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AN INTRODUCTION

The Season Of Ice Approaches...

There was once a time when winter in Iceland was the off-season. Visitors to Iceland during the darker, colder season were barely a trickle until just a few years ago.

Today, of course, the situation is totally different, as people from around the world come to Iceland in the winter, and not just for the northern lights. There are numerous activities to engage in—hiking, sightseeing, dining and such—all through this season, so it's no wonder that the phrase "tourist season" holds little meaning anymore.

At the same time, it's undeniable that there are significantly fewer visitors, but that's a plus for those who do arrive. Lines are shorter, as are wait times, and group tours can be smaller, more intimate affairs.

All this said, not every place is as accessible in the winter as it is in the summer. For this reason, we've provided two handy markers for you. If you see a **yellow badge** by an entry in this issue, it means

that access may be difficult depending on the weather, and opening hours may be sporadic. If you see a **red badge**, it means this area is either completely inaccessible in the winter or only accessible with an experienced, expert guide.

No matter the destination, before you hit the road, do take a minute or two to visit **en.vedur.is** to check on weather conditions, and **road.is** for road conditions. Taking the brief moment to check these sites ahead of time can save you considerable time, energy and money. Even your lives.

Lastly, we want to thank you for being amongst the more ambitious visitors to Iceland during the wintertime. Our country is magic all year round, but it's a special treat to visit in the ice season.

Andie Fontaine

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BEST OF ICELAND EMBLEM
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Welcome



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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

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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, on your way around the country. They indicate your best option, whatever you're looking for in the far-flung corners of Iceland. We at the Grapevine know what's best!



Look Out For These Badges In The Magazine

ALERT!

When you see this red badge, this route, hike or attraction is totally inaccessible for large parts of the winter (often roughly considered to be November-April). Don't travel without checking for info via road.is and checking in with local tourist information services.

SEEK LOCAL INFO

A yellow badge means that an establishment's opening hours might be sporadic; that a tour company may offer seasonal alternatives; or that hiking routes and nature sites may be closed due to adverse conditions. Check in advance for info from the locals who know.

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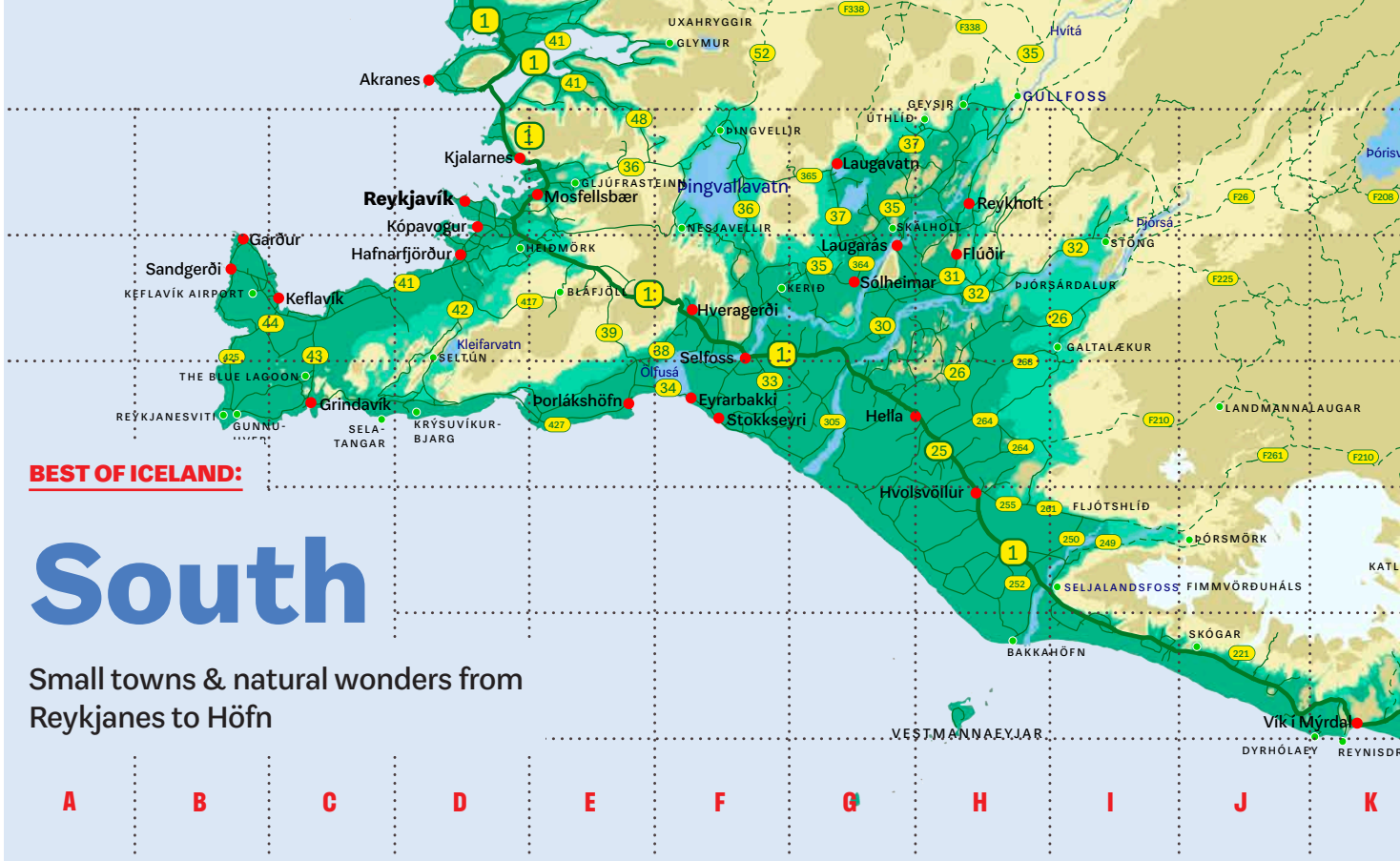
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BEST OF ICELAND:

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 Gunnhver 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.

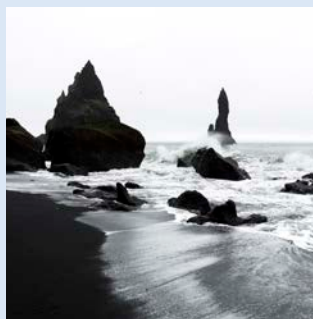
Map Square: B3 to D2



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**



DC-3 Plane Wreck

Sólheimasandur
Further Info: south.is

The famous ghostly DC-3 plane wreck sits on the beach, surrounded by the black sand of Sólheimasandur. The aircraft was once that of the U.S. Navy until its untimely demise in 1973. There's a few ways to visit the famous site: You can join a hiking, horseback riding, or ATV tour, or do the 45 minute walk yourself. While it's an easy jaunt in the summer, it can often get slippery in the winter, so be vigilant with staying on the path. If you can't catch the plane though, you can always check it out in the Justin Bieber video. **J5**



**Distance from
Reykjavík:**
300 km

How to get there:
Take route 1 south,
turn onto route 206

Tour provided by:
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South

A Lassie On Laki

Intern Josie takes us on another mountainous adventure. This time, there's pizza.



Words: **Josie Gaitens** Photos: **Art Bicnick**

What do the French Revolution, national bard of Scotland Robert Burns, and Iceland all have in common? The answer is Laki—a volcanic fissure in the south of Iceland that was responsible for an eight-month long eruption that began in June 1783 and ultimately, the deaths of thousands of people worldwide. In other words, the perfect location for a lovely countryside jaunt.

Early start (again...)

Laki, which is actually a mountain bisected by the Lakagigar volcanic fissure, is located in the Highlands and is therefore only accessible during the summer and only by 4WD. One of the best, and more relaxing ways to see the area—if you don't fancy stressful river navigations in your rental car—is to book a super jeep tour. Also, then you can tell all your friends you've

been in a super jeep.

Our tour set off from Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 8:45am, which unfortunately for us meant leaving Reykjavík at 5am. I think my editors are under the impression that I don't require sleep, which I would like to make clear is decidedly not the case. Luckily, the meeting point was the gas station, meaning we could load up on more than enough caffeine and pylsur to satisfy even the hungriest of journalists, and pick up a packed lunch for the long day ahead.

World-changing eruption

The drive from Kirkjubæjarklaustur to the base of Laki takes just over an hour, during which our knowledgeable driver pointed out local sites and explained the history of what was one of the largest eruptions on record. During the

eruption, 14 cubic kilometers of basalt lava was produced, which, if you're not great at visualising these things, is a fucking lot. In addition to this, a bunch of very unpleasant gasses were released into the atmosphere, creating a mist known as the 'Laki Haze' which floated over Europe causing widespread disease, crop failure and famine. It is this effect that is credited with instigating the French Revolution and, more weirdly, Robert Burns' poetic output. But some impacts of the disaster were far more obvious. An estimated 25% of Iceland's human population and 75% of animals were wiped out in the aftermath of the eruption.

Driving through the lava fields, it is easy to get a sense of the scale of the catastrophe. It's also easy to see how life returns to an area once devastated by lava flow, as the bumpy plains are covered with soft, pale green moss, lending the

“This effect is credited with instigating the French Revolution and, more weirdly, Robert Burns’ poetic output.”

landscape Iceland’s characteristic other-worldly feel.

Going up

At the base of Laki mountain we were greeted by a friendly ranger. The area in which the fissure is located now forms part of the huge Vatnajökull National Park, so guides are on hand at various points to provide visitors with information and to make sure the rules are adhered to. These are, predominantly, stick to the goddamn trails. I’m looking at you, Justin Bieber.

The first hike of the day was to the top of Laki. The path was at times steep and slippery but well maintained, with crude stone steps placed along some of the more challenging stretches. Hiking boots are essential, but the trail is suitable for less experienced walkers. The view from the top takes in both Mýrdalsjökull and Vatnajökull glaciers, as well as the 25km long chain of craters that make up the eruption site. The weather in the Highlands can be quite erratic, but although the wind was punishing, the sky was clear and we were blessed with excellent visibility.

Celebrity spots

From Laki we made our way through the Highlands towards the south, stopping at various points for short hikes and photo opportunities. My favourite walk was around the water-filled Tjarnargígur crater. The bright blue lake against the surrounding dark

volcanic rock and pale moss looked incredible.

But the final stop of the day was by far the most famous, and that’s thanks to a completely different type of natural disaster. The beautiful Fjaðrárgljúfur canyon has become one of the most photographed places in Iceland in recent years, and all because of one particular

man-child and his penchant for traipsing through rivers in his underwear. That’s right, Justin Bieber, I’m still looking at you. After the Biebs’ famous video for ‘I’ll show you’, tourists flocked to the valley to check out the celebrity spot. As a result, much of the surrounding landscape has been damaged by the sudden rise in foot traffic and park authorities had to rush to build proper trails and fences. Fjaðrárgljúfur is the only place in Iceland where I have seen barbed wire, which is pretty sad. Some things are just not worth a selfie, kids.

The drive back to Kirkjubæjarklaustur was a short one, during which our guide, seemingly having

run out of volcano facts, regaled us with tales of celebrities he had ferried about in the jeep. Even more of an incentive to take the tour, if you particularly want to have the opportunity to have sat in the same vehicle as Anne Hathaway.

We finished off the day with a well-deserved pizza in Systrakaffi, because it is a well-known rule that all volcanic adventures should end with pizza. And besides, as I have made abundantly clear, nobody likes a hangry journalist. 🍕



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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. Granted, it's only open during the summer, but taking away its crown for this issue felt disingenuous. The restaurant is 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, Örfæfi

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 lopapeysa 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
Eyrvævegur 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



Svartifoss

Skaftafell National Park

It may not be the biggest in Iceland, but Svartifoss is without a doubt an iconic waterfall. Located in Skaftafell National Park, the 45-minute walk to get to the waterfall is enchanting, and seeing these surreal, stunning basalt columns flanking the graceful cascade of Svartifoss is truly breathtaking in person. In the winter, Svartifoss takes on a whole new appearance; framed in bare trees, highlighted with snow, encased in the comforting silence of a winter's day. No matter the snow and ice conditions, the walk to Svartifoss is easy to navigate. **Map square: O2**

Runner Up



Jökulsárlón

Vatnajökull National Park

This icy lagoon is a true wonder. The effects of climate change have been very visible in recent years and the size of the icebergs have greatly diminished, but it's worth seeing while one has the chance. Take public or group transport to reduce your environmental impact. **Q2**

Runner Up



Svínafellsjökull

Vatnajökull National Park

After a bumpy drive up to the viewpoint, you arrive at the edge of the Svínafellsjökull glacier. Sitting quietly on the hill with a stunning view over the rich blue ice of the glacier tongue, this place brings a sense of true zen and an endless feeling of contemplation. **P2**

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



Sundlaugin 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



Reykjadalur

Hveragerði

Located just a 40-minute drive from Reykjavik near Hveragerði, this is one of the most popular hiking trails in Iceland. An hour-long hike (you'll need crampons, hiking poles and probably a guide in winter) brings you to the Reykjadalur valley, which has a warm geothermal stream running down its centre. Steam billows up into the air, making it a truly mystical spot, and the hike has the added reward of a dip at the end. In summer, Iceland has longer and grander hikes, but in winter, this is the perfect length. **F2**

Runners Up



Eldfell

Vestmannaeyjar

This hulking volcano became one of the most infamous in the world when it erupted suddenly and unexpectedly in 1973, forcing an evacuation of the Westman island and engulfing part of the town. The easy 40-minute hike to the summit crosses ash plains and bright red, orange, white and maroon volcanic rocks, to deliver a dramatic view. **H5**



Dórsmörk

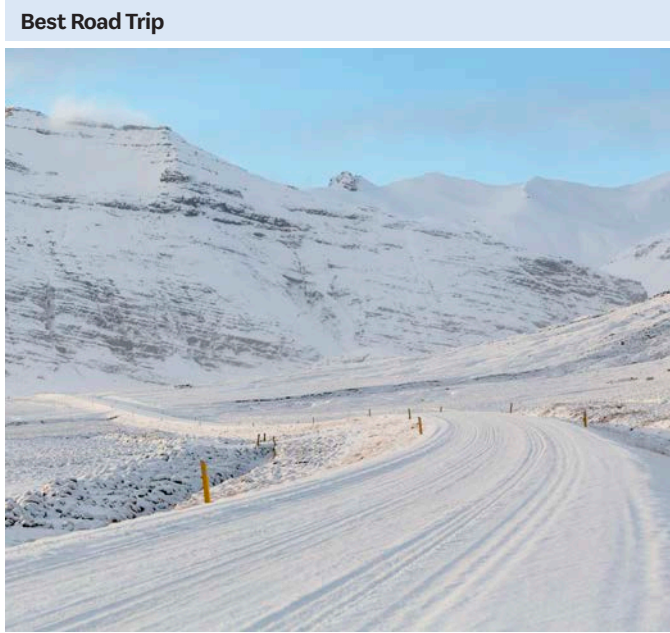
Highlands. Road F261

This huge area of hiking trails encompasses a number of hikes from short climbs to multi-day adventures. Some circuits are relaxed and low impact for inexperienced hikers. In winter, it's a very remote and hard to get to place, so only visit on a guided tour. **J4**

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

South

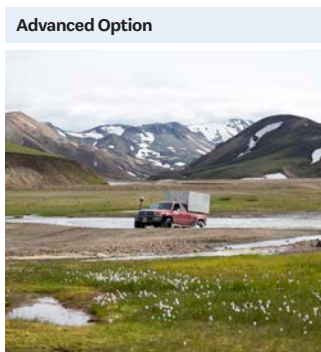
Over volcanoes and under a glacier



The South Coast

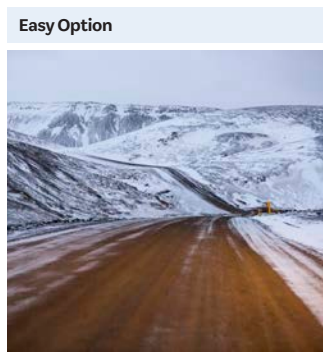
Route One South

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**



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**



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



Ice Cave Tour
Vatnajökull

Close to Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon, the ice caves of Vatnajökull are a sight to behold. As the summer meltwater begins to freeze, the caves assume new shapes, each in its own unique way. When it has recently snowed, the textured walls are breathtaking. Don't forget your camera or your warmest clothes. **D2**

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 Þríhnjúkagígur 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.

Browse these tours and more at **gotravel.is** 

LÁ ART MUSEUM



ICELAND
MUSEUM AWARD
2018

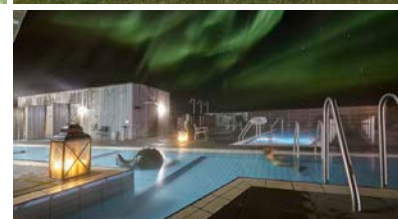
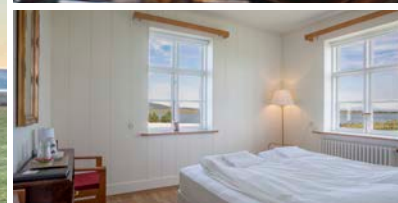
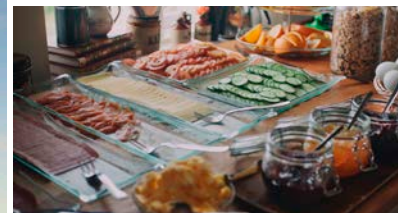
- Modern and contemporary art
- Art books to browse
- Activity centre for children
- A small Café
- Admission free of charge

 **LÁ ART MUSEUM**
Austurmörk 2
Hveragerði
listasafnarnesinga.is

Opening hours in winter:
Thursday - Sunday 12 - 6 pm
Closed December 17th - January 12th

 
[listasafnarnesinga](https://www.facebook.com/listasafnarnesinga)

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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**

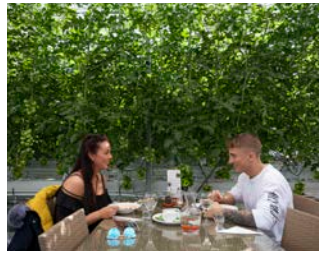
Runner Up



Listasafn Árnesinga
Austurmörk 21, Hveragerði

The Listasafn Árnesinga 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**

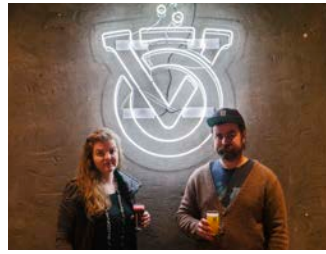
Newcomer



Farmers Bistro
Garðastígur 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**

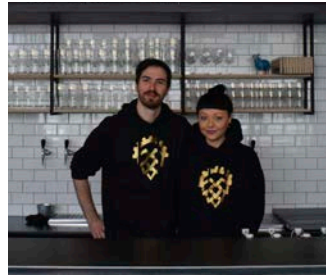
Runners Up



The Brothers Brewery
Vestmannaeyjabær

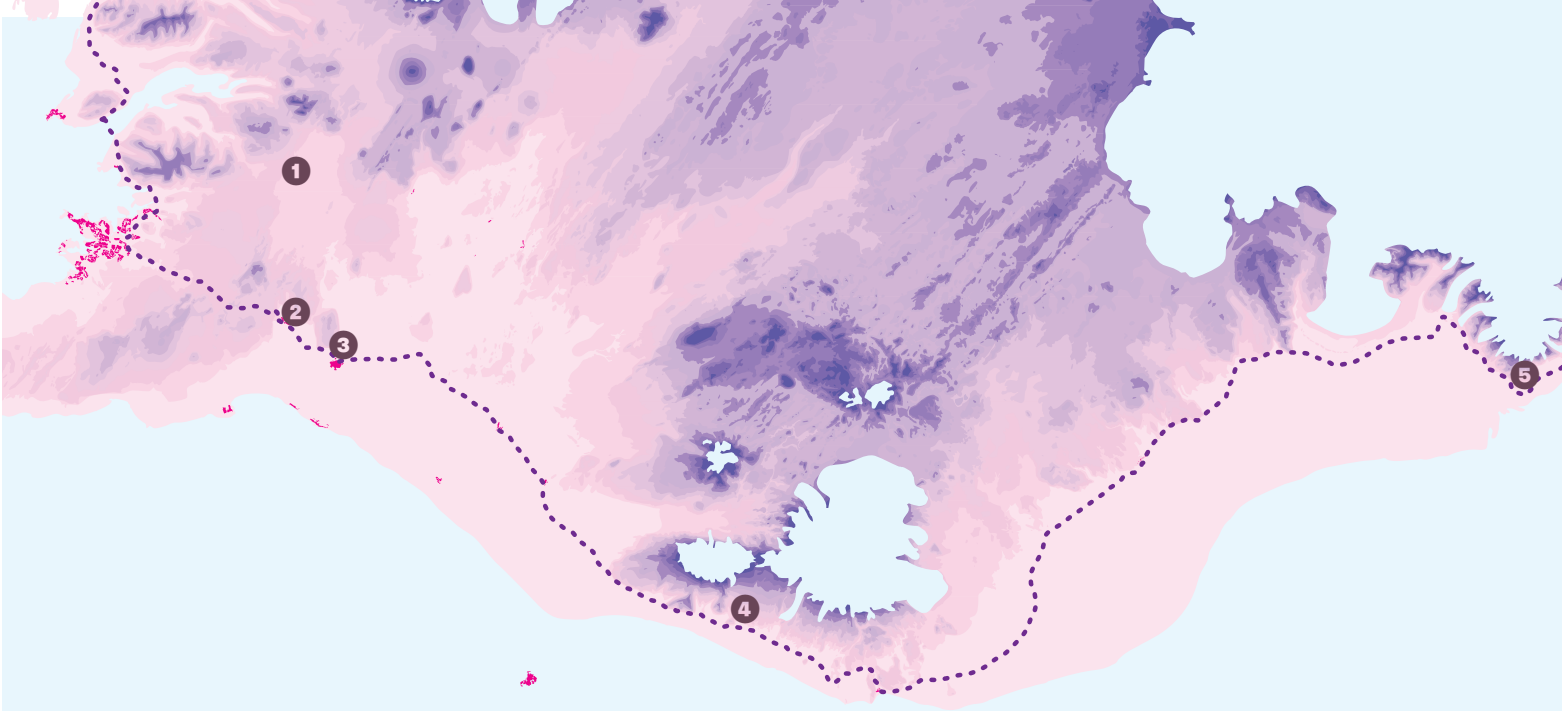
Started by a couple of friends and their brothers in 2012, this small brewery has started pumping out a selection of great small-batch beers and recently expanded into bottling. It's a friendly, genial experience and they offer a tour-and-tasting for a great price. **H5**

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

Can you imagine how it is to live in a cave? Well less than 100 years ago a normal Icelandic family did!

The caves have now been renovated and look the way they did when the last cave dwellers in Iceland lived there only a Century ago.

Join us in a Guided tour in the Caves and their Surroundings and we will bring the story to life with amazing tales about how they lived, their struggles and their happiness.



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: fischersetur.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 Skákkfélag 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 personal 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,

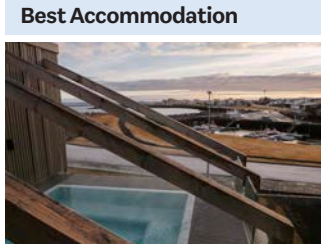
or if you are a more adventurous explorer with some experience on glaciers, we hope you will enjoy a trip with us.

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

BEST OF ICELAND 2019

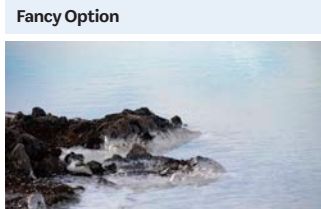
Reykjanes

The name means “Smokey Nose.” Promise!



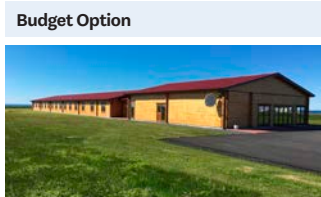
Best Accommodation
Hotel Berg
Bakkavegur 17, Keflavík

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**



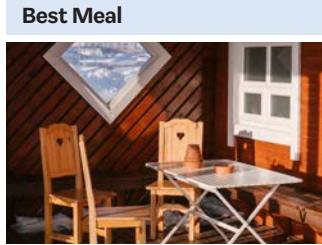
Fancy Option
The Retreat
The Blue Lagoon, Grindavík

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**



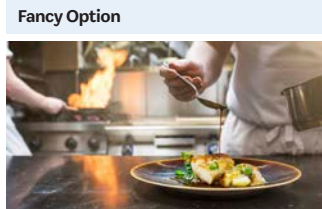
Budget Option
Lighthouse Inn
Garður

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 Garður’s twin lighthouses. 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**



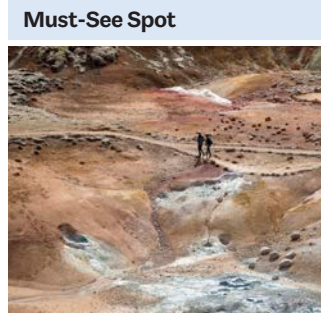
Fancy Option
Moss
The Blue Lagoon

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**



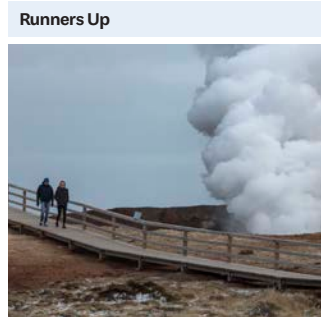
Runner Up
Papa’s Restaurant
Hafnargata 7a, Grindavík

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 there 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**



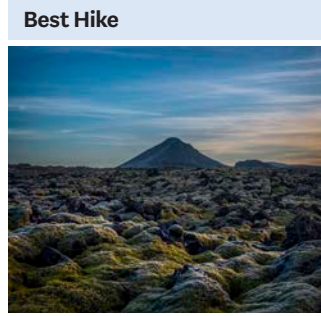
Runners Up
Gunnhver & Reykjanesviti
Reykjanesbær, Route 425

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**



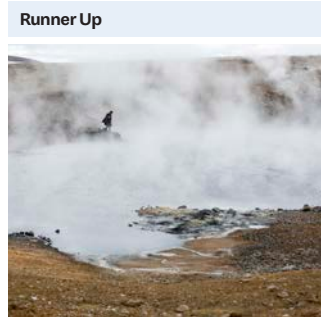
Easy Option
Hópsnes
Grindavík

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**



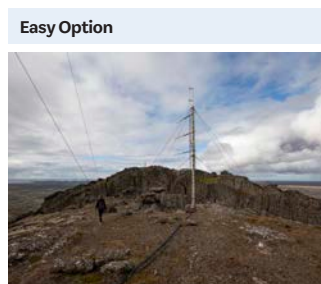
Best Hike
Keilir
Reykjanesbær, Route 41

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
Þorbjörn
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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„Red Hot Lava Soup“



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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

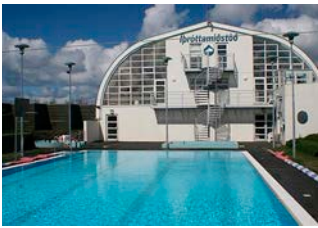
Runners Up



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 taxidermied 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

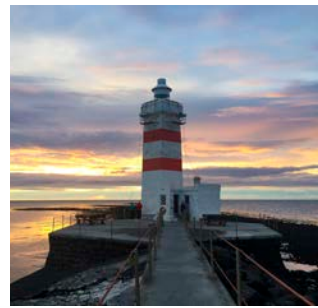


Hjá Höllu

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

Garðskagi, Garður

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**



Open
daily

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Take a taxi or bus no. 55

Rokksafn
Íslands

The Icelandic Museum of Rock 'n' Roll
For more go to www.rokksafn.is

hjá höllu

Fresh Healthy Local

Hjá Höllu is a cozy restaurant located in the town of Grindavík where you can enjoy many healthy dishes in just five minute drive from the Blue Lagoon. Fresh fish from the harbour, chicken, salad and vegetarian/vegan options.



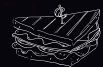
We are also located in Keflavík Airport where you can get a healthy meal to enjoy or take away in time before your flight.



Wood-oven pizza
ready 5 minutes

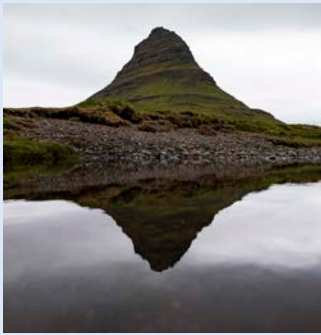


Fresh local
health food



Healthy meal
for your flight





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**



Restaurant: Skúrinn

Aðalgata 25, Stykkishólmur
Tel: +354 544 4004

Skúrinn is an all-are-welcome comfort joint. The cosy Stykkishólmur haunt boasts nachos, milkshakes, and some of the best burgers in Iceland. Try the Senior Citizen, seriously. With low prices, a homey atmosphere, and friendly staff, it’s light on the wallet while still yummy in the tummy. **D11**



Beach: Djúpalónssandur

Snæfellsnes National Park
Tel: +354 435 6680

This black pebble beach, which is supposedly haunted, and also has an elf church, was the site of a shipwreck that took the lives of 14 British sailors in 1948. You can still find rusted metal fragments from the accident scattered all over the beach. The drive there is also stunning, going directly through a lava field. Keep your eyes peeled: You might see some trolls. **B12**



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**



Church: Hellnarkirkja

Hellnar, Snæfellsnes
Info: west.is

With a year-round population of fewer than ten people, it’s difficult to say how many people use Hellnar’s church. It’s a somewhat spooky building—the type of small-town church you usually see in horror movies. That said, the strangeness of it only adds to its beauty. Inside, you’ll be met by a bright blue ceiling and chandelier. Make sure to take a stroll around the lumpy cemetery before you sit in the bright red pews. **B12**

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
Recorded info: +354 902 0600

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:
175 km

How to get there:
Route One North, Route 54

Car provided by:
gocarrental.is

West

Good Weather Not Needed

Exploring the Snæfellsnes peninsula in autumn

Words: **Josie Gaitens** Photos: **Art Bicnick**

Autumn. An elusive season in Iceland, it briefly makes an appearance as the endless summer days draw to a close, and before it's necessary to don full polar survival gear to leave the house. While the American name is less relevant—there aren't many trees for leaves to 'fall' from—those who dismiss travelling at this time of year are missing out on one of the most beautiful iterations of Icelandic scenery. Sure, the weather might not be as reliable as during the summer months, but seek out the right spots and you will be rewarded with a countryside alive with colour—at least, that's what I found on my recent autumnal jaunt

to Snæfellsnes.

A hidden gem

Off of the main 'Ring Road,' Snæfellsnes is sometimes overlooked by visitors. And yet, it showcases many of the elements that Iceland is famed for—hot springs, black sand beaches, dramatic sea cliffs, waterfalls, majestic mountains, and more.

Our first stop was the natural hot spring Landbrotalaug. Set in the most idyllic location, with the Eldborg volcanic crater as a backdrop, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more beautiful spot to take a dip. The original hot pot is very small, with only

room for a couple of people, but at the other side of the small lake are a few pools fed by piped spring water. There are no changing facilities and a lot of mud, but somehow the rustic feel makes the whole experience better. Lying in the hot water, with the hills around us ablaze in colour, we rejoiced at the gentle rain misting our faces.

Kanye West?

Slightly damp, and significantly soothed, we headed along the southern edge of the peninsula, briefly stopping at the photogenic black church Búðakirkja, before continuing further along the road, where a window in the weather allowed us to take a walk up Rauðfeldsgjá gorge. This dramatic crack in the world is thought to be the place that inspired Jules Verne when writing 'Journey To The Centre Of The Earth.' The famous novel begins on Snæfellsjökull, the glacier that perches high on the western tip of the peninsula. On a clear day, it's visible from Reykjavík, but we only caught half glimpses of it through the heavy cloud cover, despite it being right above us.

The appeal of Snæfellsnes is not limited to its natural beauty, however. A thriving arts scene also exists here, and no place is this more accessible than Hellissandur. Once a busy fishing town, the village has experienced a significant decline in fortunes over the years. Hellissandur native and owner of the Freezer Hostel in nearby Rif, Kári Viðarsson, had a vision about how to revamp the town's image. Over the last couple of years, in connection with organisation Artrvl, visiting international artists have adorned the walls of the abandoned fish factory and other buildings with colourful murals depicting local stories, Icelandic folklore, native wildlife—and, surprisingly, Kanye West.

We made the most of the rapidly dimming light to take in a couple more spots before heading home. Djúpalónssandur beach—normally rammed with tourists in the summertime—was deserted, bleak and beautiful. We watched the seabirds wheeling in the wind and cheered the waves as they crashed into the black basalt cliffs. Weather dependent? Weather independent, more like. 🍷

“Lying in the hot water, with the hills around us ablaze in colour, we rejoiced at the gentle rain misting our faces.”








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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**

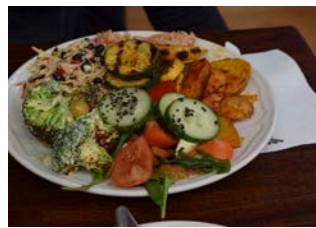
Runner Up



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 Reykjavik 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**

Book these recommended tours and more at

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Must-See Spot



Flatey
Breiðafjörður

During the summer months, Flatey is the embodiment of the season—all wildflowers and ocean breezes. But it's well worth a visit during the winter, if you're looking to truly get away from it all. 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

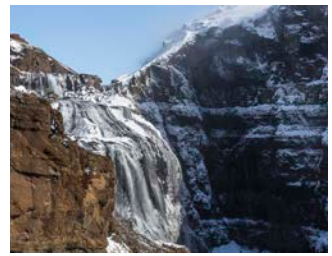
All of Iceland's glaciers are magnificent, but Snæfellsjökull is something else. It glows. It beckons you to gaze upon its majesty. You cannot say you've been to West Iceland unless you've basked in its glory, or, better still, booked a tour to the top of the glistening leviathan to explore it up close. **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 198m, and it is a real gem of the oft-overlooked or bypassed Hvalfjörður. Be warned—it's no stroll in the park and can potentially be dangerous in the winter. The hike is a four-hour round trip on uneven terrain, and requires a stream crossing. Sturdy hiking boots and a decent level of physical fitness are required, but the payoff is, as our panel puts it, "Breathhtaking!" **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

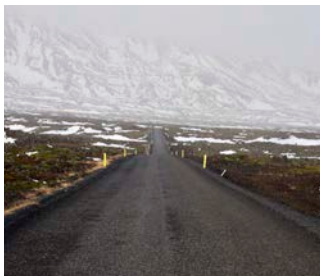
This trek up a volcano isn't for beginners, but, as the panel exclaimed, "Oh my, those views!" Your hike begins near the base of the bridge running across the fjord from Borgarnes, and will take you to a height of 844m. It can be windy, so check the forecast before lacing up your boots. **E13**

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
Bókhöðustigur 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**

Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum
Bjarnarhöfn

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. **C11**

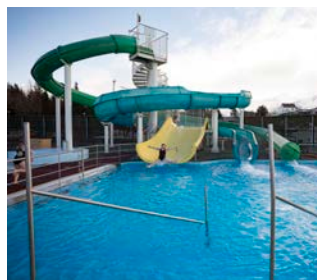
Best Bathing Spot



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
Langisandur, 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



Blíomasetrið
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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Krauma offers five relaxing natural geothermal baths, a cold tub, two steambaths and a relaxation room where you can rest by the fireplace.

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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**



Café: Gamla Bakarið

Aðalstræti 25, Ísafjörður
Tel: +354 456 3226

Gamla Bakarið deserves a mention for being one of the oldest bakeries in all of Iceland, not just the Westfjords. It's a great place to stop for breads, pastries, and baked goods. But they are especially famed for their kringlur: pretzel-like rolls flavored with cumin-seeds. If you're looking to get a taste of old Iceland, sit down for a coffee, cake, and some prime people-watching. Don't forget to take a picture with the ancient car parked in front. **C6**

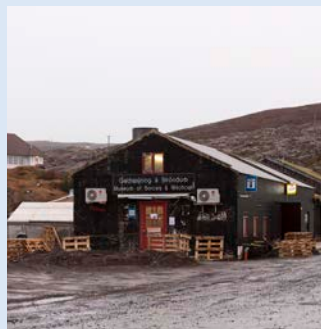


Place: Djúpavík



Strandir, Route 643
Info: djupavik.is

Djúpavík is a far-flung and breathtaking 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
info@westiceland.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:

Ísafjörður (IFJ)
Domestic flights to and from Reykjavík.

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

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

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 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

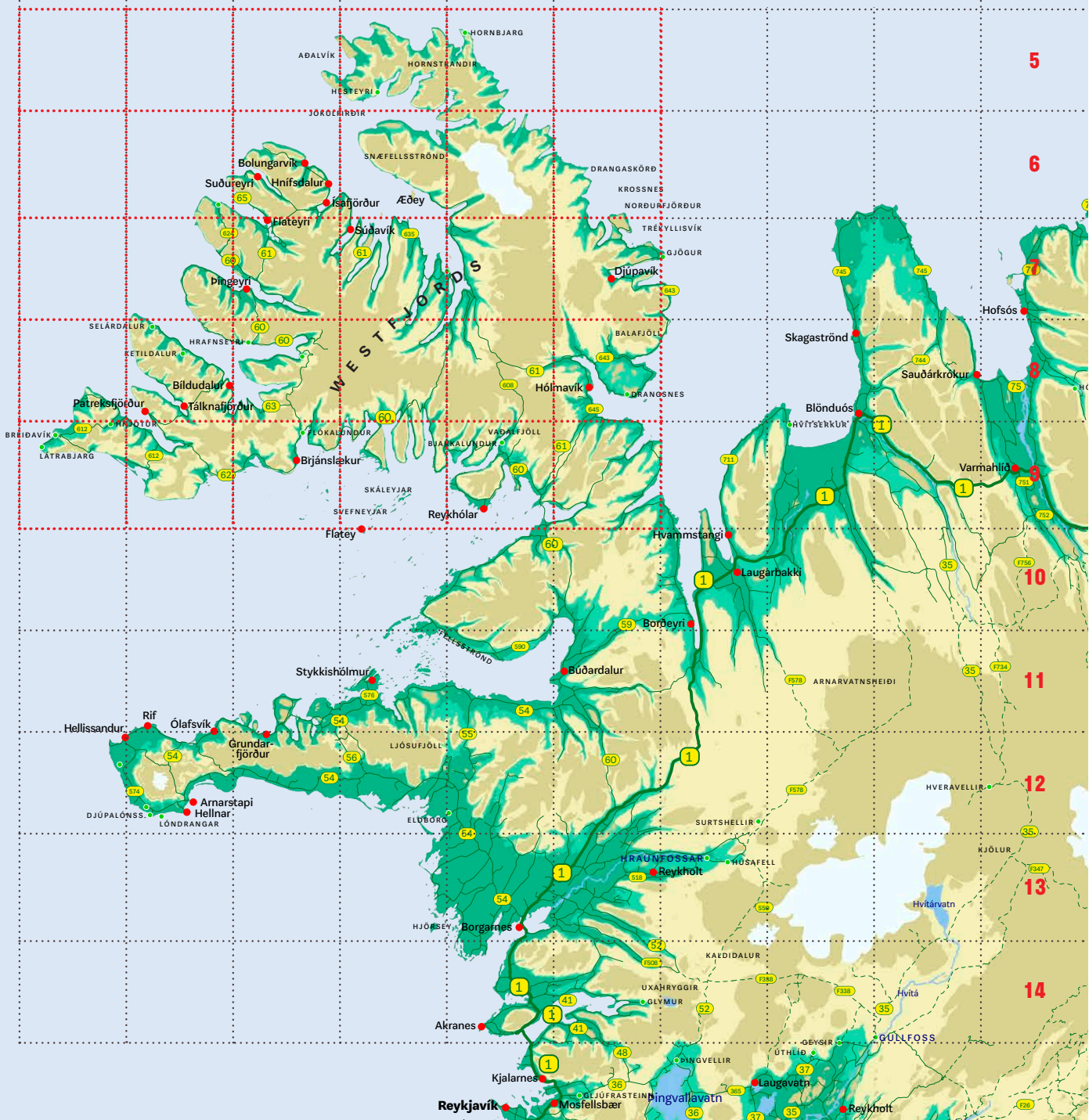
Opening hours may vary outside of the summer season, so be sure to check ahead.

BEST OF ICELAND:

Westfjords

Flat-topped mountains and raw nature in the wild Westfjords

As this region is set entirely outside of the Ring Road, it's not unusual for people to skip the Westfjords altogether. Which is a real shame; the Westfjords are very distinct from the rest of the country, and its untouched natural beauty is unparalleled. There are few tunnels in the area, so most travel in the region involves extended drives along the coastlines of the numerous stunning fjords—so stunning, in fact, that time may pass by much more quickly than usual. The town and villages of the Westfjords are as remote as they are lovely, and there are numerous museums and cafés to warm your bones during your winter visit and give you a deeper look into Iceland's history and culture. Absolutely worth your time and effort.

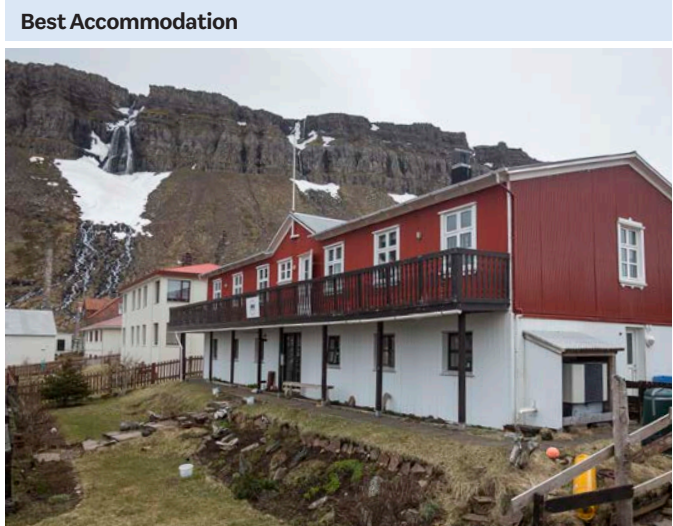


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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

Westfjords

Breathe in, breathe out



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

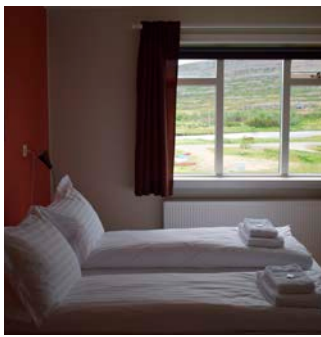


Heydalur

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 Bjarnarfjörður, 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, Dranganes

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**



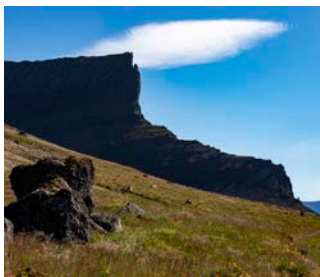
Trékyllisvík

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 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. It’s technically possible to do this hike in winter, but only recommended for those with experience hiking in perilous conditions. **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. Although it’s only open in the summer, it was another near-unanimous pick from the panel, so we’re letting it keep its crown for this issue. “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

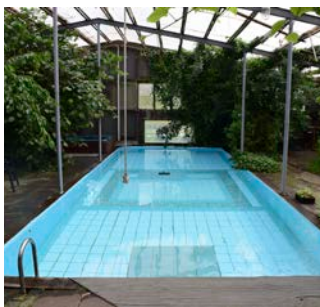
Heimabyggð’s cosy, wooden interior breeds relaxation. The panel praised the café, which opened only this year, for their coffee, fresh sourdough bread, beer selection and general atmosphere, which they described as healthy and homey. Expect large portions, larger lattes and lots of laughter. **C6**



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 Hnfsdalur 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



Vigur 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—usually only in summer—it’s an afternoon trip full of birdwatching bliss. Also, if you’re into manmade rarities, this tiny island is home to Iceland’s only windmill, and the smallest post office in Europe. We’d recommend waiting for one of those rare clear winter days to ensure you get the best view. Make sure to pay attention to the shoreline, too—you might just see some sunbathing seals. **D6**

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



Hornstrandir
Northern Westfjords



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. It’s not accessible in winter, but make sure to go in the warmer months. **D5**

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**

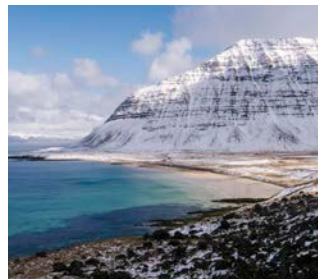


Sea Monster Museum
Dalbraut, Bildudalur



There’s no better place to learn about Iceland’s supernatural sea creatures than the tiny coastal town of Bildudalur. Indeed, Arnarfjörður is said to host many of them. This museum is dedicated to studying this branch of folklore with a loving, academic touch. It’s open all summer but by appointment by winter. **B8**

Best Road Trip



Southern Westfjords
Brjánslækur to Dynjandi

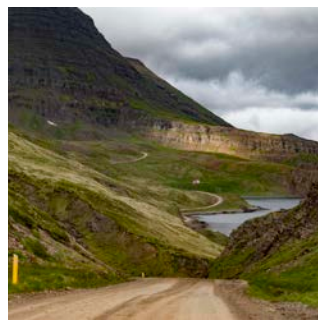
The southern Westfjords contain some of the most breathtaking scenery in Iceland. Start at Brjánslækur, where the ferry from Snæfellsnes comes in, and drive west on Highway 62 to the Rauðasandur red sand beach. Next, turn onto Highway 612 for the beautiful bird cliffs of Látrabjarg, before heading up 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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2

North Iceland is a vast region of the country, and although many visitors to the area only spend any considerable amount of time in Akureyri—the unofficial “capital of the north”—there is definitely a lot more on offer. Mývatn, for example, can be found nearby, and although the winter is typically not a season for whale watching, the northern town famous for it, Húsavík, is always worth an extended stay. The majestic Dettifoss waterfall takes on a whole new appearance in the winter and, if you’re brave, leaving the Ring Road to explore the further reaches of the eastern part of the north can introduce you to the real meaning of natural solitude.

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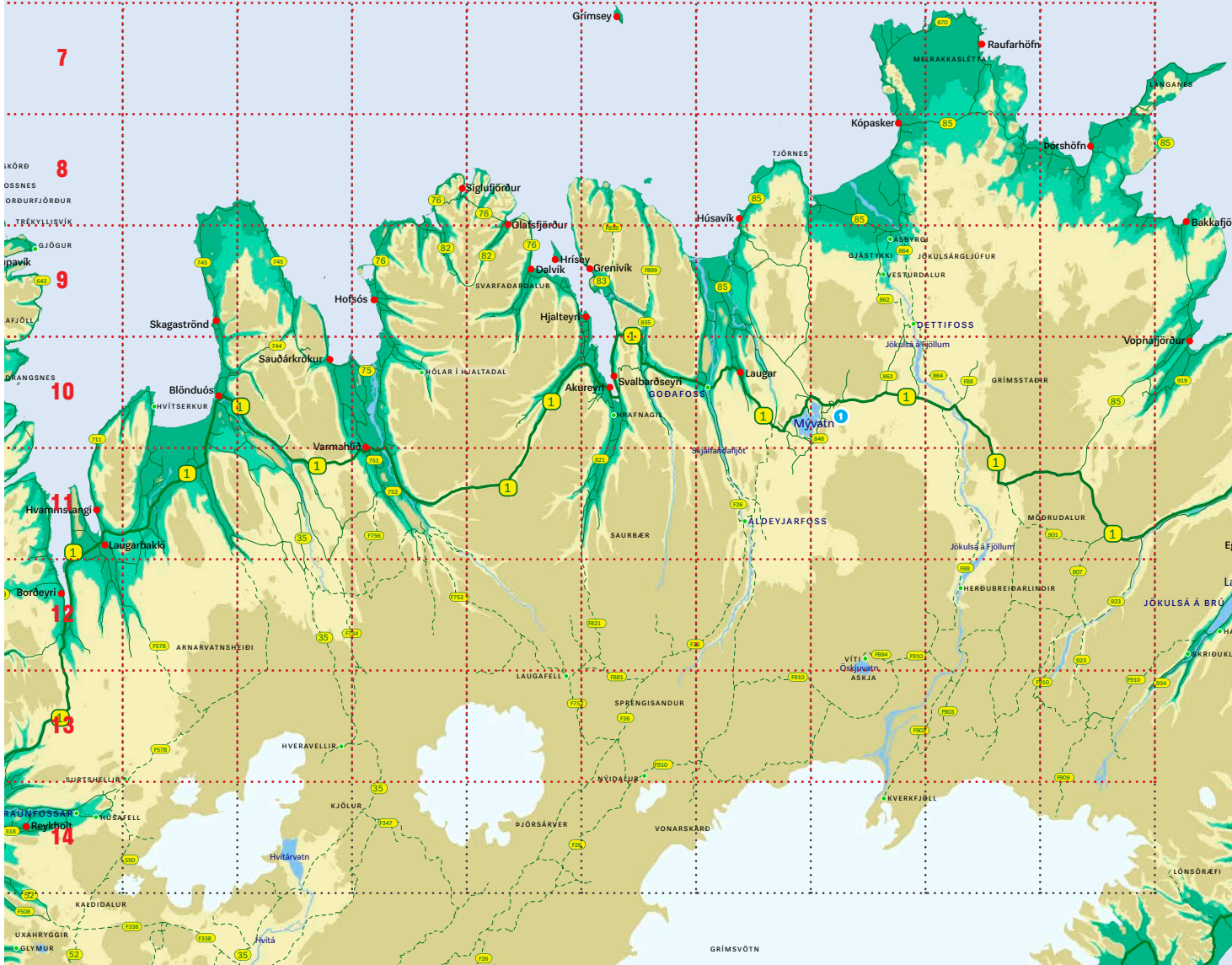
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BEST OF ICELAND:

North

Lakes, lava, hikes,
herring and whales





Diving Centre: Strýtan

Hjalteyri, near 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: E9**



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. **F7**



Site: Krafla

Near 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. **H10**



Site: The Arctic Henge

Raufarhöfn
Info: northiceland.is

Located near the remote northeast 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. **I7**



Waterfall: Aldeyjarfoss

Sprengisandsleið

Aldeyjarfoss is a stunning 20m-high waterfall tumbling over ancient basalt columns, midway in the glacial river Skjálfandaflljót. 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. **G11**



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. **B10**

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 (AEY)
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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How to get there:
Route 1 to Route 82

Travel: kukucampers.is
Accommodation: keahotels.is

North

Taste The Tröll

A culinary day trip around the Tröllaskagi peninsula

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

Pink oyster mushrooms peek over the edge of a basket at the entrance of Vellir. The mushrooms have been grown as an experiment on the organic farm. Their unusual appearance at the outset of our day trip around north Iceland's Tröllaskagi peninsula lures us into the store's embrace.

Bursting berries & herbs

Southwest of Dalvík in the valley of Svarfaðardalur, Vellir attracts locals and tourists alike. It is an organic farm bursting with berries, veggies,

and herbs, with a rustic country store featuring gourmet foods prepared on-site, including smoked Icelandic cheeses and fermented foods. Open throughout the summer months, they've turned selling produce directly from the farmer to the customer into an artform.

Along with Vellir's owner, Bjarni Óskarsson, we walk through greenhouses stuffed with strawberry and raspberry plants. He then leads us to the jewel of the farm: an old cow shed reclaimed as a banquet hall. A long table forms the centerpiece of the hall, with natural light streaming in through a floor-to-ceiling

window along the eastern wall. The hall holds antique farm and cooking equipment of all kinds, a veritable museum of ways now past in Icelandic history.

We return to the store and buy all the oyster mushrooms. Locals crowd every corner of the shop as its purveyors prepare ice cream and cheese tasting boards at lightning speed. Talk of the shop is the annual Great Fish Day festival, so we head to its host town Dalvík next.

Great Fish Day

Vellir's mushrooms have sparked an unanticipated culinary focus on our day trip. Tröllaskagi, itself, is a mountainous region named for the trolls rumoured to live there. But it is the local emphasis on farming, fishing, and drinking that makes our journey one to remember.

In Dalvík, the café and bar Gislí, Eiríkur, Helgi is a must-stop. And this day, it feels as though every resident of the town agrees. Like Vel-

lir's country store, the café is full to bursting with hungry, happy people. To accommodate the volume of visitors, the café's lunch buffet offers fish and vegetable soups with fresh-baked bread. We tuck into a window seat to watch locals amass on the village for Great Fish Day.

The three-day festival is the cultural event of Dalvíkurbyggð's summer season. Held every second Saturday of August, fish soup is offered free at the harbour as a means for the community to meet the local fisherpeople. Its draw far surpasses locals, though, as in past years it has seen upwards of 200,000 attendees. Our destiny is not fishy for this trip, however, so we continue north to Tröllaskagi's northernmost town of Siglufjörður.

Pure beercraft

Baldvin Júlíusson greets us at Segull 67, the family-owned craft brewery of Siglufjörður. The brewery has opened for a private tour of the fa-

“Vellir features gourmet foods prepared on-site, including smoked Icelandic cheeses and fermented foods.”

cility, and we are fortunate to sample the many craft beers on offer. Segull's brewery opens with a spacious bar, with seating for visitors primarily in a glassed-in room overlooking the brewing facility.

“Segull” is the Icelandic word for compass. “The compass needle points north,” Baldvin explains, “right to this brewery.”

Segull 67 produces several beers, ranging from its Sigló IPA to the pineapple-conjuring Sólstingur. Baldvin pours us tastes of Segull 67's selection. We are charmed by his care with both beer and driving advice, and leave Siglufjörður in high spirits.

Hoofin' it

Baldvin's words ring in our ears as we set out for the drive west and southwest around the rest of Tröllaskagi. “Be careful. Even locals take great care when driving this area,” he said.

Barren and rainy, the rural road provides vistas galore. We take care as we drive, though the largest threat to our journey is the sudden appearance of horses on the road. Residents around Hofsóss are preparing for the autumn réttir, the annual event when sheep are rounded up from their summer grazing, and lambs born in the spring are slaughtered for winter meat.

Before the sheep can be herded, the horses used for round-up are gathered and moved between fields. During an hour's drive, we spot sev-

eral different groups herding their horses in full gallop near the roadside. It's a Saturday, but farming work doesn't pause for weekends.

The view from here

Our journey concludes at Hofsóss, the westernmost village of Tröllaskagi. Hofsóss is a fishing village of just 200 inhabitants, providing supplies to area farmers. It is home to one of Iceland's favourite swimming spots, where visitors soak in geothermal water while overlooking the North Atlantic.

Ocean views from Hofsóss' newest eatery are equally as spectacu-

lar. Berg Bistro is a renovated post office, and they have converted the old vault into the bathroom. Their coffee proves an optimal way for us to digest all of the experiences we have accrued and new friends we have made throughout the day.

We take in the views over the North Atlantic as evening creeps close. A rainbow frames the horse round-up to the east. The unexpected reigns supreme. 🍷



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

North

Chilling by the Arctic Circle

Best Accommodation



Sigló Hótel

Snorraqata 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: B8**

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. **G10**

Budget Pick



Akureyri Backpackers

Hafnarstræti 98, Akureyri

Budget Pick: We know luxury hotels aren’t for everyone, but even so, Akureyri Backpackers is a palace amongst hostels. With their clean and minimal rooms, dorms for those truly on a budget, and a choice of cooking for yourself in the kitchen or eating in the cosy café-bar (try their arctic char if you can), this is a reliable choice with a lot of charm. **G9**

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 Wolffish. 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.” **F10**

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. **H10**



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. **D8**

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. **F10**

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. **E9**



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.” **F10**

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. **G10-H10**

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." **D9**

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, 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. The route goes deep into the Highlands so it's closed for the winter, but put it on your list for your next voyage north. **H13**

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." **G8-H10**

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. **H9**

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. **H10**

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 right and you might catch the Northern Lights. **E8**

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**



Dimmuborgir Mývatn

Dimmuborgir, or the "Black Fortress," is a 1km stretch of erratically shaped lava columns. They formed when hot lava cascaded over the ponds trapped beneath, causing the rising steam to form vents in the lava. The resulting cavern then collapsed, leaving behind a maze of rubble and strange, contorted pillars. They're imposing structures, with pockmarked frames that twist chaotically. **G12**



Geosea Sea Baths Vitaslóð 1, Húsavík

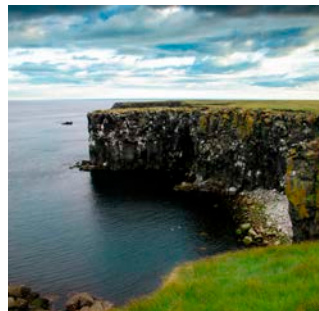
Bathe in Geosea's geothermally heated seawater with views onto the mountains surrounding Skjálfandi Bay. The serpentine architecture of this spa will invite a supple sigh from your spine as you relax. Skjálfandi Bay is one of the best to spot whales around Iceland, so keep your eyes on the water. **G8**

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!" **H10**



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. **J7**

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: G8**

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. **H13**

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. **G10-H10**

Best Museum or Gallery



The Herring Era Museum
Snorrögata 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." **B8**

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. **F10**



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. **G8**

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. **F10**

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. **F10**



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. **B8**

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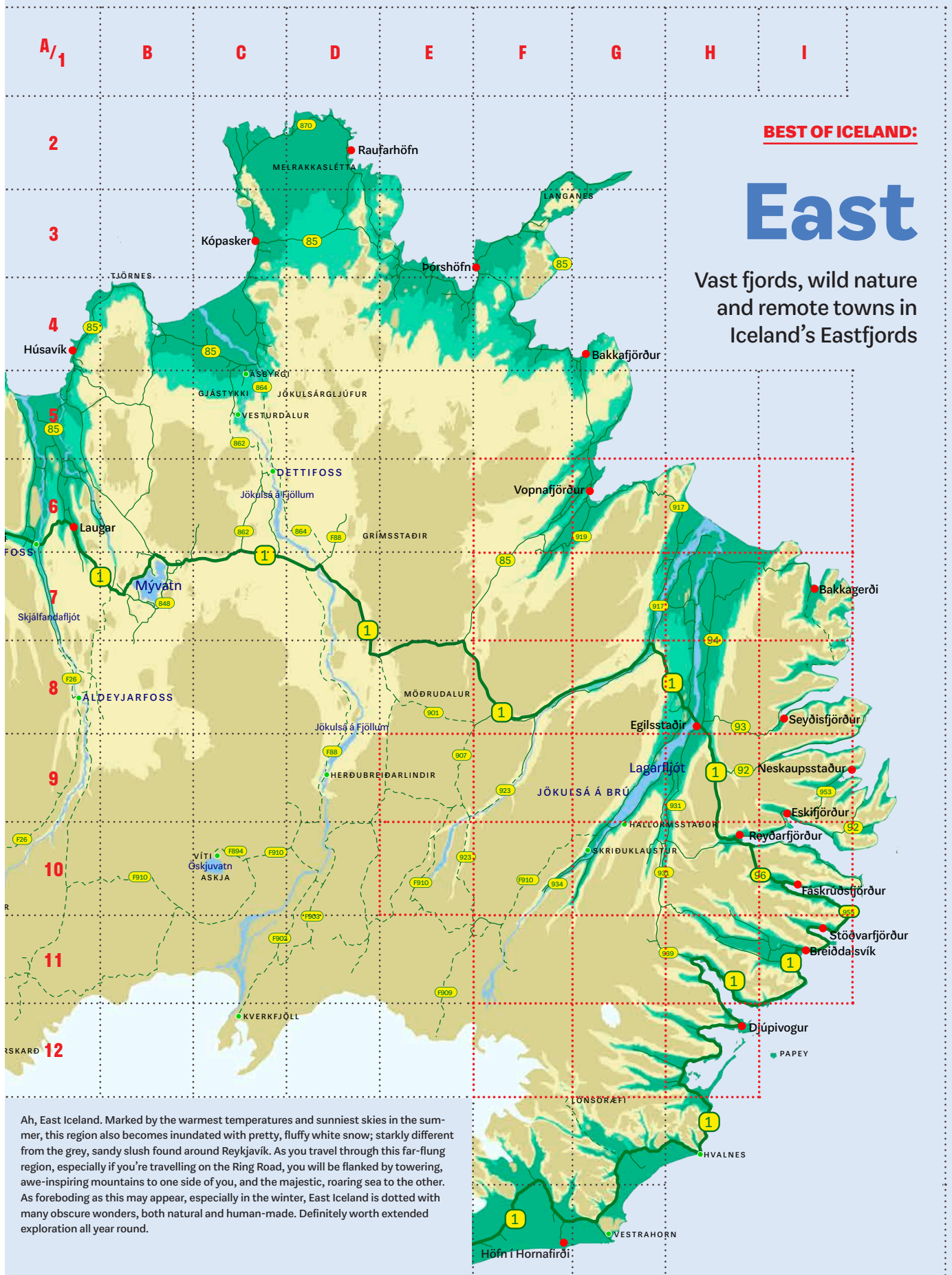
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BEST OF ICELAND:

East

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

Ah, East Iceland. Marked by the warmest temperatures and sunniest skies in the summer, this region also becomes inundated with pretty, fluffy white snow; starkly different from the grey, sandy slush found around Reykjavík. As you travel through this far-flung region, especially if you're travelling on the Ring Road, you will be flanked by towering, awe-inspiring mountains to one side of you, and the majestic, roaring sea to the other. As foreboding as this may appear, especially in the winter, East Iceland is dotted with many obscure wonders, both natural and human-made. Definitely worth extended exploration all year round.



Pool: Vök

Urriðavatn, Near Egilsstaðir

Vök's architecture is a discrete grass-roofed concrete structure, half-buried in the hill alongside Urriðavatn lake, a geothermal hot-spring. Vök capitalizes on this natural warmth, offering an outdoor spa with multiple heated pools that stretch into the lake's body. One can soak in 40-degree hot water with a hand lazily dipping into the 5-degree lake lapping the hotpot's lip. **Map square: G9**



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 Breiðsdalsvík 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**

USEFUL INFO

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

Tourist Information:
East Iceland Regional Information Centre
7 00 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: 1777
(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.



Forest: Hallormstaðurskógur

Hallormsstaður

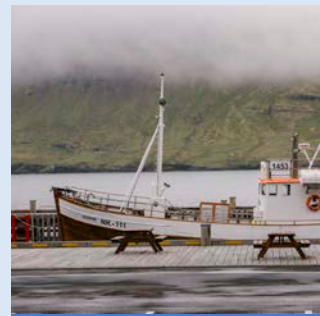
The east of Iceland is famous for its forests. While they might not contain any giant redwoods or ancient oaks, there's a spruce, piney selection of woods for you wander through. Un fact, there are woods of various types surrounding the beautiful lake of Lagerfljót, with many hiking trails, picnic spots,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



Festival: List í Ljósi

Seyðisfjörður
Info: listiljosi.com

On February 15th and 16th, the darkness of the winter will be lit up by List í Ljósi, a celebration of light art that will illuminate the culturally vibrant town of Seyðisfjörður. The festival promises a family friendly selection of "curated artworks by international and local artists, ranging from installations, projections and performances to large-scale immersive experiences." There's no admission fee: just go and be merry. **I8**



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**

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700 km if South route

How to get there:
Route One

Accommodation:
lakehotel.is & kukucampers.is

East

Hearts, Arts, Eats, And East Heat

A road trip to the hot spots and art stops of East Iceland

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

We stare into the canyon. The glacial river Jökulsá á Brú roars by Stuðlagil, one of Iceland's largest collections of basalt columns. A dizzying slope, interwoven with precarious foot trails and rope handholds, invites us for a closer view of the river and basalt. The cold August rain has temporarily abated, giving us slippery access to the trails.

On either side of the canyon, two paths lead to Stuðlagil. We've taken the highlands road side, stopping at a busy car-park for a glimpse of

the unusual geology. Tourists from Greece, France and Canada utter exclamations of wonder over this extraordinary sight, easy to understand despite language differences. We're all in awe, our adrenaline coursing fast as the icy water as we angle ourselves for jaw-dropping views of the hexagonal basalt and churning blue.

For scale, we photograph hikers on the far side of the canyon, who've walked for a few hours to get an even closer look. They wan-

der above the basalt cliffs, stepping down careful paths to stand close to the water's edge. A six-year-old darts amongst crowberry bushes and birch scrub above the basalt. Our hearts are in our throats.

Geothermally yours

Iceland's east dares you to fall in love with its wild geography and passionate population. Stuðlagil set the tone for our day's outing. We're full-throated hearts, aware of our precarity in the midst of nature danger. Wind-whipped from our first encounter, we leave the highlands for city life. Our next stop is the newly opened Vök geothermal spa.

Vök's architecture is a discrete grass-roofed concrete structure, half-buried in the hill alongside Urriðavatn. In Icelandic history, the lake raised suspicion for housing a sea monster, since ice would not form in this location over the winter. Nowadays, it's understood the lack of ice is due to the lake's geothermal hotspot. Vök capitalizes on this wellspring, offering an outdoor spa with multiple heated pools that stretch into the lake's body. One can

soak in 40-degree hot water with a hand lazily dipping into the 5-degree lake lapping the hotpot's lip.

As we enter the facilities, we're offered to create our own infusion with local Icelandic herbs harvested from Lagarfljót's ultimate organic farm, Vallanes. We heap birch leaves, thyme, and chamomile into cups and pour over hot water, carrying our treat into the change rooms and beyond to the hotpots. We're warmed inside and out.

Húswarming, heart-warming

With a glacial river and geothermal wellness fuelling our cores, we're ready to make friends. Our eyes are wide and our hearts full to bursting as we set off to explore the arts and culinary offerings of Egilsstaðir and Seyðisfjörður.

In Egilsstaðir, the regional art house Sláturhúsið converted an old slaughterhouse into a maze of arts-enabling rooms. Sláturhúsið's director, Kristín Amalía Atladóttir, shows us around the facilities, which include two exhibition rooms, a music-recording studio, an apart-

“Though new to Seyðisfjörður, Sirkus is the stuff of Icelandic lore.”

ment for visiting artists, and a future podcast studio. They have begun construction on a black box theatre, too, which will cement Sláturhúsið as the performing arts centre of the east.

Next door, Tehúsið is cosiness incarnate. A teahouse with delectable vegan treats and a few rooms functioning as a hostel, Tehúsið's purveyor is Halldór Warén. Also the former manager of Sláturhúsið, Halldór is similarly making art dreams for the region come true as he arranges concerts for touring musicians.

Dreams at the end of the rainbow

To the east of Egilsstaðir lays an artsy haven nestled in the crook of an east fjord. The town of Seyðisfjörður splays before us as we descend the mountain. It's home to the Skaftfell Centre for Visual Art, the LungA Art Festival, and the LungA School for arts practitioners.

As we approach, we spot the Smyril passenger ferry in the harbour. The town bustles with passengers about to cross the North Atlantic, eagerly snapping photos of the rainbow walkway leading up to the town's robin-egg blue church. An actual rainbow paints the sky over the town, too, as we step into beloved sushi restaurant Norð Austur.

Sushifjörður

We receive a warm greeting from Jim van Woensel, our Norð Austur host. Originally from the Netherlands, he

spends months every year in this Icelandic home-away-from-home working at Norð Austur. Though a nationally celebrated sushi restaurant, Jim will test the vegetarian menu on us this evening. The menu is scheduled to launch next year.

We chat with Jim between courses, enthusing about Seyðisfjörður's anything-is-possible mentality and the heart-stopping yuzu liqueur. Seyðisfjörður's rainbow has made it onto the plate, too, with a flower-garnished wakame salad and maki rolled with avocado, shiitake,

and sweet egg. One of the finest restaurants in all of Iceland, Norð Austur ups the cool caché of Seyðisfjörður.

Sirkus FTW

Our final stop is Sirkus. Though new to Seyðisfjörður, Sirkus is the stuff of Icelandic lore. The bar was a mainstay in Reykjavik social life until it closed in 2007. The following year for the Frieze Arts Fair, Icelandic art collective Kling og Bang set up a temporary commemoration of Sirkus by erecting it in London. News of Sirkus' return to Iceland, this time in the cool kids' capital of Seyðisfjörður, has prompted talk of pilgrimage to the beloved bar.

One of the instigators of Sirkus-Eastfjords, Philippe Clause hugs us as we enter the bar. As a prac-

ticating visual artist, Philippe's entrepreneurship has led him to design clothing and sample plants to make local scents. He is also envisioning the old bookshop as a future artist residency and studio gallery. He's the ideal champion for Sirkus' majestic return.

Sirkus is alive and well in Seyðisfjörður, with every seat in the house occupied. The lights are dim, the bar is well-stocked, and enticing conversation burbles from every corner of the room. We wish there was more time to stay in Seyðisfjörður so we could invite our new friends from Sláturhúsið, Tehúsið, and Norð Austur for drinks. It's an inspired group inhabiting Iceland's East region. Our hearts have grown three sizes from our brief but bountiful encounters.





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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

East

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

Best Accommodation



Wilderness Centre

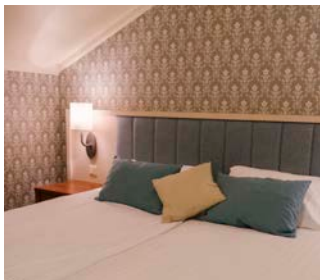


Fljótsdalur

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—local fisherman deliver unusual catches to the restaurant, so expect some curious specials. It’s not open in the winter, but again, it’s so good we felt idiotic not giving it respect. **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**

Runners 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 a sobering experience. After driving across a dusty Highland desert—check road conditions beforehand—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 Dyrfljöll. Again: please do not attempt this in winter. You might die and we will be held liable. **H13**



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BEST OF ICELAND 2019

East

Never go to the Highlands in a Yaris

Best Bathing Spot



Selárlaug

Selárdalur, Vopnafjörður

Built in 1949 as a training pool, this remote country spot is like a time capsule on the banks of a salmon-fishing river, near the tiny town of Vopnafjörður. 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. Bonus: It also has a sun deck for those rare moments of winter calm. **Map square: G6**

Runner Up



Laugarvalladalur 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. It's quite a challenge to get to, but so worth it. Warning: We imagine getting here in winter is high impossible. **E10**

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**

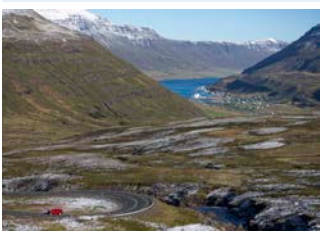
Best Hike



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. Honestly, it's not a good idea to go in winter, but put it on your list. **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. Real talk: Unless you're a very experienced hiker—we're talking Himalayan—don't do this in the winter. **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." Please don't attempt in winter. **G11**



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East

Where the mountains slump into the sea

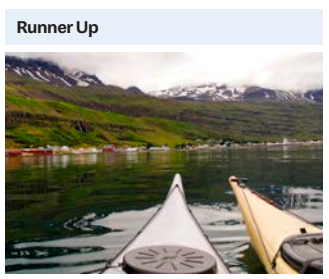
Best Tour



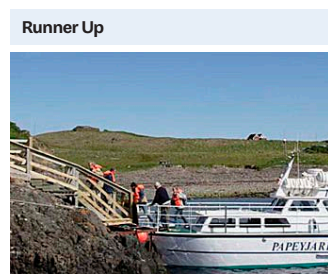
Wilderness Centre

Fljótisdalur

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. Note: Options during winter may be limited. **Map square: F10**



Sea Kayaking
Seyðisfjörður



Papey Sailing
Djúpivogur

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." Kayaking in winter is possible, but make sure to stay safe. **I8**

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, Hofskárdalur

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
Fljótisdalsvegur, 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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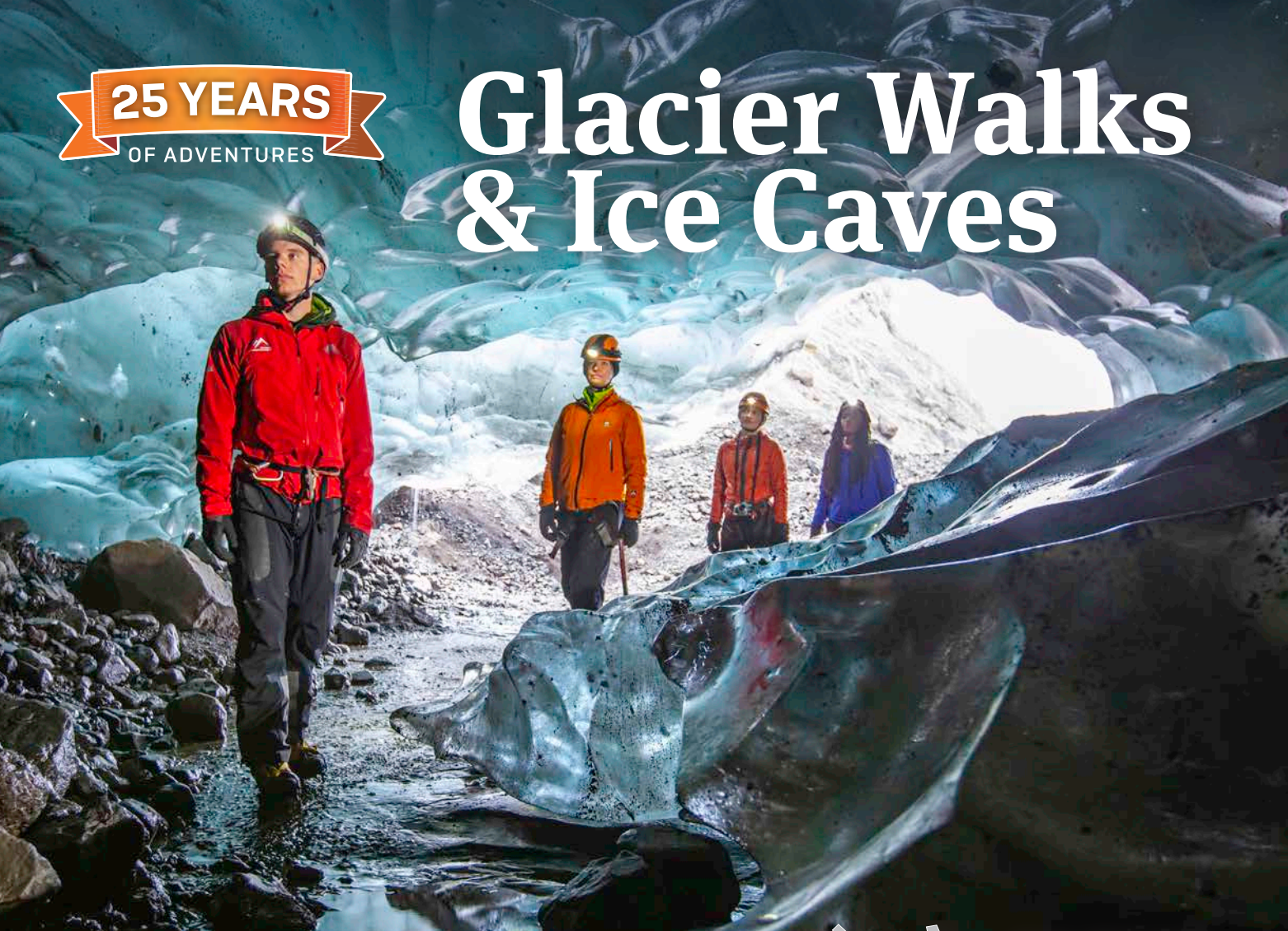
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