

Iceland

Days 1-3

Snaefellsnes Peninsula

Our tour starts in the spectacular wilderness of Iceland's westernmost peninsula - Snaefellsnes. Our hotel provides a great base to explore the flower-rich boglands and heaths, the coastal marshes and the majestic central volcano, Snaefellsjokull. Delicate Arctic Poppies shine forth from gravel flats under the volcano's icecap and here we'll also encounter the gorgeous Arctic Riverbeauty and rare Lance-leaved Moonwort. Many Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins breed on the bird stacks at Londrangar where we can also see rarer Brünnich's Guillemot and Black Guillemot. Along the coast Common and Grey Seals haul up on the many rocky promontories and offshore White-beaked Dolphins have to be wary of the schools of Orcas that hunt these waters.

Days 4-7

Myvatn

Myvatn and the nearby Jokulsargljufur Canyon must rank as one of the natural wonders of the world, and the most amazing thing about it is that you can actually see the landforms happening! The Myvatn area sits squarely on the mid-Atlantic ridge and exhibits a wide range of volcanic and geothermal topographic features in a marvellous profusion which leaves visitors bewildered by the sheer power and proximity of our planet's internal forces. Extinct volcanoes, extensive burning sulphur fields, a multitude of hot springs and some magnificent geysers are just some of the more outwardly visible signs of the ridge's activity. Krafla is the scene of the massive eruptions of the 1720's which covered much of the region in lava. We shall be able to see the eruption fissures and some amazing sulphur springs.

Myvatn is a National Park and a Ramsar site, and its centre-piece is the 37 square kilometre Myvatn Lake, a shallow expanse of water studded with peninsulas and dotted with myriad islands. The extraordinary density of nesting birds here has to be seen to be believed. Only a short distance south of the Arctic Circle, and surrounded by lunar landscapes, it has one of the richest wildfowl breeding concentrations in Europe with no less than 10,000 pairs of duck made up of 16 species. Myvatn holds 95% of the European breeding population of Barrow's Goldeneye and about 200 pairs of stunning Harlequin Ducks. These are very beautiful and rare creatures, their strikingly marked blue, white and dark maroon plumage is unusual in the extreme, and what a Latin name - *Histrionicus histrionicus*!

The wild cries of Great Northern Divers and Red-throated Divers light the imagination and the beautiful summer-plumaged Long-tailed Duck, Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser and Slavonian Grebe will prove a magnet for bird photographers. Our hotel is situated right by the shore of the lake and there will be ample opportunity to wander out in the evenings, shortage of daylight is not a problem here - neither is the weather, as Myvatn is the driest region in Iceland! The surrounding bogs and mires are jam-packed with breeding waders including the beautiful Red-necked Phalarope. The sight of this very tame species whirling in tight circles on a small pool just metres away from us will surely be one of the highlights of the tour. These same boggy areas hold a rich plant life. Among miniature birch and spruce on the Hofnoi lava headland we'll come across such delights as the Northern Green Orchid, Coralroot Orchid and Frog Orchid. Paris quadrifolia shelters with Oak Ferns in volcanic fissures and there are lovely displays of Cassiope hypnoides amid a vast crimson carpet of Trailing Azalea. We may see an Arctic Fox hunting through the white mist of cotton grass which hangs over the mires, a Merlin chasing a Meadow Pipit, or an Arctic Skua harrying an Arctic Tern above us.

The totally unpronounceable Jokulsargljufur National Park, sometimes known as Iceland's Grand Canyon, is just a few miles away and we will spend a couple of days exploring its magnificent scenery. Europe's largest waterfall, Dettifoss, is the culmination of a spectacular series of falls in the canyon. 44 metres high, it has 500 cubic metres of water passing through per second, and the plume of spray can be seen a kilometre away forming a brilliant double rainbow above the canyon. The surrounding hillsides hold some beautiful flowers, notably marvellous tufts of red *Lychnis alpina* and pretty blue *Gentiana nivalis*. The verdant forested plain and impressive horseshoe-shaped walls of Asbyrgi make an ideal hunting area for one of the world's most spectacular birds of prey, the Gyr Falcon. This, the largest of all falcons, is a wonderful sight as it cruises over its vast territory.

Days 8 & 9 Akureyri

Akureyri will be our base for a couple of nights as we explore the green valleys, spectacular mountains and gorgeous coastline in the clear air and almost continuous daylight of glorious midsummer. A better setting than Akureyri, meaning 'meadow sand-spit', is difficult to imagine, placed as it is at the head of Eyjafjordur ('island fjord') with perpetually snow-capped mountains all around. Our hotel overlooks the braided marshes on the edge of Eyjafjordur to the south of town. Akureyri's botanic gardens hold examples of nearly every species known on the island, and a

considerable collection from high latitude and high altitude areas all around the world. It is somewhat surprising to see such floral magnificence just a few miles south of the Arctic Circle and the midnight sun - but days are normally sunny and warm here!

The main Icelandic 'ring road' passes through the beautiful Oxnadalur Valley and attains its highest altitude of some 1750 feet under the imposing Trollskagi Mountain. This is a very good area to see some of the characteristic breeding birds of the mountainous interior. Ptarmigan are not uncommon and often quite tame, and Snow Buntings, in their striking black and white summer plumage, hop around the edges of snowpatches. Dunlin, Snipe and Golden Plover display above us, the combined effect of their efforts is quite mesmerising. The summer is short at these latitudes and the plants seem to be rushing to flower and set seed before our very eyes. The beautiful white flowers of the Windflower *Dryas octopetala* will be decorating higher slopes studded with perfect red mounds of Mossy Campion and the Blue Heath. On stepped cliffs by Grenivik are hundreds of thousands Heath Spotted Orchids making a most memorable show. Swarms of glittering sundews inhabit boglands and growing with plentiful Lesser Twayblade is the rare *Vaccinium microcarpum*. At Svarfadardalur's nature reserve is a complex of river floodplain, marshes and lakes which holds many breeding Eider and waders, while Arctic Terns and various species of Gull, including the occasional Glaucous Gull, patrol the nearby shore. Massed displays of Bogbean and Marsh Marigold are found here with the gorgeous large deep pink flowers of Arctic Riverbeauty. The moorlands on the beautiful 400m high headland of Olafsfiardarmuli are a wild place with wonderful views out over the Arctic Ocean, indeed the cliffs are so high that you can experience the midnight sun here during the time of our visit!

Days 10 & 11

Across the Interior to Geysir

The odyssey through Iceland's magnificent scenery continues as we take the Kjölur track across Iceland's remote interior. Famous Geysir gave its name to all the world's spouting hot springs though this one no longer erupts. There is still ample geothermal activity here though with colourful hot springs, steaming vents, multi-coloured algae and mineral deposits. Nearby Strokkur offers us the real thing as it erupts in a cloud of steam every few minutes. Rivers at Þingvellir National Park, site of the old Althing or original parliament, will give us another chance to see dapper Harlequin Ducks and Great Northern Divers. At Mossfaell we'll encounter a rich assortment of saxifrages with *Saxifragas hypnoides*, *stellaris*, *nivalis* and *caespitosa* all in good bloom along with the beautiful yellow flowers of *Saxifraga hirculus*.

Day 12
Departure

A free morning to explore Reykjavik before sadly we will have to say farewell to this beautiful wilderness of an island and return to our own, rather tamer, shores.

Trip reports are available from previous trips. If you would like to see a copy, or to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please contact us on 01298 83563 or email on enquiries@greentours.co.uk.