

# THE GRUMBLING GROUND OF ICELAND

By *Ruth Williams*

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“We are making our descent to Keflavík, where the local time is 6am,” the captain announces. “The weather is overcast with light drizzle and the temperature is seven degrees Celsius.” I shiver.

The sun must be up by the time I catch the airport shuttle bus into Reykjavík, but not a ray pierces the clouds. Through the rain-spattered windows I see an undulating volcanic terrain stretching out to the sea. The land is charcoal grey, matching the sky, and it resembles the cracked crust of a freshly baked muffin.



In geological terms, of course, the terrain *is* freshly baked. Iceland is thought to have bubbled up some 20-odd million years ago and it is continuing to grow. It sits on the divide of two tectonic plates—the North American and Eurasian—which are slowly shifting apart. When I visit the seven-kilometre-wide geological stretch mark, a guide says the plates are diverging at a rate of two centimetres per year.

We drive across the rift-valley scar tissue, observing the ripples in once-liquid rock, and reach the wet, glistening face of the North American plate. It looks angry, despite the fleecy comfort of creeping moss. Perhaps it resents having been ripped asunder from its Eurasian counterpart, its underbelly exposed to gawping tourists.

When the sun finally breaks through the clouds, it seems like an act of heroism. The countryside is transformed, and its colours are illuminated. The reds, oranges and yellows of early autumn look like splashes of lava against the green foliage. Interspersed are vivid lime green mosses. All are intensified by a backdrop of black rock.

I realise with delight that my Icelandic wool gloves and hat, purchased in haste when I arrived in Reykjavík, are the colours of the landscape. Accessorising to match the scenery could never be so satisfying in, say, New York.

The sky is blue by the time I visit the steaming hot volcanic pools, which are a vibrant, thronging version of the same colour. Suddenly, a geyser belches boiling water 25 feet into the air and I leap backwards with a squeal of surprise. The steam smells of sulphur and I position myself downwind, where it's stinky but warm. The smelly water from the pools also feed the hot taps of Reykjavík. Sulphur is great for the skin, and after freshening up at my hotel my hands and face are left particularly soft.

There is even something vaguely human about Iceland, with its groaning landscape and surging

fluids. I step out for the evening with renewed respect for the living thing beneath my feet, and I note with some relief that the scent of my sulphuric ablutions hasn't lingered.

~ RUTH WILLIAMS

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