**An Expedition to Iceland**
CoScan Report

Written by Emma Watson

From 1st June – 25th July 2021 I lived and studied in Iceland as part of the University of Glasgow Iceland Expedition team. Iceland has been a "bucket list" destination of mine for many years, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to develop my scientific research skills in such a unique sub-Arctic ecosystem, as well as being able to explore and learn about this famously beautiful country.

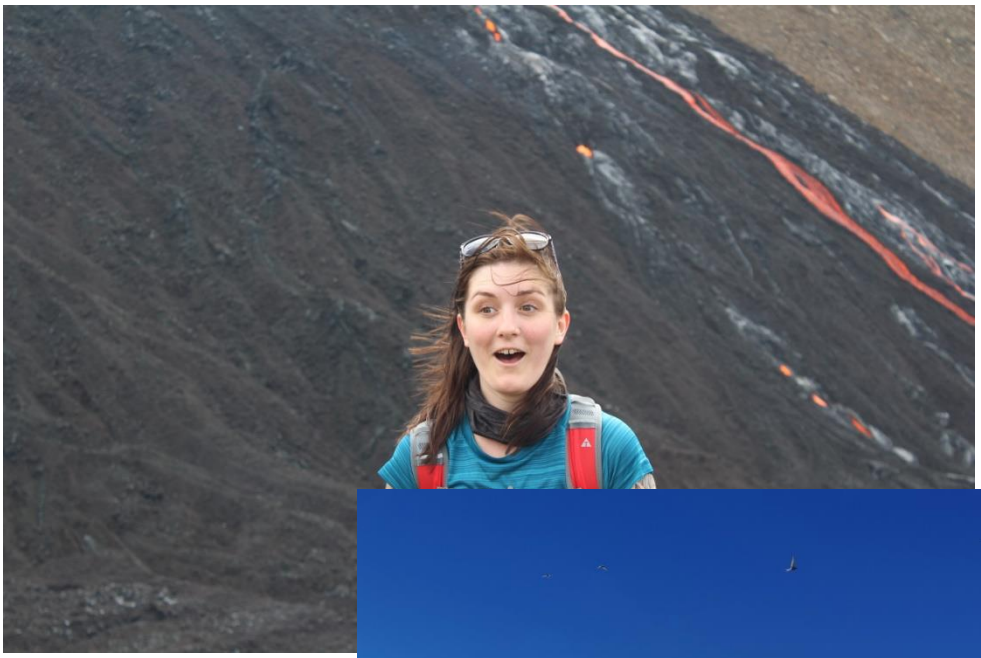
Upon our arrival in Iceland we firstly spent a week in Reykjavík, as my team-members had to quarantine for 5 days before presenting a negative COVID test. I had already been fully vaccinated in the UK, and so I felt slightly guilty that I was able to get out and about to explore the city, but had the full support (and envy!) of my team as I sent them countless photos and videos of the world outside our Airbnb. My first stop was Hallgrímskirkja Parish Church, whose design is inspired by Icelandic nature. It is clear to see how mountains, glaciers and waterfalls are reflected in the unusual shape and structure of the church, and I was able to take the elevator to the top tower at 244ft to take in some amazing 360 degree views of the city. I was in awe of Reykjavík, with its beautiful colourful houses and roofs, and the walls, roads and walkways adorned with street art; I could tell this was a city that breathed creativity and culture.

*Hallgrímskirkja Parish Church*

This assessment proved to be correct when I visited different historical and cultural attractions around the city. It is clear that Iceland is a country that is deeply connected to, and proud of, its heritage and landscape, and it was so interesting to experience this through different mediums. Some highlights were the National Museum of Iceland, which takes you on a journey through the country's cultural, geological and natural history, from settlement to present day. It also had a fantastic guide to queer history in Iceland in honour of LGBTQ+ Pride month, which was a thought-provoking insight into the roles and struggles of queer people and their identities in Icelandic history. In the National Gallery of Iceland, a video installation which was filmed in the Eldhraun lava field in south Iceland, (*Death is Elsewhere* by Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson) actually moved me to tears; as an aspiring scientist, being so moved by an art piece took me completely by surprise!

Once the team were free of quarantine, we took a trip to the Fagradalsfjall volcano, which began erupting on the 19th March 2021, and was still going strong on our visit on the 7th of June. The excitement was palpable among the groups of tourists on the 1.5 hour hike up to the viewing point, where steaming hot lava fields and rivers teased us as to what we were about to witness. At the top, we settled in with our packed lunch looking across the valley to the volcano and were treated to the show of our lives. The volcano was erupting every 10 minutes in a fiery explosion of gushing lava and flying ash, with each seeming more ferocious than the last. I could scarcely believe what I was seeing, and I was clearly not alone in this feeling as a hushed silence fell over everyone at the beginning of each eruption, save for a few gasps of awe, as we took in one of the most spectacular natural displays on the planet. I still can't believe how lucky I was to witness this phenomenon, which is genuinely one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

*Eruption!!*



*Me, not believing my eyes!*

*Skálanes on a beautiful clear day*

After this amazing experience, it was on to our expedition research

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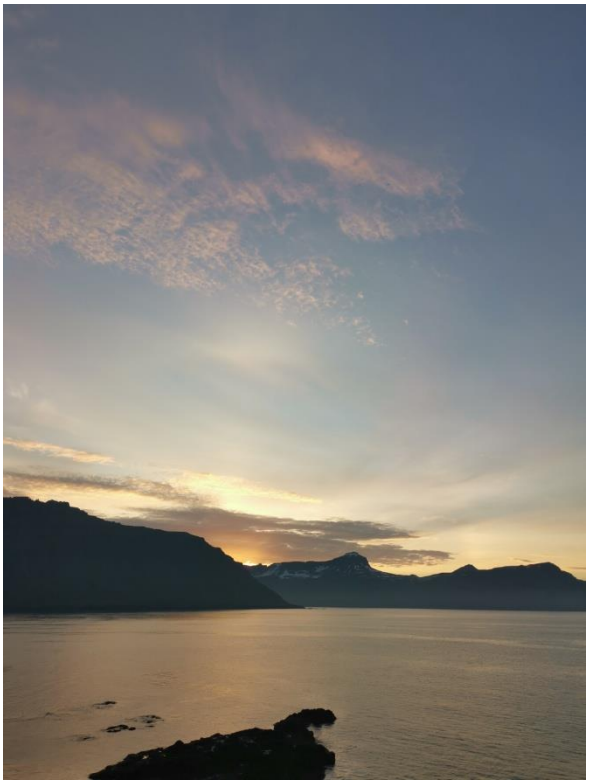
base and home for the next 6 weeks. This journey consisted of a flight to the East coast of Iceland on a tiny plane from Reykjavík's tiny domestic airport to Egilsstaðir followed by a jaw-dropping 27km drive through the Fjarðarheiði mountain pass, to the town of Seyðisfjörður. This winding road connecting the two towns sits at an elevation of 620m above sea level. Even in early June, the road was surrounded by huge snow drifts and ice sheets, and snaked through great valleys enclosed by towering mountains and giant waterfalls. From Seyðisfjörður the last leg of the journey involved a thrilling drive in a giant 4x4 jeep over 3 gushing rivers before we arrived at Skálanes Nature and Heritage Centre.

I couldn't have asked for a better, more beautiful place to live and work. The centre sits on a peninsula and within a 1250-hectare nature reserve at the mouth of the Seyðisfjörður fjord. It is surrounded by towering mountains and rocky cliffs, and the colour of the vast blue fjord is highlighted by the endless green and purple fields of Alaskan lupine. The air is alive with the cries and wing beats of the 47 bird species supported by this habitat, and looking out to the horizon from the cliff top feels like looking out to the edge of the world.

*On a hike to one of Skálanes' many waterfalls*



*Sunset at the cliffs*

*The quirky little colony*

Our expedition consisted of a variety of different zoological research projects, and my personal project investigated the effect of different weather conditions on the foraging behaviours of a small sub-colony of puffins who nest on the cliffs of Skálanes. This consisted of observation sessions studying the behaviours of these wonderful little birds in rain, hail, snow, and shine, for up to 6 hours a day.

Early analysis of my data suggests that puffin foraging is impacted by higher wind speeds and temperatures, forcing them to forage less often to conserve energy. This is unfortunate news for this already vulnerable species, as oceanic temperatures and wind speeds are predicted to increase as a result of climate change, and whose populations numbers have been declining rapidly in Iceland. I hope that my research can contribute to a growing body of data that can help predict how puffins will respond to environmental pressures induced by climate change, and therefore help inform conservation efforts to protect them. Through conducting my own research project, I was able to develop my fieldwork and data analysis skills, and learned many valuable lessons about the unpredictability of fieldwork, and how important it is to be able to adapt: the only certainty is that nothing will go according to plan!

*An observation session*

My Icelandic experience continued outside of our research through several day trips to explore the unbelievable natural features of the East Coast. I bathed in a hot geothermal spa; hiked to Hengifoss, the third highest waterfall in Iceland; climbed a tree in Hallormsstaðaskógur National Forest; attended LungA, an Icelandic arts and music festival; and even starred in an Icelandic cooking show, eating reindeer cooked by a Michelin star Icelandic chef! However, one of the most rewarding parts of my trip was befriending a group of Icelandic archaeology students from the University of Iceland, who were working on a dig excavating a mill in the town of Seyðisfjörður. We were lucky enough to spend a lot of time with them over dinners, pints, games, and the Euro semi-finals, and through them I was able to learn so much about Iceland. They are so connected to, and proud of, their culture and heritage in a way that I had not experienced at home, and they were so enthusiastic to tell us about life in this amazing country, and educate us on their history. In particular, their care to protect and preserve the Icelandic language, which is at risk of dying out, inspired me to learn Gaelic which is the founding language of my home country, Scotland. I was so happy to have met this wonderful group of people and I really feel like their friendship enhanced my trip and deepened my understanding of this wonderful country.

*Scotland vs Iceland games night; more exciting than the Euros!*

I feel so lucky to have been able to study and live in Iceland. I never thought I would have the opportunity to spend two months in this amazing place, and I am so grateful to CoScan for their generous support through the Travel Grant. I really felt like I found a second home in Iceland; I have already begun exploring options to come back to study a Master's degree!