

# Different Yolks for Different Folks

Island life – white sandy beaches, bikini-clad women and fruity drinks – isn't it grand? Think again. Straddling the Arctic Circle, Grímsey is the stuff *Cast Away* should have been made of, where the pace of life is determined by the daily catch, ferry arrival times and the number of guillemot eggs you can fit in your bucket.



BY SARA BLASK  
PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON

Every listed phone number on Grímsey plus a 6x10 centimeter map of the island fits onto three-quarters of the 1,152nd page in Iceland's phone book.

Located at 66°33' N, 18°00' W in the Greenland Sea, 40 kilometers by ferry from the northern town of Dalvík, Grímsey holds the laudable fame of being the only piece of land belonging to Iceland that sits on the Arctic Circle. While many of its three to four thousand annual visitors are only looking to birdwatch or tap into their cheesy inner maverick by officially stepping into the Arctic, they're actually missing out on the best part: communing with the locals. Its year-round inhabitants number 93 people, 17 horses, around 100 sheep (depending on the season), millions of seabirds, and a helluva lot of fish.

Grímsey's perimeter is fringed by a total of four kilometers of sheer, rocky cliffs where millions of migrating sea birds nest each spring. The mint and turquoise-speckled eggs of the guillemot and the kittiwake are considered delicacies in Iceland, and are collected in April and May every year by several burly locals who wait with measured patience for their glory egg hunting days to arrive. Real men eat the eggs raw. The less hardy? Boil 'em for four minutes and they're perfect.

The ringleader of the island's four primary egg hunters is a grizzled, pipe-smoking Iclander on the tired side of his fifties named Sigurdur Bjarna-

The author descending Borgarbjarg (City Cliff) for eggs.



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son. He started his storied egg hunting career at the ripe age of 13 and if you forget his name, just check the sticker on his red climbing helmet, “Sigurdur: The One and Only Prince of Grímsey.”

“These eggs used to be food for my family,” Bjarnason tells me. “When I was young, selling the eggs was the only money I could earn. Now I just do it because it’s my way of life, a tradition that I love. It’s heaven to be alone with the birds.”

Unbeknownst to be me, I’d arrived just in time to catch the end of the season. For whatever reason – maybe Bjarnason had been impressed by my bedhead that day – I was deemed intrepid enough to take a crack at rappelling off an 80-meter high cliff myself. I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered or scared bananas.

Every house on Grímsey has a name and every house owns a section of the cliffs. Sigurdur’s house is named Borgar and his cliff is dubbed Borgarbjarg, meaning “City Cliff.” Borgarbjarg is apparently the hottest bird nesting zip code on the island. Bring it on.

There should probably be a safety release for this kind of thing, you know, like some sort of paper requiring a signature and an in-case-of-emergency clause, but this is Iceland and I was in the hands of a seasoned local. I simply had no alternative but to put my trust in his hands, and in what appeared to be a harness made from spare parts and webbing found in a junkyard.

Turns out I actually wasn’t too far off. The har-

ness’s main components were straps from a former American military backpack, one-inch thick foam, and frayed fishing line all secured with what appeared to be yellow electrical tape. Hey, if this contraption works for him, surely it would work for me. After all, Bjarnason is the town’s handyman. One day you might catch him repairing a tractor engine, another day fixing a pothole, a faucet or a sewing machine.

After he set up the rigging – essentially a 120 meter long, 2.5 centimeter in diameter fishing line secured to the back of a tractor hitch via a series of knots and one anchor in the ground – I was ready to roll. I mean, ready to rappel down the 90-degree face of the cliff, legs straight, butt out, bouncing gently off the white poop-speckled cliff like a weightless astronaut.

Bjarnason doesn’t speak English and I don’t speak Icelandic, but I’ve spent enough time rock climbing to recognize the unspoken language contained in a specific tautness or slack in a rope: we seemed to understand each other. To collect the eggs, a plastic bucket is connected to the front of the harness and a tear-proof bag hooked to the back of the harness. Each holds about 200 eggs, which are slightly larger than a chicken’s but more ovular.

While in some ways I felt like I was shamelessly crashing a wild rave frequented by the peripatetic guillemots, kittiwakes and terns in town for a few weeks, to really see their sleek bodies up close,



Grímsey’s harbor.



Caught a cod in the harbor!

close enough to touch, close enough to detect who's chirping where, I also felt like I'd regained a vague sense of innocence. What the birds and I shared in common for those twenty minutes was staring in awe at the vastness of the sea and getting tickled by the *skarfabál*, a little white flower known for its richness in Vitamin C, that sprouts among the cliffs' impervious vegetation. The birds seemed not to be bothered by my presence. After all, I guess they've grown accustomed to hosting sentient beings to their striated basalt cliffs since the island was first settled in what is believed to be between 850 and 900 AD.

What separates the men from the boys when it comes to egg transportation skills on the cliffs, or in my case, the grossly inadequate foreign female from the local men, is how many eggs you break during the cliff sojourn. I collected 20 in 20 minutes and broke three. While some eggs are perched in nests, others are more randomly strewn, some

tucked beneath ledges, others clustered in groups of twos and threes. You take only as far as you can reach while standing on small ledges while still hooked to the rope. On any given day, Bjarnason collects a full 400 and, well, "it's very, very rare that I break an egg," he tells me, chuckling as he stares into the depths of my bucket splattered in slimy orange yolk upon my return to solid ground.

While the Arctic disposition doesn't lend itself to idle chatter all too easily, Grímsey is an exception. If you take the time to speak with the locals, it's difficult not to feel welcomed. I stayed in room number six at Básar, a guesthouse on the island owned by Sigrún Óladóttir, who grew up on the island, and her husband. They now spend their summers on Grímsey and live the rest of the year in Akureyri. When I say I felt welcome, I mean they left cookies on the counter and invited me to anything in their fridge. Their youngest daughter, Hanna, 2, sat on my lap while Óladóttir showed

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me photos of the island in the days before ferries delivered supplies three days a week and a runway was blasted for small airplanes.

"My dad quit fishing last August, he's now 74," says Óladóttir while we sit inside the town's post office, which doubles as the airport terminal. "Dad was always out fishing – he's always been such a happy man. I think it was so important that I grew up on the island. You learn how to work really hard."

Aside from the income generated by tourism during the brief summer months, fishing is the island's main (read: only) industry. It's best known for its salted cod, a.k.a. bacalao, which is shipped off to Spain, Portugal and elsewhere around the world to be consumed by real gourmands. The average age of Grímsey's year-round inhabitants is 31 and it has the highest per capita income of anywhere in Iceland. The cod in its waters equates to Abu Dhabi's black gold. It's worth billions.

Bjarni Gylfason, 29, is one of Grímsey's star fishermen. He and his wife, Rannveig, 28, plus their three children, are the island's southernmost residents, occupying a modern red house outfitted with the latest IKEA furnishings and appliances. Gylfason's family has been in the fishing business for centuries and is one of the owners of the fish factory on the island where cod is transformed into bacalao – for every ton of fish, one ton of salt is needed for curing.

We headed out on a mini fishing expedition at 9 pm beneath what might as well have been broad daylight. Though I'd stashed some ginger in my pocket in the event of random seasickness, it wasn't needed. The clear skies and glassy water almost made fishing on the high seas look somewhat romantic. I had been lucky with the weather, apparently. It was nothing like the conditions I'd imagined – swells the height of the Empire State Building and winds à la gales featured in *The Perfect Storm*.




Bjarni Gylfason and his family.

In the less than two hours I spent aboard Gylfason's six-ton boat, *Konrád*, named after his brother who passed away as a child, he caught more than 30 cod, four haddock, and two very ugly redfish. The weight of just that catch amounted to almost 170 kilos and that doesn't include the fish that his wife caught with her individual fishing rod. It's rare to come back with less than a ton of fish a day. Two tons is a decent day; five is a great one. Gylfason's days begin at 4 am in winter and end twelve hours later. During the summer he gets to sleep in until six. Six days a week.

Rannveig calls for help. She's caught a big one, at least five kilos. Bjarni's busy slicing open the neck of each cod to prevent blood poisoning and compromising its freshness. "Today was supposed to be my day off!" he smirks, helping his wife reel in the prime bounty.

Back on shore, I wasn't allowed to leave until I tried the egg of an Arctic tern. This particular bird has one of the longest migratory patterns of any in the world, traveling 38,624 kilometers (24,000 miles) every year from the South Pole to the North Pole and back again. Their survival instincts are so refined they've been known to attack innocent humans during nesting season on the island, not to mention along the shores of Tjörnin, the well-known pond in downtown Reykjavík.

Gylfason filled a pot with 20 of the small eggs he had handpicked a few days prior from around his house and boiled them to perfection for this foreigner unused to eating eggs not originating from a chicken. After peeling its dark, spotted shell and removing the vaguely translucent white egg, I popped it into my mouth. And chewed quickly. 



*Air Iceland flies to Grimsey daily in summer.*  
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