



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ EUROPE

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Slightly smaller in area than Kentucky, Iceland covers 39,768 square miles (103,000 square kilometers). It is the second largest island in Europe. The land is rugged, has diverse scenery, and is about 80 percent uninhabited. This “land of fire and ice” is a volcanic island and one of the most active volcanic countries in the world, averaging one eruption every five years. Mount Hekla erupted in 1999 and Mount Grímsvötn erupted in 2004. Mild earthquakes are also common. Iceland has more hot springs than any other country in the world; in fact, *geyser* is an Icelandic word. The uninhabited interior is a popular place for many outdoor activities. It has beautiful features, including mountains, lakes, volcanoes, and even deserts. More than 10 percent of the country is covered with glaciers, such as Vatnajökull and Langjökull.

Despite the country’s northerly location, the climate is much milder than one would expect. The warm Gulf Stream nearly encircles the island. The average temperature in July is 51°F (11°C); the January average in Reykjavík is 30°F (-1°C). However, it does often become bitterly cold in both summer and winter when the polar winds blow. There are two or three months of continuous daylight in the summer, while during the winter (mid-November to January) there may only be four or five hours of daylight (10 a.m.–3 p.m.).

**History.** The first permanent settlers in Iceland were Celtic and Norwegian peoples. Iceland claims the Norwegian Ingólfur Arnarson as the first settler in 874; he founded Reykjavík, the capital. In 930, Icelanders created the *Althingi*, their national assembly, but they had no central government or monarchy. The *Althingi* established laws and also served as a court. Christianity was adopted by the *Althingi* in the year 1000, the same year that Viking explorer Leifur Eiríksson is said to have dis-

covered America, landing at Newfoundland. In 1262, Iceland became subject to Norway, which took control during an Icelandic civil war between various local chieftains. Despite the new ruler, Iceland remained fairly autonomous.

In 1380, both Iceland and Norway came under Danish rule. In the 1530s, Denmark’s attempt to impose Lutheranism on Iceland met with stiff opposition. The Lutheran Church was not established until authorities beheaded Iceland’s last Catholic bishop, Jón Arason, in 1550. Although modern Iceland is Lutheran, Arason is still considered a national hero for his resistance to the Danes.

By the 1600s, Denmark had established a trade monopoly with Iceland, and Iceland became little more than a Danish colony. Accordingly, the 17th and 18th centuries are now considered a dark period in Iceland’s history, a time when the country lost its self-government and free trade. This period had a profound influence on later political developments and is one reason why Icelanders are very proud of their nationality. It is also why Iceland is usually among the first nations to recognize new countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1991 and Montenegro in 2006.

The 1700s brought famine and economic troubles to Iceland. An independence movement did not really begin until the 1800s, when the people experienced a revival of national literature and history. As Denmark’s monarchy became subject to a constitutional democracy, Iceland was given a chance to regain home rule. The country was granted a constitution in 1874; however, it still remained accountable to Denmark.

In 1918, Iceland gained some independence but still depended on Denmark for matters of defense and foreign affairs. Iceland’s ties with Denmark essentially were broken

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during WWII, when Denmark was occupied by Germany and the Allies helped defend Iceland. In June 1944, Icelanders officially declared the Republic of Iceland and adopted a new constitution. Iceland developed a progressive economy and stable political system. Cooperation between political parties has always been high because nearly all governments have been coalitions, with no single party dominating the *Althingi*.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Iceland's population of just over 300,000 people is growing at 0.82 percent a year. More than 92 percent of the population lives in urban areas. More than 100,000 people reside in the capital of Reykjavík. Kópavogur (23,000) and Hafnarfjörður (19,000) are the next largest towns. The central part of the country is uninhabited; most Icelanders live along the coast. The overall population density is seven people per square mile (2.7 per square kilometer).

Icelanders are descendants of the Norwegian and Celtic peoples who settled in the 9th and 10th centuries. They are considered a homogeneous people. Small but increasing numbers of immigrants integrate well into the population. Both men and women have excellent access to economic prosperity, health care, and education.

**Language.** The official language is Icelandic. Icelanders are, as a minimum school requirement, taught Danish from age 10 to 16 and English from age 11 to 16. Those who continue with their education after age 16 receive further instruction in one or both languages. During the Viking era (8th–10th centuries), all Nordic peoples shared a common language, called Old Norse. After that, separate tongues evolved in the areas of present-day Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Iceland retained the old language, which remained essentially unchanged through the centuries. (In fact, modern Icelandic is more similar to ancient Norwegian than it is to present-day Norwegian.) As a result, Icelanders can read medieval Icelandic *sagas* (stories) from the Age of Sagas (1200–1400) with relatively little difficulty. Because of this heritage, Icelanders enjoy tracing their ancestral roots. The *sagas* cover centuries of Scandinavian and British history. Through them, the lives and exploits of the Vikings and peoples who came after them are known to the world today.

**Religion.** The bulk of the population (87 percent) belongs to the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Despite the existence of a state-sponsored church, religious freedom is fully guaranteed, and other Protestants (4.1 percent), Catholics (1.7 percent), and others have congregations in Iceland. Two percent of the population has no religious affiliation. Attendance at the state church is sporadic; people usually go to baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, and Christmas Mass. But while religion is not a public matter, Icelanders are privately very religious and have a strong belief in spiritual and supernatural things.

**General Attitudes.** Icelanders are proud of their advanced society, which is egalitarian and highly literate. People's abilities are more important than their stations in life, though seeking new challenges and higher wages is increasingly valued. In general, the people are known to be individualistic, independent, and open-minded. They are friendly and genuine but tend to be reserved. There is little crime and very little pollution in the country. Cleanliness is highly valued. Most areas are heated almost entirely by geothermal energy produced naturally by hot springs. A source of pride for Icelanders, geothermal springs provide the country with renewable, clean energy.

Icelanders also have a strong work ethic; the country's work-week is one of the longest in Europe. Icelanders believe self-respect and well-being are tied to productivity.

Icelanders have a great love of history, literature, and language. Per capita, Iceland publishes more books than any country in the world. Whereas many languages will adopt or adapt foreign words (often English) into their language to describe a new item or habit, Icelanders want to keep their language as pure as possible. In fact, an official committee exists for the sole purpose of creating new Icelandic words for terms such as *telephone* or *computer*, when necessary. Doing well in school and finishing one's education are widely held societal priorities.

**Personal Appearance.** Icelanders dress well, especially when attending theaters and fine restaurants. Because the climate is generally cool, warm clothing is necessary during much of the year. Iceland is known for its woolens, especially sweaters. Dressing neatly in public is important, and most people spend a lot of money on clothing. Fashions from the United States and especially Europe are popular, particularly among young Icelanders, who like to wear trendy clothing.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** A handshake is the most common way to greet someone, along with saying *Sæll* (to a man) or *Sæl* (to a woman). The phrase roughly means "Happy" or "Glad." A more casual greeting for friends and relatives is *Halló* (Hello) or *Hæ* (Hi). One says *Góðan daginn* (Good day) when greeting a stranger. One says *Bless* (To be blessed) or *Bless Bless* to say good-bye. Strangers are often greeted, but not doing so is not considered impolite.

All Icelanders are properly and officially called by their first names (and sometimes nicknames); last names are rarely used. This is true even for doctors, teachers, politicians, etc. A first name is used after a person's title as well. A woman does not change her name with marriage. A woman's last name is formed by the possessive form of her father's first name, followed by *dóttir*, meaning daughter. A man's last name is the possessive of his father's first name, followed by *son*. Names in a phone book are alphabetized by the first given name, but it is necessary to know the last name as well.

**Gestures.** Body language traditionally has not been important to communication in Iceland. Consequently, few hand expressions are used during conversation. Icelanders do not normally eat on the street, with the exception of foods such as ice cream and hot dogs. Smoking is prohibited in public buildings.

**Visiting.** Icelanders are usually casual about visiting; they commonly drop in on people unannounced or telephone just before visiting. Truly formal invitations are rare. Hosts are expected to invite even unexpected visitors into the home. Hosts may offer a cup of coffee. Many Icelanders customarily take off their shoes before entering a home, where most social visiting occurs. Because of the cold weather, Icelanders spend a lot of time indoors and devote plenty of time, effort, and money to making their homes pleasant. Icelandic homes are usually larger and better furnished than the average Scandinavian or European homes and therefore are natural places for entertaining guests.

Although dinner guests are not expected to bring a gift to the hosts, flowers or candy may be appropriate. Icelanders do not typically introduce their guests to everyone. At the end of a meal, or even refreshments, guests are careful to express their appreciation to the hosts.

**Eating.** Breakfast is usually a light meal and includes cereal or toast with tea or coffee. Icelanders typically eat lunch around noon and dinner between 7 and 8 p.m. People eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Dinner is usually the only meal that the whole family shares. Icelanders do not dine out often, preferring to go to restaurants only on special occasions or evenings when food is followed by a movie, play, or other activity.

At restaurants, service charges and tax are included in the bill. Before the mid-1970s, going out was not popular and being a server was considered a demeaning job. Offering a tip was an insult and emphasized the server's position as a servant. Consequently, there is no tradition of tipping in Iceland. Since the 1970s, restaurants have increased dramatically in number, and waiting tables has become fully respectable. Icelanders still do not tip, but the practice would no longer be considered an insult. The increase in restaurants has also led to a wider variety of foods available in the country. Coffeehouses and restaurants serving European and Scandinavian dishes can be found in Reykjavík.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Family ties are strong and families tend to be larger than other Scandinavian families. Even though people are individualistic, family members rely heavily on each other. Because the country is small, personal ties are important and family relations play a key role. This is evidenced by the tradition of asking "Who are your people?" when meeting someone for the first time. This inquiry is an attempt to place a person in a family or professional level. The initial response is to name one's parents. If they are not known, the parents' professions might be named or the grandparents' names given. Today's youth do not practice this, but their parents' generation still does. Family history is a passion for many people, facilitated by the language having changed so little in the last thousand years.

Children are expected to do well in school and be involved in hobbies, such as sports and music. They may live with their parents until they are about 20 to 25 years old. It is popular to send children ages 8 to 16 to a farm owned by a relative (uncle, aunt, grandparent, etc.) during the summer months while school is out. Grandparents usually live on their own.

Family patterns are changing because women are now a major part of the workforce; close to 90 percent of women have jobs outside the home. In June 1980, Icelanders selected Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as president—the world's first freely elected female head of state. In 1983, an all-woman political party won several seats in Parliament. They hold fewer seats today, but women's issues are addressed more readily than before. Both mothers and fathers share responsibility for household chores, from doing the dishes to painting the house.

**Housing.** Traditionally, Icelandic houses were made of rocks and grass turf joined by layers of clay-like mud and later, imported timber. It was not until the 20th century that concrete was introduced as a building material. Though today most houses are made from concrete, a variety of architectural styles are employed and exteriors are painted in a variety of colors.

More than 80 percent of Icelandic families own their own homes. Upper- and some middle-class people live in single-family houses or in small apartment buildings. Members of the working class usually live in larger apartment buildings, sometimes consisting of 50 units. Apartments may have between two to five bedrooms, depending on a family's size and wealth.

Large houses are more often found in the countryside, where three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) may live together, though increasingly grandparents live on their own in small apartments located in retirement communities.

Icelanders take much pride in their homes; indeed, beautification of the home is a lifetime pursuit, and creating a nice atmosphere brings much prestige. As a result, a home's interior is often rich in decorations. More recently, people have filled their homes with state-of-the-art equipment such as computers, stereos, large television sets, and surround sound systems. The most attention goes to furnishing and decorating the living room, so that it will be as inviting to guests as possible.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating begins around age 15 or 16. Parties, coffeehouses, and dance clubs are among the most popular destinations for dates. Schools and workplaces are also common settings for people to find a spouse. The government recognizes common-law marriage, so many couples choose to live together without formal marriage. Some choose to marry at a later date, but they may have a few children by then. Weddings can be large affairs that include serving lunch or dinner. Guests stay at the wedding party for a long time, eating, talking, and perhaps dancing. The newlyweds usually go abroad for their honeymoon.

**Life Cycle.** Pregnancies are celebrated with much joy, perhaps due to Iceland's small population and Icelanders' many close family connections. Shortly after birth, there is a baptism or name-giving ceremony followed by a baby shower, when relatives and friends of the parents bring gifts for the baby.

Autonomy is highly valued by teenagers. At 17, they can get a driver's license. Most young people graduate with at least an undergraduate college degree and spend their twenties forming families and acquiring a desirable position in the community. During their thirties and forties, people try to raise their standard of living. After that, they devote more time to themselves, their children, and grandchildren. Most people retire in their mid-sixties and have even more time for recreation.

**Diet.** The basics of the Icelandic diet include fish, lamb, and dairy products. Fresh fish is plentiful and includes such varieties as cod, haddock, halibut, plaice (a type of flounder), herring, salmon, and trout. Popular dishes are *hangikjöt* (smoked mutton) and *skyr* (similar to yogurt). Potatoes (usually boiled) are served with most meals. *Hangikjöt* is the traditional meal on Christmas Day. For many years, greenhouses heated with geothermal water have made it possible for Iceland to service its need for tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and other produce. Water is clean and safe to drink throughout the country.

**Recreation.** Traveling and camping are favorite pastimes in Iceland. Hiking, trout and salmon fishing, swimming in natural hot springs, soccer, basketball, handball, skiing, and golf are other common forms of recreation. Snowmobiling and four-wheeling are popular year-round. Many people enjoy riding the small horses unique to Iceland. Bridge and chess are popular. Iceland is known as a bird-watcher's paradise. A three-day weekend in August called Merchants Holiday is popular for camping and travel. Cities practically empty as everyone heads to the countryside, especially the interior, to camp. People try to enjoy the summer as much as possible. There are many large, established campgrounds where they gather. Some also camp in more private areas. Others stay in summer cabins.

**The Arts.** Iceland's rich cultural life includes the National Theatre, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and the Icelandic Ballet Company. These groups often perform works by Icelandic

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composers, playwrights, and choreographers. Government support of cinematic arts has encouraged their success as well. Museums exhibit both modern and folk arts. Annual festivals call attention to traditional arts such as weaving, woodcarving, and silversmithing.

Poetry, fiction, and playwriting are very popular. Nobel Prize recipient Halldór Laxness is one of the best-known Icelandic writers. Pop singer Björk, born in Reykjavík, has also achieved international success.

**Holidays.** Public holidays include New Year's Day, Easter (Thursday–Monday), First Day of Summer (usually the third Thursday in April), Labor Day (1 May), Ascension Day, Whit-sunday and Whitmonday, *Sjómannadagurinn* (Fisherman's Day, first Sunday in June), National Day (17 June), Merchants Holiday (first Monday in August), and Christmas (24–26 Dec.). Christmas Eve is the most sacred and important time of the Christmas season. It is the evening for exchanging gifts and celebrating the birth of Christ. The 25th is celebrated with a big family meal and visiting, while the 26th is spent relaxing with family and friends or enjoying some form of recreation.

New Year's Eve is extremely popular. Icelanders celebrate with many parties, fireworks, and bonfires. These light up the dark winter nights and create excitement throughout the country, as well as attract tourists from around the world. *Bóludagurinn* (Cream Puffs Day, third Monday in February) and Ash Wednesday (third Wednesday in February) are not public holidays but are still important celebrations.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Iceland is a constitutional republic that is divided into 23 counties and 14 independent towns. A president, currently Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, is head of state and serves a four-year term. The prime minister (currently Geir Haarde) leads the government. Iceland's legislative body, called the *Althingi*, is one of the world's oldest parliaments. It has 63 seats, which are shared by five parties. Members are elected to four-year terms by proportional representation. The judiciary is comprised of the Supreme Court, district courts, and various special courts. The voting age is 18. Iceland does not have an army of its own but is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

**Economy.** The country's most abundant natural resource is fish, and fishing is the most important export industry, accounting for about 75 percent of all export earnings. Even manufacturing efforts tend to focus on the fishing industry; Iceland exports machinery used in fish processing. Almost 12 percent of the workforce is employed in fishing or fish processing. The government remains opposed to joining the European Union (EU) because of concerns about how it would affect fishing rights. Less than 1 percent of the land is suitable for cultivation; agriculture (including raising livestock) employs 5 percent of the workforce. There are many pastures and meadows used for livestock grazing. Sheep and wool are important commodities.

Industrially, Iceland has great potential for geothermal and hydroelectric power and is developing ways to exploit these renewable resources. Aluminum mining and aluminum smelting have become profitable industries. Other industries include publishing, making cement, and mining diatomite. Some factories are able to use geothermal energy for power.

### POPULATION & AREA

Population .....	301,931 (rank=174)
Area, sq. mi. ....	39,768 (rank=105)
Area, sq. km. ....	103,000

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank .....	1 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women .....	1 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita .....	\$36,510
Adult literacy rate .....	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	2 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	80 (male); 83 (female)

Major trading partners include countries of the EU and the United States. Iceland is one of the most affluent countries in the world, known for low unemployment rates and strong economic performance, which has allowed it to become a major overseas investor. Most Icelanders earn a good income and enjoy relative prosperity. The currency is the *króna* (ISK), or plural *krónur*.

**Transportation and Communications.** Most Icelandic families have at least one car. When teenagers turn 17, they get a driver's license and often purchase a car soon thereafter. In and around the capital there is an excellent bus system. People usually use taxis after going out or drinking on weekends. School buses operate in the capital and in rural areas, where they go from farm to farm collecting students. Iceland does not have a railroad. Some roads outside the capital are not paved, but most are passable year-round. One cannot travel inland or in certain remote areas in the winter.

The communications system is modern and efficient. Iceland has one of the highest per capita rate of mobile phone use in Europe. Nearly all Icelanders are proficient with computers, internet, and e-mail.

**Education.** School attendance is compulsory for ages six to sixteen. Every child must know how to swim to graduate from elementary school. Iceland has the highest percentage of children enrolled in school in the world. A large percentage of young people continue their education through specialized training schools or college preparation schools, which lead to a university education. There are eight universities in Iceland; the University of Iceland is the largest. Many people go abroad for advanced degrees.

**Health.** Icelanders enjoy good health; they have one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world. All citizens have compulsory health coverage through a national system. Dental care for adults is partially paid for by the government, and schoolchildren receive free care. Iceland recently sold the medical and genealogical records of all of its citizens to a private medical company as part of a massive research project to find cures for various diseases.

## AT A GLANCE

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