



Geography, history and culture

Geography - Iceland is a volcanic island in the North Atlantic Ocean immediately south of the Arctic Circle. About 79% of Iceland's land area, which is of recent volcanic origin, consists of glaciers, lakes, a mountainous lava desert and other wasteland; 20% of the land is used for grazing and 2% is cultivated. The inhabited areas are on the coast, particularly in the southwest. Because of the Gulf Stream's moderating influence, the climate is characterized by damp, cool summers and relatively mild but windy winters. In Reykjavik, the average temperature is 11°C (52°F) in July and -1°C (30°F) in January.



Further information about the Iceland's geography can be found on the [Foreign Affairs Ministry](#) website.

People - According to Icelandic Government statistics, 99% of the nation's inhabitants live in urban areas (localities with populations that are greater than 200) and 60% live in Reykjavik and the surrounding area. Most Icelanders are descendants of Norwegian settlers and Celts from the British Isles. Of the Nordic languages, the Icelandic language is closest to the Old Norse language and has remained relatively unchanged since the 12th century.

The total number of people in Iceland is now 300,000. 190,000 live in the Greater Reykjavik area and a further 16,000 in the country's second city, Akureyri. Significantly, the number of visitors is now greater than the total population with more than 500,000 people travelling to Iceland each year (figures from 2008).

Population information from the [Statistics office](#)

History - Iceland was settled in the late 9th and early 10th centuries, principally by people of Norse origin. In 930 A.D. the ruling chiefs established a republican constitution and an assembly called the Althingi – the oldest parliament in the world. The country remained independent until 1262, when Iceland entered into a treaty which established a union with the Norwegian monarchy. It passed to Denmark in the late 14th century when Norway and Denmark were united under the Danish crown. In 1874 Denmark granted Iceland home rule. The Act of Union, a 1918 agreement with Denmark, recognized Iceland as a fully sovereign state united with Denmark. During the Second World War, in May 1940, British military forces occupied Iceland. In July 1941, responsibility for Iceland's defence passed to the United States who remained in Iceland until the end of the war. Iceland formally became an independent republic on June 17, 1944.

Information about Iceland's history from [travelnet.is](#)

Culture - The Sagas, almost all written between 1180-1300 A.D., remain Iceland's best known literary accomplishment and they have no surviving counterpart anywhere in the Nordic world. Based on Norwegian and Icelandic histories and genealogies, the Sagas present views of Nordic life and times up to 1100 A.D. The Saga writers sought to record their heroes' great achievements and to glorify the virtues of courage, pride and honour, focusing in the later Sagas on early Icelandic settlers. The best known Icelandic writer of the 20th century is the Nobel Prize winner Halldor Laxness. Literature and poetry remain a passion with the population, literacy is 100% in Iceland and per capita publication of books and magazines is the highest in the world.

More about [Iceland's history and culture](#)

More information about the [Government of Iceland](#)

Additional Information: "Around Iceland, 2005" (Information for visitors), [Heimur, Reykjavik](#)