

Chasing the Light

The elusive Northern Lights draw visitors to Iceland, but there is so much more to the destination, as ELAINE KIM discovers

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS
OVER REYKJAVIK

PHOTO: CORBIS

THE WHIRR OF the helicopter faded into the back of our consciousness as we stared out at the land.

Long ago, the earth had spewed out a plume of magma in a fiery cough, crusted it in glaciers which had then melted away — this had become Iceland.

And now here we were in this surreal, otherworldly landscape. Grey lava fields spread out towards the sea, carpeted with a sparse layer of green-grey moss.

Pristine, vividly blue glacial lakes, so perfectly still water and sky seem to blend into one cerulean canvas.

These are the views we had travelled to Iceland for. And, if we were lucky, we would get to see the elusive Northern Lights.

To catch the famous aurora borealis — caused by collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the earth's atmosphere — that had drawn us to this part of the world in the first place, the most crucial consideration was when to go.

Visiting the land of the midnight sun in summer had the allure of warmer weather, sunshine and perfect all-day hiking conditions, but pretty much no chance of seeing the Northern Lights.

For that, one had to come during winter, but Iceland isn't called Iceland for nothing.

Sure, the first Vikings chose the name to keep this new-found land to themselves, directing other Scandinavians to colder, uninhabitable Greenland instead.

But the truth remains that winters in Iceland are extreme affairs, with bone-chilling winds that sweep across the wide swathes of lava plains.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
THINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK; A
GEYSER AT GOLDEN CIRCLE; BLUE
LAGOON; KIM AND BOYS AFTER THEIR
WHALE-WATCHING EXPERIENCE



FROM LEFT: VISIT ICELAND'S
TOP SIGHTS IN A HELICOPTER;
GOLDEN CIRCLE IS A MUST-SEE

Friends had regaled me with stories of cars being swept off streets, or skidding off the frozen roads into snow banks and ditches. With two little boys travelling with me, avoiding winter seemed prudent.

In September, the weather is mild enough to enjoy the outdoors without being bundled, shivering in layers of fur. And with rare aurora sightings as early as end August, there was a sliver of hope that my optimistic heart could cling on to.

We turned to bespoke travel company Black Tomato to plan our trip. The luxury travel company with offices in London and New York steered us clear of tourist traps.

We opted for more sedate excursions — yet even these involved braving violent waves and walking past molten lava pools. On our whale-watching boat tour, violent waves had us clinging to the rails of the boat to avoid being flung overboard into the icy water. We were rewarded with a quick glimpse of a whale popping its fin out of the choppy grey water under a double rainbow in the horizon.

A helicopter ride is an ideal way to see Iceland's top sights such as geothermal power plants, crashing waterfalls and remote fjords. You



can land onto a volcano crater, or set foot on an otherwise inaccessible glacier. Or, heck, do it all.

We chose heli-hot spring bathing. The boys were thrilled by the two-hour ride. Our pilot flew us to a river bed right by a stream, where we could slip in for a hot spring bath.

A trip to Iceland is not complete without a visit to the famous Blue Lagoon and a trip to the Golden Circle. A 45-minute drive from Reykjavik leads to one of Iceland's most alluring tourist attractions. The same geothermal activity that has provided the Blue Lagoon lava plains and volcanic fields in Iceland's preternatural landscape, also heats up the milky-blue water that fills the lagoon.

We could see the steam rising from a distance, building upon the anticipation growing since the moment the Lagoon first captured my imagination. We entered through the beautiful Lava restaurant where lunch — a spread of Icelandic cuisine including garlic-marinated langoustine and grilled arctic char — was served. Surrounding us on two sides were walls of volcanic rock and on the other two, tall,

double-height glass windows with the Blue Lagoon lying invitingly just beyond.

Standing at the door, we braced ourselves for the cold before throwing off our bathrobes and plunging into the hot water. Inside the lagoon, it's heavenly. The warmth of the water seeps through us and we glided chest-deep through the shallow pool as rising steam enveloped us. We waded to a kiosk to purchase cubes of mineral mud (purported to be a balm for myriad skin conditions including eczema), then headed for the cavern-like Finnish sauna. We spent hours just soaking in the rich, healing, geothermal waters.

The following day, we embarked on our Golden Circle tour — essentially an "Iceland 101" circuit from east Reykjavik that covers three must-sees in a day: The

geyser, waterfall and park.

Our very tall Icelandic guide Einar, a walking encyclopaedia with a deadpan humour, collected us from the Ion Luxury Adventure Hotel, our base in the Golden Circle, and piled us into a private van bound for Gullfoss.

The "golden falls" are spectacular — a powerful torrent of water tumbling across the rocks into a 100-ft crevice. The afternoon sun welcomed us by painting a shimmering rainbow across the falls.

The Geysir geothermal area is home to the Geysir (from which geysers derive their name) and Strokkur geysers. The more reliable Strokkur erupts every four to eight minutes, sending scalding hot water shooting 90ft into the air. We watched this spectacle thrice, mesmerised as the churning, boiling water rises into a huge blue bubble before the column of steam and water erupts explosively into the air.

We then headed for the shores of beautiful deep-blue glacial Lake Thingvallavatn towards Thingvellir National Park. This Unesco Heritage Site is the site of Iceland's first parliament established over 1,000 years ago, marking the country's start as a

nation. Geographically, it is significant as the meeting point of the American and Eurasian tectonic plates, which are separating at the rate of several centimetres every year, forming a rift valley in Thingvellir. It is awe-inspiring to stand at the Almannagjá fault and realise you are, in fact, on the edge of two tectonic plates. Divers will love the Silfra fissure, an underwater crack filled with crystal-clear glacial waters, where you can literally swim between the plates.

What's more, Thingvellir is a filming site for *Game of Thrones*. What place could be more suitable as the setting of *A Song of Ice and Fire* than Iceland? Looking around Thingvellir, a stunning 360-degree landscape of volcanic earth punctured by streams of dark, clear water and a backdrop of mountains (looking uncannily like *The Wall* in the TV series), I was momentarily transported to another magical land, another age.

To catch the elusive Northern Lights, we set up camp at the Ion Luxury Adventure Hotel. An hour outside Reykjavik, this architecturally striking luxury hotel clad in grey lava stone is set amid wide empty swathes of windswept lava plains.

The Northern Lights bar, an inviting glass-clad space, is designed precisely to watch the aurora borealis in the otherwise absolute darkness of the night, snug under a blanket and with a cocktail in hand.

Should the lights not show, the hotel is a destination in itself, if only for the vast, beautiful volcanic landscape outside every window.

In contrast to the stark world outdoors, inside, it is warm and inviting. The hotel oozes Nordic

minimalist style, with clean lines softened with sheepskin-covered sofas, fluffy throws and cushions and cosy fireplaces.

In the spa, the soft glow of candles lures you to the private Finnish sauna and a gorgeous thermal pool endowed with a stunning view. There's nothing like sinking into the soothing hot water, looking out on the quiet plains through the steam, feeling at one with the Icelandic world around you.

Still, being able to catch the Northern Lights makes a stay here that much more magical.

And we were incredibly blessed — it happened on our very first night. As I got ready to turn in for the night, there was a knock on the door.

"Just to let you know that the lights are here," says the hotel staff. I quickly headed for the outdoor terrace where a small group of guests had gathered. A group of Japanese tourists stood excitedly behind heavy SLR cameras perched on thick tripods — they had been waiting for four nights.

And there it was: A greenish, celestial light moving in the dark night sky, like a silent green dragon dancing across a black stage.

The initial exhilarated chatter gradually died down and we stood in complete silence as we watched the sky, surrounded by the deep darkness of the night, save for the illumination of the Northern Lights.

The lights would continue to dance and play though the night, but those first few minutes of the sighting, with the accompanying wave of awe and wonder, will remain clearly etched in my memory. ■

PHOTO OF BLUE LAGOON: CORBIS