

Iceland: \$500, 5 hours and a world away

By Andrea Marie Thompson

the joy of surprises when you least expect them



As a black woman, traveling to Reykjavik, Iceland by myself, I didn't know if I would see one person who looked like me, but the city and its people surprised me in ways I could not have imagined. In Reykjavik, immigrants from Africa, Sri Lanka and other countries are infrequent but nonetheless there. In a country where Yoko Ono recently oversaw the installation of the Peace memorial and where Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev signed the peace accord to end the Cold War, Iceland is a testament to civility and inclusion when its people may have used their isolation to justify ignorance and intolerance.

In the three days I stayed in Iceland, I visited the thermal waters of the famous Blue Lagoon steam baths, toured the city and dropped into practically every store on Laugavegur. My experience in Reykjavik was an exercise in exploration; discovering what it's like to step out of your comfort zone when traveling and why fear should never rule one's travel decisions. Just \$500 roundtrip (at the time I took my trip) and 5 hours from New York's JFK airport, Iceland is a testament to the joy of surprises when you least expect them.

a big black bear with blue eyes



Iceland is not what you think it is. Cobbled stone streets line Reykjavik's downtown; a sexy, thriving nightlife keeps the fun going to the early AM; sophisticated, exquisite, design in clothes, jewelry and furniture make shopping fun and interesting. The country's boxy, sleek, modern office buildings and quaint, colorful houses make them all look as if they could be sold in an Ikea catalogue.

Contrary to its name, Iceland is relatively warm. Arriving in early October, the average daytime temperature hovered around 53-degrees and was overcast and drizzling every day I was there. The country's capital Reykjavik is a smaller, much smaller version of Paris and London; it's countryside... the moon. Sparsely inhabited, barren and wide, black rock extends as far as the eye can see. It is like a big, black bear with blue eyes.

the blue lagoon



The blue eyes are the Blue Lagoon, an oasis of naturally heated waters that visitors come from all over the world to dip in. Relaxing, and some say healing, the Blue Lagoon is an industry onto itself in Iceland with its own branded products sold at the site itself and at stand-alone stores in Reykjavik.

I stayed at Hotel Odinsve, on the edges of downtown Reykjavik, quiet but a 5 minute walk to Laugavegur Street. The hotel, considered one of the country's best boutique hotels also houses Siggí Hall, a restaurant the magazine *Travel & Leisure* called one of the best in the world. The staff, like everyone else I met in Reykjavik, was polite and efficient, not overly friendly or kiss-assy solicitous because I was a tourist. Everyone spoke English and, of course, Icelandic, a language that sounded very much like Dutch to my ears.

love Vikings?



I made the most of my three days in Iceland, not only getting out to the Blue Lagoon (a 45-minute bus ride outside of Reykjavik) but taking a day tour that included stops at the National Museum of Iceland (love Vikings? This is your place to learn all about them), the National Church of Iceland, and all points of interest around the city.

getting around is easy, easy, easy



My favorites about Iceland: Getting around is easy, easy, easy. Navigating the entire interior of Reykjavik takes about a half-hour on foot. There are buses to get to the exterior circumference of the city, all stops convenient and easy to find. Fashion is exceptional. Stores are filled with imaginative, beyond modern clothes and footwear from local designers who would be household names anywhere else. Art is of the utmost importance. Attention-worthy photography and paintings hang on the walls of bars and restaurants; galleries are dotted throughout the city.

unexpected delights and discoveries



Residents are well-dressed and well manicured (great haircuts, etc. You can tell much thought goes into appearances). Reykjavik is surrounded by water; there are lovely views all around you. And the city is convenient; the short 5-hour non-stop plane ride from New York the same as flying to Los Angeles and other major cities. Whether you want to get away for a solo weekend like me or grab a friend or your mate and explore, Reykjavik is a city of unexpected delights and discoveries. You'll be surprised but never disappointed.