

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 8 September 2018



Kerid crater by Peter Sadd



Gunnefher by Andrew Bray



Volcanic landscape at Geysir by Peter Sadd



Purple Sandpiper by Andrew Bray

Report compiled by Andrew Bray
images by Peter Sadd & Andrew Bary



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Andrew Bray & Keith Buchanan (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 2nd September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

We were late leaving Terminal 2, Heathrow Airport, but once underway the flight passed quickly. We landed at Keflavik Airport, which was very busy, and went by shuttle bus to the car hire office, where we had another delay as one of our vehicles had a fault. Once sorted, we were on our way and drove along the Reykjanes Peninsula to Selfoss. On way we had a quick stop at Olfusa where there was Red-throated Diver and lots of Red-breasted Mergansers. There were also lots of Whooper Swans on the entire route. There was evidence of lots of old volcanic activity to start with along coast. It was a long drive to the Gullfoss Hotel past Geysir, where Strokkur blasted off as we approached. It was much greener inland and there were lots of Icelandic ponies grazing in the fields. We had a nice meal before settling down in comfy rooms.

Day 2

Monday 3rd September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Kerið - Ulfjotsvatn - Þingvellir

Today we took in the sights of the Golden Circle and we were fortunate to miss most of the heavy rain. We started at Gullfoss in bright sunshine and strong wind. Here the waterfall cascades down a fault in the rock over two stages of 11 metres and 21 metres. During the first half of the 20th century and some years into the late 20th century, there was much speculation about using Gullfoss to generate electricity. During this period, the waterfall was rented indirectly by its owners, Tómas Tómasson and Halldór Halldórsson, to foreign investors. However, the investors' attempts were unsuccessful, partly due to lack of money. The waterfall was later sold to the state of Iceland and is now protected. Sigríður Tómasdóttir, the daughter of Tómas Tómasson, was determined to preserve the waterfall's condition and is regarded as Iceland's first conservationist. The flow was very strong upstream and we read about the love story where a boy waded across the river to marry the girl on the other side. This is the iconic waterfall of Iceland and it did not disappoint with the spray rising like steam.

It was a short drive to Geysir, which gives its name to this phenomenon, and we saw Strokkur explode in a steam of hot water. It goes off about every five minutes if the conditions are right. It was a powerful vent of water up to 10 metres high that captured the imagination. We then drove to the Kerið crater, formed when the hole collapsed once the magma had left. There was Atlantic Charr in a small lake in the bottom.

We then drove to a hydro power station where we found a Fulmar on the small lake between the stations on the River Sog at Ulfjotsvatn. At the top station we visited the exhibition before driving round on the dirt road and finding two Great Northern Divers in full summer plumage, plus another one flew over the top of us.

Next stop was Þingvellir and the birthplace of the Icelandic Parliament in 860AD. We parked in the bus bay and walked to the Law rock, where the speaker of the Alþing would recite the laws (a third of them each year) and new laws were made. Vikings would travel for days each year to meet at the Alþing to settle grievances and make laws. We visited the centre and looked at the lava on the high point before heading back to the vehicles, crossing a bridge which divides the American and Eurasian Tectonic Plates.

Day 3

Tuesday 4th September

Skálholt - Seljalandsfoss - Skógarfoss - Vik - Skaftafell

Today was cloudy and rainy. It was not long before we arrived at Skálholt Church where Christianity was established, especially in the Middle Ages. It was here during the reformation that a Catholic bishop was executed and replaced with a Church of Iceland bishop. There was an archaeological site by the church where the old buildings from its heyday stood. The new church was finished in 1963 and the stained glass windows were a gift from Denmark.

We left the Golden Circle route and stopped for coffee at Hella, where we spotted a Starling. Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano with a small glacier on top that devastated airplane movements over the Atlantic in 2010 when it erupted, was covered in cloud. Not far down the road we stopped at Seljalandsfoss. Though it was raining, some of us walked behind the waterfall and were covered in spray! Others stayed on the main path and headed to a waterfall next door.

We stopped for lunch near Steiner, where most of us had the goulash which was thick and warming. Our next stop was Skógarfoss, thought by some to be Iceland's most beautiful waterfall at 60 metres high and 25 metres wide. The rain was unrelenting, as was the spray, and only one of us walked up the 657 steps to look down. We then drove through some dramatic scenery with cliffs, after massive flat plains.

The sun came out when we first stopped at the lake at Dyrhólaey, where we saw Sanderling, Dunlin and Great Skua. Further on, at the cliff head, we looked at the fantastic sea arches and saw a huge range of birds including Puffin, Gannet, Manx Shearwater, Black Guillemot, Iceland Gull and Slavonian Grebe. The small twisted sea arch was out of bounds to walk across.

It was then a long drive across the plains of Eldhraun and Skeiðarársandur, where the Vatnajökull comes down and makes a very wet and unstable area. Just before the hotel there were some twisted metal girders that were monument to the bridge near Skaftafell that was damaged in floods. It rained heavily as we got closer to the girder and our hotel. That night we had a very enjoyable meal, and our waiter came from Surrey!

Day 4

Wednesday 5th September

Jökulsárlón - Skaftafell National Park

At 1.35am, following a call to the leader, everyone was woken as the Northern Lights covered the sky. We enjoyed a good half hour of fantastic viewing.

Later, we started the day with an early morning walk to the finger glacier of Svinafellsjökull. After breakfast we drove to the Iceberg Lagoon at Jökulsárlón. Snow Bunting was in car park on arrival. In the lagoon the tide was coming in and icebergs were back from the exit. There were lots of Common Gulls as well as many Common Seals. We went out in a DUKW amphibious vehicle to look at the stunning icebergs that were blue and white in colour, with the odd one black from volcanic deposits. The James Bond film 'Die Another Day' was filmed here and the lagoon was frozen by putting a dam in place to prevent the salt water coming in. Eight Aston Martin cars were written off by hitting the icebergs frozen in the lagoon! There was Eider on the river exit to the sea. We

then headed to the beach where three Purple Sandpipers explored the small amounts of ice that had mainly dissolved.

We bought lunch at N1 opposite the hotel and ate it in the sunshine at the edge of Svinafellsjökull glacier. There was a plaque to two German climbers that went missing on the glacier, which is part of the Vatnajökull. We could see where the glacier has retreated 20 metres a year in recent times, as there was water behind the moraine.

We then drove a few minutes further to Skaftafell National Park and walked up the main path to Svartifoss. At the waterfall a few of us went down to see the basalt columns whilst the rest looked from a vantage point on the bridge. Eight of us then walked up the steps and path to the Sjórnarsker viewpoint where we could see Iceland's highest mountain Hvannadalshnúkur, covered in snow and ice at 2,110 metres. The rest of the group walked back down the opposite side of the valley and joined the main track at Magnúsarfoss. It was then back to the hotel.

Day 5

Thursday 6th September

Vik – Reynisfjara – Hlíðarvatn - Grindavík

Our first stop was the viewpoint at the Laki eruptions in 1783, which was so massive that crops failed in the northern hemisphere. We were about 70 kilometres away from the main crater, but lava flowed and eruptions took place along fissures. Next stop was at Laufskálavarða to see the hundreds of pinnacles where travellers add a stone for good luck. Here the farm was destroyed by the Kalla Volcano in 894.

Our coffee stop was in Vik at the Ice Store, which has a supermarket and clothes area as well as a cafe. An Oystercatcher was on the grass by the vehicles. Afterwards we travelled to one of Iceland's most beloved black beaches, Reynisfjara, with smooth pebbles and black sand and guarded by two rock-stack trolls; Reynisdrangar. There were lots of warnings about the sea current: too cold for a dip anyway! There were fantastic basalt columns on cliffs at a beach called Stuolabog í Reynisfjoru and caves. There were a lot of Puffins out to sea, as well as lots of Fulmars and passing Gannets.

We had lunch at Cafe Heimamenn, at the two house settlement of Skardshild, near Steiner. We then drove on to Hvolsvöllur where the Nils Saga was based. The sagas are of Iceland's history that was told by word of mouth before they were written down. In the telling over the centuries there may have been some embellishment of the stories!

It was then a long drive to Selfoss, where we turned off Route 1 and our next stop was at Ölfusa, where there were some Red-breasted Mergansers and an adult Glaucous Gull. The next inlet was Hlíðarvatn where there were lots of Ringed Plovers. On the river was Greenland Dunlin and Sanderling. The bonus was a Harlequin Duck that swam down the rapids and then swam down the river. We continued on to Grindavík and stopped at the port, full of fishing boats, where an adult Glaucous Gull posed on the harbour wall. It was then a short drive to our hotel, not far from the Blue Lagoon and the big geo-thermal power plant.

Day 6

Friday 7th September

Reykjavik – Flaxafloi Bay

The wind was blowing the rain and the steam from the geo-thermal plant horizontally when we left the hotel. It cleared up as we drove east, but the wind remained. Today was spent in Reykjavik. We found a place to park and walked to Tjornin Lake by the town hall. There were many ducks on the water including Scaup, Wigeon, Gadwall and lots of Mallards. There were also Greylag Geese, Whooper Swans and one Pink-footed Goose.

We walked up the hill through old buildings to Hallgrimskirkja, which was finished in 1964. The organ inside was very impressive with 5,275 pipes. This church was modelled on the basalt columns and the founder of Vinland (an area near Boston, USA) dominates the front; a present from the USA on the thousandth anniversary of the Alþing.

It was then back down the hill to the old port and Cafe Haiti for lunch. After lunch we boarded the Elday, the biggest ship in the company, for a whale-watching trip. We left the port with Elding Whale Tours but the sea was very rough and the wind strong, and as a consequence no cetaceans were seen. However we did see Gannet, Kittiwake and Glaucous Gull. At the entrance to the harbour was a Black Guillemot, and in the harbour itself was Eider. After the trip we drove back to our hotel.

Day 7

Saturday 8th September

Gunnehver – Reykjanesvitti – Njarðvík – Keflavik Airport - Heathrow

Today we had more rain and strong winds. Our first stop was at the port of Grindavík, where we found many Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls, plus a few others. The rain was lashing down so we moved on to our next stop at Gunnehver. Here the ground was hot to the touch and steam was rising. The best sight was the amount of steam erupting through the ground. Fortunately there was a walkway and path to keep the unwary from straying.

We returned to the vehicles and drove to Reykjanesvitti, where we saw a statue commemorating the Great Auk. The last one was killed in June 1844 for a Danish Natural History collection. The cloud and rain obscured any chance of a view of Eldey with its huge Gannet population, however many Gannets flew past the point.

We went to the 'Bridge' between continents. Here the North American and European plates are pulling apart by two centimetres per year. The bridge was built where there are two small cliffs that denote the edges of the continents along a fault line.

Next stop was the bakers in Njarðvík for cake and coffee, where we warmed up and dried off. Before going to the airport there was just time to look at the birds on the nearby coast, where there were plenty of Turnstones, Oystercatchers and Golden Plovers, as well as Wigeon.

It was then to the airport for our flight home, where our enjoyable tour of southern Iceland finished. We had not visited it for the rain, but we had seen plenty! We had also seen waterfalls, geo-thermal activity, glaciers and icebergs. We had visited the Golden Circle, drove along the flood plains of the south, and watched the Northern

Lights. We had seen some excellent birds as well. Everywhere we went the scenery was spectacular. It was an unforgettable trip in very good company.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!



Skogarfoss by Andrew Bray

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	3	2	1	1	1		1
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		4					
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1		1			1	
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x
6	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						1	
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			14		x	x	x
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		2				x	x
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x
10	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						x	
11	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					2		
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		x	x			x	
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		8			1		
14	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		x	x			x	
15	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				7	10	x	x
16	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	x	x			x		x
17	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				1			
18	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			x				
19	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					2		
20	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			1		x		x
21	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			x		x		2
22	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			x				x
23	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>							x
24	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	4		x		x		
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			5		x		x
26	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				3			
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2	1		
28	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					2		
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>							x
30	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			x	2	2		
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
32	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				x			
33	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						x	
34	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		x	x			x	x
35	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					2	x	x
36	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			1				
37	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	x		x		x	x	x
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
39	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisea</i>					12		
40	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			8		x		
41	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			1			1	
42	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>				2			
43	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			x		x	x	x
44	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			15		5	1	2
45	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			x		x	x	
46	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				2	1		
47	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	x	x	x	x	x		x

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8
48	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	x	x	10	7	x		x
49	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1	1			
50	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	1	
51	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	x		1		x	x	x
52	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	x	x	x	3	x	5	
53	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		x					
54	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				x			

Mammals

1	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				10	2	1	
---	-------------	-----------------------	--	--	--	----	---	---	--

Other sightings of note

Buff-tailed Bumblebee, *Bombus terrestris*
Stickleback, *Gasterosteus aculeatus*

Arctic Charr, *Salvelinus alpinus*

Flora

Field Geranium, *Geranium maculatum*
Lady's Bedstraw, *Galium verum*
Grass-of-Parnassus, *Parnassia sp.*
White Clover, *Trifolium repens*
Pale Lavender, *Lavandula ssp*
Birch, *Betula pubescens*
Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*
Thyme sp., *Thymus sp.*
Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*
Angelica, *Angelica archangelica*
Mountain Avens, *Dryas octopetala*
Lupin, *Lupinus ssp*

Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*
Autumn Hawkbit, *Scorzoneroides autumnalis*
Eyebright sp., *Euphrasia sp.*
Selfheal, *Prunella ssp*
Woolly Willow, *Salix lanata*
Alder, *Alnus sp.*
Field Gentian, *Gentianella campestris*
Horsetail, *Equisetum ssp*
Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*
Alpine Bistort, *Persicaria vivipara*
Lady's Mantle sp., *Alchemilla sp.*
Yellow Saxifrage, *Saxifraga aizoides*



Gullfoss by Andrew Bray



Whooper Swans by Andrew Bray