

Fjord thinking

East Iceland is an untamed beauty, finds Meera Dattani

“They say a troll fell in love with the beautiful girl, but no one knew for sure where she went,” says our guide, Stefan, enigmatically. “When she died, some say they saw a mysterious man crying at the funeral. But afterwards, he was gone...”

Iceland is all about drama. The more remote and dramatic the landscape, the more it lends itself to stories of legendary elves and other *huldufolk*, the ‘hidden people’ who live here. No wonder this island gave rise to the Icelandic Sagas, epic stories of early Norse settlers who arrived in the Middle Ages, and has been a backdrop for countless films and TV series such as *Game of Thrones*, *Fortitude* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, to name but a few.

East Iceland has dramatic landscapes by the bucket-load, where winding eastern fjords cut into a coastline of black-sand beaches, fishing villages and harbour towns. Inland is a wilder terrain, on the edge of Iceland’s largely uninhabited highlands, of magma chambers, mountain passes, waterfalls, skiing spots and Iceland’s largest forest.

Remote doesn’t mean inaccessible: the gateway to the east is Egilsstadir, served by Air Iceland’s hour-long connecting flights from Reykjavik’s domestic airport, which operate several times a day (from £120 return). With new services to the capital – notably from Aberdeen and Edinburgh, both of which launched this year – East Iceland is an easy add-on to a city break



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or a northern lights tour, offering clients a window on the less touristy side of the island.

“The main appeal of East Iceland is experiencing a more authentic side to the country,” says Jacada Travel’s Iceland expert, Byron Thomas. “It also appeals as a destination for slow travel, and is the only area in Iceland where you can see wild

reindeer. You can also spot puffins at Borgarfjordur Eystri, and there are beautiful fjords and fishing villages along the coastline.”

EGILSSTADIR AND AROUND

Egilsstadir, little more than a farming town in 1940, is the hub. It’s just a short drive from the fjord towns, and there are tours offering hiking, horse-riding, cycling, bird-watching, fishing or jeep safaris to explore the surrounding area. Egilsstadir is also the jumping-off point for self-drive, private and escorted tours offered by the likes of Cox & Kings, Regent Holidays, Jacada Travel and Titan Travel.

Nature is by far the biggest draw to East Iceland, and there are some fine spots

TOP TIP

Get more information, maps and itineraries at inspiredbyiceland.com and east.is



Cox & Kings offers a five-day trip to Egilsstadir from £875 based on two sharing, with international and domestic flights, two nights in Reykjavik and two in Egilsstadir with breakfast, plus a local excursion.

Available autumn, winter and spring. coxandkings.co.uk

Regent Holidays' five-day Landscapes and Legends of East Iceland costs from £1,065. Includes international and domestic flights, two nights each in Reykjavik and Egilsstadir, and a guided tour of the latter. regent-holidays.co.uk

Titan Travel's 10-day Icelandic Adventure is an escorted tour around Iceland from £2,349. Includes Egilsstadir and Borgarfjordur, plus all flights, breakfast, dinners and up to 17 excursions, such as Vatnajokull Glacier and Jokulsarlon. titanagents.co.uk

→ within easy reach of Egilsstadir. Lake Lagarfljot (also called Logurinn) is a highlight of the region and home to the so-called Lake Monster – Iceland's version of Nessie – as well as Hallormsstadaskogur, the country's largest forest.

There is plenty just out of town too. Thirty miles away is the Wilderness Centre, which is run by the affable Denni and Arna, who offer hiking tours and guided horse-riding on their Icelandic horses (the island has a unique pure breed that has had no cross-breeding in 1,000 years). Hengifoss waterfall is also well worth the 20-mile drive out of town and one-hour hike from the car park, too – at a towering 128 metres it is Iceland's second-highest waterfall.

As well as admiring the sights, delve a bit deeper into the area's history at the East Iceland Heritage Museum or at cultural centre Skriduklaustur, set in the former home of Icelandic writer Gunnar Gunnarsson.

This is a good base to explore the area, and Lake Hotel – the oldest hotel in town, sometimes called Egilsstadir Guesthouse – is a popular choice for its lake views, comfortable rooms and new geothermal spa (double room with breakfast from £109 a night). The restaurant has become known for its modern Icelandic dishes with



Lake Lagarfljot is a highlight and home to the Lake Monster – Iceland's Nessie

ingredients sourced as locally as possible. Think char from the fjords; barley from nearby Vallanes farm, Iceland's first organic farm; and Skyr

yogurt made from local cheese at Egilsstadir farm.

Icelandair Hotel Herad is another good choice with its modern rooms, popular Sunday brunch and reindeer sculptures.

THE EASTERN FJORDS

Some of the world's largest whaling stations once thrived here, alongside highly productive fish factories that flourished during the heyday of the herring industry. While fishing remains a key trade, there is also a growing creative community settling here, →



TOP: Lake Lagarfljot

BELOW: Lake Hotel's modern Icelandic cuisine

LEFT: Hengifoss waterfall



ASK THE EXPERTS



Jane Slade, senior Iceland travel specialist, Regent Holidays: "East Iceland tends to appeal to couples and outdoor-loving travellers who want to experience the Arctic wildernesses. Accommodation is pretty and of a good standard, though there is no high-end, luxury accommodation or anything above four stars."



Michael Fleetwood, Europe product manager, Cox & Kings: "The east coast is one of Iceland's fastest-growing tourist destinations. A couple of nights in Egilsstadir gives visitors time to see the country's largest forest or one of the 14 fjords. It's also ideal for second-time visitors."



PICTURES: VISIT EAST ICELAND; STEINRUN OTTA STEFANSDOTTIR; IRA GOLDSTEIN; OLAFUR BJORNSSON



TOP: Seal colony, Papey Island

ABOVE: Eggin i Gledivik

LEFT: Djupivogur



HOW TO SELL

Accommodation in East Iceland ranges from lodges and campsites to comfortable three or four-star hotels. Many are independently run and family-owned, so will suit clients who prefer the personal touch of a property with character, rather than full-service luxury hotels.

➔ filling the summer calendar with music and art festivals.

In the fishing village of Seydisfjordur – its Scandinavian-style wooden houses a legacy of Norwegian fishermen who first settled here – the Skaftfell Cultural Centre hosts regular exhibitions, including works by Swiss-German artist and former resident Dieter Roth. It has an excellent bistro that competes for gastronomic glory with Hotel Aldan in town, which is renowned for its Nordic restaurant and Nord Austur sushi bar.

The town of Stodvarfjordur is best known for Petra's Stone Collection, a gargantuan display of minerals and crystals collected from around the island during walks taken by the late Ljosbjorg Petra Maria Sveinsdottir. But a more recent addition to the cultural landscape is the HERE Creative Centre, where the

FAST FACT
Return economy class flights from Heathrow to Reykjavik start at £151 with Icelandair icelandair.co.uk

enthusiasm, enterprise and community spirit of three young artists have given a much-needed lease of life to the town, transforming a disused fish factory into a space for music and art events, workshops and artists' residencies.

East Iceland is rich in history and heritage. At Faskrudsfjordur, settled by French fishermen in the late 19th century, street signs

remain in Icelandic and French; the Fosshotel Eastfjords has a museum charting the settlers' story, while the restaurant L'Abri is French-inspired in their honour. At Reydarfjordur, the Icelandic Wartime Museum reflects on the country's occupation by Allied forces during the Second World War, even though Iceland was not at war.

And further north, in Borgarfjordur Eystri, folklore is a key part of the cultural heritage, with local tales and sightings of mountain trolls and elves. To get a sense of the landscape that inspired such stories, suggest the easy walk to the protected hill of Alfaborg, believed to be home of the queen of the Icelandic elves.

Epitomising East Iceland's focus on nature and art is Djupivogur, the southernmost fjord town, and Iceland's first and only spot with Cittaslow

(Slow Town') status, thanks to its commitment to local artisans and the environment. Suggest a long lunch at Hotel Framtid, a visit to the Langabud cultural centre, a boat trip to Papey Island's seal and puffin colonies, and a look at Eggin i Gledivik, 34 outdoor egg sculptures reflecting the region's rich birdlife, created by Icelandic artist Sigurdur Gudmundsson.

▶ NATURE AND NATIONAL PARKS

The southernmost section of East Iceland includes Vatnajokull national park, a nature lover's dream and home to Snaefell peak, one of Iceland's highest, along with the natural hot pools of Laugarfelli, Vatnajokull Glacier and Snaefellstofa visitor centre. Clients travelling southeast can add in a visit to the glacial lagoon of Jokulsarlon.

Companies such as Tinna

Adventure offer an innovative programme of slow jeep safaris, outdoor yoga and even silent hikes to not only explore the areas but also to get a feel for the power of these landscapes; a four-hour Slow Travel SuperJeep tour costs from £123.

While spring, summer and autumn offer more temperate weather and pleasant temperatures for exploring, winter has its charms too, as the northern lights, frozen waterfalls, Icelandic horses and wild reindeer stand out against a snowy white backdrop, although clients should factor in flexibility for the weather.

Whatever time of year, some places really cast a spell on you, and East Iceland certainly does that. Perhaps it's the uniqueness of the food, the warmth of the people or the endless, epic wilderness, but in this mysterious land, it could even be the elves. **TW**

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