

Force of nature

Iceland offers winter adventures on an epic scale, discovers **Andrew McQuarrie**

Iour guide Kristján E Karlsson points out of the minibus window at Tindfjöll, a series of peaks north of the infamous Eyjafjallajökull volcano that erupted in 2010.

"Give these mountains 200 million years and they will flatten out," he says. "They're still upright because Iceland is very young."

When something that is 16 million years old is described as youthful, you can almost feel your brain having to stretch to adjust to these new dimensions. For anyone who spends a week travelling along Iceland's south and west coasts, taking in its vast array of geological marvels, life ends up being split into two categories: 'before Iceland' and 'after Iceland'.

The immense power of the natural world, the insignificance of humans in the face of it and the relativity of time and space are suddenly as crystal-clear as the ice floating in the sparkling glacier lagoon of Vatnajökull National Park.

As we approach the Geysir Geothermal Area on the popular Golden Circle route, Kristján offers a note of caution to our small group, brought together

to explore the country on Intrepid Travel's Premium Iceland in Winter tour. "Don't do what Ed Sheeran did when he came here," he says. "He went off the path and burnt his foot severely. So don't do that."

JET STREAM

Sticking strictly to the path while bubbling hot springs belch out pungent steam around us, we reach a crowd gathered around a cordoned-off pool. We wait and wait and then it happens: whoosh! The Strokkur geyser shoots a stream of water skywards, triggering gasps from the huddled spectators as well as the 'click, click, click' of camera shutters.

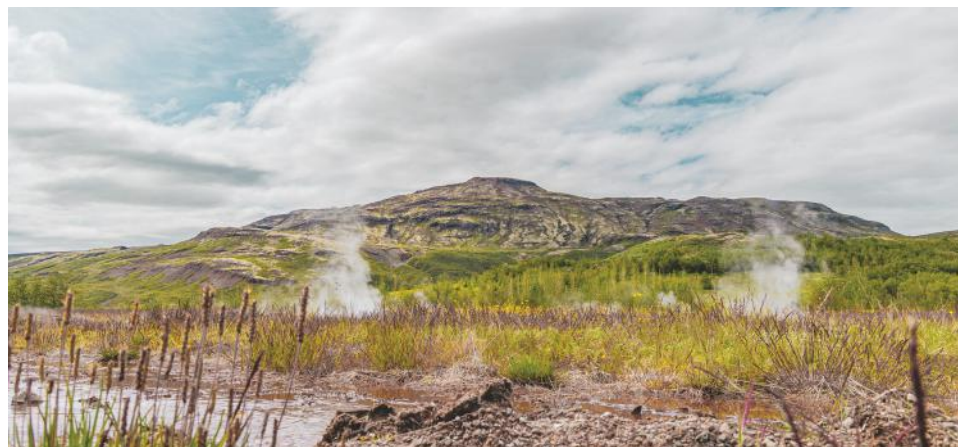
Any scepticism I had about the Golden Circle landmarks vanishes in an instant. Yes, the sites are busy with tourists, but they remain worth seeing. By 2pm on our first full day in Iceland, we have ticked off the three points of the Golden Circle – the others being Thingvellir National Park and Gullfoss waterfall – and begin our journey towards the south coast.

En route, we stop at The Secret Lagoon, the oldest swimming pool in Iceland, which has developed ➤

Gullfoss waterfall
PICTURE: Intrepid Travel

DESTINATIONS

NORDICS | ICELAND



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Strokkur geyser; northern lights; Lómagnúpur mountain; Reynisfjara beach PICTURES: Intrepid Travel; Shutterstock/Eliforcat, Nick Fox; Andrew McQuarrie

considerably from its humble beginnings in 1891 and now has modern facilities and a cafe.

"If you're interested in digging into Icelandic culture, there's no better way to do it than taking a dip in one of our hot springs," says Kristján. This is the kind of cultural immersion I can really get behind.

FOLK TALES

As we continue our journey south, heading for the black sand of Reynisfjara beach, the weather takes a turn and rain hammers on the minibus windscreen. I rue my lack of waterproof trousers, but Kristján provides a silver lining as he explains the local folklore.

"Don't worry," he says. "This is just the elves warning us. It will pass. You need to make a promise to the elves and thank them for the opportunity to visit their coast."

Sure enough, whether as a result of our silent messages or just the cloud passing overhead, the rain eventually halts and we tread through this stunning 'elven territory'. Sheer basalt columns tower over

the otherworldly black sand, which I scoop up. It is heavy, moist and dark as tar, but doesn't leave a trace as it runs through my fingers.

From the black-sand beach, we head east with a short stop at Lómagnúpur, Kristján's favourite mountain. There is certainly something striking about this square-shaped mound rising above a flat and barren landscape.

"Breathe in," I hear Kristján say to someone behind me. "Can you feel the energy?"

Normally, my instinctive scepticism would provide a polite but firm 'No, not really'. But here, in the silence and under the presence of the hulking rock, where there is not so much as a wisp of wind, my honest answer is 'Yes, I really can'.

Gesturing across the plain, Kristján brings us gently out of our collective trance to consider what lies in the distance – Vatnajökull, Europe's largest glacier, which covers about 8% of the country.

It's a movie star, he says, having featured in *Interstellar*, *Batman Begins* and James Bond films ➤



FOSSHOTEL GLACIER LAGOON

This four-star hotel, the featured accommodation on this Premium itinerary from Intrepid Travel, prides itself on its 'exquisite' location, set between Skaftafell National Park and Jökulsárlón glacial

lagoon, a prime spot to see the northern lights. In addition to 125 rooms and a restaurant that can seat up to 180, standout features include a gym and spa with hot tubs offering scenic views. An early-morning dip in the hot tubs proved a welcome opportunity to reflect on the northern lights display of the night before, while soaking up the scenery.



Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon



ABOVE: Vatnajökull glacier typifies the otherworldly nature of Iceland's landscapes PICTURE: Shutterstock/arthurphotography

Die Another Day and *A View to a Kill*, to name just a handful of its credits. Yet it has attracted few fans at the time of our arrival. It feels like a private moment with a member of Hollywood royalty, a figure far more majestic and humble than its flesh-and-blood peers.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

That night, we dine at the tour's 'feature' accommodation, Fosshotel Glacier Lagoon, in the shadow of the ice-covered Öraefajökull, Iceland's largest active volcano. Hoping for our first glimpse of the northern lights, we take a 15-minute drive to a quieter viewing spot.

Luck is on our side, so we spend a happy hour taking snaps of bright-green bands in the sky. And by the time we return to the hotel, the aurora is visible from there too – I go to bed still fizzing with excitement.

The next morning, in anticipation of a long day on the road, I take full advantage of the comforts of the accommodation and head to the hot tubs to indulge my newfound love of outdoor bathing.

En route to Reykjavik, via the south coast, we stop at Eldhraun lava field and pick our way over the

“I shelter against the cavernous cliff-face as cascades of water roar below

moss-covered terrain. Kristján reveals we are walking across the largest lava field in the country, formed by the Laki eruption that lasted for eight months in 1783-84, wreaking havoc on plant, animal and human life in the area. “It will happen again. Iceland is as volcanic now as it was 10,000 years ago – it's just a slow process,” he says.

My misgivings about the power of nature have just about worn off by the time we reach Seljalandsfoss, a roaring waterfall. At first, I think I must have misheard Kristján talking about “going behind” the crashing torrent, until we get closer and I spot the drenched clothes of the foolhardy visitors who have taken up this invitation.

Curiosity gets the better of me and I find myself sheltering against the cavernous cliff-face as cascades of water roar into the pool below. Soaked, I cannot help but grin.

JAW-DROPPING RESULTS

Snæfellsnes Peninsula in the west has dramatic landscapes, which may explain some theories attached to the area. “It's a place of spirituality,” says Kristján, with some people believing “the layers between the different worlds are thinner here”. He adds: “I met a Belgian medium who had to leave because the energy was so strong.”

After driving past craggy mountains and the occasional stream, we head ever upwards until we are at snow level in near-blizzard conditions. Just days earlier, we had been enjoying the surprising warmth of the late-winter weather.

That evening, standing outside the door of my lodge at Hotel Snæfellsnes, I hope to bask in the glow of the northern lights again, but see only large grey wisps in the sky – until I get my camera out.

The results are jaw-dropping: shafts of green, purple and violet blaze bright in the clear, starry night. The only sounds are the crunch of my boots in the snow, the clicking of my camera – and perhaps the noise of my head exploding at Iceland's ability to keep offering up mind-blowing scenes at every turn. **TW**



Kristján E Karlsson
Iceland guide,
Intrepid Travel

Intrepid Travel uses experienced local tour leaders who have extensive knowledge of geology, history and culture. They are also highly skilled drivers, used to driving in the harsh winter conditions.

Emphasise the chance of seeing the northern lights along with many of Iceland's other amazing natural attractions.

Premium tours mean travellers get to experience the wonders of near-Arctic conditions while still having their creature comforts.

Small groups offer an opportunity to get to know people with diverse interests who are curious about travelling beyond the typical wish-list places, and who are open to experiencing the unexpected.

BOOK IT

Intrepid Travel's Premium Iceland in Winter tour starts from £2,729 based on a November 30 departure, with twin-share accommodation, arrival transfer, transport on the tour, daily breakfast and four dinners, activities and tips. Flights not included. intrepidtravel.com/uk