Iceland

Location
Iceland is an island nation located in Northern Europe. This is a little misleading; however, because it is in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and the Greenland Sea. It is the western most part of the European continent. Geographically, Iceland is located at 65° N and 18° W which makes it located in the Arctic region. The total area of the island is just a little over 100,000 square kilometers. That’s just a little smaller than the Commonwealth of Kentucky! Reykjavik, the capital, is the northernmost national capital of any country in the world. It’s about a three-hour flight to the hubs of Europe, London, Paris, or Amsterdam.

Geography
One word describes the country and landscape of Iceland, glaciers. These giant ice blocks cover about 12% of the country. Recently, there has been some significant melting due to the warmer climate of Iceland and some say even because of global warming. Regardless, glaciers are one of the most distinctive features of the country and play a big part in its culture and history. The largest of these huge ice cubes is Vatnajökull located in southern Iceland. Its total area is 8,400 sq km and, in certain points, it is 1 km thick (300 feet)!

Another important geographic feature to discuss is volcanoes. The mid-Atlantic rift causes numerous volcanoes on the island. One of the Earth’s major geological faults, the mid-Atlantic rift is constantly shifting and changing which creates mountainous terrain. About half of the total area of Iceland is mountainous lava desert. This is one of the few places in the world where this high altitude phenomenon takes place. Because of the fault line, there are also many earthquakes in the country. Most of these are small on the Richter scale and cause little, if any, damage. The most notable volcano on the island is Hekla.
Most of us have heard of, or even seen, the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park. Iceland has numerous geysers throughout the country. Actually, the word geyser comes from the Icelandic language. The widespread availability of geothermal power makes hot water and heat a very cheap commodity.

The last distinguishable geographic feature of Iceland is the fjords. A fjord is a narrow inlet of the sea between narrow cliffs or steep slopes. They are found all along the coastline of Iceland. Most of the major cities are located near these picturesque fjords.

**Climate**

Iceland has a relatively mild climate, contrary to what its geographic location would indicate. The same phenomenon that causes the continent of Europe to have mild weather, affects Iceland as well. This stems from the Gulf Stream and warm ocean currents from the Gulf of Mexico. Using the capital city, Reykjavik, as a focal point, we find that the average temperatures in winter are very similar to those of Columbus, OH. In summer, the average temperature is a little lower at 51˚, but the average highs are around 76˚. In winter, the average is at the freezing point.

Because of the location of the island, Iceland experiences some very long and very short days throughout the year. For two to three months in the summer, there is continuous daylight in the country. On the other hand, the days are very short during mid-winter.

**History**

Iceland was first settled by the Norsemen in late 800 A.D. It was the last of the European countries to be established. They came from Scandinavia on Viking ships. Another influential group were the Celts, who came from the British Isles. In 930, the oldest functioning parliament in the world was established, Althingi. Sixty-three members are elected by a popular vote and serve on the parliament for four years. The only eligibility requirement to sit on parliament is that you have to be
able to vote. Iceland has universal suffrage for people over the age of 18, so practically everyone is qualified. In 1262, Iceland came under the rule of the Norwegians. Only 100 years later, the Danish took control of both Iceland and Norway. The Danish established an absolute monarchy and began to mess up trade and Icelandic culture. In the first half of the second millennium A.D., Iceland was a predominantly Catholic island. That all changed after the Reformation in the 1500s. The Danes abolished Catholicism and a universal Protestantism was proclaimed. Finally, in 1874, Iceland received its own constitution and financial control. The Republic of Iceland was formally proclaimed on June 17, 1944 which ended the long reign of Danish rule.

**Important Dates**

Important dates on the Icelandic calendar coincide with the Christian religious calendar for the most part. Some important dates on the calendar are: January 1 – New Year’s Day, April 17 – Maundy Thursday, April 18 – Good Friday, the Thursday between April 19-25 – first day of summer, May 1 – Labour Day, 6 weeks after Maundy Thursday – Ascension Day, June 17 – National Day (Proclamation of the Republic in 1944 and the birthday of Jon Sigurdsson, first Monday of August – Tradesmen’s Day, December 25 – Christmas, and December 26 – Boxer Day (the second day of Christmas).

**Population**

In 2000, the national register of persons listed the population of Iceland as 282,849 people. Ninety-seven percent of that number is Icelanders, while the other two are of various other nationalities. The population density is 6.5 persons per square mile (remember there are only 100,000 square miles). One-hundred and fifty thousand people live in the Reykjavik region, and the rest are in other coastal cities. The average population growth is only a little over 1%. Icelanders have a life expectancy of about 79 years. It must have something to do with all of the natural hot tubs in the country.
**Currency**

The official currency of Iceland is the Krona. The current (2003) exchange rate is $1.00 equals 100 Kronas.

**Education**

The literacy rate in Iceland is among the highest in the world, approaching 100%. This is due in large part to the compulsory stance that all children between the age of 6 and 16 attend school.

Education is free all the way through the university level enabling the entire population to have access to a college degree. The leading institution is the University of Iceland located in the capital of Reykjavik. There are also technical schools and colleges of agricultural and music. Another point of attention is teaching. They have a specific teacher training school for this purpose. There are currently over 7,000 people in universities.

**Language**

Iceland continues to speak the language that the Norsemen brought to the island over a thousand years ago. It is called Icelandic and the dialect has remained largely unaltered through the years. English has a large percentage of its words derived from the Icelandic language. English and Danish are also spoken practically universally throughout the country. Another interesting aspect of the language is the way they use their first name like much of the rest of the world uses last names. Their phone books even use their first names instead of last names.

**Religion**

At one time, the entire country was Catholic. But with the takeover by the Danish, Lutheranism has taken control of the religious aspect of the country. Today, the established church of Iceland is the State Evangelical Lutheran Church. The constitution grants universal freedom of religion to its citizens.

The breakdown of religions in Iceland is as follows: State Church of Iceland – 92.2%, other Lutherans – 3.1%, Roman Catholics – 0.9%, and other religions make up the last 3%.
**Agriculture**

Agriculture in Iceland is a self-sufficient practice. They do not grow wheat or corn to export out of their country. Because only one percent of the total land of the island is cultivated, it is used to supply their own inhabitants. The most important livestock in the country is sheep. The most important crop is hay. The weather conditions force Icelanders to utilize greenhouses. There, they grow tomatoes and cucumbers. Some other important crops are potatoes, turnips, and cereals. Billberries and crowberries are the only types of fruit that are grown on the island. Hens, horses, and cattle round out the livestock portion of agriculture.

**Trade**

Iceland’s foreign trade volume, both exports and imports, involve four countries for the most part. These are the United Kingdom, Germany, the U.S., and the countries of the Netherlands. The two main exported items are fish and manufactured goods. The most number of fish caught in a species are herring, followed closely by cod. Another large part of the fishing industry is fishmeal and oil. The fishing industry comprises almost 65% of the total exports of the country. Manufactured goods such as cement and aluminum make up the second largest percent of exported goods at 31%.

**Food**

Iceland has a range of traditional foods, called “thorramatur.” These are especially enjoyed between January and March. Included in these preserved foods are smoked and salted lamb, dried fish, smoked salmon, singed sheep heads, and shark. Icelandic breads include laufabrau (which is a deep-fried paper-thin bread), kleinur (very similar to donuts), and rye pancakes. Year-round Icelandic crepes are very popular. Obviously, fish play a large role in the every day meals of Icelanders.

**Landmarks**

Iceland’s biggest incentive to travel there is its natural beauty. Erupting volcanoes, geysers, hot springs, fjords, and glaciers offer tourists a variety of incomparable sites. There is also a long tradition of
golf and fly-fishing in Iceland. Many of the courses offer spectacular ocean scenery. Bird watching, hiking, and skiing are some of the activities enjoyed by tourists and natives alike.

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