

The Northern Reaches

As far as humans can possibly dwell, there exist a place where golf, a miracle drug and very long days can co-exist.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J WHYTE



OPENING PICTURE:
Aurora Borealis shimmers above Siglo Hotel in the north of Iceland



INSET - TOP TO BOTTOM:
Siglo in its winter-wonderland guise, popular for skiing; Akureyri Golf Club, host of the annual Arctic Open golf tournament; Benecta claims to help golfers keep swinging freely well into their later years.

You've heard the expression, 'If only you could bottle it' occasionally applied when one 'pures' a 5-iron, sinks a 50-foot putt or indeed any of life's more enhancing moments.

If someone could indeed 'bottle it', you'd go to the ends of the Earth to find more, right?

That is where I am right now.

My journey starts in the tiny town of Siglufjörður. It sits at the head of a narrow fjord, 23 miles south of the Arctic Circle. It is Iceland's northernmost

municipality and during the months of June and July, it barely gets dark.

This phenomenon, known as 'The Midnight Sun', has its advantages. There are no vampires flapping about for instance, at least not through the summer months. You could quite comfortably go for a game after the pub or if for some reason you can't sleep, count the birdies instead of sheep.

I was somewhat surprised to learn that North Iceland has been tipped by Lonely Planet as one of the 10 best places to visit in Europe. You don't hear that much about the area and yet through the summer months, it offers breathtaking Alpine landscapes, trout and salmon fishing, trail hiking, whale-watching, thundering waterfalls and geothermal hot tubs.

In winter, it is a skier's paradise with the added bonus of a ringside seat to watch the Northern Lights. This, by the way, was the setting for the chillier scenes in the hit fantasy series, "Game of Thrones".

But I'd not come all this way to a location-spotting tour but to find out about a product that claims to be helping people enjoy the above-mentioned sporting activities - golf in particular - well into their later years. And by the way, such a product comes in a very nice bottle.

This health-enhancing 'silver bullet' is called Benecta and comes from a town called Siglo. Siglufjörður, to give it





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its full name, is a modest hamlet of a mere 1,500 souls. In the clean, fresh Icelandic air, there's a sense of settled prosperity with brightly painted houses 'neath snow-striped hills, even at the height of summer.

It wasn't always so! In fact, just a few years back, Siglo was on its knees, its fish-processing factories abandoned and boats left rusting in the harbour. Once Iceland's main herring station, Siglo had a population three times that of today.

Then, in the 1960s, the herring stocks collapsed and Siglo started a slow, painful descent. The Icelandic banking fiasco of 2008 rubbed further salt in the wound and poor old Siglo touched bottom.

Today, it's one of the healthiest, most thriving communities in all of Iceland. There's a brand new hotel with 68 rooms and suites, a lively cafe scene, a geothermally-heated swimming pool, a craft beer brewery and at the far end of town, a brand new golf course.

The population is rising with young families moving from

Iceland's capital, Reykjavik and indeed other parts of Europe to take advantage of the town's easygoing pace and superior quality of life. There's lots of work with young businesses springing up and a large factory at the centre of it all, the one that produces the so-called perfect panacea, Benecta.

SHELLFISH INTENTS

We pulled up to the Siglo Hotel in the bright evening sunshine and waiting to greet us was the man largely responsible for the town's turnaround. Robert Gudfinnsson is a jovial, genuinely friendly character and a native son of Siglo.

The man-made millions from fish farms in Iceland, Mexico, Peru and Chile, he was residing somewhere on Easy Street, Phoenix, Arizona at the time of Iceland's fiscal belly flop.

"In 2008, when everyone was rushing to take their money out of Iceland, or at least trying to..." Robert told me sitting outside his brightly painted cafe, "I decided to put some back." "It was all about timing," he reflected. "I definitely

wouldn't do it now. At the time, I was living in Phoenix, running several very successful companies and not losing anything. That was a great advantage, being far away from my hometown to see what was going on and what could be done. You think differently from a distance. To me, it was obvious what would happen."

They say Robert spent in the region of £30 million on his old hometown, purchasing abandoned wastelands, broken down piers and decrepit old factories. His grand plan was to spruce up the town, revitalise the economy and take advantage of the upturn that he knew was bound to come.

"After the crash," he continued, "the Icelandic Krona was worth very little so that gave tourists the chance to come and visit the place." The Tröllaskagi Peninsula, where Siglo is situated, certainly has a lot to offer.

Like Shetland or Orkney in the far north of Scotland, this remote part of the world has an elemental beauty

FIRST ROW: North Iceland is perfect for summer golf in a pristine environment.

SECOND ROW - TOP TO BOTTOM: Benecta CEO, Robert Gudfinnsson has opened a hotel, cafe and restaurant on old fish factory sites; Whale watching tours leave from the port of Dalvik. We sailed out quite a distance but it was worth it as the humpbacks seemed happy to entertain us - in spectacular form; Later, we fished for whales! Only kidding... although the cod we caught were quite sizeable.

THIRD ROW: According to the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Akureyri Golf Course is the world's most northerly 18 hole golf course.



that is quite extraordinary, very different from typical tourist spots and a lot of people like that.

But tourism wasn't the only card up Robert's sleeve. "I was fined for dumping shrimp shells over the side when a friend called and told me there was value in those shells."

It was a biopolymer product called Chitin which reputedly had a role to play in protecting people's joints as well as generally alleviating symptoms associated with getting older.

With no end of shrimp shells at his disposal, Robert began looking seriously into the matter and after 10 years of research and study, his team found ways to improve the already well-documented beneficial effects of chitin or 'short chain chitosan' before finally launching their own supplement, the aforementioned Benecta.

THE BENECTA EFFECT

To delve a bit more of the science, chitin and its derivative, chitosan are natural building blocks for the body derived mainly from shrimp and crab shells. They have long been used in biomedical applications such as wound dressings, antimicrobial agents, anti-ageing cosmetics, weight loss and as a supplemental treatment for Crohn's Disease.

The Benecta product has been further developed looking specifically into the use of chitosan as an anti-inflammatory agent especially related to joints. "As we get older, we are more prone to inflammation," Robert informed me. "Chitin bonds to the proteins that cause inflammation, reducing them and eventually helping to eliminate them."

Through Robert, I met a couple of locals who'd been taking Benecta for a reasonably long period and were enthusiastic to say the least. A chap had suffered from psoriasis and from what I could make out (he didn't speak English), he believed that taking Benecta had more or less cleared it.

A golfer in our midst had also been on the supplement for several months and was swearing by it. His swing certainly didn't seem any worse for wear.

But what is clearly evident is the effect that Robert and Benecta have had on this local community. Sigló, with the Genis (Benecta) factory at its centre, is a wonderful example of how the right attitude and a few million Icelandic Krona, along with support of the locals can turn an ailing, aged community into a vibrant, economic success.

Gudfinnsson might be a shrewd businessman but he is also a clearly positive person with the means to get things done. He is an entrepreneur that believes in long term objectives rather than quick gains and in the process, is helping turn his hometown into a healthy, thriving place to live and work as well as an attractive destination for the rest of the world.

MIDNIGHT MADNESS

We had a few days adventuring around Iceland's enigmatic north and the weather was simply amazing; crystal clear skies each day and warm temperatures in spite of snow still clinging to the mountainsides, and decided it was time for some golf.

The brand new course at Sigló offers nine holes with 18 sets of tees and the customary stunning views. In spite of

its youth, the course is already a good test with a design that's up to any international standard. The clubhouse, which was under construction at the time of our visit will double-up through the winter as a ski lodge.

Skiing is also very popular in Sigló through the long winters. We took to the first tee in time for midnight and by the appointed hour, we could still clearly see where our drives were landing. I tried to do this in Shetland in the very north of Scotland one time but the clubhouse camaraderie (too many drams of whisky) and lack of light didn't quite cut it. Here at Sigló at 1am, it was still quite bright.

Akureyri Golf Club is also worth sampling. Akureyri is the main town in the North, Iceland's second-biggest urban area and a great destination in its own right. Blessed with a drier climate than the Reykjavik region, it has its own 'hipster' scenes such as local microbreweries, great seafood restaurants and a very chilled atmosphere, pun intended of course.

They also say that it is the most northerly 18-hole golf course in the world. I guess that makes Sigló the most northerly nine-holer. Akureyri hosts the annual Arctic Open tournament, which for more than 20 years, has attracted golfers from all parts during summer solstice when the sun barely sets.

We also played at Golfklúbburinn Hamar near Dalvík, a few miles to the south, a superb little 9-hole course with, yet again, amazing views from every hole.

I wouldn't say the north of Iceland is a 'must go' golf destination but if you do decide to play some proper midnight golf, you really ought to pack your golf shoes at least and hire a set to play these three delightful courses.

After that, go to the port of Dalvík and take a trip to the seas – the day is long anyway, so might as well make full use of it. You sail out quite a distance but it is worth it as the humpback whales seemed happy to entertain us. This is one of the best places to see aquatic mammals including white-beaked dolphins, minke whales, the small harbour porpoises and sometimes even the majestic blue whale. We were happy enough with our humpback.

The north of Iceland is a truly majestic place and I really loved discovering this part of the world. It offers something special and it is worth the extra miles and expense; Iceland is once again as costly as it used to be.

Benecta is not that cheap either. At around £40 for a tub of 60 (a month's supply), it is sold directly to the consumer via their website (benecta.com) keeping the price point "as reasonable as possible," Robert told me.

I've been taking Benecta since my visit nearly two months ago and my golfer's elbow seems to have disappeared. These niggling issues can be subtle and I have to admit, mine was not too bad.

Now, I wonder if someone could invent a pill that would sort out my rather desperate duck hook? 🍷



To view more of David's stories, photography and video visit www.linksland.com

LEFT PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Golfklúbburinn Hamar near Dalvík, a beautiful 9-hole course complete with stunning scenery; Robert keeps his old fishing boat parked next to his new hotel; In the clean, fresh Icelandic air, there's a sense of settled prosperity in Sigló with brightly painted houses 'neath snow-stripped hills, even at the height of summer; Sigló Hotel has been built in the marina in Siglufjörður where you can watch fishermen land their catch. The seafood here doesn't come any fresher; Sigló Golf Club, built to international standards at the far end of town is the scene of many a midnight match.

CENTER PICTURE: David takes a break from his toils to enjoy some fish soup at Kaffihús Bakkabrædra in Dalvík. The seafood, as you can imagine is some of the best in the world.

David flew from Glasgow to Iceland with Icelandair - www.icelandair.com. See his videos on the adventure at www.linksland.com