

The background of the cover is a high-angle landscape photograph. It shows a steep, rocky mountain slope on the left, covered in patches of green moss or lichen. At the base of the slope is a small, sandy beach. A person in a blue jacket and yellow pants stands on a rocky outcrop overlooking the beach. To the right of the beach is a vibrant turquoise lake with white foam from waves crashing against the shore. In the distance, more rugged mountain peaks are visible under a clear sky.

lens
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MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPHY

An Interview with **RAFN SIGURBJÖRNSSON**

**ICELANDIC EXPERT
PHOTOGRAPHER
& TOUR GUIDE**



Photo of [Rafn Sigurbjörnsson](#)

Volcanic Eruption at Fimmvörðuháls
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**RAFN
SIGURBJÖRNSSON**

ICELANDIC EXPERT PHOTOGRAPHER & TOUR GUIDE

-Hello Rafn, This is our pleasure to exhibit your work again at the International Lens Magazine. This is actually the second interview with you, the last one was on Issue#25, focused on Landscapes Photography. For those that might not have come across your photography before, please introduce yourself and tell us about your background?

I'm a freelance photographer born and raised in a small island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean called Iceland.

I have been focusing on the raw Icelandic nature and landscape since I was a young boy and hiking in the Icelandic highlands and lowlands all my life. I think by now I know the nature and the hidden spots like a true native.

I'm a self-educated photographer and have worked as a photographer for more than thirty years. I have recently published 8 photography books about Iceland called "WILD ICELAND the untouched nature"

Each book focuses on the collection of the best of the sensational nature of the individual parts of Iceland.

Now I'm teaching and traveling with other photographers through my company called "Discover Wild Iceland.com <<http://www.discoverwildiceland.com/>>", where I lead Photo and Photo workshop tours in Iceland. Along with this I have a Photo stock web called "Ice Stock Photos.com" where you can buy full resolution photos of Iceland.

-Iceland is one of the dreamiest spots in the world for photographers and you are one of the fortunate people who made the tours and the photography as a profession. Why is it so dreamy?

Oh Yes, Iceland is an Ideal place geographically for photographers and I consider myself very lucky. There are few places anywhere in the world as different from other countries as Iceland. We have colorful mountains, pitch-black volcanic beaches, waterfalls of all sizes and towering volcanoes. We have green meadows, small cute horses, creaks, rivers, cliffs, mountains etc. The weather in Iceland is far out. There is a saying “if you stand still for 30 minutes you’ve got it all”. This leads to that you will never get the same shot twice, just have the patience to wait for the right light and remember that all weathers are good photographic weathers. It’s more often better to have some character in the sky, than plain blue skies as the lighting becomes dramatic, even if the photographer is freezing and the wind is blowing hard in your face. In the summertime we have endless soft light with late sunsets and early sunrises which are amongst the unique features and makes it the most magical place for photographers and landscape lovers. The light in the wintertime is something you have to witness yourself because it’s impossible to write about. Then we have ice-caves, frozen waterfalls, frozen rivers, Northern lights (Aurora Borealis) shimmering in the sky, great glaciers, stunning mountain views and the contrast in the landscape are far beyond your imagination. Sign up with one of my private tours and I’ll prove it to you ha ha ha ha ha :-)

-What are the most important subjects to focus on to best tell the story of the area?

It all depends on what is in the landscape. Do you see a small house under the mountain and is that what you are focusing on. Is it the river in front of you or the reflection? First of all you have to give you the time needed to capture a good landscape or mountain picture. If it’s a place you are not familiar with scout it good to find the right angle. Look for places that will give you a good 3d framing in the 2d dimension photo. Look for good leading lines like a river or other lines in the landscape. Don’t stand and frame your shot like others do. Do it exactly your



Svínafellsjökull Glacier
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way.

You may have to move around a bit. It’s good to carry a compass or a good app in your cell phone which can tell you where the sun will rise and set so you will know the “Golden Hours”, and imagine how the area would look like in different kind of lights. Sometimes a cloudy, rainy or frosty violet light tells more about the place than a sunny day. Sometimes the sunrise tells a better story than sunset. This all need some practice because you also have to imagine where the light is not falling. Are there some reflections in the pond in front of you that would be

good to use or is it overwhelming so you have to use polarizing filter to eliminate some of it and increase the contrast. Is the sky too bright compared to the landscape, do you have to use graduate filters to get more balance or do you have to use both. Every place has its own personality or character and it’s yours to discover it. It’s often good to use the rule of third in this matter, do it in a little bit longer time to get the clouds on a move and use two digits for aperture. Tell the story you feel the landscape is telling you, be the landscape and capture it in your

own way.

-Where does your sense of adventure come from? Did you grow up camping, mountaineering, and loving the outdoors lifestyle?

It started in my early days when I was a boy scout. My team used to go camping a lot and we had to sleep out in the wilderness, with or without tent and camping gear. We were taught how to use the

us without damaging it. When you learn how the earth reacts, you start to respect it and love it. I think it is the best lesson I have ever learned. When I grew up a little bit more I started to take the bus to the end stop and from there I started walking - just somewhere (sometimes my mother was not satisfied with that behavior) and I'm still doing the same, that is, going somewhere, where the landscape and the light tells me to go.

-Where are the best places and what are the best times to go for photography in this area of Iceland?

The best place in Iceland is where you are at that time. The time of photography depends on what type of shootings you want to do, so it's impossible for me to decide for you the best places. Iceland is a photogenic country and you will find good framings all over. I really love winter photography so my time is when the sun is low; you have lots of colors in the clouds. Long snowy shadows, great contrast in the landscape with frozen rivers and waterfalls. I like to be in the Highlands where less is more and the wind is blowing. Something you want to see in Hollywood. To do this you need good Super Jeep on at least 38" tires and skills to use it. But that is another story

-Have you ever gone to any extremes to get a shot?

I don't know if that is extreme when you have to walk in really deep cold Glacial River to get to the canyon or the place you want to shoot.

I don't know if that is extreme if you are driving on a Glacier and the snow is blowing so hard that you only see the white in front of you and you have to rely on the GPS and take the chance that you will not drive into any crack or off the cliff.

I don't know if that is extreme when you are crossing a river and it start to leak into your car through the windows.

So. . . No, probably not

-What's the most spectacular thing you've ever experienced on a mountain?

I've just reached the top of a snowy mountain in the Southern region. I set down on a comfortable stone I found to have my lunch and view the target area. When I sat there admiring the view I suddenly felt a slow vibration in my body and I overhear a low hiss sound. The vibration started to increase and the hiss got louder. Suddenly I see where the mountain starts to move. My head starts to spin and I remember thinking "Hmmm. What now?".

The mountainside kept going down faster and faster with more power until I heard a Bang. The mountainside increased the



speed and slides down with loud noise and strong vibration on the top where I'm sitting. I sat there for a while looking at this phenomenon crawling down and I could feel the power in my body. Slowly the mountainside stopped crawling and it got quiet again.

As I was sitting petrified on my stone looking down on the mountainside I saw where the snow avalanche has taken away a big part of the path I was walking for a few minutes ago. I made it this time, but I forgot to photograph it. Maybe I'll get it next time?

-What kind of camera gear do you use? And what are your five essential items of gear?

Today I'm using Canon EOS 5D MK III along with my wide angle lens from Canon 16 – 35mm 1:2,8 L II USM. Tamron SP 24 – 70 1:2,8 USD. Canon 70 – 200 1:2,8 L IS II USM. Canon EF 100 – 400 1:4,5 – 5,6 L IS. Manfrotto 190 tripod. Manfrotto 055 PROB tripod. Canon GPS GP-E2 and Lee filters

I would say that my five essential items is a good camera along with sharp wide angle lens as well a sharp midrange lens like 24 - 70. With all that a robust tripod is needed in Iceland as we sometimes have lot and lot of wind passing by. If I tell you the truth, I would not want to be without my LEE filters, they sometimes make the difference between bad and good shots.

-How, as a Landscapes- Adventure photographer, do you bring awareness about the environment and take care of it?

Since its invention, photography has been used to document and interpret the landscape. People like Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter were central figures in influencing American attitudes toward wilderness and conservation and others have followed. I hope each country has their own environmental photographers and I'm one of them in Iceland. I'm both trying to expose the beauty in the landscape and the environmental problems, and for that I'm trying to get people to care. I may be winning some

battles here and there, but sadly it seems to me that I'm losing the war. I strongly believe that small things can add up and make a big difference. That is why I will continue to do my best to influence others to care about the beauty which is all around us in Iceland. We simply have to care.

As I live in Iceland it is my responsibility to nurse my beautiful island and let people know with my camera as a weapon of what is happening and going wrong.

- Iceland is very sensitive due to short summers and long winters, so it takes the vegetation long time to heal.
- Sorry to say that we have long past the tourists tolerance limits. We are only 300.000 people living here, but we are getting over 2.400.000 tourists this year 2017. That is eight times more than the population of Iceland.
- Iceland is changing rapidly fast due to the climate changes and the Glaciers are melting down faster than ever.
- Big industry companies are settling down because of the low electrical cost with their air, landscape and visual pollution.
- Geothermal Power plants are therefore seeking to drill in new vulnerable places and spoil our untouched natural pearls.
- Hydraulic Power Plants are doing the same and sinking whole walleyes
- These are just a few things happening in Iceland right now due to all this and because I care, I have started a campaign called **“Photographic Documentation of the Raw Nature of Iceland for future generation”** and I'm calling out to individuals, companies and Environmental Organizations to support me with a monthly fee from \$ 1 so I can document it full time. If you guys would like to be part of it, and make a difference, please. Support me. You can find all information on my campaign page <https://www.patreon.com/RafnSig> where you can find various support amounts and you will be well rewarded with gifts.

-Tell us about a typical day of shooting.

The night before my session I go through my gear, polish my lenses and filters. Check the batteries in the GPS and camera to get everything ready. I visit my computer to check the weather forecast. I go to my app to see the time, direction and the angel of the sunrise/sunset and find out the Golden hours and the different angles of the sun/light for the whole day. Usually I have been scouting this area before, so I know what I want to shoot. I start the day early enough to be there at least one hour before sunrise and I go to the places I think that will be suitable for the morning shots. When the sun gets higher I go to my app to see again how it will react to the mountain/s I have in front of me, where the shadows will be, how the rivers and other lines in the landscape will react for the 3d, and lead me into the mountains. I walk around to find the right spot with good foreground and wait until the sun/light is at the right place. This goes on the whole day until the sun sets shootings have finished. When I go on a shooting like this I try to travel light as I'm moving around a lot. In my backpack I have my full frame camera, wide angle lens, midrange lens (24-70), my LEE filters, GPS and tripod. I'm dressed according to the weather and it's important to feel warm and comfortable. Everyone has their own style in how to do the actual shootings and that's the beauty of it all.

-Any project lined up for this season? Can you tell us about it in details?

A lot of things is and has been happening this season. In January and February 2017 I was traveling in Philippine where I held several lectures about landscape photography and other things related to photography. I'm on my way now with a couple of photographers on a 7 day private photo workshop tour. We will start our workshop at Snæfellsnes (West Iceland) and shoot there for 3 days. We will have an early



wake up and late sleep to get the golden hours at various places such as Búðir, Arnarstapi, Lóndrangar, Snæfellsjökull Glacier and Kirkjufell Mountain. From there we will head to the South coast Iceland and visit Thingvellir National park, the powerful waterfall Gullfoss. We will stop in the Geyser geothermal area. Seljalandsfoss and Skógarfoss waterfall. Black volcanic sand beach at Vík and Dyrhólaey cliffs. We will continue further south to the Europe's biggest Glacier Vatnajökull. Visit an Ice cave and the Black beach of Jökulsárlón (Glacier lagoon). Surely we will take a lot of night shootings as we will hunt the Northern lights "Aurora Borealis". These are just a few of our stops as we will also go to some of my favorite hidden spots scattered all over our path.

When this tour is finished, I will go alone up to the Highlands and continue documenting places which I think are in danger. Then there is another photo tour to the North of Iceland with a good friend of mine who have been

visiting Iceland for the past six years. Then I have enough capital to go on another documenting tour. This will continue (hopefully) until I have enough sponsors to document Iceland full time.

-What would you suggest for photographers wanting to explore wildlife & Mountain photography in Iceland?

Pls. Take really good care of our vulnerable and sensitive island and be prepared for all weather conditions. Our mountains can be dangerous and you have to be "in focus" all the time. The advantage of shooting Mountains is the trekking into the wilderness and get away from it all, finding your own spot where others haven't been shooting and haven't been photographed to mince. Sometimes I hike back and forth to scout out the best spots to shoot from and then I return the next morning to do the actual shooting but that depends on various factors like weather and light. I have an



app on my cell phone (as I mentioned earlier) which shows me the time and angle of the sun at this particular spot and other spots I plan to shoot from. I recommend you get one in your phone to. It's good to do your preparation before you start your hiking. Don't try to follow in other's footsteps and copy other images that you've seen, create your own shots from start to finish because those are the ones that you will love the most.

A good cloudy sunrise or sunset is something we photographers are always on a lookout for. A dash of sunlight beaming through the clouds won't hurt. A foggy mist around the peaks or in the walleyes will help to capture your unique shot. Cool reflection that adds symmetry to the composition. Cloudy and stormy weather makes sometimes more dynamic to the photograph than dull sunrise or sunset. Don't forget the framing with a nice foreground and the 3d lines to the real focus point; it gives a better context of reality and scale of the surroundings or the object.

Things like this set it apart from a regular snapshot. Oh yes, I almost forgot. Don't forget the nights. Good moonlight can give unique shots and of course the Northern lights will make them one of a kind. Ones more, **BE CAREFULL OUT THERE**

-Many of your photography projects are air shooting. When did you start taking those kinds of photos and what kind of gear do you use for these images (Lenses, etc.) ?

It all started in 2013 when a good friend of mine and an old classmate was starting his Helicopter service called "Norðurflug". He needed aerial photos for his advertisement campaign and asked me if I could do the job. I was thrilled to be able to see the landscape from above and in a totally new perspective so I said yes. I can't say I'm sorry for that as I got a totally new vision of my beautiful island. I had to think differently due to the speed of the helicopter and I



them, not standing on them.
Below are some of the things I think about when I'm shooting from a Helicopter

- Never shoot through the glass.
- Don't have your hood on your lens as it will fly off
- Watch out for the helicopter blades in your wide shots
- Bring two cameras with you so you don't have to change lenses
- Communicate with the pilot so you will get the right angle of the subject
- Use camera speed 1/600 – 1/1250s or greater. This will insure that your shots are free of motion blur.
- Adjust the rest of your settings (ISO 200 – 1000 /Aperture f4 – f8) to get the proper exposure around that shutter speed.
- Dress warmly
- Use a safety harness

I'm using the same gear, but my favorite lenses are my wide angle lens from Canon 16 – 35mm 1:2,8 L II USM and the Tamron SP 24 – 70 1:2,8 USD

-Do you still remember/have the first images you took? If so, can you tell us something about it?

Well, it was more than 30 years ago when I was standing out in the cold painting a mountain called “Esja” to my canvas in oil. As my fingers started to get this bluish frosty color and were ready to drop off, I thought “Why not take a photo of the object and paint it at home, it's much warmer”.

I bought myself a camera and took my first photo. Wow, it was a bad shot.
Ha ha ha ha , but I finished the painting in my warm cozy room so the photo served its purpose. Later, when I became “Master of Electronics” I had to travel to most of our small villages around Iceland to repair the electric equipment's in the ships, I always had the camera gear with me. On my way I stopped frequently to shoot one and one and one and one shot. And one more :-)

-What is your career path for the future?

I will continue Creating Photographic Documentation of the Raw Nature of Iceland for future generation and fight for my sensitive and beautiful small island. Also to teach others to be better than me in photographing

-What is your dream project for the future?

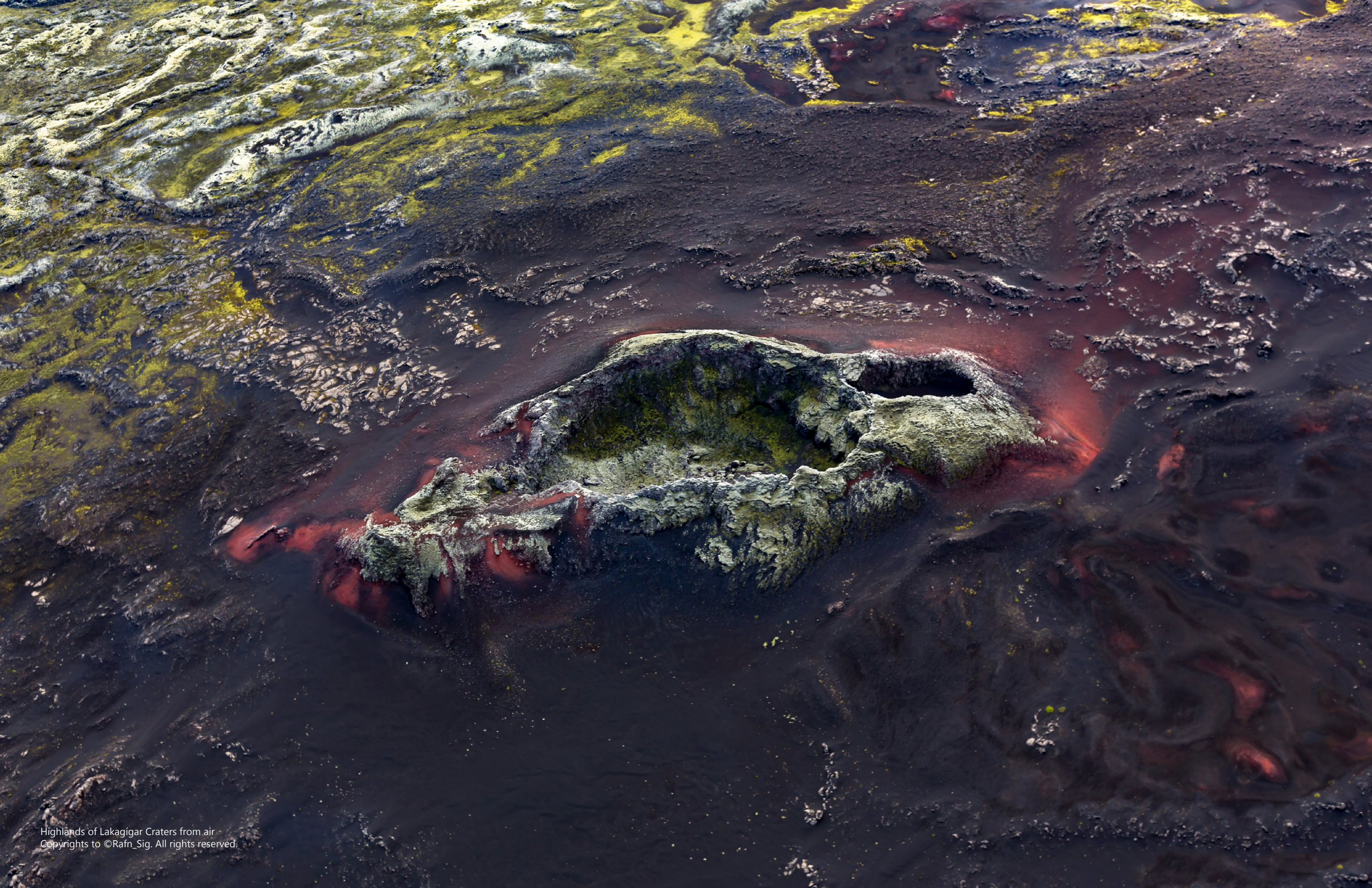
Go out into space and shoot my earth from above.
I would also like to be able to put the smell and my emotions in my photos for others to understand my work and to experience the great feeling and happiness photography gives.

-Something else you want to add?

“It's all about loving it”









Hamrahnjúkur Mountain in Svarfaðardalur valley
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Volcanic eruption at Holuhraun Highlands - Iceland
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