



West Iceland

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Why Go?

Geographically close to Reykjavík, yet far, far away in sentiment, West Iceland (known as Vesturland) West Iceland offers everything from windswept beaches to historic villages and awe-inspiring terrain in one neat little package. Yet many tourists have missed the memo, and you're likely to have remote parts of this wonderful region to yourself.

The long arm of Snæfellsnes Peninsula is a favourite for its glacier, Snæfellsjökull, and the area around its national park is tops for birding, whale watching, lava-field hikes and horse riding. Inland beyond Reykholt you'll encounter lava tubes and remote highland glaciers, including enormous Langjökull with its unusual ice cave. Icelanders honour West Iceland for its local sagas: two of the best known, *Laxdæla Saga* and *Egil's Saga*, took place along the region's brooding waters, marked today by haunting cairns and an exceptional museum in lively Borgarnes.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Bjargarsteinn Mathús (p187)
- ➔ Settlement Centre Restaurant (p176)
- ➔ Gamla Rif (p189)
- ➔ Narfeyrarstofa (p184)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hótel Egilsen (p183)
- ➔ Hótel Flatey (p186)
- ➔ Hótel Húsafell (p180)
- ➔ Egils's Guesthouse & Apartments (p176)

Road Distances (km)

Húsafell	65				
Stykkishólmur	99	158			
Hellnar	122	179	90		
Búðardalur	79	103	86	145	
Reykjavík	74	129	173	194	152
Borgarnes					
Húsafell					
Stykkishólmur					
Hellnar					
Búðardalur					

HVALFJÖRÐUR

Hvalfjörður and the surrounding area feels suddenly pastoral despite being a mere 30-minute drive from the capital. Although lacking the majesty of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula further on, the sparkling fjord offers excellent day-trip fodder. Those in a hurry to get to Borgarnes and beyond should instead head straight through the 5.7km-long tunnel (kr1000) beneath the fjord. Cyclists aren't permitted in the tunnel.

Interestingly, during WWII the fjord contained a submarine station; over 20,000 American and British soldiers passed through.

Bring your own wheels. The buses between Reykjavík and points north bypass the fjord by taking the tunnel.

Sights & Activities

★ Glymur

WATERFALL

At the head of Hvalfjörður, Glymur, Iceland's highest waterfall (198m), can be reached by following the turn-off to Botnsdalur. From the end of the road, it'll take a couple of hours to reach the cascade on rough trails; a log is placed to bridge one river only in summer. Try to visit after heavy rains or snow-melt for full effect.

Saurbæjarkirkja

CHURCH

(Hallgrímskirkja í Saurbæ; Rte 47) The church at the Saurbær farmstead is worth a look for its beautiful stained-glass work by Gerður Helgadóttir. It is named for Reverend Hallgrímur Pétursson, who served here from 1651 to 1669, and composed Iceland's most popular religious work, *Passion Hymns*.

Esja

HIKING

On the southern side of Hvalfjörður you'll find dramatic mount Esja (914m), a great spot for wilderness hiking. The most popular trail to the summit begins at Esjuberg, just north of Mosfellsbær, and ascends via **Kerhólakambur** (850m) and **Kistufell** (830m).

Sleeping & Eating

Hvalfjörður has several places to stay and good campgrounds. There are no grocery stores

Hótel Glymur

HOTEL €€€

(☎ 430 3100; www.hotelglymur.is; d incl breakfast from kr37,000; @) This hotel on the northern side of Hvalfjörður, near Saurbær, is a cache

of contemporary amenities, from double-decker 'executive doubles' with giant picture windows, to a hot-pot named one of the 'top five hot tubs in the world' by the *New York Times*. There's also a good restaurant (two-course meal kr5900) with spectacular views.

Akranes

POP 6970

Set under striking **Akrafjall** (572m), the town of Akranes lies at the tip of the peninsula separating Hvalfjörður from Borgarfjörður. Largely an administrative and factory town, it's mainly worth a stop for its **lighthouse** and its sprawling **Folk Museum** (Byggðasafnið í Gördum Akranesi; ☎ 431 5566; www.museum.is; adult/child kr800/free; ☀ 10am-5pm mid-May-mid-Sep, by appointment mid-Sep-mid-May), with a restored boathouse, drying shed, church and fishing boats.

BORGARBYGGÐ

Buzzy Borgarnes and its broad Borgarfjörður were the landing zone for several famous Icelandic settlers. Inland, up the river-twined valley, you'll find fecund farms with deep history leading to powerful stone-strewn lava tubes and highlands, the gateway to the ice caps beyond. This inland area is part of a proposed Unesco Geopark, called the **Saga Geopark**, celebrating the unique culture and landscape of the area.

Borgarnes

POP 1890

Unassuming Borgarnes has got it going on. For such a tiny place, it bubbles with local life. One of the original settlement areas for the first Icelanders, it's loaded with history, and sits on a scenic promontory along the broad waters of Borgarfjörður. Zip past the busy petrol stations and go into the old quarter to encounter the fun small-town vibe and one of Iceland's best museums.

Sights

★ Settlement Centre

MUSEUM

(Landnámssetur Íslands; ☎ 437 1600; www.settlementcentre.is; Brákarbraut 13-15; adult/child 1 exhibition kr1900/free, 2 exhibitions kr2500/free; ☀ 10am-9pm) Housed in an imaginatively restored warehouse by the harbour, the must-see Settlement Centre offers fascinating insights into the history of Icelandic