

Happy Summer's Day

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"Happy Summer's Day" is an article published in the Winnipeg newspaper Lögberg-Heimskringla, 2 May 1997 (p. 1-2) about the celebration of some holidays in Iceland.

One year ago this April, a Spanish friend of mine had almost finished his first year as an exchange student at the University of Iceland. Having survived the winter, he knew much more about our country and its people at this time than he could ever have read in travel books. For instance, he had discovered a variety of quaint habits that our people desperately cling to, and one of them is our national compulsion for holidays.

Day Before and After

Like most other nations, we have our national holiday, on June 17th. Some holidays we share with other Christian nations, e.g. Christmas Day, Easter Day and Whitsun. What makes us particular in our belief, though, is our dedication to adding a day extra for good measure, which we call "Annar í," or the Second Day of. . . .

To begin with, there is "Annar í jólum" (the Second Day of Christmas), then there is "Annar í páskum" (the Second day of Easter), and again "annar í hvítasunnu" (the Second Day of Whitsun) - all nationally celebrated holidays.

We not only spend the day after off work, but we relax on the day before as well. On "Aðfangadagur jóla," for example - Christmas Eve - everyone quits working at noon, and likewise on "Gamlársdagur," New Year's Eve.

Moreover, Easter being The religious holiday of the year, we need two days off work to make preparations: "Skírdagur" and "Föstudagurinn langi," i.e. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Counting six weeks from then, on a Thursday, comes "Uppstigningardagur," to celebrate the Resurrection, and of course you get the day off to resurrect your soul,

which must by then be absolutely starving for a holiday.

Labour Day Twice Over

May 1st, the International Labour Day, is also a nationally claimed holiday, and so is the first Monday of August - the so-called "Frídagur verslunarmanna," or the official shop and office worker's holiday, celebrated by every member of the whole nation-lawyers and bankers as well - which all grab their tents and well-isolated sleeping-bags and go camping for the weekend, rain or shine.

The only people that do not get this weekend off are shop assistants, who must provide the campers with refreshments and other necessities!

"Sumardagurinn fyrsti"

Having been introduced to a number of these holidays, my friend was not surprised to hear that one Thursday in the middle of April was a holiday as well-he was only too glad to have a day off to prepare for exams. The next day he went to buy some groceries, and as he stepped into the shop, brushing the snow off his shoulders, the shopkeeper said: "Gleðilegt sumar!"

My friend's brain started analyzing the message, aided by a vocabulary accumulated throughout one (rather mild) winter. "Gleðilegt" means merry or happy, and "sumar" means summer. Was that shopkeeper suffering from some weird affliction, causing him to lose all sense of timing? How could one think of summer while it was still freezing outside and the trees had not even started budding?

Embarrassed, my friend mumbled something, paid for his groceries and went home. The next day he met some Icelandic

friends and told them his funny anecdote about the mad shopkeeper. To his surprise, they kept a straight face and told him that the holiday on Thursday had been on account of "Sumardagurinn fyrsti," the First Day of Summer.

An Age-Old Tradition

That day, my friend found out that every year-in middle or late April-we Icelanders celebrate the coming of summer. We take the day off, put on our heavy winter coats and march in a parade with our kids, merrily wishing each other a "Gleðilegt sumar!"

My friend was delighted to hear that summer arrived so early in Iceland . In his country, they normally say that summer arrives around June 10, which he calls the "Okay to leave off your Sweater Day." Hence, my friend joined all the other Icelanders, who with a twinkle in the eye waited for the slightest symptoms of summer being here. From this day onward, everyone will make comments like: "Summer is just about here," they will smell it in the air, knowing that it is lurking somewhere, just around the corner, waiting for the correct moment to make its grand entrance.

Summer?

My friend waited for the arrival of summer for the next few months. "I spent the whole summer anticipating its arrival," he says, "but it never came. All I ever saw were some 'signs' of summer."

Well, if my friend was waiting for a day to spend at the beach, he could wait for ages. Anyway, he has now found out that we have no beaches on which to spend a sunny day. "Summer" in Iceland , he discovered, is not a term describing the temperature or weather conditions. It is a feeling, a shared spirit, a mass anticipation. The whole nation is waiting for something which is always just about to happen. This great expectation represents an uplifting of the soul after a long, dark winter. The sooner this extraordinary feeling comes, the better. Therefore, why wait until June? April is much more convenient.

This shared spirit (plus an abundance of other factors) so impressed my friend that he decided to stay on and finish his education here. In fact I think he will staying for a lot longer than that. Who does not want to work in a country where you normally get a 5 week vacation in summer-in addition to all the above-mentioned holidays?