

# VARIETY



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To get to Iceland's erupting volcano, turn right out of the airport, hang another right to pass the famous Blue Lagoon, grab a hearty pre-hike breakfast of bread, avocado, bacon and eggs at Hja Hollu in the seaside town of Grindavik, and then find the makeshift parking lot east of town.

Or, just follow the smoke on the horizon. "The volcano is especially active today," the rental car agent told me, casually gesturing toward the Keflavik airport's big windows. I turned my head, and it was right there: a huge mushroom-like plume, visible for miles on an otherwise sparkling morning above the alien landscape of mossy igneous rock on the Reykjanes Peninsula.

Iceland's hottest attraction in 2021, the volcano at Fagradalsfjall was the very first priority on our 10-day August itinerary.

## FIRE AND ICE

Iceland was a hot destination once again in 2021, thanks to the vaccine and the volcano.

Icelandair's six-hour overnight flight from Minneapolis had deposited us, sleepless, at Keflavik at 6:30 a.m., and check-in wasn't for hours. Besides, it's a good idea to start the vigorous two-hour hike by 9 or 10, before the surge of awestruck tourists becomes a veritable festival.

We parked in the roadside lot and selected one of two trail options. The first sign of volcanism was a jet-black river of solidified lava that newly filled a valley below us, some of it still smoldering. Two French tourists had amused and alarmed Icelanders by squatting on the flow to roast marshmallows. Fresh lava has since cut off the trail we chose.

After a steep and slippery ascent, we caught the first glimpse of lava undulating in its crater, a mass of bright crimson that looked unreal. At the nearest safe viewing area, maybe a quarter-mile from the caldera,

See **ICE** on E12 ►

Tourists watched as lava flowed from an eruption at Iceland's Fagradalsfjall volcano, on the Reykjanes Peninsula, in May.

Photo by MIGUEL MORENATTI • Associated Press

## TRAVEL

## FIRE AND ICE

◀ ICE from El

a dozen other early birds were shooting volcano selfies, sending up a drone or just gazing in wonder.

When the tour helicopters would pull away, I could hear the violent churning of the magma, sounding like an angry storm at sea. Occasionally the liquefied rock thrust so high that it splashed outside of the crater, trickling down the side. The eruption reportedly paused on Sept. 19, not before becoming the world's longest of this century.

Within hours of arriving in Iceland, we had already experienced the top highlight of our trip. And we still had a whole country ahead.

#### Into the north

In early March, Iceland became one of the first countries to announce it would open up to all travelers with proof of COVID-19 vaccination. (One of the most vaccinated nations on Earth — now at 77% of its population — Iceland has experienced only two coronavirus deaths since May.) With our second Moderna shots scheduled, my companion Sabrina and I began planning, in hopes that the island would be less crowded with fellow tourists than on our 2017 stopover. But by August, Iceland was a sensation once more, thanks to the vax and the volcano.

Fortunately, in the spirit of extreme social distancing, we had planned the bulk of our trip on the opposite side of the country, in the remote north and northeast. We centered our 1,600-mile loop on two newer official tourism routes: the 560-mile Arctic Coast Way, as well as the 155-mile Diamond Circle, a northern sightseeing answer to the southwest's popular Golden Circle.

Booking early, we had our run of midpriced boutique lodgings, from a geodesic dome beside a fjord to a tiny cottage on an out-of-the-way horse farm. We also hoped to make geothermal baths a theme, with many intriguing alternatives to the overexposed Blue Lagoon.

We set off on the Ring Road, the two-lane highway that loops the country, taking pleasure in Icelandic pop radio. In a country the size of Kentucky with a population (368,000) a little greater than St. Paul's, a day's drive through bucolic meadows and mountain passes makes it clear that the island is home to twice as many sheep as people. At village restaurants, lamb is on every menu, which would violate my prohibition on eating baby animals. But the fresh fish was exceptional.

Iceland's paved roads are solid and safe, and the national speed limit of 90 kmph (55 mph) is plenty. Four-wheel drive did come in handy while exploring the coastline-gripping curves of the Arctic Coast Way, which follows the northern shore of the country. Why not drive an hour out of the way to see Hvitserkur, a three-legged rock standing in a fjord like a petrified dragon? After all, our Icelandair 737 MAX was named after it. It turned out to be strangely compelling.

Not far from the northern capital of Akureyri (which is something of a mini-Reykjavik), we arrived at our geodesic dome, dubbed the "Sky-sighting Igluhus" (or, igloo house). The glamping-worthy structure belongs to a young French couple, Lola and Laurent, B&B hosts who have committed to living sustainably in the north. Each morning one of our hosts would deliver a bohemian breakfast of oatmeal and jams to the dome.

Our igloo house was in a stellar location, beside a racing river that empties into Eyjafjörður — Iceland's longest fjord — which itself is nestled between some of the highest and snowiest mountains in the north. Despite our skylights, however, the northern lights were elusive. Iceland's sky was brilliantly blue during most days — which were up to 19 hours long — but invariably cloudy at night.

We boarded a nearby ferry for the short cruise to Hrisey, Iceland's second largest island and a vibrant bird sanctuary. The isle's only village was a ghost town on Sunday, so



Photos by SIMON PETER GROEBNER • Star Tribune

Geosea in Husavik, Iceland, top, features 102-degree seawater baths and a view of the Greenland Sea. The "Sky-sighting Igluhus" is a glamping geodesic dome that overlooks mountains, a river and a fjord near Akureyri. Hvitserkur, above, is a 49-foot sea stack off the Vatnsnes Peninsula. Some say it looks like a dragon or a troll.

we hiked a 3-mile trail over a terrain of heather and wild berries, joined only by arctic terns and partridge-like ptarmigans. (Alas, puffin season had passed.) The trail features a purported "Energy Zone," a contemplative overlook of the fjord and the mountains beyond. Spiritually refreshed, we followed up the hike with a soak in Hrisey's community pool.

#### At the top of the world

Everyone has heard of the Blue Lagoon, but geothermal baths are a way of life in Iceland. Almost every town has a basic naturally heated pool,



Source: OpenStreetMap

#### IF YOU GO

Travelers must pre-register and provide a certificate of COVID-19 vaccination or recovery, plus a negative test taken within 72 hours of departure (see [travel.covid.is](https://travel.covid.is)).

You'll also need a negative test to return to the United States. Bring a BinaxNOW self-test or find free testing locations in Iceland at [covidtest.is](https://covidtest.is).

The steepest mountain pass in all of Iceland with countless switchbacks, it made for a white-knuckle experience. Our reward for surviving it was a soak in the Vök Baths, a remarkable geothermal spot in east Iceland where two hot pools seem to float upon a cool freshwater lake.

We doubled back to hit up the Diamond Circle, and two of Iceland's massive, mind-bending waterfalls. Cutting a deep trench through a lunar landscape, Dettifoss is the largest falls in Iceland and arguably the most powerful in Europe, with 6,800 cubic feet per second descending 144 feet. It's worth seeing for that statistic alone — and for the dirty, raging mess of water and sediment that's more vulgar than beautiful.

Far more aesthetically pleasing is Godafoss (Waterfall of the Gods), some 60 miles away. Here the river tumbles over a wide semicircular cliff, providing an immersive, intimate view from many angles. The story that a powerful 10th-century pagan priest renounced his Norse idols and threw them into these falls may be apocryphal.

Occasionally we came across where modern Icelanders holiday. We had stopped for a margherita pizza at a sidewalk cafe at the quaint marina of Siglufjörður when an army of short, blond women in sharp yacht-rock outfits came marching out of an alley and directly toward us. Trailed by their men, they held aloft an amp that blared the theme from "Xanadu." The parade then morphed into a tabletop dance party, chasing us from the premises.

#### Day in Myvatn

Iceland's biggest music icon, Björk, is not as ubiquitous here as you might expect, but her caterwauling ballad "Birthday" (by her '80s band the Sugarcubes) did play at breakfast at our farm B&B near Myvatn. In a bit of Björk magic, it was my birthday.

We planned for our trip to climax at Myvatn, a volcanic lake that anchors another eclectic geothermal region. The island- and crater-speckled lake itself looks like an illustration in a fantasy novel, or a prog-rock album cover. Unfortunately, this inland area is also home to the dreaded midges — tiny black flies that swarm the air on calm summer days. We were initially alarmed, but realized the flies were harmless, and wearing a head net for the day was a small price to pay.

There's a walking tour with bizarre lava formations called Dimmuborgir, and the colorful, odoriferous geyser area of Hverir. Although I refuse to actively engage in "Game of Thrones" tourism in the HBO show's many filming locations in Iceland, it was hard not to nerd out in the Grjótagja Cave, which features a clear blue geothermal pool where the wildling Ygritte deflowered Jon Snow. At 109 degrees, entry to the pool is barred to the lowborn.

So we joined an afternoon tour with Safari Horse Rental and trotted along the lake's southern shore on Icelandic horses, a beautiful smallish breed recognizable for the long hair in their eyes like an emo boy band. Our steeds, Throtur ("Strength") and Punktr ("Dot"), stepped adroitly on the steep lakeside trail past gaping lava caves. Once we hit gravel, they sped up into their unique four-beat gait known as a tölt.

We closed out a perfect day — of course — at Myvatn Nature Baths, one of the most authentic and natural of Iceland's big man-made lagoons. I stepped into the spacious sandy-bottomed pool, surrounded by piles of black volcanic rock, and plunged into mineral-rich waters that appeared a cloudy blue-white. A faint smell of sulfur cleared my sinuses, as it had back at the volcano.

The late dusk approached, and a fog descended over the lagoon, chasing the hazy sunset. I sat back in the bath, inhaled deeply and watched the far-off view of the lake fade in the mist.

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I decided to get my money's worth by taking the SUV on Road 917, a "shortcut" from north to east Iceland that climbs sharply 2,000 feet from sea level to the summit of Hellisheidi Eystri (or as I pronounced it, "Hellis Heidi").