

OK. So we know the letters are a tad small here. Not many pictures either. Still. These are book reviews. If you're at all interested in reading books, then you will be familiar with the layout. So quit complaining. And remember to visit the Nýhil poetry festival this month.

Books | Review

100 Crazy Things (Apparently)

50 Crazy Things to Taste in Iceland / 50 Crazy Romantic Things to do in Iceland
Text by Snæfríður Ingadóttir
Photographs by Þorvaldur Örn Kristmundsson
Translation by Kristín Birgisdóttir and Darren Foreman.
Design and layout by Arnar Geir Ómarsson.
Salka, Reykjavík 2009.



50 Crazy Things to Taste in Iceland lists, well, fifty crazy things to taste in Iceland. It is obviously aimed at tourists, and with me being an Icelandic native myself, I didn't expect to find the foods listed here so crazy. And, of course, the book puts forward all the usual suspects, such as putrefied shark, sour ram testicles, brennivín, singed sheep heads, puffin, hangikjöt and rot-cured skate. But the book still managed to surprise me by also listing some of the non-usual suspects that are, on close inspection, just as Icelandic as the mostly-gross-stuff listed above. They simply have less shock-value and are therefore not pushed in the tourists' faces as enthusiastically as the others. Those include scurvy grass, Malt & Appelsín, kokteilsósa, rhubarb, Easter eggs and Icelandic water.

Each item gets a photo or two, and a short explanatory text where the origins and history of the food is briefly noted. There are plenty of fun facts to be found there, such as when Icelanders first started producing Malt (1913), that bread-making is the oldest industry in the country, Iceland holding the world record in lamb consumption and last, but not least, Iceland being home to the biggest banana plantation in Europe! The author also lists practical information about how to find the less common foods (except for the Icelandic bananas because I don't remember ever seeing any in Reykjavík's grocery stores).

Most of the photos are quite nice,

except for a few where I couldn't help but think that the intention was to make the food look as unappealing as possible, such in the case of the sheep heads (which is as might be expected), but I thought they could have done the hangikjöt and skyr more justice. Especially the skyr, as the photo portrays a bearded man eating skyr and he has it all over his face so you can see the hairs sticking out of the blobs of skyr, which, in my opinion, makes it less than appetizing.

I tried very, very hard to come up with foods that I missed from the list, and came up with only two items: salty liquorice and plokkskúr (hashed fish). But the publishers probably saw that coming and left the last pages of the book blank for the reader to fill in their own crazy things to eat in Iceland.

On the whole, the book is a most excellent overview of the crazy (and not so crazy) things to taste in Iceland.

50 Crazy Romantic Things To Do In Iceland

A far cry from Icelandair's notorious 'Dirty Weekend in Reykjavík' ad campaign a few years back and the Bangkok of the North label Iceland has received in the past, this book is sweet and romantic rather than sex-oriented. It is aimed at foreign couples visiting Iceland and lists a number of romantic activities for them to try during their stay, but can just as easily give romantic-starved natives some good ideas for a date or a weekend away from the children. Some of the romantic things mentioned can admittedly be done almost everywhere, like staying together in bed for a whole week, running a marathon with your loved one, or making out at the movies, while others are limited to Iceland, such as diving in the rift between the Eurasian and American continents in Þingvellir, swinging in the Westman Islands and getting married Viking-style.

The book seems thoroughly researched and is very informative. The text makes for a fun read and the photographs are mostly very good, some even spectacular. But I have to say that in some cases the practical information was lacking, as tourists just off the plane are not likely to know where to turn to book a private flight, a diving session or who to contact in order to become a cabin guard in the Icelandic highlands for the summer.

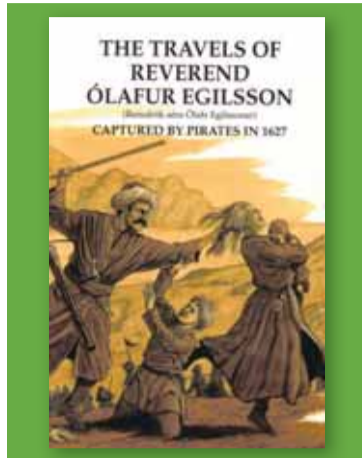
A list like this can obviously never be finite, so the last pages of the book are blanks for you to fill in your own romantic things to do in Iceland.

✂ - HILDUR KNÚTSDÓTTIR

Books | Review

The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

Translated by Karl Smári Hreinsson and Adam Nichols



On a summer day in 1627, pirates landed on Heimaey, the largest of the Westmann Islands. They swarmed over the island's farms and houses, killed thirty-four of its residents and forced 242 men, women, and children onto their ships. They sailed with their prisoners to the city of Algiers, where most were sold as slaves.

This "Turkish Raid" (Tyrkjaránið in Icelandic) is an odd and interesting episode in Icelandic history, and now there is an inexpensive book on it in English. The pirates were actually not what we call Turks today, but rather Arabic-speaking North Africans, and there were also Englishmen and other northern Europeans among the ships' crews. Though the largest number of captives came from Heimaey, the pirates also raided farms and villages in southeastern Iceland, around Djúpvogur and Berufjörður, as well as the village of Grindavík.

Ólafur Egilsson, a sixty-year-old pastor on Heimaey, was taken prisoner along with his pregnant wife and children. His wife gave birth on the voyage south. After arriving in Algeria, he watched helplessly as his eleven-year-old son was sold away from the family. Soon after, he was released and allowed to make his way to Denmark, leaving his wife and younger children behind. He was told to ask the king of Denmark, then Christian IV, to pay ransom for the captives' freedom. Unfortunately Christian IV, who had just lost a big battle to Catholic forces in the Thirty Years' War, didn't feel able to contribute to the cause. However, some of the captives were able to return to Iceland ten years later.

The English translation of the report Ólafur wrote when he came home take up eighty pages of this small book. Ólafur tells of the raid, his captivity in Algeria, and his trip home via Italy, France, Holland, and Denmark. Another forty pages translate shorter accounts of the raid by three other captives and a local Icelandic official. A brief foreword gives

context.

Ólafur was an educated and curious man and though the first thing that comes through is his sorrow at losing his family, much of his tale shows a fascination with foreign customs. Ólafur tells you what kind of hats Muslims wear and notes how the pirates didn't drink alcohol. He describes what camels look like, how monks dress, and how Catholic confession works (you still had to pay to be forgiven). He marvels at Dutch windmills. He reminds us how, four hundred years ago, distance was real. If you ran out of cash in a foreign country, you couldn't go to the ATM machine, or even the consulate, for help.

The book is an inexpensive yet nicely produced paperback, including maps and illustrations. It's short, so you can read the whole thing after dinner or on a plane trip. The translation is well done using contemporary language. Overall—thumbs up. I didn't want my two hours back.

Unfortunately and typically, the book is not being sold by anyone outside of Iceland (except perhaps on the used market), so you can't order a new copy from Amazon or other online booksellers and you basically have to buy it here in Iceland. I saw it at Eymundsson for 1.480 kr. Bóksala Stúdenta (www.boksala.is) lists it at 1.332 kr.

✂ - IAN WATSON

Poetry | Eiríkur Norðdahl

Killing Yourself With poetry



'Twas the eve of Nýhils 2nd international poetry festival, late autumn 2006. I was the manager for the second year in a row. For some reason I can't remember we didn't have any microphones. The Norwegian poet, Gunnar Wærness, had misunderstood his flight-information and missed his flight. The Swedish poets Anna Hallberg and Jörgen Cassilewski would be arriving late from Copenhagen—just before going onstage—and they'd be accompanied by their one month old son, Bruno. A storm was ripping through Europe and the Canadian poet Christian Bök was stuck at the international airport in Frankfurt, waiting it out. We were an hour from opening the doors.

Two hours earlier my neighbour in Ísafjörður had rung me up to inform me that when I left the town ten days earlier I'd forgotten to close the big skylight window over my bed. It had now been storming for three days straight in the Westfjords and as my bed filled with melting snow water, it had started to drip down into my neighbour's apartment.

The week prior to this I'd made some rather harsh remarks on the radio about a member of the Liberal Party who'd written a fiercely racist article in the newspaper, titled "Iceland for Icelanders?" As I was standing there, waiting for microphones and foreign poets and a message from my sister who'd gone to check out my wet apartment, the phone rang.

"Hello?" I said, trembling and sweating. "Is this the guy that was on the radio?" a husky voice asked me. I admitted that I was indeed I. The voice on the phone threatened to kill me. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I remember he spoke in a "we"—as in "we will kill you" and not "I will kill you".

My apartment turned out to be wet but not destroyed. The foreign poets all showed up and got on stage on time and I haven't yet been assassinated by some anonymous group of Icelandic racists. But it's probably the closest I've come to having a complete and utter mental breakdown (and I've come pretty close). And still, the two years I arranged the Nýhil International Poetry Festival was some of the best times I've had in my life: Neurotic, beer-marinated madness on a shoestring-budget, to get some of the world's best poets to perform in a country where (almost) nobody had ever heard of them. But as it was all rather nerve-wrecking and I myself, being rather susceptible to such fear and trembling, decided to let other people have a go at helming the madness.

This'll be the first year though, that I don't get to attend. In a week's time (the weekend of 21st to 23rd of August) the festival will once again be realised in Reykjavík. Be on the lookout for a bugger-eyed, sweating lunatic in the crowd. That's the person responsible for the whole kit and kaboodle. Be nice to them. Give 'em a hug and a pat on the back. Thank them for their work. The Nýhil International Poetry Festival is no mean feat nor easy task. ✂



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