

# Northeast Iceland



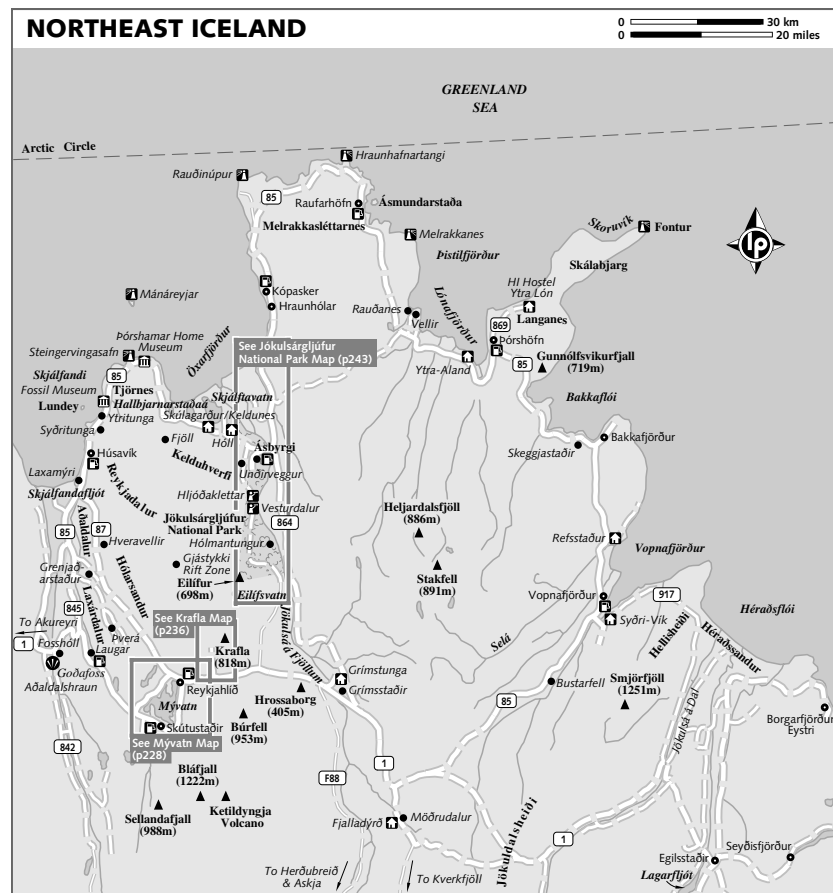
Neatly packed into a compact area in northeast Iceland are some of the country's most popular attractions. The undisputed gem of the north, the triangle between Mývatn, Húsavík and Dettifoss boasts everything from active volcanoes to towering bird cliffs, great tracts of wilderness, Europe's best whale watching, and awe-inspiring waterfalls. The violence and turbulence of the region's volcanic setting is a constant feature on the tortured land, and it is this diversity of attractions and the short distances between them that draw the crowds to the area.

The teeming bird life, vast lava fields and gurgling mudpots of Mývatn and Krafla are an obvious highlight, while to the northeast the spectacular waterfalls, canyons and rock formations of Jökulsárgljúfur National Park offer a completely different take on the country. To the northwest the pretty fishing village of Húsavík is recognised as Iceland's whale-watching capital, and, further beyond, the remote northeastern corner of Iceland stretches to within a few kilometres of the Arctic Circle.

This remote peninsula to the northeast is a little-visited and sparsely populated area of desolate moors and wildly beautiful scenery. Bypassed by the tourist hordes who whiz around the Ring Rd to the south, and isolated from commercial development, this region feels like the ends of the earth, with a rugged and captivating character all of its own. Dotted with sleepy fishing villages and home to some of Iceland's hardest souls, it makes a wonderful destination for wilderness hiking on the remote and uninhabited headlands that jut into the pounding seas.

## TOP FIVE

- Hike, cycle and climb around the wonders of Mývatn lake before soaking your aching muscles in the **Mývatn Nature Baths** (p230)
- Experience the bizarre rock formations, vast canyons and utter tranquillity of **Jökulsárgljúfur National Park** (p242) on the Dettifoss to Ásbyrgi hike
- Spot a breaching whale and be followed by curious dolphins on a whale-watching cruise from **Húsavík** (p241)
- Walk gingerly around the lava fields, craters, turquoise lakes and bubbling mudpots at **Krafla** (p236)
- Marvel at the power of mighty **Dettifoss** (p245) as you photograph its churning waters and brilliant rainbows



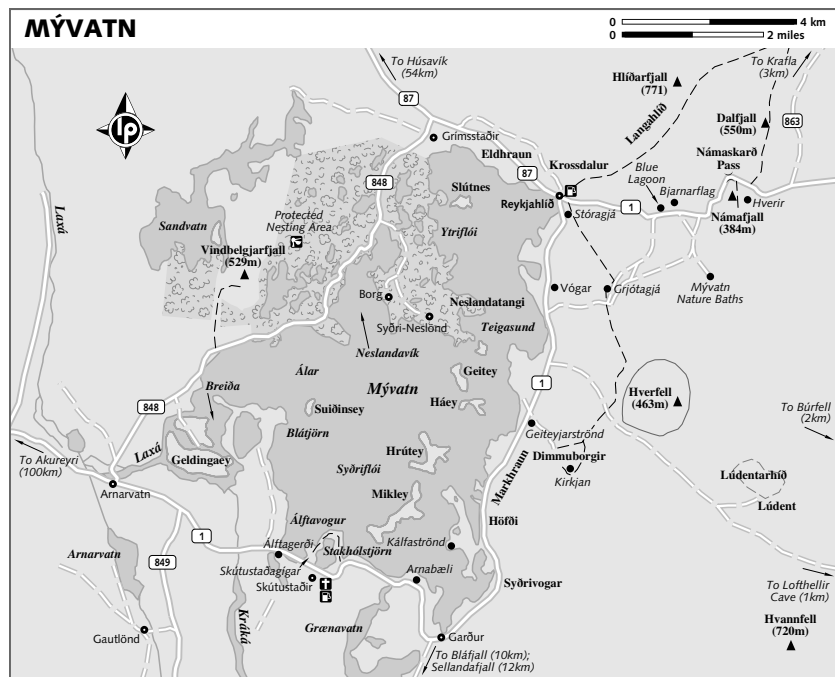
## MÝVATN & KRAFLA

The undisputed gem of the region, Mývatn lake and the surrounding area are a starkly beautiful but otherworldly landscape of spluttering mudpots, weird lava formations, steaming fumaroles and volcanic craters. The Mývatn basin sits squarely on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the violent geological character of the area has produced colourful, diverse scenery unlike anywhere else in the country. Its abundance of dramatic features, good tourist facilities and excellent trails make it a place to savour, where you can easily settle in for a few days and experience the Iceland you've always imagined.

Thanks to its location in the rain shadow of the Vatnajökull icecap, Mývatn is statistically the driest spot in Iceland, so you can expect good weather in summer. However, the name Mývatn means 'midge lake', and unfortunately the fertile water here provides a perfect breeding ground for midge and black-fly larvae. Although the larvae can be thanked for attracting prolific bird life, they can also be the bane of travellers' lives – see p229.

### History & Geology

Ten thousand years ago the Mývatn basin was covered by an icecap, which was destroyed by fierce volcanic eruptions that also obliterated the lake at its base. The explosions formed the symmetrical *móberg* peaks (flat-topped



mountains formed by subglacial volcanic eruptions south of today's lake, while volcanic activity to the east formed the Lüdent tephra (solid matter ejected into the air by an erupting volcano) complex.

Another cycle of violent activity over 6000 years later created the Ketildyngja volcano, 25km southeast of Mývatn. The lava from that crater flowed northwest along the Laxárdalur valley, and created a lava dam and a new, improved lake. After another millennium or so a volcanic explosion along the same fissure spewed out Hverfell, the classic tephra crater that dominates the modern lake landscape. Over the next 200 years activity escalated along the eastern shore and craters were thrown up across a wide region, providing a steady stream of molten material flowing toward Óxarfjörður. The lava dam formed during the end of this cycle created the present Mývatn shoreline.

Between 1724 and 1729 the Mývatnseldar eruptions began at Leirhnjúkur, close to Krafla, northeast of the lake. This dramatic and sporadically active fissure erupted spectacularly in 1984, and by the early 1990s the

magma chamber had refilled, prompting experts to predict another big eruption. As yet this hasn't happened, but it's really only a matter of time.

In 1974 the area around Mývatn was set aside as the Mývatn-Laxá special conservation area, and the pseudocrater field at Skútustaðir, at the southern end of the lake, is preserved as a national natural monument.

### Orientation

The lake is encircled by a 36km sealed road (Rtes 1 and 848), with the main settlement of Reykjahlíð on the northeast corner and a secondary village, Skútustaðir, on the south side. Most of the sights of interest are close to this road, or to the east and northeast. Following the Ring Rd (Rte 1) east from Reykjahlíð takes you over the Námaskarð pass to the Hverir geothermal area, then a turn-off to the north (Rte 863) leads to Krafla, 14km from Reykjahlíð.

With your own vehicle this whole area can be explored in a single day, but if you're using the bus or a bicycle allow two days. If you want to hike and explore more distant mountains and lava fields, allow at least three.

### INTO THE MADDING SWARMS

Plague-like swarms of Mývatn's eponymous midges are a lasting memory for many visitors to the area in midsummer. As infuriating as they can be, these pesky intruders are a vital food source for wildlife. Their larvae are eaten by brown trout, and both the harlequin duck and Barrow's goldeneye subsist on them during the nesting season.

Unfortunately for humans, the midges are attracted to carbon dioxide, so every time you exhale, the little buggers gather around your face and invade your eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Mývatn has two types of midge, the small, skinny, mosquito-like *mýflugur* or *rikmý*, known to occasionally make kamikaze dives for your lungs, and the fatter, buzzing, hair-loving *bitmý* (blackfly).

The good news is that only one species bites, so wear a head net (which you can buy for around 1kr500 at the shop in Reykjahlíð), splash on the repellent and pray for a good wind to send the nasty little blighters diving for shelter amid the vegetation.

### Getting There & Away

Daily buses run between Akureyri, Skútustaðir and Reykjahlíð (1kr2600, 1½ hours), with four buses in either direction in summer. The Akureyri to Egilsstaðir (1kr5400) bus also stops in Reykjahlíð daily in summer and four times a week from October to May. Buses to Húsavík (1kr2300, 45 minutes) run daily in summer.

Two companies operate on these routes, with SBA using the car park in front of Hotel Reyhnihlíð as its pick-up/drop-off location, and TREX stopping at the supermarket beside the tourist office.

### Getting Around

Without a car or bicycle you may find getting around Mývatn a bit frustrating. Hitchhikers can find the going tough, as most passing vehicles belong to tourists, many of whom are unlikely to stop for dusty and/or wet backpackers.

There are a few hiking trails, but they won't take you to all the points of interest, so you must sometimes walk along the road. Allow about three hours to walk between Reykjahlíð and Skútustaðir.

You can hire a car from **Hótel Reyhnihlíð** (☎ 464 4170; www.reyhnihlid.is; ☒ Jun-Aug). The cheapest vehicle will cost you 1kr9200 per day with 200km free, but for a small 4WD vehicle it's 1kr21,300 per day.

If you have calm weather, the best option for travellers without a car, is to hire a mountain bike. In Reykjahlíð you can rent bikes from Hótel Reyhnihlíð (1kr900/1800 per half/full day), Ferðaðjónustan Bjarg (1kr1000/1500 for six/12 hours) and Hlíð camp site (from 1kr1200/1600 per half/full day).

The 36km ride around the lake can be easily done in a day, allowing time for sightseeing at all the major stops.

### REYKJAHLIÐ

pop 210

Reykjahlíð, on the northeastern shore of the lake, is the main village and the obvious base for trips around Mývatn. There's little to it beyond a collection of guesthouses and hotels, a supermarket, a petrol station and an information centre.

### Information

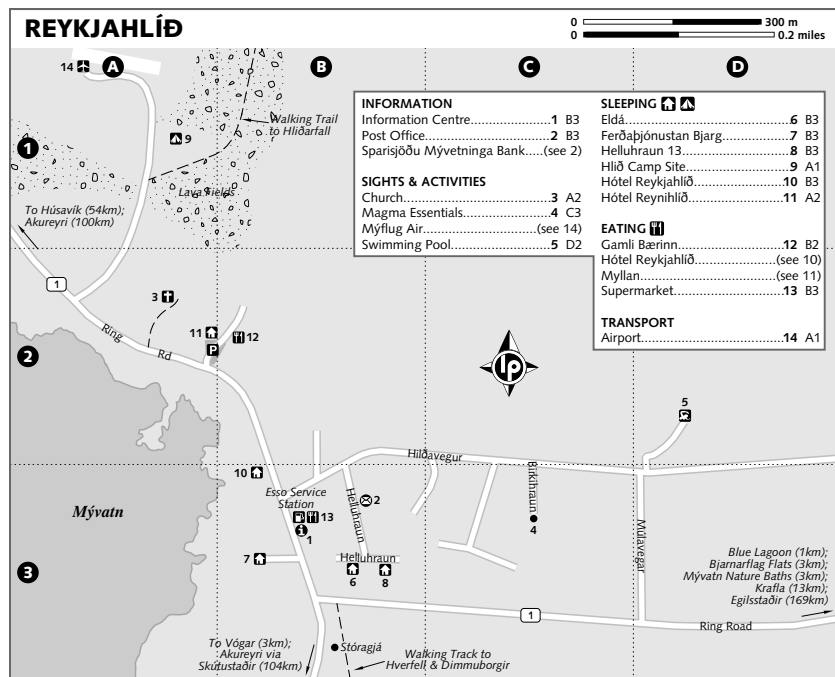
The friendly **information centre** (☎ 464 4390; www.mv.is; ☒ 9am-9pm mid-Jun-mid-Aug, to 5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & Sun Sep) is by the supermarket and has a display on the geology of the area as well as a large seating area perfect for waiting out bad weather. While here pick up a copy of the map *Lake Mývatn & the River Laxá* (1kr100). The office is only open in winter if the park ranger happens to be in.

The **post office** (Helluhraun) is on the street behind the supermarket. Inside is the local Sparisjóðu Mývetninga bank with foreign exchange and a 24-hour ATM.

Internet access is available at Hotel Reyhnihlíð (1kr500 for 30 minutes, free to hotel guests), Ferðaðjónustan Bjarg (1kr400 for 30 minutes) and at Hlíð camp site (1kr400 per 30 minutes).

### Sights & Activities

During the huge Krafla eruption of 1727 the Leirhnjúkur crater, 11km northeast of Reykjahlíð, kicked off a two-year period of volcanic activity, sending streams of lava along old glacial moraines and past Reykjahlíð to the lake shore. On 27 August 1729 the flow ploughed through the village, destroying farms and buildings, but, amazingly, the well-placed wooden **church**, which sat on a low rise, was spared – some say miraculously – when the



flow parted and missed it by only a few metres. It was rebuilt on its original foundation in 1876. You can still see remnants of the original Reykjavíð farm, which was destroyed by the lava.

In 1962 a new church was opened close to the same site and in 1972 the original church was finally taken down. The interior of the present church is filled with carvings, paintings and batik-style art. The wooden carving on the pulpit is a representation of the church that survived the lava.

Clouds of steam rise from the turquoise blue waters at the **Mývatn Nature Baths** (Jarðbaðshólar; ☎ 464 4411; www.jarðbodin.is; adult/8-16yr 1kr1100/550, towel/swimsuit hire 1kr350/350; ☎ 9am-midnight Jun-Aug, noon-10pm Sep-May), 3km east of Reykjavíð. This is the north's answer to the Blue Lagoon, and although smaller it's a gorgeous place to relax and ease aching muscles in the mineral-rich water. There are also three natural steam baths, a hot pot and a small café.

If you fancy some pampering, **Magma Essentials** (☎ 464 3740; www.magmaessentials.com; Birkihraun 11) offers aromatherapy and Raynor massage therapy.

Alternatively, a stormy day in Reykjavíð is well spent relaxing at the 25m outdoor **swimming pool** (adult/under 14yr 1kr280/150; ☎ 10.30am-9pm Jun-Aug, 10.30am-8pm Sep-May) and hot tub. The complex also has a sauna, solarium and gym (1kr550).

Although there are no regular boat trips on Mývatn, you can hire rowing boats (and obtain fishing permits and gear) from Ferðabjónustan Bjarg (opposite) for 1kr1200 per hour.

### Tours

Tourism reigns supreme at Reykjavíð and for travellers without their own transport there are numerous tours around the area. Tours can get really heavily booked during the summer months, so try to book at least a day before departure. Tours also run from the Sel-Hótel in Skútustaðir (see p234) throughout the winter.

### HORSE RIDING

Horse-riding tours around the lake are available with **Hestaleiga** (☎ 464 4103; 1/2/3hr 1kr2500/4000/5500). Tours leave at 10.30am and 5pm and can be booked at Hlíð camp site (see opposite).

### GEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING

Everywhere you go around Mývatn you'll be bombarded with geological jargon to describe the landscape. The terms below should help decipher the information signs and leaflets.

**Basalt** – the commonest type of solidified lava, this hard, dark, dense volcanic rock often solidifies into columns.

**Igneous** – produced under intense heat.

**Moraine** – a ridge of boulders, clay and sand carried and deposited by a glacier.

**Obsidian** – black, glassy rock formed by silica-rich magma that has reached the surface and cooled rapidly.

**Rhyolite** – light-coloured, fine-grained volcanic rock similar to granite in composition.

**Scoria** – porous volcanic gravel that has cooled rapidly while moving creating a glassy surface with iron-rich crystals that give it a glittery appearance.

**Tephra** – solid matter ejected into the air by an erupting volcano.

### MÝVATN

**SBA** (<http://english.sba.is>) runs a 10-hour tour of the Mývatn-Krafla area from Akureyri (1kr7700). A similar but reduced tour (1kr7400, eight hours) continues throughout the winter.

### DETTIFOSS, JÖKULSÁRGLJÚFUR & GJÁSTYKKI

Full-day tours (six to seven hours) to Krafla, Gjástykki, Hafragilsfoss, Selfoss and Dettifoss by super-Jeep depart from Hotel Reykjavíð (1kr9900) on request from 15 June to 30 September (minimum of four people).

### LOFHELLIR CAVE

The dramatic lava cave at Lofthellir is a stunning destination with magnificent natural ice sculptures dominating the interior. A five-hour tour to the cave by 4WD is the only way to get here, as there is no public access. Tours leave Hotel Reykjavíð by request from 1 June to 30 September (1kr8200, minimum of four people).

### HERÐUBREIÐ & ASKJA

**Mývatn Tours** (☎ 464 1920; myvatntours@emax.is) runs long but rewarding day tours to Herðubreið and the Askja caldera (p304 deep) in the interior. Tours (1kr14,800, 11 to 12 hours) depart from Hotel Reynihlið at 8am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 20 June to 31 August and daily from mid-July to mid-August.

### AIR SIGHTSEEING

**Mýflug Air** (☎ 464 4400; www.myflug.is; Reykjavíð airport) operates flight-seeing on request. The cost is from 1kr5000 per person for 20 minutes over Mývatn and Krafla; 1kr10,000 for an hour including Askja; 1kr9000 for 40 minutes over Dettifoss, Jökulsárgljúfur and Ásbyrgi; or

1kr20,000 for a supertour covering all these areas. You can also take a two-hour Arctic Circle tour to Grimsey for 1kr15,000.

### Festivals & Events

Regular free summer concerts are held in the church at Reykjavíð or Skútustaðir on Saturday night in July at 9pm. On one Saturday the concert is held in Kirkjan at Dimmuborgir.

In late June the annual **Mývatn marathon** ([www.myvatn.is/marathon](http://www.myvatn.is/marathon)) follows a circuit around the lake, attracting hardy souls from across the country. The organisers also host 3km and 10km fun runs. For information, contact **Sel-Hótel Mývatn** (☎ 464 4164; www.myvatn.is).

### Sleeping

Most Mývatn accommodation is in or near Reykjavíð or at Skútustaðir (see p234).

**Hlíð camp site** (☎ 464 4103; hlid@isholf.is; Hraunbrún; sites per person 1kr700, sb/cabins 1kr2000/2000; ☎) This large, well-maintained camp site has showers, toilets, drying sheds and, in summer, a kitchen tent. There's also a laundry service (1kr500 per wash and 1kr500 to dry), mountain-bike rental (1kr1200/1600 per half/full day) and internet access (1kr400 per 30 minutes). Sleeping bag accommodation is available across the road in no-frills rooms with a large shared kitchen. There are also six basic cabins sleeping four. The Hlíð is 300m uphill from the church.

**Ferðabjónustan Bjarg** (☎ 464 4240; ferdabjarg@simnet.is; sites per person 1kr750, sb 1kr1700-2500, d/tr 1kr8200/10,500; ☎ May-Oct; ☎) This smaller site has a lovely location on the lake shore and a new shower block, a kitchen tent, a laundry service, a souvenir shop, summer boat rental (1kr1200 for the first hour, 1kr600 per hour thereafter), bike hire (1kr1000/1500 for six/12 hours) and internet access (1kr400/600 per half-hour/

hour). Accommodation is also available in bright, freshly carpeted rooms in the main building. The owner sells tickets for a wide variety of tours and buses.

**Eldá** (☎ 464 4220; www.elda.is; Helluhraun 15; sb mid-Sep–mid-May only lkr1900, s/d/tr lkr7000/9900/14,000) This friendly family-run guesthouse operation owns five properties around town and offers cosy accommodation in each one. There are guest kitchens and TV lounges, and an impressive buffet breakfast is included in the rates. All guests should check in at this location.

**Helluhraun 13** (☎ 464 4132; myvatn100@isl.is; d lkr9000; ☹ May-Sep, by reservation only Oct-Apr) There are just three rooms at this small guesthouse, but they're spacious, bright and tastefully decorated with wood floors, white linens and shared bathrooms. Breakfast is included in the price.

**Vógar** (☎ 464 4303; www.vogarholidays.is; sites per person lkr550, sb 4-bed r/d lkr1800/5000, s/d/tr with bath-room lkr12,600/14,500/19,500) This quiet farm guesthouse, open all year, on the lake road about 2.5km south of Reykjavíki, has camping facilities and 20 comfortable guesthouse rooms with private bathrooms, breakfast included. New ultra-cosy Scandinavian-style log cabins are also available.

**Hótel Reykjavíki** (☎ 464 4142; www.reykjaviki.is; s/d Jun-Aug lkr13,300/16,200, Sep-May lkr7300/9900; 📍 📺) Looking out over the lake, this small hotel with a relaxed attitude has a choice of bright, spacious rooms with contemporary, neutral furnishings and handy black-out blinds. The front rooms have superb views over the lake, and there's a TV lounge, a restaurant and free internet and wi-fi access.

**Hótel Reynihlið** (☎ 464 4170; www.myvatnhotel.is; s/d Jun-Aug & Christmas lkr15,900/17,900, Sep-May lkr8900/10,900; 📍 📺) Mývatn's upmarket, business-class option is a stylish place offering generous rooms with giant beds, wi-fi access, satellite TV and international style. There's a small bar and a good restaurant here. A buffet breakfast is included in the rates.

## Eating & Drinking

The local food speciality is a moist, cakelike, molasses-rich rye bread known as *hverabrauð*. It's slow-baked underground in the Bjarnarflag geothermal area and served in every restaurant in town.

**Vogafjós Cowshed** (☎ 464 4303; Vógar; snacks lkr500-900; ☹ 10am-10pm mid-May–mid-Sep) This bizarre but memorable café is pretty unique in that it

features a glass wall between it and the dairy shed of a working farm. You can watch the cows being milked as you sip your coffee and tuck into the tasty selection of sandwiches, cakes, waffles, pancakes and smoked trout. Vógar is 2.5km south of Reykjavíki.

**Gamli Bærinn** (☎ 464 4270; ☹ 11am-10pm mid-May–mid-Sep, to midnight Jul & Aug; mains lkr1200-1990) This chilled pub-café beside Hótel Reynihlið is the best place for a meal in town and has a menu featuring everything from traditional lamb soup (lkr990) to smoked char with *hverabrauð* (lkr500), pan-fried lamb (lkr1900) and a bumper selection of desserts. In the evening it becomes the local hangout, with live music, often jazz, at weekends in high season.

**Hótel Reykjavíki** (☎ 464 4142; 3 courses lkr3200-3900; ☹ lunch & dinner Jun-Aug, dinner only May & Sep) This relaxed restaurant at the hotel has great views over the lake and serves a good selection of traditional salmon, char and lamb dishes as well as more international chicken and vegetarian specialities. Smoked trout, local rye bread and *skyr* (a yogurtlike dessert) are also featured.

**Myllan** (☎ 464 4170; 2-/3-course dinner lkr3490/3990) The town's swankiest, though often quietest, spot to eat is this upmarket restaurant at Hótel Reynihlið. There's a generous lunch buffet, and set evening meals feature traditional favourites such as arctic char, smoked and fresh lamb, hot spring-bread, and *skyr* with blueberries.

The **supermarket** (☹ 10am-8pm) at the Esso petrol station is well stocked and has a hot-dog grill.

## AROUND THE LAKE

The sealed route around the lake is only 36km long, but with plenty of walks and side trips away from the road you should plan at least a day to explore the sights, and two days if you want to hike the Hverfell-Dimmuborgir trail system. Sites not to be missed along the way include **Dimmuborgir**, **Hverfell**, **Höfði**, the pseudocraters and the view from **Vindbelgjafjall**.

This section is organised in a clockwise direction from Reykjavíki and includes Skútustaðir.

### Hverfell & Dimmuborgir Trail

A well-marked track runs from Reykjavíki to Hverfell (5km) and on to Dimmuborgir (a further 2.5km); it makes a good day trip in fine weather. The trail begins southeast of the intersection of the Ring Rd and the round-the-lake route.

### STÓRAGJÁ & GRJÓTAGJÁ

First up along this trail (about 100m from the start) is Stóragjá a rather eerie, watery **fissure** that was once a popular bathing spot. Cooling water temperatures (currently about 28°C) and the growth of potentially harmful algae mean it's no longer safe to swim in the cave, but it's an alluring spot with clear waters and a rock roof.

Further on at Grjótagjá there's another gaping **fissure** with a water-filled cave, this time at about 45°C – too hot to soak in. It's a beautiful spot, though, particularly when the sun filters through the cracks in the roof and illuminates the interior.

### HVERFELL

Dominating the lava fields on the eastern edge of Mývatn is the classic tephra ring Hverfell. This near-symmetrical crater appeared 2500 years ago in a cataclysmic eruption of the existing Lúdentarhið complex. Rising 463m from the ground and stretching 1040m across, it is a massive and awe-inspiring landmark in Mývatn.

The crater is composed of loose gravel, but an easy track leads from the northwestern end to the summit and offers stunning views of the crater itself and the surrounding landscape. From the rim of the crater the sheer magnitude of the explosion becomes apparent – a giant gaping hole reaching out across the mountain. The trail runs along the western rim of the crater to a lookout at the southern end before descending steeply towards Dimmuborgir.

Because of damage to the formation, hikers are asked to stick to the main trail only and not to descend into the crater, which has been severely damaged by graffiti.

### DIMMUBORGIR

The giant lava field at Dimmuborgir is one of the most fascinating in the country, with oddly shaped pillars, natural arches, caves and weird formations of lava formed by a succession of eruptions and lava flows across the area.

It's believed that the strange pillars and crags here were created about 2000 years ago when lava from the Þrengslaborgir and Lúdentarborgir crater rows flowed across older Hverfell lava fields. The new lava was dammed into a fiery lake in the Dimmuborgir basin and, when the surface of this lake cooled, a domed roof formed over the still-molten material below. The roof was sup-

ported by pillars of older igneous material, and when the dam finally broke the molten lava drained in stages and the odd pillars of Dimmuborgir remained, marked with terraces at various levels.

A series of colour-coded walking trails run through Dimmuborgir, leading past the main formations. The most famous of these is the large lava cave known as Kirkján, where a natural arched roof covers a gaping hole. Small and innocent-looking cracks run throughout the area, many covering deep and dangerous fissures. Stick to the marked trails and be especially watchful of children.

### HÖFÐI

One of the area's gentlest landscapes is on the forested lava headland Höfði. Wildflowers and birch and spruce trees cover the headland, and the tiny islands and crystal-clear waters attract great northern divers and other birds. Along the shore you'll see many small caves and *klasar* (lava pillars), the best known of which are at **Kálfaströnd** on the southern shore of the Höfði peninsula, where the *klasar* rise from the water in dramatic clusters. Rambling footpaths lead across the headland and can easily fill an hour.

### Pseudocraters

More than 50 islands and islets are scattered across the lake, most of which were formed by gas explosions that occurred when molten lava flowed into the water. The same formations can be seen in the small hills around the southern, western and southeastern shores. Known as pseudocraters, these hills were formed as trapped subsurface water boiled and exploded in steam eruptions through the lava surface, forming small scoria cones and craters. The largest of these, which measure more than 300m across, are east of Vindbelgjafjall on the western shore of Mývatn. The smallest ones – the islets and those south of the lake – are just a couple of metres wide and are best appreciated from the air.

### SKÚTUSTAÐAGÍGAR

The most accessible pseudocrater swarm is Skútustaðagíggar, near Skútustaðir on the southern lake shore. You can make a complete circuit around and over the craters on the hiking trail that starts near the camp site at Skútustaðir. The walk takes about an hour at a leisurely pace.

The nearby pond, Stakhólstjörn, and its surrounding area are havens for nesting waterfowl and were designated a national natural monument in 1973. The boggy marshland here is particularly delicate, so hikers are asked to stick to the marked trails.

### Skútustaðir

The small village of Skútustaðir, on the southern shore of Mývatn, is the only settlement in the area apart from Reykjahlíð. During saga times, it was owned by the notorious Vigaskúta, who was known for his ruthlessness and was marked for assassination by his neighbours. He was clever, though, and more often than not turned the tables on those who threatened him.

The **church**, just east of the village, contains a painting of the Last Supper and makes a quiet and shady vantage point.

### TOURS

To complement the summer tours run out of Reykjahlíð, Sel-Hótel Mývatn offers a program of winter tours from September to May, including snowmobiling (Ikr7500, one to two hours), 4WD tours (Ikr7900, three hours), Northern Lights tours (Ikr8500, three hours), horse riding (Ikr3900, one hour), and cross-country skiing (Ikr3300/4300/6000, one/two/three hours). Longer 4WD trips to Dettifoss (Ikr16,500, five to six hours) are also possible, as are weekend trips for gay and lesbian travellers (Ikr25,500, including four nights' accommodation).

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Camp site** (☎ 464 4212; sites per person Ikr650) You can camp in this basic site by the roadside opposite Sel-Hótel Mývatn.

**Skjölbrekka** (☎ 464 4164; sb Ikr2500) For no-frills basic beds, this local community centre offers sleeping-bag space in the large communal hall, where bunk beds are packed in between the backpacks.

**Skútustaðir Guest House** (☎ 464 4212; www.skutustadir.com; s Ikr6000, d without/with bathroom Ikr8500/11,000) This friendly guesthouse next door to Sel-Hótel Mývatn has a selection of comfortable, homey rooms and offers sleeping-bag space (Ikr2500) in the low season.

**Hótel Gígur** (☎ 464 4455; www.keahotels.is; s/d/tr Ikr13,900/17,900/23,300; ☺ Jun–mid-Sep; ♿) The lovely lakeside location here compensates for the extra-compact rooms at this business-style hotel. Popular with tour groups and often full, it's a comfortable place with tasteful but simple décor, en-suite bathrooms and free internet access for guests. The restaurant (mains Ikr2190 to Ikr3590) offers one of the best lake views in the whole area, with a lovely outdoor seating area and giant glass windows inside to protect you from the swarming midges as you watch the sunset over the lake.

**Sel-Hótel Mývatn** (☎ 464 4164; www.myvatin.is; s/d May-Aug Ikr14,200/17,300, Sep-Apr Ikr7700/9300; ♿) Skútustaðir's top hotel is getting a little dated, but its spacious, bright rooms are still comfy. There's a hot pot, a sauna and a lounge downstairs and free internet access. The hotel cafeteria serves burgers and pizzas (Ikr650 to Ikr1450) and the restaurant (mains Ikr1390 to Ikr4900) offers traditional hot and cold meals and dinner buffets (Ikr3400).

### Laxá

The clear and turbulent Laxá (Salmon River), one of the many Icelandic rivers so named, rolls across the tundra and past numerous midchannel islets from the western end of

Mývatn towards Skjálfandi. The Laxá is one of the best – and most expensive – salmon-fishing spots in the country. More affordable brown-trout fishing is also available. For permits, call ☎ 464 4333.

### Vindbelgjarfjall

The easy climb up 529m-high Vindbelgjarfjall, west of the lake, offers one of the best views across the water, the pseudocraters and the protected wetlands along the northwestern shore. The trail to the summit starts south of the peak on Rte 848. Reckon on about a half-hour climb to get to the summit.

### Protected Nesting Area

The bogs, marshes, ponds and wet tundra along the northwest shore of Mývatn are a high-density waterfowl nesting zone. Off-road entry is restricted between 15 May and 20 July (when the chicks hatch), but overland travel on this soggy ground is challenging at any time.

Most species of waterfowl present in Iceland are found here in great numbers – including nearly 10,000 breeding pairs of ducks, representing 15 species – and the area is world famous among bird-watchers. Three duck species – the scoter, the gadwall and the Barrow's goldeneye – breed nowhere else in Iceland. Also present are incredible numbers of eider ducks, harlequin ducks, red-breasted mergansers, mallards, long-tailed ducks, pintail ducks, tufted ducks, wigeons, goosanders, teals, shovellers, whooper swans, horned grebes, great northern divers, red-throated divers, black-headed gulls, ptarmigans, arctic terns, great skuas, several species of geese, ravens, gyrfalcons, golden plovers, snipe, whimbrels, wheatears and lots of other species.

Mink and arctic foxes, which take advantage of the abundant avian prey, are also occasionally seen.

### Eldhraun

The lava field along the northern lake shore, Eldhraun, includes the flow that nearly engulfed the Reykjahlíð church. It was belched out of Leirhnjúkur during the Mývatnseldar in 1729 and flowed down the channel Eldá. With some slow scrambling, it can be explored on foot from Reykjahlíð.

### Hlíðarfjall

The prominent 771m-high rhyolite mountain Hlíðarfjall, 5km northeast of Reykjahlíð, is

sometimes called Reykjahlíðarfjall. It makes a pleasant day hike from the village, affording spectacular views over the lake on one side and over the Krafla lava fields on the other.

### BJARNARFLAG

Bjarnarflag, 3km east of Reykjahlíð, is an active geothermal area where the earth hisses and bubbles and steaming vents line the valley. Historically, the area has been home to a number of economic ventures attempting to harness the earth's powers. Early on, farmers tried growing potatoes here, but, unfortunately, these often emerged from the ground already boiled. In the early 1950s attempts to extract sulphur from the solfataras (fumaroles venting sulphurous gases) that dot the area proved to be uneconomical and were abandoned.

In the late 1960s, 25 test holes were bored at Bjarnarflag to ascertain the feasibility of a proposed geothermal power station. One is 2300m deep and the steam roars out of the pipe at 200°C.

Later a diatomite (microfossil) plant was set up and the skeletal remains of a type of single-cell algae were filtered and purified into filler for fertilisers, paints, toothpastes and plastics. All that remains of the processing plant today is the so-called **Blue Lagoon**, a steaming turquoise pool of bore water from the former factory.

A cinder-brick factory here continues to manufacture building materials from the volcanic ash deposits, and nearby is the underground bread oven where *hverabraud* is packed into milk cartons and slowly baked over 22 hours. Look for the small, round glass doors that open into the ground, but don't disturb the bread.

### Námajfjall

Produced by a fissure eruption, the pastel-coloured Námajfjall ridge lies south of the Ring Rd, 6km east of Reykjahlíð. It sits squarely on the spreading zone of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and is dotted with steaming vents. A walking trail leads from the highway at Namaskarð pass to a view disc at the summit. This 30-minute climb provides a grand vista over the steamy surroundings. North of the pass is another ridge, Dalífall, which sports a large and growing notch – dramatic evidence that the mountain is being torn in two by tectonic spreading.

### MARIMO BALLS

*Marimo* balls (*Cladophora aegagropila*) are bizarre little spheres of green algae that are thought to grow naturally in only two places in the world – Mývatn and Lake Akan in Japan. The tiny balls grow slowly, to about the size of a golf ball, rising to the surface of the water in the morning to photosynthesise (when there's enough sunlight) and sinking to the bottom at night.

The balls have been honoured with a festival in Japan for some years (the name is Japanese for 'algae ball'), so Mývatn locals decided to do the same and in late September 2003 the first Marimo Festival was held at Skútustaðir. As in Japan, the festival began with a symbolic gathering of *marimo* balls, which were then displayed at Skútustaðir's Skjölbrekka community centre before being returned to the lake. At present the future of the festival is uncertain, with no plans for any celebrations in 2007, but ask at the information centre in Reykjahlíð or the Sel-Hotel in Skútustaðir for up-to-date information.

## Hverir

The ochre-coloured slopes of Hverir, the geothermal field immediately to the east of Námafjall, is a lunarlike landscape of bubbling mudpots, steaming vents, sulphur deposits, boiling springs and fumaroles, some of which are real dynamos. A heavy scent of sulphur lingers in the area and a change of wind direction can leave you shrouded by a damp, foggy cloud of pungent steam. Safe pathways through the features have been roped off, and to avoid risk of serious injury and damage to the natural features, avoid any lighter-coloured soil and respect the ropes.

## KRAFLA

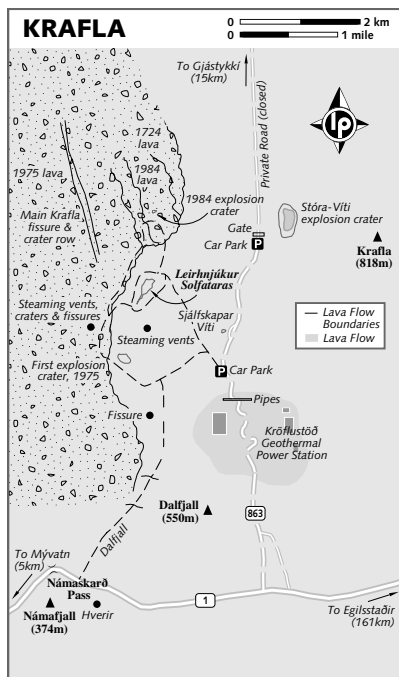
More steaming vents, brightly coloured craters and aquamarine lakes await at Krafla, an active volcanic region 7km north of the Ring Rd. Technically, Krafla is just an 818m-high mountain, but the name is now used for the entire area as well as a geothermal power station and the series of eruptions that created Iceland's most awesome lava field.

The heart of volcanic activity is known as the Krafla central volcano, but, rather than a cone-shaped peak, Krafla is a largely level system of north-south trending fissures underlain by a great magma chamber. Activity is normally characterised by fissuring and gradual surface swells followed by abrupt subsidence, which triggers eruptions. At present, the ground surface is rising, indicating possible activity in the future. The **Nordic Volcanological Center** ([www.norvol.hi.is](http://www.norvol.hi.is)) tracks the most recent developments.

As the Krafla area is still considered active, a visit will naturally involve some risk. To be safe, avoid lighter-coloured soil, which indicates a live steam vent, mudpots, sharp lava chunks and scoria slopes. Stick to marked trails, and in winter be extremely wary of hidden fissures and avoid any melting snow, which may cover a hot spot.

## Kröflustöð

The idea of constructing a geothermal power station at Krafla was conceived in 1973, and preliminary work commenced with the drilling of 24 test holes to determine project feasibility. In December 1975, however, after a rest of several hundred years, the Krafla fissure burst into activity with the first in a series of nine eruptions and 20 cases of surface subsidence. This considerably lowered the site's



projected geothermal potential and nearly deactivated one of the primary steam sources, but the project went ahead and was completed in 1978. A second turbine unit and additional boreholes were added in 1996, and Krafla now operates at its intended capacity of 60 megawatts using on average 15 to 17 boreholes at a time. The power plant's **visitor centre** (Gestastofa; admission free; ☎ 12.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug) explains how it all works.

## Stóra-Víti

The impressive dirt-brown crater of Stóra-Víti reveals a stunning secret when you reach its rim – a glittering turquoise pool of flood water at its heart. Surrounded by steaming vents, bubbling pools and desolate land, the vibrant colour makes a lasting impression as you track around the rim of the crater on a slippery walking trail.

The 320m-wide explosion crater was created in 1724 during the destructive Mývatnseldar, and it's just one of many vents along the Krafla central volcano. Behind the crater are the 'twin lakes', boiling mud springs that spouted mud 10m into the air during the Mývatnseldar.

They're now down to a mere simmer and Víti is considered inactive.

## Leirhnjúkur & Krafla Caldera

Krafla's most impressive, and potentially most dangerous, attraction is the colourful Leirhnjúkur crater, which originally appeared in August 1727. It started out as a lava fountain and spouted molten material for two years before subsiding. After a minor burp in 1746, it became the menacing sulphur-encrusted mud hole that tourists love today.

From the rim above Leirhnjúkur you can look out across the Krafla Caldera and the layers of lava that bisect it. The first of these lava flows was from the original Mývatnseldar, which was overlaid in places by lava from the 1975 eruptions, and again by 1984 lava.

The earth's crust here is extremely thin and in places the ground is ferociously hot. Steaming vents on the pastel-coloured rhyolite mountain to the west are the last vestiges of a series of explosions in 1975, when the small grass-filled crater on the western slope of the mountain south of Leirhnjúkur erupted as Kröfluedar, a continuation of Mývatnseldar.

A well-defined track leads northwest to Leirhnjúkur from the Krafla parking area; with all the volcanic activity, high temperatures, bubbling mud pots and steaming vents, you'd be well advised not to stray from the marked paths at any time.

## Gjástykkí

This remote rift zone at the northernmost end of the Krafla fissure swarm was the source of the first eruptions in 1724, and was activated when Leirhnjúkur went off in the 1975 eruptions. Between 1981 and 1984 the area was the main hot pot of activity in the Krafla central volcano, and the current Gjástykkí lava fields date from this time. The area's best-known landmark is a red mountain that protrudes from dark fields of lava. Gjástykkí is a very sensitive area and no private vehicles are allowed access. To visit you will need to join a tour; see p231.

## Getting There & Away

From Reykjavíki, a wonderful day hike leads to Hlíðarfjall and Leirhnjúkur along a marked path from near the airport. Another walking route leads from Namaskarð along the Dalvík ridge to Leirhnjúkur.

## HOME-MADE HELL

The impressive crater known as Sjálfskapar Víti (Homemade Hell), near the Krafla car park, isn't like other craters in the area. When teams were drilling the Krafla boreholes, one was so powerful that when they hit the steam chamber it exploded. A huge crater was created and bits of the drilling rig were discovered up to 3km away. Miraculously, no-one was killed. Had the project been successful, this one borehole would have been sufficient to power the entire Krafla power station. Now, the same work is done by 17 boreholes.

In summer Krafla can be reached on the daily bus (1kr900, 15 minutes), which leaves at 8am and 11.30am from Hótel Reynihlið and returns at 11.15am and 3.15pm. The Mývatn-Dettifoss excursion bus also runs via Krafla.

## SOUTHEAST OF MÝVATN

South and east of the main lake area a region of forbidding mountains, deserts and rugged geological features stretches into the interior. With plenty of time and determination, it makes challenging terrain for experienced hikers.

The **Lúdentarborgir** crater row, east of Mývatn, is part of the 8km **Prengslaborgir** fissure. To get to Lúdent, follow the track rounding the southern base of Hverfell, then continue 5km southeastward through the Lúdentarborgir crater row to Lúdent itself.

About 13km southeast of Grænavatn, near the southern shore of Mývatn, is the 1222m-high table mountain **Bláfjall**. There are no marked routes in the area and getting there is tough going, through marshes and across rocky, chunky lava flows.

Two other table mountains visible from Mývatn are **Búrfell** (953m) and **Sellandafjall** (988m), both long and arduous hikes.

## HÚSAVÍK REGION

### MÝVATN TO HÚSAVÍK

The most direct route between Mývatn and Húsavík is the partially sealed Rte 87 (54km), which crosses the barren Hólarsandur before entering the gentle, grassy valleys of the Laxá

and Skjálfandafjót that give few clues to the area's substantial geothermal activity. With a vehicle this whole area can be explored as a day trip from Húsavík or Mývatn.

Turning off either Rte 85 or Rte 87, the wealthy old farm **Grenjaðarstaður** served as a church and vicarage during the 19th century. In the churchyard there is a stone carved with runes dating from medieval times. The turf-roofed farmhouse, constructed in 1865, is one of only three left in the district and now houses a simple **folk museum** (☎ 464 3545; adult/under 14yr 1kr400/150; ☞ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug) similar to Laufás near Akureyri (p223). Grenjaðarstaður is 5km from public-transport routes.

The geothermal site **Hveravellir** on Rte 87, about 26km south of Húsavík, provides some of Húsavík's hot-water supply. The farm here sells fresh vegetables from its geothermally heated greenhouses.

The alternative road from Mývatn or Akureyri to Húsavík starts on the Ring Rd before turning north on Rte 845 at **Laugar**, the main village in this area. Apart from an overnight bed there's little to detain you in Laugar. The school here was built in 1924 and now is a hotel, **Fosshótel Laugar** (☎ 464 6300; www.fosshotel.is; s/d without shower 1kr7500/9900, with shower 1kr14,700/19,000; ☞ Jun-Aug; ☞ ). The rooms without bathrooms are basic, but the en-suite rooms are spacious and bright. Just past the village on Rte 1 you'll find cosy accommodation at **Narfastaðir** (☎ 464 3102; www.farmhotel.is; s/d 1kr6000/8600, s/d with bathroom 1kr8300/11,700).

## HÚSAVÍK

pop 2500

Húsavík, Iceland's whale-watching capital, is a picturesque harbour town that has become a firm favourite on travellers' itineraries. With its colourful houses tumbling down to the water and the snowcapped peaks of Víkna fjöll across the bay, it's the prettiest fishing town on the northeast coast. Húsavík is also home to several interesting museums: the award-winning Whale Museum, a rather bizarre but unique Phallogical Museum, and a better-than-average local-history museum. The town also has a good selection of accommodation and restaurants and a lively but relaxed atmosphere, making it a perfect base to explore the area.

## History

Although the honours normally go to Reykjavík and Ingólfur Arnarson, Húsavík was

the real site of the first Nordic settlement in Iceland. Garðar Svavarsson, a Swedish Viking who set off around 850 for the mysterious Thule or Snæland (Snowland), was actually responsible for the island's first permanent human settlement.

After a brief stop-off at Hornafjörður in the south, Garðar arrived at Skjálfandi on the north coast and built a settlement that he called Húsavík. Modestly renaming the country Garðarshólmur (Garðar's Island), he dug in for the winter. At the advent of spring he prepared to depart, but some of his slaves were left behind. Whether by accident or design, these castaways became Iceland's first real settlers, pioneering life in a new country and yet uncredited by the history books.

## Information

The **Húsavík Information Centre** (☎ 464 4300; www.husavik.is; Garðarsbraut 5; ☞ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Thu, to 7pm Fri, to 6pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun Jun-Aug) is inside the Kasko supermarket on the main street.

Húsavík has a hospital, a post office and other facilities. The **Íslandsbanki bank** (Stórigarður 1) is opposite the church and has an ATM. There's internet access at the **library** (☎ 464 6165; Stórigarður 17; per hr 1kr250; ☞ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat).

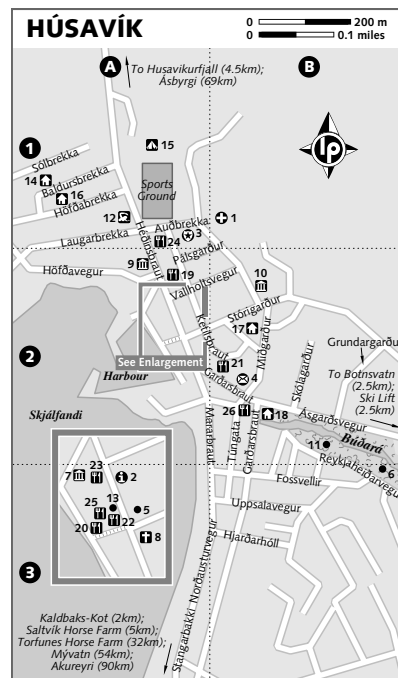
**Þórarins Stefánssonar Bookshop** (☎ 464 1234; Garðarsbraut 9), beside the bank, sells a good range of souvenirs, maps, books and novels in English and German.

## Sights & Activities

### HÚSAVÍK WHALE MUSEUM

Best visited before you head out on a whale-watching trip, this excellent **museum** (Hvalamiðstöðin; ☎ 464 2520; www.icewhale.is; Hafnarstétt; adult/6-14yr 1kr600/250; ☞ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm May & Sep) will tell you all you ever needed to know about these gracious creatures. Housed in an old slaughterhouse at the harbour, the museum looks at the ecology and habits of whales, orcas, dolphins and other marine mammals, whale conservation, and the history of whaling in Iceland.

The 'Ocean Odyssey - Follow the Gulf Stream' exhibit has detailed information on the biology of whales, their habitats and the environmental threats they face, while the 10 enormous skeletons of humpback, minke and sperm whales (all found stranded or trapped in fishermen's nets) give you some idea of the gargantuan proportions of these mammals. There's also a 30-minute film chronicling



whaling in Iceland and an exhibition devoted to Keiko, the killer whale captured off Iceland in 1979 and star of the movie *Free Willy*.

## ICELANDIC PHALLOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This unique **museum** (Hid Íslanska Redasafn; ☎ 561 6663; www.phallus.is; Héðinsbraut 3a; admission 1kr500; ☞ noon-6pm late-May-mid-Sep) houses a bizarre collection of penises of all shapes and sizes. There are over 180 pickled, dried and stuffed specimens in the museum, showing off the crown jewels of everything from hamsters to a blue whale. The only missing exhibit is that of a human. But don't rush to volunteer, four donors-in-waiting have been found to add to the collection in the future.

## SAFNAHÚSIÐ Á HÚSAVÍK

The **Húsavík museum** (☎ 464 1860; www.husmus.is; Stórigarður 17; adult/under 14yr 1kr400/100; ☞ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug, 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 4-6pm Sun Sep-May) is one of the best local museums you'll find in Iceland. The museum occupies the 1st and 3rd floor of the building (the library is on the 2nd floor) and a nearby annexe. The natural-history display has the usual array of stuffed

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animals, including arctic foxes, a frightening-looking hooded seal, and a stuffed polar bear, which was welcomed to Grimsey in 1969 with both barrels of a gun. The folk history exhibits cover everything from a re-creation of an early farmhouse, to photographic archives, paintings, traditional costumes, a healthy collection of 16th-century weapons, and historic books – including a copy of a Bible printed in 1584. There's also a carefully catalogued collection of 100,000 beer-bottle labels from around the world. Nearby, the new annexe houses an excellent maritime museum, with displays of preserved fishing boats, a pungent fish-drying shed, and lots of memorabilia and displays relating to the fishing industry.

## HÚSAVÍKURKIRKJA

Húsavík's lovely and unusual **church** is quite different to anything else seen in Iceland. Constructed in 1907 from Norwegian timber, the delicately proportioned red-and-white church

would look more at home in the Alps. Inside its cruciform shape becomes apparent and is dominated by a depiction of the resurrection of Lazarus on the altarpiece. The carved font is also worth seeking out, as are the 17th-century murals and candlesticks.

### LUNDEY & FLATEY

The small islands of Lundey and Flatey lie anchored in Skjálfandi, near Húsavík. Lundey (Puffin Island), rises dramatically from the sea in a series of high, nest-covered cliffs and is a breeding ground for puffins, fulmars and other sea birds. Flatey (Flat Island) lives up to its name, rising only a couple of metres above sea level. It's now abandoned, but as recently as 1942 it had a population of more than 100. Tours to both islands are possible with the two whale-watching companies – see opposite.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The small town park **Skrúðgárdin** is a lovely place running along the southern bank of the Buðará river. It's a relaxing spot for a walk, and there are several heritage houses scattered around, including one of Húsavík's original homes, **Arholt**.

### HIKING

Húsavík's lovely setting looking out over the blue-green bay to the mountains and sheer cliffs to the south makes it an appealing location for some hiking. In a couple of hours you can make it up the steep trail (4.9km) to the summit of 417m-high **Húsavíkurfjall**. The view from the top, alongside the communication antennae, is fantastic and on exceptionally clear days you can see the Vatnajökull icecap. The path starts on the main road just 1.8km north of town.

Another walk takes you to the lake **Botnsvatn**, in a hollow behind the village, where reforestation projects are greening the landscape. It's a 5.2km walk around the lake. Campers are welcome by the lake, but there are no facilities.

### HORSE RIDING

Short horse rides (one to three hours) and longer tours (five days) are available at **Saltvík horse farm** (☎ 847 9515; www.skarpur.is/saltvik), 5km south of Húsavík.

Similar services are available at **Torfunes horse farm** (☎ 464 3622; www.torfunes.com), at Ljósa-vatnshreppur, 32km south of Húsavík, which

offers three-hour horse rides from May to September, as well as six- to eight-day trips in July.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Northeast of town, a **ski lift** operates during winter, and the local **swimming pool** (☎ 464 1144; Laugarbrekka 2; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) has hot pots, and water slides for children.

### Tours

The SBA-Norðurleið bus picks up at Húsavík at 10am daily in summer, and does a return eight-hour excursion to Jökulsárgljúfur National Park and Dettifoss (Ikr6500), stopping at the main sights.

**Highland Expedition Tours** (☎ 464 3940; www.fjall.asyn.is) offers super-Jeep tours year-round in the northeast region.

### Sleeping

**Camp site** (☎ 464 1105; sites per person Ikr750; ☎ May-Sep) Next to the sports ground at the north end of town, this well-run camp site has such luxuries as heated toilets, washing machines and cooking facilities.

**Kaldbaks-Kot** (☎ 464 1504; www.cottages.is; 2-4 person cabins Ikr9900-12,900) Slightly out of town but great value and really cosy, these timber cottages 2km south of Húsavík have good kitchens, TVs, comfy beds and verandas with great views out to sea. There's an outdoor hot pot and horse riding for experienced riders.

**Emhild Olsen** (☎ 464 1618; Baldursbrekka 17; sb/s/d Ikr1800/3200/4600; ☎ Jun-Aug) Just opposite Aðalbjörg Birgisdóttir, and offering very similar facilities, is this well-priced guesthouse with comfortable rooms and friendly service.

**Aðalbjörg Birgisdóttir** (☎ 464 1005; onod@simnet.is; Baldursbrekka 20; sb/s/d Ikr1800/2500/5000) You'll find a few good-value, cosy rooms at this family home to the north of town. There's a guest kitchen and a warm welcome for hikers and backpackers.

**Gistiheimilið Árból** (☎ 464 2220; www.simnet.is/arboll; Ásgarðsvegur 2; Jun-mid-Sep s/d/tr Ikr6200/9600/13,400, mid-Sep-May Ikr5000/7400/9800) Friendly and well maintained but stuck in a décor time warp, this heritage house has spacious but old-fashioned rooms and bathrooms well past their best. There's an interesting collection of musical instruments, old photos and guns along the stairs.

**Fosshotel Húsavík** (☎ 464 1220; www.fosshotel.is; Ketilsbraut 22; s/d Jun-Aug Ikr14,700/19,000, Sep-May

### WHALE WATCHING IN HÚSAVÍK

Húsavík lies on the edge of Skjálfandi, a wide, deep bay with good water circulation, natural shelter and little variation in tides – ideal conditions for whales. The area has become Iceland's premier whale-watching destination, with 12 species coming here to feed in summer. Minke whales are by far the most common species seen in the bay, with regular sightings of white-beaked dolphins, humpback whales and porpoises and less frequent appearances by orcas, fin, sei or pilot whales, and the 'big one' – blue whales.

It takes about an hour to sail to the prime feeding grounds, where crew and participants get busy looking out for telltale signs of a surfacing whale. Although whale-watching tours boast impressive success rates for sightings (95% to 98%), whales don't appear on cue. Sightings are announced using a 'clock' system, with the stern of the boat at 12 o'clock.

Different whales have different habits and identifying features. The curious minke whale surfaces two or three times in quick succession before executing a deep dive and sometimes may even approach the boat. Humpback whales breach and sometimes roll over, holding an enormous flipper in the air. Most whales arrive in Icelandic waters in spring (around May) and stay to feed until September, when they return to warmer southern waters for breeding.

Two whale-watching tours operate from Húsavík harbour. The original operator is **Norður Sigling** (North Sailing; ☎ 464 2350; www.northsailing.is; Gamli Baukur, Hafnarstétt; adult/15-16yr/under 14yr Ikr3800/1900/free), which started whale watching here in 1994. It has four boats, including the 20-tonne oak schooner *Haukur*. Trips run up to four times daily from mid-May to mid-September. The same company also runs daily combination whale- and puffin-watching tours to Lundey (Ikr4900, three to four hours) and Flatey (Ikr5300, five to six hours), as well as full day trips to Grímsey on request.

The second operator is **Gentle Giants** (Hvalferðir; ☎ 464 1500; www.gentlegiants.is; Garðarsbraut 6; adult/under 15yr Ikr3700/free), with two boats making trips up to five times daily from June to mid-September. The company also offers sea-angling trips (Ikr4900, two to three hours) and tours to Flatey (Ikr7900, five hours). You can buy tickets from the 'lighthouse' ticket booth opposite the church.

Both operators provide hot chocolate and pastries during the trip, but it's still a good idea to wrap up well before departure as it can be bitterly cold out on the boat, no matter how warm it feels in town. In early and late season both operators may have only one departure daily, so check in advance. If there are no sightings, you can usually get on another trip for free.

Ikr9300/10,700; ☎ ) This large whale-themed hotel (there's even a Moby Dick bar) has compact rooms with predictable international-style décor and all the usual facilities including TV and private bathrooms.

### Eating & Drinking

**Restaurant Salka** (☎ 464 2551; Garðarsbraut 6; mains Ikr850-2350; ☎ 11.30am-10pm Sun-Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat) Once home to Iceland's first cooperative, this historic building now houses a popular restaurant serving everything from smoked puffin to pizza. The real speciality here, though, is seafood, with excellent lobster, shrimp and salt cod on offer.

**Gamli Baukur** (☎ 464 2442; Hafnarstétt; mains Ikr990-3500; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Sun-Wed, to 1am Thu, 11am-3am Fri & Sat) This rustic timber restaurant-bar down by the harbour is decorated with nautical relics and serves a good selection of fish and seafood

dishes. There's a cosy little bar upstairs and a lovely terrace overlooking the harbour.

**Túnberg restaurant** (mains Ikr1200-3500; ☎ noon-2pm & 6-10pm) At Fosshotel Húsavík, this rather soulless restaurant serves a standard menu of beef and lamb dishes, pasta and pizza, and the odd local speciality such as puffin.

**Skuld Café** (snacks Ikr350-850; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Jun-Sep) Set on the hill overlooking the waterfront, this simple, cosy summer café sells tasty baked goods, open sandwiches, light snacks, and beer and wine. It has a lovely outdoor deck area with seating for warm days.

**Kofinn** (☎ 8am-9pm Jun-Sep) This 'gourmet hut' aims to let visitors sample local foods such as dried haddock, marinated herring, dried reindeer and smoked trout for free, and it offers a small menu (dishes Ikr600 to Ikr1500) of traditional Icelandic foods. The outdoor terrace has great views over the harbour.



Both the Esso and Shell petrol stations have grills selling the usual fast-food fare, while the town bakery **Heimabakari Konditori** (☎ 464 2900; Garðarsbraut 15; ☎ 8am-5pm) sells fresh bread, sandwiches and sugary cakes. The well-stocked **Kasko supermarket** (Garðarsbraut 5; ☎ 9am-8pm) is in the centre of town, and there's a **Vín Búð** at Túngata 1.

### Getting There & Away

There are three buses to Akureyri (1kr2300, one hour) on weekdays (two at weekends) from June to August, and three on weekdays (one on Saturday, two on Sunday) during winter. Buses also run twice daily to Reykhlið at Mývatn (1kr1700, 40 minutes) and once on weekdays to Ásbyrgi (1kr1900, 45 minutes). The bus terminal is at the Shell petrol station.

### TJÖRNES

Heading north from Húsavík along Rte 85 you'll sweep along the coast of the stubby peninsula Tjörnnes, which separates Skjálfandi from Öxarfjörður. There are some interesting museums and geological features along this route as well as a colony of puffins and other sea birds on the 50m-high cliffs along the eastern coast.

### Ytritunga Fossils

Fossil-rich coastal cliffs flank the Hallbjarnarstaðaá river mouth 10km north of Húsavík. The cliffs are made up of alternating layers of fossil shells and lignite (a soft brown-black coal), with the oldest layers dating back about two million years. The fossils here are the shells of creatures that are now found only in waters of 12°C or warmer. The present water temperature along Iceland's Arctic Ocean coast is around 4°C, an indication that the sea here has cooled dramatically over the past two to three million years. You can get to the cliffs by turning off Rte 85 at Ytritunga farm.

To put the fossils in context and understand the process that formed the cliffs, it's worth visiting the **fossil museum** (☎ 464 1968; adult/under 14yr 1kr400/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug), about 2km further up Rte 85 at the farm Hallbjarnarstaðir. It displays interesting finds from the area, including plant and animal fossils from the Pleistocene era.

### Pörshamar Home Museum

Set in the middle of nowhere at the tip of the peninsula is this quirky **museum** (☎ 464

1957; adult/under 14yr 1kr400/free; ☎ 9am-6pm Jun-Aug), pride and joy of a local farmer. The eclectic collection contains Viking Age jewellery and other items dating back to the Settlement Era, as well as a large variety of matchboxes and tobacco tins, old photographs, crockery, and household implements.

The museum is about 23km north of Húsavík on the farm Mánárbakki. On the headland just west of the museum is a **lighthouse** offering views out to Grímsey in clear weather.

### KELDUHVERFI

Giant cracks, fissures and grabens (depressions between geological faults) up to 7m deep scar the earth at low-lying Kelduhverfi, where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge enters the Arctic Ocean. Like Þingvellir (p115), the area reveals some of the most visible evidence that Iceland is spreading from the centre. Most of the formations here were made by earthquakes and dramatic fissuring and subsidence during the Krafla eruption of 1975.

To the north of the main road a series of lakes and lagoons stretches to the ocean, offering good fishing and bird-watching.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Keldunes** (☎ 465 2275; keldunes@isl.is; sb/2 people 1kr5000, s/d 1kr5900/7900) You'll get small but cosy rooms with sinks at this modern guesthouse near Skjálftavatn. There's a great kitchen and TV lounge, laundry, hot pot and large balconies for bird-watching. There's also a small cottage with sleeping-bag accommodation for two people. It's about 6km west of Ásbyrgi.

**Hóll** (☎ 465 2270; hrunda@simnet.is; sb/made-up beds 1kr2500/3000) Even closer to the national park, this farm has four simple twin rooms in the main house and a summerhouse sleeping eight. Horse riding is available for 1kr2200 per hour.

**Skúlagarður** (☎ 465 2280; skulagarður@simnet.is; sb/s/d 1kr2000/5250/8000) Set in a former boarding school, this large but functional place has less personality but plenty of rooms. There's a lounge, bar and restaurant on site.

## JÖKULSÁRGLJÚFUR NATIONAL PARK

One of Iceland's best-loved national parks, Jökulsárgljúfur protects the 30km gorge carved out by the formidable **Jökulsá á Fjöllum**. The

river is Iceland's second longest, starting in the Vatnajökull icecap and flowing almost 200km to the Arctic Ocean at Öxarfjörður. **Jökulhlaups** (flooding from volcanic eruptions beneath the icecap), formed the canyon and have carved out a chasm that averages 100m deep and 500m wide. Minor floods occur roughly every 10 years and a major one once or twice in a century.

After the crowds at Mývatn and Krafla, the park feels incredibly remote, with limited access on rough roads and only basic facilities. A wonderful two-day hike (see p247), weaves along the canyon through and around birch forests, striking rock formations, lush valleys and commanding perpendicular cliffs, taking in all the major sights en route. If you're not so keen on hiking, the big attractions, such as the waterfalls at the southern end of the park and horseshoe-shaped Ásbyrgi canyon at the northern end, are accessible by road in a leisurely day.

### History

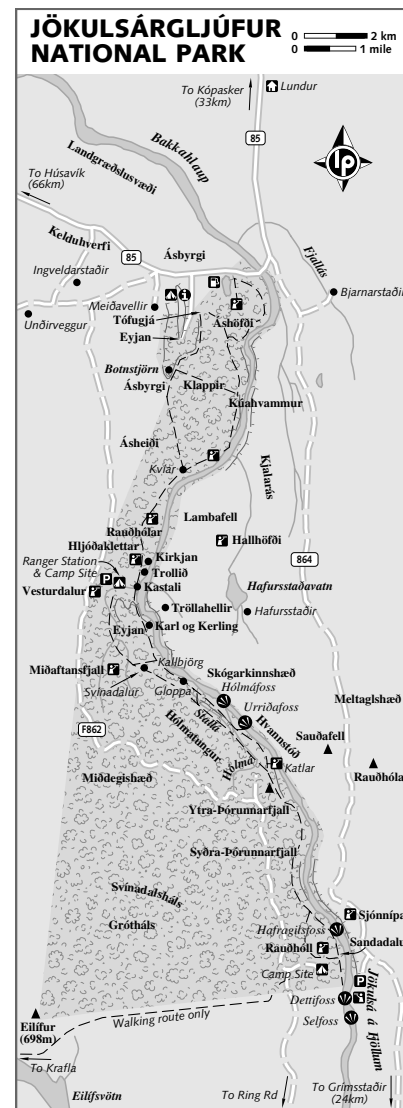
Most of the land that is now protected within Jökulsárgljúfur historically belonged to the Ás estate, one of Iceland's largest private holdings, which extended from Dettifoss to Öxarfjörður. Until the early 19th century there was a church at Ás, near the road on the northern end, but it has now gone and only remnants of the cemetery are visible.

Ásbyrgi has long been considered prime farmland and in medieval times the living was good due to the anomalous profusion of trees – that was until **jökulhlaup** floods tore through in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The national park, which was established in 1973, initially included only the farm Svinadalur, part of Vesturdalur and a small portion of Ásheiði, but in 1974 the huge Ás estate was added. Jökulsárgljúfur now contains 120 sq km and extends 28km from north to south.

### Orientation

The park's southern anchor is Dettifoss, and 8km to the north are the springs and luxuriant vegetation of Hólmatungur. Right in the heart of the park is Vesturdalur, with lots of caves and Iceland's most interesting basalt formations. Near the northern end is Ásbyrgi, a verdant, forested plain enclosed by vertical canyon walls. From Dettifoss to Ásbyrgi on Rte 864 is 25km, about 40 minutes' drive on the rough road.



### Information

Park information is available at the main ranger station in **Ásbyrgi** (☎ 465 2195; <http://english.ust.is/jokulsargljufurnationalpark>; ☎ 8am-10pm Jun & Jul, shorter hr May & Sep) and at Vesturdalur. Both stations have toilets and a car park. A new visitor centre with exhibitions and information about the park is due to open at Ásbyrgi in 2007.

The best hiking map is the *Dettifoss* 1:100,000 sheet, but if you also want to hike at Mývatn it's worth purchasing the thematic *Húsavík-Mývatn* 1:100,000 map, which includes both areas. The main hiking routes through the park are shown in the park brochure (1kr100; free if camping), available at the ranger stations and some tourist offices, which is adequate for most short hikes. You can also pick up a number of self-guided trail brochures (free) from the Ásbyrgi ranger station.

## Tours

Several companies offer tours of Jökulsárgljúfur from Mývatn (p231), Akureyri (p215) and Húsavík (p240). The tours are good value if you're in a hurry and don't have private transport. You can usually leave any of these tours at any time and rejoin later, with advance arrangements.

## Sleeping & Eating

Camping inside the park boundaries is strictly limited to the official camp sites at Ásbyrgi, Vesturdalur and Dettifoss. Basic facilities are available at Ásbyrgi and Vesturdalur (1kr600 per person), but there's only a freshwater tank at Dettifoss (free). The camp site at Vesturdalur is the usual overnight stop for hikers, while camping at Dettifoss is forbidden for motorists.

Farmhouse accommodation is available in Kelduhverfi (see p242); otherwise, the nearest option is the summer hotel at **Lundur** (☎ 465 2247, 863 4311; lundur@dettifoss.is; sb/s/d 1kr2500/4500/7000; ☹ Jun–mid-Aug; 🚰), 8km northeast of Ásbyrgi on Rte 85. The rooms here are pretty simple, but there's a restaurant with home-cooked meals (1kr1500 for dinner), kitchen facilities and a swimming pool.

The petrol station on Rte 85 at Ásbyrgi has a basic grill and limited supplies of (expensive) groceries. If you're hiking bring food with you.

## Getting There & Away

There are only two roads in the park, one on either side of the canyon. The western approach (Rte F862) isn't suitable for 2WD vehicles at its southern end (between Rte 1 and Hólmátungur), and its northern end is rough and slow going. On the eastern side of the canyon Rte 864, another rough gravel road, is passable by 2WD vehicles, but its rutted and potholed surface will tire even the most patient of drivers. Although the park is

open all year, snowfalls can make the roads impassable between October and May.

From late June to August, daily scheduled buses run from Akureyri (1kr4900, 3¼ hours) and Húsavík (1kr2800, 1¼ hours) to major sites in the park. There's also a daily Mývatn–Dettifoss (1kr1900, 1½ hours) bus via Krafla (1kr900, 15 minutes), leaving at 11.30am from the supermarket in Reykjahlíð and returning from Dettifoss at 2pm.

## JÖKULSÁRGLJÚFUR Ásbyrgi

Driving off Rte 85 on to the flat, grassy plain at the northern end of the park, there's little to tell you you're standing on the edge of a massive horseshoe-shaped canyon. The lush **Ásbyrgi canyon** extends 3.5km from north to south and averages 1km in width, making it difficult to discern at its widest point. Near the centre of the canyon is the prominent outcrop **Eyjan**, and towards the south the sheer, dark walls rise up to 100m in depth. The cliffs protect a birch forest from harsh winds and hungry sheep, and the trees here grow up to 8m in height.

There are two stories about the creation of Ásbyrgi. The early Norse settlers believed that Óðinn's normally airborne horse, Slepttur (known in literature as Sleipnir), accidentally touched down on earth and left one hell of a hoof print to prove it. The other theory, though more scientific, is equally incredible. Geologists believe that the canyon was created by an enormous eruption of the Grímsvötn caldera beneath distant Vatnajökull. It released an immense *jökulhlaup*, which ploughed northward down the Jökulsá á Fjöllum and gouged out the canyon in a matter of days. The river then flowed through Ásbyrgi for about 100 years before shifting eastward to its present course.

## HIKING

From the car park near the end of the road, several short tracks lead through the forest to viewpoints of the canyon. Heading east the track leads to a spring near the canyon wall, while the western track climbs to a good view across the valley floor. The boardwalk leading straight ahead ends at a small lake (Botnstjörn) at the head of Ásbyrgi.

You can also climb to the summit of **Eyjan** (2km, 45 minutes return) or ascend the cliffs at **Tófugjá**. From there, a loop track leads

around **Áshöföi** past the gorges. Alternatively, follow the rim right around to **Klappir**, above the canyon head, from where you can head south to Kvíar (or head east to Kúahvammur) and return via the river (the route via Kvíar will take up to four hours return).

You'll find more details on hiking trails at <http://english.ust.is/jokulsargljufurnationalpark/Hiking>.

## Vesturdalur

Off the beaten track but home to diverse scenery, Vesturdalur is a favourite destination for hikers. A series of weaving trails leads from the scrub around the camp site to the cave-riddled pinnacles and rock formations of Hljóðaklettar, the Rauðhólar crater row, the ponds of Eyjan (not to be confused with the Eyjan at Ásbyrgi) and the canyon itself. Reckon on a full day, or two, to explore the area properly.

## HLJÓÐAKLETTAR

The bizarre swirls, spirals, rosettes, honeycombs and columns of basalt at Hljóðaklettar (Echoing Rocks) are a highlight of any hike around Vesturdalur and a puzzling place for amateur geologists. It's difficult to imagine what sort of volcanic activity produced the twisted rock forms here. Weird concertina formations and repeat patterns occur throughout, and the normally vertical basalt columns (formed by rapidly cooling lava) show up on the horizontal here. These strange forms and patterns create an acoustic effect that makes it impossible to determine the direction of the roaring river, a curiosity that gave the area its name.

A circular walking trail (2.4km) from the parking area takes less than an hour to explore. The best formations, which are also riddled with lava caves, are found along the river, northeast of the parking area. Look out for **Trollið**, with its honeycomb pattern, **Kirkjan**, a natural cave in a grassy pit, and **Kastali**, a huge basalt outcrop.

## RAUÐHÓLAR

The Rauðhólar crater row, immediately north of Vesturdalur, displays a vivid array of colours in the cinderlike gravel on the remaining cones. The craters can be explored on foot, on an interesting 5km walk from the parking area. You could also take the excursion bus from Ásbyrgi to Vesturdalur and walk back to Ásbyrgi (12.5km).

## KARL OG KERLING

Two rock pillars, Karl og Kerling, believed to be petrified trolls, stand on a gravel bank west of the river, 2.5km from the Vesturdalur car park. Across the river is **Trollahellir**, the largest cave in the gorge, but it's reached only on a 5km cross-country trek from Rte 864 on the eastern side.

## EYJAN

From Karl og Kerling you can return to Vesturdalur in about three hours by walking around Eyjan, a mesalike 'island' covered with low, scrubby forests and small ponds. Follow the river south to Kallbjörg, then turn west along the track to the abandoned site of Svinadalur, where the canyon widens into a broad valley, and follow the western base of the Eyjan cliffs back to the Vesturdalur parking area.

## Hólmátungur

Lush vegetation, tumbling waterfalls and an air of utter tranquillity make the Hólmátungur area one of the most beautiful in the park. Underground springs bubble up to form a series of short rivers that twist, turn and cascade their way to the canyon. The most popular walk here is the 3.5km loop from the parking area north along the Hólmá river to **Hólmáfoss**, where the harsh lines of the canyon soften and produce several pretty waterfalls. From here you head south again on the Jökulsá to its confluence with the Melbugsa river, where the river tumbles over a ledge, forming the **Urriðafoss** waterfall. To see the falls you need to walk 500m along the trail spur to Katlar. For the best overall view of Hólmátungur, walk to the hill Ytra-Þórunnarfjall, just 1km south of the car park.

Hólmátungur is accessible by car from the north or by 4WD from the south. Otherwise it's 8km on foot to either Vesturdalur or Dettifoss. Camping is prohibited at Hólmátungur, but it's a great spot for a picnic lunch on the first day of the Dettifoss to Ásbyrgi hike.

## Dettifoss

The power of nature can be seen in all its glory at the mighty Dettifoss, the park's most famous attraction and Iceland's most impressive waterfall. Although Dettifoss is only 44m high, a massive 193 cu metres of water thunders over its edge every second, creating a plume of spray that can be seen 1km away. With the greatest volume of any waterfall in Europe,

this truly is nature at its most spectacular. On sunny days brilliant double rainbows form above the churning milky-grey glacial waters, and you'll have to jostle with the other visitors for the best views.

The falls can be seen from either side of the canyon, with a slightly broader sweep of the water visible from the western bank. The Super Dettifoss Tour from Mývatn and the SBA bus from Ásbyrgi visit the western bank, while other tours and most independent travellers stop at the more accessible eastern bank. From the car park on the eastern bank it's a five-minute walk down to the falls. From here you can continue on another 1.5km over the boulders to **Selfoss**. It's only 11m high but it's much broader and quite a striking waterfall.

Access to the western bank of the falls from the south is by 4WD vehicle only; from the Ring Rd it's 31km to the falls on the eastern bank on a rough and badly pot-holed gravel road.

### Hafragilsfoss

In one of the deepest parts of the canyon, 2km downstream from Dettifoss, the 27m-high Hafragilsfoss cuts through the Rauðhóll crater row to expose the volcanic dyke that formed it. From the eastern bank, the best view is down the canyon from the small hill just north of the Hafragilsfoss parking area. In the same area are numerous red scoria cones and craters.

The overlook on the western bank affords a marginal view of the falls, but the view down Jökulsárgljúfur is one of the best available. You can climb down to the river from the vantage point, but near the bottom you must lower yourself down a challenging vertical wall on fixed ropes.

## NORTHEASTERN CIRCUIT

The wild, sparsely populated coastal route around Iceland's northeast tip is an engaging alternative to the direct road from Mývatn to Egilsstaðir. The peninsula is a largely low-lying boggy expanse, flanked by isolated beaches and beloved by summer nesting birds.

Although mostly unsealed, Rte 85 around the coast has improved dramatically in recent years and is easily tackled in a 2WD vehicle. T Rex runs a scheduled bus service from Húsavík to Ásbyrgi (1kr1900, 45 minutes), Kópasker (1kr2200, 1¼ hours), Raufarhöfn (1kr3300, two

hours), and Þórshöfn (1kr4500, 3¼ hours) on weekdays all year round. There's currently no bus to or from Vopnafjörður.

### KÓPASKER

pop 150

The tiny, sleepy village of Kópasker, on the eastern shore of Öxarfjörður, is the first place you pass through before disappearing into the expansive wilds of Iceland's far northeast. An international trading port since 1879, today it relies on agricultural trade and the shrimp industry.

On 13 January 1976 Kópasker suffered a severe earthquake that destroyed several buildings and cracked the harbour wall. Rock slides and fissuring were violent, and evidence of seismic activity can still be seen at Hraunhólar near Presthólar, about 5km south of the town.

About 500m before the village itself, you'll see the red-roofed **church** beside the road. Alongside the church is **Snartarstaðir**, an early district assembly site, and beside it, in what was the old school, the town **Folk Museum & Library** (☎ 465 2171; www.islandia.is/boknord; adult/under 14yr 1kr400/free; ☹ 1-5pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun mid-Jun–Aug). The collection includes early photos of Iceland, a horse-drawn fire engine, an elaborately carved 18th-century cabinet with sled attachments, and a series of beautiful 19th-century local textiles and costumes, including a white wedding dress (black was customary at the time).

On the main road leading into town you can't miss the elaborate **scarecrows** that a local artist has made to protect an eider-duck nesting area.

If you'd like to stay your best bet is the **HI Hostel Kópasker** (☎ 465 2314; hostel@kopasker.is; Akurgerði 7; sb members/nonmembers 1kr1700/2000, s/d 1kr2900/4600; ☹ May–Oct), a simple five-room hostel offering bright rooms with pine furniture. There's a good guest kitchen, a lounge and a washing machine.

There's also a free camp site in the village and a small supermarket by the petrol station. The bus fare from Kópasker to Raufarhöfn is 1kr1300.

### MELRAKKASLÉTTARNES

The low-lying flatlands, ponds and marshes of the bleak and little-visited Melrakkasléttarnes peninsula are a haven for nesting birds. Large numbers of eider ducks, arctic terns, curlew and dunlin can be seen here on the shingle beaches and boggy surface of the tundra.

About 18km north of Kópasker you can turn off Rte 85 and head north along a rough track to the extinct 73m crater **Rauðinúpur**. Set on a wild headland with steep cliff faces, this remote finger of land feels like the end of the earth. Screeching gannets and a lonely lighthouse will be your only companions here, and as you look out to sea the power of nature and sense of dramatic isolation are immediately apparent.

Back on the main road and heading east through more fertile farmland, you approach the remote peninsula **Hraunhafnartangi**, the northernmost point of the Icelandic mainland. This desolate spot has narrowly missed being one of Iceland's biggest attractions – it's just 2.5km south of the Arctic Circle. A little further north and there could have been an interpretive centre, a tacky souvenir stall and a Christmas grotto. Instead it's a largely undiscovered headland that was a Saga Age landing site and is the burial place of saga hero Þorgeir Hávarsson, who killed 14 enemies before being struck down in battle. A marked trail leads along the gravel beach here to the brightly coloured lighthouse and the grave site.

The turn-off to the headland is not well signposted; look out for the lighthouse from the main road. Camping is possible anywhere on the headland.

### RAUFARHÖFN

pop 170

Iceland's most northerly settlement of any size, Raufarhöfn (www.raufarhofn.is) is a sleepy kind of place with a picturesque harbour sheltered by the small **Ásmundarstaða Islands**, just off shore. The port has functioned since the Saga Age, but the town's economic peak came early in the 20th century during the herring boom, when it was second to Siglufjörður in volume. Today, Raufarhöfn just ticks over, its rows of dull prefab housing giving few clues to its illustrious past.

Around the town the lush, level farmland is dotted with more than 29 lakes, all teeming with bird life. There are ambitious plans afoot to draw in the crowds with a massive stone circle to be built on the hill just north of town. When completed, the **Arctic Henge** (www.arctichenge.com) will be 54m in diameter with four gates (to represent the seasons) up

### DETTIFOSS TO ÁSBYRGI HIKE

The most popular hike in Jökulsárgljúfur National Park – and justifiably so – is the two-day trip (34km) on the western side of Dettifoss to Ásbyrgi, which takes in all of the canyon's major sights. To get to the start of the hike by public transport, take the scheduled bus (Monday to Friday) from Akureyri or Húsavík to Dettifoss, then walk north and pick up another bus in Ásbyrgi.

From Dettifoss, head north along Sandadalur until you begin seeing yellow trail markers. If you go left up the hill, it will lead you fairly easily around the rim of Hafragil. Go right and you'll descend steeply into the canyon, to re-emerge on the rim beyond Hafragilsfoss. With a heavy pack, this will be difficult as it involves some serious scrambling and climbing.

From Hafragilsfoss, the route leads north along the canyon rim to beautiful Hólmaturgur. You'll cross the Hólmá on two bridges, then descend past Hólmáfoss. The trail then joins a lateral moraine beneath towering basalt cliffs and crumbled basalt columns, and follows the yazoo (parallel) Stallá river, which eventually must be forded. After the ford, the trail climbs back to the canyon rim for a beautiful walk over the moors.

At unassuming Kallbjörg it's a 100m detour to an overlook perched on a rock column with sheer drops on three sides. You don't realise the drama until you're right on top of it. Another short detour will take you to Gloppla, a basalt amphitheatre that ominously resembles the maw of a hellishly large shark.

The requisite first-night camp site is at the **Vesturdalur camp site** (sites per person 1kr600). The next day, the trail winds through beautiful Hljóðaklettur and Rauðhólar to the Kviar trail junction, where you must decide whether to shoot across the moorland to the incredible view from Klappir into the Ásbyrgi canyon or continue following the main canyon rim. Both are equally worthwhile, although the former gets a bit soggy in places. There's also the Kúahvammur–Klappir trail, which takes an hour longer. The Klappir options rejoin the main canyon route at the head of Tófugjá, a challenging descent into Ásbyrgi with the aid of a fixed rope – or you can continue easily northwards to Ásbyrgi petrol station.

to 7m in height. The plan is to use the stone henge as a finely tuned sundial to celebrate the solstices, view the midnight sun and explain the strong local beliefs in the mythological dwarves mentioned in the poem *Völuspá* (Wise Woman's Prophecy).

If you want to stay, there's a free **camp site** (☎ 465 1151; ☹ Jun-Aug) beside the swimming pool at the southern end of the village, or much more comfort at **Hótel Norðurljós** (☎ 465 1233; ebt@vortex.is; Aðalbraut 2; s/d 1kr7000/10,000), the town's only formal accommodation option. Fairly unassuming from the outside, this cosy hotel overlooking the harbour has spacious modern rooms with attached bathroom. From June to September more basic rooms with shared bathroom are available in a second building (1kr2500/5000/7000 for sleeping-bag space/singles/doubles). The hotel has a decent bar and a bright restaurant serving a menu of fish and meat dishes (dish of the day 1kr2000 to 1kr2200) and a set dinner (1kr2800). There's a terrace overlooking the harbour, and kayaks are available for guest use.

The only alternatives for food are the supermarket by the main road and the usual grill at the petrol station. The bus fare from Raufarhöfn to Þórshöfn is 1kr1400.

## RAUÐANES

Heading south from Raufarhöfn, there's excellent hiking at Rauðanes, where marked trails lead to bizarre rock formations, natural arches, caves and secluded beaches. The small and scenic peninsula is edged by steep cliffs full of nesting birds, caves, offshore sea stacks and an exposed rock face, **Stakkatorfa**, where a great chunk of land collapsed into the sea. Pick up a free brochure describing the walks at any of the local tourist-information points or hotels.

The turn-off to Rauðanes is about 35km south of Raufarhöfn, but the track is only suitable for 4WD vehicles. There's a parking area about 1km from Rte 85, from where it's a 4km walk to the bridge before the farm Vellir, then another 3km northeast to the cape.

## ÞÓRSHÖFN

pop 410

The town of Þórshöfn (<http://thorshofn.com>), has served as a busy port since saga times and saw its heyday when a herring-salting station was established here in the early 20th century. Today it's a pretty modest place but makes a good base for visitors heading to the

eerily remote Langanes peninsula or on to Rauðanes.

Tourist information is available at the **swimming pool** (☎ 468 1515; ☹ 4-8pm Mon-Thu, 3-7pm Fri, 11am-2pm Sat) on the Langanes road. There's also a bank with an ATM in town. The annual **Happy Days festival** is held over a weekend in July, with markets, sporting events, dances and a bonfire.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Camp site** (free) The municipal site has basic facilities and is just east of the centre off Hálsvegur.

**Guesthouse Lyngholt** (☎ 897 5064; [www.lyngholt.is](http://www.lyngholt.is); Langanesvegur 12; sb/s/d 1kr2500/4900/7900) Bright modern rooms with subtle floral-patterned duvets, contemporary furniture and friendly service are available at this lovely guesthouse near the swimming pool. There's a TV in each room, a guest kitchen and a barbecue.

**Hótel Jörvík** (☎ 468 1400; <http://jorvik.vefur.com>; Langanesvegur 31; sb/s/d 1kr2000/4900/5900) This simple place looks more like a large house than a hotel but has a series of decent, if faded, rooms, some of which have good sea views.

**Ytra-Aland** (☎ 468 1290; [www.ytra-aland.is](http://www.ytra-aland.is); sb 1kr2300, s/d without bathroom 1kr5500/9000, with bathroom 1kr6500/11,000) This lovely farm offers top-notch accommodation in simple rooms in the main house and a new accommodation block with private bathrooms. There's also a summerhouse, evening meals on request and horse-riding tours. Ytra-Aland is 18km west of Þórshöfn.

**Eyrin** (☎ 468 1250; Eyravegur 3; mains 1kr690-3490; ☹ 11am-11pm Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat) The local pub, café, pool hall, restaurant and hangout, this friendly place at the harbour serves up an extensive menu of pizzas, pastas, burgers, salads, and hearty meat and fish dishes.

The only alternatives for food are the small supermarket near the harbour or the grill at the Esso petrol station.

## Getting There & Away

**Flugfélags Íslands** (☎ 468 1420; [www.airiceland.is](http://www.airiceland.is)) operates flights to Þórshöfn from Reykjavík twice daily on weekdays from April to October. The cheapest one-way fare is 1kr8395 and the flight takes two hours.

TREX runs a scheduled bus service from Húsavík to Þórshöfn (1kr4500, 3¼ hours) on weekdays all year round. There's currently no bus to or from Vopnafjörður.

## LANGANES

Shaped like a goose with a very large head, the foggy Langanes peninsula is one of the loneliest corners of Iceland. The tundra plain of lakes, marshes and low hills that makes up the bulk of Langanes makes unchallenging walking country, riddled with abandoned farms, and rich in arctic and alpine flora. The southern section of the peninsula is more mountainous, with the tallest peak, **Gunnólfsvíkurfjall**, rising to 719m, while the easternmost coasts are characterised by cliffs up to 130m high. Often blanketed in a thick fog, the cliffs have long proved dangerous to passing ships.

The **lighthouse** at the cape dates from 1910, and there's a monument to the shipwrecked English sailors who died of hypothermia after ascending the ravine there. It's now called **Engelskagjá** (English Gorge). At Skoruvík, towards the end of the peninsula, there's a long bay that provides a major breeding ground for the migrant arctic tern. From the western end of Skoruvík a rough track leads across the peninsula to **Skálaljarg**, a long and formidable bird cliff on the wild southern coast of Langanes. At the turn of the century the ruined farm of Skálar, northeast of the cliff, was a prosperous fishing village.

Drinking water is plentiful in Langanes, but there are no facilities beyond Þórshöfn, so carry everything you'll need. Hikers should allow a week for the return trip from Þórshöfn to Fontur. Rte 869 ends only 17km along the 50km peninsula, and, although it's possible to continue along the track to the tip at Fontur in a 4WD vehicle, it's a pretty rough road.

If you're not camping, the best base from which to explore is the friendly **HI Hostel Ytra Lón** (☎ 468 1242; [ytralon@simnet.is](mailto:ytralon@simnet.is); sb members/nonmembers 1kr1800/2150, s/d 1kr4000/6950), 14km northeast of Þórshöfn and just off Rte 869. It's part of a working farm run by a young family, and the owners are happy for guests to take part in farm life. The rooms are basic but cosy, and there's a good kitchen, a common room and a playground. Phone in advance to arrange pick-up from the bus stop in Þórshöfn.

## VOPNAFJÖRÐUR

pop 730

Tumbling down a steep hill on the side of a pretty fjord, the modern harbour town of Vopnafjörður is the largest in the region. A sleepy but thriving community, its biggest claims to fame are being home to the 1988

Miss World and the location of some of Prince Charles' angling holidays.

For visitors Vopnafjörður has all the facilities you'll need and makes a good base for hiking in the area. The **tourist office** (☎ 473 1331; [www.vopnafiardarheppur.is](http://www.vopnafiardarheppur.is); ☹ 10am-5pm Jun-Aug), in a restored warehouse, has a small exhibition on local history and environment and offers internet access (1kr300 for 15 minutes). If you're planning to do any walking in the area ask here for advice on routes and pick up a copy of *Hiking Routes in East Iceland* (1kr750), which has maps and descriptions of local walks.

## Sights & Activities

The region's biggest attraction is the **Bustarfell folk museum** (☎ 473 1466; adult/9-13yr 1kr400/100; ☹ 10am-6pm mid-Jun-early Sep), set in an 18th-century gabled, turf-roofed farmhouse 20km west of Vopnafjörður on Rte 85. The museum provides an interesting look at rural life two centuries ago and hosts a traditional festival on the second Sunday in July.

Vopnafjörður's **swimming pool** (☎ 473 1499) is way out of town – 12km north then 3km west of Rte 85 via a dirt road. It's a geothermally heated pool with outdoor hot pots set by the Séla river – worth a stop if you're passing by.

South of Vopnafjörður the truly spectacular mountain drive along Rte 917 takes you over Hellisheiði and down to the east coast. The road, which may be impassable in bad weather, climbs up a series of switchbacks and hairpin bends before dropping down to the striking glacial river deltas on the Héraðssandur. The views on both sides are superb.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Camp site** (free) There's a good camp site on the outskirts of town. Follow Miðbraut north and turn left at the school.

**Syðri-Vík** (☎ 473 1199; [budargerdi@fel.rvk.is](mailto:budargerdi@fel.rvk.is); sb/made-up beds 1kr2000/3000; ☹ May-Oct) Across the fjord 8km south of Vopnafjörður, this place has cosy wood-panelled rooms in the farmhouse as well as cottages sleeping six to nine guests. There's a guest kitchen, a dining room and a lounge, and horse riding and fishing are available on request.

**Hótel Edda Tangi** (☎ 444 4000; [www.hoteledda.is](http://www.hoteledda.is); Hafnarbyggð 17; s/d 1kr8700/10,900; ☹ May-Sep) The local hotel, restaurant and bar all rolled into one, the Hotel Tangi is the most happening place in town. The rooms here are pretty functional, but bright and modern, and the restaurant (mains

Ikr1500 to Ikr3500) serves the usual selection of pizzas and burgers, as well as local fish and meat dishes. The bar attached to the hotel is open late on Friday and Saturday night.

**Guesthouse Refsstaður** (☎ 473 1562; Refsstaður 2, Hófsardal; twocats@simnet.is; s/d Ikr3500/5000) This farmhouse 9km north of town has five cosy rooms with shared bathroom. There's a well-equipped kitchen for guest use, friendly owners and help in tracing genealogical roots.

The Esso petrol station, on the main road south of town, has a café, and the supermarket, by the hotel, has groceries.

### Getting There & Away

**Flugfélags Íslands** (☎ 473 1121; www.airiceland.is) operates flights to Vopnafjörður from Reykjavík twice daily on weekdays from April to October, with a reduced service in winter. The cheapest one-way fare on this route is Ikr8395 (2½ hours).

From Vopnafjörður it is 122km to Reykjahlíð and 92km to Egilsstaðir, so check fuel levels before you leave town.

## NORTHEAST INTERIOR

Heading between Mývatn and Egilsstaðir, the Ring Rd takes a drastic short cut inland across the stark and barren highlands of the northeast interior. There's little to lure travellers off the road, but the loneliness can be an attraction in itself in this eerie and otherworldly place of endless vistas.

If you won't be travelling into the interior proper (see p299), you'll catch a glimpse of it here. Ostensibly barren, and to some unimaginably dull, the bleak landscape here is dotted with low hills, small lakes caused by melting snowfields, and streams and rivers wandering aimlessly before disappearing into gravel beds. For most of the year it's a stark grey landscape, but if you're visiting in spring you'll be treated to a carpet of wild flowers that somehow gain root in the gravelly volcanic surface.

It has always been a difficult place to eke out a living, and farms here are few and far between. Near the remote farm **Grímsstaðir**,

### LANGANES EGG COLLECTORS

Every year from mid-May to mid-June Þórshöfn's 'egg-gathering club' heads up to the wild and rocky cliffs on the Langanes peninsula to collect eggs from the colonies of black gulls, a tradition stretching back many years. The collection involves cliff climbing and abseiling using professional equipment.

The local club welcomes visitors to join in the two- to three-day tours, which include camping out, meals, bird-watching guides and cliff-climbing instruction. For information, contact **Halldór** (☎ 468 1192; fontur@isl.is).

close to the intersection of the Ring Rd and Rte 864, 3km from the Jökulsá á Fjöllum, you can see an old **ferryman's hut**, built in 1880. Before the river was bridged it was crossed by ferry, and the former ferryman is said to haunt the run-down building. The hut is on the western bank of the river, 2km downstream from the Ring Rd bridge. If you're feeling peckish, **Grimstunga** (☎ 464 4294; djupadokk@simnet.is; sb/s/d Ikr3400/7600/9600; ☹ Jun-Sep) has a small and friendly café and basic accommodation with kitchen facilities. There's also a camp site at Grímsstaðir.

Isolated **Möðrudalur**, an oasis in the barren desert amid an entanglement of streams, is the highest farm in Iceland at 470m. The bus between Egilsstaðir and Mývatn stops for half an hour at the highland café and guesthouse **Fjalladyrð** (☎ 471 1858; www.fjalladyrd.is; sites per person Ikr750, sb/s/d Ikr1950/3300/5900), where you can get hearty soups, sandwiches and cakes, and stay in cosy wood-panelled rooms. The owners can also arrange 4WD trips to Vatnajökull and other activities.

Across the road is a church (built 1949) with an interesting altarpiece.

The vast **Jökuldalsheiði** moorland, along the Ring Rd between Jökuldalur and Möðrudalur, is quite verdant and was farmed until 1875, when the cataclysmic explosion of the Askja caldera displaced its inhabitants.

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