

# THE LAND of FIRE AND ICE

Snowmobiling across a glacier, swimming in a blizzard, and the craziest and longest fireworks spectacular in the world were all on the cards for *Norah Casey's* trip to Iceland. And she went to the world's only phallogical museum...yes it is what you think it is.



**S**nowmobiling across a glacier has to be one of the most kickass ways of starting a new year. Swooshing across a pristine white expanse of snow in the few hours of daylight in

Iceland on the last day of 2015 dressed like a Michelin man is way up there as one of my life's great experiences. If you haven't been, then let me give you a glimpse of this strange and spectacular island. There is nowhere quite like Iceland. The lava fields, glaciers, fiery volcanoes, pitch-black sandy beaches and steaming geothermal springs create a sense of otherworldliness. This surreal landscape has been the backdrop to many Hollywood blockbusters including the recently-released *Star Wars* movie. So although it's only a two hour (and surprisingly affordable) flight from Ireland it feels like a million light years away. This is a place that US astronauts use as a training ground for landing on the moon. Now, thanks to WOW Air you can fly there direct from Dublin.

A visit to Iceland is a real life geography lesson where the power of Mother Nature is up close and personal – and she is without doubt the boss of this country. If you wonder about the power that she can unleash then cast your mind back to that

erupting volcano with the unpronounceable name that caused chaos in the skies and halted air traffic across Europe in 2010. And yet by Iceland's standards the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano was pretty small. What's even more extraordinary is that the eruption led to another explosion – that of tourism. In just two years tourist numbers rocketed to a million, a pace of change that Icelanders have yet to catch up with. And while we're banking on an uplift from Skellig Michael's appearance in *The Force Awakens*, one of our guides told me that the *Star Wars* film crew came back on three occasions to different parts of Iceland, that he definitely spotted Stormtroopers on the side of a volcano and on another occasion he was fairly sure he could see Chewbacca in the distance in the south of the island. So tourism is set to rise steadily into the future.

The kick starter was the volatility of the 2010 eruption that grounded planes but also intrigued intrepid travellers keen on adventure. And there is plenty of drama to be had. Earthquakes are a daily occurrence, mostly low level – last May, Reykjavik was hit with a four and a few months previously a nearby town experienced one just over three on the Richter scale. They pretty much take this level of earthquake in their stride (over six is significant). There are over one hundred volcanoes in the central region with around 30 or so considered active. Iceland has a major



volcanic eruption around every five years or so. It's planet earth's youngest country, created from millions of years of volcanic activity and it is still constantly growing. Back in 1963 an underwater eruption created a new island called Surtsey off the south coast.

It is the only place on earth where you can see the mid-Atlantic ridge above sea level. One morning we ventured forth to the valley of Thingvellir to see this miracle of nature first hand ([thingvellir.is](http://thingvellir.is)). This is where the massive tectonic plates of America and Eurasia thrust up against

each other, shoving and pushing, causing all those earthquakes. But the two massive plates also drift apart in places, allowing magma to spew to the surface, creating new land as it cools – about 2.5 centimeters annually. It's quite something to have one foot in America and one in Europe!

While back in Ireland we're wondering if there's enough salt for the roads during an icy spell this is a country that lives with constant seismic activity, gurgling lava and shifting plates. On the plus side all that geothermal activity provides the majority of hot water and heating in Iceland, making it one of the cleanest countries in the world.

Maybe it is the precariousness of living at the whim of Mother Nature or the remoteness of the island but it's not just the landscape that's a bit different. This is a country that gave the world Björk. Here's a rundown of some of the quirkiest stuff. There are no surnames in Iceland. You're named as your father's daughter or son. A friend of mine is the daughter of Thomas so her surname is Tómasdóttir. Her husband is named after his father so he's Jóns Stefánsson and their son and daughter's surnames are Jónsson and Jónsdóttir – so they have four different surnames. The telephone directory lists people by first name and you have to apply to the naming committee if you want to introduce a new name that's not on the approved list.

It has the the lowest crime rate in the world (only 150 prisoners in the whole country out of a population of 330,000!). The language is strange and ancient and they have 46 words for snow. They are the world's most consummate book readers and writers. *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ancient stories that trace the lives of their ancestors circa 1,000 AD are among the most historically significant texts in the world. Icelanders can still read the Sagas in their original Old Norse writings and rather than opt for English words for new technologies or devices such as the mobile phone, television or computer they create a name from ancient Viking words. Many Icelanders believe in elves (hidden people) and mystical powers.

Much of Iceland in the coastal areas and to the north is deserted with the highest population in Reykjavik of around 120,000, which is similar to Cork – except it occupies a land area similar to Paris. It's a huge low rise sprawl.

Downtown Reykjavik is really just one main street. Most of the shops

feature Icelandic jumpers and cute, cuddly, furry puffins which also appear on most menus, along with minke whale and fermented shark.

They're crazy for fireworks. New Year's Eve was indescribable. Hours beforehand the fireworks started popping sporadically around Reykjavik and by midnight they were exploding everywhere, 360 degrees of the most prolonged, uncoordinated explosion of lights and sounds. Everywhere you looked blazing trails, fountains and swirls of sparkles fought for attention.

## ICELANDIC BANANAS

Extraordinarily, given that it snows for at least five months of the year, Iceland is Europe's largest banana grower through the wonders of geothermally heated greenhouses around Hveragerði – a town rocked by an earthquake measuring 6.3 in 2008. It sits on a 5,000-year-old lava field and is just 45 km from Reykjavik, so is well worth a visit. The town claims to be the hot springs capital of the world (the earthquake added a whole new area of mud and hot spring activity on its hillside). The Geothermal Park is a rustic spa treatment area where you can dip your feet in mud and wash in the warm springs. Just make sure you have a map of where's safe, because there are other pools where you can cook eggs and bake bread. Round it off with a visit to the earthquake simulator in the town's museum where you can experience a quake above six on the Richter scale.



## POOL HANGOUTS

Swimming pools and baths are the focal point for Icelandic life where young and old go most days, to chill out and catch up on the gossip. As well as the public pools there is the famous Blue Lagoon, the ethereal blue lake that is the most visited attraction in Iceland. Back in the 1980s, locals started to visit this man-made lagoon believing that the waters had skin healing properties. The lagoon is actually fed from the silica and sulfur rich water output of a geothermal power plant. In 1992 it opened officially to the public and soon after myself and my late husband Richard went to visit. There was a rustic area for showering and we ran over slippery rocks in the snow to get under the water as fast as we could. There was just us and a few others swimming in the lagoon. Now it is booked out well in advance so it's busy all the time. You can swim up to a bar and sip Prosecco under the stars, book a table in the restaurant afterwards or avail of a VIP experience with personal changing rooms. It's still a beautiful experience, even with the crowds. [bluelagoon.com](http://bluelagoon.com)



“NOTHING CAN QUITE PREPARE YOU FOR THE ASCENT UP A MOUNTAIN WITH A JEEP PLUNGING DEEP INTO SEVERAL FEET OF SNOW”



## SNOWMOBILING

Nature in all her spectacular glory is the main reason to visit Iceland. We spent five days, enough to sample some of its treasures. If you want to try the ultimate thrill of scooting across a glacier on a snowmobile then here's how we did it. Driving up the mountain to get to Iceland's second largest glacier Langjökull is not for the fainthearted – happily for us we went with Mountaineers of Iceland and someone else (Gummi) was at the wheel of the super Jeep. Iceland had more snow in December than it has had for the past ten years so the roads were treacherous. We started out in what, by Irish standards, would have been impossible driving conditions but this is a country that lives with snow for most of the winter and a few feet doesn't phase them. But nothing can quite prepare you for the ascent up a mountain with a Jeep plunging deep into several feet of snow. Even by Iceland's standards this was extreme. And it was dark for most of the journey as we raced against time to hit the glacier during daylight hours and got back down before the pitch blackness descended again. It got light around 11am and waned again around 3pm.

At times it looked like we were destined to join the many others we saw stranded on the side of the road waiting for rescue. In blizzard-like conditions Gummi hung his head out the window to try to get visibility on the road markers – virtually impossible as all you could see was a glimpse of the tip of the three foot yellow poles that straddled the route. As we neared the summit our intrepid driver got out to let air out of the tyres so that we could stay on top of the snow (on the way back down we stopped to put air back in). The jeep creaked and pitched as it plunged through the snow dunes and at times came to a standstill. Dara and I began to rummage through our backpacks to see how long our food and water provisions would last if we were stranded. It was a complete white out for the most part – impossible to tell where we were going. We thought we were hopelessly lost for the final half hour. Gummi was unusually quiet but then again he was trying to steer through three foot drifts with his head out the window. Then, suddenly the incongruous sight of a hut in the distance, a speck on the horizon.

And was it worth it? Heck yes. We stumbled through the snow into the basecamp and struggled into waterproof suits and helmets and headed out for a quick lesson. Soon we were off sliding across the snow. It was magical.



Geothermal pools near Hvítá River

Strokkur gushing skywards like clockwork



## SOMETHING YOU DON'T SEE EVERYDAY

Right across from our hotel was the proudly titled the Icelandic Phallogical Museum and I wondered if there was a chain and I had somehow missed the Irish or French version on my travels. But apparently not because it boldly states that it is the 'only one of its kind in the world'. I had to visit (once in a lifetime and all that...). After a while I had seen enough penises to do me a lifetime. There are more than 200 penises and penile parts, the man at the ticket desk told me proudly. Floating eerily in gigantic tubes of formaldehyde are various types of ghostly specimens from various mammals – whales, elephants, zebra, seals, a rogue polar bear (that's how it's listed!) and three homosapiens. I read the framed letter from one of the men who donated his – hard to explain really, something to do with posterity. I can tell you, however, that mankind didn't compare favourably to the other specimens. After a while, and especially after my mother called to see how I was getting on (there is no good way of saying I am in a room full of floating penises) I shuffled closer to the door as a couple giggled into a penis telephone under the glow of the stretched scrotum overhead lamps. It was different.

[phallus@phallus.is](mailto:phallus@phallus.is); [phallus.is](http://phallus.is);



“FLOATING EERILY IN GIGANTIC TUBES OF FORMALDEHYDE ARE VARIOUS TYPES OF GHOSTLY SPECIMENS FROM VARIOUS MAMMALS - AND THREE HOMOSAPIENS”

## THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

You can combine snowmobiling with a tour of the Golden Circle, a very accessible one-day trip around some of the great sights within driving distance from Reykjavik. Earlier that day we visited the historic Thingvellir National Park, where in 930AD (around the time of the *Sagas*) Iceland's first parliament was founded. It was dark and difficult to see anything but we returned there a few days later on a quest to see the Northern Lights.

On the way back I stood far too long in the freezing cold waiting for Strokkur to perform. Every seven or eight minutes this ancient geyser erupts up to 30 or 40 metres high – and even though you know it's going to happen, I, and the small crowd gathered around, shrieked every time it did. I had to drag myself away. Strokkur and the world's original Geysir (from which the name is derived) are in a geothermal area near the Hvítá (White) River which starts life in a lake on the Langjökull glacier where we had just snowmobiled. And afterwards we followed it on to the spectacular Gullfoss (Golden) Waterfall which literally took my breath away.



Icy Gullfoss Waterfall shrouded in a wintery white mist

“WE PORED OVER THE VARIOUS WEBSITES FOR RATINGS OF SOLAR ACTIVITY AND PREDICTIONS OF CLOUD COVER”



## THE SPECTACLE OF GULLFOSS

This was one of the most magnificent vistas among many contenders in Iceland. I have never seen a frozen waterfall and on the day we went sub zero temperatures created improbably beautiful ice spikes and a wintery white mist with the thundering river pummeling downward. It was wild and powerful and an awesome display of nature at its best. On sunny days the Gullfoss shows off her gentle side with stunning rainbows. It also took my breath away because the wind-chill tore into the multiple thermal layers and made it impossible to linger too long – my eyes were in danger of freezing up! Black ice made it difficult to get too close to the side of waterfall but I got close enough to feel the icy spray on my face. Exhilarating.

A walk along the harbour front became a daily ritual with the ever changing colours of the sea, sky and snow covered mountains. We also went to the top of the Hallgrímskirkja, Iceland's largest church, and looked out over the snow-topped roofs of Reykjavik. Most areas downtown are walkable but we also did a bus tour to see some of the famous landmarks and get a feel for the city.

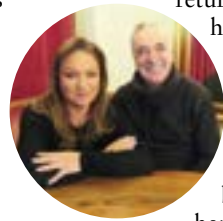
The Northern Lights have been top of my wishlist for some time and for two nights running we chased them, pored over the various websites for ratings of solar activity and predictions of cloud cover. I spent hours resetting my camera and stood well past midnight knee deep in snow. Almost every day I met someone who had seen them but sadly it wasn't to be. And although it would have been amazing to have finally seen them there were so many other spectacular sights in Iceland. I left feeling invigorated for the year ahead and with a small glimmer of excitement that I had the perfect excuse to come back and continue my quest to see those dancing lights in the sky. Some day.





## WHERE TO STAY

We stayed in a gem of a place, Hlemmur Square, right in the heart of downtown Reykjavik. This is a really funky art deco boutique hotel and hostel (it has apartments too). It has a hipster-vibe, high on style and low on fuss. The quirky decor and statement pieces added to the charm – a chess table (well used, including by us), leather armchairs, a boudoir-style mirror strewn dining area, mismatched chairs and tables and statement art that added colour and interest. I loved it and so did my fellow travelers. Also the unique combination of guests from hostel-staying backpackers to men in suits made it all the more eclectic. The staff were friendly and helpful, the bar was buzzy, breakfast was relaxed and DIY which was surprisingly nice given that I'm not much into chatting to anyone first thing (I even got the hang of using the waffle maker). Supper was simple and tasty. The bedrooms were perfect. Iceland style furnishings, clean lines, wrap



around balconies and a view across the colourful roof tops of the city. And it excelled at essentials. After long days of trudging through snow and almost incessant icy blizzard like conditions, it was sublime to return to the warmth of Hlemmur. A long hot (geothermally powered) shower, fluffy towels and then slinking between crisp fine linen sheets with marshmallow pillows and wrapped in the light as air, duvet. This unique hotel/hostel is the brainchild of Klaus Ortlieb (pictured here with me), the entrepreneurial hotelier that created the Gotham Hotel in New York City and many others besides. He's very much in evidence at Hlemmur Square, charming, funny and chatty. This was a really pleasant place to spend time in. It just worked on many levels – great price, great location and much more besides. *Hlemmur Square; Laugavegur 105, 105 Reykjavik; Tel: +35 4 415 1600; hlemmursquare.com*



## GETTING THERE

WOW Air opened up direct flights to Reykjavik from Dublin last year – and it's also the perfect gateway to fly on to the US. WOW is low cost (from just €69) but not without frills. The seats were comfortable, the staff very friendly and the best bit is that in just two hours you touch down in a magical place quite unlike any other. There is no time difference between Iceland and Ireland so it's the perfect escape. [wowair.ie](http://wowair.ie)

## GETTING AROUND

You get used to the BSI bus terminal in Reykjavik very quickly as it's the hub for all excursions and trips. Taxis are expensive and unnecessary because the bus system is superb (but allow more time as FlyBus picks up at hotels and guesthouses all around the city). You can book most tours including the Blue Lagoon, Northern Lights and others with **Reykjavik Excursions**. [main@re.is](mailto:main@re.is); [re.is](http://re.is)



## SNOWMOBILING & THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

We went with Mountaineers of Iceland in a super Jeep which was more personal than the monster buses they also provide for larger groups. Our driver, Gummi, was knowledgeable about all things and really added to the experience. [ice@mountaineers.is](mailto:ice@mountaineers.is); [mountaineers.is](http://mountaineers.is)