

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

Why Iceland? Many years ago when I was a travel agent I had a client who went to Iceland every summer and came back with glowing tales. In fact everyone I know who has been there gives it glowing marks. Geologically it is unique sitting on two tectonic plates, which give it earthquakes and volcanoes, and thermal springs. Unlike its name, which should have been given to Greenland, it has a moderate climate for being so far north, warmed by the Gulf Stream.

When my grandchildren turned eight they were invited to come for a week each summer, without siblings and without parents. This gave me a chance to get to know them and they me. My own grandmother had taken me on trips, and my mother had carried on the tradition with her grandchildren, and now it was my turn. At first the trips were simple ... up to Dahlenega to pan for gold or to North Carolina to whitewater raft the Nantahala River. We also looked for alligators in the Okefenokee swamp, visited Cumberland Island and the space center in Huntsville. As the children grew the trips became more ambitious. After Alaska, Bermuda and Cooperstown, NY last year, I found a great program called "Fast and Fun" in Iceland and decided to take all eight at once. There are four boys and four girls, ranging in age from eleven to nineteen. Some of my friends are aghast, but I don't know whether it is because I am taking 8 teenagers anywhere, or whether it is because we are going to Iceland!

So here we sit at BWI waiting for Iceland Air to open up. It is July 14, 1995. John and I came to Maryland two days ago for him to stay with his daughter. Rich is flying in from Denver, Connie and Peter from Atlanta and Brian and Brenda from Ft Myers. The Howards are coming the other direction having flown to Europe two weeks ago. They will meet us tomorrow in Reykjavik. Any comments kids?

Peter. Well, I haven't done my homework - even though I was supposed to. I don't really know what to expect - Grannie just told me today that I could expect temperatures in the 60's. I've been wondering what language they speak in Iceland - probably English. I am really looking forward to this.

Brian. I can't wait to go to Iceland. I wonder what Iceland is going to be like? My mom gave me 20 dollars to buy something. I want to see my cousins. It sounds like a fun trip. I hope it is going to be fun.

Brenda. Well, Rich has just arrived. I can't wait till all the rest of my cousins get here. Normally, on grandparents week, I just see my two cousins Connie and Alta. Well, of course, at home I see my brother Brian. I went to Bermuda at this same time last year with my cousins Alta and Connie. This year, I'll be with all of my cousins. Iceland is going to be a neat experience besides the fact that it will be cold (I live in Fort Myers, Florida where right now the temperatures are in the 90s and 100 degrees). Guess I have to pass this new computer on to the next person. I wonder if there will be enough batteries to work on in Iceland. By the way, I learned in science that Iceland is where the mid-ocean ridge started and that the Gulf Stream flows by it.

Connie. The entire group is here except for the Howards. We still have a long time to go before we even get on the plane to Iceland. We are planning on eating out tonight. I can't wait to get to Iceland. I've had a good time so far. I read mostly on the airplane, but I haven't finished the book yet. My cousins all seem to be doing well, also. We only have 2 hours of battery, and I'm a slow typist, so I'd better stop writing.

Rich. I'm here finally, after flying through Shai-town and now Baltimore. Everybody was waiting for me at the Iceland air baggage check-in. I guess the Howard crew will meet us tomorrow in Iceland. I slept like a dog on the first two flights, and I'm still tired. I was in such a deep sleep that I was knocked out during the landing and takeoff. The lady sitting next to me said that I snored too loud, and

I by accidentally hit her in the arm after she woke me up in the middle of a dream. Grannie asked us all to do this journal on the trip, but I don't have much to say yet because we haven't done

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

anything yet. However, I'm really looking forward to this experience and I know we'll all have a good time.

July 15, 1995. 6:30 AM. Reykjavik. Just 5 1/2 hours from Baltimore. We are four hours ahead of New York. There is no problem getting into the country, not even landing cards, and we even had to ask for the stamps in our passports!

It looks as if we have landed on the moon. Flat lava beds stretch as far as we can see, which is a long way since there are no trees. It's about 35 miles into Reykjavik and the Loftleidir Hotel is no five star affair. I have a very basic room, with shower, TV and two lumpy looking hard beds. They are lumpy looking because a comforter exactly the size of the bed covers an Icelandic bed, and a lumpy pillow is the entire bedding. Our rooms are scattered all over the hotel so I hope the kids are behaving themselves. We are going to have breakfast and decide what to do next. There is a pool and sauna in the hotel.

After a buffet breakfast the young go off to explore the hotel and I lie down for an all too brief nap. At 11:30, we feed everyone again and at 12:30 set out for our city sightseeing. First they showed us the suburbs and my energetic teenagers who were having no problems before with jet lag, fell asleep on the bus. But they had to wake up to tour the Asmundar Sveinsson sculpture garden and enjoyed climbing on the sculptures. We also enjoyed the Halgrímskirkja church, a modern concrete gothic church that was perfectly beautiful and is the highest point in Reykjavik. It looks a little like the space shuttle about to lift off. Down town Reykjavik has some interesting old buildings but after 2 and 1/2 hours I was glad to get back to the hotel and a well-needed nap.

At 5:30 Dowell who has brought part of his family from the airport awakens me. Their mini car would not hold the whole family. By this time the hotel is completely confused as to who belongs in which room and we really had to insist on our 6th room. But the group is now complete. Meg and the eight grandchildren; Martha and Dowell who are on their own for one whole week! Dowell returns to the airport to get Martha and the rest of the bags, a one and a half hour journey.

Dowell: I have just had a great dinner, thanks to Meg, - salmon in the hotel ... here in Reykjavik, the most expensive land in the world. Actually, for such a nice dinner, the price would be similar in the USA. The moonscape is wonderful - lava at every turn - fractures in the earth - I expect a volcano to erupt at any moment or maybe the long overdue earthquake - we'll see. It's now 9:00 PM - and is as light as mid day. This will be quite exciting to be on such a young land, the oldest about 16 million years with the most recent significant piece being added in 1967. By the way, some of the islands produced by the eruption have already washed away. How's that for brief.

Martha: This is wonderful! The landscape is spectacular, with wonderful cloud patterns. I watched a rainstorm from the airport: bright sunshine all around, and then obviously a torrent in the middle area. Distances are hard to figure out. We saw a glacier across the water that Dowell says is 100 miles away. Barren landscape, with lots of rocks, but green as well, alpine flowers and grass. A brilliant double rainbow. I am very excited about what's coming.

Rich, Peter and Megan go off to explore Reykjavik at night. I prevail on the rest to stay in the hotel since we start our tour tomorrow at 9:00.

Sunday, July 16. 9:00 AM. We meet our guide Sissa and our driver Mosay, and board our big green bus for "Iceland Fast and Fun. There are only 15 of us: the nine of us, a French couple from Paris who are very friendly and a honeymoon couple from Bordeaux, plus a Welsh couple. So the tour will be conducted in both French and English. It's clear and cool.

Our first stop is Hverageroli, a small town whose main business is greenhouse culture. Iceland grows its own tomatoes and cucumbers but must import wheat and fruits. A large tourist place called Eden provides ice cream cones and a wonderful sweater for Brenda. We view Mt Hekla, one of the famous volcanoes in Iceland and then head up a rock road to Myrdalsjökull glacier, which sits atop another volcano called Katla. [All dangerous things in Iceland have female names, Hekla, Katla and Grannie!] Here we get on snowmobiles, a motorcycle on skis. Those over 15 drive, those under 15 ride on the back and off we go in a long line, first slowly to get used

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

to it all, then at speeds up to 35 kmh. Fascinating scenery. Sometimes the snow is almost completely melted and we are on the lava, sometimes there are crevasses. We stop at one point to see where the glacier breaks up as it moves down hill and a waterfall dives into a bottomless crevasse under the ice. Alta sits behind me until Rich and Brian bog down going up hill because of all the weight. So Brian gets on the back of mine and Alta switches to be with Rich. Megan and Brenda share as do Peter and Exton. Connie hangs on behind Sissa. The glacier is over 60 meters thick on top of Mt Katla and when we are over the crater we are told it only goes off at 2:30 PM so, because it is now 2:40, we have missed the explosion. Seriously, it is due to go off soon as it goes off twice a century and the last time was 1918. We snowmobile back down and at the end they ask us to climb a steep lava hill back to the bus, and there was no way I could do it, so this old lady got a ride around the hill that the others climbed. Connie fell and tore her jeans and scraped her knee.

A tortuous journey by bus back off the glacier brought us to Vik. After a refreshment stop (my army travels on it's stomach), we are taken for a "wheel boat" ride. In my ignorance I thought this might be a paddle wheeler, but not at all. These are amphibious boats with huge truck wheels underneath. We move over the black sand to the ocean. Vik has an incredible cliff, a rookery of Puffins, Gulls and

Guillemots. Nearby a wonderful rock formation called Reynisdrangur, which Sissa tells us is probably an ancient magma chamber eroded away by the sea. In the background a huge rock has a round opening worn in it, which we are told is big enough that a plane has flown through it. We go to shore and are shown various lava formations, which formed when the magma cooled at different temperatures or under different stresses. The kids scale the heights to get very close to nesting birds. Island Magazine ranks this beach one of the top ten in the world, and the only non-tropical one.

It's getting late when we get back to the bus but, after a short snack stop, we go to Skogar waterfall a magnificent cascade. And at last we check into the Hotel Edda at Skogar. This is actually a boarding school dormitory, but it is comfortable if basic with a common bath and shower room. A great dinner smorgasbord of Icelandic specialties and for me it is off to bed ... The young are out scaling more cliffs for of course it is light all night long.

Alta. I think that Iceland is pretty cool, because of the snowmobile ride. But it is also freezing cold!

We found a great sweater for Connie in the hotel shop with horses on it. But the rest of the gang is still debating what sweaters they want.

Megan----Hello everyone. Islande is really cool. It's a little cold but not really. The weather is approximately 15-20 degree's Celsius. Last night we stayed in Skogar. There is a waterfall that falls about 60 meters into an extremely shallow pool. Anyone who jumped would immediately be dashed upon the rocks at the bottom. Last night Rich, Brian Exton and I went for a hike in the Icelandic "woods". I put the woods in parenthesis because the woods went up to my shoulders. A more appropriate term would be brush or scrub. We also went climbing into the "scrub". I went climbing on the rocks by the waterfall. There was a really nice spot where I could lie down and look and see the sky. The only problem was that the path to it was high and the sides were steep cliffs to either rocks or water. I have to go now, but I will write more later. The end result of this is that the waterfall and the rest of Iceland so far is really neat and nice and also beautiful.

Monday July 17. We visit the folk museum of Skogar, a collection of artifacts from Iceland, made by one old man who acts as our guide. The ancient Icelanders let nothing go to waste, using horsehair, whalebones, even whale bladders for their tools and furniture. Beautiful embroidered clothes from 150 years ago. Their stone and sod-roofed houses were compact and utilitarian. The beds much too short for our tall boys to sleep in!

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

We stop at a beautiful waterfall, which you can walk behind called Seljalandsfoss. The Westmann Islands stand out very clearly nearby. Some of these are of recent origin where a volcano exploded under the sea and they are being closely watched to see how life is coming to them. We stop at Skaholt Monastery (which is really a Bishopric) with its modern church where four former ones stood. Iceland adopted Christianity without a war many years ago and is now entirely Lutheran, and the Bishopric has moved into Reykjavik.

Next we went to Geysir, where the real Geysir hasn't gone off in many years, being clogged with silica deposits, but when it did, it was 60 meters high. Nearby is a smaller geyser, called Strokkur or "the Churn" which obliged us every five minutes with a 20-meter burst, and there were smaller pools of hot water and boiling mud.

Then we went to the Geysir Hotel where some of us had a salmon lunch and the others indulged at a hamburger stand nearby. And we find a jacket for Megan with a fur hood.

Next we went to Guilfoss Waterfall, a magnificent cataract rivaling Niagara or Victoria. But it is turning colder and the wind has picked up. One thing very changeable about Iceland is its weather. This morning was crystal clear and now it is very cloudy and cold.

Then we rode the Icelandic horses, the smallest horses in the world and it was quite successful for all except Rich who took an unexpected tumble when his girth slipped. We rode up on a high plateau and you could see a glacier on one side and a deep ravine with a river on the other, probably the one fed by the Guilfoss.

We check into another Hotel Edda, this one in Laugarvatn, an area known for its thermal springs. Again it is a dormitory. We walk quite a long way down to the swimming pool and this was a disappointment. First of all we were told we were to take all our clothes off and shower communally. This did not sit too well with our modest American raised girls, but we all managed. Then the pool turned out to be a normal regulation swimming pool with waters tepid 70 or so degrees. I headed for the hot tub, the whirlpool being full with a large group including two babies. The hot tub was better, filled with my large family and a wonderful 104 degrees. Unfortunately the place was also infested with bugs so after a short time I decided to dress and climb the hill back to the dorm and prepare for dinner.

Dinner started with a jellied seafood combination, and progressed to lamb and mixed vegetables, served slowly and somewhat sparsely.

The teenagers felt they didn't get enough and had to rush off to an 8:00 PM basketball game, but Peter and I discovered they had ice cream sundaes for desert and Sissa tells me we can always ask for seconds. My army travels on its stomach!

After dinner they had a video on the volcanic eruption on Heimaey in 1973 and how pouring cold water on it eventually stopped the lava flow. This is one of the greatest engineering feats of this century. The film was quite frightening to see the fires and lava flow taking everything in its path. Fortunately there was no loss of life since the fishing fleet was in port and was able to rescue everyone.

Then we connect briefly with Martha and Dowell who are doing Iceland on their own and somewhat the reverse direction of our itinerary. They had a fascinating tour of a lava tube cave. They are also staying in a better part of the hotel, with connecting baths and so forth.

Exton. Granny, this is a fun trip. The snowmobiles and Icelandic horses are really neat.

July 18, 1995. Wonderful Thingvellir National Park, where the tectonic plates meet and you can see the crevasses where the North American and European continents are being torn apart at an average rate of 2 cm per year. Also Thingvellir is where the ancient clans got together each June or July to make their laws and in general meet their fellow Icelanders. Like a giant camp meeting, friendships and courtships were made and perhaps revenges settled according to the sagas. We viewed the pond where women who committed adultery were drowned (The men were beheaded).

It's a beautiful region with the second largest lake in the country in the valley. We hiked all around and climbed up on top of the rift, which represented North America. Then we had lunch at the Thingvellir inn, a mere \$100 extravaganza of pasta but it seemed to fill up my troops for a

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

while. With cokes selling for \$3 each, I have gotten used to \$25 rest stops. Fortunately dinner is included each night so I only have to cope with lunch and snacks.

We follow the highland road Kaldidalur over the mountains to Husafell. Surely we are on top of the world. Nothing much grows up here and the erosion is pretty bad. There are impressive mountains with ice and snow patches, volcanoes and glaciers. This must be what the world looked like while it was being created!

Fascinating lava waterfalls where the water comes out from under the lava flow into the very blue river below (caused by silica). We walk to the nearby Hraunfossar (or Children's) waterfall, named for some children who drowned crossing it on a no longer extant bridge. It was a marvelous churning descent through a narrow passage. The father destroyed the bridge after the children died.

We check into a hotel in Reykholt and walk down to see a hot tub probably built by Snorri Sturkluson in the 12th century.

Brian. I liked the snowmobiling. There were lots of bumps. The seats were soft. We saw a lot of waterfalls. We just took a long time on a bus. I can't wait to go deep-sea fishing.

July 19. An early departure (8:30AM) Stop at Deldartlingmer, the largest hot springs in Europe (and of course Iceland). As Peter said, the best part was it was warm. The bad part was it smelled of sulphur. The hot water heats two towns and also supports a vegetable greenhouse.

Next stop Borgarnes. Egil Skallagrimsson lived near here. His saga, written by Snorri Sturkluson, describes him as a fierce and cruel Viking warrior, who was also a poet who among others wrote a poem about the death of his son. A sculpture at Borg commemorates the poet near his supposed grave. He suffered from Padgett's disease (a thickening of the bone in the head), which is also clear from his poetry.

Akranes. We board the Andrea and head for the sea. Everyone gets a rod and soon we are pulling in cod and haddock and red fish. Brian caught a fish that got away and you should have seen the gulls move in to devour it. Brenda soon caught a big one and then Megan pulled in two at a time. But Rich caught the prize, a big ugly salt water cat fish which came complete with teeth and tried to take a bite out of the seat! Then Peter and Rich caught what they thought was each other's lines and pulled in twin red fish. In all we caught 26 or more fish. It was most successful. When we came into the dock, we were met by the chef of the restaurant who took our catch and headed for his restaurant while we killed time with a tour of the town (which wasn't much). Then on to the restaurant for delicious chowder followed by cod and fried cat fish (which was delicious). We were stuffed.

The Akranes Folk Museum was interesting. A collection of old things from Iceland, the biggest being a fishing ketch in dry-dock, which you could board and go through. The children tried out the bunks. Near the museum was a reconstructed house where we watched some women card wool. The few sweaters on display didn't seem to suit so we are still looking for sweaters for 5 kids. Maybe they will never find ones to suit and think of the money I'll save.

We check back into the Loftleidir Hotel and say goodbye to our tour mates. For the last night we had dinner at the elegant Pearl Restaurant. On top of a nearby hill, they have several hot water tanks, filled with thermal water, which heat the homes and other buildings in the city. On top of this a dome like structure houses the Pearl Restaurant, the most elegant and expensive restaurant in town. It rotates, once every two hours. We have a most elegant dinner to celebrate our last night and Brenda and Brian's birthday, coming up next week.

It has been a great tour but we are all tired from so much activity, so it is good it is coming to an end. Even the kids, who have been so good, are starting to get on one another's nerves. But we do find sweaters for Brian and Exton in the hotel shop!

July 20. The last day! Our bus tour takes us to see the president's residence next to an historic church. Then on to the Blue Lagoon where we bathe in the sulphur water, supposed to be so good for the skin. Lots of fun in the steam and the water, which changes from hot to cold in the blink of an eye. Such a problem to get the sulphur out of our hair and the tangles out of the girl's long locks! Grindavik, where we enjoy a cafeteria lunch. Next we drive out to the end of the peninsula to where the original lighthouse stood. Arctic terns nest here and rocks and wind set

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

off the spectacular view. Then on to the aquarium near the airport where we see the various fish that live near Iceland. And at last we get to the airport.

There is a long slow line and when we finally get to the check-in we find they have overbooked and can only provide seats for seven of us. For the first time I felt a note of panic and told them either we all go or no one goes. And Iceland Air says don't worry; come back in half an hour.

Peter. Well, Iceland wasn't exactly what I expected, although it wasn't too different. The tour certainly was fast and fun, with several outdoor events scheduled every day - much more active than the trip to Alaska. Last night we had a really nice meal, which I was glad of because I was getting tired of fish. It was beginning to feel like it was fish fish fish - morning, lunch and dinner. I was disappointed when we went swimming in the thermal pool (not hot enough) but the Blue Lagoon today was nice and hot. It was GREAT!!!!!! I think that Grannie will have trouble thinking of another trip to top this one!

Megan---Anyway, I had a great time. It seems to me that the landscape in this country is only "LAVA FIELDS". They're cool, but enough is enough. They are still cool, but I think that I have had an overdose of Island. Anyway-I think that the tour was awesome. It was so interesting. We saw many interesting things and we even saw the wilds of Iceland, i.e. the highland roads that are as bumpy as our driveway. Oh well. But I agree with Peter about the Fish-we had too much. When I get home, I think I'll cook up some Macaroni and cheese. We are at the airport now and it's not much fun because Iceland Air overbooked the flight to Baltimore. I don't think that anyone is taking this very well. Fortunately I'm not worried, I think that with an overnight in Rechnivik, a tour, 100 USD, and some other junk some people will stay. What's funny is that many of the announcements are in French and German-not English.

Exton. This has been a great week. I really liked the deep-sea fishing, the snowmobiling, and the horseback riding. I hope we get on the flight to Baltimore. I can't wait to get home and see our pets.

Connie. Iceland has been great!!! Horseback was lots of fun, and so was snowmobiling and deep-sea fishing. I'd love to come again. The landscape here is fantastic. I'm only worried about today. Our plane is overbooked and three of us don't actually have a seat. If we stay overnight here we get to do a lot of stuff, but I'd like to get home. I have had a lot of fun here, and I am extremely glad I came, but home is always nice come back to.

Thank you, Grannie!!!

The whole problem is that seat assignments can only be made 24 hours in advance and no one told us this. Iceland air kept telling us not to worry and sure enough there were any number of people who thought a free overnight with room, board, sightseeing and \$100 would be great. So we did all get on the plane. Apparently there is usually no problem, but NATO has just concluded some tour of duty and so there are far more people than usual trying to get back to the states. The stewardess did drench me in red wine, but other than that the flight was uneventful and we checked into the airport Sheraton in Baltimore. After Pizzas, (the troops are still hungry), it was off to bed at last.

Rich. Well, this week was pretty adventurous. Grannie had an excellent trip planned. We went snowmobiling, horseback riding, hiking, bird watching, boating, and deep-sea fishing. My favorite part was the snowmobiling. I am really glad that I came on this trip.

This is the first trip with Grannie that I have really stopped to think about what a wonderful experience I was having. I don't know of anyone my age that has been to these exotic places. I am really thankful to have a grandmother that loves me as much as she does. I am also glad of the fact that I have had a chance to get closer with my cousins. We don't get to see each other that often and when we do, we always have our parents bugging us, which never really allowed us to get close with one another. On this trip I wondered what it is going to be like when we are all adults. None of us really have all that much in common, but we still got along just fine and

1995 ADVENTURES WITH GRANNIE ICELAND

were never bored of each other. I hope when we are all adults that we are close and get together for occasions. That's about all I have to say except, I love you all, and thank-you so much Grannie for this trip.

Alta. Thank you for taking us to Iceland it was really cool. But it was cold. I got the slowest horse. His forelock was over his eyes. All the other things we did were fun too. However on the Iceland air flights I have no comment. Love ya, Alta Howard

Brenda. This trip was really fun. It was just what the tour stated: Fast and Fun. We did fast things that were fun, and on the way a couple of snacks, of course! When we went Iceland horseback riding (we found out that they are not ponies), I had a horse named Glacier. My horse only wanted to follow the horse in front of it: Glacier wouldn't go fast unless the horse in front of it was going fast! The trail was good, but a little bit rocky. Snow mobiling was great. Megan drove me because I'm not 14 yet. She does not have her drivers permit yet but I think that she drives really well. I've never been snow mobiling before.

Megan-Yes I'm back-Well, to wrap up this Icelandic Saga-I loved it and thought that it was the neatest thing I have done in a long time. Iceland was fun and also very cold. I think that this was one of the coolest trips that I could have taken. Iceland is actually a very exotic place, even though it is not in the tropics. I believe that this has been one successful, if expensive, summer for me. First I went to the

Continental Europe, and then I went on to go exploring in Iceland. This was all in three weeks. I may not be as much of a world traveler as Grannie, but I sure feel like one now. I wanted to say that I have had a wonderful trip and I hope the rest of you did as well. I know that it was a little strenuous, but I think that it was extremely fun and definitely worth coming to. I also wanted to thank all of you; especially Grannie; for coming so we could have a wonderful time. And Grannie-Thank you very, very, etc. much for inviting me on this trip. It was a once in a lifetime trip-or maybe twice?- but I really enjoyed being with you and all of my cousins. If you ever need someone to accompany you-I'll try to accommodate that. But I really want to Thank You for bringing us on this trip. It was really neat and fun.

Tschÿs-Megan

Friday, July 21. We say goodbye. The Howards left first for Cincinnati, and then Brenda and Brian were off to Ft Myers and Peter and Connie off to Atlanta. Rich went in to see Baltimore since his flight to Denver is late this PM. I made my way to Rockville to visit the Hughes and pick up John. The trip was wonderful, and I am so lucky with my wonderful grandchildren.

Love to all of you. Grannie.