

# THE SEARCH FOR THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

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Jean Andress, Highly Commended

We knew we weren't looking for the Northern Lights the first time we went to Iceland in May 2008 because the best time is from April to August. However, it was nearly Midnight Sun time. It was still bright daylight when we arrived at 10pm and we appreciated the blackout blinds when the sun came up before 3.30am. It was a glorious day. After breakfast in the hotel where a notice proclaimed 'It is not customary to make ones lunch from the breakfast buffet' we walked along the harbour past the stunning Viking Ship sculpture to sit outside in a pavement cafe. Little did we realise how unusual that was. Apparently only five days like that a year and the whole of Reykjavik seemed to be taking advantage of it. But this was an exceptional day because at 15.45 on the 29th May 2008 there was an earthquake that measured 6.3 on the Richter scale. Volcanoes are perhaps expected in Iceland - earthquakes not so much. Fortunately the only casualties were a small number of sheep and the tomato greenhouses around Reykjavik which had some broken glass. The next day we did the Golden Circle tour - memorable for the Gullfoss Waterfall, the Geysir after which every geyser in the world is named, the area where the Eurasian and the North American tectonic plates meet and are moving apart every year - and the sight of someone peering over a crater to see if there were signs of volcanic activity. Seemed dangerous!

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Of course no trip is complete without a trip to the Blue Lagoon. This is a relatively recent phenomena and was formed in 1976 when a geothermal plant was built nearby. It was found that the excess water which created the lagoon was very pure and full of minerals. It was opened as a spa in 1987. It's meant to be particularly good for treating skin conditions but for me it was memorable because at 8pm the sun shone and the water was hot.

And the Northern Lights? Well I've since been back four times in peak Northern Lights season. I've stood in a field at midnight and I've had three harbour tours cancelled because there was cloud. But - I've had breakfast by candlelight, I've seen the view from the top of Hallgrimskirkja, I've sat in the Blue Lagoon in a snowstorm, I've listened in awe to the stories of the Hidden People who mustn't be disturbed, I've been amazed by the treeless lava fields, I've been to a restaurant that had run out of white wine, I've been astounded at the cost of a bowl of lamb soup, I've walked on a glacier, I've been mistaken for an Icelander and I've become a fan of Icelandic Noir crime fiction - but I'm still searching for the Northern Lights!