
REYKJAVIK HIGHLIGHTS

By Kevin Williams

INTRODUCTION

Iceland's economy relies on tourism and in a push to bring more visitors, Iceland Air has turned Keflavik airport into a major hub between the USA and Europe. Many of their flights to Europe are cheaper; however, they may have long layovers. Often the layover is long enough to head into the city of Reykjavik or enjoy the Blue Lagoon. Iceland Air also offers a price match on airfare if you extend your visit in Iceland for up to seven days. The following information is focused on what travelers could see, experience, and enjoy if they added a couple days in the Reykjavik area before or after their continental European adventure.

CONNECTIONS & TRANSPORTATION

Keflavik Airport

This is Reykjavik's international airport. Flights from the USA to continental Europe/UK destinations go through this airport. The airport is roughly 30 miles (45 minutes) from Reykjavik. There is a handy Tourist Information desk in the airport and they will be happy to help you connect with the city or other sites.

Reykjavik Airport

This airport is less than a mile outside of the city. It only serves domestic flights or flights to Greenland...which could be worth the adventure itself.

Driving

Car rentals will give you the freedom to explore the area around Reykjavik (and the entire island). Reykjavik has a small town feel where you can easily park a car and walk to most sites within the city. Sites outside of the city are connected with well-maintained and paved roads; however, many of the roads are gravel and you should proceed with caution at all times of the year. You can check road conditions online at (<http://www.vegagerdin.is/english/>).

- **Auto Europe:** Good consolidation website with many big names and smaller local companies (www.autoeurope.com).
- **SAD Cars:** They take old cars, fix them up and then rent them at very affordable prices. I used them and had good experiences (www.sadcars.com).

Bus/Guided Tours

Iceland is well connected via bus and with guided tours (see excursions). Reykjavik also has easy to use and handy intercity buses. (www.bustravel.is).

SITES WITHIN REYKJAVIK

- **Hallgrímskirkja:** Reykjavik's largest church. Modern building which offers one of the best views in Reykjavik via the elevator to the top of its tower (www.hallgrímskirkja.is; no English).
- **Þjóðminjasafn Íslands (National Museum of Iceland):** State of the art museum showing Iceland's social and cultural history. Displays are excellent and it would be hard not to learn



something new in here (www.thjodminjasafn.is/english/).

- **Hafnarhús (Reykjavik Art Museum):** Located in an old warehouse in the harbor area. Has works from Icelandic artists (such as Erro) and some foreign artists too. Has two other locations with more art and sculpture (www.artmuseum.is).
- **Listasafn Íslands (National Gallery of Iceland):** Houses art that leans a bit more on the modern side. Some exhibits stimulate not just eyes but play with the other senses as well. (www.listasafn.is).
- **Reykjavik 871+2:** Even though this sounds like a trendy bar, this is in fact a museum built on the ruins of an ancient Viking longhouse discovered under a hotel. Here you can get a better understanding on how the original "Reykjavikings" lived. (www.reykjavik871.is).
- **Tjornin Lake/Alþingishúsið (Parliament House)/Ráðhús (City Hall):** Small lake in Reykjavik which is great for a stroll and where people come to meet and feed the birds. In winter the lake freezes and you can ice skate here. City Hall often has interesting exhibits and is free.
- **Reykjavik's Old Harbor:** Watch ships come in and out much like they did a long time ago. Also serves as the departure point for whale or puffin watching excursion (see excursions). The Harpa Concert Hall is located here and has a very modern and eye catching construction.
- **Puffin Island:** Usually combined with a whale watching excursion. Small island off of Reykjavik's north coast is covered with puffins and sea birds in the spring and summer.
- **Laugavegur and Skólavörðustígur Streets:** Main shopping streets in Reykjavik where a variety of shops, restaurants, and bars are located.
- **Aðalstræti ("Main Street"):** Original and oldest street in Reykjavik with classic Icelandic charms.
- **Solfar Suncraft Sculpture:** Along the water to the north is this stylized Viking Boat sculpture with good views to the mountains on the other side of the harbor.
- **Perlan (The Pearl):** A hot-water storage container turned into a pricey and touristy restaurant offering great views of the city. Get a snack from the café on the bottom level but then head up

to the top to enjoy the view. (www.perlan.is).

- ♦ **Hiking Trails:** Reykjavik has some of the best walking/cycling paths within a city. One option is to circle the city from the harbor, around the Seltjarnares Peninsula, and around the Perlan.

OUTSIDE OF REYKJAVIK

Golden Circle—Nice day drive visiting:

- ♦ **Pingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park:** See where the mid-Atlantic ridge is still splitting, a beautiful lake, and where the first parliament in the world once met. (www.thingvellir.is/english).
- ♦ **Geysir:** This is the name of a thermal vent that erupts every 8 minutes. It also is where we get the word “geyser”.
- ♦ **Gullfoss Waterfall:** A massive display of nature. It has multiple waterfalls falling into one area and is one of Iceland’s best vistas.

The Blue Lagoon

This is a man-made lake of heated thermal water. It has a mix of natural minerals and chemicals that give it an unreal light blue color. The lake was found to have rejuvenating potential and thus a spa was created around it. It is near Keflavik Airport and it can be an easy quick trip to/from the airport (www.bluelagoon.com).

TOURS/EXCURSIONS

- ♦ **Icelandic Horses:** Many companies can connect you with farms that will give you a full day ride on these Icelandic horses. They have been bred to withstand the climate and are the only horses with a “fifth gait”. If you are a fan of horses don’t miss connecting with these animals.
- ♦ **Whale/Puffin Watching:** Many whales migrate past Iceland and in the spring/summer there can be many of these large mammals in the water just off-shore.
- ♦ **Glacier Hikes:** Along Iceland’s southern coast are some great glaciers which are near the world famous Eyjafjallajökull (volcano that erupted in 2010) . With an hour and a half bus ride you can be hiking one of these blue glaciers. Most tours are combined with a meal and stops at a couple waterfalls. (www.arcanum.is)
- ♦ **Northern Lights:** These tours are only offered in the winter months (or at least should be since you can’t see anything in the summer). There are a lot of variables that create the northern lights but if you are there on a clear winter night it would be worth it to join a tour or drive out of the city to try and see this natural wonder. (see useful sites)
- ♦ **“Extreme Tours”:** These can range from “Super Jeeps”, ATVs, Spelunking, Snowmobiles, Lava fissure snorkeling/ scuba diving, etc. You can find many options on the Tourist Information Board’s website or at TI offices.
- ♦ **Popular Tour companies:** Reykjavik Excursions (www.re.is/), Iceland Excursions (www.allrahanda.is/), Iceland Air Packages (www.icelandair.com)

EVENTS

- ♦ **Iceland Airwaves Festival:** Huge music festival in Reykjavik held in late October/early November. It gives many Icelandic

bands exposure and brings in bands from around the world (www.icelandairwaves.is/).

ICELANDIC FOOD 101

Since most of Iceland’s population lives along the coast, seafood plays an important part in their diet. You can find a wide variety of fresh arctic fish year round. Lamb/sheep are also popular options and freshness is very important for all meals. Depending the season you can try different and adventurous meals including whale or puffin (which you may have just seen during an excursion). Reykjavik is full of traditional restaurants which can be fairly pricy (but worth a try). If you are traveling on a budget there is a rich variety of international food and take-out options too.

Restaurants

- ♦ **Sjávargrillið** – good selection of Icelandic lunch and dinner meals (www.sjavargrillid.is/).
- ♦ **Icelandic Fish & Chips** – Affordable option for those who want to try common Icelandic fish (<http://www.fishandchips.is/>).
- ♦ **Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur** – Popular hot dog stand in the center of Reykjavik where you can try the Icelandic versions. Very popular with locals and tourists.

Adventurous Dishes to Try

- ♦ **Hákarl** – Putrefied shark that will make most visitors gag. How tough is your tongue and stomach?
- ♦ **Pickled Ram’s Testicles** – Tastes about as good as it sounds...
- ♦ **Rúgbrauð** – A rye bread that is cooked underground in or near thermal vents. Nothing like having the Earth cook your meal.
- ♦ **Seabirds/Puffin** – The saying “You are what you eat” is very true here. The meat from these birds usually tastes like fish.
- ♦ **Whale** – Rare now but you can find it in some specialty shops.

Drinks

- ♦ **Brennivín** – Local Schnapps with added moss seeds which grows on the volcanic rocks. Nicknamed “Black Death”. The “nicer” versions tend to be brown and taste like dirt while the cheaper options usually are green and taste like death.
- ♦ **Beer** – Beer was illegal until 1989 because it was seen as a “party drink”. During this prohibition it was common for Icelandic bars to serve nonalcoholic beer mixed with a stronger alcohol (vodka, schnapps, etc). Since its legalization many Icelandic beers have been created and it can be fun to try these newly formed brews. One good restaurant to try a large selection of Icelandic beers is 73 Restaurant (www.73.is).

SHOPPING

- ♦ Lots of gift shops selling winter clothing, Viking related anything and other oddities.
- ♦ Iceland is known for their sweaters which have a circle design that goes around the neck of the wearer. These can be very expensive.
- ♦ One traveler recommended going to the Salvation Army or other secondhand stores to find affordable sweaters and other goods.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Reykjavik has a lot of hotels and guesthouses. I recommend digging around with Lonely Planet's guidebook or other options online. Here are two I've stayed at and can be a good fit for some travelers:

- **Hotel Natura:** Iceland Air hotel which is about 1 km outside of the city center. They have rooms that feel like an Ikea showroom but usually have fair prices and they do have tokens to ride a bus into the city center (www.icelandairhotels.com/en/hotels/natura).
- **KEX Hostel:** In a convenient location and has won best hostel on many websites. Good option to save some money on lodging (<http://www.kexhostel.is/>).

LEARN MORE

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Surf: ricksteves.com, visiticeland.com, <http://en.vedur.is/weather/forecasts/aurora/> (Northern Lights Tracker), www.safetravel.is/en/ (Travel Safely in Iceland), www.vegagerdin.is/english/ (Road Conditions), youtube.com/watch?v=MprZuQ-gM3M&feature=youtu.be (How to Drive in Iceland video)