

Atli & Egla Explain Iceland

So there we were, in a natural “hot spot” in the Western Fjordlands enjoying a soak, when in plops this couple Inkibjork and Atli, Icelandic “townies” on a stay-vacation. Over the next hour Jim and I peppered this couple with questions, trying to better understand what we referred to as the “Icelandic Condition.” As we were parting, we exchanged information and found they lived in Reykjavik and promised to look them up when we were back in “civilization”.

Within a week we found ourselves back in Reykjavik and contacted Atli, who agreed to meet us for dinner to discuss things both in Iceland and America. What follows is a very loose interpretation of those conversations taking place at Saffron, a pizza joint in town, the coffee shop where his girlfriend works, and at the local craft beer bar where we closed our night. I also

Wages: It seems that Iceland can be used as a guide for how \$15 an hour would work. Most service positions, for someone over 18 pay \$15 here. The result is a minor “sticker shock” when you open a menu or get something done. But after the shock wears off, and you realize that there’s no tipping on services either, the prices aren’t all that much higher. All of this leading to the number one gripe amongst the workers here; taxes. The average tax rate for the working person here is 40%, which covers universal health-care and a list of other benefits. The author realizes that taking the test case of Iceland, and multiplying it by a thousand doesn’t make it America, but for a short visit, it’s sort of nice to see a running model of what could be on America’s horizon.

Icelandic Dream: I’ve asked several Icelanders if there was an Icelandic equivalent to the “American Dream”, and was sort of surprised that there doesn’t seem to be one. I think the bursting of the economic bubble here about eight years ago, removed the ability for younger folks here to have an expectation of owning a house. It seems that when the banks failed, those with existing mortgages got them wiped off the books; free house for them. But those who came after that point, faced stronger scrutiny and tighter regulation. The general sense I got from the “kids” (anyone younger than me is now a child), is that they want to work a job that’s not too stressful, be able to rent a nice place and get on with their lives. I asked if there is a certain “status” to live up to here, and the answer was no. THAT was a major surprise. The prevailing thought was “I don’t care”.

Population Distribution: From what I can gather, about a two-thirds of Iceland lives in or around Reykjavik. The magnitude of this can’t be gauged until you drive around as much as Jim and I did. “Out in the field”, you’d drive for hours without seeing any structures, let alone people. It’s as if the lava swallowed up the civilizations. There are towns as small as two people, we’re told. All these geological nooks and crannies dotted with the abandoned, decaying structures of a civilization which has since moved on; it does make for some nice photography, but to us, the dispersion was pretty shocking. We’re told that most of the abandoned houses are still technically “owned” by someone, but the almost magnetic draw towards larger population bases was apparent everywhere.

Icelandic Winter/Depression: Atli described the “winter blues” pretty accurately. Much as we’re enjoying the 24hrs of sunlight presently, the inverse, beginning in mid-September, seems to affect most

of the “locals”. Being Iceland, there is one major milk producer and they’ve just recently taken to adding Vitamin D to their product.

Sheep/Where are the Rams

Politics

Education

Language: Icelandic people would understand Faroe, but if you speak Danish, you don’t understand Faroe or Icelandic.

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