

Cool as ice

Discover the best that Iceland has to offer with our guide to some of its greatest activities and attractions

BUCKET-LIST EXPERIENCES

See the Northern Lights

On clear winter evenings, a multitude of cross-country sightseeing trips are organised around the natural phenomenon that is the Aurora Borealis. There is no guarantee you'll see these fickle dancers of the night sky, but expert guides will do their utmost to 'hunt' them down. Extreme Iceland (extremeiceland.is) offers two- to three-hour tours during the winter. A few good locations for independent travellers include Thingvellir National Park, Lake Myvatn, Dettifoss waterfall, the Snaefellsnes peninsula and Húsavík.

Explore an ice cave

Iceland is home to a number of glaciers, and venturing inside their white, blue and even black natural ice caves (anytime from November until the end of March) is a mesmerising adventure. Most tours will take you to Vatnajökull (the largest glacier in Europe) in the south east, and Langjökull (the second largest) in the south west. guidetoiceland.is

Delve deep into a dormant volcano

A 30-minute drive south east from Reykjavík, you'll find Thrihnukagigur – the only volcano on earth that can be explored on the inside. Descend 120 metres by openable lift into one of its three craters for remarkable views of its striking rocks. It's been 4,000 years since its last eruption, so rest assured there are no indications of this happening again. insidethevolcano.com

ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

Whale-watch in Húsavík

Spurting whales make fountains all along the country's Arctic coastline – and summer boat tours from Húsavík boast at least a 97 per cent sighting success rate. You'll get within face-splashing distance on a traditional oak sailing ship, sharing the awe of ancient mariners. Chuckle at the showy acrobatics of breaching humpbacks and drop a jaw for tail flukes from behemoth blues. Four-hour tours operate from May until the end of August. northsailing.is

Rescue baby puffins in the Westman Islands

Pulling at heartstrings with their sadclown eyes, cute, ankle-height Atlantic puffins take over the south coast's Westman Islands from April to September, as 60 per cent of the world's population come here to breed. Visit in August and September to watch chicks take their maiden flight – and bring a box to help local children collect lost stragglers and return them to the



Atlantic puffins

wild. Take a ferry from Landeyjahöfn. visitwestmanislands.com

Horse-ride through lava fields

Famous for possessing two additional gaits that other countries' horses don't have (the tölt, which is much smoother than a trot, and flying pace), pony-sized

Icelandic horses are experts at crossing rough terrain, and even gnarled and twisted lava fields are a canter in the park for them. Put their hooves to the test on a ride along hilly pathways and volcanic landscapes, starting an hour's drive from Reykjavík. Extreme Iceland (extremeiceland.is) offers two-hour rides with transfers from the city.

Icelandic horses



Reynisfjara beach

WIND-BLOWN BEACHES

Reynisfjara

It's dramatic enough in summer, as white waves break along the 3km stretch of black sand. In winter, and snow-dusted, it's like a living Ansel Adams photograph. Even the seabirds – northern fulmars and guillemots, which swoop between towering basalt columns and through the Dyrhólaey arch, a naturally carved tunnel between cliff and sea – fit the monochromatic colour scheme. For the most spectacular (and driest) views, drive two-and-a-half hours from Reykjavík and park on the clifftop.

Nauthólsvík

Not all beaches in Iceland suit bathing (this may be the only one, in fact), but the giant geothermal lagoon here was literally made for it. Just outside Reykjavík, like a giant civic sandpit, the artificial lake attracts a sun-seeking crowd. Kept warm by seawalls and a supply of naturally heated water at a temperature of 15-19°C, it's safe to brave in a bikini. Want it warmer? Turn up the heat by dipping into a hot tub or work up a sweat with a game of volleyball. nautholsvik.is

Búðir

If it wasn't for the wall of ash-grey mountains sloping right down to the water's edge as far as you can see, the soft blonde beach here could trick you into thinking you were somewhere 'normal'. Find a seat of wave-smoothed basalt, dip your toes into the warm, sugar-coloured sand and watch seals play among charcoal outcrops a stone's skip out to sea. Park at the Hotel Búðir and take the short hike across a prairie of grassy tussocks.

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Skógafoss waterfall

WATERFALLS

Skógafoss

Looks-wise, it's a classic: a single silky sheet of water the height of a 20-storey building, tumbling over the lip of an alligator-green cliff in Iceland's south. On a sunny day, light prisms through the cloud of mist at its base to form rainbows – which, given the right conditions, can sometimes create perfect, Saturn-ring-like circles. Soak up the spray by venturing close to the base, or climb 500-plus steps to an observation deck for a view from above.

Dettifoss

Coloured grey by tons of glacial sediment, this unearthly looking beast (which featured in Ridley Scott's sci-fi epic *Prometheus*) crashes across a jagged, alien terrain before disappearing into a foggy abyss. Shipping an average of 438,000 litres of water per second, it's rated the most powerful waterfall in Europe. The sound alone is bone-shaking – loud enough to drown out a jet. Located in the north, not far from Húsavík, it can be reached by gravel and tarmac roads.

Gullfoss

This is one of Iceland's most famous sights, featuring a series of falls plummeting from the Hvítá river into a canyon. It's also well-catered, with a café, shop and a manmade pathway that allows you to view this monster from all angles. Allow an hour to admire the different dips and cascades, and come in winter to see it transformed into a stretch of stabbing icicles.

gullfoss.is

THINGS TO DO WITH CHILDREN

Reykjavík City Museum

An archaeological exhibition on the history of Reykjavík might sound like a tough pitch, but hear us out. The Settlement Exhibition at the City Museum uses a combo of hi-tech interactive displays and a truckload of ancient archaeological findings to show how Vikings first came to populate Iceland, way back in the 1st century. While older kids will love playing with the touch-sensitive multimedia board (it's like something out of Star Trek), there's also a collection of traditional Icelandic board games and colouring activities in the play area near the front to keep the young 'uns busy.

borgarsogusafn.is

Light hikes

You don't have to clamp on crampons to reach spectacular scenery here. At Skaftafell, even toddlers can reach those glistening glaciers and plunging waterfalls. Drop into the visitor centre (for family-friendly walking maps and hot chocolate) and head off on one of their many short, easy hikes to waterfalls, or crumbling icy-blue glaciers set in valleys of iron-grey volcanic ash. vatnajokulsthjodgardur.is

Family hangouts are more fun on a glacier



The waters of geothermal pools are rich in minerals



Swimming

That Icelandic air may be bracing and the Blue Lagoon crowded, but the island steams with thermal springs, and pretty much every town has a swimming pool with shallow ends suitable for even the tiniest tot. They'll love hurtling down the waterslides into a giant geothermal pool at Laugardalslaug (visitreykjavik.is), or paddling in one of the hundreds of hot rivers dotted around the island – easily discoverable on a self-drive trip. visiticeland.com

SMALLER TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Djúpivogur

Iceland's official 'slow town', Djúpivogur, chills out in the East Fjords, its colourful harbour framed by old wooden buildings. A quirky arts scene includes an outdoor installation of 34 giant granite birds' eggs. You can see puffins on a boat trip to nearby Papey Island (papey@djupivogur.is); look for the huldúfolk (hidden folk) at the towering volcanic rock formation known as the elf church; and also hike to the witch's-hat peak of Búlandstindur mountain.

Reykholt

One of Iceland's most important historical sites and an easy pitstop on the Golden Circle route, Reykholt was home to historian, poet, saga writer and 'law-speaker' Snorri Sturluson from 1206-1241. The Snorrastofa Cultural Centre (snorrastofa.is) delves into Norse mythology and medieval Iceland, while the grass-encircled, hobbit-y Snorralaug hot-spring pool is where Sturluson did most of his thinking. Check out nearby Hraunfossar, where bubbling rivulets emerge from beneath a lava field.

Seyðisfjörður

At the head of a 17km-long fjord, Seyðisfjörður lies just off the circular Route 1. Coloured clapboard houses huddle around the harbour of this pretty village with its buzzing music and arts calendar and top-notch restaurants (including one of Iceland's best sushi bars – Nord Austur). Head to the mouth of the fjord for some spine-tingling, beautiful scenery at Skálanes Nature Reserve.



Deplar Farm is located in the north of Iceland



HOTELS IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Hotel Búðir

Sitting at the tip of the Snaefellsnes peninsula, a two-hour drive northwest of Reykjavík, with only a 19th-century church for company, the sense of isolation here borders on the spooky. Out front: a troll-scape stretching all the way to a line of cloud-capped mountains. To the rear: the silvery infinity of the Atlantic. Fish and local lamb spearhead the restaurant's gourmet menu hotelbudir.is

Ion Adventure

Hotel Despite its sci-fi film-set modernity, this hulking slab of concrete and glass jutting from the side of a moss-coated hillside remains thrillingly wild. Bask in the syrupy rays of midnight sun in its geo-thermally heated outdoor pool, before snuggling up in one of the fluffy sheepskins

draped around the minimalist rooms. Walk the site of Earth's oldest parliament at nearby Thingvellir National Park, and dive (in a drysuit) to trace the under-lake gap between two tectonic plates: Eurasia and North America meet here. ionice.land.is

Deplar Farm

This grass-roofed, glass-fronted converted sheep farm in north Iceland's Troll peninsula is as secluded as it gets. In winter, being snowed in is always a possibility. (Eventually, the hotel hopes to farm its own food, making it less reliant on the outside world.) Not that you'll be trapped: in winter, skiing, snowmobiling and swimming in a geothermal infinity pool are all on tap. In summer, you can fish, kayak and go horse-riding. elevenexperience.com

Inspired to travel? To book a trip, call +971 4 316 6666 or visit dnatatravel.com