

Destination Iceland

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In 1873, the emigration to Ameríka began in earnest. It continued into the early 1900s. People were leaving Iceland because it was the poorest country in Europe. It's being poor meant that it was a bargain for travellers. In 1882, the land of our ancestors was an exotic destination with geysers, glaciers, bird cliffs, the great Almannagjá. However, ordinary folks like us didn't travel. It was the very well off who could seek adventure.

In the summer of 1882, John Coles and two companions, Mr. Cuthbert E. Peek and Mr. E. Delmar Morgan, made two journeys across Iceland on seldom-travelled routes. After his experience, Coles advised future travelers to arrive at the beginning of July and to stay no longer than the beginning of September. If they stayed longer, he warned them, they might not be able to catch a ship back to Europe until the spring.

He says that the cost of this trip was 100 British pounds. What was that cost in terms of what the ordinary person was earning? In 1882 a shoemaker was making half a pound a day. If he worked 300 days a year, his income would be £150.00. Obviously, the shoemaker, the tailor or the candle stick maker weren't booking a passage for a holiday in Iceland.

Pack horses cost Coles and his two companions 4£ 10s to 5£ 10s each and his saddle-horses from 6£ to 12£. They had to rent 24 horses for their journey for a total cost of 133£. When they got back to Reykjavík, they sold the horses for 33£. He says that he might have received a better price at another time but that there was a shortage of hay, so buyers in Reykjavík were reluctant to buy back the horses.

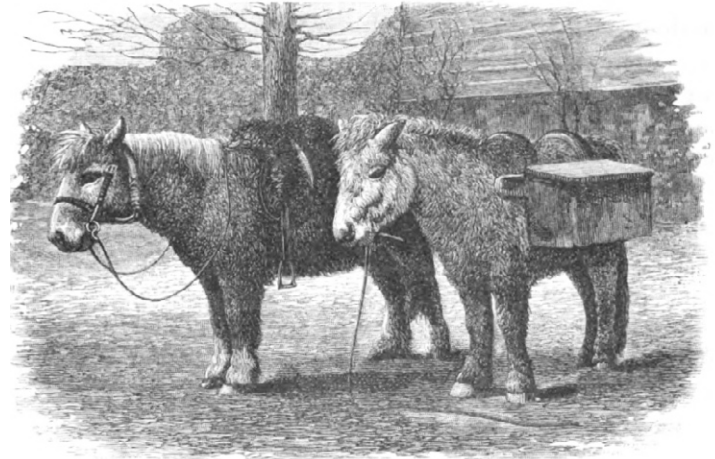
The guides were paid five shillings six pence a day, but they had to provide their own food. The travellers paid 12 krónur at every place they stayed overnight. That included supper, a place to sleep and breakfast plus the

charge for grazing their horses. If they just stopped for a meal, it cost a krónur (he says that was the equivalent of a shilling). They had to have local guides to help them ford the rivers. They paid the local guides one to two krónur, depending on the size of the ford.

He advises travellers, before leaving Reykjavík, to get about 5£ in small Danish silver coins. The exchange rate was 18 krónur to the pound sterling so that would be 90 krónur per person.

He suggests that travellers take a kettle but have the handle riveted, because the packs on the horses took a real beating. Apparently, he bought a complete camping outfit of cups, knives, forks, and dishes in an iron case at the Army and Navy store in London. A visit to Iceland, he says, is a great opportunity to wear old clothes. If you wear new ones, they'll soon look old. All clothes should be woollen because wool keeps you warm even when it is wet. He recommends that the traveller take four pairs of warm socks, two flannel shirts, two undershirts, two long stockings, six pocket handkerchiefs, two pairs of woollen gloves. "Be sure to take these", he says about the woollen gloves. An oilskin coat and a sou'wester. A Porter's anti-mosquito veil, a soft hat, a small pillow. And a railway wrapper to lie on top of the ground sheet.

Coles also suggested that if the traveller was going to stay at farm houses that he take a good stock of Keating's insect powder. Fleas were a serious



A woodcut copied from a photograph in the possession of Mr. Cuthbert E. Peek

problem at some farms.

As for food, he recommended biscuits in one pound, soldered tins, preserved meats in small tins, prepared soups, and tapioca or sago to thicken soup contained in strong bottles or tins, small tins of Leibig's extract of beef, and preserved vegetables in tins. No vegetables could be purchased in the countryside. The traveller would need tins of cocoa pre-mixed with milk and sugar. He also should take dried herbs, jams, sugar, pepper, salt and tea.

He also pointed out that skyr, dark rye bread, fish, lamb, milk, and sometimes coffee could be purchased at the farms.

Nowadays, Icelandair and Iceland Express whisk us to Iceland. Tour guides provide buses and we sleep in hotels or in schools converted to hotels for the summer

What do you think? Take a boat to England this summer, take another boat to Iceland, rent horses, live in a tent, plod across the island over a period of two months, or say to Jonas Thor, book me a tour around the Ring Road?

With notes and quotes from Summer Travelling in Iceland by John Coles, 1882