



Winter wonderland

North Iceland offers a smorgasbord of culture, local delicacies and unique outdoor activities. Stay a few days and experience both a snowstorm and sunny winter weather.

Text: Malin Ståhl Hefvalin.

Images: Vist North Iceland & Jon Steinar Ragnarsson.



The natural baths in Mývatn with the mystical Northern Lights as a backdrop.

If you take an Icelandic horse away from the island, it is never allowed back. The reason for that is to keep the breed pure and free of disease, something they have been successful in doing for almost a thousand years. Besides the many Iceland horses all across the region, northern Iceland is also made for adventure. Ours starts in Akureyri surrounded by an ice blue, deep light I have never seen anywhere else. A light snow is falling when we leave in the morning, and it seems the sky is lighter by the horizon.

“Take nothing for granted”, says Halldór Óli Kjartansson of Visit North Iceland. “The only thing you can be sure of on Iceland is that you do not know which weather you will get in the next five minutes.”

The snow is flying around the car as we drive east towards Mývatn (Mosquito Lake). An American investor once suggested changing the name to Aurora Lake to make it more attractive. But here things are called what they are, so Mosquito Lake it is.

The snow gets heavier and our snowmobile tour is cancelled. Instead we decide to take a walk on snowshoes to Dimmu borgir (the Dark Castles). This is a large protected area of unusually shaped lava fields, which according to

local legend are trolls turned to stone. We tie on our snowshoes and glide effortlessly on top of the snow-covered landscape. With a little fantasy you can see faces in the stone pillars and you understand the origin of the Icelandic stories. Parts of the film *Brothers Lionheart* were recorded around Dimmu borgir, as were the winter scenes in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*.

The natural baths in Mývatn are warmed up by steam from the earth's interior, keeping it at just over 38°C. The water in the clear blue lagoon in the middle of the lava landscape is incredibly soft, like having a bath in fabric softener and is known to be fantastic for the skin. By afternoon we most unwillingly drag ourselves out of the water and drive towards the western shores of Eyafjörður, to the micro brewery Kaldi. Unlike snaps, beer was forbidden on Iceland until 1989 because the authorities were worried that the cheaper beer would lead to increased drinking and deprivation. Since beer has been legalised, it has become the most popular alcoholic drink and many micro breweries have been established on the island. Today ten percent of the people in the village

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work at Kaldi. The brewery offers guided tours and tasting straight from the tank.

Andreas Baumgartner from Switzerland holds yoga classes and arranges outdoor activities in Akureyri.

"It is a little different to experience all of nature's elements and combine them with personal wellbeing", he says. "Here you do not meet many other tourists, so every experience feels unique."

Andreas takes us on a dogsledding tour to search for the northern lights one evening. I have not read up about this properly and assume I will sit in a cosy sled between warm furs, but boy, was I wrong.

I get a thin wooden kick sled pulled by three fluffy charming Alaskan huskys. Without further ado I just get up and get on with it. With a "Go, go, go!" I can make the dogs run in the deep snow so it feels like we are flying. The northern lights are nowhere to be seen, but the flying sensation through the darkness is adventure enough. With us on the dog sled tour are Michael and Dave from Manchester, travelling with a group of friends.

"Some of us wanted to go skiing, whilst others wanted to try some very different winter activities. Then North Iceland became an exciting choice", said Michael.



»I can eat a whole can on my own in front of a good movie.«



In Havganes, some 20 miles north of Akureyri you can try the Icelandic national dish of rotten shark. The recipe is simple: Take a Greenland shark, dig a hole and bury it in your backyard for six weeks, then hang it in a cold place for a few months after that. When ready cut it into cubes and serve with snaps.

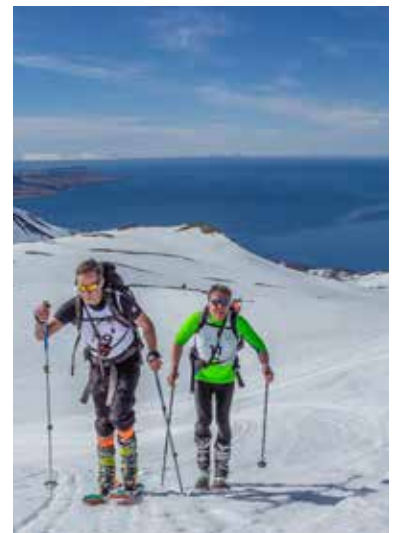
Elvar Reykjalin is a fourth generation fishmonger at Ekta Fiskur. We visit him one early morning.

"I can eat a whole can on my own in front of a good movie", says Elvar and pass around little white cubes of shark on cocktail sticks together with homemade raspberry snaps. The strong smell of ammonia and old fish is offputting, and the snaps I first declined went down quickly in order to get rid of the taste in my mouth. No, rotten shark is not my cup of tea.

Siglufjordur by the Atlantic coast houses one of Iceland's finest museums, the Herring Era Museum. Here stories are told about the rise and fall of the village as Europe's herring capital at the start of the last century. Hundreds of young people came on boats to the remote village in the north to fish, clean and pack the herring in to barrels. The museum once again attracts visitors to the village together with the skiing facilities nearby where

you can ski with an ocean view. Here are some of Iceland's best ski slopes with over two kilometres of skiing from the top lift down to the fjord. We enjoy the luxury of being almost alone on the slopes, and we ski until the lights are turned on.

Iceland has so much to offer, and the northern lights we never saw as well as the cancelled snowmobile tour have given me a reason to come back to the Island of fairytales and adventures. I am glad I am not an Icelandic horse.



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Eating out

Strikid

A top restaurant in many ways. Perched on top of Akureyris highest building offering Icelandic food with an international touch. Specially recommended is the charcoal grilled, slow cooked lamb – one of the tenderest I have ever eaten.

www.strikid.is

Vógafos Cowcafé

Through a window in the restaurant you can spy the cows in the barn who provide the milk for the homemade mozzarella and butter. Also from the same farm comes the lamb, trout and laverbread baked in an earth oven.

www.vogafos.net



Local

Rotten shark is just one of the dishes on offer during Thorrablot, the midwinter festival, which also includes Icelandic delicacies such as boiled sheeps head, liver hash and dried fish. These dishes are served at many restaurants during February.

What to do

Downhill skiing

North Iceland's ski slopes are open from January to June and offer skiing with a sea view. Skarsdalur has five lifts and is planning to expand. Hlidarfjall is just five minutes from Akureyri, where there is both chair lifts and a restaurant on the slopes.

www.skardsdalur.is

www.hlidarfjall.is

Natural baths

The nature baths at Mývatn are a dream for the frozen, with the outdoor lagoon a warm 38°C. The baths are open until 22.00 every day and it is the perfect place to study the northern lights on cloudless evenings.

www.jardbodin.is

Snowshoe hiking

Walk unhindered in metre deep snow with practical snowshoes. Search for the trolls on special walking tours arranged with experienced guides around the beautiful Lake Mývatn.

www.hikeandbike.is

Dog sled tours

An exciting adventure awaits in the mountains above Akureyri. There are tours during daytime and northern light trips during the evening.

www.inspiration-iceland.com

Sillmuseum

High up in North Iceland at Siglufjordur is the award winning Herring Era Museum in four buildings. There are a mixture of live events, films, boats and of course tastings.

www.sild.is

Kaldi Microbrewery

The micro brewery Bruggsmiðjan, located in the small town of Árskógssandur, offers guided tours around the brewery including tasting.

www.bruggsmidjan.is



Getting there

Flights are available to Reykjavik via Icelandair from:

Stockholm return trip from €233*

Copenhagen return trip from €188*

and Oslo return trip from €147*

Internal flights to Akureyri from Reykjavik go several times a day from ca 1200 kr return.

*Example prices are for return trip including taxes and other fees.