged from smooth as to, um, 'loose' and the scenery along the way was almost desolate enough to be in Australia. Seriously, it was a wonderful ride and I could see why

Erosion has created
spectacular landscapes, like this
'finger' on the southern coast.

NASA had trained its astronauts for the Moon landing here in Iceland.

At our lunch stop, which looked a bit like an Antarctic weather station, there was a free hot pool in which some of our party disported themselves. I had forgotten my swimmers, and apparently even the open-minded Icelanders are reluctant to endorse (endure?) mixed skinny dipping.

A small but thoroughly modern little family hotel in Saudarkrokur was our stop that night, and the receptionist appeared to have a bottomless supply of the local craft ale in the kitchen.

There's more! See our next issue.

Edelweiss Bike Travel -
www.edelweissbike.com

