

Vikings & Lakers

Iceland's windblown Ring Road journeys between medieval and modern, unleashing Norse lore, rotten shark meat, troll statues, blackened sheep heads, mail-order Filipino brides, raspy liquor, and the world's only phallus museum.

Story and photos by Roy M. Wallack

"You will not like *mysa*," the museum restaurant director said, pouring a clear, egg-whitish liquid into a shot glass. "Hardly anyone here in Iceland even drinks it anymore — only old, fat pensioners who started when they were young because they were told it would grow big muscles and put hair on their chests."

In desperate need of the latter, I swigged the shot, my face twisting as if it were back in college chugging tequila for the first time. Non-alcoholic, *mysa* (pronounced "missa") is the sour, vinegary, briny water that floats atop old milk or yogurt — the same stuff Viking sailors drank and pickled meat in 1,000 years ago because it was the only thing that didn't go bad on their epic journeys from Norway to Iceland and the New World. Emboldened by its historical significance (and my desensitized taste buds), I asked for another shot — and another and another. It tasted like ... liquid courage! That's because as the carton of *mysa* disappeared down my throat, so

did my paralyzing fear of the Ring Road, the 830-mile two-lane highway around this Ohio-sized island at the top of the world, which had left me hobbled, freezing, technologically impaired, hating every pedal stroke, and closer to throwing in the towel than I'd ever been on any other bike trip in my life.

Could a few slurps of a millennium-old soft drink spark an epiphany that could get me my mojo back? Could I trick myself into forgetting the miserable mileage of the Ring Road by turning myself into a rolling anthropologist in search of interesting (or disgusting) stuff about the great Norse explorers and the culture they left behind — like *mysa*?

Many people visit Iceland to run white-water rapids, watch whales and waterfalls, shop for stuffed puffin dolls, and pose with troll statues. But a deeper perspective was crucial motivation for a broken-down man with abandonment issues. I was riding solo on Highway 1 — the official name of the Ring Road — because a photographer pal who'd recruited me for the trip never showed up at the airport ("Didn't you get my email last week?" he texted me. "I'm

doing a diving shoot in Panama.")

Worse than that was the bitter, terrifying cold. I'm from Los Angeles, where breathing out frost is considered a magic trick. I waited all morning in the capital city, Reykjavik, for the icy wind and rain to abate and the sun to shine. It didn't, probably a sign that I should stay in town for the night and see if the legend of "the world's most beautiful women" was reality or myth. But with a wedding ring on my finger and a 10-day schedule of 83 miles per day on the line, the macho side of me took over and I headed north.

Rocking the bike out of the saddle into Arctic headwinds, my torso quickly was soaked in a cold sweat, and my nose and hands ceased to function correctly. My camera was next to go. When I took it out for a shot about seven miles out of town, the sub-freezing windchill (as low as -5 C, according to the occasional electronic weather signs on the roadside) actually shorted out the circuitry. Just like that, my Lumix was dead. Less than 45 minutes into my adventure, I'd become a picture-loving participant on a buddy bike trip without a camera or a buddy.

Protective measures. A group of British girls mask themselves from volcanic ash.



The next camera shop was in the picturesque town of Borgarnes, located on a peninsula 40 miles north of Reykjavik, population 1,900. It took me over 10 hours to get there due to a long, underwater tunnel that bans bikes and forced a 60-mile detour around the Hvalfjörður inlet. By the time I got back to the Ring Road, it was a shoulderless, busy two-lane freeway passing through a desolate, treeless landscape of tundra and lava rocks — with no cities or stores along the way. No surprise there, as there are just 300,000 Icelanders, with 200,000 of them in the capital area. As for the lack of trees, the first wave of Viking pioneers cut down all the native birchwoods a millennium ago. They regrow slowly in the four-month growing season of these near-Arctic Circle latitudes. “If you get lost in the forest in Iceland,” goes the saying, “just stand up,” — which refers to the sparse and runty forests that look like Christmas tree lots.

Standing up on a bike in a frigid headwind for over 80 miles takes its toll. By 9:00 PM, when I crossed the 1.5-mile Borgarfjarðarbrú bridge (the second longest in the country) into Borgarnes, all the shops were shut down — and so was my body. The hardest double centuries never beat me up like this. I was coughing, sneezing, soaked, and hurting from head to toe. My muscles — quad and hip flexors especially — were destroyed. My shoulders, neck, and triceps were stiff and spasmodic. Worst were the knees, screeching with pain like rusty hinges. Working hour after hour with no break, I was bonked beyond bonk. Shivering and shaking from the windchill



No trees here. Roy climbs above one of Iceland's many barren, windswept landscapes.

within two minutes of stopping, I shorted my normal stretching and feeding routines all day long. Oddly, for a sunless day, I was also darker than usual. It seems that the fallout of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which blew its top from March to May and disrupted flights all over Europe, had coated my face in volcanic ash and mud kicked up from the wet roads. When I saw myself in a mirror, I looked like Al Jolson singing “Mammy.”

Game Over, Range Rover

Getting a hot shower and shelter after that hellish day was a priority. After find-

ing that a Chinese group had bought out the entire youth hostel, I lucked into the last room at a bed and breakfast.

“We opened this when the market crashed,” said the proprietor, referring to the national banking scam that blew up and brought Iceland to bankruptcy in 2006. Icelanders left by the thousands. So did businesses that had to buy goods abroad, including McDonalds.

“Many people have opened B&Bs — and museums, too,” she continued. “We had to — anything to make ends meet. The exchange rate dropped from 68 kroner to the dollar to 130 now, and we all went from rich to poor. We all wanted to be Americans — big SUVs, big-screen TVs, big this, big that. Now everyone else comes here for vacation because it’s cheap. And we’re back to being Icelanders again.”

The crash gave rise to a slogan that I would hear all over Iceland in the next week: Range Rover, Game Over.

Could it be that as I was discovering Iceland, they were rediscovering themselves?

Being marooned here in little Borgarnes for a day put me way behind schedule, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise that rejuvenated my body and spirit. After sleeping through the midnight sun (you have to pull the shades all the way down), I bought a cheap camera when the shops opened the next day at 11:00 AM, charged the battery for a couple hours, then ren-

dezzed with my fateful mysa at the newly opened Settlement Centre museum. Its exhibits focused on the tourist-friendly “Saga” craze — stories of the country’s founding that usually feature Egil, the Viking pioneer and heathen warrior considered Iceland’s George Washington.

While hanging around town, I even got in a swim workout and hot-tub rehab for my aching legs at a geothermally heated pool and sauna, \$3 entry fee. Iceland, which straddles the grinding North American and European tectonic plates, is a bubbling cauldron of volcanoes, geysers, and steam vents that are used to provide cheap electricity and hot water. That’s why the country has over 200 public aquatic centers, including an Olympic-sized lap pool, kid’s dip, water slide, sauna, and locker rooms in Borgarnes. That’s probably why Iceland’s national sport is swimming (or as the guy next to me said, “sitting in a hot tub and talking”).

The pools don’t use much chlorine, so strict hygiene rules apply, such as taking a naked shower before swimming. Wall posters and a human inspector instruct you to scrub all private areas — crotch, armpits, butt, feet, face, and hair — in five languages, including Icelandic, Danish, Norwegian, German, and English. “You forgot your butt,” the man firmly reminded me.

After a necessary and satisfying day of shopping, mysa guzzling, fried chicken eating, and swimming, I spent the second night of my trip watching YouTube videos of the NBA finals and arguing the merits of Kobe Bryant versus Michael Jordan. Like most Icelandic males, Victor Rodriguez, the night manager of the Borgarnes youth hostel, was an obsessive fan of American sports. In the next couple of hours, this half-Icelander/half-Spaniard became my cultural guide, railing against the high unemployment rate and complaining of minor slights against Iceland’s growing population of black-haired halfbreeds such as himself and the kids of the one-time Filipina mail-order bride down the street, who ran the restaurant where I bought the chicken.

Hearing that I’d liked mysa, Victor told me that young boys still drank it, but as a sugar-laced beverage called *garpur* that is marketed as a “he-man” drink guaranteed to grow chest hair. He then went into the kitchen and came out with some traditional Icelandic cuisine he thought I’d enjoy because, as he put it, “they taste

WANT TO KEEP GOING? DON'T LET CHAPPED SKIN STOP YOU.

Before the road rubs you the wrong way, reach for the little green can packed with relief. Essential gear for the trip, Bag Balm® is the time-tested solution for soothing chapped and chafed skin, cuts, and scrapes.



DAIRY ASSOCIATION CO., INC.
P.O. BOX 145, DEPT. AC11, LYNDONVILLE, VT 05851/TEL. 802-626-3610/WWW.BAGBALM.COM
WEST OF ROCKIES: SMITH SALES SERVICE, P.O. BOX 48, OREGON CITY, OR 97045



CASEY GREENE

WHEELWORKS Est. 1977
BICYCLE STORES | CYCLING CENTERS

BELMONT WHEELWORKS
480 Trapelo Road
Belmont, MA 02478
tel: 617-489-3577

The New England Tandem & Touring Center

Tandems: Calfee • CoMotion • Santana • Trek • KHS
Touring Bikes: CoMotion • I.F. • Serotta • Surly • Trek

Introducing! New England's Finest Selection of Tandems, Touring Bikes, & Accessories

All Under One Roof!

wheelworks.com/goto/tandemtouringcenter

**BOSTON'S
BEST 2005/07**
IMPROPER BOSTONIAN

**PHOENIX
Best
09**
WHEELWORKS

**TOP 100
BIKE RETAILER 2005-09**
FEATURED IN:
VELONEWS
2005 the CREAM of the SHOP

**2005/06/09
BRAINY
AWARDS**
Best Pro Shop
Bicycle Retailer

**BEST OF
BOSTON
2005/07**
Awarded by BostonMagazine

like crap.” That’s how I got to sample *slátur* (pronounced slouter), a sausage made of sheep liver, blood, and intestines, ground up together, sewed up in a ball, boiled, and sliced, and *Brennivín*, a 40-percent-alcohol liquor dating from Viking times made from fermented potato pulp and caraway seeds. It’s known as the Black Death, and I know why. It tastes like black licorice from hell.

“And do you in America eat *svið* (pronounced “sweeth)?” he asked. “You must try it. It’s an entire roasted sheep’s head, with the eyeballs, ears, and other parts intact.”

Before he shut the hostel down for the night, Victor asked if I’d be passing through Husavik, a small town in the far north 30 miles from the Arctic Circle best known for whale watching. When I said no, seeing on the map that Husavik was a full day’s ride off the Ring Road and I couldn’t spare the time, he shook his head. “Then you will miss another unique thing in this country found nowhere else in the world: the Icelandic Phallogical Institute.”

My curiosity was piqued. After all, how could I come all the way to Iceland and not go to the renowned Penis Museum?

Size Matters

The 210 miles of Ring Road between

Borgarnes and Akureyri, Iceland’s second biggest city at 17,000 people and its northern sightseeing hub, are ideal for cycling — if you’re headed southwest. Unfortunately, I was still going northeast into a freezing headwind.

Back-to-back 170- and 140-kilometer days on this busy, barren, shoulderless stretch of rolling road, almost devoid of stores and shelter were only made tolerable by the lack of rain, my rested legs, and my new upbeat attitude. The ho-hum scenery — pastoral farmlands, volcanic moonscapes, grasslands with grazing horses and sheep, and occasional Christmas tree-lot forests — finally got interesting the last 50 miles. Long, steep climbs led to a veritable Little Switzerland — row after row of snowcapped peaks with the white stuff dripping down the sides like melted marshmallow on chocolate ice cream.

The reward came when the road topped out at 4,000 feet and I began a wild 90-minute, 30-mile descent that led all the way to the outskirts of Akureyri. Facing a breathtaking wall of mountains framing Eyjafjörður, Iceland’s longest fjord, the Ring Road turns right for the last 10 blissful miles into town. Heading south for the first time, tailwinds whisked me into the

city, which sits in a sheltered natural harbor at the end of the inlet.

Depleted by the tough two-day ride, I switched into R&R mode for the next 36 hours. I found a B&B and a supermarket, swam laps in the pool, and made a visit to the famous Listagi Street art and craft center. Of course I continued eating all the Viking foods I could lay my hands on. I tried *hákarl* (pronounced how-kahl), a gray cube of putrefied shark with tiny bones and a nostril-twisting ammonia reek. And I became addicted to *skyr*, a tasty Icelandic cheese-like yogurt with a built-in spoon in the lid.

I received more history on Iceland’s precarious economics from the B&B’s friendly manager-owner, Elin Conway, daughter of a G.I. stationed here during World War II, when the U.S. and Britain took over the island for several years.

“You know, I was a big-time real estate agent before the crash,” she said with a laugh. “We were all trying to be Americans — so I drove a Range Rover and took expensive vacations. I loved San Francisco.” Her daughter Ritta was a top manager at Iceland’s Landsbanki bank that precipitated the country’s rise and fall by offering exorbitant interest rates and



The one and only. The extra miles couldn’t keep Roy from the Icelandic Phallogical Museum.

then defaulting. Unemployed, she has since emigrated to Canada.

When I told Elin I wanted to take mysa back to America to sell to health-food stores, she gave me her business card and said she’d help me market it as the “Viking chest-hair grower.”

I found the Icelanders to be a helpful, outgoing people who enjoy a good laugh, at odds with the dour reputations of their Nordic cousins on mainland Europe. They have sort of an odd-man-out view of life that might stem from their country’s modern-day economic and geological

travails. More likely, their outlook is due to their thousand-year geographic isolation and near-unpronounceable Viking language, which is unintelligible even to the linguistically similar but modernized Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians. Seeing me fumble over a nine-syllable street name while asking directions to a hardware store, several people just looked at each other, threw their hands up, and laughed. “Just look for a long word that starts with a T,” they said.

They apparently like to laugh so much that they elected a comedian to one of the most important offices in the country

Jon Gnarr, a non-politician and Iceland’s best-known comic, had been elected Reykjavik’s mayor the night before. The only candidate of his self-created Best Party, he ran on the slogan, “Government in Iceland is a joke. So who better to run it?” In an attempt to calm the nerves of the business community after the election, he said, “No one has to be afraid of the Best Party because it is the best party. If it wasn’t, it would be called the Worst Party or the Bad Party.”

Bad puns were flying two days later following a crazy-hard climb out of town

Ireland – Connemara, Kerry, Causeway Coast, Dingle...

England – Cotswolds, Stonehenge, Bath, Mendips...

Scotland – Edinburgh, Borders, Fife, St Andrews...

Italy – Tuscany, Umbria, Sicily, Sardinia, Le Marche...

Spain – Picos de Europa, Costa Verde, Rioja, Asturias...

Self-Guided ♦ Guided Groups ♦ Custom Groups

**iron
DONKEY™**
BICYCLE TOURING

www.irondonkey.com

VIRTUES OF A GOOD CYCLING CAP

POST-MODERN-LY TRADITIONAL



ALL PROVIDED BY
WALZ CAPS



WEAR ONE TODAY
WALZCAPS.COM

WALZ CAPS PROUDLY SUPPORTS YEHUDA MOON & THE KICKSTAND CYCLERY, A CYCLING INSPIRED DAILY COMIC STRIP. FOLLOW THE ADVENTURES OF YEHUDA AND HIS WALZ CAP AT YEHUDAMOON.COM.



Ascent of a different kind. Roy joins others to top 6,921-foot Hvannadalshnjúkur.

on the Ring Road and a night in Mývatn National Park, a pretty mini-Yellowstone with a lake, volcanic hot pools, and stinky, sulfurous fumes. I looked at the map and realized that I not only had no hope of completing the Ring Road, but was only 35 miles from Húsavík and what could very well be the climax of my trip — the Penis Museum!

Believe me, this members-only institute, identified on the street by a tall wooden log carved into the shape of an erect penis, measured up to expectations. Highlights of the Phallogical Institute's 276-specimen collection include a 67-inch sperm whale penis preserved in formaldehyde, a 48-incher mounted on the wall like deer antlers, lampshades made from bull testicles, and, as of May, its first human schlong: the 11-inch pickled penis of newly deceased 95-year-old Icelander Pall Arason.

"He was a boaster, a braggart, a funny guy," said curator Sigurdur Hjartarson, the 69-year-old former Reykjavik college professor who had founded the Phallogical Museum in the capital and moved it up north when he retired three years ago. Allowing Húsavík tourists to combine whale watching and whale penis watching, the museum is considered a significant stimulus to the local economy.

Turning south to Akureyri, I basked in the sweet afterglow of a 30-MPH tailwind for 40 miles. Suddenly I remembered that cycling was fun. It was actually kind of romantic: After spending time with 276 phalluses, I fell in love with bike touring

again.

But the riding was coming to an end. After doing 440 mostly hard miles, I still had 500 to go and only three days to do it — so I did the logical thing and bused the Ring Road around to the island's southern shore.

In my hostel's dinner hall, a large group of Icelanders invited me to join them for hrutspungar (chewy pickled ram's testicles), and svid (the blackened sheep's head with eyes and intact teeth that Victor had told me about). As we washed Sven (as we named him) down with shots of Black Death, the group's leader, a 48-year-old named Odin, explained that my companions were part of a larger group of several hundred who the next morning would be climbing up the country's largest and tallest glacier, 6,921-foot Hvannadalshnjúkur, which covers 11 percent of the island's land mass. They'd all trained for four months in a program called "Reach the Top."

"We'd invite you to come along," Odin said, "but this is rough, steep stuff requiring ropes and crampons most of the way. No way riding your bike for a few days would give you the fitness to keep up."

He didn't know his own headwinds. My legs were super fit from the ordeal. Joining the fast group the next morning, I went to the roof of Iceland and back in 11 hours. At the top, the Reach the Toppers celebrated like it was the Super Bowl. For many of them, Odin told me over swigs from a flask of mysa, it was a chance to "get in touch with their roots" after some years of excess.

On my last day on the Ring Road, I stopped by several pretty waterfalls, then rode the last 30 miles into Reykjavik, stopping for a swim and a shower. Before catching my airport bus, I took a picture with a troll, downed a couple tubs of Skyr, ate a lamb hot dog at the Baejarins Beztu hot dog stand (known as the most popular restaurant in the country since Bill Clinton ate a lamb dog there a decade ago), then headed up to the landmark Hallgrímskirkja (the church of Hallgrímur) for a final picture.

At the rocketship-shaped church, I ran into a tall Scotsman on a touring bike. It had four waterproof panniers and a full camping kit. He wore a rain jacket imprinted with the words Paris-Brest-Paris 2007, referring to a famed 762-mile ride held every four years in France to be completed in three and a half days. This guy was a hard-core randonneur.

"How'd your trip go?" he asked. "I saw you head off from here 10 days ago. I was going to do the Ring Road too, but got intimidated by the rain and wind." He stayed in town that day and instead opted for the Golden Circle route, a tough, sight-seeing-rich 186-mile loop in the Reykjavik/southwest region with nearly 10,000 feet of climbing. He got some great photos of waterfalls and geologic formations.

As I looked at his camera screen, I thought, "This guy should have been my partner!" On the other hand, he didn't mix much with the locals and stuck to his own oatmeal, sardines, and energy bars — no cool Icelandic stuff like Svid. And he did bail out on the Ring Road even before he started.

Bottom line? The Ring Road has a nice ring to it, but it's not for the weak of heart (or legs). Iceland is big, harsh, and spread out. You need at least 10 days to do it right — by car. By bike, double that time if you can, go in mid-summer (when it's merely cold, not freezing), and be social. The descendants of the Vikings will show you stuff you can't see anywhere else. **AC**

Roy M. Wallack owes it all to bike touring. An article about his 1982 Pacific-to-Atlantic tour launched his journalism career. His first book, *The Traveling Cyclist*, detailed his many trips in the 1980s and 1990s, including the first into the USSR. His son was born exactly nine months after his 1994 honeymoon tandem ride from Nice, France, to Rome. Last summer, they did their first father-son tandem trip, from Portland, Oregon, to Yellowstone. An L.A. Times fitness columnist, Roy has edited several bike magazines and written five bike and running books, including *Bike for Life: How to Ride to 100*.

The real art of the bicycle is for each to have its purpose.



The perfect marriage between humanity and machinery.



American Made. Oregon Made. Handmade.
www.co-motion.com

Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished

It took us a little while, but finally we've engineered a fully-functioning eco-friendly fender. Made of fast growing Moso Bamboo and designed with a compound curve to help you stay dry, our Grasshopper Fenders truly are a better bicycle product for a better world. planetbike.com