



Mystical Iceland

the Land of Fire and Ice and Northern Lights

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story Laurie Wallace-Lynch

No matter who I talked to about going to Iceland last fall, people had either been there recently, or said they have always wanted to go. It seems that Iceland is THE hot (well cool actually) travel destination on many bucket lists. It's easy to see why.

There is something truly magical and unforgettable about this Land of Fire and Ice. This includes glaciers, volcanoes, lava fields, fiords and northern lights—most of which you can see in two or three days!

Iceland has a frozen-in-time quality about it. With the ex-

ception of a few cities like Reykjavik, it feels like not much has changed since the Vikings explored this rugged country. And Icelanders want to keep it that way. They are fiercely proud of their land and are dedicated to preserving their culture and native (official) Icelandic language, although English is widely spoken. Ninety percent of their homes have geothermal heating. There's a noticeable lack of trees on the mossy, rock-covered terrain which looks like I would expect Mars might be. While the geothermal regions and lava field look rugged, they are actually quite vulnerable. It's forbidden and

punishable to drive off road or to touch the moss, as it takes decades to grow back.

That means no off-roading for the Superjeeps which take you on fun-filled excursions to various parts of Iceland, including their wildly popular Northern Lights Excursion. Our driver/guide, Ingvar Orni Arnarson, was communicating with other Superjeep drivers and within minutes, we joined a convoy of five, giant white Jeeps in search of a colourful sky. It felt rather like chasing tornadoes in the movie *Twister*. On an open plain we huddled together on a crisp October night, under a sky so dark (no city lights here) that we could barely see the head Superjeep guide as he explained the science behind the northern lights.

To warm us up, the guides poured steaming hot chocolate from a giant thermos into paper cups and then laced it with a generous amount of Icelandic Vodka.

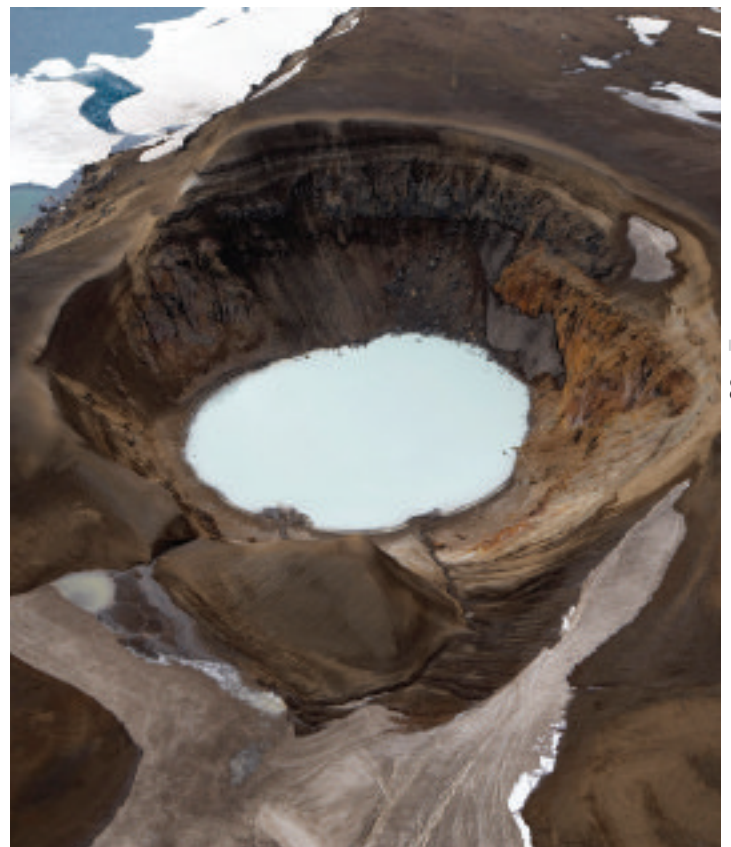
It had rained earlier that day, but the Northern Lights Tracking System indicated that the Northern Lights Tours were on and we were in for a treat. Within minutes, there was plenty of hooting and hollering as the first streaks of white light lit up the sky. Colourful streams of Jello-like green and ocean turquoise then deep-water cobalt blue painted the sky as we craned our necks to marvel at the magnificence of this jaw-dropping natural phenomenon.

“Seeing the northern lights is one of the reasons I chose Iceland,” a man from North Carolina told our group. “I also came here to see the glaciers before they are gone.”

Iceland offers many “firsts” on your bucket list of experiences, including getting up close and personal with a glacier. Icelandic Mountain Guides can lead you on a hike on to a glacier, or you travel by snowmobile to the Langjokull ice gap glacier into the world’s largest ice tunnel and caves. For an once-in-a-lifetime experience, you can go inside the Pihnu-kagigur volcano –now a crater--in an empty magma chamber (like a glass elevator on pulleys) on the Inside the Volcano Tour.

If you ask a local what you should see and do in Iceland, chances are they will suggest The Golden Circle. It’s a 300 kilometre loop which you can explore by rental car or tour by luxury coach with Reykjavik Excursions. Top stops include Pingvellir National Park, the majestic Gullfoss waterfall and the active Strokkur in Haukadalur which erupts about every six minutes, shooting hot water about 150 feet into the air.

Pingvellir (pronounced Thing-vet-eer), is a geyser site which sits on the rift between the Eurasian and American tectonic plates, causing giant cracks in the earth’s surface. You can even go snorkelling in the water-filled canyons on certain excursions. “The waterfall is where an episode of season three of *Game of Thrones* was filmed,” explained our



guide. (Other scenes “North of the Wall” were filmed in northern Iceland).

Golden Circle Tours can even be combined with snowmobiling on a glacier or a visit to the geothermal baths at Laugarvatn Fontana Spa. Visitors can book to see the famous Blue Lagoon the day they arrive as it’s not far from the airport.

The volcanic island of Iceland sits south of the Arctic Circle and is known as a land of extraordinary contrasts including green valleys and jet-black rocks and lava fields. A great way to witness this is on the Superjeep Excursion to discover Snaefellsnes Peninsula in west Iceland. Here you will see black sand beaches set against soaring, jagged cliffs which abut the sea and the Skogafoss waterfalls. Climb about 600 steps to the top of a crater. The area’s most famous landmark is the snow-topped Snaefellsjokull glacier, an active volcano that is 700,000 years old and the subject in Jules Verne’s book *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Iceland has over 100 volcanoes with about 30 different systems which are still considered to be active.

WOW Airlines offers daily flights to Reykjavik from Toronto Pearson. And here’s the best travel deal going—if you are flying to Europe, WOW allows you to stopover in Iceland for a short stay with no additional fee! In 2015, some 46,654 Canadian visitors went to Iceland through Keflavik airport outside of Reykjavik. From January to December 2016, that



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Iceland is a hotspot for taking in the beauty of The Northern Lights. The best months to see the northern lights in Iceland are January to April and September to December.





Recommended Excursions

Superjeep Excursions to the Snaefellsnes Peninsula and the Northern Lights Excursions (ask for the combo package) www.Superjeep.is

Reykjavik Excursions Golden Circle full-day tour, www.re.is

Before you Go

Food is expensive—most food is imported and this is reflected in the prices. A regular coffee will set you back the equivalent of about \$5 Canadian. Two bowls of traditional Icelandic Meat (Lamb) Soup with bread costs 3,580 Icelandic Krona (ISK) —5,000 ISK was about \$63 Canadian last fall.)

Getting There

WOW Air has daily flights from Toronto Pearson Airport to Reykjavik, www.wowair.ca

Iceland Fast Facts

- Iceland has 170 geothermal pools.
- Iceland covers 103,000 kilometres and is slightly smaller than Cuba
- Glaciers cover almost 12,000 kilometres of the island's surface. Vatnajökull Glacier covers eight per cent of the country
- There's plenty of ice in Iceland, yet influenced by the Gulf Stream, Iceland enjoys a temperate climate—cool in the summer and mild in the winter. Temperatures range from -1° C in January to 10.7° C in July.

Hours of daylight: 4 in January and 22 in June.

Where to stay

Radisson Blu Saga, Reykjavik

Owned by the Icelandic Farmer's Association, the beautiful and newly renovated hotel is known as the Farmer's Palace, referring to its past. The farm-to-table menu is expertly prepared by Executive Chef Siggí Helga. The rooms feature Icelandic designer furniture. Grilled Restaurant is on the top floor of the Radisson Blu Saga. The 2017 Michelin-award winning restaurant offers exquisite cuisine and panoramic views of Reykjavik. www.radisson-blu.com/en/sagahotel-reykjavik

number jumped to 81,144.

The capital city of Reykjavik has a population of just 118,000 people, (there are only 337,000 people in all of Iceland). It's a great walking city or you can jump on the Hop-on-hop-off Bus. Must-see stops include The National Gallery of Iceland, Hallgrímskirkja Church and Perlmán (The Pearl) Museum and Ob-

servation Deck and revolving restaurant.

The tourism slogan is "Come and be Inspired by Iceland". I'm inspired to go back a second time.

For more information: Order or download the brochure Come and be Inspired by Iceland at inspiredbyiceland.com or visit www.visiticeland.com.