



NORTHERN BITES

Blanketed in snow, geothermal Iceland is a land of extremes, where the local instinct for survival has paved the way for culinary creativity

Words **Claire Nelson** Photography **Adrienne Pitts**

It's the last place you'd expect to find a kitchen garden. The incredible lava fields of Iceland's glacial Snaefellsnes peninsula look so uninhabitable that Hotel Budir, alongside its eerily striking black chapel, casts a lonely blip on the horizon. But even now, in the middle of winter, there's plenty of hardy, lovingly tended produce ready to feed hungry guests. Hotel manager Jóhannes Arason points out thyme, vegetables and patches where, in summer, they pick blueberries. "As you can see, we're trying to grow as many of our own foods as we can. Which is," he admits, the wind whipping at the hood of his arctic jacket, "quite hard in these conditions."

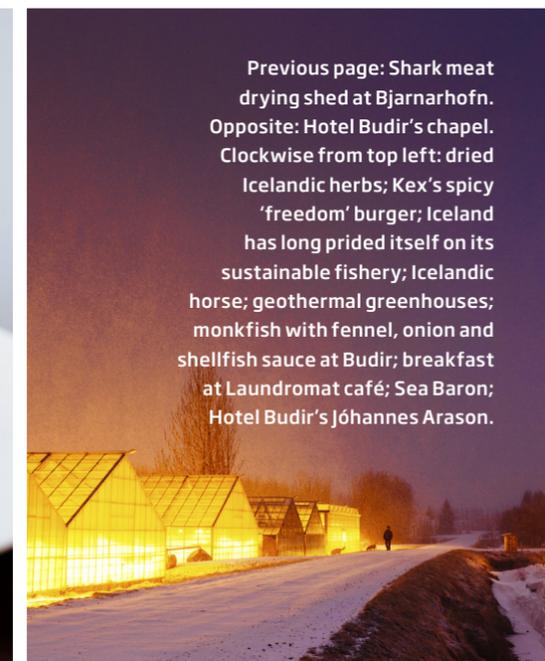
Hotel Budir is a perfect example of the fact that even in a country so extreme, there is opportunity. It's about being creative with whatever is available. "We always try to think, what can we do that's a little bit different?" Jóhannes explains. "What can we take and make our own?"

Inside the homely warmth of the hotel's restaurant, the

menu is a testament to just what they can do, from slivers of cured lamb that melt on the tongue to soft, smoked trout and barley "from the farm just over there", homemade pickled red onion, and a seafood bouillabaisse that's perfect for warming the cockles after a day trudging in the snow. Topped off with a blueberry mojito, it's an extraordinary sampler of the surroundings.

With such a challenging climate, and a population of just 327,000, Iceland has always depended on whatever it can sustain, which tends to be the hardest fare: fish and lamb, potatoes and carrots, and cream and butter from the dairy cows that - along with the short native horses that pepper the countryside - are a breed unique to the country. "Basically, the things that have kept us alive for centuries," says Jóhannes. "You have to realise that it was survival of the fittest."

Driving through the vast snow-capped west country or being battered by winds along the wild black beaches of southern Iceland, one wonders how much can grow here at all.



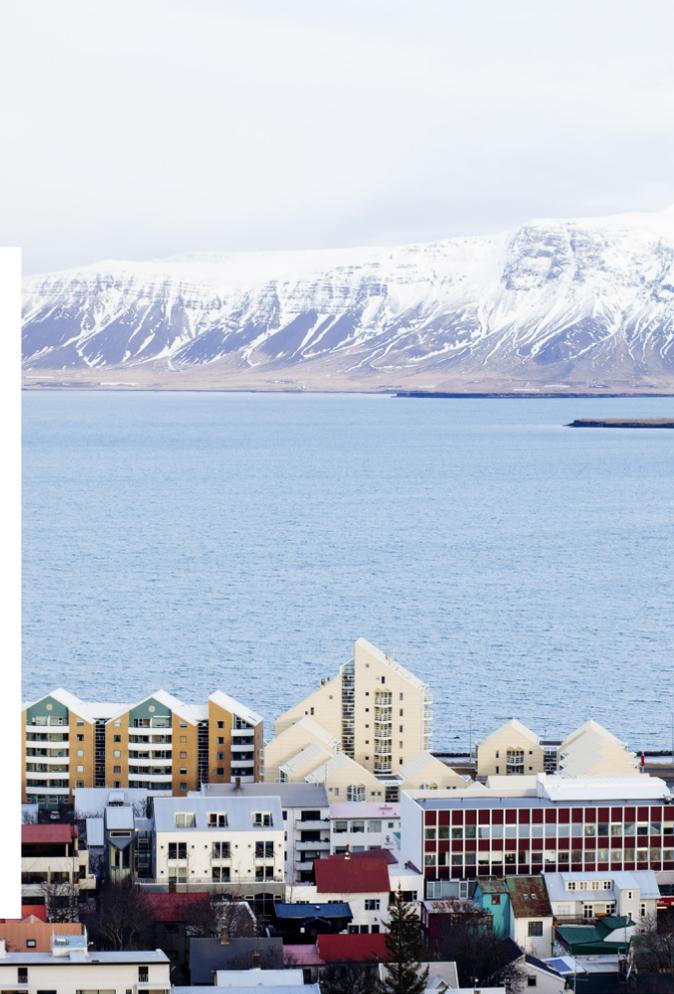
Previous page: Shark meat drying shed at Bjarnarhofn. Opposite: Hotel Budir's chapel. Clockwise from top left: dried Icelandic herbs; Kex's spicy 'freedom' burger; Iceland has long prided itself on its sustainable fishery; Icelandic horse; geothermal greenhouses; monkfish with fennel, onion and shellfish sauce at Budir; breakfast at Laundromat café; Sea Baron; Hotel Budir's Jóhannes Arason.



Sheep farmers Brynjar Hildibrandsson and Herborg Sigurðardóttir. Opposite page, clockwise from top: the view from Reykjavik's Hallgrímskirkja church; a record player and vinyl at Reykjavik Roasters; Árni Theódór Long of Ölvisholt Brugghús; shellfish haul with Seatours in Stykkisholmur; Café Babalú is hard to miss; Helena Hermundardóttir holds her lovingly grown tomatoes.

hipster-cool, pint-sized capital, alongside the many brightly coloured coffee shops and sleek modern bistros, signs encourage tourists to sample puffin burgers and whale steaks. But this is novelty food, the market for which is almost entirely fuelled by the appetites of curious visitors. Puffins were eaten when they were one of the few foods available, and although fishermen have always caught the odd whale for eating, commercial whaling didn't even take off until last century - even then, with a whole lot of battles over moratoriums and regulations. Icelanders will tell you they don't really eat these foods

anymore, except perhaps during Þorramatur, in February, a period when households are encouraged to eat the foods of their forefathers - think boiled sheep's head, cured whale and the notorious hákarl (fermented shark) - harking back to the days when people would eat what they could find, and make it last as long as they could. Much of this was fish and lamb, and that's still the case now. While fish makes up some 40 per cent of the country's export produce, sheep farming has supported local livelihoods for centuries. Herborg Sigurðardóttir, a local sheep farmer, tells me how Icelanders send their flocks out



But it's this survival instinct that has shaped a culture of creativity - Icelanders naturally think outside the box because they have always had to adapt. An impressive example of this is the country's growing collection of hydroponic greenhouses. The largest is Fridheimar, near Selfoss in the south, run by husband and wife team Knútur Rafn Ármann and Helena Hermundardóttir. The couple produce tomatoes and cucumbers all year round. There's an echo of Jóhannes' words when Helena explains: "More than ever people are saying, what do we have around us? What can we make of it? It's the idea that you are supporting your own system, the Icelandic chain." As the snow falls outside, the place glows with man-made sunshine. Helena and Knútur are making a living not just from Iceland's geothermal energy; they also benefit from the abundance of

pristine water. Anyone who has taken a dip in the hot, pastel-hued pools of Reykjavik's Blue Lagoon will appreciate this natural asset, but it's also the lifeblood of the country's produce. As Knútur explains, "If you think of a tomato, it's more than 90 per cent water, while a cucumber is 96 per cent. So it has to be good water you're giving to the plants. And we can water our plants with the same that we drink ourselves." It makes sense, then, that this world-class H2O is also a massive boon to the breweries that have begun to pop up around Iceland. Not far from Fridheimar, Ölvisholt Brugghús is making the most of not only the water but of the thriving craft beer scene. Since its inception six years ago, by a pair of farmers who fancied making a good home brew to kick back with at the end of the day, Ölvisholt now exports 50 per cent of its product to overseas

markets - not bad, considering they still operate out of the farm. Brewmaster Árni Theódór Long is excited about the change. "It's a small industry, but it's getting very competitive. For the consumers it's good as they're seeing more variety. But the scene here is still that young." The Icelandic climate is not conducive for producing hops, so they import them. It's the water - and special flavourings - that give the local brew its Icelandic characteristics. Árni holds up a bottle emblazoned with a snowy mountain. "This beer, Vatnajökull [named for the local glacier - the largest in Iceland], is made with glacial water, while the aroma mostly comes from a local herb called arctic thyme, which we pick just outside this door." This is probably not what most visitors expect when they come to eat and drink in Iceland. In Reykjavik, the country's



to graze in June, with the local community gathering to round them up again in September. By this point, the animals have spent months in the breathtaking mountainous Icelandic terrain and seasoned themselves with the natural salts and wild herbs, resulting in some of the tastiest free-range lamb in the world.

It's produce that is championed by chef Hrefna Sætran, founder of Reykjavik restaurant Grill Market. Her simple yet stylish menu showcases the best of locally farmed meats, from lamb to rib eye steak or tenderloin of horse. Its sister restaurant, Fish Market, celebrates the other side of the culinary coin with straight-off-the-boat seafood. Alongside the cod, salmon and the country's famed blue mussels are some of the freshest sushi dishes you'll taste outside of Japan. "We let the ingredients shine and spike it up with some twists," says Hrefna.

Appetites are certainly moving with the times, but it seems they won't stray far from the best home-grown ingredients. You can see it in the hearty lobster soup by the city's famous Sea Baron, Kjartan Halldórsson, a retired coastguard cook who now operates his business from a little slap-up wooden restaurant by the harbour. Or head just across the street and create a bespoke oven-cooked fish supper from the all-organic Icelandic Fish & Chips.

These days it's less about surviving – what Icelanders do best is thrive.

As Helena explains, back in her incredible greenhouse: "We have a saying in Iceland... that you see things differently through a guest's eyes. When you have a lot of visitors – and I am talking about Iceland in general – you start to realise that we have something special. And then we see it for ourselves as well."



Iceland's lamb is some of the best in the world. Clockwise from top left: Hotel Budir's seafood bouillabaisse; inside Reykjavik's Harpa Concert Hall; Gunnar Garðarsson of Narfeyrarstofa restaurant; Iceland's blue mussels are famously good; Hrefna Sætran, chef and owner of Grill Market and Fish Market.



Guide

EAT

Bergsson Templararsund 3, 101 Reykjavik; +354 571 1822; bergsson.is. Popular spot for a healthy breakfast or lunch – pick from freshly made soups, or salads made up at the counter. The chia seed porridge is a big hit with the city's morning crowd.

Fish Market Aðalstræti 12, 101 Reykjavik; +354 578 8877; fiskmarkadurinn.is. Hrefna Sætran's sleek, modern seafood restaurant. Expect warm service and some of the best sushi this side of Japan.

Grill Market Laekjargata 2A, 101 Reykjavik; +354 571 7777; grillmarkadurinn.is. The sister restaurant to Fishmarket offers a plush interior and fantastic meat dishes. Definitely try the lamb, but even the bread with lava salt butter is memorable.

Hotel Borg Posthusstraeti 11, 101 Reykjavik; +354 551 1440; hotelborg.is. Art deco hotel with an elegant restaurant serving Icelandic fusion food.

Hotel Budir IS-365 Snaefellsnes; +354 435 6700; hotelbudir.is. One of the highlights of this wildly located hotel (see Stay), the restaurant's sensational menu celebrates seasonal local produce, presented with flair.

Icelandic Fish & Chips Tryggvagata 11, Reykjavik; +354 511 1118; fishandchips.is. Choose your fish, sides and 'skyrónnes' – dips made from skyr (Iceland's yoghurt-like dairy product). Everything is organic, baked rather than fried and,

wherever possible, made using locally sourced produce.

Laundromat Café Austurstræti 9, 101 Reykjavík; +354 587 7555; thelaundromatcafe.com. Great modern diner-style food with a few Icelandic flavours - think rye bread and chocolate butter. It owes its name to the functioning launderette downstairs.

Narfeyrarstofa Aðalgata 3, 340 Stykkishólmur; +354 438 1119; narfeyrarstofa.is. Beloved local dining spot run by chef Gunnar Garðarsson. Don't miss the klofningur if it's on the menu - a sampler of the country's freshest seafood, including the famous blue mussels.

Nora Magasin Pósthússtræti 9, 101 Reykjavík; +354 578 2010; facebook.com/noramagasin. By the same owner as Hotel Borg next door, this bistro serves French/Japanese fusion food.

Sea Baron Geirsgata 8, Reykjavík old harbour; +354 553 1500; saegreifinn.is. Chances are, you've already been recommended this place. Buy fresh seafood to take away and cook at home, or pull up a pew and dine in on the best lobster soup you'll ever eat.

DRINK

Café Babalú Skólavörðustigur 22a, 101 Reykjavík; +354 555 8845; babalu.is. A cute café to escape the cold with a cuppa tea or hot chocolate and a good wedge of homemade cake.

Reykjavik Roasters Kárástigur 1, 101 Reykjavík; +354 517 5535; reykjavikroasters.ie. Come for the Scandi-cool, San Fran vibe; stay for the award-winning, home-roasted coffee.

Slipp Bar Myrargata 2, 101 Reykjavík; +354 444 4000; icelandairhotels.com. This hotel cocktail bar has a great drinks menu, often based around a theme. No mojitos here - head barman Ásgeir Már Björnsson encourages drinkers to get outside their comfort zone and try something new.

STAY

Hotel Budir IS-365 Snaefellsnes; +354 435 6700; hotelbudir.is. Charming rooms with views of the Snaefellsjokull glacier. Optional wake-up service gets you a knock on your door should the northern lights make an appearance during the night.



Hotel Egilsen Aðalgata 2, 340 Stykkishólmur; +354 554 7700; egilsen.is. Cute boutique hotel with impeccable attention to detail, from the seriously comfortable Coco-Mat beds to owner Gréta Sigurðardóttir's famous organic homemade breakfasts.

Hotel Framnes Nesvegi 6, 350 Grundarfjörður; +354 438 6893; hotelframnes.is. Waterfront hotel and restaurant, originally built as a fisherman's hostel. Managed by friendly staff and passionate chef Gisli Ólafsson, who also runs whale- and bird-watching tours from just across the street (lakitours.com).

Icelandair Hotel Reykjavík Marina Myrargata 2, 101 Reykjavík; +354 444 4000; icelandairhotels.com. Not your standard airline hotel, this is colourful, comfortable waterfront accommodation. The Slipp Bar cocktail bar is worth visiting even if you're staying elsewhere (see Drink). **Kex** Skúlagata 28, 101 Reykjavík; +354 561 6060; kexhostel.is.

Popular hostel with a hipster/boho vibe that sits well with travellers of all ages. The bar and restaurant enjoys a brilliant view, with great food that belies its hostel status.

SEE & DO

Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum Bjarnarhöfn, 340 Stykkishólmur; +354 438 1581; bjarnarhofn.is. Hildibrandur Bjarnason's museum

Left to right, from top row: Glacial brew from Ölvisholt Brugghús; the restaurant at Kex; native puffin; Reykjavik street art; the Laundromat Café lives up to its name; grabbing a bite at Bergsson; soak in the Blue Lagoon's natural spring; the scenic roads of west Iceland; barman Ásgeir Már Björnsson conjures up one of his speciality cocktails; inside Grill Market restaurant; a healthy salad lunch at Bergsson.



Illustration Jon McNaught

is a loving homage to his family's fishing origins. He is also the leading producer of the traditional delicacy hákarl (fermented shark meat), which hangs in his drying shed.

Blue Lagoon 240 Grindavík; +354 420 8800; bluelagoon.com. Luxuriate in the turquoise waters of this thermal spring, with a swim-up bar and separate restaurant. Private lounges and changing rooms are available if you're feeling flush.

Fridheimar Bláskógabyggð, IS-801 Selfoss; +354 897 1915; fridheimar.is. Knútur Rafn Ármann and Helena Hermundardóttir's incredible

geothermal greenhouse - their visitor's centre serves up simple lunches, such as homemade tomato soup. Knútur also runs regular shows with his trained Icelandic horses.

Hallgrímskirkja Church Hallgrímstorg 1, 101 Reykjavík; hallgrimskirkja.is. The unique design takes inspiration from the shapes formed by lava in rock. A nominal fee will give you access to the top of the 73-metre-high tower for 360-degree views over Reykjavík.

Harpa Concert Hall +354 528 5000; Austurbakki 2, 101 Reykjavík; harpa.is. A beautiful, award-winning

cultural venue which opened on the waterfront in 2011. Take a guided tour or just pop in for a coffee and some peace and quiet.

Seatours Smidjustigur 3, 340 Stykkisholmur; seatours.is. Watch puffins and other seabirds in the wild, and devour scallops and sea urchins straight out of the ocean.

GETTING THERE
WOW air currently flies 10 times per week from London Gatwick to Reykjavík, from just £49 one way, including taxes. Visit wowair.co.uk or call 0118 321 8384. ●