



Southeast Iceland

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Best Places to Stay

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Why Go?

The 200km stretch of Ring Road from Kirkjubæjarklaustur to Höfn is truly mind-blowing, transporting you across vast deltas of grey glacial sand, past lost-looking farms, around the toes of craggy mountains, and by glacier tongues and ice-filled lagoons. The only thing you won't pass is a town.

The mighty Vatnajökull dominates the region, its huge rivers of frozen ice pouring down steep-sided valleys towards the sea. Jökulsárlón is a photographer's paradise, a glacial lagoon where wind and water sculpted icebergs into fantastical shapes.

The bleak coastal deserts of glacial sand are remnants of calamitous collisions between fire and ice. Further inland is the epicentre of Iceland's worst volcanic event, the Lakagígar fissures. With so much desolation on display, it's not surprising that Skaftafell is so popular. This sheltered enclave between the glaciers and the sands throbs with life and colour, and the footfall of hikers.

Road Distances (km)

Reykjavík	459			
Jökulsárlón	79	378		
Skaftafell	135	323	57	
Kirkjubæjarklaustur	200	257	122	69
	Höfn	Reykjavík	Jökulsárlón	Skaftafell

Kirkjubæjarklaustur

POP 125

Many a foreign tongue has been tied in knots trying to say Kirkjubæjarklaustur. It helps to break it into bits: *Kirkju* (church), *bæjar* (farm) and *klaustur* (convent). Otherwise, do as the locals do and call it 'Klaustur' (pronounced like 'cloister').

Klaustur is tiny, even by Icelandic standards – a few houses and farms scattered across a brilliant-green backdrop. Still, it's the only real service town between Vík and Höfn, and it's a major crossroads to several dramatic spots in the interior: Landmanna-laugar and Laki.

History

According to the *Landnámabók* (a comprehensive account of Norse settlement), this tranquil village situated between the cliffs and the river Skaftá was first settled by Irish monks (*papar*) before the Vikings arrived. Originally, it was known as Kirkjubær; the 'klaustur' bit was added in 1186 when a convent of Benedictine nuns was founded (near the modern-day church).

During the devastating Laki eruptions that occurred in the late 18th century, this area suffered greatly – west of Kirkjubæjarklaustur you can see ruins of farms abandoned or destroyed by the lava stream. The lava field, called Eldhraun, averages 12m thick. It contains more than 15 cu km of lava and covers an area of 565 sq km, making it the world's largest recorded lava flow from a single eruption.

👁 Sights & Activities

If you're interested in discovering the forces of nature and the history of the area, pick up the booklet *Klaustur trail* (1kr800), which outlines a marked 20km walking trail that circles the village and takes in many of its natural features (it can be divided into shorter walks).

Kirkjugólf

ROCK FORMATION

The basalt columns of Kirkjugólf (Church Floor), smoothed down and cemented with moss, were once mistaken for an old church floor rather than a work of nature, and it's easy to see why. The honeycombed slab lies in a field about 400m northwest of the N1 petrol station: a path leads to it from beside the information board, or drive down Rte 203, where there's another gate.

Systrafoss

WATERFALL

At the western end of the village, this lovely double waterfall tumbles down the cliffs and a sign outlines three short walks in the pretty wooded area (Iceland's tallest trees grow here!). The lake *Systravatn*, a pleasant saunter up the cliffs above the falls, was once a bathing place for nuns. A marked 2.5km walking path leads from the lake to Kirkjugólf.

Systrastapi

ROCK FORMATION

Religious connections are particularly strong in this area. The prominent rock pillar Systrastapi (Sisters' Pillar), near the line of cliffs about 1.5km west of town, marks the spot where two nuns were reputedly executed and buried for sleeping with the devil and other such no-nos.

Steingrímsson Memorial Chapel

CHURCH

Consecrated in 1974, this triangular, distinctly atypical wood-and-stone chapel is on Klausturvegur. It commemorates Jón Steingrímsson's Eldmessa (Fire Sermon), which 'saved' the town from lava on 20 July 1783.

Landbrotshólar

GEOLOGICAL FEATURE

West of the village and south of the Ring Road is a vast, dimpled, vivid-green pseudo-crater field known as Landbrotshólar. It was formed during the Laki eruptions of 1783, when lava poured over marshland and fast-evaporating steam exploded through to make these barrow-like mounds.

👉 Tours

Hólasport

ADVENTURE TOUR

(📞 660 1151; www.holasport.is; ☀ May-Oct) Based at Hótel Laki just south of Klaustur, Hólasport offers super-Jeep tours, including a full-day tour to Laki for 1kr32,500, or a shorter, river-fording trip into the mountains for 1kr16,500. There are also fun, frequent quad-bike tours in the pseudo-crater-filled area of Landbrotshólar, or along black-sand beaches (from 1kr14,500).

Slóðir

HIKING TOUR

(📞 852 2012; www.slodir.is; ☀ Jun–mid-Sep) From a base east of town, a trio of knowledgeable biologist-guides offers hikes with history and nature storytelling (half-day walk 1kr5000 per person; minimum four people). Advance booking required.

🛏 Sleeping

There are plenty of high-quality, in-demand accommodation options (with on-site dining) in the beautiful landscapes around Klaustur (see also p287).