

ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



ENJOY THE COSTA BRAVA'S HIDDEN GEMS



STUNNING: A black sand beach in Dyrhólaey

Eugene Costello goes off the beaten track as he cruises through Iceland in a super jeep...

TEN years ago, you were lucky to get one run out to Keflavík (the airport 53km from Iceland's capital, Reykjavik) per week - but this has all changed, thanks to the rise in tourism. The past decade has seen the number of foreign visitors exceed the million mark (against a population of 300,000 or so), and it now accounts for almost 15% of all jobs. More than one person I spoke to on this volcanic rock suggested the Republic as a good model for the growth of tourism in Iceland.

At the time of the economic crash, when Iceland's banks tanked, the joke was that the difference between Iceland and Ireland was one consonant and six months. The sort of responsible and sustainable tourism seen back home is viewed by many Icelanders as a model they wish to follow.

Jón Halldórsson - known as Jón Skoda, thanks to his executive imported limo - has great reason to be thankful for the miracle that is Icelandic tourism. "You're my 10th customer today," he says as he chauffeurs us to Hotel Rangá.

Often cited as Iceland's leading "experience" hotel (think hot tubs, weddings and honeymoons), hotel Rangá is a 90-minute drive from

the airport across highlands, lakes and heathland with sea views.

It's a big old ranch of a place that would seem as at home in Alaska as here, and amiably eccentric, with a huge stuffed polar bear snarling away by reception. The word "hygge" has been bandied about and abused by magazines and newspapers in the past year, but this is its embodiment.

Coming in from a bitter Arctic wind that carried ice and snow with it, I suddenly understood "hygge". Warmth, fire, the smell of great food, and down-to-earth staff.

Our room was superbly comfy, with throws and blankets, and an en-suite with a huge corner Jacuzzi-style bath. Sadly, I was sharing with the photographer, so it saw no action...

What did see action, though, was the dining room. Under head →



ROAD TRIP: Eugene (centre) with guides Addi and Mummi

A wheel adventure

OFF-ROAD: Tour the volcanic outcrop in a super jeep



chef Karl Jóhann Unnarsson, Rangá offers gourmet-style fine dining that celebrates its Icelandic roots.

For starters, we tried the smoked puffin with beetroot gel and cream cheese. It was really good and tasted like smoked eel or biltong. We also sampled the reindeer carpaccio (not dissimilar to rare, thin beef), served with capers, parmesan and rocket – it was delicious.

Mains were, if anything, better. I went for rare pan-fried lamb fillet, served with green pea foam, glazed carrots, potato foam and brown cheese sauce. It was as good as anything I have eaten in Dublin, London or most of the world, for that matter. All beautifully paired with a bottle of Pauillac 2011, a lovely Bordeaux.

Hotel Rangá achieves the balance between homely and luxe perfectly, and while dining prices can be high, sometimes special offers are available. Staying here will cost no more than a break to a fancy hotel in, say, Wicklow, and you get the Northern Lights thrown in free of charge.

The next day, we were picked up by a super jeep, courtesy of Midgard Adventure. The company is run by the energetic tour guide Björg Árnadóttir – she claims to be 50 but looks 10 years younger, sprite-like with blonde hair and an easy smile.

I mentioned earlier how Iceland is

being overrun by tourists – the good news is that most rarely venture beyond Reykjavik, the capital, on the west coast. If they ever do travel further afield, it's to visit the geysers, thermal pools and waterfalls that are in what is known as The Golden Circle, the area immediately east of the capital. Because of this, tour operators can ferry everyone around for a half-day excursion and dump them back to the hotel afterwards. If your idea of fun is queuing in a jam-packed coach car parks alongside Chinese, Japanese and American tourists, and racing from one sight to another to take the obligatory selfie, then you're in luck.

Björg, however, is passionate about showing undiscovered Iceland to the world. She is, rightly, proud of the astonishing range of scenery in this volcanic outcrop and is on a mission to show it to visitors. Her two sons, Addi and Mummi, are both in the business and for the next two days they took it in turns to ferry us through rivers, across lunar black beaches and up rough tracks into the glacier.

Mummi even took us caving in the Highlands, where we saw stunning views of moss-blanketed lava fields. After tucking into a packed lunch in a mountain cabin, we had time for some fat-biking. The specialist bikes have no suspension, but enormous tyres that are inflated or deflated to just the right point to allow you to bounce



IN THE SADDLE: Explore the country on horseback

around the plateaus before freewheeling 20kms or so back down the mountain track. It's as exciting as when you first learned to ride, and you won't be able to avoid letting out childlike whoops of joy. It's pure adventure and, above all, fun.

You won't be able to avoid letting out whoops of joy. It's pure adventure and, above all...fun

It's fair to say Björg is a woman on a mission. As well as being messianic about showing the "real" Iceland to visitors, she is the ultimate pragmatist. Last year, she decided that hotel rates, with a strong króna, were high, which meant that the type of tourist she wants to see more of were possibly discouraged.

So the answer was simple. She built her own hotel. Well, it's a cross between a hotel and a hostel, with a mix of four-

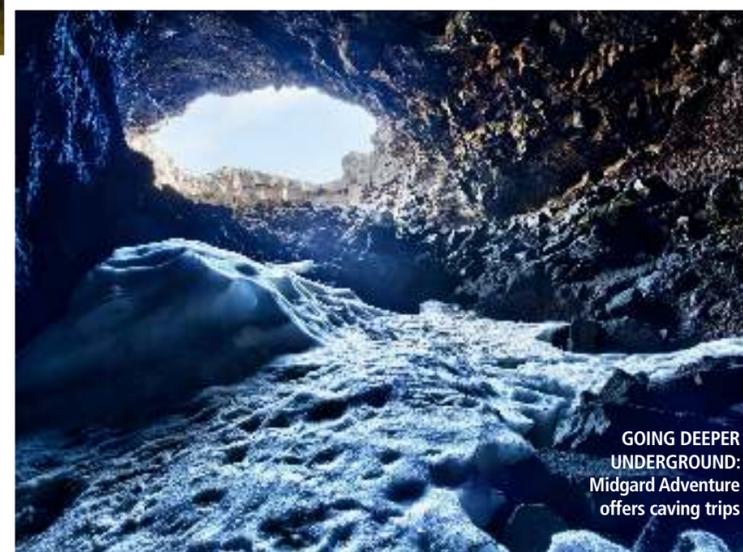
people rooms, six-people rooms and a couple of private rooms.

With prices starting at €70 for bed and breakfast, the cost of Björg's accommodation is within reach of most people. The hotel will also have a communal dining room with a selection of warm, hearty dishes that make the most of locally-sourced meat, fish and vegetables.

She has also just invested in a 10-seater Ford Econoline, which is perfect for taking larger groups on the adventure of their lives. And with Icelandic low-cost airline WOW Air flying direct from Ireland from €70 euros each-way, there's never been a better time to visit.

Travel journalism means seeing lots of the world, and often sights that are out of the ordinary. But the two days that I spent being ferried around through impossible terrain by Midgard Adventure is among the best experiences of my life.

Trips with Midgard Adventure are tailored to guests, and there is a wide range of activities available, from hiking, caving, superjeeping (my favourite, especially when the vehicle plunges into roaring rivers), horse riding and fat-biking. Speak to Midgard Adventure and let them know what you want to see and do. Just don't mention the Golden Circle – it's guaranteed to make Björg bristle! +



GOING DEEPER UNDERGROUND: Midgard Adventure offers caving trips

FACT FILE:

● WOW Air flies direct from Dublin and Cork to Reykjavik from €70 each way. For details, see www.wowair.ie

● Hotel Rangá has a range of offers available. From September to April, the Aurora package to see the Northern Lights costs €964 for two people staying four nights on a B&B basis. Visit www.hotelranga.is for info.

● Midgard Adventure will work with you and to your budget. Prices range from €160-€350 per day, though if you book as a group, the cost is reduced considerably. For more information, visit www.midgard.is

● And finally, if you want the best driver on the island without paying any more than a normal taxi fare, Jón Skoda is a cross between a tour guide and a chauffeur. For bookings, contact Jón via email at jon5650@simnet.is



This week's top late deals

Celebrate Canada

There is no better time to visit Canada – 2017 marks Canada's 150th anniversary and there will be plenty of special celebrations taking place across the country to mark its history. On top of that, you can take in the majesty of the Rocky Mountains and geographical gems such as Niagara Falls.

Insight Vacations has an eight-day all-inclusive tour on July 1, with prices starting at €2,379 pps.

During this tour, you will take in panoramic views from the CN Tower in Toronto, visit the Niagara Falls and meet a retired Mountie. You'll also visit some of Quebec and Montreal's most iconic sites, and stay in some of the country's most elegant hotels including Château Frontenac in Quebec, the Hotel Bonaventure Montréal and The Omni King Edward in Toronto.

Visit insightvacations.com, your local travel agent or phone 01-7753838.



Are you on track for fun?

Alton Towers theme park in Staffordshire, England, is reopening on March 25 and Irish Ferries has a family-friendly deal valid until May 20.

Two adults and two children under 10 can enjoy a three-night B&B stay at the nearby Holiday Inn Express for €439. The cost includes a return car ferry crossing and one full day at the theme park for all the family.

For more information or to book tickets, phone 0818 300 400 or visit www.irishferries.com/alton

Enjoy this Turkish delight

Kusadasi is beach resort town on Turkey's western Aegean coast boasting modern holiday resort facilities.

The Golden Day Wings Hotel is firmly established as a favourite with Irish holidaymakers.

The hotel offers exhilarating views of the coastline and harbour. It's just a short stroll from the marina and town centre, making it the ideal location for families and couples.

On April 29, Sunway is offering a week's B&B stay for €259pp, or a two-week stay for €299. See sunway.ie

Embark on an African adventure

Classic Resorts have an eight-night adventure in South Africa in May or June from €1,879 pps. The package includes four-nights B&B in Cape Town at the 4* Park Inn by Radisson, followed by one night at the Knysna Log

Inn, also B&B, plus a three-night, full board stay at the 4* Kariega Game Reserve with two game drives.

The price also includes flights from Dublin and car hire for four days.

For more information, call Classic Resorts on 0818 332 515 or contact your travel agent.



A trip through history

March 20 marks the start of Shakespeare Week – and fans of the Bard have a choice of two historic trips from Super Breaks.

From €807.40 per family, you can enjoy a two-night stay at the Best Western Grosvenor Hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon, with return flights to Birmingham on March 20.

Alternatively, for €712.40 per family, you can enjoy a two-night stay at the Royal National Hotel, including Shakespeare's Globe Tour and exhibition tickets, plus return flights to Stansted on March 20.

For more details, see superbreaks.ie or phone 01 695 0000.

Have a magical holiday

Attraction Tickets Direct has extended its amazing offer on tickets to Walt Disney World.

With the offer, families can save up to €950, with:

- €100 off per person
- 14 days for the price of 7
- Free Disney Memory Maker (one per family)
- Free Cirque du Soleil tickets (one per person)

This offer can be booked until March 20, 2017. Tickets are valid for use until December 2017.

To book, call free on 1800 927 467 or visit their website at www.attractionticketsdirect.ie