

Dispatch from Iceland

August 15, 2008

Too Perfect for Words



Reykjavik City Hall

It's been a while since I've been in contact via these dispatches. I regretfully delayed my plans for further time in Canada's North, after returning early from my sabbatical in January. Lured back to Toronto by the chance to work on a curriculum project for Ryerson's Faculty of Arts, I am now spending a year as interim chair of English.

Still, boreal dreams linger, fueled by several weeks of summer vacation – first in Iceland, accompanied by my Australian friend, Debbie Brown, at a David Hume conference; then Finland, where Debbie and I are staying with a Finnish friend of Debbie's near the Baltic port of Pori; and finally Greenland, which I'll be doing solo. You can expect one more dispatch in the days ahead.

For the moment, it's Iceland's charms that are front and centre. In a country so scenically splendid, and with inhabitants so affable, egalitarian and literate, what's not to like? It would take an extraordinarily blasé visitor to leave feeling no hint of admiration at this country's unique attributes.

My own admiration is mixed with relief that there are at least a few aspects of the place that do not catch my fancy. The most telling, at least in my eyes, is an antiseptic regularity that, for a Canadian used to living in a highly varied city, can seem a little dull. For me, this is best captured by Iceland's contemporary architecture. While many building interiors turn minimalist design into an art form, the exterior Legoland effect preferred by most Icelandic planners is notably lacking in charm, especially given its placement on a landscape virtually devoid of trees. As for historical buildings, they are an extremely rare commodity: when your main building material for centuries was turf, durable architectural monuments are in short supply.



Minimalism as an Art Form



Reykjanes Moonscape

taking up a good third of the ride.

After I jumped into a cab and entered the central business district, it soon became clear why Reykjavik has developed its reputation for fashionable coolness. Fancily appointed clubs and bars are everywhere. Thanks to the heady music credentials fostered by hometown acts such as pop icon Björk, and burnished by savvy tourist marketing, summertime Reykjavik attracts a set of well-heeled youthful partiers most in evidence between the twilight hours of midnight and 4 am. Midday sightings are less common, though I did have several glimpses of the hipster species, easily identified by their pallid complexions, zoned-out expressions, and “I Partied in Reykjavik and Woke up in Turkey” T-shirts. It seems municipal officials are still intent on encouraging this phenomenon. Just before Keflavik’s departure lounges, exiting visitors are handed surveys asking “Does the slogan ‘pure energy’ capture your experience of Reykjavik?” My response: “God willing, never.”

For more conventionally minded travelers, which included me and most of my conference colleagues, the central district was hardly mesmerizing. Its physical situation is attractive enough – occupying a slope leading to the waterfront – but store prices are predictably exorbitant, and the public museums small and uninspiring. The private galleries are more engaging, their inventory dominated by a style best dubbed Icelandic Moderne. Most arresting, at least for this observer, was an updated *Last Supper* (see below), with a tableside collection of contemporary-looking Icelandic youth. It nicely suggested, I thought, the favoured status this new generation of Icelanders must feel as they join a society in the throes of such intoxicatingly rapid change. After all, there’s something wondrous about the trajectory of this Nordic outpost, once cut off from the rest of the world and with an overwhelmingly rural population steeped in the past, which has become the most urban of countries (with two-thirds of its inhabitants living in Reykjavik alone), its economy dominated by sectors such as hi-tech, tourism and finance.

Björktown

Still, I wasn’t quite prepared for just how worldly and cosmopolitan this country has become – my impressions excessively shaped, I now realize, by vague notions of northern isolation and rural insularity. Reykjavik, where I landed, was a particular eye-opener. Its international airport, a one-time American airbase named Keflavik, is perched at the end of the Reykjanes Peninsula. The 50 km bus ride into town takes one past lunar-looking volcanic landscapes, set off by panoramic views of the mountain range that stretches up the western coast. The city itself extends far into the lava-cropped desert, its sprawling modern suburbs



Reykjavik’s Shopping District



Icelandic Moderne

Based on the most recent global rankings of the United Nations Development Program, Icelanders now have the world's highest standard of living. Most are well educated and widely travelled, and so fluently bilingual that I could detect not the slightest sign of mental effort as people working in stores, or even those I happened to speak to on the street, switched from Icelandic into English. The young people I encountered, however, evinced more than a touch of hauteur when dealing with a tourist such as myself. As much as they might disdain foreigners, they seemed as obsessed by American culture as young people in any other country. In one coffee shop, I took great delight in overhearing a conversation among a group of youthful locals, held entirely in English, and laced with frequent references to trips abroad. The purpose of these forays appeared to have been primarily to round out each speaker's pop-culture education, and from the way various foreign experiences were described, it was clear which continent – North America, not Europe – now holds the cachet trump card.



A Reykjavik Theatre Poster

From Tropics to Tolkien



From Caribbean Beach

touch of extraterrestrial whimsy, as one savours the delicious paradox that this tropical-feeling place is just a short hike from the Arctic Circle. Hokey, but effective: no wonder it is Iceland's biggest tourist attraction.

During the conference, our group (about 90, counting both Humeans and hangers-on) traveled halfway around the country, using the single highway that runs north along the western coast to the shores of the Arctic and east to yet another evocative landscape – a volcanic plain around an inland body of water known as Lake Mývatn, which features a fantasy-land of lava craters, hoodoo-like rock pillars, and eerily shaped peaks seemingly straight from the dinosaur age.



To Jurassic Savannah



And Middle Earth

I admit I felt no great remorse leaving behind such dime-a-dozen metropolitan airs. My initial escape, just before the conference got underway, was back out on the Reykjanes Peninsula, not far from Keflavik airport, to visit Blue Lagoon. Here one can bathe in pearly runoff water from a geothermal power plant that serves the greater Reykjavik region, while plastering supposedly therapeutic silica-infused mud over one's torso. These days, the Lagoon's major function seems to be to allow visitors to get into a beachside mood while quaffing Caribbean cocktails poured at the mid-pool bar (see photo right). The surrounding scenery adds just the right

The *Jurassic Park* movies are not the only ones that could have used Iceland as a film location. So too the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as evidenced by a chain of peaks we passed, along a lonely northern section of the highway. Even if Tolkien is said to have been influenced more by continental Norse sagas than the Icelandic ones, I can't help but think that otherworldly settings such as this were in his imagination as he envisioned the craggy summits of Middle Earth.



Arctic Toytown

Back of Beyond

Certainly such views are what most present-day tourists come here for. In my books, though, it was the communities we stayed in that were most memorable. Near Mývatn we spent two nights in Iceland's main Arctic port, Akureyri, a onetime picturesque fishing village that has managed to preserve its quaintness during its recent modernization. The highlight here was a banquet at a local restaurant sponsored by the conference organizers. If we hadn't already been persuaded, this event would have convinced us that tales of bad Icelandic food should be relegated to the dustbin

of history. Our hosts' proof of this fact required a five-and-a-half hour extravaganza of seven courses and innumerable drinks – each course including a theoretically infused mini-lecture by our slow-food-activist chef. It's a good thing that Humeans, and the sorts who accompany them, are such hardened gourmands. Otherwise, the 2 am sendoff by our hosts would have necessitated turfing our sodden forms out on the sidewalk in wheelbarrows.

But most memorable was our two-night stay at a small agricultural college named Hólar, a few Arctic fjords west of Akureyri. Part of a 900-year-old church complex in a hidden green valley, it occupies a religious site that played a prominent role in Icelandic history – the location of the country's first printing press and a centre of old-world Catholic dissent during Iceland's shift to Lutheranism. The place evokes its past with ascetic-looking dorm rooms, a communal dining room, and a staff (including a Friar Tuck chef with a penchant for personally picking or killing virtually everything on our plates) committed to adapting age-old local traditions to the present. The bucolic setting helps, of course. In a mini-Eden at the edge of the world, it's easy to imagine you've stepped out of time – as long as you ignore the presence of computer-age necessities such as cell phone reception and wireless access.



The Bustling Hólar Campus

Hólar's business manager told me in passing that foreign scholars are welcome to apply to stay there for several months at highly subsidized rates. "You just have to write to the bishop," she said. "Isn't Hólar just for agricultural scientists?" I asked. "Not at all," she replied. "One of our bishops was Iceland's Leonardo. That gives us lots of latitude." It won't surprise you to hear that when I do fantasize about returning to Iceland, it's not to go back to Reykjavik or the spots of exotic scenery we saw. It's to retrace my steps to this isolated idyll, truly in the middle of nowhere.



View toward the Arctic from Hólar