

Iceland in Autumn –Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour report

15 – 21 September 2013



Northern Lights



Jökulsárlón



Skogáfoss



Gullfoss

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott

Images courtesy of Phil Piper



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Introduction

As autumn draws to a close, it is the time to enjoy the serenity of the mountains. Colours begin to change, in both the landscape and the sky, with spectacular sunsets on a regular basis. As the evenings cool, the northern lights begin to appear dancing across the night skies. There are many charming myths and folk-lore legends surrounding the Northern Lights phenomenon, many claiming them to be Spirits of ancestors or messages from the heavens.

The scientific explanation, as is so often the case, is far less mysterious and enchanting but enlightening and interesting nonetheless. The aurora borealis are named after the Latin phrase meaning ‘northern dawn’ and are caused by solar winds interacting with the Earth’s ionosphere. Most of the winds, consisting of charged solar particles sent Earthwards by solar flares or explosions simply pass the Earth by and disappear into space, but some do enter the atmosphere at its weaker polar-points colliding with atoms and molecules which absorb the particles energy. In order to return to their ‘normal’ state these atoms and molecules emit photons, or light particles, giving us the phenomenon of the Northern Lights.

The aurora is best seen far away from artificial light, beneath the aurora oval which usually circles the Earth between 60° – 70° of latitude which makes Iceland an ideal location to witness this wondrous phenomenon. The intensity of luminescence is inextricably linked to sun-spot activity that has a natural rhythm. Waiting for these capricious manifestations to appear can be a long and often cold wait with no guarantee the celestial lights will show on any given night due to solar inactivity or cloud-cover. Those with a deep aspiration to observe the aurora it is paramount to keep a watchful-eye on the night-sky between 10:00pm – 02:00 am, especially on cloudy-nights when a weather-window may suddenly improve otherwise poor visibility.

Day 1

Monday 15th September

Heathrow - Keflavik – Gullfoss (205km)

Weather details: Low cloud and windy NE 23m/s & temp 2⁰C

After an uneventful flight from Heathrow the plane descended into a windy Keflavik airport on schedule where Malcolm was waiting to meet us. Once on board the bus we started our journey along the new coastal road towards Selfoss. The market town at Hveragerði provided a welcome opportunity to stretch our legs before continuing on our journey north to the Gullfoss Hotel. We arrived at 07:00pm and once inside we quickly found the dining room and settled down to enjoy a delicious supper of Salmon and traditional Icelandic skyr. Following a short briefing, outlining the day-to-day structure most retired for an early night full of enthusiasm for the days that lie ahead...

Day 2

Tuesday 16th September

Golden Circle (241km)

Weather details; Sunny & windy: Wind 28m/s & temp 6⁰C

Today we visited some of Iceland's most renowned landscapes starting with a short drive to Gullfoss, the 'Golden Waterfall'. The 'queen' of Iceland's waterfalls looked particularly spectacular this morning and we could enjoy her beauty without having to share the experience with hundreds of tourists coached out of Reykjavik. Back-lighting provided by the rising sun made her sparkling waters and misty-spray her crowning glory.

Next we called at the site of Geyser and visited Strokkur, the only accessible geyser in Iceland that remains active. We stood by the hole of boiling water and with eager anticipation waiting for it to erupt in a huge column of vaporous steam, and we were not disappointed!

A brief visit to the iconic seat of Icelandic learning at Skalholt followed, where the beautiful stained-glass windows cast a colourful carpet of light on the bare stone floor, before we arrived in Selfoss. Leaving the second largest town on the south coast we followed the River Sog to its source, stopping to search for an elusive Barrow's Goldeneye). At the second hydro-station we had good views of Great-northern Divers before arriving at, perhaps the most celebrated of all landscapes in Iceland, Þingvellir, site of the first every parliament and birth place of Christianity in Iceland in 1000AD. First a walk to the viewing platform where we tried to comprehend the enormity of the geological fault that stretched almost 3km across the rift floor towards the Eurasian Tectonic Plate before visiting the Interpretive Centre. It was beyond belief to learn these two giant plates are pulling apart at the astonishing rate of 2-3cm/year! We had a couple of hours to visit the 'Alping' (Law Rock) and despite the strength of the wind, it didn't diminish the enjoyment of seeing this iconic landscape cloaked in all its autumnal glory.

With a starry night and the prospects of the northern lights putting in an appearance we drove the short distance back to Gullfoss after supper and by 11:00hrs the celestial lightshow started. A green wand arced through the night-sky, fading and re-appearing, it was a calm aurora and never materialised into anything very spectacular. During a lull in the preceding we drove back down the road as far as Geyser to see if relocating our position, in relation to the earth's magnetic field, made any difference. It didn't, so we reluctantly returned to the hotel and a warm bed for the night.

Day 3

Wednesday 17th September

Drive to Kirkjæbuklauster (287km)

Weather details; Sunny with strong winds: Wind NW 27m/s & temp 8°C

After breakfast and with luggage loaded we left the Hotel Gullfoss, bathed in wonderful early morning sunshine, to start our journey east accompanied by some strong winds! We stopped at Hella to buy provisions for a picnic lunch which provided an opportunity to stretch our legs. Continuing on we soon arrived at Seljalandsfoss and although the wind caused the water at the falls to blow every which way, walking behind the waterfall still proved an irresistible challenge for some!

Our lunch stop was by the very impressive Skogáfoss, complete with a double rainbow. The more intrepid climbed to the top, while most were satisfied to watch and enjoy its thunderous sounds while Malcolm prepared an alfresco lunch in the lea of the campsite facility building. Passing through Vik we took the opportunity of a walk to the black sandy beach and photograph the off-shore stacks or simply enjoy a coffee. With an unrelenting wind gaining in strength we continued our journey eastwards. We eventually reached the Laki lava field, scene of the catastrophic eruption in 1783 when 30% of the Iceland population perished and a two-year famine caused many more deaths throughout Europe. Now covered with soft green racomitrum moss the harsh century's old landscape now looked benign. We arrived at the Laki Hotel and quickly settled into our comfortable rooms, with impeccable timing to find we had arrived in time to enjoy the bars 'happy hour'!

Following a delicious buffet meal we ventured out in search of the northern lights. They appeared faintly in the night-sky as we left the hotel, but by the time we arrived at our chosen location they had vanished, and after an hour or so we decided on returning to the warmth of the hotel.

Day 4

Thursday 18th September

Skaftafell National Park & Jökulsarlon (277km)

Weather details; Very sunny: Wind NW 4m/s & temp 10°C

This morning we departed for the Oræfi region and the vast Vatnjökull National Nature Reserve, with its spectacular gems, Skaftafell and the ice-lagoon at Jökulsarlon. We stopped on the Skeidararsandur road, scene of the catrosophic floods in 1996, to photograph Iceland's highest mountain Hvalvannashuagur. On one of the roadside pools a Red-throated Diver was still present with a well-grown young still trying to solicit food from its parent. We stopped briefly at Freysness to capture images reflected in roadside pools. At Kvisker we saw a Merlin and mixed flocks of Barnacle, Pink-footed and Greylag Geese before arriving at the spectacular ice lagoon, Jökulsarlon. For the next hour we had a magical time cruising through some amazing ice-sculptures and 'blue ice', it was simply quite spectacular. Sadly, all too soon it was time to leave this wonderful place. On the black beach Malcolm had prepared lunch on an impromptu table of logs!

Next we visited another ice-lagoon at Fjallsarlon, here we were able to get much closer to the glacier front and could hear new icebergs being calved. The weather was glorious, the landscape surreal and the day was all about appreciating and enjoying the moment!

After a comfort and coffee stop we arrived back at Skaftafell National Park by mid-afternoon. Following a quick visit to the information centre where we watch the Grimsvotn eruption video and Malcolm located two Ptarmigan in the campsite. Having driven part way up the wooded hillside we had an enjoyable walk to visit Svartifoss. The waterfall looked incredible and having captured the image to memory card it was soon time for a leisurely stroll back to the centre where Malcolm had relocated the bus.

Sinvafilellsjökull was next on our itinerary, the location of the latest Hollywood blockbuster 'Interstellar' due to be released November 2014. We stood in amazement and watched helicopters flying low up the glacier filming this heavily crevassed river of ice. After a short walk the mist descended and it was time to return to the bus. Just in case there was any remote possibility to experience the northern lights over Jökulsárlón this evening, Malcolm had arranged for us to have supper at the Freysness service station. Following dinner we waited to see if the cloud would lift, but it looked rather dubious so we reluctantly made the journey back to our hotel at Laki.

Day 5

Friday 19th September

Kirkjubæklúster - Reykjanes (357km)

Weather details; Overcast some light rain: Wind W 2m/s & temp 6°C

Sadly, it was time to leave Hotel Laki this morning for our drive back to Reykjanes. On reaching Vík we had enough time to stop for coffee and stretch our legs and for some a little retail therapy before driving onto Skogálfoss. We visited the museum and spent a very enjoyable 2-hours viewing this amazing collection of Iceland's past and not-so past, before taking lunch at the camping facilities by the waterfall.

We briefly called at Seljalandsfoss on the off-chance there may be a Gyr Falcon present, but in this instance if it was in residence it kept a very low profile! Approaching Selfoss we stopped briefly at a wool shop to buy genuine Icelandic produce and not fake Chinese imports! A visit to another wool shop in Selfoss followed a visit to the supermarket before we headed back out into the countryside for a last roll-of-the-dice to try and locate either Gyr Falcon or Arctic Fox, ideally both! We took a back-road to the hydro-station that we tried to visit earlier on the tour and where high-winds prevented us from crossing the bridge. There we scanned the rafts of Tufted Duck with hopes of finding a Barrow's Goldeneye that have recently started winter here, but we were perhaps too early in the winter and none had arrived just yet. To maximise efforts of finding the two target species we retraced our journey back to Selfoss without any encounter!

This evening we dined at a very good Thai restaurant in town before the drive back to the Northern Lights Inn. Although low cloud obscured the night sky, we were in optimistic mood of seeing the northern lights this evening. Arriving at the aptly named Northern Lights Inn we had no sooner started to unpack and settle into our cosy rooms when a window of opportunity suddenly appeared as the clouds dispersed and the celestial phenomenon put in a brief appearance. Although the aurora was initially disappointing to begin with, we were optimistic that another chance seeing the northern lights was a distinct possibility. By 01:30am the hotel telephones had started ringing to announce the northern lights had indeed made another appearance. Quickly dressing warmly and grabbing camera equipment most appeared either in the observation tower, or for those more hardy souls outside in the cold night air to experience this phenomenon. It wasn't the spectacular display that we might have wished for, but nevertheless we had the aurora for a third night.

Day 6

Saturday 20th September

Pelagic & Reykjavik (116km)

Weather details; Sunny periods: Wind West 2m/s and temp 6°C

It was a great relief to find that yesterday's wild Atlantic surf pounding the Reykjanes coastline had calmed overnight in time for this morning whale-watching. After a brief city tour we called at the old harbour to see where Malcolm intended us to meet for lunch before our sailing. Returning back to the impressive church, Hallgrimskirka that dominates the city skyline, we had time enough to enjoy the cosmopolitan ambience of this most northern capital before assembling at the harbour in time for the sailing.

Once on board we struggled into our thermal suits and eagerly returned on deck as the boat left Reykjavik harbour. On deck we watched as the spectacular Opera House, 'Harpa' faded into the distant horizon. Before too long we had encountered our first Harbour Porpoise, albeit brief, we enjoyed the moment. After an hour's sailing we eventually reached the area where Minke Whales had been seen on previous trips and we were not disappointed. The Minke Whales, all three of them, were busily engaged with feeding and totally ignored the boat. We stayed with the whales for a good hour before sailing to another area known to attract whales. Although no more whales were seen we had good views of two White-beaked Dolphins before it was time for our return.

We left the harbour and briefly stopped at the famous 'Pearlan' restaurant for coffee and some extensive views over the city before continuing on to visit Bessisstaðir, the Prime minister's official residence, and enjoyed a spell of bird-watching before returning to the hotel. After supper and the daily-log we retired to our rooms to pack in readiness for departure the following morning, only to receive a call in the early hours to announce the northern were showing. Quickly dressing into warm cloths and grabbing camera equipment we assembled outside in time to witness wands of green lights arcing through the night sky. All too soon the celestial light show was over and it was time to return to the warmth of our beds!

Day 7

Sunday 21st September

Grindavik & return flight UK (63km)

Weather details; Overcast: Wind NW4m/s & temp 8°C

With all the luggage packed and hotel accounts settled we left the Northern Light Inn this morning to visit some local landscape features special to Iceland. First we called at Grindavik harbour where we managed to find both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls before visiting the surreal landscape of bubbling mud pots and steaming fumaroles at Gunnhver, then we continued passed the lighthouse down to the coast. Here we paid homage to the Great Auk, its image immortalised in bronze, poignantly facing the island of Eldey, its last-known nesting site before its extinction in 1844. On the sea we saw rafts of male Eider Duck, in various stages of eclipse plumage and further-out Gannets were fly-by. The coastal scenery was very beautiful with the white Atlantic surf pounding the black lava rocks. We had just enough time to visit. "Bridging-two-Continents" and walked the short distance from the Eurasian Tectonic Plate over onto the American Tectonic Plate before our time in Iceland quickly ran-out and it was time for one last coffee before heading for Keflavik International Airport for our UK flight. I hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and may you return again one day soon to experience more of what Iceland as to offer...

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Rock Ptarmigan

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				2		1	
2	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		2					
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>						30	50
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>						1	12
6	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>						2	4
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	15	40	120	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				60			
9	Brent Goose	<i>B. bernicla</i>				4			
10	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				20			
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			3				
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>			17	24	24	80	30
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>			24				
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		60			✓	✓	
16	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			1			11	
17	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		20	1		1	2	
18	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				1		6	
19	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>						3	
20	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	1	2	3		
21	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>				2			
22	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		200	80	100's	100's	100's	30
23	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		6	2			3	2
24	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1	1		
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>					3	10	
27	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						3	11
28	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						1	3
29	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1	1	3	3			
30	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>			2		4		
31	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>	✓		5	12	9	✓	✓
32	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>						2	
33	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	1	4	2		2		
34	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			1	1			
36	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>	1	3	2				
37	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulas</i>				1			
38	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓					✓	
40	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		20		20			
41	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				2			

Mammals

1	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				2			
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				5			
3	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						3	
4	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						2	
5	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						1	