

Covering Iceland

Iceland is situated so far out from the centre of Europe it's easy to overlook it. That is assuming you have never been there. Once you have set foot on Icelandic lava or ice, it is a memory that will stay with you forever.

Three students from our EU-studies class got the opportunity to experience Reykjavik and Iceland first hand, as we were picked to attend the Summer School for Small States and Security, organized by the University of Iceland. We were a very international group, consisting of Giedre from Lithuania, Laura from Romania and Merethe from Norway, and accompanied for a couple of days by Briton-turned-Dutch professor Griffiths. The international Leiden internationality was matched by the other participants we got to know during the summer school, where Malta, Cyprus, Slovakia, Ireland and the Åland Islands were represented, to name but a few.

The lectures were marked by high levels of knowledge and enthusiasm, as each topic was covered by a professor or practitioner with special interest in the fields that were taught. The topic of this year's summer school was "Small States and Security", and during the two weeks of lectures, we were able to cover traditional aspects such as military security, expand the vision to economic security and delve into new hot topics such as environmental security. The students also got to show that they were paying attention in class by participating in presentations and discussions on the different topics.

The program was packed with lectures, writing sessions and field trips to various points of interest, ranging from the enchanting Blue Lagoon to the fairly modest presidential residence outside Reykjavik. We were kindly invited to visit the Parliament, which has been the site of demonstrations over the last months, and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs gave interesting talks on topics such as Iceland in the Arctic. After finishing our final exam Saturday morning, we were welcomed by the Icelandic President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson in his official residence which overlooks the picturesque city of Reykjavik. The President was eager to discuss topics relating to European affairs and small states, but understandably kept rather quiet on whether or not he thought Iceland should join the EU.

There was also time to explore Reykjavik after hours, and most of the students used the weekend to explore the areas outside the capital. We went on a grand trip north to Akureyri, Myvatn and the Waterfall of the Gods, and found out that in Iceland, the landscape changes approximately every ten minutes and ranges from stone deserts and moon landscape to blooming fields, glaciers and unbelievable waterfalls.

But even though the landscape is out of this world and the people are friendly, Iceland was this year also marked by the events connected to the financial meltdown. The square in front of the Parliament saw frequent demonstrations, and although fairly peaceful, it is clear that the spirit of the society has changed after the crash. Abandoned construction sites witness of the fact that Iceland is in considerable trouble, and will have a hard time resurfacing from the economic crisis. However, for those who jokingly asked whether the ATMs still work in Reykjavik, we can assure them that when it comes to everyday matters, it is business as usual. Tourists are even at an advantage this year, and can really profit from the drop in the exchange rate of the Icelandic króna, which means that almost everything is about half the price of what it used to be.

All in all, the summer school was a truly educational experience in every sense of the word. In the classrooms, amongst the students of different nationalities and in the midst of a society that has seen big changes and is still in the process of adjusting to their new reality. We wish them the best of luck.

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