Roots Tourism in Höfðós

Text by Ian Watson  Photo courtesy of Nelson Gerrard

At the Icelandic Emigration Centre in Höfðós, 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 tall, among men who speak carefully and methodically and gives off a sense of credibility. He comes 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 touch of, and another from a Canadian woman, who is planning a trip to Höfðós 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 Vesturfarasetrið, has done for Höfðós what whale watching did for Husavík, or lobster for Stöðvarfjörður, or whale watching for Húsavík. For visitors 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 Höfðós. The idea at Höfðós is to be as similar emigration centres, such as the Emigration Centre in Växjö.

The Centre has three museum-style exhibitions, very professionally put together and fully labelled in English. It’s sensible to do as much family history research as possible before visiting, but the centre also 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 touch of, and another from a Canadian woman, who is planning a trip to Höfðós 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 centre has three exhibition style exhibitions, very professionally put together and fully labelled in English and Icelandic. One focuses on the emigrant experience, another on Irish and another on the settlements. The idea is to spread a day among people who are dedicated to Icelandic genealogy and to Icelandic emigrant experience. It’s sensible to do as much family history research 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 (hofsos@hofsos.is). You’ll need to pay them to do any more extensive research.

The centre has three exhibition style exhibitions, very professionally put together and fully labelled in English and Icelandic. One focuses on the emigrant experience, another on Irish and another on the settlements. The idea is to spread a day among people who are dedicated to Icelandic genealogy and to Icelandic emigrant experience. It’s sensible to do as much family history research 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 (hofsos@hofsos.is). You’ll need to pay them to do any more extensive research.

Besides the Emigration Centre, Icelandic-American novelist and poet Bill Holm spends summers in Höfðós and runs one-week writing seminars every May or June (US$5,000 per person double occupancy, airport from the US is included). 20 participants max. See www.billholm.com. He has finished a new book called Windows of the West, a novel set in the American West that was published in 2001. He 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 between June through August, and it is always open the rest of the year (tel: 452-7979, further information at www.hofsos.is).

Höfðós has several guesthouses which can be booked through www.hofsos.is), a harbourside restaurant called Café Höfðós, a cafe and bar called Búðin which serves burgers, a post office, grocery store, and gas station. There’s a super view of the fireworks from Drangarí island and the mountains on the other side of Sjógurður. You can also eat or stay a twenty minute drive away at the Agricultural University in Njólan (www.njolan.is). As it’s well off Highway 1 and tends to attract more American than European visitors, Höfðós is quieter in summer than the average Icelandic destination. Driving time from Reykjavík is four hours, not counting stops. The main road over Ólafsfjöll to Ólafsfjörður is not completely paved yet, but is already passable, and shortens the trip.

The Emigration Centre has done for Höfðós what whale watching did for Husavík, or lobster for Grindavík.