ALAN'S ICELANDIC SAGA 2014

17th February - Day 1

The car and I were all packed and ready to go at 09:30 for what I hoped would be a trip to remember – to Iceland with my son Daniel, along with members of Welshot Photographic Academy (a photographic group with a difference, based unsurprisingly in Wales and offering tuition, field trips, workshops and by the sound of it, a whole lot of fun experiences).

I wasn't sure if I had everything, but I always seem to pack far too much and the scales had showed 18kg, which was under the 20kg allowance. My rucksack, complying with hand luggage rules within an inch of its life, felt like it weighed a ton with all my camera gear (except the tripod in the suitcase). Luckily, there was no actual weight limit for hand luggage, so as long as I could carry it, I should be OK…

It was a tiring drive to Manchester, where Daniel and I would be staying for the night – although I say 'night' loosely, as we would have to be up and ready to go at around 03:00 the following day. After just one previous stop at Sedgemoor Services, I arrived safely at Hilton Park Services near Telford and it wasn't long before Daniel also arrived. We ate our packed lunches in his car, drank a Costa coffee and left at around 14:00.

I took the lead and off we went on an uneventful journey, apart perhaps from a slight detour when I drove past the entrance of the Hilton Hotel. We booked in at just after 15:00 and took the cars to the long-stay car park. I realised I'd left my walking boots in the car, so Daniel kindly walked back with me to fetch them. It's a son thing ☺ We then went into the hotel bar to meet the Welshot people with whom we would be flying out to Iceland.

I have to confess I was a little on the nervous side, as I had never met or conversed with any of the group before and would be spending the next five days with them (Daniel would be staying on for an extra four days and as a professional photographer, he would be helping out with tuition). So although Daniel was with me and I'd previously dialogued online with the leader, Lee Iggulden, I did feel some pressure to make it work for Daniel. It's a father thing!

We entered the bar, where Lee greeted us very warmly and introduced us to the others, namely Kris Williams, Eirian Parry (Kris's partner) and Eifion Williams (Lee's co-leader, who said he was happy to be called the easier option of 'Av'). The rest of the party would be meeting us in the morning at the airport terminal. As it turned out, all of them made me feel most welcome while we had a meal together, a couple of drinks and then went off cheerily to bed.

18th February - Day 2

Daniel and I had shared a room for the night, or rather for the few hours before our 03:00 start. It turned out we'd both had a somewhat restless night and were awake when the alarm went off. I'd been conscious that my sinuses had started to block up and I was near to coughing a lot of the time. Although I'd tried hard not to make a noise so Daniel could sleep, I think I failed – but Daniel seemed quite bright and full of energy. His mood was infectious and we were both soon dressed and in the lobby of the hotel, waiting for the transfer bus.

We arrived at the terminal just before 04:00, so early that there were very few people about and all the check-in positions were closed. However, the Easy Jet staff soon arrived, we were checked in and joined by other members of the group – Ted and Joan (who were a bit older than me and had driven from Wales during the night), Rob, Rachel Baker, Patrick Yates, James Farley and Ian Fox (who seemed to know Kris and Eirian very well).

We all made our way en masse to the departure gate, where we put down our gear and started thinking about breakfast, as you do. Kris, Eirian and Ian wandered off in search of food, so Daniel and I followed (Lee kindly said that she and Av would look after our bags). Kris had been to Manchester airport before and knew where to go – that is, to the Grain Loft Bar, where Daniel succumbed to a bacon bap with coffee and I had porridge and honey with coffee. I was surprised how good it tasted, no doubt because by then we were very hungry.

After breakfast, we made our way back to the departure terminal and finally took off at 06:45. I was able to sleep for about 30 minutes and mostly read for the rest of the flight, but was glad to eventually look out of the window and see Iceland below us. I managed to take a couple of photos with my phone by leaning across Daniel, who had the window seat. He didn't mind – it's a son thing. We arrived at Reykjavík airport at 09:00, disembarked and collected our luggage before assembling in the entrance to await our mini-bus.

First glimpse of Iceland

'Mini-bus' was somewhat of a misnomer with its huge studded tyres that looked just the part for rugged terrain and for driving on ice and snow. In fact, it looked more like a macho-bus! We all piled in and after what seemed like a very long drive (reminiscent of jokes about Easy Jet planes landing miles away from their publicised location), we finally arrived at the CenterHotel Klöpp in Reykjavik.

Due to overbooking, the CenterHotel Klöpp didn't have a room for Daniel and me, but they arranged an upgraded room for each of us at one of their other hotels close by. A taxi was called and while we waited for it to arrive, Lee told us we were to meet back at CenterHotel Klöpp at 12:30, after we'd booked in.

The taxi arrived and took us to the CenterHotel Arnarhovll, opposite the Opera House on the sea front, but we were told our rooms wouldn't be ready until 14:00. As it was only 11:50, we left our bags with the concierge, grabbed our camera gear and made our way down to the sea front, where we found the 'Sun Voyager' (Icelandic: Sólfar) an iconic sculpture by Jón Gunnar Árnason (1931-1989). It had such a unique architectural quality that we were both soon taking photographs of it. Time went far too quickly and we had to hurry back.

Daniel down and possibly dirty with 'Sun Voyager'

At the CenterHotel Klöpp, we all gathered in the lobby and availed ourselves of the free coffee on offer. We were introduced to the final member of our group, Richie (Richard Roberts), who had been to Iceland a few times previously and would be helping Lee to organise our visits.

After the meeting finished, Daniel and I walked up to the main shopping street and then back to our hotel to check in. Daniel's room had a superb view of mountains and the sea front and both rooms were big and well appointed, so there were no complaints from either of us.

We showered and changed and I was strangely excited that it was time to go Icelandic, toasty warm in my merino wool Icebreaker base layer, Karrimor micro-fleece, Helly Hanson thermal base layer, long johns, Craghopper winter lined trousers, Bridgedale liner socks and merino wool boot socks, Rab down jacket and walking boots. Little did I know at the time that I would wear these warm and comfortable clothes for the full five days I was in Iceland and to be perfectly honest, little did I care!

We made our way back to the CenterHotel Klöpp for another meeting at 16:00, where we learned that we were about to go and visit the famous hot dog stand on Reykjavik sea front. On arrival there, I realised that I had missed the glaringly obvious, which is the fact that I don't eat meat and hot dogs are somewhat on the meaty side. There wasn't any vegetarian alternative and because I was so hungry after not having eaten since breakfast, I ate some dead flesh (although not canine flesh, presumably).

It was the first meat I had eaten for I don't know how long and although it tasted fine, it did lie heavily on my stomach for much of the evening. However, after a walk along the sea front to the Opera House and 'Sun Voyager' for some photos, a group of us retired to a pub called the Karaoke Sports Bar at Frakkastig 8, just a short walk away from the sea front.

Daniel and I had a couple of beers, as did some of the others who joined us. Kris and Eirian left early, but the rest of us stayed and talked. As I was tired, I asked Daniel if he wanted another beer, to which he prevaricated for a while before saying yes. About 15 minutes later, Kris sent a text to Patrick to tell him the holy grail of this trip, the aurora borealis, was visible.

Daniel, Patrick and I immediately dashed out into the very cold street, minus our down jackets, to have a look. I scrutinised the sky and declared that it must be a figment of his imagination, because I couldn't see it at all. Patrick said to put my hand up and blot out the street lamp, which I did – and I could see a faint glow of green in the sky over the sea front.

The three of us dashed inside, finished our drinks in a gulp, donned our down jackets, hats and gloves, grabbed our camera gear and headed as quickly as we could down to the sea front. We were met by the green glow of the aurora borealis on our very first night! I couldn't believe my eyes, because the forecast was for cloud, but the sky was almost clear.

We quickly set up our tripods and began to take photos. We then realised that it was going to keep going for a while, so we moved down to the illuminated 'Sun Voyager', the idea being to use it as a foreground to the aurora. As we arrived, we could see Kris, Eirian, Ian, Av and Richie (to name a few) already there and so we set up again and started to take more photos. It felt almost supernatural and I could feel the excitement rippling through all of us. The Yoko Ono Peace Tower light was also switched on and marked a blue line upward through the sky. It was a privilege simply to be there and to be able to photograph this amazing sight was the icing on the Icelandic cake.

The aurora borealis over the 'Sun Voyager'

After a while, the display began to disappear, so Richie, Av, Daniel and I decided that because we were ravenous, we should find somewhere to have a snack. Richie suggested going to Subway in the town centre for a roll. They had no vegetarian option, but I asked the serving girl if she could possibly make me a roll without any meat. I ended up with a cheese and fresh salad roll and it tasted really good, no doubt because of our euphoric mood. Kris's text had made the perfect end to a very different day – thank you, Kris!

19th February - Day 3

I slept quite well (despite the excitement of the previous night) and woke in plenty of time to have breakfast with Daniel at the hotel, before our planned 08:45 start. Breakfast was self-service with *so* much choice. Daniel and I both had fruit to begin with, then Daniel had a cooked breakfast, while I had porridge and honey. I also picked up two sneaky pieces of flapjack for a snack during the day, as it was basically too good an opportunity to miss. My sinuses were thankfully attempting to behave themselves.

After breakfast, we made our way to the CenterHotel Klöpp, which was only a short walk away, to meet the others. Here we all boarded the macho-bus for our day out at the Hvalfjörður ('Whale Fjord') in western Iceland.

We stopped at a petrol station complex en route, where Lee gave me a little green man, if that doesn't sound too weird. Apparently he was called Welshot Man and my mission, should I choose to accept it (I had to) was to photograph him in the various locations we were to visit, all in the aid of charity.

I stuffed him into my jacket pocket and confess that I promptly forgot about him until Eirian later reminded me of the challenge! To be honest, I was more focused on the fact that we were off to our first stop, Laxá í Kjós. Here we all disembarked and made our way up the river to a really photogenic waterfall. Before very long, we were spread out over the landscape taking photos of the waterfall, the ice and icicles from every imaginable angle – but all too soon it was time to board the macho-bus again.

Frozen waterfall at Laxá í Kjós River

Icicles on Laxá í Kjós River

The next place where we stopped was at a frozen waterfall on the River Fossá, beside the Hvalfjarðarvegur, which is the road that runs around the perimeter of the fjord. I was slowly beginning to get to grips with all the Icelandic names!

I found it quite peculiar to see a feature that would normally flow freely, looking as if it had frozen in mid-flow, although the freezing must have taken place over a period of time. I wondered what it would be like to see it gradually thawing – I found the phenomenon quite fascinating.

Once again, we all grabbed our camera gear and were soon taking photos from numerous (and sometimes rather strange and slightly dangerous) angles. This place was where I managed to remember the risk-taking Welshot Man, who somehow transported himself out onto the frozen expanse of ice, despite all of us being told in no uncertain terms that ice-walking was forbidden…

Intruder on the ice at River Fossá

Frozen waterfall, River Fossá

Our third stop of the day was at a local farmhouse, where we were served a choice of two soups, either mushroom or vegetable and lamb, with some local homemade bread. Naturally I chose the mushroom option and it was simply delicious, but very rich and creamy, so I was only able to manage one bowl. It was so good that many of the meat eaters had some and thought it was far better than the vegetable and lamb soup. The bread was good, but very salty.

Our fourth stop was at a volcanic beach and what had been an abandoned whale factory, at a place called Blaskeggsa, beside the Hvalfjarðarvegur. As we disembarked from the macho-bus, it was obvious the wind was gusting very strongly. It wasn't until Daniel and I were making our way across the beach that I realised exactly how strongly, when a sudden gust lifted me off my feet and deposited me on my back on some ice. It all happened so quickly that I couldn't believe I was lying down. I wasn't hurt, but felt a little foolish.

The spray being blown up by the wind looked so intriguing that Daniel decided we should make our way around a nearby headland towards a small port that was once used by whaling ships. After being forced to stop a couple of times when strong gusts threatened to blow us over, we made it to the headland and soon found a suitable place on which to set up our cameras.

As we started taking photos, it seemed that we had found a reasonably sheltered spot, but then we started to be literally sandblasted. It was so bad that our cameras and lenses were in danger of being damaged, so we decided to make our way back to the main beach. We had to stop numerous times and dig our boots into the pebbles to prevent ourselves from being blown away (and not in the overawed sense).

We eventually got back onto the main beach and found it was slightly more sheltered, so we set up our cameras there and took more photos. I had to prop up Welshot Man with a rock to stop him from taking flight. By then it was around 15:45 and time to leave this not exactly peaceful area. We loaded up and set off for our next place of interest.

Nearly blown away at Blaskeggsa, Hvalfjörður

The next stop was just off the Hvalfjarðarvegur, above the mouth of a river that flows into the Hvalfjörður. The light was quite poor, the wind was very blustery and my sinuses were protesting at the rough treatment they had been receiving. At that point, I decided I was not exactly feeling the love for the river and falls, so decided to stay put in the much warmer macho-bus, before everyone returned and we were once again on our way.

Instead of heading back onto the Hvalfjarðarvegur, we continued up the side road which we had turned into for our last stop. This road appeared to lead into the mountains without really going anywhere, but as we turned a bend, we caught a glimpse of another waterfall. This one seemed to be in a sheltered valley and looked interesting, so I decided to rouse myself and make the short walk up the valley. It was well worth the effort, because the falls had frozen as they flowed through a small fissure in the rock to form a beautiful cascade of ice.

Frozen waterfall, Hvalfjörður

It was finally time to get back into the macho-bus for the drive back to Reykjavik after a full day's photography. As we started on the way back, there was some talk on the radio about coast road conditions being dangerous, due to the wind, ice and snow. I can't say I was surprised! We therefore drove back to Reykjavik via an inland route, which added a bit of time to our journey, because that road was also very icy and treacherous.

When we arrived back at the CenterHotel Klöpp, Lee told us that she and some of the group were going for something to eat and asked if Daniel and I would like to join them. We said yes and left our camera bags in Lee and Av's hotel room before setting off for the main street. A restaurant that served a variety of food was quickly located, where I chose egg noodles with vegetables, washed down with a pint of Gul (a local beer).

After a very enjoyable and relaxing evening, we decided it was time to call it a day. Daniel and I had to collect our bags from Lee and Av's room, before walking the thankfully short distance back to our hotel. We arrived at around 21:30, whereupon I showered and climbed exhausted into bed.

20th February - Day 4

I woke at 06:30 and was ready for action by 07:30. Unfortunately, my sinuses were staging a full-scale rebellion and I was feeling rather compromised, but Daniel and I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at around 08:00. The hotel really does produce a good, plentiful breakfast, which is just as well, due to the vast amount of calories needed in order to cope with the extreme outside temperatures.

As we had a free morning, we walked down to the sea front and ended up taking more photos of the 'Sun Voyager', before walking further along to see if there was anything else photo-worthy. There didn't seem to be, so we made our way back to the hotel to prepare for the afternoon's adventure.

As we had to provide lunch for ourselves, as well as snacks for the rest of the day, Daniel and I revisited Subway and bought a full sub roll each. I played what I deemed clever and asked for mine to be wrapped into two halves, one for lunch and one for a snack later. We then made our way to the CenterHotel Klöpp to meet up with the rest of the group, before we all climbed into one of two vehicles that I can only call Monster Trucks.

We drove out of Reykjavik towards the snow-covered mountains and geothermal area on the Suðurlandsvegur, route 1 or the Ring Road (Icelandic: Þjóðvegur 1 or Hringvegur). This is a national road that runs around the island and connects most of the country's inhabited parts, at a length of 1,332 kilometres/828 miles.

As we drove, we could see plumes of hot air rising from the landscape and it was evident that we were heading directly to the hot spot. We soon turned off the road onto a track, although it merely looked like a snow-covered landscape with yellow poles poking up out of the snow and ice at random intervals.

The first necessary task was to stop and let down the tyres so they would perform properly on the snow and ice. After this, we drove off on the 'track' between the yellow poles, but after only a few minutes Ágúst Kárason (our usual driver in the lead vehicle) slipped his Monster Truck off the track into a big hole.

Whoops … and down into a very deep hole

He managed to extricate it, but in doing so damaged the drive train. Seeing we weren't going very far and while a replacement vehicle was being arranged, we decided it was time to renew acquaintance with our camera gear.

As we took photos, we moved ever closer to the geothermal vent from which the power station was apparently relieving the excess pressure, hence the vapour spilling out. This area is known as Bolaalda and is a very active geothermal area that supplies heat to the Hellisheiði Power Station (renowned as the largest geothermal power station in the world, situated on the Hellisheiðarvirkjun).

The closer we approached the vent, the more substantial the noise became and we began to understand the awesome energy that was directly beneath our feet. It was quite overwhelming to stand in the shadow of this incredible vent, like something reminiscent of a science-fiction movie.

Monster Truck at the geothermal vent, Bolaalda

Soon it was time to leave, as the replacement vehicle had arrived on the road not far from us. Once the other members had transferred all their gear to the replacement vehicle, we set off again across the snow-covered landscape towards yet another geothermal vent, this time one that was not venting vapour. It was an unusual experience to see the electricity pylons making their way across a snow-laden and windswept landscape.

After becoming stuck in the snow and ice several times, we eventually arrived at our next destination, Efri-Fóelluvötn. Once again it was photo quest time and we all disembarked to make our way out into the snowy wilderness. My first impression was that it looked quite surreal with the frozen green moss-covered volcanic rocks and deep snow drifts, together with an eerie silence that was broken only by the biting wind as it swept across the landscape.

Moss and snow landscape, Suðurlandsvegur

I followed Daniel across the snow and ice in his footsteps as closely as I possibly could, but my left leg suddenly disappeared up to my thigh in a snow drift. Rather than helping his beloved father out of the drift, Daniel quickly found his camera and took a photo. It's a son thing? I eventually extricated myself…

Daniel tried on his snow goggles and looked very cool – right up to the moment he disappeared in a snow drift up to his thighs. There he was, holding his tripod and balancing on his right leg with his left leg in the air. What was I to do? It was a photo opportunity not to be missed and besides, I'm never one not to return a favour. Apart from that, it's a father thing!

Daniel then found yet another large hole in the snow, one that he could actually walk into, showing just how hostile this landscape can be. It had a kind of dreamlike and almost disorienting quality that felt oddly hypnotic, but all too soon it was time for us to make our way back to the vehicles. As I was packing my camera gear into the back of the Monster Truck, I turned around quickly without realising I was standing on sheet ice. The inevitable happened and there I was, lying flat on my back for the second time! This time it knocked the wind out of me, but fortunately I once again managed to escape unharmed.

Daniel was playing it cool until this happened...

We set off through a snow storm, having to contend with deep snow drifts that meant the trucks continually had to manoeuvre themselves out of the drifts. Eventually we stopped at the Hellisheiði Power Station for a comfort break and hot coffee. As we re-boarded the trucks, the snow was still falling thick and fast.

Our final stop was at a volcanic beach at Hafnarvik, off Eyrarbakkavegur, a region of Iceland's Suðurland. Hafnarvik was a contrast of black sand, yellow vegetation and blue sea, which was a very colourful, if not incongruous landscape. I followed Daniel across the wet and windy beach and we soon had our cameras set up to begin photographing anything and everything of interest.

Sunset at the volcanic beach, Hafnarvik

We had come to this location for sunset, but the cloud layers obscuring the sun weren't obliging, so our photos were mainly of just the dunes and the sea. It was still a pleasing sight, though, one certainly not seen every day.

As the light was fading, we all settled ourselves back into the vehicles for our return to Reykjavik. By the time we arrived, no plans had been made for an evening meal together, so Daniel and I dropped our bags at the hotel and made our way back to the main thoroughfare to find somewhere suitable to eat.

We eventually settled on a place offering a promising seafood pizza. Due to the number of people out that night (a load of school children had recently arrived because of the half-term holiday), we had almost a 30-minute wait for a table. When they arrived, though, our fresh seafood pizzas of shrimps, scallops and tuna were exceptionally good and all washed down with a pint of Gul beer. I wished my sinuses were behaving a bit better, but I was so tired when we returned to the hotel, that I just showered, went to bed and slept.

21st February - Day 5

It was an early start with an 08:00 departure, so after a quick breakfast we went to await the macho-bus. It turned out we needed to provide our own lunch and snacks, but would be having an evening meal at Hötel Anna. We therefore stopped at a kind of service area on the way out of Reykjavik and I asked for a cheese and salad roll at the Almar Bakari. The lovely girl serving made me one, as all her rolls and sandwiches contained meat. We also had a cup of coffee.

At around 09:40, our first stop of the day was at the Urriðafoss waterfall, located in the River Þjórsá in south-west Iceland. This spectacular waterfall appears to be in the middle of the river and very soon we were all spread out around the banks of the river taking photos. There was a lot of careful moving around as we changed our positions, due to the prolific quantity of ice around on the river banks. This time, though, I managed to stay upright.

Urriðafoss waterfall in the River Þjórsá

The allotted time passed quickly and we were soon back in the bus and on our way to the next destination. Skógafoss waterfall is situated on the River Skógá in the south of Iceland at the cliffs of the former coastline, forming a spectacularly high waterfall. It was quite imposing and not long before our party had invaded the area, along with other coach loads of tourists.

We realised it would be impossible to take any photos without people in, so we decided to use the people to show the scale of the falls. Daniel and I moved a bit closer to the falls and they really were impressive, although the down side was that the water spray was making our camera equipment damp.

As we were about to return to the macho-bus, Richie pointed out to me that the sun was making a faint rainbow in the fall of the water. I tried one or two shots that weren't very successful, so decided to walk back to the bus. I'd only just started, when for some reason I felt compelled to turn around and there, right across the waterfall, was a beautiful rainbow. I set up my camera on the tripod and took a few shots (image below):

Skógafoss waterfall on the River Skógá

After that mild excitement, we were soon back in the bus and driving along on the way to our third destination. As we travelled to Sólheimasandur beach, I ate the cheese and salad roll which I'd bought earlier and very good it was too.

A C-47 SkyTrain 'Dakota' on Sólheimasandur beach

We eventually arrived at the beach at around 13:20, where we were confronted with the unusual sight of the skeleton of an aeroplane on the black volcanic sand. It looked somewhat out of this world perched there on its final resting place, with the mountains in the background and the blue sky overhead.

On Saturday 24th November 1973, a United States Navy airplane (C-47 SkyTrain also known as 'Dakota') had been forced to land on Sólheimasandur's black sandy beach in the south of Iceland, due to low fuel. The crew survived the landing and it was only later when the crew returned with fuel to recover the aeroplane, that they realised the plane still had plenty of fuel in the tanks and that they hadn't actually switched to the emergency fuel tank.

Due to the properties of the volcanic sand, they were unable to take off from the beach, so the aeroplane was stripped and left in situ. Also on the beach, I noticed a large ball of photogenic boulder clay and naturally made my way across the sand to take one or two photos before being called back to the macho-bus (having lost track of time yet again…)

Our next destination was Vík í Mýrdal in Iceland's southernmost village, located on the main ring road around the island, about 180 kilometres/110 miles by road south-east of Reykjavík. The church looked like an interesting place to start photography, so Daniel, Rob and I began to look for a way up to it, as it seemed to be perched on a ledge above the village. After a few minutes' walk, we espied a path in the right direction and after a bit of a climb, we finally arrived at a flat area on which the church was built. It was well worth the effort!

Vik í Mýrdal Church

After exhausting all photographic possibilities, Daniel and I made our way back down and over to the beach, where offshore lie the Reynisdrangar basalt sea stacks, remnants of the once more extensive cliff line of Reynisfjall, now battered by the sea. The story goes that the stacks are trolls that were caught by the sunlight and suffered petrification. We sat on a man-made promontory and took more photographs, before making our way back to where the macho-bus was parked. I had been a little nervous, but thankfully not petrified.

The Reynisdrangar basalt sea stacks

The macho-bus was still locked when Daniel and I got back to it, so we decided we might as well go to investigate a nearby local shop that seemed to be selling typical Icelandic goods at a reasonable price. I bought a likely-looking piece of volcanic rock to add to Kay's and my longstanding rock and mineral collection, while Daniel spotted some troll-like Vikings (not real) that he decided to buy for Willow and Piran. After these impromptu, but nevertheless pleasing purchases, we returned to the now open macho-bus.

We left Vík í Mýrdal and drove back towards the east along the Þjóðvegur (1) to Reynisfjara beach. Reynisfjara is an unusual black pebble beach and features an amazing cliff of fairly regular vertical basalt columns that give the impression of a rocky step pyramid, which is called Gardar. The Reynisdrangar basalt sea stacks were clearly visible in the distance, making a distinctive beach scene that was enhanced by the blue in the sky.

Reynisfjara beach

After spending a while photographing the beach, Daniel and I moved on to a rocky promontory that looked towards Dyrhólaey, east of us. Here there were more basalt columns rising enigmatically out of the sea, so we spent some time photographing them amid the waves (the columns, not us), before my long-suffering sinuses began to stage a sit-down strike that made me feel quite weary and long for the comfort, as well as the warmth, of the macho-bus.

However, I had no sooner put all my camera equipment into the back of the bus, when I turned around to find the sky had turned a beautiful bright red/pink colour. My sinuses didn't get a look in, as I delved into my rucksack and grabbed a camera and tripod before almost running back to the promontory, where I could see spray from the waves being lit up so that their crests when they broke made the spray look very pink indeed with the reflection of the waning sun.

I quickly set up my camera and began taking photos until the banded pink and yellow light faded at around 18:20. Everyone there was delighted with the phenomenon of the pink waves! There was then a mass exodus back to the macho-bus, where we all piled in feeling happy, but very peckish indeed.

The pink wave phenomenon at Dyrhólaey

Our next port of call was Hötel Anna for our evening meal. Once again, meat was prevalent on the menu, but I was given a starter of fresh salad (and it really did taste as if it had just been picked). My main meal was cod with carrots, potatoes, turnip and some other vegetables. The vegetables were really good and the cod was to die for (although I didn't want to, as I was hoping to see the aurora borealis again). I hadn't actually tasted cod like that since I was in my teens, many moons ago. It was all done to perfection and washed down with a pint of Gul beer. The words 'replete' and 'mellow' spring to mind.

We left Hötel Anna at about 21:30 for our final stop at a floodlit waterfall called Seljalandsfoss, only a short drive away. Seljalandsfoss is a unique waterfall in the River Seljalandsá, about 30 kilometres/18.5 miles west of Skógar. It is 60 metres/197 feet high with a footpath behind it at the bottom of the cliff, on which tourists were once able to walk behind the falls, until it was closed off.

I took quite a few photos, but once back at the car park, discovered I hadn't set the focus correctly. Daniel took pity on me and helped me to set up my tripod and camera and adjusted the focus correctly. It's a son thing ☺

I then took a couple of quick photos. I was slightly annoyed that the headlights of two vehicles had lit up the foreground, although when later processing the photos, I think on reflection that these lights actually add to the image. I was the last one to board the macho-bus for the drive back to Reykjavik and the welcome oblivion of a warm, comfortable bed.

Seljalandsfoss waterfall at night

22nd February - Day 6

It seemed incredible that my last full day had already arrived and it was another early start, as we would be having a long drive to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. It was also billed as a cultural day for some reason as yet unknown and we were joined by Yimir (who was the owner of the tour company we were with), his wife (who had arranged for our meals for the day) and Dani, Richie's girlfriend.

We again left Reykjavik on the Þjóðvegur (1) towards Hvalfjörður, but this time we took the tunnel that runs under Hvalfjörður, rather than the much longer route around it. I found the tunnel quite intriguing, because most of it is unlined and we could see the rough-hewn rock face.

The tunnel measures an impressive 5,770 metres/18,930 feet long, of which 3,750 metres/12,303 feet are beneath the seabed, with its lowest point being 165 metres/541 feet below sea level. It was also the first undersea tunnel in the world to be drilled through young basalt in a geothermal area.

After what was definitely a very long drive, we finally arrived at Heydalsvegur (Raudhalsahraun) and found ourselves in a red volcanic area, where the red is due to the high iron content of the rock. The scenery was spectacular and also very colourful, with the red rock, the white ice, the black cinder cone of Volcano Rauðhals in the distance and the mountains in the background, all beneath a partly turquoise blue sky:

Spectacular scenery at Heydalsvegur (Raudhalsahraun)

As we disembarked from the bus, we were told to hang around, because Yimir had brought along a typical Icelandic treat for us. When the 'treat' was produced, it turned out to be rotting raw shark. I have to say I didn't understand all the fuss, as it didn't taste all that bad – possibly my blocked sinuses helped!

It was followed by a local Icelandic spirit called Brennivin, which is apparently Icelandic vodka. I must admit that this tasted a whole lot better than the rotting raw shark, especially as Yimri felt it his unwavering duty to make sure all of us had our fair share of it, by giving us a shot every time we passed by him…

Needless to say, we left this spot slightly more inebriated than when we'd arrived and quite merrily journeyed onward to a local farm, where we enjoyed a beautifully arranged lunch that had been prepared by Yimri's wife, together with some other people from the local farm.

The farmhouse on Lýsuhólsvegur

At lunch, we were told that our macho-bus had a flat tyre due to a fracture in the wheel rim and was unable to be repaired on site. Ágúst Kárason somehow arranged another vehicle from the farm, but unfortunately this only had 11/12 seats. We squeezed in with all our gear and I have to say it was a very tight squeeze indeed, one that can only be described as cosy.

We drove on to Arnarstapi (or Stapi), a fishing village not far down the road at the foot of Mount Stapafell, between Hellnar village and Breiðavík farms, on the southern side of Snæfellsnes. I didn't really find this small place particularly inspiring, so only took a few photos before retreating back to the 'cosy' vehicle.

Arnarstapi or Stapi fishing village

On the drive back to the farm, we stopped in a parking area overlooking the sea, which gave access to the dark pebbly beach of Djúpalónssandur and the cove of Dritvik, not far around the headland. Both lie at the foot of the Snæfellsjökull (meaning snow-fell glacier), said to be Iceland's most famous stratovolcano – a conical volcano built up by many layers of hardened lava and tephra.

At the farm, we were given an evening meal made with local produce and I had a lovely fresh salad sandwich that Ymir's wife kindly made for me. Ymir asked if we would like to stay for a festival get-together that all the farms in the area were holding there that evening. The fare would consist of bull's penis, sheep testicles and the like, all liberally lubricated with local beers, spirits and wine.

Several of the group decided to stay and enjoy the festivities, but I was so tired that I opted to return to Reykjavik. Daniel would really have liked to stay, but decided that he would come back with me on the proper mini-bus, which had been sent out to replace the broken macho-bus. It's definitely a son thing ☺

A very tired bunch of individuals thus set off for Reykjavik, but on the way back, Daniel and Kris thought they had spotted the aurora on the horizon. It was quickly organised that we stop for them to take some test shots to see if the aurora really was visible. A camera is much more sensitive to light levels than the human eye, so is a most useful tool for detecting the aurora.

The aurora was indeed beginning to be visible, so after a quick discussion between Ari (our driver), Kris and Lee, a decision was made to stop near a lake a few kilometres ahead to see if the aurora was going to develop. We arrived at the lake and fortuitously found a suitable place to park off the road. All of us bundled out, put on our head torches, and took off across some very icy and slippery ground with our cameras, our tiredness completely forgotten.

At the frozen lake, we were not expecting the amazing display of the aurora that developed. Daniel, Rachel and I made our way out onto the ice and set up our tripods and cameras for a truly magical and spiritual experience that I shall never forget – lying on my back on the frozen ice of the lake, looking up at the ever-changing aurora. It felt out of this world, an unforgettable and simply wonderful finale to an incredible Icelandic experience.

Aurora borealis from a frozen lake on the Snæfellsbær peninsula

We arrived back at the hotel after midnight, where I had to pack my suitcase and rucksack ready for the morning, before showering and falling into bed.

23 February - Day 7

My alarm went off at 06:30 and I met Daniel for breakfast at around 07:00. I was booked out of the hotel and ready to go by 08:00. Daniel kindly waited with me for my transport to the airport (it's a son thing!) To my surprise, Lee and Ágúst arrived with a mini-bus to take me to the airport, but we first had to collect Rachel, who was travelling home on the same flight.

We arrived at the airport at around 09:00, when the four of us had coffee and chatted about our time in Iceland. Half an hour later, Rachel and I headed off to the departure gate after saying goodbye to Lee and thanking Ágúst for all he had done for us during our stay. He truly is one of the nicest, kindest and most considerate people I have ever met.

Rachel and I boarded our flight and the plane taxied down the runway, taking off on time at 11:15. After an unremarkable flight (during which I slept a little) we arrived at Manchester airport a little before 14:00.

I collected my bags, said goodbye to Rachel and headed off to find the car park transfer bus. However, I became tired with waiting, so walked to the car park, changed my boots for comfortable shoes, had a drink and some biscuits and drove out of the car park. As I was leaving, the transfer bus was just arriving.

It was thankfully a relatively uneventful journey home to Cornwall from Manchester, but to say I was exhausted is an understatement. My sinuses had finally declared all-out war and I surprised myself by making such good time.

There is no doubt that this trip to Iceland, despite the sinusitis, was an extraordinary adventure that was made all the more pleasurable by the lovely people of Welshot Photographic Academy, who helped me to feel most welcome. It also felt so special to have been able to share it all with Daniel. The whole experience was beyond words, but I hope the photos speak for themselves.