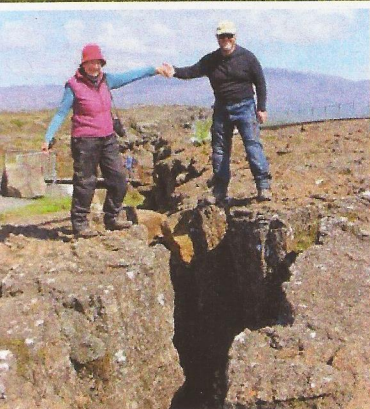


WORLD ON WHEELS

FIRE AND ICE

Words: Mike Ferris



**We come from the land of the ice and snow
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow
- Led Zeppelin, 1970, Reykjavik**

It's a little known fact that in 1970 when I was a Led Zep tragic, and people of my father's generation were constantly telling both them and me to get a haircut and a decent attitude, the hard rock band was sponsored by the Iceland government to give a concert in Reykjavik, to 'inspire the cultural development of our youth'.

How inspirational is that! Robert Plant subsequently wrote 'The Immigrant Song' (above), and the unique combination of Jimmy

Page's mesmerising guitar and John Bonham's hypnotic drumming became known as the Hammer of the Gods, from another lyric of the same song.

Iceland touches the Arctic Circle at 66 North, which bestows upon the tiny country a unique phenomenon; in the middle of winter the sun never rises, while in summer the sun never sets. It's a bizarre experience to see people heading out for a round of golf at midnight, or stagger out of a pub at 2:00am with sunnies on. Well

actually, I've seen that happen in Auckland as well, now that I come to think about it...

Iceland's location is also unique in another way. Sitting on longitude 20 West, there's absolutely nothing to the north or to the south until you get to the ice of the respective Pole!

A few Kiwis did a lap of Iceland with us a couple of years ago and described it as 'New Zealand on steroids'. It's got glaciers and fjords, beaches and mountains, rivers and lakes and waterfalls, volcanoes and geysers and thermal

springs. It's got pretty much everything, all crammed into a much smaller space. Oh, but it's got no trees. Those pesky Vikings apparently cut them all down to build their longships. The standard Iceland taxi driver joke goes, 'What should you do if you are lost in the woods? ... Stand up'.

In a country of only 340,000 people, two-thirds of them live in 'Greater Reykjavik' – which is itself an oxymoron. So, once we get out of the capital and onto the open road, it's possible to ride for an hour or more and not see another vehicle. When you're riding a GS model from the range of BMW, you can stretch its long legs on the ring road which hugs the coast for a lot of the way around the island.

The ring road is a great introduction to the amazing natural wonders with which Iceland is blessed. The coast is rugged, the waterfalls are spectacular, the floating iceberg lagoon is sensational, and you get up close and personal with that unpronounceable volcano which brought Europe's air traffic to a standstill in 2010. Yep, Eyjafjallajökull, that's the one.

Within a stone's throw of the capital (especially if the stone is thrown by a volcano) can be found a heap of the most popular tourist sites. The Blue Lagoon is not actually a lagoon but a lake, but it is indeed very blue and you may soak in

its hot, therapeutic waters. The original Geysir – which gave us the English word geyser – erupts with predictable enough frequency and force to satisfy the most addicted selfie poser. The split in the Earth's crust between the tectonic plates of Eurasia and North America gives an opportunity to stand with a foot in either camp. And Jon Snow's recently popularised Love Cave has international GoT fans breaking into feverish sweats in many languages.

But it's when we take people away from the ring road and into the off-piste Westfjords that you really get to see the true untamed Iceland. When the wind blows, it's coming straight off the North Pole, so you're going to need your heated handgrips and your absolute best riding gear. Your favourite 20-year-old leather jacket just ain't gonna cut it up here. But the landscape is unbelievable and duly rewards the dedicated traveller.

You can look across a narrow fjord and see a road about 2km away. And then you realise it's the same road you're already on, but it takes you another 40km to get there; waaay down deep into the fjord, and then waaay back up the other side. You might spot a whale or two whilst doing so, or a seal hauled up on a rock, or an arctic fox scavenging in the tidal zone. You'll certainly see puffins by the truckload, every single one of

them looking like it's their first-ever attempt at flying. They land like they've been thrown from a passing car.

The food is simply wonderful. Surrounded by ocean, seafood, of course, forms a major part of the diet with cod and Arctic char high on the agenda, as well as perhaps a Minke whale burger or a plate of fermented shark. And, dare I say it (my wife is a Kiwi) Iceland's highland lamb is even better than New Zealand's. Please address all letters of outrage and complaint to this magazine's Editor...

It's not a cheap place, as you may have heard. A standard pub meal of meat-and-three-veg will set one back about US\$70, and you'll need fat pockets to shout a round of beers. Not to mention hotel rooms pricier than in Paris or Manhattan.

Iceland is remarkably easy to get to these days. Indeed, it's positioning itself as a convenient transit hub, being roughly equidistant to both sides of the Atlantic. Reykjavik international airport has connections to at least a dozen North American capital cities and no fewer than 20 capitals in Europe, every day of the week.

One thing's for sure; it ain't gonna get any cheaper. Come and see Iceland while you can still afford it.



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