

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 km². 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. Among a few well known major eruptions in recent times are for example the eruption that formed the island Surtsey, south of the mainland in 1963, the eruption in 1973 when a volcano on the island Heimaey spilled lava into the town of Vestmannaeyjar and the eruption in the spring of 2010 in a volcano under the glacier Eyjafjallajökull in the south of Iceland, which caused enormous disruption to air travel across Europe.

About 75% of Iceland is more than 200 meters high with most of the land being high plateaus and mountains, often referred to as the highlands. Its highest peak, Hvannadalshnúkur, rises to 2,110 m. Glaciers cover 11,200 km², including Vatnajökull the largest glacier in Europe, while suitable agricultural land is about 1,400 km². Only the coastline is inhabited, and there are no inhabitants in the central highlands. The population of Iceland is just under 340,000 with more than 60% of the population, about 215,000 people living in the greater 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 governments. 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 (the parliament) 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 ten 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 state power 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 AD 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 12th century text is still easy to read for a modern Icelanders. 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 18th century, language purism started to gain noticeable ground in Iceland and since the early 19th 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. A few examples are: *sími* for telephone, *tölva* for computer, *þota* for jet, and *þyrlla* for helicopter. 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."

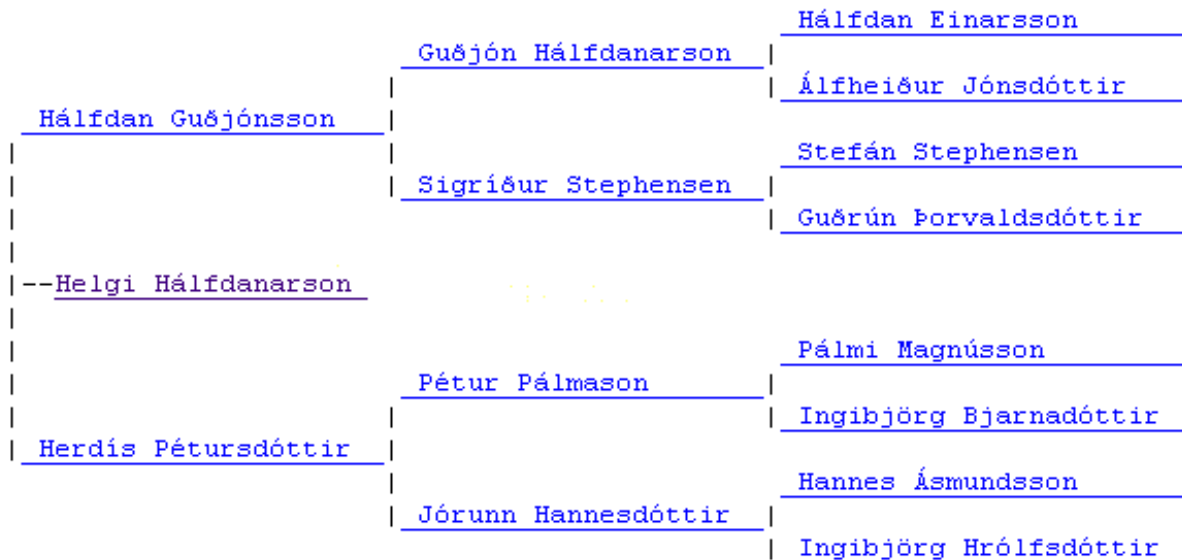
Icelandic in other countries. There are Icelandic language communities in North America. They came into being because of emigration from Iceland to Canada and the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century's. The earliest of these settlements was established 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:
 - a. Ð, ð (similar to th in gather),
 - b. Þ, þ (similar to th in thirsty),
 - c. Æ, æ (like i in like) and,
 - d. 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 difference 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 (and now becoming popular: the first name of your father **and** your mother), as shown 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 names, not by their surnames which are 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, e-mail: guðrun@lbhi.is. She has one workday at Keldnaholt; on Wednesdays.

The National and University Library of Iceland (*Þjóðarbókhlaðan*) 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 www.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 churches in 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 Hávallahgata 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 (www.islam.is). The President of the Association is Salmann Tamimi, telephone: 895-1967, E-mail: salmannt@gmail.com. Open every day from 20:00. There is another

association: The Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland, Skútuvogi 1H (2nd floor), 104 Reykjavík (<http://www.icci.is/>).

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 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 night-time.

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**. Moreover, rivers are 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 has been the nation’s major resource and has provided about 40% of export earnings of the country. Yet only about 6% of the workforce is active in this sector, while about 70% of the workforce are employed in commerce and public services. Tourism has been rapidly growing the past years into the most valuable industry in Iceland and now provides Iceland with more of its foreign exchange earnings than the fisheries. 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 (or kr. in Icelandic). All banks can exchange foreign currency, and some shops (especially those catering 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 upon arrival and departure, and in all major banks in Iceland.

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 doesn't use daylight saving time.

Calling someone in Iceland

To Iceland: The country code is (+) 354. In Iceland all phone numbers have seven-digit numbers, both landline telephones and cell phones. No area codes are used, you dial the number directly.

Most Icelanders' and Icelandic companies' phone numbers are registered online on the website www.en.ja.is (for the English site). There you can also find good roadmaps of Iceland and directions.

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.

Emergency telephone number

The emergency telephone number for police, ambulance or fire etc. is 112. Note that phone calls to 112 do not require payment.

Emergency ward

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

Traffic accidents: If a foreign national has a traffic accident while driving in the Reykjavík area, he/she is urged to contact the police without delay (phone 112 or 444 1000).

Embassies

Information on foreign consuls in Iceland may be obtained at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 25 Rauðarárstígur, Reykjavík, Phone: 545 9900, see also <https://www.government.is/ministries/ministry-for-foreign-affairs/>

About Reykjavik

Reykjavík is the capital of Iceland and also the country's largest city. The population of Reykjavik is just over 200,000 including its suburbs and nearby municipalities (the Greater Reykjavik Area). 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 Ingólfur Arnarson and his wife Hallgerður Fróðadóttir are 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 is complemented by a close connection to beautiful and unspoiled nature in the city's vicinity. In the summer, around solstice, 21 June, 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 (Straeto)

The capital area has a bus system (Straeto): most buses run every 10 or 15 minutes, and every 30 minutes in the evening and in weekends. Bus information is best to access online at: www.bus.is but is also available in print at bus centrals such as Mjodd, and at the Tourist Information Centre, Tjarnargata 11 (by the City Hall), in central Reykjavik. You can also access good information on the bus's travels in the app "Straeto" which can be downloaded from app store or play store.

A flat fare (ISK 460) is charged on the buses (no change given so exact fare is needed or loose the change). 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 45-75 min).

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 weekdays (Monday to Friday). On Saturdays, many shops are open only for a few hours from 10 or 11:00, while some are closed on Saturdays in the summer (June, July and August). Most shops are closed on Sundays. The exceptions are the two largest shopping malls in the capital area, Kringlan in Reykjavik and Smáralind in Kópavogur; they are both open from 10:00 on Saturdays and 13:00 on Sundays until 18:00. The same goes for shops in central Reykjavik that cater tourists, like bookstores, souvenir shops, etc.

The cheapest supermarket, *Bónus*, is open on Monday to Thursdays from 11:00 to 18:30. On Fridays it's open from 10:00 until 19:30. In the weekend, *Bónus* closes both days at 18:00 and opens 10:00 on Saturdays and 12:00 on Sundays. *Nettó* is a supermarket in Mjódd, which is open 24 hours. A supermarket in Hamraborg, *Krónan*, is open from 10:00 to 21:00. In the mini-market, *Krambúðin*, you can find most food items but it is quite expensive compared to the big supermarkets. It's open from 08:00 during weekdays and from 09:00 in the weekend until 23:30 all week.

Wine, liquor and beer can only be bought at the state liquor outlets called "*Vínbúðin*". Most liquor stores in Reykjavík are open Mondays to Saturdays from 11 until 18. The "beer" you can buy in supermarkets is light beer (2,25% alcohol).

Pharmacies

Pharmacies are called "Apótek" in Icelandic and are normally open: Mon-Fri 9:00-18:00, although some pharmacies have longer opening hours and close at midnight. The opening hours vary on Saturdays and further information can be obtained by calling 533 2300.

Automatic Teller Machines (ATM) Card

An ATM card may be the most convenient way to obtain money in most countries. While you are in Iceland, you can use an ATM card to withdraw money from a bank account in your home country. The money withdrawn in Iceland is in Icelandic krona (ISK) (plural: krónur, in Icelandic usually abbreviated kr.). 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. Icelandic bank notes are issued in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000 & 10 000 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, 9:00-16:00. Kringlan shopping mall have longer banking hours (open Saturdays). Money exchange service is provided in banks and at the Tourist Information Centre in Bankastræti 2 Monday–Saturday from 09.00–17:00, closed on Sundays.

Feasts/Holidays in Iceland

New Year's Day

Easter

Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday.

First Day of Summer

In the old days, the Icelanders divided the year into only two seasons, winter and summer. After the long winter they still celebrate this first day of "summer" with parades, sporting events and organized entertainment, held in various places around Iceland. It is always on a Thursday during the period 19 to 25 April.

Labour Day 1 May

Ascension Day

Whitsun and Whit-Monday

Seven weeks after Easter.

Sjómannadagur or Seamen's/Fishermen's Day

First Sunday in June. This holiday is marked by festivities such as parades, rowing and swimming races, outdoor exhibitions, tugs of war, and sometimes sea rescue competitions.

Icelandic Independence Day (17 June)

In 1944 Iceland declared independence from the Kingdom of Denmark. June 17th was chosen as the official holiday because it was the birthday of Jón Sigurðsson, who is regarded as Iceland's leader in the campaign for independence in the 19th century. The greatest celebrations are held in Reykjavík with parades, street theatres, sideshows and dancing, but throughout the country the day is filled with picnics and various organized festivities as well.

Verslunarmannahelgi

First Monday in August is a holiday. During the weekend before this Monday, Icelanders by the thousands take to their cars and head out of town to camp in the wilderness or join in one of the many organized events that are held throughout the country. These range from family-style gatherings to outdoor rock festivals.

Reykjavík Cultural Night

On this enchanted day and evening, museums, galleries, churches, cafes, restaurants, stores and other establishments in downtown Reykjavík stay open into the night and present a variety of exhibitions, concerts, performances, theatre and other cultural events. Choice selections of food and drink are served, and usually the evening is concluded with a rock concert in the centre of Reykjavik as well as a firework display at the harbour Miðbakkinn.

Christmas

Christmas Eve Day, Christmas Day, Second Christmas Day (Boxing Day).

New Year's Eve

Websites for further information

http://www.whatson.is/whats_on/

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

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