

# Do battle with the elements in another world

Wrap up well and you won't regret leaving your comfort zone to witness the raw power of Iceland's primeval glaciers and volcanoes, writes Lisa Young

The thundering wind tore across Reykjavik. "It's just a breeze," I was told by a passer-by as I was almost swept off my feet.

Iceland is a geothermal marvel of a country. I had flown there to explore the Vatnajökull glacier on the east coast of the island, one of the seven natural wonders of Europe. The most active glacier in the country, with three volcanoes under its surface, it has erupted around 60 times over the past 800 years and covers an area of over 8,000sq km.

As a special extra, I flew on the Vatnajökull plane, lovingly hand-sprayed over 24 days to look like the glacier and used on long-haul routes around the world. The paint job to celebrate Icelandair's 80th anniversary last year, also saw the Saga Lounge at the island's Keflavik Airport given a refurbishment and the beautifully designed waiting area with all mod cons was an ideal place to chill before our short flight from Reykjavik took us east, over glaciers and volcanoes, to the remote Egilsstaðir Airport. We were about to experience the real Vatnajökull glacier. There are few people in this part of Iceland; one local school is only attended by two sisters, while another has just one child and the school run takes an hour each way.

Leaving Egilsstaðir on Route 1, the main road that stretches around the island, wind, rain and a flash of sunlight followed us along a green valley. It even snowed for a moment: that's Iceland, all seasons in one hour. As we passed vast rock formations and waterfalls which tumbled down the valley, we saw reindeer, but their shyness meant they quickly disappeared when we tried to photograph them. Wild mink also roam the land, and visitors might see an arctic fox, as well dolphins and whales offshore. The occasional polar bear, lost and drifting on an iceberg from Greenland, may turn up, but it's rare. When they arrive they are often sick and starving, so are quickly relocated.

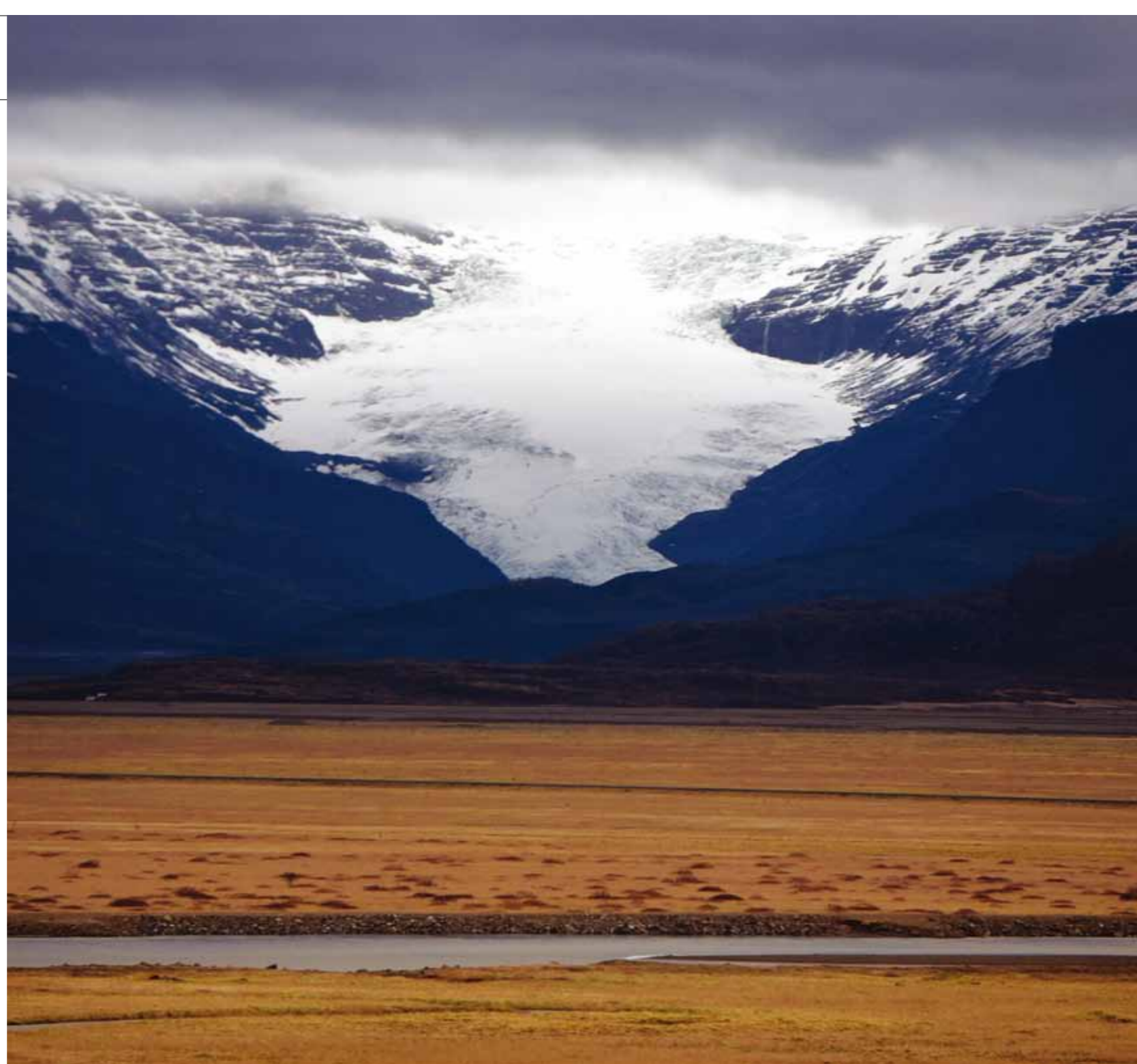
Because it's surrounded by the Gulf Stream, Iceland is seven degrees warmer than it should be for its latitude, yet



there are few trees. The first settlers cut down all the birch and willow, leaving the country barren, and if you see trees today, it's because they were planted more recently. The country's oldest wooden house, which dates back to 1750, can be found in Reykjavik, but apart from that you won't find many older structures, stone not being widely used for building until the 18th century.

Iceland is full of mythical tales of elves, giants, ghosts and trolls and we passed a fjord where a giant troll was once said to live in what is now a farm. It is said that the trolls first came to Iceland with settlers from Scandinavia and ended up in the mountains, living in caves and drinking a lot, especially at night. If you are caught by one, it will definitely eat you. However, if a troll roams outside into the sunlight, they will turn to rock – just like the trolls in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

At Höfn, with the glacier visible in the distance, we checked into Fosshotel Vatnajökull ([www.fosshotel.is/hotels/fosshotel-in-the-south-east/fosshotel-vatnajokull/](http://www.fosshotel.is/hotels/fosshotel-in-the-south-east/fosshotel-vatnajokull/)). After dinner at the town's famous lobster restaurant Pakkhus ([www.pakkhus.is](http://www.pakkhus.is)), we drove to Hoffell, a nearby farm with natural hot springs, to soak in the geothermal pools. Being early May, the days were long and we could accomplish a lot as darkness didn't fall until around 10.30pm.



**Clockwise from above left: Hvalnes lighthouse, northeast of Höfn; the Vatnajökull glacier; a geothermal pool at Hoffelsjökull; Skógafoss falls; Icelandair celebrates its 80th anniversary with a new livery.**

Photographs: Lisa Young



**'Blue bergs dotted the water, some muddy and black, some as clear as glass'**

The following morning, we bumped along a black sand and ash track in an all-terrain 4x4, through streams that almost became rivers, with the vast Vatnajökull glacier always in sight. After walking up a short hill, we headed over the brow and a massive expanse of ice filled my view. Looking in awe at this natural wonder, I pondered my insignificance in the face of its size and power.

It has been suggested that over the next 50 years many of Iceland's small glaciers will disappear and only small parts of the big ones will exist, and this one is without a doubt shrinking in size. Our local guide remembered the glacier being bigger when she was a child and pointed out a mark on the landscape indicating the point it once extended to.

Stops at Hoffelsjökull, then later at Heinabergsjökull, allowed us to take more glacier photos as we spent the whole day driving past the glacier, its vast tongue slanting down the front of the frozen mass.

In the afternoon it was time to get up close and cross part of the glacier itself with [www.glaacierjourney.is](http://www.glaacierjourney.is) on snowmobiles after being transported to the starting point in 4x4 vehicles with tyres specially designed for the deep snow and ice. Decked out in thermal gear and waterproof(ish) suits provided by the adventure company, we drove for

around an hour up the mountainside, slip-sliding and getting stuck a couple of times. Sheer drops on to the glacier from one side of the vehicle offered spectacular views until the fog took over, but we still jumped on the snowmobiles and took off across the glacier. We followed our guide, never straying too far for fear of the deep crevasses nearby.

Next day, still on Route 1, the road that wraps around the country, we left the south-east coast via a five-kilometre tunnel and came out the other end along the country's south coast, where ash and black sand from old eruptions line the road.

Our next stop was the Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon and tour, where we boarded an amphibious vehicle and motored around a gathering of huge icebergs that had broken off the glacier. We then drifted into the bay before floating under a bridge and out to sea.

Blue bergs dotted the water, some muddy and black from having been dragged along the glacier base, some as clear as glass, decorated with terns and the odd seal. In an instant, just after we had passed, an iceberg split in two, and a vast chunk of ice came crashing into the water, causing a tremendous splash.

After warming up again at our hotel for the night, Hótel Skaptafell ([hotelskaftafell.is](http://hotelskaftafell.is)), which backs on to a

glacier tongue, we had a late night walk out to the ice to take in the views and late sunset.

Yet another glacier was ticked off next day with Eyjafjallajökull, the infamously polysyllabic volcano that erupted in 2010 spewing out ash which stopped flights around the world.

We later visited the famous sea stacks on Reynisfjara Beach, near the tiny town of Vik, which is 186 kilometres (20 minutes) from Reykjavik and famous for its impressive sea stacks, basalt volcanic black sand beach and crashing waves. Thanks to the otherworldly setting, many recent films, such as *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which opens on the planet Lah'mu, have shot scenes here.

Our drive back into Reykjavik took us past Skógafoss falls, where the water tumbles down 78 feet before pounding into a pool at the bottom. You can walk right behind the waterfall, adding excitement to the experience, and also a reminder of the necessity for waterproofs, warm layers and waterproof camera covers.

Iceland is a place where the weather can change rapidly, even during the summer months, but it's worth it for a breathtaking adventure like no other: an exciting, educational and awe-inspiring journey to the depths of a raw, natural environment.



## FACT FILE

Icelandair offers flights from Glasgow to Reykjavik starting from £160 return including taxes. Icelandair also flies from Aberdeen, Belfast, Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham, with onward connections to 18 North American gateways. Long haul passengers can have a stopover of up to seven days in Iceland en route to North America for no extra flight cost, in fact if passengers opt to stop over on their outbound journey they will save approx £50 per person on APD tax. For bookings or customer service contact +44 (0) 20 7874 1000, [www.icelandair.co.uk](http://www.icelandair.co.uk)



## Do Not Disturb

NH Collection Roma Palazzo Cinquecento, Rome

# Elegance in the Eternal City

@GSOUTAR

After a long hot walk to the Colosseum, I can't think of a nicer place to kick off your sweaty gladiator sandals than in this light and bright five-star hotel, which is a member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts Lifestyle Collection ([www.preferredhotels.com](http://www.preferredhotels.com)). Just wait until you're in your bedroom, as you wouldn't want to mess up the freshly buffed marble floors, or get grit on the bright red seating in the entrance foyer.

Despite its modern interior, the building is an Art Nouveau palazzo and former post office, which only opened as a hotel last year. Of the 177 rooms, the front-facing ones boast a view of the front garden, which includes a section of defensive Servian wall, built in the 6th century BC. For a more expansive view, head to the fifth-floor, 6,460 sq ft rooftop terrace, where you can sip an Aperol Spritz at one of the two cocktail bars (the other is on the ground floor) and feel all smug while you watch stressed-out people running across Cinquecento Square to Termini Station. Ha, ha (I mean, poor things, hope they catch their trains/buses).

## Budget or boutique?

It's luxurious and palatial, but there's a pared back, comfortable and functional feel to this place. Although there are stylish twists in the smart furniture and light-fittings, it's a hotel to suit the tasteful minimalist. No swags, gold taps or orange marble.

## Room service

Our fourth floor front-facing Premium Room was cool, soundproofed and lovely. Everything is pitched really well, from the Goldilocks-friendly bed, to the grey-slate-tiled and ergonomic designer bathroom. This is fancy not fiddly, so it won't take you half an hour to work out how to switch on the rain shower or fill the large tub. There's plenty of hanging space for clothes, and wardrobes with an automatic internal light – handy when you're



rummaging for your specs at 3am (it happens). Should you want to watch some Italian telly, there's a huge one. And there's a table flanked by two velvet-covered chairs, for those who don't want to eat the cakes they've bought from a nearby pasticceria in bed. No judgment if you do.

## Wining and dining

Carb-lovers will adore the continental-style breakfast, with all sort of mini delights from which to choose, including cream buns, tarts, doughnuts and cakes, as well as breads, pizza and focaccia. There are also cheeses, salamis, hams, cotto, tacchino and other cold meats, as well as yogurt and dried fruit.

Although we didn't try it on our visit, dinner is served in the same space as part of their Grand Tour restaurant, which focuses on Italian and international dishes.

## Worth getting out of bed for

For those wanting to explore the Eternal City, this hotel is ideally located, with a 20-minute walk to sites including the Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, Colosseum, Villa Borghese and Pantheon. It's even nearer to the Teatro dell'Opera, and just next door to the less-touristy area of Monti, where you'll find little boutiques, good gelato at Fatamorgana ([gelateriafatamorgana.com](http://gelateriafatamorgana.com)), and an array of restaurants including the lovely Sciuè

Sciuè ([sciuesciueroma.it/en](http://sciuesciueroma.it/en)). For strong espresso and emergency pizza slices, Mercato Centrale Roma inside Termini couldn't be handier. As it's right beside the station, this hotel is ideal if your holiday is going to consist of more than one pit stop, or you want to include a day trip. Napoli is just over an hour away by train.

## Little extras

A midday check-out was much appreciated. Also, we loved the addition of their own in-room product range which, apart from the usual shampoos and shower gels, included a hand cream and face mask. Our boudoir also had a Lavazza coffee machine with pods, lots of tea, a kettle and a selection of tea-bags. For those suffering from blood sugar drops, there's a sweet station at reception, where you can fill a cone with sweeties and jellies from a couple of jars. The staff are so lovely, they'll turn a blind eye if you make more than, say, three visits here a day.

## Guest book comments

Perfectly located, tastefully decorated, a lot of attention to detail, a true five star hotel.

Gaby Soutar

**Rooms from €290 (based on two adults sharing). NH Collection Roma Palazzo Cinquecento, 90 Piazza dei Cinquecento, Rome (+39 06 492221, [www.nh-hotels.com](http://www.nh-hotels.com), [www.PreferredHotels.com](http://www.PreferredHotels.com))**