50 Crazy Things to Taste in Iceland lists, well, fifty crazy things to taste in Iceland. It is obviously aimed at tourists, and with me being an Icelandic native myself, I didn’t expect to find the food listed here so crazy. And of course, the book puts forth many of the usual suspects, such as putrid shark, sour rams testicles, brennrinn, dried sheep heads, puffin, hangingkit and rot- tered fish. But the book still managed to surprise me by also listing some of the non-usual suspects that are, on close inspection, just as Icelandic as the usual suspects mentioned above. They simply have less shock-value and are therefore not pushed to the tourists’ faces as enthusiastically as the others. Those include scrawny grass, Malt & Applekin, kókisellos, byrrhust, Easter eggs and Icelandic water.

Each item gets a photo or two, and a short explanatory text where the origins and history of the food is briefly noted. There are plenty of photos to be found there, such as when Icelanders first started producing Malt (1913), that is brewing the biggest industry in Iceland. Country holding the world record in lamb consumption and last, but not least, Iceland being home to the biggest banana plantation in Europe.

The author also lists practical information about how to find the less common foods except for the Icelandic bananas because I don’t remember ever seeing any in Reykjavik’s grocery stores.

Most of the photos are quite nice, except for a few where I couldn’t help but think that the intention was to make the food look as unappealing as possible, such as in the case of the sheep heads (which is as might be expected), but I thought they failed to hold the hangingkit and skyr more justice. Especially the skyr, as the photo portrays a bearded man eating skyr and he has it all over his face so you can see the hairs sticking out of the blobs of skyr, which, in my opinion, makes it less than appetizing.

I tried very, very hard to come up with foods that I missed from the list, and came up with only two items: salty liquorice and plötulíkind (bashed fish). But the publishers probably saw that coming and left the last pages of the book blanked for the reader to fill in their own crazy things to eat in Iceland. On the whole, the book is a most excellent overview of the crazy (and not so crazy) things to taste in Iceland.

50 Crazy Romantic Things To Do In Iceland

A far cry from Icelandland’s notorious ‘Dirty Weekend in Reykjavik’ ad campaign a few years back and the Bangcock of the North label Iceland has received in the past, this book is sweet and romantic rather than sex-oriented. It is aimed at foreign couples visiting Iceland and lists a number of romantic activities for them to try during their stay, but can just as easily involve romantic-starved natives some good ideas for a date or a weekend away from the children. Some of the romantic things mentioned can obviously be done almost everywhere, like staying together in bed for a whole week; running a marathon with your loved one, or making out at the movies, while others are limited to Iceland, such as diving in the rift between the Eurasian and American continents in Þingvellir, swimming in the Westman Islands and getting married Viking-style. The book seems thoroughly researched and is very informative. The text makes for a fun read and the photographs are mostly very good, some even spectacular. But I have to say that in some cases the practical information was lacking, as tourists just off the plane are not likely to know where to turn to book a private flight, a diving session or who to contact in order to become a salmon guard in the Icelandic highlands for the summer.

A list like this can obviously never be finite, so the last pages of the book are blanks for you to fill in your own romantic things to do in Iceland.

The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson
Translated by Karl Smári Heinisson and Adam Nichols

On a sunny day in 1927, pirates landed on Heimelay, the largest of the Westman Islands. They stormed over the island’s farms and houses, killed thirty-four of its residents and forced 240 men, women and children onto their ships. They sailed with their prisoners to the city of Algeciras, where most were sold as slaves.

This “Turkish Raid” (Tyrikjárnir í Íslandi) is an odd and interesting episode in Icelandic history, and now there is an inexpensive book on it in English. The pirates were actually not what we call Turks today, but rather Arabic-speaking North Africans, and there were also Englishmen and other northern Europeans among the ships’ crews. Though the largest number of captives came from Heimelay, the pirates also raided farms and villages in southeastern Iceland, around Djúpivogur and Borgarfjörður, as well as the village of Grindavik.

Ólafur Egilsson, a sixty-year-old pastor on Heimelay, was taken prisoner along with his pregnant wife and children. His wife gave birth on the voyage south. After arriving in Algeria, he watched helplessly as his eleven-year-old son was sold away from the family. Soon after, he was released and allowed to make his way to Denmark, leaving his wife and younger children behind. He was told to ask the king of Denmark, then Christian IV, to pay ransom for the captives’ freedom. Unfortunately Chris- tian IV, who had just lost a big battle to Catholic forces in the Thirty Years’ War, didn’t feel able to contribute to the cause. However, some of the captives were able to return to Iceland ten years later.

The English translation of the report Ólafur wrote when he came home took up eighty pages of this small book. Ólafur tells of the raid, his captivity in Algeciras, and his trip home via Italy, France, Holland, and Denmark. Another forty pages translate short poems from the raid by three other captives and a local Icelandic official. A brief foreword gives context.

Ólafur was an educated and curious man and though the first thing that comes through is his sorrow at losing his family, much of his tale takes a fascination with foreign customs. Ólafur tells you what kind of hats Muslims wear and notes how the pirates didn’t drink alcohol. He describes what camels look like, how monks dress, and how Catholic confession works (you still had to pay to be forgiven). He marvels at Dutch windmills. He reminds us how four hundred years ago, distance was real. If you ran out of cash in a foreign country, you couldn’t go to the ATM machine, or even the consulate, for help.

The book is an inexpensive yet nicely produced paperback, including maps and illustrations. It’s short, so you can read the whole book after dinner or on a plane trip. The translation is well done using contemporary language. Overall—ahh, I didn’t want my two hours back.

Unfortunately and typically, the book is not being sold by anyone outside of Iceland (except perhaps on the used market), so you can’t order a new copy from Amazon or other online booksellers and you basically have to buy it here in Iceland. I saw it at Eymundsson for 1.490 kr. Búlska Slóntaka (www.buls- ka.is) has it at 1.332 kr.

G. JAN TAYLOR

50 Crazy Things to Do in Iceland

A book blanks for the reader to fill in their own romantic things to do in Iceland. The book is an inexpensive yet nice-ly produced paperback, including maps and illustrations. It’s short, so you can read the whole book after dinner or on a plane trip. The translation is well done using contemporary language. Overall—ahh, I didn’t want my two hours back.

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