

CHRISTMAS WITH JUST FOUR HOURS OF DAYLIGHT

OUR BOLTHOLE IN THE WILDERNESS

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What it's like to spend Christmas in Iceland with just four hours of daylight. Everything from reindeer balls at meal time to a dip in the blue lagoon with the moon and the stars and frosty frozen eyebrows!



CHRISTMAS WITH JUST FOUR HOURS OF DAYLIGHT



Looking out from the wooden cabin the snow appeared very white as it glistened against the black lava formations under a full moon. In fact as it twinkled in the moonlight it seemed to be in direct competition with the stars in the clear dark sky.

The ocean was only a short distance away and despite a blanket of quietness the waves could be heard crashing onto the shore. Here daylight lasted for only four hours but inside our bolthole it was warm, cosy and festive and a very magical place in which to spend a family Christmas. Admittedly we had not envisaged such an isolated wilderness with just a few houses scattered on a peninsula which jutted into the ocean. Especially as we were only half an hour from the capital of Reykjavik and just a few miles from the airport and the blue lagoon, but we loved it!

OUR BOLTHOLE IN THE WILDERNESS

GRÝLA THE CHRISTMAS TROLL AND HER 13 YULE LADS

Here according to Icelandic folklore the elves and trolls are said to live among the many crags and lava formations which litter the landscape. Grýla the Christmas troll and her 13 yule lads amongst them. If you were on her 'naughty list' in the past it is said that she would appear and take you back to her cave and pop you in her stew pot but in recent years she and her lads have mellowed and now focus on leaving gifts for those on her 'good list' in any shoes left on window sills on Christmas Eve. We decided to do likewise but had to substitute our boots for shoes. The most positive factor being the fact that they hold a lot more!

Although the clocks on Dec 25th registered early morning outside it was dark, very dark. As we left for our Christmas 'treat' the waves could still be heard crashing on the shore and further along the coast a light house blinked to warn fisherman of dangerous rocks.

The track outside took on the appearance of an ice truckers nightmare but the well equipped 4 by 4 made light work of it as we made our way to the Blue Lagoon. By the time we slipped into the silky steaming water dawn was still some time away. Our eyebrows and hair become covered in frost and we fancied we looked like trolls ourselves. Gradually the blue of the water



THE BLUE LAGOON ON CHRISTMAS MORNING

intensified as the sun rose low on the horizon and the bright moon slipped out of sight. By now it was 11.30 and we toasted the new day with a glass of champagne. We continued to linger intoxicated by the warmth and a desire to make the experience last as long as possible but eventually hunger pangs got the better of us. There are no turkey farms in Iceland so we opted for the local speciality at that time of year which is lamb. Starters included copious helpings of gravlax-smokersboard style. Dessert was cornflake meringues called Marens Kornflexkökur.

Lunch was hardly over before daylight faded and we nestled down amongst the furs and brightly coloured cushions on the soft sofas to watch a movie. From time to time we continued our northern light vigil and could not believe our good fortune when a shriek went up and we peered out to see those awesome bands of iridescent green

dancing in the night sky. They stayed with us all evening and it was great to lie in the hot tub watching as curtains of green continued their shimmering ethereal display

We treated ourselves to two great memorable meals outside our bolthole. The first was on [the 23rd of December](#) which is the day of St Thorlak Thorhallsson, Iceland's patron saint and the day when Icelanders feast on their traditional putrefied skate. Stefan Sigurosson and his wife Brynhildur Kristjansdottir invited us to Vitinn-their seafood restaurant in Sandgeroi to try it for ourselves. The restaurant is akin to an English pub with plenty of antique fishing paraphernalia hanging from the ceiling but it is the holding tanks outside filled with sea water in which the catch is kept that singles it out

Non Icelanders regard the famous



dish as smelly and rotten . Fermented and cured for several months it also has a pungent taste. However with a traditional ladle of lamb fat poured over it was smooth and velvety and not that bad when eaten with a traditional helping of potatoes! Other offerings on the fish buffet that day included fish stew, salted cod, prawns, marinated herrings and even fish curry. Afters was rice pudding with a sprinkling of sugar and cinnamon.



Between Christmas and New Year we also visited MATUR OG DRYKKUR. An unpretentious restaurant close to the harbour in Reykjavik. It has been converted from the salting sheds where a hundred years ago fisherwomen salted the catch when it came ashore. On the wall a black and white image reminds of that time.

Here, it was round about the 6 th course at a Christmas tasting menu that the Reindeer 'balls' arrived. Coated with a rich sauce, blue cheese, jam and glistening red currants they were delicious. Like all the eleven courses it was an artistic master piece and made even more appealing by the description offered by our knowledgeable cheery cloth capped waiter.



STEPHAN AND HIS WIFE

PUTREFIED SKATE

MATUR OG DRYKKUR

He told us about the reindeer herds on the east of the island. He elaborated on the fact that only a certain number of licenses to shoot them are offered each year in a lottery and how sadly this year they had missed out. However a friend had come to their rescue and provided them with a fine specimen for their festive creations.

With decreased hours of light the majesty of the scenery is curtailed so we decided to take the standard Golden circle route in reverse. This way we arrived in the mountains above Selfross in the half light. Eerie and magical they appeared an intoxicating blue. Then as the sun set on our return journey it was in front of us. It took a good hour for it to finally disappear below the horizon - all the while creating an amazing band of pink and yellow against an ever darkening sky above.

At Geysir the air was heavy with the smell of sulphur and wisps of smoke drifted across the black and white landscape interspersed here and there with patches of bright green mineral deposits. Water boiled and small geysers bubbled all around. In places the heat melted the snow to reveal ribbons of hot swirling water below. Affectionally known as Strokkur the main geysir erupted to a good height every few minutes. Nearby is the Gulfross waterfall. Here water freezes in ribbons of ice towards its extremities but the mighty waters still fell with considerable fury against a white backdrop of snow across most of its wide vista.

Down near Vik, four miles down an icy track, back towards the ocean, stands the degrading carcass of a Douglas Super DC3 which crash landed in 1973. The crew survived but recovering the plane was impractical. In the eerie light as darkness falls

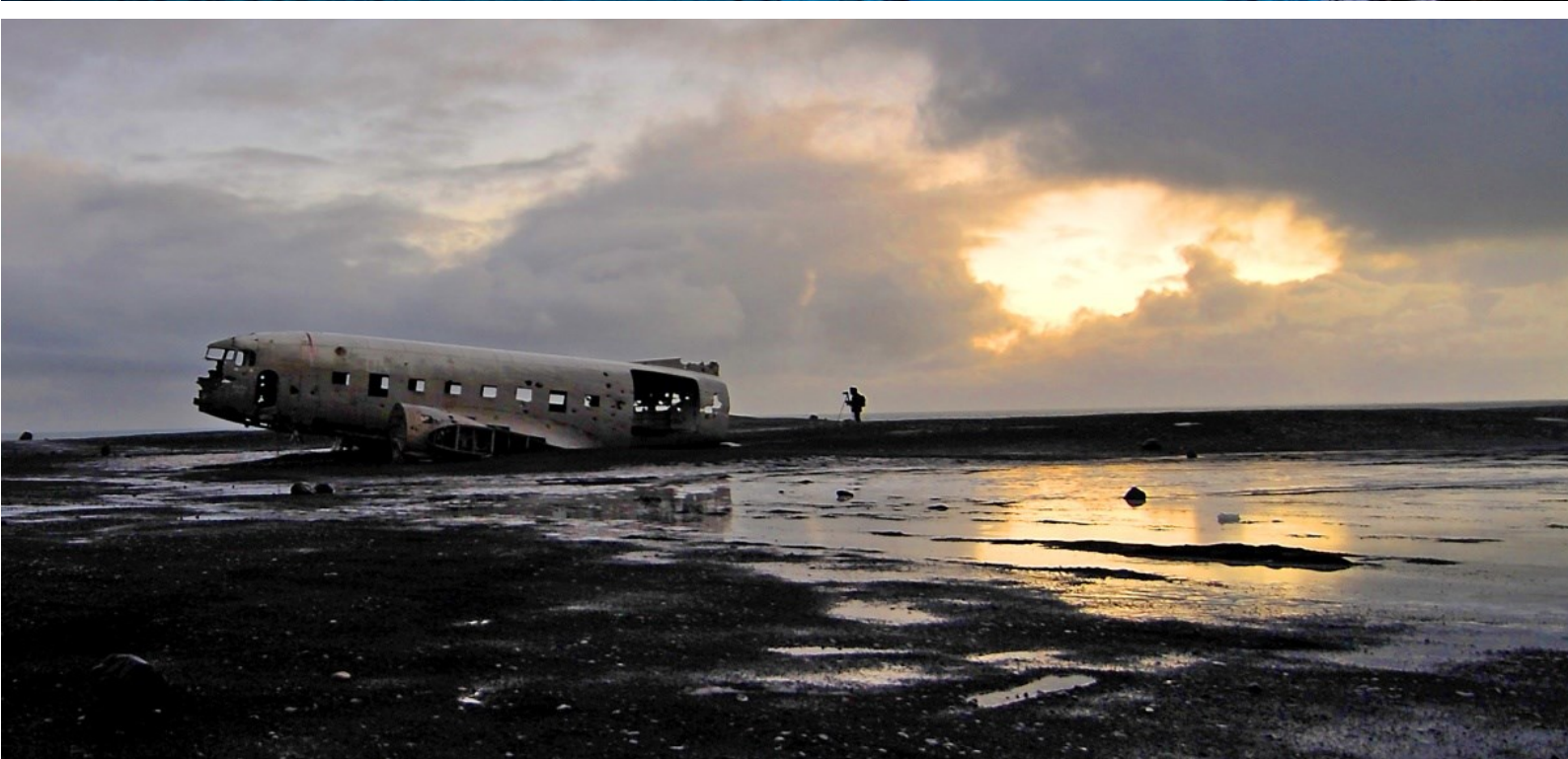


GULFROSS WATERFALL

ICY CLIMB UP SEJALANDSFOSS WATERFALL

SEJALANDSFOSS

VIK BEACH

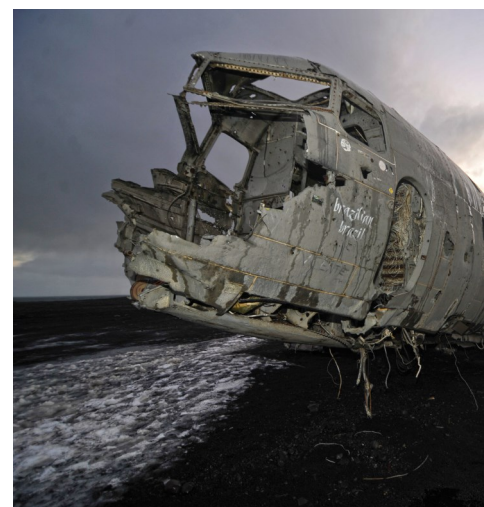


all colour is drained from the scene and photographers delight in capturing the unique atmospheric light

TIME TO GO HOME

Every season in Iceland has its own appeal. For some it is the warmth of Summer and the mid night sun but for us Winter time was perfect. The warm water of the blue

lagoon on Christmas morning, the atmospheric setting sun on the snow covered horizon and those dancing iridescent northern lights are things we will always remember. Forget the naughty list, I think the troll Grýla had put us at the top of the 'good list' because we had a magical time.



THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

DOUGLAS SUPER DC3

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Getting there

Located only a two and a half hour flight from the UK Iceland is easily accessible and budget flights are available. The international airport is small and easy to negotiate but it is a 40 mile drive from Reykjavik. Transport is available but it makes sense to hire a car at the airport.

Getting about

They drive on the right and driving is easy with only one main route around the island. The roads are heated in Reykjavik but rental cars are well equipped for the weather conditions further a field. If you wish to visit the glaziers etc or do not wish to drive, coach tours are available, but they are costly. There is no charge at any of Iceland's natural attractions

Making yourself understood.

English is spoken and understood by all the Icelanders. There are many tourist information centres and the Icelanders are warm and welcoming.

Accommodation

There is a wide range of accommodation - hotels, guest houses and hostels. In recent years a wide selection of rental properties are available -

From apartments in town to remote cabins in the great outdoors. The standard everywhere is excellent but costs everywhere are high

Crime

There is little crime in Iceland so it is a very safe place to visit. Our key was left at the front door under the Christmas elf!

Keeping in touch

Free Wi fi is available everywhere.

Cost of living

Nothing is cheap and eating out is expensive. Thai food and hot dogs are a cheaper option

Top tip

Before you leave buy spikes to pull onto your boots. They are readily available. It makes walking on the ice trouble free!

