

— OUR EPIC TOUR OF — ICELAND & GREENLAND

A REVIEW OF CHRIS BRAY'S PHOTO TOUR

By Kate Hipsley



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ICELAND

It is fantastic flying over Iceland before you visit it, as you can get the sense of the country—the grandeur, scale and perspective. We had a great view on our flight into Reykjavik, including the glorious patterns the glaciers made in the south-east coast of Iceland as they cut through the mountains and out to sea.

We had some time to explore the capital city before starting our [Chris Bray Photography tour](#). Reykjavik has a beautiful setting on a bay with a gorgeous high mountain on the opposite side of the bay. The housing design is very attractive. Timber and iron. Decorative. And with so many flowers everywhere! Hallgrims church is a stunning structure towering over the city. There is some

very modern and attractive architecture as well, for example the Playhouse which won a design award, and the Sun Voyager sculpture which successfully captures both the modern and the historical essence of the country.

We saw funky cafes, eateries, street art and public sculptures. The city is full of tourists—maps in hand. Travel pants and waterproof jackets are de rigeur for wearing around town.

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It is so easy to walk around. Everyone is so very friendly. Reminded us of Canada—hearing “you’re welcome” everywhere we go! We made a visit to the photography museum—a lovely exhibition by Sigurgeir Sigurjónsson called *Metamorphosis*.

The days are so very long! And the weather—it’s changeable—cold (comparatively) and rainy mostly at this time of year!

On the Monday night, we met the group. Our hosts are Chris and Jess Bray who were very welcoming. Our group is 8 people all up, plus our hosts and guides/drivers. And there is now a sense of relief of not having to be on the ball about our own accommodation, meals, touring and flight arrangements! Our entire time here is to be spent in the southern part of

Iceland. And on the Tuesday, we left town with Haukur and Freyr, our trusty drivers/guides.

FIRE

While we didn’t actually see any active volcanoes (thankfully) we did at least see the evidence of the fiery volcanic activity frequently affecting this country! The soil colour is dark everywhere you look around the countryside, and even the sand is a dark grey/brown colour. This is literally a growing country in area due to the volcanic activity.

We drove through so many volcanic areas including a trip to the Laki lava fields. This lava outpouring is reported to have “changed the world” back in the 1700’s. Apparently, this lava and ash event devastated crops and food



production in Europe as well as Iceland. Laki covers 1% of Iceland. The rock and mound shapes are so varied and extensive—most of it is covered in a “sickly” coloured green moss. Like a fungus growing on a Petrie dish! Some volcanoes don’t fulfil their full potential, but do change the landscape as well. When the land is covered in snow, and there is some activity below, it can result in a softly and rounded shaped mountain arising under the snow.

We spent some time photographing a lovely triangular shaped mountain that was created thus. And yet in other areas we saw massive craters, evidence of great force, and now mostly filled with water. It becomes evident how long ago each event occurred by the amount of vegetation present on the dark brown soil, or perhaps more correctly “grit”.

What stays with me is the sheer variety of landscapes this effect produces, from dark desolate looking areas, to the mossy mountains and mounds. Trees however, are virtually entirely missing from the landscape.

ICE

We had a closer up view of the glacier in a doors-off helicopter experience. The sheer



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THE SHEER SCALE AND
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scale and magnitude of the ice mass had our jaws dropping and cameras clicking. Because of the volcanic ash, there are so many black and white layers and patterns to see. And then of course that gorgeous glacial blue colour evident in and around the glacier as a contrast. Where there is so much ice, there will be lots and lots of water!

We drove through a very large area that turns into the largest river in the world when the volcano further inland (under a glacier) becomes active every 80-90 years or so. It is due again soon, as it is 99 years since it last went.... And there are so many waterfalls to see that stunned we Australians not used to the sheer volume of water this country holds. The waterfalls are everywhere. Visible from the road, or hidden away in remote locations. Tall, short, straight lines, doubles, triples and

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OF WATER!

more, and then there are the curving beauties. Stunning amounts of water continuously falling over the brown rocky escarpments and providing beauty for the eyes (and challenges for the cameras to record that beauty.)

HORSES

The Icelandic horse is a small, stocky and robust breed of horse developed in Iceland after horses were originally imported by the Norse settlers in the 9th and 10th Century.

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WE WERE PRIVILEGED TO
SEE HORSE RIDING GROUPS
OUT ON THE REMOTE ROADS
AND TRACKS.



Icelandic law now prevents horses from being imported into the country and exported animals are not allowed to return to reduce the chance of disease to the horse population. This horse has two extra gaits in addition to the typical walk, trot, and canter/gallop commonly displayed by other breeds.

We were privileged to see horse riding groups out on the remote roads and tracks on three separate occasions during the week, and witnessed the “pace” gait that they are famous for. There are always extra or spare horses in the group, and we relished the opportunity to get that one special photo of the horses at full pace, showing off their gorgeous manes!

PUFFINS & DIFFERENT BIRD GROUPS

Puffins are present in massive numbers in colonies on the Iceland coast during the summer. These iconic (and some would say adorable!) birds spend a lot of the day fishing at sea to feed their youngsters and then head back to the nests on the cliff tops to deliver the fish. Cape Ingolfshofdi was the place that we went to view and photograph the puffins.

After heading up the large (black) sandhill, we reached the undulating grassy and rocky headland. Would we see them? First, we spotted one or two, then more, and before we knew it, there were literally thousands of puffins visible

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on the cliff tops and perched on miniscule grassy ledges on the cliff face itself.

The splashes of white were what made them visible in those vast numbers, against the green grass and the rocky cliff face. And then the sight of hundreds of puffins soaring, flying and diving in the air beside and above the cliff face.

Then came the challenge to get the great puffin photo—flying, standing in groups, or alone, perhaps with a mouthful of fish! It was great to get some advice on how to engage “bird mode” on the camera, and try to track the speedy little fellas! It was windy for us all when we were up there, and I did wonder how the little birds weren’t being blown off the ledges, but in fact





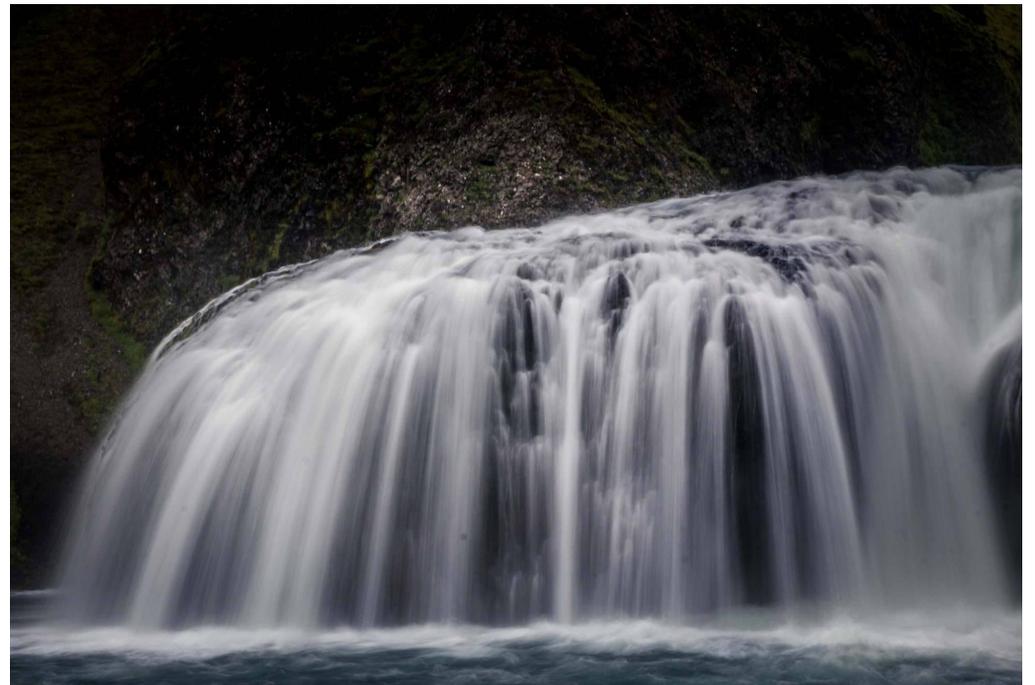
some of them did. They just handled it more gracefully than we would have!

A quick note on a different group of birds we saw, the ptarmigan, which Haukur referred to as “stupid birds”. I have a very funny memory from the day when a large group of them was spotted walking (waddling?) rapidly towards the river. We were so sure they were headed for the river and we would then be in a position to photograph them as they swam down the river. We all raced out of the vehicles, running towards to the river, cameras at the ready; only

for the birds to actually cross to an island and then all the way across the river and head far away from us. Not such stupid birds perhaps?

ALL GOOD THINGS COME TO AN END

On my last day in Iceland, I got quite emotional at the thought of leaving. We so loved being in Iceland; the people and the sights (which I can't do full justice to with my words). Sad to leave, however we were heading for Greenland, so more excitement was awaiting us.



GREENLAND

“I am going to Greenland” I told my friends. I was visiting there as part of a photography tour with Chris Bray Photography. Nobody I know had ever visited Greenland, and I had no pre-conceived ideas about what Greenland would be like. I only knew that it was probably as far away from Australia as one could actually travel!

After spending only a very small amount of time flying across the island and travelling in a very small area of the west coast, I must say that I was completely blown away by this incredible place. Vast, uncompromising, mostly covered in ice, and with only a very small amount of the land being green (thereby justifying its name?)

From the flight over the country, we could virtually only see black and white—the vast majority being the white of the snow and ice, with a few dark mountain tops visible through that white. So it was a surprise to suddenly come upon an area around Ilulissat with brown and green, a town and an airport! Having said



that though, I can't remember a minute spent in Greenland where ice was not potentially visible.

The glaciers and icebergs are a sight to behold. We have now walked beside them, sailed near them, and around them, flown over them in a small aircraft and in a helicopter. And every time, our jaws drop when we see the scale of it all. Majestic, menacing and moving all the time. To actually understand that scale, it helps to view them with a boat in the foreground to understand the immensity of it all.

And the colours! Sitting on a balcony of the Eqi Glacier eco lodge, overlooking the glacier wall, the water was calm, with a chalky blue opaque appearance. Surrounding the multitude of icebergs was a very pretty glass green colour. The glaciers are mostly white, with that glacial blue evident in the cracks and

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fissures. And some brown on top of course. The surrounding land is mostly rugged granite hills and mountains, with some green plant life. And there are some flowers! (The only down side to this location is the mosquitoes. Bug spray doesn't really do the job here— a bug net is needed on the head!)

We can hear the noises that the glacier makes; groans and cracks and rolling thunder noises come from it almost constantly. Every time we hear a long or sustained noise we turn to the



glacier wall to check if the glacier is calving, however the noise only reaches us several seconds after the event, hence we mostly miss the sight of the ice falling and splashing. Large calving events can cause local tsunamis here, and there are warning signs and advice not to go near the water's edge as the terrain is very steep, and one only has 2 minutes to get in to the safe zone.

THE LIGHT

The ever-constant feature of Greenland at this time of year. A light day and dark night are a permanent feature back home in Australia, but here, it is currently daylight all the time. The sun has just started to set for a number of minutes at some stage each “night”, but

even then, it is still light! Sleeping has been difficult as a result, and even more so here, although self-inflicted! Because the glacier is so mesmerising, we decided to leave the blinds open all “night” as we can see it from our bed. I think we were awake at least every 2 hours to look at it and just soak up the experience.

The other highlights we have enjoyed in Greenland include seeing the colourful towns and villages. Apparently, all of the buildings and homes were originally painted a darkish red, and the government buildings still are (schools, hospitals etc). But at some stage in the last 100 years, the tradition has evolved for all houses to be painted a different colour. It makes for a very bright and scenic appearance.

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TOWN FOLK

We met a local man, Julian, originally from France, who has found that Greenland is where he wants to be, and it is where he feels “right”. He now lives here, and lives the Greenlandic life, which includes hunting and fishing.

You have to admire the folk that live here. Dark all day in winter and the freezing weather conditions, so very foreign to Australian folk! To go out hunting for a week or two, they use dog sleds. Julian has 15 Greenlandic dogs. The blood line and the health of this breed is protected by not allowing other dogs into Greenland. And if a local dog is taken overseas, it is never allowed back in. Julian showed us his dogs, which were all quite

friendly and affectionate. Julian also told us about the differences between the Alaskan and Greenlandic dog teams (in Alaska, the dogs go two by two, while here, they go 5 or 10 abreast). He also showed us some sleds and how they “drive” them, not by standing on the back of the sled, but by sitting on it.

WILDLIFE

Whales and seals are plentiful in Greenland and we did see several humpback whales when we were on our midnight cruise amongst the icebergs the other *night*. And one curious seal popped its head up amongst the ice slurry near the glacier wall yesterday, checking us



out. Muskox apparently also abound in this area, and although we have eaten muskox, we are yet to see one. (The muskox skin keeps you very warm!)

NEW FOOD

I have tried new foods here that I have never eaten before—halibut sashimi, whale skin, dried musk ox and wolf fish skin cooked so that it was like thin crackling. All very tasty! The locally sourced foods are mostly protein based, as all vegetables are imported. But they do use some of the plants in their diet as either nutritional supplements or flavour enhancers. For example, our crème brulee dessert was flavoured with local thyme. Also tasty!

IS IT POSSIBLE TO OVERDOSE ON THE COLOUR BLUE?

I think I just have. The blue sky, the colour of the water, the blue in the glacial icebergs... what a glorious sight! We left Eqi lodge via boat “taxi” and headed to Ilimanaq. What an experience to zoom past the glacier again, see the enormous icebergs, experiencing again the lovely colour palate of white, green and the stunning blue while watching those icebergs shedding ice into the sea or melting under the sun by forming blue lakes on their tops and sending waterfalls over their sides. (All the while, watching the bird life, keeping an eye out for whales and seals!)

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WATCHING THOSE ICEBERGS
SHEDDING ICE INTO THE SEA!



ACCOMMODATION

We stayed in another eco lodge. Brand new this year. The lodges sit above a gorgeous little bay, with a rocky beach and clear blue and green coloured water; looking out to sea, and wait for it... yes more icebergs.

This was initially a whaling village—about 60-80 people live here—but now it is capitalising on tourism to maintain their town.



Best wishes to the people in the village of Iliminaq—we really enjoyed staying here with its stunning accommodation and fantastic meals.

CONCLUSION

Discussion over lunch on our last day in Greenland was what superlatives we could use that haven't already been used, to describe our experience here over the past week.

Chris Bray came up with “epic” and I like it. We have had an epic time.



CHRIS BRAY

PHOTOGRAPHY

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