

Reykjavik by D.Holmen **August 2011**

On August 18-22, 2011, Deb and I traveled to Reykjavik, Iceland, and I ran the Reykjavik Marathon. We traveled with Marathon Tours. There were over 100 runners and family members in our tour group. We stayed at Hotel Plaza Reykjavik, which is in the heart of the downtown area. It was a very convenient location. There were dozens of shops and restaurants within a few blocks of the hotel. We were also only a few blocks from the start and finish of the marathon. Iceland typically experiences scattered rain showers, but we enjoyed sunny skies for four straight days.

Thursday, August 18:

We arrived in Reykjavik in the morning, after an overnight flight from Minneapolis on Iceland Air. I was lucky to get a little sleep on the flight – a rarity for me. Deb wasn't as fortunate. When we got to the hotel, it was too early to check into our room, so we stored our luggage and did some souvenir shopping. At noon, our group walked a few blocks from the hotel to a restaurant on the waterfront, where we had a reception lunch. After lunch, we had a guided tour of Reykjavik. Our first stop was Holdi House, where Reagan and Gorbachev held a summit meeting in 1986. Our next stop was the Pearl, a large dome that's part of Reykjavik's main water storage facility. It's on a hill and has great views of the rest of the city. The last stop on our tour was the National Museum which chronicles Iceland's history, beginning with early Viking settlements. After about an hour at the museum, we had dinner downtown and then went to bed early. We both slept for 10 ½ hours. After that, we were adjusted to the local time zone, so we didn't experience much jet lag.

Friday, August 19:

We got up early, so we would have time for breakfast before leaving at 8 AM for an all-day tour of the southern coast. Our hotel had a nice breakfast buffet, so we started each day with a hearty breakfast. This tour was an optional excursion, but most of the people in our group signed up for it. As we left Reykjavik, we drove through the Christianity lava fields, so named because it was lava that flowed in the same year that Iceland converted to Christianity. There were steam vents in this area, and we saw a geothermal power plant. Iceland has an abundance of inexpensive electricity. Most of it is generated from underground steam or from hydroelectric plants. Underground steam is also used to heat the water, giving Reykjavik an abundant supply of hot water. Next, we drove past Hekla. Hekla is an active volcano that erupts about once every ten years. At one time, many people in Europe thought Hekla was the entrance to Hell. We also had views of Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano that erupted in 2010, disrupting air travel throughout Europe. Our first stop was Seljalandsfoss, a 40 meter waterfall with a trail that allows you to walk behind the falls. Our next stop was just outside of a farm that was nearly destroyed by the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. The farm is doing well today, but after the eruption, the entire area was covered with ash and the sky was black for several days. Our next stop was a beach with some interesting rock formations including basalt pillars. Above the rocks we could see puffins nesting. Our easternmost stop was Vik, where Deb got a good deal on a beautiful wool sweater. After a lunch stop in Vik, we drove back to Reykjavik. On the way back, we stopped at Skógafoss, another waterfall that had a rainbow at the base of the falls. At the end of the tour, we stopped at the sports arena where the marathon expo was held. This was the same arena where Bobby Fischer defeated Boris Spassky to win the world chess championship in 1972.

Saturday, August 20:

This was the day of the marathon. I lined up near the front and went out at a fast pace, in hopes of finishing the race in 3 hours. I ran the first half of the race in 1:30, but after 18K, the marathon and half marathon courses separated. Once the half marathon runners were gone, I was mostly running by myself. I found it difficult to maintain the pace, and without a pack of runners to follow, I started to slow down. At one point, a runner from Germany caught up to me, and I sped up to stay with him for the next four or five kilometers. We got separated at a water stop, and after that I slowed down

again. I finished in 3:06:27. It was my second fastest time this year, but I was a little disappointed that I'm still a long way from breaking 3 hours. I'm realizing that to run at my limit, I need to be in a pack of fast runners. The marathon course was relatively flat and gave us a great tour of Reykjavik, starting and finishing downtown. The race was the first event of Reykjavik Culture Night. There were cultural events being held throughout the day at various locations throughout the downtown area. Our hotel was right next to a town square where rock bands were performing all day. The entire square and the surrounding blocks were packed with people all day. It was basically an all-day street festival in the entire downtown area. There were street vendors selling a variety of food including hamburgers and cotton candy. In the evening, we went out to see the first lighting of the newly completed opera house. It was built up as a must-see event, but turned out to be disappointing. Everyone was expecting the lighting to be spectacular. At 11 PM, we watched fireworks over the harbor.

Sunday, August 21:

After getting up early for breakfast, we started another all-day tour at 8 AM. This was called the Golden Circle Tour. Our first stop was a lake where the first Icelandic parliament used to meet. This location is in the rift valley, where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates are slowly pulling part at a rate of about 2 cm per year. Next we stopped at Geysir, the site of several geysers and hot springs. This is where the word geyser comes from. After Geysir, we stopped at Gullfoss, the most magnificent waterfalls in Iceland. We walked all around the falls taking pictures before taking a lunch break. After lunch we drove to the Blue Lagoon at the southwestern tip of the island. The Blue Lagoon is a pool fed by water from hot springs. The water is warm and has an opaque turquoise color from the minerals it absorbs as it filters through the volcanic rock. We soaked in the Blue Lagoon for over 2 hours before returning to Reykjavik.

Monday, August 22:

Our flight back to Minneapolis wasn't until the afternoon, so we were able to sleep in and enjoy a leisurely breakfast. It rained all morning, which dampened our enthusiasm to go out and do more shopping. We spent a good part of the day visiting with other runners at the hotel and at the airport while we waited for our flight.

Iceland is a beautiful country with a variety of interesting geology including volcanoes, waterfalls, glaciers, geysers and hot springs. I think were there for the very minimum time you need to experience the country. August is probably the best time to visit, because the temperatures are comfortable and it's not as rainy as June or July. I recommend doing the marathon and also experiencing Reykjavik Culture Night.