



Sailing to the Center of the Earth

Modern-day explorers find their own fantastic adventures on the wild west coast of Iceland.

By

In Jules Verne's science-fiction classic *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, the entrance to the underground world is in western Iceland, at the top of the ice-covered Snæfellsnes volcano. His explorers have many fantastic adventures underground, encountering giant beasts and taking a punishing sail through a raging subterranean sea.

So when our two chartered 50-foot Bavaria sloops rounded the tip of the mystical Snæfellsnes Peninsula this past June, in the shadow of the volcano, we were not surprised to see some fantastic (but real) beasts: A huge whale—probably a minke—breached off the stern, large pods of orcas and dolphins passed by, and countless beautiful North Atlantic seabirds soared around us.

And when the inevitable Arctic winds kicked in from the north a day later, it almost felt as though we too could

Crewmates Dave McCoy and Ben Gardner share a laugh aboard *Esja* (left). The fishing village of Stykkishólmur offers a breathtaking view of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.



base camp in Antarctica.

A major fishing center in the region, Ísafjörður is home to the terrific Westford Heritage Museum, which depicts the harsh and bleak life of early fishermen there. It is attached to one of the best seafood restaurants in Europe: the Tár House, set in a beautiful, old post-and-beam fishing shed. With only two seatings a night served buffet-style on heavy picnic tables, the meal started with rich lobster soup, followed by several huge cast-iron frying pans filled with magnificently prepared fish, all just hours out of the water: cod, salmon, halibut, haddock, and others I did not recognize. Epicures from all over the world come to eat here, and we stumbled into it by luck.

After a lay day exploring the town, our two boats separated, *Katya* turning back south to keep to a shorter schedule, while we pushed farther north. This was our shortest leg of the trip—a motorsail of just 18 miles—and took us into a narrow and extremely remote branch of Jökulfirðir (Glacier Fjords), in the Hornstrandir Nature Preserve, just below Iceland's northern coast.

This was the day the bad weather arrived, spitting cold misty rain, fog and strong northeast wind. As the day's muted light began to fade, Iceland's renowned "magnificent desolation" in the far north seemed to become just gray, grim, barren and bleak, and intensely lonely, punctuated with blasts of stinging frigid wind. And it's a long day of light in Iceland in June: Anchoring at 66 degrees 21.5 minutes north, 22 degrees 26.8 minutes west, we were less than 10 linear miles from the Arctic Circle and the never-setting midnight sun.

What to Expect

Prices are high in Iceland, especially for food and alcohol. A \$15 bottle of Beefeaters gin in the US was \$30 in the duty-free store in Keflavik Airport and \$60 in the Vinbudin state-run liquor stores. We found that these stores have irregular hours and can be hard to catch while open.

The country's environmental record is mixed. Eighty percent of Iceland's energy is produced by clean geothermal or hydropower sources, yet Iceland is the only country that allows hunting of endangered puffins and one of the few that still permits whaling. There is only one company in Iceland that hunts whales but many that run tourist whale-watching trips. Icelanders note that only tourists tend to eat whale meat.

And while Iceland is famous for its world-class cooking, it's also infamous for its winter food festival that serves up such historically accurate (and to me, vile) ancient Viking dishes as fermented shark. Chef, author and travel journalist Anthony Bourdain, in his *No Reservations* segment on Iceland, was one of the few reporters to explain why: "They serve only Greenland shark, a unique and rare fish that excretes its waste through the skin, making the meat both toxic and foul. Only after fermenting in the ground for six months does it become safe to eat—and the Vikings were willing to wait." When he tasted the dish, Bourdain pronounced it "the single worst thing I've ever put in my mouth." For someone who made a career of traveling all over the world seeking out weird, gross and disgusting things to eat, Iceland ranked No. 1.

Given its volcanic nature, Iceland can be a hard place to anchor. There is precious little soil above or below the water, so the flukes don't always dig in well. Although we finally got a good set after several attempts, a powerful williwaw hit around 0200 and pushed our boat hard over, dragging the anchor. With about a football field to spare from grounding on sharp lava, we motored back upwind. After several failed attempts to reanchor, we gave up and motored out.

Heading South

Once we left the cover of the fjords and entered the open sea, the strong Arctic wind quickly produced our wildest day of sailing, with 25-foot seas and a full gale at our back. Thus began our hopscotching down the coast of the Westfjords. Our first stop was the small fishing village of Flateyri, a former whaling station that lost 20 people in a snow avalanche in 1996, a tragic record for Iceland. Next was Bíldudalur, home of Iceland's wonderfully tacky Sea Monster Museum, and, not coincidentally, the site of more sea monster sightings than anywhere in Iceland. It's worth the price of admission just to see all the misspellings and leaps of logic in the exhibits, let alone the life-size monster models.

After a return trip to Patreksfjörður, we left the Westfjords behind and spent three days exploring the north shore of Snæfellsnes Peninsula, a notable place in the ancient Sagas of Icelanders. We first anchored in the hurricane-hole bay of Elliðaey Island, a refuge for colorful tufted puffins and Arctic terns. Then, the next day was a short hop to Stykkishólmur, a large and charming



In Ólafsvík, fresh-caught pollock will soon be packed for export (above). Blustery conditions await the charterers in the Westfjords (opposite).

fishing town—but a little too popular, with tour buses clogging the streets.

Continuing down the coast, we stopped in Grundarfjörður, widely known both for its photogenic Kirkjufell, or Church Mountain, and legendary summer-solstice party. The crew of *Katya*, who stumbled into the party by chance on their way south, later confirmed that modern-day Vikings live up to their reputations as friendly and wild party animals.

Our last stop before returning to Reykjavik was a second visit to Ólafsvík, where we discovered the challenges of refueling in Iceland. There are two main fuel companies that provide dockside diesel in Iceland using all-automated pumps. The pumps have red and green covers denoting the brand of diesel, not fuel type (gasoline is rare at the dock). To use one, you must have a proprietary charge card and code to pump your own fuel.

Our experience turned into a classic example of cascading bad luck and a mistake: We arrived on a falling tide, and the only pump we could use was in very shallow water. Our depth alarm wouldn't shut up, so we couldn't wait, and besides, the card we had wouldn't work. And, of course, human help did not exist. Our mistake? Our calculations of fuel reserve turned out to be based on a bigger tank than we actually had. The next day, in dead calm and within sight of Reykjavik, the engine sputtered out.

Despite the embarrassment of having our grand adventure end with a tow back into the harbor, our bareboat expedition in Iceland was a huge success and a lot of fun. No, it might not be a warm cruise around a sunny lake, but for the right crew, it's a wonderful experience.

Stephen Blakely sails Bearboat, his Island Packet 26, on Chesapeake Bay.

STEPHEN BLAKELY (2)

