

INDULGE

# Land of Fire and Ice

Text and photos by Dr Mark Wong and Dr Wong Sen Chow

**SETTLED BY** Vikings in the year 874 AD, Iceland is a land of unspoiled cinematic beauty. As Europe's second largest island and with just over 320,000 people, it remains a country of vast wilderness. Home to the continent's largest glacier and more than 30 active volcano systems, it truly is a place of stark contrasts. In addition, we were drawn to Iceland in winter with the hope of witnessing the magical phenomenon of the aurora borealis or Northern Lights, which have been reported to be very active this year due to recent intense solar storms. Fortunately, the flow of the Gulf Stream ensured that the island's average temperatures hovered around 0 degrees Celsius, certainly not as cold as what most people would imagine.

Arriving in the capital, Reykjavik (where about 60% of the population resides) in February, we were whisked away on a 4x4 to the famous Blue Lagoon, named for the powder-blue mineral-rich waters. Set amid a dramatic field of black basalt lava, the lagoon is fed by geothermal pools with temperatures averaging a relaxing 35 to 40 degrees Celsius. After a long flight, this was an ideal way of unwinding and we promptly immersed ourselves for some unbridled indulgence. We were told that the silica-abundant waters and mud have been reported to possess healing properties for skin conditions like psoriasis.

The city of Reykjavik itself sits on the southwest coast, an eclectic mix of quaint wooden houses along narrow streets in its historical centre and progressively modern buildings at the expanding borders. Its most distinct landmark is Hallgrímskirkja, the grand Lutheran church of Hallgrímur, Iceland's largest. Since the economic crash of 2007 that bankrupted the country, locals have now taken on a more relaxed approach to life as the rebuilding process continues to this day. Icelanders speak English fluently and warmly welcome visitors from all over the world, as they view tourism as a very important industry.

On the second day, we were picked up in an all-terrain Super Jeep for a tour of the Golden Circle, a popular tourist route in southwest Iceland. The first stop was at the country's second largest glacier, Langjökull, where we enjoyed an exhilarating morning of snowmobiling atop the glacier and exploring the fascinating winter wilderness. We then headed to the geothermal Haukadalur Valley to watch a spouting geyser. (Volcanic activity has created most of Iceland's

hallmark features of geysers, outdoor thermal pools and geothermal electricity.) After that, we were treated to freshly baked bread and boiled eggs (both prepared with heat from the surrounding hot springs), served with Icelandic butter and herring, all washed down with the local liquor Geysir Schnapps, served ice cold! The final stop of the day was the majestic Thingvellir National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where we literally walked through the geological fault known as Almannagja. It is the only site where the continental drift between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates can be seen above ground. An amazing experience indeed!

The next day, we flew eastwards to the town of Hofn, where our guide took us to the remains of an old Viking village, set against a backdrop of majestic snow-capped mountains. In this land steeped in mythology, where elves and trolls are not entirely make-believe, we could not help but feel as though we were being watched by curious eyes as we wandered through the ruins. One of the highlights of the trip came shortly after dinner that night, as we were treated to a breathtaking display of the Northern Lights. We were enthralled by the intense colours and changing forms, as they danced across the heavens and left us spellbound for several hours. By the time it was over, our hands were numb from all the photography... but this once-in-a-lifetime experience was well worth it! We certainly considered ourselves lucky as we managed to witness the aurora borealis on three out of the six nights of our trip.

The next day brought more adventures on ice as we visited the Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon, dotted with immense blue icebergs, which served as the setting for the opening scenes of the James Bond film *Die Another Day*. We also explored an ice cave filled with magical azure lights shining through the centuries-old glacial ice. Finally, we donned crampons (footwear with metal spikes on the soles) and did some exciting glacier trekking in a wonderland of ice sculptures, ridges and deep crevasses.





**Above, clockwise from left**  
The astounding aurora borealis dancing across the night sky  
The Blue Lagoon, beautiful and serene  
Our encounter with a family of friendly Icelandic horses  
View from the edge of Eyjafjallajökull's crater

Shifting gears quite literally over the subsequent days, our Super Jeep brought us to the vast black lava beaches of the south coast, formed by devastating ancient volcanic eruptions and lava flows that transformed sea to land, and made previous islands now part of the mainland. Much of the central south coast, while boasting stunning columnar basalt and other volcanic rock formations, remains uninhabitable due to the constant danger of imminent eruptions. Its juxtaposition with the ice and snow from previous days was yet another reminder of both the raw untamed beauty and violent nature of the Icelandic landscape that keeps drawing visitors to this truly mesmerising country.

The tour culminated with an ascent in our Super Jeep to the crater rim of the volcano Eyjafjallajökull (that erupted in 2010 and shut down air traffic across Europe for almost five weeks), some 1,500 metres above sea level. Blessed with sunny weather, we enjoyed a picnic of packed sandwiches at the peak while taking in a magnificent panorama of the surrounding valley and coast; a truly beautiful and rugged setting where glacier tongues pitted with volcanic ash spill down over jagged pinnacles of surrounding mountains and

numerous enchanting waterfalls. From the edge, we also had a good view of the simmering crater floor from which steam continues to rise, possibly brooding and awaiting its next hurrah! Only 100 or so persons had been up to the crater since the eruption, so we felt truly fortunate and humbled to lay eyes on such dramatic scenery.

As we left Iceland filled with memories for a lifetime, we are thankful for having met such kind people who are so proud of their traditions and land, and having beheld some of the most awe-inspiring spectacles that nature has to offer. ■



*Dr Mark Wong (far left) is a consultant surgeon in the Department of Colorectal Surgery at the Singapore General Hospital and is passionate about traveling. Dr Wong Sen Chow is a general surgeon in private practice and revels in a good round of golf. Both father and son enjoy sharing a good vintage of red Bordeaux.*