



ICELAND

A giant sleeps under this land of ice and fire

A new museum reveals how a volcano almost obliterated Heimaey island. By **Tamara Hinson**

‘Some people say God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh,’ Iceland’s president, Olafur Ragnar Grímsson, told the crowd that had gathered for the opening of the Eldheimar Museum on the Icelandic island of Heimaey. ‘But I can’t help but suspect that he was simply so fascinated by this place that he decided to keep on creating.’

I looked out of the window at the mountains of ash and solidified lava, I could see what he meant. I’d travelled to this five-square-mile pyroclastic pile for the opening of a museum that provides a dramatic insight into how the events of 23 January 1973 transformed Heimaey.

It was around lam when the Eldfell volcano started to erupt. Lava sprayed into the air and a 5,250ft-long fissure opened, spewing a wall of fire. By sunrise, most of the 5,300 residents had been evacuated to the mainland, but over the following weeks a gargantuan flow of lava oozed out to the sea. Islanders prevented it from blocking the harbour by spraying seawater on to it, but not before it had increased Heimaey’s size by one square mile and swallowed everything in its path; 400 buildings were destroyed and 200 million tonnes of ash and lava rained down on the island.

In 2006, archaeologists started excavating the properties closest to the eruption site, and one of these houses now forms the central exhibit at the new Eldheimar (Worlds of Fire) Museum. The museum stands in the eastern shadows of the volcano, where the majority of the houses on the outskirts of the island’s only town, Vestmannaeyjar, were buried. Most residents returned, building new houses closer to the town centre.

My plane from Reykjavik to Heimaey had flown south over the island’s harbour, dramatically narrowed by a solid mountain of lava which slopes down into the cold, clear water. Two volcanic cones dominate the horizon; Helgafell is a neat, grass-covered cone but the shape of Eldfell, to its north-east, is less defined, its contours blown apart by the 1973 eruption.

Before visiting the new museum, I stopped at a café owned by Helga Jónsdóttir. In 1973, Helga was 18 and newly engaged. She left the island

hours after the eruption, returning two years later, married and expecting her first child. Her café, Vinaminni Kaffihús, serves as a memorial to the volcano. Each table tells the story of a different family, with photos of their houses before and after the eruption, and their accounts of that fateful night. On the ceiling, a mural depicts a glowing lava pool, while aerial photos show the number of houses that were swallowed up by the lava and ash. Helga’s account of that night was both sobering and surreal. ‘As my boat left the harbour, the fissure opened up and flames burst into the sky,’ she recalled. ‘The fissure extended into the ocean and I could see lava glowing beneath the water.’

On a boat ride around the island, we cruised past banks of ash sloping down to the sea, while elsewhere, the cliffs were riddled with caves. In places, the coastline had been imprinted with a geometric pattern, as though the Giant’s Causeway had been airlifted from Northern Ireland and stuck to the side of Heimaey. The captain pointed out the island of Surtsey, created by an earlier volcanic eruption in 1963, before sailing into a cathedral-like cave. He pulled out a saxophone and played a mournful solo which echoed around the natural amphitheatre.

Witnessing the devastation wrought by Eldfell, I realised why the museum is so important for the islanders. One life was lost that night, but the new museum shows the world how close Heimaey came to total



Rock on: Lava outside Vestmannaeyjar (top); the Eldheimar Museum (above, right); partially destroyed houses (left) ALAMY

‘As my boat left the harbour, the fissure opened up and flames burst into the sky’

‘A mural depicts a glowing lava pool; photos show houses swallowed up by ash’

destruction. At the museum’s heart is the shell of a cottage buried under the ash. It was one of the buildings closest to the volcano and through the windows, you can see lampshades and furniture. Frozen waterfalls of ash pour from windows and parts of the building have been ripped apart, leaving beams and wires exposed. Interactive displays allow visitors to relive the volcano’s destructive timeline, while black-and-white footage shows islanders queuing to board boats beneath a fiery sky.

Through the museum’s windows,

you glimpse the pyroclastic flows, a reminder of Eldfell’s power. They’re also a symbol of its recovery – locals have since cultivated grass over the igneous rock, now punctuated with clusters of bright purple lupins.

Before the opening ceremony, I bumped into the captain from the boat tour, who told me with a smile that everyone I spoke to would say they were on the last boat to leave. Helga Jónsdóttir gave me a wave before taking to the stage to sing a melancholic Icelandic folk song popular in 1973. After the president’s speech, the former owner of the excavated house told the crowd how, she knew something was wrong that night because the ravens nesting outside her house flew away long before the town’s fire engines started honking their horns en masse to alert islanders to the eruption.

I headed back with Helga to Vinaminni Kaffihús for a coffee. Groups of teenagers were crowded around the tables. Underneath their milkshakes and pizzas were the stories of neighbours, relatives and family friends. ‘Another eruption is inevitable, but I trust Mother Nature – she’ll give us a warning,’ Helga said with a wry smile. Like other islanders, she’s grateful for the low death toll and that Heimaey wasn’t completely destroyed. ‘We’re thankful that we’ve been allowed to continue living in such a beautiful place,’ she explained. ‘We came so close to this island being uninhabitable.’

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE
Tamara Hinson flew to Reykjavik with WOW Air (0118 321 8384; wowair.co.uk) which offers return fares from Gatwick from £138.

Return fares from Reykjavik to Heimaey with Eagle Air (00 354 562 2640 eagleair.is) start at ISK40,000 (£211).

STAYING THERE
Hotel Borg, Posthusstraeti 11,



Reykjavik (00 354 551 1440; hotelborg.is). Doubles start at ISK54,000 (£288), room only.

Hotel Vestmannaeyjar, Vestmannabraut 28, Heimaey, Vestmannaeyjar (00 354 481 2900; hotelvestmannaeyjar.is). Doubles start at ISK21,900 (£115), including breakfast

VISITING THERE
Eldheimar Museum, Sudurvegur/Gerdisbraut 10 (00 354 488 2000; eldheimar.is). Open daily 11am-6pm; admission ISK1,900 (£10).
Vinaminni Kaffihús, Vesturvegi 5 (vinaminnikaffi.is).

MORE INFORMATION
Iceland tourist board: visiticeland.com.