

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 14 September 2019



Gullfoss



Krysuvik



Diamond Beach



Organ at Hallgrims Church

Report & Images by Andrew Bray



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Tour participants: Andrew Bray (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 8th September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

The flight was nearly two hours late arriving and we all met at arrivals before boarding our minibus for the journey to the Hotel Gullfoss. The sun was shining. 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 Ringed Plover. At Ölfusá there were gulls galore. After the town of Gullfoss 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. Sadly, there were no Northern Lights.

Day 2

Monday 9th September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Þingvellir- Úlfljótsvatn - 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. Near the church the river was full of adult Arctic Char. 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.

Our next stop was at the western end of Úlfljótsvatn where we found a Great Northern Diver and three Red-breasted Mergansers. When we stopped at the hydroelectric plant, we came across two Great Northern Divers. As we approached the bridge a bit further downstream there was another Great Northern Diver and two Tufted Duck. The River Sog only produced more Black-headed Gulls, before we visited the Kerið Crater. Here we had a lovely walk around the rocky rim looking at the lake below 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 10th 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, where the rain eased. 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 gooseburgers at the Cow Shed (Gamla Fljosid). Not far away is the much larger Skogafoss where 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 with huge waterfalls. To our right, wide plains ran for several kilometres to the distant sea.

Our next stop was Dyrhólaey where we found a Great Skua and plenty of Fulmars and gulls. On the way out there was a small group of Oystercatcher on the sand of the lagoon. After excellent drinks at the cafe in Vik, we drove across the wide lava fields, stopping at Skaftáreldhraun, 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 Skeiðarásandur 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 stopped very briefly to see what water can do steel girders. We had enjoyed our journey along the south coast, through some of the most striking scenery in Iceland.

Day 4

Wednesday 11th September

Jökulsárlón - Skaftafell National Park.

We had an early morning walk up to the Svínafells jökull 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 Harbour (Common) Seals swimming about. It was then onto the black sand beach, just short of the bridge. We could 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. 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 delight with Anna, our guide. 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 walked to the other beach that was covered in icebergs on our side of the river. We saw quite a few Eider in the river and some Snow Bunting in the carpark. We then drove 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 Magnúsfoss and then onto Svartifoss with its array of basalt in hexagonal columns. Coming down, we enjoyed the looking at the juicy berries which information at the visitor centre showed were edible. On return to the bottom we stopped in the visitor centre before heading back to the hotel.

Day 5

Thursday 12th September

Reynisfjara - Ölfusá - Hilðarvatn - Grindavík

We drove through showers as we made our way back along the ring road towards Reykjavík. After a brief stop at Laufskálavarða, where we added a stone to the piles of rocks, we drove onto Vík where we stopped for a drink. 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, three Great Skua powered through just above the surf before landing on the water; what a stunning location! We could see the rain heading towards us and we escaped the hail.

After lunch at a small cafe at Heinenman we drove on through more rain showers to leave Route 1 at Selfoss. We then followed the coast onto the Reykjanes Peninsula. 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, as well as a good mix of gulls and a flock of Wigeon. Our next stop was at the bridge over the corner of Hilðarvatn, where we found a few Whooper Swans. Our final stop was at the edge of the harbour at Grindavík where there were Glaucous Gulls mixed in with the Herring Gulls, picking scraps off the water in the harbour. As we drove off, in the field close by were Golden Plover and Starling.

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 13th September

Reykjavík

The sky was clearing when we arrived in Reykjavík 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 Reykjavík! On the lake we found several interesting birds, including 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 where we had a drink to warm us up as the wind was very strong and biting. We eventually ended up back at the harbour, where we had a light lunch of Bagels in a wonderful bakery. Here we had confirmation that the boat trip was, unfortunately, cancelled.

After lunch we went to Grotta, where the tide was out so we could walk to the lighthouse. There were mainly gulls and Gannets, but we did spot the odd Turnstone. We then parked by the pond on the other side of the peninsula and saw various birds, including lots of Brent Geese and several Sanderling. We next visited

Gönguleiðir, where there were hundreds of Golden Plover, plus Redshank and a probable Icelandic Gull that flew over us. It was an early return 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 14th September

Chrysie – Gunnhver – Reykjanesviti – Sandvik - Keflavík airport

We received the messages at breakfast that our flight was seriously delayed by over three hours. We made the most of our last morning in Iceland, visiting sites across the Reykjanes Peninsula. The wind was very strong and the steam off the power plant was horizontal, as was the rain! We headed for Krýsuvík where there was steam coming off the boiling pits and the mountains protected us a bit. We visited the lake at Kleifarvatn where the only birds were Mallard. Our next stop was the steaming, hot spring at Gunnhver which 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 could hardly stand because of the wind. 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! We had lunch in a bakery near Gönguleiðir on the border of Njarðvík and Keflavík.

We arrived at the airport with plenty of time before the return flight to Heathrow. It had been an enjoyable morning, despite the wind, 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, 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						
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1	Brent (Brant) Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>						✓	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓		✓	✓	
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					✓	✓	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓		✓	✓	
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		2					
9	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				15	✓		✓
10	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	3			✓		
11	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>			✓		1	✓	
12	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			6			6	
13	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓	3	✓	✓	
14	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	10						
15	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						2	
16	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						10	
17	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					1		
18	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>						6	
19	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						4	
20	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				2			
22	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
23	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					✓	✓	
24	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>					✓	✓	
25	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>						4	
27	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			1	1	3		
28	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		5					
29	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
30	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓			✓	✓
31	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2		7	1	
32	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1				
33	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1	✓	3	5		
34	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					25	✓	
35	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓		
36	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	2	2		4	
37	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			6	1		1	
38	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				2		1	

Mammals

1	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					✓	✓		
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