

Another Planet on Earth

Iceland boasts some of Earth's most otherworldly landscapes and a vibrant culture nurtured by a small but passionate population.

By Sarah Binder

For the uninitiated, the word Iceland conjures nondescript mental images of the Northern Lights, glaciers, the Blue Lagoon, or simply an inconsequential island where one might connect for a couple hours on a flight to mainland Europe.

Up close and personal, this Nordic island nation, whose inhabited areas are linked by one 828-mile, two-lane road, packs a large punch. It's a mystical place defined by nature's extremes, where the four basic elements — air, earth, fire, and water — co-mingle in some of the planet's most stunning untouched landscapes.

"Iceland is often referred to as 'The Land of Fire and Ice' because of its combination of some of the world's most active volcanoes and largest glaciers. It is one of the few places that

is so sparsely populated and rich with natural experiences," explains Nicky Brandon, director of marketing for Ker & Downey, which offers customized journeys to the island. "Although 11 percent of Iceland is covered in glaciers, there are a lot of other things to see: gushing geysers, volcanoes, and geothermal hot spots. In the summer there is 24 hours of sunshine, so that gives travelers plenty of time to get out and explore."

A private luxury trip to Iceland allows one to explore a country that is 80 percent uninhabited (providing built-in privacy), yet home to a peaceful people who are welcoming and passionate about their unique history. The island enjoys modern infrastructure, yet is one of the geologically youngest landmasses on Earth.

"In a fast-paced world of sprawling development, Iceland's pure nature and empty expanses stand out as a luxury," explains Philippe Brown, founder of Brown + Hudson, which crafts bespoke journeys to the country. "Isolated from the rest of Europe for centuries, the unique cultural heritage of literature, music, and cuisine is captivating. Icelanders are also extremely hospitable and open, with an impulsive and easy way of life, which many people are attracted to."

Iceland offers nearly endless leisure activities for all interests, from catching sight of whales in Húsavík's Skjálfandi Bay in the north to heading to the southeast to see Jökulsárlón, an other-worldly glacier lagoon dotted with icebergs.

"One area that I personally love is

the Snæfellsnes Peninsula in the west. The glistening ice cap that crowns the area, Snæfellsjökull, is said to have mystical power. There are black and yellow sandy beaches combined with dramatic sea bird cliffs. On the north side, you drive through fjords and charming fishing villages with cozy restaurants using local fresh ingredients," says Brown. "Close by you can visit a family-owned shark museum where shark fishing and production of shark meat has been a part of the family for generations. It's a perfect place to take a light hike by the ocean where you find dramatic lava fields and bird life."

Luxury travel experts warn guests against being sucked into tourist traps and encourage them to seek out activities that

With the glacier Snæfellsjökull in the distance, the Budarkirkja church, which was built in 1703, sits alone among lava rocks on Iceland's Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

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The waterfall Háifoss, Iceland's second highest (falling 122 meters), is situated near the volcano Hekla in the south of the island.



Throughout “The Land of Fire and Ice,” natural wonders range from geysers to hot springs and volcanoes to glaciers. More than 20 species of Cetacea can be seen on whale watching tours in the summer months (top right).



illuminate Iceland from unusual perspectives. “Go beyond the typical hikes and try something more exciting like volcano rappelling or a two-week bicycle tour around the country to give you an up-close look at its raw, natural beauty,” says Brandon. While Ker & Downey creates customized trips for each client, their suggested journeys include experiences such as private dog sledding with a professional musher and angling on a private schooner to catch fresh arctic fish for dinner.

On the ground, local private guides and drivers can introduce guests to off-the-beaten-path places and help them navigate unexpected circumstances, such as sudden changes in the weather, which often entails fog and rain.

Founder and head guide of Private Travel Iceland, Jon Olafur Sigurbjornsson, explains, “I have so many favorite places that I will always stop with my guests. It might only be 100 yards from the main road, but nobody knows about them. My all-time favorite is Jokulgil [valley] near Landmanna-laugar in the highlands. It’s hard for me to describe, as the view is like a never-ending

painting. All the people who have been there will for sure say it’s the most magical place they have ever been, too.”

Guides can help guests experience even the most popular attractions in an intimate way. Sigurbjornsson recommends taking a private boat tour of Jökulsárlón to get a more in-depth and closer look at the dramatic icebergs. To tackle a visit to the perennial favorite Blue Lagoon, he advises, “Go into the VIP area. You will never feel it’s overcrowded, and you will have your own personal changing room with showers and an executive lounge that will only have about 12 people.”

As Iceland has less than three inhabitants per square kilometer, it would be easy to avoid much interaction with locals, especially if one chooses not to spend much time in Reykjavik. However, engaging with Icelanders helps travelers understand the essence of this harsh yet beautiful country and the rich culture of a people who embrace many artistic pursuits.

A hallmark annual event, Reykjavik Culture Night, is an annual festival when

museums, theaters, and other institutions launch their annual programs, hosting a free slate of cultural events throughout the day, culminating in a fireworks show by the harbor. Coming up this year on August 19, the event typically draws 100,000 guests and has the slogan: “Come on in!”

“The people of Iceland are very warm, embrace hospitality, and want to share their rich literary, art, and music history with visitors,” says Brandon. “Reykjavik Culture Night is an opportunity to really dive into and celebrate the culture of Iceland.”

Beyond public attractions and events, bespoke travel companies create individualized experiences to immerse guests in Icelandic culture. “For someone passionate about all things James Bond, we introduced them to the producer of the Icelandic sections of the Bond film Die Another Day,” says Brown. “Their particular immersion was in the Icelandic film industry. They met with different people involved in the film, saw locations, watched segments that didn’t make it into the film and really went behind the scenes of the Icelandic film business.”

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One aspect of Icelandic culture that continually surprises guests, notes Sigurbjornsson, is the food. Reykjavik alone has six world-class restaurants, he says. Despite what they may have heard about hákarl, the infamous dish of rotten shark meat, guests

will find that Iceland’s cuisine is high quality and ranges dramatically. Reykjavik offers seven-course, Michelin-starred dining at DILL restaurant, featuring Arctic char and fennel and pork belly with parsnips and honey.

For a more personal experience, Brown’s team can arrange for travelers to join a local family in their home for an evening, to cook, dine, and learn more about their lifestyle.

“Every Icelander has such an infec-

tious passion for their country, and its history, myths, and origins, so spending time with them is a must,” Brown says. “During September and October, you can also join a farmer for a sheep or horse roundup, which is always an interesting experience.” In such

a setting, an adventurous guest may be able to try a local dish such as hangikjöt, or dried Icelandic lamb, which Brown describes as similar to beef jerky. The traditional curing process involves smoking the lamb with sheep dung.

While dining with and among locals helps one make new friends and understand Icelandic culture, dining in the elements is yet another way to appreciate the primal landscapes. Sigurbjornsson’s team has ar-

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ranged private meals on glaciers and 400 feet underground in dormant volcanoes; for the owner of a whiskey brewery, they arranged a whiskey tasting with 2,000-year-old ice cubes from a glacier, retrieved via helicopter.

“We have carved out a dinner table in a glacier, as we brought in a sculptor to make a personal restaurant for a couple who got engaged,” Sigurbjornsson says. There’s nothing like seeing the sun light up an ice dinner table in the middle of the glacier with a private chef, making it the most remembered dinner they will ever have.”

No matter one’s desired activities, a luxury journey to Iceland is an opportunity to go off the grid in some of the most exotic landscapes in the world, yet in an easily accessible country where the majority of the people speak fluent English.

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