

## Volcanic rock, frozen rain and smoked lamb testicles!

It is a tiny spot on the world map but considering its size - an area of 103,000 sq km - Iceland has an incredibly diverse landscape. Just a 40 km drive from Keflavik airport to capital Reykjavik leaves you astounded.

It's almost like driving on the moon as for kilometres you encounter an undulating setting of black volcanic rock covered with green moss and occasionally catch a glimpse of groups of Nordic horses that brave the rough Icelandic terrain. But there is more that this country, located on the mid-Atlantic ridge dividing the European and American continental plates, offers.

Mighty glaciers and mountains, desolate highlands, volcanoes, geysers and lava fields dominate. For a country that has a population of just over 300,000 people and warmed by the Gulf Stream and southwesterly winds, the country can get bitterly cold during winter with just four daylight hours beginning mid-November.

Given the scarce population, it is perhaps natural that everyone seems to know the other if you have been living here for a reasonable period of time. The country's president, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, who moves with practically no security, agrees.

'Yes, most of us are on familiar terms. It is only natural,' he declares.

The first time visitor, especially from the Indian subcontinent, while taking in the open wilderness and striking contrasts, is truly amazed at how people actually live in this harsh and unpredictable country that oscillates rapidly between frozen rain and strong blustery spells.

'You must understand that the people here have a great ability and determination in adapting. Did you know that a little more than a century ago, Icelanders were scattered around the island, lived in turf huts and fished only for their needs?' says host Leifur Eiriksson.

Well, that explains it. Today, however, the standard of living in Iceland is among the highest in the world - actually fifth highest - and the citizens have the infrastructure, restaurants, shopping, and entertainment to prove it. In fact Iceland has ample natural resources to generate all the electricity needed by mainland Europe.

Unemployment is almost absent, the island enjoys a 100 percent literacy rate and mostly everyone speaks English in addition to the national language, Icelandic. Interestingly, the country boasts of the highest per capita number of artists and writers in the world.

Equally famous for its charming cafes and vibrant nightlife, Reykjavik has in the last three years become one of the hottest destinations in Europe. Hordes of Londoners make a beeline here on a Friday for their weekend caper checking out the scores of pubs, clubs and bars.

But, strangely enough, the nightlife does not really start until midnight mostly because many people are at private parties until then or even later. Another reason, one is told, is the high prices of alcoholic beverages. The average price of a beer in a fashionable club is almost 600 Kroners ( Rs.400) with a cover charge to boot.

Some traditional Icelandic food has its origins in the limited preserving possibilities that Icelanders had to cope with earlier. To make the food last through winter it was processed in certain ways that made its taste unique.

Meat was smoked, salted or pickled and fish was dried, hanged, salted and smoked. Almost everything from the animal was used. Just to mention a few delicacies made from the Icelandic sheep - blood and liver pudding, sheep heads, smoked lamb and ram testicles! To taste some of these special treats one needn't venture further than the nearest grocery store.

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