Southern Iceland: From Geysers to Glaciers

Overview

There’s something about Iceland that calls to travellers’ hearts everywhere. It has that wild, untouched nature about it, paired with history, culture, and a mesmerising collection of waterfalls, lagoons, glaciers, mountains, and black sand beaches. It’s the ideal place for a motorhome experience to explore all of the above and more and a once in a lifetime kind of thrill. When you do make this dream a reality, be sure to learn how to camp responsibly in Iceland, as the country has strict campervan laws so you will need to plan ahead and book sites.
Enter into a world of lagoons, waterfalls, and black sand beaches all in the first short leg of your road trip through Iceland. You’ll begin in Reykjavik, where you’ll have the opportunity to look around this capital city before setting off to visit the Blue Lagoon, arguably Iceland’s most famous destination. From here, it’s on to two of the country’s biggest and most impressive waterfalls - Seljalandsfoss and Skogafoss, before seeing two of the country’s most epic black sand beaches at the southern tip of the island. You’ll need about two full days to complete this leg to allow for plenty of time to soak in the lagoon, then get soaked again at the falls!

Reykjavik

A vast ocean on one side and mountains on the other, there’s no place quite like Reykjavik. It’s the world’s northernmost capital, and it’s worth exploring before you begin your road trip. One of the city’s most noticeable features is the Hallgrímskirkja church, which you can see from almost anywhere in town as it towers over all the other buildings. The design was inspired by the way lava cools, making for a dramatic and unforgettable piece of architecture. In the heart of the city, you will find Laugavegur, which is the main shopping and dining district and a good place to spend an afternoon wandering, shopping, and enjoying the atmosphere. Another impressive spot is the Harpa Music Hall, another architectural wonder that is built with glass and inspired by Iceland’s landscapes. It features regular live performances, or you can simply visit to see the building itself in its spectacular waterfront location.

Leaving the city, you’ll take Route 41 southwest for roughly 45 minutes to reach one of Iceland’s most well-loved attractions.

Blue Lagoon
The **Blue Lagoon** is a geothermal spa and one of the most luxurious experiences you’ll find anywhere on the planet. The water’s average temperature is 39 degrees Celsius throughout the year, and you can go during the day or the night - and the night is particularly special during winter as you may find yourself staring up at the Northern Lights from the comfort of a geothermal pool. The lagoon is surrounded by black volcanic rock and green moss, making the soothing blue of the waters all the more inviting, and you can opt for massages, skin treatments, saunas, and other spa options to take your experience to the next level. After being named one of the top 10 spas in the world by Conde Nast Traveller, the Blue Lagoon has seen a big increase in popularity, so you will need to book your space in advance - anywhere from several days to several weeks depending on the season - to ensure you get entry.

Next, it’s time to see some waterfalls. Drive south to join Route 427 and head east for just over two hours to reach the first one.

**Seljalandsfoss**

There are many waterfalls dotted around Iceland, but **Seljalandsfoss Waterfall** is easily one of the most iconic. This cascade drops 60 metres and is fed by melt from the volcanic glacier Eyjafjallajokull. It’s one thing to simply see this waterfall - and occasionally the rainbow generated on sunny days by the powerful spray coming from this gigantic drop - but the real attraction here is the path leading behind the falls. Venture down for a unique view from between the rockface and the water, which looks out over the valley. A camera with a fisheye lens is ideal to capture this surreal image, but it’s hard to take a bad photo of this area no matter what technology you’re working with. Note that any camera gear, your clothes, and yourself, will get very wet as you follow this path thanks to the spray, and you should wear walking shoes with good grip as the ground can be slippery. Due to the risk of falling ice, the path is closed over winter, so you can only slip behind the waterfall in summer.

From here it’s only 30 minutes to the next waterfall, so continue along Route 1 until you reach Skogafoss.

**Skogafoss**

**Skogafoss** is another 60-metre high waterfall but is larger than Seljalandsfoss at a full 25 metres wide, making it one of the biggest cascades in Iceland. It’s also unique as it is fed by two separate glaciers, Eyjafjallajokull and Myrdalsjokull. Once again, due to the tremendous amount of water spray coming of these falls, sunny days tend to mean single - or even double - rainbows appearing at the site. You can’t walk behind this one, but you can climb the 527 steps to the viewing platform at the top of the falls for an exceptional view of the area. Note that you are likely to get wet at Skogafoss, so wear a waterproof layer or clothes that you don’t mind getting soaked.

Next, drive half an hour along Route 1, but turn off to the right onto Route 218 to make your way
Kirkjufjara and Reynisfjara Beaches are black sand beaches at the southern tip of Iceland, just 20 minutes drive from one another. Reynisfjara is world-renowned and often busy throughout summer, whereas Kirkjufjara is somewhat lesser known, making for a quiet contrast to its more popular neighbour. Reynisfjara has become famous because of its striking black basalt columns that rise powerfully from the sand, creating bizarre and wonderful natural sculptures along the shoreline. It also has cliffs, caves, and the black sand known around the country for its dark hue and volcanic origins. Kirkjufjara doesn’t offer quite as much in the way of basalt columns but is still decorated with sheer cliffs and black sands. It’s important to note that both beaches have powerful, dangerous waves, so you must avoid going near the water or standing on rocks where the waves could topple you off.

After Reynisfjara, drive just 10 minutes further along Route 1 to reach the village of Vik.

Leg 1 Highlights

Blue Lagoon  Seljalandsfoss  Reynisfjara Beach

Leg 2  Vik to Geysir

In this second leg, you’ll continue your drive along Iceland’s Ring Road. Start in the tiny town of Vik for a look into life in Iceland outside of the big cities, before moving on to the other-worldly glacier lagoon of Jokulsarlon. From here, you’ll keep driving up the coast to the striking peaks of Vestrahorn Mountain, before turning right to the ocean.
Vik

Vik is the southernmost village in Iceland, and its tiny-town charm and coastal views have turned it into a must-see stop on your way around the Ring Road. Vik offers a whole different side of a country that is most notable for its wilderness and outdoor attractions - a place where you can peek into the lives of the several hundred people who call it home. **Reyniskirkja Church** is a small, charming white building that perches above the town, and can either walk or drive up to it to get a closer look and see the views out over Vik. You can also drive just north of town to see the **Myrdalsjokull Glacier**, which is an active volcano that offers numerous hiking trails if you fancy a challenging walk.

Next, carry on driving along Route 1 for roughly 2.5 hours to make your way to Jokulsarlon.

**Jokulsarlon**

Jokulsarlon is a spectacular glacier lagoon right on the edge of the **Vatnajokull National Park**. It is decorated with giant blocks of ice that fall from the glacier, where they mingle with the incoming salt water tide from the sea and slowly melt as they drift out towards the ocean. You can easily drive to the glacier lagoon and get out to explore these massive natural ice sculptures, and you might even spot seals relaxing and playing amongst them. Another option is to take a boat tour out onto the lagoon to see these chunks of ice close up, and to learn more about the area and all the movies that have been shot here, as it is Iceland’s most popular film location set.

Your next drive takes you just over an hour away to Vestrahorn, which is the farthest you’ll go around the Ring Road before turning back towards Reykjavik.

**Vestrahorn Mountain**

**Vestrahorn Mountain** adds something new again to your campervan tour of Iceland. Unlike the many flat-topped glacial mountains you’ll have seen thus far, Vestrahorn is a stand out due to its sharp ‘horny’ peaks and sheer sides that drop directly down to the beaches below. One of the best viewing points is on **Stokksnes Beach**, where you can take in the mountain vista in the background, with rolling sand dunes, wildflowers, and lapping ocean in the foreground. It’s known locally as ‘Batman Mountain’, and it’s especially photogenic during sunrise or sunset. The local farm owner of the Viking Cafe does charge a small fee to explore, so be sure to bring some cash. This also gives you access to a Viking village film set that was built in 2009 and is quickly becoming something of Iceland’s version of New Zealand’s Hobbiton film set.
From here, you will take the longest drive of your trip to head back towards the capital and check out a final handful of attractions. Stock up on snacks and make plenty of rest stops as you make your way back along Route 1, then up to Gullfoss Falls. Note that you can easily break this drive up by stopping overnight along the way.

**Gullfoss Falls**

The view of **Gullfoss Falls** is the kind of natural wonder that gives Iceland its reputation as one of the most unbelievably stunning countries in the world. This giant cascade has two separate drops, falling roughly 30 metres in total into a canyon with walls that reach up to 70 metres in height. It’s fed by Iceland’s second-largest glacier, the **Langjokull Glacier**, along the Hvita River, and often sees vibrant rainbows on sunny days. You won’t be able to see the falls from the bottom, but all the viewing points found around the top of Gullfoss let you wander your way to each of them for a fresh angle. There is also a restaurant and gift shop on site where you can rest and grab a bite to eat with a view before starting the last leg of your journey.

Aptly named Geysir is just 10 minutes from Gullfoss, and it’s an excellent place to stay the night thanks to the Geysir Camping Site right next to the attraction.

**Leg 2 Highlights**

- Jokulsarlon
- Vestrahorn
- Gullfoss Falls

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Just when you start to think Iceland can no longer surprise you, it goes and blows it out of the water - literally. This last leg begins at The Great Geysir, before moving on to a volcanic crater lake, and finally, making your way to the Thingvellir National Park where you can swim between two tectonic plates. You can fit this last leg in one big day, or stretch it over two.

**The Great Geysir**
The Great Geysir - or more simply, Geysir - is an attraction on a geothermal field that covers a few square kilometres. The Great Geysir itself is no longer as active as it once was and rarely erupts, but the nearby Strokkur geyser is significantly more active, exploding 30 metres into the air every few minutes. This area is free to enter, but visitors are strongly advised to stay on the walking paths, heed all signs, and stay within roped sections, as the waters may be beautiful, but they are dangerously hot. For something extra special, book the tour to help a chef cook eggs in an outdoor geyser, and dig up and devour bread that has been baking underground. The new Geysir Centre on site adds interesting information about the history of the geothermal field and geysers, as well as a cafe.

Next, drive approximately 40 minutes southwest to Kerid.

Kerid

Kerid offers a quick, but stunning and truly special stop along the road back to Reykjavik. It is an old volcanic crater lake rimmed by red volcanic rock, making for an arresting view. The crater is enormous with sides rising roughly 55 metres around the lake in the centre, in which you can enjoy a little time in the water for a swim or boat ride. There are even occasional concerts and performances held on a giant raft on the lake, as the shape of the crater makes for the perfect natural amphitheatre in a particularly beautiful location.

The final stop on your Iceland adventure is an unmissable destination, 45 minutes northwest of Kerid.

Thingvellir National Park and Silfra

There's only one way to finish your motorhome road trip through southern Iceland, and that's with a visit to the Thingvellir National Park. This is a place of enormous cultural and historical value to the Icelandic, as it is where the Althing was born in 930 - an assembly place where all tribes on the island could meet once per year to settle disputes, and a tradition that carried on until 1798. It is for this reason that Thingvellir is the only UNESCO World Heritage Site on the island, but many visit for much more than just the history. The Thingvellir Rift Valley is where you can physically see the rift between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates, which are moving apart at a
rate of about 2 centimetres per year, and it’s also a Game of Thrones filming location. Not only can you see the rift, but you can also snorkel in it at Silfra, where you’ll swim in clear glacial water between the edges of two of the Earth’s plates for a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Finally, it’s just 45 minutes or so along Route 36 to make your way back to Reykjavik.

There’s truly no place like Iceland, and with a campervan journey around this island of waterfalls and geysers, beaches and lagoons, you’ll see precisely why it is a bucket list destination for so many. There’s also nothing quite like the excitement of looking forward to a motorhome adventure, so you can start planning your next itinerary as soon as you hand over your camper keys in Reykjavik.

Leg 3 Highlights

The Great Geysir  Kerid  Thingvellir National Park