

WOW

magazine

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

ISSUE ONE 2017

ICELAND'S PRECIOUS NATURE



PLUS: HOW TO STAY
VEGAN/VEGETARIAN
IN ICELAND

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Urridafoss Waterfall

A WINTER ROAD TRIP

"I've never heard of this waterfall; why don't we go check it out?" I said as my finger landed on the word Urridafoss. It was just south of Selfoss, marked on the map spread across the kitchen table. "Yeah, sounds good. Let's hope the Subaru can make it there and back," said Zach as he stared out into the street to where we had parked it the day before. Thirty minutes later we had the car dug out of the overnight snow.

Text and photos: James Taylor

➔ We wanted to get outside the city to explore in spite of the onset of winter and recent snowfall. I jumped in the driver's seat, turned the key and the Subaru throbbed to life. With the heater blasting and our destination set, we headed out of Reykjavik on a winter road trip.

ICELAND'S MOST VOLUMINOUS WATERFALL

The snow had taken hold over the landscape as we drove over the mountains, on Route 1 into the South. Traveling through Hveragerði and Selfoss, we proceeded along the South's flat plain. The ground here had started to peep out from underneath the snow.

A short way past Selfoss, we came across the Þjórsá River, Iceland's longest river that flows some 230 kilometers down from Hofsjökull, a glacier in the Icelandic Highland. A smaller road branched off from Route 1 to the south, leading to the Urridafoss waterfall. The car settled into a low growl as I cautiously steered down the icy path until we finally reached it. We jumped out of the car to explore, still not able to see if it had frozen over, but as we walked closer, the noise coming from up ahead told us that the water was still flowing with force.

Urridafoss had so far resisted the icy grips of the winter and remained unfrozen. Snow upon the outcropping rocks in the middle of the falls had frozen and looked like angry, churning water, obscured by mist. The water continued out towards the ocean, where the sun was starting to lower in the sky.

Urridafoss is an unassuming waterfall, which rather than being tall, spans the wide river. It's Iceland's most voluminous waterfall as 360 cubic meters of water per second flow over it. Because of its size Urridafoss has been sought after by power companies who want to harness its powers by building a hydro-power station and subsequently destroy the waterfall. Local residents are protesting against these plans in an effort to save Urridafoss. The North Atlantic Salmon Fund as well as environmental groups in Iceland, such as Landvernd, the Icelandic Environment Association, have also pointed out the serious impacts a power plant could have on Iceland's largest Atlantic salmon stock which inhabits the river.

SAYING "HEY" TO THE HORSES

Daylight hours in the winter are short, so we got back in the car to explore further down towards the south coast. After driving along

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haps the reason for the location of the lighthouse. Large rock pools line the coast, a labyrinth of water, rock, ice and snow. I looked out at the Atlantic as it chopped and churned, protesting with anger at the wind. It was easy to imagine the horizon dotted with ships, heading home from lengthy ocean adventures. We took a long path from the lighthouse down to the rock pools, stepping over patches of ice. The still water in the rock pools reflected the changing colors of the sky, as the sun dipped below the horizon and lit up the clouds. Shades of pink, purple, orange and blue streaked across water and sky. This icy coast was a sight to behold and to explore in the dying light.

DRIVING CAREFULLY

Evening progressed and it was time for us to finish our winter road trip and get back to Reykjavik. Along the way, we passed through the small coastal fishing villages of Stokkseyri and Eyrarbakki. Lights shone out of the houses as families stayed cozy on the cold Sunday night. After exiting Eyrarbakki, we crossed a bridge saddled between the ocean and another river. The wide expanse of water opening up to our right was the mouth of the Ölfusá River. The water carved a path between the snowy banks as it rushed out to meet the Atlantic. Darkness had fallen as we turned the car northwards, aiming ourselves in the direction of Reykjavik.

After half an hour, the wind picked up and the snow began to fall, still with mountains between us and the capital. With darkness falling fast and the snow picking up, we both acknowledged the 112 emergency number on a sign at the bottom of the mountain pass leading us back home. Snow started to gust across the road as we climbed higher, and visibility worsened. Luckily our old Subaru still had some life left in it, with its growl louder than the wind. We made it over the mountain pass and back onto Route 1, heading west. Before long, the twinkling lights of Reykjavik appeared in the distance, signaling the coming end of our winter road trip. The snow hadn't stopped us from exploring more of the country, and plans were already underway for the next road trip. Let's just hope the car can make it. ❖

"I looked out at the Atlantic as it chopped and churned, protesting with anger at the wind."



Disclaimers

** If you're new to driving or have never driven in winter conditions, taking winter road trips in Iceland is not recommended. Make sure you and your car will be able to handle all situations that can arise on Icelandic roads during the winter season and check the weather forecast before you go outside the city.*

Go to www.safetravel.is for more information on how to stay safe in Iceland and remember that the Icelandic emergency number is 112.

** Icelandic horses are gentle and curious creatures but do not forget that they are animals that are being bred for their unique riding features and great temperament. Do not attempt to go inside their fences and into private property unless you have a green light from the owner. Never feed horses that are not yours. Failure to heed this advice may result in damage to the horse's temperament or illnesses related to inappropriate feeding.*

the river for a while, we turned back east to get onto a better road. Before long we were headed south again, without a sign of any other cars or people. There was no movement in the surrounding farmhouses, enhancing the desolate landscape. The only visible inhabitants were horses standing in the snow. We noticed a group quite close to the fence, so we decided to pull off and say a quick hello. For 1000 years there has been no crossbreeding of Icelandic horses; the purest horse breed anywhere in the world, they are also some of the friendliest. They vied for the attention of their two visitors, and we rubbed and scratched as many noses as we could. Another group appeared from over a hill, picking their way across the paddock. Long manes shifted in the wind, covering faces of some and giving others temporary Mohawks. Resilient against the onset of winter, they inspired us to explore further on down to the ocean. We said our goodbyes and walked back to the car, leaving the horses standing silently at the fence staring after us. Then, as the sun sank closer to the horizon, we continued on down the road toward the coastline.

A SEASON OF SUNSETS

A lighthouse appeared from behind a hill, sticking up in the distance like a pencil in the snow. We pulled off the side of the road again and passed through a gate to begin a short walk to the lighthouse. Knarrarós Lighthouse is the tallest building in the southern region of Iceland at 22 meters. It stands strong against the constant battering that it takes from the Icelandic weather. Wind whistled around the concrete corners of the building, coming from every direction. Visitors aren't allowed to climb to the top, as the only entrance was a locked door at the base. Built between 1938 and 1939, it warded ships away from the rocky coast. These rocks are a result of the largest lava flow on Earth since the ice age ended, originating from eruptions in Veidivötn. The Þjórsárhraun lava field covers 800 square kilometers of land. Large rock formations are the remnants of the lava flow and per-

