



ICELAND DELIGHTS

Adventure takes many shapes in this land of geysers, glaciers and epic lore

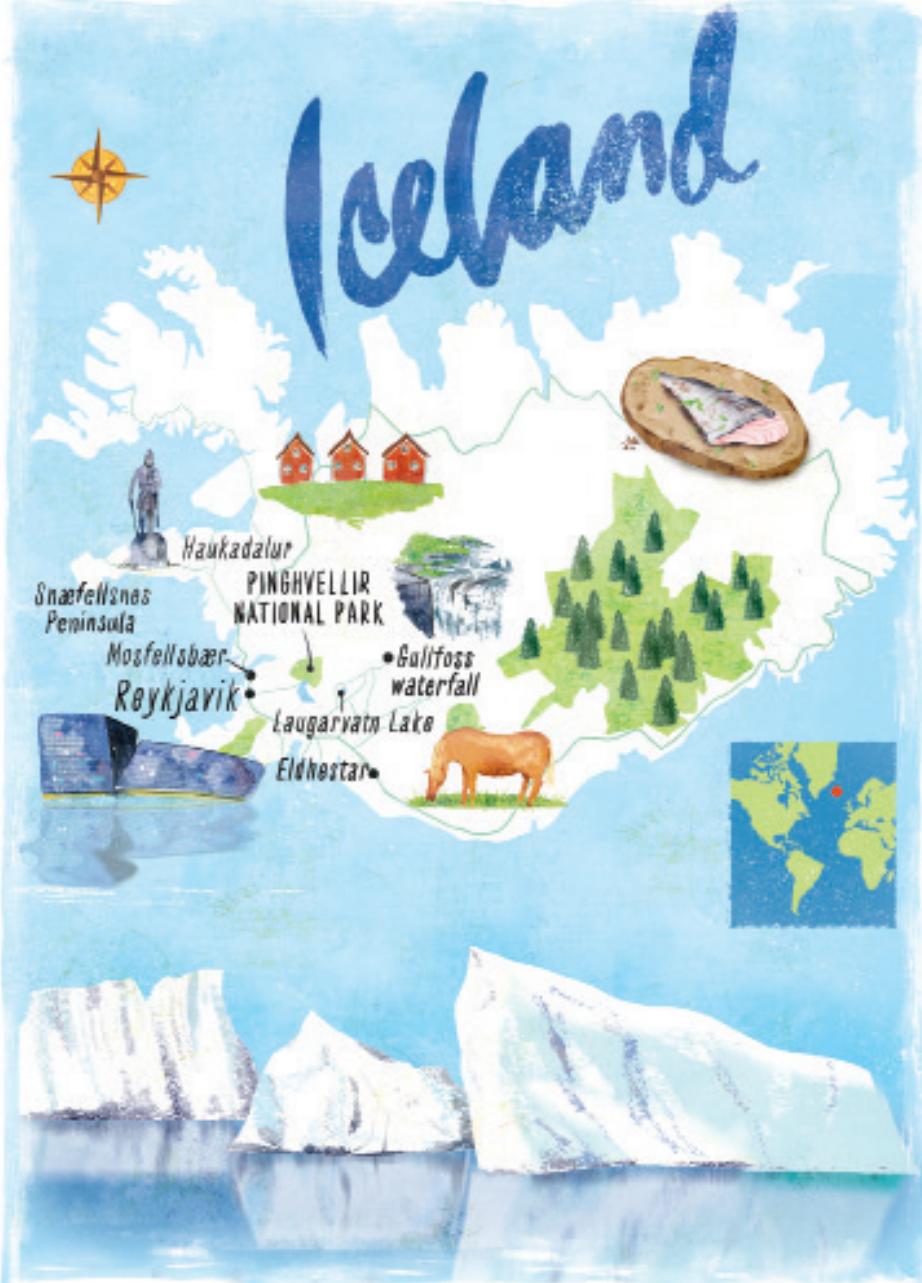
BY LESLIE FORSBERG

On a slatted wood bench inside a cement room at Iceland's newest geothermal bath, on Laugarvatn Lake, I listen to the sounds of the Earth breathing. Steam escaping the planet's mantle hisses and gurgles loudly, and the pleasantly musky scent of sulfur pervades porridge-thick air.

A loud “whoomph,” like the sound of a gas range igniting, startles me, and a sudden blast of hot steam shoots through the seat slats, filling the room instantly with fog and nearly scalding my behind. I douse myself with glacier water from a hose before retreating to steadier warmth in a nearby thermal pool.

A couple of hours later, the same steam vent offers a more utilitarian use as a jovial, silver-haired local named Jóel Friðrik Jónsson pushes a shovel into soft sand beside the lake and unearths a canister he buried 24 hours earlier. Hauling it up out of the muck, he pries open the lid to reveal fragrant, steam-baked rye bread. At his and his wife’s art-filled boutique called Galleri, Joel explains that hot-springs bread has been made in Iceland for many centuries. Topped with smoked trout caught in the lake outside, the sweet, dense bread is delicious. I ask for the recipe, and we both laugh after Jóel, with one eyebrow raised, asks how I can make it without a volcanic steam vent.

The sights in this charming land range from scenic pastures to headline-grabbing volcanoes.



Completed in 2011, Harpa Concert Hall (top) showcases stunning modern design. Colorful Reykjavík (above) is walkable and world-class. Bottom row, left to right: sunrise over Gullfoss waterfall; a monument to Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, the first European to give birth on North American soil; and Jóel Friðrik Jónsson, digging for his canister of naturally baked rye bread.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: SÓLHAÐA GISDÓTTIR; OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MAP BY SCOTTIESSOP; NICLEHOUS; ADAM JONES/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES; MONUMENT AND JÓEL BY LESLIE FORSBERG; IAN GETHINGS/Flickr/GETTY IMAGES



Such are the surprises that await in Iceland, home to slumbering giants—volcanoes that make the entire world take note—and playful, secretive elves (according to locals). It seems befitting that a land of such dichotomies is dominated by both ice—glaciers cover more than 11 percent of the terrain—and boiling geysers (the geological feature is named for Iceland's Geysir).

With Iceland's wealth of wilderness, you might expect the capital, Reykjavík, to be just an outpost. Yet it is a charming, easily walkable, world-class city with excellent museums; fabulous restaurants (including an inexplicably popular hotdog stand, Bæjarins Beztu); thriving nightlife; and the grand new Harpa Concert Hall.

I've always loved the pageantry and mysticism of sagas, and I'm thrilled to see original books of them—yellowed vellum manuscripts—in a darkened room of Reykjavík's Culture House. Ancient history aside, the sagas seem alive and a part of daily life in Iceland. Characters 1,000 years old are still talked about as though they just stepped out for a quart of milk—or more likely, a container of treasured *skyr*, a creamy, yogurt-like dairy product.

On the way to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, northwest of Reykjavík, our tour group passes through the small town of Mosfellsbær, and our guide, Bertur, recites the saga of 10th-century Viking Egil Skallagrímsson, who killed the Norwegian king's son and later settled here. Blind and greedy in old age, he ordered his servants to carry chests filled with gold and silver up the adjacent valley to bury them—and then did in his servants. "Today we're still looking for the treasure," he notes without irony, glancing at the hillsides.

In the Haukadalur (Hauka Valley), our bus tour pauses at a small monu-

ment. "Erik the Red lived here," Bertur says, as he sweeps his arm and gaze across a wild and lonely expanse of blushing heather. To walk on turf trod upon by the first European explorer of Greenland and by his son, Leifur Eriks-son, the first European to encounter North America, is simply astounding.

What draws my attention, though,

is a small, graceful sculpture of a caped woman in a boat, baby on her shoulder. It's a memorial to the first European woman to give birth on North American soil. Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, who also once lived here, gave birth to her son, Snorri, in Vinland (now known as Newfoundland's L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site) in about 1004. I'm astonished that this remarkably important site is so simple and humble. Yet as I'm getting to know Icelanders, I realize that despite their high standard of living, expansive landscapes and love for adventure, they're not prone to bragging.

A few of the must-see sights include the burly Gullfoss waterfall, the bubbling Geysir geothermal field and Pingvallir National Park. The latter is the site of the oldest existing parliament in the world and the spot where two tectonic plates—the North American and the European—are literally tearing Iceland apart.

The drive to each site takes us through country pastures where diminutive caramel- and chocolate-colored Icelandic horses roam.

One day, I choose a riding tour with Eldhestar. In a valley a half-hour east of Reykjavík, I urge my Viking steed, Meiri-Myri, into a rushing stream. Without hesitation she strides in, nearly swimming, as I grin with

The horses begin a smooth-as-a-magic-carpet pace called a *tölt*.

delight. On the other side our guide, corn-silk hair in a ponytail nearly the same shade as her mount's tail, gives a signal, and the horses begin a smooth-as-a-magic-carpet pace called a *tölt*, in which they move both right feet together, followed by both left feet; the gait is unique to Icelandic horses and just a few related Nordic breeds. Sheep dash alongside as we glide through a valley dotted with cinder cones, plumes of steam rising against the green hillsides. It's an otherworldly experience.

Yet in Iceland, it's just another day. ■

Leslie Forsberg, a Seattle-based writer with Swedish roots, is fascinated by all things Scandinavian.