

NORDIC NIRVANA



Seaside hot tub



Pic credit: Myles Axton

Abundant naturally heated water makes Iceland a top spot for outdoor swimming. **Susanne Masters** took a tour of its geothermal pools and natural hot tubs

In 1976 a power plant began operating in the Reykjanes peninsula in the south west of Iceland. Hot brine was discharged into an adjacent old lava field and formed a lagoon. People started bathing in the hot mineral-rich waters, finding that it alleviated symptoms of psoriasis. The Icelandic Psoriasis Foundation built a simple shelter to get changed and shower in and later they were given use of a disused mortuary. In 1987 public bathing facilities were opened, followed by a subsequent upgrade in 1999 when the Blue Lagoon Spa opened. Now more than 400,000 people visit the Blue Lagoon each year. Located between Reykjavik, Iceland's capital, and Keflavik international airport the Blue Lagoon is well situated for international visitors to Iceland. This is reflected in the provision of secure luggage lockers and entry prices

starting at 35 euros per person in the winter season (September to May). With prices listed in euros and a hotel under development on site it is no surprise that this stunning hot pool is now more a haunt for tourists than local people. A smoothly operated experience that requires advance booking, it is, however, a handy pit stop between airport and city.

I last visited Iceland 16 years ago. Then, I fumbled out of my clothes in sub-zero temperatures and sprinted across a sprinkling of snow in howling winds to reach the reprieve of the pool brimming with 39 degrees Celsius water. Now I wondered if untamed swims could still be found.

Icelandic friends suggested heading north to Mývatn Nature Baths. Just 105km south from the Arctic Circle, it is another pool created by the union of modern technology with natural heat from the earth. Opened in

2004, this lagoon is also filled by water from a power plant. Its waters are similarly milky blue in appearance to the Blue Lagoon, but contain more sulphur. Situated 483km from Reykjavik, it has fewer than 100,000 visitors a year. In winter the entry fee is kr. 3200 (approximately 20 euros). Perhaps in time this place will increase in popularity as more travellers reach the north of Iceland, but for now it remains a relatively peaceful hot lagoon.

Continental divide

In Iceland the boundary between the North American and Eurasian continents runs over the land and in shallow water. Consequently, while most areas where continents are moving apart can only be viewed from deep sea submersibles, in Iceland it is possible to dive or snorkel over the continental divide.

Cutting through a lava field, the Silfra fissure is famous for providing excellent views of this intercontinental gap. Fed by glacial water filtered through lava and kept below 5 degrees by Iceland's climate, the water is clear. But at that temperature dry suits are a must if you want to spend any length of time enjoying the sight. It is possible to dive and snorkel here and permits can be applied for online or at the information centre in Þingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park. Alternatively, swimmers can join organised snorkelling tours with dry suits and permits taken care of by the organisers.

South Iceland

The black sand beaches at Vík and the Gullfoss waterfall, which shines with rainbows when the sun is out, are a couple

of the features of the south coast area that place it firmly on the tourist trail. A quieter pleasure is turning off ring road No. 1 onto road 242 at the sign for Raufarfell heading to Seljavellir, parking up and following a path along the base of the hillside to find Seljavallalaug swimming pool.

One of the oldest swimming pools in Iceland, Seljavallalaug was built in 1923. Three of the walls are concrete but the 25m length of the pool rests against the hill and uses it as the fourth wall. Geothermally heated water fills the pool from a pipe as well as trickling down the black rocks, leaving a slick of vibrant green algae and wafts of steam in the air. The pool provides a dreamy immersion in the natural world with warm waters tinted green by the algae and a 360° view of the surrounding hills. For those who think summer water temperatures over 20 °C are too warm, a

dip in a snow-melt river adjacent to the pool should be enough to cool you down and whet the appetite for Seljavallalaug's warm waters.

Western fjords

Iceland's Western fjords are sparsely inhabited and one of the most remote areas of Europe. They are definitely worth exploring for swimming locations, just keep an eye on your fuel gauge and know where the next fuel stop is.

Sheltered bays at the ends of inlets fringed by rocks dressed in mats of bladder wrack seaweed provide access to the sea. Although towns are few and far between, there are many hot pools and springs along the coastal roads – perfect for warming up after a chilly sea swim. Loop around the area on route 60 to

I FUMBLED OUT OF MY CLOTHES IN SUB-ZERO TEMPERATURES AND SPRINTED ACROSS A SPRINKLING OF SNOW

SWIMQUEST
Swimming Holidays
www.swimquestuk.com

CHOOSE CLUB LA SANTA, LANZAROTE FOR:
WINTER SUN & TECHNIQUE COACHING
Kick start 2016 - Other sports included - 3 x 50m pools
January 16-22 | £815 pp

SWIMQUEST
Swimming Holidays
www.swimquestuk.com

CHOOSE THAILAND FOR:
LUXURY, EXOTIC SWIMMING
28°C water - 5* accomodation
February 13-19 | £1,900pp



Picture: Myke Axon

Things to know

Hot pool etiquette

● Shower before getting in at pools and tubs where showers are provided. Hot tubs and pools are not chlorinated and stay clean because people who get into them are freshly washed.



● Many pools and hot tubs are free to use and maintained by volunteers. Do contribute towards those that ask for donations towards their running costs.

● Some natural hot springs are closed when visitor numbers start to damage them so respect signs asking you not to swim – you won't be far from an alternative.

Safe swimming

● With so much swimming in remote places, open water swimming in Iceland is best suited to enjoying the aquatic perspective on beautiful landscapes rather than keeping up long swimming routines from warmer climates with quicker access to support services.

● Getting into hot water after a dip or brief swim in cold water is ok, but because of the impact on circulation and potential blood pressure drop when warming up too fast don't swim for a long time in cold water and get straight into a hot spring.

● Be prepared to travel a long distance to a swimming spot and amend swimming plans if the weather makes sea conditions perilous at short notice.

Safe driving

● Never go off road. Four-wheel drive is good for snowy conditions and smaller roads but never over the delicate landscape of rocks and slow growing plants.

● If venturing out of the city always check the weather for your travel route.

● Specific advice on Icelandic driving can be found at: safetravel.is/driving/driving-in-iceland

Ísafjörður and then back south along route 61 to take advantage of hot swimming pools and hot tubs nestled in coastal green valleys and perched on rocky shores. Along a gravel road and a little more remote, but still accessible, are the row of hot tubs at Drangnes. Even on a grey, rainy day the warm embrace of chlorine-free water warmed by the earth is an absolute joy.

Icelandic swimming revival

Abundant hot water for swimming pools coupled with swimming being a prerequisite for graduating from school is creating a nation of swimmers. In 2008 Nemedikt Hjartson was the first Icelandic man to swim the English Channel. In August 2015 Sigrún Þuríður Geirsdóttir became the first Icelandic woman to cross the Channel. Suddenly, cold water swimming is cool: hipsters are arranging social swims and trendy media companies are sending their employees on weekly swims.

One morning on Nauthólsvík geothermal

beach in Reykjavik I heard puffing noises that could only be a walrus or a swimmer in cold water. Two swimmers skirted the shore and then headed up the beach. They strode across the sand towards the long linear public hot tub. One of them reached down to turn around the thermometer dangling from his neck so that he could see it. "11°C. Hot today!" he laughed. "I swim here through the winter even when there is ice in the water." Then he walked into the service centre to write the sea temperature on the information board before going to sit in the hot tub with a view of the sea he swims in.



SWIMQUEST

Swimming Holidays

www.swimquestuk.com

CHOOSE FORMENTERA FOR:
CHANNEL & DISTANCE SWIMMING

Early season training - Qualifiers - Seminars

April and May dates on sale now | £835pp