

Southwest Iceland



SOUTHWEST ICELAND

Geysers spout, waterfalls topple, black beaches stretch into the distance, and brooding volcanoes and glittering icecaps line the horizon. The beautiful southwest contains many of Iceland's most famous natural wonders – and is consequently a relatively crowded corner of the country. But get off the Ring Rd (Rte 1) and there are plenty of quiet valleys and splashing streams you can have all to yourself.

Almost everyone who comes to Iceland visits the Golden Circle, east of Reykjavík. Here you'll find the gorgeous national park Þingvellir, a Unesco World Heritage site; the bubbling springs and spouting geysers at Geysir; and one of the country's most dazzling rainbow-tinged waterfalls, Gullfoss.

On the coast, you can visit the entertaining little fishing villages Eyrarbakki and Stokkseyri, or walk the black beaches at drop-dead beautiful Vík. Just offshore, the charming Vestmannaeyjar are filled with fearless puffins and friendly people. Inland you'll find one of Iceland's best museums at Skógar; important saga-age ruins in the Þjórsárdalur valley; or wonderful walking at Þórsmörk. And, if you want more of an adrenaline rush, try snowmobiling or dogsledding on the Mýrdalsjökull glacier.

TOP FIVE

- Wait for water to shoot skywards at **Geysir** (p120), or watch it tumbling down at **Gullfoss** (p120)
- Go dogsledding or snowmobiling on **Mýrdalsjökull icecap** (p140)
- Scream like a girl at the **Stokkseyri Ghost Centre** (p130), or enjoy a dose of culture at the brilliant **Skógar Folk Museum** (p138)
- Fall in love with puffins, volcanoes and teetering cliffs on the wonderful **Vestmannaeyjar** (p142)
- Stroll black-sand beaches at **Vík** (p140) and **Reynisfjara** (p140), and watch otherworldly ocean sunsets from nearby **Dyrhólaey** (p140)



GETTING THERE & AROUND

For information on bus routes and schedules in the southwest, contact the **BSÍ bus station** (☎ 562 1011; www.bsi.is), or bus companies **Austurleið Kynniserðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) or **Þingvallaleið** (☎ 511 2600; www.bustravel.is).

Frequent organised tours visit this area (see p80 for ideas). Hiring a car can work out cheaper; most southwestern roads are suitable for 2WDs.

THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

Gullfoss, Geysir and Þingvellir are unique sites commonly referred to as the Golden Circle. These sites make up Iceland's major tourist destinations, offering visitors the opportunity to see a wild, roaring waterfall, spouting hot springs and the country's most important historical area in one condensed, doable-in-a-day tour. Although they're mobbed by coach parties year-round, they're still worth visiting for their undeniable natural beauty.

Hiring a car will mean you'll be able to enjoy other nearby highlights. Nesjavellir is great for its surreal other-planet landscape; on clear days, the active volcano Hekla is a sublime sight; and there are interesting Viking ruins in the scenic Þjórsárdalur valley.

ÞINGVELLIR

This **national park**, 23km east of Reykjavík, is Iceland's most important historical site and a place of lonely beauty. The country's first national park, it was finally made a Unesco World Heritage site in 2004.

The Vikings established the world's first democratic parliament, the Alþing, here in AD 930. As with many saga sites, there aren't many Viking remains to be seen, but the park has a superb natural setting, inside an immense rift valley caused by the separating North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Its undulating mossy lava flows are scarred by streams and rocky fissures. It's particularly awesome in autumn, when the dwarf birch forests glow with brilliant red, orange and yellow hues.

History

Many of Iceland's first settlers had run-ins with royalty back in mainland Scandinavia. These chancers and outlaws decided that they could live happily without kings in the new

country, instead creating district *þings* (assemblies) where justice could be served.

Eventually, a nationwide *þing* became necessary. One man was dispatched to Norway to study law, while his foster brother travelled the country looking for a suitable site. Bláskógur – now Þingvellir (Parliament Fields) – lay at a crossroads by a huge fish-filled lake. It had plenty of firewood and a setting that would make even the most tedious orator dramatic, so it fitted the bill perfectly. Every important decision affecting Iceland was argued out on this plain – new laws were passed, marriage contracts were made, and even the country's religion was decided here. The annual parliament was also a great social occasion, thronging with traders and entertainers.

Over the following centuries, escalating violence between Iceland's most powerful men led to the breakdown of law and order. Governance was surrendered to the Norwegian crown and the Alþing was stripped of its legislative powers in 1271. It functioned solely as a courtroom until 1798, before being dissolved entirely. When it regained its powers in 1843, members voted to move the meeting place to Reykjavík.

Information

On Rte 36, the **Park Service Centre** (Þjónustumiðstöð; ☎ 482 2660; www.thingvellir.is; ☎ 8.30am–8pm daily Jun, Jul & Aug, 9am–5pm daily May & Sep, 9am–5pm weekends Oct–Apr) contains a café and a seasonal tourist desk, with books and maps for sale.

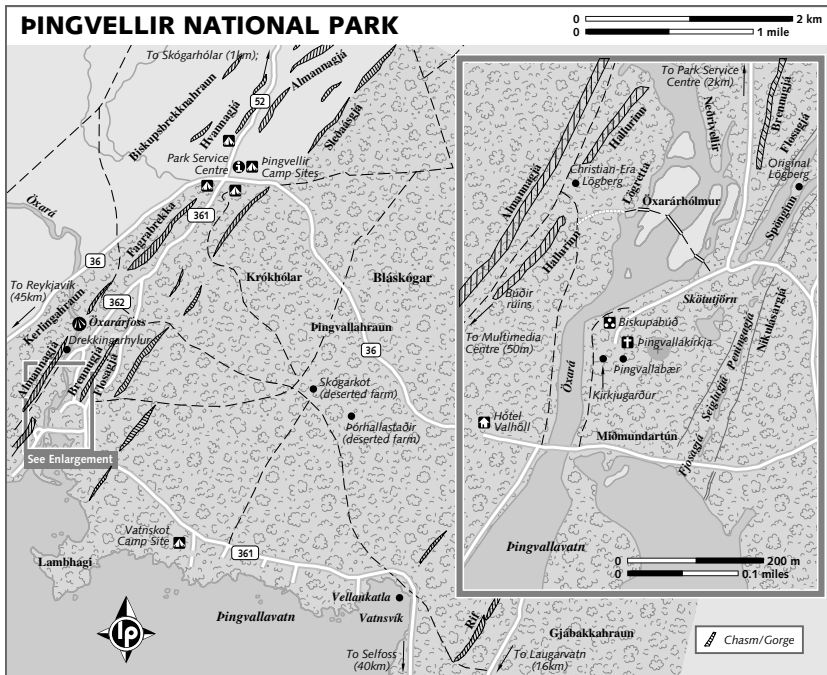
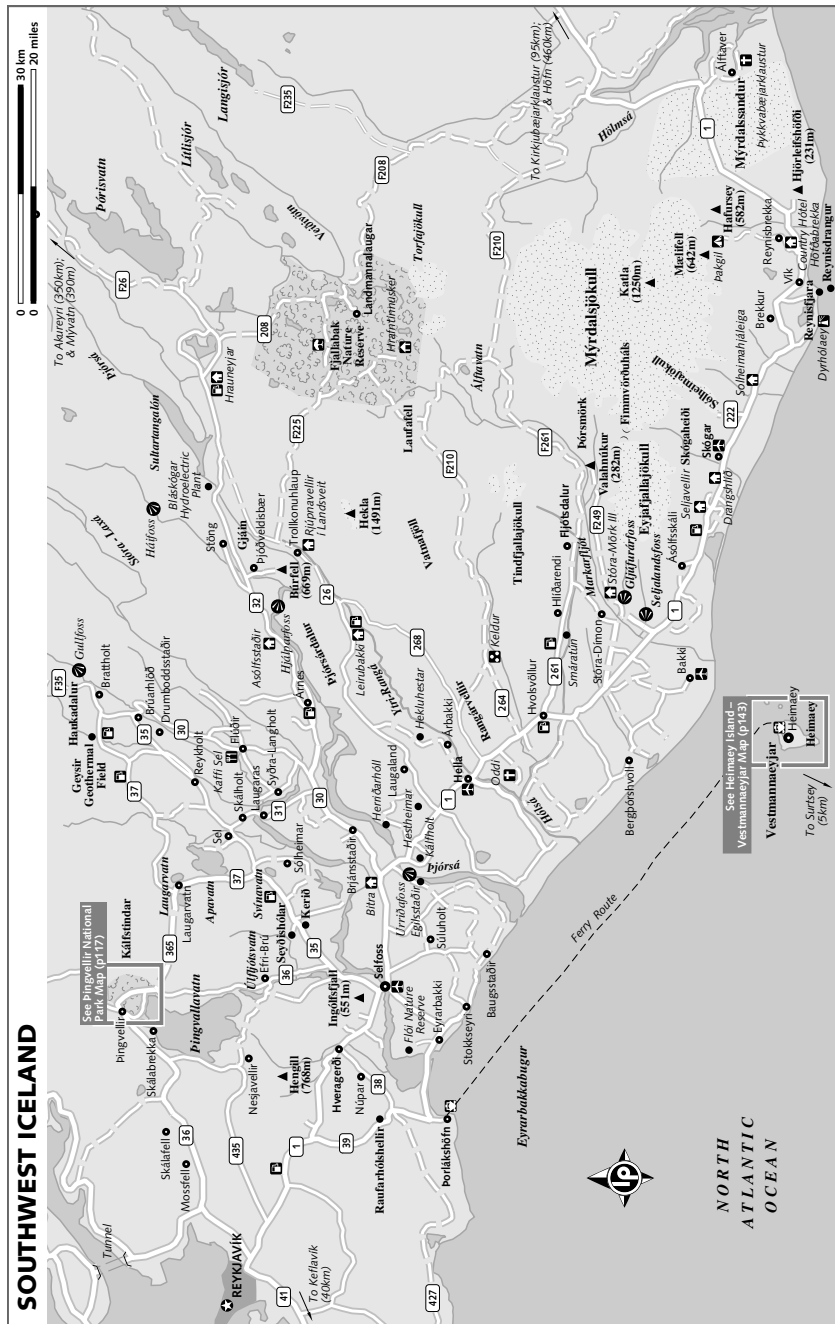
Above the park, on top of the Almannagjá rift, is an interesting **multimedia centre** (admission free; ☎ 9am–7pm daily Jun–Aug, 9am–5pm daily Apr, May, Sep & Oct, 9am–5pm weekends Nov–Mar) exploring the area's nature and history.

Sights & Activities

THE ALÞING

The Alþing used to convene annually at the **Lögberg** (Law Rock), between the Flosagjá and Nikulásargjá fissures. This was where the *lög-sögumaður* (law-speaker) recited the law to the assembled parliament each year. After Iceland's conversion to Christianity, the site shifted to the foot of Almannagjá cliffs, which acted as a natural amplifier, broadcasting the voices of the speakers across the assembled crowds. The site is marked by a flagpole, and a path leads down to it from the multimedia centre at the top of Almannagjá.

SOUTHWEST ICELAND



Decisions were reached by the Lögrétta (Law Council), made up of 146 men (48 voting members, 96 advisers and two bishops) who are thought to have assembled at **Neðrivellir** (Low Fields), the flat area in front of the cliffs.

FISSURES & WATERFALLS

The Þingvellir plain is precariously situated on a tectonic plate boundary – here, North America and Europe are tearing away from each other at a rate of 2mm per year. As a result, the plain is scarred by a series of dramatic fissures, including the great rift **Almannagjá**. A broad track follows the fault from the multimedia centre on top of the cliffs to the plain below.

The river Óxará cuts across the rift, tumbling towards the lake in a series of pretty cascades. The most impressive is **Óxarárfoss**, hidden away behind the eastern lip of the fault. The pool **Drekkingarhylur** was used to drown women found guilty of infanticide, adultery or other serious crimes.

There are other smaller fissures on the eastern edge of the plain. During the 17th century

nine men accused of witchcraft were burnt at the stake in **Brennugjá** (Burning Chasm). Nearby are the fissures of **Flosagjá** (named after a slave who jumped his way to freedom) and **Nikulásargjá** (after a drunken sheriff discovered dead in the water). The southern end of Nikulásargjá is known as **Peningagjá** (Chasm of Coins) for the thousands of coins tossed into it by visitors.

BÚÐIR

On the left of the path as you walk down **Almannagjá** are the ruins of various **búðir** (booths). These small stone-and-turf shelters were where parliament-goers camped; and they also acted like stalls at today's music festivals, selling beer, food and vellum to the assembled crowds. Most of the remains date from the 17th and 18th centuries; the largest, and one of the oldest, is **Biskupabúð**, which belonged to the bishops of Iceland and is located north of the church.

PINGVALLABÆR & PINGVALLAKIRKJA

The little **farmhouse** in the bottom of the rift is Þingvallabær, built for the 1000th anniversary

of the Alþing in 1930 by the state architect Guðjón Samúelsson. It's now used as the park warden's office and prime minister's summer house.

Behind the farmhouse is a **church** (☎ 9am-7pm mid-May-Aug), Þingvallakirkja, one of Iceland's first. The original church was consecrated in the 11th century, but the current wooden building only dates from 1859. Inside are several bells from earlier churches, a 17th-century wooden pulpit, and a painted altarpiece from 1834. The Independence-era poets Jónas Hallgrímsson and Einar Benediktsson are interred in the small cemetery behind the church.

ÞINGVALLAVATN

At a whopping 84 sq km, Þingvallavatn is Iceland's largest **lake**. Pure glacial water from Langjökull glacier filters through bedrock for 40km before emerging here. It's joined by the hot spring Vellankatla, which spouts from beneath the lava field on the northeastern shore.

Þingvallavatn is an important refuelling stop for **migrating birds** (including the great northern diver, barrow's golden-eye and harlequin duck). Weirdly, its waters are full of bleikja (arctic char) that have been isolated for so long that they've evolved into four subspecies.

An unforgettable way of exploring the lake is by **scuba diving** (see p51). The visibility is stunning, and there are several dive sites, although the most popular is the fissure Silfra.

WALKS AROUND ÞINGVELLIR

The brochure *Þingvellir Þjóðgarður*, available from the Park Service Centre, contains a small foldout map showing an overview of Þingvellir and its walking trails.

Serious walkers should bring the Landmælingar Íslands sheets *Þingvellir* 1:25,000 and *Hengill* 1:100,000. Most trails converge on the abandoned farm at Skógarkot. Southeast lie the ruins of another farm, Þórhallaðaðir, where ale was brewed and served to 13th-century Alþing participants. The 5km walk from Þingvellir to the western rim of the continental rift takes a few hours.

Walking trails at the southern end of Lake Þingvallavatn cut south across the slopes of the volcano Hengill (768m) to Hveragerði and the Hengill ski area, just off Rte 1. See p126 for more information.

HORSE TREKKING

Íslenskir Ferðahestar (☎ 894 7200; www.centrum.is/travelhorse) has two horse farms, one in Mosfellsbær (p79) and another at Skógarhólar, just 2km north of the Park Service Centre on Rte 52. It offers a three-day all-inclusive ride around Þingvallavatn (Ikr53,000).

Tours

Various companies offer Golden Circle tours to Þingvellir, Geysir and Gullfoss from around Ikr6500 (see p80).

Within the park, there are free one-hour **guided tours** (☎ departures- 10am & 3pm Mon-Fri Jun-Aug) in summer, setting off from the church.

Sleeping & Eating

Þingvellir camp sites (☎ 482 2660; sites per person Ikr600) The Park Service Centre oversees five camping grounds at Þingvellir. The best are the two at Leirar, near the café – Syðri-Leirar is the biggest and Nyrðri-Leirar has laundry facilities. Fagrabrekka and Hvannabrekka are for campers only (no cars). The fifth camp site, Vatskot, is down by the lake side.

Hótel Valhöll (☎ 480 7100; www.hotelvalholl.is; s/d Jun-Aug Ikr15,000/21,000, Sep-May Ikr10,000/17,000; ☐) Valhöll is a large farmhouse in Þingvellir National Park, down at the base of the rift. Some of the rooms are on the small side, but they've all been renovated recently; other positives include peaceful surroundings, a very good restaurant and the prime minister for your neighbour!

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get here is on a Golden Circle tour (p80) or in a hire car.

From June to August the new daily **Austurleið** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) bus service 6/6A will run at 8.30am from Reykjavík to Þingvellir, stopping for 45 minutes at the Park Service Centre before continuing to Geysir, Gullfoss and back to Reykjavík (return trip Ikr5100).

There's no public transport to the southern end of Þingvallavatn.

AROUND ÞINGVELLIR Nesjavellir

Whenever you step into that pongy shower in Reykjavík, think of the weird shining **Nesjavellir geothermal plant**, southwest of Þingvallavatn. It's here that boreholes plunge 2km into the earth, bringing up water heated to 380°C by toasting-hot bedrock. It drives a series of huge

turbines that produce the city's electricity. Hot water is also channelled off to Reykjavík, 23km away. The whole system is explained at the **visitor centre** (☎ 480 2408; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-6pm Sun Jun-Aug), where you can admire the immaculate-looking machinery; and there are **hot rivers** and **steaming vents** all around (stick to paths).

The large bungalow guesthouse, **Fosshótel Nesbúð** (☎ 482 3415; www.nesbud.is; sb from Ikr3200, s/d Ikr7500/9900, s/d with bathroom Ikr10,900/13,900), just off Rte 360, is within sight of the gleaming geothermal plant and the volcano Hengill, with views over the whole steaming, eggy-smelling zone. It offers comfortable rooms and a good restaurant – and hot pots, of course! – and prices include breakfast. Hiking tours can be arranged.

In summer the **Iceland Excursions** (☎ 540 1313; www.icelandexcursions.is) Golden Circle Classic day tour (Ikr6200) visits Nesjavellir, Þingvellir, Gullfoss, Geysir and Hveragerði.

You can also walk to Nesjavellir from Hveragerði via the volcano Hengill (see p126).

Laugarvatn

pop 150

Laugarvatn (Hot Springs Lake) wasn't named this way for nothing – this agreeable body of water is fed not only by streams running from the misty fells behind it but by the hot spring Víðálaug, famous since medieval times. A village, also called Laugarvatn, sits on the lake's western shore, and it is one of the best places to base yourself in the Golden Circle area. Naturally, there's a swimming pool here.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Down by the shore is **Víðálaug**, used for early Christian baptisms. Rather more gruesomely, the bodies of Jón Arason (Iceland's last Catholic bishop) and his sons were dug up a year after they were executed in 1550, and brought here to be washed and blessed: the bier stones **Líkasteinar** are where they were laid.

Near Víðálaug, **boat and windsurfer hire** (☎ 486 1235; ☎ Jun-Aug) is available, or visit the natural **geothermal steam bath** (Gufubað; ☎ 486 1235; Lindarbraut 1; adult/under 12yr Ikr350/200; ☎ noon-9pm Jun-Aug, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Sep-May), which also has two hot pots.

Many short hikes are possible from Laugarvatn, including one up to the viewpoint Hringrás, north of the village.

SLEEPING & EATING

Laugarvatn camp site (☎ 486 1155; tjaldmidstodin@simnet.is; sites per person Ikr600; ☎ May-Sep) By the highway just outside the village, this is a major Icelandic party venue on summer weekends. If you want quiet, stay elsewhere! Good facilities include showers (Ikr150) and a washing machine (Ikr400).

Laugarvatn Youth Hostel (☎ 486 1215; laugarvatn@hostel.is; sb dm/s/d/tr/q Ikr1900/3100/5000/6400/8300; ☐) This large year-round hostel is a great place to stay. The owners have recently added a whole new floor, giving guests an extra kitchen (with great lake views while you're washing up). Its neat rooms are indistinguishable from those of the average Icelandic guesthouse, particularly as you can pay extra for a private bathroom. There's a hot tub, an internet connection (Ikr200 per 30 minutes), and the possibility of breakfast (Ikr900) if you desire it.

Edda hotels (☎ 444 4000; www.hoteledda.is; sb from Ikr1700, s/d Ikr5800/7200, s/d with bathroom Ikr9000/11,300; ☎ mid-Jun-mid-Aug) Laugarvatn's two big schools become hotels in summer, both with the usual serviceable rooms and good restaurants.

Ourpick Lindin (☎ 486 1262; Lindarbraut 2; mains Ikr2500-5100; ☎ noon-11.30pm Mon-Thu, noon-1am Fri-Sun mid-May-Aug) Lindin is the best restaurant for miles. Its menu uses local and seasonal ingredients – fresh char from the lake, reindeer, goose and guillemot – and quiet jazz and candlelight create a relaxing atmosphere. Its Belgian dark chocolate mousse, with raspberry purée and watermelon pieces, is allegedly the best in the world – and, having tasted it, we won't argue!

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's a year-round bus service to Laugarvatn. From June to August the bus leaves at 8.30am daily from Reykjavík, calling at Laugarvatn (Ikr2000, two hours) and continuing on to Gullfoss, Geysir and then returns to Reykjavík. From September to May the bus leaves at 8.30am on weekdays and at 5pm at weekends but does not stop at Gullfoss and Geysir.

In summer a dirt road called Gjábakkavegur (Rte 365) provides a shortcut between Laugarvatn and Þingvellir. It's impassable in winter – you'll have to drive south almost to Selfoss, before heading north on Rte 36 to Þingvellir. In the other direction, Rte 37 heads east to Gullfoss and Geysir.

GEYSIR

One of Iceland's most famous tourist attractions, Geysir (pronounced GAY-zeer) is the original blasting **hot-water spout** after which all other geysers around the world are named. The Great Geysir used to gush water up to 80m into the air but, sadly, it became clogged in the 1950s when tourists threw rocks into the spring in an attempt to set it off. Large earthquakes in 2000 seem to have shifted some of the blockage – it has begun erupting two or three times daily, although not to its former height.

Luckily for visitors, the world's most reliable geyser, **Strokkur**, is right next door. You rarely have to wait more than six minutes for the water to swirl and vanish down what looks like an enormous plughole, before bursting upwards in an impressive 15m to 30m plume. Don't stand downwind.

Geysers are formed when geothermally heated water becomes trapped in narrow fissures. The water at the surface cools, whereas the water below the ground becomes superheated, eventually turning into steam and blasting out the cooler water above it.

Geysir and Strokkur are surrounded by smaller colourful springs, bubbling milky pools and steam vents, where water emerges from the ground at 100°C. The geothermal area is free (it was only ever a paying venue when an Englishman owned it in 1894).

Sights & Activities

GEYSIR CENTER

Across the road from the geysers you'll find this **tourist complex** (☎ 480 6800; www.geysircenter.com; ☹ 9am-7pm). It contains a petrol station, a café, a huge souvenir shop and **Geysisstofa** (☎ 480 6800; www.geysircenter.com; adult/6-12yr 1kr500/200; ☹ 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, noon-5pm Sep-May), an audiovisual exhibition on geysers and volcanoes, with an earthquake simulator and some folk-museum pieces upstairs. It might provide 20 minutes' distraction, but really the geysers themselves are far more fun.

HAUKADALUR

A pleasant 2km stroll north of the steaming springs is Haukadalur, a major centre of learning in Viking times. As with many saga sites, there isn't a lot to see now, but it's a picturesque walk. The Icelandic Forestry Commission (yes, there really is one!) has planted thousands of trees in the area.

HÓTEL RIDING

It's possible to rent horses from Hótel Geysir. Rates start at 1kr3000 for a one-hour horse trek. Experienced riders can do a day trip to Gullfoss (1kr10,800).

Sleeping & Eating

Geysir camp site (sites per person 1kr600; ☹ May-Sep) Stay at this camp site and you'll get to marvel at the spouting springs before the coach parties arrive. Pay at Hótel Geysir, where you can use the hot tub and pool for free.

Hótel Geysir (☎ 480 6800; www.geysircenter.com; sb/s/d from 1kr3000/9200/11,200; P ☹) Accommodation is in spick, span and tasteful alpine-style cabins; there's a geothermal pool (open mid-April to August) and two hot pots, and the hotel can arrange horse rides (see above). There are plans to build new rooms overlooking the geyser field for 2007-08 – what a sight to wake up to! The hotel restaurant (mains 1kr2200 to 1kr3700) already has a prime view of the geysers, and serves good meaty dishes like reindeer steak with truffle gravy.

There's a reasonable **café** (snacks 1kr250-990; ☹ 9am-7pm) inside the Geysir Centre.

Getting There & Away

From June to August, scheduled **Pingvallaleið** (☎ 511 2600; www.bustravel.is) bus 2/2a does an 8½-hour circuit from the BSI bus station in Reykjavík to Geysir and Gullfoss (8.30am and 12.30pm). This bus works a bit like a tour, stopping for at least half an hour at each site. On Saturday an extra bus leaves Reykjavík at 5pm and goes as far as Geysir, returning at 7pm.

Also from June to August, the new **Austurleið** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) daily bus 6/6a (return 1kr5100, 8.30am) stops at Pingvellir, Geysir and Gullfoss for at least 45 minutes each, before returning to Reykjavík.

Very popular Golden Circle tours run year-round from Reykjavík (see p80).

GULLFOSS

Iceland's most famous waterfall, Gullfoss is a spectacular double cascade. It drops 32m, kicking up a sheer wall of spray before thundering away down a narrow ravine. Whether or not you're suitably impressed can depend on the weather: on sunny days the spray creates shimmering rainbows, and it's also magical in winter when the falls glitter with ice. On grey, drizzly days, mist can envelop the

second drop, making Gullfoss slightly underwhelming.

The falls came within a hair's breadth of destruction during the 1920s, when a team of foreign investors wanted to dam the river Hvítá for a hydroelectric project. The landowner, Tómas Tómasson, refused to sell, but the developers went behind his back and obtained permission directly from the government. Tómasson's daughter, Sigríður, walked to Reykjavík to protest, even threatening to throw herself into the waterfall if the development went ahead. Thankfully, the investors failed to pay the lease, the agreement was nullified and the falls escaped. Gullfoss was donated to the nation in 1975 and has been preserved as a nature reserve ever since.

Above Gullfoss is a small visitor centre and a good **café** (☎ 486 8683; snacks 1kr500-980; ☹ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun Sep-May), whose speciality is lamb soup. A tarmac path suitable for wheelchairs leads to a lookout over the falls, and a set of steps continues to the water.

With a 4WD it's possible to continue from Gullfoss to the glacier at Langjökull and other parts of the interior via mountain road F35.

Sleeping

Hótel Gullfoss (☎ 486 8979; www.hotelgullfoss.is; s/d/tr 1kr9000/13,500/16,500; ☹ mid-May-Sep, bookings necessary Oct-mid-May) There's accommodation a few kilometres before the falls at this large, modern bungalow hotel. Its en-suite rooms, overlooking the moors, are modest-sized and businesslike, and there's a hot pot and a restaurant. Breakfast is included.

Getting There & Away

See opposite for bus information.

RAFTING IN SOUTHWEST ICELAND

The great glacial rivers of southwest Iceland provide some wonderful opportunities for whitewater rafting. **Arctic Rafting** (☎ 562 7000; www.arcticrafting.is; ☹ Jun-early Sep) offers something to suit everyone, from an easy 3½-hour River Fun trip (1kr5990, with pick-up 1kr8990) to the experienced-rafters-only adrenaline rush down the Hólmsá (1kr7990, with pick-up 1kr10,990). You have to be at least 12 years old for most of the trips. It's best to book ahead; and bring a swimsuit.

Arctic Rafting do other exciting action trips – kayaking, glacier walks, ice climbing, and (if you ever wanted to be Lara Croft) canyoning, which involves climbing waterfalls, hurling yourself off cliffs and swimming in watery caves!

The company can pick you up from Reykjavík and hotels on the southwest coast, but if you want to save on the pick-up cost you can drive there yourself. The Arctic Rafting HQ is at Drumboddsstaðir; head 7km north from Reykholt on Rte 358, then take the signposted right turn – it's about 2.5km further along on a bone-shaking dirt track.

GULLFOSS TO SELFOSS

From Gullfoss there are several possible routes back to the Ring Rd, passing through an agricultural region dotted with farms, hamlets...and countless summer houses. There isn't too much to see in this area, but there are plenty of possible bases for exploring the Golden Circle.

Most people follow surfaced Rte 35, which passes the turn-off to the Arctic Rafting HQ (see the boxed text, below), continues through Reykholt, then meets the Ring Rd about 2km west of Selfoss. You can detour off Rte 35 to Skálholt, once Iceland's religious power-house.

Alternatively, you could follow Rte 30, which is intermittently surfaced and passes through Flúðir, meeting Rte 1 about 15km east of Selfoss. An interesting detour from this road is through the scenic Þjórsárdalur valley, along Rte 32. From here you can follow Rte 26 past the foothills of the Hekla volcano, emerging on Rte 1 about 6km west of Hella.

Reykholt

pop 180

The rural township of Reykholt – one of several Reykholt around the country – is centred on the hot spring Reykjahver. Several local farms have greenhouses heated by the springs, and there's the inevitable **swimming pool** (☎ 486 8807; adult/7-12 yr 1kr250/120; ☹ 2-6pm Mon, Wed, Sat & Sun, 2-10pm Tue & Thu, closed Fri). Services include a petrol station and grill, a shop, a post office and a bank.

SLEEPING & EATING

Húsið (☎ 486 8680; husid@best.is; Bjarkarbraut 26; sb 1kr2700, made-up bed 1kr4000) This friendly place

has B&B and sleeping-bag accommodation in a quiet cul-de-sac; there's a hot tub and a barbecue. Camping (☎ 486 9816) is also available.

Gilbrún (☎ 486 8925; Dalbraut 1) This farmhouse, just off the main road, has B&B and sleeping-bag accommodation.

Kaffi Klettur (☎ 486 1310; mains lkr990-2500; ☎ noon-9pm Jun-Aug) Decorated in mock-old-fashioned style, with tapestries, old coffee mills and horse bridles, this place has a wide selection of pizzas, burgers, crepes, pasta, and traditional fish and meat mains. It's housed in a wooden lodge in a large garden with children's swings.

There's also the **petrol-station grill** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See right for details.

Skálholt & Laugarás

The name of Skálholt (population 184) resounds through Iceland's history. This hugely important religious centre was one of two bishoprics (the other was Hólar in the north) that ruled Iceland's souls from the 11th to the 18th centuries.

Skálholt rose to prominence under Gissur the White, the driving force behind the Christianisation of Iceland. The Catholic bishopric lasted until the Reformation in 1550, when Bishop Jón Arason and his two sons were executed by order of the Danish king. Skálholt continued as a Lutheran centre until 1797, when the bishopric shifted to Reykjavík.

Unfortunately, the great cathedral that once stood here was destroyed by a major earthquake in the 18th century. Today there's just a modern theological centre and a church with a tiny basement **museum** (admission lkr100; ☎ 9am-7pm except during services or concerts). Its most interesting item is the stone sarcophagus of Bishop Páll Jónsson (bishop from 1196 to 1211). According to *Páls Saga*, the earth was wracked by storms and earthquakes when he died; and, spookily, a huge storm broke at the exact moment that his coffin was reopened in 1956.

Given that Skálholt played such a major role in Iceland's history, the modern settlement is rather a letdown. If you want a clearer picture of its former wealth and power, read the brilliant *Iceland's Bell* by Halldór Laxness, which contains a vivid picture of Skálholt in the 17th century.

Just 1.5km from Skálholt is the village Laugarás (population 120), mainly known for its greenhouses. If you've got young children, you could pop into the little family park, **Slakki Dýragarður** (☎ 868 7626; www.slakki.is; adult/2-16yr lkr550/400; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-mid-Sep). Its beguilements include minigolf, farm animals, parrots and ice cream.

There's an important free classical-music festival, **Sumartónleikar í Skálholtskirkju** (☎ 562 1028; www.sumartónleikar.is), at Skálholt for five weeks from July to early August, featuring composers and musicians from all over Iceland and Europe.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hótel Hvítá (☎ 486 8600; hotellhvita@simnet.is; sites per person lkr500, sb from lkr2000, s/d/tr lkr8500/11,000/13,500; ☎ May-Sep; ☎) In a great location beside the suspension bridge in Laugarás, this hotel caters for different budgets, with a camping area, sleeping-bag bunk beds and simple parquet-floored guesthouse rooms. The new owners are currently building a wing of brand-new rooms. There's also a grill-style restaurant, with a splendid view over the Hvítá river.

You may be able to stay at the theological centre **Skálholtsskóli** (☎ 486 8870; skoli@skalholt.is) – contact them for information.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From June to August, scheduled **Þingvallaleið** (☎ 511 2600; www.bustravel.is) bus 2/2a does an 8½-hour circuit from Reykjavík to Geysir and Gullfoss, calling at Reykholt and Laugarás/Skálholt. The bus leaves the city at 8.30am and 12.30pm, with an extra service on Saturday at 5pm.

In winter buses run directly from Reykjavík to Laugarás/Skálholt (lkr2100, 1¼ hours) and Reykholt (lkr2100, 2¼ hours) at 8.30am weekdays and at 5pm weekends.

To drive to Skálholt, take Rte 35 from Selfoss. After around 30km, turn right onto Rte 31; the settlement is a couple of kilometres further along.

Kerið & Seyðishólar

Around 10km further southwest of Skálholt and Laugarás, Rte 35 passes Kerið, a 3000-year-old explosion crater containing a spooky-looking green lake. Björk once performed a concert from a floating raft in the middle; and it's said that some joker has introduced fish to the water.

About 3km northeast across the road is the bright-red Seyðishólar crater group, which produced most of the surrounding lava field.

FLÚÐIR

pop 340

Flúðir's mainly known for its mushrooms, grown in geothermal greenhouses, and for its many summer houses where hardworking Reykjavickers come to throw off big-city cares. This peaceful green settlement is the largest in this area; it has all necessary services and makes an alternative base for exploring the Golden Circle (it's around 25km south of Gullfoss and Geysir).

There's a **swimming pool** (☎ 486 6790; adult/child lkr250/100; ☎ 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 1-6pm Sun), a small folk museum at the farm **Gróf** (☎ 486 6634), a bank with ATM and a post office. **Horse riding** is available at Syðra-Langholt – see below.

Sleeping & Eating

Syðra-Langholt (☎ 486 6574, 861 6652; sydralangholt@emax.is; sites per person lkr600, sb/s/d/tr lkr2500/5000/8000/10,300) Ten kilometres southwest of Flúðir on Rte 340 is this big white farmhouse. The owners are a lively bunch and the house has all mod cons, including a hot pot. Room prices include breakfast. Horse riding is available for lkr2500/3500 per hour/two hours.

Hótel Flúðir (☎ 486 6630; Vesturbrún 1; s/d lkr13,000/16,200; ☎ early Jan-late Dec) Icelandair own this stylish chaletlike bungalow, which has much more warmth than other hotels in the chain. Comfortable rooms have parquet floors, brown leafy bed covers, and soothing prints of fruit and flowers. They all have bathroom, TV, phone and minibar, and there's a good restaurant that opens for dinner daily.

Ferðamiðstöðin (☎ 486 6535; snacks lkr500-900; ☎ Easter-Aug) This cafeteria in Flúðir has a sheltered camp site (sites per tent lkr1000) behind it.

Kaffi Sel (☎ 486 6454; Efra-Sel; pizzas lkr1000, snacks lkr800-1400; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Thu, 8am-10pm Fri-Sun May-mid-Sep) We recommend this comical option, 3km northwest of Flúðir – the local golf clubhouse! It's strange but satisfying to sit among golf trophies while you eat your lunch, watching people thwack balls around on the green. There's a good menu of homemade soup, burgers, pizzas and Mexican dishes, and sociable staff.

Flúðir has a **Samkaup-Strax supermarket** (☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun), and

a pizzeria, **Útlaginn** (☎ 486 6425; www.utlaginn.is; pizzas lkr900-2000).

Getting There & Away

The bus service from Reykjavík to Flúðir (lkr2200, two hours) runs at 5pm daily, returning at 8.30am and 7.15pm, from June to August; from September to May it runs at 8.30am on weekdays and at 7pm at weekends. Most Flúðir buses run via Árnes (lkr2100, one hour 40 minutes), and pass 5km from Syðra-Langholt.

ÞJÓRSÁRDALUR

The Þjórsá is Iceland's longest river at 230km, a fast-flowing, churning mass of milky glacial water that runs from Vatnajökull and Hofsjökull to the Atlantic. With its tributaries, it accounts for almost one third of Iceland's hydroelectric power.

You can follow it upstream awhile via Rte 32, along a valley of Saga Age farms, past the hydroelectric plants Búrfell and Bláskógar, and through the lava fields of Hekla. Rte 32 eventually meets up with mountain road F26, which continues across the interior; if you don't have a 4WD you can turn back towards the coast here along Rte 26.

Árnes

The tiny settlement of Árnes, near the junction of Rtes 30 and 32, is a possible base for exploring Þjórsárdalur. **Árnes HI Hostel** (☎ 486 6048; arnes@hostel.is; sites per tent lkr1000, sb lkr2500) isn't the cosiest place on earth, but its twin rooms and dorm are adequate, plus there's a guest kitchen, a licensed **restaurant** (☎ Jun-Aug) and small octagonal **pool** (☎ 5-10pm Jun-Aug, 7-10pm Mon, 5-10pm Wed & 1-5pm Sat Mar-May & Sep-Nov, closed Dec-Feb).

Most buses between Reykjavík and Flúðir go via Árnes – see above.

Stöng & Þjóðveldisbær

Heading along Rte 32 from Árnes towards Stöng and Þjóðveldisbær, take a short (2km) detour along a signposted track to the delightful waterfall **Hjálparfoss**, which tumbles in two chutes over a scarp formed from twisted basalt columns.

The **ancient farm** at Stöng was buried by white volcanic ash in 1104, during one of Hekla's eruptions. It once belonged to Gaukur Trandilsson, a 10th-century Viking with a tempestuous life. Unfortunately, the centuries have

destroyed all traces of his saga; brief mentions in some 12th-century graffiti in Orkney, in *Njál's Saga* and in a scurrilous medieval rhyme hint that he had a fling with the housewife at the nearby farm Steinastöðum and was killed over the affair in an axe duel.

Stöng was excavated in 1939 – Iceland's first proper archaeological dig – and is an important site, used to help date Viking houses elsewhere. The farm ruins are covered over by a large wooden shelter at the end of a bad, bumpy dirt road that branches off Rte 32 about 20km beyond Árnes. You can still see stone-lined fire pits and door lintels, made from octagonal basalt columns, and the surrounding lava landscape is impressively desolate. A **walking path** behind the farm takes you a couple of kilometres to a strange and lovely little valley, full of twisting lava and waterfalls.

We happen to think it's an atmospheric spot, but the **reconstructed Viking-era farm** (☎ 488 7713; www.thjodveldisbaer.is; adult/under 13yr 1kr500/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-6pm Jun-Aug) in Þjóðveldisbær is more photogenic. The farm was built using traditional methods, and it exactly reproduces the layout of Stöng and its neighbouring church. The two farms are like a cosmetic surgeon's 'before' and 'after' photos.

South of the reconstructed farm is the **Búrfell hydroelectricity plant**. It's a strange place for a sculpture, but one of Sigurjón Ólafsson's larger works adorns this hydro station.

From Stöng you can walk 10km northeast along a 4WD track to Iceland's second-highest waterfall, **Háifoss**, which plunges 122m off the edge of a flat plateau. You can also get most of the way there by 4WD.

SLEEPING

From May to September you can camp in a plantation of fir trees at **Sandártunga** (☎ 893 8889; sites per person 1kr600), about 7km before Búrfell. Alternatively, you could stay at the nearby farm **Ásólfstaðir** (☎ 486 6063; asolfstadir@simnet.is; ☎ Jun-Aug), which has sleeping-bag accommodation.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Reykjavík Excursions (☎ 562 1011; www.re.is) runs a 12-hour tour (1kr10,300) from Reykjavík to Landmannalaugar that stops at Þjórsárdalur. The tour runs at 8am on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday from July to September. **Iceland Total** (☎ 585 4300; www.icelandtotal.com) has a similar tour.

THE SOUTHWEST COAST

Coming from Reykjavík, this is one of the most exciting bits of the southern coast, simply because of the suspense. Rte 1 trundles through a flat, wide coastal plain, full of horse farms and greenhouses, before the landscape suddenly begins to spasm and grow jagged. Mountains thrust upwards on the inland side of the road and the first of the awesome glaciers appears.

Public transport isn't bad along the Ring Rd, which is studded with interesting settlements: Hveragerði is famous for its geothermal fields and hot springs; Hvolsvöllur is the leaping-off point for Þórsmörk, one of Iceland's most popular hiking destinations; further east, Skógar is home to one of Iceland's best folk museums; and Vík, surrounded by glaciers, vertiginous cliffs and black beaches, will leave you giddy with love.

Treats lying off the Ring Rd include the tiny fishing villages of Stokkseyri and Eyrarbakki; brooding volcano Hekla (a possible gateway to hell!); the Mýrdalsjökull icecap, where you can go dogsledding or snowmobiling; and farms and valleys rich with saga heritage.

HVERAGERÐI

pop 2080

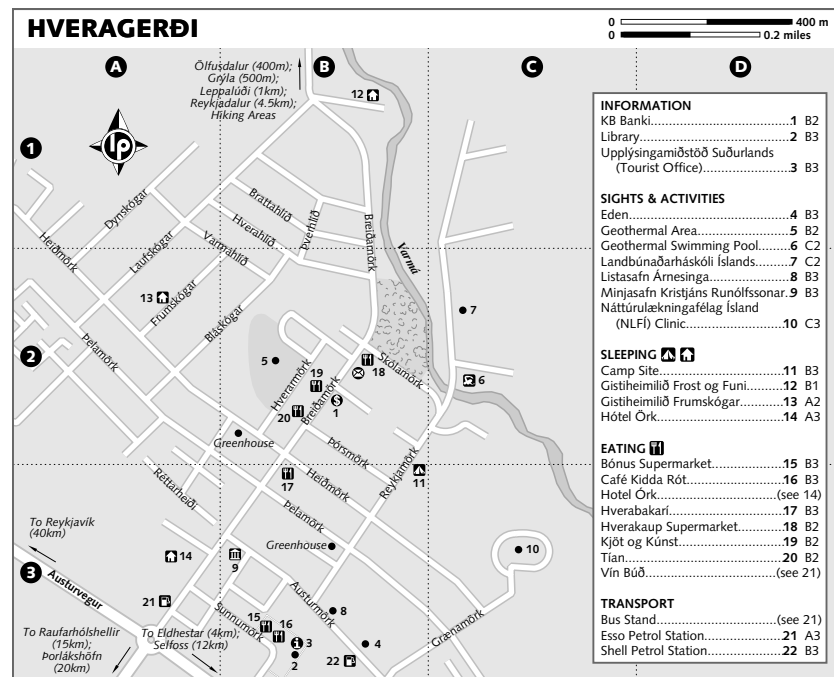
At first glance, you might write Hveragerði off as a dull grid of boxy buildings. However, spend longer than half an hour here and your ominous muttering should fade away. This friendly town has soul, and lots of small, strange things to see and do.

Hveragerði sits on top of a highly active geothermal field, which provides heat for hundreds of greenhouses. Locally, the town is famous for its horticultural college and naturopathic clinic. There are also some fantastic hikes in the area, so it makes a good walking base.

Information

Hveragerði contains the regional tourist office for the whole south coast, **Upplýsingamiðstöð Suðurlands** (☎ 483 4601; www.southiceland.is; Sunnumörk 2-4; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, noon-4pm Sat & Sun summer, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri winter), which shares its premises with the post office, inside the shopping centre. It can book accommodation for an 1kr300 fee.

A tiny room with three internet computers (1kr150 per half-hour) can be accessed from both the tourist office and the friendliest **library**



(☎ 483 4531; Sunnumörk 2; ☎ 2-7pm Mon & Wed-Fri, to 9pm Tue, 11am-2pm Sat) in Iceland. While you're here (yes, inside the building!), look down by your feet for the rift, discovered during the construction of the shopping centre.

There's a KB Banki on Breiðamörk and an ATM in the shopping centre entrance.

Sights

GEOTHERMAL FIELDS

There's a small **geothermal area** (☎ 483 5062; Hveramörk; admission 1kr200; ☎ 9-11am & 5-8pm Mon-Thu, 9-11am & 2-4pm Fri, 2-4pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug) in the centre of town, with baked earth, small mudpots and several hot springs and pools. They're a little tame, but the information sheet contains some great stories – read all about the hot-spring spider *Pirata piraticus*, the burping Garbage Spring, and the murderous mudpot. In summer there's a small café where you can buy eggs (1kr150) to boil in the water. Out of season, ask the tourist office to unlock the gates.

For something a little more explosive, head up Breiðamörk and on out of town. This valley is **Ölfusdalur**, site of several mudpots, steaming vents and the geyser **Gryla** (on the left), which

erupts 12m several times daily. There's also an artificial borehole, **Leppalúði**, on the right by the bridge near the golf-course road, which erupts continually. If you keep going a further 1.5km, you'll reach a car park; from here, it's a 3km walk to unmissable **Reykjadalur**, a delightful geothermal valley where there's a bathable **hot river** – bring your swimsuit.

EDEN & OTHER GREENHOUSES

If you take many bus tours east from Reykjavík, you could end up quite sick of the greenhouse **Eden** (☎ 483 4900; www.eden.smart.is; Austurmörk 25; admission free; ☎ 9am-11pm summer, 9am-7pm winter) – it's Iceland's nearest thing to a tourist trap, and all passing tour groups are shepherded through its doors. Having said that, there are worse places designed to separate fools and money. Bananas and papayas add a touch of the tropics, there's an enormous postcard selection; and it sells Hveragerði's famous Kjörís ice cream, made just round the corner.

The greenhouses around town are great at night, when they glow radioactive orange, and several are open to the public. It's also fine to amble into the **Landbúnaðarháskóli Íslands**

(Agricultural University of Iceland; ☎ 433 5000; www.lbihi.is; Reykir; ☞ 9am-5pm) to look at the plants.

NLFÍ CLINIC

Iceland's most famous clinic, **Náttúruvæðingafélag Ísland** (NLFÍ; ☎ 483 0300; www.hnlfí.is; Grænsmörk 10; adult/concession/under 12yr 1kr600/300/300; ☞ bath house 7.30-11am, 1-6pm & 7-9.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun), has mainly treated prescription-only patients in the past. However, it's keen to throw open its doors to visitors seeking relaxing massages (1kr4100 to 1kr8300) and deep-heat mud baths (1kr3600). NLFÍ has excellent new facilities, including indoor and outdoor pools, hot pots, a sauna, a steam bath, and a relaxation room. Treatments are available year-round, mainly on weekdays – book ahead.

GALLERIES & MUSEUMS

Close to Eden, the large, modern art gallery **Listasafn Árningsa** (☎ 483 1727; www.listasafnarningsa.is; Austurmörk 21) has some great temporary exhibitions, although opening times are hazy (ring to check).

Minjasafn Kristjáns Runólfssonar (☎ 483 1997; Austurmörk 2; adult/under 12yr 1kr500/free; ☞ 2-6pm daily) This two-room private collection belongs to Kristján, who has been collecting old folk items since he was a kid. Most are labelled in Icelandic, but Kristján is happy to explain what things are and who they belonged to.

Activities

HIKING

There are loads of interesting walks around Hveragerði. Bring the Landmælingar Íslands sheet *Hengill* 1:100,000, or ask the tourist office for the map *Hiking Trails in the Hengill Area* (1kr600).

Most trails begin from the small car park in Ölfusdalur (follow Breiðamörk out of town, and don't turn right into Gufudalur and the golf course). From here it's a 3.5km walk up through beautiful Reykjadalur (see p125) to the Dalsel survival hut.

From Dalsel, several trails cut across the hills to the shores of the great lake Þingvallavatn (p118). The shortest routes run northeast to Úlfjótuvatn (13km) or due north to Ölfusvatn (13.5km). A longer route will take you over the summit of Hengill (768m; 11.7km from Dalsel) to Nesjavellir (p118), 18.7km from Dalsel.

If you just want to climb Hengill, you can drive as far as the Hengill ski area (off Rte 1,

16km west of Hveragerði), from where it's 7km to the summit along the ridge to the west, or 6km via the Hengladalur valley. All routes to the top of Hengill are black walking trails – officially 'tough, and should not be walked alone'.

SWIMMING

Hveragerði's open-air **geothermal swimming pool** (☎ 483 4113; Laugaskaröi; adult/child 1kr270/100; ☞ 7am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm Sat & Sun), beside the Varmá river just north of town, is among Iceland's favourites. Goodies include a massaging hot pot and a steam room built directly over a natural hot spring.

HORSE RIDING

A few kilometres east of Hveragerði, the recommended horse farm **Eldhestar** (☎ 480 4800; www.eldhestar.is; Vellir) has all kinds of riding tours, from one-hour trots (around 1kr3000) in the surrounding area to multiday tours into the interior (contact Eldhestar for prices).

Sleeping

Camp site (☎ 483 4601; Reykjamörk 1; sites per person 1kr500) This excellent modern camp site is just east of the centre, and has toilets, showers, a cooking area and a laundry.

Gistiheimilið Frumskógar (☎ 896 2780; www.frumskogar.is; Frumskógar 3; s/d/apt 1kr4000/5500/9000) Clean, good-value rooms are offered at this cosy suburban guesthouse. They all come with comfy beds, thick duvets, TVs, washbasins and dressing gowns. A yummy breakfast (1kr850) can be ordered, and there's a hot pot in the garden. Self-catering apartments at the back have TV, bathroom and kitchen.

Gistiheimilið Frost og Funi (Frost & Fire Guesthouse; ☎ 483 4959; www.frostandfire.is; Hverhamar; s/d 1kr9500/14,900) This is quite a romantic spot, with access to a private pool, an idyllic riverbank hot pot and a natural steam sauna. Eight of the 14 rooms are brand spanking new; they're simple but tasteful, with large beds, TVs, en-suite bathrooms and modern Icelandic artwork on the walls. Breakfast is included.

Hótel Eldhestar (☎ 480 4800; www.eldhestar.is; sb/s/d 1kr2400/10,900/16,400; ☎ ☎) About 3km east of Hveragerði, the popular riding school Eldhestar offers large comfy rooms, all named after the farm's horses, in a purpose-built modern building. There's a great lounge with an open fire, and an outdoor hot pot – both perfect for relaxing after a day in the saddle. The

sleeping-bag accommodation is in little huts in the garden.

Hótel Örk (☎ 483 4700; www.hotel-ork.is; Breiðamörk 1; s/tw/tr 1kr13,900/16,900/18,900; ☎ ☎) Although the rooms in this big custom-built building are staid and slightly old-fashioned, unusually for Iceland they all have bathtubs. The hotel itself has excellent facilities, particularly for families – saunas, tennis courts, a nine-hole golf course, a ping-pong table, and an excellent swimming pool with slide, hot tubs and children's pool. Breakfast is included.

Eating

Hverabakarí (☎ 483 4879; Breiðamörk 10; ☞ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) An unusual cake maker works at this little bakery – look out for the marzipan chessboard and buns pulling horrible faces. There are plenty of tables, and good coffee and snacks.

Kjöt og Kúnnst (☎ 483 5010; Breiðamörk 21; ☞ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri) This deli serves delicious nibbly things for picnics – mouthwatering salads, cakes, roast chicken, slices of meat and fish. You can also eat in – choose from various different hotplate courses, then take your plate to be weighed. Dishes are cooked using steam from nearby hot springs.

Café Kidda Rót (☎ 552 8002; Sunnumörk 2; mains 1kr990-2000; ☞ 11am-10pm Sun-Thu, to 11.30pm Fri & Sat) In the shopping centre, the town's most popular café-bar sells good coffee, and a diverse menu of pizzas, burgers, Chinese meals and

THE CHRISTMAS LADS

The natural and artificial geysers at Hveragerði are named for Grýla and Leppalúði, a child-devouring troll woman and her henpecked husband. This gruesome pair are said to be the parents of the 13 *jólasveinar* (Christmas lads). One of these horrible hooligans turns up every day between 12 and 24 December, trying to steal his favourite food or cause some other mischief.

Although they're little imps, Ladle-Licker, Sausage-Snatcher, Window-Peeper and the rest of the brothers also leave a small gift in good children's shoes when they arrive (naughty kids get a raw potato). From Christmas Day onwards, the Christmas lads leave one by one, with the last, Candle-Beggar, heading back to the mountains on Twelfth Night.

cheap (although not hugely flavoursome) wild trout. It also doubles as a kind of art gallery; and old men come in to watch the news on a giant-screen TV.

Hótel Örk (☎ 483 4700; Breiðamörk 1; mains 1kr2600-3400) The restaurant at Hótel Örk is the poshest place in town, and it serves a small menu of Icelandic specialties such as *hangikjöt* (smoked lamb) and *bacalao* (salt cod), plus burgers, beef steaks and seafood kebabs.

There are several fast-food places in town, including **Tían** (☎ 483 4727; Breiðamörk 19) and the grills at the petrol stations.

Self-caterers should head for the **Hverakaup** (☎ 483 4655; Breiðamörk 27; ☞ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-9pm Sun) or cheaper **Bónus** (☎ 482 1818; Sunnumörk 2; ☞ noon-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7.30pm Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun) supermarkets. There's a **Vín Búð** (☎ 483 4242; Breiðamörk 1; ☞ 2-6pm Mon-Thu, 2-7pm Fri, 11am-4pm Sat) at the Esso garage.

Getting There & Away

The bus stop is at the Esso petrol station on the main road into town. All buses from Reykjavík to Selfoss and places further east stop in Hveragerði (1kr950, 40 minutes).

AROUND HVERAGERÐI

Rte 38 runs south from Hveragerði to Þorlákshöfn (20km), the departure point for the ferry to Vestmannaeyjar.

Raufarhólshellir

This 11th-century lava tube is over 1km long, and contains some wonderful (protected) lava columns. You'll need a torch and sturdy boots to explore; the going underfoot can be quite treacherous from earlier cave-ins. In winter cold air is funnelled down and trapped inside, producing amazing ice formations. You'll find the tube southwest of Hveragerði, just off the Reykjavík-Þorlákshöfn route (Rte 39), which passes right over the tunnel.

Þorlákshöfn

pop 1420

Most people come to this fast-growing fishing town, 20km south of Hveragerði, to catch the ferry to the Vestmannaeyjar. There's a **camp site** (☎ 483 3807; sites per person/tent 1kr200/200) next to the swimming pool if you need to stay over.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus service from Reykjavík to Þorlákshöfn connects with the ferry – see p149.

Just outside Þorlákshöfn, Rte 38 runs to Hveragerði, Rte 39 runs to Reykjavík, and un-surfaced Rte 427 runs west along the bottom of the Reykjanes Peninsula to Krýsvík.

SELFOSS

pop 5700

Selfoss is the largest town in southern Iceland, an important trade and industry centre, and wittlessly ugly. Iceland's Ring Rd is its main shopping street – as a pedestrian, you're in constant danger of ending up as road jam.

The main reason to come here is for a big grocery shop before heading off into the interior; to establish a base to explore the Flói nature reserve (p130) or the wonderful fishing villages of Eyrarbakki (opposite) and Stokkseyri (p130); or if you're desperate to go to the cinema. The nicest part is the winding river Ölfusá.

Information

The **tourist information desk** (☎ 480 2422; www.arborg.is/tourinfo; Austurvegur 2; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat Jun-Aug) inside the town library, close to the roundabout on the main road, is staffed

in summer; at other times, leaflets are available. Pick up the free pamphlet *Árborg*, which is full of tourist information about the Selfoss-Eyrarbakki-Stokkseyri district. The library offers internet access for Ikr200 per hour.

Landsbanki Íslands, KB Banki and Glitnir all have branches with ATMs on Austurvegur.

Activities

Selfoss has a fine **geothermal swimming pool** (☎ 480 1960; Bankavegur; adult/child 6-16yr Ikr310/150; ☎ 6.45am-9.15pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun Apr-mid-Sep, 6.45am-9.15pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep-Apr), with hot pots, water slides and a kids' play pool.

Mountain Cruiser (☎ 892 4030; www.simnet.is/kiddib) offers various 4WD tours, including trips to Þórsmörk and Landmannalaugar – contact it for details.

Sleeping

Gesthús (☎ 482 3585; www.gesthus.is; Engjavegur; sites per person Ikr500, sb/s/d/tr cabin Ikr2500/6900/8900/10,200; ☎ sites mid-May-mid-Sep, cabins year-round; ☎) For a choice of accommodation – sleeping-bag/camping/made-up beds in wooden cabins –

try this friendly place by the park. There's a sociable kitchen hut and a laundry for campers, and the two- to four-bed cabins are nicely equipped with desks, kitchenettes and TVs. There are two hot pots for guests.

Gistiheimilið Menam (☎ 482 4099; www.menam.is; Eyravegur 8; s/d/tr Ikr5900/8200/9300) This is a small guesthouse above the Thai restaurant in the town centre. Although the sitting room is dowdy and smells of tobacco, the rooms themselves are pleasantly furnished and cosy, with proper venetian blinds to keep out the midnight sun. Bathrooms are shared.

Hótel Selfoss (☎ 480 2500; www.hotelselfoss.is; Eyravegur 2; s/d May-Sep from Ikr14,300/17,900, Oct-Apr Ikr10,600/13,200; ☎) This is a 99-room behemoth near the bridge, with four-star business-style hotel rooms and great facilities. Make sure you get a room overlooking the broad and lovely river Ölfusá, rather than the car park. There's a good restaurant, and at the time of research a spa and fitness centre was set to open in 2007.

Selfoss has a couple of modest guesthouses in addition to Menam; ask at the tourist office for details.

Eating

Guðnabakari (☎ 482 1755; Austurvegur 31b; snacks Ikr580-680; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat, 9.30am-4pm Sun) The sweet people in this busy bakery-café have a small menu of crêpes, soup and pasta, as well as buns and sandwiches.

Hrói Höttur (☎ 482 2899; Austurvegur 22; pizzas Ikr800-1400) This pizzeria and takeaway fairly heaves with families and gangs of teens on a Friday and Saturday night.

Pizza 67 (☎ 482 2267; Tryggvagata 40) Another pizzeria, similar to Hrói Höttur.

Restaurant Menam (☎ 482 4099; Eyravegur 8; mains around Ikr1790; ☎ 11.30am-2pm & 5-10pm) For a break from grills and fish and chips, head for this authentic Thai place on the road to Stokkseyri. There's a big choice of beef, lamb, chicken and pork dishes, as well as a small international menu, although there's not much of interest for veggies.

Kaffi Krús (☎ 482 1672; www.kaffikrus.is; Austurvegur 7; snacks Ikr350-1200, mains Ikr1500-2200; ☎ 10am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat; ☎) Krús is a café-bar based in a fantastic old house, with beams and creaking floorboards. There's a varied menu of coffees and light meals – salads, sandwiches, burgers, nachos, felafel and more substantial fish-of-the-day mains.

Self-caterers have a choice between the **Bónus** (☎ 481 3710; Austurvegur 42; ☎ noon-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7.30pm Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun), **Krónan** (☎ 482 3910; Tryggvatorg; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Thu, to 8pm Fri, to 7pm Sat, noon-7pm Sun) and **Nóatún** (☎ 482 1000; Austurvegur 3-5; ☎ til 9pm) supermarkets on the main road. For fast food, try the drive-through hot-dog stand **Pylsuvagninn** (☎ 482 1782; hot dogs Ikr300-800) in the hotel car park.

Entertainment

There aren't many cinemas on the south coast – catch up with Hollywood at **Selfoss Bió** (☎ 482 3007; www.selfoss.bio), a shiny cinema inside Hótel Selfoss.

Getting There & Away

All buses between Reykjavík and Höfn, Skafptafell, Fjallabak, Þórsmörk, Flúðir, Gullfoss, Laugarvatn and Vík pass through Selfoss; there are numerous options daily. The hour-long journey from Reykjavík costs Ikr1200.

EYRARBAKKI

pop 580

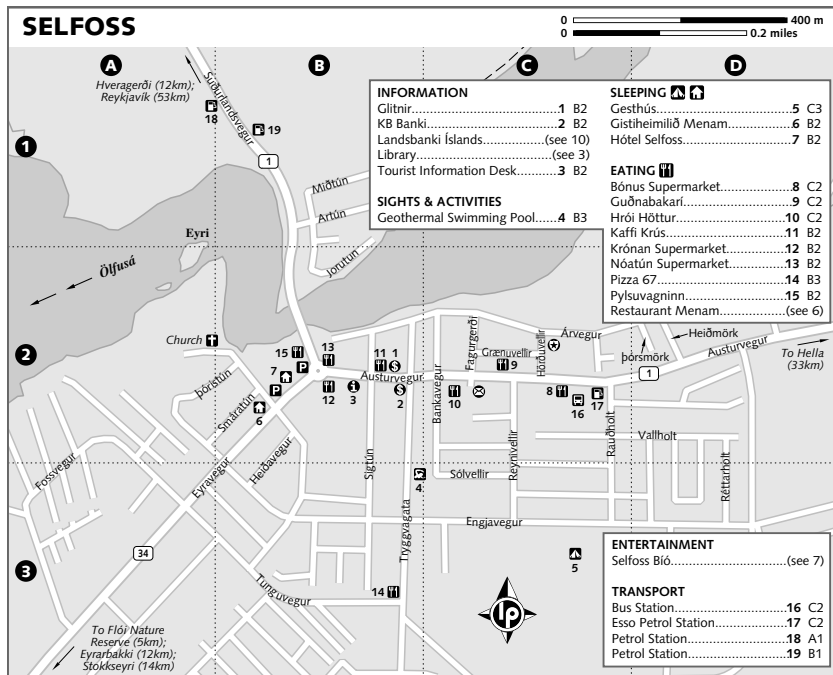
It's hard to believe, but tiny Eyrarbakki was Iceland's main port and a thriving trading town well into the 20th century. Farmers from all over the south once rode here to barter for supplies at the general store – the crowds were so huge it could take three days to get served!

Eyrarbakki is as bleak as you like in winter, when you'll slither down its only street without seeing a soul, but there are some interesting summer sights.

Sights

One of Iceland's oldest houses, **Húsið**, was built by Danish traders in 1765. Today it contains the darling **Arnessysla Folk Museum** (☎ 483 1504; www.husid.com; Hafnarbrú 3; admission to both museums Ikr500; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug, 2-5pm Sat & Sun Apr, May, Sep & Oct), which has glass display cabinets explaining the town's history, rooms restored with original furniture, a bird's-egg collection, and even a gallery of naïve artwork. Look out for Ólöf Sveinsdóttir's shawl, hat and cuffs, knitted from her own hair.

Just behind Húsið is a small maritime museum, **Sjómínjasafnið á Eyrarbakka** (☎ 483 1082; Tungata 59; admission Ikr500 to both museums; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug, 2-5pm Sat & Sun Apr, May, Sep & Oct), with displays on the local fishing community. Its main exhibit is the beautiful, tar-smelling, 12-oared fishing boat, *Farsell*.



The wild, sandy coastline is a fine place to observe migrating **birds**, and you'll often see **seals** loafing about on the rocks.

Another of Eyrarbakki's claims to fame is that it's the **birthplace of Bjarni Herjólfsson**, who made a great sea voyage in AD 985 and was probably the first European to see America. Unfortunately, Bjarni turned back and sold his boat to Leifur Eiríksson, who went on to discover Vinland and ended up with all the glory.

The large fenced building to the east of the village is Iceland's largest **prison**, Litla-Hraun.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a rudimentary free **camping area** on a patch of scrub at the western end of the village, with toilets and tap water.

For cheap eats, there's the grill at the Olís petrol station.

Rauða Húsið (☎ 483 3330; www.raudahusid.is; Búðarstíg 4; mains 1kr2900-4200; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Sun-Thu, to 10pm Fri & Sat, closed Mon) Arch-rival of the lobster restaurant in Stokkseyri, this restaurant operates in an old red house, with cheery staff and great fresh seafood. *Bacalao* and grilled lobster are specialities, and there are unusual choices such as chicken in lime. It gets the prize for best dessert name – 'Þjórsá lava', a cracked chocolate muffin.

Getting There & Away

Buses on the Reykjavík–Þorlákshöfn–Eyrarbakki–Stokkseyri–Selfoss–Reykjavík route run once daily throughout the year. They leave Reykjavík at 11am, arrive in Eyrarbakki (1kr1250) at 12.15pm and Stokkseyri (1kr1250) at 12.25pm, and are back in Reykjavík by 1.55pm. In the other direction, a bus leaves Selfoss at 10.15am daily, getting to Stokkseyri at 10.30am and Eyrarbakki at 10.40am.

On weekdays only, another service departs at 3pm from Reykjavík, calling at Selfoss, Stokkseyri and Eyrarbakki.

FLÓI NATURE RESERVE

Bird-watchers should head for the estuarine **Flói Nature Reserve** (☎ summer only), an important marshland on the eastern bank of the Ölfusá. It's visited by many wetland birds – common species include red-throated divers and various kinds of ducks and geese – with the biggest numbers appearing during the nesting season (May to July). There's a 2km circular hiking trail through the marshes. For more

information, contact the **Icelandic Society for the Protection of Birds** (☎ 562 0477; www.fuglavernd.is).

The reserve is 3km northwest of Eyrarbakki – you'll need your own transport.

STOKKSEYRI

pop 470

Eyrarbakki's twin lies east along the shore. It's another small fishing village, with a tourist emphasis less on museums and more on family fun. Again, winter is not the time to visit, but come in summer and you could easily spend a day enjoying the two villages' attractions.

Sights & Activities

For spooky (if pricey) fun, the first port of call should be **Draugasetríð** (Ghost Centre; ☎ 483 1202; www.draugasetrid.is; Hafnargata 9; adult/under 12/12-16yr 1kr1400/500/900; ☎ 2-9pm summer, 1-9pm Sat & Sun winter), on the top floor of a huge warehouse in the village centre. A 40-minute CD-guide (in English, French or German) tells you blood-curdling ghost stories in each of the 24 dark, dry-ice-filled rooms. The ghost centre recommends itself to over-12s; it certainly scared our pants off.

Tots will love the supercute family park **Töfraqarúrin Stokkseyri** (☎ 897 3801, 483 3800; v/ Stjómusteina; adult/2-12yr 1kr550/400; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Aug), signposted from the centre. Sweet baby animals – Arctic foxes, puppies, piglets, rabbits, lambs and goats – frolic in ridiculously green enclosures. There's also a big climbing frame, a bouncy castle and a café. It's only titchy but infinitely nicer than Reykjavík's zoo (see p79).

Kajakferðir Stokkseyri (☎ 896 5716; www.kajak.is; Heiðarbrún 24; ☎ Apr-Oct) does guided kayaking on the nearby lagoon (1kr2900/3900 per one/two hours), or on the sea (two hours 1kr4900). You can also wander off on an 'Robinson Crusoe' – guideless but with a 'treasure map' to follow (adult/child six to 14 1kr2900/500). Prices include admission to Stokkseyri's swimming pool, where Kajakferðir is based.

If you fancy exploring the lovely coastline in 1960s style, the Shell petrol station has 50cc **mopeds** (☎ 483 1485; 1hr/2hr/3hr/day 1kr2500/4000/6000/8000) for hire.

If you're passing, you could stick your head into the tiny, dark **Þuridarbúð** (☎ 483 1267; admission free), behind the Shell station. This turf-roofed fishing hut is a reconstruction of one that belonged to local lass Þuríður Einarisdóttir (1777-1863), one of the very few female boat captains in Iceland.

About 6km east of Stokkseyri is **Rjómabúíð á Baugsstöðum** (Baugsstaðir Creamery; ☎ 486 3369; adult/child 1kr300/free; ☎ 1-6pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 2-5pm Apr, May, Sep & Oct), an old dairy cooperative (1905-52) that still has its original machinery. Interestingly, most of its produce was sold to England – so some readers' grandparents may have eaten butter from here!

Sleeping & Eating

Við Fjöruborðið (☎ 483 1550; www.fjorubordid.is; Eyrabraut 3a; mains 1kr1500-3500; ☎ noon-10pm daily Jun-Aug, 5-9pm daily May & Sep, 5-9pm Wed-Fri, noon-9pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) This upmarket seafood restaurant on the shore has a reputation for serving the best lobster in Iceland. The legendary lobster soup costs 1kr1690 and is worth every penny. The décor's quite distinctive – old flagstones, fishermen's glass floats, black tablecloths – although the service is a bit sniffy.

There's a little grassy camp site off Dvergasteinar, with toilet and running water. For cheap meals, there's a grill at the Shell petrol station.

Getting There & Away

For details on bus services to Stokkseyri, see opposite.

AUSTUR-FLÓI

The low-lying agricultural region east of Selfoss, reaching as far as the beautiful glacial river Þjórsá (Iceland's longest river at 230km), is called Austur-Flói. Watch out for the violent ghost, Kampholtsmóri, who haunts the area.

Sights & Activities

URRIÐAFOSS

This waterfall doesn't have the slender height of many south-coast falls: its drop is a mere 6m. However, it manages to pack in the power, and it's worth a quick detour from the Ring Rd (on Rte 302) just to see what 360 cu metres of water per second looks like (pretty impressive).

HORSE RIDING

At an old ferry crossing just south of Urriðafoss, the horse farm **Egilsstaðir 1** (☎ /fax 567 6268; www.egilsstadir1.com; rides from 1kr2500 per hr) offers guided rides in the rolling farmland roundabout. The B&B is open year-round.

Sleeping & Eating

Bitra (☎ 482 1081; www.bitra.is; sb/s/d from 1kr2000/4800/8000) This modern black-and-white farmhouse

on a hillock just off Rte 1 (about 15km east of Selfoss) has the same owners as Gesthús in Selfoss. It offers tidy parquet-floored rooms, some with private bathrooms, and homemade evening meals on request. Room prices include breakfast.

HELLA

pop 670

This small agricultural community sits on the banks of the pretty Ytri-Rangá river in an important horse-breeding area. It's also the nearest village to the hulking, shadow-wreathed volcano Hekla (p132), 35km north up Rtes 264 then 268.

The Olís petrol station has tourist information leaflets, and the desk is staffed occasionally in summer. Pick up the free guide map *Power and Purity*, which covers the region from Hella to Skógar.

Sights & Activities

HORSE RIDING

With its many horse farms, dramatic volcanic backdrop and proximity to the highlands, Hella is a good place for hacks into the wilderness. Most places offer trips for more experienced riders – unguided horse hire and longer tours into the interior. Some local horse farms:

Hekluhestar (☎ 487 6598; www.islandia.is/hekluhestar; Austvaðsholt) Rtes 271 then 272, 9km northeast of Hella.

Six- to eight-day tours to Landmannalaugar/Fjallabak.

Herriðarhóll (☎ 487 5252; www.herridarholl.is) Off Rte 284, 15km northwest of Hella. Week-long tours in July and August.

Hestheimar (☎ 487 6666; www.hestheimar.is) Near Rte 281, 7km northwest of Hella. Horse rental.

Kálfholt (☎ 487 5176; www.kalfholt.is; Ásahreppi) Rte 288, 17km west of Hella (eastern bank of the Þjórsá). Two- and three-day rides in July.

Leirubakki (☎ 487 8700; www.leirubakki.is) Rte 26, 30km northeast of Hella (near Hekla). Horse rental.

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Of course, Hella has a good **geothermal swimming pool** (☎ 487 5334; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun Jun-mid-Aug, 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat & Sun mid-Aug-May), with hot pots and sauna.

Oddi (about 8km south of town on unsurfaced Rte 266) was once the site of an important Saga Age monastery – see the boxed text, p132. There's nothing much to see here today, though; you'll get a better sense of Viking history from reading the Eddas themselves.

THE EDDAS

The medieval monastery at Oddi was the source of the Norse Eddas, the most important surviving books of Viking poetry. The *Prose Edda* was written by the poet and historian Snorri Sturluson around 1222. It was intended to be a textbook for poets, with detailed descriptions of the language and metres used by the Norse *skalds* (court poets). It also includes the epic poem *Gylfaginning*, which describes the visit of Gylfi, the king of Sweden, to Ásgard, the citadel of the gods. In the process, the poem reveals Norse creation myths, stories about the gods, and the fate in store for men at Ragnarök, when this world ends.

The *Poetic Edda* was written later in the 13th century by Sæmundur Sigfússon. It's a compilation of works by unknown Viking poets, some predating the settlement of Iceland. The first poem, *Voluspá* (*Sibyl's Prophecy*), is like a Norse version of the Book of Genesis: it covers the beginning and end of the world. Later poems deal with the story of how Óðinn discovered the power of runes, and the legend of Siegfried and the Nibelungs, recounted in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The most popular poem is probably *Þrymskviða*, about the giant Thrym, who stole Þór's hammer and demanded the goddess Freyja in marriage in exchange for its return. To get his hammer back, Þór disguised himself as the bride-to-be and went to the wedding in her place. Much of the poem is devoted to his appalling table manners at the wedding feast, during which he consumes an entire ox, eight salmon and three skins of mead.

Sleeping & Eating

Árhús (☎ 487 5577; www.arhus.is; Rangárbakkar; sites per person 1kr600, sb 1kr2000, self-catering cabins 1kr5500-12,000) Right on the riverbank south of Rte 1, Árhús offers a well-equipped camp site and 28 wooden cabins that sleep three to four people, all with bathroom and kitchenette. There's also a café (light meals from 1kr500 to 1kr1800) – it's worth stopping just to enjoy the lovely river views from the outside balcony. Breakfast is 1kr950.

Gistiheimilið Brenna (☎ 487 5532; www.mmedia.is/toppbrenna; Þrúðvangur 37; sb 1kr1900, made-up beds 1kr2300) Down by the river north of Rte 1, this pink guesthouse has the most beautiful window boxes, and offers hostel-style accommodation. There are three family and three double rooms, plus a cute little kitchen and a guest sitting room. Walls are quite thin, so you'll have to tiptoe on those laminated floors.

Fosshótel Mosfell (☎ 487 5828; bokun@fosshotel.is; Þrúðvangur 6; s/d with washbasin 1kr7500/9900, with bathroom 1kr14,700/19,000; ♿) Contrary to most Fosshotels, the staff here are really charming! Most of the 53 rooms are en suite, with neat if unremarkable green décor; however, upstairs rooms are half-price because they're tiny and bathroomless. The hotel has plenty of big communal spaces, plus there's internet access in the lobby.

Hótel Rangá (☎ 487 5700; www.icehotels.is; Suðurlandvegur; s/d from 1kr16,900/21,100; ♿) Midway between Hella and Hvolsvöllur, Icelandair have created what is essentially a luxurious log

cabin. It has cosy wood-panelled rooms (all with verandas, bathtubs and the extras you'd expect from a top hotel), outdoor hot pots and a superior restaurant. Activity tours can be arranged, and there's a decent annexe 8km northeast. Prices include breakfast.

The cheapest place to eat is the grill at the Olís petrol station. Alternatively, there's **Kanslarinn** (☎ 487 5100; Dynskálum 10c; meals 1kr800-2700) on the main road or the bar-restaurant **Kristján X** (☎ 487 5484; Þrúðvangur 34; meals 1kr400-2500). Both serve the usual burgers, fish, grills and pizzas.

There's also an **11-11 supermarket** (☎ 585 7585; Suðurlandvegur 1).

Getting There & Away

Daily buses between Reykjavík and Þórsmörk, Vík and Höfn make a brief stop at Hella. In winter the schedule is reduced and there are no buses on Saturday. The fare from Reykjavík is 1kr2000.

HEKLA

The name of Iceland's most famous and highly active volcano means Hooded One, as its 1491m-high summit is almost always shrouded in ominous-looking cloud. Hekla has vented its fury numerous times throughout history, and was once believed to be the gateway to hell.

The volcano is due to blow its top again round 2010. Several walking trails lead up to the summit, but many people are happy just to see Hekla at a distance.

History

Viking era settlers built farms on the rich volcanic soils around Hekla, only to be wiped out by the eruption of 1104, which buried everything within a radius of 50km. Since then there have been 15 major eruptions – the 1300 eruption covered more than 83,000 sq km in ash.

By the 16th century, Europe had decided that Hekla was the entrance to hell. Contemporary literature reported that the black skies overhead were filled with vultures and ravens, and that you could hear the howling of the damned.

In 1947, after more than 100 years of inactivity, Hekla belched a mushroom cloud of ash more than 27km into the air. This was followed by another huge eruption in 1970. Since then Hekla has gone off at roughly 10-year intervals, with short but powerful outbursts in 1980, 1991 and 2000. The main danger comes from the ash, whose high fluorine content has poisoned thousands of sheep; although, unexpectedly, the 2000 eruption produced a small pyroclastic flow (a high-speed and highly destructive torrent of rock particles and gas, which typically travels at over 130km per hour and can reach temperatures of 800°C).

Sights & Activities

HEKLA EXHIBITION CENTRE

At the time of writing, a small **exhibition centre** (☎ 487 8700; adult/under 12yr 1kr600/free; ☎ 9am-11pm) devoted to Hekla was due to open in 2007 at the Leirubakki farm (see right). There'll be eruption footage, samples of ash and lava, an earthquake simulator and other exhibits.

CLIMBING HEKLA

You can climb Hekla, but remember that it's still an active volcano. There's never much warning before eruptions, which are usually indicated by multiple small earthquakes a mere hour or two before it blows!

Stick to days when the summit is free from heavy cloud, and carry plenty of water. There's a small car park where mountain road F225 branches off Rte 26 (about 18km northeast of Leirubakki, or 45km northeast of Hella). With a 4WD you can continue along F225 to the foot of the volcano. From here, a well-marked walking track climbs steadily up to the ridge on the northeastern flank of the mountain and then southwest to the summit crater, the scene of the 2000 eruption. Although the peak is often covered in snow, the floor of the crater

is still hot. From the Rte 26-F225 junction, the return trip takes at least eight hours; from near the bottom of the volcano, the return trip takes about four hours. Former access routes on the western side were damaged during the 1991 eruption and are not recommended.

In winter you can take snowmobile tours to the summit of Hekla with **Toppferðir** (☎ 487 5530; www.mmedia.is/toppbrenna) – call for prices.

Sleeping

Rjúpnaveilir í Landsveit (☎ 892 0409; www.simnet.is/rjupnavellir; sb 1kr1900) The closest accommodation to the Rte 26-F225 junction are these two large wooden cabins, with sleeping-bag space for 44 people and cooking facilities. There's also a five-person hut for hire.

Hótel Leirubakki (☎ 487 6591; www.leirubakki.is; sites per person 1kr750, guesthouse sb/s/d/tr 1kr2800/8400/12,900/15,300, hotel s/d 1kr13,800/16,800) This exceptionally appealing historical farm (18km from the Rte 26-F225 junction) has accommodation for everyone. There's a quiet camp site by the old churchyard; an 11-room guesthouse with shared bathrooms and guest kitchen; and a brand-new hotel with bright parquet-floored rooms, half with volcano views. Super facilities include five hot tubs; an information and exhibition centre; horse hire (1kr3500 per hour); petrol station (open 8am to 10pm daily); and a first-class restaurant (scheduled to open in 2007) that will serve trout and lamb prepared in the farm's own smokehouse.

Getting There & Away

From 9 June to 10 September **Austurleið** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) has a daily bus at 8.30am from Reykjavík to Landmannalaugar, which passes Leirubakki (1kr2900, 2¼ hours) at 10.45am. The return trip passes Leirubakki at 4.15pm.

From July to September you can go on tours from Reykjavík. **Mountain Taxi** (☎ 544 5252; www.mountain-taxi.com; per person 1kr21,000) and **Iceland Total** (☎ 585 4300; www.icelandtotal.com; per person 1kr22,000) both run a 4WD trip to Hekla and Landmannalaugar at 8am daily.

HVOLSVÖLLUR

pop 760

The countryside surrounding Hvolsvöllur is soaked with history. Its farms were the setting for the bloody events of *Njál's Saga* (see the boxed text, p136), one of Iceland's favourites; today, though, the saga sites exist mainly as

place names, peaceful grassed-over ruins or modern agricultural buildings.

Hvolsvöllur itself is a small village dominated by a huge petrol station at either end. It's a jumping-off point for Þórsmörk, and the last place where you can stock up on supplies.

There's a seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 487 8043; www.hvolsvollur.is; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun May-Sep) inside Sögusetrið – see below.

Sights & Activities

As you might expect, **Sögusetrið** (Saga Centre; ☎ 487 8781; Hlíðarvegur; njala@njala.is; adult/under 12yr 1kr500/free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun May-Sep) is devoted to the events of *Njál's Saga*, which took place in the surrounding hills. A roomful of written boards explains the most dramatic parts of the story (in Icelandic, English and German). It's OK if you just want a potted version of the saga, but you're probably better off reading the real thing (books are on sale in the attached souvenir shop).

The town has a good outdoor **swimming pool** (☎ 487 8607; Vallarbraut 16; adult/6-14yr 1kr250/150; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) with a baby pool and a hot pot.

Ask the tourist office about local **horse riding**.

Sleeping & Eating

Camp site (☎ 487 8043; sites per person 1kr500) There's a site opposite the Shell station on Austurvegur; pay for your pitch at the tourist office.

Hvolsvöllur Youth Hostel (☎ 487 5750; hvolsvollur@hostel.is; sb/s/d 1kr2100/3500/6600) Formerly known as Ásgarður (and still signposted as such at the time of writing), this quiet hostel is most unhostel-like – accommodation is in trim one- or two-bed rooms inside small wooden cabins in a peaceful garden. There's a kitchen and a lounge in the postcard-perfect main house. The hostel is 500m off the Ring Rd, signposted up Rte 261; the owner also runs the Esso garage, so ask there if you're lost.

Vestri-Garðsauki (☎ 487 8078; www.gardsauki.is; s/d/tr 1kr3500/6000/8500; ☎ Jun-Aug) This summer guesthouse just off Rte 1 is run by a friendly Icelandic-German farming family. The four neat, plain rooms are all in the basement but are surprisingly bright; they share two bathrooms. There's also a kitchen for guest use. Breakfast can be ordered for 1kr500.

Hôtel Hvolsvöllur (☎ 487 8050; www.hotelhvolsvollur.is; Hlíðarvegur 7; s/d with shared bathroom 1kr6200/8500, with en suite 1kr11,500/15,300; ☎ ☎) This large business-class hotel is under new management, and

LOCAL ADVICE ON CLIMBING HEKLA

'Yes, of course you can walk up there! I've done it many times. Just don't blame me if the volcano erupts.'

Anders, local horse breeder, Leirubakki

there are big changes planned. By 2007, 50 of the 63 comfortable, green-shaded rooms will be en suite; the fish restaurant (open 11.30am to 10pm) is to be improved; and a fitness centre will join the existing rooftop hot tub in 2008. It's already a decent hotel, but these alterations should bump it up a level.

Galleri Pizza (☎ 487 8440; Hvolsvegur 29; 1kr900-1900) The town pizzeria, one street back from the main road, is a busy, beery place with a cheery atmosphere. It also sells burgers, sandwiches and grills.

Café Eldstöð (☎ 482 1011; Austurvegur 2; soup, bread & salad 1kr1200; ☎ noon-7pm Tue-Sun May-Sep) This posh little café serves light meals (soup, salad and sandwiches) from its own handmade crockery. Opera plays in the background, the scent of coffee wafts...nice, but portions are on the small side.

There are **grills** (☎ to 9pm) at both the Esso and Shell petrol stations; the Esso garage also has a **Vín Búð** (☎ 487 7797; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 7pm Fri, to 4pm Sat Jun-Aug, shorter hr Sep-May). If you're heading to Þórsmörk you can pick up supplies at the 10-11 supermarket, opposite the Esso garage.

Getting There & Away

Buses stop at the Esso station on the main road. Public transport to Hvolsvöllur is identical to that going to Selfoss or Hella; the fare from Reykjavík is 1kr2220.

From June to mid-September, buses to Þórsmörk (1kr1900, 1¼ hours) leave Hvolsvöllur at 10.30am daily, returning at 3.30pm. On weekdays from 15 June to 31 August, a second service leaves Hvolsvöllur at 7pm. In the reverse direction, it leaves Þórsmörk at 8.30am.

Charter flights to Heimaey (see p143) leave from the airstrip at Bakki, about 27km south of Hvolsvöllur.

AROUND HVOLSVÖLLUR Keldur

About 5km west of Hvolsvöllur, unsurfaced Rte 264 winds north along the Rangárvellir valley to the **medieval turf-roofed farm** (☎ 487 8452)

at Keldur. This historic settlement once belonged to Ingjaldur Höskuldsson, a character in *Njál's Saga*. The interior was closed to visitors in 2000 after earthquake damage, but it's still worth visiting to see these Saga Age buildings. There's no public transport along Rte 264, but the 12km walk to Keldur is pleasant enough.

About 2km before Keldur, good en-suite rooms are available at **Hôtel Rangársel** (As Hótel Rangá), an annexe of Icelandair's Hótel Rangá.

Bergþórshvöllur

Down by the coast, Bergþórshvöllur is Njál's farm (although there's not too much to see today). *Njál's Saga* relates that this is where he and his wife and grandchild were burnt to death in their bed in 1011; interestingly, an archaeological excavation in 1951 did find traces of a burnt-out building here. About 4km east of Hvolsvöllur, Rte 255 and then 252 will take you there (21km).

Hvolsvöllur to Fljótsdalur

At the edge of Hvolsvöllur, Rte 261 turns east off the Ring Rd. It follows the edge of the Fljótslíð hills, offering great views over the flood plain of the Markarfljót river and the Eyjafjallajökull glacier. There are several B&Bs along the surfaced section of the road, which ends near the farm and church at **Hlíðarendi**, once the home of Gunnar Hámundarson from *Njál's Saga*. Although it seems tantalisingly close, Þórsmörk can be reached only by 4WD via mountain road F249, on the far side of the Markarfljót bridge on Rte 1.

About 8km after the tarmac ends, Rte 261 passes the turf-roofed youth hostel at **Fljótsdalur**. This is a very popular place to stay, and there are great walks in the surrounding countryside, including the 10km trek northeast to the icecap at **Tindfjallajökull** (1462m). With a 4WD you can continue along mountain road F261 towards Landmannalaugar or up to the glacier Mýrdalsjökull.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kaffi Langbrók (☎ 487 8333; Kirkjulækur III; sites per person 1kr600; ☎ May-Aug; ☎) This wooden ranch-style building 10km from Hvolsvöllur has a peaceful camp site on its grounds. There's also a café with internet access.

our pick **Fljótsdalur Youth Hostel** (☎ 487 8498; www.hostel.is; Fljótslíð; sb adult/child 6-11yr 1kr1400/700; ☎ May-Sep) If you're looking for a simple but

peaceful base for highland walks, with knowledgeable staff, a beautiful garden, a homey kitchen, a cosy sitting room, an excellent library, and mountain views that make your knees tremble, then you'll find it at Fljótsdalur. Advance booking is a must – its one seven-mattress and two four-bed rooms are often booked out by Dick Phillips' walking groups (see p333). The nearest shop is 27km away at Hvolsvöllur, so bring in all supplies.

Breiðabólstaður (☎ 487 8010; breidabolstadur@simnet.is; sb 1kr2000, linen hire 1kr800; ☎ Jun-Sep) Owned by the minister of the church next door, this friendly farm 4km from Hvolsvöllur has a bright and comfortable wooden bunkhouse with kitchen, TV lounge and indoor barbecue area.

Smarátun (☎ 487 8471; www.smaratun.is; sb 1kr2800, made-up bed 1kr5400-7400, summerhouse from 1kr12,800) This attractive white farm with a blue tin roof has horses, a hot tub, sleeping-bag spaces, B&B rooms and four- to six-person summerhouses. It's about 13km from Hvolsvöllur.

Hvolsvöllur to Þórsmörk

The road to Þórsmörk (Rte 249/F249) begins just east of the Markarfljót river on Rte 1. Although it quickly turns into a 4WD-only road, there are some interesting sights at the start of the road that can be reached by car.

From the highway you can see the beautiful high falls at **Seljalandsfoss**, which tumble over a rocky scarp into a deep, green pool. It's perfect for romantics who dream of walking behind waterfalls – a (slippery) path runs round the back. Buses on the Höfn–Reykjavík route often wait here for the Þórsmörk bus, giving passengers time for a few quick photos.

A few hundred metres further down the Þórsmörk road, in the grounds of the farm Hamragarðar, is the spooky waterfall **Gljúfurárfoss**, which gushes into a hidden canyon. To see the falls, you have to wade into the stream beside the farm.

SLEEPING

Hamragarðar (☎ 488 4200; ami@hvolsvollur.is; sites per person 1kr600; ☎ Jun-Aug) You can camp at this farm, right next to the hidden waterfall at Gljúfurárfoss.

Stóra-Mörk III (☎ 487 8903; storamork@isl.is; sb 1kr1500, made-up bed 1kr2300) About 5km closer to Þórsmörk (still on Rte 249), this historical farmhouse (mentioned, of course, in *Njál's Saga*) offers rooms with or without bathroom, a guest kitchen, and a good breakfast spread.

NJÁL'S SAGA

One of Iceland's best-loved sagas deals with two friends, Gunnar Hámundarson and Njál Þorgeirsson, destined by fate to become bitter enemies. A petty squabble between their wives kicks off a bloodthirsty feud, which escalates until practically everyone in the saga is dead. Written in the 13th century, it recounts 11th-century events that took place in the hills around Hvolsvöllur.

The saga's doomed hero is Gunnar of Hlíðarendi (near Fljótsdalur), who falls for and marries the beautiful, hot-tempered Hallgerður, who has long legs but – ominously – a 'thief's eyes'. Hallgerður has a falling-out with Bergþóra, wife of Njál of Bergþórshvöll (near Hvolsvöllur). Things become increasingly strained between Gunnar and Njál as Hallgerður and Bergþóra begin murdering each other's servants.

In one important episode, Hallgerður sends an accomplice to burgle food from a man named Otkell, who has unwisely refused to trade with her. When Gunnar comes home and sees Hallgerður's stolen feast, his temper snaps. 'It's bad news indeed if I've become a thief's accomplice', he says, and slaps his wife – an act that later comes back to haunt him.

Through more unfortunate circumstances, Gunnar ends up killing Otkell and is eventually outlawed and sentenced to exile. As he rides away from home, his horse stumbles. Fatally, he takes one last glance back at his beloved farm Hlíðarendi and is unable to leave the valley.

His enemies gather their forces and lay siege to the farm, but Gunnar manages to hold off the attackers until his bowstring breaks. When he asks Hallgerður for a lock of her hair to repair it, she refuses, reminding him of the slap she received years earlier – and Gunnar is killed.

The feud continues as Gunnar and Njál's clan members try to avenge their slaughtered kin. (Another famous episode sees Njál's son Skarphéðinn axe another man to death before sliding away to safety across the frozen river Markarfljót.) Njál himself acts as a peace broker, forming treaties between the two families, but in the end it all comes to nothing. Njál and his wife are besieged in their farm; although they're given the option to leave, they wearily refuse. Tucking themselves up in bed with their little grandson between them, the couple allow themselves to be burnt alive.

The only survivor of the fire is Njál's son-in-law Kári, who launches a legal case against the arsonists, commits a bit of extrajudicial killing himself and is finally reconciled with his archenemy, Flosi, who ordered the burning of the Njál family. The story is incredibly convoluted and it can be hard to keep track of who is murdering whom, but it's certainly epic.

ÞÓRSMÖRK

One of the most beautiful places in Iceland is Þórsmörk, a stunning valley full of weird rock formations, twisting gorges, a singing cave, mountain flowers and icy streams. Three glaciers (Tindfjallajökull, Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull) shelter it from harsher weather and provide a stunning backdrop. Way back in 1921, the loveliness of Þórsmörk was officially recognised when it was given national reserve status.

Be warned, though: Þórsmörk's ravishing appearance and proximity to Reykjavík (130km) make it an extremely popular spot in summer. It gets particularly crowded in July, when students from around Iceland descend to party. But if you like your countryside boom box free, you don't have to go too far to escape the crowds.

The main accommodation area is at Húsadalur (Map p278), where the Austurleið

bus from Reykjavík terminates. The large, artificial hot pool **Þórslaug** is a welcome new feature here – perfect for easing tired muscles after a long walk. On the hill behind the hut is the cave **Sönghellir** (one of several singing caves in Iceland), from where a maze of walking trails leads through scrubby dwarf birch forests to the Þórsmörk hut, about 3km further up the valley. The summit of **Valahnúkur** (458m), immediately west of Þórsmörk hut, has a view disc that identifies all the surrounding mountains. Allow about an hour to get there from either Húsadalur or Þórsmörk.

The higher reaches of the valley are known as **Goðaland** (Land of the Gods) and are full of bizarre hoodoo formations. There's a mountain hut at Básar (Map p278), on the far bank of the Krossá river, which marks the start of the popular trek over Fimmvörðuháls Pass to Skógar. The trail passes right between Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull, and the pass itself

makes an easy day trek from either Þórsmörk or Básar. To get to Básar from further down the valley, you must cross the pedestrian bridge over the Krossá, just downstream from the Þórsmörk hut. It's one of Iceland's more dangerous rivers for 4WDs – only attempt to cross, in a high-clearance 4WD vehicle, if you know what you're doing.

Þórsmörk is accessible from June to early September, when plenty of scheduled buses and tours run to the area.

Trekking

Myriad treks are possible in the mountains around Þórsmörk, and most can be undertaken independently. The relevant topographic sheet is the Landmælingar Íslands **Þórsmörk/Landmannalaugar** 1:100,000. As well as local hikes, you can continue inland to Landmannalaugar (see p277). Alternatively, you could head down to the coast at Skógar via Fimmvörðuháls Pass – see below.

SHORT TREKS

From Rte F249, you can easily hike up to **Steinholtsjökull**, a tongue of ice extending off the north side of Eyjafjallajökull. The ice has carved a sheer-sided, 100m-deep gorge, and the short river Stakksholtsá flows out from under it and winds down to Markarfljót. Further west the larger glacier **Gígjökull** descends into a small lagoon right beside Rte F249, filling it with carved icebergs. To explore the main icecaps at Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull you'll need special equipment – including ropes, crampons and ice axes – and ideally a GPS device.

ÞÓRSMÖRK TO SKÓGAR TREK

The dramatic and popular trek from Þórsmörk to Skógar passes right between the glaciers of Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull. The trek can be done in a long day, but it's more enjoyable to break the journey at Fimmvörðuháls Pass (1093m), which has a mountain hut run by Útivist (see following). Although the glaciers seem close enough to touch, this walk is fairly easy and you won't need any special gear. It's best attempted from mid-July to early September, but always keep an eye on the weather – it can change rapidly up here.

The trek starts about 1.5km east of the Básar hut at Goðaland and then climbs steadily to **Mornisheiði**, which has dramatic views over Mýrdalsjökull, and Eyjafjallajökull. From here,

you face a steep ascent to the ridge at **Heljarkambur**. The next stage takes you across tundra and snowfields to **Fimmvörðuháls Pass** itself, with Mýrdalsjökull on the left and Eyjafjallajökull on the right. The Fimmvörðuskáli mountain hut is a short walk off the main track, near a small lake.

The following day, you can begin the trek down to Skógar. The main trail is clear and well trodden, but an interesting alternative is to leave the track at the footbridge and follow the stream down to the waterfall **Skógafoss**, about 1km west of Skógar village. Both routes are marked on the Landmælingar Íslands map **Landmannalaugar-Þórsmörk**.

From Reykjavík, between June and August only, **Iceland Total** (www.icelandtotal.com) offers a package with bus transfers and accommodation in the mountain huts at Fimmvörðuháls Pass and Húsadalur for 1kr16,000. You're dropped off at Skógar, and picked up again at Húsadalur.

Útivist (☎ 562 1000; www.utivist.is) and **Ferðafélag Íslands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is) both run guided treks from Skógar over Fimmvörðuháls to Þórsmörk for around 1kr10,000; contact them for details.

Sleeping

There are three huts in the Þórsmörk area – at Þórsmörk, Básar and Húsadalur – and another at the top of the Fimmvörðuháls Pass. All have cooking facilities, showers and running water, but they tend to get packed out, particularly at weekends. Bring your own food and sleeping bag; a stove is also a good idea, to avoid waiting for the crowded facilities.

Wild camping is prohibited, but the three Þórsmörk huts have tent sites around them; the hut at Fimmvörðuháls Pass doesn't, as the ground is too rocky.

To book spaces at the huts (strongly advised), contact the organisations listed below.

HÚSADALUR

The eight **Húsadalur huts** (sites per person 1kr600, sb 1kr2000-2900, 5-person cottages 1kr7500), along with the café and new hot pool, almost form a tourist village. Book through **Reykjavík Excursions** (☎ 580 5400; www.thorsmork.is, www.re.is; Vatnsmyrarvegur 10, IS-101 Reykjavík).

ÞÓRSMÖRK HUT

The Þórsmörk hut **Skagfjörðsskáli** (☎ 854 1191 mid-May-Sep; sites per person 1kr700, sb 1kr2000) can sleep

75. Book through **Ferðafélag Íslands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkín 6, IS-108 Reykjavík). This organisation can also take bookings for huts along the Landmannalaugar–Þórsmörk track.

BÁSAR HUT & FIMMVÖRÐUHÁLS PASS

There's space for 80 people in the hut at **Básar** (sites per person 1kr700, sb 1kr1800), booked through **Útivist** (☎ 562 1000; www.utivist.is; Laugavegur 178, IS-101 Reykjavík).

The comfortable 23-bed hut at **Fimmvörðuskáli** (sb 1kr1800), on the pass between Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull, is also Útivist's. It lies 600m west of the main trail and is easy to miss in poor weather (GPS ref N 63°37.320', W 19°27.093'). Útivist tour groups have priority here, so it's often booked out. There's no camp site.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Austurleið-Kynniserfðir (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) run scheduled services. From 1 June to 9 September, buses leave Reykjavík for Þórsmörk (1kr3700, 3½ hours) at 8.30am daily, reaching Húsadalur around noon and returning at 3.30pm (there's also an extra bus from the city at 5pm on Fridays).

From 15 June to 31 August, an extra service leaves Reykjavík at 5pm Saturday to Thursday; in the reverse direction, the extra bus leaves Þórsmörk at 8.30am.

From 1 June to 9 September, there's a 'sight-seeing' bus that runs at 1pm from Húsadalur to Básar, returning at 1.40pm.

Several companies run day trips from Reykjavík in summer for around 1kr9500 – see p80.

CAR & BICYCLE

Even though Þórsmörk seems almost touchable from the Ring Rd (only 30km along F249), you *cannot* drive there without a 4WD with decent clearance. The gravel road surface eventually turns into boulders, and even a 4WD car probably won't make it over the bumps.

Plenty of cyclists fight their way up to Þórsmörk, but it's a hard slog. You can shave off a few kilometres by leaving Rte 1 near the farm Vorsabær and taking the old bridge over the Markarfljót, which is now closed to cars.

HIKING

You can walk to Þórsmörk from Landmannalaugar (three or four days), Skógar (one or two days) or along Rtes 249 and F249 from

Seljaland (one long day). The Skógar trek is covered in more detail on p137, and the Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk trek is covered in the boxed text, p280.

SKÓGAR & AROUND

pop 23

You begin to enter the south coast's realm of ice at Skógar, which nestles under the Eyjafjallajökull icecap about 1km off Rte 1. This tiny settlement offers two corking attractions. At its western edge, the dizzyingly high Skógafoss waterfall tumbles down a mossy cliff. On the eastern side you'll find the fantastic folk museum, open year-round for your delectation.

The village is also the start – or the end – of the trek over the Fimmvörðuháls Pass to Þórsmörk (see p137).

Folk Museum

The highlight of Skógar – indeed of this whole stretch of coast – is the wonderful **Skógar Folk Museum** (☎ 487 8845; www.skogasafn.is; adult/under 16yr 1kr700/free; ☎ museum 9am–6.30pm Jun–Aug, 10am–5pm May & Sep, 11am–4pm Oct–May, café 10am–5pm Jun–Aug, 11am–4pm May & Sep), which covers all aspects of Icelandic life. The vast collection was put together by 85-year-old Þórður Tómasson, who has been amassing items for 71 years. You might be lucky enough to meet Þórður in person – he often comes in to play traditional songs for visitors on an old church organ (be prepared to SING!). There are also various restored buildings (church, turf-roofed farmhouse, cowsheds etc) in the grounds, and a hangar-like building at the back houses an interesting transport museum, plus a café and souvenir shop.

Skógafoss

The 62m waterfall of Skógafoss topples over a rocky cliff at the western edge of Skógar in dramatic style. Climb the steep staircase alongside for giddy views downwards; or walk to the foot of the falls, shrouded in sheets of mist and rainbows. Legend has it that a settler named Þrasi hid a chest of gold behind Skógafoss; sometimes you can almost see it glittering...

Activities

The most popular walk in the area is the two-day trek (see p137) over Fimmvörðuháls Pass to Þórsmörk. However, you can also take a morning trek up to the pass and return to Skógar the same day. The trail starts on the 4WD

track to Skógarheiði behind the village. The return trip should take about seven hours.

Horse riding can be arranged through the farm **Skálakot** (☎ 487 8953; www.skalacot.com; sb 1kr1800), 6km west of Skógar. Short rides cost 1kr2500 per hour; you can wander up by the glacier on four-hour trips (1kr6000) or plan an all-inclusive riding holiday (around 1kr15,000 per day). Skálakot also has rather strange sleeping-bag accommodation, in a dorm that looks straight into the stables!

Sleeping & Eating

SKÓGAR

Skógar camp site (☎ 893 8726, 845 8724; sites per person 1kr600) This place has a great location, right by Skógafoss; the sound of falling water makes a soothing lullaby. There's a small toilet block with fresh water.

Skógar Youth Hostel (☎ 487 8801; skogar@hostel.is; sb/d/tr 1kr1800/4900/5550; ☎ 10 May–10 Sep) In an old school, this 30-bed hostel is very close to the waterfall...but, unfortunately, you can't quite see it from the building! Never mind – a minute's walk and you're there. There's a guest kitchen and a laundry.

Edda Hotel (☎ 444 4000; www.hoteledda.is; sb/s/d 1kr1700/5800/7200; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Aug; ☎) This modern and comfortable summer hotel close to the museum is split over two buildings. Sleeping-bag spaces are in the gym, or choose simple rooms with shared bathrooms. The Edda Hotel has a licensed restaurant and a hot pot.

Hótel Skógar (☎ 487 8988; www.hotelskogar.is; s/d from 12,000/15,000; ☎ daily May–Sep, weekends only Oct–Apr; ☎) Breaking the Ikea mould, this architecturally interesting hotel has unusual but quite romantic rooms, all en suite with embroidered curtains and bedspreads, and wooden animals dotted about. There's a decent restaurant, a hot tub and sauna in the garden, a computer for internet access, and a bad bird-eating cat.

WEST OF SKÓGAR

There are several places to stay at Ásólfsskáli, around 14km west of Skógar; and at Raufarfell, about 6km west of Skógar.

Seljavellir (☎ 487 8810; Raufarfell; sites per person 1kr600; ☎ Jun–Aug) This farm, 3km along Rte 242, has a lovely camp site with running water, toilet and showers, a geothermal pool and hot pots.

Hótel Edinborg (☎ 487 8011; www.islandia.is/thorn; Raufarfell; sb/s/d 1kr2500/9000/12,000) Near Drangshlið I is this tall tin-clad house with inviting

wooden en-suite rooms. Non-sleeping-bag prices include breakfast.

Drangshlið I (☎ 487 8868; drangshlid@sinnet.is; Raufarfell; s/d 1kr6800/13,900) At the foot of a green cliff full of nesting birds, this modern white farmhouse has large guest rooms, all with private bathroom, and a big, bright dining room for meals. Look out for the barns built into caves in the surrounding fields. Prices include breakfast. The friendly folk there were considering providing sleeping-bag accommodation – contact them for details.

Our pick **Country Hotel Anna** (☎ 487 8950; www.hotelanna.is; Ásólfsskáli; s/d summer 1kr11,100/15,200, winter 1kr6500/9500; ☎) Ooh, this place is nice! Its five en-suite rooms are furnished with antiques, embroidered bedspreads settle over big, comfy beds, and facilities include minifridges, kettles and satellite TV. The hotel has a Green Globe award for environmental goodness. Prices include breakfast, and evening meals are possible if prebooked. There's also a white-washed café (open 2pm to 8.30pm mid-June to August).

Getting There & Away

All buses from Reykjavík to Höfn or Vík stop at the Edda Hotel in Skógar (1kr3200, three hours).

SKÓGAR TO VÍK Í MÝRDAL Sólheimajökull

One of the easiest glacial tongues to reach is Sólheimajökull, which unfurls from the main Mýrdalsjökull icecap. A 5km bumpy dirt track (Rte 221) leads off the Ring Rd to a small car park; from there, the ice is approximately 800m away. You can scramble up onto the glacier, but keep an eye out for fissures and crevasses. The sand and gravel deposited by the rivulets running out of the end of the glacier are a definite no-go area because of quicksand.

Much better than slithering in normal shoes, you can strap on crampons and go for a proper walk up Sólheimajökull with the **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; www.mountainguide.is). Their Blue Ice Adventure (1kr3500 per person, 1½ hours, trips at 9am and 4pm; minimum age eight) or longer Sólheimajökull Exploration (1kr6900 per person, 3½ hours, 11.30am; minimum age 12) leave from the car park between June and August. The guides also do trips on Svínafellsjökull in Skaftafell National Park – see p289.

Mýrdalsjökull

The gorgeous glacier Mýrdalsjökull is Iceland's fourth-largest icecap, covering 700 sq km and reaching a thickness of almost 750m in places. The volcano Katla snoozes beneath, periodically blasting up through the ice to drown the coastal plain in a deluge of meltwater, sand and tephra (rock and other material blasted out from a volcano). Scientists predict that another eruption is due some time during the noughties.

ACTIVITIES

With the right equipment, treks are possible on the main icecap and on the fingerlike projection Sólheimajökull, close to Skógar (see p139). You can also walk to the icecap from the lovely Þakgil camp site (p142).

For Jeep, snowmobile and dogsled tours, turn off the Ring Rd and head 10km up Rte 222 to the mountain hut Sólheimaskli. Here you'll find **Arcanum** (☎ 487 1500; www.snow.is), who can take you bouncing over the glacier on one-hour snowmobiling trips (Ikr13,500/19,000 with one person/two people aboard), or on a super-Jeep tour over the ice. If you don't have a vehicle, they can pick you up from Vík (Ikr12,500), Skógar (Ikr7000) or just off Rte 1 (Ikr5000).

Although they have similar frostproof ears and thick furry coats, the dogs that pull the sleds at **Dogsledding.is** (☎ 487 7747, 863 8864; www.dogsledding.is) are Greenland dogs, not huskies! At the time of writing, the business was changing hands – contact the new owners for prices. Rides generally run between December and August.

TOURS

Various tour companies (see p80) offer trips from Reykjavík to Mýrdalsjökull.

SLEEPING & EATING

Sólheimajáleiga (☎ 487 1320; www.solfarm.sveit.is; sb/d Ikr2000/8100) This peaceful farmhouse, about 1km along Rte 222, is the closest accommodation to the glacier. It has eight smart double rooms, and there's a lovely garden. Breakfast costs Ikr900, and other meals can be requested.

Dyrhólaey

One of the south coast's most recognisable natural formations is the rocky plateau and huge stone sea arch at Dyrhólaey (10km west of Vík), which rise dramatically from the

surrounding plain. The promontory is a nature reserve and is particularly rich in bird life; however, it's closed to visitors during the nesting season. At other times you can visit its crashing black beaches and get the most awesome views from the top of the archway (best seen in its entirety from Reynisfjara – see below).

You can take a tour through the arch in an amphibious vehicle with **Dyrhólaeyjarferðir** (☎ 487 8500; www.dyrholaei.com; tours adult/under 14s Ikr3500/2500).

According to *Njál's Saga*, Kári – the only survivor of the fire that wiped out Njál's clan – had his farm here. Another Viking Age connection is the cave **Loftsalahellir**, reached by a track just before the causeway to Dyrhólaey, which was used for council meetings in saga times.

SLEEPING

Camping is prohibited on Dyrhólaey.

Hótel Dyrhólaey (☎ 487 1333; dyrholaei@islandia.is; s/d/tr Ikr9500/12,900/17,900) About 9km west of Vík at the farm Brekkur I, this large green guest-house has the usual big rooms that you find in all modern bungalow hotels in Iceland; some have great views of the coast. There's also a restaurant.

Reynisfjara

On the west side of Reynisfjall, the high ridge above Vík, a dirt road leads down to the black volcanic beach at Reynisfjara, which is backed by an incredible stack of **basalt columns**, which look like a giant church organ. The surrounding cliffs are full of caves formed from twisted and tortured basalt, and puffin chicks belly-flop off the cliffs here every summer. Immediately offshore are the sea stacks of **Reynisdrangur**. There are fabulous views west along the beach to the rock arch at Dyrhólaey.

VÍK Í MÝRDAL

pop 290

One of our favourite places in Iceland, Vík is a tiny strip of green wedged between the looming glacier Mýrdalsjökull and a battered beach of black sand and pebbles. It's a welcoming little community surrounded by natural wonders. The village started life as a fishing outpost, but a cooperative society was formed here in 1906 and is still Vík's biggest employer.

VILLI KNUDSEN'S HOTTEST VOLCANO

Personally, I've been waiting for the Katla volcano, underneath the Mýrdalsjökull glacier, to erupt for more than 30 years. Sometimes we thought the eruption might be beginning – like in 1982–83, we had earthquakes every single day for a year, and I had a camera there for months and months and months and months and months. But nothing happened.

But two years ago scientists saw signs of movement. And the earthquakes, which are normally on the eastern side, underneath the glacier, have been moving towards the west. This indicates that the water this time could come out of the glacier in more places.

After what happened in Asia [on 26 December 2004], people are getting more interested in tsunamis. Some eruptions of Katla in the past have created tidal waves which have boomeranged off Vestmannaeyjar and gone back to the town of Vík. Recent studies of the shore show that the water went much further inland than people previously thought.

The eruption is going to start with a big explosion, and there will be ashfall for many days – we don't expect any lava. The likelihood is there will be three floodings in the south and one to the west. Down by the town of Vík, the water will rise 100m to 150m. A lot of people will be stranded – rescue work will be very difficult. There's nowhere the people can go except to the next highest hill.

It's going to be a complicated eruption to film – and expensive! Because it's close to the sea, the air is very turbulent. I've had some nervous moments in planes there. The national TV station RÚV have a webcam by the side of Vík, so maybe you can see the flood happen [www.ruv.is/katla].

Thanks to Villi Knudsen, volcano chaser and film-maker, The Volcano Show, Reykjavík

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 487 1395; www.vik.is; Víkurbraut 28; ☎ 10.30am–1.30pm & 2.30–5pm Jun–Aug) is housed in the historic trading house Brydebúð. KB Banki has an ATM and foreign-exchange desk. The post office has internet access (Ikr600 per hour).

Sights & Activities

Vík's most famous sight is the cluster of sea stacks at **Reynisdrangur**, which rise from the ocean at the western end of the **black-sand beach** like sinister rocky fingers. The highest stack is 66m tall. The nearby cliffs are good for puffin watching. A highly recommended **walk** (upwards from the western end of Vík) takes you to the top of the ridge **Reynisfjall** (340m), which offers superb views along the coast.

The tin-clad house **Brydebúð** was built in Vestmannaeyjar in 1831 and moved to Vík in 1895. Today it houses the tourist office, the Halldórskaffi restaurant and a small **museum** (adult/under 16yr Ikr500/free; ☎ 10.30am–1.30pm & 2.30–5pm Jun–Aug), with displays on fishing, what it's like to live under the volcano Katla, and locally made church vestments.

Vík's **church** has some unusual red-and-white stained-glass windows in spiky geometrical shapes. The big souvenir shop **Vikurprjón** (☎ 487 1250; www.vikwool.is; Rte 1) is a coach-tour

hit – you can watch woolly jumpers being made here.

Vík has a small open-air **swimming pool** (☎ 487 1174; Mánabraut 3; adult/child Ikr300/150; ☎ 7.10am–9pm Mon–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat & Sun Jun–Aug, shorter hr winter).

Sleeping & Eating

Vík camp site (☎ 487 1466, 899 2406; sites per person Ikr600, cottages Ikr5000) The camp site sits under a grassy ridge at the eastern end of the village, just beyond the Edda Hótel. There's an octagonal building with cooking facilities, washing machine, toilets and free showers. Six-person farmhouse-style cottages are also available.

Norður-Vík Youth Hostel (☎ 487 1106; www.hostel.is; Suðurvíkurvegur; sb dm/sb d Ikr1800/3000; ☎ Apr–Oct) Vík's friendly hostel is this old beige house on the hill behind the village. Good facilities include guest lounge, kitchen, breakfast (Ikr800) and bike hire (per half-day/day Ikr1000/1500). It's usually booked out in summer.

Gistihús Arsalir (☎ 487 1400; simon@ismennt.is; Austurvegur 7; sb/s/d Ikr1900/4500/6000) There are spacious rooms with shared bathrooms (some with balconies) at this white house on the outskirts of the village, plus a kitchen and mountain-bike hire.

Guesthouse Puffin (Víkurbraut 24a; sb Ikr2600) This place has very thin bedroom walls but a great old

guest kitchen (check out the diagonally opening drawers) and a possibly haunted lounge. The guesthouse is attached to **Hótel Lundi** (following).

Hótel Lundi (☎ 487 1212; www.hotelpuffin.is; Víkurbraut 24-26; s/d with bathroom 1kr9850/14,300) This small old-fashioned family-run hotel has rooms with telephones and bathrooms, and a respectable restaurant; prices include breakfast.

Edda Hótel Vík í Mýrdal (☎ 444 4000; www.hoteledda.is; s/d 1kr10,300/12,900; ☹ May–mid-Sep; 📺) One of the three-star Edda Plus hotels, this serviceable modern place has good, clean rooms with phone, TV and en-suite bathroom. There's a restaurant with ocean views, and free internet in the dining room.

Halldórskaffi (☎ 487 1202; Austurvegur 18; mains 1kr400-1800; ☹ 11am-11pm Sun-Fri, to 2am Sat Jun-Aug, 6-11pm Fri, to 2am Sat Sep-May) In the same building as the tourist office, this recommended place serves pizzas, burgers, sandwiches, fish mains and beer in an old-world wooden dining room.

Apart from Halldórskaffi, diners have the choice of the restaurants at the Edda Hótel and Hótel Lundi. For cheap eats with a view of Reynisdrangur, head to the restaurant-grill **Vikurskáli** (☎ 487 1230; snacks 1kr790-1800; ☹ to 9pm) at the Esso petrol station, which also has a **Vín Búð** (☹ 5-6pm Mon-Thu, 4-7pm Fri). Self-caterers can make use of the large **Kjarval supermarket** (☎ 487 1250; Víkurbraut 4) near Brydebúð.

Getting There & Away

Vík lies on the main bus route between Höfn and Reykjavík, and buses stop at the Esso petrol station. From June to mid-September, the bus from Reykjavík leaves at 8.30am, stopping at places of interest, and returns from Vík at 12.30pm (one-way 1kr3800, five hours). In winter, the bus runs from Reykjavík at 12.30pm on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday only, returning at 4pm; this direct journey is a shorter 3¼ hours.

EAST OF VÍK Mælifell

On the edge of the glacier, this 642m-high ridge and the countryside around it are just spectacular. The simple but idyllic camp site at **Þakgil** (☎ 853 4889; www.thakgil.is; sites per person 1kr600; ☹ Jun & Jul), a green bowl among stark mountains, makes a convenient base from which to explore. You can walk up Mælifell, or even get up onto the glacier – a path leads

to the nunatak (hill or mountain completely surrounded by a glacier), Huldufjöll. You can drive to Þakgil, 14km along a rough dirt road (Rte 214), which branches off Rte 1 about 5km east of Vík, or there are two walking paths from Vík.

Country Hótel Höfðabrekka (☎ 487 1208; www.hofdabrekka.is; s/d 1kr11,100/15,300; 📺) At the start of Rte 214, this is a large and reputedly haunted hotel! It offers tasteful wood-panelled rooms with en suite, four hot tubs, a guest kitchen and a good restaurant (open from 6pm to 10pm; bookings necessary in winter). Internet access costs 1kr300 per 20 minutes.

Mýrdalssandur

The vast black lava sand flats of Mýrdalssandur, just east of Vík, are formed from material washed out from underneath the glacier Mýrdalsjökull. This 700-sq-km area of sand is bleak and desolate, and apparently lifeless, but arctic foxes (which have a black coat in summer) and sea birds are common sights here. To the south of Rte 1, the small peak of **Hjörleifshöfði** (231m) rises above the sands and offers good views towards Vestmannaeyjar. On the other side of Rte 1, the green hill of **Hafursey** (582m) is another possible destination for walks from Vík. As you head east towards Höfn, look out for stone cairns constructed by early travellers to mark safe routes across the sands.

VESTMANNAEYJAR

Black and brooding, Vestmannaeyjar forms 15 eye-catching silhouettes off the southern shore. The islands were formed by submarine volcanoes around 11,000 years ago, except for sulky-looking Surtsey, the archipelago's newest addition, which rose from the waves in 1963.

Several islands are scattered with summer huts, used by bird hunters and egg collectors, but Heimaey is the only inhabited one. Its little town and sheltered harbour lie between dramatic *klettur* (escarpments) and two ominous volcanoes – conical Helgafell and blood-red Eldfell. The latter has only been around for 34 years – it was created during the huge five-month eruption that buried parts of the town under 30 million tonnes of lava. Heimaey is famous for its puffins – around 10 million birds come here to breed – and for



Þjóðhátíð, Iceland's biggest outdoor festival, held in August.

Maybe it's the relative isolation or maybe it's because everyone lives on top of a temperamental volcano – whatever the reason, Heimaey is one of the friendliest places you'll find. It's also a self-sufficient working town – the islands supply around 15% of Iceland's fish catch.

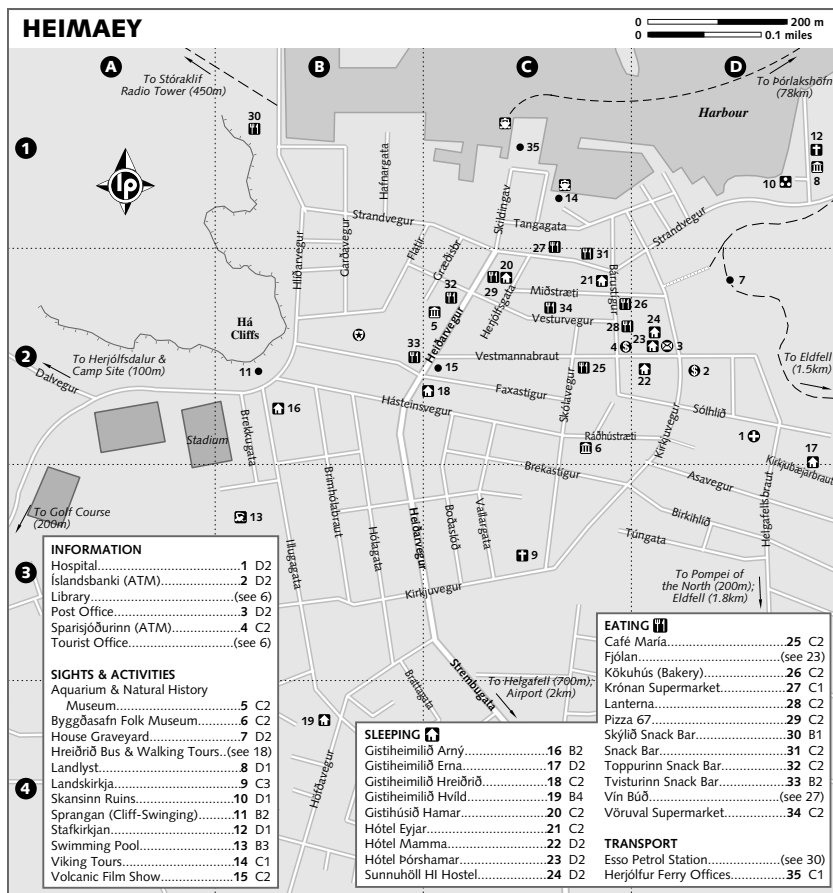
The ferry *Herjólfur* provides daily connections to Þorlákshöfn on the mainland. It carries cars, but Heimaey is small enough to explore on foot. There are also flights here from Reykjavík and Bakki (near Hvolsvöllur). An undersea tunnel was discussed recently, but the 100-billion-krónur price tag looks a little high.

HEIMAËY pop 4170

Heimaey enjoys a spectacular setting, squeezed between dramatic cliffs to the west, and the two looming volcanic cones to the east. It has better tourist facilities than many towns on the mainland.

History

The island has had a turbulent and bloody history. The *Landnámabók* recounts that Ingólfur Arnarson originally came to Iceland with his blood-brother Hjörleifur, who was murdered by his Irish slaves (Westmen) shortly after landing. The slaves then fled to Heimaey, but Ingólfur hunted them down and killed them all.



Over the centuries the island was a marauders' favourite. The English raided Heimaey throughout the 15th century, building Iceland's stone fort Skansinn as their HQ. In 1627 Heimaey suffered the most awful attack by Algerian pirates, who went on a killing spree around the island, murdering 36 islanders and kidnapping 242 more (almost three-quarters of the population). The rest managed to escape by abseiling down cliffs or hiding in caves along the west coast. Those who were kidnapped were taken as slaves to north Africa; years later, 27 islanders had their freedom bought for them...and had a long walk home.

The volcanoes that formed Heimaey have come close to destroying the island on several occasions. The most famous eruption in mod-

ern times began unexpectedly at 1.45am on 23 January 1973, when a vast fissure burst open, gradually mutating into the volcano Eldfell, and prompting the island's evacuation.

Information

The summer **tourist office** (☎ 481 3555; www.vestmannaeyjar.is; Ráðhústræti; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun May-Aug) is in the same building as the library and folk museum, and is well signposted from the harbour. The good brochure *Hiking High in Vestmannaeyjar* shows the main walking paths on Heimaey island.

There are **Sparisjóðurinn** (☎ 488 2100; Bárustigur 15) and **Íslandsbanki** (☎ 440 3000; Kirkjuvegur 23) banks with ATMs near the post office.

THE 1973 ERUPTION

Without warning, at 1.45am on 23 January 1973 a mighty explosion blasted through the winter's night as a 1.5km-long volcanic fissure split the eastern side of the island. The eruption area gradually became concentrated into a growing crater cone, which fountained lava and ash into the sky.

Normally the island's fishing boats would have been out at sea, but a force-12 gale had prevented them from sailing the previous afternoon. Now calm weather and a harbourful of boats allowed the island's 5200 inhabitants to be evacuated to the mainland. Incredibly, there was just a single fatality: an alleged drug addict who attempted to loot the town pharmacy and died of smoke and gas inhalation.

Over the next five months more than 30 million tonnes of lava poured over Heimaey, destroying 360 houses and creating a brand-new mountain, the red cinder cone Eldfell. One third of the town was buried beneath the lava flow, and the island increased in size by 2.5 sq km.

As the eruption continued, advancing lava threatened to close the harbour and make the evacuation permanent – without a fishing industry, there would have been no point in returning. In an attempt to slow down the inexorable flow of molten rock, firefighters hosed the lava with over six million tonnes of cold sea water. The lava halted just 175m short of the harbour mouth – actually improving the harbour by creating extra shelter!

The islanders were billeted with friends and family on the mainland, watching the fireworks and waiting to see if they could ever go home. Finally, the eruption finished five months later at the end of June. Two-thirds of the islanders returned to face the mighty clean-up operation.

Internet access is available for 1kr200 per hour at the **library** (☎ 481 1184; Ráðhústræti; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 5pm Fri year-round, plus 1-4pm Sat mid-Sep–mid-May).

Sights

FISKA-OG NÁTTÚRUGRIPASAFN

The **Aquarium & Natural History Museum** (☎ 481 1997; Heiðarvegur 12; adult/6-12yr 1kr400/200; ☎ 11am-5pm mid-May–mid-Sep, 3-5pm Sun mid-Sep–mid-May) has an interesting collection of stuffed birds and animals, plus fishtanks of hideous Icelandic fish and a live video link to a puffin colony. The museum acts as a hospital for puffin chicks.

BYGGÐASAFN

Housed in Heimaey library, this **folk museum** (Byggðasafn; ☎ 481 1194; Ráðhústræti; adult/6-12yr 1kr400/200; ☎ 11am-5pm mid-May–mid-Sep, by arrangement other times) has loads of local-history displays, including fascinating photos of Heimaey's 1973 evacuation. Note the cabinet of Nazi regalia, from Vestmannaeyjar's short-lived branch of the Nazi Party. The items on display were deposited anonymously at the museum in the middle of the night!

VOLCANIC FILM SHOW

The explosive hour-long **show** (☎ 481 1045; Heiðarvegur; admission 1kr600; ☎ 11am, 2pm, 3.30pm & 9pm mid-Jun–mid-Aug, by request rest of yr) plays at the

local cinema, and includes footage of Surtsey, the 1973 eruption and puffin rappelling. The film quality is naturally rather old and snowy, but it's fascinating stuff.

In the foyer there's some useful information about walking trails.

SKANSINN

This lovely green area by the sea has several unique historical sights. The oldest structure on the island was **Skansinn**, a 15th-century fort built to defend the harbour (not too successfully – when Algerian pirates arrived in 1627, they simply landed on the other side of the island). Its walls were swallowed up by the 1973 lava, but some have been rebuilt. Above them, you can see the remains of the town's **old water tanks**, also crushed by molten rock.

A shocking 80% of Heimaey's babies once died at birth, until in the 1840s an island woman, Sólveig, was sent abroad to be trained as a midwife. The tiny wooden house **Landlyst** (adult/child 1kr400/200; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug, by arrangement other times) was Sólveig's maternity hospital, and today contains a small display of her blood-letting equipment and other 19th-century medical paraphernalia.

Also here is the bitumen-coated **Stafkirkjan** (admission free; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug), a reconstruction of a medieval wooden stave church. It was presented to Heimaey by the Norwegian

government in 2000 to celebrate 1000 years of Christianity. You can deafen yourself by ringing the bell on the way out.

HOUSE GRAVEYARD & POMPEI OF THE NORTH

Four hundred buildings lie buried under the 1973 lava. On the edge of the flow is an eerie **graveyard** where beloved homes rest in peace. **'Pompei of the North'** (www.pompeinordursins.is) is a modern 'archaeological' excavation in which 10 houses are being dug up. So far, the crumpled concrete remains of No 25 Suðurvegur have been unearthed.

STÓRAKLIF

The top of the craggy precipice **Stóráklif** is a treacherous 30-minute climb from behind the Esso petrol station at the harbour. The trail starts on the obvious 4WD track; as it gets steeper you're 'assisted' by ropes and chains (don't trust them completely), but it's worth the terror for the outstanding views. Up there are a weather station and radio tower.

ELDFELL & HELGAFELL

The 221m-high **volcanic cone** Eldfell appeared from nowhere in the early hours of 23 January 1973 (see the boxed text, p145). Once the fireworks finished, heat from the volcano provided Heimaey with geothermal energy from 1976 to 1985. Today the ground is still hot enough in places to bake bread or char wood. Eldfell is an easy climb from town, up the collapsed northern wall of the crater; stick to the path, as the islanders are trying to save their latest volcano from erosion.

Neighbouring **volcano** Helgafell (226m) erupted 5000 years ago. Its cinders are grassed over today, and you can scramble up here without much difficulty from the football pitch on the road to the airport.

ELDFELLSHRAUN

Known as Eldfellshraun, the new land created by the 1973 lava flow is now crisscrossed with a maze of hiking tracks that run down to the fort at Skansinn and the 'house graveyard', and all around the bulge of the raw, red eastern coast. Here you'll find small black-stone beaches, a lava garden (Gaujulundur) and a lighthouse.

HERJÓLFSDALUR & THE WEST COAST

Sheltered by an extinct volcano, green and grassy Herjólfssdalur was the **home of Vestman-**

naeyjar's first settler, Herjólfur Barðursson. Excavations have revealed remains of a Norse house (not the bizarre construction in the bowl of the volcano, but a more unassuming site near the golf course). The island's camp site is also here.

On the cliffs west of the golf course, there's a little **monument** to the 200 people who converted to Mormonism and departed for Utah in the 19th century.

Several perilous tracks climb the almost sheer slopes around Herjólfssdalur and run along the top of Norðklettur to **Stafnsnes**. The ascent is exhilarating, but there are some sheer drops. A gentler walk runs south along the western coast of the island, passing above numerous lava caves where local people hid from the pirates in 1627. At **Ofanleitiðshamar** hundreds of puffins nest in the cliffs, and you can often get within metres for close-up photos.

STÓRHÖFÐI

A windy meteorological station has been built on Stórhöfði, the rocky **peninsula** at the southern end of Heimaey. It's linked to the main island by a narrow isthmus (created by lava from Helgafell's eruption 5000 years ago), and there are good views from the summit. It's possible to scramble down to the boulder beach at **Brimurð** and continue along the cliffs on the east coast, returning by the main road just before the airport. From June to August the sea cliffs at **Litlihöfði** are a good place to watch puffins.

LANDSKIRKJA

The lava stopped just short of the Landskirkja **church** in the middle of town. The church's carved wooden doors feature scenes from Vestmannaeyjar's history.

Activities

Heimaey's large indoor saltwater **swimming pool** (adult/child 1k300/150; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) has outdoor hot pots and a gym.

Golfers can hire clubs at the 18-hole **golf course** (☎ 481 2363; www.eyjar.is/golf) in the Herjólfssdalur valley; green fees are 1kr3000.

Horse riding is available through **Hestaleiga Gunnars** (☎ 481 1478, 861 1476) at the farm Lukka, near the airport.

In summer you can see locals practising the ancient art of **sprangan** (cliff-swinging) – an essential skill for egg-collectors and puffin-hunters – on the cliffs between the harbour and Herjólfssdalur.

PUFFIN FOR TEA?

These tiny, colourful birds have been an important source of food in the Vestmannaeyjar since Viking times. Puffins are still hunted here in the traditional way: either by climbing the cliffs or by fishing them out of the air with a long net called a *hafur*. They end up on the menu in most Heimaey restaurants, either roasted or smoked. Apparently they're very tasty, although some people might be traumatised by the idea of digesting these sociable little characters.

Of course, not all the locals regard puffins as free lunch. Every August, Heimaey is bombarded by puffin chicks attempting to fly for the first time. They're supposed to be heading out to sea, but some get confused by the lights and end up round the harbour. Many locals gather up the chicks and release them by hand at the water's edge.

For more on puffins, see the boxed text, p47.

Tours

From May to August, **Viking Tours** (☎ 488 4884; www.vikingtours.is; small boat harbour, off Ágísgata; adult/9-14yr 1kr2900/1900) run daily two-hour **boat tours**, leaving at 10.30am and 3.30pm. They bounce right around the island, slowing for the big bird-nesting sites on the south coast, and sailing into the sea-cave Klettshellir, where the boat driver gets to show off his saxophone skills! His wife, Unnur, runs recommended two-hour bus tours at 8am and 1pm in summer (possible out of season if prebooked). Vikings are also planning four-hour boat trips around Surtsey – contact them for details.

The friendly folk at Hreiðrið guesthouse run **walking tours** (per person 1kr800, 1kr5000 minimum) when there's a group, and two-hour **bus tours** (1kr2200) of the island on Tuesday and Wednesday from June to August: you'll get to sample bread cooked in the still-smoking ash of Eldfell.

Festivals & Events

The country's biggest outdoor festival is the three-day **Þjóðhátíð** (People's Festival; admission 1kr9900), held at the festival ground at Herjólfssdalur over the first weekend in August. It involves music, dancing, fireworks, a big bonfire, gallons of drunken sex (it's something of a teen rite of passage). Icelanders seem to have mixed feelings about the festival, particularly as they get older, but that doesn't stop upwards of 11,000 people attending. Extra flights are laid on from Reykjavík, but you should book transport and accommodation far in advance.

Historically, the festival was first celebrated when bad weather prevented Vestmannaeyjar people from joining the mainland celebrations of Iceland's first constitution (1 July 1874). The islanders held their own festival a month later, and it's been an annual tradition ever since.

Sleeping

Heimaey has a camp site, several hotels and loads of guesthouses, but they fill up fast after the ferry arrives. Most places drop their rates by around 20% in winter.

CAMPING & HOSTEL

Camp site (☎ 692 6952; sites per person 1kr700; ☎ Jun-Aug) Cupped in the bowl of an extinct volcano, this dandelion-dotted camping ground has hot showers, a laundry room and cooking facilities. The wind can get strong.

ourpick Sunnuhöll HI Hostel (☎ 481 2900; www.hotelvestmannaeyjar.is; Vestmannabraut 28b; sb from 1kr2200, s/d 1kr4200/6200) Sunnuhöll hostel looks and feels just like a little guesthouse! Its plain, neat single and double rooms (no dorms) have TVs, and there's a guest kitchen and sitting room. You can also use the laundry in Hótel Mamma across the road. Hótel Þórshamar acts as the reception.

GUESTHOUSES

Gistiheimilið Erna (☎ 481 2112; www.simnet.is/gisting; Kirkjubæjarbraut 15; sb/made-up bed/apt 1kr1800/3000/12,000) On the edge of the 1973 lava flow, Erna is a great budget choice. It's a friendly family home with cooking facilities, laundry, a Jacuzzi, bikes to borrow, and a TV in every room. The apartment fits eight people.

Gistiheimilið Hreiðrið (☎ 481 1045; <http://tourist.eyjar.is>; Faxastigur 33; sb/s/d 1kr1800/3500/5800) Run by the helpful volcano-show people, Ruth and Sigurgeir, this winning guesthouse has a family feel. Features include wall-to-wall puffins, a well-stocked kitchen, a cosy TV lounge and bike hire. Breakfast (1kr800) is available year-round. They also run walking and bus tours in summer, and can run you to the far end of the island for 1kr500.

Gistiheimilið Hvild (☎ 481 1230; www.simnet.is/hvild; Höfðavegur 16; sb 1kr2000, s/d/tr 1kr3500/6000/8000)

A friendly family owns this large green house, which has smallish guest rooms with shared bathroom, a TV lounge, and a peaceful garden. There's no breakfast, but there is a guest kitchen where you can prepare your own.

Gistiheimilið Arný (☎ /fax 481 2082; Illugagata 7; sb/s/d lkr2800/4200/6900) A charming couple runs this neat suburban house, which also offers guests a kitchen and washing machine, and packed lunches by arrangement. Upstairs rooms have epic views, and the owner prays for a sound sleep for all her guests!

Hótel Mamma (☎ 481 2900; www.hotelvestmannaeyjar.is; Vestmannabraut 25; s/d/tr lkr5550/7900/10,500) This is a cheery, peaceful Hótel Þórshamar-owned guesthouse with spacious rooms, all with TV and shared bathroom. There are two guest kitchens and a laundry in the basement. The attic steps are extremely small and steep – avoid if you're at all clumsy.

Gistihúsið Hamar (☎ 481 2900; www.hotelvestmannaeyjar.is; Herjólfsgata 4; s/d/tr lkr7460/9990/12,990; ☎) Also owned by Þórshamar, this place has large, modern en-suite rooms and wireless internet access. Reception for both Hamar and Hótel Mamma is at Þórshamar.

HOTELS

Hótel Eyjar (☎ 481 3636; www.hoteleyjar.eyjar.is; Bárustigur 2; s/d lkr6200/9400) This hotel, on the corner of Strandvegur, offers huge and comfortable apartment-style rooms with bathrooms, kitchens and lounges – basically they're suites at room prices! The hotel bar is quite a popular spot for watching big-screen football matches.

Hótel Þórshamar (☎ 481 2900; www.hotelvestmannaeyjar.is; Vestmannabraut 28; s/d/ste lkr10,290/15,050/20,210; ☎) Iceland's first cinema is now a hotel, with pale, pleasant rooms and facilities including a sauna, hot tubs and a snooker room. Of the older rooms, 209 is best, tucked in the corner with its own balcony; otherwise, go for the three stylish new suites. Breakfast included.

Eating

Kökuhús (Bárustigur 7; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-4pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) This is a great sit-down café-bakery, with a constant flow of people through the doors. It sells hot soup, buns and sandwiches (which can be made to order).

Pizza 67 (☎ 481 1567; Heiðarvegur 5; pizzas lkr950-2000) Feathered friends are firmly off the menu: chomp pizzas and crunchy garlic bread instead in a relaxed, publike atmosphere.

Oh my God! I woke up on the mainland, in a skip. I don't know how I got there. Or where my shoes had gone.'

Icelandic Einar reminisces about Þjóðhátíð

Café Maria (☎ 481 3160; Skólavegur 1; mains lkr1400-3500; ☎ 11.30am-11.30pm Sun-Thu, 11.30am-1am Fri & Sat) A stuffed gannet surveys proceedings at this pleasant café-restaurant, which is quiet during the day but busy at night. Pizzas, burgers, savoury crepes, and fresh-fish and meat mains are served here – plus, yes, fresh puffin.

Lanterna (☎ 481 3393; Bárustigur 11; mains lkr1500-3500; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-10.30pm) This cosy wood-panelled place, decorated with local black-and-white photos, specialises in Vestmannaeyjar delicacies and, em, Wiener schnitzel. The brave can try puffin in a sweet sauce; catch of the day costs lkr1500.

our pick Fjölán (☎ 481 3663; Vestmannabraut 28; mains from lkr2000; ☎ 7am-11pm) This upmarket restaurant lacks atmosphere (although we like the glitzy gold columns!), but it comes up trumps on the food. It serves the best fish in Heimaey, along with other traditional homemade dishes. There's also a buffet breakfast on offer.

Heimaey has several cheap petrol-station snack bars where you can get French fries, hot dogs and burgers for between lkr300 and lkr1000. For self-catering, there's the igloo-like **Vöruval supermarket** (☎ 481 3184; Vesturvegur 18; ☎ 9am-7pm daily), and two streets away is **Krónan supermarket** (Strandvegur; ☎ 11am-7pm). The local **Vín Búð** (☎ 481 1301; ☎ 12.30-6pm Mon-Thu, 11am-7pm Fri, 11am-2pm Sat) is also on Strandvegur.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Vestmannaeyjar airport is about 3km from Heimaey – a **taxi** (☎ 698 2038) will cost about lkr1000, or you could walk it in 20 minutes. Scheduled flights to Heimaey are offered by **Landsflug** (☎ 481 3300; www.airiceland.is), which flies two or three times daily from Reykjavík's domestic airport. The flight lasts 25 minutes, and the fare is lkr7200 for a full-price one-way ticket.

Flugfélag Vestmannaeyja (☎ 481 3255; www.eyjflug.is) runs charter flights from the small airstrips at Bakki, Selfoss, Skógar and Hella. Most flights require a minimum of five persons.

FERRY

The ferry **Herjólfur** (☎ 481 2800; www.herjolfur.is) sails from Þorlákshöfn (on the mainland) at noon and 7.30pm, and returns from Heimaey at 8.15am and 4pm daily throughout the year. The boat can carry cars, but Heimaey is so small it's scarcely worth bringing one. The crossing takes 2¾ hours. The one-way fare per adult/child 12 to 15 years is lkr1800/900. Motorbikes/cars cost an additional lkr1200/1800.

If the sea looks rough, a Vestmannaeyjar tip is to book a cabin, dose yourself with seasickness tablets, and try to sleep your way through the trip.

The bus service between Reykjavík and Þorlákshöfn (lkr1050, one hour) is run to connect with the *Herjólfur*. It leaves the city at 11am and 5.50pm daily, and it leaves Þorlákshöfn at 11.10am and 7pm.

Getting Around

The whole island can be comfortably explored on foot. If you need a taxi, call ☎ 698 2038.

SURTSEY

In November 1963 the fishing boat *Ísleifi II* noticed something odd – the sea south of Heimaey appeared to be on fire. Rather than flee,

the boat drew up for a closer look – and its crew were the first to set eyes on the world's newest island.

The incredible subsea eruption lasted for 4½ years, throwing up cinders and ash to form a 2.7-sq-km piece of real estate (since eroded to 1.4 sq km). What else could it be called but Surtsey (Surtur's Island), after the Norse fire giant who will burn the world to ashes at Ragnarök.

It was decided that the sterile island would make a perfect laboratory, giving a unique insight into how plants and animals colonise new territory. Surtsey is therefore totally off limits to visitors (unless you're a scientist specialising in biocolonisation). Just so you know, though, in the race for the new land, the blue-green algae *Anabaena variabilis* got there first.

You can get a vicarious view of Surtsey's thunderous birth by visiting the Volcano Show (p75) in Reykjavík, or the Volcanic Film Show (p145) on Heimaey. You can also charter a flight over the islands with Flugfélag Vestmannaeyja (see opposite), while Viking Tours (p147) may be running boat trips around it in 2007.

And here's a little conundrum for you: what are fossils doing on this newly minted island?

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