

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 24 September 2016



Jokulsarlon – group waiting for the boat by Sally Abbey



Jokulsarlon –blue ice by Sally Abbey



Blue ice by Judy Kendall



Whooper Swan at Reykjavik by Sally Abbey

Report and images by Marcus John
Images courtesy of Sally Abbey & Judy Kendall



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Summary

This autumn tour to Iceland combines stunning landscapes, extraordinary geological phenomena and a range of interesting birdlife. 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. Although the weather was often wet, we enjoyed some dry and sunny spells and we made the most of every day!

Day 1

Sunday 18th September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

Flights were on time and we all met together at arrivals before boarding our comfortable minibus for the journey to the Hotel Gullfoss. We drove through the fishing port of Grindavik and along the southern coast of the Reykjanes Peninsula. This is a windswept landscape of black lava fields and gravel hills; in the distance, white waves crashed against the craggy cliffs. When we passed the shallow lake of Hildarvatn, we spotted our first Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese.

We broke the journey at Hveragerdi, before turning off the main ring-road to travel north-east towards Gullfoss. The landscape was now relatively green and gentle, with lots of Icelandic horses grazing in the open fields. We arrived at the hotel in good time for an excellent dinner. An overcast sky and low aurora activity meant that we would have to wait for a chance to see the Northern Lights.

Day 2

Monday 19th September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Kerid - Ulfjotsvatn - Thingvellir

After an excellent breakfast, we set off to visit the famous sites that lie around the "Golden Circle". The day was overcast with frequent heavy showers, though we did enjoy some brief sunny spells. 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 boiling water bursts forth, sending a plume up to 10 metres into the air. It was fascinating to witness this extraordinary display of geothermal power.

We ate our lunch at the volcanic crater of Kerid, after an exhilarating walk around the rocky rim. From here, we drove along the River Sog, where we found a group of Harlequin Ducks feeding in the fast-flowing water. When we crossed the river by the hydro-electric plant, we came across three Barrow's Goldeneye among a flock of

Tufted Ducks. We stopped to admire the 19th century church that sits on the shores of the picturesque lake of Ulfjotsvatn, where we also found a pair of distant Great Northern Divers. As we continued past Thingvallavatn (Iceland's biggest lake), we had great views of another Great Northern Diver, this time close to the shore.

We finished our day with a walk around 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 20th September

Skalholt - Seljalandsfoss - Skogafoss - Vik - Skaftafell

We enjoyed another good buffet breakfast and set off on 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. We stopped to scan a field with Whooper Swans and grey geese; the latter turned out to be White-fronted Geese on their way from Greenland to the British Isles.

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, where we stopped for lunch. The height and volume of water combine to make this one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Europe.

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 plains ran for several kilometres to the distant sea.

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. Frequent heavy showers were interspersed with dazzling sunshine and vibrant rainbows. It was fascinating to see thousands of Fulmars circling around the high cliffs, lingering late this year. We also saw a Merlin fly across the road, while the huge Vatnajokull Glacier loomed in the distance.

When we arrived at our hotel the rain had cleared and we enjoyed a walk up to the nearby glacier, which looked magnificent in the late afternoon sunshine. Despite the weather, we had enjoyed our journey along the south coast, through some of the most striking scenery in Iceland.

Day 4

Wednesday 21st September

Jokulsarlon - Skaftafell National Park

We set off a little earlier than usual, in order to reach Jokulsarlon before the crowds. We stopped on the way to admire a flock of black-and-white Barnacle Geese, which pass through Iceland on migration from Greenland to their winter quarters in the British Isles.

We drove across the bridge that leads to the lagoon, getting our first glimpse of the icebergs, many of which were clustered together near the road. It was a spectacular sight and we quickly parked and set off to walk along the lagoon shore. Whilst some icebergs were snow white, others showed varying shades of blue; yet more showed narrow black stripes, from the dust of past volcanic eruptions.

As our boat trip was a little delayed, we walked back under the road bridge and down to the beach, where small bergs were scattered across the black sand. Despite the steady rain, it was a wonderful photo opportunity! We also found several Purple Sandpipers and Turnstones flitting around the rocks close to the path. Out on the sea were Common Eiders with three Red-throated Divers; Celia also spotted a Great Skua.

We returned to the car park, climbed aboard the amphibious vehicle and set off across the lagoon. We were able to sail very close to the biggest icebergs, towering many metres above our heads. Several Harbour (Common) Seals swam through the icy water, whilst Fulmars and gulls flew overhead.

The rain showed no sign of abating, so we returned to have a hot lunch at the cafe near our hotel. After a break (and a change of clothing), we drove the short distance to Skaftafell National Park. We walked through the rain to visit the glacier snout, where the katabatic wind was very powerful. It was a real taste of the elemental forces that have shaped this wild landscape.

Day 5

Thursday 22nd September

Klauster – Reynisfjara - Gamla Fljosid – Hildarvatn – Grindavik

We drove through more heavy showers as we made our way back along the ring-road towards Reykjavik. After a brief stop for coffee at Klauster, we drove through Vik and turned off to visit the black sand beach at Reynisfjara. The rain cleared and the sun shone as we walked out to admire the columnar basalt cliffs and a beautiful arched cave at the back of the beach. Fulmars wheeled around the towering stacks that lie just off shore and thousands more thronged the cliffs and flew above the crashing waves. Groups of Gannets passed by and a Great Skua powered through just above the surf; what a stunning location!

After lunch in the excellent Gamla Fljosid cafe, we drove on through more rain showers 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 was a small flock of ducks very close to the road. We were delighted to find five Harlequin Ducks; though not in breeding plumage, they were very distinctive.

We arrived at the Northern Lights Inn with plenty of time for those who had booked a visit to the Blue Lagoon. The rest of us made the short journey to the harbour at Grindavik, in order to seek out white-winged gulls. Almost the first birds we saw were a group of five Iceland Gulls, though most soon flew off. However, one remained long enough for us to make a direct comparison with a nearby Glaucous Gull, which was clearly larger, bulkier and with a much heavier bill. Mike picked out a rather smart Great Northern Diver and when we drove around for a closer look, James had a glimpse of a feral Mink - a most unexpected sight.

After a superb meal and the evening check list, we all signed up for the aurora call but sadly there was no need; the sky remained cloudy all night.

Day 6

Friday 23rd September

Reykjavik - Faxafloi Bay - Grotta

The sky was clearing 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 our first Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Scaup.

Next we made our way straight up to Hallgrimskirkja, 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. 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 breeze had dropped when we boarded the boat for our whale-watching trip into Faxafloi Bay.

At first it was birds that caught our attention, including several adult Glaucous Gulls. After about 30 minutes, we picked out the first of two Minke Whales. These are the smallest of the Rorqual Whales but adults can still reach a length of 9 metres and a weight of 9 tonnes! We saw it surface again quite close to the ship but, when it disappeared, we continued further out into the bay. Over the next two hours, we encountered another Minke Whale and several White-beaked Dolphins. Although the views were rather brief, it was exciting to be in the company of two species of Cetacean. Seabirds were a regular sight throughout; Gannets came close and plunged into the sea, a group of Manx Shearwaters flew past, and several Common Guillemots sat on the sea.

After a return to the Café Haiti for a warming drink, we visited the nearby headland of Grotta, where we had a close encounter with a confiding flock of Golden Plovers. These charming birds breed across Iceland and can be found around the coast in autumn, before they migrate further south.

It was our last night so we all signed up for the hotel aurora watch but once again, to no avail.

Day 7

Saturday 24th September

Gunnhver – 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 Gunnhver 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 Faxafloi 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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Ice sculpture by Judy Kendall

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				3			
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		3			1		
3	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>						6	
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>					30	12	600
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1		1	8	
7	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>							3
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			60				
11	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				100			
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						25	
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						2	
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						1	
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		15	12			6	
17	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>						1	
18	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				15	10	50	30
19	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		15			5		
20	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				1			
21	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		3					
22	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		30				6	
23	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>						19	
24	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2			
25	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1	1		
26	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
28	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					3	6	
30	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>					5		
31	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Guillemot (Murre)	<i>Uria aalge</i>						7	
34	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>							1
35	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			20	1	20	20	
36	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		3	4	2		7	
37	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			4	3	8	4	1
38	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1				
39	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>						2	
40	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
42	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	2	12	12	35	6	
43	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		2					
44	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				2			

Mammals

1	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					10		
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	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						2	
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						5	
4	American Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>					1		