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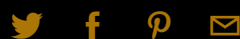
A Disney Trip to Iceland Had All the Best Parts of Disney, and None of the Theme Parks

by J U D Y K O U T S K Y

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Where to go when the kids are obsessed with Disney, but the adults need a little more adventure.



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My kids love **Disney World**. If it were up to them, we would go there every summer (and every spring break, and winter break...). While I love that the Disney theme park continues to hold interest and fun for my high-energy eight- and 10-year-old boys, I personally wanted to try someplace new; a trip where we could be active, see a new destination—and still somehow have that Disney sensibility and allure.

Finding a tour that appeals to adults and kids is not easy. What I hadn't realized was that Disney had expanded beyond theme parks and into the tour operator market. Turns out **Adventures by Disney** has been leading tours

since 2005, and has more than 50 itineraries on six continents, with Iceland being one of their newest (and, rapidly, most popular) tours. Of course, there are many tour operators that cover Iceland, but we wanted to see if Disney's ability to make a vacation feel like a vacation for both parents and kids would translate outside their parks. So we opted for their **eight-day Iceland tour**, which includes Reykjavik, Vik, Akureyri, Húsavík, and Lake Mývatn. While those names weren't overly familiar, the attractions in those towns were—namely hiking on a glacier, going to the blue lagoon, and visiting geysers and waterfalls. The tour is offered May through October, and we went in July for a summer vacation.

I wasn't really sure what to expect: Would Mickey Mouse be leading the tours? Would I be wearing Minnie ears during the trip? What exactly distinguished a Disney tour? Here's what I found out.

Piotr Redliński/Courtesy Disney

Action-packed adventure

In Grindavík, about an hour by car from **Reykjavik**, the thermal waters of the Blue Lagoon—as well as the accompanying lava mud masks—were the perfect antidote for jet lag on the first day. The second day was action-packed, covering the Golden Circle—one of the most popular routes that take visitors from geysers to craters. During our vacation, we also rode Icelandic horses that the Vikings brought to this country, hiked down into Kerio Crater, a volcanic crater that was formed more than 6,500 years ago, and explored the bubbling hot springs and geysers at Strokkur Geyser. Other highlights include hiking on the Skaftafell glacier (in shorts and t-shirts, no less), going **behind** the waterfalls at Seljalandsfoss (which seemed otherworldly), and whale watching (and being mere feet away from them) in Iceland's longest fjord. There's also white-water rafting in Skagafjorour in the north (a part of Iceland that rarely gets explored), as well as visits to the lava labyrinths in Dimmuborgir.

In the quaint fishing village of Ektafiskur, kids (and adults) can try fermented shark and get a certificate proving that they were brave enough to join the “The Rotten Shark Club of Hauganes.” It's a fun activity where kids also learn about Iceland's unique fish smoking traditions.

The **Iceland itinerary** is one of Disney's most active (and adventurous), and is one of the trips that covers the most ground. It's a total of about 30 hours in the bus for the week, but my high-energy kids didn't mind one bit, since the adventure leaders kept kids entertained along the way with riddles, bus trivia games, and plenty of snacks. Anyone who has been on a **road trip** with kids knows it's hard to avoid the fighting and boredom that sets in—so the fact that a busload of kids were entertained for 30 hours is no small feat.

The Disney touch

Disney has arguably some of the best customer service in the industry. Anyone who has been to **Disney World** knows that the lines are orderly and move quickly, hiccups are sorted out quietly and efficiently, and people are left wanting to come back again and again (which is why they have one of the highest repeat visitor rates in the industry). Adventures by Disney takes that customer service to a level that I have rarely seen in a tour operator. While things will always go wrong when traveling—there's just no way around it—it's how those hiccups are handled that make for a great (or not great) experience.

For example, on our Iceland trip, everyone wanted to see puffins—Iceland has one of the largest puffin populations in the world. The itinerary included many amazing things—but no puffins. To offset the disappointment, our adventure guides made an impromptu stop in Reynisfjara, where we saw beautiful black sand beaches, a massive cave (which the kids loved) and, surprise, tons of puffins—on the ground, in the water, everywhere. It was one of the highlights of the trip and something the guides added last minute, due to the requests of the guests.

Another nice Disney touch is that parents get date nights several nights on the trip—your “junior adventurers” will hang out with the guides for dinner and games, so the kids have fun with each other and the guides while and the parents get the night off.

Courtesy Disney

The secret sauce

Disney’s secret ingredient for its Adventure by Disney tours are the guides. There is always one local guide and one American on every trip, so you get all the history, culture, and insight of the local ways while still having the American sensibility on tour. The guides are constantly on—entertaining the kids with two truths and a lie, trivia about Iceland, and other impromptu games—but also are there to make everything seamless. They pre-order the dinner at the Lava Restaurant at the **Blue Lagoon**, so the meals were ready as soon as the kids got out of the warm waters—and before they could get hangry.

We didn’t have to wait in line at the white water rafting company or the outfit that set us up for glacier hiking; our guides called ahead and everything was waiting for us. The guides also were able to handle any mishaps (kids are notoriously picky eaters, and grilled cheese miraculously appeared when some kids didn’t like their Icelandic cuisine). They called ahead to the hotels so that all rooms were ready—and keys were waiting—when we checked in. Frankly, they were always working so we didn’t have to.

Since the guides were familiar with the itinerary, they had suggestions for what to do and where to go during free time. My kids aren’t into museums, so they suggested local pools (with a twist—the water came from hot springs). They also knew the workings of families—they knew when to push ahead and when to put on a movie (a Disney classic, of course) on the bus and let people sleep and relax. All guides train in **Orlando** at Disney, so they’re well-versed in dealing with kids of all ages, families of all backgrounds and demographics, and hiccups that can happen. Thinking on their feet is what they are trained to do. It’s like having a personal assistant on the trip.

Simply put, Disney takes the worry out of the travel, so we could enjoy and relax—and it turned Iceland into one of our favorite family trips. In fact, my boys still think of those guides as their new friends. ✦

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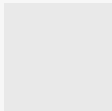
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The Best Things to Do in Iceland: Our Definitive List