

# TWO BLONDES AND A SPOON DO ICELAND

by

Gilly Pugsley

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# Forward

Or backward, depending on which way you're facing at the time. This is the tale of two blondes and an Order Spoon (No. 13) on a five day trip to Iceland. It should not be taken too seriously. Probably!

Gilly Pugsley, December 2010.

## 1. *A Flight into the Unknown*

*So far so good. All the chilluns are fit and well, Orlando the goat is still on his feet and Pug's teeth aren't absent without leave as they so often are. Only a few hours before the much beloved transports me to Tiverton to be met by one of my oldest (in terms of time known!) bessie pals. We're off on an adventure. We've had a few together in a previous life, but now approaching bus pass age we're ready for another.*

*I couldn't sleep last night, and found myself watching Kavanagh QC in the early hours. Calypso and Puff snuggled into me on the sofa, while Mr.D'Arcy snored luxuriously in his basket, dreaming of roast bones and cheesy-toast no doubt.*

*Pug brought me coffee at 3.30. He was largely responsible for the excellent organisation for this adventure. Strutting about with his clipboard, flip pad and swagger stick, everything's been listed and checked off like an army manoeuvre. I'm sure all's present and correct, but my increasing OCD prompted me to check passport, tickets and No.13 at least five (it has to be an odd number) times an hour. No.13's the well travelled order spoon from Friendship House in Barnstaple. He's joining our adventure in the winter wonderland.*

*We're on the road at 4.30 after phoning Laraine, my partner in adventure, to check she's awake. Merde ! Within the first mile we hit thick fog and, through the damp murk spot a diversion sign to boot. It's a Devon diversion, and not to be trusted. The sign simply says:-*

*"Road Ahead Closed for Proper Jobs"*

*Luckily Captain Pugwash has the Devon diversion interpretation code and avoidance map. The rule here in North Devon is to simply ignore the signs and any misleading arrows and plough on regardless. Soon we emerge through fog and the mire of a couple of cow fields back onto the correct route. Blimey, I'm on me way to Iceland and nearly got lost in Brayford.*

*Laraine's already waiting for us in the dimly lit car park at Tiverton Services, so we transfer my luggage to Laraine's car, both snog Pug and Mr.D'Arcy farewell, and we're off. Hoorah!*

*We're a couple of over-excited blonde ladies of a certain age. We have to stop at Bristol for wees and for No.13 to stretch his handle.*

*Traffic on the M4's appalling, and although we've plenty of time, I begin to panic. I needn't have bothered as we arrive at Laraine's daughter's house in style.*

*Kerry-Anne's house is gracious, comfortable with a warm, welcoming feel. I'd brought little fairy bags, presents for the girls from the Big Fat Fairy and Titchy Tiny Fairy. Paige abandoned all manners and pounced hungrily on hers. I imagine the musical wand could become quite irritating after a while. I'm not wrong.*

*Kerry-Anne has offered to drive us to Heathrow. Her car is high-tec; computerised and strung about with every gadget and extra known to the western world. It's rather like being in a cockpit with hundreds of dials, switches and whirring things. It's even got a bum warmer. I'm not used to such luxury in Pug's Reliant, which has only boasted a rear view mirror since he stuck one in last week. So even the trip to Heathrow is an adventure. Paige loses her nose in the back*

*of the car and hasn't brought the wand to magic it back. Luckily Nanny (Laraine) finds it in between the seats, and plugs it back in place.*

*We're still in good time when we check in at the isolated Icelandair desk. I cause a disturbance at security where something I'm toting sets the scanner bleeping. I insist I'm not aware of any weapons of mass destruction about my person, but the Irma Klebb type who's frisking me takes some convincing it's nothing more than the scaffolding on my armour-plated safety brassière that's interfering with the reception on her terrorist scanner.*

*We head for the boarding gate carrying the two litres of industrial strength gin we've purchased in duty free purely for medicinal purposes. In the queue we notice no one but us is booted and spurred for the arctic climes we're about to encounter. In fact one man is quite fetchingly clad in shorts, sandals and tee shirt. Do they know something we don't?*

*I've got the window seat and it's boiling hot in here. In fact we're a pair of steaming blondes now, and both glad we didn't don the thermals.*

*The plane takes off, as someone has promised it would. There's a rousing chorus of the traditional (I believe) "Hide-ho-de-hum!" from the Icelandic contingent.*

*oooOooo*

*Keflick Airport is set like a diamond in a ring of snow clad mountains, with a background of ice cold choppy sea bathed in bright sunshine. There, I'm waxing lyrical again. Pug told me not to do that in strange places or in company.*

*My first impresson of Icelandic air is that it's a touch more bracing than Blackpool, which I last visited in Laraine's company and a tsunami about 25 years ago. She heads for an ATM and I trade in our vouchers for the shuttle bus which will take us to Hotel Leifur Erickson.*

*oooOooo*

*I'm in the window seat. Again. And this time it's not so steamy. Hoorah!*

*I'm not sure what I expected, but for the next forty minutes we're travelling through a moonscape the like of which I've never encountered. Cold, barren and ragged, but with an isolated splendour that is, in one sense, quite beautiful. Here stones are piled onto one another, randomly, much like the ones Pug saw in the Sahara on his trip through Africa. What can be their meaning? Strange solitary shacks on the water's edge. We pass through a few seemingly deserted villages and, quite unannounced, spot the massively tall church in Reykjavik, which we are later to discover can be seen for miles, practically anywhere in Iceland. Now it gradually approaches, getting larger, like the progression in a flick-book.*

*As we approach down-town Reykjavik the housing style changes to a mix of high rise flats, army barracks, Swiss-style chalets and American boulevards. But there are still no people. Must be a national holiday. Or something.*

*oooOooo*

*The receptionist at our hotel is stunning; a cool statue in porcelain with cobalt blue eyes. We're dead opposite the immense church and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. No lift or portorage service, so we have to lug our cases and the gin up several*

*flights of clinical stairs. We arrive, breathless and panting at our room.*

*What a simply magnificent view! No herds of wilderbeest loping majestically across a setting sun, no hanging gardens of Babylon, not even the immense mass of the church. But, as Laraine points out, most importantly there's a SUPERMARKET. Hoorah!*

*We don our thermals and aim for the tonic counter. Armed with a magnum of Sprite and an unknown tonnage of pretzels and Doritos, we head back to our room and down two very large gins. Each. Time to hit the hot spots, and look out for them geezers we've heard about.*

*Quelle horreur! Its bleedin' freezing cold and inky black. And there are no people. Where are they? There are supposed to be a quarter of a million people in the whole of Iceland, and most of them live here in Reykjavik. But I can't see one. They must take their public holidays seriously.*

*We make for the Icelandic fish and chip restaurant recommended by our tour operator. Laraine is sort of unofficial navigator, or Map Wallah and does a grand job of finding it, at the bottom of what is to become known as the WC road.*

*I opt for the wolf fish, Laraine for the coriander haddock – we share and both are delicious. The dessert is raw sugar, spelt, agar nectar, Icelandic moss and angelica seed biscuits, washed down with tonic water, no gin. Normal fare for your average Icelander.*

*The restaurant starts to get busy, and there's a warm ethnic atmosphere. The waitresses are totally gorgeous, sort of pixie-like with retroussé nose, fair skin and faintly slant eyes.*

*No. 13's in his element as he nestles in their bosom for a photo shoot. The restaurant's fair humming by now, and everyone's wrapped up. That must explain it. Your average Icelander is nocturnal by habit. They only come out at night. Must be a bunch of vampires, which could account for their diet of whale blubber and reindeer meat.*

*As we head for home at 8.30 we're beginning to flag. It's back up the WC road and another stiff gin before we hit the sack.*

*As window wallah, I've got the window bed. Again.  
Night night chilluns, sleep tight, wherever you are. Hoorah!*

## 2. *Aurora Borealis. Hurrah!*

*I awoke at 5 a.m. on our first morning in Reykjavik. Outside the intense pitch black darkness contrasted with the stark white of the roof my window looked onto. Evidently a thick layer of snow had fallen.*

*"I think you'll find it's Dulux!" commented Laraine after she'd double checked through the window. The roof, in common with most Icelandic roofs, was painted white. Bit of a shame really, as we'd both wanted to experience snow in Iceland.*

*The room, living up to our general expectations of an Icelandic bedroom, was icy cold. In fact the radiators hadn't even reached tepid since we'd arrived. Furniture and fittings were basic, ranging from Butlins in the fifties up to minimalist. We'd been left two plastic coat hangers, so had it been warm enough to remove our coats, we could both hang them up. Also lacking were the range of luxury shampoos, shower gels, and exotic paraphernalia normally associated with even the most basic of B.&B.'s these days. No sign of hairdryer or curling tongs, not a hint of the Icelandic equivalent of the Goblin Teasmade. However, Gideon had left his spare bible in the bedside drawer, so I was able to regale Laraine with psalm or two and a provocative thought for the day. And we prayed for hot coffee. Like the angel she is, Laraine braved the several flights of stairs to the breakfast room in her pink nightie and became honorary Char Wallah for the rest of our stay. It was rather tepid when she shivered her way back, but it whetted our whistles, wherever they may be.*

*A little later, Laraine reversed into the shower room (it wasn't very big). Moments later a string of obscenities echoed about the room. A frantic and bedraggled Laraine*

*entered from stage left, in shock. The shower was apparently fierce to the point of aggressive, and mounted high up to the ceiling, from where it had vented its vicious spleen onto the unsuspecting Hobbit-sized Laraine below. She'd taken the full force of the water; the plastic shower curtain was welded, rather unfetchingly, to her thighs.*

*" At least the water's hot" she sighed miserably, as she gazed back at the shower head, where it skulked mockingly, high on the shower room wall.*

*My turn came to brave the shower. Having nearly 60 years of being vertically challenged (short arse), I swiftly pulled the shower head down its rail to a reasonable height, looked it straight in its one eye, and hey presto, no deluge. I could tell by her expression that Laraine was mightily impressed.*

*In fact, we spent very little time in the bathroom, as the filthy glutinous stench that was to characterise the room seemed to creep from the shower hole. And I call it a hole as that's just what it was, no shower tray just a hole in the floor. We were to learn later that it was the sulphur we could smell, as all the drainage and heating in Iceland is ecologically green and comes from t'hermal holes. Or something.*

oooOooo

*After breakfast we head for the Tourist Information Office. It's 8 a.m. and still dark, the streets deserted as yesterday. Maybe that national holiday continues for a few days? Where is everyone? The shops are boutique style, displaying very expensive clothes, shoes, art work but not a customer in sight. We take a left down a small dimly lit alleyway and find, in the gloom, the Tourist Information Office. And it's open. Hurrah! The fabled beauty behind*

*the counter is extraordinarily helpful and sells us an international telephone card for about a fiver, which gives us something like six hours of international chatting time. A bone of contention is my 'phone. All I'm saying is that it don't work in Iceland. Laraine's does and we're both with 02. Grrhhhh! Moral? Don't buy a phone from a 14 year old spotty youth in Barnstaple. I'll say no more.*

*I 'phone Pug. All's quiet on the South Western Front. Laraine speaks to Iain, who's just attended to his other women, Myrtle, Edna and Betty. They're his other birds.*

*We decide to find the whaling boat harbour for tomorrow's trip. There's snow on the ground here, so No.13 dons his hat. It snows for about half an hour while we explore downtown Reykjavik. We drop in for coffee at the Haitian Café. I'd seen it recommended on t'internet. Owned by a fierce lady from Haiti, it's festooned with plastic memorabilia from her home country. I would rather like a photo but daren't risk the voodoo we certainly would encounter at the suggestion, so I leave well alone. The coffee's good though, aromatic and steaming. Outside the toilet we notice photographs of the Haitian temptress in rather compromising contortions, and I'm kind of relieved I didn't push my luck with the photo.*

*The whaling harbour proves easy to find and boasts spectacular views over snow clad mountains.*

*Laraine becomes Map Wallah again. We head for the council offices near The Pond. They turn out to be the usual 60's concrete lump, but overlook a beautiful placid lake edged with chalet style houses. Onwards to the Althing, Iceland's Parliament, the oldest in the whole world. We realise we've walked past it two or three times already. It's quite modest and unprepossessing really, although the*

*pockmarked brickwork and broken windows, reminders of not so ancient gunshots, are testimony to a not so peaceful past. They remain a mystery though, as the place is deserted and there's no-one around to quiz on Iceland past or present.*

*Adventure seizes us and Map Wallah guides us to a bus stop for transport to Perlan, a Viking museum. According to the travel book, bus drivers have minimal English skills and are not generally the smiley type. How true. The bus driver's clearly Happy Harijk. It's the law here that you have to have the correct money for the fare. There is only one fare, which has been the same since the dawn of time, so we ought to know what it is, and that no change is ever given in any circumstances. Ever. Purse Wallah sorts this out while I get into the window seat.*

*The bus stops after 10 minutes and the driver grunts. Has he got wind, or can it be he's suffering cardiac arrest? Perhaps he's displaying a quaint piece of Icelandic folk lore or a traditional dance? He stabs a finger at the open bus door and we figure we should alight. All we can see is a narrow dirt track uphill. No signs of or to the pillaging and plundering we're expecting. After a steep 10 minute trudge into the back of beyond we are astonished by the sudden appearance of the surreal bubble that is Perlan.*

*Inside we're met by a most charming Icelander. He takes our entrance fee and gives us headphones for the museum. Turns out he's played golf in North Devon, somewhere very windy. He's not only the attendant but also the director and creator of all inside. Fantastic life-sized models in plaster of paris of most of his family and friends. We watch a video of them being made. We also learn a lot about the Vikings and realise why they're not the blue eyed blondes we thought they would be. Apparently, on their way to Iceland*

*they detoured to run amok in Ireland and capture many women. (I'm not sure about "capture". More like, "captivate" really. A big blond hunk of a Viking against Patrick and Shamus, it's a real no-brainer). Hence 95% of Icelandic women have Irish genes. They are slim, attractive, fine featured, brown hair, rather like Bjork. No pavement crackers, no chip retaining salad dodgers.*

*Upstairs is a restaurant with panoramic views of Reykjavik and a geyser that erupts at irregular intervals hurling waterspouts high into the air.*

*"What the f\*\*k was that?" It's more of an exclamation really, than a question, as the first of these contrived fumeroles takes me by surprise and makes me reach for the Tenna Ladies.*

*"Well it wasn't me," laughs Laraine, "and you can't fiddle with the shower head in here!"*

*We leave for the return bus and find we have a fifteen minute wait, so decide to forfeit another meeting with Happy Harijk and walk back. The massive church is in view so it should be easy going. We stroll past school playgrounds, saunter through the high rise housing, break into a canter amongst the chalet-style houses, but there are no corner shops and it's still sparse on people. We just beat the bus back and give Happy Harijk a cheery wave. I can almost see him grunt in reply.*

*At three o'clock, weary from walking, the democratic vote was in favour of a snooze before the Northern Light Trip. Laraine retired to the room while I went on a dubious expedition in search of an ATM as we needed spondulix for the pre-lights meal. It was a bit of a malarkey finding a bank but the few Icelanders that were out and about were very helpful and eager to please. Eventually I found a Bank of*

*Iceland, a bit reminiscent of Gringotts, with a host of monacled Icelandic elves perched high on stools counting piles of coinage, about a mile away. Luckily I had my passport with me as they had to take a copy of it for the Chief Elf.*

*I returned triumphant, to a freezing cold room. Laraine was fully booted and spurred, snoring peacefully in pink balaclava and gloves under the duvet. I took to my cot and joined her in the fabled Land of Nod.*

*But we awoke at five and downed two or three-ish larg-ish gins, dressed and checked with reception that the trip was on. All systems go! Hoorah! We were to leave at 7.30pm.*

oooOooo

*Our search for a restaurant serving something more Icelandic than burger and chips was the least successful episode of our first full day on this enigmatic island, and after half an hour's fruitless search panic set in. We made for the supermarket, our old haunt of drunkenness and debauchery. Here we constructed our own exotic takeaway of olives, water biscuits, Icelandic cheese and chocky bikkies, consumed back in the room and washed down with copious quantities of the industrial strength. No. 13 got a tad overexcited and jumped handle first into the cheese.*

*At 7.15 we checked in at reception only to be told our tour operator doesn't leave until 8.30. So it was that we found ourselves back in the room for more refreshments. Laraine received a text from Iain. I tried my phone. Same old story. Zilch, zippo and zero. But Laraine makd another phone call and Pug was on the end. All's well in individual fruit pie (very tasty) land.*

oooOooo

*We board the coach, more than a little excitedly. This is really what the trip's about, the Aurora Borealis. And I'm in the window seat. Again. We can hardly contain ourselves. Laraine's squeaking incoherently.*

*Luckily the sky's clearing and the driver and guide will follow the windows in the firmament. After about an hour we find ourselves in the National Park. As if magically switched on for our enjoyment, the lights begin about five minutes later. We are the only coach here.*

*The lights are subtle to start with. A gentle blue-green misty pastel undulation. But through the guide's super duper telescopic camera the scale goes from amazing through stunning to outrageous. Just to be in Iceland, in the dark, watching the Northern Lights with my bessie mate. Perfick! After about an hour they crescendo into something like a green waterspout.*

*"Oooooooooooooohhh!" That's me.*

*"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!" That's Laraine.*

*"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhh!" I think she's from Yorkshire.*

*We depart a happy coachload and the guide has kindly offered to e-mail us his shots. Wow!*

*We alight from the bus and realise we're quite a distance from our hotel. It's dark and the only lights are on the massive church. It's a marvellous landmark and would be a great guide to navigation, but Reykjavik seems to turn on its axis and it takes us quite a while to find our way back.*

*Could it be the magnetic forces of nature? The Northern Lights? The gin?*

*However, we feel perfectly safe here.*

*We finally locate the Hotel Leifur Erickson, though I'm sure it's not where it used to be. We bid the porter "goodnyktj" and after one more gin and a chocklit biscuit, hit the sack. Exhausted.*

*Hoorah!*

### 3. *A Whale of a Time*

*You can never be sure what the time is in Iceland, as it changes quite randomly and without notice. It's something to do with the configuration of the International Date Line and magnetic due north, when Venus is out of alignment with Mars. As anyone who has studied these things will tell you. Or something. Anyway, we think we awoke at 6 a.m. on our second morning, but can't be sure. After a time check with various watches and mobiles, we decided it was 7 a.m. Icelandic time. Probably.*

*Breakfast at the Hotel Leifur Erickson is a bit of a self service effort, and I attempted to make a waffle under Laraine's strict guidance. I added toppings of cheese, ham and tomato, not realising the waffle is essentially a sweet affair. But here's a tip for the unsuspecting. If you add to the above extra oranges, cucumber slices, a hefty dollop of marmalade and a soupçon of anchovy essence – hey presto you have the perfick waffle.*

*After breakfast we set off in the gloom in search of another authentic Icelandic restaurant for our evening meal. We had passed a likely candidate on our first day, and thought, perhaps, we could find it again. Unfortunately, Reykjavik had moved. As those of you who understand these matters will know, Iceland has a habit of sort of spinning on its orbital axis, quite randomly and without notice. This does make finding places difficult and, if you are blonde, confusingly irritating. Try as we may, and even with such an accomplished and experienced map wallah as Laraine, we found ourselves walking in circles against the current through deserted streets and past dark shops (still closed) in the early pre-dawn light. Eventually we did stumble across the restaurant, but it was quite accidental.*

*The Map Wallah made extensive notes on one of her by now growing collection of maps, and convincingly reassured me we would be eating here tonight. Hoorah!.*

*Next we visited the Tourist Information Office to phone home and check in with the much beloveds. The office was still, fortunately, just where we had found it yesterday. Iain wasn't in, probably attending to his ladies' needs, plumping up their cushions or whatever. Pug answered promptly, reporting that everything was going like clockwork. He already had the chicken cooking for chilluns dinner, and had taken another individual fruit pie out for his own. Bless.*

*Our Whale Watching excursion wasn't until 12.30, and we hadn't thermalled up. We would return to the hotel before lunch for a power snooze and warmer clothing.*

*On the way back we looked in some very expensive clothes shops with fabulous shoes, art shops and the usual tourist crap shops. Hardly any people, and only a spattering of tourists were on the streets. There was very little traffic too, and what cars were on the roads, stopped immediately to allow you to cross. A slight show of toenail off the kerb seems to give you priority. Nearing the hotel we walked down an alleyway to a pottery boutique Laraine has wanted to inspect. As we approached, the snooty looking owner promptly turned the "open" sign to "closed" and exited to the back of the shop. We pressed our noses to the glass and blew him a kiss. We'll attempt entry another day. Probably.*

oooOooo

*Back in our room we have an hour before departure on the whaling mission. Quelle horreur! The massive clock on the*

*massive church over the way chimes eleven times. My watch sort of states "ten". The hanging watch on my bag says "eleven" (but that is proper English time), so it must be 10. The mechanics of the massive clock (which is new to boot) must be wrong. Laraine heads for the landing to check the massive clock face, but sitting reading in the window is an American lady who has just arrived and is waiting for her room to be cleaned. Laraine has to lean precariously over her in a contorted fashion.*

*"The big hand is on the 12, the small points to 11."*

*"Who's hands?" I enquire, thinking perhaps Laraine's assaulted the American.*

*"The clock's y'fool!" snorts Laraine.*

*I feel a little foolish, or just blonde. I'm still not convinced though, so I have to check for myself and I execute my own balletic manoeuvre over the American.*

*"I wouldn't take any notice of the church clock," I tell the American. "It's an hour fast. It has to be, to compensate. It's something to do with the configuration of the International Date Line and magnetic due north, when Venus is out of alignment with Mars, you know. Or something."*

*Laraine checks with her mobile on which 12 means 11 in Reykjavik. I hope you're keeping up with this. Then, I suddenly remember I've altered my hanging watch to correct Icelandic time. There's much hilarity at this, and we both reach for the Tenna Ladies! There's no time for snoozing – we're off to the Haitian Café for quiche and scowls.*

oooOooo

*Its freezing cold as we board the boat but as we've donned our thermals we elect to sit on the top deck. The boat steadily fills, mainly with Brits. We're just about to weigh anchor and hoist the mains'l when two Japanese ladies appear running along the quay, attempting to leap aboard. Must be latter day kamikazes, or they just haven't spotted the gangplank. The Captain hoists them bodily aboard. The crew all cheer, to a man. The kamikazes collapse exhausted into the seats next to No.13. They appear to be mother and daughter. Mother promptly recovers from her exertions and takes a J cloth from her kamikaze back pack and starts cleaning our table. She smiles and gestures for us to stand while she wipes our seats. I nearly forget myself and order a No.33 with flied lice. The daughter, who is sitting next to Laraine, rummages amongst the harpoons and ropes tangled in her back pack. She produces a packet of dried fish and starts chomping noisily. The aroma is horrific.*

*We're off! A whale-watching we will go. I like this life on the ocean wave, me. Laraine's practising a nifty little hornpipe. I'm brushing up on me sea shanties for later, and we take to the northern bow, leaving Kamikaze Senior and Fishbreath behind.*

*The onboard guide tells us of the different types of whales we are likely to see and the signs to look out for. We are to shout "Avast there!" if we spot a gushing blowhole, suspicious looking black triangle, or Captain Ahab. The sea is very choppy, the scenery volcanic. The mountains are covered in snow and Reykjavik soon becomes a mere dot on the horizon, even the massive broken clock church.*

oooOooo

*After two and a half hours on rough seas our expectations begin to dim. Not a sausage let alone a whale. We're bloody*

*freezing and decide to take to the brig where a handsome well-oiled Viking is behind the bar, dishing out hot chocklit laced with rum- "Oooaarr me hearties." We indulge greatfully, and spend the rest of the cruise here joined by the rest of the whale-watchers, the crew, Roger the cabin boy and the Captain. Kamikaze and Fishbreath have been sleeping soundly for the last three hours, rhythmically snoring in unison with their hands over their heads. So amidst the stench of vomit, the waft of Double Deckers and a glimmer of hope we head back. Deep down, I know there was a whale deep down. But he was having a laugh, and thinking;-*

*"Wednesday, must be Elding Tours."*

*We disembark, a little disappointed, but invigorated by the trip, and head for the supermarket for more Sprite and crisps to compensate. It's still cold in the bedroom, and we sit in our beds, wearing thermals, gloves and hats, reading, snoozing and dreaming of whales.*

*oooOooo*

*At 6.45 it's pre-prandials. Three double gins, two double chins, olives and crisps. We party on down until 7.30, when Map Wallah guides us to the restaurant.*

*No. 13 is mightily impressed. He's spent his entire life in restaurants and is a bit of a connoisseur. This one's brightly lit and crowded with locals. We both opt for the Icelandic Platter – minke whale, traditional Icelandic fish stew, dried fish and garlic roasted lobster, washed down with Icelandic gin and lime. It's mouthwateringly fabulous. And we may not have seen any of the elusive whale, but together we damn nearly polished off one for dinner.*

*We manage to find the hotel at about 10, or 11, or maybe it's 12, depending on who's dateline you believe.*

*Coffee in bed and hit the sack. End of a perfik day!  
Hoorah!*

#### 4. *Close Encounters with Animals*

*We're rattled out of sleep by the insistent clamour of a telephone. I clamber over the detritus of last night's revelry. There's a call for us. Bugger. Something I'd secretly been dreading, as it can only be bad news. Laraine gets the gist and I ask them to put the call through. All we get's the dialling tone. We've been cut orf. A myriad of things are going through our minds in a split second. And in that split second I head towards reception like a thing possessed in my leopard skin jimjams. The confused receptionist (along with a group of Swedish herdsman just arrived from Gotenberg) reminds me of a trip around the island we allegedly previously booked, and that the coach was waiting outside. The wake-up call had been linked to the wrong room. I walk back upstairs, my heart beating wildly but returning gradually from my mouth to its proper place. Halfway back I'm confronted by a pink whirling dervish in the form of Bessie Mate. After visioning every possible misfortune at Long Lane Farm she'd made for the stairs too! It took us a good hour to chill and get ourselves ready for brekkie.*

*There's an unholy hoohah and cacophony emanating from the breakfast room. Could it be the young Swedish herdsmen. No such luck. We're greeted by about fifteen American lesbians. They're big, butch and hairy. We can't hear ourselves think. The solitary Victor Meldrew on the next table starts getting tetchy. I can notice these symptoms having had nearly 40 years practise.*

*"Shut the f\*\*k" up, for God's sake, you can be heard in the next street".*

*There's a brief lull in the chatter and some unnecessary sassiness about grumpy old Englishmen, but it does permit us*

*to eat the remains of our breakfast in relative peace.  
Laraine goes to Victor and thanks him. Creep!*

*We leave for our daily fix at the Tourist Information Office. Iain's rehearsal for the panto is going well. Pug wishes me Happy Anniversary (our 44<sup>th</sup> since meeting) I thought it was Friday but as usual he's right. Everything's fine, in fact I think he's enjoying himself.*

*We're off to the Zoo and Botanical Gardens! Hoorah! Map Wallah is already on the case and leads me to the bus stop. But first Laraine needs a ladies', and fortunately we're halfway up the WC road. We walk a few more yards and spot what looks like a giant police box with a WC sign attached to a door. I'm sure it's actually a Wesleyan Chapel, but Laraine enters, sheepishly wishing me farewell and to have a happy life. Ten minutes later, after much gurgling slurping and howling, Laraine emerges from The Tardis as if she's had eleven rounds with Benny Hill.*

*"Was it a Wesleyan Chapel, as I predicted?"*

*"Yes, indeed. But the lay preacher was very pleasant and let me use his personal loo. I left him a donation."*

*"Not a deposit then?"*

*"Oh, one of those too."*

*We're back at the bus stop, and this time Purse Wallah has the correct change. Happy Harijk is the driver again and when Laraine shows him the Zoo on one of her many maps, he grunts, slowly reaches for his spectacles and sort of nods, we think.*

*We sit next to a charming Icelander. He's on his daily trip to work and informs us that this bus driver is a miserable old gityk and should have retired years earlier. He asks our plans for the day and Map Wallah proudly shows him our*

*itinerary. He looks a bit aghast, if I've got the Icelandic expression right. He exclaims why would anyone want to go to the zoo? The fish museum would be much more interesting. We explain that after the whale watching and Japanese dried fish incident we're giving fish up for Lent. He confirms we're on the right bus for the Zoo but on no circumstances should be get off until we have reached it. He bids us farewell and alights at the next stop.*

*Now, we're the only two passengers and Map Wallah has her back to the driver. Three minutes later the bus stops, H.H. stands up and points to what I think is the North. He looks at me and, quite irritably, points again. Is there another "coming" forecast? Or does he want me to ring the bell, which is sort of in the direction of his pointing. I stand up and ring the bell. Twice. This evokes no response. I try again. By this time Laraine, clutching her maps, has crossed her arms in a gesture of bold defiance.*

*"I am not getting off this bus! I was told to say put, and I'm simply not getting off."*

*I'm not sure who looks crosser, HH or Map Wallah. I think mediation would be the best policy, and as the middle exit door is open for some reason, decide that's what is wrong. I prance gazelle-like into the footwell and start grappling with the automatic doors. They won't budge, neither will Laraine. The lady's not for moving. Nor is Harijk for that matter.*

*Frustrated that my attempts at mediation have come to nought, I slide my boot under the door and tug furiously, desperate to avoid an international incident. I have never seen Laraine this stubborn and it would be quite magnificent, were I not placed in the invidious position of peacemaker between the irresistible force of HH and the*

*immutable object Laraine's become. Next I grab hold of the pole and am about to adopt terrorist tactics when I'm approached from the rear by another man sporting a driver's uniform. He explains that it's Harijk's break time and he has brought the relief bus. I still don't think Laraine's convinced, but she relents, reluctantly, gathers her maps and follows me, indignant to the end.*

*We find the zoo after a lengthy walk through a wilderness of deserted back lanes.*

*"And pray let us know of the wonders within," I enquire of the bemused turnstile operator. "You have seals, no doubt, walruses, the odd polar bear wethinks. Perhaps a herd or two of reindeer loping majestically in a meadow. Pray do tell."*

*"We have several chickens, two ferrets and a pig!"*

*We make for the botanical gardens instead. Which is closed for the winter! So after taking a few pikkies of some enigmatic looking cabbages we head for the hypermarket. Map Wallah confidently leads me to the appropriate bus stop, which seems like about three miles further on. During this time we only see a few joggers, more joggers and a ferret.*

*The next bus (yes gluttons for punishment, us) drops us at the hypermarket. It's huge, vast, cavernous, and yet almost deserted. I've come to the conclusion that there are only three shoppers in the whole of Iceland, and they're hired by shops to give the outward appearance of bustling business. It's a curious sort of economy anyway, and difficult to understand how they can continue to exist with such a scarcity of customers.*

*It's here that I experiment with my first Subway. Me and the much beloved have always thought they were for the likes of chip retainers, salad dodgers and pavement crackers, but actually it 'aint bad. I opt for roast beef, red onions, tomatoes, gherkins, jalapenos, beetroot, mayonnaise, mustard, pickles, cucumber, horseradish, tomato ketchup, daddies sauce and jam. All tucked neatly into a roll of honey bread. Laraine follows suit. Perfick!*

*We purchase a few pressies and No. 13 buys a red spotted sink plunger he's had a fancy for.*

*We're quite weary by this time, so Map Wallah leads us to the next appropriate bus stop. How we manage this is one of those Icelandic magnet mystery things, because Reykjavik has swung over on its axis again and somehow we're going backwards. It's quite an experience and fortunately the only pleasant driver in Iceland takes pity on us and puts us on a forward bound bus. Laraine has the window seat. Hoorah!*

*It feels out of cinque, as we're heading back the wrong way according to Map Wallah.*

*"SPONGGGG!!!"*

*Just the one word, and I'm sure it came from Laraine. And she's staring at me in a very strange way. Nothing else, just SPONG. Has she had a funny turn? Is she overawed at the prospect of a window seat? Is it just wind? None of the above. We've been trying to remember the name of a young man we once shared, many moons ago. It was SPOUGE, Laraine, David Spouge.*

*We are to reminisce most of the afternoon away about David Spouge, over chocklit cakes and coffee.*

*At five, or there again it might have been six, depending on your position on the Icelandic theory of time, we lined ourselves with the statutory four or five gins, and headed down to the harbour to party away our last evening.*

*The Harbour Lights Restaurant had a warm, friendly atmosphere, and it was fair rocking when we joined the Connecticut and District Male Voice Choir and Ice Hockey Team. That was when the penny dropped. There's an international match this coming weekend. The boys from Hartford, Connecticut, are playing the Reykjavik Reindeers and the butch ladies at breakfast are playing the national female team. No 13, probably glad of some male company joins them for a photo shoot.*

*Lobster tails and reindeer balls for dinner, but we decline the offer of joining the raucous throng for more pre-match partying, bid fond farewells, and skip arm in arm up the WC road, No.13 in the middle.*

*We have absolutely no idea of the time, but as you will be aware by now, in Reykjavik time moves in a mysterious way.*

*Such times Pip, perfik!*

## 5. *The Blue Lagoon*

*It was our last day, and we'd packed and breakfasted early, so that we could wait in reception for the coach to the Blue Lagoon. We were accompanied by a West Midlander of indeterminate age, and her partner of indeterminate sex.. I preferred not to engage them in conversation, conscious that my natural sense of humour might cause an unforgiveable non p. c. gaff. Anyway, I didn't take to Mr./Ms. Hermaphrodite. He/she was a real self-obsessed knobby knowall and got on my tits. Laraine was slightly kinder and joined in the conversation, which was mainly one sided, Laraine doing a passable impression of an inarticulate goldfish.*

*Thankfully, we lost (dumped) them at the bus station and joined a charming man from Bath with his very black Amazonian wife (must be a limerick in there). They obviously hadn't come prepared for the cold, both sporting light jackets, thin summery trousers and casual walking attire. Still, as he put it "we haven't ventured out too much". We guessed they hadn't inspected the cabbages at the Botanical Gardens!*

*We're in the first coach to reach the Blue Lagoon. First impression: it's a bit of a kitsch tourist trap. Purse Wallah had competently kept back just enough krona to hire two towels. Hoorah!*

*We're given plastic wrist straps for lockers to store our handluggage, and told to shower before entering the lagoon. Merde. Outside it's bleeding freezing and we high tail it to the steaming water. Nirvana. It's hotter than bath water but the bottom's uneven and quite dangerous, and that's just mine and Laraine's.*

*I cling to the side, while Laraine boldly strikes out in a fast crawl towards the opposite bank. Bleedin' show off. Sharon Davies eat yer heart out.*

*An American pavement cracker stands, fully tented, on the Lagoon steps. She informs me she isn't able to join us in the water because of women's problems. I can sense she wants to recount all the gory details of her nether regions, but I'd just as soon not hear them. Thankfully I'm spared this particular indignity by an attendant who quickly ushers her away from the water before it's irretrievably contaminated.*

*Laraine's swift and heroic circumnavigation of the Lagoon has revealed a waterfall, and I attempt to reach it with her help. It's a slow and tortuous manoeuvre with me clutching for dear life to Laraine's arm. Bugger. I stub my little toe on some molten lava. I think it may be broken so we head gingerly back to the steps. As I reach the safety of the edge, my legs are beginning to itch. I report my discomfort to Laraine – hers are too.*

*By the time I haul my legs out of the Blue Lagoon they look like two ripe polonies and the itch is intense. I want to rip them off. We head back to the showers like two overcooked lobsters. Was it the heat or the volcanic sand? No-one else appears to be affected. After a long shower the itchiness subsides slightly. I was worried our legs would implode and we wouldn't be allowed to fly. Can you fly with imploded limbs?*

*A familiar cacophony greets us in the locker rooms. The American Dyke Ice Hockey Team. Actually they're very pleasant and quite concerned at the sight of our pins. One's offered to rub some lesbian linctus into them, but we pass on this kind offer.*

*We hairdried and put on our slap ready for the journey back to the Airport, took a few more pickkies of No.13 in the lava fields, nicked a bit of volcanic rock. While we waited for the earlier coach to the airport, Laraine demonstrated an old "Day" traditional method of drying wet swimwear. This involved wrapping it inside a towel, twisting it in a clockwise direction, while standing on a picnic table and whirling the entire contraption over one's head something in the style of a Patagonian gaucho. It worked! Hoorah!*

*oooOooo*

*At duty free I bought rich dark 60% Austrian Stroh rum. Pug and I had tried this nectar some 30 years ago and not seen it since. Laraine bought Black Death schnapps with shot glasses. We waited in the Departure Lounge with a voluble school party.*

*oooOooo*

*Heathrow was chock-a-block with arrivals and we circled overhead for at least half an hour. I had the window seat. An unusually bumpy landing. I 'phoned the much beloved while we waited for Laraine's luggage to appear. I think it must have collie dog ancestry, as it was always last on the conveyor belt, rounding up all the others.*

*We were met at arrivals by a delightful and very excited Brooke! She had been allowed to stay up and was full of it. We headed back to Kerry-Anne's via a good old British chippy. It was nine forty-five but the chippy was shut, and would not be persuaded by the two drunken males battering on the door to revise his opening times. So we made for Kerry-Anne's and had red wine with left-over Chinese takeaway. Perfick.*

*As I lay in bed my mind replayed the last brilliant five days with Laraine and all the strange, peculiar and hilarious things we had encountered.*

*SPONG! – I giggled out loud. Then I had the vision of an indignant, nay, bolshie Laraine sitting arms crossed refusing to leave the bus while I dangled from the footwell like a demented pole dancer. The immense church with the wrong time, Kamikaze and Fishbreath, Happy Harijk, fierce Haitians and reindeer balls, the WC road.. I drifted off to sleep at about 1am – probably! I even had the window seat.*

*Thankyou, Laraine. Hurrah and SPONG!!!*

