

# 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, 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. About 75% of the land 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 only covers 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 about 316,000 (April 1, 2008 estimate) with more than 60% of the population, or 198,594 people living in the capital area.

## **History- The republic of Iceland**

Iceland was settled by Nordic people in the years around 874 AD and in about 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 4 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 6 districts elected for a term of 4 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 11 ministers and 1 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.

## **Administration**

Ministries, committees and government institutions are the administration. The administrative authorities make various decisions regarding the rights and obligations of individuals. In order to protect the rights of individuals there are various laws that the administration must adhere to.

## **The Mother Tongue**

Icelandic is the native tongue of Iceland. It belongs, along with Norwegian and Faeroese, to the West Scandinavian branch of the North Germanic family of languages. Morphologically it has remained the most conservative of the Scandinavian languages, retaining, for example, three genders and a full system of case endings for nouns and adjectives. It is the same language spoken by the original Norse settlers from western Norway in the ninth and tenth centuries with, of course, the addition of modern vocabulary.

## **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 labor.

## **Religion**

More than 80% of all Icelanders officially belong to the state supported national church of Iceland, an Evangelical Lutheran denomination. However, many Icelanders do not attend church services on a regular basis.

## **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 Reykjavik 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 crane in houses in Reykjavik comes from Nesjavallavirkjun and can be up to 80°C so people should be very careful when using it. Rivers are, moreover, harnessed to provide inexpensive hydroelectric power. The electrical current is 220 volts, 50 Hz.

## **Economy**

The economy is heavily dependent upon fisheries, which are the nation's major resource, and almost 60% of all exports are made up of seafood products. Yet only a small proportion of the workforce is active in this sector (5% in fishing, 6.2% in fish processing), and over 50% of the workforce is employed in services, public and other.

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 „crown,“ 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 reexchange any surplus before you leave, as foreign banks may not deal in ISK. You can exchange your money at the bank at the airport on arrival and departure and in all major banks.

### **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.

### **International dialling codes**

To Iceland: + 354 and number from Iceland: 00 + country code and number

### **Emergency telephone number**

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

### **About Reykjavik**

It's been called Europe's hottest capital. Slick advertising campaigns have championed the city's famed nightlife. But there is more to Reykjavik than pubs and clubs. Reykjavik held the prestigious title European City of Culture in the year 2000; a welcome recognition of the energetic and colorful cultural life of the capital.

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. The population of the city 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. 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.

### **Pharmacies**

Pharmacies are listed in the telephone directory (yellow pages) under "Apótek" and are normally open: Mon.-Fri. 9:00 -18:00 and Sat. 9:00 - 16:00.

### **Business Hours**

The opening hours of most businesses are from 9:00 until 17:00. Some institutions and companies change their work hours to 8:00 to 16:00 in the summer months. Shopping hours are generally from 9:00 or 10:00 until 17:00 or 18:00 during the week (Monday to Friday). On Saturdays, many shops are open only for a few hours from 10:00, while some are closed on Saturdays in summer. Most shops are closed on Sundays.

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"

### **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.

## **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**

Banking hours are Monday - Friday, 9:15-16:00. Some shopping malls have longer banking hours.

## **About Driving in Iceland**

All mountain roads and roads in the interior of Iceland have a surface of loose gravel. The same applies to large sections of the national highway, which also has long stretches of asphalt.

The surface on the gravel roads is often loose, especially along the sides of the roads, so one should drive carefully and slow down whenever approaching an oncoming car.

In Iceland all driving off roads or marked tracks is forbidden. Speed Limits: Most country roads are unmade and not suitable for fast driving. The general speed limit is 50 km/h in urban areas, 80 km/h on gravel roads in rural areas, and 90 km/h on asphalt roads.

Right turn on a red light: It is not allowed according to Icelandic driving rules to take a right turn on red light.

Blind Spots: Blind spots at the top of hills are common and not always marked. They are, however usually marked with a "danger ahead" sign and the word BLINDHÆÐ below.

Bridges: Bridges usually only allow one lane of traffic. Many unbridged rivers appear quite safe at first sight but can prove extremely difficult once the crossing has been embarked on.

Check carefully before fording the river, especially if there are no accompanying vehicles.

Headlights: One is obliged by law to use headlights at all times day and night.

Safety-Belts: Passengers in the front and back seats of an automobile are required by law use safety-belts.

See also <http://www.us.is/scripts/WebObjects.dll/US.woa/swdocument/742/English.pdf> for further information.