

Gordon Mackie of GM Diving is introducing trips to Iceland for Scottish divers. He recently headed there to find out how the land lies and returned enthused and looking ahead to a first full trip and establishing a regular programme

Get Set For Iceland

The back story

FOR A FEW years I had meant to get round to Iceland. I had heard of the 'Silfra Experience', touching the East and West tectonic plates in gin-clear water but had been put off by the high flight prices. Although this is no longer the case as Easyjet have once again made the place I want to go as cheap as going to London!

As I had arranged for a group of 12 divers to go diving in early 2014, I had the great excuse of needing to recce Reykjavik and see both the dive sites and the land sites of Iceland in advance. I had organised everything for March with David Ramsay of Magmadive who has been diving there for a few years and had been recommended to me by a friend who had dived with him before.

All of the programmed dives will be from David's massive Ford truck 'the Beast' – a 5.8 litre V8 that gets you anywhere. He also cooks up soup, makes 'Icelandic Hot Chocolate' and even cools beer in the water for après dive. Service only Magmadive can provide!

He can even arrange helidiving, a helicopter to the dive site and back. His Icelandic partner Selma has years of experience in travel, hospitality and film production management. Between them, anything can be fixed!

Iceland in December was stunning, truly a land of snow and ice..and a language that had me so intrigued that I came home with a couple of books and CDs to get stuck into the linguistic tangle that is Icelandic. I will not be beaten!

The attractions of Iceland

I hardly scratched the surface of things to do on no-dive days or for non-diving partners. Reykjavik is stunning. The public pool at Laugardalslaug in the city has indoor and outdoor pools and hot tubs from 32 degrees to a lovely 44 degrees. Sitting in the snow in minus 25 in a hot tub has to be living!

The city is small but amazingly cosmopolitan, the Laugavegur and Skolvordustigur have fantastic shops selling everything from Icelandic music to jewellery and clothing, plus bars, restaurants, coffee houses etc. The food is astounding, fish fresh from the north Atlantic, lamb and beef - everything presented like a picture on your plate! I bought loads of CDs, books and a great jumper. Prices were OK.

David took me on the Golden Circle to see the geyser area, the stunning Gulfoss waterfall and the lakes of Bingvellir National Park. It gave me an excellent 'taster' for the natural wonders of Iceland.

We treated ourselves to a day at the famous Blue Lagoon, an open air geothermal pool, rich with mineral salts and with magical mud that you slap on your face to make you 10 years younger. I must have used too little, I only looked six months younger! Again, it was fantastic to soak and use the steam caves and sauna in Arctic wind and snow while nice and warm in the pool. The restaurant is great as well, the best lobster soup I have ever tried, followed by freshly caught cod!

The old town area of Reykjavik behind the architecturally (and acoustically) stunning Harpa Concert Hall has book shops, bars, restaurants, the lake and the museum. Close by is the stunning modernist 'spaceship' that is the Hallgrímskirkja (the iconic Lutheran cathedral) – a lift to the 8th floor gives you great views over the city.

And that just scratches the surface. There is a glacier, volcanoes, thermal pools, crazy balloon tyred 4x4s to drive or be driven in. We also went trekking with iHorse just outside Reykjavik in the snow. The Icelandic ponies are fantastic and Logi and Thelma offer a fantastic personal service.

The important bit - the diving

Iceland is a beautiful country but the real attraction of this trip is, of course, the diving. Silfra defies description, an unassuming gully filled with cold, fresh water but when you enter, you are literally between two continents, touching the tectonic plates in one of the only spots where they are accessible on earth. Elsewhere they are at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

It feels like flying, the water is so clear that you can see for 100 metres or more - quite spooky. Very civilised, there are steps right down to the water. The dive is fantastic, a narrow gully which rises and falls. There are other great features such as the Cathedral, Silfra Halls and the Lagoon. The lake has endless possibilities for future exploration and David has several sites that he uses.

Kleifarvatn is another brilliant site - bubbling volcanic gas coming through the mud and sand. And huge sinkholes, some going to 90 metres. A stunning and wild location.

In the north (which we've still to visit) there are fantastic 'smoking chimney' volcanoes rising from 70 metres to 20 metres, belching boiling water into the sea. There is also Nesgja, a split similar to Silfra and the wreck of the *Standard* in Akureyri.

In the south west, on the Reykjanes Peninsula you can dive another tectonic split, Bjarnagja, crystal clear water for photos. For wrecks, there is the tanker *El Grillo* in 45 metres and others that have either been dived once or are still to be dived. The *Goðafoss* sounds like a great one to search out. The Atlantic convoys used to muster in Hvalfjörður (whale fiord) before setting out and U boats stalked and sank a large number of them. Many fishing boat wrecks are stranded on the beaches of Iceland. How many are still to be found at sea?

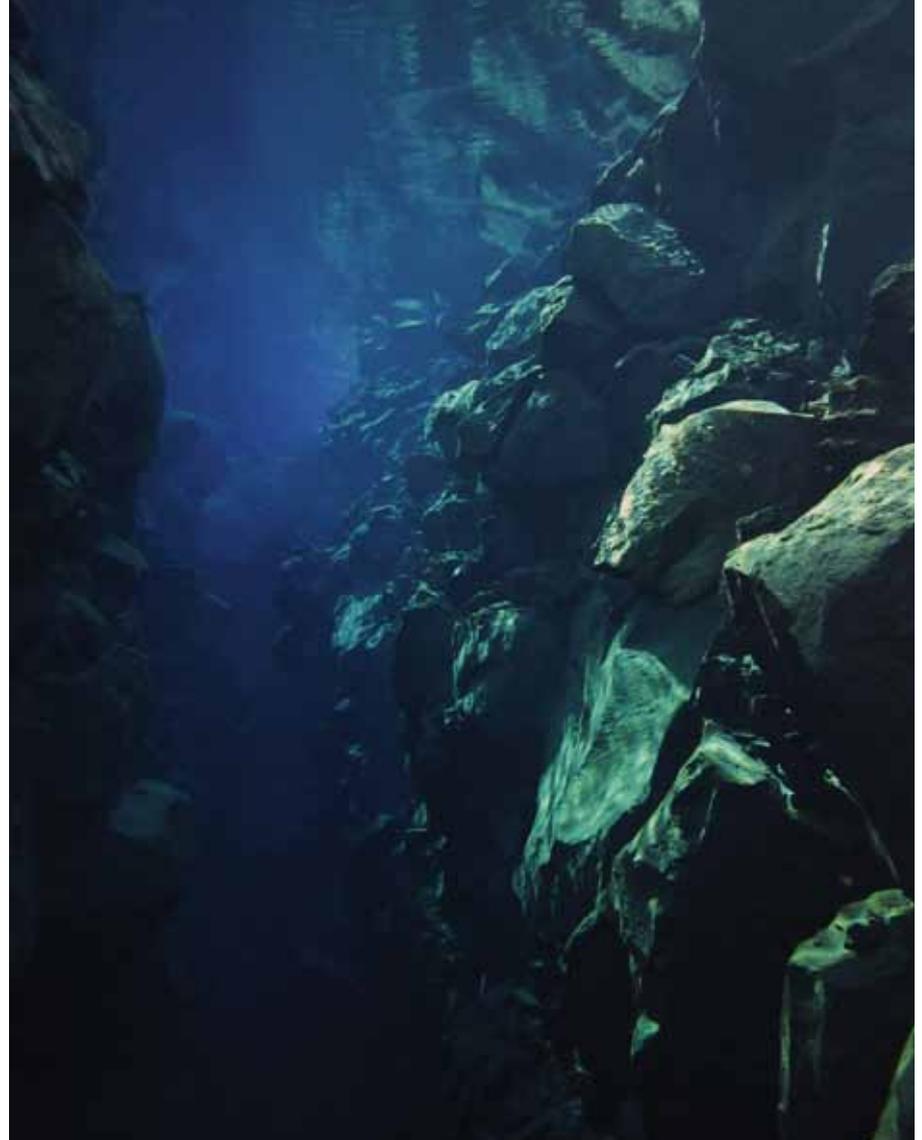
At sea, the Westman Islands provide stunning walls and scenery and is a great trip. Volcanic islands spiking out of the clear and blue seas are the highlights here.

What happens now

1 I'm planning to take a rebreather to Iceland. Nobody seems to have done it so I will be taking my Inspiration to the clear Arctic waters with the aim of running courses there. The deep, undived sumps and wrecks are ideal for a rebreather.

2 Expedition Öskjuvatn - a 200 metre deep lake in a volcano four hours' drive from anywhere. Two German explorers disappeared there in 1907; they went in with a boat and never returned. We are planning an expedition with trucks, helicopters and a NAS Moon Buggy to find out what secrets lurk in its depths. One for a documentary and we are looking for TV interest as this is a spooky and exciting dive.

3 Wrecks, wrecks and more wrecks. I have the charts for Iceland and will be looking for good marks. David is going to do research with local fishermen to see what they know. Fishermen mark wrecks to avoid losing nets on them and so are



valuable wreck detectives.

4 Getting a liveaboard or good dive day boat to explore fiords and sea sites.

5 Explore undived areas of the lakes.

Postscript

I expected to like Iceland and be impressed by the diving but it exceeded all my expectations. I will be producing a detailed report and, hopefully, good

photographs of our planned spring 2014 Iceland trip.

Captions: Main image - the end of a good day's diving; above top - touch both sides of the planet at Silfra; & above: spooky algal growth in Silfra.

All images courtesy David Ramsey