

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 – 19 September 2015



Northern Lights



Skogafoss



Jokulsarlon Iceberg Lagoon

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Introduction

This autumn tour to Iceland combined stunning landscapes, extraordinary geological phenomena and a range of interesting birdlife. We also felt privileged to witness the Northern Lights on our first two nights. Our first full day was spent around the 'Golden circle' close to Reykjavik, taking a less-travelled route in order to find the special birds that inhabit the lakes and rivers. Next, we drove along the scenic south coast to reach Skaftafell, calling in at the towering waterfalls of Seljalandsfoss and Skogafoss. Perhaps the highlight of the tour was our visit to the awe-inspiring Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon, where white and blue icebergs break off the glacier and float out past a black sand beach. We returned to the Reykjanes peninsular in order to visit the capital city and take a whale-watching trip into Faxaflói bay. The weather was largely dry and sunny throughout our stay, which helped to make the tour even more special.

Day 1

Sunday 13th September

Keflavik airport – Hveragerdi – Hotel Gullfoss

After flying from the UK, the group met together at Keflavik airport without a hitch. We set off in our bright green bus for the drive across the lava flows of the Reykjanes peninsular to our first stop in Hveragerdi, the hot springs capital of Iceland. After a welcome coffee stop, we continued past Selfoss and across relatively fertile land until we reached the rugged country where Hotel Gullfoss is situated. Roadside birds included our first groups of migrating Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese.

After a rest and a good dinner, we met together to discuss the week ahead. About 10.15pm, a member of staff alerted us to the presence of the Northern Lights. The Aurora Borealis can be impressive even as early as September in Iceland and as we headed out into the dark night, where bands of greenish white light were growing across the northern horizon. They gradually coalesced into a shimmering arc that occasionally formed into a moving curtain, showing pinkish-red fringes. This lasted for about an hour and left us simply awe-struck.

Day 2

Monday 14th September

Gullfoss – Selfoss – Ulfsfljotsvatn - Thingvallavatn – Thingvellir

After an excellent buffet breakfast, we set off to visit Iceland's biggest waterfall, the famous Gullfoss. It was an amazing sight, where a huge volume of water thunders over two wide falls. The weather was dry but continuous spray from the waterfall made the path slippery; unfortunately one of our number fell and our visit to the waterfall was cut short. Thankfully, the hospital in Selfoss wasn't too far away and they were able to look after Anita. The rest of us headed back to Reykholt for lunch at Fridheimar. This is a uniquely Icelandic food experience, where fresh tomato soup and home-made bread are served in the middle of a huge greenhouse!

Thingvellir lies on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and was the site of Iceland's ancient parliament, the Althing. Over many centuries, chieftains and their followers travelled from across the country to meet once a year, to read the law and settle disputes. To reach it, we took the minor road to the west of Thingvallavatn, which is Iceland's largest lake. Stopping first by a picturesque church overlooking the smaller lake of Ulfsfljotsvatn, we watched a pair of Great Northern Divers in pristine breeding plumage, which swam close as they repeatedly called to each

other – unforgettable! During the drive along the lakes, we saw a total of 22 Great Northern Divers along with 50 Red-breasted Mergansers.

Arriving at Thingvellir in the late afternoon, we had time for a short walk along the Almannagja, the largest of the fissures and canyons that mark the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It was here that the law-giver read the law to the assembled Althing; everyone appreciated its unique atmosphere. Our return journey took us across the unspoilt landscape of Thingvellir National Park.

After dinner and completion of our daily sightings log, we walked back outside to see if the Aurora might reappear and we were not disappointed. It began in a similar fashion to the previous evening but the greenish-white bands eventually spread across half the sky, glowing brightly - an extraordinary spectacle.

Day 3

Tuesday 15th September

Geysir – Seljalandsfoss – Skogafoss – Vik – Hotel Skaftafell

Before embarking on the long journey to Skaftafell National Park, we stopped to visit the famous site of Geysir, which of course gave its name to this geothermal phenomenon. Geysir itself is rarely active and it is the nearby Strokkur that gushes up to 30 metres every few minutes, providing an unforgettable spectacle. We stayed long enough to witness several eruptions.

Our route took us back down to the coast and then east along the ring road for almost 300 kilometres. It was a bright, sunny day and the scenery was impressive. We stopped to have lunch at Seljalandsfoss waterfall. After a short drive further east, we stopped to admire Skogafoss waterfall, the spray from which created a rainbow in the bright sunshine.

The south coast is dominated by cliffs that, as a result of post-glacial rebound, are several kilometres from the sea. Despite this, they are home to thousands of breeding Fulmars and many were still present, flying around the rocky ridges. Migrant flocks of Golden Plover were feeding on areas of flat grassland and parties of Whooper Swans were a regular sight. Greylag Geese were common, but much more exciting was a flock of Barnacle Geese, en route from Greenland to their wintering grounds on the west coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

After a relaxing break for coffee and cakes in Vik, we continued on our journey across the lava flows that dominate the landscape further east. High winds slowed us down somewhat, but the stark beauty of the scenery made for an enjoyable journey. We arrived in good time for a superb buffet dinner at the Skaftafell Hotel, which lies just below the Svinafellsjokull glacier.

Day 4

Wednesday 16th September

Jokulsarlon – Fjallsarlon – Hof – Skaftafell National Park – Svinafellsjokull

After another hearty Icelandic breakfast, it took a little under an hour to reach the iceberg lagoon of Jokulsarlon. It was an extraordinary sight in the clear morning sunlight, a lagoon at the foot of a large glacier, crammed with dozens of icebergs of varying sizes, shapes and colours. Unfortunately, high winds caused the cancellation of all boat trips, but the icebergs were an equally impressive spectacle from the shore. We walked around the lagoon

and down both sides of the channel through which the icebergs eventually make their way to the sea. A few become stranded on the black sand beach, creating a unique photographic opportunity.

We were delighted to see a Merlin, and to find an approachable Snow Bunting in the parking area. Our first Eider Duck was swimming close in to the edge of the channel, where we also found more Snow Buntings. A variety of gulls flew close over the icebergs and more were roosting on the beach. Amongst the commoner species were several Glaucous Gulls and Kittiwakes.

We went to nearby Fjallsarlón, where a smaller glacier has created another lagoon. The katabatic wind descending from the glacier was overpowering so we stayed inside the bus to eat our sandwiches - but what a view!

On our return journey, we visited the picturesque turf-roofed church in the little village of Hof. After a break back at the hotel, we continued on to Skaftafell National Park, where we enjoyed a bracing walk up to Svartifoss, a waterfall famous for its array of black, basalt columns. The park contained extensive Downy Birch woodland, which was home to good numbers of Redwings.

Arriving back at the hotel, some of us walked up to the glacier snout of Svinafellsjökull. The low sun made the top of the glacier glow pink as we listened to the cracks and groans at the very front edge.

Day 5

Thursday 17th September

Kirkjubaejarklaustur – Vik - Reynisfjara – Northern Lights Inn – Grindavik

We departed after breakfast for the long drive back west. We stopped to stretch our legs at Kirkjubaejarklaustur, where we visited the fascinating, eroded basalt columns of Kirkjugölf, which form a smooth rock floor that gives every appearance of being man-made (its name means ‘Church floor’).

After another hour along the ring road we visited the black sands of Reynisfjara, which lie just beyond Vik. This beautiful beach stretched for hundreds of metres and featured big caves and a cliff of regular basalt columns, resembling a rocky step pyramid. At one end of the beach stand the Reynisdrangar stacks; spectacularly shaped basalt stacks. Icelandic folklore has it that these two trolls attempting to drag a ship onto the shore were turned to stone as daylight broke. As we enjoyed the scenery, we noticed several late Puffins on the water. Suddenly, a Great Skua flew across to harass one of the Puffins – a memorable sight!

We enjoyed an excellent lunch at Gamla Fjósid, otherwise known as the Old Cowhouse. Suitably refreshed, we continued on to Selfoss. Roadside birds included more Whooper Swans and Golden Plover but a single Grey Heron was quite unexpected – this species is a very scarce winter visitor from Norway.

We arrived at the Northern Lights Inn in good time for those who had booked the Blue Lagoon. The rest of us visited the harbour in nearby Grindavik, where we saw the fish catch being landed and were shown the various fish species by a friendly local fisherman. Better still, lots of gulls were attracted into the harbour and we found several Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, as well as one each of Redshank and Brent Goose.

Day 6

Friday 18th September

Grindavik - Reykjavik – Faxaflói bay – Grotta

An early morning return visit to Grindavik harbour enabled those who had not visited before to catch up with Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. After breakfast, we set off for a leisurely morning in Reykjavik, where some chose to visit the famous church Hallgrímskirkja, whilst others looked for birds on Tjornin, the small lake in the middle of the city. Here we enjoyed close views of several species, including a Pink-footed Goose that had attached itself to the local Greylag Geese.

After a light lunch in the old harbour, we boarded our ship for an afternoon in Faxaflói. This wide bay has an abundant fish population, which in turn attracts good numbers of cetaceans. The clouds cleared as we headed out into open water and we had good light in which to watch the Gannets, Fulmars and Kittiwakes that often flew very close to the ship. After an hour or so we sighted our first Minke Whales, soon followed by a pod of White-beaked Dolphins. Two Minke Whales surfaced close to the ship, but perhaps the best views were when another pod of dolphins chased and harassed an adult Minke, which came close to breaching in its efforts to evade them!

On our return to Reykjavik, we made the short journey to the Seltjarnarnes peninsular to visit the nature reserve of Grotta. It was late afternoon by now and the landscape was bathed in autumn sunshine. On the shore near the lighthouse we found two juvenile Wheatears of the Greenland race before a flock of Golden Plover flew in and landed close by. Other waders included Oystercatcher, Turnstone, Dunlin and a solitary Purple Sandpiper.

Day 7

Saturday 19th September

Gunnhver – Sandvík – Njardvík – Keflavík airport

We made the most of our last morning in Iceland, visiting sites across the Reykjanes peninsular. The hot springs at Gunnhver created a strange, encrusted landscape and an unforgettable smell! Close by was the dramatic, rugged headland at Reykjanesta, where Atlantic rollers broke on the black volcanic rocks. From here we could see the small island of Eldey, the last known breeding site of the Great Auk.

Next we visited Sandvík, where a footbridge spans a fissure that marks the divide between the North American and European tectonic plates – literally crossing continents! Before returning to the airport, we took a short detour into Njardvík for our final coffee and cakes at the excellent Kaffitar coffee shop. We arrived at the airport with plenty of time to eat our packed lunch before going through departures for our return flight to Heathrow.

It had been an enjoyable morning and a great way to complete our tour of this unique country. From the waterfalls and geysers of the Golden circle, to the glaciers and icebergs of the south-east and back again to Reykjavik and Faxaflói bay, our journey had been unforgettable. There was also a real camaraderie amongst the whole group which enhanced the experience for everyone.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		22						
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			200	50	100	50		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	30	30	10	240	10	✓	
4	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						1		
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	70	100	20	400	100	✓	
6	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			53					
7	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					1			
8	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						1		
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				12				
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		30					6	
12	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				1	2	50	✓	
13	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		50	6			1		
14	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					2	20		
15	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>						✓		
16	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>						1		
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					1			
18	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2	1	3	1			
19	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			8			5		
20	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			100		20	30	✓	
21	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						12		
22	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						8		
23	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>						1		
24	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			1					
25	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						2		
26	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>					1			
27	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				6		30		
30	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			1	3	4	10		
32	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>					4	2		
33	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
35	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						3		
36	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>						2		
37	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>					6			
38	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓					
39	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		6	12	4				
40	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		4	6	20	20	6		
41	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			2		1	1		
42	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
43	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
44	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		8						
46	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				3				
Mammals										

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>		1						
2	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>					1			
3	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				6				
4	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						5		
5	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						10		

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