

# General Information about Iceland

Iceland is located in the North Atlantic Ocean, between the rest of Europe towards east and Greenland towards west. It is the second largest island in Europe, with an area of about 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Its location on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge makes Iceland volcanically and geologically active and the volcanism has defined Icelandic landscapes in various ways with different types of volcanoes, lava plates, glacial rivers, glaciers and sand fields. The frequent volcanic activity makes Icelandic landscapes change rapidly. A new island, Surtsey, was formed south of the mainland in 1963, and a major eruption took place in 1973 when a volcano on the island Heimaey spilled lava into the town of Vestmannaeyjar. A major eruption took place in spring 2010 in a volcano under the glacier Eyjafjallajökull in the south of Iceland, to the west from Mýrdalsjökull (see map).

About 75% of Iceland is more than 200 meters high with most of the land being high plateaus and mountains. Its highest peak, Hvannadalshnúkur, rises to 2,110 m. Glaciers cover 11,200 km<sup>2</sup>, including Vatnajökull the largest glacier in Europe, while suitable agricultural land is about 1,400 km<sup>2</sup>. Only the coastline is inhabited, and there are no inhabitants in the central highlands. The population of Iceland is just over 300 000 (319.575 January 1, 2012) with more than 60% of the population, approximately 200 000 people living in the capital area.

## History – The republic of Iceland

Iceland was settled by Nordic people in the years around 874 AD and around 930 the Icelandic settlers founded one of the world's first republican government. The Old Commonwealth Age, described in the classic Icelandic Sagas, lasted until 1262, when Iceland lost its independence. In 1918 it regained its independence and in 1944 the present republic was founded. Iceland has a written constitution and a parliamentary form of government. The president is elected by direct popular vote for a term of four years, with no term limit. The president's role is mostly ceremonial. Most executive power rests with the Government. Althingi is a legislative body of 63 members from six districts elected for a term of four years by popular vote. A cabinet of ministers stays in power until the next general election or a new government is formed. There are currently nine ministers and one prime minister. The ministers sit in Althingi, but if they have not been elected, they do not have the right to vote in parliament.

According to Iceland's constitution, ratified in 1944, the government is divided into 3 branches; the legislative, the judicial, and the executive branches. Althingi, where laws are made and amended, is the legislative branch. Executive branches, such as the Ministries, Directorates and various other government agencies, carry out laws. Judicial power lies with the Supreme Court and the district courts.

## The Mother Tongue

**The origin of the Icelandic language.** Iceland was settled in the period A.D. 870-930. Most of the settlers came from Norway, especially Western Norway, a few of them from Sweden and some from the British Isles, including Ireland. The language, which came to prevail in Iceland, was that of the people of Western Norway. It is commonly agreed that a considerable part of the immigrants was of Celtic stock (estimates, based partly on physical-anthropological studies, vary from 10 to 30 percent). However, the Icelandic language shows only insignificant traces of Celtic influence. The only evidence is a few words of Celtic origin and a few personal names and place-names. Icelandic and Norwegian did not become markedly different until the fourteenth century. From then onwards the two languages became increasingly different. This was for the most part due to changes in the Norwegian language, while Icelandic resisted change, no doubt thanks in part to the rich Icelandic literature of the 12th and following centuries. Resistance to change is one of the characteristics of the Icelandic language, which explains the fact that a twelfth-century text is still easy to read for a modern Icelander. However, Icelandic has undergone considerable change in its phonetics. Another characteristic of the language is its uniformity, i.e. absence of dialects.

**Vocabulary innovations.** In the late eighteenth century, language purism started to gain noticeable ground in Iceland and since the early nineteenth century, language purism has been the linguistic policy in the country. Instead of adopting foreign words for new concepts, new words (neologisms) are coined or old words revived and given a new meaning. As examples may be mentioned sími for telephone, tolva for computer, thota for jet, hljódfar for supersonic and geimfar for spacecraft. The Icelandic language committee is an advisory institution which is to "guide government agencies and the general public in matters of language on a scholarly basis."

**Icelandic in other countries.** There are Icelandic language communities in North America. They came into

being because of emigration from Iceland to Canada and the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century's. The earliest of these settlements was established in Utah in 1855, but it was around 1870 that continuous emigration began. In 1870, a small Icelandic settlement was established on Washington Island in Lake Michigan. Later, an Icelandic settlement arose in North Dakota. In 1875, the first Icelandic settlement was established in Canada, on the Western shore of Lake Winnipeg ("New Iceland"). Such settlements arose also in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Until the end of the 20th century, tens of thousands of people in these areas still could speak the Icelandic language.

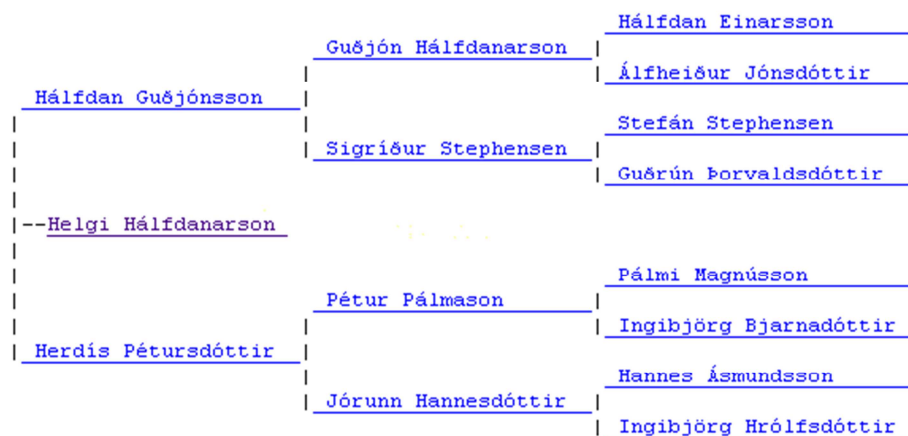
**The Icelandic alphabet.** The alphabet of the Icelandic language is the same as that of English, with the following exceptions:

- (a) Icelandic has four letters, which are not used in English: Ð, ð (similar to th in gather), Þ, þ (similar to th in thirsty), Æ, æ (like i in like) and Ö, ö (similar to u in fur);
- (b) The letters c, q, w and z are used only in marginal cases;
- (c) Except for æ and ö, each vowel letter appears in two forms, with or without an accent mark: a, á, e, é, i, í, o, ó, u, ú and y, ý.

However, the accent mark does not mean that the vowel is stressed, but marks it as different in quality from the unaccented vowel.

## Icelandic names

Most Icelanders still follow the ancient tradition of deriving their last name from the first name of their father. Study the structure below:



Helgi Hálfðanarson is son of Hálfðan Guðjónsson and Herdís Pétursdóttir. Marrying Hálfðan, Herdís did not take his last name, Guðjónsson, she continued to be Pétursdóttir, i.e. daughter of Pétur Pálmason (dóttir = daughter). The same goes for her mother, Jórunn Hannesdóttir, though marrying Pétur, she continued to be Hannesdóttir.

OK, no rules without exception: A limited number of Icelanders do have family names.

**Remember: Icelanders are always referred to by their given name**, not by their surname which is never used alone

Trying to find someone in the Icelandic telephone catalogue? It's ordered by the given names!

## Courses

Teaching language with the aid of computers has become more common in the last few decades. This online Icelandic course aims to create an interesting, entertaining and useful learning environment that utilizes the latest theories in the pedagogy of languages and the best technology available.

<http://icelandic.hi.is/>

## Electronic dictionaries:

Icelandic – English dictionary

<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/IcelOnline/Search.TEId.html>

FREELANG Icelandic-English and English-Icelandic online dictionary

<http://www.freelang.net/online/icelandic.php>

## **Research**

The Icelandic system of research and development is a multilevel system with a dispersed decision-making structure. It has a number of fully-fledged research institutions, essential funds and a strong force of well-trained scientists, and covers all major fields in science and technology. Icelandic scientists face a challenging task of maintaining the quality and range of research activities. Concentration of research in key areas is important in order to optimize resources. Science and technology have been divided at an institutional level, reflecting a particular historical development and institutional division of labour.

## **Libraries**

UNU-LRT has a small library containing books on land degradation, ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management. Part of the AUI library is also at Keldnaholt. It contains books and scientific journals on subjects related to agriculture, soils, ecology, etc. The librarian is Guðrún Þórðardóttir, tel. 433 5306, email: [gudrun@lbhi.is](mailto:gudrun@lbhi.is)

**The National and University Library of Iceland is located close to the main building of the University of Iceland.** The library and its branches contain around 1,000,000 volumes of books, journals and other materials. The library houses the largest collection of foreign scholarly works in the country. Gegnir.is is a library system hosting a national catalogue and gives access to information about material in most libraries in Iceland, e.g. college, public, administration, institution, expert, and school libraries at all levels. Copies of Icelandic and international material that can be borrowed for off-site use are found on the 3rd floor of the library main building and its branches in the University of Iceland. Journals for on-site use are available on the 2nd floor of the main building and in the library branches and in the reading hall of the national department on the ground floor. E-resources can be found at hvar.is and on the library's webpage bok.hi.is.

## **Religion and churches**

Close to 80% of all Icelanders officially belong to the state supported national church of Iceland, an **Evangelical Lutheran** denomination (telephone: 528-4000). Services are held every Sunday, at 11:00 in the summer time, in the churches of the capital area. The language is Icelandic, but there are English services at the Church of Hallgrímur, Hallgrímskirkja, at 14:00 on the last Sunday of every month. The majority of Icelanders do not attend church services on a regular basis.

Holy mass is sung in the **Roman Catholic Cathedral** at Hávallagata 14-16, 101 Reykjavík, Mondays to Saturdays at 18:00 and in English every Sunday at 18:00. Their phone number is 552-5388.

The Muslim Association of Iceland is located at Ármúli 38, 3rd floor (entrance from Selmúli), 108 Reykjavík. The President of the Association is Salmann Tamimi, telephone: 895-1967, E-mail: [salmannt@gmail.com](mailto:salmannt@gmail.com) The Islamic Center is open every day after 8 pm.

## **Weather/Climate**

Iceland enjoys a much milder climate than its name and location adjacent to the Arctic Circle would imply. A branch of the Gulf Stream flows along the southern and the western coast greatly moderating the climate. However, this brings mild Atlantic air in contact with colder Arctic air resulting in a climate that is marked by frequent changes in weather and storminess. Furthermore this leads to more rainfall in the southern and western part than in the northern part of the island. The summer tourist season is from late May to early September. During the first half of this period the sun stays above the horizon for almost 24 hours and the interplay of light and shadows on mountains, lava fields and glaciers yield an ever changing landscape. However, even during the middle of summer the sky is frequently cloudy or overcast and the sunshine does not warm the air much. Hence, during daytime the air is usually cool („refreshing” is the local euphemism) and cold during nighttimes.

## **Energy**

Situated on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Iceland is a hot spot of volcanic and geothermal activity. Thirty post-glacial volcanoes have erupted in the past two centuries, and natural hot water supplies much of the population with cheap, pollution-free heating. Geothermal heating of houses began around 1930, and today all of Reykjavik is heated by the Reykjavík Energy district heating system. Throughout Iceland, about 90% of the population now enjoy geothermal heating (not all parts of the country have utilizable hot water resources). The hot water that comes running from the tap (faucet) in houses in Reykjavik comes from Nesjavallavirkjun and **can be up to 80°C thus be very careful when using it**. Rivers are, moreover, harnessed to provide inexpensive hydroelectric power. The electrical current is 220 volts, 50 Hz. If you brought any electrical equipment with you then we advise you to check if it is compatible with the current here in Iceland before use.

## **Economy**

The economy is heavily dependent upon fisheries, which are the nation's major resource and provides about 40% of export earnings of the country. Yet only about 4% of the workforce is active in this sector, but about 70% of the workforce is employed in services, public and other. Agriculture provides about 1.5% of the export earnings and employs about 3.4% of the workforce. The main types of livestock are sheep (450,000), cows and other cattle (65,000), horses (75,000), pigs (4,000) and poultry. Several types of vegetables are cultivated outdoors such as potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbage etc. Production in greenhouses (glasshouses) is extensive in areas with access to geothermal water. Production includes various types of vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers, as well as flowers. Iceland is a member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the European Economic Area (EEA).

## **Currency**

The unit of currency used in Iceland is the krona or abbreviated ISK. All banks can exchange currency, and some shops (especially those catering to tourists) will accept payment in US dollars or Euro. Most shops and businesses accept major credit cards and debit cards so it is not generally necessary to carry much cash. Debit and credit cards are commonly used in Iceland even for quite small transactions. It is best to exchange your money into ISK in Iceland, and exchange any surplus of ISK **before you leave Iceland**, as foreign banks may not deal in ISK. You can exchange your money at the bank in the international airport on arrival and departure, and in all major banks in Iceland.

## **Tax refund**

For goods that you will take with you out of the country you can have 15% tax-free refund for tourists - off a minimum purchase of ISK 4,000 -. Services are not included, nor do food which you consume during your stay or gifts which you tend to leave behind.

### **Three easy steps to shop tax-free:**

#### ***1. Shopping***

Make your purchase where you see the Refund sign and simply ask for a Tax Free form at the register.

#### ***2. Customs verification***

If the refund amount on a single Tax Free form exceeds ISK 5,000 you have to show the goods to customs when leaving the country and verify export with a customs stamp.

This does not apply for woollen goods.

#### ***3. Get your Refund***

##### **Credit card Refund.**

Insert your credit card number on the Tax Free form and mail it in an Iceland Refund envelope for a direct refund to your credit card.

##### **Cash Refund**

Have the cheque refunded in cash by one of our agents where you leave Iceland.

##### **Prepaid Refund**

Get your refund prepaid, before you leave the country, at the malls. Then simply put your forms in the mailbox departure hall in Keflavik airport or mail it from abroad in an Iceland Refund envelope.

## Time

Local time in Iceland is Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) all year round. One hour later than Central European Time during winter but two hours later in the summer time as Iceland does use daylight saving time. When it is noon in Reykjavík during the summer, it is also noon in Accra (Ghana), the time is 13:00 in Windhoek (Namibia), 15:00 in Kampala (Uganda), 17:00 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and 20:00 in Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia).

## Calling someone in Iceland.

To Iceland: + 354 number. In Iceland all phone numbers have seven-digit numbers, both home telephones and cell telephones.

No area codes are necessary, you dial the number directly.

If you are trying to find an Icelandic person in the Icelandic Phone Book, please be aware that names are listed alphabetically by Christian/first name, not family names. If you cannot find the person in the phone book, you can dial 118 for help or go to [ja.is](http://ja.is) on the internet. There you can also find good roadmaps (in Icelandic: kort).

## International calls.

When calling a country outside Iceland, you dial without interruption the international code (00), then the country code, the area code, and finally the number. If you need help in finding a phone number abroad, you can call 114 for information.

## Emergency telephone number

**The emergency telephone number for police, ambulance or fire etc. is 112. Note that phone calls to 112 from coin-operated phones do not require payment.**

## Emergency ward

City Hospital (Landsspítali Háskólasjúkrahús), 24 hrs service, phone. 543 1000.

**Traffic accidents: If a foreign national has a traffic accident while driving in the Reykjavík area, he is urged to contact the police without delay (phone 112 or 569-9000).**

## Embassies

Information on foreign consuls in Iceland may be obtained at the *Ministry for foreign affairs*, 25 Rauðarárstígur, Reykjavík, Phone. 560 9900, see also [http://www.utanrikisraduneyti.is/media/PDF/Diplomatic\\_list\\_2009\\_-\\_des2.pdf](http://www.utanrikisraduneyti.is/media/PDF/Diplomatic_list_2009_-_des2.pdf)

## About Reykjavik

**Reykjavík** is the capital of Iceland and also the country's largest city. The population of Reykjavik is about 200,000 including its suburbs and nearby villages. Reykjavik is spread across a peninsula with a panoramic view of the mountains and the Atlantic Ocean on almost all sides. Reykjavík is believed to be the location of the first permanent settlement in Iceland, which Ingolfur Arnarson is said to have established around 870. There was no urban development in Reykjavik until the 18th century. The city was founded in 1786 as an official trading town and grew steadily over the next decades,

Reykjavik has the best of both worlds: the qualities of a modern, forward-looking society are complemented by a close connection to beautiful and unspoilt nature in the city's vicinity. In the summer, you can sit by the harbour at midnight and watch the sun dip slightly below the horizon before it makes its way up again.

## Bus (Strætó)

The capital area has a bus system (Straeto): most buses run every 15 minutes, and every 30 minutes in the evening and at weekends. Bus information is available at the bus stations at Hlemmur, Laekjartorg, Mjodd and at the Tourist Information Centre, Adalstraeti 2.

A flat fare (ISK 350) is charged on the buses (no change given so exact fare is needed). You may need to change buses: ask for a skiptimidi (transfer ticket) on the first bus and you will not have to pay again on the second bus within a certain time limit (normally 45 min).

We will give you pass for the bus when you arrive, the pass is valid for zone 1 (see map at bus.is).

Further information: <http://www.bus.is/> and fore maps see <http://www.straeto.is/leidakort/>

### **Business Hours**

The opening hours of most businesses are from 9:00 until 17:00.

Shopping hours are generally from 10:00 or 11:00 until 17:00 or 18:00 during the week (Monday to Friday). On Saturdays, many shops are open only for a few hours from 12:00, while some are closed on Saturdays in summer. Most shops are closed on Sundays.

The cheapest groceries stores like Bonus, Krónan and Netto do not open until 12:00 and close at 18:30 except Saturdays and Sundays they close at 18:00

However, shopping malls, supermarkets, some bookstores and various shops catering to tourists have longer opening hours, and are mostly open every day.

Wine, liquor and beer can only be bought at the state liquor outlets called "VÍNBUÐIN" Most liquor stores in Reykjavík are open Mondays to Saturdays from 11 until 18.

### **Pharmacies**

Pharmacies are listed in the telephone directory (yellow pages) under "Apótek" and are normally open: Mon.-Fri. 9:00 -18:00. The opening hours are variable on Sat., however further information can also be obtained by calling 551 8888 or 533 2300.

### **Automatic Teller Machines (ATM) Card**

An ATM card may be the most convenient way to obtain money in most countries. You can use an ATM card to withdraw money from a bank account in your home country.

The money withdrawn will be in Icelandic currency of the country you are in. Check with your home bank to find out what their fees are for foreign withdrawal, as it varies from bank to bank. In Reykjavík there are numerous ATM's (automatic telling machines). Open 24 hours. The unit of currency in Iceland is the króna (IKR) (plural: krónur, usu. abbreviated kr.). Icelandic bank notes are issued in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000 & 5000 kr.

### **Credit Cards**

The major credit cards used in Iceland are VISA and Eurocard/Mastercard but Diners and American Express are also accepted in Iceland. Credit Cards are widely used and accepted throughout the country.

### **Banks and foreign exchange**

Banking hours are Mondays to Fridays, 9:15-16:00. Some shopping malls have longer banking hours.

Money exchange service is provided at the Tourist Information Centre in Bankastræti 2 Monday–Saturday from 09.00–17:00, closed on Sundays.

### **Websites for further information**

[http://www.whatson.is/whats\\_on/](http://www.whatson.is/whats_on/)

<http://www.visitreykjavik.is/>

<http://www.iceland.com/>

[http://www.thjodmenning.is/index\\_english.htm](http://www.thjodmenning.is/index_english.htm)