

## Day 27 – Aug. 20, Gullfoss (Gold Falls) – Geysers – Iceland Rift Valley – The Pearl

**Golden Circle Tour:** We had purchased a Holland America Tour for today so we gathered in the Rembrandt Lounge at 8:00 this morning to catch the bus along with about 40 other people. The tour was called the Golden Circle and it would take us to several important points of interest in about 8 hours. Beside the opportunity to see the Iceland countryside we would be visiting the Gullfoss (Gold Falls), geysers, the Iceland rift valley and a facility in Reykjavik called The Pearl. The weather was sunny and the temperature was about 50°F which was comfortable with a light jacket and windbreaker.

Our tour guide's name was Kirstrun who spoke good English and was knowledgeable about the areas we went through. We rolled out of Reykjavik and took Highway 1 through the suburbs and then over a mountain range. Along the way we took a few pictures of typical Iceland landscape and buildings, as shown below.

The whole island of Iceland has a foundation of lava rock with steep hillsides and valleys. However, near the coast at Reykjavik there is a several mile wide swath of fairly flat land that is suitable for



agriculture. The natural plant life along the highway was low growing shrubs and grass where there was soil and moss was growing in much of the fields of lava. Our guide said that there were 120 types of moss growing in Iceland.

We had not traveled far before we saw one of their thermal power plants in operation. The plants generate electricity by using a system where water is heated to very high temperatures by the hot rock below the plant and then the water is flashed into steam which turns the turbines to make electricity. Here is one of the plants we saw, with the plume of steam escaping from the process.



Some of the hot water from the process is piped to nearby communities to be used for heating homes and driving industrial processes that require heat. The large insulated pipes for carrying the hot water were a common sight near the power plants.



The lava rocks that are visible in the photo on the right were covered with a couple inches of moss.

After crossing over a low range of mountains headed south we came to the village of Hveragerdi. KIRSTRUN thought we might need a toilet break so we made what she called a “technical” stop. The tour company had worked out a deal with the proprietor of a gift shop to let us use the toilets so a bunch of us filed in. The front doors were very artistically carved out of wood with a biblical scene that was sure to attract attention. In case you ever wondered what Adam and Eve looked like from behind, the other side of the doors provided an answer.



This turned out to be one of the nicest souvenir type shops we had seen in Iceland. After we had taken care of our “technical” business we spent a few minutes browsing around.

Barbara was attracted to this woolen stocking cap that she found in this large scale Viking boat model. Lee, our dinner partner, was checking out the horns on the ram.



Caroline, like Barbara, was partial to the woolen goods.

Fortunately we didn't have enough time at this stop to do much financial damage and we were soon back on the road.

We passed through some rich farm land. We were surprised at the size of the farm operations that we saw. We had expected small plots of land like we had seen in other Iceland ports. Our guide said many of these farms were dairies producing milk and cheese. Here are a couple examples of what we saw.



The hay on this farm was rolled up and contained in large white plastic bags that could be seen spread around the field.

The Icelandic people are very fond of horses. Horse back riding appeared to be a popular recreation and we have frequently seen horses on farms in the Iceland ports we have



visited. We were excited when we looked out of the bus window and saw this herd of horses running at full speed along a fence line.

**Gullfoss (Golden Falls):** After another hour of riding the bus pulled in to the parking lot at a site called Gullfoss which is Icelandic for Gold Falls. This water fall is fed by two rivers coming together. One river is primarily run-off from rain while the other is mainly water from two glaciers about 30 miles further into the mountains. The water first drops 40m (130ft) and then goes over a second fall of 80m (265ft). It is not the highest water fall in Iceland but it is said to be the most famous. We all trooped out and walked down a nice



raised boardwalk out to viewing sites. The falls were magnificent. There was a great plume of mist rising from the gorge where the falls were located. The view was well worth the long bus ride. Lee took this picture of us showing the smaller upper falls.

Stairs, as shown on the left, were provided leading down to a lower viewing area.

We were able to walk along a path leading up to a viewpoint between the upper and the lower falls. The mist rising from the falls was carried towards us by the stiff breeze that was blowing. We were getting a little moist but we were not uncomfortable.



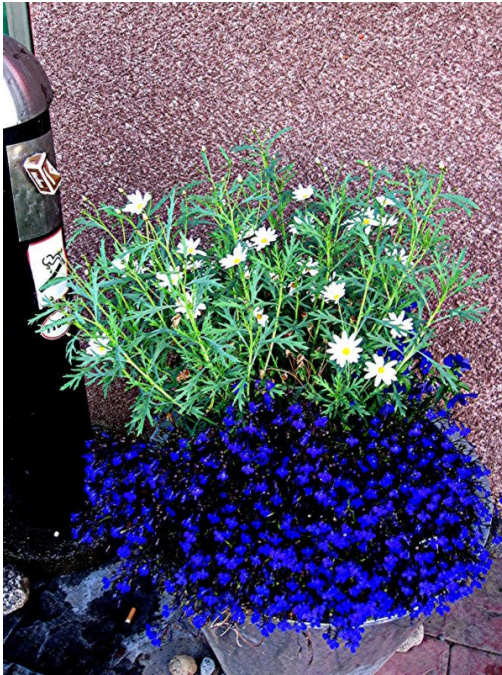
From the viewpoint between the upper and lower falls it was possible to get the following picture of the massive amount of water cascading over the falls.



Our guide told us the story of a local woman who recognized the beauty of Gullfoss and preserved it. She

worked tirelessly for many years battling political and economic powers in the region who wanted to tame the falls by having the water fall down through pipes where it would turn giant turbines and make electricity. She was ultimately successful so that we could enjoy their natural beauty today. A memorial to her, shown in the picture on the right, was placed prominently on the trail to the falls.





Soon it was time to finish the visit to Gullfoss and get back on the bus. We snapped this picture of some nice flowers near the visitor center on our way to the bus.

**Geysers:** The next site on our tour was a spot where geysers were active. This facility was also the location of a fine hotel and restaurant where we had lunch. They were set up for mass production of meals for hungry tourists who arrived by the bus load. There were several cruise ships in Reykjavik and they all were running tours on the Golden Circle so there were hundreds of people to feed. The tables were set up in a close packed array with the various bus numbers displayed on each table. We found our Bus #2 card and took a seat. The waiters only had access to the ends of the tables because we were sitting touching back to back. The efficient waiters soon brought a bowl of salmon soup and the person sitting at the end of the table ladled it out into each person's soup bowl as it was passed down. After people finished their soup, which was delicious, a large platter of salmon filets, and potatoes was brought and sat on the table. The, now experienced, person on the end of the table carefully placed a serving of salmon and potatoes on each person's plate. We were crowded but it was a congenial group and the food was wonderful. During the meal we snapped this picture of our Maasdam table mate, Caroline, (dark blouse – third row over) at an adjacent table. Lee sat across from Caroline.



After finishing our lunch we walked across the road from the restaurant and up a path to where there were steaming vents, bubbling earthen pots of boiling water, and spouting geysers.



There was one of the geysers that was being very dependable and spouting steaming water every 10 minutes or so. The name of this geyser was prominently marked on a nearby stone as Strokkur. A crowd had gathered around that geyser with cameras ready. We joined the group and after several frustrating tries Barbara was able to get this good representation of what Strokker could do.



After getting our prized photo we returned to the bus and set off for our next destination.

**Iceland Rift Valley:** Our next site to visit was the Pingvellir where the first Parliament in western civilization was established by Icelanders about 930 AD. The Pingvellir site is probably better known as part of the rift valley that has been formed where the mid-Atlantic Ridge crosses the island of Iceland. The rift valley was created by a crack between two massive tectonic plates on the earth's surface which are slowly separating. One tectonic plate known as the Eurasian is moving westerly while the American plate is moving in an eastern direction. The Pingvellir site we were visiting is located on the western end of the rift valley which extends from the mountains of Iceland in the northeast down to Pingvallavatn (Pingvellir Lake).

We got out of the bus and took about a one quarter mile hike along a path that led

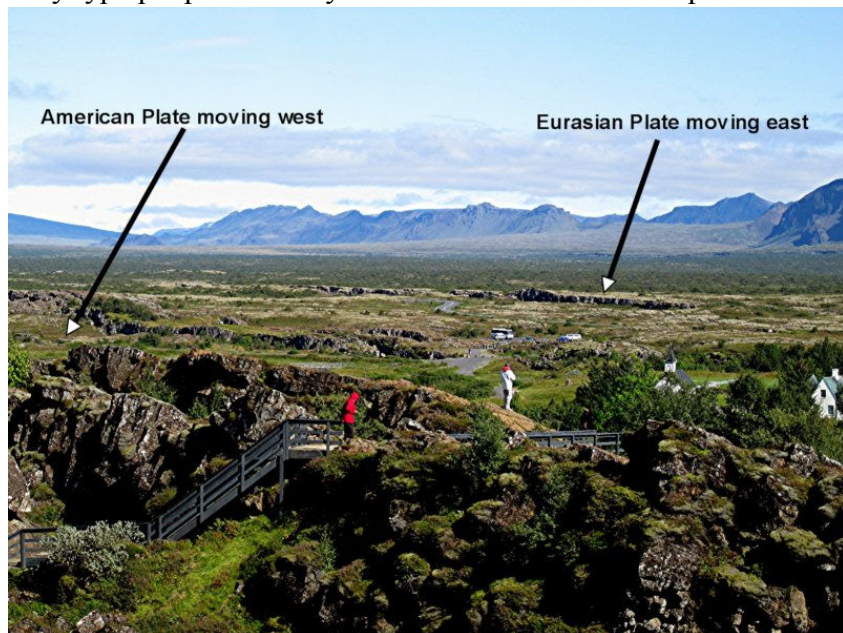


through the key areas of Pingvellir. We stopped occasionally as Kristrun, shown here on the left in the photo, explained what we were seeing. In this picture the rock wall of the American tectonic plate extending away from us on the left. The crack in the tectonic plate is not a narrow fissure at this place but rather a broad valley. Over the past 10,000

years the American and Eurasian plates have been moving apart at about 3mm (the thickness of a stack of 4 or 5 credit cards) each year. The spread over the last 10,000 years is estimated at 70 meters (about 80 yards, that is, less than the length of an American football field). Over the same period of time the floor of the valley that was created has sunk about 40 meters (44 yards).

The early Viking settlers were not concerned with the geologic formation of the area when they picked the site for an event that is important in Icelandic and world history. After settlement of Iceland, which commenced about 870 AD, plans were made for a formal government structure. A general assembly came together for the first time at Pingvellir, about 930 AD. This site was chosen for the assembly because it was conveniently located for access from all regions of the country by old overland routes. These were hardy, outdoorsy type people and they held their sessions in the open air each summer at this site.

The proceedings of the assembly were open to all observers. There was an elected “Law Speaker” who would recite the laws of the land in a loud voice from the top of a rock each year. The rock was named the Logberg. A staircase leads up to the top of the Logberg where the people are standing in this photo on the right.





Also shown in the photo are arrows pointing to the approximate edges of the two tectonic plates that are separating. The land in between makes up the floor of the valley that fills the gap created at the surface of the earth.

We finished our walk through Pingvellir and paused at an overlook. There was a convenient crack in the lava nearby and Orlin couldn't resist hamming it up with one of those traditional fake tourist pictures showing a foot on each tectonic plate. His right foot was headed for Paris but Lee quipped that he wasn't old enough for Paris yet.



We now got on the bus and headed back to Reykjavik. We passed through some more pastoral scenes with sheep grazing in the fields. We continued to be amazed at how green and luxurious the pastures looked in Iceland. However, there was a distinct scarcity of large trees. The cold winters stunt the trees so that they usually stay small.

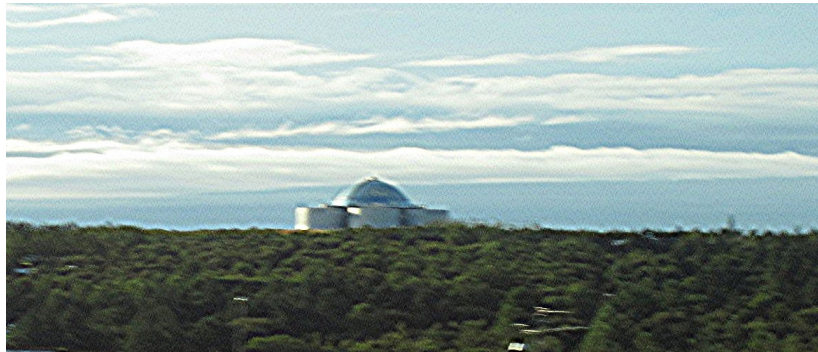
Occasionally we did see fairly large fir trees, like those shown on the right, that had been planted many years ago.



As we approached Reykjavik we were glad to see the familiar sign of a Toys R Us store in a shopping mall.



**The Pearl:** We were headed to our last stop of the tour at a facility called “The Pearl”. The name comes from the shape of the building which is capped by a glass dome that looks like a pearl set on top of a ring of huge cylindrical tanks. The picture below was taken as the bus approached the site. Our guide explained that the large cylindrical tanks forming the setting of the pearl held very hot geothermally heated water. The hot water at a temperature of 90°C (just below boiling point) is delivered to customers through insulated pipes and used to heat the homes and businesses of Reykjavik. There is no need to burn hydrocarbon fuel to keep warm in Reykjavik.



When we arrived at The Pearl site we got a close-up photo of this amazing facility.

We trooped inside this municipal building to see what it looked like from the inside. We took the stairs up to the glass dome where there was a gift shop and a restaurant that the guide said



was rotating at a very slow rate. Diners can get a 360° view of Reykjavik if they stay at their table long enough.

Shown below are views of Reykjavik we got with our camera from the top of The Pearl.





There was also an exhibit which illustrated the strong bond many Icelanders have with the United States. Near the restaurant there was a photo of presidents Reagan and Gorbachev at the US – USSR summit meeting in 1986. We got this picture (with unfortunate reflections).

Later we drove by the house where Reagan and Gorbachev met and we were reminded of the wall-to-wall TV coverage that made this house familiar to many Americans.



As we left the building this fanciful sculpture of a band playing without instruments caught our eye. We thought that this illustrated well the light hearted humor we detected in the people during our stay.



Before closing out the description of the day's activities we needed to take care of some unfinished business from yesterday. We had taken a photo of a billboard yesterday to

show that Barbara's library card had visited Reykjavik, Iceland. We got distracted by the trip to the Blue Lagoon and didn't get that picture in the blog. We'll post it here on the left to get it on the record.



Our bus took us back to the port. We said goodbye to our guide and walked through the Cruise Passenger Terminal to the dock. There was a terrific wind blowing as we made our way to the gangway leading into the Maasdam. We were told

that this was no big deal around here. The Captain came on the PA system later and said he was ordering two tugboats to help him get the ship underway in the face of the high winds. Normally he gets underway without assistance, using the Maasdam's bow and stern side thrusters. We were at the dinner table when the Maasdam got underway and slowly worked its way out of the harbor.

We were headed for Qaqortoq, Greenland. We will have two days at sea and pass through the beautiful fjord of Prins Christian Sund again. We arrive Sunday, August 23 at Qaqortoq, the site of early Viking settlement in Greenland.