

Destination Iceland

Few visitors can travel around Iceland without their hearts leaping into their mouths at the sheer beauty of it all; or leave the country without a pang and a fervent vow to return. It's that sort of place.

Although it sits bashfully on the edge of the Arctic, this wonderful little island contains some of the most impressive natural wonders in Europe (it just doesn't like to boast!). Here the continent's biggest waterfalls thunder down with such force that the ground trembles under your feet, the bleak and barren highlands form Europe's largest and loneliest desert, and the awesome icecap Vatnajökull is the biggest outside the poles. Other spectacular natural phenomena include smouldering volcanoes, slow-flowing glaciers, black nightmares of lava, gushing geysers, bubbling mudpots, soothing thermal pools and, in the darkness of winter, the magical Northern Lights.

About 20 years ago a trickle of tourists came to Iceland for nature and isolation, challenging hiking, adventurous travel, and eerily remote wilderness. That's still the case today, but now Iceland is one of Europe's hottest travel destinations. As well as awe-inspiring nature, it also boasts its cute, compact capital Reykjavik, which has a buzzing cultural scene. It's particularly renowned for its high-energy nightlife and kaleidoscopic music scene – an ever-changing line-up of fresh, feisty bands.

Icelanders are a tough, independent bunch, but they're also very warm and welcoming and keen to share their island with tourists. It's relatively easy to get around by public transport (in summer at least), and it's actually a pleasure to drive around the Ring Rd. Although it's the country's major highway, you frequently have to wait for sheep to amble out of the way or herds of horses to gallop across the tarmac.

There are activities to suit all ages, many of which can be organised from Reykjavik. They include horse riding, fishing, golf, elf hunting, whitewater rafting, glacier walks, canyoning, caving and sea kayaking in calm fjords. One of the big attractions is whale watching – in summer this is probably the best place in Europe to see minke and humpbacks, as well as dolphins and seals. The sea cliffs around the country are a paradise for bird-watchers, 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.

OK, so it does tend to rain a lot, the country's beauty is apparent only when the mist clears and it's one of the world's most expensive destinations. But don't let those things put you off. If you come prepared for all weather conditions, appreciate every moment in the sun and do a little forward planning to keep the costs down, you will never, ever regret your visit. Geologically, Iceland is one of the world's hot spots. As a travel destination, it could hardly get any hotter. Either way, there's nowhere else quite like it.

Getting Started

Nothing quite prepares you for a trip to Iceland. Most visitors expect wild nightlife, pristine scenery and frighteningly expensive credit-card bills; to some extent that's all true, but Iceland offers so much more than this and if you're travelling on a budget there are a few very simple ways to keep costs down. A little planning is the best way to ensure you find the remote but stunningly beautiful fjords, waterfalls and geysers, dig out the best pubs and clubs, and find 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, though, and planning ahead will mean you won't spend hours driving to see a puffin colony that migrated out to sea months previously, or get stuck waiting for a bus that will never come. 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 two very distinct tourist seasons. Peak season runs from June to mid-August and during this time you'll have the best weather, incredibly long days, the pick of tours and excursions, and the best choice of accommodation. You'll also experience crowds at major attractions and swarms of irritating mosquitoes.

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

Outside peak season everything slows down. From late August rural attractions can start to close, by 1 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, attractions and guesthouses outside Reykjavík 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 in time, experience the aurora borealis (see p46), ski, snowmobile or ice fish, or just luxuriate in a steaming hot pool surrounded by snow. And everywhere

For more information, see Climate Charts, p316.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Sleeping bag – even if you're not camping, you can save a packet by opting for a bed without linen at hostels, guesthouses and some hotels. A blow-up pillow is also handy.
- Plenty of film or a large memory card 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.
- Credit card – Icelanders wouldn't know what to do without plastic.
- A good dose of patience and 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.

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 Zurich. Be prepared for fierce, wind-driven rain, gales and fog, though, and shrieking winds and icy blizzards in the interior. 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 www.vedur.is/english, 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.'

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 peak-season hotel room and a 20% to 30% reduction in the rates of most guesthouses. If you're planning to travel around the country in the off season you'll need your own transport, and you should check road conditions locally as rural roads and mountain passes can be closed due to snow.

COSTS

Iceland is famed for being an expensive destination, but with a little careful planning travellers can make substantial savings, and those looking to indulge a little will find that prices aren't that much higher than elsewhere in northern Europe. 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 guesthouses. A bed in a guesthouse or farmhouse will cost roughly Ikr1800 to Ikr2500 for sleeping-bag accommodation and Ikr4000/7000 for singles/doubles with made-up beds. A hotel room will cost about 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 stay in wonderful timber cabins (sleeping up to six) with kitchen, lounge, bathroom, barbecue deck and a couple of bedrooms for under Ikr12,000 – far better than any hotel room.

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 Ikr500. Alternatively, you can fill up in a fast-food pizza joint for under Ikr1500. 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 Ikr2500 and lamb dishes anywhere from Ikr2200 to Ikr4000. Add dessert or the odd bottle of wine and eat out over the course of your holiday, and your credit-card bill can be criminal. One helpful tip is to eat your main meal in the middle of the day, when lunch-time buffets or tourist menus can be great value.

Although car hire in Iceland is expensive (about Ikr33,000 to Ikr40,000 per week), a car offers far greater freedom to visit out-of-the-way attractions; splitting the cost between other travellers can keep costs down and begin to

HOW MUCH?

Guesthouse accommodation	Ikr2000-4000
Campsite free-Ikr800	
Reykjavík-Akureyri bus	Ikr6600
1L petrol	Ikr132
Cup of coffee	Ikr280
Pint of Egil's beer	Ikr600
Loaf of bread	Ikr300
Whale-watching trip	Ikr3700
Icelandic knitted jumper	Ikr8000-10,000
Knitted hat	Ikr1700
Cuddly troll	Ikr1900

OUR FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Icelanders love to party, and whatever time of year you visit you'll find celebrations of music, culture, history or even the changing of the seasons happening around the country. The following are our top 10 favourites; for a more comprehensive list of festivals and events, see p318.

- Þorrablót (Viking Midwinter feast; nationwide) February (p318)
- Reykjavík Rite of Spring (Reykjavík) May (p81)
- Sjómannadagurinn (Sailors' Day; coastal towns) First week in June (p319)
- Akureyri Arts Festival (Akureyri) June to mid-August (p215)
- Icelandic Independence Day (nationwide) 17 June (p319)
- Midsummer (nationwide) Around 24 June (p319)
- Þjóðhátíð Vestmannaeyjar (People's Festival; Heimaey Island, Vestmannaeyjar) First weekend in August (p147)
- Verslunarmannahelgi (nationwide) First weekend in August (p319)
- Herring festival (Siglufjörður) Early August (p209)
- Airwaves Music Festival (Reykjavík) Mid-October (p81)

rival the cost of bus passes. It's also worth noting that air travel in Iceland is not much more expensive than bus travel. For more information, see p328.

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 Reykjavík and Akureyri at least), museum admission (usually Ikr300 to Ikr800) and activities such as horse riding (Ikr2500 an hour), whale watching (Ikr3700) or a snowmobile tour (Ikr9000). Budget travellers who camp regularly, self-cater and take the bus or share a vehicle could get by on as little as Ikr2500 a day. Add in a few nights of sleeping-bag or guesthouse accommodation, the odd meal out, a few tours and a shared hire car, and you're looking at about Ikr6000 to Ikr9000 a day. Anyone looking for some comfort either in made-up beds in guesthouses or hotel accommodation, their own car, some decent restaurant meals and the option of taking guided tours or activities should budget Ikr15,000 per day and sometimes more.

Our top tips for budget travellers:

- Bring a tent or use sleeping-bag accommodation in guesthouses.
- Look for places where you can use a kitchen and cook for yourself.
- Become a member of Hostelling International before leaving home.
- Buy a bus pass if you're planning a round-Iceland trip.
- Use public swimming pools rather than touristy nature baths.
- Choose a smaller area of the country to explore and plan to do plenty of walking.
- Travel outside peak season.

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* instead, a touching coming-of-age movie with plenty of dark humour. Or go for Academy Award nominee, *Children of Nature*, which follows the daring escape from a retirement home of an old couple intent on getting one more look at the fjords of their youth.

For more information on Icelandic films, see p42.

ESSENTIAL READING

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 Kárason's *Devil's Island*, a look at life in Reykjavík in the 1950s and 1960s, and some puzzling crime mysteries such as *Tainted Blood* (also known as *Jar City*) by Arnaldur Indriðason, one of Iceland's most popular authors.

For more information on Icelandic literature, see p37.

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 hot dogs for every meal.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Icelanders have embraced the internet wholeheartedly and you'll find a wealth of information online to help plan your trip. The following are some of our favourite sites:

Affordable Iceland (www.affordable.is) Tips and listings for affordable travel around the country.

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

Discover Iceland (www.discovericeland.is) Background information and tips on tours, transport, accommodation and dining.

East Iceland Tourist Board (www.east.is) Everything you need to know from the East Iceland Tourist Board.

Explore Iceland (www.exploreiceland.is) Travel information, features on local culture, and booking centre.

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

Go Iceland (www.goiceland.org) Iceland's North American Tourist Board site.

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

Icelandic Tourist Board (www.icetourist.is, www.visiticeland.com) The official sites of the Icelandic Tourist Board, with plenty of travel information in several languages.

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

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.iceland.is/travel-and-leisure) Lots of useful links from the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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

North Iceland Tourist Information (www.northiceland.is) The official North Iceland tourist information site.

South Iceland Tourist Information (www.south.is) All you need to know about travel in South Iceland.

Tourist Association of Northwest Iceland (www.northwest.is) The official site of the Northwest Iceland Tourist Board.

Visit Reykjavík (www.visitreykjavik.is) Top tips on the capital city.

West Iceland Tourist Information (www.west.is) Official site of the West Iceland Tourist Board.

Westfjords Tourist Information (www.westfjords.is) The official Westfjords tourist site

What's On (www.whatson.is) A comprehensive look at what's happening in the country from the Iceland Review team.

The Authors



FRAN PARNELL

Coordinating Author, Highlights, Destination Iceland, Snapshot, The Culture, Food & Drink, Reykjavik, Southwest Iceland, East Iceland, Southeast Iceland, The Interior

Fran's passion for Scandinavia began while studying for a masters degree in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic. Initial brushes with Old Norse left her swearing at the grammar book, but a strange slide show featuring sublime Icelandic mountains and a matter-of-fact man who'd literally dug his own grave awakened a fascination with Iceland that has just kept on growing. Since then, Fran has returned to the country as often as her finances have allowed and, when not in Iceland, can read, think and dream of little else. Fran has also worked on Lonely Planet's guides to Scandinavian Europe, Sweden and Reykjavik.

My Favourite Trip

Iceland is so gobsmacking that it's a difficult choice; however, for sheer diversity the stretch of coast between Skógar and Skaftafell is an easy but awe-inspiring drive. First I'd visit **Skógafoss** (p138), a dizzying column of water that topples into a mist of rainbows, before wandering around the fantastic **Skógar Folk Museum** (p138), crossing my fingers that I shan't be forced to sing! Next stop is **Dyrhólaey** (p140), a beautiful coastal rock arch and nature reserve, and its neighbour **Vík** (p140). Both have thousands of puffins, evil skuas, pebbly black beaches and spectacular views of the Vestmannaeyjar. If I had time I'd probably head inland and stay overnight at the secluded camp site at **Pakgil** (p142), hidden among mountains that change appearance with every passing cloud. I'd spend the day walking in the area, before returning to the Ring Rd and civilisation at **Kirkjubæjarklaustur** (p279), a tiny green village where they sell the funniest beanbag nuns. Bolstered by coffee from the friendly **Systra kaffi** (p282), I'd turn with trepidation to the next stage of the journey – across the soul-shakingly bleak sandar (glacial sand plains). After driving through this wasteland, the green oasis of **Skaftafell National Park** (p285), flanked by glaciers, comes as a welcome relief.



LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



ETAIN O'CARROLL

Getting Started, History, Environment, Activities, West Iceland, The Westfjords, Northwest Iceland, Northeast Iceland, Gateway to Greenland & the Faeroes, Directory, Transport

Etain's love affair with cold climates began after leaving college when a spur-of-the-moment decision and a stroke of incredible luck took her to Arctic Canada to work for an NGO. The three-month placement became a three-year sojourn on the tundra and resulted in an enduring fascination with the extremes of weather, terrible beauty and wonderful people of the far north. Since then, she has written about, photographed and travelled through the white outs, endless days and perpetual nights of the European and North American Arctic, both for work and for the sheer pleasure of waking up to pure blue skies and temperatures low enough to numb the mind. Etain is also the coordinating author of Lonely Planet's *Greenland & the Arctic*.

My Favourite Trip

Despite the painfully slow driving on the long, windy and potholed roads of the Westfjords, some of my favourite Icelandic territory is on these lush, sweeping green fjords that cover the coastline. Few tourists make it here, which makes it all the more rewarding. For wildlife experiences the comic antics of the puffins on the cliffs near **Látrabjarg** (p172) really can't be rivalled – bumping into each other, crash landing and huddling round to watch a fight, they're incredibly entertaining birds. Driving on between the little sleepy villages from **Patreksfjörður** (p173) to **Bildudalur** (p174) and past the thundering falls at **Dynjandi** (p175) is really spectacular. The road snakes along the coast, over some incredible passes and through otherworldly lunar landscapes. At the end of the long drive you're rewarded with the sights, sounds and tastes of the very cosmopolitan **Ísafjörður** (p177), a real treat after days off the beaten track. If there's time, hiking in **Hornstrandir** (p194) offers some fantastic scenery, towering bird cliffs, a massive icecap and plenty of challenging trails. Alternatively, the drive up the Strandir coast to **Djúpavík** (p193) is magnificently peaceful and all but deserted by other travellers. Lined with rugged mountains and wild, craggy cliffs, it really feels like the end of the world.

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