

Lobster Soup

The first thing to say about my recent summer-solstice visit to Iceland is that I really like the Icelandic language. *Íslenzka* has a liquid tunefulness that reminds me of the sound of water running over rocks. While largely incomprehensible to me, the language is recognisably European (of the Germanic/Old Norse branch). That means there are sometimes words whose meaning I can guess, so we're not talking Chinese here.

But *íslenzka* does have a bigger alphabet than my native *enska*. Thirty two symbols that include lovely letters like *eth* and *thorn* (which I've employed to decorate these pages). The alphabet used to have 33 letters but the 'z' was abolished in 1974 when, for some reason, it was deemed redundant. Despite this redundancy, Icelandic keyboards still have a zed key for those Icelanders who want to write about Zorro or ZZ Top, or spell the word *íslenzka*.

When in *Ísland* it is important to visit a volcano. The country has quite a few of them: Esjufjöll, Kverkfjöll, Öraefajökull, Eldgjá, Fremrinámur, Hrómundartindur, Kollóttadygja, Thordarhyrna, to list just some with the funkiest names. Snæfellsjökull on the Snæfellsnes peninsula became world famous when Jules Verne made it the doorway to the underworld in *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. And who can forget the mighty explosion at Eyjafjallajökull last year that was such a terror for transatlantic travellers?

For our close encounter with lava, my partner and I selected the volcanic cone of Eldfell on the island of Heimaey, which is the largest of the Westman Islands off Iceland's south coast. This is the group that includes Surtsey, the volcanic island that popped up from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in November 1963 to form Iceland's most southerly point.

Eldfell means Fire Mountain in Icelandic but at a mere 200 metres in elevation it would be more precise to call it The Hill That Roared. Nonetheless, a volcano is a volcano and this still active cone was steep enough and rugged enough that we could enjoy our Jules Verne moment. At the summit steam wisped from cracks and the lava stones were warm to the touch. We didn't find the front door to the earth's core.

Heimaey is billed as the 'Pompeii of the North' due to the destruction wrought by Eldfell's eruption in 1973. This turns out to be a bit of woolly marketing talk. Vesuvius obliterated Pompeii in AD 79 with a VEI (Volcanic Explosivity Index) of 5 (a ranking described as "paroxysmal") that was 100 times more powerful than Eldfell's detonation which was only "severe". Admittedly, the damage to Heimaey town was considerable, and the lava flow came within metres of rendering the island uninhabitable. But, unlike Pompeii, Heimaey's population made it to safety. Except for one man who, while looking for medication in the town pharmacy, had a fatal heart attack. Or, according to another version of events, was overcome by toxic volcanic fumes while plundering the town pharmacy in search of drugs.

I met a couple of displaced Heimaey people while in Iceland. One of them was our guide on a trip to the chill waters of Silfra gorge. Born some years after the eruption, he was raised on the volcano island but had to move to Reykjavik to attend university. There are no prospects for him on

Heimaey (which is largely devoted to fishing) so he dreams of going to New Zealand to get a degree in adventure tourism management. This branch of academia is new to me but it makes sense that he would study this subject in a far-away land of islands and intense geological activity that is also the homeland of commercial bungee jumping. And if Mount Taranaki blows its top he'll know what to do.

I'm mad about maps so I had to visit a shop in Reykjavik that specialised in the hard-to-find *Landmælingar Íslands* (National Land Survey of Iceland) 1:100,000 maps. The government map-making department was privatised as part of the response to Iceland's banking debacle. The maps are very pretty but it seems that when the last of the old government stock is gone there won't be any more. Shame. Aside from the maps' intrinsic charm, I find the idea of a country of just under 320,000 souls having its own fully-fledged cartographic service adorable.

They certainly have a fascinating landscape to survey. The fact that Icelanders know this is borne out by the presence of an enormous raised-relief map of the entire country that is on view to the public in Reykjavik's *radhús* (city hall). Every peak, every range, every glacier and lake lovingly modelled. And there's Reykjavik, a little orange splodge in a desert of grey and white paint.

The lady in the map shop was a Heimaey refugee. She was 13 when her island blew up and she vividly remembers her departure that night. How she was woken by the light of the sky on fire. Within an hour she was aboard one of the island's fishing boats and headed for the mainland. Permanently, as it turned out. Although now resident in Reykjavik she goes back regularly to her volcano to visit the old friends who did return. I made sure to include a 1:50,000 map of her Heimaey *Heimat* in my purchases.

Fish are a very important part of the story of Iceland. Fishing is to Iceland as sheep farming is to New Zealand; one of the pillars of national identity. Iceland's coins have fish on them, with the exception of the 50 krónur piece which has a crab. Iceland's hero of the independence movement is Jón, son of Sigureth, but Jón's most popular book was not a treatise on the merits of autonomy from Denmark but rather the *Lítill Fiskibók* (*The Little Fishing Book*). This treasured volume, published in 1859, contained guidelines for Icelandic fishermen about the best ways to catch and process the produce from the "everlasting wellspring" of the island's fisheries.

I talked to a lass from the Faroe Islands who asserted that it was the Faroese who showed the Icelanders "how to fish properly". I tested this claim on a couple of Icelanders who said it was a lot of fish bollocks. An Icelandic friend, *dóttir* of a fisherman, just rolled her eyes. There are less than 50,000 Faroese (of whom half want independence from their rulers in Copenhagen) but they seem very sure of themselves. I have identified a demographic phenomenon: The tinier the nation, the cockier it gets.

We took a walk on Skaftafell, a glacial tongue of the enormous Vatnajökull ice-cap. As the tour party hiked up the valley to the ice face, our guide pointed out the ridge on the horizon where the glacier's edge had stood just 20 years before. It was some ways off. A vast raw groove in the ground

in front of us was what remained. There's something distinctly triste about a recently-exposed moraine landscape. Black rocks and gravel slushy with puddles and lakes of cappucino-coloured water. And a misty wetting rain. Mars might look like this if it rained there.

On the glacier the ancient ice was strange and beautiful. Not least because it was covered in the dark ash of the Grimsvötn eruption of a few weeks previously. This is the view that is not shown in tourist brochures. Those glaciers are white and gleaming in the sunshine. I preferred the dark and dirty version however. It gave a fuller picture of the local ecosystem, where volcanic activity is a fact of life. I drank the melt water from the glacier streams and chewed on glacial ice. Both were the freshest and best tasting H₂O I have ever sampled but you do have to watch out for lava grit. I wished I'd brought a tumbler and some whisky with me. Thousand-year-old frozen water and a 12-year-old single cask. That would have been a scotch on the rocks for the ages.

Iceland has an unusually high proportion of good-looking young women. Many of the young men wear beards which made it hard to say much about their looks except, Hairy. Studies of the Icelandic genome have shown that while a large amount of the males' genetic content is of Scandinavian origin, the female of the species has a similar percentage of Irish and British markers. This supports the historical record which tells us that the Norsemen regularly went woman hunting in Britain and Ireland. (This was in the days before mail-order brides.) Based on the evidence I saw in Reykjavik, my theory is that the Vikings were picky. It is probable they held beauty contests in the areas they visited. Hairy judges sat around drinking mead while local damsels in bikinis paraded before them and babbled earnestly about the importance of world peace. The winner always cried. Beauty pageants haven't changed much over the years.

Iceland is a place to meet people you might otherwise never meet. One day I found myself sharing a lunch table with a member of Iceland's national football team, currently working as a professional player in England. I'd never been close to a professional football player before. He looked impressively fit. He was home for the summer before returning for the winter season. He is perfectly suited for the English winter. Icelanders have three hundred different words for rain.

I also ran into a famous musician. Except that I didn't know he was famous or a musician. He and I were alone in the outdoor section of a Reykjavik fish restaurant when I noticed him making facial expressions at his lobster soup that suggested he thought very highly of it. I liked his evident enthusiasm for his food and so, as one enthusiast to another, I asked him if it was good. I don't remember his precise response but it was to the effect: Awesome. We got chatting and when a waitress came out and got excited at finding a famous musician, and promptly asked for his autograph, I realized I was chatting with a star.

Nice guy. Witty and down to earth. Only drinks water before a concert I can tell you that. I thought he resembled a certain infamous musician who is famously less than abstemious. He told me he got this all the time. I asked him to jot his name down for me in my notebook. He wrote: "Jamie Cullum MUSICIAN ! jamiecullum.com NOT Pete Doherty..."

Jamie recommends the lemon sole at the Saegreifinn. I tried it too. It was delicious and so was the cod. Skip the whale.

Wikipedia later told me that Jamie is married to Sophie Dahl, a famous cooking expert. I'm willing to bet that when Jamie got home from his gig in the North Atlantic he told Sophie all about that Icelandic lobster soup. I know this because since my visit to the land of grit and ice I've been telling anybody who'll listen about the cod.