

The Loneliest Place on Earth

by

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Somehow I am always visiting Iceland—whether in memory or imagination—and always walking through its chilly, ghostly streets, pale even after midnight in the summer, and hushed, no dark to be seen for 2,400 hours or more. Somehow it is always half-light in the Iceland of my memories, and I am walking across empty fields alone, the sun landing on the sea at 1 A.M. and then, after settling there for an hour or so, rising again as I walk back through the pallid light and hitch a ride on an early milk truck around the magical, cloud-covered coast. It seems I am always lost in the ice blue poems of the Icelandic Romantics, and the images from the light nights that I spent there keep returning: the man with the chalk white face who accosted me in the café of a lonely fishing village sometime after midnight and told me, through piercing eyes, of his dreams of Jesus and a flock of angels robed in white; the girl with the intense Egyptian gaze who picked me up my first day in the capital and transported me off into her visions of Tibet; the pilot of the six-seat plane who consulted his map as we flew, just the two of us, low over ice fields and snowcapped

peaks, to the deserted fjords of the west. I am always standing on a hill in Iceland's golden quiet, my shadow stretching for forty feet or more, then walking through a sleeping world in the dove gray light of 2 A.M.

Perhaps because it is so otherworldly, Iceland leaves a curious impression on the mind. Days spent here are interludes from life, sojourns in some other, nether, twilight zone of the mind. Everyone knows a little about the epidemic oddness of the place: There was no beer when I first visited, and no TV on Thursday; there were almost no trees and no vegetables. Iceland is an ungodly wasteland of volcanoes and tundra and Geysir, the mother of all geysers, so lunar that NASA astronauts trained here; a place of fumaroles and solfataras, with more hot springs and mud pools and steam holes than any other wilderness on earth. One day I saw a crowd gathered on a Reykjavík street and went over to see what they were staring at: It was a dog (formerly illegal in the capital). Iceland is a duck-shaped island with eight million puffins and a thirteen-hand pony that can not only canter and gallop but *tölt*.

Even "civilization" here seems to offer no purchase for the mind: Nothing quite makes sense. Iceland proverbially boasts the largest number of poets, presses, and readers per capita in the world: Reykjavík, a town smaller than Rancho Cucamonga, California, has four daily newspapers. To match the rate of literary production of Iceland, the United States would have to publish six hundred new books *a day*. Iceland has the oldest living language in Europe—its people read the medieval sagas as if they were tomorrow's newspaper—and all new concepts, such as "radio" and "telephone," are given poetically chosen medieval equivalents. Roughly seventy-five percent of all first babies are illegitimate here, and because every son of Kristjan is called Kristjansson and every daughter Kristjansdóttir, mothers always have different surnames than their children. Every citizen of Iceland—even an erstwhile Wu Ziyang—must acquire a traditional Icelandic name, and the

only exception ever made to this—for Vladimir Ashkenazy—prompted one disgruntled exile to ask if he could take on the new Icelandic name of Vladimir Ashkenazy. People are listed in the phone book by their first name, which does not make life easy when the Jons alone take up thirty columns of the country's directory (the hotels section of the Yellow Pages does not even fill a column).

Iceland is one of the largest islands in the world, yet so intimate that it has the same kind of tranquil dottiness as the northern village in the movie *Local Hero*: Every day promises to fetch up enigmatic mermaids, unlikely rock and roll bands, and the same faces that you saw yesterday and the day before. The first day I ever spent in Surprise City (as Reykjavík is called), I saw golden-haired princesses and sword-wielding knights enacting fairy-tale sagas on the main bridge in the capital. I came within two feet of the president (who seemed, unguarded in the street, just another elegant, blond single mother). And while staring at some life-size chess pieces in the center of town, I was interviewed by the biggest daily newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, so astonished were its reporters to see a foreign face. The Salvation Army hostel is only four doors away from the parliament building here, and the parliament building itself is a modest two-story house with a doorman less imposing than those in the nearby pubs. Prisoners are sometimes allowed to go home for the holidays, and on the main road out of town you can see the country's Nobel laureate in literature, Halldór Laxness, still writing at the age of eighty-nine.

Yet there is something deeper about the uncanniness of the place, something arising from its silences and space. You can feel it in the contained intensity of many people here, in the enormous calm with which they say *já*, and in the echoing way they say nothing at all. You can see it in their eyes, as shockingly beau-

tiful, often, and as blue, as the sea suddenly glimpsed around mountain curves. You can sense it in the almost archetypal elementalism of the place, where honey-cheeked beauty queens rub cheeks with hatchet-faced yahoos (it is, as Jan Morris saw, the perfect setting for "Beauty and the Beast"); You can feel it in the settledness of the place, the weighty sense of *gravitas*. It is easy to believe, in this uninhabited space, that you are living once more amid the mead halls and monsters of *Beowulf*, within a tiny circle of light surrounded by an encroaching dark; it is easy to believe that the Irish hermits and the Viking warriors, who were the earliest settlers on the island, still possess it with their ascetic calm and violence. There is something allegorical—not quite real—about the place that inspired Tolkien's Middle Earth and Wagner's *Ring*. Iceland was, in the Middle Ages, the literal location of hell; Jules Verne's explorers came here to find the center of the earth; and for the Nazis, its pure-blond racial clarity made it a kind of Aryan paradise (Auden quoted an unnamed Nazi as declaring, "*Für uns Island ist das Land*"). Iceland may be many things, but it is not your average country.

It is always difficult, even dangerous, to return to a world that has transported you, and epiphanies rarely repeat themselves. Yet I was determined to see Iceland outside the spell of its midsummer nights' dreams, in the lunar segment of its cycle. Last fall, therefore, I returned to the place I kept on dreaming about. Icelandair is the only carrier that flies to Reykjavík from the United States, linking its capital with Baltimore and now Orlando (as well as with New York). Keflavík is the only airport in Europe that has a duty-free shop for *arrivals*, which customarily was packed with Icelanders stocking up on beer. The most comfortable seats on Icelandair are in Saga class, and its stunning cabin attendants sometimes wear leather gloves. Many Americans know Iceland only as the place they were obliged to visit on what was, for years,

the cheapest flight to Europe; now, ironically, Iceland is by some measures the most expensive country in the world (a fifteen-minute phone call from my hotel to Japan cost me \$175).

Yet none of this prepared me for the biggest shock of all, when I stepped out of the airport: The whole place was dark. In all the time I had spent there in the summer, I had never seen it dark. And dark awakens something passionate and primeval in the land, some buried, burning intensity. Our bus bumped across a rainy emptiness, with here and there a few modernist blocks and eerie, red-lit geodesic domes winking in the blue-black sky: a high-tech, lit-up vision of surreal desolation. Reykjavík, at eight-thirty in the morning, was cradled in a northern silence. There is an extraordinary stillness to the place, as if it were held in suspended animation, its red roofs shining placid in the unpolluted sky. The overwhelming impression, on the tiny, empty street where I was staying, was of silence and of dark.

It is, of course, the changes that one notices most quickly when one comes back to any place, and it did not take me long to find that beer is now legal and that there are two TV stations, broadcasting even on Thursday. I saw an *I Was a Teenage Zombie* album amid the slabs of strange fish and the jars of bee pollen in the Reykjavík flea market (held every Saturday in an underground parking lot beneath the central bank); and Filipino women in flowing Islamic robes were walking down the street. The Holiday Inn has come to Reykjavík now, and the Hard Rock Cafe. There is karaoke too, and neon.

Yet again and again I felt I was in an Alice-like wonderland. Soon after arrival, I inquired about a day-trip (to Greenland); an eight-hour tour cost \$460. I called for a cab and was picked up in a Mercedes driven by a hearty, shining matron. I walked to the Hotel Loftleidir for lunch and was treated to the sight of Anatoly Karpov, former chess champion of the world, sitting in a ring of light at one end of an auditorium, above a tiny chessboard, watched

by eight old men in anoraks. Two hours later, I was being harassed by a Greenlandic dancer with black stripes down his face and a clothespin in his mouth that he kept pushing in and out at me.

By any standards other than Icelandic ones, Reykjavík is still a quaint and quiet place, as silent as a photograph. It resembles, like most of the settlements in Iceland, a kind of Lego town—rows of tiny, clean white boxes set out in geometric grids, with roofs of red and blue and green. Much of the country feels as if it were made for children—even the ponytailed boys and ring-nosed girls are pushing baby strollers—and Reykjavík might almost be a small child's toy, as clean and perfect as a ship inside a bottle. Iceland is famous for having no mansions and no slums, in much the same way that its language has no accents and no dialects: With a population smaller than that of Colorado Springs, uniformity is not hard to achieve. And because nearly all the houses are geothermically heated, the city, whose name means "smoky bay," shines silent in the smokeless air, as clear as if seen through panes of polished glass. Reykjavík is one place where it really is worth climbing the highest building in town to see the city, mute and motionless, laid out against the silver sea.

Yet it is not because of the capital but in spite of it that most visitors come to Iceland; desolation is what they seek and find. More than eighty percent of the country consists of nothing but ice fields, barren mountains, lava, and tundra. Huge stretches are as blank and inhospitable as anything in the Australian Outback. Such settlements as do exist look like suburbs in search of a city. A solitary farmstead here, a lonely lighthouse there, occasionally an isolated steeple: a small huddle of concrete inside a giant's rough paw. Nature adores a vacuum here. And the ground itself is like nothing so much as a geologist's textbook, a pockmarked mass of volcanic craters and hissing plumes of smoke till it looks as if the earth itself is blowing off steam, and the soil in parts is so

hot that only a few inches down you can actually boil an egg. In Iceland, in John McPhee's happy phrase, "the earth is full of adjustments, like a settling stomach."

The largest glacier in Europe is somewhere in this nothingness (it is more than three times the size of Luxembourg), and the largest lava field in the world; the oldest parliament in Europe was set up on this youngest soil. Samuel Johnson used to boast of reciting a whole chapter of *The Natural History of Iceland* by the Dane Nils Horrebow. That was Chapter LXXII, "Concerning snakes." It reads in its entirety: "There are no snakes to be met with throughout the whole island."

The other factor that accentuates the bleak and weather-beaten beauty is the climate. In October, already a wild white quilt swaddles the countryside, and the sun shines silver over silver lakes. The view from a bus is identical to that from a plane thirty thousand feet above the Pole. Icelanders will tell you that because of the Gulf Stream that country has no extremes of temperature. Some years see no snow at all in Reykjavík, and the lowest temperature recorded in the capital in thirty years is minus fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. But the absence of extremes also means that it is never, ever warm. In summer, when I was here, people were complaining of a heat wave when the temperature hit a chilly fifty-four degrees.

In this unaccommodating world, it is not surprising that the people who come here are often as unorthodox in their way as the locals. Yet the country seems to bring out something pure in visitors, something a little bit out of the ordinary. The most luminous translations of modern Icelandic poetry into English, for example, were composed by a recent U.S. ambassador to Iceland, Marshall Brement, who has written beautifully of how Icelanders were the great European poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and how, even now, on one night a year every member of parliament

must speak in rhyme. And though the island's attraction to photographers (Eliot Porter) and poets (from Auden and MacNeice to Leithauser) may be self-evident, it seems to evoke something poetic in even the everyman. I once asked a young Danish student, who had chosen to live here for a year, what was the most exciting thing to do in Reykjavík. He thought for a long, long time. Then, looking a little sheepish, he said, "Well, for me, I like walking at night in the Old Town, seeing the old houses. Or, if you can go a little bit out of Reykjavík, if it is cold, like tonight, you can see the northern lights."

That kind of calm transparency is, inevitably, harder and harder to maintain as the villages of Iceland get drawn into the shrinking global village. For ten centuries now, the island has preserved its own culture and Old Norse diphthongs by living apart from the world, remote from changing realities. For centuries Iceland has been a kind of hermit among nations, a private, inward-looking odd-place-out of fishermen and visionaries and poets. The pursuits for which it has been famous are largely solitary ones made to ward off months of winter dark. Thus the country boasts six chess grandmasters and recently placed first in the World Contract Bridge Championship. The most famous Icelander in England, Magnus Magnusson, is, appropriately enough, the host of a fiendishly difficult quiz show, *Mastermind* (when I looked up the name in the phone book, I found fifty-three Magnus Magnussons). Iceland is a kind of conscientious objector to modernity, out of it in all the right ways and priding itself on being a sort of no-man's-land in the middle of nowhere (and nowhen), a quiet, neutral zone far from superpower rivalries.

Midway between Moscow and Manhattan, halfway between medievalism and modernity, it had its two moments of ambiguous fame in 1972, when it was the site of the Boris Spassky-Bobby Fischer chess championship, and in 1986, when it was the safe

house where Reagan and Gorbachev met and almost abandoned nuclear weapons. The miracle of Iceland is not just that, as Auden wrote, "any average educated person one meets can turn out competent verse" (and a kitchen maid he met gave "an excellent criticism of a medieval saga") but that the verse itself is devilishly complex. That tangled, palindromic, old-fashioned kind of rhyme has become almost a model for the country.

Now, though, increasingly that legacy is threatened. Scarcely a century ago only five percent of Icelanders lived in towns; today the figure is more than eighty percent. For almost nine centuries the population seemed scarcely to rise (it hit six figures only in this century); and by one account, as recently as 1806 there were only three hundred citizens in Reykjavik, of whom twenty-seven were in jail for public drunkenness. Today, however, 145,000 of the country's 259,600 people live in or around the suburb-sprouting capital. And the single fact of TV alone has inevitably cast a shadow over a world in which lighthouse keepers read sagas to fishing fleets and families waxed Homeric in the dark. Although the government has worked overtime to protect its culture (hence the longtime ban on Thursday TV, and no broadcasting in the month of July), its efforts have often been in vain: Iceland (which seems to lead the world in leading the world in categories) now boasts the highest number of VCRs per household in the world. In the Westman Islands, the rock formation that used to be called Cleopatra is now known by some as Marge Simpson, and the fishing crates nearby are decorated with portraits of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Even young couples, in between talking of their holidays in Spain and their dreams of seeing the Pyramids, will tell you that purity is to be found now only in the countryside; that Reykjavik is dangerous and full of drugs; that people use the word *cassette* instead of its Icelandic equivalent.

Iceland is also more and more full of foreign faces and less

militantly blond than even a few years ago. There is a Thai restaurant now in Reykjavik and a Thai snack bar (complete with a Buddha and a sign for Coca-Cola in Thai). There are Somalian refugees, adopted kids from Sri Lanka, and even immigrants from North Africa (whose children must—by law—be called Bjorn and Gudrun). In one factory alone there are ten "mail order brides," three of them cousins from the Philippines. None of this would seem exceptional except in a country where, until recently, many people could hardly imagine Somalia or Sri Lanka or even California. When I was here in 1987, I found myself an object of dark fascination to people who could hardly tell an Indian from an Indianan. Now, when I went to restaurants, I was greeted with a polite, unsurprised *Godan dag* in Icelandic.

A middle-aged matron invited me one night into her solemn, sepulchral parlor. The first things I saw when I entered were a book on the Gestapo and a picture of a sea blue sprite hiding inside a waterfall. Her grandchildren came out to stare at me, and when I explained that I was from India, they confessed they did not know if that was near Pluto or Neptune. Then I was asked what kind of music I would like to hear. Icelandic, I replied, and on came a blast of local heavy metal.

There is, in fact, a deafening strain of rock and roll in Iceland, and it is the voice of kids banging their fists against the narrow limits of their culture. With so few people in so vast a space, both elements are intensified, extreme: "Wild" applies as much to society as to nature here. Iceland, then, is an inspired setting for the Hard Rock Cafe. It is not just that the island used to have the two largest discos in Europe; or that its most famous recent export is the eccentric dance band the Sugarcubes ("I'd never been in a skyscraper place before," said their lead singer recently about her first trip to Manhattan); or even that Amina, the belle of Carthage, was recently performing there. It is, rather, that rock and roll is an

almost primal statement of rebellion here, a spirit of release. It is the way the young advertise their impatience with the old ways and their hunger for the new. Garage bands are sizzling in Reykjavík, and local magazines are full of articles on such local heroes as Deep Jimi & the Zep Creams. The radio was blasting "Leader of the Pack" when I drove one night to Kringlan, the glittery new yuppie mall where the Hard Rock is situated and inside which blonds in dark glasses and boys in ties were clapping along to "The Wall" and shouting out, in English, "Unbelievable!" and "Give me five!"

It is easy to feel, in Iceland, that one is caught up in some homemade Arctic version of *American Graffiti*. The first time I visited the country, I could not believe the "cruising" rituals that filled even the tiniest places on every weekend night. In the small northern town of Akureyri, I watched a whole procession of Pontiacs, Range Rovers, and Porsches circling around and around the tiny central square until 4 A.M., teenagers hanging out of their windows, motorcycle gangs (called Sniglar, or Snails) revving up along the sidewalks, twelve-year-old boys crying out *Gledileg Jól* (Merry Christmas) in the golden evening light. But this was in the middle of the saturnalian summer, when everything is topsy-turvy—golf tournaments start at midnight, and three-year-old toddlers caper around till one in the morning each night (or one at night each morning). This is the time of midsummer madness, when people believe that rolling naked in the dew will cure you of nineteen separate ailments and that you will be granted a wish if you walk naked in the grass or cross seven fences, collecting a flower at each one.

When I returned to Iceland in the dark, though, I found that the same furious rites were taking place even in the freezing cold: bodies jamming the narrow streets of Reykjavík, "Jumping Jack Flash" pouring out their windows, the streets packed at 2 A.M.,

cars burning rubber in the parking lots. Reykjavík on a Saturday night is a reeling madhouse of people puking, people barking, people lying on the street, beautiful faces shining with illicit glee.

Sex? asked Auden of himself in *Letters from Iceland*. "Uninhibited." And that was fifty-five years ago! Iceland discos, it seems safe to say, are not for the faint of heart. "I started smoking when I was ten, gave up when I was eleven, started again when I was twelve," a hard-drinking girl of nineteen told me, while her friend started raving about her holiday in Bulgaria. Around us, various boys were burping, dancing on the table, and pursuing rites of courtship in which solicitations came well before introductions. "These men do not have any behavior," a young Danish boy standing near me remarked. "They are not even having a funny time." Later, I found there was a subtext to his complaint. "I went with four girls to the Moulin Rouge," he reported, "and all the men were blinking at me." After the discos close at 3 A.M., anyone who is not in somebody else's arms (and even some who are) staggers off to swim naked in one of the city's open-air pools.

Still, for all these odd eruptions there is a kind of innocence in Iceland—an innocence almost betrayed by that longing for sophistication—and it is one of those places that is difficult to dislike. Even now it seems to belong as much to Hans Christian Andersen as to Tolkien, and Peer Gynt's angels are as much in evidence as Axl Rose's. The most elegant hotel in Reykjavík puts a single lighted candle on its reception desk at nightfall. The waitress at the Shanghai restaurant is a classic Nordic beauty, with long Godiva tresses falling over her Chinese page boy suit. ("The good children do get ice cream as dessert," promises the menu, "with regards from Shanghai.") The telephone numbers here generally have only five digits, and a child's painting of a rainbow that I saw in the National Art Gallery had only four (not very vibrant)

colors. Sometimes you're walking down the main street in the capital and, out of nowhere, you come across a statue of a bear, dukes up, above the legend BERLIN 2,380 KM. Everything's out of context here because there simply is no context.

Much of Iceland still has the phlegmatic, Spartan style of the laconic north. The best hotels in Reykjavík offer little more than a bed, perhaps a TV, and a Bible in Icelandic (with separate New Testament in German, French, and English); in rural areas, visitors generally stay in boarding schools. The museum in Akranes, the finest I saw in the country, offers a dentist's drill. On holidays, couples in cocktail dresses and suits munch on sheep's heads, ram's testicles, reindeer, and ptarmigan; Auden and MacNeice gnawed less happily on "half-dry, half-rotten shark." One Westman Islander told me that during the terrible volcanic eruption of 1973, he went with his grandmother to the harbor just in time to see the last fishing boat fleeing to the mainland. "Oh, well," the grandmother said as lava poured toward her, burying five hundred houses, "the last boat's gone. Let's go home and have a coffee."

Iceland has yet to lose this never-never quality. It is a cozy, friendly, Christmas tree kind of place: Even the chic black-leather girls who come into the cafés on Saturday afternoon are carrying bundles of babyhood in their arms. My old friend Kristin, now studying African dance, told me eagerly about her nine-year-old daughter's class in karate and how both of them kept strong with regular doses of "fish oil" (Icelanders, by some counts, are the longest-living people in the world). "Families are so important here," I said. She looked surprised. "They are not everywhere?"

And somehow, in the windswept silences so bare and broad that the mind takes flight, the close-knit purity of the people can work a curious kind of magic. Chill Lutheran bells awakened me

one ringing Sunday morning, and I went out into the quiet, rain-swept streets, empty save for a few children, the smell of fresh baked bread, and an old crone in earflaps delivering the *Morgunbladid*. From inside the most modern church in town, I heard choirs singing hallelujahs in the cool, severely tall, white nave. Hallgrímskirkja has the whitest, chastest interior I have ever seen, snowcapped islands misty through the windows behind its altar's cross. Across the street is the Einar Jónsson House, which opens up two afternoons a week to disclose the late artist's mythopoeic sculptures and Blakean visions of angels and ascents to heaven, all white but muscular and rugged.

And in the sepulchral silence and unearthly calm of Iceland, the religious impulse has room to stretch out and take wing and pick up light. The only thing I could find inside the reading pocket on an Icelandair domestic flight was a copy of the New Testament, and Van Morrison was singing "Whenever God Shines His Light" above the sober businessmen's breakfast at the Hotel Holt. The figure of Jesus in the Skálholt Church is one of the most haunting apparitions I have ever seen, a dim blue figure, hardly corporeal, faint as a half-remembered dream, emerging from the wall to look out upon an ice blue stained-glass window. One of my favorite Reykjavík restaurants is a medieval underground cavern lit entirely by candles, its waiters wearing friars' robes as they serve you panfried puffin in the dark. If countries were writers, Iceland would, I think, be Peter Matthiessen (whose very name and face suggest the elemental north): craggy, weathered, close to earth and sea, yet lit up from within by a high, ascetic charge. As I sailed through large caves near the Westman Islands, the ship's captain stopped the vessel, got out a flute, and started playing Bach toccatas and "Amazing Grace." The high, angelic sounds echoed around and around the empty space.

Sometimes, I knew, the strangeness I found in Iceland existed only in my head. The flaxen-haired girls I took to be paragons of Icelandic purity turned out to be from Iowa or Essex. I did, finally, spot a dog one day, though whether he had—by law—an Icelandic name, I do not know. Every day in the lobby of my hotel I saw an old man marching up and down in red ceremonial costume, carrying a huge bell. When I asked an Icelandic friend what arcane custom he embodied, she, not surprisingly, shrugged—unaware that he was in fact the town crier of Lambeth, in London, sent here by the British Department of Trade and Industry.

Other times, though, I knew there was something going on in the chilly, haunted silences. After awhile the preternatural stillness of the treeless wastes can get to you and inside you, and you can feel a Brontëan wildness in the soil. With its uncommonly beautiful people, its island curiosity, its closeness to traditions and tales, Iceland resembles nowhere so much as Java, its spellbound air charged with an imminence of spirits. Cold winds whistle through rows of white crosses on the black moor outside Akranes. The distinctive feature of the Iclander, for Sir Richard Burton, was “the eye, dark and cold as a pebble—a mesmerist would despair at the first sight.” From my bed at night I could see nothing but a white cross shining in the dark.

Something in Iceland arouses the most passionate feelings in me; it picks me up and will not let me go. On my first trip to the island, disoriented by the never-ending light, I stayed awake all night in my hotel uncharacteristically writing poems. But this time too, in the emptiness and dark, I could not sleep and found myself alone at night with feelings I could not scan, the wind so fierce outside my window it sounded like the sea. Sometimes it feels as if the forty miles or so that people can see across the glassy air here they can also see inside themselves; as if, in this penetrating emptiness, you are thrown down and down some inner well.

Sometimes it feels as if the land itself almost invites you to see in its changing needs a reflection of your own, and in the turning of the seasons, some deeper, inner shift from light to dark.

“Especially at this time of year, people have many different feelings here,” a car mechanic named Olafur explained to me one night. “In the dark they have much time to think of God—and of other things in that direction.”

1992

ICELAND'S HOT SPRINGS

The best of the country's famous hot spots



It's the rare traveler who, upon arriving in this volcanic hotspot on the edge of the Arctic Circle, isn't moved by the landscape's raw, unearthly beauty. Best of all? You can experience it while taking a soak.

While the majority of this unspoiled country consists of ice fields and tundra, there are in fact some 250 geothermal areas producing more than eight hundred steam-billowing hot springs. Most visitors make the capital city of Reykjavík their home base and take charter buses to all other less-inhabited points throughout the country. There is only one major commercial road, Ringroad, which circumnavigates the island. Fortunately, long-distance charter buses and four-by-fours are common, and services can be arranged through hotel concierges in the city. One of the largest bus organizations, BSÍ, is based in Reykjavík and publishes a thorough timetable of departures and schedules for several outfitters that run countrywide explorations (bsi.is). Here are the hot spots most worth a visit.

BLUE LAGOON

Smack in the center of the lava field, the Blue Lagoon's unreal blue waters—runoff from a nearby geothermal power plant—attract locals and visitors alike. The silica-laden liquid, which ranges from 95 to 105 degrees, flows through a spacious main pool and three smaller hot tubs. The modernized lagoon, which underwent a facelift in the 1990s, now includes a cavelike sauna

carved into the surrounding lava, changing facilities, spa treatments, and a restaurant and snack bar to keep soakers blissfully satisfied. Situated south of the Keflavík Airport, near Grindavík, the Blue Lagoon is serviced by a public van that makes pickups from hotels throughout the capital city (354-420-8800; bluelagoon.com).

LAUGAR

Just north of the Snæfellsnes peninsula in Western Iceland, on the Hvammsfjörður fjord, the town of Laugar is punctuated by several old baths, geothermal springs, and hiking trails. Here, look for remnants of the historical bathing pool used by Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, a figure from Icelandic sagas. During the summer months, a hotel and small folk museum operate out of an old school building. It's also worth a visit to the Sælíngsdalur Valley, whose springs once served as a stopping point for travelers making the journey back and forth from the Westfjords.

LANDMANNALAUGAR

Located near the outskirts of the Torfajökull volcanic district in the south, Landmannalaugar, which sits nearly two thousand feet above sea level, is one of Iceland's largest geothermal fields. Black lava fields and towering rhyolite peaks mark this desertlike landscape. Landmannalaugar anchors the Fjallabak Nature Reserve (english.ust.is), whose activities include hiking, swimming, and fishing for trout. Open daily, a soak in Landmannalaugar's simmering mineral-rich water is distinguished by its unusual flow, the result of a mixture of subterranean volcanic activity and the glacier-fed frozen waters on the surface. Midsummer draws the largest crowds, who flock to the springs for their purported healing properties.