

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 7 September 2019



Great Northern Diver



Skógafoss



Gullfoss



Minke Whale

Report & Images by Andrew Bray



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Day 1

Sunday 1st September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

Flights were on time and we all met together at arrivals before boarding our minibus for the journey to the Hotel Gullfoss. The sun was shining as it did for the next four days. 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. After the town of Selfoss, the landscape was now relatively green and gentle, with lots of Icelandic horses grazing in the open fields. We arrived at the hotel for an excellent dinner. A cloudless sky and high aurora activity meant that we would have fantastic views of the Northern Lights.

Day 2

Monday 2nd September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Þingvellir- Úlfjótsvatn - Kerið - Flúðir

After an excellent breakfast, we set off to visit the famous sites that lie around the "Golden Circle". The day was very sunny but started and finished off windy. 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.

Midway through the day we visited Þingvellir, the site of Iceland's ancient parliament, the Alþing. 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. We had lunch at the visitor centre but sat outside in the warmth of the sun. From here, we drove along the bank of Þingvallavatn and saw two close Merlin flying by the road. Unfortunately, we could not stop.

Our next stop was at the western end of Úlfjótsvatn where we found a group of Harlequin Ducks along with a pair of Great Northern Divers. When we crossed the river by the hydroelectric plant, we came across more Great Northern Divers, including an adult and two chicks. The River Sog only produced more Black-headed Gulls, before we visited the Kerið Crater. Here we had an exhilarating walk around the rocky rim before descending to the lake complete with young Arctic Char. Our final stop of the day was the Secret Lagoon at Flúðir with a bathe in the hot pool, a great way to complete our first full day in Iceland.

Day 3

Tuesday 3rd September

Skálholt - 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 route past the little settlement at Skálholt, the birthplace of the Icelandic Church. Our next 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. Lunch called and we had soup and burgers at the Cow Shed. Not far away is the much larger Skogafoss with its rainbow. The height and volume of water combine to make this one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Europe. This stretch of the road around 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.

Our next stop was Dyrhólaey where we found a juvenile Guillemot plus Cormorant, and various gulls. On the way out there was a small group of Sanderling by the water's edge of the lagoon. Unfortunately, again there was nowhere to stop. After excellent drinks at the cafe in Vik, we drove across the wide lava fields stopping at Dyrhólaey where the lava flow from the Laki eruptions was. The Laki eruptions were one of the causes of the French Revolution as the harvests had failed due to the poor weather caused by the ash cloud. The eruptions were along a fissure 16 miles long and lasted eight months. We then drove over the vast glacial flood plains of Skeiðarársandur to Skaftafell. This is a result of the melt water from Europe's largest glacier of Vatnajökull, which takes up 8% of the country's landmass. We had enjoyed our journey along the south coast, through some of the most striking scenery in Iceland.

Day 4

Wednesday 4th September

Jökulsárlón - Skaftafell National Park.

We had an early morning walk up to the Svínafellsjökull to look at the moraine and how the glacier is retreating. Our first stop was one of the remaining grass-roofed churches in Iceland at Hof. Once again, there were many Redwings flitting about. We then drove to a car park by the lagoon of Jökulsárlón where we watched a Grey Seal having fun. It was then onto the black sand beach just short of the bridge. We were just in time to see the outpouring of water and ice from the lagoon. There were Icebergs coming ashore, but those already ashore sparkled in the sunlight, though most had melted. Here we saw Purple Sandpiper and Eider with lots of Harbour (Common) Seals being washed out, as well as the ice. Once across the bridge that leads to the lagoon, we saw the main icebergs, many of which were clustered together near the road. It was a spectacular sight and we quickly parked and set off to 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.

Our boat trip was a little delayed, but once out on the water all was forgotten. It was a wonderful photo opportunity aboard the amphibious vehicle. We were able to sail very close to the biggest icebergs, towering many metres above our heads. We saw lots of Black-headed Gulls plus some Common Gulls and Fulmars. On the water, the guide told us that the glacier was about 200 metres deep (the lowest point in Iceland) and the tallest mountain, Hvannadalshnúkur at 2110 metres was nearby! We returned to have a hot lunch at the cafe near our hotel.

After a break we drove the short distance to Skaftafell National Park. We walked up the hill to Magnúsarfoss and then onto Svartifoss with its array of basalt in hexagonal columns. Some of the party came down the other side of the river and put up a Snipe. At the bridge we met up with the rest and on the journey down saw two Common Redpolls and two Willow Warblers. On return to the bottom we headed straight back to the hotel.

Day 5

Thursday 5th September

Reynisfjara - Hildarvatn - Grindavik

We drove through showers as we made our way back along the ring road towards Reykjavik. After a brief stop at Laufskálavarða, where we added a stone to the piles of rocks, we drove onto Vik where we stopped for a drink and no shopping! Our next stop was 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 cliffs and just offshore were lots of Puffins in a raft. 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 (Cow Shed), we drove on through more rain showers to leave the main road at Selfoss, where we stopped again for a drink before following the coast onto the Reykjanes Peninsula. Our first stop after Selfos was the Flói Bird Reserve where the lava flow is 8700 years old and the largest in Europe. We stopped just across the bridge at Ölfusá to look at the birds and there were huge rafts of Red-breasted Merganser. Our next stop was at the bridge over the corner of Hildarvatn, where we found a lone Black-tailed Godwit. Our final stop was at the edge of the harbour at Grindavik where there were Glaucous Gulls mixed in with the Herring Gulls and some Redshank. As we drove off, in the field close by were Golden Plover.

We eventually arrived at the Northern Lights Inn. 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 6th September

Reykjavik - Fixable Bay

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 Tjornin by the Civic Centre 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. Next, we made our way straight up to Hallgrímskirkja, the large church that dominates the skyline with 5275 pipes that make up the organ. This impressive building has a sweeping steeple, inspired by the basalt columns that can be found across Iceland. Outside is statue of Leifer Ericsson who discovered Vinland (USA) in 930 AD. We continued down the main shopping street and back to the harbour, where we had a light lunch of Bagels in a wonderful bakery.

Thankfully, the breeze had dropped when we boarded the boat for our whale-watching trip into Faxaflói Bay. At first it was birds that caught our attention, including lots of Fulmars. After about 30 minutes, we saw some Harbour Porpoises. We then picked out the first of two Minke Whales. These are the smallest of the Rorqual Whales, but adults can still reach a length of nine metres and a weight of nine tonnes! We saw it surface again

quite close to the ship. We continued further out into the bay where we encountered another Minke Whale. The views were rather brief this time though it did surface very close to the ship; 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, and several Common Guillemots sat on the sea. We then joined the rush hour traffic for our return back to the hotel.

It was our last night, so we all pushed the boat out when it came to our superb meal.

Day 7

Saturday 7th September

Keflavik Airport - Sandvik - Gunnhver - Reykjanesviti - Keflavik airport

We made the most of our last morning in Iceland, visiting sites across the Reykjanes Peninsula. Our first stop was the airport after a huge breakfast. 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! 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. There is a statue of the Great Auk, the last being shot on the island of Eldey on June 3rd, 1844 and now home to a major Gannet colony.

We arrived at the airport with plenty of time 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 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						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	2		6	12	
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>						✓	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓			4	
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓		6		✓		
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓			6	✓	✓	
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		4					
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					✓		
10	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>			1			✓	
11	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	2	1			20		
12	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					50		
13	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			30				
14	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					1		
15	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			10				
16	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2			
17	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				2			
18	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					4		
19	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			1	5			
21	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	2		1		✓	✓	1
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					✓		
23	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓		✓	✓	
24	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	2	✓	✓	2
25	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>						5	
26	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			6	2	2		
27	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1			✓	
28	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>					✓		
29	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		6					
30	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					✓	✓	
32	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		✓	✓	
33	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2			2		
34	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				1			
35	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	11	9	3	✓	✓	
36	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				2			
37	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	4			✓	
38	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1				
39	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>		3	6	✓	✓		
40	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		2					
41	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			8	4	✓	✓	
42	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	
43	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				2			

Other Taxa

1	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				1	✓		
2	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
3	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>							✓	
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>							✓	
5	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					1			
6	White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus lucorum</i>				3				



behind Seljalandsfoss



Harlequin Duck