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Roots Tourism in Hofsvós

Text by Ian Watson Photo courtesy of Nelson Gerrard

At the Icelandic Emigration Centre in Hofsvós, Nelson Gerrard shows me a thick, heavy book that he wrote about the lives and descendants of the Icelanders who settled on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in Canada. Gerrard, a retired high school history and English teacher from Manitoba who is Icelandic on his mother's side, is one of the two staff genealogists at the centre. He is a tall, strong man who speaks carefully and methodically and gives off a sense of credibility. He carries in his mind an encyclopaedic knowledge of the names and life stories of Icelandic emigrants to America. Today he is busy at the computer answering one query from an Icelandic woman, who is going to Canada in a few weeks and wants to meet cousins her family has lost track of, and another from a Canadian woman, who is planning a visit to Hofsvós this summer. An elderly Icelandic man whose parents went to Canada and then came back to Iceland stops by. He is pleased when Gerrard finds his family's records in the centre's database.

The Emigration Centre, or Vesturfarastríð, has done for Hofsvós what whale watching did for Húsavík, or saltfish for Grindavík, or what the Settlement Centre hopes to do for the old centre of Borgarnes. In Hofsvós, a town of only about two hundred inhabitants, four old buildings on either side of the swift stream that flows into the sea by the harbour have been renovated, the oldest dating from 1777. They've been turned into a museum and research centre for people interested in the experience of the twenty-thousand odd Icelanders who emigrated to North America in the later years of the nineteenth century. The whole thing was the brainchild of Valgeir Þorvaldsson, who is also the man behind the Icelandic flag factory in Hofsvós. The idea at Hofsvós is not unique. Many other Northern European countries have similar emigration centres, such as the Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö.

The reason why roots tourists should visit Hofsvós is to spend a day among people who are devoted to Icelandic genealogy and the Icelandic emigrant experience. It's sensible to do as much family history research at home as possible before visiting, but the centre also has a growing library of Icelandic genealogy books and a computer database. Let them know you're coming, as the staff welcome e-mail and will answer simple queries for free (hofsvos@hofsvos.is). You'll need to pay them to do any more extensive research.

The centre has three museum-style exhibitions, very professionally put together and fully labelled in English and Icelandic. One focuses on the emigrant experience, another on life in North America, and the third, called "Silent Flashes," presents the best images from Nelson Gerrard's collection of over ten thousand photographs of Icelandic emigrants to North America. (The man on

the right in the photo above is Jóhannes Stefansson, the older brother of Icelandic-Canadian explorer Vilhjálmur Stefansson. His friend on the left is unidentified.) Gerrard is always looking to add to his collection. Contact him through his website, www.sagapublications.com, if you have photos to give away or share.

Entry to the exhibitions costs 400 ISK each, or 900 ISK for all three. The centre is open daily from 11:00-18:00 from June through August, and by arrangement the rest of the year (tel. 453-7935, further information at www.hofsvos.is).

Hofsvós has several guesthouses (which can be booked through www.hofsvos.is), a harbour-side restaurant called Sölvík with 1,500 ISK fish dinners, a cafe and bar called Sigtún which serves burgers, a post office, grocery store, and gas station. There's a super view of Þórðarhöfði, Drangey island and the mountains on the other side of Skagafjörður. You can also eat or stay a twenty minute drive away at the agricultural university in Hólar (www.holar.is). As it's well off Highway 1 and tends to attract more American than European visitors, Hofsvós is quieter in summer than the average Icelandic destination. Driving time from Reykjavík is four hours, not counting stops. The new road over Þverfjall from Blönduós to Sauðárkrúkur is not completely paved yet, but is already passable, and shortens the trip.

Besides the Emigration Centre, Icelandic-American essayist and poet Bill Holm spends summers in Hofsvós and runs one-week writing seminars every May or June (US\$3300 per person double occupancy, airfare from the US included, 20 participants max, see www.billholm.com). He has finished a new book called "Windows of Brimnes: An American in Iceland", which will come out in October. About five kilometres north of Hofsvós, a summer colony for visual artists and architects has just been opened at a farm called Bær, and is accepting applications. Successful candidates come five at a time for a month during the summer and receive free room, board, and working space, but must get themselves to Hofsvós on their own (more info at www.baer.is).

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