

Iceland in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 16th September 2023



Aurora Borealis by Michelle McLean



Ptarmigan by Bob Gill



Strokkur by Michelle McLean



Jökulsálón Iceberg by Michelle McLean

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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Tour Participants: Dave Jackson and Bob Gill (Leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

There were so many highlights on this tour of Iceland it would be impossible to choose just one.

We witnessed the phenomenal red, purple and green colours of the Northern Lights on most nights, a fireball exploding through the earth's atmosphere, the geothermal areas at Geysir and waterfalls with Fulmars flying through the rainbow.

We boarded an amphibious craft in an iceberg lagoon on the edge of a glacier and travelled through the most dramatic scenery anywhere in the world.

We had close encounters with Snow Buntings, Ptarmigan and Great Northern Diver, we saw Minke Whales and Sooty Shearwaters on our whale-watching trip from Reykjavik and apart from a few showers, the rain stayed away until the last day.

Day 1

Sunday 10th September

Heathrow – Keflavik – Gullfoss.

Rain showers, 9°C

We left the heatwave behind in the UK as we arrived to a pleasant 9°C at Keflavik airport. After a straightforward vehicle collection we were heading to our first night's stay at Gullfoss, less one delayed guest who'd be collected later.

Passing geothermal areas and fields with Icelandic horses, Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese, Raven, Starlings, Redwing and a Whimbrel were seen as we travelled to our hotel where we arrived just in time for dinner.

Our late-arriving guest was treated to a showing of the Northern Lights in the early hours on the journey from the airport while others slept blissfully.

Day 2

Monday 11th September

Gullfoss - Geysir – Þingvellir.

Sun, breezy & clear 3-12°C

A few intrepid guests made the early morning walk up to Gullfoss for a pre-breakfast view of the magnificent waterfall and were ferried back in time for breakfast while the rest of the group enjoyed our first morning's breakfast at a much more leisurely pace. Redwings, Meadow Pipits and a Greenland Wheatear were seen from the dining room and a Merlin had been seen earlier from a bedroom window.

After breakfast we made the short drive to Gullfoss where an hour was spent photographing this spectacular waterfall and the glacier in the background. Gullfoss, meaning Golden Waterfall, is situated in a deep canyon of the Hvítá River and comprises two fast flowing, wide drops, falling 32m in all. In good morning light the falls were stunning and the opportunities for photography superb.

A White Wagtail was searching for food amongst the vehicles in the car park as we embarked for our short drive to the bubbling landscape of Geysir where, every 10 minutes or so, the famous Strokkur erupts, typically to a height of 15 – 20 metres but occasionally reaching 40 metres.

The regularity of the eruptions make this geyser very photogenic and we all made the most of this opportunity. The area is geothermally very active with bubbling pools and mini eruptions occurring over a large area. Great Geysir, for which the site is famous is undergoing a period of inactivity but may erupt in the future.

After experiencing supermarket shopping Icelandic style, we drove a few kilometres to a picnic area to eat our lunch with spectacular views over the surrounding countryside. Although a little windy the picnic was enjoyed by all before it was time to move on to our next destination.

Thingvellir (Þingvellir) National Park is an historic site known for being the heart of the Althing (Alþing), Iceland's annual parliament from the 10th to the 18th century. Early in the summer, groups of Vikings would travel for days to come together and decide the rules that would control life on the island. It is located directly on the mid-Atlantic Ridge and the boundary between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates.

Stunning fissures cut through the valley floor and we were able to walk between the tectonic plates and along the river below to the picturesque church built in 1859 before making our way back to the viewing platform where a Merlin cruised by looking for prey.

A flock of Barnacle Geese flew over the vehicles before we made our final stop of the day by the River Sog where we were greeted by 11 Whooper Swans and a distant Great Northern Diver. A short drive to a bridge over the river gave us very close views of an adult still in breeding plumage, unconcerned by the people fishing nearby.

Finally, it was back to the hotel for dinner and just as everyone had returned to their rooms the Northern Lights began to show faintly. Although the rating was a moderate 3 on the Iceland weather site all were alerted and as we gathered outside the cameras picked out the dancing green and red colours low in the sky. Not spectacular but a hint of more showings to come.

Day 3

Tuesday 12th September

Gullfoss – Skogafoss – Vik – Skaftafell

0°C – 9°C

We awoke to a clear and still morning with ice on the windscreens before checking out of the hotel for the 300km drive to Skaftafell, stopping by the wide river at Laugarás where a ferry towed by horses used to be the only way of crossing until the bridge was built in 1958.

Flocks of Redpoll alighted on the birch trees while seven Red-breasted Mergansers were slowly making their way upstream. A Merlin darted low over the water but failed to scoop any prey.

Our next stop was the very photogenic waterfall of Skogafoss with its 60 metre drop which looked glorious fronted by a double rainbow in full sun. Fulmars were continuously gliding back and forth across the face of the waterfall and a Raven was seen to make off with a Fulmar chick. The line of cliffs that the waterfall cascades over once formed the coastline but are now three miles from the sea.

We later made a stop at Vík where we again experienced Icelandic shopping for lunch and walked the short distance to the black sand beach to spread the contents of two carrier bags on an overturned cable drum which improvised as a table. A Harbour Seal bobbed about just off shore as we ate our picnic and a distant Great Skua powered inland.

Birds seen on the journey east included good numbers of Golden Plover and the roadside pools held Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Mallard and Little Grebe before a planned stop at Fossálar waterfall. Recently considered a hidden gem, this unassuming waterfall is now an official tourist spot with its own car park and information signs – the secret's out!

We finally arrived at our destination, the Hotel Skaftafell with its magnificent backdrop of Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Europe covering almost 8% of Iceland's landmass and Hvannadalshnjúkur, Iceland's highest mountain. Having dropped our bags some of us had a pre-dinner walk up to the base of the glacier where the forces of nature have pushed the ice causing large fissures and cracks in the surface.

After dinner we enjoyed a spectacular display of the Northern Lights with green, red, yellow and purple colours making up the extended display with the highlight being a rare sighting of a fireball burning up as it vaporized in the earth's upper atmosphere – and we didn't need to leave our beds in the middle of the night or lose a few fingers and toes to witness it!

Day 4

Wednesday 13th September

Skaftafell – Jökulsárlón.

Cloud with sun breaking through later, 4 – 11°C

After breakfast we headed to Jökulsárlón Iceberg Lagoon where the retreating glacier had carved out a deep lake with an outlet to the salty sea making the icebergs melt. We pulled into a small car park a few hundred metres from the main one where a short walk gave everyone their first sight of this scenic lagoon with its floating array of icebergs in various shades of blue and white. Oohs!, Aahs! And Wows! Could be heard as the breath-taking scene came into view.

We continued to the main car park where we boarded the amphibious vehicle for a cruise around the icebergs and heard about the history from our entertaining guide. The lagoon itself is only 90 years old and was formed as the glacier retreated and, in fact, continues to retreat. The icebergs themselves are formed as the glacier breaks up, some of the largest ones almost reaching the bottom of the 280 metre deep lagoon.

The pilot of the safety boat handed a large chunk of glacial ice to our guide for everyone to handle and taste if they wished, we were told that the ice could have been up to 1000 years old. Drifting lazily around the lagoon were countless icebergs of varying sizes eventually being picked up by the current before being dispatched on their journey to the sea. The photo opportunities were plentiful with the fantastic shapes and hues of the icebergs plus the Kittiwakes, Lesser Black-backed, Common and Herring Gulls resting on the bergs. Snow Buntings posed for very close photos as we arrived back at the car park.

Just across the road is Diamond Beach where large chunks of ice from the glacier are washed up on the black sand. From the beach there were good numbers of Great Northern Divers, Common Eider, Gannets, Long-tailed Duck, Great Skua and Harbour Seals.

For lunch we stopped at a pleasant café with homemade soup and a good selection of sandwiches before our next stop at Vatnajökull National Park where some of the group followed the trail to Svartifoss reaching a smaller waterfall, Hunafoss, a few hundred metres closer to the visitor centre.

From there we parked up closer to Svínafellsjökull, another arm of the larger glacier, where we were able to see the formations created as the ice is forced to lower elevations. Some of the group chose to walk back to the hotel via a series of footpaths in time for another fine Icelandic dinner. We were completing the checklist when the Northern Lights began to show again, this time with more swirling greens than the previous nights.

Day 5

Thursday 14th September

Skaftafell – Jökulsárlón – Reynisfjara – Kriunes Hotel

5-20°C

After checking out of the hotel, our first stop was at the Gígjukvísl Bridge Memorial consisting of two large, twisted steel girders resembling a crashed aircraft, all that remains of a bridge washed away by floods following an eruption below Vatnajökull in 1996.

Our next stop was Katla Geopark for a view over the strange volcanic landscape of Moss Heath. Another short drive for a comfort break proved fortuitous when four Ptarmigan appeared along the edge of the car park delighting the photographers. Their cryptic summer plumage is as equally attractive as their more well known, white winter plumage.

At Vík we once again headed to the supermarket to choose our picnic lunch before driving to the Reynisfjara Beach, one of Iceland's most popular tourist sites, where an unfortunate driver had somehow driven his hire car over a large boulder and the car couldn't be freed.

After lunch we wandered down to the black sand beach to marvel at the basalt columns that flanked the entrance to a large cave and the sea stacks just off-shore. A few miles down the road we made a roadside stop to photograph some very obliging Icelandic horses before continuing to Hveragerði for a deserved coffee stop, while some of the group couldn't resist the many ice-cream flavours in the warm Autumn sunshine.

It was then only a 30-minute drive to Kriunes Hotel, our stop for the final two nights of our tour. The hotel is situated right on the banks of Ellidavatn with the bedrooms having patio doors leading out to the lake shore. A pre-dinner viewing of Slavonian Grebe, Great Northern Diver, Whooper Swan, Wigeon and Tufted Duck proved most agreeable.

After dinner we enjoyed what was undoubtedly our finest, prolonged display of the Northern Lights with greens and purples dominating the colour spectrum reflected in the lake below.

Day 6

Friday 15th September

Reykjavik

Clear at first turning colder and wet later, 4-11°C

The day started with a captivating sunrise and the eerie calls of Great Northern Diver drifting across the lake before one took off and flew over the hotel then back to the lake.

After breakfast we drove into Reykjavik, stopping to view the Sun Voyager, a gleaming stainless steel sculpture on Reykjavik's waterfront that resembles a Viking longboat, meant to depict a dream boat and an ode to the sun.

We then walked up into the city, stopping first at Town Lake which held good numbers of common duck; Tufted, Wigeon and Mallard, Whooper Swans and Black-headed, Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls. Our next stop was the impressive Lutheran church, Hallgrímskirkja, that dominates the skyline of the city. Opened in 1986 it was built in the Gothic Revival style and based on the waterfall at Svartifoss.

We returned to the harbour via Rainbow Street; now sensibly pedestrianised, the road is painted in rainbow coloured stripes and is lined with an assortment of artisan craft and art shops as well as some fine dining restaurants and is popular with tourists taking selfies.

We boarded our boat for a three hour whale-watching trip and in the harbour we spotted several Eider and Black Guillemot. Once out in the bay we were quickly seeing lots of Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Gannets. At least two Sooty Shearwaters and an Arctic Skua were an added bonus. Cetacean activity was slow but we eventually caught up with four or five Minke Whales, a couple very close to the boat.

By the time we'd returned to the harbour the weather had turned cold and wet so we made our way back to the hotel for our final evening meal and a faint showing of the Northern Lights, grateful that we'd had such amazing views over the previous 4 nights.

Day 7

Saturday 16th September

Krýsuvík – Grindavík - Keflavík.

Rain, cold 4-10°C

Our final day in Iceland and the weather we'd enjoyed on previous days had turned rather gloomy. We had time before our afternoon flight to visit more sites including Krýsuvík Sulphur Springs, a geothermal area of bubbling mud pools and colourful hot springs made all the more "enjoyable" by the intense aroma of sulphur attacking our nasal passages.

Grindavík harbour was very quiet and no white-winged gulls were showing so we decided to continue to a café and bakery near Keflavík for an early lunch. After enjoying coffee and cake we made a 10 minute drive to nearby pools where we finally caught up with Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, a fitting end to our trip.

We'd been fortunate with the weather, having clear nights when it mattered for the most amazing Aurora Borealis displays and visited some of the iconic waterfalls and sites in southern Iceland. We'd seen whales and birds in the most dramatic scenery. It was a holiday to remember and plans were being discussed for repeat visits to this remarkable country almost from the start!

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Fireball by Dave Jackson



Svínafellsjökull Glacier by Dave Jackson

Species lists

Birds

I=Introduced		September 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		9					
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			1				
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					3		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	1	✓	✓	✓
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>						1	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				2	2	✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		6					
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			7		✓	✓	
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>					4		
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>						2	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1	✓					
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					LO		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					1		
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				1			
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓			1	1		✓
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>							✓
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>							✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		2					
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1			
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>						1	
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>		6		✓	1	3	2
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2	1		3		
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1			2		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			10				
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				7			

Mammals

		September 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			1				
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						5	