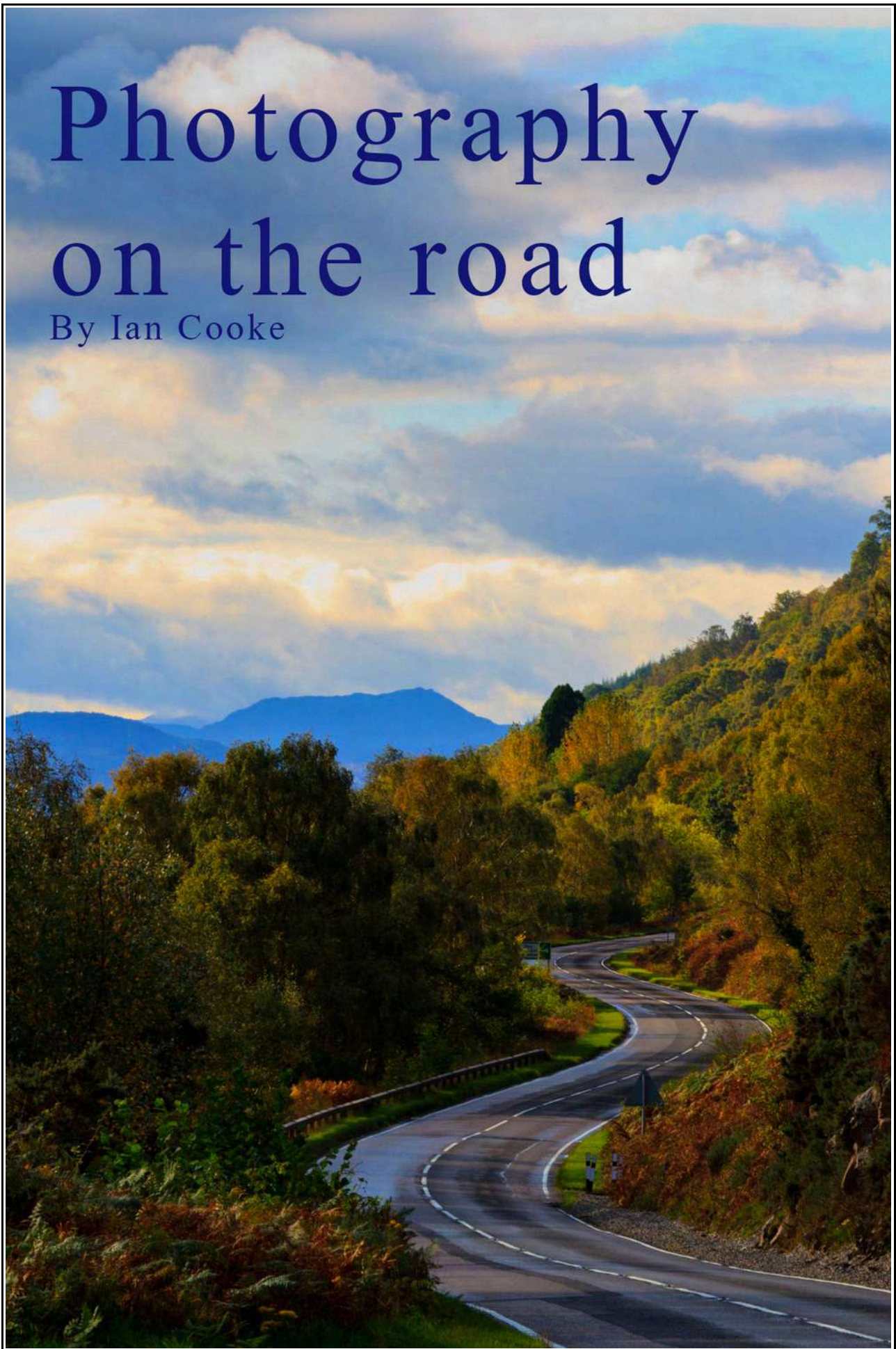


# Photography on the road

By Ian Cooke



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I've been taking photos since I was at primary school, my trusty Helina supershooter camera was with me on all my school outings and holidays, from a day at St Paul's Cathedral to school journeys at Marchants Hill and Nethercott farm, my camera and a supply of 110 film came with me. Later I was given a Kodak disk camera for my birthday and although it and I wasn't great at taking photos (who is at the age of 9) I just loved taking photos.



We would always go out for days as a family, myself, my Brother, and Mum and Dad. One weekend we got the train to Southend and found out when we got there that the annual Southend airshow was on that very day. My other passion is aviation, I had been making model kits and reading about aircraft for years, now I was going to see them for real and hopefully take photos of them. After a great day out I couldn't wait to get the films

processed but that would take a week. When I finally got the prints back I looked at them with disappointment, The aircraft that were so big to see with my eyes were literally small dots on the prints, I was gutted.

What I needed was an SLR (Single Lens Reflex), a camera that you can change the lens to suit what you are shooting. I asked my parents if I could have one for Christmas and was told the same thing every child in the world has been told at least once, wait and see what Santa brings. Unbeknown to me my Dad had already seen an advert in the paper that Curry's or Dixon's had a sale on, in that sale was SLR cameras, and he had got me one. Opening the heavy present from my Mum and Dad on Christmas day revealed a Praktica BMS SLR camera with two lenses, there was nothing to stop me now, or so I thought.



Coming from a simple point and shoot camera to an SLR is a massive step, Manual focus, setting shutter speed, film speed and aperture, what's the aperture? I started reading photography books and magazines to learn about these new things (No Youtube back then, in fact, no Internet)

It was daunting learning about how shutter speed can make moving subjects sharp or blurry, how the aperture can let in more light but at the expense of depth of field (how much is in focus), and how a higher film speed will make your photos look more grainy as opposed to a slower speed.

These 3 things make up the exposure triangle, changing one setting means you have to change another to achieve the correct exposure, and this took some time for my 15 year old brain to work out. After a while I started to get my head around it and it soon became natural to change a setting knowing what the consequences were, but despite all the hard work I was still getting blurry images, I would focus on something making sure the split screen in the viewfinder showed a nice, sharp image, wait a week for the film to come back and still blurry, why? I needed glasses.

I'm seventeen, been working for a month and it's Christmas, so I part-exchange my old Praktica and buy myself a Canon EOS 300 35 mm film camera and auto-focus lens, things start to snowball from here as I purchase new lenses and accessories when I can afford it. I've fully grasped how exposure works because I've been shooting in manual for the last 3 years and despite all the new technology I still shoot 90% of the time in manual to this day, I want the camera to do what I want it to do, not what some algorithm says.

My airshow photos start to get better, but what I really want to do is take landscape photos, after learning to drive and getting a car I start to go out at weekends further and further afield. My first few trips weren't great from a photography point of view, the exposures were spot on but something just wasn't right. Again back to the books and magazines, all say the same thing, for a great landscape shot you must have good light and good composition. Composition is where you place objects or things of interest in the frame, the idea is to lead the viewer's eye into the photo to what you want them to look at, easier said than done. There are many rules or guides to composition, the most popular being the rule of thirds which I use in most of my photos, if you divide up a frame up into 3 equal parts horizontally and vertically you get four intersections where the lines meet, place your object of interest on one of these or the horizon on the top or bottom line and you should have a good starting point. Also, adding leading lines in your image draw the viewers' attention into the frame, this could be a winding path or river, diagonal lines also work well for this.

The year 2000 saw a massive change in photography with Digital cameras replacing film, these were not very affordable at first but after a lot of saving I purchased my first digital camera in 2003, the Canon EOS 10D was groundbreaking at the time and I loved using it, in fact I still have it now. Digital was expensive, but after the initial payout that was it, this meant you could take as many photos as your memory cards would store and not be worried about the film or development costs, also you could see what you had taken instantly on the back of the camera. I taught myself how to use Adobe Photoshop and later Adobe Lightroom to get the most out of the Digital RAW files.

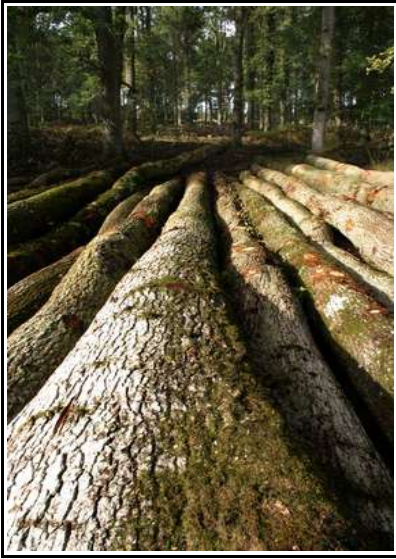
A few people have asked me over the years what is the best way to learn photography and the two things I would always say is, take loads of pictures (with digital, it's not costing you anything apart from time) watch YouTube tutorial videos (I still do) and learn to use manual exposure mode, the camera doesn't know what you are trying to achieve, only you do.

After nearly 30 years of using Canon EOS cameras, I have now switched to Sony Alpha mirrorless cameras, when I'm shooting sports the auto-focus is far faster to lock on than my previous cameras.

Now it's November 2020 and the country is in its second lock-down due to the Corona Virus, that's why I'm writing this.

## First photo holidays

My first photography holiday was to the New Forest in March 2004. I came back with some good photos but I knew I could do better.



I came across these recently cut trees and thought they looked good disappearing into the distance. The Pony kept following me around for about half an hour, I was tempted to give it my bag to carry.

Next up was Dorset, staying in the Weymouth area there was plenty of places I wanted to visit like Portland Bill, Osmington Mills, and Chesil Beach.



This photo of the guy fishing was taken with a 500 mm mirror lens at Portland Bill. Because of the design of the lens, any bright highlights that are out of focus produce a Doughnut shape as you can see in the sea here.

After a few years of travelling around within a few hours from home, I thought it was about time to go further afield.

## Scotland

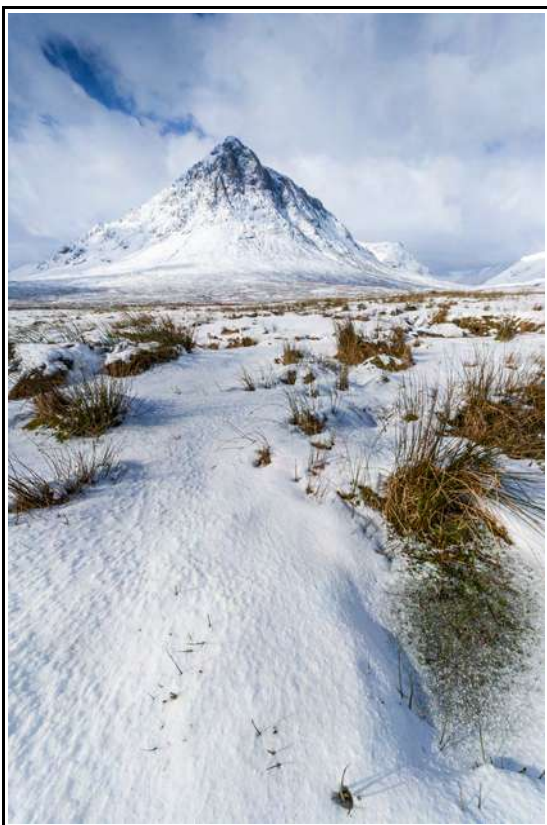
I had been to Scotland once before, I flew up to Edinburgh and met up with my friend Craig, who was up there for a wedding, he was also a keen photographer so told me of some good spots to try. We spent some time walking around the City, taking photos and just enjoying being somewhere different. It was just a one-day trip as the next day he drove us both back home. I wanted to go back and I knew exactly where I wanted to go, the Highlands.

March 2007 I set off from home, 530 miles ahead of me was Fort William which was my base for the next week. Not wanting to do nearly 10 hours of driving in one day, I had decided to stay overnight in the Lake District. When I got to the place I was staying near Windermere it was

pouring down, so no photography that day. 7am Next morning beautiful clear sky and I'm ready for the 260-mile drive to Fort William which should take me about 4 and a half hours, 30 minutes along the motorway, the clouds have come over and the temperature as plummeted 9 degrees to -2 and there's a few spots of rain on the windscreen. 10 minutes later the rain has turned to light snow but within seconds its full blizzard conditions and the motorway speed dropped to 30mph, I was just thinking of pulling over at the next services when out of the gloom ahead I see a gritter lorry and like everyone else around me we all get in line behind it, the going is slow but feel a bit safer now. After about an hour the snow has stopped, the clouds are breaking up and it's not long until I pass the sign saying welcome to Scotland. Quick stop for fuel and a loo break at Dumbarton just north of Glasgow then back on the A82 along the winding road beside Loch Lomond, oddly there is no snow here apart from on the tops of the mountains.

I've already decided I'm going to take a slight detour at Tarbet to a place suggested to me by Craig called Rest and be Thankful, the further I drive up the road which winds around the side of a mountain, the more snow is piled up on each side and the temperature is dropping again, I pull into the empty car park and see this amazing view looking down the valley, within seconds another car pulls in the guy gets out and tells me he's from the motorway agency and their closing the road because of an imminent snowstorm, so I better get down now while I can, I didn't even get my camera out before it started falling so decide it's best to listen to the advice and head down. 15 Minutes later I'm down at Tarbet, which is a lot whiter now than when I passed half an hour ago. Cursing my luck I head north on the A82 The snows not falling any more, but it's been heavy judging by the amount of snow on the mountains and fields, later I heard that the road had been closed for 4 hours, pleased I made the right choice.

When I go away on my trips I do a lot of research looking at guide books and maps, so I'm recognising the names of towns as I pass them by, Crianlarich, Tyndrum, Bridge or Orchy and here comes the snow again, oh well next place I should be coming to is Glencoe, but before that is the famous mountain Buachaille Etive Mor, known as the guardian of Glencoe and probably the most photographed mountain in Scotland because from one side it looks like a pyramid. Through the snow it is hard to make out but then there it is and just in time for a parking space too, finally I have the chance to take a photo in Scotland and to top it off the snow has stopped and there is some blue sky above the mountain.



Buachaille Etive Mor

I tried to use the tufts of grass and lines in the snow to draw the eye into the photo.

The A82 winds down the right side of the mountain and into Glencoe.



A few minutes later and the snow returns, the weather changes so quick here.

A few miles further and I'm in Glencoe, it's snowing but very light and there are breaks in the clouds letting shafts of sunlight through, decision time take a photo handheld or set up the tripod, handheld, it is as there's no time. I've been caught out before as a certain person keeps reminding me, but more about that latter.

You can actually see the snowflakes falling in the dark areas in this picture from Glencoe.



Time to push on and as I pass through Glencoe the snow stops, over the Ballachulish bridge and next stop Fort William 20 miles away.

My 4 and a half hour journey as turned into 7 hours with the snow and stopping for photos, time to check in to my accommodation and rest with a great view out of the living room window straight towards Ben Nevis.

I won't bore you with the details of the full week but I latter visited Loch laggan where the temperature was -7 and I couldn't feel my fingers within seconds of getting out of the car and that night it dropped to a chilly -15, just think about that when you complain about it being too cold at 10 degrees.

I fell for Scotland the moment I got there and have now been there 14 times in the last 13 years, from numerous visits to the Glencoe and Fort William area to the north coast of Aberdeenshire, Isle of Skye, and Isle of Lewis. All different but all with that rugged landscape that I love.

Here are some of my favourite photos from my visits.



Misty sunrise just south of Glencoe looking towards Rannoch mor.



The Quiraing, Isle of Sky



Stormy weather at Loch Ness



Another shot of Buachaille Etive Mor, this spot is always muddy, probably because of the amount of photographers struggling to get to it, it literally is about 6 inches deep at times.



## Isle of Skye

I visited the Isle of Skye for the first time in 2011, but my visit in March 2012 is one I will never forget. I had been on the island for a few days and been to a few places, on the Tuesday I had been to the fairy pools which is a good walk from the car park and had to cross a few streams and a small river with stepping stones, not great when your carrying a heavy rucksack with expensive camera gear inside and a tripod but I nervously done it, got to the fairy pools and took some photos, then returned crossing the dodgy stones again. I had been out about 8 hours so returned to the cottage I was staying in to eat and edit the photos from the day, I also bought a bottle of whisky while I was out, something else I had never done until I went to Scotland.

I finished the editing and had a whisky while watching TV, then I decided to have another, I've never been a big drinker but I really liked this whisky and I may have had a third, anyway it was about 11PM, and I was feeling tired and a bit tipsy, so I started to get ready for bed. Just at that moment my phone made an unusual noise, I checked it and an app I had recently put on my phone was telling me that the Northern lights may be visible, hurriedly I put on my coat and went outside but couldn't see anything, so I grabbed my camera and tripod just to make sure. Slowly in the darkness and my slightly drunk state I managed to get the settings right, started a 30-second exposure and waited, the shutter clicked and a second latter the image popped up on the screen and there it was slightly dark because of my hurried setting up but the sky was definitely green, wow it's the Aurora. With adrenaline pumping I was wide awake and I don't think anyone has ever sobered up so quickly, this I can't miss. I had both of my cameras shooting the lights until 4 in the morning and all the time I was sitting on a kitchen chair in the middle of the garden watching this amazing sight.



The next day after I finally got up I went into the town Portree and was talking to a woman who was also taking photos, I told her about the Aurora, and she said she had lived on the island for over 40 years and never seen them.

I thought seeing this beautiful sight couldn't get any better at least in Scotland anyway, I couldn't be more wrong as just over 3 years latter in the same area I watched an Aurora display for 7 hours that blew this one away.



For three straight nights in 2015 I had the Aurora dancing across the sky. Both of these shots were taken on the strongest night and I had learned from the first time to cut the exposure to about 10 seconds, this keeps the structure of the lights intact and not too blurry, they move surprisingly quickly across the sky.

I have now seen the Northern Lights sixteen times, nine of which were in Scotland.



This shot was taken back in 2016 from a place just North of Uig on the Isle of Skye, again I had 3 nights like this



This was from Pennan, Aberdeenshire. The Aurora is far away to the north but still visible, also running diagonally across the sky is part of the Milky Way.

## Iceland

April 2017, I've just got back from a two-week holiday in Scotland and start planning my next trip, I have a list of places I want to go to but I want to do something different, so I start looking at Iceland. Iceland has been on my bucket list for a long time, I use the internet for ideas, places to go, prices for accommodation, flights, and most importantly car hire. Iceland isn't cheap.

Finally, I settle on accommodation just outside the centre of Reykjavik where the prices are cheaper and it's only a 15-minute walk into the city. Next it's flights and car hire, I have booked 9 days in Reykjavik and one overnight stay near Jökulsárlón in the south-east.

In the summer month of June, Iceland gets 24 hours of daylight with sunset merging into sunrise which rules out the chance of seeing the Aurora, in the winter, daylight hours fall as low as four hours per day (from roughly 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.) not much time for photography, so I decide to go in September. With everything booked I purchase guide books and maps to begin planning what, where and when I'm going to visit.

Eventually September comes and with camera bag, laptop, and suitcase I set off for Gatwick Airport praying my bags aren't too heavy. After checking in with no problems thankfully, I sit and wait for my departure gate to be announced, I'm someone that would rather be an hour too early than 5 minutes late, but even I think I've got here too early this time, oh well.

The departure board now says what gate I should be going to and a whole horde of people jump up make their way there. The 3-hour flight goes quickly and the Captain announces we will be landing in the next few minutes, looking out of the window, I can't see anything except cloud, but seconds later bang, the wheels have touched the runway but I still can't see anything, it's thick fog, this doesn't bode well for the Aurora trip I have booked for tonight.

Passing through passport control and customs is quick, so I look for the car rental signs, I find where I should be going and judging by the queue I think everyone on my plane booked with the same company. After what seemed like years I get to the front of the queue and get my car for the next 10 days. For anyone thinking of hiring a car in Iceland they have an insurance policy to cover Volcanic Ash damage because it has been known when there are strong winds it can blow the ash at your car with enough force to strip the paintwork, I didn't take this expensive option as most of the time I would be around the city and the weather forecast showed light winds.

I set off for Reykjavik (first time driving abroad) and find the roads really easy to drive on and navigate with the help of my sat nav. Quick stop for some shopping and I find my accommodation by 5pm, not much time as I have the Aurora trip at 7pm. The trip run by Grayline pick you up at your hotel in a minibus, take you to the city bus station and your transferred onto a coach which then takes you out to some of the best areas to see the Aurora away from the light pollution. The coach pulls into a golf course parking area and the guide says this should be a good spot, everyone rushes to get off and are immediately disappointed that they can't see the lights, me on the other

hand now knowing what to look for am happy as I can see them. To someone who has never seen the Aurora before they look like a bright white cloud, you need to give your eyes time to adapt to the dark before you can see them properly, I'm shooting away getting photos and the poor tour guide is doing his best to show and explain to everyone that the lights are visible but some are just not listening and are getting back on the coach to get out of the cold. Some people are now coming up to me asking why I am taking photos of nothing in the pitch black, when I show them the photo on the back of the camera they go wild pulling out their phones to try to get a picture of the Aurora that according to them wasn't there 20 seconds ago. The lights get stronger and eyes have adapted, now everyone can see them.



From a foggy landing 6 hours ago the clouds have mostly cleared and the first photo I take on this trip is of the Aurora borealis.



I have seen some big waterfalls in Scotland and Wales, but in Iceland they are huge, on this trip I got to see Gullfoss, Skogafoss, and Seljalandsfoss (which you can also walk behind)



Seljalandsfoss from in front and Behind the falls, it's a shame the weather was poor while I was here.



Skogafoss taken from the car park, you can see the size compared to the people standing nearby.

Nice rainbow when the sun came out for a bit.

Gullfoss, after the initial drop you can see here the falls drop again diagonally down into a ravine.



One place I really wanted to visit in Iceland was Jökulsárlón, which is a large glacial lake with icebergs floating out to sea under the road bridge. Driving along the road nothing prepares you for the scene that comes into view near the bridge, on one side the glacier and iceberg filled lake, on the other a black sand beach with icebergs washing back up onto shore.

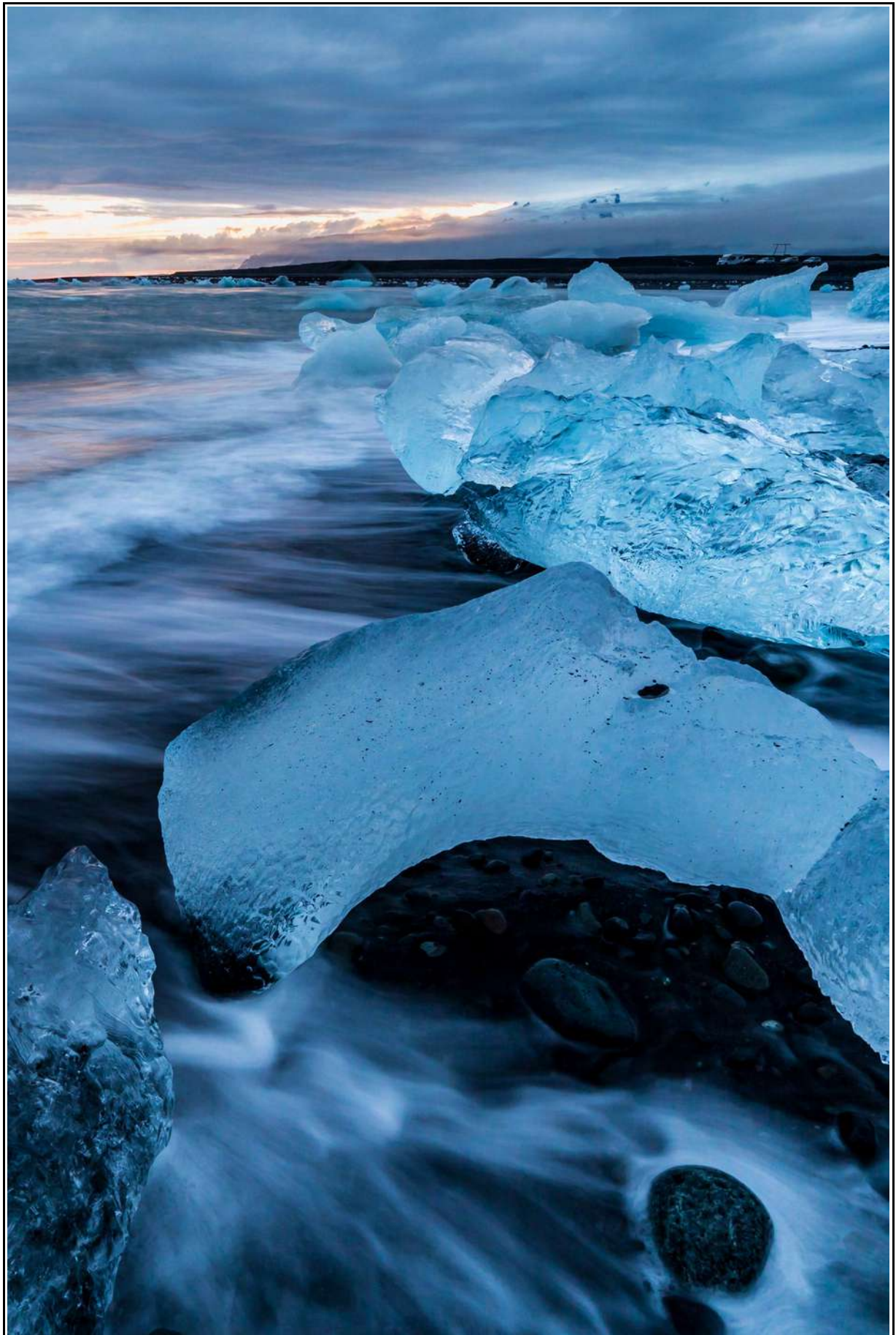


The iceberg Lagoon is amazing with so much to see and photograph, I had a boat trip booked for the next day but due to the weather conditions that was cancelled. The beach is usually called diamond beach because the clear crystal like ice reflects the light like a diamond.

Getting my feet wet to get the shot, I do get some strange looks at times haha.



One of my favourite shots from Diamond beach, I set a shutter speed of about half a second to slightly blur the water. The trick is to time the exposure for when the wave is receding.





The Golden circle is another tour that many people go on in Iceland but I chose to drive the route myself as it's only 40 minutes from Reykjavik, this takes in Thingvellir National Park, the Geysir Geothermal Area, and the Gullfoss waterfall that I mentioned earlier.

Thingvellir National Park has amazing geology and is situated between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates, it is the only place you can see the Mid Atlantic ridge above sea level and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Geysir Geothermal Area, with underground streams and magma close to the surface of the earth heating rocks enough to boil water, the pressure has to be released somewhere and here it is easy to see, there are steam vents and boiling puddles of water and mud everywhere, but the main attraction is the geyser Strokkur which erupts frequently every 7 to 8 minutes throwing water up to 40 meters into the air.



Reykjavik is Iceland's colourful and Vibrant City it's also the world's northernmost capital. Like any other city it has shops and restaurants, but don't expect to find a Starbucks or McDonald's, Hotdogs however are everywhere and regarded as the unofficial national food of choice, and believe me they are the best I've ever tasted.

Walking down to the city centre from my accommodation, I pass many buildings made out of Corrugated iron, all painted different colours, street art is widely accepted here and tasteful graffiti seems to be everywhere which definitely brightens up a bare wall or building. The best known landmark is the church Hallgrimskirkja which is also one of the largest structures in the country, it should be too it took 41 years to build. Entering the church costs about £6 but included is a Lift journey to the top of the tower where the views over Reykjavik are amazing and not to be missed.



Hallgrímskirkja and rainbow.



The view looking up to the church with art outside the shops.

The view below is from the top of the Church, The domed building in the middle is Perlan, a museum which was converted from the old water tanks that used to supply water to the city, it also offers panoramic views.



On the Reykjavik waterfront is Solfar or Sun Voyager, a sculpture that resembles a Viking longship, its steel construction reflects the sunlight but also reflects the Lights from passing cars at night, so is worth a visit anytime.



Solfar during the day, this was a 30-second exposure to blur the clouds to add some movement.



I was lucky yet again to grab a few shots with the Aurora peeking out behind the clouds.

My 10 days In Iceland were now up and it gave me a taste of what this country had to offer, a year later I would be back with a much bigger and bolder plan.

## **Falls, fails, and funnies**

Everytime I go away I always seem to end up on my rear end at some point. On my second trip to Scotland I was driving through Glen Orchy, see this fast flowing river with a bridge over it, so I stopped to see if there was anything to shoot and walked up on to the bridge which had wooden planking and a ramp at each end. There was nothing to shoot here, so started to walk back, as soon as I got to the ramp my foot slipped on the wet planking and down I went skidding all the way to the bottom on my bottom.

I lost my boot in a peat bog on that trip too, walking along what I thought was firm ground when suddenly one foot disappears in to the peat bog. Standing there with one leg seemingly 10 inches longer than the other, slowly pulling my leg out of the mess and starting to lose my balance, I gave my leg a quick jerk which freed my leg, but it also freed my foot from my welly, so I'm standing there on one foot in the middle of nowhere trying to balance. I managed to get on to firm ground again then went back for my welly which was now full of the black smelly sludge. Luckily the car was not far away.

On my second trip to Iceland I slipped on volcanic ash and smashed down on my bum, I was bruised for the rest of the trip and sitting in the car was uncomfortable for a while but my tripod came off worse as the main collar had cracked and this was only my second day there too. I bought some superglue from a local shop and this done the job, I don't know where Iceland gets there superglue from, but that tripod is still going strong 2 years later.

In 2016 My brother, Dave, was training to run the London marathon in chain-mail to try to break the Guinness world record and make some money for the London Air Ambulance. He asked me to get some shots of him to promote the attempt, so I stood on Tower Bridge waiting for him to arrive when there was a break in the clouds and London was lit with this gorgeous warm light, so I took some photos of London but didn't change my settings back to shoot fast enough to shoot someone running, result a blurry Dave. He did go on to break the record and then set the record for the half-marathon too later that year. I learnt another big lesson, don't get distracted when you're there to do a job.

Back in 2002 I went on holiday to Spain with a group of friends, we heard that there was going to be a fireworks display latter, so I wanted to try to get some photos. This was when I was still using a film camera so would be hit-and-miss, in my case a very big miss. As I heard the first bang of the fireworks everyone went outside to see them, I grabbed my camera and tripod and climbed up the stairs of the little outhouse next to our accommodation. I started setting everything up, but by the time I was ready the display was over, I didn't even get one shot off and I've been reminded of it ever since.

I was asked to do a friend's wedding, I've done a few but don't really like doing them as I find them stressful as you only have one chance to get everything, you can't rearrange for the following week because I didn't get a picture of something. This one time I was shooting the happy couple when someone walked in front of me to take their own photo with a phone, I politely asked him to move so I could take the photo, he said, sorry I just wanted to get that photo has I don't want to pay the photographer for it, I said I am the photographer, oh erm sorry mate.

While in Glencoe I was taking a photo of one of the waterfalls when a guy stood next to me and started looking at my camera, after a few seconds he asked why are you taking photos with a tripod, so I explained if you shoot water with a one-second exposure you get this nice creamy look to the water as it blurs. Can you show me how to do it with my camera he asked, yeah sure. The guy then pulls a camera out of he's bag and hands it to me, it is a Canon EOS1d, the top of the range professional camera worth about £6000 with the lens that's attached to it. I gave him the camera back and said if you turn your exposure mode to manual set 1 second exposure and aperture to f16

(or something like that) then put it on a tripod and shoot. He looked at me like I was talking a foreign language and said I don't know how to do that can you do it for me. I took the camera and set it up for him, he then balanced it on the railings and took some photos. When he finished I asked him why he had such a camera, he's reply was well if you want good photos you have to buy good equipment. A classic case of all the gear but no idea. He thanked me, turned and walked away with all the settings I had put on the camera still set, that was about 5 years ago now and I hope he has worked out how to change them back.

While taking photos in Kew gardens during the Christmas light show last year, a couple started talking to me and was looking through some of the photos I had taken, the guy asked what camera I would recommend for him, so I told him to go into a camera shop and try a few that fits he's budget, yes, that's a good idea he replied, then said in your opinion what's the most important thing about a camera, (I had been waiting for someone to ask me this as I had seen a pro give the perfect answer), the 12 inches behind it I said, he nodded very slowly trying to think about what I had told him before he's wife rolling her eyes said he means your head.

### Return to the land of fire and ice

September 2018 I returned to Iceland, this time my plan was to travel around the whole island and see as much as possible in 14 days. Route 1 is Iceland's ring road, it's 828 miles long, and I planned to travel around this road but add a few diversions in as well. Two places I wanted to go to was the Snæfellsness Peninsula, which was easy enough to drive to, but Landmannalaugar was a different matter. The highlands of Iceland are very rugged and has very few roads fit for cars, Roads in this area are rough gravel tracks and any river or stream that needs crossing you go straight through it as there are few bridges and if that's not enough they are only open in summertime due to the severity of the winter, these roads are called F-roads and it's illegal to drive on these with anything less than a 4x4 but preferably a raised 4x4 for the rivers. The only way to Landmannalaugar was on these roads, luckily for me a number of tour companies do 12 hour day trips there, they are a bit expensive but a lot cheaper than hiring a 4x4 that I would only need for the day. So I planned all what I wanted to do about 8 months before I wanted to go and came up with a 14-day trip, staying in 10 different locations, 3 tours and a route of about 1,200 miles.



This is the route map I did for my journey, the blue markers are the places I stayed and the Orange are places I planned to stop for photographs, the light Orange line is route 1.

So the departure day finally came, but my cab to the airport that was booked a month before didn't, my local cab firm came to the rescue and got me to Gatwick with plenty of time to spare. The flight was on time and landed at Keflavik Airport, I picked up my hire car and drove to my first stay in Grindavik. The next day I drove to Reykjavik with a number of planned stops on the way and a few places I wanted to visit again in the city, I stopped to get food supplies and then checked in to my accommodation looking forward to a nice hot cup of tea but unfortunately I had picked up strawberry Milkshake instead of skimmed milk by mistake. Time for an early night has tomorrow I would be going to Landmannalaugar, pick up at 8am. The minibus arrived and with camera bag and tripod I jumped on for the short drive to the cities bus station where a huge 4x4 minibus was waiting to take myself and 11 other people on the 12-hour tour. These tours are great, the driver who is also your tour guide will give you a history, geography, and geology lesson as you wind your way along the roads stopping at a few places so you can take photos but also, so he can explain about certain areas in more detail. After a twenty-minute stop at Hjalparfoss waterfall it was time to leave the tarmacked roads behind and head onto the F-roads and into the highlands. At first the road just seemed like any other, quite smooth but made of gravel, and the driver told us that the roads are regularly smoothed out by the country's highway maintenance crews, but there is only so far they can go. The next section of road was a different matter with potholes that could swallow my hire car whole yet this minibus handled it with ease, we stopped at a number of places taking in the epic views before us, this was the Iceland I wanted to see.



Slowly we made our way along the road to a river, with the water splashing out from all sides, the minibus powered its way through, and we were at Landmannalaugar. This unique landscape offers geothermal areas with hot springs, steam vents, and lava fields, but it's the mountains that are the highlight for me. The mountains are coloured various shades of brown, yellow, red, pink, and blue, all these colours have been painted onto the Mountains by geological elements such as Sulfur and Iron, by volcanic activity. With a number of Volcanoes and the largest volcanic canyon in the world, Eldgjá, all around are the signs of the area's fiery past, present, and future.



It's a shame it had just started raining because in better light the colours would have stood out more and the 2-hour hike around the area we were just setting off on would have been much more enjoyable. Walking up the steep trail there were numerous steam vents spilling their sulphurous smelling gasses, Steam rising from bubbling mud puddles and the towering Brennisteinsalda volcano rising nearly 900 metres above us. The rain got heavier as we all walked around this beautiful landscape, and taking photos in these conditions got a lot harder, the next part of the hike was through the lava fields and for this I would need both hands free to navigate the jagged and tricky landscape. At the end of the hike the rain stopped and some people went to warm up in one of the natural warm springs while I sat outside the minibus taking in the breathtaking sights.



The black shiny rocks in the image above is Obsidian, formed by the rapid cooling of viscous lava from volcanoes.

With our time at Landmannalaugar we made our way back to Reykjavik, with one last stop near the volcano Hekla which unfortunately was hidden by cloud. All in all a great day out, shame about the weather, tomorrow I will be driving to the Snaefellsness peninsular.

An easy two-hour drive from Reykjavik to the Snaefellsness peninsular and I'm at my first photo location, Ytri Tunga, I'm here for the seal colony. A short walk from the car park I find the empty beach and after some scrambling over boulders I can now see the seals basking on the rocks and swimming in the sea close to the shore. The seals don't seem bothered by my presence and I keep a sensible distance away, so I don't make them feel threatened. Their colour blends well with the Rocks and algae and it took me a while before I noticed them, I didn't realise for some time that one was only about 20 feet from me until it moved. For about 20 minutes I watched and photographed the seals hauling themselves up on to rocks and the slide back in to the water, then a small group of noisy American tourists arrived shouting and screaming and all the seals vanished into the water. I heard one woman say loudly "oh man, no seals" It amazes me that people want to see animals in the wild but don't realise it's actually their own actions that stop them from seeing them. I actually came across this same group of people latter that day when they were all congratulating each other with high fives and group hugs while shouting USA, why, they managed to walk up about 100 steep

steps, funny enough so did this fat, out of shape, asthmatic with 15 kilos of camera equipment on he's back, where was my high five!



3 seals on the rocks with Snæfellsjökull Volcano in the background.



Is this pose OK?

I moved onto a few other locations I wanted to visit, had a bowl of Icelandic Lamb soup and went off to find my accommodation for the next two nights which was on a Horse farm in a beautiful location.

The next day up bright and early I travelled around the peninsular stopping at places I had planned to go to, Búðakirkja church, Bjarnafoss waterfall, Kirkjufell, and Kirkjufellsfoss.

All of these places are easy to get to and parking spots are all nearby. Búðakirkja is a church that is situated in an ancient lava field with mountain backdrop on one side and the sea on the other, but this church stands out from all the others because it's constructed from black wood.





Búðakirkja church



Bjarnafoss waterfall just a mile or so from Búðakirkja church, I think the exposure was around one second on this to blur the water.



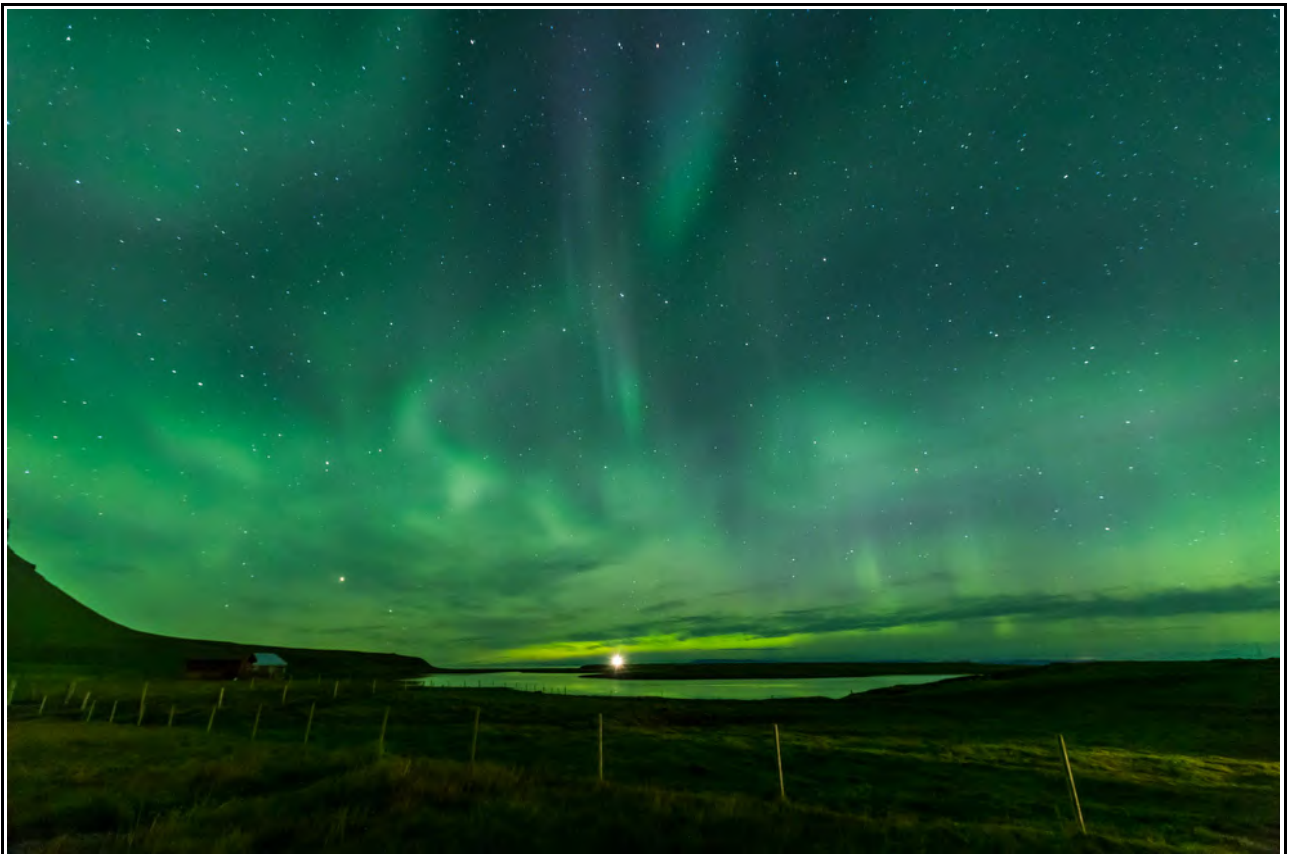
Kirkjufell, (the mountain) and Kirkjufellsfoss (the waterfall) were used as a filming location for the Game of Thrones series.

That night I had clear skies and as the sun had sent gusts of charged solar particles hurtling towards Earth, so there was a good chance of seeing an Aurora, It became the best Aurora I have ever seen.





With streams of green, purple and pink light shimmering and pulsing in every direction I stumbled about in the dark to try to get the best views, every time I set up in one place it would start in another, it truly was the most amazing sight. I had two cameras shooting that night, one I was moving around to get as many different shots as possible and the other was shooting continuously taking time-lapses.



At the height of the Aurora's activity, the lights danced across the sky with such speed and intensity and then above the cabin I was staying in a Corona formed, A Corona covers much of the sky and the curtains of light diverge from this single point. It looked as though the sky was being ripped apart by this beautiful green light, and I was looking straight up into the void. I had witnessed a Corona once before in Scotland, but it was nothing like this, this was mesmerizing and was in awe of its beauty.



The Corona above the cabin.



Two hours after the Aurora started it suddenly stopped, I had been in the right place at the right time again for a night I will never forget. It was now time to get some sleep as I would be leaving the Snaefellsness peninsular in the morning and moving on to the north coast.

Kirkjufell with Aurora above



The morning after seeing this fantastic display I was on the road to the North coast but first I had to travel on my first gravel road, at first the road was good but after an hour or so it started raining which fine as long as there wasn't another car in front of you. The mist and mud kicked up from the cars in front made driving these winding roads slow, but soon I was back on the tarmacked route 1 and off to Hvitserkur.

Hvitserkur is a Basalt sea stack which can be reached at low tide, it looks like a drinking dinosaur from the cliffs and shoreline. Pulling into the clifftop car park I jumped out to see amazing views of the bay and surrounding area, walking to the viewpoint I noticed how cold it had suddenly got and the wind had picked up too. A few hundred yards along the path I got my first glimpse of Hvitserkur.



It really does look like a dinosaur, Icelandic folk lore says that it is a troll that didn't take shelter when the sun came up and was turned to stone. Although you can't see it in these photos but the base around the rock as been reinforced with concrete so it doesn't get washed away by the tide.

Walking back to the car I realised how dirty my hire car was due to the rain on the gravel road, my once shiny white car was now shades of black, grey and brown, time for a jet wash which I was surprised to find are free.

I drove to my next Accommodation which was in the small town of Skagaströnd, I had a few places in mind I wanted to visit here, but the rain was falling pretty hard now, oh well maybe next time. Back on the road the next morning I started the long drive to Akureyri, Iceland's second city. My first stop was to visit the Staðarbjörg basalt columns near Hofsó, these are very similar to the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. Parking at the town's swimming pool I walked around the side wall to the almost vertical stairs which take you down to the columns and

with only a rope on either side this was a bit treacherous. On the rocks I had the place to myself and tried by best to get some good photos of this incredible place before the rain came down. Making my way back up the rudimentary stair case was as much fun as going down.





I was now half-way through my holiday, starting to feel tired and the weather wasn't exactly great for photography but I would try when and where I could. Pulling into a car park just off route 1, I got out to stretch my legs and have a break from driving, following a path that led to what looked like a viewpoint. Once there this canyon like vista opened up in front of me but the light was terrible, it was very overcast and there had been many rain showers up until now.



I have no idea what this place is called and had I not needed to stop for a while I would have driven right by. With some sidelight this could have been amazing.

Reaching Akureyri I found somewhere to eat and went for a walk around the city, parking restrictions are much stronger here than in Reykjavik and you have to pick up a parking permit from a local petrol station but It only gave me one hour of free parking, trying to find a parking spot was hard enough. Walking through the small streets and amongst the wooden buildings, it seemed much busier than Reykjavik but just as friendly, especially when you notice the red light in their traffic lights are heart shaped. Having visited a few shops and spent a small fortune on a Woolley hat I liked, I drove across the bay to where I would be staying the night. I really needed an early night has the next day would be the longest drive with plenty of stops planned.

I wanted to get an early start the next morning but I woke up to a view I couldn't miss, The low cloud had lifted and from the balcony of my accommodation I was looking at Golden sunlit snow-capped mountains and a cloud inversion in the valley, rushing around I grabbed my coat and camera to get this shot before the colours faded. First few shots of the day in the bag and I wasn't even dressed yet.



Goðafoss or waterfall of the gods was a 45-minute drive from Akureyri along Route 1, one of the largest waterfalls in Iceland and one not to be missed. From a few hundred metres away the noise from the falling water is loud but when up close its immense.



The temperature had really plummeted in the last few days and I went into the gift shop to warm up with a nice hot cup of tea, with feeling back in my fingers I was back on the road again, next stop the pseudo craters at Skútustaðagígar. The pseudo craters on the shore of Lake Myvatn were formed by gas explosions, when boiling lava flowed over the swampy wetlands, the lava probably coming from the nearby volcano Krafla.





Signs of volcanic eruptions are easy to see around here and a few miles along the shore of Lake Myvatn you can walk in amongst the lava fields where the dark lava rock is in contrast to the colourful vegetation.



A few miles on from the lake and I'm on another planet or at least it feels that way, Hverir is probably the largest geothermal field in Iceland and it sits right next to the ring road. With the exception of billowing clouds of hot water vapour, steaming mud pools and fumaroles, Hverir is desolate. Walking in this alien environment, your senses are hit with the smell of Sulphur, you can hear the gasses hissing as they vent from the fumaroles and the mud pools popping and plopping as the bubbles burst to the surface, and you can feel the heat. It's a bit scary now thinking about it that lava was flowing not far beneath my feet but I didn't even think of it at the time, I was just engrossed in this amazing landscape. Iceland has 31 active volcanoes and experiences hundreds of earthquakes every week, the vast majority barely felt, but this is what has made Iceland the beautiful country it is, and Iceland has harnessed that power with over 90% of housing heated by natural geothermal heat. Hverir is an amazing place and I wish I could have stayed there longer but I still had a very long drive to go.



Hverir, steaming vents and fumaroles in a bare landscape and finally some blue sky.





It was hard to Leave Hverir as there was more places I hadn't explored yet but I had a nearly 3 hour drive ahead of me and with the beautiful weather I knew I would be stopping for more photos. I got back onto route 1 and after an hour or so of driving the lovely blue sky gave way to ominous dark clouds, the rain started shortly after. Nearing my destination, the town of Reyðarfjörður, the clouds were low and the rain torrential I knew there was no chance of taking any photos of this area which is set in a spectacular fjord on the east coast, so I started work editing my photos from the day. The next day the rain had stopped but the clouds were still low, so I didn't get a chance to see the fjord. I was heading for the south coast now and route 1 should take me through a number of fjords along the coastal route, at least that was the plan, for some reason my sat nav decided it wanted to take the shorter mountain pass route. Leaving the tarmacked road and joining the gravel track took me higher into the mountains and eventually into the low cloud. On a clear day this may have been great but driving in the foggy conditions and on a road full of pot holes and shear drops it certainly was squeaky bum time, but I pushed on anyway. Finally, after an hour I was back on a good road and the weather had improved dramatically, finding the coastal route again was a relief and the views were breathtaking, stopping whenever I could to take some photos.



I took this photo shortly after joining the coastal road, I was going to wait for the woman to move away but I thought she added some scale to the image.

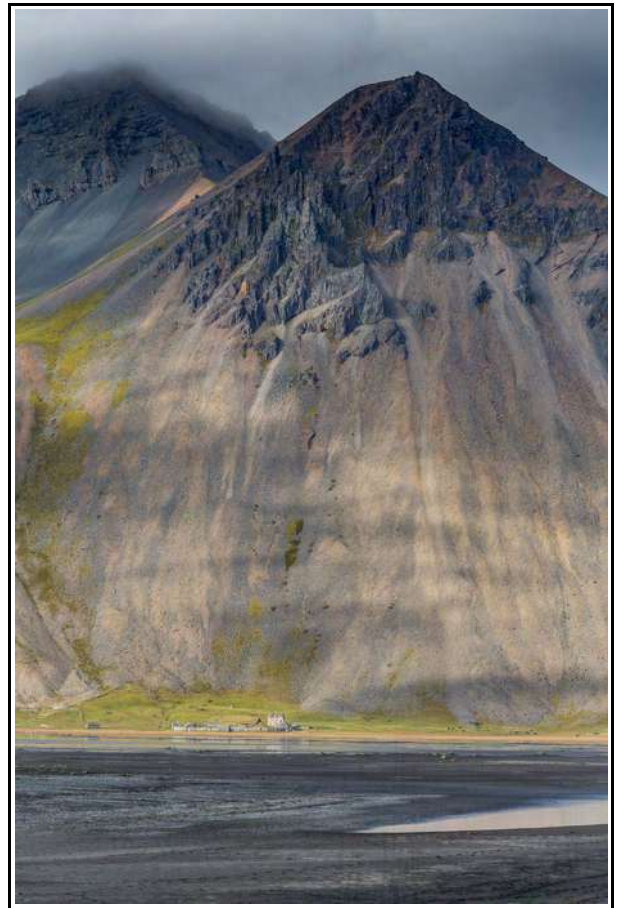
After driving through a tunnel which takes you through a mountain instead of around it, I pulled into my next planned stop at a place called Stokksnes, Part of this area is privately owned, so I walk into the cafe in the car park to pay a small fee that would allow me to travel further up the road to the best views. With black sands, a lagoon, and amazing views of the mountain Vestrahorn, this really is a photographer's paradise, it's also the site of a Viking village film set, unfortunately the film was never shot. The set is open to the public to view, but today of all days it was closed for maintenance, just my luck.

The mountain Vestrahorn is striking, Its name means west horn, and it's easy to see why, with its spiky peaks, to the right of Vestrahorn is the mountain Brunnhorn, which the locals now call The Batman Mountain, again not hard to see why as it looks like Batman's logo.

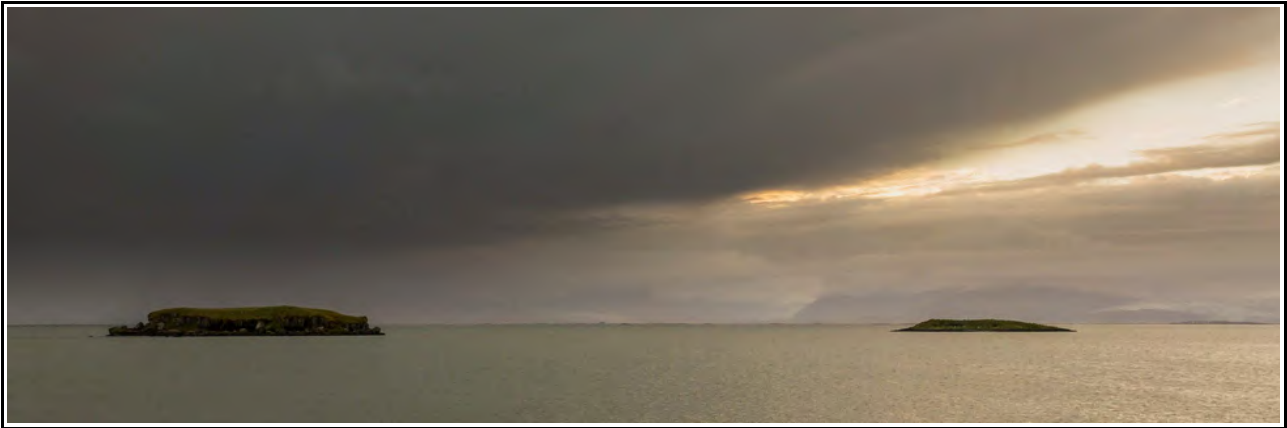


Vestrahorn and to the right Batman mountain.

A close up shot of Batman mountain and on the right the Viking village film set can be seen at the bottom of the mountain.



Later that evening I went to the nearby town of Höfn hoping to get a good sunset but I only got a few before the rain started coming down.



The next morning I started out early for the 1-hour drive to Jökulsárlón glacial lagoon which I visited on my previous trip to Iceland, but this time I was praying the winds were calm enough and the light rain would stop for the boat trip I had booked.



Luckily all was OK and the trip on the amphibious boat was on, once on the water the size of the icebergs was obvious and the tour guide told all on board that the captain of the boat has to keep his distance from them in case they turn over. The tour guide fished out a small piece of ice from the lagoon and started chopping it up with an axe, he then passed it around to all onboard, so we could all taste 1000 year old ice.

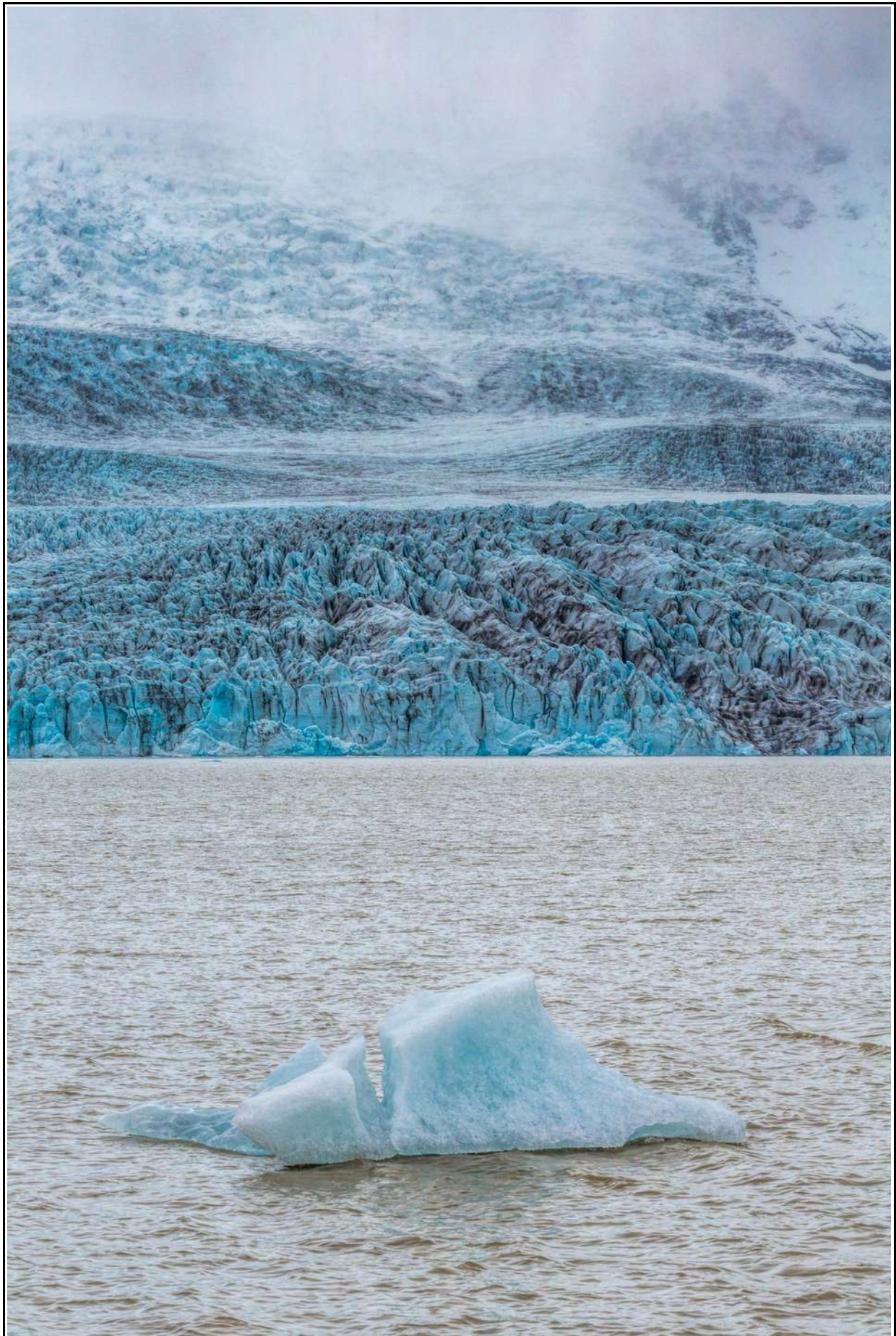




The colours of the ice vary from a crystal clear to a vibrant blue

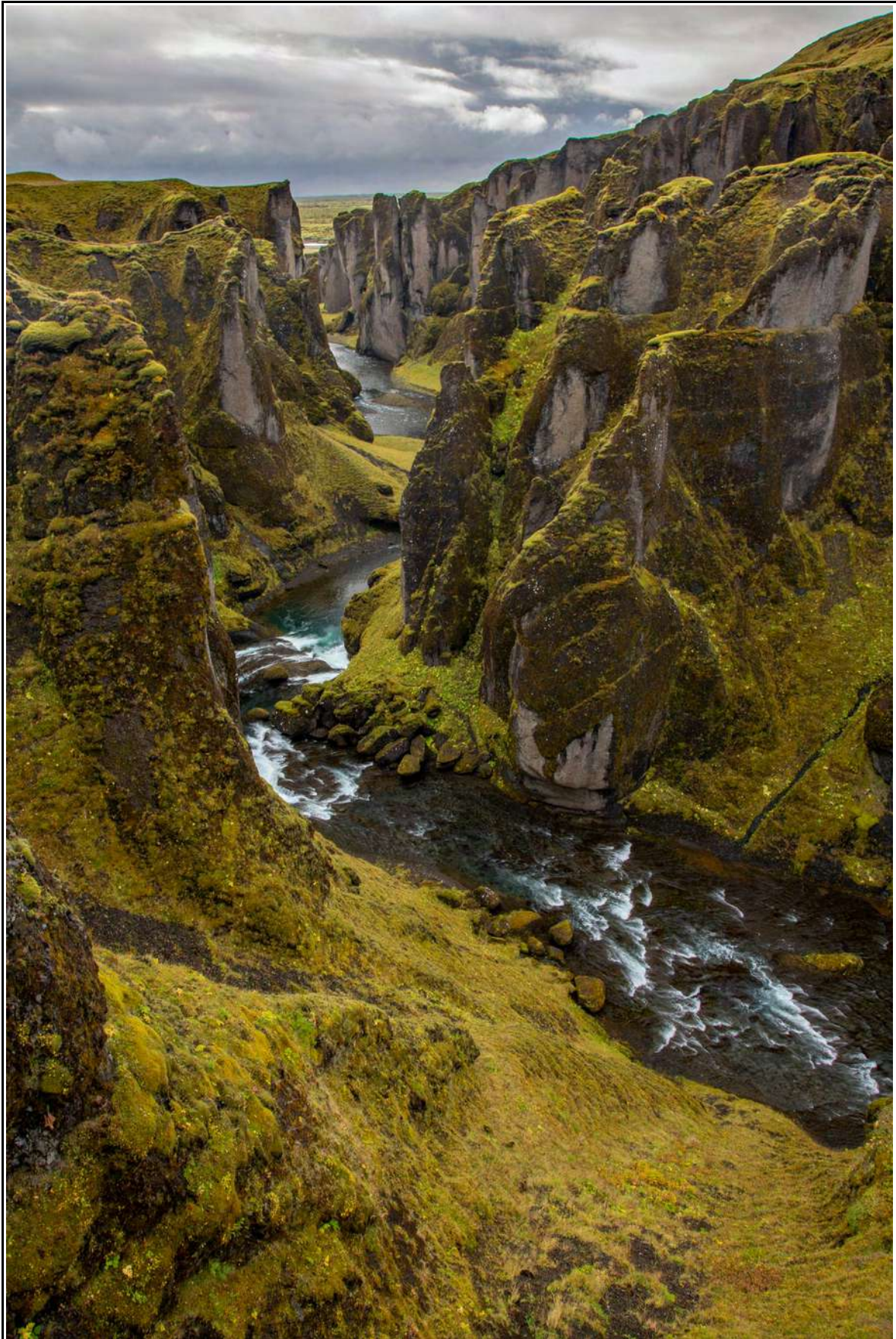


A few minutes up the road is another glacial lagoon called Fjallsárlón, it's smaller than Jökulsárlón but seems just as busy with tourists and just as beautiful.

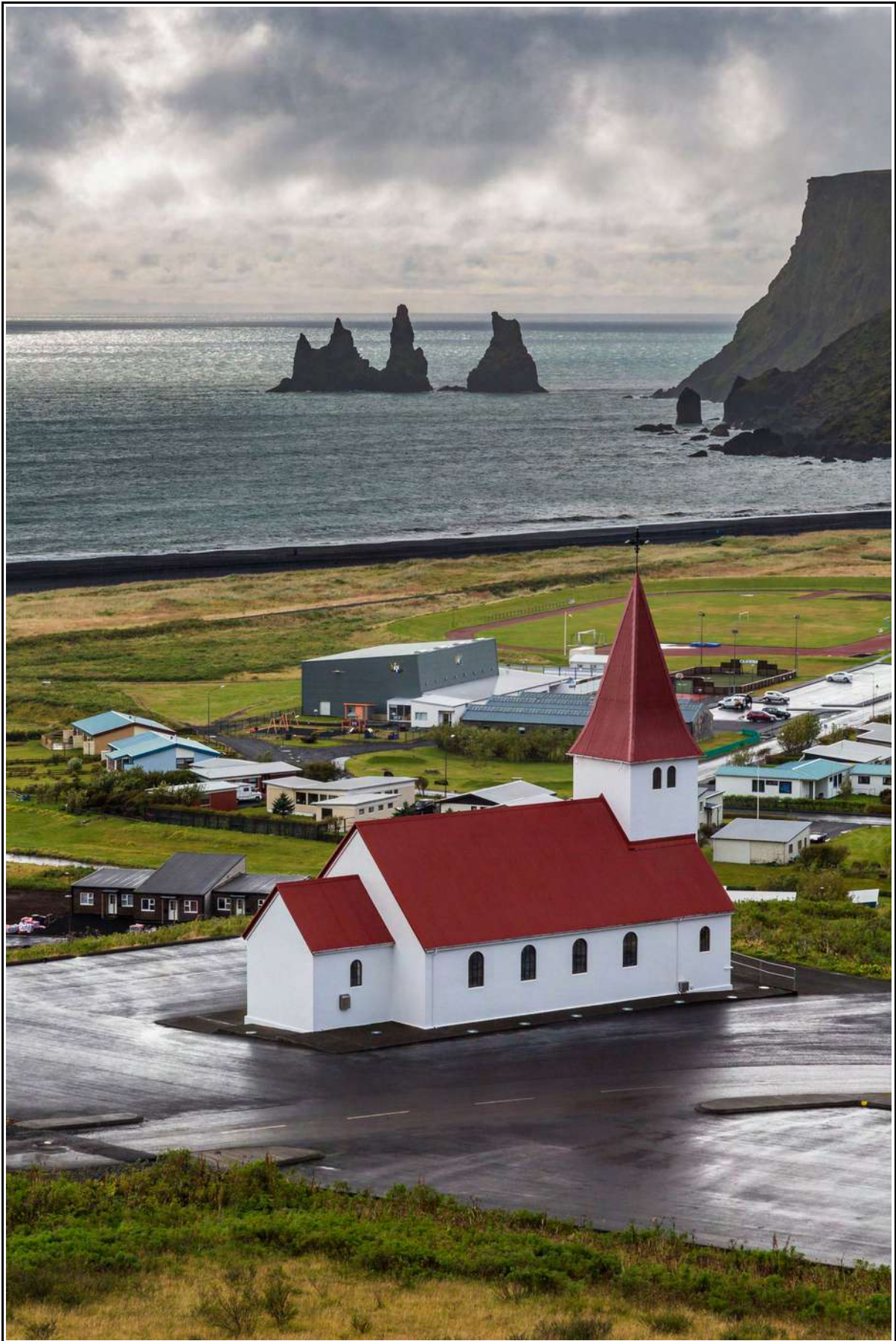




Travelling further along the Route 1 my next spot to stop at was a Canyon, the magnificent Fjaðrárgljúfur Canyon is 100 meters deep and over a mile long. It became so popular with tourists because it was in a Justin Bieber video that it was closed to the public for a while for repairs to the footpath.



Next up would be Vík, a village on the south coast and is home to the beautiful wooden church Reyniskirkja, Reynisfjara black sand beach and the Reynisdrangar offshore rock formations. The opening scenes from Star Wars Rogue One were shot on a black sand beach not far from here.



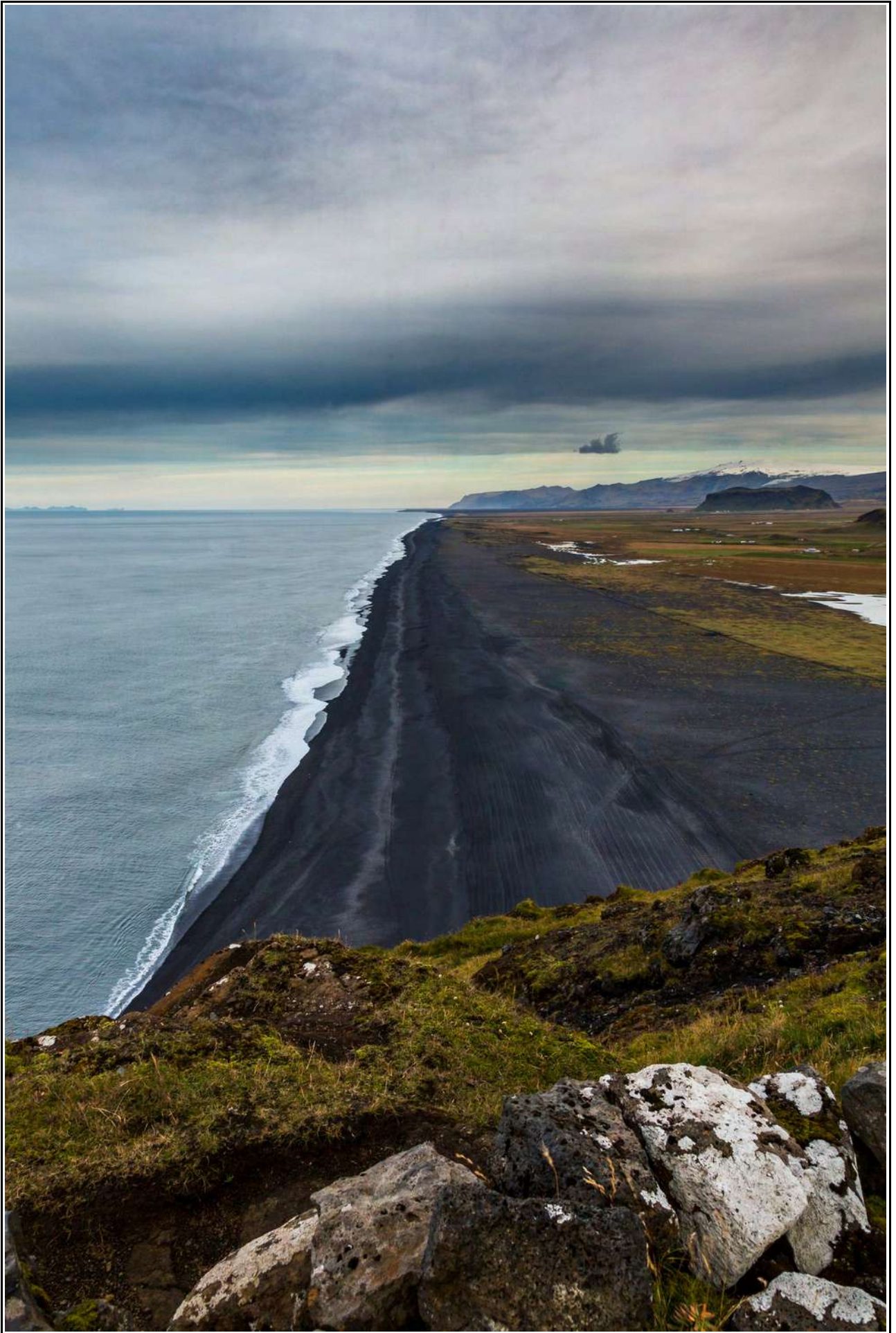


Reynisfjara black sand beach and the Reynisdrangar offshore rock formations.



Staying overnight just west of Vik I caught a quick glimpse of the northern lights through the heavy cloud but unfortunately didn't get any good shots. The next morning I travelled back towards Vik as I wanted to visit the small peninsula of Dyrhólaey which has great views in all directions.





I would have loved to explore this area more but I had to be back in Vik for an Ice cave tour. That's the problem trying to pack in as much as possible on a holiday. I drove into Vik and parked in the shopping centre car park as my tour ticket said and walked around to find the meeting point, it wasn't hard, the massive mini bus gave it away.



The tour guide packed us in and explained what we were all going to get up to while he drove to the location of the Ice cave. Shortly after leaving the main road we were bumping and bouncing over a rough track towards the black, green and white coloured mountains.

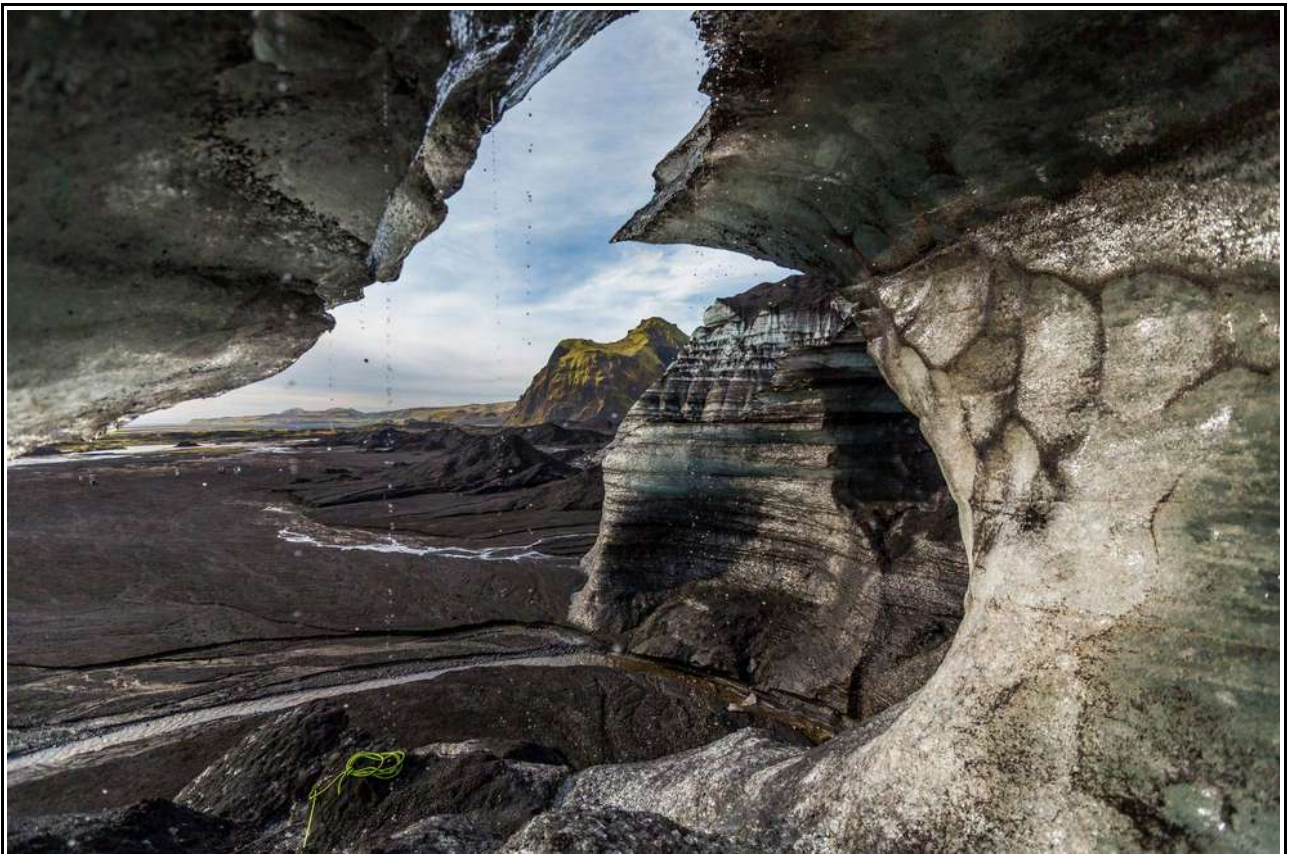


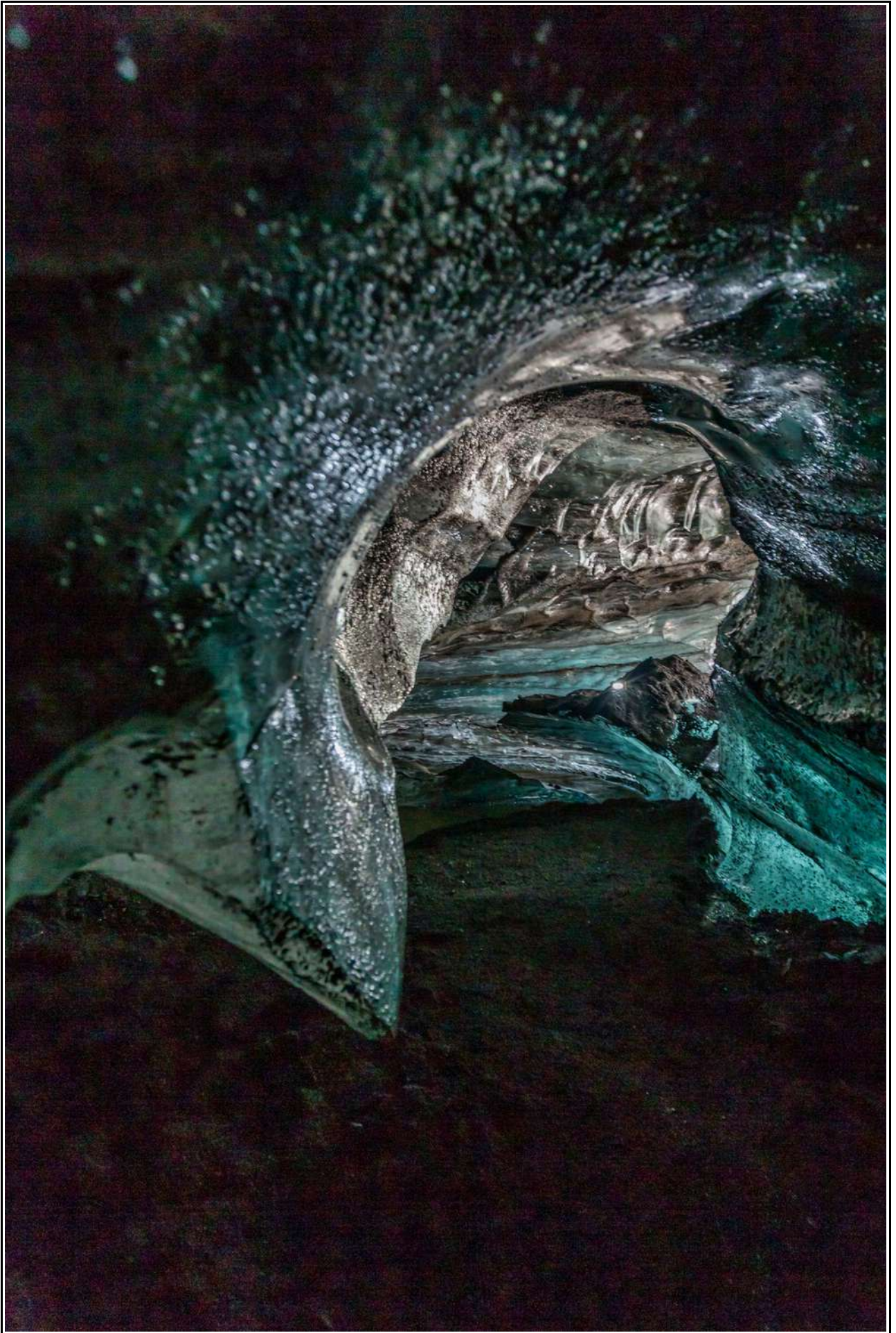
Once we stopped at the location hard hats and crampons were handed out, and we were told there would be a very good chance we would all be getting cold and wet, very wet. We all walked through the desolate landscape trying to take photos and keep up with the rest of the group, coming to a shallow stream that we had to cross we found this was the wet part as the bridge normally used had been washed away in a flood a few months earlier (you can see the stream snaking through the above photo), luckily I was prepared as I had a pair of waterproof socks and boots on. Arriving at the entrance to the cave we had to climb the ice using our crampons and a rope. Digging the spikes of the crampons into the ice and pulling yourself up on the rope I found surprisingly easy, and we all made it to the entrance of the cave.



Climbing to the cave entrance on a block of ice.

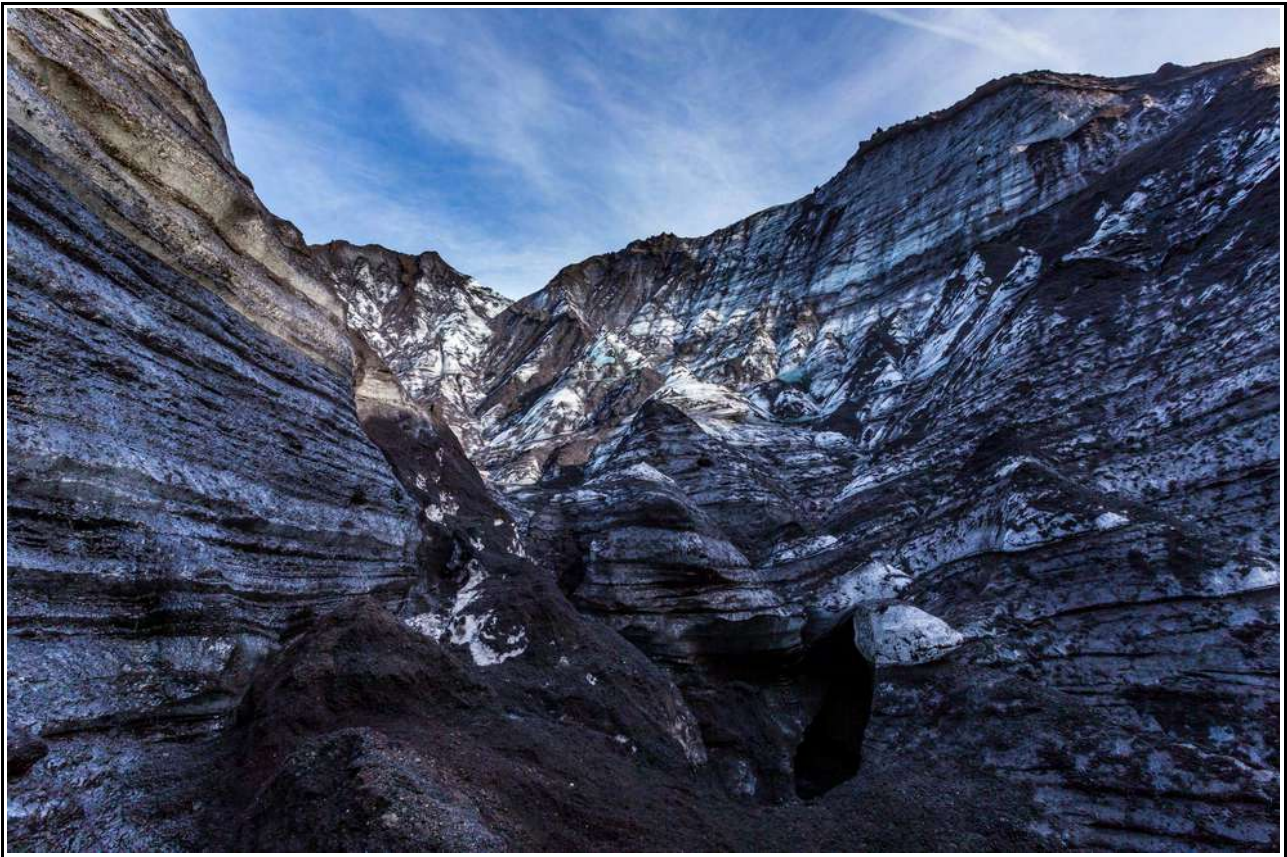
The view looking out of the cave.







Inside the cave you could feel the coldness start to seep in, water was constantly dripping from the ceiling and the floor was either solid Ice, gravel or a stream of icy cold water, and it was dark, only lit by torches or where daylight came in through small holes. After about 10 minutes a bright area could be seen in front of us and after crossing a small stream which had a narrow wooden board to walk across we emerged in to a large open space with ice walls all around and blue sky above.



Walking back into the cave we waited for a few minutes for our eyes to adjust to the darkness and our tour guide spoke about how this cave will probably only be used for another year before it becomes unsafe to visit, he said guides from his company would go out and find new caves that have opened up and prepare them for future visitors.

After being dropped off back at the shopping centre car park, I had something to eat, done some shopping and made my way towards the town of Selfos where I would leave Route 1 and join Route 35 to the town of Bláskógabyggð where I would be staying for two nights. Bláskógabyggð is in the middle of the Golden circle so plenty of places to keep me occupied for a few days. On the way I wanted to stop at a waterfall I had read about, Faxifoss is a dramatic waterfall that spans a river, apart from the rushing noise of the water it is a very peaceful and quiet place.



This is a great place to stop to get away from the crowds of the better known places in the Golden

circle, I think there was only about 5 or 6 people here when I was there.



Staying in a small log cabin for the next two nights, I woke to a frosty landscape, so I was off to a spot about 20 miles away, Öxarárfoss is a waterfall in Þingvellir National Park and is positioned inside the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.



Then travelling a few miles further I arrived at the Þingvellir visitors centre, parking the car and walking to the centre on this bright, sunny but bitterly cold day I realised how tired I had become, the almost non-stop driving around the island moving from one accommodation to another, early mornings and late evenings had started to take its toll, and I was exhausted. I stopped to look at the view of the national park but with the cold and tiredness I couldn't force myself to take many photos and the ones I did take were awful. Walking back to the car I felt chilled to the bone and couldn't wait to get back to the warmth of my cabin, I had a whole day planned in this area but I just couldn't do it, I needed sleep. The cars dashboard temperature gauge was reading -5 but with the wind chill factor it was much lower than that and although I have been in colder conditions before I am sure this was the coldest I had ever felt.

Back at the cabin, after a mug of hot tea, I jumped back into bed and slept for the next few hours, not what I wanted to do on this beautiful day, but what I needed to do to be fit for my last full day ahead. Later that afternoon I decided to go to Strokkur the Geysir for sunset just a few miles along the road which I visited on my first trip to Iceland, the clouds had come over again but there was a gap on the horizon so there was a chance of a good sunset.



The sunset I hoped for didn't happen, but getting a few photos here made me feel better knowing that the whole day wasn't wasted. Again the cold got to me within minutes of leaving the car, so I knew I was not going to be here long. My fingers felt like blocks of ice even with two pairs of gloves on and I soon started to shiver, walking through the steam from the vents I could feel the warmth on my face which was a lovely feeling despite the smell of the sulphur. Yet again I rushed back to the cabin to warm up and quickly fell asleep on the sofa before waking and then quickly going back to bed.

Waking the next morning I rushed around packing my bags and clearing everything up before I had to leave the accommodation at 10am, I still felt tired but today was my last full day and I wanted to make the most of it, my first stop Kerið crater was about 10 miles away. Kerið is a unique volcanic crater lake, its caldera didn't form from an explosion like most others do, but the magma chamber caved in when the magma depleted itself.



This is an amazing place to visit, black lava fields stretch for miles around but in the centre of all that darkness is this beautiful bright green lake with vivid colours on the crater walls.

The weather had started to change again with the clouds now coming over and a few small rain showers, as the day went on the rain got heavier and my last chance for any good photos were now gone. The last Photo I took was of some horses taken from a lay-by where I had stopped for a while. I made my way to my last stop over which was only 3 miles from the airport, I had driven just over 1500 miles in two weeks, I planned this holiday months in advance and it worked out well, I didn't get to all the places I wanted to go to but I enjoyed every minute of it. Iceland is a place I can see myself going back to again at some point, especially to the north and east coast where I would have liked more time.

With my bags all packed, I drove to the airport, dropped off the car and walked over to the terminal ready for the flight back to Heathrow. I think it's fair to say every holiday has its highs and lows, but thankfully this was one of the best I've had. I look at my photos sometimes no matter where they are from and think that looks great, and then others I think even the best photographers in the world can't do this place justice but I've given it my best shot. Iceland has beauty in abundance and I can't wait to return again to the land of fire and ice.



## **What next?**

This year has been tough with the virus, lockdowns, Furlough, and ultimately Redundancy for me but I did get away for a week to the Essex coast, and a week on the Isle of Wight.

The Isle Wight is definitely a place I want to go back too at some point and I would also like to go to Dartmouth and possibly the Peak District in the future. Scotland is always high on my list and I have locations in my mind already for that.

As for abroad, I was hoping to go to the Faroe Islands this year but I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon, I've always liked the look of Copenhagen and Rome. Recently I watched a video on Lanzarote and was surprised how much the volcanic area looked like Iceland so that's another on my growing holiday list.

I have nothing planned for next year yet as none of us know what's going to happen it's just a matter of wait and see.

Well I hope you enjoyed this glimpse into my hobby and who knows I may find time to write another one day.

Ian