



ICELAND

Untamed, stunning –
and on the verge
of evolution.







Iceland – a world apart, enchanting and renowned as a land of fire and ice, now has a pivotal, fresh immigration policy signalling significant developments for the nation on a human rights level and ushering in a revolutionary new era. DANIELLA AROCHE reports

Excitement builds as your flight approaches Iceland, a land of rich Viking heritage, long summer days illuminated by the Midnight Sun and the famed winter spectacle of the Northern Lights. The Nordic island nation is the source of countless myths and folktales and the home of some of Europe's largest glaciers as well as plenty of the world's most active volcanoes. You just know you're in for an adventure.

But as the plane enters its still widely unknown territory, and you look down onto the wild Atlantic waves crash against lonely shores of black sands, with their volcanic grains creating an endless ink-stained canvas.

Beyond breathtaking natural splendour, Iceland is unique in myriad of ways. This isolated realm has a population of fewer than 400,000 and is under-visited relative to other European countries.

Most of the population lives in the world's northernmost capital, Reykjavik, a special place from the moment you step in a mini metropolis where modern creativity and ancient Nordic heritage blend seamlessly against a backdrop of stunning wild landscapes.

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With its beautiful coastal views, a thriving cafe culture and a spirit of innovation, Reykjavík is both cosmopolitan and deeply connected to the untamed nature that surrounds it –dramatic volcanic lands, cascading waterfalls, and vast glaciers that create an otherworldly atmosphere, on arrival and all through your stay. The feeling is elusive yet humbling – nature is honestly in control here and people are scarce – and at every turn the land exudes a mystical, raw power.

Yet humans have also made their mark. Reykjavík’s avant-garde creativity is undeniable, and its streets are alive with public art. Among the most conspicuous on arrival in the tourist strip of hotels and restaurants is its huge, wide rainbow street – painted in 2015 to celebrate Reykjavik Gay Pride. Visitors are bound to meander up and down it more than once.

That said, it’s definitely worth making time to go for a relaxed stroll, it pays to investigate further, to weave through some of the smaller laneways that are home to locals’ cafes and boutiques featuring stunning local arts, crafts and paintings – many of them with historical ties.

Along the way, Reykjavik’s colourful houses and charming streets give off a kind of kaleidoscopic warmth,

contrasting with the refreshing chill in the air. Watching over walkers is the architecturally stunning Hallgrímskirkja church – designed to resemble the dramatic volcanic formations and cliffs of the country’s landscape, the landmark ensures you’ll never get lost, as it towers over the skyline like a beacon.

It’s all quite dreamlike for the new arrival, whether rested or jetlagged, and the out-of-this-world odyssey continues as you delve further into this extraordinary land on your own unravelling saga.

For mine, it was glacier hiking to a stunning ice cave, a trip to the famed Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon in Vatnajökull National Park, a visit to two awe-inspiring waterfalls – Skogafoss and Seljalandsfoss – and the famous Reynisfjara Black Sand and Diamond Beaches. This, and a few more incredible stops, topped off by horseriding over rugged volcanic terrain and steamy sulphur hot springs.

The trek begins

The journey commences as most rugged adventures do, with an extended trip over unknown lands.

Stocked with snacks and a much-needed coffee, the



bus ride is cosy, stopping to drop off other passengers, we arrive at my destination. It's the last outpost – on Iceland's glistening Vatnajökull glacier. This is home to the beautiful natural formation of Skaftafell Blue Ice Cave, like so many other spots it has its own fascinating tale to tell.

It's hard to pinpoint its exact age, but ice caves such as this one typically take several centuries to form and evolve, so the Skaftafell cave could have been here for 1000 years or more.

To get there though, it's a trek in itself – and one must prepare, we must suit up and get our gear at a makeshift cottage surrounded by mountains – and there are no change rooms, so if you're planning to join an expedition, don't expect much but the basics at camp, and leave your inhibitions in Reykjavik – you're in the wilderness now.

In the midst of this frozen kingdom, it's both bizarre and ethereally enchanting – a vast, shimmering road, where the sun reflects intensely off the ice and sparkles away. A serene silence descends upon us, a sign of the many secrets untold beneath this veil of frozen blue and white, and all we can hear is the crunching of our

crampons on the ice, and the odd clicking of photos – it's strangely quiet, but calming as we press on.

Much of this sapphire ice has remained untouched for centuries – so it's impossible not to envision you're treading in the very footsteps of the original Viking settlers.

Protected as a UNESCO World Heritage site, Vatnajökull Glacier National Park is an epic part of the Icelandic Highlands – the biggest ice cap not just in Iceland, but in Europe – and also home to the country's highest mountain range and tallest peak, Hvannadalshnukur.

In the last ice age, numerous volcanic eruptions under Vatnajökull created many subglacial shifts, and it covers more than 8000 square kilometres, accounting for about 8 per cent of the Icelandic land mass. At its deepest point, the ice is about 1000 metres deep.

Falljökull – another of the park's impressive features we view along the way – is an expansive glacial tongue that extends from the caldera of Oraefajökull. Its name translates from Icelandic to The Falling Glacier.

Reaching the Skaftafell cave after a few hours, we enter one by one, and it's an almost celestial sight, with

the pale Arctic light reflecting off each side.

Technically, its vivid blue colour is created by the way light interacts with the compacted ice and snow inside the cave, creating a surreal and striking appearance. Beyond the fact that it's a scientific marvel, you feel as if you're stepping into a secret, frozen world – the very heart of winter itself.

After the inspiring, yet gruelling, trek to our destination, the soft blue glow of the walls and cool crisp air in this icy cathedral of sorts provide a welcome break. It's fleeting, as it's time to head back to base.

Before sundown, we're headed for what might be one of Iceland's most famous spots – Diamond Beach – where the frosty waters of the Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon create a unique river that flows into the Atlantic Ocean, sweeping large chunks of ice onto the black volcanic sand, and creating the magical scene that gives it its name.

These crystal icebergs create a stunning contrast against the dark canvas, and the waves gently lap at the ice; with the play of light on the frozen natural statues on the sand creating a sparkling, surreal atmosphere.

Memorable to see and hear, parts of the melting glacier cracking off into the ocean, only to be washed onto the sand to form the Diamond Beach phenomenon. It's exquisite beauty, with an unforgettable, prehistoric quality. It is something I will never forget.

Time flies here, and as sunset creeps in, we head the closest local cottage an hour away for a traditional Nordic meal. Changed and refreshed, and over delicious dishes of freshly roasted salmon, grilled vegetables and potatoes, our now closeknit group swaps stories about what we've done that day. A pure, genuine and positive energy surrounds the table – and a well-deserved sleep follows.

I can also guarantee to anyone that you've never tasted anything like the cuisine you'll savour in Iceland. Its extreme location means this is as organic as it gets for seafood – and in a world where pure produce is becoming all the rarer, this is as important to the trip as the scenery, and all part of what makes this place truly unforgettable. Our guide stresses the necessity of preservation, a point to pass on to others – and one I've been sure to communicate since.

Waterfalls, rainbows & rides to remember...

Rest is incredibly peaceful and undisturbed under the full moon (helped by being a world away from the roar of civilisation). It's a 5am rise, fuelled by a shot of caffeine and the prospect of another day of adventure.

Skogafoss waterfall, the first stop, a sheer curtain of water tumbling from a height of 60 meters that fills the air with a roar – and standing before it, you feel small, almost lost in its majesty. The fog rising from its base conceals a cave and we walk into another realm, another perspective, peering through the cascade from this archway in the rock.

Next, Seljalandsfoss waterfall can be best described as a fairytale setting. The sun is high, intensifying the brilliance of the waterfall, with the mist rising from

the thundering water to create two welcoming rainbows – their vibrant arcs stretching high into the sky.

In this enchanting and mesmerising scene, one river, lined by time-smoothed black and white pebbles, splits into two from the source, and then back into the lake

where the waterfall cascades into – grassy, bright green slopes rise from the riverbed, dotted with wildflowers and moss-covered rocks. The air is pure here, and there are distant glimpses of the endless horizon and stunning mountains, making it all the more picturesque.

A truly mesmerising experience, the air is pure here, and it feels like you've been given this rare chance to visit nature's heart, and feel its pulse.

The final stop is the world-famous Reynisfjara Black Sand Beach, on the south coast of Iceland near the small fishing village of Vik i Myrdal. It is renowned for both its captivating raw beauty – and its danger.

Deserted and somewhat spellbinding, it has a soothing soundtrack as the sea rushes back and forth on the obsidian-hued shore – but the calm is deceptive.

The sea here is known for sudden swells called "sneaker waves" – and they're silent hunters, unpredictable and merciless as they surge up the beach to carry off an unsuspecting visitor. They can be deadly, and have been for many, as our tour guide warns us.

One step too close, one moment too long spent at the edge, and the next wave could knock you off your feet, dragging you into the freezing depths and beyond. How many Vikings may have come here and tragically died this way?

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The air here is thick with salt and mist, and the wind carries the roar of the ocean. The scene is framed by several towering, ebony columns in the distance, created by the collision of Iceland's volcanic past and the Atlantic's relentless power. These geometric formations have been sculpted by time and nature's fury, and the dark, looming pillars, remnants of cooled lava, stand as silent sentinels guarding the shore from afar.

Folklore tells that these bizarre looking basalt giants are petrified trolls that were caught outside at sunrise and frozen in time – and it's something that's easy to believe, since anything seems possible here. Ravens fly overhead marking their territory and making it all the more eerie, but hauntingly beautiful.

Further along the shoreline, hidden caves are carved into the cliffs offering refuge from the howling wind. The mouth of the largest, Halsanefshellir, is wide enough to step inside, where echoes of the crashing waves blend with the calls of seabirds nesting above. The cliffside, deep charcoal and slate grey, has a unique texture, a seemingly architectural surface marked by hexagonal formations chiselled sharply by time.

This place is a dramatic meeting point of land, sea and sky – and a fitting finale for this part of my journey on Iceland's south.

On the way back to Reykjavik, a quick sidetrack takes us to the vast Eldhraun lava field ("Fire Lava"), in the southern Highlands. One of the world's largest lava flows, it's a bizarre, endless expanse of undulating lava rock mounds, now softened by a thick, velvety blanket of moss.

Covering 565 square kilometres, Eldhraun is the result of the Laki eruption of 1783-1784 – a cataclysmic volcanic event in human history.

There are no trees, no rivers, or no signs of human life here – as it stretches to the horizon, a steamy haze sometimes lingers, adding to the otherworldly atmosphere.

Standing here, it's impossible not to feel the weight of time – to imagine the fire, and the slow, constant rebirth of this land with each eruption. Eldhraun is a reminder of Iceland's violent past, yet it's also a testament to nature's quiet resilience.

With another day here and a keen rider, I wake at sunrise for a rare opportunity to ride over a lava field



on an Icelandic horse – or, translated, Íslenski hesturinn” – which simply means “The Icelandic Horse”.

These horses, smaller than most, are known for strength and resilience, plus their friendly, yet spirited nature. Strictly purebred, they are known for their unique fifth gait, the tolt – and they have remained genetically unchanged for more than 1000 years due to Iceland’s extremely strict no-import policy.

Riding over the steaming landscapes, past traditional grass-roofed huts – “torfhus” in Icelandic – with snow-tipped mountains around, and sulfurous steam hissing up from the ground as you explore, it’s easy for your mind to travel back in time.

In Reykjavik, the Viking Museum is the place to learn more about the country’s fascinating past, and how it was discovered, fact and myth. It’s said that three ravens acted as an ancient compass for Norwegian Viking Hrafna-Floki Vilgerdason. The first known settlement established by Norsemen was about 874AD, by Ingólfur Arnarson.

In this island realm, ever a changing canvas, creates a reminder for the traveller that fire and ice coexist somehow, and the earth is constantly reshaping

itself beneath the surface – a destination framed into memory forever.

It’s also a country whose people are incredibly advanced – known for strong gender equality, world-class education and healthcare, low crime rates and a robust economy driven by innovation and sustainable tourism. Soon, it seems, yet another positive is about to unfold.

A country with further changes on the horizon

In this faraway land, known for its dynamic character, changes are significant and continuous. When we think of these transitions, we understandably skip straight to nature, yet there are constant transformations at hand – economically, culturally and socially.

Last October marked one of the nation’s most significant developments in human rights, when the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Market, Gudmundur Ingi Gudbrandsson, presented an instrumental draft policy on immigration for 2025-2038 to the Althing, Iceland’s parliament.

This document – as reported by the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) – has



been shaped by contributions from stakeholders and the public, and sets out the government's objectives for the next 13 years, presenting a vision for Iceland as an inclusive, multicultural society where immigrants have equal opportunities in the workforce and the broader community.

It focuses on respecting diversity, providing access to Icelandic language education, and supporting democratic, equal and human rights-based values. One of the key targets focuses on equality and integration – including strong, early support for refugees.

To support the policy, the government has created an initial four-year action plan, starting in 2025-2028. This plan outlines concrete strategies for integrating immigrants into Icelandic society and will inform decisions on matters that affect their lives and overall well-being.

Heralding a new chapter for the Nordic nation, the policy sets out for the first time the Icelandic government's vision for the future and the main goals until 2038 on immigrant issues. Emphasising its importance, Gudbrandsson stated: "I have placed strong emphasis on immigrant issues [since becoming minister]. Now, we are approaching Iceland's first comprehensive policy on immigrant affairs. This is very important and long overdue."

While in Iceland, I gained further insight into its potential impact – by connecting with some people on whom the policy will have a direct effect. One of these individuals is Yamal, a refugee originally from Afghanistan, who for the past six years has made Iceland his home. After his escape from Afghanistan, his original country of asylum was Hungary.

For Yamal, it was not an easy journey to arrive and make his final home in Iceland, but he's very grateful to have been able to settle in Reykjavík. He had worked as a journalist in his motherland, but had to flee due to persecution and threats.

Overall, he said, he is happy to live in Iceland – especially given the state of affairs in Afghanistan. His family is suffering and, under the Taliban, "there is no work, with almost everything stopped". He has a good income in Iceland now and can support his family remotely every month, and help them financially.

Very grateful for the opportunity to live in Iceland, he admitted the move had difficulties. In his experience, it had not been an easy place to live or adapt to, because the language was difficult to learn, and "it's taken time to fit in, particularly with the weather and harsh seasons of winter and summer, with the extreme dark and light".

Overall though, it had been a blessing to be accepted into the country – and be able to make a new start.

"I honestly am not missing my country right now, and with the situation with Taliban there, I count myself lucky that I am here, and not there – and I don't know when I will be visiting my country again, if ever," he said.

How did he feel about the immigration policy changes about to be made in Iceland, affecting the treatment of new arrivals/refugees? He was hopeful, but reluctant to believe too much in life-changing improvements.

"The public attitude is always different towards us, because we are foreigners, and I don't think that it is possible that everything is going to be the same or equal for us. We are not Icelandic, so of course a lot of things are different," he said.

"Everywhere there is bound to be racism or double standards. That's just the way it is."

At best, his reaction was cautiously optimistic – and, as progressive as the transitions in Iceland appear, one can't really blame Yamal for his feelings looking ahead, given his experience.

However, one can only hope it's a move in the right direction – and whilst further interviews with Icelandic authorities haven't been possible to obtain so far, given that it's still early days since the policy announcement – it all seems like a step forward.

What we can say, and see – is that this incredibly beautiful place, constantly in some state of flux, with its dynamic landscapes and forward-thinking society, is always adapting and transforming – so it will inevitably be interesting to observe how it all unfolds in the future.

What I do know for sure, is that I'm fortunate and ever-grateful to have experienced for myself this particular moment in time on the extraordinary isle that is Iceland – and the country, culture, and people make it a truly memorable destination, unlike any other... and that I *can* guarantee. R