

Fire and Ice

Due to glaciers and volcanoes, Iceland is one of the few countries that can have “fire and ice” shows. There are many opportunities to see glaciers, geysers and volcanoes but the trips require time and money. I had neither so my view of Iceland was largely of Reykjavik city center and an inner suburb. The city center hostels were sold out largely due to a festival with a lot of live bands and drinking. Iceland became somewhat of a popular spot in the 1990’s for its night life in which people stayed out all night but because of white nights it seemed like it was still only eight at night. Many locals were wearing black, dark clothing and listening to dark music under a dark, cloudy sky. Coming from the Middle East, I was extremely cold as there was a bitter wind from a cold front that had moved through. I literally had every piece of clothing on me with five layers of shirts, socks being used as mittens and shorts being used as caps and I was still cold.

The trek into the city center was made easier because on the festival day and Sundays public transport was free. On Saturday, I braved the cold with socks on my hand and saw some of the attractions of Iceland. About halfway between my hotel and the center was The Pearl (Perlan). The attractive glass domed building contains tanks in which natural hot water is stored for heating the city. There is also a café, restaurants, shops and a viewing platform to see Reykjavik and the beautiful surroundings including Mount Esja.

On the first floor is a small artificial geyser which periodically erupts and the Saga Museum. The museum is largely a wax museum that describes early Iceland history from the Viking age. The museum describes why Iceland has Scandinavian and Irish looking people: the Norse women didn’t want to come to Iceland so the men kidnapped the Celtic women on the way over. There was another history museum that explained this part of the country's history as well as its religious and more current history.

The walk to the Pearl passes by Strokkur, a man-made geyser that imitates the natural spouting hot springs and Oskjuhlid hill. On the hill there are footpaths for walking. At the bottom of the hill lies Nautholsvik geothermal beach, which didn’t have many customers due to the cold weather.

The view from Oskjuhlid hill and the Pearl illustrates the dominance of Hallgrimskirkja Church on the skyline of Reykjavik. It is the largest church in Iceland with a 73-meter-high church tower. The design of the church is meant to resemble volcanic basalt rock



formations. The inside is wide open and attractive but somewhat bland. In front of the church is a statue of Icelandic-born Leif Eriksson, who many believe was the first European to discover America around 1,000 A.D. But because he was not a self promoter and didn't tell others of his voyage, Christopher Columbus got credit for the discovery five hundred years later.

Slightly more recent history can be witnessed at Hofdi House. The house is famous for the 1986 summit between US president leader Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader and Mikhail Gorbachev, which helped lead to the end of the Cold War. This white house was broadcast throughout the world during the summit. The house originally served as a French Counsel and is still used for some government meetings.

My last activity on the way to the airport was relaxing at the Blue Lagoon which is a



heated geothermal lagoon. It was a great way to end the trip, surrounded by a near lunar landscape because of the volcanic activity; its where the American and European plates meet. The geothermal seawater has minerals such as algae and silica, a gooey substance that is supposed to make the skin look younger. There is also a waterfall to refresh in cool water after sitting in a sauna.

Even with a recent economic crash, Iceland is still expensive. My last meal of whale was relatively cheap but it's one of the few items they don't need to import which is one reason why things are expensive. But, as with most islands, Iceland is unique. It's Scandinavian but there are enough differences to make it feel distinctive such as the surrounding mountains and volcanoes and isolated feel.

