

A puffin with a black cap and a large, colorful beak is perched on a grassy cliff. The background shows a blurred view of the ocean and other puffins in the distance.

# Exploring

## ICELAND'S WESTFJORDS

– James Taylor

On the western edge of Iceland and far from the well-trod tourist routes, the Westfjords region remains somewhat of an enigma to the everyday traveller. I discovered that the single best way to experience the wild and untouched nature of these lands is by camping out in the middle of it all.



I'm lying flat on my belly, spreading my weight evenly over the unstable ground at the edge of the cliff, the ocean raging below. The fierce Icelandic wind tugs at me as if it wants to throw me off the cliff, swirling in every direction, but I don't budge.

I'm focused on two puffins barely a metre away, who are ignoring my presence as they pick at tufts of grass with their colourful beaks, disappearing with their bounty to help build a nest in a burrow they've dug into the cliff below me. I'm amazed I can get this close.

All around me are thousands of puffins, razorbills, guillemots and other sea birds soaring gracefully, dipping and turning in an elaborate aerial dance before landing expertly on the cobalt-grey cliff face. Even more are resting out on the Atlantic Ocean, dark specks rising and falling as behemoth waves roll peacefully beneath them to smash violently into the razor sharp rocks below, sending sea spray up to be carried away by the wind. It's quite the spectacle.

The cliffs of Látrabjarg sit on the westernmost tip of the Iceland's Westfjords, widely considered to be one of the best bird watching locations in Europe. A

region relatively isolated from the rest of the country, the sub-arctic landscape is dominated by lofty table mountains, waterfalls caressing their sides and forming streams and rivers that criss-cross their way through valleys towards the ocean.

Sitting modestly at the base of these giants on the shores of the deep fjords are remote fishing villages; constantly locked in battle with the ferocious elements of nature, connected by roads of varying quality that cling precariously to the coastline and lead over the treacherous mountain passes. It's an extreme place, and not one to take lightly. This is the area I'll be travelling through with a campervan over the next three days.

Swollen grey clouds hang low in the sky as I leave Reykjavik, matching the colour of my 4x4 campervan. The jeep-turned-camper has everything I'll need to stay safe over the next few days; a bed in the back, curtains to block out the midnight sun, a gas cooker, and most importantly a heater that I can leave running overnight. Ahead of me awaits a few cosy nights camping and exploring the remote wilds of the Westfjords.

It drizzles on and off as I follow the main route north, the clouds stretching as far as

I can see. By the time I'm rolling through the first few fjords, the drizzle has turned into a steady rain – clouds of mist folding over the tops of the initial mountains.

On one side of the road are paddocks full of sheep, looking curiously at the intruder who trundles past, baby lambs of black and white hiding behind their mothers. The inky fjord lies on my other side, the dark water perforated by a thousand ripples from the rain. The landscape is dotted

spot fed by the Earth's mantle, the highly volcanically active island enjoys endless geothermal energy bubbling forth from underground to create some of the best bathing spots found in nature.

I melt into the 38 degree water, feeling the soft moss covering the bottom of the pool with my feet. A burnt-yellow seaweed clings to the shoreline below, smothering the black rocks underneath. The quiet of the scene is only interrupted by a few birds

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## “ONE OF THE BEST BIRD WATCHING LOCATIONS IN EUROPE”

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with seemingly abandoned farmhouses of fading colours, and I meet few other travellers on the road. There are only a little over 7000 people living in the entire region, and a lot of that population exists on the north side of the fjords.

Just below the road on the far side of Vatnsfjörður lies the natural hot spring Hellulaug. Thanks to the country's position over two tectonic plates as well as a hot

squawking madly overhead as they chase a stray seagull out of their territory.

The first night's campsite is in a deserted valley, overlooking a red sandy beach. I wind down from the mountains towards the bottom of the valley, a few farmhouses, a church and one other camper the only other signs of life. I set up in the field sandwiched between the beach and a number of waterfalls rushing down the



## “THE WATERFALL RUSHES OVER A STAIRCASE-LIKE SET OF CLIFFS”

nearby mountain side. The perpetual twilight of the Icelandic summer evening casts a steely light over the land. I tuck into some pasta that I whip up on the gas cooker, before shutting myself in the camper for a few warm hours of sleep behind the curtains.

Thanks to its position on Arnarfjörður, the village of Bíldudalur is seen as the epicentre of sea monster activity in Iceland; there have been over 180 sightings of sea monsters in this fjord alone. The Icelandic Sea Monster Museum in the town is a vibrant probe into this intriguing branch of zoology, taking a look at the folklore surrounding the sea monsters and bringing them into reality through the information on display. It casts a different light on the peaceful waters sparkling under a timely appearance from the sun, and I eye the fjord suspiciously as I continue on my way.

It’s at the very bottom of this fjord that I come across a furious roar; the beast that is Dynjandi. Crashing down from the lofty heights of the table top mountain, the waterfall rushes over a staircase-like set of cliffs getting wider and wider, before finally reaching the bottom and charging off into a number of other waterfalls that flow down the mountain side towards the fjord. I hike up to the bottom of Dynjandi, dwarfed by the immense flow. A waterfall of this power and beauty would normally draw crowds of tourists, but today there are only a handful. It’s the Iceland I always imagined.

“Tourism in the Westfjords has grown a little bit, but not nearly as much as the rest of the country” says Midge, the manager of the Arctic Fox Centre located in Súðavík.

A not-for-profit museum and research centre, the Centre is dedicated to education and spreading awareness about the arctic fox, the only native land mammal

in Iceland. They even have two arctic foxes of their own, housed out the back of the building. Estimates put the arctic fox population in Iceland anywhere between 4000 and 10,000, most of which can be found in the Westfjords Hornstrandir Nature Reserve.

“Visiting the Westfjords is like visiting Iceland 10 years ago, before all of the tourists arrived”.

“The busiest day in the Westfjords is just an average day down south. We’re actually seeing a lot more Icelandic people coming to the region now, trying to escape the crowds” says Midge.

Those busy days are centred around Ísafjörður, capital of the Westfjords, where cruise ships can unload up to 3000 visitors at once; more than the entire population of the town. A one-lane tunnel cuts through the sheer mountains surrounding it, built to circumnavigate the often closed mountain pass. Ísafjörður sits on a spit of land that juts out into the icy waters of the fjord, the mountains surrounding the area still stricken with snow from the winter. It’s here where I make camp for the second night, hiding away from the misty rains in my 4x4.

I marvel at the diversity of the scenery that changes from fjord to fjord. I wind through tunnels cut into the cliffs, towards a hazy distance punctured by even more peaks dripping with snow. I zig zag up through the mountain passes, the camper keeping me safe from the wind and sleet of the desolate, lunar-like summits. These are the landscapes that I make my way through on the final day, stopping often to explore the valleys by foot, shared only with the sheep.

A bridge cuts across one of the deepest fjords to cut travel time in half. I opt to take the bumpy ride down to the bottom, and it’s just as well I do. My reward is a small manmade swimming pool sitting on the edge of the water, a bright green square house at one end – the changing room. I pull over and jump in the water. Not surprisingly, for the whole hour I’m in the hot pot I don’t see another car or person.

Lying on my back in the warm water, the only signs of life I see for the whole hour are a pair of birds floating in the sky. I clamber back up to my camper to get changed before moving on. My trip in the Westfjords is coming to an end, but I’ve still got one night left camping out in isolation – the best way to explore this country.



To book your own Iceland adventure, speak to your Travel Associates advisor, who can arrange Go Camper campervan hire or a range of guided tours and cruises to this fascinating area.