

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 17 September 2016

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Summary

This autumn tour to Iceland combines stunning landscapes, extraordinary geological phenomena and a range of interesting birdlife. We also felt privileged to witness the Northern Lights on two separate 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 National Park, 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 Peninsula in order to visit the capital city and take a whale-watching trip into Faxaflói bay. The weather was mixed but we enjoyed some dry and sunny spells and made the most of every day!

Day 1

Sunday 11th September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

Our flight landed on time but the baggage was very slow coming through and so we left Keflavik airport a little later than planned. Our route took us through the fishing port of Grindavik and along the southern coast of the Reykjanes Peninsula to Hveragerdi. We passed the shallow lake of Hildarvatn, where we saw our first Whooper Swans; more unexpected was a single Long-tailed Duck, a good find along this coast in Autumn. Several more species were seen as we continued our journey, including Raven, Golden Plover and Whimbrel.

We arrived at our comfortable hotel and had time to unpack before meeting for a late dinner and a chat about the week ahead. The aurora forecast was promising and, before heading for bed, everyone agreed that they would like to be woken if the Northern Lights were seen.

The sky was only partly cloudy when we met outside just after midnight to look for the Northern Lights. At first, a broad band of light rose vertically in the sky to the north-east, separating into blurry columns. However, as time went on, a band of white light extended across the sky and became quite bright. Meanwhile, as the cloud cleared to the north-west, a more typical horizontal sheet of light could be seen, with a hint of green. It was fascinating to watch the lights slowly develop over the next hour and satisfying to witness this spectacle on our very first night.

Day 2

Monday 12th September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Ulfjotsvatn - Fridheimar - Thingvellir

After an excellent breakfast, we set off to visit the famous sites that lie around the "Golden Circle". The day was mainly cloudy, though we did enjoy some brief sunny spells and it remained dry. We first visited the iconic waterfall of Gullfoss, arriving before the crowds appeared. We took our time to enjoy every viewpoint of this spectacular double cascade, the thundering sound almost as impressive as the sight of surging white water and spray climbing into the sky.

It was only a short drive to Geysir, the site that gave its name to the phenomenon of erupting hot springs. The whole area is covered in Sulphur deposits, steaming vents and hot pools but it is the regular eruptions of Strokkur which everyone comes to see. Every few minutes, the seething pool of water drops, before forming a dome through which the boiling water bursts. We watched several cycles of activity, fascinated by this extraordinary display of geothermal power.

We drove through the rather gentle landscape to the picturesque lake of Ulfjotsvatn, where a large pool (formed by a hydro-electric scheme) regularly attracts a flock of diving ducks. Amongst dozens of Tufted Ducks, we were able to pick out three Barrow's Goldeneye and two Greater Scaup. A group of Red-breasted Mergansers were feeding on the water as we drove on to visit the beautiful little church that sits on a grassy promontory on the lake shore. Unfortunately, we could not find the Great Northern Divers that are often here in Autumn.

We had an excellent lunch at Fridheimar, where an enterprising family have set up a restaurant right in the middle of a huge tomato greenhouse! Homemade tomato soup and home-baked bread made an excellent meal on a cool and breezy day.

As we drove to our final destination, we saw large flocks of both Whooper Swan and Golden Plover close to the road. We soon arrived at Thingvellir, the site of Iceland's ancient parliament, the Althing. It lies right on the mid-Atlantic ridge, where the flat valley floor is intersected by a series of dramatic fissures, the largest of which was the meeting place for the island's original settlers. Groups of Vikings would walk for many days to gather here in early summer and agree the laws that would govern life across the island. History and geology combine to create a unique place with a special atmosphere; a great way to complete our first full day in Iceland.

Day 3

Tuesday 13th September

Skalholt - Seljalandsfoss - Skogafoss - Reynisfjara - Vik - Skaftafell

We enjoyed another excellent buffet breakfast and set off for the long journey along the south coast to Skaftafell. We took a different route past the little settlement at Skalholt, the birth place of the Icelandic Church. Just after scanning a field full of Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans, we spotted a Merlin flying across the road. We stopped to watch it dive-bombing three Great Black-backed Gulls; an unlikely target for such a diminutive raptor!

Our first scheduled stop was at the picturesque waterfall of Seljalandsfoss, where we took the path that runs around and behind the cascade, offering a very different perspective. Not far away is the much larger Skogafoss, which made a convenient lunch stop. The height and volume of water combine to make this one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Europe.

The scenery on this stretch of the road ringing the island is stunning. To our left, high, rocky ridges towered above grassy slopes that ran down to the road. To our right, wide, flat plains ran for several kilometres to the distant sea.

We took a detour from the main ring-road to drive down to Reynisfjara, where Atlantic rollers crash onto the black sand beach. The cliffs at the back of the beach are composed of columnar basalt, which creates fantastic geometric patterns, at one point forming a beautiful, arched cave. Hundreds of Fulmars flew around the rocks

and over the sea, joined by dozens of Gannets. Ciaran did well to find a Red-throated Diver sitting out on the choppy water, which we all admired through the scope.

After excellent coffee and cakes at the old cafe in Vik, we drove across the wide lava fields around Klauster and then over vast glacial flood plains to Skaftafell. We saw another Merlin fly over the road and found a small group of Red-breasted Mergansers in a roadside pool, while the huge Vatnajokull Glacier loomed in the distance. We had time to settle in, before enjoying a delicious dinner and signing up for the hotel's aurora watch. Everyone headed for bed in anticipation of being woken in the small hours!

We were woken at 2 am when the Northern Lights appeared again. A bright band could be seen in an arc across the sky, whilst close to the nearby glacier, a curtain of greenish light developed. It was an even better display than on our first night!

Day 4

Wednesday 14th September

Jokulsarlon - Fjallsarlon - Hof - Skaftafell NP

We had an early breakfast and set off for our visit to the iceberg lagoon with the sun shining brightly. By the time we arrived, however, low cloud had swept across the sky and a steady drizzle was falling - hardly ideal conditions! However, the rain soon stopped and the grey sky showed off some startlingly blue icebergs to great effect. By the time we boarded the amphibious vehicle for our trip across the lagoon, the sky had brightened and we enjoyed amazing views of this extraordinary place.

Once back on dry land, we walked down to the black sand beach, which was strewn with a carpet of smaller icebergs. As we looked out to sea, lines of Gannets were flying past beyond the rolling breakers and several Red-throated Divers sat on the sea. Ciaran spotted a large cetacean that was almost certainly a Minke Whale. As we tried to relocate it, a Great Skua flew in off the sea and along the sand; two more were harassing gulls over the sea. When we walked along the channel back to the lagoon, we found Turnstones and Purple Sandpipers feeding amongst the rocks close to the path. Back by the car park, we had wonderful views of a very tame young Snow Bunting. Equally exciting, we found three adult Harbour (Common) Seals swimming in the milky-blue water.

In the early afternoon, we set off back towards Skaftafell, stopping first at the nearby Fjallsarlon, where the lagoon has fewer icebergs but where the glacier is much closer. There were far fewer visitors and we enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere. We ate lunch as we drove back along the ring-road to visit the traditional turf-roofed church at Hof.

In the late afternoon we visited Skaftafell National Park, walking out through the birch woodland to the snout of the Skaftafell glacier. The trees were full of Redwings; it was great to hear their song, which we never normally hear when they visit us in the UK.

It had been a truly memorable day, with breathtaking views of icebergs and glaciers, along with a good variety of birds. The wonderful photographic opportunities were greatly appreciated by everyone.

Day 5

Thursday 15th September

Svinafelljokull - Klauster - Gamla Fljosid (Skoga) - Hildarvatn

We rose early and went out for walk before breakfast. The sun shone as we walked up behind the hotel to the snout of the Svinafelljokull glacier. As we stood admiring the view, a single figure could be seen walking out across the ice, crampons on his feet and an ice-axe tied to his rucksack. He looked tiny as he traversed the wide expanse, giving a human scale to this vast landscape.

After breakfast, we set off for the long drive back towards Reykjavik, along the main ring-road. We stopped for a break in the little village of Klauster and walked out to look at the "Church Floor", where basalt columns form a flat surface that gives the appearance of hexagonal flagstones.

After lunch in the excellent Gamla Fljosid cafe, we drove on through persistent rain to leave the main road at Selfoss and follow the coast onto the Reykjanes Peninsula. As we crossed a bridge over the corner of Hildarvatn, we realised that there were two separate flocks of ducks close to the road. We had already seen lots of Red-breasted Mergansers but we were delighted to find a flock of 14 Harlequin Ducks! Although not in breeding plumage, they were very distinctive.

We arrived at the Northern Lights Inn in time for some to visit the Blue Lagoon, while the rest of us popped down to Grindavik harbour to look for white-winged gulls. Despite the rain, we found an immature Glaucous Gull and an adult Iceland Gull; a great way to finish the day.

Day 6

Friday 16th September

Reykjavik - Faxafloi Bay

A light rain was falling when we arrived in Reykjavik to spend the morning in this fascinating city. We parked by the old harbour and walked to the small lake in the city centre. This took us through a residential area, where the corrugated iron and wooden houses date back to the early 20th century - that's old for Reykjavik! On the lake we found several interesting birds, including the only Pink-footed Goose of the tour.

The rain persisted so we made our way straight up to Hallgrímskirkja, the large church that dominates the skyline. This impressive building has a sweeping steeple, inspired by the basalt columns that can be found across Iceland. Just as we entered, an organ recital began and music filled the vaulted space; a special moment.

We continued down the main shopping street and back to the harbour, where we had a light lunch in the wonderful Cafe Haiti. Thankfully, the rain had cleared when we boarded the boat for our whale watching trip into Faxafloi Bay.

At first it was seabirds that caught our attention; an adult Glaucous Gull and an immature Kittiwake flew close and next to the harbour wall was a Black Guillemot. After about 40 minutes, we picked out the first of four pods of White-beaked Dolphins. Not normally the most demonstrative of Cetaceans, they were surprisingly active, rising high in the water and even breaching clear of the surface. After an interval, large splashes gave away another pod. When we approached, we could see that they were leaping repeatedly out of the water and twisting

in mid-air, before crashing back into the sea - an amazing sight! To round off an epic encounter, another individual was riding the bow wave of a huge tanker that passed quite close.

On our way back towards the harbour, we spotted something surfacing several hundred metres in front of the boat; when it resurfaced, it was obviously a Minke Whale. Not everyone had seen it so we had an anxious wait before it reappeared, this time only 50 metres away. It was a superb finale to a memorable boat trip.

Day 7

Saturday 17th September

Gunnuhver – Reykjanesviti – Sandvik – Njardvik – Keflavik airport

We made the most of our last morning in Iceland, visiting sites across the Reykjanes Peninsula. The steaming, hot spring at Gunnuhver creates a strange, encrusted landscape and an unforgettable smell! Close by is the dramatic, rugged headland at Reykjanesviti, where Atlantic rollers break on the black volcanic rocks. From here we could see the small island of Eldey, the last known breeding site of the Great Auk and home to a major Gannet colony.

Next we visited Sandvik, 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 Njardvik 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 the 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. We had enjoyed each other's company throughout the week, which enhanced the experience for everyone.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1	5			
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			50	12	3	30	1200
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2	1	1	6	1
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						1	
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			1		10		
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		160				6	
11	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		2					
12	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			1	12	20	100	20
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>					14		
14	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	1						
15	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		3					
16	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		10	4		14	4	
17	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>			2	1	1		
18	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			3				
19	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					1		
20	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	2	200	200		20		
21	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				2			
22	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					1		
23	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				6			
24	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	3				4		
25	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					1		
26	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1		1				
27	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1				
28	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				3		1	
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
31	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓		✓	
32	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					1	4	
34	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>					1		
35	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Common Guillemot (Murre)	<i>Uria aalge</i>						4	
38	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>						1	
39	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	6	4	6	2	
40	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	3	10	10	6		
41	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1				
42	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			3		12	20	
44	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		2					
46	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				1			

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			11	12	13	14	15	16	17

Mammals

1	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				3	1		
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>				1		1	
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						20	