

Special Issue

The Travel Awards

The
REYKJAVÍK
GRAPEVINE

Autumn 2019

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A Spin Around The
Stunning Diamond Circle

The Must-See Spots

West & Westfjords

Meet The Witches
Of Snæfellsnes

Strange Shops & Top Stops

South & Reykjanes

All Green Everything:
Eco-Tourism In The South

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AN INTRODUCTION

Warning: Iceland Can Be Addictive

It's a strange quirk of travel that ticking off a visit to a long-anticipated destination can leave you with many more items on your wish list. This goes doubly for Iceland. You might find yourself finally setting out to see some far-flung site with nothing ahead of you but the open road; but along the way, a curious sign will catch your eye for a small town, an unfamiliar viewpoint or an obscure fjord.

"Maybe on the way back," you'll think. But as you continue, this mental list will grow too big to remember.

That's because the more you travel around Iceland, the more your eyes are opened to the amount of noteworthy places there are to see. Every turn untaken becomes an unresolved question. And that's when it'll hit you: you've become addicted to Iceland.

Of course, I'm speaking from a position of privilege: as someone who lives here,

jumping in a car to go and explore is easy. But we hope that even for the most seasoned traveller in Iceland, this guide will throw up some new wishlist destinations.

For visitors to Iceland, time can be tighter—and that's when this guide can come in especially handy. Our expert panels from all over Iceland have distilled their local knowledge into this magazine with the aim of helping you discover the very **Best of Iceland**.

So go forth and enjoy. Bear in mind that as the high season winds up, it's worth checking opening times, as some winners are open in the summer only. If it's a particularly wild spot you're headed to, check road.is and safetravel.is to make sure the way ahead is clear. Also, be sure to download our new **Best Of App** to have access to all this info on the go! Most of all, be safe, and have fun.

John Rogers, Best of Iceland Editor

Browse the tours we've recommended at

gotravel.is



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THE AWARDS

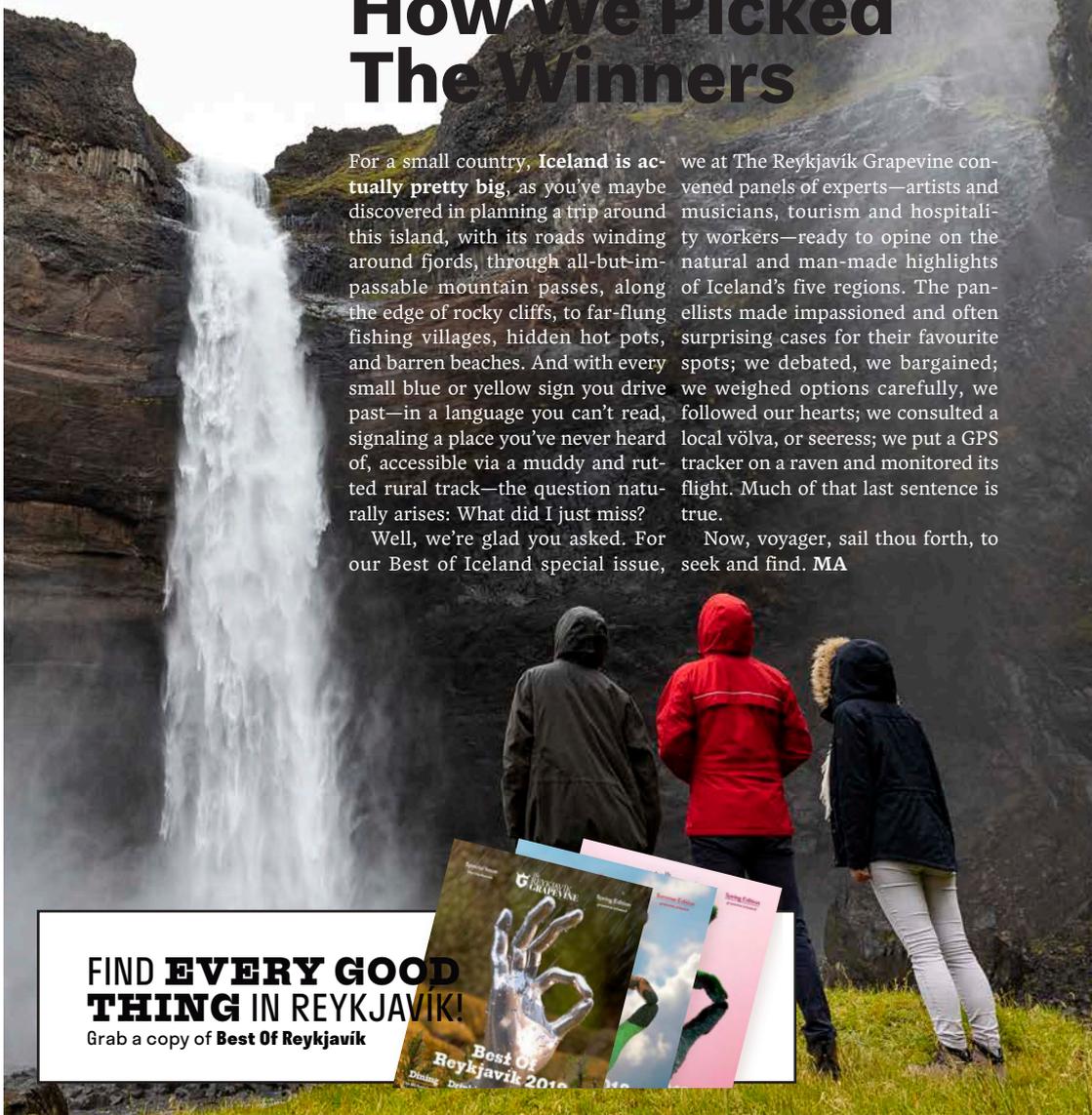
How We Picked The Winners

For a small country, Iceland is actually pretty big, as you've maybe discovered in planning a trip around this island, with its roads winding around fjords, through all-but-impassable mountain passes, along the edge of rocky cliffs, to far-flung fishing villages, hidden hot pots, and barren beaches. And with every small blue or yellow sign you drive past—in a language you can't read, signaling a place you've never heard of, accessible via a muddy and rutted rural track—the question naturally arises: What did I just miss?

Well, we're glad you asked. For our Best of Iceland special issue,

we at The Reykjavik Grapevine convened panels of experts—artists and musicians, tourism and hospitality workers—ready to opine on the natural and man-made highlights of Iceland's five regions. The panellists made impassioned and often surprising cases for their favourite spots; we debated, we bargained; we weighed options carefully, we followed our hearts; we consulted a local völvu, or seeress; we put a GPS tracker on a raven and monitored its flight. Much of that last sentence is true.

Now, voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find. MA



FIND EVERY GOOD THING IN REYKJAVIK!

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THE GUIDE-GUIDE

Look For These Stickers Out There In The Wide World

You'll find these stickers of recommendation, which we've handed out to this year's winners, as you make your way around the country. They indicate an award winner—a place that our panels and experts want to flag to you as absolutely worth your time and attention. Whatever you're looking for in the far-flung corners of Iceland, we hope that they will act as a guiding light and a helpful presence on your trip. And if you find something you think deserves a sticker? Let us know at grapevine@grapevine.is.

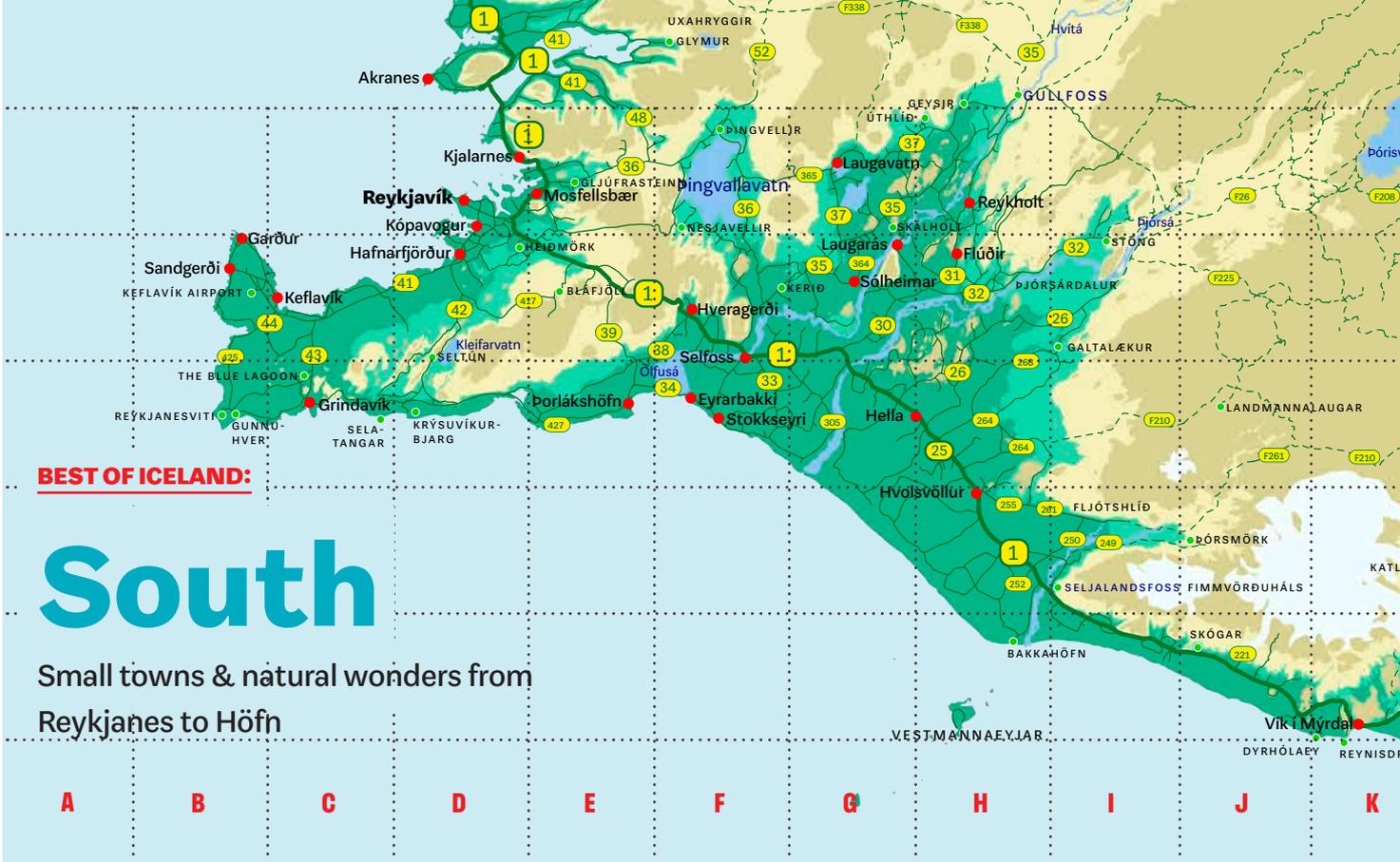


A DAILY DOSE OF ONCE IN A LIFETIME

Hrifunes Nature Park is a new 5400 acre nature resort in Southern Iceland. The park lies in a lush area, nestled in between powerful glaciers and is surrounded by the nation's most significant natural wonders. Hrifunes luxury villas can be rented all year round and premium land is available for purchase. For more information, visit hrifunesnaturepark.is.



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BEST OF ICELAND:

South

Small towns & natural wonders from Reykjanes to Höfn

A B C D E F G H I J K



Reykjanes

Southwest Iceland
Further Info: visitreykjanes.is

This Reykjavík-adjacent volcanic peninsula is where people enter the country at Keflavík Airport, but holds much more besides. You can easily fill a day with a road trip around the eerie Kleifarvatn lake, the multisensory Krýsuvík and Gunnuhver geothermal areas, the bustling town of Grindavík with its many restaurants, and the stunning viewpoint of Reykjanesviti. There are organised day tours of the peninsula, too, if you're not driving. See our awards for the Reykjanes area from page 22.

Map Square: B3 to D2



Sólheimar Ecovillage

Grímsnes
Further Info: solheimar.is

The Sólheimar Ecovillage is a peaceful rural community where people with special needs live, work and thrive together. It's an idyllic location, with greenhouses, gardens, a pleasant café, a shop selling handmade objects, and events going on all year round. You'll leave feeling calmer than when you arrived. **G2**



Dyrhólaey & Reynisfjara

South Iceland
Further info: south.is

These two proximate spots are incredibly beautiful in different ways. Dyrhólaey is a high headland with a stunning view of Mýrdalsjökull and the endless black sands of Sólheimasandur; Reynisfjara is a black beach with basalt rock cliffs behind and the Reynisdrangar sea stacks in front. Note: Always stay far back from the water. Reynisfjara is known for its sneaker waves and strong undertow. **K5**

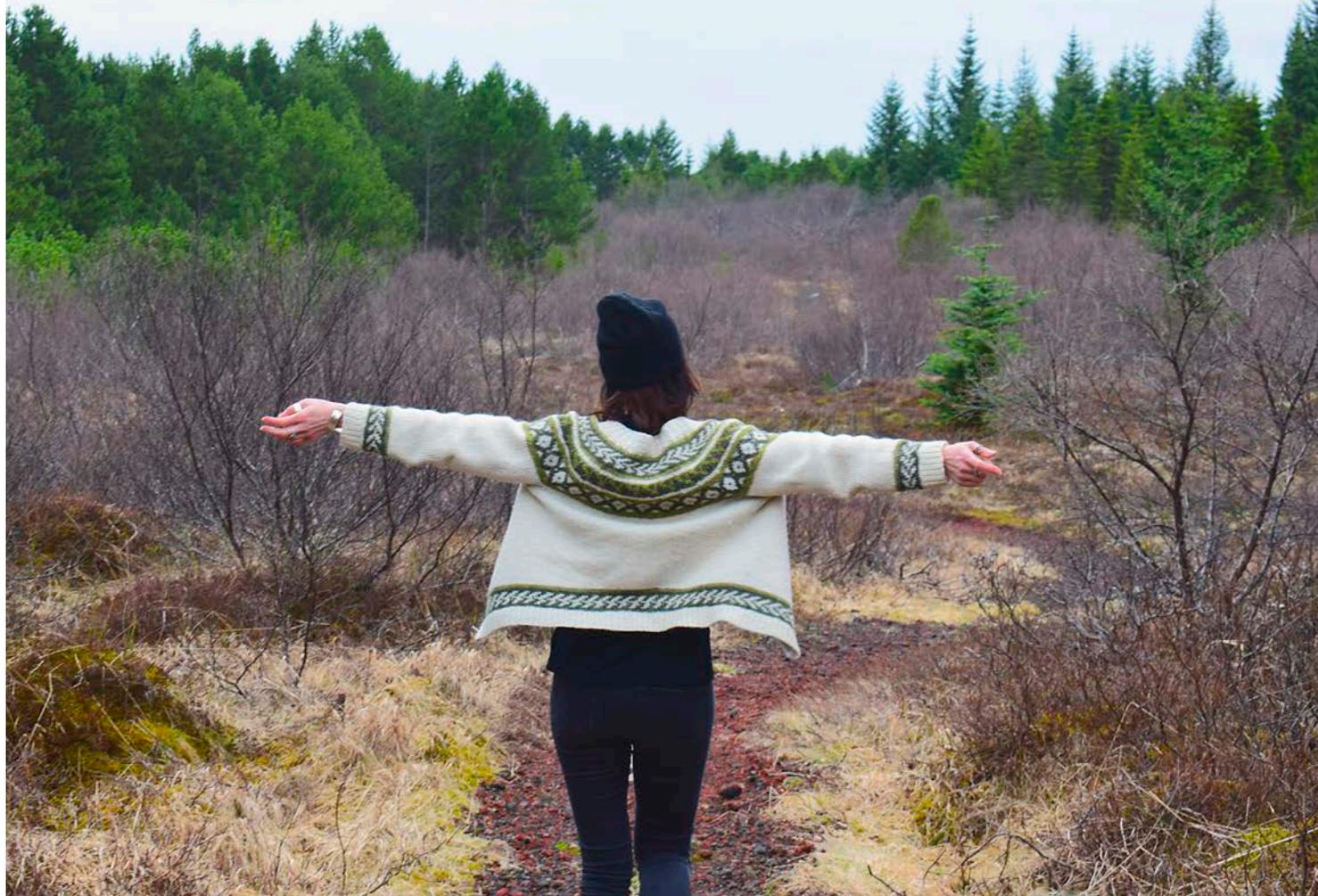


The Highlands

Central Iceland
Further Info: south.is/en/the-highland

Only accessible in the summer, Iceland's desert interior is a stunning, inhospitable wilderness. There are two main roads cutting across it, leading from south to north: Kjölur in the West, and Sprengisandur in the East. A sturdy 4x4 is required to drive there, but there are buses too; the Kerlingarfjöll and Landmannalaugar campsites are must-sees.

Note: check road.is and safetravel.is to check if the roads are safe, and don't dream of going there in a regular car.



Distance from Reykjavík:
103 km

How to get there:
Route One to Selfoss then Routes 35, 30, 31 & 36

Car provided by: gocarrental.is

South

The Green Circle

An eco-friendly road trip through Árnessýsla County

Words & photos: **John Rogers**

Árnessýsla County begins just a few kilometres east of the Reykjavík city limits. Stretching from the black beaches of the south deep into the dusty Highlands, it's an 8,287 km² tract of land perhaps best known as the region that contains natural wonders like Geysir, the majestic Gullfoss waterfall, the stunning historic site of Þingvellir, and the colourful Kerið crater—known collectively as the Golden Circle.

But there's much more to Árnessýsla than that. Those visiting the main sightseeing spots might also notice how people have put

this powerful nature to work. Vast clouds of steam float upwards from geothermal power stations; ranks upon ranks of neat, brightly lit greenhouses line the small, well-kept towns, and various hand-made signs beckon passers-by to buy local produce and products at tucked-away farmer's markets. For those who aren't on a tight schedule, there's much to discover just off the beaten track.

Steam resources

With this in mind, we set out from Reykjavík under a cloud-studded

spring sky with a list of less-travelled eco-friendly stops in mind. The first is the Hellisheiðarvirkjun Power Station, located just before the Hellisheiði mountain pass over the volcanic mountain of Hengill. As well as powering much of Reykjavík and the surrounding area, it's home to a Geothermal Power Exhibition. We peel off route one and glide towards the huge bulk of the power station, passing under power lines and past several geodesic domes that guard bore holes down to the naturally boiling hot water in the earth's crust.

The entrance hall of the power station is huge, with huge glass windows and a grand staircase leading up to several floors of exhibits. A timeline leads from the early uses of geothermal resources by Icelanders—such as bathing in the Sagas, growing potatoes in warm fields, and washing clothes in geothermal springs in the 18th Century—through to today's exploitation of natural warmth to

create electricity. Windows look into the cavernous, clean, quietly humming turbine halls, which produce 303MW of electricity, making Hellisheiðarvirkjun one of the largest single unit power plants in the world.

Greenhouse mecca

Over the mountain pass, the road circuitously winds down into Hveragerði. This town is quite literally steaming, with a small geothermal park in its centre, a beautiful municipal pool with a steam room built over a bubbling geothermal vent, and the Ölverk bar serving geothermally-brewed beer. Jets of steam shoot up from the surrounding mountains, and the environmentally friendly resources are put to work to power a village of greenhouses growing fruits and vegetables.

They also produce other kinds of flora. Rósakaffi is a pleasant bistro that serves cakes, soups and

“Flóra Garðyrkjustöð sells plants of all descriptions, from tough English Ivy to sculptural orchids. The colours, shapes and scents of the thriving flora stir the senses.”

snacks in a verdant greenhouse environment. Up the street, the Flóra Garðyrkjustöð is a gardening nerd’s mecca. Also located in a greenhouse, it sells plants of all descriptions, from tough English ivy in hanging baskets to delicate fronds of fern, and from giant, teeming Monstera to sculptural orchids. It’s a quite literal breath of fresh air, and the colours, shapes and scents of the thriving flora stir the senses.

Farm to table

We turn inland at Selfoss, taking in the easterly view over the flatlands to the snowy peak of Eyjafjallajökull. The car park of the Keríð crater is packed, so we instead take a left to the Snæfoksstaðir forest area. There’s not a soul to be seen on the walking trails, which meander through some rich woodland, heathery clearings and fir copses to a perfect tucked away picnic spot.

We don’t stop to eat, as tempting as it is, because we’ve a reservation at the Fríðheimar café. The tables of this popular lunch stop are nestled between high walls of tomato vines, and the bar is overgrown with creeping tendrils and broad green leaves. Groups meander around on guided tours of the facilities, and diners tuck into the house speciality of fruity and delicious farm-to-table tomato soup

and the buffet of freshly-baked bread. Each table has basil plants with scissors to trim your own garnish. Bees buzz through the air, and there’s a quite civilised burble of conversation. Despite the bustling crowd, Fríðheimar remains a blissfully restful lunch stop.

All eco everything

Just up the road is the Sólheimar Ecovillage. This small community is home to around 100 people, many of whom have special needs. It’s open to the public, with a shop selling objects made on site, a second-hand market, and a café. Calm radiates through the community, from the sculpture garden, to the burbling riverside walking path, to the friendly smiles of the staff and residents.

Nearby Flúðir is another geothermally active town that’s opening its doors to the curious public. The Flúðasveppir mushroom farm offers a fascinating tour of its zero-waste facility, with an airy bistro to taste the eye-opening fresh-

ness of their produce first hand.

The nearby Secret Lagoon spa is glittering in the late afternoon sun as we arrive. We walk around the bubbling, sulphurous hot pots and the thigh-high mini-Geysir before sinking into the naturally hot water and letting any last shred of tension vanish into the ether.

We wend our way back to Reykjavík through the knotty forests of Þingvellir and the rolling farmlands of Mosfellsbær, our eyes glowing from this energising brush with the Earth’s natural energy—and everything that mushrooms around it. Gold may be considered the top prize, I think to myself; but perhaps beneath that shiny veneer lies a bright and sumptuous green. 🍄



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

South

Greenhouses and local ingredients

Best Meal



Slippurinn

Strandvegur 76, Vestmannaeyjar

The undisputed heavyweight of South Iceland restaurants is the exquisite family-run Slippurinn eatery. Only open during summer, it's located on the wild and picturesque Westman Islands. Head chef Gísli Matthías Auðunsson is a famed New Nordic innovator whose team lovingly harvests wild ingredients, and works with local farmers and suppliers—you can be certain that everything on your plate has been thoroughly considered. The result? A stunningly fresh and vibrant taste of Iceland that you'll never forget. **Map square: H5**

Runner Up



Tryggvaskáli

Tryggvatorg, Selfoss

Located in a historic former hotel building on the banks of the gushing Ölfusá river, Tryggvaskáli is a charming restaurant that uses local ingredients to eye-popping effect. The colourful, playful dishes will wake up your tastebuds and the warm environment and friendly service are perfect. A worthy dinner stop. **F2**

Newcomer



Otto Matur & Drykkur

Hafnarbraut, Höfn

Otto is a new-kid-on-the-block restaurant that's making waves in the south-eastern outpost of Höfn. Once the main building of the town, this historic harbourside house now holds a tasteful eatery with an equally tasteful and tasty menu. "Their risotto is perfect," said the panel. "It's a real find on your road trip." **S1**

Best Accommodation



Skálakot Manor Hotel

Hvolsvöllur

Ideally located in the heart of South Iceland, Skálakot is our favourite from a considerable crop of recently-opened hotels. It's a new building, but you'd never know from the comfortable country manor vibe; every detail of the rooms is perfect, from the tasteful patterned wallpaper to the modernist kettles, slender coffee makers, cloud-like beds and deep bathtubs. The in-house restaurant is also excellent. "It's like an Icelandic version of the Twin Peaks Great Northern Lodge," said the panel. **I5**

Runner Up



Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon

Hnappavellir, Öræfi

Fosshotel is a reliably comfortable hotel chain, and the Glacier Lagoon location is one of their newest additions. The rooms are comfortable and minimal, with nice design touches, and all south-facing windows look directly onto the sea; it makes a luxurious base from which to explore the Vatnajökull area. **R1**

Budget Option



Héraðsskólinn Boutique Hostel

Laugarbraut 2, Laugarvatn

This old schoolhouse is a proud and pleasing piece of architecture set on the shores of lake Laugarvatn. It retains an old-Iceland charm that's increasingly hard to find, and offers everything from dorm bunks to ensuite private rooms, so it'll always suit your budget. **G1**

Best Shop



Sveitabúðin UNA

Austurvegi 4, Hvolsvöllur

A spacious emporium packed with locally-made products, UNA is probably Iceland's best souvenir shop. You can pick up that authentic hand-knitted lopapeyssa you've been dreaming of, and browse shelves and display cases teeming with interesting objects. Jewellery made from lava beads? Check. Rhubarb-infused salt from the Westfjords? Check. And don't think twice—yes, you will fit be able to squeeze that cosy and pristine sheepskin rug in your case. Go for it. We support you.. **H4**

Runner Up



Geysir Centre

Haukadalur, Reykholt

You don't go to Geysir to shop, it's true—but you probably will anyway. The sprawling complex has a wide range of Icelandic-designed clothing and accessories. "It can be a bit expensive, but it is one of the best shops for souvenirs," said the panel. "There's also a warm and well-organised café." **H1**

Budget Option



Nytjamarcaðurinn Selfoss

Eyravegur 5, Selfoss

The shelves of this cavernous and enticing secondhand shop are laden with finds, from handmade drinking glasses to candleholders, old Icelandic LPs, home decor, kitchenware and clothing. "You can find anything from plants to blenders to musical instruments," said the panel. "It's impossible to leave empty handed." **F2**

South

Floating glaciers and steamy hikes

Must-See Spot



Landmannalaugar

Friðland að Fjallabaki, Highlands, Road F208

Of all the deep nature of the South, the astounding Landmannalaugar is a true must-see. “It’s a stunning place with fantastic views,” said the panel. You could spend days hiking the trails, which wind around the geothermal area where hot steam pours from vividly coloured mountains. There are captivating lava fields, a bright green canyon, crater lakes, and lots more. Only accessible in summer, buses arrive at the campsite daily. Don’t forget your swimming gear—there’s a geothermal bathing spot. **Map square: J3**

Runner Up



Hveradalir

Kerlingarfjöll, Highlands, Road F347

This hidden gem is high in the west Highlands. Take a bus to Kerlingarfjöll, check into a cabin or pitch up on the lovely campsite, then take a daylong hike into the mountains along the well-marked trail. You’ll find a jaw-dropping series of geothermally active valleys. “It’s life-changingly beautiful,” said the panel.

Runner Up



Þórsmörk

Highlands. Road F261

The Þórsmörk valley is surrounded by active volcanoes, glaciers, and the gnarled, ashen landscape they created, it’s a deeply immersive environment for camping and hiking. “You can see parts of three glaciers when you hike in the mountains,” said the panel. Take a shuttle bus: the rivers are notoriously treacherous for drivers. **J4**

Best Bathing Spot



The Secret Lagoon

Hvammssvegur, Flúðir

“Of all the geothermal pools, this is the one where you see the process most,” said our panel of this remarkable bathing spot. “There’s a mini geysir, and you can hear the bassy gurgling fumaroles and feel the temperature fluctuations in the water.” While the “secret” of this popular outdoor bathing lagoon is out in recent times, our panel was impressed by the investment into better facilities. “It’s clean and organised, but still not too manicured—you’re right there in the landscape.” **H2**

Runners Up



Sundaugin Laugaskarði

Reykjamörk, Hveragerði

An understated architectural classic, Laugaskarði stands head and shoulders above the municipal pools in South Iceland, boasting a reception building that’s perfectly curved to shield the water from the wind. “This retro beauty has a straight-from-the-earth steambath,” said the panel. “It’s a Wes Anderson dream of symmetry.” **F3**



Seljavallalaug

Seljavellir, Route 242

Originally built as a training pool in 1923, this curious unmanned pool juts directly from the mountainside, making it a popular tourist attraction. “It’s lost that secluded vibe over recent years,” said the panel. “But it’s still a stunning place to visit, and a great place to go for a dip.” Note: there are no toilet facilities. **I5**

Best Hike



Fimmvörðuháls

Skógar to Þórsmörk

One of the more challenging day-hikes in Iceland, this 25km route is only safe during peak summer. The trail starts at the foot of Skógafoss, passing countless Highland waterfalls on the way to its 1,000m apex. You cross between the Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull glaciers, passing the still-steaming site of a 2010 eruption. Finally, you’ll descend into the dreamy Þórsmörk valley, where you can camp, bathe, and catch a homeward bus. Check safetravel.is for up to date safety info. **J4**

Runners Up



Landmannalaugar

Friðland að Fjallabaki, Highlands

There are routes to suit all skill levels threading around this remote Highland paradise. “The colourful mountains are just amazing,” said the panel. Access the area as the finale of a multi-day Landmannalaugar hike, take a rugged 4x4, or go by bus; camp for a few days to reap the full benefit. A truly breathtaking trip. **J3**

Easy Option



Reykjadalur

Hveragerði

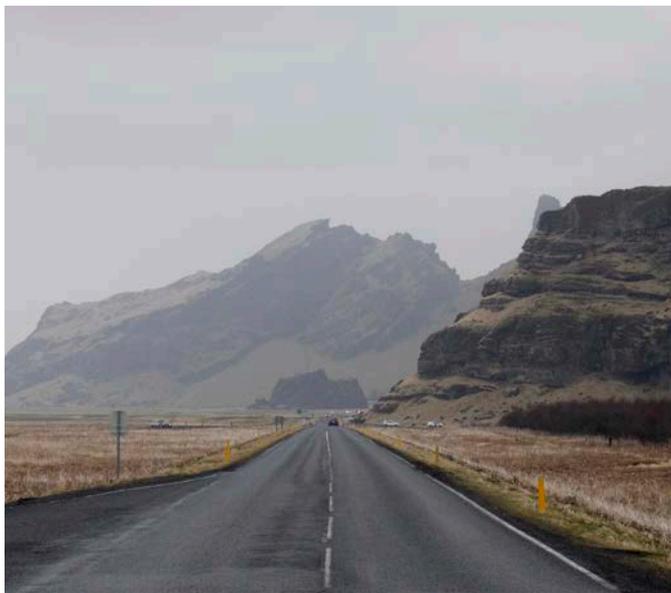
In the Reykjavík-adjacent town of Hveragerði you’ll find this famous route. It’s a gentle hike over a stunning mountain trail with a dreamy soak waiting for you at the end in the geothermal river that gushes down the Reykjadalur valley. “Go first thing, or late in the evening when it’s quiet,” advised the panel. **F2**

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

South

Over volcanoes and under a glacier

Best Road Trip



The South Coast

Route One South

Iceland's south coast is the road trip dreams are made of, and there are countless things to experience and discover along the way. "The whole shoreline is spectacular, and no one spot is like another," said the panel. "You'll see waterfalls, lava fields, active volcanoes, black beaches, glacier tongues, flood plains, natural bathing spots, wildlife, and all the local life of the lovely seaside villages." Whether it's your first time of your fiftieth, it just never gets old. **E2-S1**

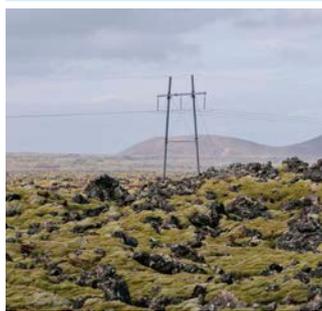
Advanced Option



Friðland að Fjallabaki
The Highlands

If you're driving a 4x4 and it's summertime, head to the one-off region of Friðland að Fjallabaki. "This exuberant drive takes you along an unforgettable road up into the Highlands," said the panel. "You'll see views that are hard to put into words." Camp at Landmannalaugar to extend the adventure. **J3**

Easy Option



Reykjanes Ring
Reykjavík-Grindavík-Sandgerði

The Reykjanes peninsula is a treasure trove in its own right, with many thrilling tucked away secrets—and it's easily doable in a single day. "Drive past the Kleifarvatn lake to the Seltún geothermal area," said the panel. "Loop past Grindavík, Gunnhver, Reykjanesviti, Sandgerði, and back to Reykjavík. A perfect day." **J3**

Best Sightseeing Tour



Rib Safari
Westman Islands

The Westman Islands is an intriguing archipelago, easily reachable from the mainland by ferry. However, only one island is inhabited; the others sit scattered around it, jutting up mysteriously from the fog and spray. A Rib Safari boat tour provides a closer look at some of the smaller islands, also offering a unique perspective on the coast of Heimaey, with its majestic puffin cliffs, echoing sea caves and dazzling rock formations. **H5**

Runners Up



Glacier Hike
Various locations and suppliers

The best way to get up close and personal with a glacier is an guided ice hike. With an experienced glacier guide, a helmet and crampons provided, it's safe to hike up a glacier tongue, taking in the deep blue hues and shining icefalls, and learning about glaciers' features. Sólheimajökull and Skafafellsjökull are both ideal.



Inside The Volcano
Operated by 3H-Travel

After a short hike, descend into the dormant Þríhnjúkagigar volcano and witness a side of the earth one could rarely experience. "There's something bizarrely humbling and emotional about standing in the Rothko-esque empty belly of a volcano," said one panellist after seeing this natural wonder. **E2**

Best Action Tour



Snorkelling at Silfra
Pingvallavatn

Going snorkelling in the rift between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates took our panel's collective breath away. "It's overwhelming in the most magical way," they said. "There are so many sights and sensations all around you—it's truly something you won't be able to experience anywhere else." The tour is tailored to individual preferences, and can be made more athletic or relaxed, with divers hovering in the sub-zero water in their thick floatation suits. **H1**

Runners Up



ATV Tour & Snowmobiling
Sólheimar, various suppliers

From the Arcanum tours reception at Sólheimajökull you can either go snowmobiling on the top of Mýrdalsjökull, or motoring over the black sands of Sólheimajökull on an ATV. Both are just stunning—highlights include a view of the distant Westman Islands, or the famous DC-3 plane wreck, respectively. **J5**



Ice Climbing
Various locations and suppliers

Another way to get close to a glacier is to take an ice climbing trip. With expert guides, you'll soon master the technique of scaling an ice wall. "There are plenty of places to do it," said the panel. "It's harder than it looks, but thoroughly rewarding." Note: never venture onto a glacier without an experienced guide.

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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

South

Beautiful, and needs a little time...

Best Museum/Gallery



LAVA Centre

Hvolsvöllur

There's a huge range of museums in South Iceland, from old-time folksy town museums, to exciting technology museums. The Lava Centre is one of the latter, boasting engaging interactive displays and ingenious visualisations of Iceland's volatile geography. "The museum displays exciting and interactive scientific information from knowledgeable Icelandic volcanologists," said the panel. A memorable highlight is a huge model of the glowing tectonic rift below the country, which really puts things in perspective. **Map square: H4**

Runner Up



Eldheimar
Gerðisbraut 10, Vestmannaeyjabær

Well-conceived, entertaining and informative, this modern museum focuses on the Westman Islands' eruption of 1973. Indeed, it's built around two houses that were half-buried in molten lava. Interactive displays show the spread of lava over the island, and video footage from the time brings the disaster to life. **H5**

Runner Up



Listasafn Árneseinga
Austurmörk 21, Hveragerði

The Listasafn Árneseinga art museum brings local and international contemporary art to Hveragerði year round. It's a beautiful white space, with carefully curated shows that are always worth a look. "They have the best exhibitions," said the panel. "There's always something interesting to see—and there's a lovely café there as well." **F2**

Best Café



Fríðheimar
Reykholt

The wonderful Fríðheimar is a café experience like no other. Located inside a large tomato greenhouse, it's a verdant haven where you can taste soups, pasta sauces and Bloody Marys that are as fresh as possible. There's a bread buffet to fill up on, and basil plants on the table to garnish your delicious homegrown tomato soup. Eating amongst the vines rejuvenates your mind, body and spirit. Book ahead—it's a very popular stop on the Golden Circle. **H2**

Runner Up



Suður Vík
Suðurvegur 1, Vík

Perched on the hillside in Vík is this wonderful homely café. "It's a great spot for a mid-journey meal," said the panel. "The service is friendly and the menu has something for everyone." The raftered upstairs dining room overlooks the famous sea stacks below. **K5**

Newcomer



Farmers Bistro
Gardastigur 8, Flúðir

At Farmers Bistro, you can get a tour of the facilities of Iceland's only mushroom farm, learning about mycelium, hyphae, fertilization and waste-free practices. Best of all, the adjoining café boasts a stellar menu. Everything is locally grown and completely fresh, and the prices are outstanding, especially for Iceland. **G2**

Best Bar



Ölverk
Breiðamörk 2, Hveragerði

Brew-pubs are popping up all around Iceland, but nobody does it better than the cosy and welcoming Ölverk Pizza & Brewery. Whether you're dropping by for a quick pint of their house-brewed beer—made just metres from the tap—or you're a beer nerd who wants the full tour of their steam-powered facilities, Ölverk is a fantastic boon for Hveragerði. The pizzas are great, so it's an ideal lunch or dinner stop, too. The designated driver has our pity. **F2**

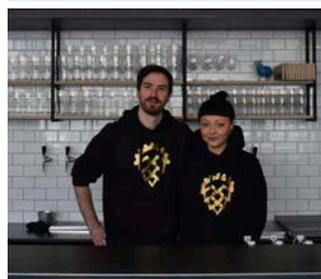
Runners Up



The Brothers Brewery
Vestmannaeyjabær

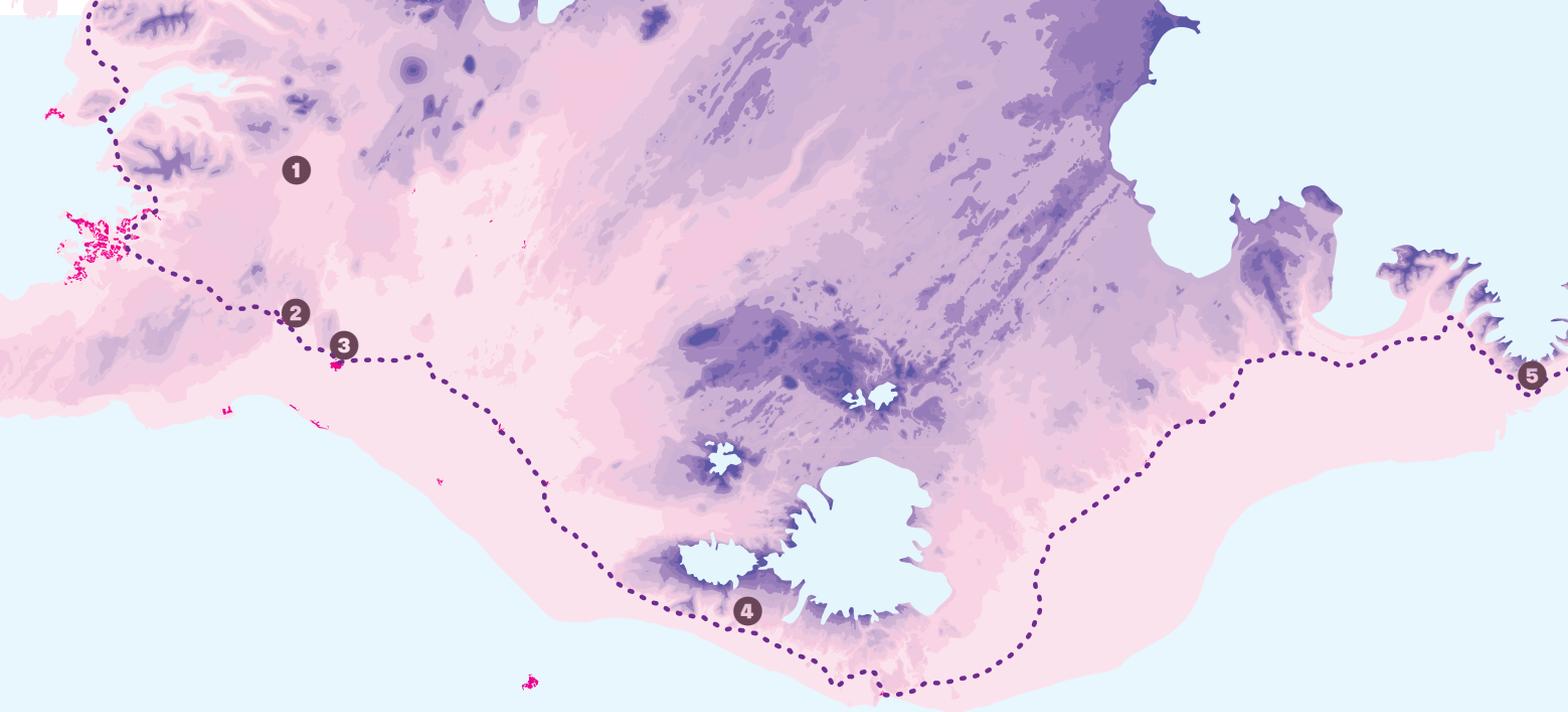
Started by a couple of friends and their brothers in 2012, this small brewery has started pumping out a selection of great small-batch beers and recently expanded into bottling. It's a friendly, genial experience and they offer a tour-and-tasting for a great price. **H5**

Newcomer



Smiðjan
Vík í Mýrdal

Smiðjan is a year-old brewpub with ten beers on tap and an impressively extensive craft-beer bottle menu. The interior is crisp, but with a grungy edge, and you can see the brewing facilities through a glass wall at the back. They also have a solid bar food menu and they're open till midnight. **K5**



Local Delights: South

ADVERTISEMENTS



1 The Cave People

Háholt 2c, Laugarvatn
 Info: thecavepeople.is
 Tel: +354 888 19 22

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2 Give It a Chance, It Might Surprise You

Austurmörk 21, Hveragerði
 Info: listasafnarnesinga.is
 Tel: +354 483 1727

The Listasafn Árnesinga / LÁ Art Museum is only 40 minutes' drive from Reykjavik on the Golden Circle in the geothermal town of Hveragerdi. On Bus 51 route.

We welcome you to exhibitions of modern and contemporary art in our spacious art galleries. We also offer a seating area with wealth of art related material, activity for children and a small Café.

Entrance free of charge.



3 The Bobby Fischer Center

Austurvegur 21, Selfoss
 Info: fischeretur.is
 Tel: +354 894 12 75

The Bobby Fischer Center houses memorabilia of the world chess champion Robert James Fischer. The Center also serves as a club house for Skákfélag Selfoss and others that want to play chess, offers chess classes, and hosts chess tournaments. In addition, the Center has a small chess library for those who want to learn more about chess and offers lectures about the chess game and other related matters.

From May 15th to Sept. 15th: open daily, 13.00 - 16.00 or appointment by contacting the personnel at the Sjafnarblóm store on the first floor at the Center Building.



4 Skógar Museum

Skógasafn 1 (Museum way), Skógar
 Info: skogasafn.is
 Tel: +354 487 88 45

Skógar Museum was founded in 1949 and now hosts a collection of more than 18,000 regional artifacts, exhibited in 3 Museums. It is located 150 km east from Reykjavik just off Ring Road 1 and 30 km west of Vík. The Folk Museum offers variety of artifacts displayed on three floors and in the Open-Air Museum you can catch the atmosphere of times long gone. The Technical Museum tells the story of technology and transportation and its development in Iceland.



5 Local Guide of Vatnajökull

Hofsnes Mói, Örfæfi
 Tel: +354-894-1317
 E-mail: info@localguide.is

We at Local Guide are a small family run company, we pride ourselves in offering glacier tours suitable for all abilities and levels of enthusiasm. So whether you are experiencing the glaciers for the first time,

or if you are a more adventurous explorer with some experience on glaciers, we hope you will enjoy a trip with us.

In the summertime we offer glacier hikes on Vatnajökull, in the wintertime we specialize in Ice Cave tours.

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

Reykjanes

The name means “Smokey Nose.” Promise!

Best Accommodation



Hotel Berg
Bakkavegur 17, Keflavík

This smart, modern hotel is located on the hill behind Keflavík harbour. While the town itself is not known for its beauty, this spot is as tranquil as you could wish for, with comfortable bedrooms, a relaxed sitting area, and a rooftop pool from which you can watch the sun sink into the sea. Two highlights of Keflavík are practically nextdoor: the Skessuhellir troll cave, and the Duus Museum and café. The perfect final stop before a morning flight. **Map: C2**

Fancy Option



The Retreat
The Blue Lagoon, Grindavík

The Blue Lagoon powered up recently, coping with ever-increasing demand by enlarging the bathing area and adapting the facilities. One upgrade is this luxury hotel, which also contains the Michelin-rated Moss restaurant. Had a lottery win? Book the suite, which comes with a private “lava cove” lagoon. **C3**

Budget Option



Lighthouse Inn
Gardur

As far as location goes, the Lighthouse Inn is winning. Perched right on the toe of Reykjanes, it’s a clean, warm and welcoming hostel that’s a stone’s throw from Gardur’s twin lighthouses. One of them opens as a café in the summer, and on a clear day, you can see all the way to Snæfellsnes. **B2**

Best Meal



Salthúsið
Stamphólsvegur, Grindavík

Grindavík’s “House of baccalao,” Salthúsið, is a spacious, wood-panelled restaurant that takes humble salted cod and places it front and centre on the menu. With a down-to-earth atmosphere and a menu that prides itself on Icelandic recipes and ingredients—especially, of course, fresh local seafood—you’ll come away with a full belly and a smile on your face. It’s right next door to the town pool, so you can take a dip before or after. **C3**

Fancy Option



Moss
The Blue Lagoon

When the Michelin Guide revisited Iceland earlier this year, they confiscated the island’s only Michelin Star, but they also lavished several Bib and Plate awards on new eateries. Moss was one of the recipients, and their upscale New Nordic fare, tasting menus and vegan options are a true treat. **C3**

Runner Up



Papa’s Restaurant
Hafnargata 7a, Grindavík

Serving steaming hot, perfectly battered deep-fried fish pulled straight from Grindavík harbour, it doesn’t get any fresher than the outstanding fish ‘n’ chips at Papa’s restaurant. The chips are chunky, the servings are generous, the service is friendly... and it’s so delicious we wish we could eat it every day. **C3**

Must-See Spot



Seltún
Krýsuvík, Route 42

Reykjanes is a lively, geothermally active peninsula, and there’s nowhere better to feel the heat and power of the living earth than at Seltún in the Krýsuvík valley. The iconic zig-zagging wooden walkway takes you over steaming vents, bubbling fumaroles and gurgling clay pots; the colours vary from earthy to vividly fluorescent. There’s a hiking path to get a view over the area, and more tempting trails lead you up to other hidden hot spots. **F2**

Runners Up



Gunnhver & Reykjanesviti
Reykjanesbær, Route 425

Less quaint but more powerful, the allegedly haunted Gunnhver hot spot sends a torrent of steam jetting into the sky. Nearby, you’ll get a chance to straddle the tectonic divide. The Reykjanesviti lighthouse area has a Great Auk sculpture looking out to sea, marking the spot where the last one was reportedly hunted. **H5**



Hópsnes
Grindavík

On the southern shore of Reykjanes is the thriving seaside town of Grindavík. The Hópsnes peninsula that juts out from the town is a truly curious spot: drive around the winding dirt track to the lighthouse to see lava plains studded with eerie rusting shipwrecks. **C3**

Best Hike



Keilir
Reykjanesbær, Route 41

This cone-shaped mountain is much-admired, standing between Keflavík and Reykjavík. Most people only gaze at its silhouette from the Flybus, but there’s a hiking trail to the summit. It begins just off Route 41, taking you through a lava field and up a rough dirt road before the 378m ascent begins. The path is steep and gravelly in places, so wear sturdy shoes; if you time the 2.5-hour hike well, you’ll get a sublime sunset view. **F2**

Runner Up



Krýsuvík
Krýsuvík, Route 42

There are many hikes in the Krýsuvík geothermal area. The main focus of the region is, understandably, Seltún, but if you have some spare time and a sense of adventure, take a chance on one of the lesser-travelled marked routes—you could be rewarded with a remote geothermal area all to yourself. **D2**

Easy Option



Porbjörn
Grindavík

This 243m mountain is located between the Blue Lagoon and Grindavík. An easy ascent offers impressive views of the surrounding lava fields and ocean. A narrow cleft scars its peak; you’ll have to squeeze between the tall walls to descend the other side. **C3**



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Best Bathing Spot



The Blue Lagoon
Norðurljósavegur 9, Grindavík

Iceland's iconic, cinematic, mineral-rich geothermal lagoon is extremely popular—and deservedly so. Sliding into the milky water in the midst of a gnarly lunar landscape is an experience like no other. The water coats your skin in silica; slather on a mineral mask for a rejuvenating spa experience. Our panel gave a shout out to the recent improvements to the pool, which made it feel more spacious than before. Book ahead—it's sometimes sold out. **Map square: C3**

Runners Up



Grindavík Pool
Austurvegi 1, Grindavík

Iceland's standard-issue municipal swimming pools are amongst the best in the world. With naturally heated geothermal water swirling through the outdoor pool, and two hot pots, one of which has a jet massage, you'll come away refreshed—especially if you dare for a plunge in the cold pot on the way out. **C3**



Vogar Pool
Hafnargata 17, Vogar

An all-but forgotten hamlet located just off Route One between Reykjavik and Keflavik, Vogar has a lovely little swimming pool. Drop by for a soak in the hot pot, get some exercise swimming laps, and soak in the authentic feeling of small-town life in Iceland. **C2**

Best Museum



Viking World
Vikingabraut 1, Njarðvík

There are a lot of Viking-themed stops around Iceland, but nowhere else will you find a full longboat replica. Viking World in Njarðvík allows you to set foot on the Íslendingur, a longboat built in 1996 and modelled after the famous Gokstad vessel—a close-to-complete Viking ship that was excavated in Norway way back in 1882. You'll also find a Smithsonian-produced exhibition spanning the key events of the whole Viking saga. **C2**

Runners Up



Museum of Rock 'n' Roll
Hjallavegur 2, Keflavík

Icelandic music aficionados can have an informative and fun time at "Rokksafn". The museum attempts to trace the history of Icelandic music, from the 1800s to the present day, via memorabilia, interactive exhibits, and, of course, displays about Iceland's biggest musical exports. **C2**



Sudurnes Science and Learning Centre
Garðvegi 1, Sandgerði

For anyone interested in wildlife and natural sciences, the Sudurnes Science and Learning Centre could prove to be a mecca. As well as being an active research institute, they host several exhibitions; their taxidermed specimen collection includes allegedly Iceland's only stuffed walrus. **B2**

Best Tour



ATV Adventure
Grindavík

Yearning to get close to nature? Straddling a roaring ATV and zooming into the wilderness might not be the most tranquil method, but it quickly gets you into the thick of it. You'll reach impressive spots much faster than by hiking, and you'll be able to crawl over black sand beaches and summit towering mountains that road-trippers can only gaze at longingly through the wind-screen. Hike? Road trip? An ATV tour offers the best of both. **F2**

Runners Up



Reykjanes Ring
Various tour providers

There are many Reykjanes tours on offer that will reveal the peninsula's sights and secrets in an easy day-trip. Whether it's a bargain bus ride around the basics, or a tailored private tour that goes further afield, the decision is yours—and you'll have fun either way. **All Over**



Whale Watching
Various locations and providers

Having caught sight of a pod of orcas hunting off the coast at Reykjanesviti, our panel can vouch for the presence of whales around Reykjanes first hand. A whale watching boat tour will get you even closer to the sea giants. Look out for spray plumes; have your camera at the ready. **A1-D3**

Best Café



Hjá Höllu
Vikurbraut 62, Grindavík

Hjá Höllu really is a no-brainer when it comes to good food. Seasonal menu? Check. Locally sourced ingredients? Double check. Rip-roaringly delicious? Triple check. This unassuming restaurant is run with a great deal of care and love that translates straight to the plate. Highlights include an open beef sandwich with thin strips of tender meat, the variety of sauces (including a particularly delicious bear-naise) and balsamic onions that our panel still dream about. **C3**

Runners Up



Old Lighthouse Café
Gardskagi, Gardur

Built in 1897, but long since obsolete—see the taller, new-fangled lighthouse just a few metres away—the second oldest lighthouse in Iceland is the memorable location of a café during the summertime. Pop by for a coffee and a snack, and to fulfil your lighthouse keeper fantasies. Open June-September only. **B2**



Bryggjan Café
Miðgarður 2, Grindavík

For some delicious cakes, coffees, breads, and possibly the best lobster soup in the country, don't miss beloved local haunt Bryggjan Café. Cosy, warm, and inviting, the café is all you could hope for in the winter chill, but it also serves up a delightful outdoor sitting area in the summer. **B3**

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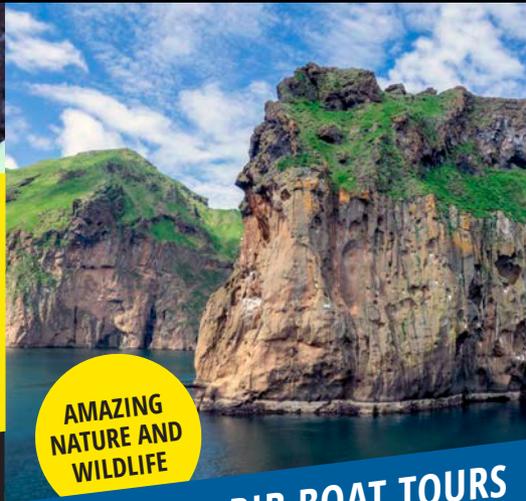


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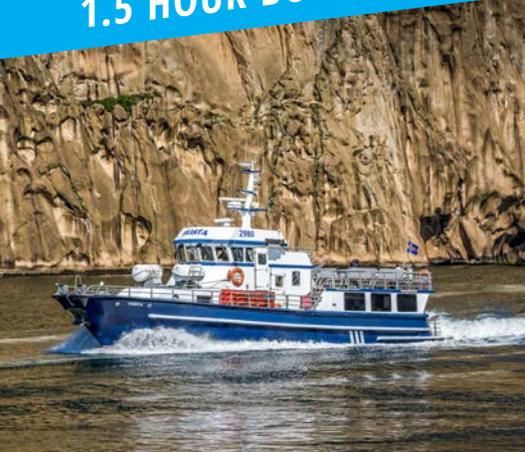
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Fresh local
health food



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Mountain: Kirkjufell

Grundarfjörður, Snæfellsnes

On the northern shore of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, not far from the town of Grundarfjörður, is the impressive Kirkjufell. Meaning “Church Mountain,” the 463 m Kirkjufell is entrancing. Broad and flat topped from one angle, but appearing to jut up from the earth like a shark fin when viewed from another side. There’s a reason this mountain is the most photographed in Iceland. **Map square: C11**



Town: Stykkishólmur

Snæfellsnes
Info: visitstykkisholmur.is

Of all the small towns around Iceland’s coastline, Stykkishólmur—population 1,195—is perhaps the most charming. The small harbour is enclosed by a small and easily hikeable cliff that offers views out into the island-dotted fjord, and for such a small place there’s plenty to see and do, including a handful of museums, shops, and restaurants. The perfect spot for a weekend getaway. **D11**



Farm: Háafell

Hvítársíðu, Borgarbyggð
Tel: +354 437 1600

The Icelandic goat is on the decline, so stopping by the country’s only goat farm at Háafell is a must-do in the West. Play with the goats, learn about the breed, and sample some goat cheese and goat milk ice cream. You might even meet a television star: Háafell’s goats appeared on “Game of Thrones.” Whether or not any were harmed in the filming by being consumed by actual dragons remains unconfirmed. **E13**



Museum: Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum

Bjarnarhöfn, Tel: +354 438-1581
Info: www.bjarnarhofn.is

One of Iceland’s notorious bizarrely specific museums, the Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum is packed to the brim with shark boats, shark info sheets, shark skeletons, shark stomach contents, and so much more shark related content. If that’s not sharky enough for you, just up the hill is a drafty shack where shark meat hangs down right before your very eyes. We’d recommend you don’t eat it, but hey, it’s your life. Make your own choices. **C11**



Food Tour: Viking Sushi

Stykkishólmur, Tel: +354 433-2254
Info: www.seatours.is

Viking Sushi gives you a two for one deal: a gorgeous cruise among the Breiðafjörður bay and a taste of the freshest seafood around. Right in front of your very eyes, scallops, clams, and sea urchins are plucked from the seafloor and served to you on a giant trough on the bow of the boat. It’s a unique experience your brain won’t soon forget, and a delicious culinary one your tongue won’t either. **D11**



Road Trip: Kaldidalur

Húsafell to Þingvellir

The snowy, glacier-flanked mountain pass of Kaldidalur is a dirt trail which meanders through some of Iceland’s most beautiful scenery. It’s a rough road, no doubt, but one that allows you unfettered access to some of the more obscure locations about Langjökull. On a good day, don’t forget to park and take a hike up to Ok, the dead glacier. The trip starts at Húsafell, eventually ending at Þingvellir. Check road.is and safetravel.is for advance road info. **G14**

USEFUL INFO

Grapevine on the West:
gpv.is/west
Our articles, info and guides for West Iceland and the Westfjords

Tourist Information:
West Iceland Marketing Office
www.west.is
info@westiceland.is
Tel: +354 462 3300

Emergency services
Tel: 112 (national helpline)

Weather report
en.vedur.is
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HOW TO GET THERE

By car:
Road conditions
www.road.is
Tel: 1777
(Summer hours: 08:00-16:00 / Winter: 06:30-22:00)

By ferry:
From Stykkishólmur
Ferry to Flatey and Brjánslækur
Schedule & Info:
www.seatours.is

By bus:
National Bus Network
www.bus.is
Tel: +354 540 2700

SAFETY NOTE

The summer “high season” in Iceland ends on September 1st. Please check vedur.is/en for weather and road.is for driving conditions in the late summer. Some roads close completely when weather is poor. Additional travel alerts can be found at safetravel.is.

OPENING HOURS

Opening hours may vary outside of the summer season, so be sure to check ahead.

Browse Grapevine recommended tours from this region at

gotravel.is





Distance from Reykjavík:
173 km

How to get there:
Route One North, Route 54, park at Hotel Búðir

Car provided by: gocarrental.is
Accommodation provided by: hotelbudir.is

West

The Witches Of Búðir

A visit to a magical little shop in Snæfellsnes

Words: **John Rogers** Photos: **Art Bicnick**

Hotel Búðir juts up from Búðahraun lava field on the southern coast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula. Visible for miles around, this imposing hotel is well known as one of the most plush and comfortable getaways in Iceland, sitting almost in the shadow of the towering, mesmerising Snæfellsjökull glacier.

Lesser known is the mysterious store that occupies one of the nearby sheds. With a large Ægishjálmur stave—the Helm of Awe, a magical stave of protection—mounted on the wall, and a sign that says simply “SHOP,” it picks up plenty of foot traffic from

hotel guests and passersby who come to visit the historic black wooden church of Búðakirkja.

A bell tinkles when you step through the door into the dark confines of the store. At first, your eyes might not know where to rest—everywhere you look, there are fascinating objects. The neat tables are packed with small, softly lit carvings, amulets and bowls of intriguing rune tiles; the shelves are loaded with paper parcels and brown bottles with handwritten labels, containing mysterious powders and tinctures, and the windowsills are lined with sculptures made from familiar beach ephem-

era, wave-worn sticks, shells, strands of wool, fronds of seaweed, knotty string and weathered floats.

Suddenly, I become aware of two pairs of eyes looking at me from a side-door. It’s Sigga and Agnes, the two self-professed witches behind this curious place. They emerge from the office smiling, happy to share stories of their craft.

Beach herbs

Everything in the store, says Sigga, is handmade. “We climb the mountains looking for roots and herbs,” she says in a calm, assured voice. “We go through the lava fields to the beaches to get herbs, and collect them at the right time. We bring them back here, work them, dry them, and pack them—everything is done personally and by hand.”

The picking season for Icelandic plants starts when the snow begins thawing in March, and runs through into the autumn. “All the herbs go into oils so I can work with them later in creams and balms,” says Sigga. She speaks circuitously, weaving together different points and returning to others,

slowly painting the picture of the shop’s story. “These things have been done throughout the ages. We’re continuing with the old habits of using the herbs. That’s where I learned this way of doing things.”

Heathen calendar

At first, Sigga and Agnes had to seek out obscure bits of information from various conversations and sources. But over time, collating traditional knowledge has become easier. “In the beginning I really had to dig,” says Sigga. “It has become more open—more information is available now, and shared online. What we have here is the heathen way. It’s getting quite popular, now. People are becoming more open to using things from mother nature.”

Heathen beliefs run through many aspects of the store. Sigga points to a calendar on the wall, divided up into eight sections in a circular design. “We work a lot with this Chan Tok—a calendar of the old heathen seasons, with eight holidays in the wheel of the year,” she says.

“The modern calendar has the

“People felt we were really quite weird at first. Some still do. Which is okay. We are witches. It doesn’t bother us.”

familiar months we know now, but here we see the old Icelandic months, and in the inner circle are the old heathen holidays. Celebration, of course, starts on the 21st of December on the Winter

Solstice. Then there’s the Spring Equinox, the Summer Solstice and the Autumn Equinox. It’s all about harvesting, and loving mother nature. Everything we make has a meaning—to celebrate mother na-

ture, and give grace and thanks.” She smiles. “Not very complicated.”

Blessed beginnings

The shop’s intriguing displays are no coincidence. “We are both in the arts,” says Agnes. “I work in the hotel, taking care of the flower arrangements and things like that. Sometimes I go there with lavender and bless the hotel. People will say ‘What was that?’ when I come. And when I put out the flowers, I also go with a little bit of mag-

ic. I work on many weddings here with the flowers, and I always put a little bit of magic inside. They don’t know about it, but I bless the marriage.”

Guests of the hotel might also sometimes see a ritual taking place from their room windows. “We work with the magic of nature,” smiles Agnes, her eyes shining brightly. “We sometimes have ceremonies outside when it’s good weather, and people are welcome to join us. We burn sage, and let people come and write wishes. It’s all about where the moon is—if it’s waning, waxing or full. There are rituals for if you want to take something in from the flow of the cosmos, or if you have something to let go.”

Witch and proud

Some hotel guests love the store, say the pair, but they get all kinds of reactions. “People felt we were really quite weird at first,” laughs Sigga. “But not any more. Still some do—they think this is a serious witch shop. Which is okay—we are witches. That’s fine. It doesn’t bother us.” Agnes adds: “There are still people who walk in then walk out. But others come inside, and their eyes open wide. They look at it like a museum, talking very softly.”

“People think we have all the solutions in the world,” finishes Sigga, smiling softly. “We had a woman who was 150 kilos come into the shop looking for chocolate—there was none here, and she was going to buy ten soaps because she thought they were chocolate bars. I told her they were soaps, and her mind changed immediately. She bought rune books and charms, and she left happier than ever.”



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

West

Go West, life is peaceful there

Best Accommodation



Hótel Búðir

Búðir, Snæfellsnes

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Hotel Búðir is our favourite luxurious westerly bolthole once more. "It's still the best," one panellist declared. We can't argue. Inside and out, Hotel Búðir is a charming destination. Whether you explore the picturesque surroundings, with views of the majestic Snæfellsjökull one way and the sea the other, or plant yourself in the handsomely appointed lounge taking in the sights through Búðir's antique telescope, you can't go wrong. **Map square: B12**

Runner Up



Hótel Húsafell

Stórarjódur, Húsafell

Another classy standout in the West, Hótel Húsafell "has it all," as one panellist put it. "A beautiful building, breathtaking scenery, and comfortable beds." There's also a swimming pool and an excellent restaurant and bar serving up toothsome tasting menus and dangerously good cocktails. **G13**

Budget Option



Freezer Hostel

Hafnargata 16, Rif

Need an affordable place to stay in Hellissandur? Freezer Hostel. Looking for some local performance art? Freezer Hostel. What about some exciting street art? You guessed it: Freezer Hostel. Located on the cusp of the Snæfellsjökull National Park, it's a lively crash pad with a fun social calendar throughout the summer. **B11**

Best Restaurant



Bjargarsteinn Mathús

Sólvellir 15, Grundarfjörður

Location, location, location! Plus a charming old-world interior and delicious fare. Bjargarsteinn Mathús makes it worth the drive to Grundarfjörður. "It's very charming and the food is fantastic," raved one panellist, who was particularly impressed by the seafood soup—brimming with shrimps, juicy king prawns and bright orange scallops—and the perfectly prepared lamb fillets. The waterside location, with a view across the bay to the iconic Kirkjufell, further augments an already memorable dining experience. **C12**

Runner Up



Hótel Húsafell

Stórarjódur, Húsafell

Even if it isn't Tuesday, you should treat yourself to a tasting menu at perfectly remote Hótel Húsafell. The tasting menu presents the freshest Icelandic ingredients, creatively prepared and artfully plated. The service is also top notch. "It's just really, really good," enthused the panel. A countryside haven. **G13**

Budget Pick



The Settlement Centre

Brákarbraut 13-15, Borgarnes

Don't simply drive through Borgarnes. Our panel sang the praises of the lunch buffet at the Settlement Centre, which boasts fresh, local ingredients, salads, soups and more. "I cannot recommend this highly enough," exclaimed one panellist. Vegetarians can come hungry; the plant-based options are top notch. **E13**

Best Café



Gilbakki Kaffihús

Gilbakki, Hellissandur

Don't pass through Hellissandur without dropping in on your grandma. Okay, so maybe not your actual grandma—but we imagine she'd be right at home in this comfortable café. "I love the cosiness of the place," said one panellist. "Enjoy a piece of cake with your coffee." Another panellist called Gilbakki the perfect place to while away a summer day, enjoying the view of the glacier, framed by antique lace curtains. **B12**

Runners Up



Café Kaja

Stillholt 23, Akranes

The only certified organic cafe on the island, "Kaja is a treasure," one panellist exclaimed. With fish soup, falafel salad, avocado toast, cakes, coffee and more on the menu, it's all you could you ask for in the Western outpost of Akranes. Plus, there's an organic market—something the denizens of 101 are still missing. **E13**



Skemman Kaffihús

Hvanneyrabraut, Hvanneyri

If your tummy is growling for, as one panellist put it, "the best waffles in West Iceland, without a doubt," then let Skemman be your beacon. Located in the oldest house in Hvanneyri, this cosy café brews Reykjavík Roasters coffees to serve alongside those aforementioned waffles. Did we mention the waffles? Waffles. **E13**

West

Go West, in the open air

Best Tour



Snæfellsjökull Glacier Tour

Various providers, Snæfellsnes National Park

The Snæfellsjökull glacier is a staggering 1,446m high, crowning the tip of Snæfellsnes. Many would be happy just gazing up at its icy form—but then you'd be missing out on the best tour in the West. There are a couple of ways to summit Snæfellsjökull. 3-5 hour tours will deliver you to the highest accessible point in a snowcat, with the option of skiing back down; other tours allow you to conquer the glacier on foot. **Map square: B12**

Runner Up



Víðgelmir Cave
Fljótstunga

The West is riddled with caves, but you'll need a guide to safely explore them. One cave with regular guided tours is Víðgelmir. The tour brings you into the heart of the largest lava cave in Iceland, to explore the lava formations therein and gape at the earth's power. **G12**

Runner Up



Into the Glacier
Langjökull, leaving from Húsafell

So, you've seen glaciers in the distance—but have you been inside one? Into the Glacier is a tour that gives you the opportunity to do just that, via a man-made tunnel into Langjökull. It's a fascinating glimpse at the lifespan of the ice giant, with history literally frozen into the tunnel's walls. **H13**

Must-See Spot



Flatey
Breiðafjörður

You know that quintessential summer feeling of time slowing down? The smell of the season—grass, wildflowers, sea spray—floats on the breeze and there's nothing on your agenda but to breathe it in. That's Flatey. Drive to Stykkishólmur—a gem of the West in itself—and catch the ferry out onto Breiðafjörður to spend a day among Flatey island's colourful houses, impossibly green grass and undeniable charm—and puffins. Said one panellist: "It's a magical place." **A10**

Runners Up



Snæfellsjökull
Snæfellsnes

All of Iceland's glaciers are magnificent, but Snæfellsjökull is something else. It glows. It beckons you to gaze upon its majesty. You cannot say you've been to West Iceland unless you've basked in its glory, or, better still, booked a tour to the top of the glistening leviathan to explore it up close. **B12**



Arnarstapi & Hellnar
Útnesvegur, Snæfellsnes

These two coastal villages are just a stone's throw from one another—a 6-minute drive, or an hour-long stroll—and both come recommended by our panel as places to sit and watch the sea life as the sun sets. Fly over to Arnarstapi for seabirds, or roll down to Hellnar to try and spot seals. **B12**

Best Hike



Glymur
Botnsdalur valley, Hvalfjörður

If you want a hike to brag about, try Glymur. Iceland's second-tallest waterfall, Glymur plummets an impressive 198m, and it is a real gem of the oft-overlooked or bypassed entirely Hvalfjörður. Be warned, though—it's no stroll in the park. The hike is a four-hour round trip on uneven terrain, and crossing a stream. Sturdy hiking boots and a decent level of physical fitness are required, but the payoff is, as our panel puts it, "Breathtaking!" **F14**

Runners Up



Arnarstapi to Hellnar
Snæfellsnes

If you need to stretch your legs on a Snæfellsnes road trip, this is a no-brainer. It's an easy coastal walk that takes around 50 minutes (one way); in exchange for your minimal effort, you'll see crashing waves, lively bird cliffs, lush valleys and possibly a playful seal or two. **B12**



Hafnarfjall
Borgarnes

This trek up a volcano isn't for beginners, but, as the panel exclaimed, "Oh my, those views!" Your hike begins near the base of the bridge running across the fjord from Borgarnes, and will take you to a height of 844m. It can be windy, so check the forecast before lacing up your boots. **E13**

Book these recommended tours and more at

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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

West

Go West, be all that you can be

Best Road Trip



Snæfellsnes
Snæfellsnes

Forget the Golden Circle, Snæfellsnes is where it's at. Oft referred to as "Iceland in miniature," this peninsula has it all: mesmerizing lava formations, bird cliffs, seals, picturesque old churches, twisted remnants of a shipwreck, a shark museum, street art—and the cherry on top is Snæfellsjökull glacier. You can do it on a day trip from Reykjavík, but a more leisurely drive is preferable. Bunk somewhere for a night or two, and take your time.

Map square: A12-D11

Runners Up



Borgarfjörður
Borgarnes-Húsafell

Borgarfjörður makes for a great road trip. Start at the Hraunfossar and Barnafoss waterfalls; check out the museum in Reykholt, and drop by Húsafell; catch the view to Langjökull, then circle the Kalmanstunga lava field, visiting the Víðgelmir lava tube; end up at the Krauma spa, which is powered by the Deildartunguhver hot spring. **E13**

The Waterfall Circle
Hvalfjörður-Akranes

The South has the Golden Circle, the North has the Diamond Circle, but the West has the Waterfall Circle. This route delivers you to one stunning chute after another—six, to be precise—while driving through Hvalfjörður, Borgarfjörður, Borgarnes and Akranes. Glymur is a four-hour round-trip hike, so this could be a multi-day adventure. **E14-G13**

Best Museum/Gallery



Library of Water
Bókhöðustígur 17, Stykkishólmur

Vatnasafn—or The Library of Water—is an eye-opening museum. Made by Roni Horn, the main room is a display of glass cylinders filled with meltwater from Iceland's glaciers. It's fascinating how the colour of each sample is unique, and sobering to think that more than one of these samples comes from a glacier that no longer exists. Eventually, as the glaciers keep melting, the samples in the museum could be all that's left of Iceland's mighty ice giants. **D11**

Runners Up



Borgarnes Museum
Bjarnarbraut 4-6, Borgarnes

"It's a solid museum, whether you're interested in history, art or nature," said the panel. The artfully arranged Borgarnes Museum gives visitors an overview of the flora, fauna, and history of the area, but it's the permanent childhood-themed exhibition that'll keep you engaged with its treasure trove of hidden artefacts. **E13**

Eiríksstaðir Living Museum
Haukdalsvegur, Buðardalur

Eiríksstaðir is the farmstead of Erik the Red, the birthplace of Leifur Eriksson, a.k.a. Leif the Lucky, a.k.a. the first European in North America. See where the legend was born and learn about Icelandic farm life 1,000 years ago. "It's one of the most historic sites of Iceland," noted the panel. **F11**

Best Bathing Spot



Krauma
Deildartunguhver, Reykholt

Asking for an Icelander's favourite bathing spot is sensitive business. One panellist said their favourite is "somewhere I want to keep a secret so it doesn't get too busy." Still, several panellists sang the praises of the Krauma spa, with one declaring it a "10/10." It's a stark and stylish place featuring steam rooms and hot pots powered by the sulphurous water of Deildartunguhver. Your muscles will thank you for visiting this (literal) hotspot. **B12**

Runners Up



Borgarnes Pool
Þorsteinsgata 1, Borgarnes

Calling all families and the young at heart: Borgarnes Pool has not one slide, but three. That's right: three slides! This swim palace also boasts an indoor and outdoor pool, hot pots and mountain views. As one panellist said, "it's a no-brainer." **E13**



Guðlaug
Langjandur, Akranes

These beachside hot pots are brand new, and they're an impressive piece of design. Plus, they're never crowded, so you can soak your muscles in one of the geothermally heated pools and look across the bay toward all the suckers in Reykjavík that aren't in Guðlaug. **H13**

Best Shop



Krambúðin Witch Shop
Búðir, Snæfellsnes

This fascinating store is a true one-off. Tucked away in an unassuming cottage next door to Hotel Búðir, you'll recognise it for the Icelandic stave stencilled onto the wall. Step inside, and you'll be entranced by scores of runes, tinctures, charms, spell kits, salves and more, all made from ingredients sourced from Icelandic nature. The pair of witches who run the place will no doubt be present, and they're happy to share some of their secrets. **C12**

Runners Up



Blómasetrið
Skúlagata 13, Borgarnes

This quaint plant and flower store is a lovely place to shop, and also to spend some time—it doubles as a homely café. Get a cup of coffee and cake, shuffle through the various fortune-telling card decks, and leave with a radiant peace lily or some flowers for your home. **E13**



Leir 7
Aðalgata 20, Stykkishólmur

Located on the main strip of Stykkishólmur, Leir 7 sells eye-catching and unusual ceramics. Run by Sigríður Erla Guðmundsdóttir, a graduate of the Icelandic Academy of the Arts, everything in the store is made from Icelandic clay; they'll pack your purchase carefully to get it home safely. **D11**



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Gallery: Húsið

Patreksfjörður, Tel. +354 695-7620
Info: www.husid-workshop.com

The Húsið Creative Space brings art and culture from around Iceland and beyond to Patreksfjörður. Stop by for a monthly exhibition programme, artist talks, events, and a store selling local handicrafts, Reykjavík Roasters coffee, posters, design objects and more. If you fall in love and decide to move to Patreksfjörður, you could also hire a desk in the co-working space on the second floor. Above all else, Húsið proves that one need not be in the big city for some cutting-edge art. **Map square: B8**



Place: Látrabjarg

Route 612
Info: westfjords.is

Sitting pretty on the westernmost point of Iceland, Látrabjarg could best be called the avian metropolis of Iceland. A lush green cliff that juts abruptly down more than 400 metres into the Atlantic, Látrabjarg is the perfect place to laze around and watch the puffins dance above your head. Birds in this location are particularly tame, and thus it's a great location for photography, bird-watching or just general enjoyment. **A9**



Town: Ísafjörður

Info: isafjordur.is

The regional capital of the Westfjords is Ísafjörður, an old merchant town that's definitely worth a visit. It's the cultural capital of the area, and around the turn of the 20th century, Ísafjörður was the second-biggest town in Iceland, with a history filled with witch trials and industry. Today, it has a population of only 2,600, but despite its location deep in the Westfjords, it remains a lively town with three museums—including the oldest row of houses in Iceland—two bars, and a movie theatre. Its houses are old, and its people proud. **C6**



Area: Hornstrandir

Accessible only by boat, horse or hike
Info: westfjords.is

This largely uninhabited peninsula is so far off the beaten track the only way to get there is by boat, or as part of a multi-day hike. The trouble is worth it: it's a hidden preserve of outstanding natural beauty, and a haven for Arctic foxes, which are protected in the region. In summer, it's also something of a hiking mecca, with campsites and all the trails you could want. Be prepared, whether you're going on a day-trip or a week long adventure. **D-E5**



Place: Djúpavík

Strandir, Route 643
Info: djupavik.is

Djúpavík is a far-flung and breath-taking hamlet around a rough dirt track deep in the Westfjords—be sure to check ahead that the road is serviced because it's truly sketchy. A handful of houses and a rusting shipwreck stand nestled next to a huge, crumbling factory building that seems like a surreal vision in the depths of the Strandir coast. The factory was abandoned when the fish vanished, and now serves as a workshop, museum and gallery; the workers' quarters are now a cosy and informal family-run hotel. **F7**



Museum: Museum of Witchcraft & Sorcery

Hólmavík, Tel: +354 897 6525
Info: galdrasyning.is

A weathered wooden structure with a turf roof, Hólmavík's main tourist attraction may look underwhelming, but like its subject, it's got some magic. The museum's most famous acquisition is a replica of a pair of "necropants": trousers made of human skin, which allegedly dispense gold from the crotch for those brave or psychotic enough to make a pair. If that tickles your occult bone, indulge your morbid side with a visit. **F8**

USEFUL INFO

Grapevine on the Westfjords:
gpv.is/westfjords
Our articles, info and guides for West Iceland and the Westfjords

Tourist Information:
West Iceland Marketing Office
www.west.is
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Emergency services
Tel: 112 (national helpline)

Weather report
en.vedur.is
Recorded info: +354 902 0600

HOW TO GET THERE

By domestic airline:

Ísafjörður (IFJ)
Domestic flights to and from Reykjavík.

Main airline operator:
www.airiceland.is
Tel: +354 570 3000

Other airports are at Bíldudalur and Gjógur, with flights to and from Reykjavík serviced by eagleair.is

By car:

Road conditions
www.road.is
Tel: 1 777
(Summer hours: 08:00-16:00 / Winter: 06:30-22:00)

By ferry:

From Stykkishólmur
Ferry to Flatey and Brjánslækur
Schedule & Info:
www.seatours.is

By bus:

National Bus Network
www.bus.is
Tel: +354 540 2700

SAFETY NOTE

The summer "high season" in Iceland ends on September 1st. Please check vedur.is/en for weather forecast and road.is for driving conditions in the late summer. Some roads close completely when weather is poor. Additional travel alerts can be found at safetravel.is.

OPENING HOURS

Opening hours may vary outside of the summer season, so be sure to check ahead.



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How to get there: Routes 1, 60, and 61
Accommodation: einarshusid.is

Westfjords

At The Speed Of Birds

A road trip to the eyris and eyries of the Westfjords

Words: **a rawlings** Photos: **John Rogers**

Our gas is running on fumes as we emerge from the belly of the mountain, driving north out of a long single-lane tunnel into the Westfjords' picturesque Súgandafjörður. As the road winds down the west bank, kittiwakes and fulmars glide alongside the car. We follow the birds. A rainbow paints the fjord's mouth as birds and car slow into the quaint fishing village of Suðureyri.

With a population of just 300 people, Suðureyri offers a firsthand experience of an environmentally engaged community in an isolated fjord. The village marina holds an international eco-label Blue Flag for

its sustainable environmental management. Suðureyri's local school is one of two internationally recognised eco-schools in the Westfjords, awarded a Green Flag by the Foundation for Environmental Education.

This village haven immerses the visitor immediately in the homely comfort of a rural community aware of its interdependence with the ecosystem. The swimming pool is nestled at the foot of Breiðafjall, offering a welcome opportunity to contemplate the mountain. After our morning soak and mountain meditation, the pool's manager, Ívar, recommends plokksfiskur at Fisherman

Café. We head there next.

Fisherman is a major attraction for Westfjords authenticity and environmental education done well. The ambitious establishment offers accommodation, a café, a restaurant and a gourmet seafood tour to experience local practices. By the end of our meal, we are on a first-name basis with Viktoria, our café hostess, who shows us the plokksfiskur recipe on proud display. Suðureyri proves a warm welcome to Westfjords hospitality.

Star-crossed plovers

After our soak and bite, it's time to fly to our next post. Suðureyri's only gas pump is permanently closed, so we weigh our options and opt to continue towards Flateyri rather than backtracking to Ísafjörður to refuel. We tunnel into the mountain again, driving south and west for dark kilometres until we emerge to overlook Önundarfjörður. The valley stretches far below, with the North Atlantic strung by an unexpected white-sand beach on its western bank.

We turn right and coast into Flateyri's gas station with bare-

ly a drop left in our tank. The gas pumps have yellow tape haphazardly wrapped around them, with a hand-scribbled "lokað" sign announcing they are out of service. The station's staff explains the pumps will open in two hours, as they are being restocked, so we commit to a walking tour of Flateyri.

Yet another tunnel—this time containing a footpath instead of a road—beckons us up to the hill above the town. Lupins line the path, and we sound our voices in echoic booms and hoots as we pass through the tunnel. Our vocal experiment has roused golden plovers and common snipes. Plovers lure us with "tuuuuu" up the path to ward us from their nests. Snipes murmur their neighs from the East—a sign of good luck in Icelandic folklore. Following the birds rewards us with a lovely view of Flateyri and gravel bank on which it was built.

Flateyri is even smaller than Suðureyri, with a population of under 200 people. Walking into the village proper, a sign demarks the presence of Iceland's oldest store—a bookstore that turns out to be a charming time capsule of the village's

“The sand is warm, and the North Atlantic an almost Mediterranean aquamarine blue.”

history. On the main street, we pass several signs nodding to the local tradition of shark fishing, and the bar Vagninn, where the reggae band Hjalmar sets up for their evening performance as part of the town's summer festival.

The two hours fly by, and we're greeted with green lights when we return to the gas station to fill our car.

Wait your tern

Traversing the trio of eyris—Suðureyri, Flateyri, and Þingeyri—is a favourite road trip in the Westfjords. “Eyri” translates as a sand or gravel bank, and it is on such banks that these three villages have prospered. It's almost shocking, really, to see life thrive on such slender spits of rock and sand between the imposing Westfjordan mountains and the cold ocean.

As we backtrack along the 20km fjord, we decide to stop at a proper, unpopulated eyri—the white-sand eyri by Holt farm. We roll our car through a sand-dune track towards the ocean. The sand dunes are a protected nesting ground for eider ducks, so we inch along to minimise disturbance of the area. Scores of arctic terns circle their warnings above our car as we crawl along the track. One insistent mother tern hovers outside the windscreen, swooping and cawing. We soon spot the cause for her concern: in the roadside grass, three eggs ready to hatch.

The enticing beach is a safe distance from ducks' and terns' breed-

ing grounds. Socks and shoes slip off rapidly. The sand is warm, and the North Atlantic an almost Mediterranean aquamarine blue. We are beach babes below the Arctic circle, plodging and beachcombing on a mid-teens summer day.

After a walk under the pier, our desire to learn the secrets of the final eyri pulls us from our shoreline

saunter, so we pile back into the car in search of our next bird guide.

The world is our oystercatcher

After traversing the mountain pass to Dýrafjörður, Þingeyri appears across the bay. Oystercatchers line the road. Plump black-and-white bodies look at odds with the shock of neon orange beaks bleating cheeps as we park the car. One waddles from a gravel nest, where we spy three more eggs, similarly splotched to the tern eggs, but larger in size. The village of Þingeyri feels the most like the place

to root and roost after a pleasant day exploring the fjords.

Simbahöllin Café has a strong roast brewing, and we refuel ourselves with a coffee in anticipation of the drive back to Ísafjörður, through the tunnels and fjords. The village feels lived-in, familiar, comfortable. If only we could stay to share the local gossip, learn to play the langspil, and take up residency in the co-working centre of Blábankinn. But there are more birds to follow, and more slow travel in our futures, so we set off home, our dreams ready to hatch and soar. 🐦



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

Westfjords

Breathe in, breathe out

Best Accommodation



Hotel Djúpavík

Djúpavík, Strandir

Frozen in time in the smallest village in Iceland, Hotel Djúpavík is more than just a hotel: it's an experience. Hotel Djúpavík's haven-like atmosphere encapsulates the word 'unforgettable.' There's an abandoned herring factory-turned-museum, a shipwreck, and the surrounding wilderness to keep you company. The panel praised the hotel's homely atmosphere, friendly staff and—of course—location. "All you hear at night is the nearby waterfall, the tide, and the birds," said one panellist. "It's so peaceful."

Map square: F7

Runner Up



Heydalur
Mjóifjörður, Ísafjörður

"Entering Heydalur is like entering a little utopian fantasy," exclaimed one panellist. In a picturesque valley near Ísafjörður, it's more than just a place to sleep, boasting a guesthouse, campsite, restaurant, swimming pool, greenhouse, farm, and recreation centre. It's a perfect base for outdoor activities in the Westfjords and you can try local food and bathe in one of the best pools in the country. **C6**

Runner Up



Hótel Laugarhóll
Hólmavík

Located in the quiet hamlet of Bjar-narfjörður, Laugarhóll is, according to the panel, "the perfect spot for peace and quiet." In its immediate vicinity is a 25-metre outdoor geothermal pool, and a small natural hot pot with panoramic views of the unbridled Westfjords nature. **B8**

Best Meal



Tjörúhúsið
Neðstakaupstað, Ísafjörður

This was an easy one for the panel. "It's the best fish restaurant in Iceland," said one panellist. "What else can you say?" With communal tables, low wooden ceilings, warm lighting and a seemingly endless buffet, Tjörúhúsið offers an informal take on fine-dining in an 18th century fishing building. The fish comes straight from the harbour, so dishes change daily—it could be anything from crunchy gellur to wolffish in cream cheese sauce. Book ahead, and come hungry. **C6**

Runners Up



Restaurant Galdur
Höfðagata 8, Hólmavík

Don't let the exterior fool you. Attached to the Icelandic Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft, the modest Restaurant Galdur is a true hidden gem, full of authentic Icelandic grub. The panel recommend the locally-harvested blue mussels—but if they're not in stock, the fish soup is positively divine. **F8**



Malarhorn
Grundargata 17, Drangsnæs

A low-key restaurant, Malarhorn offers a down-to-earth selection of Iceland's finest. "There's something about looking out towards Grímsey on Steingrímsfjörður and eating the tasty fish caught by local fisherman earlier that day," said the panel, fondly. The catfish with pepper sauce comes recommended. **F8**

Must-See Spot



Dynjandi
Just off Route 60

Iceland—and particularly the Westfjords—is dripping with waterfalls, but Dynjandi is a show-stopper, nonetheless. Cascading down a series of levels like a tiered wedding cake, it has an immense presence that must be seen to be understood. For the full experience, check out the view of Dynjandi from across the fjord before seeing it up-close. The difference in scale is breathtaking. There's also a lovely picnic spot at the bottom. **C8**

Runners Up



South Westfjords Beaches
Southern Westfjords

The southern Westfjords area is famous for its beaches, include the yellow sand of Barðaströnd and the red sand of Rauðisandur. Both are off the beaten track, making them an ideal spot for tranquil strolls and wildlife spotting. Walk out to the sand reefs, stare out into the bay, and keep your eyes peeled for seals. **A9-A11**



Trékyllisvík
Trékyllisvík, Árneshreppur

The remote cove of Trékyllisvík is located deep in the sparsely-populated Árneshreppur. Hemmed in by mountains, it's the perfect place for birdwatching and seal-spotting. Mostly undiscovered by tourists, this stark village seems stuck in time. Take a walk along the road towards Munaðarnes to see the jagged peaks of Drangaskörð. **F7**

Best Hike



Kaldbakur Dýrafjörður

Directly between Dýrafjörður and Arnarfjörður lies Kaldbakur, the highest point of the “Alps of the Westfjords.” Unlike the flat-topped, glacier-shaped mountains you might expect in Iceland, this one is steep and pointy and, as such, it’s recommended that only those who are physically fit, with good hiking gear attempt this hike. That said, the view is worth it, with a 360° expanse of valleys, lakes, mountains, and grasslands for your eyes to drink in. **B7**

Best Bathing Spot



Krossneslaug Route 643, past Árneshreppur

Straight up the road from Djúpavík, this old-school bathing spot is quite literally where the road ends. Sandwiched between the mountains and the sea, it offers a wild and positively sublime pool experience. “By the time you make it there on that rough road you’re exhausted, and jumping in the pool is that much more rewarding,” said the panel. “Those views out to the sea from the edge of the pool are just incredible.” **D7**

Best Bar



Vagninn Hafnarstræti 19, Flateyri

An almost unanimous pick, Vagninn is without a doubt the most happening bar in the Westfjords. “It’s a legendary spot, and it always gets me in a good mood,” said one panellist. Known for its tasty food, great beer selection, live music, local vibe, and rowdy crowd, Vagninn proves that you can find that sweaty, smiley bar ambience, even in the middle of nowhere. **C7**

Best Café



Simbahöllin Fjarðargata 5, Þingeyri

Who says you can’t get Belgian-style waffles in the middle of nowhere? Certainly not Simbahöllin. This cafe is nestled in the tiny fishing village of Þingeyri, and it was another near-unanimous pick from the panel. “It has the best coffee, the best waffles, and the jam is magic!” exclaimed one panellist. “It’s also worth the stop just to sit in that beautifully restored old building,” another added. They make a damn good latte, too. **C7**

Runners Up



Hornbjarg Hornstrandir

The crowning jewel of Hornstrandir—the uninhabited northernmost point of the Westfjords—is Hornbjarg. Only accessible by a boat ride and five hour hike, it’s a series of lush, green cliffs that drop abruptly down into the harsh Arctic waves below, with nothing standing between you and the North Pole. **E5**

Runners Up



Pollurinn Tálknafjörður

A few kilometres outside of Tálknafjörður, this idyllic fjordside bathing spot offers an unforgettable, jaw-dropping view of the surrounding mountains. There are a couple of hot pots of different temperatures. It’s open 24/7, so feel free to arrive late to soak while the sun sets. **C8**

Runners Up



Húsið Hrannargata 2, Ísafjörður

“It’s a social hub,” said one panel member in regards to Ísafjörður’s beloved Húsið. “It has a decent selection of my favourite Icelandic beers,” another agreed. “And the atmosphere is really nice.” A café by day, Húsið transforms into the best type of small town pub later on. Expect to make new friends. **C6**

Newcomer



Heimabyggð Aðalstræti 22b, Ísafjörður

Heimabyggð’s cosy, wooden interior breeds relaxation. The panel praised the café, which opened only this year, for their coffee, fresh sourdough bread, beer selection and general atmosphere, which they described as healthy and homey. Expect large portions, larger lattes and lots of laughter. **C6**



Seljalandsdalur to Syðridalur Seljalandsdalur

The valley of Syðridalur is a prime location for spotting eiders, bar-tailed godwits, black-headed gulls, and many other winged inhabitants of Iceland. It’s also surrounded by awe-inspiring views. Start in the skiing area in Seljalandsdalur and hike six hours to a beautiful vista overlooking the picturesque Hnífsdalur and Ísafjörður. **C6**



Heydalur Ísafjörður

Heydalur offers four choices: two indoor pools, a warm swimming pool, and a hot tub. Housed in a greenhouse surrounded by fruit trees, it’s a true oasis. Don’t miss the natural hot pot—it’s only accessible by walking across a cold, narrow glacial stream. But that just makes it all the more worth it, right? **F6**



Edinborgarhúsið Aðalstræti 7, Ísafjörður

Edinborgarhúsið could best be described as the cultural centre of Ísafjörður. With everything from rowdy rock and rap gigs to jazz nights, the venue is certainly a mixed-bag, but one that works steadfastly to bring the best of Icelandic culture all the way to the far reaches of the Westfjords. **C6**

Runner Up



Stúkuhúsið Aðalstræti 50, Patreksfjörður

Stúkuhúsið walks the line between diner and café, but its warm atmosphere and friendly service make it the perfect place to stop for a bite of cake and a hot cup of joe. “It’s like being at your grandma’s house,” said one panellist. “And the cakes are homemade!” **B8**

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

Westfjords

The Westfjords are so foxy

Best Tour



Hornstrandir

Northern Westfjords

This was an easy one for the panel. “Take any tour out to Hornstrandir,” they said. Lying at the northernmost point of the Westfjords, Hornstrandir is a deserted region that is inaccessible except via boat, or a days-long hike. There are no roads, no hotels, no campsites—not even toilets. That said, you’ll be rewarded with an immersive tract of Icelandic nature. With sheer cliffs, wide valleys and abandoned villages, “it feels like the end of the earth out there.” **D5**

Runner Up



Whale Watching
Hólmavík

In Hólmavík, you’ll probably see a humpback no more than a stone’s throw from the town centre. The calm bay has smooth currents, so it’s a perfect place to see the giant marine mammals. Our panellists recommend Láki Tours. “I don’t think they’ve ever not seen whales on that tour,” they said. **F8**

Runner Up



Vígur Island
Ísafjörður

This tiny island, smack in the middle of Ísafjarðardjúp, has more avian residents than humans, including puffins. Reachable via boat from Ísafjörður or by taking a kayak tour, it’s an afternoon trip full of birdwatching bliss. Make sure to pay attention to the shoreline, too—you might just see some sunbathing seals. **D6**

Best Museum



Samúel Jónsson Museum
Brautarholt, Selárdalur

Imagine this: You’re driving through one of the most isolated areas of Iceland on an unserviced 25km dirt track. Suddenly, you come upon a house surrounded by bizarre, brightly coloured, cartoonish sculptures. Well, welcome to the Samúel Jónsson Museum. Samúel was a self-taught artist and a hermit who used his pension money for plaster, which he used to make the memorable oddities that litter the yard surrounding his jaunty white and red house. “It’s wonderfully surreal,” said the panel. **B8**

Runners Up



Arctic Fox Centre
Eyrardalur, Súðavík

Stopping at the Arctic Fox Centre is a magical afternoon for adults and kids alike. Arctic foxes are, in fact, the only terrestrial mammal native to Iceland. Famously elusive, they’re also amongst the hardest to spot in the wild, so the centre is your best bet to get close to one. **D7**



Sea Monster Museum
Dalbraut, Bíldudalur

There’s no better place to learn about Iceland’s supernatural sea creatures than the tiny coastal town of Bíldudalur. Indeed, Arnarfjörður is said to host many of them. This museum is dedicated to studying this branch of folklore with a loving, academic touch. Come with an open mind and you might leave a believer. **B8**

Best Road Trip



Southern Westfjords
Brjánslækur to Dynjandi

The southern Westfjords contain some of the most breathtaking scenery in Iceland. Start at Brjánslækur, where the ferry from Snæfellsnes comes in, and drive west on Highway 62 to the Rauðasandur red sand beach. Next, turn onto Highway 612 for the beautiful bird cliffs of Látrabjarg, before heading up to Patreksfjörður to check out the Húsið art space. Take Route 63 to the Samúel Jónsson Museum, then cross Dynjandisheiði for a perfect finale at the incomparable Dynjandi waterfall. **C9-C8**

Runners Up



Súðavík To Þingeyri
Súðavík To Þingeyri

Here’s your itinerary: Start with the foxes in Súðavík, go to Ísafjörður for a snúður at the Old Bakery and lunch at Tjörúhúsið, head to Suðureyri for a soak at the pool, jaunt to Flateyri for a pint at Vagninn, and end with some coffee and waffles at Simbahöllin. Now that’s a day well-spent in Iceland. **D7-C7**



Strandir
Route 643

“If you want remote, this is it,” said the panel of the Strandir road. “It’s only for confident drivers, but you’re treated to sheer cliffs with mist clinging to their tops, waterfalls, beaches, and total solitude for hours.” Stop at the Djúpavík factory to see their latest exhibit, and finish at Krossneslaug. **F7-G7**



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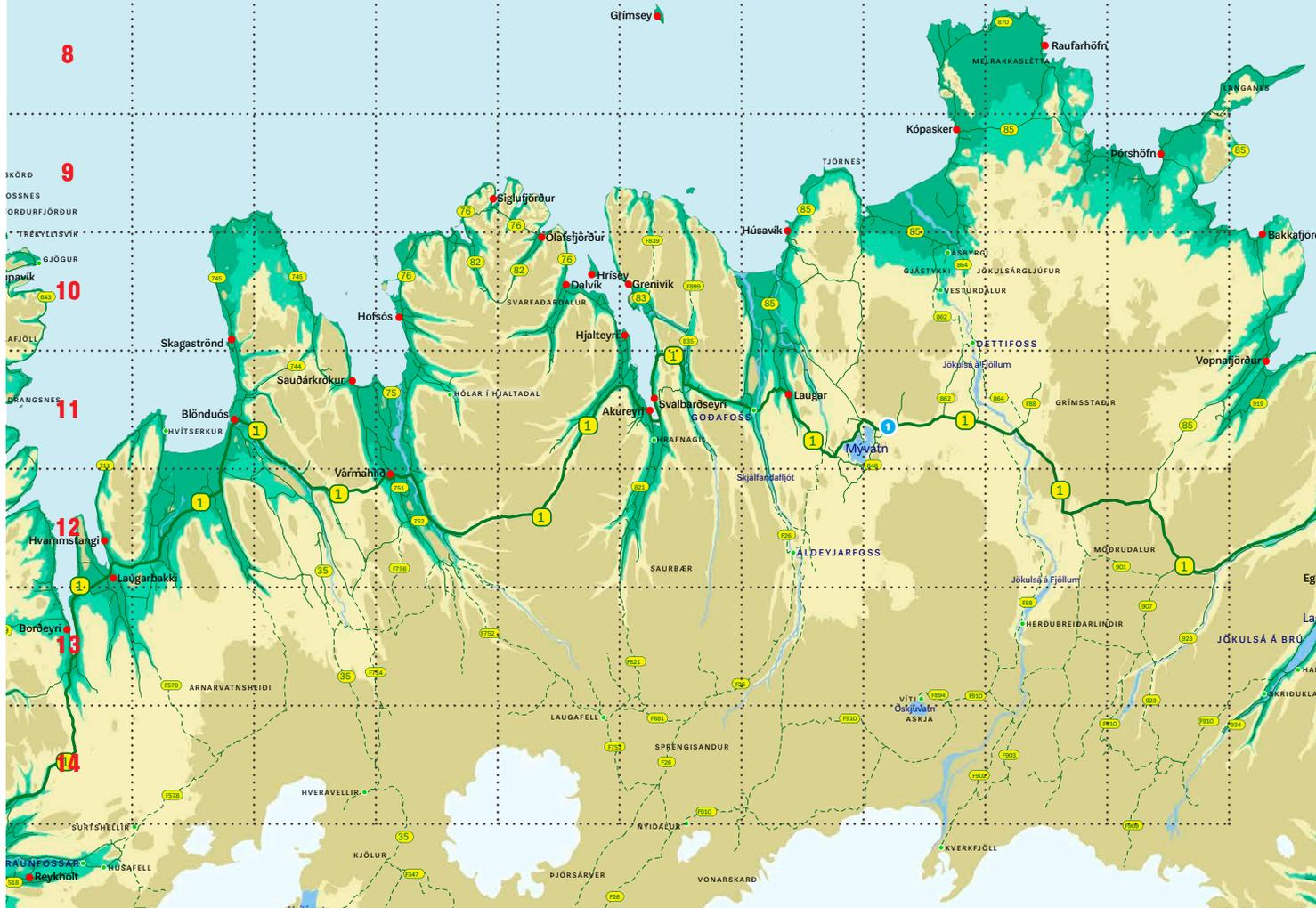
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North Iceland is a bucket-list of must-experience majesty. As the capital of the north, Akureyri is Iceland's second-largest city and provides a fantastic base from which to explore fjords, the Arctic Ocean, and the volcanic desert. Travelling to the northern tip of Eyjafjörður delivers you to the once-rich herring village of Siglufjörður. Head east on the Diamond Circle to visit cetaceanophilic Húsavík, the volcanic fantasia of Lake Mývatn, and the glacial waterfall Dettifoss. In summer months, you have great access to the Icelandic highlands with highlights of Hveravellir's geothermal area and Askja caldera. The remote northeast is a coastal paradise for birdlife, well worth a visit for those craving rural beauty.

BEST OF ICELAND:

North

Lakes, lava, hikes,
herring and whales





Diving Centre: Strýtan

Hjalteyri, Nr. Akureyri
Info: strytan.is

In the ocean water of Eyjafjörður sits a submarine phenomenon: two hydrothermal limestone chimneys, located in the Arctic Ocean at a depth of just 70 metres. They have formed from a mineral-rich freshwater hot spring bubbling through the seabed over the past 11,000 years. Hydrothermal chimneys are popular research sites as ecosystems for the earliest known life forms. Strýtan is among the top five cold-water dive sites worldwide for experienced recreational divers. **Map square: F8**



Island: Grímsey

Info: akureyri.is/grimsey-en

While North Iceland is almost entirely subarctic, its northernmost point is bisected by the Arctic Circle. Grímsey sits 40km north off of Iceland's mainland, the only opportunity to step foot into the Icelandic Arctic. With a human population less than one hundred people strong, the island's abundant inhabitants are birds—especially auks and gulls. **F8**



Site: Krafla

Nr. Lake Mývatn
Info: northiceland.is

One of Iceland's most active volcanoes, Krafla erupted nine times between 1975 and 1984. Walk the still-smoking Leirhnjúkur lava field by the explosion crater Víti ('Hell' in Icelandic), teeming with vibrant moss and ribbons of bizarre lava formations. Nearby Krafla Geothermal Centre is a great way to learn about sustainable energy and geothermal power production. **H11**



Site: The Arctic Henge

Raufarhöfn
Info: northiceland.is

Located near the remote north-east village of Raufarhöfn is Arctic Henge. Though it looks ancient, Arctic Henge is a newly constructed monument for Ásatrú practitioners who worship the old gods. Arctic Henge mimics its namesake by acting as a huge sundial. There are 72 stones, each named after a dwarf from the Eddas. **I8**



Waterfall: Aldeyjarfoss

Sprengisandsleið

Aldeyjarfoss is a stunning 20m-high waterfall tumbling over ancient basalt columns, midway in the glacial river Skjálfandafjót. The waterfall is positioned on the northern edge of the epic highland road Sprengisandur, and has been under threat of disappearing if potential hydropower dam construction is approved. It's a challenging drive that would need a 4x4 to do, but Geotravel runs private tours to make getting there easy. **G12**



Museum: Icelandic Textile Centre

Árbraut 31, Blönduós
Info: textilemidstod.is

Break up the northwards drive in Blönduós with a visit to The Icelandic Textile Centre. You can tour the former women's school (run from 1879-1978). The Textile Centre is popular with textile and visual artists who knit, weave, embroider, and sew, so you never know who you'll encounter creating their next pièce de résistance. **B11**

USEFUL INFO

Grapevine on the North:
gpv.is/north
Our articles, info and guides for North Iceland

Tourist Information:
Visit North Iceland
Hafnarstræti 91, 600 Akureyri
northiceland.is
info@northiceland.is
Tel: +354 462 3300

Emergency services
Tel: 112 (national helpline)

Weather report
en.vedur.is
Recorded info: +354 902 0600

HOW TO GET THERE

By domestic airline:

Akureyri Airport (AEV)
Domestic and international flights
Eyjafjarðarbraut vestri, Akureyri

Main airline operator:
www.airiceland.is
Tel: +354 570 3000

Other airlines:
norlandair.is
Tel: +354 424 4000

Húsavík Airport (HZK)
Domestic flights to and from Reykjavík.
Main airline operator:
www.eagleair.is
Tel: +354 464 1300

By ferry:
From Akureyri to Grímsey and Hrísey
Schedule & Info:
visitakureyri.is/en/transport/ferries

By bus:
National Bus Network
www.bus.is
Tel: +354 540 2700

SAFETY NOTE

The "high season" in Iceland ends on September 1st. Please check vedur.is/en for weather forecasts and road.is for driving conditions in the late summer. Some roads close completely when weather is poor. Additional travel alerts can be found at safetravel.is.

Local Delights Advertisement: North



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North

All That Glitters

A road trip around North Iceland's otherworldly Diamond Circle

Words: **Felix Robertson** Photos: **Art Bicnick**

You don't need to spend long on the Diamond Circle—northern Iceland's greatest sightseeing route—to realise that it's a different world to the neatly kempt and touristed Golden Circle. Deep in the rugged countryside of the north, everything is rougher, stranger and often even more beautiful.

We started out from Akureyri, northern Iceland's largest town and a good base for the Diamond Circle. After passing through the Vaðlaheiðargöng tunnel—note, despite minimal signage, you have to pay online to avoid a fine—we're soon deep in the wilds of the north. A

thick mist contributed to what was an already disorienting landscape.

The old gods and new

Our first stop was the waterfall Goðafoss, so named for the statues of pagan gods that Icelanders threw into the waters after they converted to Christianity. Looking down into the seething torrents of the semi-circular cascade, you could well imagine why a near religious significance was ascribed to this place.

40km eastward lies Lake Mývatn, one of the landmark sites of the Diamond Circle. It's technical-

ly just one lake, but it's so pocked by outcrops and islands that it feels like many more. We stopped at Skútustaðagígar and walked amongst the pseudo-craters—bizarre rock formations caused by lava violently exploding when it reached the lake-water. From the top of these craters, Mývatn seemed to stretch on forever; the outcrops like strange boats on a misty grey sea.

Boiling and erupting

This elemental clash between water and lava defines much of the Diamond Circle, nowhere more strikingly than at Dimmuborgir. Sometimes known as 'The Black Fortress,' this strange area was formed when heavy lava covered wetlands, causing the water to boil and erupt through the newly formed rock. The result is an eerie array of calcified explosions. Extensive pathways run through the site, allowing you to hike through the twisted, rocky forest. Over it all towers the jet-black volcano

Hverfjall, which poured forth the lava over 4,000 years ago.

The largest town on the Diamond Circle is Húsavík, where we checked into the luxurious Fosshotel Húsavík and enjoyed a pleasant meal before heading off to explore. Húsavík is a beautiful port town, famed for its whale watching tours, which have some of the highest success rates in the country. When we visited, the town was heavily decorated with a range of colourful, and often bizarre, sculptures and artworks. The tourist office explained that it was for Mærudagar, the festival of candy—and we thought the town couldn't get any sweeter.

Thick, pearly silver

Before departing Húsavík in the morning, we dropped in at the Geo-Sea Geothermal Baths. These toasty bathing pools look over the sea, so you can linger in the warm seawater and gaze out towards the Arctic circle, thinking about the day to come

“Were the earth flat (no arguments please), this is surely what the edge would look like.”

exploring the north. But for us, it was time to press on. The fog had lifted the previous evening, but it returned with a vengeance, cloaking the near-empty road in a thick, pearly silver haze.

Having seen the dramatic power of lava to shape the landscape, now we were to see the power of water and ice. Our next stop was Ásbyrgi, a vast canyon with rock walls over 100 metres high. Scientists believe it was carved out in a mighty flood from the Jökulsá glacial river, thousands of years ago. It's a magical place to visit, with the canyon cradling a lush green wood where you can walk, emerging every so often onto viewing platforms where Ásbyrgi's vastness becomes clear once more. Some say that Ásbyrgi is the capital of the húldufólk, or “hidden people”—and it's true that the misty forest felt profoundly numinous. But perhaps the overwhelming sense is one of raw, elemental force; the power of water to carve out mighty, extraordinary worlds.

The edge of the world

The power of Icelandic nature was the most vividly on display at the Diamond Circle's most famous stop. Even from the car park—a good 10-minute walk away—you can hear the thundering of Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in the whole of Europe. Fierce spray emerges beside this breathtaking torrent as the iron grey water churns over the edge at over 500 cubic metres per second. For reference, Gullfoss, the largest waterfall on the Golden Circle route,

flows at around 140 m³/s. We were thoroughly soaked, and completely and utterly awestruck. Were the earth flat (no arguments please), this is surely what the edge would look like.

We were nearly finished our epic

trip, but no sightseeing expedition in Iceland is complete without that pungent, sulphurous smell of rotten egg. At the Hverir geothermal field, it was present in spades. Just a short jaunt from Mývatn, Hverir is a bleak but beautiful expanse of brightly coloured rock, riddled with fumaroles and pools of bubbling mud. Steam rushed from vents in thick clouds, just cool enough to walk through, which made for a delightful change from the chill of Dettifoss and Ásbyrgi. Should you wish to

warm up even further, the beautiful Mývatn Nature Baths a mere minute drive away—a perfect place to relax after a long drive.

For us, however, it was time to head back home, with the memory of the Diamond Circle sure to stay with me for a long time. The Golden Circle is wonderful. But to see a rougher, more elemental and more profound side of Iceland, the Diamond Circle is a trip you cannot miss. 🍷



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North

Chilling by the Arctic Circle

Best Accommodation



Sigló Hótel

Snorrögata 3, Siglufjörður

Fans of Scandi Noir may recognize Sigló Hotel from the Icelandic TV series 'Trapped.' Stately and on the harbour, the hotel boasts views onto the fjord, the mountains of the Tröllaskagi peninsula, and the Siglufjörður marina. Combining old Icelandic charm in its décor with Nordic luxury, each spacious room has a view onto the sea. With a fireplace indoors and a hot tub by the harbour, it's comfort and romance incarnate. **Map square: B9**

Runner Up



Fossotel Mývatn

Grímsstaðir, Skútustaðahreppur

Fossotel Mývatn aims to rhyme with its breathtaking namesake lake. The hotel's architecture features larch wood, a grass roof, and floor-to-ceiling windows in the restaurant, inviting in panoramic views. Our panel remarked that Fossotel Mývatn is "immaculate—lovely design, unobtrusive on the landscape, and with a fabulous lake view from the breakfast room. **G11**

Budget Pick



Ásbyrgi Campground

Ásbyrgi, Kópasker

Sleep in the hoofprint of Óðinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Steeped in Ásatrú mythology and well-equipped with showers, the campsite at Ásbyrgi is a quiet spot to slumber in the northern tip of Vatnajökull National Park. Our panellist recommends to "go on a walk late before sleeping—magical!" **H10**

Best Meal



Rub23

Kaupvangsstræti 6, Akureyri

Rub23 is a renowned seafood restaurant showcasing a large array of local catch and sushi. They're also the North's go-to for steak—whether it's tenderloin beef or Atlantic Wolfish. Try one of their "festivals" (a.k.a. tasting menus) for a true foodstravaganza. One panellist reports that "Rub23 has a fancy-feeling interior with warm service, and you can order your preferred main ingredient with different spiced 'rubs' as the flavouring." **F11**

Runner Up



Vogafjós

Vogafjós, Mývatn

Near the shore of Lake Mývatn is the charming restaurant Vogafjós. Located at a working farm, the restaurant produces its own mozzarella. Other local ingredients include smoked trout and hot-spring-baked rye bread. You can even watch the cows being milked while you dine. After your meal, pet a calf or try the fresh milk. **H11**



Siglunes

Lækjargata 10, Siglufjörður

Be transported to Africa while in North Iceland. Chef Jaouad Hbib conjures Moroccan-style dishes using local Icelandic ingredients. The menu is updated daily, but you can anticipate mouth-watering lamb, chicken, fish, and vegetarian tagines. Menus often also feature homemade cheese, dates, oranges, and salads flavoured with mint and rose. **D9**

Best Café



Café Berlin

Skipagata 4, Akureyri

There's no better place than Café Berlin for a Sunday morning brunch. From the classic eggs and bacon to more Instagrammable options like poached eggs and avocado toast, this place has everything your heart (and stomach) might desire. You can add warm waffles for a small additional fee. Enjoy some people-watching with a hot coffee—you'll feel right at home. **F11**

Runners Up



Gísli, Eiríkur, Helgi Kaffihús

Grundargata, Dalvík

Café or museum? Bar or concert venue? This cool stop is named after the historic and storied brothers Gísli, Eiríkur and Helgi who roamed the region. The café is decorated with antique farm treasures and paintings of the brothers. The Kaffihús' delicious menu offers the best of North Iceland's home-cooking. **E10**



Bláa Kannan

Hafnarstræti 96, Akureyri

Spaciously laid out with a menu for all tastes, Bláa Kannan is the ideal place to people-watch in downtown Akureyri. It opens for breakfast and sleeps after a night-cap. Bread is fresh-baked daily. One panellist remarked that Bláa Kannan is "simply the best—beautiful, beautiful building, very Icelandic, nice atmosphere, good coffee, also vegan cakes." **F11**

Must-See Spot



Mývatn-Laxá Conservation Area *Mývatn*

Experience this spectacular volcanic nature reserve, nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Mývatn is the fourth-largest freshwater lake in Iceland, and easily the most otherworldly. You'll find unusual geologic and volcanic features, including pseudocraters and lava pillars. The lake itself is the summer home of fifteen migratory boreal and arctic duck species, and the only European breeding ground for Barrow's goldeneye ducks. Extremely rare and endangered moss balls known as marimo also inhabit the lakebed. **G11-H11**

Best Bathing Spot



Hofsós Swimming Pool *Hofsósbraut, Hofsós*

Hands-down our panel's favourite, Hofsós Swimming Pool was praised for its spectacular views across the North Atlantic to the island Drangey. Built into the hillside and designed by the same architect as the Blue Lagoon, Hofsós includes a 25m pool, hot pots, and a sauna. "I love the relaxing atmosphere," said the panel. "It's priced like a municipal pool, but this amazing bathing spot is a design classic with an infinity pool that makes you feel like you're swimming into the horizon." **D10**

Best Hike



Kverkfjöll *Vatnajökull National Park*

Iceland's largest geothermal area meets Europe's largest ice cap. An advanced pick for serious hikers, start your hike at the northeast corner of Vatnajökull. You'll pass between two glacial tongues, famed for the constant volcanic activity below them, threatening eruption. Along the way, visit wild mud pools and hot springs. Kverkfjöll also features the genesis of Jökulsá á Fjöllum, the glacial river from which Dettifoss tumbles in the north. As this route is deep in the Highlands, paths are only accessible July to September. **H14**

Best Road Trip



The Diamond Circle *All around the north*

This powerhouse road trip features the best of the north. Visit Húsavík, famed for its whale-watching tours and Whale Museum. Continue to Ásbyrgi, canyon of the Norse gods. Take in the roaring power of Dettifoss, Europe's most voluminous waterfall. Explore the volcanic region of Lake Mývatn, replete with rare-in-the-world volcanic formations (pseudocraters) and critters (marimo a.k.a. moss balls). As one panellist exulted, "It has been called the Diamond Circle because the landscape is like a multiplication of beauty." **G9-H11**

Runners Up



Dettifoss *Vatnajökull National Park*

The most powerful waterfall in Europe, Dettifoss tumbles 193 m³/s of glacial river over its lip. Our panellists recommend visiting the nearby hexagonal basalt columns at Hljóðaklettur, and the horseshoe-shaped canyon Ásbyrgi. There's a new road, making it more accessible, but check road.is in advance of your visit to be safe. **H10**

Runners Up



Mývatn Nature Baths *Jarðbaðshólar, Mývatn*

The striking blue hue of Mývatn Nature Baths' geothermal water invites calm just by looking at it. This lagoon is situated in the fragile lava ecosystem surrounding Lake Mývatn. While the lagoon itself ranges in temperatures between 36°C to 40°C, the steam baths clock in at 50°C, with near-100% humidity. **H11**

Runner Up



Tröllaskagi *Near Siglufjörður*

With the highest mountains in North Iceland (towering over 1400m), Tröllaskagi offers gorgeous views of the Arctic Ocean and a variety of hiking terrains. For an easy option, consider Svarfaðardalur Nature Reserve as your target destination. Time your hike on summer nights when the sun reaches the surface of the sea. **E9**

Runners Up



The Highlands *Central Iceland*

Accessible only in summer months, the Highlands are a vast volcanic desert populated by glaciers, geothermal hot spots, gushing rivers (some of which you'll have to carefully cross) and stunning mountains. The Kjölur road threads down to the west, and the Sprengisandur east. Both are unpaved: take a rugged 4x4. **All around**



Hveravellir *Kjölur, The Highlands*

Translating from Icelandic as 'Hot Spring Fields,' Hveravellir is a highland wonderland accessible by bus or via summer and winter tours. Enjoy a bath in the natural hot spring as you gaze at sky-blue water and smoking fumaroles. Between the glaciers Hofsökull and Langjökull, this is a geothermal oasis in the volcanic desert. The Kjölur road is only open in summer: check road.is. **C14**



Geosea Sea Baths *Vitaslóð 1, Húsavík*

Bathe in Geosea's geothermally heated seawater with views onto the mountains surrounding Skjálfandi Bay. The serpentine architecture of this spa will invite a supple sigh from your spine as you relax. Skjálfandi Bay is one of the best to spot whales around Iceland, so keep your eyes on the water. **G9**

Easy Option



Leirhnjúkur *Near Mývatn*

Start your hike at Leirhnjúkur Mountain and make your way towards the nature baths in Mývatn. You'll experience hot springs, boiling mud pools and fumaroles in this volcanic region. Our panel says, "The nature completely changes from volcanic fields to green Icelandic trees and nature." Drop by the Nature Baths afterwards!" **H11**



Langanes Peninsula *Northeast Iceland*

The northeasternmost point in Iceland, Langanes translates from Icelandic as "Long Peninsula." This remote region is perfect for watching puffins, gannets, and guillemots live their best seabird lives. You'll even find a ghost town: Skálar! If you're seeking "off the beaten path" as a hallmark of your road trip, Langanes is your answer. **J8**

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

North

The reset button for the soul

Best Tour



Whale Watching

Various providers

Our panellists were unanimous: whale watching in Eyjafjörður or Skjálfandi Bay is the best tour North Iceland has to offer. While nothing is guaranteed, it's possible to spot humpback whales, blue whales, minke whales, dolphins, harbour porpoises and more cetacean life during a cruise on the Arctic Ocean. Seabirds, including puffins, Arctic terns and eider ducks, may also be seen. Boat tours are available from Akureyri, Dalvík, Grenivík, Hauganes, Hjalteyri and the "whale capital" of Húsavík. **Map square: G9**

Runner Up



Askja & Holuhraun by Superjeep

Various providers

A trip to the Askja caldera and the Holuhraun lava field in the volcanic desert is a life-changing experience. Askja is a 50 km² volcanic crater filled with freshwater, forming the deepest lake in the country at 217 metres. Holuhraun is Iceland's youngest lava field, still cooling from the eruption of 2014-15. **H14**

Runner Up



Mývatn Day Tours

Various providers

Book a day trip north of the wall to Lake Mývatn, where 'Game of Thrones' was filmed. On the eastern shore, you can hike through the lava field of Dimmuborgir to an elf church. Krafla volcano is a few kilometres east, as is the stunning Hverir geothermal field, where hot springs, fumaroles and mud pools abound. **G11-H11**

Best Museum or Gallery



The Herring Era Museum

Snorrágata 10, Siglufjörður

The only Icelandic winner of the European Museum Award, the Herring Era Museum in Siglufjörður is Iceland's largest maritime museum. One panellist described The Herring Era Museum as "an amazing artwork, where you are tele-transported to the past and the excitement of the great herring rush in Sigló." Another panellist enthused, "Awesome museum covering 'the herring adventures' that made this small town one of the richest in the world." **B9**

Runners Up



Akureyri Art Museum

Kaupvangsstræti 8-12, Akureyri

Refurbished last year during its 25th anniversary, this world-class art gallery features contemporary exhibitions by local and international artists. In 2019 and 2020, Iceland's Venice Biennale representative Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir (a.k.a. Shoplifter) will exhibit work here. Akureyri Art Museum is also home to AI, an annual international performance art festival. **F11**



The Húsavík Whale Museum

Hafnarstétt 1, Húsavík

The Húsavík Whale Museum is the perfect partner to the town's popular whale watching tours. The museum emphasises North Atlantic whale species through exhibitions on whale evolution, biology and ecology. There is also the option to learn about the history of the whale industry in Iceland. **G9**

Best Bar



R5

Ráðhústorg 5, 600 Akureyri

With an expansive selection of craft beer, R5 is your cozy local in the North. R5 prides itself on its high quality and professionalism, which shines through in the passionate bar staff. Their taps pour a diverse array of ales from Icelandic breweries. Our panel raves that this is the "ideal place to have a beer or wine with friends and just sit down and chat." Time your visit with a weekly concert for an extra treat. **F11**

Runners Up



Akureyri Backpackers

Hafnarstræti 98, Akureyri

Akureyri Backpackers is full of "amazing people and cosy surroundings" according to our panel. With a relaxed and international atmosphere, it's an unpretentious spot to enjoy a cold beverage after a long day of adventuring. In addition to its bar, Backpackers also has affordable accommodation for those seeking the hostel experience. **F11**



Segull 67 Brewery

Vetrarbraut 8-10, Siglufjörður

There are a variety of breweries that offer enticing experiences, including the Beer Spa and Kaldi Brewery. Siglufjörður's Segull 67 is a family-owned craft microbrewery in a renovated fish factory. While not a traditional bar or a place to shoot the shit with locals, our panel raved about the tour and the taste. **B9**

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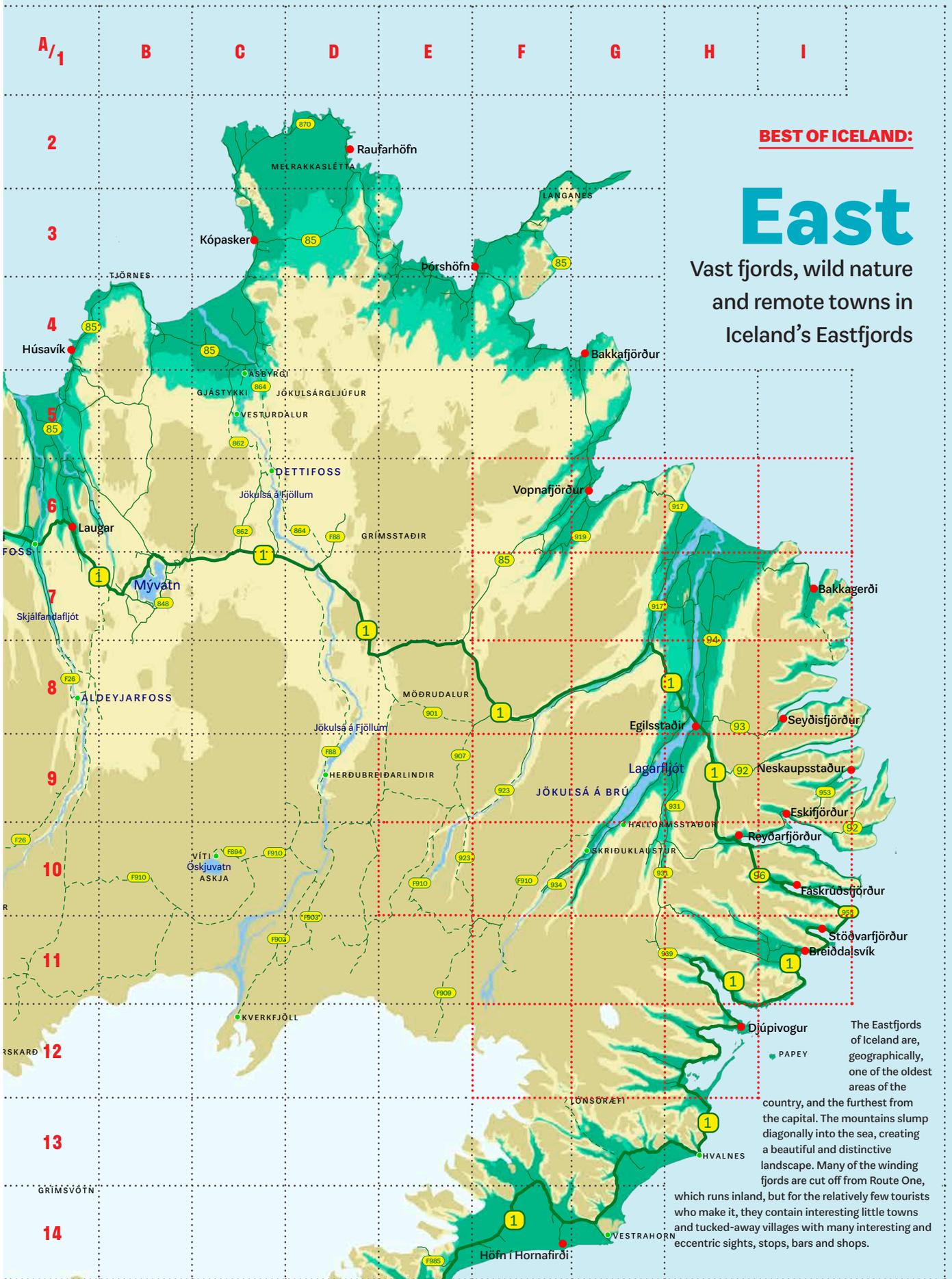
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BEST OF ICELAND:

East

Vast fjords, wild nature and remote towns in Iceland's Eastfjords

The Eastfjords of Iceland are, geographically, one of the oldest areas of the

country, and the furthest from the capital. The mountains slump diagonally into the sea, creating a beautiful and distinctive landscape. Many of the winding fjords are cut off from Route One, which runs inland, but for the relatively few tourists who make it, they contain interesting little towns and tucked-away villages with many interesting and eccentric sights, stops, bars and shops.



Mountain Pass: Öxi

Mountain road, Lagarfjót to Berufjörður

It's closed for much of the winter, so check [road.is](#) before going, but this high mountain dirt road offers some absolutely stunning views of those old, scored, scraped east-coast mountains slanting down into the sea. Grip the wheel tight, take it slow and stop for a break at every viewpoint. Only go if you're in a decent car and up for some white-knuckle driving. **Map square: G10-H11**



Bar: Sirkus

Seyðisfjörður

The legendary Sirkus was Reykjavík's most renowned party bar, and left a gulf in the city's nightlife upon its closure in 2007. However, now it has come back to life in the far eastern outpost of Seyðisfjörður. With the original owner and an energetic crew of new helpers, we're yet to drop by, but we certainly will next time we're out east. For now, be sure to visit if you're in the area. **I8**



Brewpub: Beljandi Brewery

Breiðdalsvík
info: [facebook.com/beljandibrugghus](#)

The countryside isn't famous for its bars, but the fairly recent arrival of Beljandi Brewery is looking to change that. This Breiðdalsvík brew pub more than deserves a visit. The atmosphere is wonderful, the views are amazing and, like the waterfall it's named after, Beljandi keeps the good stuff flowing. If you can't make it out East, visit them at Mathöll Höfða in Reykjavík. **I11**



Forest: Hallormstaðurskógar

Hallormsstaður

The east of Iceland is famous for its forests. While they might not contain any giant redwoods or ancient oaks, there's a spruce, piney selection of woods for you wander through. Un fact, there are woods of various types surrounding the beautiful lake of Lagerfjót, with many hiking trails, picnic spots, cabin villages and campsites to visit. Go get a lungful of oxygen and celebrate our quiet arboreal friends. **G10**



Museum: Petra's Stone Collection

Stöðvarfjörður

Steinasafn Petru is a museum dedicated to the life's work of a late great local of Stöðvarfjörður whose hobby of collecting precious and pretty minerals from the area spawned this vast rock collection. Still run by Petra's descendants, take your time to feel those crystal vibes. On a summer's day, it's a blissful place to hang out. There's a café, a nice garden, and a chance to pick up a stone or two for yourself. **H10-11**



Road Trip: Reyðarfjörður

Route 92 from Reyðarfjörður to Eskifjörður and Neskaupsstaður.

This long fjord holds the small towns of Reyðarfjörður—which has a few surprising apartment blocks for smelter workers—and the more picturesque Eskifjörður. The end of the road is Neskaupsstaður which boasts a great pool, the Hildibrand Hotel, an excellent town museum with a taxidermy diorama and crystal collection, and boat trips out into Norðfjörður. If you end up spending some serious time there, you can take a multi-day hike out into the “abandoned fjords” of the area to truly get away from it all. **H10-19**

USEFUL INFO

Grapevine on the East:
[gpv.is/east](#)
Our articles, info and guides for East Iceland

Tourist Information:
East Iceland Regional Information Centre
700 Egilsstaðir, Iceland
[www.east.is](#)
[info@east.is](#)
Tel: +354 471 2320

Emergency services
Tel: 112 (national helpline)

Weather report
[en.vedur.is](#)
Recorded info: +354 902 0600

HOW TO GET THERE

By domestic airline:

Egilsstaðir (EGS)
Flights from Reykjavík.
Sunnudalsvegur, Egilsstaðir

Main airline operator:
[www.airiceland.is](#)
Tel: +354 424 4020

Smaller airports
Þórshöfn, from Akureyri with Norlandair ([norlandair.is](#))
Hornafjörður, from Reykjavík with Eagle Air ([eagleair.is](#))
Vopnafjörður, from Akureyri with Norlandair ([norlandair.is](#))

By ferry
The Smyril Line Ferry travels between Seyðisfjörður and the Faroe Islands & Denmark once a week
Schedule & Info:
[www.smyrilline.com](#)

By car:
Road conditions
[www.road.is](#)
Tel: 1 777
(Summer hours: 08:00-16:00 / Winter: 06:30-22:00)

By bus:
National Bus Network
[www.bus.is](#)
Tel: + 354 540 2700

SAFETY NOTE

The summer “high season” in Iceland ends on September 1st. Please check [vedur.is/en](#) for weather forecasts and [road.is](#) for driving conditions in the late summer. Some roads close completely when weather is poor. Additional travel alerts can be found at [safetravel.is](#).

OPENING HOURS

Opening hours may vary outside of the summer season, so be sure to check ahead.

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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

East

If west is the best, east is a... feast?

Best Accommodation



Wilderness Centre

Fljótsdalur

Ever wondered how it would be to live like Icelanders of yore? Well, you can experience it at the Wilderness Center. They offer authentic old-style accommodation that sends you back in time—whether you want to become a landowner, a farmer, or just an ordinary person. Every detail has been considered by the charming hosts. There’s a range of trips and activities on offer, and you’ll have access to a bath house with a sauna.

Map square: E10

Fancy Option



Fosshotel Fáskrúðsfjörður
Hafnargata 11-15, Fáskrúðsfjörður

A beautiful, historic hotel in the old hospital in Fáskrúðsfjörður, which was originally built to service French fishermen. Their cultural impact remains in the small museum, and the more-than-decent wine list. The hotel itself is a delight—charming, cosy, and a welcome change from the Nordic minimalist zeitgeist. **I10**

Budget Pick



Hallormsstaðaskógur Campsite
Fjarðarbraut 37a, Stöðvarfjörður

These two campsites—Atlavík and Höfðavík—are located in the largest Icelandic forest, covering an area of 740 hectares, right by the famed Lagarfljót lake. Quiet-seeking travellers can listen to the rich birdlife, walk in the forest, sit on the banks of the lake and look out for the infamous Lagarfljót Worm. Blissful. **I11**

Best Meal



Norð Austur
Nordurgata 2, Seyðisfjörður

This restaurant in the remotely cool fjord is reputed to make the best sushi in Iceland. This is what happens when you import expert chefs from overseas and let them run wild with fresh Icelandic seafood. “The sizzling salmon, served on a hot stone, was so good I almost cried,” said the panel. It’s worth the drive from Egilsstaðir to enjoy this quality cuisine—local fisherman deliver unusual catches to the restaurant, so expect some curious specials. Summer only—check ahead for opening hours. **I8**

Runners Up



Vallanes Organic Farm
Vallanes, Egilsstaðir

Home of Móðir Jörð, the Icelandic brand that produces organic vegetable-based products. The food is always fresh, tasty, local, vegetarian or vegan, and seasonal. Enjoy it in a newly built house made entirely of Icelandic wood, or in the greenhouse whilst chatting with the owners. **G9**



Síreksstaðir Farm
Síreksstaðir, Sunnudalur

At this family-run farm restaurant, every dish on the menu is made up of fresh homegrown vegetables and free range meat. Their organic home-cooked meals are made with love—and also some serious know-how. “Happy just tastes better,” enthused the panel. **F7**

Must-See Spot



Mjóifjörður
Mjóifjörður, Fjarðabyggð

One of the most remote fjords in the East, the drive to Mjóifjörður is an adventure in itself. Following the steep slopes down to a tiny village of about 20 inhabitants also provides you with astonishing views of the surrounding mountains and the beautiful Klifbrekkufossar waterfalls. Also highly recommended is a trip to the Dalatangi lighthouse. Don’t rush it: life out East is slow, so sink into the rhythm and enjoy it all the more. Check road.is in advance. **I7**

Runner Up



Kárahnjúkar Dam
The Highlands

It’s not the most beautiful place in Iceland, but seeing the country’s largest and most notorious hydroelectric dam is an impressive and sobering experience. After driving across a dusty Highland desert (summer only, of course), the hard lines of the dam appear from the wilderness like a remnant of a lost civilisation. **E10**



Hellisheiði Eystri
Off Route One towards Vopnafjörður

This road is not for the faint-hearted, the off-season, or reckless drivers—but if you’re prepared to cry your eyes out for a good view, this is a must. The dirt track crosses some alarmingly high scree slopes, and on a clear day offers views north all the way to Langanes, and south over to the glorious Dyrfjöll. Check safetravel.is and road.is in advance. **H13**



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

East

Never go to the Highlands in a Yaris

Best Bathing Spot



Laugarvalladalur Geothermal Pool

Laugarvalladalur Valley

It's always nice to take a dip in a natural hot pool, but this bathing spot takes the experience to the next level. In what feels like the middle of nowhere, is this green oasis with a natural geothermal pool and stream. Not only can you sit in hot water and chill (not literally), you can even take a shower under the hot waterfall! It's quite a challenge to get to, but so worth it. **Map square: E10**

Runner Up



Selárlaug
Selárdalur, Vopnafjörður

This remote country pool is like a time capsule. It feels like the quintessential old-school Icelandic pool. You have to drive there, and it's perched on the edge of a gushing river—the changing rooms, pool and hot pots are basic and unpretentious, but it's just unforgettable. **G6**

Runner Up



Neskaupstaður Pool
Miðstræti 23, Neskaupstaður

Neskaupstaður pool is small, but it has everything you need—a steam room, hot pots and a swimming pool—with the added bonus of an epic mountain view right across the fjord. Also, the town is so quiet it's never crowded, so ease your worries away as chilled out locals chit-chat around you. **I10**

Best Hike



Stóruð
Borgarfjörður eystri

This hike, starting from Vatnsskarð, takes approximately 6 hours to complete. After a long trek up the valley, you come to a stunning maze of huge broken rocks that have tumbled down from Dyrfjöll, leaving a vast horseshoe-shaped cleft in the mountains above. The biggest reward, though, is Stóruð itself—gigantic boulders surrounded by unearthly turquoise water. It's one of the most striking places in all of Iceland. Summer months only. **I7**

Easy Option



Waterfall Lane
Seyðisfjörður

From Seyðisfjörður town, hike through some pleasant countryside to the Neðri-Stafur rock stratum, passing lots of beautiful waterfalls. "You ascend a series of cliffs, like a staircase made for a giant," said the panel. At the top, you get a stunning view of Seyðisfjörður. Try to reach Vestdalsvatn lake, which is frozen almost year-round. **I8**

Advanced option



Víknaulóðir
Borgarfjörður Eystri to Seyðisfjörður

If you're up for an ambitious five-day hike, this "trail of the inlets" has all the awe-inspiring scenery you could want. This epic hike winds its way around deserted coves, less-travelled valleys and abandoned fjords of the impressive and undulating East Iceland coastline, delivering you to the lovely town of Seyðisfjörður. **I8-I9**

Best Road Trip



Borgarfjörður Eystri
Borgarfjörður Eystri, Eastfjords

This drive is as scenic as it is pleasant. You start off driving towards the wide black beach of Sandur, curving right into the mountains; soon, you're looking down across the East Iceland coastline from high above. You swoop down into an all-but abandoned valley, where there are a few interesting stops, before winding around a sheer scree slope on a dirt track, arriving at one of the cutest towns in Iceland as your reward. Check road.is in advance. **I7**

Runners Up



Möðrudalsöræfi
Route One, Eastfjords to North East

Whatever the weather or the time of day or night, this area will always be enchantingly or hauntingly beautiful. "I drive this route regularly and it never gets boring," said the panel. "Suddenly you're in the Highlands—usually all by yourself—and you realise it's just you and the trolls up there." **E8**

Easy Option



Öxi & Lagarfjót
Route 939, Berufjörður to Lagarfjót

During the summer months, ascending the steep peaks of the Öxi pass from Berufjörður is breathtaking, adrenaline-inducing, and not for the faint of heart. Descending to Lagarfjót, you can use the remaining daylight to circle the lake or drive to the Kárahnjúkar dam, checking out the Laugarfell hot pot on the way. **G11**



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

East

Where the mountains slump into the sea

Best Tour



Wilderness Centre

Fljótsdalur

This fantastic base camp has it all—accommodation in a beautifully renovated, historic house, a restaurant, a museum, and best of all, warm hosts who'll help you fill your time with anything from stargazing to bike-rides, hikes, or driving up into the Highlands. They offer day tours, escorted adventures and tailor made trips to all the sites and activities of this tucked away corner of East Iceland. It's also the perfect base camp between excursions. **Map square: F10**

Runner Up



Sea Kayaking
Seyðisfjörður

Experience this gorgeous fjord from the water. "I did a tour a few years ago and it was the most calming and wonderful experience," said the panel. "The sun was shining and the fjord was like a glass of still water." Pick a nice day and you're in for a real treat. **I8**

Runner Up



Papey Sailing
Djúpivogur

Tours on the Gísli í Papey ferry are offered daily throughout the summer. The trip takes you to Papey Island, with its bird-cliffs and seals, and the possibility to hike up to see the oldest and smallest wooden church in the country. It's great for a relaxed and easy going afternoon tour. **H12**

Best Museum/Gallery



Skaftfell
Austurvegur 42, Seyðisfjörður

This far-flung cultural outpost maintains a year-round arts programme in a tiny eastern town, with a surprising and cutting-edge programme that relates to the town's artistic history. It's probably the best place in the East to see some contemporary art from both local and international artists. On the ground floor, there is also a café-bistro-bar with great pizzas, local beers and a small library. There's an events programme with lectures and concerts in the summertime, too. **I8**

Runners Up



Snæfellsstofa
Skriðuklaustur, Egilsstaðir

This visitor centre located in the first BREEAM certified—meaning it's sustainably built—building in Iceland offers a great exhibition about the Eastern part of the Vatnajökull National Park, and its fauna, flora and geological development. It's a perfect place to spend a rainy day and organize your trip as the staff is always ready to give advice. **H8**



Bustarfell
Bustarfell, Hofsaárdalur

Just outside Vopnafjörður, is this really informative and charming little museum. It's a window into the lives of many generations who lived and worked on the farm and it's run by the last generation who lived there. "And they have stories, I tell ya," said the panel. **F7**

Best Café



Fjóshornið
Egilsstaðir 1, Egilsstaðir

When you have high coffee standards, sometimes you desire more than the basic drip variety, which is often the only option in the East. But at Fjóshornið, they know how to make the good stuff. The atmosphere is more than welcoming, you can sit either inside in a cosy "living room" or on the sunny terrace. The selection of home-made cakes is great, and the place is also a dairy farm, so you can take home some fresh skyr, cheese or meat. **H8**

Runners Up



Klausturkaffi
Fljótsdalsvegur, Skriðuklaustur

This curious little café worth a stop because of their outstanding cake buffet. You can eat as much of the delicious home-made cake and freshly fried kleinur as you please from the buffet table, and there are savoury delicacies on offer, too. The lunch buffet will fill you up for the rest of your road trip. **G10**



Havari
Nr. Djúpivogur, Berufjörður

Havari is a farmstead run by the singer of Prins Póló Svavar Pétur Eysteinnsson and his wife Berglind Hasler. Their fun spirit runs through Havari, which is a hostel, working farm, music venue, and fantastic little café with snacks, cakes and soups. Sleep there, party there, eat there—the decision is yours. **H11**

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