

Iceland

Iceland is literally a country in the making, a vast volcanic laboratory where mighty forces shape the land and shrink you to an awestruck speck. The country's natural features – eruptions of lava; gushing geysers; hot springs; tearing fissures and slow, grinding glaciers – are so cinematic that at times they seem unreal. Bathe in turquoise pools, stand behind a toppling cascade or walk across a glaring-white icecap to experience the full weirdness of Icelandic nature.

Iceland's creatures are larger-than-life too: there's no better place on earth to come eye-to-eye with sleek, spouting whales. Fearless little puffins flutter and bill in their millions along the tops of towering sea-cliffs.

The landscape is infectious: hidden energy and a desire to shape the world are Icelandic traits. Vibrant Reykjavik, that clean, green little capital, must contain the world's highest concentration of dreamers, authors, poets and musicians – meet them on the high-spirited *runtur*, the city's wheeling weekend pub crawl.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 103,000 sq km
- **Capital** Reykjavik
- **Currency** króna (Ikr): €1 = Ikr95.16; US\$1 = Ikr76.06; UK£1 = Ikr138.31; A\$1 = Ikr56.86; CA\$1 = Ikr66.90; NZ\$1 = Ikr47.25; ¥100 = Ikr64.86
- **Famous for** fishing, sagas, Björk, the Blue Lagoon, rotten shark meat!
- **Official Language** Icelandic
- **Phrases** *halló* (hello), *gjörðu svo vel* (please), *takk fyrir* (thanks), *skál!* (cheers!)
- **Population** 300,000
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 354; international access code ☎ 00; reverse-charge operator ☎ 533 5309; telephone area codes don't apply
- **Visa** unnecessary for visitors from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia, EU countries, the UK and the USA staying for under three months (see p284)



HIGHLIGHTS

- Cavort with crowds of partygoers on the drunken Reykjavík **runtur** (p248)
- Explore the explosive, lava-strewn wastelands of **Mývatn** and **Krafla** (p262)
- Come eyeball to eyeball with ocean giants on a whale-watching trip in **Húsavík** (p262)
- Be cool in the south – watch baby-blue icebergs float out to sea at **Jökulsárlón** (p268) or walk over a glacier in **Skaftafell National Park** (p268)
- Bathe in turquoise pools in the **Landmannalaugar** (p274) geothermal area

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Arrive in Reykjavík on Friday to catch the decadent runtur (p248). Sober up in Laugadalur geothermal pool (p274) before sightseeing. Don't miss the views from Hallgrímskirkja (p240) or Perlan (p241). In summer, sleep is for wimps: squeeze in a midnight horse ride. On Sunday, visit Gullfoss, Geysir and Þingvellir as part of your tour of the Golden Circle (p251). Stop to soak in the Blue Lagoon (p250) on the way back home.
- **One week** Take a whale-watching trip (p240) from Reykjavík harbour, then head for the countryside. Serene Snæfellsnes (p253) lies north; the volcanic Vestmannaeyjar (p270) spot the sea off the southern coast; or else drive east to Europe's largest national park, Skaftafell (p268), for hikes and glacier-walking.

HOW MUCH?

- **Cuddly troll** 1kr1900
- **Postcard** 1kr65
- **Cinema ticket** 1kr800
- **Knitted hat** 1kr1700
- **Whale-watching trip** 1kr3700

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** 1kr134
- **1L bottle of water** 1kr230
- **Pint of Egils beer** 1kr600
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 1kr1500
- **Hot dog** 1kr200

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Reykjavík's mildish climate can rapidly degenerate into heavy rain, biting wind or fog; May, June and July are the driest months of the year. In the north and east, the weather is better. Blizzards and fierce sandstorms occur in the interior deserts and on the coastal sand deltas. The **Icelandic Meteorological Office** (☎ 902 0600; www.vedur.is/english) provides a daily weather forecast in English.

Mid-June to August is high season, but most highland tours don't operate until July because of snow. At other times, many tourist facilities outside Reykjavík are closed.

Also see p486 for a climate chart.

HISTORY

Irish monks were probably the first people to come to Iceland in around AD 700. Their solitude was rudely shattered by the Age of Settlement (871–930), when a wave of Nordic people descended, driven from the Scandinavian mainland by political clashes. Many raided Ireland and the Scottish islands on the way, bringing Celtic slaves to the new country.

Ingólfur Arnarson, a Norwegian fugitive, became the first official Iclander (AD 871). He settled at Reykjavík (Smoky Bay), which he named after steam he saw rising from geothermal vents. According to 12th-century sources, Ingólfur built his farm on Aðalstræti – an enthralling archaeological excavation recently unearthed what may have been his longhouse (p241).

The settlers rejected monarchy and established the world's first democratic parliament at Þingvellir (Parliament Plains; p251), outside Reykjavík. The country converted to Christianity in the year 1000.

Two hundred years of peace ended during the Sturlunga Period (1230–62), when Iceland's chieftains descended into bloody territorial fighting. The era is epitomised by the life and violent death of historian and political schemer, Snorri Sturluson (p252). Iceland ceded control of the country to Norway in 1262, then was placed under Danish rule in 1397. For the next six centuries, the forgotten country endured a Dark Age of famine, disease and disastrous volcanic eruptions.

In the early 17th century, the Danish king imposed a trade monopoly that was utterly exploited by foreign merchants. In an attempt to bypass the crippling embargo,



weaving, tanning and wool-dyeing factories were built, which led to the foundation of the city of Reykjavík.

Iceland's next calamity was volcanic. In 1783 the vast crater row Lakagígar (Laki; p269) erupted for 10 months, devastating southeastern Iceland and creating a lingering poisonous haze. Nearly 75% of Iceland's livestock and 20% of the human population perished in the resulting famine; an evacuation of the country was discussed.

In spite (or perhaps because) of such catastrophes, a sense of Icelandic nationalism was growing. Free trade was restored in 1855, and the Republic of Iceland was established on 17 June 1944 (p280), symbolically at Þingvellir.

Iceland began to thrive during WWII, when it serviced British and US troops stationed at Keflavík (the base remained until September 2006). Subsistence farming gave way to prosperity and a frenzy of building; the Ring Rd was completed in 1974.

A corresponding boom in the fishing industry saw Iceland extend its fishing limit in the 1970s to 200 miles (322km), precipitating the 'cod war' with Britain. Today the fishing industry makes up 70% of Iceland's economy.

Iceland's president is Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. The largest political party is the conservative Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn), led by Prime Minister Geir Haarde.

PEOPLE

Icelanders are reserved but friendly. They value independence, and have a live-and-let-live attitude. However they are proud of their seafaring culture and will express their strong views about whaling in the face of objections. Icelanders recently discovered that much of their genetic makeup is Celtic, suggesting that far more of the Viking settlers had children by their Celtic slaves than originally thought.

Icelanders' names are constructed from a combination of their first name and their father's (or mother's) first name. Girls add the suffix *dóttir* (daughter) to the patronymic and boys add *son*. Therefore, Jón, the son of Einar, would be Jón Einarsson. Guðrun, the daughter of Halldór, would be Guðrun Halldórsdóttir. Icelanders always call each other by their first names.

The country has one of the world's highest life expectancies: 78.9 years for men and 82.8 years for women. Of a population of 300,000, almost half live in Reykjavík.

RELIGION

Iceland officially converted to Christianity around 1000, although followers of the old pagan gods were allowed to worship in private. The Danes imposed Lutheranism in the 1550 Reformation: 84% of Icelanders are Lutheran today.

ARTS

Literature

Bloody, black and powerful, the late 12th- and 13th-century sagas are without doubt Iceland's greatest cultural achievement. Written in terse Old Norse, these epics continue to entertain Icelanders and provide them with a rich sense of heritage. One of the best known, *Egils Saga*, revolves around the complex, devious Egil Skallagrímsson. A renowned poet and skilled lawyer, he's also the grandson of a werewolf and a murderous drunk. You can admire original saga manuscripts in Reykjavík's Þjóðmennin-garhúsið (p241).

The best-known modern Icelandic writer is Nobel Prize-winner Halldór Laxness, who lived just outside Reykjavík (p241). His darkly comic work gives a superb insight into Icelandic life. *Independent People*, concerning the fatally proud farmer Bjartur and the birth of the Icelandic nation, is his most famous book and an unmissable read.

Modern Icelandic writers include Einar Kárason, who wrote the outstanding *Devil's Island* (about Reykjavík life in the 1950s); Hallgrímur Helgason, creator of *101 Reykjavík* (about a modern-day city slacker); and Arnaldur Indriðason, whose Reykjavík-based crime fiction, including the award-winning *Silence of the Grave*, regularly tops Iceland's bestseller lists.

Music

Björk is Iceland's most famous musical export, followed by Sigurrós. The swirling maelstrom of Icelandic popular music constantly throws up new bands. Leaves, Trabant, Múm, Mugison, Mínus, Quarashi, Cynic Guru and Benny Crespo's Gang are currently popular at home or abroad or both, several of them brought to a wider au-

dience by the music-documentary *Screaming Masterpiece* (2005).

Bands perform live at venues such as Gaukur á Stöng (p248) and Grand Rokk (p248).

Visual Arts

Various artists have wrestled with Iceland's enigmatic soul, including the prolific Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958). His work, depicting Icelandic landscapes and folktales, can be seen at the National Gallery in Reykjavík (p242). Pop Art icon Erró (b 1932) is honoured with a permanent collection in the Listasafn Reykjavíkur (p242).

Sculptors are well represented: the mystical work of Einar Jónsson (1874–1954; p242) dwells on death and resurrection, and Ásmundur Sveinsson's (1893–1982) sculptures (p242) celebrate Iceland and its stories.

Cinema & TV

Based on Hallgrímur Helgason's book of the same name, Baltasar Kormákur's film *101 Reykjavík* (2000), the painful, funny tale of a Reykjavík dropout's fling with his mother's lesbian lover, won an international audience.

More recently, European art cinemas have screened *Nói Albínói* (2002), Dagur Kari's black comedy about life in an isolated Icelandic valley.

For forthcoming films, see the informative www.icelandicfilmcentre.is.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Iceland, a juvenile among the world's land masses, is shaped by desert plateaus (52%), lava fields (11%), sandur or sand deltas (4%) and icecaps (12%). Over half of Iceland lies above 400m and its highest point, Hvannadalshnúkur, rises 2119m above sea level. Only 21% of Iceland is considered habitable.

The country's active volcanic zone runs through the middle of the country, from southwest to northeast. Active-zone geological features include lava flows, tubes, geysers, hot springs and volcanoes, and rocks such as basalt, pumice and rhyolite.

There are very few trees. Most of the native flora consists of grasses, mosses, lichens and wildflowers. *Plöntukort Íslands* (Botanical Map; Ikr1290), available from Reykjavík's bookshops, is a good guide.

Wildlife

The wild-eyed Arctic fox is the only indigenous land mammal; introduced species include reindeer and mice. Polar bears occasionally turn up on the north coast, but their life expectancy in Iceland is short.

The lack of land mammals is compensated for by vast numbers of birds and rich marine fauna. Kittiwakes, fulmars and gannets form large coastal colonies (best seen at Látrabjarg, p256); there are hosts of Arctic terns, golden plovers, ducks, swans, divers and geese at Mývatn (p262); and Vestmannaeyjar has huge populations of lovable puffins (p270). The website www.fuglar.is lists what rarities are about. *Fuglakort Íslands* (Bird-watcher's Map; Ikr1290), sold in Reykjavík's bookshops, is a handy reference.

Four different seal species and 12 species of cetacean (including blue whales and dolphins) have been spotted: boat trips run from various coastal towns including Reykjavík (p240), although the best sightings are at Húsavík (p261).

National Parks & Nature Reserves

Iceland's four national parks (*þjóðgarður*) are Skaftafell (p268), Jökulsárgljúfur (p265), Snaefellsjökull (p254), and Þingvellir (p251), a Unesco World Heritage Site. There are countless nature reserves (*fríðland*), the most significant being Mývatn (p262). Parks and reserves are open to visitors at all times. Wild camping is restricted: for further information, contact the government's Environment & Food Agency, *Umhverfisstofnun* (☎ 591 2000; www.ust.is; Suðurlandsbraut 24, IS-108 Reykjavík). Roughly 5% of the total land area of Iceland and the government has the ambitious aim of increasing that percentage ten-fold over time.

Environmental Issues

Historically, sheep farming and timber extraction caused immense environmental damage. It has been estimated that a mere 1% of Iceland's original woodland remains. Large-scale aerial seeding and intensive tree-planting programmes are combatting erosion.

Concerns over declining fish stocks have led the government to invest in other areas, particularly heavy industry. The most controversial project in Icelandic history is the dam being built in the Kárahnjúkar peaks

to power an American aluminium smelting plant. Its construction (due for completion 2009) will affect the courses of two glacial rivers and flood a vast area of untouched wilderness.

Iceland is endeavouring to free itself of fossil fuels by 2050, relying instead on hydrogen cells and solar energy.

FOOD & DRINK

Cafés and restaurants in Reykjavík cater to most tastes, but fresh fish, seafood and Icelandic lamb naturally get top billing on most upmarket menus.

The government levies high taxes on alcohol to discourage excessive drinking. Check out Friday-night Reykjavík to see the success of this policy!

Staples & Specialities

Born from centuries of near-starvation, Iceland's traditional dishes reflect a 'waste not, want not' austerity. Specialities include *svið* (singled sheep's head complete with eyeballs), *súrsaðir hrútspungar* (pickled ram's testicles) and *hákarl* (putrefied shark meat, buried and rotted for three months to make it digestible). These gruesome dishes are only eaten nowadays during the February celebration of Þorri. You can try cubes of shark meat at Kolaportíð Flea Market (p249), but be warned that the smell alone makes many foreigners ill! Some restaurants serve whale meat (*hval*), culled during 'scientific' hunts (see the boxed text on below).

More commonly, Icelanders consume *lundi* (puffin), which looks and tastes like

calf liver. Most of the birds are netted on the Vestmannaeyjar (p270). *Harðfiskur* is an everyday snack: these brittle pieces of wind-dried haddock are usually eaten with butter. Delicious yogurtlike *skyr*, made from curdled milk, is a unique treat; sugar, fruit and cream are often added to turn it into a rich dessert. Around Mývatn (p262), look out for a regional pudding: *hverabrauð* (hot-spring bread) is a sweet, dark, sticky loaf, baked in the ground using geothermal heat. Other cakes include *kleinur* (twisted doughnuts, traditionally deep-fried in lard); and *ástar þungar* ('love balls'; round, raisin-stuffed doughnuts).

Coffee is a national institution, and most cafés offer free refills. The traditional Icelandic alcoholic brew is *brennivín* (burnt wine), a sort of schnapps made from potatoes and caraway seeds with the foreboding nickname *svarti dauði* (black death). Note that if you buy *syrmjolk* from the supermarket, it's sour milk.

Where to Eat & Drink

Reykjavík has no shortage of cosy cafés (commonly open from 11am until 1am, later at weekends) that turn into bars at night. They're great for lingering coffees, light lunches (from about 1kr800) and late-night beers. Restaurants are more upmarket, often serving gourmet food, with mains from about 1kr2000 to 1kr4500 per person. Some are open for lunch (between 11am and 2pm), and most open nightly (between 6pm and 10pm). In other towns, choice is much reduced and opening times can be shorter.

WEIGHING UP THE WHALE DEBATE

After 150 years of hunting, many whale species are now facing extinction. To give populations a chance to recover, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) called for a suspension of commercial whaling in 1986. Most countries complied; however, Iceland continued by using a loophole: 'scientific' whaling (with whale meat sold to restaurants or rendered down into animal feeds).

Following international pressure, there was a lull between 1989 and 2003, but now Icelandic whalers kill around 30 minke yearly, and there are plans to begin full-scale commercial hunts in 2007. Many countries have issued formal protests, and conservationists are calling for a boycott of Iceland and Icelandic goods.

Whaling is an emotional topic. Supporters of the hunt (around 70% of Icelanders) believe minke whales are depleting fish stocks and need culling; whereas antiwhalers fear for the animals and for the flourishing whale-watching industry, which brings in about US\$18 million annually.

For more information, see the websites of the International Whaling Commission (www.iwc.office.org), World Wide Fund for Nature (www.wwf.org) and Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org).

Every village has at least one *kaupfélagið* (cooperative supermarket), with Bónus and Netto being the cheapest. Petrol stations and grills sell relatively inexpensive fast-food snacks (hot dog and chips cost around 1kr700).

Beer, wine and spirits are available to people aged over 20 years from licensed hotels, bars, restaurants and *vin búð* (state monopoly) stores.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Outside Reykjavík, which has three vegan/veggie restaurants, choices are limited. Most places offer one veggie dish, but as this usually involves cheese, vegans may have to self-cater.

REYKJAVÍK

pop 115,676

Reykjavík, the pint-size capital of Iceland, is cute, complex and fuelled entirely by coffee. Here you'll find all the cultural trappings of a large 21st-century European city: cozy cafés, top-quality restaurants, fine museums, myriad live bands and state-of-the-art geothermal pools. All these delectable diversions are layered over a foundation of rich Viking history. The froth on top is Reykjavík's eccentric and very excessive *runtur*, a wild pub-crawl that starts on Friday night around small, super-stylish clubs and bars and ends sometime before Monday.

The world's most northerly capital offers a bewitching combination of village innocence and big-city energy. As if that weren't enough, Nature herself adds a pow-

erful extra dimension: ominous mountains and volcanoes line the horizon; the ocean rolls right up to the very edge of town; and the air is as cold and clean as frozen diamonds.

ORIENTATION

Reykjavík's old town lies between Tjörninn, Lækjargata, the harbour and the nearby suburb of Seltjarnarnes. Nearly everything in the city – bars, cafés, restaurants, the post office and the tourist office – is within walking distance of the old settlement. The shopping district extends east along Laugavegur from Lækjargata to the Hlemmur bus station.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

There are three big bookshops offering a superb choice of English-language books, newspapers, magazines and maps.

Eymundsson (Map p242; ☎ 511 1130; Austurstræti 18; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat, 1-10pm Sun)

lða (Map p242; ☎ 511 5001; Lækjargata 2a; ☎ 9am-10pm)

Mál og Menning (Map p242; ☎ 515 2500; shopping@edda.is; Laugavegur 18; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun)

Discount Cards

Reykjavík Tourist Card (24/48/72hr 1kr1200/1700/2200) Available at various outlets including the tourist offices. It gives you free entry to galleries, museums, swimming pools and the zoo, and includes a bus pass.

Emergency

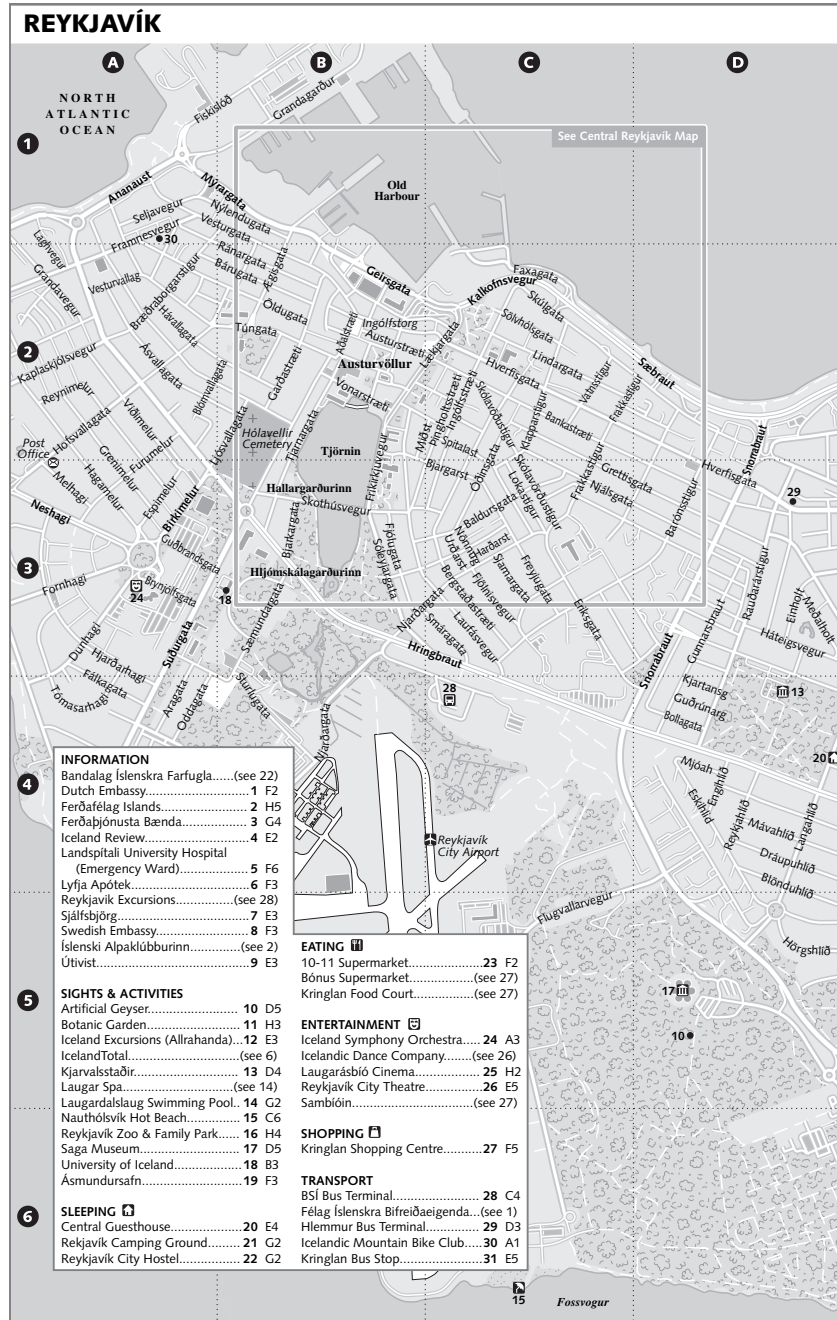
Landspítali University Hospital (Map pp238-9; ☎ 543 2000; Fossvogur) 24-hour casualty department.

SEARCHING FOR COD: A FISHERMAN'S TALE *Davið, Fisherman*

I work on a fishing boat, a longliner with an automated fishing line; it's not done by hand these days. The line, 10km long, is looped onto a reel; when we reach the fishing grounds, you just press a button and it all unwinds. One of my jobs is to feed the baiting machine with pieces of squid and other bycatch; I go through several pairs of chainmail gloves a year!

When the line comes up, we unhook the fish, cut their throats, put them on ice; later we'll gut and clean them. We mostly catch cod, which are filleted on land in the fish-factory. You'll see the women there using ultraviolet lights to hook out the worms.

Some of the big trawlers go out for a month, but we go out for five days at a time. It can be lonely. The married men miss their families, their kids. I've joined a dating agency to meet more women! But the pay is good – we make four times as much as the people who work in the fish factories – and I like being out at sea.



Internet Access

Libraries have the cheapest internet access, at 1kr200 per hour.

Aðalbókasafn (Reykjavík City Library; Map p242;

☎ 563 1717; www.borgarbokasafn.is; Tryggvagata 15; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon, to 7pm Tue-Thu, 11am-7pm Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun)

Ground Zero (Map p242; ☎ 562 7776; Vallarstræti 4; per 15/35/60min 1kr200/300/500; ☎ 11am-1am Mon-Fri, noon-1am Sat & Sun) A dedicated internet café full of moody teenagers.

Medical Services

Dentist on duty ☎ 575 0050.

Health Centre (Map p242; ☎ 585 2600; Vesturgata 7)

Doctor's appointment 1kr700 (under 16s pay 25%). **Lækna-vaktin** ☎ 1770. Nonemergency telephone medical advice between 5pm and 11.30pm.

Lyfja Apótek (Map p242; ☎ 552 4045; Laugavegur 16; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-4pm Sat) Central pharmacy.

Lyfja Apótek (Map pp238-9; ☎ 533 2300; Lágmúli 5; ☎ 8am-midnight) Late-night pharmacy, near the Nordica Hotel. Bus Nos 52, 14 and 15.

Money

Banks round Austurstræti and Bankastræti offer the best exchange rates. You can exchange foreign currency at hotels, but commission is high. ATMs accept MasterCard, Cirrus, Visa and Electron.

Change Group Has branches at the Keflavik airport and at the main tourist office (Map p242). Commissions from 2.75% to 8.75%.

Landsbanki Íslands (Map p242; ☎ 410 4000; www.landsbanki.is; Austurstræti; ☎ 9.15am-4pm Mon-Fri) No commission charges.

Post

Main post office (Map p242; Pósthússtræti 5; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Telephone

Public phones are elusive in mobile-crazy Reykjavík: try the main tourist office, the street opposite Laugavegur 38, and the Krínglan shopping centre.

Tourist Information

Reykjavík has a helpful main tourist office with a booking service, and satellite desks at the bus terminal and city hall. There are several private offices in the city. Pick up the free booklets *Reykjavík This Month* and *What's On in Reykjavík* for events in

the capital. The excellent English-language newspaper *Grapevine*, widely distributed, has the lowdown on what's new in town.

BSI bus terminal desk (Map pp238-9; Vátnsmyrarvegur 10)

Main tourist office (Upplýsingamiðstöð Ferðamanna; Map p242; ☎ 590 1500; www.visitreykjavik.is; Aðalstræti 2; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep-May)

Raðhús tourist information desk (Map p242;

☎ 563 2005; Tjarnargata 11; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, noon-4pm Sat & Sun, closed Sun Sep-May) Inside city hall.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Hallgrímskirkja

This immense concrete **church** (Map p242; ☎ 510 1000; www.hallgrímskirkja.is; Skólavörðuholt; ☎ 9am-5pm) is Reykjavík's most attention-seeking building, visible from 20km away. Its sweeping frontage represents columns of volcanic basalt, and took a staggering 34 years to build. Admire the elongated, ultrastark interior; then for an unmissable view of the city, take an elevator trip up the **75m tower** (adult/child 1kr350/50). Outside, a **statue** of Leifur Eiríksson, the first European to visit America, gazes proudly forth. It was a present from the USA on the 1000th anniversary of the Alþing (p251).

Whale- & Puffin-Watching

Iceland is terrific for spotting whales: there is a 98% chance of seeing one (see boxed text, p262). Between April and October, two companies run three-hour trips from the harbour, generally at 9am and 1pm: **Elding** (Map p242; ☎ 555 3565; www.elding.is; adult/7-15yr 1kr3900/1600; ☎) and **Hvalstöðin Whale-Watching Centre** (Map p242; ☎ 533 2660; www.whalewatching.is; adult/7-15yr 1kr3800/1500; ☎). During breeding season (mid-May-mid-August), they also spin round Lundey to look at the puffins.

REYKJAVÍK IN TWO DAYS

Arrive on Friday night to experience the **runtur** (p248). Sober up on Saturday with a quick dip in the **Laugadalur geothermal pool** (opposite). Don't miss the panoramic views at **Hallgrímskirkja** (above), or **Perlan & the Saga Museum** (opposite). Book a **whale-watching trip** (above) for Sunday morning, then visit the **National Museum** (opposite) or chill out at **Nauthólsvík Hot Beach** (opposite).

Geothermal Pools & Spa

Reykjavík's many outdoor swimming pools, heated by volcanic water, are the social hubs of the city: children play, teenagers flirt, business deals are made, and everyone catches up with the latest gossip.

Don't miss out on a dip: the biggest and best facilities are found at **Laugardalslaug** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 4039; www.laugar.com; Sundlaugavegur 30; adult/child 1kr280/120, swimsuit/towel hire 1kr300/300; ☎ 6.50am-9.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat & Sun; ☎), next door to the camping ground, which has an Olympic-size indoor pool, an outdoor pool, seven Jacuzzi-like 'hot pots', steam bath, and a curling 86m waterslide for children. Attached to Laugardalslaug is the new five-star health resort **Laugar** (☎ 553 0000; www.laugarspa.is; admission 1kr3500; ☎ same as pool), with themed saunas, steam rooms and beauty treatments. Catch bus No 14 from Lækjartorg.

Bringing a touch of the Riviera to Reykjavík, the Blue-Flag **Nauthólsvík Hot Beach** (Ylströndin; Map pp238-9; ☎ 511 6630; admission free; ☎ 10am-8pm mid-May-mid-Sep) is a dinky crescent of golden sand warmed by 18°C to 20°C geothermal water. There are big crowds in sunny weather. Take Bus No 16.

Perlan & Saga Museum

The huge water tanks on Öskjuhlíð hill are also a tourist complex known as Perlan (the Pearl), a popular Sunday afternoon outing for families. Silicon models, thudding axes and bloodcurdling screams bring Iceland's history to life at the excellent **Saga Museum** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 511 1517; www.sagamuseum.is; adult/child/concession 1kr900/450/700; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, noon-5pm Oct-Mar). Don't blame the *brennivín* if you see the characters walking round town; they were modelled on Reykjavík inhabitants!

Two **artificial geysers** (one inside and one outside) blast off every few minutes. Upstairs, a **360-degree viewing deck** shares tremendous mountain and city vistas with a café and revolving restaurant. Take bus No 18 from Lækjartorg.

Volcano Show

Eccentric eruption-chaser Villi Knutsen is the photographer, owner and presenter of this awesome **film-show** (Map p242; ☎ 845 9548; vknutsen2000@yahoo.com; Red Rock Cinema, Hellusund 6a; 1hr show adult/child/student 1kr900/250/750, 2hr

SCRUB UP

As chemical cleaners like chlorine aren't used in the pools, it's vital that visitors wash thoroughly without a swimsuit before getting in. For further information, see www.spacity.is.

show adult/student/child 1kr1150/950/300; ☎ in English 11am, 3pm & 8pm daily, in German 6pm daily, in French 1pm Sat Jul & Aug, in English 3pm & 8pm daily Sep & Apr-Jun, in English 8pm Oct-Mar). His explosive footage captures 50 years' worth of Icelandic volcanoes.

Museums

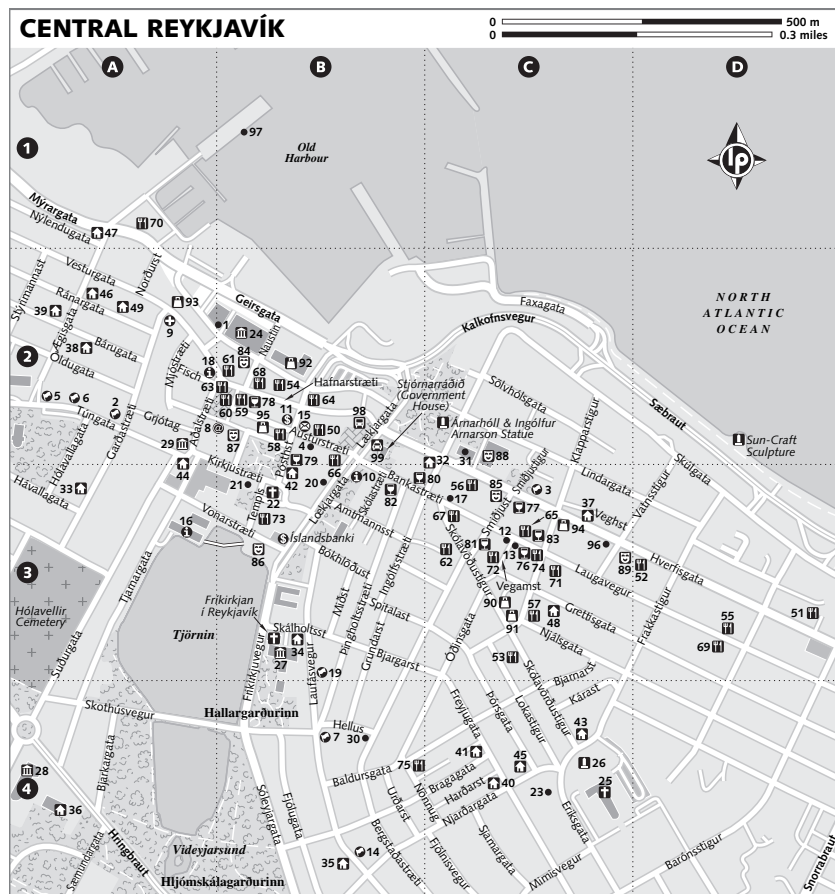
The city's newest museum **Reykjavík 871+/-2** (Settlement Exhibition; ☎ 411 6370; www.reykjavik871.is; Aðalstræti 16; adult/12-18yr 1kr600/300; ☎ 10am-5pm; ☎) is a superb combination of archaeology, technology and imagination. Although the exhibition is compact (it's based around a single Viking longhouse), it's completely absorbing. Best are the tiny wraiths – go and see!

The **National Museum** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 530 2200; www.natmus.is; Suðurgata 41; adult/under 18yr/concession 1kr600/free/300, admission free Wed; ☎ 10am-5pm daily May-mid-Sep, 11am-5pm Tue-Sun mid-Sep-Apr, to 9pm first Thu of month; ☎) gives a fine overview of Iceland's history and culture. The strongest section shows off swords and silver hoards from the Settlement Era, but their most treasured artefact is a stunning carved 13th-century church door. Walk or catch bus Nos S1, S3-6, 12 or 14.

The excellent **Þjóðmenningarhúsið** (Culture House; Map p242; ☎ 545 1400; www.thjodmenning.is; Hverfisgata 15; adult/under 16 1kr300/free, admission free Wed; ☎ 11am-5pm; ☎) offers intelligent displays about the sagas, and the darkened rooms here contain the actual vellums themselves.

Quaint old buildings have been uprooted from various places, then replanted at **Árbæjarsafn** (Open-Air Museum; Map pp238-9; ☎ 411 6300; www.arbaejarsafn.is; Kistuhylur 4; adult/under 18yr 1kr600/free; ☎ 10am-5pm daily Jun-Aug, by tour only 1pm Mon, Wed & Fri Sep-May), which is a kind of zoo for houses, 4km from the city centre. Kids love running round the creaky timber homes. Take bus No 12.

Out in the suburb of Mosfellsbær, the home of Nobel Prize-winning author Halldór Laxness (1902-98) is now open



to visitors. Highlights of the **Gljúfrasteinn Laxness Museum** (586 8066; www.gljufurasteinn.is; Mosfellsbær; adult/under 16yr 1kr500/250; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Sep-May) include the study where Laxness wrote his defining works, and his beloved Jaguar parked outside. Buses are an extremely awkward way to get there; you really need a car.

Art Galleries

The **National Gallery** (Map p242; ☎ 515 9600; www.listasafn.is; Frikirkjuvegur 7; admission free; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun; ☎) contains works by Iceland's most renowned artists, and provides an interesting glimpse into the nation's psyche: surreal mud-purple landscapes mingle with visions of ogresses, giants and dead men.

The weird symbolist creations of Einar Jónsson, 'Iceland's first sculptor', are objects you'll either love or hate: find out which at the cube-shaped **Einar Jónsson Museum** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 551 3797; www.skulptur.is; Njarðargata; adult/under 16yr 1kr400/free; ☎ 2-5pm Tue-Sun Jun-mid-Sep, 2-5pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep-Nov & Feb-May, closed Dec & Jan).

Listasafn Reykjavíkur (Reykjavík Art Museum; www.listasafnreykjavikur.is; adult/under 18yr 1kr500/free, admission free Mon) is split over three sites. At the rather wonderful **Ásmundarsafn** (Ásmundur Sveinsson Museum; Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 2155; Sigtún; ☎ 10am-4pm May-Sep, 1-4pm Oct-Apr), you'll find the artist's massive concrete sculptures in the garden (admission free); plus there are smaller, spikier works in wood, clay and metals in the igloo-shaped studio he de-

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signed. His themes range from folklore to physics. Bus No 14 passes close by.

Jóhannes Kjarval (1885-1972) was a fisherman until his crew paid for him to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. His unearthly Icelandic landscapes can be seen inside the angular glass-and-wood **Kjarvalstaðir** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 552 6131; Flókagata; ☎ 10am-5pm; ☎). Catch bus No 1.

The third Listasafn Reykjavíkur is **Hafnarhúsi** (Map p242; ☎ 590 1200; Tryggvagata 17; ☎ 10am-5pm; ☎), a severe concrete building containing works by political cartoonist Erró, plus changing modern-art exhibitions.

Parks & Gardens

The only attraction aimed at (youngish) children is Reykjavík **Zoo & Family Park** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 585 7800; www.mu.is; Laugardalur; adult/5-12yrs 1kr550/450, 1-/10-/20-ride tickets 1kr170/1500/2800;

☎ 10am-6pm mid-May-mid-Aug, 10am-5pm mid-Aug-mid-May; ☎). Don't expect lions and tigers: think seals, foxes and farm animals. Nearby are child-size bulldozers, a giant trampoline and minifairground rides.

Next door, the **Botanic Garden** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 8870; botgard@rvk.is; Skúlatún 2; admission free; greenhouse ☎ 10am-10pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar) has sub-Arctic plant species, colourful seasonal flowers, and a café in June to August.

There is no direct route but bus Nos 14, 15, 17, 19 and S2 pass within 400m of both attractions.

Other Sights

Old Reykjavík grew up around **Tjörnin**, a large lake that echoes with the honks and hootings of thousands of geese, swans, ducks and gulls. The pleasant park at the southern end is laced with walking and cycling paths.

Rising on stilts from the northern shore is the postmodern **Raðhús** (City Hall; Map p242; ☎ 563 2000; Tjarnargata 11; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-6pm Sat & Sun; ☎). It contains a tourist information desk, café and a huge, impressive 3-D map of Iceland: a mass of mountains, fjords and volcanoes.

The neat grey basalt building on the southern side of Austurvöllur, the main square, houses the Icelandic Parliament, the **Alþingi** (Map p242; ☎ 563 0500; www.althingi.is; Túngata; ☎). Next to it is the **Dómkirkja** (Map p242; ☎ 520 9700; Lækjargata 14a; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), Iceland's small but perfectly proportioned cathedral.

There are brochures for themed walks, such as statuary and literary figures, that you can follow around Reykjavík and these brochures are available at the tourist office.

SLEEPING

Reykjavík is packed in summer: book accommodation well in advance. Breakfast is usually included in room prices (but not for sleeping-bag accommodation).

Budget

Reykjavík Camping Ground (Map pp238-9; ☎ 568 6944; www.reykjavikcampsite.is; Sundlaugavegur 32; camp sites per person 1kr800, 2-bed cabins per night 1kr4000; ☎ mid-May-mid-Sep, reception 3-6pm; P ☎) There's only one camping ground in Reykjavík, and it gets very busy in summer. It holds 650 people, though, so you'd be unlucky not to find a pitch. Laundry and internet facilities.

Reykjavík City Hostel (Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 8110; www.hostel.is; Sundlaugavegur 34; sleeping bag in 6-/4-/2-bed sb 1kr1700/2400/3500, bed linen 1kr600; P ☎) Beside the campground, the award-winning youth hostel has many commendable points: it's environmentally friendly, and has helpful staff and excellent facilities (24 hour reception, several kitchens, laundry, large-screen TV room, internet access, wi-fi, bike rental etc). School parties can be a nuisance. Bring ear plugs. Breakfast 1kr800.

Salvation Army Guesthouse (Map p242; ☎ 561 3203; www.guesthouse.is; Kirkjustræti 2; sb/s/d 1kr3100/5500/8000) This is the nearest thing Reykjavík has to a Japanese capsule hotel! The tiny rooms are highly functional and frill-free, but it beats the youth hostel hands-down on location. There's a similar bustling backpackery atmosphere, guest kitchen and lounging area.

Garður Inn (Map p242; ☎ 562 4000, Jun-Aug 551 5900; www.inns-of-iceland.com; Hringbraut; sb 1kr2300-3200, s/d 1kr7500/9900; ☎ Jun-Aug; P) The university campus, about 1km from the centre, has utilitarian rooms once students have left for the summer. The cheapest sleeping-bag accommodation is in 16-person dorms.

Midrange

Tower Guesthouse (Map p242; ☎ 552 5581, 896 6694; www.tower.is; Grettisgata 6; d 1kr9900-13,900, 1-4 person apt 1kr18900-32900, discounts Oct-Apr) This castle-like place has a sweeping spiral staircase and elegant apartments, and you can stargaze from the rooftop Jacuzzi! The guesthouse is popular with gay travellers, and there's the odd phallus-shaped plant pot around, but everyone is welcome. Breakfast isn't provided, but there are kitchen facilities.

Sunna Guesthouse (Map p242; ☎ 511 5570; www.sunna.is; Þórsdaga 26; summers/d from 1kr8400/10,700, winter from 1kr6100/7900, apt 1kr3300-22,500; P ☎) Rooms at this guesthouse are simple and sunny with honey-coloured parquet floors. Those at the front offer good views of Hallgrímskirkja. Families are encouraged to stay at the Sunna; there is a handful of brand-new studio apartments accommodating one to four people.

Three Sisters (Þrjár Systur; Map p242; ☎ 565 2181; www.threesisters.is; Ránargata 16; 1-/2-person apt €98/148, family apt €210; ☎ Jun-Aug; ☎) A twinkly-eyed former fisherman runs the Three Sisters, a lovely townhouse in old Reykjavík, now divided into eight studio apartments. Comfy counterpane beds are flanked by old-fashioned easy chairs and state-of-the-art flatscreen TVs. Each room comes with a cute fully-equipped kitchen. A short stroll seawards is a second building with sleeping-bag accommodation in six-bed dorms (around 1kr2600).

Guesthouse Butterfly (Map p242; ☎ 894 1864; www.kvasir.is/butterfly; Ránargata 8a; s/d/apt from 1kr6900/8900/13,900; ☎ Jun-Aug) This is on a quiet residential street within fluttering distance of the centre, and has neat, simply furnished rooms. There's a guest kitchen, wi-fi access, and the friendly Icelandic Norwegian owners make you feel right at home. The top floor has two self-contained apartments that have a kitchen and balcony.

Álfhöll Guesthouse (Map p242; ☎ 898 1838; www.islandia.is/alf; Ránargata 8; s/d/tr 1kr6800/9000/11,000

2- to 6-person apt 12,000-18,000; ☎ Jun-Aug) Almost identical in feel and facilities to neighbouring Guesthouse Butterfly, this place is run by a family of elf enthusiasts.

Castle House & Embassy Apartments (Map p242; ☎ 511 2166; http://hotelsiceland.net; Skólhótsstígur 2a & Garðastræti 40; 1-6 person apt 1kr7600-28,000; ☎) Turn to these pleasant self-contained apartments for satisfyingly central and commendably quiet accommodation. They are much more personal than a hotel, but come with room service. Fresh towels appear daily, and even your washing-up seems to magically clean itself. Breakfast is not included. Be aware that this establishment does change its tariff depending on the demand.

Central Guesthouse (Map pp238-9; ☎ 552 2822; www.central-guesthouse.com; Bólstaðarhlíð 8; summer sb/s/d/tr 1kr2300/4700/5900/7100, winter sb/s/d/tr 1kr1800/3600/4800/6000; ☎) This welcoming place is about 10 minutes' walk from the BSÍ bus terminal and Perlan. Rooms are uncomplicated, light and trim; the attic room, with sloping ceilings and private balcony, has the most character. Breakfast is not included, but there's a guest kitchen.

Gistiheimilið Domus (Map p242; ☎ 561 1200; www.domusguesthouse.is; Hverfisgata 45; summer sb/s/d 1kr2900/9500/11,300, winter sb/s/d 1kr2000/5900/7900) Once the Norwegian embassy, Domus' rooms have stately proportions and antique windows, but vaunt modern touches such as new radio alarms and TVs. The best rooms are on the 1st floor, and feature hardwood floors, leather sofas and artwork on the walls (none have private bathroom). Breakfast is included in accommodation above sleeping-bag level.

Galtafell Guesthouse (Map pp238-9; ☎ 699 2525; www.galtafell.com; Laufásvegur 46; summer s/d/apt from 1kr7900/8900/16,900, winter s/d/apt from 1kr6000/6900/12,000; ☎) Recommended by readers, this new guesthouse has a great location; it is in a quiet, well-to-do suburb within easy walking distance of town. The four spruce apartments each contain a fully equipped kitchen, cosy seating area and separate bedroom, and there's also three double rooms available.

Gistiheimilið Ísafold (Map p242; ☎ 561 2294; isafold@itn.is; Bárugata 11; summer s/d from 1kr7300/9800, winter from 1kr5400/6800) This recommended, rambling old house (a former bakery/rehab centre/bookshop) lies in peaceful

old Reykjavík. Sun-filled bedrooms contain washbasins and rustic beds, there are tea-making facilities in the lounge, and solemn Icelandic dolls keep an eye on diners in the attic breakfast room. At the nearby annex (Bárugata 20), all accommodation comes with private bathrooms (around 1kr1000 extra).

Hótel Leifur Eiríksson (Map p242; ☎ 562 0800; www.hotelleifur.is; Skólavörðustígur 45; summer s/d/tr 1kr14,200/17,400/20,500, winter s/d/tr 1kr9300/11,600/14,200) This hotel glories in one of the best locations in Reykjavík: it's slap on the end of arty Skólavörðustígur, and more than half of the 47 rooms have inspiring views of Hallgrímskirkja. All are decorated with blue carpeting, gauzy curtains and en-suite bathrooms.

Guesthouse Andrea (Map pp238-9; ☎ 552 5515; www.aurorahouse.is; Njarðargata 43; sb/s/d 1kr2900/7000/9000; ☎ mid-May-Sep) Friendly Siggí runs this hidden place, tucked down a side-street in a quiet residential area. Its five private rooms have spruce wooden floors, and are ideal for self-caterers: each has a sink, cooker, fridge and tiny two-seater table.

Gistiheimilið Aurora (Map p242; ☎ 552 5515; Freyjugata 24) This is also run by the Guesthouse Andrea people, and it is a homely purple townhouse just round the corner. Room No 33, with a balcony and sea view, is the best.

Top End

101 Hotel (Map p242 ☎ 580 0101; www.101hotel.is; Hverfisgata 10; s/d/ste from 1kr27,900/29,900/37,900; ☎ ☎) Reykjavík's newest boutique hotel is devilishly divine. Its 38 sensuous rooms – with yielding king- or queen-sized beds, glass-walled showers and rich wooden floors – may mean you boycott the bars and opt for a night in instead. A spa with masseurs, a small gym and a glitterati bar add to the opulence.

Hótel Borg (Map p242; ☎ 551 1440; www.hotelborg.is; Pósthússtræti 11; summer s/d/ste 1kr17,000/28,000/36,000, winter 1kr13,000/21,000/28,000) For those who love labs of character, this magnificent 1930s Art Deco palace is located in prime position on Austurvöllur square. A wooden elevator rattles up to luxurious rooms, decorated with antique furniture but complete with all mod cons. The buffet breakfast will set you back an extra 1kr1300.

EATING

Reykjavík's eateries vary from hot-dog stands to world-class restaurants. Two things are consistent: high quality, and high prices. The best dishes are generally those made from Iceland's outstanding fresh fish, seafood and juicy mountain-reared lamb. For types of eatery and opening hours, see p236.

Reykjavík's dining places are found along Laugavegur, Hverfisgata and Austurstræti. Tips are always included in the bill. See also Food & Drink (p236).

Restaurants

MIDRANGE

Austur Indía Félagið (Map p242; ☎ 552 1630; Hverfisgata 56; mains lkr2200-3700; ☎ 6-10pm Sun-Thu, 6-11pm Fri & Sat) The northernmost Indian restaurant in the world is an upmarket experience, with minimalist interior and a select choice of sublime dishes. One of its finest features, though, is its lack of pretension. The atmosphere is relaxed, and the service warm. Apparently this place is a favourite of Harrison Ford's, and who dares argue with Indy?

Við Tjörnina (Map p242; ☎ 551 8666; www.vitjornina.is; Templarasund 3; lkr2000-3600; ☎ noon-2.30pm Thu & Fri, from 6pm) Tucked away in an alley near Tjörn, this famed seafood establishment serves up beautifully presented Icelandic feasts such as guillemot with port, tender lamb fillet and garlic langoustine. The restaurant itself is cosy and wonderfully distinctive; it feels like a quirky up-perclass 1930s drawing room.

Á Næstu Grösom (First Vegetarian; Map p242; www.aenastugrosom.is; ☎ 552 8410; Laugavegur 20b; daily specials lkr1350; ☎ 11.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) This first-rate veggie restaurant, in a cheerful orange room overlooking Laugavegur, offers several daily specials. They use seasonal organic veg, with inventive dressings that give lettuce new appeal; and there's extra spice on Indian nights (Friday and Saturday). Organic wine and beer are available.

Grænn Kostur (Map p242; ☎ 552 2028; www.graennkostur.is; Skólavörðustígur 8; daily special lkr1100; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 1-9pm Sun) This serves similar organic, vegetarian set meals. It's smaller and harder to find, but persevere!

Hornið (Map p242; ☎ 551 3340; Hafnarstræti 15; 9in pizza lkr1200-2000, mains lkr1700-3000; ☎ 11.30am-11pm) There is an easy-going atmosphere at this bright Art Deco café-restaurant,

with its warm terracotta tiles, weeping-fig plants and decently spaced tables. Pizzas are freshly made before your eyes, the prettily presented pasta meals will set you up for the day, and you can sample traditional Icelandic fish dishes.

Sægreifinn (Map p242; ☎ 867 3660; Verubúð 8, harbour, mains lkr900-2000; ☎ 8am-6pm) Eccentric Sægreifinn serves up fresh seafood in what looks almost like a 1950s English chip shop...except for the barrel seats and stuffed seal. The owner is a sprightly old gent, who buys and cooks all the fish himself; lobster soup and smoked fish are particular specialties. He speaks only Icelandic, so make sure you know what you're asking for!

Galileo (Map p242; ☎ 552 9500; www.galileo.is; Hafnarstræti 1; mains lkr1750-4000; ☎ 11.30am-11pm Mon-Fri, 1-11pm Sat & Sun) Reykjavík's old falcon house now contains Galileo, a sophisticated Italian restaurant that's perfect for intimate dining – even down to the romantic starry-sky ceiling. Icelandic lamb and fish dishes are served, and pasta, pizza and risotto.

Þrið Frakkur Hjá Úlfari (Map p242; ☎ 552 3939; www.3frakkar.com; Baldursgata 14; mains lkr2700-4000; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 6-10pm Mon-Fri, to 11pm Sat & Sun) Owner-chef Úlfar Eysteinnsson has built up an excellent reputation at this snug little restaurant; and it's been given the thumbs-up by Jamie Oliver. Specialties include salted cod, anglerfish and *plokkfiskur* (fish stew) with black bread.

TOP END

Einar Ben (Map p242; ☎ 511 5090; www.einarben.is; Ingólfstorg; mains lkr2600-4500; ☎ 6-10pm Mon-Thu, to 11pm Fri-Sun) One of the city's finest restaurants, Einar Ben is frequented by diplomats and is renowned for its top-class service and gastronomic marvels. Dishes are Icelandic with a continental twist: think puffin terrine, and lamb Dijon with blueberries and thyme.

Sjávarkjallarinn (Map p242; ☎ 511 1212; www.sjavarkjallarinn.is; Aðalstræti 2; lkr2900-4500; ☎ 11.30am-11.30pm Mon-Fri, 5.30-11.30pm Sat & Sun) Not one but two of Iceland's Chef-of-the-Year winners (2004 and 2006) devise exotic dishes at this atmospheric seafood restaurant. Shimmering fish and succulent crustaceans are combined with the unexpected – pomegranate, coconut, lychee and chilli – and served up like miniature works of art.

Cafés

The distinction between cafés and bars is vague; see p248.

Café Paris (Map p242; ☎ 551 1020; Austurstræti 14; snacks lkr450-870; ☎ 8am-1am Mon-Thu, to 3am Fri, 9am-3am Sat, to 1am Sun) This old favourite has undergone a recent refit and is now better than ever. Leather-upholstered chairs provide a level of bum-comfort previously missing. Although there's a selection of light meals, such as sandwiches, crepes and tacos, people come here for coffee, cakes, chatter, and to check out the crowds.

Café Garðurinn (Map p242; ☎ 561 2345; Klappargstigur 37; soup/mains/both lkr650/1050/1500; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, noon-5pm Sat) This tiny but tasteful veggie café is based around seven tables and the hum of civilised conversation. Choice is limited, but it's delicious. We heartily recommend spinach soup and Catalanian tofu balls.

Café Cultura (Map p242; ☎ 530 9314; www.cultura.is; Hverfisgata 18; snacks & light meals lkr800-1400; ☎ 11.30am-1am Mon-Thu, 11.30am-4am Fri & Sat, 1pm-1am Sun) This arty intercultural café has scratched wooden floors and mosaic tables, and offers well-priced Mediterranean- and Arabic-influenced nosh such as felafel, spicy meatballs and couscous cuisine. There's a tolerant attitude to kids. Free tango lessons start at 8pm Wednesday; and it becomes an equally funky bar at weekends.

Té og Kaffi (Map p242; ☎ 562 2322; www.teogkaffi.is; Laugavegur 24; snacks lkr600-1100; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat, 11am-6pm Sun) Iceland has created its own indigenous version of Starbucks, complete with barristas and a huge coffee menu. It's popular with families, footsore Saturday shoppers and Lonely Planet readers.

Babalú (Map p242; ☎ 552 2278; Skólavörðustígur 22a) More inviting than your own living room, Reykjavík's newest café is *über*-cute (if smoky). It sells only tea, coffee, hot chocolate and the odd crepe, but once you've settled into one of its snug corners, you won't want to move. In summer there's occasional live music.

Kofi Tómasar Frænda (Koffin; Map p242; ☎ 551 1855; Laugavegur 2; snacks around lkr600; ☎ 10am-1am Mon-Thu, to 5.30am Fri & Sat, 11am-1am Sun) Subterranean Koffin has a studenty feel. Relax with magazines and a snack (nachos, lasagne, sandwiches, cakes or chocolate-coated marzipan) and watch disconnected feet scurry

along Laugavegur. At night, it turns into a candlelit bar with DJs. Wi-fi hotspot.

Kaffi Hljómalið (Map p242; ☎ 517 1980; Laugavegur 21; www.kaffihljomalid.org; snacks lkr650-1100; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Fri, 11am-11pm Sat & Sun; ☎) This commendable organic and fair-trade café is run on a not-for-profit basis. It looks like a 1950s home with 1970s flourishes (prayer flags, patterned chairs, handpainted cups and saucers), and is a meeting-place for Reykjavík's radicals. Wi-fi hotspot.

Svarta Kaffið (Map p242; ☎ 551 2999; Laugavegur 54; snacks & light meals lkr800-1300; ☎ 11am-1am Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat; ☎) Order thick homemade soup (one meat and one veg option daily; lkr990) at this cave-like café – it's served piping hot in fantastic bread bowls. It's also a whimsical nightspot, with African masks and dim lighting adding a certain frisson.

Vegamót (Map p242; ☎ 511 3040; www.vegamot.is; Vegamótstígur 4; snacks/light meals lkr800-2190) A long-running café/bar/club, but still a vogueish place to eat, drink, see and be seen. There's a startling choice on the 'global' menu, including Mexican salad, sesame-fried monkfish, seafood quesadilla and blackened chicken. The attached takeaway charges 10% less.

Quick Eats

Icelanders swear it's impossible to get a bad hot dog from **Bæjarins Beztu** (Map p242), a van near the harbour, patronised by Bill Clinton! Use the vital sentence *Eina með öllu* (One with everything) for mustard, ketchup, remoulade and onions. The kiosks **Hlölla Bátar** (Map p242; ☎ 11am-2am Sun-Thu, 10am-7am Fri & Sat) and **Emmessis & Pylsar** (Map p242; ☎ 10am-11pm) on Ingólfstorg sell ice cream and hotdogs (lkr330 to lkr790).

Head for **Nonnabiti** (Map p242; ☎ 551 2312; Hafnarstræti 18; snacks lkr280-690; ☎ to 2am) if you want burgers and hot dogs; when you've overdone the fried meat, **Kebabhúsið** (Map p242; ☎ 561 3070; Lækjargata 2; ☎ to 11pm Sun-Thu, to 7am Fri & Sat) offers falafel, and fish and chips (around lkr800).

Self-Catering

Bónus (☎ 11am-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7.30pm Fri, 10am-6pm Sat; Laugavegur 59 Map p242; Kringlan Map p238-9; also ☎ noon-6pm Sun) is the cheapest supermarket. The more upmarket **10-11** (☎ 8am-9pm; Austurstræti Map p242; Hverfisgata Map p242; Laugalækur Map pp238-9) has branches all over the place.

DRINKING

Reykjavík is renowned for its Friday- and Saturday-night *runtur*, when industrious Icelanders abandon work and party with passion (midweek drinking is not part of Icelandic culture). Beer is shockingly expensive. Most people visit a government-owned *vín búð* (the only shops licensed to sell alcohol), tinkle at home, then hit the town from midnight til 6am. There's a central *vín búð* (Map p242; Austurstræti 10; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 7pm Fri, to 2pm Sat), and another in Kringlan shopping centre (Map pp238-9).

Some venues have cover charges (about Ikr1000), and 'in' clubs have long queues at weekends. Things change fast; check *Grapevine* or *Reykjavík This Month* for the latest listings. You should dress up in Reykjavík, but there are pub-style places where you won't feel scruffy in jeans. The minimum drinking age is 20.

Bars & Pubs

Often the only difference between a café and a bar is the time of day; see p247.

Sirkus (Map p242; ☎ 511 8022; Klapparstigur 3) Our personal favourite, this kooky offbeat bar has dinky fairylights, bus seats in the attic, an annual Tom Selleck Moustache Competition, and a loyal local following. DJs and bands play regularly, and there's a summer garden where you can snatch gulps of fresh air. It's up for demolition, so make the most of it. However it remains in posterity in Björk's music clip 'Triumph of a Heart'.

Kaffibarinn (Map p242; ☎ 551 1588; Bergstaðastræti 1) Damon Albarn from Blur has a stake in this *über-trendy* bar, which had a starring role in the cult film *101 Reykjavík*. It's popular with celebs: at weekends you'll need a famous face or a battering ram to get in.

Grand Rökk (Map p242; ☎ 551 5522; www.grandrokk.is; Smiðjustigur 6) You'll feel as though you've known this down-to-earth bar all your life. During the day, chess enthusiasts play concentrated matches here; at weekends it's great for live music, luring you to three bands per session. Enjoy it while you can; it's scheduled for destruction in a redevelopment scheme.

Café Oliver (Map p242; ☎ 552 2300; www.cafeoliver.is; Laugavegur 20a) One of Reykjavík's newest café-bars, Oliver is the most in-vogue place for brunch; and for partying

late in super style. DJs pump out the tunes on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, with long queues snaking back from the doors.

Kaffi Sólón (Map p242; ☎ 562 3232; www.solon.is; Bankastræti 7a; snacks & light meals Ikr900-2000; ☎ 11am-1am Mon-Thu, to 5am Fri & Sat, noon-midnight Sun) Sólón, decked out in white-leather seats and oversized artwork, is a cultivated international bistro during the day and a swish club for a beautiful, martini-drinking set by night. There's long queues, in-demand DJs, moody lighting and (a popular Reykjavík item) a dancefloor containing around 17 people per square metre. It's also a wi-fi hotspot.

Kaffi Brennslan (Map p242; ☎ 561 3600; www.brennslan.is; Pósthússtræti 9; snacks Ikr390-1790; ☎ til 3am Fri & Sat) All kinds of folk frequent Brennslan, an unpretentious Art Deco café-bar, where conventional tastes mix with Matrix-style leather coats and avant-garde haircuts. It entices a twenties and thirties crowd by offering beers from 20 countries, but never gets so packed that you can't move.

Nelly's (Map p242; ☎ 551 2477; Þinghólststræti 2) By serving the cheapest beer in town (Ikr900 for 1.5L), publike Nelly's naturally pulls in a young, alternative, studenty crowd. DJs and live bands play regularly, it opens until 6am on weekends, and there are daily offers on alcohol.

If Viking beer isn't doing it for you, head for a pint of Guinness at one of Reykjavík's two Irish pubs. **Celtic Cross** (Map p242; ☎ 511 3240; Hverfisgata 26), done up like a funeral parlour and with bands in the basement on weekends; and the **Dubliner** (Map p242; ☎ 511 3233; Hafnarstræti 4; ☎ to 1am Sun-Thu, to 5am Fri & Sat), with live music every night from 10.30pm.

Nightclubs

Hverfisbarinn (Map p242; ☎ 511 6700; www.hverfisbarinn.is; Hverfisgata 20; ☎ to 1am Thu, to 5.30am Fri & Sat) This trendy bar and club attracts a stylish, studenty crowd, and has long queues at weekends. It is done out in a cool modern-Scandinavian style, which adds to the spacious feel. There's live music on Thursday from 9.30pm, and DJs on Friday and Saturday.

Gaukur á Stöng (Map p242; ☎ 551 1556; www.gaukurinn.is; Tryggvagata 22; ☎ 8pm-1am Sun-Thu, 8pm-5.30am Fri & Sat) Despite its divey air, stalwart Gaukurinn is one of the most popular

taverns in town, particularly with younger drinkers. It was responsible for creating vodka-spiked beer (still available), and is a notorious weekend pick-up joint. It's best as a weeknight venue for catching Icelandic bands (nightly from 11pm).

NASA (Map p242; ☎ 511 1313; nasa@nasa.is; Austurvöllur; admission Ikr1000) The biggest nightclub in Reykjavík, Nasa is a stripped-pine affair filled with Prada-clad crowds. It plays chart music and club anthems, and is also a sometime-venue for live bands. Email for upcoming music.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

Many of the bars, pubs and clubs listed have live band performances, particularly Grand Rökk (opposite), Gaukur á Stöng (opposite), Nelly's Café (opposite) and Nasa (opposite). For listings of live music in Reykjavík, see the excellent English-language newspaper *Grapevine*, available free from cafés and tourist offices.

Two cutting-edge music festivals are **Iceland Airwaves** (www.icelandairwaves.com; ☎ late Oct) and the new **Reykjavík Rocks** (☎ late-Jun/early-Jul) contact the tourist office for details.

Theatre & Classical Music

The **National Theatre** (Map p242; ☎ 585 1200; www.leikhusid.is; Lindargata 7; admission adult/under 16 Ikr2700/2300; ☎ box office 12.30-6pm Mon & Tue, to 8pm Wed-Sun, theatre closed Jul & Aug) puts on around 12 plays, musicals and operas per year, from modern Icelandic works to Shakespeare.

The country's second-largest theatre, **Reykjavík City Theatre** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 568 8000; www.borgarleikhus.is; Listabraut 3, Kringlan; adult/under 12yr Ikr2500/free), also stages classic and contemporary plays. The **Icelandic Dance Company** (☎ 588 0900; www.id.is) is in residence here.

For spooky Icelandic folktales and a demonstration of traditional wrestling, try the English-language performance '**Light Nights**' (☎ 551 9181; www.lightnights.com; Baldurgata 37; tickets adult/7-12yr Ikr2500/1800; ☎ 8.30pm Mon & Tue Jul & Aug) at the **lónó Theatre** (Map p242).

The **Iceland Symphony Orchestra** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 545 2500; www.sinfonia.is; Háskólabíó, Hagatorg; tickets Ikr2500-3800) will move to flashy new premises in 2009, but for now it's based at the Reykjavík University cinema. There are around 60 classical performances per season, normally on Thursday at 7.30pm.

Cinemas

Films are shown in their original language with Icelandic subtitles; all cinemas charge adult/under six years Ikr800/450. The newspaper *Morgunblaðið* lists cinema programmes, or click on the 'Í Bíó' tab at www.kvikmyndir.is.

Reykjavík has seven multiplexes, including **Sambíóinn** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 588 0800) in the Kringlan shopping centre, and **Laugarásbíó** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 2075; Laugarás) near the youth hostel. Central **Regnboginn** (Map p242; ☎ 551 9000; Hverfisgata 54) sometimes shows arts films.

SHOPPING

Laugavegur is the main shopping street; Austurstræti and Hafnarstræti contain tourist stores selling puffin-decorated trinkets; and Skólavörðustigur sells arty-crafty one-offs.

Handknitting Association of Iceland (Map p242; ☎ 552 1890; www.handknit.is; Skólavörðustigur 19) Traditional handmade hats socks and sweaters are on sale here... or buy yarn and knitting patterns and do it yourself!

Kolaportíð Flea Market (Map p242; Geirsgata; ☎ 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) Vendors here sell a pleasing range of second-hand stuff, while those brave enough can try *hákarl* from the fishmarket.

For cutting-edge Icelandic tunes, try hip record shops **12 Tónar** (Map p242; ☎ 511 5656; 12tonar@12tonar.is; Skólavörðustigur 15), with three floors of music and its own recording label; or **Smekkleysa Plötubúð** (Map p242; ☎ 534 3730; basement, Laugavegur 59; ☎ noon-6pm Mon-Thu, to 7pm Fri, to 5pm Sat).

On the dark side, buy bottles of *brennivín* from *vín búð* (see opposite); or your own Icelandic voodoo doll from **Nornabúðin** (Witch Shop; Map p242; ☎ 552 3540; Vesturgata 12; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Sat).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The city airport, Innanlandsflug, serves all domestic destinations, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Internal flight operator **Flugfélag Íslands** (Air Iceland; ☎ 570 3030; www.airiceland.is) has a desk there, but internet bookings are cheaper.

International flights operate through **Keflavík airport** (www.keflavikairport.com), 48km west of Reykjavík.

Bus

From June to mid-September, there are regular direct services between Reykjavík's **BSÍ bus terminal** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 562 1011; www.bsi.is; Vatnsmýrarvegur 10) and the following places (reduced or no service rest of the year):

Akureyri (Ikr6600, six hours, daily)

Höfn (Ikr7400, eight hours, daily)

Reykholt (Ikr2200, two hours, Friday and Sunday)

Skaftafell (Ikr5400, six hours, daily)

Þorlákshöfn (Ikr1000, one hour, daily)

Þórsmörk (Ikr3700, 3½ hours, daily)

On Friday and Saturday in May, it's possible to get from Reykjavík to Egilsstaðir (Ikr11,100; 11 hours) and Mývatn (Ikr8300, nine hours) in one day, changing in Akureyri. At other times, you'll have to stay overnight in Akureyri (or Höfn).

To reach Húsavík (Ikr8200, eight to 11 hours, daily) change in Akureyri.

For Stykkishólmur (Ikr3300, 2½ hours, daily), change in Vatnaleið.

GETTING AROUND**To/From the Airport**

It's a 1km walk into town from the city airport terminal (domestic flights), or there's a taxi rank.

The **Flybus** (☎ 562 1011; www.re.is) to and from Keflavík airport meets all incoming flights. Tickets cost adult/12 to 15 years Ikr1100/550 (credit cards accepted) and the journey to Reykjavík takes around 50 minutes. On the return journey, the bus leaves the BSÍ bus terminal two hours before international departures. Reykjavík City Hostel and the main hotels can arrange transfers to the bus station. Taxis to/from the airport cost around Ikr8000 one way.

Bicycle

Cycling is a great way to buzz round the city (although bicycles seem to be invisible to Reykjavík's car drivers). **Borgarhjól SF** (Map p242; ☎ 551 5653; www.borgarhjol.net; Hverfisgata 50; 10hr/24hr/1 wk Ikr1500/2000/10,500; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) has bikes for hire, also available from Reykjavík City Hostel and the camping ground (p244).

Bus

Reykjavík's superb **city bus system** (☎ 540 2700; www.straeto.is/english) runs from 7am to 11pm or midnight. A limited night-bus service

runs until 2am on Friday and Saturday. Buses only stop at designated bus stops, marked with the letter 'S'. The two central terminals are Hlemmur (Map pp238-9) and Lækjartorg (Map p242).

The fare is adult/six to 12 years Ikr250/75 (no change given). **Skiptimiði** (transfer tickets) are available from the driver if you need to take two buses to reach your destination. The Reykjavík Tourist Card includes a bus pass.

Taxi

Taxi prices are high; flagfall starts at Ikr520. There are usually taxis outside the bus stations, domestic airport, youth hostel, and pubs and bars on weekend nights. Alternatively, call **Borgarbill** (☎ 552 2440), **BSR** (☎ 561 0000) or **Hreyfill-Bæjarleiðir** (☎ 588 5522). Tipping is not expected.

AROUND REYKJAVÍK**Blue Lagoon**

As the Eiffel Tower is to Paris, as Disney World is to Florida, so the **Blue Lagoon** (Bláa Lónið; ☎ 420 8800; www.bluelagoon.is; adult/12-15yr Ikr1400/700, towel/swimsuit/robe hire Ikr300/350/700, spa treatments from Ikr1300; ☎ 9am-9pm mid-May-Aug, 10am-8pm Sep-mid-May; ☎ is to Iceland...with all the positive and negative connotations that implies. Those who say it's too expensive, too clinical, too crowded are kind of right, but ignore them. The Blue Lagoon is a must-see, and you'll be missing something special if you don't go.

Set in a vast black lava field, the milky-blue spa is fed by water (at a perfect 38°C, and at Blue-Flag standards) from the futuristic Svartsengi geothermal plant, which provides an off-the-planet scene-setter for your swim. Add in steaming silver vents and people coated in silica-mud, and you're in another world.

Be careful on the slippery bridges and bring plenty of conditioner to stop your hair going solid. There's a snack bar, top gourmet restaurant and souvenir shop on site, plus roaming masseurs. At the time of research, the lagoon was being extended and will be doubled in size by 2007.

The lagoon is 50km southwest of Reykjavík. Between 10am and 6pm daily, there are six **Reykjavík Excursions** (☎ 562 1011; www.bsi.is) buses from the BSÍ bus terminal (or from your hotel on request). The Ikr3400

cost includes lagoon admission and return fare to Reykjavík (or onward journey to Keflavík airport).

The Golden Circle

Gulp down three of Iceland's most extraordinary natural wonders - Gullfoss, Geysir and Þingvellir - in one day-long circular tour.

Gullfoss (Golden Falls) is a spectacular rainbow-tinged double cascade, which falls 32m before thundering away down a narrow ravine.

Ten kilometres away is **Geysir**, after which all spouting hot springs are named. The **Great Geysir** was plugged in the 1950s, when tourists clogged it with rocks and rubbish, thrown in an attempt to set it off. Since earthquakes in 2000, it has begun erupting again two or three times daily. Nearby, the world's most reliable geyser, **Strokkur** (Butter Churn), spouts every six minutes, when its bulging blue eye bursts into an impressive 15m to 30m plume.

Þingvellir National Park is Iceland's most important historical site: the Vikings established the world's first democratic parliament, the Alþing, here in AD 930. It also has a superb natural setting, on the edge of an immense rift caused by the separating North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Þingvellir was (finally!) made a Unesco World Heritage-listed site in 2004.

Interesting features, concentrated in a small area of the park, include: **Lögberg** (marked by a flagpole), the podium for the Alþing; the remains of **búðir** (booths) where attending Vikings camped; a **church** and **farm**, now the President's summer house; **Drekkingarhylur**, where adulterous women were drowned; **Þingvallavatn**, Iceland's largest lake; and several fissures, including **Peningagjá** (wishing spring), **Flosagjá** (named after a slave who jumped his way to freedom) and **Nikulásargjá** (after a drunken sheriff discovered dead in the water).

INFORMATION

Just by the turnoff to Þingvellir, the Park Service Centre contains a café and **seasonal tourist desk** (☎ 482 2660; www.thingvellir.is; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm daily May & Sep, to 5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr).

Above the park, on top of the rift, is an interesting **multimedia centre** (admission free;

☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 5pm Apr, May, Sep & Oct, to 5pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) exploring the area's nature and history.

SLEEPING & EATING

There is a discreet **café** (☎ approximately 9am-5pm winter, 9am-8pm summer) at each of the three sites.

Geysir camping ground (per person Ikr600) Stay at this camping ground, and you'll get to marvel at the spouting springs before the coach parties arrive. Pay at Hótel Geysir, where you're also entitled to use the hot tub and pool for free.

Þingvellir camping grounds (☎ 482 2660; camp sites per adult Ikr500) The Park Service Centre oversees five camping grounds at Þingvellir. The best are those around Leirar (near the centre).

Hótel Geysir (☎ 480 6800; www.geysircenter.is; summer sb/s/d from Ikr3000/8400/10,200, winter from Ikr2900/8000/9800; ☎ Accommodation is in spick, span and tasteful alpine-style cabins. There are plans to build new rooms overlooking the geysir field for 2007 or 2008. The hotel can also arrange horse rides, including day trips to Gullfoss (Ikr10,800).

Hótel Valhöll (☎ 480 7100; www.hotelvalholl.is; summer s/d Ikr15,000/21,000, winter Ikr10,000/17,000; ☎ Valhöll is a large farmhouse in Þingvellir National Park, tucked down at the base of the rift. Some of the rooms are on the small side; positives include peaceful surroundings, a very good restaurant, and the president for your neighbour!

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Golden Circle day tours from Reykjavík cost between Ikr6500 and Ikr7900 (without lunch). Tour operators include Reykjavík Excursions and Iceland Excursions (see p283); you're usually picked up from your accommodation.

From June to August, scheduled buses run from the BSÍ bus station to Gullfoss and Geysir (return Ikr4400, 8.30am and 12.30pm), stopping for at least half an hour at each site.

Hafnarfjörður**pop 22,767**

The 'Town in the Lava' rests on a 7000-year-old flow and hides a parallel elfin universe, according to locals. It's worth a quick summer jaunt if you've time to spare.

The dynamic **tourist office** (☎ 585 5500; www.hafnarfjordur.is; Strandgata 6; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug) is inside the town hall.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Hafnarfjörður Museum (☎ 585 5780; admission 1kr300) is spread across three sites. **Pakkhúsið** (Vesturgata 8; ☎ 1-5pm daily Jun-Aug, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun Sep-May) is the main building, with interesting displays on the town's history. **Sívartsen's Hús** (Vesturgata 6; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug) is an upper-class 19th-century house. At the other end of the social scale is **Siggubær** (Sigga's House; Kirkjuvegur 10; ☎ 11am-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug), a restored fisherman's hut. The Reykjavík Tourist Card covers admission to all three.

The tourist office publishes a smashing **sculpture trail** map; the highlight is **Hellisgerði** (Reykjavíkurgvegur), a peaceful park filled with lava grottoes.

In mid-June, the peace is shattered as Viking hordes invade town for the **Viking Festival**, with staged fights and traditional craft demonstrations.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Hafnarfjörður is a short, easy bus trip from Reykjavík: take bus No S1 (1kr220, 30 minutes, every 20 to 30 minutes) from Hlemmur or Lækjartorg bus stations. The **Flybus** (☎ 562 1011) to/from Keflavík airport also stops for reserved passengers.

Krýsuvík

For a taste of Iceland's weird countryside, Krýsuvík, an abandoned village and volatile geothermal area, makes a fascinating day trip. The area lies about 20km south of Hafnarfjörður; you'll need your own transport. At **Seltún**, boardwalks meander round egg-smelling, rainbow-coloured steaming vents, mud pots and solfataras, where the ground temperature reaches about 200°C.

Just down the road is **Kleifarvatn**, a creepy 1km-deep lake surrounded by volcanic cinders. It's said to be inhabited by a wormlike monster the size of a whale.

The nearby coast is a bleak stretch of seabird cliffs and black beaches, which stood in for Iwo Jima in Clint Eastwood's WWII epic *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006). Dozens of hiking tracks crisscross through this barren territory.

THE WEST

UPPER BORGARFJÖRÐUR

A must for saga fans, the lakes and lava flows of this region feature in *Egils Saga*, and its author, Snorri Sturluson, lived here. Upper Borgarfjörður is 90km north of Reykjavík.

Reykholt & Around

You'd never guess it, but tiny **Reykholt** (www.reykholt.is), 22km east off the Ring Rd and with a population of 33, was once a political and religious power centre. During the blood-thirsty Sturlunga Period (1230-62), it was the home of Snorri Sturluson, Iceland's greatest saga writer, historian and social-climber. Close to the cellar where he was eventually murdered, you can see his circular medieval hot tub **Snorri's Pool** (Snorralaus). The museum **Heimskringla** (☎ 433 8000; www.snorrastofa.is; Reykholt; admission 1kr500; ☎ 10am-6pm daily May-Sep, to 6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) explores Snorri's fascinating life, and will be augmented in 2007 by an exhibition of recent archaeological finds.

Deildartunguhver, 4km west of Reykholt, is Europe's most powerful, prolific and pongy hot spring, spouting out at 180L per second. About 18km northeast of Reykholt is **Hraunfossar**, a 1km-long stretch of 'magic waterfalls' mysteriously emerging from beneath a lava flow. Just upstream is **Barnafoss**, where the river Hvítá thunders through a narrow gorge. According to legend, two children drowned here when a natural bridge collapsed.

There's a **camping ground** (☎ 435 1182; Kleppjársreykir; per person 1kr500) next to a geothermal swimming pool 6km west of Reykholt. **Hótel Reykholt** (☎ 435 1260; www.fosshotel.is; Reykholt; sb/s/d 1kr3200/13,700/17,900 Jun-Aug, 1kr3200/9300/10,700 Sep-May; ☎) is part of the Foss Hotel chain. It's a modern place with boxy but pleasant rooms, sunny staff, a funny Norse-gods theme, and extras including a restaurant and brand-new 'wellness facility' (sauna, massages etc). Cheaper rooms with shared bathrooms are available.

Buses run from Reykjavík to Reykholt (via Deildartunguhver) on Friday and Sunday at 5pm (1kr2200, two hours). You'll need private transport for Hraunfossar and Barnafoss.

SNÆFELLSNES

[Cue Twilight Zone music...] The peninsula is a magnet for UFOs, and for New Age believers who swear that the glacier Snæfellsjökull (1446m) emits a healing aura. It's certainly atmospheric – shadowy mountains, twisting lava flows, tiny fishing villages and scattered farmhouses all sit under the shadow of the glacier. Jules Verne was impressed enough to use Snæfell as the gateway to the underworld in *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. More recently, the whole of the peninsula's tip, was designated a national park.

Stykkishólmur

pop 1167

Quaint coastal Stykkishólmur is the largest village in Snæfellsnes, overlooked by mighty mountains and a striking church. It makes a serene base for boat trips, horse riding and kayaking, or as a picturesque shortcut to the Westfjords – car ferries run via Flatey, an island with 19th-century buildings.

The **tourist office** (☎ 438 1750; Smiðjustígur 3; ☎ 9am-8pm Jun-Aug) is inside the Sæferðir shop/office (see Tours below) by the harbour; out of season, Sæferðir staff can help with inquiries.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are admirable views of Breiðafjörður (see boxed text, right) from **Súgandisey**, a basalt islet that shelters the picturesque harbour.

Tarry-smelling **Norwegian House** (☎ 438 1640; norkshus@simnet.is; Hafnargata 5; adult/6-16yr 1kr400/200; ☎ 11am-5pm Jun-Aug) contains a folk museum, café and art gallery.

Visit Breiðafjörður's straits and skerries on guided paddles with **Seakayak Iceland** (☎ 690 3877; http://seakayakiceland.com; bookings via internet); they start from 1kr5500 for a two- to four-hour trip.

You can also hire **bikes** from Sæferðir (per day 1kr1500; below) to explore the peninsula at a leisurely pace.

TOURS

Horse treks, snowmobiling, boat tours, even visits to a nearby farm to see shark-meat being cured; **Sæferðir** (Seatours; ☎ 438 1450; www.seatours.is; Smiðjustígur 3; ☎ 9am-8pm Jun-Aug, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) has all the

local attractions sewn up. Most activities are June to August only, but some are year-round. They also run three-hour **whale-watching trips** (adult/12-15yr 1kr4900/2450; Jun-Aug) from Ólafsvík, 80km along the coast.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping ground (☎ 438 1750; per person 1kr600; ☎ year-round) A huge but rather exposed spot on the way into town. Basic facilities include a laundry.

Sjónarhóll HI Hostel (☎ 438 1417, 861 2517; www.hostel.is; Höfðagata 1; sb/d 1kr1650/5000; ☎ May-Sep; ☎) The dorm rooms in this charming hostel have fantastic views of the harbour. You can also catch fish on its Breiðafjörður boat tours, then barbecue them on the patio.

Hótel Stykkishólmur (☎ 430 2100; www.hotel.stykkisholmur.is; Borgarbraut 6; s/d 1kr11,900/13,900, 1kr8900/10,900 Apr, May & Sep-Nov Jun-Aug; ☎) This 33-room hotel is fairly ugly from the outside, but the good-quality rooms all have great views, and there's a smart restaurant and bar.

Narfeyrarstofa (☎ 438 1119; Aðalgata 3; mains 1kr2000-3700) This old house is a welcoming daytime café and evening bar/restaurant. The à la carte menu focuses on locally caught fish and seabirds (such as black guillemot), cooked on the rare side. There's not much for veggies, but kids can eat burgers and chips from the bar menu.

Opposite the camping ground there is a sit-down **bakery** (Nesvegur 1; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat).

TROLL TROUBLE

The breathtaking sight of Breiðafjörður's 2700(-ish) islands inspired a legend. Three misanthropic trolls decided to separate the Westfjords from the rest of Iceland. All night, they hacked away huge lumps of earth and hurled the pieces into the nearby fjord. The task was so engrossing that they didn't notice the growing light. As the sun touched them, the two male trolls turned instantly to stone. The trollette almost made it home, when she suddenly remembered that she'd left her cow grazing on Grímsey. Stopping to look at it, both she and Daisy came to a rocky end.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Daily buses ply between Reykjavík and Stykkishólmur (Ikr3300, 2½ hours), with a change to a connecting bus in Vatnaleið. You also have to change there when travelling between Stykkishólmur and Ólafsvík.

See right for details of the Stykkishólmur-Brjánslækur ferry.

Snæfellsjökull National Park & Around

The tip of Snæfellsnes peninsula, including the glacier, is a national park. The **visitor centre** (☎ 436 6860; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug) is at Hellnar, an absolutely gorgeous reserve filled with sea birds, 6km outside the main park boundary on the south coast.

The most interesting way up Snæfell is from the western end of the peninsula, along the Móðulækur stream (4WD vehicles can go 4km up the track). This takes you via the red scoria craters of Rauðhólar, the waterfall Klukkufoss and scenic Eysteinsdalur Valley. It takes a couple of days and you may need crampons and ice axes to reach the summit.

ÓLAFSVÍK

As a base, Stykkishólmur has the best facilities, but Ólafsvík (population 1016) is much closer to the park. It has a sheltered **camping ground** (☎ 436 1543; camp sites per adult/tent Ikr300/300; ☎ Jun-Aug) 1km east of the village. Central **Hótel Ólafsvík** (☎ 436 1650; www.hotelolafsvik.is; Ólafsbraut 20; s/d from Ikr11,950/14,800; 🏠) has been refurbished and has comfortable business-class rooms. If you don't mind sharing a bathroom, prices fall by almost 50%. The hotel has a restaurant; otherwise there's the **bakery** (Ólafsbraut) and burger-bar **Prinsinn** (Ólafsbraut; from Ikr300; ☎ 10am-11.30pm Mon-Fri, 11.30am-11.30pm Sat & Sun) across the street.

HELLNAR

The spirit of the glacier, Bardur, once lived at tiny Hellnar: he couldn't have chosen a more idyllic spot. The park visitor centre and a small café overlook a dingley bay, echoing with the shrieks of sea birds, and up the hill stands Iceland's only eco-hotel, **Hótel Hellnar** (☎ 435 6820; www.hellnar.is; s/d Ikr10,900/13,900 Jun-Aug, Ikr9800/12,500 May & Sep; ☎ May-Sep; 🏠 ☒). Its twin-bedded rooms are clean, bright and monastically simple, the restaurant uses local organic produce, and the guest lounge has marvellous sea views. It's quite common to see whales from the window.

THE WESTFJORDS

The remote Westfjords once had a fearsome reputation for witchcraft, and its abandoned villages, crying sea birds and wild Arctic foxes still cast a haunting spell. You could lose yourself for days in the bleak mountains, or hide away in end-of-the-earth-town Ísafjörður. There is some folklore that people in the Westfjords have been known to swear by rum-soaked seal blubber, horsemeat or a red-haired boy as the best bait for shark fishing!

Getting There & Away**AIR**

There are twice-daily flights between Reykjavík and Ísafjörður (Ikr10,500) with **Flugfélag Íslands** (www.airiceland.is; ☎ 570 3030).

BOAT

The **Baldur** (☎ 438 1450; www.seatours.is; Smiðjustigur 3, Stykkishólmur) ferry operates between Stykkishólmur and Brjánslækur (one way per car/passenger Ikr2190/2190, 2½ hours). From June to August, it leaves Stykkishólmur at 9am and 4pm, and Brjánslækur at 12.30pm and 7.30pm. From September to May, it departs Stykkishólmur at 9am Saturday and 1.30pm Sunday to Friday, and Brjánslækur at 12.30pm Saturday, 5pm Sunday to Friday. Ferries link quite badly with buses.

BUS

Scheduled buses in the Westfjords are infrequent, headache-inducing and only possible from June to August.

From Reykjavík to Ísafjörður, you will need to change in Brú and Hólmavík. Buses leave Reykjavík for Brú at 8.30am and 5.30pm, but they only connect with the Brú-Hólmavík service on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday; Reykjavík-Hólmavík costs Ikr4900. The bus company **Stjörnubílar** (☎ 456 3518, 893 6356; www.stjornubilar.is) runs the Hólmavík-Ísafjörður leg (Ikr4050), at 3pm Tuesday, Friday and Sunday.

Buses also run to the Westfjords via the ferry from Stykkishólmur. There are daily buses from Reykjavík to Stykkishólmur (left), but these don't link well with the ferry; you'll have a few hours to look around, or may even have an overnight

stop. On the other side of the water, there are connecting buses from Brjánslækur to Ísafjörður (Ikr2350), running via Látrabjarg and allowing 1¼ hours at the cliffs. In reverse, buses leave Ísafjörður at 9am Monday, Wednesday and Saturday.

If you want to travel between Ísafjörður and Akureyri, you'll also need to change in Hólmavík and Brú.

ÍSAFJÖRÐUR**pop 2779**

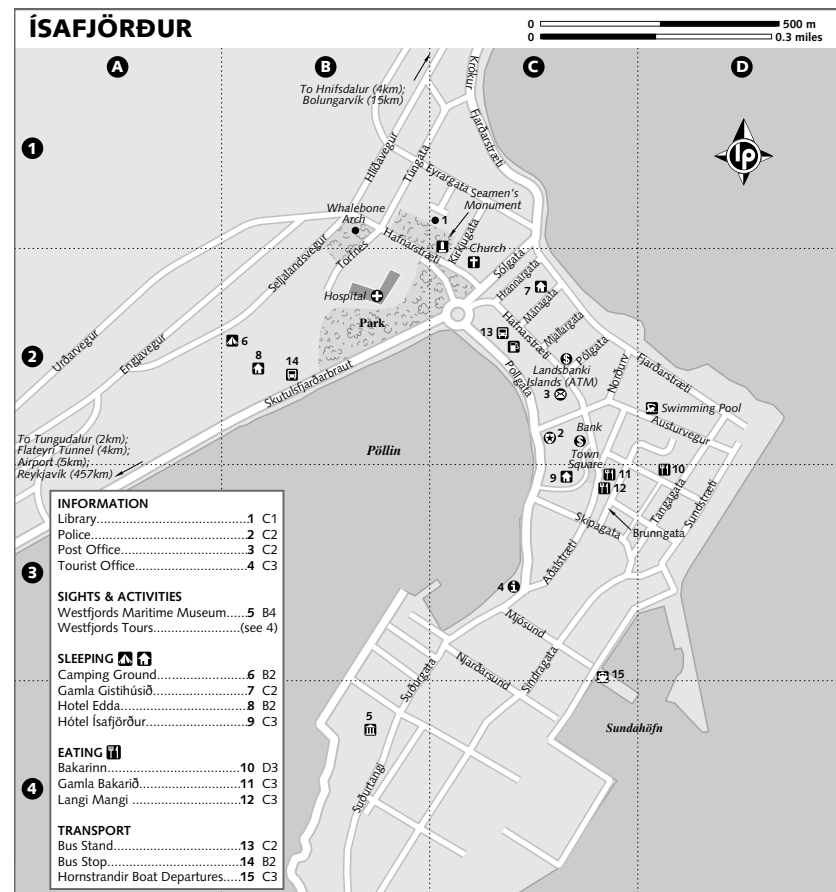
You feel as though you've reached the ends of the earth when you get to Ísafjörður, the Westfjords' largest settlement. Surrounded by vertiginous mountains and deep fjord waters, the town is remote and

peaceful...apart from the croaking of conspiracies of ravens.

The Westfjords' largest settlement contains a **tourist office** (☎ 456 5121; www.vestfiridir.is; Aðalstræti 7; ☎ 8am-6pm daily Jun-Aug, 11am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May), several banks, and a **post office** (Hafnarstræti 9). Internet access is available at the immaculate **library** (☎ 456 3296; www.isafjordur.is/bokasafn; Eyrtanúni; per hr Ikr200; ☎ 1-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat).

Sights & Activities

The knowledgeable staff at the **Westfjords Maritime Museum** (☎ 456 3293; Neðstíkaupstaður; admission Ikr500; ☎ 10am-5pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun Jun), based in three old wooden warehouses, brings the excellent nautical and whaling exhibits to life.



There are some interesting **hikes** round Tungudalur, 2km west of Ísafjörður; ask at the tourist office, or see the Trekking section on www.vestfiridir.is for detailed walking information. Westfjords Tours (see below) can arrange **kayaking** in the bay. In winter, there's downhill skiing at Tungudalur.

Tours

Westfjords Tours (Vesturfirðir; ☎ 456 5111; www.vesturfiridir.is; Aðalstræti 7) specialises in Hornstrandir visits, including a four-hour trip to the abandoned village Hesteyri (Ikr4400, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday at 2pm, July to mid-August).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping ground (☎ 444 4960; Skutulsfjarðarbraut; camp sites per adult plus tent Ikr600; ☞ mid-Jun–mid-Aug) Centrally located behind the secondary school. There's another **camping ground** (☎ 456 5081; camp sites per adult Ikr750) by a pretty waterfall in Tungudalur.

Gamla Gistihúsið (☎ 456 4146; www.gistihus.is; Mánagata 5; sb/s/d Ikr2000/3900/6000; ☒ ☒) This former hospital and old people's home is a tonic, with sunlight dappling through the windows and homely touches everywhere. The nine neat rooms (with plentiful shared bathrooms) all come with TV, plus there's a guest kitchen and free internet access. Recommended. Breakfast Ikr800.

Hótel Ísafjörður (☎ 456 4111; www.hotelisafjorður.is; Silfurtorg 2; s/d from Ikr13,900/16,900 Jun-Aug, up to 40% reduction Dec-Feb) Overlooking Skutulsfjörður and the main square, this modern hotel is at the hub of things. Rooms are smart and businesslike, with TVs, radios, minibars and recently renovated shower rooms; deluxe versions also come equipped with bathtubs. Sleeping-bag accommodation (double Ikr7200) is available out-of-season.

Hotel Edda (☎ 444 4960; www.hoteledda.is; sb/s/d from Ikr1700/5800/7200; ☞ mid-Jun–mid-Aug) This is a no-frills option in summer, run by Hotel Ísafjörður in the secondary school. Sleeping-bag accommodation is in classrooms, or you can upgrade to a private room.

Langi Mangi (☎ 456 3022; Aðalstræti 22; snacks Ikr400-800; ☞ 11am-11pm Mon-Wed, 11am-1am Thu, 11am-2am Fri, noon-2am Sat, 1-11pm Sun) Langi Mangi is an atmospheric little cafe/art gallery with a range of coffees, meandering music and home-made soup. There are live performances at weekends.

Two bakeries, **Bakarinn** (☎ 456 4770; Silfurgata 11; ☞ 9am-4pm Sun-Fri) and **Gamla Bakaríð** (☎ 456 3226; Aðalstræti; ☞ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4pm Sat) are good for bread, buns and chocolate frogs.

HORNSTRANDIR

The wildest corner of the Westfjords has a sad history: its elderly inhabitants, left behind with no electricity, roads or telephones, made a collective decision to abandon the peninsula in the 1950s. It's now a spectacular nature reserve, which solitary hikers share only with sea birds and Arctic foxes.

The peninsula is accessible by boat from Ísafjörður, with one-way fares around Ikr4500; contact Ísafjörður tourist office for details. There's basic sleeping-bag accommodation at **Hesteyri** (☎ 456 7183; sb Ikr1500; ☞ Jul & Aug) in four rooms with kitchen access.

LÁTRABJARG

The world's biggest bird breeding grounds are the towering, 12km-long Látrabjarg cliffs. Fulmars, kittiwakes and the most fearless puffins you'll ever meet fight for nesting space at the westernmost point of the Westfjords. It's a truly impressive sight, but wrap up well; the wind is bitter.

For accommodation, try the beautifully located **guesthouse** (☎ 456 1575; breidavik@patro.is; camp sites per adult Ikr900, sb/s/d from Ikr2000/4000/6000; ☞ mid-May–mid-Sep), part of a working farm, on a golden beach at Breiðavík, 12km from the cliffs. Nondorm rooms are in a new minihotel extension; functional from the outside, but pleasant inside. You can also pitch tents in a neighbouring field.

THE NORTH

SIGLUFJÖRÐUR

pop 1344

Siglufjörður, one of Iceland's loveliest towns, enjoys a dramatic setting at the northern tip of the Tröllskagi peninsula. In the past, herring fishing brought frenzied activity and untold riches; today the town's appeal lies in its peaceful isolation. The rollercoasting coastal road currently stops at Siglufjörður, although a new tunnel (to be completed by 2008/9) will make the town more accessible.

The award-winning **Herring Era Museum of Iceland** (Sildarminjasafn Íslands; ☎ 467 1604; www.siglo.is/herring; Snorrugata 15; adult/12-16yr Ikr800/400;

☞ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug, 1-5pm Sep-May), lovingly created over 16 years, does a stunning job of recreating Siglufjörður's boom days. You can trace the herring's journey through the museum's three harbourside buildings: from the full-size night-time harbour; to the poignant salting station Roaldsbrakki, looking as though the herring workers have just left; to the huge machinery of the fishmeal and oil processing plant. The museum also functions as the **tourist information centre**.

For hiking, skiing and the lively **Herring Adventure** festival on August bank holiday, check out the town's website www.siglo.is.

The little **camping ground** (Ikr500; ☞ Jun-Aug) is situated right by the town square, and has a toilet block and laundry. In a gilt, cherub-decorated 1930s hotel, whose stately proportions hint at wealthier times, you'll find **Gistihúsið Hvanneyri's** (☎ 467 1378; alla@simnet.is; Aðalgata 10; sb/s Ikr1800/Ikr4000, d Ikr6000-8000) 19 rooms with mountain views. There are a couple of TV lounges, a mighty dining room, and guest kitchen.

BioCafé (☎ 467 1111; Aðalgata 30; mains Ikr1000-1700, 9in pizza from Ikr800; ☞ 11.30am-9pm) serves good-value burgers, pizzas, and fish and lamb dishes, and the upstairs bar opens late on Friday and Saturday nights.

The other dining choice in town is **Pizza 67** (☎ 467 2323; Aðalgata; 9in pizza from Ikr900).

From June to September, you can get from Reykjavík to Siglufjörður by bus, but you'll have to change at Varmahlíð and Sauðarkrúkur. For good through connections, catch the 9.30am service (Ikr7100) on Monday or Wednesday.

AKUREYRI

pop 16,579

Fertile, sheltered Akureyri (www.akureyri.is), situated alongside Iceland's greatest fjord, has the warmest weather in a cold country. The best restaurants, cafés and cinemas outside the capital nestle beneath a range of snowcapped peaks. It's a place to linger, admiring the flowery gardens, maple trees, shining sculptures and all the bobbing fishing boats and cruise ships.

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 462 7733; www.nordurland.is; Hafnarstræti 82; ☞ 7.30am-7pm mid-Jun–Aug, to 5pm Mon-Fri & 8am-5pm Sat & Sun May–mid-Jun, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr) can organise tours.

There's a central **post office** (☎ 460 2600; Skipagata 10; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) and the fantastic **municipal library** (☎ 460 1250; Brekkugata 17; ☞ 10am-6pm Mon & Fri, to 4pm Tue-Thu) has an English book section larger than many UK libraries, plus internet access (per hour Ikr200).

The **Akureyri Hospital** (☎ 463 0100; Spítalavegur) is just south of the botanical gardens, and **Nonni Travel** (☎ 461 1841; www.nonnitravell.is; Brekkugata 5) is the main tour agency.

Sights & Activities

Akureyrarkirkja (Eyrarlandsvegur) was designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, the architect of Reykjavík's Hallgrímskirkja. Although the basalt theme connects them, Akureyrarkirkja looks more like a stylised 1920s US skyscraper than its big-town brother. The church admits visitors in summer; check the board outside the church for opening times.

Akureyri Museum (Minjasafnið Akureyri; ☎ 462 4162; www.akmus.is; Aðalstræti 58; adult/child Ikr400/free; ☞ 10am-5pm Jun–mid-Sep, 2-4pm Sat late-Sep–Jul) houses local-historical items, including an interesting Settlement Era section. The building is set back from the tranquil garden that set the fashion for Iceland's 19th-century tree-planting.

Children's writer Reverend Jón Sveinsson (1857–1944) spent his childhood in Akureyri and his old-fashioned tales of derring-do have a rich Icelandic flavour. Make sure you visit the higgledy-piggledy wooden **Nonnahús** (☎ 462 3555; www.nonni.is; Aðalstræti 54; adult/under 16yr Ikr350/free; ☞ 10am-5pm Jun-Sep), the author's childhood home, and pick up an English translation of his book *At Skípalón*. You can purchase a **joint ticket** (Ikr550) for Nonnahús and Akureyri Museum.

The most northerly botanical garden in the world is **Lystigarður Akureyrar** (Akureyri Botanical Gardens; ☎ 462 7487; Eyrarlandsvegur; ☞ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-10pm Sat & Sun Jun-Oct), a delightful spot on sunny days. Opened in 1912, it includes every native Icelandic species, and other tough plants from high altitudes and latitudes.

Akureyri has one of the country's best **swimming pools** (☎ 461 4455; Þingvallastræti 21; adult/6-15yr Ikr310/150, sauna Ikr500; ☞ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat & Sun) with hot pots, saunas and flumes suitable for little kids and big.

Sleeping BUDGET

Central camping ground (☎ 462 3379; hamrar@hamrar.is; Þórunnarstræti; camp sites per adult 1kr800; ☽ mid-Jun-Aug) They are threatening to close down this central camping ground, but it's here for the moment, and has improved security and a fresh splash of paint on the toilet blocks. It's conveniently located close to the swimming pool, supermarket and town.

Hamrar camp site (☎ 461 2264; hamrar@hamrar.is; camp sites per adult 1kr700; ☽ Jun-Aug) This huge camp site, 1.5km south in a leafy setting by the scout camp at Kjarnaskógur, has newer facilities and mountain views. Both places have kitchen and laundry.

Stórholt HI Hostel (☎ 462 3657; www.hostel.is; Stórholt 1; summer sb/s/d 1kr1800/3900/6600, winter 1kr1750/2950/5800; P) This spotless hostel, 15 minutes' walk from the town centre, has three comfy sitting rooms and three large kitchens, with a summery decking area outside. There are two attractive summer-houses (one/seven days 1kr14,280/49,500), each holding seven people. Bookings pour in after Easter; don't get left in the cold.

MIDRANGE

Gistiheimilið Salka (☎ 461 2340; salka@nett.is; Skipagata 1; sb d/tr/q 1kr5000/6600/8000, s/d/tr/q 1kr5000/6600/8100/10,000) Distinctive, large 2nd-floor rooms filled with books, ornaments, couches and TVs make Gistiheimilið Salka

feel just like home; there is also a fully equipped kitchen. Recommended.

Sólgarðar (☎ 461 1133; solgardar@simnet.is; Brekkugata 6; sb/s/d 1kr2900/4300/6000) The owner of this place works shifts, so don't be surprised if she's bleary eyed! Her three rooms, one with balcony, overlook a quiet residential street and they're gleaming. Breakfast is available (1kr800), and there are discounts for stays over three days.

Gistiheimili Akureyri (☎ 462 5588; www.gistiheimilid.net; Hafnarstræti 104; s/d 1kr5300/7300 May-Sep, 1kr4300/5300 Oct-Apr) This largeish place lacks the intimacy of a guesthouse; it's more of a budget hotel with kitchen facilities. The 19 rooms are small but clean, all with satellite TV and washbasins; some have private bathrooms. The sunny, balconied breakfast area (summer only) overlooking bustling Hafnarstræti is the star feature. Breakfast is 1kr850.

Gula Villan (☎ 461 2810; www.gulavillan.is; Brekkugata 8; sb/s/d 1kr3500/5000/6600) At this family-friendly place, you'll find spotless, snow-white rooms with leafy patterns stencilled on the walls. The owners have another buttercup-yellow building (Þingvallastræti 14; open in summer only) opposite the swimming pool. Both houses have kitchens, or you can order breakfast (1kr950).

Edda Hotel (☎ 444 4000; www.hoteledda.is; Eyrarlandsvegur 28; s/d with bathroom 1kr10,300/12,900, ☽ mid-Jun-late-Aug) Around 200 summer rooms are up for grabs in the grammar school: two-thirds have TVs and private bathrooms. There's a café and large restaurant on site.

TOP END

Hótel Kea (☎ 460 2000; www.keahotels.is; Hafnarstræti 83-5; s/d/tr 1kr14,700/18,900/24,500 Jun-Aug, 1kr11,900/14,900/19,500 Sep-May) Akureyri's top hotel has been going since 1944. Rooms here are business-class with slightly old-fashioned trimmings; the five nicest have balconies overlooking the fjord. Kea is the only hotel in town with facilities for wheelchair users. Hotel Harpa (s/d/tr 1kr12,700/16,100/20,900 June to August, 1kr10,100/12,700/16,600 September to May) shares Kea's restaurant and reception. In some ways its small rooms are superior; they're freshly renovated, with parquet flooring and modern furniture.

Eating

Café Paris (Bláa Kannan; ☎ 461 4600; Hafnarstræti 96; ☽ 9am-10.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10.30pm Sun; ☽) This tearoom, with its old wooden interior and swirly-coloured tables, is a peachy place to idle away a morning. In summer, outdoor tables mushroom on the main street, and people flock in for lunch specials (soup, salad and main for 1kr950), often veggie.

Karólína Café (☎ 461 2755; Kaupvangsstræti 23; ☽ 11.30am-1am Mon-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat, 2pm-1am Sun) Karólína lures a young, crazy-haired crowd with magazines, squashy sofas, alcoholic coffee (1kr790 to 1kr990) and monthly art exhibitions. Above, the upmarket restaurant (mains 1kr2500 to 1kr4300; open from 6pm) is run by Iceland's Chef of the Year 2003. As you might expect in an important fishing town, the emphasis is on perfectly-presented seafood dishes.

Greifinn (☎ 460 1600; www.greifinn.is; Glérárgata 20; mains 1kr1700-3000; ☽ 11.30am-11.30pm) This is a bustling, lively spot popular with families, birthday parties and work outings. The varied menu includes sizzling Tex-Mex, much-praised pizza and big meaty dishes. A bat-phone button on the table summons the waiter in seconds.

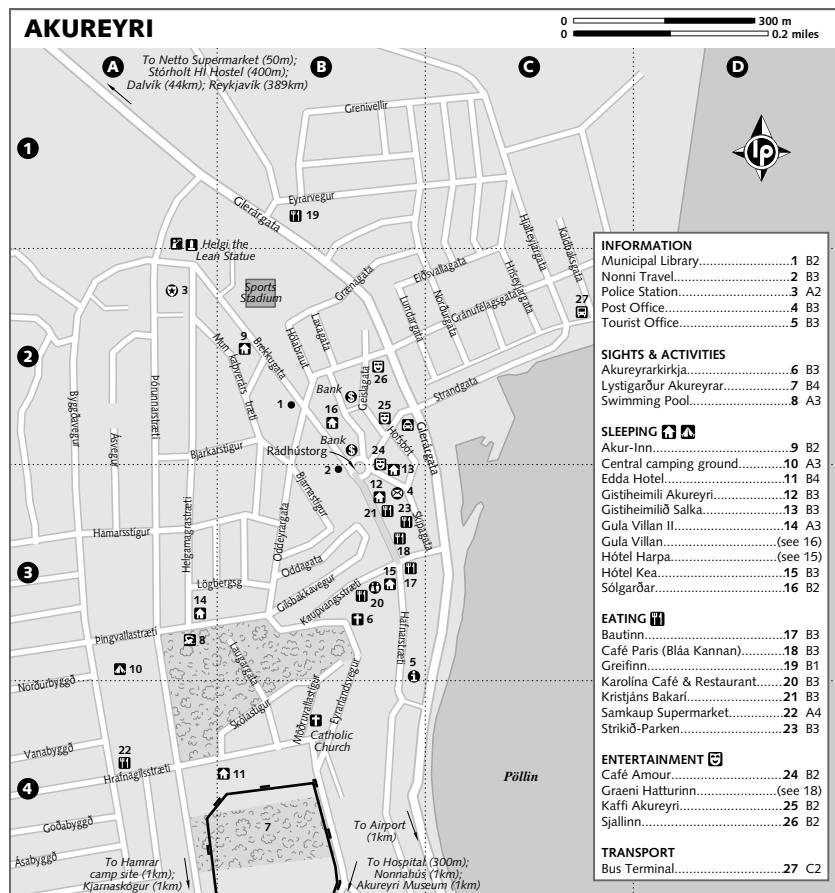
Bautinn (☎ 462 1818; Hafnarstræti 92; soup & salad 1kr1290, mains 1kr1300-3400) Open all day, this restaurant is a favourite for its friendly staff, decent prices and loaded salad bar. There's a large glazed conservatory, and a more shadowy interior if you don't enjoy that goldfish-bowl feeling. Be warned, dishes include everything from pizzas and salad to puffin and whale.

Strikið-Parken (☎ 462 7100; Skipagata 14; mains 1kr2000-3500; ☽ from 11.30am Mon-Sat, from 6pm Sun) Huge windows with panoramic fjord views lend a little magic to this new 5th-floor grill and restaurant. It's a tasteful, minimalist affair, with a small menu of Icelandic seafood and world cuisine: chicken tortilla, salmon with rocket and basil, lobster tails.

Kristján's Bakari (Hafnarstræti 100; ☽ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) This bakery sells fresh bread, salad and cakes.

Drinking & Entertainment

There are several pubs in Akureyri, including **Græni Hatturinn** (☎ 461 4646; Hafnarstræti 96). Karólína Café (above) is a popular weekend hangout with a more arty crowd.



Inhabitants shake their booties at **Kaffi Akureyri** (☎ 461 3999; Strandgata 7; ☎ 3pm-1am Sun-Thu, to 4am Fri & Sat), a dressy venue good for live music and dancing; **Café Amour** (☎ 461 3030; Raðhústorg 9; ☎ 11am-1am Sun-Thu, to 4am Fri & Sat), a smoky café/cocktail lounge/wine bar with an upstairs dancefloor and the most garish ceiling you'll ever see; and the very popular **Sjallinn** (☎ 461 2757; Geislagata 14; ☎ 3am Fri & Sat), a large nightclub with chart tunes, DJs and bands.

Getting There & Away

AIR

In summer, **Flugfélag Islands** (www.airiceland.is; ☎ 460 7000) has up to seven flights daily between Akureyri and Reykjavík (Ikr10,600). Internationally, **Iceland Express** (☎ 0870 850 0737; www.icelandexpress.com) flies twice a week from London Stansted (around UK£230, three hours).

See right for flights to Grímsey.

BOAT

See right for boats to Grímsey.

BUS

In 2006 the bus company **Trex** (☎ 899 4660; Kaldbaksgata) moved the bus station to its current inconvenient location in the middle of an industrial estate. Akureyri inhabitants want it back outside the tourist office: check the state of the wrangle before departure.

Buses between Akureyri and Reykjavík depart at least once daily (Ikr6600, six hours) year-round. Buses travelling over the Kjölur route to Reykjavík leave daily from 20 June to 31 August (Ikr8200, 10 hours).

A bus to Mývatn (Ikr2200, 1½ hours) runs daily from June to August (four per week during the rest of year), continuing to Egilsstaðir (Ikr2600, two hours), where you can catch another bus (sometimes a good connection, sometimes a five-hour wait) to Seyðisfjörður. Buses to Húsavík (Ikr2100, one hour) depart once or twice daily.

For buses to Dalvík (for the ferry to Grímsey), see right.

AROUND AKUREYRI

South of town is Iceland's most visited 'forest', **Kjarnaskógur**, popular for family outings. A good day walk from Akureyri follows the **Glerárdalur** valley as far as Lambi mountain hut. From Akureyri you

can hike up and down **Mt Sulur** (1213m) in about eight hours; if possible, get a lift to the signposted turnoff (it's a dull walk out of town), from where the summit is a 5km climb.

About 50km east of town is curvy waterfall **Godáfoff**, where Þorgeir Ljósvefningagoði, when asked to decide whether Iceland should adopt Christianity, symbolically threw his statues of the old Norse gods. Buses from Akureyri to Mývatn pass the waterfall.

Grímsey

The main attraction of **Grímsey**, a wind-blown island 40km from the north coast, is that it's the only part of Iceland that lies (partly) inside the Arctic Circle. A large signpost marks the theoretical line; once you've crossed into polar realms, buy a commemorative certificate from the harbourside café. Abundant birdlife (puffins, razorbills, guillemots, gulls and psychotic Arctic terns) outnumbers the close-knit community by around one million to 100. The boat ride adds to the mystique of reaching this isolated place.

The **Sæfari** (☎ 458 8970; www.saevari.is) sails from Dalvík (44km north of Akureyri) to Grímsey island at 9am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (return Ikr4340, 3½ hours), returning from Grímsey at 4pm. In summer, connecting buses leave Akureyri at 7.30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, returning from Dalvík at 7.30pm (Ikr1000).

There's one daily scheduled evening flight from Akureyri to Grímsey (one way Ikr7700, two hours). Nonni Travel (p257) can arrange day trips by boat or air (Ikr5100 to Ikr14,200).

HÚSAVÍK

pop 2269

Most people visit the 'whale-watching capital of Europe' to do just that; in season, you're almost guaranteed to see these awe-inspiring ocean giants feeding in the Skjálfaandi bay.

The **tourist information desk** (☎ 464 4300; inside Kasko supermarket; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Thu, to 7pm Fri, to 6pm Sat Jun-Aug) is staffed in summer; brochures are available year-round. There's internet access in the **library** (☎ 464 6165; Stórigarður 17; per hr Ikr250; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Thu, to 5pm Fri).

Sights & Activities

The fascinating **Whale Centre** (☎ 464 2520; www.icewhale.is; Hafnarstétt; adult/6-14yr/student Ikr600/250/400; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm May & Sep) deserves a couple of hours' attention, preferably *before* you go whale-watching. It tells you everything about Icelandic whales and whaling, and the hanging gallery of skeletons allows you truly to appreciate their size.

From mid-May to mid-September, **North Sailing** (Norður Sigling; ☎ 464 2350; www.northsailing.is; Gamli Baukur, Hafnarstétt; adult/under 14yr/15-16yr Ikr3800/free/1900) and **Gentle Giants** (Hvalferðir; ☎ 464 1500; www.gentlegiants.is; Garðarsbraut 6; Ikr3700) offer three-hour whale-watching trips on sturdy oaken boats (see the boxed text, op-

posite). There's a 99% chance of sightings; mostly minke and harbour porpoises, but humpback and blue whales appear occasionally. Buy tickets from the 'lighthouse' ticket booths opposite the church.

Once you've recovered your land legs, **Safnahúsið** (Museum; ☎ 464 1860; www.husmus.is; Stórigarður 17; adult/child Ikr400/100; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug, 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 4-6pm Sun Sep-May), the local museum, has impressive maritime and natural history collections, and admission includes a cup of coffee.

The unique **Icelandic Phallogical Museum** (☎ 561 6663; www.phallus.is; Hédinsbraut 3a; Ikr500; ☎ noon-6pm Jun-mid-Sep) contains 183 penises – pickled, dried and stuffed – from local mammals ranging in size from a hamster to a blue whale. The only willy missing is that of *Homo sapiens*, although four donors have been lined up.

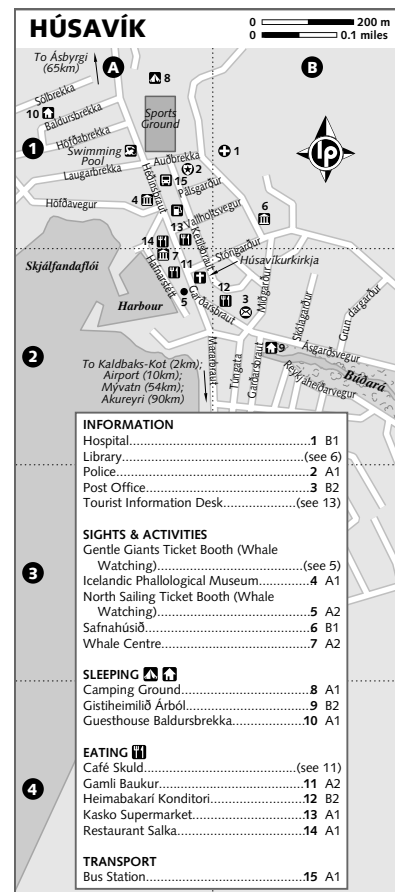
Sleeping

Camping ground (☎ 845 0705; per person Ikr800, 2nd & 3rd nights free) This option, located at the northern edge of town, has heated toilets, washing machines and cooking facilities.

Gistiheimilið Árból (☎ 464 2220; www.simnet.is/arboll; Ásgarðsvegur 2; s/d/tr Ikr6200/9600/13,400 Jun-mid-Sep, Ikr5000/7400/9800 mid-Sep-May) This ex-governor's mansion, on the edge of the park, is the best place to stay in town. It's spacious and welcoming, upper rooms have lovely views of either the harbour or the mountains, and there's interesting ephemera on the walls, including bugles, guns and old photos of Húsavík.

Kaldbaks-Kot (☎ 464 1504; www.cottages.is; off Rd 85; 2-/4-person house Ikr9900/12,900, discounts in low season) For extraordinarily cosy, well-priced accommodation, try these self-contained wooden cottages, 2km south of Húsavík. They contain everything you need (fully equipped kitchen, living room, comfy beds, veranda, TV), have mountain-and-sea views, and there are three hot tubs for starlit bathing.

Guesthouse Baldursbrekka (☎ 464 1005; mariam@simnet.is; Baldursbrekka 20; sb/s/d Ikr2000/2500/5000) The cheapest option, this family home in a quiet cul-de-sac has five dinky rooms, cooking facilities and a garage to hang wet clothes. Breakfast Ikr700. If it's full, the pleasant lady at No 17 opposite has four rooms and a guest kitchen; prices are similar.



Eating

Gamli Baukur (☎ 464 2442; www.gamlibaukur.is; Hafnarstétt; mains 1kr990-3500; ☎ 11.30am-9pm Sun-Wed, to 1am Thu, 11am-3am Fri & Sat) Built from driftwood, the Old Tankard is a cosy harbour-side restaurant-bar with a nautical theme. It's decorated with copper lamps and compasses, and fresh scallops, cod, shrimp and herring usually feature on the menu (hamburgers are available for the fish-disinclined).

Restaurant Salka (☎ 464 2551; Garðarsbraut 6; mains 1kr900-3000; ☎ 11am-10pm Sun-Thu, 11.30am-11pm Fri & Sat) This historical building, which was once Iceland's first cooperative, houses another good restaurant. Salka also has a bar and an extensive local menu (lobster, shrimp, puffin, lamb), plus pizzas and burgers.

Heimabakari Konditori (☎ 464 2901; Garðarsbraut 15; ☎ 8am-5pm) Fresh bread, sandwiches and droolworthy cakes are sold at this fantastic bakery. At the time of writing, the bakery was about to open at the harbour-side Café Skuld (open 8.30am to 10pm summer), selling tasty baked goods, plus beer and wine.

Getting There & Away

Trex (☎ 899 4660) run one to three daily buses to Akureyri (1kr2100, 1¼ hours). From mid-June to August, **SBA-Norðurleið** (☎ 550 0700) run two services daily to Reykjavílið at Mývatn (1kr1600, 40 minutes), and one service on weekdays to Ásbýrgi (1kr1800, 1¼ hours).

EYE TO EYE: A WHALE ENCOUNTER *Fran Parnell*

On Thursday morning in Húsavík, I'm popping sea-sickness pills and praying to the rain gods to back off. But as I join the other passengers on board the wooden whale-spotting boat, the water is calm and the sun shivers out. We set sail into Skjálfandi bay, snowcapped mountains all around, and within 15 minutes we have seen our first minke.

Over the next two hours, sightings of these amazing creatures come thick and fast. It's a rare moment when there isn't a whale visible somewhere: shining backs roll from the waves, and blasts of air spout from blowholes in all directions. Some of the whales are so close that you can even smell their breath – a rancid stench of month-old fish! Besides minke and a solitary dolphin, we watch five humpbacks repeatedly coming up for air. There's ample time to admire their huge flukes as they dive, each patterned with a Rorschachlike blotch as individual as a human fingerprint.

Just before the boat turns for harbour, there's a noise like a steam engine and a humpback surfaces just metres from where I'm standing. Its knobbed head rises from the water, and for long seconds, a prehistoric eye surveys us gravely; then the head submerges, the fluke curves, and the whale is gone.

MÝVATN

Mývatn is the calm, shallow lake at the heart of a volatile volcanic area. Nature's violent masterpieces are everywhere – crazy-coloured mud pots, huge craters, and still-smouldering eruption debris. Once you've had your fill of all the explosive horror, mellow out with cycle rides, bird-watching (geese, Arctic terns, golden plovers, ducks and swans can be seen) and with a bathe in the north's version of the Blue Lagoon.

Reykjavílið (population 208), at the northern end of the lake, is more an assortment of accommodation than a true town, but it makes the best base (Skútustaðir, at the southern end, also has summer facilities). The **tourist office** (☎ 464 4390; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug) is in Reykjavílið, on the main road next to the supermarket. At the time of research, low season hours weren't determined due to the office being newly opened.

The down side to Mývatn (Midge Lake) are the dense midge clouds that appear in summer: on the bright side, they don't bite! Also, if hiking, keep a look out for deep fissures, especially if you are travelling with children.

Sights & Activities AROUND THE LAKE

One of the best ways to experience the 37-sq-km lake is by bicycle or horse; several places in Reykjavílið rent them. We recommend a leisurely ride round the shores, taking in the forested lava headland of **Höfði**;

pinnacle formations at **Kálfaströnd**; pseudo-craters at **Skútustaðir**, where ponds, bogs and marshlands create havens for nesting birds; the climb up **Vindbelgjarfjall** (529m); and a high-density waterfowl **nesting area** along the northwestern shore (off-road entry restricted between 15 May and 20 July).

One of the most interesting walks begins at **Stóragjá**, a hot spring near the village. After a few minutes, the path comes to a dead end at a pipeline. Turn left and walk several hundred metres until the track turns southward. It crosses a lava field to **Grjótagjá**, a 50°C hot spring in a spooky fissure, then continues to the prominent tephra crater **Hverfell** (sadly scarred by graffití), and **Dimmuborgir**, a 2000-year-old maze of twisted lava whose highlight is the 'Church', a natural arched cave that really looks manmade.

MÝVATN NATURE BATHS

Ease aching muscles at the **Mývatn Nature Baths** (Jarðbaðshólar; ☎ 464 4411; www.jarðbodin.is; adult/8-16yr 1kr1100/550, towel/swimsuit rental 1kr350/350; ☎ 9am-midnight summer, noon-10pm winter), the north's answer to the Blue Lagoon, 5km east

of Reykjavílið. It's much smaller but is nicely landscaped, with a hot pot and saunas.

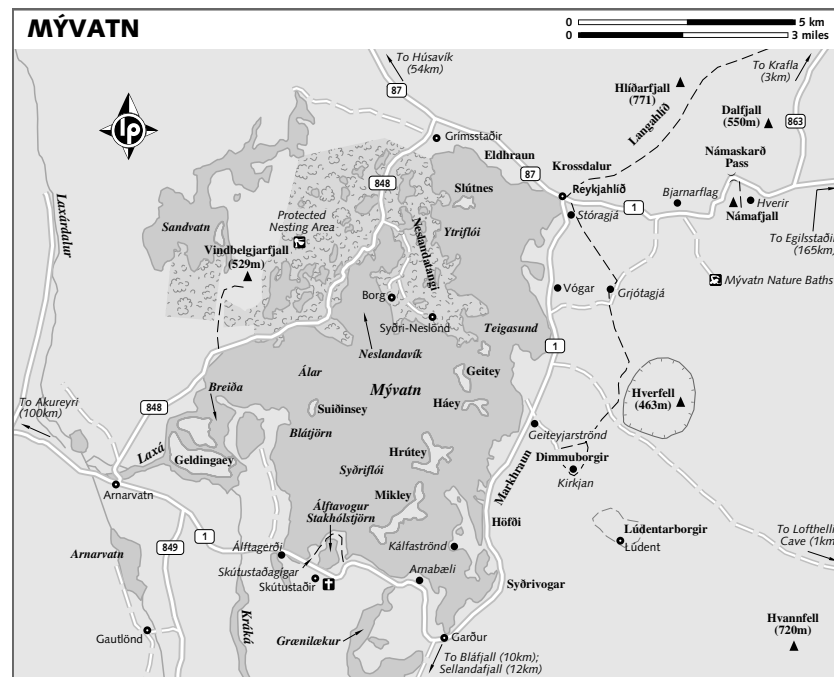
NÁMAFJALL & HVERIR

Vaporous vents cover the pinky-orange Námafjall ridge. At its foot, fumaroles and solfataras in the Hverir geothermal field scream steam and belch mud. The area rests on the mid-Atlantic rift (hence all the activity), and can be seen from quite a distance. It's just off the Ring Rd 6km east of Reykjavílið.

KRAFLA

The colourful, sulphurous mudhole **Leirhnjúkur** is Krafla's prime attraction. From there you can meander round the **Krafla Caldera**, where several different lava flows overlaid each other; some from the 1984 eruptions are still smoking.

Nearby **Stóra-Viti** is a 320m-wide explosion crater and lake (now inactive...allegedly). The 30-megawatt **Króflustöð Power Station** sources steam from 17 boreholes around the volcano; step into the **visitor centre** (Gestastofa; ☎ 12.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug) for an explanatory film. One



of the power station's preliminary searches produced the whopping crater **Sjálfskapar Viti** (Homemade Hell; near the Krafla car park), when a team drilled into a steam chamber which exploded. Bits of the rig were found 3km away.

Between 20 June and 31 August, a daily Mývatn–Dettifoss bus (see opposite) runs via Krafla.

Tours

From mid-June to September, **Hótel Reykjahlíð** (see below) run daily tours to Dettifoss via Krafla (Ikr9900, seven hours); to Lofthellir, a lava cave with magnificent natural ice sculptures (Ikr7700, five hours); and to the cratered wasteland of the Askja caldera (Ikr14,400, 12 hours). There's a maximum of eight passengers allowed on each tour, so it is advisable to book tickets in advance.

SBA-Norðurleið (www.sba.is; 3-day tour Ikr20,700; Akureyri ☎ 550 0700; Reykjavík ☎ 550 0770), has tours departing from Akureyri (8.30am), Húsavík (9.45am) or Mývatn (11am) on Monday.

Sleeping & Eating

The following options are all in Reykjahlíð (Skútustaðir, at the southern end of the lake, also has seasonal camping, farmhouse and hotel accommodation and a restaurant.) Camping at Mývatn is prohibited outside designated areas.

Ferðabjónustan Bjarg (☎ 464 4240; ferdabjarg@simnet.is; Mývatn; camp sites per tent Ikr750, sb Ikr2500, d/tr Ikr8200/10,500 mid-Jun–Aug; ☎ May–Oct; 📺) This is primarily a large, well-equipped camping ground, perfectly situated on the lakeshore. There's a new shower block with underfloor heating, a laundry service, summer boat (Ikr1200 per hour) and bike hire (Ikr1000/1500 for six/12 hours) hire, and a nifty kitchen tent. There are also three bright, freshly carpeted rooms in the main building; sleeping-bag accommodation (from Ikr1750) is available out-of-season. If you're lucky, you might get to see the owner's smokehouse...quite amazing.

Hlíð Camping Ground (☎ 464 4103; hlid@isholf.is; Hraunbrún; camp sites per tent Ikr600, sb Ikr2000; 📺) This large stepped camping ground, 300m inland from the church, has internet access (per 30 minutes Ikr400) and some first-class mountain bikes for hire.

Hótel Reykjahlíð (☎ 464 4142; www.reykjahlid.is; s/d/tr Ikr13,300/16,200/21,200 Jun–Aug, Ikr7300/9900/13,900 Sep–May; 📺 📺) New owners María and Petur have completely refurbished this lovely lakeside hotel. Its nine light rooms are now a delicate yellow, with billowing curtains, brand-new beds and wi-fi access. The hotel has a bar and à la carte restaurant (open summer only) with the best views in town.

Hótel Reynihlíð (☎ 464 4170; www.reynihlid.is; s/d Ikr15,900/17,900 Jun–Aug & Christmas, Ikr8900/10,900 Sep–May; 📺 📺) One entire wing of this smartish business hotel has been spruced up: ensuite rooms, with tea-making facilities, are now modern-looking and a restful shade of green. Almost half have lake views. The hotel has an upmarket restaurant serving Icelandic specialities. It also rents out bicycles (Ikr1800 per day).

Hraunbrún (☎ 464 4103; sb Ikr2000) For cheap sleeps, try out these six-bed rooms in a portakabin-style building; just pray your neighbours aren't noisy. There are good kitchen facilities and a shower block; check in at Hlíð camping ground.

Eating options in Reykjahlíð are limited to the two hotel restaurants and **Gamli Bærinn** (☎ 464 4170; 📺 11am–10pm mid-May–mid-Sep, til midnight Jul & Aug; mains Ikr1200–1990). This atmospheric 'country tavern' is a place of two halves. By day, it's a mellow café serving coffee, cakes, quiche and baguettes, while at night it becomes an effervescent bar-restaurant offering up lamb, chicken and smoked char dishes (Ikr1950) and live entertainment.

Look out for dark, sticky *hverabraud* baked in the area using geothermal heat. It's sometimes available at the supermarket and gift shop.

Getting There & Away

The main long-distance bus stop is outside the supermarket in Reykjahlíð. Buses between Mývatn and Akureyri also stop at Skútustaðir. From June to August, there's a daily bus (four per week rest of year) between Akureyri and Mývatn (Ikr2200, 1½ hours), continuing to Egilsstaðir (Ikr2600, two hours).

See p262 for information on buses to/from Húsavík.

See p273 for information on buses to/from Reykjavík via Sprengisandur.

JÖKULSÁRGLJÚFUR NATIONAL PARK

Sticky-birch forests, orchids and bizarre rock formations fill the rift of **Jökulsárgljúfur National Park** (☎ 465 2359; www.ust.is), sometimes called 'Iceland's Grand Canyon'. One highlight is **Ásbyrgi**, a hoof-shaped chasm formed by a flood of biblical proportions from a glacier 200km away. The swirls, spirals and strange acoustics at **Hljóðaklettar** (Echo Rocks) are similarly unearthly, and near the park's southern boundary is **Dettifoss**, Europe's most forcefully-flowing waterfall, where around 200 cu metres of water per second thunder over the edge.

Camping is limited to the large camping ground at **Ásbyrgi** (camp sites per adult Ikr600, all facilities); and smaller sites at **Vesturdalur** (camp sites per adult Ikr600, no showers) and **Dettifoss** (camp sites free, hikers only). The camping grounds are open from June to mid-September. Food is available at the snack bar, supermarket and petrol station at the **Ásbyrgi farmstead** (Rte 85).

From 20 June to 31 August, daily scheduled buses run from Akureyri (Ikr4900, 3¼ hours) and Húsavík (Ikr2800, 1¼ hours) to major sites in the park. There's also a daily Mývatn–Dettifoss (Ikr1900, 1½ hours) bus via Krafla (Ikr900, 15 minutes), leaving at 11.30am from the supermarket in Reykjahlíð and returning from Dettifoss at 2pm.

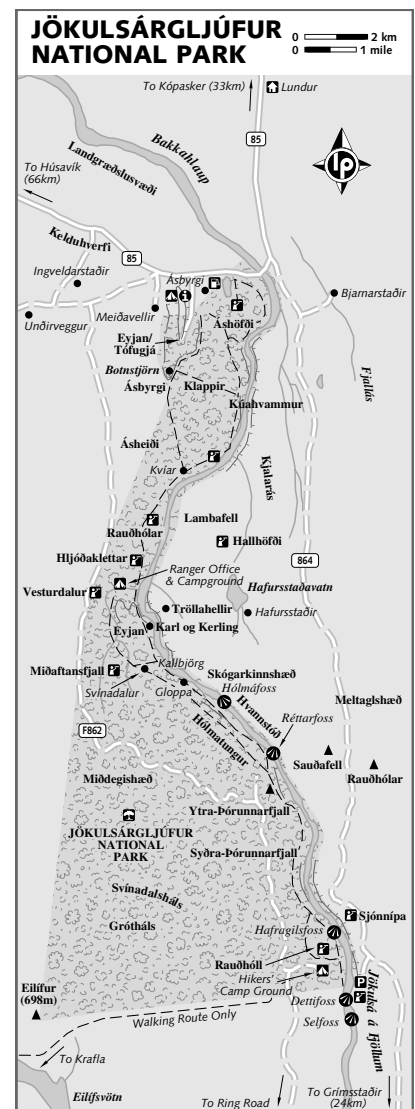
THE EAST

Iceland's wild reindeer roam the mountains of the empty east, and Iceland's version of the Loch Ness monster calls the area home. Tiny villages dot the fjords, surrounded by streams of tumbling water. Sadly, the east is also the site of Iceland's controversial aluminium smelter (see p235).

EGILSSTAÐIR

pop 1905

Egilsstaðir is a grey service town and the main regional transport hub. Its saving grace is lovely **Lagarfljót** (Lögurinn), Iceland's third-largest lake. Since saga times, tales have been told of a monster, the Lagarfljótsörmurinn, who lives in its depths. All amenities are clustered near the central crossroads, including the regional **tourist office** (☎ 471 2320; www.east.is; 📺 9am–6pm May, Jun & mid-Aug–mid-Sep, 8am–10pm Jul–mid-Aug; fewer hours at other times) at the camping ground.



Sleeping & Eating

Camping ground (☎ 471 2320; info@east.is; Kaupvangur 10; camp sites per adult Ikr750, sb Ikr2300, 5-person hut Ikr7000; 📺 year-round; 📺) Camp sites are lined in utilitarian rows, but the facilities are good (including a kitchen, laundry and internet) and there are some dorm beds available.

Gistiheimilið Egilsstaðir (☎ 471 1114; www.egilsstadir.com; s/d lkr10,500/13,900 May-Sep, lkr6900/9500 Oct-Apr; P) The town was named after this splendid heritage guesthouse and farm, 300m west of crossroads, on the banks of Lagarfjöt. Its sensitively renovated en-suite rooms retain a real sense of character. Breakfast is in the lakeside dining room, which also does a good Icelandic dinner buffet.

Hotel Edda (☎ 444 4000; sb/s/d lkr2200/9000/11,300; ☞ Jun-mid-Aug) Based in the school opposite the swimming pool, off Tjarnarbrau, rooms have private bathrooms, and there's a restaurant with panoramic views.

Café Nielsen (☎ 471 2626; Tjarnarbraut 1; lunch lkr1300, dinner mains lkr1700-2900; ☞ 11.30am-11.30pm Mon-Thu, to 2am Fri, 1pm-2am Sat, to 11.30pm Sun) The top choice straddles the divide between smoky bar and genteel restaurant. There's everything from veggieburgers (lkr1720) to scallops with mango and chilli (lkr2650).

The **Shell petrol station** (Fagradsbraut 13) at the top of town has an extremely popular set lunch.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are up to five **Flugfélag Íslands** (☎ 471 2120; www.airiceland.is) flights daily between Reykjavík and Egilsstaðir (lkr11,975).

BUS

The main terminal in Egilsstaðir is at the camping ground.

For Akureyri-Mývatn-Egilsstaðir buses, see p260, for Egilsstaðir-Höfn, see opposite.

Between 1 June and 10 September **Ferðajónusta Austurlands** (☎ 472 1515, 852 9250) operates a daily bus to Seyðisfjörður (lkr700, 40 minutes), with two buses on Wednesday and Thursday. At other times of year, there are six buses per week.

TAXI

Ferry and bus connections are not too hot: if you get stuck, a **taxi** (☎ 892 9247) between Egilsstaðir and Seyðisfjörður costs around lkr8000.

SEYÐISFJÖRÐUR

pop 731

Things get lively when the Smyril Line's ferry *Norröna* sails majestically up the 17km-long fjord and docks at pretty little Seyðisfjörður (www.sfk.is). The picturesque

multicoloured houses, snowcapped mountains and cascading waterfalls make the perfect welcome to Iceland.

The **tourist office** (☎ 472 1551; ☞ 10am-noon & 1-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-noon & 1-8pm Wed summer, 1-5pm Wed & Thu rest of yr) is inside the ferry terminal.

Sights & Activities

For an unearthly experience, try a guided midnight **kayaking trip** (☎ 865 3741; www.iceland-tour.com; ☞ Jun-Aug) round the tranquil lagoon (lkr1500, one hour); more experienced paddlers can go on six-hour/two-day trips (lkr6000/17,000) to Austdalur or Skálanes. Hlynur also does **mountain-bike tours** (two-hour trips lkr2000); or hire a bike and go off on your own (half-/one day lkr1500/2000).

The Seyðisfjörður to Vestdalur **hike** is a fine taste of the countryside, around Mt Bjölfur to the Seyðisfjörður-Egilsstaðir road.

Seyðisfjörður is full of 19th-century **timber buildings**, brought in kit form from Norway: read all about them in the brochure *Historic Seyðisfjörður*, available at the tourist office. For an insight into the town's fishing and telecommunications history, there's a worthwhile museum, **Tækniminjasafn Austurlands** (☎ 472 1596; Hafnargata 44; adult/child lkr400/free; ☞ 10am-5pm Jun-mid-Sep, 1-4pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-May).

On Wednesday evenings in summer, live music performances are held in the pretty **Blue Church** (Ránargata; lkr1000; ☞ 8.30pm Jul-mid-Aug).

Sleeping

Camping ground (☎ 861 3097; ferdamenning@sfk.is; Ránargata; camp sites per adult lkr600) A pleasant, sheltered grassy camping ground with big hedges and picnic benches.

Hótel Aldan (☎ 472 1277; www.hotelaldan.com; Oddagata 6) is shared across three old wooden buildings. Reception and the bar-restaurant (where breakfast is served) are based at Norðurgata 2. Cheaper rooms are at **Snæfell** (Austurvegur 3; s/d/tr lkr10,800/14,800/16,800 summer, lkr6500/8800/10,800 winter; P), a creaky, characterful three-storey place with fresh white paintwork, draped muslin curtains and Indian bedspreads to add a splash of colour. **Old Bank** (s/d/tr lkr12,800/16,800/19,800 summer, lkr7800/11,800/14,800 winter; P) houses a truly gorgeous boutique guesthouse with all mod cons. Its luxury rooms are bright,

spacious and furnished with antiques, and beds snuggle under hand-embroidered bedspreads. Triple rooms have wicked alcoves.

Hafaldan HI Hostel (☎ 472 1410; thorag@simnet.is; Ránargata 9; sb dm lkr1650, sb d lkr4800, d lkr6000; ☞) This cheerful arty hostel is split over two sites (facilities are shared). The original building has harbour views, a sunny lounge, newly fitted kitchen, laundry, internet access... and even a snug Mongolian yurt (July and August) in the garden. The central new building used to be the old hospital, but you'd never guess; Indian hangings and funky old furniture make it homely.

Eating

Skaffell Café (☎ 472 1633; Austurvegur 42; snacks lkr450-1100, mains lkr2000-3500; ☞ summer; ☞) This highly recommended, welcoming bistro-bar and internet café is a popular place with local artists and musicians. Snacks include omelette, waffles and toast with caviar, and the freshly caught seafood is great.

Hótel Aldan (☎ 472 1277; Norðurgata 2; mains lkr2600-3500; ☞ 7am-9.30pm mid-May-mid-Sep) Coffee and light meals are served all day. In the evening, damask tablecloths, crystal wine glasses and flickering candles prettify the tables, and the menu features traditional Icelandic ingredients (lamb, lobster, reindeer, fish) with contemporary salads and sauces. The bar buzzes when the boat comes in.

There's a **snack bar** (☎ 472 1700; Hafnargata 2) at the Shell petrol station and a **Samkaup-Strax supermarket** (☎ 472 1201; Vesturvegur 1; ☞ closed Sun).

Getting There & Away

For bus information, see opposite. Details of the ferry service from mainland Europe are on p293.

THE SOUTH

Getting There & Away

The main bus company in the south is **Austurleið Kynnisferðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is). It runs the following services:

Reykjavík-Kirkjubæjarklaustur-Skaftafell-Jökulsárlón-Höfn (lkr7400, 8½ hours) June to mid-September; it departs at 8.30am daily from both ends (a reduced service departs later in the day out-of-season). Eastbound from Reykjavík the bus passes Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 1.30pm (lkr4400), Skaftafell at 2.35pm

(lkr5400) and Jökulsárlón at 3.30pm (lkr6200). Westbound from Höfn it passes Jökulsárlón at 10am (lkr1300), Skaftafell at 11.10am (lkr2300) and Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 12.40pm (lkr3300).

Skaftafell-Jökulsárlón (lkr2300, 9am & 1pm) July and August. Stops for 1½ to 2½ hours at the lagoon before returning.

Höfn-Stafafell-Egilsstaðir (lkr4900, four hours) June to August. Departs from Höfn at 8.30am, and from Egilsstaðir at 2pm daily. The bus passes Stafafell (eastwards towards Egilsstaðir at around 9am, westwards towards Höfn at around 5pm).

Reykjavík-Kirkjubæjarklaustur-Skaftafell, via Landmannalaugar (lkr8100, 11 hours) Mid-June to August. Departs from Reykjavík at 8.30am and from Skaftafell at 8am daily. The bus passes through Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 6.30pm eastbound and 9am westbound.

STAFAFELL

pop 10

On the southeast coast between nowhere and nowhere, Stafafell is a lovely, lonely hiking area flanked by the **Lón lagoon** and the colourful **Lónsöræfi mountains**.

Wildhaired and welcoming, Bergsveinn is the good-humoured, knowledgeable host of the area's only sleeping choice, **Stafafell HI Hostel** (☎ 478 1717; www.eldhorn.is/stafafell; sb lkr2000, s/d from lkr4500/6545) – when he's not tending to his 500 sheep. The hostel is full of light pine fittings and bright sunshine, and has a peaceful feel. Meals are available in summer if reserved in advance, but bring backup food. There's also a **camping area** (camp sites per adult lkr600) and cottages for hire.

Mountain-bus tours (lkr5000, ☞ Jun-Aug) to Kollumúli, in the Lónsöræfi mountains, are highly recommended and can be arranged at the HI hostel. The hostel can also advise on about a dozen local **walking routes**.

See left for scheduled buses.

VATNAJÖKULL

Mighty Vatnajökull is earth's largest icecap outside the poles. It's three times the size of Luxembourg (8300 sq km), reaches a thickness of 1km in places, and if you could find a pair of scales big enough, you'd find it weighed an awesome 3000 billion tonnes! Scores of glaciers flow down from the centre as rivers of crevassed ice.

Accommodation is available at the **Jökulásléi Hut** (☎ 478 1000; sb lkr1800), near the edge of the ice.

Tours

From June to August, **Vatnajökull.is** (☎ 894 1616; www.vatnajokull.is) run a trip from Höfn to Jöklašel (near the edge of the ice), leaving at 9.40am. You arrive around 11am, allowing time for a bone-shaking one-hour skidoo ride. It returns via Jökulsárlón (see below), where it's possible to take a boat ride on the lagoon, arriving back in Höfn at 5.15pm. The bus costs 1kr5200. Bus, skidoo and boat ticket combined costs 1kr14,800.

Warning

Hiking around the Jöklašel Hut isn't advised due to dangerous crevasses.

AROUND VATNAJÖKULL Jökulsárlón

A ghostly procession of luminous-blue icebergs drifts through the 17-sq-km **Jökulsárlón lagoon**, before floating out to sea. This surreal scene (right next to the Ring Rd between Höfn and Skaftafell) is a natural film set: you might have seen it in *Batman Begins* (2005) and the James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002). The ice breaks off from Breiðamerkurjökull glacier, an offshoot of Vatnajökull.

Boat trips (☎ 478 2222; info@jokulsarlon.is; 1kr2200) among the bergs are available from June to August.

See p267 for buses.

Höfn pop 1662

Tiny Höfn makes a handy base for trips to the glacier. The tourist office is inside the **Jöklašlyning Glacier Exhibition** (☎ 478 2665; www.joklaslyning.is; adult/under 16yr 1kr600/free; Hafnarbraut 30; ☎ 1-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr, to 6pm daily May & Sep, 9am-9pm daily Jun-Aug), which has two floors of interesting displays on Vatnajökull and the southeastern corner of Iceland as well as some altogether too-strange glacial mice.

The two main companies running summer tours to the glacier are **Arctic-Ice** (☎ 478 1731; www.arctic-ice.is) and **Glacier Jeeps** (☎ 478 1000; www.glacierjeeps.is). The cheapest 3¼-hour Super-Jeep trip costs from 1kr9000, with prices rising for longer tours including skidoo rides. A farmer, Einar Sigurðsson pulls visitors along in a **haycart ride** (☎ 894 0894; www.hofsnes.com; ☎ 11am May-Aug), 10km over glacial sands to Ingólfshöfði, a 76m sheer headland and protected site where there are

loads of sea birds (great skuas, guillemots, fulmar, puffins etc). The headland is named after Ingólfur Arnarson, who spent his first winter in Iceland there.

There's a **camping ground** (☎ 478 1606; camping@sinnet.is; Hafnarbraut 52; camp sites per adult 1kr650) with 16 log cabins sleeping up to six people (sleeping bag 1kr2000, whole cabin 1kr6500): it has cooking facilities, but you'll need your own pans.

At the harbour end of town, **Nýbær HI Hostel** (☎ 478 1736; hofn@hostel.is; Hafnarbraut 8; sb 1kr2200; ☎) is a medium-sized place with laundry facilities. Run by the same couple, **Gistiheimilið Hvammur** (☎ 478 1503; hvammur3@sinnet.is; Ránarslóð 2; sb 1kr2500, s/d 1kr6500/8800; ☎), overlooking the boat-filled harbour, is the pick of the guesthouses for its smart rooms and internet connection. There are sinks and satellite TV in every room.

For business-class accommodation, try friendly **Hótel Höfn** (☎ 478 1240; www.hotelhofn.is; Víkurbraut; s/d from 1kr12,750/17,500; ☎ ☎), where most of the rooms look either out to sea or over the glacier. It also does formal meals, fast food and buffets in its two **dining rooms** (mains 1kr1900-2900; ☎ 9am-9pm).

Kaffi Hornið (☎ 478 2600; Hafnarbraut; mains 1kr1800-4000; ☎ 11am-10pm Mon-Thu, noon-1am Fri & Sat, 3-10pm Sun) This informal log-cabin affair is decorated with old B&W photos of the town. The food is served in stomach-stretching portions; there are a couple of veggie options and a Höfn speciality, garlic-toasted lobster (1kr4000), as well as burgers, pasta, fish mains and salads.

Buses (see p267) leave from outside Hótel Höfn.

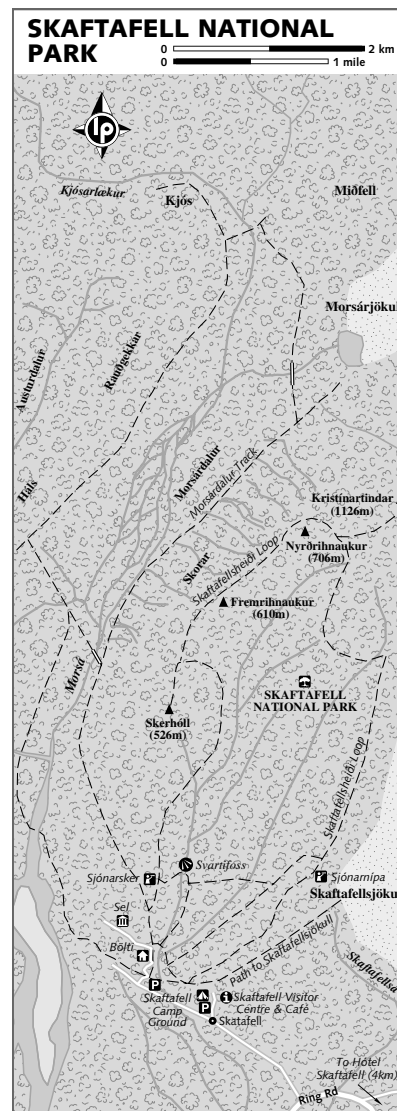
SKAFTAFELL NATIONAL PARK

Europe's largest national park encompasses a breathtaking collection of peaks and glaciers. It's the country's favourite wilderness: 160,000 visitors per year come to marvel at thundering waterfalls, twisting birch woods, and the brilliant blue-white Vatnajökull ice-cap. Expansion plans are underway; eventually, the Skaftafell and Jökulsárgljúfur (p265) will join to form one 15,000km² megapark – 40% of the entire country.

There is a really helpful **visitor centre** (☎ 478 1627; www.ust.is; ☎ 8am-9pm Jun-Aug, 10am-3pm May & Sep) which shows a cool film about the 1996 *jökulhlaup* (glacial flood) in peak season.

Walking

Skaftafell's main feature is **Svartifoss**, a gloomy waterfall that thunders over black basalt columns. Due to immense pressure in this area, rangers are encouraging visitors to explore elsewhere; for example, the easy one-hour return route to **Skaftafellsjökull**. The trail (wheelchair-accessible) begins at



the information centre and leads to the glacier face, where you can see the bumps, groans and brilliant blue hues of the ice. The **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 999; www.mountainguide.is) leads glacier walks in summer (2½ hours 1kr3500, minimum age 10).

In fine weather, the circular walk round **Skaftafellsheiði** is a treat. There are some enjoyable day walks from the camping ground to **Kristínartindar** (1126m), **Kjós** or the glacial lagoon in **Morsárdalur**; plan on about seven hours for each return trip.

Tours

The Laki eruptions of 1783 caused utter devastation to the area. Over 30 billion tonnes of lava spewed from the Laki fissure, the largest recorded flow from a single eruption. The still-volatile **Lakagigar area**, with its spectacular 25km-long crater, is now part of the national park. In July and August, daily 9½-hour **Austurleið Kynniserðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleið.is) trips from Skaftafell (1kr7300, at 8am) and Kirkjubæjarklaustur (1kr5300, at 9am) visit the craters.

Sleeping & Eating

Book all accommodation ahead in summer, as Skaftafell is immensely popular.

Camping ground (☎ 478 1627; camp sites per adult over 16yr 1kr600) Camping is permitted only at this large, gravelly location (with laundry facilities), right by the visitor centre.

Bölti (☎ 478 1626, fax 478 2426; Skaftafellsheiði; sb/d 1kr2200/7500; ☎ May-Sep) This farm, behind the western edge of the camping ground, is superbly located with dizzying views over the *sandur*. There's sleeping-bag accommodation in six-person rooms, plus small cottages with twin beds and cooking facilities; dinner can be supplied if requested in advance.

Hótel Skaftafell (☎ 478 1945; www.hotelskaftafell.is; Freysnes; s/d May-Aug 1kr11,000/14,600, low season 1kr9000/11,100; ☎ Feb-Nov) At Freysnes, 5km east of the park, Skaftafell's 63 rooms (all with bathroom and TV) are functional rather than luxurious. The staff are helpful, and even the rooms in the prefabricated buildings at the back have great glacial views. There's a restaurant, and a pleasant walking trail.

The visitor centre café is the only place to get food inside the park.

Getting There & Away

See p267 for buses.

KIRKJUBÆJARKLAUSTUR

pop 139

Kirkjubæjarklaustur (translated 'church-farm-cloister') is a tiny settlement lost in the staggeringly vast and empty *sandur*. It's full of sights that hark back to its religious beginnings.

There's a **tourist information point** inside the Skaftárskáli petrol station.

Kirkjugólf's regular basalt columns, cemented with moss, were once mistaken for an old church floor rather than a work of nature, and it's easy to see why. The 'floor' lies in a field about 400m northwest of the petrol station.

Systrastapi (Sisters' Pillar) marks the spot where two nuns were reputedly executed and buried, after sleeping with the devil and a few other no-nos. **Systrafoss** is the prominent waterfall located near the hotel. The lake **Systravtn**, a short saunter up the cliffs, was once a place where nuns went to bathe.

See (p269) for information about tours to the **Lakagígar craters**.

Sleeping & Eating

Kirkjubæ II camping ground (☎/fax 487 4612; camp site per adult 1kr600; ☞ Jun-Aug) Pitch tents on the greensward under a pretty waterfall at this pleasant camping spot above town. Hot showers, kitchen and laundry facilities.

Hótel Klaustur (☎ 487 4900; www.icehotels.is; Klausturvegur 6; s/d from 1kr13,000/16,200) One of the Icelandic chain, the 57-roomed Klaustur looks like a Soviet-bloc hotel, but contains a three-star interior with the usual business-like rooms. The restaurant (mains 1kr1900 to 1kr3900) has an à la carte menu with typical Icelandic mains and some unusual starters – snails, anyone?

Systrakaffi (☎ 487 4848; Klausturvegur 13; light meals 1kr850-1500, mains 1kr1800-3000; ☞ 10am-midnight, to 2am Fri & Sat Jun-Aug, 6-10pm Fri & Sat May & Sep) This ambient little café sells a variety of food including chilliburgers, baconburgers, pizzas and reasonably priced fish and meat dishes, including a bouillabaisse-like seafood soup (1kr1250).

For freshly-made fast-food snacks, there's the **Skaftárskáli petrol station** (☎ 487 4628).

Getting There & Away

See p267 for buses.

ÞÓRSMÖRK

The Woods of Thor is a stunning glacial valley, full of weird rock formations, twisting gorges, a singing cave, mountain flowers and icy streams. Its proximity to Reykjavík (130km) makes it a popular spot in summer, when tents pile up and the camping grounds become partyville. Luckily you don't have to go far to escape the crowds.

Wild camping is prohibited, but the three Þórs mörk huts have **camp sites** (per adult 1kr700) around them. The huts themselves have showers and cooking facilities; reservations are strongly advised, particularly for weekends.

For **Þórs mörk hut** (sb 1kr2000) book through **Ferðafélag Islands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, IS-108 Reykjavík). Bookings for **Básar hut** (sb 1kr1800) are through **Útivist** (☎ 562 1000; www.útivist.is; Laugavegur 178, IS-101 Reykjavík). For the **Húsadalur huts** (sb/d 1kr1700/4000) book through bus company **Reykjavík Excursions** (☎ 580 5400; www.thorsmork.is, www.re.is; Vatnsnýrvarvegur 10, IS-101 Reykjavík).

From June to mid-September, buses run between Reykjavík and Húsadalur (over the hill from Þórs mörk) at 8.30am daily (1kr3700, 3½ hours) with another bus at 5pm Friday; from mid-June to August, a service runs at 5pm Saturday to Thursday.

Even though Þórs mörk seems tantalisingly close (only 30km from the Ring Rd), you *cannot* drive there without a 4WD: the gravel road surface eventually turns into boulders.

VESTMANNAEYJAR

pop 4172

Black and brooding, the Vestmannaeyjar islands form 15 eye-catching silhouettes off the southern shore. They were formed by submarine volcanoes around 11,000 years ago; except for sulky-looking Surtsey, the archipelago's newest addition, which rose from the waves in 1963. Ten years later, unforgettable pictures of Heimaey were broadcast across the globe when a huge eruption buried a third of the town under 30 million tonnes of lava.

Heimaey is the only inhabited island. Its little town and sheltered harbour lie between dramatic *klettur* (escarpments) and two ominous volcanoes – blood-red Eldfell and conical Helgafell. Heimaey's cliffs are a breeding ground for 10 million puffin pairs – see the boxed text, p273.

The **tourist office** (☎ 481 3555; www.vestmannaeyjar.is; Raðhústræti; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-4pm Sat mid-May-mid-Sep) is in the same building as the library and folk museum, and is well signposted from the harbour. There are Sparisjóðurinn and Íslandsbanki banks with ATMs near the post office. The library has internet access (1kr200 per hour).

Sights & Activities

The **Aquarium & Natural History Museum** (Fiskaog Náttúrugripasafn; ☎ 481 1997; Heðarvegur 12; adult/child 6-12yr 1kr400/200; ☞ 11am-5pm mid-May-mid-Sep, 3-5pm Sun mid-Sep-mid-May) has fishtanks of hideous-looking Icelandic fish as well as a live video link to a puffin colony. There are fascinating photos of Heimaey's 1973 evacuation in the **folk museum** (Byggðasafn; ☎ 481 1194; Raðhústræti; adult/child 6-12yr 1kr400/200; ☞ 11am-5pm mid-May-mid-Sep, 3-5pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep-mid-Apr).

The explosive hour-long **Volcanic Film Show** (☎ 481 1045; Heiðarvegur; admission 1kr600; ☞ 11am, 2pm, 3.30pm & 9pm daily mid-Jun-mid-Aug, by request at other times) plays at the local cinema, and includes footage on whales and puffin rappelling.

Four hundred buildings lie buried under the 1973 lava; on the edge of the flow is an eerie **House Graveyard** where beloved homes rest in peace. **'Pompei of the North'** (www.pompeinordursins.is) is a modern 'archaeological' excavation, where 10 houses are being dug up. So far, only the crumpled concrete remains of **No 25 Suðurvegur** have been unearthed.

Skansinn, the oldest structure on the island, is a ruinous 15th-century fort built by English marauders; nearby is a picturesque replica **Norse stave church** and an old water tower crushed by the 1973 lava.

Opportunities for **hiking** abound, including the walk to Stórhöfði and climbs of Helgafell and Eldfell. It's a treacherous 30-minute climb to the top of **Stórkliif**, 'assisted' by ropes and chains, but worth the terror for the breathtaking views.

Tours

From May to August, **Viking Tours** (☎ 488 4884; www.vikingtours.is; small boats harbour, off Egisgata; adult/8-14yr 1kr2700/1700) runs daily boat (10.30am and 3.30pm) and bus (8am and 1pm) tours of the island. If nobody's about, ask in nearby Café Kró.

Sleeping

There are lots of guesthouses to choose from, but they fill up fast after the ferry arrives.

Herjólfssdalur Camp Ground (☎ 692 6952; camp sites per adult 1kr700; ☞ Jun-Aug) Cupped in the bowl of an extinct volcano, this sheltered, dandelion-dotted camping ground has hot showers, a laundry room and cooking facilities.

Gistiheimilið Erna (☎ 481 2112; www.simnet.is/gisting; Kirkjubæjarbraut 15; sb/made-up bed/apt 1kr1800/3000/12,000) On the edge of the 1973 lava flow, Erna is a great budget choice. It's a friendly family home with cooking facilities, laundry, a Jacuzzi, bikes to borrow, and a TV in every room. The apartment fits eight people.

Gistiheimilið Hreiðrið (☎ 481 1045; http://tourist.eyjar.is; Faxastígur 33; sb/s/d 1kr2300/3700/6000 summer, 1kr1800/3000/5000 winter) Run by the helpful volcano-show people, Ruth and Sigurgeir, this winning guesthouse has a family feel. Features include wall-to-wall puffins, a well-stocked kitchen, cosy TV lounge and bike hire.

Hotel Þórshamar (☎ 481 3663; www.hotelvestmannaeyjar.is in Icelandic; Bárustígur 2; s/d/ste 1kr10,240/14,430/20,110 May-Sep, discounts at other times; ☎) Iceland's first cinema is now a hotel, with pale, pleasant rooms and facilities including sauna, hot tubs and snooker room. Of the older rooms, No 209 is the best, tucked in the corner with its own balcony; otherwise go for the three new suites, all with big beds, modern décor and dark wood floors. The same family run several cheaper guesthouses – ask the hotel reception for details.

Eating

Fjólán (☎ 481 3663; Vestmannabraut 28; mains from 1kr2000; ☞ 7am-11pm year-round) Next door to Hótel Þórshamar, this upmarket restaurant has a rather staid air...except for its glitzy gold columns! The buffet breakfast is open to all; after that, traditional home-made Icelandic food is served all day, including probably the best fish on Heimaey.

Lanterna (☎ 481 3393; Bárustígur 11; mains 1kr1500-3500; ☞ 11am-2pm & 6-10.30pm Fri & Sat Sep-May, 11am-10.30pm daily Jun-Aug) This cosy wood-panelled place, decorated with local B&W photos, specialises in Vestmannaeyjar delicacies and, erm, wienerschitzel. The brave can try puffin served with a sweet sauce; catch of the day costs 1kr1500.

Café Maria (☎ 481 3160; Skólavegur 1; mains 1kr1400-3500; ☎ 11.30am-1.30am Mon-Fri, to 1am Sat & Sun) A stuffed gannet surveys proceedings at this pleasant café-restaurant, which is quiet during the day but busy at night. Pizzas, burgers, savoury crepes, and fresh-fish and meat mains are served – plus, yes, puffin.

Pizza 67 (☎ 481 1567; Heiðarvegur 5; pizza 1kr950-1350; ☎) Feathered friends are firmly off the menu: chomp crunchy garlic bread instead in a publike atmosphere.

There's a great sit-down **bakery** (Bárustigur 7) and several cheap service-station grills. For self-catering, there's the central igloo-like **Vöruval supermarket** (☎ 481 3184; Vesturvegur 18; ☎ 8am-7pm daily).

Getting There & Away

Landsflug (☎ 481 3300; www.landsflug.is) flies two or three times daily to as well as from Reykjavík (1kr7200, 25 minutes).

The **Herjólfur** (☎ 481 2800; www.herjolfur.is) sails May to August from Þorlákshöfn to the Vestmannaeyjar. It leaves at noon and 7.30pm (noon only on Saturday), returning from the island at 8.15am and 4pm from Sunday to Friday (8.15am only on Saturday). The crossing takes 2¾ hours. In the low season, there are fewer departures. The one-way fare per adult/12 to 15 years is 1kr1800/900.

Austurleið Kynniserðir buses (1kr1000) connect with the ferry, leaving Reykjavík at 11am and 5.50pm, returning from Þorlákshöfn at 11am and 7pm.



THE INTERIOR

The desolate interior is so vast, barren and remote that the Apollo astronauts held training exercises here before the 1969 lunar landings. The highlands are truly one of Europe's greatest remaining wilderness areas. There are practically no services, accommodation, mobile-phone signals, bridges, and no guarantees if things go wrong: careful preparations are essential. Routes are only accessible in July and August.

ROUTES OF CENTRAL ICELAND

Historically, the interior routes were used as summer shortcuts between north and south, places of terror to be traversed as quickly as possible. Some *útilegumenn* (outlaws) fled into these harsh highlands: those who survived gained legendary status, like the superhuman Grettir or Fjalla-Eyvindar, an Icelandic Robin Hood/Butch Cassidy figure.

Routes in this section are summer-only, and are strictly for high-clearance 4WD vehicles. It's recommended that vehicles travel in pairs.

Many mountain huts are run by **Ferðafélag Íslands** (☎ 568 2535; www.fi.is; Mörkín 6, 15-108 Reykjavík): accommodation is on a first-come, first-served basis, so book in advance. Facilities tend to be spartan, and if there are kitchens, they generally lack utensils.

LITTLE NORTHERN BROTHERS

Iceland is famous for its puffins (*Fratercula arctica*). It's hard not to get dewy-eyed over these expressive, sociable little 'clowns of the ocean'; but really they're as tough as old boots, living out on the stormy winter seas and surviving on salt water.

It's easy to spot puffins: they're the clumsiest things in the air. Wings beat frantically 300 to 400 times per minute to keep them aloft, and the birds often crash-land. Underwater, it's a different story – their flight beneath the waves is so graceful that they were once thought to be a bird-fish hybrid.

Every spring, the puffins return to land to breed. They're discerning birds: 60% of the world's population choose to nest in Iceland. From late May to August, the best places to see them include offshore Reykjavík (p240), Heimaey (p270) and Látrabjarg (p256), where the colonies are wonderfully fearless.

Pufflings start leaving their nests in August. On Heimaey, the young birds are often confused by the town's lights; every year, the children stay up late to collect them and point them seawards. Puffins and their eggs are a traditional part of the Icelandic diet: if you can bring yourself to devour them, you'll find them on menus everywhere, especially in the Vestmannaeyjar.

Kjölur Route

The Kjölur Rte (35) was once believed to be infested with bloodthirsty outlaws. Today, it's a favourite with visitors: it's greener and more hospitable than the Sprengisandur Rte, and forms a neat shortcut between Reykjavík and Akureyri. The route's name (Keel) refers to the perceived shape of its topography.

Kjölur's main attraction is **Hveravellir**, a geothermal area of fumaroles and multicoloured hot pools at the northern end of the pass. A camping ground and two mountain huts with kitchens are run by **Hveravallafélag** (☎ 452 4200; www.hveravellir.is; camp sites per adult 1kr700, sb 1kr1800).

From mid-June to August, **Trex** (☎ 899 4660; www.trex.is) buses travel over the Kjölur Rte between Reykjavík and Akureyri (1kr8200, 10 hours), departing at 8am from both ends.

Sprengisandur Route

The Sprengisandur Rte (F26) may be less interesting than Kjölur, but it does offer some wonderful views of Vatnajökull, Tungnafellsjökull and Hofsjökull, as well as Askja and Herðubreið. The bus passes the photogenic waterfall **Aldeyjarfoss**, which topples over clustered basalt columns.

A good place to break your journey is **Nýidalur**, where there's a **camping ground** (camp sites per adult 1kr700), two **Ferðafélag Íslands huts** (☎ Jul & Aug 854 1194; sb 1kr2000; ☎ Jul & Aug) and numerous hiking possibilities. A recommended, challenging day hike takes you to

the **Vonarskarð Pass** (1000m), a colourful saddle between Vatnajökull, Tungnafellsjökull and the green Ögöngur hills.

From mid-July to late August, **Austurleið Kynniserferðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) buses travel between Landmannalaugar and Mývatn via Sprengisandur. They leave Landmannalaugar at 8.30am on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday (1kr7200, 10 hours), and leave Reykjavílið supermarket (Mývatn) at 8.30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Daily buses (1kr4500, four hours) run between Reykjavík (depart 8.30am) and Landmannalaugar (depart 2.45pm), early June to early September.

Öskjuleið Route (Askja Way)

Herðubreið and Askja on the Öskjuleið Rte (F88) are the most visited wonders of the Icelandic desert.

HERDUBREIÐ

Iceland's most distinctive mountain, Herðubreið (1682m), has been described as a birthday cake, a cooking pot and a lampshade, but the tourist industry calls it (more respectfully) the 'Queen of the Desert'. The track around it makes a nice day hike from **Herðubreiðarlindir Nature Reserve**, a grassy oasis created by springs flowing from beneath the lava. There's a **camping ground** (camp sites per adult 1kr700) and **Þórsteinsskáli Hut** (sb 1kr1800; ☞ Jun-Aug), with basic kitchen, both run by **Ferðafélag Akureyrar** (Akureyri Touring Club; ☎ 462 2720; ffa@ffa.is).

ASKJA

Askja is an immense 50-sq-km caldera, created by a colossal explosion of tephra in 1875. Part of the volcano's collapsed magma chamber contains sapphire-blue **Öskjuvatn**, Iceland's deepest lake at 217m. At its northeastern corner is **Víti**, a hot lake in a tephra crater where the water (around 25°C) is ideal for swimming.

The two **Dreki Huts** (sb 1kr2200) at **Drekagil** (Dragon Ravine), eight kilometres away, accommodate 50 people, and are run by **Ferðafélag Akureyrar** (Akureyri Touring Club; ☎ 462 2720; ffa@ffa.is).

TOURS

Hótel Reykjavílið at Mývatn run tours to the Askja caldera; see p264 for details.

Kverkfjöll Route

The 108km-long Kverkfjöll Rte (F905, F910 and F902) connects Mjórdalur with the Ferðafélag Íslands' Sigurðarskáli hut. This is 3km from the impressive lower **Kverkfjöll ice caves**, where a hot river flows beneath the glacier, melting shimmering patterns on the ice walls. There are other (less impressive) ice caves higher up the glacier and a **hot waterfall** (30°C) at Hveragil, five hours' return from Sigurðarskáli: ask at the hut for directions.

The 85-bed **Sigurðarskáli hut** (sb 1kr2000) and camping ground can be booked through **Ferðafélag Fljótaldshéraðs** (☎ 863 5813; ferda felag@egilsstadir.is).

TOURS

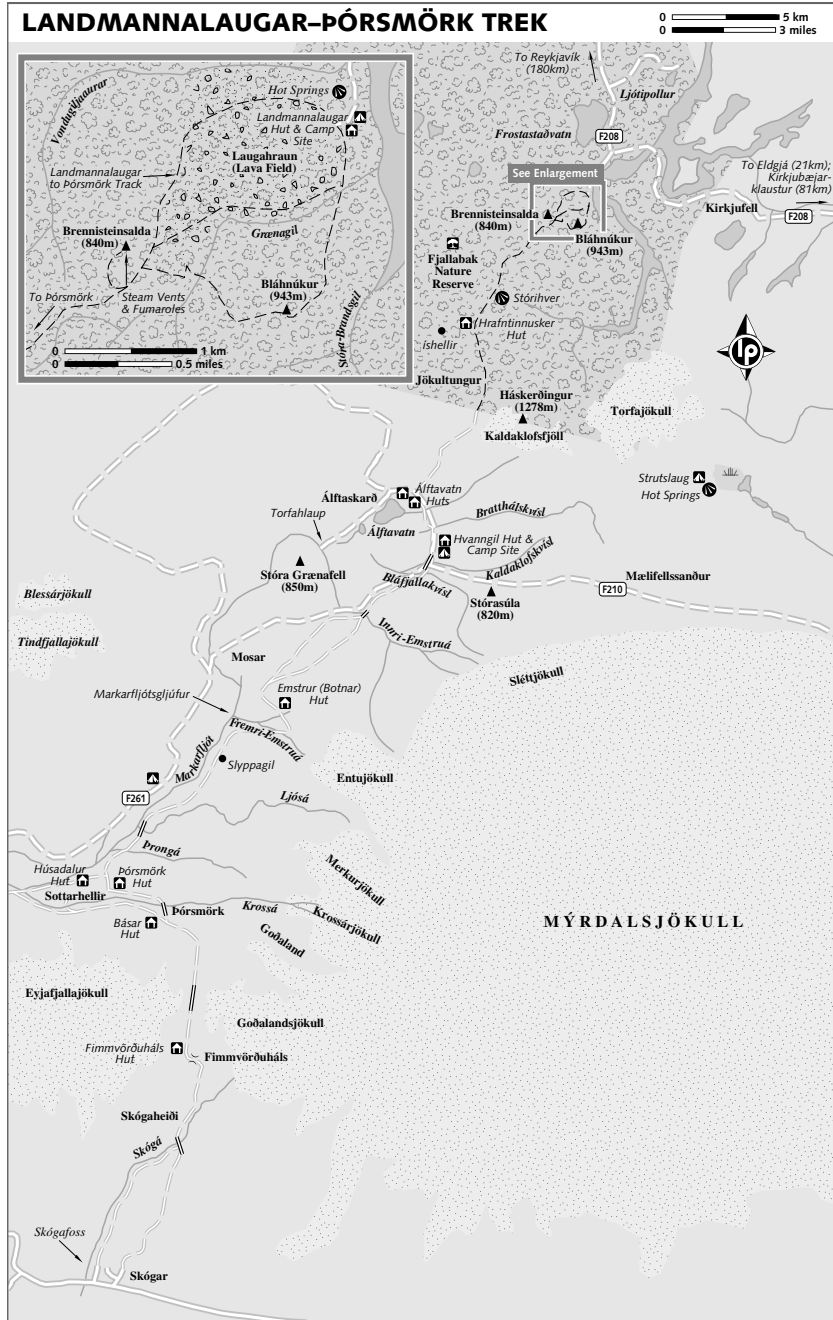
The simplest way to visit Kverkfjöll is with **SBA-Norðurleið** (www.sba.is; 3-day tour 1kr20,700; Akureyri ☎ 550 0700; Reykjavík ☎ 550 0770), with tours departing from Akureyri (8.30am), Húsavík (9.45am) or Mývatn (11am) on Monday in July and August. Tours are just transport and a guide: you must organise your own accommodation and food. Warm clothing, a thick sleeping bag and strong boots are essential.

FJALLABAK NATURE RESERVE

The Fjallabak Route (F208) is a spectacular alternative to the coast road between Hella and Kirkjubæjarklaustur. It passes through the scenic nature reserve to **Landmannalaugar**, an area of rainbow-coloured rhyolite peaks, rambling lava flows, blue lakes and hot springs which can hold you captive for days. Much of the route is along (and in!) rivers and therefore unsuitable for 2WD vehicles.

The star attractions around Landmannalaugar are: **Laugahraun**, a convoluted lava field; the soothing **hot springs** 200m west of the Landmannalaugar hut; multicoloured vents at **Brennisteinsalda**; the incredible red crater lake **Ljótípollur**; and the blue lake **Frostastaðavatn**, just over the rhyolite ridge north of Landmannalaugar. **Bláhnúkur**, immediately south of Laugahraun, offers a scree scramble and fine views from the 943m peak.

Ferðafélag Íslands' **hut** (☎ 854 1192 Jul-Sep; sb 1kr2200) at Landmannalaugar accommodates 78 people on a first-come, first-served basis, and books up quickly with tour groups and club members. Others will probably have to use the **camping ground** (camp sites per adult 1kr700), which has toilet and shower facilities.



Getting There & Away

From mid-June to very early September, **Austurleið Kynnisferðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) run a scheduled Reykjavík–Skaftafell bus which goes by the scenic inland route, weather permitting, departing from Reykjavík (Ikr4600) at 8.30am and from Skaftafell (Ikr3500) at 8am.

LANDMANNALAUGAR TO ÞÓRSMÖRK TREK

The trek from Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk (see map p 275) deserves the same fame as great world walks such as the Inca Trail. The best map is *Landmælingar Íslands' Þórsmörk/Landmannalaugar* (1:100,000).

The track is usually passable mid-July to early September. You shouldn't have any problems if you're in reasonable condition, but don't take the walk lightly: it requires substantial river crossings, all-weather gear, sturdy boots and sufficient food and water.

Most people walk from north to south (because of the net altitude loss), taking three to four days. Some continue on to Skógar, making it a six-day trip (which can be difficult if bad weather strikes); huts along this stretch are operated by **Útivist** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 562 1000; www.utivist.is; Laugavegur 178, IS-105 Reykjavík).

Public huts along the track have wardens, although dates when they're there vary from year to year. They can provide information on trail conditions. Huts may be booked out by tour groups; check with **Ferðafélag Íslands** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 568 2535; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, IS-108 Reykjavík) before you set out.

From Landmannalaugar and hut, cross the **Laugahraun** lava field and ascend **Brennisteinsalda** (840m). Cross some rhyolite hills, then descend to the steaming vents at **Stórihver** and continue across the moors (covered in obsidian chunks and extensive snowfields) and a mountain pass to the **Hrafninnusker hut**. From Hrafninnusker, the track bounces over parallel rhyolite ridges before ascending steeply to a ridge studded with hot springs and fumaroles. Cross more ridges of descending altitude then drop steeply from the **Jökultungur** ridge into the **Álftavatn** valley, where a 4WD track leads to two huts.

There are several stream crossings south of Álftavatn; after 5km, you'll pass the

privately owned **Hvanngil** hut and camping ground. Cross the footbridge over the Kaldaklofskvísl, follow the route posted 'Emstrur/Fljótshlíð' and ford the knee-deep Bláfjallakvísl. The track enters a lonely and surreal 5km stretch of black sand and pumice desert, skirting the pyramid-shaped peak, **Stórasúla**. The next barrier is the river **Innri-Emstruá**, which is bridged but may have a knee-deep side channel. After the bridge, continue up to the crest and watch on your left for the 'FÍ Skáli' signpost, which directs you through a desolate desert to the **Botnar** (Emstrur) huts.

Cross a small heath then drop steeply to cross the roiling **Fremri-Emstruá** on a small footbridge. From there, the trail is relatively flat to the Ljósá footbridge. Over the next hill is the more difficult unbridged river **Prongó**. The onward route on the opposite bank isn't obvious; look for a V-shaped ravine just west of the marked crossing point. There, the track enters the **Þórsmörk** woodland. When you reach a junction, the right fork leads to Reykjavík Excursions' **Húsadalur hut** and the left fork to the Ferðafélag Íslands' **Þórsmörk hut**. Camping is restricted to sites near the huts. For more on Þórsmörk, see p270.

ICELAND DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Iceland has a full spectrum of accommodation options, from spartan mountain huts, through hostels, working farms, guesthouses and school-based summer rooms, to luxury hotels.

Sleeping-bag accommodation (designated 'sb' in this guide) is a peculiarly Icelandic concept, and a huge boon for those on a budget. Many hostels and guesthouses let you have a bed without sheets, duvet or blankets for a large discount on their standard prices, you use your own sleeping bag.

In this chapter, budget accommodation is defined as a bed for Ikr4000 or less; midrange places offer singles for Ikr4000 to Ikr9000 and doubles for Ikr6000 to Ikr12,000; and top-end places charge from Ikr9000/12,000 (singles/doubles). Reviews are listed in order of preference.

Many places close in winter; check accommodation in advance.

Camping

Make sure your tent is up to the Icelandic weather: storm-force winds and deluges aren't uncommon in summer.

Wild camping is possible in some areas (although not on fenced land without permission, or in national parks and nature reserves), but is often discouraged. With approximately 130 *tjaldsvæði* (organised camping grounds) in towns and at rural farmhouses, there's usually a camp site close at hand. Some have washing machines, cooking facilities and hot showers, others may just have a cold-water tap and toilet block. Camping costs around Ikr700 per person and grounds usually open from June to August.

Standard rules apply: leave sites as you find them, use biodegradable soaps for washing up, carry out rubbish, and bury toilet waste away from surface water.

Campfires are not allowed, so bring a stove. Butane cartridges and petroleum fuels are available in petrol stations and hardware shops. Since they're not allowed on air flights, you might get lucky with other people's leftovers!

A free directory *Útilega: Tjaldsvæði Íslands* (available from tourist offices) lists many of Iceland's camping grounds.

Edda Hotels & Summer Hotels

Once the students leave, many schools become summer hotels, with accommodation ranging from sleeping-bag space in classrooms to standard-looking rooms.

There are 15 **Edda Hótel**s (☎ 444 4000; www.hoteledda.is) run on this basis; most have restaurants, and many have geothermal pools. Four are termed 'Edda PLUS' – three-star places where all rooms have private bathrooms, TV and phone. Sleeping-bag accommodation costs from Ikr1700 to Ikr2200 per person, and singles/doubles start at Ikr5800/7200 for a room with washbasin.

Other town and village schools operate their own private summer hotels.

Emergency Huts

ICE-SAR (Icelandic Association for Search & Rescue; ☎ 570 5900; www.icesar.is) and **Félag Íslenskra Bifreiðaeigenda** (Icelandic Automobile Association; ☎ 562 9999; www.fib.is) maintain bright-orange huts on mountain passes and remote coastlines, only to be used in dire emergency (it's il-

legal to stay there if not). They are stocked with food, fuel and blankets.

Farmhouse Accommodation

Across Iceland, many rural farmhouses offer camp sites, sleeping-bag space, B&B and chalets. Facilities vary: some farms provide meals or have guest kitchens; some have hot pots; and some can organise fishing trips, sheep roundups or horse rental.

Around 150 farmhouses are members of **Ferðapjónusta Bænda** (Icelandic Farm Holidays; Map pp238-9; ☎ 570 2700; www.farmholidays.is; Síðumúli 2, IS-108 Reykjavík), which publishes an annual listings guide. Twenty-five are wheelchair-accessible; see the website for details.

Guesthouses

There are various types of *gistiheimilið* (guesthouses), from private homes that let rooms to custom-built motels. Most are comfortable and homey, with kitchens, TV lounges, and buffet-style breakfast (either included in the price, or for around Ikr800 extra). Some will also offer sleeping-bag accommodation.

As a general guide, sleeping-bag accommodation costs Ikr1500 to Ikr3500 (usually excluding breakfast); double rooms range from Ikr5000 to Ikr10,500; self-contained flats cost from Ikr6000 to Ikr15,000.

A high percentage of places open from June to August only. Students often take over Reykjavík guesthouses from September to May.

Hotels

Every major town has at least one up-market business-style hotel, usually with bland but comfortable rooms and all the expected amenities. Prices for singles/doubles start at around Ikr9000/11,000, including a buffet breakfast. Two of the largest home-grown chains are **Fosshotels** (☎ 562 4000; www.fosshotel.is), and **Icelandair Hótel**s (☎ 444 4000; www.icehotels.is), who also run the Edda chain (left).

Mountain Huts

Sæluhús (mountain huts) sprout up on popular hiking routes, mostly in wilderness areas. Accommodation is of the rough-and-ready variety: sleeping-bag spaces in communal huts. Some huts have cooking facilities, a warden and camping outside.

The huts are open to anyone, but members get a discount. It's highly advisable to book in advance as places fill quickly.

The main mountain-hut provider is **Ferðafélag Islands** (Icelandic Touring Association; Map pp238-9; ☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, IS-108 Reykjavík). It has 34 huts on its books, although some of these are maintained by local walking clubs. When appropriate, we've given further contact details in this chapter. Sleeping-bag space costs nonmembers from Ikr1200 to Ikr2200; camping (where available) is around Ikr800 per person.

Youth Hostels

Iceland has a network of 26 superb youth hostels, administered by the **Bandalag Íslenskra Farfugla** (Icelandic Youth Hostel Association; Map pp238-9; ☎ 553 8110; www.hostel.is; Sundlaugavegur 34, IS-105 Reykjavík). All hostels have hot showers, cooking facilities, luggage storage and sleeping-bag accommodation, and almost all have family rooms. If you don't have a sleeping bag, you can hire sheets and blankets (Ikr600 per stay). Most are open summer-only, so phone before rolling up out-of-season.

Join **Hostelling International** (HI; www.hihostels.com) before you arrive to benefit from HI member discounts. For a dorm bed, HI members pay around Ikr1900/Ikr2200 (children aged five to 12 years pay half-price), with a surcharge of Ikr1200 if you want a room to yourself. Breakfast (where available) costs Ikr750 to Ikr900 extra.

ACTIVITIES

Dogsledding

For exhilarating, summertime glacier-top action, driving your own huskies is hard to beat. Contact **Dog Steam Tours** (☎ 487 7747; www.dogsledding.is) for further information.

Fishing

Salmon fishing seems like a great idea but a one-day licence may cost anything up to Ikr200,000, making your catch some of the world's most expensive fish! However, you can fish for rainbow trout, sea trout and Arctic char on a more reasonably priced voucher system. Trout fishing runs from April to mid-September but ice fishing is possible in some areas in winter. For further information, contact the **National Angling Association** (☎ 553 1510; www.angling.is).

Hiking, Trekking & Mountaineering

The best way to see the country is undoubtedly on foot, whether on an afternoon hike or a two-week wilderness trek. However, the weather can leave careful plans in tatters: rain, fog and mist are common, and snow may fall in any season at higher altitudes. The www.outdoors.is website gives very good general information about mountaineering and hiking in Iceland.

In the highlands, straightforward hiking only becomes possible in July, August and early September: at other times, routes are impassable without complete winter gear; and in late spring, melting snow turns many tracks into quagmires where whole vehicles have sunk without trace! Unbridged rivers can be difficult to cross at any time of year.

There are stunning hikes and treks all over the country, including in national parks and nature reserves; only the most well-used trails are marked. The most popular walks are in the deserted Hornstrandir peninsula (p256), in the lake-dominated Mývatn area (p262), through Skaftafell National Park (p268), and the Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk trek (p276) in the highlands. If you are into mountaineering, there are some serious routes, including Hvannadalshnúkur (2119m), Iceland's highest peak.

Use caution when walking with children, especially in fissured areas such as Mývatn and Þingvellir, where narrow cracks in the earth can be hundreds of metres deep. Tough boots are needed for negotiating lava fields.

For details on hiking and mountaineering, contact **Ferðafélag Islands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, IS-108 Reykjavík), or **Íslenski Alpaklúbburinn** (☎ 581 1700; www.isalp.is/english; Pósthólf 1054, 121 Reykjavík).

Horse Riding

The Icelandic horse (*Equus scandinavicus*) was brought over by the first settlers, and has been prominent in the development of the country. These sweet-natured, small but sturdy animals are perfectly suited to the rough Icelandic terrain and are still used for farm work. They are also ridden recreationally, and are known for their *tölt*, a smooth, distinctive gait which makes riding easy, even for beginners.

You can hire horses through farms and tour agencies throughout the country, with a one-hour/one-day ride costing about Ikr2800/10,000. In September you can also volunteer for the *réttir* (sheep roundup): contact local tourist offices to arrange this.

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

Skiing

Skiers who enjoy out-of-the-way slopes will find some pleasant no-frills skiing in Iceland. In winter, nordic skiing is possible throughout the country, and in the highland areas it continues until early July. The greatest drawbacks are the lack of winter transport in rural areas and bitterly cold winds. Both Reykjavík and Akureyri have winter resorts for downhill skiing (Bláfjöll and Skálafell, the two closest to Reykjavík, get very busy), with ski rental and instructors. A summer ski school operates at Kerlingarfjöll near Hofsjökull in central Iceland.

Snowboarding

The ski resorts nearest to Reykjavík have facilities for snowboarders; Bláfjöll has a dedicated snowboarding track. For four weeks of the year, the **Nikita Iceland Park Project** (www.icelandparkproject.com) runs a snowboarding camp on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, near the glacier.

Swimming

Thanks to an abundance of geothermal heat, every town has at least one *sundlaug* or *sundhöll* (public swimming hall), some with saunas, Jacuzzis and slides. Admission costs around Ikr280/125 per adult/child. There are also natural hot springs, such as those located at Landmannalaugar (p274).

Whale-Watching

Iceland is one of the best places in the world to see whales and dolphins. Quiet oak-hulled boats minimise disruption to the creatures and can get astonishingly close. Regular sailings depart from Húsavík (p261) and Reykjavík (p240), among other places. A three-hour trip costs around Ikr3800, and there are sailings from mid-May to September (in winter, the whales migrate south).

BUSINESS HOURS

Most banks are open from 9.15am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Shops are usually open from 9am to 6pm on weekdays, 10am to noon or 4pm on Saturday. Petrol stations stay open until 10pm generally and supermarkets stay open to 11pm daily. Liquor stores open from 11am to 6pm Monday to Thursday, to 7pm Friday and to 2pm on Saturday. For cafés or bars, these are open from 10am, to 1am Sunday to Thursday and stay open late until 3am or 6am on Friday and Saturday nights, and restaurants are usually open from 6pm to 10pm. Post offices open from 8.30am (or 9am) to 4.30pm (or 5pm) Monday to Friday.

CHILDREN

Icelanders have a relaxed attitude to kids, but there are not many activities provided especially for them. Frequent bad weather may put you off family camping, but everyone can enjoy a ride on a mild-mannered Icelandic horse (opposite).

Children aged two to 11 years pay half fare on Flugfélag Islands (Air Iceland) flights and tours, and are charged half-price for farmhouse and some other accommodation. Destination Iceland buses and tours charge half fare for ages four to 11. There's a 50% discount at pools, and admission to museums and cinemas varies from full price to free.

Every town has an open-air swimming pool, which will delight waterbabies. Reykjavík contains some attractions suitable for little kids, such as the family fun park and zoo (p243) and feeding the birds on Tjörnin (p243). The most suitable museums for older children are the open-air Árbjarsafn (p241) and the dramatic Saga Museum (p241).

CUSTOMS

Visitors are permitted to import up to 3kg worth of food provided it doesn't cost more than Ikr13,000 or include animal products. Those aged over 18 years may bring in 200 cigarettes or 250g of other tobacco products. Those aged over 20 years may import duty-free 1L of spirits (22% to 79% alcohol) and 1L of wine (less than 22%); or 1L of spirits and 6L of foreign beer; or 1L of wine and 6L of beer; or 2.25L of wine.

To prevent potential contamination, recreational fishing and horse-riding clothes

and equipment require a veterinarian's certificate stating that they have been disinfected. Alternatively, officials can disinfect gear when you arrive (Ikr1800 to Ikr2200).

Vehicle import duty is waived for students and visitors staying less than one month (extendable up to 12 months), but vehicles cannot be sold without payment of duty.

For a full list of customs regulations, see www.tollur.is.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Iceland has a low crime rate, police don't carry guns, and prisoners go home on public holidays. People aren't the danger here; it's nature that you need to be wary of. In geothermal areas avoid thin crusts of lighter coloured soil around steaming fissures and mud pots. Snowfields may overlie fissures, sharp lava chunks, or slippery slopes of scoria (volcanic slag). Don't underestimate the weather: only attempt isolated hiking and glacier ascents if you know what you're doing.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Many hotels, restaurants and large shops have facilities for people with disabilities. The airlines can take disabled passengers, as can two of the coastal ferries, the *Baldur* and the *Herjólfur*. Flugfélag Íslands offers discounts to disabled travellers. Facilities aren't available on scheduled bus services, but tours on specially equipped buses can be arranged. For details, contact the tourist information centre in Reykjavík, or the organisation for the disabled, **Sjálfsbjörg** (Map pp238-9; ☎ 550 0300; www.sjalfsbjorg.is; Hátún 12, IS-105 Reykjavík).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Iceland Embassies & Consulates

A full list of Iceland's embassies and consulates is available at www.mfa.is. Icelandic representation abroad includes the following list.

Australia (☎ 02-9365 7345; iceland@bigpond.net.au; 16 Birriga Rd, Bellevue Hill, Sydney, 2000, NSW)

Canada (☎ 613-482 1944; www.iceland.org/ca; 360 Albert St, Ste 710, Ottawa ON K1R 7X7)

Denmark (☎ 33 18 10 50; www.iceland.org/dk; Strandgade 89, DK-1401 Copenhagen K)

Faroe Islands (☎ 30 11 01; info@faroyard.f; J.C Svabosgata 31, postbox 65, Tórshavn)

Finland (☎ 09-612 2460; www.islanti.fi; Pohjoisesplanadi 27C, Fin-00100 Helsinki)

France (☎ 01-44 17 32 85; www.iceland.org/fr; 8 Ave Kléber, F-75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-5050 4000; www.iceland.org/de; Rauchstrasse 1, DE-10787 Berlin)

Greenland (☎ 98 12 93; kelly@greenet.gl; c/o Hotel Angmagssalik, Sulup Aqq B725, postbox 117, Tasilaq)

Ireland (☎ 01-872 9299; jgg@goregrimes.ie; Cavendish House, Smithfield, Dublin)

The Netherlands (☎ 431 3313; robbie@reved.nl; 2nd fl, Strawinskylaan 3037, Amsterdam)

New Zealand (☎ 09-379 4720; ebarratt@sanford.co.nz; c/o Sanford Ltd, 22 Jellicoe St, Auckland)

Norway (☎ 2323 7530; www.iceland.org/no; Stortingsgata 30, NO-0244 Oslo)

Sweden (☎ 08-442 8300; www.iceland.org/se; Kom-mendörsgatan 35, SE-114 58 Stockholm)

UK (☎ 020-7259 3999; www.iceland.org/uk; 2a Hans St, London SW1X 0JE)

USA (☎ 202-265 6653; www.iceland.org/us; 1156 15th St NW, Ste 1200, Washington, DC 20005-1704)

Embassies & Consulates in Iceland

The following countries have representation in Reykjavík:

Canada (Map p242; ☎ 575 6500; rkjvk@international.gc.ca; Túngata 14)

Denmark (Map p242; ☎ 575 0300; www.ambreykjavik.um.dk; Hverfisgata 29)

Finland (Map p242; ☎ 510 0100; www.finland.is; Túngata 30)

France (Map p242; ☎ 551 7621; www.ambafrance.is; Túngata 22)

Germany (Map p242; ☎ 530 1100; embager@internet.is; Laufásvegur 31)

Ireland (☎ 554 2355; davidsch@islandia.is; Ásbúð 106, 210 Garðabær)

The Netherlands (Map pp238-9; ☎ 533 1002; holland@holland.is; Borgartún 33)

Norway (Map pp238-9; ☎ 520 0700; www.noregur.is; Fjólugata 17)

Sweden (Map pp238-9; ☎ 520 1230; www.sweden.abroad.com; Lágmúli 7)

UK (Map p242; ☎ 550 5100; www.britishebassy.gov.uk; Laufásvegur 31)

USA (Map p242; ☎ 562 9100; www.usa.is; Laufásvegur 21)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to the festivals listed opposite, there are various arts festivals and sports tournaments whose dates vary from year to year. For forthcoming live music festivals, see www.musik.is.

February

Þorrablót This midwinter feast is marked with knuckle-whitening meals: see p236 for a sample menu.

Bolludagur (Bun Day; 23 February) Icelanders gorge themselves sick on puff-pastry cream buns. Kids get up early to 'beat' the buns out of their parents with a 'bun wand' (*bolluvöndur*).

Sprengidagur (Bursting Day; 24 February) The feast continues. The aim is to stuff yourself with *saltkjöt og baunir* (salted meat and split peas) until you burst. Both are Lenten traditions.

March

Beer Day (1 March) Dating back to the glorious day in 1989 when beer was legalised in Iceland. As you'd expect, Reykjavík's clubs and bars get particularly wild.

April

Sumardagurinn Fyrsti (First Day of Summer) Arrives optimistically early on the first Thursday after April 18, with Reykjavík holding the biggest carnival-style bash. (The First Day of Winter, Fyrsti Vetrardagur, on the third Saturday of October, does not inspire similar merriment.)

May

Reykjavík Arts Festival (www.artfest.is) The city is taken over by local and international theatre performances, films, lectures and music during this two-week event.

June

Sjómanna dagurinn The first Sunday is dedicated to seafarers. The Seamen's Union sponsors a party in each coastal town.

Independence Day (17 June) The largest nationwide festival, commemorating the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944 with parades and general merriness. Tradition has it that the sun isn't supposed to shine. And it usually doesn't!

Midsummer Celebrated around 24 June in Iceland, but with much less fervour than on the Scandinavian mainland.

August

Þjóðhátíð Vestmannaeyjar This earth-shaking event occurs in Heimaey on the August bank holiday, commemorating the day in 1874 when foul weather prevented the islanders partying when Iceland's constitution was established.

Verslunarmannahelgi Also celebrated on the August bank holiday, the rest of the country celebrates with barbecues, horse competitions, camping and family reunions. Wild boozing takes place in the national parks and at Þórsmyrk.

Gay Pride Thousands of people parade carnival-style through the streets of Reykjavík on the third weekend.

Reykjavík Marathon With shorter distances and fun runs for those who like to grit their teeth less.

Culture Night Held on a Saturday in Reykjavík in mid-August, with art, music, dance and a fireworks finale.

September

Réttir In the highlands, the autumn sheep roundup is an occasion for rural camaraderie and festivities.

Reykjavík Film Festival This annual occurrence sees blockbusters make way for international art films in cinemas across the city, and talks from film directors from home and abroad.

Reykjavík Jazz Festival (www.jazz.is) Another fun yearly cultural event is the Jazz Festival with jazz concerts around the city.

October

Iceland Airwaves (www.icelandairwaves.com) This four-day event, in Reykjavík near the end of October, is one of the world's most cutting-edge music festivals: don't expect to sleep.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Icelanders have a fairly open attitude towards gays and lesbians. For specific information, contact the gay and lesbian organisation **Samtökin '78** (Map p242; ☎ 552 7878; office@samtokin78.is; 4th fl, Laugavegur 3, IS-101 Reykjavík), which doubles as an informal gay community centre with a drop-in café (8pm to 11pm Monday and Thursday). See the website www.gayice.is for news and events.

HOLIDAYS

The following annual holidays are observed in Iceland:

New Year's Day 1 January

Maundy Thursday Thursday before Easter

Good Friday to Easter Monday March/April

First Day of Summer 1st Thursday after April 18

Labour Day 1 May

Ascension Day May

Whit Sunday & Whit Monday May

Independence Day 17 June

Shop & Office Workers' Holiday First Monday in August

Christmas Eve 24 December (afternoon)

Christmas Day 25 December

Boxing Day 26 December

New Year's Eve 31 December (afternoon)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Iceland Review – What's On guide (www.whatson.is)

Icelandic Tourist Board (www.icetourist.is)

Icelandic Tourist Board – North America (www.goiceland.org)

Statistics Iceland (www.statice.is)

Visit Reykjavík (www.visitreykjavik.is)

LEGAL MATTERS

Drink-driving laws are very strict in Iceland; one drink can put you over the legal limit of 0.05% blood-alcohol content. The penalty is loss of your licence plus a large fine.

Penalties for possession, use or trafficking of illegal drugs are strict, with long prison sentences and heavy fines.

The legal age for drinking alcohol in Iceland is 20.

MAPS

Ask tourist offices for the free *Map of Reykjavík* and *Around Iceland* booklets (with bags of information plus town plans).

Landmælingar Íslands (National Land Survey of Iceland; ☎ 430 9000; www.lmi.is; Stillholt 16-18, IS-300 Akranes) publishes several series of high-quality maps covering the whole country, purchasable via its website. Most drivers use the general 1:500,000 *Ferðakort Touring Map*. Also useful are the 1:25,000 maps of Skaftafell and Þingvellir, the 1:50,000 maps of Vestmannaeyjar and Mývatn, and the 1:100,000 maps of Hornstrandir, Snæfellsnes, and the Landmannalaugar to Þórsmörk trek.

Landmælingar Íslands maps are available from tourist offices and bookshops all over Iceland.

MEDIA Magazines

The free fortnightly **Grapevine** (www.grapevine.is) magazine is an excellent read for Icelandic news and reviews. It's available online, or from tourist offices, hotels, bars and even bus stations.

The slicker English-language magazine **Iceland Review** (Mappp238-9; ☎ 5127575; www.icelandreview.com; Borgartún 23, IS-105 Reykjavík) is available on subscription for US\$40 per year (four issues).

Newspapers

Iceland's main daily newspaper is *Morgunblaðið*. German-, French- and English-language periodicals are available at large bookshops throughout the country.

Radio & TV

The BBC World Service is relayed at FM 94.3 (Reykjavík only). Icelandic TV stations broadcast subtitled British and American programmes during prime time.

MONEY

Icelandic VAT is included in the prices of goods. However, if you spend over Ikr4000 in a shop offering 'Iceland Tax-Free Shopping', you can claim back up to 15%. Shop staff will give you a tax-refund form: hand it in at the tourist office, the airport or the ferry terminal for a rebate. If you spend over Ikr40,000, take your forms and goods to customs before checking in.

Also see (below) for general information about using your debit cards and ATMs abroad.

ATMS

You can draw cash from any bank using MasterCard or Visa; and from Íslandsbanki using Diners Club. Exchange rates for ATM cards are usually good.

Credit Cards

MasterCard and Visa are accepted everywhere; Diners Club and American Express are less commonly used. Icelanders use cards for grocery shopping and other small purchases.

Moneychangers

Travellers cheques in foreign denominations, postal cheques and banknotes may be exchanged for Icelandic currency at banks for a small commission (commission-free at Landsbanki Íslands). Beware of using other exchange offices; commissions can reach 8.75% and exchange rates are lower. Any leftover krónur may be exchanged for foreign currency before departure.

Tipping

As service and VAT are always included in prices, tipping isn't required in Iceland.

POST

The **Icelandic postal system** (Pósturinn; www.postur.is) is both reliable and efficient. An airmail letter or postcard to Europe costs economy/priority Ikr65/75; to places outside Europe it costs Ikr70/95.

Poste restante is available in all cities and villages, but Reykjavík is best set up to handle it. Mail should be addressed with your name to Poste Restante, Central Post Office, Pósthússtræti 5, IS-101 Reykjavík, Iceland.

TELEPHONE

For public telephone boxes in Reykjavík, see p240. Elsewhere, there's usually a phone outside the post office or in the petrol station. Many payphones accept credit cards. Be aware that telephone directories are alphabetised by first name, so Guðrún Halldórsdóttir would be listed before Jón Einarsson.

Mobile Phones

Most European phones are compatible with the GSM network, used in Iceland; for information, contact your phone company. You can generally only pick up a signal in populated places. Mobile phones can also be rented from **Síminn** (☎ 550 6000; www.siminn.is; Armúli 27, Reykjavík), for around Ikr400 per day plus deposit.

Phone Codes

Direct dialling is available to Europe, North America and elsewhere. After dialling the international access code (☎ 00 from Iceland), dial your country code, area/city code and the telephone number.

For dialling into Iceland from abroad, the country code is ☎ 354. There are no area codes: just follow the country code with the seven-digit number.

Within Iceland, just dial the seven-digit number. Most Icelandic mobile phone numbers begin with the digit '8'.

Directory assistance (international) ☎ 1811

Directory assistance (local) ☎ 118

Operator assistance ☎ 115

Reverse-charge (collect) calls ☎ 533 5019 for assistance

Phonecards

The smallest-denomination phonecard (for use in public telephone boxes) costs Ikr500, and can be bought from post offices and Síminn telephone offices.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

For police, ambulance and fire services in Iceland, dial ☎ 112.

TIME

Iceland is always on GMT/UTC, and it has no daylight-saving time. So from late October to late March, Iceland is on the same time as London, five hours ahead of

New York and 11 hours behind Sydney. In the northern hemisphere's summer, Iceland is one hour behind London, four hours ahead of New York and 10 hours behind Sydney.

TOURIST INFORMATION

You'll find tourist offices with friendly staff in towns all over the country. Pick up the useful *Around Iceland* (general tourist guide) and *Aning* (accommodation guide); both are annual publications and they're free.

The **Icelandic Tourist Board** (☎ 535 5500; www.icetourist.is; Lækjargata 3, IS-101 Reykjavík) is the umbrella organisation in charge of tourism. The main tourist office in Reykjavík is called **Upplýsingamiðstöð Ferðamála** (Map p242; ☎ 590 1500; www.visitreykjavik.is; Aðalstræti 2).

TOURS

Iceland's many private tour-bus operators are an excellent option if you're short of time, or want to access beautiful but remote locations without hassle. Most companies run in conjunction with adventure-tour operators, so you can also book snowmobile, horse-riding, whale-watching, rafting, hiking, bird-watching, or Northern Lights tours. You can often do the same trips by Super Jeep or Super Truck (prices are at least double those of a bus tour). The following is a brief list of some of the best operators.

Dick Phillips (☎ 01434-381440; www.icelandic-travel.com; Whitehall House, Nenthead, Alston, Cumbria, CA9 3PS) British-based Dick Phillips runs a specialist Icelandic travel service, and has decades of experience leading wild hiking, cycling and skiing trips.

Ferðafélag Íslands (Icelandic Touring Association; Map pp238-9; ☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkin 6, IS-108 Reykjavík) Lead summer treks in Hornstrandir, Landmannalaugar and Þórsmörk, and also has some bus tours and cross-country skiing trips.

Iceland Excursions (Allrahanda; Map pp238-9; ☎ 540 1313; www.icelandexcursions.is; Höfðatún 12) The cheapest bus-tour operator, with comprehensive day trips plus horse riding, whale-watching, underground explorations, diving, and self-drive holidays.

IcelandTotal (Map pp238-9; ☎ 585 4300; www.icelandtotal.com; Lágmúli 4, IS-108 Reykjavík) Inexpensive tours often using small local operators and scheduled bus services. Also organises special-interest tours, eg bird-watching, fishing, cycling.

Nonni Travel (Map p258; ☎ 461 1841; www.nonni-travel.is; Brekkugata 5, PO Box 336, IS-602 Akureyri)

Rafting, horse riding, whale-spotting, Super Jeep tours and self-drive trips; specialists in excursions to Greenland.

Reykjavik Excursions (Kynniserðir; Map pp238-9; ☎ 562 1011; www.re.is; BSÍ Bus Terminal, Vatnsmýrarvegur 10, Reykjavik) The most popular bus-tour operator has summer and winter programmes. Extras include horse riding, snowmobiling, and themed tours tying in with festivals.

Útivist (Map pp238-9; ☎ 562 1000; www.utivist.is; Laugavegur 178, IS-105 Reykjavik) Day trips and weekend hiking tours.

VISAS

The Schengen Agreement means that those from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden can enter Iceland for up to three months as a tourist with a valid identity card.

Citizens of the European Economic Area (EEA), including Ireland and Great Britain, can visit for up to three months on a passport that is valid for at least four months from their date of arrival.

Citizens from America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Canada can travel in Iceland without a visa for up to three months within any six-month period, with the time limit beginning on the first entry to any Schengen Agreement nation.

Other nationalities need a visa before arriving in Iceland.

VOLUNTEERING

A volunteering holiday is a good (and relatively cheap) way of getting intimately involved with Iceland's people and landscape. One of the longest-running projects is the conservation work done by **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers** (BTCV; www.btcv.org) in Skaftafell National Park (see p268).

TRANSPORT IN ICELAND

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Keflavik airport (☎ 425 0600, flight times 425 0777; www.keflavikairport.com), located 48km west of Reykjavik, is Iceland's main gateway. Flights to/from Greenland and the Faroe Islands use Reykjavik domestic airport in the city centre. A couple of international flights per week land at the tiny Akureyri airport, in Iceland's 'second city' in the north.

Fares in this section are general indications only, and are for average-priced high-season return tickets. Cheaper deals are generally available if you are flexible, or if you travel in the low season.

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM ICELAND

Only a few airlines have scheduled flights to Keflavik, Reykjavik and Akureyri airports. All have great safety records:

Atlantic Airways (airline code RC; ☎ Faroe Islands 34 10 00; www.atlanticairways.com)

British Airways (airline code BA; ☎ 421 7374; www.britishairways.com)

Flugfélag Íslands (Air Iceland; airline code NY; ☎ 570 3030; www.airiceland.is)

Icelandair (airline code FI; ☎ 505 0700; www.icelandair.net)

Iceland Express (airline code HW; ☎ 550 0600; www.icelandexpress.com)

SAS (airline code SK; ☎ 505 0300; www.scandinavian.net)

CONTINENTAL EUROPE

There are regular direct Icelandair flights to Keflavik from Amsterdam (€300), Copenhagen (Dkr2000), Frankfurt (€300), Oslo (Nkr2000), Paris (€400) and Stockholm (Skr3000), most of which take approximately 3½ hours. Icelandair also has seasonal flights between Keflavik and Barcelona, Berlin, Helsinki, Madrid, Milan, Munich and Zürich, taking between six and nine hours.

Iceland Express flies year-round 14 times weekly between Keflavik and Copenhagen (Dkr2300, three hours). In summer, there are two to four flights weekly between Keflavik and Alicante (€415, four hours), Berlin, Frankfurt, Friedrichshafen (all €450, 3½ hours), Göteborg and Stockholm (both Skr3000, three hours); and between Akureyri and Copenhagen (Dkr3300, three hours).

SAS runs direct flights from Keflavik to Oslo (Nkr3000, 2¾ hours).

GREENLAND & THE FAROE ISLANDS

In summer, Flugfélag Íslands flies from Reykjavik to Greenland: to Kulusuk (Ikr66,000, two hours) six times a week; and to Narsarsuaq (Ikr60,000, two hours) twice weekly.

Flugfélag Íslands and Atlantic Airways fly between the Faroe Islands and Reykjavik (Ikr45,000, 1½ hours) up to four times weekly from April to October.

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UK

Icelandair (☎ 0870 787 4020; www.icelandair.net) has flights to Keflavik from London Heathrow (UKE200, two hours) at least twice daily. Between April and October, there are flights from Glasgow (UKE150, one hour) four or five times per week; and two flights per week from Manchester (UKE380, 1½ hours).

Internet-based airline **Iceland Express** (☎ 0870 850 0737; www.icelandexpress.com) flies twice daily (less frequently in winter) from London Stansted to Keflavik (UKE300, three hours). It also runs two flights per week from London Stansted to Akureyri (UKE230, three hours).

British Airways (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com) are also muscling in on the Iceland routes, and now have a new service from Keflavik to London Gatwick (UKE300, two hours).

From Ireland, the cheapest way is to fly with **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) from Dublin to London Stansted, where you can catch the Iceland Express flight to Keflavik.

USA

There are daily Icelandair flights between Keflavik and Boston, and several flights a week between Keflavik and Baltimore/Washington, Minneapolis, New York and Orlando. A new summer service departs from San Francisco four times weekly. Online return fares from New York to Keflavik cost about US\$900; the flight takes around six hours. If you're flying with Icelandair from the US to Britain or Europe, you can include a free stopover in Iceland as part of your travel itinerary.

Sea

CARGO SHIP

Icelandic cargo-shipper **Eimskip** (☎ 525 7000; www.eimskip.com) sails the route Rotterdam-Hamburg-Göteborg-Århus-Fredrikstad-Tórshavn-Reykjavik, which takes eight days, returning to Rotterdam via eastern Iceland and Tórshavn only. The shipper can take up to three passengers on each of its vessels *Dettifoss* and *Godafoss*, although passengers are not accepted between mid-October to mid-April. The trip from Rotterdam costs €1124 per person (€806 for the return journey), and €488 for a car.

FERRY

You can travel to Seyðisfjörður in eastern Iceland from Bergen (Norway), Hanstholm (Denmark), Lerwick (Shetland Islands, UK) and Tórshavn (Faroe Islands) by the **Smyril Line's** (www.smyril-line.fo) smart car-ferry *Norröna*. See p502 for the sailing schedule, and for details of the linking ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick.

GETTING AROUND

Air

There's an extensive network of domestic flights in Iceland, the fastest way to get from place to place. Flexible travel plans are essential, though, since schedules are dependent on the weather.

Flight prices given in the chapter are for full-fare one-way tickets; however, there are often internet offers, and you may be able to snap up standby tickets for up to half-price. There are significant discounts for senior citizens, students and children.

The main domestic airline, **Flugfélag Íslands** (Air Iceland; ☎ 570 3030; www.airiceland.is), has daily flights in summer between Reykjavik and Akureyri (Ikr10,565, 45 minutes), Egilsstaðir (Ikr11,975, one hour) and Ísafjörður (Ikr10,565, 40 minutes). Landsflug operates flights to smaller airstrips in Iceland, including several flights daily from Reykjavik to Vestmannaeyjar (Ikr7180, 30 minutes): book tickets through Flugfélag Íslands.

AIR PASSES

Flugfélag Íslands offers four-/five-/six-sector air passes costing Ikr29,700/33,700/38,700. These are valid for one month and must be bought outside Iceland. There's also a Fly As You Please ticket which gives 12 days of unlimited internal flights for Ikr47,000.

Domestic airport tax (Ikr930) has to be paid on every departure.

Bicycle

Cycling is one of the best ways to view Iceland's incredible landscape. However, gale-force winds, sandstorms, sleet and sudden flurries of snow add to the challenge! Bring the best waterproofing money can buy; and remember, you can always put your bike on a bus if things become intolerable. A mountain bike is probably more practical than a touring rig – you can get off the

Ring Rd onto minor roads and unsurfaced tracks. It is wise to bring plenty of spares and several puncture repair kits. The Kjölur Rte through the interior has bridges over all major rivers, so it's accessible to cyclists.

Domestic airline flights charge Ikr3200 per bicycle. You can carry bikes on the long-distance buses for Ikr600 to Ikr1000, but space may be a problem at busy times.

In areas best suited to cycling, such as Mývatn, Reykjavík and Akureyri, bicycle hire costs around Ikr1700 per day, plus deposit. Children under 15 must wear a helmet by law.

The **Icelandic Mountain Bike Club** (☎ 562 0099; www.mmedia.is/~ifhk/tourist.htm; Brekkustígur 2) and **Icebike** (www.icebike.net) have lots of information and links about touring in Iceland.

Boat

The main car ferries operating in Iceland are *Herjólfur*, between Þorlákshöfn and Vestmannaeyjar (p272); *Baldur*, between Flatey, Stykkishólmur and Brjánslækur (p254); and *Sæfari*, between Dalvík, Hrísey and Grimsey (p260).

Bus

Iceland's long-distance bus network is divided between several private companies who provide routes in different areas of the country. They're overseen by **BSÍ** (Bifreiðastöð Íslands; ☎ 562 1011; www.bsi.is), based in the BSÍ bus terminal on Vatnsmýrarvegur in Reykjavík. The booking desk sells tickets, and distributes the free *Ísland á Eigin Vegum* (Iceland on Your Own) brochure, which contains timetable information for some southern journeys. From June to August, there are regular buses to most places on the Ring Rd, and to larger towns in the Westfjords. During the rest of the year, the service is limited or nonexistent: check with BSÍ or the companies below for details. The main bus companies include the following: **Austurleid+Kynniserðir** (☎ 545 1717; www.austurleid.is) South and east Iceland.

Flybus (☎ 562 1011; www.flybus.is) Reykjavík to Keflavik airport.

SBK Travel (☎ 420 6000; www.sbk.is) Keflavik and Reykjanes.

Stjörnubílar (☎ 456 3518, 893 6356; www.stjornubilar.is) Westfjords.

Trex-Hóperðamiðstöðin (☎ 587 6000; www.trex.is) West and north Iceland.

BUS PASSES

Bus passes are available from BSÍ, and can save money on long journeys. However, the usefulness of the Omnibus winter and Western Fjords passes are questionable because of sparse bus services.

Full-Circle Passport (Hringmiði; Ikr24,900; ☎ Jun-Aug) Valid for one circuit of the Ring Rd in one direction, stopping wherever you like. An extension (Ikr29,900) allows travel from Reykjavík to Akureyri through the interior (via the Kjölur Rte) instead of the Ring Rd; and between Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Hella via Landmannaugar instead of the Ring Rd.

Full-Circle Passport/Western Fjords (Ikr37,500) As the Full-Circle Pass, plus one circuit of the Westfjords, reached only via the ferry *Baldur* (from Stykkishólmur). **Omnibus Pass** (Tímamiði; 1-/2-/3-/4-week pass Ikr28,700/40,200/51,700/57,400; ☎ mid-May–mid-Sep) Allows unrestricted travel on scheduled buses (excluding interior bus routes). A limited version of the one-week pass is available for Ikr17,300 mid-September to mid-May.

Car & Motorcycle

AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

The Icelandic national motoring association is **Félag Íslenskra Bifreiðaeigenda** (FÍB; ☎ 414 9999; www.fib.is; Borgartún 33, Reykjavík). Membership is only open to Iceland residents. However, if you already have breakdown cover with an automobile association that's affiliated to ARC Europe, you may be covered by the FÍB – check with your home association.

BRING YOUR OWN VEHICLE

It's relatively easy to bring a vehicle on the ferry from mainland Europe. Drivers must carry the vehicle's registration documents, proof of valid insurance (a 'green card') and a driving licence (EU, North American and Australian licences are fine: otherwise you may need an international driving permit). After vehicle inspection, an import permit will be issued which lasts for a month, after which you must export the vehicle or apply for a permit extension. Contact the **Directorate of Customs** (☎ 560 0300; www.tollur.is) for further information. Also see p508.

FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Petrol prices around the country are fixed: unleaded 95 octane (*býlaust*, 95 *okt*) costs Ikr134.4 per litre, and diesel Ikr128.3. Leaded petrol and LRP (lead replacement petrol) aren't available. Outside Reykjavík, petrol station opening hours vary, but out-

of-hours there's usually a Visa or MasterCard-operated pump. Service stations can be quite widely dispersed; make sure you fill up when you have the chance, and carry a jack, jumbleads, spare tyre etc. Getting stranded on a cold and lonely road is no fun at all.

HIRE

Although rates are expensive by international standards, prices compare favourably against bus or internal air travel. The cheapest vehicles, such as a Toyota Yaris, normally cost around Ikr8900 per day, with unlimited mileage and VAT included. Rental charges for 4WD vehicles are at least twice that. The Reykjavík tourist office keeps details of special offers.

You must be at least 20 years old to hire a car, and will need to show a recognised licence (most firms are happy with your home licence, although you could bring an international driving permit to be on the safe side) and pay by credit card.

ROAD CONDITIONS & HAZARDS

Icelandic highways aren't suitable for high-speeds – they're two-lane affairs, often narrowing to a single-lane over bridges, and there are sometimes long unsurfaced sections. Headlight and radiator protection from dust and rocks is advisable. Road edges are often steeply cambered, with no shoulders or margins. Beware of oncoming cars driving in the middle of the road.

Four-wheel drive vehicles are needed on the F-numbered (interior) highway system.

If you're planning to drive through the interior, do so with an accompanying vehicle – there are no services, and glacial rivers and drifting sand pose real threats. It goes without saying that you'll need full tool/repair kits (and the expertise to use them) and emergency supplies. It's illegal to drive off-road or off-track: Icelandic soil and vegetation are extremely fragile, and damage caused by vehicles can be irreparable.

Current road conditions can be seen on the website of the **Icelandic Meteorological Office** (www.vedur.is/english).

ROAD RULES

Drive on the right and keep your headlights on at all times. The use of seat belts (front and rear) is compulsory. In urban areas, the speed limit is 50km/h or less. On paved/unpaved roads, the speed limit is 90/80km/h. Drink-driving laws are very strict in Iceland and the legal limit is set at 0.05% blood-alcohol content. The penalty for driving over the limit is loss of your licence plus a large fine.

Slow down or give way at blind peaks (marked *blindhæð*) and on single-breadth bridges (marked *einbreið brú*).

Hitching

Lonely Planet does not recommend hitching. Summer hitching is possible but can be inconsistent. The best idea is to find a petrol station, then try to charm drivers who have stopped for a break. At least if waits are long, you can get a coffee! See Hitching in the Transport chapter (p510).

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