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**Go With the Flow: New eWays for
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Silfra: A Dive Between Two Continents



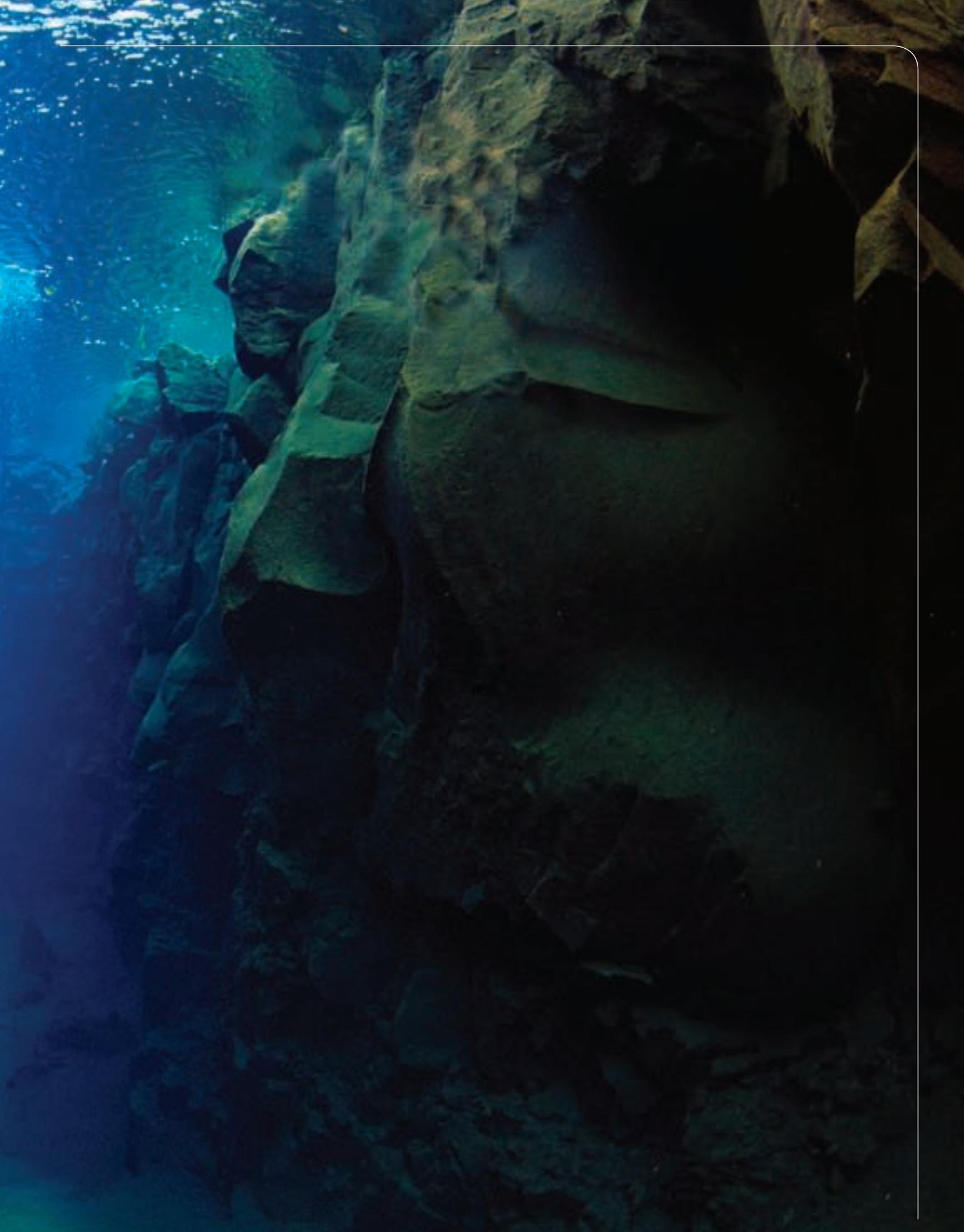
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Silfra:

A Dive Between Two Continents

Article and photos by Charles Hood



I have had a self-imposed ban on the phrase “gin clear water” for the past nine months, however on this occasion, I must allow myself to describe the waters of Silfra Lagoon as transparent as Gordon’s finest. Without question, Silfra’s pure, filtered water is by far the clearest I have ever dived in. Horizontally, the visibility was limited to about 100 metres/300 feet; limited meaning we could clearly see the other side of the lagoon, so certainly the visibility would have exceeded my estimate were it wider.

About 20 million years ago, give or take a few years, Africa and South America were connected. A rift developed between the two landmasses and, as they drifted apart, water rushed in to fill the space and the Atlantic Ocean was born. What began as a small crack in the earth’s crust is now called the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a giant, mostly underwater mountain range that runs from about 333 kilometres/207 miles south of the North Pole to sub-Antarctic Bouvet Island – and right through the middle of Iceland. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is the official dividing line between the continents of Europe and





North America and is, in effect, a huge crack in the earth's surface that is widening at the rate of about 2 centimetres/0.79 inches per year. In the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean this crack mostly goes undetected, but as the fault cuts through Iceland's center, gigantic gullies are formed. Melt water from Iceland's glaciers is filtered by porous lava rock and flows into these gullies. Icelanders call one particular gully Silfra, or the Silver Lady as it is known in English.

Diving Silfra is surreal. It's probably best described as the closest thing to an actual space walk as most of us are ever likely to experience; due to the water's extreme clarity, one loses all sense of depth. Indeed, Tómas Knutsson, owner of The Sport Diving School of Iceland, the country's only PADI facility, says divers often suffer from vertigo upon first entering the water. The reasons for this outstanding clarity are two-fold. First, the water is extremely cold (with little year round temperature variation) and unable to support much in the way of aquatic life. Secondly, the water itself is exceptionally pure. It begins as distilled water when



the leading edge of the glacier melts high up on Hofsjokull Mountain. The melted glacier water then disappears and runs underground to emerge once again in Thingvellir National Park. On its journey down the mountain it is constantly filtered by porous lava rock. So pure is this water it can be drunk without the need of further purification treatments.

There are three parts to the dive – Silfra Hall, the Cathedral and Silfra Lagoon. All three can be dived on one dive depending upon how cold you or your divers get. During my dives there, I noticed it wasn't my body that got particularly cold, but rather my hands. I usually surfaced after about a half an hour to try and get some feeling back into my fingers, using a thermos full of hot water kept on hand for just such a purpose.

To get to the entry point, divers need to walk about 50 metres/164 feet over the tundra (permanently frozen subsoil). This is slow going and for safety reasons we made three trips carrying a third of our equipment each time. I was buddied up with Peter Rowlands, editor of *Underwater Photographer* magazine, with Knutsson as our guide. Previously, we had decided I would lead the first dive, which would allow me to take images with two divers in the frame. On a subsequent dive, Rowlands would do the same. When we reached the deepest

part of the dive at around 20 metres/66 feet, Knutsson descended below the “apparent” bottom and swam through a cave system. As his exhaust bubbles rose from below him, they reflected the light from above, lighting up Silfra Hall like a cut-glass chandelier. The ravine then rose sharply to a depth of barely one metre/three feet and we had to practically crawl over the shallow rocks to enter the next stage of the dive. On the other side of the ravine appeared a spectacular crack with gigantic rock formations on either side. We had entered the Cathedral, an awe-inspiring demonstration of the earth's incredible power to simply divide continents – North America and Europe.

At this point in the dive about 30 minutes had elapsed and we made a welcome stop to bring the circulation back to our frozen fingers and to exchange enthusiastic experiences – surely nothing could top the dive we had just done? Knutsson, who had probably witnessed such excitement many times before, briefed me on our next route. I had barely put my head back underwater, though, when I surfaced again with a shout to Rowlands. We had just turned a corner from the Cathedral and entered Silfra Lagoon. Words cannot describe this site. Absolutely stunning comes close, but is still an understatement. When I looked around on the surface to see just how far away the other side of the lagoon was (around 100 metres/300 feet), I got a true appreciation of just

how clear the water here is. Completing the scene was a second crack running through the lagoon's bed. All in all we made four dives at this site, "sacrificing" some of the other scheduled sea dives. I would rank the Silfra Crack as one of the world's top 10 dive sites and it is definitely in my top three.

In addition to Silfra, there are other dives to be made in Iceland. Underwater, it is similar to the south coast of England with the water temperature at a steady 5° Celsius/41° Fahrenheit. Other great dive sites in and around Iceland include Ottaarstadir, Keflavik Cliffs and Gardur. Marine life is identical to the species found around the British Isles although noticeably more numerous with plenty of flatfish, such as plaice, flounder and brill. Among the rocks are anglerfish, lumpsuckers and wolf eels.

Getting to Iceland is easier now than ever. Iceland Express has daily flight service from Stanstead to Keflavik (about 50 kilometres/80 miles from the capital city of Reykyavik). Return flights are relatively inexpensive and take about two hours one way.

During surface intervals, you and your divers can do some hiking, or check out the volcanic activity at Geysir Centre. A must for every visitor is Iceland's Blue Lagoon, one of the country's most unique and popular attractions. All Iceland's

domestic hot water is supplied centrally and delivered via a network of pipes straight to its citizens' doorsteps. This water is heated in huge heat exchangers powered by superheated water from deep in the earth's crust – the perfect environmentally friendly power supply. Once this geothermic water (around 260° Celsius/500° Fahrenheit) has been used it is allowed to filter back into the lava rock. However, some of this water inevitably gets trapped and forms pools. Years ago local people used to swim in these warm lakes. By chance, someone who was suffering from psoriasis discovered the healing properties of the water. Word got around and, after several people were tragically boiled alive by accidentally jumping into the wrong lake, the Blue Lagoon Spa was formed. Today thousands of visitors enjoy one of the world's largest open air health spas. A good way to end your trip is by spending a couple of hours on board the MS Moby Dick to observe the many species of whales and dolphins that visit Iceland. ♦

For more information on Iceland, go to:

www.dive.is

www.bluelagoon.is

www.dolphin.is

www.visiticeland.com





Get your Group to Iceland

About Iceland: Iceland is an island, approximately 103,000 square kilometres/39,756 square miles, with an average height of 500 metres/1640 above sea level. Its highest peak, Hvannadalshnjúkur, rises to 2111 metres/6925 feet and more than 11 percent of the country is covered by glaciers, including the Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Europe.

Before you go: A passport or other travel document valid for at least three months beyond the intended stay is required for visitors to Iceland. The Schengen Agreement is in effect in Iceland, meaning visitors from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Holland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Germany who hold a Schengen visa, will, in principle, be able to visit Iceland without a document check.

Getting there: Iceland Express and Icelandair maintain regular international flights to Iceland's Keflavik/Reykjavik and Akureyri airports. Fares differ between seasons. Contact your local travel agent for full details on fares and service to Iceland. Flights from London, England to Reykjavik take about three hours and flights from New York, USA, take about five and a half hours.

Getting around: The surface of most mountain roads, roads in the interior of Iceland and some sections of the national highway is loose gravel, especially along the sides of the roads, so drive carefully and slow down when approaching an oncoming car. Mountain roads are also often narrow, and are not made for speeding. The same goes for many bridges, which are only wide enough to accommodate one car at a time. In addition to not having an asphalt surface, mountain roads are often very winding. Journeys therefore often take longer than might be expected.

Energy: Iceland is situated on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and, as such, is a hot spot of volcanic and geothermal activity: 30 post-glacial volcanoes have erupted in the past two centuries, and natural hot water supplies much of the population with cheap, pollution-free heating. Rivers are also harnessed to provide inexpensive hydroelectric power.

Population: 299,388 (July 2006 estimate)

Currency: Icelandic krona (ISK)





Language: Icelanders still speak the language of the Vikings (Old Norse) although modern Icelandic has undergone changes of pronunciation and, of course, vocabulary. English is widely spoken. Iceland is alone in upholding another Norse tradition, too, i.e., the custom of using patronymics rather than surnames. An Icelandic Christian name is followed by his or her father's name and the suffix -son or -dóttir, e.g., Guðrún Pétursdóttir (Guðrún, daughter of Pétur). Members of a family can therefore have many different surnames, which sometimes causes confusion to visitors.

