



Caption goes here in this spot.

Gaithy Images

WINTER WONDERLAND

Now's the time to beat Iceland's crowds

By BRANDON PRESSER

FEW countries have experienced a meteoric rise in popularity quite like Iceland, an island nation of around 360,000 people that, over the course of only a few years, has managed to quadruple its amount of incoming tourists. It feels like we all know someone who's been enticed by the free layovers on the way to Europe or the bargain-basement flight pricing.

But the year-on-year rise came to a screeching halt this spring when Iceland's budget carrier, WOW Air, shuttered operations in a dramatic act reminiscent of the country's currency crash. WOW Air was the spark that lit the fuse for the initial boom in travel, but the sudden reduction in tourist numbers has helped visitors reclaim ownership over their experiences, especially in winter when crowds hush even further under the perpetual banner of golden-hour glow.

And if travelers spend more than just a long weekend, it's possible to stay far away from the legions marching around the circuit of marginally interesting natural attractions that form the so-called Golden Circle.

Roundtrip flights from New York to Reykjavik start at about \$383 on Icelandair. But once in the capital, consider hopping a domestic flight aboard **Air Iceland Connect** (from \$73 one

way) to reach **Akureyri**, in the country's north. The newly christened **Arctic Coast Way**, modeled after Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way, helps link together Iceland's lesser-known wonders, like its quaint fishing villages, hidden hot springs and roaring bird colonies. Slough off the jet lag in the port of **Husavik** with a dip in **Geosea**, a thermal bath that combines the healing properties of sea water with a bubbling artesian spring. Husavik is also a 45-minute drive from the geological anomalies at **Myvatn**, like the spiky shards of lava at **Dimmuborgir**, known to house a band of Christmas goblins called the Yule Lads, and **Hverir**, where gloopy mudflats belch and pop due to the geothermal heat beneath the surface.

As you make your way down to Reykjavik by car, it's worth considering a detour along the Snaefellsnes peninsula, home to the Snaefellsjokull glacier made famous by Jules Verne in "Journey to the Center of the Earth." The area's biggest village, **Stykkisholmur**, is often considered Iceland's prettiest due to the collection of Danish-style houses along the harbor. Don't miss the **Library of Water** perched atop a small hill in town — once the municipal library, the space now has an installation by New York artist Roni Horn, who encased gallons of water from melted local glaciers inside floor-to-ceiling cylindrical tubes.

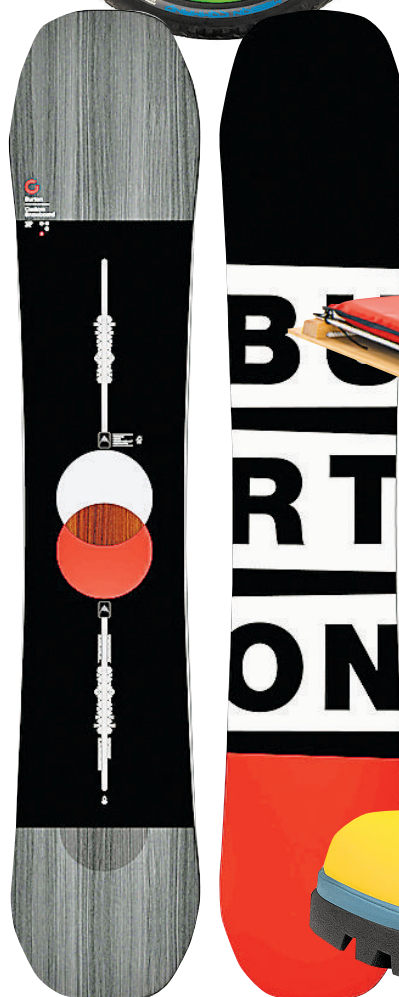


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