

LIVING TRAVEL

Letting off steam in Iceland

An awful aurora borealis, a 50-minute wait at Reykjavik's top-rated fish restaurant and knitwear patterns from the Triassic era failed to cool **Alan Air's** ardour for Iceland

Iceland is on the margins of the Aurora Borealis," warned the tour guide blithely. Margins? My heart sank like Gordon Brown's copperplate handwriting tutor on receipt of a thank you card from his former pupil.

"But look to your right! Through the window! Stop the bus!" he screamed to our driver, pointing to a faint rim of greyish-white light above charcoal clouds hanging low over Reykjavik.

Thus, parked up at 10.30pm on a deadly cold volcanic fell in Iceland, another of my boyhood dreams – swathes of dancing green and blue Northern Lights filling the heavens like the closing sequence of 2001: A Space Odyssey – was cruelly dashed. As a biting -5C wind chill factor forced me into an unnatural relationship with the throbbing exhaust of the bus, I tried to articulate the unbearable wave of emotion engulfing every fibre.

Flailing, I cried: "Is that it? But it's absolute rubbish," only to instantly translate this short critique into "Yes, fabulous!" as the tour guide emerged out of the gloom pleading: "Some show, yes?"

But what of Iceland's other attractions? After the country's recent financial meltdown halved the cost of food and hotel rooms, more and more of us are flying north for a weekend in Reykjavik, the capital of cool.

The hottest ticket is surely The Blue Lagoon, an outdoor geothermal swimming pool where, thankfully, the Brooke Shields film of the same name is never shown on grounds of taste. A half-hour drive from Reykjavik and eerily familiar from a plethora of glossy magazine adverts, this stunning outdoor attraction must surely figure in the ultimate list of 100 Things To Experience Before You Die.

Amid lava rock landscapes visited by Apollo astronauts in the Sixties to prepare for moon landings, steaming hot mineral-rich waters, waterfall massages and generous silica mud face packs make this the ultimate luxury spa.

With a restaurant menu offering delicious coffee and vanilla-smoked salmon and reindeer burgers served with spicy black-currant relish, just forget the prices (which are impossible to



Above: the spectacular Gullfoss waterfall. Below: there are warm springs for bathing all over the country



convert from Krona into Euros without a doctorate in quantum physics) and pile on the feelings of total wellbeing.

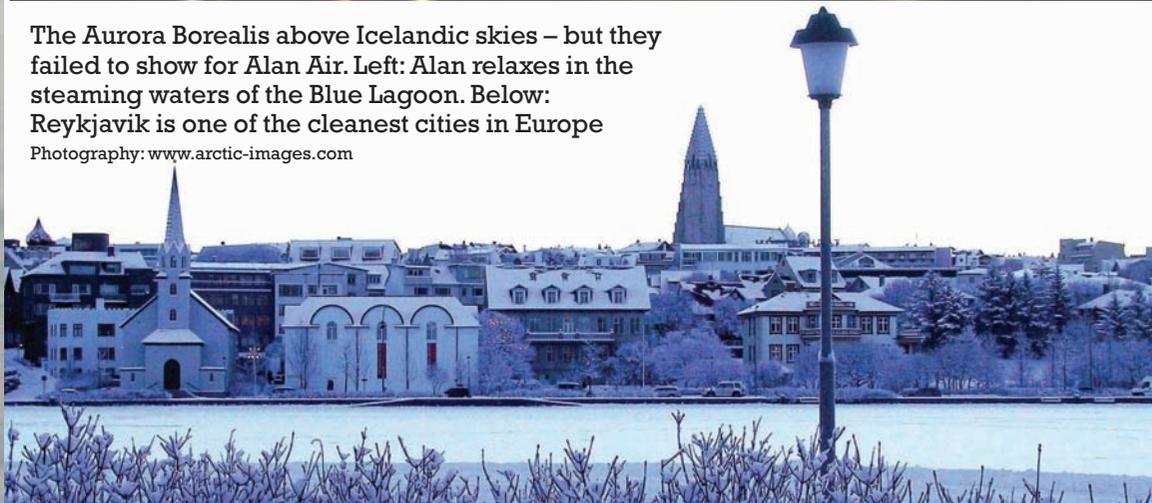
Later, having rested in the executive lounge of the Hilton Nordica hotel, I set off for the Reykjavik restaurant that everyone talks about – the Seafood Cellar.

It's pricey and jam-packed with important-looking types with impossibly high cheekbones, and the maître d' put my seasoned travelling companion on DEFCON 4 Alert (her purring



The Aurora Borealis above Icelandic skies – but they failed to show for Alan Air. Left: Alan relaxes in the steaming waters of the Blue Lagoon. Below: Reykjavik is one of the cleanest cities in Europe

Photography: www.arctic-images.com



state is 5) by announcing that our table would take 10 minutes.

“To make or get ready for dinner?” she replied icily, while I surreptitiously made throat-slitting gestures to warn of his fate should he fail.

Sadly, he did. Fifty minutes later the cowering maître d’ hurriedly ushered us to our table (next to the sliding kitchen door and two overbearing American couples) before descending into a permanent sulk.

I swear the rest of the evening is a blur. Fabulous fish food certainly, slivers of this, slivers of that, microscopic slices of flesh here, pipettes of soy sauce there, hints of fennel, sorbets bathed in enough dry ice to welcome Bjork on stage and a massive discount thanks to my companion going to DEFCON 1 which brought the bill down to just under £20,000. Each. You really must go, if only to see how food is transformed into art and how the other half live.

Speaking of halves, Iceland hangs together over the slowly diverging tectonic plates of America and Europe (think 2012: The Movie) and their ancient Althingi parliament was sited directly above the fissure. Guy Fawkes, eat your heart out.

On the famous Golden Circle bus tour, you also visit the astonishing Gullfoss waterfall; Strokkur geyser and Hellisheidi geothermal power plant (imagine a steaming Sellafield without the high-level nuclear waste storage ponds).

Finally, a piece of information to voyeurs, followed by a word of warning to souvenir hunters – do not bracket all Icelanders as exhibitionists for failing to draw their curtains at night. SAD (Seasonally Adjusted Drapes) means they simply crave every last drop of daylight in winter to stave off darkness-induced depression.

But do resist the temptation to buy dreadful patterned Icelandic knitwear as upon your arrival in the UK you run the risk of full body searches by the fashion police.

■ Alan Air travelled to Iceland with Icelandair (Heathrow to Keflavik) and stayed at the Hilton Nordica Hotel in Reykjavik.

Land of fire and ice

■ Iceland is known as the Land of Fire and Ice due to its spectacular natural features, such as glaciers, hot thermal springs, active volcanoes, geysers, snow-capped mountains and vast lava deserts – although in recent months it has also been known as the Land of the Busted Banks after the global financial meltdown.

■ A popular pastime for holidaymakers is whale watching.

■ Despite its name, Iceland is warmer than some central European countries thanks to the warm Gulf Stream. The average summer temperature is a respectable 14C, with winter temperatures just below freezing. It does rain a lot, though.

■ Iceland is the world’s 18th largest island, and the second in Europe behind Britain.

■ It has the world’s oldest surviving parliament, the Althing, which was founded in 930.

■ Looking for somewhere to invade? Iceland has no army or military defence force.

■ The main tourist areas are in the south of the island near Reykjavik, in the region known as The Golden Circle.

■ Reykjavik has a reputation for being the cleanest city in Europe and the standard of living is one of the highest in the world. And who needs power stations when you’ve got a city heated by steam rising from natural underground springs.

■ Famous Icelanders include singer Bjork, the late Mastermind host Magnus Magnusson and folk rockers Sigur Ros.

■ Relations between the UK and Iceland are cordial now – but back in the Seventies the two countries were engaged in the so-called Cod War over fishing rights in the North Atlantic. The fishing industry still provides over 70 per cent of the country’s exports.

■ The national dish of Iceland is called Hakar, which is fermented shark meat, salted and buried until rotten.