

Iceland

few signs of a crisis

By Natalia Kadenko

The bus is going past another row of black hills, covered by the daring green moss, which seems to be the only indication of life within the eye range – except our bus filled with tourists, that is. The black hills consist of volcanic lava, which more or less covers the whole island. It is hard to believe that more than 80% of its surface used to be covered by forests – the vast open spaces that we can see from our windows confirm the current 2%, which are not there for us at the moment to prove that it’s actually the blooming spring.

Visiting Iceland has been my dream for quite some years now, nourished by the wonderful pictures of the waterfalls and blue waters, generously offered by the visit-Iceland websites. After a three hour flight I got the first impression of my dreamed destination, which was “did the crisis hit them so badly?” Because only minutes

before landing nothing was to be seen except the hilly brownish surface with no signs of life, and the thin thread of the highway indicating human presence. Moments later, a tiny group of houses comes into sight, and there must be our airport.

The view of the scenery below made it clear to me that this definitely must be a distinctive country. I don’t mean here the structure of the airport, which is pretty typical, nice and modern, and not too crowded (and not too expensive, which you might expect after seeing the prices in Reykjavik). No, this country manifested its unique nature while I was looking for, ehm, the place you very often need to look for in unfamiliar surroundings. But for the sign in English, I would have never directed myself to the place called *snyrtingar*.

Proud to learn my first word in Icelandic, and yet a bit confused, I throw myself in the welcoming hands of the people, whose task is to deal with stupid tourists like me. It is good to be a tourist in Iceland: as a tourist you bring a substantial amount of income to the country’s budget, and people treat you well for that. They gladly switch to English for you, show you the way to the three tourist companies so that you could pick up the cheapest tour, and the bus driver doesn’t laugh when you mispronounce

Hafnaþjörður. Even off-season, everything is organized to the guests’ convenience: a small shuttle bus coming to almost every hotel and tiny guesthouse at the most impossible hours, bringing people to the bus station, where one can set off for an airport every 15 minutes.

Thanks to the courtesy of my hostess, who called the tour company while I was having breakfast, I am sitting in a comfortable bus that brings me to the must-see, “the Golden Circle”. It’s sunny, windy and chilly – extremely good for May, our German guide says. Feeling lucky and pressing my winter hat to my head, I am admiring the most unusual panorama (one that you won’t find in the Netherlands): big open space, palette of gray, brown and occasionally green, small groups of houses clutched together, with the snowy mountains in the background. Oddly, even these modern buildings, equipped with the latest facilities and means of communication, make one think about the battle of survival that Icelanders have been waging since the twelfth century. At that time the Vikings set off from the north of Europe for a new life in a no-man’s land, having nothing but their survival skills and Celtic women, which they took from Ireland on the way. The new land wasn’t too welcoming: it could barely grow anything, wood was a luxury item and bread could be

eaten only during the feasts. Cattle-farming and fishing didn't provide substantial meals every day.

In the Skogar land museum there is a big picture of a whale-boat with the team, dressed in their best (and probably only) Sunday costumes. The boat looks old and unsafe, the faces of the seamen rigid and confident. They know their job too well, and they won't smile for the

Geysir takes another share of space on my memory card. Pools with the crystal blue water, heated up to 120°C somewhere in the bowels of the earth; streams of hot water "shooting" high every 10 to 15 minutes; small, almost pot-seized ponds of boiling water in which you could boil an egg. Hot springs are a major tourist attraction and also provide a large share of the island's energy. After the heat is

search for the golden knight's ammunition. According to the legend, it was drowned in the waterfall, and someone almost managed to get it out – yet it was too heavy, so the gold-seeker got only the ring by which he was pulling. We actually got to see that ring in the museum on the same day. I wasn't very surprised, remembering that the city of Hafnafjörður was offering the tour along the roads inhabited by elves, stating in the brochure that only those with the second sight could actually see them.

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strangers – just as they won't listen to the arrogant inhabitants of the continent telling them that whale-hunting is a cruel job and should be stopped. Friendly and welcoming, the Icelanders are nevertheless self-confident up to the stubbornness, and they don't like being told what to do.

The road makes a twist, and the bus suddenly stops at one of the most beautiful waterfalls – Gullfoss. At this point I finally get to see the Iceland of my dreams, so I start taking pictures enthusiastically, still holding my hat against the wind and cleaning the lens every five seconds from the tiny water drops.

The sun is shining, and the nature surrounding me is magnificent, unspoiled by the humans, feeling confident in its power: the whole island being in the tectonically active area, its inhabitants live at the mercy of nature. One can say that Iceland is one of the few places on Earth where the humans have yielded to nature, to live together in peace and harmony.

taken from the water, it is carefully returned back to the depth it came from. The Icelanders have learnt to use what the nature gave them in the most efficient way. The museum with the whale-boat picture also contained a whole set of wooden items, carefully carved from drift wood, and whale vertebrae used as pots or stools. Even whale bladders would be turned into jars and cow bladders into barometers.

The next time I went for a day-long sightsee the weather was more typical, ranging from pouring rain to lingering mist. The fact that our tour on that day included three waterfalls didn't make the small but brave group of tourists any drier; however, we got the opportunity to stand behind the waterfall. "It's a bit easier if you go clockwise", was the advise from our guide who stayed in the car himself. Well, balancing on slippery stones, surrounded by the pool of mud and the roaring water (remembering to hold and protect the camera!) wasn't easy on either side, but at least it reduced the temptation to

Our final destination was the Glacier, slightly molten due to the mild May weather. The members of our small group quickly lost each other from sight, as everybody wandered between the black hills and hollows, covering the distance to the mountain with the promised glaciers. Nothing else was to be seen, and I felt small under the grey sky, lost in the black mountains that once were flowing lava or acrid ashes. Occasional spots of green moss and white-bluish ice blocks, reflected in the small lakes filled by the rain, formed a unique combination. No way could it be called pretty, yet the view was unforgettable, just like the whole trip.

There might have been days of unrest when the crisis struck, but Icelanders never allowed themselves to panic. In fact, they never quit their struggle; their ancestors came to the island and survived, and the Islanders are prepared to keep on fighting. Although Iceland is now a modern developed country, Icelanders never lost their connection with nature. They treated it with respect, and they can ask it for help again. This is where the inhabitants of the continent presently have a long way to go. ■