

words | tamara warren

Volcanic lava rocks gleamed with heathery wisps of snow sprinkled like confectioner's sugar. The two front wheels of the Land Rover LR3 took to the steep surface with bolstered confidence, hoisting the rear section of the vehicle through the dense mass of rock formation. Chunky ice water swirled in a shallow stream as we careened through in our floating mass of steel adorned with leather, rubber, and elegant trim. Soon we safely reached the other side of the swirling glacier-infused waters, and were on to the next thrilling obstacle. This is the infectious adrenaline rush of an adventure off-roading in what feels like the Earth's last untouched corner: Iceland.



John Gunner Arnasson's 'Sun Craft'

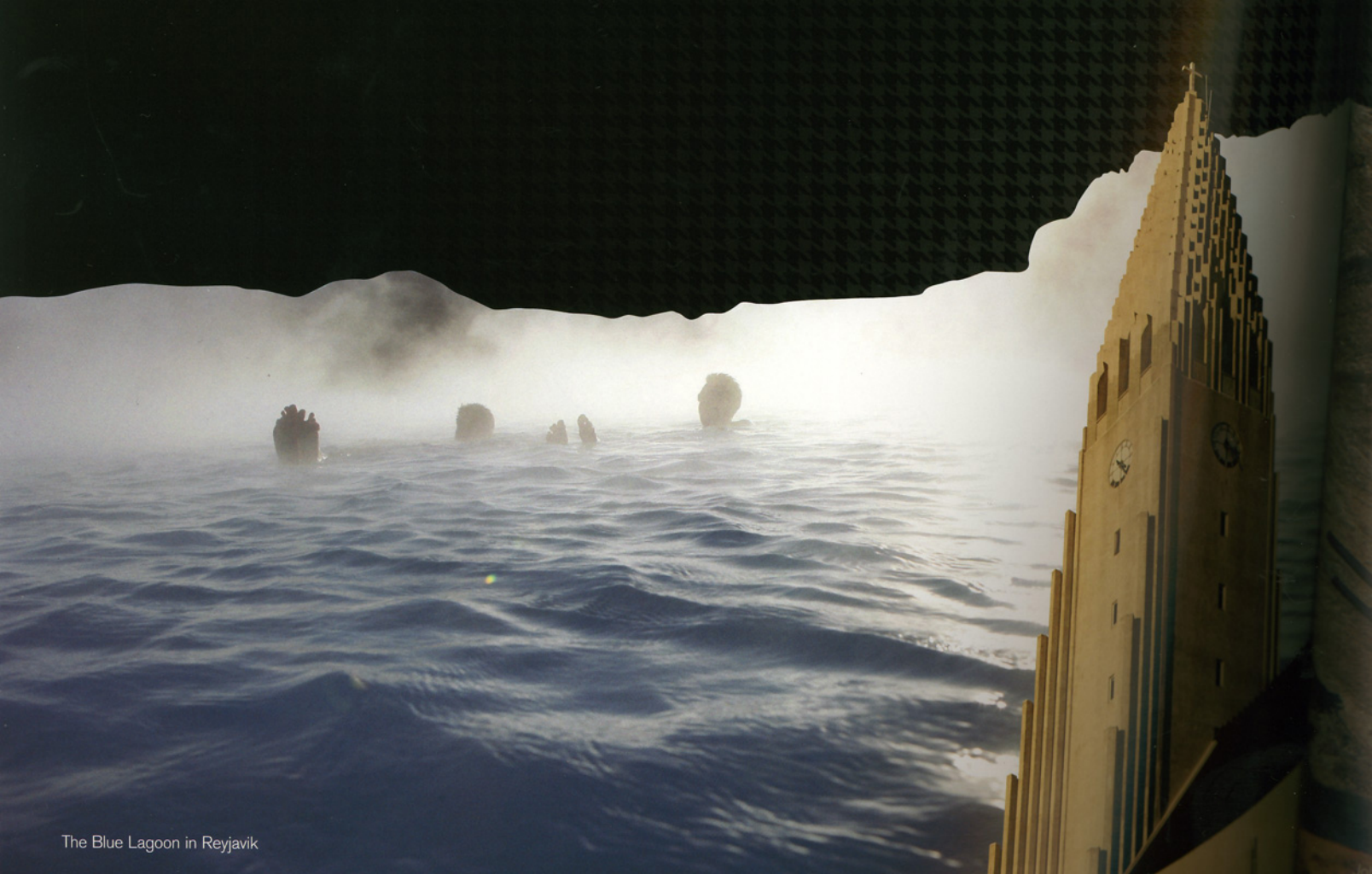
Local church near Myrdalsjokull glacier

Adventures on Ice To see Iceland properly, off-roading vehicles are required for most seasons; and the Land Rover LR3 is an ideal companion. We were bound for Lanmannalaugar, a remote cabin nestled within the Icelandic highlands, taking a day's journey over rocks, glaciers, rivers and snow. One has not seen Iceland until this buried paradise is unearthed, where the huldúfólk, or hidden people, (also known as Icelandic elves) dwell. When we arrived at Lanmannalaugar after dark, we retreated into a cozy log cabin, where we sampled peppery codfish soup and other Icelandic delicacies. Surrounded by hot springs, there is nothing closer to the heavens than swimming beneath the Northern Lights in snowy wonder at Lanmannalaugar.

We awoke to a blanket of snow that had gently caressed the virgin October land. We set out in the morning, as the snow steadily fell and the winds picked up. At -6 degrees Celsius, things were growing blurry before our eyes. We suddenly found ourselves in nothing short of a blizzard. Even with our trusty Land Rover vehicles, the winds blinded our views. Instructors led vehicles by

foot, toting long walking sticks to feel for sharp declines. Hours passed and progress waned – were going nowhere fast. Daylight gave away to dimness. Food and water were diminished, and we were running out of gas.

We received word that Big Foot drivers (Iceland's local guides) were en route from Reykjavik, where the freak snowstorm had shut down the city. We waited, cocooned in our Land Rovers as nature took over with its swift lashings. When the Big Foots arrived nearly 12 hours later, we had traveled less than 10 kilometers during the entire day in ten Land Rovers. Alas, with an intimate knowledge of the land's nooks and crannies, the Big Foot rescue team gingerly guided us out of the quagmire, with the last of our group reaching safety some time after midnight. Once back at the resort, we were greeted with delicious food and friendly company. Then the realization set in: while Iceland can indeed be a lonely and mysterious land, it is one that is balanced with the extreme warmth of its people and natural, fascinating beauty.



The Blue Lagoon in Reyjavik

Reyjavik is the kind of city that feels young with possibilities, while hints of subversive culture – smatterings of graffiti, sexy boutiques and well-stocked record shops – dot the quaint European-style streets. While tourist destinations can be passé, the Blue Lagoon is worth the trek by tour bus or borrowed car. Part spa, part amusement park and part natural wonder, the warm sulphuric waters deflect the chill of the coldest day. Hotel Nordica prepares a traditional Icelandic breakfast of herring, smoked salmon and fresh-baked breads and rich, throaty coffee. Meanwhile, for design conscious travelers, the minimal design of Hotel 101 is a must see.

Hallgrimskirkja Cathedral

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In Iceland, the pristine, strange land of frozen castles, bubbling hot sulphur-scented springs, measured design and infinite stillness, nature is overwhelmingly awesome and in charge. We were tiny dots, engulfed in this landscape of mystical, storied beauty. We moved about like crawling ants in our vehicles, on what was to be an adventure beyond imagination. We came to navigate the Land of Ice, but Iceland would inevitably navigate us.

With a population of only 288,000 clustered in the low-lying sea level areas of Reykjavik and Selfoss (a town that translates to "seal waterfall"), it's safe to say it didn't take long to find a place to be alone. With only seven inhabitants per each square mile, Sigurgeir Sigurjonsson's book *Lost In Iceland* captures the essence of his home in pictorial splendor. A proper journey to Iceland starts in Reykjavik, the undisputed epicenter, and moves to the outer limbs, where nature triumphs over culture, creating a longing for the confines and comforts of civilization.

Reykjavik Cool It was a crisp, cold October morning before dawn descended upon the land. As the plane descended onto the runway of the Icelandic airport, the strangeness of the journey set in. A blast of frigid morning air stung bones, pumping its freshness across limbs and through lungs. We had arrived in Reykjavik, postal code 101, where vitality pulsed with the fervor of a tiny population constructing a sleek urban existence. Locals run into each other in smoky, dimly lit cafes, greeting each other with hearty enthusiasm reserved for the familiar. There's everything from student-type hangouts like Vegamot to hipster bars like Oliver's on Laugavegur and Kaffibarinn. Cafés and bars are packed on the weekends with the big Icelandic bands of the moment (Hjalmar, Mugison and Trebant) carrying on in the tradition cultivated by Bjork back in the 80's. Locals sip Icelandic beer and Islensket brennivín vodka and Hákari, (made from...fermented shark) that is buried for six months underground.