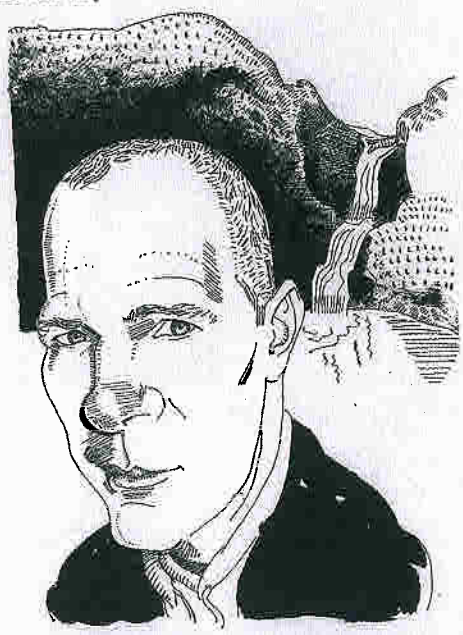
RICK MOODY on Iceland

The author of *The Ice Storm* on an unexpected Eden

Only in retrospect does it seem odd to have chosen Iceland as a travel destination just two weeks before September 11, 2001. My wife and I hadn't been on vacation in a long while. As always, I was interested in somewhere that contrasted maximally with New York City, where we live. Iceland, its landscape almost entirely devoid of people, was that place.

At the time, Reykjavík, the capital, had a reputation as an international destination of cool. There was a lot of dance music coming out of the city; Bjork, the nation's ubiquitous export, was broadcast in the street; the bars were open late. We arrived in downtown Reykjavík early on Saturday and slept off our jet lag to the sounds of drunken revelers finishing their festivities from the night before. After a day spent around the city—there's a good art museum, a nice shopping district, and the notorious but rather ho-hum penis museum (it's true: Size doesn't matter)—we got out of town.



It didn't take long to do. To reach some astoundingly beautiful Icelandic scenery, such as Geysir (from which we get the word *geyser,* and which is just what you'd expect) or the waterfall called Gullfoss, takes only a couple of hours, most of it spent driving through flat, spooky moonscapes. In rural Iceland, a tourist attraction is a place where you drive up, get out of the car, and look. Rarely are there fees to see things; still less often are there docents, forest rangers, lines, tour buses, parking lots, or anything else. Even the notable man-made attraction called the Blue Lagoon, where you can bathe in the runoff from a nearby geothermal power plant, is lovely and peaceful.

However, the most arresting spot in Iceland is one we found entirely by accident. On the last long day of our trip, we set out to find some Saga Age structures in Stöng, a couple hours south of Reykjavík, near the active volcano called Mount Hekla (in days gone by it was considered the actual mouth of Hell). For some time, we circumnavigated the ostensible location of Stöng, unable to find any structures or, in truth, anything much at all. Finally, we got out of the car, believing that a certain dirt track had to be the way to Stöng and its Vikings. We followed the track through a series of forks until, in the middle of nowhere, we came upon a lonely sign marked GJÁIN. (The word, I later learned, means rift.) We had no idea what this sign indicated, nor even what feature—road, mountain, valley—it pointed to. But walking a couple tenths of a mile farther, we crested a lip of Icelandic desert and descended into a gorge. Not just any gorge but a gorge of florid, even show-offy, beauty. Here it was: Gjáin.

When I think back on it now, Gjáin would be my idea of what the Garden of Eden looked like, if I were pressed to come up with a real-world analogue. Gjáin had not one, not two, but three separate waterfalls, all tumbling into an animated and cheerful creek; it had interesting little trails from one craggy overlook to another; and it had a profusion of blossoming wildflowers, many of them deliciously redolent. This may not sound astounding—wildflowers—until you remember that Iceland is almost barren of trees and shrubs of any kind, partly because of its severe climate but also because the early settlers burned everything they could to stay warm. A field of wildflowers in Iceland is a rare thing. A field of wildflowers on a volcanic plain, smelling like paradise? You come upon it once in a lifetime.

Did I mention that there was not a soul there? Not a soul! To say that it was in the middle of nowhere would be to understate the case comically. Eventually, after lingering in the gorge, we did manage to find the Viking settlement at Stöng, but it was a letdown compared with the awesome, unsullied beauty of the place we'd just seen.

Two weeks later, of course, history convulsed upon itself. For some reason, I find it hard not to look back on everything before 9/11 without returning, eventually, to the memory of Gjáin. In those days, international tourism seemed an American birthright. Today, we are less secure in our travels. *Before* was the magical aspect of Gjáin, the heavily symbolized gorge of flowers in the middle of a somber landscape. *After,* life can feel all about the security screenings. Gjáin was out of a fairy tale; it was out of a movie. And it still exists in South Iceland. To those who visit it now, in a more jaundiced and fearful world, I'm sure it seems even more precious. □

Illustration by Joseph Cardiello