



Iceland's Story

Natural marvels, saints and sagas

13–20 August 2025 (ML 760)

8 days • £5,190

Lecturer: Dr Chris Callow

Geographical drama, variety and spectacle in volcanic landscapes, from the Golden Circle to the west coast.

Iceland's history, explored through the scenery, sagas and the manuscripts that recorded them.

Traverse the majestic Snæfellsnes peninsula, a setting of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

Time to explore Reykjavík's museums, galleries and its architectural daring.

'Here let the citizen, then, find natural marvels... the student of prose and conduct places to visit, / the site of a church where a bishop was put in a bag, / the bath of a great historian, the fort where / an outlaw dreaded the dark, / remember the doomed man thrown by his horse and crying / Beautiful is the hillside...'

Figures from the past are part of the landscape and intrigue of Iceland. Immortalised in the medieval sagas, they also live on in place-names and landmarks that have inspired literary and artistic figures for centuries.

The lines above, from W. H. Auden's *Journey to Iceland*, appeared in *Letters From Iceland*, the collection of poetry and prose that Auden published with Louis MacNeice after the pair visited in 1936. William Morris was an earlier 'saga pilgrim', while Jules Verne eternally popularised the formidable glacier-capped mountain Snæfellsjökull on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, when he imagined it as the site of a hidden passage to the centre of the earth in his famous 1864 novel.

Recorded anonymously, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the sagas are foundation legends that describe how Iceland was settled from mainland Scandinavia – in some cases via Norse settlements in the British Isles from AD 871. Iceland had no monarchy or aristocracy until it came under Norwegian rule in the 1260s. Instead, the sagas are inhabited with warrior-farmers and chieftains, influential women, martial champions, poets, outlaws and the walking dead.

The real and half-real people and quasi-historical events they depict reflect



Snæfellsnes Peninsula

the challenges of creating a new society in a previously unoccupied and hostile environment. This was a world characterised by violent and sometimes deadly disputes over honour and natural resources, but one that was also swiftly regulated – to a greater or lesser degree – by the laws adopted by the early republic.

Running through the sagas and integral to the tour, is the remarkable story of Icelandic Christianisation. The clash between ancient beliefs and the new religion in tenth-century Iceland has parallels elsewhere in the Viking world but the resolution adopted in Iceland was unique, and sheds light on many aspects of early Icelandic culture, society and law.

Iceland's landscapes remain much more than a mere backdrop to the saga action. Exploring these phenomenal feats of nature is a powerful, even emotional experience. Nearly 30 years after his first visit, Auden wrote: 'In my childhood dreams Iceland was holy ground; when, at the age of twenty-nine, I saw it for the first time, the reality verified my dream; at fifty-seven it was holy ground still, with the most magical light of anywhere on earth.'

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 1.00pm (Icelandair) from London Heathrow to Keflavík International Airport. An introductory evening lecture precedes dinner at the hotel. First of three nights in Reykjavík.

Day 2: Reykjavík. A morning walking tour of the city's architectural highlights with a local guide including Hallgrímskirkja (Hallgrímur's church) and the Harpa Concert Hall. An afternoon visit to Safnahúsið (Culture House), the original home of the National Library and Archives of Iceland. The exhibition *Sjónarhorn* presents examples of Icelandic visual art from the earliest times to the present, and includes a selection of medieval and post-medieval Icelandic manuscripts.

Day 3: Golden Circle, Reykjavík. An all-day excursion to visit the classic sites of Geysir, a geothermal attraction since the early 19th century, spectacular Gullfoss (Golden Waterfall), and Þingvellir (Assembly Plains) the astonishing site of Iceland's early parliament. Stop at Skálholt, which became an important centre of learning and manuscript production

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after the first Icelandic bishopric was established there in 1056.

Day 4: Reykjavík, Stykkishólmur, Búðir. At the Reykjavík 871 +/-2 Museum, see the excavated remains of a Viking longhouse. The National Museum gives a good overview of the history of the country from settlement to the present. Our route to the west runs beneath the Hvalfjörður fjord and follows the coast. Helgafell, on the northern shore of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, was home to the chieftain Snorri goði, who features in several sagas, and to Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, heroine of the romantic Laxdæla saga. An Augustinian monastery also stood here from the 1180s until the Reformation. Búðir, where our hotel stands in the midst of a lava-field, was another trading post and fishing site until the early 20th century. First of two nights in Búðir.

Day 5: Búðir, Snæfellsjökull, Hellnar, Arnarstapi. Stykkishólmur has been an important centre of commerce in the west of the country since the 19th century. Today's route circumnavigates the Snæfellsjökull glacier. Setting for the Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, the Snæfellsnes peninsula is famous for its dramatic coastal scenery.

Day 6: Búðir to Húsafell. The museum at Borgarnes, with its exhibits on the settlement of Iceland, is one of several sites around the town to highlight Egil's saga, a narrative chronicling the 9th-century farmer and warrior-poet: the burial mound of Egil's father and son is situated in a small memorial garden near the museum. En route to Húsafell, subterranean water emerges mysteriously from beneath the surface of the plain into the Hvítá river at Hraunfossar, an extraordinary lava fall. First of two nights in Húsafell.

Day 7: Húsafell, Reykholt. There is much to explore at Húsafell, including the work of the contemporary sculptor and artist Páll Guðmundsson. Eastwards, the fringes of the central highlands are lava fields and woodland, beyond; the glaciers of Langjökull and Eiríksjökull. At Reykholt, visit the exhibition dedicated to Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), the famous medieval chieftain-historian, and his role in 13th-century politics and culture. Remains from his time include Snorralaug (the hot pool), in which he is said to have bathed, an underground tunnel and the foundations of a medieval farmstead and hall. There is evidence of early Christian settlement here and today,

a striking modern church sits beside its 19th-century timber forerunner.

Day 8: Húsafell. Drive to Reykjavík for some free time in the capital before continuing to Keflavík International Airport to fly to London Heathrow, arriving c.8.20pm.

Lecturer

Dr Chris Callow. Associate Professor in Medieval History at the University of Birmingham. He followed his BA degree in Medieval Studies with a year studying Modern Icelandic in Iceland and then completing a PhD on medieval Icelandic history. He is author of *Landscape, Tradition and Power in Medieval Iceland* (Brill, 2020). He is currently writing a book on the way people in Iceland have thought about slavery over the centuries. Chris's research reflects his interdisciplinary interests. He has used sagas, laws, varied forms of archaeology, and place-names to try to understand both the realities of early Icelandic society and the way later people thought about it.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £5,190 or £4,840 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £6,130 or £5,780 without flights.

Included: flights with Icelandair (economy class, Boeing 757); travel by private coach for airport transfers and excursions; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 3 lunches and 5 dinners with a glass or two of wine, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Holt, Reykjavík. (holt.is): 4-star centrally-located boutique hotel in a historic building. Houses the largest privately owned art collection in Iceland. **Hótel Búðir, Búðir** (hotelbudir.is): a beautifully located boutique hotel. Rooms are comfortable with good views. **Hótel Húsafell, Húsafell** (hotelhusafell.com). A modern hotel in extensive grounds with geothermal baths, showcasing work by local artist Páll Guðmundsson.

Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.

How strenuous? Fitness is essential. This is a long tour with two hotel changes and some long journeys. You will be on your feet for long stretches of time, in some cases on exposed sites and walking over rough terrain and therefore sure-footedness and agility are essential. Average coach travel per day: 69 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.