

ICELAND Country of extremes

With its strange geology and challenging climate, this isn't a holiday destination for the faint-hearted – but there's plenty to reward adventurous palates, as Susan Low discovers

hungry traveller.



There's nothing soft and pretty about Iceland. Its northern coast almost grazes the Arctic Circle, and this country the

size of England sits on a major geological fault line. Its topography is an otherworldly mix of steam and snow, lava and water. In lightless winter, the landscape evokes the dark side of the moon – but in the 'white nights' of summer, when the days barely end and the temperature can climb to a near-tropical 20°C, islanders cram a year's worth of partying into a few months.

Like the landscape, Icelandic food can be extreme. On my first trip to Reykjavík 15 years ago – after bonding with some new-found friends in a bar and downing too much of the local firewater, brennivín – I was introduced to a local delicacy called hákarl (fermented shark). Imagine, if you can, a substance resembling ripe brie, with an odour of clogged drains, and a taste so ammoniac it makes your eyes water. Fifteen years haven't diminished the horror of the memory. This time round, I knew to steer clear of Icelanders bearing gifts.

During the intervening years, Iceland had its moments in the limelight. In 2008, the banking crisis plunged the economy into a three-year depression. In 2010 the country was back in the headlines as a volcano with an unpronounceable name spewed ash skywards, grounding planes and closing European airspace for six days.

ICELANDIC CHEFS GO 'NEW NORDIC'

Something equally dramatic happened to Iceland's food: New Nordic cuisine cast its influence northwards, holding Icelandic chefs in its grasp. New Nordic's roots lie in Copenhagen, where chefs René Redzepi and Claus Meyer of groundbreaking restaurant Noma launched the movement back in 2004. It even has its own 10-point manifesto, aiming to promote 'a cuisine based on purity, simplicity and freshness that reflects the' >>

A WARM WELCOME
TO ICELAND
...where the
cuisine is as
theatrical as the
landscape

MEET THE MAKERS



VALDI'S ICE CREAM

Given the climate, you'd think ice cream would be fairly low down the list of must-eat foods. Not so, say husband and wife Gylfi and Anna Valdimarsson, the owners of this busy ice cream shop on the waterfront near the Viking Museum (vikingaheimar.is). "Icelanders eat ice cream all year-round," says Gylfi. "Even in a snow storm!" The couple can barely keep up with demand for their exotically flavoured ices (my favourite is salted caramel and turkish pepper). They make about 100 flavours with 15 or so available each day. The one-time chef learned his craft from an Italian-American in New York City. "I was going to open a restaurant but couldn't get a loan," he says. valdis.is



HAFLIÐI RAGNARSSON

Baker-turned-chocolatier Hafliði has been hand-making chocolates since 2003, after taking second place in a major world chocolate competition. "That's when I started making chocolate for real," he says. In Iceland, chocolate is seen as just another type of confectionery, and it's almost all imported from Europe. "Getting people to understand and enjoy the complexities of artisan chocolate – that's the challenge," he says. His signature flavour is pistachio with tonka bean, but I liked the blood orange and chilli. The chocolates are sold in shops in Reykjavík and at Keflavik airport. konfekt.is

BREAKING THE ICE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Grillmarket's stylish interior and an equally stylish dish; sound of the underground at Kaffibarinn; puffin and shag plate at Seafood Grill; hot pink rockfish tempura at Fishmarket

changing seasons'. Food is 'inspired by traditional dishes and the use of ingredients that benefit from the Nordic climate, waters and soil.'

New Nordic cooking fetishises localism and seasonality. Dishes made by traditional techniques such as scorching, salting, smoking, pickling and preserving are revered – and in Iceland the themes are taken to their geographical limits.

Redzepe now claims to be 'over' New Nordic, but it's still big in



Iceland, as I discovered over lunch at the excellent **Seafood Grill** (sjavargrillid.com), in the compact city centre, where young-gun chef Gústav Axel Gunnlaugsson is in charge. My plate of beautifully arranged moundlets of puffin, smoked shag (a type of cormorant) and marinated minke whale is dotted with blueberry, fennel and toasted hazelnuts. It's challenging and unexpected: Iceland on a plate.

At nearby **Dill** (dillrestaurant.is; open Wed-Sat pm), chef Gunnar Karl Gíslason also taps into the Nordic trend, creating exquisite (if pricey) dishes. Working closely with farmers and food producers, he serves the likes of torched and glazed monkfish with sweet and sour glaze; lamb, celeriac and angelica; and burnt bay leaf ice cream with whey caramel.

For a less rarefied (but no less exciting) taste of what Reykjavík has going on, I headed to sister restaurants **Fishmarket** (fiskmarkadurinn.is) and **Grillmarket** (grillmarkadurinn.is), within a short stroll of each other in the ancient heart of the city. Both ultra-chic, they're run by enterprising young chef Hrefna Rósa Saetra and are magnets for food-savvy fun-seekers. Fishmarket's menu is all about fresh Icelandic seafood, with a stylistic nod to Japan. Rockfish tempura, the batter coloured pink with beetroot juice,



resting atop a seaweed salad with yuzu mayonnaise and little balls of watermelon, looked – and tasted – the part. At Grillmarket the emphasis is on meat, bought direct from nearby farms and cooked over fire.

THE PRICE CHALLENGE

Since my first visit, when I subsisted on overpriced pizza and pasta, a new passion is evident in Reykjavík's burgeoning restaurant scene – but it comes at a price. Following the



fisherman, it's famed for its lobster soup (about £7 for a bowl) and smoked eel. Choose what you want from the chiller, then take a seat on the shared picnic table-like benches while the chefs cook it for you.

Another Reykjavík institution is the red and white **Baejarins Beztu Pylsur** (bbp.is), which roughly translates as 'the best hot dog in town'. The flagship outlet is located near modernist Harpa Concert Hall (you can spot it by the queues). Eating here is a Reykjavík ritual, which Bill Clinton is purported to have taken part in once upon a time. At about £2.50 for 'one with everything', this is one of the capital's few food bargains.

WHERE TO DRINK

Alcohol is expensive here (at least £5 for a pint of ordinary lager) but high price points don't dampen Icelanders' enthusiasm for drinking. Laugavegur, the city's main boozing-and-shopping drag, is awash with bustling bars. The best is funky **Kaldi** (Laugavegur 20b), where the own-brewed Czech-style beer goes down a treat and fellow punters are friendly – piano-playing is optional. Nearby **Kaffibarinn** (kaffibarinn.is), with its distinctive London Undergroundesque signage, has been around for ages but is still a cool hangout, with a jazzy muso vibe and Icelandic >>

NORTH TO DALVIK: GREAT FISH DAY (fiskidagurinnmikli.is)

Iceland's economy relies heavily on fishing, and the annual Great Fish Day festival in the northern port town of Dalvík turns necessity into a party. Some 20,000 visitors descend on the village for the festival, most of them (bravely) pitching tents on the outskirts. On Friday evening, village people throw open their doors and invite visitors to sample their interpretation of fish soup.

The next day, the harbour is turned into a funfair. Stalls serve fish of all sorts, from traditional air-dried cod topped with butter (during the Little Ice Age, c.1350-1850, when barley couldn't grow in Iceland, dried fish replaced bread and it's still nostalgically enjoyed today) to the international – Thai fish soup from the town's sole Thai representative. There are fish burgers, fish sausages, fish brochettes, whale meat and grilled fish galore. Everyone scoffs heartily as ABBA tribute bands play on the stage. On Saturday night, when the sun sets after midnight, they all turn out for fireworks. And it's all free. "Happy Fish Day," well-wishers shouted as we stumbled to our hotel. *This year Great Fish Day is 7-9 August. Fly to Akureyri Airport from Reykjavik Domestic Airport and pick up a hire car to travel the 30 miles north to Dalvík.*



Crowds gather for air-dried cod (below) and spectacular fireworks at the annual fish festival



PHOTOGRAPHS: THUNKSTOCK; BLÖRN ÁRNASON; HÖRÐUR ÁSBJÖRNSSON; HSH; GUY DIMOND

WHERE TO STAY

• Icelandair Hotel Marina

This sleek hotel near Reykjavík Harbour opened in spring 2012. Rooms are nicely designed and some overlook the harbour. Great bar too. hotelreykjavikmarina.com; doubles from £170

• Hlemmur Square

A new, funky, design-conscious establishment to the east of the town centre that's part hotel, part hostel and justifiably popular. There's a craft beer and music bar on the ground floor. hlemmursquare.com; shared hostel rooms from £19; double hotel rooms from £134.

NEXT MONTH

Find out why Puglia, in southern Italy, is a magnet for food lovers

Einstök White Ale on tap.

The classy **Slippbarrinn** (slippbarrinn.is), in the Icelandair Hotel by the harbour (see Where To Stay), takes great care over cocktails made with delights such as birch sap, buckthorn syrup and dried cherries.

LOCAL FOOD HEROES

Almost four fifths of Iceland is uninhabitable, and the climate is so harsh, locally grown food is a rare thing – but that hasn't stopped food hero Eirny Sigurdardóttir from rallying behind a small but growing band of artisanal producers. She's even launched an occasional farmers' market in Reykjavík – next one is scheduled for 29-30 August.

Eirny is an authority on Icelandic food, and the lunchtime workshops she runs twice-weekly at her deli, **Burid**, near the harbour, are a fast-track route to learning the country's agricultural history (in season, 6,400 kronor per person; blog.burid.is). She teaches everything there is to know about Icelandic cheeses, too, including the wonderful soft, yogurty skyr. The shop itself is stacked to the gunnels with excellent chutneys, jams, cured meats and crispbread – as well as cheese from all over Europe. I couldn't resist buying a small jar of local Saltverk birch salt (smoked over smouldering birch twigs), which I've been lavishing on my eggs ever since I returned home.

Back in the centre of town, another small local food enterprise, **Fru Lauga** (frulauga.is), sells locally grown organic vegetables. I marvelled at the late-summer display of ripe tomatoes, fresh basil, garlic, onions and peppers, fully aware of the determination it takes to coax such riches from this inhospitable climate. Financial crashes, lack of sunshine and unpredictable volcanoes aren't enough, it seems, to repress Iceland's great food awakening. *Susan travelled to Iceland courtesy of Regent Holidays (regent-holidays.co.uk) and WOW Airlines (wowair.co.uk)* 



Try this at home...

Eirny Sigurdardóttir's happy marriage cake

SERVES 12. HANDS-ON TIME 20 MIN, OVEN TIME 30 MIN, PLUS COOLING

“Traditional Icelandic rhubarb jam is cooked on a low heat for a long time so it becomes thick and dark in colour. Sugar was expensive and in short supply in the old days, so this method minimised the moisture and gave the jam a longer shelf life.”



The finished cake will keep for 3 days in an airtight container.

- 250g unsalted butter, softened
- 200g dark muscovado sugar
- 200g caster sugar
- 1 large free-range egg, beaten
- 250g plain flour
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 250g rolled oats
- 200g rhubarb jam or rhubarb and ginger jam
- 100g strawberry jam

1. Line a 23cm, deep loose-bottomed cake tin with baking paper. Heat the oven to 180°C/160°C fan/gas 4. In a large bowl, cream the butter and sugars with an electric mixer until pale.
 2. Beat in the egg, a little at a time. Once all the egg has been added, sift in the flour and bicarb, then add the oats and carefully fold in using a metal spoon.
 3. Set one third of the mixture aside. Spoon the remaining mix into the prepared tin and smooth the surface with the back of a spoon. Mix together the rhubarb and strawberry jams, then spread over the mixture. Top with the reserved mixture, leaving a few gaps so the jam peeks through.
 4. Bake for 30 minutes or until the cake mix is set and golden but still quite gooey. Serve topped with a dollop of softly whipped cream, if you like, and enjoy with a cup of tea.
- PER SERVING** 510kcal, 19.5g fat (10.8g saturated), 5.3g protein, 77.3g carbs (49.9g sugars), 0.3g salt, 2.6g fibre 