Warming up to Iceland

Mike Grenby
Bond University, Mike_Grenby@bond.edu.au

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Harsh economic climate has made the land of ice and fire easier on the wallet.

Warming up to Iceland

This really is the land of fire and ice. While three major glaciers cover 9 per cent of the country, you can also get up close and personal with thermal vents as they bear their superheated sulphurous steam out through cracks in the ground.

"It's hot!" exclaimed one visitor as he quickly pulled back the hand he had thrust forward one foot alongside Highway 1, just past Lake Myvatn, here in northern Iceland.

The geothermal activity provides the country with much of its hot water and heating plus about one-quarter of its electricity.

While nearby Greenland is nearly ice, Iceland, which hugs just below the Arctic Circle, is mostly green — at least in the summer. And Canadian "green" goes twice as far as it used to, thanks to Iceland's economic problems, which cut the currency value in half.

Iceland's attractions revolve mainly around nature. The vast treeless landscapes are truly spectacular.

Lava fields in various stages of disintegration dominate large parts of the country. Mountains, including volcanoes, rise steeply from the valleys. The ocean is never far away and along with the many lakes, attracts abundant wildlife.

Because of the fire below, you can bathe in large outdoor spa pools like the Blue Lagoon, and the 800-year-old Myvatn Nature Baths whose opening is sometimes delayed while the superheated water is cooled to a tolerable 40°C.

The volcanic nature of Iceland is very evident.

Photos: Mike Greenly, for the Calgary Herald

Iceland snapshot

SIZE: 103,000 square kilometers, slightly smaller than Cuba

POPULATION: 306,700 (July 2009 estimate)

RESOURCES: Fish, hydropower, geothermal power, diamonds

LAND: Mountain peaks, ice fields, fjords, less than one per cent suitable for farming

Eruptions are so prevalent that volcanoes have erupted over the past two centuries, the phrasebook's "how to cope with natural disasters" section includes detailed instructions on the best way to survive a volcanic eruption.
ICELAND: From lava fields to Vikings

FROM F1

Recent major eruptions occurred in 2000 and 1996. The worldwide economic crisis forced overstretched Iceland into bankruptcy. The exchange rate doubled in favour of foreign currencies. Some prices have tripled, but prices for foreign visitors generally have fallen to half of their former very expensive levels.

Although Europeans can catch a ferry for the three-day trip to Iceland — Norway and then Denmark ruled Iceland until it became independent in 1660 — the most convenient way to reach Keflavik airport or via a one-day cruise is to ferry. Uniflakafl fly directly to Keflavik from Seattle, Toronto and Halifax with fares starting from under $1,000 return.

Keflavik sits on Iceland’s south-west tip, the Reykjanes peninsula, which offers a taste in miniature of the country’s attractions: picturesque waterfalls and rivers, moonlike landscapes and another world. The easy, one-day Golden Circle tour just to the east of Reykjavik includes Geysir (And the Strokkur geyser which shoots water and steam 30 metres into the air every few minutes), the Gullfoss waterfall (a replica of the Viking ship Islendingur), the Blue Lagoon; see www.visitreykjanes.com.

Reykjavik, the world’s northernmost capital city, is a 45-minute drive north on a mostly four-lane highway. Keep an eye out for the irreverent Iceland Grapevine, which recently published The Best of Reykjavik 2009, including “Best place to cheer up (the petting zoo),” “Best place to shop (Veganiot, Hresso, Dubliners)” — “Best place to hook up (Bandon),” “Best place to watch up (Nagssoque, Dikablon) — as well as restaurants and bars; check www.grapevine.is.

You wouldn’t suspect the locals were experiencing financial problems, judging by the shopping and bar action and the number of Range Rovers, BMWs, although one person said: “People took out loans based on foreign currencies. So since the value of our currency dropped in half, many people have trouble making double their former payments and worry about losing their car or home.” Also, more Icelanders are holidaying at home, so booking accommodation in advance is important. A powersellingroom about 4,000 kilometres around Iceland, past mountains, rivers and lakes as well as farmhouses and churches set along the shore or up into the mountains.

By the middle of the short summer — similar to that of Canada’s North — large rolled hay bales, covered in white plastic, start showing up in the fields, along with sheep and cows and the stubby 1.3-metre high and mild mannered Icelandic horses, whose special running walk is so smooth the riders hardly notice the motion (they are also raised for their meat).

Here are just a few highlights:

- The Settlement Centre provides a fascinating history of how and where the Vikings settled in Iceland start­ling in the 10th century.
- Lake Myvatn is surrounded by lava fields, craters, bubbling mud pots, steam vents and the most amazing chocolate mousse with raspberry puree and watermelon pieces, plus a lunch or dinner stop at Lindin restaurant, in Laugarvatn.
- Credit cards are widely accepted; service is included so you don’t need to tip. Hotel room rates often include breakfast. Caring offers an in­expensive alternative. Most people speak English.
- Long daylight hours in summer allow you to make the most of your visit.