

Travel

GETAWAYS

SHORT-HAUL SUN

■ **CROATIA:** Holiday Options (0844 477 0452) offers seven nights' B&B at three-star hotel in seaside town of Makarska for £399, saving £230, ex-Gatwick Aug 1.

■ **MALTA:** Malta Direct (0845 365 3410) offers seven nights' B&B at five-star hotel in San Anton from July 20 from £335, saving £235.

■ **CYPRUS:** Holiday Jewels (0870 067 2352) offers seven nights' B&B at three-star hotel in Paphos, July 30.

Ex-Manchester £493, with transfers extra.

■ **IBIZA:** First Choice (0871 664 9011) offers 14 nights' self-catering at three-star apart-hotel in Es Cana from £584, saving £195, ex-Manchester Aug 1.

■ **MAJORCA:** Directline (020 8239 3399) offers seven nights' self-catering in Sa Coma on east coast for £386, ex-Gatwick Aug 7.

■ **MAJORCA:** lowcostholidays.com (0800 111 6271) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at three-star hotel in Palma Nova from £427, ex-east Mids July 22.

■ **COSTA BRAVA:** lowcostholidays.com (0800 111 6271) offers seven nights' all-inclusive from £1,029 (two adults and two children), ex-Liverpool July 23.

■ **TURKEY:** lowcostholidays.com (0800 111 6271) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star hotel in Marmaris from £1,479 (two adults and two children), ex-Gatwick July 29.

■ **PORTUGAL:** On the Beach (0870 606 0708) offers seven nights' self-catering at Vilamoura from £266, ex-Manchester July 22.

■ **HALKIDIKI:** On the Beach (0870 606 0708) offers seven nights' self-catering from £340, ex-East Mids July 27.

■ **COSTA BRAVA:** On the Beach (0870 606 0708) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at three-star HTOP Gran Casino Royal Hotel from £372, ex-Cardiff July 21.

■ **KOS:** Club 18-30 (0844 800

7038) offers seven nights' self-catering at two-star studios in Kardamana from £321 (three sharing), ex-Birmingham Sept 17.

■ **FUERTEVENTURA:** Direct (0871 664 7764) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star apartments in Corralejo from £575, ex-Manchester Aug 4.

LONG-HAUL

■ **RED SEA RIVIERA:** Jewel in the Crown (0870 067 2352) offers seven nights' half-board at five-star Crowne Plaza Resort in Sharm el Sheikh for £602, and £393 for 2-11s, ex-Gatwick Aug 2. From Aug 9, prices are £664 and £419 respectively, for package incl return flights, transfers.

■ **SENEGAL:** Senegal Experience (0845 338 8706) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star hotel from Aug 19 and 26 from £949, saving £202, with flights ex-Manchester (via Brussels) and transfers.

■ **DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:** First Choice (0871 664 9011) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at three-star Holiday Village Golden Sands from £719, saving £306, ex-Manchester July 21.

■ **SRI LANKA:** Thomson Worldwide (0871 664 0273) offers eight nights' B&B at five-star Taj Exotica, Bentota, from £699, saving £459, ex-Heathrow with Emirates Aug 12. Extensive facilities incl four restaurants, two bars, landscaped pool, fitness room, beauty parlour, floodlit tennis, shuttle services to lagoon nearby.

■ **WONDERS OF EUROPE:** Cosmos Tourama (0871 423 8636) offers 12-day escorted

tour ex-St Pancras International Aug 3 from £939, via Lucerne, Venice, Rome, Florence, Paris with 11 nights' B&B, some meals, tour director throughout.

■ **SPLENDOR OF WESTERN US:** Jetsave (0871 664 0293) offers nine-day tour from July 29 for £1,249, saving £251, via LA, Scottsdale, Grand Canyon and bright lights of Las Vegas. Package incl Virgin Atlantic flights ex-Heathrow, seven nights' hotel accom, tour director.

■ **TOMATOES IN VALENCIA:** Directline City Breaks (020 8239 3399) offers three nights' B&B ex-Gatwick Aug 24 from £364, to catch La Tomatina festival where 100 tons of tomatoes are flung in a pitched battle.

■ **HERITAGE OF AMERICA:** Collette Worldwide (800 804 8705) offers 11-day journey from Aug 14 from £1,749 (saving £180) via Philadelphia, Washington DC, Shenandoah Valley, Buchanan's Palatial Wheatlands. Package incl return flights, accom with 12 meals, door-to-door transfers within 100 miles of airport.

■ **WONDERS OF CHINA:** Wendy Wu (0844 499 3899) offers 16-day tour departing Sept 20 from £2,290 (saving £100), incl all flights, fuel surcharges, all meals, entrance fees, guides and daily tours. Visa fees for UK passport holders also included.

CRUISES

■ **ORLANDO STAY & CRUISE:** Travel City Direct (0871 226 5783) offers 14 nights ex-Gatwick Oct 13 from £799, with seven nights on Emerald Princess to Fort Lauderdale, Princess Cays, St Maarten, St Thomas and Grand Turk.

■ **NILE:** Archers Direct (0871 423 8638) offers eight-day tour of Ancient Egypt via Valley of Kings & Queens, Edfu, Aswan, Luxor, Karnak ex-Manchester from July 27 and Aug 3 and 10. Package from £655 incl flights into Luxor, seven nights' full-board, tour director.

Adventures

Mike Keegan finds out that when you've got 24 hours of sunlight there's more than enough time for all the activities on offer in Iceland

HAVE got to admit that when the good folks at Icelandair sent me their itinerary for this 'adventure' trip, I was a bit sceptical.

Horse riding through lava fields, white water rafting down a glacial river, ice climbing and quad biking all in the space of four days seemed a bit of a stretch.

And when you throw in a 25km hike across some of the country's toughest terrain, I didn't fancy our chances to be honest.

But this place is different. For a start, at this time of year it doesn't go dark so there's plenty of time to do what you want. Fancy golfing in volcanic surroundings at midnight? Easy. Just bring some matchsticks for your eyes.

In fact, as I type this on a rainy afternoon in Manchester, it's probably murkier now than it ever got over there.

But before I tell you how we did it, a bit about the place itself. Size-wise, Iceland is roughly similar to England and Wales combined, with about as many inhabitants as Bolton.

And I don't know if this is a knock-on effect of the open space or nightless midsummer days but Icelanders are a bit, erm, different.

Apparently, about 70 per cent of them believe in elves and trolls. Some even go as far as painting doors on rocks so they can go in and shelter.

And at the risk of sounding like Timmy Mallett those we met were a little 'wacky'.

Not weird, just super confident (they're very good looking) and a bit exhibitionist.

On hearing my dulcet Lancastrian tones in one Reykjavik bar a little Bjork-a-like ran round almost in tears of laughter, trying to repeat what she had heard to her equally amused friends.

And thanks to the economic crash, it's nowhere near as

pensive as it once was. While the locals bemoan Britain's use of terrorism laws to freeze their bank's assets (the Prime Minister's head features on one popular tee shirt next to the words 'Brown is the colour of poo'), the plunging krona has made the place a lot more accessible. It's not cheap, but it's not expensive, if that makes sense.

Anyway, after the two-and-a-half hour hop from Manchester Airport we were soon on horseback.

And even the horses were different. Short and squat, with shiny blonde barnets that would put Paris Hilton to shame.

Ishestar Riding Tours are based about 15 minutes drive away from the capital.

And if you're looking for a quick way to blast off flight cobwebs they're ideal.

They offer routes for all kinds of riders, from the Lester Piggotts (experts) to the Mike Keegans (absolute beginners).

We took a one-hour jaunt across blackened lava fields under the shadows of the imposing Blafjoll mountains.

At one point I thought I saw an elf scuttle across our path. It doesn't take long to get into the swing of things.

After sprucing up in the minimalist yet exclusive surroundings of the Hilton Nordica (complete with blackout curtains) it was into the centre of Reykjavik.

At first glance it's not very pleasing on the eye. In fact, the High Street is a bit Birmingham. But on closer inspection there are some fantastic shops.

One of the most popular is outdoor gear store 66 Degrees North. This place is an Icelandic institution.

Their fleeces, jackets and hats are worn across the country like a badge of honour. And for good reason – the firm's roots lie back in 1926, when they began to produce tough clothing to protect the country's fishermen against the harshest



Atlantic storms. The city is also littered with sensational restaurants, where surf and turf is pretty much the order of the day. Icelanders will tell you that lamb has kept them alive for centuries and they didn't win three cod wars with Britain for nothing.

Restaurant Reykjavik, complete with its own ice bar, is one of the best, serving superb raw meat and zesty fresh fish to be cooked by the diner on their own hot plate.

If you can get over the fact it's light when you go in and light when you come out, there are also plenty of lively bars and nightclubs. There's your usual

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Business

call on land, sea and ice

» SCENIC Thorsmork valley.
Right: White water rafting on
the Hvita River and, below, Reykjavik



selection of European ales and a couple of decent Icelandic beers, including the imaginatively titled Viking. But if you really want to get into it, try Brennevin. A fiery shot known affectionately as 'black death' it measures in at a liver lashing 40 per cent – perhaps another reason for the eccentric behaviour of the locals.

The following day starts with a whale watch cruise, again with a difference. Our faithful commentator for sea adventures firm Elding gives us regular updates and for a second it's like being in a Spitfire. 'Minke whale, two o'clock', she cries excitedly, and like

obedient schoolchildren scores of tourists race to the right side of the boat to catch a glimpse. Despite the warnings we might be unlucky and see nothing there's a plentiful supply of puffins, whales and dolphins for my fellow passengers to snap their Canons at.

After disembarking we're picked up by Arctic Rafting who take us to the fast flowing Hvita River and we're straight into the thick of things.

After holding on through a host of rapids I'm assured this really is the beginner's route.

Halfway down comes the chance to jump into the river off a 10 metre high cliff. Well, it's

one way of getting rid of the hangover. And by the time I'm nursing a glass of chardonnay in the hot tub at the Hotel Skogar the previous night's over-indulgence is well and truly behind me.

After another fine meal and the benefit of more blackout curtains the following morning sees the start of our 'epic' hike.

I say epic because it took us 11 hours to do 25km. Led by our Manchester United supporting guide Arni (I'm worried about next year without Ronaldo) the trip starts with a steep climb above the mystical waterfall.

Legend has it that the first

Viking, Prasi Þórólfsson, hid treasure behind it. A local boy later found it, but could only grasp the ring on the side of chest before the treasure hid itself again so it seems apt that as we begin our descent a rainbow appears over the thrashing water.

We then crack on through snow fields and dramatic backdrops. The number of photo stops we take probably contributes to our shocking journey time, which the ever-polite Arni admits is up there with the worst.

When we finally descend to our home for the night, a mountain hut complete with huge

barbecue, I'm instantly reminded of the US cult TV show Northern Exposure. A racing stream dissects massed ranks of pebbles underneath the towering green mountains. It's very Alaska.

After sinking plenty more Viking and in the 2am daylight it's time for bed again.

From then on it's a doddle. Ice climbing the Solheimajokull glacier? Check. Quad biking past the shipwrecks in the misty Reykjanes Peninsula? Check.

There's even time for a dip in the milky waters of the famous Blue Lagoon and some Icelandic fish and chips (the waitress

assures me they are healthy but I'm not so sure) before hopping back on the Manchester-bound flight.

When I arrive I'm wearily reminded of Simon and Garfunkel as the Icelandic energy fades and British night falls.

Hello darkness, my old friend.

FACTFILE

A package for flights, three nights accommodation and tour starts at £249. From September 25, Icelandair will fly four times per week from Manchester. More information at icelandair.co.uk