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Malmstrom Finds That Iceland Is Land Of Surprises

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(This is another in a series of articles on European countries prepared especially for The Mining Journal by Vincent H. Malmstrom, Ishpeming, who has been studying Geography in Scandinavia. -Ed.)

BY VINCENT H. MALMSTROM

On the evening of the fifth day out of Copenhagen, the south coast of Iceland loomed up out of the twilight mist. My first glimpse of this remotest land in Europe was much as I always had imagined it would be – a long, low coastline partially obscured by rain squalls and fog patches, and rising up behind it, rugged black mountains crowned by great wrinkled glaciers.

It was a cold, forbidding coast, as colorless as a steel engraving in its twilight hues of blue, gray and black. But it opened many exciting prospects as I recalled the adventurous Irish and Viking sailors who had skirted along it over one thousand years earlier and of the heroic settlers who have managed to eke out an existence in this desolate land for over 19 centuries.

View Of Westman Islands

A little farther along our ship passed the Westman Islands -- jagged volcanic bits that jut out of the water like misshapen fingers. Here the twinkling electric lights told us that even there people were living, not in a primitive state as one would expect from the sterility of the land, but with all modern conveniences. As I crawled into my bunk that night it was with great expectations for the days to come. Iceland had already proved to be a land of fascinating surprises and I hadn't even set foot in it yet.

The next morning found us steaming along the north side of the Reykjanes Peninsula, a long arm of land which reaches out to the west and which we had to detour during the night. The morning sunlight outlined a continuous row of volcanic cones stretching out along the entire length of the peninsula.

Forces Of Fire And Ice

Even the most casual visitor to Iceland will soon come to appreciate a little of that country's geology, for he is never out of sight of a volcano or a glacier. The forces of fire and ice that have shaped the island into its present configuration are even now continuing their struggle for dominance, and before the visitor leaves Iceland he will most surely see one or both of them in action.
The sandy, uninhabited coast now was flecked with patches of green, and houses became more and more numerous. Minutes later the entire city of Reykjavík, Iceland’s capital and largest city, was spread out before us. It is not an attractive city, for the overwhelming proportion of it is constructed of concrete in various shades of gray, and the only dashes of color that tend to break this monotony are the multi-hued roofs of corrugated iron. Adding to its cheerlessness is the almost complete absence of trees, but aside from its lack of beauty (a characteristic shared by most cities), Reykjavík, is modern and up-to-date in every way.

**Highest Auto Ratio**

Its inhabitants now number over 56,000, which means that of the entire population of some 144,000 in Iceland, over one-third live in the capital city alone. The shops are full of foods and luxury goods that are seldom seen in other parts of Europe, and the city's streets are crowded with traffic of large American automobiles scarcely equaled by other cities its size on the continent. In fact, today there is one automobile for every 10 persons in Iceland -- the highest per capita ratio in all of Europe. In the homes there are large American refrigerators, radios and washing machines, and the girls dress with a stylishness to be envied in Paris or New York. How all this material wealth can be found in a land that is as basically poor and isolated as Iceland may be a mystery to the foreign visitor - -at least until he remembers World War II and the American occupation.

Because of its extremely strategic location, Iceland was occupied first by the British during World War II and then by the Americans. This occupation not only prevented the islands’ seizure by the Nazis, but also contributed to the country's independence (Iceland broke it bonds with Denmark in 1944 and became an independent republic) and its present economic status. With millions of dollars of occupation money being poured into a country of less than 140,000 people the only possible result could be inflation -- and that's just what Iceland has today.

**Big Capital Investments**

It has made tremendous capital investments in machinery, automobiles, airplanes and ships, built new roads and public buildings and thoroughly modernized itself as a result of this influx of wealth, but how it will maintain these gains in the long run is a question that only the future can answer. The war was a boom period for Iceland, perhaps its Golden Age, but what about the time when the country's economy must once more pay its way with exports of fish and a little wool and hides? That's the big question mark in Iceland today.

Though the over-all aspects of Reykjavik may be somewhat monotonous and cheerless to the average visitor, to characterize the entire city in such terms would be quite unjust. Certainly some of its more modern buildings are among the most beautiful and striking found anywhere. A structure of undisputed simplicity and beauty is the main
building of the new Icelandic university, and a source of pride for all Icelanders is the National Theater completed in 1950. Overlooking the central part of the city is a dynamic bronze statue raised to the memory of Ingólfur Arnarsson the first man to reside permanently in Iceland and the founder of Reykjavík. Farther up the hill in the eastern part of the city stands a monument to Leif Ericsson, the storm-driven Icelander who reached the shores of North America almost 500 years before Columbus. It is fitting that this monument was erected, not by the Icelanders themselves, but as a gift of the American Congress.

Visit To Thingvellir

But Reykjavík is not Iceland, and to see the land as it really is one must travel into the surrounding countryside to understand and appreciate its uniqueness. As a guest of the Iceland Tourist Bureau, I was privileged to join a party of British and Scotch visitors in some of the most notable attractions in the vicinity of Reykjavík.

The first of these tours took us to Thingvellir, about 30 miles east of the capital. Here, near where the little Oxará River flows into Thingvallavatn, Iceland's largest lake, the surface of the earth has been cleft by an earthquake so that the one side of the cleft rears up as a jagged wall over the other down-warped side. Virtually in the shadow of this lava precipice the great landlords of Iceland came together to legislate for the first time in 930 A. D. -- the date that marks the foundation of the Icelandic republic. Though the country's political center later gravitated to Reykjavík -- particularly due to Danish pressure -- Thingvellir has remained the most sacred shrine in all of Iceland, and it was on this same rocky, grass covered slope that the country's independence was proclaimed in 1944.

In the millennium between 930 and 1944 the political fortunes of Iceland rested largely in the hands of the Norwegians and Danes, for only until 1262 were they completely free from foreign interference. In that year, the liberty-loving Icelanders finally agreed to acknowledge the king of Norway as their sovereign too, but after the Norwegian royal family became extinct in 1380, they, like the Norwegians, came under the sway of the Danes, and so they remained until 1918 when they took advantage of the first World War to declare their independence. From that time until 1944 their only tie with Denmark was a personal union with the Danish king, but World War II likewise brought an end to this. Finally after six centuries of foreign domination the Icelanders are once more free -- the youngest democratic republic in Europe with the oldest parliament in the world.

'Smoking Valley'

On the way back from Thingvellir, our tour took us into Reykirdalur (literally, “the smoking valley”). Here we saw two unique institutions -- one, a completely self-supporting convalescent home for tubercular patients and the other, a collection and pumping station for water issuing from a myriad of hot springs and bore-holes in the valley's upper end. The TB sanatorium was built to remedy a social need -- that of re-
introducing the tubercular patient into society gradually so that he need not be abruptly pushed out to work or try to compete in an eight hour-a-day rush, only to end up once again back in a hospital bed. Instead the patients at the Reykirdalur sanatorium work two, three or four hours a day (depending on their stage of recovery) at making such things as school furniture and textiles, and the profits of this production cover the institution’s costs of operation and maintenance. When the patient has gradually worked up to six, seven and eight hours a day without undue strain, he is confident that he can return to his old job without a serious risk to his health.

While this social institution may well be used as a model in most any country in the world, the other Reykirdalur attraction will always remain virtually an Icelandic monopoly. This is the tapping of hot water from the earth. For apart from New Zealand, Iceland is the only country in the world where such a resource is abundantly available. The water from the Reykirdalur springs has been led into insulated concrete mains and then pumped 11 miles over the barren plains into the city of Reykjavik where it is used both for central heating and washing. At its source, the water has a temperature that is almost boiling and only about six to eight degrees are lost in the transmission over the 11 miles into the city and some 25 miles of pipes that conduct it into two-thirds of the capital’s dwellings and shops. Thus, Reykjavik is the only city in the world that can boast a central heating plant deriving its energy entirely from the earth's internal heat. The forces of Nature that so long have gone virtually unused have at last been harnessed and put into the service of Man.

**Journey To Whaling Station**

On a second tour arranged by the tourist bureau, we traveled to a whaling station in Hvalfjördhur, about 30 miles north of Reykjavik. Fortunately our arrival coincided with a small British whaling ship that had two massive sea-mammals in tow and we might have watched the entire gory, smelly Process of carving these 10-ton monsters into pieces and boiling them into oil. I say *might* have watched it, for most of the British guests preferred to forsake this spectacle for a cup of tea instead. Rigorous and unpleasant a business as it may be, whaling nevertheless plays its part in helping Iceland to balance its budget, and in a land so poor in resources as this youngest republic in Europe, no opportunities can be thrown away.

On our third and final tour in southwestern Iceland, we motored eastward from Reykjavik to visit a series of the most impressive attractions that anyone could hope to crowd into one extremely busy day. Our first stop was at Hveragerdhi where we saw another remarkable example of how the forces of Nature have been put to constructive use. Here, in great greenhouses covering several acres we saw all imaginable varieties of flowers, vegetables and fruits being grown.

**Something To Marvel At**

Few people realize that it is technically possible for Iceland to be self-sufficient in oranges, but thanks to the abundance of natural hot water, such things as roses, grapes,
bananas and corn can all be grown without difficulty in Iceland, and today Reykjavík receives much of its fresh fruit and vegetables from these natural hot houses. The fruit-growers of California and Florida will probably never have to fear Icelandic competition, but it may give them something to marvel at when they consider that such cultivation is taking place in the very shadow of the Arctic Circle!

Somewhat farther along we stopped to contemplate that most active of all Icelandic volcanoes -- Hekla. Rising some 4,800 feet above sea-level, Hekla has erupted 23 times since the country was settled, the most recent outbreak having taken place in 1947. Still smoldering from this latest eruption, Hekla today stands 150 feet higher than it did before the outbreak, while over a dozen farms at its foot have been totally destroyed by lava and ash.

**Waterfall Observed**

Turning northward, we motored next to Gullfoss, the largest waterfall in southwestern Iceland. The fall itself is in two steps, the one about 50 feet high and the other about three times as high, and is formed by the Hvíta ("White River") plunging into a narrow gorge. In the walls of the gorge one could see clear evidence of the tremendous battle of natural forces which has shaped Iceland into what it is today, for there layers of volcanic lava alternated with those of glacial sand and gravel. Indeed, no truer picture of Iceland can be given than to call it the "Land of Fire and Ice."

By far the most dynamic moments of my Icelandic tour (and I might well say, of any tour I have yet made) were spent on the edge of Stori Geysir -- that great-grandfather of all erupting hot springs and the one which has lent its name to all similar springs the world-over. Located in Haukadalur, about 10 miles west of Gullfoss, Geysir sporadically throws a column of superheated water and steam into the air some 150 to 200 feet. Very irregular in its habits, it usually has to be "coaxed" with 100 pounds of soap powder to help build up pressure, and during cold weather it sometimes refuses to spout at all.

Though many visitors may have to wait several days to see it in action (or even occasionally to go away without seeing it erupt) our party was fortunate enough to have finished lunch and surveyed its fascinating surroundings only a half hour before it erupted in one of the most spectacular eruptions of the entire season. A warning rumble deep in the bowels of the earth sent the curious onlookers scurrying to a safe distance from its six-yard wide orifice. Scant seconds later, frothy, boiling water began bubbling over its sides like a coffee pot boiling over on a stove. As the pressure increased, the scalding column of water began leaping higher and higher -- 10, 20, 30 feet. Occasional spurts climbed to 50 or 70 feet. But suddenly this prelude, for that is what it was, was over, and after a second or two of passivity it burst into the air with renewed force, shaking the earth with its thunderous roar. One explosion followed the other as the column towered ever upward -- 100 feet, 150 and finally as it neared the 200-foot mark it fell back in a spray of scalding steam and was quiet once again. Stori Geysir had put on as dynamic and impressive a display of natural forces in action as any other I, or anyone
else present there that day, have ever seen -- an unforgettable climax to an unforgettable tour.

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