

The Dark side of Iceland

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“satisfy the click”

Magnús Secka and his mother Sara Magnúsdóttir were both exploring the Snaefellsnes (*pronounced SNAIY-fell-SNES*) peninsula, when they discovered a sticker on their car's rearview mirror reading, “If you are black or brown: please leave this town!” Yet another disturbing incident in Iceland, this time

in the Snæfellsnes, region. Strangely enough, Magnus' family was from that area.

Disclaimer: Viewer Discretion is advised.

Though they had a nice day, they were upset when they saw the sticker along with a link to a racist American website on Magnus' car when they returned. Sara posted a picture of the sticker on social media, triggering a significant backlash, garnering over a thousand likes. As of now, neither mother nor son have officially reported the incident to the police, and Magnus does not expect them to do so. He expresses hope that this occurrence will remain an isolated one, underscoring the desire for a more tolerant society.

Alarmingly, it isn't the first time something like this has happened. These stickers have been found on several vehicles. Now, even though the world has come to recognize Iceland as a country that's almost picture-perfect, you'll be surprised to know that the country is actually battling numerous cases of racism, mental-health issues, loneliness, discrimination, among a variety of other disparities over the past years.



The question always arises, “how is that even possible?” Iceland is one of the happiest countries in the world. While that statement is true, the Nordic country’s issues might be conventionally different from the ones prevalent around the world. However, they stem from the same disparities, you get to see everywhere else.

Iceland ranks 3rd among the world's happiest countries. Its culture, seclusion, and sights draw visitors from across the globe. Rich in their Nordic origins, the people of Iceland, although open-minded and known for their human development, wouldn’t necessarily be the first people you would consider when doing a video like this one. However, when we look beyond the serendipity of the country’s picturesque vistas, Iceland holds its fair share of secrets.

While the world thinks Iceland is a paradise, which it definitely is, some of its more daunting issues have slipped through the cracks. This is the dark side of Iceland.

Racial Discrimination

In Iceland, racism mostly targets immigrants, especially those who are not white or Western. Since the country has a long history of being ethnically and racially homogenous, there is limited diversity in its population. It is often assumed that Icelandic national identity is associated with whiteness, which causes non-white individuals to be considered outsiders to the Icelandic identity.

Even though there are few cases of racism, the Icelandic Human Rights Center has shown that there are many subtle or “hidden” forms of racism in the country. Iceland is the only Nordic country without a native population. Iceland was previously uninhabited prior to its settlement by Norse and Celtic settlers. According to researchers, this could effectively be one of the many reasons Icelanders aren’t very accepting towards immigrants, and people of different races.

Alarmingly, there are groups that display extreme traces of discriminatory ideologies. Some followers of Ásatrúarfélagið, often referred to as Ásatrú (I have a feeling I butchered the pronunciation, sorry about that folks), have embraced a slightly distorted form of Icelandic paganism that aligns with neo-Nazism and white supremacy.



Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, the leader of the Ásatrú Society, has explicitly disavowed individuals who advocate for racist ideologies and white supremacy within the religious community. The Southern Poverty Law Center has observed that the founders of “Ásatrú” intentionally steered clear of interpreting their Eurocentric cosmology in racist ways.

In addition, people who follow Ásatrú in the United States are more likely to follow versions of the religion that have racist elements than those in Iceland according to research, but ultimately this cannot be proven, as signs of discriminatory behavior have risen in Iceland as well. As immigration to Iceland has increased in the 21st century, racism, and social phobia have also increased. A significant portion of the anti-immigrant sentiment targets individuals of color, ethnic minorities, Eastern Europeans, and Muslims.

The Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland conducted a study in 2010 to examine how Polish immigrants are depicted in Icelandic media. The study found that Icelandic media discourse has created a stereotype

of foreigners as threatening, usually Eastern European men, connected to organized crime, rape, and fighting.”

The Icelanders have shown signs of being discriminatory towards general groups, which also include individuals of brown and black backgrounds. Traces of this can be found way back in the 1922, Icelandic rendition of the song “Ten Little Indians” which bore the title “Negrastrákarnir” (again, I know I’m totally butchering the pronunciation on that). The song portrays Black individuals through racially offensive caricatures.



While that period wasn’t necessarily a period of equality around the globe, what really stirred people up was when Skrudda's, an Icelandic publisher, republished the song in 2007. It caused a lot of debate and disagreement in Iceland. Despite the fact that certain Icelandic citizens viewed the song as a remnant of past times, viewed within the context of amusing and absurd

historical narratives, others expressed reservations about its perpetuation of racism and invoking a sentiment of “colonial nostalgia.”

The outdated Icelandic expression “negri” was deemed socially acceptable until the 1970s; however, it has since morphed into a racial slur akin to the derogatory term “N-word.” International celebrities from Iceland aren’t far off either. There have been criticisms directed at Icelandic singer Björk for instances of casual racism. She used the phrases “sound is the n****r of the world” and “audio is the n****r of the world,” which have been deemed insensitive and offensive.

When talking about real life incidents, a concerning disruption highlighting racism in Iceland took place in 2020 when an 8-month-old boy and his parents faced a distressing racial confrontation at an Icelandic swimming pool. This strange event shows how Icelandic society still holds on to prejudice.



Kolfinna, the mother, expressed his disdain in a story about a fellow patron who asked Kristófer's father's ethnicity and used a derogatory term to describe the child. Even though Kolfinna objected, the offensive language continued. Feeling shaken, she left the pool area.

The incident evokes strong memories for Sigur, the father, who was adopted from Sri Lanka, and who shared his long-standing encounter with Icelandic prejudice. He challenged the notion that Iceland is completely free from racism, highlighting the ongoing presence of it throughout the country. It is a stark reminder of the reality of racial discrimination in this country.

While Iceland is dotted with incidences like this one along with a whole host of others, there is an uprise fighting against it. African Americans who live in Iceland started an Icelandic chapter of the global Black Lives Matter movement. Numerous demonstrations promoting this cause took place in Reykjavík and Ísafjörður, further strengthening the position of people of color in this country. However, racial disparities aren't the only thing that fogs the minds of Icelanders. The prejudice just might be a little more deep-seated.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia

Minorities like Muslims and Jews also face discrimination in the form of Islamophobia and antisemitism. There are numerous traces of antisemitism and Islamophobia in Iceland, although they might not be considered as major disparities as compared to the rest of the world, they play a crucial role in understanding the overall sentiments of the country.

The more prevalent of the two is Islamophobia, with the rise of numerous globally recognized events involving extremist groups over the past few decades. In 2014, there was a controversial situation regarding the financial support provided by Saudi Arabia for the Reykjavík Mosque. Saudi funding could contribute to the promotion of Islamic extremism within Iceland, according to the then Icelandic President, Grímsson. Defendants argued that Grímsson's statements exhibited elements of Islamophobia.

Numerous instances of significant Islamophobia have been observed in Iceland. After the attacks at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in 2015, Icelandic social media platforms became a place where people discussed the dangers Muslims could pose and the possibility of Islamizing both Europe and Iceland. The extremist group PEGIDA established a local chapter in Iceland thereafter.



To ensure they had no affiliations with terrorism, an MP from the conservative Independence Party suggested conducting comprehensive background checks on all Icelandic Muslims. Jónas Kristjánsson, a former editor of DV, put forward the idea of imposing distinctive conditions on the citizenship process for Muslims. This idea called for them to swear a loyalty oath to the government, as a pledge to uphold Western ideals.

The unfolding situation raises both concern and curiosity. The current Muslim population in Iceland is about 1,500 people. The genuine apprehension stems from the actions of politicians and other influential individuals who are igniting the flames of these irrational sentiments.

Despite the widespread condemnation of overt calls for discrimination, recent events have demonstrated the disturbing trend of these ideas moving closer to the center of political discussion.

Possibly, the most disturbing example of this was the Progressive Party's appointment of Gustaf Nelsson, a prominent member of PEGIDA and a leading figure in Iceland's quote on quote "Islamophobic community", as an alternate

member of the legislature. PEGIDA stands for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West.

Despite the fact that Gustaf's appointment was revoked within a day due to extensive criticism, its occurrence is of significant concern.



The Progressive Party's Reykjavík division has been facing accusations of Islamophobia on a consistent trend. Earlier instances highlight this recurrent behavior. Before the municipal elections, the party leader, proposed removing land slated for a mosque, prioritizing politics over principles. Leaders such as Prime Minister Gunnlaugsson, while denying any anti-Muslim sentiment, reaffirmed urban planning explanations, concealing any potential prejudice.

Now it is one thing to disagree with another man's religion, but it is another thing to discriminate against that person because of his religion.

Mental Health

A much milder disparity compared to what we spoke of previously, but something that is nonetheless severe is the fact that the country's seasonal

extremes cast a shadow on its residents' well-being. During winter, the sun only shines for five hours every day. Mental health in Iceland is affected by this period of limited daylight and prolonged darkness. Also, the southern parts of the country often get a lot of rain during the summer months, which impacts the population's psychological state.

The lack of sunlight throughout the winter months contributes to feelings of sadness and other mental health issues in Icelanders. In 2017, an article from Iceland Magazine reported that one in ten individuals in Iceland experienced episodes of depression in their lifetime. In 2015, the country had the fourth-highest depression rate in Europe and the second-highest rate of severe depression symptoms.

Interestingly, a report from Globally Minded in 2017 found that Iceland is not very high in suicide rates worldwide, at 35 according to the World Health Organization or WHO. In this outcome, the close-knit nature of Icelandic communities is important. Most Icelanders have their obituaries published in the main newspaper, which creates a social environment where the publicity and stigma associated with self-demise discourage people from doing it.

Like we have all come to know, Iceland has a remarkable high in the happiness ranking. The World Happiness Report of 2022 indicated that Iceland was the third-happiest country in the world. This significant improvement could be attributed to Iceland's distinctive 'shotgun method' for treating mental disorders.

Statista reported in 2020 that Iceland leads the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries in antidepressant consumption. Even for milder depression or anxiety cases, Icelandic psychiatrists readily prescribe antidepressants, similar to their U.S. counterparts.

According to Svava Arnardóttir's account, published by Mad in America, the "shotgun method", for numerous patients, has been described as, taking up to 16 different psychiatric medications simultaneously over five years. In this approach, numerous medications are prescribed, with the hope that one will prove effective. But this method hasn't had the positive effect on public health

that people wanted, as evidenced by the increased rates of psychiatric treatments for depression.

The nation's well-being is impacted by its climate-related challenges and its unique approach to mental health treatment. Although the country's antidepressant prescription strategy is unconventional, the country's overall mental health landscape requires ongoing efforts to refine treatments and expand holistic alternatives.

Iceland's impression on the rest of the planet has been inspirational. From being an exceptional country for tourism, human development, and culture, the country is wonderful. However, like all countries, Iceland suffers from issues that can only be changed with the transformation of ideologies.

Understanding the darker side of Iceland motivates us to reflect on the diverse nature of any nation. It's no wonder Iceland is the 3rd happiest country in the world because their officials tirelessly work towards the countries' betterment. And the disparities that we've mentioned today might only make up a small portion of cons, that are heavily outweighed by the country's pros. It won't be surprising to see Iceland's remaining issues resolved in the coming future.

Have you ever been to Iceland? What was your experience like? And what reforms should be imposed to tackle these issues in Iceland? Let us know in the comments below, and as always, thanks for watching!

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