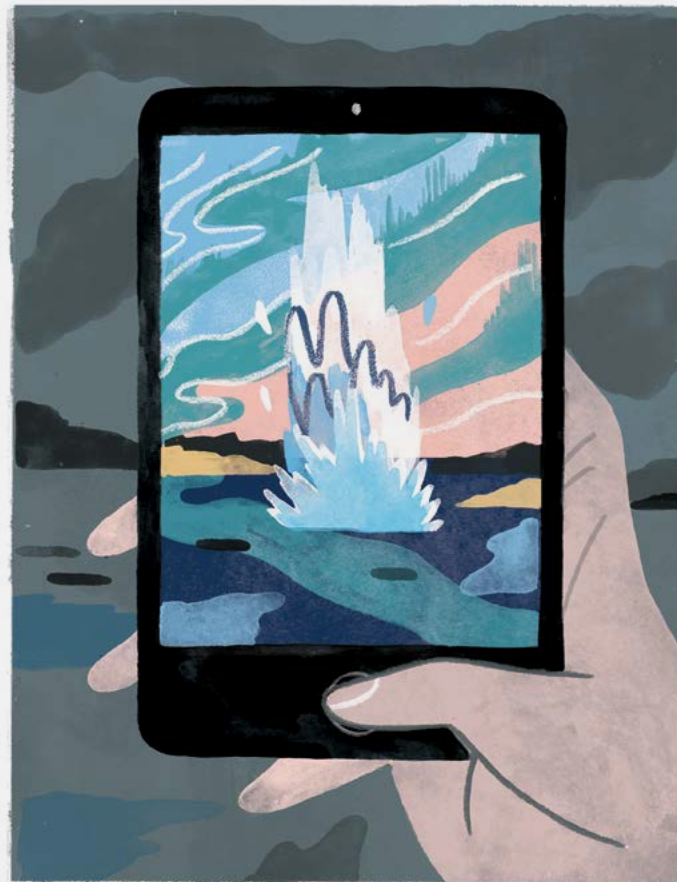


How Not to Travel to Iceland

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Aurora borealis. Even the name possesses an otherworldly beauty. I have wanted to see the celestial phenomenon known as the Northern Lights for as long as I can remember, and it was one of my principal motivations for going to Iceland. Observing it requires the alignment of a number of weather conditions: darkness, clear skies, a certain type of solar wind activity. One does not plan to see the aurora, one hopes to see it—and that I did. In the lead-up to our trip I talked about it constantly to friends, to family, to my husband with whom I would be traveling. I even talked about it to myself—that other self that I address in my journal entries, the one who knows how I’m feeling but whom I insist on telling anyway.

The first disappointment of the trip occurred before we even left home. Despite the fact that we had planned our visit for late September, when the chance of solar wind activity was high and the probability of inclement weather low, the forecast predicted rain for the duration of our stay. Every day I checked the weather report and every day it stubbornly refused to shift. By the time we boarded the plane I knew that should those magical lights deign to dance above my head, I would not be able to see them. When we landed at Keflavík International Airport, the grey drizzle I saw through the oval window reflected my mood perfectly.

That week, we drove along Iceland’s rain-slicked Ring Road in our rented Toyota, compromising on our plans at every turn. At

the town of Hveragerði my husband raised his eyebrows questioningly: *Do you still want to do this?* From here we were to hike to the natural hot springs of the Reykjadalur valley, another of my Iceland fantasies. I considered the overcast sky, the light but steady precipitation that had been falling all morning. I thought about hiking for an hour in the rain and then emerging from a steaming river to pull on my damp socks. It was not how I had imagined this experience. *No*, my furrowed eyebrows answered, *I don’t want to do this anymore.*

I soon gave up on Iceland fulfilling any of my expectations. We pressed on with our itinerary as best we could—what else were we to do? I made myself moderately useful as a photography assistant, holding an umbrella over the camera lens as my husband tried to capture the moody scenery. We took advantage of any dry spells to get out of the car and stretch our legs by walking to the top of a waterfall or the edge of a glacier. In Iceland it seems one is never very far from one or the other. When it rained heavily we simply drove on, the open landscape coming briefly into focus with each pass of the windshield wipers and then disappearing again.

On the black sand of Sólheimasandur beach, we pulled up to the wreckage of a US Navy plane that crash-landed in 1973. It’s a haunting sight—a hollow fuselage abandoned on barren, inky gravel—and perhaps due to the weather, we had it all to ourselves. We had brought picnic supplies, but since the ground was wet and cold we laid out slices of bread, salami, cucumber and cheese on the dashboard of our

Toyota instead. Eating lunch in the front seat of a car is a rather charmless excuse for a picnic. And yet, as I looked through the windshield at that eerie vista, I had to admit that this was something different, something special.

It was still raining on our final day, as we checked into a Reykjavik hotel. My body was feeling the effects of sitting in a car for a week, so I pulled on a swimsuit and went for a soak in the hotel's outdoor hot tub. I was surprised to find three young men already sitting in it—Icelanders, I gathered from the sound of their speech and their utter indifference to the drizzle. I followed their lead and ignored the weather, for what does it matter when you're already wet?

After they left I lingered in the tub alone, watching the rain embellish the surface of the water. I closed my eyes, let the raindrops run in rivulets down my face and neck, and realized that the weather had never been the problem. The problem was expectation that left no room for discovery. The problem was superimposing the idea of a place over the place itself. The problem had been me, all along, and in these last moments of the trip I had finally found the solution. 📌



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