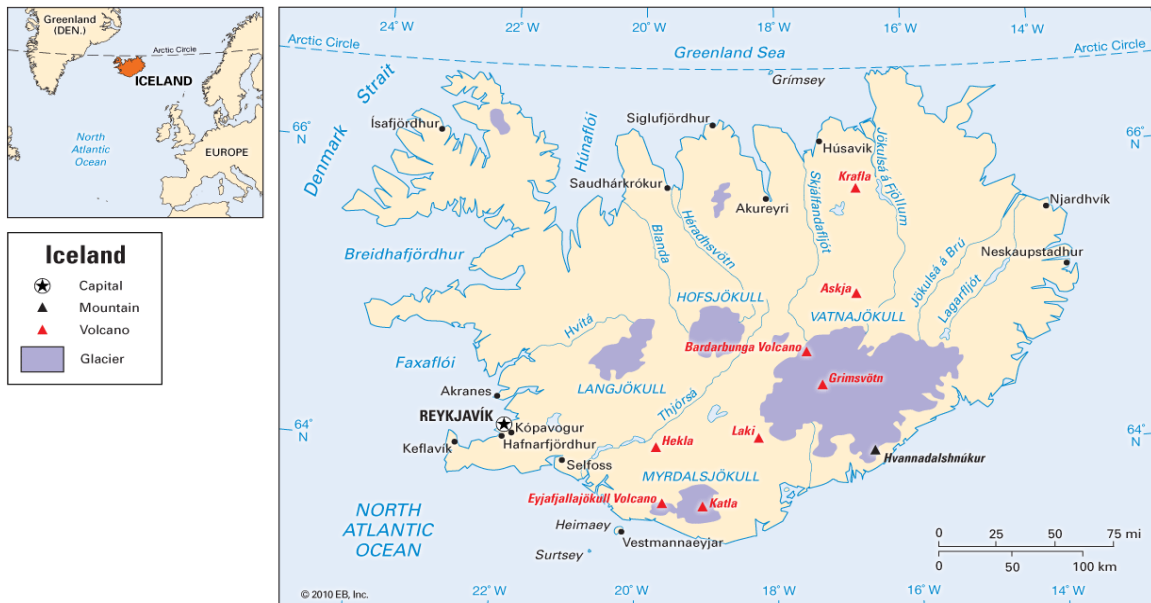


ICELAND



Official name: Lýðhveldidh Ísland
(Republic of Iceland)

Form of government: unitary
multiparty republic with one
legislative house (Althingi, or
Parliament [63])

Head of state: President Guðni Th.
Jóhannesson

Head of government: Prime
Minister Bjarni Benediktsson

Capital: [Reykjavík](#)

Official language: Icelandic

Official religion: Evangelical
Lutheran

Monetary unit: króna (ISK)

Population: 334,300

Total area: (sq mi) 39,777

Urban-rural population:

Urban: 94%

Rural: 6%

Life expectancy:

Male: 81.3 years

Female: 84.5 years

Literacy:

Male: 100%

Female: 100%

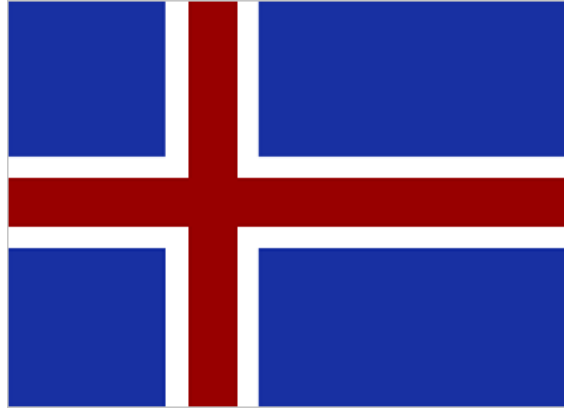
GNI per capita: (U.S.\$) 49,730

FUN FACT: About 80 percent of Icelandic people believe in elves. Roads have even been built to specifically avoid rocks and trees where elves are rumored to live.

FUN FACT: The town of Þingvellir is one of only TWO places in the entire world where you can see two of the earth's tectonic plates meeting above the earth's surface (the other is in Africa).

Introduction

The island of Iceland is one of the stepping-stones of land between the North American and European continents. It is located just south of the Arctic Circle about 180 miles southeast of Greenland, and 500 miles northwest of Scotland. Over 80 percent of the island is



unpopulated because the land is covered either with permanent snow and ice fields (glaciers) or has a volcanic surface, which has poor soils that are not suited to crop growing, sheep grazing, or other agricultural activities.

Most of the people live in or near the capital city of Reykjavík in the extreme southwestern portion of the island. It is located on major shipping and air lanes of the North Atlantic Ocean, and it occupies a unique position in the world as one of the first independent, democratic republics.

Land and Climate

The geological origin of Iceland is volcanic in nature and the surface has been formed by lava flows that come from numerous erupting volcanoes, some of which are still active. Hot lava is near the surface, and many geysers or hot springs are formed when water comes into contact with the lava-heated rocks. The steam or hot water created by this contact is used to heat the homes and buildings of Reykjavík as well as greenhouses, which produce flowers and vegetables.

Active volcanoes, such as the 4,891-foot (1,491-meter) Hekla, erupt occasionally and sometimes cause considerable damage. The volcanic island of Surtsey off the southern coast was formed by eruptions that began in 1963. After nearly 190 years of dormancy, the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in southern Iceland erupted in March 2010; a second, much more powerful eruption occurred the following month, when the volcano spewed massive amounts of ash into the atmosphere that caused widespread disruptions to air travel.

The extensive lava plateaus are largely covered by ice caps from which many glaciers move outward toward the sea. Rugged mountains are characteristic of the coastline, except for the plains area near Reykjavík in the southwest.



The Icelandic climate is rather moderate despite being so far north because of the warm North Atlantic Drift waters on its southern and western coasts. The mean temperature at Reykjavík in January is 31° F and 52° F in June. The average annual precipitation is from 40 to 60 inches in the populated southwest.

The country's lava soils, climate, and poor drainage conditions are not favorable to tree growth. Most of the lower parts of the island were covered with trees that were either burned off by early settlers, cut for timber, or killed by sheep gnawing at the bark for food during winter. The present vegetation consists of cotton grass and other sedges and rushes in the marshy areas; small forested areas consisting of dwarf willows, birches, and mountain ash.

The fox is the only native four-legged animal. The reindeer was introduced from Norway about 1770. About 100 species of birds, including many types of waterfowl, inhabit the island. Whales and seals are found along the coast.

People and Culture

Icelandic culture is similar to that of the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway. The Icelandic language is primarily Old Norse in character, although it varies considerably from modern Norwegian. The Evangelical Lutheran church is the state church, but the people are free to worship as they please. Education levels are high in Iceland, where more books and newspapers are published per person than in any other nation. The

University of Iceland in Reykjavík, founded in 1911, is free to citizens. Schooling is required through age 16.

Despite the problems presented by Iceland's natural environment, the standard of living is relatively high. The people receive a variety of social services from the government, including medical care, unemployment insurance, pensions for the elderly and handicapped, and free schooling. The homes in the cities are equipped with modern conveniences, and most houses are constructed from concrete rather than wood, which is scarce. The cost of living is relatively high in Iceland because so many foods, other raw materials, and most manufactured products must be imported.

Economy

The few resources available in Iceland place limits on the economy. Fishing is a dominant industry because of the rich fishing grounds for cod and herring in the waters that surround the island. Much of the processing—such as salting, freezing, and canning—of fish is done in Reykjavík. The fishery limits were extended to 200 nautical miles in 1975 in order to protect this crucial industry.



Agriculture is based primarily on sheep and dairy cattle, which can only graze outside for part of the year. Less than 1 percent of Iceland is under cultivation, due to the cold summer temperatures, and the short growing season.

Tourism has made a significant contribution to the economy of Iceland. Many airline passengers visit the country while en route between the United States and Europe.

Government and History

Irish monks established early isolated settlements in Iceland, but Norwegians arriving from 874 AD were the first permanent settlements. In 930 they established a representative form of government was established at Thingvellir with the Althing as the deliberating body.

Norwegian missionaries introduced Christianity, which was adopted as the state religion in about 1000. The country existed as an independent republic until 1262, when the Althing voted that Iceland should come under the rule of Norway.

In 1380 Iceland and Norway were taken over by Denmark, and when Norway was separated from Denmark in 1814, Iceland remained a Danish possession. Iceland became self-governing in 1918 but still was a protectorate of Denmark. In 1944 Iceland proclaimed itself an independent republic.

Iceland became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defense plan in 1949. Membership in NATO is especially important because Iceland has neither an army nor a navy. An American air base operates at Keflavík in southwestern Iceland.

The country has endured many difficult periods. In the 1400s a plague reportedly killed a large percentage of the population. Volcanoes caused much destruction in Iceland in the 1600s and 1700s. In 1973 a volcanic eruption on the island of Heimaey necessitated the evacuation of 5,000 people.

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was elected president on June 30, 1980. She became the world's first elected woman president. She was reelected in 1984, 1988, and 1992.

In early 2009 Iceland's coalition government (led by the center-right Independence Party) resigned, and on February 1 a new coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Left-Greens came into office under Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the world's first openly gay head of government.