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Bessastadir
Bird Paradise
Under the Arctic Circle
Where the Presidents Reside
The Theatre is the Home of Humanity
The Universal Human Search for Lost Time
Co-Habitation with the Calamities of Nature

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BEST OF ICELAND



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The population of Iceland is steadily increasing and is rapidly approaching 400,000 people. While this may not seem like a large number in many other parts of the world, for small Iceland, it is a significant and remarkable milestone now within sight. Development grows in proportion to the population, and urban areas are expanding throughout the country, particularly in the capital itself, Reykjavík. Such growth undoubtedly brings opportunities – but equally, significant challenges. Urban planning is one of the most critical issues, as the goal is to ensure the well-being of the population.

In Iceland, however, more factors must be considered, such as volcanic eruptions and seismic activity. It is not always certain that new neighbourhoods are being planned in entirely safe areas. Iceland is a land in constant transformation – as evidenced by the recurring volcanic eruptions on the

Reykjanes Peninsula in recent years – which has had a substantial impact on settlements, particularly the coastal village of Grindavík. In November 2023, the town underwent a full-scale evacuation after it was deemed unsafe for habitation due to earthquakes that severely damaged infrastructure in the town, along with persistent threats of volcanic eruptions and lava flows.

These disasters have forced a large portion of the residents of Grindavík to permanently leave their town, even though it goes against their will, as it is simply no longer considered safe to live there. Geological risks make urban planning in Iceland even more complex, and it was already one of the most challenging tasks beforehand. It is essential that authorities consider expert opinions on areas that are risky for development, as every effort must be made to ensure that the hardships faced by the people of Grindavík are not repeated. Being forced to leave one's home out of dire



necessity is one of the most burdensome decisions a person can face.

Iceland is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Europe, and finding suitable land for development that is not situated on geologically hazardous terrain should not be an insurmountable challenge.

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Icelandic language

Icelandic is one of the European root languages, like Latin. There is no 'c' or 'z' in modern Icelandic, except in foreign words. However, it still contains some letters not found in most other languages. This basic list provides a general idea of their sounds, using familiar words rather than phonetics.

| Character | Pronunciation |
|-----------|-------------------------------|
| á | Like 'ow' in 'cow' |
| æ | Like the personal pronoun 'I' |
| ð | Like 'th' in 'with' |
| þ | Like 'th' in 'thing' |

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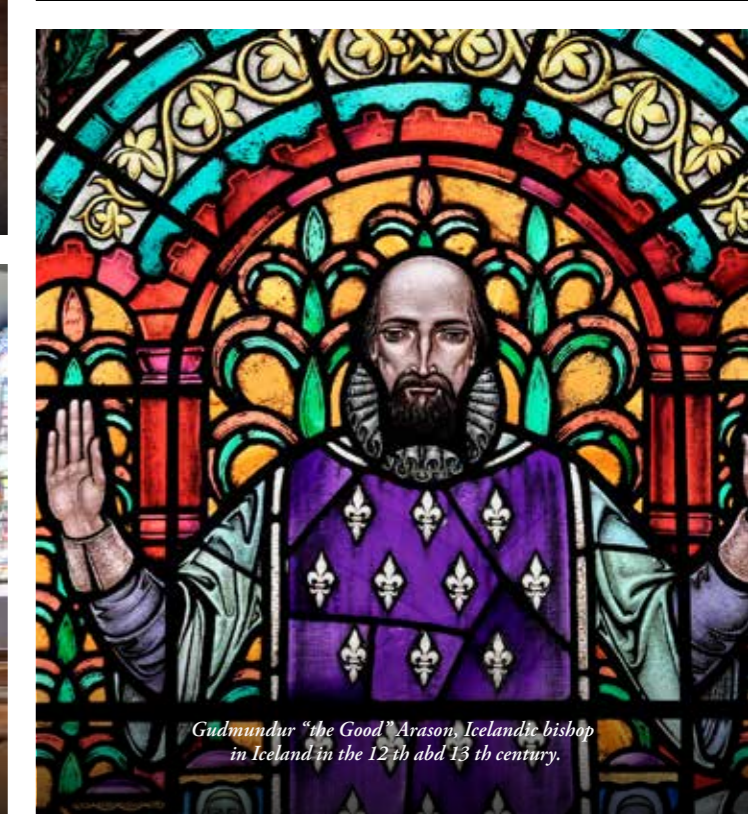
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BESSASTADIR

— WHERE THE PRESIDENTS RESIDE

Bessastadir, the residence of the President of Iceland

Pulpit by Finn Jónsson

Bessastadir, located on Álfanes between Hafnarfjörður and Reykjavík, have been the residence of the President of Iceland since the establishment of the republic. Previously, for about five hundred years, Bessastadir was the seat of Danish royal officials, the Governors of Iceland. In fact, Bessastadir has been the residence of officials and chieftains in Iceland for nearly a thousand years and has been a church site since the year 1000, when Christianity was officially adopted in the country. Bessastadir Church, the church that adorns the site, was built over a period of fifty years, with construction beginning in 1773 and completed half a century later

in 1823. The Danish king imposed a tax on all the churches in the country to finance the construction. A little over a century later, the church had fallen into disrepair, and the State Architect, Guðjón Samúelsson, was tasked with restoring the building when Iceland finally gained independence from Denmark. He enlisted the artists Finnur Jónsson and Guðmundur Einarsson (from Míddalur) to create stained glass windows for the church. They did not look to the Bible for inspiration, however; instead, they turned to Iceland's history and fate for their models.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Inside Bessastadir Church

Guðmundur "the Good" Arason, Icelandic bishop in Iceland in the 12th and 13th century.



IOI LÆKJARGATA

Here, the creek flows from Tjörnin, which gives Lækjargata its name, running under the street north to the sea.



Lækjargata 2, at the corner of Austurstræti and Lækjargata



Sýðri hluti Lækjargötu

In 1839, a citizen's meeting in Reykjavík approved the construction of a road running south from Austurstræti towards the Tjörnin pond, along the creek flowing from Tjörnin to the sea. In 1848, this stretch was officially named Lækjargata. The creek was enclosed in a conduit in 1911, the road widened, and the bridges that had adorned it were removed. Lækjargata has seen more alterations than most streets in the city, although the buildings on its east side have been better preserved than in many other areas. Lækjartorg square, across from the Prime Minister's Office, was also planned and named in 1848. At the corner of Austurstræti and Lækjargata stands one of the street's oldest buildings, Lækjargata 2, built in 1852 as Reykjavík's first corner

building on a historically significant plot, being the first lot sold in the capital.

Lækjargata 2 burned down in 2007 and was rebuilt, larger and taller but in a similar style, the following year. Many notable buildings with historical, cultural, and political significance line Lækjargata, such as the Prime Minister's Office, originally built as a prison between 1761 and 1771; the Reykjavík Junior College, built in 1846; and Bernhöftstorfa, constructed between 1834 and 1905. The newest addition is Hafnartorg, across from Arnarhóll, which was completed in 2020. Lækjargata spans 450 meters, running from Fríkirkjuvegur by the Tjörnin pond to Geirsgata by the east harbour, west of Arnarhóll.

Photos og text : Páll Stefánsson



At the Prime Minister's Office



Nyrsti hluti Lækjargötu, Hafnartorg og Harpa



Hafnartorg and Geirsgata, where Lækjargata transitions into Kalkofusvegur



FRANCE / ICELAND

Nice

One of the more fun words in Icelandic is "peysa", meaning sweater. In French, "paysan" means farmer, but when the French became the foreign nation that fished most frequently in Icelandic waters between 1850 and 1914, between 200-300 schooners would be present off the coast of Iceland from May to October, with almost five thousand fishermen aboard. When they came ashore, they would point at the locals and ask in French, paysan – "Are you a farmer?" The Icelandic farmers misunderstood the question and thought they were being asked about their sweater (peysa in Icelandic), and the word stuck in the Icelandic language.

At that time, the French established bases, such as in Reykjavík and Vestmannaeyjar, but their main stronghold was in Fáskrúðsfjörður in the East Fjords. To this day, one can still feel French influences there, as the French were very active in the area. Among other things, they built an impressive hospital and a Catholic chapel. Relations between the two nations have been good and successful throughout the centuries. According to the

Icelandic Tourist Board, in 2023 the French were the fourth largest group of tourists to visit Iceland, numbering 99,208.

France is Iceland's second largest buyer of seafood products, with exports to France totalling 40 billion ISK last year, having doubled in constant prices over ten years. According to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, France is Iceland's fourth largest export market, with a total of 63 billion ISK in goods exported there. France ranks eighth among the countries Iceland imports goods from, with imports from France amounting to 34 billion ISK last year.

Cultural exchanges between the two nations have been strong over the centuries, and one of Iceland's first embassies was established in Paris in 1946. Icelandic Times has been published in French since 2012, for 12 years, and thus recently took a trip to France, this great nation of culture and cuisine. Here are a few glimpses of what we came across.

Images & text: Páll Stefánsson



Cannes



Marseille



Cannes



Cannes

ANNA MARÍA Design

The influence of the Icelandic nature

Anna María Sveinbjörnsdóttir is an Icelandic jeweller and designer who runs her own jewellery store, Anna María Design, on one of the main shopping streets in the city, Skólavörðustígur 3, in the heart of Reykjavík. Anna María studied both in Iceland and Denmark and has run her own company for more than three decades.

Anna María's design is pure, timeless and modern at the same time. She stresses exceptional attention to detail and craftsmanship and has eye for the smallest detail.

The jewellery is both for women and men and encompass silver, gold, white gold, Icelandic stones as well as precious stones like diamonds. In the store, you can find one of the biggest selections of jewellery with Icelandic stones in the country like Agate, Mose-agate, Jasper, Basalt and Lava.

When it comes to emphasis and style, Anna María mentions free and organic forms based on the Icelandic nature. Iceland is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and its waves inspire the jeweller and much of her jewellery where you can see the forms of the waves on rings, necklaces, bracelets or ear-rings.

Filigree represents a delicate form of jewellery metalwork usually made in silver and is well known regarding the traditional Icelandic women's costume. In some of Anna María's designs you can find this extraordinary delicate work, which reminds one of the Icelandic heritage. -SJ



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A VISIT TO SMIDSHÚS

— Interview with Architect Manfred Vilhjálmsson



Manfred Vilhjálmsson Architect

Manfred Vilhjálmsson is undoubtedly among the most respected and revered architects in Iceland, past and present. His portfolio includes a variety of buildings, many of which are considered some of the most beautiful in Icelandic architecture and have significantly influenced the field in many ways. Manfred invited a journalist from Icelandic Times to visit his home, Smidshús, in Álftanes, where they discussed and reminisced over many aspects of his long career and numerous works.

The atmosphere is somewhat heavy with murky clouds covering the sky on this late summer afternoon when I knock on the door of Manfred's home, the renowned Smidshús whose name translates to 'Carpenter's House'. Somehow, the weather doesn't seem to affect the appearance of the house; this single-family home, built in 1961, is not only timeless in its design and character, but in its own unique way, it stands apart from its surroundings, regardless of the leaden sky threatening rain. The building's classic design emanates from its structure. The house is neither particularly large nor multi-story, yet it is incredibly striking to behold, and even more so once you step inside.

Timeless from Day One

"The name of the house is in honour of my father, the craftsman. That's where the name comes from," says Manfred as he greets me warmly and invites me inside. I can't help but feel privileged to walk through the house that I've read so much about and often admired in photographs. As mentioned earlier, it was built in 1961, but it's safe to say that if the house and its interior layout were revealed for the first



Árbejarkirkja church, designed by Manfred and Thorvaldur S. Thorvaldsson, was built between 1973 and 1987 and consecrated on March 29 of that year.

time today, it would seem just as fresh and perhaps even as avant-garde as it did back then. We take a seat at the dining table, and Manfred offers me a malt & orange soda. Outside, a heavy downpour has started, but inside Smidshús, it's warm and cozy—something some doubted would be the case when they first laid eyes on the blueprints six and a half decades ago.

"He actually built the house," Manfred continues once we're settled with our malt drinks, as he gestures over his shoulder to a portrait of his father, Vilhjálmur Jónsson, a master builder. "He built the house according to my designs, though some of his colleagues weren't too thrilled when they first saw them," Manfred says with a grin. "They told my father that he was working on some nonsense his son had come up with."

As it turned out, the house has hardly aged a day. The same can be said for the house next to Smidshús, called Vesturbær, as both houses

were collaborative projects between Manfred and architect Guðmundur Kr. Kristinsson.

Various Innovations Tested

The exterior appearance of these houses is very similar, but they differ on the inside. Although these houses have long been considered classic examples of Icelandic architecture, some craftsmen were sceptical at the time, as mentioned earlier. Smidshús is essentially what you could call an experimental house—Manfred wanted to test various innovations here before trying them out in other people's homes. One of the main things to note is that only the foundations are made of concrete, while everything else is constructed from lightweight materials. For instance, facing the living room are continuous windows that stretch from the floor to the ceiling, offering a magnificent view to the south toward Reykjanes, with Keilir

mountain in the distance. "People had no faith in this setup and said that the neighbourhood kids would smash the windows on the first day," Manfred says, smiling at the thought. But that didn't happen, and the glass held.

Manfred continues: "Then there's the flat roof, which they claimed would never withstand Icelandic weather. But it's well-built and has never leaked a drop. My father pointed out to his colleagues that the University of Iceland building also has a flat roof. He worked on that building as well. And that settled the matter." There are also no traditional radiators in Smidshús; instead, it has an air heating system, and Manfred points out the small, elongated vents in the floor beneath the windows.

As I contemplate these remarkable aspects of Smidshús's construction, I'm reminded of the famous words of another influential architect. The legendary Le Corbusier

wrote in 1927—a year before Manfred was born—that houses are machines for living in, meaning that in well-designed homes, everything has to have a function ensuring the best possible living conditions for the inhabitants. There's some truth to this, but the humanity and warmth of Smidshús are so enveloping that I dismiss this thought, even though everything here does indeed seem carefully considered.

We spend a moment gazing at the vast windows of the south side of Smidshús. Then, Manfred glances back at the portrait of his father, Vilhjálmur, and reiterates how much his father influenced him. "I intended to become a carpenter and even started an apprenticeship with him, working for him for three or four summers. But then I just got sidetracked," he adds with a chuckle. "But that experience taught me to better understand the craft of carpentry, and hopefully made communication with



Mávanes 4, Gardaber.



The National and University Library of Iceland stands in the Melar area of western Reykjavik and opened on December 1, 1994.

the craftsmen easier later on, once I began working as an architect," he says with a half-smile. "Not that I'm necessarily the best judge of that. But it was good knowledge to have in the back of my mind."

The Years of Study in Gothenburg

Manfred's buildings carry his distinct signature, whether they are public structures or residences for individuals, located in densely planned urban areas or more natural environments. However, he is reluctant to claim that he always approached new projects with a single, fixed method. On the contrary, he believes that it is most important to maintain broad-mindedness to make the most of each task. In this regard, he emphasizes that, in his view, it is crucial for Icelandic architects to study abroad as well, to broaden their perspectives. He himself studied in Sweden, more specifically at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg. Manfred speaks very highly of his time in Gothenburg, and his expression brightens when he recalls his university years abroad. It turns out that he chose Sweden primarily for practical reasons when it came to selecting a school abroad.

"This was shortly after the war, in 1949, and at that time most countries in Western Europe were damaged to some extent. There weren't many countries that emerged out of that conflict reasonably intact, except for Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. But when it came to the choice, it was cheapest to go to Sweden," Manfred explains. "That was really the reason. I also consulted with older colleagues here at home, like Sigvaldi [Thordarson], whom I knew well and who had studied in Denmark. But at the end of the day, I couldn't afford to go to the United States, and Switzerland was also expensive, as it has always been," he adds with a wry smile.

"I spent six years in Gothenburg—five years in school and then worked for one of my professors for a year. I could easily have settled in Sweden, but I suppose my wife saved me and brought me back home," Manfred says with a laugh. "But I was very comfortable in Sweden. It's quite remarkable that it's now over seventy years since then, and I haven't spoken a word in Swedish in seventy years!" He laughs again as he refills our glasses with malt. "That's not entirely true, but it's close."

Adaptation of Buildings to Each Era

When asked, Manfred mentions that he has returned to Gothenburg a few times since his studies ended. He notes that during the preparation for the National Library on Arngrímögata, he went on study trips to several destinations, including Sweden, Denmark, England, and the United States. The National Library is probably Manfred's most famous and undoubtedly most extensive work, with construction spanning from 1972 to 1994. It's worth noting that architect Porvaldur S. Porvaldsson was involved in the initial design of the building while the main concept was taking shape, but the final design was in Manfred's hands. The extensive preparation and construction time paid off, as the building was thoroughly thought out and exceptionally well-executed—something this author recalls fondly from his university years from 1994 to 1996, when countless hours were spent there in reading and studying. The memories are marked by the building's unique acoustics, excellent lighting, and light woodwork.

"I hope this work has been of some value," says Manfred, as if he has just read the journalist's thoughts. "The main point is that the use of the building can be adapted; that is, the structure of a library or a book repository can be changed, and the way it functions can evolve. This has shifted somewhat over the centuries—but you never know. The building should be able to meet those wishes and demands. This perspective has somewhat guided all my solutions."

In the same way, this description applies quite accurately to Smidshús, even though it is in most respects vastly different from the National Library, both in function and scale. A testament to this is the fact that while Manfred lives alone in the house today—his wife of 70 years, Erla Sigurjónsdóttir, passed away in 2022—there were once eight people living there at the same time, which speaks to the house's adaptability and practicality. "There was me, my wife, we have five children, and my mother-in-law also lived here for a while. It was an incredibly enjoyable time." Manfred smiles at the thought. "Now it's

just me here, hanging around," he says with a laugh. "But it has been an exceptionally good place to live."

We sit and chat for a while as the contents of the can of malt drink are slowly consumed. The rain has cleared, and the freshly watered Keilir mountain is now visible in the distance. Manfred shows me around the living room area of Smidshús, telling me about the various artworks found there, most of them created by personal friends of his and his late wife, Erla, as he accompanies me to the door. Now that the weather has brightened, Manfred points again to the large windows. "I thought of it a bit like horses in a pasture when I designed the large windows facing south and the small ones facing north. You want to open yourself up to the summer and the southern sun but turn your back to the northern chill." There's more laughter, and Manfred Vilhjálmsson and I part ways with smiles on our faces, at the doorstep of the house he designed, and his father built.

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason



Bárðavogur 13, a single-family house designed in 1967 for the painter Kristján Davíðsson.

"THE THEATRE IS THE HOME OF HUMANITY"

The Reykjavík City Theatre is home to the Reykjavík Theatre Company, one of the country's oldest cultural associations, celebrating its 127th anniversary this year. The upcoming theatre season offers fresh innovations mixed with award-winning classics, Icelandic works alongside foreign ones, and as the season progresses, a national treasure beloved by all will reveal who they truly are.

"We obviously put an immense amount of work into crafting a season that appeals to our audience," says Brynhildur when asked about the annual task of putting together the winter schedule. "We meticulously plan the year. Running a theatre—selling

a spiritual experience—means we need to capture people's attention. We know we are competing with all forms of entertainment and also vying for people's time and the money they have available."

When asked how best to approach this task, Brynhildur thinks for a moment and adds: "It's always more successful to read the audience when it comes to putting together a theatre season. The theatre is, in its own way, an institution of upbringing, and we nourish our guests but also delight them. We can never be here to force-feed people anything. We don't preach, and we can't tell people how something should be. Instead, we tell the story, and it is up to

the person in the audience, wherever they may be on their journey in life, to take it in, process it, and maybe walk out with a changed perspective. That's the magic of art. That's why art must sometimes challenge; it needs to be uncomfortable. It can't always be velvet and silk gloves. Sometimes art has to be harsh. Only then does one experience the world in a different way."

The Largest Theatre Hall in the Country

The Reykjavík City Theatre began performances in its building by Kringlan in 1989 and has operated there for nearly 35 years. "Our largest hall, which also has the widest,

biggest, and best-equipped stage in the country, seats 550 audience members. This is where we stage the big musicals, which we specialize in, as well as major children's shows. There's also a certain group of audience members who seek out the great classics, and we've featured those on the main stage."

The Reykjavík City Theatre is the most popular theatre in the country, welcoming nearly 200,000 people each year. In recent years, many productions have been staged that run through the entire season and then continue into the fall. "This has happened here, for example, with the show 9 Lives, which ended with a full house after its 250th performance," Brynhildur points out. "That means around 30% of the nation came to see the same show."

Another good example is the renowned show Elly, which broke all records in its time and is returning to the Main Stage by popular demand. "The best scenario at the start of a theatre season is to carry over

something from the previous year, or even earlier years, and that's what we're doing now with Elly returning five years later. We premiered the show seven years ago, and it ran for two years. Now it's back on stage, and the interest is undeniable since we've already sold out 13 performances."

That's quite impressive for a market of this size, and Brynhildur agrees, offering an explanation. "We're unique; we are a storytelling nation, and we love having stories told to us. I believe it's in our DNA—we are still the people from the old farmhouses who needed stories to escape in our minds and get through life."

The Veil Lifted from Laddi

Indeed, the stories the Reykjavík City Theatre plans to tell this winter should transport theatregoers of all ages across lands. "Take [famed Icelandic comedian] Laddi, for instance. The genius, our darling, and the national treasure, Laddi, who has delighted



generations of Icelanders for decades – he will join us on the main stage from March next year and will reveal who Laddi really is. The show is called This is Laddi and is the latest creation by Ólafur Egill Egilsson, who wrote and directed the aforementioned and hugely popular play 9 Lives."

The City Theatre's festive production this season is Miss Iceland, based on the award-winning novel of the same name, which is one of the most popular books by Audur Ava Ólafsdóttir. "This magnificent work by Audur Ava is about young people in Reykjavík in 1963, a time when men were born poets and women were invited to become Miss Iceland. It's an unforgettable story set 60 years ago, but with a strong resonance that speaks to the present day. It addresses the desire to create and the need to express oneself, yet society doesn't offer the space for it. This is a reality for many. The fight is far from over, both in terms of women's rights and LGBTQ+ issues, where we've seen a certain backlash in recent years."

A Golden Age Classic and Forbidden Love in the Mountains

"We are also featuring a classic of the American Golden Age, A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by Tennessee Williams, where a big birthday party spirals into an explosive situation filled with emotional tension, a timeless and intense





drama directed by Thorleifur Arnarsson. This is only the second time this historic award-winning play has been staged by a professional theatre in Iceland. Following the grand old classic, I'd like to mention a new and hilarious American play, Óskaland (Grand Horizons). It tells the story of a couple in their seventies who have been together for 50 years and now plan to divorce. However, their sons and daughter-in-law refuse to accept it!" Brynhildur laughs at the thought. "But this isn't a play about old people; it's about freedom and the ownership grown children sometimes feel over their parents."

Fjallabak (Brokeback Mountain) is the Reykjavík City Theatre's adaptation of Ang Lee's hugely popular 2005 film Brokeback Mountain. It tells the story of cowboys Ennis Del Mar and Jack Swift, who meet while herding sheep in the mountainous regions of Wyoming in the mid-20th century. Despite all the social values of their time, they are drawn to each other. "Here, we are taking a beautiful step, we believe, by telling a story of men who live under conditions where they can't even imagine the possibility of falling for each other. They can't express their feelings, as it would literally be a matter of life and death. We have two of the finest

male actors in the house in this timeless story of forbidden love."

Leaving a Beautiful Imprint on the Soul

The Reykjavík City Theatre is a non-profit institution, not funded by the state but receiving 40% support from the City of Reykjavík, as Brynhildur explains. "This agreement includes, among other things, that we bring 4,500 children from Reykjavík's primary and preschools to the theatre free of charge every single year, for performances specially tailored to each age group. And we present them with proper theatre, not just some inept hullabaloo. But

operating a theatre with 60% self-generated revenue is, frankly, a bit insane. That much has been said in the cultural pages of the newspapers, but somehow, we make it happen," she adds with a smile.

"What drives us at the City Theatre is showing people what happens when they sit in a full auditorium and experience something collectively because the theatre can create that magic. It's an experience that leaves a beautiful imprint on the soul and can open up vast, unknown dimensions, leaving us there – speechless, yet with all the words ready."

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason





ORIGINAL CREATIONS, STRONG EMOTIONS, AND STORIES CLOSE TO HOME



The National Theatre of Iceland is heading into a milestone year, as it celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2025. While exciting new productions await the lifting of the curtain, featuring both comedy and drama, the theatre will continue to present four wildly popular plays from last season—a momentum that Artistic Director Magnús Geir Thordarson warmly welcomes.

“In short, we have an incredibly diverse program ahead, with a lot on offer—probably more than ever, really,” says Magnús

Geir when discussing the upcoming season. “One of the things that stands out about this season is the unusually large number of shows that were extremely successful last year and will continue with us into the winter. These include the Gríma Award-winning play *Saknadarilmur* (“The Scent of Longing”), the major musical *Frozen*, and *Ord gegn ordi* (*Prima Face*, by Suzie Miller). Not to forget the stand-up show *At the Red Light*, which was a big hit. Among the new productions, I’d like to highlight a hilarious Icelandic comedy called *Eltum vedrid* (“Chasing

the Weather”), which premieres at the beginning of October. Many of the country’s top comedic actors are involved, and there’s a lot of excitement about this play, where we see the Icelandic nation in a nutshell—chasing the weather.”

The National Theatre’s Christmas Production This Year is *Yerma* — a stirring and powerful play, according to Magnús. “This is a new modern production that Gísli Örn Gardarsson will direct, with Nína Dögg Filippusdóttir in the lead role, and I expect it will resonate with audiences in much the same way as *The Mayenburg Trilogy*, which we performed last year and fondly remember, as it shares a similar tone.” Additionally, Magnús Geir mentions a new work by Hrafnhildur Hagalín, titled *Home*. “This is an incredibly well-written play about Icelandic people, an Icelandic family today.” He also highlights *Taktu flugid, beibi* (“Take flight, baby”), *Jolabodid* (“The Christmas Dinner”), and *Blomin a thakinu* (“The Flowers on the Roof”), which is one of six children’s plays that will be offered this winter.

Icelandic Reality and Stories That Move Us

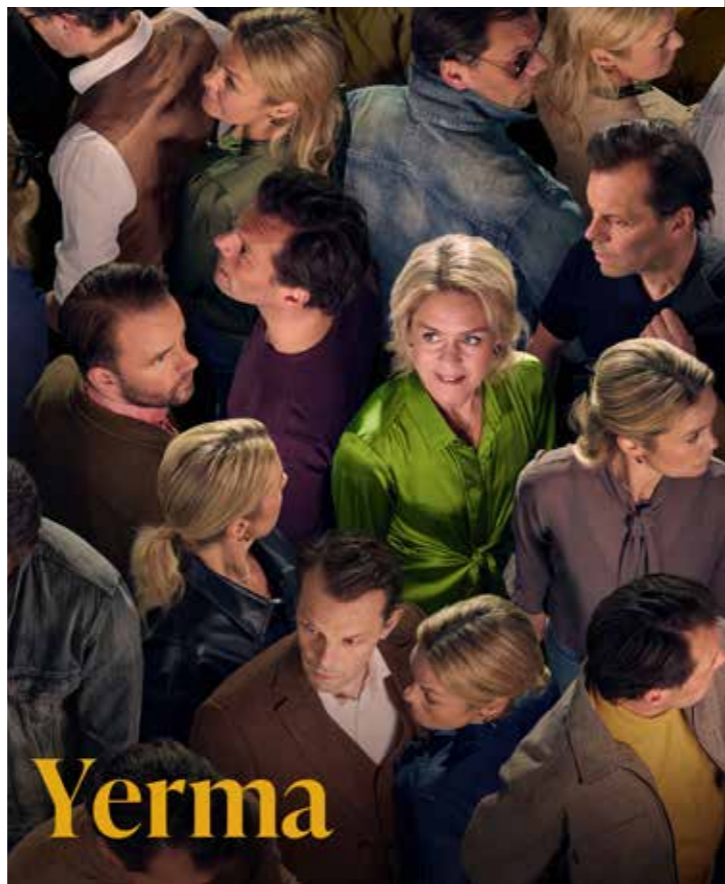
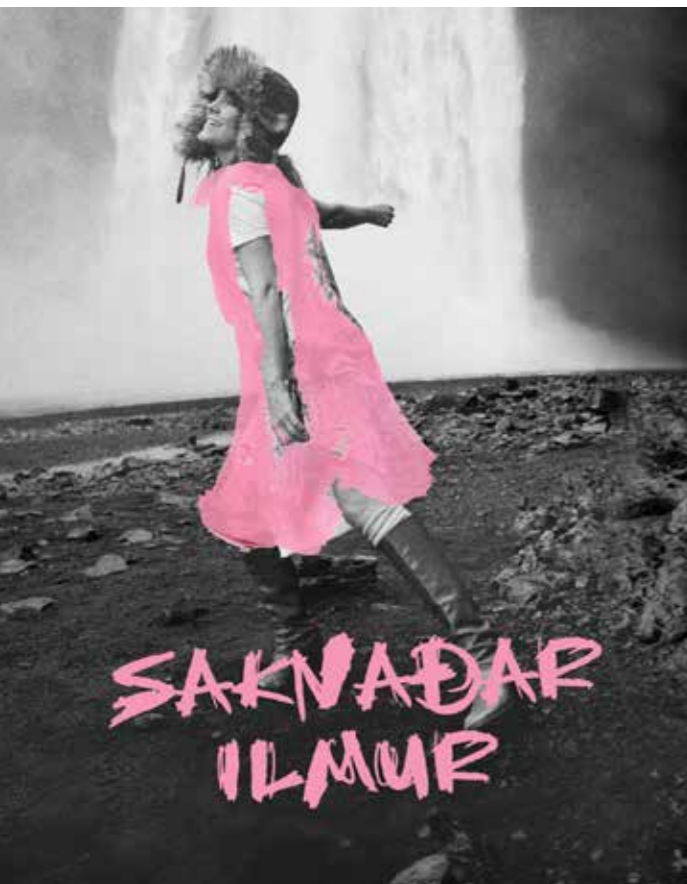
After the New Year, a new Icelandic musical will premiere. It is titled *Stormur* (“Storm”) and is based on the music of the popular local musician Una Torfadóttir. “This is a story written and directed by Unnur Ösp Stefánsdóttir, who is working in collaboration with Una. It’s a story deeply rooted in current Icelandic reality, one that we can all relate to and that will move us, accompanied by Una’s wonderful music,” says Magnús Geir. “I think it’s safe to say that this season is characterized by stories that are close to us. There’s great originality, deep emotions, and amazing actors.”

One might assume it would be difficult to follow up such a strong season as the last one at the National Theatre, with four productions still running, but Magnús Geir says quite the opposite is true. On the contrary, it provides undeniable momentum going into the fall and winter. “This is truly a luxury position, and we are extremely pleased with how strong and proud we emerged from last season. Many

of our stage productions broke attendance records, and our shows did incredibly well at the Gríman Awards [the annual Iceland Performing Arts Awards]. When you stop shows while they’re playing to full houses at the end of the season, it’s clear that we enter the new season with packed audiences and everything in full swing already by the end of August. Ultimately, it’s always about the audience, and the theatre is always more enjoyable when you feel that the interest is tangible and that shows are sold out. More than anything, this situation motivates us to keep moving forward in the same direction.”

The Theatre Always Reflects the Present

As it should, live theatre always takes cues from its external environment—it reflects the zeitgeist, so to speak, at least to some extent. Magnús Geir wholeheartedly agrees. “Theatre is always a certain mirror of its contemporary moment. On one hand, theatre deals with something universally human and timeless—human emotions, love and



compassion, hate and conflict, families, lovers, and so on, and that’s part of what we do. That’s why theatres around the world are still performing Shakespeare, Chekhov, and the classical Greeks.”

At the same time, Magnús Geir and his colleagues are constantly trying to connect the theatre to people’s lives today and ensure that their selection of projects reflects current issues that are important to people. “What stands out a bit for us this winter is that we are reflecting on human relationships and the family as the cornerstone of life,” notes Magnús Geir. “We’re also addressing issues that have been prominent lately, and I would mention *Prima Face* first, as we are about to perform the 70th show soon. This is a play we premiered last year—an incredibly powerful and impressive piece, with Ebbja Katrín Finnsdóttir in the lead role. It deals with sexual harassment and how the legal system processes such cases. It’s an incredibly clever work that brings us very close to the subject, allowing us to understand it in a completely different way than what we see in the media every day.”

Another play that Magnús says is firmly rooted in contemporary times is the

forementioned work featuring the music of Una Torfadóttir, *Stormur*. “This play is about the lives of young people finishing university and stepping into adult life, finding their way in that world. Many topics are raised that relate to life in Iceland today and the complex environment we live in. I can tell you that we had a table read of the play yesterday, and people here were tearing up over various aspects that resonate deeply with what we’re experiencing around us today.”

The Art of Crafting a New Theatre Season

It’s to be expected that an esteemed institution like the National Theatre must cater to as many people as possible while also ensuring its broad role in the cultural life of the nation. At the same time, it must remain fresh, innovative, and in tune with contemporary issues when it comes to selecting content. So, how does the person in charge—none other than the National Theatre’s director—go about planning a new season? Magnús Geir smiles at the question. “That’s right, it’s

a tricky task, but an incredibly fun and rewarding one. At the theatre, we work in such a way that, although the director holds ultimate responsibility and leads the process, they work alongside a strong team—a project selection committee that operates throughout the year. And we’re always trying to gauge—what stories do audiences want to hear, and what stories do they need to hear, and what is important for society to be presented on stage. With that in mind, we’re constantly reaching out into the world, keeping track of what’s happening in theatres around the globe, reading newly released novels, and staying in regular contact with writers. We always have countless ideas and countless works under consideration and discussion. Slowly but surely, this narrows down, and eventually, we have our season.”

And that’s precisely what Magnús Geir and his team are offering to the nation this fall and winter. It’s clear to see and hear that the National Theatre is entering its 75th year in full stride—fresh and forward-looking.

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN SEARCH FOR LOST TIME



Gufunes / RVK Studios – Studio 1

One of the most popular films of the year in Icelandic cinemas is *Touch* by Baltasar Kormákur, based on the most popular book of 2020 by Ólafur Jóhann Ólafsson. Icelandic Times' journalist met Baltasar for coffee at the impressive Rvk Studios premises in Gufunes in the outskirts of Reykjavík and discussed the film, the story's appeal, and how its main themes resonate with most of us in one way or another – not least with Baltasar himself.

Baltasar Kormákur is the Icelandic director who has achieved the most success abroad, with his films featuring some of the biggest stars of our time in leading

roles. Under his direction, Jake Gyllenhaal and Josh Brolin have ascended the peak of Everest, Idris Elba has battled a blood-thirsty lion, and Denzel Washington has wielded his guns. These are just a few of the many world-famous actors he has worked with over the past two decades or so. His latest film, *Touch*, based on the bestselling book of the same name by Ólafur Jóhann Ólafsson, has received excellent reviews both in Iceland and abroad. Unlike the aforementioned films – *Everest*, *Beast*, and *Two Guns* – *Touch* unfolds slowly, driven by deep emotions rooted in true events.

"My daughter gave me the book, and as soon as I started reading it—I might

have been on page 100—I knew this was something I was going to get deeply into. Ólafur Jóhann's story has the quality that it starts off lightly, if I can put it that way, but then it slowly tightens its grip, becoming more and more intense, and by the end, something has happened inside you that you didn't see coming," explains Baltasar. "Both emotionally and narratively, it becomes much denser as it progresses. That was an interesting quality that really captivated me."

Good Collaboration with Ólafur Jóhann

Baltasar didn't wait long; he immediately got in touch with Ólafur Jóhann Ólafsson,

scriptwriting process. "The collaboration was really enjoyable, especially considering that there is a general consensus that you shouldn't work with the author of a book when adapting a screenplay. It hasn't always gone well when I've tried that," he adds with a playful sparkle in his eyes. "But Ólafur and I approached this with the right mindset. There's just something that clicked, and it became an incredibly easy collaboration. We constantly bounced ideas off each other, and if I suggested something that deviated from the book, as often happens when adapting for the big screen, he embraced it and worked with me. This undoubtedly helped ensure that the tone of the book was always present in the film. His authorial voice is there, but the collaboration was never such that he wasn't willing to let me adapt the story to the film format. As a result, I think there are more changes to the story as it appears in the film than people generally realize. The core of the story, which is what matters most, remains true to the book and is very much present."

A Star Performance by Two Generations

Much has already been said and written about Egill Ólafsson's performance in the role of Kristófer in the present day, and it's safe to say that he delivers a stellar performance. When this journalist saw the film, the actor who portrays the younger Kristófer caught his attention just as much—this was none other than Baltasar's son, Pálmi Kormákur, in his first major role. Despite Baltasar's experience, confidence, and talent as a director, wasn't he at all nervous about throwing his son straight into the deep end with a leading role in a full-length film? The father smiles at the thought. "It wasn't originally my idea for Pálmi to play this role—Selma Björnsdóttir [*Touch*' casting director] suggested it. She pointed out my two sons, Stormur and Pálmi, for the role, and my initial reaction was that one of them wasn't the right type for the role—even though he's a great actor—and the other one actually was, but he had no interest in acting because his heart is in visual arts. And I wasn't sure if he even had it in him despite a handful of small roles when he was younger. But I just asked Selma to get in touch with

the boys, invite them to audition, and then just let the process take its course rather than me interfering."

It turned out that Stormur wasn't the right character for the sensitive and emotional Kristófer (trust Dad to know his boys!) and Baltasar wasn't even sure if Pálmi would show up for the auditions. Pálmi hesitated at first but eventually decided to take the plunge, challenge himself a bit, and attend the auditions. It turned out to be a great stroke of luck. "I checked out the auditions material and, as they say, the boy absolutely nails it, much to my surprise and delight. Everyone who sees the auditions afterward agrees that he's the right one for the role. The same thing happens with the people at Focus Features [the film's production company], and that's when I start thinking, what now? I knew there was no one else who could play the role, but I also knew this would be difficult for me because what if it didn't work out in the end? It's one thing to make mistakes in filmmaking, but another to make mistakes with your child's life. It could have caused him long-term difficulties if the role hadn't gone well for him, and to be completely honest, this wasn't easy for me. But we faced it together as two adults, and there's nothing more enjoyable than getting to know your children through work. It's incredibly rewarding, especially because the lad does such a great job."



Baltasar Kormákur Portrait – Ásdís Ásgeirsdóttir



Lilja Jóns fyrir RVK Studios

A Bygone Era That Stirs Up Old Wounds

Through Pálmi's portrayal, we get to know the protagonist Kristófer as a student during his student years in London in the late 1960s, and how it comes to be that he starts working at a Japanese restaurant, falls in love, and life smiles upon him—until fate intervenes when events from the past resurface. Without going into detail about the plot's progression, a Japanese term called hibakusha plays a significant role in Kristófer's life. The term emerged from the events when atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II and refers to those affected by the bombings; the word *hi* means "suffering," *baku* means "explosion," and *sha* means "person"—a person who suffers due to the explosion.

This term does not refer to those who perished in the disaster, but to the people who survived and lived in the shadow of the long-term effects of radiation and other lasting impacts. In the aftermath of the bombings, survivors began to be stigmatized, and there was prejudice against them and their descendants. It was believed that the blood of survivors

was contaminated by radiation, and it was generally assumed that hibakusha could not have healthy children. Few wanted such individuals in their families. Thus, another silent and cruel tragedy was born on top of the devastation caused by the bombs themselves.

"This Hiroshima story is so incredibly well integrated into the narrative by Ólafur—how the butterfly effect from long-past atrocities can have such significant consequences in the present. It gives the story much greater depth and a more profound tone," says Baltasar, and it's clear that this aspect of Kristófer's story resonates with him. "This is coming to light more and more recently, and there was an article in the Guardian about it because of the documentary *Atomic People*, which deals with these people—the hibakusha."

Baltasar falls silent for a moment, deep in thought. Then he speaks again.

"I am going to tell you something. Something quite remarkable. About a week ago, I received a letter from an actor in the film who told me that he is a descendant of hibakusha. Participating in this film had a significant impact on his life, and he apologized for not daring to tell me this while

we were making the film. This is so deeply ingrained in Japanese national consciousness that even though he is just a descendant of hibakusha, he didn't dare mention it because of the perceived possibility that he might carry in him some genetic defect. And this is an adult man, a Japanese actor living in Germany, and he couldn't bring himself to talk about it!"

We sit in silence, reflecting on this for a moment. It's shocking how pervasive the stigma and prejudice against those who survived the bombings remain, even today—nearly 80 years later.

"But I was incredibly touched to receive this letter, in which the actor expresses his sincere gratitude. Since *Touch* deals with this sensitive issue that has weighed so heavily on a group of Japanese people—who did nothing wrong other than survive war crimes—he wants to help raise more awareness about the film, if he can, in Japan and beyond."

Just like how Baltasar's parents met...

The silencing and marginalization surrounding those considered hibakusha is, of course, a theme we Icelanders are all too familiar with throughout history. The prejudice against Icelandic girls who had relationships with soldiers from the occupying forces during World War II persisted for decades after the war ended and the soldiers were long gone. We must also remember that, here as elsewhere, people hesitated for a long time to be in the same room as HIV-positive individuals. Perhaps this is why people in Iceland relate so well to the story—along with the fact that, in some personal way, we are all in search of lost time?

"I think that's absolutely right, and this is a very universal theme," says Baltasar. "This may be a bigger and broader story than most people experience in these matters. And yet..." Baltasar smiles at some thought and then continues speaking. "My parents actually met just like Kristófer and Miko. At Mokka Café [Iceland's oldest operating coffee shop, on Skólavörðustígur, Reykjavík]. Just exactly like that. My dad, a Spaniard who was living in Norway, was just passing through on his way to work in the herring industry in Siglufjörður to earn some money. He planned to buy oil colours and canvas in town, and he knew that local artists met at



Gufunes – framtíðarplön

Mokka. So that's where he went. My mom had just come to town from the countryside and was working at Mokka. My dad sees her, stands up, walks over to her, and asks her name—and he hasn't left the country since. These stories are everywhere, and I didn't even realize my parents' story until after I had finished making the film."

Ready for the Next Project—with a Hollywood Superstar

When asked if he needs to gather his strength after *Touch*—which he says was one of the most complex projects he has undertaken, with filming across two continents, in three countries, and in three languages—Baltasar says that's far from the case. On the contrary, he's full of energy and is about to start work on his next blockbuster. It's the thriller *Apex*, with Charlize Theron confirmed to star in the lead role. The story is about an outdoorswoman who finds herself in grave danger in the wilderness, where she has to fight off threats beyond just the forces of nature. "This film is certainly different from *Touch*, a thriller set in the outdoors, but at its core, I'm still telling an interesting story," Baltasar interjects. But first, he has to finish the television project *The King & The Conqueror*, an

8-part series that Baltasar's company, Rvk Studios, produced in collaboration with the BBC and CBS, no less. It's about the great battle at Hastings in 1066—a massive project that was filmed in the studio facilities at Gufunes. So, we've reached the point today where we can handle productions of this magnitude in a studio in Iceland?

"Yes, absolutely," Baltasar responds firmly. "This is a dream I've had ever since I came here and saw these buildings about 20 years ago. I didn't feel ready to take it on back then, but it's always been in the back of my mind. Then the moment came when I told myself I was going to do it, and in 2016, I finally made it happen. I'll be honest with you, people thought I had lost my mind—I'm not joking—they were convinced that I was setting myself up for abject failure. But it's working, and it's working well. We've taken on major projects here, and there's plenty more in the pipeline. This has created an entirely new platform for Icelandic filmmaking."

With that, we finish our coffee. Baltasar has his next meeting to get to. He needs to meet with people so he can continue doing what drives him every day—telling stories.

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason



Baltasar Breki Samper fyrir RVK Studios



Gufunes / Skrifstofa RVK Studios



deCODE Genetics HQ



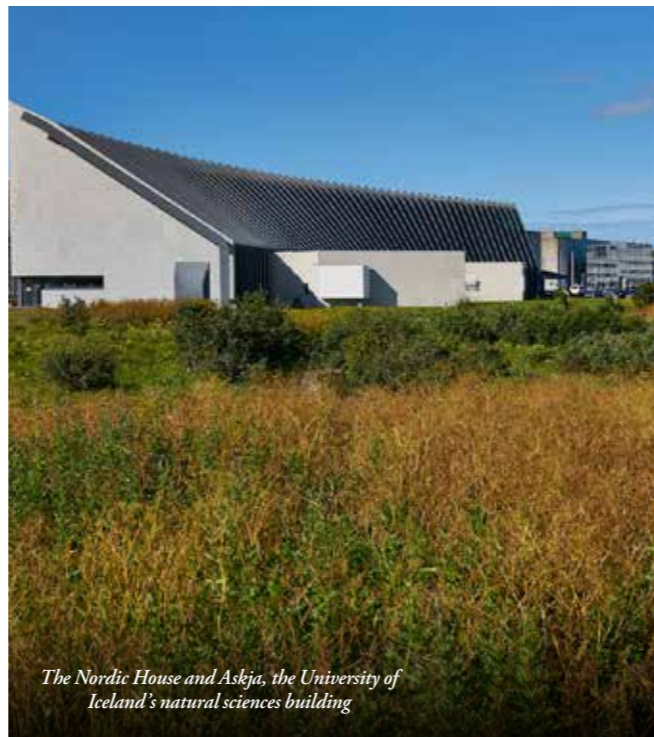
Alvotech Iceland HQ

CULTURE & SCIENCE

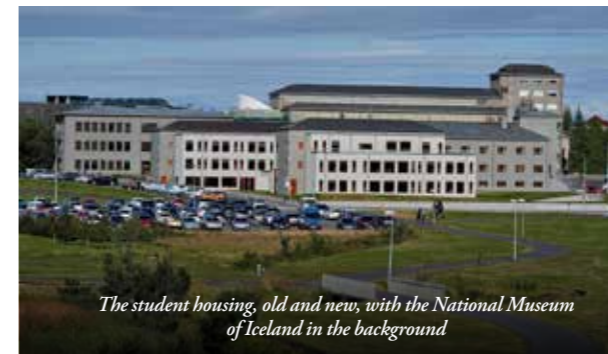
The centre of culture and science in Iceland is located in Vatnsmýri, Reykjavík. In this small area, just west of Reykjavík Airport, you'll find not only the University of Iceland with the majority of its operations but also two of the country's most powerful biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, deCODE Genetics and Alvotech Iceland, as well as the Nordic House and Gróska, the hub of innovation in Iceland. Three years ago, the Mayor of Reykjavík, the Rectors of the University of Iceland and Reykjavík University, the CEO of Landspítali (National University Hospital), and the Chairman

of the University of Iceland Science Park signed the establishment of the Science Village in Vatnsmýri. This project is marketed internationally under the name Reykjavik Science City by Business Iceland. Icelandic Times visited the area, which is centrally located in the capital but still somewhat secluded. When—or if—the Borgarlína transit system is established, Vatnsmýri, between the University of Iceland and Landspítali, will become the country's main transportation hub and possibly even a train station for Keflavík Airport.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



The Nordic House and Askja, the University of Iceland's natural sciences building



The student housing, old and new, with the National Museum of Iceland in the background



The Nordic House in the middle of Vatnsmýri, with Alvotech Iceland in the background



Main building of the University of Iceland, designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, inaugurated on June 17, 1940



Gróska on the right, deCODE Genetics on the left



From Ljósvallagata



LIGHT MOODS AROUND LJÓSVALLAGATA

One of the most beautiful streetscapes in Reykjavik is Ljósvallagata in the western part of the city. The row houses were begun in 1926 and mostly completed by 1930. Row housing was the dominant architectural style in Reykjavik at the time, after wooden houses were banned following the Great Fire near Austurvöllur and Austurstræti in 1915. The main proponents of this architectural style were state architect Guðjón Samúelsson and famed physician Guðmundur Hannesson, both of whom served on the first national planning committee. Reykjavik's first city plan, from 1927, was based on these

ideas. A good example of this is the workers' housing estates on Hringbraut and the west side of Ljósvallagata, while Hólavallakirkjugardur Cemetery, which was in use from 1838 to 1932, lies along the eastern part of the street. However, the era of row housing in Reykjavik was brief, lasting only twenty years. The people of Reykjavik, and Icelanders in general, likely prefer larger lots and bigger houses than their neighbouring nations, as the capital now stretches nearly twenty kilometres eastward from Sólvallagata in the west end.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson





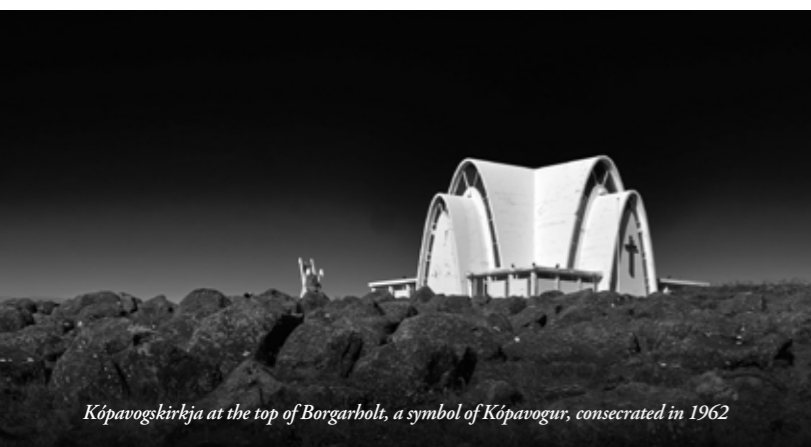
A view over Kópavogur, with Íslandsbanki's headquarters in the tower, and Smáralind on the far left



Smáralind, the largest shopping mall in the country, opened at 10:10 AM on 10/10/01



A view over Kringlumýri, the sports area of Breidablik, with Digraneskirkja in the right-hand corner and Keilir in the background behind the new development at Nónhed



Kópavogskirkja at the top of Borgarholt, a symbol of Kópavogur, consecrated in 1962



Gerdarsafn and the concert hall Salurinn in the centre of Kópavogur, with Hamraborg in the background

40,000 SOULS

The most common name in Kópavogur is Jón – no surprises there – with 490 residents bearing that name out of the town's total of 41,349 inhabitants, making it the second most populous municipality in Iceland. Anna is the second most common name in the town, with 479 residents. According to data from the National Registry, 15 percent of Kópavogur's residents, or 6,198 people, are foreign nationals. Kópavogur is a young town, turning 70 years old next year. The town was granted municipal rights in 1955 after separating from Seltjarnarnes in 1948. Kópavogur is centrally located within the capital region, south of Reykjavík and north

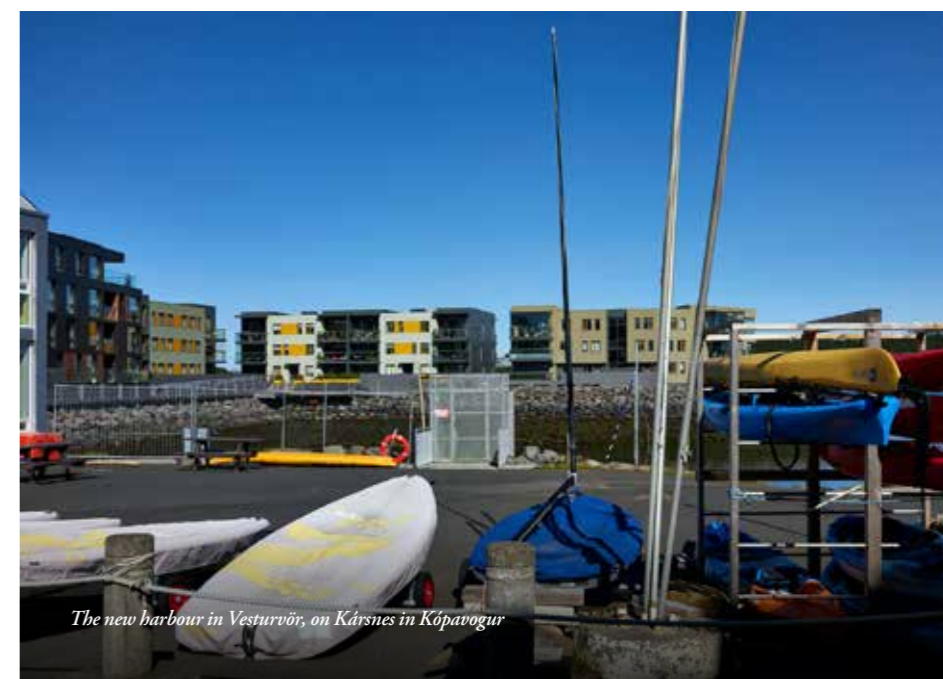
of Gardabær. Significant development in Kópavogur didn't begin until around 1960, and seven years later, in 1967, Kópavogur surpassed Akureyri to become the second largest town in the country, with 10,524 residents, while Akureyri had 10,102. Over this past half-century, Kópavogur's population has quadrupled, while that of Akureyri has only doubled, now standing at 20,374 residents. Icelandic Times visited Kópavogur, home to the tallest building in the country, the largest shopping centre, and excellent outdoor recreation areas and sports facilities.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson

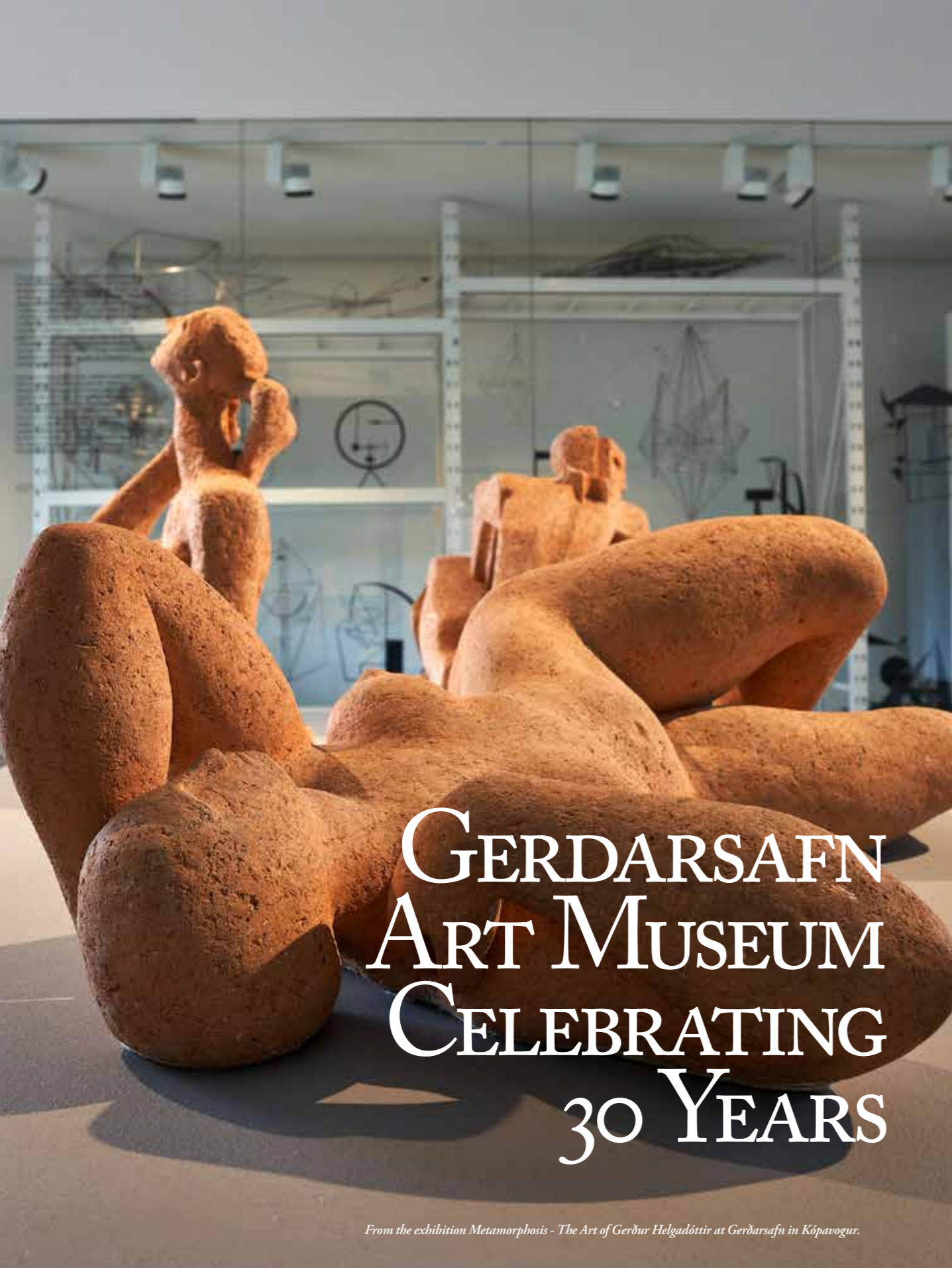
www.icelandictimes.com



A flamboyantly decorated hut by Kópavogur harbour



The new harbour in Vesturvör, on Kársnes in Kópavogur



GERDARSAFN ART MUSEUM CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

From the exhibition Metamorphosis - The Art of Gerður Helgadóttir at Gerðarsafn in Kópavogur.



The origins of Gerðarsafn – The Kópavogur Art Museum can be traced back to 1977 when the heirs of revered artist Gerður Helgadóttir (1928-1975) donated all of her works to the Kópavogur Art and Culture Fund on the condition that the town would build an art museum to exhibit her works and preserve her memory. Gerðarsafn, designed by Benjamín Magnússon, was opened in 1994, thirty years ago, in Borgarholt in the centre of Kópavogur, just east of Kópavogur Church. The church features stunning stained-glass windows by Gerður, which depict the journey of life from cradle to grave.

To celebrate the museum's thirtieth anniversary, the exhibition Metamorphosis – The Art of Gerður Helgadóttir is currently on display. This outstanding exhibition showcases the power of this giant in the visual arts. As the exhibition catalogue states: "Gerður's creative force was immense, her ideas countless, and her observations deep and exploratory. Gerður was a pioneer

in sculpture and a trailblazer in three-dimensional abstract art in Iceland. She challenged accepted ideas about visual art with her experimental approach. Her skill was extraordinary; she mastered numerous complex techniques and worked across various media, creating with a fluid, dancing, soaring agility, yet at the same time with great strength."

In the Metamorphosis exhibition, Gerður's art is placed in a historical context, and her works are examined in relation to the movements and trends of her time. The focus is particularly on the rapid changes in her artistic creation and her evolution from traditional figurative imagery to the abstract—how she transitioned from stone to clay to iron and bronze, from highly structured forms to a floating lightness, and towards more organic and natural shapes. Mere words hardly capture the timeless quality of Gerður's art, but the exhibition manages to convey its essence—at once timeless and hugely enjoyable.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Looking from Laugavegur towards Hverfisgata, all new, both with old and new designs



Center Hotel on Laugavegur



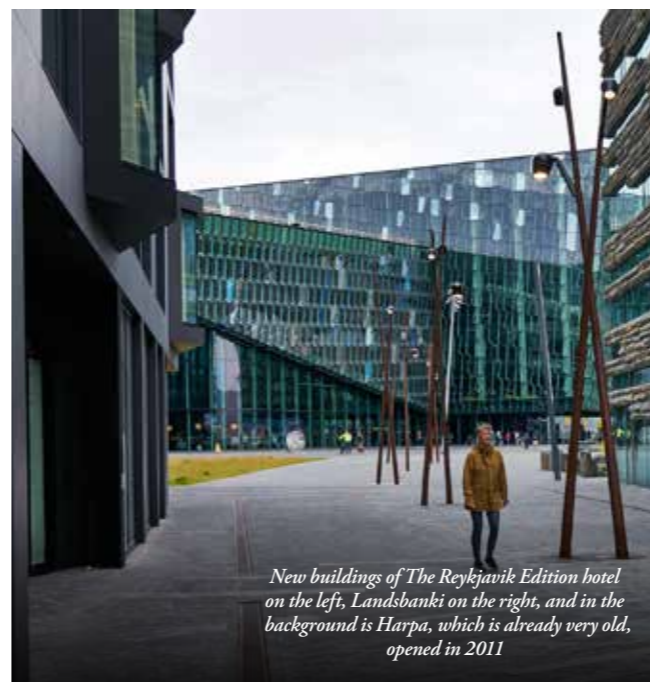
Hotel Reykjavik on Lækjargata



New office building of the Parliament on the corner of Vonarstræti and Tjarnargata



The new building of Landsbanki Íslands and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs by the east harbour

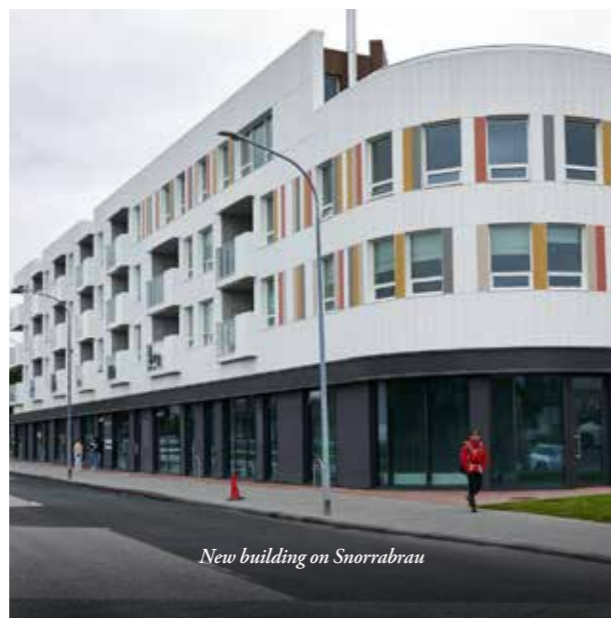


New buildings of The Reykjavik Edition hotel on the left, Landsbanki on the right, and in the background is Harpa, which is already very old, opened in 2011

WITH OLD AND NEW DESIGNS



Looks old, but newly built from the ground up on Hafnarstræti



New building on Snorrabraut



New with an old design on Hverfisgata

The city centre, postal code 101, is the oldest part of Reykjavik. In Kvosin, a village began to form in the latter part of the 18th century in what is now Adalstræti. The downtown area is defined by Snorrabraut to the east, Gardastræti to the west, and the eastern part of Reykjavik harbour, including Reykjavik Airport. The neighbourhood's population is small; of Reykjavik's 145,571 residents, only 11,498 live in the city centre. The downtown area is the hub of national and city administration, where you'll find the Parliament, ministries, the Supreme Court, the National Gallery of Iceland, the Reykjavik Art Museum, and the National Theatre. It is also home to the city's main landmarks, such as Hallgrímskirkja church,

Austurvöllur square, Tjörnin with Reykjavik City Hall, the main shopping streets Laugavegur and Skólavörðustígur, the new Hafnartorg, and many of the country's largest and finest hotels. Although the city centre was nearly fully developed over 80 years ago, before World War II, it is constantly being changed and improved. Icelandic Times took a leisurely walk through the downtown area of the capital and photographed new buildings that have been constructed in the oldest part of the city in recent years. The easternmost part of Hverfisgata has probably seen more changes in recent years than any other part of the city centre.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



URBAN DENSIFICATION — URBAN ALTERATION

New building being completed at the corner of Nóatún and Borgartún



Rapid development has occurred at the Kirkjusandur lot



The Kirkjusandur lot, Íslandsbanki offices demolished, new residential buildings taking their place



The corner of Suðurlandsbraut and Grensásvegur



The Héðinn lot in Grandi

There is extensive construction happening all around the capital city. Icelandic Times toured the city and took photos of large construction sites west of the Elliðaár River, from Skeifan in the eastern part of the city to Grandi in the west. On June 1, 2024, according to the National Registry, 145,571 residents lived in Reykjavík, with 23.4% or 34,108 individuals being foreign citizens. The population has increased by 1,654 individuals over the past six months, since December 1. The oldest resident of the capital is 106 years old, and Reykjavík is home to 162 women who are 95 years or older, as well as 65 men in

the same age group. There are five thousand more men in Reykjavík than women, with 75,112 men compared to 70,346 women. There are 113 gender-diverse individuals. In 1924, a hundred years ago, Reykjavík had a population of 20,657, which is slightly fewer people than now live in the city's most populous neighbourhood, Breiðholt, where 23,334 people currently reside. Breiðholt is a neighbourhood that began to be developed around 1970. Isn't it time to start densifying the development in Breiðholt?

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



The Orka lot at Suðurlandsbraut, Ármúli



The Hekla lot at Laugavegur



New National Hospital rising at Hringbraut



New large building at Hringbraut in the Óskjuhlíð neighbourhood



Construction at the Héðinn lot at the corner of Mýrargata and Ánanaust



TARAMAR

– Icelandic Purity for Your Skin

TARAMAR is an Icelandic skincare brand that has opened a stylish boutique at Hafnartorg, in the heart of Reykjavik. The products are the brainchild of Guðrún Marteinsdóttir (Rúna), a professor at the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences at the University of Iceland, and her husband, Dr Kristberg Kristbergsson, professor emeritus in food science at the same university.

TARAMAR was founded in 2010 when the couple, Rúna and Kristbergur, decided to utilize their over 30 years of scientific experience, in marine ecology on one hand and food science on the other, to develop 100% toxin-free, natural, and organic skincare products. “When I was in my fifties, I started noticing certain signs of aging on my own skin,” Rúna explains. “I wasn’t actually looking for a new project, being a full-time professor at the University of Iceland. However, I was searching for a good moisturizer, that could protect the skin against the elements while I was out at sea,” she says with a smile.

That’s how it came to be that the scientist Guðrún – or Rúna, as she’s always called – who spent most of her career as a professor in fishery-related fields, became an entrepreneur, founded a company, and used her knowledge to produce top-quality skincare products.

Where the Universal Mother and the Ocean Meet

The name TARAMAR is a combination of the word “Tara,” which refers to the universal mother, goddess of compassion, love, and healing, and “Mar,” meaning the

ocean. TARAMAR thus signifies both the eternal feminine and the power of the sea. “It’s interesting to mention that when I was on expeditions as a specialist with the Marine Research Institute, I was in close contact with fishermen. They told me how they used marine resources to stay energized, boost their strength, and protect themselves against harsh conditions and the cold. I found all of this very fascinating,” Rúna explains. “It was during this time that my ideas first began to take shape. When TARAMAR was created, my focus was primarily on marine resources and bioactive compounds from the ocean.”

Superfood for the Skin

TARAMAR began as a hobby but quickly snowballed into a serious project where no expense was spared. An immense amount of time, a total of 8 years, was devoted to deep thinking, research, and experimentation to develop top-quality skincare products using only the best available ingredients. “I sometimes compare TARAMAR to handcrafted Persian rugs, where every



little detail is carefully crafted to create a high-quality product, with natural ingredients coming together in perfect harmony like a flawless symphony. This product is truly unique in the market and completely different from the mass-produced items that flood today’s market.”

According to Rúna, TARAMAR’s uniqueness lies in its ingredients and purity, as the products are entirely free from chemical substances and other toxins. “Our products are among the very few globally that provide anti-aging protection while being 100% free from harmful and toxic substances for the skin and body,” says

Rúna. “The development is based on long-term research in food science on superfoods, so you could say that our products are more like food than typical skincare products. They truly are a superfood for the skin,” she adds. The products are based on research conducted at the University of Iceland and Rutgers University, dating back to 1980. “Additionally, the products are lovingly handcrafted here in Iceland, and we are one of the few Icelandic skincare brands that truly manufacture their products in Iceland, using the finest pure Icelandic ingredients along with high-quality ingredients from other parts of the world.”

Innovation for the Benefit of the Skin

Given that the entrepreneurial couple behind TARAMAR have backgrounds in science and long-term research, it’s no surprise that the development of their products follows the same principles, as Rúna explains.

“Our long-term research and development have enabled us to create powerful natural extracts, Arctic Complex, which can truly transform and heal the skin. To achieve 100% purity and synergic vibration of the formula we invented a new technology, NOTOX, that we have patented. This method involves a unique technique to create skincare products that make it possible to avoid all harmful substances by replacing all synthetic and toxic ingredients with organic herbs, algae, vegetables, and fruits.” TARAMAR has also conducted long-term research on the condition of water and its interaction with antioxidants from natural compounds. “The results have allowed us to optimize water for better absorption through the skin. This technique, Molecular Water, is also a registered trademark.”

From the very beginning, Rúna’s vision for the skincare products has been clear. “Everything we produce is entirely free from all toxins and harmful substances, pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides. These substances are present in most skincare products, often without being listed in their ingredients. TARAMAR products are completely sustainable and 100% safe for the environment.”

General Skin Care and Protection Against Issues

According to Rúna, TARAMAR products are suitable for everyone—children, teenagers, adults, and seniors. “Our research



Guðrún Marteinsdóttir

shows that in all cases, people notice significant changes with use and experience that their skin becomes stronger, healthier, and more beautiful,” she points out. “Women have even told us that they stopped using

includes major product launches in New York and Dubai. Sverrir Viktorsson, who manages TARAMAR’s marketing in Dubai and New York, will be traveling extensively to promote TARAMAR this fall and establish our presence in these markets.

“There is constant product development happening with us. We are expanding our range and will soon be offering hair products, deodorants, spa products, and more.” The latest products from TARAMAR include Mist Treatment, Exfoliator, Gel Masks, shampoo, and hair serum.

“We want to offer the market a wide range of pure and safe products because we believe everyone should have access to



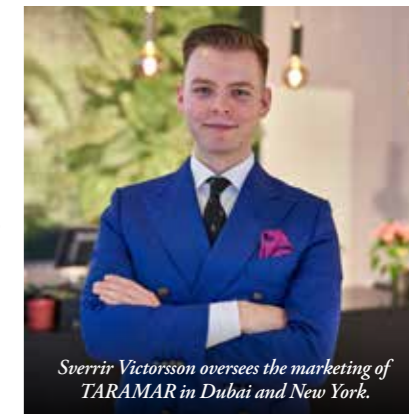
foundation and other products because their skin became so beautiful that there was no need to add anything. Nothing compares to clear skin that radiates health.”

At the same time, TARAMAR products have beneficial effects in repairing and improving specific conditions, such as persistent acne, rosacea, dry skin, sagging skin, pale skin, eczema, and wrinkles. “We also have many miracle stories where customers have used TARAMAR to rebuild their skin after their teenage years with great success.”

First Hafnartorg in Reykjavik – Next New York and Dubai

Now that the flagship store has opened in downtown Reykjavik, TARAMAR staff are already considering the next steps. This

high-quality products that are both safe and harmless for people and the environment,” Rúna from TARAMAR concludes.



Sverrir Viktorsson oversees the marketing of TARAMAR in Dubai and New York.



"A SINGLE BRUSHSTROKE CAN COMPLETELY CHANGE A PAINTING"

Helgi Thorgils Fridjónsson has been one of the most prolific and well-known living painters of Iceland over the past few decades. In addition to his constant exhibitions worldwide, he has operated a private gallery in his home continuously since 1980, mostly introducing foreign artists to Icelanders. And there's plenty ahead for Helgi, who, as ever, is not sitting idle.

Helgi Thorgils was born and raised in the small seaside community of Búdardalur but moved to Reykjavík at a young age to begin his art studies. Although he took on farm work early, the muse of art visited him early in life, as he recounts to me when we sit down for a chat at his home. Helgi's corner sofa is adorned with numerous colourful pillows, just as his home is filled with beautiful artworks wherever you look.

"I feel like this started when I was very young, and I don't really know when I began to be an artist," says Helgi about his early years. "I had, of course, read *Lust for Life* [the story of Vincent Van Gogh by Irving Stone] and *The Moon and Sixpence* [W. Somerset Maugham's novel partly based on the life of Paul Gauguin], and many other things, and at first, I thought an artist's life was something like that. These are stories of great artists who gradually become who

they are. Gauguin started as a clerk, and Van Gogh intended to become a priest but failed at that," Helgi adds. "But as for art education"—Helgi pauses for a moment—"in my opinion, an art school doesn't create an artist, but it can accelerate the artist's journey because you connect with many things at the same time and with others who have similar thoughts, a process that would otherwise take you an additional five to ten years."

"Getting Through It—Or Not Getting Through It"

Helgi Thorgils has been drawing for as long as he can remember, although his hands were never idle when it came to



farm work, which he was tasked with at an early age. The couple who ran the farm at Höskuldssstadir, where he stayed for half the year from the age of 7 to 13, were born in the 19th century, and both had grown up on farms visited by the English artist W.G. Collingwood when he travelled through the country in 1897. "When Collingwood travelled around the country, he often sketched the children on the farms, so there's a possibility that somewhere there's a portrait of the couple as children by Collingwood," Helgi adds with a smile.

"But I did all the main chores, and I think that when you're alone, working hard from

the age of seven until confirmation, you eventually fall into one of two categories: the kind of person who gets through it and grows from the experience, or the kind who perceives that period negatively. Fortunately, I was always rather solitary by nature. But looking back, I remember that adults always enjoyed talking to me. That's quite special. There weren't many peers around to play with in the countryside. But with art, for me, it was always the case that I read a lot and wrote a lot, and my career could have perhaps developed in that direction. In part, I owe a lot to writing because it complements the art in a way that develops many aspects of it, maybe even more so than if I had focused solely on writing. I think this is the

reason why I have a rather broad view of art, and my gallerist in Italy once said something that meant a lot to me: 'Your art is such that one can see the whole history of art, the entire history of humanity, in what you're doing.'"

"The Passage of Life" from One Place to Another

For more than 44 years, Gallerí Gangur (Gallery Corridor) has followed Helgi Thorgils, quite literally in the hallway of his home. On the National Gallery of Iceland's website, it states: "Gallerí Gangur is an artist-run exhibition space founded by artist Helgi Thorgils Fridjónsson in 1979 and is probably the oldest privately run gallery in



Iceland to have operated continuously since its founding.” The gallery’s operations began in January 1980 at Laufásvegur 79 and have moved around Reykjavík since then, always following Helgi’s place of residence, even with a temporary outpost at Kárástígur 9 in Hofsó, in the north of Iceland, a few years ago. In a way, the gallery represents the passage of life for Helgi.

“Right now, Bernd Koberling is exhibiting here,” Helgi says, noting that since its inception, the Corridor has aimed to introduce contemporary international artists to Iceland. “Gallerí Gangur has had a significant impact on the art scene here in Iceland, much more than people realize, I think. Many foreign artists have taken their first steps in Iceland through this gallery,” he adds. While many artists have long struggled to promote themselves, Helgi has consistently worked to promote others. He suggests that this spirit of collaboration may have roots in the rural life of his childhood.

“This is simply from the countryside as it was back in the day, and I have never

accepted anything for hosting exhibitions or selling works at the Corridor, nor have I ever received any grants for its operation. I decided from the get-go that this would never have anything to do with money. All this neoliberalism—one day in the future, people will look back on it as temporary nonsense. That mindset is not dedicated to life in any way. But the Corridor—it is life itself.”

According to Helgi, galleries and exhibition spaces that later showcased the same artists, whose first Icelandic exhibitions took place at Gallerí Gangur due to his personal friendships with the artists, have not always mentioned the Corridor in their promotional material regarding these artists’ careers in Iceland. “But that’s okay,” he says with a sly smile. “I’ve always told all my students and anyone who will listen: Avoid becoming a bitter artist because you’re the only one who will suffer from your bitterness. No one else gives a hoot.” Helgi laughs. “And I have no interest in spending my short life being bitter.”



Showing Up – Facing the Easel

Throughout his career, Helgi Thorgils has been remarkably industrious with exhibitions, both in Iceland and abroad. His solo exhibitions number over a hundred, and group exhibitions are approaching three hundred. He says he’s a creature of habit when it comes to his work, and it’s clear that he doesn’t rely solely on inspiration to bestow him with creativity. “I am always in front of the canvas early in the morning. Kolor and I”—he gestures to his dog—“always go for a morning walk at exactly five, and I’m back here by quarter to six. Then I have some coffee and sit down in

front of the easel. The first thing I do is write down some thoughts. Then I start working.”

Helgi describes how the ideas and motifs for his paintings, especially the larger ones, often ‘simmer’ in his subconscious for several months before it’s time to stretch the canvas. “Then you look at the canvas, scribble back and forth, maybe with charcoal, and then it starts to take shape and becomes clearer. Then I start working on the pieces, and some people even think my paintings are most beautiful at that stage—when they’re unfinished and expressionistic. Then comes the stage of gradually digging toward the final image, and that’s not always necessarily enjoyable. But all of a sudden, something clicks, and that process might take a week or half a month. At that point, you more or less know how the painting will end up. But in painting, it’s naturally the case that one brushstroke can change the entire image,” he adds, with a thoughtful expression.

Five Exhibitions Next Year – Including One in an Unexpected Location

Speaking of the big picture, it’s crucial for Helgi Thorgils to maintain a good overview of the present moment, as there is much on the itinerary ahead. In an average year, he typically puts up two to three exhibitions, but in 2025, there will be no fewer than five.

“One of the exhibitions will be in an unexpected location, and it’s not quite time to reveal it yet, but it will be in June next year. In January, I’ll have a solo exhibition in Silkeborg, which, of course, is Asger Jorn’s place, and then I’ll have another solo exhibition in Gothenburg. I’ll also be participating in a group

exhibition in Germany that opens at the beginning of August, and likely another one in the city of Trento, Italy.”

And lest we forget, Gallerí Gangur will showcase works by notable artists throughout the next year, as per usual. Among them is the renowned Australian artist Jenny Watson, who emerged from the second wave of feminism and has previously exhibited at Gallerí Gangur.

Finally, Helgi sits up on the sofa, resting his elbows on his knees, with his hands clasped tightly. He is silent for a moment with a reflective expression but then begins to speak.

“I want to mention my friend Hreinn Fridfinnsson, who has recently passed away, and I’m going to tell you about our last work together. The morning Hreinn died, I sent him an email inviting him to set up an exhibition in Gallery Gangurinn, as we had often talked about. But Hreinn must have died at the very moment I pressed the button to send the message. Stefán, the husband of Bára, Hreinn’s niece, came to see me around ten that morning for a chat and coffee. He had barely come through the door when Bára called, and Stefán immediately said he had to leave right away—there was something urgent calling him. After he left, I opened my email on my phone, and there was a message from Hreinn’s assistant. She thanked me for the email I had sent earlier that morning and informed me at the same time that Hreinn had passed away that morning. Shortly after, I received another message from Stefán telling me of Hreinn’s death. This cycle is really Hreinn’s fourth exhibition in Gangurinn.”

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason



MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVED PUBLIC TRANSPORT

It's safe to say that the city of Reykjavík has undergone considerable changes over the last 15 years or so. New neighbourhoods have emerged, and the city center has, in many ways, been transformed. Icelandic Times sat down with Ólöf Örvarsdóttir, director of Reykjavík's Department of Environment and Planning, to review the projects, the benefits for residents, and—last but not least—what lies ahead in the near future.

The Department of Environment and Planning oversees nearly everything related to the man-made environment of the city. This includes urban planning, construction, transportation, climate and environmental matters, waste management, managing the Botanical Garden, the Youth Employment Program, and all construction and maintenance work, to name a few. The projects, needless to say, are numerous and diverse.

Building the City Inward, Not Outward

"One of our main challenges at the moment is to increase the supply of residential housing, which is probably the most extensive project today. It's important to keep in mind

that we currently have a lot of approved zoning plans that can soon be built upon. However, favourable loan terms and other conditions need to be in place as well," Ólöf points out. "The policy of the City of Reykjavík is to build inward rather than outward, as there are growth limits in the capital area, just like in other municipalities. This approach helps utilize infrastructure more efficiently and makes the city more sustainable."

Strengthening High-Quality Public Transportation

According to Ólöf, the reason for these growth limits in the regional plan from 2015 is primarily that if people can only live in one part of the city and work elsewhere, the need for additional transport infrastructure



increases, and as most people are aware, the roads can hardly handle more traffic. "Cities are generally more sustainable if there is a mix of residential areas and employment opportunities," she adds. "To address the need for transportation improvements, and particularly in response to climate issues, the municipalities in the capital area have made a transportation agreement with the state, in which it was decided to enhance high-quality

public transportation. It's all connected—being able to work near your home, live close to your workplace, access services within walking distance, and having high-quality public transportation, not to mention a dense network of bike paths—improves both health and the overall quality of life for city residents. Let's not forget that owning a car is expensive, and that cost should rightly be considered part of the overall cost of living.

We need to ensure a diverse housing future that aligns with our environmental priorities through planning, in collaboration with stakeholders and the construction industry. It's a considerable challenge."

Transport Channel from Suburbs to City Center

Here, Ólöf touches on the pressing issue that has repeatedly appeared in local news in recent years and is commonly referred to in everyday speech as urban densification.

"Yes, the term for this is also what's known as Transport-Oriented Development, and its manifestation is visible in the form of the transport channel that now stretches from the city center all the way up to Keldur area, which is the next major suburb in Reykjavík," Ólöf explains. Borgarlína [The City Line, a soon-to-be-realised urban transport system] will run along this channel.

"If we trace this channel from east to west, it will start at Keldnaholt, where a diverse and eco-friendly neighbourhood will soon be established. Next comes Ártúnshöfði, where we are building new developments alongside the old to densify and mix the area. This project is already well underway and will transform into a new neighbourhood, although mixed with what's already there. Apartments, schools, a cultural centre, exciting outdoor spaces, squares, and more," says Ólöf. "This neighbourhood

will be connected by a bridge to the new district in Vogabyggð, where significant development has been ongoing. A recent design competition for a school and primary school just concluded, with a school building set to connect the two neighbourhoods. There are also plans to put Sæbraut in a tunnel, which will better connect the neighbourhoods on the surface to our old and established Vogahverfi."

Then we reach Suðurlandsbraut, where Mörkin is located, and in Skeifan, considerable development is planned. A large residential building has already been constructed at Grensásvegur 1.

We continue our virtual tour with Ólöf's guidance and arrive at the so-called Orkureitur lot, where the Orkuhús building once stood. There is significant development happening here, and more is planned in Álþheimar, where residential buildings are set to be constructed on the site of a gas station.

"If we go a little further west, we reach Ármúli, Vegmúli, and Hallarmúli," Ólöf adds. "We are working on a development plan for this area where we will slightly increase the height of the buildings to add apartments on the upper floors, turning the area into more of a mix between residential and commercial spaces. Behind the Nordica Hotel, a zoning plan is in progress where more apartments could be added. Meanwhile, a new four-star Hyatt hotel is under construction where



the old building of RÚV, the National Broadcasting Company used to be, and just a little further is the Hekluhreitur area, where hundreds of apartments are being built. Then we arrive at Hlemmur bus terminal, where everything is being revamped with beautiful outdoor spaces and pedestrian streets."

"The route continues down Hverfisgata, where there has already been significant densification with new buildings and apartment blocks. Finally, we arrive at Hafnartorg and Austurhöfn harbour, where numerous apartments have been built. When you put all of this together, we have a densification channel along the public transport routes. All of the aforementioned developments lie along the Borgarlínan line," Ólöf explains. The number of apartments is higher than in a traditional school district, she adds.

Maintaining Moderate Building Heights

It's an old and familiar story that while construction companies often want to build as many floors as possible—to fit the maximum number of apartments on a given plot—it is generally considered more people-friendly not to build too high so that sunlight can be enjoyed, and views are not overly obstructed. The most favourable solution for all involved is likely to find a balance between the two. But how will this be handled in the aforementioned projects, where densification is taking place and new buildings are being constructed?

"We're not building particularly tall structures in any of the projects I mentioned earlier. At Hlíðarendi, we are going up to five floors, possibly six in some cases. At Hekluhreitur,

we're going up to six to eight floors, with the uppermost ones being set back. Those are the tallest we're doing. Generally, we're working with buildings that are three to four or five floors. In selected areas, we're going up to six or seven floors, and slightly higher around the proposed Borgarlínan stations."

Urban Design Policy on the Table

Ólöf adds that there is a requirement for sunlight in gardens based on calculations that have been integrated into Reykjavík's master plan, "so that we have something concrete when negotiating with developers. As for sunlight in apartments, we often want to go further than the building regulations stipulate—which is actually very minimal. In fact, I wish the building regulations were a bit stricter in that regard," she

adds with a smile. "Daylight and sunshine are so precious at our latitude."

"We're also quite far along in developing a so-called Urban Design Policy. In this, we're ensuring, amid the rapid development that's been taking place, that there will be things like forecourts in front of new buildings and plenty of greenery in every location. If underground parking garages are built, there's a requirement for thick soil above them so that vegetation can grow and thrive. Ultimately, urban planning is also about flowers and bees. When building new within older areas, it's more efficient for municipalities and the environment because the infrastructure is already there—like roads, utilities, schools—although sometimes expansions are needed. In contrast, the footprint of development in the suburbs is much larger in every respect, both in terms

of environmental impact and financial resources."

Capital Traffic Volume Unlikely to Decrease

Everyone who drives in Reykjavík and its surroundings is familiar with the heavy traffic that dominates the mornings when people drive to school and work, and then again in the afternoon when it's time to head home. In light of this new transportation improvement, what changes can residents of the Greater Reykjavík area expect when the Borgarlína (City Line) comes into operation? Is it realistic to expect fewer cars on the roads?

"No, we won't see fewer cars," says Ólöf. "I think it's unrealistic to expect that. However, with Borgarlína, commuters will have an alternative. Our population is constantly increasing, and people are unlikely

to stop driving. But hopefully, we will reduce the rate of growth in the number of cars on the roads and prevent the massive increase we've seen in recent years. The number of cars cannot grow in proportion to population growth because there simply isn't enough space for that, and the impact on the environment and public health would be negative. Borgarlína, which will operate every seven minutes and move on a designated lane without hindrance, will be an efficient option for people to get from one place to another. Additionally, bicycle commuting has grown significantly in recent years. These changes, along with well-executed urban densification, are the key to good urban development for the future, which, in my opinion, is the best way to address the current situation."

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason





View over the pond in Hafnarfjörður, towards Sólvangur from Lækjargata



Shop on the northern corner of Strandgata and Lækjargata



The Pond in Hafnarfjörður

220 LÆKJARGATA

When Hafnarfjörður received its municipal rights in 1908, the town practically an unplanned cluster of houses with few actual streets, and a population of just under fifteen hundred. The only real streets were Strandgata and Reykjavíkurvegur. Most houses in the town were simply placed in the lava field where they fit, with no thought given to future street planning. In 1911, a committee was established to name the paths and streets, number the houses, and organize the settlement. Street names were drawn from the landscape or previous establishments in the area. Templarasund, for instance, was named after the Good Templars' house, Strandgata (Coastal Road) followed the coastline, Sudurgata (South Road) ran south and west towards Reykjanes, and

Reykjavíkurvegur led to the capital city. Lækjargata (Stream Road) was named thus because it runs alongside the southern part of Hamskotslækur (Hamskot Stream) from Strandgata eastward from the harbour. The first houses along the street were built shortly after 1900, just before Hafnarfjörður became an official municipality in 1908. Now, the street runs from Fjardargata to Hlídartorg on Reykjanesbraut. On Lækjargata, just west of Reykjanesbraut, there's a small roundabout named Lækjartorg. Hafnarfjörður is the third most populous municipality in Iceland, with 32,000 residents. Icelandic Times visited Hafnarfjörður and shot a few frames of what catches the eye when one is in or near Lækjargata, 220 Hafnarfjörður.

Photos og text : Páll Stefánsson



Hafnarfjörður Church on the corner of Strandgata and Lækjargata, consecrated 110 years ago



Lækjartorg



Education Center by the Stream



FROM INDIFFERENT CITY COUNCILORS TO EXUBERANT TOURISTS



Dofri Hermannsson

The inhabitants of Iceland, as well as foreign tourists, have not been oblivious to the volcanic eruptions on the Reykjanes Peninsula over the past three years. Among those who had previously warned about the danger of an eruption near populated areas, long before the fires began in March 2021, is Dofri Hermannsson. At that time, he was a deputy city councilor for the City of Reykjavík – today, he takes tourists on tours of the new lava fields.

"I started doing this because I was assisting my brother, who was organizing cave tours to Leiðarendi near Bláfjöll. Occasionally, there were people on these tours who balked at the thought of entering the cave. So, he asked me to take those people somewhere else. Since I was

well-acquainted with the mountains in that area, the Krýsuvík region, and other places near Reykjavík, I began showing people around and telling them about the potential volcanic eruption."

Visions of Lava Flowing Towards Reykjavík

When asked how he became familiar with the area in question, Dofri explains that during his stint in politics from 2006 to 2010, as a deputy city councillor for the Social Democratic Alliance in the Reykjavík City Council, a clairvoyant he knew approached him. This individual was deeply concerned that lava might flow down Elliðaárdalur Valley (in eastern Reykjavík) having repeatedly had visions predicting such an event. These warnings



gave Dofri much to ponder, as this person often had insights into future events, something that was difficult to explain.

"I hadn't given much thought to geology at that time, I was surprised by this talk, and wasn't sure if such a thing was even possible," says Dofri. But his interest was piqued. "I went and spoke with some of our most respected geologists at the time and asked them outright, can lava flow down Elliðaárdalur Valley? They all answered that at some point, such an event would occur; it was just a matter of time. The last time this had happened was about 4,600 years ago. I then asked them if they knew of any emergency plans in place to respond to such a scenario. They said they didn't think so. There had generally been very little interest in seriously examining this volcanic threat to the capital area. They added that this was, of course, neither the most serious nor the most likely scenario; that would be in nearby town of Hafnarfjörður. One of them said he was puzzled about how the Vellir neighbourhood got through planning, built in the lowest area in the most probable path for the next lava flow, where lava can be expected at least once every thousand years, and now it's been almost 900 years since the last lava flow."

Like a tipsy uncle at a confirmation party

As stated before, at that time Dofri was involved in politics—far from being involved in any kind of travel or tourism service—and he tried twice to make his point from the podium in the city council. According to him, it was a very strange experience. "People probably thought I was there to draw attention to myself for an election that would take place two years later. The experience of standing in the podium and talking about how Reykjavík should have contingency plans in case of a volcanic eruption, and feeling like people were looking at me as if I were a tipsy uncle at a confirmation party, that was odd. But of course, it deepened my understanding of how politics work."



At the same time, Dofri's interest in the geology of the area around the capital grew. He freely admits to getting engulfed in his interests, almost to the point of obsession. When earthquake tremors occurred, he often contacted Sigmundur Einarsson, a geologist, to ask if he thought there might be an eruption coming up. Alongside this, Dofri explored the region and read extensively. Before he knew it, he had accumulated a wealth of knowledge about accessible places and a plethora of entertaining stories. It made perfect sense that he should engage with tourists who hesitated to go on a cave tour and instead chose to explore the ground above.

Speculation Trips Around Active Volcanos

Dofri founded his tour guide company, Reykjavik Erupts, in 2017. "From this, the material for volcanic speculation tours emerged. I've put together these tours for travellers around Reykjanes, showing them where eruptions have occurred, where recent activity took place, and where eruptions might happen in the no-too-distant future," explains Dofri. "Travellers find it incredibly interesting to see 3,000-year-old lava, 1,000-year-old lava, and even lava that's only 2 to 3 years old. When I add

to that the insights from local geologists who suggest that an eruption could occur next week, it brings the whole narrative to life. It's better if we can explain geology in a simple way for amateurs, even children, so the subject comes alive."

Enthusiasm for his tour guiding services is ample beyond Iceland's borders, and when asked whether his company has faced challenges similar to those warned about by travel industry representatives in Iceland this year, Dofri remains optimistic. He believes this year isn't worse than previous years, partly due to careful planning and meticulous execution. Reykjavik Erupts received the Travel & Hospitality Award earlier this year for "Unwavering commitment to excellence and exceptional service." Recently, the company also received recognition from TripAdvisor, placing it among the top 10% of businesses worldwide. "Our strategy has never been to expand significantly; instead, our focus is on enjoying what we do and make an effort to do our job well," says Dofri. He shares a motto he encourages everyone working for him to keep in mind: "Treat everyone as if they were your family from your time as an exchange student, finally coming to meet you and see your country."

It's safe to say that Dofri has found fulfilment in transitioning from speaking in front of disinterested city council members to engaging with curious travellers. In addition to these volcanic speculation tours, his company offers excursions to Hekla, Katla, and Snæfellsjökull – all volcanoes that have erupted, could erupt, and will surely erupt again.

Who knows? It might happen tomorrow, as the geologists say.



The cliffs near Krísuvík

WHERE & WHEN?

The oldest rock on the Reykjanes Peninsula is about 500,000 years old, located near Reykjavík in the easternmost part of the peninsula. The majority of the peninsula, where nearly three out of every four Icelanders live, is much younger, around 50 to 100 thousand years old, with the newest part formed just last year. In other words, this is new land, still very much in the making. The volcanic history of the Reykjanes Peninsula is well-known, especially over the last hundred thousand years. Shield volcano eruptions were common until about 5,000 years ago, after which fissure eruptions became predominant, occurring roughly every thousand years. Each volcanic episode has lasted for over 200 years. The last episode began in the mid-10th century and ended in the latter part of the 13th century. Now, a new phase has begun.

Volcanic eruptions behave in such a way that at the start of each episode, a

fissure opens, and land rifting occurs. The rift expands by several meters during each episode. Each eruption also occurs in sequences, lasting a few days or weeks, followed by a reduction in activity for months or years before the next eruption. Underwater eruptions also occur on the Reykjanes Ridge, southwest of Reykjanes. These eruptions behave similarly to those under glaciers, producing a lot of ash. Iceland's international airport, Keflavík Airport, is located on the Reykjanes Peninsula, not far from Eldey, which formed during the Reykjanes Fires in 1226, as well as Illahraun, where the Blue Lagoon and the geothermal power plant in Svartsengi are situated. That volcanic episode was quite significant, lasting thirty years from 1210 to 1240. So, where and when will the next volcanic eruption occur? Has a new volcanic episode begun?

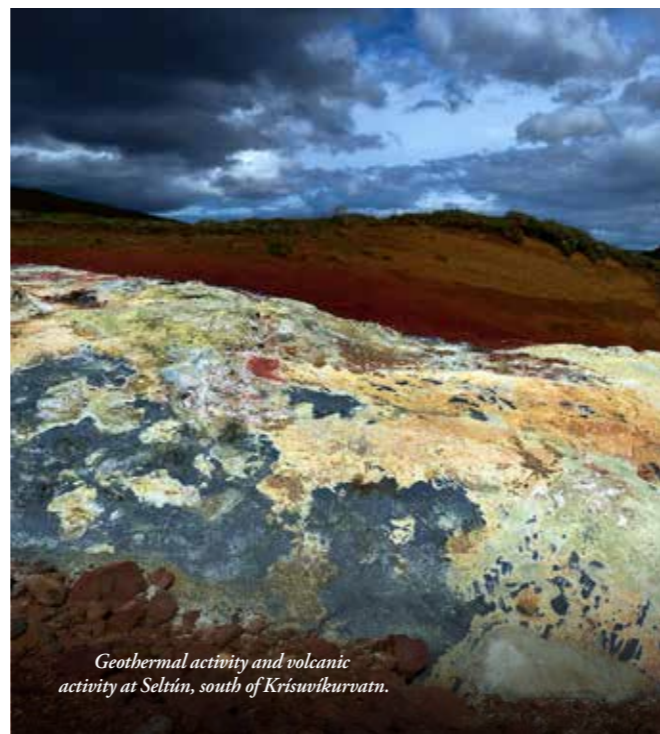
Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Eldey, just west of Keflavík Airport, was formed in an underwater volcanic eruption in 1226.



One of the largest gannet colonies in the world is in Eldey.



Geothermal activity and volcanic activity at Seltún, south of Krísuvíkuvatn.



In Krísuvíkurbjarg cliff on the southern Reykjanes Peninsula, you can see layers of rock from previous volcanic eruptions.



Fire and brimstone (or rather, sulphur) at Seltún, in the land of Hafnarfjörður.



CO-HABITATION WITH THE CALAMITIES OF NATURE

Trausti Valsson - Professor emeritus

If the volcanic eruptions on the Reykjanes Peninsula—which began on March 19, 2021, and show no signs of ending—have taught us anything, it is that Iceland is a land in constant formation. The country is located on tectonic plate boundaries, which run diagonally from the southwest corner to the northeast. The movements that occur beneath these intersections of the Earth’s crust regularly make their presence felt on the surface in varying degrees of intensity.

For the past three years, Icelanders have been thoroughly reminded of their proximity to the forces of nature. Since

the ongoing volcanic eruption series began in the spring of 2021 with an eruption in Geldingadalir near Fagradalsfjall, a total of nine eruptions have occurred on the Reykjanes Peninsula. The initial eruptions were far from populated areas and attracted a large number of tourists, both locals and foreign visitors. They were referred to as “tourist eruptions” and were treated as just another attraction for travellers. However, the seismic activity and volcanic eruptions since December 2023 have been dangerously close to populated areas, specifically Grindavík, causing significant disruptions to the community

there. Not to mention the tragic fatal accident that occurred during earthworks as a result. For the first time in 50 years, a populated area in Iceland faces a real threat from lava flows.

The Threat Has Always Been There

But how surprising should the ongoing volcanic activity on the Reykjanes Peninsula really be to us? Was there no way to foresee the possibility of such disturbances? While the events of recent months caught most people off guard, they did not surprise everyone. Ever since the Vestmannaeyjar eruption over half a century ago, Trausti Valsson, an urban planner and professor emeritus at the University of Iceland, has advocated for taking potential natural hazards into

account when planning settlements in Iceland. He believes building in hazardous areas without precautionary measures is irresponsible.

“The reality is that we must consider the circumstances here in Iceland and stop building recklessly on fault lines where there is a likelihood of earthquakes and even lava flows,” says Trausti in an interview with Icelandic Times. Although he retired from teaching at the University of Iceland nearly a decade ago, it is clear that Trausti remains passionate about this issue and is determined to raise awareness of the imminent threat. “I have pointed out the facts of this matter for decades, and while people may not take me seriously, the events in Grindavík and the surrounding



Einar Þorsteinn Ásgeirsson, Trausti Valsson, Pétur H. Ármannsson

infrastructure should be enough to alert authorities to the danger,” he adds.

A New Volcanic Period Has Begun

As mentioned earlier, Trausti has tirelessly emphasized the need for public authorities to address the imminent danger posed by the ongoing volcanic activity. Unfortunately, vested interests often cloud common sense, leading to oversight. Presently, approximately 80% of the nation resides in the southwest corner of Iceland, where the threat of natural disasters is very real. The region is dominated by geothermal activity, and as Trausti has pointed out, this can manifest in various ways: lava flows, ashfall, earthquakes, and floods from melting glaciers.

But where are the main risk areas in the capital region? “It’s safe to say that a new volcanic period has begun on the Reykjanes Peninsula, and we simply cannot rule out the possibility that this activity could extend to any of the six volcanic systems found on the peninsula,” explains Trausti. “Recent events at Fagradalsfjall and Svartsengi serve as reminders, but there has also been increased activity in the Krýsuvík system and the Brennisteinsfjöll area. We must bear in mind that these systems produced the lava found in Garðabær, Hafnarfjörður,

and Reykjavík, and repetition of such events cannot be dismissed.”

Proactive Measures in the Face of Volcanic Activity

In anticipation, precautions must be taken once Reykjanes awakens, according to Trausti. “Predicting the future is, of course, impossible, whether here or elsewhere. However, it’s essential to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Defending the Vellir area in southern Hafnarfjörður, built on recent lava, will unavoidably come at a cost. But neglecting it would have far greater consequences, and that can be avoided. Constructing protective barriers for this particular area is, in fact, unavoidable. It’s akin to insuring your car—you invest in insurance, hoping nothing happens. Yet, calamities sometimes occur unexpectedly, and that uncertainty warrants the utmost caution.”

Trausti also highlights that the current situation in the capital region involves urban expansion encroaching upon fault zones. Nevertheless, building on stable ground between faults remains feasible. “By doing so, we can prevent accidents and reduce the impact of natural disasters in the future.”

Text by Jón Agnar Ólason



Grindavíkurkirkja og umhverfi urðu fyrir miklum skemmdum



Yfirgefin hús, Vesturbraut, Grindavík



OH GRINDAVÍK

Steam rises from the new lava by the highway between Reykjavík and Keflavík



Protective barrier at Fornavör in Grindavík



Lava that erupted within the protective barriers and destroyed several new houses



Anything can happen – here is a sign down by the Grindavík harbour area on Gardsvegur



A residential building under construction, which of course was halted when disaster struck

Grindavík has now been reopened to general traffic. The town was evacuated exactly one year ago, on November 10, 2023, following a significant earthquake swarm that caused extensive damage to infrastructure and buildings. On December 18, 2023, an eruption began at Sundhnjúksgígur, just north of Grindavík and east of Svartsengi. Since then, the town has been more or less closed to general traffic, and permanent residence has not been allowed. However, business operations at the harbour have continued, as many strong fishing companies are based in Grindavík, and the Blue Lagoon has also remained open, though it has experienced frequent closures.

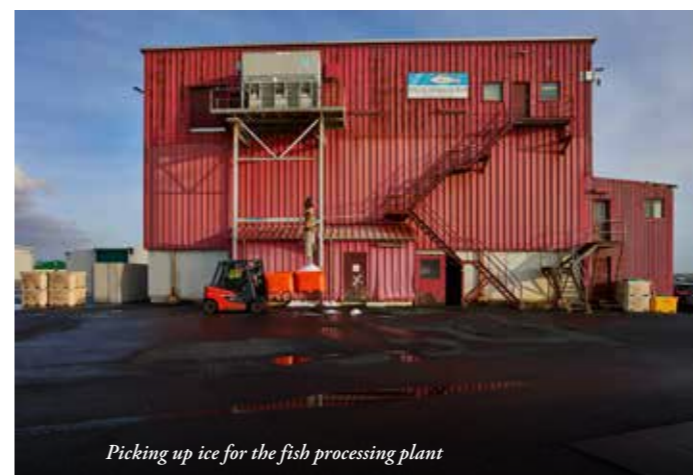
In the past eleven months, there have been six eruptions in the area. The next eruption is expected in the coming weeks, according to a statement from Civil Protection at the beginning of November.

Being in Grindavík now is quite a unique experience. Few cars, all houses empty, as Icelandic Times checked in on this town where a year ago, four thousand people lived—1% of the nation's population. This proportion is equivalent to all 4 million people in Boston being forced to leave their homes, or all 650 thousand residents of Liverpool, which is also 1% of the British population.

Ljósmyndir & texti : Páll Stefánsson



The elderly and nursing home was severely damaged in the earthquake in November 2023



Picking up ice for the fish processing plant



Small cabins at the campsite in Grindavík



Dalasýsla



Aurora borealis, Skarðsströnd

WONDERFUL VALLEYS

Dalasýsla by Hvammsfjörður at the bottom of Breiðafjörður in the West is a sparsely populated area, an agricultural region with less than a thousand inhabitants. It is as if time has stood still in this historic region. Around 975, one of Iceland's most famous sons, Leifur Heppni Eiríksson, was born in Eiríksstaðir in Dalasýsla, who was the first white man to come to North America in the year 1000. The settler Auður Djúpuðga Ketilsdóttir settled most of Dalasýsla in 890, but she found an excellent place at Hvammsfjörður, which she named Hvammur. Auður died in old age around 930, the year Alþingi was founded, but she was born in Norway around 850. She is the only queen who rests in Iceland, but her husband Ólafur

the White was king of the Viking kingdom in Dublin (Dublin) in Ireland. He died in battle, and then Auður went to Scotland, but their only son, Þorsteinn rauði conquered half of Scotland in company with Sigurður, Earl of Orkney, before he fell in battle. Then Auður went back to Iceland with her seven grandchildren. Many great people in Icelandic history were descendants of Auður, who had herself buried in the seashore at home in Hvammur, because she was a Christian, and there was no holy ground nor an ordained priest in Iceland. Here are some photos from this historic region, which is definitely worth visiting, only two hours drive away from Reykjavík.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Sheep gathering at Krossbólur by Hvammur



Dalasýsla



Looking out at Breiðafjörður and Dagverðarnes



Aurora borealis, Skarðsströnd



Miðdalir in the fall



PRISTINE NATURE, HISTORY, AND GOURMET FOOD IN DALIR



Eiríksstaðir

Dalir region in Western Iceland not only offers some of Iceland's most significant historical sites from the Settlement Age but also provides unique nature where one can ground themselves, enjoy tranquillity, and experience a retreat from the pace and bustle of modern life.

In Dalir, people experience balance and closeness to nature. The rhythm in the region is generally calm and pleasant because that's how the locals want it, and we find that visitors appreciate it," says Jóhanna María Sigmundsdóttir, project manager in Dalir. "Though the Ring Road is not far away, Dalir offers a unique setting to take a break from the stress and noise of urban life. We've heard this from both Reykjavik residents and international visitors from big cities around the world.

Step Off the Merry-Go-Round and Into Dalir
 Jóhanna does have a point. A glance at a map of Iceland shows that Búdardalur, the largest town in Dalir, is only about a 30-minute drive from Route 1. "We see that, in modern times, tranquillity has become an attraction in itself, something people seek out to recharge. Here in Dalir, it's ideal to find peace and quiet, step off the merry-go-round for a while, and take a deep breath. We can clearly see that people appreciate it as they

savour delicious local food, explore historical sites, or enjoy the natural surroundings."

History in Dalir: from the Settlement Age to Modern Times

It's no exaggeration to say that history lives in almost every hill in Dalir. Here, Audur the Deep-Minded settled and built her chieftain's estate, and at Eiríksstaðir, visitors can see the birthplace of Leif "the Lucky" Eriksson, the first European to discover America, while experiencing the way of life and conditions of his family during the Settlement Age. We can't forget the ancestral leader of the Sturlunga clan, Hvamm-Sturla Thórdarson, who lived at Hvammur in Dalir.



Dalabótel



Klofningur on Skarðsströnd

He was a descendant of Audur the Deep-Minded, and his sons Thórdur, Sighvatur, and Snorri were all born there. But the people and places in Dalir are not only linked to the Saga Age. It's worth mentioning that the beautiful church at Hjardarholt was designed by Iceland's first formally educated architect, Rögnvaldur Ólafsson, as Jóhanna points out. "We also have many poets from Dalir, including Steinn Steinarr, Jóhannes úr Kötlum, Theódóra Thoroddsen, and Stefán from Hvítadal. And let's not forget that artists Ásmundur Sveinsson and Hreinn Fridfinnsson also have roots in Dalir."

A Gourmet's Dream Destination

As Jóhanna points out, Dalir offers not only the chance to nourish the spirit with the region's history and nature but also serves as a true treasure trove of culinary delights, making it an ideal destination for a gourmet trip. "The cheeses from Dalir are, of course, known throughout the country, and here in the region

we grow garlic that, I'd argue, has no equal," says Jóhanna. "There are exceptional berry fields throughout Dalir, and the creamery at Erpsstaðir is a perennially popular stop for gourmets. The production there is unique, and guests are always welcome. A visit to Dalir is a true feast for the taste buds."

Peace and Relaxation in a Natural Setting

As previously mentioned, Dalir is ideal for what might be called "slow tourism," where the goal is to connect with

untouched nature and experience tranquillity and well-being. "Here in Dalir, life is relaxed and good. It's interesting to note that visitors, whether Icelandic or from abroad, tend to quickly adapt to the atmosphere in Dalir, finding a certain calm in the unique natural surroundings. Tourists often remark to locals about how deeply relaxed they feel in the area. This is something we see as valuable and will always protect. Dalir is and will remain a sanctuary, far from the hustle and bustle of modern life."



Weather changes in Álftafjörður

LET THERE BE LIGHT

When driving around the country at this time of year, the mind tends to conjure up images, as happened when the family had business in the Westfjords last week. It is the light that changes everything. Here are a few moments that had to be captured for you to see. There was rarely much time to react—the light changed so quickly, one had to act swiftly to capture moments on film that passed, and some even did before the photographer managed to click. It is also fascinating and amusing, the pictures that were not captured—the moment that got away.

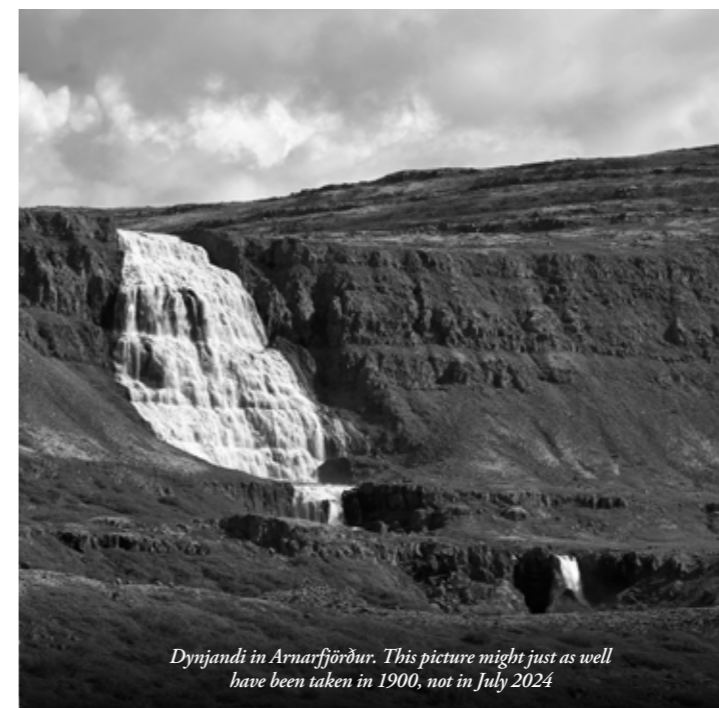
Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



View across Hvammsfjörður



A Summer cottage in Sökkólfssdalur



Dynjandi in Arnarfjörður. This picture might just as well have been taken in 1900, not in July 2024



View across Borgarfjörður towards Snæfellsjökull



Silfurtorg square, Ísafjörður

ÍSAFJÖRÐUR

Ísafjörður in Skutulsfjörður, the capital of the Westfjords, is a unique town. Bright in the summer, pitch dark in the winter. About three thousand people live there, out of the eight thousand who inhabit the entire Westfjords. Ísafjörður Municipality, which was formed in 1996, when Flateyri, Þingeyri, and Sudureyri, along with the sparsely populated areas in Önundarfjörður, Súgandafjörður, and Dýrafjörður merged with Ísafjörður, creating a municipality where over half of the Westfjords' population resides. In 1900, Ísafjörður was the second-largest town in the country, with just over twelve

hundred residents, home to the largest saltfish processing facility in Iceland, at a time when saltfish was Iceland's largest export product. Remnants of this history can be seen when walking around the town. Large, beautiful houses, built as stately homes over a hundred years ago. Icelandic Times visited the capital and enjoyed capturing on film a town that is exceptionally picturesque, especially in the summer. Ísafjörður is close to Reykjavík, just half an hour by plane, and nearly five hours by car.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Edinborg House in Ísafjörður, built in 1907, has everything: the Westfjords Marketing Office, a bistro, a concert hall, and more



On Hafnargata, a guesthouse nearby, Ísafjörður church in the distance



Þvergata



Hafnargata



Nedstíkaupstaður, Westfjords Heritage Museum



Ísafjörður harbour



Eyri / The spit in Ísafjörður



Aðalstræti



Silfurgata



There are few towns that have as intact an older townscape as Eyri in Skutulsfjörður in Ísafjörður

ÓSVÖR, ÓSHÓLAVITI & ÖLVER

Despite being a fishing station for centuries, there was no permanent settlement in Ósvör, at the easternmost part of Bolungarvík, on the west bank of Ísafjarðardjúp in the Westfjords, until 1905, and then only for the next twenty years. The town of Bolungarvík decided to rebuild the fishing station in 1980, a project that took ten years, and opened a museum there when the work was completed in 1990. Ósvör consists of a fishing hut, a salt house, a fish drying area, and a drying shed, in addition to the six-oared

boat, Ölver, which is situated on the beach. The boat was built in 1941 by Jóhann Bárðarson from Bolungarvík, based on the Bolungarvík design, known for its excellent seaworthiness, speed, and good landing capabilities. It provides a good representation of the boats used for fishing in the Westfjords from the mid-19th century. Ósvör is a rare place to peek into a past that is so near, yet so distant and alien.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



From Ósvör fishing station.



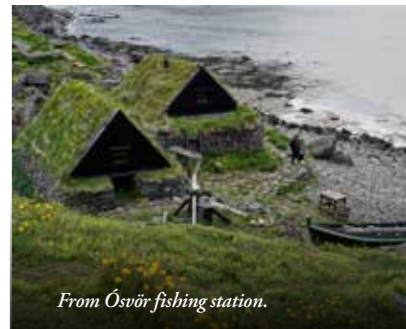
From Ósvör fishing station.



From Ósvör fishing station.



From Ósvör fishing station.



From Ósvör fishing station.



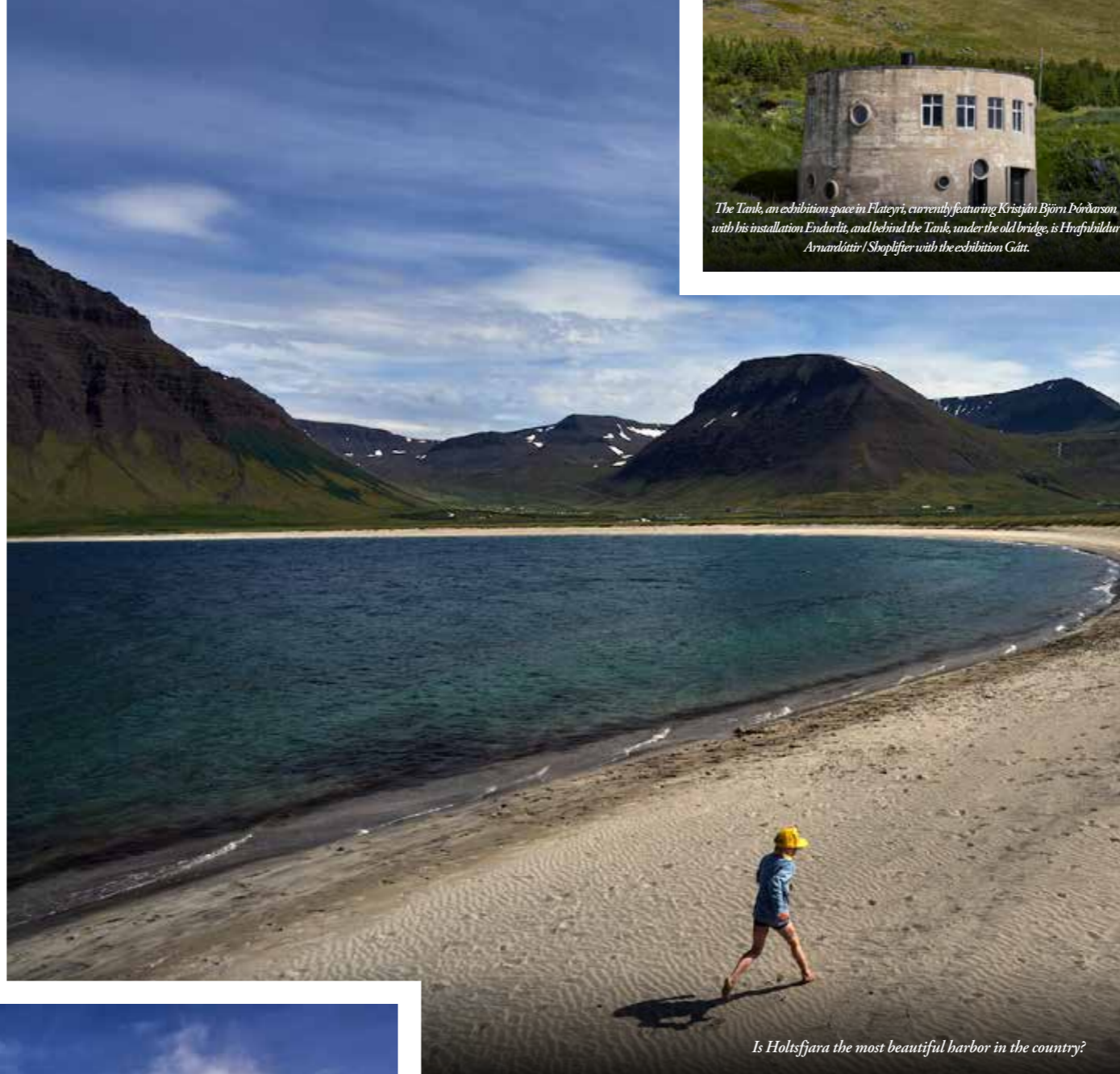
Óshólavíti lighthouse, built in 1937, just east of Ósvör. There is a fantastic view from the lighthouse over all of Ísafjarðardjúp.



From Ósvör fishing station.



What remains of the whaling station at Sólbakki, established in 1899.



Is Hofs fjara the most beautiful harbor in the country?



The Tank, an exhibition space in Flateyri, currently featuring Kristján Björn Þórðarson, with his installation Emdurlit, and behind the Tank, under the old bridge, is Hrafnabildur Arnardóttir / Shoplifter with the exhibition Gátt.



Hafnarstræti in Flateyri with Flateyri Church in the background.



Á leið í sólbæð í Hofs fjör. On the way to sunbathe at Hofs fjara.



In front of the restaurant Vagninn, on Hafnarstræti.



The oldest original store in the country, the Old Bookstore on Hafnarstræti in Flateyri.



The pier at Holt in Önundarfjörður.

THE VIKING MR. VIKINGSSON

Who named Önundarfjörður according to the ancient Landnámabók? The Viking Önundur Víkingsson around the year 900, is the answer. He built a farm by this beautiful 20 km / 12 mi long fjord, which lies between Dýrafjörður in the south and Súgandafjörður in the north, in the northern part of the Westfjords. The village in the fjord, Flateyri, now has about 250 inhabitants, roughly the same

number as in 1900, when one of the largest whaling stations in the country was at Sólbakki, just outside Flateyri. When Flateyri was at its bustling peak around 1970, nearly six hundred people lived there. The village is undeniably one of the gems of the Westfjords, with a charming town center, a very good restaurant, Vagninn, a unique shop, a bookstore that has been run by the same family since 1914, and not to forget the beautiful

midnight sun later in the summer in Flateyri. Although summer is beautiful in Önundarfjörður, winters can be harsh. A deadly avalanche fell on the town in 1995, and another in 2020, which destroyed the harbor, but fortunately, no one was seriously injured in that avalanche. It is almost a six-hour drive from Reykjavik to the fjord of Önundur.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



MAJESTIC MOUNTAIN NAMES

Askja. An eruption might be imminent there, as the land has risen by about a meter in a short time. Eruptions in Askja are usually quite significant.



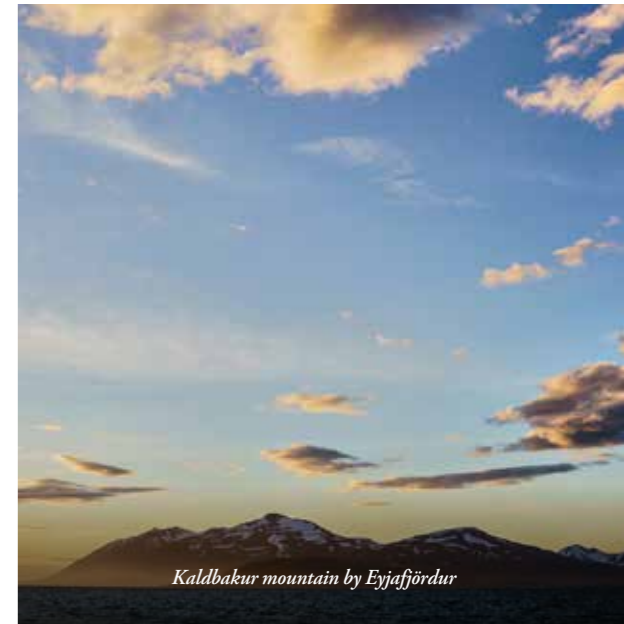
Herdubreid, considered the most beautiful mountain in the country by the locals



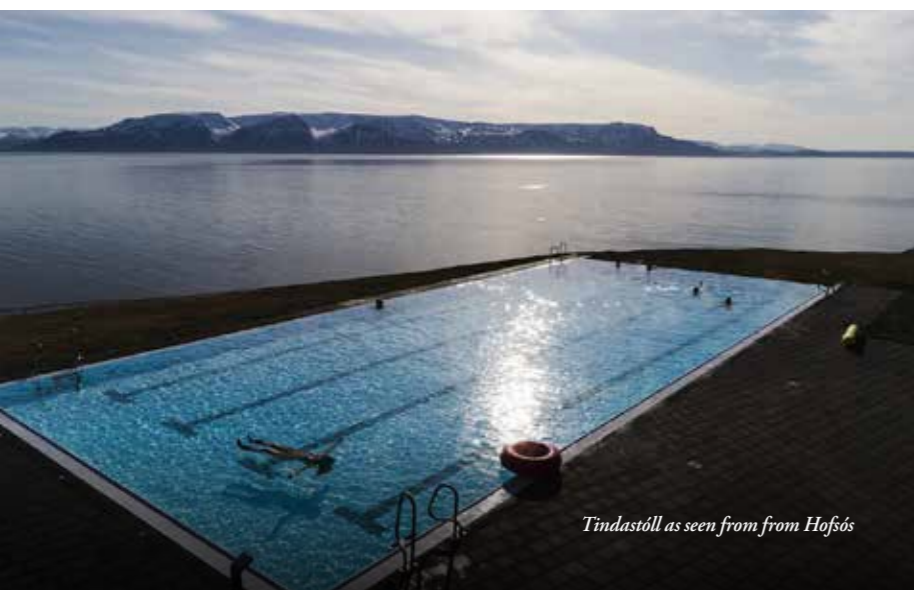
Hekla, here during its last eruption, a very small one in 2000



Katla, last eruption in 1918, overdue by now



Kaldbakur mountain by Eyjafjörður



Tindastóll as seen from from Hofsó

Esja, Katla, Hekla, Askja, then Herdubreid, Skjaldbreid, Tindastóll, and Kaldbakur. These are names of some of the more renowned mountains in Iceland. Beautiful and exceptionally strong names that are so deeply symbolic of the land and the nation, but also of the language that has lived with us for nearly 12 centuries. Subsequently, these mountain names have also been used for businesses such as car dealerships, fishing companies, a meat processing plant, a sports club, and a cultural center in the east fjords. This is hardly surprising, as Because these are powerful names for majestic mountains.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Esjan dressed in water



Skjaldbreid, just north of Þingvellir



Gudmundur Ármann Sigurjónsson

ENDLESS INSPIRATION IN EYJAFJÖRDUR

Painter and teacher Gudmundur Ármann Sigurjónsson held his first exhibition at Mökkakaffi in 1961 and has been pursuing his art alongside teaching ever since. Expect him to step out of doors whenever the weather permits to capture his surroundings near Akureyri, the seasons, and the light on paper using watercolours and a remarkable technique.

"I moved here in 1972, to Akureyri, having just recently completed my art studies in Sweden. It was actually Hördur Ágústsson [artist, designer, teacher, and scholar in visual arts] who sent me up north to teach art. Shortly after, I founded the Akureyri School of Visual Arts – which was then called Myndsmidjan – in collaboration with the Akureyri Art Society. Here, I have worked on my art, including graphics and oil paintings, while also teaching almost continuously since that time."

Preferably No Rain and No Frost

In 2014, Gudmundur retired. "You could say that around that time, I started painting with watercolours outdoors. It's become a tradition for me to head outside and paint as long as the weather is suitable – preferably no rain," he says with a grin, "and the temperature shouldn't be below freezing. But I make the most of the time when the opportunity arises to go outside, and I really enjoy it, in between working in my studio on large oil paintings and graphics."



Hörgá and Staðarbjúkur



Eyjafjarðará

The Most Beautiful Valley in Iceland

But what is it that makes the environment around Eyjafjörður so special? It seems that everything in the area serves as inspiration for Gudmundur.

"Yes, that's absolutely right. I don't have to go more than half an hour at most to reach Svarfadardalur, and that place offers endless possibilities. Ásgrímur [Jónsson, painter] always said that it was the most beautiful valley in Iceland, and he regretted not discovering it until his later years. There's an endless supply of beautiful motifs in Svarfadardalur and the Tröllaskagi peninsula as a whole – it's simply a fairytale unto itself."



Eyjafjarðará and Staðarbyggðarfjall



Svalbarðsvitinn and Súgur

The Only Way to Capture the Light on Paper

When asked why he chose watercolours to capture the landscape around Eyjafjörður, Gudmundur explains that they are the most suitable medium for outdoor painting, which he has been doing in recent years. "Everything happens much faster with watercolours. With oil and acrylics, there's a lot more involved—so many things you have to bring with you. I've used watercolours from the beginning, but I must say that when I met some painters from Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Norway, and Denmark, I saw that they used watercolours a bit differently than I had experienced before. Instead of applying the watercolour to dry paper with brushes, they used brushes that hold a lot of water and often painted on wet paper, letting the colours flow and blend without much brushing. I don't use the brushes for anything other than controlling the flow and the colour to match the light I'm working with at the time, whether I'm painting the sky, reflections in water, or something else."

This technique is known as the "wet-in-wet" method, according to Gudmundur, and it has been adopted by Nordic artists like Lars Lerin, Anna Törnquist, and others. "This method offers much more light. It creates a brightness that you can't achieve any other way, and ultimately, that's my focus in my work—to capture the landscape, the season, and the light."

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason



Eyjafjarðará



Staðarbyggðarfjall



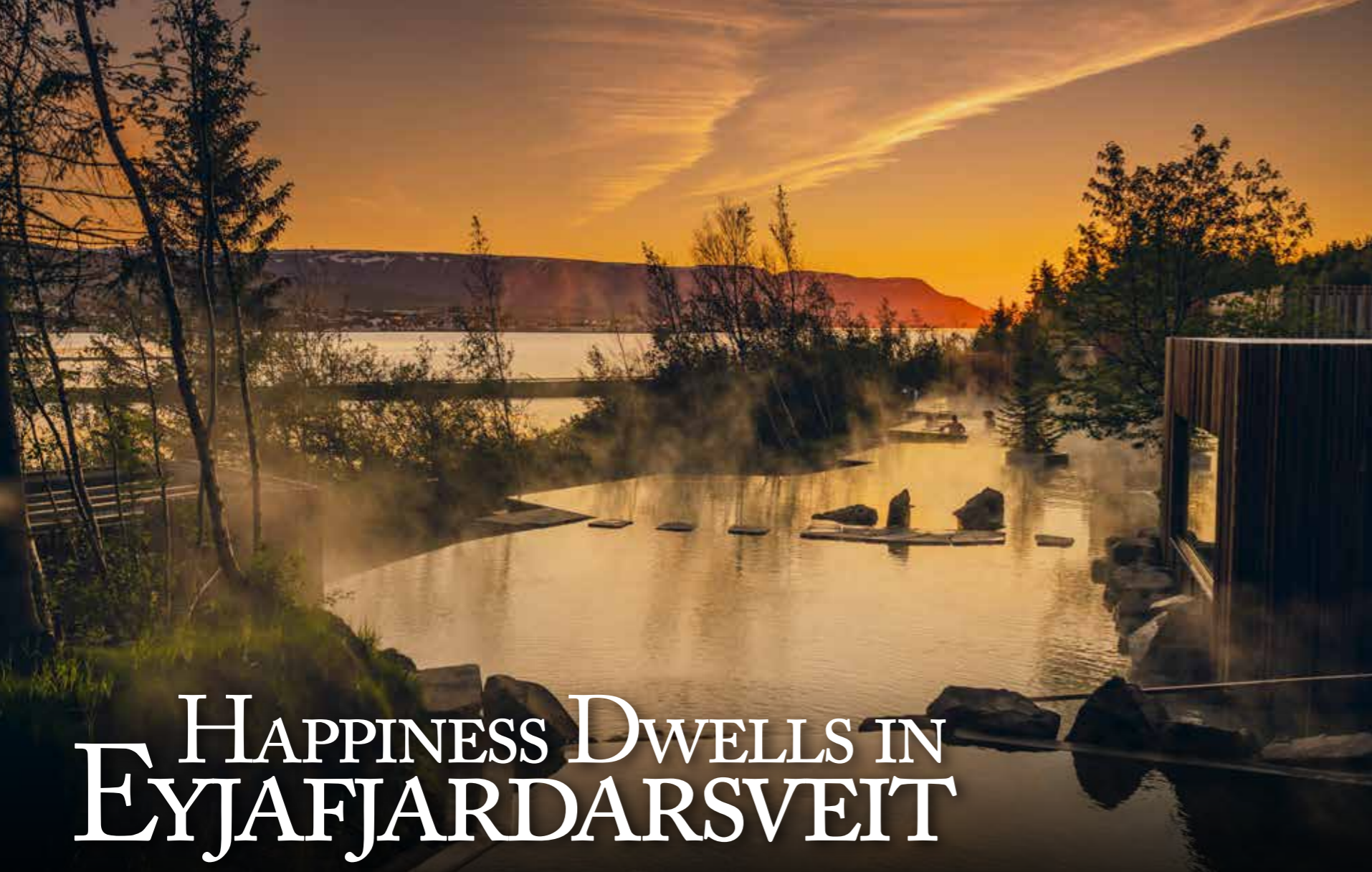
The western mountains by Eyjafjörður



Desert farm by Eyjafjörðu



Útsýni frá Laufási



HAPPINESS DWELLS IN EYJAFJARDARSVEIT

A gentle, pleasant spirit seems to hover over Hrafnagil in Eyjafjardarsveit, south of Akureyri, as Finnur Yngvi Kristinsson, the mayor of Eyjafjardarsveit, shares in conversation. Despite this tranquil atmosphere, there is a vibrant growth in the local community, with expanding services and ambitious plans for the future.

"More time with family," answers Finnur Yngvi without hesitation when asked what most defines the quality of life in the area. "That's the number one thing, above all else. Here, people spend far less time in traffic compared to the Capital area in the south. You simply don't lose as much time driving and getting around here in Hrafnagil. Some might feel Akureyri is far from us, but that's only because there's an open landscape in between, where you can sense the peace. It's really just a 12-minute drive from downtown Akureyri," he says with a smile. "We often underestimate how much time goes

into simply getting from place to place, and anything that gives us more time with family, more quality moments, is just incredibly valuable."

Finnur Yngvi mentions children's sports activities as another example in this context. "For children in Eyjafjardarsveit, a large portion of sports activities take place before 4 p.m., especially for the younger kids, and are timed to align with their after-school hours. This setup is extremely convenient, both for those living in the Hrafnagil area and for families in the more remote areas of the municipality."



Finnur Yngvi Kristinsson

A Vibrant, Inclusive Social Life

According to Finnur, the close-knit community of Eyjafjardarsveit is most clearly reflected in the extensive and varied social activities offered. "Anyone interested in joining in can find something to suit their tastes. We have a very active youth center for teenagers, and senior citizens enjoy a wonderful program, meeting once a week for organized social activities and three times a week for different fitness programs, like aqua aerobics and strength training. There are three women's associations here, a rescue team with all the activities that come with that, an equestrian club, Freyvangur Theatre—which is a very lively amateur theatre—along with a Lions Club and many more. There's simply a lot to get involved in."



Finnur also highlights the work of the sports club Samherjar, which supports activities from children's teams to programs for senior citizens. "There's a rich diversity of social activities within this close-knit and unified community."

The Precious Tranquillity of Rural Life

According to Finnur Yngvi, the atmosphere in the Hrafnagil area is relaxed, and a sense

of calm pervades, something modern people increasingly perceive as a life quality. "People here mainly seek services in Akureyri, which is a 10-minute drive away, and as a result, the neighbourhood maintains a very peaceful ambiance. Visitors from the capital area have described spending even half a day here as an experience akin to a worn-out individual finally getting some rest. The quiet simply rejuvenates you, and once you've experienced



this quality of life—which becomes more valuable as the pace and pressures of modern life increase—you really don't want to let it go. There is just so much well-being that comes from living in this nurturing environment day after day, and I think it's something more people are beginning to miss and actively seek out."

Finnur adds that in the rural areas south of Hrafnagil, one can find true peace—a natural setting where silence envelops you. "There's limited traffic in this majestic landscape, and the quality of life gained by simply going there and taking a deep breath—in tranquillity and proximity to nature—is truly unique."

Low-Rise Buildings and Spread-Out Development

For years, the local government in Eyjafjardarsveit has placed strong emphasis

on maintaining the aforementioned quality of life in the area, partly through a clear approach to planning and development, says Finnur Yngvi. "This policy is primarily about low-rise, spread-out development rather than building upwards. Many places are building more densely than we do here, which is one housing option. We offer a different option," he explains. "The focus is entirely on this kind of planning, and we recently worked on a joint master plan with Svalbardsströnd in Vadhlaheidi, a shared area where we coordinated our planning. There, the emphasis was entirely on single-family homes with large lots, with a maximum of four lots per hectare. Each lot is around 2,000–3,000 square meters, designed with that scale in mind. Lush greenery, tranquillity, and well-being are the key

concepts, with the goal of fostering and establishing a sense of calm. This tranquillity is becoming an increasingly tangible and desirable quality of life."

Abundant Employment—Diverse Jobs

In the past, it was almost certain that young people from rural areas in Iceland who moved to the Reykjavik region for university would be unable to return home due to limited employment opportunities suited to their education. Finnur Yngvi notes that this has radically changed today. "The main change is that all sorts of possibilities have opened up in terms

of remote work. Specialists can often now choose where they want to live, regardless of the location of the company's headquarters. Here in the area, agriculture is, of course, prominent, as Eyjafjörður is often called Iceland's breadbasket, producing nearly 10% of the nation's milk. Tourism is also making a stronger impact, with Eyjafjardarsveit including Skógarböðin nature baths with its extensive operations, along with other outstanding tourism companies. The construction sector here is booming, with 200 planned residential units on the outskirts of Hrafnagil. There's also significant activity within the

municipality itself, with extensive development underway, and job availability and variety are continually increasing, especially as we steadily strengthen services for residents. Among other things, we're opening a new preschool next year, which will greatly enhance services for families with preschool-aged children. In many ways, we are planning for the future, while also taking care to enjoy the present moment, maintaining the quality of life that makes our beautiful countryside so special," says Finnur Yngvi in conclusion.

Text: Jón Agnar Ólason



Raudmúpur in Melrakkaslétta, Northern Iceland



Raudfoss waterfall, in Raudfossafjöll mountain range, Rangárvallasýsla region



Raudanes in Þistilfjörður.



Raudamýri, in Fjallabak region



Raudasandur Beach, in the southernmost part of the Westfjords



Raudhólar, Reykjavík

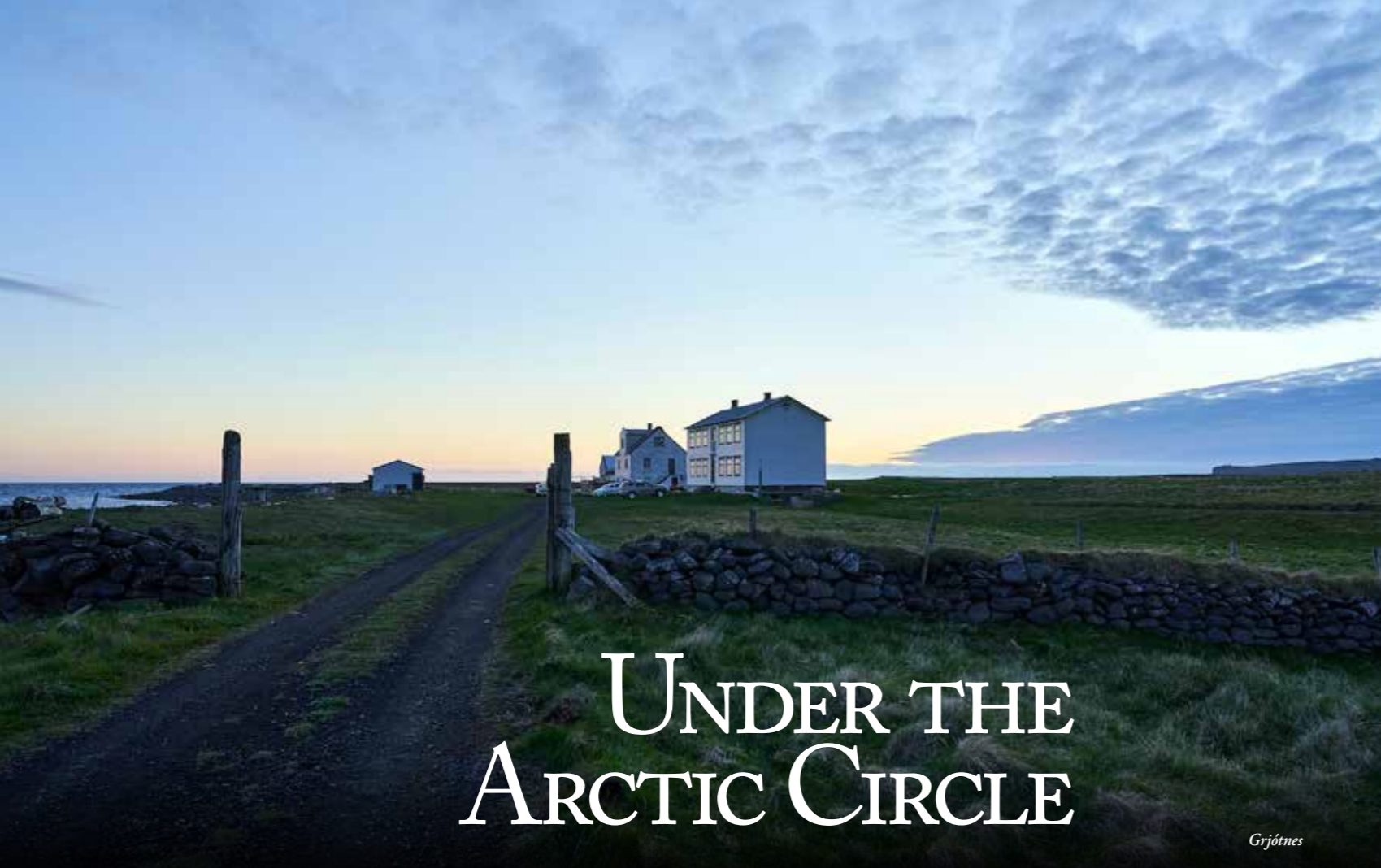
ARE YOU SEEING RED YET?

There are quite a few places here in the Republic that are associated with the color red, such as the two Raudhólar (“Red Hills”) areas—one just east of Reykjavík/Kópavogur, and the other in Jökulsárgljúfur, midway between Dettifoss and Ásbyrgi in Northern Þingeyjarsýsla. Here is a photo series of red places that are worth visiting, and of course, with a camera in hand.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Raudhólar in Nordur-Þingeyjarsýsla region



UNDER THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Grjótnes



The Beach at Valþjófsstaðir, just south of Kópasker



Raufarhöfn



The midnight sun at Leirhöfn

Melrakkaslétta is a unique place in Iceland. Although less and less people keep a permanent residence in the peninsula, the natural beauty and tranquility of the region are unmatched anywhere in the country. Melrakkaslétta is the northernmost part of Iceland and as far from the capital area as possible—literally on the far side of the country. Two villages are situated in Melrakkaslétta, Kópasker and Raufarhöfn, and a few farms near the waterfront. The most beautiful is Grjótnes, where fifty people lived and worked a century ago. Now it is deserted. Just south of Melrakkaslétta you will find two unique natural wonders, Ásbyrgi and Dettifoss. Next time you find yourself passing through, take a few hours to tour Melrakkaslétta and kiss the Arctic Circle along the way, which lies at Hraunhafnartangi, the northernmost point of Iceland.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Driftwood comes around Melrakkaslétta probably in greater numbers than tourists. At Niúpskatla near Raudmúpur.



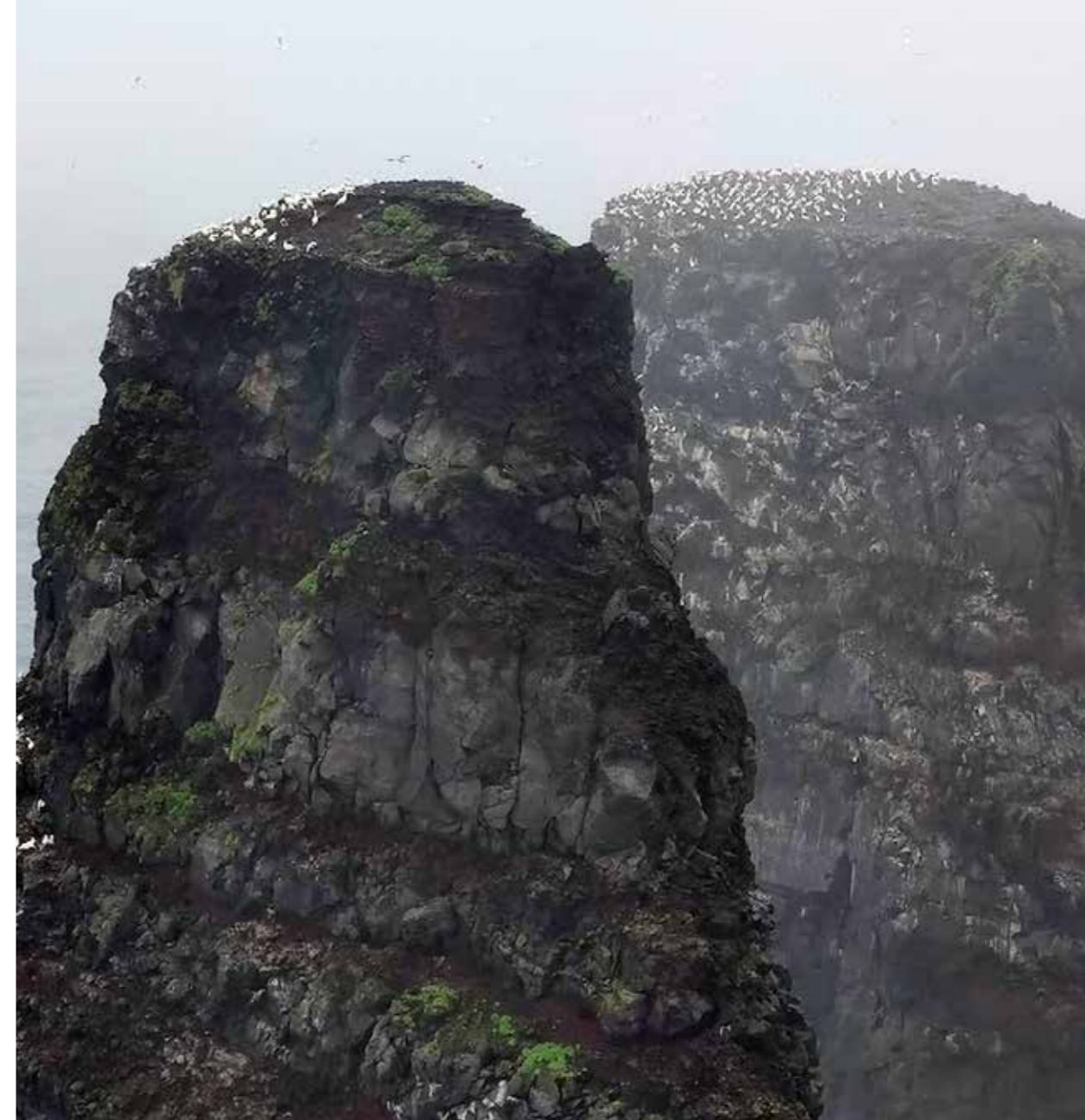
An unperturbed straight road in Melrakkaslétta



The thunderous waterfall Dettifoss



Raudínúpur- Einar Th. Thorsteinsson



RAUÐINÚPUR

Raudínúpur is a 73 m high cliff located on the western most point of Melrakkaslétta and is a well known landmark from sea.

The view from there is very panoramic. Raudínúpur is believed to have formed in an eruption during the late ice-age. Its distinct red colour is due to volcanic scoria. There are two picturesque rock pillars of equal height in front of

Raudínúpur called Sölvanöf and Karlinn (the man) or Jón Trausti, after the well known writer who lived at Núpsskatla during his childhood. A lighthouse was first erected in the year 1929.

The current lighthouse was built in 1958 and modernized in 1988.

Raudínúpur is a 73 m high cliff



Gæsavötn lakes, Bjálkur seen in the distance



Stadarfjall sporting its triad of summits



Lindarbakki at Bakkagerdi, built in 1899



Gæsavötn lakes in Viknabeidi



Gæsavötn lakes, Bjálkur seen in the distance

OF ELVES AND BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAINS

Borgarfjörður Eystri and Víknaslódir, the abandoned settlement south of the fjord, is one of the most beautiful areas in Iceland. The fjord is the northernmost of the East Fjords, located south of Héraðsflói and north of Seyðisfjörður. Today, just over a hundred people live in Borgarfjörður Eystri, but the Víkur area was abandoned in 1974 when the last resident of Húsavík moved away fifty years ago. Around 1900, the area was home to well over 300 people—along with elves and hidden people. Many believe that their capital in Iceland is Álfborg, located near the campsite in Bakkagerði, the village in Borgarfjörður Eystri.

While the area is mostly known for its grand summer music festival, Bræðslan, it is also an extraordinary natural gem for everyone to enjoy year-round, being only a short distance from Egilsstaðir—a mere hour away. From Reykjavík, it's just a few more kilometres, totalling around 800 km, the equivalent of roughly 500 miles.

It comes as little wonder that one of Iceland's greatest sons, the painter Jóhannes Kjarval (1885-1972), spent his childhood in Borgarfjörður Eystri.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Geese at Jökulsárlón, East Skaftafell County.



Small one at Vopnafjörður, North Múlasýsla.



Looking over Hérad, on a summer night in North Múlasýsla.



The capital town Seyðisfjörður by the fjord of the same name in North Múlasýsla. The only car ferry to the country arrives weekly at Seyðisfjörður from Denmark, with a stop in Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands.

EAST ICELAND — BUT OF COURSE!

There are over 600 km (360 mi) to drive from Lómagnúpur, where the Eastfjords meet the South Coast, to Finnaþfjörður in Bakkaflói (Bakkafjörður), where the North begins – or ends. The residents of the six municipalities (as well as half of Langaneybyggd) in this region make up about four percent of the country's population, or just over thirteen thousand individuals. The fewest live in Bakkafjörður, with just over sixty people in a community that is the furthest from the

capital area in terms of distance. Most reside in Fljótsdalshérad and Fjarðarbyggd, with just over five thousand people in each. However, the Eastfjords boast natural beauty and tranquillity that is unique in Iceland and even beyond its borders.

Here are some glimpses of the Eastfjords, which should undoubtedly be visited more by locals and foreign tourists alike.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson



Bustarfell in Vopnafjörður, North Múlasýsla, one of the best-preserved turf farms in the country. Now part of the National Museum of Iceland.



Lónsöræfi, East Skaftafell County.

ISLANDS & MOUNTAINS IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC



A summer night in Örafasveit, Örafajökull towering over the hotel at Freysnes.



Hvannadalshnúkur, the highest peak in Iceland



Örafajökull / Hvannadalshnúkur peeking out from behind the slope of Lómagnúpur

As a young person, I always thought it was unfortunate how low the mountains are in Iceland compared to other islands on the Atlantic Ridge in the North Atlantic. Even Jan Mayen, to the north of Iceland, has a higher mountain, Beerenberg, which stands at 2,277 meters, despite the island's area being only 0.3% of Iceland's. On the Azores, the highest mountain is Mount Pico, reaching 2,351 meters, while the next island to the south, Madeira, has its highest peak at only 1,862 meters, almost the same height as Snæfellsjökull to the east.

Thus, Madeira is the only island on the Atlantic Ridge with a lower highest point than our own Hvannadalshnúkur in Örafajökull, which stands at 2,110 meters. The highest mountain in the Canary Islands is Teide on Tenerife, which is 3,715 meters high, while the volcano Pico do Fogo on Cape Verde rises from the sea floor to 2,829 meters above sea level.

Photos og text : Páll Stefánsson



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BIRD PARADISE

In the mouth of the Fáskrúðfjörður fjord lies Skróður island. The island is one big rock made of basalt and acid volcanic rock that rises 160 metres out of the sea. The island belongs to the Vattarnes land and was protected in 1995; it is 530 metres wide and 590 metres long. Over the centuries, there has been a lot of egg harvesting on Skróður, as 18 bird species nest on the island. The birds number in the hundreds of thousands. There are, for example, 300,000 puffins in Skróður alone. It is the most common nesting bird along with the gannet, which started nesting on the island in 1943. Fulmar and black-legged kittiwake are also common nesting birds on Skróður. There is a remarkable cave on the island coast named Skróðhellir. It is estimated at around 4,000 m², 125 metres long, and 80 metres wide at its widest point. Many puffins nest in the cave. Decades ago, fishermen sailed from Skróður and between rowing tours, they stayed in the cave.

Photographs & text: Páll Stefánsson



Skróður Island in all its glory



Nesting gannets on Skróður



Gannets in flight



The gannet settlement on the east side of Skróður



Looking at Skróðhellir

EXPLORING BEAUTIFUL Vopnafjörður



The scenic town is home to striking nature and fun outdoor activities. Vopnafjörður is full of picturesque mountains, wondrous waterfalls, historical farms and one of the best spots on the island to enjoy Iceland's peace and tranquility. It's scenic, steeped in medieval history and home to an array of wildlife. The history of the village dates back 1100 years as the bay was first settled by Viking seafarers from Norway. Foreign merchants frequently sailed to Vopnafjörður in the early modern age, and a settlement gradually formed on a peninsula where the village of Vopnafjörður now stands.

Stunning nature

The village has numerous opportunities for relaxation and outdoor activities. Many well-marked walking trails lead through the region's natural pearls. One of them, "the elephant", is a significant rock pillar on the east side of Vopnafjörður that resembles an elephant. Fuglabjarganes is a prominent cliff that juts out on the northern coast of the town. You can get a good look at it from a marked hiking path from the Strandhafnarvegur road, which is along the Fugla River. The scenery is beautiful with white beaches, towering cliffs and impressive rock caverns and pillars. Vopnafjörður is only 1-1.5 hours away from pearls of Iceland like Dettifoss, Mývatn and Langanes and only 2-3 hours from Herðubreið the queen of Icelandic mountains, Askja and Holuhraun.

Outdoor activities

Vopnafjörður is a birdwatcher's dream and the Tangi peninsula north of the village is a beautiful and remote spot to watch seabirds. Vopnafjörður also offers several hiking routes that vary from easy to challenging. Beginners will find a wide range of mapped routes and marked trails that offer scenic views of the whole of Vopnafjörður—the bay, the Tangi Peninsula, inland areas and mountains. Hike to the end of the Tangi Peninsula to find interesting rock formations and beaches. Other fun activities include a round of golf at the well-maintained 9-hole course and taking a dip in the town's heated swimming pool.

Culture and history

The old farm of Bustarfell is one of the best-preserved of the traditional Icelandic turf houses, which Icelanders called home for centuries. The museum offers a great opportunity to see how people's ways of living have changed through the centuries. The foundations of the current house are from 1770, but the house has undergone alternations over the years. Meanwhile, the East Iceland Emigration Center is dedicated to the emigration years 1870-1914, the years after the great Askja eruption of 1875 that displaced hundreds. The center is focused on the history of the region and renewing contact with emigrants' descendants. There are documents and photos on display. Stop by the village on your next trip to Iceland! -JG



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www.vopnafjordur.com

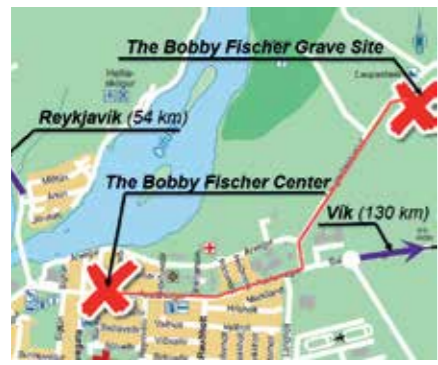


THE BOBBY FISCHER CENTER

Housing the memorabilia of the 11th World Chess Champion BOBBY FISCHER, the Match of the Century and the Selfoss Chess Club.

The American Bobby Fischer became the World Chess Champion when he defeated the Soviet grandmaster and reigning World champion Boris Spassky in Reykjavik in the summer of 1972. Taking place at the height of the cold war, the match is generally referred to as the Match of the Century, showdown between the American Fischer and the Soviet Spassky. This match was significant not only for its intense gameplay but also for its political symbolism, as it represented a clash between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, who dominated the chess world at that time, mirroring the tense relations between the two superpowers. Since 1948 Soviet chess players had held the World championship title – uninterrupted for a quarter of a century. Fischer won the match—making some historic moves along the tournament like game one’s iconic 29...Bxh2—becoming the first American to win the World Chess Championship. His victory subsequently ignited the “Fischer Boom”, a surge of interest and popularity in chess across the United States and other parts of the world.

The match was a great spectacle and attracted massive attention worldwide, putting Iceland on the map. At FIDE 100th Anniversary earlier this year, the Match of the Century in 1972 was named Most Memorable FIDE Tournament, making a visit to the Bobby Fischer Center even more enticing. On display at the Bobby Fischer Center in Selfoss are among other things Spassky’s and Fischer’s scoresheets, a printout from the radiation measurements demanded by Spassky’s delegation after the 17th game and a replica of the chess board used during the match which was staged in Laugardalshöll in Reykjavik. In addition many curious items related to Bobby Fischer’s stay in Iceland during his last years (2005-2008), for example his chair from the antiquarian bookshop Bókin in Reykjavik. He died on 17th of January 2008 at the age of 64. Bobby Fischer’s final resting place is at Laugardælir cemetery, a few hundred meters away from Bobby Fischer center.



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Toxic fumes rising from the crater



Inside an ice cave, Breidamerkurjökull glacier



Spectacle at Holubraun: Toxic fumes and lava emerge from the ground



Hiking on Vatnajökull glacier

Iceland is a fantastic place to visit, safe and beautiful. Or is it? When accidents happen, like the tragic fatal accident in the ice cave in Breidamerkurjökull in Vatnajökull, one starts to wonder—how safe is Iceland? Of course, one must always proceed with caution, whether standing near the cliffs at Raudanúpur, Melrakkaslétta, or watching the powerful waves hitting the black sand beaches at Reynisfjara in Mýrdalur. It is often said that Iceland is a land of fire and ice, and that is exactly where the greatest dangers lie—during volcanic eruptions and on glaciers. Glaciers are constantly changing and have their own weather systems, so special care is required, whether exploring ice caves or hiking on the glacier surface. Similarly, volcanic eruptions are extremely dangerous, as flowing lava can move very quickly and unexpectedly, and gas pollution can be lethal. Therefore, let's explore the country with caution, so that we all return home safely.

Photos and text : Páll Stefánsson

THE VOYAGES OF SAINT BRENDAN THE NAVIGATOR

If his story is to be believed, he was over seventy years old when he embarked on the journey that has made his name famous worldwide. Musical works, films, novels, and numerous paintings are associated with him and his story, and in Ireland, where he was born in the late fifth century, his character is shrouded in myths and legends. His name was Naomh Bréanainn, but he is best known as Brendan the Navigator.

Brendan was a contemporary of the notable cleric and missionary Columba, and his biography, "Vita Sancti Columbae," is the oldest surviving source (679 AD) that mentions Brendan. However, the main source is his own biography, "Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis," whose author and date of

writing are unknown. The oldest manuscript of this is from the 12th century.

Seven Years at Sea for Brendan and His Men

In his old age, after serving as an abbot for many years, Brendan decided sometime between the year 512 and 530 AD to embark on a journey in search of the "Island of the Blessed," which was believed to lie west of Ireland. Accompanying Brendan were 14 monks and 3 servants, all of whom died during the journey, and their vessel was a currach—an Irish type of boat with a wooden frame over which animal hides were stretched—that Brendan had built for him on the Kerry coast of south-western Ireland. It was evidently

a very sturdy craft, as the journey was a great adventure that lasted for 7 years. Soon after leaving port, the holy men got lost at sea and first arrived on a deserted island where one of the servants lost his life.

Onwards to the Island of the Blessed

From there, they sailed to the Sheep Islands and, after a short stay among the sheep, stranded their boat on the back of a gigantic fish named Jasconius, which they mistook for an island. They barely escaped with their lives when they realized it was a fish and not an island after lighting a fire on its back. They continued to the Island of Birds and then encountered thick fog. When they emerged from the mist, floating crystals appeared before them. Later, they came across an island inhabited by silent monks and another where very strong and large men lived, who threw fiery boulders at them. Finally, they reached the "Island of the Blessed," where they rested and recuperated before joyfully returning to Ireland.

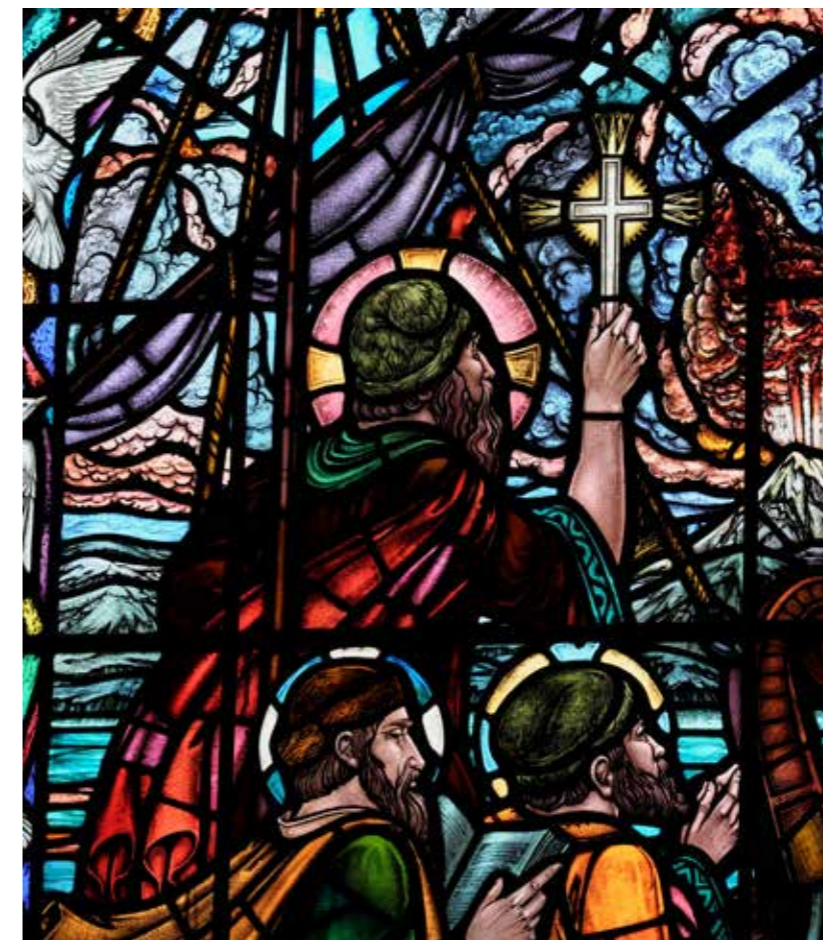
Thus concluded Brendan's legendary sea voyage.

Sailing in the Wake of Brendan

In the many books that have been written about Brendan the Navigator, authors often try to make his travel story credible and interpret it in various ways. Some claim that he did not sail north or west but went south towards the Canary Islands and Madeira. Others are certain that the Sheep Islands are the Faroe Islands, the floating crystals were icebergs, and the giants who threw stones at them were volcanoes in Iceland.

As most people know, modern-day seafarer Tim Severin was so convinced that Brendan had sailed the northern seas that he built a similar craft to what Brendan would have needed for his journey and then sailed from Ireland to the Faroe Islands, then to Iceland, and finally west to the shores of North America. By completing the voyage he wanted to support the credibility of the legend of Brendan.

Text : Svanur Þorkelsson





SAGNAHEIMAR FOLK MUSEUM *in the magical Westman Islands*

The Folk Museum of Vestmannaeyjar – the Westman Islands – is a museum built on old traditions. In addition to the many artifacts housed there, today’s technology gives the history and culture a new dimension. While the adults are learning about the stories of fishing, cliff hunting, the Eldfell eruption of 1973 and the Algerian pirate raid of 1627, the children can dress themselves in pirate costumes and search for hidden treasures in the Pirate Cave. Displays and exhibits showing the deep connection with the Mormons, the colourful sports history of the Islands, the reconstructed fishing shack from yester-year or the “Festival” tent where islanders entertain during the annual Þjóðhátíð – National Festival can also be investigated. At the end of the 19th

century, when the population was about 600, great changes took place. In 1904, the first motorised boat was purchased, and more followed soon afterwards. By 1930, the population had risen to 3,470. Now the Westman Islands are Iceland’s most productive fishing centre.

The Turkish Abduction

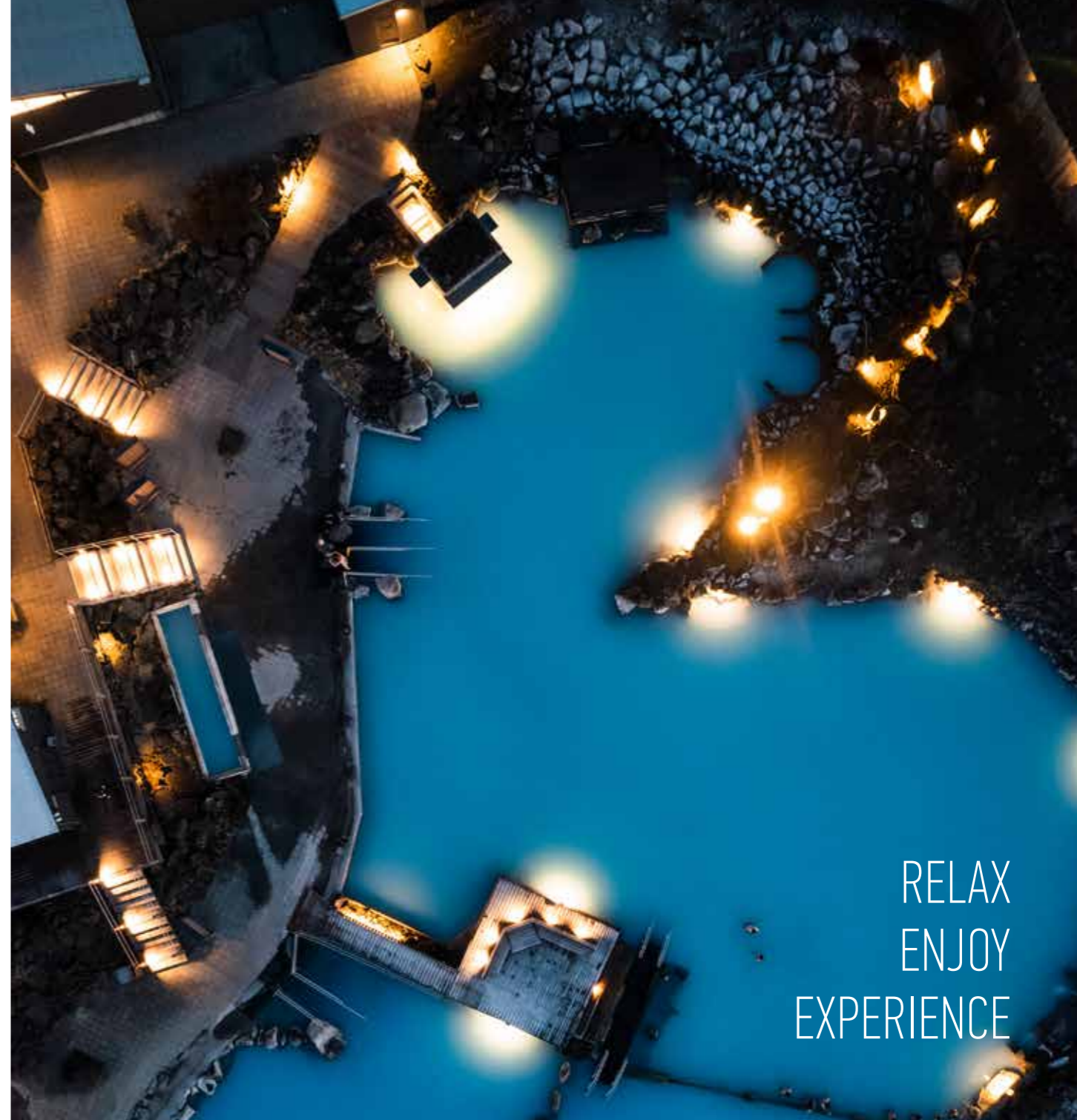
Another traumatic event befell on the Islanders 16th July 1627, when three Algerian ships sailed north up the Atlantic to the eastern shores of Heimaey. It is known as the Turkish Abduction because Algiers was under the control of the Turkish Ottomans. Three hundred Pirates disembarked and captured 242 islanders whom they brought to Algeria where they were sold into slavery. The story of this

fateful day is vividly captured. The pirate cave is a wonderland for children. One of the captives, Lutheran minister Ólafur Egilsson returned in 1628 and wrote a book about the event. In 1636, ransom was paid for 34 of the captives but most spent the rest of their lives in bondage in the Muslim world. After this, a small fort was built at Skansinn – The Bastion – as armed guards kept watch from Helgafell mountain. The Islands are famed for their annual Þjóðhátíð – National Festival – which attracts thousands of people from the mainland. The festival was first held in 1874, at the commemoration of the millennium of the settlement of Iceland. For the first time, a Danish King was visiting Iceland: Christian IX, who brought the Icelanders their Constitution that paved the way to sovereign statehood. The Westman Islanders were prevented from sailing to the mainland for the festivities by bad weather, so held their own celebration locally and have done so ever since.

The Mormon connection

The Mormons also have their historical story exhibited at the museum. The first Icelandic Mormon missionaries, Þórarinn Hafliðason from Vestmannaeyjar and Guðmundur Guðmundsson from Rangárvellir on the south coast, worked in Vestmannaeyjar. Between 1854 and 1914 about 200 Islanders emigrated from the island to the Western World. The Mormon exhibit is in collaboration with Brigham Young University in Utah, along with a large group of enthusiasts who have researched the history and destiny of these pioneers. -HH

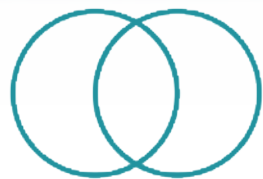
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