

PM: Idyllic Iceland

By Polly Mann

I became interested in Iceland during World War II when the husband of a close friend was stationed at a military base near Reykjavik. (The U.S. maintained a military base and naval station in Iceland until 2006.) No American soldier could go into Reykjavik without written authority from his commanding officer. The Icelandic government was very protective of young Icelandic women who might have been attracted to the soldiers and kept the men isolated.

My next connection to Iceland was the arrival of some Icelandic women in the Twin Cities? all belonging to Kvinnalista, a women's political party. One was also a member of the parliament. They gave me a beautiful white and lavender nylon scarf with the word "Kvinnalista" on it in large letters. Iceland's population then was 250,000; today it's 320,000, a little better than half that of the state of Wyoming.

So it was with interest that I read recently that violent crime is extremely rare in Iceland. According to the 2011 Global Study on Homicide by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Iceland's homicide rate from 1999 to 2009 never went above 1.8 per 100,000 in any given year. The U.S. had homicide rates between 5.0 and 5.8 per 100,000 during that same stretch. In 2009 Brazil had 43,909 homicides; Denmark had 47 homicides; the United Kingdom had 724 homicides; and the U.S. had 15,241. A question that follows is "how come?" How come Iceland has so few homicides?



Iceland's Blue Lagoon. Water from the ground near a lava flow is used to run turbines that generate electricity for consumption. After passing through the turbines, the steam and hot water is then used to provide heat for a municipal water-heating

system. The mineral-rich water is subsequently fed into a man-made lagoon for recreational and medicinal users to bathe in.

Photo: National Geographic

A U.S. law student from Eveleth, Minnesota did research on the issue which was published in *The Moral Atheist* of March-April 2014. He interviewed government officials, lawyers, journalists and random citizens. His conclusion, in short was “there is virtually no difference among upper, upper middle and lower classes in Iceland. And with that, tension between economic classes is non-existent.” A study done by a University of Missouri student found that only 1.1% of Icelanders identified themselves as upper class, while 1.5% identified as lower class. The remaining 97% identified themselves as upper-middle class, lower-middle class, or working class.

Crimes in Iceland usually do not involve guns though there are approximately 90,000 guns in the country. However, owning a gun requires a medical examination and a written test. Police are unarmed. There is no standing army.* The usage of hard drugs is low.

In terms of health, life expectancy at birth in Iceland is 82 years, two years higher than the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 80 years. Life expectancy for women is 84 years, compared with 81 for men. Voter turnout, a measure of public trust in government and of citizens’ participation in the political process, was 85% during recent elections; among the highest polled by the OECD where the average is 72%. In general, Icelanders are more satisfied with their lives than the OECD average, with 87% of people saying they have more positive experiences in an average day (feelings of rest, pride in accomplishment, enjoyment, etc) than negative ones (pain, worry, sadness, boredom, etc). Does all this explain the low crime rate? I would think so.

* Iceland joined NATO in 1949 with the understanding that it would not establish a standing army and it still doesn’t have one. The Icelandic Coast Guard and Air Defense under it maintain mainly protection and rescue for its fishing industry. NATO, “Members and Accession,” nato.org; Landhelgisgæsla Íslands, “Iceland Coast Guard,” www.lhg.is/english

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