



Reykjavik is the world's most northerly capital

## MINI GUIDE

# EXCURSIONS FROM REYKJAVÍK

Famed for its Viking history and high-energy nightlife, Iceland's capital is also the perfect pitstop for a range of activities: be it bobbing in a geothermal pool, spotting puffins or taking in one of the world's best dive sites.

## Geothermal pools and spas

### 1 BLUE LAGOON

Set in a black lava field, the milky-blue spa is fed by water (at a perfect 38°C) from the futuristic Svartsengi geothermal plant. Its silver towers, roiling clouds of steam and people daubed in blue-white silica mud provide an off-the-planet scene. There are two steam rooms, a spa, café and restaurant; it's a 45-minute drive from the city centre ([bluelagoon.com](http://bluelagoon.com); 240 Grindavík; from £28).



Blue Lagoon's hot water comes from a geothermal power plant

### 2 LAUGARDALSLAUG

Laugardalslaug Geothermal Pool is the largest in Iceland, and a place where children play, teenagers flirt, business deals are made and everyone catches up with the gossip. It also has the best facilities: an Olympic-size indoor pool (28°C), an outdoor pool, four hot pots (38°C–44°C), steam bath, whirlpool, and curling 86m water slide. Get there via bus 14 ([reykjavik.is](http://reykjavik.is); Sundlaugavegur 30a; 6.30am–10pm weekdays, from 8am weekends; from £3).

### 3 NAUTHÓLSVÍK

The dinky Blue Flag Nauthólsvík geothermal beach, on the edge of the Atlantic, is packed with happy bathers in summer, thanks to golden sand imported from Morocco and an artificial hot spring that keeps the water at a pleasant 18°C–20°C. There are sociable hot pots, a snack bar, changing rooms, and canoes and rowing boats. Get there on bus 19 ([nautholsvik.is](http://nautholsvik.is); Ylströnd; free admission 15 May–15 Aug, £2.80 rest of the year).

## Animal watching

### 4 WHALES

Iceland is a fantastic place for whale watching – its waters hold more than 20 species of cetacean. In Faxaflói bay you'll come across white-beaked dolphins, harbour porpoises and minke; migratory humpbacks are also spotted. Between April and October, Elding Whale Watching runs three-hour trips from Reykjavík's old harbour ([whalewatching.is](http://whalewatching.is); Old Harbour; from £45).



Humpback whales are famed for their breaching behaviour

### 5 PUFFINS

Known for crash landings and frantic fluttering on land, the puffin is surprisingly graceful in water and spends most of its year at sea. Between May and August it comes to land to breed, and around 50,000 of these clumsy and endearingly comic birds nest on Lundy and Akurey, two islands just offshore from Reykjavík. Visit them on the one-hour Puffin Express boat trips, which sail from the harbour several times a day (special tours. [is](http://is); Old Harbour; from £20).

### 6 BIRDS

Head less than a mile west from the city centre and you reach a red and white lighthouse, a lava-strewn beach and a windswept golf course. Seltjarnarnes – where the air has a salty tang and fish-drying racks sit by the shore – is a haven for birdwatching. Some 106 species have been spotted and the offshore island of Grótta is a natural reserve (accessible on foot at low tide but closed in nesting season, May–July). Expect to see Arctic terns, eider ducks and fulmars ([seltjarnarnes.is](http://seltjarnarnes.is)).

## Other excursions

### 7 HORSE RIDING

Horses are an integral part of Icelandic life and the sturdy, short local horse is a gentle breed, ideal for inexperienced riders. Horse farms around Reykjavík offer some truly unforgettable tours: from trotting through lava fields under the midnight sun to riding to the beautiful Gullfoss waterfall and the hot springs at Geysir ([eldhestar.is](http://eldhestar.is); from £35 for a one-hour countryside tour).



Vikings brought horses to Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries

### 8 WALKING

The tiny, uninhabited island of Víðey, just a few minutes offshore, is criss-crossed with paths and makes an ideal day trip. Strange modern artworks (including Yoko Ono's *Imagine Peace Tower*), an abandoned village and shipwrecks give a melancholy feel and the walks are eminently peaceful. Pick up a trail map at the harbour ([videy.com](http://videy.com); return ferry from Old Harbour or Skarfabakki pier; £11).

### 9 DIVING

Iceland's waters offer 100m visibility, lava ravines, wrecks and thermal chimneys, making it a special dive destination. One of the best sites in the world is Silfra at Þingvellir – a freshwater rift that runs between the Euroasian and American continental plates. Dive Iceland runs a half-day tour from the city, half an hour away ([diveiceland.com](http://diveiceland.com); £193, including pick-up, two dives, equipment and refreshments).

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## Excursions from Reykjavík



## Reykjavík essentials

### T TRANSPORT

Icelandair flies to Reykjavík from London Gatwick, Heathrow, Glasgow and Manchester, while Wow Air flies from Gatwick, easyJet from Edinburgh, Luton and Manchester, Iceland Express from London Gatwick and Jet2 from Edinburgh, Leeds Bradford and Newcastle (from £170 from Gatwick; woviceland.co.uk). Keflavik Airport is 30 miles west of the city; the easiest way to get there is on the Reykjavík Excursions Flybus, which can drop you off at your hotel (50 minutes; £11 to city centre, £14 to your hotel; re.is). The city is easy to traverse on foot or by bus (straeto.is/english).

### WHERE TO STAY

1 Rooms at **Sunna** are simple, with honey parquet floors, and several have good views of Hallgrímskirkja church. There are studio apartments that sleep up to eight, and breakfast includes home-baked bread (sunna.is; Thorsgata 26; from £70).



Hotel Borg has quadruple-glazed windows to keep out street noise

2 **CenterHotel Arnarhovll** offers views of the bay and Mount Esja. Rooms, though small, have large windows letting in all that lovely Nordic light; head to the basement for a sauna and steam room (centerhotels.com; Ingólfsstræti 1; from £100).

3 The city's most historic hotel, **Hotel Borg**, had an overhaul and now super-smart beige, black and cream décor, parquet floors, leather headboards and Bang & Olufsen flatscreens are standard throughout (hotelborg.is; Posthusstræti 11; from £190).

## The know-how

### POOL AND SPA ETIQUETTE

What to take off and what to put on...

#### Community spirit

Icelandic pools have a strict code of hygiene because they are free of chemicals. Have a thorough shower without your swimsuit before you enter.

#### Valuable tip

If swimming in natural springs, remove jewellery and watches as the minerals can discolour the metal.

#### Look after your locks

When visiting the Blue Lagoon, cover your hair in a swim cap or apply plenty of conditioner afterwards – the silica in the water plays havoc with hair.

#### Smooth operator

Apply the silica mud that's provided in vats around the lagoon to your skin to cleanse and exfoliate.



### TOP TIP

A day-long bus tour is one of the best ways to see natural wonders and ideal if you want to combine sightseeing with snowmobiling, horse riding, kayaking, rafting and other activities (Golden Circle & Glacier Snow Scooter Ride Day tour £215; adventures.is).

### FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Iceland* (£15.99) has a full chapter on Reykjavík and the surrounding areas, which is also available to download at lonelyplanet.com (£2.99). Iceland Review is a daily news digest, which also covers entertainment and culture (icelandreview.com). Nobel-Prize-winning writer Halldór Laxness lived in Reykjavík and many of his works, such as *Independent People*, focus on local people, (£9.99; Vintage Classics).

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