TOP 10 ATTRACTIONS



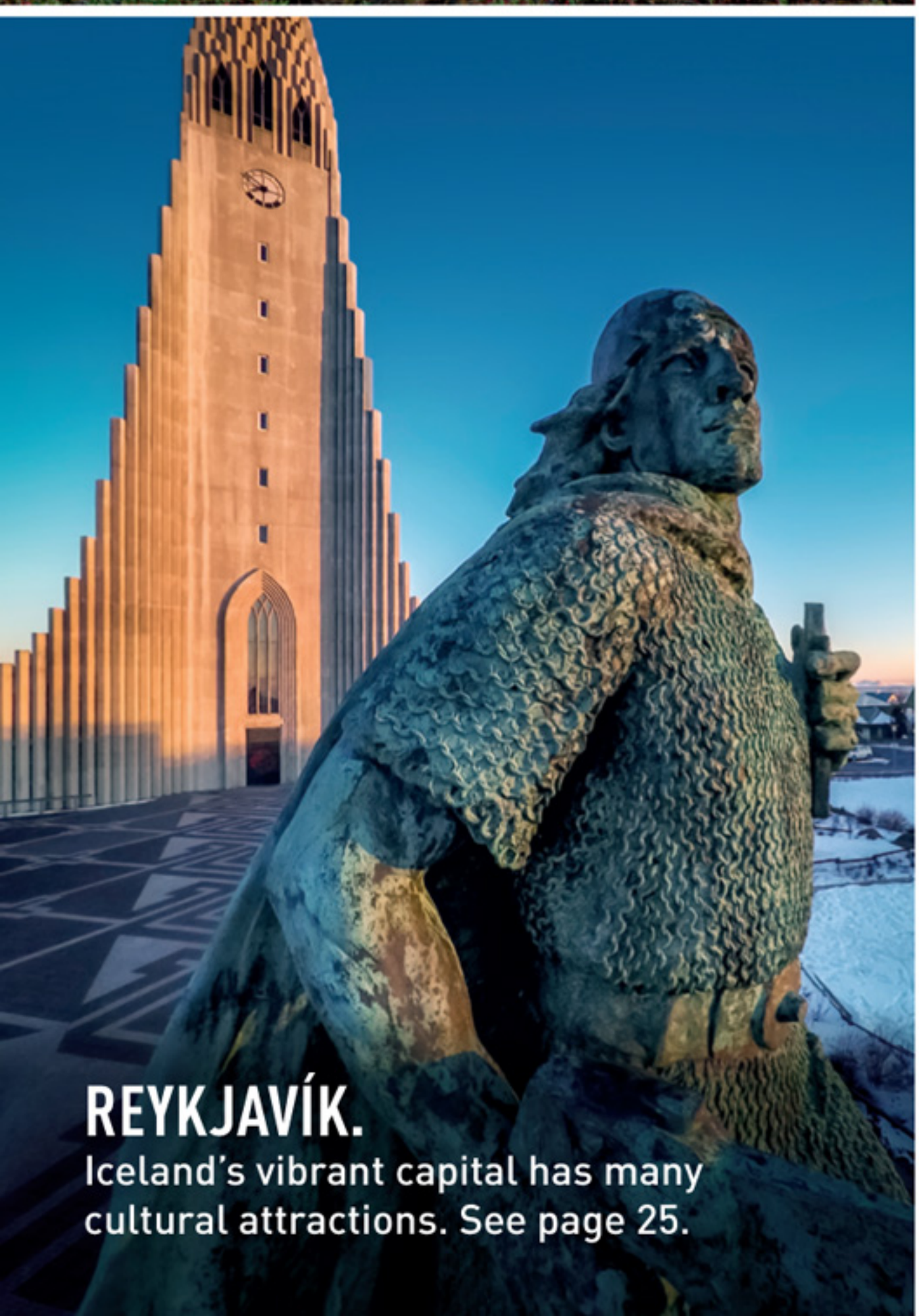
ÞÓRSMÖRK

One of Iceland's most dramatic wilderness areas. See page 57.



HEIMAEY

A quintessential Icelandic fishing port with an attractive harbour. See page 54.



REYKJAVÍK.

Iceland's vibrant capital has many cultural attractions. See page 25.



GEYSIR

No visit is complete without seeing Iceland's hot springs. See page 44.

GOÐAFOSS

Witness the power of these staggering falls. See page 74.

BLUE LAGOON

Bathe in the naturally heated, therapeutic waters. See page 39.

LAKE MÝVATN

A bird-watcher's paradise surrounded by volcanic peaks. See page 74.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

The most breathtaking lightshow on earth. See page 14.

JÖKULSÁRLÓN

This spectacular iceberg-studded lagoon is out of this world. See page 62.

WHALE-WATCHING

Spot one of these majestic creatures off Húsavik. See page 71.

A PERFECT DAY



9.30am

Breakfast

Start the day with breakfast at your hotel or head to the retro-style café, Grái Kötturinn, on Hverfisgata 16, for orange juice, pancakes with bacon and syrup and plenty of coffee refills.



1.30pm

Reykjavík's heart

Take a walk through Austurvöllur square, the city's traditional heart, where you'll find the statue of Jón Sigurðsson, Parliament House and, adjacent, Reykjavík's modest cathedral, the Dómkirkjan. Slip past the City Hall to see the abundant birdlife on Tjörnin pond.



11.00am

Shoreline stroll

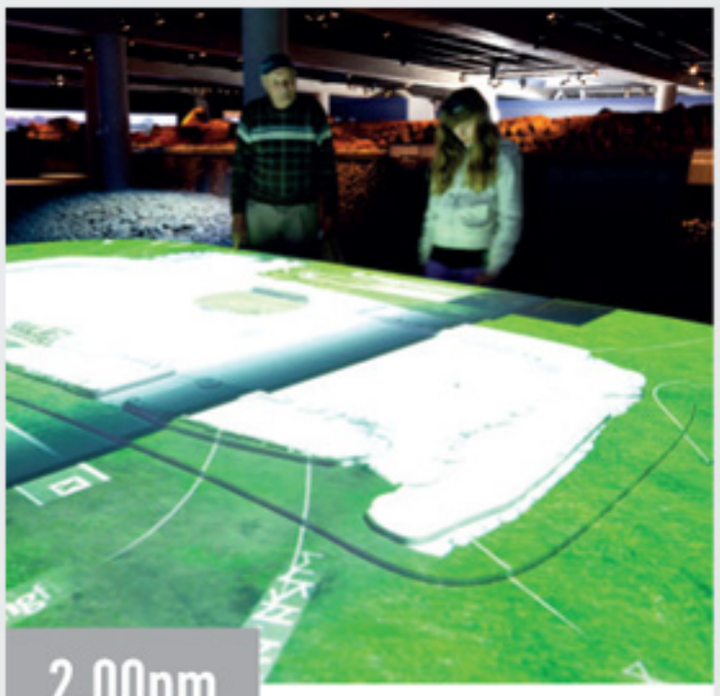
Take a morning walk past the glittering Harpa concert hall to the harbour area. If you are tempted, you could take in a whale-watching trip from one of the boats moored here. Check out Icelandic pop art at the Hafnarhús gallery and admire Mt Esja across the bay.



12.30pm

Lobster stop

Stop for a bowl of lobster soup and a beer at Sægreifinn fish shack on Geirsgata 8.



2.00pm

Heritage walk

Walk down Reykjavík's oldest street, Aðalstræti, and look in at the city's most modern heritage museum, Reykjavík 871±2 Settlement Exhibition, for some Icelandic history.



10.00pm

On the town

Austurstræti is a good place to start: the Micro Bar (no. 6) serves beer from Icelandic breweries; or grab a well-made cocktail at dressy Loftið (no. 9). Laugavegur and the surrounding streets are packed with iconic bars and clubs, such as Boston (Laugavegur 28b) and Kaffibarinn (Bergstaðastræti 1). Grab a hotdog *(pylsur)* with mustard from an all-night food stand on the way back to your hotel.



3.00pm

Retail therapy

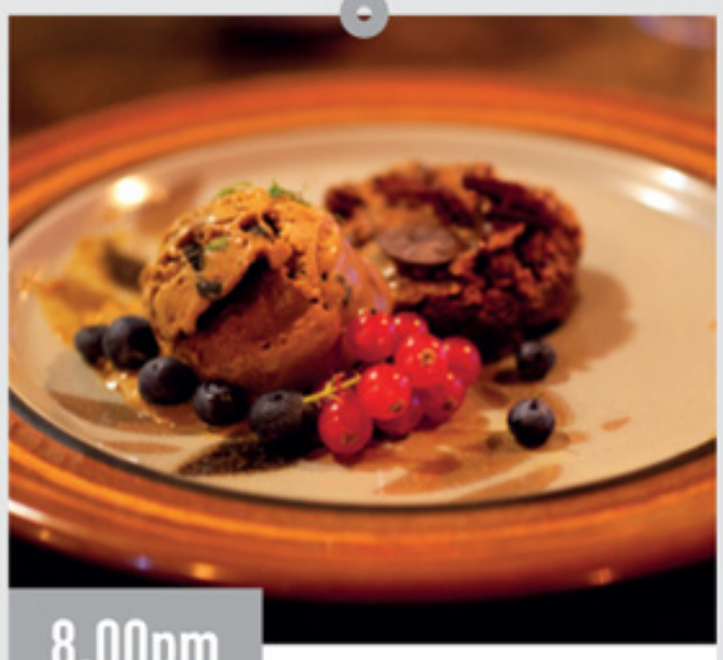
Head to Reykjavík's main shopping street, Laugavegur, for vintage clothes (Spúútnik at 28b) and vinyl (Bad Taste at 28), along with exclusive, cutting edge fashion labels. Branching off diagonally, Skólavörðustígur is lined with beautiful art and design shops.



5.00pm

Steam and soak

Time to recover from shopping and sightseeing at one of Reykjavík's many geothermal pools. The most central is Sundhöllin, on Barónsstígur. The pool is indoor, with outdoor hot pots to relax and gossip in – the perfect way to get ready for the night ahead.



8.00pm

Fine dining

There are many excellent restaurants in the city centre. Two options for fine cosy dining are the **Ostabúðin** *(Skólavörðustíg 8)* and Skólabrú (Pósthússtræti 17), in a beautifully restored house just off Austurvöllur square.





CONTENTS

Introduction 10

A Brief History 15

Where To Go 25

❶ *Numbered map references pinpoint the sights*

Reykjavík 25

Hallgrímskirkja and Vicinity 26, Central Shopping Area 28, The Government District 29, The Harbour Area 32, Western Reykjavík 34, Eastern Reykjavík 35, Viðey and Lundey 37, The Outskirts 38

The Blue Lagoon 39

The Golden Circle 40

Þingvellir 41, Skálholt 43, Geysir 44, Gullfoss 44

The West Coast 45

Akranes 46, Borgarnes 46, Reykholt and Vicinity 46, The Snæfellsnes Peninsula 48

The West Fjords 50

Ísafjörður and Around 50

The Westman Islands 53

Heimaey 54

The South Coast 56

Þórsmörk 57, Skógar 57, Vík 59, Vatnajökull 60, Jökulsárlón 62, Höfn 62

The North Coast 62

Akureyri 63, Eyjafjörður 67, West of Akureyri 69, Húsavík 71





Lakes, volcanoes, canyons and falls 73

Lake Mývatn 74, Námafjall and Krafla 78, Jökulsárgljúfur 79

Eastern Iceland 80

Egilsstaðir 81, Lögurinn and Snæfell 82, The Eastfjords 82

The Interior 84

Askja and Herðubreið 85, The Sprengisandur Route 86, The Kjölur Route 88

What to Do 91

Eating Out 104

A–Z Travel Tips 115

Recommended Hotels 135

Index 142

Features

The Icelandic Horse 10
What's in a Name 12
The Sagas 18
Historical Landmarks 23
Reykjavík City Card 31
Smoky Bay's Steamy Power 37
The Parliament at Þingvellir 42
The Puffin Population 56
Whales and Whaling 72
The Ducks and Birds of Mývatn 76
Iceland's Birdlife 95
Tax-Free Shopping 100
Calendar of Events 103
Meal Times 104

INTRODUCTION

Few places on earth can match the raw and intense beauty of Iceland. Both fiery and cold, forbidding and inviting, it is a place of dramatic contrasts, home to immense ice fields, bubbling mud pools, colossal waterfalls and hot springs. Although Iceland has a long, rich cultural history, it is the land itself, sculpted by the forces of nature into a unique, ever-changing landscape, that tells the country's true story.

UNDERGROUND DRAMA

In geological terms, Iceland is a mere baby, composed of some of the youngest rocks on earth and still being formed. Over the centuries, eruptions have spewed vast fields of lava across the island's surface and projected choking clouds of ash high into the air, blocking out the sunlight and blighting crops. In 2010, the ash cloud from a volcanic eruption under Eyjafjallajökull glacier paralysed Europe's air traffic for six days; and a flare-up under Grímsvötn the following year caused more travel chaos. Every day there are thousands of minor earthquakes and shocks, most of which are only detectable by seismologists.

THE ICELANDIC HORSE

Horses have been used for transport and farming in Iceland for over 1,000 years. The country's isolation and a ban on importing new horses to keep out disease mean that its horse population is remarkably pure. Icelandic horses are relatively small but extremely tough and they can handle the rugged terrain with ease. They are found in a wide variety of colours and are respected worldwide for their intelligence, stamina and speed. The Icelandic horse has a unique gait, known as a *tölt* – a kind of running walk with a gentle flowing movement that makes for a very smooth and comfortable ride.



The Seljalandsfoss Waterfall

The presence of so much natural energy just below ground makes it possible not just to see the awesome power of nature, but to feel, hear and smell it. The limitless reserves of geothermal energy that have produced such a varied terrain also supply heat and power to Iceland's homes, and the 'rotten egg' smell of sulphur is unmistakable whenever you turn on a hot tap. Dams across fast-flowing glacial rivers provide the nation with more than enough hydroelectrically generated power to meet its needs.

The abundant hot water not only heats homes and offices: in winter it is piped under pavements in the centre of Reykjavík to melt away the snow and ice. All year round it contributes to the social life of the Icelanders, filling outdoor swimming pools, where people meet to take a little exercise or just to chat in the hot tubs and steam rooms.

POLLUTION-FREE LAND

For Icelanders, keeping their landscape clean and pollution-free is a top priority. It is with justifiable pride that they boast that the water from any stream or non-glacial river is drinkable, due to the lack of heavy industry. Even in the capital, Reykjavík, the air is bitingly clean and light pollution is minimal – when the northern lights are in full flow, they can be seen from the city. You won't see rubbish tipped at the wayside here, nor will you encounter widespread burning of fossil fuels. There are several foreign aluminium smelters in the country, drawn by Iceland's cheap energy; however, the last