

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

28 February – 5 March 2015



Images taken at the aptly named Northern Light Inn



Aurora Borealis over Kolgarfajfjörðu

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Introduction

The northern lights are elementary particle physics, superstition, mythology and folklore come to life. Throughout the ages, they have filled people with wonder and fear; they have challenged and inspired scientists and artists. But while scientific knowledge of the 21st century may offer us a cold and precise explanation of this magnificent phenomenon, we should never cease to relish the fascinating tales of old and enjoy the natural beauty and magic of the northern lights.

To be lucky enough to see the aurora is an unforgettable experience, since no pen can draw it, no colours can paint it, and no words can adequately describe it in all its magnificence. Auroras are caused by a vast super-heated, super-sonic collection of smashed atoms, known as the solar wind, that enters the earth's upper atmosphere where they collide with oxygen and nitrogen atoms. These collisions usually take place between 60 – 300 kilometres above ground, causing the oxygen and nitrogen atoms to become electrically excited and to emit light (fluorescent lights and televisions operate in much the same way). The result is a dazzling dance of green, blue, white and red light in the sky, but seeing the aurora borealis on any given night is never guaranteed.

Day 1

Saturday 28th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn. Weather: Clear sky & Bright, wind E 4m/s, temp -3⁰C

After an uneventful flight, the plane descended into a beautiful, sunny Icelandic evening (quite a rare event this winter!) where Malcolm was waiting in the Arrivals Hall to greet us. We were soon on board the bus, for the short journey to the aptly named Northern Light Inn. Expectations for a good showing of the aurora this evening were high, so we quickly settled into our cosy rooms before a tour briefing in the bar (where else?), followed by an early supper.

After a delicious traditional Icelandic dinner, we retired to the lounge where Malcolm held a 'camera clinic', advising on how to set up cameras, and giving guidance on the best techniques for capturing good northern light images. No

sooner had he finished, than we were dashing to our rooms to collect warm clothing because the celestial light show had started, and we had been in the country for less than four hours!

Outside, the lights were becoming very intense, with emerald and magenta wands swaying through the starry sky. With so many people staying at the hotel, Malcolm suggested we board the bus and head a short distance way from the crowds, to a frozen lake that would provide a beautiful foreground to the images of the aurora. It proved an inspirational choice of venues; the light show was amazing. The aurora started to form tornado-esque spirals and shapes that resembled a flickering flame, and fast gained colour and intensity. We were spellbound as the vivid green wands swirled slowly in the darkness, flickering amongst the constellations. We stood almost breathless, totally absorbed for over an hour until, suddenly, as though somebody had cruelly flicked the light switch, the aurora almost vanished, as if it had never been there at all.

We returned to the hotel, which was much quieter by now and, while drinking cups hot chocolate to thaw our frozen bodies, Malcolm checked the skies outside and returned with news that the aurora had started again! With fewer people around the hotel, we managed to find an area on the car-park that gave a good mountain foreground. The streaming ribbons of colourful lights appeared to be erupting from the mountain, volcano-like. To witness such an amazing display once would have been marvellous, but a second showing in one night exceeded our expectations. The light intensity ebbed and flowed over the next few hours and, by midnight, we were all exhausted and decided to call it a night, retiring to the warmth of our rooms, with feelings of nocturnal bliss and great privilege at having seen such a fascinating natural phenomenon. Tonight, we slept contentedly, with the knowledge that it doesn't get much better than this!

Day 2

Sunday 1st March

Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle (396km). Weather; Bright, overcast late pm, wind NE 12m/s, temp -3°C

We left the Northern Light Inn this morning for a relaxing day taking in some of Iceland's most iconic and celebrated landscapes. The long journey to Gullfoss was well worth making, as the waterfall was stunningly beautiful, encrusted with blue ice. However, the wind was relentless and bitterly cold, which meant we didn't linger for too long. It was a little warmer at Geyser, where we experienced the phenomenon that gave its name to the world. Although Geyser itself is no longer active, we enjoyed watching Strokkur eject vast columns of hot vapour skywards, and managed to capture the images too.

We had lunch 'on-the-hoof', travelling on to the Parliamentary Plain at Þingvellir. The scenery could have been straight out of a winter's fairy-tale; it was truly magnificent and, with little wind, it felt comfortably warm. On leaving this iconic site, we travelled back to Selfoss, following the outfall River Sog, where we found four Barrow's Goldeneye and an unexpected adult White-eagled Eagle. Driving back along the south coast, the weather deteriorated, the wind increased in strength and combined with snow-flurries to make visibility difficult.

Once back at the hotel, we had time to relax and unwind before supper. Being Sunday, dinner tonight was a traditional roast of lamb and salmon, and it was absolutely delicious. The daily log and a briefing followed and, with little chance of a repeat of last night's magical light show, we disappeared to bed!

Day 3

Monday 2nd March

Northern Light Inn - Reykjavik (127km) Weather: Snow flurries am, winds of NE 7m/s temp -3°C

Today necessitated some rescheduling of events to facilitate those who wished to experience the Blue Lagoon, since its popularity now demands pre-booking! After breakfast, Malcolm took the bathers to the Blue Lagoon, and returned to the hotel to load all the luggage. After re-organising the whale-watching from a morning to an afternoon sailing, Malcolm phoned Eldings to confirm sailing times, only to be told the boat had been relocated to Sandgerði, much nearer to the hotel. It would now sail at 2pm. This gave us the opportunity to visit Grindavik harbour for a spot of birdwatching. The harbour was quiet, yet full of 'white-winged' gulls, mainly Icelandic with a few Glaucous Gulls, that gave Malcolm an opportunity to explain the subtle differences in field characteristics between the two species. Amongst the rafts of Common Eiders, we found no less than three Great Northern Divers that allowed some extremely close views.

We followed the coast road back to Sandgerði where the whale-watching ship was already in the harbour, waiting our arrival. Once on-board, we struggled into our 'onesies' and waited for the other passengers to be conveyed from Reykjavik. Although there was a strong swell, the sailing wasn't too uncomfortable, as we busied ourselves identifying the seabirds. We had to wait a while for our first pod of White-beaked Dolphins to be seen riding the bow wave and, shortly afterwards, we found a pod of nine Orcas, much to everyone's enjoyment.

It was getting late in the afternoon by the time we made the journey in to Reykjavik, and the setting sun cast a cerise tinge over the clouds and distant mountain; it was beautiful. By the time we arrived at our city hotel it was almost 7.30pm, so quickly depositing luggage in our rooms and headed down to the restaurant, where we had dinner. Meanwhile, Malcolm had been in contact with the Orca people in Grundarfjörður, trying to re-organise our sailing for the following day, as a storm was forecast which meant it would be unlikely we could sail on our appointed day.

Some took the opportunity for a late evening stroll to Harpa, the new concert venue, while others decided to retire early.

Day 4

Tuesday 3rd March

Reykjavik – Stykkishólmur (299km). Weather: Sunny, wind E 2m/s, temp -3°C

After breakfast we had just enough time to stroll through the streets of this northern capital, to experience its vibrant ambience, before we all gathered outside Harpa for the journey onto Snæfellsness. The sun shone throughout the journey and the scenery was awesome. Snæfellsjökull glacier dominated the diverse and magical landscape of the peninsula. The glacier is considered to be one of the most beautiful mountains in Iceland, and is believed to be one of seven main energy centres of the earth. Snæfellsjökull is also the setting for the classic novel by Jules Verne, 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'.

When we arrived at the Hvalfjörður tunnel, it seemed as if we destined to follow in the footsteps of Jules Verne, as we descended into the 6km-long tunnel. Although in fact only 0.6km in depth, the road seemed to disappear deep into the bowels of the earth, before eventually re-emerging above ground on the far side.

Travelling on, we eventually arrived in the small fishing town of Grundarfjörður, in plenty of time for some birdwatching before our sailing. We parked by the seawall and started scanning through the raft of eiders that were

closest and, by good fortune, we managed to find a hybrid between a King and a Common Eider, showing many King Eider features. Further along the seawall, seven Harlequin Duck were making a break for distant shores, but not before everyone had seen them. Turnstone and Purple Sandpipers were present, feeding amongst the seaweed-strewn boulders.

With a sailing due at 4.30pm, we headed off the whale-watching centre for a hot coffee, before collecting our 'onesies'. This would be the third sailing of the day and, with no previous sights of Orca, we were a little sceptical. As we left the harbour, the light was sublime, gilding distant mountain peaks in a warm glow and, perhaps more important, the sea was calm. With little to distract our attentions, we could simply focus on and appreciate the flying abilities of the Fulmars as they glided effortlessly past the ship; true masters of the ocean's thermals. A pair of Grey Seal by a skerry proved to be the only mammals we would encounter. Despite extensive searching, even sailing round the headland into Kolgarfafjörður, we found no evidence of Orcas. After a warming cup of hot chocolate and a doughnut twist, it was time to head back to harbour. By now the sea was becoming much rougher, as the ship bounced its way back into calmer water and the home harbour. The snow-covered mountains were, by now, bathed in moonlight, quite a surreal ending to the day.

Once back at Grundarfjörður, we quickly stepped out of our thermal suits and boarded the bus for the final leg of our journey to the hotel. It was 8.30pm when we sat down to dinner and, with favourable conditions for a good aurora looking very likely, Malcolm was keen to 'chase the lights' as soon as was practical. As we boarded the bus at 10pm, the northern lights were clearly evident in the night sky. We didn't quite make it to our planned destination at Kirkjufell: as we approached Kolgarfafjörður, the sky suddenly lit up with ribbons of coloured light, lime green and pink stripes, and intense white light, mixed into shimmering curtains that wafted through the starry sky. This was amazing, and our third experience of this rare phenomenon in as many nights. We stood, surrounded by white, majestic mountains, and couldn't believe our good fortune. By midnight, the show was over and we retraced our journey back to Stykkishólmur, albeit it slowly scanning the moonlit landscape, should our luck hold and an Arctic Fox make an appearance out of the darkness. On this occasion it didn't, but that didn't stop us retiring contently with our experience.

Day 5

Wednesday 4th March

Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjordur (82km), Weather: Overcast, snow showers, wind NE 17m/s and temp 2°C

Hotel Stykkishólmur sits on top of a hill, with a stunning view of Breiðafjörður Bay stretching out to the north with its many islands. Breiðafjörður is an expansive and shallow bay, located on the west coast of Iceland. The bay is the largest area of shallow coastal water in Iceland, and rich in wildlife. The area has greater tides and tidal currents than elsewhere in Iceland, and its many islands are almost infinite, with an estimate at approximately 2,500. Its birdlife is unique, and one of the most important in Iceland and the whole of the North Atlantic. This microcosm is characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on marine life, and many of them nest in large colonies. The area holds two-thirds of the Icelandic White-tailed Eagle population and, to the north, perhaps the world's largest Razorbill colony is found on the Látrajarg bird-cliffs. About one-third of the Common Eider population breed in Breiðafjörður.

After such a late night, we had a leisurely start today. After breakfast, we gathered in the lounge and held a two-day bird log and briefing. The weather report confirmed our worst fears, the predicted storm was about to hit

Snaefellsnes around lunchtime. So we made the most of what was left of the ‘good weather’ and returned to Kolgarfajörður, where we had some brilliant views of three White-tailed Eagles, who were finding life a little difficult in the strengthening wind. There were many Common Seals also present, taking shelter in the inner fjord.

By the time we had arrived at Grundarfjörður, the weather had deteriorated considerably and, with poor visibility, we stopped at the whale-watching centre for a quick coffee, before heading back to the relative safety of the hotel. We spent the afternoon chilling-out and/or previewing the hundreds of northern light images we had acquired during our few days in Iceland. After dinner, Malcolm held the customary daily log, followed by a briefing and, with no clear skies and only a weak aurora forecast, we decided to retire for our final night in Stykkishólmur.

Day 6

Thursday 5th March

Stykkishólmur – Keflavik (247km). Weather: Overcast, hail/snow showers, wind NE 15m/s and temp 2°C

During the night, storm-force winds rattled the hotel windows, as the bad weather peaked. After an early breakfast, Malcolm loaded the bus and we were soon leaving a very wintery Stykkishólmur, bound for the International Airport at Keflavik, and a flight back to the UK.

The journey was without incident, if a little slow. We stopped at the bakery in Borgarnes for a welcome coffee, before arriving in the capital, where we dropped Bob and Susan off at their city hotel before continuing on to the airport.

Check-in completed and baggage dropped off, we bade farewell to Malcolm and headed upstairs for a spot of retail therapy while waiting for our onward flight south.

NB - On a personal note, I sincerely hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and its wildlife and that one day you may return to experience more of the wonders Iceland can offer.

Malcolm

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = present, but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March					
			28	1	2	3	4	5
1	Great-northern Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>			3			
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	6	✓	5	
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	6	✓
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		1	80	80		
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		4	✓	6		✓
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4	✓	✓	40	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				6		
9	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	✓	
10	King Eider x Common Eider	<i>S. spectabilis x mollissima</i>				1		
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				7		
12	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		1		2		
13	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					3	
14	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1			3	
15	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1		1			
16	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				6	60	✓
17	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				4		
18	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2	9	
19	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				1		
20	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			40			
21	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				12		
22	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓		
23	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			10	24	30	
24	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			200+	60	250+	
25	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			3	1	100+	
26	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓	300+		
27	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			1	100+		
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>					3	
29	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>						6
30	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3	60	30	50	80	20
31	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		2	✓	✓	6	✓
32	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	143	150	100	150	50	80

Mammals

1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			9			
2	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			5			
3	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			1	3		
4	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				20		

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