

On the Road



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I've been banging on about how marvellous Iceland is for years to anyone who will listen, including my long-suffering parents. So it was wonderful to finally persuade them to visit. We met up on the south coast and had a picnic on the banks of the glacial river Þjórsá in Þjórsárdalur (p129), before driving up to this incredible lookout. Such a gentle day – but it was magical to be standing on top of the world, dizzy with blue sky, clear water and distant Hekla, sharing my love of this country with my dear old mum and dad.



BRANDON PRESSER Breaks from the relentless research routine are few and far between when I'm on the road, but a chance to volunteer at the Arctic Fox Research Station (p188) was too good to pass up. After hiking and kayaking my way through Hornstrandir, I finally reached the survey camp at Hornbjarg, the reserve's ultimate Arctic edge. This photo was taken while I was 'on assignment'; I spent eight glorious hours on that mossy patch watching the foxes trot around their den while taking in the majesty of the snowcapped hills in the distance. It was a tough gig, but someone had to do it.

Destination Iceland

Few visitors can travel around Iceland without being deeply touched by the sheer beauty of it all; and few can leave the country without a pang and a fervent vow to return. It's that sort of place.

Perched on the edge of the Arctic, this wonderful little island contains some of the most impressive natural wonders in Europe. The continent's biggest waterfalls thunder down with such force that the ground trembles under your feet; the barren highlands form Europe's largest, loneliest desert; and the awesome ice cap Vatnajökull is the biggest outside the poles. Other spectacular phenomena include smouldering volcanoes, slow-flowing glaciers, extruding lava, gushing geysers, bubbling mud-pots, soothing thermal pools and, in the darkness of winter, the magical northern lights.

Until about 20 years ago, Iceland's fantastic scenery, challenging hikes, friendly natives and eerily remote wilderness were a well-kept secret. Today the country is one of Europe's hottest travel destinations. As well as having awe-inspiring nature, it boasts the compact capital Reykjavik, a city filled with Viking history and renowned for its high-energy nightlife and kaleidoscopic music scene.

Some of this exuberance was knocked out of the country following the 2008 global financial crisis. Its three major banks went into receivership, the króna went into free fall, and relations between Iceland and Britain were strained as Gordon Brown used antiterrorist laws to freeze Icelandic assets. Violent protests forced the prime minister's resignation and a change of government in January 2009. EU membership is now on the cards – it's an unpopular move, but one that should stabilise the country's finances.

Although these recent horrors have shaken the country far harder than its biggest earthquakes ever do, and although national pride has been seriously dented, Icelanders are a tough, industrious and inventive bunch who have survived centuries of hardship. Their stoicism and black humour will no doubt help them weather the worst, as will the income generated by the sudden boom in tourism. Excellent exchange rates mean that Iceland is cheaper than it has been in decades for foreign visitors.

Take advantage of the current low prices to indulge in horse riding, elf hunting, white-water rafting, glacier walks, caving and sea kayaking. Whale watching is a big attraction – in summer Iceland is probably the best place in Europe to see minkes and humpbacks. The sea cliffs around the country are a paradise for birdwatchers, but even if you're not a twitcher you'll be blown away by the sight of 20,000 puffins nesting on a cliff-top.

It's relatively easy to get around the country by public transport (in summer, at least), and the Ring Road is actually a pleasure to drive around – although it's the country's major highway, you'll frequently encounter sheep ambling out of the way or herds of horses galloping across the tarmac. OK, so it does tend to rain a lot in Iceland, but don't let the weather put you off. No matter if it snows, rains or blusters, or if you spend your whole visit basking in the sweetest spring sunshine, Iceland is a ravishingly beautiful place that you'll long to return to.

FAST FACTS

Population: 319,400

Unemployment precrash (2008): 2.3%; postcrash (2009): 6%

Number of foreign passengers passing through Keflavik International Airport (2007): 458,890

Percentage of Icelanders who use the internet: 93% (the world's highest)

Number of MacDonald's in Iceland: 0 (all three outlets closed in November 2009)

Most popular girl's name: Sara

Most popular boy's name: Jón

Total fish catch (2008): 1.3 million tonnes

Percentage of Icelanders who check the weather forecast daily: 70%

Getting Started

Nothing quite prepares you for a trip to Iceland. In the past, visitors have gone to experience a weekend of wild nightlife or a fortnight of pristine scenery, and have left again with expensive credit-card bills. These days, Iceland's become a top honeymoon destination, and is just waking up to the possibilities of adventure tourism, with skiing, white-water rafting, kayaking, snowmobiling and a host of other wild activities available. Reykjavík's Friday-night drinking and the Land of Fire and Ice cliché remain compelling drawcards, and the country's recent economic troubles mean that, for the time being at least, it's never been cheaper to visit.

A little planning is the best way to ensure you find the remote, stunningly beautiful fjords, waterfalls and geysers, dig out the best pubs and clubs, and uncover the country's hidden gems – from luxurious spas to ends-of-the-earth-style wilderness camping – all on whatever budget you can afford.

Iceland is a very seasonal destination, and planning ahead will mean you don't spend hours driving to see a puffin colony that migrated out to sea months previously, or get stuck waiting for a bus that never comes. Although the short summer season (June to August) offers the widest choice of activities and destinations, an off-season visit can be magical and gives you the benefit of having the top tourist attractions entirely to yourself.

WHEN TO GO

Iceland has a very distinct and short-lived tourist season, which runs from June to August. During this time you'll have the best weather, incredibly long days, the pick of tours and excursions, and the best choice of accommodation. On the downside, you'll also experience huge crowds at the biggest attractions, and at times the Ring Road will feel like a countrywide carousel where the fairground horses have been replaced by shiny grey hire cars.

September and May can be good months to travel, with generally good weather and far fewer tourists. Public transport will not be on a full schedule at these times, however; campsites will be closed; and, if you're hiking, snow may not clear from high passes until well into July.

Outside high season everything slows down. From late August rural attractions can start to close, by early September buses revert to a severely reduced winter schedule, and by the end of the month the days are getting noticeably shorter, tours are almost nonexistent and many museums,

See Climate Charts (p326) for more information.

IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WEATHER NOW...

Although the Icelandic summer is short, the days are long and the climate is generally mild. Daytime temperatures hover around 12°C to 15°C, with lows of about 5°C overnight. May and June are the driest months, but coastal areas, particularly in the south and west, are prone to rain at any time. Thanks to the moderating effects of the Gulf Stream, winters are surprisingly mild, and it's often warmer in Reykjavík in midwinter than in New York or Zürich. Be prepared for fierce, wind-driven rain, gales and fog, however, and shrieking winds and icy blizzards in the highlands. The clearest and coldest winter weather is generally around Akureyri and Mývatn in the central north. You'll find a daily weather forecast in English at <http://en.vedur.is>, but if you're in any doubt just refer to the old local saying: 'If you don't like the weather now, wait five minutes – it'll probably get worse.'

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A sleeping bag – even if you're not camping, you can save a packet by opting for a bed without linen at hostels, guest houses and some hotels. A blow-up pillow, pillow case and nonfitted sheet are also handy.
- A large memory card or plenty of film for your camera – neither are cheap to buy locally.
- Swimsuit and towel – for those glorious natural hot springs, geothermal pools and hot pots (outdoor hot tubs).
- Rain gear and thermals – if you're planning to hike, cycle or hitch, don't dream of travelling without them.
- A credit card – Icelanders wouldn't know what to do without plastic.
- A sense of humour – for those days when fog and low cloud shrouds everything in your path or you're holed up in a hut while a summer blizzard rages outside.

attractions and guest houses outside Reykjavik and Akureyri have closed. Listings throughout the book give details of opening times, though, and despite reduced facilities it's well worth considering an off-season trip to see mighty waterfalls frozen still, experience the aurora borealis (see the boxed text, p59), ski, snowmobile or ice-fish, or just luxuriate in a steaming hot pool surrounded by snow. And everywhere you go you'll get an especially warm welcome from the locals. Another benefit is that accommodation costs drop substantially from about mid-September to mid-May, when you'll get up to 40% off the cost of a high-season hotel room and a 20% to 30% reduction in the rates of most guest houses. If you're planning to travel around the country in the low-season you'll need to hire a car, and you should check road conditions locally as rural roads and mountain passes can be closed due to snow.

HOW MUCH?

Guest-house accommodation d Ikr10,000-14,000

1L unleaded petrol Ikr185

Large glass of Egil's beer Ikr700

Whale-watching trip Ikr8000

Icelandic knitted jumper Ikr10,000

COSTS & MONEY

Iceland has traditionally been an expensive destination, but the recent financial crisis (see the boxed text, p35) has changed all that. At the time of writing, exchange rates were extremely favourable for tourists. But the economic situation is still up in the air, and of course those tourist-friendly rates could change at any time.

Iceland is an almost cashless society – Icelanders use their credit and debit cards for almost every transaction, so you don't need to make large cash withdrawals in order to get around.

The cheapest accommodation option in Iceland is camping, but if you don't fancy a night under canvas you can keep costs down by choosing sleeping-bag accommodation in guest houses. A bed in a guest house or farmhouse will cost roughly Ikr2500 to Ikr4000 for sleeping-bag accommodation and Ikr10,000 to 14,000 for a double room with made-up beds. Hotel room prices start at around Ikr14,000/18,000 for a single/double in high season, with prices dropping by up to 40% in low season. Families or groups can get cheaper deals by finding multiple-bed rooms or, in rural areas, stay in self-contained cottages or cabins. You can overnight in wonderful timber summer cabins (sleeping up to six people), with kitchen, lounge, bathroom, and barbecue deck and prices starting from around Ikr11,000 per cabin per night.

Eating out in Iceland can be expensive unless you're prepared for an overdose of fast food. Inexpensive, filling but largely unhealthy meals are available at the ubiquitous grill bars in petrol stations, where you'll get a

burger or fried chicken, chips and a drink for about Ikr700. Alternatively, you can fill up in a fast-food pizza joint for around Ikr1400. To eat well you'll need to cook for yourself or be prepared to pay for the privilege. Fish and lamb are the main-course staples at most Icelandic restaurants, with fish dishes costing about Ikr1800 to Ikr2800 and lamb dishes anywhere from Ikr2500 to Ikr4000. For those on a budget, one helpful tip is to eat your main meal in the middle of the day, when lunchtime buffets or tourist menus can be great value.

Hiring a car gives you freedom to visit out-of-the-way attractions; sharing the hire with other travellers can keep expenses down and begin to rival the cost of bus passes. The cheapest hire cars cost around Ikr20,000 per day – book well ahead. Most hire cars are not insured to drive on the country's mountain F roads. If you want to access the highland interior, you'll need to hire a 4WD for around Ikr45,000 per day. It's also worth noting that air travel in Iceland is not much more expensive than bus travel. For more information, see p337.

For a true idea of how much a trip to Iceland will cost, you'll also need to factor in things such as nightlife (in Reykjavik and Akureyri at least), museum admission (usually Ikr500 to Ikr800) and activities such as horse riding (Ikr3000 an hour), whale watching (Ikr8000) or a snow-mobile tour (Ikr10,000). Budget travellers who camp regularly, self-cater and take the bus could scrape by on as little as Ikr3000 a day per person. Add in sleeping-bag or guest-house accommodation, a meal out, a bus tour and a shared hire car, and you're looking at about Ikr10,000 to Ikr16,000 a day. Those staying in average hotel accommodation, driving their own car, eating decent restaurant meals, and taking advantage of Iceland's tours and activities should budget for expenses of at least Ikr25,000 per day.

Our top tips for budget travellers:

- Bring a tent or use sleeping-bag accommodation in guest houses.
- Look for places where you can use a kitchen and cook for yourself.
- Become a member of Hostelling International (HI) before leaving home.
- Buy a bus pass if you're planning a round-Iceland trip.
- Choose a smaller area of the country to explore and plan to do plenty of walking.
- Travel outside high season.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Iceland's reliance on geothermal and hydroelectric power gives the country an enviable environmental reputation. Iceland is suffering, however, from the rest of the world's reliance on fossil fuels – global warming is having a particularly devastating effect on the country's glaciers.

Short of avoiding the flight to Iceland in the first place, try to reduce your carbon footprint as much as possible. Consider using the bus service, which is not too bad in summer, particularly along the south coast.

WARNING: FLUCTUATING PRICES

This book contains prices researched in high season of 2009, but be warned that by the time you get there, the country's unstable financial situation might make prices look very different.

Many companies have begun listing prices in euros only, as it's a more stable currency; and now that Iceland has applied for EU membership, it's likely that Icelanders will abandon the króna altogether in favour of the euro around 2011.

ESSENTIAL VIEWING

Watch the black comedy *101 Reykjavík* before leaving home to understand Reykjavík's late-night hedonistic spirit. For a glimpse of teen angst in rural Iceland, try the quirky *Nói Albinói*, a touching coming-of-age movie with plenty of dark humour. The thriller *Jar City*, adapted from Arnaldur Indriðason's award-winning novel *Tainted Blood*, follows world-weary Detective Inspector Erlendur as he investigates a brutal murder and some dodgy doings at Iceland's Genetic Research Centre.

For more information on Icelandic films, see p46.

Recycling schemes are uncommon, although the youth hostelling association encourages travellers to separate their rubbish.

There's a growing Slow Food Movement – look out for restaurants participating in locally grown food schemes, and choose Icelandic lamb and reindeer dishes over those made from imported ingredients.

It isn't a crime to buy bottled water in Iceland – but it ought to be! Icelandic tap water generally comes from the nearest glacier, and is some of the purest you'll ever drink.

Although it looks huge, harsh and eternal, the Icelandic landscape is surprisingly fragile. If you've hired a 4WD vehicle, you must stick to marked trails. Off-road driving is illegal due to the irreversible damage it causes. See the boxed text, p67, for tips on low-impact camping and hiking.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

For a gritty glimpse of the Icelandic soul, Halldór Laxness's humorous, heart-breaking, deep-minded work *Independent People* is an absolute must. Follow it up with the dark humour and turbulent times of Einar Kárasón's *Devil's Island*, a look at life in Reykjavík in the 1950s and 1960s, or some crime fiction by Iceland's best-selling author Arnaldur Indriðason – six of his novels have been translated into English, including the award-winning *Tainted Blood* (also known as *Jar City*). For more information on Icelandic literature, see p41.

For an irreverent look at the country from a traveller's point of view, try *Letters from Iceland* by WH Auden and Louis MacNeice, an amusing and unconventional travelogue written by the two poets in 1936. In contrast, Alan Boucher's *The Iceland Traveller – A Hundred Years of Adventure* is full of 18th- and 19th-century romance, history and drama. For a warts-and-all view of contemporary Icelandic travel, Tim Moore's *Frost on My Moustache* lays bare the realities of overambitious cycle trips and eating hot dogs for every meal.

INTERNET RESOURCES

You'll find a wealth of information online. The following sites are particularly useful for planning your trip:

BSI (www.bsi.is) Information on bus travel around Iceland from the bus companies' consortium.

Gisting (www.accommodation.is) Comprehensive list of accommodation options in Iceland laid out on relevant street maps.

Iceland Review (www.icelandreview.com) Excellent daily news digest from Iceland with current affairs, entertainment, culture and more.

Icelandic Tourist Board (www.visiticeland.com; www.icetourist.is; www.goiceland.org) The official sites of the Icelandic Tourist Board.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Information on travel in Iceland and plenty of traveller tips on the Thorn Tree forum.

Nordic Adventure Travel (www.nat.is) Practical information and planning tips, plus the low-down on lots of rural towns.

TOP PICKS



FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Icelanders love to party, and you'll find celebrations of music, culture, history or the changing of the seasons happening year-round. The following are our favourites; for more, see p22.

- Porrablót (Viking midwinter feast; p22) – nationwide, February.
- Independence Day (p22) – nationwide, June.
- Sjómannadagurinn (Sailors' Day; p22) – coastal towns, June.
- Midsummer (p23) – nationwide, June.
- Listasumar Akureyri, (Akureyri Arts Festival; p217) – Akureyri, June to August.
- Bræðislan music festival (p270) – Borgarfjörður Eystri, July.
- Menningarnott (Culture Night; p87) – Reykjavík, August.
- Þjóðhátíð Vestmannaeyjar (National Festival; p153) – Heimaey Island, August.
- Herring festival (p210) – Siglufjörður, August.
- Iceland Airwaves music festival (p88) – Reykjavík, October.

EXPLOSIVE SIGHTS

Serene, majestic scenery belies Iceland's fiery heart. Vast explosions have shaped the land and forged the resilient spirits of its residents. Don't miss the volcanoes, craters, geysers and fiery light displays.

- Laki (p292) – marvel at a mountainous volcano and the still-volatile Lakagígur crater row.
- Leirhnjúkur (p239) – Iceland's best example of smouldering earth and smoking vents.
- Northern lights (p59) – lucky visitors may catch the eerie colour bursts and light storms.
- Heimaey (p149) – in the House Graveyard a third of the town lies buried under lava after the entire island blew up in 1973.
- Strokkur & the Great Geysir (p126) – Strokkur blasts steaming water into the air every six minutes, and the Great Geysir itself blows several times a day.
- Hekla (p139) – active and due to erupt any time. Dare you climb its ashy slopes?
- Menningarnott (p23) – fabulous fireworks light up the heavens at the end of Reykjavík's lively cultural festival.

ECCENTRIC ICELAND

Ever since Björk's astounding voice first made the world turn and stare, the words 'Iceland' and 'eccentric' have never been too far apart. Isolation, long days of darkness, an unpredictable landscape and *brennivín* (the local schnapps) have helped create a nation of quiet oddness.

- Blue Lagoon (p117) – Iceland's number one tourist attraction is an extremely weird idea: where else do you queue to go swimming inside a geothermal power station?
- 'Hidden People' – there's widespread respect for the supernatural creatures that are said to dwell throughout the country.
- Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft (p195) – 17th-century runes, riddles and the gruesome 'necropants' show that Westfjords weirdness is not a modern phenomenon.
- Quirky Gifts (p102) – fish-skin handbags, bowls made from radishes and boxes made from pigs' bladders...
- Víti Crater (p316) – skinny-dipping in this water-filled volcanic crater is a favourite Icelandic activity on highland trips.
- Singed sheep's head (p98) – sample the Icelandic delicacy of *svið* in traditional eateries.
- Icelandic Phallogical Museum (p241) – an oddball museum, this place flashes a collection of 300+ penises at its visitors.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

REYKJAVÍK & THE GOLDEN CIRCLE Four days / Reykjavík to the Blue

Lagoon (via the Golden Circle & south coast)

Arrive in **Reykjavík** (p70) on Friday to catch the *runtur* pub crawl (p99). Next morning, sober up in the fantastic geothermal swimming pool at Laugardalur (p83), before sweeping up the steeple of **Hallgrímskirkja** (p75), ingesting Viking history at the **National Museum** (p77) and admiring modern creations at **Hafnarhúsið** (p77) art gallery. Join a **whale-watching trip** (p84), then indulge in an afternoon's weird and wonderful shopping (p101).

Next up, the Golden Circle: start at **Pingvellir National Park** (p121), cradle of the nation, before heading to **Geysir** (p126) to watch the Strokkur geyser gush. Saddle up and horse-ride to thundering **Gullfoss** (p127), one of Iceland's most impressive waterfalls. Now head for tiny fishing village **Stokkseyri** (p136) to kayak on a tranquil lagoon or scare yourself silly at the Ghost Centre. The more sober attractions at neighbouring **Eyrbakkí** (p135) include the wonderful museum Húsið. Dine at a top-notch seafood restaurant, **Við Fjöruborðið** (p137) or **Hafið Bláa** (p136), between Eyrbakkí and Þórlákshöfn.

Stop at the idyllic **Blue Lagoon** (p117) on the way back to the airport.



A 300km route perfect for those with little time to spare. Once you've explored Reykjavík's charms, catch a glimpse of what lies in the vast beyond outside Iceland's only real city: waterfalls, geysers, lava formations, ghosts and trolls, tiny fishing villages and steaming geothermal pools.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

WESTFJORDS CIRCUIT Seven days to three weeks / Stykkishólmur to Krossnes

Arrive in the Westfjords in style: take the ferry from pretty **Stykkishólmur** (p164) and stop off midroute at the quaint island of **Flatey** (p168), with its colourful houses and population of five. Once you've landed in the Westfjords, head straight for Iceland's most western point, the cliffs at **Látrabjarg** (p180), teeming with bird life. Wiggle your way north along the next big fjord to beautiful **Ketildalur** and **Selárdalur** (Kettle Valley; p183), where you'll find the weather-worn sculptures of Samúel Jónsson. Spend at least two days in remote, raven-filled **Ísafjörður** (p185) to take advantage of the kayaking, birdwatching and boat trips available from the town. Those with time to spare can branch off into true wilderness on a lonely multiday hike across the deserted **Hornstrandir Peninsula** (p192). Rte 61 out of town leads you to **Súðavík** (p190) and the newly opened Arctic Fox Center, before slowly shimmying its way round empty fjords and over mountains back to the mainland. Not you, though – instead, take Rte 643 up the eastern **Strandir Coast** (p194), a gloriously serene stretch of jagged crags. Drop in to **Hólmavík** (p195) to check out the necropants in the Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft. Go on to soak in the seaside geothermal hot pots at **Drangsnæs** (p196). For even more exclusive bathing, head for the open-air geothermal swimming pool, on the edge of the world at **Krossnes** (p198).

Too many people shunt round the Ring Road and miss the wild and lovely Westfjords. This 560km route takes you to some of the emptiest, strangest and most spectacular parts of Iceland – places that will seem like a dream when you're safely back home.



THE EMPTY EAST **Three days to one week / Seyðisfjörður to Papey Island**

Ferry passengers from Denmark have the good fortune to land in bohemian **Seyðisfjörður** (p272). Treat yourself to a kayak tour (p274) in the pretty fjord, or head to the isolated farm and nature reserve **Skálanes** (p275) for prime birdwatching. Head over the mountain and north to **Borgarfjörður Eystri** (p269) for quiet contemplation...or wild celebration, if you happen to catch the Bræðislan music festival (p23) in July.

Returning south, head for **Mjóifjörður** (p191), where an abandoned whaling station and ruined lighthouse enhance the sense of isolation; there's enough good hiking for a two-day stay.

Rte 92 takes you through **Reyðarfjörður** (p276) and **Eskifjörður** (p276), a pair of sleepy fishing villages enveloped by looming, emerald-green basalt mountains. From there the road climbs up and over Iceland's highest mountain pass, before dropping down to **Neskaupstaður** (p278), where Frú Lú Lú is one of the most fun places in the Eastfjords to hang out.

Return to Reyðarfjörður and head east along Rte 96, which undulates along the coast past the tiny villages of **Fáskúðfjörður** (p280), **Stoðvarfjörður** (p280) and **Breiðdalsvík** (p281). At Stoðvarfjörður, don't miss mineral collection of octogenarian Petra Sveinsdóttir, lovingly collected over a lifetime. Rejoin the Ring Road and follow the coast to the last fjord town **Djúpivogur** (p281), the harbour for boat trips to the beautiful nature reserve **Papey Island** (p282).



The Eastfjords are less showy than their western counterparts, but filled with quirky oddments and stunning blasts of nature. On this 500km route, swoop down vertical mountainsides to see how life is lived in Iceland's remote fishing villages.

TAILORED TRIPS

SEEKING THE VIKINGS & THEIR STORIES

Most of the stories that have survived about the Vikings were written down in the medieval sagas. Start your quest in Reykjavik at the **Culture House** (p77), where the original saga manuscripts are kept. To flesh out the stories, visit the **National Museum** (p77) which has a floor dedicated to the Vikings; the inventive **Reykjavik 871 +/-2** (p77) exhibition, based around an original Viking longhouse; and the larger-than-life **Saga Museum** (p76). Hafnarfjörður holds an annual Viking Festival (p109) in mid-June.

The excellent Settlement Centre at **Borgarnes** (p160) focuses on the Vikings' discovery of Iceland, and the bloodthirsty anti-hero of *Egil's Saga*. Scholar and schemer Snorri Sturluson probably wrote the latter – visit the museum dedicated to him at **Reykholt** (p162). In the 1960s a Viking grave was discovered at solitary **Skarðsvík** (p172), a stunning spot to sit and contemplate life. Check out the reconstruction of Eiríkur Rauðe's (Erik the Red) house at **Eiríksstaðir** (p175), deep in *Laxdæla Saga* country. Tragic hero Grettir the Strong met his death on the atmospheric island of **Drangey** (p207). There's a pleasant 10km marked walking trail from **Aðalból** (p269) in east Iceland, following the main sites featured in *Hrafnkell's Saga*. *Njál's Saga* is set around **Hvolsvöllur** (p140). For two different views of an early Norse farm, head for **Þjórsárdalur** (p129).



SWIMMING POOLS, SPAS & HOT SPRINGS

The swimming pool is sacred in Iceland, and the hot tub is the social hub of every village and town. No trip to Iceland would be complete without a visit to the **Blue Lagoon** (p117). Reykjavik has some fine swimming pools, including the Olympic-sized pool and spa at **Laugardalur** (p83), and its own little geothermal beach (p83). The river runs warm in Reykjadalur, near **Hveragerði** (p131) – bring your swimsuit. Friendly **Laugarvatn** (p125) has hot springs that feed a natural steam bath. In the highlands the pool at **Landmannalaugar** (p285) is a pleasure for muscle-weary walkers; delightful **Þórsmörk** (p143) has a large manmade outdoor hot tub; and the chance to swim in the turquoise water inside the Víti volcanic crater

at **Askja** (p315) presents a unique opportunity. The town of **Höfn** (p302) has just got a super new swimming pool, which seems almost miraculous after the long drive through nothingness on either side of town. The 'Blue Lagoon of the North' can be found at **Mývatn** (p232) – smaller, quieter, but just as relaxing as its famous forefather. If you're a connoisseur of open-air swimming pools in strange places, try **Þjórsárdalslaug** (p130), made from the leftovers of nearby Búrfell hydroelectricity plant; **Seljavallalaug** (p145), built straight into a hillside and filled by a natural hot spring; and **Krossnes** (p197), a pool perched on a lonely black-pebble beach.



Events Calendar

True to their Viking roots, Icelanders love to party in raucous style. The country's main events tend to be based in Reykjavík, but all kinds of small, enthusiastic, and very often slightly unhinged celebrations are held countrywide.

JANUARY–MARCH

ÞORRABLÓT 18 Jan–16 Feb
The Viking midwinter feast is marked nationwide with stomach-churning treats such as *hákarl* (putrid shark meat) and *svið* (singled sheep's head).

BOLLUDAGUR Mon before Shrove Tuesday
In preparation for Lent, Bun Day sees children encouraged to beat their elders with coloured sticks in order to extract vast numbers of *bollur* (cream buns) from them.

SPRENGIDAGUR Shrove Tuesday
Bursting Day is another pre-Lenten celebration. The aim is to stuff yourself with *saltkjöt og bannir* (salted meat and split peas) until you burst.

ÖSKUDAGUR Ash Wednesday
Another excuse for children to menace adults, this time by collecting money for goodies and tying small sacks of ash on their backs.

WINTER LIGHTS mid- or late Feb
Reykjavík hosts a celebration of light and darkness to celebrate the end of winter, with cultural events, a mini food festival and illuminated buildings (www.vetrarhatid.is).

BEER DAY 1 Mar
Beer was illegal in Iceland for 75 years. On 1 March Icelanders celebrate the marvellous day in 1989 when the prohibition was overturned.

APRIL

ORKUGANGAN Mar or Apr
This popular cross-country skiing event sees participants race the 60km between Krafla and Húsavík in northern Iceland.

SUMARDAGURINN FYRSTI 1st Thu after 18 Apr
Icelanders celebrate the first day of summer with carnival-type celebrations and street parades, particularly in Reykjavík.

EASTER

The usual Easter-egg hunts, followed by smoked lamb for dinner.

SKÍÐAVIKAN & ALDREI FÓR ÉG SUÐUR

around Easter
Snow permitting, Skiing Week (www.skidavikan.is) takes place at Ísafjörður in the Westfjords around Easter. The week ends with the free two-day music festival Aldrei Fór Ég Suður ('I Never Went South'; www.aldrei.is).

MAY

FOSSAVATN SKI MARATHON early May
Ísafjörður in the Westfjords hosts this 50km cross-country ski marathon (www.fossavatn.com).

LISTAHÁTIÐ Í REYKJAVÍK mid-May
Reykjavík Arts Festival, Iceland's premier cultural festival, showcases two weeks of local and international theatre performances, film, dance, music and visual art. See www.listahatid.is/en for the program.

MÝVATN MARATHON late May
The annual Mývatn Marathon follows a circuit around the region's lovely lake (p232).

JUNE

SJÓMANNADAGURINN 1st Sun in Jun
Fishing is still a vital part of the Icelandic soul, and Sailors' Day is the biggest festival of the year in fishing villages. The Seamen's Union sponsors a party in each coastal town, with drinking, rowing and swimming contests, tugs-of-war and mock sea rescues.

HAFNARFJÖRÐUR VIKING FESTIVAL mid-Jun
The peace is shattered as Viking hordes invade this tiny seaside town near Reykjavík for a six-day festival.

INDEPENDENCE DAY 17 Jun
The country's largest festival commemorates the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944 with parades and general merriness. Tradition has it that the sun isn't supposed to shine. And it usually doesn't!

DJASSHÁTÍÐ EGILSSTAÐA 3rd weekend in Jun
In eastern Iceland, Egilsstaðir's annual jazz festival (www.jea.is) takes place at various venues in the area.

MIDSUMMER around 24 Jun
The longest day of the year is celebrated with solstice parties, although the Icelandic midsummer isn't as major an event as in the rest of Scandinavia. Some superstitious souls roll naked in the midsummer dew for its magical healing powers.

Á SEYÐI mid-Jun–mid-Aug
Seyðisfjörður's cultural festival teems with exhibitions, workshops and gigs. Its renowned Wednesday-evening concerts are held in the distinctive Blue Church (p274).

LISTASUMAR AKUREYRI late Jun–late Aug
The northern capital of Akureyri's 10-week annual arts festival attracts artists and musicians from around Iceland, with concerts, theatre performances, street parties and a parade (p217).

JULY

DÝRAFJARÐARDAGAR 1st weekend in Jul
This festival celebrates the area's Viking heritage and the saga of local man Gísli Súrsson (p183).

HUMARHÁTÍÐ early Jul
Höfn in southeast Iceland honours the lobster each year with a funfair, flea markets, dancing, music and lots of alcohol.

SUMARTÓNLEIKAR Í SKÁLHOLTSKIRKJU Jul–early Aug
This free, five-week classical-music festival draws international musicians to the church at Skálholt, in southwest Iceland (p128).

ÞJÓDLAGAHÁTÍÐ Á SIGLUFIRÐI mid-Jul
The tiny but perfect five-day folk-music festival (<http://festival.fjallabyggd.is>) in Siglufjörður welcomes Icelandic and foreign musicians.

EISTNAFLUG 2nd weekend in Jul
Punk and metal festival, held in the eastern-fjord town of Neskaupstaður (p279).

BRÆÐISLAN 3rd weekend in Jul
The Bræðislan pop/rock festival is earning itself a quality reputation, with big names coming to play in out-of-the-way Borgarfjörður Eystri (p270).

AUGUST

VERSLUNARMANNAHELGI 1st weekend in Aug
A bank-holiday long weekend when Icelanders flock to rural festivals, family barbecues, rock concerts and wild campsite parties.

ÞJÓDHÁTÍÐ VESTMANNAEYJAR 1st weekend in Aug
This earth-shaking event occurs in Heimaey on the August bank holiday, commemorating the day in 1874 when foul weather prevented the islanders partying when Iceland's constitution was established. More than 11,000 people descend to watch bands and fireworks, and drink gallons of alcohol.

HERRING FESTIVAL 1st weekend in Aug
On the August bank holiday, one of Iceland's most enjoyable local festivals takes place, celebrating Siglufjörður's former days of glory with dancing, feasting, drinking and fish cleaning.

SKAGASTRÖND COUNTRY-MUSIC FESTIVAL 3rd weekend in Aug
A two-day country music festival in Skagaströnd, organised by Hallbjörn Hjartarson, the eccentric self-styled Icelandic Cowboy (p204).

MENNINGARNOTT mid-Aug
On Culture Night Reykjavik turns out in force for a day and night of art, music, dance and fireworks (www.menningarnott.is; p87).

REYKJAVÍK MARATHON mid-Aug
This race takes place on the same day as Culture Night, with full and half-marathons for the fabulously fit, as well as children's runs and fun runs. See www.marathon.is for application details and a route map.

REYKJAVÍK JAZZ FESTIVAL mid-Aug
This five-day festival (www.reykjavikjazz.is) attracts international names as well as Iceland's leading jazz musicians (p87).

GAY PRIDE 3rd weekend of Aug
Merriment and wild costumes as thousands parade carnival-style through the streets of Reykjavik to an open-air stage show featuring live music and entertainment (www.gaypride.is).

DANSKIR DAGAR 3rd weekend of Aug
Stykkishólmur celebrates its Danish roots with bridge dancing and live bands at the Danish Days festival.

SEPTEMBER

NIGHT OF LIGHTS early Sep
Keflavík's Ljósanótt í Reykjanesbæ festival (www.ljosanott.is) has a particularly lovely finale, when waterfalls of fireworks pour over the local sea cliffs.

RÉTTIR Sep
Farmers ride into the highlands to round up their sheep for winter. The annual ritual is accompanied by rural celebrations when the sheep are safely home.

REYKJAVÍK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL late Sep/early Oct
This 10-day event features the hottest new international films as well as seminars and workshops (www.riff.is; p87).

OCTOBER

FYRSTI VETRARDAGUR 3rd Sat of Oct
Families get together at Fyrsti Vetrardagur (First Day of Winter) to mourn the passing of summer. As you might expect, it's generally a low-key affair.

ICELAND AIRWAVES mid-late Oct
Reykjavík is home to the cutting-edge Iceland Airwaves music festival, staged at the end of the month. It features five days packed with top DJs, international live music and hard-core partying – check out www.icelandairwaves.is for past and present line-ups.

NOVEMBER

DAGAR MYRKURS early Nov
Egilsstaðir (in eastern Iceland) perversely celebrates the onset of winter over 10 days, with dark dances, ghost stories, star walks and torch-lit processions during its unusual Days of Darkness festival.

DECEMBER

NEW YEAR'S EVE 31 December
Festivities aplenty with dinners, bonfires, fireworks, parties and clubbing till the early hours of New Year's Day to celebrate the arrival of a brand-new year.

The Authors



FRAN PARNELL

Coordinating Author, Reykjavik, Southwest Iceland, Southeast Iceland

Fran's passion for Scandinavia began while studying for a masters degree in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic. A strange university slide show featuring sublime Icelandic mountains and a matter-of-fact man who'd literally dug his own grave awakened a fascination that has kept on growing. Deserted valleys and blasted mountain tops are her chosen lurking places, and Hekla is her favourite volcano. Fran returns to Iceland as often as possible and, when not there, can read, think and dream of little else. Fran has also worked on Lonely Planet's guides to Scandinavian Europe, Sweden and Reykjavik. For this edition she also wrote Destination Iceland, Getting Started, Events Calendar, itineraries, History, The Culture, Iceland's Great Outdoors and Directory.



BRANDON PRESSER **West Iceland, The Westfjords, Northwest Iceland, Northeast Iceland, East Iceland, The Highlands**

Growing up in northern Canada, Brandon was all too familiar with sweeping desolate terrain and shiver-worthy landscapes. But no snowdrift was big enough to prepare him for the sheer awesomeness of the remote Icelandic countryside. It was a simple transcontinental layover that turned harmless curiosity into full-blown infatuation and now, several years later, he's checked off almost every fjord head and mountain pass from his to-do list. He's even received compliments on his Icelandic pronunciation! (His grammar, however, is improving at glacial speeds.) Brandon spends most of the year writing his way across the globe – he's authored a dozen Lonely Planet guides and explored more than 50 countries. Which one is his favourite? You're reading about it right now. Brandon also wrote Food & Drink, Environment, Activities, Gateway to Greenland & the Faeroes and Transport.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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