The Bizarre Truth: Culinary Misadventures Around the Globe

Andrew Zimmern
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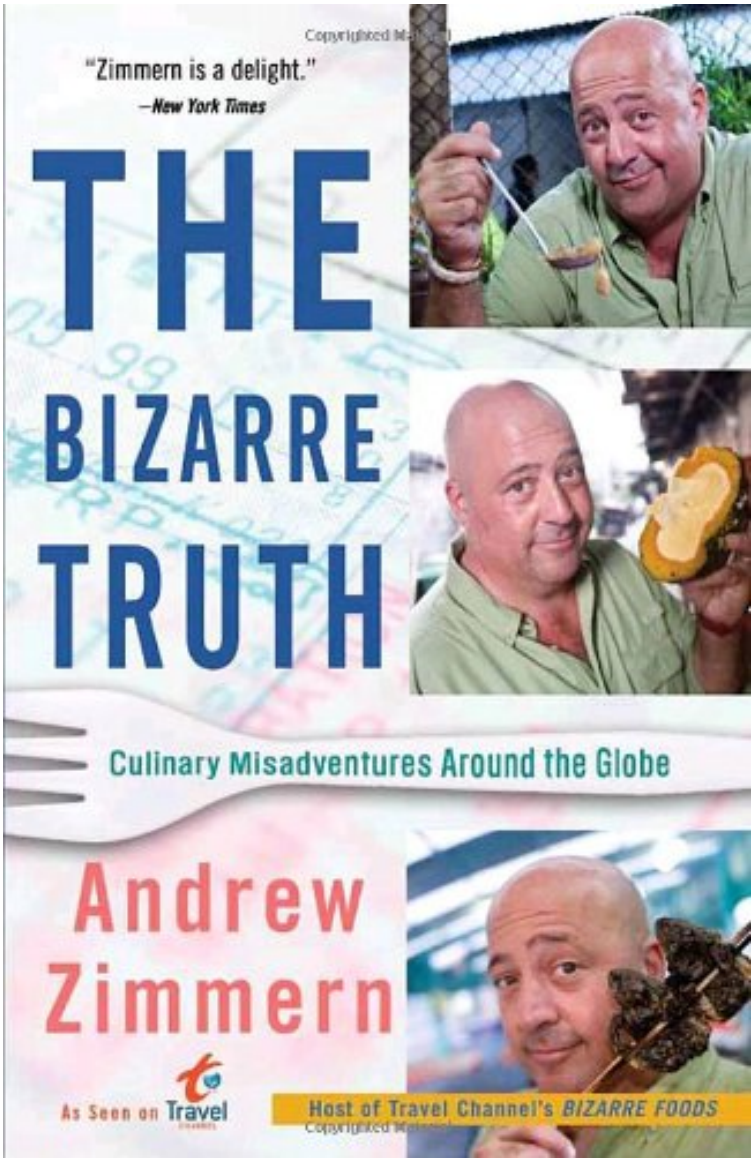

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Andrew Zimmern : The Bizarre Truth: Culinary Misadventures Around the Globe before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Bizarre Truth: Culinary Misadventures Around the Globe:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. It was good but repetitiveBy OdiebrownEven though Andrew Zimmern is my favorite food network star and always entertaining, his book was a bit of a yawner but enjoyable.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy CustomerGreat read!!0 of 0 people found the following

review helpful. A fun read with a lot of wit and heartBy JSA fun read with a lot of wit and heart, and some really enjoyable perspectives and narrative on food, culture and people. Would love to see another book with a whole new set of stories!

Andrew Zimmern, the host of The Travel Channels hit series Bizarre Foods, has an extraordinarily well-earned reputation for traveling far and wide to seek out and sample anything and everything thats consumed as food globally, from cow vein stew in Bolivia and giant flying ants in Uganda to raw camel kidneys in Ethiopia, putrefied shark in blood pudding in Iceland and Wolfgang Puck's Hunan style rooster balls in Los Angeles. For Zimmern, local cuisine bizarre, gross or downright stomach turning as it may be to us -- is not simply whats served at mealtime. It is a primary avenue to discovering what is most authentic the bizarre truth about cultures everywhere. Having eaten his way around the world over the course of four seasons of Bizarre Foods, Zimmern has now launched Bizarre Worlds, a new series on the Travel Channel, and this, his first book, a chronicle of his journeys as he not only tastes the taboo treats of the world, but delves deep into the cultures and lifestyles of far-flung locales and seeks the most prized of the modern travelers goals: The Authentic Experience. Written in the smart, often hilarious voice he uses to narrate his TV shows, Zimmern uses his adventures in culinary anthropology to illustrate such themes as: why visiting local markets can reveal more about destinations than museums; the importance of going to the last stop on the subway the most remote area of a place where its essence is most often revealed; the need to seek out and catalog the last bottle of coca-cola in the desert, i.e. disappearing foods and cultures; the profound differences between dining and eating; and the pleasures of snout to tail, local, fresh and organic food. Zimmern takes readers into the back of a souk in Morocco where locals are eating a whole roasted lamb; along with a conch fisherman in Tobago, who may be the last of his kind; to Mississippi, where he dines on raccoon and possum. There, he writes, "People said, 'That's roadkill!' No it's not, I said. It's a cultural story.Whether its a session with an Incan witch doctor in Ecuador who blows fire on him, spits on him, thrashes him with poisonous branches and beats him with a live guinea pig or drinking blood in Uganda and cow urine tonic in India or eating roasted bats on an uninhabited island in Samoa, Zimmern cheerfully celebrates the undiscovered destinations and weird wonders still remaining in our increasingly globalized world.From the Hardcover edition.

From Publishers WeeklyHost of his own Travel Channel show, chef and food writer Zimmern has made a career of unusual travel destinations and even more unusual food. In this memoir of his exotic experiences, Zimmern shares his favorite experiences as well as his broad-mined approach to the world. From illegal lobsters in Cuba to roasted bats in Samoa to a simple bowl of noodles in Guangzhou, China, Zimmern lets his gusto be his guide, resulting in a passionate but messy read. While he helpfully avoids overloading readers with shock after shock (knowingly referring to himself as "a guy who eats bugs"), he's seemingly uncertain whether to organize his stories by theme or location, leading to repetition nonetheless. Popular ecological themes-sustainable food production, neutral carbon footprints, local ingredients-wend throughout, but the tantalizing focus is Zimmern's unrelentingly positive methods of travel and immersion, emphasizing keystone values like graciousness, open-mindedness and leaving assumptions behind while stirring readers' appetite for adventure. About the AuthorAndrew Zimmern is a food writer, dining critic, chef, and co-creator, host, and co-producer of Travel Channel series Bizarre Foods and Bizarre Worlds with Andrew Zimmern. Zimmern is the founder and editor in chief of www.andrewzimmern.com, writes monthly for Delta Sky Magazine and Minneapolis-St Paul Magazine and lives in Minneapolis with his wife and son.From the Hardcover edition.Excerpt. Modern Day VikingsPuffin Hunting in the Landof Fire and IceIceland looks and feels like no other place on earth. As our plane touched down just outside Reykjavik, I was almost convinced wed landed on the moon. Not surprising, given that NASA astronauts trained in Iceland prior to the first moon landing. In much of the country, the barren, rocky topography looks otherworldly in the extreme. Iceland is roughly the size of Ohio, a moss-covered, glacial, rocky expanse, born of the volcanic womb. Treeless mountains, sweeping fields of arctic grasses waving out to the horizon, awe inspiring geysers, raging rivers, spectacular ocean vistas and therapeutic hot springs fueled by boiling, underwater volcanoes are stunning, but make much of the island uninhabitable. Iceland is called the land of fire and ice yet, despite its staggering natural beauty, the overwhelming majority of the population lives in the capital city of Rekyavik. Everyone else is a farmer, or works in either the thermal energy business (booming) or the greenhouse gardening industry (emerging).The country is changing and growing all the time literally. In 1963, a volcanic explosion just off the southern coast of Iceland created an island one square mile in size. This landmass, named Surtsey after Icelands mythological god of fire, grew to official landmass status in only three and a half years. I was fortunate enough to travel to Surtsey by boat one day. Its a phenomenal the thing to see, an island that is as big as it is, that is as new as it is, and freakishly almost exactly as old as I am.I knew the food in Iceland would be wonderful. As a chef in New York and Minneapolis, Id always been floored by the quality of Icelandic lamb, dairy products and seafood Id occasionally run across from time to time. Icelandic animals drink the cleanest water on the earth, eat the freshest grass and breathe the purest air. Everything, from the horses to the sheep and cows, is genetically

pristine and raised not only for their meat, but for their milk and cheese products. Skyr for example, the addictively cheesy yogurt product you see everywhere in Iceland, comes from cows that eat sweet grass for such a brief period of time, then silage for most of the year, which gives them a unique flavor profile that is distinctly their own. Sweet and white, devoid of the yellowed and grassy notes that conventionally raised cows milk contains for much of the milking year. I spent much of my time in Rekyavik, puttering around town and enjoying the beautiful summer weather. Summer temperatures climb into the 40s during the day, maybe 50s in the sun. We got a lot accomplished thanks to the globally famous amphetamine affect of the short nightfall. Occurring between 12AM and 5AM, the mid hours of the night are mostly dusky blue and never really deep black. The food scene in Iceland is vibrant, small little cafes like the Sea Baron serve up steamy bowls of chowder and lobster bisque, elegant eateries like Vox and Siggi Hall would be great restaurant with huge followings in any city in the world, and the local seaport boasts a lamb hot dog shack that is a must for any food lovers Icelandic itinerary. I swam and spa-ed at the geo-thermal hot spring, the Blue Lagoon. I availed myself of the local public bath houses in town, which are very popular, and made a host of new friends courtesy of our larger-than-life host, Svein Sveinson. Svein is a filmmaker, bon vivant and legendary lover of the good life, who introduced himself to me online by sending me a picture of himself, stripped to the skin, after hed stuffed his enormous 6 foot 5 inch frame into the teeniest hot spring he could find. After four or five days of cruising around town, I was itching for a change of pace, and I was also looking forward to my first taste of Puffin, those cute little black and white birds with big orange beaks. Before you get yourself all worked up about me eating this cute n cuddly creature, consider the fact only 300,000 people call Iceland home. The puffin population, on the other hand, runs between eight and ten million. Icelanders could eat puffin at every meal for now until eternity and they would never make a dent in that regions population. As a matter of fact, they urge people to eat them as a point of civic duty because there are just so many of them. The country even hosts giant puffin-centric food festivals, where everyone eats smoked puffins and grilled puffins and drinks to the wee hours of the morning. Its a strange food concept that few people outside Iceland really understand.But to eat the best puffins, and to hunt them where they live you need to head south of Reykjavik. There, youll find the Vestmannaeyjarare Islands, a cluster of smaller islands that make up one of the regions most famous fishing communities. This areas other claim to fame is the 1973 volcanic eruption on Heimaey, the largest island in the chain. Its Icelands version of Pompeii, but only a few decades old. Lava flows crushed half of the town, and when you see the end results of something that destructive and realize that it happened within your lifetime, it gives you great pause. You see homes buried, and cars half frozen in black, porous rock. Luckily, everyone was able to get off the island in time to save themselves, but my fantastically negative, cynical mind kept telling me I was trapped on an island without an much of an escape route.Millions of puffins call the Vestmannaeyjarare Islands home, and the local restaurateurs take advantage of this ample source of food. The rest of the citizenry are devoted puffin eaters or hunters or both. Once our six-seat puddle jumper landed on Heimaey, we tried to negotiate our way over to the far side of Vestmannaeyjarare, tooling through the small town, lunching at a teeny fish house on steamed cod and brown bread. With its simple harbor, occasional spouting orca, seals and numerous birds, it was perfect for shooting a little b-roll. Along the way we end up running into a guy who claimed he could arrange to have us picked up by boat on the far side of the island, and taken to an uninhabited island to experience a puffin hunt first hand. Without hesitation, we piled the crew into our van and head over to the far side of the island. Its a bright, beautiful summers day in Iceland, and in the sun it feels like its in the low 50s. Perfect sweatshirt weather. We pass alongside a huge half moon bay, complete with breathtaking views of the ocean and the outer isles, which included Surtsey, and started unloading our gear onto the mile long black sand beach. There isnt a trace of human imprint as far as you can see. Not a jet contrail in the sky, not a footprint in the sand, not a boat at sea... its just empty and desolate. You know for sure youre at one of the ends of the earth, a feeling I find so satisfying and I could have sat at that beach all day. We locked our vehicles, thanked our new friends and waited for our guide by a giant piece of driftwood that had washed up on the beach. After 20 minutes, we see a Zodiac boat puttering over to us. It lands on the beach and off steps Pall. Hes a modern day Viking: 6 tall, blonde hair, 175 pounds and shakes your hand with a grip that could crush pecans. Not big and muscley or long haired with a horned Helga helmet, but he was clearly the kind of guy you just know can repair his own engines, build his own house, fight his way out of bar brawl and shoot the wings off a butterfly. Hes the kind of guy who would travel alone in a Zodiac, a 14 flat bottom rubber boat, across five miles of open ocean from an uninhabited island to pick me up. Hot on Palls heels is a closed-cabin, 20 cruiser with an inboard engine that will ferry the crew as they capture Pall and I having the authentic experience of taking the zodiac to the island of Alsey, where his family has hunted on for years.I was glad I put on my knee-high rubber boots that morning as I piled into his boat from the surfside. The crew has already headed out into the channel on the cruiser, headed toward a giant boulder looming in the distance. Ive been in a Zodiac plenty of times, so I plopped down on the edge of the craft on the gunwale, just as I did as a little kid puttering around the inner harbors of the South Fork of Long Island. Its the perfect vehicle for flat, calm water. Easy in, easy out. But today Pall instructs me to sit down on the floor of the boat itself, explaining thats how its done in Iceland. Im all confused-- What do you mean, sit on the flat bottom? In the water no less? And in his stern, Vikingly way, he says it again: Sit on the flat bottom. Next, he instructs me to wrap my arms around the ropes attached to the gunwales. What do you mean, wrap

my arms around the ropes? He explains that I have to hang on tight unless I want to get thrown out of the boat. It is then that I begin to get a brief idea of what the afternoon will hold for me. He turns toward me, sees the look on my face and a huge grin spreads across his, because he can clearly see Im fucking shit-face petrified. After a moment of pure self-satisfaction he tells me, Today will be a great test of your manhood. And he goes back to staring out at the horizon as he guides the boat out of the quiet water and into the rolling seas. When youre in a 14 flat bottom zodiac in rolling waves, maybe about eight or ten feet high, its like being stuck on the longest rollercoaster ride of your life. No life preservers. No radios. Just me and Pall the Viking, cranking down the engine as hard as it could go in this little rubber dinghy. Oh, and in case you forgot, were in Iceland. The water is just a degree above freezing. We are miles and miles from civilization as the crow files, at least ten miles from the nearest town. If you fall into that water, youre a goner. You cant survive; its just too cold. I say a prayer in my head. Out of nowhere, an entire pod of killer whales pops up next to us. All those friendly, Sea World-inspired killer whale images go right out the window when you see this 30 foot monstrosity cresting the waves adjacent to your itty bitty keel-less zodiac. I am sitting so low in that boat that I am almost eye level with the water. The killer whales are right there. The immediacy of the situation was oddly thrilling, and I am not a ballsy guy by any stretch of the imagination. The fear that was on my face became more and more evident to Paul who just kept smiling at me. I know he thought it was just hysterical that I was almost peeing my pants.We finally arrive at our destination after about a half an hour at sea, up the side of a wave and down the other side, repeat. The island looks like a giant round cylinder of granite rising straight up out of the water, topped with a grassy Kid N Play haircut. As we got closer, I could see a wooden cabin built on stilts on the side of the cliff. And I think I can see Palls family waving at us. It turns out that every year in puffin hunting season, which is about two weeks long, three generations of Palls family- father, brothers, kids-- head to Alsey (sp?), and spend a few days hunting as many puffin as they can. Im talking thousands of birds. Theyve done it every year since Palls father, the patriarch of the family, was a kid. This is their ancestral family tradition. We cruise into some softer water about a quarter mile off shore and idle beside a giant, two inch thick wire coming from the house and disappearing into the water beside us. I learn that the only way to unload the gear is through a pulley system. Several years earlier the family sank a giant anchor into the water, attached a two inch-thick wire cable about 500 feet off the cliff and then pulled the wire up to the house, securing it with block and tackle to a landing about 50 feet below the houses platform. They lower the block and tackle down toward the water hooked up with a giant cargo net and we load up all our gear from the two boast. I watch it disappear as six or seven guys yank all the equipment to the top of the hill. I assumed that while it looked tricky, thats how were going getting on the island. Nope. Even these latter day Vikings find that method a tad dangerous. If the equipment disappears, youre out the equipment. But people disappearing from that height, thats another story. Here is the safer method of hopping onto Alsey: You run the little Zodiac boat at top speed, straight toward the rock face of the cliff. A split-second before you smash the boats nose into the granite wall, Pall guns it into reverse. The boat freezes and you jump out at the last possible moment of sweet inertia, grasping, struggling to clutch the flimsy climbing rope dangling from some pitons high atop the cliff. As the boat pulls away, you hold yourself there, balance your feet on the slippery, wet rocks and essentially pull yourself up, Batman Bat-rope style. Foot over foot, hand over hand, while other kind people (if you are lucky) whove arrived before you attempt to pull on the rope to make it a little easier for you. In comparison, getting back was a piece of cake: You just hang onto the rope and when the boat comes in, you let go and fall (indelicately, I might add) into the Zodiac with a big thud. But leaping out of that boat onto the rock wall, aiming for this little piece of climbing rope about the width of your pinky, is one of those experiences that I will never forget. A literal leap of faith. I knew that this great test of my manhood was not going to get any easier. Fortunately, Pall was a great coach and talked us through the whole thing. Our crew was wet, bruised and scraped, but without Palls expertise, we didnt have a prayer. Our success was directly related to skill set of our leader, and he had gotten us all on the island.We reconned on the top of the granite cliff, and climbed our way to the top of the crest of the upper hillside, walking carefully along the cut-in path to the stone path at the highest part of the bluff, then up and over the last ridge to their hunting cabin. We walked about a quarter mile from the landing point to the house itself, where and changed into our puffin hunting clothes, sturdier shoes, tough Mackinaw jackets, hats and hunting equipment. Now puffin hunting is done in a very specific way. You hide yourself in the rocks, holding onto a long and extremely unwieldy 20 foot long, thick wooden pole that weighs at least 40 pounds. At the end, theyve attached a big net. I must admit that puffin, while beautiful to look at, are some of the stupidest animals known to man. When feeding time comes, millions of them are just flying around their nests, so scooping a few into your net is as simple as swatting mosquitoes at the Friday night family picnic. You time it precisely however. When you see a puffin flitting past you, you swing this massively heavy net at it and attempt to guide the net toward the puffins flight path. Its an ungainly process, the stick is so heavy and awkwardly long, its like netting extremely speedy butterflies but on a much larger scale. The birds are so dumb that they dont really know how to move out of the way. Once you get a feel for how the puffins react, you can be very successful, starting your long slow arcing swing, aiming at an imagined point where the birds flight path will intersect with the future position of your net. When you see someone do it with a lot of experience, it almost seems like they can will the bird into the basket. Palls eight-year-old nephew netted about four of them while I was just getting comfy in my spider hole

burrow. Pall, his brother and their kids are just whooping it up, everyone has their puffin net in full extension, swinging it around, going gangbusters on these birds. Palls youngest son nabs an additional two or three birds. His 12-year-old son did the same, as did Pall and his brother. In an hour and a half, I netted one. It is literally as easy as shooting fish in a barrel, but only if you know how the puffins fly, and arent completely preoccupied by the thought of slipping and plummeting to your untimely demise. I almost fell off the hill the couple of times I summoned the courage to stand and swing my pole. The hill is nearly vertical, pitted with puffin nests, covered in thick matted grass so you cant see the rocks and ridges. That, in addition to the steepness, make the terrain practically unmanageable to do anything other than squat on. In fact, Gordon Ramsey, the famous English chef, went hunting with Palls family about three years after we did and fell into the water where he almost died. It was horrendously scary sitting up there. There was a charming aspect to it. You see, if you leaned out over the edge of the cliff just enough and looked down, you could see all the wild seals basking on the rocks, swimming to and fro and making cute seal noises. Perhaps waiting for someone to fall? Who knows. You could see the orcas blasting through their blowholes, rounding up krill, and all the sea birds diving into the water for their evening meal. It was glorious.As the weather began to cool off, we started extracting the live birds from the net, snapped their necks and breasted them out. Puffin meat looks a lot like wild Buffle Head duck; very dark and very purplish, with a small breast size. Im accustomed to eating wild ducks and Ive sampled sea ducks which have some of the worst tasting meat in the whole worldchewy, fishy, dry and oppressively oily. I was expecting puffin to fall into this category, but the grilled puffin I ate on the deck outside the Alsey cabin was one of the most delicious meats ever to pass over my lips. It tasted like a delicately mild, finely grained piece of elk (or ostrich even) that had been waved over a pot of clam juice. The salty and sea life-intense diet these puffins have makes them naturally seasoned in a sense. Their musculature is such that they have a fairly small breast. Youd think it would be very tough from of all the flying they do, but its actually quite tender. Not grilling them past medium rare helps. Pall and the lads sprinkled the meat with salt, pepper and a dash of their favorite grilling spice from the local supermarket and we devoured the entire platter before we even got inside the cabin. Our hosts served up some smoked puffin once we got indoors. Smoked puffin is the most popular preparation you will find in Icelandic restaurants, mostly because it is so stable at that point and can sit in the fridge for weeks at a time without degrading in quality. We sliced it paper thin, pairing the meat with sweet Galia melon. Here is yet another oddity of Iceland: They have no growing season. Sure, they have some hydroponic stuff that is coming out of local greenhouses, but not much of it. A bag of carrots in Iceland costs $10, but a pound of lamb or a pound of crayfish costs next to nothing. Its the exact reverse of the way it is in the rest of the world. Imagine a culture with plentiful meat and fish that are very cheap, but where all the vegetables are very expensive because its all shipped in from other places. So while I was all gaga about the puffin, Palls family swooned over this melon. As we wrapped up dinner, I took a moment to explore the cabin and was completely fascinated with the set up. It was a shack without central heating, just a few electric heaters used only on especially cold nights. Palls family engineered a water system, securing a PVC pipe 200 feet up the cliff from the cabin, topped with a large 100 gallon drum so that they could collect the rain water and glacial runoff. The pressure feed that resulted allowed them to shower and wash up with rainwater, which they also drank. Now where in the world can you do that? It was one of the most inspiring self-sustaining environments Ive ever experienced. In a world where green living and sustainability is something we are all trying to force into our lives in dribbles and drabs, this family was living in almost perfect harmony with their surroundings, despite the fact that it is only a place where, once a year, these guys get together for the family hunting experience. Over the decades, its grown from a lean shack to more of a modern lodge, now outfitted with two big community rooms, a living room, a couple of bunk bed-filled bedrooms and a bathroom, complete with slickly engineered, gravity-fed plumbing. They built a deck around the outside of the house, and they primarily cook and eat outdoors on the grill. Its a very macho, manly experience, and to be perfectly frank, its a little unsettling spending time with people whose eight-year-old kid can kick your ass. Ive never felt wimpier in my life. Despite the fact that I couldve been hung out to dry by the smallest of these guys, the camaraderie of it all was very familiar. Ive spent a lot of time with friends and family duck hunting in New York and Minnesota, and the easy going vibe of sitting quietly with the people you love in the great outdoors, with a gun on your shoulder or just a camera, is a contentment inducing experience in the extreme. The puddle jumper wed chartered was leaving the airport in a few hours, and we knew that if we didnt get off the island fast, wed miss the flight. We said our good-byes, scampered down the path wed arrived on, climbed down the ropes, dropped ourselves into the Zodiac, falling really into the wet bottom of the dinghy. We ferried the crew out to the big boat and took our equipment off the zip line as Palls brother and his kids sent it hurtling down from the house platform. Before heading back to the cruiser to drop me off, Pall took the Zodiac around to some of the caves where we had spotted some seals. He held the boat steady while huge waves broke on the rocks just in front of us, and I got a chance to stand a foot or so away from the wild seals before he took me back to the crew on the cabin cruiser, where we continued back to the main island. Pall orchestrated a nice send off for us, popping wheelies with his Zodiac against these giant rolling waves as his whole family gave us the Alsey cheer from the deck. They shouted, Alsey, Alsey, Ah- Ah- Ah! as we puttered off into the sunset, killer whales trailing us, cresting the surface of the water around our boat. It was probably the most exhilarating day of travel that Id ever had in my life up to that point, the charm of the simplicity of another

way of life quickly squashed by the immediacy of the modern day fact that we had to race to catch a plane. We arrived at the harbor in the darkness and had to hijack several locals, begging them for a lift to the airstrip to catch our plane, almost leaving our guide, Svein, behind in the chaos. The sense of accomplishment I felt after that day was incredible. The food was singularly fantastic; I have never had any eating experience like that. Its the type of eating that, as a collector of these moments in life, is something so unique, its hard to measure it against anything else. I have yet to bump into any other group of people in my world that have hunted wild puffins and eaten them. I know there are some out there, non-Icelanders, but we are a rather small bunch. There is a postscript to all this. The little boat that took us home, the cabin cruiser well, the morning after he drove us home, it hit a rock and sank. Because of all the volcanic activity in the area, and the shale-y nature of the rock in that part of Iceland the rocky bottom of the ocean is always in flux. Say you are 100 yards off shore, you could be in 100 feet of water one day and in five feet of water the next. A rock could come up from the bottom of the sea or rocks can fall off the sides of the mountains into the water, which makes depth charts in that part of the world about as useless as the Random House Dictionary is at Harpo Marxs house. We were very upset the next day to find out that the boat sank, but ironically, looking back I realized that at the point and time that I felt the most safe and secure was the time that we were actually the least. Funny world.From the Hardcover edition.