

# Understand Iceland

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# Iceland Today

A decade or two back, Iceland began to carve itself a niche in the collective global conscience thanks to quirky musicians achieving unexpected international success. Then it really hit the headlines, with a collapsed banking system in 2008 and an unpronounceable, plane-grounding volcanic eruption in 2010. But these events have proved that there's no such thing as bad publicity: all that free exposure put Iceland's charms under the spotlight, and tourism has boomed.

## Best on Film

**101 Reykjavik** (2000) Dark comedy exploring sex, drugs and the life of a loafer in downtown Reykjavik.

**Jar City** (2006) Carefully crafted detective thriller based on the novel by Arnaldur Indriðason.

**Heima** (2007) Follow Sigur Rós as they perform throughout Iceland.

**The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** (2013) Iceland's landscapes take centre stage (as Iceland, Greenland and the Himalaya).

**Of Horses and Men** (2013) A surreal portrait of the intertwining lives of men and horses.

## Best in Print

**The Draining Lake** (Arnaldur Indriðason; 2004) One of many engrossing tales from a master of Nordic Noir.

**Independent People** (Halldór Laxness; 1934–35) Bleak tragi-comedy from the Nobel Laureate.

**The Sagas of Islanders** (Jane Smiley et al; 2001) Excellent, readable translations of Iceland's epic, often brutal tales.

**Devil's Island** (Einar Kárasón; 1983) American culture clashes with rural tradition in postwar Reykjavik.

**Burial Rites** (Hannah Kent; 2012) Haunting novel based on the true story of the last public execution in Iceland.

## Tourism: the 'New Klondike'?

Earth-rending eruptions are par for the course in Iceland, so the international attention garnered by Eyjafjallajökull's ash-filled outburst was truly unusual to the local population. The Iceland tourism board quickly capitalised on the event by launching its 'Inspired By Iceland' campaign, and the push for more tourists became a smash hit – frustrations from the continent transformed into curiosity, and travellers started arriving. Word quickly spread: Iceland's natural beauty is astounding and its people welcoming (the world's *most* welcoming, according to the World Economic Forum ranking in 2013, in a report that examined 140 countries based on travel and tourism competitiveness).

And so began the 'new Klondike', as some locals have described it: the boom in businesses catering to the boom in tourists. Iceland has been registering record-breaking tourist numbers: it hosted around 1 million international visitors in 2014 (up from 489,000 in 2010), with no signs of a slow-down – especially if the country's volcanoes continue to provide spectacles that capture media and traveller attention (case in point: 2014's Bárðarbunga eruption). Winter visitor numbers are also spiking, with every traveller's bucket list now seemingly topped by 'see Northern Lights'.

## The Good with the Bad

There's little escape from the tourist rush in the peak of summer, especially in Reykjavik and the south (where most visitors spend time). Locals are generally welcoming – to a point. When polled, Icelanders acknowledge the economic recovery tourism has stimulated, and the job opportunities created. They appreciate many of the services that have grown to cater to the increased traffic (more great music festivals, for example, and more restaurants and nightlife). Many locals admit that foreign