

Mum's Gone to Iceland by *Simon Armitage*

When your mother asked you if you wanted to go with her on the *Yorkshire Post* readers' day trip to Iceland, your first thoughts were that you did not. You'd been to Iceland a couple of years ago and had a very trance-like and introspective three or four weeks, feeling you were in another life, or having one of those experiences that happens outside or parallel to everyday passages of time. To go again on a Wednesday from Leeds/Bradford airport and be back in time for a drink might somehow break the spell, or make what you'd felt before redundant, idiotic even. But when you'd checked the date of the trip and seen that it coincided with National Poetry Day, it felt like the perfect alternative to doing something embarrassing and unprofitable in the name of literature. So you'd stumped up the hundred and odd quid there and then, and put your name on the list.

You'd also thought that there might only be a handful of us, making the journey in a half-empty twin-prop commandeered for the day from an aviation museum somewhere in the region. But the concourse is packed with people, most of them retired it looks like, all of them wearing a little Monarch Airlines tag on the end of a piece of string, like a rip-cord.

The plane is full. The ratio of pensioners to poets is roughly three hundred and fifty to one. The temperature in Reykjavik is two degrees centigrade, and our estimated time of arrival is 9 a.m. There's an atmosphere on board like the beginning of a works outing, the sort of trip that might end in community singing and a whip-round for the driver.

There are seven tour buses ready and waiting outside Keflavik airport, one for Reykjavik only, three for the guided tour, and three for the guided tour including the Viking Lunch. Mum thought that twenty quid for a reindeer steak and baked Alaska was 'a bit on the pricey side', so we've brought sandwiches and a thermos, and we climb on to one of the coaches, pleased that about a hundred and fifty reasonable-looking people evidently thought the same thing. The first stop, on the outskirts of the capital, is a thermally heated open-air swimming baths, and we're encouraged to stand in front of a glass wall taking photographs of Icelandic citizens chugging up and down a twenty-five-metre pool. In the 'hot-pots' along the side, men and women seem to be boiling themselves in circular tubs of bubbling water, ranging from 36 to 44 degrees C, colour-coded from flesh-pink to lobster-red. You're the first back on the bus, apart from Mr Green who never got off, who snores with his head back and mouth wide open, music still leaking from his ear-plugs.

The convoy of blue coaches – fifties-looking, charabanc things – circles the city before making for the great white spire on the horizon. 'If you see a strange-looking building in Iceland, it's probably a church,' says the tour-guide. It makes a change from West Yorkshire, where if you see a church it's probably a discount carpet centre or an architect's house. We tumble off, snoop around, make a donation and climb back on board. Then it's lunchtime, and you drag Mum along to a café on the main street, where you gave a reading when you were here last time. We order coffee, and sneak sandwiches out of a bag, breaking them in half under the table.

The tour bus makes another circuit of the city. You point at buildings and streets from the window, saying this is where such and such happened last time, this is where you met so and so. Mum puts her hand over her mouth as she yawns. Asleep, Mr Green goes past on the wrong bus in the opposite direction. It starts to rain and the guide says, 'We have a saying in Iceland: if you don't like the weather – wait a minute.' Half an hour later, we're travelling under a clear blue sky along a single-track road across acres of broken stones. The woman behind you has become obsessed with the opening and closing of the back door of the coach. Stopping at the sulphur pools, she leans over to Mum, saying, 'The back door's open.' Mum nods in agreement. 'They haven't opened it this time,' she announces at the fish-processing plant, then 'Open again,' at the president's house. The president, as it happens, is not at home, which is just as well for him because half the party go lumbering across the lawns and gawp through the windows. No doubt he saw the fleet of blue buses trundling up towards him out of town, and slipped out the back, scooting along the spit of land in his Nissan Micra, making for the interior.

The last stop of the day, and also the highlight of the trip for which we've forked out an extra fiver, is the Blue Lagoon. As the bus climbs over the last volcanic hill, we see the lagoon about a mile in front of us, a cloud of steam rising from the green, opalescent water. On its own it would be a miracle, an oasis of colour in a landscape of inert, grey stones. But the massive power-plant behind it somehow deadens the effect, especially when we hear that the efficacious water we're about to immerse ourselves in is a by-product from a heat-transfer process. The guide explains that the naturally hot water from under the earth is 'too much in clogging and clagging' to be put through pipes, so it's used to heat surface water, then drained into a pond. When changing huts are erected around the pond, it becomes a pool, and when the rich minerals of the earth's interior are added into the equation, it becomes a spa.

You strip off in one of the cubicles and follow the slotted wooden walkway outside. There are a couple of seconds in which you're conscious of standing in the open air in a freezing wind in a pair of trunks in front of a power station in Iceland, and then the warmth from the pool drifts up the gang-plank towards you, and you take the plunge.

It's very, very hot. You swim out to the middle, and tread water with half a dozen people from the bus. Mum's face looks the way it does when she cooks Christmas dinner – red cheeks, hair wet with steam. Mr Green sits on one of the salt-coloured islands like a cormorant on a rock. Those who didn't bring a swimming costume watch from the pier, stamping their feet to keep warm.

It's just gone eleven when we land back in Yorkshire. There's a hold-up on the runway, then we have to queue outside the building in a light drizzle before passing through passport control, then have to queue again at the customs desk. Mum gets irritated with the wait, and says something, and the woman in front in a green headscarf turns round and says, 'Better safe than sorry.'

'I suppose so.'