

Scotland & Iceland

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We started in the Melrose, Scotland, located in the Borders area, about one hour south of Edinburgh. We stayed at Fauhope Country House which is actually a very old (1897), large country home high on the hill overlooking the area. It is up a long gravel driveway, but the view was great and the location quiet. Melrose is a picture postcard town, very clean and not overrun with tourist shops etc. It has lots of restaurants and as of about two years ago they have an annual European food and wine festival (not when we were there). Melrose Abbey is right in town and worth a visit. The river Tweed runs by it and is supposed to be the best salmon fishing in Europe. The tourist info center had a brochure detailing with walks of the area. All are clearly defined and you know exactly how long they are. The walking is just great. The day after we arrived we took a six mile walk from Melrose to Abbotsford Hall (home of Sir Walter Scott). There is a lot to do in the Melrose area, walks, castles and manor houses etc.



After two nights in Melrose we had a full day to get back to Glasgow Airport where we spent the night at the Holiday Inn. On the advice of Fauhope's owner, we drove towards the coast - walked along the old walls of Berwick Upon Tweed, then went to Dunbar to walk along the coastal paths before heading to Glasgow in the evening. A long day, but worth it.

Holiday Inn at Glasgow is very convenient. It is right across from the terminal exit. There is a Holiday Inn Express, a Travelodge and some others, but the Holiday Inn is the most convenient. It was not noisy at all because the airport basically shuts down in the evening. They have just last week changed the terminal so that passengers cannot be picked up outside the door. I really like how they have "Look Left" and "Look Right" in foot-high letters in the pedestrian crossing areas so people leaving the terminal after just arriving don't get run over because they might look the wrong direction out of habit!

Flew Icelandic Air to Reykjavik the following morning. It is a two-hour flight and one hour closer to us in time than Britain, but world's apart in most other respects. In the Icelandic Air magazine there is a page on Driving in Iceland. And along the highway not far from the city is a pole with two wrecked cars about 20' in the air. It definitely gets your attention. Driving is serious business here. Reykjavik is an easy airport and about 40 min from the city, actually in Keflavik. We got the car and headed south, bypassing the city. Two hour drive to Hotel Ranga, an Icelandic Air hotel. Considered "the only four-star hotel in the south" (it really doesn't seem like a four-star, but it is all relative). It is more like a lodge — next to a river which is supposed to be great for fishing. Three room types — standard (overlooking the parking lot) superior and deluxe both overlooking the river. Two hot tubs, one on each end of the hotel. It is still light there past 1am at this time of year. The windows have dark shades that can be pulled down. The hotel serves breakfast and dinner daily — good but limited menu. The hotel will do lunch on request and will do box a lunch as well.

Driving: there is a two-lane highway which goes around the entire country. The parts we drove were well maintained. However, the highway is narrow and there are no shoulders. This is the dangerous part because it goes right from highway to gravel. There weren't all that many trucks but quite a few buses — most say Reykjavik Excursions on them. Gray Line also operates there but in the country I only saw the Rek Excursion buses. Also there are very few turnouts, miles apart. So no place to stop for a few minutes, take photos etc. You just get on the highway and keep going. Distances are quite far so you need to watch the fuel. At various places there are gas stations with little convenience stores and a restaurant. All the locals are at these places too. So even though you feel somewhat remote, if you pay attention to the fuel and use these stops it is okay. Gas was about double the price it is here. Getting directions was somewhat vague whether it was for hiking or driving but every time we asked directions we seemed to acquire another map and people were helpful.

Prices in Iceland are very high regardless of the exchange rate. In 2005 the UN deemed Reykjavik the fourth most expensive city in the world (the top three were Tokyo, Osaka, and I think Oslo). London and Paris were less. They also rank Iceland as having one of the highest standards of living in the world. (It makes sense if you think of it in terms of literacy rate, health, longevity, etc).

Sightseeing: We stayed in one place convenient to most of the major scenic attractions in the country. However, it would also be fun to take a week or more and drive around the entire country. That way, you could drive/hike/stop for the night versus having to drive further back to the original hotel. But no matter how you look at it, the distances are far. The excursion buses from Reykjavik do many of the things we saw from our hotel in the south — some of the day trips are 11 hours long. So choices are: stay in the city and plan to do day trips by bus if you don't want to drive, drive around the entire country which takes at least a week, drive to one spot or more like I did depending on your time, or take a tour. If not on a tour then it is for independent and resourceful travelers because tourist information is not right there. In the city, yes, but in the country hotel there were no racks of brochures with sightseeing ideas etc. You have to dig a little and ask questions to find out what to do. Iceland is a rugged outdoors country — lots of camping, hiking, backpacking, fishing, ATVs, dog sledding, etc. The more people can walk the more they will see.

Icelandic Horse: of course had to ride one, they are unique in the world and even have their own unique gait, the "tolt". The horses helped settle the country and are very much a part of the culture. They are absolutely everywhere. The farm where we rode had 100. They dot the countryside like sheep. I would recommend a one hour ride to anyone interested (unless they are terrified of horses — and even then, these are called horses but are pony size — very hardy, sure footed and strong, not intimidating). They can take you on a simple trail ride and it was not expensive — about \$42.

Some of the interesting sights I saw: Vatnajökul, the largest national park containing the most active volcano, largest glacier and highest mountain We got to Skaftafell about 2-1/2 hours driving from our hotel. This was the location of a flood in '96 that resulted in pieces of glacier 100-200 tons each coming down, destroying the bridge, before going out to sea. The glacier flood actually caused the volcano to erupt, not the other way around. You definitely feel the awesome power of nature here. There is a tourist information center at this location. Another place was Þórsmörk National Park — about 40 min from the hotel — this early in the summer it is not accessible by regular car. So we got one of the excursion buses on the way from Reykjavik., paid the driver directly, and he drove the bus through rough terrain riverbeds into the hiking area. We had about 3 hours to hike and have lunch before getting back on the bus. It was nice to leave the driving to someone else. The cost for the roundtrip bus in and out of the park was about \$50USD.

On the way back after leaving the Ranga Hotel, we did the Golden Circle, noted in all the tour brochures. There are three sights and it can be done in a day from Reykjavik. Gullfoss - huge, Niagara-like waterfall (definitely worth seeing - you can walk very close to it), Geysir (several in one small area) and Þingvellir National Park which is the meeting place for the North American and European tectonic plates that are slowly drifting apart.

Weather: clear days, great for hiking until we got to Reykjavik. No surprise that Iceland is chilly — at night when we went walking we wore gloves and head bands because of the wind. There are seven words in Icelandic for wind! The best thing is to layer/layer/layer. Waterproof gear is almost mandatory and easy to pack.

Language: they all speak English so no problem. Before I said anything they spoke to me in English. There is no way you can understand what you are hearing in Icelandic. If they mention a place name you need to have it written down so you can recognize it on a sign because the letters are pronounced so differently.

Safety: they say it is very safe there and I didn't see anything to make me feel otherwise. Hiked in some areas that felt very remote but weren't all that far. Went walking down roads across from the hotel with no one around late at night after dinner and never felt uncomfortable. Everyone seems to mind their own business.

Rekjavik was to me a disappointment. I was expecting a more sophisticated city — given all the great restaurants they write about and the "fashion-conscious" people. The core of the city with the shopping street and lots of restaurants didn't have the vitality I was expecting either. There is a good museum.

Spent two nights at Foss Hotel Baron — tourist class hotel. It is right by the harbor and about three-four blocks walk from the shopping streets. I have mixed feelings about it. I think the Nordica Hotel which is not as close to the city center is one

where lots of celebrities stay — so would be more upscale but also big and commercial looking. Then there is the Hotel Fron which is right on the shopping street. I imagine it could be noisier than where we were on the weekends. The Radisson SAS is at the lower end of the shopping street.

Blue Lagoon: it is the “thing” you are supposed to do in Reykjavik. It is even arranged so that you can do the Blue Lagoon during long layovers at the airport as well. It is close enough to the airport that I think it can be done with a 4-hour layover. This is a thermal pool that gets water from as far as 6000' below. You can buy the bus ticket and admission at the hotel. It is about 40 minutes or so from town. Then you get on whatever bus you want to return. Two restaurants - a cafeteria and a sit down - floor to ceiling windows where you look out at the lagoon. They are in the process of building a larger area. The cost for the roundtrip bus and admission was about \$50USD.

We left Reykjavik on a morning flight to **Glasgow**. Transfers to/from airport are by FlyBus and tickets can be purchased at the hotel or at the airport. They picked us up at the hotel at 5am (earliest possible) for the 7:40am flight. We were told that was plenty of time and it did work although it takes 1-1/2 hrs to get to the airport. On arrival Glasgow went to the Holiday Inn to leave bags for the day but they had a room and checked us in at 11am. We then went to Edinburgh by bus which leaves from in front of the terminal. For those going to stay in Edinburgh, there are places on the bus where you can put your luggage. The bus goes to Glasgow Buchanan St station where you change for Edinburgh. We didn't wait more than 10-15 minutes and the buses are usually parked close together. Arrival Edinburgh is right downtown by St Andrews Square. You can buy tickets in the terminal at tourist information or from the driver.

We did the hop on/off tour which generally is a good idea. It was a beautiful spring day and we sat outside on the top deck (guide was inside on top deck). It was quite warm inside but outside due to the traffic noises we did not hear most of what she said. Also due to the traffic it took the bus awhile to go around and parts of the Royal Mile were undergoing road work. After that I did Mary King's Close tour — it is an underground tour showing how and where they lived as far back as the 1600's.

Back to the airport by bus in the evening, overnight at the Holiday Inn and home the next morning.