Some notes on Elly’s trip to Iceland in June 2012

The first week of June, there was a linguistics conference in Iceland which I decided to go to and to which I added a week of driving around the island. The conference organizers had the great idea to spend two days of the conference in Reykjavik (where we also saw the Edda and other manuscripts) and then to do a day of sightseeing (the Alþingi, where the Icelandic ‘parliament’ used to meet and where two tectonic plates come together, Geysir, the Selfoss and Urriðafoss) before having another two days of papers at the foot of the Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano that erupted two years ago and where the dust still hasn’t settled. The conference was memorable!

The weather was extraordinarily beautiful as was the country: a steady change of show-capped mountains, glaciers, cliffs, beaches with black sand, tree-less moss-covered hills with many shades of green, old churches in the middle of nowhere, and very picturesque harbors and fishing villages.

I rented a car from SADcars (thanks Jóhanna!) which is an Icelandic company with about 160 cars that are mostly older than 10 years but well maintained. Mine was a Hyundai Santa Fe 4-wheel drive with over 220,000 kilometers on it and I added 2500 more! I much recommend the company. The only advice they gave was to be careful opening car
doors on the southern coast and were they ever right: the wind can really be brutal! The driving around Reykjavik is busy (3 lanes in each direction) but this peters out very soon and many roads will have long stretches of unpaved one-lane roads, with steep (12%) ups and downs, and even one-lane tunnels (a bit harrying). The only problem was finding gas stations in the more remote areas.

West of Skaftafell

Shortcut via Öxi

There are very few trees and the joke is that, if you are lost in an Icelandic forest, all you have to do is stand up (thanks Tonya!). Along the beaches of the Westfjords, I saw lots of big trees trunks that had been washed ashore. When I asked, they said these came from Siberian forests! Lupines were introduced to halt erosion and they are no so wide-spread that they may be endangering more native plants. They were in full bloom (see ‘at Skaftafell’) with quite a distinctive smell. Mink are around (although I didn’t see them) because they escaped from mink farms and arctic foxes came on their own, on floating ice. I saw beautiful collies herding the horses (and sheep I assume) and some tame rabbits.

Icelanders are refreshingly different from many other Scandinavians I know. They are much more relaxed and if something doesn’t open on time that’s fine! From DNA-studies, it is known that their genes are a mix of Norwegian and Celtic ones. One can imagine the controversy when that was first discovered! There are even some linguistic features where Celtic may have influenced Icelandic (thanks to David White, p.c. for pointing this out). The facial features and hair colors are certainly very diverse. At the moment, there are Poles and Thai that have come to work and there are many Thai restaurants. I didn’t try any though.

All the conference participants visited a tomato greenhouse. Icelanders want to buy tomatoes and cucumbers that are grown in Iceland. Lots of jokes about Dutch tomatoes! Thermal heat is free but the electricity to create light in the winter is subsidized by the government (which the farmer wasn’t happy about...). I found the greenhouse fascinating because I had worked in the summer, when I was in high school and later as a student, in Dutch tomato-growing greenhouses. The technology is very different now: electric carts move pickers, the plants are hanging like poor victims, and insects do the work of pesticides. I loved the taste of these tomatoes and smelling the plants.
Traditional food is lamb and fish (salmon, haddock, cod, mussels): delicious. There was puffin and whale on the menu of one restaurant but I couldn’t get myself to eat that, especially having watched (blue) whales from a boat around Husavik. Whaling has resumed again (of some species) but whale meat is said to be mainly eaten by tourists not Icelanders and the practice of whale killing is controversial in Iceland.

Coffee is generally wonderful; I became a real coffee addict! In the US, I have beef jerky and coffee on trips but in Iceland there is fish jerky (although they don’t call it that). Beer only became legal in 1989 and can be bought at restaurants and at the Vínbúð(in), which sometimes opens one hour at a time (in Seyðisfjörður from 5-6pm, for instance) and in some places is hard to find. It was great that the conference organizers told us about this (thanks to Tonya!). I didn’t see much recycling/separation of garbage except at the University in Reykjavik. There is a lot of geo-thermal heat and plenty of water so no need for short showers!
Some of my favorite parts: Dyrholaey, from Skáftafell to Hofn, Seyðisfjörður, and the area around Hólmavik. If I were to go again, I’d rent a cabin somewhere around Hólmavik and then do hikes.

Hólmavik, in the Westfjords, is also the home of the museum of sorcery and witchcraft which I found very interesting. The Westfjords are seen a very remote part (the NW appendage) of Iceland as are the highlands (where outlaws ended up). Sorcery ‘became’ a problem it seems only after Lutheranism was introduced from Denmark: quite a number of men (but only one woman) were put to death in gruesome ways after being accused of this. As everywhere, societal divisions are interesting. Iceland prides itself on not having royalty and no palaces, but there is the issue of ‘the city’ versus ‘the country’. The Westfjords definitely count as the latter and I talked to someone about that who was really furious at people from Reykjavik for their attitudes. I read Halldór Laxness’ *The Atom Station* which is really insightful on this for a much earlier period.