

Facts: Iceland

Architecture of the Embassy of the Republic of Iceland

Red Ryolite, Glass, Concrete, Lava

The Icelandic Embassy is situated in the western part of the embassies' premises and borders on the copper band, which surrounds all of the Nordic Embassies.

The building designed by the architect Pálmar Kristmundsson symbolises the rough nature of Iceland and makes a reference to Icelandic building tradition. It consists of a two-part rectangle structure with a glass atrium in the middle.

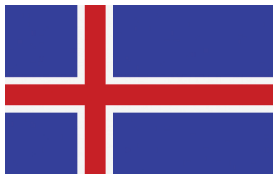
The five-storey front block contains the embassy offices and is clad with red ryolite which, depending on the rays of the sun, reveals a splendid play of colours. The four-storey rear block is clad with wave-formed, sandblasted concrete panels, which are reminiscent of corrugated iron, a typical building material used in Iceland. Both parts of the building have grass-covered roofs.

The glassed atrium looks out onto the copper band and a pool of water which visually connects the Icelandic and Danish Embassies. The floor of the atrium is covered with black lava slabs which are illuminated from below with red light.

The materials for the façade, the natural stone floors, the maple parquet and the interior decoration made of differently treated larch and maple wood originate from Iceland.



Flag



Blue and white are the historical Icelandic colours; a white cross on a blue background was the flag of the Icelandic independence movement. The present flag was designed in 1913. The colours blue, red and white were meant to symbolise the blue of the mountains, fire and ice. It was not until 1919 that the flag was officially recognised by the Danish King Christian X, but it was already flown on the 1st of December 1918 when Icelandic independence was declared. When Iceland proclaimed itself a republic on June 17, 1944, this flag was adopted as the national flag.

National Anthem

The Icelandic national anthem, Ó guð vors lands (O God of Our Land) was originally composed as a hymn in 1874. The occasion was the millennial celebration of the settlement of Iceland. The lyrics were written by the national poet Matthias Jochumsson (1835-1920). The melody was composed by Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson (1847-1926), the first Icelander to make music his career. The anthem was first sung at a festive service in Reykjavík Cathedral on Sunday, 2 August 1874.

Prior to the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944, Iceland had no national anthem in the actual sense of the term. However, during the last quarter of the 19th century Ó guð vors lands was often sung at public events, and hence it became the national anthem by tradition.

The lyrics are more like a religious hymn than a patriotic ode, and due to the wide range of notes, it is difficult for many people to sing. Nevertheless, Icelanders do not regard this as an obstacle, even though there were other hymns that were easier to sing. People in Iceland revere Matthias Jochumsson's work, and the solemn, moving song is dear to their hearts.

1. Ó Guð vors lands, ó lands vors Guð!
Vér lofum þitt heilaga, heilaga nafn!
Úr sólkerfum himnanna hnýta þér krans
þínir herskerar tímanna safn.
Fyrir þér er einn dagur sem þúsund ár
og þúsund ár dagur, ei meir.
Eitt eilífðar smáblóm með titrandi tár,
sem tilbiður Guð sinn og deyr.
Íslands þúsund ár, Íslands þúsund ár,
eitt eilífðar smáblóm með titrandi tár,
sem tilbiður Guð sinn og deyr.

Language

Compared to other languages, the Icelandic language has hardly changed over the past centuries. Even today, it is very similar to Old West Norse, i.e. Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian. The long-established practice of replacing loanwords from other languages with new words created from Old Icelandic – a phenomenon of linguistic purism – is still effective today. For those who have a more intensive interest in the language, it is fun to “decipher” the beautiful descriptions. For example, Icelandic has the word *muna* (to remember, to think about something). The word *mynd* (picture) has the same origin – meaning that a picture is a recorded memory or thought. Icelandic has several unique letter characters of its own, such as *Þ/þ* and *Ð/ð*. They are pronounced as the “th” in English. „Þ/þ” is pronounced as „th” in „thing” and „Ð/ð” is pronounced as the „th” in „them”.

Mini language course in Icelandic:

Good day – *góðan daginn*

Good evening – *gott kvöld*

Hello – *halló*

Good-bye – *þess*

Thank you – *takk*

Excuse me – *fyrirgefnið / afsakið*

National Holiday

During the mid-19th century Iceland’s political struggle for autonomy from Denmark was initiated by Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), who today is commemorated as a national hero. For the millennial celebration of the island’s settlement in 1874, the King of Denmark granted Iceland its own constitution as well as financial sovereignty.

In 1904 the first Icelandic government was established. It consisted of one minister who resided in Iceland. On 1 December 1918 Iceland attained independence as a sovereign state and became the Kingdom of Iceland, but the Danish monarch remained the King of Iceland in personal union.

In 1944 the Republic of Iceland was officially proclaimed in Þingvellir on the 17th of June, the birthday of Jón Sigurðsson. This date has since become Iceland’s official national day, on which Icelanders throughout the country commemorate the foundation of the republic in 1944 by taking part in open-air events with colourful parades, speeches and the message from the “Lady of the Mountain” (Ávarp Fjallkonunnar).

Christmas

Christmas is called Jól in Icelandic

Advent Season

In Iceland there is not only one Father Christmas or Santa Claus, but 13 "Yule Lads", who enjoy playing pranks and are sometimes quite gruff. Thirteen days before Christmas the first Yule lad comes down from the mountains, and then the others follow, one each day up to Christmas Eve. Starting thirteen days before Christmas, Icelandic children place a shoe on the windowsill every evening, hoping to find a gift in it the next morning. On the 23rd of December, also called St. Thorlakur's Day, people eat skata (fermented skate), the Christmas tree is decorated and the last Christmas presents are bought. The stores are open until midnight on this day.

Christmas Eve

In the morning, many Icelanders go to the cemetery and put a candle on the graves of their loved ones. At 6 p.m. the church bells ring in Christmas Eve and the Christmas celebrations commence. Many Icelanders also attend a church service. Rjúpa (snow grouse) or pork roast are served as the traditional meal.

Christmas Holidays

On one of the Christmas holidays hangikjöt (smoked lamb), prepared according to a traditional recipe and laufabrauð (snowflake bread) is served.

New Year's Eve

In many places people gather around one of the many bonfires and light fireworks. The 13 Yule Lads disappear one after another into the mountains again until the 6th of January. On this day, as end of the Christmas season, the elves dance around a bonfire together with the elf king and queen.

Easter

Easter is called Páskar in Icelandic

Holy Thursday is a holiday in Iceland, as well as Good Friday and Easter Monday. Many use the holiday to go on a skiing vacation.

There is no tradition of the Easter bunny in Iceland – rabbits that hide Easter eggs are not known in Iceland, and therefore Easter egg hunts are unknown as well. Nonetheless, children are given chocolate Easter eggs on Easter Sunday. The hollow eggs come in different sizes, and contain sweets and a note with a saying on it. The big ones are decorated with a bow, and a chick sits on top. The eggs are made of delicious creamy chocolate, and of course all children want to receive the largest possible Easter eggs from their parents and grandparents!

The Icelandic Easter tradition is young, since the date of Easter was too early in the calendar to be considered a spring festival. Thus, a later date was chosen to celebrate the arrival of spring – sumardagurinn fyrsti, literally the first day of summer. Presents were distributed and people symbolically began with their spring work. To this day, there is no school on sumardagurinn fyrsti.

Summer

The climate in Iceland is influenced by various ocean currents such as the Gulf Stream. That is why the climate is relatively mild and dynamic despite its northerly location. Sometimes so dynamic that the saying goes: "If you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes! It'll change!"

Summers are maritime and cool and the average temperature stays around 10° C. Summer nights are light. Midsummer is not an official Icelandic holiday, and there are not any special Midsummer traditions like in the other Nordic countries.

An Icelandic holiday and official flag day is Seamen's Day, which is celebrated on the first Sunday in June. Seamen's Day was first celebrated in 1938 in Reykjavík. The festivities later spread to ports and fishing villages throughout the country. Especially outstanding achievements, for example in sea rescue operations, are honoured on this day. All over Iceland, festivities take place with games and competitions.

During the spring and summer festivals take place in Iceland such as the Reykjavík Arts Festival and the Summer Arts Festival in Akureyri.

Sports

Icelanders enjoy sports. Swimming is very popular. Due to the many hot springs that fill the outdoor swimming pools, swimming is possible outdoors the year round. Many Icelanders like to ride on Iceland ponies that are famous for their varied gaits.