

think outside the circle*

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Who lives in Austurland?



AUSTURLAND



Photo: Daniel Byström

ABOUT

Think outside the circle - *The Destination Austurland Magazine* is published by Austurbrú ses. – a regional business, cultural and education development organisation – that oversees the project Destination Austurland in cooperation with Samband sveitarfélaga á Austurlandi and Ferðamálasamtök Austurlands.

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Sunna Júlía Þórðardóttir
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Austurland: Sustainable Destination

Austurland, as we call the eastern part of Iceland, covers an area of 15,792 km² and is inhabited by 10,300 people. It boasts a dramatic coastline, narrow fjords, vast highlands and mountains, plus numerous waterfalls that together, frame a fertile inland.

The initiative, *Áfangastaðurinn Austurland (Destination Austurland)*, was begun in 2014 by the regional tourism organisation FAUST - Ferðamálasamtök Austurlands - and has been run by the regional business development organisation Austurbrú. From the beginning the project has been built around a wide base of stakeholders. The process has been open and inclusive to address, in appropriate manner, the need for professional, long-term, and sustainable destination management that will benefit Austurland as a whole.

Central to the project is the idea of *identity*. It is what we imagine when we think about ourselves. Our identity is not a slogan, campaign theme or a tagline; it is an expression of the compelling, complicated and hopefully unique, experience of Austurland.

Our vision is to create such a strong identity that it will make the people of Austurland feel as one, so that even if our voices are different, we will harmoniously be singing the same song! Plus, we want our identity to be rooted in real experiences that communicate the reality and emotion connected to our nature, history, and culture.

It is no secret that times have been hard for Austurland, as they have for other remote areas in Iceland. Many people have moved away to find jobs, and therefore an improved lifestyle. The default reaction has been to create all manner of assorted and sundry jobs, hoping that would somehow solve all our problems. Well, people might move to Austurland for a new job, but when they stay and become a part of Austurland, it is due to the lifestyle that this region has to offer.

At the core of this project is the belief that we do not necessarily need anything else. This mind-set forms the basis of *Destination Austurland*. The region is an endless source of inspiration and fascination. If one allows oneself to be enchanted, the surrounding beauty will be forever breathtaking and humbling. In this sense, *Destination Austurland* is a project that entails a nurturing of pride amongst the inhabitants of Austurland.

The magazine you are reading is dedicated to the lives of people in Austurland. We live in close connection to nature, are bound to our cultural heritage and we feel there is always a story to tell. Sustainable destination development is never complete. It is an ongoing work that will require further update and amendment. That is one of the main reasons we are launching this magazine and the website: "austurland.is". However, these forms of media are not only to inform our guests about us and what we do. Their content is also to encourage discussion amongst local inhabitants, and to address a weighty challenge: how will we (the people of Austurland) ensure a future where quality of life meets the expectation of both guests and - very importantly - ourselves.





The Farmer's life

*Machines, Technology, Social media
and dirt under the fingernails*

” In the spring we will release the sheep and lambs to wander the mountainside, and then we’ll look back on the lambing season with pride; it is a good and singular feeling. One feels satisfaction

– Jón Björgvin Vernharðsson, farmer in Jökuldalur.



” Many farmers are technologically savvy and use all kinds of social media. Snapchat-channels such as “Young farmer” and “An experienced farmer” are incredibly popular.

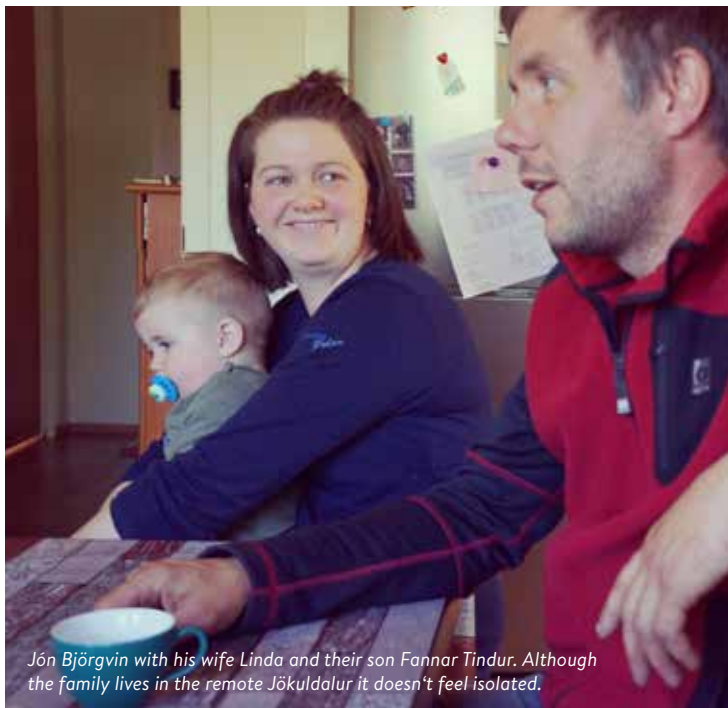
ON 1 FEBRUARY 2011 Jón Björgvin Vernharðsson and his wife, Linda Björk Kjartansdóttir, started farming at Teigaseli 2 in Jökuldalur. “I grew up in Möðrudalur but have lived in Egilsstaðir and Akureyri. When I was 25 years old I wanted to move to the countryside. I wanted to start my own business and get back to nature again. I really enjoy machines and technology and there is plenty of that in modern farming. It has also helped that my wife is a carpenter and an agronomist, and is interested in sheep farming. She really is more of a farmer than I am,” he says.

Teigaseli 2 has 1150 hectares of land. Jón and Linda have 500 sheep, and keep a few ducks. Being sheep farmers in the early 21st century can be a challenge. “Just from the financial

viewpoint it can be difficult,” says Jón, and continues: “No one becomes rich from sheep farming. We had to really improve facilities here when we started, and it was hard work. However, with the support of our families and friends we managed to do it. I have to work outside of the farm too: sheep shearing, driving lorries to the slaughterhouse, any odd job available. There might be obstacles, but people don’t go into sheep farming for an easy life. Men, or women for that matter, who want to become sheep farmers, will find a way.”

Nonetheless, Jón declares sheep farming to be rewarding work: “All farmers, or nearly all, like animals. They like to be around animals and are interested in them, whether they be sheep, cattle, dogs, or whatever.” He adds: “it’s hard to explain, but I’ll try. For example we have just received the news that 930 of our sheep are due to lamb in the spring. So a lot of work awaits us at that time. Later in the spring we will release the sheep and lambs to wander the mountainside, and then we’ll look back on the lambing season with pride; it is a good and singular feeling. One feels satisfaction.”

“HARD WORK IS A VIRTUE, AND MOST FARMERS I KNOW ARE HARD-WORKING,” says Jón. “We like to work, and work hard. For example, many farmers, especially ones of the younger generation, like to maintain a Search and Rescue Team. What does that entail? Well, for sure, it requires endless work for little or no money. But the members are happy with their work; receiving gratitude is compensation enough.”



Jón Björgvin with his wife Linda and their son Fannar Tindur. Although the family lives in the remote Jökuldalur it doesn't feel isolated.



"I really enjoy machines and technology and there is plenty of that in modern farming."

Jón and Linda have three children: Heiðdís Jökla, Snærún Hrafna og Fannar Tindur, and their ages range from from one to five years. Although they live in Jökuldalur they do not feel isolated. "Things have changed so much in recent years," Jón says. "Many farmers are technologically savvy and, for example, use all kinds of social media. They use this not only to communicate with each other, but also to enlighten others who are not intimate with this world, to life in the countryside. Snapchat-channels such as *Young farmer* and *An experienced farmer* are incredibly popular."

"People know too little about life in the countryside, which is regrettable. Modern technology is maybe a way of combating the chasm between countrylife and urban life, and could prove very positive," philosophises Jón Björgvin Vernharðsson, farmer in Jökuldalur, Austurland.



"Men, or women for that matter, who want to become sheep farmers, will find a way."

5 questions

for a photographer

” There is a different pace of life here, when you allow yourself to join that pace you quickly feel at home.

– Rhombie Sandoval

Overwhelmed by the generosity of others

In connection with the project *Destination Austurland* we asked American photographer *Rhombie Sandoval* to photograph our region. She's been travelling constantly, since mid-February until now (mid-March) and it has been a genuine pleasure to see how she perceives Austurland and its people. Some of her pictures appear in this issue, and more will be published in later issues, during the coming months. On pages 12-13 you can see a tantalising glimpse of her work.

Who are you?

I am an artist exploring the mediums of photography and storytelling. I regard everyone I meet as a teacher, and believe in the beauty of people. I am an artist in residence at "Heima" in Seyðisfjörður, Austurland. I originally came to Iceland to experience all that it has to offer. I wouldn't be the same without all it has provided me.

Why photography?

My interest in photography stems from my desire to learn about myself through others. My camera is a tool that allows me to gain access to another's story. It provides an opportunity to pay attention to detail and simply makes me happy.

What is there to photograph in Austurland?

I am constantly surprised when travelling the roads in Austurland. Each town is uniquely beautiful and uniquely different. This has fuelled a desire to see what the region has on offer. The landscape is in a constant dance with the weather, so you are given an opportunity to witness the beauty of the East through various weather forecasts. I fell in love with Austurland because of the people. The more you listen, the more you see. Austurland has opportunities for every type of adventure seeker so you will find whatever you crave to photograph.

What has surprised you here?

While working with Austurbru I had the opportunity to learn more about the culture through each town. You quickly learn to be present here. My interest in each moment was continuously engaged. Every day here offers an opportunity to remember to be thankful you are where you are. I was often overwhelmed by the generosity of others. There is a different pace of life here, when you allow yourself to join that pace you quickly feel at home.

You prefer film over digital, why?

I prefer film over digital because the process allows me to slow down and pay attention to detail. Each roll of film provides 10 frames to capture the way I see, so I carefully compose each image. During this process I am able to engage in conversation with whoever I have the pleasure of having in front of my lens. That conversation is just as important as the photograph itself. Listening to another's story takes time, so my process needs to move slowly, because I want to give each person the time they deserve.

Developing new & unknown skills in small towns



Photo: Rhombie Sandøval

They say it can be too quiet in little towns - that every day feels the same: repetitive, dead-end and boring. But those in the know will tell you that no one is as busy as the inhabitants of a small town.

"WHEREVER YOU LIVE, IT SEEMS THAT STRESS IS THE MAIN PROBLEM AFFLICTING PEOPLE," says Hrönn Grímsdóttir, a yoga instructor in Neskaupstaður, Austurland. "It makes no difference whether you live in a small town or a big city. However the catalysts for stress and anxiety in small communities are just different. People who are socially active tend to participate in more activities and engage in all kinds of projects that they might not have become involved in, if living in a larger community. In small towns one can see ordinary people on the stage in the community hall singing or acting, without having had any professional experience. People step into such fields, possibly without executing their roles perfectly, but in the process they gain knowledge, develop skills, and confidence previously thought lacking, and unattainable. But when there is no one around who has such skills, they just might have the confidence to step forward."

Digressing slightly, Hrönn says: "I probably would never have learned to become a yoga teacher if I had lived in the capital. In Reykjavík there are a lot of great yoga teachers

and one feels no need, either for the community or for oneself, to immerse oneself to such study."

But, returning to her original idea, Hrönn adds: "this *multitasking* can put a strain on people and yoga is one way of helping people find tranquility, and in my estimation calm contentment is a source of joy, energy, and concentration," says Hrönn, who is in no doubt about the value of yoga:

"You're making room for joy and you learn to focus attention," she explains, giving an example: "In one exercise, you just concentrate on your toes. This may appear as being something insignificant or trivial, but still, the focus is there on your toes. It's not flitting elsewhere, to aches and pains or to everyday problems. In yoga, you learn to quiet the mind and shift attention. If you allow it, this ability can then be used in other aspects of life: When you are talking to your child, you are not doing anything else at that same time. You are simply in the moment, in the *here and now*, and you realise this brings you happiness. Slowly you become more comfortable in your own skin. You feel satisfied with every day. And, just speaking for myself, I feel that things are in my hands. I am in control."

The Traveler & the Storyteller

“Traveling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller.” – Ibn Battuta

Photographer Rhombie Sandoval started working for project Destination Austurland in mid-February and has been traveling in Austurland ever since then. “The more you listen, the more you see” she said, when asked about what there is to photograph in Austurland. “Austurland has opportunities for every type of adventure seeker, so you will find whatever you crave to photograph.”

We think Rhombie Sandoval is on to something and here is a glimpse of her travels in the east.



Photos: Rhombie Sandoval

Local

Jón is one of the people we have had the pleasure of meeting and spending time with in Djúpvogur. “Money is not everything that’s why it cost nothing to come here,” he says about his home that he sells his artwork in. All material he uses are found locally. Djúpvogur belongs to the Cittaslow movement which emphasizes taking your time and enjoying life in a sustainable way.



Icelandic Joy

Öskudagur, an Icelandic holiday when children dress up in costumes and sing songs for candy. Instead of going door to door they greet business owners, who are also often dressed up, excited to hear each group’s song. You’ll even find the Mayor in costume!



Tinder and Austurland

While in Eskifjörður I was assigned to photograph Beggi. After our shoot we ended up getting a drink at the local bar. As we walked there he said he recognized me from our Tinder conversation over the summer. I turned bright red and burst into laughter. We shared stories over drinks until the owner was done knitting and wanted to go home.



Calm

There is a calmness felt as the horses move towards Sunna. One horse's interactions with her caught my attention. Elgur (Moose) is an offspring from the only stallion her Father has bred. Elgur had been to 3 different trainers but none of them succeeded. Her Father decided to give it a try, riding him in deep snow so it was less likely he could run away. "He was very closed off and afraid, but curious, and therefore I connected with him. I remember feeling like a hero, 16 years old riding this crazy horse that everyone gave up on. Although he is blind, I still ride him, he's my "round up" horse."

Their trust in one another allows Sunna to take Elgur anywhere. "I've fallen off him so many times, but he always stops and waits for me to get back on. He understands me, and I understand him so well. I can't really explain it better, it's just a feeling." Sunna has just completed her application to Hólar. She is currently working with other trainers to prepare for the exam.

Pushing the Limit

I met Stefán and Bjartur in Neskaupstaður when I saw them skateboarding outside of the gas station. "There aren't many people who skateboard here, so we got into it to make things happen for ourselves," they said. They both work on pushing their limit to land new tricks.



Photos: Rhombic Sandoval

Listen

"Most of the tourist don't listen, they only see. When you come to a place the best thing to do is lay down, close your eyes, and listen for a few minutes. Then you have an idea of where you are. What you see is only part of the place, you must listen. The sound is forever."- Jón Þórðarson, mayor of Borgarfjörður

*Everyone seemed to know me
but I didn't know anyone*



Photo: Rhombie Sandøval

” People think it’s hard to move, but it isn’t.

William Óðinn Lefever, aged 32, is a sports and youth representative in Djúpvogur. He lives there with his girlfriend, Greta Mjöll Samúelsdóttir, and together they have one daughter, Anna Regína. Despite having no connection to the east, they moved to Austurland from Kópavogur in the southwest two years ago, and in that time have become serene *small-town*ers.

“I WAS OFFERED A JOB,” says Óðinn, when asked why he moved east. “I’ve got my roots in the western part of the island, and neither my wife nor I had any connections here. We just decided to try it, and it has been wonderful; fun and easy. People think it’s hard to move, but it isn’t.” He adds that, when he told them, the most common question he received from friends and colleagues in Kópavogur was whether the plan was to settle. “People do not expect that you are moving for a long period or even permanently,” he says.

Being a sports and youth representative involves, among other things, managing Neisti, the local sports club, directing the youth social centre, supporting students, plus doing other projects for the municipality, such as preparing the formation of a youth agency. The agency’s aim is to empower youth in town, and give young people the opportunity to influence society. “At their core, all teenagers are alike. And the differences between adolescents, whether they live in small or large communities is decreasing. Use of social media has helped in narrowing the distance. For instance, I notice that the guys here are in daily contact with kids in Norðfjörður, or Reyðarfjörður, or wherever. This was not the case ten years ago, and I think this is a huge step forward.”

Óðinn has adjusted easily to Djúpvogur. “I appreciate small-town residency,” he says. “To begin with it seemed everyone knew me, but I didn’t know anyone.” He laughs, and says: “but now I’m slowly becoming the same as the locals. I’ll notice an unfamiliar car driving past, and immediately start wondering who is behind the wheel”.

Other things have pleasantly surprised him: “On the one hand, errands get done really quickly. For instance, I’ll call the doctor at 10:00 and get an appointment for two hours later. On the other hand, it surprised me how quickly one can become immersed in a town’s social life. All of a sudden one becomes entangled in all kinds of side-projects. The fire department contacted me soon after we moved here, I was offered, and took, a part-time teaching job, I now play guitar in a band, and, am learning to shoot and hunt, which is something I never even thought about doing before,” he says.

Óðinn concludes: “although there is a definitely a more languid atmosphere here, the local populace expects you to get involved and assumes that you will be willing to do so, which of course I am, I don’t want to let the community down.”

I am not waiting for anything specific

Kristín Amalía Atladóttir is a scholar and a film producer at Hólshjáleiga in Hjaltastaðarþinghá, Fljótaldalshérað. Recently she took over as director of the cultural centre in Fljótaldalshérað. She has no roots in Austurland but that doesn't worry her. "I do not fear the lack of a common bond – it can be very liberating if one chooses to look at it that way," she says.

"I FEEL GOOD HERE," says Kristín, she ponders a little, and then continues: "Mother Nature plays such a big part in my daily life here. Everyday my behaviour is dictated by her. Weather-wise, no hour is ever the same. This has added a new dimension to my life: seeing the amazing interplay of light and cloud - not to mention the vastness of this area itself - I'm simply hooked on it. I receive my energy, stimulation and satisfaction from observing the environment, and thus nature has become the focal point in my life. It is almost like I pursue and assimilate the river, the birds, the vegetation, and this is very meaningful to me. In fact, it means more to me than most of what happens in the outside world."

In 2015, Kristín wanted to take a summer break in the east of the country. She had no roots in Austurland, but through friends she stumbled on *Hjaltastaðarþinghá*. "I saw an advertisement for a housekeeper, and it happened to be in Borgarfjörður, which I knew just a little

bit about," she says. "I had been there before, and had felt really good there. I applied, landed the job, and spent the whole summer there. Although it was cold and wet, it was quite obvious that the autumn would be glorious. I had always thought that I would end up as a strange woman living in the wilds of nowhere. I realized that autumn that I was possibly at a crossroads, and stayed in the house in *Hjaltastaðarþinghá* over the winter. I managed to stay there the whole season thanks to a lamp-post outside the house. I would not have made it through without it. I would have wasted away and left. However, now I have a dog, and these days, I even find the glow from the lamp-post unnecessarily bright and, in fact, don't mind that it is broken right now."

And Kristín is still here: "I was lucky enough to get a job at the Cultural Centre in Fljótaldalshérað. It has allowed me to become more rooted in the community, as much as I need to feel rooted. However, I am sometimes invited to participate in this or that, and I appreciate it and of course I enjoy it, and am grateful to be included.

At the same time, I am socially aware, and am interested in strengthening the community. My basic goal in this new position and long-term project, is to work with children and young people and to present to them the world of creative industries. In the future, creative abilities will be a key

component to their future and I want to contribute so that young people here have the same opportunity to become active in a world of automation and artificial intelligence, and be on par with their peers in the capital. If we don't take action now, we run the risk that in the future these young people might be considered a form of second-class citizen. "

Kristín also considers Austurland to be a long-term project. "Certainly it can feel a bit disjointed to live in a place without having had any previous connection to the community. But I have lived abroad and find this feeling to be similar, it can be very liberating if one chooses to look at it that way," she says. "And somehow, communities always seem to accept you, if you are willing to contribute. So, I do not have any plans to move and I do not either intend to be a permanent fixture. I'm fine here right now, and do not need to prove anything to myself. I just live on my farm, and am not waiting for anything specific."

” *I had always thought that I would end up as a strange woman living in the wilds of nowhere.*



Why are we here?

So - who lives in Austurland? As ever, the region holds a few surprises and it's more diverse than you might initially expect. We asked the journalist Carolyn Bain to look around in the east and investigate why some people have decided to build a life here even though they are born and raised in - sometimes - faraway places.



Celia Harrison

Celia is a New Zealand-born artist and designer, and a co-founder of Seyðisfjörður's List í ljósi festival (www.listiljosi.com). Each February, the festival lights up the town with artworks by international and local artists. Celia first visited Austurland in 2015 to take part in an artist residency and now calls Seyðisfjörður home.

WHY I LOVE AUSTURLAND

I arrived by ferry, and I fell in love with Seyðisfjörður the moment the ferry entered the fjord. It was wrapped under a thick blanket of fog with the colourful houses beckoning me to participate in this community. There is something very special about the east, the people, the landscape, the space. In Seyðisfjörður, you are hugged by mountains that drop into the sea - they create this sense of security and at the same time remind you about the power of nature. I get a lot of creative energy from the landscape. A local once told me it's because of the crystals...

MY FAVOURITE PLACE

Every morning, the view from my window when I wake up makes me contemplate how lucky I am.

Cathy Josephson

Cathy hails from Minnesota, USA, and now resides in Vopnafjörður. Her Icelandic ties stretch back generations - her grandparents emigrated from Vopnafjörður in 1893. Cathy first visited Iceland in 1994, and is now married to an Icelander. She works in the East Iceland Emigration Center, helping descendants of emigrants trace their Icelandic roots.

WHY I LOVE AUSTURLAND

I am a daughter of generations of farmers, but like so many young people I decided to 'look around'. In 1994 I traveled to Iceland with my father, siblings and many cousins - and fell in love. After living in cities and towns from Virginia to California, Georgia to Minnesota, far from family and friends, I had finally come home - to East Iceland.

MY FAVORITE PLACES

For me, my favourite places are shared with our guests from the Americas. Here at the Emigration Center we are actually in the family reunion business. So many people left East Iceland, and their descendants visit us every summer - asking about distant cousins, asking where the old family farms are. Their places are, for a day, our places and their family becomes part of our family - always!

All Iceland's countryside is special to me - but, of course, my favourite haven is here at Refsstaður in Hofsjárdalur. Especially when the summer flowers are bright, the strawberries are red and sweet, the field grasses rustle in the breeze, and the young waxwings are fluttering into their new lives. Or especially when the sun hangs low in the evening sky, gilding all the landscape. Maybe, rather, when the night skies are a-swirl with the northern lights in all their colours and fighting with our Christmas tree for attention!



” Every morning, the view from my window when I wake up makes me contemplate how lucky I am

Celia Harrison, co-founder of Seyðisfjörður's List í ljósi festival



Charles Ross

Charles is a British-born musician, composer, ethnomusicologist and music teacher who grew up in Scotland and has lived in Austurland since 1986. He writes for and plays with contemporary music group Stelkur, plus various other musicians and orchestras, and splits his time between Eiðar and Fáskrúðsfjörður.

WHY I LOVE AUSTURLAND

Lots of reasons. The people (mostly the lack of them), the wild craggy shoreline, the strange individuals (of which I have become one). The new growing woodlands and the old spindly tangled dwarf ones. The wildlife and the semi-tamed life around the farms. The enormous circling sky. The feeling that I came here alone and now I am surrounded by family. Probably most important is the overall feeling of a ghostly, sentient landscape, something that gradually surrounds, then permeates mind, body and soul.

MY FAVOURITE PLACES

Húsatjörn at Eiðar is a wonderful lake surrounded by woodland. Just about all of my musical works begin their lives there with me walking around the lake, dreaming, thinking. Also Kolfreyastaður on the peninsula between Reyðarfjörður and Fáskrúðsfjörður, for its incredible sense of space and timelessness.

Nelita Vasconcellos

Nelita is a teacher and language expert from São Paulo, Brazil. She has lived in Iceland for over six years (including two years in the west, and two in the south) and she currently lives in Djúpvogur with her Icelandic husband. Nelita is involved in various projects, including providing information for summer tourists to the area.

WHY I LOVE AUSTURLAND

I love the unbridled nature and the spectacular fog that engulfs us, creating a magical, out-of-this-world atmosphere. We are surrounded by spectacular natural beauty at every turn, and Djúpvogur's message to slow down and enjoy it is a great message to take to heart.

MY FAVOURITE PLACES

I love to climb the rocks at the beach in Djúpvogur, especially when it's high tide or the weather is stormy. I watch the sea crashing on the rocks, breathe the fresh air, and find my inner happy place. I do that (almost) every day, whatever the weather.



Carolyn Bain is an Australian travel writer who has been visiting the Nordic region for close to 30 years. She has written dozens of guidebooks and articles for destinations around the world, for publishers including Lonely Planet and BBC Travel, but her heart belongs to Iceland.

Á gráu svæði (*The Gray Area*) is the first hip hop band in Austurland.



Photo: Rhombie Sandóval

The "do-it-yourself" culture of Austurland

A Room for Every Crazy Dream

"IN A SMALL TOWN THERE IS ROOM FOR EVERY CRAZY DREAM," the band "Á gráu svæði" (Trans: The Gray Area) says about their hometown Neskaupstaður. Á gráu svæði is the first hip hop band in Austurland.

As we spoke they reminisced on their gymnastics teacher who once said: "We need more music, we need more rock and roll" and that is how the music festival *Eistnaflug* was born. In July the festival transforms the town of Neskaupstaður into Iceland's largest Metal Festival. It started with 150 people attending *Eistnaflug* and now 3000 escape to the East to enjoy the music and partake in the festival's motto, "No Idiots Allowed." Here you'll find stories of festival attendees in their leather jackets picking up trash and throwing it out, or of wallets being returned with everything still there.

ONE THING ABOUT THE MUSIC SCENE HERE IS THAT YOU REALLY DON'T HAVE TO KNOW ICELANDIC TO FEEL THE LYRICS IN YOUR BONES. I often have no idea what they are saying but you can feel that everyone is welcomed. There is a true DIY mentality over the music scene in the East. When Daniel, the drummer, decided he wanted to start a hip Hop band, each member trained, Leifur even taught himself how to rap. "The smallness of it all facilitates what happens. You teach

yourself whatever you need to know to help the music come to life," says Daniel.

Within Austurland there are other festivals embodying the same DIY culture to create an experience for all. In Seyðisfjörður you will find the *LungA festival*, a week long workshop



Eistnaflug transforms the town of Neskaupstaður into Iceland's largest Metal Festival.

based international art festival for young people. It combines creativity and music to transform the town into a large exhibition. Here the artistic atmosphere heavily celebrates the dreamer who dreams while awake. The *LungA Festival* extends past the concerts to include workshops and exhibitions. At the *LungA Festival* you will leave with a new group of friends, who you likely met by taking a swim in the fjord with.

Another festival in the East contains an extra experience just getting there. Traveling 70 km from the nearest town

along a gravel road to Borgarfjörður eystri, home to around 100 people throughout the year. *Bræðslan* music festival is held there every year. They only sell 800 tickets and the concert is held in an old fishing factory, an experience you are not likely to forget in your lifetime. No matter what festival you attend it is likely to feel like a reunion as familiar faces in the music scene greet you.

After our interview, Á gráu svæði called the local venue to see if they could put on a spontaneous show. Within 30 minutes they were performing onstage. There are a lot of reasons the music scene here is unique, but I think the beauty of it all is that music is a huge part of this culture, so if you want to make something happen you know who to call for help.

All three festivals take place in the summer, when the sun never sets, endless possibilities in each small town; where there is room for every crazy dream to come to life.

By Rhombie Sandoval

Forestry in a Treeless Land

” When you are 15 or 16, you usually don’t know what you want to do with your life, but I did



As you visit Austurland you will find that there are various fjords to travel to off the main road, but the main road itself passes through the town of Egilsstaðir, a hub for every service you need to continue on, but continuing on may be the last thing you want to do.

THERE IS A JOKE IN ICELAND that states that if you get lost in a forest, you just have to stand up. This is not entirely the case in Hallormsstaður National Forest. Hallormsstaður National Forest lies just outside of Egilsstaðir, covering 740 hectares, making it the largest forest in Iceland.

Here I met Þór Þorfinnsson, the director of forestry in Hallormsstaður. He originally came there to work for a month in 1984 but fell in love with the place and hasn’t left yet. “When you are 15 or 16, you usually don’t know what you want to do with your life, but

I did,” he says. Þór shares with me what makes this forest so unique: The oldest trees in Hallormsstaður were imported and planted in 1905, which makes them among the oldest ones in Iceland. It was also in 1905 that work on the conservation of the native birch forest in Hallormsstaður began alongside research on exotic trees that could thrive in the Icelandic climate. Now over 85 tree species and shrubs from 600 places in the world can be found in the forest. If you were to dig into the soil you would find that each layer represents a timeline of each volcano eruption, the top layer being from Askja’s eruption in 1875.

Þór showed me around the arboretum, sharing the history of each tree species in the forest. Trees from places such as Northern Scandinavia, British Columbia, Alaska, and Russia. During our walk, he stops to show me the Wishing Tree, where you can put a coin and have one wish granted.

WHEN YOU VISIT HALLORMSSTAÐUR, be sure to ask the small crew working there about the forest. Some have been there long enough to have witnessed a seed they planted grow into a tree in a forest stand they now are thinning. Hallormsstaður National Forest includes two campsites, picnic areas and over 40 km of marked trails and footpaths. In the forest, you can also find different services such as hotel, restaurant, gas station, spa, horse back riding, boat rent and ATV trips.

By Rhombie Sandoval



Photos on this page: Josh Wood

*Þór Þorfinnsson, the Director of
Forestry in Hallormsstaður*



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