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*These documents demonstrate the supportive style of the notes that we supply with the ticketing pack for your independent holiday. Please note that details in sample documents are not updated or checked for accuracy, and in some cases they are for holidays no longer available through Inntravel.*

# **An Icelandic Adventure**

Home to Europe's largest icecap, bubbling hot lakes, brooding volcanoes, velvety green valleys and deep blue canyons, Iceland offers scenery that is both epic in scale and surprising in nature. You never quite know what you're going to find around the next corner...

# An Icelandic Adventure

## **Assistance:**

In the rare event that you should encounter any problems during your stay, please contact the owners/agents in the first instance as they act as our representatives. Please do not wait to report any dissatisfaction until you return home as problems can only be rectified if you give us the chance to do so at the time.

## **24-hour emergency contact with Inntravel**

If you need to contact Inntravel on urgent matters, please phone

**+44 (0) 1653 XXXXXX.**

Out of office hours your initial call to this number will be taken by our emergency assistance service. Please provide them with your contact telephone number, location, booking reference number (if you have this easily to hand) and a brief description of your problem; they will then immediately contact Inntravel's 24-hour Duty Officer, who will call you to assist. If you are unable to reach us on this number at any time, you should call **+44 (0) XXXX XXXXXX** as an alternative way of reaching our emergency assistance service.

Please do not call this emergency number for routine matters or enquiries which can be most effectively handled by our full team during office hours by calling **01653 XXXXXX**.

The local emergency services in Iceland can be summoned on **112**.

The international dialling code for Iceland is **+354**

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## Documentation for Your Holiday

### Your information pack includes:

- Itinerary
- Tickets / e-ticket as applicable (please double-check these)
- Car hire voucher & information leaflet
- General information on your holiday
- Directions for reaching your accommodation
- Suggestions for sightseeing
- ITM Driving Map Iceland
- Walking maps:
  - Kringum Snæfellsjökull map (in box of 4)
  - Atlaskort 14 - Mýrdalsjökull (1:100,000)
  - Sérkort 5 - Skaftafell (1:100,000 & 1:50,000)

### **You should already have received the following documents with your holiday confirmation/invoice (please let us know if you have not received these):**

- Your insurance policy documents (if applicable)
- Preparing for your walking holiday
- Driving in Europe
- 'Iceland' Country Information

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## Your accommodation

### **Fosshotel Hellnar**

356 Hellnar

Tel: +354 XXX XXXX / Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

### **Hotel Odinsve**

Pórsgata 1

101 Reykjavík

Tel: +354 XXX XXXX / Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

### **Country Hotel Anna**

Moldnúpi

861 Hvolsvelli

Tel: +354 XXX XXXX / Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

### **Hotel Geirland**

800 Kirkjubæjarklaustur

Tel: +354 XXX XXXX / Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

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## Your Icelandic Adventure

More than anything this is a tale of a landscape - of scenic grandeur forged from fire and carved by ice; a story of fragility, of impermanence and of man's resilience on a restless continent.

As you drive north from Reykjavík, you can already see the peninsula of Snæfellsnes beckoning in the distance. Floating above the ground is the tiny but perfectly formed ice-cap of Snæfellsjökull, crowning a dormant volcano which was the inspiration for Jules Verne's heroic tale 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. This is a region of closely-knit fishing communities, of tales of magic and mystery, of twisted lava fields and delicate coves.

After a few days in the vibrant capital, you then continue along the southern coast, following the green, watered coastal plain that edges the stark, inland desert. As you travel, the interior spills down to meet you; great glaciated tongues slip down to the sea, powerful waterfalls plunge through canyons and over cliffs and sinuous, silver rivers trace their way through black volcanic sand. Sheltering beneath rocky cliffs, small settlements dot the plain, growing grass and scanty vegetables through Iceland's short growing season, and offering hospitality to the increasing numbers of summer visitors.

## The Journey on the Map

Our story begins under the protection of the Snæfellsjökull ice-cap, in the tiny hamlet of Hellnar, set midway along the southern coast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula in grid square 24°64'30". This is Iceland's only coastal national park and home to laid-back fishing villages, bird-filled fjords and dramatic volcanic cliffs – this is Iceland at its most serene.

From here you continue south to visit the world's most northerly capital, the vibrant city of Reykjavík.

From the city, our route down to the south coast heads first north to Mosfellsbær from where you embark on the classic Golden Circle tour; Þingvellir National Park and then continuing eastwards to Geysir and Gullfoss before dropping down onto the south coast at Selfoss. Your destination on the south coast is Skógar, located in grid square 19° 63'30" and right in the shadow of the Eyjafjallajökull ice cap.

You are now truly on the edge of rural Iceland, as from Skógar the way onward is eastward along the coastal road through Vík, where unexpected,

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isolated headlands, stretches of black sand and basalt rock formations accompany you on your journey to Kirkjubæjarklaustur in grid square 19° 63°30' (most people abbreviate it to Klaustur).

From here you can really begin to explore in detail, either on foot in the Skaftafell National Park, by car to the remarkable glacial lake at Jökulsárlón or by using local specialised transport to get deeper into the interior. We provide you with plenty of information to make your choice.

Taking your journey slowly around Iceland, we hope that you get the chance to feel both the extraordinary beauty, power and the serenity of this unique landscape.

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## Iceland – A Natural Wonder

### Fire and ice

The events that precipitated the birth of Iceland began 60million years ago when the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates steadily pushed apart. As this happened, the landmass that we now know as Greenland split off from the European mainland and vigorous volcanic activity threw up a ridge which transiently formed a land bridge between North America and Europe. When much of this new land eventually sank beneath the ocean, only the high points of Iceland and the Faroe Islands remained exposed above sea level; the visible reminder of a sub-oceanic mountain chain straddling a turbulent boundary – where the continental plates continued to drift apart at a rate of approximately 2.5cm/year.

Along this boundary, molten magma reaches the earth's surface and is extruded, creating deposits of igneous rock along the ocean floor and visible, vigorous and repeated volcanic activity throughout Iceland. This activity has steadily shaped the Icelandic landscape, producing a high, sterile lava plateau dotted with hot springs and geysers. The dominant landforms include shield volcanoes – broad flattened domes made by the slow extrusion of fluid lava; classical conical volcanoes created by more exuberant activity and extensive chains of smaller craters, formed as lava has bubbled up at multiple points along large volcanic fissures. Ancient lava fields have been weathered away, but newer, jagged lava fields coat significant tracts of the land. Distinctive, hexagonal basalt columns are easily spotted and landscapes of ochre, red and yellow create vistas of are beauty.

Overlying the volcanoes, and covering around 10% of the island's surface, are a small number of glaciers and ice caps that have extended and retreated over the millennia as climatic conditions have changed. Five thousand years ago, when Earth was experiencing a period of milder weather, surface ice on the island had all but disappeared. However, by the time Iceland was settled around the 9th century new ice caps had formed and were similar in extent and distribution to those we see today. Each of these ice caps cover important volcanoes such as Eyjafjallajökull (which was the volcano that erupted in 2010), Katla, Iceland's most active and destructive volcano (under the Myrdalsjokull ice cap), and Grímsvötn and Kverkfjöll, submerged under Europe's largest glacier, Vatnajökull

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With changing climatic conditions, the ice caps are retreating once again. Vatnajökull, Iceland's largest ice-cap, started to recede in 1920 following several decades of warmer weather. In doing so, it created the glacial lagoon at Jökulsárlón, which only appeared in 1936. Since 1994, the glacier has been losing about 1m of its average thickness every year and it is predicted to disappear within two centuries. It is expected that as a result, rivers in the area will rise significantly over the next 50 years before falling again in the 22nd century. Land that previously lay submerged will be visible once again, and with the fall in surface pressure, the land is likely to rise by as much as 100m in elevation. Similar events must follow at Snæfellsnes, and the western peninsula's most emblematic feature will slowly dwindle away.

## **Notable volcanic eruptions**

Since the settlement began, there have been well over a hundred volcanic eruptions recorded throughout Iceland. Not all have caused serious damage, but a significant number had important effects on the local population, causing death from toxic fumes, especially amongst livestock, destruction of farms and settlements, glacial floods and subsequent famine. The eruption of Katla in 1755-6 was notably catastrophic and added to the burden of a number of poor harvests. Heavy ash drifted over the north-eastern part of the country causing death from asphyxiation and widespread damage. A glacier outburst washed southwards and fifty farms were temporarily abandoned.

However, it was the eruptions of 1783-4, known locally as the Laki eruptions, which have gone down in the annals of history. The severity of the eruption changed the climate and the poor harvest that followed are said to have contributed to the social unrest that culminated in the French Revolution.

## **The Laki eruptions of 1783**

In the spring of 1783 a series of volcanic fissures opened up in the highlands above Kirkjubæjarklaustur in Southern Iceland, and violently spewed lava and toxic gasses over a period of eight months. A huge lava flow spilled down 2 river valleys eventually covering an area of 580km<sup>2</sup>. Noxious gases poisoned livestock and the build-up of sulphur dioxide in the atmosphere changed the prevailing climatic conditions, precipitating a severe winter. 80% of Iceland's sheep died, 50% of the cattle and horses

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and 20% of the population in the ensuing famine. The poisonous cloud drifted southwards to Bergen, then spread to Prague by 17 June, Berlin by 18 June, Paris by 20 June, Le Havre by 22 June, and to Great Britain by 23 June. The fog was so thick that boats stayed in port, unable to navigate, and the sun was described as "blood coloured". The local death rate in Chartres was up by 5% during August and September, with over 40 dead. In Great Britain, the records show that the death rate in Bedfordshire, Lincolnshire and the east coast was perhaps two or three times the normal rate. The weather became very hot, causing severe thunderstorms until the haze finally dissipated in the autumn. As in Iceland, the eruption was followed by an extremely cold winter, with 28 days of continuous frost in Southern England. The extreme winter is estimated to have caused 8,000 additional deaths in Britain.

### **Eyjafjallajökull and the grounding of air traffic 2010**

By all accounts the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in April to May 2010 was a small affair, and the disproportionate disruption to Europe's air traffic, an unfortunate conjunction of circumstances. The volcano certainly sent up a significant plume of ash, but the problem lay in the fact that this took place directly under a jet stream. The jet stream was particularly stable and maintained a persistent SE heading, causing the ash to blow towards Northern Europe. The ash cooled quickly, resulting in a cloud of highly abrasive, glass rich emission – setting off the debate about what sort of ash should ground air traffic! Whilst the eruption certainly had significant effects for the local population and downed our aeroplanes, if it hadn't been for climatic conditions, the eruption would probably have just been a footnote in Iceland's exciting history!!

### **Safety Precautions:**

So much of Iceland's appeal lies in the natural wonders and remarkable landscapes shaped by volcanic action over many thousands of years, but the eruptions of Bárðarbunga in 2014, Grimsvötn in 2011 and Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 are testimony to the fact that volcanic evolution of the landscape continues apace to the present day. An eruption of a volcano such as Mount Katla (which lies beneath the Mýrdalsjökull glacier in the southern section of our Iceland journey) generally occurs only once or twice every hundred years, and usually shows some warning signs before doing so, but nevertheless it is advisable to be aware of safety precautions issued

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by Iceland's Civil Protection department in the unlikely event a substantial eruption happens while you are in the area:

- If a substantial eruption has occurred or is thought to be imminent, Iceland's Civil Protection department puts emergency procedures into action in the affected region. This includes the mobilisation of local public assistance teams to help residents and tourists;
- Warnings are passed to all main tourist venues. Land wardens at the major mountain cabins in the risk area will fire 5 'maroons' (which explode with a loud bang) and 5 flares to warn people in the region, a signal which is repeated 20 minutes later;
- Follow the advice of your hotelier, other local people and authorities and, if possible, listen to the radio for news and instructions, which may be summarised in English. Principal radio stations can be found on FM 98.2, 95.0 and 100.9.
- If you happen to hear an eruption warning while you are out walking, try to return to your start point or seek the nearest shelter. If possible, keep to higher ground away from rivers and streams to avoid possible glacial melting. There is a risk of lightning within 30-40km of volcanic eruptions, so do not use mobile phones and avoid metallic objects which may conduct electricity.

## A challenging ecosystem

Iceland presents many challenges to colonising plant life. A constantly changing volcanic landscape creates sterile lava flows which need to be broken down before many higher species can establish themselves. Geographic isolation and the effects of the Ice Age have each in turn helped to limit the number of species. While some experts think that as much as a fifth of Iceland's flora survived the Ice Age, others believe that all species growing in Iceland today were carried here after the Ice Age by the wind and migrating birds. In total 5,600 species have been recorded on Iceland – these are mainly fungi (2,100 species), algae (1,660), lichens (755), and mosses (606), with only 490 flowering plants.

## Plants of Mainland Iceland

Lichens and mosses are widespread and are often the primary colonisers of the lava fields, particularly the grey fringed lichen, *Stereocaulon vesuvianum* and the woolly fringe moss. Around half of all the flowering

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plant species are distributed throughout the country, with the occasional exception of the central highlands, where growing conditions are much harsher than in coastal areas. These plants include flowering plants such as dandelions and buttercups. Other species have more limited distribution and grow only in certain areas of Iceland. Some of these are emblematic for the region in which they grow, such as harebells and yellow saxifrage in East Iceland and arctic poppies and small cow-wheat in the West Fjords. Other species have been found at no more than a few locations – some are only known to grow at a single location. These rare species include northern spleenwort (*Asplenium septentrionale*) in Northern Iceland and wolf's-foot clubmoss (*Lycopodium clavatum*) in Southwestern Iceland.

### **Birdlife**

About 330 species of birds have been recorded in Iceland; of these, only about 85 nest or have attempted to nest, and about 12 are common passage migrants or winter visitors. The rest are accidentals and casual visitors. The last category consists mainly of passerine birds of European origin, the most common of which are chiffchaffs, willow warblers, blackcaps, garden warblers, chaffinches, bramblings, redstarts and robins. Quite a few of the accidental visitors come from North America, such as parula warblers, America robins, hermit thrushes and indigo buntings. Other regular but rare visitors are seabirds like pomarine- and long-tailed skuas, sooty- and great shearwaters.

For Iceland's breeding species, the waters to the north of the Snæfellsnes peninsula – the shallow Bay of Breidafjörður, the many islands that lie off its coast and the great cliffs of the western edge – are extremely important habitats. Waders, sea-birds, geese as well as the rarer sea-eagle all congregate here and, in total, 57 species nest around the shores. During the summer months, puffin, eider duck and kittiwake are particularly abundant. The eider stay close to the sea-shore all year around, feeding on the shellfish that lie in the shallow waters. The puffins nest in dense colonies on grassy cliffs, a little way away from human habitation. A great favourite with human visitors, they usually depart for open sea at the end of August to spend the winter at sea. Other common sights include guillemot, fulmars, shags, cormorants and a variety of gulls. For a real feast of bird life, you could consider taking the boat out from Stykkishólmur on the north of the peninsula. A bird tour takes in many of the islands that lie offshore.

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Along the extensive southern alluvial plains such as Breidamork and Skeidarar, you will find the largest colonies of great skuas in the northern hemisphere – about 5,000 pairs (36% of the world's population) are found here. Barnacle goose and Iceland's grey Phalarope also breed in the area. In addition, arctic skuas and great black-backed gulls can be found on all the larger sandy plains of the southern coast. The headland of Ingolfshofdi, the site of the first Viking landing, has a great birding cliff, where puffins nest and ordinary guillemots far outnumber Brunnich's guillemots.

In the Landbrot (just on the seaward side of Klaustur) and west of the vast outwash plains, in the Medalland District, are still some uncultivated, boggy areas where the extinct water rail used to breed. Horned grebe and a variety of ducks can be found here as can the white fronted goose during the migrating seasons. Close to the village of Vík, arctic terns and several more large colonies of puffins are found on the grassy slopes that run above it.

Nearby, at the headland of Dyrhólaey, colonies of great black-backed, lesser black-backed and herring gulls are commonly found. Gannets can be seen on the rock stacks in the sea to its south, as well as arctic terns and eiders. On the cliffs one can expect to find puffins, Brunnich's- and common guillemots, razorbills, fulmars and kittiwakes.

## **Mammals**

The only native mammal was the Arctic fox, although accidental and sometimes intentional introductions have now extended the range of resident mammals to include mice, rats, mink and rabbits. Reindeer were introduced for hunting during the late-17th century. However, you are unlikely to see them as they are confined to the east of the island. Of course, it's out at sea where Iceland's most fascinating mammals are found. Most common sightings are of pilot, fin, sei and minke whales, but orcas, sperm and blue whales can occasionally be spotted.

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## The settlement and beyond

Iceland is a young country both geologically and historically. Despite the archaeological finds of a few Roman coins, it is generally believed that the first people to set foot on the island were Irish monks seeking solitude. A number had settled in the Faroe Islands around the middle of the 7th century and probably arrived in Iceland by the mid to late 18th century. A couple of authoritative, early historical works record the monks' presence when the Norsemen arrived – however, it seems likely that they left soon after, either driven out or unable to tolerate the heathen ways.

During the time of the Viking expansion, from the beginning of the 9th-century onwards, the Norsemen made a number of exploratory sorties to the island taking back news of a rich and hospitable(!) land. The first Vikings credited with actually settling the island were two foster brothers, Ingólfur Arnarson and Hjörleifur Hróðmarsson. Already rich from adventures abroad, they quarrelled with, and killed the sons of a neighbouring noble so had to leave Norway in a hurry. After an investigatory voyage they decided to settle in Iceland, returning to Norway first to sell up, then equip themselves with family, Irish slaves, animals and other goods. As they approached the shores of Southern Iceland, Ingólfur threw overboard the high seat pillars that he had brought with him from the family home and vowed to settle where they beached. The two brothers made landfall at Ingólfshöfði where, although the pillars were still adrift, Ingólfur initially settled. Hjörleifur sailed further west and settled at Hjörleifshöfði, near Vík on the south coast.

Unfortunately, Hjörleifur soon came to a sticky end; in the following spring his Irish slaves revolted, killed Hjörleifur and sailed away with booty and the women of the party, making their own landfall at what are now known as the Westman or Vestmannaeyjar islands (named after the men from the west). Ingólfur eventually came looking for his brother and, finding the settlement pillaged and abandoned, set off to exact revenge. He tracked the slaves down, killed them and re-captured the women including his own sister, Helga. Returning to Hjörleifshöfði for a while, he then continued his quest for the pillars. En route, he built a house at what is now Skógar before finding them washed ashore at a small bay, misted up with the steam from hot springs. He called this place Reykjavík or 'Smoky Bay'.

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What followed is known in Iceland as the 'Age of the Settlement'. From 870-930 political changes in Norway encouraged many noblemen to flee the restrictions and war fuelled by King Haraldur Fairhair as he tried to unite Norway into a single state. Waves of immigrants arrived, including some from Ireland and Scotland who claimed land throughout the island. These arrivals and subsequent claims were carefully recorded. A man was allowed to take land within a boundary defined by how many fires in sight of each other he could light in a day; women by the circuit they could walk with a heifer between sunrise and sunset. By the end of the settlement period it is thought that Iceland may have had a population of around 60,000.

The land they occupied was, unlike today, extensively wooded. The streams were rich with fish and there were plenty of seabirds, eggs and whales to be hunted. Land was cleared for grain and animals pastured, sadly beginning the steady process of absolute deforestation. Problems of infighting between settlements were brought to heel by the creation of a clear set of laws and the establishment of a meeting place and parliament in 930AD, just to the north of Lake Thingvallavatn. Each regional chieftain with 2 advisors or assistants was a member of the new assembly, as well as a 'law speaker'. The assembly had legislative and judiciary power whilst other powers were devolved to the local chieftain. The law speaker was the repository of all legal knowledge until 1117, when the laws were finally written down. Many people today make their way to see the site of the assembly on a tour known as the 'Golden Circle'.

## **The Saga Age and the coming of Christianity.**

From 930-1030, we enter what is known as the Saga Age. This was an age of prosperity in Iceland as the early settlers consolidated and developed their farms. Many owned ships and became merchants or went abroad to take part in lucrative Viking raids. It was a time of national and cultural growth when many of the heroic events took place that formed the basis of the Saga tradition. Poetry flourished and the sagas were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Exploration continued and Greenland was discovered and colonised; North America visited but never permanently settled.

With the transition to Christianity in 1000AD came the introduction of the Latin alphabet and the setting down of the laws, the Sagas, the history of the settlement and an Icelandic alphabet.

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## **Loss of sovereignty**

During the 11th and 12th centuries, a small number of powerful families began to dominate events, initiating a series of bloody clan wars. Decades of internal conflict followed until the Icelandic chieftains finally agreed to accept the sovereignty of Norway, signing a covenant which established a union with the Norwegian monarchy.

At the same time, Icelanders were forced to trade for grain from continental Europe - an expensive proposition. Fortunately, Church fast days increased the demand for dried codfish, which was easily caught and prepared for export, and the cod trade soon became an important part of the economy.

Iceland remained under Norwegian rule until 1380, when King Olav IV died without heirs. Norway (and thus Iceland) then became part of the Kalmar Union, along with Sweden and Denmark, with Denmark as the dominant power.

The 15th century brought wholesale devastation from plague, killing up to half Iceland's population. It seems that Iceland's cultural life broke down, written records became scarce, the price of land fell and the cost of labour rose. The Church became even more powerful as land was bequeathed to it by the dying population. At first Icelanders opposed the Reformation, but became Lutherans in 1550 and remain largely so to this day.

In the 18th century, climatic conditions deteriorated further and the Laki eruptions and subsequent famine devastated the population. The country's climate continued to worsen through the 19th century, resulting in mass immigration to the New World. However, a new national consciousness was revived in Iceland, inspired by romantic nationalist ideas from continental Europe, and an independence movement developed. In 1874, a thousand years after the first acknowledged settlement, Denmark granted Iceland home rule.

## **Independence**

The Act of Union of 1918 recognised Iceland as a fully sovereign state – the Kingdom of Iceland – but joined with Denmark, which continued to represent Iceland on defence matters and foreign affairs until Denmark was occupied by the Nazis in 1940. At this point, Iceland took control of its foreign affairs and, just four years later, following a referendum, it formally became an independent republic on June 17, 1944, while Denmark was still occupied by Germany.

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## **Iceland today**

Iceland, a country the size of England has a population of around 320,000, 2/3 of which live in the SW corner in and around Reykjavík. The remainder live in the scattered communities that edge the coast. Although it has few mineral resources the country is rich in geothermal energy and water-based power. Iceland's renewable energy industry provides over 70% of the nation's primary energy – proportionally more than any other country. The Icelandic Parliament decided in 1998 to convert vehicle and fishing fleets to hydrogen fuel and consequently Iceland expects to be energy-independent, using 100% renewable energy, by 2050.

Low cost energy also supports the use of greenhouses for some vegetable production, although much of Iceland's food is imported. With the collapse of the international financial sector, tourism and fisheries have become the other mainstays of the economy, with over 1.5million visitors coming to Iceland in 2016.

## **Icelandic People**

Fiercely independent as a nation, mostly due to their isolation from the rest of the world, the Icelanders are however warm and welcoming, and keen to share their island with tourists. They have educational and health systems of an enviably high standard, with a greater than average life expectancy, and infant mortality rates which are amongst the lowest in the world.

The Icelandic language is a Germanic language and is very similar to 9th-century Old Norse, having changed little over the centuries as a result of the island's isolation. Grammatically it is incredibly complicated, and still retains the ancient letters 'eth' (ð) and 'thorn' (þ), which existed in Old English, but have since disappeared. The language has changed so little that school children can still read the texts of the 12th and 13th-century sagas with little difficulty. English is, however, widely spoken.

Icelanders' names also follow age-old traditions, with an official list of possibilities and any new additions having to be approved by the Icelandic Naming Committee! As their surnames are constructed from a combination of their father's first name and either *dóttir* for girls and *son* for boys, Icelanders tend to address each other by their first names, making for a wonderfully democratic society. For example, Jón the son of Einar would be Jón Einarsson and Dóra the daughter of Magnús would be Dóra Magnúsdóttir.

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## Food and Drink

Sparse soil, extreme weather and limited crops have influenced the cuisine of the country, with a heavy emphasis on fish, seafood, lamb and simple root vegetables tending to dominate the menus. However, Iceland too has become part of the Nordic cuisine culture and, certainly in Reykjavík, there are some very good restaurants keen to serve up traditional food as tastily and imaginatively as possible.

Fish is very much a mainstay of the Icelandic diet. Freshly caught Arctic char and cod are a delight. If you are feeling brave (and want to be entirely authentic), then you may like to try *hakari* (shark). It apparently tastes like a combination of dodgy fish and French cheese with a subtle undertone of ammonia! The shark is buried in the sand for about 6 months before being sufficiently rotten to eat. The darker meat tends to be less pungent.

Icelandic lamb is hard to beat – mainly due to the fact they will have munched on succulent grass throughout the summer – and fillets, pan-fried or smoked, are commonly seen on menus.

Warming soups, served with hunks of fresh bread and salad are a ubiquitous feature in roadside cafés, and are a great choice for a light lunch. Traditional breads are still popular including *rúgbrauð*, a dense, dark and moist rye bread, baked in the ground in stone pots, and *flatkaka*, a soft brown rye flatbread.

Dairy products are consumed in large amounts, especially berry-flavoured yoghurts and a yoghurt-like curd cheese known as *Skyr* – delicious! Apparently, your average Icelander consumes 100 gallons of dairy products per year!

To drink, Iceland takes great pride in its crystal clear, pure spring water - it's certainly extremely good and reminds one of how water should taste without the added chlorine. Good coffee and coffee bars are widespread. Alcohol is expensive and only available from licensed restaurants and bars as well as the cheaper state-controlled off-licences known as *Vinbúð*. These often have short and inconvenient opening hours and tend to sell a good range of New World wines at around 15-20GBP per bottle.

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## Climate

There's a saying in Iceland - that it doesn't really have weather, just samples of it!! The truth of it, though, is that, caressed by the Gulf Stream, the island is actually considerably warmer than one would expect for its northerly latitude. However, even at the height of summer, you need to be prepared for almost anything; glorious, clear sunny days of course, but also a sudden loss of visibility if mist or fine rain descends.

The table below shows the average monthly rainfall and maximum daily daytime temperatures for Reykjavík and Stykkishólmur.

<b>Reykjavik</b>	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
<b>Rainfall (mm)</b>	56	42	42	50	56	67	94
<b>Max Temp(°C)</b>	6	10	12	14	14	11	7
<b>Stykkishólmur</b>	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
<b>Rainfall (mm)</b>	52	36	40	42	52	58	80
<b>Max Temp(°C)</b>	5	9	12	14	13	10	6

**NB** Iceland is on GMT but does not alter for daylight saving and is therefore an hour behind the UK in the summer.

## What to take

If you plan to walk inland, we advise you to wear solid hiking boots, as the terrain can be rough underfoot. Wherever you are, the weather can change suddenly, so pack and carry proper waterproofs as well as a windproof fleece, hat and gloves. Carry a map and compass (or GPS) as well as a (charged) mobile phone for emergencies.

The bird life is astounding, so you might like to pack binoculars.

We found a corkscrew useful as wine purchased from the local off-licence (15GBP) is substantially cheaper than hotel prices (around 30GBP).

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## Driving in Iceland

- In Iceland you drive on the right.
- The speed limit is usually 50km/hr in built up areas; 90km/hr on other surfaced roads – blue signs advise you of any other local speed restrictions.
- Rural roads are often narrow in places and winding – the combination of this with the breathtaking scenery means that you shouldn't count on covering much more than 60km/hr.
- You should always have your headlights on, regardless of conditions (it's the law).
- When approaching a single lane bridge, the car nearest to the bridge has right of way.
- Roads pre-fixed with an F are only for 4-wheel drives – don't try them!
- There is zero tolerance for driving after drinking alcohol (any amount).

## Staying safe

It's highly unlikely that you will run into any problems, but it is important to have a healthy respect for the weather and environment when walking or driving.

- Our walking suggestions have been chosen with your safety in mind, but if you decide to go off route remember that it's important to calibrate your compass for declination (on average about 20°).
- Routes are sometimes marked with wooden sticks of varying height and robustness. It is not uncommon to find them blown over.
- Always carry good waterproofs and spare warm (preferably wind resistant) clothing, including gloves and a hat
- Check the weather forecast – [www.vedur.is](http://www.vedur.is) and [www.belgingur.is](http://www.belgingur.is)
- Approach glaciers with respect – the front edge is often unstable and large fissures can open up. If you would like to walk on a glacier, it is advisable to do this **only with a guide**. This can be arranged at the Skaftafell visitor park. Bear in mind that for every 100m ascent, the temperature drops by 0.6°C so take plenty of warm clothes

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- If the weather should close in on you and you should get lost, stay still and phone 112 – Iceland has an excellent search and rescue service.
- Should you experience severe winds when driving, pull off the road and take shelter – wait for the wind to abate.

Please see also the paragraph headed “Safety Precautions” in the unlikely event of major volcanic activity during your stay.

## Directions and our route note abbreviations

Our notes for city tours, walks and driving directions are written in a concise bullet-point style. Please familiarise yourself with the following abbreviations before setting off:

L	left
R	right
LH	left-hand
RH	right-hand
J	junction
TJ	T-junction
X-road	crossroad
SA	straight ahead, straight across or straight on
SP	sign post/sign posted to

Compass directions are also written in abbreviated form

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## Driving directions to Hellnar

The fastest and most direct route involves taking the main coastal highway northwards from the airport, circumnavigating Reykjavík and then travelling on to Borgarnes (115km). From here it's another 120km along route 54 onto the southern coast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula to the hamlet of Hellnar. You should allow 3 hours for the journey.

### Road directions

**Route:** Keflavík – Garðabær – Mosfellsbær – Borgarnes – Route 54 – Vegamót – Hellnar

- Exit the airport carpark and follow the road as it bends to the R.
- Arrive at a roundabout and take the 1st exit onto route 41 SP Keflavík and Reykjavík. Note: You are following signs for Route 1 which is shown in a dashed outlined box.
- Continue SA over two roundabouts as you bypass the town of Keflavík, keeping on route 41.

Continue on this road for 13km driving through the lava fields, a great introduction to the wonderful scenery Iceland has on offer. If you look over to your left, on a clear day you should spot the Snæfellsjökull glacier in the far distance, your final destination.

- You pass the town on Hafnarfjörður.
- At next roundabout continue SA and then in 1km, take slip road SP route 1 Reykjavík and Gardabær.
- Keep on route 41 for 8km until you see the SP for route 1and Kopavogur
- t roundabout with route 1 turn L, SP 1n. You are now on route 1, the famous Icelandic road which circumnavigates the island.

Completed in 1974 with the opening of the Skeiðarárbrú Bridge between Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Höfn along the south coast, the Ring Road circumnavigates the island.

- You now continue on route 1, crossing numerous roundabouts, following signs for Mosfellsbaer, Akureyri and Borgarnes.

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- Approximately 82km from the airport you pass through the Hvalfjörður Tunnel. The payment booths are at the northern end of the tunnel. The toll is ISK1000 and you can pay by credit card. Go to the LH booths as the one on the far RH is for E-Tag pre-payment system used by locals.
- After leaving the payment booths you reach a roundabout; take the first exit, heading for Borgarnes
- In 35km arrive at the town of Borgarnes
- At the TJ, turn R keeping on route 1 following signs for Akureyri
- 2km after the TJ you reach a roundabout. Take the second exit on to route 54, signed Stykkishólmur & Ólafsvík
- Follow route 54 for approx 63km until you reach Vegamót and aR turn onto route 56 to Stykkishólmur. Continue SA keeping on route 54 now running along the southern coast of the peninsula. **Note:** This is the nearest petrol station to the hotel.
- After 36km, turn L onto route 574 towards Hellissandur, Hellnar and Arnarstapi
- In 18km turn L into Hellnar
- Descend the hill and turn L when you see SP to Hotel Hellnar
- Drive past the church on your R and then turn R into the hotel car park

## An Icelandic Adventure

### Your accommodation

#### Fosshotel Hellnar

356 Hellnar

Tel: +354 XXX XXXX/ Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxxxx.com

The front of the hotel has wonderful sea views and you can watch the sun rise over breakfast or spot whales from the sun deck. There is a cosy lounge area and a light and airy restaurant, again making the most of the sea views. The food here is delicious – classic Icelandic food with an international twist. The menu in the hotel is created with locally sourced products, including lamb and chicken, and of course the beautifully fresh fish. A 3-course dinner is included in your stay and you can pick your choice of dishes from the menu. Dinner is served from 1800-2100 and reception will ask what time you would like a table reserved. A good buffet breakfast is served from 0730-0930.

The bedrooms are equipped with a TV and hairdryer. Free wifi is available throughout the hotel, please ask at reception for the code.

#### Hellnar

The tiny fishing hamlet of Hellnar is in an idyllic setting overlooking a spectacular rocky bay. Legend has it that this was the home of Bárður, who was half human and half ogre; there is a rock formation reputed to be him on the way to the next village. The story of Bárður is that he had two daughters, and two nephews, Rauðfeldur and Sölvi. When the children were playing, Rauðfeldur pushed the oldest daughter out onto an iceberg in the sea, where she luckily floated safely to Greenland. Enraged, Bárður pushed Rauðfeldur into a canyon and Sölvi off the top of a cliff and into the sea. Afterwards, he walked into the glacier and disappeared, never to be seen again.

Hellnar can trace its history back to the Middle Ages, although the oldest written record of a fishing village on this site dates from 1560. It was the birth place of one of medieval Iceland's greatest travellers and explorers, Gudridur Thorbjarnardóttir.

The village has very few facilities; there are two cafés but no shops or banks.

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## Around Hellnar

This is Iceland at its most serene and the charm of this part of the peninsula is the lack of villages and facilities, giving you the chance to kick back and relax in your beautiful surroundings.

Should you wish to venture out then there are some options:

**1) Walk to the fishing village of Arnarstapi** – considered as one of Iceland's most beautiful fishing villages, the walk along the cliff tops takes you past some unique rock formations.

**2) Descend into the glacier** – as the Snæfellsjökull icecap is your focal point during your stay on the peninsula, you may wish to descend into the depths of the glacier.

**3) Whale and puffin watching** – there is an abundance of wildlife which ply the waters of the western fjords to the north of the peninsula and there is no better way to see these creatures up close than from a boat

**4) Visit Stykkishólmur** – the old trading station and the largest town on the peninsula. Enjoy lunch in the town before a leisurely drive around the end of the peninsula.

# An Icelandic Adventure

## 1) Walk to the fishing village of Arnarstapi

Starting at the door of hotel, this walk takes you along the cliff tops of the southern coast. The incredible forces of nature are clearly visible as you pass unique rock formations, exposed rock strata and canyons. There is an abundance of birdlife to be observed on the cliffs and islands you pass.

We have included distances on the notes for this walk but not timings. There are so many side trails you may want to explore, natural phenomena to wonder at and photographs to be taken that any times would be irrelevant.

**Map:** Kringum Snæfellsjökul

### Walk notes:

- On leaving the hotel's front door turn R and R again down the side of the hotel. Proceed for a short distance across the lawn and pick up the vehicle-wide lava road which runs between the hotel and the chalets in the hotel garden.
- Follow the lava road for 250m until it crosses a cattle grid.
- Turn L onto vehicle-wide lava road following the SP for Fjöruhusid (café).
- After 50m turn R and descend towards the café.

### 400m

- Take the path which leaves from the front of the café, signed Arnarstapi 2.5km.

You are now joining the Neostagata track to Arnarstapi. It is marked intermittently with 1ft high posts with red painted tops.

- Follow this clear path as it winds its way through the lava field and along the coastline

### 750m

- Reach a house with a steep blue roof on your L and on your R you pass a large standing stone signed Einbúi (Hermit). Just around the corner there is a further sign for Nátthagi (natural pasture)

### 800m

- Pass through/over a dilapidated wire gate/fence.

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1.22km

- Pass a sign for Bólholarl

**1.53km**

- Pass a sign for Draugalág

**1.93km**

- Reach and pass through a gate with a seat just beyond it.

**2.12km**

- Cross stream via a small footbridge with a single hand rail.

**2.33km**

- Reach a TJ and the path you are joining is constructed with plastic grids. Turn L onto this path heading towards the large stone statue which represents Bárður, the half man, half ogre.

**2.46km**

- Reach Bárður, and standing behind him, take the grassy track to his R, leading towards the sea.

**2.55km**

- Proceed for 100m until reaching an X-roads in the grassy path, take the R path.

**2.63km**

- Turn L, and continue for just 20m and take the R grass track, heading towards the wooden viewing platform 100m ahead.

**2.73km**

- Reach the viewing platform which overlooks the free standing rock arch (Gatklettur)

From this point you continue following the trail northwards, with the sea on your R, passing incredible natural arches, blowholes and cliffs which are being eroded into amazing shapes and patterns. You are directed to all the features by signs and posts and we are sure you will want to take time to explore.

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### **2.96km**

- 230m from the viewing platform, had you have walked directly to it, you will see a sign for the harbour, follow this. There are still further geological features to explore.

### **3.26km**

- There is a small rectangular cream building on the cliff top on the R - the lighthouse.

### **3.52km**

- The harbour appears directly below you.

### **3.62km**

- A further 100m on, arrive at the harbour car park on the L. Here you bear L onto the road, passing the monument to Guðmundur Bergþórsson, a celebrated Icelandic poet who was disabled and spent much of his life in Arnarstapi.

### **4km**

If you continue along the road for 500m you will reach the Arnarbaer Restaurant which serves drinks and refreshments as well as lunch.

- From here you retrace your steps back to hellnar.

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## 2) Descend into the glacier

Located a 10 minutes' drive west from Hellnar, it is possible to descend into the **Vatnshellir Cave**, to see some beautiful lava and rock formations deep beneath the Snæfellsjökull Glacier. The cave is an 8000 year old lava tube created by volcanic eruption from a nearby crater. As the lava flowed down the hill it cooled, creating a solid crust on top of the lava river which continued to drain after the eruption stopped, leaving behind the empty lava tube or tunnel.

A 45-minute tour costs ISK3250. Tours run every hour on the hour from 1000 to 1800.

Ensure you have warm clothes, walking shoes or boots. Gloves are recommended.

## 3) Whale and puffin watching

The Breidafjörður separates the Snæfellsnes Peninsula from the West Fjords to the north and, due to its shallow waters, islands, islets and skerries, has a huge biodiversity, best appreciated from a boat.

Daily **whale watching trips** depart from Ólafsvík harbour, 40 minutes' drive westwards around the end of the peninsula. From 13 May–14 June and 20 August–15 September, there are departures at 1300, whilst from 15 June–19 August there are 2 daily departures at 1000 and 1400. A trip costs ISK9900 and you will be out for about 3hrs.

**Puffin trips** head out daily from Grundarfjörður to the protected island of Melrakkey at 2000 from 1 June to 20 August and 1400 from 16 June to 20 August, depending on when the birds are in residence (ISK5900, 1.5hrs).

You can book a place on the tours on their website [www.lakitours.com](http://www.lakitours.com). Minimum numbers are required to operate some of the tours but you will be notified by email the day before if there are any issues. Weather conditions can also determine whether or not the boats go out. It is best to arrive 30 minutes before departure and the boats leave either from Ólafsvík or Grundarfjörður harbour which are clearly signed from the main road

## An Icelandic Adventure

### **4) Visit Stykkishólmur & drive around the peninsula**

One of the most picturesque towns of the region, the old trading station of Stykkishólmur is a pleasant drive from Hellnar. This place was settled from the earliest times, and like Reykjavík, was chosen because of another set of Viking house pillars thrown overboard and washed ashore! The town remained much of a backwater to Grundarfjörður's commercial cut and thrust until around 1832, when Arní Thorlacius inherited the trading rights to the town from his father. He opened a trading store built along Norwegian lines and helped create a thriving commercial centre.

The development of the town as a ferry port also helped to preserve its fortunes, and in recent years there has been considerable investment in renovating the old commercial centre. The result is a picturesque town that washes down to the harbour; an arts and crafts scene and an excellent restaurant for lunch; Narfeyrarstofa is located in a green and white building on the R just before the road turns sharp L by the harbour (open Mon-Fri 1130-1400 & from 1830 and Sat-Sun from 1130 onwards). It has a wide menu for lunch and dinner, we can particularly recommend the mussels from Breidafjörður.

#### **Driving directions**

- From the hotel head back to the main road, route 574, and turn R onto it
- After 20km, at TJ turn R onto route 54
- At Vegamót turn L onto route 56.
- Approx. 16km after joining route 56 you reach a TJ. Turn R onto route 54 SP Stykkishólmur 18km

#### **Return route around the end of the peninsula**

- Retrace route out of Stykkishólmur on route 58
- Pass L turning onto route 56, but continue SA SP Grundarfjörður; this is now route 54

The road passes through a lava field before sweeping across a series of fjords and then descends into Grundarfjörður

# An Icelandic Adventure

## Grundarfjörður

This small fishing town is home to about 1000 people and is both dominated and sheltered by the graceful 463m high peak of Kirkjufell. Although pretty quiet by many standards, the town has a distinguished past and vibrant present. Founded in 1786, it was granted an important trading licence by the Danish king and by 1800 was exerting considerable influence as a commercial hub along the whole northern coast. French fishermen arrived in 1800, building their own church, hospital and commercial quarters and remained until 1860 when they dismantled the lot (including the graveyard) and shipped everything back to France! Despite many changes in Iceland's fishing industry, the town has remained an important fishing port and holds a significant fishing quota – one of the largest in Iceland.

At the X-roads in the centre of the village there is a good café in the tourist information centre.

- Continue on route 54 through the village and past the imposing Kirkjufell
- As you continue on the road its number changes to route 574 just before Ólafsvík.

**Ólafsvík** is the oldest trading town in the country, having been granted a trading licence in 1687. It has a tourist office together with a folk museum inside the Gamla Pakkhúsið which was originally used as a packing house.

As you continue along route 574 you will pass the neighbouring villages of **Rif** and **Hellissandur**. Between the two, about 2km inland, is Ingjaldshóll Church; this was the first concrete church to be built in Iceland in 1903. It contains relics from both the 17th and 18th centuries, with its origins as a place of worship going back to 1317.

As you pass through Hellissandur, you will pass a small maritime museum on your L (0900-1800 Jun-Jul & 1200-1800 Aug-15 Sept, ISK500)

Just after the radio mast at the US Loran station, the road bends L and there is a R turn SP Öndverðarnes which takes you to the beautiful white sandy beach of **Skardsvík**. In 1962 a Viking grave was discovered on the beach and it is easy to see why this beautiful location was chosen as a final resting place.

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For a more traditional Icelandic black sandy beach, further along the road you will pass a R turning to **Djúpalón**. From the car park it is a short walk onto the beach where you will pass the four 'lifting stones' just as you reach the beach. These were used by fishing boat crews to test the strength of aspiring fishermen. The smallest stone is Amlóði (Bungler) at 23kg, followed by Háfdrættingur (weak) at 54kg, then Hálfsterkur (half-strong) at 100kg, and the largest, Fullsterker (fully strong), at 154kg. Any men who were unable to lift Háfdrættingur were deemed to be unsuitable for life at sea. Mysteriously, there now seem to be five stones!

The beach is covered in the iron remains of the British Trawler, the Epine GY7 which was wrecked east of Dritvík in heavy seas on the night of 13 March 1948. Five of the crew of 19 were saved. After the tide turned it was possible to shoot out a line which the remaining crew managed to tie to the mast, and the men who were still alive were pulled to safety.

As you approach the southern coast of the peninsula, you will see the dramatic rock pillars of **Lóndrangar**. The taller pillar is 75m, and the smaller is 61m. They are the remainder of a long-vanished volcano: eruption vents filled up with volcanic material, which formed a hard plug. The plug, much harder rock than the surrounding volcano, remains as a pillar when the rest of the volcano has been eroded away. The Lóndrangar pillars were believed to be un-scalable until 1753, when the smaller was climbed. The larger was not scaled until 1938. Locals say elves use the lava formations as a church!

- Approximately 54km after leaving Grundarfjörður, reach the R turn to Hellnar and back to the hotel.