

ICELAND

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For several years now I have done the sensible thing in mid-March. Packing up my 500mm lens and heading to Florida, warm weather with spectacular and approachable birds. Well that lens seems to be growing heavier with time. So why not go somewhere new, at least to me?

I learned an old friend had taken up leading photo-tours and had one scheduled for Iceland to photograph the Aurora Borealis and other natural wonders. New to me and no 500mm lens needed. I was joined on the trip by several friends and members of the Greater Lynn Photographic Association.

Our first day involved some hot spring photography and an introduction to the never-ending Icelandic March wind. Each night we watched for the Aurora which proved a bit more elusive than you might hope. Like much of nature photography it is easier to imagine than to actually photograph it.

In the interim we photographed many beautiful waterfalls where it was enjoyable to play with long and short shutter-speeds in various compositions. I found the little details in the runoffs at the base of each magnificent fall to be as interesting as the falls themselves.



Quaint churches and dramatic landscapes were also frequent subjects as well as magnificent mountain landscapes dusted with windblown snow. The first hand experience was impressive with little lost in the finished photographs. All the while we still looked to the night sky for the Aurora.



After three uneventful nights including one spent waiting in the cold for hours by a promising foreground with no luck, the northern lights made an appearance. We all scrambled out of our rental cars at a roadside stop with tripods and cameras. It was good thing that we did not take our time, as the Aurora disappeared after 15 or 20 minutes. Because of clouds and poor luck the Aurora did not reappear for the duration of our eight day trip. Despite the advice of others, I started photographing with a Canon 50mm f1.8 lens on my Canon 7D, because it was my fastest lens, which was easier to see with and focus in the needed manual mode. I was wisely told to go wider as a 50mm is not wide enough to record the grandeur of event.



I switched to my 12-24mm f4 Tokina zoom lens which took in a far better field of view at 15mm. However the slower maximum aperture and reduced size of details of the super wide-angle lens made it difficult to focus under night conditions. A

problem that was dealt with by magnifying the image on the back of the camera to see if the image was truly sharp.

The good news is the modern digital cameras function well in the dark, recording the detail in the Northern Lights that is not fully visible to the naked eye. Unfortunately this also applies to distant farm lights that you will need to eliminate by cropping the image to retain a true nature image. A tripod is needed and an ISO of 1000 was used. The moon was present behind us and while generally not desirable for this type of night photography it did provide light on the foreground mountains.

While one might hope Iceland is a secluded photo destination untouched by the 21st century, it is truly a modern European nation with the summer months being the true tourist season.

In March when we visited, the tourists were few but the vagaries of travel were still present. Mid-trip while traveling between Reykjavik and Hali in occasional white outs, a seemingly innocuous electronic sign displayed the red number 37, it seemed harmless enough until we learned it meant a wind speed of 37 meters per second or greater than hurricane force at 82 mph causing the authorities to close the road, a fact emphasized by their armored amphibious vehicle. All trip long we had enjoyed the company of being friends, this became particularly important when with the road closure, we could only get hotel accommodations with beds for one half our group number leaving the others to sleep on the hotel room floors. An event that becomes more dramatic and enjoyable in the retelling. The next day we started out again and at the end of our journey, we found the icebergs at Jökulsárlón Beach. Beautiful blue and white shards of glaciers all the more photogenic by being washed ashore on a black volcanic sand beach.

All in all despite the vagaries of weather and erratic nature of the Aurora it was a great trip with spectacular natural and manmade beauty to photograph.

The recommended equipment per Shiv Verma our tour leader was: 1 or 2 DSLR bodies and wide angle lenses; 10mm for crop factor cameras; 14mm to 35mm (any lens in this range - the wider the better); fish eye lenses are not required. 24 mm to 70 mm, 70mm to 200 mm, 24mm, 35mm, and 50mm lens are excellent choices. Graduated ND filters and a polarizing filter. ND Filters (variable ND if you have one) along with extra batteries for your cameras (two spares are ideal per body). We were told to please remember to keep the spare batteries close to our body to keep them warm. Extra memory cards, an adapter for European current; a cable release and a tripod. Good foot wear and warm clothes were essential.

Shiv Verma our able tour leader was assisted by a talented local Icelandic photographer and guide Olgeir Andresson. It was not all nature photography in the true definition of the word but a visual adventure well worth the trip.

I recommend "Photography Night Sky" by Jennifer Wu and James Martin, Mountaineers Books as a super field guide for shooting after dark.