

[Travel](#)

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See Iceland's top sights en route to or from Europe



Visitors exfoliate with silica mud from the Blue Lagoon, Iceland's top tourist attraction.

courtesy of Iceland Travel



The Strokkur geyser is Iceland's version of Yellowstone's Old Faithful.

COURTESY OF ICELAND TRAVEL/ROMAN GERASMYENKO

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Second of two parts

Such a deal: Fly to Europe and tack on a trip to Iceland at no additional airfare.

Since the 1960s, Iceland's budget, no-frills airline, Icelandair, has made that offer and travelers from backpackers to businessmen have taken it up on it.

And why not? The airline allows stopovers of up to seven nights, enough to explore most of the country. But you can take in the top sights in and around Reykjavik in a long weekend. It's a twofer that's tough to pass up.

Getting around is a cinch. Keflavik international airport is 40 minutes from downtown Reykjavik, a good base for exploring the city and its surroundings on escorted tours.

Among the most popular:

The Blue Lagoon

Iceland's No. 1 attraction can be visited on your way from the airport; it's just 20 minutes from the terminal. And who wouldn't want a hot soak in a giant geothermal pool after a flight?

Two of Earth's tectonic plates meet under Iceland creating a network of hot springs that bubble just below the surface of this island in the North Atlantic. Nearly 90 percent of the country is fueled by geothermal heat and every town has a community pool where locals meet to soak and socialize on almost a daily basis.

The Blue Lagoon, though, is not a natural hot spring, but the runoff of a geothermal power plant. Minerals, algae and silica give the water a bluish-white hue and are said to treat skin conditions such as psoriasis. Everyone, though, can benefit from exfoliating with the white mud from the pool.

Surrounded by black lava rock, the lagoon is an amoeba-shaped pool containing more than 1.5 million gallons of water ranging from 98 degrees to 104 degrees and from 2.6 feet to 5.2 feet deep. It's self-cleansing; the water changing every 40 hours.

Shower, slip into your swimsuit in the locker rooms, then ease into the pool to bob around, glide over to the wooden vats of white mud for a do-it-yourself facial or to the swim-up bar for a beer or signature cocktail -- blue, of course. Book an in-water massage for extra muscle relaxation.

You'll need to stow your jewelry in your locker because the minerals in the water can damage gold and gemstones. Forget about a fancy hairdo. The minerals will dry out your glossy locks, so apply the free conditioner dispensed in the locker room and leave it on while you are in the pool or you'll emerge with a tangle that's tough to comb out.

The lagoon's indoor complex has a cafe, restaurant, salon for beauty treatments and a shop selling its own line of beauty products. It's open year round, even in the dead of winter when icicles may form on your hair while you soak and, if conditions are right, the Northern Lights glow in the dark sky.

The biggest crowds tend to arrive in summer in the middle of the day and are mostly visitors, not Icelanders who can use their own pools at a fraction of the cost. Admission rates range from around \$44 to \$380 depending on which day package you pick.

The Golden Circle

A trio of attractions make up day-trip itineraries northeast of Reykjavik. At Thingvellir National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, you'll see where the world's first parliament met in 930 A.D. On the outdoor assembly site, leaders stood on the Law Rock to address Icelanders camped in the fields. Guides point out an 1859 church built on the grounds of the original erected in 1016, the Axe River and the Drowning Pool where women were executed in Iceland's own version of the Salem witch trials. Parliament continued to meet here until the 18th century when it moved to Reykjavik.

The park sits on a rift valley where tension between two tectonic plates causes it to widen about a third of an inch a year. As you walk through a gorge, guides urge you to put your hand on the rock wall on one side to touch Europe and on the other to touch North America. Purists in plate tectonics say technically it isn't so because Iceland has a second rift valley farther east.

The word geyser comes from the Icelandic geysir, and Geysir is the name of a field of hot springs, pools and waterspouts that's on the Golden Circle route. The original geysir, discovered late in the 13th century, has become little more than a bubbling pond, but the nearby Strokkur reliably sends a column of steam and hot water up to 115 feet in the air every five to 10 minutes. Don't stand downwind; the water is well above the boiling point. And stay in the marked paths on the Geysir site. Wander off and you could break through fragile crust into a hot puddle that will turn your gym shoes to soup in short order.

Iceland's most visited waterfall, Gullfoss, or Golden Falls, is the third attraction on the Golden Circle. As the Hvita River flows south, it makes a turn and drops in a series of staircase cascades before it plunges into a 230-foot gorge so steep you can't see the bottom even when standing next to the falls. With luck, the sun will be out and you'll see a rainbow arc through the spray.

Reykjavik City Tour

The world's northernmost capital is young, lively and liberal with a high standard of living. Book a city tour and guides not only show you the sights, but also clue you in on life in Iceland -- like the fact that everyone goes by his or her first name, even the President.

One reason: Icelanders last names are formed from their father's first name with an sson at the end for men and an sdottir for women. If your name is Erik, your son's last name becomes Eriksson and your daughter's Eriksdottir. Women don't change their names when they marry. All the Nordic countries once used this naming convention; all but Iceland switched to traditional surnames.

Iceland's language hasn't changed much either. As in all Nordic countries, it's based on old Norse spoken by the Vikings who settled the island, but Norwegian, Swedish and Danish evolved as separate languages. Icelanders, isolated on a rock in the North Atlantic, kept to the old ways. Not to worry, English is widely spoken.

Isolation also means many Icelanders are related to each other. Their DNA is mostly Norse and Celt, fueling speculation that those Vikings kidnapped women in Ireland en route to Iceland. Tracing one's ancestry is a popular -- and sometimes necessary -- pastime. A website helps couples find out how closely they are related before they become romantically involved. There's even a smartphone app, handy in a bar if they meet someone who strikes their fancy.

City tours stop at Hallgrims Church, largest in Iceland, with an unusual poured concrete design made to look like columns of volcanic basalt. A statue of Leif Eriksson on the church plaza was a gift from the U.S. marking the 1,000th anniversary of Iceland's Parliament. A giant pipe organ dominates the interior of the Lutheran church and if you're

lucky you might catch part of a concert or rehearsal. Take an elevator to the top of the church tower for a nice view of the city.

You'll get another view from the observation deck of The Pearl, built over six water tanks regulating the geothermal output into Reykjavik homes and businesses. The first floor of the dome-shaped building has a replica of a geyser. There's a revolving restaurant on the top floor.

Museums in the city relate to Icelandic lore, history and art. The Asmundur Sveinsson Sculpture Museum displays works the Icelandic artist based on human forms and abstract shapes, including more than 25 in the museum's sculpture garden.

After a city tour, allow time to walk around Reykjavik. Stroll the waterfront to see the Sun Voyager, an abstract sculpture of a Viking ship, and the Harpa, a concert and convention hall built in 2011 with an unusual glass honeycomb design illuminated at night. On the main shopping street, Laugavegur, the Icelandic Phallogical Museum always attracts attention. More than 215 examples of the male member are on display representing all mammals in Iceland, including humans.

Reykjavik night life is notorious with more than two dozen bars and nightclubs welcoming revelers. On weekends, the action doesn't heat up until midnight and some establishments don't close until 6 a.m.

After a day of sightseeing, you might need a nap first before you join the party.

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

Reykjavik Stopover

Getting there: Icelandair flies nonstop from North American gateways, including Toronto, New York, Newark, Boston, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C.; icelandair.us

Getting around: Flybus makes regular trips from Keflavik airport to Reykjavik where Iceland Travel, the country's leading tour operator, offers a wide variety of tour packages, icelandtravel.is

Where to stay:

Icelandair Hotels: Reykjavik Marina and Reykjavik Natura; icelandairhotels.com

Hilton Reykjavik Nordica, hiltonreykjavik.com

When to go: Summer is peak season with almost 24 hours of daylight and an average high of 60 degrees in July. The Gulf Stream sweeps around Iceland making winters mild for this latitude, an average high of 36 and a low of 28 in December and January with just four hours of daylight, ideal for viewing the Northern Lights.

Details: Promote Iceland, visiticeland.com; Visit Reykjavik, visitreykjavik.is

<http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20150412/entlife/150419835/>