

# An American at Þorrablót

GERRIT MARKS

If you like snow, Iceland's Westfjörds would be a good place to spend the winter. While the southern coast is more exposed to the open sea and its storms, the northern and western fjörds get blizzards that are impressive even for Icelanders who are used to them. The year 2012 was a standout for extreme weather up north. I had the good fortune to spend the entire winter there, in a rented house that stood by itself on the outskirts of the fishing village of Súðavík. By this time, I had immersed myself, to some extent, in Icelandic life with a nearly nonexistent command of the language. Some progress on that front would come later, but for the moment the Icelanders of my acquaintance were obliged to speak English if we were expected to communicate.



*Figure 1: On the road to Súðavík.*

Gerrit Marks, a long-time visitor to Iceland, is currently working on a book that examines the changes in Iceland over the past two decades, examining the rise of tourism and resulting challenges Iceland faces.

My little house overlooked the brooding waters of the fjörd, which lapped at the distant hills visible from the front porch. For those not familiar with fjörds, they are intrusions of the open sea into the land, spreading finger-like into the mountains. Some, like the fjörd I lived on, were small. You could make out the tiny cars on the other side, slowly driving along the water's edge. Others were huge, very much resembling the open sea. It is a wild and mostly untamed landscape with mountains rising from the waters and a little ribbon of road winding its way up and down and around the fjörds. This is where I lived for the winter.

An imposing and hard-to-ignore personality from the town greeted me in the general store early in my stay. He had come to be a good friend, but on this day we were unknown to each other. He ran the town's repair shop, and kept his own sheep, as many Icelanders out in the country do.

"You will come to my shop and tell me stories!" He commanded on that first meeting. His speech was that of the old Icelandic family he had come from. Shaped by centuries of battling the wind and snow and volcanoes and wayward sheep, Helgi was the product of this world, and very likely had the blood of those early Viking invaders pumping through his heart.

His little upstairs lunchroom came to be a destination for me on those cold winter mornings well before the winter sun peeked above the horizon. It was a gathering point for the workers around town; Helgi would set out hot coffee, bread and cookies and often delicacies like smoked lamb. Absent an actual cafe to gather in, the townsfolk would congregate here and tell stories and laugh at anecdotes and strengthen the fabric of their bond. Knowing only a few words, I would mostly have to guess what they were talking about. But I could tell everyone was enjoying the company, and there was always plenty of food.

Helgi was a good host. As far as I know, this tradition continues to this day. I called the gathering place a "lunchroom," but it was rare that Helgi himself ate lunch there. His house being only a few minutes up the road, he often went home to eat.



Figure 2: Helgi and his daughter.

In little Súðavík, everyone knew each other. It was not a place where you were going to go unnoticed or fly “under the radar.” I realize now that I was a bit of an oddity, wintering over in my lonely house at the base of the steep hills that rose through boulders and a jumble of rocks that would give way with a sharp “CRACK” during the spring thaw.

It was what is referred to as a “summer house” in Iceland, not a place where you’d live permanently or during the winter. The reason being that it was cold. The little heaters were barely sufficient to get things to a tolerable temperature. Not exactly freezing inside but not toasty warm either. I had plenty of blankets and a cat that my friends in town had loaned me for company and to keep the mice at bay. So, in this way, I was not really alone in the little house. Tása the cat and I would watch movies on the one channel the TV received. Bundled up in blankets on the sofa, and with a bowl of fresh popcorn, it was a cozy situation.

Blizzards hammered the area that winter. Snow and gale-force winds that closed off the one road that led in and out of town came with some regularity. Once the massive snow-removal equipment cleared a narrow path, the walls of snow created a tunnel-like effect that looked like a scene from the arctic. It lingered for a long long time; well into the warm, late spring months, the snow still held on.

I had had a lot of run-ins with snow over the course of the winter. My house sat atop a good rise just before the steep hills that led to the rocky cliffs. During this time, I had a little car not at all suited for snow-driving. The driveway, which curved like a snake to the house, was at times impassable. But this created a fun game for me: Always happy to push things to the limit, I would get a running start at the bottom of the hill, work through the gears as the car thrashed from side to side, and sometimes actually make it to the top. It was a scramble. Often, I’d stall some distance from the house, the wheels spinning helplessly in the deep snow. I’d get out and walk, often carrying the yellow shopping bags from the Bónus supermarket up to the house.

Ísafjörður, the capital of the Westfjörds, was about 20 minutes down the road. It was the only thing that kept Súðavík from total isolation. There were big stores and at least two supermarkets, as well as two bakeries I often frequented. Bónus, the store I consider Iceland’s unofficial supermarket, was just on the outskirts of town as you arrived from the direction of my village. It was a convenient location, as it was unnecessary to drive right into the center of town. It was part of a little collection of businesses, all in the same development. A mattress store on the second level, and a Polish store just to the side of Bónus. My town had a little store and restaurant, named after an explorer— Jón Indíafari — but it was more typical for everyone there to head over to Isafjörður to shop or get away for a bit.

It was about midway through my stay that the celebration of Þorrablót was on everyone’s mind. Nevermind this weirdo living in that house outside of town, or the daily grind and tribulations of life. It was time to celebrate. Celebrate what? I couldn’t rightly say. And I am not certain that I would have fully understood any explanation. Sometimes it is better to go into a new experience with no precise expectations. I will say this, however: I could have been better dressed. Not knowing if this was going to be an informal party with

a lot of drinking and merrymaking, I was a bit too casual in my attire. Yes, there was drinking and merrymaking, and a great Icelandic band playing a mix of pop and traditional music, but I saw right away that everyone had put on their very best clothes.

They took the occasion seriously. The women were done up for the finest ball, and their men were looking smart in coats and ties. The crowd sparkled under the lights and decorations of the school's gymnasium. Because I had caught some stray comments about food, and didn't exactly like what I had heard, I thought it best to bring my own dish. But this was the norm—at least for this Þorrablót. Even though all the guests were dressed to the nines, they arrived carrying their covered dishes.

It was something of a “potluck” and others were expected to share in what you had brought. For the spread that was laid out for general consumption, I decided to stick to my own fare. I could not see myself biting into pure fat from some sea-dweller or cutting away a piece of a sheep's head or fermented shark. If this is what the Icelanders enjoyed, I would be happy to leave them my share.

So, it was a party and a good one at that. Snow fluttered outside, and already there was a crunchy layer on the ground from a previous storm. So, this came at a good time, the celebration of Þorrablót. I won't pretend to know the history, and what little I have gleaned from readings leaves me a bit hazy on all the details, so I will simply say that it is a tribute to Iceland's old ways and traditions, especially with respect to some of the food they ate to sustain themselves through harsh winters. I would fully encourage additional reading.

The standout for me this winter evening was the entertainment. The townspeople performed elaborate skits that chronicled the year in review—at least as it related to their little village. A lot of preparation had gone into the show, and you would think everyone was a professional actor the way they pulled it off seamlessly. The physical comedy was hilarious, even if I could not comprehend everything they said. And there were some in the town who were easy marks and lampooned mercilessly in the skits. Of course they were in attendance, so it became something of a “roast,” although I cannot say they were willing participants.

Strictly speaking as an outsider, I think there were times when they crossed the line with these skits, strayed from what should have been good-natured fun into something more mean-spirited. Again, just my impression.

It is life in a fishbowl, these little places. While on the plane I watched a short Icelandic documentary, an independent film about a very isolated town up north. There were interviews with various people around town. Like Súðavík, it was a fishing village. I recall the lone officer from the Icelandic police saying she felt so isolated and lonely in her job and life. If she dared enforce a minor infraction, the people of the town would turn against her. There was really nothing for her to do in her job. At least Súðavík had no police force—if there was a need, the cops would come from nearby Ísafjörður. But there was rarely any need, since nothing much happened there.

Þorrablót concluded with couples dancing to the lively band's music. By this time a lot of alcohol had been consumed, and during the traditional songs the guests would join in, singing the lyrics they knew so well. It was at moments like this that I realized how much of

an outsider I was. I had not even the faintest idea what songs they were singing. I knew the big acts that had broken through on the world stage, but not the music that older Icelanders had grown up with. It was touching to see the emotion it brought forth, the happiness of memories, and the strengthening of the bonds that brought them together this evening. I was honored to be a part of it.