

Dan and Martin's Iceland Trip, July 2000

Fri, Jul 7

We left JFK at about 9pm yesterday and arrived in Keflavik at around 6 this morning. I hadn't checked the arrangements 'til just before we left and when I did, I found we had a room reserved in Reykjavik last night and were to catch the 8:30 bus to Dick Philips' Youth Hostel at Fljotsdalur today. I called and canceled the room and tried to get one for tonight but there were none available.

When we got our bags and cleared immigration, I discovered the Flybus was on strike, but four people were looking for two more to share a taxi, so we did that. We got to the bus terminal just before 8 and I called the Youth Hostel to confirm. We found the right bus and I fell asleep. Fortunately, Dan stayed awake and woke me when we reached Hvollsvolur. Paul, Dick's partner, the one who leads the tours, met us in a temperamental converted Russian ex-military van – he said it had already started once that day and might not do so again - and drove us to the Youth Hostel.

We felt less tired after a meal of haddock and potatoes and walked up the hill behind the hostel. The clouds are very low and it rained when we were as high as we went. We followed deep gorges up the hill and saw a snow bridge that had formed when snow slid down. There were a few sheep but most had been taken up to the summer pastures in the interior a few weeks ago. Each parish has its own grazing area up there.

The hostel is maybe a hundred feet above a plain at the bottom of the valley. The gorges in the hills opposite still have snow. A river meanders down the center of the plain and we'll go visit it tomorrow. Now, we're drying out.

I found Ernest Vesey's book about gyrfalcons in Dick's library. Falcons were what first interested me in Iceland. But now, Dan would like to play dominoes, so I'll write more later.

Sat, Jul 8

I woke at 9 this morning and noticed that Dan was still asleep. Next time I woke, it was 11 and he'd been up since 9:30.

We climbed Thorolesfell this afternoon, 534 meters, and the sun was out so we saw that we had only gone a short way yesterday. We're both surprised by how green the land is, and by the many streams and waterfalls. There's still snow in sheltered areas higher up. In some of the flat areas, very thick moss grows. Dan lay on it. He also collected a big bag full of lava rocks.

A couple from Massachusetts is staying here. They're retired and traveling by tandem bicycle. She's 70 and he's a couple of years younger. She has an artificial hip. They have a folding tandem with a carrying case for shipping and they leave the case somewhere when they arrive. He advised me to try hardfiske, which is like beef jerky but made of dried cod.

The main meal of the day in Iceland is mid-day. Ernest Vesey says it's inconvenient for hikers because they only get a small breakfast and a skimpy supper. Judy, the wife of Paul the tour leader, cooked lamb today, not one she had known personally, she said.

The growing season is very short although the daylight is so long that things grow visibly from day to day. Some plants, such as peppers, enjoy the light, but tomatoes need eight hours of darkness, so the greenhouses have shades. There are government forests, which are small, and grain plots, but it's not likely they'll be very successful.

Gardening has recently become popular and many people now grow a few vegetables. There used to be few flowers or vegetables around people's houses, but there's a big house a little way down the valley that used to be a hotel in the '30s and was operated by a lady who created a large flower garden. When she got very old, her son kept it up but now he's died, too.

Paul spends five months a year at the hostel and Judy is here during the school holidays. Their son, Edward, is also here. He's 14. He lit a barbecue, so I'm going outside now.

Sun, Jul 9

Dan and I set off at 11 this morning. A very sunny day. There was a very prominent mountain with a red top to the west of Tindfjallajokull and we decided we could climb it. We reached the summit at 4 and got back to Flotsdalur at 7. Much of the walk was across the hraun – many types of lava. Some was black, obsidian, maybe. Some was like limestone shale, the type Northern England cottage roofs are made of, some was ash and some was what my mother used to call clinker, the inert stuff that was sometimes mixed in with the coal.

Some people came yesterday while we were walking, Judy said. They had lived in this farmhouse in the '20s. Seventeen children were born here, of whom twelve survived.

Last night we barbecued hot dogs, roast potatoes and a trout. Paul raids skips for scrap wood for the fire. Skips were introduced in Iceland about three years ago and he's now an enthusiastic recycler of other people's stuff. He found a wooden bed a couple of weeks ago and transformed it into a bookcase.

Up in the mountains there are many streams. They look similar to the ones in N. England and Scotland. It's very bright green around the streams, which are formed by the melting ice.

We have a large collection of volcanic rocks already, which we'll leave in a bag at the hostel. We'll come back for them at the end of the tour after renting a car in Reykjavik.

Dan and I are both very impressed with the gaiters. We almost didn't bring them, but Dick Phillips had recommended them so we decided to trust his experience. They keep the dust and ash out of your boots perfectly.

My original plan was to spend a day exploring Dick's library before the hike, and he does have an excellent stock of books, but it's so beautiful that we've had to go out and walk instead. Well, that and sleeping. Dan woke at 6 this morning but I didn't until 9:30.

For dessert today, we had skyr – not sure of the spelling – a creamy, sweeter version of yogurt, which you eat with white sugar and milk. It was very good.

I'm fitter than I expected. I'd done some exercise on the stepper but not much, and some with the arm machine. It must be that any type of exercise is beneficial even to muscles that you don't use.

All the other tour members have now arrived. There are ten or twelve of them, mostly in their 20s and 30s, but also one man who was here on a school trip from England in the '50s and again while at university in the early '60s, but not since.

The mountains here remind me of the ones I saw in Switzerland when I was 14 although the resemblance is superficial and mainly because of the snow. Most of the mountain sides here are shallower sided because they're just loose heaps of rock fragments and ash.

Mon, Jul 10

We started on the tour today at about 10 and reached the hut around 6. We walked up one side of the flat, stony area in front of the hostel and after lunch, crossed the plain, which is all stones. We waded through three very fast streams, one of which was knee deep. It was quite hard to stay upright. We then rested and dried our boots a bit. You take your socks off but keep your boots on to protect your feet from the stones. If you have gaiters you wear those, too, to protect yourself from rolling rocks. We then climbed up a lava plateau and Dan and I discovered we were quite stiff. The plateau continued for a couple of miles and we eventually reached the hut.

The hut belongs to a farmer who uses it when he rounds up his sheep the second week of September. The rest of the year, the upstairs is used by tour operators who pay him a fee. It's a new pine attic room with a big window at either end and bunks around the edges. The farmhouses were constructed this way and the animals wintered downstairs. There was little or no wood for fires and no coal, so the animals' body heat was important. Keeping them watered was a problem because the water froze. Lack of light must have been as big a problem as lack of heat. Candles were almost unknown. Fish oil lamps provide very dim light.

My legs are very stiff this evening. Dan was sick during the night - I guess he was allergic to the skyr – so he was dragging for the last hour or so of the hike. An Australian, Andrew, who is currently working in London, noticed his gait had changed

and asked me if he was just tired. I told him about Dan being sick and he gave Dan some re-hydration salts.

There's also a girl who was born in Croatia but moved to England when she was young. She says Croatia has mountains in the south but flat agricultural land in the north. It gets to 90-100 degrees F in summer and minus 20 F in winter when the winds blow from Siberia.

There's an English couple – the husband is the one who came to Iceland as a schoolboy. He's very thin and wiry and bites his words off so it's hard to understand him. He's a bit prickly. He was born in Somerset but moved to Scotland over 30 years ago "*because you can go up in the mountains and get away from people*". His wife is maybe ten years younger and seems very patient and well practiced at heading off "scenes" when Peter becomes petulant.

There's a young Scottish couple who seem to be newly married and are friendly, and a large middle-aged Englishman who has traveled widely in Nepal and other exotic places. He makes jokes about bringing his marmalade with him on treks but unfortunately he hasn't done so this time. There's also a woman of perhaps 40 who I don't know much about except that she hates scrabble and claims to be a poor loser, and there are two other men on their own, one of whom talks but hasn't yet said anything memorable and the other of whom I haven't yet heard speak.

The scenery is beautiful and much more varied than I expected. It's quite lush, very green anyway, at low elevations but the hraun is more like the Arizona desert although with different plants - moss rather than cactus. Although the hills are green from a distance they're very dry because the rain drains down immediately.

In the stony plain a bit east of the Fljotsdalur hostel, part of the area has been reclaimed. The stream was routed nearer to the far side, then the area was leveled a bit and seeded and fertilized from the air. It now grows enough grass for summer grazing for sheep.

It was about 70 degrees F all day and sunny. I forgot suntan lotion yesterday and got quite red, but remembered today.

It's hard to write interestingly about scenery. It's very quiet apart from the wind. There are birds, but not many because there's not a lot for them to eat. The only animals are the sheep and horses, about fifty of which are being fed hay just downhill from the hut right now. Dan has gone to take a picture.

Tue, Jul 11 am

The man who speaks but says nothing is a university professor. The Australian does structured finance deals for a German bank. Barry the Silent has remained so. Big John refused the rhubarb and custard last night on the grounds that he was required to eat too much of it at his public school. Most people climbed the adjacent mountain last night, except Dan and me, who had climbed a mountain the previous day and were very

stiff, the Australian, who had injured his leg playing cricket two weeks before and is being careful, and Barry the Silent, who didn't explain his reasons.

Thur, Jul 13 am

Tuesday was a pretty long walk mostly in heavy drizzle. The clouds were a little above us and we were in what dribbled down from them. My muscles stiffened and my right knee hurt. We stayed overnight in a sheep roundup hut. Dan and I luckily got to sleep on the wooden floored kitchen. Most people slept on the bare earth of the adjacent stable.

Yesterday was another long walk. It felt long, anyway, because my muscles were so stiff. Most of it was easier than the previous day, a lot of it across black cinders.

Tuesday, we went to a deep gorge with a powerful waterfall at its head.

Weds was following a river for some hours, which we had to leap. It's painful to the knees because of the extra weight of the backpack, and hard to judge how far you can leap because the muscles are weaker and you're carrying more weight.

The pictures of central Iceland are very green, unconvincingly so, but it really is that green - various greens, some yellowish, others dark. The rock is very variously colored and the vegetation mostly doesn't cover it completely, so from a distance you see blackish green or pale green, or red and green. The ground is also constantly changing color because it dries so fast, partly owing to the wind and also because it drains so quickly. The drizzle comes and goes constantly, also.

There's quite a lot of snow left in gulleys where the sun doesn't penetrate.

The quiet is more complete than I've known. Only the constant wind.

The group is settling into those who talk and those who listen. Big John talks most. He works for the police, doing what I'm not sure. Programming, but also active police work. The other John, the professor, is growing more strongly like Mr. Bean. He interjects inane comments and brays with laughter for no apparent reason.

Gill is full of opinions. She doesn't see the point of the monarchy and in fact considers the whole idea of being a subject abhorrent. Big John counters that policemen must all swear allegiance to the queen, and that's much better than swearing allegiance to politicians. Gill thinks that may be one reason there are so few Indian police - they probably don't like the idea of subjugating themselves to the queen.

Neil is good at provoking conversation. He wanted to know why you can't buy dried whole milk, only dried skim milk, which led by turns impossible to recreate to a discussion of the feasibility of boiling an egg by whirling it round your head in a sling.

Last night and tonight we're in an A-frame camping hut. Some people are upstairs but they didn't let on how much space is up there, so most of us slept downstairs. Peter

woke early and wanted his breakfast so he kept going out and coming back and leaving the door open to wake everyone else. He often does the washing up but really wants everything his way. He mumbles things at his wife and when she doesn't do what he wants, he makes an irritable barking noise that's meant to signify that he can't understand what's going on.

Paul, our guide, responds to all questions by pausing thoughtfully and then saying: "*I'm glad you asked that.*" He doesn't say anything else, just continues to look thoughtful but with a bit of a secret smile, and continues what he was doing before.

The mountains are similar to those in Scotland but more bleak in one way – there's very little vegetation because the growing season is so short – and more friendly in another way because most of the contours are softer. The rock is mostly eroded and the slopes are often covered with scree.

Today is a rest day, or a day to hike where you will. Dan, Andrew, Barry and I have stayed at the hut this morning. Big John went off on his own to take pictures with his Hasselblad, Peter and Marion went for a steep hill walk. The others went with Paul to see a waterfall and climb a smaller hill. My muscles are still very stiff. If it doesn't rain, though, I'll probably go for a walk this afternoon.

Dan went down to the river to wash his socks and hair but he doesn't recommend it because the water's so cold. There are some small steamy puddles in this area, but none large enough to bathe in.

It's started raining. On the May and August tours, they often get snow.

Tomorrow is the longest walk so far, 20 KM, and it includes several river crossings. When the water is ankle deep, you take off your socks and wade. When it's knee deep, you hold hands with two other people because the current is very fast and the riverbed is very rocky, so it's easy to fall. If you have a blister, river crossings are especially bad because you lose the bandage, soften the skin more, and can't dry your feet enough to keep a new bandage on.

Yesterday afternoon, Andrew noticed I was favoring my knee and lent me one of his poles. It helped a lot. He said he was skeptical about them until a few months ago when he borrowed a pair to see if they'd help with his damaged knee. They do help you keep your balance and you can take some of the weight with your arms.

Sat, Jul 15 am

It's very windy this morning with intermittent rain. The hut shakes with the gusts. We're delaying today's start.

On Thursday it was a rest day and I needed one. I did climb a hill in the afternoon and got great views of a lava plain but most of the day we spent festering, as Neil calls it. He views it as a male activity, something men tend towards naturally but need to practice. Dan was agreed to be promising material as a festerer.

Yesterday was great – sunny although quite windy. Paul says it usually is windy in the highlands because several currents meet around Iceland making the weather very variable.

We started the day by fording a river barefoot. Extremely painful. On the far side was a small hot spring, enough to warm the feet. We then climbed steadily, heading east until we reached a high basaltic area. Most of the area is rhyolite, which formed a huge dome that has been eroding away, especially in the center. The hills around are all roughly the same height.

There are three types of volcanoes, very high pressure ones that explode and produce rhyolite, basaltic ones which are low pressure and produce lava, and thirdly, the ones in the middle. Icelandic volcanoes are mainly high pressure ones. Obsidian is super-cooled rhyolite.

We continued climbing, stopping at an ice cave that was formed by a hot spring under the snow. The cave is about 20 meters deep now and will be much deeper in another month. The snow is in horizontal layers but because of the hot spring, the layers are distorted on the edge of the snow cliff.

We lunched at a high hot spring. The water seeps through the rock and when it passes hot rock, it gets hot. The steam then works its way up to the surface.

We continued up and down along the high ridges, stopping occasionally at the highest points. Quite a lot of the way was across snow. Near the end of the day, we crossed a river on a snow bridge which Paul expected might have been melted by now.

I was going pretty slowly towards the end and Dan eventually flagged, too. It was supposedly a 20 KM walk. We started at about 9 am and didn't get to the hut until after 9 pm.

We were very lucky the weather was so good. It would have been miserable walking so far and so strenuously in rain with no views.

The scenery is spectacular. The rhyolite heights yesterday were desert. There was a bit of moss and occasional tiny flowers, but mainly broken rock and cinders. Near the end of the day, we saw rhyolite hills that were just giant heaps of pale tan rock chunks. It was reminiscent of the Badlands but a different color.

The social dynamics continue to be very interesting. Dan hung back for the first couple of days but then started chatting with people. Big John told me last night that he's impressed by Dan. I said he's very stable and sensible, smart and noticing. John said, yes and he can be very funny, too.

Big John has been to all kinds of exotic places. He mentioned a trip to the upper Amazon to photograph giant otters. He has always worked very long hours as a policeman and taken comp time so he could go for three months worth of trips every

year. Being on the Fraud Squad was a problem because their cases often take a year or more. Another problem is that cases often don't come to court for a few months after the case has been completed by the police. So John would often be on a trip to Annapurna, ballooning across the Kalahari desert, etc when his cases were first scheduled.

Paul has gone to see if we can stay here again if the weather stays bad. We'll be in tents the next three days, which would be bad in this weather. This is another hut that's a stable for horses, in this case with a sleeping area in the attic.

I'm not feeling nearly so stiff this morning although my right knee still hurts and I have a blister. Yesterday, I wrapped a long gauze bandage around my left heel to keep the bandage in place. It worked well and the blister hasn't gotten any worse. My boots are getting very smelly because they're wet so often. The combination of sweat and brackish water is very smelly. I wonder if there's any way to fix this?

It's a good thing I didn't realize quite how strenuous this hike would be. By the end of yesterday, I felt the way I used to feel when Felicity and I first went on hitch hiking holidays. We had canvas steel framed ex-army backpacks that were very heavy. When the hitching didn't work, we did a lot of hiking. I always wanted to go further, so the days were very long. At the end of one day in Scotland I slept soundly on a concrete floor with no mattress, I was so tired.

Mon, Jul 17 pm

Saturday was very windy with heavy intermittent rain. The cloud layer started at 200 feet, dropped to one hundred and then to ground level. Paul arranged for us to stay an extra day at the Hvangill hut and we festered all day. There wasn't much food, but plenty of biscuits. We played guess what famous person I am, a sort of twenty questions. I got Beethoven and Dan was Marilyn Monroe.

Yesterday, we walked to the hot spring here at Strutslaug where Dick Phillips' hut was swept away by an avalanche. It was a relatively flat walk by the edge of Myrdalsjokull but the ground was mostly very soft cinders in melt water. Very beautiful.

We spent the night in tents about half an hour – Paul says ten minutes – away from the derelict hut. Paul has rebuilt a sort of garden hut from scavenged pieces. Getting there involves crossing 8 or 10 rivers that run through the boulder strewn flatland, so we get very wet. Tea, minestrone, spaghetti with meat sauce, stewed fruit and custard and coffee almost made up for the hardship of the crossing, but I decided to skip breakfast.

I slept 'til 11:30 this morning and then lay in the hot pool for a long time. It's very pleasant being in a huge hot bath with the cold wind blowing, surrounded by beautiful scenery. The outlaws who survived in the interior after being banished from society lived near hot springs. I wonder if they appreciated the beauty of the experience or just the fact that they'd found a way to survive.

Several of the others, including Dan, have gone for tea but I'm enjoying having almost dry feet. I guess by 7 I'll be hungry enough that it will seem worthwhile to make the trek. The cold when I got out of the hot pool was certainly a price worth paying, although that was a much rarer experience than eating.

Later on the 17th

Paul built bridges of scrap two by sixes that worked well. With three planks, he bridged two of three channels at the bottom of the gorge where the rivers originate. You could step through the remaining stream fast enough not to get water in your boots if you wore gaiters.

More about people. Peter is a semi-retired computer programmer. Anna works for the Scottish Tourist Board specializing in marketing to US customers. They like history and romantic scenery with a few people. The Germans like dramatic scenery with no people. The French like romantic scenes with a couple in a beautiful spot. Neil works for the Scottish Hotel Trade Association. He started in an admin job with the Foreign Office in London, returned to Aberdeen to do a history degree, got a job with the Scottish Home Office, was chosen to be Second Secretary to the Scottish civil servant who corresponds to the Prime Minister, found the First Secretary intolerable, and just started his new job. Maya works for the BBC doing royalty accounting. She's studying at night to qualify as a CPA and will soon search for a job that will give her broader exposure as an accountant. She expects that eventually she will have a very nice life and is stubbornly set on getting what she wants.

Tues, Jul 18

Quite an easy walk today, mostly flat, across mossy plains. A couple of river crossings, including a wide one about eight inches deep with what Paul described as "*a sandy bottom, Icelandic sand, that is, which some might call razor sharp gravel.*" It was sunny all day, windy of course, with some high cloud. Andrew lent me one of his walking poles which made it much easier to avoid hurting my knee.

I talked with Maya, whose ankle still slows her down. Her parents both worked and she didn't see them much when she was young. Her mother was very troubled by Maya's opinions about things as well as her behavior. It made her more headstrong. Her younger brother, however, spent more time with their mother and was eager to please her. He's very trusting and too generous. Maya spent as much time as possible with her two maiden aunts, who both traveled a lot. When she was eighteen, her father told her it was time to leave home. When her brother turned eighteen, it was his turn, too. When she was twenty, she went to England. She hikes a lot because she always has done and she enjoys meeting people, which surprised me because she had seemed stand-offish.

I don't remember if I wrote the only thing I've learned about Barry, which is that when he and his mates left school, a dozen or more of them would go on holidays together and drink for two weeks. Most of his mates are now married, however, and Barry doesn't want to spend his holidays drinking, anyway.

This evening, we're in another hut that used to be used for the sheep roundups. The farmer built a bigger, better hut about 6 KM away, so they don't use this one now. It has a couple of rock wall corrals and the walls of the hut are also rock, sealed with turf. The roof is corrugated iron. The hut is set in a valley surrounded by rounded mossy hills, and a small stream meanders across the plain. There are several small waterfalls.

We passed a fairly large waterfall today. Not very high, but a lot of water. The number of streams keeps surprising me although of course there would be a lot because of all the snow melt.

I talked with Paul this morning about another of his tours, the Heads of the Valleys. It's in the Thorsmork area, so the scenery is different – there are trees – and they base themselves at each place for three days and do day walks in the valleys if it's bad weather and on the ridges if it's good. There's one hard day, walking north from Thorsmork over the pass. There are usually only a few people on these tours, so they take side trips in the van, also. Somewhere on the tour, they stop at an agricultural museum, which Paul says is very interesting.

I would definitely come on another trip but I'd make more effort to get fit ahead of time. I'm only now feeling reasonably strong, apart from my knee, and we haven't done much since the very long hike in the high rhyolite.

It's still very sunny outside at 7:30 pm but starting to get cooler. It was about 50F during the day although the wind makes it feel cooler. I needed my parka all day despite the heat you generate walking with a backpack. It gets too hot with a fleece under the parka, though.

My boots are almost dry for the first time in what seems like days. I wore my last pair of clean socks today. Most of them are now quite smelly because there's been no way to wash them.

Everyone else is outside chatting except for Peter who went for a walk on his own and John and Gill who went in the opposite direction together. Paul is cooking dinner.

Wed, Jul 19 evening

Another sunny, windy day. We went for a 20 KM there and back walk to see a waterfall NE of here. It was fairly flat but there were a few steep hills. At one point, we descended into a narrow gorge about thirty feet deep and walked along the bottom for half a mile. We stopped briefly at a lava bridge. The destination waterfall used to have a lava arch in front of it, but it recently collapsed.

Mr. Bean scrambled up the side of the hill to see the upper half of the waterfall but was thwarted by an area of scree that he must not have noticed from the ground. He then climbed to the very top by a different route. Andrew, Barry, Neil, Dan and I decided to start back to the hut and Peter said that he and the others would wait for John. We set off at a fairly fast walk. We got back in two and a half hours although it had taken three

and a half to get there. We'd gone perhaps a mile, negotiated a rock strewn hillside path and come down into a valley when suddenly Mr. Bean ran past with a very odd expression on his face. Dan's theory was that maybe he urgently needed to get to the WC at the ford further up the valley. Mr. Bean ran 50 meters past us and then power walked to the WC. However, he passed behind it, climbed a bit of hill and then sat down. We could think of no explanation.

Back at the hut, Big John had stayed behind and made tea when we arrived.

Paul left us at the ford on the way to the waterfall. He was going to walk back and catch the bus so he could meet his next tour in Reykjavik.

We're now waiting for Judy. She's coming by bus with food. Tomorrow, the bus takes us back to Reykjavik and the tour ends.

Thur, Jul 20, 10:15 am

Starting in the bus on a drizzly day. We just went through a ford deep enough that the water came over the bottom step of the high wheel base bus.

This trip was Neil and Anna's honeymoon.

Peter is 59, Big John 46 and Andrew 30.

Later

We drove for almost five hours including a stop for lunch at the hut where we were rained in for a day. Most of the drive was across black ash next to the ice cap. Rain and low cloud all the way. Occasional small peaks looming out of the cloud. It felt like driving across the moon.

Notes

Breakfast every morning was porridge. Lunch was sandwiches for about three days until we'd eaten all the bread, then biscuits. Cream Crackers, three types of Ryvita, all of which Dan hated, and Icelandic digestive style biscuits. The evening meal was soup, sometimes with leftover porridge, then pasta or suchlike, then some type of pudding, and coffee. Once we had sausage - horse, Paul said. Once it was haddock cut in thick round slices from a can - marine spam, Paul said. The diet was primarily carbohydrate.

We stopped at Fljotsdalur to drop off Judy and Edward and have cake and coffee. Now we're back on the road to Reykjavik.

Fri, Jul 21, 10:15 pm

Last night we all stayed at Snorri's Guesthouse. The first thing everyone did was have a shower. Then Andrew, Neil, Anna, Barry, Dan and I avoided going out with Peter and Marion and Mr. Bean. Gill set off on her own right after a fast shower in search of salad.

I don't know what Big John was doing. Peter eventually gave up trying to organize everyone and set off with Marion and Mr. Bean. The rest of us left half an hour later and looked for a restaurant.

We eventually settled on an Italian one where we had fish and chips, pizza and so forth. Dan had pizza followed by tiramisu, at Anna's suggestion. We then went to find a suitable bar, meaning by Andrew's definition, one big and busy enough not to notice Dan. Andrew and Neil were determined to further Dan's training in festering by getting him a beer. Anna advised him to be aware that girls are not impressed by festering and he should keep it a secret. Neil had done so for two years. We all pushed our way into the Dubliners, where two Icelanders were singing '60s to '90s rock and roll. Andrew got Dan a half of Guinness which he drank slowly and professionally while chatting with Neil, Anna and Andrew. When it was time for the next round, Dan admitted that he hadn't liked the Guinness very much so I suggested he should try Newcastle Brown. He liked that better. At closing time, 2 am, we returned to Snorri's.

This morning, we said organized goodbyes to Peter, Marion and Mr. Bean and disorganized ones to the others. Dan and I went looking for breakfast and eventually found a ham and cheese sandwich for me and Belgian waffles for him. Dan was more cheerful after that. I wanted to go to the bookstore to find Icelandic books but Dan didn't, so he went to the supermarket to buy sandwich ingredients for lunch. I wasn't very successful because not many Icelandic books are in print in English translation. I found an excellent used bookstore, but almost all his books were in Icelandic. He had several heroically posed photographs of Hitler in the front of the store, facing in.

At about 1 pm, we set off in our rented car for Thingvellir. It was driving rain and very gray. I got out and walked around when we got there while Dan stayed in the car searching for Icelandic radio stations. I believe I found the Speaker's Rock, and the rock wall behind it looked familiar from pictures, but there were no markers or explanatory material as there would be in the US. Dan was feeling that he'd already done what he came for.

We set off for Geysir and found that Strokkur really is impressive. A dome forms in the water, rises, and then bursts into a plume of water and steam. The water runs back into the hole where the geyser forms and the cycle repeats.

I was pleased I'd seen Thingvellir because I've read about it so often and we were both pleased we'd seen Strokkur because it's so unusual and exciting but Dan wanted to know where we'd spend the night and was pretty grumpy. I got us both a big plate of French fries and a Coke, which had positive effects, studied the map and the Lonely Planet guidebook and decided to try to stay in Fludir after seeing Gullfoss. I saw that Fludir has a hotel with a restaurant and a sauna. I called, made a reservation, and Dan cheered up.

We continued to Gullfoss, which amazed us both. It's very big, very powerful, and there's nothing else there. There are a couple of warning ropes, but mostly nothing. The water was very brown and the rain was falling hard. The spray was also brown and a hundred feet high or more.

The road to Fludir is a dirt road that has had a lot of drainage work recently. It was quite slow because of the potholes but we reached the hotel at about 6 and went for dinner, which was an excellent buffet with salmon. After the good meal, we decided to try the sauna. It turned out to be part of a swimming pool complex that had nothing to do with the hotel. It was 9 by the time we found it and discovered that we had to pay and needed to go back to the hotel for money. It closed at 10 but we decided we had time for 20 minutes in the sauna, which gave Dan a nose-bleed, and half an hour in the hot tub. The tub was outside so you stepped coldly out to it through the rain and then immersed all but your head, so your body was warm and relaxed while your head was beaten invigoratingly by cold rain. Very soothing.

We had to rinse the gnurd out of our swimming trunks before going to the pool. Despite Andrew and Neil's shoveling at Strutslaug, the hot spring plant life was still thick. I can better understand after this evening why Paul sometimes spends an entire night in his pool at Strutslaug observing the Northern Lights, or not. It's a pool he made in the middle of nowhere with its own hot tap, an arrangement of stones to let more or less hot water flow into the pool. The only sound is the river and the wind.

Sun Jul 23, 8:30 pm

Yesterday, we crossed Iceland's interior by the Sprengisandur route. It was still raining heavily. The lady at the gas station said it had been raining hard for three days and that's very unusual.

We stopped at the reconstructed medieval farmhouse at Thorsadalur. The walls are of stacked turf. The roof has large beams carrying the weight and branches between them, in some parts with stone on top like in North England and turf over the stone, and in other places the turf was straight on the branches. The beams seemed too large to be authentic and the tables were made of planks that were too wide, but maybe the original was made of wood that drifted from Siberia. It was very quiet inside and fairly dry apart from a few leaks.

We drove on and were pleased to be able to follow the map and see occasional confirmatory road signs. It became very bare, sometimes rhyolite but usually black/gray cinders. Almost nothing was growing except around the occasional lake. The wind was very strong. After several hours, we came to a river which was very brown, very fast and looked quite deep. It was obviously more substantial than usual because of the three days of heavy rain. We examined it from our small Kia 4-wheel drive car and wondered where to try to cross. A hi-lift 4-wheel drive van came along, a big Ford, and its driver eyed the stream carefully and set off on a zigzag path. I followed as accurately as I could and there was no trouble until the final few feet when the nose plunged into the water and the underside started hitting rocks. I maintained speed and we got through. A mile or two further on there was another wide brown stream and the van had stopped to wait for us. We followed him again, without incident but with trepidation. There were no more adventures after this, just a long drive.

As we reached civilization again, we were briefly confused because the road was barred by a wire fence and seemed about to end in a farm. It was still the road, however. The farmer had two gates across it. When we emerged from the dirt road and found Route 1, the ring road, it was 9:30 pm, so we decided to head towards Akureyri even though it's in the opposite direction from Myvatn because we thought there'd be more hotels that way.

We found an Edda Hotel quite soon but they were full. However, the receptionist got us a room in the Fosshotel at Laugar, so we returned towards Myvatn. We'd noticed that everyone says "*you can't miss it*" with no regard for accuracy. This time it worked, though, and we not only got a room but also were still able to get a meal of vegetable soup followed by baked haddock with cheese. It was a school cafeteria kind of dining hall.

Today, we decided to go first to Akureyri to replenish our food supplies. We found a supermarket, and a second hand bookstore that was closed, and started back towards Myvatn. There are more trees in this area and much steeper hills. Akureyri is a large, pretty harbor. Most of the buildings are modern cubes but there are a few older ones that are a bit more ornate and painted yellow, green, or red and blue, like houses in Norway.

At Myvatn it was hard to find a room anywhere because the area is crowded with tourists. The receptionist at the Edda Hotel at Rejkalith eventually found us this room at the south end of the lake for tonight and the receptionist here found us a room in Rejkalith for tomorrow.

We climbed Hverfell, an extinct volcano, and walked around the edge. I forgot to say that today has been hot and sunny all day. Then we walked around Dimmuborgir, an area of lava pillars that were left behind when the other lava, which had been dammed somehow, ran away. There were piles of crusts, rock that very obviously had been molten and cooled rapidly.

Then back to the hotel for a meal, and now perhaps a walk.

10:30 pm

I went for a walk around the pseudo craters while Dan had a sulfurous shower. The craters were formed when lava met wetland. A farmer has been cutting hay in every flattish area around the craters. The ground near water level is very spongy. A bird was very angry that I'd invaded its territory and kept screeching and diving at me until I left.

The colors in Iceland are just those I like best. Lots of yellow.

After the crater walk, I went to see the churchyard, which is full of Peterssons. The small wooden church is surrounded by quite large trees, maybe twenty feet tall. The wind was blowing hard and rustling the leaves. It was an oasis in the bleakness, but part of the bleakness.

It's very peaceful going for a walk at 10 o'clock at night when it's still bright and the wind is fairly warm. Not as soothing as lying in a hot tub with the cold rain blowing in your face, but still with a feeling of privilege and rarity so you feel very fortunate to be there.

Mon, Jul 24, 4:15 pm

I'm sitting in Gamli Baerin (???) in Rejkalith with a large beer. Dan is in the hotel room.

Today, we went to Krafla and walked around the hot lava. It erupted from 1974 to 1983. The recent lava is almost black, the older gray. Steam comes out of the ground in places and you can easily imagine the lava being molten. We also went to the visitor center at the Krafla power plant and saw the turbines and a film about the eruption. Then we went to the hot springs nearby – mudpots and fumaroles, really. I climbed the hill by a very loose scree path. The ground is white and sulfurous near the top. It's all very exciting.

It's another hot sunny day today. Lots of tourists in buses, who immediately made for the bar when their buses arrived. They're enjoying their ice creams, coffee, salmon snacks and cakes.

Neil's big joke, which Andrew stepped right into, is about the difference between weasels and stoats. Neil asked what small wild animals there are in Australia, and when Andrew didn't mention them, asked if there are weasels or stoats. No. Do you know the difference between them, Neil asked. No. One is weasely recognized and the other stoatly different.

I need to check the map later and decide where we should aim to be each day. I had it all worked out but it looks like I left the notes at home.

I think the trip has gone on long enough for Dan, maybe too long already. He's missing the familiar things of home, and needing some down time. I'm feeling very content. I could sit here in the pub/café for a long time and then investigate a new area tomorrow. We're both sleeping a lot, 11 to 8:30 today in my case, a bit longer in Dan's. He claims that Sidwells need twelve hours of sleep per day. I'm certainly feeling healthier for more sleep, plenty of fresh air, walking, and no worries.

10:15 pm

I climbed the hill behind the hotel after dinner. I'm enjoying feeling fit at last. I had very good asparagus soup and haddock with lobster cheese. Dan had a steak and chocolate cake. All the meals have been very attractively presented. When I got back to hotel level, a farmer was bailing hay. One tractor raked the hay, a second bailed it into big circular bails, then a third wrapped each bail in plastic. A very ingenious machine first lifted the bail onto itself, where the bail sat on rubber rollers. There was a spool with a roll of white plastic which was somehow attached to the bail, and the bail was then rotated parallel to the ground to wrap the plastic round itself. As it turned, the bail was also moved slowly so the plastic strip overlapped itself mostly but gradually

covered the entire bail. Somehow the plastic strip was then cut and attached to the rest of the plastic. Finally, a scooped piece behind the machine lifted up, the rollers rose to meet it, the bail was rolled over onto the scoop, and the scoop was lowered, allowing the bail to roll gently onto the field and come to rest against the other bails. At the hut at Hvangill, the bails were cubular, probably four feet long and wide and two feet high. They were easier to stack than the round – well, cylindrical – ones, but the plastic also looked different. I wish I'd looked more closely but it was raining hard and I was very tired after the 20 KM high rhyolite walk.

I was tempted to buy Mark a jar of Radkal and tell him that road-kill is an Icelandic delicacy. It's really red cabbage. I was also tempted to get rhubarb or berry jam for Felicity. I got some Bjarnarflags bread – a sweet, sticky bread that's traditionally cooked using volcanic heat - for Dan and me instead and we snagged butter from the dinner bread basket to go with it. It will go well after hardfiske, which I like but Dan hates.

Tues, Jul 25, 10pm

We drove from Rejkalith to Dettifoss, a tremendously powerful waterfall, but not such an interesting shape as Gullfoss. The chasm walls are very attractive, with vertical pillars.

We then drove north and connected with Route 85, which goes around the periphery of the NE headland. There was low cloud when we first reached the sea. We stopped at a desolate black sand beach with huge pieces of driftwood and ate lunch. We continued north and it was very flat and desolate. There were occasional farms, but very far apart. It must be a very lonely existence there.

We took a cart track to the Thorgeirdys lighthouse at Hraunhafnartangi, the northernmost point of the road, because there was nothing but sea between us and the polar icecap. The birds hated us being there and kept diving at us and screeching. They had each laid one quite large greenish speckled egg, not in any sort of nest. I don't think we trod on any eggs. We found spherical aluminum buoys and plastic ones and other debris that had washed ashore. We each took an aluminum buoy as a souvenir and Dan discovered that if you hurled the plastic ones, they bounced excellently off the rocks – which are like those at Chesil Beach – and landed in the pond behind the rock pile. The lighthouse didn't seem to be operating, but a few sheep were using it for shelter. On the far side was a tumbledown turf roofed shelter.

We set off again at about 4 and continued past lonely farmhouses. One had a small sawmill for the larger driftwood. Sometimes there was low cloud, sometimes bright sun. As we went south down the east coast, the land became a bit less barren. In places there were exceptional views of the sea, which had been a slaty green in the north but was now bright blue.

We continued along the dirt road to Vopnafjordur, a fishing town that did indeed smell very fishy, and then got onto Route 917 and crossed Fagradals fjall, a very windy climb, mostly 10 and 12 degrees, with hairpin bends both up and down. The views were

magnificent because it was mostly sunny, all but a short distance when we climbed through cloud. On the far side, the earth was redder and there were outcrops of rock, so it looked a bit like cowboy country in the West. But there are also high hills, primarily scree covered but with vegetation of extraordinary green clinging wherever it can.

There seem to be more sheep here than in the south. We also encountered two calves standing in the road. They could only think of trotting along in front of us. It was a mile before they finally left the road.

We reached Egilstadir at around 8:30 and found an hotel next to a museum. We had a very good dinner, the best so far, smoked salmon then monkfish for me, salad, chicken and chocolate cake for Dan.

I'm going for a short walk now while Dan reads a Harry Harrison book about the Civil War. Then to bed.

11:15 pm

Everyone had gone to bed except for a man with a giant Cat loader who was working on his driveway.

I haven't seen a single cat in Iceland and very few dogs. I mentioned this to Dan, who said "*I saw one cat. I've seen four dogs. No, five.*" Long pause. "*They'd probably have a lower suicide rate if there were more.*"

There are many trees here, usually twenty to thirty feet tall, and a few as much as forty. It must be much more protected than in the south, where there are very few trees.

Wed, Jul 26

We drove on Route 1 from Egilstadir to Hofn. Some of Route 1 has a tarmac surface and some is dirt. The clouds were around two to three hundred feet up at first. There was quite a bit of re-afforestation with firs and what looked like poplars. The hills near Egilstadir have shrub covering them on the lower parts.

We had another very steep and winding dirt road mountain ascent and descent and then followed the coast. The scenery is spectacular. Many of the mountains are layered, presumably with successive lava flows, and they're tilted at about a ten degree angle. There are very few cars on the road even though this is the height of the tourist season. As we approached Hofn, there were extraordinary views of Vatnarjokull icecap.

I stopped at Hofn and phoned the hotel at Skaftafell where I'd like to have stayed tonight, but they were full. The lady there said she'd been phoning everywhere in the area and everything was full. So we got a room at the Hotel Hofn.

I went for a walk and in an hour saw the whole town. There's a derelict deep sea fishing boat pulled up on land at the harbor's edge and you can explore it, so I did. There was a fine view of the active fishing boats from the bridge.

Outside the cinema is a brightly painted 1972 orange Bombardier snow scooter, a half-track with steering skis that seated ten.

Dan had noticed free admission tickets to the museum at the hotel reception so we went there after my walk. It's quite small but has an interesting collection of personal belongings of dead local note-worthies, explanatory materials about manure spreading, hay making, sheep care, and domestic articles such as a mangle like the one my mother had, traditional clothes, and an exhibit of stuffed birds, birds eggs and butterflies. There was a set of four leather shoes for horses, with wooden shoes onto which were nailed iron horse shoes. The leather was about four inches high.

Sheep were milked until about 1910 but then cows took over and after 1930, sheep milking was unknown.

For lunch today I had hardfiske, which Dan hates the smell of, a bread roll with cheese baked in its top, and the heavy molasses bread that's cooked in the hot lava at Myvatn. I drank Egil's Mix, a soda that tastes of pineapple. Dan had bread and cheese, followed by a cake that's lighter than the molasses bread.

Now, we're sitting in our room. Dan is reading. At 7, the dining room will open.

9:30 pm

In the Lonely Planet guidebook, they say the food at Hotel Hofn is uninspired unless the seafood buffet is on. It was, and it's a terrific selection of salmon, shrimp, mussels, cod, pickled herring, and etc. There were also very good new potatoes. This was followed by a dessert of whipped cream accompanied by orange flavored whipped cream. There was a busload of middle-aged Italians who were very enthusiastic about second helpings of everything. There was also an English family with a teenage son and daughter. All ordered something other than the buffet, spoke little, and ate very quietly.

Thur, Jul 27, 7:15 pm

First stop today was Jokullsaalen, the lagoon with icebergs. It's very pretty and unlike anything I've seen before. Some of the 'bergs are almost black, some are brilliantly white, some are translucent blue. The water is slate green. Small pieces of clear ice drift by. It's relatively small, certainly compared to what you imagine from postcards.

We drove along Route 1 across the flat pebbly area left by the hlaup – the floods from under Vatnarjokull when the volcano erupts and melts the ice. The eldhraun was eery. It's old lava chunks covered in white, green and gray moss.

We stopped at Vik to see the beach, which is reputed to be one of the world's ten best. The sand is black. It didn't seem all that much better than other beaches I've seen, but it's a good one. A river runs down to the beach and then parallel with the sea's edge for a while, with beach on either side. Hundreds of arctic terns were fishing in the stream

and when I went for a closer look, half a dozen of them dived at me, screeching repeatedly.

A bit further on was Dyrholaey, where we stopped to see puffins. We went down to the beach, which is backed by a rock face eighty to a hundred feet high. The puffins perch on ledges and look very exotic. They fly very straight, beating their wings fast, and it's easy to see how they could be caught in nets.

We arrived at Skogar at about 6 and decided to visit the Folk Museum tomorrow. The Edda Hotel was full and the receptionist not very helpful. The second hotel we tried was also full. We got the last available room in the third and last hotel, which is primarily sleeping bag.

I went to see Skogarfoss while Dan read his book. It's a very symmetrical, beautiful fall and you can walk right up to the bottom. I climbed the hill beside the fall and walked along the track until I'd been gone three quarters of an hour, then returned in half an hour. Dan was still reading with great concentration. There are several small falls above the main one and it's an attractive walk.

I noticed in Hofn this morning that most of the buildings have roofs with a very shallow pitch, which is surprising in such a snowy place. The roofs are metal, so perhaps the snow slides off. We've been trying to remember and think the roofs have mostly been shallow pitched everywhere.

Paul told us a story about Dick Phillips' early cycling trip in Iceland. He was in the NW and had been having great trouble fording streams. He hadn't seen any houses for a long time. At last, he saw one. He knocked on the door and said: *"Sorry to bother you. I'm Dick Phillips, from England, I'm cycling round Iceland and I rather think I'm starving to death."* *"I knew you were English"* was the reply *"because as you walked up the path, you combed your hair and tried to shine the toes of your shoes on the back of your trouser legs. Come in."*

At Fljotsdalur, I met a man from Finland. I told him I'd only seen Helsinki and asked where else he'd suggest. *"Lapland"* he said instantly. *"Also, the center of Finland. It's very beautiful there."* He wasn't enthusiastic about Helsinki although he lived there.

Fri, Jul 28, 11:15 pm

We didn't sleep well. Dan was on the floor with two thin mattresses and I was on the bed. It was a youth hostel kind of place and people were noisy.

Breakfast didn't start until 10 so we went to see Skogarfoss and got quite wet from the spray.

After breakfast, we went to the Folk Museum, which was excellent. The proprietor, Thorthir, explained where many of the items had come from and was delighted by Dan's interest. We went out to see the reconstructed cottages. There's a sequence of them

of different ages, starting with stone and turf walls and progressing to wood paneled walls and wooden floors. One had a front room, a kitchen behind it with a hallway at the side of the front room, and then off the kitchen was a door down to the stable and a steep stair up to the bedrooms over the stable. There was also a small church with a bright blue ceiling. I went back into the museum to thank the proprietor again and he seemed very disappointed that Dan wasn't there, too, so I told Dan and he went in on his own, returning with postcards Thorthir had given him.

We drove to Hvollsvollur, where we stopped to see the Saga Center. They retell the story of Njall's Saga and have displays of diverse old things.

Then on to Reykjavik, where we checked into the very elegant Hotel Holt. It's much like an English Gentleman's Club. There's a library with very comfortable leather armchairs and a selection of newspapers. I took the car back to Snorri's Guesthouse and stopped off to buy a few more books on the walk back. Dan stayed at the hotel and was watching Zorro when I returned. We watched it to the end, then had dinner in the very elegant hotel restaurant. Mahogany paneling, waiters in bow ties, and food served very attractively. I had an excellent salmon tartare and rather dry monkfish, nothing like as good as the one at Egilstadir. Dan had an excellent steak.

We checked the library on the way back to the room and found it filled with well dressed people and cigar smoke.

I asked Dan what he thinks he'll remember most about Iceland and he says it will be the people. He's glad we met Thorthir this morning and that we saw the puffins, but he expects he won't remember much about the last week. He thinks he will remember a lot of the hiking.

Tomorrow, we fly home.

I had an odd dream the night before last. Felicity had decided to marry some other guy. I had finally recognized that she was really going to do it. People were telling me I should be pleased for her. One reason was that this guy had previously been married to a fairly famous Nordic beauty, a film actress I think. I wasn't happy for her, or for me. I was sure she was making a mistake about the guy even if she was sure she wanted to stop living with me. Somehow, they got me to go the wedding reception, where I was a bit disruptive.

Today was mostly cloudy and gray but it was fairly sunny in Reykjavik. T-shirt weather.

Dan finished his Harry Harrison Civil War time travel book and has started reading a new version of Faust, which he says is excellent.

Sat, Jul 29

A good breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and peach pastry.

I went walking to investigate the flea market. Dan stayed in the room and watched TV.

We got the Flybus to the airport. The bus was late, so by the time we got to the airport, we couldn't get seats together on the plane. I was unable to resist buying a bottle of Berserker Brennivin in the duty free store.

I asked Dan if he now had a taste for hiking and meeting new people. He said he prefers to meet people he already knows – they're different every day.

5:30 pm EST

People who come to Iceland seem to come repeatedly. I met an American who looked a bit like Hemingway at the reception desk this morning. He was waiting to see if he could stay an extra night because his plane changed. He told me a complicated story about his first fishing trip to Iceland thirty years ago.

Jim Edmonds – did I know Jim? – was supposed to meet them but he was en route somewhere else to get laid. Someone else met them instead and told them all to get in the cars parked nearby. They did. It was pouring with rain. All the other cars set off but not his. Then the owner came and turned them out, so they went into the radio station. That's what he said. They phoned the camp and a woman answered. He explained that they'd been left behind and she said: *"Oh my God!"* Nothing else. *"We need a car"* he said. *"Oh my God!"* she replied. *"Hello?"* he said. *"Oh my God"* she replied and hung up. He has come back every year since then.

An old man at another table last night, who turned out to be 90 years old, has come to Iceland several times a year for the last 33 years.

I was expecting to be happy on this trip – I'd been planning it and reading about Iceland for nine months – and I very much want to come again. It's so beautiful, so varied, and yet so consistent. It's very quiet, there are very few people, the air and water are so clean, and the hiking makes you very fit. I slept far more than usual and felt very relaxed. Dan was a great companion. He enjoyed most of it very much and I hope he can do it again some time. I guess it will depend on the friends he makes, especially his girl friend when he gets one.

I don't think I ever wrote about the time when Dan was sitting in the kitchen with Mark. He went to the fridge and when he came back, his plate had been hidden.

"Where's my plate?"

"Your plate?"

"Yes, you moved it."

"Huh?"

"Well, someone moved my plate and the first three letters of his name are M, A, R. The last is K."

"Oh, you mean Marbarbalak!"

Ever since, Marbarbalak has been Mark's evil twin. In fact, Mark and Dan like each other very much. Mark used to protect Dan from the big bullies at school but Dan is big enough now that he doesn't need protection any more.