

Iceland – Northern Lights & Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Keflavik
- Day 2** 'Golden Circle' tour
- Day 3/4** Excursions & whale-watching trip from Stykkisholmur
- Day 5** Fly London

Departs

February / March

Focus

Landscapes, birds, cetaceans and the Northern Lights

Grading

A. Easy to moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ISL04) or brochure

Highlights

- Visit Geysir, & Gullfoss ('Golden Falls'), Iceland's most beautiful waterfall
- Venture out after dark in search of Northern Lights
- Look for wintering sea-ducks and White-tailed Eagles
- Stay on the Snaefellsnes peninsula and join a whale-watching tour to look for Orca and White-beaked Dolphins
- Enjoy the beautiful landscapes that inspired Jules Verne's "Journey to the Centre of the Earth"



From top: Orca by Kirkjufell (C Kinsey), Harlequin Duck, Northern Lights at Stykkisholmur (S Byland)



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Introduction

In the depths of winter, many holiday-makers journey south in search of some winter warmth and relaxation. We hope, however, that those with an adventurous spirit and the desire for a rather different, exciting winter break, might consider an alternative destination this winter! Allow us to tempt you north instead — to Iceland, a land of volcanoes, bubbling mud-pools, waterfalls, glaciers and some surprising winter wildlife! If that isn't enough to tempt you, the winter months are also the best time to look skyward in the hope of witnessing nature's most breathtaking light show, the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights.

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

Reykjavik

We depart from London on an early afternoon flight to Keflavík, Iceland's main international gateway and on arrival we drive towards the capital Reykjavik and to cozy country hotel next to lake.

This evening, when darkness falls, we will gather to gaze upwards to the heavens in the hope that the skies will be clear and the Aurora on show. Our tour leader will begin the evening with a 'camera clinic', in order to ensure that any keen photographers in the group will be fully primed and ready, should the Aurora appear, to capture the event for posterity! The Northern Lights can be active at any time after dark, but activity tends to peak around midnight. Whilst we will be well placed for the light show, only 'mother nature' will decide whether or not display will



Northern Lights (by Ann Miles)

take place with such factors as cloud cover and solar activity being out of Naturetrek's control! We hope, however, that both will work in our favour and we will end our days in Iceland mesmerised by dancing curtains of green and red light over a snowy lava-scape.

Day 2

Our hotel is ideally located to begin our exploration of South Iceland. We will spend much of today visiting some of the most celebrated landscapes from thunderous (or quite possibly frozen!) waterfalls to a geological phenomenon that gave its name to the word, Geyser, and the tranquil countryside of Þingvallir. We may choose to visit the 'Alþing' – parliamentary meeting place – and will enjoy the stunning views of Þingvallavatn, where pure glacial waters from the Langjökull Glacier travel some 40 kilometres before emerging here to form Iceland's largest freshwater lake. We must also keep our eyes peeled for Barrow's Goldeneye, which can often be spotted on the nearby river at this time of year.

After a full day spent enjoying some spectacular scenery, we return to our hotel for dinner and look for northern lights.



Strokkur (by Malcolm Stott)

Days 3 – 4

Stykkishólmur

Leaving the capital we drive north for around 3 hours to the dramatic Snæfellsnes Peninsula, winding our way through the wild and frozen landscape of western Iceland. We will be based for the next 2 nights in Hotel Stykkishólmur, which is located on the edge of the attractive village of Stykkishólmur on the northern coast of the peninsula. Then, for the next two days, we will focus our attention on the scenic and wildlife delights of this beautiful coastline. Our exact itinerary will be kept flexible to take account of the weather, local road conditions, recent sightings and bed time the previous night!

In recent years, large shoals of Herring have gathered during the winter in sheltered fjords off the peninsula, and whilst Herring attract a multitude of sea birds and are the favoured feast of numerous cetaceans, by far their most formidable nemesis is the ocean's top predator, the Orca or 'Killer Whale'. Pods of Orca have been seen regularly in the Grundarfjörður area over the past few years, feasting on the fish during the winter months. One afternoon, therefore, we will wrap up warm against the arctic chill and head out onto the icy waters of Grundarfjörður, which is located approximately 30 minutes from Stykkishólmur. The Orca watches last for around three hours. They are, however, weather dependent and will not run if the seas are rough or the visibility poor! We will keep our fingers crossed for calm conditions and trust in the skill of the vessel's captain who will employ their wealth of knowledge on the area, and the movement of the whales, to ensure the very best chance of an encounter with this sleek and powerful predator.

As we scan the ocean around us, we should also be on the lookout for pods of speedy White-beaked Dolphins which are frequently seen streaking past, as well as Humpback and Minke Whales which are seen in this area on occasion. Some years, Orca and White-beaked Dolphin have regularly swum into the inner fjord near Grundarfjörður, and should our visit coincide with this activity, our tour leader knows the best places to enjoy great views from land.



Orca (by Peter Dunn)

Throughout our explorations of this coastline we will also enjoy the flocks of seabirds including Gannets, Kittiwakes and Fulmars which all prey on Herring from above, plus the likes of Black Guillemot, Common Guillemot, Common Eider, Red-throated Diver, and perhaps a group of Harlequin Ducks risking life and limb in the shoreline surf. This is also a good area to look for White-tailed Eagle, and on rare occasions we have even spotted the mighty Gyr Falcon!

During our stay in Stykkishólmur we will also spend time enjoying some of the dramatic landscapes of this spectacular region of Iceland including 'Snæfellsjökull', the large, gently sloping shield volcano at the western tip of the peninsula and the doorway into the planet's interior chosen by Jules Verne for his book 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. Later in the evening, we will once again look towards the night sky, hoping that a clear night and some solar activity will keep us entertained long after dark!

Day 5

Transfer to Keflavík, Fly London

This morning we will gradually make our way back south towards Keflavík airport. Depending upon how the long journey takes (which very much depends on the winter weather conditions), there may be a little time to explore the Reykjanes Peninsula before we transfer to Keflavík Airport in time to catch our flight back to London.

Tour Grading

Grade A - This is an easy tour with gentle short walks and sightseeing by minibus. Although west Iceland is a little milder and wetter than the north of the island, it is likely to be snowy and icy underfoot in places so an average level of fitness is required to get the most out of this tour.

Focus

During the day we will focus on visiting the region's spectacular landscapes, searching for cetaceans and enjoying the limited winter birdlife of west Iceland. Please be aware that the whale-watching excursion is dependent on the weather and will not operate if it is windy and the sea conditions are rough. We will keep our itinerary flexible to take advantage of the best weather for our whale watching tour, but if it is not possible to go out onto the water we will instead turn our attention to looking for cetaceans from land and enjoying the region's stunning scenery and limited birdlife.

After dark, we turn our attention to the skies in the hope of enjoying a show of the Northern Lights. 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.



Searching for cetaceans (by Charles Kinsey)

Please also note the following:

1) From winter 2011/12, Orca have followed the movement of Herring into the sheltered fjords around Grundarfjörður, arriving around mid-December, and staying until mid-April. For three years, February, March and early April were the most successful months for whale watching, with almost daily sightings both from land and from whale-watching excursions. In November 2014 the Herring and the whales arrived in the waters off Grundarfjörður as usual, but from the early part of January to mid-February sightings were less frequent, before beginning to increase once again in March. The reasons for this are not fully understood, though possibilities include a reduction in the amount of Herring in the fjord, and the exceptional (extremely stormy) weather conditions in early 2015. Although sightings can never be guaranteed, this behaviour was contrary to that of the previous years when there had been regular sightings of Orca between mid-December and mid-April.

2) 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 of which are cloud cover and the level of solar activity during your visit. Since western Iceland does tend to suffer from somewhat wetter and cloudier conditions than the north-east of the island, those people interested primarily in viewing the Northern Lights might

also consider our 'Iceland - Gyr Falcons and Northern Lights' tours departing in February and March which are based around Lake Mývatn. For further details please call 01962 733051.

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 incredibly magical experience. The best time to travel very much comes down to personal preference!

Regional flights

We are happy to organise regional flights to and from Iceland wherever possible. Currently, flights depart several times a week from Glasgow (Icelandair), 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 nights of accommodation in Iceland before and / or after the tour to enable you to travel from your preferred airport.



White-tailed Eagle (by Jari Peltomaki)

Weather

You should expect cold weather on this tour, with daytime temperatures only a few degrees above freezing and night-time temperatures dipping somewhat below that. Iceland has a maritime climate so does experience wet and windy periods from time to time throughout the winter months. You will need to wrap up warm for the whale watching excursion, and thermal suits are provided by the boat operators.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included throughout the tour, except for lunch on Day 1 en-route to Iceland. We will be staying for the first 2 nights in a countryside hotel near the capital followed by 2 nights at Hotel Stykkishólmur.

All rooms have private facilities, hairdryers in the rooms and free Wi-Fi access. Breakfast and dinner will be enjoyed at our accommodation. Breakfasts are buffet style and you will be able to choose a lunch from a convenient store or café. Your leader will also keep a supply of snacks in the vehicle. Please bring a thermos flask for hot drinks.

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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