Iceland: Climate Change and the Arctic

Country Overview & Packing Guidelines

Spring 2027

Country Overview

GENERAL INFORMATION

Iceland was settled by Vikings in the late ninth century. Various Scandinavian countries ruled Iceland at different times, most recently Denmark. When Germany invaded Denmark during World War II, Icelanders took the opportunity to declare their independence.

Iceland was essentially a subsistence economy from settlement until World War II. Over the centuries since settlement, Icelanders endured many unfavorable climate changes and natural disasters (e.g. volcanic eruptions), exacerbated by deforestation and soil erosion. Starting in the mid-20th century, mechanization of the fishing fleet and increasing world demand for fish brought new prosperity to the small population. In the last 60 years, Iceland has steadily built up its economy, infrastructure, educational system, and social services, and today it has one of the highest quality of life standards in the world. Although tourism recently passed fishing as the largest contributor to GDP, fish are still the most important export. Other industries are growing, notably aluminum smelted with inexpensive and renewable electricity. The population is still small, with around 383,000 inhabitants, about two-thirds of which is concentrated in the capital area.

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Reykjavík is the northernmost national capital in the world, and Iceland has more land covered by glaciers than in all of continental Europe, yet Iceland enjoys a much milder climate than its name and location straddling the Arctic Circle would imply. A branch of the Gulf Stream flows along the southern and western coasts, greatly moderating the climate. This brings mild Atlantic air in contact with cold Arctic air, resulting in a climate that is marked by frequent changes in weather and storminess. There is also more rainfall in the southern and western part than in the northern part of the island.

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The weather in Iceland is constantly changing, so you can easily experience wind, snow, sleet, and sunny skies in a single day, and despite so much variability, Icelanders continue with their normal routines, taking their bikes out in freezing rain or holding recess outside when it's sleeting. If anything, Iceland's weather teaches you resiliency. Icelanders are also well equipped to handle the abundance of darkness during the winter months, making their homes, cafés, and restaurants as cozy and inviting as possible, and never forgetting their *lýsi*, a cod liver oil supplement that gives you the Vitamin D you need when the sun disappears. With a little patience on such long nights, you will be treated to the magnificent light show of the Northern Lights.



LOCAL CUSTOMS

Icelandic culture is somewhat similar to that of its Scandinavian neighbors: sophisticated and modern with a dark sense of humor and rarely a cold disposition. However, Iceland is notably eccentric due to its isolation, rugged environment, and small population. Icelanders, especially outside the capital, can be friendly towards visitors, though interactions tend to be more measured than more animated greetings in the United States. It is appropriate to greet strangers on the street with a nod or hello, and particularly with an Icelandic greeting such as "Góðan daginn" all day and "Gott kvöldið" in the evening. Iceland is a progressive nation and men and women are equally expected to participate in household activities including cooking, cleaning, and caretaking, so be active in your host home! As is typical of many Nordic nations, public pools and saunas are a large part of Icelandic culture, and it is common for Icelanders to go at the end of the day to share time and space together. Icelanders are very non-judgemental and very comfortable in their own skin, and students have noted how relaxing, empowering, and body positive the pool experiences have been.

Do:

- Greet people you meet.
- Take off your shoes when you go into someone's home.
- Always say thank you at the end of a meal. It is a customary gesture to the host(s).
- Socialize with your hosts and other acquaintances.

Don't:

- Talk or laugh very loudly, making a scene in the street. Be modest and aware of volume.
- Help yourself to food, coffee, or other seemingly "shared" items until you have been given permission or specifically invited. It is considered rude to take what is out but not yours.
- Wear shoes inside someone's home. It is a cultural faux pas.

LOCAL DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in the country. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.



For centuries Icelanders clung to life on a windswept rock in the North Atlantic, and even today access can be limited by isolation and weather, so traditional and current diets consist mostly of seafood, grazing animals such as lamb, dairy products, and potatoes and cabbage. With modern technology and transportation, access to vegetables and a greater variety of food is more common, but dietary options thus may be limited, particularly in rural areas. Coffee and sweet pastries are also very central to the Icelandic diet. Icelanders enjoy breakfast, lunch, and dinner at a similar time and importance as is common in North America. Vegetarians and vegans are uncommon in Icelandic culture (though becoming more common), so students with specific dietary preferences are advised that family meals or cultural meals may still center on traditional Icelandic foods including meat, fish, and dairy.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform the office of Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing prior to the start of your program (studenthealth@sit.edu). We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience.

SIT recommends you do research prior to departure about the health, safety, and security specifics of the country(ies) you plan to visit. Consult the U.S. Department of State website and search their Countries and Areas Archive for international travel information and current travel advisories for each country. Search the Center for Disease Control Traveler's Health page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country(ies) you plan to visit. It will be critical that you educate yourself about the potential health and safety hazards that may exist in your areas of travel and make informed decisions about what preventative measures to take prior to departure. You should also reference the Health, Access, and Identity information on your program's webpage.

While Iceland is a very safe country in many ways, some of the hazards are different than those found in other countries. Your in-country orientation will cover procedures to be followed in these circumstances, and Iceland is quite experienced in handling these so there is significant awareness and preparation of the national response teams. Here we highlight the few items that benefit from preparation/packing in advance:



- You will experience the strong seasonal shift between very long winter nights/long summer days. This can be disorienting and can make sleeping difficult. Be aware that sleep deprivation can impair judgment and increase risk of accidents, as well as being unpleasant. Eyeshades for sleeping may be helpful during the beginning of the fall semester and the end of the spring semester (most Northerners learn to sleep in the light and do not have heavy shades in their homes). A bright light source can be very helpful to wake up in the darker months (especially the end of the fall semester). Varying weather conditions combined with high latitude and strong winds in Iceland can lead quickly to hypothermia and risk from exposure, so appropriate clothing (warm layers and a rain jacket) is crucial as you pack. Prioritize excellent waterproof and warm clothing over fashion, layers are best.
- Although all basic healthcare services are available in Iceland, we suggest that you have a complete health checkup prior to leaving the US, including a dental checkup and any subsequent work. We strongly recommend bringing a full semester's supply of prescription medication(s), as it may not be possible to get your specific prescription filled in

Iceland and mailing from the United States is extremely slow and undependable, with packages often getting lost or coming so slowly the student has already left for the semester before it arrives. Therefore, students should bring an entire semester's worth of medication with them.

If you have any questions, please reach out to the Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team. Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, health and personal property insurance, and general program tips, please read the Safety, Security, and Health document and Student Handbook on your program's predeparture page.

HOUSING

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that in many countries the idea of what constitutes a "home" may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities and expectations. Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.** We seek to foster increased cross-cultural understanding in students by immersing them in local culture through daily life in a new family and community. Students are expected to assume roles as family members, respecting and following host family norms around communications, visitors, and activities of daily living. Each student will have their own room, so you will also have some space for yourself.

In this program, you will be staying in one homestay in Ísafjörður for about three weeks. While Ísafjörður is the "capital" of the Westfjords, its population is only about 3,000.

Homestay families will be scattered around the small town and nearby neighboring towns, and most places are within walking distance within the main town, so it's easy to get around. The University Centre, where classes will be held, is located downtown, close to a bakery, grocery store, and shops.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Other than your homestay, most accommodations will be hostels during the travel portions of the program. Rooms are in shared dormitories, with shared common facilities such as kitchen and bathroom. In non-homestay locations, the group will do its own food shopping and cooking, so come prepared to cook (or do dishes, if you are cooking-challenged!). Helping out with cooking is normally appreciated during the homestay as well. Students should expect to share a room with one or more students during travel portions of the program. During the ISP project portion of the program, students choose their own lodging to match their chosen project location using a housing stipend with the help of SIT staff. You will be able to do laundry during your homestay. It will also be possible to do laundry in some of the other places we travel around Iceland, though limited.



TRANSPORTATION

The group will be traveling with both public and privately hired buses, as well as potentially a ferry. At times you will be required to carry all of your luggage—generally, 20kg is a manageable amount. If you can't comfortably carry your luggage off the ground (on your back or in your arms) and walk for a distance over potentially icy and uneven ground, you are bringing too much.

COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

Visit our Contact & Communication page for practices on program communication, emergency communication, and home institution communication.

PHONES AND INTERNET

Cell Phone Policy

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls at all times (i.e., not a plan that you activate on a per-day basis only), including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from wi-fi. Failure to maintain a working phone capable of making and receiving calls/texts will be considered a conduct violation and a breach of our student code.

We strongly recommend getting an Icelandic SIM card and Icelandic phone number rather than solely extending a US phone plan internationally. While not required, an Icelandic phone number is helpful for access to in-country medical care and for getting a bank account for meal stipends. Former students have also found this improved their ability to access resources and to succeed in their ISPs as Icelanders are not likely to answer a call from a foreign phone number. SIM cards with both data and cell service can be bought online as eSIMs through Icelandic providers such as Siminn or Sýn, and this can be done during orientation after arrival. Note: Your phone must be unlocked in order to utilize an Icelandic SIM, so be sure to check with your carrier in advance of coming to Iceland.

Free Wi-Fi is widely available in Iceland at cafés, restaurants, and other public locations, though it is important to note that it may not always be a strong signal. Wi-Fi is also available in the Keflavik airpart and the hostel, so it is possible to use Wi-Fi on arrival and set up an Icelandic eSIM during orientation.

MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged. Mailing prescription medication abroad is illegal.



For this program, **DHL and FedEx services are available in country**. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability.

When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

Mail is very expensive, unpredictable, and slow. **You are strongly discouraged from having packages or letters sent to you in Iceland.**
If you must have letters or packages sent, they must arrive between a set date window, please email your admission counselor for the exact dates that mail should arrive for you in Iceland. If it is necessary for someone to send you mail, then posted letters and packages should be sent to the following address:
Student Name
C/O World Learning Iceland
Suðurgata 12
400 Ísafjörður
ICELAND

MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only, based on the cost of living at the program base. **Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP are the students' responsibility**. Please plan accordingly.
The Icelandic currency is the Icelandic krona (króna), abbreviated ISK. While most things are available in Iceland, prices tend to be high: expect to pay at least twice the US price for most items. For instance, restaurant food, electronics, and accommodations are particularly expensive. Note: this program may utilize a local bank account for students to have a local debit card for stipends throughout the program. Check current exchange rates: http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad.
It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, ISP/Internship-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages**.

A suggested total amount of personal spending money to budget ranges from **US$1000 to $2500**. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including optional travel costs or a specific personal expense.

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending: (from past student suggestions)	$500-2,000
Books or supplies:	$100
Up-front medical costs: *(you will get reimbursed for medical costs)*	*$500-1,500*
Cell phone costs:	$100-200
Estimated total:	$1,000-3,800

In addition to personal spending, it is recommended that students have access to additional funds in case of a medical emergency (to be reimbursed later). Up-front medical costs can vary widely, but generally fall between **$500-1,500,**. Though you are completely covered by SIT's travel insurance BlueCross BlueShield, which you can read more about on our Participant Insurance page, in Iceland you will need to pay up-front for medical care and then file for reimbursement.

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation Policy.

If a visitor does come while a program is in progress, they must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Please read our full Independent Travel policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Please note that independent travel is only allowed during program free time and students will not be excused from program activities to travel. SIT is not responsible for any costs of student independent travel including logistics, preparations, cancelation fees, change fees, and any other costs associated with independent travel. We highly recommend you wait to book any independent travel until AFTER arriving on program and receiving the final academic schedule from your program. Given the remote nature of Iceland, frequent weather cancellations in country, and full schedule, it is generally not possible for students to travel out of the country during the semester, though many choose to travel immediately after the end of the program.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist.

CODE OF CONDUCT AND POLICIES

SIT maintains a Code of Conduct and clear institutional policies regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. Visit the policy page for detailed policies around academic integrity, alcohol and drug use, anti-harassment and non-discrimination, attendance and participation, credit hours, equal education opportunities, grading, housing, independent travel, prohibited activities, religious holiday observance, sexual harassment and misconduct, and withdrawal among others.

Packing Guidelines

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own in your arms or on your back (snow, ice, and gravel make traditional rolling bags not possible). Minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since this program travels frequently and space may be limited.
We recommend a small daypack as your carry-on (also useful for short excursions on the program) and a multiday backpack or travel duffel for your checked luggage. Do not bring a large hard suitcase with wheels. Students in the past have all given feedback that they wish they had brought less.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the "General Health Tips" section in the Safety, Security, and Health pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (http://www.tsa.gov) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

The weather may change quickly from mild and sunny to cold winds, rain, and snow. Plan to dress in layers—as it gets warmer or colder, you can simply eliminate or add layers. A waterproof outer layer over wool sweater or heavy fleece pullover and a light base layer is commonly worn by locals. We will be walking over varied terrain in a variety of settings, so be sure you have comfortable, waterproof footwear, as well as a rain jacket and rain paints. You will also need warm headgear, a scarf, and gloves. Do not bring an umbrella, as they are dangerous and ineffective in Icelandic winds. You will visit some of Iceland's geothermally heated pools, so bring a swimsuit that you are comfortable in and a small travel towel.

EQUIPMENT

Headlamps and good spikes for your shoes for walking on icy paths are a necessity for this program as required safety items.



COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is recommended that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft (SIT insurance does not cover personal property). We will be traveling a great deal on this program, and many of the program elements (readings, assignments, schedules, etc.) will be accessible only on our program web page; you will also be asked to submit most assignments electronically. Thus, **having a laptop computer is extremely important**, and internet connections are good almost everywhere in Iceland.

Do not have your laptop or other electronics mailed to you while in Iceland. You may be charged hundreds of dollars in customs duty, no matter how much you actually paid for them. Do not bring any electrical appliances without a voltage converter and a two-prong European plug adapter; the electricity voltage is 220 in Iceland.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/.

GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Gifts do not need to beexpensive, choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Most host families have children (or grandchildren), so it's a good idea to bring small toys or candy for them. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Most Icelanders love chocolate and candy or anything new to them, so something that is ordinary to you at home may be quite special here. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share. You will not meet your homestay family in Iceland until after your first excursion, so make sure any gifts you bring are easy to pack.

WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Bring a reasonable but not excessive supply of shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, tampons, etc. These items can easily be bought in Iceland, but are likely more expensive and the varieties you want may not be available. Prescriptions are difficult to obtain, so please bring what you will need and a copy of the written prescription from your doctor in case of loss.

Over-the-counter medicine is common and diverse, but may be different from what you are used to, and some medicine like anti-nausea or many cold/flu medications may not be available. Pack accordingly knowing there will be differences here.

ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: https://studyabroad.sit.edu/admissions-aid/application-process/contact-a-former-student/.

Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

Packing List

These packing guidelines are **based** on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

Packing List sample:

LUGGAGE

- Small daypack as your carry-on (used for short excursions on program)
- Large hiking backpack or travel duffel for your checked bag. [Do not bring a hard roller suitcase]

GENERAL

- 1 outfit appropriate for a dinner out, cultural events, or meeting with government officials
- Active wear (clothes/running shoes, as you like for the gym/running/etc)
- 2-3 pairs of pants
- 4-5 shirts
- 1-2 sweaters or fleeces (wool and synthetic materials are recommended)
- Underwear (1–2-week supply, doing laundry is expensive and sometimes not available)
- Thermal underwear/base layer (wool and synthetic materials are recommended)
- Socks (1–2-week supply, minimize cotton)
- Pajamas
- Raincoat/outer shell (go for quality, it will be worth it)
- Cold weather layering (down or synthetic jacket to go over fleece/sweater and under rainshell)
- Rain pants
- Warm hat, scarf/buff, and gloves/mittens
- Swimsuit and travel towel

- 1 pair comfortable shoes for walking around town
- 1 pair **waterproof** boots (Should be comfortable for hiking and use in snow and on rough ground)
- 1 pair nice shoes that you can wear with your nice outfit (can be same as everyday shoes)
- Shoe spikes or cleats for walking on icy streets. Some students have found having both nanospikes (for town) and microspikes (for hiking/more rugged days) helpful.
- Headlamp

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Copy of residence permit email (and visa, if applicable)
- Any relevant vaccine records/documents

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Toothpaste/tootbrush/floss
- Adequate supply of medication (birth control, vitamins, motion sickness pills, cold care, etc.)
- Extra supply of contacts and solution (Extra pair of glasses if needed)
- Shampoo/conditioner, soap, feminine products (Iceland may not have the products you use)

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Computer, notebooks, journal (at least one, you will complete a journal during ISP), writing supplies
- Credit or debit card
- Electricity converter and/or European two prong adapter
- Cellphone
- Water bottle/thermos for coffee/tea
- Sunglasses
- Earplugs
- Gift for host family

OPTIONAL

- Tupperware for lunches/leftovers (recommended by prior students to be on the required list)
- House shoes/slippers
- Shower shoes
- Camera
- Portable charger

- Art supplies, cards
- Gators (especially if your rain pants are on the shorter side)
- Some sending schools suggest students bring a small **battery-operated carbon monoxide detector** for general travel abroad.

NOTES

- There is a lot of walking with a range of difficulties (Comfortable, waterproof shoes are crucial)
- It can be wet, windy, and cold, so minimize cotton and prioritize wool or warm-when-wet materials.
- Frequent moves between locations, choose your luggage and packing style to be comfortable on the move and with limited space to store your luggage.
- Prior students often say they wish they packed less and that they used the same clothes over and over. They recommend: "**Pack LIGHT, pack LAYERS, REWEAR"**