

Half an hour outside Reykjavik lies Iceland's most famous thermal pool, the Blue Lagoon.

A breath of fresh air

Iceland: land of fire, ice, rotten shark, and potentially, the world's first hydrogen economy. **Marc West** found himself somewhat bewildered, but charmed.

Reykjavik is said to be the least polluted capital in the world. This is a view from the Hallgrímskirkja, a church which is the third tallest building in Iceland.



G-spot

Geologically, Iceland is the world's youngest country. It began rising from the North Atlantic seabed just 25 million years ago.

Swimming is our national sport," the tour guide remarked casually to the astonished travellers who stood rugged-up and shivering by the bus. A few Icelanders nodded in agreement, as if this fact were obvious.

This was not the first aspect of Icelandic life that seemed to make no sense. Before my visit I had wondered how a country so far from everywhere, which spends half the year in darkness, could have one of the highest life expectancies in the world, and occupy second place, behind Norway and followed by Australia, on the Human Development Index (a global measure of the standard of living compiled by the United Nations Development Program).

But if Iceland seemed an exotic and unusual place from a distance, the mystery deepened when I arrived. Keflavik airport in the southwest is surrounded by the lava

It was nearly midnight and the Sun was still high in the sky; a faint smell of sulphur hung in the air. Where on Earth was I?

wasteland that covers 64 per cent of the country. It was nearly midnight and the Sun was still high in the sky; a faint smell of sulphur hung in the air, and looking around I saw billboards advertising volcano tours and restaurants serving rotten shark and lamb testicles.

Where on Earth was I? I wasn't surprised to hear that astronauts have visited Iceland's unearthly-looking terrain to prepare for missions to the Moon.

Iceland straddles the edges of the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates, and as the plates tear apart, the

country literally expands. A vast valley is opening in Þingvellir National Park in the country's southwest, with sheer cliffs creeping slowly apart on either side.

The rifting plates also make Iceland one of the most geologically active countries in the world. The island of Surtsey emerged from the ocean off the southern coast in 1963, after a four-year volcanic eruption. Hot springs and geysers dot the landscape, and with sporting fields often covered in snow or engulfed in darkness, it's not surprising Icelanders choose to swim year-round in naturally heated pools. »



ICELAND

• Þingvellir National Park

• REYKJAVIK
Keflavik

Surtsey

North Atlantic Ocean

Getting there

Iceland Express, British Airways and SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) fly daily to Reykjavik from northern Europe and the UK. Iceland Air offers the cheapest one-way trips between London and Reykjavik, starting from \$170 and also flies from eastern US airports. Of course, you need to get to the Northern Hemisphere first...

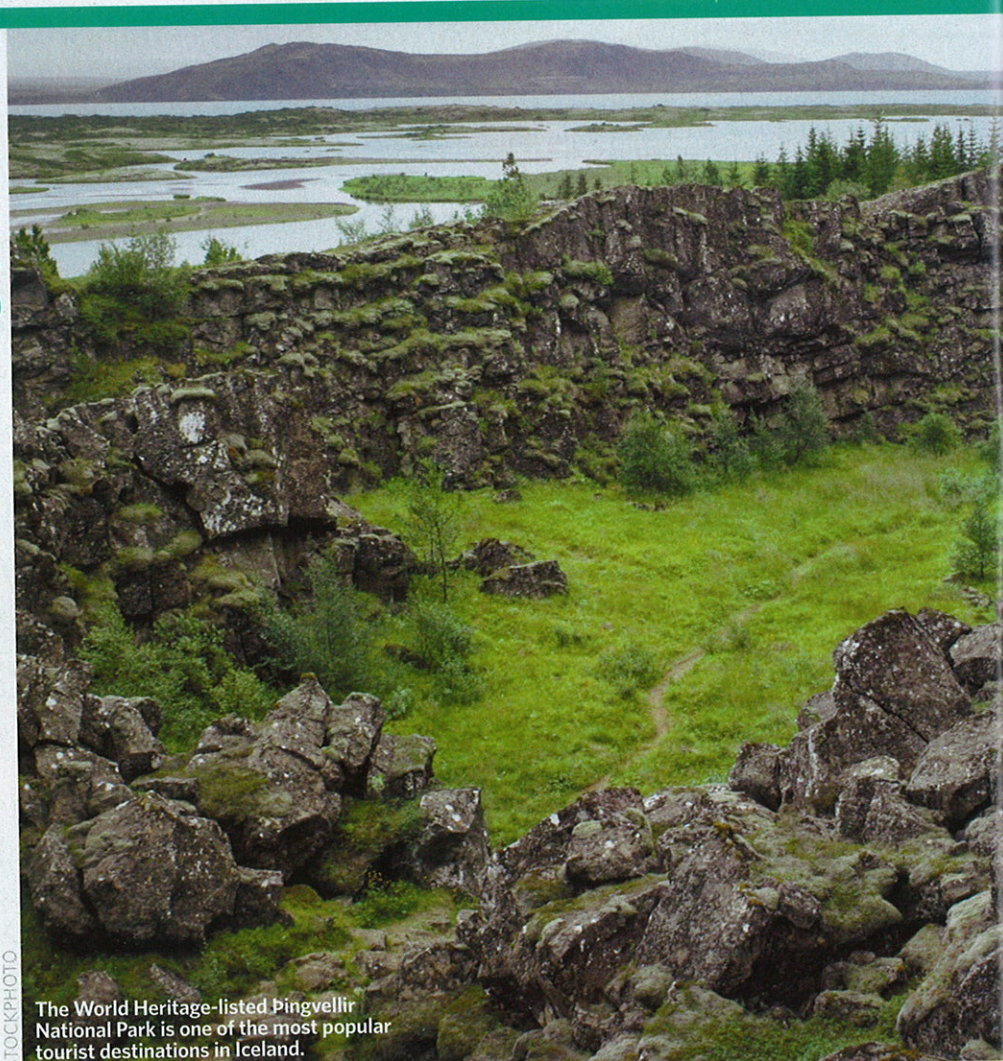
Last Minute (www.lastminute.com) offered five nights B&B accommodation and flights from London Gatwick for \$650. The accommodation is simple but clean and private, and with the sun up all night in summer, you need not spend much time there.

Costs

Iceland is very expensive. Expect to pay more than \$100 a night for a single budget room, \$25 for a pub burger, \$10 a beer and up to \$80 for an Icelandic delicacy such as puffin. Day trips to the major sites around Reykjavik cost \$80 and a Golden Circle Tour around \$150. You can camp if you want to brave the weather, and it is possible to hire a 4WD (\$100+ a day).

Best time to go

Summer offers nearly 24-hour sunlight and this is when most of Iceland's cultural festivals take place. Winter brings the Northern Lights. Depending on the weather, many of the major attractions around Reykjavik are accessible year-round. Temperatures during the day range from -2 to 2°C in mid-winter and 9 to 14°C in mid-summer.



The World Heritage-listed Þingvellir National Park is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Iceland.

» The Blue Lagoon, a 30-minute bus ride from the capital Reykjavik, is the most famous of Iceland's thermal baths. There, men, women and children use white silica mud from the lagoon to cleanse their skin. The sight of visitors emerging from the steaming waterhole, set amongst lava

power from renewable sources, mostly hydroelectric and geothermal plants. Coal imports ceased more than 50 years ago, and the government plans to make the whole country carbon neutral by 2050.

Travelling around Reykjavik — one of the cleanest capital cities in the world — is

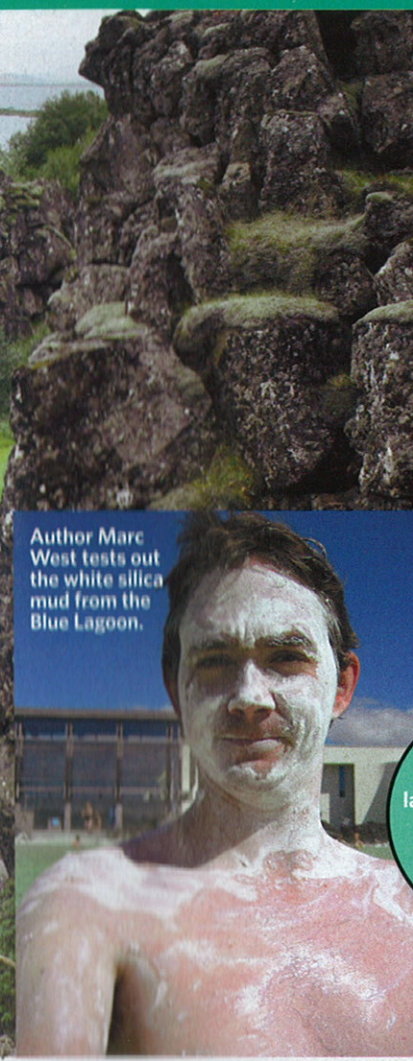
Coal imports ceased more than 50 years ago, and the government plans to make the whole country carbon neutral.

flows and ice, their faces covered in dried white silica and their bodies dripping blue, is truly alien. The only drawback to this beautiful scene is the powerful smell of sulphur at showtime.

But just as interesting to me as the remarkable landscape is Iceland's world-leading position on renewable energy. In fact, Iceland derives 72 per cent of its

literally a breath of fresh air. Commuters walk, ride bikes, or catch hydrogen-powered buses. And local company Iceland New Energy plans to create the world's first hydrogen economy by eventually powering the country's ageing fishing fleet.

"What we are doing...shows what you can achieve when you have the will to change," said Maria Maack, spokeswoman



Author Marc West tests out the white silica mud from the Blue Lagoon.

G-spot

12% of Iceland's landmass, equivalent to 12,360 square kilometres, is covered in glaciers.

environmental goals by the 'Green Flag Program'. One primary school we visited on the Snaefellness Peninsula, a day trip from Reykjavik, built a dam to generate electricity for greenhouses, constructed windmills and captured solar energy.

In future, even booking tours and accommodation in Iceland could come at a lower environmental cost, with Internet companies showing interest in moving energy guzzling server farms to Iceland, due to its cheap and renewable electricity.

This is seen as a more environmentally conscious method of creating jobs than the aluminium industry, which generates much of Iceland's wealth and creates an oversized national carbon footprint.

Hands-down, Iceland is the most expensive country I have ever visited. With such sumptuous dishes as rotten shark on the menu, unless odd meals appeal, you go to Iceland for its natural beauty. Mountains and truly imposing glaciers smother the

as akin to "saying Hail Marys to atone for your sins," it is a positive step. Schools are awarded

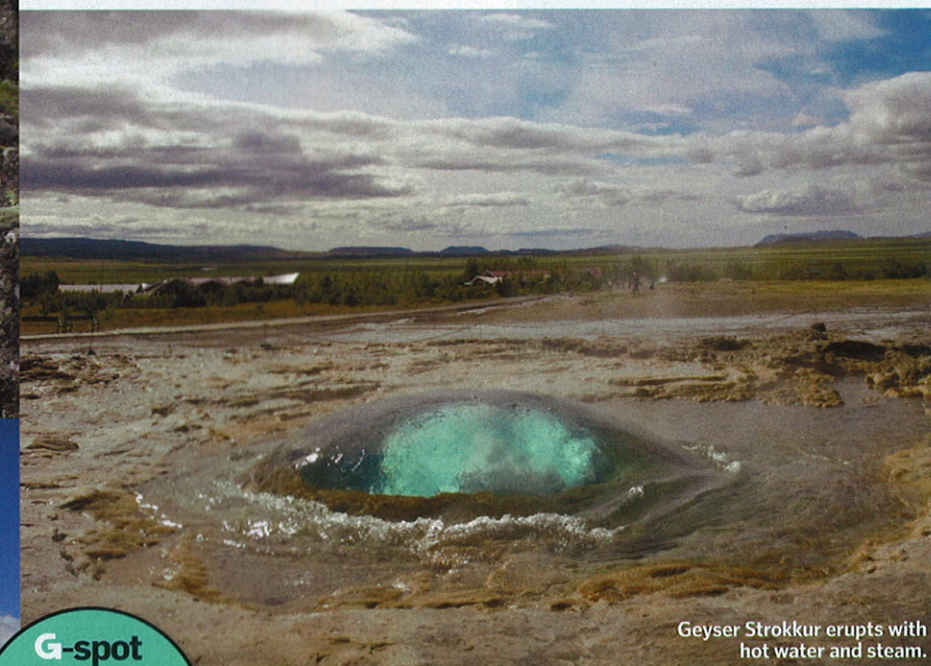
prizes for meeting their

horizon. The Gulfoss waterfall, part of Iceland's 'Golden Circle' (along with the massive Kerið volcanic crater, the Geysir hot springs field — from which all geysers get their name — and the spectacular Þingvellir National Park) appears from nowhere, carving an enormous gorge into the barren geography.

Icelanders are genuinely passionate about their beautiful country, and it is easy to see why. I could not have been happier gazing at the awe-inspiring mountains surrounding Reykjavik harbour and eating celebrated Icelandic ice cream (who knew?) at midnight with the Sun still up in zero-degree temperatures.

Perhaps it was because Icelanders and Australians are both from isolated, water-locked countries with largely unpopulated interiors and swimming as a national sport, or perhaps I was invigorated by the sense of escape, of fleeing to the opposite side of the Earth — but this was a country I fell in love with almost instantly. **G**

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Geyser Strokkur erupts with hot water and steam.

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real life experiences...

