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Reykjavik's skyline and Mount Esja



Photo by *Jeremyred* (Dreamstime)

DISCOVER VIKING ROOTS IN REYKJAVIK, BUT NOT ONLY

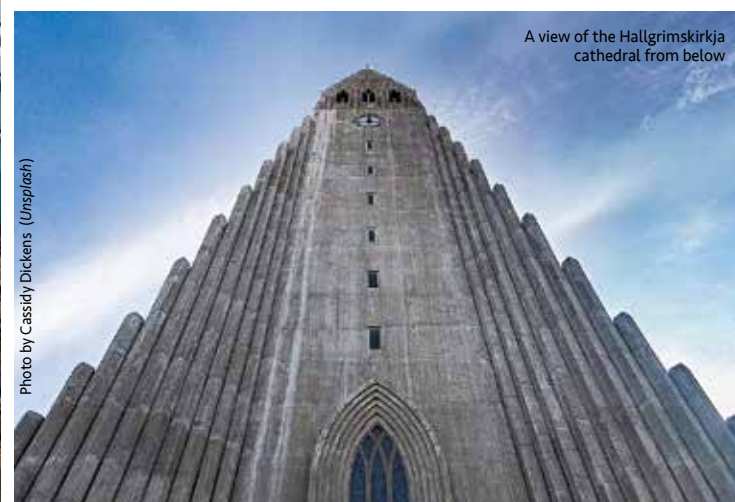
Delving into the tumultuous history of Iceland's first settlers alongside a food and drink scene that embraces Icelandic tradition.



Seafood restaurants in the 'Bay of Smoke'



Jón Gunnar Árnason's Sun Voyager sculpture



A view of the Hallgrímskirkja cathedral from below

Photo by Cassidy Dickens (Unsplash)



Harpa Concert Hall

Photo by Denise Jans (Unsplash)



Faxaflói Bay and the Engey Lighthouse near Reykjavik

Photo by Rafael Carcen (Unsplash)



Hvammsvík Hot Springs on Hvalfjörður Fjord

Iceland's landscape is untamed, erratic, and simmering with volcanic activity beneath the surface. It's no wonder the Vikings felt right at home here. The first settlers to this isolated island were Norwegian Vikings and, in 870 CE, one Ingólfur Arnarson built Iceland's first homestead in the Bay of Smoke (a.k.a. Reykjavik). Beyond the whale-watching cruises, waterfront walks, and striking modern architecture, there are still pockets of Viking influence to be found in Iceland's seemingly quiet capital city.

'Vikings have a bad reputation,' says photographer Guðmann Þór Bjargmundsson. Once a location scout for *Game of Thrones*, he now runs a Viking photography studio, called *Mink Viking Portrait*, in the heart of Reykjavik. I've been dressed in tunics, furs, and copper jewellery and am sporting a bow and arrow on a Viking photoshoot. 'Vikings are misunderstood,' Guðmann continues. 'The first settlers in Iceland were Vikings, but they were mostly farmers looking for a new life. They were teachers, healers, explorers... and, yes, some were warriors.'

Bjargmundsson tells me to glare into the camera. After all, even Viking farmers were known for their short tempers and passion for fighting.

After a session looking the part, I head out into Reykjavik to find the city's Viking roots. At the waterfront, a steel-grey sea stretches before me and boats putter out to spot mink and humpback whales in Faxaflói Bay. The *Sun Voyager* sculpture catches the light, glowing golden against the snow-splotched Mount Esja looming above the water. This skeletal metal work of art resembles a Viking longship and is an ode to exploration and undiscovered territory. It's also beautifully photogenic in the sunlight.

The streets of central Reykjavik are lined with snow-white, deep red, and navy blue wooden buildings, and it's a short walk from the shore to Hallgrímskirkja, the crowning glory of the city. This grey-as-concrete Brutalist-style cathedral stands on a small hill above the main shopping street. In front of the striking façade is a statue of one of Iceland's national heroes, Leif Eriksson.

A peaceful Viking explorer, Eriksson beat Christopher Columbus by some 500 years in terms of being the first European to reach North America. As Bjargmundsson says, not all Vikings were preoccupied with fighting and pillaging.

A couple of Reykjavik's museums are dedicated to the Viking founders of Iceland. The Settlement Exhibition is in the city centre and was built around a 10th-century longhouse unearthed in 2001. It's an interesting delve into the archaeological findings. The Saga Museum down by the new harbour tells a compelling story of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and a people that settled and tilled virtually inarable, near-Arctic land to create a place to live.

Strolling down the Laugavegur in the evening, I pop into one of the many bookshops to pick up a copy of the Viking sagas. Statistically, Iceland is the world's best-read country, with people here reading a national average of four books a year and one in ten Icelanders publishing some form of written word. Iceland's literary history began with the

sagas – epic tales of the Viking Age written between the 12th and 14th centuries. In a cosy bakery on the corner of Laugavegur, I read about Egil Skallagrímsson while the sweet smell of freshly baked cinnamon buns fills the room. Skallagrímsson is a complex character; a berserker and warrior but also a farmer and poet. He composed his first poem at the age of three and committed his first murder at the age of seven. After a life of fighting kings and settling blood feuds, he died vulnerable, blind, and alone. His story is told against a backdrop of rugged hills, tumbling waterfalls, and a landscape battered by North Atlantic winds.

Just beyond the city lies a playground of natural wonders: glaciers, volcanoes, geothermal hot springs, and black-sand beaches where the Atlantic Ocean crashes against the shore and puffins peer out of their cliffside nests. This was the landscape sought after and tamed by the Viking settlers. There's plenty to see across the island, but before heading out into the wilderness, start as the Vikings did – in the Bay of Smoke.

REYKJAVIK'S FOOD SCENE

As the Vikings discovered, agriculture has never been easy on this small island in the North Atlantic. But the people here persevered, smoking fish to preserve the catch for winter, flavouring wild lamb with Arctic herbs, and eventually growing tomatoes and cucumbers in geothermally-heated hot houses. Reykjavik's food scene is an ode to local ingredients from a challenging landscape.



For breakfast

'Is this the best goddamn bakery in Iceland?' an American voice booms at the counter at *Braud & Co*. The staff don't hesitate to confirm it is. And they have every right to be confident. Here, the classic Scandinavian flavours of cinnamon and sugar are baked into sweet-smelling twisted buns the size of my hand – the perfect start to the day. *Braud & Co* has three branches serving freshly baked pastries, sourdough loaves, and rocket-fuel coffee in the city centre alone. braudogco.is



For ice cream

Ice cream may seem counterintuitive in Europe's most northerly capital city, but a rich dairy-producing tradition in Iceland has led to an obsession with the cold desert, no matter the weather. It's hard to miss the bright turquoise exterior of *Valdis* in the funky new harbour district. It serves gelato with some distinctly Icelandic flavours, such as rye bread ice cream. *Valdis* is perfect for a walk along the seafront or topping a waffle dish inside. valdis.is

For coffee

Said to be the first place in Reykjavik to serve espresso coffee, *Mokka Kaffi* has been trading since 1958. It's a favourite among locals who flock to the distinct red building for a caffeine hit before work. Located on the 'rainbow street' that leads to Hallgrímskirkja, it's LGBTQ+ friendly and doubles as a quirky art gallery. *Mokka Kaffi's* house waffles are as famous as its Italian-style coffees. mokka.is

For lunch

Catering to all diets and desires, *Hlemmur Food Hall* is Reykjavik's first street-food hall. Stalls line the glass-fronted interior of this former central bus station, serving everything from LA-style tacos packed with fresh seafood from Faxalói Bay to famous Icelandic lamb at *Fjánhúsið* (meaning 'the sheep's head'). *Skál* is an upmarket gastro pub within the food hall that serves perfectly presented New Nordic cuisine. hlemmurmatt.holl.is



For dinner

Leaning into the small-plates craze accompanying Iceland's wine bar surge, *Mat Bar* shows off the length and breadth of local Icelandic ingredients mixed with flavours from across the globe. Here, Icelandic lamb is flavoured with Turkish spice and freshly grilled fish is seasoned with a zesty hit of ponzu. For a real splurge, hit Iceland's only *Michelin*-starred restaurant. *Dill* has retained a star since 2017, and chef Gunnar Karl Gíslason takes his inspiration from Iceland's rugged landscape to flavour an exceptional seasonal tasting menu. matbar.is
dillrestaurant.is



For drinks

Iceland has a rocky relationship with alcohol, having been under prohibition until 1989. A slew of cosy craft beer pubs has cropped up across Reykjavik in the past 20 years, and it doesn't get more Icelandic than the *Einstök Bar* serving the country's most famous craft beer. However, wine bars have recently become *the* thing in the Icelandic capital, and none is more atmospheric than *Vinstúkan Tiu Sopar*. At this basement bar, the focus is natural wines and wines made by small producers, and a medley of small plates accompanies the extensive wine list. einstokbeer.com
natturuvin.is



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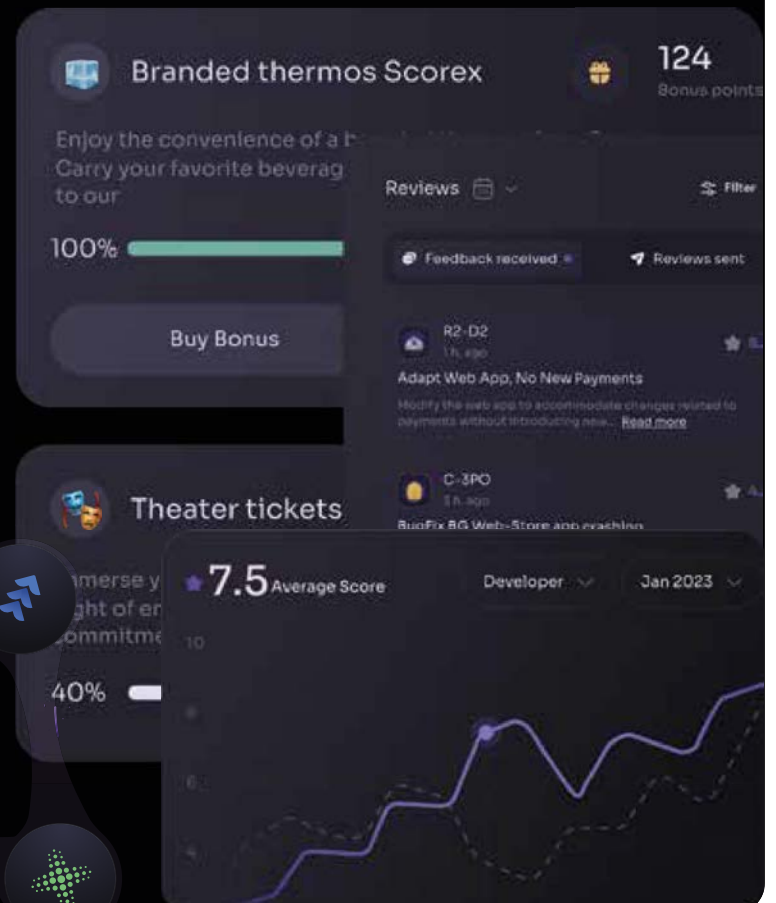
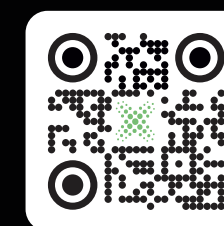
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BEYOND THE CITY

Reykjavik is a jumping-off point for discovering Iceland's wild, volcanic beauty. Beyond the city, you'll find an untamed landscape formed over millennia of seismic activity and shifting tectonic plates. The scenery ranges from mossy lava plains to towering green hills where waterfalls tumble between chasms and glaciers top mountains. Active volcanoes bubble with lava and the country's most famous geothermal lagoon offers relaxing afternoons.

Soak in a geothermal hot spring

Hvammssvík lies a 45-minute drive from Reykjavik and is one of Iceland's newest hot-spring experiences. On the shore of the Hvalfjörður fjord, it blends seamlessly into the landscape of pale green mountains and shimmering water. The experience embraces the hot and cold traditions of Icelandic outdoor bathing, and there's also a farm-to-table restaurant onsite whose chef was trained at *Dill*.

hvammssvik.com



Inside an ice cave with *Ice Pic Journeys*

Hike or zipline over a glacier

Ice Pic Journeys offers a range of glacier experiences beyond Reykjavik. Glacier walks are led by professional glacier guides so you can set foot on a vast, icy expanse safely, avoiding hidden sinkholes and chasms. Try your hand at ice climbing or enter the sleek, blue world of a natural ice cave. Tours are accompanied by a professional photographer who captures the adventure in the best light. *Ice Pic Journeys* also offers the world's only zip-wire over a glacier for those who want a real adventure on the ice.

icepicjourneys.is



Snorkelling at Silfra with *Dive.is*

Snorkel between the continents

Iceland sits on the continental divide between North America and Eurasia. It runs like a scar along the west of the island, resulting in a dramatic chasm of volcanic rock at Þingvellir National Park. Here, you can walk between the continental plates or, even better, dive or snorkel in the chasm between the continents. Having filtered through lava for decades, the water at the Silfra fissure is crystal-clear, allowing you to observe this other-worldly underwater landscape of volcanic rock formations.

dive.is



A boat against the backdrop of the northern lights in Reykjavik

Hunt for the northern lights by boat

Every evening between October and March, boats putter out into Faxaflói Bay from Reykjavik's main harbour. Out on the open water and away from the city lights, there's a much better chance of spotting the northern lights. You can choose between keeping warm in the cosy lounge or bracing the cold on deck to scan the star-speckled sky for the ethereal green glow dancing against the night sky. A knowledgeable guide is on board to help you hunt for the lights and capture the best images with your phone or camera.

elding.is

Experience Iceland in miniature

While most visitors to Iceland head along the southern coast and to the highlights of the Golden Circle, it's worth turning and facing the other direction to explore West Iceland. The Snæfellsnes Peninsula is a two-hour drive from the capital and is said to represent Iceland's varied landscapes all in one place. Sheer cliffs plunge to the sea and rustle with birdlife at Arnarstapi, photographers flock to the striking pyramid-shaped Kirkjufell mountain (featured in *Game of Thrones*), and you can marvel at 8000-year-old lava formations in Vatnshellir Cave.

visiticeland.com



A purebred Icelandic horse at *Viking Horses*

Get friendly with an Icelandic horse

Did you know that once an Icelandic horse leaves Iceland, it is forbidden to return? Iceland's horses have been purebred since Viking times and are known for their short stature and friendly demeanour. In Iceland, tradition dictates you must learn a horse's name before you can ride it, so get to know a friendly Icelandic horse at one of the stables on the southern coast. Fifteen minutes' drive from Reykjavik, a horse-riding experience at *Viking Horses* takes you through the Rauðhólar area, past (and through) shimmering lakes, and into a volcanic landscape of bright red craters.

vikinghorses.is

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WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN REYKJAVIK

As well as being the capital city, Reykjavik is Iceland's hub of creativity and culture – from the striking Harpa concert hall on the seafront to cosy little art galleries and quirky museums filling the streets. A litany of traditional celebrations and modern cultural festivals occurs across and around the city throughout the year.



Sheep grazing in the hills of Iceland

The Réttir (annual sheep and horse round-up)

September 6 – October 9

Throughout September and into the beginning of October, farmers in the wildlands surrounding Reykjavik begin to herd their sheep and horses from their wild summer grazing back to their farmsteads. There's a festival atmosphere to the events across the hamlets and small villages of Iceland, with locals and visitors coming to watch the event and celebrate the beginning of autumn. Live music plays and beer flows freely at the Réttarball afterwards. *Visit Iceland* has a calendar showing when and where each local Réttir takes place. visiticeland.com

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New Year's Eve celebrations

December 31 – January 1

On December 31, strict traditions are upheld in Reykjavik as people across the city ring in the new year. It begins at 7 p.m., when most people head out for a meal with family (make sure to book a table at a restaurant well in advance). Afterwards, they gather for bonfires and fireworks across the city before heading home to watch an annual, televised comedy roast at 10.30 p.m. Just before midnight, everyone heads back onto the streets of Reykjavik and the sky is illuminated with blooming fireworks before they retire to cosy pubs and house parties that carry on until the early hours of the morning. It's quite the spectacle for anyone visiting Reykjavik over the New Year period.

visitreykjavik.is



Let the magic begin

Iceland noir

November 20–23

In the darkest days of the year, crime writers from across the world and local to Iceland gather in Reykjavik for a festival celebrating the macabre side of fiction. A series of panels, talks, and events centred around literary crime sees a list of big names in the genre take to the stage to talk about all things murder and mystery. Ann Cleeves, Anthony Horowitz, and Harlan Coben are headlining the 2024 event. icelandnoir.weebly.com



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