

Geographical overview

Iceland covers a surface of about 103,000 km², which makes it about half the size of Great Britain and twice the size of the Netherlands. It lies just below the Arctic Circle and about 200 km off the east coast of Greenland.

Iceland is an extremely rugged country. Its coastline is indented by long, deep fjords, creating a coastline of about 5000 kilometres. In many places, the land rises steeply from the ocean's depth.

Iceland's interior is dominated by a large wild highland, that is completely uninhabited – a land of polar deserts, barren mountains and icecaps. The three largest icecaps, the Vatnajökull, Langjökull and Hofsjökull are all situated in the central highlands and cover together about 10% of the land's surface.

Most of Iceland's 390,000 inhabitants (2025 census) live in the coastal region. Two out of every three inhabitants live in the greater Reykjavik area (the capital plus satellite towns). The plains of Selfoss and the towns of Akureyri in the north and Egilsstaðir in the east also house a fair number of people. These areas correspond with the country's most fertile and flat lowlands and are far apart. Ring Road one, the nation's logistic traffic vein, circles the country and connects these areas. It is the road you'll inevitably take as you visit Iceland.

Most international visitors to Iceland arrive at Keflavik international

Airport in the southwest, not far from Reykjavik. The **south-western corner of the country** is also where you'll encounter some of the most famous sites and geothermal phenomena, such as the Skogafoss and Gullfoss waterfalls, the blue lagoon, the Strokkur geyser and the Þingvellir plain, where Iceland's parliament and court were once housed (see page 64 and route 1). The routes and sites in this area are described from page 122 onwards.

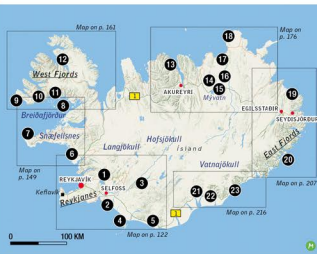
North of Reykjavik lies the **Snæfellsnes peninsula**, where one of the three National Parks of the country are situated (next to Þingvellir and Vatnajökull). Snæfellsnes is sometimes referred to as Little Iceland, as it combines every landscape type of the country within a small area. It is relatively easy to visit and offers superb scenery and birdlife. The routes and sites in this area are described from page 149 onwards.

Beyond Snæfellsnes, on the far side of the island-dotted Breiðafjörður (broad fjord), lie the **West Fjords**. This is Iceland's wild, empty and little visited north-west region. The many deep fjords and rocky peninsulas make travel here time consuming, but the stunning nature, rich wildlife (including many sea bird colonies) and authentic villages make a visit very worthwhile. The routes and sites in this area are described from page 161 onwards.

The **northern fjords**, in particular the wide Eyjafjörður bay near Akureyri, harbour Iceland's second largest concentration of inhabitants. Akureyri is a small town and a gateway to the spectacular inland sites of the north, which include impressive volcanic landscapes, dramatic waterfalls, a rich flora, remnant patches of subarctic woodland and, above all, the glorious Mývatn lake, which will prove a highlight of any trip to Iceland. The routes and sites in this area are described from page 176 onwards.

The coastline of **east Iceland** is again dominated by fjords. These East Fjords are where you'll first set foot if you arrive by ferry. The international ferry arrives at the village of Seyðisfjörður, which lies close to the valley of Egilsstaðir, the main concentration of human habitation in this part of the country. The routes and sites in this area are described from page 207 onwards.

Southeastern Iceland has a dramatic landscape, dominated by the Vatnajökull. This is Iceland's largest icecap which also harbours its highest peak, the 2,119 m high Hvannadalshnúkur. The southeast is a land of extremes, even by Icelandic standards. There are glaciers and icecaps, but also vast, barren plains of volcanic ash (*sandurs* – see page 38). In Skaftafell, a wonderful hiking area, there are important remnants of the Icelandic natural birch woodland. The southeast is also the location of the iceberg lagoons – a superb attraction for photographers and naturalists alike. The routes and sites in this area are described from page 216 onwards.



Overview of Iceland. The numbers refer to the routes on page 124 and further.

The hot vapour has to escape somehow and violently explodes through the weakest spots in the sheet of lava. Thereby it creates pseudo-craters – craters without a lava channel within. Superb examples are seen at Mývatn.

Basalts, rhyolites and tephra

Volcanoes spit out a large variety of different materials, ranging from alkaline basalts to acidic rhyolites and volcanic ash known as tephra.

The dark basalts are the most common rock on Iceland. They occur in different forms, reflecting the viscosity (thickness) and cooling process of the original lava.

Basalt rock is famous for forming hexagonal pillars known as columnar lava. This particular manifestation of basalt is a feature of very thick lava that cooled down slowly. In the process, the lava shrinks and fractures predominantly into neat six-angled columns (although between three and a dozen sides can be observed). There are spectacular examples of this type of basalt all over Iceland, for example near Vík, Arnarstapi, Ásbyrgi and in Skaftafell.

Slightly more runny lava flows down slowly, like thick soup. The outer layer cools down more quickly than the centre. As the exterior part gradually solidifies, the liquid interior keeps on flowing, pushing forward the half-hard crust which ripples under the pressure. The result is a typical structure known as ropey lava.

The very runny lava is responsible for the barren lava fields or *hrauns* (see page 57). It is called block lava, as it forms distinctive blocks and chunks. On Iceland, particularly along the mid-Atlantic ridge in the southwest,



The bizarre mountains of Landmannalaugar consist of Rhyolite lava.

Short geological guide – lava types

Hraun or block lava field field of young basaltic lava, blackish of colour, with brittle, sharp rocks. The lava solidified quickly, trapping the gasses within. Hence block lava is very porous. Examples: route 4, 7, 14, 15, 16 and sites 2, 3 and 4 on page 141-142, site 21 and 23 on page 159-160, and 48 on page 226.

Ropey lava very thick lava that cooled slowly, leaving a typical rope-like structure. Examples: route 1, 14 and 16.

Basalt columns long hexagonal pillars, the result of the slow cooling and shrinking of basalt lava. Most beautiful examples: Vík (route 5), Arnarstapi (route 7), Ásbyrgi (route 17) and Svartifoss in Skaftafell (route 21).

Rhyolite light-coloured, acidic lava, occurring in very conspicuous, light hills and mountains. Examples: route 19, Lón (site 56 on page 229) and Landmannalaugar (site 18 on page 148).

Tephra volcanic ash. May cover large areas, creating a typical 'sandy' landscape of volcanic origin. Examples: many places in the interior, e.g. route 3 and 16, also on the sandurs (route 18 and 23 and sites 31 on page 201 and 52 on page 228).

Tuff compressed tephra. Because of the high gas content, tuff stone weighs very little. Examples: route 7.



Block lava field of the Eldhraun (site 48 on page 226)

Ropey lava field at Þingvellir (route 1)

Basalt cliffs at Arnarstapi (route 7)

there are large areas covered in this lava. These are atmospheric places: the dark, razor-sharp rock contrasts so beautifully with the soft, greyish-green cushions of the Fringe-mosses (photo on page 57). Sometimes eruptions produce acidic igneous rocks rather than basalt. The most common is rhyolite. Rhyolite mountains are much lighter, with sandy and brick red colours. Locally, minerals emerge, adding whitish, bluish and greenish hues to the landscape. Rhyolite lava is very viscous and can flow out in a steady, prolonged flow, producing high mounts



Iceland's bird with the highest X-factor: the Puffin.

Iceland's top birds

Puffin Everyone loves Puffins. These attractive 'clowns' of the north Atlantic are a feast for the eye. It is the national bird of Iceland, and with good cause – the country hosts an estimated 2-3 million birds in autumn, the world's largest population. Unfortunately, it is in decline. See Puffins on routes 4, 5, 8, 9, 18, 19 and 20.

Harlequin Duck Perhaps Iceland's prettiest species of duck and certainly one of the avian highlights. This beautiful slaty-blue duck breeds across Siberia and around the Pacific rim with outlying populations in eastern Canada, Greenland and Iceland. In the breeding season, it has a very special habitat choice: fast-flowing rivers. Out of season, it spends its day on the rough seas around Iceland. See Harlequin Ducks on routes 3, 14, 19 and 23 in the breeding season and 7, 11, 13, 19 and 23 outside the breeding season.

Gyr Falcon this mythical raptor is renowned for being the largest falcon on earth. In Europe it is rare in the tundra's of Scandinavia, but much more common in Iceland, where it hunts for Ptarmigan. Birds here are mostly of the grey form. See Gyr Falcons on routes 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18.

Barrow's Goldeneye An American species (like Harlequin Duck with a restricted range in Canada and the US) that has its only European outpost in Iceland. Nearly the entire population lives in and around lake Mývatn. Here, it is common. See Barrow's Goldeneye on route 14 or site 11 on page 145.

Brünnich's Guillemot This is the northern cousin of the common Guillemot and within Europe only present in Iceland and Arctic Norway. It occurs throughout the Icelandic coasts, but is much more common in the North-west. See Brünnich's Guillemots on routes 7, 9 and 18.



Brünnich's Guillemots are superficially similar to Common Guillemots, but have a thicker neck and bill. Above all, the white line along the bill is diagnostic.

Icelandic Wren This bird is special because it is one of only three birds in Iceland that has an endemic sub-species on the island (the others being Redpoll and Black-tailed Godwit). The Wren is a typical species of Iceland's birch woodlands, and since these are now restricted to a few sites, so is the Wren. See Icelandic Wren on routes 1, 3, 10, 15, 17 and 21.

Arctic Tern With over 100,000 pairs, Iceland holds the largest population of Arctic Terns in Europe. Arctic Terns breed in large colonies in the lowlands.

This graceful bird holds the record of annual migration distance. Each year, the breeding birds of the Arctic fly all the way to the Antarctic waters. Arctic Terns can be seen on most routes; large colonies are present on routes 5, 7, 18, 20 and 23.

Grey Phalarope In Britain this bird is named for its grey winter plumage, but in America it is called Red Phalarope due to its splendid brick-red breeding plumage. Grey Phalaropes are truly arctic birds, occurring in a ring around the north pole. Within Europe, they only occur on Svalbard and Iceland, where they are rare and breed mostly on small islands off the coast. Search for Grey Phalarope on route 8.

Great Northern Diver The third American-Icelandic bird is the Great Northern Diver (Common Loon in American English). In Europe, it only breeds in Iceland. With about 300 pairs, it is not very common, but the birds are conspicuous and not so difficult to find. They breed on the shores of large lakes. See Great Northern Diver on routes 1, 6, 11, 12, 14 and 18.

Great Skua The impressive (and aggressive) Great Skua has the largest populations in the world on Iceland. Here, they are almost restricted to the great sandur outwash plains in the south. See Great skuas on routes 2, 4, 5, 18, 19 and above all, 23.



Arctic Terns will dive-bomb everyone who comes close to the colony.



Thousands of Windmill Fringed Gentians grow in the coastal grasslands beneath the Stokkseyri lighthouse.

you can be trapped by a rising tide. This area is also good in winter, with King Eider and Gyr Falcon as regular visitors.

5 Continue to Stokkseyri from which there are more opportunities to scan the coast for birds. Just beyond the village, the lagoons hold Whooper Swans and Red-throated Divers.

The 33 connects with the 34. Turn left to Eyarbakki. After 2.4 kms, turn right onto a track to Nesengjar and Öseyri.

6 This track leads to the Flói bird reserve – an area of former meadows that have been transformed back into marshes. The track to the reserve offers wonderful birdwatching. Drive slowly and look carefully and you stand a very good chance of seeing one or more Short-eared Owls. They are active during the day, but even more so in the evening. Watch carefully for a pale bird hunting over the fields with a graceful, butterfly-like flight. Other likely encounters will be with Arctic Skuas and Red-throated Divers, while Black-tailed Godwits and Snipe stand on the poles alongside the track. On the small ponds, look for Red-necked Phalarope.

7 After crossing a small river and cattle grid, turn left to the bird hide. From here a walking trail starts, for which you need wellies to keep your feet dry. The area around the hide is also excellent for the aforementioned species.

Retrace your steps and cross the 34 into Eyarbakki.

8 This lovely village is known for its old houses, good fish restaurant and is another good vantage point for watching seabirds. In particular the area west of the old harbour can be rewarding.

Return via the 34 back to Selfoss.

Various pairs of Short-eared Owls breed around the Flói marshes.



ROUTE 3: TO HEKLA – TRIP INTO THE INTERIOR

175 KM, 6 HOURS



*Perfect introduction route to the nature of Iceland.
Something of everything: from highland desert to forest.*

Habitats: rivers, grasslands, meadows, heathlands, highland desert, plantation

Geology: stratovolcano, tephra fields, columnar basalt

Selected Species: Arctic Riverbeauty, Northern Bedstraw, Northern Small White Orchid, Mountain Avenas, Alpine Catchfly, Goldcrest, Redpoll, Golden Plover, Harlequin Duck



This route takes you all the way from the green lowland meadows into the barren highlands of the interior – and it is all driveable with a normal car. On the way back, you pass along the foot of mount Hekla, Iceland's most active volcano. This trip introduces you to a wide variety of Icelandic ecosystems. It is also a great route for finding wildflowers. All in all, it is the route we'd start with on our first day in Iceland.

Starting point: Junction of road 1 and road 30. Follow the 30 towards Flúðir.

1 The first section leads through meadows and grasslands with sheep and horses. This area of Iceland – the old river floodplains of the Hvíta, Þjórsá and Hólsá rivers – is the largest area of farmland in the whole of Iceland. En route, you're likely to see Redshanks, Golden Plovers and Arctic Skua.