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IN FIMMVÖRDUHÁLS – 24 PAGES

2010

NIGHT VISION

HIKING FIMMVÖRDUHÁLS BEFORE THE ERUP

BY EVAN SPRING



ON



The Fimmvörduháls mountain ridge between Skógar and Thórsmörk is among the most stunning and popular hiking routes in Iceland. The rugged trail has been trekked by thousands of people who have enjoyed its spectacular beauty. **Evan Spring** joined fifty happy hikers on a solstice ritual night trek over the ridge last summer. The last part of that trail has now been destroyed by the glowing fissures of volcanic craters. For experienced hikers it takes between five and six hours to reach the craters above Thórsmörk.

The culmination of our all-night hike came at 5 a.m., when our guides handed each of us a golden chalice filled with a fragrant elixir of nectar and ambrosia. Actually it was cheap champagne in a plastic cup, but we hardly knew the difference. The fifty of us had walked for nine hours, ascending more than a thousand meters, in the perpetual light of late June. Now we were perched at a panoramic overlook, with an awe-inspiring expanse known as 'Land of the Gods' (*Godaland*) spread below us. It was hard not to feel Olympian.

I could hardly believe that the guides—all members of the wilderness club Útivist, and none of them paid—lugged all those bottles over the pass on our behalf. In the U.S., where I live, a touring organization would never risk a lawsuit by serving alcohol to hikers about to descend a dizzying slope on exhausted, wobbly legs. Thank goodness Icelanders aren't so sane.

Since the early 1990s, on the weekend closest to the summer solstice, Útivist has staged its annual showcase event: a night-long, 24-kilometer trek from the southern coastal village of Skógar to the Thórsmörk nature reserve, over the Fimmvörduháls pass. As many as 400 people have participated in a given year, yet somehow this remarkable ritual is barely known outside Iceland. Útivist posts no description or invitation online in English, but anyone with hardy legs is welcome.

On Friday evening, buses depart Reykjavík at

PHOTO BY HALDUR KRISTJANSSON

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staggered intervals for Skógar, while camping supplies are transported directly to Thórsmörk. (Icelanders, mercifully, do not seem to regard a heavy backpack as a badge of virtue.) Each busload forms a separate hiking contingent. The trek takes eleven hours, more or less, at a medium pace. The sun scoops beneath the horizon for four hours, but flashlights aren't necessary in the dusky evening light. Weary hikers are buoyed by the throng, not to mention the midnight sun, exquisite scenery, and invigorating polar air. By 9 a.m. most participants have reached Thórsmörk and collapsed in their sleeping bags. Saturday is for sleep, followed by well-earned festivities long into the night. Buses arrive Sunday for the ride back to Reykjavík. On Monday, ordinary life resumes.

Fimmvörduháls is already among the five most renowned trekking routes in Iceland. The trail starts at Skógafoss, the magnificent curtain cascade. As you head upstream along the Skógá river, dramatic waterfalls seem to unfold at every turn. At peak altitude, the trail squeezes between two glaciers, Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull. (Less fanatical hikers make the trip in two days, overnighing near the pass in Útivist's mountain hut Fimmvörduskáli.) A final, vertiginous descent leads to Thórsmörk (Thor's

Wood), a lovely interior oasis of wildflowers, mosses and birch trees encircled by hulking mountains and flat, river-braided stretches of sediment and rocks.

On the whole, Iceland has fewer solstice celebrations than other Scandinavian countries. Perhaps Icelanders are too innately attuned to the phases of the sun to feel self-conscious about it. In any case, solstice events are starting to catch on. Many locales organize midsummer celebrations, including Siglufjörður, Eyrarbakki and Grímsey, Iceland's northernmost inhabited island. Ísafjörður, in the Westfjords, hosts the classical music festival Vid Djúpid. At Hafnarfjörður's Viking Festival, modern-day Norsemen hack away at Christians in staged battles (virtually all participants are foreigners, as Icelanders hasten to point out). Iceland's Pagan Society, Ásatrúarfélagid, offers a dignified and state-sanctioned alternative: at the 2009 solstice ceremony in Thingvellir, an Icelandic-American couple were married.

For 2009, the Fimmvörduháls trip was not the only organized excursion under the midnight sun. On June 16, the eve of National Day, I joined Útivist on a kind of warm-up overnight hike along Leggjabrjútur ('leg-breaker'), a 16-kilometer route from the outskirts of

Thingvellir to Hvalfjörður. It was a worthwhile trip, but couldn't compete with Fimmvörduháls in scenery or spirit.

Útivist's sister organization, Ferðafélag Íslands, ran two solstice-themed events: a six-day yoga jaunt to Hornstrandir in the West Fjords, and an overnight ascent of Snaefellsjökull, the iconic glacier. (Ferðafélag Íslands usually leads a climb up the volcano Hekla, but not last year because it's due to spew.) Snaefellsjökull was last year's novelty and drew a crowd of 225, but I never suspected I'd signed up for the wrong adventure. After climbing Snaefellsjökull, participants hopped back on the bus and went home. Our Fimmvörduháls weekend wasn't just an overnight lark—it was a true seasonal rite, a life-punctuating escape from everyday routine.

It began 5 p.m. Friday, June 19, at Reykjavík's BSÍ terminal. As I boarded the bus, several organizers in yellow vests stared suspiciously at my feet. I was wearing Gore-Tex hiking boots, but apparently not the correct type. Útivist is understandably strict about gear, especially with non-Icelanders; in 1970, some French travelers were trapped in bad weather near the pass and died of hypothermia, along with an Icelandic woman who tried to help. I flashed my backup wool socks, and we were off.





Around 150 people signed up, a third of them Útivist members. Many more drove right to Thórsmörk to join the party without all the hard work. Still, this was the lowest turnout in several years, probably due to Iceland's economic troubles. The price looked very reasonable to me—19,600 ISK (USD 150 / EUR 110) for transport, guides, trailside refreshments, and Saturday dinner, not to mention a performance that was announced on the bus: "In Thórsmörk you will hear a concert by the Útivist Big Band, which has two or three guitar players and about 200 singers."

Útivist has the logistics down cold, avoiding all unnecessary suffering (unless, of course, you consider the whole hike to be unnecessary suffering). Guides, stationed front and rear, kept a lookout for stragglers. A nurse was on call for blister cases. A strapping co-ed rescue team from Selfoss tagged along. At the first rest stop, we found a table laid out with *hangikjöt* (smoked lamb) and *flatkökur* (cakey flatbread). At 900 meters we reached the Baldvinskáli hut, the last point accessible to 4WD vehicles. There

we received hot soup plus a choice of tuna or shrimp sandwiches. I was certainly feeling well taken care of. There was even a portable toilet, hauled all the way up there on a trailer. Never has a porta-potty looked so nurturing. (The toilet driver, by the way, was the only trip organizer to receive payment—and only for gas money.)

The guides also knew how to give us our space. On a trip I once took in Utah with the Sierra Club—an American organization similar to Útivist—the guides treated us like schoolchildren. Fearing a human domino chain, they would lecture anyone who walked within six feet of another person on steep parts of the trail. On the Útivist trip, the guides served champagne before the steep parts of the trail. When some of us slid down an ice patch on our butts, they looked unhappy but didn't try to stop us.

The Fimmvörduháls pass itself is the most hazardous part of the route. The temperature drops, the glaciers create a wind funnel, and hidden puddles lurk beneath thin sheets of ice.

But we were blessed with perfect weather: the ice was firm, the air almost still, the sky near cloudless for the 3 a.m. sunrise.

The entire trail proceeds north, ideal for stalking the midnight sun as it traces a shallow, bowl-shaped arc across the sky. The sun feels like an honored guest, leading me to wonder if the weekend is a dim vestige of traditional solstice ceremonies practiced by Icelanders and their Viking forebears. My Icelandic companions were not conversant with pagan rites of old, but did tell me snatches of folklore as we walked along the trail. The key night for superstitions is not the actual solstice, which falls on June 20 or 21, but St. John's Eve (*Jónsmessa* in Icelandic) on June 23, a Christian holiday introduced to Iceland in the tenth century by Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason as a substitute for the pagan festival. According to a grizzled policeman from Reykjavík, cows speak to each other that night. Seal maidens shed their skins, becoming human, and dance naked on shore (a man could snatch a skin to win a seal bride). Magic stones float to the surface of certain lakes at midnight;



PHOTO BY ORVAR THORGERSSON

some make a wish come true, others make you invisible. But the story I heard most often was that good health and fortune come to those who roll naked in the evening dew. "I tried it once," a woman in our group admitted. "There was nothing to lose."

For historical precedents, we may also look to the national parliament (Althingi) held at Thingvellir in late June through 1798. I like to think we were following in the footsteps of all the Icelanders who journeyed there through the uninhabited interior with makeshift skis and fish-skin shoes. The Althingi was as much a social event as a legislative assembly. And there must have been an Althingi Big Band.

Finally we arrived at Thórmörk's Básar campground. A volunteer handed me a commemorative T-shirt. Another held forth a tray with two final rewards: a shot of cod liver oil chased down with a shot of Gammel Dansk, an anise-flavored bitter. (I guess not *all* unnecessary suffering was avoided.) Even after this revolting nightcap, I was too exhausted to brush my teeth.

When I awoke late Saturday afternoon, the celebrations were already underway. Dining tables were arranged inside an enormous, striped tent. An organizer was sticking bright yellow tape on the tent straps to prevent drunken collisions. Another supervised the fire pit, where

cuts of lamb roasted in foil. Others prepared the salad, potatoes, and fresh-baked rolls.

Spirited sing-alongs began at dinner, accompanied by guitar and accordion. The tent swayed and rattled in the wind, so organizers gripped the tent poles and swayed along. After dinner, most of us sat on an embankment around the bonfire and joined the Útivist Big Band. Others wandered around at will; everyone did as they pleased. Later came the boozefest, of course, with young men dispensing wine from huge cartons slung over their shoulders.

A more thorough catharsis could hardly be crammed into a single weekend. Shortly after the close of the work week we were immersed in



PHOTO BY ORVAR THORGERSSON



PHOTO BY BALDIR KRISTJANSSON

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Iceland's wild interior, forging new friendships. Intense exercise in the surreal half-light unraveled our customary habits of perception. Then came the final release: feasting, singing, drinking, bonfiring. On Sunday, as I walked through Reykjavík, normal life seemed wonderfully unfamiliar.

For all the Icelanders who have had to forfeit vacations abroad, I hope it's some consolation to have such blissful, otherworldly escapes so close at hand. Icelanders are also fortunate to have a cooperative like Útivist, with its welcoming atmosphere, personable scale, egalitarian structure, and volunteer ethos. Útivist runs dozens of trips all over Iceland, with only two full-time employees: a chief executive and an office manager. As one Útivist member on the trip told me, "We are not a travel company. We are a union of people who love the outdoors."

