

Iceland Travel tips - the Complete Guide

By Reykjavik Rent a car – Car rental in Iceland

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Where's good to see in Iceland?

Iceland is packed with interesting sights and things to do. In fact, when you're driving around you'll notice how quickly the scenery changes and just how many different types of scenery there are.

Despite being spoiled for choice, we know every visitor needs a little assistance and that's why we're going to share with you a few of our favourite places in the north, south, east and west of Iceland; as well as in the beautiful Westfjords peninsula.

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North Iceland Travel Tips

Akureyri

Akureyri is Iceland's second city – the self-titled Capital of the North. And with its population of nearly 20,000, it's not hard to see why!

In all seriousness, despite its small population, Akureyri offers constant surprises to the visitor and has as many attractions as a typical town several times its size. It should also be mentioned that it is a very attractive town set against a breathtaking natural backdrop with excellent skiing in winter.

Some of the top attractions include the national aviation museum at the airport and the cathedral with its stained glass windows rescued from Coventry Cathedral (UK) in the Second World War. The swimming pool is top class, with slides, toys, hot pots, bathing decks and more; and don't forget the world's northernmost botanical gardens.

Goðafoss

On the well-travelled route between Akureyri and Mývatn, you drive past Goðafoss – much more than just another of Iceland's countless waterfalls. Goðafoss is right beside Route 1 (Iceland's main highway, sometimes called the ring road) and simply begs the visitor to stop off for a closer look.

The falls are made up of two wide and two narrow waterfalls emptying into a semicircular basin.

Goðafoss may lack the statistics: it is not the biggest, or the fastest, or the tallest. But it is very pretty – and also historically significant.

Goðafoss gets its name from the statuettes of Pagan gods thrown in by Lawspeaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði in the year 1000 after he succeeded in persuading Icelanders to vote in favour of converting to Christianity. Þorgeir was actually a Pagan himself; but meditated for a day and night before deciding that Christianity was the best way forward as long as Icelanders could continue to practice Paganism in private. After the vote, he converted to Christianity.

Dimmuborgir

Further to the east beyond beautiful Lake Mývatn lie the caves and ghostly lava formations of Dimmuborgir. A geologist's dream, Dimmuborgir were formed from a lake of molten lava some 2,300 years ago and the way that lava interacted with water in the area. The complicated geological processes have had some truly amazing and long-lasting consequences.

The whole place resembles the post-apocalyptic remains of an old city and the numerous lava tubes, towers and caves provide more than enough to explore for even the most enthusiastic visitor.

Húsavík

The pretty town of Húsavík is worth a visit all by itself and the drive there is most pleasant. But there are two other very good reasons to check it out: penises and whales.

The Icelandic Phallogical Museum is a world-renowned collection of nearly 300 penises from the animal kingdom. The museum aims to hold specimens from every mammal species in and around Iceland and has been promised a human specimen from an elderly Icelandic patron following his death. The 95 year-old gentleman sadly passed away recently – although at the time of writing, it was not confirmed whether or not the offer still stood.

Húsavík is also known as the Whale Watching Capital of Europe due to the amazingly high likelihood of seeing whales nearby and the beautiful wooden sailing boats offering unforgettable tours. The town is also home to an excellent whale museum.

Ásbyrgi

Ásbyrgi is one of several destinations in this mini guide which are inside Europe's largest national park – the Vatnajökull National Park. The park is so big it covers parts of North Iceland, East Iceland and South Iceland!

Ásbyrgi is a huge horseshoe shaped canyon which is a favourite camping spot among Icelanders due to the fact that it is a perfect summertime sun trap. That is also one of the reasons it is so densely vegetated. The area is crisscrossed with hiking trails and is a great stop off, whether for just an hour or for days on end.



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South Iceland Travel Tips

Skaftafell

The former national park at Skaftafell has now become part of the new Vatnajökull National Park – the largest in Europe.

Skaftafell is famous for its variety. There are few other places in Iceland where one can be surrounded by a glacier, stark mountains, lush trees and vegetation, rivers and barren sand plains all at the same time. Skaftafell has its very own microclimate, making it warmer and sunnier than most of South Iceland.

Skaftafell is a beautiful, and large, oasis of greenery and animal life sandwiched between Europe's largest glacier, Alp-like mountains and the extensive, bleak floodplains. Needless to say, it is a very special place.

Seljalandsfoss

Here's another suggestion for a waterfall right next to Route 1 that is well worth a stop. This is the famous Icelandic waterfall which you can walk behind. You've probably heard of it or seen it on TV.

The picturesque Seljalandsfoss is tall and thin, like a ribbon of white dangling down the cliff. Because of its height it throws up a lot of spray, creating a treacherous but beautiful ice kingdom in winter and a multitude of rainbows in summer.

Laki volcano

Here is where you go if you want to see the deadliest volcano in recorded human history. Laki killed half of Iceland's livestock in 1783-4 and a quarter of its people. In addition to this, it also spewed out enough ash and toxic gas to kill an estimated six million people worldwide.

Luckily today Laki is quite safe and a perfect excuse to take a trip inland to the unequalled space and strangeness of the Icelandic highlands where the black sand, grey rock and matte green moss make a unique and memorable sight.

Eyjafjallajökull

Eyjafjallajökull was the Icelandic word on the world's lips during the 2010 eruption which caused widespread travel chaos – at least it would have been if anybody could actually pronounce it.

Luckily, you don't have to be able to say the word to visit this South Iceland glacier and since the eruption there has been a constant stream of visitors wanting a closer look.

Tourist services in the area have responded and plenty of tours are now available – but be warned, the top of a glacier is no place to be without an experienced guide!

Landmannalaugar

Of all the difficult to reach highland locations in Iceland, Landmannalaugar is probably the most popular – and deservedly so.

The area is known for its abundant hot water for au-naturel bathing and for its bizarrely coloured rhyolite mountains with their shades of yellow, gold, purple and green.

Landmannalaugar is a bit too much to ask of a small car; but is accessible in summertime to most 4x4s.

Hekla

The Mount Hekla volcano is the gateway to Hell. At least that's what people once thought. And having blown its lid more than 20 times since Iceland was settled, it's not hard to see why.

When Hekla is quiet, she is still an impressive sight and a formidable climb. The snow capped peak is 1,491 metres tall and is covered in reminders of its volcanic past – truly a geologist's dream.

Hekla last erupted in 2000.



A waterfall every 5 minutes. Seljalandsfoss in South Iceland.

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East Iceland Travel Tips

Seyðisfjörður

Seyðisfjörður is among Iceland's most charming towns, with its old wooden buildings and powder blue church. It is also known for its residents' creativity and artistic flair, as well as for being Iceland's only international ferry port – not that there are any warehouses or gantry cranes to spoil the views.

Seyðisfjörður is surrounded on three sides by mountains and looks out over the fjord of the same name: a steep-sided, snaking fjord which has for centuries offered sanctuary from North Atlantic storms.

As a driver, the greatest thrill is surely the journey along the only road into and out of town to nearby Egilsstaðir. "Postcard-picturesque" is an understatement.

Dettifoss

Another feature of the Vatnajökull National Park, Dettifoss is Europe's biggest waterfall by volume. And from the intense roar and dense spray, it's not hard to believe!

Located in a rough and rocky part of northeast Iceland, Dettifoss is well worth the detour. The landscape has an epic, fairytale quality that will surely put you in mind of orcs, goblins and epic journeys into the clutches of danger.

Víti

Víti, part of the Askja volcanic system, is a flooded volcanic crater in the highlands of East Iceland. It is filled with bright blue warm water at excellent swimming temperature.

Lying in the rain shadow of Vatnajökull, Askja receives very little precipitation and played host to NASA Apollo astronauts training to carry out geological studies on the moon.

Despite the pleasant swimming temperature, it is not advised to take a dip in Víti on calm days, due to the possible build up of dangerous CO₂. But fear not: there is lots more to see in the area.

Kárahnjúkar

The controversial Kárahnjúkar hydroelectric dam is used for one thing only: to power an aluminium smelter in the town of Reyðarfjörður.

Whether you think it is a sensible use of renewable resources bringing much needed jobs and money, or if you think it is an unwelcome and unwise attack on Mother Nature, you have to admit it is a marvel of human engineering. Like so many other things in this mini guide, it is the Biggest in Europe and it is very hard to remain unmoved by the towering structure and the brand new Háslón lake.

There are occasional events and open days at the power station and it is possible to book tours for large groups.

Hallormsstaður

Have you ever heard that old chestnut that there are no trees in Iceland? Or the joke about what to do if you get lost in an Icelandic forest (the punch line is 'stand up')?

Well, don't believe a word of it. It's not quite the Amazon, but Hallormsstaðaskógur ('the forest at Hallormsstaður') is the biggest in Iceland and even the tallest person will be dwarfed by the trees.

According to the forest rangers, experiments with planting trees from around the world began at Hallormsstaður in 1903 and the planting accelerated quickly after 1950. Now the forest contains multiple specimens of around 50 different tree species from 177 different locations all around the world.



Beware of sheep crossing the roads

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West Iceland Travel Tips

Stykkishólmur

The town of Stykkishólmur lies on the north coast of West Iceland's Snæfellsnes peninsula. The town is rich in history, and the area is strongly linked to the Icelandic sagas.

The peninsula is also reputed to have magical properties, as well as being a converging place for ley lines.

Stykkishólmur is the departure point for the ferry to the Westfjords – a recommended voyage, even though it is also possible to drive all the way.

Húsafell

The pleasant estate of Húsafell is perhaps not a massive attraction in itself; instead it is a great base and service centre from which to explore the surrounding wonders.

Húsafell is not a town, despite its restaurants, hotels and other tourist services. In fact it is an old and very large farm of some 100 square kilometres.

Húsafell has a good swimming pool, a golf course and is a base for organised glacier tours. Also check out the local waterfalls and the Víðgelmir caves.

Grábrók

Not so far from Húsafell, and right next to Route 1 near Bifröst, you will see the compact and perfectly formed cone volcano called Grábrók. It is all-too-easy to just drive on by; but a stop off is highly recommended.

At just 170 metres tall, Grábrók is the largest of three nearby volcanoes and an easy hike with rewarding views from the top.

It has been a protected natural site since the 1960s and it is possible to walk around the rim and even climb down to where molten lava once spewed forth, creating the surrounding craggy landscape some 3,600 years ago.

Akranes

The town of Akranes is perhaps mainly known overseas for its successful football team, ÍA and for the fact that it is the town you can see looking north over the sea from Reykjavík. However, there is much more to Akranes than that: its museum, for example, is reason enough to visit the town all by itself.

The museum complex houses five separate exhibits including the national sports museum, a geological museum, an extensive exhibition on rural life in an old fishing town, and an impressive look into the construction of the nearby Hvalfjarðargöng – one of the world's longest underwater road tunnels.

Snæfellsjökull

The Snæfellsnes peninsula (where Stykkishólmur is located) takes its name from Snæfell mountain and the tiny glacier on its peak, called Snæfellsjökull – or 'Snow Mountain Glacier' in English.

The glacier may be monumentally tiny, but it is also breathtaking to behold. Just think of a giant, curly wisp of cream or ice cream placed on top of a mountain. It's no wonder that Snæfellsjökull has inspired stories, superstition and intrigue throughout the centuries.

Just three of its many cultural accolades are as the entry point in Jules Verne's novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, as the supposed meeting point of ley lines and as the place where aliens from outer space are first going to land (sooner or later).



Kirkjufell in Grundarfjörður on the Snæfellsnes peninsula

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Westfjords Travel Tips

Sæból

This hidden gem involves an exciting drive with arresting views over Dýrafjörður fjord. Between the towns of Flateyri and Þingeyri, Sæból is a beautifully isolated valley with just one permanent settlement remaining: a lone sheep farm and a well-maintained church from a time when other farmers lived there year round as well.

There are two main reasons to visit Sæból: the unquestionable peace and natural beauty and the farmhouse where the farmer supplements her income selling a wide range of hand made crafts, clothes and jewellery – as well as good coffee.

Dynjandi

Dynjandi is the most spectacular waterfall in the Westfjords region and probably one of the most distinctive and beautiful anywhere.

A seemingly delicate cascade of water, Dynjandi actually means 'Booming' or 'Droning' and is much wider at the bottom than the top; giving it an appearance somewhat like a skirt. Because it is so cascading, Dynjandi is, technically speaking, a series of waterfalls and not just one.

Hrafseyri

Hrafseyri is the site of a farm from the Viking settlement age and still features turf roofed farmhouses today.

As well as being a Viking-age historical site, it was also the birthplace of Jón Sigurðsson; by far the best-known of Iceland's nationalists who pushed for Icelandic independence from Denmark.

Jón Sigurðsson is often called Jón the President, even though he died some 70 years before Iceland gained its full independence – an event which is deliberately celebrated on Jón's birthday, the 17th June. You can see Jón Sigurðsson on the 500 krónur notes in your pocket and also at the Jón Sigurðsson museum at Hrafseyri.

Hornstrandir

Hornstrandir is possibly the most peaceful place in Iceland. Totally uninhabited since the middle of last century, there are no roads or mains electricity in the area and the only ways to get there are by hiking from the south or by boat from Ísafjörður and nearby towns.

Hornstrandir is Iceland's northernmost peninsula and is a nature reserve. It is the only place in the country where the Arctic fox is completely protected; making it one of very few places the animals are comfortable enough to make themselves seen regularly.

Hornstrandir lies directly to the north of Drangajökull, the Westfjords' only glacier.

Nauteyri

Located at the innermost part of the huge Ísafjarðardjúp fjord, at the opening of the smaller Ísafjörður fjord, Nauteyri is a natural pearl offering the visitor plenty to explore.

There is a natural hot pot on the site, as well as lakes, rivers and important bird habitats. In the autumn, Nauteyri plays host to many thousands of migrating geese.

Nauteyri has a wooden church and a non-profit organisation is hoping to create a sustainable activity and education centre there, as well as green accommodation.

The road north through Nauteyri ends as close as one can drive to Hornstrandir and runs tantalisingly close along the edge of the imposing Drangajökull glacier.



Dyjandi waterfall in the Westfjords.

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