

SKOGAFOSS
60 meter drop
from Skoga
River



IMPOSSIBLY SCENIC ICELAND: A UNIQUE ITINERARY TO THIS “HOT” DESTINATION

BY BRAD BOWINS, SEPTEMBER 2017

For a destination with the word, ice, in it to be so “hot” it must really be special, and Iceland stacks up. Beyond being a safe and friendly place to visit, with a well-developed tourism infrastructure, it is what can best be described as impossibly scenic! A glacier here, another over there, countless thankfully dormant volcanoes, spiky lava fields, lagoons filled

with icebergs, and the list goes on and on.

While the value of visiting Iceland is crystal clear for nature lovers, and those open to new experiences, the how to do it is less straightforward. Many travellers take advantage of the generous Icelandair stopover option, up to 7 days currently, spending a couple of days exploring near the capital, Reykjavik,

before moving on to Europe, while others take on the 10-day “ring road” circling the entire island. Although both of these options have their advantages, the first does not provide enough time to see what Iceland really has to offer, and the “ring road” tour involves more vacation time than what some people can afford, and the strain of a new hotel every night. From a recent trip, I

discovered that another option exists, and one that can be done in 7 to 8 days, with only a couple of locations as your base from which to explore. I wish to share this unique way of visiting Iceland, allowing you to experience the majority of top-rated sites!

Two ideal bases to explore from are the southeast and Reykjavik, covering a good 8 out of 10 best Iceland experiences over approximately half the country. This itinerary applies to travel from June to September, as some options are not available outside of this time frame. I started with the southeast, embarking on a driving tour after arriving around 6:30 AM, a common time if departing from North America. The direct route from Keflavik International Airport takes about 5 hours. Having extra time and sunny skies, I detoured visiting two-thirds of the Golden Circle sites—Geysir and Gullfoss (see below); the third Golden Circle site of

“Two ideal bases to explore from are the southeast and Reykjavik, covering a good 8 out of 10 best Iceland experiences over approximately half the country.”

Thingvellir is best left for the Reykjavik part, for reasons I will shortly get to. A word of advice, and certainly to photographers and hikers—The weather in Iceland can change quickly and is not always sunny, so if you wake up to clear and sunny skies take advantage of the opportunity, and do not assume the next day will be the same.

Geysir & Gullfoss two of the Golden Circle sites.



THE SOUTHEAST

Southeast Iceland, justifiably claims some of the best experiences in Iceland. I recommend the Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon, a very modern and comfortable hotel located right off the main highway, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, but yet ideally positioned for exploring the region. Fosshotels are adding a comfort dimension to staying in some of the more remote areas of Iceland. The experiences that southeast Iceland offers are variable and travellers can do all of them, or those that suit their interests.

SKOGAFOSS: Technically more in south Iceland this waterfall (foss means waterfall) from the Skoga River plunges 60 meters in a single drop over a cliff, that in ancient times was the coastline. Stairs take the energetic to the top, and a path along the Skoga River reveals several mini waterfalls. Of special significance, the base of Skogafoss frequently displays a rainbow, that even shows some nights. I visited this very scenic waterfall on my route to the southeast; it is right beside the main highway to and from this region.

SKAFTAFELL NATIONAL PARK: Part of the larger Vatnajökull National Park, it offers one of the best day hikes in Iceland, the 16 kilometer Skaftafell loop trail. I was fortunate to have clear and sunny weather for this amazing hike, and opted to start the trail from the left side passing by the small Svartifoss waterfall, that is the end point for many visitors. The loop trail ascends over volcanic rock, then through hedges, to the crest of Nyorihnauker offering a panoramic view including Morsarjökull glacier. From the top the path continues across the mountain face to a point, Giarna,

overlooking the massive Skaftafellsjökull glacier. This glacier can be hiked to along a short trail from the Skaftafell Visitors Centre. The Skaftafell loop trail takes about 5-6 hours on a clear day; on a cloudy day I cannot advise taking it as parts of the trail marked by sticks will be hard to follow, and the view much less impressive. The downward section contains loose volcanic rocks making the route challenging without the right hiking boots.

GLACIER HIKE: From the Skaftafell Visitors Centre, hikes on Svinafellsjökull glacier are offered. I went with Icelandic Mountain Guides, and did the hike after the loop trail, although this is a very energetic combination, and requires starting the loop trail early. Crampons, and if required solid hiking boots, are provided. The walk itself does not require much stamina, and the experience of actually standing on a glacier and viewing the origin and outlet is not to be missed. Equally impressive are the deep crevasses and contours. Glacier hikes are available elsewhere in Iceland but this is one of the most accessible options.

GLACIER ICEBERG LAGOON

KAYAKING AT FLATEY: From this working farm kayak tours to land-enclosed Heinabergsjökull glacier lagoon, full of icebergs, are offered. Dry suits are included in the price. The water is perfectly still as it does not flow to the ocean, and narrow passages between icebergs provide for a unique kayaking experience. It is such a thrill to reach out and touch one of these oversized ice cubes when gliding by, as was “beaching” our kayaks and taking a stroll on a large iceberg. The kayaks are very

stable, and even first time kayakers did well. This lagoon freezes over late September, but my mid-September day was so sunny and warm that hat and gloves were not needed!

From Flatey, a short drive leads to Hofn, a very typical seaside town on the east coast. There are several good restaurants for lunch or dinner, and a walking trail by the sea.

JOKULSARLON: Featured in the James Bond movie, Die Another Day starring Pierce Brosnan, as well as several other films, this glacier iceberg lagoon is located right beside the main highway, with a gift shop/restaurant, and boat tour options. The lagoon is different than the one by Flatey, in that it flows right into the ocean, meaning that the icebergs are not stable enough for kayaking, and certainly not for walking on one. What makes Jokulsarlon unique are the oddly shaped icebergs and also seals right by the lagoon shore, and how the lagoon merges with the ocean by a

"It is such a thrill to reach out and touch one of these oversized ice cubes when gliding by, as was "beaching" our kayaks and taking a stroll on a large iceberg."

black volcanic sand beach. It can easily be visited on the way to or back from Flatey and Hofn.

LAKAGIGAR: Typically referred to as "Laki" this site is the closest most of us will get to seeing what the surface of another planet might look like. In 1783 one of the most powerful eruptions ever took place over 8 months, producing about 130 craters evenly split in a row on both sides of Mt. Laki. This mountain comprised of more ancient and solid rock withstood the lava, seemingly anchoring the craters on either side. The mostly gradual hike up Mt. Laki and down into the algae covered crater to one side takes about 2 hours, and is a

**Skaftafell
Loop Trail
summit &
Lakagigur
(Laki)**



must for the view of the craters stretching to the horizon. The crater on the opposite side of Mt Laki is worth hiking into given the steep but short descent to a lake, and colorful algae matting the volcanic surface further along the trail.

An additional advantage of the Laki tour is a visit to Fagrifoss, translated as beautiful waterfall, aptly named as it is often cited as the most beautiful in Iceland with the water cascading down a series of rocks from a half-circle summit, often in two divided streams.

It is important to note that Laki is accessed via an F road. These roads, clearly marked on maps with an F before the number, can only be attempted with 4-wheel drive vehicles. So-called super-jeep tours are also available, the vehicles capable of navigating flowing streams and rivers. I booked a super-jeep tour with Secret Iceland, departing from the town of Klauster.

“Typically referred to as “Laki” this site is the closest most of us will get to seeing what the surface of another planet might look like.”

LANDMANNALAUGAR: Accessed via an F road, this site is more to the south than southeast. I did not have time to visit it, but have heard and read that the attraction here is very colorful volcanic rock, and it is the start of a scenic 3-4 day hike, not to be missed for those seeking this type of adventure. Full day super-jeep tours from Reykjavik are another way of visiting this site.

**Glacier hike
from
Skaftafell &
Flatey
glacier
iceberg
lagoon
kayaking**





Fargrifoss (“Beautiful”) waterfall Laki & Jokulsarion glacier lagoon ice formations



REYKJAVIK

Shifting from the remote and sparsely populated southeast region to densely populated Reykjavik is something of a shock. However, several nearby experiences are spread out in different directions making the capital city an ideal base to explore from.

GOLDEN CIRCLE—GEYSIR, GULFOSS, THINGVELLIR & SIFRA:

Geysir, much like Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park, shoots out a geyser of heated water reliably every several minutes. It was my first time

seeing a geyser, and despite the crowds very worth the detour on my way to the southeast. Just down the road from Geysir is Gullfoss.

Gullfoss provides a different water-based experience, with water from the Olfusa River dropping 32 meters in two steps into a narrow canyon. For shutter-bugs, there are excellent vantage points at the top of the bluff and also right by the water where it transitions from the first to second step. Visiting on a sunny day with the mist rising is a very rewarding experience, camera or no camera.

Thingvellir and Sifra, are based on one of the most unique geological features of Iceland—Separation of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Thingvellir demonstrates this separation right by the parking area! A “thing” refers to a meeting place, and this site is where the first democratic parliament in the world met in 874 AD. Equally unique is Sifra, where freshwater from a spring flows through the rift between tectonic plates into a lake. A guided excursion into what is one of the most amazing snorkel sites in the world is not to be missed. Dry suits with warm undergarments are provided, and the tour starts from a partially submerged platform. We sampled the incredibly pure water prior to heading out, so clean that it has a special taste. The two visual features that stand out are first, the incredibly crystal clear water, and second, amazing algae growth along the rocks, particularly near the exit point. Doing scuba and snorkelling for many years, I have never experienced anything as special as the long and colorful algae strands. I recommend snorkelling over scuba diving because with the visibility everything is clear from the surface, and the algae are in very shallow water. The Sifra experience takes about 2 hours from start to finish, so it is not wise to attempt it on the way to or from the southeast; instead book it for when based in Reykjavik.

SNAEFELLSNES PENINSULA: Up the west coast, passing through a 6 kilometer long toll tunnel, yields a very special full-day driving excursion. I started from the north side at the seaside town of Stykkisholmur. Driving along the north coast of the peninsula to the town of Grundarfjordur is like a smooth

rollercoaster ride up and down and around slopes. It is no wonder that this location is the setting for *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, featuring Ben Stiller skateboarding along these roads. From Grundarfjordur, impossibly scenic waterfalls and ice-capped peaks are clearly visible. Next stop is Kirkjufell (mountain) and the nearby small waterfall, Kirkjufellfoss, a mere 5-minute walk from the roadside. At the end of the peninsula pull into the parking lot and take in the view along the north coast and out to the sea where whales can often be seen. Moving to the south side of the peninsula, Skarosvik accessed by a brief detour off the main road, reveals an odd golden sand, instead of black volcanic sand, beach, hemmed in by volcanic cliffs. Next on the route is Saxholl Crater with metal stairs to the top. Perhaps most unique is Cave Vatnshellir, a 35 meter deep and 700 meter long lava tube. At one end lava flowed in a circle, evident by ridges in the cave, before exiting! This 45-minute tour can be pre-booked or purchased upon arrival. Snaefellsnes Peninsula is named for Snaefellsjokull volcano, the site of Jules Vernes, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Hikes, including on the glacier, can be arranged with an F road access. When I passed by the area was covered in clouds and raining; thankfully I did a glacier tour in the southeast.

INSIDE THE VOLCANO

(THRIHNUKAGIGUR): Various sites listing the best experiences worldwide, commonly cite this one, and justifiably so. Starting from a volcanic slope ski hill, a 45-minute hike ascends what is reported to be one of the largest craters in the world, to a comfortable hut at the top; important given

the rain/snow combination we encountered. Once harnessed up our small group crossed a narrow metal walkway to an open elevator car. The descent through a needle like opening into the deepest (120-meter) crater in the world is well, something that words fail to capture; you really have to experience it. This “journey towards the center of the earth” reveals rocks in brilliant colors representing a range of minerals. From the bottom, the cave appears like a cathedral, this shape apparently preventing the roof from collapsing, a geological wonder found nowhere else! Stroll around the interior path while considering that you are now deep within a crater that at one point was spewing lava out. I strongly advise booking this option in advance to avoid missing out, and pack warm clothing.

Beyond the Reykjavik area sites highlighted here, other options abound such as:

“The descent through a needle like opening into the deepest (120-meter) crater in the world is well, something that words fail to capture; you really have to experience it.”

Whale watching tours from Old Reykjavik harbour, a late afternoon one under clear skies revealing humpback whales and dolphins.

The National Museum by the university, showcasing life in Iceland from the early years.

The Blue Lagoon near Keflavik, where heated water from a geothermal plant has been applied to create an open spa.

Although most articles and books about Iceland recommend this, I found it to be the only experience in this adventurous country that can be seen as overly commercial, but then if you do not stop in, you might regret it given the hype.

Skarosvik & Kirkjufell with waterfall, Snaefellsnes Peninsula



For even the most seasoned traveller there is much to experience in Iceland, and the unique two-location itinerary set out here provides the majority of the primo sites in a week, and without the hassle of a new hotel every night. Whatever, itinerary you select be sure to see for yourself why impossibly scenic Iceland is so “hot.”

TRAVEL PLANNER:

Icelandic Mountain Guides (Skaftafell glacier hike): www.mountainguides.is

Secret Iceland (Laki super-jeep tour): www.secreticeland.com

Glacier Kayak Adventure (Flatey): info@iceguide.is

Sifra Snorkel Tour: www.dive.is

Summit Adventure Guides (Vatnshellir Cave): www.summitguides.is

Whale watching tours from Old Reykjavik harbour, a late afternoon one under clear skies revealing humpback whales and dolphins.

Inside The Volcano (Thrihnukagigur) info@InsideTheVolcano.com

Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon Hotel: www.fosshotel.is

For information about the author Dr. Brad Bowins and additional travel articles see: <https://www.docbowins.com/photos/>

Brad on glacier hike & algae growths in Sifra, a natural spring dividing the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates

