



KNEE-DEEP IN NICELAND (PART 2)

Island of fire, ice and herring

WORDS/PHOTOS THE BEAR

We resume our tale of *The Bear's Icelandic adventure ride with Edelweiss Bike Tours.*

WHO WOULD HAVE thought that herrings would be interesting, except as

tucker? Well I'm here to tell you that the Herring Era Museum in Unpronounceable (and unspellable), a small town which in the 1940s and '50s was the Herring Capital of the World (seriously) is a knockout. The fascinating combination of displays of boats, photos and implements with a

complete salting works including the staff dormitories creates an impressive vision of those times. I had three types of herring for lunch, with some dried fish (not herring) on the side.

The riding was just as impressive as the museum; we followed a couple of fjords around, the hillside road

"He alone who wanders wide and has much experienced, knows by what disposition each man is ruled and who possesses common sense."

NORSE PROVERB

interrupted only by some tunnels. The new ones were two-way; the older ones were single lane with voluntary passing bays along the way. I can't imagine anywhere other than co-operative Iceland where this would work. Views (yes, except in the tunnels) were what we are used to calling 'sweeping', and the weather was good. This is apparently not uncommon in north-western Iceland; some of the rest of the island is less benign... as we would discover.

But for now the sunshine continued. We rolled along the main highway into Akureyri where the modern

- 1. Not all of Iceland is rugged and uninviting. This is just near the site of the parliament, the Thingvellir.
- 2. 'F' roads like these are off limits to rental cars, but perfect for our bikes on this Adventure Tour.
- 3. Following the road around the fjord Hvalfjörður. And it's sunny, look!
- 4. Three kinds of herring, dried fish and bread baked in a volcanic vent. Pretty good lunch!



Leaving one of the many waterfalls, each more impressive than the last. Well, if you ride them in order.

Say What?

'The national language is Icelandic,' says one of the guide books, 'and... we're grateful anytime a visitor tries to use godan daginn (good day) or takk (thank you).' That might be true for simple words like those. But try to pronounce 'getur du vinsamlegast hjalpa mer?' (can you help me). Vatnajokull or Snaefellsnes and what they are likely to be grateful for is a good laugh. Stick to English except for basics, just remember that 'beer' is 'bjor'. By the way, I have not tried to use or approximate the occasional Old Norse letter used by the Icelanders. I think everyone would be happier if they settled on using, for example, 'th' instead of the stick-and-circle letter that's pronounced exactly the same way. Just me, just me.

Icelandair hotel welcomed us not only with a sunny beer garden featuring conveniently supplied half litres of Viking Lager (for a change) but also with the usual three course meal. Yes, fish. Hey, I'd much rather that than lamb (a long-time aversion of mine). First stop next morning was Godafoss. In the year 1000 at the annual parliamentary meeting, the Althing, Icelanders debated whether to become Christians. They referred the decision to their Law Speaker. He decided that yes, they would change their religion but that anyone who wanted to continue worshipping the old gods could do so – as long as it was done in private. When he returned home he threw all of his pagan paraphernalia into a waterfall, which was henceforth called Godafoss, the Waterfall of the Gods. It's a beautiful place, and like all big waterfalls it's seriously impressive. The day's riding was just as impressive as the day before; it's not traditionally 'great' motorcycling, although the gravel is fun, but the combination of large-scale scenery and sweeping curves makes it an

outstanding experience. Our hotel for the night was in Husavik, one of the other Icelandic hotel chain beside Icelandair, Fosshotels. That means Waterfallhotels – the name might be a little odd, but the standard is high. In fact, I think we stayed in the best hotel in town every night except in Reykjavik itself, where we stayed in the best locally-owned hotel. Edelweiss has this sorted out very nicely. Husavik is the 'whale watching capital of Europe', so most of the gang went off on a converted trawler to do just that while I took it easy visiting and photographing the harbourside bars. I've seen whales before, but I haven't drunk in every bar in the world. Despite what Mrs Bear might tell you. The town's whale hunters – yes, Icelanders still kill whales, so much for 'Niceland' – were complaining that minke whales, their usual prey, were becoming hard to find. As it happens, the hunting and the whale watching use the same bay – but different ends of it. Whale watching tours were having no trouble finding minkes.

"The whales have learned to stay out of that bad neighbourhood," said one local barfly with whom I was sharing a few Brennivins. "And wouldn't you go where they just watch you instead of where they kill you?" I had to



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Whoops! Watch out! This is where the American and European tectonic plates move apart at 3mm a year.

agree that I would do precisely that, we shared a good laugh and ordered a couple more Black Deaths.

MIX IT UP

In the morning, we set out along the tarred road that follows the northern coastline before turning off to look at the Asbyrgi Canyon with its hundred-metre high vertical cliffs. The three-and-a-half-kilometre canyon may have been formed over the course of only a few days when a volcanic hot spot under a glacier liquefied a great chunk of ice. That burst out in a narrow deluge and cut its way 100 metres into the countryside on its way to the sea. Imagine being there when a usually slow geological process happened in such a short time. Today the canyon holds a forest of dwarf birch trees, an unusual sight in Iceland.

But Asbyrgi was to be only the first fascinating sight on what I would call the best day of the tour. We left the sealed road and headed south to check out a few more waterfalls, which well repaid the effort. I am not particularly confident on dirt, but the road (like most gravel roads here) was at that nice standard where it doesn't slow you down but definitely keeps you awake.

There was one stretch which was sandy and rocky, actually a bit difficult, so much so that a couple of our riders decided to skip it. The guides accommodated that very easily, and the excursion was well worthwhile. It took us to a line of huge rocks making up a



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forbidding wall which was nothing of the kind; it was an end moraine of a since melted glacier.

After a bit of tar as part of the Ring Road, it was back onto the dirt to cross the hills of, wait for it, Modrudalsfjallgardar. This, and most of the ensuing ride to our hotel in Egilsstadir, was large-scale wind-blown high country with little vegetation but the occasional huddle of two or three sheep. Icelandic sheep are really clean, much whiter than the Australian

or New Zealand critters. Opinions were divided on the reason. "They're Icelandic – everything is clean here. They probably have a dip in a hot pool every night," was one suggestion. "The reason that there's almost always more than one is that they need to soap each other up." The other thought was that most of them weren't in fact real, but models placed out there to give the huge landscape scale. This may be true; only one of them ever attempted to commit sheepicide under

- 1. The glaciers are retreating and leaving small but deep lakes into which they drain.
- 2. Beatrice relaxes in style at the Fosshotel Nupar on the lava plain.

my wheels, although there were quite a few posed picturesquely by the side of the road, ignoring the bikes. While we're on the subject of scale:



the next day took us over a bare, high saddle on Highway 1 (but on dirt again) down to the sea. From here we followed the rugged, beautiful coastline on the now-sealed main road to Hofn, where our hotel was right on the harbour. We got there relatively early and I wandered around to check out the local museum; it's fascinating how interesting some photos and a few artefacts can be. Iceland has a serious history; from unpromising beginnings things often got worse with plagues and the like. At one stage, not all that long ago, Reykjavik's population dropped to 200. You can only try to imagine how many people would have been left at that time in little Hofn. By the harbour I finally had one of the famous Icelandic hot dogs. They're good, I recommend them and they only cost A\$4.50.

ICE IS FREE

"Better grab this," said our guide on the Army Duck plying the Glacier Lagoon. Small icebergs, calved from one of the valley glaciers fed by the

giant Vatnajokull shield glacier, float in the lagoon on their way into the open sea and the Ducks take you out to (nearly) touch them. The guide, a bouncy blonde with thick pigtails, was talking about a slab of ice from the lagoon that she was passing around. "Better grab this because it's the only thing you'll get in Iceland that's free!" I had hopes of getting some of it into a glass of bourbon, but sadly it melted too quickly.

We spent the whole day riding along the southern border of the giant glacier and stopped a couple of times to admire its valley glaciers close up. At nearly 9000 square kilometres, Vatnajokull is the third-largest shield glacier in the world after the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets, and it feeds literally dozens of valley glaciers of varied sizes. As you ride past it, its curve is a constant presence above the mountains. You could mistake it for a great hovering cloud.

We stayed in another Fosshotel that night at... no, I won't overload your brain with the name of the locality. You want it anyway? Okay, it was

Tour Mates

My thanks to my travel companions: Hans-Peter from Switzerland, Christine and Julian from Narrabeen, Felix from South Africa, Peter from Britain, Sonja and Martin from Germany, Beatrice and Denis from France and Jean-Claude from Luxembourg. It would not have been as much fun without you.

Kirkjubaejarklaustur – and I am not making that up. The name, like many Icelandic names, is in effect a history of the place and means church-farm-convent. It seems the area was first settled by Irish monks, well before the Norsemen arrived, and you can see how it would make a good place for meditation. The hotel is laid out like a motel but is modern, pleasant and well placed out in the impressive moss-covered lava plain. It demonstrated the Edelweiss capacity to pick just the right place to stay, once more.

Next morning, I had a decision to make.



1. Life might have been hard, but it was not without beauty. This is a drinking horn skilfully embellished with historic images. And no, horns were not worn on helmets!

2. Some of Iceland's most spectacular sights are quite difficult to reach, like this river valley.

WET ABOVE, WET BELOW

The choice was between the highland route and the one along the coast. The former was gravel and offered some 20 water crossings, while the latter was tar and passed places like the famous long black sand beach, impressively

grim offshore rocks, various waterfalls and volcanic caves. I wanted to get some more scenic photos, so I gave Manuel my small camera with instructions to get some water crossing shots, and took the coast road.

If it had crossed my mind that I might stay a bit drier on the lower road (and in the cause of absolute honesty I'm not saying it didn't) then I was to be disappointed. The high riders had a beautiful sunny day; we down on the coast had rain, ranging from drizzle to a few good, soaking showers. If I hadn't been grateful for my Klim Kodiak suit before (though I was) this would have done it. Not a drop got through. Photography was not going to be highly successful, especially as the beach, caves and waterfalls were all overrun by tourists in brightly-

coloured wet weather gear. Felix from South Africa had a simple solution.

"This calls for Photoshop," he said looking at the screen of his camera. "You there in the bright yellow windcheater: phht, gone."

I was pleased to find that not all localities had long and detailed names. We rode through Vik, a small town whose name means simply 'bay'. By the way, Reykjavik means 'Smoky Bay'; no kidding, it's 'Smoke on the Water'!

At the hotel in Hekla, the high riders arrived well after us, but while we were wet all over they were only wet to the waist. An outstanding dinner and a careful tasting of the local craft beers concluded the day with all of us wet... inside, anyway.

Along the shores of Thingvallavatn, on our way to Thingvellir, the site of

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Iceland's (and probably the world's) first parliament starting in 930 (the year, not the time of day), we found something that had so far eluded us on our travels: a really good, twisty and well-surfaced bike road! With one corner after the other, through beautiful green hills, the road unleashed the beast in quite a few of the riders, including yours truly. Iceland has an overall speed limit of 90km/h, and we may have exceeded that, er, slightly.

A couple of people were expecting a building at Thingvellir, but apart from a thoroughly modern visitor centre and a sweet-looking little white-painted wooden house there



2

1. This is typical of the better gravel roads. They were not all as smooth as this one.

2. Waiting for some of the party to catch up on the high plain.

3. Hundred-metre-high walls were not created by volcanism, but by huge bursts of hot water from the base of a glacier.



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is just the plain. Tough as ever, the Icelanders had met by the Law Rock in the open air. The rift between continental plates is not a single chasm here, but a series of parallel cracks. Some are only a foot wide, so you can kid yourself that you're standing with one foot in America and one in Europe. Until you meet the watchful termagant who let us know in no uncertain terms that this is frowned upon. I'm not sure why; you're not going to accelerate or brake the 3mm that

the continental plates move per year. Are you? Hmm.

The fun continued when we reached the fjord north of Reykjavik. We took the loop road around it, an excellent bit of tar that also offered some interesting riding. I stopped to get a photo and hit a thoroughly respectable speed while chasing the others. That was when the Suicide Sheep made its run, and I'm here to tell you that the ABS on the Triumph Tiger works. Our ride through the six kilometre

tunnel that connects Akranes and Reykjavik was made interesting by a traffic jam when we were about a kilometre from the end. A large truck had broken down ahead, and the police eventually stopped traffic from entering the tunnel to allow us to get out.

And then it was all over once again. Manuel and Pablo checked the bikes and we all got ready for the final night's dinner. It was lamb, of course, and my request for fish and chips instead was met by

monumental reluctance. Manuel took a strong stance in my support and I eventually got my meal – probably the worst fish and chips I've ever had in my life. Smacks to the kitchen staff at the Icelandair Marina Hotel, Reykjavik.

But no matter how hard I try, that's the only negative impression that I took away from the Edelweiss Fire and Ice tour. The planning was impeccable, the bikes exactly right and the guidance matched the style of the tour

perfectly. I commend the company and Niceland to you. And if you're still hungry for a bit of Viking lore, check out Edelweiss' Norway tours.

The Bear travelled at Edelweiss Bike Travel's invitation and expense (except for lunches, booze and fuel), and would like to thank them for the opportunity to see this literally amazing place aboard one of their motorcycles. He would also like to thank guides Manuel and Pablo, who did a terrific job. 🐻

Contact!

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Check out the Edelweiss website, even if you don't think you're interested in a tour. You may just change your mind.

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A shard from a small iceberg calved from one of Vatnajokull's valley glaciers.