

Incidents (of Travel)

Episode No. 9

Reykjavík, Iceland

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The light will disappear fast during this time of year. We will have approximately six hours of sunlight before dusk at 16:11. Our journey is planned around the three main entry/exit routes to/from Reykjavík, and on a hill overlooking the city.

Kjalarnes / High tide / Low tide / (dis)appearing forest. To/from North-West

On the way north from the city, just below Highway 1 before driving into the undersea tunnel in Hvalfjörður, are the remains of an old forest at Kjalarnes. During high tide you can see old trunks discharging into an irregular, mismatched system of swirling roots around a shoreline that is partially covered in peat. The soft plant remains have protected the trees from decomposing all these years. During low tide, the peat—along with the root systems—disappears under the sea.

We know that the peat dates back to approximately 9,000 years ago when the sea level was 30–40 m below the current seabed, and that it would be around the same time that the trees would have stopped growing as the swamp took over. In comparison, one of the oldest trees on Earth, Old Tjikko in Sweden, is estimated to be around 9,550 years old.

Rauðhólar to/from the East. Just another hole in the ground

Rauðhólar (meaning Red Hills) are series of pseudo-craters that formed in steam explosions when lava flowed over wetlands. The craters are located close to an active volcanic area and you can see signs of lava streams around them. There are around eighty craters in total, but in the past many of them were dug into and destroyed to use the material for building roads. It wasn't until 1974 when the Environmental Agency of Iceland protected the area.

For sight-seers it can be tricky to realize what they are, as there are not many shapes left that remind you of a crater. This is also one of the many places in Iceland where you can easily lose a sense of where you are. You are nowhere and somewhere at the same time.

Glacier moraines. To/from the airport

The main link from Kópavogur city (the largest municipal after the capital) to Reykjavík, is cut in half by a glacier moraine that is around 11,000 years old. I've been looking at geological maps of Iceland in order to follow the traces and movements of glaciers during the Ice Age. While working on this project I got hold of maps centered around the capital. It had not occurred to me before, but of course there are visible signs of glacier moraines in the city. I had driven past them so many times without realizing that there was where a glacier had once reached. At first, I thought it was a man-made hill to protect the road from flooding during high tide. But when you get closer, you can see that the moraine is open, and in the cross-section an irregular arrangement of rocks in many different sizes can be seen, a composition that only a glacier could do.

Icelandic Meteorological Office

We will be in the city now and on top of the place whose reports dictate the typical local's everyday mood. It is also one of the most important information centers in Iceland and its website (www.vedur.is) is probably one of the most visited by residents. The roof of the building also provides a great vantage point as you can see the mountains that encircle the capital.

Passage of Time

We will then make our way to one of my favorite public sculptures in the city. The work is by a great artist named Sólveig Aðalsteinsdóttir. In her own words, she wanted to “unveil the history of the site and point out these glacier-carved stones.” They are called *hvalbök* in Icelandic (meaning the back of a whale) and visitors can see the direction the glacier was heading before it melted away.

Öskjuhlíð and Perlan

Across from the glacier-carved stones is another hill with a single, large building on top. Perlan (the Pearl) is located on Öskjuhlíð, which used to be an island during the Ice Age, when the sea level was 43 meters higher than it is today. You can see evidence of an old shoreline around the hill. The part that is facing the shoreline is a man-made “hot beach”, a very popular leisure destination all year round.

Five of the six tanks that form the base for the glass ceiling, are extra water supplies for the city if there will ever be a water shortage. I read somewhere that the noted Icelandic painter Kjarval was the first person to point out the possibility of building a grand structure, a sort of temple devoted to the splendors of Iceland on this particular hill. One of his ideas was to place many mirrors on the ground surrounding the temple so people could walk on the northern lights. He imagined the roof being covered with crystals in all of the colors of the rainbow and a grand beam of light shining in all directions.

I sort of celebrate the kitschiness of Perlan. There used to be a famous restaurant on the top floor for many years where you could dine and drink prosciutto while the floor turned 360°. Today there is a new restaurant on the top floor, a coffee house chain and a gift shop with various nature-inspired merchandise.

Wonders of Iceland

As it turns out, the building on top of the hill has become a temple devoted to Icelandic nature. Perhaps it has slowly been building up to this considering past ventures and visions?

Visitors can walk into the coolest man-made ice cave there is and imagine how it is inside a glacier. Inside one of the water tanks visitors are invited to virtually travel around Iceland inside the new Planetarium, the first of its kind in Iceland, and “discover the magic of Icelandic nature.” The exhibition will expand further into space in 2019.

More recently The Icelandic Museum of Natural History opened an exhibition centred around Water on the 2nd floor of Perlan. The exhibition marked

a big chapter in the museum’s history as there has been no building devoted to the collection of this important museum since its formal establishment in 2007. The museum originates from the Icelandic Natural History Society founded in the late 18th Century.

Since 2007, the museum has lent a few artifacts and objects to other exhibitions, including Wonders of Iceland, maintaining a small visibility. You get the feeling that only pieces that serve commercial purposes are requested for loan, as stand-ins for something that’s obviously lacking. But there is a good chance that this most-missed of Icelandic museums will soon have a larger venue outside of a commercial context.