

Visiting Iceland (public)

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What This Document Is

We (my wife and I) have put some of our thoughts and practical tips about visiting Iceland as an American into this Google document. We hope it will be helpful! Once you visit, please let us know how our suggestions have worked out for you.

This document mostly focuses on sightseeing within a day's drive of Reykjavík. If you are planning a longer trip, we're happy to discuss various options farther away.

Our time zone is 8 hours later than Pacific Standard Time and 7 hours later than Pacific Daylight Time. (5 hours later than EST and 4 hours later than EDT.)

Day Trips, Routes, and Tours

Here are a few driving routes that can make nice day trips from Reykjavík. Later on, we'll suggest some sights to see and things to do on these routes.

[Along the South Coast to Vík](#)

[The Golden Circle \(Geysir, Gullfoss, Þingvellir\)](#)

[North to Snæfellsnes Peninsula \(Snæfellsjökull National Park and Stykkishólmur\)](#)

You can either rent a car and drive yourself, or join an organized tour. A few tour companies that operate regular tours along these routes are:

[Reykjavík Excursions \(big tour buses\)](#)

[Gray Line Tours \(also big tour buses\)](#)

[Saga Travel \(smaller\)](#)

We have ourselves been on Reykjavík Excursions and Saga Travel tours, and have enjoyed both of them.

Common travel plans that involve spending time outside of Reykjavík are to either travel along the south coast to Vík and spend the night (which can allow you to spend a day at Vatnajökull National Park and visit the iceberg-filled glacial bay at Jökulsárlón) or travel all the way around the ring road (Highway 1), staying in towns along the way.

It is also possible to take domestic flights via [Air Iceland Connect](#) from Reykjavík Airport, downtown, to a number of other Icelandic towns including Akureyri, Ísafjörður, and Egilsstaðir. Saga Travel, also, offers packages that let you fly to Akureyri in the morning, take a day trip to places like Lake Mývatn or Dettifoss, and fly back to Reykjavík in the evening. This can be kind of expensive but if you want to get a little bit off the beaten path in a very short time, it can be a neat experience.

Renting A Car

If you plan to rent a car, driving in Iceland is relatively easy for Americans, but there are a few details which can be unfamiliar. This web page offers some helpful information:

<https://visitreykjavik.is/driving-iceland>

Some of the local car rental companies are:

<http://avis.is/>

<http://budget.is/>

<http://enterpriserentacar.is/>

<http://hertz.is/>

<http://sixt.is/>

You can either pick up a rental car in Keflavík when you arrive, or pick it up in Reykjavík later. Since the drive from the airport is pretty long and you'll arrive tired from an overnight U.S. flight, we recommend using the airport buses to get to Reykjavík and picking up your car later.

It's unlikely you'll drive a diesel car, but if you do, be aware that U.S. and Canadian pumps color diesel GREEN while Icelandic and other European pumps mark it with BLACK.



Californian and Icelandic Fuel Pumps. Note the Diesel.

Before You Leave

Before you leave for Iceland, here are some things to consider:

Contact Your Bank

Almost everyone in Iceland takes credit or debit cards, but if you plan to use a U.S. credit or debit card, you may need to contact your bank to let them know you'll be traveling. If you do not do this, your card may either not work at all or may stop working during your trip!

Some cards may not charge an additional fee for international use other than the “hidden” fee that is incorporated into the exchange rate. Others charge an additional fee, sometimes as high as 3%. We recommend checking on your cards’ international fee policies and using the card with the best terms.

Phone Unlocking

If price is no object, or if you must be reachable on your U.S. mobile number, you can contact your cellular phone provider and arrange to be able to roam in Iceland. If you just turn on your phone in Iceland and start using it, it will likely work, but you’ll incur massive costs. Most carriers offer much cheaper international voice and data plans. These are still expensive but with some care you can avoid bills that are several hundred dollars or more for a week-long trip.

If you roam with your U.S. number, you can usually turn off cellular service on your phone except when you need it, and use Wi-Fi to access data. Many restaurants, cafés, and hotels in Reykjavík offer free Wi-Fi for their customers.

An alternative to consider is to either “unlock” your phone if necessary (which allows using it on a different carrier) or buy/borrow an unlocked phone, then buy a prepaid SIM card in Iceland. This will be a lot cheaper, and will give you a local Icelandic number to use when traveling.

You can contact your U.S. carrier to see if your phone needs to be unlocked. Some U.S. carriers will only unlock your phone once your initial contract is finished or once you’ve had the phone for a certain amount of time, although it may be possible to pay an early termination fee and get it unlocked immediately. Other carriers (I believe T-Mobile and Sprint) sometimes sell phone unlocked to begin with.

Note: Check what your provider charges for international roaming. At least one plan on T-Mobile allows unlimited use of text and data in Iceland and very reasonable per-minute charges for calls. Other carriers may have something competitive too.

Power Adapters

Like most of the rest of Europe, Iceland’s power is 220V/50Hz instead of the U.S. 110V/60Hz standard. Many phone chargers and chargers for mobile devices will work with either type of power, and for these you can use a simple plug adapter. Our sockets look like this:



And plug adapters look like this:



You must be very careful to check the device's power requirements before plugging it in! Plugging in a U.S. device that is not made to accept 220V power can destroy the device or start a fire!

If your device only takes 110-120V power (some hair dryers/curlers or electric shavers, for example) you can use a power transformer. A small one made for travel looks like this:



Stores that specialize in travel items often have these adapters. An inexpensive online shop that has a wide range of such devices is www.110220volts.com, and that's where many of our power transformers and plug adapters have come from.

Arriving in Iceland

When you fly into Iceland from the USA, you'll almost certainly arrive through Keflavík International Airport (KEF) sometime in the morning.

Passport Control and Duty Free

When you arrive, you'll first go through passport control, then walk down a long series of gates to other Schengen countries (which do not require passport control for travel from Iceland.) You'll arrive in a large shopping area, and a sign will direct you to the left and down an escalator to baggage claim.

Across from baggage claim is a duty free store. This is the only duty free store you can use when entering Iceland. If you'd like to buy wine, beer, liquor, or cigarettes during your stay, we strongly recommend doing so here, because the prices are much lower than outside the airport. Note that you must adhere to [Iceland's customs limits](#) if you do this. The duty free store also sells prepaid SIM cards.

Getting a Prepaid SIM Card For Phone Service

If you've chosen to get a prepaid Icelandic SIM card, you can buy a Vodafone prepaid SIM at the duty free store, the Elko store in the airport shopping area, or at the 10-11 store in the arrival hall just to the right of where you exit customs (after baggage claim.) You can also buy prepaid SIMs at 10-11 stores and gas stations in the city or at the carriers' stores. The mobile carriers in Iceland are:

[Vodafone](#)

[Nova](#) (in Icelandic only, unfortunately.)

[Siminn](#)

Icelandair also sells Vodafone prepaid SIM cards on their flights to Iceland!

If you plan to travel to other EU or EEA countries on your trip, EEA regulations now require that carriers allow you to roam for a limited time within the EEA area using an EEA SIM card with no extra charges, if the prepaid SIM supports roaming at all. [Here's more information on this.](#) The rules should apply to your Iceland-purchased prepaid SIM card, unless your trip is unusually long. If you are an EEA phone subscriber, you can also use your phone in Iceland as though you were at home, as long as your plan permits international roaming.

Getting to Reykjavík

Once you clear customs, you can either pick up a rental car if you've reserved one in Keflavík, take a taxi, or use an airport bus. Taxis cost about 18,000kr. (about \$140 as of this writing) and airport buses cost about 3500kr. per person.

We recommend the [Reykjavík Excursions Flybus](#) to get into the city from Keflavík airport. You can either buy a ticket to the BSÍ bus terminal and take a bus or taxi, or if you are staying at a local hotel or hostel, you can pay a little more and use the Flybus+ service to change buses at BSÍ to go to your hotel.

You may book in advance online. Also, Icelandair sells Flybus tickets on their flights when they are walking the aisles to sell duty free goods, and Play Airlines may as well. It's also possible to buy a Flybus ticket in the arrival hall after customs. Buses run whenever flights are arriving.

Money and Paying For Things In Iceland

There is usually little need to carry cash in Iceland. Nearly everyone takes credit or debit cards. (See [Contact Your Bank](#) above.) Note: Visa and Mastercard are widely accepted, but many places do not accept American Express.

If you need to get cash, you can either withdraw it at an ATM (the first one you'll encounter is in the arrival hall at Keflavík to the left of where you exit customs, after baggage claim) or exchange cash at Landsbankinn, on Austurstræti, downtown.

Tax is included in all prices, and Icelanders do not usually tip. However, many restaurants and businesses maintain tip jars on the principle that they prefer not to refuse free money from foreigners. One local bar recently got some bad press for setting up their credit card machines to ask for tips. They apologized and explained that they do not expect Icelanders to tip but wouldn't wish to get in the way of foreign guests being able to do so if they prefer.

The Icelandic currency is called the Icelandic Króna (plural: Krónur), and is often abbreviated Kr. or ISK. (If you are an Eve player, you should know that pronouncing or spelling out "ISK" in a shop will just get you a strange look.) Exchange rates fluctuate and vary based on bank and which way you're exchanging currency, but as of this writing the exchange rate is about 100 Kr. to the U.S. dollar.

Getting Around Reykjavík

There Is No Uber.

Uber has not come to Reykjavík. Sorry.

Taxis

There are a number of taxi stands in downtown areas, run by licensed taxi companies. You can also call for a taxi. The taxi company that I have on speed dial is Hreyfill (www.hreyfill.is) at +354 588 5522. Taxis here take Visa and Mastercard, and Hreyfill has a mobile app.

Buses

Another option is the Reykjavík bus system, called Strætó. Their website is www.straeto.is. To ride their buses, you must either have a ticket or pass already, or you can pay cash. The bus drivers do not make change. [They have an app for iPhone and Android](#) that allows you to set up a credit or debit card to purchase tickets on your phone, which is very convenient if you plan to be using the bus a lot. (Once you download the app, it is possible to switch its language to English in the settings.) [Bus passes for multiple use are sold through the Klappið app](#).

A city bus pass is included in the [Reykjavík City Card](#).

Sightseeing in Reykjavík

The Reykjavík City Card

The [Reykjavík City Card](#) offers included entry to the city zoo, city pools, a bunch of museums, and unlimited use of the bus system, plus various other discounts for 1-3 days. If you plan to visit more than one museum in the city, it is worth considering getting one.

Old Harbor

The [Reykjavík Old Harbor](#) is near the downtown area, and is currently where many of the whale watching and puffin viewing trips depart. The Viking Sushi Tour mentioned below can be a better alternative to see puffins.



Old Harbor

A few companies that run whale and puffin watching tours are [Elding](#), [Reykjavík Sailors](#), and [Extreme Iceland](#).

Museums

There are a few neat museums in downtown Reykjavík worth checking out. Admission for many of these is included in the [Reykjavík City Card](#):

[Reykjavík Art Museum](#)

[Reykjavík Photography Museum](#)

[Iceland National Museum](#)

[The Settlement Exhibition](#)

[The Iceland Phallological Museum](#)

[Aurora Reykjavík](#)

[The Saga Museum](#)

[Perlan Museum](#)

Swimming Pools and Hot Tubs

Public swimming pools and hot tubs are an Icelandic tradition and a social hub for Icelanders. The largest swimming pool in Reykjavík is [Laugardalslaug](#). There are smaller pools all around town, and admission is 175 kr. for kids under 18 and 1100 kr. for adults. Admission for both is free with the [Reykjavík City Card](#).

One thing to note is that public swimming pools in Iceland generally require showering fully disrobed before entering, which some Americans may find uncomfortable. Some swimming pools, though, have private shower stalls available.

The most famous swimming pool in Iceland is probably [The Blue Lagoon](#), which is actually much closer to Keflavík Airport than Reykjavík. It is possible to take a Reykjavík Excursions bus to the Blue Lagoon and then from there to the airport when you fly out. Reservations are usually required and the price is nearly ten times as much as visiting a public swimming pool.

Observation Decks

There are two great observation decks in Reykjavík, both of which charge small admission fees. [Perlan Museum](#) has an observation deck on a hill overlooking Reykjavík City Airport, downtown. And, [Hallgrímskirkja](#), the tall church in the center of downtown, has an observation deck near the top. Both are worth visiting.



Hallgrímskirkja

Food and Drink in Iceland

Traditional Icelandic Foods

Iceland's traditional foods tended to be meat and dairy based, since growing crops here is difficult. Sheep farming and fishing were both common for hundreds of years, with a heavy emphasis on smoking, pickling, and fermenting or putrefaction for long-term storage.

The Famous Downtown Hot Dog Stand

After Americans established the (now closed) Air Force base at Keflavík, fast food, hot dogs, and pizza became very popular. Reykjavík has a famous hot dog stand downtown, called [Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur](#), that sells Icelandic hot dogs (made with a mixture of pork and lamb) with five toppings: Ketchup, a sweet mustard sauce, remoulade (kind of a thick mayonnaise), raw onions, and “cronions,” or toasted crunchy onions. A few years ago, the Reykjavík Grapevine English-language newspaper ran [a comparison of all combinations of the five condiments available there](#).

Reykjavík Restaurants for Breakfast/Brunch

[Prikíð](#): A nightclub at night and a breakfast place/diner by day. Great food, slow service.

[Snaps](#): A popular place for weekend brunches. Really good French toast.

[Kaffihús Vesturbæjar](#): A nice little coffee house. A bit off the beaten tourist path.

[Laundromat Cafe](#): A diner-style restaurant, great for breakfast as well as lunch and dinner. Recently reopened after being closed for a while.

Reykjavík Restaurants for Nice Meals

[Apotek](#): A newer restaurant downtown that has become a favorite for nicer, celebratory meals among our friends.

[Grillmarkaðurinn](#): “The Grill Market,” a restaurant specializing in red meat (including lamb, beef, and horse.)

[Fiskmarkaðurinn](#): “The Fish Market,” sibling restaurant to Grill Market, specializing in all kinds of fish (including Nordic-inspired dishes and sushi.)

[Sjávargrillið](#): Another seafood-focused restaurant with excellent food. We have enjoyed every visit so far!

About Putrefied Shark, Minke Whale, and Puffin

These foods are sold primarily to tourists. Some older Icelanders enjoy eating putrefied shark, but most do not. Normally I would say don’t bother. Minke whale, however, tastes pretty good.

Weather and Travel in Iceland

Weather can be a concern for travel any time of the year, and severe storms and high winds often close roads and sometimes result in canceled flights. Iceland temperatures rarely get below 20 degrees F even in the winter, but strong winds can amplify the effects of cold weather.

Even in the warmest parts of summer, most days are in the 60s (Fahrenheit) and temperatures can dip down to the 40s at night, with winds that will cut through a light jacket. So, we recommend planning to wear a few layers of clothing and bringing a hat, gloves, and a warm jacket for occasions when it's necessary, particularly in winter.

In winter, snow and ice can make walking treacherous, so inexpensive rubber crampons like [Yaktrax](#) are well worth having. These are not necessary in the summer unless you plan to visit a glacier.

A good source for travel advisories and general safety information is [Safetravel.is](#). Also, the weather service has a comprehensive weather information site at [en.vedur.is](#).

Viewing The Aurora

One of the most popular sights to seek out, and one of the rarest to see, is the aurora borealis, or "Northern lights."



The Aurora Borealis

To have a chance to see the aurora, you need to visit during one of the months when the sky gets truly dark at night. The aurora normally can be seen from September to April, but from May to August, the sky is usually too bright.

Even during those months, auroral activity is often not strong, and cloud cover can prevent seeing what activity there is. You can see predictions for auroral activity and cloud cover at the [weather office's aurora forecast site](#).

The Golden Circle

[Route Map](#)

The most popular day trip from Reykjavík is the “Golden Circle,” which consists of one of the world’s few active geyser fields at Geysir, one of Iceland’s largest waterfalls, Gullfoss, and Þingvellir (roughly pronounced THING-vet-leer) National Park, which sits on the rift between the North American and European plates, and was the original gathering place for Iceland’s parliament, the Alþingi (ALL-thingy).



Geysir

You can drive the Golden Circle route yourself, you can take a bus tour run by one of the larger tour companies (about \$80 per person), or you can take a smaller or private tour. During the peak tourist season of July and August, you may find it nicer to drive the route unusually early or late to avoid tons of traffic at the sights.



Gullfoss

Usually, tours leave Reykjavík in the mid to late morning, arrive at Geysir first, then proceed to Gullfoss and Þingvellir. There are basic restroom services and shops at all three locations, but Geysir has much better options for food, so we suggest planning to have a meal there.



Pingvellir

Sightseeing On The South Coast

[Route Map](#)

Iceland's south coast features a number of beautiful waterfalls and other natural sights. If you wish to take a day trip from Reykjavík, you can either join an organized tour or drive yourself. To visit the south coast in one day, we recommend traveling as far as the town of Vík and then returning, as going farther can make a very long day. However, if you're up for a very long day of sightseeing, and you're visiting during the very long days of late spring and early summer, you can go farther.

Selfoss

You'll travel through the town of Selfoss first after leaving Reykjavík. It's also on the way to the Golden Circle. Selfoss can be a nice place to stop to eat or refuel on the way back from the South Coast.

Urriðafoss

Urriðafoss is a wide, shallow waterfall to the right of the highway shortly after leaving Selfoss. It's been the subject of a preservation campaign intended to prevent the river from being obstructed by development. We often joke that it's the "most beautiful waterfall in Iceland" since that seemed to be a thrust of the preservation campaign. (In fact, it's a nice waterfall, but perhaps not the most dramatic.)



Urriðafoss

Seljalandsfoss and Gljúfrabúi

Seljalandsfoss is a high waterfall in front of a shallow cavern, through which a walking path runs. When weather is good, you can walk behind Seljalandsfoss on the path, although we recommend taking care in slippery or icy conditions.



Seljalandsfoss

A paved path leads from the parking lot to the left of Seljalandsfoss. Many visitors do not go all the way to the end of the path, but if you do, you'll come to a shallow creek running out of a gap in the rocks on the right. You can step into the creek and walk into the gap, which reveals a grotto into which the waterfall Gljúfrabúi falls.



Gjlúfrabúi

Eyjafjallajökull Visitor Center

Farther along Highway 1 is the visitor center for the volcano Eyjafjallajökull, which is the Icelandic volcano that erupted in 2010, stopping all transatlantic air travel for about a week. From the highway, you can see the peak of the volcano.



Eyjafjallajökull

Skógafoss

Past the visitor center, Skógafoss is one of the largest waterfalls on the South Coast. To the right of the waterfall is a staircase that you can use to ascend to the top of the waterfall. At the top of this staircase is the head of a hiking trail that leads to the highlands.



Skógafoss

Dyrhólaey

Travel a bit farther down Route 1 and take Route 218 to the right, and you'll arrive at Dyrhólaey, which consists of a striking stone arch structure reaching into the water and an adjacent black sand beach. You can often see puffins here during the spring/summer.



Dyrhólaey

Reynisfjara Beach

Some distance farther down Route 1, take Route 215 to the right and travel all the way to the parking lot at the end, and you'll arrive at Reynisfjara Beach, a black sand beach with prominent basalt columns and a large cavern next to the water. From here, you can look back and see Dyrhólaey from a distance.



Reynisfjara Beach

DO NOT TURN YOUR BACK ON THE WATER at Reynisfjara Beach. Occasional, unpredictable “sneaker waves” travel hundreds of feet farther up the beach than average waves, and can sweep tourists out to sea. This has happened several times in the last few years, usually when tourists turn their back on the water to take pictures of the basalt columns, and because of the water’s low temperature, rescue is very unlikely.

Vík

The town of Vík is often where you may want to consider turning around on a day trip to the South Coast. It’s a good spot to refuel and have lunch. If you wish to make a two-day trip of the South Coast, you may choose to stay in or near Vík for the night.

South Coast (Day 2)

If you’re pressing ahead for a very long day trip, or if you are staying on the South Coast and continuing onward for a second day, there are some amazing sights to see past Vík.

Fjaðrárglúfur

Fjaðrárglúfur is a dramatic canyon that you can reach from Highway 1 just before Kirkjubæjarklaustur. It is accessible by a left turn that is about 10 km beyond Route 208 (also on the left.) There is a steep uphill hike to get to the top of the canyon, or you can walk along the river's edge at the bottom.



Fjaðrárglúfur

Skaftafell/Vatnajökull National Park and Svartifoss

[Vatnajökull National Park](#) is a large protected wilderness area farther down Highway 1. There are many hiking trails that lead to and around the glacier there. Svartifoss is a waterfall surrounded by basalt columns that is accessible by hiking uphill a mile or two from the park entrance. Our one visit to the park was rather brief, but one could spend days exploring the hiking trails in the area.



Svartifoss

Jökulsárlón (The Glacial Lagoon)

Jökulsárlón is one of the most dramatic sights in Iceland, a lagoon where huge icebergs cleave off the nearby glacier. If you plan to make it this far, we strongly recommend booking a [Zodiac boat tour](#). This experience was one of the most unique and exciting we've had in our time in Iceland.





Jökulsárlón

Sightseeing In Snæfellsnes

[Route Map](#)

The Snæfellsnes Peninsula is a couple-hour drive from Reykjavík and suitable for a day trip. Worth visiting are [Snæfellsjökull National Park](#) and the town of Stykkishólmur on the peninsula's north side.



Stykkishólmur

Our own visit to the area was somewhat limited, but we did have a remarkable experience going on a boat tour from Stykkishólmur called the [Viking Sushi Tour](#). This boat tour travels out into the channel from Stykkishólmur among many small islands that serve as bird nesting habitats, particularly in the spring and summer.

At the end, they fish up shellfish from the channel and encourage everyone to try tasting them, hence the name of the tour.





The Viking Sushi Tour

Other Experiences Worth Considering

Horse Riding

[Íshestar](#) offers horse riding and stable visits. I have not personally visited but they come recommended.



Fákasel Horse Park

There are a number of places not too far from Reykjavík where one can ride Icelandic horses. Please note that it is usually a bad idea to stop by the side of the road and interact with horses you may see. We did hear about a local horse-owner who decided to explicitly encourage visitors to offer treats to their horses, though, so if you remind us, we might be able to locate the information that led us there.



The Icelandic horse

Other Things To Know

Don't build cairns!

[This article](#) explains why.

CCP Explorer's Collection of Places Worth Knowing About

A fellow CCPer, CCP Explorer, has compiled [this collection of restaurants, shops, sites, and useful places](#).

Some Tips about Pronouncing Icelandic Place Names

You don't need to learn this to get around but it might be fun to know, and getting closer can help you avoid writing out common place names when you ask directions.

Icelandic place names are often long, difficult compound words with unfamiliar characters in them, but Icelandic tends to be spelled phonetically, and you can often sound words out. Here are some of the letters and letter combinations, and how they sound.

Þ, þ: These sound like the "th" sound in the English word "thing."

Ð, ð: These are closest to a voiced "th," like when you say "the" or "either" in English. But, unlike in English, these often occur at the ends of words.

Ö, ö: These sound like "uh."

Æ, æ: These sound like a long-I sound in English, like in "pie."

Á, á: These are pronounced "ow."

É, é: These sound like the "ye" in "yeti."

Í, í, Ý, ý: like the "ee" in "fee."

Ó, ó: A long O, like in "photo."

Ú, ú: like the "oo" in "too."

a, e, i, o, u: Like the short versions of these vowels in English.

J, j: Usually pronounced like a Y in English.

au: Like the "oi" in "hoi polloi"

ei: Like the "ay" in "pay"

ll: Double Ls are usually pronounced like a “tl,” which sounds a little bit like in “butler.” (That’s not exactly the right sound but it’s a good place to start.)

Unlike English, the first syllable of each word is always stressed.

Here are a few examples:

Laugavegur: LOY-gah-vey-ur

Þingvellir: THING-vet-lir.

Ægisgata: EYE-gis-gah-tah.

Háaleitisbraut: HOW-ah-lay-tis-broyt.

Eyjafjallajökull: EH-jah-fyat-lah-yuh-kutl.