

[Travel](#)

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Iceland's Ring Road a tale of fire and ice told in scenic topography



Rainbows pop out of the mist blowing from Skogafoss waterfall in Iceland.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Iceland's Ring Road travels through farm fields dotted with sheep and cattle.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

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First of two parts

"See you on the Ring!" We bid our breakfast companions a cheery farewell and prepare for another day of traveling Iceland Route 1.

Yesterday we pulled over at waterfalls, passed jagged mountains and fields dotted with sheep and sturdy Icelandic horses. These we spoke about enthusiastically, contributing to the din of conversation in the hotel breakfast room. From what our fellow travelers who've been down the road tell us, today holds the promise of glaciers, lava fields, black-sand beaches and a lagoon filled with icebergs big as a house.

Gas tank topped off, camera batteries charged and map unfolded on my lap, my husband pulls our rental car onto the road and we join the journey through some of Earth's rarest geographic features.

Volcano erupts, tourism explodes

An island roughly the size of Kentucky, Iceland hangs just below the Arctic Circle in the chilly North Atlantic. Almost two-thirds of its 320,000 people live in the metropolitan area in and around the capital, Reykjavik, leaving the rest of Iceland eerily isolated. An ice cap covers most of the island's interior making it uninhabitable. One main road circles its fringe of fjords and fishing villages. Route 1, the Ring Road, connects them, an 828-mile ribbon of two-lane highway that draws scenery junkies like us.

Driving the entire circumference takes about a week, plus time for sightseeing in Reykjavik. We have just four days, so we limit ourselves to the southern coast where we're told we'll see some of the best vistas.

As we leave Reykjavik, suburban houses and fast-food joints quickly give way to fields of black lava rock cloaked with moss in Kermit the Frog green. Cliffs rise sharply from the fields and we catch a glimpse of white on mountain summits above them: a glacier and the source of waterfalls tumbling over rock faces along the road.

We pull over at a roadside display with a photo of the red-roofed farm buildings standing at the foot of the mountain before us. Today those buildings gleam under a blue, sunny sky, but in the photo dated April 14, 2010, they are dwarfed by massive black and gray clouds billowing atop the mountain behind them. This is the eruption of Eyjafjallajokull, the volcano that spewed a plume of ash so enormous it brought transatlantic air traffic to a halt.

Like all of Iceland's volcanoes, E15 -- blessedly shortened by Icelanders to its first initial and the 15 letters after it -- lies under a glacier. When they erupt, this meeting of fire and ice can have dramatic results.

This particular eruption also had unexpected consequences. News reports of the volcano shone the spotlight on Iceland, sparking curiosity. Since 2010, tourism has climbed to the country's No. 1 source of revenue. We're not the only ones on the Ring Road who came to see what Mother Nature wrought.

With a wary eye on the mountain, we push on to Skogafoss, a waterfall just off the Ring Road. More than 200 feet high and 80 feet across, it's an impressive sight. As we walk a black gravel creek bed toward it, a single rainbow, then a double, blooms from its mist. A staircase leads to the top of the cliff for those who want to view the falls from above.

Next door, the outpost of Skogar has one of Iceland's finest folk museums, the work of one man who's been collecting artifacts since 1949. Carved wooden chests made by farmers during Iceland's long winters are displayed in

the main building of the Skogar Folk Museum along with tapestries, old agricultural implements and a wooden fishing boat circa 1855. Outside a turf farm has been re-created. These buildings were common in rural Iceland a century ago: rock walls, dirt floors and stone slab roofs covered with sod. Any wood inside would be driftwood, since only 1 percent of Iceland is forest.

A long and lonely road

Without trees, the landscape sprawls, the Ring Road stretching into the distance. Often ours is the only car in sight. The two lanes are paved and well-maintained, but there are no shoulders and pullouts are few. Grazing animals sometimes wander onto the road. Signs warn of one-lane bridges and blind summits, hazards when there's oncoming traffic. Drivers must be prepared for weather that can change from bright sun to fog to rain and back again in a single afternoon. Headlights must be on day and night. Top speed limit is 55 mph.

When the village of Vik pops up on the horizon, we're both charmed and relieved by this tiny sign of civilization, population a little more than 500. The black-sand beach makes a good place to stretch our legs. A row of gray basalt columns, formed when lava cools quickly, stand like a battalion of soldiers along the base of a cliff facing the beach. At low tide there's access to a spooky, black sea cave. The scenic high point, though, is a group of three jagged sea stacks nearly 220 feet tall, resisting the relentless pounding of the North Atlantic surf.

The next town we reach is even smaller than Vik. Kirkjubæjarklaustur, shortened to Klaustur by the locals, isn't much more than a hotel and a few houses and stores. It does have a full-service gas station, though, a welcome sight to motorists. Because refueling spots are few and far between on the Ring, drivers must keep an eye on their gas gauge. Some stations are unmanned and pumps will take only a credit card with a smart chip requiring a PIN, something that's standard in Europe, but still new in the U.S.

We'd hate to be stranded on the next section of the Ring, the most desolate yet. The largest ice cap between the Arctic and Antarctic Circles, Vatnajökull, dominates the skyline.

Volcanoes sleep beneath it, their eruptions triggering a massive gush of meltwater wiping out everything in their path. For mile after mile, we drive over a flood plain as flat and black as a freshly plowed Iowa corn field, the aftermath of a 1996 eruption that took out two bridges on the Ring and damaged a third. A roadside monument made of their twisted beams tells the story. Thankfully, no lives were lost or villages destroyed.

Sitting on the juncture of two tectonic plates, the North American and Eurasian, Iceland has always been a hotbed of volcanic activity. It's Europe's youngest land mass, geologically speaking, and still growing. Nearly three square miles were added to the coastline after the 1996 eruption.

And Iceland's volcanoes have had the power to affect the course of history. An eruption from 1783-1784 spewed so much ash and poisonous gas it changed the climate of Europe for several years, creating a famine some historians believe fueled the civil unrest that led to the French Revolution.

Great gobs of glacier

From exhibits in the visitor center at Skaftafell National Park we learn more about the volcanoes and the great tongues of ice that creep down the park's mountain valleys. One glass display case contains personal items -- shoes, socks, walking sticks -- that emerged from these glaciers years after careless hikers who ventured onto them were swallowed up.

Hiking trails lead from the center to one of the glaciers, and mountain guides offer hiking and ice climbing tours. We're pressed for time, so we head down the Ring and turn off on a gravel road that leads directly to another glacier.

Signs warn of dangerous crevasses. A plaque memorializes two Germans who went missing here in 2007. Carefully climbing boulders along the edge of the glacier, we look down on frozen waves of ice and listen for the creaks and groans they make as they move ever so slowly down the mountain.

As glaciers melt, great hunks of ice calve, plummeting into the meltwater at their feet. We have the opportunity to see them up close at Jokulsarlon, a glacial lagoon just off the Ring Road. Icebergs float in the placid water, some a deep blue streaked with black from volcanic ash and soil picked up as the glacier that birthed them scraped the earth. Densely packed and slow to melt, they erode into fanciful shapes. Seals frolic around them, stopping their play to peer at us standing on the shore. For a closer look at the big bergs, you can book a guided tour of the lagoon in an amphibious vehicle or Zodiac raft.

But we're out of time. Back at the hotel, we swap stories of what we've seen with other travelers and envy those who will continue around the Ring. Car packed, we head back to Reykjavik, eager to enjoy the scenery along the southern coast a second time.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference subsidized by Iceland Travel and its tourism partners.*

Iceland's Ring Road

Getting there: Iceland's budget, no-frills airline, Icelandair, offers nonstop flights from North American gateways, including Toronto, New York, Newark, Boston, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C.; icelandair.us

Where to stay: Icelandair Hotels has six countryside properties scattered along the Ring Road; icelandairhotels.com

Where to eat: The best restaurants are in hotels, though some villages have colorful, casual cafes. The largest gas stations serve fast food, especially the popular Icelandic hot dog made with lamb.

When to go: Midsummer is peak season, has nearly 24 hours of daylight and the best chance of fair weather.

Details: Iceland Travel, icelandtravel.is; Promote Iceland, visiticeland.com; South Iceland, en.south.is

Coming Sunday, April 12: Part 2: Iceland stopover

<http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20150410/entlife/150419983/>