"This boy Grettir—well, he was trouble from the very beginning."

High atop Drangey Island, Jón Eiriksson stood at the nub of a jagged rectangle of stones, looking out at the fjord and the mainland beyond. Above him, sea birds wheeled in the salt wind over Drangey, a green-capped spike of rock thrust down like an axe head into a tongue of the North Sea. Jón took off his hat and ran his fingers through a tussock of white hair, then he sat down on a half-buried stone.

"Grettir is our neighbor, you know," Jón said. "He was born on a farm near Midfjord, a place called Bjarg. That means 'stone' in Icelandic. When he was young, he was a handsome boy—but rough and mischievous. He made clever poems, but they were mostly scornful. His father and nearly everyone believed that he would amount to nothing."

Jón talked in the familiar terms one might use to describe a ne'er-do-well kid who squeals his tires through the subdivision. But at the age of 72, Jón isn't quite old enough to have known his juvenile-delinquent neighbor.

Grettir was born a thousand years ago.

I had arrived in Iceland with photographer Michael Moore, determined to follow the path of Grettir Asmundarson, the warrior, poet, ghostbuster, and outdoorsman popularly known as Grettir the Strong. This medieval Jesse James outwitted his pursuers for nearly 20 years, roaming and wreaking havoc across the most remote corners of 11th-century Iceland. As any

Icelander will attest, and as Jón told us, "Grettir was not only the strongest man who ever lived in Iceland, but also the greatest outlaw."

Iceland, the last great wilderness in Europe, has few old buildings, and no castles or palaces. But to Icelanders, history and myth are woven into the landscape itself. Every hill, every river and rock, seems to have a story behind it. Collectively, these stories are known as the Icelandic Sagas. The sagas were written by anonymous authors, between 1200 and 1400, and they're still part of the daily consciousness, the Icelanders' key to comprehending their extraordinary environment, their countrymen, and themselves.

I had planned to read some of the sagas as a means of getting to the root of a place that had already attained mythical status in my imagination. I dreamed of Iceland, perched precariously on a volcanic fault at the top of the Atlantic, as an adventurer's paradise of glaciers and salmon-filled rivers, high green cliffs and spectacular fjords. Returning travelers spoke of it as a dramatically lit, ghost-blown place, peppered with lava flows and geysers, populated by farmer-poets and fair-haired beauties.

Contrary to my expectations of middle European literature, the sagas featured no frilly-sleeved princes or distressed virgins. They read like American Westerns —indeed, John Huston said that many of his film plots were inspired by Icelandic sagas—with fast-moving narratives that were propelled by brutal feuds and punctuated by bursts of sarcastic wit.

Grettir's Saga—also known as *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*—is one of the most readable, with its well-rendered battles, daring deeds, and a charismatic leading man who is still retains the title of the Icelanders' favorite saga character.

"Icelanders relate to Grettir as an underdog who refused to back down to the rich and powerful," said Örnólfur Thorsson, a Reykjavik-based scholar and editor of a series of English translations of the sagas. "He's a complex hero—he's a superman and a villain, he's a Robin Hood and a hot-headed goon, he's a womanizer and a family man. He has tremendous advantages of strength and intellect, but he's hobbled by hubris and bad luck."

Like most of the sagas, *Grettir's Saga* is part fact and part ghost story. Grettir Asmundarson was a real person, whose outlawry and death (in the year 1050) can be cross-referenced in census books and other records. But in the 300 hundred years before his story was written down, it was exaggerated to include a fantastic array of deeds (the boulder Grettir supposedly lifted at Bjarg must weigh more than 10 tons) and supernatural beings.

As a teenager, Grettir was more interested in picking fights and wowing neighbors with tests of strength, than in working on his father's farm. His father was not amused, but his mother detected greatness in her son, and encouraged him with heroic tales of his ancestors' triumphant battles.

On Grettir's first journey outside his home district, he killed a neighbor in a brawl, setting into motion a series of events that eventually resulted in Grettir being declared a "full outlaw," condemned to wander the wilderness with a price on his head.

Grettir tried to channel his strength into positive endeavors, but his every good deed was destined to go awry. Abandoned by his friends as his infamy grew, he made his solitary way across the land, battling enemies and Iceland's bizarre environment (often manifested in evil spirits and fearsome trolls). Brandishing a short sword and spouting memorable lines of poetry, the outlaw circled Iceland, pausing to horse-jack travelers, assist a widow with a ghost problem, or tryst with a saucy farm maiden. When he finally runs out of places to hide, he makes his way to the top of Drangey and pulls the ladders up behind him, expecting to live out the rest of his life in security.

It occurred to me, while reading of his exploits, that Grettir would make a hell of a guide to Iceland. Mike and I determined to use his itinerary to create our own ultimate adventure tour of the country, following Grettir's outlaw odyssey on foot, horseback, bicycle, kayak, and four-wheel-drive truck. We would climb into the caves where Grettir slept, and backpack into the lost valleys where he rustled sheep and romanced trolls' daughters. We would ply the icy waters where Grettir swam, soak in the hot springs where he soothed his bones, and dine on meals of puffin, fish, and lamb.

Grettir's Saga was on Mike's lap when we touched down at Keflavik Airport on a July morning, groggy and looking forward to three weeks of adventuring in the most volcanic place on earth. Through the airplane's windows we looked out over a lava field stretching from runway to horizon. In the distance, two plumes of white steam vented into the low gray sky.

Grettir's great-grandfather, Onund Tree-Foot, would have seen something similar when he arrived in the 10th century after a harrowing voyage from Norway. Onund and his rowdy contemporaries had escaped the clan wars that wracked their homeland, but they found themselves in a strange new world where violence seemed to spring from the landscape itself. Iceland was—and is—still under construction, and any given day might be interrupted by rattling earth, stampeding lava, or showering ash.

After shopping for food and last-minute camping gear in Reykjavik (once described, accurately, as resembling a vast Audi dealership), we needed to finalize our route. We contacted an English expatriate named Bernard Scudder, who had recently finished a new English translation of *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Since Iceland's single phone book is alphabetized by first name, and only two Bernards are listed, he was easy to track down.

Bernard was eager to fuel our quest with information, so I met him and the scholar Örnólfur Thorsson at a restaurant in Reykjavik. Spreading our books and maps on the table between plates of herring and lamb, we plotted a rough itinerary. At the end of the evening, Örnólfur offered some parting words.

"Bernard and I talked about what you are planning on doing, and we don't believe anyone has ever done it before—probably because all the places Grettir visited are so remote. If you succeed, we are quite certain that you would be the first."

Something tells me you will be needing this.

"Might be the understatement of the millennium," Mike said. We had left Reykjavik in a rented truck, and rolled north through vivid green valleys backed by snow-capped peaks and crisp blue fjords. It was late afternoon when we arrived at Bjarg, Grettir's birthplace, just ahead of a storm rolling in from the southwest.

Still a family farm 10 centuries later, Bjarg's front lawn features a monument to Grettir's much-suffering mother, Ásdis. A bronze bas-relief of the scene in which she gives her son her grandfather's inlaid short-sword, is captioned with her portentous quote.

Bjarg was the starting point for Grettir's first trip beyond the Midfjord region. With the rain coming down hard, we jumped back into the truck and rolled away from the green coastal valley, into the high moor called Tvidaegra, or "two days' journey."

Driving through the misty, marathon dusk, we negotiated our way through a vast, lake-dotted bog. No houses or people came into view, but ancient stone cairns lurched out of the roadside fog like hulking night-giants, startled by our headlights.

As we entered the Hallmundarhraun lava field, the road deteriorated into a rocky obstacle course. I shifted into creeper-gear and negotiated over and around huge slabs of tossed lava. At 11:30—still dusk—we set up camp, using the truck as a wind-block. We cooked a dinner of pasta and dried codfish, at times catching glimpses of the Eiriksjokull glacier, glowing paternally through the mist and rain.

The rain-laden wind screamed all night, but in the morning a broad rainbow arched over the glacier. We made coffee, then pressed onward toward the Borgarfjord valley.

According to the saga, Grettir's party stopped at the farm called Fljotstunga to sleep and rest the horses. These days, the farm is part of Iceland's popular farm-stay program. Hosts Kristín and Bjarni rent bunks to spelunkers keen on exploring the extensive cave systems nearby. With their son-in-law, Erlendur Palsson, they look after Vídgelmir, one of the world's largest lava caves. The cavern was formed when flowing lava at the surface cooled rapidly and solidified, while the lava underneath flowed away, leaving an open space.

"This cave was well known to the outlaws of the Viking Age," Bjarni said. "I found an axe handle near here, and other people have found sheep bones, glass pearls, and food remains. The inhabitants must have left in a hurry."

Erlendur guided us down a ladder to the entrance of the cave, then we squeezed through a narrow gap into a long, low tunnel with a declining ceiling. The solid-ice floor was covered with three inches of bitterly cold water. Crouch-sliding on our boots, we pulled ourselves through until we couldn't squat any lower. Then we surrendered our hands and knees to the icy water, and crawled through the corridor until we emerged into a spacious chamber. As we stood up our head-lamps revealed a spectacular array of stalagmites and stalactites, formed of lava.

Our caving adventure continued in Surtshellir, the longest and most renowned cave in Iceland. Mike and I spent most of a day inside, in an unguided exploration of the airy main galleries and claustrophobia-causing side chambers.

The cave is said to have been occupied in the 10th century by outlawed thieves called Hellismenn, who left jewelry and bones behind. Most of these relics have since been looted, but remnants of the outlaws' stone walls and bedsteads are still visible. In one section, sometimes called the Ice Cave, we came across remarkable ice formations, ice candles, and massive ice columns. Looking down at the ice floor, I was surprised to see a grotesque face of carved stone staring up at me. There were a dozen more of these sculptures in the room, all partially submerged in the ice. We would soon meet the man responsible.

In the morning, Grettir argued with a neighbor boy named Skeggi. Skeggi seized his axe and struck at Grettir, who grabbed the shaft of the axe and wrenched it free. Then Grettir struck Skeggi with the same axe, through to his brain.

"In the year 1920, my uncle Pall Einarson found the skull below the farmhouse at Fljotstunga," said Kalman Stefánson. "The skull was very old, but it was quite clearly split in two at the forehead, as if from an axe." Kalman illustrated with a vertical karate-chop to the center of his forehead, covered with bushy white bangs.

Mike and I had stopped by Kalman's farm, next to Fljotstunga, to ask him about local cave-lore, and about Grettir's adventures in the area. Rural Icelanders are invariably approachable, especially when an inquiry relates to matters historical or poetic. As his wife plied us with biscuits and strong coffee, the 66-year-old Kalman showed us a photograph, taken by a Scottish traveler in 1898, of Kalman's grandfather standing in front of a turf-roofed structure, holding a large can of sheep's milk.

"The first Kalman came to Iceland eleven hundred years ago," said Kalman. "He landed near Keflavik, where your plane landed. Then he moved around quite a bit. You see things named after him everywhere. My grandfather moved here in 1858, and the house was built in 1905, 1932, and 1970 — we've been assembling this place for a hundred years!"

As a younger man, Kalman and his uncle spent much of their time exploring nearby caves. In 1956, some 30 miles away in the lava field, they found evidence of habitation.

"We found sheep bones, and a fire ring. Some historians came to inspect it, and said it closely resembles the cave where Grettir's friend Hallmund lived. So they christened it Hallmundshellir—Hallmund's cave."

He draws us a rough map. "Position yourself in a line between the mountains Eirksgnypa and Sydra Saudrafjall, northeast of the dry lake, and look for a sandy depression. But I must warn you that it is a fight of a trip. What sort of thing are you driving?"

The "thing" that we were driving—an old Mitsubishi Pajero—had already overheated several times, and was gobbling oil. But the prospect of finding Hallmund's "storm-driven den" was too good of an adventure to pass up.

As we drove east, into the thick of the lava field, the road got rougher and the sky turned purple as a storm came on, blasting rain and wind at us. We crossed a swollen river and turned off the cairn trail, following vague tracks according to Kalman's instructions and then steering by compass, until the visibility got so low that we couldn't get our bearings on the mountains. The fronts came in more quickly, but the truck, despite our doubts, seemed to be coming into its own in this rough country, moving sturdily over the heaving lava.

"This thing's a regular Grettir," Mike said.

We kept moving as evening wore on, getting stuck a few times and freeing the truck, pummeled by cold rain. Close to midnight, through braids of rain, Mike and I both thought we saw the broad outline of a large man, pressing forward through the mist. Once we figured out that it was only a cairn, we realized that it was time to stop. We set up our tents and made dinner.

The wind screamed all night, joined often by rain. But in the morning, we woke to another rainbow. We spent another half-day looking for Hallmund's cave, then we pulled the plug on the mission and headed back toward Fljotstunga.

According to Kalman, Skeggi's skull was brought to the church at Reykholt and buried in the cemetery there. But the minister at Reykholt said he had no idea where Skeggi's skull is buried. "And if anyone tells you they do," he told us, "they're lying." The clergyman suggested that, if it's skulls we were after, we head up the valley to Husavell, to visit Pall (Palli) Gudmundsson, an internationally renowned sculptor. It was Palli's creepy sculptures that we had seen buried in the ice in Surtshellir.

"Don't be surprised if Palli is not at home," the minister told us, "since he spends much of his time in the mountains alone, looking for stones. If he is there, though, don't be surprised if you run into Björk—you know, the strange little thing? The two of them sometimes collaborate."

The village of Husafell is sheltered from the northern winds and crowned by the Eiriksjokull glacier, named after Eirik ___, an outlaw and double amputee who escaped by pulling himself up the glacier with his hands. We pushed the Pajero through the rainy, 50-degree afternoon, passing a shirtless man jogging in the rain just outside town.

We found Palli—alas, no Björk—in an old silo that he uses as his studio, in a meadow strewn with giant, sculpted feet. Thin and wired with childlike energy, he enthusiastically trotted us over to a stone paddock that his ancestor, the clergyman and ghostbuster Snorri Björnsson, constructed in the late 18th century. “Here was where he killed some ghosts,” Palli said, pointing to a half-dozen bug-eyed skulls, which he sculpted as “a ghost memorial” to Snorri.

Palli brought us to a turf-roofed shed housing his “stone harp,” which consists of dozens of flat stones arranged on long boards like a xylophone. He picked up a pair of mallets and plucked out the opening notes to Mozart’s “Eine Kleine Nachtmuzik.”

“It took me twelve years to collect all the stones,” he said. “I go out to the mountains with a tuning fork to ask each stone if it has a tone. One night I was looking for the C-note, and I spent the entire night hiking around, listening to stones. At dawn, I finally found my note.”

We followed Palli into a blueberry patch behind the house, where he crouched over a chunk of red-orange palagonite. “You will recognize this man,” he said, turning the stone over to reveal Grettir’s broad face exploding out of the rock—eyes bulging, forehead rippling, mouth contorting in a fearsome bellow. As an expression of pure rage, this is was the most convincing sculpture I had ever seen.

“I found the stone near here,” Palli said, “where he would have walked. The stone would remember his foot steps. Yes, it’s true that the stones have memory—the stones remember everything.”

Grettir ascended the Geitlandsjokull glacier and turned his steps south-east. He went on until he came to a long and narrow valley in the glacier. He found fair grass-grown banks and hot springs, and it seemed as if volcanic fires had kept the ice from closing in. A little stream flowed down the dale, and the number of sheep seemed to him countless. Grettir named the valley Thorisdal (Thorir’s Valley) after a giant named Thorir, who ruled over the valley. Grettir said that Thorir had daughters with whom he had some play, and that they were very pleased, because few people came there.

Unpacking the truck on the southern flank of the Skjaldbreid volcano, Mike and I realized that the likelihood of having a great four-day hike was far greater than the likelihood of finding an outlaw’s Shangri-La hidden in the notch between the two glaciers, Geitlandsjokull and Thorisjokull. On the map, the high elevations and bunched-up contour lines suggested a rough alpine environment. But Iceland’s landscapes are so protean that maps are rarely the last word on any stretch of topography. The glaciers had advanced substantially since Grettir’s time, so it was possible that the valley, if it ever existed, might have been covered up. Then again, the glaciers were currently in retreat. Could Thoris’s verdant valley be back there somewhere, newly uncovered?

“You won’t find it unless you’re meant to,” Örnólfur had told us, back in Reykjavik.

With four days’ provisions riding on our backs, Mike and I began hiking up Skjaldbreid, a broad, inactive volcano surrounded by an extensive lava field. According to the saga, Grettir left an enticing clue on Skjaldbreid, a marker that would enable him to find his way back to Thorisdal:

Grettir headed down south, reaching the top of Skjaldbreid. There he erected a stone and bored a hole in it. He said that if a man put his eye to the hole he could see into the gully which flows out of Thorisdal.

Nearing the volcano's summit, we stopped to look to the north. If we didn't already know it, we'd never imagine that there was a valley between Geitlandsjokull and Thorisjokull —they appeared as one massive, continuous ice cap. We continued up and across Skjaldbreid's snow fields toward the wide caldera, encircled by a steep wall buttressed by braids of solidified lava resembling the trunks and roots of giant redwood trees. Fifty yards from the wall, Mike stopped in his tracks.

"Tom, you're not going to believe this. It's . . . a hole."

Sure enough, a small circle of sky peeked through the rock rim. We scrambled up the wall to get a closer look.

On the rim of the caldera, we quickly realized how the hole-drilling story must have evolved. Strewn around the rim were hundreds of spyglass-like cylinders of lava created during an eruption as gas bubbles rose through the quickly cooling lava. Some of the pipes were several feet long—although none seemed to point toward the valley. We picked one up and laid it atop the wall. Using the map and our advantage of elevation, we lined it up with what looked like the most promising approach, between two mountains tailing off the ramparts of the Thorisjokull glacier. And we began walking.

The glaciers appeared to be a few miles away, but the lack of humidity in the Icelandic air often confounds the human sense of scale and distance—making everything look much closer than it really is. This problem is mitigated—or complicated, depending on how you look at it—by the fact that, during the Icelandic summer, a hiker pretty much never runs out of light. For the next three days, we would hike 12 to 16 hours a day—and enjoy nearly every minute of it.

We walked across a wind-whipped lava field and forded a river bounded by pyroplastic ash falls and bubbled lava. Following a milky stream into a notch below the Thorisjokull ice cap, we stopped for a snack. In the grocery store in Reykjavik, we had selected some of the most adventurous foods we could find, including *reykur lax*—salmon smoked over sheep dung.

An Icelandic delicacy, Reykur lax is as indelicate as food gets; in fact, the smell of the smoke and its unsavory fuel nearly overpower the taste of the fish. But in the wilderness nearly everything tastes good; we wolfed down half the fish and flipped a 10-kroner coin. Mike, the loser, stashed the stinky leftovers in his pack.

"Did you ever hear of a *hlaup*?" Mike asked, raising his eyes toward the towering ice caps. I hadn't, and I wondered aloud if it was some kind of troll, or ogre, or a physical feature that we might see.

"Let's hope we *don't* see one," Mike said, explaining that a hlaup isn't a spirit or a thing; rather, it's an event: a catastrophic release of meltwater trapped under a glacier. When an ice-damn breaks, a wide torrent of milky water thunders down, wiping out everything it its path.

For two days we walked in the shadow of the massive glacier, across beautiful brown wastelands and muddy lake beds. Dwarfed by the landscapes, we made our way through rivers and shallow lakes, into canyons lined with caves, and through fields of land-locked icebergs—the slow-melting remnants of old glacier tongues. We gained a pass and climbed into the gap between the glaciers. Unable to find sheltered flat spots, we camped in the open and dined on smoked and dried fish. At times, the very ground under our feet seemed alive, and I wondered whether our next gurgling footsteps might sink us toward the center of the earth, or shoot us toward the moon.

"That's what's great about this country," said Mike, who had made five previous trips to Iceland. "It's not just pretty sights; there's incredibly weird stuff everywhere you go."

As we climbed higher the lichen began to assert itself ever more flamboyantly, in arrays of red, yellow, purple, and green. Once, we chanced upon two strips of flamboyant moss, more vivid than neon. Atop the moon-like brown rock, the parallel strips of glowing moss formed an avenue fit for Alice, which we followed up into the gully.

Each day, we watched the sun travel three-quarters of the way around the horizon, not seeing a single cairn or walking on a single trail. By the third morning, we were coming to accept that we weren't going to find the verdant valley that Grettir shared with his friend Thorir. We gained a vantage point and looked out over the valley. There were no grassy banks, no fat sheep, no frisky Amazons—nothing but massive, overpoweringly beautiful landscapes, cradled by the two opposing glaciers—an end-of-the world vista that was reward enough for our efforts.

Reluctantly, we turned on our blistery heels and started heading toward the truck, taking a seemingly more direct route on the way back. Halfway across a broad, exposed ridge, the sky blackened and a cold rain began in earnest. The wind came in hard, snaking over the mountains and accelerating through the valley. This was the worst weather we had seen, and with no windbreaks nearby, it was starting to look like we were in for a rough night. Then . . .

"Tom, you're not going to believe this . . ."

Mike spotted what looked like the silhouette of a hut, on a distant ridge. There was nothing on the map, but we were desperate enough to check it out anyway. By the time we reached what did indeed turn out to be a large hut, we were wet and chilled to the marrow. The door was locked.

We boosted ourselves up to the porch and peered through double-insulated window glass at a warm and dry fantasy world, outfitted with everything we lacked: padded bunk beds, a wind-free kitchen, even booze. Judging by the photos on the walls, it was some kind of winter clubhouse for a snowmobile club.

After considering the circumstances—wind, cold rain, exhaustion—and taking another look through the glass, we . . . well, we committed what North American police refer to as a "B & E." Using a combination of pocket-knife tools and tent poles, we managed to spring a window lock open, without damaging it. Then we climbed inside. We hung our clothes to dry, cooked a big meal, and slept the sleep of sheltered outlaws.

In the morning, we swept up and re-secured the window, and left our haven just as we had found it. Almost. Just before I pulled the locked door shut, I tucked the equivalent of $30 in the guest book and composed a short poem thanking the snowmobilers for their inadvertent hospitality. Then we signed it . . .*"Yours truly, Grettir & Thorir."*

Grettir went boldly on and let his hands sweep over the property of the smaller cultivators. He traveled on all the way to Vatnsfjord and spent many nights in a sheep shelter, and completely relaxed his guard.

We followed Grettir's path through the Westfjords on bicycles, taking advantage of sunshine that stayed with us for a remarkable (by Icelandic standards) two days.

The remote Westfjords region was well-populated in Medieval times, but in the past century, hundreds of farms have failed and vast tracts of land have reverted to the wolves and birds. The Westfjords' nearly deserted dirt roads parallel some of the loneliest and most stunning stretches of coastline in Iceland.

Zigzagging along the convoluted coast, we stopped often to pick blueberries and crowberries, and to climb on abandoned Viking-style fishing boats. At the side of Mjóifjord, we chanced upon a hot spring and made instant soup in the surprisingly sulfur-free water. Then we jumped into the steaming pool and soaked our sore biking-muscles, breathing in a fresh breeze and looking out over the blue fjord, at peace in the still air.

Farther down the road, we stopped to ask a farmer to direct us to the spot where a band of 30 farmers who threw themselves atop Grettir as he slept. Fed up with the great brute who had shattered their peace, the small-holders managed to get ropes around the bucking, kicking giant.

Following the farmer's directions, I pedaled up the hill behind his house, resolving to arrive at Grettir's capture-spot via mountain bike. Bad idea.

Mike, wisely, wanted nothing to do with this stunt, so I spent most of the afternoon alone, sinking in the trail-less bog, cursing and throwing the bike from tussock to tussock. Eventually, I came to the hilltop lake where the hulking Grettir, tied down, watched as the farmers built a gallows for him. He was saved with the arrival of a local leader named Thorbjorg the Stout, "a woman of firm character and foresight."

"Whatever drove you to want to come here and cause trouble to my people, Grettir?" Thorbjorg asked him.

"I had to be somewhere," Grettir replied.

From the lake, I headed north toward Vatnsfjord to meet up with Mike, and encountered a briar patch as tall as I am. I battled the thicket for another two hours, tossing the bike over the brush and then throwing my body through the prickers. Finally, I emerged into a boggy, steep downhill and jumped on the bike.

I careened down the mountain, springing from one spongy tuft to the next in a wild ride that lasted about 10 seconds; it ended when I flew over the handlebars.

Grettir traveled all the way to Iceland's easternmost fjords, appealing for support among all the influential men. Although none would take him in, many offered him good advice.

As I drove, Mike followed our route in the *Visitors Key to Iceland*, a locally published guide with comprehensive details about Iceland's sights. Every landmark seemed to have a story behind it—usually involving an outlaw, an elf, or a troll.

Here was a hot spring where an outlaw stopped to boil a stolen sheep; over there was the hill where Grettir's head was briefly buried. Here, at the side of the road, was a large cloven rock that had been inhabited by elves, who disrupted road work when the rock was moved in 1995. (According to a road department spokesman whom I spoke with later, the work continued "uneventfully" after the a medium to struck a deal with the elves.)

Few cultures so fully inhabit the landscape in which they live, or so fully embrace their communal history. In the shadow of the Snaefellsjökull glacier (which Jules Verne identified as the gateway to the center of the earth), we listened while a wide-eyed innkeeper talked of the many races of *Älfar* (elves), and *Huldufolk* (hidden people) in the nearby rocks.

Moving east again, we stopped at Berserkjahraun (Berserks' Lava), to hike through a man-made cut through the center of a jumbled lava field. According to Eyrbyggja Saga, two fearsome berzerks—"bear-shirted" warriors who whipped themselves into animal-like tantrums when doing battle—cut the trail, in exchange for the daughter of a farmer named Killer-Styrr. When they had finished, Killer-Styrr couldn't bear to keep his side of the bargain, so he tempted them into his bathhouse, then poured hot water over them and felled them with his spear as they tried to escape.

We trekked through the Kerlingarfjöll ("old woman") Mountains, which are the most Alpine of Iceland's ranges, and among the most mysterious. Until the 1850s, Icelanders believed that they were inhabited by vicious outlaws, and the mountains remained unexplored. Now, a ski area has sprung up near the western edge of the range. We pushed in deeper, and spent a day hiking among the jagged peaks, hopping over steaming streams and soaking in hot springs.

We stopped several times to attempt to lift a few of the many mapped *Grettishaf*, rocks supposedly lifted by Grettir. Some seemed within the realm of possibility—though we never so much as budged one—while others, like the boulder in the back paddock at Bjarg, were as big as a New York apartment.

We stopped to fish in Arnarvatn (Eagle Lake) Moor. One of Iceland's "innumerables," the moor has more lakes, supposedly, than can be counted. Below a line of cairns staring down from a ridge, I tossed in a line, getting the attention of a dozen swans on summer vacation from England.

From my position on a small tongue of land jutting into the lake, I watched a beam of light squeeze through a gap in the clouds and sweep across the water, spotlighting islands, swans, and then me—fishing in the very spot where Grettir had tried his luck a thousand years ago. Basking in that momentary circle of warm light, I took it as something more than a coincidence that the sunbeam had targeted me, at that place and that time. For a few moments, at least, it was easy to believe that strings were being pulled somewhere, that the elements had conspired to connect me and my unseen guide, casting across the centuries.

Traveling in disguise and pursued by his arch-enemy, Thorir of Gard, Grettir rode west toward Skagafjord.

With the help of the tourist board, we located a group of horse enthusiasts who were moving a herd of 21 horses across Trollaskagi, a peninsula formed of a gnarly maze of mountains. With its relatively mild weather and majestic scenery, Trollaskagi is superlative riding and trekking country.

Our group included a biologist, a veterinarian, a school principal, and a historian named Gunnar Rögnvaldsson. As we saddled up at an abandoned farm at the end of a valley northeast of Akureyri, Gunnar previewed our route.

"We'll climb over that pass," he said, pointing up at a snow-draped saddle to the west, "then we'll come across through Heljardalsheidi [Hell's Heath], and down into Heljardalur [Hell's Valley]. There are some wild horses there, and if they decide to mix it up with our horses, we could get some action."

The Icelandic horse is extremely pure-blooded—no horse has been imported into Iceland for more than 800 years—and bred for long-distance backcountry riding. Unique among the world's horses, these low, sturdy beasts have a unique "fifth gait," a smooth running-walk called the *tölt*. This easy-rider trot virtually eliminates the jarring that keeps many people—men, especially—off horses. Once we mastered the art of getting the horses to tölt—essentially, you send a mixed message by simultaneously kicking and holding the reigns up and back—riding became pure pleasure.

As we set off toward the pass, I asked Gunnar why the peninsula is called Trollaskagi ("troll's peninsula [FC]"). "Well, look at it," he said. "It's big and rough; the scale itself is inhuman. Remember that in Iceland, our trolls are not tiny, as Americans think of trolls. They are more like ogres—huge, horrible things. The mountains and valleys here are not tidy—they look like they've been dug out by the hands of giant trolls!"

We moved steadily through the zigzagging, treeless green mountains, then up over the snow-packed pass. On the far side we stopped at a crippled stone corral and ate some smoked trout, washing it down with jolts of homemade brandy. As we continued westward toward Holar, the site of Iceland's medieval bishopric, the riders sang a traditional song, "In Sprengasandur" Riden Riden" ("Ride, Ride"), in a rhythm similar to "Rawhide."

Riden riden riden

Let's ride and ride by the light of the day
And let's get home by evening
Riden riden riden
The queen of elves is bridling her horse
And we don't want to meet her

As we approached Heljardalur, a herd of about 50 wild horses gave chase, and we set our mounts into a gallop, thundering across the valley. We made it through the gate and got it closed as the wild horses stormed up behind us.

"There is an island in Skagafjord called Drangey," Gudmund told Grettir. "It is a good place to mount a defense, because it can only be ascended by ladder. Once you reach it there is no chance of anyone overcoming you there with arms or trickery, so long as you guard the ladder well."

Jón first rowed out to Drangey with his father in 1942, at the age of 12. Although Iceland now has one of the highest standards of living in the world, it was, until the end of World War II, a hard-luck, nearly roadless country where horses and boats were the only means of getting around. Each springtime, facing starvation, the farmers around Skagafjord ventured to Drangey to collect bird eggs and hunt puffins.

Jón's father taught him how to rappel down Drangey's 558-foot cliffs and fill his sack with eggs. The work was difficult and dangerous, and as Iceland became more affluent, most of the farmers were happy to stop coming to Drangey. But Jón and his sons built a series of ladders and cables to ease access to the island's grassy summit, and Jón came to be known, informally, as the Earl of Drangey.

Mike and I made the trip to Drangey twice—once in Jón's boat, the *New Viking*, and once in sea kayaks. We launched the kayaks from Reykir, on a beach littered with whale bones and driftwood from Siberia. Past the surf, we made our way steadily toward Drangey's stark silhouette, haloed in the sun's deep-orange light. For a little more than an hour, we paddled eye-to-eye with minke whales, puffins, and quite a few dolphins. As we closed on Drangey's ramparts, we could see seals flopping around on the rocks. We paddled toward a rock pinnacle, whitewashed with guano, which guards Drangey's south flank.

"The rock is called Kerling [crone]," Jón had told us earlier. "She is the oldest and tallest woman in Skagafjord—and the hardest to get on top of!"

The sea birds' laughter grew louder as we passed Kerling, reaching a hysterical, mocking pitch. The birds—puffins, fulmars, razorbills, skuas, guillemots, gulls, and terns—swarm Drangey in unimaginable numbers, adding even more drama to the island, which rears out of the sea with a chilling determination. Drangey is, quite simply, one of the creepiest, most imposing places on earth.

It is also, according to Icelanders, a bastion of wickedness, with an evil reputation that has been reinforced by a millennium of fatal disasters. Earlier, Jón had showed us the rocks where his neighbor perished while rappelling for eggs, and the rocks where Jón himself was pinned down by a storm that seemed to arise from nowhere, swamping his boat. At the northern extremity, eight fishing boats were crushed in 1655 when the cliff under which they were sheltering collapsed, during an earthquake.

On the island's western spur, contrasting colors of rock form the shape of a cross called Heidnaberg—"Heathen Rock." Earlier, Jón had told us how the cross got its seemingly ironic name.

"Two hundred years after Grettir, the bishop was traveling around the country, blessing all the rocks in Iceland. He came to bless Drangey, but when the egg-collectors lowered him down to bless the cross shape, a red hand burst out of the rock. The rope was fraying. A voice told him, 'You shall not bless more, Father Gudmunder! You have removed evil elsewhere, but the evil things need a place to stay also. Drangey shall be our place!'"

The egg-collectors frantically hauled the bishop up by the fraying rope, and he quickly departed from the island, leaving Drangey's northeastern section as the last unblessed rocks in Iceland.

Eight hundred years later, in the summer of 2000, Jón brought the current bishop of Iceland out to Drangey in the New Viking. Once he had finished showing the entourage around the island, Jón asked the bishop if he would venture to bless Heathen Rock, and thus complete the Christianization of Iceland's rocks.

"He said he had been thinking about this question," Jón said, "because he knew someone would ask. But he said that perhaps it was best to leave them alone. He said, 'If the evil things want this place, then'"—Jón's voice quivers—"'then let them keep this place.'"

One night the fire went out, and Grettir decided to swim to Reykir, to fetch fire from the nearest farmer. He smote the water bravely, and had the current with him as he swam towards shore, reaching Reykir after sunset. There he bathed in a warm spring.

Olympic-caliber athletes have duplicated Grettir's four-mile swim across the freezing fjord several times in the late 20th century. But for Mike and I, our round-trip kayak crossing was challenge enough. We didn't have Grettir's luck with the wind, and by the time we finished pulling the boats out of the surf at Reykir, we were in need of a good warm-up.

With the kayaks beached, we walked over to the hot pool—now called Grettislaug—and jumped in. Within a few minutes, we were joined by Jón's nephew, Steinn, and a German couple camping nearby. The Germans brought over a round of weissbier, and we sat back against the submerged stones, taking in a misty panorama of fjord, mountain, and sky.

The talk got around to a scene in the saga, in which a farm maiden encountered Grettir lying naked on the farmhouse floor, the morning after his swim. This scene—which the saga goes on to describe in further spicy detail—took less than five miles from Jón's farmhouse.

According to the saga, Grettir didn't have any surviving offspring. But when we met Jón's son Viggo, on our second trip to Drangey, we had to wonder if some of the strongman's genes hadn't been handed down that day

Viggo, whose last name is Jonsson — "Jón's son," in the Icelandic tradition — is a monster of a man, a true Viking. He cuts an imposing figure in his blue coveralls—"my puffin-hunting outfit"—but like the rest of Jón's 10 children, he has a quick smile and a gentle sense of humor.

During the puffin-hunting season, Viggo often sleeps atop the island in the turf-roofed hut the family built. Mike and I pitched our tents next to the hut and spent the night with Viggo and a few of his friends, eating roasted lamb and drinking schnapps in the cool mist. During the festivities, Viggo asked us if we'd like to accompany him on the next day's puffin hunt, on Drangey's western spur.

In the morning we followed him from the island's summit down along a series of tenuous hand-holds. Then we climbed up a swinging chain ladder, and back down a precariously steep meadow pocked with puffin burrows. We climbed past hundreds of juvenile fulmars, still fuzzy and flightless in mid-summer. In a curious defense mechanism, the birds projectile-puked their partially digested food at us.

At the edge of the cliff, Viggo crouched in the grass with his net, mounted on a 12-foot pole. When a puffin flew within range, Viggo arced the net up swiftly and snared the bright-beaked bird, which flapped helplessly in the webbing until Viggo removed it. With a quick turn of the wrist—krrriick—he snapped its neck.

"I think it is better than being a chicken, at least," Viggo said, setting the bird in the grass. "Most chickens stay in jails the whole lifetime. This is a more noble way, yaw?"

Within a few hours, Viggo had laid a couple of hundred birds out to cool on a shady ledge. In the four-week puffin-hunting season, the family catches up to 9,000 of the birds, which they sell to individuals and restaurants for about a dollar apiece. Mike and I helped Viggo bag the birds, then we climbed back to Drangey's main summit, where Jón sat at the nub of a jagged rectangle of half-buried stones.

"When Grettir had been an outlaw for 19 years, the law speaker said that his sentence could be lifted the next year, because no man should be an outlaw for more than 20 years—and besides, they thought it was unwise to keep in outlawry a man who is capable of causing so much trouble. But some local farmers had left some sheep atop Drangey, and they kept coming in their boats below the cliffs, trying to convince Grettir to leave. Grettir yelled down from up here, and said, 'I shall not leave unless I am dragged away dead.'

"One particularly angry farmer was named Thorbjorn Hook. He asked his foster mother, Thurid the Crone, to use sorcery against Grettir, even though Iceland was now a Christian nation. She took a tree stump and carved runes into the root, then smeared it with her blood. Then she set the wood drifting toward Drangey.

“When Grettir tried to chop it for the fire, the axe bounced off and sank into his thigh. It was a deep wound, and it soon became infected. Grettir felt his strength draining. A few nights later, the ladders were left down, and Hook’s men climbed to the top of the island. They stormed the hut and tore the roof off it. Grettir was close to death and could barely rise from the bed, but it was quite a fight. Finally, they subdued him, and with Grettir’s own sword, Hook cut off Grettir’s head.

“And so, the strongest man who ever lived in Iceland was taken down by sorcery, and only a year before he was to be pardoned.”

On Drangey’s summit, the wind had tapered off, and the sun, a deep orange ball, was sliding slowly toward the northern horizon. Jón put his hat back on his head and stood up stiffly, hands on knees.

“Well,” he said, “I won’t bore you with any more of my babble. I will go home now and see if there is any coffee on the table.”

Mike and I rose from the stones on which we’d been sitting. Grettir, our unseen guide, was dead, and our trip was winding down. We hadn’t managed to go everywhere he had gone, but we had managed to explore some of the most adventurous corners of his country—and to grasp something of the character of Iceland, and the Icelanders themselves.

Mike had one final question: Grettir’s hut, where the final battle took place—where was it?

Jón turned around, surprised. “I did not tell you? It was right here—these stones where we have been sitting and talking, all this time.”

I experienced a frisson of realization: To think that these stones were here that day—that they were here all along, carried through the seasons and shaped by the forces that shaped Iceland, the same forces that shaped the fates and fortunes of the Icelanders themselves.

Our visit is short, our memories easily scattered to the wind. But the stones were here all along—and the stones remember everything.