

Iceland in Autumn – Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 25 September 2011



Jokulsarlon



Aurora Borealis



Skogafoss



Ice-lake cruise

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Monday 19th September

Heathrow – Keflavik

Weather details: Sunny with light showers

After an uneventful flight the plane landed, on schedule, at Keflavik Airport, having given us some great views of Surtsey during the descent. Baggage collected, money exchanged and bus sorted we were soon heading along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula towards the cosmopolitan capital. En route we had a brief stop at Àlftanes, the Presidential Residence, for a breath of fresh 'arctic-air' and a little bird-watching, where we saw several family groups of Whooper Swans and various ducks. On leaving the bustling city Malcolm decided on taking a scenic mountain road to enjoy the soft evening sunlight that gilded the autumn colours of the heath mosaic.

We soon arrived at Nesjavellir, our hotel for the next two nights, located beneath the dormant volcano Hengill. The most striking feature of the hotel was its location, next to a new geo-thermal power station with white plumes of steam rising into the clear-blue sky. Malcolm gave a short briefing after which we enjoyed our first traditional Icelandic supper of Arctic Charr (some had pork chops) before retiring in anticipation of what we might expect in the days ahead.

Day 2

Tuesday 20th September

Golden Circle

Weather details; Bright and sunny with light showers pm

Although we spent much of today visiting some of the most celebrated landscapes in south Iceland on the 'Golden Circle' route, we didn't ignore the birds. Soon after leaving the hotel we had great views of our first Merlin before calling the National Parks Visitor Centre. Thingvellir is an iconic site in Iceland's history; the site of the world's first Parliament. The landscape was tranquil, a beautiful mosaic of heaths, scrub and Iceland's largest freshwater lake and the only terrestrial evidence of the North Atlantic Rift. After visiting the Information Centre we stood at the viewing point and from the American tectonic plate we gazed across the picturesque 'rift valley' to the distant Eurasian tectonic plate. A short walk to the Althing was compulsory, followed by a stroll down to the water's edge where we watched two obliging Great Northern Divers that were relatively close to the shore.

Next we visited the thunderous Gullfoss, the queen of Icelandic waterfalls, and it lived up to all expectations complete with its rainbow tiara, before returning to Geysir, the geological phenomenon that gave its name to the world. Malcolm dropped us off to stroll through this amazing landscape while he prepared lunch.

Our return journey was via Selfoss, where we enjoyed some typical Icelandic hospitality at Irma's home before a quick visit to a wool shop and continuing with our bird-watching on the coast near Eyrarbakki. Although we didn't find many birds, we did see a group of Common Seals hauled out on some rocks and located a few Oysterplants in the sand-dunes before driving back to Selfoss for an evening meal at a Thai Restaurant. Although the drive back to our hotel was in darkness, the overcast skies denied us the opportunity of seeing any Northern Lights tonight.

Day 3

Wednesday 21st September

Drive to Skaftafell

Weather details; Sunny with isolated showers

Today we took a leisurely drive along the south-east coast, making several stops to enjoy the break-taking scenery. Although the beautiful waterfall at Seljalandsfoss was our first stop, it was the two Gyrfalcons and a Merlin that proved to be the main attraction! We had lunch by the impressive falls at Skogafoss, where some managed to climb the steps to the top, while the rest of us simply enjoyed the thunderous falls and the arcing rainbow. Travelling through ancient lava fields, softened by centuries of Rhacomitrum moss, we could only image the secret they concealed as to the biggest volcanic eruption to hit the northern hemisphere, Laki. The great eruption of 1873 devastated much of Iceland and affected parts of northern Scandinavia, causing widespread famine. The small hamlet of Kirkjubaejarklaustur, so badly affected by the most recent eruption in May, provided a welcome stop for coffee before we crossed the Skeiðararsandur, scene of an earlier sub-glacier eruption that overwhelmed this corner of Iceland in 1996.

Eventually we arrived at the Skaftafell National Park and the scenery was almost overwhelming; jagged mountain peaks capped with white snow-fields and glacier-snouts that linked sky to earth, quite spectacular! The weather was so beautiful we decided to go the extra mile (or more likely the extra 40 km) this afternoon and visit the impressive ice-lagoon, Jokulsarlon. It looked stunning with many glaciers glistening in the evening sun, while several Grey Seals played hide-and-seek amongst the ice-sculptures. No wonder it has been the back-drop to so many epic films in recent times.

During our drive back to the Skaftafell Hotel we had no less than 3 Merlins and a Gyrfalcon enjoying the warmth of the tarmac on the edge of the road, giving superb views as they flew on our approach! The hotel is situated in one of Iceland's most beautiful and dramatic landscapes, nestled under Europe's largest glacier, Vatnajökull and the country's highest point Hvannadalshnukur. Once settled into our rooms we headed straight for the restaurant where we enjoyed another delicious meal.

The daily-log was held in the upstairs bar while we patiently waited for the Northern Lights to make an appearance. After a long day travelling most of the group had retired by 1130pm, which was unfortunate since the Northern Lights began dancing through the inky-blue velvet sky, just after midnight to provide a dazzling, albeit, short display.

Day 4

Thursday 22nd September

Jokulsarlon & Skaftafell National Park

Weather details; Sunny, very warm

Skaftafell looked stunningly beautiful this morning for our drive back to Jokulsarlon; the landscape appeared ablaze, dominated by the fiery red colour of Northern Bilberry and the burnished yellows of autumn willows. We stopped frequently to enjoy the spectacular landscape, taking many photographs of the reflections in various roadside pools. We stopped briefly by the little turf church at Hoff to search for the rare House Sparrow and to our surprise found a warbler skulking in the scrubby trees, but sadly it disappeared before we could confirm its identification. Unfortunately we had no time to re-locate the bird because we needed to be at Jokulsarlon in time for our cruise. As we drove along the narrow coastal-strip that divided mountains from the white pounding Atlantic surf we saw flocks of Pink-footed Geese busily feeding before completing their long migration and lesser numbers of Barnacle Geese near Kvisker. We arrived at the ice-lake in plenty of time to enjoy the scenery before boarding the amphibious craft for a ride amongst the ice-sculptures where we learned all we needed to know about ice! The experience was amazing, so many colours of ice!

By late morning Jokulsarlon had become rather busy so we relocated to Kviasarlon to escape the crowds to have closer views of the ice-front. After lunch we retraced our route along Road 1 and visited the National Park at Skaftafell where Malcolm pointed out carpets of the rare River Beauty plant before we ascended the plateau. There are few superlatives that could adequately describe the stunningly beautiful views across the scrubby plateau to the majestic towering peaks of Hvannadalshnukur on our walk to Svartifoss; the waterfall that inspired the new church that dominates the Reykjavik skyline. During the walk we found Small-white Orchids and the much rarer Northern-green Orchid and Frog Orchids were numerous, sadly all were well past their best.

Before returning to the hotel we stopped for some close views of a glacier-snout at Svinafellsjokull. The ice was a dirty-grey colour, volcanic ash, and more evidence should we need it, to remind us of the May eruption. After a short walk we returned to the hotel to make our preparations should the Northern Lights make an appearance tonight.

Throughout the tour our food had been amazing and tonight's was no exception. After another delicious meal we all gathered in the up-stairs bar for the daily-log and to wait should the Northern Lights appear. We didn't have to wait too long before Malcolm announced the 'light-show' had started! Clad in warm clothes we all ventured outside to experience this wondrous phenomenon. Although the light intensity was not as brilliant as the previous night, its duration was much longer giving everyone the opportunity to capture this magical experience on camera before retiring back into the warmth of the hotel just before midnight.

Day 5

Friday 23rd September

Reykjanes Peninsula 'Northern Lights Inn'

Weather details; Overcast with rain shower midday

After breakfast there was enough time for a brief walk through the scrub covered moraines in search of the elusive Ptarmigan. Our efforts were rewarded with a sighting then two more were seen in front of the hotel!

Sadly, it was time to leave this beautiful corner of Iceland and retrace our journey back to the Reykjanes Peninsula. Although the drive took just over 8 hours we had no trouble breaking-up the journey; first Vik for coffee, followed by an informative hour or so at a museum near Skogafoss before lunch.

We made a stop at Seljalandsfoss on the off-chance the Gyr Falcons would still be present. Although this may have proved a little optimistic, we did manage the second Merlin of the day. We called at the market garden town of Hveragerdi to experience a taste of liquorice ice-cream (and we were not disappointed!) and see the geological fault that ran beneath the new shopping complex before taking the coast road back to the Northern Light Inn.

Although the night-sky was overcast, we gathered in the observatory after supper to wait for the 'light show' more as a gesture than anything else before retiring for a well desired night's sleep!

Day 6

Saturday 24th September

Pelagic & Reykjavik

Weather details; Raining am, overcast with bright periods pm

After a brief tour of Reykjavik and an early lunch by the Marine Lake we arrived at the old harbour where many White-winged Gulls were present. Before long we were on board the whale-watching boat and sailing past the new 'Harpa' Concert Hall at the entrance to the harbour. We didn't have to wait too long before an encounter with the first of the 3 Minke Whales - one performing 5 metres from the bow of the ship! The sea was calm and we had great views of Gannets diving from great heights for fish. A constant passage of Glaucous Gulls escorted our sailing, along with the occasional Iceland Gull and two immature Kittiwakes. Both Black and Common Guillemot were also seen during the return sailing.

Back on land we had plenty of time for coffee and some bird-watching at the marine lake while Sally indulged in a little retail therapy before we returned to the hotel.

We again gathered in the observatory after supper in an optimistic mood that the 'lights' may just show despite the cloud conditions. And before going to bed we did manage a flicker of the Northern Lights, but not the spectacular display as on previous nights.

Day 7

Sunday 25th September

Grindavik & return flight UK

We left the Northern Light Inn this morning, some taking advantage of the 'Blue Lagoon' while the rest visited Grindavik for a last morning bird-watching by the small fishing harbour.

En route back to the airport we collected the bathers and briefly visited Keflavik, to fill the bus with fuel, before arriving at an unusually quick departures hall. The flight was on schedule and we touch down at Heathrow in darkness. We collected our baggage from the carousel, said our farewells and melted into the crowds for our onward journey.

Thank you all for your good spirits and patience throughout the tour. I hope your images rekindle many of the magical experiences we shared together in Iceland and I look forward to travelling with you again soon! Irma had a new grandson the day after our visit, and all are doing well.

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		2					
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>				24		60	20
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		60				12	✓
5	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>							7
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	20	24	100	150	✓	✓	15
7	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				500	800		
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				11	21		
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	✓						
11	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>	2				3		
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		4					
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	5						
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	6		150		20	✓	✓
16	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		4				2	
17	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	30				3	
19	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>					3		
20	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2	6		2		
21	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolar</i>			3				
22	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1	1					
23	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	250	500	5		✓		
24	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>							2
25	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>							1
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3	1		1		
27	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			6	4	3	4	5
28	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	2	2				60	8
29	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						8	3
30	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>					1	✓	✓
31	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓					10
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>	✓	✓	1	2	1	✓	✓
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						2	
35	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>				2			
36	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						1	
37	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>						2	
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>			50		30		
39	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	1	1		
40	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	1	3	2			
41	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>		6	2	1			2
43	Warbler spp	<i>Phylloscopus (?)</i>				1			
44	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6	10	12	6	✓	1	2
45	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
46	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				1			
47	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	✓	6					
48	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			1	3			

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25

Mammals

1	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						3	
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			7	5			
3	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		6		2			



Gyr Falcon