

5 Day Iceland Itinerary: How to Plan a First Trip to Iceland

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I have a reputation for being an obsessive planner when it comes to our family vacations. But planning a trip to Iceland really took the cake. For our five days in Iceland, I spent over 20 hours pouring over guidebooks, maps, and blogs to create our 5 day Iceland itinerary. That's a lot of work to plan a vacation, but it paid off.

Since our first trip to Iceland, I have returned twice, once in winter months and again to visit Snaefellsnes and the Westfjords in early fall. I have also become a certified Iceland trip planner, helping over 20 families with their Iceland vacations. With all this experience, I've updated this post from when I first wrote it in 2017 to include what I've learned, and some new attractions that have recently opened.

This Iceland itinerary covers a 5-day trip in the summer months when you can take advantage of the long days and lots of sunlight. I'll provide a day-by-day itinerary for an Iceland road trip along the South Coast of Iceland, from Reykjavik to the Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon. This self-drive trip includes the famous Golden Circle, beautiful waterfalls, and other natural wonders along the main road.

You can follow this 5-day itinerary at any time of year, but you will need to use more caution if you are driving in the winter. You wouldn't have the same long days at that time of the year, but you would have a chance to visit the ice caves near Vatnajökull National Park and maybe even see the Aurora Borealis.



How to Plan a trip to Iceland: Know Before you Go

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Is 5 Days in Iceland enough?

If you are hoping to drive around the entire country on the Ring Road, then no, 5 days in Iceland is not enough. For your first time in Iceland, you don't need to cover the entire island. You can pick different parts of the country to give you a taste of the magic of Iceland. Most first-time visitors to Iceland will choose to visit Reykjavik, the Capital Region, and the Southern Coast of Iceland covered in this itinerary.

How Much Does a Trip to Iceland Cost?

Before you go, it is important to realize that even if you find cheap airfare, Iceland is an expensive country to visit. I have put together this [Iceland budget guide](#) to help families and others understand how much a trip to Iceland costs, depending on your budget and interests.

Keep in mind that when you visit greatly impacts costs, with the most expensive times being between June through August and during the festive season. To reduce costs, plan on staying in guest houses and vacation rentals in the countryside and limiting your time in Reykjavik. You can also focus on free activities, like hiking, and minimize paid tours and excursions. It is hard to avoid Iceland's high-priced food, but you can minimize your food budget by planning casual meals and preparing many of your own meals.



The black sand beach at Vik

When to Visit Iceland

Trying to “do” Iceland in 5 days means you are going to be busy, so it is best to go in the summer when the days are long. I have also visited [Iceland in the winter](#), but I still prefer summer when there is more daylight for exploring.

Keep in mind that a trip to Iceland means long days with a lot of driving and also moving hotels frequently. Even with only five days in Iceland, there is no getting around moving a couple of times if you want to minimize driving. It is possible to stay in Reykjavik and take [day trips](#), but you will be doing even more driving (or time spent on tour buses.)

Given the limited amount of time, you will likely want to focus your attention on the South Coast for your first trip to Iceland. This will allow you to fit in Reykjavik, [the Golden Circle](#), black sand beaches, waterfalls, and maybe even the Glacier Lagoon.

If you want to drive the entire Ring Road and get to the more remote places like the [Westfjords](#), you are going to need at least 10-14 days.

Getting to Iceland



IcelandAir (which codeshares with JetBlue) is the primary carrier for flights to Iceland, with direct flights from New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis, and Orlando. The newly launched Play Airlines offers great budget fares (replacing the now defunct WOW Airlines) and United and Delta also offer a few direct flights from the USA.

On our first trip, we flew IcelandAir from Boston to Keflavík, arriving at 11:40 pm on the summer solstice, just in time to get the full effect of the midnight sun. These days, flights usually arrive in the early morning, which leaves you with the conundrum of what to do until your accommodations are ready for check-in.

Ideally, you would book for the night before, arranging for an early morning check-in, but that is going to cost more. Since most flights to Iceland are fairly short, from the East Coast of the U.S. at least, you will be tired and it is hard to hit the ground running with a busy day.

If you have a hotel, you can at least drop off your bags and walk around to stay awake. If you are staying in an Airbnb, there is luggage storage at the main bus station. On my last trip, I ended up hanging out at the Hlemmur Food Hall until our Airbnb was ready. Many people will choose to make their first stop at the [Blue Lagoon](#), as it is the perfect place to relax and kill some time until check-in.

Getting Around Iceland



Driving near Dyrhólaey

Unless you are planning on using a private driver or taking tours, you will need to rent a car in Iceland. If you are going to just base yourself in the city and take day trips from Reykjavik, you can book the FlyBus to get from the Keflavik International Airport to the main bus station (where you can switch to another bus for hotel drop-offs.)

I would recommend using **Auto Europe** to check car rental rates from multiple suppliers. Depending on where you are going, you probably won't need an SUV, but if you are going to drive into the interior on any of the "F" gravel roads, it is a requirement. We were glad we had a 4×4 just for getting through the bumpy dirt roads you often drive on to get to waterfalls, hikes, and some tours, especially in parking lots.

When renting a car in Iceland, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

- Lines at the rental car offices can be quite long, be prepared and be patient.
- Additional insurance (particularly gravel and ash) is HIGHLY recommended and costly — build this into your Iceland budget

Keep in mind that you don't want to rely entirely on Google Maps when you are driving as what it says looks like the better way can sometimes take you on interior F roads that aren't even open. Also, your GPS will generally tell you something takes less time than it actually will — give yourself plenty of time for driving and stops along the way.

Where to Stay in Reykjavik



Reykjavik is a small, walkable city. If you stay anywhere in the core downtown area, you are no more than a 20-30 minute walk to all the main attractions. The city itself is clean and very safe.

Reykjavik has been growing and it is no longer quite as hard to find a hotel room. (See my list of family-friendly [hotels in Reykjavik](#).) Since hotels are so pricey, vrbo was the way to go for our family.

I've stayed in multiple [vrbo apartments downtown](#) that have been under \$250 a night which worked out perfectly (except for the late check-in and the need to carry luggage upstairs.) The convenience of a hotel is ideal but the apartment rentals are much more budget-friendly. At least now there are some options for those that want to use points, including the [Canopy by Hilton](#) and the [Marriott Edition](#).

For more suggestions on planning a trip to Iceland, make sure to read my separate post on [Iceland travel tips!](#)

5 Days in Iceland Itinerary: Exploring the South Coast

As mentioned earlier, if you only have 5 days in Iceland, a popular option for first-time visitors is to explore Reykjavik, the Golden Circle, and the South Coast. If you have already been to Iceland, or you are looking to get a little more off-the-beaten path, you can also check out my itineraries for the Snafellsness Peninsula and the Westfjords. Together, these also make an excellent five-day Iceland itinerary.

Day 1 – Reykjavik



On your first day in Iceland, if you are arriving in the morning, you may want to plan a stop at the Blue Lagoon on your way to Reykjavik to kill some time before you can check into your accommodations. Personally, I find the Blue Lagoon very touristy (see my [Blue Lagoon review](#) here), but I know many feel a trip to Iceland isn't complete without seeing the Blue Lagoon. At least if you get there very early in the morning the crowds won't be too bad.

As an alternative, you could try the newer hot springs at Sky Lagoon, which is closer to the city and offers beautiful views overlooking the water. If you don't have a car, you can also [book a ticket including transfers](#).

After checking in to your accommodations, grab some lunch (see my recommendations on [where to eat in Reykjavik](#).) Next, take a walk along the waterfront to see the Sun Voyager sculpture and make your way over to the stunning Harpa Concert Hall (Austurbakki 2). Be sure to walk around inside to see the light reflecting through the glass and the beautiful architecture.

After the Harpa, walk over to the Old Harbor for a [Puffin Express boat tour](#) or an [express whale watching tour](#). The puffin tour is just an hour, leaving you plenty of time to explore but also giving you a view of these cute little birds.

If it is too cold to get out on the water, another great option is to [visit the Perlan](#). This glass dome-shaped building includes an ice cave and a planetarium show that makes you feel like you are under the Northern Lights. It is a great option for those that have limited time in Iceland but still want to experience some of its magic.

Another alternative, especially for those that miss out on a whale-watching tour, would be a visit to the [Whales of Iceland](#) exhibit downtown. Kids will especially love the 23 life-size replicas of whales and the interactive exhibits.

After the afternoon activity, take some time to explore and shop along Laugavegur, which is the main shopping street in the city centre and finish off with an elevator ride to the top of the [Hallgrímskirkja church](#) (Hallgrímstorg 1) for beautiful views over the city.

Get a good night's sleep on your first night because you will be exhausted and need your energy for a full day tomorrow.

Day 2 – Golden Circle



Gulfoss Waterfall

Begin your second day with a hearty breakfast from Sandholt Bakery (Laugavegur 36) or at your hotel/apartment.

I recommend spending the second day on a self-driving Golden Circle tour and keeping your home base in Reykjavik, so you don't need to switch hotels every night.

If you are interested in joining a small group tour, I would recommend using [Hidden Iceland](#). **Use promo code WE3TRAVEL to get 10% off scheduled group day tours with Hidden Iceland.** I did a tour with them recently and was so impressed with their knowledge and customer service.

If you want to avoid the big tour buses at each attraction, plan to do the Golden Circle counterclockwise, starting at the 6,500-year-old Kerid Crater for a quick walk around the caldera. Next, you may want to plan a stop at the [Secret Lagoon](#) for a more rustic and natural hot spring environment.

Another popular spot on the Golden Circle route is at [Fridheimar](#), a restaurant and tomato farm, which uses geothermal energy to heat the greenhouses that are the source of those fresh salads you can find in Iceland. If you want to have lunch, be sure to book a table in advance.

Your next stop will be at the impressive Gullfoss waterfall. Give yourself enough time to walk along the various viewpoints and take in the double rainbows that you often find above the waterfall. Many find this the most beautiful waterfall in Iceland, but you will see my favorite tomorrow.

Once you are done at Gullfoss, it is a short drive just ten minutes down the road you will come to the Geysir Visitor Center. It is then a short walk across the street from the parking area to watch the reliable Strokkur geyser erupting.

While it isn't as tall and impressive as Old Faithful in [Yellowstone](#), I love that you can get up close (and you don't have to wait as long for the eruption.) Just before it erupts, a giant blue bubble forms that then explodes upward in a spray of steam and water. You can also spend time walking through the geothermal area, but generally, this stop shouldn't take too long.

If you have time in your day, add a stop at the [Laugarvatn Fontana spa](#) for a dip in their pools and a tour of their thermal bakery (they bake bread in the ground but reservations are needed).

You can also have a late lunch there or you could stop at Efstidalur II, at Blaskogabyggd 801, a farm hotel and restaurant with great homemade ice cream.

The last stop of the day is at Thingvellir National Park (Þingvellir National Park), the site of the country's first Parliament and UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is also a Game of Thrones filming site and a spot where you can see the rift between the North American and Eurasian continents (and even [snorkel](#) between the tectonic plates!)

To be honest, the views here aren't that remarkable but it is a good spot if you want to do a bit of hiking. Generally by the end of the day you are getting tired of getting in and out of the car and might prefer just a short stop.

You can return to Reykjavik for dinner, or stop at Lindin, at Lindarbraut 2 in Laugarvatn. Lindin specializes in seafood (including whale and puffin) and game (like reindeer burgers) and isn't the most kid-friendly but it was fine for our foodie family.

Day 3 – South Coast



On your third day, you will want to check out of your hotel early and arrange for a hotel room in the town of Vík or ideally near the Glacier Lagoon for the next night or two. This will be a long and busy day exploring some of the most beautiful spots on the South Coast. Be sure to stock up on snacks before you head out.

Depart Reykjavik early to make the most of your day and drive east along Rt 1 (aka the Ring Road) for approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes to Rt 249 towards the Seljalandsfoss waterfall. You will see the waterfall as you drive towards it and don't be surprised if you see quite a few tour buses too.

Hopefully, you can sneak in there between the bus tours and enjoy the falls without the crowds, but keep in mind that even when Iceland is crowded, it is nothing like the crowds you will find somewhere like Niagara Falls.

One of the fun things at Seljalandsfoss is that you can get to walk behind the waterfall, which is one of the coolest things I've done. Just be sure to wear good non-slip, waterproof shoes and a raincoat and rain pants because even to get close to the falls you will get soaked from the mist — see my [Iceland packing list](#) for more suggestions!

I also wouldn't recommend attempting to walk behind the waterfall in the winter as the area surrounding the waterfall is pure ice and you will need crampons or microspikes if you want to get close (see my [Iceland winter packing list](#).)

After walking behind the falls, follow the path a few hundred meters further along the cliff face to the **Gljufurarbui waterfall**. You will need to enter into a crevice in the cliff and walk through a small stream to find this hidden waterfall. So many people on bus tours overlook this hidden gem but it was a highlight of our trip! You will need some good waterproof hiking shoes to get in there though unless you don't mind cold, wet feet for the rest of the day.

If you are hungry, there is usually a food truck or a fish and chip stand set up at Seljalandsfoss.

After you have had your fill at Seljalandsfoss, continue on Rt 1 for another 30 minutes to the Skogafoss waterfall in Skogar. You can walk to the foot of the falls and also climb a staircase to see the falls from above. I personally think this is the most beautiful waterfall on this 5-day Iceland itinerary. Just make sure you leave yourself plenty of time to enjoy the falls! You may think these are going to be short photo stops but the waterfalls are so impressive that you will want to take time just to enjoy the views from every vantage point.

When you are done, continue along Rt 1 to Rt 218 to Dyrhólaey (35 minutes), [a stone sea arch where puffins nest](#). You'll need to drive up a steep, narrow dirt road to reach Dyrhólaey. Just note that this area is closed during puffin nesting season in late May and early June.



We lucked out because it was open when we visited and by leaning over the cliff slightly we got some close-up views of these cute little puffins. Just be very careful here as there are no guardrails along the cliff edge and the wind can be quite strong. There is also a cute lighthouse on the promontory.

Next, head back to Rt 1 and follow it to Rt 215 to Reynisfjara (30 minutes), which is home to a black sand beach with amazing basalt columns, caves, and sea stacks. This is an iconic spot in Iceland that you won't want to miss.

There is also a small cafe here that serves up a delicious meat soup — a classic Icelandic dish.



If you haven't eaten yet, stop for lunch in Vík and take a walk out to the black sand beach to see the famous Reynisdrangur rock formations. I would also recommend checking out the new [Icelandic Lava Show](#) to experience the “fire” part of the land of Ice and Fire.

You may want to choose to stay in this general area on the south coast for two or three nights to minimize moving around. Some options include:

If you are continuing on to the Glacier Lagoon this day, it is a long drive and you can stop for dinner at [Systrakaffi](#) at Klausturvegi 13, 880 Kirkjubæjarklaustri. This nice cafe offers simple fare like pizza and hamburgers, but also nicer entrees like a very well-prepared arctic char. If you can't find lodging near the glacier or closer to Vík, this is a good spot to look for a vrbo.

If you are [staying near the glacier lagoon](#), drive across the lava fields to the Jökulsárlón Lagoon.

Day 4 – Icebergs & Glacier Hiking



Getting up close to icebergs

If you are staying on the south coast, start off with a drive east to the Jökulsárlón Lagoon. You can see icebergs from the beach, but I would recommend a [boat tour](#) to get up close to them. Unless you have little kids, a zodiac boat tour will get you up close to all types of icebergs and you can also get up close to the glacier face.

If you cross the bridge between the lagoon and the sea, you will get to Diamond Beach. It was named for the large chunks of ice that wash up on shore, glittering on the black sand beach like diamonds.

If you are visiting in the winter, you can take a [tour of an ice cave](#) instead. Although I wouldn't recommend driving out here by yourself in the winter unless you are very comfortable driving under winter conditions (be sure to check out my tips for [visiting Iceland in the winter](#).)

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When you have finished at the Lagoon, you can drive back towards Reykjavik or Keflavik, stopping again on the South Coast.

In the afternoon, I'd recommend a glacier hike. Near the glacier lagoon, you can take a hike on a glacier in Skaftafell National Park. On our trip, we took a three-hour glacier hike with Arcanum Tours on Sólheimajökull glacier.





Day 5 – South Coast / Reykjanes Peninsula

If you have five full days in Iceland, you have one more day of adventure before heading home. However, if you are flying out late on your fifth day, you should start to make your way toward Keflavik and take a self-driving [tour of the Reykjanes Peninsula](#) before heading to the airport.

If you have kids, they would enjoy a visit to the Viking World Museum near Keflavik airport to see a full-scale replica Viking ship that actually sailed from Iceland to Canada and the U.S. You can learn about Viking history and Norse mythology. Outside there is a small petting zoo and playground.

However, if you don't fly out until your sixth day, take another day to enjoy some more activities along the south coast. A few I would recommend include:

- A superjeep tour into Thorsmork valley
- Horseback riding on the black sand beach in Vik
- [ATVs on the black sand beach](#)
- See my list of 23 [unique things to do in Iceland](#)

I hope that you leave Iceland just as in love with this magical country as we did — exhausted, exhilarated, and enthralled.

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