




VIKING

Discover a different side of
Iceland's Viking history on a tour
with a very specific dress code

CHIC

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 Photography by Guðmann Þór Bjargmundsson and Ryan Newburn

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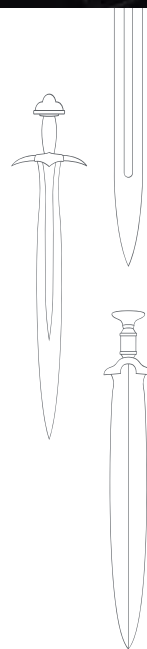
You've probably heard of the Golden Circle. Maybe you've even heard of the Diamond Circle in northern Iceland. But have you heard of the Viking Circle? The brainchild of Mike Reid and Ryan Newburn – founders of Ice Pic Journeys, the only tour company in Iceland where you're accompanied by a professional photographer as you venture into ice caves, across glaciers and around the volcanic landscape – the Viking Circle takes in key sites related to the country's history as a Viking stronghold. The best bit? You do it all dressed as a Viking. So today, I'm ditching the 21st-century waterproof uniform of Iceland's everyday tourists in favour of faux furs and a swooshing cape.

The day begins at the Mink Viking Portrait Studios in Reykjavik, where a narrow staircase leads to a room crammed with velvet tunics, wooden shields and leather armbands. We're in the capable hands of photographer Guðmann Þór

Bjargmundsson, whose array of runic and Viking-inspired tattoos reassure me that he knows what he's doing. Guðmann worked as location scout for *Game of Thrones*, seeking out hidden caves and endless lava plains for the Queen of Dragons and co, so he has an eye for detail.

Taking me in with piercing blue eyes, Guðmann selects a forest-green tunic, a cape, leather wristbands and period jewellery. I am to be a Viking queen, it seems. My friend, Sarah, gets a slightly less regal looking straw-coloured tabard, but after the addition of belts and furs, she looks like a ferocious shield maiden from the TV series *Vikings*. Then, Guðmann's off, clicking away with his camera and calling out for us to scowl, roar, pout and angle our chins just so.

"What do you know of the Vikings?" he asks me between shots. I mumble something about pillaging raids on Lindsfarne, a few kilometres from where I



Below Sarah strolls through the historic Thingvellir National Park
Right Writer Suzy strikes a warrior pose

“The Vikings were not all raiders. Like any people, they were everything – farmers, peaceful settlers, healers and explorers”



grew up in North East England, and some stereotypes like bushy beards, horned helmets and angry warriors.

Guðmann scoffs. “Actually, the Vikings are misunderstood. They were not all warriors and raiders. Like any people, they were everything and anything – farmers, peaceful settlers, healers and explorers.”

Indeed, Viking explorer Leif Erikson is credited as being the first European to discover America. He’s one of Iceland’s national heroes, setting sail to North America some 500 years before Columbus. No bloodshed, no pillaging – driven only by curiosity and determination.

“Now, bow your head down, raise your axe and roar at the camera like a warrior,” Guðmann instructs. After all, some Vikings were raiding warriors.

The results of the shoot are, quite simply, amazing. We ooh and aah over the moody photos, which could easily be used to advertise a Netflix mini-series, on Guðmann’s computer screen. Eyeing one shot where I’m looking straight down the line of a bow and arrow, ready to let loose on my enemy, I think I’ve finally found my new LinkedIn profile picture.

After a quick costume change, it’s time to get out of the city and hit the Viking Circle. Now decked out in shimmering velvet cloaks, we power across Iceland’s wild volcanic landscape in a 4x4. Around the 10th century, nearly all free men would make their way to our first stop, Thingvellir, to attend the annual Alþing (Althing). Considered the world’s first parliament,

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Above Suzy and Sarah admire the mighty Hjálparfoss waterfalls

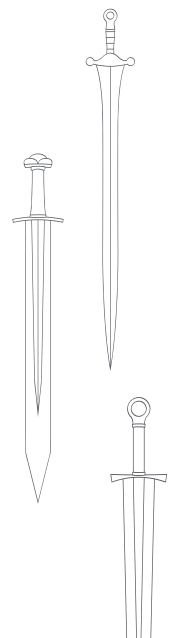
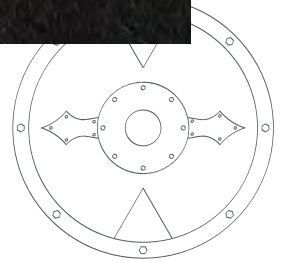
the Alþing was something of a Viking Bacchanalia, with a tented village, flowing mead, feasting and festival music long into the light summer nights.

Thingvellir – now a national park – is also where the continents of Eurasia and North America divide, and this broken seam in the land, dotted with towering basalt columns and mossy rockfaces, is the perfect backdrop for two cloaked Viking maidens. Our guide, Ryan, picks the most impressive spots – tiny outcrops against the black volcanic rock that make our velvet cloaks pop, and a tumbling waterfall spewing white over onyx rocks.

It's June, but it's Iceland and a flurry of light snow settles in our hair and on our capes, adding another layer of drama to each photograph. We stroll through the park, our cloaks streaming in the wind behind us, earning a few curious looks from other visitors wrapped up in cagoules and woolly hats.

Next, we bypass the selfie-stick-laden Gullfoss for two lesser-visited waterfalls. At Brúarfoss, the water glows an ethereal blue and bubbles in whirlpools beneath a rickety wooden bridge. Gullfoss may be more powerful but, to me, Brúarfoss is even more beautiful. There's a handful of other tourists here, but nothing like the crowds of Gullfoss or Skógafoss. Hjálparfoss is quieter still. Two thundering waterfalls cascade into a teal plunge pool and the mighty Hekla volcano looms in the distance. It's summer, so a smattering of purple lupines adds a pop of colour to the rugged landscape. There's no one else around so we have the viewing platform all to ourselves.

For our next injection of Viking history, we stop at the Commonwealth Farm. This recreated building sits on the foundations of an excavated Viking manor farm, and the traditional turf-roofed long house is dwarfed by the impressive Sámstaðamúli mountain and another waterfall. The whole



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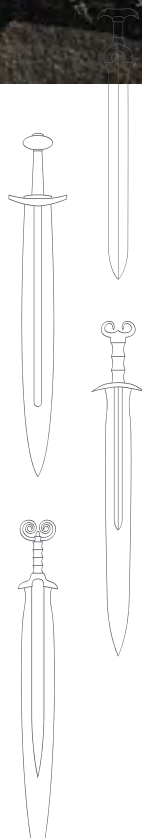
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I started the day feeling self-conscious, but I've become empowered

Above, left to right Suzy in her Viking cloak; a feast fit for a warrior at Ingólfsskáli Viking Restaurant



scene is idyllic so, of course, we pause for some photos. I started the day feeling self-conscious, but over the hours I've become unashamed and empowered by Ryan's directions. Inside, the Commonwealth Farm gives a window into the lives of the early settlers, with beds laid out around a faux fire, a communal latrine (thankfully not in use) and a kitchen where real fish is salt-drying from the rafters. Here, we learn about the peaceful side of Iceland's Vikings: tending to sheep and horses, sharing stories and music by the fire and using axes to clear the way for agricultural land rather than cleaving the enemy in two.

Finally, we stop for dinner at Ingólfsskáli Viking Restaurant. I'm sceptical of gimmicky restaurants, but the quiet drum beat and dim candlelight create an undeniably cool setting. Tables line a long, wooden hall and I can easily picture fur-clad Vikings cheering and joking around as they drank, replica horned cups are at every table and homemade mead is on the menu, but the food is certainly no gimmick. Icelandic lamb flavoured with Arctic herbs is rose-pink at its core, while confit duck legs are served on a bed of pulses, embracing the flavours of medieval Europe. Historically accurate



Above The Viking queens pose in their full regalia before their adventure begins

I'm sad to remove my cloak. It has protected me from Iceland's erratic weather, but it has also given me confidence

and delicious to boot. Outside, there's a final chance to embrace our inner Viking at the axe-throwing and archery range. Straw targets let out a satisfying 'thwack' as arrows hit, and cleaving a wooden target in two with an axe feels hugely therapeutic.

Returning to Reykjavik, I'm sad to remove my cloak for the final time. It has protected me from Iceland's erratic weather, but it has also given me a sense of confidence, like a true Viking warrior. As we reacclimatise to the 21st century at the hotel bar, my phone pings with an email from Guðmann. Our Viking photos are ready and, scrolling through them, it's like looking at two different people: we are strong, daring and powerful. Sure, we learned a lot about Iceland's Viking history and visited stunning natural wonders along the way, but what will stick with me about the Viking Circle experience is the feeling of letting loose and embracing my inner Viking warrior for the day. Well, that and my new badass LinkedIn photo. icepicjourneys.is

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