



HOLIDAY ON ICELAND

It may not sound like much of a summer destination, but Reykjavik offers one of the coolest short breaks in Europe. Esquire says 'Go north, young man' By Philip Watson

Ten years ago Reykjavik was little more than a parochial subarctic backwater. Now the Icelandic capital is about the hippest and most happening city in Europe. Offbeat, energetic and cosmopolitan, the country's devastatingly good-looking younger residents are creating some of today's most original and progressive music, fashion and art – and its wildest nightlife. Reykjavik, at the weekend at least, is a city that rocks.

The next few months also provide the best time to visit. Mild and warm (though

don't expect a tan), the city is bathed in a soft sun that hardly sets from mid-May until the end of July. During the day, you can head out to the most primitive and explosive landscape on the planet; by night, hit the quirky bars and edgy clubs – this is a city where people still queue in the rain at 6am to get into places. As Damon Albarn, who keeps a flat in the city, once said about Reykjavik's ravers: "They come out at midnight, drink all night, dance like bastards, and then run through the streets shagging each other senseless. It's brilliant!"





HOW TO DO ICELAND THE ESQUIRE WAY

GETTING THERE

Between 25 March and 15 September, budget airline Go (0845 605 4321; www.gofly.com), flies daily from Stansted to Reykjavik. Departure times are not exactly convenient (outgoing flights arrive at 1.20am; return flights at 6.15am) but prices are low at £140. Flights take just two-and-a-half hours. You must stay a Saturday night; car hire and hotel deals are also available.

The more flexible Icelandair (020 7874 1000; www.icelandair.co.uk) has 13 flights a week from Heathrow, seven from Glasgow and one from Manchester; prices start at £199. It also offers two-night "Club Mix" packages from £239, inclusive of flights, accommodation and transfers. Other packages are available through Arctic Experience (01737 214 214).

WHERE TO STAY

The best place in town is the centrally located Hótel Borg (00 354 551 1440; www.hotelborg.is), an Art Deco gem built in 1930 by local boy Jóhannes Josepsson, who made his fortune in the US as a champion wrestler. Make sure to book one of the 30 rooms in the original part of the hotel; doubles start at £107. If the Borg's full, try the Hótel Holt (00 354 552 5700; www.holt.is), a member of Relais & Châteaux, which has slightly smarter rooms, a great whisky and cigar bar, and the largest private art collection in the country. Doubles start at around £115.

NIGHTLIFE

It's true that Reykjavik has a tiny population of 110,000, and that by day the low-rise city centre streets can seem grey and empty. But at weekends most of the city's bars and clubs stay open until 7 or 8 in the morning. They are also

Angels and the architecture

Clockwise from above, Iceland is home to some of the most beautiful women in the world; the church of Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavik, completed in 1974, resembles a mountain of lava; the Strokkur geyser erupts every few minutes

crammed full of the most cool, confident and beautiful women in the world.

While the most famous bar is probably Kaffibarinn (1 Bergstatharstraeti), the drinking shack part-owned by Damon Albarn, the most fashionable is the Terence Conran-designed Rex (9 Austurstraeti), Kaffi Thomsen (17 Hafnarstraeti), with its open brickwork and abstract murals, is also worth checking out, as is the bar at the white, bright open-plan restaurant Apotek (16 Austurstraeti).

One of the best clubs is Skuggabarrinn (4 Posthusstraeti), beneath the Hotel Borg; or head to the recently refurbished live-music venue Gaukur á Stöng (22 Tryggvagata), which holds up to 800 revellers on three floors. But wander around the compact city centre and you'll find loads of places to party. (And yes, we did bump into Björk – twice.)

EATING AND DRINKING

As you've no doubt heard, the cost of food and drink in Iceland will make your wallet wince. Import costs and super-high sales taxes mean beers can set you back £6 a bottle; a meal in one of the city's better restaurants can easily reach £50 a head. Everything is so costly that this is almost a cash-free society – everybody pays for everything with credit cards (even at McDonald's). It's best to bring in your own booze or stock up at the duty-free shop at Keflavik



airport and, like the locals, get tanked up before you go out. Oh, and try to steer clear of Iceland's legendary Brennivín, an evil caraway seed-flavoured aquavit that is also known as Black Death.

If you've got the budget, try the rotating restaurant Perlan (00 354 562 0200), which offers reindeer steaks and great views over the city; Vid Tjörnina (3 Templarasund; 00 354 551 8666), the city's best fish restaurant; and La Primavera (9 Austurstraeti; 00 354 561 8555), where the whimsical dishes include veal with rhubarb, and plaice with a banana-and-blue-cheese sauce. Try also Thrir Frakkar ("Three Frenchmen") at 14 Baldursgata (00 354 552 3939), a small, dark, traditional restaurant off the beaten track specialising in whale steaks and sushi – both of which are strong and succulent, and like nothing else you've tasted before.

MUSIC

Icelandic music offers a lot more than Björk and big beat. There is an underground scene in Reykjavik that encompasses rap, speed metal, Sixties soul-jazz, new electronica and hardcore techno. Look out for new acts Sigur Rós and Emiliana Torrini, and one-off festivals.

THE BLUE LAGOON

As unmissable as the nightlife. About half an hour from the capital, this large, steamy, geothermal sea-water pool, rich in minerals and located in the middle of a lava field, is pure joy in which to bathe and relax. And it will not only leave you feeling cleansed and invigorated; along with Reykjavik's seven naturally-heated outdoor swimming pools, this is also the world's best hangover cure.

THE PENIS PALACE

Or, to give it its correct title, the "Icelandic Phallological Museum". A collection of "over 80 penises and penile parts belonging to various types of land and sea mammals" (whale wanger, anyone?), as well as artistic oddments and practical objects, this is, not surprisingly, the only one of its kind in the world. Open Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.



North country fair

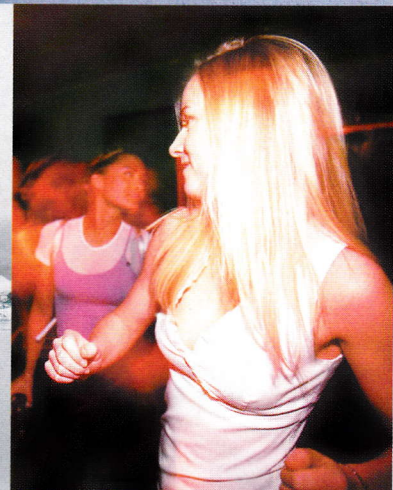
Clockwise from top, the Hótel Borg is the place to stay in Reykjavik; its best rooms are in the original block; the nightlife is decidedly frisky considering the size of the city; the Jökulsárlón lagoon

BIG COUNTRY

Iceland is not just another country; it's unlike any other place on earth. With a treeless, mountainous, glacial landscape so young it is still being formed, Iceland offers a scenery of extremes, from technicolour-blue mountain lakes to violently spouting geysers. Some areas are so lunar-like that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin trained here before their Apollo 13 mission.

There are three major attractions within an hour of the capital: the dramatic Golden Waterfall (Gullfoss); the bubbling Strokkur geyser; and Thingvellir, a lava plain that was the site of Iceland's – and the world's – first parliament. Outdoor types can also go hiking, whale-watching, horse-riding, trout-fishing, river-rafting, or head out on 4WD safaris; call Arctic Experience on 01737 214 214.

For more information, call the Iceland Holiday Information Centre on 020 8255 7373



Reykjavik Club Pass

Valid for:



Book a weekend package with Icelandair and you'll also get a free Reykjavik Club Pass, which gives you free admission and discounted drinks at 10 of the city's coolest clubs and bars, including

Kaffi Thomsen, Skuggabarrinn and Rex. Another money-saver is the Reykjavik Tourist Card (about £5; call 00 354 562 3045), which gives you free bus travel and admission to museums.

