

West Iceland



Little visited, under appreciated and yet spectacularly scenic, west Iceland is in many ways a microcosm of what is on offer elsewhere in the country. Add the fact that it's easily accessible from Reykjavík and it becomes an ideal destination for shorter trips. You can avoid the long days on the road that awaits those screaming around the Ring Rd and still get to see glaciers, fjords, wild volcanic landscapes and some excellent museums. Thanks to the region's low-key presence on the tourist radar, you'll get most of these sights entirely to yourself.

Along the coast the glacial landscape is particularly striking with alternating fjords and peninsulas scattered with isolated fishing villages. Inland, dramatic lava fields are dotted with impressive waterfalls and incredible lava caves. West Iceland's most memorable feature, though, is the Snæfellsnes peninsula, a rugged and mountainous finger of land boasting jagged peaks, beautiful beaches, steaming geothermal fields, excellent bird-watching and its very own icecap, Snæfellsjökull.

Historical links are strong, with the *Laxdæla* and *Egil's* sagas sprouting from this area and the remnants of Viking farms still visible. The Settlement Centre in Borgarnes offers a fascinating insight into this period, and the medieval study centre in Reykholt gives a glimpse of the life and times of one of Iceland's most beloved historians, Snorri Sturluson.

Whether you're in search of the inspiration behind Iceland's sagas, wild and otherworldly scenery, a glimpse of the biggest mammals on earth or adrenaline-pumping activities, west Iceland offers an incredibly diverse range of highlights within a manageable distance.

TOP FIVE

- Explore Iceland's subterranean world in the lava caves of **Viðgelmir, Surtshellir and Stefánshellir** (p157)
- Breathe deep as you take in the incongruous golden sands and turquoise water of **Skarðsvik beach** (p165)
- Get out on foot to explore the wild volcanic landscapes and dramatic ice floes at the western end of **Snæfellsnes** (p158)
- Drive through the remote and alien landscape of the **Kaldidalur valley** (p158)
- Step back in time and experience utter tranquillity with a visit to the traditional island of **Flatey** (p161)



Getting There & Around

If driving take Rte 1 west out of Reykjavík to reach west Iceland. Most roads in the area are paved and driving conditions are good. West Iceland also has good public-transport connections, with regular services from Reykjavík to Akranes, Borgarnes, Reykholt and Búðardalur, as well as daily buses to Stykkishólmur, Grundarfjörður and in summer to Ólafsvík and Hellissandur-Rif.

HVALFJÖRÐUR

If you've got plenty of time it's worth taking the 80km scenic route around Hvalfjörður rather than the 5.7km-long tunnel that runs beneath its waters. The fjord offers good hiking and fishing and is home to Iceland's highest waterfall. In summer there's also a good chance of spotting whales from the shore.

Sights

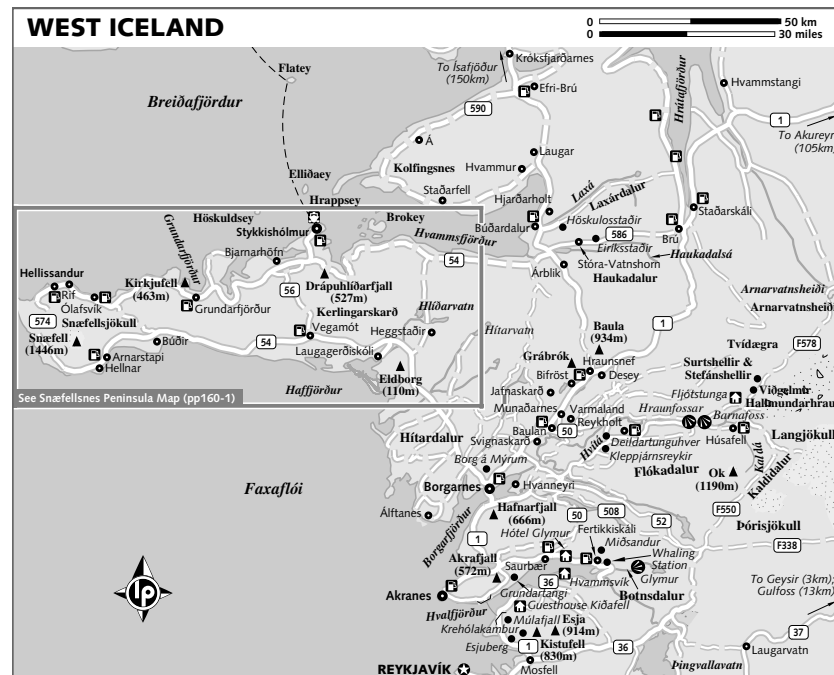
Dramatic **Esja** (914m), on the southern side of the fjord, is a great spot for wilderness hiking. The trail to the summit begins from the old farm Esjuberg, site of Iceland's first church, and ascends via the 850m spur Krehólakambur

and 830m Kistufell. To get here, turn off Rte 1 just north of Mosfellsbær.

For a more leisurely walk, a 5km trail runs up the Botnsdalur valley at the head of the fjord to **Glymur**, Iceland's highest waterfall (198m). Set in a deep, short canyon, the waterfall is at its most dramatic after heavy rain or snow-melt – in a dry period it can be a little underwhelming.

As you join the north shore of the fjord you'll pass the Miðsandur NATO Fuel Depot, once the site of Iceland's main **whaling station**. In 1989 protesters sank two of Iceland's whaling boats and sabotaged the plant, forcing Iceland to finally submit to the international moratorium on whaling. Although there's little to see today, grisly pictures of whale processing in operation are on display at the Olis petrol station at Fertikkiskáli, 4km further west. With increasing support for the pro-whaling lobby internationally (see p152), it's feared that the station may some day come back into operation.

Just past the petrol station at **Saurbær**, the local church is worth a look for its beautiful stained-glass work. Built in memory of



TO WHALE OR NOT TO WHALE?

In 1986 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) introduced a worldwide ban on commercial whaling; Iceland, however, decided to continue hunting. Under the auspices of a 'scientific research programme' the country's trawlers headed out to sea and killed 90 cetaceans in the following three years. Quite where the scientific research came in was never fully explained, as the whale meat was sold to restaurants in Iceland and Japan, and the carcasses were made into pet food, vitamins and lubricating oil – all of which had cheaper and more environmentally sound substitutes.

International pressure and direct action by conservationists finally forced Iceland to call a halt to its whaling activities in 1989. Iceland quit the IWC in protest. By 2002 whaling was back on the Icelandic agenda and they slinked back into the organisation and attempted to push through a proposal to slaughter 100 minke whales, 100 fin whales and 50 sei whales as part of a so-called 'feasibility study' to research the effect of whales on the marine environment.

With support from pro-whaling Norway and Japan, Iceland passed the motion by one vote in August 2003. Conservationists the world over were stunned and the IWC itself issued a formal protest, backed by members of the international scientific community and Iceland's tourism industry. Iceland's new image as a sanctuary for the magnificent creatures had created a whale-watching industry drawing 82,000 visitors to the country annually and generating US\$27 million for the Icelandic economy – far more than commercial whaling ever did.

Despite this, the hunt resumed and conservationists from all over the world flocked to Iceland to protest. To appease the situation the Icelandic government promised that all whales would be caught outside whale-watching areas – that was until the first kill occurred in September, right in the main whale-watching area south of Reykjavík.

In spite of international condemnation, Iceland and Japan continued to hunt whales under the auspices of scientific research and Norway ignored the ban altogether. In the hope of eventually taking control of the IWC, these pro-whaling nations spent the following years encouraging small and developing nations to join the IWC and investing in their fisheries industries. By June 2006 they had garnered enough extra support for their policies to push through a resolution supporting a return to commercial whaling. Although the 33-32 vote left the pro-whaling members far from the 75% majority needed to overturn the 1986 ban, their campaign gained serious momentum and the anti-whaling lobby was dealt a serious blow.

Three months later Iceland decided to resume whale-meat exports banned by the UN's Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) agreement. Iceland (along with Norway and Japan) has conveniently exempted itself from the CITES restrictions and has begun exporting to the Faeroes, an area not covered by CITES. It seemed only a matter of time before the country decided to flout the international ban altogether.

The swiftness of Iceland's decision surprised many, however. By mid-October the Icelandic government announced its plans to resume commercial whaling, granting 39 licences to commercial hunters – 30 for minke whales and nine for the endangered fin whale. Within a week of the announcement three fin whales had been killed. While pro-whalers cite cultural traditions, creation of jobs and adverse effects on the cod stock as reasons to resume the hunt, there seems to be little evidence to support their claims. Recent opinion polls show that there is little or no market for whale meat, and there is a dearth of scientific evidence to show that whales significantly contribute to the depletion of fish stocks. Most bewildering of all, economic predictions suggest that commercial whaling would be likely to generate only a fifth of the income currently provided by whale-watching tours.

Few understand why the Icelandic government has given in to such a small interest group in the face of such compelling evidence against the resumption of the hunt. Regardless, it looks as though the battle to save the whale is right back on the agenda.

For the latest on this controversial issue, visit the following websites:

Greenpeace <http://whales.greenpeace.org>

International Whaling Commission www.iwcoffice.org

Ocean Alliance www.oceanalliance.org

Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society www.wdcs.org

Hallgrímur Pétursson, who composed Iceland's most widely known religious work, *50 Passion Hymns*, the church is only slightly more modest than Reykjavík's Hallgrímsskirkja, also named after the composer.

Sleeping & Eating

Hvammsvík (☎ 566 7023; www.hvammsvik.is; sites per tent 1kr500; ☽ Jun-Aug) On the southern side of the fjord you can stay at this beautifully situated recreation centre set right on the water at the foot of a sweeping slope. It's a dramatic place offering a nine-hole golf course (1kr1000 per day) and kayaking (three-hour tours 1kr4500).

Guesthouse Kíðafell (☎ 566 6096; www.dagfinnur.is/kidafell; sb/s/d May-Sep 1kr2500/4200/7900, Oct-Apr 1kr2000/3500/6500) For more comfort, try this farmhouse offering pleasant accommodation in wood-panelled rooms. Breakfast (1kr900), evening meals (1kr2000) and horse riding (one hour 1kr2300) are also available.

Hótel Glymur (☎ 430 3100; www.hotelglymur.is; s/d/tr May-Oct 1kr16,900/23,900/30,400, Nov-Apr 1kr14,900/18,900/25,400) On the northern side of the fjord, this sleek hotel offers luxurious, contemporary-styled minisuites. Giant windows with great views, abstract art and swish bathrooms are on offer, as well as a huge open-plan restaurant, a library and lounge and two outdoor hot pots looking out over the fjord.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport around Hvalfjörður, so you'll need your own vehicle to get here. Coming from Reykjavík, take Rte 47 just before the tunnel under the fjord. If you take the tunnel on Rte 1 the toll is currently 1kr1000/400 per car/motorcycle. Cyclists aren't permitted to use the tunnel.

AKRANES

pop 5900

Set under the imposing concave plateau Akrafjall (572m), the pleasant town of Akranes lies at the tip of the peninsula separating Hvalfjörður from Borgarfjörður. According to the Icelandic history text the *Landnámabók*, the town was settled in around 880 by a group of Irish hermits, but today fish processing and cement production are the main industries. Home to an excellent museum, a decent beach and some lovely old wooden buildings, the town is worth a brief detour on the trip west.

Information

The friendly **tourist office** (☎ 431 5566; www.visitakranes.is; ☽ 10am-5pm mid-May–mid-Sep, 1-5pm mid-Sep–mid-May) is based at the museum centre. You'll find the post office and several banks with ATMs on Kirkjubraut, the main street.

Sights & Activities

AKRANES MUSEUM CENTRE

The town's main attraction is the engaging **Museum Centre** (☎ 431 5566; www.museum.is; adult/under 16yr 1kr500/free; ☽ 10am-5pm mid-May–mid-Sep, 1-5pm mid-Sep–mid-May), which is full of nautical relics, crystals, fossils, tales of sporting heroes and local lore. Outside, you can explore a restored boathouse, a drying shed, a church and several historic houses, and take a look at a collection of fishing boats, including the cutter *Sigurfari*. The museum is about 1km east of the centre, just off Grádagrund.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

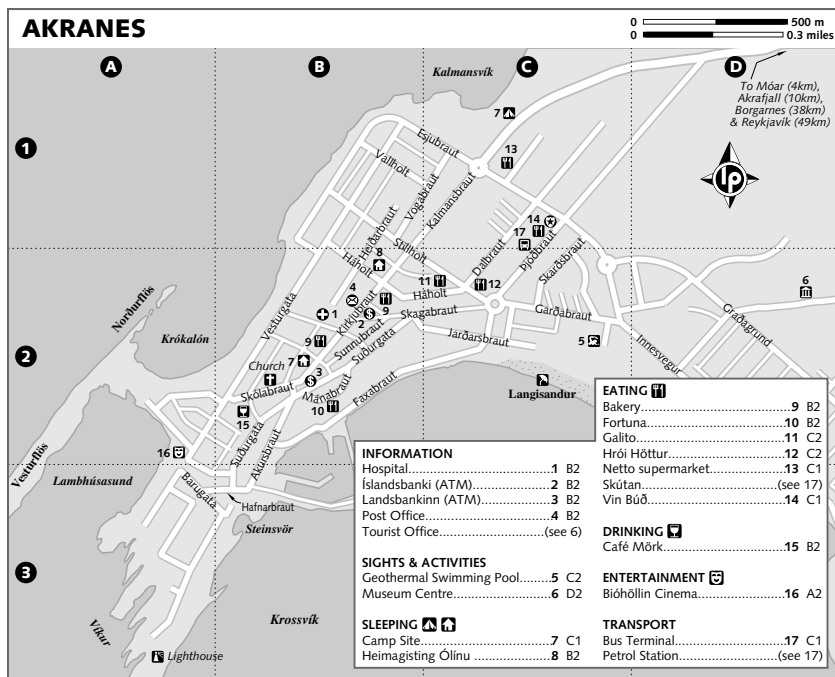
Akranes old town is well worth a wander for a look at the lovely old wooden buildings still in use. The most interesting section runs between the cinema and the pretty little church on Skólabraut. Also worth a visit is the 1km-long sandy beach at **Langisandur**, good for gentle walks or swimming on a warm day. On windy or wet days the town's **geothermal swimming pool** (☎ 433 1100; adult/under 14yr 1kr200/free; ☽ 6.15am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) is a better option, as the beach can feel quite exposed. For some more serious walking, the 572m peak **Akrafjall** can be easily climbed in a day via the Berjadalur valley, which splits the plateau in two.

Sleeping & Eating

Camp site (☎ 864 5510; sites per tent/person 1kr400/300; ☽ mid-May–mid-Sep) The well-maintained town camp site is close to the shore and has sweeping views over the fjord to Snæfellsjökull on clear days. There are good washing facilities and a free washing machine and tumble dryer.

Heimagisting Ólína (☎ 431 1408; olina@mailbox.is; Háholt 11; s/d 1kr3000/5000) Right in the centre of town on a quiet street, this pleasant B&B offers made-up beds in cosy rooms. Breakfast costs 1kr700.

Móar (☎ 431 1389; sollajoh@simnet.is; sb/made-up bed 1kr2500/3500; ☽ Jun-Aug) Although 4km from town, this friendly, modern farmhouse is well worth seeking out for its comfortable rooms and excellent service. Summerhouses sleeping up to five people can also be rented for



Ikr10,000 per night. Móar is just off Rte 1 near Akranesvegamót, 4km east of Akranes.

Galito (☎ 430 6767; Stíllholti 16-18; mains Ikr800-2100; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Mon-Thu, to 10pm Fri-Sun) This modern but nondescript place is a good bet for a reasonably priced meal that's a step up from the usual fast food. It serves a decent selection of reliable favourites including pizza, panini and burgers.

Fortuna (☎ 431 3737; Mánabraut 20; mains Ikr1000-2500; ☎ 11.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri) Akranes' best bet for lunch is this popular eatery in the basement of a building close to the harbour. The menu offers a good selection of fish, steak and vegetables as well as exotic fare such as burritos.

For fast food, try the **Hrói Höttur** (☎ 431 1200; Stíllholti 23; pizzas Ikr1100-2250) pizzeria or the bus-station grill **Skútan** (☎ 431 2061; Þjóðbraut 9). There are also several supermarkets near the town centre, a **bakery** (Kirkjubraut) and a branch of **Vin Büð** (Þjóðbraut 13).

Drinking & Entertainment

Your best bet for entertainment is to go back in time with a visit to the wonderfully old-fashioned cinema **Bíóhöllin** (☎ 431 1100; Vesturgata

27), which shows films several times weekly, and follow the movie with a drink at nearby **Café Mörk** (☎ 431 5030; Skólabraut 14).

Getting There & Away

Akranes is part of the Reykjavik city transport area; bus 27 runs every two hours to Mosfellsbær, from where bus 15 runs to the city centre. The entire journey takes about 80 minutes and costs Ikr250.

BORGARNES

pop 1800

Looking out over the brooding waters of Borgarfjörður and the steep slopes of Hafnarfjall, Borgarnes has a pretty spectacular setting. It's an unassuming town, deprived of any serious fishing potential by strong tidal currents in the fjord, but a bustling service point for travellers and home to one of Iceland's newest and most fascinating museums. To get a real sense of what the town is like, leave behind the cluster of petrol stations, cafeterias and supermarkets on the main road and venture into the old town, where rambling streets and quaint buildings portray a very different character.

Information

The main tourist office for west Iceland, **Vesturland** (☎ 437 2214; www.vest.is; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun May-Aug, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr), is in the Hyrnan complex by the Esso petrol station. Internet access is available for Ikr100 per 10 minutes. There's a Sparisjóðurinn bank with ATM and a post office on Brákarbraut.

Sights

Housed in a wonderful restored warehouse by the harbour, the new **Borgarnes Settlement Centre** (☎ 437 1600; www.landnam.is; Brákarbraut 13-15; adult/under 14yr for one exhibition Ikr800/600, for both Ikr1400/1000; ☎ 10am-7pm mid-May-mid-Sep, 11am-5pm Wed-Mon mid-Sep-mid-May) offers a fascinating insight into the history of Icelandic settlement and the saga era. The museum is divided into two exhibitions, one covering the discovery and settlement of the island and the other recounting the adventures and tales of the man behind *Egil's Saga* (see p156). Although it's expensive, the museum is a wealth of information and gives a wonderful insight into Iceland's history and a firm context in which to place your Icelandic visit.

As part of the museum's efforts, stone cairns have been erected at the most important *Egil's Saga* sites around the region. A free leaflet includes a map and guide to the route. One such site is the town park **Skallagrímgarður** (Skallagrímstgata) where the burial mound of the father and son of saga hero Egill Skallagrímsson can be seen, along with Viking weapons and equipment.

For more history, head for the **Borgarfjörður Museum** (☎ 430 7200; Bjarnarbraut 4-6; admission free; ☎ 1-6pm daily year-round, plus to 8pm Tue & Thu Jun-Aug), where the very traditional exhibits include local art, stuffed birds and farmhouse equipment.

Also worth a visit is the wonderful outdoor and indoor **swimming pool** (☎ 437 1444; Þorsteinsgata; adult/under 14yr Ikr310/155; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun), which has water slides, a sauna and hot pots. Golf fanatics can take in a game at the 18-hole **Golfklúbbur Borgarnes** (☎ 437 1663; www.gbborgarnes.net; green fees Ikr4000) north of the centre on Rte 1.

Sleeping

Hostel Hamar (☎ 437 2000; www.gbborgarnes.net; sb/s/d members Ikr1950/2950/4900) Set in a large restored farmhouse above a golf club, this hostel is a cosy, well-equipped place with a basic kitchen, a café and a TV lounge. The rooms are small

and functional, but they're the cheapest sleep around. The hostel is about 3km north of town on Rte 1. Nonmembers must pay a small supplement to stay.

Bjarg (☎ 437 1925; bjarg@simnet.is; sb/s/d Ikr2000/4400/8800) One of the nicest places to stay in town, this attractive farmhouse set overlooking the fjord has warm, cosy rooms with tasteful wood panelling, crisp white linens and lots of little extras such as TV, radio and personal lamps over the beds. There's a shared guest kitchen, spotless bathrooms and an additional self-catering apartment sleeping four. Bjarg is about 1km north of the centre, just off Rte 1.

Mótel Venus (☎ 437 2345; motel@centrum.is; 311 Borgarnes; sites per tent Ikr500, sb Ikr2500, s/d without bathroom Ikr5300/6800, wd with bathroom Ikr9300) Like something out of the American Midwest, this rather forlorn-looking motel on the far side of the bridge across the fjord has functional, modest rooms and a decent restaurant and pizza bar (mains Ikr1400 to Ikr1600). Room rates drop about 30% in winter.

Hótel Borgarnes (☎ 437 1119; www.hotelborgarnes.is; Egilsgata 14; s/d Ikr10,900/12,900) Big, bright but tired rooms with typical business-style décor are available at this large and rather characterless hotel in the centre of town. The restaurant offers two-course traditional meals for Ikr2900, and in winter the room rates drop by about 40%.

Hostel Hamar (☎ 433 6600; www.icehotels.is; 310 Borgarnes; s/d Jun-Sep Ikr13,600/17,000, Oct-May Ikr8200/10,200; ☎) Sleek, stylish and by far the best spot to sleep in town, this new hotel has a series of contemporary-styled rooms with large windows and great views, private terraces and wi-fi access. The restaurant (mains Ikr2800 to Ikr5500) serves an excellent choice of fish, lamb and veal, and there are three outdoor hot pots for relaxing.

Eating

Matstofan (☎ 437 2017; Brákarbraut 3; mains Ikr550-1350) Serving an unusual combination of Icelandic, Filipino and fast food, this basic place on the way to the harbour is popular with locals. Although stylistically challenged (think gingham tablecloths teamed with plastic placemats), the steaming plates of *adobo* (Filipino curry) go down well.

Búðarklettur (☎ 437 1600; Brákarbraut 13; mains Ikr1400-2900; ☎ 10am-9pm daily mid-May-mid-Sep, 11am-5pm Wed-Mon mid-Sep-mid-May) Borgarnes' best bet for food is this bright and airy restaurant at

the Settlement Centre. The large windows, stripped wood floors and modern furniture give it a wonderfully contemporary style, while the menu features a tempting range of lamb, fish and pasta dishes as well as lighter snacks and cakes.

For the usual array of burgers, fried chicken and doughy pizza, you could also try the grill bars at the Esso and Shell petrol stations. Self-caterers should head for the **Bónus supermarket** (Borgarbraut 57). There's a branch of Vín Búð in the Hyrnu Torg centre on the main road.

Getting There & Away

All buses between Reykjavík and Akureyri, the Westfjords and Snæfellsnes stop near the Esso and Shell petrol stations at the Hyrnan complex. The one-hour trip to Reykjavík costs 1kr1600. In winter high winds rolling in off the Atlantic can frequently close the southern approach to Borgarnes.

AROUND BORGARNES

Borg á Mýrum

Iceland's most famous farm, Borg á Mýrum (Rock in the Marshes), lies just north of Borgarnes on Rte 54. Although there's little to see here except the large rock (*borg*) that gave the farm its name, the site holds great significance for Icelanders as the core location in *Egil's Saga*. The saga recounts the tale of Kveldúlfur, grandfather of the warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson, who fled to Iceland during the 9th century after falling out with the king of Norway. Kveldúlfur grew gravely ill on the journey however, and instructed his son, Skallagrímur Kveldúlfsson, to throw his coffin overboard after he died and build the family farm wherever it washed ashore – this just happened to be at Borg. Skallagrímur's son, Egill Skallagrímsson, grew up to be a bloodthirsty individual who killed his first adversary at the age of seven and went on to carry out numerous raids on the coast of England. The complex tale of the family's adventures is believed to have been written by the historian Snorri Sturluson, who married into the family in 1197. Snorri (see p158) lived briefly at Borg, but the marriage broke down and he moved inland to Reykholt. As well as the large stone marker, you can see a wooden church and a modernist sculpture by Ásmundur Sveinsson. In case you were wondering, the Icelandic beer Egil's is named after Egill Skallagrímsson.

UPPER BORGARFJÖRÐUR Bifróst

Heading north along Rte 1 you'll pass through a large lava field belched out by the 3000-year-old cinder cones of Grábrók and Grábrókarfell, which rise dramatically from the flat surroundings just beyond the village and college complex at Bifróst. There are plenty of walking trails crisscrossing the area, and a well-worn track leads up through the moss, lichen and dwarf birch to the lip of **Grábrók** (173m), which offers great views over the surrounding lava flow but can be extremely windy. Nearby, **Grábrókarfell** has been rather disfigured by gravel extraction.

Bifróst lies on the main bus route between Reykjavík and Akureyri; the fare from Reykjavík is 1kr2400.

Reykholt

Laid-back, postcard pretty and incredibly unassuming, Reykholt is a sleepy kind of place that on first glance offers few clues to its bustling past as one of the most important medieval settlements in Iceland.

To get some insight into the significance of the area, visit the fascinating medieval study centre **Snorrstofa** (☎ 435 1491; www.reykholt.is; admission 1kr500; 🕒 10am–6pm Jun–Sep), devoted to the celebrated medieval historian Snorri Sturluson. The displays here explain the laws, literature, society and way of life in medieval Iceland, the country's golden age. Iceland's oldest document, the 12th-century deeds to the original church, are also here, and a new exhibition looks at the role of women in 13th-century society.

The centre is also home to one of Iceland's newest churches. Built in 1996, the simple but harmonious structure contains some beautiful contemporary stained glass woven with lines from early Christian poetry. The church also features an early Lutheran baptismal font and a 600-year-old organ that was originally installed in Reykjavík cathedral. If you're visiting in late July, look out for information on the annual classical-music festival.

Behind the centre, a pretty 19th-century church stands out brightly against the surrounding hills, and beyond it a grassy field covers the site of a recent archaeological dig. At the time of writing it was planned that medieval finds from the dig would be displayed by the National Museum in Reykholt from 2007. Further on, you'll come to **Snorralaug** (Snorri's

Pool), a circular, stone-lined pool fed by a hot spring. The stones at the base of the pool are original, and it is believed that this is where Snorri came to bathe. Behind the pool is a passage believed to lead to the cellar where Snorri Sturluson was murdered.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camp site (☎ 435 1182; sites per person 1kr500) The nearest camping ground is set beside the tiny geothermal centre of Kleppjárnreykir on Rte 50 about 6km west of Reykholt.

Brennistaðir (☎ 435 1193; brennista@islandia.is; sb/made-up bed/summerhouse 1kr1800/3600/7200) This bright and cheery farmhouse is 11km down the valley on Rte 50.

Fosshótel Reykholt (☎ 435 1260; www.fosshotel.is; s/d Jun–Aug 1kr10,700/17,900, Sep–May 1kr9300/13,700) Housed in a modern block behind the old church, this well-equipped hotel has comfortable, businesslike rooms and a Norse mythology theme. Exhibits on each floor delve into Icelandic mythology, runes and sagas. The hotel has a decent restaurant (mains 1kr2000 to 1kr3000) and a wellness centre offering massage, aromatherapy and a Jacuzzi steam bath and sauna. Cheaper rooms with shared bathrooms are also available.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Reykholt is 40km northeast of Borgarnes on Rte 518. Public buses from Reykjavík leave at 5pm on Friday and Sunday (1kr2200, two hours). In the opposite direction the bus leaves Reykholt at 7.15pm.

Around Reykholt

DEILDARTUNGHVER

Europe's biggest **hot spring**, Deildartunguhver spews up billowing clouds of steam as 180L of boiling water bubbles from the ground every second. The incredibly powerful hot spring provides the region with its boiling-hot water, while a 64km-long pipeline takes a supply to Borgarnes and Akranes. Any excess goes to heating the greenhouses that dot the surrounding area.

Deildartunguhver is close to Rte 50, just north of Kleppjárnreykir, close to the turn-off for Reykholt.

Húsafell

Tucked between the river Kaldá and the edge of the desolate lava fields at Hallmundarhraun, Húsafell is a popular outdoor retreat

for Reykjavík residents. The leisure complex **Ferðapjónustan Húsafelli** (☎ 435 1550; www.husafell.is; sites per person 1kr750, sb 1kr1400, s/d with shared bathroom 1kr8500/9500) is a one-stop shop, with a camp site, cabin and farmhouse accommodation, a guest kitchen, a laundry and a restaurant (mains 1kr1200 to 1kr2200). There's also a lovely outdoor geothermal swimming pool (1kr400/250 for adult/child under 14, open 10am to 10pm daily June to September, shorter hours other months), a children's playground, a nine-hole golf course and a petrol station.

There's no public transport to Húsafell, but twice a week you can get as far as Reykholt by bus (see p157). Several companies also offer day trips to Kaldidalur (p158) that pass through Húsafell.

Around Húsafell

HRAUNFOSSAR & BARNAFOSS

Four kilometres west of Húsafell is Hraunfossar, a series of trickling **cascades** that emerge as if by magic from beneath an ancient lava flow. From here a short trail leads upstream to Barnafoss (Children's Waterfall), where the river Hvítá roars through a cauldronlike gorge. There used to be a rock arch here, but two children were swept off it to their deaths – hence the waterfall's name – and the arch was destroyed.

HALLMUNDARHRAUN

East of Húsafell the vast, barren lava flows of Hallmundarhraun make up an eerie landscape dotted with gigantic lava tubes. These long tunnel-like caves are formed by flows of molten lava beneath a solid lava crust, and they look as though they've been burrowed out by some hellish giant worm.

Closest to Húsafell, further along Rte 518, is the 1.5km-long lava tube **Vígelmir**. The cave is preserved and can only be visited on guided tours arranged through local guesthouse **Fljótstunga** (☎ 435 1198; www.fljotstunga.is; 1-3/hr tours per person 1kr1200/3500, minimum 4 people over 8yr). The roof of the cave close to the entrance has collapsed, creating a dramatic rock arch and two forbidding black chasms descending into the earth. Inside you'll see weird rock formations, and on the longer tour you'll descend to the bottom of the cave. Accommodation in the cosy, wood-panelled rooms at Fljótstunga costs 1kr2000/2700/4000 for sleeping bags/singles/doubles.

Even more dramatic are the tubes of **Surtshellir** and **Stefánshellir**, further to the east. Here

SNORRI STURLUSON

The chieftain and historian Snorri Sturluson is one of the most important figures in medieval Norse history – partly because he wrote a lot of it down himself. Snorri was born at Hvammur near Búðardalur (further north), but he was raised and educated at the theological centre of Oddi near Hella and later married the heir to the farm Borg near Borgarnes. For reasons not fully revealed, he abandoned his family at Borg and retreated to the wealthy church estate at Reykholt. At the time Reykholt was home to 60,000 to 80,000 people and was an important trade centre at the crossroads of major routes across the country. Snorri composed many of his most famous works at Reykholt, including *Prose Edda* (a textbook to medieval Norse poetry) and *Heimskringla* (a history of the kings of Norway). Snorri is also widely believed to be the hand behind *Egil's Saga*, a family history of Viking *skald* (court poet) Egill Skallagrímsson (see p156).

At the age of 36 Snorri was appointed *lögsögumaður* (lawspeaker) of the Alþing (Icelandic parliament), but he endured heavy pressure from the Norwegian king to promote the king's private interests at the parliament. Instead Snorri busied himself with his writing and the unhappy Norwegian king Hakon issued a warrant for his capture – dead or alive. Snorri's political rival and former son-in-law Gissur Þorvaldsson saw his chance to impress the king and possibly snag the position of governor of Iceland in return. He arrived in Reykholt with 70 armed men on the night of 23 September 1241 and hacked the historian to death in the basement of his home.

the tube roof has collapsed in three places, and you can enter at the far end and scramble back toward the road along the tube floor, exiting via a cairn of stones in the first chasm. The floor of the tube is covered in slippery boulders so don't attempt this without a torch. To get to the caves, turn onto mountain road F578, midway between Fljótsunga and Húsafell, and continue for about 8km.

If you've got a 4WD it's possible to continue along Rte F578 to the lakes of **Arnarvatnsheiði** and on to Hvammstangi.

KALDIDALUR & LANGJÖKULL

Southeast of Húsafell, the Kaldidalur valley skirts the edge of a series of glaciers and offers incredible views of the Langjökull icecap and on fine days the snows of Eiríksjökull, Okjökull and Þórisjökull. Although there's no public transport along unsurfaced Rte 550, you can drive south in a private vehicle to Þingvellir.

Many tour companies including **TREX** (www.hopferd.is/engl/tours/daytours.htm), **Activity Group** (www.activity.is), **Mountain Taxi** (www.mountaintaxi.is) and **Esquimos** (www.esquimos.is) offer tours of the region looping from Reykjavík through some or all of the following: Borgarnes, Reykholt, Húsafell, Surtshellir, Kaldidalur and Þingvellir. Tours take between eight and 10 hours and cost from 1kr9000 to 1kr20,900. More expensive tours include an hour's snowmobiling.

Activity Group also offers whitewater rafting on the river Hvítá (1kr5900) and dogsled-ding on Langjökull (1kr6900).

SNÆFELLSNES

Lush fjords, volcanic peaks, dramatic sea cliffs, sweeping golden beaches, a glistening icecap and Iceland's newest national park make up the diverse and fascinating landscape of the 100km-long Snæfellsnes peninsula. The area is dominated by the icecap Snæfellsjökull, immortalised in Jules Verne's fantasy tale *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, but today it's a lot more accessible. Good roads and regular buses mean that it's an easy trip from Reykjavík and ideal for a short break, offering a cross section of the best Iceland has to offer in a very compact region.

Most of Snæfellsnes' inhabitants live on the rugged and mountainous north coast, with the national park protecting the western end of the peninsula. The area can get a bit of a hammering from the weather, so be prepared and bring your rain gear if you're planning any outdoor activities.

Snæfellsnes is a **Green Globe** (www.greenglobe.org) community, dedicated to sustainable development for travel and tourism and committed to environmental protection.

STYKKISHÓLMUR

pop 1240

The charming town of Stykkishólmur, the largest on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, is built up around a natural harbour protected by a dramatic basalt island. It's a picturesque place with

a friendly, laid-back attitude and lots of brightly coloured wooden buildings, in use since the town's heyday in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With a good choice of accommodation and restaurants, good public transport, and a ferry to Flatey and the Westfjords, it's an excellent base for exploring the area.

Information

Tourist information is available at the **Sæferðir Information Centre** (Seatours Information Centre; ☎ 438 1450; Smiðjustíg 3; ☹ 9am-8pm Jun-Aug, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May), which also has internet access (1kr100 for 15 minutes). Internet access is also available at the **library** (☎ 438 1281; Bókhúðustígur; 30 min 1kr200; ☹ 3-7pm Mon & Thu). The KB Banki and post office are on Aðalgata.

Sights & Activities

Much of Stykkishólmur's charm comes from the cluster of wooden warehouses, stores and homes around the town's harbour. Most date back about 150 years and many are still in use. Pick up a copy of the free 'Old Stykkishólmur' brochure at the tourist office for information on the buildings.

One of the most interesting is the **Norska Húsið** (Norwegian House; ☎ 438 1640; norkshus@simnet.is; Hafnargata 5; adult/6-16yr & senior 1kr400/200; ☹ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug), now the municipal museum. Built by trader Árni Þorlacius in 1832, the house has been skilfully restored and displays a wonderfully eclectic selection of farm equipment, butter churns, sewing machines, saddles, wooden skis and other salvaged items of local history. On the 2nd floor you can see the typical layout of an upper-class home in 19th-century Iceland.

Looking decidedly out of place in the surrounding landscape, Stykkishólmur's futuristic **Stykkishólmskirkja** is a striking white church with a sweeping bell tower and what looks like a giant ship's vent to the rear. The interior is known for its hundreds of suspended lights and huge modern painting of the Virgin Mary and Jesus floating in the night sky.

Also worth exploring is the basalt island of **Súgandisey**, which protects the town harbour and offers grand views across Breiðafjörður. You can get to the island by walking across the stone causeway from the harbour.

There's excellent swimming at the town's **geothermal swimming pool** (☎ 438 1372; adult/under 14yr 1kr280/120; ☹ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), which has water slides and hot pots.

For information on fishing, kayaking, cycling and other activities, see Tours, below.

Tours

Sæferðir (Seatours; ☎ 438 1450; www.seatours.is; Smiðjustígur 3; ☹ 9am-8pm daily Jun-Aug, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) runs a variety of boat tours, including popular nature-watching cruises to the islands of Breiðafjörður, where you can see seals, puffins and eagles (1kr4400, 2¼ hours); sea-angling trips (1kr4150, 2¼ hours) and whale-watching tours from Ólafsvík (see p164). Most activities run June to August only, but some are year-round. You can also hire bikes (1kr1500 per day). Kayaking tours around the islands of Breiðafjörður (see p161) can be arranged through **Seakayak Iceland** (☎ 690 3877; <http://seakayakiceland.com>; 2-4hr 1kr5500). If you'd like the lowdown on the history of the town and its lovely buildings, Dadda Dagbjóst offers **guided tours** (☎ 438 1121; Sjavallborg, Hafnargata 4; 1hr per person 1kr600) of the town for five to six people.

Sleeping

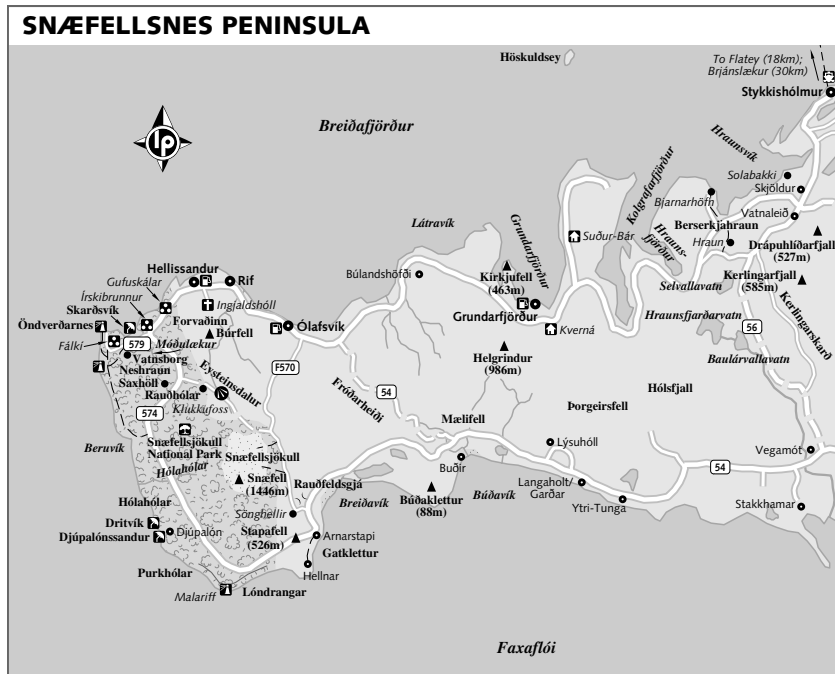
Camp site (☎ 438 1750; sites per person 1kr600) Near the pool, the site has toilets and sinks.

Sjónarhóll HI Hostel (☎ 438 1417; www.hostel.is; Höfðagata 1; sb members/nonmembers 1kr1650/2000, d 5000; ☹ May-Sep) Set in one of the town's oldest buildings, this renovated hostel has clean, simple rooms and a decent kitchen. Dorms sleep two to four people, and there are also some private rooms.

Heimagisting María Bæringsdóttir (☎ 438 1258; fax 438 1245; Höfðagata 11; s/d 1kr3800/6500) Set back from the waterfront in a residential street, this homey guesthouse has a selection of cosy rooms and a wonderfully warm welcome. There's a garden and veranda overlooking the bay, and a sumptuous breakfast is included in the price. Book in advance.

Hótel Breiðafjörður (☎ 433 2200; www.prinsvali.ant.is; Aðalgata 8; s/d Jun-Aug 1kr8900/11,000, Sep-May 1kr7100/9200; ☎) Right in the centre of town, this small hotel offers bright, spacious rooms with modern furniture and good views from the balconies. The décor is simple and neutral, and all the fittings are new.

Hótel Stykkishólmur (☎ 430 2100; www.hotel.stykkisholmur.is; Borgarbraut 6; s/d Apr-May & Sep-Nov 1kr8900/10,900, Jun-Aug 1kr11,900/13,900; ☎) Slightly out of the centre and set on a hill, this hotel was once the top spot in town but is now looking pretty dated. The business-style rooms are simple enough, with plenty of



space and good views, and there's a time-warp restaurant (mains lkr1750 to lkr3800) serving traditional Icelandic food.

Eating

Bakery (Nesvegur 1; ☎ 8.30am–6pm Mon–Fri, 8am–4pm Sat) On the main road out of town, with plenty of seating, this bakery is a good choice for breakfast or lunch. It serves good sandwiches and cakes as well as *ástar-pungur* (literally 'love balls'; fried balls of dough and raisins).

Fimm Fiskar (☎ 436 1600; Frúarstígur 1; mains lkr800–2800) Across the road from and not quite so charming as Narfeyrarstofa (following), this place has a good range of the more predictable pizzas, grills and seafood dishes.

our pick **Narfeyrarstofa** (☎ 438 1119; Aðalgata 3; mains lkr1500–3700) Stykkishólmur's top spot for food is this atmospheric place serving up a bumper selection of excellent dishes. There's plenty of fish with heavenly sauces, succulent burgers, and such delicacies as black guillemot for the more adventurous. During the day it's a welcoming café with a good selection of cakes.

A cheap grill can be found at the petrol station, and there's a Bónus supermarket near

the swimming pool. The local Vin Búð is at the hardware store Skipavík HF, behind the Norska Húsið.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses run to/from Reykjavík (lkr3300, 2½ hours) once daily (twice on Friday and Sunday), with a change to a connecting bus in Vatnaleyð. You'll also need to change in Vatnaleyð for the service to Grundarfjörður, Ólafsvík and Hellissandur-Rif. In summer, buses also run around the tip of the peninsula to Hellnar once daily. Services from Vatnaleyð are limited and don't always link well with the *Baldur* ferry to and from the Westfjords. In Stykkishólmur, buses stop at the petrol station on the main road.

FERRY

The car ferry *Baldur* (☎ 438 1450; www.seatours.is) operates between Stykkishólmur and Brjánslækur in the Westfjords (2¼ hours), via Flatey. From June to August there are daily departures from Stykkishólmur at 9am and 3pm, returning from Brjánslækur at noon and 6pm. On

Monday, Wednesday and Friday from June to August buses connect from Ísafjörður, leaving at 9.30am to connect with the ferry and pick up ferry passengers to go to Patreksfjörður and Látrabjarg. The afternoon ferry connects with Westfjords buses to Ísafjörður, while the morning ferry connects with buses to the bird cliffs at Látrabjarg. Buses from Ísafjörður also connect with the morning ferry.

Adult fares to Brjánslækur and Flatey are lkr2190 and lkr1530 respectively (lkr1250/1095/free for seniors/child 12 to 15/child under 12). Vehicles up to 5m long cost lkr2190 and motorcycles cost lkr825.

AROUND STYKKISHÓLMUR Helgafell

About 5km south of Stykkishólmur is the **holy mountain** Helgafell (73m) that was once venerated by worshippers of the god Þór. The first Icelandic *þing*, or assembly, met here in the 9th century, but it was later moved to the flat promontory Þingvellir after assembly members defiled the sacred mountain with their toilet ablutions – this triggered several bloody battles in saga times. A Christian church was

built here in the late 10th century by Snorri Goði, a Þór worshipper who converted to Christianity, and the nearby farm at Helgafell was where the conniving Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir of the *Laxdæla Saga* spent her lonely old age. You can still see the ruins of the church on the hill top, from where you'll also get great views over the islands of Breiðafjörður.

Breiðafjörður

Created by trolls from the Westfjords – so legend has it – and now home to a rich selection of bird life, the thousands of tiny islands that block the waterway between Hvammsfjörður and Breiðafjörður create an idyllic tapestry of greens and blues across the water. The only inhabited island is Flatey; the other low, rocky islets are home only to kittiwakes, fulmars, gulls, guillemots, puffins, cormorants and eagles. Seals are also commonly seen on low-lying skerries. A free brochure available in the tourist office in Stykkishólmur gives details on the fjord and the birds that can be seen here.

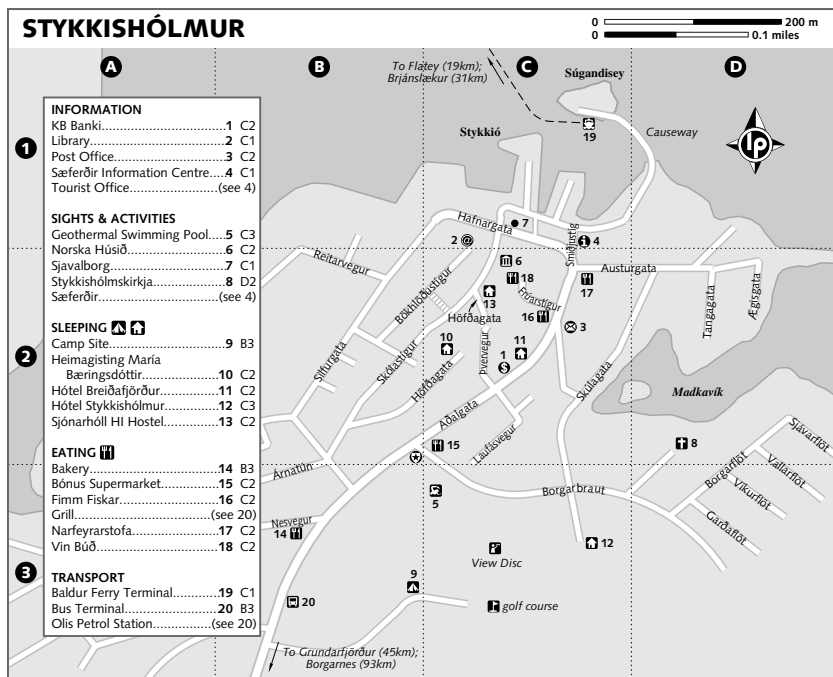
FLATEY

For a glimpse of Icelandic island life it's well worth taking the trip to the low-lying island of Flatey. Here, life runs at an even slower pace and the brightly coloured wooden houses seem little changed in centuries. The island was the site of a literary monastery in the 11th century, and today it is full of historical buildings and has a church with paintings by Spanish-Icelandic artist Baltasar. More recently, Flatey was used as the location of the film *Nonni & Manni*.

You can take a day trip to Flatey with Sæferðir (see opposite). You can camp at **Ferðþjónustan Grænigarrður** (☎ 438 1451; sites per person lkr600; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Sep), 300m from the ferry dock. In summer accommodation is also available at **Gisting Jónsdóttir** (☎ 438 1476; sb lkr2200), in summerhouses with shared kitchens, and at pleasant **Hotel Flatey** (☎ 422 7610; www.hotelflatey.is; s/d lkr13,900/16,900; ☎ mid-Jun–mid-Sep), which has comfy rooms and great views over the fjord.

Berserkjahraun

The sweeping lava field Berserkjahraun (Berserks Lava), stretches inland from Rte 54 about 15km west of the intersection with the Stykkishólmur road. This lunar landscape backed by sweeping mountain sides is named after a tale from the *Eyrbyggja Saga* – see p163.



If you're feeling peckish after a walk around the area you can detour to the farm **Bjarnarhöfn** (☎ 438 1581) to see the Icelandic delicacy *hákarl* (putrid shark meat) being produced. The farm is at the end of a dirt track, signposted off Rte 54 – call ahead to make sure someone is in.

Kerlingarskarð

About 25km south of Stykkishólmur, **Kerlingarskarð** (Witch Pass) was named after a female witch or troll who was turned into the stone pillar at the northwestern foot of Kerlingarfjall, the mountain east of the pass. Nearby lake **Baulárvallavatn** is reputed to be the home of a Nessie-style lake monster. Buses between Reykjavík and Stykkishólmur pass the lake, but the pass itself is reached via a long track that branches off Rte 54 just east of the junction with Rte 56.

GRUNDAFJÖRÐUR

pop 980

Spectacularly set on a dramatic bay, the friendly little town of Grundarfjörður is backed by the steep slopes of the forbidding Helgrindur (986m) and protected from the sea by the strik-

ing peak of Kirkjufell (463m). The town itself is a typical prefab Icelandic fishing community, but the facilities are good and the surrounding landscape is just aching to be discovered.

The incredibly friendly **Eyrbyggja Heritage Centre** (☎ 438 1881; Grundargata 35; ☎ 10am-6pm) acts as tourist office, café, internet point (access 1kr200 for 10 minutes) and local museum (admission 1kr400). Displays centre on rural life in Iceland from 1900 to 1950, and there are screenings of Icelandic films each day in summer.

The local **swimming pool** (adult/under 14yr 1kr200/100; ☎ 8.15am-9pm Mon-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) is a great place on a wet day and has two hot pots to relax in after your breathtaking descent.

Sleeping

Grundarfjörður Hostel (☎ 562 6533; Hlíðarvegur; sb member/nonmember May-Sep 1kr1600/1950, Oct-Apr 1kr1750/1400, tw/s 1kr2550/3150; ☎) Friendly, central and well equipped, the local hostel has a range of simple rooms and good kitchen facilities. Spearheading the local campaign for environmental responsibility, the hostel runs on green principles and encourages sustainable devel-

opment in town. It can organise a variety of local tours, has bike hire (1kr1200 per day) and offers unlimited internet access for 1kr300 per day.

Hótel Framnes (☎ 438 6893; www.hotel-framnes.is; Nesvegur 8-10; sb/s/d Jun-Aug 1kr4000/9000/11,500, Sep-May 1kr3500/5100/7500) Comfy but fairly predictable, this hotel by the docks has decent but characterless rooms in a modern building. The restaurant offers a set two-course dinner (1kr2800 to 1kr3500), and the hotel can organise various local tours including town walks and horse riding. At the time of writing, the hotel was set to change management.

Other accommodation options:

Kverná (☎ 438 6813; www.simnet.is/kverna; s/d 1kr4000/7000) Cosy farm just outside town offering cottage accommodation, horse riding and walking tours.

Suður-Bár (☎ 438 6815; www.sudurbarsveit.is; s/d with bathroom 1kr6500/9200, without bathroom 1kr7900/11,200) Friendly guesthouse 7km east of town with pleasant rooms and horse riding (1kr2500 per hour).

Eating

Kaffi 59 (☎ 438 6446; Grundargata 59; mains 1kr700-950; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat, to 10pm Sun) Less formal and more predictable than Krákan (following), this is the place for pizza, burgers, sandwiches and beer, served up in a diner-style modern building by the main road through town.

Krákan (☎ 438 6999; Sæbol 13; mains 1kr1000-1600) This cosy restaurant hidden down a residential street towards the western end of the village serves up a good selection of fresh fish

and lamb dishes as well as delicious lighter snacks such as lobster soup.

There's the ubiquitous grill at the Esso station and a **supermarket** (☎ 9am-7pm) just down the road towards the docks.

Getting There & Away

There are daily bus services to and from Reykjavík (1kr3800, 2¼ hours), and there's a summer service around the head of the peninsula (see p167).

SNÆFELLSJÖKULL NATIONAL PARK

In June 2001 the tip of Snæfellsnes peninsula, including the mighty glacier, became Iceland's newest national park. The icecap is famous around the world, courtesy of Jules Verne, who used it as the setting for his famous *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. In the book a German geologist and his nephew embark on an epic journey into the crater of Snæfells, guided by a 16th-century Icelandic text with the following advice:

Descend into the crater of Yocul of Sneffels, Which the shade of Scartaris caresses, Before the kalends of July, audacious traveller, And you will reach the centre of the earth. I did it.

Arne Saknussemm

It's easy to see why Jules Verne selected Snæfell – the dramatic peak was torn apart when the volcano beneath the icecap exploded and the volcano subsequently collapsed into its own magma chamber, forming a huge

GONE BERSERK

The wild lava flows southwest of Stykkishólmur were named after an unusual tale from the *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Apparently, the farmer of Hraun was frustrated with having to walk around these ragged flows to visit his brother at the farm Bjarnarhöfn. Returning from a voyage to Norway, he brought back two berserkers – insanely violent fighters who were employed as hired thugs in Viking times – but to his dismay one of the berserkers took a liking to his daughter. He turned to the local chieftain, Snorri Goði, for advice, but Snorri had his eye on the farmer's daughter himself and he recommended setting the berserker an impossible task. The farmer decided to promise the amorous berserker his daughter's hand in marriage if he was able to clear a passage through the troublesome lava field – surely impossible for a normal man.

To the horror of both Snorri and the farmer, the two berserkers set to work and soon managed to rip a passage straight through the lava flow. Rather than honouring the promise, the farmer trapped the berserkers in a sauna and then murdered them, later agreeing to give Snorri his daughter's hand in marriage. The passage through the lava between Hraun and Bjarnarhöfn can still be seen, and a grave discovered there in recent digs was found to contain the remains of two large men.

caldera. Among certain New Age groups, Snæfellsjökull is considered one of the world's great 'power centres', and it definitely has a brooding presence.

Today the crater is filled in with ice and makes a popular hiking destination in summer. There are several routes to the summit. The shortest start on mountain road Rte F570, which cuts across the peninsula from Arnarstapi to Ólafsvík. A longer and more interesting route climbs the western slope along the Móðulækur river, passing the red scoria craters of Rauðhólar and the waterfall Klukkufooss.

On any of these routes you should be prepared for harsh weather and carry food and water as well as a map and compass. If you want to reach the summit you'll need crampons and ice axes. With a 4WD you can drive some of the way along all of these routes. From either Ólafsvík or Arnarstapi allow at least five hours for the ascent and another three hours to get down. The western approach takes considerably longer and will require an overnight stay on the mountain.

For more information, contact the **park rangers** (☎ 436 6860; <http://english.ust.is/Snaefellsjokullnationalpark>; Klettsbud 7, Hellissandur) or pay a call to the visitor centre at Hellnar (see p166).

Tours

Snowmobile tours on the glacier are run by **Ferðapjónustan Snjófell** (☎ 435 6783; www.snjofell.is) at Arnarstapi. In summer snowcat tours of the glacier cost 1kr4000 per person, or there's a snowmobile tour (1kr7000 per person, minimum of six people). Midnight sun tours are also available. If you just want a lift as far as the snow line, it will cost you 1kr1300 return.

ÓLAFSVÍK

pop 1010

Quiet, unassuming and well kept, workaday Ólafsvík is primarily worth a visit for its excellent whale-watching tours. Although it's the oldest trading town in the country (it was granted a trading licence in 1687), Ólafsvík is a modern place, and few of its original buildings survive.

Sights & Activities

The old packing house **Gamla Pakkhúsið** (☎ 436 1543; Ólafsbraut; adult/under 16yr 1kr300/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug) is home to the local tourist office as well as an interesting folk museum telling the story of the town's development as a trading

centre. The building was constructed in 1841 by the Clausen family, who owned Ólafsvík's leading trading firm.

Down by the harbour, the small maritime museum **Sjávarsafnið Ólafsvík** (☎ 436 6961; ☎ 10am-6pm) has displays on local history and fishing fleets.

Ólafsvík is also a potential starting point for hikes up Snæfellsjökull; the difficult trail begins 1km east of the camp site. Allow five hours to reach the edge of the ice, and bring crampons and ice axes if you intend to go out onto the icecap.

The local **swimming pool** (☎ 436 1199; adult/under 14yr 1kr250/150) is on Ennisbraut.

Tours

Ólafsvík is one of the best locations for whale watching on the western coast. Tours are run by **Sæferðir** (Seatours; ☎ 438 1450; www.seatours.is; adult/12-15yr 1kr4900/2450) at 11am and 3pm daily from June to August. The trips take about three hours and offer good chances to see orcas, minke whales, humpback whales and occasionally blue whales; dolphins are also spotted on most trips. The best sightings are usually in late June and early July.

Sleeping & Eating

Camp site (☎ 436 1543; sites per person/tent 1kr300/300) Situated by the road 1km east of town, this basic site has hot and cold running water and showers.

Hótel Ólafsvík (☎ 436 1650; www.hotelolafsvik.is; Ólafsbraut 20; s/d from 1kr11,950/14,800; ☎) A mighty step up from camping, this large hotel has spacious, functional rooms with tiled floors, neutral décor and very little character. The hotel also offers cheaper rooms with shared bathroom (1kr6700/8400 for singles/doubles) in an annexe next door. The hotel restaurant (mains 1kr1830 to 1kr2300) is probably the best place to eat in town and offers a range of high-quality Icelandic meals as well as pizzas and burgers.

Prinsinn (☎ 436 1362; Ólafsbraut; mains from 1kr300; ☎ 10am-11.30pm Mon-Fri, 11.30am-11.30pm Sat & Sun) The local fast-food joint, this place is in the main shopping centre and serves the usual pizza and burgers.

There's also a grill at the petrol station, a good bakery opposite the hotel, and a large supermarket by the harbour. The Vin Búð alcohol shop is on Mýrarholt, uphill from the main street.

Getting There & Away

There are two to three services daily to/from Reykjavík to Ólafsvík, connecting through Vegamót (1kr4200, 2¾ hours). All buses continue on to Hellissandur (1kr250, 15 minutes). The buses drop off and pick up at the petrol station in Ólafsvík.

A summer round-glacier bus takes passengers around the tip of the peninsula; see p167 for details.

HELLISSANDUR-RIF

pop 580

Perched out on the westernmost tip of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, the tiny twin towns of Hellissandur and Rif are good bases from which to explore the national park. Hellissandur (sometimes called Sandur) is the original fishing village, while Rif is a modern cluster of buildings built up around the new town harbour. Hellissandur has a petrol station, a post office and an ATM.

The only artificial sight in the area is **Sjómannagarður** (☎ 436 6784; admission 1kr300; ☎ 9am-6pm Thu-Tue Jun-Aug), a small maritime museum set in a turf-roofed sea shanty. There are lots of old photos here and plenty of local memorabilia, including a set of lifting stones once used to test the strength of prospective fishermen. The museum is by the main road on the western edge of town.

About 2km inland from Hellissandur is the church at **Ingjaldshóll**, the first concrete church in Iceland (built in 1903). If the doors are open you can see some ancient heraldic tombstones and painted wooden altarpieces inside.

If you'd like to stay, the free **camp site** (☎ 436 1543), opposite the Edda hotel, has basic facilities including sinks and toilets but can be pretty windswept. You can get limited groceries at the petrol station.

For far more comfort, check into the **Edda Hótel** (☎ 444 4940; www.hoteledda.is; Klettsbúð; s/d 1kr10,300/12,900; ☎ mid-May-mid-Sep; ☎), a well-run place offering bright, modern rooms with contemporary interiors and sparkling bathrooms. The hotel restaurant (mains 1kr2000 to 1kr3000) serves a good selection of Icelandic staples.

All buses from Reykjavík to Ólafsvík continue to Hellissandur, stopping at the Esso petrol station. The fare from Reykjavík is 1kr4400 and the journey takes about three hours.

SOUTHWEST SNÆFELLSNES

Continuing southwest from Hellissandur, the scenic but potholed Rte 574 skirts the rugged western slopes of Snæfellsjökull. Known as Forvaðinn, this desolate area offers eerie views of spurs of lava sticking up through the scree and, on misty days, when the clouds swirl among the peaks, you can easily see where legends about trolls came from. Beyond the glacier the road improves again and passes the villages of Arnarstapi and Hellnar, which are surrounded by interesting sea-sculpted rock formations, and continues east along the broad southern coastal plain, passing the huge sandy bays at Breiðavík and Búðavík.

Gufuskálar

About 2km west of Hellissandur, the huge radar mast of the US Loran Station is the tallest structure in Iceland. Nearby is the small ruined **Írskibrunnur** (Irish Well), which has a whale skull as a lintel and was built by Irish monks before Norse settlement. On the opposite side of Rte 574 is a vast lava field, Prestahraun – the lava studded with the ruins of hundreds of **fiskbyrgi** (stone fish-drying sheds) constructed by medieval Viking fishermen. A trail marked with red posts leads between the huts.

Öndverðarnes

At the westernmost tip of Snæfellsnes, Rte 574 cuts south, while a tiny bumpy track heads west across an ancient lava flow to the tip of the Öndverðarnes peninsula. En route you'll pass **Skarðsvík**, a perfect golden sandy beach lapped by blue waters and hidden by black lava cliffs. A Viking grave was discovered here in the 1960s and it's easy to see why this stunning spot in the middle of an otherwise desolate area would have been favoured as a final resting place.

From the parking area a marked trail leads across the lava flows to the imposing volcanic crater **Vatnsborg**, from where further trails lead to the nearby sea cliffs around the southern edge of the cape, where seals laze on the skerries and the cliffs are carved into dramatic sea arches and caves by the constant pounding of Atlantic breakers. The **lighthouse** at the tip of the cape can also be reached by continuing beyond Skarðsvík on the bumpy road. En route you'll pass the abandoned stone well **Fálki**.

Southwest of the Öndverðarnes turn-off the road passes the start of the steep 4WD track to Snæfellsjökull and also the roadside

scoria crater **Saxhóll**, which can be climbed in a few minutes for views northwest over the Neshraun lava flows.

Hóláhólar

About 5km further south the volcanic craters of **Hóláhólar** are clustered about 150m west of the road. A track passes through the wall of Berudalur, the largest, and into a natural amphitheatre inside the cone.

Dritvík & Djúpálón

About 4km further along Rte 574 a dirt road leads down to the wild black-sand beach at **Djúpálónssandur**. It's a dramatic place to walk, with a series of rocky stacks emerging from the ocean. You can also still see four 'lifting stones' on the beach where fishing-boat crews would test the strength of aspiring fishermen. The smallest stone is Amloði (Bungler) at 23kg, followed by Hálfdrættingur (Weak) at 54kg, Hálfsterkur (Half-Strong) at 100kg, and the largest, Fullsterkur (Fully Strong), at 154kg. Hálfdrættingur marked the frontier of wimp-hood, and any man who couldn't heft it was deemed unsuitable for a life at sea. Mysteriously, there now appear to be five stones.

If you tramp up over the craggy headland you'll reach the similar black-sand **beach** at Dritvík, where around 60 fishing boats were stationed from the 16th to the 19th century. The black sands are covered in pieces of rusted metal from the English trawler *Eding*, which was wrecked here in 1948. Several freshwater pools and the rocky arch **Gatklettur** are close to the car park.

About 2km south of Djúpálón a track leads down to the rocket-shaped **lighthouse** at Malariff, from where you can walk along the cliffs to the rock pillars at **Lóndrangar**, which surge up into the air like a frozen splash of lava. Locals say that elves use the lava formations as a church.

Hellnar

The guardian spirit of Snæfells, Bárður, chose Hellnar, a picturesque spot overlooking a rocky bay, as his home. Today Hellnar is a tiny fishing village where the shriek of sea birds fills the air and whales are regularly sighted. Down on the shore the cave **Baðstofa** is chock-a-block with nesting birds while, between the village and main road, **Bárðarlaug** was supposedly the bathing pool of Bárður. East of here a dramatic ancient lava flow lies covered in

a velvet cloak of moss, backed by sweeping mountains and glorious views out to sea.

Hellnar is a remarkably peaceful place and an idyllic spot to while away a couple of days.

Gestastofa (☎ 436 6888; admission free; ☺ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug), the national park visitor centre in Hellnar, has displays on the geology, history, people, customs and wildlife of the area and has an impressive collection of old black-and-white photographs of local people.

our pick **Hótel Hellnar** (☎ 435 6820; www.hellnar.is; s/d Jun-Aug 1kr9300/11,990, May & Sep 1kr8400/10,700; ☺ May-Sep), Iceland's only eco-hotel, makes an excellent retreat. The twin-bedded rooms are clean, bright and minimalist, and the **restaurant** (mains 1kr2000-3500; ☺ 7-9pm May-Sep) uses local organic produce. There's also a wonderful guest lounge with fantastic views of the sea, and there are quite regular sightings of whales.

For a light lunch **Fjóruhúsið** (☎ 435 6844; snacks 1kr200-1000), by the harbour, is a small but good café that serves quiche, soup and coffee.

Arnarstapi

Heading northeast from Hellnar a scenic 2.5km coastal path leads past rock arches and lava flows eroded into weird and wonderful shapes to the tiny fishing village of Arnarstapi. The legend of Bárður continues here with a strange rock sculpture in his honour.

Behind the village, 526m-high **Stapafell** is supposedly home to the little people, and you'll see miniature house gables painted onto rocks in their honour. Mountain road F570 leads around Stapafell towards the glacier and passes a collapsed crater, which has created a series of strange lava caves about 1.5km from the main road. The largest cave is **Sönghellir**, which is full of 18th-century graffiti and is rumoured to resound with the songs of dwarfs. Bring a torch and look for the smallest cave entrance along the ridge.

From Stapafell, a small track branches east off Rte 574 to **Rauðfeldsgjá**, a steep and narrow cleft that disappears mysteriously into the cliff wall beside the road. A stream runs along the bottom of the gorge, and you can scramble up between the sheer walls for quite a distance.

Overnight accommodation can be found at the turf-roofed **Ferðapjónustan Snjófjell** (☎ 435 6783; www.snjofell.is; sites per tent 1kr700, sb/made-up bed 1kr2550/3400), a simple guesthouse with cosy rooms and a decent restaurant (meals 1kr690 to 1kr2990). Snjófjell also runs snowmobile and snowcat tours on the glacier – see p164.

THE ROUND-GLACIER BUS

From June to August a special round-glacier bus leaves from Ólafsvík at 11.15am daily and loops around the head of the peninsula, stopping at Arnarstapi for an hour. Passengers can disembark here and walk along the scenic cliffs to Hellnar, where the bus picks up at 1.45pm, before heading north to the Djúpálón beach and back to Hellissandur. The entire circuit costs 1kr3200 and you can get off and reboard anywhere along the route. It's a handy option if you want to stop and explore the rugged southwestern tip of the peninsula, and you can use the same ticket to get back to civilisation the next day (you'll pay 1kr1600 for the first day's travel – around a section of the route – and another 1kr1600 the following day to go the rest of the way).

Breiðavík & Búðavík

East of Hellnar and Arnarstapi, Rte 574 skirts the edges of the long sandy bays at Breiðavík and Búðavík. These windswept beaches are covered in yellow-grey sand and are wonderfully peaceful places to walk. At Búðavík the abandoned fishing village of Búðir is now home to one of Iceland's best country hotels. From the hotel a walking trail leads across the elf-infested Buðahraun lava field to the crater **Búðaklettur**. According to local legend a lava tube beneath Buðahraun, paved with gold and precious stones, leads all the way to Surtshellir. It takes about three hours to walk to the crater and back.

Gistiheimilið Hof (☎ 435 6802; www.gistihof.is; sb/s/d May-Sep 1kr2000/3500/6000, Oct-Apr 1kr1000/2200/3600) has a selection of contemporary rooms with shared kitchen, living room and bathroom. The veranda has a barbecue and great views across to the icecap. The large **Gistiheimilið Langaholt** (☎ 435 6789; www.langaholt.is; sites per tent 1kr500, sb 1kr2300, d 1kr7300-9000) has bright, modern rooms with tasteful décor and good facilities.

our pick **Hótel Búðir** (☎ 435 6700; www.budir.is; d 1kr18,600-36,700; ☑), windswept, lonely and very romantic, is a sleek, stylish hotel with understated, quirky design and not a hint of pretension. Expect individually designed rooms with elegant furnishings, flagstone bathrooms, DVD players and wi-fi access and – if you're lucky enough to bag No 23 – a freestanding bath separated from the bedroom by a wooden screen. Open fires, plenty of books and an excellent restaurant offering a menu rich in such delicacies as veal, foie gras and truffles top off the absolute luxury of the place. If you're going to splash out at any point on your trip, this is the place to do it.

Eldborg

Immediately southeast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, the prominent egg cup-shaped

volcano Eldborg rises over 100m above the desolate Eldborgarhraun plain. It's a 4km walk from Kolbeinsstaðir, which lies on the main road from Borgarnes to Ólafsvík (Rte 54). Almost opposite the turn-off to the Hótel Eldborg a dirt road leads northeast to **Gerðuberg**, a long escarpment formed from ruler-straight basalt columns.

SLEEPING

Hótel Eldborg (☎ 435 6602; www.hoteleldborg.is; sites per person 1kr800, sb 1kr2500, s/d 1kr6900/8900; ☺ Jun-Aug; ☑) Basic rooms with simple furnishings are available at this school complex on Rte 567, about 4km from the main road. All rooms share a bathroom, but there's a decent restaurant (three-course meals 1kr3000) and a toasty geothermal swimming pool. Horse-riding trips to the nearby beach can be arranged from the hotel (1kr7000 for three to four hours).

Snorrastaðir (☎ 435 6628; www.snorrastadir.com; sites per tent 1kr1000, sb/6-person cabin 2200/10,000) Tucked away off the main road, this down-to-earth horse farm offers basic sleeping-bag accommodation and made-up beds in wooden cottages. Horse rides along the beach cost 1kr2200 per hour. The farm is 3km from Eldborg and it's signposted from the main road.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's no public transport to either Hótel Eldborg or Snorrastaðir, but buses between Reykjavík and Stykkishólmur can drop you at the junction on the main road.

LAXDÆLA SAGA COUNTRY

The area around Laxárdalur served as the setting for the *Laxdæla Saga*, the most popular of the Icelandic sagas. The story revolves around a love triangle between Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, said to be the most beautiful woman in Iceland, and the foster brothers Kjartan Ólafsson and Bolli Þorleiksson. In a fairly typical saga

tale, Guðrun had both men wrapped around her little finger and schemed and connived until both of them were dead – Kjartan at the hands of Bolli, and Bolli at the hands of Kjartan's brothers. Most Icelanders know the stories and characters by heart and hold the area in which the story took place in great historic esteem.

Búðardalur

pop 260

Although there's not a lot to see in Búðardalur, it's a handy base for exploring the area. Founded as a cargo depot in saga times, the town now survives on fish processing and dairy farming, and it occupies a pleasant position looking out over Hvammsfjörður, at the mouth of the Laxá river. There's a bank, a petrol station and a **tourist office** (☎ 434 1410; ☹ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri, 11am–6pm Sat & Sun Jun–Aug) here, and at the time of writing there were plans to open a local museum.

If you want to stay there's a free **camp site** (☎ 434 1132) behind the school. Alternatively, guesthouse **Bjarg** (☎ 434 1644; www.aknet.is/bjarg; Dalbraut 2; s/d lkr4200/6900; 📺) has simple, modern rooms and an internet café in summer. The attached **Villa Pizza restaurant** (mains lkr1000–2500) serves grilled meat and fish as well as pizza. You can also get fast food (mains lkr300 to lkr990) at the Esso petrol station.

Buses run between Reykjavík and Búðardalur (lkr3400, 2½ hours) daily except on Wednesday and Saturday. Tuesday and Sunday services continue to Reykhólar in the Westfjords.

Eiríksstaðir

The farm Eiríksstaðir, across the Haukadalsá from Stóra-Vatnshorn's church, was the home of Eiríkur Rauðe (Erik the Red), father of Leifur Eiríksson, believed to be the first European to visit America. Although only a faint outline of the original farm remains, an impressive **reconstruction of the farm** (☎ 434 1118; www.leif.is; adult/under 14yr lkr600/free; ☹ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun Jun–Sep) has been built using only the tools and materials available at the time. Enthusiastic period-dressed guides show visitors around, bake bread, brandish weapons and tell the story of Erik the Red, who went on to found the first European settlement in Greenland. In July there's a Viking festival with a traditional market and games, storytelling, and theatre.

You can stay in nearby Stóra-Vatnshorn at a friendly **farmhouse** (☎ 434 1342; www.islandia.is/storavatnshorn; sb/made-up bed/summerhouse lkr2000/2800/5300), which has a selection of simple but comfortable rooms and two self-catering cottages sleeping up to five.

Saga Farms

Little remains of the original farms from saga times, and although the region is central to many of the best-loved Icelandic sagas, you will need a creative imagination to make the connection.

About 4km up the Laxá river from Búðardalur, **Höskuldsstaðir** was the birthplace of Hallgerður Longlegs, wife of Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, who starred in *Njal's Saga*. Other important descendants of the family include Bolli and his foster brother Kjartan from *Laxdæla Saga*.

Across the river from Höskuldsstaðir is **Hjarðarholt**, the one-time home of Kjartan and his father, Ólafur Peacock. Their Viking farm was said to be one of the wonders of the Norse world, with scenes from the sagas carved into the walls and a huge dining hall that could seat 1100 guests, but no trace of it remains today.

Further north, the farm at **Hvammur** produced a whole line of prominent Icelanders, including Snorri Sturluson of *Prose Edda* fame. It was settled in around 895 by Auður the Deep-Minded, the wife of the Irish king Olaf Godfráidh, who has a bit part in the *Laxdæla Saga*. By coincidence, Árni Magnússon, who rescued most of the Icelandic sagas from the 1728 fire in Copenhagen, was born at Hvammur.

About 1km north of Hvammur on Rte 1, the geothermal village of **Laugar** was the birthplace of *Laxdæla Saga* beauty Guðrun Ósvífursdóttir. A small **folk museum** (☎ 434 1328; admission lkr400; ☹ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, to 2pm Sun Jun–Aug) in the school complex can help put the remains of the saga farms in context. You can also overnight at the school during the summer, when it becomes an **Edda Hotel** (☎ 444 4930; www.hoteledda.is; sites per person, lkr600, sb lkr2200, s/d with bathroom lkr10,300/12,900, without bathroom 5800/7200). The rooms are simple, but there's a good restaurant (mains lkr1750 to lkr3500) and a naturally heated outdoor pool (lkr250/130 for adult/child under 12).

Farmhouse accommodation is also available at **Purranesi** (☎ 434 1556; www.centrum.is/thurranes; sb/s/d lkr1800/2800/5600), where there are cosy, country-style rooms and a guest kitchen.

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