

Land of Fire and Ice

Never mind its chilly name—as a travel destination, Iceland is hot!

◀ A rainbow adds color to a mountain landscape in Iceland.

1 Located in the North Atlantic Ocean, Iceland is Europe's westernmost country with the most northerly capital city in the world. Viking explorers **migrated** here from northern Europe
5 in 930 A.D. when they established the world's first parliament.¹ The country's national language can still be traced to the one spoken by the Vikings over 1,000 years ago.

Today Iceland has a population of just
10 over 310,000, spread over 100,000 square kilometers (about 40,000 square miles). Despite its small size, there are many reasons to visit this remarkable country.

City of Culture

15 Most visitors' first port of call is the country's capital, Reykjavík, a small and clean city known for its colorful and stylish **architecture**. The city's downtown area is lined with shops, art galleries, cafés, and bookstores. In 2000,
20 Reykjavík was awarded the title of Europe's City of Culture, thanks to its impressive art and museum scenes and lively nightlife.

The good news for visitors is that Iceland's temperatures are fairly **mild**, even in the winter
25 when they stay at around four degrees (40° F). During winter months, nights are long, and the Northern Lights² become **visible**, lighting up the night sky with a spectacular natural display. In summer, the country gets almost 22 hours of

¹ A **parliament** of a country is the group of elected people who make or change laws.

² The **Northern Lights** (also called the "aurora borealis") are colored lights often seen in the night sky in places near the Arctic Circle.

30 daylight, and native Icelanders and visitors alike enjoy partying outdoors until dawn.

Hot Springs

Iceland is one of the most volcanically active nations in the world, and there are a number
35 of thermal (hot water) springs around the island. All are heated naturally by underground volcanic activity. In fact, Iceland **converts** energy generated by these springs into electricity which powers and heats people's
40 homes and businesses. As a result, Iceland burns very little fossil fuel, such as oil and gas, and has some of the cleanest air in the world.



Visitors to Reykjavik's ▼
Blue Lagoon relax in
its bright blue waters.

One of Iceland's most popular hot springs is the Blue Lagoon, a huge lake of bright blue seawater just outside Reykjavík. Surrounded by volcanoes and lava fields, the Blue Lagoon receives more than 300,000 visitors a year. After a long day's sightseeing or a long night of partying, visitors can relax their muscles and release their **tension** in the lagoon's steaming hot water, which has an average temperature of about 38 degrees (100° F). Some believe the waters are able to **cure** certain illnesses and improve skin quality.

Caves and Monsters

Most of the inner part of Iceland is uninhabited³ and accessible only by truck or other **vehicle**. Nevertheless, there is a range of outdoor activities to enjoy elsewhere in the country, particularly along the coasts: "Iceland is an adventure," said Sol Squire, whose Icelandic company organizes adventure trips around the country. "We have Europe's biggest glaciers, active volcanoes, cave explorations, and skiing."

One of Iceland's most popular attractions is caving. Exploring Iceland's unusual lava caves, most of which formed more than 10,000 years ago, requires only basic caving knowledge and equipment. Ice caves, however, are more challenging and require special clothes and hiking tools. The best-known ice caves are in Vatnajökull—a **vast** layer of ice which, at 4,828 square kilometers (3,000 square miles), is Iceland's—and Europe's—largest glacier. It also happens to be situated just above an active volcano!

If exploring caves and glaciers doesn't interest you, head south, just outside the town of Vík, to check out⁴ the huge rock formations that were once believed to be **monsters** turned into stone. These are a dramatic part of the scenery on one of Iceland's most impressive black-sand beaches.

³ If a place is **uninhabited**, no one lives there.

⁴ If you **check out** a person or place, you look at it or try to find out more about it.



▲ Tourists look down on the mid-Atlantic fault that runs through Thingvellir National Park.

The Golden Circle

And finally, no trip to Iceland would be complete without a visit to the Golden Circle, a pathway northeast of Reykjavík that connects Gullfoss (a huge "Golden Waterfall"), the hot springs region of Geysir, and Thingvellir National Park. The mid-Atlantic fault that runs through Iceland is literally pulling the island apart. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Thingvellir Valley, where the land is actually separating and the stony ground beneath your feet frequently shifts. Hold on while you hike!