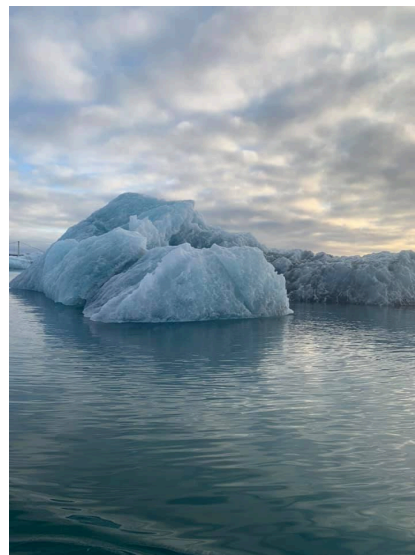


## ICELAND WITH INTREPID – OCT 2019

On arrival into Keflavik airport, I took the Fly Bus to the Hallgrimskirkja church which was only about a 5 minute walk to our meeting point at Guest House Aurora. Tonight, we all agreed that as a group we would go out for dinner to get to know each other. We went to Loki Restaurant which is overlooking the Hallgrimskirkja church and serves traditional Icelandic cuisine including fermented shark, lamb soup and Icelandic fish.

Our first travel day is spent doing in the infamous Golden Circle route. We started at Thingvillir National Park where the North America and Eurasian tectonic plates meet. Next stop was the Geysir hot springs and Stokkur with boiling hot pools and exploding Geysers. We stopped at 3 waterfalls on the Golden Circle route – Gullfoss, one of Iceland’s largest; Seljalandsfoss – a gorgeous falling waterfall that you can walk behind; and Skogafoss – falling from an impressive 60 metres. We spent the night at a cute little farm guest house called Solheimahjaleiga which is family owned and very comfortable. The whole group agreed that this was a highlighted accommodation as the owners were very welcoming and the rooms were spacious and comfortable.

Our second morning we got up early to beat the crowds and headed straight to the beautiful black beach of Reynisfjara with its impressive basalt columns, before heading to the ancient lava fields. Our next stop was the gorgeous Fjadrargljufur canyon, which was simply breathtaking. A few more hours of driving and we arrived at the magnificent Skaftafellsjokull glacier, before heading around to Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon which was a real highlight of Iceland for me. Blue waters where curious harbour seals play and watch nearby tourist. We took a short cruise through the lagoon, dotted with floating icebergs from the surrounding glaciers, which float out to the nearby Atlantic, leaving icebergs on the nearby black sand beach; better known as Diamond Beach. This evening was spent at an ocean front guesthouse called Gerdi Guesthouse where I was able to try Skyr Kata which is similar to cheesecake, only made from the local Skyr yoghurt.



This morning we had the option of spending the morning at leisure or enduring the ice-cold winds and rain by hiking to a glacier and through the ice-caves. I decided to take on the challenge and went for the glacier. We hiked across black volcanic rocks and across flowing rivers in freezing rain and howling winds to get to the caves and it was certainly worth it. Inside, the ice shimmered intense

blue in a range of shapes and patterns that photos couldn't do justice. We had a few hours' drive to Seydisfjordur which took us on a drive through snow before arriving in the gorgeous town where we stayed for the night at Studio Guest House. Of course, a visit to Seydisfjordur isn't complete without a photo of the gorgeous blue church on the rainbow road.



Our Tuesday started with Hengifoss – which translates to Hanging Waterfall. It was a gorgeous waterfall, surrounded by basalt columns. Today, the snow, rain and wind had all disappeared and we were left with a warm sunny day! So, the hike to Hengifoss was quite a hot and strenuous one. Our cheeky guide ensured us it wasn't that hard and was very proud of us for all reaching the final lookout point. We were rewarded with our hard work in the afternoon, with a stop at the gorgeous Vok hot baths. This stunning bath is quite new to Iceland, so it is still very secluded and quiet, which was relaxing. The view overlooks the surrounding lake and mountains. For those brave enough, they could choose to leave the comfort of the 38° baths and leap into the 7° waters of the lake! Or for those who enjoy their comfort (like me) you can head to the swim up bar and enjoy an ice-cold beer instead. I was hit with a bit of a culture shock here however, as before you head into the hot baths, you are required to shower and wash yourself and this is done in a gender specific, communal shower room!

Tonight's stay was one of my favourites! We stayed at Modrudur farm in a small farmhouse. Our guide told us to ensure we kept the front door closed so that the goats don't come inside. I thought that was the most ridiculous statement until a goat trotted into our front room and tried to head-butt his way in. This gave us all a good laugh!

Of course, first stop this morning was another waterfall – Dettifoss! Europe's most powerful waterfall. Second stop of the day was at the Namafjall Hveriv boiling mud pools. These mud pools reach temperatures of above 100°C and create sulphur deposits, so it didn't smell too good, but it was an incredible scene with steaming pockets, colourful sands and boiling mud. We had a quick stop at Skutustadagigar – which is a cluster of dormant volcanic craters – before heading onto Dimmuborgir lava fields. While at the Dimmuborgir lava fields, our guide told us all about the 13 Yule

Lads which act as an Icelandic Santa Clause and live in a cave in these lava fields. We did get to visit the cave these trolls supposedly live and it was interesting to learn about the Icelandic Christmas Culture which includes celebrating over a period of 13 days (one day for each Yule Lad and one present from each) and enjoying a Christmas feast of smoked lamb with cabbage with the family. Tonight, we stayed at Narfastadir Guesthouse which was located on a remote farm.

No prizes for guessing how our day started today. Of course! Godafoss – the waterfall of the gods! We headed on to Akureyri which is known as the capital of the north. Is it a charming little town, but certainly the largest town we had visited since Reykjavik with a gorgeous church on the hill and a pleasant centre lined with shops, cafes and bakery. We headed to the old fishing town of Siglufjorhur for lunch, before visiting the basalt causeway at Hofsos and Elephant Rock (Hvitsekur). Our guesthouse tonight was called Gauksmyri which is an Icelandic horse farm, that also own the local restaurant Sjavarborg, located in town about 10 minutes' drive away. Tonight, we were blessed with the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) which started at about 10pm. We stayed up until about 12.30am photographing the lights dancing in the sky.



Our first stop today was a waterfall – Kolugljufur – however, before walking across the frosted ground to this gorgeous “Foss”, we did stay back at the hotel a bit longer to pat the Icelandic horses. Our next stop was at the Borgarfjordur volcano crater, followed by (another) waterfall – Kirkjufellsfoss. Game of Throne fans would recognise this location by the shape of the arrow mountain in front of the waterfall. We then got to spend a little bit of time at the Djupalonssandur black beach where the shipwreck of the Trawler Epine lay rest, before heading to see the troll sculpture at Arnarstapi. This afternoon was spent with a sunset horse ride before enjoying a home cooked meal at Guest House Kast. The Northern Lights started early tonight and could be seen from 9pm.



Today was a sad day, as it was our last day as a group! We started the day with a visit to The Church in Budir, located on a cliff overlooking the ocean, this church is unique because it is painted black, opposed to the traditional white Icelandic churches. Of course, we couldn't finish the tour without a visit to a waterfall! We visited Hraunfossar and Barnafoss before heading back into Reykjavik and taking a walking tour of the city.

Overall, I loved everything about my time in Iceland and our tour with Intrepid. Our guide was professional, knowledgeable, flexible and funny. He did his best to alter the itinerary to suit us and beat the crowds. All the accommodation was clean and comfortable, and the recommended restaurants were delicious and reasonably priced. I would absolutely recommend Iceland with Intrepid to anyone who is wanting to see all the major sights, as well as authentic Iceland experiences as the locals do. I learnt so much about the Icelandic history, culture and way of life and had an immense amount of fun at the same time.

