

## INSPIRED BY ICELAND

PRESENTS

TARA'S  
BIG  
TRAVELS

## IT'S A DRY COLD!

THE CBS5 GLOBETROTTER FOLLOWS BEN STILLER TO THE LAND OF BJORK AND PUFFINS.

BY TARA HITCHCOCK

In Arizona, we have a phrase that might as well be our state motto. When someone asks how hot it gets in the summer, no matter how many digits we throw out in response, we always follow it up with, "But it's a dry heat."

Similarly, the hearty Nordic natives of Iceland have a common answer when you ask them how cold it gets in their country: "They don't call us Vikings for nothing!" My guess is that's their way of saying "It's a dry cold." Actually, Iceland isn't as frigid as it sounds. In fact, it was warmer in Reykjavik after my 4 1/2 hour flight from JFK than it was in New York City.

The country - known for its rugged glacial beauty and colorful Scandinavian cottages - also has a surprisingly diverse geography. Years ago, a location scout from Hollywood discovered that Iceland's mountainous highlands were a perfect stand-in for Afghanistan. Depending on the time of year, it can also do a fair impersonation of an alien planet, the Swiss Alps, or even Minnesota. Right now, Russell Crowe is on a black beach in Iceland walking around with a beard, in a robe finishing the Biblical epic *Noah*. And if you're a *Game of Thrones* fan (I'm looking at you, Larry Fitzgerald), the cast will be back this summer shooting another season.

What hooked me personally on Iceland was a British secret agent. After watching James Bond race around on frozen ice in an Aston Martin Vanquish V12 in *Die Another Day* and finding out it was filmed in Iceland, I was struck by the beauty of the country and added it to my bucket list. Imagine my excitement when 20th Century Fox invited me along for a set visit to spend two days visiting some of the sites where they shot Ben Stiller's film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

## BEN THE VEGAN

After landing in Reykjavik, I heard these words: "Are you the news lady?" Who would have thought the first people I'd bump into at 7:20 a.m. local time in Iceland were Sue and Eric Zambo of Phoenix, on a trip to track the Northern Lights? Impressed that someone recognized me in their small country, my Iceland hosts put me on a commuter plane and we flew to a town called Hofn in southwest Iceland. I'm still waiting to hear if the Zambos captured their light-display quarry.

Hofn - which means "harbor" - is a charming fishing village with a population of 2,100 people. It's the kind of place where you can smell the day's fresh herring catch as you walk from the visitor center to your lunch spot. But last September, the population of Hofn swelled to 2,250 when *Mitty* stars Ben Stiller and Sean Penn - and their crew - called it home to film a soccer scene and a Himalayas hiking trek. Since the crew packed the local hotels and B&Bs, Ben ended up bunking at the local dentist's house. Being a big fan, the dentist had no issues relocating his own family to make sure Ben was comfortable. Unfortunately, not everyone in Hofn was as trusting with the *Zoolander* star. One local 9-year-old eyed the temporary fence constructed around Ben's borrowed home and asked his mother if the "foreign actor" was dangerous. He thought the fence was built to keep Ben from escaping.

As Iceland's "Langoustine Capital of the North," Hofn specializes in great seafood. That can pose a problem when your new local celebrity is vegan. But Icelanders are resourceful. When Stiller's

“people” approached Restaurant Humarhofnin to cater the production, owner Ari Gísladóttir and his wife Maria flew in a well-known vegan chef from the nation’s capital to do the work, while they fed the rest of the cast. Ari was thrilled when I told him that “I’ll eat anything,” and immediately brought out his best langoustine. After a few Icelandic beers, he even dragged his wife Maria out from the kitchen to read us a limerick she penned about the whole “Ben’s a Vegan” experience:

“When Ben Stiller came here to dine  
we thought everything would be fine  
but he had an issue  
with animal tissue  
for that’s where he draws the line.”

Despite Maria’s great rhyming skills, she didn’t snag a part in *Mitty*. However, the town’s three hens, Gisur, Lopapeysa and Stína, got roles, and local guide Ardis Halldorsdóttir says their fifteen minutes of fame turned them into such divas they still haven’t laid a single egg since. The snub didn’t affect Maria’s review of the film. “We went to see the movie this week and we loved it. It made us feel very good to hear the Icelandic language in a big movie like this,” Ari told me. After stuffing ourselves with Ari’s “mini-lobsters” and the most amazing garlic bread I’ve ever tasted, we followed our driver’s advice and checked out a pair of local homes engaged in a brutal and heated Christmas lights display contest. This is a big deal in Hofn and the entire town takes part. But the odds were stacked, as one of the homeowners was a millionaire and made it clear that he would spend whatever it took to win. Apparently, he made his fortune in the fishing business. I’m praying he doesn’t blow the whole thing on holiday lights and wind up on the cover of *People*.

After almost 24 hours of traveling, it was time for a sunset – which, during the dead of winter in Iceland, is around 3 p.m. The tradeoff: If you visit in July, it’s around midnight.



ABOVE AND LEFT PHOTOS BY WILSON WEBB

**Clockwise from opposite:** The author at the Jokulsárlón “glacier lagoon”; *Water Mitty* crew members assemble a crane overlooking a valley in Vatnajökull National Park; director/star Ben Stiller and extras; a sunset in downtown Hofn.





## I CAN'T FEEL MY FACE

Located in the southeastern part of Iceland, Hofn is a great starting-off point to venture into some of the country's most beautiful terrain, including the majestic glaciers of Vatnajokull National Park, which doubled for the Himalayas and Afghanistan in *Mitty*. Iceland is a geologist's dream. Most of the country is dotted with glaciers or lava fields, earning it the nickname "the land of fire and ice."

Our guides took us in four-wheel Super Jeeps about an hour west of Hofn to a spot overlooking a film site. We had the opportunity to strap cramp-ons to our boots and venture into an ice cave. Oskar from local adventure company Iceguide warned me to walk with my legs spread so I wouldn't tear my pants with my shoe-spikes as I trekked along the ice. I'm not always a good listener. After a few steps looking like one of Hofn's hens, I forgot to do what he suggested, and sliced open my favorite pair of gray jeans. Nothing some gray duct tape can't fix! Oskar also told me they are always on the lookout for caves to take tourists inside and since the glaciers are al-



ways moving and alive with rivers whose flow-patterns are never consistent, it's a gentleman's game of letting other guides know when a cave is discovered. I'm not sure how the guides remember where all the new discoveries are, as most of the Icelandic names I saw were a jumble of H's and F's and S's and L's. I just started calling everything "Snuffleufagus" to make it easy.

The reason most people assume Iceland is always freezing is because when it's windy, it actually is freezing – that, and the fact the country is called Iceland. Having spent a winter in Chicago at journalism school, I had experienced this combination of wind and cold before. But once inside the beautiful crystal ice cave near Snuffleufagus – actually, the one near Jokulsarlon and Fjallsarlon, but good luck remembering that – it warmed up. In fact, if you're ever caught in a blizzard in Iceland, head for a cave. It protects you from the elements and it's so beautiful, you forget you just lost feeling in your face.

## INSPIRED BY ICELAND:

### HOW DO YOU FIGHT A WAVE OF NEGATIVE OPINION?

With a banking crisis and devastating volcanic eruption (Eyjafjallajokull in 2010), the spotlight on Iceland has not always been kind. So leaders came up with the largest tourism campaign in Iceland's history: "Inspired by Iceland." The campaign focuses on the people of Iceland, from humble puffin-hunters to pop stars. And it appears to be working: 2013 was the most successful year yet for Iceland tourism, with an over 70 percent increase in visitors compared to 2010. Unlock Iceland's secrets by visiting [inspiredbyiceland.com](http://inspiredbyiceland.com).

### FOOD AND MUD

A few years ago, my doctor told me to watch my gluten and dairy intake. I sometimes forget to do those things when I'm on the road. It's even harder when award-winning Icelandic chef Halldor Halldorsson creates a dessert for the *Mitty* journalists called "Skyr Volcano," made with white chocolate "skyr mousse" and brown sugar caramel. So what is *skyr* (pronounced "skeer")? It's Iceland's national yogurt, a cultured dairy product that dates back to the time when Norwegian settlers first laid claim to what is now Iceland. I still don't know what's



## ICELAND FACT BOX

**GREAT MEALS:** Húmarhofnin Restaurant in Hofn. Ask for the proprietor Ari to grab his wife from the kitchen and recite the limericks she wrote about the *Walter Mitty* cast. Oh, and eat a ton of their langoustine. Also try Pakkhus in Reykjavik for a great vibe and maybe that skyr dessert.

**FUN FACT:** Iceland is such a close-knit and small country (pop. 300,000) that Icelanders refer to their president by his first name and he's even listed in the phone book.

**MUST DO:** Iceguide... ask for Oskar! He's adorable but married (I asked for one of the other gals in our group) and looks like he could be Iceland's Adam Levine. [iceguide.is](http://iceguide.is)

**GO STILLER-STYLE:** Iceland is activity-packed year-round, but the longer summer days definitely constitute peak season. Visit [icelandair.com](http://icelandair.com) for travel and trip packages, including Walter Mitty Tours starting in April.

**WHERE I STAYED:** Don't miss the breakfast buffet complete with gluten-free bread at Hotel Hofn ([hotelhofn.ic](http://hotelhofn.ic)). And make sure you hit the bar at the Icelandair Hotel Reykjavik Marina in Reykjavik ([icelandairhotels.com](http://icelandairhotels.com)). It's one of the city's top hipster hot spots, and they call their workout facility the "Boiler Room." Now, that's hip.

in this stuff, but here's what I do know: It's heaven in a cup. Much better than our stuff. It's thicker, tastier – in fact, I tried to convince our guide that if they lease a small shop space in Arizona, tack on "ology" or "land" to the word skyr, it could be a money-making franchise opportunity.

Icelanders must be rebounding nicely from the banking crisis a few years ago, because my idea was quickly dismissed.

Originally driven by necessity and the island's remoteness, Icelandic cuisine can be a little unnerving. Icelanders will find ways of using every part of an animal. *Svid*, or sheep head, is served with the tongue and eyes intact – the latter being considered a delicacy. *Slatur* and *lifarpylsa* are blood and liver sausages that resemble Scottish haggis. Fortunately, two other national specialties – fermented shark and pickled ram testicles – never made an appearance during my visit. It's a rule in my family to eat what's offered you when abroad, but those particular dishes would have tested that policy.

You could be forgiven for leaving Iceland without trying the ram testicles, but not for skipping the mud soak. One of the most visited tourist spots in the country is near Reykjavik's Keflavik airport right in the middle of a lava field. Tourists often hit the Blue Lagoon before boarding their place for a soak, silica mud facial and smoothie. Don't think about looking for Brooke Shields here – the



"lagoon" is actually man-made, fed by water warmed at the adjacent geothermal power plant. I admit I was a bit skeptical. I mean, what good could come from a community hot tub and residue from a power plant? But it wasn't like that at all. The "pool" was dignified, relaxing and clean, heated by Iceland's natural geothermic activity, which also heats most of the island's homes and buildings.

Plus, Iceland is very strict about hygiene, requiring swimmers to bathe before and after getting into the lagoon. I'm glad the attendants didn't see my spray tan as I'm sure I added a slight orange tint to the water, wading around taking iPhone selfies of silica mud on my face. Years ago, someone found out that the silica and sulfur in the lagoon water helped with psoriasis. I may not have psoriasis, but as I get older, I know I have more eye wrinkles and sun spots. Either way, my skin felt tighter and I purchased two bottles of mud as I exited the Blue Lagoon gift shop.

## ICE ICE BABY

"Iceland is a very special place," Stiller said after completing the *Mitty* shoot. "There is something about the landscape, the quality of the light and the energy of the place that makes it like no other." I agree. My meager two-day visit wasn't nearly enough time to see this amazing country. But then, I once flew to Italy for 24 hours of work, only to return home the next morning. I'll always make the trip if it means seeing something new, so I'd gladly return to Iceland to see the Northern Lights, or go whale watching, or glacier trekking, or biking the western fjords, or to hear more clever limericks. Arizona has a lot to offer with our year-round sunny weather. But you know what? Despite its moniker, Iceland is one of the warmest countries you'll ever visit. ■

**Clockwise from top opposite:** Exploring glaciers at Vatnajökull National Park; Tara at the Blue Lagoon thermal mud pool; the Thorbergur Centre in the Vatnajökull region; skyr yogurt; hanging with the *Mitty* location manager.



Watch Tara's *Reel Travels* Thursday mornings on CBS5 KPHO or visit [taraontv.com](http://taraontv.com).

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