

# CONTENTS

---

## 1. GENERAL INFORMATION

<b>The big picture</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Geography .....	6
Culture and society .....	7
History.....	7
Demographics.....	9
Language.....	10
Literature.....	10
Films .....	11
Traditions .....	12
Yule lads.....	12
Grýla, Leppalúði and the Christmas Cat .....	13
Þorláksmessa.....	14
Christmas .....	14
New Year's Eve .....	14
Þorrablót.....	15
Food .....	15
Climate.....	17
Seasons.....	17
Dressing for the weather .....	19
<b>Transportation to and within Iceland</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Getting there .....	20
Flight .....	20
Ferry.....	20
Upon arrival.....	20
Getting around in Iceland .....	21
Cars and motorcycles.....	21
Ferry.....	24
Cycling .....	24
<b>Accommodation</b> .....	<b>24</b>
Classification.....	24
Types of accommodation .....	25

Guesthouses .....	25
Farm holidays .....	25
Hostels .....	25
Mountain huts and cabins .....	26
Camping .....	26
<b>General practical information .....</b>	<b>27</b>
Language .....	27
Currency and banks .....	28
Tipping and retail taxes .....	28
Passport and visa regulations .....	28
Smoking .....	28
Alcohol .....	29
Visitors with disabilities .....	29
Phone and Internet service .....	29
Time zone .....	29
Safety .....	29
Medical treatment .....	30
Useful numbers .....	31
Public holidays .....	31
<b>2. PLENTY TO DO</b>	
<b>Shopping .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Shopping locations .....	32
Popular purchases .....	32
Jewellery and other design items .....	33
Outdoor wear .....	33
Music, literature and art .....	33
Tax-free shopping .....	34
<b>Nightlife .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Dining .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Museums and galleries .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Capital area .....	37
Capital city suburbs and other areas of Iceland .....	37
<b>Events .....</b>	<b>38</b>
Spring events .....	39

Aldrei fór ég suður .....	39
Reykjavík Arts Festival .....	39
ATP Iceland.....	39
Summer Events .....	39
Viking Festival .....	39
National Independence Day .....	39
Secret Solstice .....	40
Eistnaflug .....	40
Folk Music Festival.....	40
LungA.....	40
Reykjavík Pride .....	40
Bank Holiday Weekend .....	40
Reykjavík Culture Night .....	41
Reykjavík Marathon and other races.....	41
Autumn events.....	41
Reykjavík International Film Festival (RIFF) .....	41
Iceland Airwaves .....	41
Winter events.....	41
Winter Lights Festival .....	41
Sónar .....	42
Food and Fun.....	42
<b>Celebrating the holidays in Iceland.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Outdoor activities.....</b>	<b>43</b>
Hiking .....	43
Birdwatching .....	45
Geothermal pools and spas .....	46
Whale watching .....	48
Northern lights .....	48
Horse riding .....	49
Cycling.....	50
Diving .....	51
Caving .....	52
Ice climbing.....	52
Golf.....	53

Angling.....	53
Skiing and snowboarding .....	54
Other activities .....	54
<b>3. REGIONS</b>	
<b>Reykjavík and the capital area.....</b>	<b>55</b>
Attractions.....	56
<b>South Iceland.....</b>	<b>58</b>
Attractions.....	59
Nature .....	59
Towns and cultural attractions .....	61
<b>East Iceland .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Attractions.....	63
Nature .....	63
Towns and cultural attractions .....	64
<b>North Iceland .....</b>	<b>65</b>
Attractions.....	66
Nature .....	66
Towns and cultural attractions .....	67
<b>West Fjords.....</b>	<b>68</b>
Attractions.....	69
Nature .....	69
Towns and cultural attractions .....	70
<b>West Iceland .....</b>	<b>71</b>
Attractions.....	72
Nature .....	72
Towns and cultural attractions .....	73
<b>Reykjanes .....</b>	<b>74</b>
Attractions.....	74
Nature .....	74
Towns and cultural attractions .....	76
<b>Central highlands .....</b>	<b>76</b>
Attractions.....	77
Nature .....	77
Towns and cultural attractions .....	78

# 1. GENERAL INFORMATION

---

## The big picture

### Geography

Iceland is an island lying in the North Atlantic Ocean. The nearest neighbouring country is Greenland, 286 km away, followed by the Faroe Islands at 420 km, Scotland 795 km and Norway 950 km.

The Arctic Circle runs just north of the Icelandic mainland; in fact, the small, inhabited island of Grímsey, off the north coast of Iceland, lies on the Arctic Circle. It takes approximately five hours to fly from New York to Iceland, and three to four hours to fly from most airports in Western Europe.

With a greater surface area than Ireland but smaller than Great Britain, Iceland is Europe's second largest island, and the world's 18th largest. Iceland stretches across 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which is slightly more than Austria, Hungary or Portugal, but about the same as Kentucky. It is easy to drive a relaxed circle around the island and enjoy many outstanding sights within a 10-day holiday, even though other visitors spend a month or more year after year and still have plenty left to experience. At its widest, Iceland measures 500 km from east to west and 300 km from north to south. Extending off its coastline, the country maintains a fisheries jurisdiction of 200 nautical miles.

While Iceland's highest peak is Hvannadalshnjúkur, reaching 2,110 m above sea level, very few Icelanders live at altitudes of over 250 m, instead occupying the coast and fertile lowlands. Due to factors such as steep mountain slopes, glaciers and glacial washout plains, almost 80% of the country is uninhabited. Some 11% of it is covered by the glaciers and washout sands, and these serve to catch many a traveller's eye, partly by providing a flat foreground to spectacular mountains or glacial ice on the other side. In addition to the glaciers, which include Europe's largest, Vatnajökull, there are many lakes and lengthy fjords. Some further special characteristics of the landscape include frequent waterfalls and pure rivers, an abundance of hot and cold springs, beaches of black basalt sand or light-coloured shells, volcanoes and fresh lava fields, as well as older fields overgrown with thick moss. Like the glaciers, lava fields also cover around 11% of the island's surface area.

With all surface rock dating less than 20 million years in age, Iceland is one of the planet's youngest landmasses and continues to be built up by some of the world's most active volcanoes. The island has risen above the ocean surface on account of a volcanic hotspot located under fissures in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. These fissures make up a rift dividing the American tectonic plate of the earth's crust from the Eurasian plate and running roughly from southwest to northeast. If there were no erosion along its east and west coasts, the island of Iceland would grow wider by about 2 cm per year, as these two tectonic plates float apart from each other on the molten magma underneath.

The last volcanoes to erupt were Bárðarbunga in 2014 to 2015, Grímsvötn in 2011 and Eyjafjallajökull in 2010. Iceland also has several recently formed islands off shore, such as Surtsey, which rose above the sea in a 1963-64 volcanic eruption and has ever since been kept isolated and protected due to its international importance for science.

Earthquakes happen frequently, fortunately so frequently that their collected tension is seldom great enough to cause destruction. The same may generally be said about the island's volcanic eruptions, which have occurred on average every five years or so since the first people arrived. From a global perspective, earthquakes are less likely to be destructive where tectonic plates move apart, as along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, rather than butting up against or scraping alongside each other.

## **Culture and society**

Though rooted in ancient Norse heritage, Icelandic culture has been shaped by isolation and the extreme forces of nature. These conditions have led to a resilient society, where the ties to family and nature are often close. While the sense of tradition and customs is also strong, today's Icelandic society is quite modern and progressive.

A small country by most measures, where most people who meet may soon be talking about someone they both know or are mutually related to, Icelanders work hard to ensure a high standard of living as well as extensive political freedoms.

## **History**

Not many countries can name their original settlers in a factual manner, but Iceland's well-documented history, not least through its world-famous sagas, is

one of its many claims to an international reputation. In the early 870s, having first dwelt briefly at a few places farther east on the island, Hallveig Fróðadóttir and her husband Ingólfur Arnarson, who had been a chieftain in Norway, arrived with their household on the southwestern shores of Iceland. Thinking of the steam which rose from thermal springs there, they called that vicinity Reykjavík, which means the smoky inlet.

Although this household is generally recognised as Iceland's first permanent settlers, there is both written and other evidence that at least Christian hermits and perhaps some other Celts from the British Isles had already been living in the country for a number of decades but were gradually assimilated by the new settlers in various ways. Moreover, the Norse settlers often brought with them wives and slaves directly from the British Isles, so that today's DNA studies demonstrate most of the Icelandic female genes to stem from the Celts, even though the original males of the nation were mostly Norse.

Hallveig and Ingólfur were quickly followed by other Norse settlers, who also chose land in the low-lying, more easily inhabitable areas of Iceland. By the year 930, just fifty or sixty years after settlement officially began, the country's more desirable agricultural land was considered fully claimed, giving occasion to organise a common government by founding the Icelandic Althing, or Alþing. With þing meaning parliament and al- meaning that it represented all of the island, the Althing is often referred to as the world's oldest parliament that continues to meet more or less in its original form. For many centuries, the Althing met at Þingvellir, which is about 50 km from Reykjavík and has today become a national park.

The ruling male settlers of Iceland were predominantly pagan, following the traditional Norse religion. As Scandinavia and other parts of Europe became more and more Christian, political pressure mounted on the Icelanders to convert to Christianity. Tensions were eased in 1000 AD, when the Christian faction at the Althing allowed Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði, who led the Althing as speaker of the orally transmitted laws, to decide on a future religion. Although Þorgeir (Icelanders prefer to use first names even in formal situations) was himself a pagan priest, he decided to proclaim that the country would convert to Christianity, with the easy-going compromise that current pagans would be permitted to continue practising their religion in private.

In contrast to that peaceful solution, deadly fighting occurred between major clans in the 13th century, accompanying the hard times caused by the

eradication of woods, overgrazing and cooler weather. After decades of conflict, the Icelandic chieftains agreed to accept the sovereignty of Norway. Political shifts in the Scandinavian countries put Iceland under Danish rule in the late 14th century. In 1550, the Icelanders switched by royal decree from Catholicism to a Lutheran denomination, similar to that in the rest of the Nordic countries. Fortunately the Icelandic reformation, except for leading to the execution of the southern Icelandic bishop and two of his sons, was mainly peaceful and thereby helped save the country's wondrous medieval manuscripts from destruction in religious wars.

From around 1600 to 1900, the climate became even colder and less favourable for agriculture and the regrowth of overgrazed, eroded areas. Whereas up to a third of the country was covered by at least low-growing birch when the first settlers brought their livestock, this cover had been reduced to only 1% of the surface area by the end of the 19th century, adding immensely to the difficulty of Icelanders in sheltering and feeding their livestock, which in addition to fish were their main source of livelihood. Between 80 and 90% of the residents still lived on farms just before 1900, above all in homes built of turf and loose stones.

In 1874, celebrating the official millenium of the country's settlement, Denmark granted Iceland a constitution and home rule. In 1918, Iceland became a sovereign state under the Danish crown and remained such until 17 June 1944, when the Republic of Iceland was declared while the Nazis were in possession of Denmark. Since then, June 17th has been celebrated as Iceland's National Independence Day.

## **Demographics**

With its physical size and a population of only 335,000, Iceland represents the lowest population density in Europe. The nation's capital is Reykjavík, and two-thirds of the nation's residents live in the municipalities of the greater capital area, leaving the rural areas yet more sparsely settled. Outside of the capital area, the most populous town, Akureyri, has only 18,000 residents. Since the rest of the population also lives primarily near the coast, the middle of the country with its lower temperatures and very short growing season remains uninhabited.

Although the recent financial crisis struck a heavy blow as of autumn 2008, the Icelanders have largely recovered and maintain good standards of living, with



the nation ranking highly in worldwide measures of well-being such as life expectancy, safe births, literacy, gender equality and overall happiness.

During the twentieth century, Iceland's main industry was the fisheries, though recent decades have seen an increasing emphasis on renewable energy and its use in the metals or other heavy industry. On a world scale, tourism has been mushrooming, often increasing between 10 and 20% annually, so that since 2014 the nation receives about three times more visitors per year than it has residents.

## **Language**

The language of Iceland, Icelandic, is one of the many Indo-European languages, belonging to the sub-division of North Germanic languages like those in other Nordic countries, excepting Finnish. Icelandic is very similar to Faroese and demonstrates some Celtic influence, perhaps including some of the country's narrative traditions in literature.

As an insular language, however, Icelandic has not been heavily influenced by other languages since the settlement. For this and other reasons, such as the sagas, poetry and an emphasis on reading ability, the language has changed comparatively little over the centuries. It did not become markedly different from Norwegian until the 14th century, when Norwegian underwent increasing influence from Swedish and Danish. Because of how minor the language changes have been in Iceland, 12th-century texts remain largely accessible to Icelandic school children.

## **Literature**

Language is a cornerstone of Icelandic culture, and Icelanders are justifiably proud of their literary heritage. Some poetic traditions, especially the age-old Germanic patterns of alliteration, are alive and common, with thousands of people composing at least occasionally according to such patterns, and crowds of the general populace gathering around the country in hundreds to listen to poets who can humourously follow these rules. Iceland has often been termed a classless society, though this description is debated, but it certainly holds in reference to this type of traditional poetry and to some extent has also been typical of the sagas. The capital, Reykjavík, has become a UNESCO City of Literature, and in 2009, the country's main collection of saga manuscripts was entered in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

The Icelandic Eddas and sagas are certainly the country's most recognised contribution to global literary treasures, with the 13th-century Snorri Sturluson being an important figure behind preserving ancient historical and literary knowledge, even crucial for the entire Nordic realm.

Written in the 13th century, the Eddas tell vivid stories of Norse mythology and legend, as well as explaining poetic rules. The sagas to a great extent report enhanced tales of actual people and events, in the main occurring between 850 and 1050. Above all, these events include the deeds of the nation's early settlers and their first descendants, with plenty of violence, intrigue, romance, and pithy proverbs. Such combinations of stories and history were mostly passed on orally until being written down in the 12th to 14th centuries. Many authors in other countries have been influenced by the sagas and other old Icelandic literature, including J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit.

Iceland's only Nobel Prize winner so far was recognised in 1955 and was in the category of literature. Halldór Laxness composed prolifically (over 60 novels, in addition to poetry, plays and other writings), on themes ranging from the Icelandic national identity to global communism. His most famous works are Independent People, The Atom Station and Iceland's Bell.

Literature still thrives today, with modern Icelandic authors getting more books published per capita than in any other country. In recent years, Icelandic crime fiction has garnered an international following, adding onto that of the sagas. Most famously composed by Arnaldur Indriðason and Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, the Icelandic works can be related to the fashionable, overall genre of Nordic crime literature.

## **Films**

Icelandic film producers are industrious and creative enough to have turned native cinema into an important cultural as well as economic factor. The film industry has been prospering, producing several films per year. Moreover, Iceland's scenic landscape provides popular shooting locations for many foreign parties, including Hollywood productions such as Tomb Raider, Die Another Day, Batman Begins, Flags of our Fathers, Journey to the Centre of the Earth and The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Icelandic authorities help through policies which reduce production costs for foreign film makers. The Film in Iceland commission is ready to assist foreign film companies which are thinking of shooting in this country.

International recognition has been earned by several modern Icelandic filmmakers, such as Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, whose film *Children of Nature* was nominated for a 1991 Academy Award as Best Foreign Film. Dagur Kári's full length debut, *Nói Albínó*, received critical acclaim and was nominated for the European Film Awards in 2003. Dagur Kári has gone on to turn out such movies as *The Good Heart*. Another successful Icelandic filmmaker is Baltasar Kormákur, who has built on such Icelandic hits of his as *101 Reykjavík* to start a Hollywood career. However, the leading Icelandic name internationally has been that of Sigurjón Sighvatsson, producer, whose long filmography includes titles ranging from *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Zinedine: A 21st-Century Portrait* to cult favourites like *Wild At Heart*. In 2015 at the renowned Cannes festival, Grímur Hákonarson's *Rams* won the category of Un Certain Regard.

In recent years, Icelandic television production has also been on the rise. The children's television programme *LazyTown* has seen unprecedented success abroad, with stations in dozens of countries around the world broadcasting its message of healthy lifestyles. *The Night Shift*, a sitcom about the hapless lives of night personnel at a petrol station, has received critical acclaim and been broadcast in several European countries. *Fortitude*, a 2015 TV crime series from Sky Atlantic, was to a great extent filmed in Iceland.

## **Traditions**

Icelanders have several of their own unique holidays, besides celebrating some international holidays in special ways. Many festivities are related to ancient Norse traditions, while others frequently connect to the Christian calendar.

The traditional winter holidays are especially meaningful for Icelanders. The Christmas period is an intriguing mixture of religious practices and traditional folklore, beginning on 23 December and ending on 6 January, Epiphany. In between, there is a whole lot of food to eat, people to meet and fireworks to launch.

### **Yule lads**

You might say the Icelanders have not one Santa figure but a whole series of thirteen, the *jólasveinar* or Yule lads. Descended from trolls, they were apparently often mentioned to scare children, but in recent times have been personified as a lot friendlier.

One by one, they come to town in the days before Christmas; the first one arrives during the night preceding December 12 and the last one during the

night preceding December 24. Formerly, they tried to pilfer their favourite things or play tricks on people (hence their names below), but now their main role is to give children small gifts. Just about every child in Iceland puts a shoe on the window sill in the evening so the lad coming that night can leave a present in it. Of course, if the child has been naughty, the lad might just leave an untasty raw potato instead!

While the number of Yule lads has varied in different times and regions, it is now consistently 13. The number 13 and their current names were printed in Jón Árnason's folklore collection of 1862, establishing the Icelandic names as follows, even if various translations are possible:

1. Stekkjastaur (Sheep-Cote Clod)
2. Giljagaur (Gully Gawk)
3. Stúfur (Stubby)
4. Þvörusleikir (Spoon-Licker)
5. Pottasleikir (Pot-Licker)
6. Askasleikir (Bowl-Licker)
7. Hurðaskellir (Door-Slammer)
8. Skyrgámur (Skyr-Gobbler)
9. Bjúgnakrækir (Sausage-Swiper)
10. Gluggagægir (Window-Peeper)
11. Gáttapefur (Doorway-Sniffer)
12. Ketkrókur (Meat-Hook)
13. Kertasníkir (Candle-Stealer)

As you can tell from the list, these lads are mischievous, and each one has retained some of his unique characteristics to this day.

### **Grýla, Leppalúði and the Christmas Cat**

The Yule lads' vices may have something to do with unfortunate genetics and upbringing, since according to Icelandic folklore they were the sons of a three-headed ogress called Grýla – whose favourite dish was a stew that she cooked out of naughty children – and her third husband, an aged, ugly ogre called Leppalúði. Nonetheless, their cat was perhaps even more vicious, Jólakötturinn

(the Christmas Cat), who was rumoured to eat those children who had no new clothes to wear on Christmas Day.

### **Porláksmessa**

Porláksmessa (Saint Porlákur's Mass) is on December 23 and is named after Porlákur Þórhallsson, a 12th-century bishop over the more southerly parts of Iceland. The ideal dish on Porláksmessa Day is putrefied skate. As December 23 was traditionally the last day of the pre-Christmas fast, no one was supposed to eat meat, but was allowed to eat skate and other fish. Eating putrefied skate on December 23 is still a popular tradition in Iceland, despite the sharp smell of ammonia. In addition, Porláksmessa is usually the biggest day of the year in Icelandic retail stores, as people flock out to do their last-minute Christmas shopping, which involves a lot of good cheer as everyone meets others and passes on warm Yuletide wishes.

### **Christmas**

Christmas and Easter Day are Iceland's longest holidays, with all of the following day also being a holiday for most persons (the so-called Second Days of Christmas and Easter). At Easter, both the Thursday and Friday before Easter Sunday are also holidays, which makes five days in all for people who are off work on Saturdays. At Christmas, most businesses remain closed from noon on Christmas Eve till after December 26. For many decades, the main family celebration in most homes has begun at six o'clock on Christmas Eve. The family dine together that evening, perhaps dance and sing around the Christmas tree, and exchange presents. In the following two days people often gather with the wider family and family friends.

The Icelandic Christmas may be seen as two celebrations: on the one hand celebrating the birth of Christ and on the other celebrating the beginning of longer daylight hours. The Icelandic word for Christmas, jól, refers neither to Christ nor the church, but is a much older Germanic word and also exists in English cognates such as Yuletide.

### **New Year's Eve**

New Year's Eve is probably the wildest party of the whole year. On this night, everyone is allowed to light fireworks, and the sky is blanketed with an explosive display that has to be seen to be believed. In many towns and villages, this is repeated in a smaller scale during the evening on the Thirteenth Day of Christmas, when the last Yule Lad has left for the mountains and the Christmas season is considered over. It is easy to obtain protective gear for the

eyes and even ears, and everyone is encouraged to wear it, especially those who are lighting and shooting the fireworks.

### **Porrablót**

Early in the Icelandic past, Porrablót was a mid-winter festival with sacrificial offerings to the pagan gods. Although it was abolished after Christianisation, it was resurrected in the 19th century as a social celebration continuing to this day. Small communities, clubs, schools, etc. often arrange their own Porrablót. The timing for the festival coincides with the month of Þorri, which according to the traditional Icelandic calendar begins on the first Friday after January 19 (in the 13th week of winter).

Visitors may look for a chance to try out some culinary adventures during the Porrablót season. The traditional Icelandic dishes date from times when there were no freezers and when many common Icelanders even lacked salt for preserving food. Nor was there always much hot, dry weather for curing foods as in other countries, although drying was one of the preservation methods, as well as smoking. Lactic acid, a milk product, was another primary means of preserving food back then, and in itself provides a certain flavouring. While not everyone will be enthused about all of the traditional foods served, it's an experience to give them a taste and thereby notice flavours and smells that very few tourists are used to from home. The traditional Porrablót menu includes items such as rotten shark's meat (hákarl), boiled sheep's head (svið), smoked lamb, and cooked sheep's blood and tallow (blóðmör). A traditional way of washing down such food, at least at a party like Þorrablót, is with some brennivín – also known as "Black Death" – a potent schnapps made from potato and caraway.

A Þorrablót banquet is accompanied by traditional songs, specially prepared skits and humorous talks or pictures, followed by a night of dancing which in true Icelandic style continues into the early hours of the morning. If it is impossible to attend a family feast or stay in a community where even visitors can reserve a ticket in advance, local restaurants will often create a Þorrablót atmosphere and offer such dishes on their menus.

### **Food**

The mainstays of Icelandic cuisine are lamb, fish, milk products and potatoes. Nowadays beef, pork, chicken and vegetarian options are widely available.

Farmers take pride in their free-ranging "mountain lamb" as the world's best – savouring of the sheep's summer diet of wild grass, shrubs and herbs. As for Icelandic fish, it has long had an international reputation for quality and was exported even in medieval times. Freshwater salmon and trout can be added on to ocean fish for variety, not to forget the popularity of salted or smoked fish. Once seen as a staple to the diet, not least in times of poor grazing and meagre hay harvests, sea birds such as the guillemot and puffin are now often served as delicacies. The high-quality cod liver oil common in grocery stores is often taken home by tourists who may find it better and cheaper in Iceland. Whale and seal meat are also worth mentioning here as traditional, tasty dishes.

Icelandic dairy products rank first-class. Like the horses, the Icelandic breed of cows was brought along by the settlers and thereafter bred in isolation, so that they today comprise a unique species which has never been crossed with others except to produce beef calves. It is popular to see them cavorting out to pasture on the first warm days of spring, but with their good hay they give milk that has a pure, delicate flavour year-round. Visitors should try popular Icelandic specialities such as skyr, a cultured skimmed milk curd which today is also copied overseas, and súrmjólk, a soured milk that is for instance delicious with cereal and perhaps some berries or brown sugar.

Such dairy products are often served with crowberries or bog bilberries, both of which are plentiful in the wilds of Iceland. Blueberries can be frequent too, except along the most southerly coasts, and in some places stone bramble berries and strawberries also await the hungry. Picking is generally possible from sometime in July till sometime in September, and mushrooms can often be found at the same time, if the traveller is able to distinguish the wholesome species.

While the capital area offers the widest spectrum of cuisines, intriguing and even top-notch restaurants and cafés may be found all around the country. It is even easier to find establishments serving quick helpings of pizza, burgers, chicken and fish, while hot dogs are practically a national dish at petrol stations and fast-food establishments. The range of sweets, including many excellent Icelandic brands, is likely to be quite different from what people are used to at home. Grocery stores are on hand in all but the smallest villages, and some towns have admirable bakeries which serve pastries and nutritious breads on the spot.



Despite being banned for much of the twentieth century, beer has come a long way since it was legalised in 1989, and today a whole flora of craft beers is on offer. Brennivín is Iceland's traditional hard liquor, though recent decades have seen the development of excellent vodka and other spirits. Note that State policy is against alcohol and tobacco advertising and taxes these goods heavily, with the retail sale of alcohol only being allowed through the State Alcohol and Tobacco Company, though of course many restaurants and bars are licensed to sell drinks.

Whereas alcohol is expensive in Iceland, the finest drink available – water – is free of charge. Icelandic tap water is always safe from the tap and among the cleanest in the world. In some towns, visitors may be surprised to smell sulphur when they turn on the hot water, but the minerals which might be left in the tap from using hot water are harmless too. If you dislike the taste, just let the cold water run a moment before filling your glass. About 90% of Icelandic homes are now reached by geothermal water, which of course also heats them, provides warm showers, comfortable local swimming pools, etc.

## **Climate**

Thanks to being an isolated island reached by the Gulf Stream, Iceland enjoys a temperate maritime climate, with refreshing summers and surprisingly mild winters. However, the island is located right at the Arctic Circle, and its weather is also affected by the East Greenland polar current, which curves south-eastwards off the north and east coasts. The wind direction is thus highly influential.

While temperatures fluctuate only a little from night to day or season to season, precipitation often begins unexpectedly and breezes can add to the cold. Tourists should be prepared even in summer for chilly, wet, windy days; in winter, blizzards may suddenly delay their travel plans, and blowing sand in windstorms or late thaws in the highlands might affect their plans even in summer. As the locals will reassure them, however: if you don't like the weather, just wait a bit.

## **Seasons**

Iceland has short, cool summers and long but mild winters, while wet periods may occur in some area of the island at any time of the year, even when the opposite side of the island or of a mountain range remains dry.



From June to August, visitors can expect average monthly temperatures of around 10-13 °C (50-55 °F). Even if the island has of course felt the effects of climate change, experiencing a general upward drift in average temperatures, the warmest days are unlikely to peak above 20-25 °C (68-77 °F).

The middle of the year features the midnight sun. Due to its flat trajectory along the horizon, the island never grows fully dark during what most Western countries call late spring and early summer. On July 1 in Reykjavík, for example, even if the sun sets at 23:57 and rises again at 03:04, it stays amazingly light outside the whole time. This effect is even more pronounced in the north of the country, where you can easily get around with constant 24-hour lighting from early May to early August, after which the lengthening nights of winter, in clear weather away from town lights throughout the island, are often decorated by the northern lights.

Despite the country's high northerly latitude, Iceland's winter temperatures are relatively mild. The southern lowlands have monthly averages of around 0 °C (32 °F) in the dead of winter, while even the much colder highlands tend to average only around -10 °C (+14 °F). Snow is commonplace, and can be seen both as an exciting attraction as well as a possible hindrance to travel. In the northern half or so of the island, winter snow is assured enough to open a variety of adventure and sporting opportunities, particularly in higher reaches.

On the warmer and particularly on rainy, wet days in all of the lowlands, above all in more southerly regions, such snow can melt away again in short order even in mid-winter, or else partially melt and then freeze into hard, slippery ice. Even if Iceland's temperature figures are not so extreme, conditions are sometimes harsh and hazardous, with snow storms or near-freezing rain in strong winds common throughout the colder months. Travellers should always check the weather forecast and road conditions before setting out on their journey, preferably even discussing them with the locals, and show full consideration for road closures or warnings.

Winter days are short, although they nowhere remain dark for the whole time. On 1 January in Reykjavík, the sun rises at 11:19 and sets at 15:44. While the hours of potential direct sunlight are shorter farther north on the island, twilight lasts substantially longer everywhere than nearer the earth's equator. Also, although skies may be dark, Icelanders brighten up the winter days with twinkling fairy lights, warm cosy cafés, a variety of sports and a packed schedule of winter festivities. Every winter traveller ought to try the swimming

pools, for instance meeting the locals in a hot tub and watching the snowflakes melt when approaching the surface.

The spring and autumn nights and days are more similar in length to each other. High winds and stormy weather, however, may be somewhat more common in the spring and autumn seasons. In northerly regions, snow and wintry conditions are still likely to occur on occasion in May or even early June, and at higher altitudes in every month of the year. Finally, one might note that Icelanders do not follow any exact splitting of the year into four seasons, but on calendars only show a summer half and winter half. Summer officially begins on the First Day of Summer, which is on the last Thursday in April, and the summer is actually supposed to turn out better, according to old beliefs, if there is frost on that morning.

### **Dressing for the weather**

Since Iceland's weather is notoriously unpredictable, it's important that travellers prepare for any conditions, whatever time of year. They should dress in sturdy shoes and in several clothing layers which they can add or take off according to the situation, always having handy a wind- and water-resistant outer layer. If there is perilous ice in winter, it is easy and advisable to purchase cleats or other gear to put on shoes, and the wide assortment of reflectors for the pedestrian or cyclist will help automobile drivers to notice them. Wind is a major factor in assessing outdoor conditions, with the wind chill and possible rain or wet snow rendering mild temperatures extremely and even dangerously cold, if anyone is outside and unprepared. In Iceland, there is often no shelter and it may rain or snow sideways in the wind, so repellent outer wear is much more helpful than umbrellas, which strong gusts may quickly destroy.

## **Transportation to and within Iceland**

### **Getting there**

#### **Flight**

Iceland is only 3-4 flying hours from Europe, and 5-6 hours from the eastern coast of North America. From numerous cities on both sides of the Atlantic, flights to Iceland are operated year-round, accompanied by the competition of domestic as well as foreign airlines. In addition to normal one-way and return fares, attractive excursion and family prices are available, as well as group rates and variations between seasons. The Visit Iceland website presents a comprehensive and up-to-date list of airlines flying to Iceland.

#### **Ferry**

The Smyril Line ferry sails between Seyðisfjörður in East Iceland, Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands and Hirtshals in Denmark once a week. Travellers can thus opt for sea passage and avoid air transportation if they wish, as well as having the option of bringing their own vehicle with them from Europe to Iceland.

#### **Upon arrival**

A regular bus transfer service runs between Keflavík Airport and Reykjavík, and taxis and car hire services are also available. Buses and car hire are also available for travellers at the island's other major airports, as well as for ferry passengers to Seyðisfjörður.

Besides the possibility of staying on the Reykjanes peninsula, near Keflavík International Airport, the traveller can head to Reykjavík and the rest of the capital area via a bus ride which takes about 45 minutes, relative to the BSÍ bus terminal located near Reykjavík's city centre. Direct drop-off and pick-up are also available from a few points on the way, as well as from many hotels, guesthouses and hostels in the capital area. Buses ply the BSÍ – Keflavík route frequently, and travellers are advised on their return journey to catch a bus which is scheduled to leave Reykjavík at least 2.5 hours before their flight's scheduled departure. Further information can be found at the BSÍ and Keflavík Airport websites.

Passengers arriving in Seyðisfjörður via the Smyril Line can continue on buses to major destinations in Iceland, as well as to the nearby airport at Egilsstaðir. The Visit Seyðisfjörður website provides up-to-date information on bus schedules.

## **Getting around in Iceland**

### **Cars and motorcycles**

Driving around Iceland is one way for visitors to take in Iceland at their own pace. Traffic is usually sparse, and parking is rarely any issue outside of the Reykjavík city centre. Most of the main roads are paved; however, stretches of loose gravel, especially on mountain or farming area roads and in the interior, as well as the country's rugged landscape and unpredictable weather, create challenges for even the most experienced drivers, so travellers are advised to drive cautiously and to be well-prepared before setting out on their journey, besides finding out current conditions and postponing or changing their plans if necessary.

The minimum age for driving in Iceland is 17. Anyone who has reached that age and is carrying a valid driving license from another country is permitted to drive in Iceland during a limited stay (up to one year).

Visitors arriving in Iceland via ferry can bring along their own cars and motorcycles, not to mention bicycles. A "Green Card" or other proof of third-party insurance is mandatory for motorists driving their own vehicles in Iceland, except from countries in the EU and the EEA.

There is a wide flora of car rental agencies in Iceland. Cars can be booked online and through a travel agent or airline, or for instance upon arrival at airports, though it is advisable to book in advance to help reserve the type of car a driver wants. Many types of cars are available, including small family cars, powerful four-wheel drive vehicles and motor homes.

The Icelandic road system is fairly extensive but easy to navigate. Highway Number 1, commonly known as the Ring Road, is the most travelled route circling the country, giving access to all sorts of side trips. The Ring Road is open throughout the year, though weather conditions can close certain sections temporarily during winter and even occasionally in summer. Most major highways are paved, but drivers must take note and slow down in time at places where the pavement ends and gravel starts, since a large portion of the Icelandic road system does consist of gravel surfaces, particularly in the highlands. These surfaces require special care even in 4WDs, but even more so in other vehicles and on motorcycles. While most of this section will mention only cars, the points often apply to motorcycles as well.

The condition of gravel roads can vary greatly, including potholes, unstable loose material and washboard surfaces. Of course, gravel roads are certainly an interesting phenomenon if the driver maintains a positive, sensible attitude and takes care. In any case, the driver will need to pay attention to the road ahead, reduce speed as necessary, and keep to the right when there is any possibility of meeting others or when someone wants to pass. Loose gravel can be difficult to drive on, and perilous to turn on sharply if the vehicle is going too fast. Care must certainly be taken when passing another vehicle, and it also pays to slow down on gravel when meeting one. Small rocks thrown up by the tires can easily cause damage such as cracked windshields or a ruined paint job. Mountain roads are often very narrow and curve frequently and unexpectedly, definitely not designed for speeding. If you see another car coming, look immediately for places where other cars have pulled to the side, so that you can avoid large rocks and also not damage fragile, pretty vegetation and unspoiled ground surfaces.

While sheep often roam free across paved roads, this is even more the case along unpaved roads, so drivers must be watchful for them and horses, for instance when lambs rush to their mothers on the other side of the road. In East and Southeast Iceland, even reindeer may suddenly run across the road. Many bridges and some tunnels only have one lane, so that one or more cars will need to stop in time and wait for others to get by.

All of the above factors mean that journeys are likely to take longer than expected, not counting abrupt urges to stop and photograph beautiful scenes or walk up to magnificent waterfalls. Therefore, those who are not relaxing on a bus tour must allow themselves plenty of time to cover distances, so as not to get stressed by time shortages which spoil the vacation, perhaps even by leading to faster speeds and accidents.

The general speed limit in urban areas is 50 km/h; in rural areas, it is 80 km/h on gravel roads and 90 km/h on asphalt roads. Seat belts are compulsory for the driver as well as each passenger, and children must be secured in restraints suitable for their age and weight, meeting the standards of ECE Regulation 44.04 or later. No alcohol consumption is permitted before driving, nor open containers of alcohol in the passenger space. Headlamps or at least daytime running lights must be switched on at all times. Off-road driving is strictly forbidden in order to preserve the vegetation, soil and landscape. There is an exception for driving on snow or frost, but you should enquire in particular about the equipment and possibilities for that, and preferably accompany

experienced persons in suitably equipped vehicles. While special warning signs often indicate the threats ahead, such as sharp bends, there is often no separate indication to reduce speed. Every driver has the legal duty to adjust speed according to actual conditions, at all times and everywhere.

A 4x4 vehicle is essential on undeveloped roads in the highlands and other places where travellers may encounter rough terrain, rocks, unbridged waters, etc. The highland roads remain closed in winter, just as the weather may at times cause other roads to be closed as well. When the weather outlook or road conditions are doubtful, the people where a traveller stayed or stopped last need to know where and when s/he is planning on reaching the next destination. Those who can go online are advised to leave details on their plans at the SafeTravel website. If drivers are being warned not to travel at all, or only in better-equipped vehicles, then the tourist must definitely wait for safer conditions, perhaps asking about other enjoyable routes or things to do for the time being.

Detailed, up-to-date maps are also important for choosing appropriate routes and types of road, and navigation systems are in many cases reliable. While at least self-service filling stations are operated in all towns and along major highways, population densities and the distances between stations vary immensely. Drivers should always make sure they have enough fuel to reach the next station.

Visit the Icelandic Transport Authority, SafeTravel and the Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration for further information on driving in Iceland.

#### Air

The country is well-served by domestic flights, even to surprisingly remote areas and some outlying islands. Charter planes and sightseeing flights are also available, including by helicopter. Through coordination with bus companies, domestic airlines enable air/bus connections to over 40 towns throughout Iceland.

The Visit Iceland website has an up-to-date list of domestic airlines.

#### Bus and coach

Many important destinations are linked by regular coach services, some of which operate year-round, and guided coach tours are offered by numerous companies. Several companies advertise a selection of bus passports, giving travellers the freedom to wait or continue onwards at their leisure.

Strætó, the public transport company, runs buses in the capital area as well as between major destinations around the country.

### **Ferry**

A number of ferry lines and boat operators provide transport to particular islands and fjords, including on scheduled sightseeing excursions during the summer. See the Visit Iceland website for an up-to-date list of ferry services.

### **Cycling**

For active types wishing to get closer to the environment, cycling is a common way to experience Iceland. Bike hire is widely available for visitors unable to bring their own bikes, and cycling tours are available for those who prefer a guided experience. Spiked winter tyres or the possibility of changing to them will prove more reliable, depending on the weather and ice conditions, more or less from October through April, and lights and reflective clothing are a must for dusky weather.

The capital area and Akureyri have extensive networks of cycling and walking paths, and many villages have at least some well-built paths, besides enjoying less traffic. Cycling is thus a healthy, inexpensive means of reaching urban attractions, including on some guided bicycle tours.

Outside of towns, however, cycling paths are uncommon, so cyclists normally have to share the road with motorists. On the other hand, tourists on durable bicycles might try some of the seldom-driven roads or even rough tracks, which can be asked about in each area and even pinpointed on some maps. Such options will often be covered by snowdrifts in winter. As always, Iceland's weather and terrain are fickle and challenging, so cyclists should acquaint themselves with conditions before planning the day, in addition to leaving information on their plans, as at the SafeTravel website.

### **Accommodation**

Iceland mirrors the standards typical for other Nordic countries. Whatever the clients' means or choice, they should be able to find suitable or even high-quality accommodation. A comprehensive and up-to-date list of accommodation in Iceland can be found on the Visit Iceland website.

### **Classification**

VAKINN is the official quality and environmental accreditation system of the Icelandic Tourist Board. It is a multi-faceted certification that applies to many



types of tourism service companies. To earn the VAKINN label, accommodation or tour companies must meet comprehensive assessment criteria and maintain high standards in all aspects of business practice. Although certification is not mandatory, tourist services are encouraged to obtain it, as VAKINN assures customers that the company operates in an ethical, professional and environmentally sustainable manner.

### **Types of accommodation**

There are hotels around Iceland to suit all tastes and budgets, from simple and sufficient to luxurious. Visitors can choose from a range of small private hotels, an increasing number of chic boutique locations, and chains of standardised hotels. Several travel agencies and airlines have special accommodation offers which can only be purchased outside Iceland, and there are also opportunities for private people overseas to trade homes with Icelandic residents.

#### **Guesthouses**

A comfortable guesthouse can provide lasting, friendly experiences. Most Icelandic guesthouses are family-owned and -operated, maintaining a homey atmosphere and personal service. These are plentiful throughout the country, with individual regional websites providing lists for each area.

#### **Farm holidays**

For those who want to enjoy more of the countryside and a rural spirit, farm accommodation is ideal. Icelandic Farm Holidays is a chain of farms selling accommodation and a variety of services, such as riding, fishing, etc. The facilities include farmhouses, country hotels, separate houses, campsites and cottages. Depending on the location, the client can choose between sleeping-bag accommodation and bed & breakfast services, staying in rooms with or without private facilities. Cottages are often rented by the week. Farm Holidays also offer guided tours and independent self-drive tours.

#### **Hostels**

There are several dozen Hostelling International establishments around Iceland, open to people of all ages. So that travellers can keep costs to a minimum, such establishments offer budget accommodation in clean, comfortable lodging, as well as opportunities for self-service. All such hostels maintain a well-equipped guest kitchen and family rooms. Visit the Hostelling International website for information and bookings.



### **Mountain huts and cabins**

For those traversing the Icelandic highlands, mountain huts are available along the most common trails and primitive roads. In most cases these huts are very basic shelters, but space is limited in the high seasons, so guests will need to book in advance, and in the off-season will need to enquire about openings. Visitors will also need to bring all of their own food and equipment with them, unless they can arrange for the popular option of baggage transport, which is widely available by means of special vehicles or boats.

### **Camping**

There are very numerous inspected and registered campsites in Iceland; they normally stay open from around the beginning of June to the end of August or middle of September, though they often start much later in the highlands. While most campsites charge a modest fee, some are free of charge. Sewage hookups are unlikely to be available outside of towns, but are often specified in the advertising for particular sites. Several companies offer tents, camping trailers and motor homes for hire.

People camping in remote locations need to be adequately prepared for Iceland's rugged terrain and unpredictable weather conditions.

## **General practical information**

### **Language**

Even if it would take a while for a newcomer to learn much Icelandic, virtually everyone speaks some English. The younger generations generally prove fairly willing and fluent, while most older folks manage at least basic communications. A great number of people speak a blend of the Scandinavian languages; indeed, it is not many years since Danish was the first foreign language taught in compulsory school rather than English. The island is small, encouraging Icelanders to travel, study and establish manifold business connections overseas, so even tourists from far-off language areas may be able to discover abilities in their native languages.

On the other hand, learning some Icelandic is fun. The rule that will matter most in pronunciation is also a simple one: every Icelandic word is stressed on the first syllable, as was originally typical of all the Germanic languages. Although the Icelandic alphabet, necessary for pronouncing names on signs and helpful in remembering the names of people and so forth, may look intimidating at first, the letters generally stand for close to the same sounds, making it worthwhile to learn how the unknown characters are pronounced. The ones that most non-Icelanders need advice on are Ð and Þ, even though their sounds exist in English too, which quit spelling the difference after the period of Old English and started writing both as TH. The Ð is a voiced 'th' sound, as in 'soothe' or 'that', and Þ is an unvoiced 'th' sound, as in 'with' or 'thin'.

The study of Icelandic is important for all of the Germanic languages, including for instance the Scandinavian ones, Dutch and English. This is to a large extent because of how comparatively little the language has changed since the settlement and to how well the sagas and many historical documents in Icelandic have been preserved. Many travellers come to study Icelandic or work for a time on the island to practise it, and it is in fact introduced in dozens of universities overseas. Iceland is a member of the European Economic Area, rendering it easy for individuals from nearly every European country to be permitted to work here. Volunteer work programmes and student exchanges are also common.

### **Currency and banks**

Iceland's currency is the Icelandic krona (plural: kronur; abbreviation: kr.; code: ISK). In all figures, periods are used to separate thousands, and commas are used as decimal points, so that five thousand kronur is written as 5.000 kr, and two point five percent as 2,5%.

ATMs are plentiful around the country, as are banks where it is easy to change common currencies. Therefore, most places serving tourists, including many grocery stores, don't mind taking common foreign bills, especially euros, dollars, pounds and the other main Nordic currencies, though an Icelandic business may have to return only approximate change in Icelandic money. Travellers' cheques are less known nowadays but are accepted at banks and major hotels or tourism centres. The banks are generally open 9 am to 4 pm Monday through Friday. Finally and above all, credit and debit cards are readily accepted by nearly all Icelandic businesses, even for the smallest purchases like a newspaper or pack of sweets, so in the minds of Icelanders they are normally the most convenient means of payment.

### **Tipping and retail taxes**

All service and VAT are generally included in the prices shown to consumers. Although tipping is not customary and is in no way a condition, it is appreciated when offered.

### **Passport and visa regulations**

Iceland is party to the Schengen Agreement, which exempts travellers from personal border controls between most European countries. Note that for residents of countries outside the Schengen area, a valid passport will be required for the duration of the stay. For information on passport and visa requirements, as well as the Schengen Area regulations, visit the website of the Icelandic Directorate of Immigration.

### **Smoking**

Iceland was one of the first countries to ban smoking in all public buildings and often even beside them, as well as in restaurants and bars. Smoking is also prohibited in the public spaces of apartment buildings and hotels, and nowadays most hotels ban it everywhere indoors.

## **Alcohol**

Iceland's minimum drinking age is 20. Guests at bars and restaurants, for instance, may be asked to show valid identification. Outside of bars and other licensed drinking establishments, alcohol may only be purchased at a state-owned alcohol shop, called a Vínbúð.

## **Visitors with disabilities**

Advance enquiry and planning will usually ensure a trouble-free visit. Much of Iceland's tourism infrastructure is equipped to help disabled visitors. However, many shortcomings unfortunately exist, even if work is ongoing to improve the circumstances.

## **Phone and Internet service**

The code for calling Iceland from overseas is 354, generally followed by only seven digits. From within Iceland, long-distance calls can be made to other parts of the world by dialling + or 00 plus the country code before the telephone number inside of that country.

Several GSM mobile telephone services are operated in Iceland, with a couple of them providing coverage throughout most of the lowlands, though by no means in all unpopulated and mountainous areas. Pre-paid SIM cards are easy to obtain, and travellers can purchase refills at most petrol stations or convenience stores.

As for going online, many places of accommodation, as well as eating establishments and public libraries, offer access for free or for a small charge. Outside of these places, most of the populated areas receive at least GPRS signals, if not 3G or 4G. As so often for a traveller, accessing much data by using a SIM card from home is likely to be prohibitively expensive, whereas an Icelandic SIM card should prove reasonable in price.

## **Time zone**

All of the country uses Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) throughout the year. No Summer Time/Daylight Saving Time is observed anywhere. Times are typically written according to a 24-hour clock, such as 13:00 for 1 p.m.

## **Safety**

Iceland is one of the world's safest countries, due to a low crime rate and excellent medical care. However, due at least to the weather and other natural

hazards, it is necessary to show some caution when travelling in Iceland, noting that conditions can change without notice.

Travellers thus need to pay attention to weather forecasts and check online or ask about road conditions. This applies especially in the highlands and in winter, though caution should be exercised everywhere and at all times, since even sections of the main Ring Road might be closed during special situations. The Icelandic Meteorological Office and the Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration provide more details.

Appropriate clothing and equipment are essential. For recommendations regarding different types of activities, visit the SafeTravel website.

Those travelling by vehicle or motorcycle must acquaint themselves with the law and rules of the road as well as current conditions, and make sure their vehicle or cycle is suitable for the journey intended. Again, the Road and Coastal Administration website provides further information, and many Icelanders will be willing to voice an opinion, as at an information office or campsite.

When people are heading for the Icelandic interior, or if the weather outlook is precarious, it is always imperative to let someone know as exactly as possible about travel plans. An easy method if travellers can go online is for them to report their plans on the SafeTravel website. Alternatively, travellers can for instance leave their plans with their host or tour operator. No such trips should be undertaken without having consulted experienced, knowledgeable people.

The Icelandic emergency number is 112. The 112 Iceland app enables travellers to contact the Icelandic emergency services easily, which helps them locate travellers quickly if trouble occurs.

Visit the Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue website, SafeTravel, for comprehensive safety information.

### **Medical treatment**

In the event of a medical emergency, citizens of other Nordic countries need to present their passport, while citizens of EEA countries (including the EU countries) must present a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC card) to avoid being charged in full.

Citizens of non-EU/EEA countries will be charged in full at hospitals or clinics. They can then seek reimbursement from the public or private insurance they

may have in their country of origin, according to the rules and regulations applicable there.

### **Useful numbers**

Emergency line: 112

Reykjavík police: 444 1000

Healthcare clinic and nurse hotline: 1770

Dental emergency: 575 0505

Road conditions: 1777, 1778

Phonebook/information: 118

Telegrams: 1446

### **Public holidays**

	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
New Year's Day	1 January	1 January	1 January
Maundy Thursday	2 April	24 March	13 April
Good Friday	3 April	25 March	14 April
Easter Sunday	5 April	27 March	16 April
Easter Monday	6 April	28 March	17 April
First Day of Summer	23 April	21 April	20 April
Labour Day	1 May	1 May	1 May
Ascension Day	14 May	5 May	25 May
Whit Sunday	24 May	15 May	4 June
Whit Monday	25 May	16 May	5 June
Independence Day	17 June	17 June	17 June
Bank Holiday Monday	3 August	1 August	7 August
Christmas Eve	24 Dec	24 Dec	24 Dec
Christmas Day	25 Dec	25 Dec	25 Dec
2nd Day of Christmas	26 Dec	26 Dec	26 Dec
New Year's Eve	31 Dec	31 Dec	31 Dec

## 2. Plenty to do

---

### Shopping

Icelanders can be a creative bunch, blissfully unrestrained by tradition. This has resulted in a creative scene that makes shopping in Iceland an enjoyable series of surprises. Although prices in Iceland tend to be high on an international scale, foreign shoppers can save by taking advantage of tax-free shopping.

### Shopping locations

Reykjavík's main shopping streets, Laugavegur and Skólavörðustígur, include some upscale design houses featuring the latest in world fashion, together with tiny shops featuring local designers. Interestingly mixed in, visitors will also find souvenir shops, vintage clothing stores, jewellery designers and outdoor clothing outlets. Several shopping malls in the capital area are also attractive, each offering a wide selection of shops at one spot. The Kolaportið flea market, open on weekends, is a great place for bric-a-brac, second-hand clothes and Icelandic books, as well as a selection of traditional local food.

While the biggest variety of stores is to be found in Reykjavík, other capital area municipalities offer intriguing shops which sell further souvenirs, books, clothes, handicrafts and local specialities. The Hafnarfjörður centre is even a charming old town, right by the little harbour and unusual homes amid lava formations.

When travelling out in the country and getting to know the landscape, atmosphere and even society of a particular area, nothing could give more satisfaction than finding a perfectly designed and locally produced piece of clothing, jewellery, jar of jam or whatever article fits that area. In recent years some farms have started to run direct outlets for their produce, for instance ice cream made right on the farm. Nor should one forget how interesting it can be to seek out groceries, drinks or other necessities at any Icelandic supermarket or small food store, partly to view what is different and select something new to try.

### Popular purchases

Lopapeysa

The Icelandic lopapeysa, a knitted wool sweater with special designs below the shoulders, became an iconic fashion item already in the 20th century. Worn for practical reasons by farmers, fishermen and others, the sweater (or its variations, including button or zipped cardigans) has remained one of the trendiest items around. Moreover, visitors can buy a variety of other high-quality items made of the same loosely-spun lopi wool that is used in the lopapeysa.

### **Jewellery and other design items**

Jewellery inspired by the country's pagan roots and nature is often fashioned from such Icelandic materials as horns, leather and fish skin or lava stones and minerals. The nation's designers have been celebrated for observing ancient Celtic and Norse patterns, as well as creating highly original motifs. The constant desire for fresh materials and inspiration has kept designers throughout the country churning out useful or decorative gallery pieces. Expertly trained, ambitious designers of various goods have also gradually sought to live and work not only in the capital area but in numerous communities around the island. Finally, many who work part-time at handicrafts are also highly talented and original, producing interesting items which can be purchased in local galleries, etc.

### **Outdoor wear**

If any group knows how to make outdoor wear practical, durable and fashionable, it is the Icelanders. Several companies offer stylish clothing for a range of weather, not least for the worst cold, wet and storm. Shoppers can therefore confidently stock up on everything from fleece or rain gear to hiking socks, with an eye not only to using them later at home or in some other country but also to trying them out right away in a bracing gale outside.

### **Music, literature and art**

Visitors can often buy the best up-and-coming Icelandic music here at a fraction of the import price they would pay back home. Some established local acts include Sigur Rós, Of Monsters and Men, Gus Gus and, of course, Björk. There is also a wide selection of folk music, often with printed texts and even translations.

Beautiful photography books depicting all things Icelandic are available, as well as translations, above all into English but also into some other languages, of



works such as the Eddas, sagas and stories by well-known Icelandic authors such as Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness or contemporary detective story writers.

Visual art, ceramics and more are represented both by museums and a number of private galleries. While the capital area and Akureyri in the North certainly display the major offerings, the true connoisseur is left with a chance to scout for something extra special in less explored artistic locations, perhaps also in relation to specifically local motifs. Many villages around the country nowadays support visiting artists or have even become popular dwelling spots for artists of various media, whether in the summer, the winter or throughout the year.

Many shops will stay closed on Sunday and open shorter hours or not at all on Saturdays, but opening times vary a great deal. Luckily, they are often detailed in tourist brochures or on websites.

### **Tax-free shopping**

Designer brands such as Hugo Boss and Max Mara frequently prove less expensive in Iceland than in Europe or the USA. Moreover, foreign shoppers can benefit even further by obtaining value-added tax (VAT) refunds on all purchases exceeding ISK 6,000. VAT is charged in two tax brackets, 24% or 11%, depending on the goods and services purchased. Since taxes are already included in the prices normally shown to retail consumers, the percentage of the total price to be refunded in the 24% bracket amounts to 19.35% and in the 11% bracket to 9.91%.

To be eligible for a refund all of the following conditions must be met:

- The buyer has a permanent address outside of Iceland
- The buyer takes or ships the goods out of the country within three months of purchase.
- Each set of goods purchased (including VAT) costs at least ISK 6,000.
- The articles along with required documents are presented upon departure.

When departing from the country, the buyer shall produce the articles along with a refund cheque to the refund service provider, who will purchase it subject to fulfilment of all the above conditions. The refund provider may not purchase the cheque unless the buyer supplies sufficient proof that s/he is a

permanent resident abroad. If the amount of the refund itself exceeds ISK 5,000, customs authorities must confirm the export of the goods by signing the cheque.

## **Nightlife**

Though Reykjavík is no metropolis, it deserves its reputation for some of the world's hottest nightlife. The downtown area has pubs, clubs and bars to suit every taste, and live music is easy to find. On weekdays, most bars remain open until 01:00, with extended party hours from Thursday evening through the weekend, when operations continue until 03:00 or longer. On Fridays and Saturdays, in fact, city bars don't grow particularly active until after midnight, with the party spirit getting into stride by around 02:00 and in acceptable weather extending into the streets.

Most bars and clubs charge no entrance fee, though there will generally be a small charge for entrance to a live music venue. See the Visit Reykjavík website for a listing of bars and live music venues in the capital area.

Nightlife outside of the capital tends to be a much quieter, less regular affair, though larger towns often have one or more bars and even some regular live entertainment. In each area, it pays to look at advertisements or ask about major dances, concerts and so on, checking for instance at information centres or on bulletin boards at swimming pools, campgrounds and grocery stores. Such events can provide a wonderful chance to become acquainted with an Icelander.

Note that the minimum drinking age in Iceland is 20, and guests may be asked to show a valid ID.

## **Dining**

Together with other Nordic countries, Iceland has emerged in the past few years as one of Europe's most dynamic gastronomic scenes. Icelandic chefs are winning prizes abroad and often utilising traditional ingredients to create avant-garde dishes. In many cases, their practices fulfil ideals of the New Nordic Cuisine, with the thrilling freshness of local seasonal ingredients often playing a vital role.

One staple of Icelandic cuisine is freshly caught fish. For centuries, fishing has been an essential part of Icelandic history and culture. In fact, white fish served as a lifeline of the nation, both as a mainstay in the diet and as a primary export

product. Nowadays scallops, mussels, langoustine (or lobster, as many may call it) and so on have also become popular. Not only does Reykjavík has several dedicated fish or seafood restaurants, but most leading Icelandic restaurants all around the country will have one or more excellent fish dishes on the menu.

Icelandic lamb is another popular ingredient. Tourists tend mostly to observe and photograph the sheep as these range through the open countryside and across mountain slopes during the summer, feeding on wild grasses, brush and herbs. Come fall, they will be rounded up by groups of farmers and those who are helping out, then separated in corrals according to the farms to which each sheep belongs. Such festive corral days are often visited by people from the towns or even from overseas. The free-range flavour from an Icelandic lamb's summer of grazing in the wild is praised by chefs all over the world and appreciated on both restaurant and family tables.

Chefs throughout Iceland also use vegetables and other produce grown in Iceland's many geothermally heated greenhouses, as well as herbs living in the clean outdoors, in order to assure their guests' enjoyment of the highest-quality ingredients available. Iceland's dairy products have been gaining international acclaim for their wholesome flavour, particularly the thick, naturally low-fat skyr, which has lately been marketed or even produced overseas.

While fish and lamb are most traditional, many restaurants also include beef, poultry, pork, game, seabirds, langoustine, shrimp and scallops on their menus, as well as vegetarian dishes. A great many specialist restaurants can be found, highlighting for instance the Mediterranean area or the Orient.

Streetside stands, petrol station shops, etc. serve some inexpensive, interesting musts for visitors, especially the pylsa, or hot dog. Traditionally served with crunchy fried onions, raw onions, ketchup, sweet mustard, and rémoulade sauce, possibly leaving out one or more of these whenever an individual consumer prefers, Icelandic hot dogs have an enticingly unique flavour through generally containing some mutton. Another Icelandic pleasure in which many enjoy partaking is eating soft ice cream year-round.

For the adventurous, further traditional Icelandic fare is widely available. In the era preceding modern storage technology – i.e. the fridge and freezer – food was traditionally stored using primitive methods which produced dried, pickled, fermented, salted, cured, or smoked fish and meat of numerous sorts. In order to survive the long winter months, all parts of the animal were consumed, which nowadays may be less necessary but are typically Icelandic and provide

traditional optional flavours. Harðfiskur, meaning "dried fish" but easily understood through the English cognates, "hard fish", is healthy, short on calories and highly tasteful to most people.

For a list of restaurants in Iceland, see the Dining section of the Visit Iceland website, and ask or look around upon arrival in any town or countryside.

## **Museums and galleries**

Iceland's variety and number of museums and collections may seem astonishing for a nation of well under 350,000, spotlighting for instance cultural history, geology and wildlife, as well as some outlandish curiosities. Please keep in mind that numerous highly interesting collections are not mentioned here, whether in Reykjavík, its suburbs or many other places around the island, often even in the open countryside.

### **Capital area**

For tourists who visit the capital and are on a tight schedule, perhaps the most important collection is the National Museum, which has a permanent exhibition of Iceland's history from the settlement to present day.

Art lovers should check out the Reykjavík Art Museum. Its gallery spreads into three downtown buildings, displaying contemporary works by Icelandic and international artists.

The Whales of Iceland museum is the largest of its kind in Europe. With life-size models of all 23 whale species living in Icelandic waters, the museum will please animal enthusiasts of all ages.

For novelty, the Icelandic Phallogical Museum is a prime choice. It contains a collection of over 215 penises and penile parts from nearly all of the land and sea mammals found in and around Iceland.

On the way from Reykjavík to the national park at Þingvellir, tourists acquire an introduction to Iceland's Nobel prize winner for literature, Halldór Laxness, at the Gljúfrasteinn Laxness Museum, Mosfellsbær, which like some other Icelandic museums often hosts musical concerts.

### **Capital city suburbs and other areas of Iceland**

Many interesting museums and exhibitions are located outside the capital area, so as above, the museums mentioned below represent just a few outstanding examples.

In the South, the Skógar Folk Museum and the adjacent Museum of Transport are well worth a visit, and remain strong in the memories of many past visitors.

At Fáskrúðsfjörður in East Iceland, the French Fishermen in Iceland museum, together with the surrounding restored buildings of French origin, gives insights into fishing by Frenchmen and their dealings with Icelanders up into the early 20th century.

In the North, there's the Whale Museum at Húsavík, not to mention for instance the assortment of museums in and around Akureyri, exhibiting subjects from art to aviation. Farther west, there's for instance the preserved turf buildings at Glaumbær.

At Hólmavík in the Strandir region, fans of the supernatural will enjoy the Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft. This museum delves into the history of Icelandic magic and even includes "necropants" – trousers made from a dead man's skin which were supposed to bring wealth to the wearer.

Among the West Fjords' attractions is Ísafjörður's Old Town, or Neðstikaupstaður, an antique and inviting quarter which is preserved by law and represents all Iceland's most complete cluster of 18th-century buildings.

In the West, the two exhibitions at the Settlement Centre tell on the one hand the saga of Iceland's settlement and on the other the saga of a famous local Viking, Egill Skallagrímsson.

## **Events**

Even the oldest sagas and histories of churchmen illustrate how the Icelandic people has always relished social gatherings. Year round, visitors will thus find creative events dedicated to food, language, culture, the arts and more. During summer in particular, town festivals around the country dominate the events calendar, attracting crowds of natives and scattered foreigners. Iceland's abundant daylight hours during summer and long evenings during winter help render such festivals unique.

This section covers some of the country's biggest annual events. For full event listings, not least for the constantly appearing new ones, whether in music and the arts or a variety of other themes, see the regional websites, as well as the festival section of the Visit Iceland website.

## **Spring events**

DesignMarch and the Reykjavík Fashion Festival

From fashion to furniture, architecture to food, these events, timed near the start of spring, present the best of the Icelandic design scene, along with exciting international developments. Now collaborating with DesignMarch, the Reykjavík Fashion Festival has added its explosion of fashion design and music, introducing the fall/winter collections of Iceland's most provocative and skilled designers.

### **Aldrei fór ég suður**

Also abbreviated as AFES and initiated by the popular Icelandic musician Mugison, this rock music festival takes place over Iceland's long Easter weekend and offers free admission. The venue is Ísafjörður, which is the most populous town of the West Fjords and a stepboard to fabulous skiing.

### **Reykjavík Arts Festival**

This festival, one of Northern Europe's oldest in the arts field, promotes Icelandic and international culture in all artistic branches, bringing together the best in the visual arts, theatre, dance, music, etc.

### **ATP Iceland**

Held near the time of the summer solstice on the former NATO base at Keflavík, ATP (All Tomorrow's Parties) presents popular musical acts both from Iceland and abroad.

## **Summer Events**

### **Viking Festival**

Emphasising authenticity at its excellent Hafnarfjörður venue, this festival is Iceland's oldest and largest Viking event. Viking culture is for example showcased by typical cuisine, handicrafts, storytelling, music, archery, games and fighting demonstrations.

### **National Independence Day**

The Republic of Iceland was founded on 17 June 1944. Almost every community celebrates this day with festivities such as parades, concerts, traditional costumes and a host of further family-friendly activities. In most places, tourists will be able to join crowds of people in a cheerful mood, though

there might be some political demonstrations in the seat of national government, Reykjavík.

### **Secret Solstice**

Already amassing huge crowds when held for the second time in 2015, Secret Solstice spotlights diverse local and international artists. Scheduled around the year's very lightest nights, it is themed on Norse mythology and set in the Laugardalur recreational area, with its enticing geothermal bathing facilities.

### **Eistnaflug**

A metal music festival that has taken place annually since the summer of 2005. With fabulous indoor concerts and marvellous outdoor scenery, Eistnaflug is situated in Neskaupstaður, a pleasant village beside Norðfjörður fjord on Iceland's easternmost coast.

### **Folk Music Festival**

For many years running, this festival at Siglufjörður, North Iceland, has performed Icelandic folk music as well as holding conferences to discuss it and that of other countries. There's no better way to meet people interested in the field and to experience what is unique in Iceland's folk music.

### **LungA**

A continuously growing music and art festival in the eastern town of Seyðisfjörður, where in fact residents, institutions and visitors celebrate and practise art throughout the year. First held in 2000, LungA encourages the arts among young people, supported by lectures and workshops.

### **Reykjavík Pride**

Here Icelanders and a growing number of tourists join in celebrating and furthering rainbow culture, together with universal human rights. Continuing for several days, the programme sports a range of themed events, not least the gala Pride Parade.

### **Bank Holiday Weekend**

By far the best-known festival of this three-day Icelandic weekend (which always includes the first Monday in August) is the celebration held outdoors in Herjólfsdalur valley, Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands). The music performances and group singing, huge camp fire and fireworks have attracted amazing crowds for nearly a whole century.

### **Reykjavík Culture Night**

With around 100,000 guests, Culture Night is Iceland's most strongly attended festival. The programme offers a cross-section of everything cultural, with a host of events ranging from musical performances to exhibitions of art and architecture.

### **Reykjavík Marathon and other races**

The opportunities for individuals or small groups to compete, adding onto the traditional team sports, have mushroomed in recent years, whether in cycling, swimming in various types of waters, cross-country skiing – you name it! Held on the morning of Reykjavík Culture Night, the Reykjavík Marathon also includes shorter distance events and a fun run, and you can check online for numerous other running competitions throughout the country. While most such events occur in summer, others can be found spreading out through all seasons of the year.

### **Autumn events**

#### **Reykjavík International Film Festival (RIFF)**

RIFF takes place in late September every year and shows a wide range of cinema from over 40 countries. Independent undertakings are highlighted, putting an emphasis on the up-and-coming film producers.

#### **Iceland Airwaves**

Held annually in Reykjavík, this is one of Iceland's most popular music festivals. Airwaves spans five days and showcases some definitely spearheading sounds, Icelandic as well as international.

### **Winter events**

#### **Winter Lights Festival**

The main objective of this festival is to lighten up the deep darkness of winter with an assembly of sparkling events that elicit capital area beauty. The festival includes a museum night and swimming-pool night, as well as light-art installations which illuminate some of the city's most prominent public spaces and structures.



### **Sónar**

Held in Reykjavík, Sónar illustrates the current electronic music landscape and its interactions with other artistic fields, bringing together an exciting selection of established artists and emerging talent.

### **Food and Fun**

World-renowned chefs collaborate with many of the leading restaurants in the capital area. As an extra serving, chefs compete in creating a three-course meal with exclusively Icelandic ingredients.

## **Celebrating the holidays in Iceland**

Iceland is an ideal place to celebrate several holidays, especially around Christmas and New Year's.

While the skiing opportunities around Easter must not be forgotten, the Christmas season has enormous importance to Icelanders because it coincides with the winter solstice. Although this is the darkest time of the year, it is furthermore the time when the days once more start to grow longer. As a result, Icelanders put emphasis on bringing light into their Yuletide festivities. The towns are lit up with bright Christmas decorations, injecting a wonderfully warm, festive sensation into the wintry chill and darkness. Music also helps brighten spirits, with holiday-themed concerts being popular in the weeks leading up to Christmas no matter what part of the country the traveller is in.

At lunch or supper on 23 December, Þorláksmessa, adventurous eaters can sample putrefied skate, the traditional meal of the day. Far into the evening, Icelanders fill the main shopping places to finish some last-minute Christmas purchases, or simply cheer their festive spirits by means of carolling and hot chocolate. The main Christmas celebration is held on 24 December, Christmas Eve, when families gather no later than 18:00 to eat and exchange gifts. The following days are spent relaxing at home or visiting loved ones, and it helps that the 25th and 26th are both holidays. Numerous places of work remain closed as long as till after New Year's Day.

Icelanders like to strengthen their reputation for partying, and New Year's Eve proves the most flamboyant party of the year, with everyone being allowed to light fireworks – of course using recommended safety equipment such as goggles. Huge bonfires burn skywards, with Icelanders and visitors gathering around to sing and share the warmth. Many foreigners find the common belief of Icelanders in elves, or the "hidden people", extremely interesting, and the

turn of the year is when these are said to be the most active, with normal humans celebrating them and singing well-known songs about them. While most of the organised offerings for foreign tourists are in the capital area, even small villages usually have agendas to which everyone is welcome and where foreigners may well be more likely than in the capital area to be able to strike up conversations with the locals.

As a culturally significant event which is unique to Iceland and even more prominent in rural areas than in the capital area, the Þorrablót winter festivals, occurring from mid-January to mid-February, bring locals together to eat, drink, sing traditional songs, dance and be merry. The menu consists of unusual culinary delicacies reminiscent of the old days, and many restaurants have unique, traditional Þorrablót favourites on the menu for that season.

Finally, Icelanders are unique in celebrating their First Day of Summer on the last Thursday in April, keeping in mind an old saying that the best summers can be expected if temperatures are freezing on that morning. The main national radio channel plays traditional songs, and thousands of people go skiing throughout the entire following weekend, because several major skiing areas have some of their best snow available at this time, as well as sunshine far into the evening. There are also numerous musical and other cultural events, often with a distinctly traditional Icelandic air.

## **Outdoor activities**

### **Hiking**

Iceland is a hiker's paradise. The landscape is extraordinarily diverse, including colourful mountains, lava fields, glaciers, waterfalls, marshes and ponds, hot springs as well as copious cold springs, and a variety of vegetation growing in contrast to desolate black sands or beaches. This rugged nature has been shaped by the elements to form a majestic, often adventurous scenery unlike any other place in the world.

Since hiking trails are as varied as they are numerous, trekking overviews for the entire country are hard to come by. Individual trails can be examined in some detail at local tourist information centres around the country, and many helpful, inexpensive maps are available at such centres or at bookstores, as well as a number of hiking books. Many mountain huts, equipped with stoves and mattresses, can be booked alongside popular routes, allowing visitors to prolong their hikes and explore their destinations more closely, or dry off some

after rain or snow. If you are simply out in open countryside, away from special tourist attractions or protected areas, you can often roam on foot as you like, of course avoiding cultivated areas that are fenced in and the lots around cottages and homes.

Over the summer, hiking in the highlands of Iceland adds onto the multitude of possibilities in the lowlands or on mountains neighbouring the lowlands. Depending on the snow and thaw each spring as well as on the location, many highland trail heads and huts may not be open till late June, July or sometimes even later.

The Laugavegur trail, which runs between Landmannalaugar and Þórsmörk, is as popular a route among locals as among foreigners, and remains one of the world's most extraordinary wilderness trails. It offers a great variety of landscapes: mountains with rock and gravel in various colours, hot springs and glaciers, rivers and lakes. The difficulty of the track depends greatly on the weather conditions. Limited accommodation is offered at campsites and six huts along the trail (subject to booking).

Whereas you may meet dozens or perhaps hundreds of people on the famous Laugavegur trail, many other trails and even trail networks exist in other parts of the island where it will be much easier to stay alone for most of the day and perhaps to find an unreserved bunk at a hut, or even find tourist accommodation at handy farms or villages. The regional websites provide more information, and organised hiking tours or baggage transport between overnight stops are widely available for booking. Day or weekend tours are popular during wintertime, with longer tours more commonly organised during summer.

Particularly if visitors go hiking independently, without participating in an organised tour, they should exercise caution at all times. It is essential to take adequate clothing and provisions and to notify others of plans which are as precise as possible. Also, hikers need to have adequate maps and at least a compass along, if not both a compass and electronic navigation devices. The SafeTravel website provides further information and allows hikers to register their travel plans in case of emergency. Camping is not allowed within nature reserves or water protection areas and is undesirable in additional areas for environmental reasons, so hikers should study or enquire about the possibilities before leaving, as well as finding out current trail conditions and the weather forecast.

## **Birdwatching**

While Iceland cannot boast of very many species of breeding birds, it is still considered a birdwatcher's paradise, and more species appear during migration. Great multitudes of seabirds nest in certain places along the coast, or can be more easily seen than overseas due to Iceland's sparse vegetation. Furthermore, many a tourist has the opportunity to watch and hear species which behave differently at their winter home, whereas in Iceland they sing their summertime breeding songs, nest, stay active all night, etc. Some species may be quite shy elsewhere, but have always been left alone or even loved in this country, so that during their breeding season they will allow humans to watch them at much closer proximities than overseas. Finally, Europeans can check off some typically American species nesting nowhere else inside Europe.

The birds most frequently spotted along the coasts of Iceland include the Arctic tern, eiders, waders and passerines, as well as seabirds such as the guillemot, razorbill, puffin, fulmar, gannet and various gulls. Some excursions and guides specialise in birding, and a few areas have birdwatching hides and trails.

Iceland's wetlands provide a favourable habitat for many species of birds, including migrators stopping en route. Lake Mývatn and the Laxá river which flows from it rank at the top globally for their number of breeding duck species, including the harlequin duck and the Barrow's goldeneye, two of the species which only Iceland is home to in Europe. Some other leading birding locations also found in North Iceland include the estuary areas of Svarfaðardalur valley and of the Eyjafjarðará river, or the bird cliffs of Grímsey or Drangey islands.

In the West Fjords, Látrabjarg is a hotbed of bird activity; in fact, it is the largest known bird cliff in the world, home to millions of birds and for instance nearly half the world population of the razorbill. Also, just off shore by Steingrímsfjörður fjord in the isolated Strandir area lies the island Grímsey (confusingly named the same as the Grímsey off North Iceland) with its large colonies of puffins and other seabirds. In addition, hikers farther north in the uninhabited areas of Strandir will see huge numbers of birds, which by Hornbjarg are often also viewed from cruising ships.

In South Iceland, at several places just west of Vík, various species of seabirds can be viewed up close, for example at Dyrhólaey, a stunning, protruding cliff with a hole at sea level. Off shore, the hills and cliffs of Heimaey and other islets in the Westman Islands are famous birding destinations. Although warming seas and the advance of mackerel into Icelandic waters have led to a

drastic decrease in the small fish which many seabirds need for themselves and their young, the Westman Islands offer highly developed tourism facilities and even exciting boating tours which include birdwatching.

Even downtown Reykjavík with its city pond, Tjörninn, has a breeding colony of Arctic terns and other species that are fun to watch or show to children, and both the city and surrounding suburbs have further inviting parks and shorelines where there are good jogging and cycling paths and, especially in summer, numerous birds. Sometimes birds collect in winter where the tides or else geothermal heat keep spots of water ice-free.

When visiting breeding grounds around Iceland, visitors should remain on the marked trails, if available, as nests may be hard to notice before stepping on the eggs or young. In some places, visitors must observe postings at breeding grounds which are temporarily closed during the nesting season. Air traffic is also prohibited by some breeding grounds, though Icelandic flight or land excursion companies should be adequately aware of all such prohibitions.

The prime birdwatching season in Iceland is from the end of April through early June, although the season varies considerably among species and some tours are offered year-round. One should contact or visit an information office for more details, including maps, tips and rules and regulations.

Besides reindeer hunting, which is possible only in East Iceland and where only lucky hunters end up having their names drawn for a licence, some of the most common and unusual hunting is for seabirds, permitted from the beginning of September to late April. Duck hunting is less common among Icelanders but is allowed for a number of species till mid-March. The rock ptarmigan hunting season varies from year to year, though this bird is especially popular as a Christmas dish. Finally, the pink-footed and the graylag geese are the most popular Icelandic game. Hunting privileges can be booked and often lodging and transportation as well, not least directly from the farms which cater conveniently to visiting hunters and sometimes even provide additional entertainment and services.

### **Geothermal pools and spas**

A natural wonder which is strongly related to Icelandic culture but less of a factor in many other societies is the use of geothermally warm or hot water. While fancy spas were not introduced to Iceland until recent times, thermal pools have been relished for pleasure and health benefits in Icelandic society since the first centuries of settlement. Snorri Sturluson, the famous thirteenth-

century historian and author, was a bathing enthusiast who had a hot pool lined with rocks so he could comfortably soak with his friends whenever the mood struck them. They clearly conversed in a pool of similar size and shape to that found beside most Icelandic swimming pools to this day. Of the thirteen hot pools known to have been frequented in the early days of Icelandic society, four still exist.

Pool culture continues to play an important role in today's society. Locals of all ages and professions frequent the easily accessible public pools for exercising, relaxing and stretching stiff muscles, as well as for socialising by gossiping with other locals or even with foreign visitors. Not only does the capital area alone have seventeen public swimming pools, but almost every village throughout the island has one also. Most such pools and the hot tubs generally positioned beside them are outdoors, especially where the water is geothermal, and some facilities are equipped with saunas and steam baths.

Rules of hygiene are taken seriously, and all visitors are required to shower thoroughly without a swimsuit, i.e. naked, before entering the water. Note that the sexes are separated until exiting to the pool area itself, though a child up to age 10 must be accompanied by a person of at least 15 and may be with the other sex. After undressing, everyone needs to take their towel and any personal shampoo, lotion or shaving equipment they wish to use into the showering and washing area with them if they wish to use it there, so that they will be able to dry off before returning to the dry dressing room. There is in fact no special need to bring normal soap along anyhow, because all pools inside towns offer free soap right beside the showers.

As of the late 20th century, geothermal water has also been utilised in luxury spa settings. The most famous of these is the Blue Lagoon, located in a lava field on the Reykjanes peninsula, not far from Keflavík International Airport. Indoor spas are also gaining popularity.

Reykjavík sports a geothermal beach, with yellow sands and ocean water warmed by geothermal injection. There are some other hot pools located at stunning coastal spots or by river and lake shores around the island. Finally, since there are those who swear by the psychological and physical benefits of swimming or even surfing in the cold ocean, you will also find Icelanders wading out into the cold Atlantic.

## **Whale watching**

Few places in the world offer opportunities for whale watching comparable to those off the Icelandic coastline. Numerous companies offer whale-watching tours, and achieve a high success rate in spotting these mammals.

The best time for watching whales off Iceland is from April through September, when over 20 species of Cetacea – including the orca, minke, humpback and blue whale – can be observed in seas around the island. Other species commonly sighted include the white-beaked dolphin, harbour porpoise and basking shark, as well as seals and numerous seabirds.

While whale-watching excursions are widely available around the island, one of the smaller towns leading in whale watching is Húsavík on the north coast. Húsavík has in some ways pioneered in whale watching, domestically and even internationally, not least in using traditional or environmentally friendly ships. Throughout Iceland, however, tours and whale-watching vessels tend to be small in scale and personal.

Whale-watching tours are less frequent in the winter months but come with the bonus of stark, outstanding scenery: snowcapped mountains, long-lasting sunsets and even chances of seeing the northern lights.

It might be mentioned that, like other peoples of the Far North, Icelanders have hunted whales for a long time and want to maintain their right to decide what animals are hunted for meat within their national jurisdiction, just as other countries allow or even need to hunt deer, coyotes and so on. Whales strongly impact fish stocks, which are economically vital to Iceland. Thus the state performs research, collaborating with scientists and institutes in other countries, and strictly regulates whale and other hunting to make sure that no endangered whale or other animal species are thereby threatened, as well as to ensure humane hunting techniques.

## **Northern lights**

The lengthy darkness of Icelandic winters has some advantages. More or less from September to April, the nights grow dark and long enough for enjoying the magnificent aurora borealis, named after the Roman goddess of dawn, Aurora, and the Greek god of the north wind, Boreas, and commonly referred to as the northern lights.

The northern lights are due to electrically charged particles emitted by the sun. While these particles are mostly warded off by the Earth's magnetic field, it is



weaker nearer the poles, where the solar particles are more likely to penetrate the field and collide with gaseous particles in our atmosphere. The energy released through these collisions yields a soft, wondrous luminosity that varies in colour.

On clear winter nights, sightseeing trips are organised around this spectacular – though fickle – natural phenomenon. The ideal sites for observation vary, not least according to weather, but excursion leaders are skilled in seeking out locations where conditions are best for seeing the lights on any given night.

Though there will never be guarantees of seeing the aurora borealis, a tourist's chances can be greatly improved by travelling away from the light-pollution of towns, at least while on excursion. Also, in relation to the weather, it often amazes foreign visitors how strongly cloud cover and precipitation can differ in Iceland just by driving to the other side of a mountain range. Rural places of accommodation are normally not booked heavily during the winter months, so that then it is usually feasible to move on short notice to a different part of the island depending on the weather. Some small-town hotels with 24-hour desk services also offer to wake guests who request to find out whenever the lights make a show.

Sometimes the northern lights become visible even in heavily populated areas, and on black, frosty nights the news may spread quickly among locals urging each other to go out for a look. The Icelandic Met Office provides a daily northern lights forecast which will improve a visitor's chances of observing this splendid natural phenomenon.

### **Horse riding**

Horse riding is a magnificent way to travel far from roads and explore unspoiled nature, with panoramic landscapes and grazing sheep. Offered all around Iceland by farms and other enterprises, riding tours are available to suit every level of experience and endurance, as well as the visitor's time frame. Note however that riding will not be offered everywhere during winter, so that prior inquiry is worthwhile during that season.

The Icelandic horse is a unique breed of slightly smaller horses that was brought to the island 1100 years ago by the first settlers from Norway. Archeological digs in Europe have revealed that it descends from an ancient breed of horses which ceased to exist outside of Iceland, where it fortunately survived in isolation.



Known for general docility, as well as sure-footedness in rough terrain, the Icelandic horse is unique in that many individuals are capable of mastering five gaits. One of these, the tölt, is known in hardly any other of the world's breeds. By lifting one foot at a time, a tölting horse can keep the rider comfortable over considerable distances. Such characteristics have made the Icelandic horse so popular that nowadays there are more of them being bred in other countries than in Iceland, but often Icelandic names are used even there, and many owners of Icelandic horses overseas enjoy coming here to ride the breed in its home environment. In order not to infect the animals here with any foreign diseases, however, no horse which has been in another country is allowed to enter Iceland, even if it was once born and grew up here.

In addition to typical riding tours, visitors can experience one of Iceland's oldest agricultural traditions at the annual horse and sheep roundups, most of which take place during September. In each farming community across Iceland, hundreds of sheep and in some places horses are herded together in the stunning mountains and isolated pastures where they graze over the summer. Every community and even individual farms have somewhat differing customs, dependent on the weather, the landscape, etc., with some area roundups lasting up to a week. Large-scale round-ups occur in the Skagafjörður and Húnavatnssýsla counties in the North, as well as in the broad expanses of South Iceland.

## **Cycling**

Cycling around Iceland is both challenging and rewarding. While the weather is unpredictable and the distances to cover may be long, the scenery is certainly spectacular, and, like hikers and horse riders, cyclists are able to listen en route to the birds, sheep, waves and so on. Many bike enthusiasts come to Iceland simply to circle the island on the Ring Road, the well-known Highway 1. Others choose to concentrate on areas with considerably less traffic by detouring into the West Fjords or out onto smaller peninsulas, or prefer the less travelled gravel roads of farming neighbourhoods and even the rough roads by deserted fjords and across the highlands, such as the scenic route across Kjölur or up to Kverkfjöll.

Outside of urban areas, special bike paths are uncommon, and cyclists usually have to share the road with motorised vehicles. Cyclists often also encounter hilly terrain and numerous blind rises, in addition to dust from cars along gravel roads, should this not be whisked away by gusty side-winds or dampened by

rain. Since the distance to the next village may be considerable, it is essential to take along appropriate equipment for basic repairs as well as extra tubes and tires. Maps, GPS and communications equipment are also essential, particularly away from the Ring Road. Sturdy bikes with shock absorbers are a good idea anywhere off the asphalted highways.

Cyclists should definitely always wear a helmet and have along durable clothing that is both warm and water resistant, not to forget high-visibility outer wear and reflectors in order to alert drivers. Gloves are indispensable at all times of the year, as temperatures can drop suddenly, particularly at higher altitudes.

Cyclists should never travel alone where there may be little traffic in the Icelandic interior or other entirely deserted areas. As with all travel in Iceland, it is important that they let others know of their plans before setting out. Unbridged rivers are common, and no one should attempt to cross them without taking proper safety measures.

Finally, it is important for cyclists as well as all other travellers to keep in mind that much of the most beautiful Icelandic nature is particularly delicate. Bike tyres may cause serious, ugly, long-lasting damage to the environment, for instance in sand or mud which has been free of tracks, or in moss and other vegetation. Cyclists should stay on roads or trails, and if they need to cross a sensitive area where feet would do no damage, they should simply pick up their bikes and carry them.

## **Diving**

Iceland might not be the first place one would think of to go scuba diving, but it in fact offers some extraordinary dive sites providing miraculous views of underwater geology. Two extremely popular sites include Silfra, a fissure in Þingvellir National Park, and Strýtan, a thermal chimney in Eyjafjörður, North Iceland. Even in the inland Silfra, it is possible to dive year-round, since the temperature of the spring water flowing through it stays a constant 1-3°C. Strýtan is not only in seawater but considerably warmer, as hot water rises from a spring at the bottom, 70 m below the surface. Dives for suitably experienced persons can be organised through tour companies, which will provide all the necessary gear and assistance.

## **Caving**

Due to its position on a hot spot of the Mid-Atlantic ridge, Iceland is one of the world's most active volcanic regions. A variety of geological phenomena are prominent enough in the landscape to be easy even for untrained tourists to see and understand, given a bit of appropriate explanation. Moreover, many rock formations and bodies of water are awe-inspiring, including beneath the ground surface. Various tube caves – formed by magma flowing below the surface after the lava overhead has solidified – can be safely explored on guided excursions year-round.

For transportation and safety reasons, on the other hand, different caves may be explored in different seasons. The most commonly visited caves are Gjábackkahellir cave near Þingvellir National Park in the summer months and Leiðarendi cave in the Bláfjöll area in wintertime.

Combination tours are also available, whereby caving trips are combined with other popular activities such as snorkelling or driving ATVs.

One of the worldwide outstanding opportunities is that of entering a magma chamber at the Þríhnúkaígur crater. This remarkable phenomenon is the interior of a 4,000-year-old volcano that, like so many others, only erupted once and was then exhausted. The ground space inside the volcano is equivalent in size to about three basketball courts, and the Statue of Liberty could easily fit into the cavity. Reaching this cave is an adventure demanding an hour-long hike and a descent of 120 m via open cable lift. As a magma chamber usually collapses following the eruption, the Þríhnúkaígur crater is truly an extraordinary phenomenon.

## **Ice climbing**

When undertaking a trip to Iceland, one would hardly want to forget the country's namesake – i.e. its 11,000 km<sup>2</sup> of glacier ice. While ice climbing on waterfalls is only possible in winter, it can be practiced year-round on glaciers. This is above all done on the Sólheimajökull and Svínafellsjökull glaciers near the south coast. Other glacier spots can also be arranged, with hiking also available onto Snæfellsjökull glacier in the West and other parts of Vatnajökull glacier in the East. Of course, glacier walking or climbing should never be attempted without the proper equipment and in the company of a trained guide. Glacier walking tours can often be combined with other tours such as jeep safaris and boating on a glacier lagoon.

These tours offer visitors an invigorating first-hand experience of Iceland's untamed nature, tailored to various levels of experience and difficulty. Crampons and ice axes are generally provided and hiking boots are often available for rent, but it is recommended that the tourist bring at least a waterproof jacket and pants, quick-dry trousers, a sweater, hat and gloves.

## **Golf**

Golf has become widely popular in Iceland, which boasts some of the most stunning courses in Europe. All of the island's main golf courses are open to visitors, and charge only moderate green fees. One of the most exciting courses can be found on Heimaey, Westman Islands, where players tee off for the 18 holes in a volcanic crater, with a backdrop of sharp cliffs, but in fact every area of Iceland has one or more attractive courses.

At the end of June, golf enthusiasts can take advantage of the midnight sun by competing throughout the night in the Arctic Open, Akureyri. This 36-hole international match tees off just before midnight and continues into the early hours of morning. Reykjavík golf clubs also hold a midnight tournament during this time of no darkness, with courses staying open late throughout the summer months.

## **Angling**

Crystal clear rivers, lakes and streams have made Iceland a mecca for anglers from around the world. Sea and fjord angling have also become popular sports.

The quality of salmon fly fishing is such that permits are in incredible demand, ranking among the most expensive in the world. While the price and season vary by river, the latter lasts from approximately June to September. Visitors who book ahead may be able to find some quite reasonable prices, though never very inexpensive for any of the leading rivers.

In contrast, fishing for abundant sea trout, rainbow trout and Arctic char is easier on the pocketbook. Most fishing is on private land and needs to be booked in advance, generally through an association of the owners or simply at a tourist information office selling for the landowners. As one example of variety, anglers in the North Iceland region of Skagafjörður might reel in eels, arctic char and brown trout from the rivers, then catch cod from the sea shore.

The river trout season is more or less from April to September, while lake fishing is from May to September. The highlands have a shorter season, approximately June to August. Beginning late in May, the sea angling season

lasts until the end of August and is spiced by several tournaments in different parts of the country.

### **Skiing and snowboarding**

While Icelandic temperatures are never extremely cold, this often encourages considerable snowfall that provides great skiing in the mountains and highlands and in slopes near towns all the way from the West Fjords along the north coast to the central eastern fjords. Many of the skiing areas illuminate their slopes with floodlights to extend skiing hours into the long winter evenings. Sometimes plentiful snow occurs in the southwest part of the island, but is often soon melted away once more, under the influence of warm, rainy winds blowing off the Gulf Stream.

The best time for skiing varies but might be thought of as January to June. Frequently, it would be possible to find good conditions sooner, especially for cross-country skiing, by enquiring about the glaciers or about different sections of the country. Those looking for some serious adventure might just try skiing on the glaciers, though wisdom calls for skiing with someone who knows the terrain, as crevasses pose a serious danger.

### **Other activities**

Iceland offers a seemingly endless line of adrenaline-inducing activities. Further examples of popular outdoor activities include river rafting, dog-sledding, snowmobiling, surfing and many, many more. Check out the Adventurous Iceland section of the Visit Iceland website for additional inspiration and a list of adventure tour companies.

## 3. Regions

---

Iceland is typically divided into eight geographical regions: Reykjavík and the capital area, South Iceland, East Iceland, North Iceland, the West Fjords, West Iceland, Reykjanes and the Central Highlands.

Around a million tourists arrive in Iceland annually. Over a tenth of them are passengers on ocean cruisers, which often land at several harbours around the coast, excepting in particular the Central Highlands.

About 96% of the others arrive at Keflavík International Airport, located in the Reykjanes region. However, 4% or so arrive on the Smyril Line ferry in East Iceland or arrive elsewhere on other ships or at other airports. Work is ongoing to offer scheduled flights from overseas to the international airports at Akureyri in North Iceland and Egilsstaðir in East Iceland, thereby providing more distribution and further possibilities for the start and end points of trips by plane to Iceland. Since the new upswing in tourist numbers began in 2011, ending a slump after the financial collapse of 2008, the annual increases in tourist numbers to Iceland have lain between 15 and 24%.

This module will go on to explore the tourist highlights of each region.

### **Reykjavík and the capital area**

The capital area of Reykjavík is the most frequent starting point for visits to Iceland, and not undeservedly so. As just outlined, Keflavík International Airport is the main arrival point, and most vehicle traffic from there proceeds to the capital area before heading for other parts of the country. Also, the capital is world-renowned for its culture, history and natural beauty, besides having enough natural wonders at its doorstep to serve as a convenient base for exploring a great deal of spectacular landscape in several directions.

Neither with its own population of 120,000, nor with the 200,000 total of the entire capital area, can Reykjavík be accounted a metropolis. Few skyscrapers exist and traffic jams are rare. Nonetheless, a pulsing beat of energy and events keeps the capital area alive and exciting. People are often both surprised and impressed that such a small capital can offer so much in the way of culture, arts and activities. Long renowned for its surrounding natural scenery, recent decades have seen Reykjavík raised to the ranks of the planet's coolest, hippest cities.

## **Attractions**

Downtown Reykjavík (also known by its postal code of 101) is the nucleus of Iceland's culture and arts scene. By day, café culture rules supreme, with a lively hum of conversation. Encouraged by free WIFI and excellent coffee, Reykjavík's café-goers enjoy lingering. As evening arrives, people start filing into the cities' excellent restaurants.

No matter where it occurs in Iceland, sunny, warm weather seems to bring on a spontaneous holiday. In the capital, sunbathers and picnickers fill Austurvöllur, the green square in front of Parliament; locals and tourists alike stroll up and down the main drag of Laugavegur – shopping, stopping for coffee, and watching everyone else. Those who are thirsty jockey for the sparsely available outdoor seats at any bar where happy hour is rolling around. Crooning buskers line the store fronts; performance artists stage surprise acts; a marching band might appear from nowhere. Anything can happen.

Throughout 101, playful murals and street art testify to fertile creativity and fun. Art galleries such as the Reykjavík Art Museum and the National Gallery showcase the works of classic Icelandic artists, while smaller independent galleries display the projects of avant-garde native and foreign artists.

Various museums illustrate the culture and history of the capital area and the country at large. The most important is perhaps the National Museum, which explains the story of Iceland's past, from the days of Viking settlements to contemporary culture. Designated as a UNESCO City of Literature, Reykjavík is at the heart of Iceland's literary developments, serving as home to treasures of literary heritage and to many of the currently thriving poets and other authors.

Major items on the packed events calendar fill the city with Icelanders and foreigners alike. Among the most popular happenings are Iceland's National Day, Gay Pride, Culture Night and the music festival Iceland Airwaves.

Local music is a mainstay of capital area cultural life. The genres span a spectrum from bluegrass folk to death metal, rap to lo-fi, punk rock to reggae. Downtown record stores are eager to show off all sorts of native numbers and are worth browsing, while it is also easy to experience live concerts. Bars and clubs around 101 regularly host performances that draw lively crowds of congenial fans and friends.

Catching some live music is therefore an excellent way to kick off an evening on the town. Reykjavík is known for a vibrant nightlife that begins late and



carries on far into the morning hours. The clubs don't really start filling up till around midnight, and the party starts bouncing around one a.m. Even for tourists, there's a good chance of getting to know someone.

Branching off Laugavegur is Skólavörðustígur, a hunting ground for original Icelandic arts and crafts and Icelandic designer clothes. Towering at the top of the street is the iconic Hallgrímskirkja church. Built between 1945 and 1986, this church's unique architecture mirrors the basalt columns that are so familiar in the Icelandic landscape. Visitors can go to the top of the steeple for a stunning view over the city.

Another excellent vantage point is Perlan, a shining glass-domed structure atop some of the city's geothermal water storage tanks. Serving as a venue for expos and exhibitions, Perlan has a revolving restaurant, café and viewing deck, in addition to being surrounded by the woods of Öskjuhlíð hill and the shelter they provide for walks on windy days.

One of the city's newest landmarks is the visually stunning Harpa concert hall, which opened in 2011. Besides being home to the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and the Icelandic Opera, Harpa hosts a wide range of further concerts, conferences and additional events. Harpa's colourful glass façade was designed by the renowned artist Ólafur Elíasson, in cooperation with Henning Larsen Architects, and is fully as impressive when viewed from inside the building.

History buffs will want to stop by Höfði House, venue of the 1986 summit of presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbatsjov, a historic meeting which in effect marked the end of the Cold War.

Also worth visiting is City Hall, overlooking the picturesque Tjörninn pond. Framed by beautifully coloured houses of the last century or two, Tjörninn is one of Reykjavík's most photographed scenes. During colder winter periods, the pond freezes over so that locals walk or skate across the ice. When thawed, Tjörninn is home to flocks of ducks, geese, gulls and whooper swans.

Reykjavík's colourful Old Harbour, built between 1913 and 1917, has been booming in recent years as a recreational area. Nowadays it is home to an excellent Maritime Museum and some of the capital area's best cafés and restaurants. Apart from being an inviting place to walk and drink in panoramas of mountains across the bay, the Old Harbour is an assembly point for such marine activities as whale watching and puffin tours, though one must not



forget the outstanding sea-going offerings a few kilometres south, departing from the pretty harbour of Hafnarfjörður.

No visit to the capital area would be complete without a dip in one of the many thermal pools and spas. After all, an exercising swim and a warming soak in the hot pots are not only naturally therapeutic but also a key to Icelandic culture, perhaps helping the tourist to strike up conversations with locals.

Viðey island, visible from much of Reykjavík, can be reached by a short ferry ride. Viðey is the perfect spot for a day or afternoon away from car traffic, with paths to explore in the scenic outdoors, horse riding tours, and a restaurant in the historical Viðey House. The island is also the location of the Imagine Peace Tower, a work of art conceived by Yoko Ono and dedicated to the memory of John Lennon. Nowadays, it commemorates both of their birthdays as well as serving as a beacon to world peace by shining into the evening sky from every 9 October to 8 December, from the winter solstice through New Year's Eve, on 18 February, and for one week at the spring equinox.

Within the greater capital area, runners and cyclists on the excellent paved paths, as well as anyone using the bus system, taxis or rented cars, will for instance enjoy heading west towards the lighthouse in the neighbouring municipality of Seltjarnarnes, or south to the inviting harbour, antique houses and home-garden lava formations in the town of Hafnarfjörður, which also offers a focus on Viking culture.

Overlooking Reykjavík is the beautiful mountain of Esja. Located only a short drive away, it is a popular hiking destination, promising views over the capital and beyond.

Many day trips of varying distance are available from the city to historic points, mountains, glaciers, volcanoes and hot springs; on some of these trips, organised recreation is included such as horseback riding, glacier climbing, river rafting, caving, whale watching and more.

## **South Iceland**

From wonderful waterfalls to glistening glaciers, the South has it all. Its natural wonders and proximity to the capital, together with a wealth of culture, make it a highly popular destination. Three of this region's world-famous attractions – Þingvellir National Park, Gullfoss waterfall and the Geysir geothermal area – lie on the Golden Circle route, and have for centuries been a must-see for any tourist to Iceland. Continuing farther east and nearer the coastline, visitors will

find the Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss waterfalls, several massive glaciers, Jökulsárlón glacial lagoon and a multitude of other sights and experiences.

South Iceland's rich history and culture are introduced by a number of informative museums and exhibitions. Sites of saga events or of geological interest are indicated in many ways throughout the region, as on maps and signs or in the descriptions becoming more and more widely available in Iceland to hear and see on smart phones and tablets.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

The South's proximity to Reykjavík means that much of its scenic splendour is close enough for a city breaker to visit on a day trip, though there is also a tremendous and ever expanding offering of accommodation and restaurants throughout the region.

Seeing Þingvellir National Park is a must for any visitor to Iceland. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the park figures in Icelandic or even world history since the oldest parliament still meeting in the world first assembled there in 930 CE (AD). Þingvellir is also protected due to its unique geological features. Almannagjá is a fissure formed as the tectonic plates of the earth's crust have separated, so that tourists can clearly see the evidence of continental drift.

Also on the Golden Circle route is the Geysir geothermal area, with its bubbling hot springs and exploding geysers. Whereas Geysir, from which English and many other languages get their word for geysers, is at the moment rather inactive, the playful Strokkur geyser erupts impressively a number of times each hour, reaching heights of up to 40 m.

The third scenic icon of the Golden Circle is Gullfoss waterfall, tumbling down over two main precipices into the gaping Hvítá river gorge, which also includes popular stretches for white water rafting.

Two other awe-inspiring and easily accessible South Iceland waterfalls are Seljalandsfoss, where visitors can walk all the way behind the crashing waters and peer through them, and the 60-m-high Skógafoss, which also often produces frequent rainbows and where the 370 steps up to the brink lead to a panorama of the magnificent surroundings and coastline.

The southernmost tip of mainland Iceland is a 120-m-high promontory named Dyrhólaey, not far from the village of Vík. Dyr means door and applies to the huge opening where waves wash through the promontory. The nearby beaches of black basalt ash, pebbles and sand include Reynisfjara beach, where the eye is drawn on the one hand to pretty basalt columns in cliffs above the beach and on the other to Reynisdrangar, sea stacks standing just off shore. It must be noted that the waves are not only grandiose to see and hear but also differ unpredictably and pose a serious hazard for anyone coming too near, making it imperative to follow warnings and take care, as elsewhere in Icelandic nature.

To the north in the deserted highlands lies the geothermal area of Landmannalaugar, where visitors can relax in a naturally warm river, surrounded by obsidian and colourful rhyolite mountains. From there, the extremely popular, long-distance Laugavegur trail leads to the nature reserve of Þórsmörk – a hidden woodland paradise encircled by mountains, glaciers and glacial rivers. Þórsmörk serves as a popular base camp for hikers interested in the glaciers and other fabulous scenery of these uninhabited areas.

Farther east, the river Fjaðrá has carved Fjaðrárgljúfur, a stupendous canyon up to about 100 m deep and 2 km long. Most of the time, the Fjaðrá is a gentle stream, so that experienced groups of hikers can walk along its banks in the canyon, though having to wade in places. Most people choose to use the path up on the edge, carefully peeking down.

In the Southeast, Europe's largest glacier, Vatnajökull, towers over the glacial sands and other coastal scenery. There are fantastic opportunities for walking in glorious landscapes while overnighting at one or more of the countryside accommodations, or at the villages of Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Höfn, while engaged in glacier and mountain exploration.

The former Skaftafell National Park was merged into the immense Vatnajökull National Park in 2008. The area of the latter includes some 14,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or about an eighth of Iceland, extending all around Vatnajökull and even throughout the former Jökulsárgljúfur National Park in Northeast Iceland. The environs of Vatnajökull are known for exciting glacial views, jagged mountain peaks, dramatic water courses and diverse sub-Arctic flora and fauna.

On the south side of Vatnajökull lie the breathtaking Fjallsárlón and Jökulsárlón lagoons, with boat rides available in summer to view the iceberg-crowded waters and spectacular glacier in the background. Jökulsárlón stretches from

the snout of the Breiðamerkurjökull outlet glacier almost to the sea, allowing seals to join the birds and icebergs not far from crashing ocean waves.

In addition to the enormous Vatnajökull, the South hosts an array of other quite significant glaciers: Langjökull, Hofsjökull, Tindfjallajökull, Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull.

Moreover, the South is home to some of Iceland's most active volcanoes: Hekla, which has erupted around 20 times since the country's settlement, Katla, under the Mýrdalsjökull glacier, and Eyjafjallajökull. The last of these central volcanoes is slumbering for the moment under the glacier of the same name, but has only done so since 2010, when it appeared on media screens around the globe, spewing thick layers of ash over its surroundings and disrupting air traffic as far away as mainland Europe. Plains of outwash sand reaching out to sea below the glacially masked volcanoes testify to the huge quantities of ash from them as well as to the erosive force of the glacial ice and rivers melting from it.

Just a short ferry ride from the south coast are the jewels called the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands), with all their lava, birdlife and eventful history. Of the 15 islands, only Heimaey is inhabited, with a population of around 5,000. It was here in 1973 that one of the world's most publicised modern volcanic eruptions took place, destroying many homes while also building up a brand new mountain, Eldfell. Nowadays the village offers a range of services as well as several museums.

### **Towns and cultural attractions**

South Iceland has numerous villages supplying a full range of services. Selfoss, the largest town, certainly offers a wide variety of shops, accommodation, restaurants, etc. The neighbouring town of Hveragerði is for one thing interesting through its many greenhouses, prosperous vegetation and the horticultural department of the Agricultural University of Iceland. There is an earthquake exhibition with a quake simulator and, right in the middle of town, a geothermal field which is open to visitors during summer and upon group request in the wintertime.

The pleasant, clean villages of Stokkseyri and Eyrarbakki lie directly on the seaside. In the past, Eyrarbakki was one of Iceland's main commercial centres, and the many antique, renovated wooden houses lend the town an admirable charm. Stokkseyri has an elf and troll museum as well as a ghost museum, so that visitors get chances to relish the supernatural.

Porlákshöfn, a growing harbour town, has a swimming pool with excellent facilities for children. Located farther inland, Flúðir, Reykholt and Laugarvatn are somewhat removed from fickle ocean breezes. The Flúðir and Reykholt economies build to a great extent on geothermal farming. The University of Iceland's sports and health sciences programmes have long been located at Laugarvatn, along with the geothermal steam baths now in the Fontana spa.

Farther east on Ring Road No. 1, Hella and Hvolsvöllur again offer many services and local attractions, including a focus on the most famous Icelandic saga, that of Njál. Though Skógar, yet farther east, has few inhabitants, it is only a short walk from Skógafoss waterfall and is home to an excellent historical museum which is well worth a visit.

Vík, in a grand setting between the mountains and the sea, is within walking distance of black sand beaches, puffin nesting grounds and the famous Reynisdrangar sea stacks. Vík also has a tourist information centre at the cultural centre Kötlusetur.

Kirkjubæjarklaustur is a scenic, historical sight right on the banks of a glacial river. Not least among the many natural wonders in the environs are the world's greatest lava fields formed during historical times, those from Laki.

Finally, the fishing port of Höfn serves the island's southeast corner not only with its fishing and lobstering harbour (for the langoustine variety) but with numerous other services such as banks, stores and restaurants. There are interesting museums and exhibitions and an annual lobster festival held in June.

## **East Iceland**

East Iceland is home to the country's largest forest, lush farmlands and an assortment of streams and mountains. Thanks to the East's fjords and their natural harbours, a variety of picturesque fishing villages border the coast.

Iceland's biggest rhyolite formations directly accessible from an inhabited area are those around Borgarfjörður Eystri, while many other colourful or unusual mineral deposits and rock formations appear throughout the East. Vatnajökull is a huge glacier, and in summer can even be visited en route from East Iceland to North Iceland. The hiking and riding possibilities are numerous, including across extensive but well-mapped uninhabited areas. Winter tourism, for instance skiing or driving on snow, is also important.

In the summer months, the region becomes a creative hub for artists and young people from around Iceland and abroad, as a variety of exhibitions and music and arts festivals have popped up and expanded in recent years. Seyðisfjörður, a vibrant arts venue with structural backdrops from circa 1900, is the landing place for the Smyril Line ferry connecting with the rest of Europe. The eastern landscape and society generally offer rich ideas for artists, and one of Iceland's most beloved artists, the painter Kjarval, grew up by the fjord of Borgarfjörður Eystri.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

Not only is Borgarfjörður Eystri a superb place for getting near puffins, it also serves as a springboard to one of the best-developed hiking and riding areas in the country, the so-called Víknaslóðir, or Trails of the Deserted Inlets. With the tiny village as well as huts farther away to provide accommodation, tours lasting one or many days are possible, bringing the sightseer to such highlights as the giant boulders at Stóruð and the magnificent Dyrfjöll or Door Mountains peaks. A second major hiking and riding area is that around Gerpir, between the fjords of Norðfjörður and Reyðarfjörður. Here too, one can view the remains of settlement that lasted well into the 20th century.

Highlights in the eastern territory of the tremendous Vatnajökull National Park include the volcanically, geothermally and glacially active Kverkfjöll mountains, the Hvannalindir spring-fed oasis, the ancient, towering volcano of Snæfell, and the Eyjabakkar haven of the reindeer and pink-footed goose. That corner of the glacier can include hikes along the glacial river Jökulsá í Fljótsdal, with its string of waterfalls, as well as all along the east edge of the glacier, called the Lónsöræfi route or Avenue East.

Other attractions in the eastern highlands include one of the deepest, most spectacular canyons in Iceland, Hafrahvammagljúfur, the nearby valley of Laugavalladalur, with its natural warm shower and pool, the warm spring and walking routes at Laugarfell and, at 469 m, Iceland's highest farm Möðrudalur, with its fantastic view of Herðubreið mountain.

The 80-km-long Lagarfljót lake and river, carrying mostly glacial melt, flows right by Egilsstaðir. The lake making up the southern half of Lagarfljót is home to a huge legendary wyrm which was first chronicled in 1345 and is named Lagarfljótsormur. Near the lake is Iceland's largest forest, the delightful

Hallormsstaðaskógur, where visitors will find numerous trails and some of the country's tallest birch.

By the upper end of Lagarfljót is Iceland's second highest waterfall, the 128-m Hengifoss. The Tertiary basalt strata surrounding it, with decorative red layers in between, make this fall particularly picturesque. Those walking up for the view can also marvel at the graceful basalt-column waterfall Litlanesfoss.

At the mouth of Seyðisfjörður fjord, an hour's easy hike from the footbridge in Austdalur, the nature reserve of Skálanes includes a 678-m-high sea cliff that welcomes thousands of birds as well as the researchers who come to study them and other local aspects. At the inner end of the fjord, as well as for instance at Neskaupstaður, novice and advanced kayakers will love taking to the waters.

### **Towns and cultural attractions**

East Iceland is rich in history and culture, ever since the early settlement. From the coast to the remote highlands, history is revealed by museums, ruins and historical sites.

Today the biggest town is Egilsstaðir, located by the Lagarfljót river. With convenient traffic connections, an internationally equipped airport and a range of shops and services, the town makes a handy base to begin an exploration of the surrounding areas.

The municipality of Fjarðabyggð has consolidated the formerly separate local authorities in six contrasting fjords to comprise the East's most populous community. Known for a great deal of splendid scenery, the area and its trails provide yet another excellent base for hikers in East Iceland. Neskaupstaður hosts the annual Eistnaflug heavy metal festival, which has taken place every summer since 2005.

The town of Seyðisfjörður is also well worth a stay. The Smyril Line ferry operates from the town's harbour and has done so for decades as Iceland's only ferry from overseas, arriving from docks in Denmark and the Faroe Islands. In addition to Seyðisfjörður's natural beauty, the town is known for its lively creative scene, including the summer arts festival LungA, which attracts inspired young people from all around Iceland and abroad.

With such fabulous scenery as the cosmic power centre of Búlandstindur mountain and the coast by Teigarhorn with its renowned zeolites, Djúpvogur is itself a charming village with a long history of trade. Langabúð, the oldest Djúpvogur building (dating to 1790), was once the trading post store and has



been renovated to serve as a cultural centre. Right beside the village, the Búlandsnes bird sanctuary is renowned among bird lovers, and visitors can see puffins and seals during the boat rides which are sold to nearby Papey island.

Bustarfell is one of the few remaining turf farmsteads in Iceland. Located in Vopnafjörður, the farmhouse was originally erected in 1770. Since it was being used as a home, it gradually evolved through the years, though it is now under protection of the National Museum. While the Selárdalur swimming pool is not large, it is right on the banks of a major salmon river.

The Skriðuklaustur mansion is a unique, attractive building in Fljótisdalur valley, some 40 km south of Egilsstaðir. Designed by the German architect Fritz Höger, it was built in 1939 to be the family home of author Gunnar Gunnarsson, and now serves as a museum for the author as well as a centre of culture and history. Nearby are the excavated ruins of a 16th-century monastery, as well as a visitor centre for Vatnajökull National Park.

Borgarfjörður Eystri is charming not only through scenery but also the supernatural. The ancient "Elf Hill", Álfaborg, stands just above the village campground and is home to the queen of Icelandic elves.

## **North Iceland**

North Iceland is truly a region of contrasts. Long valleys and peninsulas are interspersed with mountain ranges, lava fields and smooth hills carved out by rivers, to a large extent dependent on the geological age and history of each area. There is scenery with lush vegetation as well as barren landscapes. As one nears the Arctic Circle in the northern latitudes, the midnight sun is invariably awe-inspiring, and there are longer nights in winter for marvelling at the Northern Lights.

The North contains Iceland's leading town outside of the capital area, Akureyri, located in the mild climate of Eyjafjörður, with prosperous agriculture extending along the coast and into the valleys. Rich in culture and history, Akureyri has a charming old town with numerous wooden houses a century or more in age. Several northern towns show their appreciation of marine life and fishing heritage through excellent museums and opportunities for whale watching.

In the northernmost reaches of Vatnajökull National Park, the impressive Ásbyrgi hollow and the nearby Jökulsá canyon provide stupendous scenery including Europe's most powerful waterfall, Dettifoss. Lake Mývatn and its



surroundings stand out worldwide for their variety of ducks, as well as unique rock formations.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

With unique scenery and direct accessibility on the Ring Road between Akureyri and East Iceland, Mývatn lake and its environs make up one of Iceland's most popular destinations. The lake itself has many small islands and is Iceland's fourth largest, with a surface area of 37 km<sup>2</sup> and extensive surrounding wetlands.

The lake and wetlands are a veritable paradise for birdwatchers. While various species of waders and other marsh dwellers also make their home there, Mývatn is probably most outstanding as the breeding grounds of more duck species than any other location on earth.

Other must-sees on the banks of the lake or in its immediate environs are Grjótagjá, Hverfjall, Höfði, the highly unusual lava formations of Dimmuborgir and the pseudo-craters around Skútustaðir. Just over the volcanically heaped-up mountains to the east, there are Leirhnjúkur/Krafla for viewing recent lava flows and the technological potential of geothermal energy, and, just east and south of Námaskarð pass, a field of hot springs with boiling mud pits and steam vents.

The Laxá river, one of the most bountiful and sought-after fishing rivers in the whole country, whether for salmon or trout, carries Mývatn's surplus mix of cold and hot fresh water out to sea.

The imposing Hverfell/Hverfjall is one of the most symmetrically shaped volcanic craters on the planet, with most people being capable of the thrilling climb up its slopes in order to look down inside the rim or out over the broad scene of the neighbouring lake and lava fields.

The Lofthellir lava cave boasts not only of volcanic origins but of fabulous natural ice sculpturing. Several companies offer tours supplying lights, helmets, etc., and it must be noted that proper equipment and a guide are necessary for safety.

Mývatn's geothermal spa, the Nature Baths, is certainly another must-see, as well as a wonderful place to relish the warmth and enjoy the panorama.

Much of the enormous Vatnajökull National Park lies within North Iceland, including some of this park's most touted attractions. In ancient times, catastrophic glacial floods gouged out the horseshoe-shaped cliffs of Ásbyrgi and other surroundings of the current glacial river Jökulsá and its canyon. These natural wonders are introduced at the visitor centre, which offers a large camp site. Further attractions along the Jökulsá include the mighty waterfall of Dettifoss and the crater plugs of Hljóðaklettur, which are further must-sees for any visitor to the North.

Among the multitude of other waterfalls in the North is Aldeyjarfoss, with its graceful array of basalt columns. Tourists can stand right beside the magnificent Goðafoss falls, quite near Ring Road #1, in addition to reading or hearing how its name connects to Iceland's conversion from the Nordic gods to Christianity.

Remote spots such as the region east of the mouth of Eyjafjörður, the low-lying expanses of Melrakkaslétta and of the deserted peninsula of Langanes in the far northeast, the uninhabited lava fields and other landscapes west from the Jökulsá á Fjöllum river and past the major glacier in the centre of Iceland, Hofsjökull, will satisfy any traveller seeking the peace and quiet of nature.

From Akureyri, clients can visit Hrísey island (less than 200 inhabitants) and Grímsey island (less than 100 inhabitants), the latter of which is crossed by the Arctic Circle.

### **Towns and cultural attractions**

Built by the largest harbour in the spacious, scenic fjord of Eyjafjörður, Akureyri is often spoken of as the Capital of the North. This town has a university and major secondary schools, along with various industry and an airport of international standards, which together help support the population of around 20,000 and a broad selection of shops, restaurants and almost a dozen area museums.

The slopes visible directly above Akureyri are the venue of Iceland's Winter Games, a skiing and snowboarding competition held annually in March. Downtown, one major attraction is a scenically located church, graced in part by stained glass from England's pre-war Coventry Cathedral. The nearby botanical garden is not only brightened by pretty flowers but has labels identifying the astonishing range of flora growing here just south of the Arctic Circle. Every summer, an 18-hole golf course exploits the long days at this northerly latitude by hosting the Arctic Open.

The Kjarnaskógur woods offer pleasant walking and jogging paths which are also floodlit and thus often perfect for cross-country skiing in winter. Several well-equipped geothermal swimming pools around Eyjafjörður fjord are immensely comfortable and warming, as well as excellent places in any weather for meeting the locals and getting exercise.

Another town on Eyjafjörður fjord, Dalvík, is situated in one of the farming valleys leading to the huge wilds of Tröllaskagi peninsula. This region, as much of North Iceland, has tempting hiking trails. Not only is there a ferry to Iceland's northernmost island, Grímsey, but also to the tiny village on Hrísey island, right out in Eyjafjörður.

Sauðárkrúkur, lying on the southwest shore of Skagafjörður fjord, is the second largest town in the North, with prospering horse farms in the huge valley and trips to the bird cliffs and saga scenes of Drangey island. Somewhat farther west, at Blönduós, a glacial river which also provides salmon habitat runs right through the village.

The North offers several famous salmon-fishing rivers, and the lakes on Arnarvatnsheiði are not only fertile trout habitat but are also one of Iceland's three natural features which has traditionally been called "uncountable". Located entirely within North Iceland, a second such uncountable feature consists of the extremely numerous mounds resulting from long-past rock avalanches down into Vatnsdalur valley.

Seals can be studied at the Seal Centre in Hvammstangi, then viewed right on the nearby coast. To the east of Akureyri, the bay at Húsavík counts as one of the best whale-watching spots in all of Europe. Húsavík town is also close to many of the North's major natural wonders, including Mývatn and the Northern Region of Vatnajökull National Park.

## **West Fjords**

One of Iceland's best-kept secrets is undoubtedly the country's huge northwest corner, the West Fjords, where being a bit removed from Ring Road # 1 helps preserve a range of wilderness experiences. Largely uninhabited but with a number of charming villages and tourist-catering farms, this region is frequently mentioned by travel guides as a destination of excellence – a top option for any serious explorer as well as anyone eager to encounter little traffic and plenty of scenic peace and quiet.

Ships often come close enough to bird cliffs to appreciate the bustling bird life. The West Fjords' northeast coast, Hornstrandir, indeed comprises a beautiful nature reserve for hiking and for approaching wildlife such as the Arctic fox. Although Hornstrandir comprise the most famous hiking area, particularly for hikes of several days, the West Fjords abound in scenic trails, with good maps available and in most cases the likelihood of getting entirely away from crowds.

In addition, the West Fjords sport Europe's westernmost point, Látrabjarg; this dramatic sea cliff is host to a major proportion of the world population of some bird species. Near this gigantic cliff is a broad beach tinted red by seashells, Rauðasandur, as well as Patreksfjörður and a row of other pleasant villages towards the north, or long stretches of sparsely inhabited coast still farther towards the east. The spectacular Dynjandi, a set of waterfalls with a combined height of 100 m, is certainly a must-see.

Tradition and heritage play telling roles in the region's culture, for instance through historical buildings by the Ísafjörður harbour. A close relation to the ocean is evident in regional cuisine, while folklore is as much alive in the West Fjords as anywhere else in Iceland, here including monsters and creatures from the sea, as well as a special emphasis on sorcery and witchcraft at Hólmavík.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

The West Fjords are a prime destination to recommend to anyone interested in experiencing some of Iceland's most remote, spectacular scenery. There are whole chains of lengthy fjords, each with its own character to attract for instance those paddling a kayak. Near the west end of the long southern coast lies the beach of Rauðasandur, always gorgeous to look at and ideal for wading on a calm, sunny day. The hues of sand and even types of shoreline differ greatly throughout the West Fjords; moreover, the geothermal pools of Krossholt, Drangsnæs and Krossnæs are outstanding through their scenic positions right by the sea, as well as the seaweed baths at Reykhólar. Indeed, pools of various sorts scattered through the West Fjords often offer a fabulous panorama.

Látrabjarg, Europe's westernmost point, is a breathtakingly towering cliff and the breeding place of more seabirds than anyone could ever photograph, including puffins, gannets, guillemots and razorbills.

The uninhabited Geirþjófsfjörður would represent just one more scenic area among the western fjords, unless the tourist also found out about or even read saga literature, that is. A pilgrimage goal for lovers of the exciting Gísli's Saga, Geirþjófsfjörður is a secluded spot for hikers of any type.

Dynjandi, the West Fjords' largest waterfall, is surely also one of the most photogenic in Iceland, thanks to its unusual triangular form. Whereas the widest part of the waterfall gets the most attention, there are in all six impressive waterfalls along the river, and one can walk behind the fall named Göngumannafoss.

The tall, steep mountains around Ísafjörður and the excellent lifts and cross-country trails there provide first-class winter skiing, as well as magnificent panoramas at any time of the year. From Bolafjall, visitors might even be lucky enough to glimpse Greenland on a clear day.

The Hornstrandir coastline, always a jewel, has been deserted for decades and left to the whims of nature, but has become popular with hikers, who can obtain added access by boat from Bolungarvík or Ísafjörður. Hardly any landscape could be called more inspiring than Hornstrandir. Now Arctic foxes, flowering meadows, deep fjords and majestic cliffs with raucous seabirds make Hornstrandir a paradise for the nature lover.

### **Towns and cultural attractions**

The region's largest town and service centre is Ísafjörður. Despite its wide variety of services, Ísafjörður remains relaxed and charming. Several tour operators are based here, helping render the town a convenient base for the first-comer, particularly those arriving by air. Ísafjörður is also host to the Aldrei Fór ég Suður music festival, a popular annual event taking place in April.

The nearby Bolungarvík is definitely worth a visit, with its even taller mountains, a natural history museum and a reproduced fishing station from the old days.

Of the interesting villages heading farther down the western coast of the West Fjords, the most populous town awaits nearly till the southwest corner, Patreksfjörður. There are some intriguing museums or exhibitions along this coast, such as at Þingeyri on the Vikings. Numerous bird species catch the eye of those walking in the vicinity of Reykhólar, situated on the southern coast of the West Fjords.

The main village in the Strandir area is Hólmavík, home to well-kept old houses as well as the Icelandic Museum of Sorcery & Witchcraft. As elsewhere in the West Fjords, travellers will probably be surprised by finding some of the

enjoyable, useful services located even on some quite isolated stretches of the Strandir coast.

## **West Iceland**

Geologically, West Iceland is one of the country's most diverse regions. Its natural wonders provide an almost complete sampling of everything that Iceland has to offer, ranging from slumbering volcanoes and majestic waterfalls to varying flora and fauna. The region also prides itself on a number of outstanding historical sites, and the short distances between popular destinations help tourists enjoy the area at a comfortable pace in any season. Through West Iceland's spectacular scenery and proximity to Reykjavík, the region makes an excellent first stop for people travelling away from the capital, and some of the West's natural and cultural sights can even be reached on day trips from the capital area, though plenty of enjoyable accommodation and other services allow for inviting stays within the region itself.

The leading group of natural attractions is that of Snæfellsjökull National Park, which includes not only stretches of intriguing coastline but, towering overhead, Snæfellsjökull, a huge volcano capped by glacier. This mystical sight has inspired artists and poets through the centuries, and in clear weather even beckons all the way to tourists in the capital area to come west! Said to be one of the earth's seven powerful energy centres, the volcano and glacier Snæfellsjökull serves as the setting of Jules Verne's classic novel, *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (Journey to the Centre of the Earth). In 2008, the five municipalities on the long Snæfellsnes peninsula earned the Earth Check award as a sustainable community.

At the east end of the peninsula, the scenery of the Dalir area awaits, calling on the traveller to roam northwards through the sprawling countryside and also out onto the sparsely-driven peninsula north of Hvammsfjörður. Dalir was the cradle of the explorers Eric the Red and his son, Leif the Lucky, who became the first European to set foot in the Americas. Heading south and nearer the capital, the broad area of Borgarfjörður, with the valleys around it and the fjord south of it, Hvalfjörður, offers a wide variety of magnificent scenery.

## Attractions

### Nature

Not far north of Reykjavík, in full view of the capital, stands Akrafjall, a picturesque mountain rising near the equally picturesque, immaculate town of Akranes. Climbing Akrafjall mountain offers an optimum view over all of Faxaflói bay, reaching from the area around Keflavík International Airport across to Snæfellsjökull glacier and the peninsula of Snæfellsnes.

At the eastern end of Hvalfjörður fjord is Iceland's highest waterfall, at 198 m, Glymur. Challenging hikes as well as easier scenic walks are possible in that area as well as elsewhere around the fjord.

The geothermal water used for heating, washing and so on in the villages of Borgarnes and Akranes is mostly taken from Deildartunguhver, a productive hot spring located in Reykholtsdalur valley. The largest hot spring in Europe, it provides 180 litres per second of boiling water.

Highly unusual, pure and pretty, the Hraunfossar waterfall appears where clear, cold springs emerge at the edge of a lava field, only to cascade straightaway into the Hvítá river. The nearby Barnafoss waterfall is also an imposing sight, as well as the subject of a folk tale. Eldborg, an exquisitely formed crater, rises 60 m above the surrounding lava field and can comfortably be accessed from Snorrastaðir, 2.5 km to the south. Yet another easily accessible volcanic crater is Grábrók, the largest of three craters along a short volcanic fissure.

Langjökull is Iceland's second largest glacier and on a clear day offers sightseeing rides beyond comparison. Close by, the icy dome of Eiríksjökull can hardly be topped for symmetrical beauty. While the glacier capping the Snæfellsjökull volcano is not immense, the environs present diverse volcanic features, such as volcanic plugs, surface lava which has flowed since the last glaciation, and tuff resulting from eruptions under glacial ice or sea water.

At the west end of Snæfellsnes peninsula lies Djúpalónssandur, a black sandy beach that historically served at various times of the year as a busy fishing station. The fishermen staying here throughout a fishing season tested each other's strength on the four hefty lifting stones.

Some other scenic points include the stunning Kirkjufell mountain in Grundarfjörður and the long sandy beaches of Löngufjörur, which can also be traversed on horseback.



### **Towns and cultural attractions**

The largest town in West Iceland is Akranes, with a spacious array of museums at Garðar. Near these museums, there is an 18-hole golf course and an outdoor area with a playground for children of all ages. Down by the sea, there are two lighthouses, the taller of which is open to the public for climbing up and relishing the view. The yellow sandy beach of Langisandur is a joy for observing the locals, exercising and relaxing.

The town of Borgarnes also offers good shops and services, such as an excellent swimming pool and museums on various themes.

Stykkishólmur, on the northern coast of Snæfellsnes peninsula, is a charmingly picturesque town where a ferry leaves for the isolated, homey Flatey island, past still other bird-populated islets and onwards to the West Fjords. Icelanders indeed think of the islets in Breiðafjörður bay as one of the country's three "uncountable" phenomena.

The tiny villages of Arnarstapi and Hellnar used to be important for trade and fishing. Columnar basalt, gaping clefts entered by the sea waves, and in summer breeding birds characterise the officially protected coastline. Hellnar has a charming church as well as a visitor centre.

Reykholt in Borgarfjörður is one of the most important historical sites in the whole country, having been home to the 13th-century author Snorri Sturluson, who was responsible for recording a history of the Norwegian kings as well as the fantastic myths and legends in the Prose Edda. The Snorrastofa cultural and medieval centre at Reykholt was founded in his memory.

In fact, most of the Icelandic sagas were written down in West Iceland, even if they took place elsewhere, and the area is itself rich in saga-related locations. Dalir and the wide expanses of Borgarfjörður are the scenes of a multitude of saga events, with just two of the famous personalities including the Viking hero and poet Egil and the beautiful, tragically intriguing woman Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir. At Borgarnes, the Icelandic Settlement Centre exhibition describes both settlement history and the saga hero Egil Skallagrímsson. His home was at the nearby Borg farmstead, where a sculpture commemorates his poem on the loss of a son. Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir lived by a geothermal pool at Laugar in Sælingsdalur. While that pool was later covered by a landslide, a new pool was built close by in 2009.

At Eric the Red's farm, Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur valley, there is today a reconstruction of the ruins. In summer and as arranged for groups, guides



dressed in Viking Age costume enliven the setting and provide information to visitors.

The home of Iceland's Nobel Literature prize winner Halldór Laxness, at Gljúfrasteinn, Mosfellsbær, is also open to visitors and frequently offers musical performances.

## **Reykjanes**

Reykjanes peninsula is replete with natural marvels, in addition to the renowned Blue Lagoon and an array of lighthouses. Moreover, Iceland's busiest international airport and thus the main gateway to the island is located at Keflavík.

Reykjanes has several high-temperature geothermal areas, three of which have been harnessed to generate electricity. In the Geothermal Energy Exhibition in the Hellisheiði lava fields, visitors can learn not merely about geothermal power but also local geological history.

Nowhere else is the junction between the European and American tectonic plates of the earth's crust as plainly noticeable and comprehensible as on the Reykjanes peninsula. Thus it is no wonder that the peninsula has now been designated as the Reykjanes Geopark, which besides being a landscape to admire and study is also a veritable hotbed of recreational activities. The dramatic, rugged landscape is dotted with volcanic craters, caves, lava fields, geothermal springs and steam, accompanied by a variety of restaurants, museums and other services in the neighbouring villages.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

As they touch down at Keflavik International Airport, visitors are greeted by a moon-like landscape. Unless hidden by snow, a seemingly endless lava field topped with green-grey moss blankets much of the Reykjanes peninsula, and this rather other-worldly sight turns out to be most people's first glimpse of Iceland, the land of fire and ice. This is likely to be different enough from their home environments, but when visibility is good, they also catch a peek at the many mountains which add variety to the surroundings.

From the airport, it is just a 20-minute drive to the Blue Lagoon, Iceland's most frequented attraction; this long-established spa has achieved such popularity that tickets should be booked in advance. Black sand and magical lava fields

surround the 5,000-m<sup>2</sup> pool, where the six million litres of geothermal seawater are constantly renewed to maintain purity, as well as to keep temperatures comfortable at 37-39°C. Luxurious mud, algae and naturally present minerals refresh the skin of the traveller, as well as a wide range of cosmetic goods and congenial services.

The Svartsengi geothermal power plant, right beside the Blue Lagoon, adds to the bather's impression of connecting with geological forces from the earth's innards. Moreover, the Reykjanes peninsula, with its diversity of volcanic and geothermal activity, clearly displays the Mid-Atlantic Rift even to non-geologists. A number of other peninsula formations are unique, including contrasting types of volcanoes in at least four separate volcanic zones, with hundreds of open fissures and faults.

The Brennisteinsfjöll mountain range demonstrates crater rows and small shield volcanoes. Sulphur mining under the thick lava sheets was attempted around 1880 but was soon abandoned, though it is still evidenced by interesting ruins.

At Krýsuvík, columns of steam rise skywards, mud pools bubble softly or loudly, and the hot spring banks are coloured green, yellow and red. A boardwalk and information signs help tourists attain an introduction to local geology.

Grænavatn and Gestastaðavatn lakes, as well as Augun, which is a pair of pools separated by the road, are all water-filled craters resulting from gaseous eruptions at different times.

While Kleifarvatn is the largest lake on the Reykjanes Peninsula, its surface area varies significantly, not least when earthquakes open up fissures that drain water from the bottom. Nonetheless, trout fry released into the lake in the 1960s have grown well, in co-habitation with a monster said to lurk in the lake. However, the birch trees and bushes which once grew in the environs of Krýsuvík have long been cut and grazed away, much soil blown or washed to sea, and the farms gradually abandoned, though leaving a still picturesque church built in 1857.

Hikers will enjoy accomplishing the peak of Keilir, a small volcanic mountain with a distinctive conical shape, formed underneath the last glaciation. A wide selection of other trails draw the adventurous through the lava fields and along the coasts of the Reykjanes peninsula, where it is easy to escape from the madding crowd even without being very far from roads and sparkling clean villages. Interesting fauna and sea birds abound, along with intriguing cliffs and rock formations, including many which have been polished by ocean waves.

### **Towns and cultural attractions**

Reykjanesbær, the biggest municipality on the Reykjanes peninsula, includes several harbours and villages. The museum Viking World displays a seafaring replica of the famous Gokstad ship and informs the visitor of many aspects of Viking life, in addition to offering splendid views of the Atlantic. The locality takes pride in being the cradle of Icelandic pop and rock music, a genre which can be handily explored at the Museum of Rock 'n' Roll.

Across the peninsula, in the flourishing fishing village of Grindavík, sports comprise yet another facet of this flourishing society, particularly basketball as elsewhere on Reykjanes peninsula. Grindavík also offers several galleries and museums, as well as a range of outdoor recreational activities.

Indeed, spending several days making the entire circle around the peninsula, including more of the attractive villages, taking in refreshments and fine meals, and enjoying the bracing ocean air as well as the often deserted lava fields and scenic shorelines, will combine into a trip to remember.

### **Central highlands**

For centuries, the interior of Iceland was virtually inaccessible, hardly approached except by outlaws in hiding, who themselves were likely to die there of cold, starvation or in some cases thirst. Nowadays, via such mountain roads as those over Kjölur and Sprengisandur, which today are fairly often traversed in summer, the more or less untouched wilderness of Iceland's mountainous middle has become a region of spectacular scenery for the general public to experience with due care on foot, bicycle, horse or 4x4 vehicle – in at least part of the summer months, or on snow and ice in winter.

Farther east, Vatnajökull National Park is contributing to clearer signage for vehicle roads and foot trails. In yet other highland areas, there are additional routes, but it must be noted that highland routes can be quite undeveloped and risky if the traveller has not checked on current conditions and is inadequately prepared. In many isolated places, for instance on glaciers or at river crossings, preparatory measures or special equipment will be called for, besides informing other parties in advance of the plans, and it is often inadvisable to go alone.

The highlands of Iceland are an untamed mingling of rocky deserts, jagged peaks, volcanoes, ice caps, valleys and both hot and cold springs or streams which should be treated at all times with respect and care. Summers here are even shorter and normally cooler than in the island's lowlands, so that

vegetation is extremely sensitive. It and the meagre soil have been critically damaged by overgrazing and erosion since the settlement, even if the farms themselves were almost never, or only for short periods, located in the highlands. In any case, high-altitude nature is so sensitive and exquisite that it is imperative to find out about and stay on designated roads and, where trails are available, to remain on them. Frost may stay underground till mid- or late summer, making it necessary for the Road Administration to forbid traffic on certain routes even in July or sometimes August in order to prevent serious road damage. Therefore, all road signs and closings must be complied with, in addition to showing general consideration for the environment.

Notwithstanding all of the warnings and requirements, Iceland's interior is now revered as one of the most uniquely beautiful places on earth, beckoning many and likely to please anyone. The ordinarily crystal-clear air, enthralling illumination, depth and colour enthuse the eye no less – and sometimes more – than in the lowlands. As for the blind and all but the deaf, the natural sounds or general lack of man-made sounds in the highlands may also provide a deep and lasting experience.

## **Attractions**

### **Nature**

In the geothermal area of Landmannalaugar in the Fjallabak Nature Reserve, the rhyolite colours of yellows, greens and reds are interspersed with white and black. Visitors can bathe in naturally warm waters, though the sheer number of visitors may result in limited admission. A highly popular 55-km hiking trail links Landmannalaugar with Þórsmörk, a sheltered valley beneath glaciers which with its stunning scenery, lush vegetation and further trails has long been a favourite among travellers.

At Kverkfjöll, steam rising near the margins of the glacier melts bizarre ice caves, while in the Dyngjufjöll mountains, Öskjuvatn lake is situated in the volcanic caldera of Askja. Right beside Öskjuvatn is Víti crater, containing a geothermal pond in which it is possible to bathe and relish the wild surroundings. Both lakes were created through a gigantic eruption in 1875; ash from that eruption still shows on broad expanses and at the time caused farmers living far to the east to abandon their lands for up to several years. Such intermittent re-shaping of the landscape also occurred recently, through a six-month eruption connected to the central volcano Bárðarbunga; the magma

released till February 2015 left a major field of fresh lava between Dyngjufjöll and Kverkfjöll.

The two main highland routes completely crossing the central highlands, Kjölur and Sprengisandur, are both ancient passes through the region. Kjölur leads between the glaciers of Langjökull and Hófsjökull, today providing access to such highlights as the glacial milk of Hvítárvatn lake, the thrilling hiking routes in Kerlingarfjöll mountain range and the Hveravellir geothermal area, with its numerous steam and water outlets and warm bathing water.

Sprengisandur is steeped in folklore. Many travellers buy and even learn to play or sing the famous "Á Sprengisandi", telling the tale of a fearful traveller crossing the long and treacherous pass on horseback. This route passes between Iceland's largest glacier, Vatnajökull, and third largest, Hófsjökull; from the south, the route leads by major hydroelectric installations, intersects with the road to the oasis of Veiðivötn, arrives at the highland accommodation at Nýidalur and finally goes by Aldeyjarfoss, one of Iceland's prettiest waterfalls.

#### **Towns and cultural attractions**

There are no towns in the Central Highlands; indeed, one of its salient characteristics is that it has never been permanently in habitation, mostly due to its harder winters and shorter, cooler summers.