


Exploring Iceland's Golden Circle



- Nov 2, 2011
- [Stephanie Wilkins](#)

 Gullfoss, Iceland - Stephanie Wilkins Photography

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The natural wonders of Geysir, Gullfoss and Þingvellir National Park make the Golden Circle an unforgettable part of any trip to Iceland.

If your trip to Iceland allows you time to explore beyond the town limits of Reykjavík, a tour of Iceland's famous Golden Circle is a must. The popular route, looping east of Reykjavík into central Iceland and back again, offers 300 kilometers of breathtakingly unique geothermal scenery and a chance to see some of the country's most popular natural landmarks. The route can be covered in a single day and includes Iceland's "big three" tourist attractions, Þingvellir National Park, Geysir and Gullfoss, among other unforgettable sights.

Þingvellir National Park

Located approximately 23 kilometers east of Reykjavík, Þingvellir is one of the most historically and geologically significant sites in Iceland. Sitting on the rift between the planet's North American and European plates, which are slowly drifting apart at the rate of approximately one millimeter each year, the park is characterized by a series of dramatic fissures and waterfalls. Þingvellir is also the original home to the Alþing, Iceland's parliament. In addition to the historical site, visitors today can see a picturesque church and the farmhouse that serves as the summer home to Iceland's Prime Minister. Those with more time can spend an entire day exploring the park's geological wonders on foot or on horseback.

Geysir

Lending its name to geysers around the world, Iceland's Geysir first started erupting in the 14th century. Today its eruptions are infrequent and the geyser has been known to lie dormant for years at a time in recent history. Luckily for visitors, just down a walking path through a field of bubbling mud and steam vents is the reliable Strokkur geyser. Strokkur erupts approximately every five minutes, offering tourists ample opportunities to snap photos of its towering jets of steaming water.

Gullfoss

A few minutes' drive from Geysir brings visitors to Gullfoss, Iceland's most famous waterfall. From the Icelandic for Golden Falls, Gullfoss is one of the country's most popular tourist attractions. Rushing water tumbles a total of 32 meters over the course of two massive tiers into the Hvítá River below. Flowing year-round, Gullfoss is a remarkable spectacle in any season. In summer, the falls are surrounded by lush greenery and shimmering rainbows can often be seen in the mist hovering over the gorge. In winter, Gullfoss transforms into

an icy wonderland as the mist freezes on nearby surfaces, encasing ropes and benches in ice and forming surreal shapes in the surrounding blankets of snow.

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Beyond the Big Three

If you have your own car, you have more freedom to take in the scenery and explore the small towns that dot the Golden Circle. If you choose instead to visit the Golden Circle from the comfort of one of the many tour buses departing from Reykjavík each day, your tour will likely be focused on the “big three” sites, with a couple other short stops added to the agenda. Among the most popular of these additional stops is the church at Skálholt. Situated on an isolated, wind-swept plain, this area was the center of Icelandic Christianity from the 11th to 18th centuries. Many tours also include a stop at the Nesjavellir geothermal power plant, where visitors can learn more about the industry that is such an integral part of Iceland’s identity.

Hiring a rental car allows you to view the sights of the Golden Circle at your leisure and avoid the crowds from the tour bus circuit. However, roads can be difficult to navigate in the winter months, especially in a standard rental car. For this reason, many winter visitors choose the tour bus option and leave the driving to the professionals. Several tour operators run Golden Circle tours out of Reykjavík and most hotels will be happy to help you with arrangements.

Whether exploring on your own or with a group, the Golden Circle offers a true taste of Iceland that can’t be experienced in Reykjavík alone. The magic of Iceland’s waterfalls and geothermal wonders will inspire to you venture further afield and uncover what lies down this country’s many unbeaten paths.

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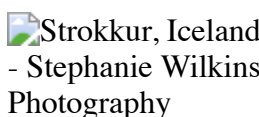
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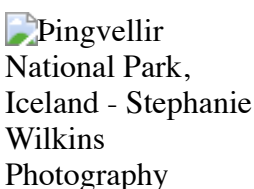
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