

TRAVELLERS' CLUB 29TH JULY 2007

ICELAND – LAND OF FIRE & ICE

We welcomed our speaker, Stephen Codrington, who was visiting Sydney during his annual homecoming from Hong Kong during the northern hemisphere summer vacation. As well as our helpers (Nancy, Lee, Marilyn, Nicole), and our regulars, it was refreshing to see several new faces and to be joined by Sandra and Geoffrey from Bendigo, as well as members of the Codrington clan!

Our May speaker had concluded with a brief touchdown in Iceland, so we were primed for “the works” from Stephen’s two sojourns there. He proposed to give us an introduction and “visit” to nine regions/locations around the perimeter of this island nation, which has a population of 288,000 and is located just south of the Arctic Circle. The interior is permanently frozen and virtually uninhabited.

A world map showed us shifting tectonic plates over the earth’s molten interior magma and under the oceans. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is a fissure/crack consisting of the youngest rocks emerging and cooling under water - except in Iceland, which is the only place where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is visible on land. Iceland is being torn apart by the movement of the plates, which provide new molten rock material to the island’s surface through volcanic eruptions and lava flows. This unique situation also allows geothermal power stations throughout Iceland to provide a reliable source for lighting, cooking and heating.

We read a list of place names as they were spoken to us through a recording of a native Icelander, and we certainly agreed that:

- (a) there was no connection/clue to pronunciation in the script
- (b) that this Viking language was most difficult and complex – a handicap for travellers and students alike.

Following this mind and ear-twisting introduction, we looked at the nine regions identified by Stephen:

1. In spite of its status as an international capital, **Reykjavik** looks somewhat like a country town situated around a small lake with heritage buildings of corrugated iron. Because there are no forests at this latitude, building materials have always been imported. The majority of buildings are 3 storeys, but there is one “skyscraper” – a church. The Prime Minister’s residence and Rathaus (Assembly Building) are two notable buildings for the citizens.
2. To the east of the “city” in the **Golden Triangle**. We were shown a river flowing along a complex geological fault line that produces a spectacular waterfall. We saw geysers at the place that gave them their name – Geysir. We were also shown fissures and lava flows shaped like ropes at Pingvellir, one of the places where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is tearing apart the earth’s surface. Interestingly, Pingvellir was also the

place where Iceland's government met between 930 and 1221, at which time Iceland was invaded and occupied by Norway.

3. **Vestmannaeyjar** is a group of islands to the south of the mainland. The largest town is Heimaey. Accessible to the mainland via the daily car ferry, Heimaey has an economy based on fishing and fish processing, very steep cliffs with abundant bird life (puffins) and some small volcanic peaks. In 1973, a new volcano suddenly appeared, and within a few months grew to 220 metres in height, burying a third of the town, and extending the coastline. The lava flow that was threatening to block the harbour entrance was stopped only by the efforts of the townsfolk, who sprayed cold ocean water on the advancing lava from high pressure hoses. To-day, the surface the lava flow contains many memorials to the deceased. In some areas, moss is now growing on the young rocks, but in other parts the rock remains too hot for any growth. Some of the youngest rocks in Iceland are on these islands

4. The **south-west coast** region has the second highest density of population in Iceland due to its good farming soil – with the notable exceptions of some new lava flows which are infertile and will grow only moss. Stephen's mid-summer photos showed ice-capped hills (part of the escarpment encircling the interior). Farm houses are nestled at the base of the escarpment seeking protection from the harsh windy winter climate. We saw summer ice-melt waterfalls flowing over the resistant sandstone in many places where the escarpment was very close to the ocean. We also saw some remarkable black sand beaches with resistant basalt pillars of rock near the southern town of Vik.

5. In an elevated area 49 kilometres inland from the highway which circles the island, is **Lakagigar**, site of one of the world's largest fissure eruptions in 1783. This eruption produced a spectacular row of craters as well as a 60 kilometre long lava flow. The eruption was so prolonged and devastating that it almost led to the abandonment of Iceland. Closer to the coast on the way to Lakagigar was Fjardrargljufur, a beautiful gorge maintained by the constant erosion of a stream despite the gradual uplift of the land in this area. The highway stays away from this uplifting – unlike the river it could not cope.

6. In the **south-east of Iceland**, exposed to Atlantic winds and rain, the town of Kirkjubaejarklaustur (population 170) is the centre of a community of graziers who farm on the narrow plan between the ocean and the escarpment. Their pasture soil comprises glacier sediments. Their water supply flows over the escarpment in waterfalls, and each farm has housing for cattle as well as for humans. The nearby Skaftafell National Park features glaciers discharging directly into the ocean, and is attractive to walkers who can walk on the glaciers. In 1996, a volcanic eruption under the ice cap caused massive flooding that destroyed the bridge on the perimeter highway and devastated strip more than 20 kilometres wide. There were no casualties, so if it were not for the damage to the highway, the event may have gone unnoticed in the media – a fairly common omission in Iceland. Also in the south-east is Jökulsarlon, a lake of icebergs. The lake's mouth to the ocean is so narrow that it cannot discharge all the icebergs that detach from the glacier

that feeds the lake. The largest town in south-west Iceland is Höfn (population 1780), the main port of this region.

7. The **Eastern Fjords** region has Iceland's oldest rocks, which are under attack by strong ocean waves. There are waterfalls everywhere, lots of bird life, and sheep grazing narrow bands of glacial debris that fan out from the hills. Egilsstaðir (population 800) is the east coast's main urban centre with its market gardens inside floodlit glasshouses and the east coast's only airport. About 26 kilometres to the east is the small port town of Seyðisfjörður, with its famous blue church, ferry terminal and traditional Norwegian style houses.

8. **Northern Iceland** has the nation's second largest town, Akureyri (population 15,500), which also boasts a ferry terminal. Another town in northern Iceland, Húsavík (population 2500) is a centre for fishing and for whale watching, Escarpment waterfalls provide reliable which, together with the fertile soil in the region, accounts the numerous farms. In this region is Europe's largest waterfall, Dettifoss – 44 metres high with a flow of 500 cubic metres of water per second.

9. **Lake Myvatn** (Midge Lake) has a population of 450, and is inland. As well as inhaling midges, one inhales the strong sulphur odours of this extremely active geothermal region. Although there is enough cool soil for a few farms, it is the geothermal activity that makes this area remarkable. One can enjoy great walks over hot rocks that are still steaming from the 1984 eruption, along steaming fissures, past pseudo craters, together with views of everyday geothermal activity up close with absolutely no fences or barriers. Previous notable (i.e. not everyday) activity occurred in 1723 (lava flow and new crater created) and 1984 (fissure eruption and lava flow). It seems that only tourists like to observe the rise and fall of the local power station as it responds to geothermal pressures below – the locals are used to it just get on with life.

Thanks to Stephen for such a comprehensive and enjoyable talk.