

BREAD SERVED WITH WHIPPED ICELANDIC BUTTER (BELOW) AND SEAFOOD SOUP (RIGHT) FROM HÖFNIN



# Feast Of Vikings

Most visit Iceland for its famous Northern Lights, but that's not all there is. The Nordic island nation also offers an epicurean adventure, as ELAINE KIM found out

WE HAD GONE to Iceland in search of the Aurora Borealis. And we found it, along with plenty of adventure. Quite unexpectedly, we also found in this remote place a gourmet destination: a treasure trove of fresh authentic Nordic dining that seems to have been a well-kept secret.

Arriving in Reykjavik, the world's northernmost capital, via Copenhagen — where we had only just dined at Rene Redzepi's Noma — we discovered that the Icelandic capital is small, almost like a town really, but there's a sophisticated, modern buzz for its size. One can see the city in half a day, but I was glad to have the time to amble

through its art galleries, cafes and shops; to linger and admire the beautiful architecture of the new iconic glass-structured Harpa Concert Hall and to meander along the harbour. And though you're in the city, you're never far from nature — it's in the crisp pure air you breathe in, the mountains on the horizon, the still glassy grey water of the bay and even the steam rising from the sidewalks in winter (heated by a sophisticated system that harnesses natural geothermal energy from the earth).

Above all, the people here are friendly, cosmopolitan and creative, though for some reason they tend to make self-deprecating jokes about all being related to one another.

Just a 10-minute walk from City Hall, the 101 Hotel, where we put up, is the most stylish place to stay in town. Each of its 38 rooms are sleek

and modern with pale oak floors, monochrome furnishings and deep claw-foot bathtubs in open-concept bathrooms. The inviting lounge area sports thoughtfully placed contemporary art, modern fireplaces and thick design tomes atop mirrored coffee tables. It's all so on trend, yet we feel incredibly at home. The reception staff know everyone in residence and the daily breakfast (of home-cooked eggs, granola, yoghurt, waffles and other sumptuous treats) at the gorgeous sun-drenched in-house restaurant has a laid-back, communal feel. Some mornings we even have the entire place to ourselves and it



FROM LEFT: WAFFLES FROM HÖFNIN; COOKING AN ICELANDIC MEAL BY THE GEYSIR HOT SPRING; DILL RESTAURANT



feels like our own dining room.

Happily breakfast-fed, we set off on daily adventures, beginning with the eateries just across the street. One of them is Dill restaurant, which serves up exquisite Nordic gastronomy. Its inventive seven-course tasting menu is such an enjoyable experience, especially so when you are seated in its cosy, candlelit vaulted private room situated in the basement. A short walk away, there's also the sweet and snug maritime-themed Höfnin, a seafood restaurant overlooking the harbour where we tucked into a memorable steaming pot of fish stew. Another must-visit we discovered was Grillmarkaðurinn (or Grillmarket), a sexy spot with a trendy vibe and tasty grills.

Some of my favourite meals of the trip were also the simplest. Take for instance, the Lobster Hut. Not quite an establishment, it's a humble van on the street (right around the corner from 101 Hotel) that sells hot, creamy lobster soup. I have the most wonderful memory of me and my three-year-old son Kyan sitting on a little bar stool on the street, all

bundled up on a cold day, sipping the delicious, steaming hot soup from a styrofoam bowl.

Nearby is another tiny shack called Baejarins Beztu Pylsur, which is Icelandic for "the best hot dogs in town". And do they live up to their name. The hot dogs are delicious. The "one with everything on top" has crispy onions, mustard, ketchup and remoulade. It is so good that I tell myself to return to Iceland just to have it again.

It's not just in Reykjavik that we indulge. At the Golden Circle — the popular tourist route — we enjoyed a private dining experience by the Geysir hot spring, dining on rye bread, freshly baked by being buried in the geothermal ground and served with soft whipped Icelandic butter, hot spring-boiled eggs, fresh herring and a glass of champagne. It was an unforgettable experience and also utterly delicious.

Our base in the Golden Circle was the Ion Luxury Adventure Hotel, a sleek, modern luxury hotel set in the midst of empty volcanic wilderness. And to our delight, it also provided plenty of gastronomic pleasures. The hotel's signature restaurant Silfra serves contemporary Icelandic cuisine that incorporates seasonal, locally sourced ingredients. And it was exquisite. Over a degustation dinner at its private dining room one evening, our group was treated to deliciously tender Icelandic grilled lamb sprinkled with lava salt, Arctic char freshly caught from Thingvallavatn lake nearby, and local skyr brulée

and ice cream with brown sugar meringue and Icelandic birch foam.

When it came to our meals, the excellent quality offerings everywhere we went never failed to blow away the gourmands among us. Additionally, for the more adventurous epicureans, many restaurants also serve puffin and minke whale.

Before we leave Iceland, we can't help but return once more to the Lobster Hut and Baejarins Beztu Pylsur for our last Icelandic meal, which may have been a humble treat but it was certainly a divine one. **E**

101hotel.is; ioniceland.is; blacktomato.com