

Beauty that will take your breath away

ICELAND: Snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure is a truly unique experience *By Yvonne Gordon*

'E'ARTHQUAKES are constant and there is at least one quake happening in Iceland at any given moment...' reads the guidebook in the hotel reception, '...the earthquake zone is limited to the main fault line of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge...'

I stop reading. At the moment an earthquake is my worst fear. We are about to go snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure – a gap between the North American and the Eurasian tectonic plates, on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in Iceland. The fissure is in Þingvellir National Park, surrounded by volcanic lava fields, and people snorkel and dive here for the range of underwater visibility – up to 100m in places.

My joke before the trip had been: 'I hope there isn't an earthquake when we are snorkelling!' I hadn't realised that it was so likely...

However, I forget any worries as soon as I look out the hotel window at the expanse of snow-sprinkled lava fields,

surrounded by low hills. In the distance, a cloud of steam quietly rises from the geothermal power station on the lake.

The Ion Hotel is beside the national park and, far away from any towns or cities, it's a great place to see the Aurora Borealis. The night porter promises to wake us up if the lights appear, and sure enough, at about 11.30pm we get a call to say there is aurora activity and we rush out to watch the mesmerising swirls of white and faint green light overhead.

Next morning, we head to the Silfra Fissure to meet Montira and Snorri, our snorkelling guides. Montira shows us a scale model of the tectonic plates, and explains how the constant tension between the two plates has formed 'scars' on the landscape – fissures – filled with glacier water that has taken 50 to 100 years to travel through the volcanic lava fields.

Next we get kitted out. The air temperature is -6°C and the water is 2°C, so the first layer is a 'teddy suit' – like a giant insulated babygro. Next we put on drysuits – rubber suits sealed at the neck and wrists, followed by a hood, gloves, flippers, snorkel and mask.

We walk over to the fissure, and I go down the steps slowly. Surprisingly, the water doesn't feel cold. Where we are looks like a narrow river with rocks on each side – the North American plate on the right and the Eurasian on the left. But when I put my head into the water and look down, I see a whole new blue world set between two vast cliffs of white rocky architecture and stretching right down into the deep.

The water is totally clear and visibility seems to go down to infinity. It is totally still. There is no sign of life, of fish or other aquatic creatures. The plates have formed layers of white lava rock under the water, with steep sides; the blue in places is a shade I've never seen before. I drift along, paddling my flippers gently, sometimes being brought along by the current. I see a giant boulder wedged between the two plates. I wonder when it fell in – it could have been last week or 1,000 years ago, and another earthquake could send it down into the depths forever.

I lose myself in the subaquatic vistas as I glide along, breathing through the snorkel, and when I lift my head again a good while later, I am surprised how normal everything looks up above – the rocks have given way to grassy, muddy banks formed

on the volcanic lava fields to either side.

We snorkel through an area known as the 'cathedral', the deepest area of the fissure, where we see the most vibrant blue. It's a big and vast watery place of worship that we can only peer down into in awe. Montira says during summer shafts of light shine down into it.

Some areas are shallower and I touch the bottom, immediately stirring up a cloud of white dust into the water. Apparently the dust is a sign of lots of tension between the plates. There are algae floating here too. The water is filtered glacial water so it is no problem to



Going under: Yvonne and the snorkellers prepare to venture into the deep of the Silfra Fissure in Þingvellir National Park, after tentatively descending the stairs into the water (left)

drink. The only place I feel the cold is in my hands, but it's worth it for the experience.

After viewing a sea cave that goes right out into the main Lake Þingvellir, we get out of the water. Montira warns us not to hold the handrail in case our hands stick to it, and as soon as I get out, icicles freeze on my drysuit. It is only then that I realise my suit had leaked – one wrist was not sealed. I was so absorbed in the experience, I never noticed the cold water getting in.

Luckily there was no dramatic tectonic plate movement when we were in the water – but Montira tells us there were about 20 earthquakes during the time we were snorkelling. This is normal, because of the amount of geological activity in the area.

THE next day we go on a Golden Circle tour by jeep. We walk a canyon between the tectonic plates, peer down the Gullfoss Waterfall, see the Geysir at Haukadalur and visit the Langjökull Glacier, where it is snowing heavily. All the way, our guide Jacob explains how the landscape of lava fields was formed, and the status of any recent – or expected – volcanic eruptions.

He also takes us on some off-road driving through snow and across rivers. That night, we go on a Northern Lights hunt, and Jacob uses a

range of techniques to find the best spot in the mountains to see the lights, which we do. It feels chilly but I am wrapped up well. I find out afterwards that the temperature we were outside in for two hours was -12°C. That's one thing about Iceland in winter – you get so absorbed in the experiences, you don't really notice the temperature.

BARE ESSENTIALS

Snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure with Arctic Adventures costs from 13,990 ISK (approx €86) per person, see www.adventures.is. Superjeep's Golden Circle tour is 34,900 ISK (€220) per person and the Northern Lights hunt is 19,500 ISK (€123), see www.superjeep.is

GETTING THERE

WOW Air flies from London Gatwick to Reykjavik, Iceland from Stg€74 (€89) one way, including taxes and hand luggage allowance. To book, see www.wowair.co.uk or call 0044 118321 8384. Rooms at Ion Hotel start from €175 per night, see www.ioniceland.is. For more about Iceland, see visiticeland.com.

