

## LAMB

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"Stewart, look!" I said to my fiancé, pointing out my passenger window at a sheep farm in northwest Iceland. "A sheep on its back!" I thought of our rat terrier back at home in Los Angeles, flopping on her back to beg for a belly rub, her hind legs twitching like the sheep's.

Stewart was skeptical. "I'm not sure that's a good thing."

I wondered what he meant but didn't say anything else. After a minute, I picked up his phone and opened the web browser to run a search. "Sheep on its back." I read the first entry I could find.

"Stewart, turn the car around."



Sheep outnumber people in Iceland. I liked that fact, because it meant there weren't a lot of people in Iceland, and that everyone ate lamb. My fiancé and I went to Iceland in September, and beforehand, we had to do a lot of explaining to our families and friends about why we'd visit Iceland before, well, almost anywhere else. But we really wanted to see the Northern Lights, and we were curious about hiking onto a glacier, swimming in the Blue Lagoon, and generally being around so many active volcanoes. Mostly, we wanted a break from city life. The few people we knew who'd been—lovable outliers in life as in travel, really—urged us to go. We got the sense that if we were even considering going to Iceland, we should probably go to Iceland. "Hope you like lamb," a friend warned. I couldn't imagine not wanting to eat it.

I love lamb and always have. And it has never bothered me that it comes from a cute animal. When I was little, my mom served lamb with mint jelly on Easter Sunday. She set the dessert out as a centerpiece—a pound cake shaped and frosted to look like a baby lamb at pasture, with a big pink icing bow around its neck. I don't think anyone even noticed that we were celebrating the cuteness of an animal while eating it.

At 30, I eat lamb at least weekly. I love its earthy release, the way it seems to come already seasoned with a hint of cinnamon. And my guilt about eating as much meat as I do is alleviated by my sense that sheep are more ethically and sustainably farmed than most cows, pigs, or fowl—I figure it's not popular enough to be commodified in that way. I prepare steaks from the leg with white wine, garlic, thyme, and dijon mustard, or I buy ground lamb for burgers with tzatziki sauce. There is a Uyghur lamb dish at a Chinese

restaurant in LA that Stewart and I have eaten dozens of times, seasoned heavily with cumin and punctuated with onions, tomatoes, and cashews. We order lamb stew when we eat Ethiopian and lamb curry when we eat Thai. I've had lamb tongue and lamb belly.

Eating this much lamb has led to some contemplation of its death. I honestly don't think sheep die in vain for my consumption. I haven't taken one of the expensive butchery classes that are popular among conscientious nose-to-tail home cooks like myself, wherein one of the students has to kill the animal to be butchered, but if I could easily afford to, I'd like to. And I've thought that if I had to be that student, I should do it. I've personally killed a lot of lobsters with a knife through the head. I'm accountable. But senseless killing, I've never understood. Animal shelter euthanasia, trophy hunting, Biblical sacrifice (arguably senseless)—it seems so cruel. At least eat it. An animal's life has to be worth more than our mere caprice or convenience, right?

Stewart doesn't share my intentionality, but he does share my taste for lamb, and he and I genuinely looked forward to eating what would likely be the best lamb of our lives in Iceland. We would spend a week driving counterclockwise around the perimeter of the island on its one mostly paved highway, the Ring Road, stopping in a different village each night, and we'd have two days in Reykjavik on either end. We arrived at what felt like 2:00 a.m. to us, disembarking to a wet runway, paved across a flat, barren, colorless landscape. Following the advice of our Lonely Planet, we went to the Blue Lagoon between the airport and Reykjavik for a soak, and the experience of standing in hot, steaming milky blue water, sipping strawberry flavored sparkling wine, with chalk-white silicone masks on our faces, was so pleasurable and weird that we knew we were in the right place.

We didn't eat lamb our first night in Reykjavik, at a 24 year old family-run restaurant tucked into an old neighborhood away from the main street—we ate monkfish, puffin, and whale—but we did our second night, at a trendy restaurant near city hall and the museums, and the third, at a guesthouse and working horse farm in the south. There, lamb shanks were roasted in the oven for seven to ten minutes, five times, over four hours—according to our server, who would lead our trail ride in the morning, and whose wife was cooking for the entire restaurant. He didn't tell me anything else, and I understood. It tasted like a closely guarded recipe.

For the next two days, the Ring Road teetered over the coastline, steep rock faces to our left and the ocean to our right, a few meters of gravel shoulder on each side, and powerful winds sliding down the mountains and toward the ocean. Stewart drove, and I could see and feel his constant corrections on the steering wheel as he countered the wind's force. Glacial flood plains provided the worst kind of relief—miles-wide breaks between the coastal mountain ranges became wind tunnels for 100 mile per hour gusts rolling off the inland glaciers.

Much of Iceland seemed uninhabitable by any reasonable person's standards—and yet there were sheep everywhere. Sheep looked down at us from the steep slopes. Sheep braced themselves against winds that were otherwise blowing out windows and eroding

paint on cars. Sheep rummaged the volcanic rock beneath them, looking for nourishment that wasn't there. The mountains occasionally receded inland and allowed for small, grassy sheep farms, with herds a few hundred strong, but this was the exception, not the rule. Even when the road turned inland and we drove in near-white-out conditions for most of an afternoon, we occasionally caught glimpses of sheep along the side of the road, ice clinging to their wool. At one point, we came across a herd of sheep in the middle of the road and videotaped them running ahead of our SUV and to the shoulder as we slowly advanced. Their bleating seemed like laughter. It was adorable.

Weather conditions improved in the second half of the trip, when we reached the north. Our meals in the north were the best, too. We ate langoustines and cod chins that had been caught that day at restaurants overlooking their frigid waters, and we drank warm milk from cows we'd just watched get milked and enjoyed homemade cheese at a guesthouse and working dairy farm. We ate lamb shanks, smoked lamb, a roasted lamb sandwich, all of it local. We also saw the Northern Lights, in Akureyri. It wasn't the intensity that surprised me but the scale; green wisps stretched from one horizon to another and moved like a woman's long hair underwater.

On our ninth day in Iceland, we were to drive from the tiny fishing village of Saudarkrokur, in the northwest, to Hellnar, on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula to the west. It was one of our longer drives, and we were wistful. After Snaefellsnes, we'd return to Reykjavik, and after Reykjavik, we'd be home in southern California, staring at computer screens, breathing in pollution, eating industrial-organic meat that came packed in styrofoam trays.

The first half of the drive was stressful. The coastal road was unpaved for long distances at a time, even as it ascended high over the ocean and fjords; what few guard rails existed were never where they were most needed. Every time we slithered around a bend, we were rewarded with a view out over an emerald valley, a fjord reaching inland as far as it could and a tiny fishing village just beyond its grasp on the shore. We rarely passed other cars—few tourists to Iceland ever venture this far from Reykjavik—and we stopped often to photograph the empty landscapes. We finally turned inland and enjoyed the safety of endless farmland around us, rolling hills, clear skies, sheep.



And a sheep on its back.

My internet search on Stewart's phone revealed that a sheep on its back is called a "cast sheep," and they often die within a short time if they're not helped to their feet. Few sheep are successful in righting themselves without assistance. I read what I found to Stewart.

"What are you planning to do?" he asked.

"We have to right it," I implored.

Stewart slowed the car and turned around on the narrow road. We talked about driving back to the farmhouse to alert someone, but it was so much further back, and I didn't think we had time. We would have to enter the pen and right it ourselves. We agreed that the other sheep would just walk away from us, so we didn't worry about being intimidated or bitten. We did worry a little about being accosted for trespassing, but it was nothing that couldn't be explained away.

Stewart pulled the car to the side of the road when we arrived to the sheep. It was still alive, bleating with all of its might. The other sheep had moved away from it, and I felt a tinge of anger at their indifference. Once outside the car, we saw that actually getting to the cast sheep would not be easy. The pen was lined with a chest high fence, strung with rusty barbed wire. And between the road and the pen, there was a moat, four feet deep, six feet across, with about two feet of standing water in it. Thick, tall grass covered everything, and as we stepped into it just off the edge of the road, we felt how deceiving it was—our feet dropped deeper into the grass than we expected.

"Can you go?" I asked. Stewart gave me a look—tilted head, furrowed eyebrows, frown—that reminded me that this was my idea. "I don't know how we get across this without getting wet."

Stewart didn't, either. "There's the barbed wire, too."

The cast sheep continued to plea for its life.

I started to step into the moat, but I didn't want to go in. I looked down at my week-old Viking brand hiking boots, with their bright white stripe around the sole. I had just spent \$200 on them in Reykjavik, much more than I'd wanted to spend, but the less expensive pair I'd ordered right before the trip didn't fit. I liked these, though, and I didn't want to submerge them in muddy water and ruin them. Two days prior at Lake Mývatn, I'd declined to venture into Hverir, the steaming mud pits at the base of the volcano Námafjall, mostly because the air was too heavy with the stench of dog poop, but partially because I didn't want the inches-thick mud of the pathways to stain my hiking boots. I briefly considered taking them off, but there was no saying what was in the moat. I assumed parasites. My thoughts then drifted to my jeans. They would get wet to my knees and probably rip on the barbed wire, and I dreaded the feeling of cold, wet, rough fabric stinging my shaven legs for the rest of the day. I also needed to wear the jeans again on the trip.

We agreed that both of us would need to go—I wasn't strong enough to right the sheep on my own, and we'd need to help each other over the fence. I sank further into the grass while we talked about it, growing yet more aware of my shoes and jeans.

Finally, we had a plan. But I didn't move. We just looked at each other, not saying

anything, the sheep's cries intensifying. I finally shook my head and suggested that there might be a driveway further back that traversed the moat, or a gate, without barbed wire. I stepped up out of the grass and crossed the road to get in the car, not looking back.

Stewart and I both knew that if I wanted to do it, he would have done it with me.

We drove toward the farmhouse, scanning for anything that would let us breach the pen. Nothing. When we finally arrived to the gate at the opposite end of the pen, higher than the pen walls and also lined with barbed wire, we were so far from the sheep that we couldn't see it.

"What do you want to do?" Stewart asked.

"There's nothing we can do," I said. The opportunity had passed. I'd let it.

We turned the car around and drove slowly, looking again for some way in. But when we arrived back to the cast sheep, its legs were still. I cried a long cry. Between whimpers, I kept saying it was so sad.



But the tears dried.

It's uncomfortable, being confronted with the realization that I'm someone who wanted to save a noble, thinking animal from untimely, unnecessary, painful death, not someone who actually had the courage, selflessness, and compassion to do it. I always rationalized eating so much meat by making good choices when I did, hoping I was never responsible for an animal's suffering in life or death—but now I know I'm capable of subjecting an animal to exactly that, and watching it happen, and walking away.

That night, at our hotel restaurant, I ordered the lamb.

End