

Beyond the Blue Lagoon:

Two Days in Reykjavík

lonely planet

CITY • BREAKS

OK, so you know you have to splash around in the Blue Lagoon and visit the trilogy of sights that make up the Golden Circle and you probably know that the sun doesn't set in the summer and the locals are a bit partial to a few sociable drinks. To find out what else Iceland's unique capital has to offer, read on...

FROM THE SEA TO THE SKY

Early risers should visit the bustling working **harbour** north of the centre to watch the fishing boats come in with the daily catch. It's backed by stunning views of Mt Esja across the fjord. Afterwards, head for bacon and eggs at **Grái Kötturinn** (Hverfisgata 16a). The tiny six-tabled cafe looks like a cross between an eccentric bookshop and an art gallery; it's got a slightly lopsided feel but exudes charm.

Next up call into **Hallgrímskirkja** (Skólavörðuholt; www.hallgrimskirkja.is). The star of a thousand postcards, the immense concrete church is the most jaw-dropping building in Reykjavík. Architect Guðjón Samúelsson's radical design – the epic tower is flanked by sweeping columns, representing volcanic basalt – caused huge controversy. He never lived to see the church's completion, as it took a painstaking 34 years to build (1940-74). For an unmissable view of the city, take a trip up the tower.

In front of the church, a statue of the Viking Leifur Eiríksson, the first European to stumble upon America, gazes nobly forth. It was a present from the USA on the 1000th anniversary of the Alþing (Iceland's parliament) and complements the church's design perfectly.

For an interesting glimpse into the nation's psyche, head to the **National Gallery of Iceland** (Fríkirkjuvegur 7;

www listasafn.is). In a converted ice-house you'll find surreal mud-purple landscapes intermingled with eerie impressions of ogresses, giants and dead men walking.

For a light lunch, ensconce yourself by the huge glass windows lining **Café Paris** (Austurstræti 14; www.cafeparis.is) and watch the world go by on the busy streets outside.

The afternoon should be spent at the bustling weekend flea market. **Kolaportið** (Geirsgata; www.kolaportid.is) is a Reykjavík institution. Browse through piles of second-hand clothes, CDs, antiques and children's toys, or pick up Icelandic fish delicacies – including the infamous *hákarl* (rotten shark meat).

If you're shopped out, catch the No 13 bus south of the centre to Öskjuhlíð, a popular park and home to the **Perlan** complex (www.perlan.is). 'The Pearl' was created out of the huge water tanks that supply Reykjavík's hot water. Its biggest thrill is the superb **Saga Museum** (www.sagamuseum.is), which brings Iceland's history to life with silicon models and a soundtrack of thudding axes and blood-curdling screams. Don't blame the *brennvin* (schnapps) if you see some of the characters about town – they were modelled on Reykjavík inhabitants.

Upstairs is a hexagonal **viewing deck**, with tremendous mountain and city vistas. Perched on top of the water tanks inside the pearly dome is your destination for dinner – the revolving restaurant **Perlan** (☎ 562 0200; www.perlan.is). If you can tear your eyes from the view, you'll find delicacies such as caviar, reindeer and guillemot begging to be eaten.

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Once the bill's been settled, it should be just about time to head back into town and join the *runtur*, Reykjavík's notorious Bacchanalian pub crawl. Rather than cosying down in one venue, it's the done thing to cruise from bar to bar. To get you started, our top tips are: **22** (cnr Laugavegur & Klapparstígur), **Sirkus** (Klapparstígur 31), **Kaffi Sólon** (Bankastræti 7), **Prikið** (Bankastræti 12) and, if you can get in, **Kaffibarinn** (Bergstaðastræti 1).

BEACHES & VOLCANOES

After the night you've just had, start the recovery slowly with brunch at **Café Oliver** (Laugavegur 20a; www.cafeoliver.is). Follow that up with some focused lounging at **Nauthólsvík Geothermal Beach** (Nauthólsvík; bus No 16). Bringing a touch of the Riviera to Reykjavík, this Blue-Flag 'hot beach' is a dinky crescent of golden sand warmed by 18-20°C geothermal water.

You can either choose to spend the day down here, or head back into town to the **Einar Jónsson Museum** (Njarðargata; www.skulptur.is). Filled with unforgettable artwork, the museum is dedicated to Iceland's first modern sculptor (1874-1954). You'll find his dreamlike symbolist casts in the garden and inside the fortress-like building, which Jónsson designed himself. You also get to snoop around the austere penthouse flat the artist shared with his wife.

Once stomachs start to rumble, settle in at **Tapas** (Vesturgata 3b; www.tapas.is) for an Icelandic take on Spanish nibbles. Alongside *patatas bravas*, you'll find puffin with blueberries, saltfish and pan-fried lobster tails.

Round off the evening at the **Volcano Show** (Red Rock Cinema, Hellusund 6a; ☎ 551 3230), an explosive introduction to Iceland's violent geography. Eccentric eruption-chaser Villi Knudsen is the film-maker, owner and presenter of the one- and two-hour documentary shows, which begin at 8pm. Don't miss the opportunity

to chat with Villi when you arrive. A new addition to the cinema is a recording studio, where you can star (in a seven-minute video or DVD) in your very own volcanic eruption. Oooh!

If you have the energy, wait for the sunset at the cafés and bars along **Laugavegur**, the city's main street. You'll be waiting one hell of a long time...

SLEEPING

Budget

Salvation Army Guesthouse (www.guesthouse.is; ☎ 561 3023) Basic guesthouse and hostel in a central location.

Midrange

Skólabrú Guesthouse (www.skolabru.com; ☎ 551 5511) Charming guesthouse with superbly comfortable rooms and amiable hosts.

Top End

101 Hotel (www.101hotel.is; ☎ 580 0101) Devilishly divine boutique hotel with 38 sensuous rooms.

For more reviews of Reykjavík accommodation, check out the Sleep section on www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation.

By Amanda Canning

For the complete guide to Reykjavík grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Best of Reykjavík* guide, available online at shop.lonelyplanet.com.

