

ÁRSHÁTÍÐ – THE ANNUAL PARTY

Eliza Reid

The death throes of winter bring with them a modern Icelandic tradition – the *árshátíð*. Loosely translated as an ‘Annual Celebration’, an *árshátíð* is usually held sometime between February and April by almost all companies, as well as virtually every club or group of people which meet regularly (eg: if you play football with your mates on a Saturday morning, you’ll hold an *árshátíð*). Most locals get invited to several each year.

The *árshátíð* is more than just another social evening with colleagues. It is a gilded, glossy, no-holds-barred affair where heavy drinking and sentimental recitals of ancient poetry go hand in hand.

Dress is formal. Many women buy a new gown for each *árshátíð* they attend and men sometimes appear in the double-breasted waistcoats of Icelandic national costume. In an effort to outdo their competition, many companies even hold their events in another country (city breaks in Copenhagen or London are the most popular), although the norm is to have the *árshátíð* at a restaurant, rented hall or hotel in the countryside.

Icelanders enjoy the ritual of tradition, and the *árshátíð* is no exception. The evening always begins with a free aperitif for the assembled guests. The meal itself is a three-course affair, usually with a seafood starter and a lamb, or possibly beef, main course (fish is not seen as upmarket enough for the entrée of a formal dinner). Vegetarians are few.

Once the free aperitifs and expensive wine begin to take effect, the biggest tradition of the *árshátíð* begins: *skemmtiatriði* (roughly ‘fun activities’). Every attendee at the *árshátíð* (except partners) will be in a small group which prepares one activity for the larger group on the evening. This might be a silly song, a poetry recital, a quiz show, or a game like charades. Like speeches at a wedding, good *skemmtiatriði* makes the evening fantastic; boring poetry recitals make you wish you were at home reading the phone book.

In addition to the organised fun activities, anyone who wishes is able to give a speech, usually guided by the Master of Ceremonies (at larger *árshátíð*, a local celebrity is often invited to play this role). Many speeches feature quotes from the sagas, Icelandic limericks or in-jokes from the office which confuse people’s partners. By midnight, the wine is really flowing. Once the speeches have finished, it’s time to dance. Any *árshátíð* worth its salt will have hired a local celebrity entertainer to sing Icelandic songs that everyone will know the words to.

Visitors to Iceland are unlikely to get formally invited to an *árshátíð*. Like Christmas, this sacred occasion is reserved for members of the hosting organisation – be it company employees or members of the football team. But, like Christmas, if you find yourself in the right place at the right time (keep an eye open for speeches given in fancy dress), you may get invited to join in a round of *skemmtiatriði*. The modern Icelandic marriage of flashy materialism and fiercely proud traditions and friendships is never better epitomised.

Iceland, Orkney and Faroe islands. Some people tend to confuse the flag of Iceland with that of Norway, which sports an identical design but with inverse colours (though the shades are quite different).

Iceland’s constitution is quite specific about the flag’s colours, declaring them to be sky blue (*hejðblár*), fire red (*eldrauður*) and snow white (*njálhvítur*). The flag is flown on all national and religious holidays. It is also considered improper for the Icelandic flag to be flown after midnight, even if it is still light.

NATIONAL SYMBOLS Iceland’s national flower is the *jöklasóley* or **glacier poppy** (*Ranunculus glacialis*), a light pink to whitish blossom that grows in the high fjords and snow-capped mountains, usually near the coast. The national bird is the **gyrfalcon** which is still represented on various insignia. For many centuries, the King of Denmark had absolute rights to capturing and hunting with falcons in Iceland – his falcon house is now a popular bar in Reykjavík. If Iceland had a national fish, it would be the **cod**, for its abundance and for the essential role it plays in the economy. Iceland’s previous national insignia portrayed a headless, disembowelled cod, split down the centre, flattened and dried, beneath the Danish crown. If anything, the depiction of stockfish as a national crest is honest – dried, salted cod was Iceland’s main export for a good 500 years.

NATIONAL ANTHEM Iceland’s national anthem is *Ó Guð Vars Lands* which means ‘Oh God of our Land’. The words to the hymn were written by the Reverend Matthías Jochumsson and inspired by Psalm 90 (*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world . . . thou art God*). The music was written by Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson, an Icelandic composer with whom Matthías was staying in Scotland at the time. The anthem was first performed to a royal audience (Danish King Christian IX) in Reykjavík’s Dómkirkjan (see page 161) as part of Iceland’s millennial celebrations in 1874.

NATIONAL DRESS Iceland’s national dress is anything that keeps you warm and dry when you go outside. The national costume looks a little more provincial. The women’s outfit is based around the *peysuföt*, a heavy grey or black woollen dress that is gathered in the back and covers everything from wrist to neck to ankle. Fancier modern versions are made of velvet with extraordinary embroidery around the lower hems and sleeves. As a variation or accessory, women also wear the *upphlutur* which is a tight sleeveless bodice tied over a light blouse. The compromise arrangement is the *skautbúningur*, which comprises a long skirt with a fitted jacket that is typically embroidered with shiny thread into floral designs (different flowers denote different regions). The *skothúfa* is the small cap with a tassel worn to one side.

It should be noted that the idea of a national costume is a wee bit contrived. The artist and nationalist Sigurður Guðmundsson began drawing up fashion designs for women’s costumes in the 1860s, convinced that a universal national costume was one step closer to self-determination. The *peysuföt* is quite traditional (a clear reference to the common dress long worn by Icelandic peasant women) but some of the elaborate headdresses are romantic imaginations. In 1994, a contest was held for a suitable ‘male’ costume, since there were too many variations floating around. The winning design consists of long black trousers (or knee breeches), with a dark-coloured double-breasted waistcoat and cravat. The Icelandic government manages a National Costume Board which conserves knowledge about national dress and promotes its proper wear. The very best time to see Icelanders in national dress is on Independence Day (17 June) and other summer festivals. Schoolchildren will also dress up for festivals.

HOLIDAYS AND TRADITIONS Icelanders make sure to have at least one holiday per month – it helps the long winter months go faster and the long summer days last longer. According to the Old Norse Calendar, Thorri is the fourth month of winter (from the end of January to early February). The weather can be ghastly at this time and so Icelanders huddle up inside and partake of some of ghastly cuisine during the **feast of Thór** (*Þorablót*). The feast is one of the most Icelandic of festivals, relishing Icelanders’ strong pagan roots and celebrated with patriotic fervour. The menu is highly traditional and is vaguely referred to as ‘food of Thór’ – apparently the god Thór eats marinated shark, pickled whale blubber, ram testes, seal flippers, blood