ICELAND IN BRIEF

Official name: Iceland

Flag: Blue with a red cross outlined in white. The colours are symbolic for Iceland: red is for the volcanic fires, white recalls the snow and glaciers, and blue is for the skies above.

Size: 103,000 km² (40,000 sq. miles), slightly bigger than Hungary and Portugal, and slightly smaller than Cuba.

Population: 325,000 (January 2014). Median age is 35.6 years.

Capital city: Reykjavik. The largest municipalities are Reykjavik* (118,000); Kópavogur* (30,000); Hafnarfjördur* (25,000); Akureyri (17,000); Reykjanessbaer (14,000).

*cities in the capital region.

Government: Parliamentary constitutional republic.

Language: Icelandic. English is widely spoken and understood.

Religion: Predominantly Christian.

Currency: The Icelandic króna (plural krónur) –ISK.

Time: Iceland is on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) throughout the year.

Glaciers: Glaciers cover 11,922 km² (4,600 sq. miles) of the island’s surface. Vatnajökull National Park is the largest national park in Europe.

Highest point: Hvannadalshnjúkur peak 2,110 m.

Natural resources: Fish, hydropower, geothermal energy.

Natural hazards: Volcanic activity, earthquakes, avalanches, glacial outburst floods.

Helpful websites
iceland.is
visiticeland.com
Inspiredbyiceland.com
Safetravel.is
En.vedur.is (Icelandic Met Office)
Road.is
Static.is
En.island.is
Cb.is (Central Bank of Iceland)
schengenvisainfo.com
It is no coincidence that author Jules Verne chose Snæfellsjökull glacier as the entry point for his heroes, in his famous adventure, ‘Journey to the Centre of the Earth.’
But Iceland is also the land of darkness and light. Its location just below the Arctic Circle makes for long summer days with near 24-hours of sunlight, offset by short winter days with little sunlight at all. Fortunately, while winters are dark, they are relatively mild and play host to one of nature’s most spectacular exhibitions of beauty: the Aurora Borealis. On a dark and clear night, the Northern Lights can often be seen dancing across the sky overhead in all their green glory. You should move fast to catch them though, as they often disappear just as quickly as they appear, behaving much like Iceland’s weather which shifts in mysterious ways.

If you don’t like the weather, just wait five minutes. Or, at least, that is what the locals will tell you. While the average temperature is favourable, the conditions can alternate quickly from sunshine, to rain, to sunshine again. This complicates the selection of the correct attire, but Iceland’s dramatic weather adds to the already great diversity of landscape and lighting, which changes with every turn in the road and every changing season.

Given how unpredictable the elements are, it’s not strange that Icelanders have a rich tradition for folklore rife with sorcerers, ghosts, elves, trolls, hidden people, and other mystical beings. Many stories are influenced by the long dark nights of winter, while others are related to the long summer nights.

Iceland is a curious mix of old traditions in new settings. Iceland is both, the youngest landmass in Europe; and home to the continent’s oldest parliament, formed in 930 AD. The parliament’s original location, Thingvellir, is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, located at the juncture between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates, which are drifting apart by a few centimetres every year. In Thingvellir, it is possible to walk or even dive between the two continents.

From the moss covered lava fields in the southwest through the barren highlands in the centre, to the soaring fjords in the northwest, Iceland will attest to the great diversity of landscape and lighting. It’s also often said that parts of Iceland, such as its barren highlands, are so otherworldly that people feel like they have arrived to planet Mars. Images captured by the Mars rover Curiosity certainly attest to their similarity. Not only that but a lava field in North Iceland served as training ground for NASA astronauts, including Neil Armstrong, before their first expedition to the moon.

If Iceland weren’t astounding enough above the ground, there’s more to see beneath the surface. Iceland is home to hundreds of underground caves and many of them can be explored in all their wonder. It is even possible, during the summer, to go into a volcano for a closer look at one of Iceland’s bigger claims to fame.

WHERE THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS EVERYDAY

A country of sharp contrasts, Iceland is not easily defined. Home to the largest glacier in Europe as well as some of the world’s most active volcanoes, it is widely known as “The Land of Fire and Ice.”
**BETWEEN CONTINENTS**
Due to its unique position on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Iceland is one of few places on Earth where it’s possible to be between continental plates. Walking between the North American and Eurasian plates is a nice reminder of our place in the Universe.

**AURORA BOREALIS**
There is nothing like lying on your back, looking up at clear skies on a dark winter’s night, and watching the riveting Northern Lights dance across the sphere. The show begins often out of the blue and is surely worth waiting for.

**THE ARCTIC CIRCLE**
Iceland sits just below the Arctic Circle with the exception of one small island 40 kilometres off shore. Grímsey, a home to less than 100 people, is a bird watcher’s paradise with hundreds of thousands of birds.

**BETWEEN CONTINENTS**
Due to its unique position on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Iceland is one of few places on Earth where it’s possible to be between continental plates. Walking between the North American and Eurasian plates is a nice reminder of our place in the Universe.

**GLACIAL ICE**
Given just how green Iceland gets, it’s not surprising that people wonder about the country’s seemingly misleading name. But there is actually a fair amount of ice in Iceland. Iceland is home to the biggest glacier in Europe and a tenth of its surface is covered by ice.

**BENEATH THE SURFACE**
Under the volcanic landscape of Iceland there are endless caves and tubes with spectacular lava formations - only a small number that have been explored or even discovered.

**MIDNIGHT SUN**
Summer in Iceland is a magical time. The whole island comes alive under the constant sunlight. Taking a stroll in the midnight sun will show you Iceland in another colour.

**OUTDOOR BATHING**
When the frost sets in and the snow is coming down and the wind is blowing hard, it is time to head for the nearest pool or soak in a geothermal hot spring. The best way to experience the extremes of Icelandic nature is through its stark contrasts.

**PEACE**
There is no place like Iceland to enjoy a peaceful time. The least densely populated country in Europe, Iceland will allow you to connect with nature and make you feel like the last person in the universe.
Volcanic activity is a fact of life in Iceland, where people have learned to live with both its drawbacks, and considerable advantages, such as geothermal energy and dramatic natural environment.

Iceland sits on top of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a 40,000 km long crack in the ocean floor caused by the separation of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Even today, the landmass is growing by about 2.5 cm per year, as it splits wider at the points where the two tectonic plates meet. Accordingly, the western part of Iceland, to the west of the volcanic zones, belongs to the North American plate and the eastern part to the Eurasian plate, which means Iceland is actually in two continents.

This is also one of the most volcanically active areas on earth. On average, Iceland experiences a volcanic event every 5 years. Since the Middle Ages, a third of all lava that has covered the earth’s surface, has erupted in Iceland. The largest recorded lava flow in world history occurred in Iceland during the summer of 1783, when a 25-km row of craters, Lakagigar, southwest of Vatnajökull, poured out 14 km³ of lava.

This same geological activity is also responsible for some of the most dramatic features of Icelandic nature. The mountainous landscapes, black lava fields and geothermal pools and geysers are the result of continuous interplay between volcanic activity and the natural elements.

Icelanders have also reaped the benefits in the form of vast resources of geothermal energy. Over 90% of housing in Iceland is heated by natural geothermal heat - one of the cheapest and cleanest forms of energy in existence. Hot springs can be found almost everywhere, and the meltwater created by sub-glacial volcanos provides the country with an abundant source of hydroelectric power.

With all this power residing just beneath the earth’s crust, safety is top concern in Iceland. All seismic activity is closely monitored and infrastructure is designed to deal with natural catastrophes. As a result, serious threats are extremely rare.
The extreme darkness of the Icelandic winter has a few perks. Between September and April, Iceland is treated to a magnificent natural display: the Aurora Borealis. Named after the Roman goddess of dawn, Aurora, and the Greek name for the north wind, Boreas, the phenomenon is often simply referred to as the Northern Lights given that they keep to the far-northern latitudes.

The Northern Lights are created by particles from the sun that are released in solar explosions. When these particles interact with the atmosphere in the Earth’s magnetic field, energy is released, causing the skies to light up in an array of colors. The Northern Lights occur high above the surface of the earth where the atmosphere has become extremely thin, in an altitude of 100-250 km.

On clear winter nights, many sightseeing trips are organized around this spectacular natural phenomenon. The ideal location for sightings varies and excursion leaders are skilled in “hunting” the lights, finding locations where conditions are best for seeing them on any given night. There are no guarantees that you will see the aurora borealis during your stay, but your chances are immediately improved outside populated areas, especially away from the brightly lit capital.

The Northern Lights can still be seen from within the city, and on many cold winter nights news spreads quickly between locals, who implore each other to go out for a look at our local wonder. More often than not, people miss their chance to see them, not because the lights aren’t there but because they simply aren’t looking up at the sky late at night or early in morning.

To gauge whether it’s worth staying up and staring out the window, there are a number of factors to consider, including the time of sunrise, sunset and moonrise as well as the cloud cover present. The Icelandic Met Office provides this information along with a handy Aurora activity forecast on its website (www.vedur.is). The forecast is computed on a scale of 0-9 with 0 being quiet and 9 being loud. Given dark, clear skies, a moderate forecast of 3 or even a low 2 is sufficient to catch the dazzling lights.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THE SKIES DANCE BEFORE YOUR EYES?

On clear winter nights, many sightseeing trips are organized around this spectacular natural phenomenon.
Spa is a modern day invention, but bathing in geothermal pools is an ancient tradition dating back to the settlement.
The Icelandic diet is rich in quality raw materials, farmed, bred and caught in unpolluted nature and produced with the utmost care. Fishing has historically been Iceland’s largest industry. Icelandic cod and haddock have been the most plentiful and have long been a staple of the Icelandic diet. Fresh water-wise, salmon and Arctic char can be found in Iceland’s many rivers. Icelandic sheep enjoy a peaceful life grazing freely in the mountains before being herded down come fall. This good, natural life may have something to do with the fact that Icelandic lamb is world-renowned for its exceptional taste.

The air quality in Iceland is good due to the island’s North Atlantic oceanic climate and steady winds. Furthermore, most of the country’s electricity needs are met with renewable energy sources. Geothermal energy, a much cleaner alternative to fossil fuels, is used to heat more than 90% of the country’s buildings and most of the country’s 170 swimming pools.

Icelanders also enjoy natural hot springs and geothermal lagoons, such as the famous Blue Lagoon and the Mývatn Nature Baths, whose high levels of silicates and other minerals have an especially rejuvenating effect on the skin. Swimming has long been a popular pastime in Iceland. The capital area boasts a number of pools and almost every town in Iceland, no matter how small it is, has its own public swimming pool. Learning to swim is part of the school curriculum and people of all ages meet up at the pool and enjoy a relaxing time in the geothermal hot tubs, which often functions as the local version of the pub in some other countries, where you are most likely to catch upon all of the town gossip.

The quality of the drinking water in Iceland is also exceptionally good due to the wealth of fresh water rivers that stream down from the mountains and glaciers. In fact, it’s perfectly safe (and recommended) to drink this water straight from the source. Otherwise, it’s still just a pipe away to your tap.
The best thing Icelandic cuisine has going for it is location. Surrounded by some of the world's finest fishing grounds and clean natural environment, Icelandic restaurants enjoy some of the purest materials available.

Icelandic food production is focused on quality and fresh materials. No matter if it is freshly caught fish, free-grazing Icelandic lamb, organically grown vegetables or sea salt, made the old fashion way; the pure Icelandic nature provides healthy foods to local and global markets. Sustainability and secure production are important.

For centuries Icelanders have relied on their innovation and creativity for producing, storing and preparing food. Creative mentality is leading to new, fresh products and exciting delicacies. Icelandic fish is renowned for its quality. Harvested in a responsible manner, and produced to the highest industry standards, it is a coveted material. Icelandic lamb is also a source of national pride, known for its tender meat.

Organic vegetables are grown in geothermal greenhouses around Iceland, and supply much of the country's demand. Skyr—a tasty, low-fat, high-protein dairy product similar to yogurt—is another unique delicacy special to Iceland. These, and other, fresh ingredients serve as the basis for a rich Icelandic food culture.

Chefs in Iceland have been eager to embrace New Nordic cuisine. A philosophy that promotes regional ingredients and stresses purity, simplicity and ethical production. Menus can thus change based on which ingredients are in season at the time.

Icelandic nature, the people and the culture all influence Icelandic food production and cuisine. There is a great variety of high quality restaurants in Iceland, many of them specialize in using Icelandic raw ingredients. Some choose a traditional cuisine while others choose to explore new ways of preparing the food. Icelandic chefs, many of whom hold distinguished international awards, intertwine the fresh, quality ingredients, their family’s food traditions, innovative way of thinking and their professional skills to offer memorable and delicious meals.
### Icelandic Specialities to Try

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<tr>
<th>Speciality</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Skyr</strong></td>
<td>A cultured dairy product, skyr is similar to yogurt in texture, but it is technically a soft cheese. Skyr is popular for its low level of fat and high level of protein. It is delicious with blueberries and a dash of cream. Known as the Icelandic superfood.</td>
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<td><strong>Lamb</strong></td>
<td>Icelandic lambs traditionally spend summers grazing wild in the Icelandic highlands, mostly subsisting on mountain herbs, which gives this lean gourmet meat its delicate flavour.</td>
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<td><strong>Plokkfiskur</strong></td>
<td>Fish stew made from boiled fish, potatoes and onions, plokkfiskur is served in white sauce and with rúgbrauð. Traditionally a way to treat leftovers, this is now considered an original delicacy.</td>
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<td><strong>Rúgbrauð</strong></td>
<td>Icelandic straight rye bread, dark and dense, usually rather sweet, traditionally baked in a pot or steamed in special wooden casks buried in the ground near a hot spring. Often served with fish. Very healthy.</td>
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<td><strong>Harðfiskur</strong></td>
<td>Dried fish, usually made from haddock, Atlantic wolfish or cod. Another Icelandic superfood, since this is almost a pure source of protein. A popular snack for children and adults alike, it’s delicious with a small layer of butter on top.</td>
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<td><strong>Íslenскt Brennivín</strong></td>
<td>While not strictly a “dish,” Icelandic schnapps, commonly known as Black Death, is very much a part of Icelandic food culture. It is made from fermented potatoes and flavoured with caraway seeds. Usually served chilled. Exercise caution.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Arctic Char</strong></td>
<td>Arctic char is a delicious fresh-water fish found in the far North. A staple of Icelandic cuisine, you will find it prepared cured, smoked and grilled.</td>
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<td><strong>Icelandic Craft Beer</strong></td>
<td>Relatively late to the game, Icelanders have only been drinking beer since 1989. In recent years, a number of microbreweries have sprouted up around the country and Icelandic craft beers are now readily available.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kjötsúpa</strong></td>
<td>Icelandic kjötsúpa, which translates to ‘meat soup,’ is a hearty lamb soup with vegetables. It is a popular winter dish, but is enjoyed at restaurants and in homes year round.</td>
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<td><strong>The Icelandic Hot Dog</strong></td>
<td>Over the years Iceland has become famous for its hot dogs. Properly ordered as “eina með öllu” (one with everything), the dog comes with fresh onion, fried onion, ketchup, mustard and remoulade.</td>
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CULTURAL ICELAND

Icelandic culture has been shaped by isolation and the extreme forces of nature. While strongly rooted in customs and traditions, today’s Icelandic society is both modern and progressive.
Iceland was the last country in Europe to be settled, and to this day, it remains the continent’s most sparsely populated state. The country was first settled by emigrants from Scandinavia and the British Isles in the tenth century, and due to its location in the North Atlantic, it remained an isolated nation of mostly farmers and fishermen until the early twentieth century. Isolation and the extreme forces of nature have shaped Icelandic culture through the years, creating a resilient nation where family ties are tight, the sense of tradition is strong, and the bond with nature is intense.

Through the centuries, Iceland has developed a unique tradition for storytelling and literature, beginning with the esteemed Icelandic Sagas from the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is an overstatement to say that Icelanders can still read the old Sagas as they were written then, but it is true that the Icelandic language has been carefully preserved throughout the centuries and is the least changed of the Nordic countries. This heritage of literature and language shapes the culture to this day. In 2011, Reykjavík became the first non-English speaking city in the world to be selected as the UNESCO City of Literature, and every year, Iceland publishes more books per capita than any other nation.

Icelanders maintain a strong relationship with folklore and tradition. They celebrate several unique holidays and many festivities are related to ancient Norse traditions, while others tie in to the Christian calendar, although nowadays most Icelanders celebrate these events in a secular way. While Icelandic culture is strongly rooted in customs and traditions, today’s society is both modern and progressive. Iceland has a high standard of living, extensive political freedom, and has taken an active role in sustainable development and commitment to the environment.

ÍSLENSK MENNING*

The Icelandic language has always been a vital part of this island nation’s identity. Compared to the modern day languages spoken by its Nordic brethren, Icelandic most closely resembles the Old Norse once spoken across the Nordic countries.

ÍSLENSK TUNGA**

The Icelandic language has always been a vital part of this island nation's identity. Compared to the modern day languages spoken by its Nordic brethren, Icelandic most closely resembles the Old Norse once spoken across the Nordic countries. This is due to centuries of isolation in addition to the nation’s conscious struggle to preserve its language. The movement for language protection began in the 18th century when Icelandic came under threat from Danish influence and it has since been the dominant linguistic policy in the country.

Every year, on November 16, which has been deemed “the day of the Icelandic tongue”; the Minister of Education and Culture bestows the Jónas Hallgrímsson Award upon an Icelandic who has contributed in some way to the growth of the Icelandic language. The date marks the birthday of Iceland’s beloved national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson who fought to protect the Icelandic language from Danish influence in the 19th century.

Rather than adopting foreign words for new concepts, an effort has been made to create new and unique Icelandic words, or repurpose old words that have lost their relevance over time. The word for computer, for instance, is tölva, which is the combination of tala (“digit”) and völva (“seeress”). And the word for iPad is spjálvtölva, which is the combination of spjál (“tablet”) and tölva (“computer”). Also to protect the language, every Icelandic baby must be given a name from a database of approved names or else send their proposal to a special naming committee, which either accepts or denies the name based primarily on whether or not it complies with Icelandic rules of orthography and grammar.

Resisting the European convention of using family names, Iceland also maintains a patronymic and matronymic naming system. Everyone—the President and Prime Minister included—is addressed by their first given name, as their last name simply says that they are the son or daughter of their father or mother, with the latter growing in popularity.

Two Icelandic words have actually found their way into the English language, and unsurprisingly, they are both related to geology. They are the words geyser, which is derived from a geyser in Iceland called Geysir, and jökulhlaup, a scientific term used to describe a glacial flood following the sudden and rapid melting of ice caused by, for instance, a sub-glacial eruption.

*  Icelandic culture
**Icelandic language
Icelandic Christmas is a celebration quite different from the version of the holiday celebrated by most.
Iceland is the ideal place to celebrate the holidays. Icelandic culture is rich in Christmas traditions, and, to be honest, for a festival of lights, darkness is an asset.

Icelanders celebrate 13 days of Christmas, and traditionally, the celebration is centered on good food and family. This celebration is deeply rooted in most Icelanders, since it coincides with the darkest period of the year, and the time when the days start to grow longer again. As a result, Icelanders add extra emphasis on bringing light into their Yuletide festivities. Icelanders decorate their houses with bright Christmas lights both inside and outside. And, as in many other parts of the world, a brightly-decorated Christmas tree is an important living room fixture.

Indeed, Christmas in Iceland is a fare quite different from the version celebrated in other countries. For starters, it includes not one, but 13 Santas, who are more passionately referred to as Yule Lads. Rather than flying in from the North Pole via a sleigh pulled by reindeer, Iceland’s Yule Lads live in the mountains and walk to town one by one until Christmas Eve to bring children small gifts. This was not always the case. According to Icelandic folklore, their vices may have something to do with some unfortunate genetics and/or upbringing, being the children of a three-headed ogress called Grýla—whose favourite dish is naughty-kids stew—and her third husband, a comparably ugly ogre called Leppalúði. Perhaps even worse though is their cat, jólakötturinn, who is rumored to eat children who don’t receive any new clothes to wear on Christmas Day.

New Year’s Eve is probably the biggest party night of the year. Fireworks are lit all night long, reaching the high point at midnight, when the sky lights up for a few minutes as the fire trucks and harbored ships ring their bells and blow their horns to welcome the New Year. It is certainly the grandest display of fireworks you will ever see.

CELEBRATE THE HOLIDAYS IN ICELAND!
Individual freedom has been an important part of the Icelandic ethos since Settlement times. Fleeing political persecution on the Scandinavian Peninsula, Norse farmers and sailors sought new lands where they could be their own lords. With no central government, decisions were reached at regional and national assemblies after discussion and deliberation. Although Iceland spent 700 years under the colonial yoke of Norway and Denmark, independence and self-sufficiency remained a hallmark of the Icelandic mentality. The national assembly, Althingi, continued to convene during this time, and it now serves as Iceland’s primary governing body, making Iceland the oldest parliamentary democracy in the world. Despite old traditions, the Icelandic political mentality is progressive with the country repeatedly receiving top ranking in studies measuring political freedom, gender equality, and human development. Icelanders elected the world’s first female president in 1980. The country has topped the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report in recent years. The rating means Iceland is the country where women enjoy the most equal access to education and healthcare. It is also where women are most likely to be able to participate fully in the country’s political and economic life. Women rank high in political empowerment, occupying nearly as many seats in parliament as men, but they also have achieved near equal participation in professional and technical jobs.

Iceland also is a leader in LGBT rights. In 2009, Icelanders also elected the first openly gay prime minister in the world. Domestic partnerships for same-sex couples have been legal since 1996. A new bill in 2010 not only made same-sex marriage legal, but it rendered marriage a gender-neutral institution, which means that there is no legal distinction between straight marriage and same-sex marriage. The nation has wholeheartedly embraced Reykjavik’s Gay Pride festival as something of a national holiday. About a quarter of the population attends the festival annually—and it was never considered odd for Jón Gnarr, Reykjavik’s former mayor, to show up to the festival in drag.

Iceland has also repeatedly clocked in as the most peaceful nation in the world according to the Global Peace Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace. Although the US army maintained a base in Keflavik during World War II, and a small military presence until 2006, Iceland itself has never had its own standing army. Iceland’s crime rate is one of the lowest in the world. Violent crime is rare, though taken seriously by the Icelandic police force. Automatic rifles and most handguns are illegal in Iceland. With the exception of Iceland’s Viking Squad (the SWAT team), the Icelandic police does not carry weapons.

Photo: Imagine Peace Tower is an outdoor work of art conceived by Yoko Ono in memory of John Lennon. It is located on Viðey Island, Reykjavik.
For an isolated culture in the North Atlantic, creativity is important. Since the 9th century, when Iceland was settled, writing and music have been an integral part of life in the country.
ICELAND AS AN INSPIRATION

It has often been maintained that creative types in Iceland seek inspiration in the dramatic landscapes, the culture, the dark winters, or the bright summers. What ever it is, Iceland can be your inspiration, too.

This remains true to this day, as the creative industries in Iceland employ more than 5% of the work force—a larger share than the fishing industry and agriculture combined—and generates a larger share of the GDP than agriculture.

Icelandic music in particular, has in recent years reached a large audience on a global scale thanks to the efforts of international pop stars such as Björk and Sigur Rós. Both have unquestionably been influenced by Iceland’s deep-rooted traditions. A form of narrative poetry passed down by word of mouth since the 14th century known as Old Icelandic rímur has, for instance, found its way into modern works by Sigur Rós. With the addition of Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center, Icelandic music has received a home worthy of the talent on display, but the building was awarded the prestigious Mies Van Der Rohe architecture award.

Iceland has also produced a number of talented writers including 20th century Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness and more recently crime fiction writers Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Arnaldur Indriðason, whose books have been translated into many languages around the world. Iceland has a well educated population with one of the most extensive literacy rates in the world. It’s no accident that Iceland’s capital, Reykjavík, became the first non-English speaking city in the world to be named a UNESCO City of Literature in 2011.

Performing arts are also a staple of Icelandic culture. Many of the country’s most respected writers create works exclusively for theatre, or adopt their previous works for the stage. Icelandic theatres enjoy great local interest, and the relatively young Icelandic dance company is quickly gaining respect, both domestically and abroad.

The film industry too has taken off in recent years, benefitting greatly from the influx of Hollywood directors who have come to these shores to make films starring Iceland’s incredible landscapes. Icelandic films have also found receptive viewers abroad. The works of director Baltasar Kormákur have been particularly successful, such as ‘101 Reykjavík,’ based on a book by Icelandic author Hallgrímur Helgason, and ‘Mýrin’ (‘Jar City’), based on a book by Arnaldur Indriðason. His 2012 film ‘The Deep,’ which recounts the true story of a fisherman who miraculously swam to shore in the dead of winter after his ship sunk off the south coast of Iceland, was shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Oscar at the 85th Academy Awards.

Icelandic artists, such as Ragnar Kjartansson, whose performance art often combines different mediums, such as paintings, music and videos; and Katrín Sigurðardóttir, whose sculptures explore the boundaries between physical structures and perception, have built upon the fine reputation of Icelandic artists to create great interest around the world.

The recent emergence video game developers on the global stage further attest to the importance of innovation and creativity for the Icelandic society. The Massively Multiplayer Online Game Eve Online and the mobile trivia game Quizup were, for instance, born in Iceland and now enjoy a great number of subscribers worldwide.

With a drive for innovation and commitment to sustainability, Icelandic designers have also come to enjoy the growing respect for Icelandic artists in international circles and at once help to bolster the country’s reputation for creativity.

Iceland is perhaps best known for its iconic wool sweater, the lopapeysa, but fashion and more generally design are now some of the more diverse and blossoming industries in Iceland. Growing and maturing with each year, Reykjavík’s annual DesignMarch festival and the Reykjavík Fashion Festival certainly attest to this.
The sparse Icelandic population has always enjoyed a gathering of good people. All-year round, you will find creative festivals dedicated to music, film and fashion. During summer, town festivals attract large groups of people around the country, dominating the event calendar. With abundant daylight hours during summer, and the long after hours of winter, nothing beats a good festival in Iceland. For more selections, visit our website.

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<th>ICELANDIC FESTIVALS</th>
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- **SÓNAR REYKJAVÍK**
  Founded in Barcelona as a festival for "advanced music and multimedia art" in 1994, Sónar has expanded to a number of cities around the world, becoming one of the most important event of the annual music calendar, including in Reykjavik.

- **DESIGNMARCH**
  For four days in March, Reykjavik fills with design related exhibitions, events and talks. It recently grew to include the annual Reykjavik Fashion Festival as well.

- **TECTONICS MUSIC FESTIVAL**
  Founded in Iceland by conductor Ilan Volkov, the annual Tectonics Festival is his attempt to get symphony orchestras to be more modern and experimental. Although it varies from year to year, the program is always an amalgamation of classical modern, improvisation, electronics and rock.

- **REYKJAVÍK FASHION FESTIVAL**
  The Reykjavik Fashion Festival is the main platform for the always daring and talented Icelandic fashion designers. The festival displays the development and opportunities in the Icelandic fashion industry.

- **ALDREI FÓR ÉG SUDUR**
  Every Easter weekend, Icelanders from all over the country flock to Ísafjörður, a small fishing hamlet in Iceland’s Westfjords. Why? To enjoy a notoriously fun and free rock festival founded to showcase local talent alongside biggest Icelandic names.

- **REYKJAVÍK ART FESTIVAL**
  A celebration of all things art, the Reykjavik Art Festival has been a staple of Reykjavik cultural life since 1970. The festival spans two weeks and takes place at a variety of venues around the city.

- **REYKJAVÍK SHORT & DOCS**
  A film festival that shares a selection of sexy, funny, outrageous, educational short films, animations and documentaries from around the globe.

- **DARK MUSIC DAYS**
  The annual new music festival Dark Music Days is an increasingly popular contemporary music event. The festival is held by the Iceland Composer Society in collaboration with most of the best performers in the country.

- **ICELAND WINTER GAMES**
  The northernmost slopestyle free ski competition of the season takes place in Akureyri, one of the most popular ski destinations in Iceland. This is unique opportunity for skiers and followers to discover and experience this truly magnificent town close to the Arctic Circle.
SKJALDBORG FILM FESTIVAL
The Skjaldborg film festival takes place over the Pentecost holiday in the small seaside town of Patreksfjörður. The festival provides filmmakers and documentary enthusiasts with an opportunity and a forum to discuss and enjoy what the rich and flourishing documentary filmmaking industry in Iceland has to offer.

REYKJAVÍK FILM FESTIVAL
RIFF takes place every year in late September for eleven days. The festival highlights independent filmmaking from all over the world with an emphasis on up-and-coming filmmakers. RIFF encourages the interaction of film with other art forms by organizing concerts, photo exhibitions and more.

LUNGA ART FESTIVAL
Held every summer in a small East Iceland town called Seyðisfjörður, the LungA Art festival attracts artists to participate in weeklong workshops and visitors to see the resulting exhibitions as well as to enjoy a closing concert with popular Icelandic bands.

ICELAND AIRWAVES
Every autumn, thousands of people fly to Reykjavík to attend Iceland Airwaves, a five-day music festival that sees hundreds of musicians perform at bars and cafés around town in addition to Harpa, Iceland’s relatively new concert hall and conference centre.

SEQUENCES
A ten-day festival that takes place every other year in Iceland, Sequences deals exclusively with real-time visual art, in particular time-based performances, sonic works, videos and public interventions.

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EISTNAFLUG
In a remote fjord on the Eastern coast of Iceland, the world’s friendliest devil-horn toting metalheads congregate for a weekend of crowd surfing and other metal related activities.

REYKJAVÍK PRIDE
Tens of thousands of Icelanders and visitors from abroad gather in downtown Reykjavík to take part in or watch the annual Reykjavík Pride Parade followed by an outdoor concert. Although the parade is arguably the highlight, a number of other festivities take place over the week.

LÓKAL
The international theater festival Lókal is an annual event in Reykjavík, hosting theatrical events from all over the world. The aim is to bring together Icelandic and international cutting edge theater.

REYKJAVÍK DANCE FESTIVAL
It is more than a festival – it is a community that places dancing and choreography at its center. A scene within which all those that participate, collectively push in search of other ways of doing, thinking, seeing, hearing, speaking, making and participating.

THE REYKJAVÍK INTERNATIONAL LITERARY FESTIVAL
Every September, the annual Reykjavík International Literary Festival puts on readings, seminars, interviews and discussions with both international and Icelandic authors.

REYKJAVÍK JAZZ FESTIVAL
The Reykjavík Jazz Festival presents the best in Icelandic jazz, flavored with exotic tastes from the international jazz scene.

ALL TOMORROW’S PARTIES
The international music festival All Tomorrow’s Parties has found its way to Iceland, where it takes place in an abandoned NATO air base by Keflavík, lending the entire event a peculiar backdrop for enjoying A-list attractions.

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Iceland On The Silver Screen

Speaking of otherworldly locations, Iceland has been featured frequently in the popular HBO series Game of Thrones. Scenes taking place North of the Wall are commonly shot in Iceland, but Icelandic nature can also be seen in other parts of Westeros.

“I have wanted to shoot in Iceland since I first visited in the 90’s. It is one of the most unique and inspiring landscapes on the planet,” says director Darren Aronofsky, whose epic tale of an ark builder called Noah (2014) was shot in Iceland. But, Aronofsky is hardly the only one. Filmmakers have long been lured to Iceland, inspired by its beauty, long daylight hours, and the varied landscapes that make it possible to create different worlds, all within a short distance.

Many may remember Clint Eastwood’s epic WW II drama, The Flags of Our Fathers (2006), depicting one side of the battle for Iwo Jima, and the men who were eternalized in one of the most iconic war photographs of our times. The film was shot almost entirely on the Reykjanes peninsula. Another example is Ben Stiller’s The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (2013), which was also shot largely in Iceland, with the country standing in for locations in Greenland, Afghanistan and the Himalayas (and Iceland, of course).

Lara Croft’s adventures in Tomb Raider (2001) were partially set in Siberia, with the Icelandic glacial lagoon Jökulsárlón standing in representing the icy tundra. Later, James Bond was involved in an epic car chase along the ice covered surface of the same lagoon in Die Another Day (2002). Interestingly enough, the very same lagoon was also used to shoot the opening scenes of A View to a Kill (1985), with Bond showing his considerable skiing talent in a wild escape from Russian baddies. In 2005, a ragged Bruce Wayne travelled to Bhutan to train with his mentor and later arch-villain Ra’s al Ghul and League of Shadows, in Christopher Nolan’s Batman Begins. As you may have guessed, these scenes were shot in Iceland, with the big fight shot in the exact same glacial lagoon.

While other superheroes, such as, Judge Dredd (1995) and The Mighty Thor (2013’s Thor: The Dark World) have also been filmed in Iceland, the otherworldly scenery has been used creatively in the sci-fi genre to stand in for both foreign planets, and post-apocalyptic earth. Prometheus (2013), Ridley Scott’s prequel to the Alien franchise, was largely shot in Iceland, with the particularly riveting opening scene shot by the waterfall Dettifoss. In Oblivion, Tom Cruise was also seen racing along the black sands of the Icelandic interior, which served as a version of a New England, following a nuclear war. Scenes from Interstellar (2014) and Star Trek: Into Darkness (2013) were also shot in Iceland.

Speaking of otherworldly locations, Iceland has been featured frequently in the popular HBO series Game of Thrones. Scenes taking place North of the Wall are commonly shot in Iceland, but Icelandic nature can also be seen in other parts of Westeros. And, it’s not only Icelandic nature that has been present on the show. Both Icelandic band Sigur Ros, and World Strongest Man competitor Hafthór Júlíus Björnsson have been featured as well.

Interested visitors can travel around the country visiting familiar scenes, which have been marked on a map at www.filminiceland.com.
LOVELY REYKJAVÍK

Small, safe and friendly, Reykjavík is a modern city with close ties to nature.
With a population of 120,000, Reykjavik is not a whirlwind metropolis. Few skyscrapers grace the skyline, traffic jams are rare and faces are familiar. But don’t be deceived—a steady beat of energy and events keeps the city alive and pulsing with excitement. Sunny days feel like spontaneous holidays in Reykjavik. Sunbathers and picnickers fill Austurvöllur, the green square in front of Parliament; locals and tourists alike stroll up and down Laugavegur, the main drag, shopping, stopping for coffee, and people watching. The thirsty jockey for sparse outdoor seating at bars as happy hour rolls around. Crooning buskers line the sidewalk; performance artists stage surprise acts; maybe a marching band appears from the ether. Anything can happen. Downtown Reykjavik (also known by its postal code as 101) is the nucleus of Iceland’s rich culture and arts scene. By day, café-culture rules supreme.
A steady hum of conversation keeps the city’s several cafés lively. With free wifi and refills on drip coffee being fairly common, Reykjavík’s café-goers like to linger until they’re sufficiently buzzed on the strong, dark elixir. As day turns into night, people start filing into many of the city’s excellent restaurants. Throughout 101, playful murals and street art testify to the city’s sense of creativity and fun. Art galleries such as the Reykjavik Art Museum and The National Gallery showcase the works of classic Icelandic artists, while smaller independent galleries display the projects of cutting-edge, contemporary Icelandic and international artists. Various museums preserve the culture and history of both the city and the country at large. Designated as a UNESCO City of Literature, Reykjavik is also the core of Iceland’s literary heritage where you’ll discover a treasure of literary works and a wealth of talented poets and authors.
ICELAND

IT IS NOT A DESTINATION
- IT IS AN ADVENTURE
ADVENTUROUS ICELAND

Adventure is always just around the corner in Iceland. Take a 20 minute drive in any direction and find yourself in the seclusion of Iceland’s spectacular landscapes. These landscapes, however, are hardly just for gaping at.
CREATED FOR THE EXTREME EXPERIENCE

Iceland was created for the extreme experience. With its abundance of mountains, volcanoes, glaciers, rivers, lakes, caves and otherwise rough terrain waiting to be tackled, Iceland is truly an outdoor enthusiast's paradise.

Hiking has long been a popular activity in Iceland and beautiful trails can be found in all parts of the country, from shorter day hikes to multi-day treks such as the 53 km long, world famous Laugavegur trail, which will take you past Eyjafjallajökull volcano and into the interior of Iceland. This is considered one of the most spectacular hiking trails in the world.

The Icelandic hillsides provide excellent opportunities for skiing and snowboarding from late fall through spring. Around the country, you will find excellent skiing resorts, in particular in the Westfjords, North Iceland, East Iceland, as well as closer to Reykjavik.

For those who would rather enjoy motorized adventures, it's possible to choose between guided snow mobile trips around Iceland's glaciers or jeep safaris across the highlands, Iceland's largely untouched interior.

Although Iceland doesn't immediately bring to mind water sports, they are alive and well on this North Atlantic island. Every kid in Iceland learns to swim in grade school and swimming remains a popular pastime for Icelanders of all ages. The geothermal energy under your feet is used to heat more than 170 public swimming pools around the country, and nothing says awesome like pulling over on the side of a gravel road to find one of Iceland's natural hot springs tucked away just out of sight.

To get the adrenaline pumping, visitors can also join the local sea swimming association for a cold dip in Nauthólsvík, windsurf in the bay or head out of town to check out some of Iceland's waves, where a small contingent of surfers can be found on most good days.

Be it the ocean or a glacial river, the cold water is nothing to be afraid of if you're prepared. White water river rafting, in fact, is a classic activity that has traditionally seen more Icelanders than tourists. Since 1983, more than 150,000 Icelanders, which is roughly half of today's population, have gone rafting down Hvítá River in South Iceland. More advanced rafters can also tackle 4+ grade rapids of Jökulsá River in East Iceland.

Being one of few islands sitting on the mid-Atlantic ridge, Iceland not only offers the rare opportunity to see this geological phenomena, but also the even more rare opportunity to snorkel or scuba dive between continental plates. Although we're talking about getting into a glacial river as it empties into Iceland's largest lake, Thingvallavatn, the cold water offers some of the best visibility in the world, allowing you to see clearly Earth's youngest crust pushing up and out approximately 2 centimetres per year.

Sharing Icelandic nature with its natural inhabitants is just as rewarding. Whether you are on board one of the many whale-watching boats around the country, taking in bird life, or trekking around the country on an Icelandic horse, the riveting beauty of the rugged landscape will never cease to amaze you.
STAY ACTIVE IN ICELAND

SURFING
In recent years, Iceland has garnered a reputation as a surf spot. The waves can be first class, although the sea temperature requires a particularly thick wetsuit. A small contingent of surfers goes out year round and a few tour operators cater specially to visitors.

SUPER JEEPING
Iceland’s highlands are rugged and snowy. However, it is possible to explore parts of the highlands via super jeep almost year round.

SNOWMOBILING
An exhilarating and perhaps less strenuous alternative to hiking, snowmobiling is a great way to experience Iceland’s various glaciers.

WHALE WATCHING
The most popular activity in Reykjavik is whale watching. Travel a little bit further, to North Iceland, and you’ll find some of the best whale watching in the country.

SALMON FISHING
Iceland is home to some of the best salmon fishing rivers in the world, and some of the world’s most famous salmon fishing enthusiasts regularly visit Iceland to flex their rods.

HIKING
From short day hikes to multi-day treks, Iceland’s mountains are ripe for all kinds of hiking with incredible views. In the southern part of Vatnajökull National Park, for instance, Skaftafell offers startling vistas of serrated peaks, shimmering icecaps, and barren flood plains stretching toward the sea.
DIVING
Although one typically associates diving and snorkelling with tropic islands and exotic fish, Iceland’s glacial water offer some of the greatest visibility in the world and the view of some of Earth’s youngest crust pushing up from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is spectacular.

RIVER RAFTING
For those not afraid of a little glacial water, Iceland has some great rivers for rafting and jumping in if tackling the rapids on the boat itself isn’t exhilarating enough.

KAYAKING
Iceland’s clear rivers are excellent for stream kayaking, and few things in life compare to sea kayaking in calm seas in a remote fjord.

CAVING
Lava tubes and other caves abound in Iceland. A small opening in the ground often leads you to an unexpectedly large world below, one that is full of geological formations such as stalagmites and stalactites that you won’t find elsewhere.

HORSEBACK RIDING
What better way to take in the Icelandic landscape than on horseback? Although they are smaller than the average horse, you would be remiss to call them ponies. With two extra gaits, Icelandic horses are a special ride.

ICE CLIMBING
Constantly melting and shifting, glaciers change from day to day. However, it’s always possible to find a vertical wall of ice and tours are offered year around for all skill levels.
SUSTAINABLE ICELAND

As a small island in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, Iceland has had to find ways to be as self-sufficient as possible. To that end, it uses all its resources to the fullest. Chief amongst those is renewable energy and fisheries.
A country that greatly depends on the sustainable management of its resources, environmental protection is a top priority for Iceland. The country is committed to the use of green energy and given the economy’s reliance on fisheries and seafood exports, the sustainable harvesting of living marine resources is both an economic and environmental priority.

Although it’s a myth that Iceland is the biggest banana producer in Europe, a number of greenhouses heated with geothermal energy allow Iceland to produce fruits and vegetables that would otherwise not grow in this climate. Fisheries has long been Iceland’s biggest industry and fish remain the country’s greatest export. To protect Icelandic fish stocks from overfishing, a quota system based on years of research was introduced in 1990 and has proved successful in protecting this important resource.

Reykjavik, which means ‘Smokey Bay,’ refers to the steam rising from nearby hot springs, which inhabitants used to wash their clothes in the early 20th century. In 1930, the first public building in Reykjavik was heated with geothermal energy. Today Icelanders use geothermal energy to heat 90% of buildings in the country and for 25% of the country’s electricity production. With the rest of Iceland’s energy needs met by emission-free hydropower, Iceland remains one of the greenest countries in the world.
ISELAND - GENERAL INFORMATION

PASSPORT AND VISA REGULATIONS
Iceland is an associate member of the Schengen Agreement, which exempts travelers from personal border controls between 22 EU countries. For residents outside the Schengen area, a valid passport is required for at least three months beyond date of entry. For information on passport and visa requirements as well as the Schengen area regulations, visit the website of the Icelandic Directorate of Immigration: www.utl.is/english

ARRIVAL IN ICELAND
Bus services are operated between Reykjavík and Keflavík International Airport in connection with all arriving and departing flights, and seats are guaranteed. Busses depart to and from Keflavík every 45-60 minutes. The drive between the airport and Reykjavík takes about 45 minutes. For departing flights, it is recommended that you take a bus leaving at least 2.5 hours before your scheduled departure. It is possible to arrange a hotel pickup. Taxi services are available to and from the airport. The car-ferry MS Nörrona sails weekly between Denmark, and Seyðisfjörður in East Iceland giving visitors the option of bringing their own vehicle for transport.

LANGUAGE
Icelandic is the national language. English is spoken widely and Danish is the third language taught in schools in Iceland.

MEDICAL ATTENTION
Pharmacies are called “Apótek” and are open during normal business hours. Only a few are open at night. Medical Care can be obtained by visiting a Health Care Centre, called “Heilsugaæslustöð” in Icelandic, during opening hours. For information, call +354-585-1300 or see www.heilsugaeslan.is Medical help: There is a medical centre or hospital in all major cities and towns in Iceland. The emergency phone number (24 hours) in Iceland is 112. Health insurance: Citizens of EEA countries must bring their EHIC card (European Health Insurance Card), otherwise they will be charged in full. Non-EEA citizens are not covered by the EEA regulations and will be charged in full. For further information, contact the Icelandic Health Insurance. Tel.: +354-515-0100, Fax: +354-515-0051 Office hours: 10:00–15:00. www.sjukra.is. Special vaccinations are not required to enter Iceland.

DRIVING IN ICELAND
Ring Road Nr. 1 around Iceland is 1,332 km (827 mi). The general speed limit is 50 km/h in urban areas, 80 km/h on gravel roads in rural areas, and 90 km/h on asphalt, rural roads. Major highways are paved. Most mountain roads are closed until the end of June, or even longer, because of snow and muddy conditions, which make them impassable. For more information, be sure to visit www.safetravel.is. Most roads in the interior of Iceland have a loose gravel surface, which is especially loose along the sides of the roads. The mountain roads are quite narrow and are not made for speeding. The same goes for some bridges that will only let one car cross at a time. Information on road conditions, tel.: +522-1000, daily 8:00–16:00. www.road.is.

All off-road driving and driving outside of marked tracks is prohibited by law. Icelandic nature is delicate and tire tracks from off-road driving can cause substantial damage to the vegetation and leave marks that will last for decades. Respect the nature and tread carefully. For some mountain tracks it is strongly advised that two or more cars travel together. Passengers in the front and backseats of an automobile are required by law to use safety-belts. Icelandic law forbids any driving under the influence of alcohol and driving while talking on a mobile phone is also banned.

NATIONAL PARKS
There are three National Parks in Iceland, each with its own particular points of interest. Thingvellir, is in a rift valley between the North Atlantic and Eurasian Plates. It is a site of historical and cultural as well as of geological importance, and is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Snæfellsjökull National Park includes a volcano and glacier, and is steeped in mystery and romance; it is the only Park that reaches from the seashore to the mountaintops. Vatnajökull National Park is the largest national park in Europe, covering an area of 13.600 km². The park encompasses, among other areas, the Vatnajökull glacier, Skaftafell, Jökulsárgljúfur, Lakagígar and Langisjör.
**BANKS AND POST OFFICES**

Opening hours are Mon–Fri, 9:00–16:00. 24-hour cash dispensers are found in cities and villages around the country. Look for the Hraðbanki sign. All major credit and debit cards are accepted, especially by hotels, restaurants, shops and petrol stations in Iceland. Traveller’s cheques are accepted at many hotels and tourist information centers. The major cards in Iceland are MasterCard and VISA. Currency exchange: The Icelandic monetary unit is the króna (ISK). All Icelandic banks provide foreign exchange. Post offices: General hours are Mon–Fri 09:00–18:00. More on postur.is/en

**CLIMATE AND CLOTHING**

Thanks to the Gulf Stream, Iceland enjoys a cool, temperate maritime climate; cool in summer and fairly mild in winter. However, the weather is very changeable and tourists should be prepared for the unexpected. For weather information in English, tel.: 902-0600. http://en.vedur.is. When travelling in Iceland you should bring along lightweight woollens, a sweater or cardigan, a rainproof (weatherproof) coat and sturdy walking shoes. Travellers who are camping or heading into the interior will need warm underwear and socks, rubber boots and a warm sleeping bag.

**SHOPPING**

Shops in Iceland are of international standard and carry a wide variety of merchandise. Local specialties include woolen knitwear (sweaters, hats and mittens, for example), ceramics, glassware and silver jewelry. General opening hours are 10–18. Saturdays 10/11–14/18. Visitors with permanent residence outside of Iceland can get a refund on Value Added Tax (VAT). Further info can be found online.

**QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Vakinn is the official quality assurance organization for Icelandic tourism. Only companies that maintain the highest standards in all aspects of business practices and meet a comprehensive assessment criteria have earned the right to carry Vakinn – Iceland tourism’s official quality label. When you see a business displaying the Vakinn symbol, you can be assured that it is trustworthy and professional. Accommodation locales are divided into several categories. Within each category, ratings from one to five stars may be awarded, as is generally known.

**USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS**

Emergency number: 112  
Police: 444 1000  
Medical assistance: 1770  
Information: 1818