

NOMAD

December 2014/ January 2015

FANTASIES THAT LIE WITHIN THE LAND

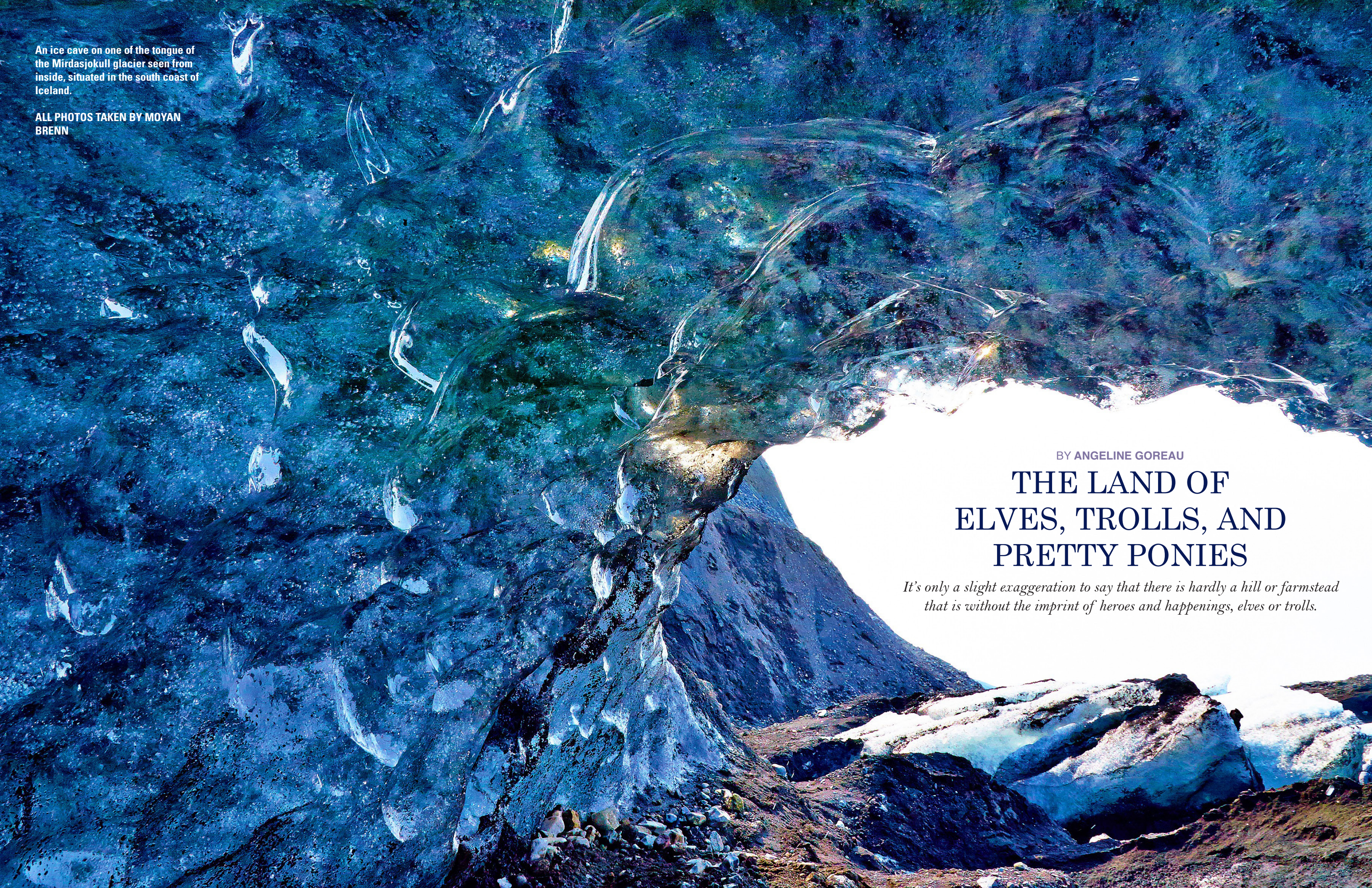
*Explore the world of elves,
trolls, and pretty ponies*

ROAD TRIP
TRAILBLAZER
OF THE
HORIZON

GOING GLOBAL
THE LAKE
OF DREAMS

SPOOKY VISITS
INDIA'S MOST
HAUNTED
SITES





An ice cave on one of the tongue of the Mirdasjokull glacier seen from inside, situated in the south coast of Iceland.

ALL PHOTOS TAKEN BY MOYAN BRENN

BY ANGELINE GOREAU

THE LAND OF ELVES, TROLLS, AND PRETTY PONIES

It's only a slight exaggeration to say that there is hardly a hill or farmstead that is without the imprint of heroes and happenings, elves or trolls.

Iceland isn't foreign, it's extraterrestrial," a friend of mine once said. There is, when you come right down to it, hardly anywhere as elsewhere as Iceland: suspended in mid-Atlantic at the very fringe of the Arctic Circle, it was for centuries the ultima Thule of the known world. For many of us, it is a place visited but never seen, a mythical place where one refueled on the way to somewhere else.

A caveat: if you plan to go to Iceland you will very probably have a good deal of explaining to do. "But why are you going to Iceland?" your friends will demand, tacitly answering the question for themselves and henceforth classing you among the more eccentric of their acquaintance.

Once you have been to Iceland, there will be further explaining to do. But this time it will be more fun. In fact, you may find that it is impossible to restrain from explanation.

I have a theory about why this should be so. Iceland makes large demands on the imagination. There is a remarkably rich history and culture here, but material evidence is in short supply. There are no chateaus or pyramids, no Louvre, no Westminster Abbey. What Iceland has in great abundance is stories. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that there is hardly a hill or farmstead that is without the imprint of heroes and happenings, elves or trolls.

"Conventional standards of beauty don't apply here: one has to learn to see the landscape on its own terms."

There are, first of all, almost no trees. But the starkness of Iceland's wide expanses throws colors and shapes into strong relief -- the intense green of the grass, strange rock formations, black volcanic beaches, crevassed icecaps, clouds scudding at almost supernatural velocity across the sky.

To visit Iceland is to encounter the world standing on its ear: it is as though all the elements of the picture one expects to see have somehow disengaged themselves and reshuffled into improbable combinations. Hail falls into boiling craters of mud; glaciers sit atop volcanoes, melting into eerie patterns or releasing sudden floods when the energy from deep below erupts. In summer it is light nearly all the time, and in winter the night seems to last forever.

Rain can fall in any direction (even horizontally), and it can snow in the middle of the summer. But because Iceland is brushed by the warm Gulf Stream, the winters are surprisingly mild. "We don't have weather here," Icelanders like to say, "only samples." The only predictable thing about the climate here, they will tell you, is its fickleness.

We surprised ourselves by coming here in November. I had been to Iceland by myself before in the summer, but wanted to show it to my husband, Stephen, and our daughter, Keaton. And I was curious to see the countryside in winter's half-light. A few weeks before leaving, we ordered thermal



Iceland, Seljalandsfoss waterfall during sunset in spring

ICELAND FAST FACTS 2005



NATIONAL FLAG

Blue with a red cross outlined in white.

The colors of the flag are symbolic for Iceland: red is for the volcanic fires, white recalls the snow and glaciers, and blue is for the mountains in the distance.

NATIONAL FLOWER

Mountain Avens



The flowers are produced on stalks of up to 10 cm long, with eight creamy-white petals.

NATIONAL ANIMAL

Gryfalcon



Nest in the arctic regions frequently begin breeding and laying eggs when the temperature is still below freezing.

NATIONAL DISH

Hákarl



Greenland shark which has been cured with a particular fermentation process and hung to dry for four to five months.

NATIONAL SPORT

Handball



Iceland was the host of the 1995 World Men's Handball Championship.



underwear, little chemical pocket warmers and face masks. We exhumed copies of sagas and troll stories and read W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice's "Letters From Iceland" out loud every night, howling over the "letter" from Hetty to Nancy: "In the center of Iceland there are only three kinds of scenery -- Stones, More Stones and All Stones. The third type predominated today."

We thought ourselves thoroughly prepared, but when we actually stepped out of the air terminal in Keflavik, the wind cut right through the layers of down to the bone. "Maybe we made a big mistake," I thought. My next thought was: "Never mind. If it's too cold to go outside, we can stay in the hotel reading troll stories." The Loftleidir, I remembered, also had a heated pool.

The wind had died down by the next morning so we set out to go pony trekking at the Laxnes Farm, about 40 minutes from Reykjavik. The owner, Thorarinn Jonasson, came to pick us up in his van and we chatted about horses as we drove out into the countryside.

Brought to Iceland by the Vikings in the ninth century, the Icelandic horse evolved in splendid isolation from other breeds, adapting to the extremes of climate. Although small (technically they aren't ponies, but are often so called because of their diminutive size, generally about 13 hands high), the horses are sturdy and swift, spirited but not skittish, affectionate and curious. They are also famously sure-footed and intelligent, finding their way home through fog over the most uncompromising terrain.

What most distinguishes the Icelandic horse, however, is its unique fifth gait, the tolt. A kind of running walk, it offers a far smoother ride than the more common trot. "They stand on one foot at a time when they tolt," Thorarinn tells us in his heavily accented English. You can sit on him like in a chair and drink a beer without spilling it even when they're moving fast.

In their thick winter coats, the Laxnes horses look like nothing so much as overgrown teddy bears. When my daughter reaches out to pet one, her hand half-disappears in its thick hair. Her mount is a beautiful strawberry-blond mare called



Dixon. "She is from a good family," Thorarinn's wife assures us, "and she has been a lead mare for many years. She's always the first one who comes in at the roundup."

My 9-year-old daughter, who has been riding no more than a dozen times in her life, is cheerfully donning one of the rough-weather spacesuits that hang in the stable, but I am beginning to get cold feet about the three-hour ride. "Then I'll go on my own," Keaton unequivocally declares.

The seven-mile itinerary took the riders over a frozen river and up a narrow mountain path to a waterfall called Trollafoss (Troll-Woman's Waterfall). It is presided over, so the story goes, by a troll named Gryla, the mother of the many Icelandic Santa Clauses. "This road is the old Viking road, you know," Thorarinn later tells us. "It was the way they took to Thingvellir. You really feel like a Viking when you're on horseback."

The ride, according to Keaton, was a great success. "Dixon went right over ice and rocks and didn't even slip once," she crowed.

a character in "letters from Iceland" says that Icelandic cooking makes her think of "a little boy who has got loose with Mother's medicine-chest," but cuisine has come a long way since Auden visited the island in the 1930's. I have a friend who says that it's worth going to Iceland just to eat. The seafood is so fresh it practically tap-dances on your plate. And the mountain lamb has been allowed to graze freely in fields that are innocent of fertilizer.

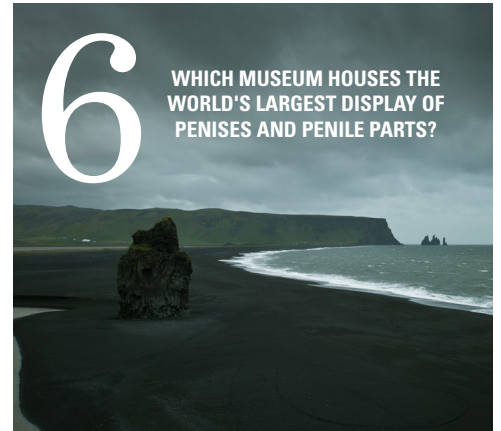
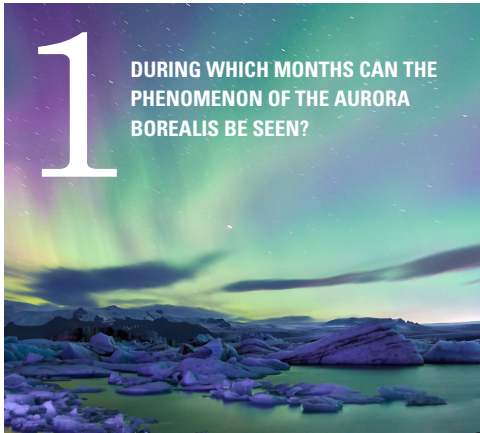
My favorite restaurant in Reykjavik is a little place called Vid Tjornina, just around the corner from the Tjornin lake. Homey and small, it is divided into several rooms and decorated with old photographs and grandmotherly embroidery. The handwritten menus, which change every day, come in funny homemade construction-paper folders. But the food's exuberant inventiveness belies the simple decor. We had seabird pate, followed by blue ling and Icelandic lamb with dates and red-wine sauce.

When a man at the next table asked how we liked Iceland, I seized the chance to ask something I had been wishing to know. "Is it true that a majority of Icelanders believe in elves?" I ventured.



Test Your Iceland Travel IQ

By JENNIFER WONG



ANSWERS 1. November and December 2. 100 celsius 3. 18 4. Knitting 5. Lobster 6. Icelandic Phallological Museum 7. Artic Fox 8. The Heart 9. Yule Lads