

Everything is by Chance

The plan was to fly on Air Iceland to Egilsstaðir, a small town located in East Iceland, and continue to Borgarfjörður eystri. The plan was to write about elves.

You see, Borgarfjörður eystri is home to the Icelandic elf-queen, church of elves and a whole host of hidden people. But like anything imaginary (are elves imaginary, or are they real?), one has to rid logic, release the inner child and be open to make-believe and fairy tales. I can usually do this, however, right now, I am just not *feeling* it. I am just not sensing the elves.

So. What *am* I going to write about?

Driving along Route 94 from Egilsstaðir to Borgarfjörður eystri begins as a rather sleepy drive. Clumps of moss hug together by the road, a road that is part paved, part gravel ... a road with a visual of flat land that appears to go on forever.

However, when the sea becomes visible in the horizon, the landscape optic changes to gorgeous. Sapphire-coloured puddles of water intertwine with extensive beds of moss. Snow-capped mountains hug Héraðsflói Bay, and a straight visual of blue appears when the sea and sky merge.

And then? Well, let's just say: stay focused. Otherwise, you may end up in the drop zone. Vertical up, hairpin curves, horizontal traverse, vertical down. Up, over and down the mountain she goes.

But what is on the other side will take your breath away. And I am not the only one who thinks so.

Mirjam Wouters was born in The Netherlands. She is thirty-four years old. I meet her in Borgarfjörður eystri at Álheimar, a guesthouse owned by Arngrímur Viðar Ásgeirsson. The plan was to meet Arngrímur but he had to travel to Akureyri. So instead, I spend an afternoon with Mirjam, his first guest of the season.

Mirjam is instantly likeable. She is pretty, friendly and jovial. She has a unique story to tell, therefore, the writing piece on elves is shelved.

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Like any child filled with imagination and the ability to just 'know', at the age of three, Mirjam told her mother she was going to explore the world. She then went outside (her mother assumed she was off to play in the neighbourhood) and walked five kilometres to a pond.

Growing up in the Netherlands, where biking is part of the culture, Mirjam spent family holidays biking and camping around Holland, Belgium and Germany.

So, it is not surprising she set out to explore the world. And it is not surprising being on a bicycle feels natural to her. But what is surprising is, thus far, she has travelled approximately 70,000 kilometres exploring the world by bicycle.

At age twenty-one, she backpacked Ireland and for the next six years alternated between working at a youth hostel in Derry and travelling, working at temporary jobs along the way.

During this time she biked to Spain and fell in love with the freedom of travelling on a bicycle. A detour, a result of her bicycle being stolen, took her from Seville to Santiago de Compostela by foot – approximately 1,200 kilometres. But walking hurt her back, knees and feet. It was much easier to travel by bicycle.

Her biking routes are too many to list, however, her biggest and grandest achievement has to be: at age twenty-seven she set out on an epic journey.

By bicycle, she travelled from Holland to Australia via Europe, Eastern Europe, the Stans (i.e. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Bali and Sumatra. Flying to Darwin, she biked through Australia and New Zealand. Upon return, she continued biking through Japan and South Korea before flying back to Holland.

Throughout this six-year journey, she alternated between travelling around by bicycle and working. (She did fly home a few times to visit her family.) She is financially self-sufficient and finds it rude when people ask her where she gets her money. She just doesn't spend, nor does she need, a lot of money.

Her first love is travel and the people she meets along the way. She is quick to point out that she is not a cyclist. Rather, she is a traveller who uses a bicycle as transportation.

She does not set goals for a certain amount of kilometres per day and she does not set a travel plan. Instead, she allows the travel to unfold as it is supposed to, organically, authentically. She leaves it to chance. "If you plan, something always turns out another way," she tells me.

Mirjam is a rarity and that is part of what makes her special. She is not afraid to be true to herself or be dictated by what others think she should do. She has at times been made to feel stupid, told that she should be more useful (get a real job) and that her life is a constant holiday. She has been made to question herself: is she a bit selfish?

I suggest to her that people who make comments like that may be jealous. They are to some extent, a product of society's expectations and afraid to venture out of the conventional wherewithal box.

Mirjam is not processed by what people expect of her. She does not feel guilty for travelling the world. She makes no apology, nor should she.

No, she is not on holiday. Instead, she is brilliantly experiencing a life few dare to. No, she is not stupid. In fact, she is smart. (She has encountered few situations where she felt uncomfortable or in trouble.) And yes she contributes to society, perhaps in more ways than the average person.

She is an inspiration. She is a breath of fresh air. She believes in herself and in her instinct, and she is true to her spirited being. She simply lives the life that feels real to her. I suspect she has no idea how many people she has met who have been touched, or changed, by meeting her.

Mirjam arrived in Reykjavík and bicycled the south of Iceland with a friend before biking solo along the east coast to Egilsstaðir. From there, she bicycled towards Borgarfjörður eystri.

One morning, leaving her tent where she pitched it the night before (she is nomadic by nature, preferring to sleep in a tent), she set out up and over the mountain to see what lay beyond. Two and a half hours later, she came upon Borgarfjörður eystri. At first glance, she felt like her heart was going to burst. She instantly fell in love with the village and scenery.

Borgarfjörður eystri is a small fishing village with a population of approximately one hundred and thirty people. It is a beautiful nook of a place by the sea. The smell of the ocean permeates blissfully about. One can't help but think it is a lovely little secret off the tourist-tramping map.

The village and surrounding area is primarily known for outstanding hiking trails, elves and hidden people, and a large puffin colony.

Mirjam spent the day walking around and talking to a few of the inhabitants including Arngrímur. She got on her bicycle to begin the ride back over the mountain to her tent, when a voice inside said, "No, go back and see if there is work."

If Mirjam is to stay in one place for a while, she needs to work. She went to Álfheimar and asked Arngrímur for a job.

So for now, she, her bike and about forty kilos of her belongings (everything she owns with the exception of a pair of roller blades at her parents house) will stay in Borgarfjörður eystri.

“There is an energy here – something special. It’s a place that you feel in addition to the fact it is beautiful. The people are really nice here,” Mirjam tells me.

She is a brave girl. No question. But what makes her exceptionally brave is that she dares to live her life on her own terms. She dares to allow everything to happen by chance and she dares to travel into the unknown.

* Since this story was written, Mirjam left Iceland. You can follow her journey: www.cyclingdutchgirl.com