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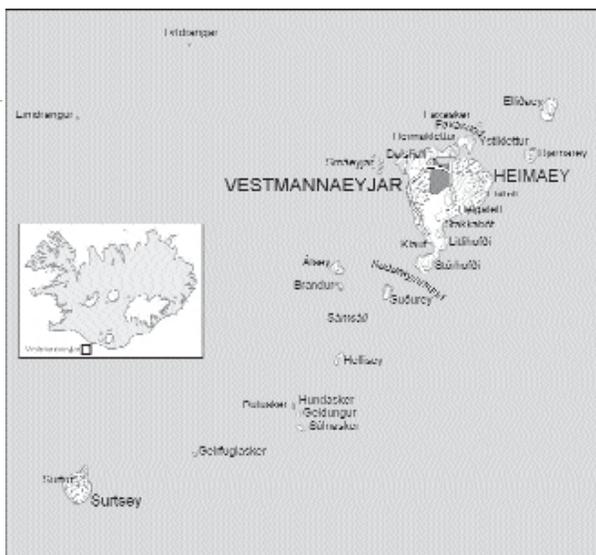
# WHEN THE EARTH SPLIT OPEN

30 Years from the Heimaey Eruption

Thirty years ago the ground on Heimaey in Vestmannaeyjarsuddenly opened when a massive volcanic eruption began at the edge of the fishing village. The inhabitants, 5,000 people, had to leave the island immediately not knowing if they would ever see their homes again. Hjálmar R. Bárðarson has for more than a half-century recorded Iceland's nature with his camera. Here he tells the remarkable story about the unforgettable night when the eruption started.

◀ *This aerial photo was taken over Heimaey on April 7, 1973. Lava had by then buried the easternmost part of the town, The steam clouds rising at the edge of the lava flow are due to the cooling process, the pumping of sea water into the lava. The new volcano Eldfell is still active. Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

► *Vestmannaeyjar islands lie a few kilometers off Iceland's south coast. Only one of the islands is inhabited: Heimaey, where the eruption in 1973 took place. Map: National Land Survey of Iceland*



WHEN THE EARTH SPLIT OPEN

▼ *This picture is a view over the Kirkjubær home field in the easternmost part of Heimaey. It was taken before the 1973 eruption, showing the field where the earth's crust split open in a rift just 200 m from the houses. Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

At about 2 in the morning of 23rd January 1973 the telephone rang at my home in the town Garðabær, a suburb of Reykjavík. On the line was the minister of communications Mr. Hannibal Valdimarsson. He told me that a volcanic eruption had just started in Heimaey, the biggest island in the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago and very close to the only town on the island. No lives had been lost, but it had to be decided if fuel oil and petrol tanks should be emptied into a tanker to avoid fire and explosion. My department, the Directorate of shipping, was an administration under the ministry of communications, and the minister

asked if I could fly to Heimaey to consider what action should be taken regarding the fuel tanks at the harbour. An airplane was waiting for me at the Reykjavik airfield. When I came to Reykjavík, the airplane was at the end of the airstrip, ready to take off, and a car from the fire brigade drove me to it. In the plane I met the geologist Dr. Sigurður Þórarinsson.

At Vestmannaeyjar the airplane landed on half the length of the airstrip, as the rest of it was covered with volcanic ash and glowing bombs from the eruption. A police car picked Sigurður and me up. The car drove us closer to the upper end of the volcanic rift. I went out to take a picture, but had soon to take shelter in the car, as the glowing ash was falling all around us. We borrowed steel helmets at the police station and after that we went to the townside of the volcanic rift.

At that side the "rain" of glowing stones and ash was not so heavy as at the airfield end. I walked up the slopes of the nearly 5000-year-old volcano Helgafell, which was considered to be extinct, and from there I had a good view over the volcanic rift which reached a length of 1,600 m stretching all the way from near the



► *A view from the slopes of the volcanic cone of Helgafell in the early morning of the first day of the Heimaey eruption, January 23, 1973. Now black volcanic ash covers the home field. Note the distance, only 200 m, between the houses and the volcanic fissure. All the houses seen in this picture were later engulfed by the advancing lava, which is now 100 m thick above the houses. Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*





▲ *The eruption varied a great deal in intensity. During its most violent phases glowing chunks of lava flew far into the town. Some houses caught fire when these ‘bombs’ shot through the windows. Many house owners therefore closed the windows of their houses from the outside with steel plates. In this picture of a stately concrete house it is on fire on January 28, 1973, while the angry crater spews fire and brimstone in the background. After the eruption this house was rebuilt. Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*



▲ *This picture shows a part of a wooden house that has been pushed forward by the lava front, broken into pieces and is burning away on March 23.*

*Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

end of the airstrip into the ocean, where the red glowing lava continued and reached some meters under the surface of the sea. The red-hot melted lava stones were thrown high into the air and had built up walls on both sides of the rift. Between these walls the lava was filling the rift, and due to the heavy pressure from the lava, the walls were moving outward on both sides, thus enlarging the area of the floating lava inside. The lighthouse at Urðir was engulfed by the lava flow shortly after the rift opened which then flowed into the ocean increasing the area of Heimaey.

Eyewitnesses told us that the first volcanic activity, which was spotted in a field where the earth opened just 200 m from Kirkjubær, the easternmost part of the town on Heimaey, was like a fire in dry grass. The earth's crust then split open in a rift that lay in both directions from this spot, soon resulting in the fissure we were now observing and photographing.

At 11 a.m. a meeting of the town council was held and Sigurður and I were invited to join and consider the situation. At this meeting I proposed that no attempt should be made to empty the fuel oil tanks at the harbour. A thick layer of volcanic ash already covered and

insulated them, and thus it would be more risk to send tank vessels into the harbour to pump the oil out. This view was agreed upon at the meeting, and experience later on showed that this decision was correct, as nothing happened to the tanks during the eruption.

But what happened to the townspeople of Heimaey? The residents of the eastern part of the town woke up to the roar of the eruption and reacted quickly when they realized what was happening. They got dressed and informed the police and their nearest neighbours. By good luck the entire local fishing fleet was in port because of a storm the day before. The people went down to the harbour and most were taken from there by fishing vessels to Þorlákshöfn on the mainland. From there they were bussed to Reykjavík. About 300 went to Reykjavík by air. The evacuation of 5,000 people went very smoothly. It was almost complete by the morning. The only people left on Heimaey were 200-300 key personnel engaged in essential services.

As usual for a fissure eruption the crater row soon developed into a single active crater in the middle of the rift. Already in February a high single crater called Eldfell had developed and many houses in the eastern part of the town were inundated by lava flows. The eruption varied a great deal in intensity. During the most violent phases glowing chunks of lava flew far into the town. Some houses caught fire if these "bombs" shot in through the windows. Many house owners therefore closed the windows of their houses from the outside with steel plates.

The Vestmannaeyjar harbour is naturally of priceless value to a community that depends for its life on fishing and fish processing. Therefore every possible effort was made to prevent the harbour from damage or destruction by the lava flow. The most important measure taken was to



pump enormous quantities of sea water onto the side of the lava flow which was coming close to the entrance to the harbour, in an attempt to change its course and slow it down. This first attempt was therefore made near the harbour entrance when the pumping machinery of a sand dredger was used for this purpose. In March the lava flow stopped there before it had reached the rock Heimaklettur. If it had, it would have blocked the harbour entrance. The entrance is now narrower and is even much more sheltered than it was before the eruption.

Quite early during the eruption, attempts were also made to protect the town by making barriers of slag from the eruption and also using fire

hoses and fire pumps to pump sea water on the advancing lava, in order to cool it down and slow its progress. This cooling of the lava had some effect, but the first attempt showed that the volume of water was too small and the range of the fire pumps too short for any measure of success. At the end of March, 43 pumps obtained from the USA were mounted. Their capacity was 800-1,000 l/sec, and their lifting height capacity 100m through 1,000m-long pipes. This equipment made it possible to apply the dampening down effort to a much larger area of the advancing lava to cool it down. During the eruption a total of 6.2 million tons of sea water was pumped onto the lava to cool it down. Drillings showed

▲ *'I live and thou shall live' is written on the gate to the Heimaey cemetery. These words were in many people's minds while the new volcano spewed ash and fiery lava over the town. This photo was taken on February 18th. The graves in the cemetery are covered with a thick layer of ash. But the words on the gate proved to be true. After the eruption life on the island gradually went back to normal. The eruption, however, still stands out in the minds of the islanders. Events are said to have occurred before or after the eruption.*

*Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

► *The lava flow crushes houses and even whole streets without mercy.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*



▼ *This aerial photograph shows well how Heimaey island got enlarged by the eruption. The dotted line is drawn where the coast was before the eruption. The other line shows the rift that opened on January 23 and soon developed into a single active crater (Eldfell).*

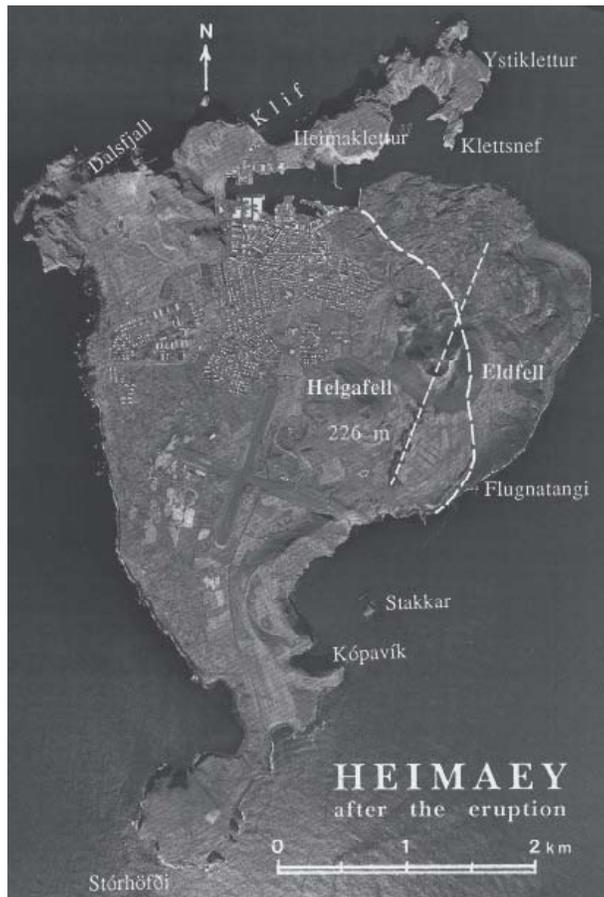
*Hjálmar R. Bárðarson from his book, Ice and Fire.*

that the cooling had had a significant effect on the solidification of the lava and therefore slowing down its advance. The sea water pumped onto the lava contained about 220,000 tons of salt.

In spite of the effect of the cooling and slowing down of the lava flow, on the evening of

March 22 a 300m-wide tongue of molten lava advanced almost 150 m into the town. During the next few days about 200 houses were engulfed by lava. On its way, the lava broke down sturdily-constructed concrete houses and set wooden houses on fire. The following weeks after April 4 much less lava was coming from the volcano, and mostly covering older lava flows. On April 22 suddenly a thin lava fountain opened on the east side of the volcanic cone and from there an open river of lava was running into the ocean until June 28, the last day lava was seen flowing in Heimaey.

The Heimaey eruption which lasted about five months was certainly a great loss, but there were also some gains. The harbour entrance after the eruption is much more sheltered, as there is a long fjord between the new lava and the rocks Ystiklettur and Heimaklettur. A great area of the eastern part of the town was engulfed by the lava flow, but a considerable area (about 2.2 sq km) has been added to the island. A new western part of the town has been built, and the airfield now has two landing airstrips instead of one, as the volcanic slag which had covered part of the town was ample material for this purpose.



*Further reading: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson: Ice and Fire, contrasts of Icelandic nature (1980).*



## SURVIVING THE ERUPTION

The Heimaey eruption in 1973 came as a complete surprise – the volcano Helgafell on the island of Heimaey is about 5,000 years old, and was considered to be extinct. Seldom have Icelanders faced such danger from natural disaster as by this eruption. Yet the island’s community of Heimaey was rebuilt in an astonishingly short time and has become a fascinating destination for travellers. Margrét Jónasdóttir is a historian and TV producer. She did a television documentary about these tremendous events. Translated by Victoria Cribb.

**My first visit** to Vestmannaeyjar was in October 1998. I had just completed my history studies at a university in London, writing a dissertation about British trawlers in Icelandic waters during the Cod Wars, so I thought it would be highly appropriate to sail home from the English port of Hull on an Icelandic fishing boat. I had been at sea for three days and nights with a seasoned Vestmannaeyjar crew when land was sighted at last. The Mýrdalsjökull glacier rose from the sea just as the sun was setting.

I had hoped to see the islands by daylight but

this was not to be. After a strenuous few days of 70 mph winds and fierce storms, it was pitch black when the Gjafar VE 600 finally put into harbour at the little volcanic island off Iceland’s south coast, scene in 1973 of one of the most dramatic natural catastrophes ever to have occurred in a populated area. On this occasion the stopover on the islands was brief. But I was immediately captivated by the beauty of the scenery and the character of the people who chose to live in one of the most active volcanic areas in the world. Their warmth and good humour piqued my interest. There was the makings of a film here.

▲ *View towards the harbour entrance. The photo shows clearly how the lava almost blocked the harbour entrance. Fortunately the lava flow stopped before it reached Heimaklettur and now the harbour is even much more sheltered than before the eruption.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*



▲ *Eldfell, now thirty years old and looking like it has always been there.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*

Two years later I returned to Vestmannaeyjar to make a documentary about the 1973 eruption. I was welcomed everywhere with open arms and since then have felt almost like an adoptive daughter. The grandeur of the islands still takes

my breath away, whether I approach them by sea with the ferry Herjólfur, or by plane and then drive from the airport to town. It hardly matters whether the weather is good or bad.

There are fifteen islands in the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago not counting skerries or stacks, but only one of them, Heimaey, is inhabited. The island is ten square miles in area and has been the site of one of the richest fishing stations in Iceland since the time of settlement. In addition to fishing, the islanders have for centuries lived off the resources of the cliffs in the form of eggs and birds, as millions of seabirds inhabit the spectacular rock walls of the outlying islands. The islanders of Vestmannaeyjar have always been a hardworking people, fishermen and fishworkers, ready to show their mettle when the going gets tough. Their indomitable spirits on the night of the eruption, 23 January 1973, were proof of this. Never before in history have humans taken on an erupting volcano and won.



▲ *For thousands of years, Vestmannaeyjar has withstood the immense power of the Atlantic. Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson.*

▼ *This general view along the crater row was taken as seen from the old volcano Helgafell the morning of the first day of the eruption.*

*Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

### The Eruption

On the morning of 22 January 1973 there was a violent storm off the south coast of Iceland, no weather for putting out to sea. The islanders' boats lay in harbour and visiting vessels from other Icelandic ports had also sought shelter there to wait out the storm. It was as if some higher power had conspired to ensure that this whole fleet would be on hand in the islands. In the evening the wind dropped and there was a dead calm. The Mayor, Magnús Magnússon, seized the chance to play his customary round of winter golf. When he came home he put Beethoven's Ninth on the record-player. "While I was listening to the music I felt a series of tremors." People thought there might be an eruption under the Mýrdalsjökull glacier on the mainland but no one dreamt that the earthquakes were linked to activity on Vestmannaeyjar. At ten to two in the morning disaster struck.

On the eastern part of Heimaey stood a small cluster of houses known as Kirkjubær, a sort of hamlet just outside the village. It was here that the momentous events began. Marý from Kirkjubær takes up the story: "I was actually awake and had just fetched a glass of water for my five-year-old daughter when our bedroom was suddenly lit up as if there was a fire outside the window and then there was this tremendous booming. I ran out and saw tongues of flame coming up almost right outside our house. Then I saw the earth just tear open!" Some people taking a late-night stroll experienced the same sight when the hayfield by Kirkjubær tore open and spurted out glowing rock. In Vestmannaeyjar-town the lights came on in house after house. People couldn't believe their eyes. Mt. Helgafell, commonly regarded as an extinct volcano, had woken from its deep slumber.



The inhabitants of Kirkjubær hastily grabbed whatever was to hand, children were wrapped in blankets and families made off towards town. There was an emergency meeting of the local council and the news was telephoned to the mainland, to the Civil Defence Authority and the State Broadcasting Corporation in Reykjavik. There is hardly an Icelander born before that time who can't tell you where they were on that fateful night when the biggest mass-evacuation in Icelandic history took place. The islanders abandoned their homes without knowing whether they would ever see them again – people of all ages; babies, pregnant women. Yet there was no panic and no one was aware of any fear. Within only a few hours of the eruption breaking out, the islanders were almost all embarked on ships and boats, some still wearing their nightclothes under their coats and many carrying the strangest objects. A well-known musician was spotted on the voyage to land clad in pyjamas and carrying a frozen leg of lamb, while another older man

was wearing his seriously outgrown confirmation suit. Very few had managed to pack anything into suitcases. The boats formed an almost continuous procession of lights as they sailed from the islands towards the nearest mainland port. Late that night the first passenger plane landed in a rain of ash on the islands' only airstrip and began to airlift people to Reykjavik. At this time of year it is not unusual for a plane to leave black wheelmarks on the snow-covered runway in Vestmannaeyjar, but this time the tracks were white in a black layer of ash.

On the second day the first houses were engulfed by the lava. Brynja Pétursdóttir from Kirkjubær remembers: "It was a terrible shock. The night of the eruption was like a stone in the pit of your stomach, you didn't know what to expect, what would happen next, but then you really broke down when you knew that your house was going with everything in it." During these first days the houses of Kirkjubær fell victim to the lava, one after another, and now lie buried under a layer of solidified rock some 100 metres thick. The farmers of Kirkjubær spared their cows a horrific death in the lava by shooting them on the spot.

By the fourth day the town looked like a battlefield. Ash was raining down and many buildings were half buried in pumice. Chaos reigned for the first few days, as there were no emergency plans for what to do when an eruption broke out in an inhabited area. But rescue operations were quickly organised – work began on salvaging people's furniture and other household belongings. Then, when the lava continued its inexorable progress through the town and

▼ *At the darkest hour, when it seemed the lava would engulf all they owned, people gathered in the church to pray.*  
*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*



began to threaten the harbour, someone had the brainwave of trying to hinder or divert its flow by pumping seawater on to it, a method that caught the attention of the world media (for more detail see Hjálmar's article).

In the middle of February conditions in the town abruptly took a turn for the worse. Deadly toxic gas began to pour from the crater and suddenly salvage workers had to be very wary of going down into dips, valleys or cellars. The gas tended to pool in these places, which could only be approached with extreme caution and using oxygen tanks. The gas was an invisible enemy and one man died from it. Example of a narrow escape was when a man saw a dead cat lying on a cellar floor and was out of there like a shot. Another shock came in late March when the eruption suddenly intensified and for a while the battle with the torrent of molten rock seemed in vain.

At last, as spring wore on, the volcanic activity began to subside. On 2 July 1973 a group of brave men decided to lower themselves into the crater and see whether it was safe to cancel the emergency status. All was reported to be quiet and on 3 July 1973 the Vestmannaeyjar Civil Defence Authority formally announced that the eruption was over. The islanders were invited to return.

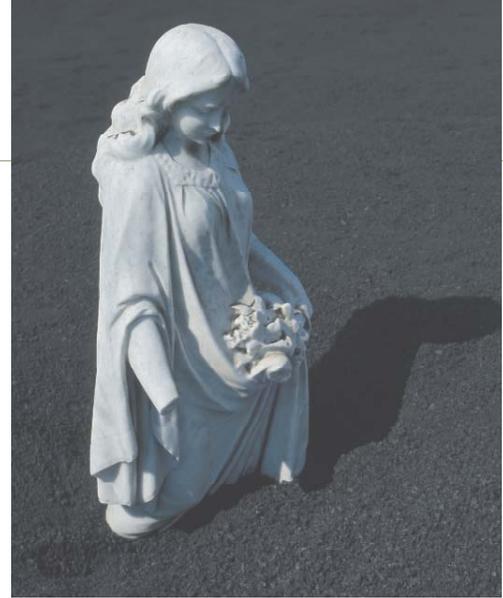
After listening to almost a hundred islanders recalling the events of the eruption, I find it hard to believe how many went back. There were 5,000 people living in the islands when the volcano erupted and around two-thirds of them came back. The drive and determination of the people, who returned to resurrect their community from the ashes, recultivate the land and come to terms with the lava flow that had buried a third of the

▼ *Life goes on.*

*Some of Iceland's richest fishing grounds lie close to Vestmannaeyjar. Unfazed by the rumbling volcano, the islanders got on with the important business of hauling fish from the sea.*

*Photo taken in April 1973 by Sigurgeir Jónasson.*





▲ *Already before the eruption came to an end work began on excavating the town and clearing away ash and debris. Thick lava could not be tackled, however. Big bulldozers and heavy excavation machinery were used. The ash was used for roadbuilding and extension of air strips of the Heimaey airfield. Many of the houses were completely buried in volcanic ash.*

town, are extraordinary. The lava looks as if it might have been there for thousands of years. But at times steam still rises from the new mountain that formed during the eruption, Eldfell (Fire Mountain), an eerie reminder of the devastating forces lurking beneath. Óskar Sigurðsson is lighthouse keeper on the headland Stórhöfði which is buffeted by some of the strongest winds in Iceland. He stayed on in the lighthouse throughout the eruption and now keeps an eye on one

▲ *Angel standing in the ash in the graveyard.*  
*Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

of the island's seismic monitors. "On calm days when I hear the whales blowing out at sea I sometimes get an uneasy feeling," Óskar admits. "The blowing sounds remind me of the volcanic booming."

The rebuilding of the settlement on Heimaey began before the eruption was even over – as early as the beginning of May plots were being marked out for new buildings. Bulldozers and human hands armed with shovels helped to clear away the ash. Great emphasis was laid on ridding the town of any reminder of the eruption and some people feel now, thirty years after the event, that this may have been done a little too thoroughly. About the only remaining sign of what happened to the town is the gable of a house called Blátindur, which still sticks up out of the lava's edge. But you can learn the story of the catastrophe at the Vestmannaeyjar Folk Museum and a special museum of the eruption is now in preparation, involving the excavation of houses currently lying under the lava.

The islanders of Vestmannaeyjar have worked miracles in their town since the eruption. It is still the base for a flourishing fishing industry, and the cultural life is an entertaining mix of the locals' amateur efforts and international influences that have filtered in over the years. But there are still no more than 4,500 islanders; neither the population nor the vegetation has yet recovered its pre-eruption levels.



▲ *This is a view over the Heimaey town from the Klif after the eruption, taken in August 1978. On the left side of the old Helgafell a new neighbour has risen, the volcano Eldfell. Lava engulfed the eastern part of the town. Normal life and activity are back in full swing.*



### Party on – the unofficial National Holiday

One of the things that marked the end of the eruption, and is dear to the hearts of the islanders, is the annual Þjóðhátíð, or National Holiday, which has long been held in Vestmannaeyjar in the first weekend of August. In 1973 it was held almost exactly a month after the eruption ended. Although Iceland's official National Day is on 17 June (the birthday of Jón Sigurðsson, Iceland's national hero), the islanders of Vestmannaeyjar hold their own national holiday in the valley of Herjólfsdalur to commemorate the granting of the Icelandic constitution in 1874.

In the space of a day one of the biggest campsites in the country rises here. And for three days the town empties and the Valley fills with people. The women bake randalín, or layer cakes, and boil puffins. The men pitch tents and

carry supplies. The white tents of the locals are furnished as comfortably as possible with three-piece suites and paintings. An enormous bonfire is piled up on an outcrop known as Fjósaklettur and the atmosphere reaches its climax at midnight when the brennukóngur (fire king) sets the bonfire alight, bathing the hillsides in its glow. It is a weekend of song and tireless partying. From inside the tents come snatches of humorous verse and the playing of instruments. The festival also draws thousands of visitors every year from the mainland.

Everyone competes at holding out the longest during the festivities, and I was quite taken aback to hear women, mothers many times over, vying as to who had stayed out latest in the Valley the previous night. It's considered no shame to crawl back to bed towards morning. The islanders certainly know how to party.

▲ *Iceland's biggest outdoor festival is held every year in Vestmannaeyjar and thousands of visitors come from the mainland to celebrate with the locals. Many islanders who have moved away take the opportunity to return home and visit their families.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*



▲ A hut used by puffin hunters on Ystiklettur, Heimaey. The new lava is clearly visible in the landscape opposite.

Photo: Jóhann Óli Hilmarsson

▼ Boat excursions around the islands are among the most popular tourist attractions in Vestmannaeyjar. Sightseers are enchanted by the multitude of birds and the grottoes carved out by the sea.

Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson

#### Arctic Puffin tastes as good as it looks

It's an exhilarating experience to sail round Heimaey and see the outlying islands and skerries that form the archipelago. The most remarkable of all is unquestionably Surtsey, which was created by a submarine eruption that began on the seabed south of Heimaey in 1963 and lasted for four years. The inhabitants of Vestmannaeyjar had therefore already

experienced volcanic activity almost on their doorstep and had even spent romantic evenings down on the shore watching the distant eruption. On a fine day it's wonderful to cruise among the islands, ending up at Sönghellir (Song Cave), where the captain takes out his magic instrument and wakes the echoes from the rocks.

In addition to getting a grandstand view of the stupendous bird-life when you sail past the outlying islands, you can't help noticing the little houses perched precariously on top of sheer cliffs. These are the huts of puffin hunters, who go gathering eggs in spring and netting puffins in the summer months. This is unquestionably the islanders' national sport and many of them are so agile on the cliffs that you feel faint from watching their exploits. Young islanders learn to lower themselves on ropes down the cliff faces, collect seabirds' eggs and catch puffins under the watchful eyes of veteran hunters. Last summer I went to the islands on an egg-collecting expedi-





▲ *The islanders learn to swarm down cliffs on ropes from an early age. It's common to see children playing fearlessly on high crags. Photo:*

tion with the filmmaker Páll Steingrímsson and his brothers. We were well prepared, with food supplies for three nights, though eggs and puffin would probably be on the menu when Páll's meat soup ran out. Aware that I would be sharing the hut with seven men, I armed myself with ear-plugs; after a hard day on the cliffs followed by firewater and merrymaking, it seemed a fair bet that snoring would put paid to my night's sleep.

The puffin hunters are amazing to watch. On a belt of green grass where the cliff ends the hunter sits hidden behind a low hummock. He lets his net lie concealed among the tussocks, keeping a hand on the long pole. The slopes are carpeted with birds. Flocks fly up from the sea and whirl in circles out to the edge of the island and back again. A bird flies over. Quick as a flash the net takes to the air and a puffin is caught in the bag. The man pulls the net towards him and with practised hands frees the bird without coming into contact with beak or claw. A split second later the puffin knows no more – its neck has been wrung with a lightning-quick flick of the wrist. The pile below the hummock grows. On a good day an experienced hunter can catch up to a thousand birds. There's enough to spare as there are hundreds of thousands if not millions of puffins on the Vestmannaeyjar islands.



▲ *Common Guillemots enjoying their handsome catch.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*

In the autumn the Cliff Hunters' Club of Vestmannaeyjar holds its famous Puffin Ball to celebrate the end of the season. The different island clubs take it in turns to host this sumptuous affair at which up to two thousand puffins are served and the imagination is given free rein – all in order to out-do the previous year's efforts. All the entertainments are made up especially for the occasion, with the sole purpose of upholding the honour of the club that hosts the ball. Then there is dancing till dawn.

▼ *The islanders of Vestmannaeyjar are great sailors and rely on the sea for their livelihood.*

*Photo: Jóhann Ísberg*





▲ *"Farewell little bird!"*

*A girl gives a lucky puffin chick a helping hand towards the sea.*

*Photo: Jóhann Óli Hilmarsson*



▶ *Two young friends nose to nose.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*

Otherwise the puffin and islanders live in peaceful coexistence. Although they hunt and eat puffin, the islanders take care that the birds are not endangered. When the nights begin to draw in during August the puffin chicks often get confused by the glow from the town and fly in their hundreds towards the bright lights. By then the parents have left their chicks to fend for themselves and hunger drives them to cast themselves out into the darkness and use their wings for the first time. These are exciting days for the island children. They are given special permission to stay awake at night and wait in the streets and alleyways for bewildered chicks. These are scooped up as soon as they land and penned in sheds until morning. Then an army of children bearing cardboard boxes assembles on the cliffs beyond the harbour. The chicks are taken out one after another and released into the air, rejoicing in their freedom and at finding the sea at last. The children compete to see whose chick flies farthest. It's a highly enjoyable event and the children's parents help to rescue the chicks, look after them and then aid them on their way. Who knows, perhaps they will one day grace the National Holiday buffet.



For the past five years the people of Vestmannaeyjar have held a special *goslokahátíð* (End of Eruption Festival) on 3 July. There is a great deal of partying packed into a little alleyway, the delightfully named *Skvísusund* ("Babe" Alley), where fishermen open up their baiting sheds and invite locals and islanders who have moved away to come and meet old friends, let down their hair, sing island songs and dance until the small hours. This year's *goslokahátíð* began symbolically with the digging of a spadeful of earth from the lava, the first step in the excavation of several houses which are believed to have survived fairly intact under the heavy weight of ash. These will provide visiting tourists with a graphic illustration of the most dramatic events in the island's history.

Many of the 3,000 guests who visited the islands that weekend took a guided walk over the new lava field and got to taste fresh bread baked in the lava itself. Others went on horse treks or sea-kayaks and did a little exploring. And the golf

course, considered one of the 200 best in Europe, thronged with people in the midnight sun, which enhanced the island's staggering beauty with its soft light. Memories of the eruption may live on in Vestmannaeyjar, but the view that greets the visitor today only goes to prove that when a strong will to cooperate goes hand in hand with a dynamic population, the sky is the limit – even the power of nature doesn't stand a chance.

▲ *Vestmannaeyjar is a fairy-tale world, once experienced never forgotten.*

*Photo: Jóhann Óli*

▼ *As in many places, golf is a popular sport in Vestmannaeyjar, but few courses can boast such a stunning backdrop.*

*Photo: Sigurgeir Jónasson*

