



West Iceland

Includes ➔

Borgarnes	161
Upper Borgarfjörður... ..	167
Stykkishólmur	170
Grundarfjörður	175
Ólafsvík	177
Rif	177
Hellissandur	178
Snæfellsjökull National Park	178
Eiríksstaðir	182
Hjarðarholt & Around	183
Laugar & Around	183

Why Go?

Geographically close to Reykjavík yet far, far away in sentiment, West Iceland (known as Vesturland; www.west.is) is a splendid microcosm of what Iceland has to offer. Yet most tourists have missed the memo, and you're likely to have much 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 new 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. West Iceland offers everything from windswept beaches to historic villages and awe-inspiring terrain in one neat, little package.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Narfeyrarstofa (p173)
- ➔ Settlement Centre Restaurant (p166)
- ➔ Fjörúhúsið (p180)
- ➔ Plássið (p174)
- ➔ Gamla Rif (p177)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hótel Egilsen (p173)
- ➔ Hótel Flatey (p174)
- ➔ Fljótstunga (p169)
- ➔ Lýsuhóll (p182)
- ➔ Bæninir og Brauð (p173)

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, the fjord offers quick day-trip fodder. Those in a hurry to get to Borgarnes and beyond should instead head straight through the 5.7km-long **tunnel** (1kr1000) beneath the fjord. Cyclists aren't permitted in the tunnel.

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

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

At the head of the fjord, **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. Try to visit after heavy rains or snowmelt for full effect.

The **church** at Saurbær farmstead has beautiful stained glass by Gerður Helgadóttir. The church is named for Reverend Hallgrímur Pétursson, who served here from 1651 to 1669, and composed Iceland's most popular religious work, *Passion Hymns*.

Hvalfjörður has several places to stay, including **Hótel Glymur** (☎430 3100; www.hotelglymur.is; d from 1kr44,300; @☎), where contemporary amenities abound: from two-storey 'executive doubles' to villas with private plunge pools; there's also a good **restaurant**.

Akranes

POP 6744

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 worth a stop for its sprawling **Museum Centre** (☎431 5566; www.museum.is; adult/child 1kr500/free; ☎10am-5pm Jun-Aug, 1-5pm Sep-May), with a folk museum, restored boat-house, 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 leading to

powerful stone-strewn lava tubes and highlands, the gateway to ice caps beyond.

Borgarnes

POP 1824

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; 1 exhibition adult/child 1kr1900/1500, 2 exhibitions adult/child 1kr2500/1900; ☎10am-9pm Jun-Sep, 11am-5pm Oct-May; ☎) Housed in an imaginatively restored warehouse by the harbour, the must-see Settlement Centre offers fascinating insights into the history of Icelandic settlement and the Saga era. The museum is divided into two exhibitions, each take about 30 minutes to visit. The Settlement Exhibition covers the discovery and settlement of Iceland. Egil's Saga Exhibition recounts the amazing adventures of Egil Skallagrímsson (the man behind *Egil's Saga*) and his family. A detailed multilingual audio guide is included.

This is not your run-of-the-mill Icelandic folk museum: the Settlement Centre offers deep background into Iceland's history and flora and fauna, and a firm context in which to place your Icelandic visit. And *Egil's Saga* is one of the most nuanced and action packed of the sagas. The centre has placed **cairns** (p166) throughout town marking key sites from *Egil's Saga*. It also has a top-notch restaurant.

BORGARNES' LOCAL LIQUORS

Stedji Brugghús (☎896 5001; www.stedji.com; tours 1kr1500; ☎tours by appointment) This little family-run brew-house 25km north of Borgarnes off Rte 50 has a small range, from strawberry beer to lager and seasonal beers. Tours by appointment, with tastings.

Reyka Vodka (www.reyka.com) Iceland's first distillery, in Borgarnes, offers crystalline vodka.