

History

Geologically young, staunchly independent and frequently rocked by natural disaster, Iceland has a turbulent and absorbing history of Norse settlement, literary genius, bitter feuding and foreign oppression. Life in this harsh and unforgiving landscape was never going to be easy, but the challenges and hardships of everyday life cultivated a modern Icelandic spirit that's highly aware of its stormy past yet remarkably resilient, fiercely individualistic, quietly innovative and justifiably proud.

EARLY TRAVELLERS & IRISH MONKS

A veritable baby in geological terms, Iceland was created just 17 million years ago. It was only in about 330 BC, however, when the Greek explorer Pytheas discovered the island of Ultima Thule, six days' sailing north of Britain, that the Europe became aware of a landmass beyond the confines of their maps, lurking in a sea 'congealed into a viscous jelly'. Although Pytheas was almost certainly referring to Iceland, it is unlikely he actually visited the island.

For many years rumour, myth and fantastic tales of fierce storms, howling winds, enigmatic lands and barbaric dog-headed people kept explorers away from the great northern ocean, *oceanus innavigabilis*. It was possibly St Brendan, an Irish monk, who was the first to venture north again. In the 6th century AD St Brendan sailed for the New World in a skin boat, stopping en route in Iceland and possibly making it as far as Newfoundland. At this time Irish monks regularly sailed to the Faeroes looking for solitude and seclusion, and voyages further afield may well have brought them to Iceland.

The first written evidence of this comes from the Irish monk Dicuil, who wrote in 825 of a land where there was no daylight in winter, but on summer nights 'whatever task a man wishes to perform, even picking lice from his shirt, he can manage as well as in clear daylight'. This almost certainly describes Iceland and its midnight sun.

It's thought that the first monks settled in Iceland around the year 700, but, being uninhabited, the island existed as a hermitage and not a mission. When the Norse began to arrive in the early 9th century, the Irish *papar* (fathers) fled, wishing to avoid confrontation and maintain their contemplative life.

THE VIKINGS ARE COMING!

After the Irish monks, Iceland's first permanent settlers came from Norway. The Age of Settlement is traditionally defined as the period between 870 and 930, when political strife on the Scandinavian mainland caused many to flee. Although much Icelandic national pride is derived from notions that they're 'children of the Vikings', most North Atlantic Norse settlers were ordinary Scandinavian citizens: farmers, herders and merchants forced to flee by Nordic despotism. They settled right across western Europe, marrying Britons, Westmen (Irish) and Scots, before being forced to flee once again when the violent and barbaric raids of the Viking Age (800–1066) caused an exodus into the North Atlantic.

It's likely that the Norse accidentally discovered Iceland after being blown off course en route to the Faeroes. The first arrival, the Swede Naddoddur,

landed on the east coast around 850 and named the place Snæland (Snow Land) before backtracking to his original destination.

Iceland's second visitor, Garðar Svavarsson, came in search of Naddoddur's reported discovery. He circumnavigated the island and then settled in for the winter at Húsavík on the north coast. When he left in the spring some of his crew remained, or were left behind, thereby becoming the island's first residents.

Around 860 the Norwegian Flóki Vilgerðarson uprooted his farm and family and headed for Snæland. He navigated with ravens, which, after some trial and error, led him to his destination. This odd practice provided his nickname, Hrafna-Flóki or Ravens' Flóki.

Hrafna-Flóki sailed to Vatnsfjörður on the west coast but quickly became disenchanting with the place. Upon seeing icebergs floating in the fjord, he renamed it Ísland (Ice Land), which he perhaps considered even less flattering than Snæland, and returned to Norway. It was a number of years before he returned to Iceland, settling in the Skagafjörður district on the north coast.

Credit for the first intentional settlement, according to the *Íslendingabók* (see p27), goes to a Norwegian called Ingólfur Arnarson, who landed at Ingólfshöfði (southeast Iceland) in 871, then continued around the coast and set up house at a place he called Reykjavík (Smoky Bay), after the steam from thermal springs there. Ingólfur was a true Viking who'd had his day in the British Isles; he and his blood brother Hjörleifur were forced to flee Norway after they encountered some social difficulties there. Hjörleifur settled near the present town of Vík but was murdered by his slaves shortly thereafter.

As for Ingólfur, the site of his homestead was determined by the custom of the day, which required well-born intending settlers to toss their high-seat pillars, a symbol of authority and part of a Norse chieftain's pagan paraphernalia, into the sea as they approached land. Tradition and prudence dictated that they build their homes at the place where the gods chose to bring the pillars ashore. At times, settlement necessitated years of searching the coastline for stray pillars, and it's likely that Ingólfur was disappointed with the barren, rocky bay he was forced to settle on.

While Ingólfur Arnarson and his descendants came to control the whole of the southwestern part of Iceland, other settlers were arriving from the Norwegian mainland. By the time Ingólfur's son Þorsteinn reached adulthood the island was scattered with farms, and people began to feel the need for some sort of government.

ASSEMBLING THE ALÞING

Now firmly settled, Iceland's landowners soon became chieftains, and local disputes were normally settled at regional assemblies. As trade and commerce increased it became necessary to create a more formal form of government, however, and it was decided to set up a general assembly of the nation where the country's most powerful men could meet to discuss rulings and dispense justice. Such a structure had never proved itself before, but Icelanders reasoned that it could only be better than the fearful and oppressive system they had experienced under the Nordic monarchy.

In the early 10th century Þorsteinn Ingólfsson held Iceland's first large-scale district assembly near Reykjavík, and in the 920s the self-styled lawyer Úlfljótur was sent to Norway to prepare a code of law for Iceland.

Iceland's 1100 Years: The History of a Marginal Society, by Gunnar Karlsson, provides an insightful, contemporary history of Iceland from settlement to the present.

History of Iceland, by Jon R Hjalmarrson, is a lively and absorbing account of the nation from settlement to the present day, looking at Iceland's people, places, history and issues.

www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/voyage/subset/iceland/history.html – Irish and Viking Discovery of Iceland, a Smithsonian Institute-related site, covers the early settlement of Iceland.

www.viking.no is an educational site of the Viking Network Web covering the history and lifestyle of the Vikings.

TIMELINE AD 600–700

Irish monks voyage to uninhabited Iceland, becoming the first (temporary) settlers.

850–930

Norse settlers from Norway and Sweden arrive, call the island Snæland (Snow Land), and set up scattered farms.

871

Norwegian Viking Ingólfur Arnarson sails to the west coast and establishes the first major settlement at Reykjavík.

930

Icelandic parliament, the Alþing (National Assembly), is founded at Þingvellir.

THE VIKINGS

Scandinavia's greatest impact on world history probably occurred during the Viking Age, when the prospect of prosperity through trade, political stresses and an increasing population density inspired many Norwegians to seek out greener pastures abroad. The word Viking is derived from *vik*, which means bay or cove in old Norse and probably referred to Viking anchorages during raids.

It's suspected that the main catalyst for the Viking movement was overpopulation in western Norway, where polygamy led to an excess of male heirs and too little land to go around. In the 8th century Nordic shipbuilders developed a relatively fast and manoeuvrable sailing vessel sturdy enough for ocean crossings. While Norwegian farmers had peacefully settled in Orkney and the Shetlands as early as the 780s, it's generally accepted that the Viking Age didn't begin until 793, with the Northmen plundering St Cuthbert's monastery on the island of Lindisfarne off Britain's Northumberland coast.

The Vikings apparently had no reservations about sacking religious communities and, indeed, many Vikings believed that the Christian monasteries they encountered were a threat to their pantheistic traditions. But the Vikings also realised that monasteries were places of wealth, where a relatively quick and easy victory could result in a handsome booty. They destroyed Christian communities and slaughtered the monks of Britain and Ireland, who could only wonder what sin they had committed to invite the heathen hordes. Despite this apparent predilection for warfare, their considerable barbarism was probably no greater than the standard of the day – it was the success and extent of the raids that led to their fearsome reputation. The Vikings had no fear of death – only dishonour.

In the following years the Viking raiders returned with great fleets, terrorising, murdering, enslaving, assimilating or displacing the local population, and capturing many coastal and inland regions of Britain, Ireland, France and Russia. The Vikings travelled as far as Moorish Spain (Seville was raided in 844) and the Middle East (they even reached Baghdad). Constantinople was attacked six times but never yielded, and ultimately Vikings served as mercenaries with the forces of the Holy Roman Empire.

Between the 10th and 14th centuries the Scandinavian Norsemen also explored and settled land throughout the North Atlantic – including the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and parts of North America.

A major stepping stone across the North Atlantic was Iceland, which, unlike Greenland, remained uninhabited. Icelandic tradition officially credits the Norse settlement of Iceland to a single mainland phenomenon. From the mid- to late 9th century the tyrannical Harald Haarfager (Harald Finehair, or Fairhair), the king of Vestfold district of southeastern Norway, was taken with expansionist aspirations. In 890 he won a significant naval victory at Hafrsfjord (Stavanger), and the deposed chieftains and landowners chose to flee rather than submit. Many wound up in Iceland and the Faeroes.

While Viking raids continued in Europe, Eiríkur Rauðe (Erik the Red), having been exiled from Iceland, headed west with around 500 others to found the first permanent European colony in Greenland in 987. Eiríkur's son, Leif the Lucky, went on to visit Helluland (literally 'land of flat stones', probably Baffin Island), Markland (literally 'land of woods', most likely Newfoundland or Labrador) and Vinland (literally 'land of wine', probably somewhere between Newfoundland and New Jersey). He had set foot in the New World as early as the year 1000 – but permanent European settlement was thwarted by the *skrælings* (Native Americans), who were anything but welcoming.

The last Viking raids occurred in the 11th century, after King Harald Harðráðl died in battle in England. Almost 300 years of terrorising the seas were coming to an end.

At the same time Grímur Geitskör was commissioned to find a suitable location for an Alþing (National Assembly). Bláskógar, near the eastern boundary of Ingólfur's estate, with its beautiful lake and wooded plain, seemed ideal. Along one side of the plain was a long cliff with an elevated base (the Mid-Atlantic Rift) from where speakers and representatives could preside over people gathered below.

In 930 Bláskógar was renamed Þingvellir (Assembly Plains). Þorsteinn Ingólfsson was given the honorary title *allssherjargoði* (supreme chieftain) and Úlfljótur was designated the first *lögsögumaður* (law-speaker), who was required to memorise and annually recite the entire law of the land. It was he, along with the 48 *goðar* (chieftains), who held the actual legislative power.

A remarkably peaceful system of government evolved and, although squabbles arose over the choice of leaders and allegiances were continually questioned, the new parliamentary system was deemed a success. At the annual convention of the year 1000, the assembled crowd was bitterly divided between pagans and Christians, but eventually a decree was agreed and Iceland accepted the new religion and converted to Christianity. This decision gave the formerly divided groups a semblance of national unity, and soon the first bishoprics were set up at Skálholt in the southwest and Hólar in the north.

Over the following years the two-week national assembly at Þingvellir became the social event of the year. All free men could attend. Single people came looking for partners, marriages were contracted and solemnised, business deals were finalised, duels and executions were held, and the Appeals Court handed down judgments on matters that couldn't be resolved in lower courts.

During its first century, the Alþing was stained by corruption as the *goðar* demanded bribes in exchange for favours. But by this time Icelandic society and the agrarian economy were well established and the government held. Schools were founded at the two bishoprics and elsewhere, and the resulting educational awareness prepared the way for the great literary era to come.

ANARCHY & THE STURLUNG AGE

The late 12th century kicked off the Saga Age, when epic tales of early settlement, family struggles, romance and tragic characters were recorded by historians and writers. Much of our knowledge of this time comes from two weighty tomes, the *Íslendingabók*, a historical narrative from the settlement era written by 12th-century scholar Ari Þorgilsson (Ari the Learned), and the detailed *Landnámabók*, a comprehensive account of the settlement.

Despite the advances in such cultural pursuits, Iceland was already beginning to suffer. By the early 13th century the enlightened period of peace that had lasted 200 years began to wane, and the ineffectual government and constant power struggles between rival chieftains led to violent feuds and a flourishing of Viking-like private armies who raided farms across the country. This dark hour in Iceland's history was known as the Sturlung Age, its tragic events and brutal history graphically recounted in the three-volume *Sturlunga Saga*.

As Iceland descended into chaos, the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson perched on the country's boundaries pressuring chieftains, priests and the new breed of wealthy aristocrats to accept his authority and relinquish control of the ailing Alþing. The Icelanders, who saw no alternative, dissolved all

The Althing at Thingvellir, by Helmut Lugmayr, explains the role and history of the oldest parliament in the world and includes a section on Þingvellir's unique geology.

The Alþing, established in 930, is the oldest continuous parliamentary democracy in the world.

Iceland Saga, by Magnús Magnússon, offers an entertaining introduction to Icelandic history and literature, and explains numerous saga events and settings.

1000

Iceland officially converts to Christianity under pressure from the Norwegian king, though pagan beliefs and rituals remain.

1100–1200

The great literary age of the sagas.

1200

Iceland descends into anarchy during the so-called Sturlung Age. The government dissolves and, in 1291, Iceland is absorbed by Norway.

1300, 1341 & 1389

The volcano Hekla violently erupts, causing death and widespread destruction.

but a superficial shell of their government and swore their allegiance to the king. An agreement of confederacy was made in 1262. In 1281 a new code of law, the *Jónsbók*, was introduced by the king and Iceland was absorbed into Norwegian rule.

Norway immediately set about appointing Norwegian bishops to Hólar and Skálholt and imposed excessive taxes. Contention flared as former chieftains quibbled over high offices, particularly that of *járl* (earl), an honour that fell to the ruthless scoundrel Gissur Þorvaldsson, who in 1241 murdered Snorri Sturluson, Iceland's best-known historian and writer (see the boxed text, p158).

Meanwhile, the volcano Hekla erupted three times, covering a third of the country in ash; a mini-ice age followed, and severe winters wiped out livestock and crops. The Black Death soon arrived, killing half the population, and the once indomitable spirit of the people seemed broken.

ENTER THE DANES

Iceland's fate was now in the hands of the highest Norwegian bidder, who could lease the governorship of the country on a three-year basis. In 1397 the Kalmar Union of Norway, Sweden and Denmark brought Iceland, still a province of Norway, under Danish rule. After disputes between church and state, the Danish government seized church property and imposed Lutheranism in the Reformation of 1550. When the stubborn Catholic bishop of Hólar, Jón Arason, resisted and gained a following, he and his two sons were taken to Skálholt and beheaded.

In 1602 the Danish king imposed a crippling trade monopoly whereby Swedish and Danish firms were given exclusive trading rights in Iceland for 12-year periods. This resulted in large-scale extortion, importation of spoilt or inferior goods and yet more suffering that would last another 250 years.

RETURN TO INDEPENDENCE

Fed up with five centuries of oppressive foreign rule and conscious of a growing sense of liberalisation across Europe, Icelandic nationalism began to flourish in the 19th century. By 1855 Jón Sigurðsson, an Icelandic scholar, had successfully lobbied for restoration of free trade, and by 1874 Iceland had drafted a constitution and regained control of its domestic affairs.

Iceland's first political parties were formed during this period, and the country began to change as the focus moved from rural to urban development and new technologies boosted agricultural and fishing production. By 1918 Iceland had signed the Act of Union, which effectively released the country from Danish rule, making it an independent state within the Kingdom of Denmark.

Iceland prospered during WWI as wool, meat and fish exports gained high prices. When WWII loomed, however, Iceland declared neutrality in the hope of maintaining their important trade links with both Britain and Germany.

On 9 April 1940 Denmark was occupied by Germany, prompting the Alþing to take control of Iceland's foreign affairs once more. A year later, on 17 May 1941, the Icelanders requested complete independence. The formal establishment of the Republic of Iceland finally took place at Þingvellir on 17 June 1944 – now celebrated as Independence Day.

WWII & THE USA MOVES IN

Iceland's total lack of any military force worried the Allied powers and so in May 1940 Britain, most vulnerable to a German-controlled Iceland, sent in forces to occupy the island. Iceland had little choice but to grudgingly accept the situation, but the country profited from British construction projects and spending that bolstered the economy.

When the British troops withdrew in 1941 the government allowed American troops to move in, on the understanding that they would move out at the end of the war. Although the US military left in 1946, it retained the right to reestablish a base at Keflavík should war threaten. After the war, and back under their own control, Icelanders were reluctant to submit to any foreign power. When the government was pressured into becoming a founding member of NATO in 1949, riots broke out in Reykjavík. The government only agreed to the proposition on the conditions that Iceland would never take part in offensive action and that no foreign military troops would be based in the country during peacetime.

War with Korea broke out in 1950 and at the request of NATO the Icelandic government agreed that the US could again take responsibility for the island's defence. By 1951 the US military had completely taken over Keflavík International Airport with no obvious intention of budging. It justified its actions by indicating that Iceland required US protection from the Soviet troops that had invaded North Korea, and indeed Iceland served as an important North Atlantic base for monitoring the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

When the Icelanders realised what was happening they were predictably unhappy, but they were powerless to evict the Americans, whose numbers and military technology at Keflavík continued to increase over the next four decades. The controversial US military presence in Iceland only ended in September 2006 when the base at Keflavík finally closed.

MODERN ICELAND

Following the Cold War period and the demise of the herring fishing industry, Iceland went through a period of growth, rebuilding and modernisation. The Ring Rd was finally completed in 1974 – opening up transport across the remote southeast – and projects such as the Krafla power station in the northeast and the Svartsengi power plant near Reykjavík were developed.

In 1992–93, however, Iceland's fishing quotas were reduced by 22.5% to allow overfished stocks to regenerate. The fishing industry went into recession and by October 1992 unemployment had reached 3%, a previously unheard-of level in Iceland. The króna was also devalued by 6% to relieve pressure caused by turmoil in international currency markets.

The country slowly began a period of economic regeneration as the fishing industry stabilised. Iceland also secured restrictions on fishing in its waters as part of a 1993 European Economic Area agreement between the EU and the European Free Trade Association.

In the mid-1990s the Reykjavík stock market, Verðbrefafing Íslands, commenced operations, and in 2003 Iceland resumed whaling as part of a 'scientific research programme', despite a global moratorium on hunts (see p152). In 2006 Iceland resumed whale exports to the Faeroes and announced its plans to recommence commercial whaling, in spite of condemnation from around the globe.

The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, edited by Viður Hreinsson, is a must for saga fiends. It's a summary translation of 50 saga tales, featuring all the main yarns, along with a few shorter fantasy tales.

Daughter of Fire – a Portrait of Iceland, by Katherin Scherman, is a beautifully written and evocative historical overview of Iceland, covering the land, the people and the sagas.

1397

Iceland comes under Danish rule.

1602

Denmark imposes a crippling trade monopoly, giving Danish and Swedish firms exclusive trading rights in Iceland.

1855–74

Iceland moves towards independence with the restoration of free trade and a draft constitution.

1918

The Act of Union makes Iceland an independent state within the Kingdom of Denmark.

COD WARS

Protected by its isolation and often forgotten by mainland Europe, Iceland has managed to maintain a pretty low-key existence, avoiding international disputes and keeping good working relationships with most countries – that is, until something as precious as its fishing rights are disputed.

Fishing is Iceland's main source of livelihood and protection of its fishing rights are a top priority. Problems first arose in 1901 when Britain and Denmark reduced the extent of the country's offshore fishing rights to fewer than four miles (6.5km). Unhappy with this restriction, Iceland increased the limit to four miles offshore in 1952, and to 12 miles (19.3km) in 1958. The resulting skirmishes with British vessels eventually brought warships onto the scene and led to what became known as the first Cod War. By the late 1960s the lucrative herring industry had collapsed as a result of overfishing by both Icelanders and Norwegians, and the Icelanders were again thinking about increasing their fishing zone.

In 1971 Iceland expanded its exclusive fishing rights to 50 miles (80.5km), and then 200 miles (321.9km) in 1975. The subsequent net cutting and ramming of vessels soon escalated into clashes between Icelandic gun ships and British warships until finally a stopgap agreement was made in 1976. Since then British fishing boats have respected the 200-mile limit, and no new violence has erupted.

Interestingly, Iceland claims the tiny islet of Kolbeinsey, 100km north of the mainland in the Arctic Ocean, as part of the country. Although it's little more than a speck (about 40 sq m) it adds 9400 sq km to Iceland's territorial fishing waters, making it the most important piece of offshore rock in the North Atlantic. Kolbeinsey is being eroded at an alarming rate, however, and even conservative estimates state that the island is likely to completely disappear by 2020.

Politically, Iceland is a stable democratic republic with a tradition of coalition government. Legislative powers rest with the Alþing and a president is elected to a four-year term by majority vote. The prime minister is the country's head of government and is selected by the president.

In May 2006 Geir Haarde, leader of the Independence Party, became Prime Minister of Iceland after Halldor Asgrimsson stepped down following a poor performance by his Progressive Party in local elections. The return to office of Iceland's largest political party is likely to signal a move towards tighter fiscal policy. Iceland was dogged by record inflation rates and spiralling prices in 2006, with a slide in the value of the króna further adding to the country's economic woes. With the economy reliant on the fishing industry and highly dependent on imported goods, prices remain high and the economy vulnerable. Inflation rates were expected to reach 11% by late 2006, far above the government target of 2.5%.

Despite this, Iceland is one of Europe's most developed countries with extremely high literacy levels, consistently high standards of living, one of the highest levels of computer and mobile phone use in Europe, and an increasingly wealthy elite. State education and health-care facilities are so good that there is no demand for private facilities, crime levels are extremely low, life expectancy is high, and Icelanders consistently rate as one of the happiest nationalities on earth. For most Icelanders the most pressing questions today are the possibility of EU membership and the environmental issues surrounding new hydroelectric power plants and aluminium smelters in east Iceland (see p49).

Iceland has the highest density of mobile phone use in the world – there are more mobiles in use than there are people.

1940–41

British troops occupy Iceland; a US base is later established at Keflavik.

2006

The controversial US base at Keflavik closes down after 45 years in service; the government also approves resumption of whaling.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Centuries of isolation and hardship, and a small, homogenous population have instilled particular character traits in Icelanders. This is a tightknit nation of only 300,000 souls, where everyone seems to know each other or to be distantly related: family ties are overwhelmingly important.

Naturally enough for people living on a remote island in a harsh environment, Icelanders are self-reliant individualists who don't like being told what to do. The current whaling debacle is a prime example. Although most Icelanders wouldn't dream of eating whale meat, a majority are in support of hunting – a silent sticking-up of two fingers at the disapproving outside world.

Icelanders have a reputation as tough, hardy, elemental types, and it's true that rural communities are mainly involved in the fishing or farming industries. But these aren't badly educated bumpkins. Iceland has always had a rich cultural heritage and an impossibly high literacy rate, and its people have a passion for all things artistic. This is true of the whole country, but it's particularly noticeable in downtown Reykjavík. Although people adopt an attitude of cool fatalism, get them talking about something they enjoy and the pessimism falls away. Most young Icelanders play in a band, dabble in art, or write poetry or prose – they're positively bursting with creative impulses, and there's an underlying sense that it's possible to achieve anything.

However, this buoyant, confident, have-a-go attitude is, paradoxically, tinged with insecurity. Icelanders know that it's easy to be a big fish in a small pond, but how might they fare outside their cosy nation? Will the rest of the world...*think they're any good?* Icelanders who achieve international success (singer Björk, the band Sigur Rós, novelist Halldór Laxness, footballer Eiður Gudjohnsson), winning honour and prestige for their homeland, become heroes.

Many young Reykjavík-dwellers bitch that there's nothing for them in Iceland: the country's too small, they've tried everything there is to try, the

Xenophobe's Guide to the Icelanders, by Richard Sale, is a compact, humorous look at the Icelandic character and foibles – everything from customs and driving habits to obsession with material possessions.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Icelanders' names are constructed from a combination of their first name and their father's (or, more rarely, mother's) first name. Girls add the suffix *dóttir* (daughter) to the patronymic and boys add *son*. Therefore, Jón, the son of Einar, would be Jón Einarsson. Guðrun, the daughter of Einar, would be Guðrun Einarsdóttir.

Because Icelandic surnames only tell people what your dad's called, Icelanders don't bother with 'Mr Einarsson' or 'Mrs Einarsdóttir'. Instead they use first names, even when addressing strangers. It makes for a wonderfully democratic society when you're expected to address your president or top police commissioner as Oliver or Harold!

About 10% of Icelanders have family names (most dating back to early settlement times), but they're rarely used. In an attempt to homogenise the system, government legislation forbids anyone to take on a new family name or adopt the family name of their spouse.

There's also an official list of names that Icelanders are permitted to call their children. Any additions to this list have to be approved by the Icelandic Naming Committee before you can apply them to your child – so there are no Moon Units, Lourdeses or Apples running round here! Interestingly, there's a lingering superstition around naming newborns: the baby's name isn't usually revealed until the christening, which can take place several months after the child is born.

Until recently, foreign immigrants had to give themselves Icelandic names before they could become citizens, but the naming committee has relaxed this rather stringent requirement!

only option is to emigrate. Don't be fooled – their feet may be itchy, but their hearts are full of righteous pride for this lovely land. It's no coincidence that Icelandair wishes a heartfelt 'Welcome home!' to its passengers when the plane touches down at Keflavik.

Town layouts, the former US military base, the popularity of TV programmes such as *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost*, and the prevalence of hot dogs and Coca-Cola point to a heavy US influence, but a 2006 survey showed that 69% of Icelanders see their relationship with the rest of Scandinavia as the most important.

Indeed, they have much in common, although Icelanders are not as aloof as their Scandinavian counterparts in Sweden, Norway and Finland. They're curious about visitors and eager to know what outsiders think of them. 'How do you like Iceland?' is invariably an early question. While most Icelanders speak English very well, they're extremely proud of their language, and to greet them with a little carefully pronounced Icelandic will result in a look of mild surprise (bordering on shock) followed by a broad smile.

While Icelanders are generally quite reserved and stoical, an incredible transformation comes over them when they party. On a Friday or Saturday night inhibitions are let down, and conversations flow as fast as the alcohol!

LIFESTYLE

In the last century the Icelandic lifestyle has shifted from isolated family communities living on scattered farms and in coastal villages to a more urban-based society with the majority of people living in the southwestern corner around Reykjavik. Despite this more outward-looking change, family

www.statice.is – the Statistics Iceland site has thousands of fascinating facts and figures about Iceland.

SUPERNATURAL ICELAND: GHOSTS, TROLLS & HIDDEN PEOPLE

Once you've seen some of the lava fields, eerie natural formations and isolated farms that characterise much of the Icelandic landscape, it will come as no surprise that many Icelanders believe their country is populated by *huldufólk* (hidden people) and ghosts.

In the lava are *jarðvergar* (gnomes), *álfar* (elves), *ljósálfar* (fairies), *dvergar* (dwarves), *ljúflingar* (lovelings), *tívar* (mountain spirits), and *englar* (angels). Stories about them have been handed down through generations, and many modern Icelanders claim to have seen them...or to at least know someone who has.

As in Ireland, there are stories about projects going wrong when workers try to build roads through *huldufólk* homes: the weather turns bad, machinery breaks down, labourers fall ill – until the construction company decides to build around the fey folk's rock or hill and all goes smoothly once more. In fact, the town council at Hafnarfjörður contains three people who can mediate with elves during building projects.

As for Icelandic ghosts, they're not like the wafting shadows found elsewhere in Europe but are strangely substantial beings. *Írafell-Móri* (*móri* and *skotta* are used for male and female ghosts respectively) needed to eat supper every night, and one of the country's most famous spooks, *Sel-Móri*, got seasick when he stowed away in a boat. Even more strangely, two ghosts haunting the same area often join forces to double their trouble. And Icelandic ghosts can even age – one rather sad *skotta* claimed she was becoming so decrepit that she had to haul herself about on her knees.

Many folk stories explain away rock stacks and weird lava formations by saying that they're trolls, caught out at sunrise and turned forever to stone. But we don't know anyone who claims to have seen a troll – they're more the stuff of children's stories.

A quick word of warning – you might not be surprised to hear that many Icelanders get sick of visitors asking them whether they believe in supernatural beings. Their pride bristles at the 'Those cute Icelanders! They all believe in pixies!' attitude...and even if they don't entirely disbelieve, they're unlikely to admit it to a stranger!

SWIMMING-POOL SENSE

Icelanders are a relaxed bunch with a live-and-let-live attitude, but there is a sure-fire way of unwittingly causing offence. The one time we've seen Icelanders get visibly angry, disgusted and upset is when talking about tourists abusing their swimming pools. It's vital to conform to Icelandic etiquette by washing thoroughly without a swimsuit before hopping into the water. (It makes good hygiene sense, as Icelandic swimming pools don't contain chemical cleaners.)

connections are still very strong in Iceland, but young people growing up in rural Iceland are more likely to move to Reykjavik to study and work.

Icelanders work hard – the retirement age is 70 – and enjoy a very high standard of living. But keeping up with the Jónssons and Jónsdóttirs comes at a price. It's not unusual for young Icelanders out of school to borrow money to buy a house or 4WD and spend the rest of their days paying off loans and living on credit. And you'll often come across Icelanders who are supposedly on their summer holiday leading treks, running tours and generally spending their 'free time' immersed in a second job!

This addiction to grafting explains several strange features of Icelandic recreation: Icelanders work hard, and they have a fairly excessive idea of play too. The bingeing in Reykjavik on Friday and Saturday nights is relaxation gone mad. So too are the hundreds of summer houses you'll see when you're driving round the Golden Circle, and the exceptional number of swimming pools, which form the social hub of Icelandic life.

The social care system is so good here that young Icelandic women have few worries about the financial implications of raising their child alone. And since there's no stigma attached to unmarried mothers, you'll see lots of pushchairs with contented-looking young mums behind them (rather than the haggard, harried faces you see on some of their counterparts elsewhere in the world!).

Although there were apparently two carjackings last year (shock! horror!), crime is notable for its absence. We can't think of a safer city than the country's capital.

POPULATION

The population reached the nice round number of 300,000 at 7.20am on 10 January 2006. (At the time of writing, it had crept up to a less pleasing 304,334.) A whopping 38% of all Icelanders live in Reykjavik, and the number is growing steadily as more people migrate from the country to the city – around 4000 people drift into town every year.

The Icelandic birth rate has been very high over the last few years, and the population is increasing by around 2.2% annually – that's around one baby popping out every hour. And the little nippers can expect to live long in a pleasantly empty land: Iceland has one of the world's highest life expectancies – 78.9 years for men and 82.8 years for women – and the lowest population density in Europe, with only 2.9 people per sq km.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE

Although Icelanders don't often stand on ceremony, there are a few simple rules to follow that will pave the way for a smooth trip. It's important to take your shoes off as you enter a house, and if you've been lucky enough to be invited for dinner it's a good idea to bring a gift for your host – a bottle of foreign wine is usually welcomed. To make a toast you should say 'Skál!', and at the end of the meal, 'Takk fyrir mig' shows your appreciation to your host.

According to a 2005 report by Transparency International, Iceland is the least corrupt country in the world (the UK was 11th and the US came 17th).

Iceland's population has tripled in the last 100 years.

Icelanders discovered only fairly recently that much of their genetic make-up is Celtic, suggesting that far more of the Viking settlers had children by their slaves than originally thought. Even though they speak the nearest thing to Viking in existence, Iceland is actually the least purely Scandinavian of all the Nordic countries.

MULTICULTURALISM

Immigration used to be very strictly controlled, but a shortage of Icelandic workers to do more menial work and the opening up of Europe have prompted a massive surge in immigration.

In the mid '80s only about 600 foreigners per year settled here. In 2006 around 5000 immigrants arrived to work temporarily in the country, and a further 6000 were granted Icelandic citizenship. The number of foreign workers in the country is now thought to be around 6% of the total population, with Polish people forming the largest group of immigrants, followed by Danes.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

Iceland's main daily newspapers are published only in Icelandic. The biggest-selling, *Morgunblaðið*, is moderately right wing, but Icelanders generally don't take journalists much more seriously than they do their politicians.

For snippets of Icelandic news, the *Iceland Review* website (www.icelandreview.com) has a free daily news digest (which you can have delivered to your email inbox), and its glossy quarterly magazine has some entertaining, light articles about Icelandic people, culture, history and nature.

An excellent read for Icelandic news, views, reviews and what's hot in Reykjavik is the new *Grapevine* magazine, a fortnightly newsprint magazine distributed free in summer. The editors are not afraid to write at length about big issues in Iceland, but it's done with humour and a deft writing style. It's available at the tourist office, hotels and bars in Reykjavik.

Homer Simpson's friend and nuclear-plant colleague Carl Carlson was born in Iceland!

ICELANDIC ANCESTRY & GENETIC RESEARCH

Thanks to Ári the Learned's painstaking 12th-century works, Icelanders can trace their family trees right back to the 9th century through two books – the *Landnámabók* and the *Íslendingabók*, which is all very interesting for history buffs. But add this well-documented genealogical material to Iceland's unusually homogenous population and you end up with something potentially quite sinister – a unique country-sized genetic laboratory.

Controversially, in 1998 the Icelandic government voted to allow the creation of a single database containing all Icelanders' genealogical, genetic and medical records. Even more controversially, in 2000 the government then allowed American biotech company deCODE access to it all.

The decision sparked public outrage in Iceland and arguments across the globe about its implications for human rights and medical ethics. The chief questions it raised were: should a government be able to sell off its citizens' medical records? And is it acceptable for a private corporation to use such records for profit? The company claimed that its encryption methods meant that individuals could not be identified by researchers (but read *Tainted Blood* by Arnaldur Indriðason for a cynical take on this statement).

The biotech company set to work, using the database to trace inheritable diseases and pinpoint the genes that cause them. The database was declared unconstitutional in 2004, and deCODE had to change its procedure, but it has still succeeded in isolating 15 genes linked to heart attacks, strokes and asthma. This information will be used to develop new drugs to combat the diseases. As a kind of payoff to the guinea pigs, deCODE have promised that any drugs created through its research will be free to Icelanders.

BUILDING BRIDGES – THE A-HÚS INTERCULTURAL CENTRE

What is the A-Hús Intercultural Centre?

The intercultural centre serves immigrants by giving them information about their rights and obligations, and we teach Icelanders about immigration issues, do antiracism training, and run courses on how to have a more multiculturally friendly company.

Where do immigrants come from?

It's very much talked about, how many people have come from Eastern Europe recently. When Europe opened up, Iceland used its adjustment time and a lot of the newer countries didn't get complete rights here until 1 May 2006. The incomers are mostly in blue-collar labour: construction, fisheries, maintenance and so on.

How well do foreigners settle in?

One of the issues that we're concentrating on is getting people to integrate. Blue-collar workers spend 12 hours a day in gruelling labour, and they just don't have a lot of spare time [for mixing with Icelanders]. They're dead tired. And as the foreign community gets bigger, they have their own support network – Polish people can work, live and hang out with other Polish people. Our teachers go into companies where there are lots of foreigners and teach occupation-related language classes. We're trying to break down that barrier – where Polish people are sitting at one table in the lunch room and Icelanders are at another.

Are Icelanders generally welcoming?

Well, there is naturally some racism; there's no escaping it, unfortunately. There are people that occasionally write in to the papers and say negative things. But, overall, I think things are pretty positive. A recent Gallup survey found that the majority of Icelanders were positive about having a multicultural society or said they didn't care where people came from.

Tell us about Café Cultura.

It's the face of the intercultural centre. It's a popular café with foreigners and Icelanders as well. There'll be all sorts of people here: actors, politicians, media people, theatre students – a bohemian crowd. You can hear all sorts of different languages being spoken, and there're always different things going on. Last weekend was a Russian weekend, with a Russian DJ playing Russian house music, and Russian vodkas to sample!

Thanks to Barbara Kristvínsson, A-Hús Intercultural Centre

TV & Radio

Until 1988 Iceland had only one state-run TV station – which went off air on Thursdays so that citizens could do something healthier instead. (It's said that most children born before 1988 were conceived on a Thursday...) Today, there are three stations and they broadcast on a Thursday. So, now you have a choice.

TV and radio are more for entertainment than enlightenment, although the Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV; Icelandic National Broadcasting Service) evening news is the country's second-most-watched programme. If you're near a TV on Saturday night, check out Iceland's favourite show – the unfathomable current-affairs satire *Spaugstofan*, which is watched by over half the country. Much of the programming, particularly in the evenings, comes from the USA and the UK – in English, with Icelandic subtitles.

An Icelandic TV show that you might already have seen, particularly if you have children, is the violently colourful *Latibær* (Lazy Town), starring Sportacus, Stephanie, Robbie Rotten and some shudderingly ugly puppets. It was recently nominated for the American Emmy and British Bafta awards.

RELIGION

Norse

The original religion in Iceland at the time of the Settlement was Ásatrú, which means 'faith in the Aesir (the old Norse gods)'. It was the ancient religion of most Germanic peoples and also appears as far away as India. The medieval Icelandic text, the *Galdrabók*, reveals that people were calling upon the Aesir long after Christianity was adopted across Northern Europe.

There were many gods in the pantheon, but Þór (Thor), Óðinn and Freyr were the major trinity worshipped across Scandinavia. The religion is also closely linked to a reverence for the natural world.

Óðinn, the god of war and poetry, was the highest-ranking deity, chief of the gods, and a brooding and intimidating presence. He influenced the sway of battle and handed out literary talent to those deemed worthy.

Free from warfare, in Iceland most people were devoted to Þór (and there are still plenty of Icelandic people with names such as Þórir, Þórdís and Þóra). This giant, rowdy god of the common people controlled thunder, wind, storm and natural disaster, so he was a vital deity for farmers and fishermen to have on their side. He was depicted as a burly, red-haired, red-bearded dolt, who rumbled through the heavens in a goat-drawn chariot.

Freyr and his twin sister Freyja, the children of the sea god Njörður, served as the god and goddess of fertility and sexuality. Freyr was the one who brought springtime, with its romantic implications, to both the human and the animal world and was in charge of the perpetuation of all species.

Icelanders peacefully converted to Christianity more than 1000 years ago, but the old gods are being revived by followers of the modern Ásatrú religion (see the boxed text, opposite). The modern religion evolved in the 1970s, almost simultaneously in Iceland, the US and the UK. Farmer-poet and high priest Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson managed to get the *Íslenska Ásatrúarfélagið* (www.asatru.is) recognised by the Icelandic government as early as 1973.

The two main rituals of Ásatrú are *blót* (the sacrifice) and *sumbel* (the toast). Nowadays 'sacrifices', which take place on the winter and summer solstices, on the first day of winter and summer, and at Þorrablót (see p58), are usually libations made with mead, beer or cider. The *sumbel* is a ritualised three-part toast: the first is made to the god Óðinn (it's also wise to pour a few drops for Loki, the trickster, to ward off nasty surprises); the second round is to the ancestors and honourable dead; and the third round is to whomever one wishes to honour.

Whereas membership of other religions in Iceland has remained fairly constant, Ásatrúarfélagið is growing quickly and now has around 1000 registered members and eight priests (five of whom can perform marriage ceremonies). At the time of writing, the society was building its first temple in Reykjavík, due for completion in 2008 or 2009.

Christianity

Traditionally, the date of the decree that officially converted Iceland to Christianity has been given as 1000, but research has determined that it probably occurred in 999. What is known is that the changeover of religions was a political decision. In the Icelandic Alþing (National Assembly), Christians and pagans had been polarising into two radically opposite factions, threatening to divide the country. Þorgeir, the *lögsögumaður* (law-speaker), appealed for moderation on both sides, and eventually it was agreed that Christianity would officially become the new religion, although pagans were still allowed to practise in private.

Today, as in mainland Scandinavia, most Icelanders (around 84%) belong to the Protestant Lutheran Church.

Thursday is named after Thor (Thor's Day); but you knew that already, right?

RETURN OF THE GODS

Can you tell us about your religious beliefs?

The short answer is that we follow the sun. Our celebrations are in June, September, December and March, on the solstices and the equinoxes. The Norse gods are our gods...Þór, Óðinn. We are a nature-based religion, although we're not environmentalists in the modern sense. We don't kill for fun, but we don't mind killing an animal if the purpose is eating it. We're not pruders. Our main sacred place is Þingvellir...you've been there? So you have seen the beauty of it?

Do you see Ásatrú as an unbroken tradition?

Yes, we do. It did have some hard times over the last centuries, but it never completely disappeared. We lack some information about the tradition 1000 years ago, but it's not that bad. We know what it's all about, anyway.

It seems to us that although many Icelanders are outwardly Lutheran, inside they have an interest in nature and the old ways.

Yes, you're right. Our existence is accepted by the population, but the head of the church doesn't like us at all. This is fine, because every time the bishop says something negative about us, we get more members. So he is in a way, although not deliberately, something of a friend of ours!

Your membership is growing, and now we hear you're building your first temple.

It'll be in Öskjuhlíð, on the slopes of that hill. The place is not especially significant, but the temple will be. We want to have quality. We don't want it to be...what's the word? Kitsch. It will be modern but also based on old traditions. We want it to be of such quality that it will be a landmark in Reykjavik in future times.

Will it be open to the public?

It will absolutely be open to everyone. Everyone is always welcome to our gatherings.

Thanks to Ottar Ottósson, Ásatrú follower

ARTS Literature

Bloody, black and powerful, the late 12th- and 13th-century sagas are without doubt Iceland's greatest cultural achievement. Written in terse Old Norse, these epics continue to entertain Icelanders and provide them with a rich sense of heritage.

But Icelanders are never ones to rest on their literary laurels, and today the country produces the most writers and literary translations per capita of any country in the world.

THE SAGAS

Iceland's medieval family sagas have often been called the world's first novels. They're certainly some of the most imaginative and enduring works of early literature – epic and brutal tales that suddenly flower with words of wisdom, elegy or love.

Written down during the late 12th to late 13th centuries, they generally look to earlier times – they're tales of bloodthirsty disputes, doomed romances and the larger-than-life characters who lived during the Settlement Era. Most were written anonymously, though *Egil's Saga* has been attributed to Snorri Sturluson (see the boxed text, p158).

The sagas provided not just entertainment but a strong sense of cultural heritage, as they were written, over the long desperate centuries of Norwegian and Danish subjugation, when Icelanders had very little else. On winter nights, people would gather in farmhouses for the *kvöldvaka* (evening vigil),

Betra er berfættum en bókarlausum að vera. (It's better to be barefoot than bookless.)

a time of socialising and storytelling. While the men twisted horsehair ropes and women spun wool or knitted, a family member would read the sagas and recite *rimur* (later verse reworkings of the sagas).

And the sagas are very much alive today. Because modern Icelandic has scarcely changed since Viking times, Icelanders of all ages can (and do) read the sagas in Old Norse, the language in which they were written 800 years ago. Most people can quote chunks from them, know the farms where the characters lived and died, and flock to cinemas to see the latest film versions of these eternal tales.

One of the best known, *Egil's Saga*, revolves around the complex, devious Egill Skallagrímsson. A renowned poet and skilled lawyer, he was also the grandson of a werewolf and a murderous drunk. Other favourite works include *Grettir's Saga*, about a superhuman but doomed outlaw, Grettir the Strong; *Laxdæla Saga*, the tragic account of a family in Northwest Iceland; and *Njál's Saga* (see p136), another tragedy about two warring families, whose heroic characters make it one of the most popular sagas of all.

You can admire the original saga manuscripts in Reykjavík's Þjóðmenningarhús (p76).

EDDIC & SKALDIC POETRY

The themes of Icelandic poetry were probably dreamt up in mainland Scandinavia, but they weren't actually written down until the 12th-century Saga Age.

Eddic poems are subdivided into three classes – the Mythical, the Gnostic and the Heroic – and were composed in free variable metres with a structure very similar to that of early Germanic poetry. Mythical poetry was based on the antics of the Norse gods and was probably promoted as an intended affront to growing Christian sentiments in Norway. Gnostic poetry consists of one major work, the *Hávamál*, which extols the virtues of the common life. The Heroic Eddic poems are similar in form, subject matter and even characters to early Germanic works such as the *Nibelungenlied*.

Skaldic poetry was developed and composed by Norwegian court poets, or *skalds*, in veneration of heroic deeds by the Scandinavian kings, but other themes were introduced as the genre grew in popularity. The most renowned *skald* was Egill Skallagrímsson – he of *Egil's Saga* – who amid his other exploits ran afoul of Eirík Blood-Axe, king of Jorvík (modern-day York), in 948. After being captured and sentenced to death, on the night before his execution Egill composed an ode to Eirík. The flattered monarch released Egill unharmed, and the poem is now known as the *Höfuðlausn* (Head Ransom).

Skaldic poems are mainly praise-poems, with lots of description packed into tightly structured lines. As well as having fiercely rigid alliteration, syllable counts and stresses, they're made more complex by *kennings*, a kind of compact word-riddle. Blood, for instance, is 'wound dew'; an arm might be described as a 'hawk's perch'; and battle is often referred to as 'the Valkyries' glorious song'.

20TH-CENTURY LITERATURE

Nobel Prize-winner Halldór Laxness is Iceland's undoubted literary genius. His work is magnificent – for more details, see the boxed text, opposite.

Other authors you may come across are the early-20th-century children's writer Reverend Jón Sveinsson (nicknamed Nonni), who grew up in Akureyri. Although he mostly wrote in German, his old-fashioned tales of derring-do have a rich Icelandic flavour, and they were translated into 40 languages. *At Skípalón* is the only one readily available in English. Just after him, Jóhann

HALLDÓR LAXNESS – ICELAND'S FINEST AUTHOR

It's frightening how we miss out on literary masterpieces from other countries, simply because no-one bothers to translate them. Halldór Laxness (1902–98) is Iceland's most celebrated author of the 20th century, and his genius was recognised when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. However, his greatest work took years to appear in English, and only a portion of his 51 novels and countless short stories, articles, plays and poems are currently available in translation.

The author was born as Halldór Guðjónsson, but he took the name of his family's farm Laxnes (with an extra 's') as his *nom de plume*. Laxness, a restless, inquisitive, prolific soul, had work published from the age of 14 and began travelling at the age of 17, wandering and writing around Scandinavia. Three years later he joined a monastery in Luxembourg and converted to Catholicism, studying Latin, praying fervently and writing his first proper novel, *Undir Helgahnúk* (*Under the Holy Mountain*). However, he soon became disillusioned with monastic life. After briefly returning to Iceland he went to Italy, where he wrote of his disaffection with the church and his increasingly leftist leanings in *Vefarinn Mikli frá Kasmír* (*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*). Laxness then set off for America to try his luck in the fledgling Hollywood film industry. There he wrote one of his best-known works, *Salka Valka*, as a screenplay. It was during this stay in America during the Great Depression of the 1930s that he became a communist sympathiser. Quickly finding himself facing deportation from the USA, he bought a ticket to Germany.

Laxness became so absorbed with the Communist Party that he attended the 1937 purge trials in Moscow and deliberately misrepresented them in his writings (by his own later admission) lest he in any way defame the system in which he had placed all hope and trust. Most of Laxness' work during his communist days reflects everyday life in Iceland, often with thinly disguised autobiographical details. *Independent People* describes the harsh conditions under which the average Icelander lived in the early 20th century, focusing on the heartbreakingly bloody-minded farmer Bjartur of Summerhouses, one of the most perfectly drawn characters in world literature.

His other major novels include *Iceland's Bell* and *The Atom Station*. The former is a three-part work, a sagalike portrait of extreme poverty and skewed justice. Set in an Iceland subjugated by Danish rule, it revolves around the interweaving fates of destitute farmer and possible murderer Jón Hreggviðsson, and the stoical beauty Snæfríður, sister-in-law of the bishop of Skálholt. The second book, written prophetically in 1948, is a slim, droll volume about the American military presence in Iceland, nuclear proliferation and the socialist struggle for state welfare provision. His other works currently available in translation are *World Light*, *The Fish Can Sing*, *Paradise Reclaimed* and *Under the Glacier*.

All of Laxness's works are masterpieces of irony; his characters, however misguided, are drawn with sympathy; and seams of the blackest humour run through them all. Whatever you think of his works, it's impossible not to be affected by them. At the time of writing, they were very controversial – quite a few Icelanders disputed his observations, although their complaints were often motivated by national pride and reluctance to publicise Iceland's relative backwardness. However, when Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, in true Icelandic style he became a hero of the people.

By 1962 Laxness had settled in Reykjavík for good (his home at Laxnes, near the suburb of Mosfellsbær, has now been turned into a museum – see p104). Apparently mellowed by his experiences with extremism at both ends of the spectrum, he wrote *A Poet's Time*, which recanted everything he'd ever written in praise of the Communist Party.

Sigurjónsson wrote *Eyvind of the Hills*, a biography of the 18th-century outlaw Fjalla-Eyvindur, which was later made into a film. Two other masters of Icelandic literature are Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889–1975) and Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888–1974), who was beaten to the Nobel Prize by Laxness. You'll have to look out for their work in second-hand bookshops.

For more up-to-date and easily available fare, try Einar Káráson's outstanding *Devil's Island*, about Reykjavík life in the 1950s; it's the first of a trilogy,

Iceland publishes the greatest number of books per capita in the world, and the literacy rate is a perfect 100%.

You might think *Icelandic Folktales*, translated by Alan Boucher, is just a collection of children's tales, but these light-hearted little gems encompass Icelandic history, humour and belief; they're the stories the country has been telling itself for hundreds of years.

If you read nothing else, at least read Halldór Laxness's dark, funny, painful masterpiece *Independent People* – it's fantastic, and you'll marvel all the more at Iceland's progress in the last 70 years.

but unfortunately the other two haven't been translated into English. *101 Reykjavík*, by Halldór Helgason, is the book on which the cult film was based. It's a dark comedy following the torpid life and fertile imagination of out-of-work Hlynur, who lives in downtown Reykjavík with his mother. Even more black, with flashes of humour, is the strange *Angels of the Universe*, by Einar Már Guðmundsson, about a schizophrenic man's spells in a psychiatric hospital.

Currently surfing a tidal wave of success is Arnaldur Indriðason, whose Reykjavík-based crime fiction regularly tops the bestsellers list. Works available in English include *Voices*, the award-winning *Silence of the Grave*, and our favourite, *Tainted Blood* (also published as *Jar City*).

Music POP

Internationally famous Icelandic musicians include (of course) Björk. In Reykjavík, look out for the bestselling *Gling Gló*, a collection of Björk-sung jazz standards and traditional Icelandic songs that's quite difficult to find outside the country. Sigur Rós are following Björk to stardom; their last album *Takk* (2005) garnered rave reviews around the world. You may also be familiar with Emiliana Torrini, the Icelandic-Italian singer who sang the spooky *Gollum's Song* in the Lord of the Rings film *The Two Towers*.

Back home, Reykjavík's music scene continues to flourish – at times it seems the whole city acts as a dizzying music-producing machine, with everyone under 30 playing an instrument or singing in a band. (Something to do on those long, dark nights?) A swirling maelstrom of musicians play gigs, record albums, go solo and re-form, creating a constantly changing line-up of new bands and sounds.

It's hard to pin them all down. Currently popular are Leaves (called 'the new Radiohead' by NME); Trabant (who describe themselves as 'Monty Python meets Thomas Dolby'), Mugison (introspective but tuneful songs from one man and his guitar), Múm (weird electronica mixed with real instruments), Mínus (whose thrashy guitars have supported Foo Fighters and Metallica), *My Summer as a Salvation Soldier* (poignant acoustic songs from singer Þórir), Hafþís Huld (spiky female popstress critically acclaimed in the UK), Cynic Guru (perky pop encompassing lots of different styles), Benny Hemm Hemm (highly rated guitar strumming with blasts of brass), and Tilraunaeldhúsið (Kitchen Motors; experimental 'sound sculpturists' whose ages range from 20-something to 70-something).

MOOD MUSIC FOR ICELAND

Download these Icelandic tunes to get into the quirky Reykjavík spirit. If you can't find them on conventional music-download sites, go to www.musik.is and search for individual bands' websites and MySpace pages there.

- The Sugarcubes – 'Birthday'
- Jakobínarína – 'His Lyrics Are Disastrous'
- Emiliana Torrini – 'Sunny Road'
- Leaves – 'Whatever'
- Sigur Rós – 'Sé Lest'
- Mammút – 'Thorkell'
- Hafþís Huld – 'Ice Cream Is Nice'
- Cynic Guru – 'Digging the Holes'

TOP MUSIC FROM 12 TÓNAR

Best Icelandic band at Airwaves 2006?

Mammút – they were great. And Jakobínarína – very good, too.

Current bestselling CD?

Fjölskyldualbúm Tilraunaeldhússins (Kitchen Motors Family Album) – it's been our bestseller ever since it came out. It's a compilation album; they've worked with lots of artists and have done some exclusive stuff with Sigur Rós.

Best venue for seeing live bands?

At the moment? NASA (p94).

Band of the future?

Hmm...looking into my crystal ball...Rökkurró (www.myspace.com/rokkurro). They're going to be big.

Thanks to Helgi Hauksson and Einar Kristjánsson, 12 Tónar (independent music shop)

Several of these bands were brought to a wider audience by the music documentary *Screaming Masterpiece* (2005), which contains moments of toe-curling pretentiousness but is worth watching to grasp the sheer diversity of Icelandic music.

At the time of writing, Reykjavík's two oldest and best music venues had closed, to the shock and outrage of all. It wasn't quite clear which bars might take over staging bands, although Café Amsterdam (p95) was looking likely. Check the free paper *Grapevine* for current news. As computer-mad internet fiends, a lot of Icelanders spread their music via sites such as MySpace. The best music festival in Iceland is Airwaves (held in Reykjavík in October), which showcases the cream of Iceland's talent along with international acts.

TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Until rock and roll arrived in the 20th century, Iceland was a land practically devoid of musical instruments. The Vikings brought the *fiðla* and the *langspil* with them from Scandinavia – both a kind of two-stringed box that rested on the player's knee and was played with a bow. They were never solo instruments but merely served to accompany singers, as did the few church organs that appeared in the 19th century.

It's not really surprising, in a country permanently on the verge of starvation, that instruments were an unheard-of luxury, and that singing was the sole music. The most famous song styles are the *rimur*, poetry or stories from the sagas performed in a low, eerie chant (Sigur Rós have dabbled with the form), and *fimmundasöngur*, sung by two people in harmony. Cut off from other influences, the Icelandic singing style barely changed from the 14th century to the 20th; it also managed to retain harmonies that were banned by the church across the rest of Europe for being the work of the devil!

Iceland also has hundreds of traditional ditties that most Icelanders learn before school age and are still singing with relish in their old age. They're dredged up whenever an occasion brings the generations together: family parties, outings, camping. The two favourites (which you'll hear exhaustively) are *Á Sprengisandi*, a cowboy song about sheep herders and outlaws in the desert interior, and a tear-jerking lullaby based on a legend about outlaw Fjalla-Eyvindur's wife, who threw her starving baby into a waterfall. Several collections of traditional Icelandic music are available from Reykjavík music shops and souvenir shops around the country.

www.musik.is – this useful website contains links to the websites and MySpace pages of most of the underground bands currently rocking Reykjavík.

CONVERSATION ABOUT AN OLD ICELANDIC INSTRUMENT

Author: I'd love to hear how a *langspil* sounds – do you know where I could listen to one?

Museum curator: No, sorry, I don't.

A: Do any folk groups use them in their music?

MC: No, I can't think of any.

A: So not many people play them these days?

MC: No, not many.

A: Why's that, then?

MC: Well...they sound awful.

Cinema

Iceland's film industry is young – regular production started only around the early 1980s – but it's developing at a cracking pace. Icelandic short films in particular have received all kinds of international awards. Full-length features are rarer, but they often contain the same quirky, dark subject matter and superb cinematography, using Iceland's powerful landscape as a backdrop.

In 1992 the film world first took notice of Iceland when *Children of Nature* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. In the film, an elderly couple forced into a retirement home in Reykjavík make a break for the countryside where they belong. The film's director, Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, is something of a legend in Icelandic cinema circles, although some of his films are definitely better than others. *Cold Fever* (1994), *Angels of the Universe* (2000) and the English-language *Niceland* (2004) are three that are worth watching.

Massive acclaim at home doesn't necessarily translate into international fame. Certain films have been storming successes in Iceland, but aren't well known outside the country. These include *Íslenski Draumurinn* (The Icelandic Dream; 2000), a comic drama about a man whose life revolves around soccer, juggling current and former girlfriends, and peddling imported cigarettes; *Mávahlátur* (Seagull's Laughter; 2001), following the lives of a group of women in a 1950s fishing village; and *Betta er ekkert mál* (2006), a biography of Jón Pál Sigmarsson.

If one film has put Iceland, and especially Reykjavík, on the cinematic stage, it's *101 Reykjavík* (2000), directed by Baltasar Kormákur and based on the novel by Hallgrímur Helgason. This dark comedy explores sex, drugs and the life of a loafer in downtown Reykjavík. Kormákur's most recent release, though, *A Little Trip to Heaven* (2005), has received rather mixed reviews.

Some other films that have gone some way to emulating *101 Reykjavík's* success include *Nói Albinói* (2003), directed by Dagur Kári, about a restless adolescent in a snowed-in northern fjord town, and *Kaldaljós* (*Cold Light*; 2004), a slow-moving, poignant film about life in another isolated fjord, with a stunning performance from the little boy on whom it centres. And perhaps forthcoming Icelandic films such as Árni Ólafur Ásgeirsson's *Blóðbönd* (*Thicker than Water*), Björn Björsson's *Cold Trail* and Kormákur's *Jar City* will become hits.

Iceland's immense beauty and the government's 12% discount (or bribe) for filmmakers have encouraged Hollywood directors to make movies here. Try to spot the Icelandic scenery in blockbusters such as *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Tomb Raider* (2001), *Die Another Day* (2002), *Batman Begins* (2005), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), and the forthcoming Robert de Niro fairy tale *Stardust*.

www.icelandicfilmcentre.is – catch up on the latest in the Icelandic film industry.

Architecture

People who come to Iceland expecting to see Viking longhouses will be disappointed, as the turf-and-wood buildings haven't stood up to the ravages of time. At best you'll see grassed-over foundations. These materials, however, were used right up until the 19th century, and several later turf-roofed buildings around the country have been preserved as folk museums – there are good examples at Keldur (p134) and Skógar (p138) in southwest Iceland, and Glaumbær (p204) in north Iceland.

For information on architecture in Reykjavík, see the boxed text, p78.

Painting & Sculpture

Iceland's most successful artists have traditionally studied abroad (in Copenhagen, London, Oslo or elsewhere in Europe), before returning home to wrestle with Iceland's enigmatic soul. The result is a European-influenced style but with Icelandic landscapes and saga-related scenes as key subjects.

The first great Icelandic landscape painter was the prolific Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958), who was attracted to impressionism while studying in Italy. He produced a startling number of oils and watercolours depicting Icelandic landscapes and folk tales. You can see his work at Reykjavík's National Gallery (p77).

One of Ásgrímur's students was Johannes Kjarval (1885–1972), Iceland's most enduringly popular artist, who lived in the remote east Iceland village of Borgarfjörður Eystri as a child. His first commissioned works were, rather poignantly, drawings of farms for people who were emigrating, but he's most famous for his early charcoal sketches of people from the village and for his surreal landscapes.

Contemporary artists to look out for include pop-art icon Erró (Guðmundur Guðmundsson), who has donated his entire collection to Reykjavík Art Museum's Hafnarhúsið (p77); mural and glass artist Sjöfn Har; and Tryggvi Ólafsson (p268), whose strikingly colourful abstracts depicting Icelandic scenes hang in national galleries in Reykjavík, Sweden and Denmark.

Sculpture is very well represented in Iceland, with works dotting parks, gardens and galleries across the country, and its most famous sculptors all have museums dedicated to them in Reykjavík. Notable exponents include Einar Jónsson (1874–1954; p76), whose mystical works dwell on death and resurrection; Ásmundur Sveinsson (1893–1982; p77), whose tactile work is very wide ranging but tends to celebrate Iceland, its stories and its people; and Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908–92; p77), who specialised in busts but also dabbled in abstract forms.

Reykjavík heaves with modern-art showrooms full of love-'em-or-hate-'em installations – ask the tourist office for a full list of galleries, and see also p76.

A Guide to Icelandic Architecture (Association of Icelandic Architects) looks at 250 Icelandic buildings and designs.

Environment

It's difficult to remain unmoved by the amazing diversity of the Icelandic landscape. Contrary to popular opinion, it's not an island completely covered in ice, nor is it a barren lunar landscape of congealed lava flows and wind-swept tundra. Both of these habitats exist, but so too do steep-sided fjords sweeping down to the sea, lush farmland, rolling hills, glacier-carved valleys, steaming fields, bubbling mudpots and vast, desertlike wasteland. It is this rich mix of scenery and the possibility of experiencing such extremes, so close together, that attract, surprise and enthral anyone who has been lucky enough to visit the country.

THE LAND

Plonked firmly on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a massive 18,000km-long rift between two of the earth's major tectonic plates, Iceland is a shifting, steaming lesson in school-room geography. Suddenly you'll be racking your brains to remember long-forgotten homework on how volcanoes work, how glacial moraines are formed, and why lava and magma aren't quite the same thing. With 22 active volcanoes, 250 geothermal areas, 780 hot springs and the world's third-largest icecap (after Antarctica and Greenland), it's a vast reserve of information for scientists and a stunning playground for the rest of us.

Iceland is roughly equal in size to England, but with only 300,000 people (as opposed to England's 49 million), scattered around its coast. Beyond the sliver of habitable land along its shores, half the country is covered by the inhospitable desert and another 15% is taken up by icecaps. Add on some lava fields and a few sandar (glacial sand plains), sprinkle generously with geysers, fumaroles and hot springs, and you've pretty much covered the island.

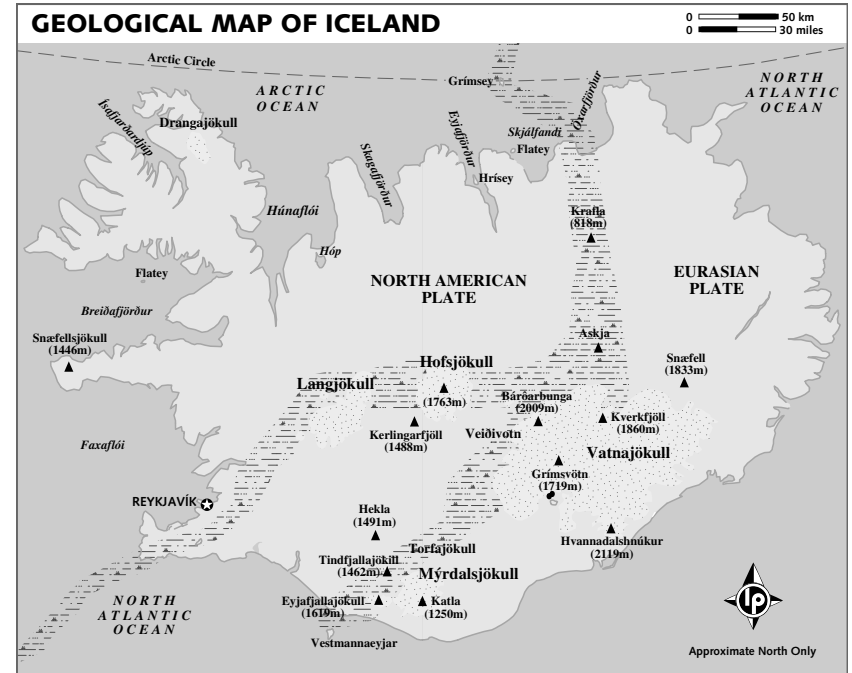
Iceland isn't truly an arctic country, though – the northernmost point of the mainland falls short of the Arctic Circle by a few kilometres. To cross that imaginary boundary you'll need to travel to the island of Grímsey (p223), Iceland's only true piece of arctic territory.

NATURE'S FURY

Iceland's unique position on a simmering fault line brings it plenty of low-cost energy, hot water and incredible landscapes, but the highly active rift has also caused frequent natural disasters.

In the 14th century a series of violent eruptions caused widespread death and destruction among Iceland's Norse settlers, and towards the end of the 16th century severe winters and widespread crop failure meant that 9000 Icelanders starved to death. The following two centuries were not much better. Continuous eruptions from Hekla, Krafla and Örafi characterised the 17th century, and in 1783 Lakagígur (Laki) erupted, resulting in a poisonous haze that destroyed pastures and crops. Nearly 75% of Iceland's livestock and 20% of the human population died. A series of earthquakes and another spell of severe winters followed, pushing the already suffering Icelandic population close to despair.

Natural disasters continue to occur, but better communications, advance warning and the urban population have reduced their impact considerably. In 1963 an underwater eruption created the new island of Surtsey just southwest of Vestmannaeyjar. Ten years later Heimaey experienced a terrible eruption that created a new mountain and buried most of the town, and in 1996 Grímsvötn went off and released the largest *jökulhlaup* (flooding caused by volcanic eruption beneath an icecap) of the 20th century. Hekla erupted in February 2000, and a series of powerful earthquakes shook the country four months later. Earthquakes and subsurface volcanic rumblings continue – stay tuned for the next 'big one'.



Geology

A mere baby in geological terms, Iceland is the youngest country in Europe, formed by underwater volcanic eruptions along the joint of the North American and Eurasian plates 17 to 20 million years ago. These two massive tectonic plates create a fault line across the centre of Iceland and right down the Atlantic Ocean.

The earth's crust in Iceland is only a third of its normal thickness, and magma (molten rock) continues to rise from deep within, forcing the two plates apart. The result is clearly visible at Þingvellir (p115), where the great rift Almannagjá broadens by about 1mm per year, and at Námafjall and Dalfjall (p235), where a series of steaming vents mark the ridge.

Along with the dramatic steaming vents, bubbling mudpots, weird rock formations and lava fields that draw in valuable tourist currency, Iceland's unique position on top of a highly active fault line brings other benefits. Turn on any Icelandic shower and you'll have piping hot water instantly (but try to brush your teeth and you'll have to wait several minutes for the cold water to filter through). Iceland has a surplus of superheated steam and hot water that is used to produce cheap electricity, heat buildings and swimming pools, and even keep the pavements of Reykjavík clear of snow in winter.

Iceland's use of geothermal power is one of the most creative in the world, and the country's energy experts are now advising both Chinese and Indian industries on possible ways to harness geothermal sources. Iceland is also hoping to reduce its dependency on imported fossil fuels, and it has begun to invest in hydrogen fuel research with the aim of phasing out petrol- and diesel-powered cars by midcentury.

Iceland is one of the world's most active hot spots – one-third of all the lava to surface on earth in the last 1000 years is of Icelandic origin.

Geology of Iceland: Rocks and Landscape, by Þorleifur Einarsson, is a comprehensive guide to the country's geology, discussing volcanic and geothermal activity, rock formation, and plate tectonics.

Glaciers & Icecaps

Glaciers and icecaps cover about 15% of Iceland, many of which are remnants of a cool period that began 2500 years ago. Icecaps are formed as snow piles up over millennia in an area where it's never warm enough to melt. The weight of the snow causes it to slowly compress into ice, eventually crushing the land beneath the icecap and allowing the ice around the edges to flow downward in glaciers.

These slow-moving rivers of ice have carved out and shaped much of the Icelandic landscape since its creation, creating the glacial valleys and fjords that make those picture-postcard photos today.

Iceland's largest icecap, Vatnajökull in the southeast, covers almost 13% of the country and is the third-largest in the world. Other major icecaps are Mýrdalsjökull in the southwest, and Langjökull and Hofsjökull in the interior.

WILDLIFE Animals

Apart from sheep, cows and horses, you'll be very lucky to have any casual sightings of animals in Iceland. The only indigenous land mammal is the elusive arctic fox, and although polar bears occasionally drift across from Greenland on ice floes, armed farmers make sure they don't last long.

Your best bet for wildlife spotting is probably in east Iceland, where herds of reindeer can sometimes be spotted from the road. The deer were introduced from Norway in the 18th century and now roam the mountains.

Bird life, however, is prolific, at least from May to August. On coastal cliffs and islands around the country you can see a mind-boggling array of sea birds, often in massive colonies. Most impressive for their sheer numbers are gannets, guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, fulmars and puffins. Less numerous birds include wood sandpipers, arctic terns, skuas, Manx shearwaters, golden plovers, storm petrels and Leach's petrels. In addition, there are many species of ducks, ptarmigans, whooping swans, redwings, divers and gyrfalcons, and two species of owl. For more information on where to see the birds, turn to p51.

Another drawcard is the rich marine life, particularly whales. On whale-watching tours from Hafnarfjörður, Keflavík and Ólafsvík in western Iceland, and Húsavík in northern Iceland (among other places), you'll have an excellent chance of seeing minke, humpback, sperm, fin, sei, pilot and blue whales. Orcas (killer whales), dolphins, porpoises and seals can also be spotted. Seals

AURORA BOREALIS

The Inuit thought they were the souls of the dead, and their shamans called upon them to cure the sick; Scandinavian folklore described them as the final resting place for the spirits of unmarried women; and the Japanese believed that a child conceived under the dancing rays of the aurora borealis would be fortunate in life. Modern science, however, has reduced these romantic notions to a more prosaic explanation.

The magical natural phenomenon that creates the curtains of colour that streak across the northern night sky can be explained as the result of solar wind – a stream of particles from the sun that collides with oxygen and hydrogen atoms in the upper atmosphere. The collisions produce the greens and magentas of the aurora as the earth's magnetic field draws the solar wind particles towards the polar regions.

The best time to see the aurora in Iceland is between late September and early May, but everything depends on solar activity and, of course, cloud cover. For information on the best times and places to view the aurora, and tips on photographing it, visit www.northern-lights.no.

Plants and Animals of Iceland, by Benny Génsböl and Jon Feilberg, is an illustrated guide to all of Iceland's flora and fauna, including birds, marine mammals and 220 species of plants.

LITTLE NORTHERN BROTHERS

Cute, clumsy and endearingly comic, the puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) is one of Iceland's best-loved birds. Known for its goofy antics in the air, crash landings and frantic fluttering, this bird is also incredibly graceful underwater and was once thought to be a bird-fish hybrid.

The puffin is a member of the auk family and spends most of its year at sea. For four or five months it comes to land to breed, generally keeping the same mate and burrow from year to year. Sixty percent of the world's population of puffins breed in Iceland, and from late May to August you'll see them in huge numbers around Lundy (p240), the Vestmannaeyjar (p142) and Látrabjarg (p172).

Despite extended trips out to sea, the puffin is far from graceful in the air, flapping its wings up to 400 times per minute just to stay afloat. Neither is landing a puffin's forte – it often tumbles onto the grass, knocking over other birds in its way, or resorts to a crash landing on water. Puffins are also very curious and often gather in large numbers to watch others fighting.

In recent years there has been a decline in the number of puffins in many areas, and in 2006 baby birds were weighing in at around 200g, instead of their normal 300g. Similar problems in other countries have been blamed on overfishing: as the adult birds fly farther to find food, chicks starve before they return. Many others drown in fishing nets set in the water. With a normal life expectancy of about 20 years, a life cut short could severely affect numbers seen in Iceland in coming years.

can be seen in waterways around the Eastfjords, on the Vatnsnes peninsula in northwest Iceland, in the Mýrar region on the southeast coast (including at Jökulsárlón), in Breiðafjörður in the west, and in the Westfjords. For more information on whale watching, see p56.

Plants

Although ostensibly pretty barren in places, the vegetation in Iceland is surprisingly varied – you just need to get close to see it. Most vegetation is low growing, staying close to the ground and spreading as much as possible to get a better grip on the easily eroded soil. Even the trees, where there are any, are stunted. As the old joke goes, if you're lost in an Icelandic forest, just stand up.

If you're visiting in summer, you'll be treated to incredible displays of wild flowers blooming right across the country. Most of Iceland's 440 flowering plants are introduced species. You'll see the bright-pink flowers of the tall arctic fireweed around riverbeds; the distinctive, graceful bell shape of the purple arctic harebell; and several varieties of colourful saxifrage and daisies lining every trail. In grassy lowlands look out for the pale and dainty northern green orchid, and in upland areas the white heads of arctic cotton, the soft yellow petals of the upright primrose and the small, pretty flowers of the mountain heath. Coastal areas are generally characterised by low grasses, bogs and marshlands, while at higher elevations hard or soft tundra covers the ground.

Another common sight when walking just about anywhere in Iceland is the profusion of fungi. There are about 1500 types of fungi growing in Iceland, and you'll see everything from pale white mushrooms to bright orange flat caps as you walk along trails, by roadsides or through fields. In southern and eastern Iceland new lava flows are first colonised by mosses, which create a velvety green cloak across the rough rocks. Older lava flows in the east and those at higher elevations are generally first colonised by lichens.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Although Iceland has only four national parks, they protect some of the country's most pristine wilderness and most significant historical areas. In addition to the parks, over 80 nature reserves, natural monuments, country

For more information on Icelandic fauna, try www.faua.is.

Colonies of puffins can only be seen around Iceland's coast during nesting season, from around May to mid-August. After that they take off en masse to breed out at sea.

REDUCING YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

As Iceland becomes more accessible and more popular, the number of travellers visiting the country increases, and with each arrival comes a potential negative impact on the environment. The magnificent wilderness that attracts visitors is one of the most fragile on earth, and a footprint, tyre track or fire ring can scar the landscape for many years; the slow-growing vegetation or barren lava fields are unable to cover the damage.

To minimise your impact and help protect the fragile environment, follow these rules:

- always keep to established paths and trails
- camp in designated camp sites whenever possible, and carry out all rubbish
- question tour companies about their environmental policies and impact
- consider arriving in Iceland by ferry rather than by plane
- use public transport
- buy locally produced souvenirs and food
- speak out against careless exploitation and industry in Iceland
- if hiring a 4WD vehicle, stick to marked trails; offroad driving is illegal as it causes irreparable damage to the delicate landscape

parcs and wildlife reserves are scattered around the country. The parks (other than Þingvellir) are managed by **Umhverfisstofnun** (Environment & Food Agency; <http://english.ust.is>). The website contains a comprehensive section on each national park including maps and information on hiking, flora and fauna, and nature conservation.

Þingvellir (www.thingvellir.is; see p115), Iceland's oldest national park, is as famous for its scenic 84-sq-km lake and the geologically significant Almannagjá rift as for its historical significance as the site of the original Alþing (National Assembly). The park is administered directly by the prime minister's office and is a Unesco World Heritage site.

Skafafell (<http://english.ust.is/Skafafellnationalpark>; p285) in southeast Iceland is a classic wilderness park with superb hiking trails and glacier views. The park was enlarged in 2004 and now covers about two-thirds of Vatnajökull, as well as a volcanic fissure, a crater area and an outwash plain.

Jökulsárgljúfur (<http://english.ust.is/Jokulsargljufurnationalpark>; p242) in northeast Iceland protects 120 sq km of rugged land, including a canyon carved out by a glacial river, some bizarre rock formations and the awesome Dettifoss waterfall.

Snæfellsjökull (<http://english.ust.is/Snaefellsjokullnationalpark>; p163) in west Iceland is the country's newest national park, established in June 2001. The park protects the Snæfellsjökull glacier and the surrounding lava fields and coast.

Many of Iceland's other spectacular natural features are protected by nature reserves, such as the hiking areas of Fjallabak, Lónsöræfi and the Kverkfjöll mountains, islands such as Hrísey, Surtsey and Flatey, and waterfalls such as Gullfoss. Mývatn is classed as a 'special conservation area'.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Iceland's small population, pristine wilderness, lack of heavy industry and high use of geothermal and hydroelectric power give it an enviable environmental reputation. Recycling programmes are expanding, and many guesthouse and farmhouse owners are signing up to the Green Globe initiative (www.greenlobe.org), a worldwide certification programme for businesses committed to protecting the environment. However, pressing environmental concerns have forced a realisation among Icelanders that the continued existence of their pristine backyard is not an absolute birthright.

One of Iceland's most enduring environmental issues is soil erosion caused by high winds and overgrazing of sheep. Iceland was possibly deforested by overgrazing shortly after settlement, and today the sheep continue to chew vegetation down to the roots and expose the underlying soil to the forces of water and the fierce winds. In parts of the country, particularly around Mývatn lake, results are dramatic, reducing formerly vegetated land to barren wastes.

One measure used to tackle the problem was the introduction of the nootka lupine plant in 1945 to help anchor and add nitrogen to the soil. The project has been a victim of its own success, however, revegetating vast tracts of land but now also affecting Iceland's biodiversity. The lupine's bitter taste means that grazing sheep will not feed on it, so it continues to spread its relatively tall foliage, blocking light for indigenous mosses, lichens and shrubs.

Whaling is also a pressing issue in Iceland. In 2003 the country resumed whaling as part of a 'scientific research programme', despite a global moratorium on whale hunting, and in 2006 Iceland announced plans to resume commercial whaling, much to the consternation of environmentalists around the globe. For more information on the whaling debate, see the boxed text, p152.

As elsewhere around the world, global warming is a serious concern for Iceland. Warming sea temperatures could force the cod and herring stocks, so vital to the Icelandic economy, to migrate to cooler waters, and receding glaciers could affect Iceland's ability to produce energy from meltwater. Vatnajökull, Iceland's largest icecap, is already receding at a furious rate of about 1m per year. At this pace it could completely disappear in 300 years. More worrying, however, is the disruption of ocean currents, and consequently global climate systems, which could be caused by increased fresh water flowing out to sea.

The global push for cleaner, cheaper energy has also affected Iceland in other ways. Thanks to an abundance of so-called green energy and a special allowance under the Kyoto protocol, Iceland attracts multinationals in search of cheap energy, and the Icelandic government seems keen to help out. If its current plans for increased energy production to service heavy industry go ahead, then all of Iceland's glacial rivers would need to be harnessed. Environmental campaigners foresee catastrophic environmental damage, while politicians and multinational big shots peddle promises of untold economic benefits and jobs for all.

The most controversial scheme is the Kárahnjúkar hydroelectric project in the Eastfjords. The project involves construction of a network of dams, a vast reservoir, tunnels, a power station and high-tension lines to power an Alcoa aluminium smelter. It's the biggest construction project in Iceland's history and threatens to devastate the starkly beautiful landscape of the area.

Although it's claimed that the project will create about 1000 jobs, most of these are monotonous, low-paid positions unlikely to tempt young locals to stay in rural areas. So far over 80% of the workforce on the project is foreign.

As more information emerges about the project, even formerly uninterested Icelanders are beginning to protest. The Icelandic High Court has ruled that a proper environmental impact assessment was never carried out, gagging orders have been placed on critics, and concerns about the seismic instability of the area on which the dam is built have been sidelined. Additionally, many Icelanders are furious that taxpayers' money has funded the construction of the dam.

Despite claims by Alcoa that the plant will be one of the 'most environmentally friendly in the world', severe habitat destruction, dust storms, toxic fumes and pollution of the ground water are very real threats. For more information on the project, see the boxed text, p258.

A Guide to the Flowering Plants and Ferns of Iceland, by Hörður Kristinnsson, is the best all-round field guide to Icelandic flowers.

Marimo balls (golf-ball-sized spheres of algae) are found naturally in only two places in the world: Lake Akan in Japan and Iceland's Mývatn lake.

Icelandic Geographic is a glossy annual magazine featuring the most interesting and unique aspects of the Icelandic landscape; check it out online at www.icelandicgeographic.is.

TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

While the Kárahnjúkar project steals most of the current headlines, many other areas of Iceland are under threat from proposed dam projects, aluminium plants and smelters. In east Iceland, Eyjabakkar, the country's second-largest highland wetlands, is under threat from massive dams; Langisjór, at the western edge of Vatnajökull, is targeted for destruction; Kerlingarfjöll, southwest of Hofsjökull, is to be harnessed for its geothermal energy; north Iceland's Skálafandafljót, with its magnificent waterfalls Aldeyjarfoss and Goðafoss, is under threat; and the glacial rivers of Skagafjörður and Jökulsá á fjöllum are potential power sources.

Another aluminium plant is planned for Bakki near Húsavík, with test drilling for the site already begun near Krafla; existing smelters in southwest Iceland are to be expanded; a new smelter is planned for close to Keflavík; and permission has been given for an anode-rod plant at Katanes in Hvalfjörður.

Despite the severity and intensity of the work facing campaigners, there is some cause for hope. In south Iceland the Þjorsarver wetlands were recently given a lucky reprieve when plans for a hydroelectric scheme on the protected nature reserve were finally shelved. The wetlands are home to many nesting birds and are the world's largest breeding ground for pink-footed geese.

Some useful websites:

Iceland Nature Conservation Association (www.inca.is) Independent conservation organisation looking at environmental issues affecting Iceland.

Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project (www.karahnjukar.is) Official site of Iceland's largest and most controversial energy project.

Nature Watch (www.natturuvaktin.com/english.htm) Action group fighting for the preservation of Iceland's highlands.

Saving Iceland (www.savingiceland.org) Campaign group calling for action on Iceland's most pressing environmental issues.

WWF (www.panda.org/arctic) A look at issues affecting arctic regions and what can be done about them.

Environmental experts predict that the area around Reykjavík will soon become one of the most heavily polluted in Europe.

The best dive sites are conveniently placed around the Reykjanes peninsula and Þingvellir, with other less-frequented sites on the Vatnsnes peninsula and in Seyðisfjörður and Vestmannaeyjar. There are only two local operators, but between them they offer day and multiday tours as well as training. For more information, contact **Diveiceland** (☎ 421 7100; www.dive.is; Keflavík) or **Dive Iceland** (☎ 699 3000; www.diveiceland.com; Hafnarfjörður). **Iceland Excursions** (www.icelandexcursions.is) can also organise day trips. Divers need to have a recognised scuba qualification and dry suit experience or a minimum of 10 logged dives.

Dogsledding

Dogsledding, where you're pulled along behind Greenlandic huskies, is another typically arctic experience organised for tourists. A one-hour tour costs around Ikr8500. Longer expeditions can be arranged with sufficient numbers.

Try the following operators:

Activity Group (☎ 580 9900; www.activity.is)

Dog Steam Tours (☎ 487 7747; www.dogsledding.is)

Eskimos (☎ 414 1500; www.eskimos.is)

Fishing

Iceland's salmon fly-fishing is world renowned, but try it on the most popular lakes and rivers and it could be some of the most expensive fishing you ever do. One-day licences can cost up to Ikr250,000 on the Laxá river (p234), and that's before you pay for gear hire, a guide or transport. The good news is that with all the celebrity fishers in the one place, you can safely avoid them by heading for some of the country's cheaper rivers, where day licences cost a more reasonable Ikr20,000 per day (book in advance). The salmon-fishing season runs from early June to mid-September.

From April to mid-September you can also fish for rainbow trout, sea trout and arctic char on a more reasonably priced voucher system. Ice fishing is also possible in some areas in winter.

For further information, contact the **National Angling Association** (☎ 553 1510; www.angling.is).

Hiking

The opportunities for hiking in Iceland are virtually endless, from leisurely half-day walks to multiday wilderness treks. However, the unpredictable weather is always a consideration, and rain, fog and mist can turn an uplifting hike into a miserable trudge. Come prepared with good rain gear and strong boots, and if you're planning anything other than a short hike carry good maps, as many trails are unmarked. You'll also need to ford rivers on many trails (see p306), and look out for fissures, which can be hundreds of metres deep.

In the highlands the best months for walking are July and August, since late or early snow is a real possibility; in some places it never melts. May to September is a good time throughout the rest of the country, and popular trekking routes may be less crowded late or early in the season. Weather conditions can change in minutes at any time of year, so always be prepared.

For more information on hiking and mountaineering, contact the Iceland Touring Association **Ferðafélag Íslands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, 15-108 Reykjavík), or **Íslenski Alpaklúbburinn** (☎ 581 1700; www.isalp.is/english; Pósthólf 1054, 121 Reykjavík).

These are our top hikes:

- Landmannalaugar–Þórsmörk trek (p280)
- Fjallabak Nature Reserve (p276)
- Skaftafell National Park (p285)

Visit www.outdoors.is for good information on hiking in Iceland.

SAFE AND RESPONSIBLE HIKING IN ICELAND

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience that minimises your impact on the environment:

- Obtain reliable local information about conditions along your intended route.
- Be aware of local regulations about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions, and on trails, within your realm of experience.
- Check weather forecasts before setting out, and be prepared for dramatic changes in temperature and outlook. Icelandic weather is very fickle and conditions can deteriorate quickly.
- Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts. Hill sides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion; walk through, rather than around, muddy patches so as not to increase the size of the patch. Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.
- Do not light camp fires. Bring a stove for cooking.
- Carry out all your rubbish. This includes orange peel, cigarette butts, plastic wrappers, tampons, condoms and toilet paper.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging, and make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Keep it clean: contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, use it. Where there is none, bury your waste in a hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Use biodegradable soaps, detergents or toothpastes and wash at least 50m (160ft) away from any watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully. Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, and to unbalanced populations and diseases.

- Dettifoss–Asbyrgi Canyon (p247)
- Lónsöræfi (p296)
- Snæfell–Lónsöræfi trek (p259)
- Hverfell & Dimmuborgir Trail (p232)
- Kjölurvegur trek (p302)
- Hornstrandir peninsula (p194)
- Seyðisfjörður–Vestdalur (p265)

Horse Riding

Horses are an integral part of Icelandic life and you'll see them all over the country. Riding is a popular activity and the naturally gentle breed is ideal for even inexperienced riders.

You can hire horses and take riding tours in every part of the country, often which often take you into wild and otherwise inaccessible corners of the landscape (check the destination chapters for details of operators). Expect to pay about Ikr200/10,000 per hour/day trip. Longer tours, including tent or hut

THE ICELANDIC HORSE

Pure bred, sturdy and short, the Icelandic horse (*Equus scandinavicus*), is a mild-mannered breed widely used on farms and recreationally. Horses first arrived in Iceland with the early Norse settlers, and since no other horses have been imported recently, the breeding stock remains pure.

Standing about 1.3m high, the Icelandic horse is a photogenic creature but a tough breed perfectly suited to the rough Icelandic conditions. Like some Mongolian breeds, they have five gaits: *fet* (walk), *brokk* (trot), *stökk* (gallop), *skeið* (pace) and the famous *tölt* (running walk), which is so smooth and steady that the rider scarcely notices any motion.

Today the horses are mostly used during the autumn sheep roundup, but in the early days horse fights were organised as entertainment and the meat was consumed as a staple and used in pagan rituals.

accommodation, guides and meals, cost about 1kr14,000 per day. In September you can also volunteer for the *réttir* (sheep roundup): contact local tourist offices to make arrangements.

Horse fanatics might be interested in the **Landsmót** (National Horse Festival; www.landsmot.is/english), which takes place every two years in Skagafjörður in the north of Iceland.

Note that foreign riding clothing or equipment (saddles, bridles etc) must be disinfected upon entry into the country.

Ice Climbing

Iceland offers some excellent opportunities for ice climbing, with plenty of unclimbed routes and lots of ice virtually free of other climbers. Most routes are close to main roads and can be climbed between November and mid-April. Possibly the best time to visit is in February, when the Icelandic Alpine Club holds their annual ice-climbing festival.

Some of the most popular ice climbing areas are in the west of the country. They include Múlafjall on the southern side of Hvalfjörður, and Glymsgil on Iceland's highest waterfall Glymur – these routes are best from December to February; Haukadalur on Rte 586 near Eiríksstaðir; Kaldakinn in Skjál-fanda near Björg on Rte 851 northeast of Akureyri; and Örafasveit, one of the most varied but inaccessible ice-climbing areas of the country, about an hour from Höfn. For more information, contact local mountaineering clubs (see below).

Mountaineering & Ice Trekking

Unfortunately for rock climbers, Iceland's young and crumbly rock formations don't lend themselves well to technical rock climbing, but experienced mountaineers will find lots of scope for adventure. Anywhere on the ice, however, dangerous crevasses may lurk beneath snow bridges, and even innocent-looking snowfields may overlie rock and ice fissures, so technical expertise and equipment are essential. Crampons, ropes and ice axes are needed for any walk on glacial ice, and clothing must be able to withstand extreme conditions, especially on alpine climbs.

Unless you're proficient, experienced and well prepared, the best way to get involved in mountaineering is with a local, organised expedition. Contact the **Iceland Touring Association** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is) or the commercial outfit **Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; www.mountainguide.is). For more information on routes and conditions, visit www.outdoors.is/mountaineering.

If you're just after a quick look at the glaciers, several operators including **Explore Adventures** (www.explore.is) run tours. For more details, see the destination chapters.

For information on ice climbing and mountaineering, visit the Icelandic Alpine Club at www.isalp.is/english.php.

Mountaineering in Iceland, by Ari Trausti Guðmundsson, has basic information on ascents of peaks as well as rock- and ice-climbing locations.

Sea Kayaking

Kayaking is gaining popularity, particularly in the calm, accessible waters of the Eastfjords and the rugged Westfjords. You can go out on guided kayaking trips in Seyðisfjörður (p263) and Neskaupstaður (p268) and in the lagoons of Stokkseyri (p130); it's also possible to rent kayaks in some places, such as Mývatn (p227). A number of Reykjavík-based adventure-tour operators include kayaking in their programmes; try www.seakayakiceland.com for more information.

Skiing

Iceland has some enjoyable, little-known slopes offering pleasant, no-frills skiing. In winter cross-country skiing is possible throughout the country, and in the highland areas it continues until early July. The main drawback is the limited winter transport and the bitter winds.

Reykjavík and Akureyri both have downhill resorts with ski rental and instructors, though Bláfjöll and Skálafell (p76), the two closest to Reykjavík, get very busy. Hlíðarfjall (p215), near Akureyri, is quieter. Expect to pay about 1kr1400 for combination day and evening lift tickets.

There are also more basic resorts at Ísafjörður (p180), Siglufjörður (p209), Ólafsfjörður (p223) and Dalvík (p222), Húsavík (p240) and Eskifjörður (p268).

Snowboarding & Snowkiting

Snowboarding is slowly becoming more popular, and dedicated trails and terrain parks can be found at Bláfjöll near Reykjavík and in Akureyri. For four weeks of the year the **Nikita Iceland Park Project** (www.icelandparkproject.com) runs a snowboarding camp on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, near the Snæfellsjökull glacier.

Snowkiting (high-adrenaline snowboarding with a kite) is also taking off in Iceland, with good conditions and plans to host a snowkite cup competition on Langjökull. For more information or to organise a trip, contact **Vindspott** (snowkiter.co.uk).

Snowmobiling

Tearing around an icecap on a snowmobile can be exhilarating, but for most travellers an hour or two is more than enough. For glacier tours the best places are Mýrdalsjökull, Vatnajökull and Langjökull, and the cost is about 1kr8000 to 1kr10,000 per hour, including transport and gear.

While high-altitude glacier tours run from April to August, during the January to May there are possibilities for snowmobiling in other parts of Iceland. Adventure-tour operators in Reykjavík and Akureyri can organise trips. The northern coastal highlands, such as Ólafsfjörður, provide excellent opportunities. See the destination chapters for details.

Swimming

Thanks to Iceland's abundance of geothermal heat, swimming is a national institution, and nearly every town has at least one *sundlaug* (public swimming pool). Most pools also offer hot pots (small outdoor heated pools), saunas and Jacuzzis. Admission is usually around 1kr280/130 per adult/child.

Icelandic swimming pools have a strict hygiene regimen, which involves a thorough shower without swimsuit *before* you enter the swimming area. Watch what Icelanders do and observe signs and instructions. There are also plenty of glorious natural hot springs; see the destination chapters for details. If swimming in natural springs, remove all jewellery before entering the water as the minerals can quickly discolour the metal.

In the summer of 2003, Americans Chris Duff, Shawna Franklin and Leon Sómme completed an unsupported circumnavigation of Iceland in sea kayaks in less than three months. In the same year Briton John Burleigh did the same trip solo in 77 days.

Activities

Iceland's dramatic scenery, pristine wilderness and abundance of tour operators mean that it's easy to get into the great outdoors and enjoy the country at its best. Whether you're a weather-beaten adrenaline junkie looking for the next high or an armchair adventurer content with some leisurely walking and great photo opportunities, Iceland has something for you. This chapter will give you an overview of what's on offer; you'll find information on local trails, operators and activities listed in the destination chapters.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Bird-Watching

On coastal cliffs right around the country you can see huge numbers of sea birds, often in massive colonies. The best time for bird-watching is between June and mid-August, when gannets, guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, fulmars and puffins can be seen. Some of the best spots for bird-watching include the Látrabjarg peninsula (p172) and Grímsey (p193) in the Westfjords; Hrísey (p221), Drangey and Málmeý Islands (p206) in northwest Iceland; Mývatn (p227), Lundey (p240) and the Langanes peninsula (p249) in northeast Iceland; and Breiðamerkursandur (p290) in southeast Iceland.

For more comprehensive information on the bird species in Iceland, see p46.

Caving

Caving and potholing are relatively new sports in Iceland and only a couple of operators run tours. Lava caves dating back more than 10,000 years are the most common types of cave and can be toured with minimum caving gear and experience. Organised tours are operated by **Ultima Thula** (www.ute.is), **Iceland Excursions** (www.icelandexcursions.is) and **Iceland Total** (www.icelandtotal.com). Experienced cavers in search of something more challenging should contact the **Icelandic Speleological Society** (www.speleo.is) for assistance in organising a caving expedition and advice on which caves to visit. Iceland's spectacular ice caves are extremely challenging and require professional equipment and knowledge.

Iceland's ice caves were formed by geothermal runoff water.

Cycling

Iceland is a great place for cycling independently or as part of a group. For more information on bike touring, see the boxed text, below; for general advice see p328.

Diving

Little known but incredibly rewarding, diving in Iceland is becoming increasingly popular. The clear water and great wildlife, and some spectacular lava ravines, wrecks and thermal chimneys make it a dive destination like no other.

MOUNTAIN-BIKE CLUB

To learn about cycling in Iceland from locals who 'fear only a flat planet', contact the **Icelandic Mountain Bike Club** (☎ 562 0099; www.mmedia.is/iffh/tourist.htm; Brekkustigur 2, IS-125 Reykjavík). Between late May and early September the club organises cycling trips around the country, and visitors are welcome to join in. For up-to-date information and advice on cycling in Iceland, visit the website or try **Icebike** (www.icebike.net).

Visit www.icewhale.is for lots of info on whales, whale watching and whaling in Iceland.

Whale Watching

Iceland is one of the best places in the world to see whales and dolphins, and tours on quiet oak-hulled boats minimise disruption so you can get astonishingly close. The most common sightings are of minke whales, but you can also spot humpback, fin, sei and blue whales. The best places for whale watching are Keflavík (p108), Ólafsvík (p164) and Húsavík (p241). A three-hour trip costs around Ikr3700, and there are sailings from mid-May to late August.

Whitewater Rafting

With glacial rivers flowing off icecaps and thundering towards the coast, whitewater rafting can be an exhilarating Icelandic experience. Some of the best rafting rivers and most established operators are in north Iceland. **Activity Tours** (☎ 453 8383; www.rafting.is) in Varmahlíð offers day trips or multiday safaris of the east and west glacial rivers, while **Arctic Rafting** (☎ 562 7000; www.arcticrafting.is) has trips on the Hvítá, Þjórsá, Markarfljót and Hólmsá rivers.

Rafting trips include guides, equipment and refreshments, and overnight trips usually include transport, accommodation (tents or huts) and food. Expect to pay Ikr6000 to Ikr10,000 for a day trip.

SPORT

Football (soccer) is a national passion for both spectators and players. Although Iceland doesn't win a lot of international games, several Icelandic players have made it on to top European or English premier-league teams. The biggest national venue is the 14,000-seat Laugardalsvöllur stadium in Reykjavík, and matches are keenly followed.

The next most popular team sport is handball, a game played by two teams of seven. Internationally, Iceland has had increasing success with the game, finishing seventh in the 2003 world championships and the 2006 European championships. You can see handball matches at sports halls around the country – Reykjavík, Hafnarfjörður and Akureyri are good places.

Iceland's most traditional sport is *glíma* (Icelandic wrestling), a unique national sport with a history dating back to Viking settlement in the 9th century. Icelanders still practise the sport, but it's not common on a competitive level and you're most likely to see it as a demonstration at a traditional festival.

Check out www.ksi.is – the official site of the Football Association of Iceland.

Food & Drink

For much of its history Iceland was a poverty-stricken hinterland where food was solely about survival. Its traditional dishes reflect a 'waste not, want not' frugality and are viewed by foreigners less as sustenance and more as body parts from a slasher movie (see p58).

Icelandic farmer-fishermen had a hard time: sparse soil and long, harsh winters meant crop-growing was limited, and those who lived by the coast wrested a dangerous living from the sea and shore. Sheep, fish and sea birds and their eggs were common foods, and every part of every creature was eaten – fresh, or preserved by drying, salting, smoking, pickling in whey or even burying underground, in the case of shark meat.

In terms of the staples little has changed over the centuries – fish, seafood, lamb, bread and simple vegetables such as potatoes form the basis of a typical Icelandic diet. However, the way in which these ingredients are prepared has changed drastically over the last 10 or 20 years. Now it's a source of national pride to serve up traditional food as tastily and imaginatively as possible, using methods borrowed from fashionable culinary traditions from around the world. You can see examples of innovative fusion food absolutely everywhere, for example reindeer ravioli at La Primavera (p87), *svartfugl* (literally 'blackbird', but in fact guillemot) marinated in far Eastern spices at Indian Mango (p87), 'jungle satay' monkfish at Sjávarkjallarinn (p89) and puffin tapas at Tapas Barinn (p88).

There's no denying that dining out in Iceland is expensive, but it's worth spending a little extra and trying some of Reykjavík's top restaurants. If you're being determinedly frugal, you'll almost certainly be eating French fries, hot dogs, hamburgers and pizzas – cheaper eats in Iceland are heavily influenced by the USA.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Fish & Seafood

Fish has always been the mainstay of the Icelandic diet. Fish served in restaurants or on sale in markets is always fresh, and when cooked it usually comes boiled, pan-fried, baked or grilled.

In the past, Icelanders merely kept the cheeks and tongues of *þorskur* (cod) – something of a delicacy – and exported the rest; but today you'll commonly find cod fillets on the menu, along with *ýsa* (haddock), *bleikja* (arctic char) and popular meaty-textured *skötuselur* (monkfish). Other fish include *lúða* (halibut), *steinbitur* (catfish), *sandhverfa* (turbot), *sild* (herring), *skarkoli* (plaice) and *skata* (skate). During the summer you can sometimes get *silungur* (freshwater trout) and *lax* (salmon). Wild salmon is called *villtur* and farmed salmon is *eldislax*.

Harðfiskur, a popular snack eaten with butter, is found in supermarkets and at market stalls. To make it, haddock is cleaned and dried in the open air until it has become dehydrated and brittle, then it's torn into strips.

Icelandic Food and Cookery, by Nanna Rögnvaldardóttir, is an excellent book full of foodie history, festivals, customs and interesting recipes.

Saltfish (wind-dried, salted fillets of cod) was so important to the Icelanders that it once appeared in the centre of the country's flag.

WHALE MEAT

Although some older Icelanders love whale meat it's not particularly popular with younger generations, which makes the recent resumption of commercial whaling even harder to understand. Many readers have written to us about their distress on discovering whale meat on menus. We've tried to indicate where this is the case by using '[Whale meat served]' in restaurant reviews.

ONE-OFF ICELANDIC WONDERS

Eyeball a plate of old-fashioned Icelandic food, and chances are it will eyeball you back. In the past nothing was wasted, and some traditional specialities remind sensitive 21st-century souls more of horror-film props than food. However, you won't be faced with these dishes on many menus – they're generally only eaten at the Þorrablót winter feast.

Þorrablót specials:

- *Svið* – singed sheep's head (complete with eyes) sawn in two, boiled and eaten fresh or pickled
- *Sviðasulta* (head cheese) – made from bits of *svið* pressed into gelatinous loaves and pickled in whey
- *Slátur* – a mishmash of sheep leftovers tied up in a sheep's stomach and cooked
- *Blóðmör* – sheep's blood and suet sewn up in a sheep's diaphragm
- *Súrsaðir hrútsþungar* – rams' testicles pickled in whey and pressed into a cake
- *Hákarl* – Iceland's most famous stomach churner. *Hákarl* is Greenland shark, an animal so inedible that it has to rot away underground for six months before humans can even digest it. Most foreigners find the stench (a cross between ammonia and week-old roadkill) too much to bear, but it actually tastes better than it smells... It's the aftertaste that really hurts. A shot of *brennivín* (schnapps) is traditionally administered as an antidote.

Other Icelandic snacks are more palatable:

- *Brennivín* – sledgehammer schnapps made from potatoes and flavoured with caraway
- *Hverabrauð* – a rich, dark rye bread baked underground using geothermal heat; try it at Mývatn
- *Lundi* (puffin) – this cute little sea bird looks and tastes like calf liver
- *Skyr* – delicious concoction made of pasteurised skimmed milk and a bacteria culture similar to yogurt, sweetened with sugar and berries
- *Hangikjöt* – hung meat, usually smoked lamb, served in thin slices
- *Harðfiskur* – brittle pieces of wind-dried haddock, usually eaten with butter

Shrimp, oysters and mussels are caught in Icelandic waters, and *leturhumar* are a real treat. These are what the Icelanders call 'lobster', although the rest of the world know them as langoustine. Höfn, in southeast Iceland, is particularly well known for them and even has an annual lobster festival (see p295).

Meat

Icelandic lamb is hard to beat. During summer sheep roam free to munch on chemical-free grasses and herbs in the highlands and valleys, before being rounded up in the September *rettir* and corralled for the winter. The result of this relative life of luxury is very tender lamb with a slightly gamey flavour. You'll find lamb fillets, pan-fried lamb or smoked lamb on most restaurant menus.

Beef steaks are also excellent but are not as widely available and are consequently more expensive. Horse is still eaten in Iceland, although it's regarded as something of a delicacy – so if you see 'foal fillets' on the menu, you're not imagining things.

In eastern Iceland wild reindeer roam the highlands, and reindeer steaks are a feature of local menus.

Birds have always been part of the Icelandic diet. You'll often come across *lundi* (puffin), that sociable little sea bird, which appears smoked or broiled in liver-like lumps on many dinner plates. Another sea bird is *svartfugl*,

New Icelandic Cookbook, by Atli Vagnsson, is an impressive 144-page volume featuring traditional and modern Icelandic recipes and plenty of photographs from around the country. It's available in English, Swedish and German.

commonly translated as blackbird on English-language menus, but what you'll actually get is guillemot (*langvía*). High-class restaurants favouring seasonal ingredients often have succulent roasted *heiðagæs* (pink-footed goose) in autumn. Later in the year *rjúpa* (ptarmigan), a plump but tough bird related to the grouse, plays the same part in the Icelandic Christmas dinner as the turkey does in the British. The bird is officially protected, but *rjúpa* hunting is still a popular pastime.

Sweets & Desserts

Don't miss out on *skyr*, a delicious yogurtlike concoction made from pasteurised skimmed milk. Despite its rich and decadent flavour, it's actually low in fat and is often mixed with sugar, fruit flavours (such as blueberry) and cream to give it a wonderful flavour and texture. *Skyr* can be found in any supermarket (it's a great snack for kids) and as a dessert in restaurants.

Icelandic *pönnukökur* (pancakes) are thin, sweet and cinnamon flavoured. Icelandic *kleimur* (doughnuts) are a chewy treat, along with their offspring *ástar þungur* (love balls), deep-fried, spiced balls of dough. You'll find these desserts in bakeries, along with an amazing array of fantastic pastries and cakes – one of the few sweet legacies of the Danish occupation.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic

Life without *kaffi* (coffee) is unthinkable. Every café and petrol station will usually have an urn full of filter coffee by the counter, and some shops offer complimentary cups to customers. A coffee costs anywhere from 1kr200 to 1kr290, but you'll normally get at least one free refill. European-style cafés where you can get espresso, latte, cappuccino, mocha and imported coffee are becoming popular in Reykjavík. Tea is available but clearly doesn't offer the caffeine fix Icelanders need.

And they really are caffeine addicts. Besides all that coffee, Icelanders drink more Coca-Cola per capita than any other country (about 25 gallons each per year). Another very popular soft drink is the home-grown Egils Malt Extrakt, which tastes like sugar-saturated beer. At Christmas time, Malt Extrakt (or sometimes alcoholic beer) is mixed with orangeade to form *jólaöl* (Christmas brew), which has a taste generously described as Guinness seasoned with Marmite.

Bottled water is widely available, but tap water is delicious and free.

Alcoholic

Icelanders generally don't drink alcohol to savour the taste – getting trilled is the aim of the game. Particularly in Reykjavík, it's the done thing to go out at the weekend and drink till you drop (see p93). However, you might be surprised to learn that drinking during the week hasn't been culturally acceptable in the past. It's becoming more common but, if you order a midweek pint in the countryside, people may assume you have an alcohol problem! In Reykjavík many of the cafés become bars at night, staying open

WOULD YOU BELIEVE

...that beer was illegal in Iceland until just 18 years ago? In an attempt to circumvent the law, several Reykjavík pubs began serving nonalcoholic beer mixed with vodka, until this too was banned in 1985. The nation gathered in protest, held mock funerals and sang dirges for the swill that had become a national staple. Suddenly, in 1988 a vote was taken to legalise real beer, and on 1 March 1989 the amber fluid began to flow. Reykjavíkurs have never looked back!

'They taste great...but you have to eat a family of the little guys to feel full.'

www.vinbud.is – check here for the opening times of the government alcohol shops Vín Búð.

until 1am from Sunday to Thursday, and until between 3am and 6am on Friday and Saturday.

You must be at least 20 years old to buy beer, wine or spirits, and alcohol is only available from licensed bars, restaurants and the government-run Vín Búð liquor stores. There are 39 shops around the country; most towns of any size have one, and Reykjavík has five. Opening hours vary but are usually from 11am to 6pm Monday to Thursday, 11am to 7pm on Friday, and 11am to 2pm on Saturday (closed Sunday), although in some places they only open for a couple of hours a day. Expect queues around 5pm on a Friday. You can pick up a bottle of imported wine for around 1kr1000 (and up), and beer is about a third of what you'll pay in a bar.

Petrol stations and supermarkets sell the weak and watery 2.2% brew known as Pilsner, but most Icelanders would sooner not drink at all.

There are three brands of Icelandic beer: Egil's, Thule and Viking, all fairly standard lager or Pils brews; you can also get imported beers such as Carlsberg and (in Irish bars) Guinness. A pint of beer in a pub costs about 1kr700; a glass of house wine or a shot of spirits in a restaurant costs 1kr600 to 1kr800.

The traditional Icelandic alcoholic brew is *brennivín* (literally 'burnt wine'), a potent schnapps made from potatoes and caraway seeds, with the foreboding nickname *svarti dauði* (black death).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Restaurants

Iceland's best restaurants are in Reykjavík (p87), although you'll come across the odd gem on your travels outside the capital. Bear in mind that the price difference between an exceptional restaurant and an average one is often small, so it can be well worth going upmarket. However, much of the time in rural Iceland, you may not have a choice – the town's only eating place will probably be the restaurant in the local hotel (or the grill in the petrol station – see opposite).

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT REYKJAVÍK'S TOP RESTAURANT?

Tell us about Sjávarkjallarinn (p89)

Sjávarkjallarinn is the most popular restaurant in Iceland! We make very good fusion food – Icelandic ingredients, mixed up with Asian. We alter the menu very regularly, just whenever we feel, 'Ahhh, we want a change'. We'll make three new main courses, and the next week we'll make three new starters.

Which one would you recommend?

We have one dish that's been on the menu from the start, and that's lobster served in a special way. It's called 'pick-me-up' because you have to pick the lobster up out of the jar. It's very good, although I change my own favourite dish very often. At the moment it's our Icelandic cod, salted overnight with many types of spices.

Does anybody really eat traditional Icelandic food any more?

Icelanders always eat traditional food once a year. At Þorrablót everybody eats the old food. Most Icelandic people don't eat it for the taste. It's just for the fun – like being a Viking! I really like sheep's head, and we eat the eyes and the tongue also.

Why is modern Icelandic cuisine such a success?

I think Icelandic food is so good because we are always trying different things. We follow world-wide food fashion; and then we are always doing something new and fresh as well.

Thanks to Hrefna, Head Chef, Sjávarkjallarinn

www.tekstotaal.com
/cbrenvin.html – this
comical page tells you
how to make your
own approximation
of *brennivín* (Icelandic
schnapps).

ICELANDIC PÝLSUR

Along with copious amounts of coffee, the *pýlsur* (hot dog) is the fuel of modern Iceland. Hot dogs are for sale (around 1kr230) in every petrol station and fast-food kiosk. You can choose between toppings of raw onion, crunchy deep-fried onion, ketchup, mustard and tangy rémoulade, or just ask for 'ein með öllu' (one with everything).

Locals in Reykjavík reckon the world's greatest hot dogs come from Bæjarins Beztu (p91), a busy hot-dog stand opposite the Kolaportið flea market. Rumour insists that they're so delicious because they're cooked in beer. We think that must be an Icelandic joke.

Main courses at eateries usually cost between 1kr1600 and 1kr5000, depending on where you are and what you choose to eat. À la carte menus usually offer at least one fish dish, one veggie (invariably pasta) choice and several meat mains, and lots of restaurants also have a menu of lighter, cheaper meals such as hamburgers, sandwiches and pizzas. In Reykjavík, and to a lesser extent Akureyri, there are an increasing number of ethnic restaurants, including Thai, Vietnamese, Italian, Mexican, Indian and Chinese.

Restaurants usually open from 6pm to 10pm, and some also open for lunch from noon to 2pm.

Cafés & Pubs

Downtown Reykjavík has a great range of smoky bohemian café-bars where you can happily while away the hours sipping coffee, eating good-value meals, gossiping, tinkering with your laptop, and people watching. Typically creative menus range from simple soups, bagels and gourmet burgers to fish dishes, and café-bars offer some of the best bargain meals in Iceland (from about 1kr800).

Most of Reykjavík's cafés metamorphose into wild drinking dens on Friday and Saturday nights. Suddenly DJs appear, beer swills, and merry people dance, screech and stagger around until somewhere between 3am and 6am.

Some other towns around the country have café-bars created along similar lines, for example Karólína Café (p218) in Akureyri.

Quick Eats

KIOSKS

Icelanders love fast food, and you'll soon discover that a cheap way to stave off hunger until dinner is to have a *pýlsur* (hot dog). Most towns have a kiosk serving hot dogs, burgers and chips.

PETROL-STATION GRILLS

Outside Reykjavík, many large petrol stations have good, cheap grills and cafeterias attached to them – often the busiest eating place in town. They generally serve sandwiches and fast food from around 11am to 9pm or 10pm. Some also offer hearty set meals at lunch time, such as Icelandic meatballs, fish of the day or plates of lamb.

BAKERIES

We can't praise the wonderful Icelandic *bakari* (bakeries) enough. Every town has one, usually open from 7am or 8am until 5pm on weekdays (sometimes also Saturday). They sell all sorts of inexpensive fresh bread, buns, cakes, sandwiches and coffee, and provide chairs and tables where you can sit to eat and drink.

In rural Iceland the
local bar is usually in a
restaurant or hotel.

Self-Catering

Every town and village has at least one small supermarket. The most expensive are 10-11 and 11-11, and Bónus (easily recognised by its garish yellow-and-pink pig sign) is the country's budget supermarket chain. Others include Nóatún, Krónan, Kasko, Samkaup-Strax and Samkaup-Úrval. Opening times vary greatly; in Reykjavík most are open from 9am to 11pm daily, but outside the capital hours are generally shorter.

Iceland imports most of its groceries, so prices are exorbitant – roughly three times what you'd pay in North America, Australia or Europe. Tinned fish and dairy products represent the best value. Some fruit and vegetables are grown locally, and these tend to be fresh and tasty, but imported vegetables usually look tragic by the time they hit the supermarket shelves. Fruit and veg prices were fluctuating wildly at the time of writing, so if you're on a very tight budget it's probably worth shopping around.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

You'll have no problem in Reykjavík – there are three excellent meat-free, organic café-restaurants in the city, and many more eateries offer vegetarians plenty of choice. Outside the capital most restaurants have one veggie item on the menu – although as this is invariably cheese-and-tomato pasta or cheese-and-pepper-and-onion pizza, you could get very bored. Vegans will have to self-cater.

It's unlikely that you'll ever have to explain yourself in Icelandic but, just in case, *'Ég er grænmetisæta'* means 'I'm a vegetarian' and *'Ég borða ekki kjöt'* means 'I don't eat meat.'

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Icelandic eating habits are similar to elsewhere in northern Europe and Scandinavia. Breakfast is usually light (often just coffee), as is lunch (soup and bread or a snack). Dinner is the main meal of the day.

Three strange little foodie festivals follow the bloody Þorrablót feast in February (see p58). First off is Bolludagur (Bun Day; 23 February), when Icelanders gorge themselves sick on puff-pastry cream buns. Kids get up early to 'beat' the buns out of their parents with a *bolluvöndur* (literally 'bun wand'). The following day is Sprengidagur (Bursting Day; 24 February), when the aim is to stuff yourself with *saltkjöt og baunir* (salted meat and split peas) until you burst. Both are Lenten traditions.

Continuing the excess, Beer Day (1 March) is a less traditional celebration. It dates back to the glorious day in 1989 when beer was legalised in Iceland. As you'd expect, Reykjavík's clubs and bars get particularly wild.

On Christmas Day *hangikjöt* (hung meat) – which is normally smoked lamb – is served, as well as *flatkökur* (unleavened bread, or pancakes, charred on a grill or griddle without fat).

EAT YOUR WORDS

See p338 for pronunciation guidelines.

Food Glossary

STAPLES & CONDIMENTS

<i>brauð</i>	bread
<i>(soðið) egg</i>	(boiled) egg
<i>flatkökur</i>	rye pancakes
<i>hrísgrjón</i>	rice
<i>hunang</i>	honey
<i>krydd</i>	seasoning

marmelaði
morgunkorn
ostur
pipar
salt
sinneþ
smjör
sulta
sykur
tómatsósa

marmalade
cereal
cheese
pepper
salt
mustard
butter
jam
sugar
ketchup (tomato sauce)

FISH

bleikja
fiskur
harðfiskur
humar
lax
lúða
rækja
reyktur
sandhverfa
sild
silungur
skata
skötuselur
steinbitur
vilttur
yssa
þorskur

arctic char
fish
dried haddock
lobster
salmon
halibut
shrimp
smoked salmon
turbot
herring
freshwater trout
skate
monkfish
catfish
wild salmon
haddock
cod

MEAT

bjúgu
hangikjöt
hreindýrakjöt
kjöt
kjötsúpa
kjúklingur
lambakjöt
lundu
nautakjöt
pýlsa
saltkjöt
skinka
svínakjöt

smoked minced-meat sausage
smoked lamb
reindeer
meat
lamb, rice and vegetable soup
chicken
lamb
puffin
beef
hot dog, sausage
salted lamb or mutton
ham
pork

VEGETABLES

blómkál
græn paprika
grænar baunir
grænmeti
gulrætur
gúrka
hvítkál
hvítlaukur
kartöflur

cauliflower
green pepper
green peas
vegetables
carrots
cucumber
cabbage
garlic
potatoes

Geothermal greenhouses are used to grow Iceland's fruit and vegetables.

www.isholf.is/gullis/jo – Jo's Icelandic Recipes is a great independent website full of recipes and customs, written by an Icelander with a passion for food.

laukur
salat
sveppir

onion
lettuce
mushrooms

FRUIT

ananas
appelsínur
aprikósur
ávestir
bananar
bláber
epli
ferskjur
jarðarber
krækiber
perur
sítróna
vínber

pineapple
oranges
apricots
fruit
bananas
blueberries
apples
peaches
strawberries
crowberries
pears
lemon
grapes

SWEETS & DESSERTS

ávaxtagrautur
búðingur
ís/fjómaís
kaka
kleinur
pönnukökur
skyr
smákökur/kex
súkkulaði

stewed fruit
pudding
ice cream
cake
Icelandic doughnuts
thin, sweet, cinnamon-dusted pancakes
thick yogurtlike concoction made from skimmed milk and bacteria culture
biscuits
chocolate

DRINKS

appelsínsafi
ávaxtasafi
bjór
brennivín
drykkir
G-mjólk
goddrykkir
jógúrt
kaffi (með mjólk/svart)
mjólk
rauðvín/hvítvín
súrmjólk
te
vatn
whisky

orange juice
fruit juice
beer
literally 'burnt wine'; Icelandic caraway-flavoured schnapps
drinks
longlife milk
soft drinks
yogurt
coffee (white/black)
milk
red/white wine
sour milk
tea
water
whisky

MEALS

hádegismatur
kvöldmatur
morgunmatur

lunch
dinner
breakfast

In the depths of winter the sun doesn't rise above Iceland's most steep-sided fjords. When it does eventually reappear, villagers gather to drink caraway-flavoured *sólarkaffi* (sun coffee) and celebrate their first glimpse of sunlight in months.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'