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ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ICELAND

Ten unpronounceable but unforgettable places in the land of fire and ice

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Alamy and from publicity
materials



HALLGRÍMSKIRKJA [Hatl-greems-qier-kyə]



At the top of Skólavörðustígur Street sits the iconic church of Reykjavik, Hallgrímskirkja. It's the largest church in Iceland and can be seen from almost anywhere across the city. Construction on the church began in 1945 and was fully completed in 1986, with the church serving as a symbol of the city ever since. Its design is inspired by Icelandic nature, the wings of the church resembling basalt columns formed by cooling lava, which you can find in different locations around Iceland. The church tower is 73 metres high, standing tall and strong in the face of the strong winds and stormy weather that so often batter the small island.

For ISK 900 (EUR 8) you can take an elevator to the top of that tower, where you get a 360-degree view over Reykjavik and the surrounding mountains and ocean. This is by far the best view you'll find in Reykjavik and is well worth the small fee. Inside the simple yet striking nave, a large organ adorns the wall, but not much else. The stark interior is different from any other church in Europe, but it suits Iceland. In front of the church is a statue of Leifur Eiríksson (Leif Erikson), an explorer who was the first European to discover America. He did so in AD 1000, a full 500 years before Christopher Columbus.

REYKJANES
[Ray-kye-nes]



Another peninsula easily accessible from Reykjavik, called the Reykjanes Peninsula, lies just south of the city. On arrival at Keflavik International Airport, you will be transported straight through the middle of a large lava field that lies on the peninsula towards Reykjavik. Iceland's most famous attraction, the Blue Lagoon, is also located on the Reykjanes

Peninsula, but there is quite a lot more to discover in this region that doesn't see many tourists. Drive around the mysterious Kleifarvatn Lake, surrounded by volcanic black sands and green hills hidden in mists, before arriving at Krýsuvík, a highly active geothermal zone. A collection of boardwalks wander through the steamy hot springs and bubbling mud holes,

spewing forth boiling water from beneath the ground. All of this is surrounded by the moon-like formations of a lava field, the chaotic formations of black rocks covered in bright green moss.

Continue on to the southern coast to reach the cliffs of Krýsuvíkurborg, standing tall and strong against the ferociousness of the Atlantic Ocean. It's an impressive sight and home to thousands of sea birds nesting during the summer months. Further along the coast is Brimketill, a natural rock pool right on the sea filled with heated water from a nearby natural spring – a truly Icelandic experience.

LANDMANNALAUGAR
[Landt-manna-leugh-ar]



For a real experience of Iceland's highlands, Landmannalaugar is the place to go. It's only accessible in the summer months by four-wheel drive, and the area is known for its spectacular

hiking and geothermal baths. Having a relaxing soak in the 36°–40° C water after exploring one of the many trails that meander throughout the highlands is absolute heaven. One of the

most popular hikes to do from this base is to the peak of the Bláhnjúkur volcano, which provides a stunning view across the surrounding valleys, mountains, and rivers. There are three different campsites that you can camp at, and there are also a limited number of mountain huts that are open from mid-June to mid-September.

The area lies at the edge of the Laugahraun lava field, formed as the result of an eruption in the year 1480. It is also flanked by mountains of ever-changing colours, glowing different shades of red, brown, pink, and purple as the sun makes its way across the sky.

EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL
[Ay-uh-fyat-luh-yoe-kuutl]

In 2010 the world watched in awe as Eyjafjallajökull erupted, breaking through its glacier cap and sending an ash cloud into the skies that disrupted air traffic over Europe for weeks. Since then, the number of tourists travelling to Iceland has been increasing at an incredible rate, the eruption drawing attention to the country and its otherworldly landscapes, astounding nature, and promise of inspirational adventures.

Driving from Reykjavik to the southeast, there's no way you'll miss this behemoth. Mountains materialise on the distant horizon, smothered year-round in snow and ice. Stop at the visitor centre on Route 1, dedicated to giving you information on the volcanic eruption and one family's experience living in the shadow of the volcano. If you are excited to explore Eyjafjallajökull, tours include helicopter flyovers, skiing, snowmobiling, or 4WD super-jeep adventures. You can also hike right past the volcano on the famous five-day Laugavegur trek, which starts next to the Skogafoss waterfall and leads into the highlands of the country.



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SNÆFELLSNES

[Sny-fels-nes]



The Snæfellsnes Peninsula is a long spit of land that juts out north of Reykjavik and is often undertaken as a day trip from the city. It is described by the locals as an ‘Iceland-in-miniature’, due to the area containing everything that you’ll see around the rest of the country: fields of ancient lava, black sand beaches, waterfalls, hot springs, wild landscapes, and

even its own volcano lying underneath a glacier – Snæfellsjökull. The national park that the volcano and glacier sit in is without a doubt the main attraction of the peninsula, and it offers many different hiking trails on and around the volcano. Snæfellsjökull is also the setting for the famous story *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne, in which a group of scientists

venture into the crater of the volcano.

As for the rest of the peninsula, the small town of Stykkishólmur on the north coast is undeniably pretty, and it’s here where you’ll find some of the freshest seafood in the country. Along the spectacular coastline at the end of the peninsula are hiking trails that lead you between the small coastal fishing villages. At Rauðamelsölkelda you can drink fresh carbonated water coming straight out of the ground, and Búðir is a picturesque black church on the coast, with waves crashing onto the rocks on one side and tall mountains dusted with snow looming on the other side. These are some of the most beautiful, dramatic, and awe-inspiring landscapes in the entire country, steeped in legends and myths, and a place you definitely won’t forget.

KIRKJUFELL

[Keer-kyu-fetl]



Located on the northern coast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula is the picture-perfect mountain of Kirkjufell. Situated right next to the small town of Grundafjörður, you’ve likely come across

photos of this mountain if you’ve done any research on Iceland. Its perfect shape and unique location behind a waterfall makes it the most-photographed mountain in the whole of Iceland

and a definite must-see in the country. The different seasons each bring their own unique look to the location, so no matter what time of year you visit, it’s always going to be impressive. In the dark of winter this is an exceptional spot to seek out the northern lights, which appear between September and April, and during the summer months the midnight sun often turns the sky different hues of pink, orange, red, and purple.

If you’re feeling brave, there is a treacherous path to the top of the mountain that will take about three hours up and back. If it’s a windy day, it’s a lot safer to stick to the walking trails at the bottom that make their way around towards the beaches on the other side of the mountain.

FJAÐRÁRGLJÚFUR

[Fi-ath-rour-gee-oo-fuhr]



This gorgeous canyon sits just past Eyjafjallajökull on the main route east. The Fjaðrá River runs through the 100-metre-deep

and 2-kilometre-long canyon, but the water level is often low, making the bottom of the canyon accessible and allowing you to admire the steep

craggy walls from below. From the top, the walking path takes you along the canyon and gives you views of the serpentine-like formation of the canyon twisting and turning into the distance. Greys, greens, and blacks meld together, creating an unforgettable and dramatic view.

The canyon formed 9000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age, as water emptied from a lake that formed as a result of a retreating glacier. The powerful flow of the glacial river carved out the form of the canyon that you see today.

VATNAJÖKULSPJÓÐGARÐUR

[Vat-na-yoe-kuutls-thee-oth-gar-thur]



This national park not only contains the largest glacier in Europe, Vatnasjökull, but also includes the varied landscapes that surround it. Covering roughly 14% of Iceland, the park was created only recently by incorporating national parks to

the north and south into one unified park.

It is very popular to book a tour to hike on the glacier here, a thrilling and unique experience only available with a qualified guide. The highlands in the north of the park past the

glacier are dominated by three different volcanoes: Askja, Kverkfjöll, and Snaefell. The landscape is moulded from explosive eruptions over the years and powerful glacial rivers, making for some of the most otherworldly and dramatic scenery in Iceland. One of the highlights here is Viti, a volcanic crater that has since filled with a milky blue water from a nearby hot spring, allowing you to take a dip in the lunar-like landscape. Also contained in the north of the park is the impressive Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe. In the south of the park, glacier tongues creep down valleys lying between craggy mountains, and the Svartifoss waterfall surrounded by black basalt columns in the Skaftafell region is one of a kind.

SELJALANDSFOSS

[Sel-ya-lands-foss]



Travelling along the south coast is in itself one of the highlights of a trip to Iceland. The astounding landscapes begin as soon as you leave Reykjavik, and you'll be hard-pressed not to pull over every five minutes to take a photo. The first sight that you'll come across when driving the main route south can be seen from the road, the Seljalandsfoss waterfall charging out

over the cliffs from the highlands, which were the former coastline of the country. Difficult to pronounce but easy to fall in love with, this is one of the most popular waterfalls in the country. What makes it so special is that you can walk around behind the waterfall, affording you great views out over the plain. It is especially wonderful as the sun sets, casting golden light

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across the land and, more often than not, creating plenty of rainbows from the spray of the falls. Make sure to take a rain coat, because the water crashes powerfully into the pool below, sending a fine mist up into the air.

Located very close to Seljalandsfoss is another waterfall, called Gljúfrabúi, that often gets overlooked. Follow the cliffs north to a small crevice in the rock that obscures the waterfall inside. Only the very top of the falls can be seen from the outside, but wade in through the river and you can walk right up to the waterfall. Again, be prepared to get wet.

LÁTRABJARG

[Low-tra-be-arg]



Látrabjarg is the largest sea-bird cliff in Europe and also the westernmost point of both Iceland and Europe. Widely considered to be one of the best sea-bird cliffs in the world, during the summer months thousands of birds flock to the tall cliffs for the breeding season. Included in all of the different bird species is the Atlantic puffin,

an icon of Icelandic culture. This is one of the best places in the country to see puffins, and it's definitely the one colony that you'll be able to get the closest to. Usually nesting just over the edge of the cliff, they appear from mid-May to late August to build their nests and breed. For the rest of their lives, these hardy birds live out

at sea on the wild North Atlantic Ocean.

Látrabjarg itself is made up of a number of different cliffs stretching along the coast for 14 kilometres. At the edge of the cliff is a painted white line warning people about getting too close to the edge – there are no safety barriers here. To peer over the edge to see the birds, it's suggested that you lie flat on your stomach and crawl up to the edge of the cliff, because the edges aren't stable enough to stand on. These cliffs are located in the Westfjords region of Iceland, an area often overlooked by tourists thanks to it being relatively cut-off from the rest of the country by large mountains guarding the two entrances. To explore this area, it's widely recommended that you plan an extra two or three days to see everything. But it is well worth the effort. **BO**