

# Travel

## Iceland Heats Up as Tourist Hot Spot

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*Special to the Jewish Exponent*

Iceland is a "baby" continent ... only 60 million years old. But, believe it or not, 60 million is young in the grand scheme of time when land masses came into existence.

Consequently, like many "kids," Iceland hasn't completely settled down yet. There are all manners of physical phenomena at work: earthquakes, volcanoes, new ravines splitting the ground, a magnificent waterfall, geothermal springs and geysers spewing into the air.

The terrain is black, consisting mostly of volcanic rock, making for startling, rather strange, vistas approaching the country via airplane.

But the capitol city of Reykjavik is not strange at all. Instead, it is an engaging, architecturally interesting community with a wide variety of colorful buildings in its center. The Allthing, or Parliament building — located on the edge of an open plain right in the middle of the "old town" — while handsome, is not colorful, since it is constructed of local, dark stone.

The Icelandic Parliament, on the other hand, is fascinating in and of itself, since it is the longest continuously functioning body of its type in the world (although not in its current quarters).

The history of the country is intriguing, beginning with the Vikings having settled there in

ancient times and who began recording history from day one on carved stone, wood or on parchment. The Viking religion, with its Norse mythology, is still very much in evidence in Iceland, with its reliance on sagas that contribute both to the literature and the lore.

### A Jewish presence

There is, oddly enough, a single instance of a Jewish presence in Reykjavik — a large, attractive white building with a prominent

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Star of David carved into the area over the front door. It is known by most people as "the Jewish House," since it has been the property of three generations of Jewish men who resided in the city.

The most recent Jewish citizen died last year, leaving express instructions in his will about the kind of business that would be permitted on the main floor of the building in order to maintain its continuity of identification. In fact, while there is a restaurant on the upper level, a fine men's clothing store is being readied for the ground-floor space, as stipulated

by its former owner.

Across the street from the "Jewish House" is a quirky antique shop with all manner of merchandise, much of it of interest to Icelandic history buffs. Not that there are Viking helmets, but nearly everything else is laid out in the disarray.

There are opportunities galore for people who want to take advantage of the city shopping for Icelandic sweaters in their classic designs or for the exceptional artwork that is produced on the island. Probably the most outstanding place to be assured of the chance to view a fine body of Icelandic art is at the Hotel Holt, home to the country's largest private collection.

Among the outstanding places to visit are the Gullfoss waterfall, or rather, *waterfalls*. This Gullfoss is a series of magnificent falls extending over a broad spectrum of the land. En route to Gullfoss, most tours will stop at an area where the concentration of geothermal heat has spawned an entire greenhouse industry.

If there is one natural phenomenon that leaves a lasting impression on most visitors, it has to be the Blue Lagoon, where most people enjoy a swim, or at least a dip, in the tepid mineral springs (with their touted healing properties).

And that, in a nutshell, begins to describe the assets of Iceland. **JE**