

ICELAND

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IN July, 1964, an expedition arranged by the British Schools Exploring Society and consisting of 69 final year school boys, ten leaders and myself as medical officer sailed from Leigh Docks in the Gullfoss for a seven week expedition to Central Iceland. The Society had been founded in 1932 by Surgeon Commander G. Murray Levick, R.N., who was a member of Scott's last antarctic expedition. Each year the Society chooses wild and trackless country for their expeditions to teach the school boys to fend for themselves in such surroundings. In addition, reports are made on local meteorological conditions, natural history, ornithology, and the area is carefully surveyed and photographed. This year, glaciology was studied.

The sea voyage took 3 days; crossing the Pentland Firth was grim and the sea sickness casualty rate was incredibly high. I tried to hibernate with vast quantities of dramamine and seconal but I was soon "elected" honorary ship's surgeon and had to attend an Icelandic passenger who had fractured his skull during this crossing—but, as he had been leaving the bar, it would be debateable what was to blame! On the third day at 0600 hours we passed within half a mile of Surtsey—the new island which had appeared 9 months earlier following a submarine eruption. Seeing Surtsey made the whole journey worthwhile—here was an active volcano, with red hot lava pouring out, the hissing of steam as it hit the sea and the smoke rising high above the crater. (On our return journey in September we steered even closer and it was midnight as we caught sight of the island; we again saw the ball of fire suddenly intensifying with the eruptions, and momentarily lighting up the crater and surrounds—probably the most exciting natural phenomenon I have ever witnessed).

Six hours later we had landed at Reykjavik and set off in 3 coaches to the interior of Iceland. This journey took many hours as the "roads" are bad; the countryside was dull as the centre of Iceland is simply a larval desert. We saw hot springs, around which dwellings cluster, as these provide the local source of hot water. The air in Iceland is the purest in Europe as other fuel is little used—however even the 5 star hotels (I am told) smell of the sulphur from this source of heat. The walls and roofs of some of the houses were turfed—for extra insulation during the winter—and this made them very attractive in the summer.

Our first stop was at the Gull Foss (the golden waterfall). This is one of the most beautiful sights in Iceland. It is a huge "3-tier" waterfall from which the foam rises hundreds of feet. As the sun shines through this foam, a golden rainbow is seen. Little did we think that in a few days we would be cursing its very existence, for we were to find that because of it, no fish could populate the rivers in the area we were to explore!

We arrived at our base camp at about 2300 hours and it was still light, as it was when we turned in 2 hours later, making it unnatural to sleep. The camp was situated about 3 miles from a melt lake called Hvítarvatn between two huge ice caps called Lanjökull and Hofsjökull. Into this lake two large glaciers flow off the Langjökull. I was kept awake at first by the crashing of hundreds of tons of ice breaking off ends of the glaciers into the water. A few yards from our tents flowed a crystal clear, fast flowing, bitterly

cold stream—a plentiful supply of pure water. There was no firewood in this desert of rock and ice, so we had to cook on very limited supplies of heat from our little Bluet burners—there was no hot water for washing and I was very grateful for my battery razor.

The day after we arrived it snowed and, as I went to bed on July 31st, I again wondered if it was all worthwhile and how I might be relaxing on the Riviera instead. A biting east wind blew continuously for the first fortnight, and for the 2 weeks after it rained practically all the time—certainly not ideal conditions in the thin little tents we were living in!

After 3 days we set off on our various projects. I attached myself to the Natural History Party and we set off to examine some hot sulphur springs on a remote mountain. We travelled about 20 miles that day with weights of about 45 lbs on our backs—and it nearly killed me. When we got to the area on the second day, the visibility had fallen to 50 yards and we stumbled over the mountain without seeing anything. Next day the mist had risen and, although we saw the hot springs clearly, we also saw that we had missed a deep crevasse by a few feet! To get close to the springs we had to wade through knee-deep mud and cross icy rivers and, as I finally tried to photograph the bubbling water, the steam misted up my camera lens. The wind was now blowing at gale force and I was utterly miserable. We returned to base camp on the 4th day and by now I had developed achilles tendonitis, a swollen ankle, a painful knee and some horrid blisters. So I rested.

For the bird watcher Iceland is a “must”—we found the nest of a snowy owl on



Fig. 1 The Northern Lights

a subsequent “march”—these birds are extremely rare—and I also spent a long time photographing an irate golden plover who was trying to frighten me off his “stand”. However, the ptarmigan were our favourites as these could be killed by throwing rocks at them and so supplemented our iron rations.

I finally decided to make a “Crocks” party of all the disabled and explore the island in a more leisurely style. On our first night out—when I had to pay a call to nature at about 0300 hours—I saw the Northern Lights (Figure 1) for the first time—it was as if enormous searchlights were radiating across the sky from the North Pole. We spent many hours on a subsequent night photographing this phenomenon. I discovered a huge ice cave under the Langjökull glacier and also a waterfall about 150 feet high in one unexplored mountainous area which I immediately named the “Pittfalls”. After 6 weeks we came home via the Great Geyser (from which the name geyser was derived). A column of 180 feet of boiling water and steam spouts out every 3-5 minutes (Figure 2). I was told that, by dropping a large amount of detergent down the hole, this lowers the surface tension and the geyser spouts forth.



Fig. 2 The Great Geyser

Medically the general health was excellent. There was no diarrhoea at all because it was too cold for flies to breed. However, a quarter of the boys suffered from sprained achilles tendons—three boys requiring local injections of cortisone, but one boy was resistant to all therapy. Sprained lateral ligaments of ankles also responded dramatically to cortisone and local anaesthetic and mobilisation. There was one boy with a torn medial cartilage, but this happened before the expedition, two mild cases of chondromalacia patellae and one case of mild anterior tibial syndrome. Sprained fibres of the latissimus dorsi also occurred due to the heavy weights we had to carry.

Other problems included two cases of right iliac fossa pain treated with terramycin, two cases of tonsillitis, a septic heel, carbuncle of neck, an infected toe, three paronychia (two drained under ring block), a pilonidal sinus, an abscess of the leg requiring drainage under general anaesthetic (given by Capt. Merrick with a Medrex machine), three cases of mild haemorrhoids, a leader with peripheral arterial disease, a case of Raynaud's disease, one leader with the aftermath of pre-exercise frost bite, a case of undiagnosed colic, tinea cruris, herpes simplex, a boy allergic to rice who also had psoriasis, one with schizophrenic tendencies and two who were decidedly accident-prone. Four cases of septic blistering of the back of the hand occurred in the plane-tablers in the survey party but these cleared up with aureomycin ointment. Cracks on the finger tips were terribly common and resistant to all forms of therapy.

Summary

I have described the B.S.E.S. expedition to Iceland in 1964 from my angle as their Medical Officer.

I would like to thank the B.S.E.S. for their permission to publish this article.
