

I have been drawn to Vestmannaeyjar ever since I first saw those mysterious island shapes shimmering on the horizon, on my first short trip to Iceland in 2006. It was like a force of nature that couldn't be denied. I just had to go there.

When I returned in August 2007 for a longer trip with more time to explore, those islands were first on my list. Sailing into Heimaey harbour, through a narrow opening surrounded by a jumbled chain of steep cliffs on one side, and a huge field of intimidating lava flows on the other side is just mind-blowing. But for this trip, I specifically chose to fly in on a small airplane from Reykjavík domestic airport for added excitement. Arriving on Vestmannaeyjar from the air has to be one of the most spectacular flying experiences you can imagine. As the plane approaches, it flies closely over those cliffs steeply jutting out of the sea, and circles around them while making sharp turns to descend quickly on the short landing strip before it runs out into the ocean.

I knew straight away that this was one of those places I would want to come back to, and that it wouldn't be the last time I visited. It was beautiful beyond belief. I was in a constant state of natural high, and the ridiculous smile it induced never left my face during the 2 days I spent there.

The islands were coughed up from the sea in a series of eruptions from the hotspot that flows underneath, which continues to create more additions at irregular intervals. In 1963 another island, Surtsey, arrived in spectacular fashion, and in 1973 a grassy field on Heimaey erupted out of nowhere and created a whole new mountain. It was still steaming in places when I stood in its crater, and the view from the top of the Eldfell was one of the most awe-inspiring I've ever seen.



The camera just can't take it all in... it's spectacular in all directions!

It was then when I first heard about this music festival, that had just been held a couple of weeks before I visited.

I took a boat trip around the island, and the captain (who also treated his guests on a saxophone solo to demonstrate the incredible acoustics in one of the island's sea caves) told me all about it. And learned me how to pronounce this bewildering looking word that is the name of the festival: Þjóðhátíð. And

the name of the long weekend holiday when it takes place:
Verslunarmannahelgi. It's the weekend before the first Monday in August.

So that was it: I had to come back. I just had to see this fabled
Verslunarmannahelgi Þjóðhátíð Vestmannaeyja. By the time I left, I could
pronounce the whole thing fluently.

I seriously intended to return the next year, in August 2008. But in the end it
didn't happen, and it wasn't until June 2014 when I came back to Iceland. I
had lured one of my friends into going, and for me there were 2 places that just
HAD to be on the itinerary.

1 - The walking track across Eyjafjallajökull

2 - Vestmannaeyjar!

Everything else was optional and flexible, and wouldn't disappoint either.

There is of course no Þjóðhátíð in June, but by then my interest in Iceland, that
had been smouldering beneath the surface for years, was reignited in a big
way.

Back home, I 'accidentally' stumbled upon Icelandic music on YouTube. I was
already a big fan of Sigur Rós, in fact: they were the one reason I visited
Iceland in the first place in 2006, and I became curious for more. And I
discovered one great song and one great band after another. Then one
suggestion mentioned a clip from Þjóðhátíð 2012 - a song called 'Ðar sem
hjartað slær'.

Of course I clicked on it... It was the first time I actually saw footage from the
festival. It featured people gathered on the hills and in the Herjólfssdal valley,
having a merry time, with lots of bonfires and fireworks. I quite liked the
melody of the song too, but it wasn't until 3 minutes into the video when it
really got to me, when its dramatic highlight unfolded. The complete
mountainside was set on fire with a row of flames along the entire length of the
valley. There seemed to be no end to it! At that moment, I must have looked
like that stupefied smiley, with eyes popping out and jaw dropping to the floor,
as I was struck with complete and utter awe by the sight of it all.

It spoke directly to my volcanic core ;-)

The official Þjóðhátíð site described how on Sunday evening, the final day of
the festival, people gather and sit on the hillside to sing along with Icelandic
folk songs. 'As midnight approaches, the atmosphere rises to something
indescribable and hits its peak when the valley lightens up in visual
highlights, an eruption of red torches, representing the islands volcanic
flames'.

Then I saw another clip - also from 2012 - filmed by someone on their mobile
phone, standing in the middle of it, where this was shown in its full glory - an

entire valley with thousands of people, singing their hearts out to 'Lífið er yndislegt' - another song I had come to like.

I was blown away. I HAD to go there. I had to see this for myself, and immerse myself into this incredible atmosphere.

Last year, in July 2016, I finally had the chance.



Natural high!

I spent the whole week around Þjóðhátíð on Vestmannaeyjar, happily bumbling around the island. I climbed all the kletturs, and the volcanoes, saw the puffin colony at Stórhöfði, and even did a joyful round of running around the island, as I was training for the upcoming Reykjavíkur (quarter) marathon. The weather was absolutely glorious and the festival was just fantastic.

Every year, a special theme song is composed for the festival, the so-called Þjóðhátíðarlag. Some are better than others, and over the years some epic classics have emerged and remained. They are all about the enthralling atmosphere, the excitement of being at Þjóðhátíð, and the beauty of the islands. And they all refer to Herjólfssdal at some point. It seems to be an unwritten rule.

Herjólfssdal is the location where the festival is held, and it truly is a stunning, magical place. There are lots of spectacular rocks and mountains in Iceland, but Herjólfssdal is something out of this world indeed. It looks like a giant natural amphitheatre, with stupendous rocks rising up on all sides as you enter the valley. There is something about it that is just beyond words. It is as if there's an unexplained energy emanating out of it.

I could even sense it from a distance, that first time I saw those island shapes shimmering on the horizon.

The craggy rocks, with boulders defying the law of gravity, the intimidating peaks rising steeply up into the sky. The way the light flows along the hillsides and falls into the natural bowl of the valley. It takes my breath away and makes my heart glow with joy every time I set eyes on it. You just never get bored of the views.



As I gaze upon the valley of magic, I shall fear no heights



And in 2012 there was the song that is probably the most epic Þjóðhátíð theme song of them all. It captures the atmosphere and feeling like no other, and

became an instant classic. Ever since, this song is played live on the stroke of midnight, at the culmination of the festival on Sunday night, when the mountainside is set alight. And you will hear it many times throughout the festival. It's the song that immediately caught my heart.

‘Þar sem hjartað slær’, by Sverrir Bergmann and Fjallabráður.

Kveikjum eldana

Þar sem hjartað slær

We light the fires

Where the heart beats

It also has one of those beautiful descriptive word combinations that seem to be so prevalent in Icelandic.

Í fjallasal - in the hall of mountains.

The live version of ‘Þar sem hjartað slær’ they did right after the torches were lit was just out of this world and spine-tinglingly beautiful. It was so intense that I was literally moved to tears, filled with feelings of happiness and euphoria that I was finally there to be overwhelmed by it all.

Sjá, Heimaey og Herjólfssdal

Þar sem hjörtun slá í takt við allt

Where the hearts beat in tune with everything

That song is engrained in my heart forever.

And the guy's voice is just incredible.

Last year, in 2016, Sverrir Bergman had the honour of composing the Þjóðhátíðarlag again, this time together with Friðrik Dór and the band Albatross. It's called ‘Ástin á sér stað’, and it features a part where the audience joins in clapping their hands and stamping their feet to the lyrics of the song. When it was played on the Sunday evening of Þjóðhátíð, it actually got registered as a small earthquake by the measuring station in Stórhöfði, on the other side of the island.

Þjóðhátíð came about by accident in 1874, when the weather was too bad for local residents to sail over from Vestmannaeyjar to the mainland to attend the celebrations of the 1000 year anniversary of Iceland. So they decided to organise their own festival instead, and it has been held every year since then. Even in 1973 - the year of the devastating eruption that created the Eldfell but caused the entire island to evacuate - it went along. Albeit for one day only, for a small audience consisting of those who remained and were cleaning up the aftermath.



The 143th year of Þjóðhátíð

Each year, another torch is added for every year the festival has been held. This year there were 143. I checked it personally. When I walked across Herjólfssdal, I noticed there were numbered papers attached at regular intervals to the fence about a quarter up the hillside, where the fires are lit.

So the row of flames just keeps getting longer!

Sjá(umst) Heimaey og Herjólfssdal :-)

Ástfangið ég gangi hér



Vestmannaeyjar smile



Ég stend á skýi - í algleymi

Nancy Claus January 2017