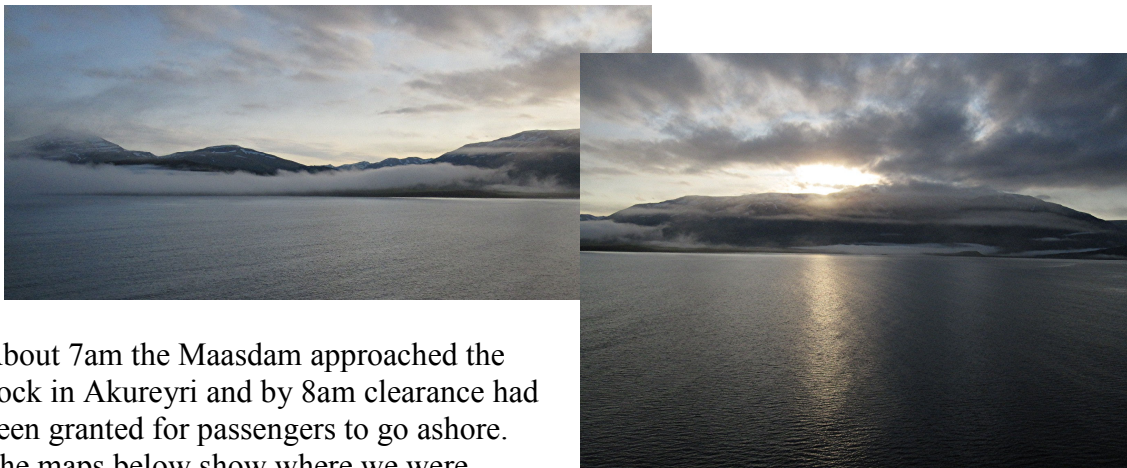


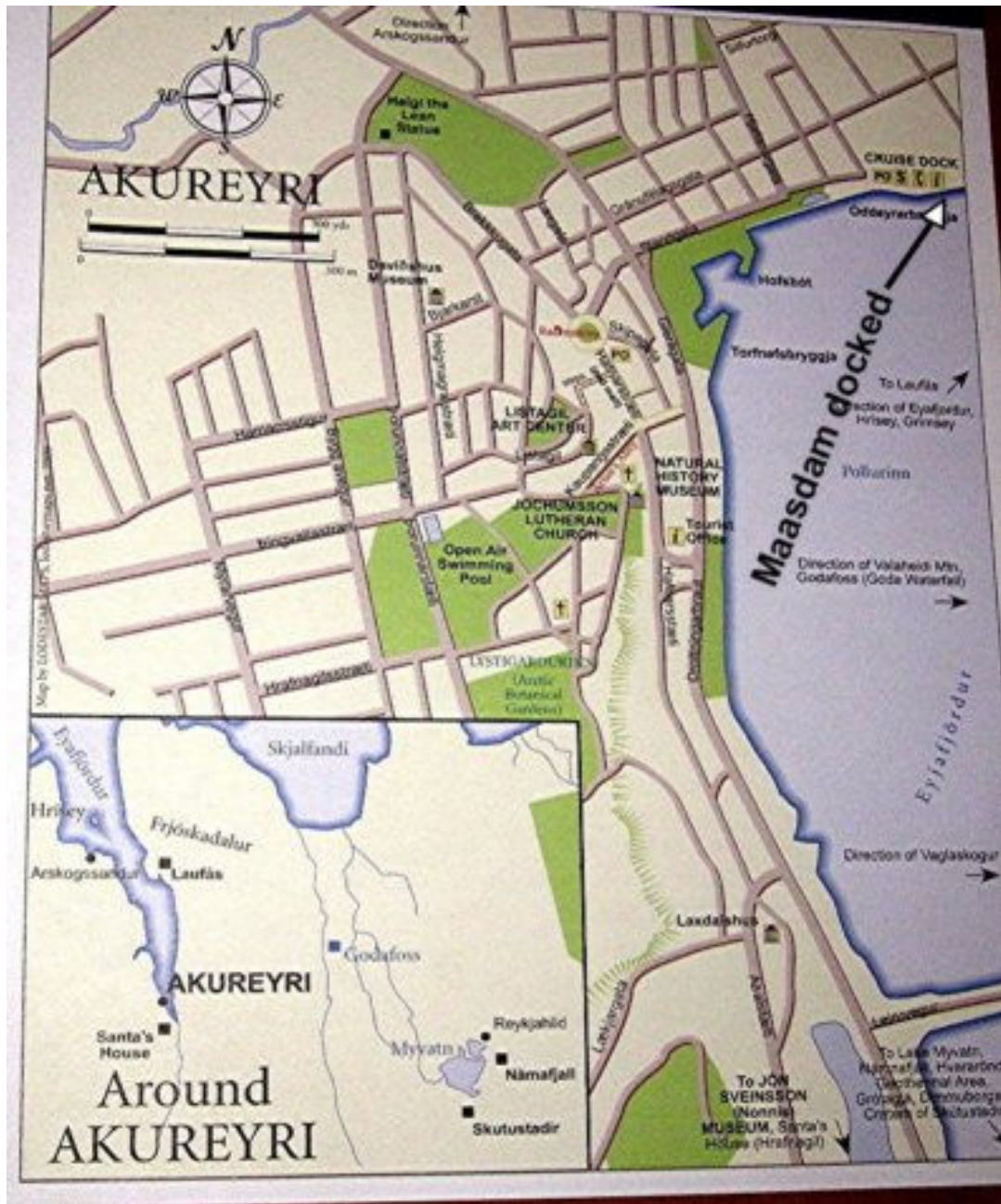
## Day 11 Aug. 4 – Akureyri, Iceland – Polar Bear Ceremony

**Akureyri, Iceland:** The day started with calm seas and bright morning light at about 3am. It had been dark since about 11pm but the night darkness was short. We managed to sleep for a couple more hours but finally got up and had some coffee. We had been cruising along the north coast of Iceland and we were now entering the wide Eyjafjordur channel leading to Akureyri, Iceland. The Eyjafjordur channel is the longest fjord in Iceland and the city of Akureyri is located at the south end. It was a cool morning, in the 50 to 60 degree Fahrenheit temperature range. Low lying fog obscured much of the mountains on either side of the fjord but the sun was making a valiant effort to break through as shown in the photos below.



About 7am the Maasdam approached the dock in Akureyri and by 8am clearance had been granted for passengers to go ashore. The maps below show where we were located in Iceland and where the ship was docked in Akureyri.





Akureyri is located in a beautiful mountain setting on the banks of the Eyjafjörður fjord. The city has a population of about 15,000 people and is a major commercial center for northern Iceland. Most of business and residential districts are shown in the photos below.





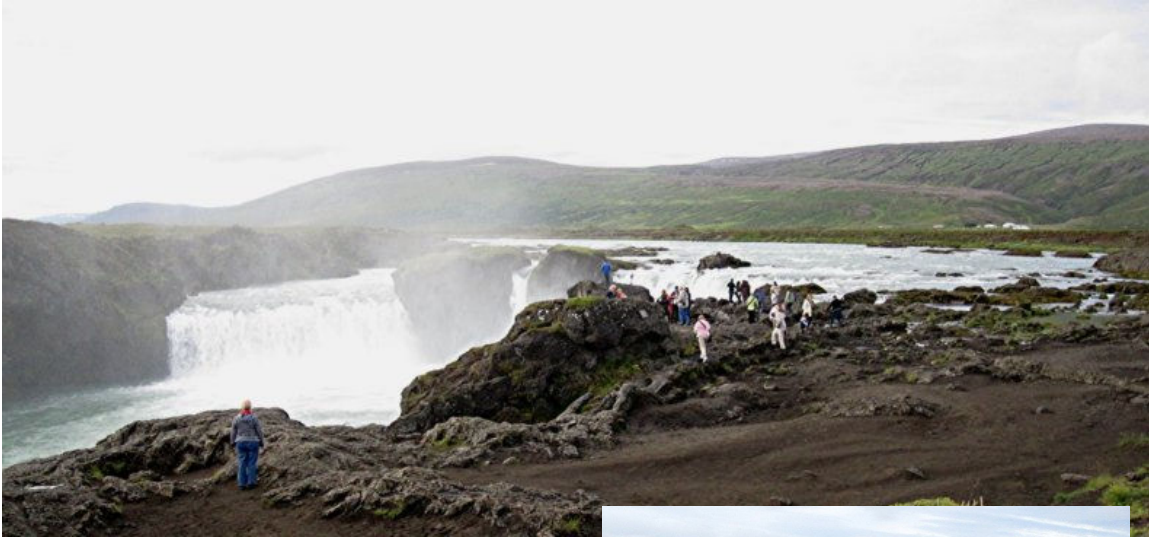
We had signed up for a 4 hour bus tour through the countryside out to Godafoss Waterfalls followed by visit to a traditional

Icelandic farm. We boarded the bus and left the pier about 8am. Our guides name was Karen and she turned out to be one of the better guides we have had on land tours. She was a native Icelandic but spoke English more clearly than most Americans. She taught English in a vocational school during the school year and was a tour guide during the summer vacation period.

On the way to Godafoss Falls we passed through farming country as well as mountains. At this time of year and in this part of Iceland the agricultural scene looked pretty robust. It was not the sheet of ice that the name "Iceland" brings to mind.



The bus out to Godafoss Falls took about 45 minutes. We arrived and eagerly walked down to the falls for a photo opportunity along with several other busloads of people from the Maasdam. Two rivers join just above the magnificent falls to produce this scene with mist rising from the tumult below.



Here is another view of the falls. The fellow on the cliff overlooking the falls was tempting fate to get a good view and he survived the gamble.



After seeing Godafoss Falls and the inevitable gift shop we headed back towards the Maasdam on a 30 minute ride along a well maintained gravel road through this broad valley shown below. The whole of Iceland was formed through volcanic activity and then glaciers during the ice age shaped the features of the land, including this valley which now provided a home to many farms.





We stopped at an old traditional farm that was set up for tourist visits. The farm was situated in an agricultural area along the Skagafjordur fiord that the Maasdam had passed through on its way to Akureyri.



The main feature of the farm was a series of houses made from sod or turf cut from the fields. The turf covered the walls and roofs. Here are some photos showing how the turfhouses looked up close.



Some of the houses had wooden frames with turf stacked against the walls. The storage sheds and



animal shelters tended to have just turf walls with poles at the corners supporting the roof structure. The roofs were wooden frames with turf stacked on the frame.

Some repairs were being made to the house shown on the right. The window frames are deep to allow for stacking the blocks of turf making up the walls. A friendly sheep from the farm decided to join the scene.





This old turf house shown below is showing some signs of erosion along the roof peak and walls from years of service.



Shown below are some blocks of turf that are ready for installation.



In a nearby field we saw some turf being harvested as shown below. The body of water in the background is the fjord that leads to Akureyri about 20 miles to the left.



These Icelandic ponies on a nearby farm were a beautiful sight.



Our visit to this part of Iceland opened our eyes to the fact that in isolated pockets, such as Akureyri, there can be some



intense agriculture being practiced. Our guide, Karen, said that in early times, say from the first Vikings to 100 years ago, these same farms were very hard scrabble operations with marginal existence. However, with the advent of modern farming tools and fertilizer the farmers can now lead a comfortable life.

The bus took us from the farming district back in to Akureyri where we stopped to tour the city's botanical gardens. This facility is advertized as the most northern botanical garden in the world. We were surprised that we were familiar with many of the plants and flowers that also do well in East Tennessee. Shown below is a collection of photos we took of the most colorful plants.



These pansies were our favorites.



After the tour of the botanical gardens the bus returned us to the Maasdam, a short distance away. We had lunch and then headed out to take a quick walk around the town of Akureyri.

The Maasdam was docked just a few blocks from city center so we were soon in the middle of the shopping district as shown on the right.

The flower pots filled with brilliant colors made for a pleasant walk through town.





We were fascinated by the range of architecture concentrated in a small area. Here are some photos that we took on a one hour stroll through town.



The Jochumsson Lutheran Church shown below, is a striking sight and was mentioned in port talks we had attended.



This elaborate fountain – waterfall was in the front yard of what appeared to be a comfortable residence on a busy city street.





We stopped by The Viking souvenir shop and couldn't pass up the opportunity to have our photo taken with the proprietor.



On the way back to the Maasdam we passed by the rather sad sight of the new cultural center which was located near the ship. Earlier, our bus tour guide had pointed out that the current economic collapse in Iceland had caused a halt in the construction of the

cultural center. When finished, it will be a beautiful building and a real asset to the harbor area but for now you can tell it is living through hard times as suggested by this photo of the building from the street.



Our guide said her husband was in the construction business and had been laid off. However, he was starting to get part time work and they were hopeful that the worst of the bad economic times was over.

We had difficulty finding a prominent sign advertizing the city of Akureyri to document the visit of Barbara's library card. Just in time, we found this sign at the entrance to the dock where the Maasdam was docked.



We hustled back on board the Maasdam and got ready for sail away scheduled for 5:30pm.

**The Polar Bear Ceremony:** The Captain had announced a change of plans for the evening. Instead of just sailing the short distance along the north Iceland coast to the city of Husavik, we would detour north to the vicinity of the island of Grimsey (shown with the map of Iceland above) where we would cross over the Arctic Circle. The Arctic Circle, located at 66° 33' North latitude, is an important geographic point of reference for travelers and everyone was looking forward to adding this accomplishment to their list of triumphs. For those people who need severe challenges to add texture to their lives there would be a traditional Polar Bear Ceremony to commemorate the crossing of the Arctic Circle. On some Arctic Tours the Polar Bear celebrants loll around in a pool of water carved out of an ice sheet. With global warning and all we didn't have an ice sheet handy but the Maasdam staff prepared the aft deck swimming pool for a swim by any brave



person who wanted to take a dip in celebration of having survived the rigors of travel to above the Arctic Circle.

We kept a close vigil to be sure the crossing was complete before going up to the big Lido Deck party that was forming. On schedule, about 10pm, and in the dusky light of a polar evening, we passed over the Arctic Circle on a northern course.



Up on the Lido Deck the Cruise Director, Susan, was the master of ceremonies and orchestrated what was generally a pretty chaotic scene. The perspective Polar Bear initiates were first assembled in their bathrobes on the Lido Deck while less hardy souls took pictures and encouraged their brave companions.



Here we caught our cruise critic friend, Larry, in the dark glasses, putting on a brave face.

The Captain and Hotel Manager had promised to participate and they were back by the Aft Pool making sure the water met the Polar Bear temperature standards.



On a signal from Susan there was a rush to the back of the ship as the perspective Polar Bears and their supporters jockeyed for position. On a signal from Susan the robes came off and the giddy (and shivering) celebrants jumped into the pool.

Here it looks like our Internet Café Manager, Rodin (in the blue shirt), is appropriately initiated.





In this photo an unidentified survivor provides a graphic picture of the sheer joy of the event while a friend snaps his picture. Meanwhile the spectators lining the rails bring up disturbing images of holidays in the Coliseum in Rome 2000 years ago.



Luckily, we were able to locate our friend, Larry, and confirm that he lived to tell about the experience.



At this point we exited the chaotic scene and tried to settle down for the night.

Tomorrow we dock at Husavik, for another day of exploring the cities of Iceland. It promises to be a calm day compared to what we have just witnessed on the Maasdam.