

# Snow lonely

Want to avoid Reykjavik's crowds? Head to north Iceland, says Joanna Booth



**U**ntil I visited north Iceland, I didn't fully appreciate the range of sounds snow can make. There's the shushing of a sled cleaving through powder, pulled by a team of dogs. There's the satisfying scrunch as your snowshoe sinks deep into a drift. There's the rhythmic whump of a horse's hooves compacting the fluffy stuff beneath your combined weight. And then there's the almost imperceptible fizzle of flakes falling into a hot tub as you sit and soak.

## ▶ THE QUIET NORTH

There's nothing particularly unique about north Iceland's snow, although there is an abundance of the lovely, powdery stuff during the winter. What is special is the silence that allows you to appreciate its tuneful tonality to the full.

Tourism in Iceland has been a major success story. Greater awareness, lower prices and an increase in airlift have seen travellers flock here. The annual number of overseas visitors has

more than quadrupled over the past six years. The only downside has been overcrowding, with sometimes overwhelming numbers rushing to the famous southern hot spots of Reykjavik, the Golden Circle and the Blue Lagoon.

Here in the north, it's all rather different. Although tourists and operators - including Super Break, which launched winter charter trips here last season - are wising up to its charms, it's still beautifully quiet. From friendly,

pint-sized Akureyri, where - unlike Reykjavik - the bars are full of locals, to the titanic wilderness that surrounds it, this is Iceland without the crowds.

These epic landscapes feel even more monumental when you have them to yourself. I heard the legends of the first Viking settlers from the back of a surefooted Icelandic horse, and the tales seemed particularly believable with no traces of civilization in the sweeping Skagafjörður valley, other than [→](#)

➔ a few faraway farm buildings. Searching for the elusive northern lights, we didn't need to venture far from town. Light pollution here is minimal, and if the lights are bright enough you can sometimes spot them from your own bed. At Hotel Laxa, set on the quiet shores of Lake Myvatn, you can pop your name on the list at reception and they'll ring your room if the aurora comes out to play. At luxurious Siglo Hotel, in the tiny hamlet of Siglufjörður, you can regularly spot the lights from the harbour-side hot tub.

can pedal them through powder.

We make a slow but steady ascent along the side of the fjord, enjoying the unique huffing sound of the tyres on snow, but then it's time to venture through some really deep drifts, so we swap two wheels for two legs.

Snowshoeing is a wonderfully inclusive activity. It requires no special skill – if you can walk, you can snowshoe – and guides can choose gentle routes to suit less able guests.

Need something more thrilling? That's doable too. We puffed up a hill, pushing our way through thick tree branches, then slid down a vertiginous descent, landing giggling in a pile of silky powder at the bottom.

All you need for beginner's husky sledding is a similar have-a-go attitude. Perched on the slim runners of the sled, I hung on for dear life as the team of six eager dogs shot across the

snow. Once I got the hang of the braking system – huskies seem to have just one speed, and that's 'as fast as possible' – I fell in love with the sensation of skimming over the snow.

When it came to another form of snowy transport, I was glad not to be driving. Superjeeps – souped-up 4x4s with 46-inch tyres – are the ultimate winter off-road vehicle, but as we alternately slid and bumped through metre-deep drifts, I was relieved we had an expert at the wheel. Our guide Halldor showed us steaming geothermal springs, dramatic wind-carved canyons and half-frozen, horseshoe-shaped waterfalls in the -4C chill.

▶ TAKE TO THE WATER

The cold doesn't scare off Iceland's biggest swimmers, so whale-watching trips run year-round. Clients can tog up in the supplied overalls and watch from the boat as resident humpback whales put on a show in the sheltered Eyjafjörður fjord. If they're lucky, they might even see a visiting VIP – a blue whale.

The sea may be freezing, but Iceland's warm heart keeps its swimming pools toasty throughout the year. Splash into the geothermal waters of the spa-style Myvatn Nature Baths and visitors can float around, beer in hand, for around £30 a



LEFT: Joanna tries out fat biking

RIGHT: Northern lights at Siglo Hotel



▶ SNOWY ADVENTURES

Siglufjörður is where I get to try the latest wintry craze to hit Iceland. Here, fat bikes with five-inch-wide wheels don't merely keep mountain bikers cushioned from off-road bumps in the summer. In winter, with the tyres slightly deflated, you

visit. If that sounds steep, send clients to the nearest municipal swimming pool. While this might not appeal in the UK, in Iceland these centres have alfresco hot tubs. At Hofsos, they won't believe a visit to the sleek, architect-designed pool with panoramic sea views comes for the bargain price of £6.35.

If the beer was the main attraction, they should head for Björböðin Beer Spa. Not only can they drink beer in the bath,



Within arm's reach is a tap, so they can keep pulling pints of signature Pilsner while they soak

but the bath itself is beer. When this family-run microbrewery discovered there were numerous anti-ageing properties in ale, they built a state-of-the-art spa where customers lie back in a barrel of young beer, hops and geothermal water. Within arm's reach is a tap, so they can keep pulling pints of signature Pilsner while they soak.

▶ BOOKING A BREAK

After selling out its inaugural programme of charters to Akureyri last winter, Super Break has expanded its offering for this coming season. This is the only way to fly direct from the UK to north Iceland, and the operator is offering three and four-night breaks from 16 UK airports.

Standard itineraries start from £699 and £749 respectively,

with accommodation, a northern lights tour and a Lake Myvatn Adventure, visiting Goðafoss Waterfall, the boiling mud pools of Namafjall and Vogafjos farm, all included.

Extra departures have been added to offer four-night breaks over Christmas from Manchester, which include additional festive dining and a visit from Santa, and four-night New Year breaks from Leeds Bradford, with a gala dinner, bonfire and fjord cruise with fireworks.

For those who like the convenience of the direct flight, but prefer something more unusual than the standard package, there are also options for small-group luxury and wilderness tours, from £1,199 and £1,099 respectively, with no more than 16 passengers per group, plus the opportunity to book a self-drive break instead. This includes the hire of a 4x4 alongside accommodation and starts from £999. [superbreak.com](http://superbreak.com)

Using Icelandair's connecting flights via Keflavik, Regent Holidays offers a five-day North Iceland Discovery escorted group tour from £1,655. In addition

to showcasing the best of the region, including Akureyri, Siglufjörður and the Myvatn area, the trip makes the most of the indirect flights with time to sightsee in Reykjavik and a visit to the Blue Lagoon, so guests can compare and contrast the north and the south. [regent-holidays.co.uk](http://regent-holidays.co.uk)

Regional specialist Best Served Scandinavia offers this combination at greater length, with the seven-day North Iceland

Aurora Adventure, from £2,095. Exploring the north in more depth, it has plenty of inclusions, from northern lights spotting to snowshoeing into an ice cave, and a bit of free time with optional fat biking and Superjeep adventures. If customers like their freedom, Best Served can also tailor-make bespoke trips out of Akureyri, with accommodation, transport and activities that best suit your client. [best-served.co.uk](http://best-served.co.uk) TW

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LEFT: Björböðin Beer Spa

OPPOSITE: Husky dog sledding

