

## Did You Know?

- On average, people in Iceland live longer than people in nearly every other country in the world.
- Every Icelander is required to learn how to swim at school.
- Iceland is one of the few countries in the world with no military.
- Per capita, Iceland publishes more books than any other country in the world.
- Family history is a passion for many Icelanders.
- Iceland has more hot springs than any other country on earth.
- The waters of the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans that surround Iceland are ideal for whale watching. Some of the types of whales that can be seen include minke whales, humpback whales, killer whales, sperm whales, pilot whales, fin whales, and blue whales.
- Iceland was the last European country to be settled.
- All Icelanders are officially called by their first name even though they have a last name.
- Only seven species of wild mammals can be found in Iceland: Arctic foxes, reindeer, mink, brown rats, black rats, field mice, and house mice.
- Icelanders are proud of their Viking ancestors. They honor their culture through art, music, and festivals.

## Flag

The colors represent three of the elements that make up the island. Red symbolizes the fire from Iceland's volcanoes, white stands for the snow and ice fields, and blue is for the sea. Other Scandinavian flags also include the Latin cross.



## National Image

The Icelandic coat of arms was adopted in 1944. The shield is based on the Icelandic flag. The shield-bearers are the four protectors, or guardian spirits, of Iceland: a bull, an eagle, a dragon, and a giant. According to legend, these guardians protected Iceland from invasion.



## People and Places

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 39,769  
Area (sq. km.): 103,000

Iceland is the second largest island in Europe. It is a little smaller than Guatemala or the state of Kentucky. Iceland is a rugged volcanic island and one of the most active volcanic countries in the world. Also, about a tenth of Iceland is covered with *glaciers* (large masses of snow and ice). It is often called the "land of fire and ice." Most Icelanders live near the coast because much of the country, particularly the interior, is *uninhabitable* (not suitable for humans to live). The landscape of the interior is rocky



and barren. There are few trees. The soil is so poor and the climate so harsh that it is often impossible to grow crops. However, the interior also has many beautiful features, including mountains, lakes, volcanoes, and even deserts. Mild earthquakes are common.

Although it is located next to the Arctic Circle, Iceland's climate is much milder than you might expect. The *Gulf Stream* (a warm ocean current that originates in the Gulf of Mexico and flows northward through the Atlantic Ocean) nearly encircles the island and helps make Iceland warmer than it would be otherwise. The average temperature in July is 51°F (11°C); the January average in Reykjavík is 41°F (5°C). However, Iceland can get very cold in both summer and winter when the polar winds blow. There are two or three months of continuous daylight in the summer, but during the winter (mid-November to January) there may only be four or five hours of daylight (10 a.m.–3 p.m.).

## Population

*Population: 317,351*

Iceland is the most sparsely populated country in Europe, with an average of less than 8 people per square mile (nearly 3 people per sq km). Most Icelanders live along the coast. About two-thirds of the population lives in or near the capital city of Reykjavík. Icelanders are descendants of the Scandinavian and Celtic peoples who settled in the 9th and 10th centuries. Iceland has a relatively small but growing number of immigrants. Icelanders have excellent access to health care, education, and economic prosperity.

## Language

The country's official language is Icelandic. Icelandic comes from Old Norse, which was the language spoken by the original settlers of Iceland. Icelandic has remained largely unchanged through the centuries. As a result, Icelanders can read medieval Icelandic *sagas* (stories) from the Age of Sagas (1200–1400) with relatively little difficulty. The *sagas* cover centuries of Scandinavian and British history. Through them, the lives and exploits of the Vikings, farmers and settlers, and others who came after them are known to the world today.

English and Danish are both widely spoken and understood in Iceland. In school, children learn Danish and English. Those who continue with their education after age 16 receive further instruction in one or both languages.

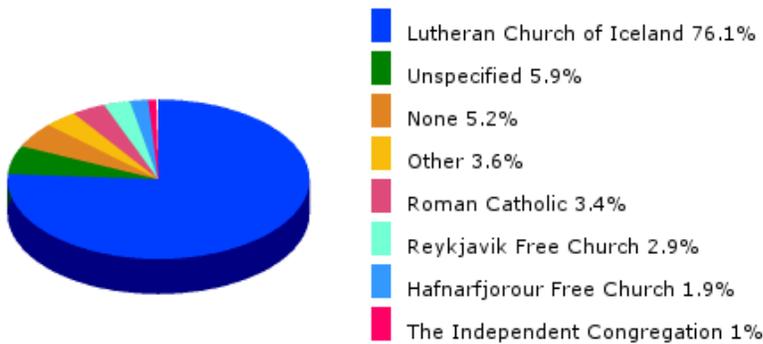
While many languages will adopt foreign words (often English) into their language to describe a new item or habit, Icelanders want to keep their language as pure as possible. In fact, an official committee exists for the sole purpose of creating new Icelandic words for terms such as telephone or computer, when necessary.



### Can You Say It in Icelandic?

Hello	<i>Góðan daginn</i>	(GO-don DAH-kin)
Good-bye	<i>Bless</i>	(bless)
Please	<i>Takk</i>	(tahk)
Thank you	<i>Takk</i>	(tahk)
Yes	<i>Já</i>	(yow)
No	<i>Nei</i>	(nay)

### Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2014. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2014.*

Most of the population belongs to the state church, the Lutheran Church of Iceland. However, freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, so there also are other Protestants, Catholics, and other religions in Iceland. Most Icelanders rarely attend church, usually just for baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, and Christmas Mass. A small percentage of the population does not belong to any religion. Although Icelanders may not attend church frequently, many have strong beliefs in spiritual and supernatural things.

## History

### Time Line

AD 800

870s First Viking settlers arrive



930	The <i>Althingi</i> , the world's first parliament, is created in Thingvellir to make laws and resolve conflicts	
986	Erik the Red leads a group of settlers from Iceland to Greenland	
1000		
1000	Iceland adopts Christianity	
1200s	Icelanders begin to write down the Old Norse <i>sagas</i> (stories) for the first time	
1264	Norway takes control of Iceland	
1300		
1380	Iceland and Norway come under the control of Denmark	
1402–04	The Black Plague devastates Iceland, killing half of the population	
1494–95	The plague returns again, resulting in thousands more deaths	
1700		
1700s	Disease, famine, and a volcanic eruption in 1783 cause a period of decline in Iceland	
1800		
1800	The <i>Althingi</i> is <i>abolished</i> (ended) by the Danish king	
1814	Norway becomes a part of Sweden, but Iceland remains under Danish rule	
1845	The <i>Althingi</i> is reinstated	
1874	Iceland is given greater independence; Iceland approves its own constitution	
1900		
1915	Iceland adopts its own flag	
1917	Women get the right to vote in national elections	
1918	Iceland gains increasing independence but is still in union with Denmark	

1940	British troops are stationed in Iceland to protect against German invasion
1941	The United States takes over the defense of Iceland from the British, putting thousands of troops on the island
1944	Iceland votes to become an independent <i>republic</i> (government in which the leader is elected); Sveinn Bjornnsson is the first president
1949	Iceland becomes a founding member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
1975	Iceland bans foreign fishermen from within 200 miles of its coastline
1980	Vigdís Finnbogadóttir becomes the first woman in the world to be elected president
2000	
2006	The United States closes its military base in Iceland, ending its military presence in the country; Iceland allows limited commercial whale hunting again after a 21-year ban
2008-09	Iceland's economy is hit hard by the global financial crisis; the government announces that it is <i>resigning</i> (quitting)
2010	The Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupts in southern Iceland, spreading a cloud of volcanic ash across all of Europe and causing major transportation problems
PRESENT	



### Early Settlement

Although other people had visited Iceland before him, Iceland's first permanent settler was Ingólfur Arnarson, who came from Norway in 874. He and his wife and family built a homestead near what is now Reykjavík so that they could farm. Over the next 60 years or so, thousands of Nordic settlers moved to Iceland. Most of the settlers came from the area that is now Norway, which at that time was being united under the rule of King Harald Fairhair. Some people feared that the king would take away their property and freedoms. Also, farmland had become scarce in Norway. Iceland offered an opportunity for these settlers, their families, and their servants to start again in a new place.

### Althingi

Early on, the settlers in Iceland were governed by various local chieftains. There was no king or other strong leader to govern the country as a whole, and there was no uniform system of laws. But in 930, the Icelandic chieftains met in Thingvellir to establish a nationwide *legislature* (lawmaking body), or parliament, called the *Althingi*. This became the government of Iceland.

The *Althingi* met once a year to make laws and resolve disputes. The meetings were held outdoors, for two weeks each summer. It was also one of the year's biggest social events, attended by farmers, traders, craftsmen, and storytellers. In contrast to today's



laws, which are published and available for people to read, for nearly two centuries in Iceland, laws were not written down. They had to be memorized and recited by the person leading the *Althingi*. The *Althingi* is the world's oldest lawmaking body and is still the name of the Icelandic parliament today.

### Foreign Domination

Iceland remained independent until 1262, when the king of Norway took control of the country during a civil war between various local chieftains. This marked the beginning of a very difficult period in Icelandic history, when the country was ruled by outsiders up until the 1800s. In 1380, both Iceland and Norway came under Danish rule.

Denmark gradually created a *trade monopoly* where no country but Denmark could trade with Iceland. Denmark also determined the price of goods so that Danish farmers and traders would benefit. As a result, Icelanders were forced to pay very high prices, even for basic necessities, and they weren't able to sell their own products for what they were worth. These trade restrictions, along with other problems, devastated Iceland's economy and left many people in poverty.

In the 1530s, Denmark forced Icelanders to abandon their Catholic beliefs and become Lutherans. Many Icelanders opposed this attempt to limit their freedoms but eventually had to give in when the last Catholic bishop, Jón Arason, was beheaded in 1550.

In addition to having their nation controlled by foreigners, Iceland suffered other tragedies as well. Between 1402 and 1404, the Black Plague wiped out nearly half of Iceland's entire population. Less than a hundred years later, in 1494–95, the plague hit again, with similar devastating effects. Also, a series of famines during the 18th century resulted in even more deaths.

### Modern Iceland

A gradual move toward independence began in the latter part of the 1800s, but it wasn't until World War II that Iceland's ties with Denmark were fully broken. An agreement from 1918 called the Treaty of Union, which bound Iceland to Denmark for 25 years, expired during World War II, while Denmark was occupied by Germany. Icelanders saw this as an opportunity to finally achieve the independence that they had desired for so long. So in June 1944, they officially declared the Republic of Iceland and adopted a new constitution. Since that time, Iceland has worked hard to build its economy, protect its fishing rights, and increase the prosperity and well-being of all its citizens.



## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

Icelanders like a variety of sports. As in many other countries, soccer is the most popular sport, but Icelanders also enjoy playing handball and basketball. Public swimming pools, many heated by natural hot springs, are common in almost every town and tiny village. These facilities are very important to Icelanders, who not only swim for exercise but to socialize with friends and neighbors. *Glíma*, a traditional form of Icelandic wrestling, is still enjoyed by some. Icelanders appreciate many outdoor activities. They like to go hiking, fishing, skiing, and horseback riding.

Chess is also popular in Iceland. The 1972 world chess championship was held in Reykjavík, and the country has produced a surprising number of world-class grandmasters for a country so small. Numerous chess clubs in Iceland provide an opportunity for amateur players to improve their skills. *Bridge* (a card game) is another game enjoyed by many people.



## Holidays

Christmas is a favorite time in Iceland. Icelanders celebrate 13 days of Christmas. The season starts on 24 December and ends on 6 January, which is when Icelanders take down all their Christmas decorations. In preparation for Christmas, people clean their houses, put up decorations, buy new clothes, shop for presents, and make lots of good food, especially cookies. In Iceland, Christmas Eve is the most important day of the season. Families get together on the evening of 24 December to exchange gifts and celebrate the birth of Christ. The 25th is celebrated with a big family meal and visiting, while the 26th is spent relaxing with family and friends or enjoying some form of recreation.

New Year's Eve is also very popular. Icelanders like to throw big parties. After dinner, people get together to light large bonfires. Later on, everyone gathers around their televisions to watch *Áramótaskaup*, a show in which Iceland's best comedians poke fun at the major events and people of the past year. Fireworks go off non-stop. They light up the dark winter night and create excitement throughout the country.

## Food

Meat, mainly lamb, is a big part of an Icelander's traditional diet, although chicken, beef, and pork are all common now. Even hot dogs are made partly of lamb, along with beef and pork. Fresh fish is available year round and includes such varieties as cod, haddock, halibut, *plaice* (a type of flounder), herring, salmon, and trout.

Popular dishes include *hangikjöt* (smoked mutton) and *skyr* (similar to yogurt). *Hangikjöt* is the traditional meal on Christmas Day. Potatoes (usually boiled) are served with many meals. For many years, greenhouses heated with geothermal water have made it possible for Iceland to grow tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and other produce in spite of the cool climate. Traditional Icelandic foods include blood pudding, shark, and sheep head. These foods are increasingly eaten in January and February during festivals in honor of Icelandic history and culture, rather than on a daily basis.

Breakfast is a light meal and includes cereal or toast with tea or coffee. Icelanders typically eat lunch around noon and dinner between 7 and 8 p.m. Dinner is often the only meal that the whole family shares. Coffee is extremely important at any workplace or social gathering.

## Schools

*Adult Literacy: 99%*

Iceland has an excellent education system. Iceland has the highest percentage of children enrolled in school in the world. Children are required to attend school between the ages of six and sixteen. Kids in *primary* (elementary) school study Icelandic (grammar and literature), Danish, English, mathematics, history, social studies, science, crafts, home economics, music, and sports. Every child must know how to swim to graduate. A large percentage of young people continue their education through specialized training schools or college preparation schools, which lead to a university education. There are nine universities and colleges in Iceland; the University of Iceland is the largest. Many Icelanders leave the country to earn advanced degrees.



## Life as a Kid

Children are expected to do well in school and be involved in activities such as sports, drama, and music. Not only that, kids spend a lot of time in front of their computers, surfing the internet and chatting online with their friends. Most kids have cell phones as well, so they call and text each other. Listening to music and watching videos are also popular activities. At home, kids often have chores to do, such as keeping their rooms clean and doing the dishes after meals. In the summer, children may also help in the family garden. When it comes to eating, kids in Iceland like pizza, soda, and potato chips. Saturday is often known as "candy day."



## Society

### Government

*Capital: Reykjavík*

*Head of State: Pres. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson*

*Head of Government: PM Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson*



Iceland has an elected president who serves a four-year term, but the prime minister is the one who actually oversees the daily affairs of the government. After every election, the president selects the prime minister from among the members of Iceland's *Althingi* (lawmaking body), usually the leader of the largest political party. The prime minister then has the responsibility to form a new government. The *Althingi* has 63 members. They are elected to four-year terms. The voting age is 18.

### Money and Economy

*Currency: Icelandic króna*

Despite having few natural resources, Icelanders enjoy a standard of living that is among the highest in the world. Fishing is the country's most important industry. Fish and fish products account for a large percentage of *exports* (products sold to other countries), and fishing provides many jobs. Other important industries include aluminum, *ferrosilicon* (used to make steel), and geothermal energy. Tourism is another huge source of income, as more and more people visit Iceland to enjoy the beautiful scenery or to go whale-watching. Less than 1 percent of the land is used for growing crops, so agriculture employs just a small fraction of the workforce. Many pastures and meadows are used to graze sheep, cattle, and horses. Sheep and wool are important commodities.



## Getting Around

Most families in Iceland have at least one car. In and around the capital, a good bus system helps people get from place to place. Cycling and walking are also increasingly popular. People also use taxis. Iceland does not have a railroad. In the winter, it is often impossible to travel inland or in certain remote areas because of poor road conditions. When teenagers turn 17, they can get a learner driver's license and often buy a car soon thereafter.

## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Icelandic Names

In Iceland, people use their father's first name as the basis for their surname, or last name. The father's first name is combined with *-son* (meaning "son") if the child is a boy, or *-dóttir* (meaning "daughter") if the child is a girl. So if a father named Jón has a son named Steinar, the son's name would be *Steinar Jónsson*. And if Jón has a daughter named Lilija, her name would be *Lilija Jónsdóttir*. Women do not change their last names when they get married.

Although most Icelanders still follow this naming tradition, not all of them do. Some people choose to use their mother's first name instead of the father's. So the person's last name would be his or her mother's first name followed by *-son* or *-dóttir*. Some people use both their parents' names.

When Icelanders address each other, they use first names (and sometimes nicknames); last names are rarely used. This is true even for doctors, teachers, and politicians. Also, names in a phone book are alphabetized by the first name rather than last name, but it's usually necessary to know the last name as well, or at least where they live.

### Learn More

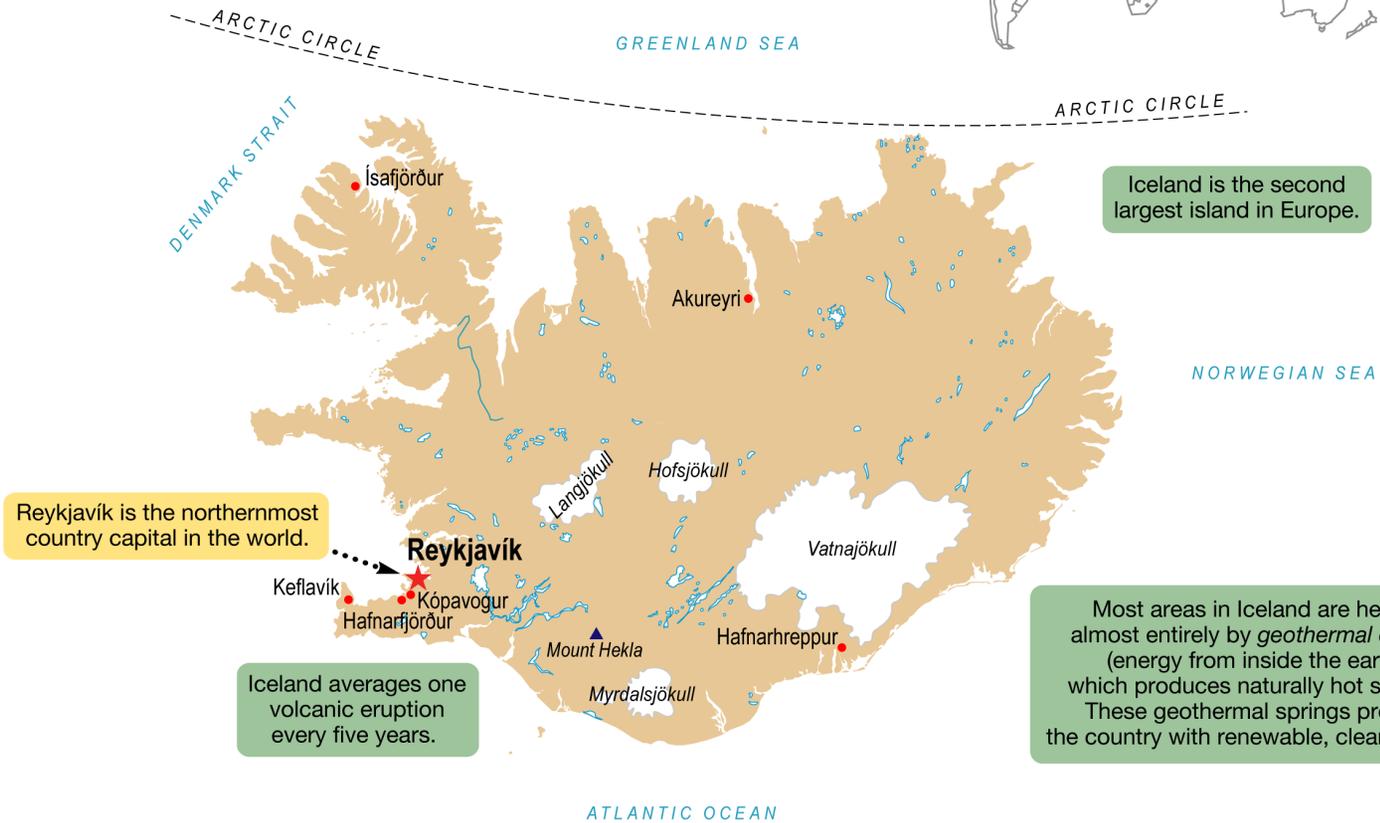
Contact the Embassy of the Republic of Iceland, House of Sweden, 2900 K Street NW #509, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 265-6653; web site [www.iceland.is/iceland-abroad/us](http://www.iceland.is/iceland-abroad/us). Or contact the Icelandic Tourist Board, phone (212) 885-9700; web site [www.visiticeland.com](http://www.visiticeland.com).

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# Iceland



Iceland is the second largest island in Europe.

Reykjavik is the northernmost country capital in the world.

Iceland averages one volcanic eruption every five years.

Most areas in Iceland are heated almost entirely by *geothermal energy* (energy from inside the earth), which produces naturally hot springs. These geothermal springs provide the country with renewable, clean energy.