

Iceland lies scarcely fifty miles south of the Arctic Circle, but despite its geographical position the island enjoys a more moderate climate the year around than one would expect by comparison with the weather of Greenland at the same latitude. The more easterly situation of Iceland places it within the influence of the northern fringes of the Gulf Stream, the tempering effect of which produces cool stormy summers and mild snowless winters.

Iceland's location is determined by a suboceanic structure, the mid-Atlantic ridge, a recently discovered geophysical phenomenon related to the movement of vast blocks of the earth's crust. Except for a few islands in the South Atlantic, Iceland at the northern terminus of the ridge is the only part that rises above the ocean surface. The ridge marks the line of separation of crustal blocks where lava from the mantle rises to fill the slowly widening gap. Entirely volcanic Iceland has been gradually raised over a period of many millions of years by this still continuing process.

The line of volcanic activity which roughly marks the spreading zone extends diagonally across Iceland from the newly formed island of Surtsy off the southwest coast, through the Westermann Islands, Mt. Hekla and the hot spring areas to the north and east of the volcano, and on north-eastward to the moon-like landscape known as Askja north of Vatnajokull, the largest glacier of Iceland. Along this zone are found many of the strangest juxtaposed geological features of the island produced by awesome events originating from intense volcanic activity.

The beauty of the Iceland landscape, however, is not confined to its volcanic phenomena, its mountains of igneous rock, its torrential rivers and thunderous falls, and its ice-filled glacial lakes. Wherever plant life has become established Iceland is clothed in Arctic vegetation.

fern
fern

The trees are dwarf and stunted willows, birches, and evergreens. Indra covers much of the interior. Wild flowers belonging to arctic and alpine species proliferate here in the summer months. A most striking feature of Iceland is its mosses. Old lava flows everywhere are overgrown with pillowy, gray-green, spongy masses resembling sphagnum in coarseness of structure. Bordering streams, below a retreating glacial front, and on cinder deposits mosses develop to brilliant gold and emerald fed by the mineral rich soil.

Iceland's affinities are with the sea. Its rocky core sprang from the ocean depths in a prolonged firey birth that continues to this day. Its plant life came to it as voyagers from the continents to the east and west. Of mammal life it claims scarcely any of its own; what it acquired was brought there by its first human visitors little more than a thousand years ago. But its closeness to the sea finds ultimate expression in the sea bird population for which the surrounding fish-rich waters provide a lasting source of food. Puffins by the hundreds of thousands nest on Iceland's cliffs together with fulmars, glaucous gulls, and kittiwakes whose numbers seem small only by comparison. Fiercely agressive arctic terns colonize the low coastal plains which they share with shearwaters and skuas. Shore birds arrive in the spring in considerable numbers and varieties, largely from Europe, fewer from America. The small number of land birds that have established a migratory route to Iceland all come from Europe. Iceland is literally a self-sufficient land tenuously connected to Europe by a few venturesome birds and to America by a fading ocean stream.