

# HIKING ICELAND'S VOLCANIC TRAILS

## Alumni Trip

Location: Reykjavik, Iceland

Dates: July 7 - 13, 2027



Photo by Dustin Lundebrek

## Course Features

- 50+ miles of trailed route through the stunning Icelandic highlands
- Small crowds on less populated trails
- Otherworldly mineral colors created by volcanic activity
- Dynamic environment of interesting volcanic flora dominated by moss, lichen, tenacious plants and drainages with vibrant green moss.
- Five days hiking and four nights in dormitory-style mountain huts
- Two nights in Reykjavik hotels
- Luggage and food shuttle to keep packs light (~15 lbs)
- 10 participants, 2 NOLS instructors

## Trip Description

The route covers an average of 10 miles per day with moderate elevation changes and rolling terrain as we walk down huge glacial valleys and historic volcanic flows. Each travel day will take 6-8 hours on the trail to the next hut; this includes breaks and a stop for lunch. We'll wade rivers or small streams every day. The rivers here are generally wide, cold and manageable with scouting. Hut living allows us to carry light packs each day as tents and camp kitchens are not needed and most of our luggage is shuttled via vehicle. Huts are communal living with other groups and individuals; it's a highlight of the trip to mix with hikers from all over the world, but it can also feel a bit cramped at times.

The trip starts with an evening orientation where we will get to know each other, review gear packing, and look at our route. Packing for this trip is different from most NOLS backpacking adventures: a local outfitter transports luggage from hut to hut for us so we will have a multi-bag system and can bring a few more luxuries.

## A Day in the Life

You will tend to wake up about 7:00 am and get breakfast, coffee, and tea going. Mornings have a leisurely pace where the team packs lunch and then loads backpacks for the day's trek. After loading luggage into the trailer for transport, we will put on our day packs and start hiking around 8:30 am. We will stop along the way to eat lunch together and take breaks as needed. Instructors will be on either end of our hiking troop to ensure no one gets lost and everyone is well taken care of.

Once arriving at our next hut, there may be an additional hiking option for those who are interested or relaxation time for those who are not. The instructors are in charge of cooking and cleaning but will appreciate, in the spirit of expedition behavior, help from trip participants. Dinner is typically around 7:00 pm and we are cleaned up by 8:30 pm. Group hangout time, cards, and enjoying the late sunshine are all common activities until most folks pop their ear plugs in and drift into bed around 10:00 pm.

On our first full day, we will stash our luggage, eat breakfast, and shuttle four hours from the hotel to the trail head. We'll drive along the south coast, then turn inland onto highland tracks, gradually leaving civilization behind. By midday we arrive at Hvanngil valley, where the trek begins. We'll hike this afternoon through the palagonite formations of Hvanngil, a striking volcanic landscape of cliffs, canyons, and eroded lava formations. We transition to the black volcanic sands of Kaldaklof, with Mýrdalsjökull glacier to the south and the Torfajökull rhyolite massif to the north. The day ends at the Strutur Hut.

The second day we will hike east across the Holmsarbotnar valley and onto the lower slopes of the Svartannuksjoll, passing spectacular green moss. Eventually we will walk along the Syðri

Ófæra River, our companion for a few days. Rolling hills take us over the final section to the Álftavötn hut and its nearby lake.

Day three will see us continuing down the Syðri Ófæra through a pretty gorge and to our first view of the Skaftá river. We'll hike up and onto the rim of Eldgjá canyon- the Canyon of Fire- where towering cliffs and dark lava walls reveal the immense volcanic forces that shaped Iceland's highlands. We'll see the beautiful waterfall Ofaerufoss. We end the day with a long descent to the Skælingar hut with its interesting lava formations.

Our fourth hiking day takes us along a ridge above the Skaftá, through a narrow gorge under Uxatindar peak, past a lake and over rolling terrain, through black sand and moss covered fields along the Skaftá to our hut under Mt. Sveinstindur.

A short hike the final morning takes us to our pickup at Langisjor. The drive back to Reykjavik takes about seven hours along the south coast. Showers and a final celebration dinner at a local restaurant round out the day when we arrive back in Reykjavik. Most folks will return home the next morning or perhaps travel onward to other destinations.

## Trip Itinerary

| Date   | Description  | Lodging  |
|--------|--|--|
| July 6 | We encourage you to arrive in Reykjavik on this day, allowing for jet lag recovery, possible baggage delays, and some optional activities on your own. | You are responsible for your lodging, meals and airport transport. |
| July 7 | The trip starts with an <b>orientation at 5:00 pm</b> in the <a href="#">hotel lobby</a> . <a href="#">Midgardur by Center Hotels</a> .                | Lodging is provided by NOLS. Dinner is not included.               |
| July 8 | Pack up. Store in-town luggage at the hotel and drive to our drop off at the Hvanngil Hut, then hike to the Strutur Hut                                | Lodging: Strútur hut<br>9 miles, + 500 ft                          |
| July 9 | Hike from Strutur to a smaller hut at Álftavötn  | Lodging:<br>Álftavötn hut<br>13 miles, +1200 ft                    |

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| July 10 | Hike from Álftavötn to Skælingar, passing through the dramatic and wide Eldgja fissure   | Lodging:<br>Skælingar hut<br>12 miles, +1740 ft   |
| July 11 | Hike from Skælingar, along the Skaftá river to the Sveinstindur hut  | Lodging:<br>Sveinstindur hut<br>10 miles, +820 ft   |
| July 12 | A short hike this morning over to our pickup at Langisjor. The drive back to Reykjavik takes about seven hours along the south coast.<br><br>We will clean up and have a celebratory dinner together this evening! | Transport to Reykjavik included this afternoon.<br>Lodging provided by NOLS in Reykjavik. |
| July 13 | Depart Reykjavik or continue to explore Iceland on your own  | Airport transport and all meals on your own   |

## Difficulty Scale

This trip is rated 4 out of 5 on our difficulty scale. Staying in huts means cultural interaction, bunks, team meals and lightened packs, but the weather in Iceland can occasionally add a special challenge.



We use a difficulty scale to help participants evaluate if a trip is right for them. It considers probable weather conditions, physicality of activities, and food and accommodations. You don't need to be a honed athlete, but pre-trip work to improve your strength, flexibility and endurance, is highly encouraged to improve your enjoyment of the place.

## Trip Environment

Iceland's climate is much milder than its name implies, but quick changes in weather and storms are common. While the variable weather is more mild-mannered in the summer months, it is still possible to experience intense rain or even snow storms, heavy fog, and strong winds at any time in Iceland. Unpredictable weather definitely adds to the wild nature of the landscape. Expected low July temperatures average in the mid-40s with highs in the mid-50s, although temps could get up to the 70s. Strong winds and dense fog are almost guaranteed at some point on the hike. The sun rarely sets in July, so it's likely you will not see darkness during the trip.

Trails in Iceland are generally well marked but less so on this route. We expect our map reading skills will come in handy as we navigate this terrain.

Iceland is well known for its varied mid-summer flora. As you walk through different elevations and types of volcanic soil, the plants change dramatically. Colorful flowers and grasses dot the fields along the hike and add beauty to an already incredible landscape.

The geology of this area route is dramatic. Not all lava is created alike, and you will be able to see the differences in a few types of old lava flows. From red rhyolite soils to shiny obsidian, you will have a living geology class before your eyes.

You won't see much fauna in Iceland. Home to very few mammals, Icelanders commonly see birds and sheep and not much else. While other species have been introduced in modern history, they are uncommon sights along the trail where occasional birds are our most common companions.

## About Iceland

Iceland is located on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, making it both a volcanically and tectonically active area. These natural forces have created spectacular scenery including many-colored mountains with ice caps and glaciers that melt into wild rivers running to broad gravel floodplains.

Settled around 871 AD by Vikings, Iceland quickly became an agricultural community as residents modified their raiding ways. Over the next 1,100 years, Iceland was largely an economically depressed area. That began to change after World War II and, thanks largely to tourism, the country has been looking up economically since then (with the exception of an economic crash in 2008).

Nowadays, Icelanders are very proud of their country and their heritage. With a population of under 400,000 in an area about the size of Kentucky, Icelanders love to joke about their Viking ancestors and the contrast between the current way of life. Iceland has no military, only a small police force, and virtually no crime. The country consistently ranks number one in gender equality and embraces festivals such as Gay Pride that celebrate diversity and individualism. Icelanders are a laid back and generous people that enjoy showing off their country to visitors while also learning about you.

## Food on the Trip

There will be plenty of food provided on the trip for everyone. We are happy to ensure that folks who have reasonable dietary needs and/or preferences are well taken care of throughout

the entire trip. Listing those needs on your registration paperwork is critical for our success here.

If you would like to bring your own snacks along, that is highly encouraged. We all have treats that we enjoy and bringing something special is a great way to keep motivation high and not have to rely on the group's schedule for your munchies.

## Equipment List

This list focuses on the backcountry portion of the trip, you will need to pack other clothing and items for travel and time in Iceland.

### Packing System

This trip will use a variety of different packing systems, please read carefully so that you are well prepared.

1. Luggage storage - Anything that isn't going "into the field" with us can be left in Reykjavik.
2. Day pack - You will be carrying water, snacks, and layers for the day, nothing more.
3. Van Bag - This bag is transported for you in our support vehicle. Additional clothing, toiletries, sleeping bag, book, etc... (around the size of an airplane carry-on)

Gear can be rented in Iceland from [Iceland Camping Equipment](#).

| Upper Body Clothing      |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Equipment                | Notes  |
| Base layer (1-2)         | Mid-weight underwear top made of wool or synthetic   |
| Top layer (1-2)          | Heavy-weight fleece or a medium-weight puffy layer   |
| Rain jacket              | A sturdy, waterproof jacket with a hood. Both coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable |
| T-shirt (1-2)            | A lightweight synthetic or merino wool t-shirt   |
| Sports bra or tank (1-2) | Synthetic sports bra or a synthetic sports tank are recommended  |
| Hut shirt                | Some folks find it nice to have a cotton t-shirt to wear in the huts   |
| Warm hat                 | Something that is still warm when wet  |
| Lower Body Clothing      |  |
| Equipment                | Notes  |

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| Base layer                         | Mid-weight synthetic, or wool tend to be best   |
| Wind/ hiking pants (1)             | Breathable nylon wind pants or lightweight hiking pants.  |
| Underwear / briefs (2-3 pairs)     | Wear what's comfortable; cotton, silk, or synthetics are fine   |
| Rain pants                         | A sturdy waterproof pants. Both coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable  |
| <b>Footwear</b>                    |   |
| <b>Equipment</b>                   | <b>Notes</b>  |
| Hiking shoes                       | You will need a sturdy pair of shoes. Boots are great but lighter- weight hiking shoes also work well. Running shoes are not recommended.                       |
| Hut shoes                          | Shoes that can be worn around huts with socks. Crocs or slippers with a good sole are great   |
| Socks (3-4 pairs)                  | ½ crew to crew-length wool socks  |
| Water shoes                        | For river crossings - not normal for NOLS, but common in Europe. Closed toe shoes required, neoprene socks with tevas are fine. Old running shoes work as well. |
| <b>Miscellaneous Personal Gear</b> |   |
| <b>Equipment</b>                   | <b>Notes</b>  |
| Gloves/mittens                     | It can be wet and cold so waterproof gloves might be important.   |
| Trekking poles                     | Most participants enjoy hiking with two poles   |
| Medium duffel bag                  | A duffel bag is used for luggage that will go in the transport trailer and get shuttled between huts  |
| Day pack                           | Must be big enough to carry daily personal items (e.g., water, food, clothing layers). 30+ liters is a good size  |
| Food bowl                          | A 16-24 oz tupperware with a sealable lid for carrying lunches. Rectangle shaped works particularly well for sandwiches   |
| Bandana (1-2)                      | Most folks enjoy having a bandana and women often use one for personal hygiene  |
| Sleeping bag and stuff sack        | The huts tend to stay at least 50 degrees, so a summer-weight bag is good for most people. If you sleep cold, bring a bag rated for a colder temperature        |
| Towel                              | A couple of the huts have showers where you can pay to get hot water. You must have your own towel and toiletries for these.                                    |

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| Plastic trash bags (1-2) | One to two heavy-duty trash compactor bags (33 gallon) to help waterproof items in your day pack                         |
| Water bottles or bladder | Bottles/bladder with at total capacity of at least 1.5 liters  |
| Umbrella                 | When it isn't windy, these are great.  |
| Lip Balm (1-2)           | SPF 15 or greater  |
| Sunscreen                | SPF 30 or greater  |
| Sunglasses               | Good-quality sunglasses with 100-percent UV protection   |
| Eye mask and ear plugs   | Huts can be noisy places with many people in a room. Earplugs are critical for some folks to get a good night of sleep.  |
| Toiletries               | Toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, brush, skin lotion, tampons, etc. Travel or trial sizes are enough.                        |
| <b>Optional Items</b>    |  |
| Wind Shirt               | A lightweight, breathable, wind shell in either pullover or parka style  |
| Hiking shorts            | Nylon, quick dry shorts  |
| Hut pants                | It is nice to have a pair of pants to lounge around the hut  |
| Pack cover               | Some people prefer this method of keeping their packs dry instead of plastic trash bags.                                 |
| Headlamp                 | Not critical, but occasionally useful  |
| Book or e-reader         | Bring something fun to read.   |
| Games                    | A deck of cards or a game to play in the huts  |
| Camera                   | We would love to see your photos post-trip!  |
| Gaiters                  | Some people enjoy having short gaiters to keep rocks and debris out of their shoes                                       |
| Bug head net /repellent  | There are midges and other flying insects in Iceland, although they are uncommon. If bugs bother you, bring these along. |

## Trip Logistics

### Getting to Reykjavik

The trip starts and ends in Reykjavik, Iceland's capital city (population of ~ 120,000). Plan on flying into the Reykjavik airport (airport code KEF). We encourage you to arrive in Reykjavik early to allow for jet lag recovery, possible baggage delays, and some sightseeing. If you arrive early, you are responsible for your lodging reservations.

You must arrange for your own transport into Reykjavik (and back to the airport when you depart Iceland). We recommend [Reykjavik Excursion's FlyBus](#) but there are many companies that offer the same service for similar prices. Plan on about an hour between the airport and the hotel. Most services will drop you off within a couple of blocks of the hotel at a designated spot. This is common as larger vehicles are not allowed in the downtown corridor of Reykjavik. The driver will point you in the direction of the hotel.

Taxis are also an option to take you straight to your hotel, but they are significantly more expensive than the bus shuttles.

## Lodging

Your two nights in Reykjavik (one before and one after the trip) are included in the trip tuition. We will organize single-gender rooms at our lodging, but if you'd prefer to share a room with a specific person, please let us know. We will be able to store luggage at the hotel while we are in the field.

During the hiking section, we will be staying in the mountain huts. These huts are basic and involve sharing small amounts of space with other people. Mountain huts are a melting pot of cultures as we meet others from all over the world. To live together in harmony, cultural curiosity, positive attitudes, and smiling a lot are critical.

Dress is very casual in the huts. Most folks wear the same clothes they hike in while others choose to have clean, relaxed clothing like t-shirts or sweatpants. The bunks themselves are commonly double beds with simple mattresses (no pillows or sheets) where you will need to sleep side-by-side with another person in the group in your sleeping bags.

Most of our rooms are small and sleep upwards of 20 people while also functioning as our dining rooms. The rooms stay warm and occasionally are even hot. Warm clothing and heavy sleeping bags are not needed inside. Space is a commodity indoors when the weather is foul. Eye masks and earplugs are important for some folks as snoring and other nighttime noises are unavoidable.

The huts have running water and Strútur has hot shower possibilities (bring your own towel.) Where offered, showers are an extra ~ 600 ISK in Strútur. (about \$5 to \$7 USD). With a few exceptions, the huts do not provide or sell any food, so our outfitter will carry sufficient food for our entire time in the field. Do not plan on charging electronic devices in any of the huts. Please bring solar chargers or bricks if you need one.

## Currency

You will need cash in the form of Icelandic Krona (ISK) for miscellaneous purchases and showers (showers are ISK 600 / about \$6 USD) throughout the trip. You will receive the best exchange rate at your local bank, but money exchange kiosks are handy in most airports. Debit and credit cards are commonly used, even for small charges, and cash can be obtained at banks and ATMs.

## Electricity stuff

You will not have regular access to power plugs on this trip. To be able to plug in and charge your devices in the hotel, you will need a C or F adapter. If you would like to charge a device while hiking, you should bring a power bank.

## Travel Insurance

We will confirm whether your trip is running approximately 60 days prior to the start date. We strongly recommend purchasing airline tickets that are refundable or changeable and consider travel cancellation insurance in case unforeseen circumstances require you to adjust your plans, or if NOLS needs to cancel a trip for any reason.

We also encourage you to confirm any existing coverage with your personal insurance provider. Please consider purchasing additional travel medical insurance to help cover medical care or evacuation needs when traveling, whether domestically or internationally. Some examples are [cat70.com](https://www.cat70.com) or [worldnomads.com](https://www.worldnomads.com) for a wide variety of options. NOLS is not affiliated with any of these companies.

## Visa / Passport

Attention International European travelers - ***Must read... Action Required***

**ETA VISA REQUIRED for entering the UK-** If your travels have you **entering or transiting** (passing through or laying over) **in the UK**, you will need to apply for and have an approved Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) to continue to your destination. Here's [the link](#) for how to apply through the UK government website. This is new since summer 2025.

**ETIAS-** At some point in the future Europe (EU) will be requiring an ETIAS travel authorization for most countries that are visa-exempt. This includes USA citizens. Once this system goes into effect, you will need to apply using this new system before traveling and pay a small fee for the authorization. Read updates [here](#).

For international NOLS Alumni Trips, your passport **must be valid for at least 6 months after the conclusion of your trip**. For example, if your trip in Europe ends on **January 30**, your

passport must be valid through **July 30**. Please also check the specific entry requirements for the country you are visiting.

## Storage of Personal Belongings

NOLS will arrange safe locations for you to store your luggage while we are in the field. This may be a NOLS campus, hotel or vendor office. Nothing is 100 percent guaranteed and NOLS assumes no responsibility for your stored baggage.

## NOLS Staff

Our staff are employees of NOLS and trained and certified accordingly. This means they maintain certifications in wilderness medicine and are trained to NOLS' high standards in risk management. They are senior staff at NOLS who have spent years working and teaching in backcountry environments all over the world. Additionally, our staff specialize in bringing together groups of strangers and building the group culture and camaraderie that makes NOLS trips great.

## Expectations of Participants

The alumni trip atmosphere is more relaxed than a typical NOLS course; however, it is not a guided trip; we call it an educational, participatory vacation. Alumni trips are self-reliant adventures through remote areas where evacuation to modern medical facilities can take several days. Throughout the course, you will travel outdoors, help prepare some meals, and care for yourself.

Different from our standard expeditions, alumni trips do allow electronics and alcohol for those that are of legal age in the country of the trip. We believe that these luxuries can add to a course experience and local flavor. Excessive alcohol consumption is not a part of the culture of alumni trips.

## Curriculum

This trip focuses on many traditional NOLS skills, competencies, and concepts including map reading, hiking, and group travel. The instructors will provide information necessary for the group to comfortably travel as well as optional topics as desired by participants. These could include natural history, local history, leadership, decision making, and team function, among other things. Formal "classes" are few and mostly optional, but informal discussions are plentiful. Anticipate a required base level of group management and cohesion.

## Tipping

While tipping is common in the outdoor guiding culture, your NOLS Instructors are not driven to excellence by tips but rather a love for taking people outdoors. You are welcome to tip the

instructors if you choose, and many instructors are honored by a [donation](#) in their name to the NOLS Annual Fund which supports scholarships for future NOLS students.

Some countries we travel in do require tips for porters and local guides. Your instructors will let you know what is expected as far as bringing additional cash for these local tips.

## Immunizations / Vaccinations / Travel medications

International travel poses special health considerations. NOLS strongly advises all participants to carefully review the vaccinations and inoculations required or recommended for your specific trip. Regulations and recommendations can change, so consulting with a physician, travel medicine specialist, or other healthcare professional is highly recommended. The final decision about which inoculations you receive is your responsibility. There are many sources of information, and some of the information is contradictory. In addition to consulting with your healthcare provider, the following organizations provide useful information:

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control, either via the CDC International Travelers Hotline (404) 332-4559 or their [website](#).
- International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IMAT), 417 Center St, Lewiston, NY 14092, (716) 754-4883.
- Shorelands Travel Health [Online](#)

NOLS suggests specific inoculations based on guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). For more information, visit the CDC International Travelers website: [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)

## Trip Registration

The best way to register is through the trip information page on the [nols.edu](http://nols.edu) website. A non-refundable deposit secures your spot on the trip. Your enrollment is complete with receipt of your full tuition and your completed application forms; these are **due 60 days before the start of your trip**.

If any issues arise, please call the NOLS Alumni Department at (800) 332-4280.

All participants are required to submit registration materials, including a medical form. These forms highlight the intersection of your trip's anticipated physical rigor and your current health and fitness status while also providing NOLS information about things like your dietary needs.

NOLS is not responsible for additional costs incurred by late arrivals or evacuations. Those expenses are the responsibility of trip participants and we recommend purchasing travel insurance to mitigate the impact of unforeseen circumstances.

*Do not book travel greater than 60 days before the start of the trip unless you have confirmed with NOLS that the trip will run. On rare occasions, we do cancel trips due to low enrollment.*

## **Cancellation and Transfer Policy**

For your reference, here is the Alumni Trips [Cancellation and Transfer Policy](#). When enrolling on a trip, you will need to agree to this policy.