

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW



DISCOVERY

Ancient Greek explorers, Irish monks, and Norse Vikings all happened upon Iceland—some by accident, others in search of peace or new wealth. Each newcomer tried to describe the intense natural beauty of the land—the sun, the snow, and the grass—but the Viking Floki discovered icebergs and called it ‘Ice Land’. The name stuck.

SETTLEMENT

The first Icelanders were adventurers who sailed from Norway in open boats packed with horses and timber. They built homesteads and benefitted from the natural hot springs while learning to live with the surrounding volcanoes. Today in Reykjavík, you can still visit the remains of a farm that was built in 874 AD.

DEMOCRACY

Iceland was founded as a country of free men without a king. To protect their freedom, the early Icelanders gathered in 930 AD and established the Althing—the world’s first parliament. Leaders met every summer in the valley of Thingvellir to decide the laws, try important cases, and arrange weddings. In 1000 AD, the Althing adopted Christianity as the national faith.

THE SAGAS

A wealth of Icelandic literature and poetry burst forth after the 12th century, thanks largely to the great sagas of Snorri Sturluson. These intricate stories recount in detail the colorful times of Iceland’s ‘Golden Age’ and have preserved the country’s vast history to this day.

FOREIGN REIGN

Yet while Iceland prospered, the battle to control its riches grew stronger. Eventually, Iceland fell subject to foreign kings, first to Norway in 1262 and then to Denmark in 1397. Throughout the 15th Century, English and German ships fought for access to Icelandic cod and by the 1600s, the Danish crown had imposed a strict trade monopoly on Iceland.

REFORMATION

Lutheranism in Denmark led to reformation in Iceland. The country’s Catholics resisted for decades but Protestantism finally won over. Thanks to an Icelandic translation in 1584, Icelanders were able to read the bible in their own language long before most other Europeans could do the same.

NATIONALISM

Iceland’s capital city of Reykjavík was founded in 1784 after the trade monopoly was relaxed. Throughout the 1800’s, Icelandic intellectuals rallied for a free and independent Iceland, led by the national hero Jón Sigurdsson (whose face now appears on Iceland’s 500 krónur note). The Althing was re-established in 1845, and in 1871, Iceland’s national anthem was performed for the first time at the country’s millennial celebrations.

INDEPENDENCE

After two World Wars and a national referendum, Iceland was declared independent on June 17, 1944. Self-government paved the way for independent trade. Iceland only gained exclusive rights to fish their own waters after the “Cod Wars,” a series of conflicts that lasted until the 1970s.

COOL ICELAND

The world began to take notice of little-known Iceland in the 1980s when the country made bold steps forward: electing the first woman president, hosting the Gorbachev-Reagan summit in 1986, and opening the modern Keflavík Airport in 1987. Traditional Icelandic creativity rippled through the fields of fashion, design, art, and haute cuisine, while Reykjavík’s independent music scene exploded into the worldwide fame of artists like Björk and Sigur Rós. By the 1990s, North Americans began to realize that Iceland had something unique to offer. Tourism grew by leaps and bounds.

ICELAND TODAY

The 21st Century has seen Iceland embrace globalization while playing a unique new role in helping the rest of the world deal with new challenges. Iceland’s keen sense of survival kicked in after the global recession of 2008 opening the door for a quick and stable recovery, while its trademark clean energy sources inspire other nations in the fight against climate change. As the rest of the world continues to discover Iceland—through travel or its unique products—a new chapter of the story unfolds.



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