

The Best of Iceland

On each trip to Iceland, we are always struck by how often other travelers are—or intend to be—repeat visitors. Many come year after year, never exhausting Iceland’s endless variations of magnificent scenery and adventure. Returning travelers immediately recognize the crisp, invigorating polar air, and what W. H. Auden called “the most magical light of anywhere on earth.”

Iceland’s astonishing beauty often has an austere, primitive, or surreal cast that arouses reverence, wonderment, mystery, and awe. Lasting impressions could include a lone tuft of wildflowers amid a bleak desert moonscape or a fantastical promenade of icebergs calved into a lake from a magisterial glacier.

The Icelandic people—freedom-loving, egalitarian, self-reliant, and worldly—are equally exceptional. They established a parliamentary democracy over a millennium ago, and today write, publish, purchase, and read more books per capita than any people on earth. Reykjavik, their capital, has become one of the world’s most fashionable urban hot spots. In November 2007, the U.N. named Iceland the world’s best country to live in, based on life expectancy, education levels, medical care, income, and other criteria.

1 The Best Natural Wonders

- **Glymur:** Iceland’s tallest waterfall is nimble and graceful: Streamlets descend like ribbons of a maypole into a fathomless canyon mantled in bird nests and lush mosses. The hike there is somewhat treacherous, but those who brave it are rewarded with enchanting scenery—and possibly total solitude—all within easy range of Reykjavik. See p. 138.
- **Gullfoss:** This astounding waterfall crowns and climaxes the “Golden Circle,” Iceland’s most popular day tour from the capital. Gullfoss looks almost too perfectly landscaped to be real: The Hvítá river hurtles over a low tier, turns 90 degrees, plunges into a cloud of spray, and shimmies offstage through a picturesque gorge. Clear skies guarantee a rainbow. See p. 146.
- **Blue Lagoon:** The central activity at this spa—Iceland’s top tourist attraction—is bathing in a shallow, opaque, blue-green lagoon amid a jet-black lava field and smearing white silica mud all over yourself. The lagoon was artificially created from pumped-in seawater and runoff from a geothermal power plant—not exactly a *natural* wonder, but it could make you feel like one. See p. 150.
- **Raufarhólshellir:** With the right preparations and precautions, anyone can just saunter right into this lava-tube cave and wander more than a kilometer ($\frac{3}{4}$ mile) to its darkest depths, past eerie ice candles and tortured lava formations. See p. 161.
- **Látrabjarg:** These colossal sea cliffs at Iceland’s westernmost point prove



that the “ends of the earth” come with a bang, not a whimper. The sheer volume of birds is unbelievable, and the puffins are particularly willing to have their picture taken. See p. 191.

- **Hornbjarg:** These sea cliffs in Iceland’s far northwest aren’t easy to reach, but pilgrims are treated to the most arresting sight on the country’s entire coastline. An undulating, razor-backed ridge is etched against the sky: On its inland side, a steep slope scoops down to a meadowed plateau; on its opposite side is a sheer 534m (1,752-ft.) drop to the sea. See p. 212.
- **Aldeyjarfoss:** In northwest Iceland, at the doorstep of the desolate highlands, these pummeling falls crash into a bizarre theater of columnar basalt. If you saw it in a science fiction movie, you might think they were overdoing it. See p. 250.
- **Hverfell:** Of all the monuments to Iceland’s volcanism, this tephra explosion crater near Mývatn is the most monolithic: a jet-black bowl of humbling proportions, with a stark, elemental authority. See p. 253.
- **Leirhnjúkur:** In a country with no shortage of primordial, surreal landscapes, this lava field in the Krafla caldera of northeast Iceland outweirds them all. An easy trail wends its way among steaming clefts, each revealing a prismatic netherworld of mosses and minerals. See p. 254.
- **Dettifoss:** Europe’s mightiest waterfall, located in northeast Iceland’s Jökulsárgljúfur National Park, is a massive curtain of milky-gray glacial water thundering over a 44m (144-ft.) precipice. To stand next to it is as mesmerizing as it is bone rattling. See p. 270.
- **Fjaðrárgljúfur:** Iceland has several dramatic gorges, but this one’s spiky crags and vertiginous ledges virtually summon the mystics and landscape painters. Fjaðrárgljúfur is close to the Ring Road, near the village of Kirkjubæjarklaustur in south Iceland, and the trail along the rim is a breeze. See p. 309.
- **Laki Craters:** This monstrous row of over a hundred craters, lined up along a 25km (16-mile) fissure, is scar tissue from the most catastrophic volcanic eruption in Iceland’s history. Velvety coatings of grey-green moss soften Laki’s terrible, bleak beauty. See p. 309.
- **Jökulsárlón:** Hundreds of sediment-streaked, blue-tinted icebergs, seemingly the work of some mad sculptor, waltz around this surreal glacial lagoon in the southeast, while seals join in the carnival procession. See p. 316.
- **Askja:** This staggering whorl of volcanic mountains, circling an 8km-wide (5 mile) bowl formed by collapsed magma chambers, is one of Earth’s grandest pockmarks and the most sought-out destination in Iceland’s desolate highland interior. Visitors can swim in a warm, opaque blue-green pond at the bottom of a steep crater: a real “if my friends could see me now” moment. See p. 359.

2 The Best Towns & Villages

- **Suðureyri:** This traditional yet eco-conscious fishing village in the Westfjords is pioneering a tourism model that welcomes visitors into the daily work rituals of Icelandic life. Touring a fish-processing factory or joining a fishing boat crew may not be your idea of a fun vacation—but these are authentic cross-cultural experiences you’re unlikely to forget. See p. 196.
- **Ísafjörður:** The Westfjords region is almost a country unto itself, and its

honorary capital has real vibrancy despite its remoteness and small population. Credit the phenomenal setting, thriving harbor, first-rate dining, hip cafes, and festivals ranging from alternative music to solo theater performance—and even “swamp soccer.” See p. 198.

- **Siglufjörður:** With a single road leading in, this isolated, untouristy fjord town has a picture-perfect setting and an endearing nostalgia for its herring-boom glory days—case in point, the ambitious Herring Era Museum—and fabulous hiking. See p. 225.
- **Akureyri:** With a university, several museums, fine dining, a distinguished summer arts festival, lively downtown pedestrian streets, and active nightlife, this northern capital’s 17,000 inhabitants think they have everything Reykjavík has—minus the rainy weather. See p. 230.
- **Heimaey:** As the only town in the gorgeous Westman Islands, Heimaey—surrounded by magnificent sea cliffs and two ominous volcanic cones—

would have made this list for its setting (and cute puffin population) alone. Its distinctive local identity and heroic resilience in the aftermath of a devastating 1973 eruption only add to its luster. See p. 245.

- **Vík:** This southernmost village in Iceland wears its fine setting lightly, but its landscape stays vividly etched in the mind: the lovely beaches of black volcanic sand, the spiky sea stacks offshore, and on the neighboring Reynisfjall cliffs, the most scenic walk on Iceland’s south coast. See p. 303.
- **Seyðisfjörður:** The arrival point for European ferry passengers, and a fashionable summer retreat for Icelandic artists, this dramatically situated Eastfjords village has a cosmopolitan pulse that squares perfectly well with its tiny scale and pristine surroundings. Chalet-style wooden kit homes from the 19th and early-20th centuries provide a rare architectural historicity, and the country’s first telegraph station is now an interesting technology museum. See p. 340.

3 The Best Big-Name Hikes

- **Hornstrandir Nature Reserve:** This saw-toothed peninsula, the northernmost extremity of the Westfjords, is for travelers whose eyes instinctually roam to the farthest corners of the map. Protected since 1975, Hornstrandir has no roads, no airstrips, no year-round residents—only the beguiling coastline, flowering meadows, and cavorting birds and foxes the Vikings first encountered over a millennium ago. See p. 210.
- **Jökulsárgljúfur National Park:** This elongated canyon park formed by Iceland’s second-longest river is book-ended by Dettifoss, Europe’s mightiest waterfall, and Ásbyrgi, a U-shaped ravine reputed to be the hoof print of

the Norse god Óðinn’s eight-legged steed. Each bend of the river brings a succession of delights on a more human scale: honeycombed basalt, woolly willows, cascading springs. See p. 266.

- **Landmannalaugar:** Your friends may refuse to believe that your photos of Landmannalaugar’s astonishing rhyolite mountains—with marbled streaks of yellow, red, green, white, and purple scree—weren’t “digitally enhanced.” It’s not only the most celebrated hiking area in Iceland, but also the ideal launch point for the Laugavegurinn, a world-renowned 4-day trek to Þórs-mörk through a cavalcade of inland scenery. See p. 289 and 292.

- **Þórsmörk:** This verdant alpine oasis, encircled by monumental glaciers and river-braided valleys of silt, has the aura of an enchanted refuge—a nice counterpoint to the distinctly Martian appeal of most interior regions. The Fimmvörðuháls, an equally charmed 2-day trek threading a high mountain pass between two glaciers, connects Þórsmörk to Skógar near the south coast. See p. 298 and 300.
- **Skaftafell National Park:** Close to the “Ring Road” (Rte. 1) on the southern edge of Vatnajökull, Skaftafell is the most accessible of Iceland’s major hiking destinations, with startling panoramas of serrated peaks, shimmering icecaps, and barren flood plains stretching toward the sea. At your feet is pleasant scrubland resplendent with wildflowers and butterflies. See p. 313.

4 The Best Hikes Off the Beaten Track

- **Sveinstindur–Skælingar:** Landmannalaugar unjustly steals the limelight from many nearby interior regions, most notably this amazing stretch of mountains and sediment-filled river valleys between Landmannalaugar and Vatnajökull. Views from the peak of Sveinstindur over the glacier-gouged Lake Langisjór are among the most otherworldly and sublime in all of Iceland. See p. 292.
- **Þakgil:** This idyllic campsite and its mountainous setting near the southeast edge of Mýrdalsjökull are sure to become better known. Þakgil itself is in a perfectly sheltered, stream-fed gully. The surrounding tuff mountains, formed from compacted volcanic ash, have been elaborately sculpted by wind and water erosion; trails lead right to the moraines of the receding glacier. And with a brand-new crop of snug cabins, you don’t even have to rough it. See p. 304.
- **Núpsstaðarskógar:** Accessible only to rugged 4WD vehicles and committed hikers, this magical enclave of scrubby birch, sculpted gorges, and luxuriant waterfalls along the Núpsá river is virtually untouched by tourists. If you can’t get there on the ground, consider an exhilarating aerial tour from the Skaftafell airfield. See p. 311 and 314.
- **Lónsöræfi:** Wonderfully removed from civilization, this private nature reserve in the mountains east of Vatnajökull is paradise for hikers who enjoy lingering over each unfolding nuance along the trail: the subtle spectra of a rhyolite rockslide; the ubiquitous waterfalls and river chasms; the fine textures of moss and lichen and tiny wildflowers. Reindeer could make a cameo. See p. 324.
- **Borgarfjörður Eystri:** This well-rounded coastal region combines many geological marvels found in the interior—particularly rhyolite mountainsides and their marbled color patterns—with an abundance of flowering plants and the romantic melancholy of its formerly inhabited fjords and inlets. Locals have put great effort into designing maps, marking trails, and organizing Jeep tours of the area. See p. 345.
- **Kerlingarfjöll:** A short detour from the relatively accessible Kjölur Route through the interior, this mountain cluster in the shadow of Hofsjökull has an astonishing range of scenery: lofty mountains, chiseled ravines, exotic geothermal fields, glimmering icecaps. . . . The clinchers are the hot springs that form enormous natural Jacuzzis and the pleasant, private lodgings at Ásgarður. See p. 355.

- **Kverkfjöll:** Deep within Iceland's highland desert interior, this geothermally restless mountain spur protrudes from Vatnajökull amid charred expanses of red, brown, and black rock dusted with lichen and moss.

Though best-known for a mesmerizing glacial ice cave, Kverkfjöll is anything but a one-hit natural wonder and merits 2 or 3 days to appreciate its austere gravitas. See p. 362.

5 Iceland's Best Museums

- **Harbor House Museum** (Reykjavík; ☎ 590-1200; www.artmuseum.is): Born Guðmundur Guðmundsson in 1932, Erró—the most prominent Icelandic artist of the late 20th century—has donated most of his life's work to this contemporary art branch of the Reykjavík Art Museum. The exhibit spaces are inside a 1930s-era warehouse perfectly suited to the vast, cartoon-styled montages for which he is best known. See p. 113.
- **National Museum of Iceland** (Reykjavík; ☎ 530-2200; www.natmus.is): This museum's permanent but ever-evolving exhibit, "The Making of a Nation," covers the entire span of Icelandic history and culture. You might anticipate a numbing encyclopedic survey, but the curators' selective restraint manages to say more with less. Look out for impromptu appearances by a youth choir singing haunting scores from the past. See p. 115.
- **Einar Jónsson Museum** (Reykjavík; ☎ 551-3797; www.skulptur.is): The work of Iceland's most revered sculptor draws heavily on classical mythology and traditional folklore, with a virtuosic command of gesture and ingenious meshings of human and beastly forms. His romantic symbolism is sometimes difficult to interpret, but never fails to carry deep emotional and spiritual resonance. Einar spent as long as 10 years perfecting his works, many of which are displayed exclusively here. See p. 115.
- **Settlement Center** (Borgarnes; ☎ 437-1600; www.landnam.is): With state-of-the-art multimedia exhibits dedicated to *Egils Saga* and the first 60 years of Icelandic settlement, this engaging new museum tries almost too hard to turn learning into a kind of amusement park fun house—but we're not complaining. See p. 168.
- **Glaumbær** (Skagafjörður; ☎ 453-6173; www.glaumbaer.is): Iceland has several museums inside preserved 19th- and early-20th-century turf-roofed farm buildings; but, if you see just one, make it Glaumbær in the northwest. Fish-skin shoes and other fascinating artifacts are on view, but the most affecting moments are when you imagine the smell of burning peat and the sounds of the family clan pattering about these dark, damp, and snug rooms through the long winters. See p. 222.
- **Museum of Small Exhibits** (Near Akureyri; ☎ 463-1261; www.smanunasafnid.is): "I collect old things," explains Sverrir Hermannsson, the eccentric carpenter behind this strange and unique museum. Sverrir has meticulously culled, categorized, arranged, and mounted all sorts of things—hammers, kettles, record-player needles, belt buckles—in an art of pattern, repetition, and variation. The objects themselves may be ordinary and worthless, but as he cryptically notes, "The thought alone can be of aesthetic value." See p. 248.

- **Safnasafnið** (Near Akureyri; ☎ 461-4066; www.safnasafnid.is): The curators of this inspiring art museum comb the country for what they call “honesty,” ignoring conventional distinctions between contemporary art, folk art, and “naïve” art. The museum is not anti-elitist so much as immune to all aesthetic dogma. Whatever the grounding principles, the results are compelling: Exhibits could spotlight anything from women’s needleworking tools and wooden figurines whittled by a farmer to fine photography and sculpture. See p. 249.
- **Húsavík Museum** (Húsavík; ☎ 464-1860; www.husmus.is): Guðni Halldórsson, the intense and tireless curator of this prolific folk museum in northeast Iceland, is used to seeing

most visitors to Húsavík take a whale-watching tour, giggle at the jarred penises in the Phallogological Museum, and depart. Nothing wrong with that, but you might take some time to enjoy the fascinating range of regional artifacts on display here, from a stuffed polar bear to necklaces made from human hair. See p. 261.

- **Skógar Folk Museum** (Skógar; ☎ 487-8845; www.skogasafn.is): This is without a doubt the greatest of Iceland’s many folk museums, with an enormous artifact collection ranging from fishing boats to carved headboards and makeshift mousetraps. Let the staff lead you around; otherwise, you won’t know what the hollow fishbone was used for. See p. 302.

6 The Best Accommodations for Local Flavor

- **Hotel Glymur** (Hvalfjörður; ☎ 430-3100; www.hotelglymur.is): This stylish retreat is just 45 minutes from Reykjavík and 90 minutes from the international airport—but feels worlds away, especially when surveying the fjord from the vantage point of the hot tub. The rooms, all duplexes, were smartly remodeled in 2006. See p. 140.
- **Hótel Búðir** (Snæfellsnes Peninsula; ☎ 435-6700; www.budir.is): This country-contemporary boutique hotel with an estimable restaurant is surrounded by nothing but ocean, broad sandbanks, sprawling lava, stone ruins of fishermen’s huts, and a restored 19th-century church, with Snæfellsjökull loftily presiding over the scene. See p. 182.
- **Guesthouse Breiðavík** (Látrabjarg peninsula; ☎ 456-1575; www.breidavik.net): Around the corner from Iceland’s largest sea cliff, this warm and welcoming farmstay is in a breathtakingly picturesque bay with Mediterranean-hued waters. Wind

down with an evening stroll on the beach, followed by a drink at Europe’s westernmost bar. See p. 194.

- **Faktorshúsið í Hæstikaupstað** (Ísafjörður; 456-3868; gistias@snerpa.is): In the heart of the Westfjords’ happening capital, this painstakingly restored 1788 house—with just one top-floor guest room—is as steeped in Icelandic history as anyplace you’re likely to encounter outside a museum. See p. 202.
- **Heydalur Country Hotel** (Ísafjarðardjúp; ☎ 456-4824; www.heydalur.is): With a majestic fjord and friendly seal colony, this rustic farm retreat in the Westfjords has everything you need to craft a perfect day: horseback riding, fishing, sea kayaking, home-cooking, and a blissful outdoor hot pool. See p. 206.
- **Hótel Djúpavík** (Strandir Coast; ☎ 451-4037; www.djupavik.com): Beautifully situated along the wild and remote Strandir Coast, this former boarding house for seasonal

herring workers is so warmly and authentically connected to its past that any luxury deficits are irrelevant. Original driftwood boards creak underfoot, and the decaying herring factory looms wistfully nearby. See p. 209.

- **Hótel Tindastóll** (Sauðárkrókur; ☎ 453-5002; www.hotelvindastoll.com): Each large, handsome room in this lovingly restored 1884 Norwegian kit home is an ideal synthesis of luxury and provincial charm. The natural-stone hot pool in back is the finishing touch. See p. 228.
- **Hótel Reykjahlíð** (Mývatn; ☎ 464-4142; www.reykjahlid.is): Perched right on Iceland's most celebrated and scenic lake, this stately country hotel has an understated elegance complemented by a first-rate restaurant. See p. 256.
- **Country Hotel Anna** (west of Skógar; ☎ 487-8950; www.hotelanna.is): An appealing interlude for road trips along the south coast, this intimate hotel is an ideal blend of an upscale B&B and a rural farmstay, though prices reflect the former. See p. 305.
- **Fljótsdalur Youth Hostel** (Markarfljót valley; ☎ 487-8498; www.hostel.is): This charmed, turf-roofed hideaway is nestled deep within the Markarfljót valley, on the cusp of Iceland's interior. All beds are in bunk rooms and the amenities are few—but, with civilization left safely behind, things couldn't be cozier. See p. 296.
- **Guesthouse Egilsstaðir** (Egilsstaðir; ☎ 471-1114; www.egilsstadir.com): Few travelers linger in Egilsstaðir, the transit hub of east Iceland, but for the many who pass through, this lovely manorial farmhouse offers sumptuous rooms, a fine restaurant, lake views, and—that rarity of rarities—a shady grove of tall trees. See p. 334.
- **Hótel Aldan** (Seyðisfjörður; ☎ 472-1277; www.hotelaldan.com): Recent refurbishment of this 19th-century Norwegian kit building struck an exquisite balance of period restoration and sleek modern design. Aldan is easily the Eastfjords' most captivating hotel, in the region's most captivating village. See p. 344.

7 The Best Icelandic Restaurants

- **Sjávarkjallarinn (Seafood Cellar)** (Reykjavík; ☎ 511-1212): Culinary conservatives may distrust this restaurant's radical experimentation and splashy presentation—lobster with truffles served in a Mason jar? But the Seafood Cellar would be Iceland's best restaurant even if the food came in Styrofoam containers at a drive-thru window. See p. 99.
- **Fjalakötturinn** (Reykjavík; ☎ 514-6000): Traditional yet worldly (for an appetizer, think smoked lamb carpaccio with chutney and celery root salad), this stellar restaurant has a plain white dining room with a few photos of old Reykjavík on the wall. No glam appeal, but the cooking—and the country's most refined wine list—speak for themselves. See p. 102.
- **Salt** (Reykjavík; ☎ 599-1020): Housed in the minimalist-chic Radisson SAS 1919 Hotel, this recent entry has a prize-winning celebrity chef, but the menu—emphasizing natural flavors and traditional crowd-pleasers like trout with lemon and capers, or tenderloin with crispy potatoes and béarnaise sauce—is anything but an ego trip. See p. 102.
- **Við Tjörnina** (Reykjavík; ☎ 551-8666): If smoked lamb's heart, fermented shark, and salt-cod mousse can be made palatable, leave it to the maverick chefs at this offbeat Reykjavík institution. (Don't worry: The

lamb fillet in port wine sauce is just as exceptional.) Check the wall for the chef's "band photo," and ask for a bag of leftover bread to feed the ducks in the pond outside. See p. 103.

- **Þrír Frakkar** (Reykjavík; ☎ 552-3939): The hallmarks of a "real Icelandic restaurant" are all here: nautical decor; a wide selection of fresh seafood and seabirds, always complemented by potatoes, familiar vegetables, and rich sauces; and there's nothing dainty about the portions or presentation. See p. 103.
- **Fjöruborðið** (Stokkseyri; ☎ 483-1550): Icelanders drive long distances—and sometimes even drop in by helicopter from Reykjavík—to butter their bibs at this famed lobster

house on Iceland's southwestern coast. See p. 165.

- **Tjöruhúsið** (Ísafjörður; ☎ 456-4419): Tucked away in an 18th-century fish warehouse, this no-nonsense Westfjords restaurant serves up amazingly fresh and tasty pan-fried fish without the slightest fuss or pretense. Ask the cook if the fish is ever frozen and you'll get a look of utter horror. See p. 204.
- **Fríðrik V** (Akureyri; ☎ 461-5775): This family-run affair, offering an impressive variety of modern European preparations, is the best restaurant outside the capital—and it's written all over the faces of the waitstaff, who deliver lectures on each dish with well-earned, unconcealed pride. See p. 238.

8 The Best of Iceland Online

- **www.icelandreview.com: Iceland Review** is an online magazine that strikes a fine balance between serious journalism and touristic concerns; the travel articles are great for scouting destinations. All previous issues are archived and searchable, and a free print version can be found in cafes and hotel rooms across the country. The site links to **What's On Iceland** (www.whatson.is), excellent for catching wind of scheduled events.
- **www.samkoma.com: Samkoma**, which means "meeting place," was set up to foster interchange between Icelanders and Canadians of Icelandic descent, but it also contains the Internet's best collection of Iceland-related links.
- **www.grapevine.is: The Grapevine**, a free left-wing magazine found all over Iceland, is a terrific resource for reviews of art, music, dining, shopping, and trips within Iceland. All issues are archived and searchable online.
- **www.nat.is:** The homepage of **Nordic Adventure Travel** delivers on its cheery promise: "We cover everything you are coming to enjoy! The whole island is air conditioned!" The endless links are particularly helpful for those planning a fishing, hunting, or hiking adventure. Click the trail icons on a national map, and detailed trail maps and descriptions appear.
- **http://blog.icelandexpress.com/iceland:** This blog, run by budget airline Iceland Express, is titled "**How Do You Like Iceland?**"—a question visitors are asked continuously. Entries are much more informed, candid, and amusing than you'd expect from an airline website.
- **http://kort.bok.hi.is: Antique Maps of Iceland** has high-resolution digital files of vintage, pre-1900 maps of Iceland. Some 16th- and 17th-century maps include great captions for sea monsters popping their heads out of the ocean. One reads, "He hath been scene to stand a whole day together

upright upon his taile . . . and greedily seeketh after mans flesh.”

- **www.edjackson.ca/19thcenturyiceland:** Ed Jackson is a connoisseur of rare and long-forgotten Iceland travelogues, and his website **Travels in 19th Century Iceland** presents absorbing extracts with period photographs and illustrations. Entries are cross-indexed by location (Reykjavík, Þingvellir, and so on) and themes such as dress, customs and manners, and children.
- **www.icelandicmusic.is:** This new government-sponsored site, titled

Icelandic Music Export (IMX), is a great way to sample the country's music scene. Features include news, events, downloadable videos, podcasts, and links to homepages of Icelandic artists. **The Icelandic Music Page (www.musik.is)** is another excellent site with links for musical events throughout the country.

- **www.halfdan.is/vestur/vestur.htm:** **The Emigration from Iceland to North America** is the best site for non-Icelanders of Icelandic descent to trace their ancestry and find living relatives.