



Reykjavik is the capital and largest city of Iceland.

My Trip to Iceland

THE LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

ICELAND IS A COLD and windswept volcanic island about the size of the state of Kentucky. Located in the wild Atlantic, it is suddenly on the bucket lists of seasoned travelers and millennials alike. To better understand the attraction, and to hopefully catch a glimpse of the elusive Northern Lights, I boarded a five and a half hour nonstop stop flight from Chicago on a snowy February day for the capital city of Reykjavik. The airport in Reykjavik was much larger than anticipated for an island with only about 320,000 inhabitants.

With only about nine hours of sunlight per day

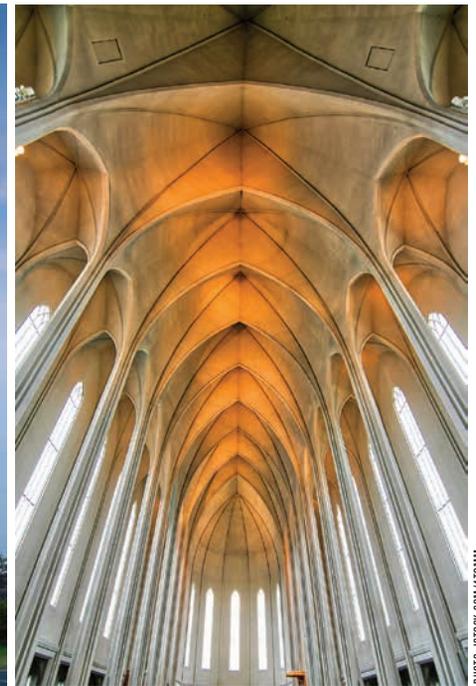
in February, the 40-minute early morning ride from the airport took place in frigid darkness, reminiscent of films of the lunar landing. Black rock formations jutting up from a snowy abyss on one side and turbulent waves of the sea crashing over the road on the other. Few buildings or structures of any kind were visible for miles.

As the sun came up, arrival into the capital city of Reykjavik was a pleasant surprise. Home to two-thirds of the island's population, Reykjavik has all the charm of a quaint European port town. The city center and old harbor area offer a vibrant, hip shopping, dining, and music scene.

Restaurants feature a wide variety of delicious (and familiar) foods. The prices are similar to those found in a Chicago bistro with tax and gratuity added. (You do not, however, tip in Iceland.) For a bargain meal, try the Icelandic hot dogs, served with a special mustard blend and crispy onion straws. The city also offers some interesting



Shopping, restaurants, and hotels are found on Laugavegur Street in Reykjavik.



Above: The Hallgrímskirkja Church is the tallest building in Iceland and stands guard over Reykjavik. This Lutheran Church took 41 years to build. In front is a statue of Leifur Eiríksson who is claimed to be the first European to find America. Right: The Hallgrímskirkja Church is the crowning landmark in Reykjavik, and offers an observation tower for panoramic views of the city.

architecture, museums, and attractions. Reykjavik is easily walkable and very safe. Crime in Iceland is among the lowest worldwide and even police do not carry firearms.

Iceland has a 99 percent literacy rate, evident in the attentive friendliness of the people, most of whom speak perfect English. Iceland has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world at 2.9 percent, which is attained in part by the boom of hotels and services needed to accommodate the growing demands of tourism. Comfortable hotels with breakfast included are available in the city center. Bed and breakfasts and farm-stay accommodations have popped up in many rural locations. There are a few boutique and high-end resorts on the island, such as the Hotel Ranga, which has its own observatory with high-powered telescopes for stargazers. The ION Luxury Adventure Hotel, rising from the Icelandic landscape like a science fiction fantasy, serves up fresh Nordic and organic cuisine and is perfect for design nerds, romantic couples, and thrill-seekers looking for unique excursions.

THE BLUE LAGOON

A visit to the famous Icelandic Blue Lagoon, the largest man-made lagoon in the world, offers a large modern spa facility visited by almost 3,000

guests daily. Warm up and relax in the mineral rich water averaging 99-102 F. The lagoon even has a swim-up bar! The modern clubhouse houses locker rooms, massage facilities, a retail area, and several restaurants. Advanced reservations are recommended.

Not as cold as its name indicates, winter temperatures in Iceland average 30-40F degrees, while summer temps hover in the 60s. As the third-windiest place on earth, the weather is ever-changing. Sunny, rainy, and snowy fronts

come and go and one is prompted to change outerwear and accessories often throughout the day. The high-tech Icelanders have phone apps which keep them up-to-the-minute on moving wind and weather fronts, flooded road closures, and the probability of sighting the Northern Lights.

A GEOLOGICAL PARADISE

There is a surreal beauty to the starkness of the Icelandic countryside with its snow-covered plains erupted by black volcanoes, mossy covered



Visitors enjoy the spa at Iceland's Blue Lagoon, a geothermal lagoon that is manmade. The lagoon's warm waters are mineral-rich and located in the heart of volcanic land.

rocks, and geothermal curiosities. Thingvellir National Park is a geological paradise where one can walk through the rift valley between the North American and European tectonic plates. The geothermal area with natural hot springs, spouting geysers, and bubbling mud pits offers an easy trail walk between features, as well as more extensive hiking options. Waterfalls are visible at every bend of the road. The mighty Gullfoss waterfall with five levels of powerful flow is a highlight in this “Golden Triangle” area. Small, furry Icelandic horses brought to the island by the Norwegians centuries ago wander the rolling green farmlands.

Easily approachable are the dramatic turquoise, white, and black striated glaciers that crack and flow into the lakes, forming impressive icebergs. Clear chunks of the broken icebergs wash onto the black sand beach and lay like huge diamonds in the shimmering sunshine. Glacier truck tours and ice cave diving are popular tour options. These magnificent glaciers, waterfalls, and natural thermal pools provide Iceland with some of the purest water on earth and a continuous flow of hydroelectric and geothermal power, making Iceland one of the most energy-efficient countries in the world.

NATURAL ATTRACTIONS

In the spring and summer months, whale watching is popular and you may also see the colorful



To have a chance to see the Northern Lights in Iceland, it is recommended that visitors stay for seven days.



Atlantic Puffins at the Latrabjorg Cliffs in Iceland.



Historic turf houses located at the Skogar Museum in Southern Iceland. Turf houses were the solution to a difficult climate with superior insulation with locally sourced materials.

puffin birds nesting in the area. In Northern Iceland, you can visit Godafoss, the waterfall of the gods, and Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe, and lovely Lake Myvatn. Hiking is popular in this area of waterfalls, lava formations, hot springs, and natural mud baths.

Our search for the Northern Lights did not disappoint. Away from town on a clear, star-studded night, we witnessed a small, pale green streak of light across the sky which gradually appeared larger and brighter, and developed into varying shades of green, turquoise, and rose—creating a most humbling experience.

Amazing scenery, an incredible standard of living, a pristine ecological environment, and every level of adventure and pampering are what make Iceland a highly desirable and fascinating vacation spot for all travelers and all seasons. U

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