

# Southeast Iceland



Iceland's southeast is a kingdom made for trolls and ice giants, rather than creatures of warm flesh and blood. Mighty Vatnajökull, the largest ice cap outside the poles, dominates the region. Even casual visitors travelling along the Ring Road will be awestruck by its huge rivers of frozen ice pouring down steep-sided valleys towards the sea. The glacial lagoon Jökulsárlón, at the foot of the ice cap, is a photographer's paradise – wind and water sculpt its chilly-blue icebergs into fantastical shapes.

A terrible desert of dark glacial sand unrolls on the southern side of the Ring Road. The damage is caused by the Grímsvötn and Öraefi volcanoes, trapped beneath Vatnajökull. When they blow, huge areas of the ice cap melt, sending powerful rock-filled rivers smashing onto the coast. The most recent *jökulhlaup* (glacial flood) was only a decade or so ago.

Further inland is the epicentre of Iceland's worst eruption. In the late 18th century, the Lakagígar fissure erupted in a 30km-long sheet of flame and ash, blotting out the sun and causing famine across the northern hemisphere. Today such apocalyptic fire and darkness seem far away; the fragile lava craters are covered in soft green moss and the only sound is the wind. With desolation all around, it's not surprising that Skaftafell, the greenest part of Vatnajökull National Park, is a popular spot. This sheltered enclave between the glaciers and the dead grey sands throbs with life and colour.

Although part of the interior, we've included Fjallabak Nature Reserve and Landmannalaugar in this section. With a mesmerising landscape and superb hiking, this 'back road' between the southeast and southwest shouldn't be missed.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Admire the ever-changing ice sculptures at **Jökulsárlón** (p299), a bewitching glacial lagoon
- Bathe in steaming thermal pools at **Landmannalaugar** (p285), or rise to the challenge of the **Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk hike** (p288) – one of the world's great walks
- Visit Iceland's favourite area of Vatnajökull National Park, **Skaftafell** (p294), an area of green and lovely life amid the vast dead sandar (sand deltas)
- Stride up **Laki** (p292) for views of three glaciers...and unbelievable volcanic devastation
- Feel like a mountaineer on an easy but exhilarating **glacier walk** (p298); make it real by scaling Iceland's highest peak, **Hvannadalshnúkur** (p298); or roar across the **Vatnajökull ice cap** (p302) on a snowmobile



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