Full Detailed Itinerary - Iceland: Birding and Whale Watching in the Land of Fire and Ice

Day 1: Arrival in Reyjavik (Keflavik International Airport). Flight to Akureyri and transfer to Myvatn

After meeting at Reykjavik airport this morning, we will take a short and scenic domestic flight over volcanoes and lava fields to the northern town of Akureyri, which sits just below the Arctic Circle. Iceland has some of the best whale-watching anywhere in the world, and Akureyri is one of the main hubs for this activity. We'll take a boat trip to the outer fjord where we hope to have breath-taking encounters with Humpback and Minke Whales, as well as the charismatic White-beaked Dolphin and our first encounters with alcids from the nearby breeding colonies. After our whale watch, we'll make the short journey inland to one of Iceland's premier birding hotspots, Lake Myvatn. Along the way we'll encounter our first of many tame Meadow Pipits and Redwing, as well as an abundance of breeding shorebirds including, European Golden Plover, European Oystercatcher, Common Snipe, and Common Redshank, and we'll comb the shorelines for Dunlin and Purple Sandpiper. Arctic Fox is rare in Iceland, but we will keep our eyes peeled for this miniature canid as they are seen from time to time on this tour. Rock Ptarmigan may be another early highlight, sitting atop a volcanic tuff. We'll arrive in Myvatn by evening to settle into our base for the next three nights. The days are almost 24-hours long here, so there may still be time to explore the local area this evening if the group is not too tired!

Days 2-3: Myvatn & Husavik

We'll spend two full days in the northeast corner of Iceland, the first of which we'll focus on Lake Myvatn itself. Our main goals will be to search the many rivers for stunning Harlequin Ducks, scour the streams and lakes for Barrow's Goldeneyes, and keep our eyes open for a Gyrfalcon hunting on the wing. Throughout the day we will be blown away by the numbers of wildfowl around this recently formed lake, and we hope to see stunning Horned Grebes, Red-necked Phalaropes, Common Mergansers, Common and Red-throated loons, and a bounty of shorebirds, all in their finest breeding refinery and often incredibly approachable. We will also see the amazing geological features of the Myvatyn area, the steaming fumeroles of Krafla, the boiling mudpots of the Hverir geothermal field, the Viti explosion crater and the Dimmuborgir 'Dark Castles' formations. The second of these days will be used to take further advantage of Iceland's superb whale-watching. We will make our way the short distance to the famous town of Husavik. Here we will board a local whale-watching boat and venture a short distance out to sea in search of more cetaceans. Minke Whales are regular here at this time of year, and although this area regularly produces the incomprehensible Blue Whale, we would still be lucky to encounter one. An excellent supporting cast can include Humpback Whales, White-beaked Dolphins, Harbor Porpoises, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gulls, and yet more Red-necked Phalaropes. Once back on dry land we'll make our way back to Myvatn by way of the superb Godafoss Waterfall and spend the afternoon trying to find any missing targets, perhaps including Gyrfalcon and Arctic Fox. These two nights will also be in the Myvatn area.

Day 4: Myvatn to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Given the vastness of Iceland, one primarily travel day is needed. We'll make our way west to the scenic, but difficult to pronounce Snæfellsnes Peninsula. We'll of course stop several times along the way for any birds we encounter, which may include Rock Ptarmigan, White-tailed Eagle, more Horned Grebes, and Red-throated and Common Loons. Some years, there is at least one immaculate male King Eider spending the summer with its Common cousins on the northern coast, and we'll make a special effort to see it if this is the case. Our base on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula will be the beautiful Grundarfjörður, famous for its towering and much-photographed landmark mountain. We'll likely spend the afternoon in the local area, taking advantage of photo opportunities with the mountain, waterfalls and local wildlife, all while keeping an eye on the sea, hoping for one of the area's regular pods of Orca. The next two nights will be spent in Grundarfjörður.

Day 5: Snæfellsnes Peninsula

We'll spend the entire day on the peninsula, with two primary goals. The first will be a visit to some local seabird cliffs, which are rammed full of both Common and Thick-billed Murres, Razorbill but headline with the stunning Atlantic Puffin. Our other main endeavor today will be another whale watching trip. The beauty of whale watching in Iceland is that each hub has its own specialties. Here in the west we'll search for the enigmatic Orca, and again if we are extremely lucky perhaps the bizarre Sperm Whale, while we also stand a chance of seeing Fin, Sei or even Blue Whales. Seabird diversity is low in the high Atlantic, but Manx, Sooty and perhaps Great Shearwaters could also be seen to compliment our haul of cetaceans. Another night will be spent in Grundarfjörður.

Day 6: Snæfellsnes Peninsula to Keflavik

Today we'll spend a long day being "regular" tourists and undertaking the famed "Golden Circle". We'll leave Grundarfjörður early and travel first to Thingvellir National Park, which is home to Iceland's largest lake, and the first home of the world's longest functioning parliament. Perhaps most impressive here though are the visible rifts where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge passes through Iceland, allowing us to look down into the gap between two major tectonic plates. Onwards, we'll make our way to the two local, famous, and impressive geysers, known as Strokkur and the imaginatively-named 'Geysir' (in fact it is this blower that gave all others around the planet their name), that sit in a thermally-active valley. After admiring the staggering Gullfoss Waterfall, we'll make a visit to the stunning Kerid Crater, the water-filled caldera of an ancient volcano that has walls of red, green, blue and yellow. Eventually we'll make our way to our final hotel on the Keflavik peninsula southwest of Reykjavik, where we can make an evening trip to the peninsula in search of yet more birds, or for those that wish, to visit the famous Blue Lagoon thermal baths (optional). The night will be spent in Keflavik near the international airport, but if folks wish they can take the Skybus into Reykjavic, Iceland's fascinating capital, located right at the top of the World, (it is the most northerly capital of an sovereign state), with its well-deserved reputation as the greenest, cleanest, and safest city in the world.

Day 7: Departure from Reyjavik (Keflavik International Airport)

There should be time to have one final search of the peninsula for alcids, shorebirds, gulls, before making our way to the airport to board our flights home.

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