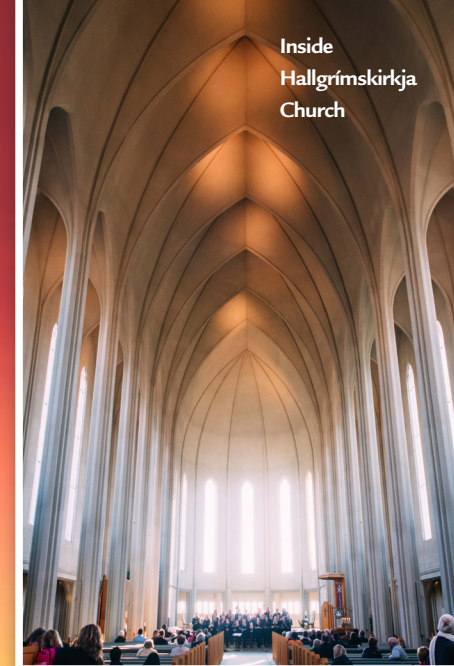


Ice and Fire

A country of contrasts, Iceland is a place for every type of traveler

By Petra Vrablicová



Inside
Hallgrímskirkja
Church



Outside
Hallgrímskirkja
Church



In the last few years, Iceland has made most travelers' bucket lists, especially visitors looking for adventure or some major change in their life. But this trend wasn't produced by some clever promoters sitting in the warmth of their offices, but rather by diversity of this country itself.

For those who can only stop by for a while...

If you're visiting for three or four days, that's enough time to get around Reykjavik and its spectacular downtown. The streets are full of graffiti and modern art that often covers entire houses and pathways, which brings you to the hidden restaurants, little shops with handmade products (mostly crafted from wool and stone) or galleries. The main street, Laugavegur, which is heated by thermal water during winter so it never freezes under ice, takes you to the city's iconic church, Hallgrímskirkja or to Harpa, the famous opera house. Both have a lot to offer—the cathedral features impressive architectural details and offers an incredible view from its tower, while the opera's modern space is a welcome break from the chilly outdoors, especially during Iceland's typically long winters. The tour is free and it is best to end it with some nice food. There is a little restaurant hidden in a harbor close to Harpa, serving the best lobster soup in the town. How do you find it? Right in one of those little buildings that was used for fishing and all related to that work. A life-size statue of its owner awaits you inside when you walk past the kitchen to find

a place to sit down.

If you're short on time, the Golden Circle tour is another fun option. The first stop is at Þingvellir national park, a natural valley created by two tectonic plates—North American and European—moving away from each other over the centuries. In the same place, Althing, the first parliament in Europe, was also created and thus, Iceland became the world's first democracy in modern terms. Another unique historical fact about Iceland: it's probably the only country in the world where more men than women were killed during the witch hunt with clear aim. The next stops take visitors to see the breathtaking Selfoss and Gullfoss waterfalls and of course, the famous hot spring Geysir.

For those, who want to experience nature

If you like more backpacking, hitchhiking and nature, you have a whole island to enjoy. If you want to take route No. 1 and go around the country, you'll need to budget 10 to 15 days so you can also enjoy the Westfjords. It's worth staying on to visit some places which are not far from the capital, such as the Snæfellsnes peninsula. Located only a few hours away from Reykjavik, it has, arguably, the best of everything that Iceland has to offer. From waterfalls to little fjords to beautiful beaches with seals if you are lucky, the longer you stay the more hidden places you'll get to enjoy. And if you're up for it, try a domestic specialty: shark meat that is first buried in the ground and

later dried in fresh air to get rid of all lethal toxins. A little hard to chew, the delicacy isn't for everyone, but still worth a try.

Another place you've got to try is Hveragerði—don't let the sulfuric aroma (which smells rather like rotten eggs) put you off from an experience of a lifetime: taking a bath in a hot river in the middle of the mountains. You can hike up here on your own or if you prefer, you can pay for a horse to take you up.

Before You Pack

First off, leave your umbrella back home. During the summer, you will almost never need it and during the rest of the year it won't do you much good—if it's raining in Iceland, then chances are that the wind will be so strong you might easily be blown away and your umbrella will be useless. Instead, pack a waterproof jacket, pants and sensible shoes

If you are visiting during the summer, the days will be long, with the sun out almost 24/7. Consider travelling during the night. Sunset is an almost unknown concept, so you can change your sleeping hours and enjoy places without tourists in daylight at 4:00am. Or even try to visit all the hot springs and natural thermal pools on the island if you have enough time.

Look out for the sheep; they are worth more than you think and take priority on the road.

Chicken is not very popular or readily available at supermarkets, you're more likely to see horsemeat on the shelves. It can be tricky to tell both apart.

