

**Sidebar to “Fire and Ice”:
ICELAND INFORMATION**

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by

Beth A. Leonard

EAST COAST OF ICELAND

As we motored out of Seyðisfjörður, the 20-kilometer long fjord on the east coast of Iceland where we had made landfall from the Faroes, I thought we had rarely had a more perfect day. Muff, an American woman teaching in Seyðisfjörður, had taken us on a three-hour tour of the fjord and the 50-kilometer long valley beyond carved by Lagarfljót, a turquoise blue glacial river so wide it looked more like a long lake. From the top of the 800-meter pass leading out of the fjord, we had looked down upon the small town of Seyðisfjörður nestled under 1,000-1,200 meter high snow-covered black mountains. We had crossed through Arctic winter as we went over the pass where a still frozen lake lay covered with four feet of snow laced with snowmobile tracks. That pass had been closed two days before by an unusual late May blizzard, our introduction to Iceland’s temperamental and changeable weather.

But, as is so often the case in this sea-going life, only a few mistakes separate the pure euphoria of a day spent exploring a new world and learning about a new culture from a life- or boat-threatening misadventure. Within a few hours, a series of mistakes resulted in us going aground on rocks in Borgarfjörður, twenty kilometers north of Seyðisfjörður. Had we done just one thing differently, the grounding would have been avoided.

The Harbourmaster in Seyðisfjörður had given us a chart for this harbour, a chart that later proved to be for a planned development and not for the current harbour. As we approached the jetty that protected the narrow harbour, neither of us thought it looked like the chart. At that point we should have left and continued to the next harbour another twenty kilometers north. Instead, we decided to back in along the wall so we could leave easily if we didn’t like the situation. But with the depth sounder in front of the keel, we got no warning before the rudder and the back of the keel bumped over some rocks, and fell back against them again and again in the slight surge. A combination of a kedge anchor and a line to the pier got us off the rocks, and a quick inspection showed no hull or rudder damage. But we had bent one of the steering rods and sheared bolts in the steering quadrant. A winch and some leverage on a tie ring ashore straightened the steering rod, and a drill and some new bolts fixed the quadrant. *Hawk’s* solid aluminium construction had made up for our mistakes, but the experience in a lonely and isolated fjord where we spoke almost none of the local language reinforced for us how dangerous complacency can be and how essential self-sufficiency is for anyone cruising these waters.

When we reached Akureyri after our misadventure on the east coast, we had a diver check over the bottom to be sure we hadn’t done any serious damage. Erelendur, a professional diver who services trawlers, ships and fish farms, took video footage of every inch of *Hawk’s* rudder and keel. He found only a few small scratches on the bottom of the keel and the rudder.

Cruise planning. When we started planning our summer’s voyaging, we faced two key decisions – the timing of our visit and the direction of our partial circumnavigation around Iceland. Little disagreement exists on the first question. The sailing directions, friends who had sailed these waters and the Pilot Charts all name June, July and August as the best months for

cruising Iceland's waters, with a departure by mid-August recommended to avoid the onset of the fall gales. We arrived in Seydisfjörður on May 28th and that turned out to be a bit too early for this year, as we had force 9 snowstorms on May 31st and June 5th that were serious enough to close the major ring highway.

Which way to sail 'round proved more controversial. The Pilot Charts show a predominance of easterly and northeasterly winds north of Iceland during June, July and August with northeasterly winds over 30% of the time in the Denmark Straits. In the same months, there tends to be a slight bias toward westerly winds south of the island. This seems to argue for an anti-clockwise circumnavigation for a sailing vessel. However, the Pilot Charts also show the inshore current running clockwise right around the island. Light winds of average Force 4 predominate both north and south during the summer months, though the incidence of calms to the north of the island is double that to the south in both June and July and close to triple that in August. Thus, vessels traveling clockwise around the island will be going with the current and, on average, face moderate winds from all directions to the south of the island and light headwinds and calms to the north. Vessels traveling anti-clockwise will be fighting the current in calms or very light apparent winds over the stern to the north of the island and find moderate winds from all directions to the south.

Along the north coast, the current has been noticeable only around the large peninsulas on the east and west corners of the island. But we have indeed experienced a predominance of winds under Force 3 from the north and northeast while offshore, though inshore we've frequently encountered strong katabatic winds of Force 5-7 blowing along the axis of the long fjords. Our decision to sail clockwise was in the end dictated by our future plans. As we plan to sail straight down the Atlantic to the Canaries after leaving Iceland, we needed to depart from the west coast to maintain as much westing as possible before entering the prevailing southwest winds below 40 degrees latitude.

NORTH COAST OF ICELAND

Hawk swung to her anchor under a sheer cliff in the shallow water behind a narrow sand spit, or "eyri," the remains of a glacial moraine. On either side of the ten-kilometer long fjord, sheer black cliffs alternated with green meadows in steep-sided bowls, and these were backed by yet more cliffs in serrated rows extending out of sight. Snow lay in large patches right down to the waters' edge, and the deep drifts on the ridges fed a dozen waterfalls running down the slopes in lacy white plumes. Flocks of eiders paddled and dove all around the boat, and a host of other birds flew and swooped and swirled in the sky. The "kea" cries of the Arctic Terns and the high-pitched shrieks of the fulmars punctuated the soothing rumble of tumbling water.

We had arrived the day before at Veiðileysufjörður, one of a series of fingers projecting into the Hornstandir peninsula on the claw-like northwest corner of Iceland, after what we had come to regard as a typical sailing day. We had left the sheltered lagoon at Ísafjörður, the largest town and administrative center of the "westfjords" area, in clear weather and light winds, beat for four hours into Force 6 in dense sea fog before dropping our anchor in water so still I watched the spreading ripples disappear into the white wall surrounding us.

This out-of-the-way and isolated corner of Iceland proved to be a pristine, if challenging, cruising ground. Between Látrabjarg and Hornbjarg, a series of fjords from ten to fifty kilometers long intrude into the rugged, sparsely populated peninsula, some of them splitting repeatedly before ending in a backdrop of blasted black sand and glaciated peaks. Small towns with man-made boat harbours can be found in most of these fjords, but Hornstrandir has been uninhabited since

the 1950s and no roads lead into the rugged, 580 square kilometer wilderness. A dozen anchorages in the fjords off Jökullfirðir provide access to Hornstrandir's glacial valleys, sheer sea cliffs and undulating alpine meadows. One even lies within hiking distance of Drangajökull, the glacier straddling the Hornstrandir peninsula.

Cruising this area, Evans and I enjoyed sunsets that melted into sunrises in a wash of gold and red. We sailed along the Arctic Circle on midsummer's eve while the sun just kissed the horizon to the north, its long rays painting the cliffs of Iceland's "Horn" rose and copper, before it heaved itself skyward once again. In the supernatural clarity of the high-latitudes, we saw the stepped edges of Drangajökull from some thirty kilometers away. Of course, the "real" high latitude sailors consider the Arctic Circle to be the summer's starting point. They aim 800 miles further north, to the edge of the ice pack, testing their limits at 80 degrees and beyond. But our "stroll" along the Arctic Circle has introduced us to the rewards and challenges of the high latitudes and made us eager for more.

Fire and Ice. Evans and I stood on the red gravel lip of the explosion crater called Víti, 150 meters above the surrounding black lava plateau called Krafla, and peered down into the green glacier lake inside. Víti means "hell" and I could easily understand why, when the crater erupted in 1724, the local people would have believed it was the gateway to hell. To the south of the crater, steam issued up in wide columns where shiny metal tubes crisscrossed the black scree and sand below. Seventeen boreholes up to two kilometers deep brought steam to the surface for use in the power station located in the valley we had driven up to reach the plateau below the crater. In the far distance, high black mountains met the blinding white expanse of Vatnajökull, Europe's largest icecap, some seventy-five kilometers to the south. We had entered a landscape where the word "fantastic" kept coming to mind, as in fantasy – a surreal landscape outside of my previous experience.

Sailing Iceland's coasts offers almost endless opportunities to view the rugged and dramatic flat-topped, snow-covered red and black volcanic peaks that line every fjord and the dozens of waterfalls from plumes to thundering torrents originating in the snow and glacier melt. Seeing Iceland by boat also provides frequent encounters with the abundant sea life including marine mammals such as white-sided dolphins and minke whales and a plethora of sea birds such as Arctic terns, puffins, guillemots, fulmars and kittiwakes. However, a cruise to Iceland would not be complete without visiting the "fire and ice" of volcanoes and icecaps in its interior.

Highlights for visitors in the eastern half of the country include the Lake Mývatn and Krafla districts in northeast Iceland and the Vatnajökull icecap and Skaftafell National Park in the southeast. But reaching them requires leaving the boat in a secure harbour with rental cars companies or tour operators. The two best options can be found on the north coast – Akureyri, which lies at the head of thirty-mile long Eyjafjörður, or Húsavík, the small fishing village approximately thirty kilometers to the west of Akureyri. While Akureyri offers a wider variety of tours and more flexible scheduling, the quiet, well-protected boat basin at Húsavík makes a better place to leave the boat.

WEST COAST OF ICELAND

Over the course of the last month sailing the west coast of Iceland, we have found ourselves more or less back on the beaten track. After not seeing another cruising boat for three months, we tied up to the visitor's dock in Reykjavík to find three other cruising boats already in residence, and a dozen more passed through during our stay. For the first time in Iceland, we enjoyed the

convenience of stepping off the boat onto a floating pontoon within easy walking distance of the city center instead of clambering up tractor-tire festooned concrete walls and hiking a mile or so to reach supermarkets, post offices and other necessities.

Close to two-thirds of Iceland's quarter million-plus inhabitants now live in and around Reykjavík, an almost four-fold increase since Iceland gained its independence from Denmark in 1944. The resulting sprawl of housing developments and shopping centers wouldn't be out of place on the outskirts of any European or American city, but the city center remains uniquely Icelandic. A large central square bustling with kiosks and sidewalk cafés borders two blocks of green parkland to the south of the small lake called Tjörn ("the pond"). In this birdwatchers' paradise, over forty species of birds breed and beg handouts from the city's residents who bring them bread by the bagful.

But the highlight of our west coast cruising proved to be the tiny island of Heimaey ("Home Island") in the Vestmannaeyjar, a small archipelago off the southwest corner of Iceland. At 2 AM on 23rd January 1973, a rift opened up along the edge of the island and started raining fire and soot onto the town of 5,000 people. Most of the island's fishing fleet was in harbour after two days of bad weather, and they were able to evacuate the islanders within twenty-four hours without any injuries or loss of life. Over the course of the next four months about a quarter of the town was destroyed and the lava field crept closer and closer to the vital harbour mouth, without which the island's fishing-based economy would collapse. Huge pumps were rigged to flood the lava with seawater in an attempt to slow or stop the flow. No one knows if that made the difference, but the lava crawled to a halt 175 meters short of sealing the harbour entrance. The results today are breathtaking – to reach the harbour boats pass through this kilometer long channel flanked on one side by the black lava field and on the other by 250-meter high cliffs where millions of seabirds nest.

Though the harbour is not set up to handle yachts and we had to clamber over an obstacle course to get ashore, the incredible stories and sights associated with the eruption, the dramatic wall of lava hovering over the east side of the town, the beautiful cliffs along the north shore, the incredibly friendly people and the huge puffin colonies in the south all made Heimaey an unforgettable experience.

Additional information for those considering a cruise to Iceland follows:

Boat equipment. High temperatures averaged in the fifties once summer weather set in about mid-June, with the occasional perfect day of 65-70 degrees and the not infrequent rainy, damp, forty-degree day. Water temperatures averaged in the mid-forties, so at night temperatures would drop inside the boat to the high forties without a heater. A reliable heater capable of operating in freezing temperatures and storm-force winds tops the list of essential equipment in these latitudes. Weather fax or SatCom-C provide forecasts in most of the places around the coast where VHF forecasts are unavailable.

Charts/Guides. Along Iceland's coasts, the more pilotage information carried aboard the better. The only English-language guide to Iceland, the Royal Cruising Club Pilotage Foundation's *Faroe, Iceland and Greenland*, offers basic information for the major ports and some selected secondary harbors, but does not include sketch charts or detailed pilotage information. The British Admiralty publication, *The Arctic Pilot Vol. II (NP11)* or the DMA publication *Sailing Directions (Enroute) Greenland and Iceland (Pub. 181)* provide necessary information on currents, tidal races and offlying dangers. Half-sized, full color, detailed harbor charts can be

purchased for all primary and secondary harbors including Heimaey in the Vestmannaeyjar, Hafnarfjörður, Ísafjörður, Akeureyri, Húsavík and most of the eastern fjords. For those interested in exploring the more remote fjords and smaller fishing harbors, the Icelandic Hydrographic Office, Sjósmælingar Íslands, has produced an excellent pilot book: *Leiðsöbók fyrir sjómenn við Ísland*. Though written in Icelandic and not updated since 1991, this book provides aerial photos and detailed harbor charts with soundings of all fishing ports not covered by the standard charts. Boats arriving from the States can make due with the DMA charts for Reykjavík and then purchase additional charts and the Icelandic guide at AttavitaÞjónustan (www.rafor.is/attavita, Raför ehf., Eyjarslóð 9, 101 Reykjavík Iceland, Phone: 354-551 5475, Fax: 354-552 8595). Alternatively, Jónas Þorsteinsson (Verkstæði Draupnisgötu 7g, 603 Akureyri Iceland, Phone: 354-462 1571, Fax: 354-461 3039) speaks English and will package and ship charts to overseas customers. We used the *Admiralty Tide Tables – Europe (excluding United Kingdom and Ireland), Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean* and found them satisfactory for navigating around Iceland.

Formalities. Every port has a harbormaster, and most preferred to be contacted on VHF channel 12 as we approached. Customs officials are located in all major harbors including Reykjavík, Akureyri, Seyðisfjörður and Heimaey in the Vestmann Islands. They usually came to the boat within an hour of our arrival. A valid passport is required; importing alcohol is strictly limited. The police also tracked our whereabouts and in every harbor, no matter how small, they eventually stopped by and asked us to fill out a form. All officials were relaxed, friendly and courteous.

Diesel. Fuel can be purchased at fuel docks in the small boat basins or from fuel trucks at the trawler docks. Trucks are easy to arrange and require no minimum volume. Diesel costs about \$2 a gallon.

Docking. One doesn't visit places like the Faroes, Iceland and Newfoundland expecting to find marina facilities for yachts. But well-sheltered anchorages can be equally hard to come by in long, steep-to fjords subject to katabatic winds. Dockage, then, must often be found in boat basins along piers meant for trawlers and big ships, and we must be able to secure the boat to these in such a way that we can sit out gale or storm force winds on the beam as we have already done twice in our month in Iceland. To be of any use on these types of piers, fenders need to be at least eighteen inches in diameter or used with a stout fender board at least eight feet long. On many piers, bollards meant for big ships are too few and far between for yachts, but we can almost always find a way to shackle a six-foot length of chain to a beam or support to which we then secure our lines. Where we can't tie the lines through the shackle, a round turn on the chain minimizes chafe. We stow two-foot lengths of reinforced water hose the same diameter as the line on each of our mooring lines. These can be positioned anywhere on the line to prevent chafe. We also use snatch blocks attached to the toe rail, stanchion bases or the pier to get a fair lead when lines must pass cleanly around sharp edges or other boats. When docking, we set the bow line up so it can be led to the rope gypsy of our windlass and lead the stern line to a primary winch. Once the bow or stern line is secured ashore, we can use the winch or the windlass to help position the boat.

Provisions. Even the smallest towns have a full-service supermarket where a full range of fresh, frozen and packaged foods can be purchased – for a price. The photo shows what \$20 buys in Iceland. A scrawny roasting chicken costs \$10; a head of lettuce costs over \$2. We paid the highest premium for meat, vegetables and fruit, while packaged products from the States cost only 15-20% more than they would there and fresh fish can be bought for next to nothing.

Alcohol can only be purchased from state-run stores. A six-pack of beer costs about \$10, and wine runs from \$12-15 per bottle.

Touring inland. A cruise to Iceland would not be complete without visiting the “fire and ice” of volcanoes and icecaps in its interior. Highlights for visitors in the eastern half of the country include the Lake Mývatn and Krafla districts in northeast Iceland and the Vatnajökull icecap and Skaftafell National Park in the southeast. Around Reykjavík, the glacier and waterfall studded area to the east and Þingvellir, the sight of the ancient Alþing, or annual meeting of Viking chieftains that ruled the country from sometime around 900 AD through about 1300 AD should not be missed. But reaching them requires leaving the boat in a secure harbour with rental cars companies or tour operators. The two best options for visiting eastern attractions can be found on the north coast – Akureyri, which lies at the head of thirty-mile long Eyjafjörður, or Húsavík, the small fishing village approximately thirty kilometers to the west of Akureyri. The visitor’s pontoon in Reykjavík is secure, especially if the boat can be left on the inside of the dock. Car rentals cost a small fortune – an average of \$100 a day – so touring with another couple is a good idea.

Visibility. Whether navigating in fishing or shipping areas in dense fog, snow or hard rain or hoping to be sighted by rescue craft in breaking waves, good visibility translates into increased safety. White sails, white or gray masts and white or blue hulls can be impossible to pick out in such conditions. Many organized races and rallies now require the use of international orange on the sail or hull to increase visibility. To improve our chances of being seen at sea, we painted a two-foot wide international orange stripe around the top of our mast and had an international orange panel sewn into our trysail. These radically increased our visibility, but we wish we had doubled the size of the colored areas in both cases. (120 words)

Voyage planning. The 500-mile passages to reach Iceland via Newfoundland and the west coast of Greenland from the east coast of the US offer well-found cruising boats a viable alternative to the normal Bermuda to Azores run for crossing the North Atlantic. A stop at Reykjavík and Heimaey will give cruisers a taste of Iceland in an area with decent yacht facilities and protected harbors. The best weather for visiting Iceland can be found between mid-June and mid-August. At that time in most years, the Greenland high has become established, reducing gale frequency to almost negligible levels and bringing stable weather with light easterly winds for a week or ten days at a time.

Water. Water is generally not available on piers where yachts tie up, and where it is the fittings are sized for large vessels and require a reducer. But in most harbors hoses are left running on the docks where the fishing boats land their catches. Yachts can come alongside when the docks are open and take on water free of charge.

Weather forecasts. For local forecasts, the Reykjavík harbormaster broadcasts the Navtex weather in English every day at a little after 11:30 local time. The daily newspaper, *Morganbladid*, carries detailed and easily interpreted weather maps for the current situation and five-day prognosis on the second to last page.

Wildlife. Large pods of whales feed throughout the summer months along the west and north coast of Iceland, where the local whalewatching boats see whales on 97% of their outings. Early in the season, Minke whales and Humpback whales are regularly sighted on the north coast, especially in the area around Húsavík. On the west coast, the mighty Blue whales feed forty to fifty miles offshore, especially off the Snæfellsnes peninsula north of Reykjavík. Orcas,

Humpback and Fin whales are common off Reykjavík. We saw dolphins almost every time we left the fjords and sailed for more than a few hours. Seabirds of almost every type surrounded us all the time we were at sea, with fulmars, black-backed gulls, guillemots, razorbills, puffins, kittiwakes and gannets the most common.

Yacht services and chandleries. Almost nothing exists in the way of fiberglass repair, but excellent facilities for engine and hydraulic repairs, metalworking, welding, machining and woodworking as well as slipways capable of hauling yachts can be found along the trawler docks in Akureyri and Reykjavík. Most of the smaller harbors have a few basic facilities including a small, often disused, slipway. Almost anything can be shipped overnight from Reykjavík to the larger towns at a reasonable cost. Byko, a do-it-yourself superstore with outlets in Akureyri and Reykjavík, carries a full range of basic hardware items including an impressive array of stainless steel fastenings, sealants and high-quality tools. Several chandleries in Reykjavík focus primarily on outboard and diesel engine sales and service.