Iceland Country Study

Postcards from Iceland
by Brian Crump

Iceland is a geographically isolated and relatively harsh country just below the Arctic Circle and is sparsely settle with only three inhabitants per square kilometre. Approximately 80% of the island is uninhabitable and of the 300,000 citizens, about 200,000 live in and around Reykjavik the capital. Much of the country is desert and comprises glaciers, mountains, volcanoes, grasslands in the southern region and open fields of black volcanic rock. (An excellent website to explore is www.iceland.org).

Iceland has no trains, no army, no lizards or reptiles, no frogs; most mosquitos freeze to death and the people are amongst the friendliest in the world. Although the environment is unlike Australia, the Icelanders I met see themselves as more like Australians than Europeans because both share, to a degree, a frontier land. It takes only a short conversation before an Icelander invites you into their home, especially if you talk to them about Australian beaches and summer temperatures.

The art and craft movement is flourishing and all Icelanders love to sing!!! Singing is almost a national sport with every small village having its own community hall where people go to sing most nights of the week. In fact, Icelanders sing so much that there is a rumour that many people flee the country and rent a flat in Reykjavik for a week or two so they can watch television and veg out in peace. TV is limited to two channels.

News and information is broadcast in Icelandic by day and American sitcoms and movies in English at night. Both channels are owned by the government, as are all alcohol and tobacco outlets. The major shareholder in Icelandair, the national airline, is the government. In turn, Icelandair owns almost all the bus and transport companies in Iceland. So many functions are controlled or owned by the government that it gives the impression that the island is one large co-operative. Indeed taxation is high - a rate of about 40% is applied to income and there is a Goods and Services tax of 25% on all goods and services including food. However, education is largely free and housing and water supplies are heavily subsidised. The policy of the government is to prioritise the care of the community and local culture.

Iceland is becoming famous for its artwork and the scope of local modern art contained within the National Gallery in Reykjavik is astounding. Very little of this art makes its way outside the country. Colours are extraordinarily bright and confronting. For a visit try http://www.listasafn.is/
The beaches are made of black sand from the volcanoes but the weather does not permit swimming which takes place in the geothermal pools found in every town around the country. In fact, the local geothermal pool is often a centre of culture where people of all ages gather to swim, laze and exercise in hot water pools that are fed by hot water from underground. A highlight of my visit to Iceland was a trip to the local geothermal pool at the end of each day. Some are humble places but most are rather magnificent structures featuring waterslides (the ladder to climb up is enclosed and heated!!!), fully equipped workout rooms, massage centres and cafes. By 3.30 pm the local geothermal becomes the meeting place for high school students who hang out in the lap pools or baking pools which are very hot and shallow. It is almost the Icelandic equivalent of hanging at McDonalds... (McDonalds is rare in Iceland and there is a strong anti-McDonalds movement which opposes any extension of American culture into Icelandic life.) The only downside to swimming in a geothermal is that it is so good you might not want to leave. Where else can you find grandmothers of eighty cheerfully splashing the local school kids and where any age can frolic freely before going home to a dinner of cod? Perhaps the strange part to a visitor is the strong sulphur smell that all hot water has in Iceland because all hot water is heated from a volcano!!

The Icelanders are fiercely independent people and have rejected membership of the European Union on two grounds. Not only would membership compromise their exclusive use of their coastal areas for fishing but it would also bring them into an uncontrolled cultural contact with other European countries. However, they use air travel and the internet to maintain trade between Iceland and the USA and Europe as a means of generating income and investment. Developing a high level of ICT literacy amongst Icelanders of all ages is a high priority for the government as it ends their geographical isolation and allows them to invest offshore. Much of the capital is covered by free WIFI systems that allows people to log on from a cafe or while sitting in a local park. Incidentally, Reykjavik must be one of the few cities in the world where the footpaths are heated by piped water to keep them free from snow in winter!!

These independent people have the world's oldest Parliament established in 930 AD and today one third of its elected members are women; a sharp contrast to Australia. The Althingi (parliament) began as a means of tribal leaders democratically solving disputes and settling issues and developed through periods of the nation being controlled by Denmark through to a fully independent and democratic institution that Icelanders hold in the highest regard.

Being such a small nation means only one telephone book is required for the entire country and people are listed by first name. Surnames do not exist in the sense we know
them. A child's surname is based on his or her parents' name. For example, Anna Kristen Gunnarsdottir is literally Anna Kristen, daughter of Gunnar and Bjorn Magnusson is Bjorn, son of Magnus. Bjorn's son Peter would be Peter Bjornason!!

Globalisation is evident in Iceland and people are highly fluent in both Icelandic, which is an ancient Norse language, and English. This is a result of government policy which teaches English fluency in all schools. The aim of this policy is to facilitate international tourism and trade. Icelanders travel frequently and one elderly lady (who claimed to be 75 although she did not look a day over 50 - is it the lack of UV damage?) told me she had spent the previous weekend visiting her nieces in New York and planned to fly to London for some shopping the next weekend. Iceland incidentally has one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Economically Iceland has traditionally relied on fishing and shepherding but increased integration with the global economy has seen a decreased reliance on shepherding and the development of manufacturing such as aluminium smelting made from Australian bauxite and which is then exported to the USA. To do this the Icelanders utilise inexpensive geothermal electricity. Water is pumped deep underground onto the molten lava of a volcano and the resultant steam powers turbines that generate electricity. The water is then cooled and used in geothermal swimming pools and resorts such as Blue Lagoon (www.bluelagoon.is for more details). It is a surreal experience to be swimming in hot, milky-blue translucent water while the air temperature hovers around zero Celsius and set amidst a landscape of twisted black rock. The water is also used to heat glass houses to grow flowers and vegetables with many tulips being exported to the Netherlands, traditionally the home of tulips. Although shepherding is considered to be highly destructive to the fragile environment, a high cultural value is placed on its continuance and it is heavily subsidised by the government. Not only do wool producers receive up to half of their income from government payments but any woollen product is taxed more lightly than other products and foreign tourists receive a bigger tax rebate on purchases of jumpers, rugs and scarves than for other purchases. This encourages tourists to purchase woollen goods made by a certified member of the Hand Knitters Guild of Iceland and so supports small scale and home-based manufacture.

Even at sub zero temperatures I found one jumper to e enough to keep warm and comfortable. The wool itself comes in three natural colours of cream, brown and black and is never dyed because doing so would strip the protective oils from the strands. Icelandic sheep, like Icelandic horses, are genetically different from sheep anywhere else in the world because of their long isolation from cross-breeding and the fleece contains a mixture of short tufted wool and long, angora like fibres. This combination makes for a
multi layered effect that traps air and retains warmth. Attempts at introducing new genetic material in the form of introduced sheep have proven to be a failure.

So let's move on to one of the most significant festivals in Iceland - the annual sorting of the sheep. This festival demonstrates the link between environment and culture, two of the key concepts that we are all familiar with from the course logo. Environments of all types shape human activities and this is obvious in Iceland where a mild spring/summer/autumn season of about three months dictates that for the remainder of the year activities have to be largely restricted to indoors. Hence, singing is significant but also important is the increasing range of sports that are played at indoor centres, such as soccer, tennis, basketball and netball. The only sport played outside seems to be swimming!!

During the warm three months of the year the sheep are allowed to range free in the commons areas of the mountains and the extraordinarily fertile valleys with rivers that are fed by melting snow and glaciers. The Icelanders proudly point out that drinking from any river or stream anywhere in the country is possible because of the lack of pollution.

All sheep from an area are allowed to roam freely together on the summer pastures because in winter when the island is covered in snow they will need to be housed and hand fed. The obvious result of the sheep grazing on common ground is that by the end of the season they are all mixed up and need to be sorted out so that each farmer can take home only his own sheep. So, how do you tell which one is your sheep?

Here is where the fun begins. Firstly, Icelanders use the unique Iceland horse to bring the sheep down to a common paddock on the lowlands and all sheep are herded together. Groups of about 500 sheep are selected at random and herded into a central pen by Icelandic sheepdogs and the job of the children and adults is to select their own sheep and take them to a separate pen. Sheep are identified by different coloured and numbered ear tags that have been clipped into their ears while they are lambs and sometimes a coloured dye, or raddle, is sprayed onto the wool during the sorting process to make identification easier.

The whole event has a circus like atmosphere with farmers often camping at the site until the job is completed. The major role of children and young adults seem to be to find a sheep you own and then ride or drag it into your own pen under the watchful eye of the adults who are standing on earthen walls surrounding the assembling pen. The major role of adults seems to be to drink copious amount of, alternatively, coffee from a thermos flask and a fiery potato spirit called Brennevin from a common bottle. The whole
process is accompanied by the shouting of instructions from those standing on the earthen walls, the singing of songs and the inevitable gossip as people catch up with the latest news. It could be a scene that has remained unchanged for a thousand years but for the facts that almost everyone is wired to an MP3 player or mobile phone and that the car park is filled with large American SUVs fitted with raised suspensions from Australia and oversized tyres to allow them to drive over the volcanic rocks that have been spewed across the land at various times in the last five thousand years.

As one might expect, it is the elderly women who seem to hold pride of place with the largest supply of hot coffee and who clearly are in charge of the event. The day I visited a sheep herding outside Gulfoss, the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also the Minister for Agriculture, was in the thick of the event, culling and sorting sheep and drinking Brennevin alongside the local farmers. His presence and involvement indicates the high cultural value placed on the event and many city dwellers go to the countryside each year to help relatives and to join in the celebrations.

At the end of each day, and the event lasts up to a week before all the sheep are sorted and taken home, the singing begins in earnest. As the sun sets around 8.30pm all the farmers and local villagers gather to sing, drink and gossip into the night before the whole process begins again the next day. The most amazing aspects of the event are that everyone is involved from the youngest to the oldest and that everyone joins in and clearly revels in the community singing at the end of the day. I suppose it should not be surprising because with such isolation from the rest of the world most people are distantly related to each other and this was illustrated by the telephone book. I asked how it was possible to accurately look up someone's name if names were listed by first name. The answer was simple; we know where most people live - they have always lived there!! How different from Sydney where people change residence every three years on average.