



THIS BIG
LANDSCAPE
IS HOME TO
ICELAND'S ONLY
WILD REINDEER



ICELAND

Live slow. Eat local

Meera Dattani samples the relaxed pace of life in East Iceland, where people are learning again to live off the land

They say Icelanders are tough and resourceful. Nature certainly dictates the way of life on this steaming, gurgling, remote landmass beneath the Arctic Circle. In the east, ice-age glaciers have shaped the fjords, winters are snowy white and unpredictable, and descending fog and screeching Norð Austur (north-east) winds make newbies shake in their wellies. Being hardy seems almost prerequisite.

After 2008's economic crash, many Icelanders had to rethink their ways. One response was returning to tradition, to the land. If this felt like a step backwards, it was anything but. In East Iceland, a big landscape of small towns, black-sand beaches and secluded valleys, home to Iceland's only wild reindeer and location of its third highest waterfall, Hengifoss, some had already adopted this approach.

At the 904-acre Vallanes farm, just outside the region's main town and airport hub Egilsstaðir, Eymundur Magnússon and Eyglo Ólafsdóttir, who founded →



FROM TOP Slow food at Vallanes Farm: slow living: winter in Seyðisfjörður
PREVIOUS PAGE Local specialities at the Lake Hotel

the Slow Food Iceland movement, set up Iceland's first organic farm. Here, they run their food company, Móðir Jörð (Mother Earth).

FARM TO TABLE

They have been selling barley to supermarkets since 1985 and are credited with reintroducing the ancient grain into modern Icelandic dishes, supplying pioneering chefs such as Gunnar Karl Gíslason, whose New Nordic cuisine has been a hit in Reykjavik. "Choosing local ingredients is important for the environment, but it also communicates a story of nature, culture and place to travellers," says Eyglo. They grow local herbs, and Eymundur planted a million native birch trees to reforest the area. There's on-site accommodation, and from May to October their shop opens and visitors can book 'farm-to-table' tours.

There's a similar ethos at Lake Hotel, or Egilsstaðir guesthouse, the town's oldest hotel. An inviting place overlooking Lake Lagarfljót, with a new geothermal spa, it's run by Hulda Danielsdóttir and Gunnlaugur Jónasson. Gunnlaugur's family has been at Egilsstaðir farm since 1889. "Our food borders traditional and progressive," says Hulda, who runs their restaurant, Eldhúsið. "We're proud of Icelandic agriculture and try to find ingredients in nearby valleys and fjords."

Potato and mushroom soup with rye bread, cod and Arctic char from the fjords with creamed barley (thank you, Eymundur), and skyr yogurt with wild berries don't disappoint. Even WH Auden, who didn't particularly take to Iceland, enjoyed dinner when he stayed in the 1930s.

Hotel Aldan's Nordic restaurant and Norðaustur sushi bar in Seyðisfjörður also source locally; the langoustine and bacalao salted cod are renowned. Executive chef Michelangelo Bartoloni says, "We buy from local fishermen where possible. Other signature dishes are mountain lamb and reindeer, carefully hunted

to sustain the wild population."

This hyper-local approach suits Djúpivogur, the southernmost harbour of the eastern fjords, population 460. In 2013, it became Iceland's first, and only, town to receive Cittaslow/'Slow City' status. Over lunch, mayor Gauti Jóhannesson explains: "These towns strive for their inhabitants. We appreciate small-town living, history, local production, local artisans. We try to keep globalisation at bay." Connecting to nature is central to the ethos, with several hiking trails and protected wildlife habitats, such as Papey Island's seal and puffin colonies.

FRESH FROM THE FJORD

Across the fjord is Berunes hostel, run by Ólafur Eggertsson and Anna Antoníusdóttir, whose grandparents built the original Old House. "In autumn, we pick crowberries and blueberries, angelica and thyme from the garden, and summer rhubarb for jams," says Anna. Their sea trout comes from nearby Berufjörður, smoked or cured for breakfast, or fried in Icelandic butter for dinner. Ólafur adds: "We want to support local farming and fishing. Luckily, it's easy to offer a true taste of the Icelandic east."

Others are innovating. Berglind Häsler and Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson were already selling their Bulsur vegan sausages in Reykjavik, but wanted to make swede crisps from scratch. "With Djupivogur part of Cittaslow, we knew we'd found the right place," says Berglind. They left Reykjavik in 2014 and bought Karlsstaðir farm in Berufjörður, renovating the 1920s farmhouse into a four-bedroom rental property, and started making their Sveitasnakk crisps under the name Havari. Like many Icelanders, they multi-task, making music with Icelandic bands Skakkamanage and Prins Póló. They're also opening a café and live music venue on the farm.

The Slow Food movement began in Italy in 1986, supporting local and organic producers, and →



LOCAL INGREDIENTS TELL A STORY OF NATURE, CULTURE AND PLACE TO TRAVELLERS



FROM TOP Mjoifjodur; Langabúð museum and café; hot pool at Laugarfell Highland Hostel



DJÚPIVOGUR IS ICELAND'S ONLY TOWN TO RECEIVE 'SLOW CITY' STATUS

PHOTOGRAPHY: RAGNOR TH. SICURDSSON; ASLAUC SNORRADOTTIR; ERLA DÓRA VOGLER



ABOVE A clear winter's day in Seyðisfjörður

encouraging the use of sustainable, age-old techniques. The movement's 'Ark of Taste' list of endangered heritage food includes, in Iceland, skyr, a protein-rich yogurt made from local cheese using a special, 1,000-year-old recipe, and cold-smoking hangikjöt (smoked lamb) using sheep dung.

OLD WAYS

In many ways, slow living is an extension of slow food. Slow Jeep safaris with family-run Tinna Adventure, based in Breiðdalsvík, can include yoga and a silent hike. On the road, there's time for Icelandic Sagas about the early Norse settlers, tales of trolls and Iceland's huldufólk (hidden folk), as well as pronunciation lessons; I can now say Reyðarfjörður, Neskaupstaður and Fáskrúðsfjörður.

Icelandic traditions are part of the experience of the Wilderness Centre, in a quiet valley 50km southwest of Egilsstaðir, run by Denni Karlsson and Arna Björg Bjarnadóttir. Alongside standard accommodation, hiking and riding tours, they've constructed an old-fashioned dormitory loft, replicating traditional turf farmstead dwellings, and are opening an on-site heritage exhibition. Their approach to food is similar. "We cook and bake from scratch," says Denni in their open kitchen. "Guests can sit, chat and experience a traditional Icelandic kitchen. We rebuilt the old smoke hut and we smoke



meat there." He offers a piece of fermented 'rotten' shark. It's politely declined. "We use everything from sheep, too," he adds. "Head, rams' balls, horns, bones, stomach, especially at Porrablót festivities in January." Slátur, a blood sausage, is also popular. Contrary to belief, Icelanders don't eat much whalemeat; it's considered unethical, and puffins, while not endangered, have been declining in numbers.

Dinner is innard-free, luckily. Denni serves a hearty goulash-style meat soup with homemade bread, fresh trout, then skyr, washed down with Brennivín, or Black Death, 75-80% proof schnapps of potatoes or fermented grain and caraway. The beer is tastier, brewed from clear Icelandic water. Prohibition laws had full-strength beer banned until as recently as March 1, 1989, which is now celebrated as Beer Day, but microbreweries and brew pubs are flourishing.

Championing small-scale producers and age-old traditions isn't easy, but it's happening here. Individuals create, nature and communities benefit and tourism gets a boost. It seems simple. At the Fish Factory Creative Centre in Stöðvarfjörður, a developing art space in an abandoned herring factory run by Una Björg Sigurðardóttir and Rósa Valtingoer, Rosa has a theory. "When you live slowly, you have time. Maybe that's why, as a nation, Icelanders manage to create so much." 

WAY TO GO

Meera Dattani travelled as a guest of East Iceland (inspiredbyiceland.com); Icelandair (icelandair.co.uk) and Air Iceland (airiceland.is). A night at Berunes Hostel costs from £85 (berunes.is). Egilsstaðir Guesthouse is from £109 B&B (lakehotel.is). The dorm at the Wilderness Centre costs from £38 (wilderness.is). Tinna Adventure offers a four-hour, 'slow travel' Jeep tour from £123 (tinna-adventure.is).

Discover the World offers a seven-night Exploring East Fjords self-drive including B&B, flights to Egilsstaðir and car rental from £1,026. Departures May to Sep (discover-the-world.co.uk; 01737 214250). **Cox & Kings** offers an eight-day self-drive tour of Iceland, including Egilsstaðir and Hoft in the southeast, from £965 per person. Includes flights and car rental (coxandkings.co.uk; 020 3811 0910).