

Reykjavík Audio Guide · 9 Points · v3

Each block is the script for a single audio file. Length ~1-1.5 min per point. Tone — friendly, neutral. Each block ends with navigation to the next stop.

CORE 6 points: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7

EXTRA 3 points: 6, 8, 9

Point 1 — Hallgrímskirkja + Leif Erikson

In front of you stands Hallgrímskirkja — the most recognizable church in Iceland. At 74 meters tall, it's the highest in the country.

The architect, Guðjón Samúelsson, drew inspiration from basalt columns — those hexagonal pillars you find all over Iceland's nature, around waterfalls and on the black beaches. The columns of the facade rise upward like organ pipes. And that's no accident — there's a real organ inside, with 5,275 pipes. Concerts happen here from time to time, the schedule is posted on the door.

Construction took 41 years, from 1945 to 1986. In that span, Iceland managed to gain independence, win three Cod Wars against Britain, and hold a referendum.

Out front stands a statue of Leif Erikson — the Iclander who reached North America 500 years before Columbus. The statue was a gift from the United States in 1930, marking the millennium of the Alþingi parliament. The subtext of the gift was roughly: "here's Leif, just so you remember who got there first."

What's worth doing here. Step inside — it's free. If you have 11 euros to spare, head up the tower. An elevator takes you most of the way, then a few stairs. From the top you see the whole city and harbor, and on a clear day even the Snæfellsjökull glacier 120 kilometers away.

Two more local-style spots near here. Reykjavík Roasters (Kárástígur 1, 2 minutes away) — the best coffee in town, a quiet, no-frills cafe, around 700 krónur. Sundhöllin Reykjavíkur (Barónsstígur 45a, 5 minutes away) — the city's outdoor thermal pool, cheap (1,300 krónur, 9 euros), the kind of place locals drop by before work, no tourists.

From here the route follows Skólavörðustígur, the street running northwest down from the church. You'll spot it instantly — the road is painted as a rainbow.

Point 2 — Skólavörðustígur (the rainbow street)

This is Skólavörðustígur — a name you can't really pronounce, but you don't have to. Locals just call it "the rainbow street."

The rainbow was painted in 2015 for Reykjavík Pride, the city's main LGBTQ celebration. It was meant to be temporary, just for the summer. But the city decided to keep it, and every August they touch up the paint so it doesn't fade.

A bit of context: Iceland was one of the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, back in 2010. The Prime Minister at the time was actually in a same-sex marriage herself. Here it's all treated as completely ordinary, no fuss.

If you turn around — the shot of the rainbow with Hallgrímskirkja in the background is probably the best photo in town, second only to Sun Voyager. It's the most recognizable vertical frame of Reykjavík.

About the street itself. You'll find workshops, small galleries, cafes, and wool shops. Prices run roughly 30 percent higher than on Laugavegur, the main tourist drag. If you're planning to buy souvenirs or clothing — better to wait and shop on Laugavegur.

Right on this street is Kaffi Mokka (Skólavörðustígur 3a). The oldest cafe in the city, open since 1958. The vintage interior has never been restored — sofas and tile from the original era, brass chandeliers, yellowed photographs. It's famous for waffles with whipped cream and jam. Half the local bohemia of the second half of the 20th century used to sit here.

Continue straight down along the rainbow paint. After 200 meters Skólavörðustígur runs into Bankastræti — the city's main intersection. Walk straight across, and the street is now called Laugavegur.

Notice for readers in the Russian Federation: the international public LGBT movement is recognised as extremist and banned in Russia (Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruling, 30 November 2023).

Point 3 — Laugavegur

Laugavegur is Reykjavík's main street. The name translates as "the road to the hot springs." This is literally where women used to walk to wash laundry in the natural warm waters. The springs are still around, but the street has long since turned commercial.

Here's what you'll find. 66°North — Iceland's flagship outdoor brand, expensive, premium. Their parkas and jackets are worn by travelers all over Scandinavia. IceWear is cheaper, with similar quality. Rammagerðin is the flagship souvenir shop, stocking everything from wool socks to silver jewelry with runes.

Lopapeysa — the traditional wool sweater with a circular yoke pattern. If you're thinking of buying one, keep in mind: this wool is intentionally not washed, the lanolin is left in, which makes it nearly waterproof. Prices: 12,000 to 15,000 krónur for kids, 18,000 to 25,000 for adults. That's roughly 80 to 180 euros.

Pro tip: tax-free refunds kick in on a single receipt of 6,000 krónur or more — about 35 to 40 euros back. Hold onto your receipts; the refund desk is at Keflavík airport.

Along the way you'll see cafes serving the local fish stew, plokkið — flaked fish simmered with cream and potato. A very Icelandic dish, perfect after a windy walk. If you're after good coffee — Reykjavík Roasters has one of its best locations in this area. Walk along Laugavegur for about 400 meters until you hit Hverfisgata. Turn left at that intersection and head down toward the waterfront — about five minutes later you'll see the glass building of Harpa straight ahead.

Point 4 — Harpa

Harpa is the concert hall built from glass hexagonal cells right at the water's edge. In Icelandic, "harpa" means "harp" — that's where the name comes from.

The architect is Olafur Eliasson, the same artist behind the waterfall at the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. He pulled the concept straight from Icelandic nature. Those hexagonal cells are basalt columns — the same basalt you see everywhere in this country: at Svartifoss, on the black beaches of Reynisfjara, on the facade of Hallgrímskirkja.

The building has a tough backstory. Construction began in 2007. In 2008 Iceland's banking system collapsed and the country came close to bankruptcy. Everyone was asking: shut the project down or finish it? They chose to finish it, completing in 2011 at 30 percent over budget. Today it's a symbol that the country pulled through.

Going inside is free. A massive lobby, staircases, a bar, concert halls higher up. The color of the glass shifts depending on how the light hits it. The shot of the harbor through the glass is a must.

If you can catch a concert — the Iceland Symphony Orchestra plays here. Tickets typically start around 3,000 krónur, about 20 euros.

From here, follow the waterfront to the right, heading east. About five minutes in, you'll spot the steel silhouette of a ship by the water — that's Sun Voyager.

Point 5 — Sun Voyager

Sun Voyager. In Icelandic, Sólfar. It's not a Viking ship — though almost every tourist assumes it is. The sculptor, Jón Gunnar Árnason, spent his life pushing back against that interpretation.

What he actually built was a "dream boat" sailing toward the sun. A metaphor for hope, undiscovered lands, forward motion. The sculpture was installed in 1990, marking Reykjavík's 200th anniversary. The artist didn't live to see it unveiled — he passed away the year before.

But tourists keep calling it the Viking ship. Because anything in Iceland that touches water sends people's minds straight to Vikings.

Look closely — the bow points west, toward the Atlantic and Greenland. In summer the sun rises in the northeast and sets in the northwest, and Sun Voyager catches the setting sun

right at its bow. In May, sunset is around 22:30. If you happen to be here at that hour — the golden light on the steel gives you the best shots of the day.

Photo trick: lie down on the ground or crouch low and shoot from below. That way the ship stands against the sky alone, no cars or people behind it.

From here the route turns southwest. From the waterfront, climb the small hill of Arnarhóll — it's right behind Harpa, five minutes on foot. From the top you'll see the statue holding a spear.

Point 6 — Arnarhóll + Ingólfur statue

Arnarhóll hill. At the top stands the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson, the first Norse settler of Iceland. According to legend, he sailed here in 874 AD and chose where to build his home by tossing his sacred wooden high-seat pillars into the sea.

The story is almost mystical: wherever the pillars wash ashore, that's where I'll settle. Three years later, they were found beached right around here. That's how Reykjavík got its name — "the smoky bay," named after the steam rising from the geothermal springs.

Ingólfur stands on his pedestal, facing the harbor, with shield and spear in hand. The sculpture is about 2.4 meters tall and was installed in 1924. The sculptor, Einar Jónsson, was the leading Icelandic artist of his time — his museum is just ten minutes from here.

The hill offers one of the best panoramas of the city center, taking in the harbor and Harpa. It's especially nice at sunset, when Harpa's facade lights up orange.

If you have time and curiosity — directly behind the hill stands Stjórnarráðshúsið, the government building. It's the smallest government headquarters in Europe, built in the 18th century as a prison. So Iceland's ministers literally hold meetings inside a former jail. Locals joke that it's the most honest piece of architecture in the world.

From here, head down the hill to the west toward Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur. From Arnarhóll you can already see a small red kiosk near the harbor — about a five-minute walk down Hverfisgata.

Point 7 — Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur

Final stop. Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur. Pronounced something like "byrins-bestu" — but the locals don't really care how tourists say it.

This is a hot dog stand that's been running since 1937. Iceland has lived through World War II, gained independence in 1944, fought four Cod Wars with Britain, weathered a banking crisis, watched Eyjafjallajökull erupt — and the stand has just kept on serving every single day.

The list of people who've eaten here: Bill Clinton, Kate Middleton, Anthony Bourdain, Till Lindemann from Rammstein. Clinton left an autograph — there's a framed photo and signature inside. He famously ordered "only mustard." That version was nicknamed the

"Clinton dog" for a long time. Plenty of tourists still copy his order — and end up with a stripped-down, much worse version.

The right order: "ein með öllu" — "one with everything." That means mustard, ketchup, remoulade (a kind of mayo with capers), crispy fried onions, and raw onions. All of it tucked into a bun on top of the classic milk-fed lamb sausage — the Icelandic standard.

Price — 750 krónur, about 5 euros. The line is usually 5 to 10 minutes, sometimes longer.

Pro tip: eat it fast. A lot of the magic of this hot dog is about temperature — hot sausage, cold onion, warm bun. Five minutes later it's just not the same.

If you want to keep going — head south toward Tjörnin, the city pond. Take Pósthússtræti down, about six minutes on foot. On the way you'll pass Alþingi, the parliament, and Dómkirkjan cathedral.

Point 8 — Tjörnin + Alþingi

Tjörnin is Reykjavík's main city pond. Right in the center, surrounded by colorful houses with bright roofs.

The pond is home to ducks, geese, and Arctic terns. If you spot a black-and-white bird with a red beak and a fierce stare in April or May — that's an Arctic tern. It just flew in from Antarctica. Seriously: this bird holds the world migration record, covering 70,000 to 90,000 kilometers a year between the two poles. If you wander too close to a nest, it might dive at your head — wear a hat.

In winter the pond partly freezes, but never fully — the city pipes in warm water from the geothermal grid to keep some of it open so the birds aren't left without space.

On the south shore stands Alþingi. It's one of the oldest parliaments in the world, founded in 930 AD at Þingvellir. Today it operates out of this modest 19th-century stone building. Compared with other parliaments, it's tiny. There's just enough room for 63 members.

Right next to it is Dómkirkjan, the oldest cathedral in Reykjavík — Lutheran, built in 1796. Modest and gray on the outside, but lovely inside. By Icelandic tradition, every new president takes the oath of office here.

At the western end of the pond is Reykjavík City Hall, the ráðhús. Inside, there's an enormous 3D map of Iceland, several meters across. Step in for free, take a look, and tick off the places you've already visited.

The final stop is Old Harbour. From City Hall, head west along Vonarstræti and continue straight to the water. About seven minutes on foot, passing the university and the national theater along the way.

Point 9 — Old Harbour

Old Harbour — Reykjavík's old port. Until pretty recently this was a strictly working harbor: fishing trawlers, warehouses, nothing touristy. About twenty years ago the area started

getting a fresh life, and now it's full of restaurants, museums, and the launch points for sea tours.

What sets out from here. Whale watching. Season runs April to October. The tour lasts 2 to 3 hours, prices are 11,000 to 13,000 krónur, and most operators give you a partial refund if you don't see whales. Realistically, 90 percent of trips deliver — humpbacks, minke whales, occasionally orcas. The top operators are Elding and Special Tours.

Puffin tours. Season is May through August, when they nest on the small island of Akurey just off the shore. About an hour to an hour and a half, around 7,000 krónur.

There are also Northern Lights cruises — but those are for winter, not now.

Real Icelandic fishing schooners are docked in the harbor — mostly cod and halibut boats. Sometimes you can watch them unloading the catch. The smell of fish, the seagulls, the Icelandic flags — full-on port-town atmosphere.

If you're hungry for fish — Sægreifinn (the Sea Baron) is right nearby, a legendary spot for langoustine soup at 1,700 krónur. You sit at communal tables, cafeteria-style, everything simple and seriously good. Plenty of travelers call it the best soup in Iceland.

If you're into history — between point 7 and the harbor sits the Settlement Exhibition (Aðalstræti 16). It's an underground museum built around the actual remains of a 9th-century Viking longhouse — the foundation was uncovered during construction. Inside there's an interactive reconstruction of Reykjavík in 871 AD, plus original artifacts. Tickets are about 2,200 krónur, 15 euros, and you'll need an hour.

The route ends here. From Old Harbour back to Sun Voyager is a five-minute walk east — you can return along the waterfront and close the loop. Or head straight to dinner: langoustine soup at Sægreifinn right here, or one of Reykjavík's 200-some cafes — plenty of options.