

Edited by
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ES Travel

Most visitors to Iceland stick to the south-west, but new flights take you to the natural wonders of the north and east.

Laura Holt jets off

THE wheels of our super-Jeep make short shrift of the ground beneath us, carving through a vast, volcanic landscape of lava fields and cindered craters.

I imagine it's like being on the moon; little wonder, then, that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin used northern Iceland to train for their 1969 lunar landing. It's no surprise either that scenes from sci-fi epics including *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and the Tom Cruise vehicle *Oblivion* were filmed here.

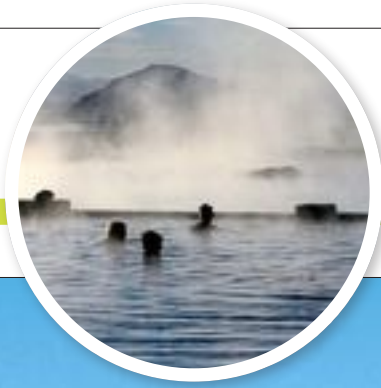
The vast majority of travellers to Iceland don't venture beyond the country's south-west corner, taking in Reykjavik before touring the well-trodden, 300km-long Golden Circle route. But this summer, a new direct air link from UK tour operator Discover The World is opening up the remote eastern and northern flanks of this North Atlantic nation with a twice-weekly flight from Gatwick to the lakeside town of Egilsstaðir.

Among the delights waiting to be discovered is the Diamond Circle route, a 260km trail that laces through northern Iceland, linking the whale-watching centre of Húsavík with a parade of natural wonders, including the volcanically active shores of Lake Myvatn, the geothermal area of Hverir and several powerful waterfalls, such as Dettifoss.

My base is Akureyri, Iceland's second-largest city and the self-styled "Capital of north Iceland". With a population of just 18,000 people, "second-largest" is a relative term. But nonetheless, it's a place with big-city aspirations – a university town with a handful of good restaurants and cosy hotels, set on Iceland's longest fjord, Eyjafjörður. It's a fine place to bed down after a day out exploring the dramatic mountain-backed terrain that encircles Akureyri's compact smattering of low-rise buildings.

I head out with my guide, Jonas Stefansson of Saga Travel, along Route 1, the ring road that encircles Iceland. We climb away from the glassine fjord, up and out through a cradle-like glacial valley, carved out during the last Ice Age. Tiny farms fleck the foothills, standing resolutely in isolation against the elements, save for a few sheep.

Our first stop is Godafoss – "Waterfall of the Gods" – so named, says folklore, when statues of Iceland's Norse idols were cast into the watery abyss, during the country's conversion to Christianity around 1000AD. It's shallow and scenic rather than forceful but more than



Final frontier: clockwise from main image, Akureyri, Iceland's second biggest city; Guesthouse Egilsstaðir; hot springs in Hverir; Husavik, where humpback whales, inset left, are a common sight. Inset top, Lake Myvatn Nature Baths



Northern exposure

enough to put an end to paganism. Its waters originate in Vatnajökull National Park, home to Europe's largest glacier outside the Arctic.

Beneath charcoal skies, smudged by Renaissance-like streams of light, we make our way to Lake Myvatn. "You might recognise this from *Game of Thrones*," Jonas says, as we pull up to the lake's shore. *Thrones* fans will indeed be all too familiar with this area, after it was used to film much of Jon Snow's adventures "beyond the wall" in *Season Three*.

Luckily, there are no Wildlings in sight

today but the lake is dramatic nonetheless. Created after a volcanic eruption 2,300 years ago, it's a hotbed of activity, fringed by curious formations such as hollow, pipe-like lava pillars and cone-shaped "pseudo craters", which resemble the real thing but don't possess a vent to expel magma. The lake's nutrient-rich waters are also a magnet for birdlife, including 13 species of duck, which ruffle the feathers of ornithologists.

As we make our way towards Dettifoss, Europe's most powerful waterfall, the natural beauty of the

landscape is interrupted only by the smooth Tarmac of Route 1. Jumping out of the 4x4, we trek through craggy, crinkle-cut scenery, volcanic soil crunching under foot, before the thunderous sound and spray of the waterfall washes over us.

I'm here in winter, when the ice-locked landscape leaves the fall at its lowest ebb, but it still makes an impact, gushing headlong into the depths of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum river. In spring, when the season's melt makes the waterfall swell, it's said to be even more spectacular.

From here the Diamond Circle traditionally heads north to the horseshoe-shaped Ásbyrgi canyon, whose deep walls rise to protect a delicate green blanket of non-native fir, larch and pine trees, and then on to the tiny town of Húsavík, which has a big reputation for whale watching. But, as the season would have it, the first heavy snowfall has blocked our path. Instead, we head back to Akureyri to seek out cetaceans, via a stop at the belching hot springs of Hverir, whose marbled, mud pools and steaming fumaroles flood my nose with the stench of sulphur.

I've seen whales before, in California and Argentina, but this experience proves to be one of the most impressive. Akureyri's position means I can jump straight onto local outfit Ambassador's sturdy ship from the town's small dock and the fjord's smooth, pancake-flat water makes it easy to see the flick of a tail fin from far away.

Within an hour we get our first sighting. Actually, make that our first, second, third and fourth sightings. Humpbacks surround the boat, fins sailing above the surface, water spouting into the sky.

At one point we get so close that we can see the whale's giant blowhole rise from the depths, before it breaches and bids us farewell, leaving pods of dolphins and minke whales to see us back to shore.



Rich in folklore: the Godafoss waterfall, between Akureyri and Myvatn

Details: Iceland

Discover The World's (01737 214 291; discover-the-world.co.uk) flights between Gatwick and Egilsstaðir start tomorrow and run until August 20. Week-long packages start at £1,140pp including flights, accommodation and car hire.

Hotel Akureyri (00 354 462 5600; hotelakureyri.is) has B&B doubles from 10,740 Icelandic krona (£70).

Saga Travel (00 354 558 8888; sagatravel.is) offers a "Diamond Circle Classic" Super-Jeep tour from June to September for 34,000 Isk (£215)pp.

Ambassador (00 354 462 6800; ambassador.is) runs three-hour whale-watching tours between April and October for 11,490 Isk (£75) per person.

■ iceland.is; northiceland.is