

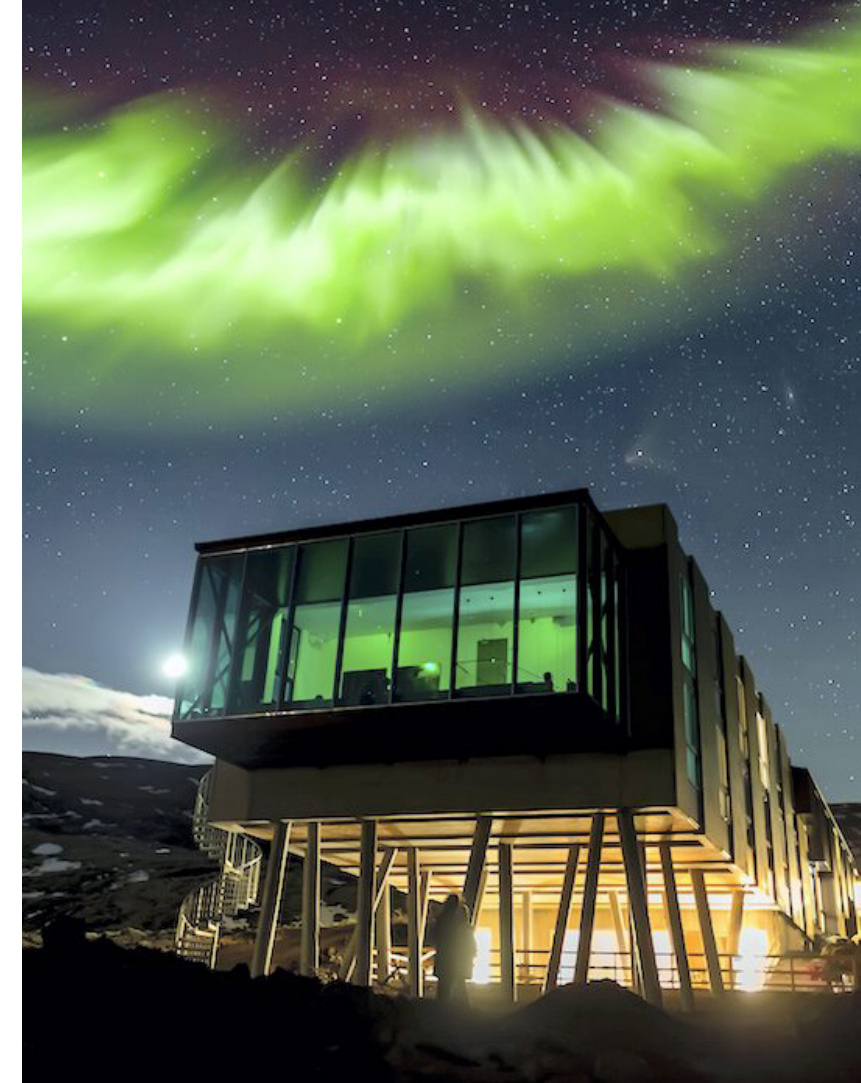
travel

YOUR WEEKEND TRAVEL SECTION STARTS HERE

New Depths in... ICELAND

by Yvonne Gordon

PICTURE: CATHERINE MCCUSKER



WHERE TO STAY:

To get away from city lights and out into the wilderness to see the Northern Lights, book into Ion Hotel which has a geothermal pool and is beside Þingvellir National Park, where the tectonic plates meet. Double rooms from €175 per night, including breakfast. See ioniceland.is



HOW TO GET THERE:

EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies from Belfast to Reykjavik twice a week with fares from £30.99 (approx €39) one-way, including taxes, based on two people travelling together. Wow Air (wowair.ie) will fly from Dublin to Reykjavik three times a week from June 2015, with fares from €59.

For more tips, deals and inspiration
log on to independent.ie/travel

WHAT TO PACK

Iceland in winter is *cold*. Have warm clothing and lots of layers including warm or thermal undergarments and socks, and a proper hat and gloves. Bring a waterproof jacket and trousers and proper hiking shoes for outdoor activities. A flask and pocket handwarmers will all come in handy, too.

ploding geysers, and a stop at the mighty Gullfoss waterfall.

Iceland's capital is a good base, but it's not the only one. We chose to get away from the bright lights of the city at the Ion hotel, for example — located beside Thingvellir, to the southwest of the country. It feels like the middle of nowhere, surrounded by volcanic lava fields and low, snow-covered hills.

Here, random clouds of steam rise from geothermal pools under the land. Hotel staff

keep watch for the Northern Lights. They wake us in the middle of the night when the aurora starts to show. Another novelty is that, under the hotel (which is partly on stilts) there is an outdoor hot tub. We try it in one morning before sunrise — in the pitch dark with an air temperature of -12°C — but the heat of the geothermal water is just toasty.

As we sit there, the sky lightens a little, becoming pink with sunrise and giving the lava fields a gentle glow, before bathing the hills and snow with pink, then orange light.

I get out, and run back into the building. The water left by my footsteps freezes into foot-shaped puddles on the wooden deck. Iceland in winter can be cold, but it's refreshing. It's fascinating.

It's the place for adventure... and it makes me feel alive.

3 must-dos...



SNORKELLING

WHERE: Snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure with Arctic Adventures costs from €104 per person, including a guide, drysuit and all snorkelling equipment.

WHY: You can also combine the snorkelling with a guided lava cave tour in Thingvellir/pingvellir National Park. **SEE:** Adventures.is



NORTHERN LIGHTS HUNT

WHERE: The tour visits the Icelandic countryside for a clear view of the Aurora Borealis from €129 per person including pick up from Reykjavik.

WHY: Guides use a range of forecasting techniques to find the best spot (weather dependent). **SEE:** Superjeep.is



JEEP SAFARI

WHERE: The Golden Circle and Langjökull Glacier day tour goes to Þingvellir, Gullfoss waterfall and Geysir geothermal area as well as Langjökull glacier.

WHY: You also learn all about Iceland's landscape, geology and history. **SEE:** Superjeep.is

AS COLD AS ICELAND

I can't feel my hands. I check that they're still there, to reassure myself. Everything else feels warm and dry as I glide along... surprising, considering that the temperature of the water I'm snorkelling is just 2°C and the air temperature is -6°C.

Welcome to the Silfra Fissure in mid-winter. The days are short here (five hours) and the sky heavy with snow clouds. There's ice and snow scattered on the volcanic wasteland around us. Sometimes, when I lift my head out of the water and look around, all I see is flat fields of grass and mud.

When I put my face down into the water, however, I can see between two continents. There are layers of white rock and boulders reaching down into the deep, dark blue water. This is another world — a blue, still, lifeless one. Cold hands are a price I'm happy to pay. The Silfra

Fissure is the gap between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates, on the Mid-Atlantic ridge. As the plates pull apart, the land between drops down and forms scars. This one is filled with melt-water from the Langjökull glacier. That water moves slowly too — taking 50 to 100 years to travel here through the lava fields that filter it clear.

The water is clean enough to drink. Carried along in its gentle current of glacial water, I see no colourful fish or pieces of waving coral; everything is blue. Some parts are shallow, with grey dust symbolising the seismic activity; others are rocky. At one point, I see a huge white boulder wedged between the two plates. It looks like it could topple hundreds of metres into this otherworldly abyss. The light shines down like shafts in an underwater cathedral.

Adventures like this are one of the reasons people go to Iceland — all year round. For so long, this place was pricey enough to put it out of reach of many tourists. It's still relatively expensive, but since the financial crisis of 2008, its currency has

been devalued. That makes a difference. Tourism is one of the things that has helped the economy recover.

And despite the havoc that the Eyjafjallajökull volcano wreaked in 2010, it did help to put Iceland back on the map. Annual visitor numbers reached a record 807,000 last year, and with two new direct scheduled flights (EasyJet has started flying from Belfast, with Wow air to follow from Dublin next June), getting there from Ireland is looking more affordable than ever.

Snorkelling at Silfra is just the start of my winter adventures. As well as seeing the Northern Lights and swimming in geothermal pools such as the Blue Lagoon, Iceland's tourism boom has led to a rake of new adventure companies offering everything from ice climbing to glacier hiking, from exploring lava tube caves to volcano descents.

If you're short on time, try the Golden Circle tour out of Reykjavik. It takes in Thingvellir National Park, where a parliament was founded 1,000 years ago; the Geysir geothermal area with its ex-

