

**Walking over the Earth: A 74-year-old woman
chronicles her solo journey to the Arctic
Circle, the Sahara Desert, and points in-
between**

by Laureen Kruse Diephof

This book is for my sons, Larry, Brad, and
Ron

CHAPTER ONE: APRIL, 2012

From the Arctic Circle to the Sahara Desert and points in-between, the free spirit begins her journey.

I've been called a "Free Spirit" and suppose those who think that of me are correct, for here I am, embarking on a yearlong traveling adventure beginning in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Where will it end? Even I don't know that yet.

It's not the first time for me to exercise my adventuresome spirit, for I have lived in Holland and in Costa Rica, and I have visited other countries from those vantage points. This includes visiting Cuba from Costa Rica in 2003. Friends have encouraged me to use my age as a good example for other senior citizens to get off the couch and travel. I resisted doing that because I didn't think my age had anything to do with my adventuresome spirit. I just happened to have been 74-years-old when I began the yearlong journey. I was honored for my 75th birthday while on the road, compliments of the kind folks in Papa Westray Island, off of Scotland. I left San Francisco on April 2,

2012, looking forward to the unexpected.

I'm in Reykjavik, but where is the guesthouse?

The terrain from Reykjavik's Keflavik Airport put me in mind of a moonscape. From the bus window, you see miles and miles of rolling hills of black lava rock with low-growing yellowish grass and green moss blanketing chunks of lava rock structures lying helter-skelter.

The rocks of all sizes and shapes rolled out of the Icelandic volcanoes years ago and stayed in place forming structures whose sole purpose from then on was to enhance a traveler's imagination.

Yesterday morning, after the flight beginning in San Francisco on Alaska Airlines and a change to Icelandair in Seattle, I arrived in Reykjavik extremely tired, and then I had to walk nearly three miles to the Igdlo Guesthouse dragging luggage behind me. I had one hand holding a bag on top of a small, rolling, suitcase, pulling it behind me, my laptop computer in the other hand, and a camera over my neck.

It was chilly but not freezing cold. My black raincoat and vest under it was just right for the brisk walk I took to find my first home.

However, even before boarding a bus from Iceland's

Keflavik Airport to Reykjavik, I inquired from a patient woman about one of the places I would be staying after the eight days I'd be at the Igdlo Guesthouse. I had worked out the next place before I left the U.S, knowing it would be in another part of Iceland that I knew nothing about. She gave me some help, and I learned that the next place would be on the Arctic Circle in a fishing village of 500 people.

Walking up an incline from the city airport/bus terminal, where I was dropped off, and then across the street, I couldn't figure out which way to go, so I stopped a woman riding a bike and asked her where the Igdlo Guesthouse was. She told me to wait a minute. I stood on the cold sidewalk wondering if I should keep waiting for her or continue on down the street. She came back a few minutes later and told me to follow her, that she had found the guesthouse.

This was the first example of how often people would step up to help me along the way. It is also my first word of advice for travelers: You must never be afraid to ask questions, even in English first if you don't know the language. Pantomime works, and pointing to a map, or finding a word in the local language dictionary works, too. A good dose of humor and smiles will go a long way. Learn

to say thank you in every language.

I found Igdlo, which is a Greenland language word for igloo, and now I'm sitting in the community room writing of my experiences.

I can report that the house, while it was difficult to find on foot, is clean and comfortable. Ingimar, one of the owners, is a complete gentleman and ready to help out in a moment. He has been called into service a few times already.

Expats meet expats.

I have met two other expats from other places in my Igdlo home. Mireia is from Barcelona, Spain, and works in Iceland for a touring company that takes Spanish-speaking people to various sites. She just climbed up onto a ladder and did something that turned on the Internet.

My other new friend, Gergo, is a young man from Hungary. All senior citizens should meet someone like Gergo. I met him yesterday, and while we were sitting in the community room, I mentioned that I had to go shopping for groceries. The kitchen was available for all guests.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked. I told him I had an egg salad sandwich sometime in the morning. When

he heard that, he went to the kitchen and made a noodle dish with cheese and ketchup and presented that to me.

"Thank you, Gergo. I'm calling this Hungarian Rhapsody." It was delicious.

"I will need to get some groceries tomorrow. Is there a grocery store nearby?"

"It's several blocks away. I'll go with you in the morning if you like," Gergo, who became my first friend on the journey, promised.

I woke up at 5:30 a.m. wide awake and wanting to make coffee. However, the coffee maker grinds the beans and then makes the coffee all in one action and is quite noisy. Not wanting to disturb the house, I decided just to lie in bed for a little while.

There was a knock on the door, and without first putting on my glasses, I opened it and saw outlines of two men. They were Ingimar and Gergo wondering what happened to me. I was supposed to meet Gergo at ten for shopping. It was 10:30 a.m.

Well, they could breathe easier knowing I wasn't dead, only jet-lagged.

Gergo and I walked to Bonus, the grocery store near the shopping district downtown. I purchased a half-dozen

eggs, a can of tuna fish, a small loaf of bread, a bread-like cake, a package of carrots, salad mix, mayonnaise, a container of coffee cream, a carton of yogurt, two apples (they were imported from the U.S.), a bag of potato chips, and Gouda cheese (from Holland). It all came to approximately \$18. I'm going to make it last for the entire 11 days at this home. I took Gergo out for coffee to pay him for helping me out. At the coffee shop, all tables had bottles of water and tiny glasses for customers to enjoy a sip. Gergo carried all the groceries back to the guesthouse.

I washed out some things in the sink in my room. The water smells like sulphur, which is normal here. Heating buildings is cheap due to the natural sulphuric water that is available all over the island.

Ah, I met a local character.

Day before yesterday, I was sitting in the Mokka Coffee Shop downtown. A gentleman sitting near the door lifted his cup of tea as a greeting to me, and I smiled back. When I walked to leave, he met me halfway and said something in Icelandic. He first thought I was English, then learned I was American.

We agreed to meet the next day where I could interview him about his life as an actor. So the next day at the appointed hour, I was in the coffee shop sitting next to a tall, young Icelandic woman. I asked her if she was a student, and we exchanged names.

"Oh, I knew you would be here. I'm meeting Kitel, as well. He's going to read what I wrote." She translated her fantasy piece into English for me, and then in walked Kitel Lassen with his friend, Gestur Gunnarsson, who did much of the translating between Kitel and myself.

Kitel has a full beard, big smile, and seems to know many people who walk through the door. In the 70s, he toured with the Innk Group Players across 19 countries, including the U.S., acting in five plays. He played an Eskimo. The playwright traveled with them, he said.

Kitel is an actor, poet, painter, and singer. He studied at the National Theater School, which is now called Iceland Academia of Arts and is the school where Asta Fanney Sigurdardottir, the young woman who sat with us, goes to school now. She invited me to a graduation exhibition on April 21st at the school. *Asta* means love, and *Fanney* means snowy Iceland.

While in the company of the three Icelanders, the two

men told me many stories from their memory of American soldiers on a base near where they lived during World War II. One soldier took it upon himself to deliver fruit to Kitel's mother. His sister was very ill and food was scarce. Other stories they told made me proud of the Americans.

Yesterday, while on a walk again through the town, the rain, and fog, I met Gergo on the street. He walked with me for a while until he turned and went the other direction. Later, he said he had wanted to look at the hotel where he had applied for a job.

"I hope you get the job, Gergo. You are so kind, and I hope the manager sees that."

"Maybe kindness doesn't get the job," Gergo replied with his head down.

"Well, it should."

On the walk back to the guesthouse, I stopped into a pottery shop where I met the third generation potter. A Bill Clinton lookalike, he explained that the generational pottery business is a hobby of his now, and that he works for a prison full-time but comes into the shop to throw pots. The pots are beautiful and are purchased by collectors. He gave me the website: www.listvinahusid.is.

He showed me that each pot had the seal of the business on the bottom. The business was established in 1927.

About prisons in Iceland: The longest anyone would stay is 16 years, and that would be for killing someone. Iceland does not have the death penalty.

Today is Good Friday, and most stores, museums, and government offices are closed, so I'm going to take a walk to the other side of town. I'm quite sore but realize it's a good sign that I'm getting stronger. Sitting for seven years as a photojournalist in front of a computer has left my body weak.

So, this senior citizen, traveler, explorer, and temporary expatriate will show how to get back into stronger condition.

Cured by a Viking

My goal today was to walk to the Saga Museum and the Perlan (Pearl) Restaurant that sits all aglow on a hill. The restaurant has a mirrored, windowed dome that can be seen from far away.

The gourmet and pricey Perlan, located on the fifth floor, rotates so a guest can view the country in all 360 degrees.

I opted for the cafeteria on the fourth floor, which was more affordable. We're fogged in, so the gourmet restaurant wouldn't have been a good choice, anyway, at least until the fog clears and the stores open again. Most everything has been closed during Easter holiday.

On the way to the museum, the heartburn I have been fighting reared its gaseous head, and I've been suffering.

I stopped at a Shell station to get directions, and while there, I looked around for something to curb heartburn. A Viking of a man assured me there wasn't anything in the store for heartburn but that he'd share his cure. He opened up a quart carton of milk, poured a glass full, and handed it to me.

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I know what heartburn is like, so it's free to you."

I ask you, how is that for good customer service? The milk has actually worked for most of the day.

The same as in many other countries, I learned later, Iceland does not sell products such as Tums without a doctor's prescription.

The Saga Museum and the Perlan sit on top of a circle of six large geothermal water containers. On the first

floor, with a headset tour guide, you can visit the earliest settlers in Iceland through a chronological history with lifelike replicas of Icelandic figures found in the Viking sagas. The figures and the stations within the saga were so lifelike, I felt I was watching the action of real people. This includes the burning of Sister Katrin, a heretic, the beheading of Jon Arason, a Catholic bishop, and a scene of the people who died from the notorious Black Death that led to the destruction of one-third of Europe's population. Ingolfur Arnarson was there with his wife Hallveig Frodottir in 874 A.D., when Arnarson first arrived in Iceland from Norway.

Later, while on a walk again through the town, the rain, and the fog, I met Gergo on the street. He's still on a job search.

Viewing the city

Today, I walked nearly all day, and I'm happy to say my legs did pretty well until the end. I thought I couldn't walk one more step. All the coffee shops were closed, and it was cold. Then I found Yo-Yo, a yogurt shop.

There were many choices of yogurt and toppings. I walked in and think I scared the customers. Imagine a

white-haired lady in ice-cold weather, wearing sunglasses, dressed all in black, limping in and shaking from the cold. I sat my black purse down and took off my coat (wearing black under the coat, as well), and all the while, the three kids of a family sitting at a table nearby watched me.

Then, after I got my dish of yogurt and sat down, one of the girls braved a smile at me. I smiled back, and then I guess I wasn't witchy-looking anymore. She broke the ice and warmed me up. Perhaps I appeared more approachable when my glasses changed from sunglasses to clear.

I had walked from one end of Reykjavik to the harbor and back. There were brief moments of sunshine.

I saw the Hallgrimskirkja concrete church, a famous landmark. The church houses a 5,275-pipe organ, which I heard demonstrated on my last visit to Reykjavik with my friend, Marilyn McCord, five years earlier.

The statue of Liefur Eiriksson, the first European to arrive on the land that later became America, stands in front of the Hallgrimskirkja Church. The 74.5-meter statue of Eiriksson was a present from the U.S. on the 1,000th anniversary of Iceland's first parliament. The gift was officially received by Iceland on May 3, 1932.

From the church, I walked to the harbor. Snowcapped mountains framed the opposite end of the harbor where large ships, yachts, and sailboats were anchored.

While in the Geysir Restaurant, I had a crepe with fish, rice, and vegetables. Three young ladies sat next to me. Two were from the States, one from Illinois, and one from Kansas. The other young lady was from Amsterdam, where all three work for the same company. The lady from Illinois works in Switzerland, while the other two work in Amsterdam. It was quite refreshing to hear them talk and laugh.

You never stop learning, I've learned! Ingimar loaned me a book, and one of the first items I read in the forwarding chapter was that modern Icelanders refer to Vikings as "ravaging plunderers" of the period of Scandinavian voyages, 793-1066 A.D. That is from the book *Iceland From Past to Present* by Esbjorn Rosenblad and Rakel Sigurdardottir-Rosenblad. My apologies to any handsome, burly, large men, whom I ever thought of as plunderers.

Travel plans may be up in the air.

The sun came out today, and I will take a long walk to the port and near the Civic Center and the House of

Parliament.

Several newcomers have joined me where I'm staying for another three more days. They seem like gifts to me, bringing their enthusiasm and friendliness with them.

There was some discussion between Gergo and Marianne, a laughing lady from Switzerland, and Ingimar about where I'll be going in June. In Marianne's tour book, Thorshofn is listed as the loneliest spot in the world.

This is what I know: It's close to the Arctic Circle, and to get there depends on the weather. The person I'll be renting the place from may drive me either all the way, with a possible stop along the way, or straight there; it all depends on the weather. I may even fly to the nearest city and then take a bus the rest of the way. This evening, I spoke to Siggi, the owner of the hotel, about the travel plans.

I agreed to call him again in two weeks.

How will I get there? Not even I know, yet.