



INSPIRING ICELAND

by Elisabeth Lee

Outdoors is where the action is – be wowed by the one-of-a-kind Northern Lights, marvel at an erupting geyser and relish a soak in ancient geothermal pools.

PERCHED just beneath the Arctic Circle, the sparsely-populated island of Iceland is one of the most remote nations in the world. Yet it is also arguably one of the world's most stunning destinations. Blockbusters such as *Thor*, *Prometheus*, *Oblivion* and even the popular HBO series *Game of Thrones* have set their scenes amid its brutal splendour, taking advantage of the sweep of its vast plains, rugged volcanic terrain and towering ice-capped mountains.

Nowadays, travelling to Iceland isn't just for the intrepid adventurer. Icelandair and numerous other budget airlines link its capital Reykjavik to most major European cities, making it just as easy to plan a trip to one of Europe's last outposts as it is to New York or San Francisco. Here are a few highlights you shouldn't miss:



NORTHERN LIGHTS

SUBLIME. SURREAL. SPECTACULAR.

Those who are lucky enough to have seen nature's most flamboyant display will agree that words can hardly do justice to such a breathtaking scene. But viewing the Northern Lights, or aurora borealis, is an adventure in itself – you can't pencil one into your calendar like you would an art gallery opening or a Broadway show.

While the Northern Lights can be capricious and temperamental, waxing and waning with pulses of solar radiation, Iceland is one of the world's best spots for catching a glimpse. Think borealis cruises, overland tours or even a night spent under the stars waiting for the cosmic show to begin.

The best times to catch the aurora is between the autumn and spring equinoxes. The Northern Lights can only be seen at night, so the perpetual dark of Iceland's winter makes it ideal. The light show is, however, notoriously difficult to capture on camera, so don't forget your tripod!



Reykjavik 101

Despite being home to just 120,000 people, Reykjavik has lots to offer in terms of culture, art and dining. While the island is large, many of Iceland's top attractions are an easy drive from the capital city, making it a great base for day trips. In between tours out to the geysers and national parks, don't miss the charms of the city itself – there's so much more to Iceland than icebergs! Here are our top picks:

REYKJAVIK 871±2
www.reykjavik871.is

Located in the very spot where the country was first discovered by Vikings in the 9th Century, Reykjavik 871±2 is an illuminating exhibition that sheds light on the original settlers of Iceland. Informative and extremely well-designed, the exhibition shows in great detail what life was like for your average Viking family.

HARPA
en.harpa.is

Despite opening during the depths of the financial crisis that engulfed Iceland in 2011, the award-winning Harpa has gone from strength to strength. The eye-catching concert hall located along the newly revitalised Reykjavik waterfront hosts myriad concerts and events. Take in a guided tour of the venue, check out a cultural performance, and round off your evening with a sumptuous dinner at the sleek 4th floor restaurant with striking views of the harbour.

12 TONAR
www.12tonar.is

While the popular shopping street of Laugavegur is packed with unique finds – think one-of-a-kind knits and vintage wear – the laid-back 12 Tonar is where the hip action really is. Enjoy a free espresso while you read magazines, listen to Icelandic tunes (think Sigur Ros, múm, Björk) and browse the venue's legendary record collection. Don't miss the live music in summer.



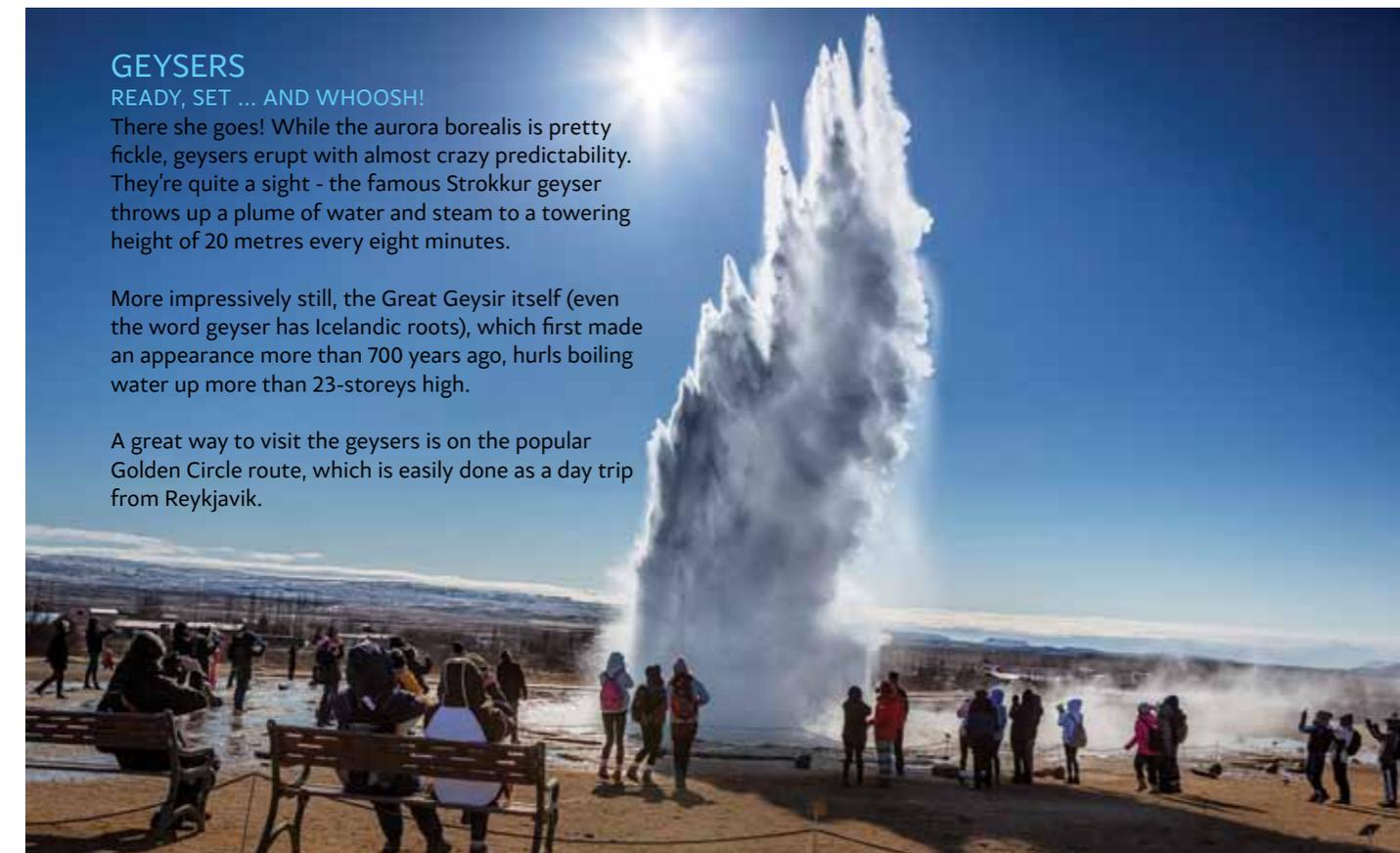
GEYSERS

READY, SET ... AND WHOOSH!

There she goes! While the aurora borealis is pretty fickle, geysers erupt with almost crazy predictability. They're quite a sight - the famous Strokkur geyser throws up a plume of water and steam to a towering height of 20 metres every eight minutes.

More impressively still, the Great Geysir itself (even the word geyser has Icelandic roots), which first made an appearance more than 700 years ago, hurls boiling water up more than 23-storeys high.

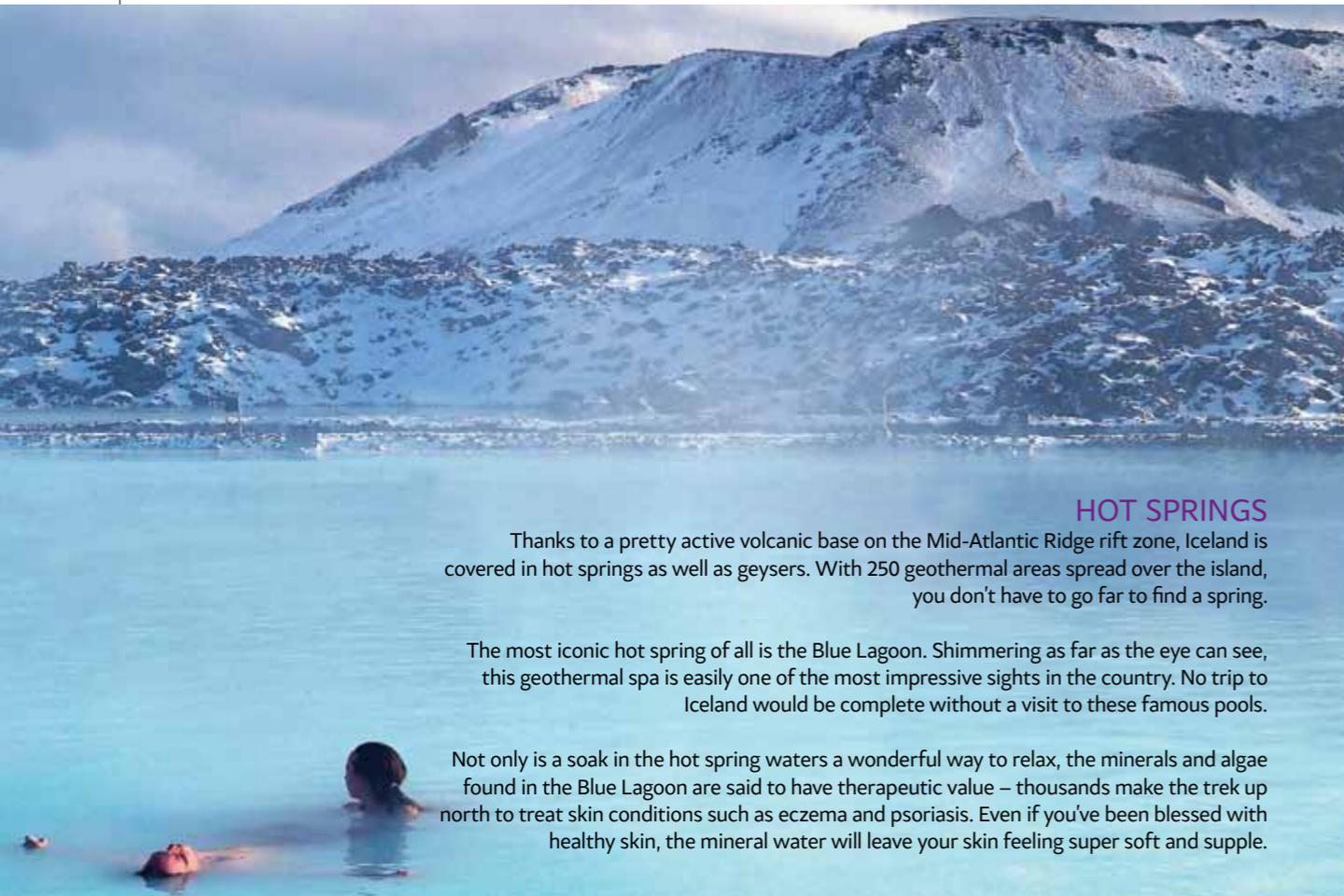
A great way to visit the geysers is on the popular Golden Circle route, which is easily done as a day trip from Reykjavik.



Photos: www.iceland.is, www.bluelagoon.com

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ERUPTING GEYSERS, THE NIGHT SKY LIT BY NORTHERN LIGHTS, REYKJAVIK WATERFRONT, THE HARPA.
NEXT PAGE: HOT SPRINGS AT THE BLUE LAGOON.





HOT SPRINGS

Thanks to a pretty active volcanic base on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge rift zone, Iceland is covered in hot springs as well as geysers. With 250 geothermal areas spread over the island, you don't have to go far to find a spring.

The most iconic hot spring of all is the Blue Lagoon. Shimmering as far as the eye can see, this geothermal spa is easily one of the most impressive sights in the country. No trip to Iceland would be complete without a visit to these famous pools.

Not only is a soak in the hot spring waters a wonderful way to relax, the minerals and algae found in the Blue Lagoon are said to have therapeutic value – thousands make the trek up north to treat skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis. Even if you've been blessed with healthy skin, the mineral water will leave your skin feeling super soft and supple.

Where to stay in Iceland

HOTEL RANGA
east of Reykjavik, South Iceland
www.hotelranga.is

★★★★☆
For a dash of decadence along with your Northern Lights, head to Hotel Ranga. Themed suites, some with stunning views of nearby Mt Hekla, provide guests with plenty of luxe comfort.



HOTEL GRÍMSBORGIR
close to Þingvellir National Park, South Iceland
www.grimsborgir.com

★★★★☆
Less a hotel than a collection of luxury apartments equipped with all mod cons, Hotel Grímsborgir has everything a discerning traveller could want – private hot tubs, en-suite dining, picturesque views and more.

101 HOTEL
Reykjavik, South Iceland
www.101hotel.is

★★★★☆
This modern, art-focused boutique hotel shows off the quirky and cool Icelandic sense of design to great effect. Don't miss the hotel's famous hot chocolate – it's a fantastic pick-me-up on a cold winter's day.



BLUE LAGOON CLINIC HOTEL
Reykjavik, South Iceland
www.bluelagoon.com

★★★★☆
Soak in the therapeutic waters of the famed Blue Lagoon in total privacy with a stay at the Blue Lagoon Clinic Hotel. Enjoy the award-winning rooms and pamper yourself with spa treatments while taking in the views of the surreal lava landscape.



VIAGGIO SOLA

(I TRAVEL ALONE)

by Liza Ramlı



If you're intrigued by how luxury hotels earn their credentials, then this is the movie – the “dramedy” – to watch. Viaggio Sola is about the life of Irene, a 40-year-old woman who is childless and single, and about how she balances her professional and personal lives. Irene's work involves travelling the world, alone, to inspect and appraise hotels. She is a Quality Inspector for The Leading Hotels of the World...