



IT'S ONE OF THE GEOLOGICAL WONDERS OF THE WORLD, OFFERING ETHEREAL GLACIERS, COLLAPSED VOLCANOES, NATURAL SPAS AND STEAMING HOT SPRINGS, A VAST ISLAND THAT'S BECOME A MECCA FOR THOSE SEEKING COOL CHIC. IT'S ICELAND. *SUBLIME* TAKES A JOURNEY THROUGH THIS ANCIENT LAND OF FORMIDABLE AND UNTOUCHED NATURAL BEAUTY

A WORLD APART

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Photographs Stuart Westmorland



Previous page and top Divers, Silfra Fissure, Thingvellir National Park. Below (left) Hot spring, Thingvellir National Park. Next page (clockwise) Spouting hot spring of Geysir, Thingvellir National Park; sunset at the Blue Lagoon natural spa; snowmobiling safari across virgin snowfields and collapsed volcanoes

FED BY GLACIAL MELT WATER FILTERED THROUGH LAVA FIELDS OVER THE AGES before emerging, through underground wells, into the lake, these are some of the purest waters on earth. Thingvellir is known as Silfra (the Silver Lady) because of the mercurial light that ricochets from these depths. In order to descend you will be loaded with weights, but once you've slipped inside you'll glide effortlessly through deep watery cathedrals, craggy tunnels of granite cliffs and angular boulders. In tropical waters a visibility of 30m is considered excellent, but here you will have crystal clear vistas of up to 100m. The reason this lake is so astonishingly clear is that there is little aquatic life because there is nothing for fish to eat. Swimming through this brilliantly blue underwater world is one of the most dramatic experiences imaginable.

But Iceland is not merely confined to Blue Planet adventures. Above water level there are incredible wildernesses to explore, particularly in its 'Golden Circle' – a collection of natural wonders and historical sites located along the southern part of the island. As well as Thingvellir National Park, there are the geysers of Geysir, the Gullfoss Waterfall, and Kerith volcano crater where Icelandic Vikings annually met in the 10th Century, gathering round a giant rock formation to create new laws and amend previous ones. The tradition continues – today the area is an important site for national gatherings with people from all over Iceland coming to congregate here.

Next stop on the Golden Circle is Geysir where you'll witness huge bellowing steam clouds with boiling water fountains cascading 30m into the sky, and then on to the turquoise-coloured blis hot springs. A short drive away is Gullfoss, or 'The Waterfall of the Gods' – the largest in Europe, with incredibly loud crashing free-flowing water. From here the final stop in the Golden Circle is Kerith, an extinct volcano which has collapsed and is now home to a spectacularly surreal lake.



THE LANDSCAPES OF ICELAND ARE ANCIENT AND UNTOUCHED, A PURE embodiment of the force and splendour of the natural world. Depending on how adventurous you want to get, you can go on a snowmobiling safari across virgin snowfields, whitewater rafting down frothing rivers, or quad-biking over collapsed volcanoes. For a picnic with a twist, head for the glacial summit where you'll feast on Icelandic specialties like lobster and Arctic char, guaranteed to be one of the most memorable culinary experiences of your life.

The Blue Lagoon, with its spa steam baths of milky blue geothermal water, rich in minerals, is the perfect spot to unwind and relax. Arriving before sunrise is wonderfully surreal as the area is lit up with floodlights; the warm bubbling waters of the lagoon set between snow-covered volcanic rocks a chilly dash from the changing room. Get here just as the doors open and enjoy a divine sunrise soak before the crowds arrive. ■

Bespoke tour operators Black Tomato can arrange a long-weekend Tectonic Plate Diving in Iceland from £1,299 per person. Price is based on two sharing and includes flights from London to Reykjavik, private transfers, all activities and guiding throughout, three nights at boutique design hotel 101, and a private group Tectonic Dive experience with equipment blacktomato.co.uk

Pictures by Stuart Westmorland / stuartwestmorland.com and Black Tomato



As you descend onto the moonscape of Iceland, a large frosted island located at a point on the mid-Atlantic ridge where tectonic shifts have played incredible tricks on the landscape, it feels as though you're dreaming, or perhaps that you've landed in outer space. Whatever time you visit (during winter Iceland is cloaked in 24-hour darkness), it won't come as a surprise to learn that this place is seriously cold – the sun seemingly rises and sets in a perpetual mystical haze throughout the day. A layer of snow covers the vast expanse of lava rock and jumbled volcanic boulders, giving it an otherworldly, ethereal quality.

Iceland has until recently been one of the most expensive countries to visit in the world. Iceland's current economic struggles have meant that as a tourist you now get a serious bang for your buck. In fact, there has never been a better time to contribute your tourist currency to this beautiful country.

OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS THE CAPITAL REYKJAVÍK HAS carved out a name for being one of the world's chicest cities, esteemed for its creative energy and edgy music, for its restaurant and club scene. Hotel 101 in Reykjavik – all blond wood, understated design and backlit glass – is classic

Iceland cool and a superb spot to base yourself. From Reykjavik take an early morning jeep safari into the heart of the geo-thermal south, an hour's drive away, where you will find the dazzlingly clear lake of Thingvellir National Park. Scuba diving here is undoubtedly a once-in-a-lifetime experience (a diving certificate is necessary) but even well-seasoned diving aficionados will be blown away by what's to come: descending into the watery chasm between two craggy tectonic plates is no ordinary dive.

Thingvellir – an enormous tectonic rift between Eurasian and North American plates – is one of the few places in the world where the mid-Atlantic Ridge comes above the water line. The original walls of this valley have been slowly cracked apart over millennia of tectonic movement, creating an eerie landscape of volcanic boulders and fractured granite. In the distance you'll spy a backdrop of thermal steam, emitted from a volcano that lies 25km to the north. As you make your way to the glassy water's edge with your BCD strapped on, you'll be well wrapped up in a thermally insulated dry suit. After a briefing from the instructor, you'll submerge into icy waters smack-bang in the middle of a colossal rip in the earth's crust – America on one side, Europe on the other.

