

## That Comes with a Black Death Chaser

For months, we'd been planning nearly every detail for our seven-week jaunt of mostly Eastern Europe, with the focal point being three weeks in Lithuania, where my wife's mother grew up. As we were flying Iceland Air through Reykjavik to Frankfurt, we decided to stay on the way out to sample Iceland. My travel rule is carry-on only and this would be no exception. I also had no desire to lug a heavy jacket around Europe for seven weeks so we bought winter jackets at a thrift store for \$10, intending to leave them at the Reykjavik airport on the way out.



I had pre-booked a 10 am walking tour of Reykjavik for the morning we landed. While we were still at the Pittsburgh airport, I got an email saying they'd canceled the tour, as we were the only ones who had signed up but we could do their noon tour if we liked. Presumably, Icelanders had never heard that the show must go on. It was just as well because the weather in Reykjavik was 44 degrees Fahrenheit and raining. I later learned it is always 44 and raining except in July when it is 47 and raining. Then there is January when it is 27 and sleeting. We slept through the noon tour. Once you get outside Reykjavik, Iceland is an amazing place worthy of a multi-day stay. I booked the Golden Circle and Secret Hot Springs tour for our second day, wondering how secret the hot springs would really be. This tour, for which we shared a van with six other people, turned out to be a winner. We saw spectacular waterfalls, geysers, tectonic plates, and a rift valley, plus got to soak in the not-so-secret but wonderfully hot and steamy hot springs. For most of the tour it did not rain, which our tour guide found quite puzzling. We couldn't find the Japanese restaurant we'd selected for dinner our last night in Reykjavik but another restaurant offering appetizer specials caught my eye. Being from Sarasota, land of the happy hour, how could I resist? We ordered a variety of Icelandic specialties, all of which were unique and

delicious. We started off with herring pickled two ways, then moved to the smoked lamb (awww...), then the smoked puffin (gasp...), climaxing with Hákarl and Black Death. Hákarl is fermented, essentially rotted, chunks of Greenland shark and Black Death is a caraway-spiced liquor. The Black Death, I was told, was necessary to kill the taste of the rotten shark. The shark chunks were served in a glass jar with a resealable gasketed glass lid.

I tried my first piece and thought I was biting into smelling salts. As I was masticating my rubbery, ammoniated shark, the waiter came over. "Excuse me, sir. Could you kindly keep the lid on the jar except when you are removing the Hákarl, as otherwise other patrons will begin leaving the restaurant." I told the waiter the taste, texture, and aroma were so different that I sort of liked it. "Well, that's a rare review," he replied. My wife opened her jar and tentatively sniffed the contents before not so tentatively passing it over to me. As a bonus, she also gave me her shot of Black Death.

Departure day began very early, as we had to catch a 4:30 am van a few blocks away in the mid-40s rain. As we waited, groups of young people spilled out of the bars, hooting and hollering. Once again, I was reminded that I was old, very old. Was there really a time when that appealed to me? I don't remember.

We settled into the warm, dry van for the trip to the airport. But wait, the van went in the opposite direction and pulled into the bus terminal at the edge of town. What's this, we all wondered? Seems we had to now board a bus that made further pickups around the perimeter of the city, as large buses weren't allowed in the inner city. But all went well and a couple hours later we waved goodbye to Iceland and our winter jackets and took off for Frankfurt and the connection to Varna, Bulgaria.

Six weeks later, we again landed in Reykjavik, this time for the 90-minute layover. But a late departure from Frankfurt caused us to miss our connection and we had to spend another night in Iceland, this time with no jackets. It was cold, very cold. And raining.

- David Landsperger