

# Iceland at ITS BEST

From waterfalls to glaciers, hot springs to mountains—Iceland is a multifaceted destination worth getting to know

— Diana Ballon

Retreat Lagoon

In winter, people often think about going south to maximize hours of sunlight. So when I first considered going north to Iceland in December, when there is less than seven hours of sunlight, the idea seemed a bit crazy. But by taking the plunge (more on geothermal plunges later), what I learnt was that quality of light can trump quantity.

On a recent Exodus Travels tour of Iceland's natural highlights, we let light be our guide—and of course in our case, our awesome Exodus tour leader Oskar Gudjonsson. That meant boarding our van every morning by 8:30 or 9:00 a.m. so we could arrive at our first destination when the sun was up. And what this light revealed to us

was a beautiful, sparsely populated island where natural wonders abound—where you can walk on glaciers under a bright blue sky and gaze out at icebergs sticking out of the water like irregularly-shaped turquoise crystals; visit erupting geysers, pass volcanoes and hot springs and encounter countless waterfalls in your travels. Even in the early morning as we drive along the tundra-like terrain, with volcanoes and mountains like black inverse cones in the distance, the sun rises gently in front of us, like a flattened rainbow across the horizon.

Our Exodus sightseeing tour had been billed as a Northern Lights tour, but we unfortunately were not lucky enough to see the Aurora. Although chances of seeing them are good in winter—because of minimal light

pollution and maximal darkness—you can't always predict the workings of the sky.

What I can attest to is witnessing many other extraordinary sights on our tour. Here are some highlights.



Glacier walk



**Thursday, Day 1:** We left the capital, Reykjavik, early to begin our drive along the south coast of Iceland. Our first stop is Gallery Flói, an artisan shop where you can find everything from cool glass beads, to funky jewellery and pottery. We also visit the Ullarvinnslan Gilhagi Woolmill next door, where they sell a huge range of beautifully-coloured Icelandic wool and the sweaters from which they are made.



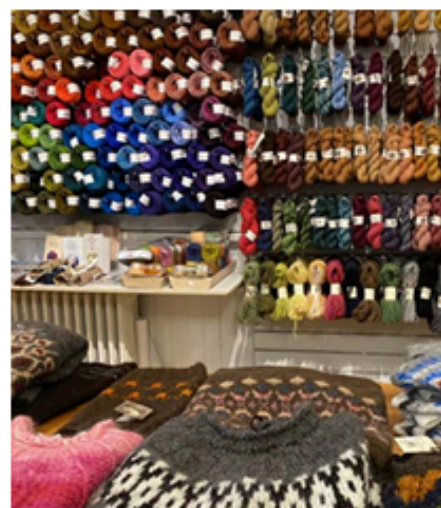
Back in the van, the mountains are beginning to adopt a purplish hue and we pass many short, stocky Icelandic horses grazing along the side of the road. Our next stop is the impressive 60-metre high Seljalandsfoss waterfall, and then a bit later, Skógafoss waterfall, where we ascend 360 stairs and are rewarded with a view of a field beneath us, glowing golden in the setting sun. Our final stop for the day is the Dyrhólaey peninsula in the southernmost part of Iceland. It is cold and windy when we arrive, but that hardly detracts from its impressive vista overlooking the North Atlantic, with a huge black arch extending into the water and a lighthouse that looks more like a castle standing stalwart against the shoreline. Then we drive again. It is dark by the time we arrive at Hotel Laki, our base camp for the next two nights.

**Friday, Day 2:** We rise early, this time for a bucket list experience—to walk on a glacier! We traverse along the Skeidararsandur floodplains and by 11 a.m. have arrived at Falljokull, the outlet glacier where our walk will begin. At the base, with pebbly volcanic rock underfoot, we strap a harness around our waists, fit crampons on our boots, don a helmet and grab a pickaxe. From there, we start a slow and gradual ascent, until we're surrounded by the blue ice of the glacier, against a deeper blue sky overhead. It is magnificent!

After a hearty bowl of meat soup we head to Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon, a lagoon created when the glacier retreated from the coast about 70 years ago, leaving a 20-kilometre lake filled with icebergs, with the occasional seal that bobs its head to the surface.

There we walk along a volcanic black sand beach where big pieces of glass have washed up, creating random shapes: one looks like a whale, many others like birds.

After a 90-minute drive, we arrive back at our hotel for a delicious buffet dinner and then—sleep. It's been a long and very full day.



Wool sweaters

**Saturday, Day 3:** This last day we tour the three main attractions of what is known as the Golden Circle, a well-touristed route that can easily be covered in a day from Reykjavik. We see the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Þingvellir National Park, where the first parliament in Iceland resided, back in 930 AD, and where scenes from the popular *Game of Thrones* TV series were shot. We drive to the Geysir Geothermal Area, site of the famous (but dormant) Geysir and also Strokkur, which we can see erupting, its boiling water and steam bursting some 50 feet in the air. And we see Gullfoss (or “Golden Falls,” one of Iceland’s beloved waterfalls), of which there are about 10,000 in the country!

Then it is back to Reykjavik for our final good-bye dinner.

**Day 4 and beyond:** Although we have bid our fellow companions good-bye, a friend and I spend a few additional days in Reykjavik. With its bustling night life, fun cafés, beautiful architecture, 18 public swimming pools with tons of hot tubs—and not to mention the thermal spa, Sky Lagoon, there is plenty to see and do.

We also visit the Blue Lagoon, a geothermal spa just a short drive from the airport and an ideal stop at the beginning or end of a trip. We are lucky enough to spend an overnight here at the luxurious Retreat at Blue Lagoon, but its less expensive neighbour the Silica Hotel is also a worthy option.

No matter what season you visit, Iceland offers a truly memorable experience for everyone. ■



Geysir



### The Retreat at Blue Lagoon

With Iceland’s moss-covered lava fields and the Svartsengi mountains as a backdrop, it’s hard not to want to be part of the landscape. And what better way to do so than by staying at the luxurious five-star Retreat Hotel: it’s a place where floor-to-ceiling windows link Nordic-style interiors to the dramatic landscape that surrounds it.

Everything about this 62-suite hotel—with its clean, minimalist designs, Michelin-recommended dining and private lagoon next to the more public and touristed Blue Lagoon—spells luxury. You can while away your days floating in the lagoon’s geothermal mineral-rich waters, and even enjoy an “in-water” massage! You can perform “the ritual” at the spa, which is a three-part process involving self-lathering with silica, algae and a mineral-rich lava and salt—all meant to cleanse, nourish and exfoliate the skin. And then there’s chill time in the spa’s ultra-relaxing subterranean spaces. There is no better way to go underground.