



OUTDOORS | ICELAND

Elves of the lava shelves

Elves. They're everywhere, moving ever so cleverly across the vast swathes of emerald green moss. Basalt knolls bulge out of the ground, and from the passenger seat of the car, the landscape looks a little like a bubbling cauldron. The cunning creatures leap from one mound to the next before vanishing into ancient lava tubes.

I'm in Iceland with my husband and two kids, and we're on a self-guided road trip with 50 Degrees North, loosely following the Snæfellsnes and Golden Circle self-drive route before heading south. We have an itinerary, our hotels and activities have been booked, and we mostly follow the schedule. But as any parent would know, the best-laid plans can go awry when little people are involved.

Located on the westernmost edge of West Iceland, the 90-kilometre-long Snæfellsnes Peninsula is often referred to as Iceland in miniature due to many beautiful natural features packed into a small space. At the very tip, Snæfellsjökull National Park – one of three national parks in Iceland – is a natural beauty.

As we drive along Route 54, the high midday sun pours over the fields and mountains around us, highlighting the bands of colour like a spotlight on a layered cake – moss greens, sunflower yellows, russet reds. The colours are varied and dramatic, yet I imagine that winter, when the island is carpeted in white, is just as impressive, just differently so.

Iceland is riddled with stories about elves – locally known as *alfafolk* and *huldufolk* – hidden people from a parallel world. Not all locals believe in their existence, but many respect their myths and traditions nonetheless. In 2013 a highway construction project was paused by Iceland's Supreme Court due to elf activists insisting that the work would disturb an important elf habitat.

Eventually, a 3.5-metre-long rock which local woman Ragnhildur Jonsdottir



With beautiful scenery at every turn, this peninsula is indeed Iceland in miniature, writes Tatyana Leonov.

maintained was an elf church, was transferred to a more appropriate location so the elves could continue using it as intended. Rocks throughout the whole island have been designated elf rocks, and breaking them apart or moving them is avoided by most Icelanders.

In Iceland you can gaze at rocks all you like, though, and there are some spectacular geological formations to admire along the coastline of Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Located just off Route 54 north of Reykjavik, the Gerouberg Cliffs are a common first stop. These astonishing basalt columns have been formed by ancient lava flows, and from afar they appear like a solid wall.

Drive closer and you will notice the intricate formation of the hexagonal pillars. The theory is that during a volcanic eruption, burning lava tumbled down the cliffs and as the sea water quickly cooled the lava, the odd shapes began to form.

The drive to Ytri Tunga Beach from the Gerouberg Cliffs only takes half an hour, then as we make our way down to the beach from the carpark we spot a small group of tourists, cameras at the ready, standing on the shore pointing at a small herd of seals.

The next hour is spent meandering up and down the beach, watching the seals frolicking in the water and periodically scrambling onto the rocks. Iceland's population is just under 400,000, and with 103,000 square kilometres of landmass, this means people have more space to live when compared to other countries in Europe.

Perhaps that's why the folk here are willing to invest in longer conversations. Or maybe it's just that Icelandic folk are very nice.

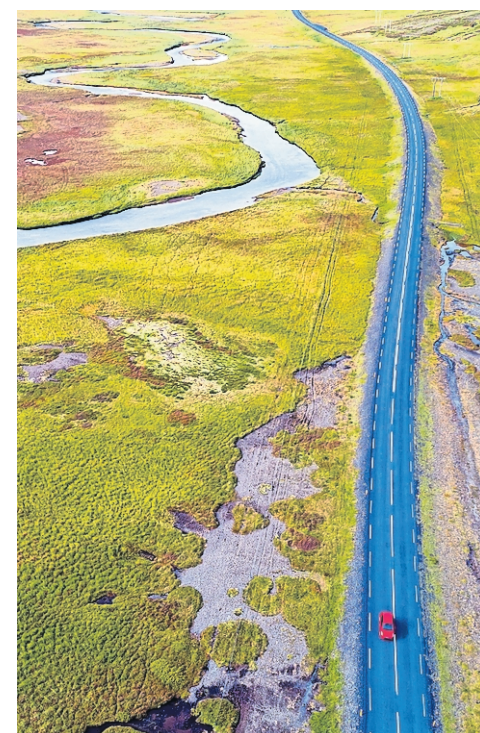
The following day, when we stop in the fishing village of Arnarstapi, on the cusp of Snæfellsjökull National Park, my chat with one of the staff members working at a cafe that overlooks the sea concretes my theory that it's the Icelandic people's way. Sitting on the deck with sunbeams shimmering over the wooden tables and the seawater glimmering a sparkly blue, she tells me about the 700,000-year-old Snæfellsjökull glacier-capped volcano that the national park is named after.

The volcano was made famous by Jules Verne's novel, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and its splendour looms over the landscape on approach. On a clear day, you can see the volcano from Reykjavik, but you only grasp its magnitude when up close. Snæfellsjökull is thought to have erupted most recently between AD50 and AD350 and here, the landscape has been moulded and shaped by lava flows and extreme weather conditions.

As the sea hurtles wave after wave at the cliffs and the adjacent fields glisten green, I remember the local woman from the cafe telling me that farmers have never utilised these surrounding fields due to whisperings about elves residing here. Right now, staring out into the vastness, I almost believe it to be true. **1**

The writer was a guest of 50 Degrees North.

The Kirkjufell Waterfall on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, West Iceland; travelling through elf county. Photos: iStock



THE DETAILS

The Snæfellsnes & Golden Circle self-drive tour by 50 Degrees North is a premium 10-day experience priced at \$10,525 a person. It includes car-hire, airport transfers and stays in rural boutique hotels and a central Reykjavik hotel. Activities like snorkelling in Silfra, glacier walks, Blue Lagoon entry, a Viking Sushi Adventure boat tour, and more are also included. See fiftydegreesnorth.com