

By **SHOBA NARAYAN**, Writer

“Once you get used to the cold, you get drawn into this ancient land of fire and ice.”



A TRIP TO ICELAND TO SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS BECOMES AN EXERCISE IN SURVIVING FRIGID WINTERS

Imagine my plight. I grew up in Chennai and suddenly my daughter tells me that she wants to go to Iceland. Now those of you sitting in Delhi and beyond might think that this is no big deal. What's a bit of snow, ice and freezing temperatures, you might say. Well, for this Chennai girl, going to Iceland is like going to Mars. And now that I have gone to Iceland, I can tell you that it was a journey like none other.

There is a difference between travel and journey. The former alludes to a checklist of places that you visit and tick off. It refers to sights and sounds; all exterior journeys are inward. It is an alchemy of place and person all of which catalyse change. Iceland did that for me. Whenever something Herculean comes up, I think, “Heck, I went to Iceland, I can conquer this.” It has become my metaphorical Everest.

We flew into Reykjavik—my daughter from the US and me from Bangalore. If you think airlines cannot transform tourism, think again. The reason my college-going daughter picked Iceland was because Wow Air offered \$99 fares to Reykjavik from several cities in the US. Why can't Wow Air ply to India? It will increase our tourist arrivals.

You cannot just show up at Iceland and expect to visit museums, particularly if you are going in November, like we did. The ostensible purpose of the trip was to see the Northern Lights. The reality was to do a mother-daughter trip (without arguing) and see if we could handle frigid winters.

After researching countless websites that offered a variety of local trips including whale-watching, ice-caving, and night tours to see the Northern Lights, I picked a website called “Guide to Iceland” (guidetoiceland.is) mostly because it allowed me to choose trips based on

every possible filter: price, time of day, and duration.

* ICELAND IN FOUR DAYS

You ought to see a glacier and the one we picked was the most popular one. It is called Jökulsárlón, a large glacial lake. The best way to do this is to take a two-day trip. The bad part? Most pickups for sightseeing in Iceland happen at the crack of dawn, or in this case, 8 a.m. You wake up, drink some strong coffee, wrap yourself in about five layers of woollens and trundle down the road to the busstand where a long line of shivering tourists are waiting for the various buses that take them north, south, east and west.

Our trip in a comfortable minibus began at an icy waterfall and didn't let up. I am going to dispense with naming the local sights because most of

You cannot just show up at Iceland and expect to visit museums, particularly if you are going in November, like we did

them have long Icelandic names that confound even polysyllabic speakers such as ourselves. Here are a few though. We saw a wonderful church at the somewhat risqué sounding Sveitarfélagið Hornafjarður. Bright yellow, it stood at the seat of mountains.

Once you get used to the cold, you get drawn into this ancient land of fire and ice. You can still see the young volcanoes which are in danger of spewing fire any day. You can see glaciers that stand like defiant

icons against the ravages of global warming. And you see icy streams where plump dolphins still cavort. All of this combines to give a sense of the earth as it once used to be before the human species ravaged it.

The glacier itself was as you would expect a large icy mass to be. Tour buses lined up. People ran out with cameras to take photos of the large chunks of ice that looked no different for miles. On the way back, we visited an ice beach in East Iceland where my daughter posed on a mermaid shaped ice. Iceland is Instagram-friendly, which makes it hugely popular with digital natives.

Talk about Iceland and most people mention two things: the Blue Lagoon and the Northern Lights. We did both. The Blue Lagoon is halfway between Keflavik airport and the country's capital, Reykjavik. The best way to do it is to book a ticket on one of the tour buses that takes you there and back. The Lagoon itself is wonderful. Hot sulphur springs surrounded by cool air. We basked for hours, came out for a drink of water and went back into the hot springs.

The Northern Lights were more challenging. We took a night trip to the northern part of Iceland, far away from city lights. We did see streaks of green in the northern sky but nothing like in the photographs. After one night in the below-freezing cold, I was ready to call it a day.

My daughter surprised me, and this too, is what journeys do to the human spirit. I thought that this student who had come to Iceland for a break from her rigorous engineering course would take it easy. Instead, on the last night, she insisted on going on yet another Northern Lights tour to the outskirts of Reykjavik. She stood outside and waited for the sky Gods to smile at her. They did. Streaks of amazing green lights lit up the sky. Mission accomplished. n

* **TOURIST HOTSPOT**
The blue Lagoon hot sulphur springs