

Our trip to Iceland started with me, Angela, flipping through a Travel and Leisure magazine. I read an article about how Iceland was opening back up to tourists who are vaccinated and I suddenly thought to myself, “Interesting, maybe we should go to Iceland!” I later brought this idea up to my husband and three boys and needless to say they were reluctant and thought I was a little crazy, however after spending the weekend watching every show about Iceland on the Travel Channel, they were all convinced! So you may be asking “How does a family of five, with me being a teacher, afford such a trip?” Well, remember the stimulus payments the government sent out, ya, that’s how! We like to joke that the government sent us checks to buy things here, we spent our government's money in another country! After those checks were sent out we also thought we should be responsible adults and save it or pay bills. Since we aren’t aren’t always responsible adults and like to make memories, travel was the choice we made, let's go and explore a totally different place and make some awesome memories!

Fast forward to November 2021. In terms of Covid and travel, we had to pay \$180 each for my husband and me to get the super fancy travel nose swabs, (too bad they weren’t free) to travel abroad and we also loaded up on masks and hand sanitizer. My sons who were 6, 10, and 12 had never been on a plane, we do road trips, not usually plane trips, and were both excited and nervous. We had done lots of shopping because it’s cold in Iceland in November and we are desert dwellers, we live in Phoenix Arizona, and the boys usually get and wear new shorts and T-shirts for Christmas. So we packed up three large suitcases full of all our warm clothes (we don’t have much), including five new pairs of hiking boots and new heavy jackets, and set out first stopping in Denver and then making our way throughout the night to a little island in the North Atlantic! Needless to say, we were all a little nervous.

We landed around 6 a.m. and after a long and frustrating ordeal with getting a car rental, we finally left the airport two hours later and started the journey to Reykjavik. The drive into town was amazing and it looked like another planet and it was cold, at least to us thin-blooded tourists. We live in the desert but it’s a lush desert, full of thin trees and tall saguaro cactus and bushes where the lizards often live, very different to the barren landscape of Iceland. All I can say is that we loved it, it was a complete dream vacation that we didn’t know we needed or wanted. I love being a tourist! My middle son and I are gift shopolics and can spend a lot in a small amount of time, I love collecting treasures from our journeys and this trip was no exception. I also love seeing “the must-see sights” of a place and being able to say I went somewhere that everyone knows about. So on this trip, we did all of that. Day 2 (after a long day 1 of trying to get over jet lag) we just walked and walked and checked out the main shopping street and just wandered. I have dozens of pictures of the unique homes that lined the beautiful streets and of and from the top of the famous Hallgrimskirkja church. Day 3 we took a bus tour around the Golden Circle to see the famous geysers and waterfalls. The Covid restrictions were on during the tour as everyone on the bus had to show their cards and wear a mask. All but one person, an American, complied and of course, he was sitting in front of us. My husband and the man had a conversation about wearing masks but thankfully in the end they both apologized and we all got off for our first stop to enjoy the indoor tomato farm. Later in the day, at a gift shop, the man’s mother wouldn’t put her mask on, even after the employee asked her to. I was next in line and said “Sorry about that, she won’t put it on in the bus either,” and we both chuckled and rolled our eyes. Luckily that was the biggest Covid restriction problem we had. The half-frozen waterfalls and the challenge of walking on a frozen parking lot in high winds took our minds off of that and made for some great stories later.

The rest of the trip was amazing, to say the least. We explored the bridge between the two continents and took pictures holding up the bridge. The Blue Lagoon, probably the #1 tourist spot in Iceland was incredible. We arrived a little before sunset and watched it disappear into the afternoon (the sun sets about 4 p.m. in November). While there we experienced sun, dusk, darkness, and a hail storm which rained down little shards of sharp ice, luckily at that moment we were standing under an overhang smearing different volcanic creams on our faces, so it was a definite experience! Another day started with us getting up and out of the hotel at five in the morning to drive into the darkness, along the southern coast of the island to Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Europe and Iceland, we had splurged and booked an ice cave tour. Because of the slower speed limit in Iceland, the drive was long but scenic, we passed dozens of waterfalls and numerous rivers of freezing water flowing out into the ocean. There were also dozens of bridges carving through what looked like tundra, such an amazing landscape. Getting out at Glacier Lagoon the wind was blowing so hard and it was so cold, the coldest these desert dwellers had ever been! But trekking up to and then down into the ice cave was amazing, the boys loved it! They followed the German tour guide like little chicks following their mom, my youngest loved it when he was given the guide's icepick to hold up for a picture. They also loved it when he had them fill their water bottles with melting glacier water, the coldest water we've ever had. My youngest said it tasted too much like dirt, but the rest of us thought it was great and it was fun that night in the hotel, saying were drinking glacier water.

The next day on our way back to Reykjavik we stopped in the famous town of Vik to photograph the beautiful red-roofed church and to explore the black sand beaches. I had bought and brought with us a travel tripod specifically for this moment, to get the best Christmas picture ever and I was determined for it to happen! What I like about the black sand on these beaches is how it doesn't stick like regular sand, it's wet but it falls off, which is wonderful for keeping both the children and the car clean! Lucky for my picture at the moment the beach was empty and we got what I wanted, a cute smiling family in front of a breathtaking scene, thank you Iceland! This day also happened to be Thanksgiving and we decided to find and try native Icelandic food. We were able to get a reservation in a cozy corner of a second-floor restaurant overlooking the famous church and a full tree decked out in white Christmas lights, a perfect spot to celebrate. I was so proud of how adventurous we all were, especially the boys. My youngest got the lasagna but the rest of us tried native dishes, and despite some of them being a little different, they tried it all, like the lamb head jelly, shark jerky, and of course, the fermented shark and brennivín (well the boys didn't try that, it's adults only). I can say that as much as the shark smelled, the lamb's head jelly was not our favorite and the shark was better. We talk about this meal often, it was probably the best Thanksgiving we've ever had.

On the morning we had to leave we had to get a mandatory Covid test, all five of us. What makes Iceland better at handling Covid, in my opinion, was the fact that everyone wore masks and the only people we saw argue about it, were Americans. In addition to that, when we scheduled the test and went to get it, we found it was free. All tests, even the more in-depth travel Covid tests were always free for the people of Iceland and all tourists. Despite it being 5:30 in the morning and that they were doing the tests in the local bus station (which turned out to be the cleanest bus station we've ever seen), the nurses were kind and courteous and answered any questions we had. We really appreciate the government providing these tests at no cost, because why not, it's for health and safety. It's too bad our country didn't feel the same. This was one of those life-altering vacations that I'm hoping my youngest will be able to remember in the future.

We talk about it a lot and want to return, the boys now have passports that are burning holes in their pockets! However we also talk about other far-flung places we'd love to explore, and how do we choose, there is a world full of adventure out there. I think if it wasn't for Covid we wouldn't have gone on this trip, I guess it's one positive that came from it, thanks Covid!