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ICELAND

Date - January 2020

Duration - 14 Days

Destinations
Keflavik - Reykjavik - Isafjordur - Hornstrandir Nature Reserve - Grundarfjordur - Olafsvik - Gullfoss - Thingvellir National Park - Hella - Dyrholaey - Vik - Kirkjubaejarklaustur - Vatnajokull National Park - Jokulsarlon - Hofn - Djupivogur - Breiddalsvik - Selfoss

Trip Overview

When you consider that the Arctic fox is the only native terrestrial mammal in the entire country, Iceland may seem like a strange destination for a wildlife tour, particularly for someone whose primary interest is mammals. However, what it lacks in species, this extraordinary island more than makes up for in terms of some of the most spectacular landscapes on earth and it is difficult to think of anywhere else that you might mistake Iceland for. Although marketed by far too many unimaginative tour operators as a land of 'Ice and Fire', this representation of Iceland as a volatile primeval realm is difficult to escape, particularly when you arrive, as we did, during the middle of a bleak, unforgiving winter. Obviously you expect to encounter a certain amount of inclement weather at this time of year in a country on the periphery of the Arctic Circle, but well before our arrival the winter had been unusually harsh and on more than one occasion all international flights had been cancelled, largely as a result of exceptionally high winds and severe blizzards. I was again travelling with my assistant Karina and we were actually fortunate to get in on time, as we met several passengers who had been severely delayed and others who had been forced to change their plans because certain major roads had been closed. We would experience this later when attempting to reach Snaefellsjokull National Park, but for now my only priority was the 500 kilometre drive north from the airport at Keflavik to Isafjordur, from where we were due to catch a boat to Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. Given the enormously variable conditions, which can fluctuate from deceptively benign to hazardously extreme within a

matter of moments, I would always hire a four-wheel drive at this time of year in Iceland and throughout the trip I was extremely grateful to be driving a robust and dependable jeep with special winter tyres. Most of our journeys, a couple of which even exceeded that initial long drive to Isafjordur, were either on snow or, more usually, ice and at one stage I switched to two-wheel drive, just to see how bad conditions were on a particular stretch of frozen highway. As it was, I was barely able to keep the vehicle on the road for just a few minutes and at times, in the very worst snowstorms, visibility was no more than a metre or so. At least two of our transfers would not have been possible without the innovative Icelandic system of yellow poles at the side of the road, as these were often all you could see to drive by, with their reassuring and dependable design of two reflectors on the left and one on the right. Given the fact that there is considerably less than six hours daylight in mid January, many of our journeys extended into the dark and that was the case as we approached Isafjordur, partly as a result of the sheer distance involved and the demanding conditions, but also because I was already stopping regularly to admire the dramatic scenery. The final section was certainly the most impressive, as we navigated a series of breathtaking fjords, which basically meant that as much time was spent driving away from our destination as towards it, at least geographically. This is not excessively onerous during daylight, as the views are magnificent and there is always a chance of spotting one of the several marine mammals that occur in these waters, including various whales, dolphins and seals. However, it does become slightly more irksome at night, particularly towards the end of the drive when you are already exhausted and realise that you are actually driving away from the lights across the water that you are fully aware you should be driving directly towards. We got in fairly late and woke the next morning to the news that we were unlikely to be able to reach Hornstrandir, as the only way in is by boat and the sea was apparently too rough to risk a crossing, or more precisely a landing, as the remote reserve has neither a harbour or mooring of any kind and all arrivals have to be made in a zodiac up on the beach. Given that we were only due to spend five nights at a destination that is almost entirely isolated during the winter months, this was obviously far from ideal, particularly as we were also informed that the weather was due to worsen and that this first afternoon had looked like being our only real opportunity for at least a few days. For those who are not aware, Hornstrandir is the lone reserve in the country where Arctic foxes receive any protection and I had arranged to join a group of mostly photographers, primarily to assess the area as a possible Arctic fox destination for future tours. There would be eight of us in all including our guide and although none of the other guests were my own clients, the dynamics of dealing with a group of wildlife enthusiasts remain the same and this would be an invaluable experience for Karina, specifically in

terms of evaluating the expectations and demands of seasoned travellers who more or less all have the same objective. That objective was of course a professional photograph of an Arctic fox and although I was also hoping to take a few nice shots, I more wanted to gauge the likelihood of encountering foxes here and to assess just how natural those encounters were likely to be. Having all made it clear that we would still prefer to try and reach Hornstrandir on that first day if even the slightest gap in the weather presented itself, the two of us went to explore Isafjordur and the fjords beyond. We did not get that far and a short while after encountering our first fox at the small Arctic Fox Centre, a captive animal raised from a cub after its parents had been killed by hunters, we received the call that we had all been hoping for. Apparently there was going to be a break in the weather and we had a brief window during which a local captain had agreed he would attempt to drop us at the reserve. The sea crossing, in what was a relatively large and sturdy vessel, actually proved to be reasonably comfortable and no one was ill until we dropped anchor in the swell and began relaying goods and passengers to the shore in the zodiac, at which point the conditions did start to become unpleasant and one of the photographers was

extremely ill. Unfortunately, the wind had picked up again and the sea was just too rough to risk the usual landing area, within a short distance of the old house that would be our home for the next five nights, and instead we had to move around the headland and disembark in a more sheltered area, if indeed jumping into a tiny pitching inflatable and scrambling to shore even qualifies as disembarking. As it was, everyone made it without getting too soaked, but we now had a steep climb and a relatively challenging walk to our accommodation, certainly when you consider that it was now dark and we had to drag all of our possessions and food on the sledges that we had carried with us for just this eventuality. That said, we had all chosen this option and were mainly just relieved to have made it to Hornstrandir, a sentiment that would be further echoed the next morning, when we surfaced to gale force winds and a white frothing sea that none of us would have even considered risking. If that sounds like an exaggeration, the waves were metres high and a week or so later our hire car company sent us a severe weather warning, cautioning that wind speeds were likely to reach up to 90 kilometres per hour. It was that type of trip and on our very first morning Karina and I became stranded after taking a short walk and being overtaken by a blizzard that swept in out of nowhere. We literally could not see in which direction we were attempting to stagger and although we had been on our way back and were no more than a few hundred metres from the sanctuary of the house, we had no choice but to sit down with our backs to the elements and wait for the worst to pass. Thankfully the storm disappeared almost as abruptly as it had developed, but it would happen on several occasions and we had to be careful in terms of taking longer hikes away from our base. This was not really an issue initially, as the photographers were very keen to get their shots and did not venture far from the house, around which our guide would strategically bury fish each morning to hopefully attract a fox. I cannot pretend that I was overly thrilled by this, as I had not been informed that the foxes would be baited and when I did become aware of the situation, I was told that only a few flakes of dried fish were ever used, really just to encourage a fox to investigate the smell. This

was sadly not the case and although relatively small amounts of fish were used at first, the feeding did increase over the course of our stay and by the end our guide was running around with a spare hamburger. To be fair, he was looking for the best area to bury it for one last set of photographs and I do have to stress that no foxes were actually handfed, but they still certainly associated areas just beyond the house with food and the vast majority of our sightings were not entirely natural. That is not to say that there were no natural encounters and on one memorable occasion myself and one of the photographers sat out in yet another snowstorm, just a few metres from a fox that we had seen go to ground as the weather rapidly deteriorated. A magnificent view of a humpback whale aside, this was the sighting of the tour as far as I was concerned and we spent well over an hour admiring the tenacious little fox as it huddled down against the elements. Sadly, the conditions were so poor that my pictures were never likely to do such a fabulous encounter justice, but I still would not have swapped them, as these are true Arctic creatures and it was utterly captivating to be able to share a genuinely dramatic winterscape with such a special animal. Unfortunately this proved to be the exception rather than the rule

and as good company as all of the photographers were to a man, it is very difficult to enjoy authentically wild experiences with people who are looking for specific images and who consequently need to stage proceedings, at least to a certain extent. That extent was too much for me on this particular trip and whilst I very much enjoyed visiting Hornstrandir, I would not do so in this way again or at this time of year, despite the evocative winter setting. Instead, I will be advising future guests to visit on their own in the late spring or summer months, when it is possible to camp away from any other people and to savour the supreme solitude of this isolated wilderness. You would almost certainly see foxes if you devoted a few days to the task and in a far more natural and relaxed way than eight people huddled together in a house for up to twenty hours a day, primarily due to the extreme weather and seasonal lack of daylight. The hiking would also be easier, both in terms of the climatic conditions and because you would not have to worry about disturbing either the foxes or the snow for the photographers, who need their pictures taken in pristine conditions and not soiled by unsightly footprints. The only proviso to this advice would be regarding those visitors who want to experience the epic celestial dance of the aurora borealis or the northern lights as they are commonly called. Contrary to popular opinion, this spectacular atmospheric phenomenon occurs all year round, but the effects are rendered invisible to the human eye in the light summer months of the far north, so roughly between April and August. Instead you need to travel when there are dark and hopefully clear skies, as cloud cover will also negate literally the greatest light show on earth, as we experienced throughout this tour. Although a bright and cloudless sky by no means guarantee that the northern lights will make an appearance, dazzling or otherwise, you have no chance at all in overcast conditions and the weather in general was so dismal for the first ten nights of the trip, that we were restricted to just one brief and fairly lacklustre performance at Hornstrandir. Despite the amazing image below, which I will explain in more detail, it was hardly the stuff of legend and we had to wait until night eleven to savour the true wonder of this most magnificent of spectacles, by which time the weather had cleared considerably and there was barely a cloud in the sky, either during the day or at night. In all our last three nights produced three superlative displays, the first of which illuminated the entire sky in swirling, shimmering shades of green for almost two hours and was described by our hotel manager as the ‘best show for more than a year’. For fun, we classified each manifestation out of ten and decided that if the initial relatively uninspiring performance had been a hesitant two, the triumphant second act must have been a joyous eight, with marks of five and seven awarded to the two glorious encores, both of which fittingly occurred on our final night, but separated by several hours and at least 250 kilometres. If you had been fortunate enough to witness any of those last displays or indeed if you have ever personally observed this mesmerising heavenly occurrence anywhere on earth, you would no doubt assume that I had taken an entire gallery of extraordinary images. However, I have never been interested in what I would call formal photography and do not use a tripod, preferring instead to shoot on the move, purely as a method of recording what I see, hopefully as I see it. Unlike actual photographers, both professional and amateur, I do not spend a great deal of time manufacturing a preconceived shot and although I did set my manual focus to infinity, my aperture to 2.8 and an exposure time of

between ten and twelve seconds, without a tripod I was never likely to produce anything that I could use in this format. The picture above was instead taken by the German photographer Simon Schneider and although it is well known that the camera captures far more of the northern lights than the human eye ever can, it is testament to his great skill that this image was taken during that first slightly underwhelming display at Hornstrandir. Whilst I greatly enjoyed the company of all of the photographers, particularly listening to their stories and swapping misadventures, I probably had more in common with Simon and I hope to have the opportunity to travel with him again. He is a patient man and whereas the tendency can be to try and chase or force shots, or in my case wildlife encounters, he understands the importance of just being and waiting for the moment to arrive. Regrettably he was not with me when I chanced upon the fox sheltering from the driving snow, but we did have other very close views and in all we saw at least three different animals, all of which had dark coats, characteristic of the blue morph. This permanently dark version is apparently more regularly observed at Hornstrandir, but elsewhere the white morph is far more common, with an entirely white coat during the winter months and a distinctive summer coat of white, grey and brown. Needless to say, all of the group were desperate to see a pure white fox against the winter background and I have to admit, I would have loved to as well. It was not to be, however and after returning by boat on a surprisingly smooth crossing to Isafjordur, we all went our separate ways, with myself and Karina travelling over 400 kilometres southwest to Grundarfjordur, one of several notable whale watching destinations in the country. I had not initially intended to book any whale trips on this tour, as Icelandic waters are far more productive in the summer months, when you can hope to see a variety of species. Humpback, minke, sei, fin, long-finned pilot, northern bottlenose and blue whales are all feasible, but in winter from Grundarfjordur you are mainly likely to encounter orcas and white-beaked dolphins. I would have been thrilled to see either of course, but I knew that January was a little early in terms of more or less guaranteed orca sightings and dolphins can also be hit or miss at this time of year. That said, it is practically impossible for me to spurn even a chance of watching these majestic wolves of the sea, as orcas are very aptly described, and I also wanted to support the International Fund for Animal Welfare ‘Meet Us Don’t Eat Us’ campaign, which, as the name suggests, is trying to educate people that whales are better conserved for everyone to enjoy than butchered for just a few people to eat. I will go into this significant campaign in more detail later in this report, as Iceland does not have a great record in terms of animal welfare and it is important to recognise that some people are at least trying to change this and adopt a more ethical approach. For now though, my immediate concern was whether we would even be able to search for a whale, as the weather and marine conditions had been so severe, only two trips had taken place during the previous three weeks and there would be just four in total in all of January. Neither of the tours that had been able to sail prior to our arrival had encountered either a whale or a dolphin, although the first did apparently have a brief view of a harbour porpoise. None of which inspired a great deal of confidence and when we woke for the first of the two whale tours that I had booked, we could not even see the renowned Kirkjufell mountain, despite the fact that it is 463 metres in height and our cabin was situated directly in front of it. Apparently Kirkjufell, or Church Mountain as it translates, is the most photographed mountain in all of Iceland, primarily due to its distinctive shape, which is said to resemble the steeple of a church. To me it more resembles a traditional witches hat or perhaps an old flint arrowhead, which is appropriate enough, as Kirkjufell features as ‘arrowhead mountain’ in the HBO series ‘Game of Thrones’, much of which was filmed in Iceland. Photographers travel from all over the world to try and capture an iconic shot of Kirkjufell illuminated by the northern lights, often with a nearby waterfall showing in the foreground. I photographed both the mountain and the waterfall, but not particularly successfully and there was no chance of the aurora borealis lighting up the heavens during the two nights that we were here, as you could barely see the ocean for most of our stay, let alone a starry night. We were not even able to reach Snaefellsjokull mountain, the volcano that Jules Verne used in his 1864 novel ‘Journey to the Center of the Earth’, which I read as a young boy before eventually watching the original film version with James Mason. Verne’s famous landmark is situated in the national park of

the same name, one of only three national parks in Iceland, all of which I had been due to visit on this trip. Sadly the access road to Snaefellsjokull had been closed due to the heavy snow and it was no surprise when we received an email confirming that our first whale tour had been cancelled. Fortunately I had arranged a second, which is a standard precaution that I take with all specific wildlife activities and I always advise my guests to do likewise. In fact, two attempts is usually an absolute minimum and in many cases I would recommend more, particularly where people are travelling largely for one main experience that their entire trip depends on. That was not a factor on this occasion and our schedule was already so tight that I had booked our second excursion for the day that we were due to leave Grundarfjordur. Not that it looked as if it was likely to go ahead and at one stage I considered leaving earlier, instead of just sitting around waiting for the inevitable to occur, which I thought must be the case when I received another email from

the local operator. Happily, it was just to inform me that the weather was expected to improve sufficiently for the tour to go ahead and although the forecast changed continually as the tour approached, causing more than a few anxious moments among the prospective passengers and ultimately a lengthy delay, we were finally able to get out to sea. It was exhilarating to be back on the ocean again and as I stood at the bow riding the waves, dozens of mainly Chinese passengers vomited over the side or into hastily distributed sick bags. The sea was not actually that rough initially and most people were fine as we steamed beyond the protection of the harbour defences and towards the feeding grounds where we were likely to encounter whales. As is so often the case, the predominantly inexperienced tourists really only started to react to the unfamiliar conditions when the boat slowed down and began to roll on the swell, at which point most of them succumbed reasonably quickly. To be fair, the ship was pitching and rolling fairly vigorously at this stage and I have to say that I was expecting Karina to join the growing rank of casualties, most of whom had fled towards the back of the boat or taken shelter in the cabin. That she did not, stands her in good stead for future tours, as I have seen far more experienced travellers than her struggle in considerably calmer waters than these. For her resilience, or at least her good fortune in apparently not suffering from seasickness, Karina was rewarded with an amazing moment in her life, the sight of her very first whale. This is a wildlife highlight that almost no one ever forgets and it was not just an ordinary view of an unidentifiable creature at extreme distance, this was a magnificent humpback whale that we were able to spend around an hour with as it dived to feed right in front of the vessel. On three occasions it crossed our bow, riding so high in the water that almost its entire body was visible. It was probably the best sighting you could hope for without a whale actually breaching and it is unusual to encounter a humpback in these waters at this time of the year, as the majority migrate to warmer breeding grounds around the Equator and this was almost certainly an immature animal that had remained here to feed. To further emphasise just how fortunate Karina had been, and everyone else on board of course, this was the only humpback whale seen until the 25th of February, so basically a full month later, and the only whale sighting at all in January or February until an orca was spotted on the 18th of February, at which point orcas started to be observed more regularly. You know that you have been extraordinarily lucky when you are the only visitors to see a whale of any kind in almost 50 days and this was such a magical experience, not to mention being almost entirely unexpected, that I did not even reach for my camera and decided instead just to savour the moment. Whilst it is never easy to take even reasonable shots when the boat is swaying and lurching in rough seas, I am actually taking this approach more often now regardless of conditions and earlier that month

in Estonia I had declined an opportunity to photograph my first Eurasian lynx. I am not sure that this would have been possible even a couple of years ago and although I will probably continue to try and document many of the animals that I either search for or chance upon, a photographic record is becoming far less important to me. From Grundarfjordur we would travel southeast, visiting a few of Iceland's countless natural wonders before continuing east along the coast for the third and final main wildlife element of the tour, the herds of wild reindeer that occur around Djupivogur and Breiddalsvik. The delayed whale tour had meant a late start and it was almost dark as I began the 260 kilometre drive to our first destination, Gullfoss waterfall. However, on auspicious days like this, everything seems to work in your favour and by travelling at night we were able to observe our only Arctic fox beyond their protected reserve at Hornstrandir. It was another of the blue morphs and a very special way to end such a memorable day, particularly of course for Karina, who was still elated at having seen her first whale. Gullfoss was our first stop on the famous Golden Circle, a tourist loop

from the capital Reykjavik, which also includes Thingvellir National Park and the geysers at Haukadalur valley. Although it is possible to visit all three in a single day, as literally millions of tourists will no doubt be able to testify, there are many other less well known attractions in the area that some astute local operators include as part of a longer tour. As you can imagine in Iceland, several of these additional highlights are waterfalls and other destinations include the Secret Lagoon hot spring, which is anything but given its popularity, Langjokull glacier, where visitors can go snowmobiling, and Kerid volcanic crater, which, it must be said, is far less impressive in the winter when you can no longer discern the pretty crater lake under all the snow. This is not uncommon and although the winter landscapes can be highly evocative and are certainly reminiscent of the country itself, the conditions at this time of year can actually detract from its unique beauty, particularly the perpetually grey overcast skies that make it so difficult to either fully appreciate or photograph the true natural splendour of an area or landmark. We barely glimpsed the sun during the first ten days of the tour and at Gullfoss, which rather ironically translates as Golden Falls, the bleak overhead conditions were particularly apparent, as this is one of the most commanding waterfalls on the continent and yet it was almost impossible to convey its majesty or immense power in such bleak and unforgiving light. Whilst admittedly the site itself does not have the epic grandeur of Gullfoss, this was also the case at Haukadalur, where the black, uninviting clouds were full of snow and it was difficult to really appreciate the geysers between the inevitable flurries. Given that Geysir, or the Great Geysir as it is sometimes referred to, is now more or less inactive, Strokkur is the principal attraction here and it usually erupts every five to ten minutes. With spouts of around twenty metres, it is neither as imposing or as famous as Geysir, which is the first geyser recorded in written documents and is consequently the geyser from which all others are named. At its peak following an earthquake in 2000, Geysir erupted for two continuous days up to a height of 122 metres, which apparently makes it the second highest geyser of all time. I have absolutely no idea if that is the case or not, but as Old Faithfull in Yellowstone National Park averages a height of around 44 metres, it must have been a remarkable sight for all of those able to visit during that brief window. In comparison Strokkur is somewhat disappointing and we only waited for it to explode once before moving on to Thingvellir National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where visitors can snorkel or dive in the Silfra rift, a fissure between the tectonic plates separating Europe and North America. If the unique opportunity to swim where two continents collide is not tempting enough, then the water might be, as it is said to be the purest in the world and visibility is an incredible 120 metres. I cannot substantiate either fact, but I can testify that the water is crystal clear and that it can take anywhere from 30 to 100 years to reach Silfa as meltwater from the Langjokull glacier, more than 60 kilometres to the north. The glacial water is filtered through porous underground lava and the constant flow of freshwater ensures that the fissure never freezes and maintains a constant temperature of between 2°C and -4°C all year round. We did not have sufficient time to brave the elements, which have to be tackled in a dry suit, as we had less than a full day to explore what is a ravishing and historic destination. The Althing, the oldest surviving parliament on earth, was founded here in 930 and continued to sit for two weeks every year until 1798. We visited a

possible site of the Logberg or Law Rock, the precise location is unknown, where the annual assembly would convene in order to hear disputes and create law. Much of our remaining time was spent hiking to the charming Oxararfoss waterfall in Almannagja gorge, one of the most dramatic and imposing features of a park that also includes the northern section of Thingvallavatn, the largest natural lake in the country. Although they do not occur naturally in Iceland, I was hoping that we may also spot an American mink at Thingvellir, as they are farmed for their pelts across much of Europe and over the years captive animals have escaped the horrific conditions of the fur industry and established wild populations. Thingvellir is known to be a particularly good area for them, but we did not have sufficient time to search properly and our rather inadequate endeavours were appropriately rewarded with no more than a few Arctic fox tracks. I did consider staying into the evening to look for a fox, but the weather once again intervened and there would have been little point searching in what turned out to be one of the most severe blizzards I have ever experienced. At some points the driving snow was so intense, visibility was reduced to more or less zero and I either had to crawl along at between ten and fifteen kilometres per hour or stop altogether and wait for the conditions to improve. The journey to our next hotel would have been impossible without the yellow poles and reflectors along the side of the road and this simple but immensely effective system must save hundreds of lives every year, particularly in terms of the tourists who are not used to driving in such hazardous and unpredictable conditions. Thankfully, this proved to be the last severe weather of the tour, the storm before the calm so to speak and the next morning the sun made a tentative first appearance. I was initially concerned that it was likely to be swallowed again by the ominous dark clouds from which it had almost reluctantly emerged, but it grew in confidence throughout the morning and our last three days were bathed in a glorious warming sunshine that I vowed I would never take for granted again. It had been that kind of trip sadly, but we still had a number of outstanding areas to visit and they would all now be viewed in bright weather and under a more or less cloudless azure sky. I was relieved in terms of the driving as much as anything else, as the conditions had been extremely demanding even with a four-wheel drive and our remaining days all involved long journeys with a number of stops and detours. It was a joy just to be driving on tarmac or even gravel again, as opposed to ice, and I was now able to take at least some notice of the sumptuous scenery, instead of having to permanently concentrate on not driving directly into it. At least hitting an animal had not been a major concern, as there are very few wild animals in Iceland and the gorgeous domestic horses that you see throughout the country are all safely fenced. The only real issue involves the wild reindeer and over the next couple of days I would be driving east along the coast to where they occur. On

the way I had arranged to visit a number of well known tourist destinations, including the Seljalandsfoss, Gljufrabui and Skogafoss waterfalls, as well as Eyjafjallajokull, a volcano that memorably erupted in 2010, covering much of northern Europe with a layer of ash and causing around twenty countries to close their airspace for several days. We also stopped to take the short hike to the base of Solheimajokull, one of several outlet glaciers of the vast Myrdalsjokull icecap. Although it is possible to take a guided walk on the glacier, we spent most of our time around the stunning glacial lake at the bottom, which is apparently growing by the size of an Olympic swimming pool every year due to the unmistakable effects of global warming. Solheimajokull continues to melt at an entirely unnatural rate and we would visit another receding glacier the next day, where the undeniable results of climate change were even more evident. For now though we were heading to the Dyrholaey peninsula and Reynisfjara, a world famous black volcanic sand beach, with views of the Reynisdrangar basalt sea stacks. According to local legend, two of these imposing volcanic rocks are said to be trolls that were trying to drag a ship with three masts from the sea. Sadly for the trolls, they tarried too long in their mighty task and did not notice when the first rays of the sun appeared and turned them to stone. To this day, when all is quiet except for the howling of the wind across the ocean, you can still hear their terrible eternal cries and pitiful laments, as they try desperately to return to the safety of their cosy home, the nearby Katla volcano. They would have been safe enough hunting during the first ten days of this tour, when the sun barely made an appearance, and it was no coincidence that following what had been our only clear day, the northern lights suddenly came out to play, illuminating the sky in a breathtaking iridescent display and scoring a remarkable eight out of ten on our impromptu aurora scale. I was particularly pleased for Karina, as she had never previously experienced this extraordinary phenomenon and the somewhat disappointing display at Hornstrandir had not exactly lived up to her expectations, let alone the many professional images that she had probably made the mistake of looking at before travelling. We would ultimately savour two more almost equally intense performances before we were due to return home and after a brief visit to Fladrargljufur canyon early the next morning, we continued east along the coastline to Vatnajokull National Park, one of only three UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country. The national park incorporates all of the Vatnajokull glacier, which covers approximately 8% of the country and is the second largest icecap in Europe, if, that is, you include Russia's Severny Island glacier as part of Europe. Other than Vatnajokull itself, which I had arranged a tour on, the main reason for visiting the area is Jokulsarlon, a spectacular glacier lagoon fed by meltwater from the adjoining Breidamerkurjokull outlet glacier. Whilst unquestionably magnificent, Jokulsarlon basically exists as a result of global warming and if anyone remains in doubt regarding climate change, other than Donald Trump and the rest of his slavering Republican cronies, they should visit a lake that is now four times larger than it was less than fifty years ago. Jokulsarlon was not even exposed until 1934, when global temperatures began to rise and Breidamerkurjokull started to recede. At that stage Breidamerkurjokull was just 250 metres from the Atlantic Ocean and now it is almost eight kilometres away. Of course most visitors are not overly concerned by the environmental disaster they are inadvertently documenting and are far more interested in taking selfies with the pretty white and blue icebergs that calve from the adjoining glacier and float across the lake. The ice that they are so captivated by, for at least as long as it takes to post a photograph on social media, is more than a thousand years old, but there is no understanding that this glacier, or indeed any other, simply cannot survive another millennium. Although Jokulsarlon is not quite as exquisite during the winter months when everything is frozen solid and covered in snow, some of the loose ice drifts out to sea and is washed back on to what has become known as Diamond Beach. This is also a popular spot for pictures, with often multiple chunks of ice scattered across the shore, glistening like diamonds against the black volcanic sand. I was personally more interested in the seals, as Jokulsarlon also happens to be one of the best places in Iceland to watch seals and during the summer it is possible to take a boat trip on the lake and photograph them at reasonable distances. Both harbour and grey seals occur here, although harbour seals are more common and this was the only species that we were able to observe during our short stay. The rest of our time was devoted to our ice

cave tour, which involved a drive up onto Breidamerkurjokull and visits to two of the temporary caves that are carved by meltwater on the glacier during the summer months. Most visitors are expecting, or at least hoping, to enter a cave shimmering with vivid shades of blue, which is reasonable enough when you consider the alluring images that appear on every website offering these tours. The reality is slightly different and although our second cave was certainly blue in places, and the experience itself was undoubtedly interesting, for me the immense panorama from the top of the glacier was far more inspiring than the cave itself, particularly as it included another celebrated location from the HBO series ‘Game of Thrones’. For those who know the series, we were able to look down upon the frozen lake where the Night King, a character that does not even exist in George R.R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and

Fire' novels, kills Viserion, one of Daenerys Targaryen's three dragons. From Vatnajokull we were due to continue east to initially Djupivogur and then Breiddalsvik, both of which are good areas to observe reindeer. However, it is possible to encounter reindeer almost anywhere around the national park and I spotted a herd of five within a few minutes of leaving Jokulsarlon. Whilst it was getting dark and I was really only able to take a couple of reference shots, it was encouraging to see these iconic creatures ahead of schedule and I had arranged a tour for the next morning to hopefully get a little closer and take some better pictures. In reality the reindeer are actually fairly easy to see on your own, but I more wanted an opportunity to photograph them away from the road and to explore a little of what is an extremely scenic area. This would have been impossible in my own hire car, despite the fact that it was a four-wheel drive, and I therefore arranged a few hours with a local guide in her huge off-road vehicle, which was designed

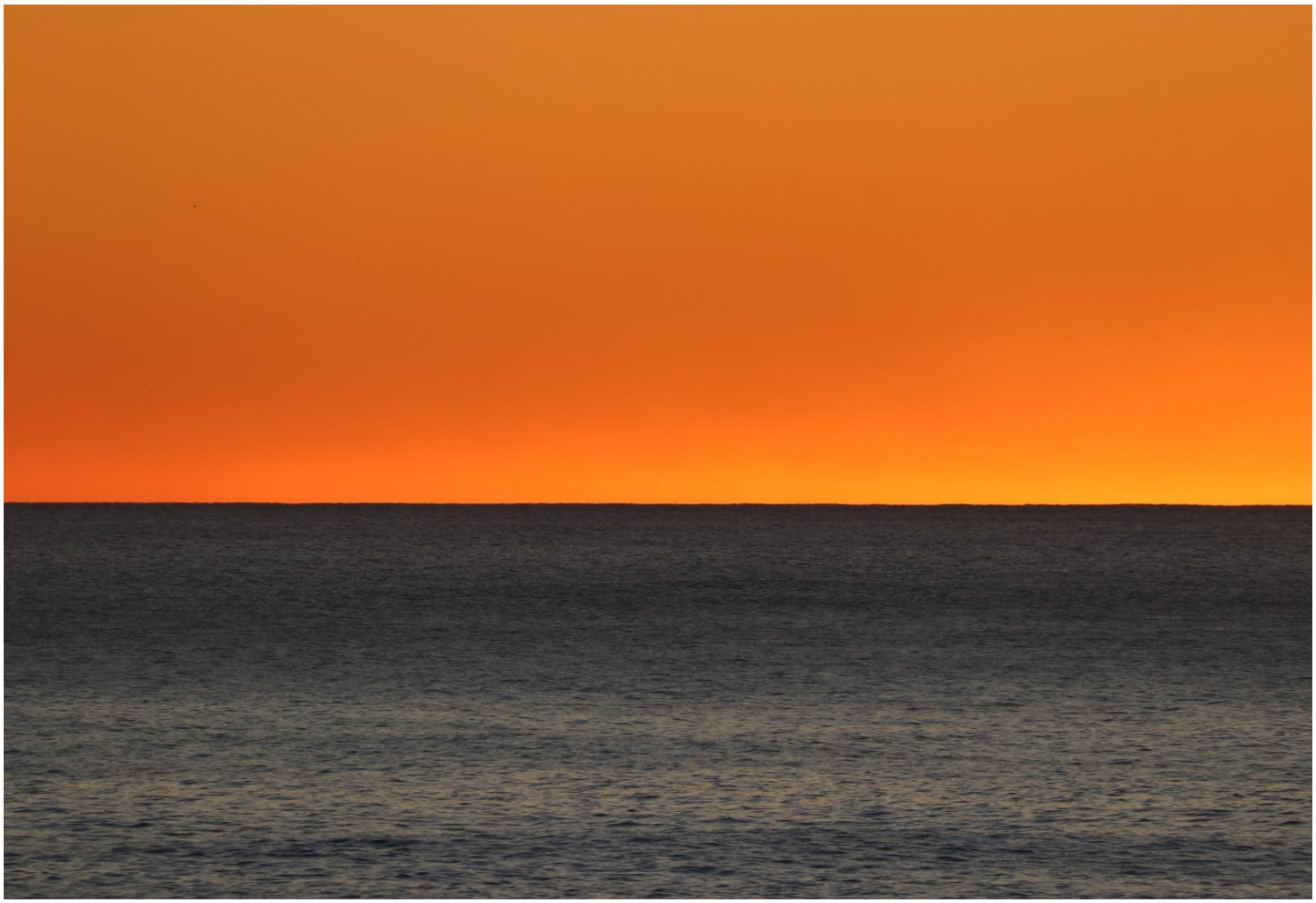
specifically for severe winter conditions and deep snow. The reindeer themselves are not native to Iceland and were introduced here in the late 18th century for farming purposes. Four herds were originally translocated from Finnmark in Norway and although many initially survived, reindeer herding never took off in the country and over the years three of the populations died off. Only the animals released in the Eastfjords region ultimately prospered and I was informed that there are currently around 6,000 reindeer in the area, although their numbers are strictly controlled in an intensive hunting season between the 15th of July and the 15th of September. We actually drove past several herds on the way to meet our guide and in all we were probably able to observe between 300 and 400 reindeer throughout the entire day, including a few at reasonably close quarters and one moderately large herd of perhaps 60 animals. I was glad that we had made the additional effort to reach these wild populations, not to mention a simply stunning area that relatively few visitors ever see, but I now had a drive back of almost 700 kilometres, which I would stretch across our final evening and a few hours the next morning before we were due to fly home. Whilst fairly exhausting after an already long day and an occasionally demanding tour, I have to admit that the journey back was made appreciably easier by two entirely distinct and spellbinding displays of the aurora borealis, the second of which was almost as spectacular as the performance we had watched in awe just two nights

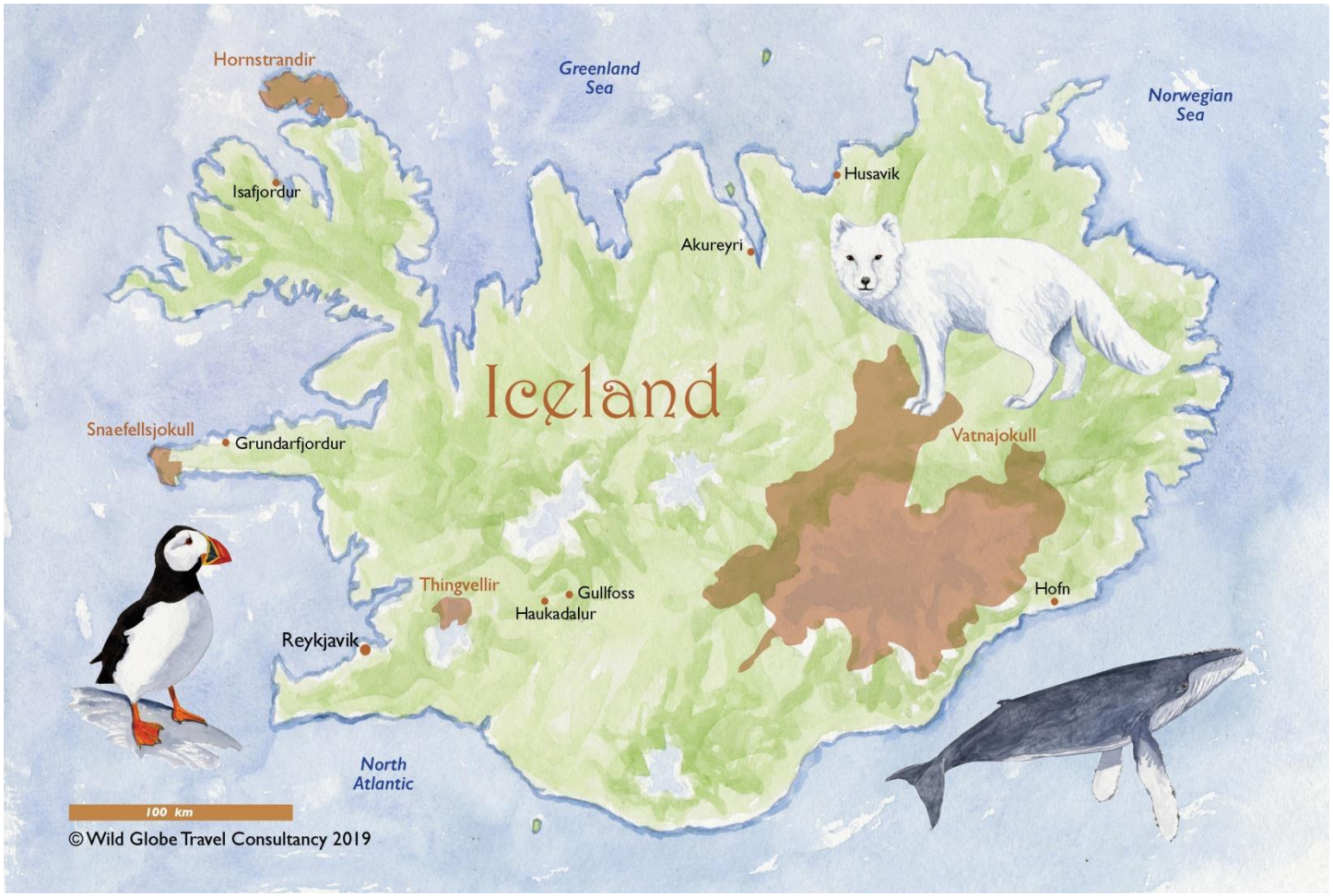
before. It was an unexpected and extraordinary way to finish a trip that had not been without difficulty in a country that is not without issues. Despite its ravishing primeval beauty and extremely low population, Iceland is the most sparsely populated nation in all of Europe, with approximately 364,000 people living in a country larger than Portugal, there is very little natural balance here and seemingly even less tolerance regarding the few wild species that occur. As I have already mentioned, the reindeer population is severely controlled and there is a thriving hunting industry that is even supported by the Icelandic Tourist Board. Hunts can be arranged to kill almost anything, from reindeer, Arctic fox, puffins and various seabirds to muskox in nearby Greenland. Reindeer you could shoot from the edge of the road through your car window and I have stood just metres from a dozen muskoxen with only a camera in my hand, so what sort of satisfaction can be obtained from killing these animals is difficult to imagine. The activity should

really just be called shooting or slaughtering, as the only hunting that actually takes place involves an individual with generally no thought or concern for their planet, browsing the internet to see which outfitters offer which defenceless animals to butcher. I have heard it suggested that as reindeer are an invasive species, their numbers need to be controlled for their own welfare, but in reality they are killed to protect the grazing land of hundreds of thousands of domestic sheep and it would be difficult to attempt to apply the same feeble excuse to the Arctic fox, which is Iceland's only native mammal and was here long before any humans settled on the island. In much the same way that the red fox has been persecuted in the British Isles, the Arctic fox is traditionally regarded as vermin in Iceland and killing these charming creatures has become almost a national pastime. As recently as 2017 The Environment Agency of Iceland was paying thousands of dollars to rural communities to kill foxes and although it is never fair to generalise about an entire people, it must say something about the national psyche when you cannot live in harmony with the only other land mammal in the country. There are obviously commercial factors involved, as I constantly read how ethical Icelanders are and how angry they get when tourists damage their sensitive moss, and yet the same people are selling Arctic fox pelts and seal furs at their main tourist sites, or at least they are not objecting to what to me is a thoroughly obscene practice. No one visiting Gullfoss or any of the country's tourist attractions should be subjected to dead animals hanging in the gift shops, particularly wild animals that should be receiving at least an element of protection. Despite the fact that their populations are far lower than they should be, particularly in terms of the grey and harbour seals that breed here, seals are still hunted in Iceland, both commercially and to protect the fishing industry. Polar bears receive even less consideration and any that are unfortunate enough to arrive on the island, and there have been five I believe in the last decade, are instantly and indiscriminately killed. This is actual national policy, regardless of the fact that polar bears are in decline across much of their range and that most Icelanders expect people in other countries to live alongside these iconic predators. Until recently, when Japan turned their collective and honourable back on both scientific opinion and common decency, Iceland was also one of only two countries to ignore the 1985 International Whaling Commission ban on commercial whaling, the other being Norway. To their immense discredit, Norway was actually the first nation to violate the international treaty in 1993 and Iceland followed some thirteen years later. Between the two, thousands of whales have subsequently been slaughtered and in February 2019 the Icelandic fisheries minister announced that 209 fin whales, the second largest creature on earth, and 217 minke whales, could be killed each year until 2023, so basically in excess of 2,000 whales in a five-year period. I guess that we should probably not be surprised, as the Icelandic government is not exactly known for its ethical approach to either conservation or the environment and in recent years ministers have basically ignored the fact that pregnant whales have been killed, as well as at least two blue whales, which is completely illegal even within a country that generally supports this type of atrocity. Whale meat has never even been a traditional dish in Iceland and the vast majority of the butchered minke whale meat is sold to tourists in restaurants and more or less all of the fin whales killed are exported to Japan. More people pay to look for whales in Iceland every year than actually live in the country and already whale watching generates far more income than commercial whaling. This is partly why I persist in visiting countries that

continue to behave so irresponsibly and why I encourage others to do so, as it is vital that between us we prove that there is another way and that these majestic leviathans, and all wild animals in general, are worth far more alive than dead. Some locals are at least trying to make a difference and IceWhale, or the Icelandic Whale Watching Association, has launched an initiative intended to finally end commercial whaling in Iceland. Their 'Meet Us Don't Eat Us' campaign, in association with the International Fund for Animal Welfare, is largely aimed at tourists, who they are asking to only use whale friendly restaurants that do not serve whale meat. Although it is certainly the case that the vast majority of whale meat is consumed by tourists, as most Icelanders are only too keen to point out, it is equally true that these transitory visitors are not actually killing the whales or profiting from their horrific deaths. That distinction belongs to Icelanders alone and if their nation was not one of only three countries on earth to disregard the international ban on commercial whaling, not to mention any vestige of human decency, tourists would not be noticing whale dishes on the menu and ordering them, however similarly despicable that is. Whilst obviously I fully endorse what is a hugely important campaign, and indeed I made sure that the whale watching operator I used was a member of IceWhale, it still does not make a great deal of sense to blame foreign visitors for a problem that clearly originates in Iceland and is actively supported by the Icelandic government, not when there are so many other environmental outrages taking place in your country and you are selling wild animal pelts in your tourist centres, alongside colourful painted puffins and comical trolls. Why would the majority of often ill-informed and culturally unaware tourists even stop to consider the ecological or moral consequences of eating whale meat, when you are also encouraging them to buy dead foxes and dead seals? Removing the domestic demand for whale meat would undoubtedly be a significant step in the right direction from both a commercial and ethical perspective, but to entirely eradicate whaling, it would probably be necessary to address a wide range of associated conservation issues and why the people of Iceland have no real affinity with much of their wildlife. Certainly there does not appear to be any collective will to protect even the whales that migrate to these shores and although many of these issues exist all over the world, particularly regarding hunting, the problems are far more apparent in a land where there are so few major species and most of those are openly persecuted. I guess this is probably why Icelanders are so quick to draw attention to the fact that it is mainly foreigners who consume whale meat, as it must be unbelievably difficult to accept that you either actively support, or are at least part of, one of only three regimes on the planet that maintains that it is entirely reasonable to kill whales for commercial gain. If you would like further details regarding either the 'Meet Us Don't Eat Us' campaign or whale watching in Iceland, please visit the IceWhale website (www.icewhale.is). There is a petition that you can sign online, registering your objection to whaling with Iceland's Minister of Fisheries, and details of all of the companies that have joined the Icelandic Whale Watching Association and agreed to operate within its code of conduct, which is also featured on the website. For my part, I am delighted to support this enormously significant initiative and to continue to visit what I have always regarded as one of the most alluring destinations on earth. I just hope that one day when I return, it will be to a country that has grown to value its foxes as well as its whales.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Arctic Fox	Vulpes lagopus	Multiple sightings of at least three different animals at Hornstrandir and a single fox at night near Gullfoss.
2	Reindeer	Rangifer tarandus	Several hundred in generally small herds from Vatnajokull National Park to Breiddalsvik.
3	Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	An individual swimming in the Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon.
4	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus	Lone animal in a fjord on the drive from Isafjordur.
5	Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae	Solitary animal on a boat tour out of Grundarfjordur.





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