
MY SECRETS TO A BETTER PHOTOGRAPHY EXPERIENCE IN ICELAND

Quick Guide
Written by Ľudmila Borošová



Yearly, more than two million tourists visit this isolated country with a population of roughly 360,000. Incredibly challenging weather conditions and high consumer prices aren't stopping tourists from their journey to this magical land. Why? It's simply worth all the challenges you're going to be facing.


Iceland has a nickname of "The Photographer's Paradise" and after stepping out of the plane (or a ferry!) and breathing in the freshest air, you'll soon realize all you need to do is head out of the capital city and into the real wilderness.

Yes, you will need to plan your photography trip to Iceland very carefully, because it's probably not like any other country you have visited. Simply, if you want to make the most out of your photography, plan your trip in advance. I'm a person who likes to visualize things, so I made myself a small old-

fashioned travel book to keep all the places to visit and tips regarding them. Why? Well, I don't only like the feel of pen and paper; I also prefer having something "real" when the technology (and signal) fails me.

Today, we will be covering:

- the art of planning and prioritizing,
- how to prepare for Iceland, and
- some of the places you shouldn't miss.

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WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH?

Unless you're spending months in the country, it's impossible to visit all the unique places that Iceland offers. Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize – and at the end, calculate. Open your personal notebook and think: What are your absolute must-photograph places to visit? How long does it take

to get from A to B? Can your car enter this road? Where is the nearest gas station? How far away from the sight is the parking lot? How long is the hike? What is the best time to catch the perfect light? If the road is closed due to bad weather, what's your Plan B?



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO BE AWARE OF?

Please, if you're traveling to such an unpredictable environment, make yourself familiar with all the safety measures of the country. Educate yourself and be a step ahead. So many photographers, in the "photography fever," don't realize they are putting themselves in danger. Did you know that on most of the beaches in Iceland (like the black sand beach in Vík or Dyrhólaey) it's dangerous for you to walk close to the ocean because of the "sneaky waves"? Each part of the country has its unique safety measures, so when you see a sign, please respect it. Even though the urge to take the "perfect shot" is sometimes tempting, stay away from these areas.

Be comfortable with all the driving rules as well, and drive according to the current weather conditions. Route 1, which goes all over the island, is ideal for any type of car – and it's a great way to discover the basic sights. However, if you want to visit some other well-known areas, you might end up on a gravel road or F-road. On a gravel road, an off-road vehicle is highly recommended, while on an F-road (in the middle of the country, the highlands), it is an absolute necessity. And last but not least, always inform someone back at home about your travel plans, so they know exactly where you are, and when you should update them!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

WHAT GEAR DO YOU NEED?

The best camera is, of course, always the one you have on you. Cliché, right? I do think that in travel photography, your accessories are a bit more important than what you carry on your neck.

- **Warm and Durable Clothes** – Ah, you thought I'd start with camera gear?! No! How can you take great photos you're proud of when you're not in full safety and comfort? Some things should be on your list for Iceland, even in the summer, including gloves, a hat, merino wool thermal layers, hiking or waterproof boots, and a waterproof and warm jacket. Don't underestimate the power of the land of fire and ice!
- **Waterproof Camera Case** – I purchased mine right before my trip to Iceland. When I had to prioritize what to keep in my backpack, my case always won! It's a bit impractical to operate the camera buttons when it's inside, but trust me, you won't regret it when the weather changes like crazy every few minutes, especially in the country where using an umbrella is a waste of time, because the rain falls from the side! Bring a wipe for the glass on the front of the lens as well. In the image on the left, you can see the type of waterproof case I use.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Camping with locals, overlooking Iceland's most famous volcano which erupted in 2010. My small GorillaPod was much needed for the short night!

- **Spare Batteries** – This might be obvious to some of you, but I can't stress it enough. Batteries tend to run out of power very quickly in colder environments, so it's important to keep them somewhere warm. I had mine next to my body, so they could steal some of my heat. And the same should go for your phone!
- **Tripod** – This is needed especially when you visit Iceland in the Northern Lights season! But you can do magic with it even in the summer. Just imagine all the waterfalls you can play with, especially if you're a fan of long exposure water shots.
- **ND Filter** – Sometimes the light is just too bright for a perfect shot! Did you know that in the summer, the sun sets only for around three hours? Even during this short period, it's not dark enough outside, so filters may come handy.

HOW CAN YOU TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SEASON?

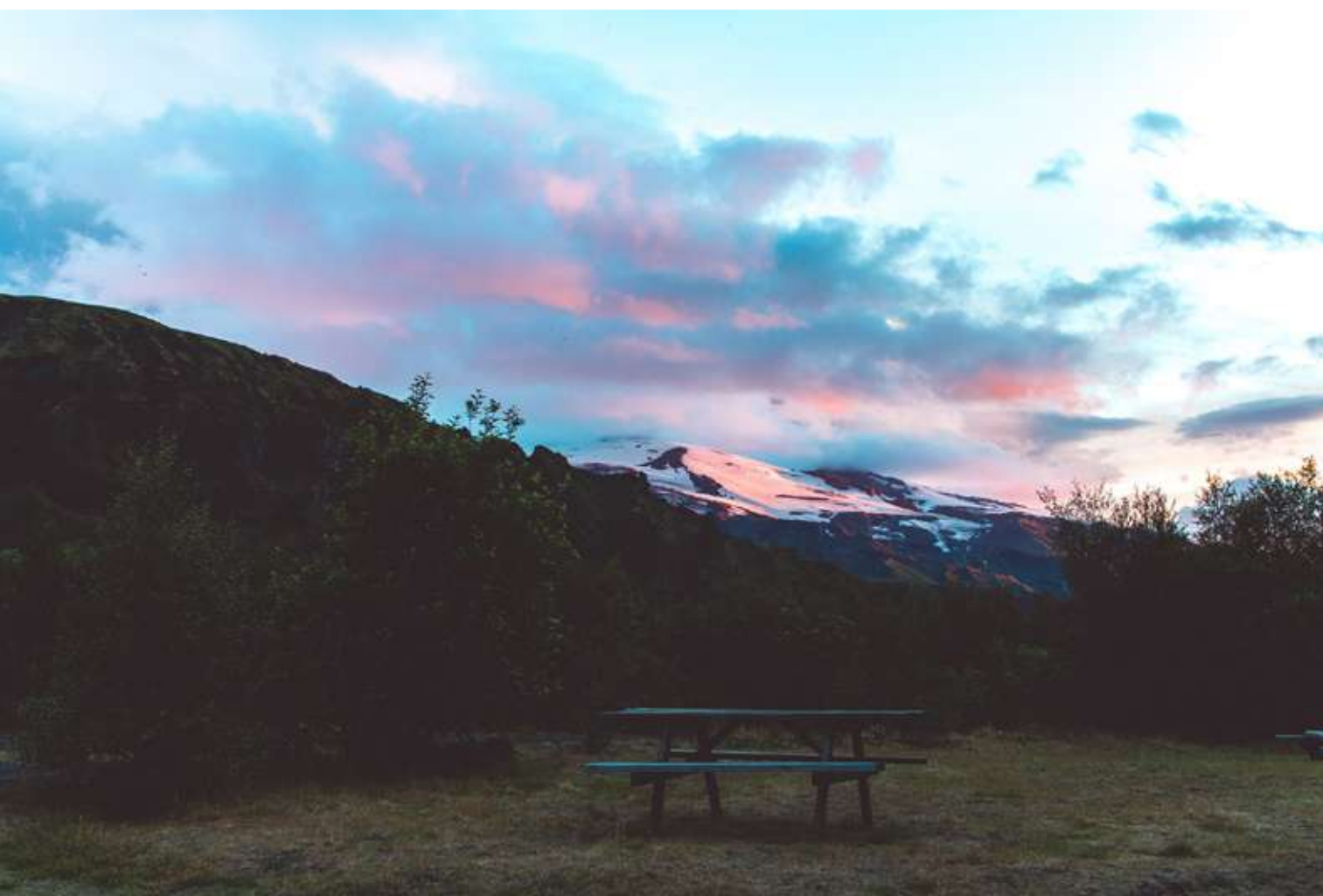
Every season is unique – it very much depends on what you're looking for. As I mentioned before, in the summer you can get light almost 24/7, and the temperatures aren't as challenging as in winter. For obvious reasons, this draws a lot of tourists to the country. Don't worry, they usually stay in the Reykjavík area or the popular south coast. The more isolated and unique places you choose, the higher chance you have of enjoying them alone with your camera. It's not the few travelers like you who usually disturb your photo. You can just kindly ask them to move for a few seconds. Bigger problems are, of course, bus tours, and there are a lot of them during the day, so it might be impossible to get your perfect shot. For this reason, I would consider photographing some places at evening or night, when the light is in similar brightness. Ah, the privacy is priceless!

In the winter, however, it's calm. The freezing beauty and the contrast between white snow and black sand is breathtaking. For this scenery, you need to make some sacrifices. The first of them is the ability

to be 100% flexible! In Iceland, it's not uncommon to get sudden huge snowstorms and, with them, road closures. It's a common reason to get stuck in the middle of nowhere, so traveling on a tight schedule isn't the best idea. And, winter... well... did I mention it's cold?! You should really weigh the pros and cons, but if you're not scared of cold, you're an experienced driver, and you're flexible with time, then I would definitely consider winter for more interesting shots!

Now that you're familiar with all the things you should be aware of, what are some of the places you shouldn't miss and the practical information you need for catching the perfect moment?

When traveling to Iceland, you're probably going to land in Keflavík airport and spend your first night in the Reykjavík area. The capital is a cute, small city, but I think one or two days is enough to relax and prepare for your photography journey. One, two, three, let's go!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

FROM REYKJAVÍK THROUGH THE GOLDEN CIRCLE AND SOUTH COAST

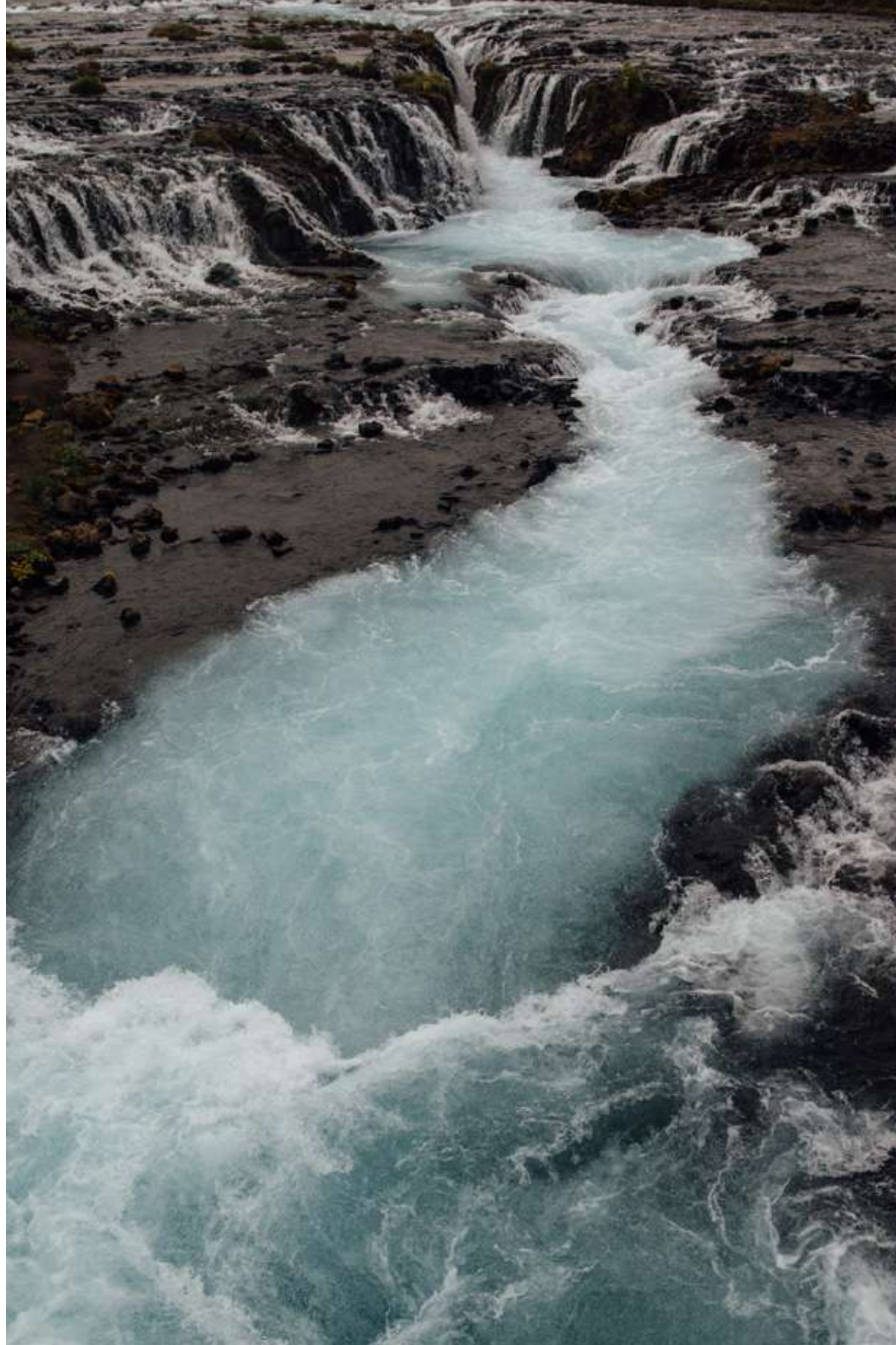
The most touristic road is ahead of you, so prepare for tons of buses and tourist groups. Take this as a challenge to create the best possible picture given the conditions! And don't worry, it's going to get better the further you go. So, what should be on the bucket list of places?

Hveragerði Hot Springs

Hiking to Hveragerði hot springs is my number one thing to experience, especially at dawn, when all the crowds are gone and there are significantly more hot spots to find. I personally spent two weeks volunteering in this town, so it is very close to my heart! It's a photo spot that's worth it, but I would personally just take time to relax before the adventure. Don't worry too much about shots (yet), just soak in the water and enjoy the Icelandic nature welcoming you.

Þórsörk Valley

Camping in this valley was something out of this world – falling asleep in a tent while overlooking the famous volcano Eyjafjallajökull, discovering small creeks, crossing rivers by car and discovering hidden waterfalls. All of this in the middle of the season, completely alone in some of the spots.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Brúarfoss Waterfall

Are you an adventurer, but not ready for a difficult hike yet? Perfect! This blue waterfall is an easy hour-long walk, while still quite challenging to find. You need to follow the signs properly so you don't end up accidentally trespassing. In this place, you can play with contrasts of blue and black, as well as with cropping your image – you can see that I put my focus on the lower part of the waterfall, not the “eye” of it. It's a beautiful spot, so it doesn't matter if you choose a wide lens or water details; your pictures will turn out just stunning!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Gullfoss Waterfall

One of the most visited waterfalls in Iceland, Gullfoss is right on the Golden Circle tourist route along with places like Strokkur (Geysir), Thingvellir National Park, and the crater Kerid. (I hope you're already writing down the names!) It's almost impossible to capture the waterfall in its full beauty, other than walking to the highest viewing point. But you know what? I think I like it from a close-up perspective, just how you can see in the picture!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Hjálparfoss Waterfall

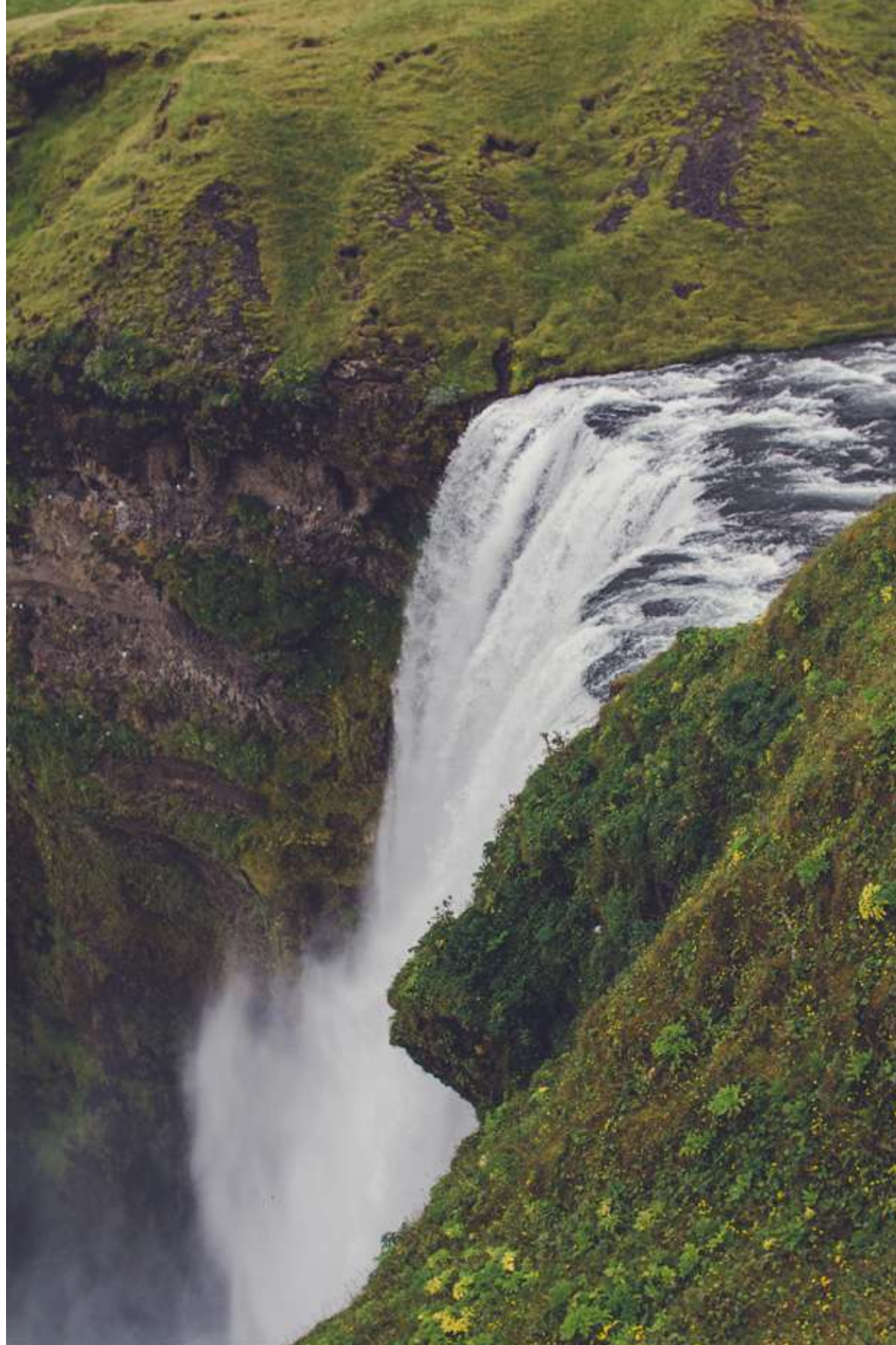
This lesser-known spot is very accessible and makes a great place for tripod selfies! The unique structure of this waterfall compensates for its size, and I'm sure you won't regret stopping by. Since you can't find it on all tourist maps, it's a nice and calm picnic spot as well!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Háifoss Waterfall

One of the highest waterfalls in Iceland, this offers the most stunning views for photographers, so don't miss this one! Be careful, though; you can only reach it by a gravel road, so make sure you're confident with your driving skills.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Skógafoss Waterfall

Easily one of the most visited places in Iceland, this waterfall is amazing from all angles. It's an opportunity for fantasy lovers, as you can spot at least three heads of trolls in the surroundings. For this one, come in the evening! I think it's also the most beautiful waterfall if you want to try portrait photography in nature. It isn't an accident that many famous video clips were shot here.

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Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Dyrhólaey Black Sand Beach and Vík

If I had to choose one place you need to visit in Icelandic winter, it would be the black sand beach! Just imagine the contrast of perfectly white snow on the black sand. Be careful and never take risks to get pictures – if you're down next to the ocean, stay meters from the edge as the waves are dangerous.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Icelandic Highlands

So, what's the place that stole my heart the most – and it's going to do the same to every photographer out there? It's the Icelandic Highlands, especially the Landmannalaugar mountains. If I ever come

back again, I want to spend at least a few days over there. You'll need to rent a 4x4 car to access it, and the road is sometimes a nightmare, but you will be rewarded with views like these:



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Slowly, the moon-like country will start showing green mountains, which were once active volcanoes and now are just abandoned calderas. For mysterious pictures, you can stop on the side of the road (safely!) and enjoy the end-of-the-world feeling. Even if it's tempting, do not step on the moss if you see moss fields – you're likely to ruin a plant that's been growing for hundreds of years.

As the road continues, you will reach the camp of Landmannalaugar, the "Rainbow Mountains," where you will have a choice of easy, moderate, and hard hikes. The easy walks are doable if you don't have any physical difficulties, and they take only two hours. That's what I went for, and I'm honestly sad we didn't have more time – my photography soul wasn't fulfilled enough.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

However, these are the views you can be rewarded with on the easiest walks, so I can't even imagine what I could see if I decided to go higher. Under this mountain is another geothermal area with stunning sulfur creations.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

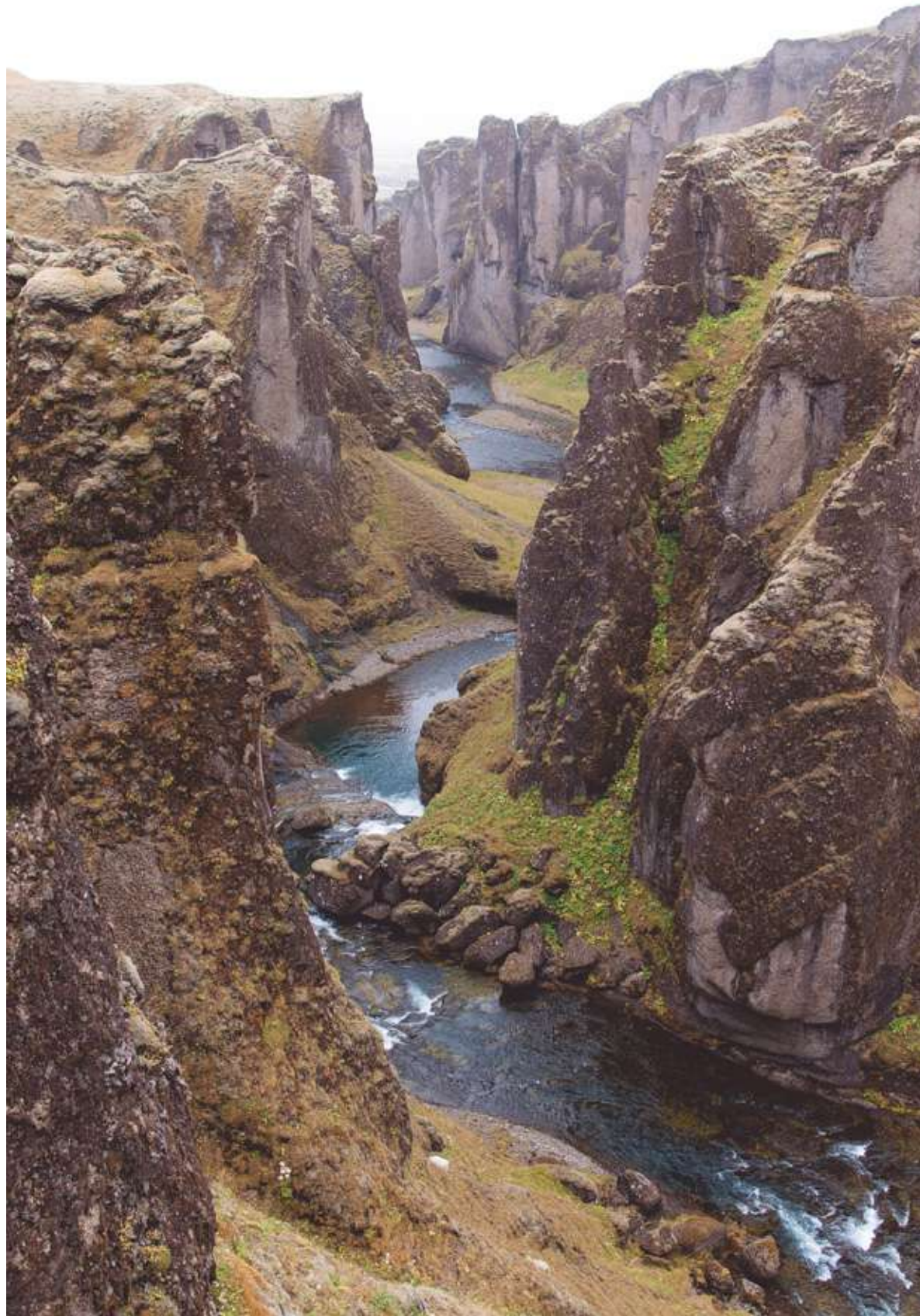
Especially in this wild place with never-ending changes in the weather and small water droplets from the steam, it was essential to carry my waterproof camera pack. All these pictures were taken using one. The only con is that the camera is not so quick to operate through the plastic, but trust me, in nature like this, there is no need to hurry!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová



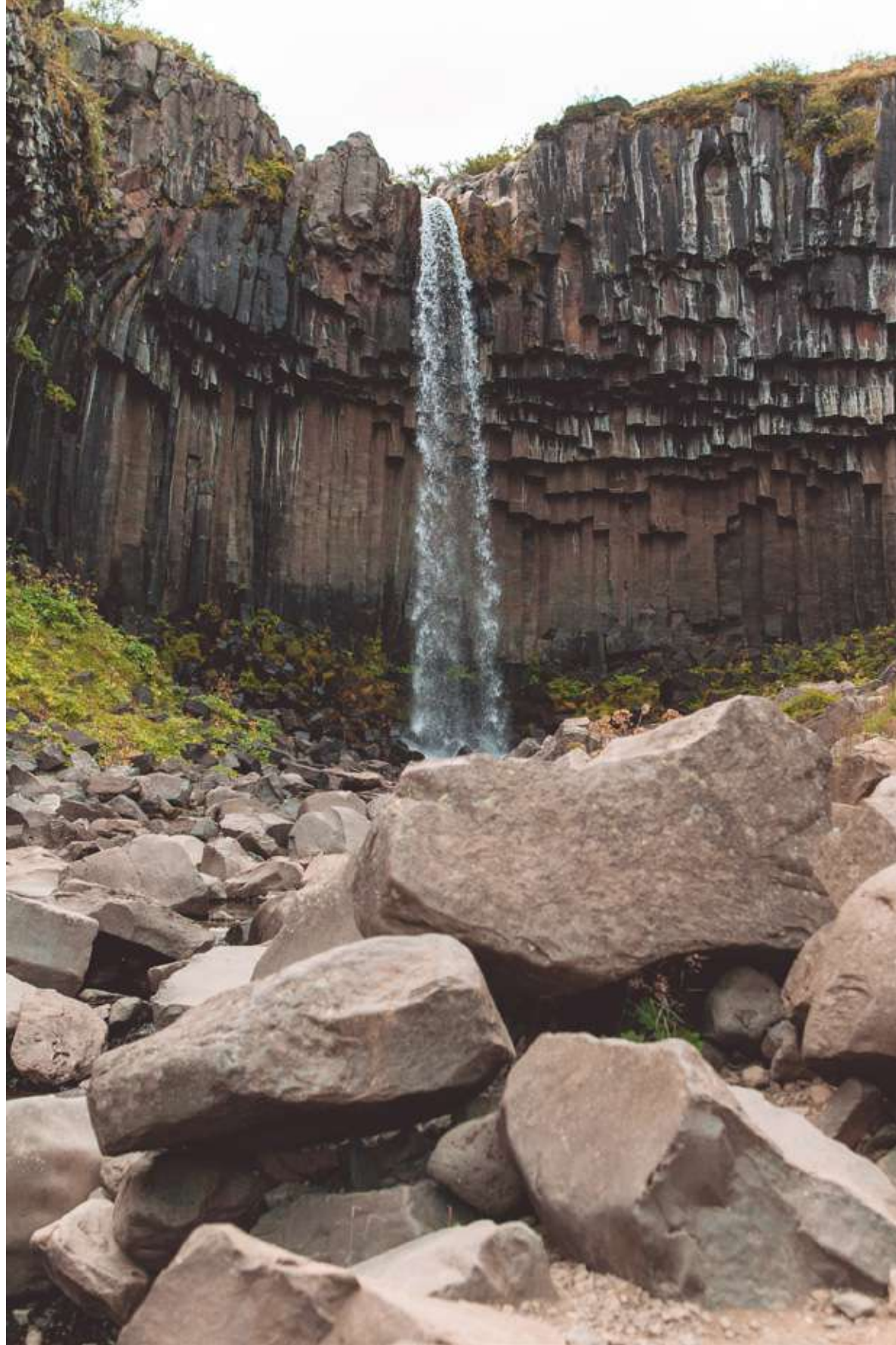
Photograph by Ludmila Borošová



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Fjaðrárgljúfur

It's not so hard to find this place. As it is difficult to read its name, this is one of the lesser-known canyons in Iceland hiding a waterfall at the end. It's a short walk with a high chance to get perfect pictures, but be careful and don't go near the edge.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Svartifoss

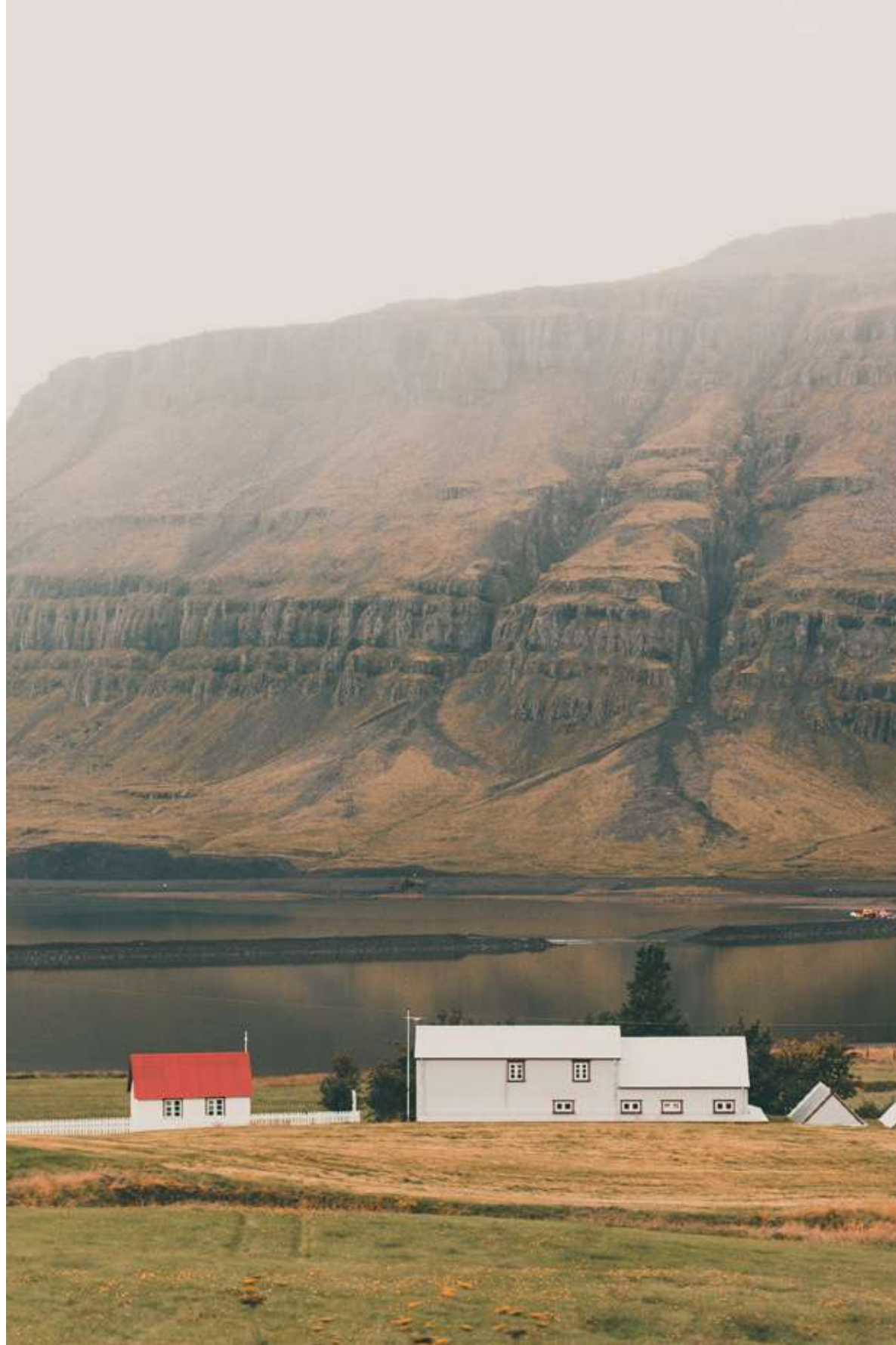
If you have time to explore the national park Skaftafell – awesome! If not, take a short and easy walk to just one of its treasures: Svartifoss waterfall. The unique black columnar basalt forms beautiful small sculptures and makes perfect opportunities for photographers.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Jökulsárlón

The glacial lagoon, Jökulsárlón, consists of two photogenic spots, and I can't even decide which one I like more! First is the black sand beach, where the glacial crystals are washed up from the ocean, creating a wonderful contrast. The second one is a lake, where you can take a boat ride next to the amazing glaciers to see them as close as possible. The lake is 248m deep, and you can usually see just the top of the icebergs – it blows your minds and cameras!

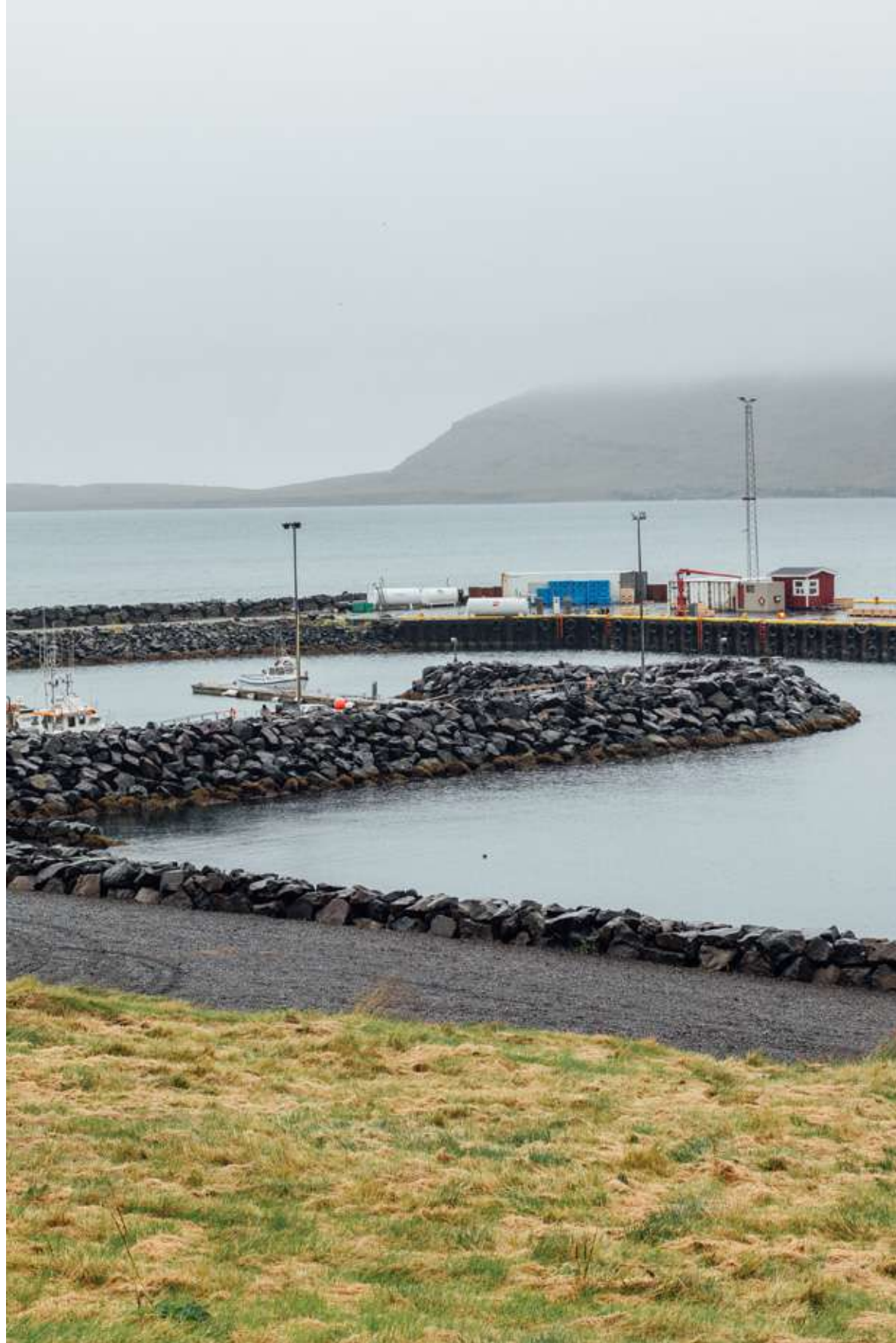


Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

FROM THE SOUTH COAST, UP TO THE NORTHLAND AND BACK TO REYKJAVÍK

Eastfjords

If you're looking for fewer hikes and more driving, Eastfjords are the perfect place for "car window" photographers. These pictures were taken from the window, and I'm not ashamed! Just be ready to capture the perfect moment anytime it comes up.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Eastfjords are well known for small fishing villages, so it's easy to stop by and have a chat with locals, sit outside and enjoy small piers, and find a local café and rest from the tiring journey. It's like time stops here; you have nowhere to hurry, so just take time for your pictures.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Lágarfljót

Do you see the lake behind the sheep? If you're into documentary photography, this is the area for you! Legend says that there is a creature called Lágarfljót monster living in it, similar to the Loch Ness monster. Will you be one of those catching it on your camera?!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Sænautasel

Do you enjoy going a bit off-road to places lesser known by the majority? Enjoy this turf house, as well as the road leading to it. Why is it so special?



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

It dates back to 1843, and there are generations taking care of this beautiful building. It was inhabited until 1943, so it holds one hundred years of precious history ready to be captured. The local family in charge of the house, pets, and a local café wears the typical sweaters, so you can easily get very traditional-looking pictures!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Northland

As you reach the northern part of Iceland, you will realize that compared to the south, there are almost no people – and no cars! The road might look endless, but you'll have a few interesting stops on the way.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Dettifoss Waterfall

The most powerful waterfall in Europe, the majestic Dettifoss is actually very hard to photograph. Take your time and wait for the crowds to pass. It's also possible to visit this waterfall from both sides, so take your time choosing the right one for your photography project – it's a detour to get to the other side.

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Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Mývatn Area

Welcome to the moon! As soon as you start driving by, there's a sulfur smell almost everywhere. With geothermal spots, mud pools, Krafla volcano, Grjótagjá cave or the caldera Hverfjall, you're not going to be bored over here. There is also a less famous version of Blue Lagoon here!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Húsavík

If you're into wildlife spotting, Húsavík should be on your list for whale watching. Even in the summer, you need to dress up well and have your camera and batteries fully prepared, because the weather in the Arctic is very cold. And a tip: for better experience, try avoiding any meals that might be upsetting for you, as the seas are very rough!



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Goðafoss Waterfall

I want to end my recommendation list with the waterfall of Gods, because it isn't only tied up with legends, but also with wonderful views all around it. It's easily accessible and equipped with a parking lot, so you will have plenty of time to catch the perfect shot.



Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Other photography gems worth writing down, but not shown in this guide, are Seljalandsfoss, Hengifoss, Stokksnes, Hvitserkur, Dynjandi, Rauðisandur, Kirkjufell, Hellnar, Arnarstapi, Snæfellsjökull, Selvallafofoss, Glymur, Kerlingarfjöll, and Blue Lagoon. And of course, there's much more! So, as I mentioned before, research and prioritize in order to make your photography trip as pleasant and efficient as possible.

💡 **Bonus Tip:** Purchase a disposable/film camera! Iceland has the perfect atmosphere for film camera shots. I personally carry a disposable one with me, so it is always a surprise how the photos are going to turn out.



Cover Photograph by Ludmila Borošová

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) What questions should you ask while planning your Iceland trip?
- 2) What topic should you educate yourself on?
- 3) What kind of gear is essential to make the most out of your visit?
- 4) How can you take advantage of each season in Iceland?
- 5) Can you drive to the Highlands with any car?
- 6) What part of Iceland is the most crowded?
- 7) Are there any legends tied to the island?
- 8) What are some of the places you can visit?

Assignment:

Make an Excel sheet of the places you shouldn't miss traveling to in Iceland. With each place, try answering these questions:

- Where is it? What is the GPS location? (This could be useful without cell phone signal or battery.)
- Where is the parking location?
- How long is the drive from the asphalt road to the parking location?
- Do I need to go on a gravel road/F-road to access it? Do I need a 4x4 car?
- How long is the return walk/hike to my car? How long do I want to stay?
- When is the ideal time to visit for the best light on site?
- Should I pack different outfits matching the colors in case I want to do portrait shoots?
- Are there any other useful notes visitors recommended?
- Do I have pictures of this place from other photographers for inspiration?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ludmila is a Slovak photographer focusing on portraiture. She does photography while finishing her Master's degree in Business Administration, specializing in Entrepreneurship. She is based in Prague, Czech Republic but loves to travel around the world and share her stories, as well as her photoshoots, on her blog.

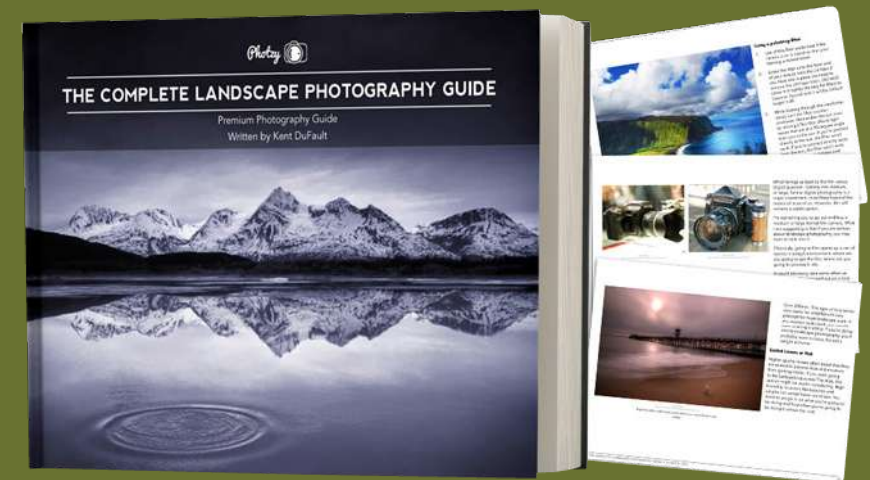
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