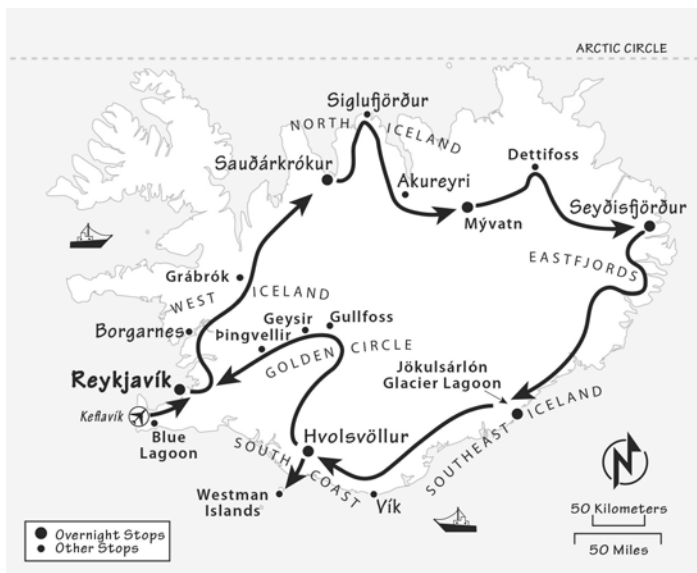


Iceland

Lecture by Cameron Hewitt



Iceland 101

- **Why Visit Iceland?** Astonishing, unique natural wonders; cinematic landscapes; easy stopover on the way to/from Europe; surprisingly rich culture/cuisine; wonderful people.
- **Don't Visit Iceland...** to save money; for great art/architecture; for hot, sunny weather.
- **Area & Population:** 39,682 square miles (a little bigger than Maine) with 340,000 people (like Corpus Christi, Anaheim, or Honolulu)—2/3 in Reykjavík area.
- **History:** First settled by Scandinavians during Viking Age (9th century); was a collection of remote farms for nearly its entire history. Wrote down history and folk tales (the sagas). Starting A.D. 930, chieftains met annually at the Althing at Þingvellir. Christianized and came under control of Norway, then Denmark. Slow process of independence, made official in 1944. "Occupied" by Allies in WWII (built Keflavík airport); economic crisis in 2008/2009; tourism boom today.
- **Names:** Last name is patronymic (-son and -dóttir); everyone's on first-name basis.
- **Icelandic:** Old Scandinavian roots, tricky to pronounce. Key letters: Ð/ð = voiced "th" (breathe); Þ/þ = unvoiced "th" (breath); j = "y"; ll = "tl"
- **Money:** Roughly 100 Icelandic *krónur* = \$1. All transactions are credit card; don't get much cash.
- **Budget:** Expect very high prices. Seek out budget strategies. Fortunately, natural wonders are free.
- **Sleeping:** Basic accommodations cost \$150/double with shared bath; nice hotel is more like \$300. Demand outstrips supply, so prices are high.

Guesthouses with shared bath are common and cheaper. Airbnb is a budget-friendly option; consider staying in the suburbs for a local experience.

- **Eating:** Icelandic food is good and worth splurging on. A basic meal costs \$20-30, but for \$10-20 more you can go high-end. "Hardship foods" (rotted shark, fish jerky, lamb's head). But also delicacies: fresh fish, flavorful lamb, soup & bread buffet, skyr. Even top restaurants have great lunch deals for \$25; splurge at lunch and skimp at dinner (picnic, fast food). Nice microbrew culture; happy hours help cut costs.

Itinerary Considerations

- **Summer vs. Winter:** To really explore Iceland, I prefer summer (better weather, endless daylight) vs. winter (very short daylight, icy roads keep you close to Reykjavík). **Northern Lights** are winter-only, always chancy—don't plan a trip around it (but thrilling if you see it). Prepare for cold/windy weather anytime!
- **Quick Layover (1-3 days):** A quick taste of Iceland on the way to/from Europe. Home-base in Reykjavík but spend your daylight hours in the countryside: Blue Lagoon (near airport), Golden Circle, South Coast.
- **Longer Visit (4-8 days):** This allows more day trips (Westman Islands, overnighting on South Coast, glacier activities), and more time for Reykjavík.
- **All Iceland (9-14 days):** Driving the Ring Road is well worth the investment of time, and lets you see essentially the entire country.
- **Transportation:** Car rental is best for most trips—most highlights are not accessible by cheap public transit. Bus excursions are convenient, but costs add up quickly. In summer, don't splurge on 4X4.

Reykjavík

- Iceland's capital (pop. 125,000, or 220,000 metro, like Topeka or Charleston) and tourism hub lacks major sights but has quality accommodations, restaurants, and nightlife. On a short visit, home-base here but don't over-invest your time; countryside is more rewarding.
- **Exploring Downtown:** Low-key "**Parliament Square**" (Austurvöllur) with Alþingi (since A.D. 930) and statue of independence advocate Jón Sigurðsson. Better for hanging out: main shopping/nightlife drag **Laugavegur**. Icelandic sweaters are good but very expensive (consider thrift shops). Licorice candy is cheap and local.
- **Hallgrímskirkja:** Lutheran church (1930s, state architect Guðjón Samúelsson), Reykjavík's main

landmark, views from tower. Statue of **Leifur Eiríksson**, likely first European to visit the Americas.

- **History Museums: Settlement Exhibition** preserves foundation of 10th-century longhouse; **National Museum of Iceland** has well-described artifacts.
- **Harborfront:** Cutting-edge **Harpa** concert hall, opened 2011. Nearby **Sun Voyager** sculpture already city icon. **Whale/Puffin Watching** boat trips...but no guarantees. Nearby **Whales of Iceland**, pricey but good exhibit with life-size models.

Day Trips from Reykjavík

- **The Blue Lagoon:** Top-end thermal bathing complex in volcanic landscape, 45 min south of Reykjavík (near Keflavík Airport); pricey (starts at \$80) and *requires reservations* (bluelagoon.com). There are also **thermal swimming pools** all over Iceland, including more than a dozen in Reykjavík. Very relaxing local custom to adopt. Carefully follow procedure (shower first!) and go with the flow.
- **The Golden Circle:** Iceland's quintessential day trip: 150-mile loop with grand scenery, **Þingvellir** (site of Iceland's Althing gatherings, along a jagged tectonic fissure), **Geysir** (steamy field with *the* original geyser); **Gullfoss** (thundering waterfall), other stops (including Kerið crater, hike 1 hr to Reykjadalur thermal river)
- **The South Coast:** Rivals Golden Circle as Reykjavík's top day trip: spectacular waterfalls (**Seljalandsfoss** is best, walk behind it), glacier tongue (**Sólheimajökull**), black-sand beaches (**Reynisfjara**), **Eyjafjallajökull** (famous 2010 volcano); **Lava Centre** in Hvolsvöllur.
- **Westman Islands (Vestmannaeyjar):** Archipelago just off the South Coast, accessible by boat or plane (but weather-dependent). Famous Jan. 1973 eruption; today part of town still buried under lava rock. Excellent volcano museum; the world's largest puffin colony; aquarium with a resident puffin (Tóti).

The Ring Road (All Around Iceland)

- **Logistics:** Highway 1 encircles Iceland 800 miles on twisty roads, lots of worthwhile sightseeing stops and detours. Allow 5 days minimum (better with 6-7 days). Some overlap with South Coast; can also tie in Golden Circle and/or Westman Islands. I've described it clockwise, but it can be done either way. Can be done with small 2WD car. Best to book accommodations in advance. Some enjoy camping.
- **West Iceland: Borgarnes** (Settlement Center); **Víðgelmir** lava tube (another volcano cave experience is "Into the Volcano"); **Grábrók** climbable crater.

- **Skagafjörður:** Northern valley with excellent **Glaumbær** folk museum; scenic **Tröllaskagi** ("Troll Peninsula") drive to charming port town of **Siglufjörður**, with excellent Herring Era Museum.
- **Akureyri:** Iceland's "second city" (pop. 18,000), feels like a mini-Reykjavík with landmark church.
- **Mývatn:** "Midge Lake," named for the mini-mosquitoes here. Area of remarkable natural beauty, lava formations, thermal areas. Highlights include **Skútustaðir** pseudocraters, **Dimmuborgir** lava formations, and **Mývatn Nature Baths** (simpler version of Blue Lagoon for half the price). Just over the ridge is the striking **Námafjall** geothermal area and **Krafla Valley**, with geothermal plant, Víti crater, hikes.
- **Húsavík:** Charming port town near Mývatn, with whale watching and whale museum. Just east is stunning **Dettifoss** waterfall.
- **Eastfjords:** Jagged, sparsely populated, lots of long driving. Best town by far is fjordside village of **Seyðisfjörður**, beautiful setting, lots of art students, surprisingly cosmopolitan, ferry from Denmark.
- **The Southeast:** Few towns, but Glacier Country (in the shadow of Vatnajökull (Europe's biggest glacier). Stunningly beautiful glacier lagoons: Famous **Jökulsárlón**; less touristy and also spectacular **Fjallsárlón**; both have RIB rides. Nearby "**Diamond Beach**" where icebergs wash up. Also possible to hike or snowmobile across a glacier, or visit an ice cave (arrange in advance, consider sleeping in this area). **Skaftafell** National Park with hike to Svartifoss falls.
- **The South Coast:** The Ring Road route ends with a drive past the South Coast, described earlier, and back to Reykjavík.

Resources

Rick Steves Iceland guidebook

Reykjavík Highlights travel talk by Kevin Williams
(www.ricksteves.com/travel-talks)

Helpful Websites:

Grapevine.is—Reykjavík's great English newspaper
IHeartReykjavik.net—Insightful local blog
GuideToIceland.is—Consortium of tour companies
Iceland.is—Official tourism website