

# The Icelandic diaspora: from the Askja Caldera to Canada and beyond

By John Bechtel  
Freelance writer

In 1785, there were maybe 47,000 people in all of Iceland. One hundred years later, there were 2000 Icelanders in the province of Manitoba, in an area they called Gimli, in Icelandic—a “place protected from fire”, a paradise of sorts, a ‘Promised Land’ of their own. The name is appropriate enough, considering their reason for being there. They were, quite literally, running from fire.

## The Askja Caldera

Things were not going well in Iceland in the late 19th century. There had been several years in succession of nasty weather, crop failures, losses

of herds, and even starvation. Danish monopolists had a choke hold on the economy of Iceland from afar, and local opportunists were busy lining their pockets. Then, as if that wasn't enough,

the Askja Caldera in the central highlands of Iceland massively erupted, beginning on March 29, 1875, raining smoke, ash, and lethal debris all over the island. (Continued on page 00)



Times were tough, and turf houses became home for a number of icelanders during the 19th century.



Surrounded by the Dyngjufjöll mountains, the Askja Caldera was virtually unknown until the destructive 1875 eruption, which spewed heavy ashfall, killing livestock and triggering a wave of emigration out of Iceland. Viti crater in foreground.



19th century German “Charte” of Iceland, dated 1815.



Circa 1900, vintage photo of “Hraun. Styr’s home” in Iceland.



A mail train around 1900, making great use of sturdy Iceland horses.



TOUGH TIMES IN IRELAND, 1800-1900.

### LIVING CONDITIONS:

Families lived in houses made with turf roofs and wooden walls, providing no warmth during Iceland’s winters. A lack of timber also meant there was no fire to keep warm (except in the kitchen, where the stove was mostly fueled with sheep manure), making people more susceptible to illness and disease.

### WORKING LIFE:

The majority of Icelanders were farmers or fishermen because manual labor was the only choice they had, as they were too poor to afford an education. Those who could afford it generally did receive an education and went into professions such as medicine, law or education. As it is now, literature was very important at that time in Iceland.

### DISEASE:

Turf houses provided the perfect breeding ground for a typhus epidemic in 1810, that killed many Icelanders living in areas exposed to rat feces, fleas or other rodents. A series of devastating measles epidemics also swept through many communities, killing scores more people.



An Allan Line poster offering an “escape” to North America for many Icelanders.

(Continued from Page 00)

## The Allan Line

Conveniently, a Canadian company called the Montreal Ocean Steamship Company, later shortened to the Allan Line, had an agent in Iceland at the time, trying to hustle emigrant Icelanders to relocate to Canada, where the Canadian government was promising free farmland. With horrendous weather at home, no food, the sun obscured by smoke, and cinders raining from the sky, hundreds of Icelanders needed no further convincing, and hurriedly sold their homes, threw a few clothes in a bag and headed for the docks.

The boats were crowded, with non-existent sanitation or privacy. Some got sick, and some died, especially children and the elderly. The tickets were expensive and in high demand, and if there wasn't enough money for all, some in the family were left behind. As difficult as it had to be to go, the ultimate blow was being disowned as traitors by some friends and family who remained behind in Iceland.

## The Icelanders wish list

However, where to go, specifically? Canada is a huge place. The only Icelanders in North America at that time were the few who had converted to Mormonism a few decades before and moved to Utah in the U.S. But these new emigrants just wanted good land where they could grow grain and raise livestock.



PHOTO: FREDRIK HOLM

**Modern-day volcano disrupting the Iceland landscape, much as it did in the 1800s—a justifiable reason for leaving, in the eyes of many emigrants.**

They preferred to live among themselves, in isolation. It helps to remember that Iceland, in the very beginning, was the largest habitable settlement on the globe with no history of prior, primitive tribes existing there. Though archaeological evidence indicates Gaelic monks from Ireland, known as papar according to sagas, may have settled there earlier, when the first Vikings arrived in Iceland in the 9th century. Recorded settlement dates back to that time—the time of the Vikings. However, no pre-existing natives were around to teach the

newcomers how to adapt and survive in such a hostile environment.

Based on some educated guesswork, some believe the population of Iceland during the Commonwealth period of 1100 C.E., was about 75,000. All human habitation on the island was rural, and the Icelanders did not congregate in hamlets or villages, but spread out in isolated farms with considerable distance between them.

**Seven hundred years later, while the populations of Norway and Sweden had doubled or tripled, Iceland's population decreased to about 47,000! There are many reasons for this, including putting their farms and livestock too close to the volcanos, soil depletion, and other factors resulting in thousands of abandoned settlements. This was the heritage and the frame of reference of the Icelanders emigrating to North America. They wanted lots of space!**

They wanted somewhere with no history of natural disasters! Life in their Iceland had always been life on the edge, with a wary eye on the elements of nature: extreme climate change, drift ice, glacier movements, soil erosion, volcanic eruptions, glacier bursts (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g75-kFMnCXg> for a recent video of one), and earthquakes.

They wanted more healthful living. Enough with the Black Plague and leprosy! They wanted clean air and clean water and perhaps a warmer climate.

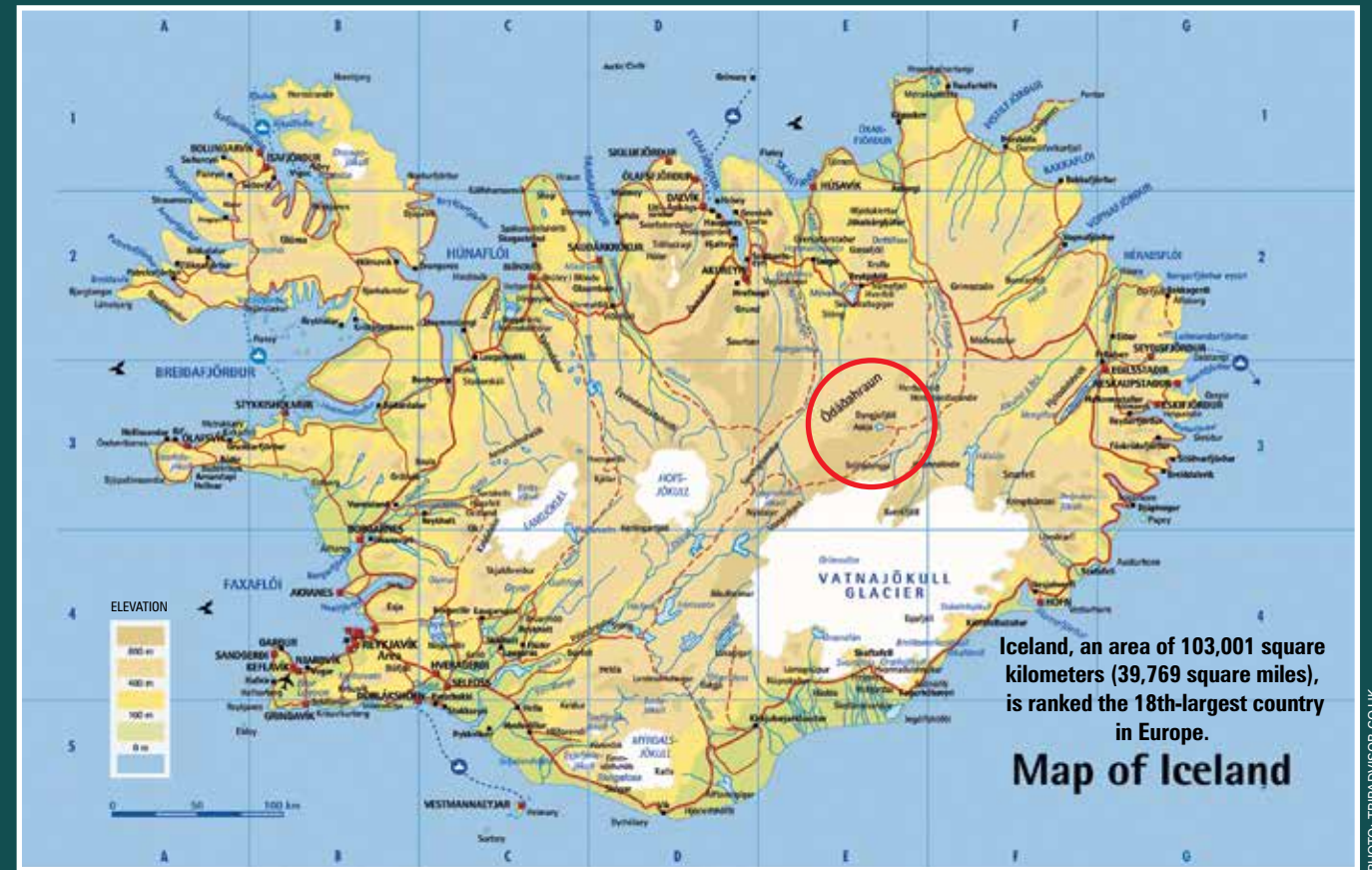
## Paradise gained . . .

Fellow Icelander, Sigtryggur Jonasson, had an answer for them. He had traveled to Manitoba, the easternmost Great Plains province of Canada, and, in 1872, scouted an ideal location for an Icelandic colony, a place that by their present standards would seem like paradise.

Their first settlement would be called Gimli, Manitoba, a part of a greater area called New Iceland. About 200 followed Jonasson to North America.

## . . . and paradise lost

Well, paradise it was not. Without being warmed by the Atlantic Ocean,



Iceland, an area of 103,001 square kilometers (39,769 square miles), is ranked the 18th-largest country in Europe.

## Map of Iceland

PHOTO: TRIPADVISOR.CO.UK

the weather was decidedly colder than in Iceland. They had to leave all their possessions behind, including their homes and cattle. Most, that first winter, lived in tents or holes they dug in the ground, with the bitterly-cold wind and snow blowing in from Lake Winnipeg, and no time to grow and store crops.

Thirty-five Iceland immigrants died from scurvy and exposure. However, there was no looking back. They had made their choice. They got busy, and within nine days of landing, they wrote the Canadian authorities requesting permission to start a school. Without waiting for a response, they began enrolling students. By the following summer, their little community had swelled to 2,000 inhabitants.

Unfortunately, with the grand influx came disease in the form of smallpox. In 1876 it was not uncommon for an Icelandic farmer to come in from the field, tired but flushed with purpose, only to find members of his family sick or already dead. The disease spread from the unvaccinated settlers to the Cree Indian tribes along the river. The

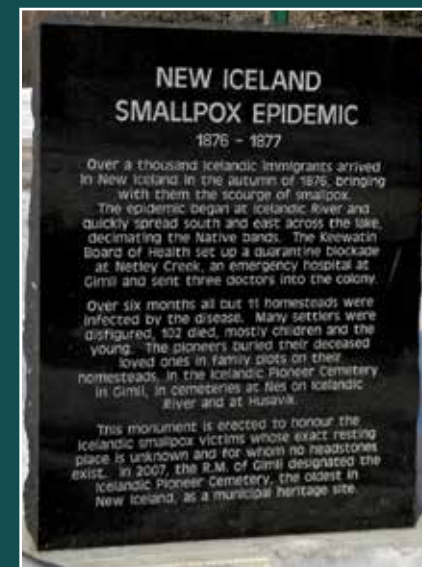


PHOTO: WAYMAKING.COM

**Erected in 2007, the Gimli, Manitoba, memorial monument is dedicated to the smallpox victims who perished during the epidemic in 1876-1877. Over a six month period, all but 11 homesteads were infected by the disease.**

settlement was quarantined, and before it was lifted in 1877, an estimated 500 perished. (Continued on page 00)

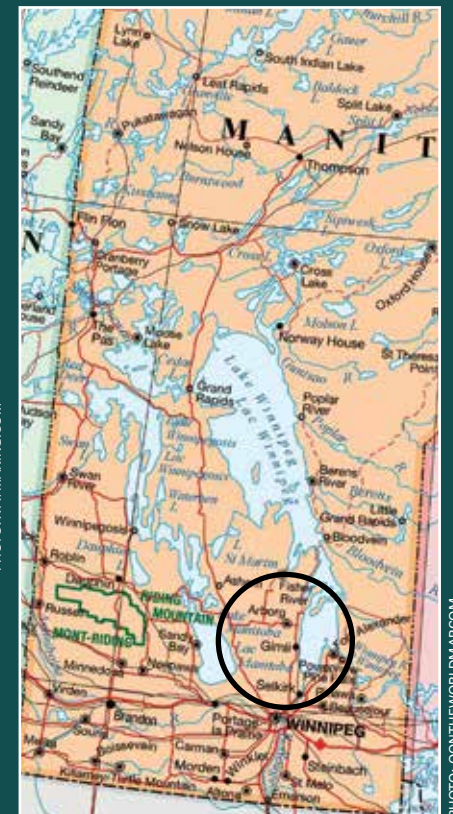


PHOTO: OONTHROWORLDWAP.COM

**Manitoba, Canada, with location of Gimli, in an area called New Iceland.**

(Continued from page 00)

## We're all Canadians now

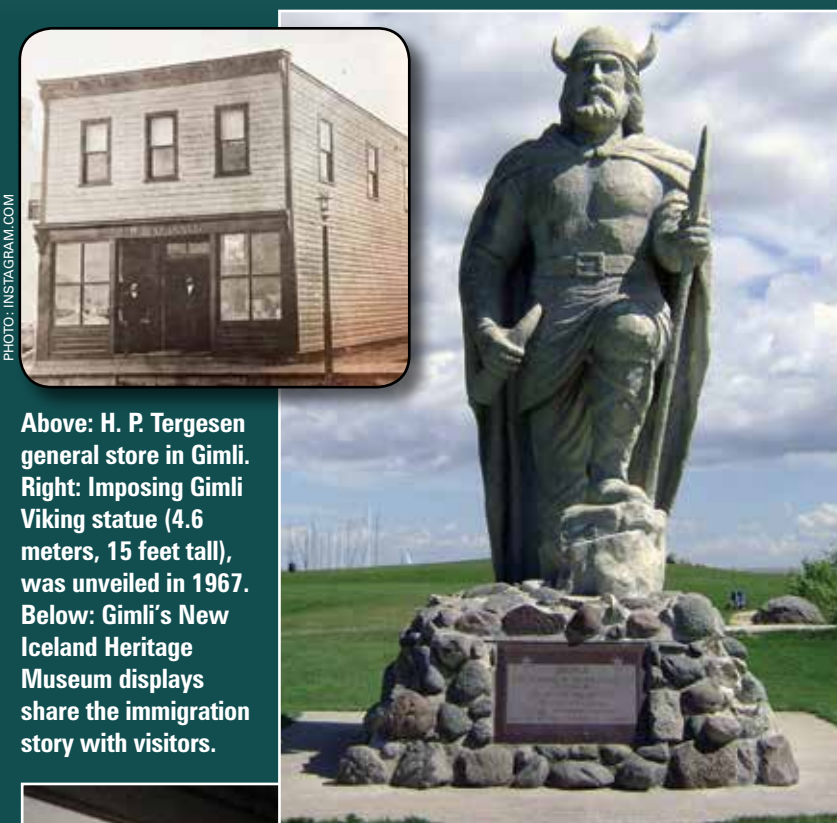
By 1881, many of the remaining colonists of New Iceland had abandoned the settlement—some to go south to Winnipeg, and others to go further north along the Icelandic River. Some crossed the border to settle in the Dakotas of the U.S. The community of New Iceland slowly crawled back to its former strength as the Icelanders found employment in the nascent industries of fishing and freight, logging and lumbering, and as word continued to spread, even touring. For a time, local euphoria may have caused some to think of their growing community as the beginning of a new nation, a second Iceland, and in 1878, they even created their own Constitution. However, Manitoba expanded to encompass New Iceland, and they all became Canadians.

## Gimli, Manitoba

In 1899, Hans Peter Tergesen opened Tergesen's Store, a large general store. Run by his descendants, it is still open for business today. The Canadian Pacific Railway began operations through Gimli in 1906, opening the door for tourism. By the 1930s, vacation real estate began replacing farmland along the southern edge of Lake Winnipeg.

Today, there are approximately 100,000 persons of Icelandic descent in Canada, the highest concentration of Icelanders outside of Iceland. There are another 40,000 of Icelandic descent in the U.S. During the period from the 1870s to 1914, about one fifth of the total population of Iceland moved to North America. The last great wave of Icelandic immigration into North America was during and after World War II, when local girls married GIs stationed in Iceland.

Even though there are large concentrations of Icelanders in British Columbia (26,000); Alberta (20,000); and Ontario (13,000); the largest of all is still in Manitoba (37,000). Gimli, Manitoba remains the symbolic heart of the Canadian Icelandic population, and the *Icelandic Festival of Manitoba* has been held in Gimli since 1932. All of this began with the eruption of a volcano back in Iceland in 1875.



Above: H. P. Tergesen general store in Gimli. Right: Imposing Gimli Viking statue (4.6 meters, 15 feet tall), was unveiled in 1967. Below: Gimli's New Iceland Heritage Museum displays share the immigration story with visitors.



Viking battle, one of a number of exciting events at the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, held in Gimli in July, this year. For information on 2020 Festival events, vendors, food, and fun, go to [icelandicfestival.com](http://icelandicfestival.com).

## Iceland's volcanoes: from dangerous liabilities to tourism assets

A volcano is a mountain of rock. Underneath every volcano, there is what is called a magma chamber, where molten rock simmers below the earth's surface. When the volcano erupts, this magma bursts up and out of its "chimney" as lava, sometimes melting in the process and collapsing the top of the mountain that formerly contained it. When this cools, a crater forms, a sinkhole, "bowl" or cauldron. Some of these fill up with water over time and become lakes inside the volcano. Sometimes small islands of land will appear in these volcanic lakes, which is the result of a mini volcano pushing up inside the original caldera. Not all volcanic eruptions produce calderas. In the last 500 years, volcanic eruptions in Iceland have created one third of all lava output globally.

(Continued on page 00)



2010 Eyjafjallajökull eruption set off "fireworks" display, spreading ash everywhere.



PHOTO: FREDRIK HOLM

Iceland volcano eruptions expell a mixture of tiny rock, mineral and glass particles into the atmosphere, creating what is called an ash "plume."



PHOTO: JULIA STAPLES

Clouds of ash cover widespread areas in minutes as they are blasted out and away from the volcano crater's magma conduit.



PHOTO: ELISABETH ANDANSON / SYGMA VIA GETTY

Ash-buried homes in Vestmannaeyjar, after eruption of Eldfell volcano in 1973.



PHOTO: ICCTINFO

Travel on Iceland's rugged F roads, accessible only during the summer, is an adventure in itself.

(Continued from page 00)

Caldera blew ash all over Scandinavia and even Germany and Poland.

You can visit the still active, but dormant area in the Dyngjufjoll Mountains—located on the northern side of the Vatnajökull National Park in the central highlands of Iceland. Most tourists have never heard of it, and it is only accessible during the summer months of May to September. You will need a large model 4-wheel drive vehicle because you will be driving on the ungraded and unpaved F roads, and there are three river crossings involved. The online instructions for getting there strongly suggest conferring with the local rangers because Icelandic weather can change radically and quickly, and because—if you take a wrong turn, fording certain rivers will require a particular type of vehicle and a snorkel.



PHOTO: ZIGZAGONEARTH.COM

F Road 208 meanders through some of Iceland's spectacular landscapes.



PHOTO: SNORRI IS

Young Snorri program participants from North America enjoy the last week of their stay in Iceland as they tour the country's many amazing sights. Specific destinations vary from year to year—always exciting, enlightening and invigorating.

## Reconnecting to the wonders of Iceland

You can discover the beauty that is Iceland in-depth, both its people and its geology, by signing up for a Snorri hands-on cultural experience. These are tours designed explicitly for Icelanders and their North American (both U.S. and Canadian) cousins to discover each other and explore their shared heritage in a deeper way than simple tourism. It requires an investment of time and money, but will by all accounts, reward you with the memories of a lifetime.

### Here's what you need to know:

There are three choices: **Snorri**, **Snorri Plus**, and **Snorri West**. The first two of these programs, Snorri and Snorri Plus, are operated by the Snorri Foundation with cooperation from two partners, the Nordic Association and the Icelandic National League of Iceland (INL of I.) The third program, Snorri West, is operated by the Icelandic National League of North America (INL of NA). In all cases, the most current details and prices are available online, as well as when and how to apply. In some cases grants are available.

### Snorri (basic program)

The first Snorri program is a four- to six-week program in Iceland for young North Americans (ages 18-28). The first two weeks are spent in and around the capital of Reykjavik, including Icelandic language classes with lectures, discussions, and teamwork. Attendance is obligatory, and there is homework. There is even prep work before arriving in Iceland.

After the first two weeks, you stay with an Icelandic family, quite possibly your own extended family if you are of Icelandic origin. You will be given a job that is considered typical for an Icelandic person of your age. The program chooses your employment for this period from a broad range of possibilities including hotel work, farm work, slaughterhouse, hospital work, day care, fish freezing plant, senior citizens homes, banking, and more.

The last week of this program is a tour of Iceland. The specific locations visited vary from year to year. It could include visiting a volcano or hot geothermal springs and baths, river rafting, or glacier climbing.

### Snorri Plus

This program is an opportunity for North Americans 30 years of age or older, to spend two weeks in Iceland researching and connecting with their roots and extended families.

This includes spending time on



PHOTO: FLYCKR

Host Kent Lárus welcomes Snorri Plus visitors to Iceland in 2014.

foot in Reykjavik, and learning about Icelandic history, culture, and geology.

The program will contact your relatives and arrange a reunion with you. You will experience Reykjavik's Culture Night, and attend the INL of I's international convention.

To promote your health, you can participate in a local mini-marathon. You will take a tour of the island, including a visit to a commercial or professional organization relevant to your career. A quick flight to a small domestic airport on the east side of the island, to visit several unique waterfalls and to sample more Icelandic cuisine, will end your tour on a high note.

### Snorri West

Snorri West is an opportunity for young Icelanders (18-28) to spend four weeks in North America, exploring Icelandic settlements and meeting their North American relatives. Because North America is so vast, this program is divided into East Coast, Central, MidWest, and West Coast corridors, each featuring both Canadian and U.S. locations with significant Icelandic activities. (Continued on page 00)



PHOTO: ICCTINFO

In 2018, the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto hosted Snorri West travelers.

(Continued from page 00)

## The Deuce of August celebrations



PHOTO: THEDEUCE.ORG

Celebration in Mountain, North Dakota.

Iceland at one time was the property of Denmark, and possibly, because it was so small and underpopulated, it was micromanaged, and business there was monopolized by friends of the king. **Iceland was finally granted its independence on June 17, 1944.**

During the mid-19th century, however, Icelandic parliament president Jón Sigurðsson persuaded Danish King Christian IX to visit Iceland, which the king did in the summer of 1874, and on the 2nd day of August, he handed over a new constitution to the Icelandic people.

The Icelanders saw the constitution as a disappointment, but acknowledged it as making progress. This event is celebrated as *Deuce of August* in Mountain, North Dakota, and as *Íslendingadagurinn* in Manitoba.

Snorri members are in attendance at both locations each year.



PHOTO: EXPLOREGIMLI.COM

Celebration in Gimli, Manitoba.



PHOTO: EUROPE-WESTWIND57.TRAVELERSPOINT.COM

No respecter of Icelander's private property, numerous steam-spewing fissures can be found almost anywhere in Iceland.

## Geologic extremes become Iceland's calling card

Iceland is a part of the planet cursed with an advanced case of geologic acne, inflamed blocked pores in the earth's surface spewing forth noxious, smelly, and dangerous substances; all indications of mysterious pathology beneath, and leaving behind lava scabs and strange pigmentation as the earth heals. Steam rushes out of fissures in the ground as if escaping from rusted, fractured underground pipes.

How do you sell that to the world? The Icelanders did a masterful job because a recent survey of travelers rated Iceland as the 8th most beautiful country in the world!

### In conclusion...

The poet Keats may have supplied our answer to the mystery of Iceland with his chiasmus, "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*"

Our perception of the world's beauty expands as our understanding of its processes grows. Our fear of it diminishes as our ability to cope

advances. Instead of fleeing, we go closer in curiosity and respect. We indulge and exploit human fascination with nature's oddities when we know we can do so safely.

The 1875 eruption of the Askja Caldera sent one-fifth of the island's population fleeing for their lives to places thousands of miles away; today the same volcanoes attract thousands of tourists, creating economic benefits for those who live there.

John Bechtel is a professional freelance writer for the food, wine, and tourism industries; ghostwriting non-fiction books; and web content strategist for businesses.



Follow him on his website:  
[www.johnbechtelwriter.com](http://www.johnbechtelwriter.com)