



**ADRIFT:** Icebergs floating in Jökulsárlón Lagoon (left), and Sun Voyager sculpture in Reykjavík (right)

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## Ring Around Iceland

Pair business in Reykjavík with a scenic drive along the wild coast. BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

**W**hat's that shade of blue? The odd color catches my eye from the road, so I pull into a gravel lot for a closer look. Big as a house, the icebergs float in a quiet lagoon mirroring their iridescent hues. Are they turquoise? Aquamarine?

So much of what I've seen in Iceland defies description. Its geological oddities form the cast of Mother Nature's enthralling freak show: boiling pools of mud, rivers of ice, exploding spouts of steam and black lava fields stretching from ice-capped volcanoes that might erupt at any moment.

But here at Jökulsárlón Lagoon all seems calm, with the only sound the cry of gulls and the bark of seals frolicking at the edge of

the ice, beckoning me to draw near. The ice is ancient, the detritus of glaciers compressed over millennia before birthing these dense, blue-green bergs. Slowly they melt, eroding into fanciful shapes revealing black streaks of volcanic ash and grit picked up as the glaciers ground their way toward the North Atlantic.

I've come to Iceland to attend a conference in Europe's northernmost capital, Reykjavík, but I vow to see as much of the country as I can between meetings at the Hilton Reykjavik Nordica, one of the city's largest convention hotels.

A city tour hits Reykjavík's highlights. The abstract stainless steel sculpture of a Viking ship, *Sun Voyager*, stands on the waterfront



**WATER VIEWS:** *The Pearl, built atop water tanks (top); and a waterfall at Thingvellir National Park (bottom)*

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paying tribute to Iceland's Norse heritage. A statue of Leif Eriksen on the plaza outside Hallgrímskirkja, the Lutheran church, is a gift from the United States to celebrate the 1,000th anniversary of Iceland's parliament, the oldest in the world. Inside the church an elevator to the tower unveils a view of the city.

I get another view from The Pearl, an odd attraction built atop water tanks regulating the city's geothermal energy. A revolving restaurant at the top hosts my conference for a dinner one evening, and on another night we dine at the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center. Its glass honeycomb exterior lights the waterfront after dark.

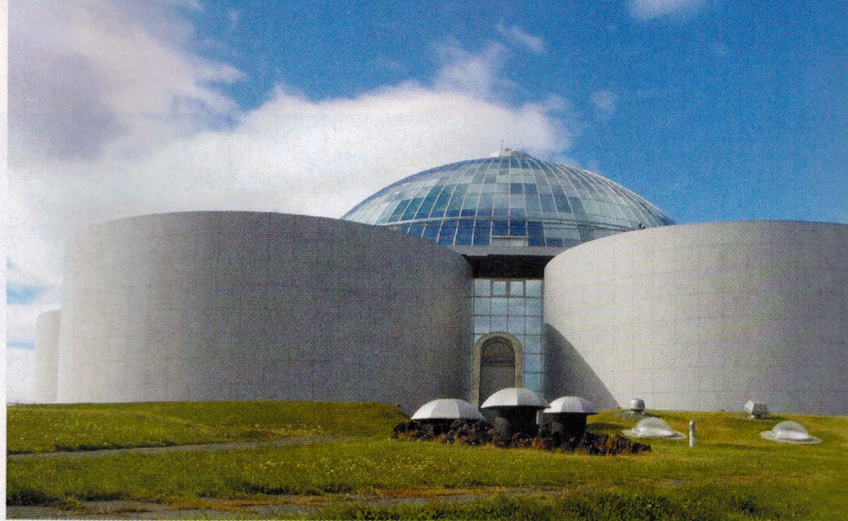
A daytrip outside the city makes three stops on Reykjavik Excursions' Golden Circle Tour. Iceland's parliament first convened in an open field at Thingvellir National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. A rift valley running through the park marks the spot where two of Earth's tectonic plates move apart about one-third of an inch a year, one heading toward Europe, the other toward North America.

I see more evidence of tectonic activity at Geysir, an expanse of hot springs, boiling mud and geysers. Our guide instructs us to stand on the upwind side of Strokkur and wait for it to blow. Five minutes pass, then 10, before a column of steam shoots 115 feet in the air. Last stop of the day takes us to Gullfoss, a waterfall pouring across a broad staircase of rock before plunging into a seemingly bottomless gorge.

When the conference ends, my husband and I rent a car and head for Iceland Route 1, the Ring Road circling the island nation's perimeter. Driving the entire 828-mile route would take about a week, but our flight leaves in four days, so we stick to the southern coast, reputedly the most scenic. We've booked rooms in Icelandair Hotels along the way.

Roughly the size of Kentucky, Iceland has a population of about 320,000, with two-thirds living in and around the capital. The rest of the island remains sparsely populated with fishing villages and hamlets hugging fjords. The Ring links them like charms on a bracelet.

Often we have the road to ourselves, which is just as well. The two-lane highway is paved and well-maintained, but one-lane bridges and blind summits keep us on our toes. There are no shoulders and few places to pull over. The legal speed limit is 55 mph, and headlights must be on at all times. We've been warned to keep an eye on the gas gauge because service stations are few and far between. Many are unmanned and require a credit card



## INFO TO GO

Icelandair is the principal carrier at Keflavík International Airport, about 40 minutes from Reykjavík. Flybus, operated by Reykjavik Excursions, shuttles between the airport, the city bus terminal and hotels. Tour company Gray Line Iceland provides transfers on its Airport Express. Taxis run by the meter.





**CHILLING:** Hiking up the glacier at Skaftafell National Park  
 PHOTO: © MEGHAN CROSNO | DREAMSTIME.COM

**Gray Line Iceland**  
[grayline.is](http://grayline.is)

**Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre**  
[en.harpa.is](http://en.harpa.is)

**Hilton Reykjavik Nordica**  
[hilton.com](http://hilton.com)

**Icelandair**  
[icelandair.us](http://icelandair.us)

**Icelandair Hotels**  
[icelandairhotels.com](http://icelandairhotels.com)

**The Pearl**  
[perlan.is](http://perlan.is)

**Reykjavik Excursions**  
[re.is](http://re.is)

**Skaftafell National Park**  
[vatnajokulsthjodgardur.is](http://vatnajokulsthjodgardur.is)

**Visit Iceland**  
[visiticeland.com](http://visiticeland.com)

**Visit Reykjavik**  
[visitreykjavik.is](http://visitreykjavik.is)

*Because many Icelanders are related, young singles consult an app based on genealogical data before pursuing a love interest.*

with a chip and pin as payment.

Still, it's an easy drive, and we barely need the GPS.

We catch glimpses of white crowning the mountains, an ice cap and source of waterfalls streaming down roadside cliffs. Beneath the ice lies Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano that exploded in 2010 and shut down air traffic over Europe and the North Atlantic. The dragon sleeps today, so it's safe to detour from The Ring to look at Skógafoss, where a double rainbow emerges from the mist of the 200-foot falls.

Near the village of Vík, a black-sand beach leads to a trio of serrated sea stacks, the surf roaring around them. Down the road we see more signs of past volcanic activity: miles of

coal-black flood plain, the result of an eruption beneath an ice cap that sent torrents of melt water racing toward the ocean.

A hike in Skaftafell National Park leads to the edge of a glacier. We're careful to watch our step along the frozen river of ice, mindful of the exhibit in the visitor center containing personal effects swallowed when their owners slipped and fell to their deaths.

I'm just about to turn around for our drive back to Reykjavík when I spot the blue ice. At the edge of Jökulsárlón Lagoon, I pick up a jagged shard of a berg. How old must it be, I wonder, how many centuries passed on its journey through this land of fire and ice?



**ONLINE EXTRA**  
 Jump to [gtravmag.com/blue](http://gtravmag.com/blue) to read about Iceland's geothermal Blue Lagoon.