

ICELAND

Iceland's history dates back to the 9th century, when a Norwegian Viking settled in what is now the city of Reykjavik. Though, some records show that Irish monks had already settled in Iceland some two hundred years before.

Iceland's history is rich and closely intertwined with Denmark's and Norway's. It is where the world's oldest continuous parliament, Althingi, was born, and is home to the Icelandic Sagas, which according to former President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, "have been the foundation of Iceland culture, forged the nation's identity and inspired people to bold deeds in times of adversity." In fact, the Sagas have contributed so much to Iceland's deep literary tradition, that 1 out of every 10 Icelanders are said to go on and publish a book during their lifetime!

Alongside its fascinating history, Iceland is known to the rest of the world for its stunning and vastly varied nature. Geologically considered to be a very young country at less than 20 million years old, Iceland's natural history of glacier movements, erosions, volcanic eruptions and tectonic movements have helped shape its unique landscape – making it very much a work in progress and an absolute joy for the curious, the adventurous and everyone else in between.

Traveling to Iceland, whether by land or by air, you will quickly see that the island's volcanos and glaciers have played a major role in its constant and breath-taking evolution. As you travel through and around Iceland, you will notice the drastically changing landscape: From the secret gems hidden away in immaculate Westfjords to its wild and vividly colored Highlands interior, the sprawling volcanic flatlands of the South with its collection of colossal glaciers and majestic waterfalls well-loved and often visited by tourists, the East's quiet and lush farmlands, fjords, magma chambers filled with colorful mineral deposits and vast forests, to the North's peninsulas and long valleys interspersed with mountains, lava fields and smooth hills long carved out by rivers, and finally the West, where you will find a dramatic sampling of the entire island concentrated in one region with hibernating volcanos, glacier capped mountains, golden beaches and spectacular waterfalls.

Truly, Iceland has something for everyone and it is here that travelers will see and experience how much of the island's nature has affected and continues to play an important part in its people's lives. The environment has always been important to Icelanders, and over time, they have tried to give back what they take from the island. Not only has Iceland continued to search for cleaner and greener energy solutions, many Icelanders volunteer their spare time to conserve the nature around them, making it one of the greenest countries in the world – and with the great influx of tourism in the country over the last few years, they highly encourage travelers to do the same.

Did You Know?

- ❖ The Icelandic language still bears great similarities with ancient Norse, so much so that texts written 1,000 years ago are still quite easily read. This makes the language very difficult to learn, owing to its grammatical structure, sounds and letters that are no longer in use in modern Germanic languages.
- ❖ There are no mosquitos in Iceland!
- ❖ Icelanders still use the traditional Nordic naming system, where your first name is followed by your father's name and the suffix for son (-son) or daughter (dóttir). So members of the same family have different last names, and in the phonebook, people are listed by first name and profession. Even first names have to be approved by an Icelandic Naming Committee, which has made the news in the past owing to its extremely strict rules.
- ❖ While there may not be any McDonald's restaurants anywhere in Iceland, travelers will find KFC and Domino's Pizza. It is also in Iceland where the consumption of Coca-Cola per capita is higher than in any other country in the world.
- ❖ With such a small and isolated population and great genealogical records, most Icelanders can trace their ancestry back at least 1000 years! A deCODE Genetics project in Iceland, aimed at genetically mapping all Icelanders in order to better understand the links between certain genes and diseases is ongoing – and on a lighter and separate note, Icelanders have also begun using a mobile app that quickly tells two users if they are related or not by simply bumping their mobile phone together!