

how to live in Iceland

Nordic cuisine is getting a vibrant new lease of life on this ever-changing volcanic island. Here, you'll find some of the best lamb and seafood in Scandinavia *words* DIANA HENRY

Iceland is on fire right now – and we're talking food rather than erupting volcanoes. This Nordic island used to be something of a culinary joke with every guidebook urging you to eat fermented shark (a delicacy that nobody, except tourists, gets excited about) and to drink Brennivín, an unsweetened schnapps (also known as 'the Black Death', which tells you everything you need to know). But the financial crash in 2008 changed everything. Icelanders could no longer afford to eat the expensive imported goods they'd come to love, so they started looking at the food on their doorstep. Locals began making cheeses, jams, syrups from birch and meadowsweet cured meats; and embracing Icelandic cuisine, influenced in part by the New Nordic movement. Reykjavík's first food hall has just launched in the old bus station, and new restaurants and bars are opening all the time. In short, it's the perfect time to visit.

3 must-visit restaurants

Michelin-starred **Dill** is a beacon in Reykjavík. It was the first place to really take Icelandic ingredients seriously, and founding chef, Gunnar Karl Gíslason, is the most garlanded in the country. The food is New Nordic (beautiful, rather than mad-scientist scary) and is served in a cool dining room of distressed and rough-hewn surfaces. Five-course menu for two, excluding drinks, from £180. dillrestaurant.is

Slippurinn, set in an old shipyard workshop in Heimaey (a small island just off the mainland), is a day trip but, boy, is it worth it. It's owned by the prestigious young chef Gísli Matthías Auðunsson, and the food is modern Icelandic with French touches. The cocktail area, decked out with his granny's old furniture, is a great place to drink lovage-infused gin & tonics. Two courses for two, excluding drinks, from £75. slippurinn.com

Matur og Drykkur is the best place in the Icelandic capital for excellent, casual Icelandic food. The menu is full of old-fashioned (but newly imagined) dishes that are made accessible. Think smoked lamb with buttermilk and nutmeg, halibut soup with apples, and tomatoes with Icelandic barley, smoked cheese and mustard. Five-course dinner for two, excluding drinks, from £155. maturogdrykkur.is



Matur og Drykkur



Slippurinn

5 foodie travel tips

YOU NEED TO LIKE FISH

There's a lot of lamb in Iceland, but fish dominates, and it's some of the sweetest and freshest you'll ever eat. Cod, crab, langoustine, blue mussels and lobster; they're all superb. You can even get fish & chips accompanied by skyr (see overleaf), in Reykjavík restaurants.

TAKE A PICNIC

Iceland's mercurial weather might not seem like ideal picnic conditions, but the scenery is stunning. Pack a pillow (and a brolly), buy some rye bread, and collect some cheeses from Búrið, the best deli in Iceland (see overleaf), and smoked lamb.

VISIT SMALLHOLDERS AND FARMS

Farmers' markets are rare, partly because they are so hard to organise due to the cold, dark winter days, but a couple are held every year at Harpa, the beautiful concert hall at the harbour in Reykjavík (usually in March and November). Find information about food events online at icelandreview.com and grapevine.is.

GO FORAGING

Even if you think foraging isn't your scene, do try it here. There are wild herbs, leaves, berries and mushrooms everywhere. Travel just 15 minutes outside Reykjavík and you'll get a haul of Arctic thyme, angelica (big in Icelandic cooking), wild blueberries and chanterelles. Arrange with The Tin Can Factory via Iceland Traveller (see right).

GET INTO CAFÉ LIFE

Icelanders love cakes and coffee – Sunday afternoons are traditionally spent enjoying both at grandma's. In Reykjavík, visit Stofan Café, Mokka Kaffi or Laundromat Café. Or you can buy wonderful pastries at Brauð & Co (you can find its main bakery at 16 Frakkastígur), and take it to a branch of Reykjavík Roasters. They don't mind you bringing in things to eat, and the coffee is the best in the capital. eykjavikroasters.is



Skógafoss Waterfall

HOW TO DO IT

Iceland Traveller offers trips to Iceland for around £1,780pp, including flights and transfers, four-star accommodation and B&Bs, some meals, programmed food tours and tastings (guided or self-drive – car included), plus cookery classes and farm visits. The accommodation, flights and assistance for this trip were provided by icelandtraveller.co.uk.

10 things to eat and drink

SMOKED SALT

Local salt is produced by evaporating seawater using geothermal power. As well as the plain stuff, you can buy salt mixed with black lava (much more delicious than it sounds), with Arctic thyme and smoked over birch, which is fantastic with eggs.

LOBSTER SOUP

It's become a cliché, but it's still worth having the lobster soup served at Sægreifinn (saegreifinn.is) down by the harbour in Reykjavík. It's not fancy – the place isn't much more than a shack – but the Icelandic lobster is good, and the soup is heavenly. The other place to try it is at the Hotel Búðir (hotelbudir.is) on the Snæfellsnes peninsula in the west of Iceland – but it will cost you a lot more there.

BOILED COD HEAD WITH LOVAGE AND POTATO SALAD

This, says chef Gísli Matthías Auðunsson, who came up with the dish when he worked at Matur og Drykkur (see p138), is a perfect example of how old Icelandic dishes have been reimaged. The cod head is poached in chicken stock, glazed with a blow torch (it looks like a bronze sea monster) and served with potato salad and lovage, a plant which is hugely popular here. The best bits are the cod cheeks.



Brauð & Co

ICELANDIC LAMB

With seaweed and angelica as grazing crops, Icelandic lamb is the best I've tasted. Old-fashioned dishes include lamb stew (a kind of Icelandic-Irish stew) and smoked lamb (eaten cold with rye flatbread or warm with potatoes and white sauce). Visit sheep farms, such as Bjarteyjarsandur (bjarteyjarsandur.is), an hour from the capital, to talk to the farmers and taste their cured lamb, stew and sausages.

RYE BREAD

One of my favourite things to eat here is the soft, cake-like rye bread, which is slowly cooked underground using geothermal heat. You see loaves of it for sale everywhere and it's lovely eaten with Icelandic cheeses or rhubarb jam.



ICELANDIC BEER

Until 1989, beer was outlawed in Iceland, but, making up for lost time, now there are microbreweries all over the place. Most cafés and restaurants have beer on the menu and some offer seasonal 'tasters' (five or six served together, particularly great in the summer). Some can be briny, others as floral as meadows.

SALT LIQUORICE

Icelanders are crazy for liquorice; you'll find it in cakes, meringues, and even ice cream. Buy the ice cream at Valdis (valdis.is) in Reykjavík, or seek out packets of salt liquorice and bars of liquorice-flavoured dark chocolate in any supermarket.

FRUIT SCHNAPPS

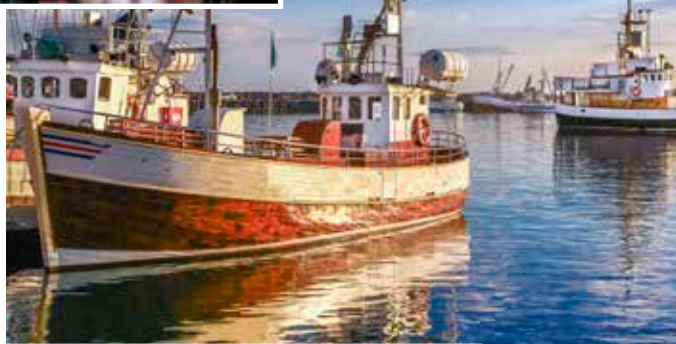
Vodka production is really on the up (and there are some very good ones), but the schnapps and liqueurs, made from botanicals, fruit and birch leaves, are even more distinctive. Try 64° Reykjavík Distillery (reykjavikdistillery.is) – the rhubarb liqueur is particularly delicious.

CINNAMON BUNS AND KLEINA

Cinnamon buns are not specifically Icelandic, but the ones at Brauð & Co in Reykjavík (braudogco.is) are so good that people queue from 6am for them. For a specifically Icelandic pastry, get kleina, deep-fried doughnuts dusted with cardamom sugar. Go to Sandholt bakery (sandholt.is) to try them.

SKYR

You can buy skyr in UK supermarkets, but it isn't the real deal. Proper skyr (a soft-cheese/yogurt-like product specific to Iceland) is made from a starter from a previous batch and rennet. Sample the difference at cheese workshops run at the Reykjavík deli, Búrið (blog.burid.is/english).



Bjarteyjarsandur



Good Food contributing editor Diana Henry is an award-winning food writer. Every month she creates exclusive recipes using seasonal ingredients, see p102 [@DianaHenryFood](https://www.instagram.com/DianaHenryFood)