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Sarah  
*Jessica*  
Parker

*Her Dazzling  
Next Chapter*





**LEFT & BOTTOM:** In 1975, 20,000 protesters gathered for the biggest demonstration ever in Iceland, forcing men to cook their own dinners. This led to wide-ranging policy change.

**BELOW:** Sky Lagoon is a geothermal spa located just a short 15-minute drive south of downtown Reykjavik, popular with visitors and locals alike



# THE LAND OF FIRE, ICE & EQUALITY

Half a century after the Women's Day Off changed everything, Iceland remains the world's most gender-equal country – a land of fierce weather, fiery landscapes and fearless women, says *Sarah Marshall*

Crowned with a sparkling cascade of snow and ice, Hekla is justifiably nicknamed the 'Queen of Icelandic Volcanoes'. Dominating South Iceland's skyline, her frequent rumblings have shaped landscapes and imaginations for centuries. Gauging by reports from geophysicists at the University of Iceland, this portal to the underworld is due to erupt again soon.

It's no coincidence many of Iceland's major volcanoes have female names. In this tiny Nordic nation of fewer than 400,000 residents, mothers, daughters, sisters and wives command respect.

A surprising hub of fiery feminism, Iceland stunned the world on 24 October 1975 when 20,000 protesters downed tools and gathered for the biggest demonstration ever held in the country, forcing men to care for children at home and cook their own dinner.

The term 'strike' was substituted with 'day off', but the long-term impacts were no less radical. The movement prompted major policy changes including universal childcare, paid paternity leave and, eventually, a law mandating equal pay for companies with more than 25 employees. It also helped establish Iceland as one of the most gender-equal nations in the world, repeatedly

ranked number one in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.

Fifty years later in downtown Reykjavik, I stood among a new generation of female and non-binary campaigners celebrating the admirable work of their foremothers while voicing demands for the future.

'I'm here to raise awareness about injustice,' proclaimed

**Iceland stunned the world on 24 October 1975 when 20,000 protesters downed tools and gathered for the biggest demonstration ever held in the country**

14-year-old Lilja Karen, tossing her blonde plaits to one side. Wearing thick mittens, she clung to a handmade cardboard placard reading: 'Girls Just Wanna Have FUNDamental Human Rights.'

Progressive attitudes have shaped a better Iceland – and a more welcoming destination. I've visited many times in the last 25 years, hunting for the aurora, clambering over glaciers and bathing in geothermal pools. Travelling solo, I've never felt intimidated or alone.

Volcanic eruptions aside, Iceland is widely regarded as one of the world's safest countries, ranked number one on the Global Peace Index for 17 years in a row. Crime rates are low and there's no need for an army.

To dig deeper into Iceland's egalitarian roots, I visited a new exhibition at the National and University Library. Glass cabinets featured songbooks from Women's Day Off instigators the Red Stockings, who made headlines by bringing a cow to a beauty pageant and crucifying the mannequin of a tired housewife to a Christmas tree. One wall was dedicated to largely forgotten female heroines, such as Oddný Guðmundsdóttir, a teacher and mountaineer who circumnavigated Iceland by bike and wrote a book about her travels.

'We suffer from a real gender divide in our archives,' admitted programme director Rakel Adolfsdóttir. 'Only about two percent of diaries we have in the library were written by women.' A common global problem, the disparity explains why historical accounts are so often skewed. →



One woman with a well-documented story is Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, a former schoolteacher and single mother who made history in 1980 by becoming the world's first democratically elected female president. She paved the way for women to secure powerful state positions including police commissioner, bishop and 46 percent of seats in Parliament.

Speaker of the Parliament Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir represents a new guard of women in politics. But on a tour of the Parliament House, she warned that there's still work to be done. 'We are always only one election away from all of this falling apart and we have to be aware of that,' she remarked, proudly showing a room where pictures of 'old men' had been replaced with paintings by handicapped artists.

Hinting Iceland is not immune to the 'toxic' immigration debate sweeping Europe, she continued: 'Women have always stood with minority groups. They are all under attack.'

Tourism is another industry where women thrive – helming restaurant kitchens, guiding groups up mountains or, in the case of Rannveig Grétarsdóttir, organising whale-watching and aurora tours. Braving bitter winter winds later that evening, I boarded one of her company's vessels in Reykjavik harbour – although choppy seas kept us tethered to the dock.

'When my family started Elding in 2000, I knew nothing about the sea,' confessed the no-nonsense entrepreneur, who took over the business six years later. 'I couldn't even tell the difference between a minke and a humpback.'

At that time, the seafaring industry was dominated by men. Captains would bypass Rannveig and ask to speak to a manager. Determined to cultivate a community of acceptance, she has introduced strict criteria for staffing. 'We look for people who respect nature, value equality and believe kindness and strength can go hand in hand.'

In a tiny nation where weather dictates everything, camaraderie is a way of life – essential for survival. Governments are formed through coalitions and there are no stuffy airs and graces. Everyone is on familiar terms and even the president goes by her first name.

Blizzards, earthquakes and multiple eruptions – 12 in the last five years alone – have forced people to work together. In many ways, these hostile conditions created the perfect environment for an inclusive movement like the Women's Day Off.

'We are ruled by nature,' agreed Rannveig as another gust rocked the boat. 'If someone gets stuck, you have to help them.' Through proactive effort, tolerance and acceptance, communities have developed resilience and a fatalistic approach to daily life.

'We have a phrase for it,' she smiled, uncorking a bottle of wine for the long dark night ahead. 'Þetta reddast – it'll all work out in the end.'

*Sarah's return flights from London Gatwick to Keflavik had a carbon footprint of 585kg of CO<sub>2</sub>e (collectivecarbon.com)*

## CHECK IN: REYKJAVIK



**STAY:**  
**PARLIAMENT HOTEL**  
Keeping up appearances with its government neighbours, this central downtown hotel is slick, modern and efficient. But there's enough personality in the cosy rooms to elevate it beyond a business hub. Doubles from £220 B&B. [hilton.com](http://hilton.com)

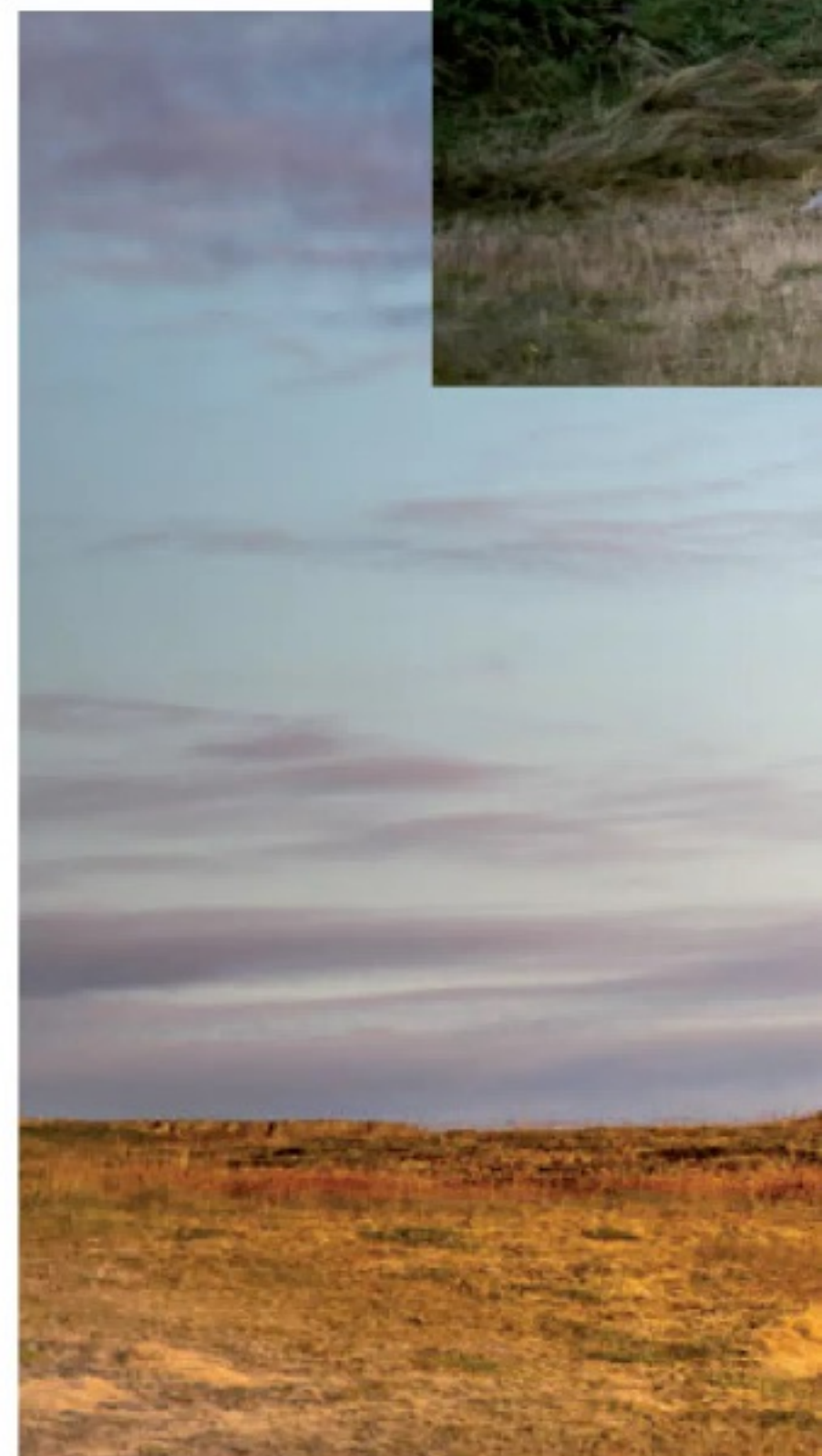
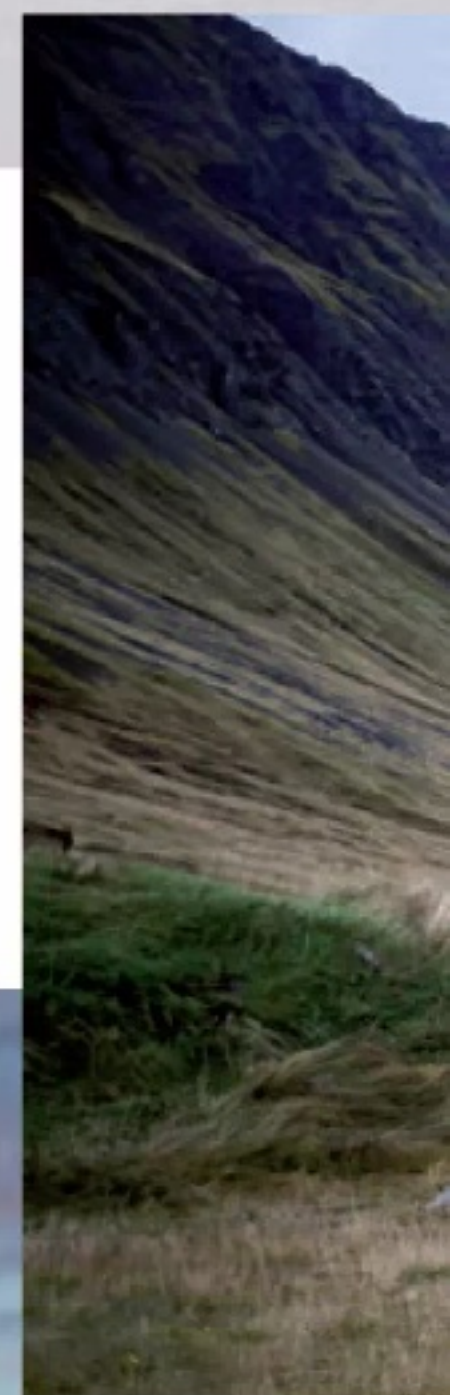
**EAT:**  
**JÓMFRÚIN**  
Equality works all ways in Iceland. Jakob Jakobsson opened this restaurant specialising in Danish open-faced sandwiches after becoming the first man to be certified as a 'smørrebrødsjomfru' (smørrebrød maiden) in Copenhagen. Order Jakob's Plaice – rye bread topped with fried fish, caviar and asparagus. [jomfru.is](http://jomfru.is)

**SEE:**  
**PERLAN**  
A glass dome resting on geothermal tanks houses Iceland's dynamic interactive nature museum. A new immersive Volcano Show plunges spectators into the belly of a magma chamber to experience an eruption from 2,000 metres down. [perlan.is](http://perlan.is)

**SHOP:**  
**FISCHERSUND**  
Musician Jónsi Birgisson from Sigur Rós co-founded this perfume store with his siblings. Blends are inspired by memories and Icelandic moods using local oils and herbs. Poetic descriptions of tarred telephone poles and burnt driftwood are as heady as the scents. [fischersund.com](http://fischersund.com)



**FROM TOP:** Eleven Deplar Farm is an off-grid Arctic paradise offering wild adventures





# ICE UNLEASHED

At the edge of the Arctic, Iceland reveals a rare kind of wildness, says *Amelia Windsor*

Waking up to total darkness which doesn't subside until after 9am creates a tantalising feeling in the stillness of the morning – the thrill of waiting for the landscape to appear and the day to take form as the weather wishes. Folklore is part of the fabric of Iceland and it is easy to see how the longer nights ignite mystery and magic. The short days also mean making the most of the time available before the light starts to dim over Eleven Deplar Farm.

The black-timbered and grass-roofed former sheep farm sits in the mountainous Fljót Valley in the Troll Peninsula of Northern Iceland, around 230 miles from Reykjavik. Flying direct to Akureyri though, the hour and a half drive to Deplar offers views of cinematic, ice-covered fjords, Icelandic ponies, glowing snowcapped peaks, as well as passing through Siglufjörður, filled with colourful houses and the Herring Era Museum, an industry vital to the country's economy.

Days at off-grid Deplar Farm are mapped out depending on the conditions and the desires of each group, with choices from riding and snowshoeing to sea kayaking at sunrise surrounded by seals. Come deep winter, the conditions are perfect for hugely popular heli-skiing.

During my visit, we climbed snow-covered mountains with not a soul in sight, and I had never felt anywhere more remote. The higher we hiked, the more out of breath we became, but the otherworldly views of the Arctic Sea and the light hitting the peaks around us – with a hot chocolate in hand – ignited our pioneering spirit.

On a rainy day – as an enjoyable curveball – we visited Flóki Studios, where Justin Bieber recorded his recent album and which has hosted artists such as Pharrell Williams and Calvin Harris. Designed to offer musicians a unique and isolated experience away from urban distractions, surrounded by roaring fires and rugged nature, creativity can be unleashed.

In my own unleashing, I braved a Viking sauna. This 60-minute guided fire-and-ice experience meant jumping from the extreme heat of the sauna to a cold plunge in the outdoor pool – and by cold, I mean a toe-shrivelling four degrees – which, when you're outside in the elements, can feel much brisker. For those less inclined to the extreme, there are also facials and massages to ease tired limbs and icy-wind-struck faces.

The 13 en suite rooms, all named after Norse Gods, can be booked together or independently. They are the height of cosiness, with extra down-filled duvets and piles of woollen blankets. Come evening, the resident mixologist lures us from our caves for pre-dinner cocktails, before a feast cooked by chef Jakub Maciag featuring local delicacies.

The arrival of night always comes with the added frisson of not knowing whether the Northern Lights might come out to play. Whether or not the sky dazzles with its natural light display, an after-dinner dip in the pool is its own reward of a vast darkness ablaze with stars. That feeling of being unleashed has never felt stronger. ■

**BOOK IT:** Doubles from £2,958 per night, based on two sharing. This includes adventure itineraries, all meals and drinks and transfers. [elevenexperience.com](http://elevenexperience.com)

*Amelia's return flights from London Gatwick to Akureyri had a carbon footprint of 576kg of CO<sub>2</sub>e (ecollectivecarbon.com)*

