

**PHOTO  
ADVENTURES**  
*By Lee Frost*



# Iceland

IT MAY HAVE GROUNDED AIRCRAFT AND WASHED AWAY ROADS, BUT THE RECENT VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS WASN'T GOING TO STOP LEE FROST FROM VISITING THE LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

WORDS & PICTURES: LEE FROST



**ABOVE & LEFT:** My EOS-1Ds MkIII was feeling pretty sorry for itself after getting up close and personal with an erupting volcano. This is me behind the surgical mask, pretending to be on assignment for *National Geographic*.

**TOP:** Reykjavik has to enjoy one of the most stunning locations of any capital city in the world. No smog or pollution here.

**RIGHT:** Eyafjallajökull in full force. The houses in the bottom of the frame give you an idea of just how big the ash plume was. Bet their insurance goes up next year!

**OPENING SPREAD:** Talk about being in the eye of the storm. "Guys, I think we just took a wrong turn and ended up on the moon".

I'M LOUNGING on the landing of a cosy hotel in the small Icelandic town of Vik í Mýrdal, downloading the day's images and downing Scotch with a couple of photographer mates who have joined me on the trip. It's been a long day – they always are in Iceland outside the never-ending night of winter – and 'just another one for the road' has become a fourth, or maybe a fifth.

We're just about to call it a night when a man so big he could play the giant in Jack & The Beanstalk without the fancy dress decides to join us. He's very sweaty; we're slightly squiffy. It would have been nice of him to ask, but who's going to argue with Conan the Barbarian?

"Hey guys, you know Sarah Brightman?" His voice is deep and gravelly, like he eats volcanic rock for fun.

"Erm, you mean the singer who used to dance in her underwear on *Top of the Pops*?" My voice is squeaky and pathetic, like I'm auditioning for *Alvin and the Chipmunks*.

"Yes. That one," replies the Gruffalo. "She's the most beautiful woman in the world. I love her. She saved me."

As introductions go, that's about as surreal as it gets in my book, despite the duty-free. And he's not done yet. Having casually informed us that he's a nutcase and an alcoholic (quick, hide the booze lads) he looks deep into my eyes, tells me I could be his brother, does a scary

rendition of Jesus on the cross, complete with wake-the-dead wailing and disturbing dribbling, then pops outside for a smoke. That's our cue. Gathering laptops and card readers like a volcano's about to erupt, we scarp to our rooms, bolt the doors and hope he doesn't have an axe.

Next morning, relieved to have survived, we head downstairs for breakfast and are informed by the jovial hotelier that our strange friend disappeared in the early hours. "Got in his car, drove away and left all his belongings in his room". I look outside. A volcano is erupting. Man, this place is weird.

Actually, it's not just weird. It's also amazing, stunning, awe-inspiring, mind-blowing. Iceland is everything you ever imagine it to be – multiplied by 100. And we've only been here for three days.

The trip had been planned months earlier, long before Eyafjallajökull decided to blow a gasket, but what the heck, we thought. If nothing else it'll add a bit of excitement. It certainly did.

The previous day, hours before meeting Sarah Brightman's stalker, my mates and I found ourselves driving through a dust storm of biblical proportions. One minute bright sunshine and blue sky, the next, *War of the Worlds*. As far as the eye could see the landscape was covered in black powdery ash. It was how I imagine the surface of the moon to be – dead, desolate and ▶



I spotted this lonely church from several miles away and knew immediately it would make a great subject. The style of architecture on Iceland is quite unusual.



## Iceland



### Lee's kit

A Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII with a Zeiss 21mm f/2.8 lens; Canon 17-40mm; 24-70mm and 70-200mm zooms, Lee ND hard grads, Heliopan polariser, Gitzo tripod with Manfrotto 410 geared head, Lowepro Vertex 200 backpack, 60GB of CF cards, MacBook laptop and Lacie back-up hard drive.

**"My hair was matted, my ears and nose clogged. I dreaded to think what state my camera's sensor would be in after such a severe sandblasting"**

deserted. Savage gusts of wind whipped up dust that stole breath and stung eyes, while in the distance, behind the mountains, the menacing volcanic plume belched away unabated.

I'd never taken photographs in such extreme conditions. My hair was matted, my ears and nose clogged. I dreaded to think what state my camera's sensor would be in after such a severe sandblasting – or the unfiltered lens for that matter. I found out later, and it wasn't pleasant! "Pass me the Arctic Butterfly boys, I'm going in".

Out of nowhere a police Jeep pulled up. But instead of telling us to 'hit the road, Jack', as I expected, the kind officer handed us each a face mask and wished us a good day. So it was back into the action, padding around the ash-covered earth in search of alternative angles and volcano views, shooting handheld – too spongy for tripods – and laughing quietly inside our masks at the wonder of it all. Changing lenses would have been sensor suicide so I made do with the 17-40mm locked on the camera body. It proved to be the perfect choice.

Exploring Iceland is as easy or as difficult as you want

it to be. The easy option is to follow Highway 1, which circumnavigates the island in an 800-odd mile loop. We met one English guy who'd done it on a bicycle in 12 days, and passed a mad Japanese unicyclist who'd given himself three months. Call me old-fashioned, but I'll take the 4x4 if it's okay with you.

While it's tempting to do the full circuit and sample the highlights on a whistle-stop tour, we decided on a shorter route so we could spend quality time at chosen locations and return to them if necessary when the light was better.

Travelling in May means generally good weather, long days – but not the 22-hour days of summer – far fewer tourists, no need to book hotels in advance and lower prices. Despite financial collapse, Iceland is still an expensive country. In July and August a modest 4x4 will set you back around £175 per day to hire and beer's a fiver a pint. In May, vehicle hire costs almost halve. Beer's still a fiver a pint, but you can't win 'em all.

The main downside to travelling outside the summer months is that the roads through the interior are closed. That's the difficult option compared to Highway 1 – head into the highlands and you really are in the back of

**TOP: There are probably more horses on Iceland than people. This group were taking shelter behind a rock outcrop by the side of Highway 1.**

**ABOVE LEFT: Dramatic cliffs of Dyrhólaey near Vík í Mýrdal. The big cloud is the ash plume of Eyafjallajökull. Vik got it bad while we were there, ash falling like snow.**

**ABOVE RIGHT: The Reykjanes Peninsula mud pools. Reminders that Iceland is a giant ticking timebomb.**



**ABOVE:** On the evening this image was taken, you could hear Eyjafjallajökull rumbling like thunder. It was a truly amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience. Hopefully!

**TOP RIGHT:** Icebergs heading for the sea at Jökulsarlón glacial lagoon, one of Iceland's most amazing sights, though not the easiest to capture.

**"It rumbled like thunder before hurling rocks the size of cars into the sky - rocks so big you could see them with the naked eye from several miles away"**

beyond, among vivid mountains, icy lakes and the perfect craters of extinct volcanoes. But having researched the trip and spoken to other photographers, I decided that there's more than enough to see and shoot in Iceland without straying too far off the beaten track, so the highlands could wait for the next trip.

Our plan was to pick up Highway 1 at Keflavik, home to Iceland's main airport, then head down to the south coast via Reykjavik, travelling east as far as Höfn (pronounced Hup) via waterfalls at Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss, on to the charming town of Vik ǫ Myrdal, the coastal cliffs at Dyrhólaey, Skaftafell National Park and the Vatnajökull Glacier, Jökulsarlón glacial lagoon - with detours into the hills where possible - then retrace our route before

heading north to Gullfoss, Iceland's most famous waterfall, Geysir, Pinvellir National Park and Reykjavik.

The billowing ash plume from Eyjafjallajökull was a constant presence for the first few days. When weather conditions were clear it made an amazing sight - and sound - as it rumbled like thunder before hurling rocks the size of cars into the sky - rocks so big you could see them with the naked eye from several miles away. We made many unplanned stops to capture this spectacle, just pulling up by the roadside and pulling out our telezooms, but really it was just an amazing aside and there were many more stunning views to experience and capture, far more than we would have time for.

I had great fun shooting the towering waterfalls of

Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss. The weather at the start of the trip was cloudy and the light flat, but this gave me the perfect excuse to put a ten-stop ND filter on my lens and experiment with long exposures before converting the images to black & white. At the coastal town of Vik my ten-stop ND saw further action down on the black volcanic beach, creating fine-art images full of motion and mood, while the nearby rock stacks of Reynisdrangar provided further inspiration.

East of Vik, Iceland proper appeared on the horizon. The Vatnajökull Glacier is the world's biggest icecap outside the Poles and suddenly you're driving past it. Covering 8,300km - three times bigger than Luxembourg - the scale is impossible to grasp.

At its fringes, glaciers pleated with deep crevasses creep between mountains like giant icy tongues. We visited Skaftafellsjökull in the Skaftafell National Park and were awestruck by a sea of shifting, creaking ice,

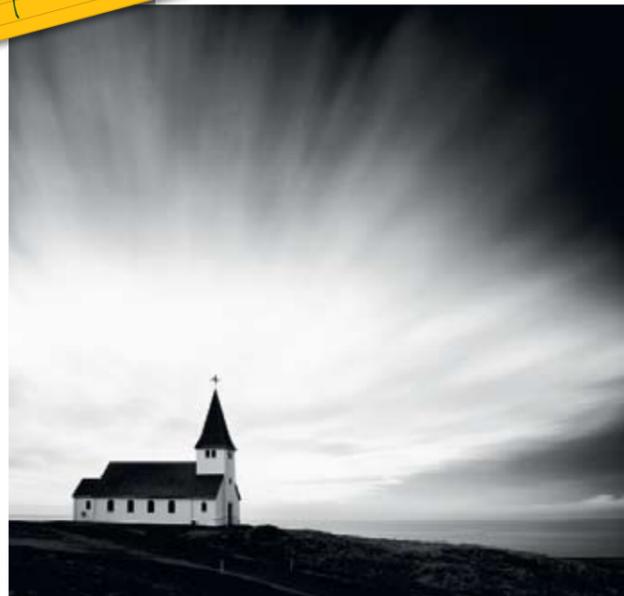


then Svinafellsjökull and the beautiful Fjallsarlón. But nothing compares to Jökulsarlón, where the Briedamerkurjökull glacier crumbles into a deep lagoon and icebergs bob luminous-blue before floating out to sea, where the crashing emerald green waves of the North Atlantic melt and shape them into delicate glassy ice sculptures before throwing them back up onto the beach - a perfect black backdrop of volcanic sand. It really is like being in another world and we spent hours alternating between lagoon and beach, filling memory cards at an alarming rate.

Heading back west from Höfn, we were prevented from visiting a few of our planned locations due to floods caused by the eruption taking out roads. We saw clear evidence of this close to Highway 1, but up in the

**ABOVE MIDDLE:** When the icebergs at Jökulsarlón do get to the sea, they're tossed and turned by the waves then unceremoniously dumped back on the beach. I was lucky this one stayed still.

**ABOVE BOTTOM:** The impressive mountains near Höfn. Amazing views are never far away in Iceland.



**“Þingvellir was due to be our last location before heading back to the UK, but Eyjafjallajökull had other ideas and started kicking off again, closing the airport”**

hills the thundering meltwater caused devastation.

Heading back through the fallout zone of the ash plume brought more action and excitement. Then a few miles beyond the farming town of Hella (pronounced Hetla), we left it behind for the final time – or so we thought – and headed north, to magnificent Gullfoss where spray from the thundering falls creates a beautiful rainbow every time the sun shines, then Geysir, where every few minutes the Strokkur geyser explodes, sending water and steam 30 metres into the sky.

Nearby, Þingvellir National Park is a haunting, lonely landscape of stunted trees and deep mossy fissures. To Icelanders it's sacred ground – the Vikings established the world's first democratic parliament, the Alþing, there in AD 930 – but it's also where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates play tug-of-war and are slowly pulling the earth apart at a rate of 2mm per year.

Þingvellir was due to be our last location before

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The magic of mono: Vik church at dawn; an example of abstract simplicity on Vik beach; a dark, brooding Skogafoss waterfall and the ash plume of Eyjafjallajökull rises over Skogar.

**RIGHT:** Waterfall at Þingvellir National Park – a surreal and lonely place well-suited to black & white.

heading back to the UK, but Eyjafjallajökull had other ideas and started to kick off again, closing Keflavik Airport and stopping all flights out. Normally such a delay would have been greeted with dismay, but having only scratched the surface we were happy to spend another couple of days exploring the amazing Icelandic landscape. So with the 4x4 hire duly extended we headed to Reykjanes Peninsula where we were greeted by bubbling mud pools and smoking earth in the colourful geothermal landscape.

Iceland is big, bold and beautiful. It's a land of contrasts and if you enjoy shooting magnificent wild landscapes, there's nowhere quite like it. It's also a place you'll want to return to again and again, because one trip simply isn't enough. ■

*Lee will be leading a photo tour of Iceland in May 2011. Dates and prices are to be confirmed, but you can register your interest at [info@photoadventures.co.uk](mailto:info@photoadventures.co.uk)*

