



VENTURE II IN HUSAVIK.

When everyone else was leaving to head south for the Mediterranean we turned north for Iceland. Most people said we were mad not only because we were heading for more frigid climes but also because Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano was showering Europe with ash and disrupting air travel. But we had designed the Fleming 65 for extended offshore cruising and Venture II was eminently suitable for a voyage of just this sort. Theoretically, if we took the direct route, we had the range to reach Reykjavik without refuelling but we were not in any hurry and our itinerary took us along the south coast of England to the Scilly Isles, Ireland, the Isle of Man, the Western Isles of Scotland

and the Faroe Islands.

We spent six weeks in Scotland before heading into the North Atlantic to our next stepping stone en route to our ultimate destination. The Faroes archipelago consists of 18 islands, 17 of which are inhabited. In recent years, most of the major islands have been connected by tunnels or causeways so that it is possible to drive extensively all over the country. English is widely spoken, the people are extremely friendly and hospitable and the scenery dramatic and universally magnificent. Harbours tend to be few and far between so most of our touring here was done by car through spectacular scenery almost entirely devoid of trees.

Heading for Iceland

One week later it was time for us to head for Iceland. The weather was clear but very windy, with gusts to 25 knots. The Atlantic rollers were on the beam whipped up by a strong northerly wind. The wind and waves gradually increased during the second day so that the ride became progressively more uncomfortable. By lunchtime seas were up to about 2m and the wind 17 knots. The seas continued to build so our second night was very uncomfortable. The waves were steep and short and often came in groups so the bow flew up in the air and then crashed down into a hole on the other side. On a couple of occasions, with the forward half of the boat



VENTURE II TORSHAVN FAROES.

Venture II Circumnavigates Iceland

AS A DESTINATION, ICELAND, THE HOME OF THE NOW INFAMOUS EYJAFJALLAJOKULL VOLCANO MAY NOT COME UP IN THE TOP TEN LIST FOR CRUISING PEOPLE, BUT AS TONY FLEMING AND HIS CREW DISCOVERED, IT'S CERTAINLY WELL WORTH THE TRIP.

TEXT BY TONY FLEMING

virtually unsupported over a great void, we hit with a bone-jarring crash.

We were now at 63 degrees north. The sun did not sink below the horizon until after midnight, leaving behind an exquisite sunset that lingered for hours. It never became completely dark and when the sun rose out of the turbulent sea at 0430 hours we had Iceland in sight. The tall mountains back lit by the sun looked very dramatic, especially under the wild conditions. We kept reducing speed to lessen the force of the impacts. Our speed dropped as low as 6.9 knots and for ages the "time to go" never seemed to drop below twelve hours. Finally – and with great relief – we made our Icelandic landfall in



GJOGV, ESTEROY, FAROES.



FARM AND MOUNTAINS AT SEYDUSFJORDUR

Vestmannaeyjar, the Westman Islands, at 0830 hours local time. These islands lie between 5 and 10 nautical miles off the coast of Iceland and only one of them, Heimaey, is inhabited.

The island has a turbulent history. As recently as 1973, the island had to be temporarily abandoned when without warning, at 3 o'clock in the morning of January 21st, a mile long fissure split open just 500m from the nearest houses. Within five hours the 5,000 inhabitants had been evacuated by the town's fishing fleet which, by good fortune, happened to be in port because of a storm the previous day. One third of the town was over-run by lava but determined efforts on the part of the islanders saved the harbour and people were able to return six months later.

The day following the summer solstice (June 21st), we headed back out to sea. The sea was rough and the scene other worldly as we picked our way through the sixteen islands and 30 smaller islets and sea stacks which make up the archipelago. The newest island is Surtsey, which appeared above the waves only in 1963 soon after fishermen spotted smoke coming out of the sea. It was fascinating to behold a substantial piece of land that did not even exist just 47 years ago.

On to Reykjavik

We continued on to Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, where we rented a small 4-wheel-drive Suzuki and over the next few days drove a total of 1850km exploring the surrounding country. There is no space in this article to list chapter and verse of every place we visited but we saw many of the sights for which Iceland is famous, including glaciers, geysers and beautiful waterfalls.

We passed through areas that had been flooded with debris or covered with ash from the Eyjafjallajokull volcano. We made two attempts to get close to the volcano itself but were forced to turn back when wind-blown ash reduced the visibility on the unmade track to just a few feet and the fine, gritty material got into everything including our precious cameras.

After 10 days it was time to move on up the west coast and continue our circumnavigation of Iceland. Ahead we could see the Snaefells Jokull (glacier) when still 50 nautical miles



SKOGAFOSS WATERFALL.

distant. Our first stop on our way north was the harbour of Olafsvik before crossing the Breidafjordur to the Bardastrond peninsula and past the bird cliffs at Latrabjarg. This is the most westerly point in Iceland. It was also the most westerly point on our trip. 24 degrees 36.68 W. We rounded the headland and found ourselves having to deal with steep head seas very similar to those we had experienced during our passage from the Faroes. But it was only for a couple of hours and conditions began to ease once we made the turn into Talknafjordur. The inner part of the fjord is almost completely closed off by a spit of land and beyond it the water was flat calm. We were now at latitude 65 degrees, 37 minutes – farther north than Fairbanks, Yellowknife and Archangel.

The following morning we headed back out into the Denmark Strait. Initially the sea was calm but the wind continued to increase all day until it reached as high as 24 knots and, once again, we were faced with steep, breaking, head seas which dropped us into holes and hurled sheets of spray against the windshield. There were plenty of small fishing boats being tossed around in the rough conditions and seabirds were revelling in the strong wind as they skimmed the tumultuous waves. The scenery was dramatic, with soaring cliffs and huge mountains bearing increasing amounts of snow

We turned into Isafjardardjup where we learned from the harbourmaster that about 40 sailboats a year stopped here in transit to East Greenland while waiting for the ice to melt. Virtually all of these were sailboats from all over Europe.

Waiting for the weather

Seriously bad weather was forecast and we were lucky to be securely moored in a snug and convenient berth, although wind gusts in excess of 30 knots created quite a chop even in the protected inner harbour. We were told that this was the lowest depression recorded for ten years, and the rings of isobars on the Met Office weather chart certainly were packed closely together.

After two days the weather calmed down sufficiently for us to be able to continue with our adventures. This whole region of Iceland is known as the West Fjords. These fjords

stick out like a multi-fingered hand into the Denmark Strait. No matter which direction the wind came from it had a bite to it. To the west lay Greenland, now only 150 nautical miles away, and to the north there was nothing between us and the North Pole. We were now at latitude 66 degrees 20 minutes north, only about 10 nautical miles south of the Arctic Circle.

We went back out into the main fjord of Isafjardardjup, to the north of which is Hornstrandir – a vast peninsula where there are no roads and the only access is by boat. We rounded a precipitous headland into the Jokulfirdir fjord and ahead of us we could see the vast Drangjokull icecap shimmering in the sun. All around us the surrounding peaks were still well endowed with snow. While sitting out the storm, a local yachtsman had told us that the best fjord to visit was Lonafjordur. He assured us that, even though it was uncharted, there were no navigation hazards provided we kept to the eastern side of the fjord on the way in. Once inside he said that the water was 30m deep right up to the head of the fjord. We kept a close eye on the depth finder and found this information to be accurate. We anchored without any problem at the head of the fjord where a large waterfall, fed by the melting snow, filled the air with the soothing sounds from its tumbling torrent.

The following morning we moved on and I followed Venture II in the tender for several nautical miles until we reached the main fjord. It was an exhilarating experience and I took photos and video of her underway. This is what she was designed for and she looked completely at home in these magnificent surroundings.

We rounded the Horn (Northern version) and passed the amazing bird cliffs of Hornbjarg. These are home to tens of thousands of guillemots, razorbills, puffins, kittiwakes and fulmars and the highest point along the cliffs, Kalfatindur peak, drops nearly 540m sheer into the sea.

Taking advantage of the calm weather, we headed straight across the open ocean, referred to in some sources as the Greenland Sea, to the entrance of the Enjafjordur which leads to Akureyri – the second largest city in Iceland and the capital of the North.



VENTURE II PILOTHOUSE UNDERWAY.

Endless days

I stayed up all night because I wanted to see for myself how sunset metamorphosed into dawn at this latitude of 66 degrees 20 minutes north. On July 10th the sun disappeared below the horizon twenty minutes past midnight and reappeared exactly two hours later. A glow on the horizon revealed the position of the sun all the while it was hidden from view. A long lingering sunset gave way to an equally lingering sunrise, giving the illusion of a reverse motion replay of the sunset. As the sun rose out of the sea to port,

it cast a rosy glow over the snow capped peaks to starboard.

The morning after our arrival in Akureyri we rented a small Toyota and drove out to the Lake Myvatn area. The drive was through huge mountains interspersed with lush farmland in the valleys. Once past the lake we visited areas where steam roared from the ground with a noise like a jet engine which could be heard several kilometres away. We hiked a few kilometres into an active volcanic area where the air smelt of sulphur and hot springs bubbled



PUFFINS AT GRIMSEY ISLAND.

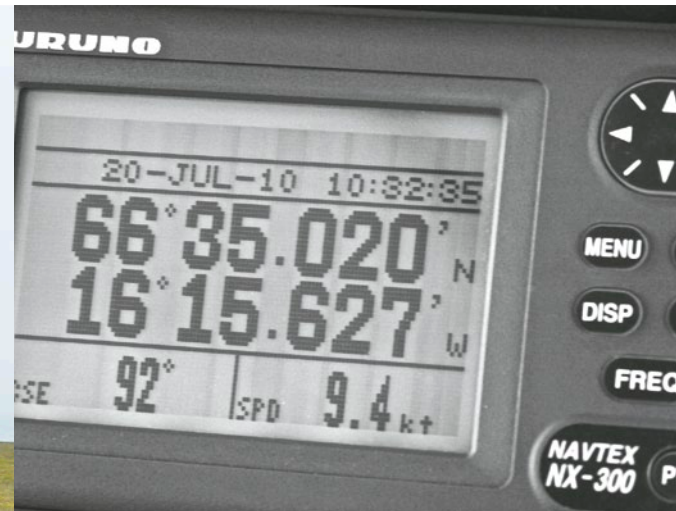
from the ground.

We left Akureyri on July 17th for Grimsey Island 55 nautical miles to the north. The island's main claim to fame is that the Arctic Circle passes right through it. We arrived just after lunch and we were soon the centre of attention in this small place with less than 100 inhabitants. A passerby took our lines when we came alongside and soon we had a crowd of men and young boys who all wanted to see the boat. We invited them on board and, in return, one of them generously offered to drive us round the island.

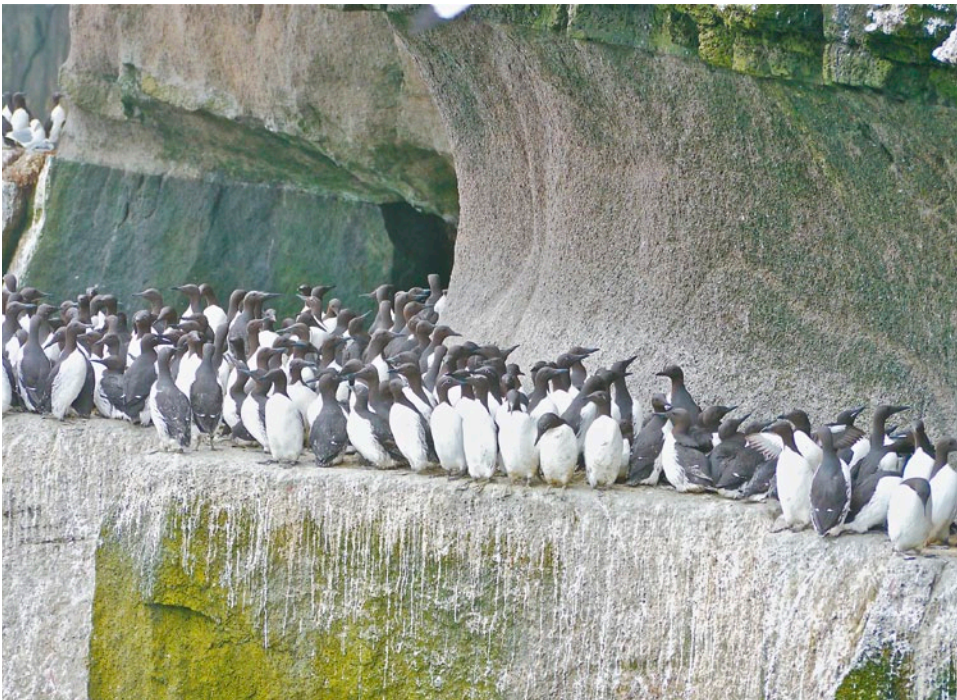
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SIGNPOST AT THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, GRIMSEY ISLAND.



GPS SHOWING FARTHEST NORTH.



GUILLEMOTS IN 'SECRET' PLACE. GRIMSEY ISLAND.

The island is only 4km by 2km but it would have been quite a hike around the perimeter. Our guide took us to the signpost marking the Arctic Circle where we took photos while flocks of noisy Arctic terns wheeled overhead. There were thousands of puffins nesting in the cliffs that ring the island and I was finally able to take the photos I wanted. He took us to what he called a secret place at the extreme northern tip of the island. To reach it he led us to a spot we would certainly never have found or dared to approach on our own. He took my hand as we scrambled down a precipitous slope littered with loose rocks and we wondered where on earth he was taking us. We rounded an outcrop well down the cliffs and found ourselves in a place that was absolute

magic. Towering crags, at least 30m high, rose sheer from the waves that exploded in sheets of foam around their base. Overhead, countless seabirds wheeled around our heads, filling the air with their cries. Flocks of black and white guillemots crowded shoulder to shoulder on a wide ledge while, in every available crevice, nesting kittiwakes and fulmars, many with fluffy youngsters, were almost close enough to touch. It was a wild and wonderful scene that exceeded anything I had ever experienced before.

Checking out the whales

We next headed for Husavik, hoping to see the whales for which the place is famous. Sadly there were none to be seen, although many whale watching boats were out. We were told

in Grimsey that they had gone 40 nautical miles north into colder waters – perhaps another manifestation of warming sea temperatures.

We had not been able to identify any really suitable ports in the north east of Iceland and, as time was beginning to run short, we decided to make a 130 nautical mile run around the northeast tip of Iceland to Vopnafjordur, well south on the east coast. It was a beautiful sunny morning when we arose at 0400 hours to take our leave of Husavik. The northeast corner of Iceland lies just south of the Arctic Circle and we crossed the line for a second time and went as far north as 66 degrees 35.55 minutes when rounding it. This was our most northerly point before permanently turning south and we celebrated by broaching our one, long-held, bottle of champagne and drinking it mixed with orange juice. We poured a generous libation to King Neptune over the side for allowing us to venture unmolested into his arctic domain.

We stopped for the night in Vopnafjordur and were underway again the following morning. It was a stunningly beautiful day with a cerulean sky. The wind was 16 to 18 knots but it was from aft for a change and the ride was like sitting in an armchair. With her long, deep keel Venture runs straight and true in following seas. Our log passed the 5,000 nautical mile mark before we turned into Seydisfjordur, with huge mountains on either side. Snowmelt from the peaks fed many silvery streams in almost continuous waterfalls as they tumbled down the steep slopes.

We consulted a number of weather forecasting sources and made the decision to make the direct 500 nautical mile crossing to Stornoway, bypassing the Faroes to make up the time we had spent waiting and also to get there before the next weather system arrived.

We cleared customs and departed Iceland at 0440 hours on Saturday July 24th after spending slightly more than one month circumnavigating and driving through this fascinating country. Two days later we were back in Scotland and six weeks after that, Venture II was on display in the Southampton boat show, none the worse for wear after our 5,000 nautical mile trip around Iceland and above the Arctic Circle.

