

## ICELAND

'To see the northern lights' was high on my 'bucket list', and was our prime motivation for going to Iceland, in the middle of winter.

To get the bad news out of the way, Iceland is very expensive! Almost everything costs at least double what it would in England. However, if you are able to tolerate that, it is a wonderful country to visit! It has become increasingly popular since it is now offered as a stopover in flights between Europe and North America.

We found a hotel in the centre of Reykjavik, and booked flights from Gatwick. Although Reykjavik has an airport, it is small and only used for domestic flights. All international flights go to Keflavik, which is 48km from Reykjavik by road, and involves a ride in a shuttle bus or taxi. Tourism is the main industry in Iceland, and within the city almost all of it involves the use of shuttle buses. Typically, a minibus will take you from a bus stop near your hotel to a bus station elsewhere in the city, where you transfer to the 'proper' bus for the main part of your journey. This is unusual, but it has certainly helped to avoid congestion around the town centre.

As English speakers, we are spoiled in Iceland! We didn't come across anyone involved in any way with tourism, who didn't speak fluent English. You can understand why—not many people speak Icelandic, and to describe it as 'jaw-cracking' doesn't even come close!

There are lots of things to see, both inside and outside the city. The National Museum is excellent, and we were surprised to find that our hotel (Hotel Reykjavik Centrum) was supported on concrete posts above an archaeological dig—the



*'Sun Voyager' by Jón Gunnar Árnason*

excavation of a Viking longhouse from around 900AD. Visiting this was a particular bargain, as although quite a few attractions offer a 'senior discount', this one (known as AD 871±2) was free to seniors! Also in the city, we particularly enjoyed two interpretative centres, one about the northern lights and one about volcanos, of which there are many, some of which erupt every few years. Well to the south of the city is a facility known as 'Perlan', which is devoted to the many different aspects of nature. It includes a cliff covered in seabirds and an ice cave, as well as an exhibit predicting the drastic

results of global warming. There is a free shuttle bus to and from Perlan, every 30 minutes from the 'Harpa' concert hall, on the waterfront to the north of the central area, and close to the modern sculpture of a Viking longship.

However, most people who visit Iceland do so to enjoy the dramatic scenery outside the city. Taking the northern lights first, at least a dozen firms offer a coach, minibus or jeep ride out of town, to look for them. To get to see them, you need three things: 1) sunspot activity; 2) little or no cloud cover, and 3) someone who will take you to a good spot, and find them for you! Not everyone is lucky enough to see them; we were

among the fortunate ones, although they were not as spectacular as in the pictures we had seen. This is because photographing them, using a time exposure, enhances the colours, and speeding up a movie exaggerates any movement. However, we had an unexpected bit of excitement on our tour—our minibus got stuck in a snow drift, under blizzard-like conditions, and the driver had to recruit a passing SUV to pull us out!

The other really popular trip outside the city is the 'Golden Circle'. This visits three very different places—'Þingvellir' or 'Thingvellir', where the Icelandic government was first established, and which lies on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates are separating, resulting in deep fissures and seismic activity; 2) the 'Geysir' geothermal area, where there are hot springs, boiling mud vents, and geysers (which gave us the word, of course) and 3) the huge and spectacular waterfalls of the Gullfoss. As an optional add-on to this trip, we visited the 'Secret Lagoon'—not very secret, as it is visited by tour buses! It is an outdoor swimming pool fed by hot springs. There is a larger and better-known pool, the Blue Lagoon, which is situated close to Keflavik airport. We visited them both and luxuriated in the hot water!



*The Blue Lagoon*

Icelandic restaurants are known for the quality of the food they serve, especially the fish, fishing being the number two industry of the island. It is worth booking, to get a table at one of the better restaurants. Many of the bars and restaurants offer an early-evening half-price 'happy hour', which takes some of the pain out of buying drinks!

The advice given to visitors in winter is to pack two things—warm clothes and a swimsuit! The latter, of course, is for bathing in one of the many hot springs and thermal pools. We were glad of the warm clothes for the wind-chill and the odd blizzard or snowfall!

The money takes a bit of getting used to. There are about 150 Icelandic Krona to the pound—not an easy conversion to do in your head. I embarrassed myself by buying a coat at what I thought was the bargain price of £80, only to discover that I had got my sums wrong, and it was actually £800! They were kind enough to take it back and give me a refund!

Normally, in a foreign country you need some local currency, but everywhere we went we were able to pay by card, so if you do change some money, don't get too much! Tipping is not usual in Iceland, although it is creeping in, as a habit introduced by American tourists! There are ATMs at the airport, which also has several huge duty-free shops, for use by both arriving and departing passengers. This is a good place to stock up with wine, although the prices are still higher than at home!

A thoroughly enjoyable visit, and that item on the bucket list has now been ticked off! Now, how about that flight to Mars...?

*Mike Whittle*