

Iceland's Last Windmill

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Pictures by Angela and Nigel Smith



During a 'small ship' cruise round Iceland in August – which was mainly devoted to birds, geology, walking, and some IA – we were zodiaced ashore to the small island of Vigur in Ísafjarðardjúp in the Westfjords of Iceland.

Vigur (*spear*, as the island is spear-shaped) is a privately-owned island of some 111 acres, measuring about 2km north to south and 400m east to west. In the 17th century the farm was home to Magnús Jónsson, a wealthy man who collected and commissioned manuscripts.

Since 1884 Vigur has been home to several generations of the same family who farmed part of the land, with the farm and fields occupying 25 acres. The island is a great and safe breeding place for birds such as puffins, black guillemots, arctic terns, and eider ducks. Seals are also found on the rocky shoreline.

Currently the family of five – father, mother, son, niece, and her husband – have lived on Vigur since arriving 25 years ago. Farming of sheep and cattle (and earlier families also slaughtered thousands of puffins for their meat) has given way to tourism and eider down production, with some 110-130lbs produced annually during the breeding season and prepared during the winter months.

There is a Victorian house on the island which is owned by the National Museum of Iceland and in use as a ten-bedroom guest house. In addition to the arable fields there are farm buildings including a sheep pen which can hold 70-80 animals, a large cowshed which has recently been renovated as a restaurant with large kitchen that can accommodate 80 guests, a smokehouse, a cottage, and some smaller buildings.

On the southern shore is a wooden boat called *Breiður*, the oldest operational boat in Iceland. It is an 8-oar rowing boat used now for fishing and ferrying. Thought to be 220 years old, there seem to be two versions of its origins with one saying it was constructed on the island from Siberian driftwood and the other that it was pre-cut in Norway.



Most of the island is devoted to the protection of birds and a mown pathway through the lush grass took us on a 1km guided walk round the southern end, finishing with tea and splendid cakes at the restaurant, which also sells souvenirs and postcards that can be posted at the smallest post office in Iceland. There are around 10000 visitors a year who arrive by boat from Ísafjörður, on the south shore of the fjord, between June and late August, or on cruise ships as we did.

On a prominent hillock in the south east corner is a small, white-painted wooden post mill – the only surviving windmill in Iceland. There had been a few others built in the country, but watermills dominated. Built about 1830-1840 and also owned by the National Museum of Iceland since 1996, it was used to grind corn meal until it ceased milling in 1917. It had to be turned into the wind by hand, which was a reason given for its demise. There is very little room inside which is mainly taken up by a substantial post. It was not possible to peer inside as your author was already well behind the rest of the group on the bird spotting walk! A 2011 Reykjavik newspaper said that the museum planned to restore the mill: maybe this was subsequently carried out as the windmill does appear in very good condition.



The wooden structure sits on a stone base, and a cracked millstone is on display under the small entrance door.

All this could be yours! Earlier in the year the family put up the island for sale, although no price was given but 'open to offers'. It is speculated that it could cost at least 300 million Icelandic krona, which is somewhere in the region of £2,200,000. Perfect for a bird lover, with a little windmill to look after as a bonus.

Editor: This picture and diagram come from *Windmills and Watermills in Iceland* by A J Beenhakker (1976), a very slim publication in the HMG library, which clearly demonstrates how very few windmills and watermills there actually were in Iceland, and how little appears to be known about them.



