

Hvalfjörður

By Cathy Becker



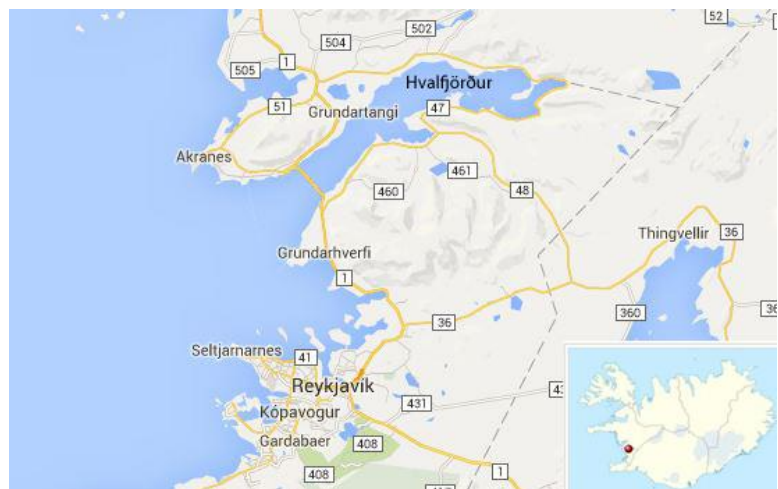
Panoramic view of Hvalfjörður (Credit: Hansueli Krapf)

Hvalfjörður is located just north of the capital of Reykjavik in southwest Iceland. It is a long fjord reaching about 30 kilometers (18 miles) inland and 5 km (3.1 miles) wide. Also known as “whale fjord,” Hvalfjörður is named for the large groups of whales that at one time could be found there. Iceland’s only whaling station is located at the fjord.

The area around Hvalfjörður was settled in the 9th century, with Akranes founded in 880 by the brothers Þormóður and Ketill from Ireland in 880. Fishing has been the area’s main source of employment since the 17th century. Whaling began in Hvalfjörður in the 12th century, with commercial whaling introduced in the 19th century. The International Whaling Commission imposed a moratorium on whaling in 1986. Today Hvalur H/F still practices whaling from Iceland’s only whaling station located in Hvalfjörður by using a scientific permit.

Hvalfjörður is often referred to as the “backyard of Reykjavik” because it is so close to the capital and makes a wonderful day trip for residents. Attractions that the area has to offer include

- Esja, a volcanic mountain range on the south peninsula
- Glymur, the second-largest waterfall in Iceland, inland at the head of the fjord
- Bjarteyjarsandur farm, inland to the north of the fjord, where visitors can interact with sheep and lambs.
- The War and Peace Museum on the northeast shore of the fjord, which explores the history of British and American occupation of the area during World War II
- Saurbær farmstead church on the north peninsula, which features beautiful stained-glass work by Gerður Helgadóttir
- Akranes, the city at the tip of the north peninsula, featuring the Peace and War Museum.



In this chapter, I will provide a preview of attractions in Hvalfjörður, as well as discuss the area’s history, agriculture, and industry.

Access

Until the 1990s, Reykjavik residents who wanted to visit the north peninsula of Hvalfjörður had to drive all the way around the fjord inland, a trip of 62 km (35.5 miles) that took over an hour. But in 1998, the Hvalfjarðargöngin tunnel was opened, providing a shortcut under the ocean.

This 5,762 meter (3.5 mile) tunnel runs 165 meters (541 feet) below sea level and takes about six minutes to go through. The current toll for vehicles less than 6 meters (19 feet) is 1,000 krone (7.60 USD). Although the tunnel was designed to handle about 5,000 cars a day, traffic has been significantly higher, and the operator has proposed building a second tunnel nearby.



South entrance to the Hvalfjörður tunnel
(Credit: Evsteinn Guðni Guðnason)

Hvalfjörður and the area around it encompass what could be described as a “greatest hits” of Iceland: mountains, volcanoes, waterfalls, farms, ,ocean, and industry. If this was the only place you visited in the country, you would get a glimpse of much of what makes Iceland tick. Traveling from Reykjavik north and inland around Hvalfjörður, then back out across the north peninsula, one could stop at Esja, Glymur, Bjarteyjarsandur, the War and Peace Museum, and Saurbær before ending at Akranes. We will consider each of these attractions in turn.

Esja

Overlooking Reykjavik from about 10 km (6.2 miles) northeast is Esja. Also called Esjan (“the Esja”), Esja is not a single mountain but a volcanic mountain range made of basalt and tuff. It is one of the most popular hiking destinations in Iceland, with the best-known hiking paths leading to Þverfellshorn (780 m/2559 ft), Kistufell (830 m/2723 ft), and Kerhólakambur (851 m/2791 ft). The hike to Þverfellshorn is about 6 km (3.7 miles) and takes about an hour and a half. Athletes compete on these trails every year for the Mt. Esja Ultra Run. Esja’s highest point is Habunga (914 m/2998 ft), but it is difficult to access and marked only with a wooden stick. Icelandic musician Ásgeir Trausti played a concert at the top of Esja on May 29, 2015.



Esja dominates the skyline overlooking Reykjavik. (Credit: Stuck in Iceland)

Esja formed during the repeated glaciations of the Pleistocene, which ran from 2.5 million years ago to about 11,700 years ago. During warm periods lava from the volcanic range flowed freely, resulting in the formation of basalt, but during cold periods, volcanic ash built up under the glacier, resulting in tuff. The oldest part of Esja, about 3.2 million years old, lies to the west, with the younger part, about 1.8 million years old, located inland toward the east. The tectonic plate that runs diagonally through Iceland continually pushes the mountain's older strata west.

Glymur

At 198 meters (649 feet), Glymur is the second-tallest waterfall in Iceland. It had long been considered the tallest waterfall until retreat of the Vatnajökull glacier revealed a slightly taller waterfall in 2011. Glymur, whose name means “rumble” or “clash,” was a popular destination before the Hvalfjörður tunnel was built, as the road around the fjord runs nearby. Although fewer people visit the waterfall now, it is considered one of the most beautiful areas of Iceland.



Glymur waterfall (Credit: World of Waterfalls)

Glymur is situated just inland from the head of Hvalfjörður. The waterfall is part of the river Botnsá, which originates from Hvalvatn lake to the east. Hvalvatn is a 4 km² (2.5 mi²) lake surrounded by four volcanic mountains. The river Botnsá flows out west before falling down Hvalfell mountain into a steep canyon, though which it travels before flowing into the fjord.

The 4-hour hike to the top of Glymur waterfall is steep and strenuous but incredibly beautiful. The trail requires hikers to climb rocky hillsides with only a rope for balance, walk narrow pathways with terrifying dropoffs, crawl through caves, and use a narrow log to cross a raging river. But the reward is stunning beauty with a view of the entire waterfall and the canyon below.

Bjarteyjarsandur



Children with lambs at Bjarteyjarsandur farm (Credit: Visit West Iceland)

Traveling around Hvalfjörður just northeast of the fjord is Bjarteyjarsandur farm, a popular destination for agrotourism. Visitors can book a cottage or camp overnight while learning about the farm and participating in activities. Bjarteyjarsandur is a working farm run by three families with sheep, horses, free-range hens, cats, dogs, and wool rabbits. Nearby is a beach where visitors can collect mussels and watch birds.

The experience at Bjarteyjarsandur emphasizes environment and sustainability. The farm's main product is lamb meat raised organically, but it also sells artisanal handicrafts. Reforestation and soil reclamation are practiced to minimize erosion. Waste is minimized through conservation, reuse and recycling. Thousands of school children and tourists visit the farm each year.

War and Peace Museum



A display at the War and Peace Museum
(Credit: Gudmunder Ofnir)

Located on the north shore of Hvalfjörður is the War and Peace Museum, where rooms full of high quality artifacts explore the British and American occupation of the area during World War II. The British and American navies chose Hvalfjörður for a naval and submarine base because the water is deep and clear. Storage tanks were built to hold 164,000 tons of fuel oil, and more than 20,000 British and American soldiers passed through.

The naval base at Hvalfjörður worked in coordination with army units near Reykjavik and an airfield at Kaldaðarnes, south of the capital, to defend Iceland against a German invasion, which would have blocked British and French maritime

trade routes. Some of the naval barracks can still be seen near the museum, and one of the naval piers is still being used by Hvalur H/F as a whale processing station.

Saurbær

Midway across the northern peninsula is Saurbær, noted for Hallgrímskirkja, a church named after the 17th century minister Reverend Hallgrímur Pétursson, who composed Iceland's most popular religious work, the Passion Hymns, while he served there from 1651 to 1669. The church features beautiful stained glass by the 20th century Icelandic artist Gerður Helgadóttir.

Pétursson was one of Iceland's most famous poets and influential pastors. The Passion Hymns is a collection of 50 hymns that explore the life of Christ from the time he entered the Garden of Gethsemane to his crucifixion and burial. Published in 1666, the hymns have gone through 75 editions and been translated into multiple languages.



Hallgrímskirkja at Saurbær (Credit: Jutta234)

Akranes



Aerial view of Akranes (Credit: Visit West Iceland)

Moving toward the Atlantic all the way to the tip of the northern peninsula of Hvalfjörður is Akranes, the largest town in west Iceland with a population 6,630. It is an industrial town, with a cement plant in operation since the 1950s and an aluminum smelting plant opened in 1998.

Although Akranes is not the most beautiful city in Iceland, it does have some features of note:

- The museum area downtown includes exhibits on farming, housekeeping, and social conditions in the area; boats and ships with information about seafaring and fishing; and a sport museum with exhibits on Akranes's strong football tradition.
- Langisandur, a long stretch of white sand beaches, rare in Iceland, along the fjord where people can go for a stroll or swim
- The lighthouse at the edge of the peninsula that people can go up to enjoy the view and see a photography exhibit.

Whaling

Iceland's history of whaling dates back to the 12th century, and the industry has permeated much of Icelandic thought and culture. The word "hvalreki," which literally means "beached whale," is commonly used to refer to something good that has unexpectedly come your way.

Hvalfjörður has long been the hub of whaling in Iceland. Hvalvatn lake, from where the river Botnsá flows over Hvalfell mountain to create Glymur waterfall, gets its name from a folktale about a sorcerer who used magic to drive a monstrous killer whale up the river to the lake.



Icelanders flensing a whale from a 16th-century manuscript.

Early whalers in Iceland used the spear drift method in which they struck whales with spears, then waited for the whale to die and the carcass to wash up on shore. In 1865, American whalers introduced the rocket harpoon to Iceland, ushering in the era of commercial whaling.

From 1883 to 1915, 10 whaling companies operated 14 stations in Iceland with unrestricted catches. This led to a depletion in whale stocks and a ban on whaling starting in 1915. The ban was repealed in 1928, with a permit for a new whaling station issued in 1935.

In 1948, Hvalur H/F bought the American naval base at Hvalfjörður and converted it to a whaling station. Hvalur H/F, owned and operated by multimillionaire Kristján Loftsson, hunts endangered fin whales and exporting the meat to Japan. Another company, Útgerðarfélagið Fjörður ehf, hunts minke whales for the domestic market; this meat is sold mainly to tourists.



Commercial whaling station in Hvalfjörður. (Credit: Arnaldur Halldorsson/Bloomberg)

Since 1948, Iceland's history of whaling has been one of on and off hunts along with contention in the international community, both other governments and nongovernmental organizations.

In 1949, 14 nations formed the International Whaling Commission to “provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry.” Although Iceland joined at the outset, it didn't always follow IWC rules. For example, Iceland hunted blue whales until 1960 even though the commission banned taking them in 1955.

In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment proposed a moratorium on whaling. Iceland joined with five other nations to vote no. Over the next 10 years, membership in the IWC increased to 37 mostly anti-whaling nations, and the moratorium passed in 1982. Under pressure from the United States, Iceland's Althing voted 29-28 not to object.

The 1982 IWC moratorium on whaling included an exemption allowing governments to issue permits to hunt whales for scientific research. Iceland wasted no time submitting proposals to kill fin, sei and minke whales. From 1986 to 1989, Hvalfur H/F killed 386 fin and sei whales under the research permit, exporting most of the meat to Japan despite IWC requirements to sell the meat domestically. Biologists in Iceland condemned the program as unscientific.

International tensions

Iceland's whale hunt, especially of the endangered fin whale, has led to a lot of international tension. In 1978 and 1979 Greenpeace used its ship *Rainbow Warrior* to interfere with the hunt, so Iceland sent its navy to escort the whalers and seize the Greenpeace ship. In 1986, activists with Sea Shepherd sabotaged the Hvalfjörður whaling station and sunk two whaling ships.

In 1987 and 1988 Greenpeace

orchestrated the seizure of almost 400 tons of Icelandic whale meat by local authorities in Germany and Finland. In 1989 Greenpeace organized boycotts of Icelandic seafood by grocery and restaurant chains, cutting into Iceland's economy.



Signing the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, Washington, D.C., December 2, 1946.



A Hvalfur H/F boat returns to Hvalfjörður with a dead fin whale lashed to its hull. (Credit: IFAW)

In 1990 and 1991, the IWC rejected Iceland's applications for research whaling. Iceland left the IWC in 1992, complaining that the body had gone from regulating whaling to banning it completely. However, without IWC membership Iceland was unable to sell products from whaling because IWC rules banned member nations from trading with non-members.

In 2001 Iceland applied to get back into the IWC on the condition that it could hunt whales under a "reservation" to the 1982 moratorium on whaling, even though Iceland had not opposed the

moratorium at the time it was passed. The IWC admitted Iceland only as an observer.

In 2002 the IWC called a special meeting in which Iceland was first restored to voting status, then allowed to vote on upholding its own reservation to the whaling moratorium. By a 19-18 vote, Iceland regained a full membership to the IWC, and its reservation was allowed to stand.

For the next five years, Iceland killed 200 minke whales under a research permit, despite condemnation by Britain and 23 other countries. In 2006, Iceland began issuing permits for commercial whale hunting, leading to a formal diplomatic protest by 25 nations. From 2006 to 2015, Hvalfur H/F killed 706 fin whales using quotas three times the number set by the IWC.

Economics



Hvalur whalers cut open a fin whale at the Hvalfjörður processing station in 2009. (Credit: Halldor Kolbeins, AFP/Getty Images)

Despite its determination to kill whales, the Icelandic whale hunt makes very little economic sense. Icelanders do not eat fin whale, so the entire catch must be sold to Japan, yet ports in Europe and Africa are refusing to allow ships carrying whale meat to dock. Appetites for whale meat in Japan are falling so much that they can't absorb their own whale catch, much less that of Iceland, and whale meat is piling up in warehouses or ending up in dog food.

Minke whale meat is sold in Iceland, but mostly to tourists, as only 3 percent of Icelanders eat it. Yet the number of tourists who try whale meat has fallen from 40 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2014. Meanwhile, the number of tourists who go whale watching has reached 300,000 per year, equal to the entire population of Iceland, bringing in annual revenues of \$15 million.

In 2016, Hvalfur H/F announced it would not hunt fin whales at all this year. Besides problems with being turned away by foreign ports, Loftsson said Japan's insistence on testing the meat for toxins hindered sales. "If we knew what kind of trouble was brewing in Japan when we commenced whaling in 2009, after a 20-year pause, we would have never started again," he said.

It is unclear whether fin whaling will start again next year, or what will happen to Iceland's minke whale hunt. But clearly international pressure to end whaling has had an effect, whether through seafood boycotts, protests at ports of call, or simply less demand for whale meat.

Reykjavik City Council recently passed a cross-party resolution calling on the minister of fisheries to create a sanctuary for whales in Faxafloi Bay, the large bay off western Iceland that encompasses Hvalfjörður. Perhaps someday Hvalfjörður will be known again as a great refuge for whales rather than as the center of the industry responsible for their deaths.

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