

# Rocks and Light: 10 Pictures of Iceland

By Grace McLellan

1. The first picture I take when we arrive. It's a little blurry, my hands certainly shaking from exhaustion and the jostling of the bus over foreign terrain. The sky in the picture is a dreary and sleepy gray, but still light enough to remind us it's morning. How am I going to get over the jetlag? Large raindrops cling to the window I'm sitting next to, and I can see the warped reflection of my blue and white striped shirt in them. My mom bought that shirt for me right before I left. We're passing gray building after gray, monochromatic building. In a new place, yet it feels boringly familiar.
2. A white horse is standing alone in a field, entirely unbothered by our presence. The grass is a bright green despite the dull dark colors of the endless cloud-filled background. There isn't anything else around. No trees, not even a mountain in the distance. It's a barren floating rock with a white stallion standing proudly upon it as if to say to us tourists, "This is my world. You cannot even begin to know what I know about my mother and I will not let you claim her."
3. Standing on cliffs that jut out into the sea. It's both astonishing and frightening to see jagged claws that stick out of the glowing blue waves. White foam crashes into the pillars of stone and I can feel the cold spray mixing with the rain that seems to be never-ending. I'm soaked as I stand for this picture, grimacing when I should be smiling. Wet hair sticks to my skin and the feeling makes me shiver, yet I feel no reason to complain. I think I'm surrounded by magic.

4. Grindavík. I'm standing at the edge of creation. In the actual moment, I'm having a hard time fathoming what I'm looking at. My feet are stepping on the foundation of a land that harbored Vikings and soldiers and fishermen with their families, looking for a life away from the chaos and control of the giant powers that surrounded them. They would flee to a world considerably young compared to the rest, built upon the same hardened lava which my Columbia hiking boots are now traversing. I can almost feel the radiating power and heat from below me, as if the lava were still red and glowing, pooling around my feet and burning my toes. The dark layers of rock have created swirling patterns with random splatterings of reds and greens which shimmer in the right light. I take a piece of porous lava rock when we leave, not for the novelty, but for a reminder of nature's uncontrollable and spontaneous divinity.
  
5. In this photo, we've just arrived at the office of Icelandic writer Andri Snær Magnason. The photo itself is taken from an angle down low looking up at the perpendicular letters that decorate the front of the building. The red paint on these letters is faded and peeling. There are noticeably large charcoal-colored cracks that seem to originate from the structure's base and branch upwards. They are vicious roots threatening to take hold of the weak concrete and drag it back down to the earth where it came from. I know I was expecting more. Of course, once I meet Andri, my expectations are shattered and reformed. He welcomes us eagerly and practices what he preaches, talking to us with the same ease and intimacy as he does in his writing. We are children gathered around a coffee table covered in books as our uncle (who we had never met before) tells us what's what with fantastical stories and songs, until suddenly the world makes sense. He awoke

the volcanic childlike wonder and excitement I had for the future which had become dormant for too long.

6. In a church in Reykholt, a village where the prose writer Snorri Sturlusson lived and died. Light is streaming in through a long, vertical window to the right of us. The sunlight is hitting a stone sacred vessel, but no holy water is in it. The window itself is telling a story through tinted shards of glass, a rainbow pieced together like a mosaic. It depicts the history of Norse Kings and their infamous tragedies. I think about the stories I've read before, including these same kings, and the sagas that Snorri Sturlusson himself wrote about them. So few people were taught to write at the time, and his work has become the basis for studies by historians and anthropologists like myself. I like to imagine that I will contribute to the same tradition of knowledge and storytelling that will exist after my time in the centuries to come. I want to tell the stories of my generation and inspire and inform the generations after me.
7. Walking behind a waterfall in the Icelandic countryside. The sheer force of the water makes a thundering sound as it rushes over our heads. It roars and gushes, spraying us with water and mist. It is so loud that we have to shout to hear each other, and it's a challenge to even get out a word without laughing over ourselves at the absurdity of it all. We're all in awe, but I feel particularly moved by the force of natural power above me. I'm completely still in this picture, and I'm squinting at the intense brightness emanating from the water that is almost entirely blocking the cove that we're huddled in. The waterfall itself doesn't even make it into the photo, but the dense wall of rock, the outer layer of a mountain, is behind me and glowing almost as brightly with green and yellow hues. The plants and moss which we've grown used to seeing, despite being blocked by a

wall of water, are thriving in the dampness of the environment they've been born into. Us tourists slip and stumble through mud, aliens to the world not made for us. I watch with fascination as nature does what it has been doing for thousands of years, and I think we should follow her lead.

8. Sitting on the black sand beach, I manage to capture a picture of the crashing waves without any of the tourists in the frame. There are plenty of footsteps in the sand, like fossils that will be washed away when the tide comes in, only to be replaced by new ones. The water looks almost titanium white against the black lava sand. A painter's dream subject, with so much contrast in such small detail. The beach, despite my fear of the ocean, has been a constant beacon in my life. Following my family tends to always lead me to a beach, no matter where we go. To me, it's familiar, a place that I recognize as home. By the time I take this photo, our trip is slowly reaching its end, and I appreciate the comfort of the sand between my fingers and the sound of waves crashing.
9. The hardest visit throughout the entire trip. We stand collectively in front of a beautiful white mass of ice, coated in a sable black dust that sticks indefinitely to everything it touches. A glacier that lives tucked away in the mountains, but is not hidden. It partially floats on a river of its own making, breaking off chunks that glide slowly past us away from its body. I watch in silent horror as melting water leaves a trail of devastation as it bleeds from the cracks in the layers of ice. I feel distant, and I think I feel it from my peers, too. I feel lucky to have Oli, a guide that acts more like a lighthouse to my lost mind, which is always on the brink of crashing into the rocks of fret and despair before he pulls me in safely, and releases the weight of worry from my sinking ship. He reassures us that we have time. He's shown us the beauty and pain of his little island, and he has no

intention of letting us leave without understanding what we've seen and how we impact it, and how much he trusts in our ability to make the right changes.

10. The last picture I take in Iceland on the way to the airport. It isn't as impressive (skill-wise) as the other pictures, but it means just as much. We're passing through Reykjanesbær one last time, but the sky is a little clearer this time. I'm excited to be on my way home, but I feel an early grief to be leaving such an incredible place. The grass is a little greener, though the field remains rocky and mostly moss-covered. I think about the things I've learned, what I'll bring back, and the possibilities ahead of me. In the distance, on the tiniest of hills, sits four large rectangular rocks. Each rock carries a smaller more circular rock, and suddenly they become people with heads on their shoulders. One is taller and broader than the others, and I think of my dad. I think their posture looks about the same. The shorter one next to him is definitely my mom, a more relaxed version of the first. My sister and I, just like in every family photo, are standing on either side of them. We're younger than they are, their children, there to support them and learn from them just as much as they do from us.

I'm looking into the rock faces of my family. We're strong. Maybe we seem a little unstable sometimes, and maybe we threaten to crumble, but we've lasted this long. We come from the earth. We have faced creation and destruction and survived.