Exploring southern Iceland: 
Eyjafjallajokull and Skardshlid

As a child growing up in Iceland. I heard a story that said that the Vikings, the first settlers, arrived in winter. That was why they called the place Iceland. By the time they got to Greenland, it was summer.

I moved to Australia as a teenager, but I return to my birthplace every couple of years. Each time, I find myself collecting new stories, or new version of old ones. I’ve discovered that the name of Greenland was actually a bit of Viking propaganda, intended to attract farmers.

But despite its name, Iceland too has drawn its share of newcomers. One is my sister’s partner Luca, an Italian lawyer who’s taken a break from the law to build a touring business. When I ask him why Iceland, he smiles and says, ‘Well, I always wanted to see this place in the far north. Then I met a beautiful girl, your sister. And then I bought a four-wheel drive at a good price. You know, just after the financial crash in 2008.’

It all sounds a bit happenchance, but perhaps that’s just how life is. A few years on, he takes small groups up into the highlands. As he puts it, the countryside is his office. By European standards, the landscape here feels raw, and much less ordered. In the centre of the island, mountains and vast expanses of tundra remain uninhabited and difficult to cross. It pays to have a guide.

One evening when I’m over for a visit, Luca invites us – me, my wife Olanda and our two boys – for a drive. We’re about to head into the countryside anyway, so we agree to meet at a tiny village called Laugarvatn, an hour’s drive outside Reykjavik.

It’s turned bitterly cold, and the roads out of town are treacherous with ice. But the countryside is dazzling, winter at its best. The snow amplifies the soft light. We drive up onto a heath that overlooks Thingvellir, a national park of narrow gorges and small forests. In the white light, the view is almost vaporous.

When we get to the village, we transfer from our little car into Luca’s truck. This is what our boys have been looking forward to most of all. It’s red and has vast, knobbly tyres, like a giant toy. When I get in, the boys are bouncing around on the back seats. Luca holds out a headset with a microphone. ‘You want to tell them some stories while I drive?’ he asks.

They’ve heard most of my Iceland stories already. ‘Then they’ll have to hear my versions,’ Luca laughs.

The road follows a small lake that shares its name with the village. Laugarvatn means ‘pool water’, but, like many Viking names, this doesn’t quite do it justice. A ‘laug’ is a hot spring, and the banks of this lake bubble and steam, a surreal sight. On the far side of the lake, the active volcano Mount Hekla sits clear of its neighbouring hills.

‘It’s my favourite volcano,’ says Luca. ‘In the Middle Ages, people thought it was the gateway to hell.’
You can see why: it’s a beautiful mountain, but somehow always threatens violence. The ‘hell’ that it takes you into is a chain of volcanoes that have turned the south coast into rubble, broken mountain tops, rifts, and lava fields.

Further on, we pass a cabin that’s been built into the tiniest of spaces between enormous, fallen rocks. It seems only a matter of time before it will be crushed by the next rock to come down, and so it’s been given the name of ‘mother-in-law’s’ cabin. The Icelandic sense of humour has a rough edge to it, rather like the Australian one. Maybe that’s what happens when you live at the base of volcanoes.

We begin a slow arc towards the southern coastline. Eyjafjallajökull comes into view, the volcano that erupted in 2010, sending an ash cloud kilometres into the air and closing European airports for a week.

It’s hard to imagine such chaos on a day like today. The sun has come up, and it’s intensely clear. The name of Eyjafjallajökull tripped journalists up; eventually some just called it E15 after the number of letters. But it’s pretty in Icelandic, and very descriptive: ‘Island Mountain Glacier’. The volcano is in fact trapped under the ice.

‘What would you call it?’ I ask the boys.

‘I would call it Getoutoftheway,’ says Finnur, our oldest. Or G13.

We bounce off the main road to look at the glacier from the black beaches of the south. The sun is barely above the horizon, but it catches the top of the mountain – its snow cap, and the otherworldly ledges that have been formed by glaciers, earthquakes and eruptions.

When we rejoin the main road, Luca points ahead to a ridge that extends across the horizon like a row of broken teeth. It’s Skardshlid, or ‘Sharp Hill’. But more than that, too. ‘Boys,’ Luca calls out, ‘can you see the giant lying on his back?’

Our younger son Magnus sees the giant in the mountain straight away, but Finnur can’t make it out. We stop and disembark. While the boys make out the shape, I turn my back against the sharp wind. ‘A nice story,’ I say. ‘It makes sense of the landscape.’

‘I love it,’ replies Luca. ‘There are so many folk stories here.’ A pause, and then, ‘Just look at this country. Nature’s magnet: you can’t leave it.’

It’s not only chance, then, that makes him stay. He’s as stuck as the giant in the mountain.

To end, we drive to an icy track that leads to a waterfall running off a high, inland cliff. ‘We can walk the last bit,’ says Luca, ‘but it’s very slippery. Bend your knees, boys, and stay nice and low to the ground.’

They follow his instructions, and walk on, laughing at how silly they look. But when we return to Australia a couple of weeks later, it’s one of their strongest memories of the trip. A crouched walking style that they decide to name the Luca Walk.