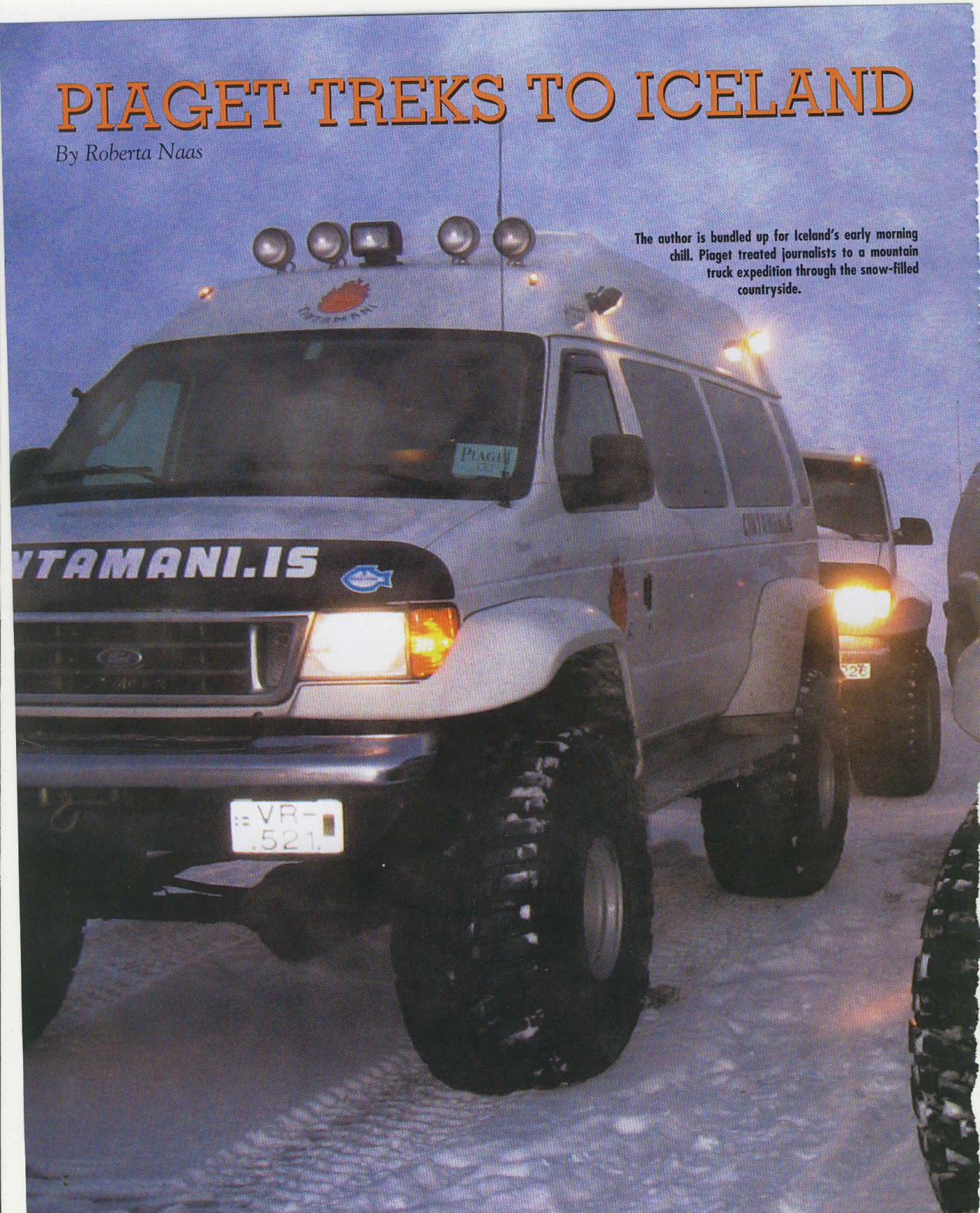
PIAGET TREKS TO ICELAND

By Roberta Naas



The author is bundled up for Iceland's early morning chill. Piaget treated journalists to a mountain truck expedition through the snow-filled countryside.

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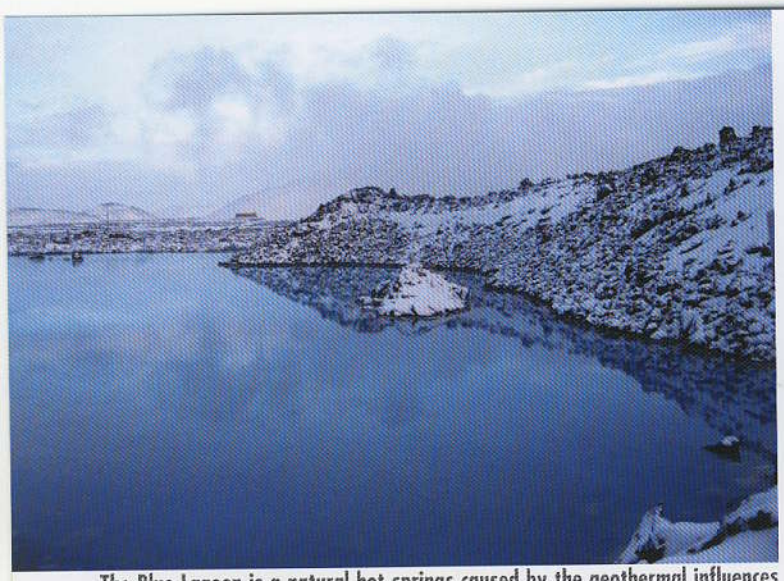


The Blue Lagoon is a natural hot springs caused by the geothermal influences of Iceland's volcanoes.

Not many brands go out on a limb, so to speak, to unveil their newest collections to key journalists of the world. Piaget, however, selected to release its Limelight New York to Paris series on an island halfway between these two cities — Iceland. (See Piaget article on page 74) A world apart from anything we know, this was a true experience.

Few lands can truly be called different. Then, there's Iceland. Billed as the warm country of the north, a force of geothermal energy — Iceland teams with ravage scenery that is at once alluring, awe-inspiring and ever-changing. This island — once linked to Europe and North America — is home to a climate that changes by the moment, to volcanoes that churn constantly, to geysers and hot springs that lure locals and tourists alike, and to forces of nature seen nowhere else on earth.

Alone in the north Atlantic Ocean, Iceland was formed by magma, spewing from the rift caused by the slow separation of the American and European continental plates. It is constantly plagued by terrible weather, earthquakes, volcanoes, glaciers and lava. Within a 15-minute time period in January, the weather can go from clear to snowing, to raining, to sleet, to clear again! The sun rises at around 10 am at that time of year, and sets again at around 5 pm. If one is lucky, at this time of year — on a good night, out and away from the city, one can view the northern lights.

Only a portion of the country is habitable, and thanks to wonderfully rich fishing and a fabulous supply of geothermal energy (due to the volcanoes and their steam), life in the cities such as Reykjavik is actually enjoyable. The culture in Iceland is an interesting mix of rich Viking and Nordic history. Legends and tales are a vital part of Icelandic culture even today, and heritage is something Icelandians hold dear. While Iceland seems remote, with today's travel, the culture here is a homogenous one for the quarter of a million people who comprise the Icelandic population.

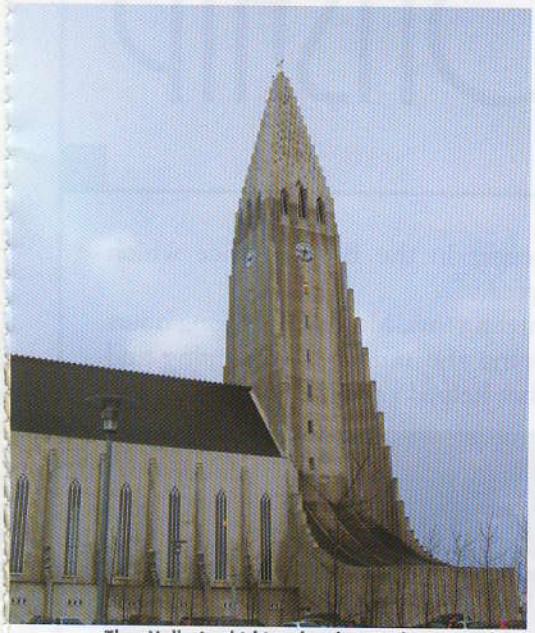
Perhaps top among the land's treasured riches is the Blue Lagoon, a lake of geothermal brine where visitors indulge in steamy water, filled by the runoff from a geothermal power station. Here, amid jagged lava fields, the steamy waters of the blue lagoon are rich with cleansing nutrients — acting as a natural spa. Sensational for the spirit and the mind, the Blue Lagoon is a traveler's haven. In winter — one can indulge in the warm waters, taking in the snow-capped lava fields surrounding the lake, while remaining in the warm waters. Once a natural open-air lake, today the Blue Lagoon is ensconced by a hotel, spa, restaurant and walk-out heated pool. Still, it is a MUST experience.

Another site not to be missed is Pingvellir National Park — a UNESCO site. Reflecting the history of Iceland, Pingvellir lies within a belt of volcanic activity and fissures that run across the country. This is a part of the mid-Atlantic Ridge, the junction of the American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Pingvellir is located at the western end of a rift valley. Over the past 10,000 years the earth's crust has been subsiding and diverging here. At this end is Pingvellir Lake, Iceland's largest natural lake. Over the centuries, governments and legislative bodies have met in this region. It is now a national park protected by UNESCO. One won't want to miss the chance to take a walk into the Continental rift.

Reykjavik is a small and intimate city with beautiful buildings, both old and modern.

After visiting this park, it's on to the spectacular Gullfoss (Golden) waterfalls, where the Hvita River plunges with immense power into a 200-foot deep gorge. Other indulgences not to be missed while in the Southwest corner of Iceland are the geysers — natural steam and water that spew forth from the ground at regular intervals thanks to the heated lava below. The geyser Strokkur is the most famous of the country's geysers. (Interestingly, "geyser" is one of the few Icelandic words that have been adopted by the rest of the world.)

The city of Reykjavik (capital of Iceland) is itself a captivating place, with its many churches, parliament, capital on the lake, and stunning restaurant Perlan, which is built on water tanks that hold the city's hot water supply. Indeed, Reykjavik is bustling with energy. Here, small corrugated-iron houses are built in contrast to futuristic glass buildings and state-of-the-art facilities. The city boasts a range of fine restaurants with imaginative cuisine, including fresh seafood, wild game and lamb. Galleries and museums, theaters and festivals keep visitors busy.



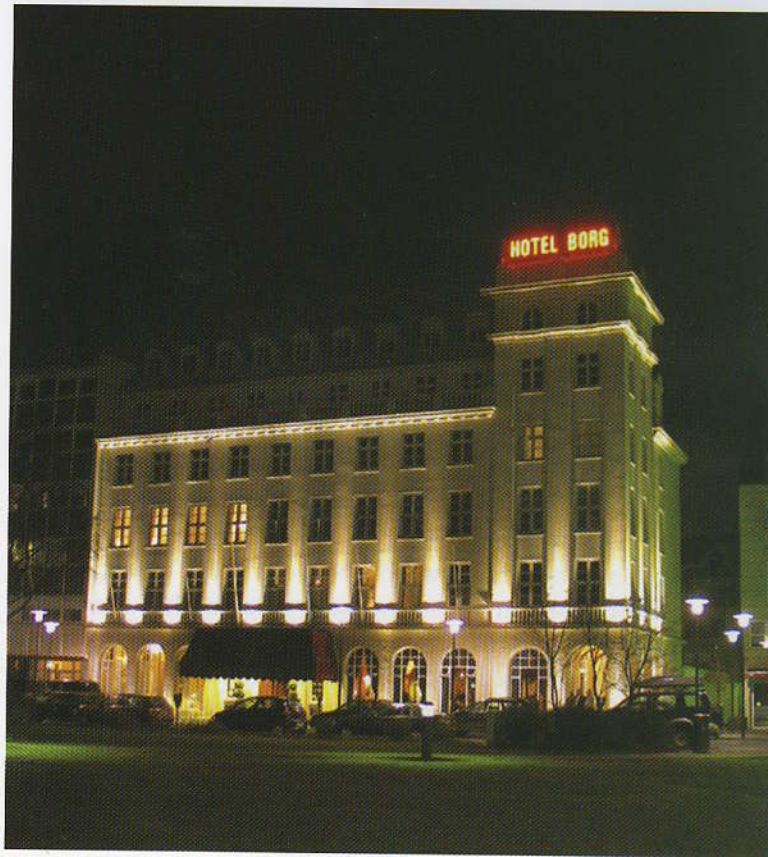
The Hallgrimskirkja church can be seen from almost everywhere in Rekjavik.

One of the highlights of the Piaget trip — in addition to witnessing the fabulous timepieces, and all of the aforementioned cultural and island experiences, we also were treated to a fabulous mountain truck excursion across the snow-covered countryside. For the adventurous spirit — this is an excursion not to be missed!

The geysers are just a few hours' drive from Reykjavik. Several regularly explode, spewing water and steam.

HOTEL BORG

There are several wonderful hotels in this great city, but for character and style, try Hotel Borg — right on the square across from the Parliament building in the old town. This four-star hotel with 56 rooms was originally built in 1930, but has been restored to its original Art Deco style and is a showcase of sophistication. Each room has custom-made furniture and fittings, and is equipped with modern amenities.

The Hotel Borg combines old-time elegance with style. The bar and the Silfur restaurant offer Art Deco décor with a modern twist. French cuisine is conjured up by an award-winning chef at the Silfur restaurant, and breakfast is served in a separate room in old English style.

Best of all — location, location, location. From this hotel — shopping, food, and nightlife — are all within walking distance.