



Land of fire and ice

Iceland has triggered the world's curiosity with its proximity to nature's forces, its striking landscapes, lyrical language and strong literary culture.

By Sarah Hender —

Iceland is a living breathing landmass of energy, both underground and above with its steaming geothermal springs and massive glaciers of ice that sit atop its rumbling volcanoes. Probably due to the ever-present fear of an imminent earthquake or volcanic eruption along with its long dark winters, the country's residents have developed

a strong affinity with their natural surrounds. Icelanders' favourite topic of conversation is the weather. The end of a long winter is welcomed. Every school child knows the song about the Golden Plover, a bird who arrives at Iceland's shores with the onset of summer, "the Golden Plover has come to sing away the snow".

It is surprising that, for all of the potential for sudden catastrophes, Icelanders are a laid-back people. There are only 340,000 of them, many of them closely related, the majority living in the capital of Reykjavik. Icelanders look out for each other. The crime rate is very low, with an average of three murders a year. Reykjavik's citizens were shocked when, in January last year, a teenager was snatched from the tiny city's main street and murdered while walking home late at night. There was a collective sigh of relief when the culprits were found not to be fellow Icelanders but foreigners, fishermen from Greenland.

A geologist's dream, you don't need to go far from Reykjavik to discover a cluster of natural wonders, the focus of the Golden Circle tour run by a number of local operators. There are hot springs (geysers) that spectacularly blow columns of hot water and steam out of the ground, a massive two-tiered waterfall (Gullfoss) that gushes water into a deep canyon and Pingvillir, the site of the first Viking parliament and the only place in the world where you can stand between the two tectonic plates of North America and Europe. These plates are separating at 2.5cm every year, causing movement across the whole island resulting in regular earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. On visiting these jewels of Iceland's crown, it is immediately clear why Iceland has developed its reputation for out of this world landscapes.

A visit further around the South Coast, about two hours from Reykjavik, steps it up a level. A small local operator (Iceland Horizons) takes a fortunate five of us to visit the Sólhimajökull glacier, a tongue of blue ice that is at once a majestic and incongruous sight cutting

its way through the brown Icelandic plains. The melting of Iceland's glaciers are the most visible signs of climate change. It is shocking to hear that this one is melting at the rate of about one Olympic-sized swimming pool a year.

I assume this sight will be the pinnacle of the tour but a visit to the Seljalandfoss waterfall is equally as memorable. It is famous for the three-dimensional experience it offers, as you can walk around the back of it to feel its full force.

Finally, we head to a black beach, Reynisfjara, near Vik, boasting huge caves carved out of the cliffs and 66m high columns of rock that resemble monsters emerging from the sea. Signs warn to watch out for regular sneaker waves that are known to come high up on shore at any time and grab a tourist or two never to be seen again. I keep a keen eye on that shoreline as my blurred photos will attest.

Wherever you turn in Iceland there is an example of nature demanding respect from the humans that inhabit it. It is good for the human spirit to be reminded now and then that there are forces bigger and more powerful than you and in learning that lesson, you are left in awe.

No visit to Iceland is complete without a visit to one of its geothermal pools, its most famous being the Blue Lagoon, a half-hour's drive from Reykjavik. The lagoon is huge and although well-populated, you can easily find your own space. The colour of the water is sky-blue and not from any chlorination but from its natural minerals, apparently known for its health properties, although as I discover, not so good for the hair, turning it into a clump of steel wool for days afterwards. My hair has recovered but the memory of the lagoon lingers.

My departure from this country throws in a last-minute twist.

After a 4am pickup and the 50km drive to the airport, the realization that I have left my passport back in the hotel safe is not good news. My driver takes it well. Yes, he thinks I can still make my flight but in a massive understatement, he warns that "the drive back might not be quite as comfortable as it has been" as he accelerated through Reykjavik's red lights. He adds, as he hurls the car around a roundabout, "but if it makes you feel any better, I used to be a professional racing driver." It does.

It must be that Viking ancestry – you might not know what this seething hot and cold, restless landscape is likely to do but you can believe in the take-charge approach of an Icelander.

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