

# PLAYING IN NATURE DEPLAR FARM

ON A REMOTE ICELANDIC PENINSULA, YOU'LL FIND  
CHEF GARDAR KARI GARDARSSON WHO GUARANTEES  
YOUR VISIT WILL BE TRULY UNIQUE.

Words **Jocelyn Pride**

The magical beauty  
of Deplar Farm.





“I never cook the same dish twice,” says Gardar Kari Gardarsson. “An artist wouldn’t paint the exact same picture again.”

Not only did the dynamic young chef’s innovative approach see him named Iceland’s Chef of the Year in 2018, as Executive Chef of Deplar Farm, Gardar intermingles the known with what’s possible. “If you feel the ingredient, you can visualise what it wants to be. Here it’s all about how we play with nature.” And what a playground.

Even by Icelandic standards, Deplar Farm is remote. A two-hour drive from Akureyri on the Troll Peninsula in North Iceland, it’s like Tolkien got together with a bunch of Vikings to hatch a plan. Set against a backdrop of mountains swathed in swirling mist, the 18th century former sheep farm is tucked behind a grassy knoll known as Álfhóll (Elf Hill). Elves, also known as hidden people, are part of Icelandic folklore. So, when Chad Pike, Managing Director of Eleven Experience, the high-end adventure company behind the transformation of Deplar, heard about the spell over the farm ‘to not prosper if Álfhóll was mowed or changed in any way’, he left it alone. The result is truly magical.

Everything inside the rustic black wooden walls, wrapped in a turf roof, screams intrigue – bedroom doors with names like Thor, Odin and Snorri beg to reveal Icelandic mythology, a fine collection of taxidermied birds of the region perched



along a wall incites curiosity, and the stone floors hold stories of those who’ve walked before. Superbly curated artwork hangs in every room, fires crackle (even though it’s the height of summer), sheepskins drape over Scandinavian style lounges, there’s a library, gym, yoga studio, swim-up bar in the indoor/outdoor pool (heated by geothermal springs) and who can resist a ‘Viking’ sauna and plunge pool labelled ‘only for the brave’?

#### LIFE AT DEPLAR

At the centre of Deplar is the stunning hand-crafted communal dining table flanked by picture windows that blur the lines of outside and in. With no fences or boundaries, sometimes sheep



from the farm next door press their noses onto the glass to peek inside or huddle in nooks drawing warmth from the walls.

Meals are a happy mix of cultures. It’s a full house (28 people) and I sit amongst diners from eight different nations. Nothing is formal – it’s a walk-around-in-pyjamas-if-you-feel-like-it type of atmosphere, where people simply share the pure joy of being immersed in the wilderness.

Breakfast is buffet style – granolas, skyr (traditional Icelandic yoghurt), in-house breads, smoked salmon, smoothies (including the healthy cod liver oil shot and ginger shots), and eggs ‘any way’ cooked to order. Lunches are taken in house or out on excursions, and dinners are grand affairs.

There are no menus, or names of dishes. Chef Gardar presents each dish with a brief description in the same way a proud parent might introduce their child. Meals are personalised according to likes/dislikes and dietary needs. Ingredients have the lowest of food miles – lamb from next door, beef over the mountain, fish from the local lake and stream (often caught by guests) and greenhouses using geothermal heat at a nearby farm supply the vegetables. “Farmers knock on our door with goods and we knock on theirs with requests.”

Depending on the season, food is also foraged – in summertime there’s mountain moss, lovage, berries, Arctic thyme, sugar kelp, pine leaves angelica and sea truffles.

“The angelica leaves with the scallops come from next to the waterfall 15 minutes walk from here,” says Gardar. “I can base a seven course dinner around the leaves, seeds and stems. Roasted, dried or pan-fried, it can produce 12 distinct flavours.”

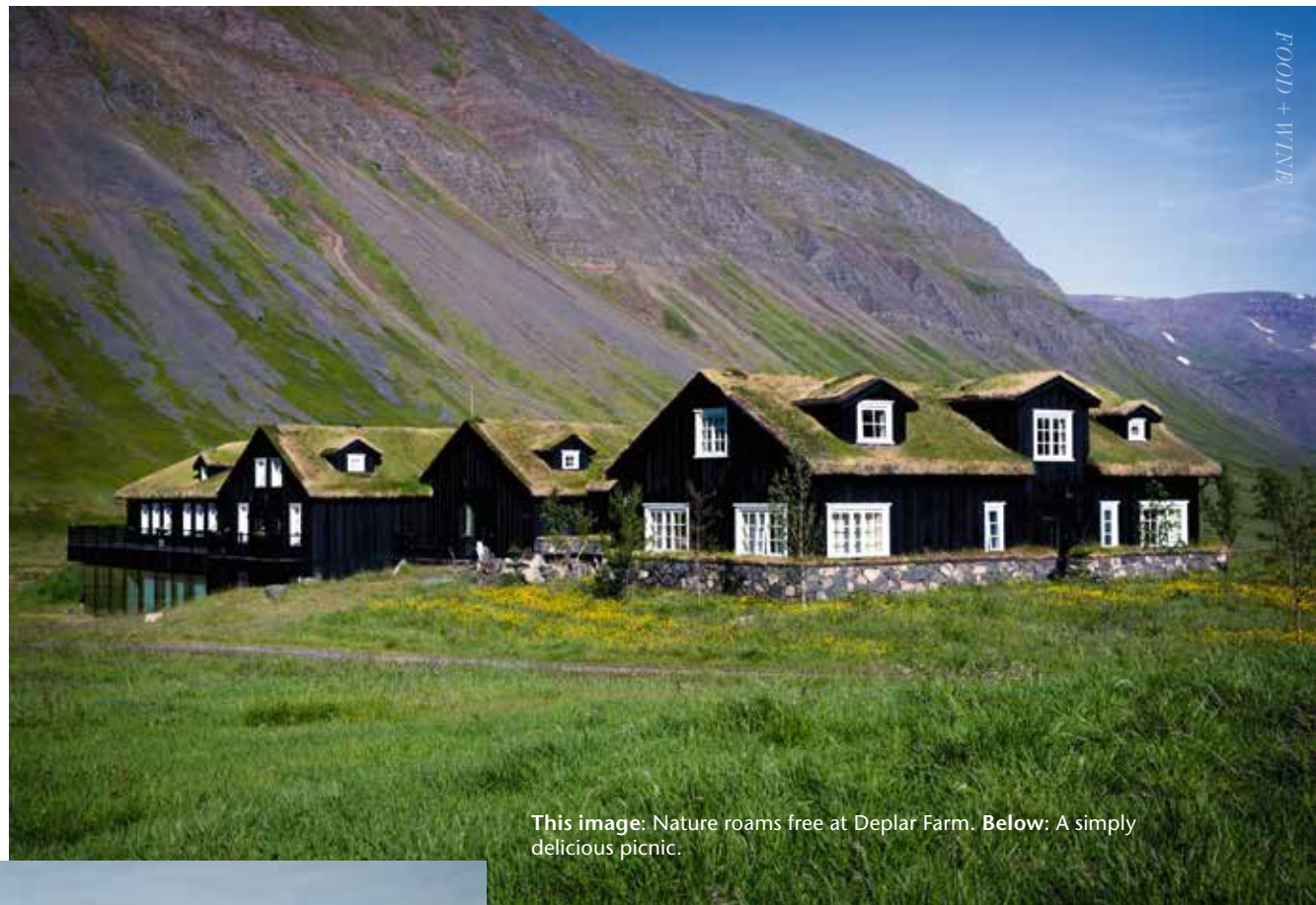
Other seasons bring a different bounty. “In autumn, chanterelles grow at the bottom of the mountain. They’re only found in four places in Iceland, so we keep it a bit of a secret.”

**Clockwise from above:**  
The swim-up bar;  
Chef Gardar Kari  
Gardarsson; Whale  
watching; Chef  
Gardarsson never  
serves the same  
dish twice; Drinking  
from the waterfall with  
local guide, Eyrán.

ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE EXCEPT WHALE AND FOOD  
BY JOCELYN PRIDE.



Clockwise from below: Puffins – the darlings of the north; Another of Gardar’s incredible creations; Tranquil waters.



This image: Nature roams free at Deplar Farm. Below: A simply delicious picnic.

Wine is paired with each course and introduced by sommelier, Rory Conniffe.

“The classic expression and light citrus of the Bramito della sala Chardonnay from Umbria brings out the freshness of the parsnip and cucumber garnish on the wolfish.”

The wine collection, mostly European, is extensive. Highlights include Gaja ‘Gaia and Rey’ Chardonnay from Piedmont and the acclaimed Burgundy, Domaine Bruno Clavelier Aux Brulees Vieilles Vignes Vosne-Romanee Premier Cru.

#### FURTHER AFIELD

Although meals are a highlight, so too are the activities. I’m here in summer, so there’s virtually 24 hours of daylight (in winter, Deplar transforms into one of the best heli-skiing resorts in the world). Each guest has their own guide and days are planned according to active interests such as fly fishing, hiking, cycling, kayaking and horse riding, or activities like whale-watching and trips to local villages.

Like many of the guides, Eyran was born and bred in the area and has the Icelandic can-do attitude. Proud of her country, her eyes shine with excitement as we explore together.

One morning we take a hike over the hills. The narrow track winds through a patchwork of lichen covered rocks studded with clumps of wildflowers – pink, purple, white, yellow and blue. I think of the strength and resilience of these tiny flowers that lie for months under a blanket of winter darkness. We cross streams, fill our water bottles from a waterfall and listen to the beautiful birdsong of the Golden Plover.

“These birds are very special to us,” says Eyran. When we first hear them, we know summer is coming.”

Other days we ride Icelandic horses through fields of buttercups, spot humpback whales breaching in a fjord and



discover the history of the fairy-tale village of Siglufjörður, home of Kristen Sölvadóttir, the real Snow White.

And then there’s the day we skim across the glassy water of Skagafjörður fjord to Drangey Island.

#### GRAND FINALE

Jutting straight out of the sea, Drangley Island is the remains of an extinct volcano. It’s also one of the best places in Iceland to hang out with the darlings of the north – puffins.

Viggo Viggosson has the largest hands I’ve ever seen. “These are true Viking hands,” he says, followed by a chuckle just as large. He and his son, Helgi Rafn, are the only tour operators



allowed on the island. And it’s a good place to be in big, safe hands.

As we clamber the 200 metres up sheer cliffs, clutching hold of ropes secured between rocks, puffins poke their faces out of their burrows. Many have a neat row of fish tucked into their beaks ready to feed their puffling, some preen themselves and others simply stand and stare, totally at ease with our presence.

Reaching the top, we sprawl out on the grass and listen to the cacophony of puffins and other sea-birds like kittiwakes, guillemots and shearwaters nesting on and around the island. The sheer numbers defy belief. A speck in the ocean – the breeding ground for the next generation of tens of thousands of birds.

Helgi Rafn also tells stories of the island – the night a troll couple were travelling through the fjord with their cow and didn’t make it to the other side before the sun came up, so they were turned into stone. And of Grettir the Strong, who lived and died on the island over 1,000 years ago, the basis of one of Iceland’s Saga.

After reflecting on the day with a cocktail in the hot springs pool, Chef Gardar prepares a spectacular degustation dinner served in the wine cellar.

From the sublime Arctic char (caught that day) cooked simply in butter, to the tartar of reindeer, (one of four Gadar bought directly from a licensed hunter and prepared himself), the delicate flavour of langoustine with Arctic thyme flowers, beef brisket slowly cooked for 24 hours, cauliflower with ocean truffle and carrot cake with burnt butter ice-cream – each course is a triumph.

In the words of Gadar, “I want guests to come and experience something they’ll never get again. And in a way they should never want it again, because that would spoil the memory.”

IMAGES OF PUFFIN AND DEPLAR FARM BY JOCELYN PRIDE.