



THE WEST FJORDS OF ICELAND

by Jennifer Wilcox

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For facts and information about the trip see oceanpaddlermagazine.com



Before I went to bed just before midnight, I looked up to see both the moon and the sun in the sky. I had just spent the day paddling beneath a glacier then swimming in a hot geothermal pool here in the West Fjords of Iceland, just south of the Arctic Circle.

The first thing I noticed as I arrived at the main street of Reykjavik were the “Don’t f**k with Iceland! We may not have cash but we’ve got ash!” slogans in the tourist shop windows. Clearly this was a land of independent and spirited people, who could cope with a little adversity (such as an economic crisis) with some humour. My plane arrived on time, unaffected by the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud that hung over many of Europe’s airports. Although it was 11.30pm, it was still warm enough for a T-shirt and the sky was still light as I walked towards the hostel. Less than 24 hours before, I had been out in my kayak catching the tides that swirl through the notorious Corryvreckan and its surrounding seas on Scotland’s west coast. I had wanted to get a little practice in before heading off

to unknown territory, so it had been a very long day! I had no trouble falling asleep.

The journey to Iceland’s West Fjords had been planned for months. Runar Karlsson of Borea Adventures had organised a two-week trip for me. Only a month earlier I had graduated from The Glasgow School of Art’s Visual Communication department. Iceland was a destination I had wanted to visit and photograph for a very long time, so this trip was a great start to my career.

The first thing I noticed upon stepping off the plane at Keflavik International Airport was the light. It seemed more intense than the light I had just left behind in Scotland. A band of cloud half-covered the sky; in the clear air its edge was so straight that it looked like it had been drawn with a ruler. This weather front stretched from one end of the horizon to the other, creating crazy patterns on the land as shafts of sunlight broke through to illuminate the distant landscape.

After a night in the lively city of Reykjavik I caught an internal flight to Isafjordur, the

largest town in the remote West Fjords. Runar greeted me at the tiny airport and we drove to Borea Adventure’s and (its sister company) North Explorer’s newly refurbished, traditional log house in the Isafjordur peninsula. The other members of staff were relaxed and friendly. I soon settled in with the good company and the sun shone brightly outside. That evening we sat down to a buffet at ‘the best fish restaurant in Iceland’. (I was assured there was no whale or shark on the menu!) Through dinner we chatted about Iceland, the economic climate, culture, travel, tourism, volcanoes, aurora borealis, snow and, of course, the sea. Iceland has become a much more affordable and realistic destination for the independent traveller/adventure seeker since the country’s recent economic crisis. As the finance sector has shrunk, this hospitable nation is keen to further develop its tourist industry. From what I have seen, Iceland has a great deal to offer the adventurous tourist.

The next day was spent meeting the others in the group and preparing the kayaks and

gear for the five-day expedition that lay ahead. We were to explore part of a huge fjord called Isafjardardjup. Like Scotland, the Icelandic coastline is steeped in history and folklore so we expected to see lots in addition to the geology, glaciers and natural history for which the country is famed. There were ten in our group, with ages ranging from 29 to 82. Some of the group (including Jonathan, the 82-year-old from Texas) were using the Icelandic expedition as a warm-up before heading off to Greenland on Borea’s yacht, the Aurora. They planned to kayak and camp in almost uncharted waters, led by Olaf their guide. It sounded fantastic and I was really inspired by Jonathan – will I be spending three weeks kayaking and camping when I reach his age?

By afternoon the boats were packed up and ready to go and we were all eager to start our journey. We launched the kayaks from the head of Seydisfjordur, two fjords to the east of Isafjordur. Apart from a few very long tunnels (which are amazing constructions), there are no shortcuts to areas by road: it’s the long way round the head of the fjords

almost every time. The steep slopes of the valleys tower high above the tarmac and we were told that avalanches and rock-falls occur regularly. The water was flat calm as we paddled off from the small beach and a gentle breeze picked up as we followed the coast down the fjord. This peninsula is now deserted, but 200 years ago it was inhabited by over 100 people. Now there are only deserted ruins.

I found myself completely disorientated when I realised it was almost midnight but still light. We stopped for our first night’s camp beside a ruined village just before the Fofafotur (Horse’s leg) headland. Soon the tents were up and Runar prepared a light meal for the group. We watched the midnight sun melt into the sea as we ate.

The next morning was blustery. After a hearty breakfast, we packed up camp and made our way around Fofafotur on very bumpy seas. We then left the coast, crossing to the small inhabited island of Vigur. There was a strong westerly cross-wind that blew straight down the fjord,

ensuring that breakfast was burnt off. We landed at the south end of Vigur for a welcome break. The owner of the island greeted us with the most amazing spread of ground coffee and warm freshly baked bread – this was hardly roughing it!

The island is well known for its Eider down and large quantities of the birds’ feathers are collected here. It is also home to thousands of puffins, some of which are caught in nets to be served in restaurants in Reykjavik. I kindly declined the delicacy, along with sheep’s head and mature (rotten) shark. Unsurprisingly, due to a lack of arable land, meat plays a large part in the Icelanders’ diet – I don’t recall meeting a single vegetarian Icelander. It is also worth remembering that my Scottish ancestors would have wolfed down both puffins and sheep heads, if not mature shark.

The wind increased throughout the afternoon. The next leg was a long open crossing to the island of Aedey (Eider Island) on the far side of the fjord. The sea state was rough but the tides are minimal ►

in the area; not having to be concerned with them (turning against the wind throughout the day) felt unusual. Half-way across, a water spout appeared from a whale passing by, most probably a minke. Sadly, it was to be the only whale we saw on this trip. Since this was also in the roughest waters, there are sadly no photographs.

We now had the wind at our backs and, in the easier following seas, we could turn our attention to the amazing Icelandic landscape. The land rose steeply up from sea level to a high plateau. There were still patches of snow on the higher ground and majestic waterfalls tumbled down from mysterious hanging valleys. Remains of extinct volcanoes could clearly be identified. There wasn't a tree in sight.

As we approached Aedey, the sea became calmer as we rounded its southern point and made our way up the sheltered east coast.

We were all happy to get out of the wind and were soon paddling into the island's small, natural harbour. There is a large farm on this island, with buildings all along the water's edge. One was being held upright against the prevailing wind by old wooden rafters. More Eider ducks greeted us and watched intently as we carried our kayaks up their rocky beach. Everyone was tired and a little cold; however, we soon warmed up as we sat together in Runar's tipi, enjoyed dinner and talked long into the night.

I wandered off with my camera to make the most of the midnight sun. Strolling along the cliff edge, I met two young boys from the farm on the rocks who were on their way to catch puffins. I asked if I could join them and they were happy for me to come. Their uncle was also catching the birds. He told me that it is only when the west wind blows that the birds can be caught like this, and they are restricted to specific dates.

Fascinated, I captured it all on my camera. I had just finished an Art School project on St Kilda, where this way of life had died out more than 80 years ago. The boys spoke perfect English and I enjoyed listening to their stories. The younger one, aged 11, showed me how to wring the birds' necks. He also pointed at my arm warning me about 'the creatures that live on the birds'. I promptly removed two huge ticks and thanked him. The boy was enthusiastic and constantly smiled as he told me about his life on the island. In the short time I spent with them I got a feel for their life here in the remote West Fjords. I left the boys at their work and returned to the camp. I could hear the laughter from the tipi from a great distance off. I rejoined the group and we shared stories and adventures from around the world.

The winds continued to blow that night, and did not relent the following morning. We

therefore had a leisurely rise followed by another hearty breakfast before exploring the island and visiting its lighthouse. This area reminded me a little of the remote south coast of Mull back in Scotland. From the top of the lighthouse we mapped our journey from the day before and followed the coastline that still lay ahead of us. Back at camp we said our goodbyes to the friendly family and set off again. With the strong westerly wind still blowing and a following sea, we had an easy paddle in front of us. Blue skies soon appeared behind the weather front, cutting the sky in two. The island sheltered us from the stronger gusts and we were pushed along the coast at a very acceptable pace.

I was keen to explore the next section of coastline. It wasn't long before we arrived at our first stop of the day at Unadsdalur church. Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000AD. Not too far ahead lay the Kaldalon

Sound (cool lagoon), an inlet on the NE side of Isafjardardjup. At its head, the West Fjords' only glacier, Drangajokull, deposits its meltwater and silt. This glacier began to retreat in the latter half of the 20th century. However, it began to advance again in the early years of this century; it is one of the few glaciers in the world which is growing. It is the fifth largest glacier in Iceland and is the most northerly.

As we entered the glacial bay in our kayaks, we were able to catch some surf as the water shoaled over the glacial deposits. If we had had more time, it would have been nice to hike up and explore a section, taking in the views of the fjord from above. We stopped briefly for a rest and then continued around the coastline. There were some fairly rough conditions which made for fun paddling, especially where the river Sela met the sea and the current stacked steep waves against the wind. Once across

the bar, a calm silt-bottomed lagoon opened out and we paddled upstream for a short distance against the current. We spent the third night of the expedition on the banks of this glacial river. The tents were pitched on a bed of blueberries growing on the sand dunes. The sun shone brightly and there was fresh water to wash in and refill our water bottles. All was well in Iceland and spirits in the group were high. We enjoyed another evening of conviviality in remote and beautiful surroundings.

We awoke on day three to find the winds had dropped completely and everything was still. The milky colour of the glacial river merged with the pastel sky. As we packed the kayaks that morning, we all savoured the silence with no wind roaring in our ears. The sea was a complete contrast to the previous days' rough water. Instead, we glided over glassy seas, able to watch the sandy bottom deep below ►





our keels. Puffins and Artic tern flew over us as we paddled up the fjord towards our next destination, Borgarey Island. As we approached the island, hundreds of puffins darted through the sky with whirring wings before crashing into the sea. They floated together in large rafts, each occasionally cocking its head and looking down through the crystal-clear waters for any fishy morsel below. Feeling hungry ourselves, we stopped for lunch in the hazy sunshine. We had to watch our footsteps as the island's slopes were riddled with puffin burrows.

After a lazy afternoon spent exploring the island, we set off for our next destination... the geothermal pools at Reykjanes! We were hardly on the water when the weather changed abruptly. A breeze whipped up and the sky darkened; I really can't do justice to the atmospheric scene we enjoyed as we paddled towards the hot springs. The stormy sky hung over a curious sea. Plumes of white steam rose high out of the waters, swirling and contrasting with the low, dark clouds above. I had never experienced anything like it before; it was such a contrast

to the icy glacial meltwaters we had just left. While I posed for a photograph, I felt the plastic kayak begin to soften under me (sorry Runar)! The kayaks were pulled to safety from the hot sea and we went for a swim in a naturally heated outdoor pool, one of the largest in Iceland. It felt so good! Completely rejuvenated, we were all smiling and laughing. After what seemed like hours, we reluctantly left the heated water, looking and feeling like soaked prunes. In the stormy skies we kayaked on towards our final camping site.

The rain drizzled down that night but our spirits weren't affected; it had been such a great day. Before bed, I looked up to see both the sun and the moon in the sky near midnight. The rain had slowly stopped and bright, pink bands of clouds lay across the horizon. At the edge of the sea, Jonathan was silhouetted against the bright north sky as he stood on the end of the rocks. He contemplated the beautiful scene for a long time. I am sure he was thinking of his forthcoming trip to Greenland with our camp stories of walruses, polar bears

and icebergs going through his mind. If I live to be 82, I hope I remain as young at heart as he is! I was envious of their trip to Greenland but, in the week before I returned to Scotland, Runar had organised a little surprise trip for me here in fabulous Iceland!

Our last day together was graced by the flight of a sea eagle within feet of our group. It was fascinating to see one so close in its natural habitat. Playful seals followed the boats and the waters remained calm as we made our way. We reached our final destination near Ogunnes that afternoon and the staff from North Explorers met us to take the boats back to Isafjordur by road. Although it had only been 5 days since we had set out on our trip to the West Fjords, it seemed like much longer. I can't wait to go back! ■

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