



## EVS in Iceland – I found myself a place to call home

**The idea of doing the European Voluntary Service or EVS** has been in the back of my mind for years now, so this whole thing has been a long process full of ideas, wishes, dreams, planning and of course pure coincidence. The initial plan of going to the colorful Latin-America became a seven month adventure in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, on the icy and volcanic island of **Iceland**. These months were filled with joy, difficulties, amazing adventures and discovering oneself - everything that an EVS can and should bring with it, an unforgettable time.

**The first connections to this mystical island** for me were through music, especially the music of a group called Sigur Ros, and the powerful nature of the place which is depicted excellently in a movie by Sigur Ros, titled "Heima" ("At Home"). Aside from that there was not much more I knew about this country called Iceland, it sure seems captivating and unreachable, exciting but at first glance I remained doubtful and cautious. But then things started finding their own way. A friend of mine got me interested in an organization by the name of **Worldwide Friends** (Veraldarvinir), which, on their webpage wrote about the environmentally oriented projects they have to offer, where my attention was caught by a project called Clean Up the Coastline of Iceland. Since environmental awareness was something I had really started to take a great interest in, I decided to write and ask about the project. With the help of my sending organization, **Involved NGO**, who did a great job with the planning and preparations, I found myself with two other Estonians in Iceland. Looking back at it, I can say that you never really know what you get until you are there, the information provided in the papers and webpages is usually never very accurate, and so it was with our project. This may as well be a good thing, keeping things interesting and letting things happen like they do, without unnecessary fear and pessimism. Perhaps it is because of not knowing the details of how things really were going to be I so fearlessly embarked upon this journey in this beautiful land.



**The great land of ice and fire**, Iceland, truly is a remarkable place on earth, it was quite easy imagining arriving to the moon walking amongst the **endless lava fields**. It feels counterintuitive, the meeting of ice and fire, hot and cold, the contrast is captivating. You can easily find opportunities to bathe outside in the middle of nowhere with minus degrees and thick snow in naturally formed **hot spots, pools of geothermally heated water**. One of the most surprising experiences were, in fact, paddling around in a cave with water heated by a nearby **volcanos**, the water approximately 45 degrees Celsius, and lying in a hot, flowing river,



both in February and only a few hundred kilometers south of the arctic circle. Just as important as taking good and warm clothing is to take a swimsuit, with almost every tiny town having an outdoor swimming pool. They are extremely popular and a very important part of Icelandic culture, luckily we could go there as much as we wanted, and, as volunteers, for free. The water in the hot tubs is around 38 to 44 degrees, this is where people sit around and discuss the day and have a chat. Then you have a larger pool for swimming and usually a sauna. We often made new contacts whilst sitting in the hot tub. The hot water coming from under the ground due to volcanic activity is used for a variety of reasons. For example I had the chance to volunteer at some greenhouses, which were running throughout the year, heated by geothermal energy, producing tomatoes and cucumbers, even bananas just to defy the rugged winter and prove a point.

The thing that makes Iceland cold is not actually the temperature, but the **glaciers** and **strong winds**. In the south, the capital it is rarely below zero degrees, in the north and east, however, it is usually colder. It's the wind that gets you, stormy weather is common. The glaciers however are something completely incredible - these giant moving ice masses, an amazing site to behold and extremely dangerous to tread upon are a significant and unique part of Icelandic landscape. The biggest glacier in Europe, **Vatnajökull** covers a big amount of Iceland. Most of the country is actually unpopulated, the cities are all around the shoreline and the inner country is only accessible during the summer months. Apart from the **endless waterfalls** and rivers around every corner you will also come across many **friendly horses**, who are very eager to communicate and countless **fearful herds of sheep**, who actually have a greater population than the people.

One of the most extraordinary things I did over the course of seven months was an **80 km long hike along mountains** (from Landmannalaugar to Thorsmörk), through amazing scenery with the road eventually leading up to **volcanoes and glaciers**, where we crossed fast paced rivers and sat on three year old warm lava. There were quite a few of memorable hikes, for example running down snowy mountains in April and adventuring alongside glaciers in July. Nature was really my best friend and with this time I came to truly respect all of this wonder.

**My work was dealing with nature preservation** and being the **group leader of environmental work camps**, where people of all ages and from all around the world came together to Iceland for two weeks to work in an environmental or cultural camp. My job, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, was to organize the activities of the camp (5-15 people), to work with them, take care of the housing and the food and arrange free time activities and just take general responsibility upon the camp going smoothly. This was sometimes easier said than done due to the group sizes, cultural and personal differences, the work arrangements, living conditions and sometimes we, as the group leaders were at a place for the very first time ourselves, not knowing really anything or anyone, but soon the experience amounted to some





degree of competence and it got easier to make things run smooth. We were mostly working in **small towns and countryside villages** (there is only one big town in Iceland anyway) and thanks to the moving around I got to see a lot of places. In the camps we did such work as cleaning the coastline, planting trees, working in greenhouses, everyday cleaning activities around the town and so on. It soon became evident that the project Clean Up the Coastline of Iceland for which we initially aspired to participate in was no longer in action and so we were leading the various environmental work camps. There were good and bad jobs, interesting and boring ones, but the fresh air and usually nice scenery was always there as an upside. My attitude towards physical work outdoors was definitely positively changed during this time.

The most important and tiring aspect of the camps was actually **the communication**. I have never before met so many new people in such a short time, and with such **huge cultural diversity**. Ironically this happened in Iceland, with a population of just 300 000, less than the population of Tallinn (the capital of Estonia) alone, but then again, tourism is thriving. Most of the participants were from Spain, France, Italy, Germany, South-Korea and Japan, a little less from Russia, South-America, England, Poland and Slovakia. A few times I also met some Finns and Estonians. The air in the camps was crazy with diversity and this was very interesting, a wild experience, but over time quite tiring. Seven months of this life has greatly improved my skills and feel for communication with different people from different cultures around the world, significantly improved my communication and self-expression abilities and feel a connection to the greater picture of life and all the people living around the planet.

In the end I had worked in a total of **nine different work camps in six different towns**. The amount of people who I met are practically impossible to count, but I can say that I have roughly 70 new contacts. I got to circle the island a few times, I know all the main attractions and I could give you the places to visit on the south coast in my sleep so sometimes I was even introducing some places to Icelanders themselves and new visitors who thought I was local myself.

**In these seven months I was lucky enough to find myself a place to call home**, despite constantly moving around the island - a small town in the eastern fjords called **Eskifjörður**. After first visiting the place already in February I was left with an unforgettable impression. The view from our windows to a mountain a kilometer tall just across the narrow fjord went straight to my heart. In this town I spent most of my time, led many camps and met



locals. We also organized an open house day for the locals there, to introduce them to our voluntary work in Iceland and the general idea of volunteering. This was a big event for all of us, a step closer to the local life and a good experience in taking initiative. **Icelanders** are friendly and kind, but it is sometimes hard to get to know them personally. They are very similar to Estonians in some ways, the small population, close to nature dotted with small villages, the humor and a modest closed mentality that opens slowly and lets you in over



time. But there are some obvious differences as well, for example the take on time and organizing. Icelanders are surprisingly sometimes even worse at keeping in touch with set times than southerners, this because of the Icelandic weather, never predictable, as they say. If the weather can change in seconds, so can the plans, which are usually not made at all because of this. As an Estonian and an organizer it was sometimes very hard to get by with all this constant change and chaos, but this is also a part of my **informal learning**.

In **Eskifjörður** we got to meet really kind and good people, befriend some fishers and the local priest. We helped each other when need would arise and so we got a great touch of **Icelandic culture and life**, more than we would have gotten if staying in the capital and the areas surrounding it (which actually is home for 60% of the population). **Icelanders** are much more carefree than Estonians, everything is fine and you can always hear whether in the beginning or end of a sentence the phrase "no problem". Their language is old and with a peculiar sound to it, it's hard to learn and sadly we didn't manage to get a steady teacher for ourselves during this time, but instead I got to practise my English to great extent, which I am also grateful for. The months I lived in Eskifjörður will forever stay with me as bright and emotional memories where a part of me lives on forever.

**In the end I can say** that EVS was a stage in my life for which the full extent and real consequence is so immense that I cannot yet completely fathom the whole nor I ever will, but if there is one thing I do understand about it is that it has helped me closer to finding my true way. I recommend this kind of undertaking, to let go of fear and prejudice, to leave the comfort zone, to dive head first into unknown waters and learn to swim, to be really open to everything new and different. It is a challenge in every way, which can bring with it contradicting feelings and confusing emotions, but in return for this there is just as much happiness, discovery, adventure and development to be gained. I am grateful for this memorable and insane time, full of desperate and idyllic situations, in this very different kind of organization and mystical country.

With the best of wishes

Reeli Lonks

EVS volunteer in Iceland, February – August 2013

Blog (in Estonian): [www.evislandil.wordpress.com](http://www.evislandil.wordpress.com)

Sending organization: Involved NGO – [www.involved.ee](http://www.involved.ee)

