

Going Beyond Reykjavík

The capital region is great but there's so much more of Iceland to discover once you get into the countryside.

By Richard J. Litell

A layover or protracted visit to Iceland's capital city of Reykjavík offers visitors easy access to many unusual attractions in the immediate vicinity—the imposing Hallgrímskirkja (church), thermal bathing in the Blue Lagoon and an excursion to the historic Þingvellir area, to name but a few. But for those who can spend more time in this fabulous country there is so much more to be seen beyond the capital.

It's been said of a lot of the world capitals, and it is no less true of Iceland—you haven't really seen the country until you get out into the countryside. Largely because of its unique geology and terrain—with signs of volcanism all around you—there are wonders to behold everywhere.

For those with few if any time restrictions, and the pocketbook to match, the ideal way to see Iceland is to rent a four-wheel-drive, high-chassis vehicle and drive wherever you want, be it on well-paved roads or off-road lava fields. Some may choose to travel (by car or bus) along the periphery of the island on the so-called Ring Road. Others will have to limit themselves to specific regions at a time and hope they can return to Iceland to cover what they have missed initially.

Able to devote a week there, I opted for the northeastern quadrant of the country, the one containing Iceland's second largest city (Akureyri), the much-extolled, bird-rich, lake called Mývatn, and the course of Iceland's second longest river, Jökulsá á Fjöllum.

I was surprised to experience that the flight from Reykjavík to Akureyri—from one coast to another—took only about an hour, and it served as a reminder about how small this North Atlantic island really is. It is about the same size as the state of Virginia or Kentucky. As we landed and stepped out on the tarmac two large cruise vessels dominated the view across the fjord. Their port of call was the delightful town of Akureyri (pop. about 15,000), resplendent that day in brilliant summer sunshine. Actually, the

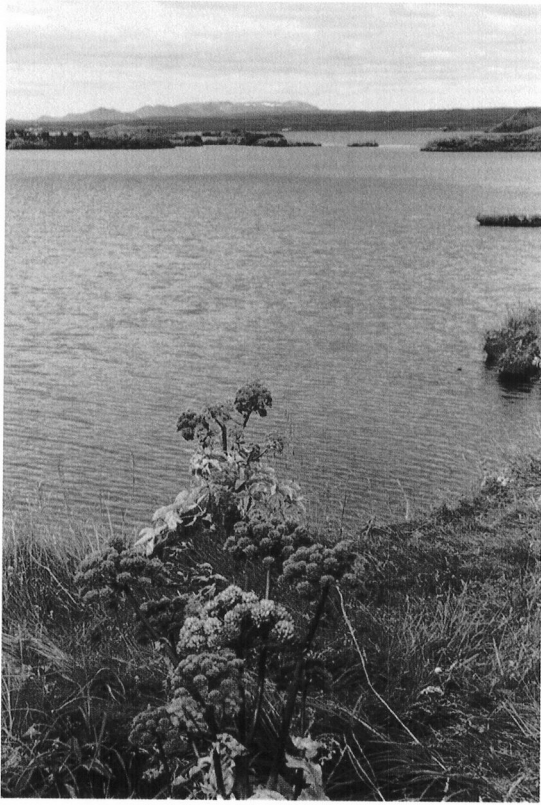


Iceland's celebrated bird lake, Mývatn, seen (above and opposite from two separate vantage points, contains 50 islands and islets and averages only 10 feet in depth.

northeastern part of Iceland gets more clear days than the rest of the country. The town required more time than my schedule permitted, but after walking around it for a few hours I noted that this is a place I would like to return to. Renting a small car I set off for Mývatn, crossing the bridge at the foot of the fjord and gradually ascending through scenic mountain terrain. Before I knew it I had arrived at Goðafoss (Waterfall of the Gods) and remembered its legend. Back in the year 1000 (some say 999), Þorgeir, a regional chieftain and lawmaker of the Alþing (the world's oldest parliament), was entrusted with the task of deciding whether Icelanders should adopt Christianity. He opted in favor of the new faith and, upon his return home, threw his statues of the pagan gods into the waterfall. The falls are horseshoe-shaped and about 40 feet high.

MY ATTRACTION TO MÝVATN WAS BECAUSE OF ALL I HAD read about it as being particularly bird-rich. Perhaps it was because my visit was after the nesting season and before the migration season I was disappointed in getting to see only a fraction of the many species of marine and land birds to be seen there. The lake itself is smaller than I had imagined it (about 14 square miles) and it provides no open vistas because it contains more than 50 islands and islets. Its average depth is less than 10 feet and its basin straddles the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Adding to its tourist appeal is the fact that the area is the driest in Iceland.

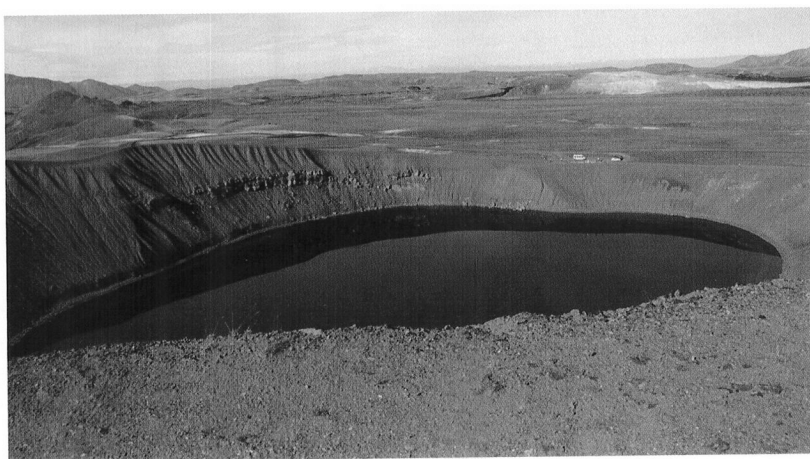
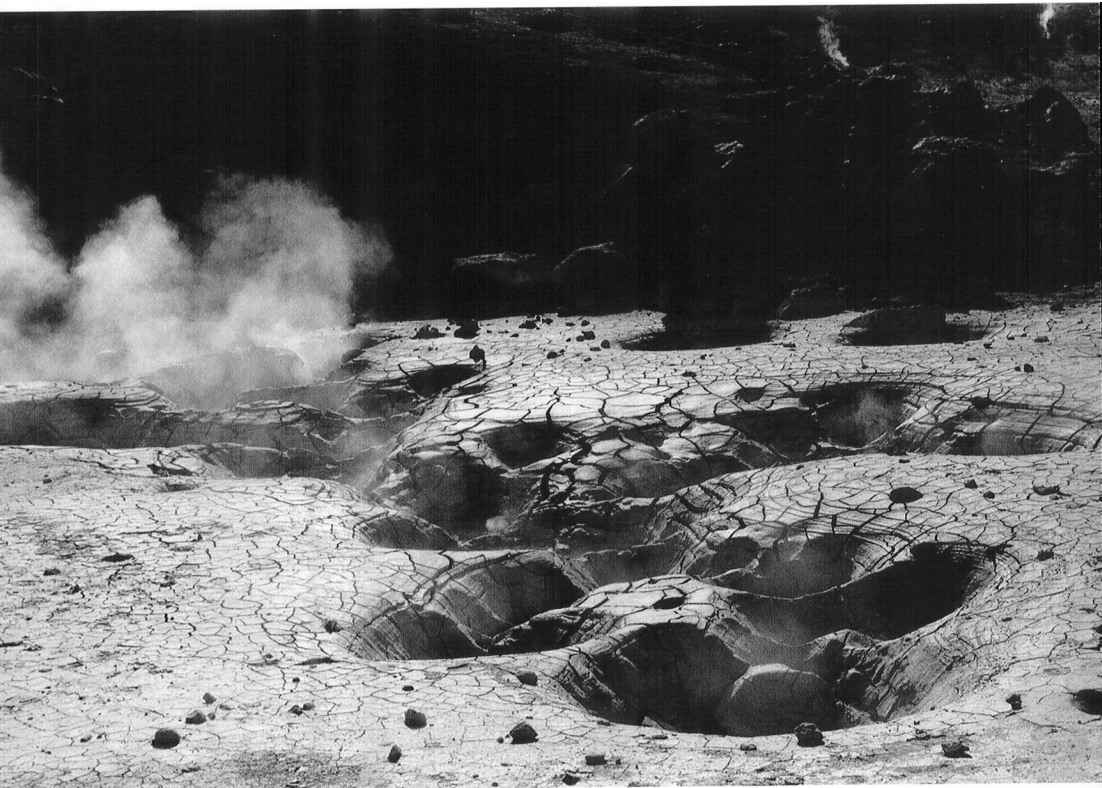
I stayed three nights in the area's largest community, Reykjahlíð. Jón Il-lugason, who runs a local camping site as well as a number of guest houses, served as my guide and host during my stay. He arranged for me to stay in the home of his son and South African daughter-in-law (of Icelandic descent) and their hospitality was exceptionally warm and gracious. The daily breakfast spread was unbelievable: cereals, regular milk and butter milk, juices,



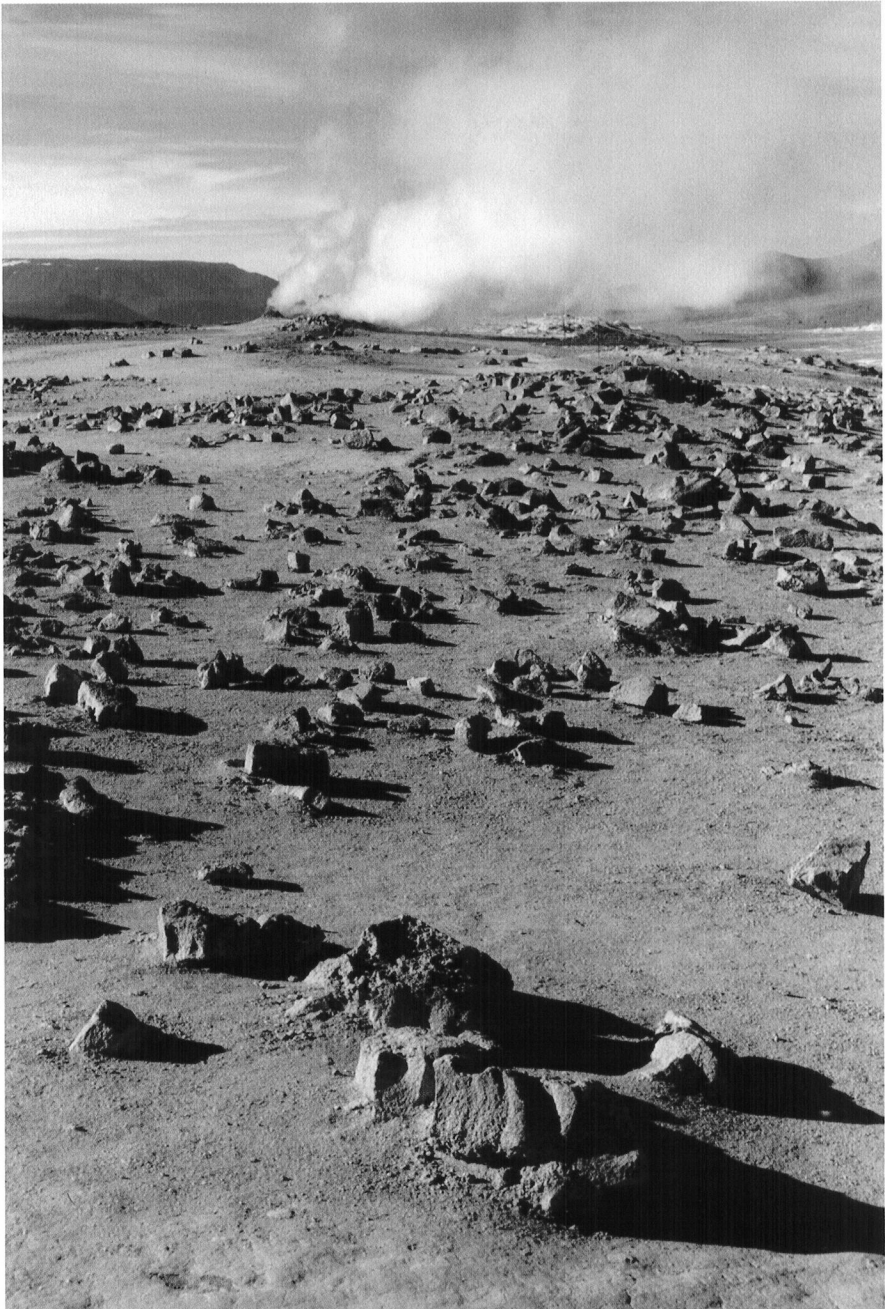
several types of bread (including one right out of the oven each morning), assorted cold cuts and cheese, a huge bowl of fresh banana and orange slices—even a selection of marinated herring with appropriate sauces. My fellow guests for most of my stay included a family of four from Örebro, Sweden, and a young couple from Belgium. (Most of the tourists encountered during the entire week were from western Europe; there were hardly any Americans.)

Illugason's brother, who manages the camping grounds, is an avid bird-egg gatherer and he showed me his startling collection. He had eggs from at least a dozen species of birds and in greatly varying sizes. I was not surprised that he ate many of them as we would hen's eggs, but he shocked me when he displayed, below his smokehouse (used for smoking fish), several chests of flat draws containing eggs preserved by year. He went on to describe the various stages of decomposition over time and spoke of good and bad vintages as one would about fine wines.

After considerable searching by car I managed to find a farm house at the end of Mývatn's longest peninsula that contained a large collection of more than 300 different species of stuffed birds, mostly from Iceland. The collec-



Viti (meaning hell) is the name of the 1,000-foot-wide explosion crater (above) beyond the power station at Krafla.



Steaming vents, bubbling mud and a myriad of pastel colors mark the other-worldly terrain (above and opposite top) at námafjall not far from Mývatn.



The warm water in this tephra crater at Asja tempts many tourists to take a dip if they can negotiate the steep climb down.

tor, now deceased, had wished that it be housed in a special museum; efforts are underway to fulfill his wishes.

Many days can be spent seeing all the unusual sites around Mývatn, which means, by the way, Midge Lake, a not inappropriate appellation. More often than not when you are out walking, swarms of tiny midges tend to buzz around your head, not caring whether or not they enter your eyes, nose and mouth. They are believed to be attracted to the carbon dioxide that people exhale. Oddly enough, they never seem to follow one indoors.

Nearby *must* visits include Dimmuborgir, an area of weirdly shaped pillars and crags created about 2,000 years ago by flowing lava, the pastel-colored Námafjall ridge dotted with steaming vents, and Krafla, which can be reached via a narrow road that passes a geothermal power station. Strictly speaking, Krafla is a mountain, but the name is now applied to an entire region and to a series of eruptions that created Iceland's awesome lava field. Well beyond the power station you come to an imposing 1,000-foot-wide explosion crater called Viti (meaning Hell). A walk around it is rewarding.

FOR A PROLONGED FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE WITH LAVA fields, however, I would recommend the 12-hour, round-trip bus tour from Reykjavík to Askja, near the northern extremity of Vatnajökull, Iceland's and Europe's largest glacier, which covers the greater part of southeastern Iceland. Don't let the long trip time fool you; the distance is little more than 50 miles as the crow flies. This visit I did by bus because the difficult road—or lack thereof—and the frequent need to ford streams preclude access



The heavily silt-laden Dettifoss, seen here in two views, is Europe's most powerful watterfall.



by normal cars. Moreover, most of the route is over the crusty and irregular surface of a massive lava field. This is where the astronauts preparing for the moon landing did much of their training. For much of the trip the bus had to drive in first gear, constantly making precarious S-turns.

The drive to Askja did include a few stops, such as at a sparklingly clean spring-source river to quench our thirst and allow time for picture-taking, along the shore of the upper silt-laden Jökulsá river and at a makeshift cave reputed to be the winter hideout of a convicted outlaw who had sought refuge in the wilderness a century or so ago. Apparently he had stolen some sheep and a horse and sustained himself on little else. It is said he used the hide and rib cage of the horse to fashion a roof over the cave opening.

Askja is an enormous 50-square-foot caldera formed in 1875 when two cubic kilometers of tephra were ejected from the volcano, spreading effluent all the way to western Europe. Volcanic activity continued for 30 years. The deepest part of the collapsed magma now contains the sapphire-blue lake called Öskjuvatn, at 712 feet the deepest lake in Iceland. In the original eruption, a nearby active vent exploded and formed the tephra crater also bearing the name Viti. It still contains a hot lake that tourists like to bathe in provided they can negotiate the steep climb down.

A LONGER EXCURSION FROM MÝVAÐN—and I devoted a full day to it—is to the lower stretches of the Jökulsá, where it gets dramatic. This river is 208 miles long from its glacier origins to the North Atlantic through a national park containing Iceland's own Grand Canyon—Jökulsár-glúfur. About 16 miles long, one-third of a mile wide, and up to 328 feet deep, it contains several spectacular waterfalls, among them Dettifoss, Europe's most powerful.

Leaving the car at a nearby parking lot I walked close to the river above Dettifoss and observed the chocolate-colored water above the precipice. The color is due to the large amounts of silt emanating from glacial debris and material ground off the riverbed along its seaward course. It is estimated that the river carries some five million tons of clay into the sea annually.

Dettifoss is not the tallest cascade in Iceland—it is only 144 feet high—but the close to 18,000 cubic feet rushing over its edge causes a plume of spray visible for at least a half mile and makes for some wonderful rainbows. The river's catchment area is the biggest in Iceland.

Selfoss, another impressive falls, is about a half mile upstream from Dettifoss. It is only 32 feet high but very broad and can be easily walked to from Dettifoss. A remarkable falls *below* Dettifoss is the 88-foot-high Hafragilsfoss.

Instead of driving back to Mývatn after my morning with the waterfalls I decided to follow the river to the sea and return via the town of Husavik, making a stop at Ásbyrgi along the way. The latter is a horseshoe-shaped canyon about two and a half miles long and about 328 feet deep. Near its center is a solitary outcrop looking like a location site for a John Ford west-



Iceland's Grand Canyon, the imposing jökulsárgljúfur, contains several spectacular waterfalls.

ern. There are two unusual things about Ásbyrgi. One is that it has no inflow, the other is that it has such lush vegetation, something you don't expect to see on an island reputed to be virtually treeless. Geologists have a rather intricate explanation for its formation; a more colorful one is that Odin's flying horse, Sleipnir, accidentally touched the earth there and left his huge hoofprint on it. As for vegetation, protection from grazing sheep and steep canyon walls to provide a windbreak have allowed the valley to become rich in all types of flora, with birch trees as high as 25 feet.

Husavik is another charming town with a colorful harbor and views of snow-capped peaks. It has a unique cruciform church built of Norwegian timber and resembling a gingerbread house, and an outstanding whale museum that won a UN award in 2000. A major attraction in Husavik is its whale-watching access. Whales of one species or other, it is claimed, are seen on over 99 percent of outings. I was to have gone on such a cruise but had to cancel because I had spent too much time on landlubber pursuits.

The morning after my return to Mývatn I drove back to Akureyri and turned in my car, completing my Icelandic adventure—for now. I was both surprised and pleased to learn that I had used less than a full tank of fuel for the entire trip. Distances really *are* short in Iceland.

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