

Wild isles

An Icelandic itinerary offers unexpected adventures on land and at sea, discovers Jeannine Williamson

Hold on to my hat as our small boat circles another rocky outcrop on the island of Heimaey, known as the windiest place in Iceland due to its exposed position in the north Atlantic.

I'm here to see puffins, so the last thing I expect to spot is an elephant. However, rising 200 metres out of the water in front of me is the remarkable sight of a jumbo block of basalt called Elephant Rock – a perfectly formed pachyderm with its trunk dipping into the sea.

It might only be just over five square miles, but Heimaey is the biggest island in the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago of 15 islands and 30 rock stacks off the south coast of Iceland – and it's certainly big on sights. We arrived in Heimaey's tiny natural harbour, sheltered from the elements by steep cliffs, aboard a tender, with our ship, Holland America Line's *Nieuw Statendam*, at anchor in the distance.

SMALL PLEASURES

This trip is the highlight of one of HAL's new itineraries, which combines Iceland with some equally wild and wonderful sights closer to home in Scotland. Our enthusiastic guide is one of Heimaey's 4,300 residents – the population is only about 1,600 more 📍

Godafoss waterfall, Iceland

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kotenko Oleksandr



FROM LEFT: Elephant Rock in Heimaey and the island of Djúpivogur, both in Iceland PICTURES: Shutterstock/Joan Vadell, JMP_Traveler

than the number of passengers on our cruise ship – and introduces herself as ‘B’, telling us her Icelandic name is difficult to pronounce.

As our boat bobs along, B explains how the archipelago was formed by Iceland’s volatile volcanoes and recounts dramatic tales of her family’s experience when Heimaey’s Eldfell volcano last blew its top in 1973 – a six-month eruption that led to all the islanders being evacuated.

As we round the next cliff, we’re greeted by some of Heimaey’s other residents – members of the world’s biggest puffin colony. More than a million of the colourful birds make it their home from April to late summer to breed and raise their young, which go by the joyous name of pufflings. While they are expert divers and swimmers – plunging like arrowheads to depths of up to 60 metres to catch fish – it’s comical to see these cute but clumsy birds ‘running’ across the water to achieve lift-off and then almost crash-landing on the grassy cliffs.

Birdlife and natural wonders are a big draw on these itineraries, but clients need to be mindful that Mother Nature rules the waves around here. One morning there’s a collective groan at breakfast when the captain tells us it’s too choppy for the ship’s tenders to transport us safely to the remote

island of Djúpivogur, with its small fishing community and Viking history.

PAST TIMES

Bypassing Djúpivogur, our spirits are lifted, in every sense, as the entertainment team pulls together a programme of activities, including an impromptu cocktail-making demonstration and all-important tasting. The itinerary includes other planned sea days, when there’s never a shortage of things to do.

I particularly enjoy an insightful talk by the cruise director on the history of Holland America Line, one of the world’s oldest cruise lines, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2023. In the early 1900s, it competed with other lines to transport thousands of Dutch immigrants to start a new life in the US. The line installed fake funnels on its ships because passengers, worried about getting seasick, thought a vessel with more funnels would get them to New York more quickly.

However, there’s nothing fake about *Nieuw Statendam*, which is the sixth ship in the line’s history to bear the name. I like the touches that reflect its heritage, such as the Grand Dutch Cafe, with its blue and white china, and drinks including genever, advocaat and Dutch beers. ➔

ask the expert



KAREN FARNELL
director of sales and
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“Iceland continues to attract British travellers with its dramatic landscapes, unique culture and extraordinary natural phenomena, making it a standout destination for 2025. Its relative proximity and ease of access mean Brits can enjoy this bucket-list destination with minimal travel time, while our expertly crafted itineraries immerse guests in glacial vistas, geothermal wonders and vibrant ports and cities. Agents can highlight Iceland’s appeal to clients who are looking for adventure, serene natural escapes and enriching cultural experiences. Focus on intrepid clients or those who have previously enjoyed Alaska, Scandinavia or expedition-style cruising.”

GRAND VOYAGE



FROM LEFT: Reykjavik, Iceland; Heimaey is home to the world's biggest puffin colony PICTURES: Shutterstock/Oleg Senkov, Oleg Troino

LIGHT FANTASTIC

Another of our stops is Reykjavik, the world's most northerly capital. It coincides with the spectacle of the midnight sun – visible from mid-May to mid-August – and it's a real novelty to walk back to the ship late in the evening through streets still bathed in daylight.

It's no secret that the price of drinks in Iceland can be pretty eye-watering, but a top tip for clients is to take advantage of the happy hour on offer in many bars and restaurants from 5pm to 7pm.

As we sail on, there's more rugged natural beauty to be found closer to home in Scotland. We explore ancient stone circles on a tour from Kirkwall in the Orkneys, before reaching the mainland the next day, where some passengers head off to Loch Ness. No sightings of Nessie are reported, but we still have plenty to talk about over dinner on a cruise taking in all manner of wildlife – both real and imaginary. ●

BOOK IT: *Holland America Line's 14-night Viking Trails & Celtic Origins cruise on Nieuw Statendam, round-trip from Dover, departing on August 9, starts at £1,999. The cruise calls at Rotterdam, Ålesund, Djúpivogur, Akureyri, Ísafjörður, Reykjavik, Heimaey, Stornoway and Portree.*
hollandamerica.com



Nieuw Statendam, Holland America Line

The 2,666-passenger ship was launched in 2018 and emerged fresh from a refurbishment in 2023, which included a new library and Starlink internet. While *Nieuw Statendam* is one of the largest in HAL's fleet, in cruise ship terms it's a mid-sized vessel and doesn't feel overwhelming. This stylish ship will appeal to clients who prefer classic cruising rather than water parks or thrill rides.

That said, it's far from staid. Designed around a music theme, the ship offers an array of nightly live acts, including blues, jazz and rock'n'roll, spread across three venues. A full daily programme, starting with early-morning exercise classes such as tai chi and ending with late-night dancing, includes everything from craft sessions and music trivia to pickleball and bar crawls in between.

The food offering is equally varied, whether in the elegant main dining room, expansive buffet or one of the speciality restaurants. A standout included venue is the Grand Dutch Cafe, celebrating the line's heritage with comfort foods such as pea soup, Edam cheese and ham toasties, and apple cake. Recommend clients dine at Tamarind, which is well worth the \$35 cover charge to feast on exquisite pan-Asian food. The elegant yet relaxed restaurant is in a prime spot towards the stern of the ship, and on warm days guests can dine in a lovely alfresco area surrounded by Asian-inspired decor.