

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

How to Plan the Perfect Trip to Reykjavik, Iceland

Here's everything you need to know to plan a trip to Reykjavik.

By [Lydia Mansel](#) | Published on November 30, 2024



Fireworks at night in Reykjavik, Iceland.
Credit: Arctic-Images/Getty Images

Iceland is synonymous with adventure and unforgettable views. Travelers come from all over the world to drive the Golden Circle, soak in the hot springs, and get a glimpse of the country's majestic volcanic landscape. Though there are endless incredible places to see and things to do in Iceland, visitors should make it a point to spend at least a couple of days exploring the capital city.

A hub of culture and design, a [UNESCO City of Literature](#), and a popular layover stop for those traveling between North America and Europe, Reykjavik has more than a handful of reasons to visit. "Reykjavik is a small city compared to other capitals in the world," says Steinunn Guðbjörnsdóttir, [Explore Worldwide's](#) Iceland tour director — but, she adds, it's filled with

“colorful houses, friendly inhabitants, and great food.” Dan Petursson, the owner of [Wake Up Reykjavik](#), also references the city’s culinary scene as a main draw, sharing that “there are so many great coffee shops, bars, and restaurants” — a few of which he highlights below.

Other items to add to your Reykjavik travel schedule? Spotting the northern lights and participating in the famous New Year’s Eve celebrations. To ring in the new year, Icelanders gather around neighborhood bonfires, set off fireworks, and take full advantage of the nightlife in Reykjavik (though there will be a moment of calmness from 10:30 to 11:30 p.m. as everyone watches the TV show *Áramótaskaupið*).

Whether you’re hoping to welcome 2025 in Reykjavik or visit a little later in the year, here’s everything to know to plan a trip.

Best Hotels



Luxurious comfort from The Reykjavik EDITION's rooms.
Credit: Nikolas Koenig/Courtesy of The Reykjavik EDITION

The Reykjavik Edition

Travelers seeking a modern luxury property will appreciate [The Reykjavik Edition](#), which Petursson says has “great service with awesome views of the water.” Along with plenty of five-star amenities — including a full-service spa — the hotel boasts an unbeatable location within walking distance of excellent shopping and the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre.

Hotel Borg

History meets classic luxury at [Hotel Borg](#). The property comes recommended by Guðbjörnsdóttir, who notes the “historic art deco hotel is located in downtown Reykjavik next to parliament and the cathedral.” Room categories range from singles to the two-floor tower suite outfitted with panoramic views.

Hotel Kriunes

“If you prefer to be out in nature but still within the capital area,” says Guðbjörnsdóttir, book a room at [Hotel Kriunes](#). She describes it as a “relaxing, family-owned, and friendly hotel with a homely atmosphere and exceptional mountain view overlooking the lake.”

Room With a View

Petursson says [Room With a View](#) is a great option if you’re searching for something budget-friendly but still centrally located. The room categories provide slightly more variation than your typical hotel — you can book a triple or even a quadruple room — so it’s perfect for those traveling in small groups.

Things to Do



Aerial sunset view of Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavik.
Credit: Kevin Pages/iStockphoto/Getty Images

Book a walking food tour.

A walking food tour is at the top of the must-do list for both Guðbjörnsdóttir and Petursson. According to Petursson, who founded [Reykjavik Food Walk](#), this type of activity allows you to “dive into Icelandic food culture” and meet some locals along the way.

Spend a morning at a geothermal swimming pool.

Petursson says visiting a local geothermal swimming pool is “a true Icelandic experience and a very local thing to do.” “You can find at least one geothermal pool in every town or village in Iceland, and in the capital area, there are at least 15 outdoor pools,” says Guðbjörnsdóttir, who recommends planning your visit for the early morning if you want to meet the locals who “enjoy swimming and relaxing in the hot pots.” Popular Reykjavik swimming pools include [Sundhöllin](#), [Laugardalslaug](#), and [Vesturbæjarlaug](#).

Visit Hallgrímskirkja, the largest church in Iceland.

Thanks to its towering height (244 feet) and Expressionist architecture, Hallgrímskirkja is recognized as one of Reykjavík's most iconic landmarks. The church itself is free to enter, but a fee of about \$10 is required if you plan to climb the tower. "The view from the top is fantastic on a clear day. It's the perfect spot to get a sense of the city's layout and natural surroundings," says Petursson.

Stroll through the Elliðaárdalur Valley.

"Elliðaárdalur is only a few minutes away from the heart of the city but is a perfect place to go walking or cycling," says Guðbjörnsdóttir. "It has forests and woodlands, many wildflowers, rivers and waterfalls, wild rabbits, abundant birdlife, and dozens of perfect picnic spots." The Elliðaár River, which runs through the valley, also features several waterfalls; Guðbjörnsdóttir adds that this is "one of the few salmon rivers located in a capital."

Experience FlyOver Iceland.

Billed as the "ultimate flying ride," [FlyOver Iceland](#) is one of the most unique — and heart-pumping — ways to get a glimpse of the country's natural diversity. Lasting about 35 minutes, the experience brings you on a journey "over the country's most interesting landscapes and geography from the comfort of your seat," says Guðbjörnsdóttir. Special effects like mist, wind, and different scents accompany the spherical screen and suspended seats, leaving riders feeling as if they're actually in the air.

Best Shopping



A view of the Hallgrímskirkja from downtown Reykjavik.
Credit: tapanuth/Getty Images

66°North

Didn't bring the right jacket for the Icelandic weather? Petursson recommends [66°North](#) "if you need outerwear or nice gifts." Founded in 1926, the brand has been making warm, protective clothing for nearly 100 years and the flagship store is located in the heart of the city.

Kolaportið

To truly experience a city or a culture, you often need to stop by its local markets; in Reykjavik, that's the Kolaportið, a massive flea market at the Old Harbour. "It can be great to drop by the Kolaportið on the weekends to get the full scope of Icelandic culture, from the wool garments to the candy and fermented shark," says Petursson.

Skólavörðustígur

“My favorite shopping street in Reykjavik is Skólavörðustígur, straight from Hallgrímskirkja, where you can find all kinds of cozy art and craft shops, plus the Handknitting Association of Iceland if you want to buy a real *lopapeysa* (Icelandic woolen sweater),” says Guðbjörnsdóttir. Travelers may also make their way to Skólavörðustígur — often called the Reykjavik Rainbow Street — to snap a photo of the painted rainbow road, which first appeared in 2015 to celebrate Reykjavik Pride.

Best Restaurants



Íslenski Barinn, The Icelandic Bar, a popular restaurant serving traditional Icelandic meals.
Credit: Courtesy of Íslenski Barinn

Íslenski Barinn (The Icelandic Bar)

[The Icelandic Bar](#), says Petursson, is “hands-down” one of the best restaurants in the city: “It’s such an approachable place for both locals and visitors who want an honest Icelandic meal at a good price.” Guðbjörnsdóttir shares it’s a good spot for anyone interested in trying shark, fish jerky, or Icelandic flatbread with smoked lamb. “Locals and tourists alike frequent the place, and their happy hour is great,” she adds.

Grillmarkaðurinn (The Grill Market)

“I also really enjoy [Grillmarkaðurinn](#) when I want to splurge on a nice steak and be in a fancier dinner setting,” says Petursson. The restaurant’s lunch and dinner menus are grounded in Icelandic ingredients, offering dishes like grilled reindeer, smoked puffin, and arctic char. “I would recommend the tasting menu (served for the whole table), as it takes you on a journey around Iceland one bite at a time,” suggests Guðbjörnsdóttir.

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“[OTO](#) is a newer one that has gained a lot of momentum for its great vibe, service, food, and drinks,” says Petursson. The menu is tightly curated and takes inspiration from Icelandic ingredients and Japanese and Italian flavors. Expect to dine on entrees such as charcoaled eggplant, salmon sashimi with Icelandic wasabi, and Japanese milk bread.

Best Time to Visit



Aurora borealis over Hallgrímskirkja church at night.
Credit: Eloi_Omella/Getty Images

Both Petursson and Guðbjörnsdóttir agree that Reykjavik is a year-round destination, but anyone hoping to see the [northern lights](#) should time their trip appropriately. “My favorite time is during September since you usually get decent Iceland summer weather but also since it’ll be dark enough to see the northern lights,” says Petursson. “It’s also less crowded compared to our summer months and therefore less expensive.” The season for northern lights spotting runs through March — Reykjavik’s [Winter Lights Festival](#) also takes place in February — although the warmer months shouldn’t be overlooked. If you come in the summer, says Guðbjörnsdóttir, you’ll get to experience “the charming midnight sun and 24-hour daylight, festivals, events, and a warmer climate.”

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