

Some suggested answers and extension(for teachers only!)

Your Viking name

Interesting extra fact – in Iceland names still work this way. The telephone directory in Iceland is ordered by first names... so anyone who's finished early could order the class that way too, for a new register while studying the Vikings. If two people have the same name (two John Johnssons, for instance) that's when the extra nickname becomes important... in Iceland today it's usually a job title that distinguishes people.

Viking travels/Where did the Vikings go?

Viking voyagers didn't have compasses or maps (they wouldn't have been able to draw the map being used today, for example!) so to avoid getting lost they stuck to the coastline as far as possible. It takes about a week to get to Greenland to Iceland by boat. Note that the Viking settlements are all on the side of Greenland facing Canada – look up Qaqortoq on Google Maps and you'll find the site of one. (They have a sculpture of Erik's son Leif there too.)

Viking discovery

Some extras about Greenland. Greenland was hard to survive in, in Viking times, because it was very cold in winter and the summers are short. It's also (surprisingly) subject to drought. You can't grow wheat there at all (so it's very hard to make bread) and even sheep and cows can't be farmed over much of the land. You can hunt seal though, and fish, although the sea freezes in winter (you can fish through holes in the ice but it's not easy). It was also hard to have warm enough clothes. Wool isn't enough – you need furs.

Greenland was also a long way from Europe. It takes a week to get there from Iceland if the wind is blowing the right way and you don't meet a storm. There is also a lot of ice. In winter the sea freezes around a lot of Greenland. In spring, ice from further north comes drifting down the east coast and is very dangerous – big sharp lumps of ice in the ocean. The replica Viking boat Islingur (pictured in the Viking travels sheet) has made the voyage from Iceland to Greenland.

Erik set off on his own, with just a boat crew. He would have arrived in spring and then had to build a shelter for winter and get enough food to last through, collecting it and hunting and drying fish and meat. He would probably have brought farm animals with him – but that meant he had to get food for them for the winter as well as for himself and the crew.

Ways to entice friends to Greenland might include: it's very beautiful and the sun shines in summer on the blue sea. (In Viking times...) farmland for sheep and cows, with nobody at all living on it so lots of space - "If you come to Greenland you can have a whole fjord to yourself!"; walrus ivory in the north (get rich quick – it was very valuable); plenty of seals and birds to eat because they aren't used to being hunted by humans, plenty of fish in the sea.

There was also a 'push' - by the time Greenland was settled, Iceland had been inhabited for 100-200 years. The resources that had been available at that time were wearing thin: pollen samples suggest that large numbers of trees had been cut down and not replaced. Possibly too the bird and seal populations which had been a larder for so long were feeling the pressure of the occupation and hunting was getting harder. Another problem in Iceland was volcanoes, which erupt and are very dangerous. And it rains a lot – though that's good for growing hay for sheep.

(Nowadays...) people go there on adventure holidays, kayaking up the fjords and fishing, visiting Viking ruins, going on wild walks across the virtually unsettled landscape, crossing the glacier (parts of which are still marked on maps as Unexplored)

Viking houses: Turf was a great material because it's insulating, it's waterproof (because the walls are thick, really), it blends into the landscape, it's everywhere, there's lots of it and it grows back after you use it (very eco friendly!). Your sheep can even graze on your roof! (Well, if it's strong enough). In contrast, bricks are really hard to make – think of all the firing etc; there is hardly any wood in Iceland and what there was would be needed for boats; stone walls would often have gaps in, letting in the draughts. Houses were built out of turf in Iceland up to as recently as 200 years ago. The only problem is that they don't last forever. Eventually the grass plants decay and the turf sods crumble apart.

The two houses featured are the Sorcerer's Cottage north of Holmavik in Iceland – a reproduction of a sixteenth century house – and of Eiriksstadir, a reproduction of a Viking house at one of the places Erik the Red is said to have lived, Haukadale.

Viking food: Cows' milk would have usually been used fresh. Sheeps' milk would have been used for skyr. Skyr is a cross between cheese and yoghurt. It tastes a bit like fromage frais. To make it, you add bacterial culture to yoghurt and then add rennet so it separates and you get skyr and whey. The whey is a preservative, and parts of the sheep would have been pickled in it, so they lasted the winter. The skyr would keep for months in barrels, after which it could be mixed with milk and served. More on skyr at www.skyr.is, a very child-friendly website. You can get it in the UK – at the Kensington Wholefoods Market in Kensington High St, London. The butter was unsalted (there is not much salt in Iceland) and so would be allowed to go mouldy and sour (as brie is today). Preserving food was really important in Iceland and Greenland because you had to have enough food to last the winter.

Vikings in Iceland and Greenland did not eat many vegetables. Things like moss and lichen (certain types, not all!) would have provided some vitamins. They did eat bread – flat bread baked on a stone on the fire - if they were in countries where you could grow wheat (ie not too far North). They did not have potatoes, rice, pasta, tomatoes, or many of the staples we rely on nowadays! And to get milk they would have had to keep a cow and milk it; to get lamb they would have looked after the sheep all year before slaughtering and eating it. That looking after included, of course, cutting grass for it to eat in winter, making it winter shelters, driving it up to pasture in summer, fetching it back in winter...

Note that it's the roe of the sea urchin you eat, not all of it, and you have to know what you're doing to get into one!

Recognising the images: the one that looks like fudge is the rotten shark (it smells of ammonia but the Icelanders say if you hold your nose it tastes OK.) Hung out on the line is the dried fish; the brown spiky things are the sea urchins with the odd scallop and the edge of a starfish; the brown bowl holds skyr; the pinkish stuff is seal fat (used for oil not just eaten neat!).

Viking Voyage

One way to transport food, in the days before canning and freeze-drying, was to bring live animals. Vikings did take their animals on boats if they were going to settle: that is how sheep, horses, etc got to Iceland in the first place. (Humans have transported these animals over millennia from the Middle East where agriculture began).

Further reading: The Vinland Sagas (The Greenland Saga, and The Saga of Erik the Red). These tell the story of Erik's journey, and of his son's journey to America. Also Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga by Fitzhugh and Ward has great illustrations and short articles on different topics if you want more depth.

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