

ECOLIVING IN ICELAND



Photographs by Hildur Jackson

Hildur Jackson describes Sólheimar, meaning ‘home of the sun’, one of the oldest and most developed ecovillages in Iceland. Its main focus is the integration of people with special needs into the wider community.

This story begins many years ago. Sesselja H. Sigmundsdóttir was 13 and lived on the Thingvellir Plain where her father was the local minister. Since 881, the Vikings have met here and practised direct democracy and conflict resolution. This is also the place where the American and European tectonic plates meet and actually drift apart by about 2cm every year, creating some very special effects, such as thermal springs and rock formations.

Sesselja had just been confirmed by the Christian church and sat staring pensively at the high black rocks. Here she saw the vision of how she would spend her life, creating a place for young children. This is a vision which she has remained true to all her life and which is now called Sólheimar. It is a home for people with special needs, here called the ‘home people’.

Sólheimar was founded in 1930 by Sesselja who studied the care of children and the mentally challenged in Germany and Switzerland. Sesselja was fascinated by the vision and theories of Rudolf Steiner, and based her work primarily on his methodologies. She emphasised organic horticulture, healthy food and artistic expression in her work with children with learning difficulties alongside those without. Today, Sólheimar is a charming village of about 100 inhabitants, renowned for its international, artistic and ecological atmosphere which prides itself on its varied cultural, social and sporting activities.

Sólheimar, and indeed all of Iceland, celebrated Sesselja’s 100th birthday in 2002 with the issue of a postage stamp printed with her picture.

Although enjoying a growing recognition, Sólheimar has also had its share

of hard times. In the beginning it was a home for orphans and Sesselja wanted to feed the children vegetables and fruit. In the 1920s and 30s in Iceland the local diet was potatoes, fish and lamb. Eating fruit and vegetables was looked upon with suspicion. Many people did not want Sesselja to take care of the orphans for that reason alone. Later she took in children with special needs and, as they in turn grew up, also adults with learning difficulties. The public then condemned her for mixing the two groups (orphans and those that were commonly termed ‘retarded’).

Today, Sesselja’s house has for years been home to the project’s offices, but you can still see two rooms with three small beds in a row under the roof close to where she used to sleep herself. The whole house is now slowly being turned into a museum.



Left & Top: Iceland's rugged landscape.

Centre: Sesselja's 100th birthday celebration stamp.

Bottom: Five orphans on a horse.

Top: The education building.

Centre: Solheimar's director Agnar Gudlaugsson.

Bottom: Gulfoss waterfall.

Top: Sesselja's father's ministry.

Centre: The geothermally heated outdoor swimming pool.

Bottom: Solheimar.

ICELANDIC WILDERNESS

Iceland is a country with a harsh and grandiose nature with much lava and very few trees. The light changes constantly and awesome views appear continually. The early April snow has not melted entirely, streams and rivers are vigorously making their way to the ocean, which is never far away. Rocky and mossy covered mountain sides alternate with plains covered with yellow grass. Not one blade of green grass has survived the winter. Waterfalls and geysers add to the shifting scenery. Sturdy Icelandic horses and sheep roam everywhere, birds feed and fly in flocks and all contribute to a feeling of wilderness.

Arriving at Sólheimar, my husband, Ross, and I drive down a long road into a sheltered valley with many big trees and houses close together. The name 'Home of the Sun' seems well chosen.

We are directed to one of the two guest-houses and given a small flat all to ourselves on the other side of the valley. Up to 30 guests can be housed.

The director of Sólheimar, Agnar Gudlaugsson, is leaving for a small holiday today but takes his time to help us get some food in their local store filled with many of their own products including handicrafts, foods and art. Edda Bjorgvinsdottir, a well-known actress in Iceland and summer resident of Sólheimar, has promised to take us on a guided tour. But first she needs to finish the instruction of a play with a group of the 'home people'.

In the meantime, we get a key for the outdoor swimming pool and relax for an hour in the geothermally heated hot water surrounded by leafless trees. Several other visitors and some children share the experience. More people

arrive, among others an athletic man of 50 laughing heartily with a friend. I recognise Reynir Petur from a book I was given on a previous visit. The book was about his two months walk around Iceland to raise money for a new theatre at Sólheimar. We laugh and talk and enjoy the swim. He tells us about his new computer and DVD and about his love of numbers. He has been here since he was three years old. That is 50 years ago. His partner is sitting on a bench smiling.

ART & ECOLOGY

Edda is a lively actress from Reykjavik, who spends time here setting up theatre shows and helping to promote Sólheimar to the public. Right behind the guesthouse she takes us to the education centre: Sesselja House, which was inaugurated at Sesselja's 100th



birthday celebration in 2002. It is covered with silvery driftwood, has a sod roof and, being on the top of a hill, it has a magnificent view. The walls are insulated with Icelandic lambswool, and the roof is insulated using recycled paper. Many ecological features make the building itself an attraction.

£800,000 was raised, including help from the state, to build the centre. It has a big auditorium (for 100 people), an exhibition area and several smaller meeting facilities. All the furniture has been designed locally and produced with local wood (quite exceptional for treeless Iceland). Edda proudly gives us a small publication about Sesselja produced for the opening and later reprinted and distributed throughout all of Iceland as an insert in one of the major newspapers. On the walls hang homemade musical instruments.

Behind the education centre Sólheimar has purchased 400 hectares (1,000 acres) of land. Every year they plant more trees here. Some of the trees grown in Ölur are planted under Iceland's south-west forestry reforestation programme, in which Sólheimar takes an active part. Yearly, some 17,500 trees are planted on the Sólheimar estate, and in addition, many are planted around the village itself. Around 450,000 trees of different species are envisaged for the Sólheimar reforestation area.

Next to the centre, a new building is growing out of the rock. From the shape you recognize a church. The architect is Árni Fridriksson, who also designed



Sesselja House. The church seats 200. There is an emphasis on good acoustics because the church will also be used for concerts. The walls are constructed of concrete, but with a turf exterior, and the roof will be made of driftwood. It has not yet been finished.

HOUSES OF THE 'HOME PEOPLE'

The home people either have their own homes (if they are able to take care of themselves) or share a house with others and trained staff. The houses are cheerful and brightly coloured. When they work in protected jobs (like in the greenhouse, dining hall, the shop, cleaning or producing art) they earn a wage and pay for rent, food and goods like everyone else. Everybody eats lunch together in the dining hall.

WORK

Sólheimar has many different workplaces where people with special needs work alongside those without special needs. This variety of opportunities for work, particularly in creative employment, is unique in Iceland. Some of the workplaces are run by Sólheimar Day Services, an independent company, but there are four other independent companies. Five international volunteers from different countries assist in the workplaces when needed.

There is an art workshop, ceramics and weaving studios, soap and candle factories, a carpentry workshop, an organic tree nursery and reforestation centre, organic horticulture and farming,



Left: The well landscaped church.

Centre: Sculpture.

Above: Home produced plants.



Left: Using the old greenhouse.

Centre: Watering lettuces.

Below: A productive polytunnel.





Above: Greenhouse cafe.



Centre: Solheimar's geese.



Right: The theatre.



Above: Morning circle gathering.

Below: Ceramics workshop.

Centre: Candlemaking.

Right: Sesselja's room.



a hotel, café and restaurant, a general store and crafts shop, a maintenance department, plus cleaning, telephone and postal services.

On our tour, Edda shows us the two big buildings for workshops for the 'home people'. Seven workshops run by Sólheimar Day Services have a creative focus. Sólheimar is perhaps the only place where people with special needs can develop their art, working every day under the instruction of accomplished artists – and many residents have developed their artistic talents to a very high level. Their arts and crafts products are sold in the local store.

A hexagonal hall with a stage was built using Steiner-inspired architecture. Outside a sculpture garden illustrates the emphasis put on art in this community. This focus on art has also raised much controversy... "Why do retarded people have to have art around them?" ask some outsiders. Edda explains how important art is for our well-being. Hearing her, we have no doubt it is true.

GREENHOUSES, VEGETABLES & TREES

I ask to visit the new, big greenhouses for which Edda, however does not have a key. Luckily, we find Rosa working here on Easter Friday. The plants do not take breaks! They are tall and tomatoes and cucumbers will soon be ready for harvesting. Bumblebees take care of pollination. Seaweed mixed with porous pieces of lava help to fertilise and aerate the soil. The hot springs are abundant so that only the amount of sunlight limits the

growing season. They plan to buy lamps when they can afford to and then they will be able to produce year round.

Every day in the growing season they take organic produce to Reykjavik, being the only organic greenhouse growers on Iceland. They also propagate plants and trees in the nursery to be planted outside later in the year. They have 40 varieties of trees. I also sneak a look at their stables. They have chickens, geese and cows for meat, eggs and fertiliser. They supply the whole of Sólheimar with their own eggs and also sell them in the store.

ENERGY PRODUCED IN THE COMMUNITY

Sólheimar has a hot spring that generates near boiling water at prodigious rates – 55-70 litres (12-15 gallons) per second. This is more than adequate to provide central heating for all buildings, including the greenhouses that grow vegetables and nursery trees year-round, a warm swimming pool with a hot tub, and hot water for the community.

This innovative community has a five-stage reuse of geothermal water before final discharge. Water enters from a nearby hot well at 83°C (180°F). A new well needed to be drilled after the earthquake in 2000 reduced the flow of the original one. The heat is harnessed by use of a bimetallic heat converter that passes cold water over an opposing microcircuit, generating an electrical current based on the temperature differential. The initial prototype is small, but a next-stage 1 kW converter

will eventually supply much of the power for interior lighting, airflow and projection. Given Iceland's enormous geothermal and snow resource, practical devices that tap temperature differential offer a significant advance over the steam turbine methods used widely in Iceland.

Second stage water leaves the converter at 80°C (176°F) and is used for hot water in the kitchen and bathrooms, or alternatively run through the radiant heating system. Third stage water is captured in the grey water drains and from radiator exhausts at 60°C (140°F) and run through a heat exchanger for convective airflow at the underground point of entry for incoming air. Fourth stage water at 35-40°C (95-104°F) is sent under the outdoor paving (for deicing) and then, stage five, flows by gravity into the biological digesters and constructed wetlands where it keeps useful microflora active year-round.

THE FUNDING OF SÓLHEIMAR

What is the secret of Sólheimar? Edda explains that being a well-known actress people listen to her. She can reach people who might normally not care,


so now almost everybody on Iceland knows about Sólheimar.

The chairman of the board, Petur Sveinbjarnason, also deserves great credit. His vision and persistence has been a vital contribution. He is a businessman (in real estate) living in Reykjavik. He knows people and can cultivate funding sources, which would be difficult for somebody living at Sólheimar.

Petur heads a rather hierarchical structure. The people living at Sólheimar do not even have a representative on the board. For many ecovillagers this is provocative but, like it or not, it often takes a 'bulldozer' to get things done. Several successful projects I know of have had similar people with a lot of focused male energy as initiators. The development of the project often depends on their capacity to materialize a vision, attract the right people, raise funds and step aside when that too is needed. Peter Caddy at the Findhorn Community had this role. Edda talks very highly about Petur and feels confident that in some years the inhabitants will have representatives on the board and Sólheimar will have

a more democratic structure.

Can Sólheimar be replicated? Is it a model for others to imitate? There seems to be a growing interest in modernising social welfare. We cannot just buy a good life for the handicapped, the old and the infirm. We have to get involved and take a direct responsibility in creating communities.

Several Steiner Camphill projects in Norway, Denmark and Sweden have managed to develop working models that are also ecologically sustainable. In Hertha, Denmark they coined the term 'social ecology' about this reversed integration of people with special needs. When you visit Sólheimar, you have problems distinguishing who is 'handicapped' and who isn't. If in doubt, you will usually find it is the most friendly and loving ones who are the 'home people' 

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