

Iceland – Gyr Falcons and the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Keflavik & transfer Hotel Kríunes.

Day 2/4 Fly Akureyri; excursions from Mývatn.

Day 5 Fly London.

Departs

February and March

Focus

Birds, landscapes, geology and the Northern Lights

Grading

A. Easy to moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ISL02) or brochure

Highlights

- 3 nights on the edge of Lake Mývatn, a stronghold of the Gyr Falcon
- Venture out after dark in search of the Northern Lights
- Look for Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck, Snow Bunting & Ptarmigan
- Visit boiling mud pools, cinder cones & steaming fumaroles
- Dramatic volcanic landscapes of north Iceland
- Swim in Icelandic thermal baths
- Led by an expert naturalist guide



Images from top: Northern Lights at Mývatn (by M.Stott), Gyr Falcon (by W. Leppard), Goðafoss (by K.Porteus)



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Introduction

During the height of the Arctic summer the dramatic volcanic island of Iceland is bathed in 24-hour daylight. As the summer sun sinks lower in the sky, however, and winter's icy grip gradually takes hold, the nights lengthen and heavens darken to reveal one of the natural world's greatest spectacles, the ethereal flickerings of the Aurora Borealis, or 'Northern Lights'. The Aurora has been a source of wonder and mystery for thousands of years and, although we now understand the science behind the spectacle, these mesmerising - other worldly - lights still transfix all that witness it to this day.

To enjoy the Aurora Borealis at its best we must head north and position ourselves under the *Auroral Oval*, a 'doughnut-shaped' expanse of atmosphere that sits over the Earth's magnetic north pole. This oval expands or contracts with the intensity of the solar wind, the stream of hot plasma ejected from the sun which reacts with gas molecules in the upper atmosphere creating the light display itself. When solar wind activity is high the aurora often take the form of dancing curtains which evolve and change continuously, each curtain consisting of many parallel rays lined up with the direction of the magnetic field. At other times it may take the form of a slowly pulsing green, blue or red glow in the sky. We have based this tour in northern Iceland, not only because it lies further under the Auroral Oval, but because the weather is typically drier than in the south and west. We will spend the nocturnal looking skyward in search of the Aurora and the hours of daylight exploring the dramatic landscapes of northern Iceland enjoying the winter birdlife and geothermal features of this geologically active island.



Northern Lights (by Ann Miles)

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Keflavik, overnight Reykjavik

We depart from London Heathrow on an early afternoon flight to Keflavik, Iceland's main international gateway. Arriving in the late afternoon, we will transfer the 45 minutes to Hotel Kriunes, our base for the evening on the outskirts of Reykjavik. Our hotel is comfortable and

welcoming for our first night Iceland, boasting beautiful views over Lake Elliðavatn, but most importantly it is away from the city's lights! This evening, when darkness falls, we will gather outside and look across the lake and upwards to the heavens, in the hope that the skies will be clear and the Aurora on show. The Northern Lights can be active at any time after dark, but activity tends to peak around midnight. We can therefore expect late nights on this tour, but no compulsory early mornings!

Days 2 – 4

Mývatn

We will take a short flight this morning from Reykjavik's domestic airport to the town of Akureyri in the north of the island. From Akureyri we head east through the dramatic scenery of north Iceland to Lake Mývatn and the beautifully positioned Hotel Mývatn which will be our base for the next three nights of the tour. Our hotel overlooks the lake and offers a wonderfully open panorama from which to enjoy the Northern Lights. It is also on the flight path of the local Gyr Falcons! We will return here each evening to gaze upwards to the heavens in the hope that the skies will be clear and the Aurora on show.



Godafoss (Jenny Thynne)

Our journey to Mývatn is likely to be through a beautiful snowy landscape, past frozen lakes and white mountains. En route we will stop at Goðafoss (the 'Waterfall of the Gods'), a spectacular waterfall typically frozen at this time of year. It is said that law speaker and chieftain Phorgeir flung his pagan idols into the falls after making Christianity Iceland's official religion in the year 1,000 AD.

During the daylight hours we will focus our attention on the scenic delights of north Iceland and the limited wildlife on offer at this time of year. Our exact itinerary will be kept flexible to take



Gyr Falcon (Kerrie Porteous)

account of the weather, local road conditions, recent sightings and bed time the previous night! Nearby Lake Mývatn, one of Iceland's foremost birdwatching spots in the spring, is likely to be mostly frozen, but there will be areas of open water. Incidentally, Mývatn means 'midge lake' ('vatn' is the Icelandic for lake). The midges are mostly non-biting flies that hatch in huge numbers in the summer; fortunately in the winter months 'Midge-Lake' is midge free! As we travel around the lake, we'll be keeping our eyes peeled for Gyr Falcon, the largest of the world's falcon species. In another month or so the local Gyr Falcons will take up their nesting

sites and become a little more elusive, but at this time of year they are frequently spotted around the lake, with some groups having seen three, four, or even five different individuals during their stay!

Most of the summer birds will have yet to arrive from further south, but we still need to keep our eyes open for a few lingering ducks, which should include Barrow's Goldeneye, and perhaps a family party of Whooper Swans or geese. Snow Buntings are often recorded around the lake shores, whilst a little further inland Ptarmigan are common. The winter landscape here is spectacular and we will stop frequently to take short walks and to admire the cinder cone of Hverfjall, the Pseudo-craters and the peculiar lava formations at Dimmuborgir, and the birch forest at Höfði.



Barrow's Goldeneye (Wendy Leppard)

We will also venture north to the coast at Husavik for a spot of coastal birdwatching. Here we hope to see Iceland Gull and its big cousin, the 'Burgomaster', or Glaucous Gull. Curiously, Iceland Gulls do not breed in their eponymous land, they only winter here! Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck are usually in evidence and we will make a special effort to find the beautiful Harlequin Duck that breeds inland but usually winters in the surf on the coast.



Left: Ptarmigan (Wendy Leppard) Right: Snow Buntings (Charles McMaster)

Iceland sits astride the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, that great cleft in the Earth's surface that runs north/south through the centre of the Atlantic Ocean. Mývatn and its surroundings sit directly on top of the ridge and to this day is very geologically active. One of the most accessible pockets of geothermal activity is to be found at Námafjall and Krafla, a short distance from Mývatn. Here boiling mud pools, high pressure steam vents and steaming fumaroles create an alien landscape of yellow sulphur deposits and swirling clouds of steam. These are in turn surrounded by vast black rocky lava fields, some from eruptions as recent as the 1980s.

After a full day of admiring the winter scenery and birdlife of north Iceland, there will be an opportunity one evening to visit the Mývatn Nature Baths to relax in some of the beautifully warm thermal waters for which Iceland is famous, before returning to our hotel for our evening meal. We will have plenty of daylight to explore Iceland's diurnal landscapes, and plenty of darkness to turn our attention skyward in the hope of enjoying the Northern Lights.

Day 5

London

This morning we must make our way back to Akureyri in time to catch our short flight to Reykjavik. Depending on our flight time, there should be a little time to explore this small and colourful European capital before we transfer back to Keflavik Airport and connect with our late afternoon return flight to London.

Tour grading

Grade A - We enjoy a mixture of sightseeing by minibus and plenty of short walks over generally flat terrain. Please note, however, that it is very likely to be snowy and icy, particularly around Myvatn, so an average level of fitness and the ability to walk confidently on icy surfaces is required to get the most out of this tour. Taking removable crampons that fit onto the soles of your shoes (such as 'Yetis' or 'YakTrax') will make walking much easier if it's icy.

Focus

During the day we will focus on the beautiful winter landscapes, the geological features, and the birds of northern Iceland. After dark, we turn our attention skyward in the hope of enjoying a display of the 'Aurora Borealis' or Northern Lights. Please note, however, that the Northern Lights are a natural phenomenon and, as such, there are no guarantees that there will be a display during the dates of our visit. Any journey north in search of the Aurora is somewhat of a gamble and, whilst we will put you in the right place to witness a display, whether or not one will take place (and its intensity) is subject to a variety of variables outside of Naturetrek's control; the two most important



Left: Northern Lights over Myvatn (Malcolm Stott). Right: Enjoying the Myvatn Nature Baths (Wendy Leppard)

of which are cloud cover and the level of solar activity during your visit. Displays can occur at any time of night; often around midnight, sometimes much later. Your tour leader and hotel staff will be keeping an eye on the skies, but those rewarded with the best views are often those who stay up late!

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included throughout the tour. We will be staying for 1 night at Hotel Kríunes on the outskirts of Reykjavik, followed by 3 nights at Hotel Mývatn. The hotels we use for this tour are comfortable, but not luxurious in nature; all rooms have private bathrooms, and tea and coffee making facilities and hairdryers in the rooms. Free Wi-Fi is available at both hotels. Breakfast and dinner will be enjoyed at our accommodation, whilst we normally take a packed lunch to keep us going during the day. Please bring a thermos if you would like to take a hot drink out with you during the day (we also plan tea / coffee stops most days).

Moon cycles

The winter months between November and February offer the darkest skies and longest evenings for gazing at the sky, whilst auroral activity can be stronger in October and March. The phases of the moon do not affect auroral activity, though a weak display of the Northern Lights may be harder to see during the brightest phases of the moon as the moonlight may reduce its intensity. Watching a display of the Northern Lights, however, with the foreground light by the moonlight, can be an incredible experience. It very much comes down to personal preference as to when the best time to travel is (and of course, clear skies and solar activity will always help!).



A particularly snowy year at Mývatn! (Jenny Thynne)

Weather

The north and north-east of Iceland is typically drier and colder than the south-west of the country around the capital. Average annual precipitation for Mývatn is only 40 cm in contrast to Reykjavik which gets over double that amount. Typically there is snow cover throughout much of the winter and this usually extends into March. You should expect cold weather on this tour, with daytime temperatures around freezing and night-time temperatures dipping somewhat below that. The weather in February is typically calmer than earlier in the late autumn/early winter, but the occasional stormy period with snow (or occasionally rain) and high winds is not unusual.

Regional flights

We are happy to organise regional flights to and from Iceland wherever possible. Currently, flights depart several times a week from Glasgow and Birmingham (Icelandair), London Gatwick (Icelandair

and Wow air), Manchester (easyJet and Icelandair), and Edinburgh, Bristol, Belfast and London Luton (all with easyJet). As these flights do not always fit in perfectly with the tour dates or group flight times, we would be happy to arrange additional accommodation in Iceland before and / or after the tour to enable you to travel from your preferred airport.

Extending your holiday

You are only likely to have a few hours to explore Reykjavik during this holiday, so anyone that wishes to spend a bit more time in the capital might like to consider extending their holiday with a couple of extra nights in Reykjavik before or after the main tour. From here you can also take a full day excursion to enjoy the 'Golden Circle', which includes Geysir and the beautiful Gullfoss waterfall, or to the famous 'Blue Lagoon' thermal spa. This is easy to arrange; please contact the Naturetrek office for further advice.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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