

## Pool Rules: Visiting an Icelandic Thermal Swimming Pool

Iceland's public bathing culture has its own set of customs, which locals take very seriously. You'll quickly get the hang of the system. Just follow these steps.

**1. Bring a swimsuit and towel** (rentals are available but expensive). Also bring any other gear you need: bathing cap, goggles, flip-flops (although most Icelanders don't bother with them), or toys for children (you can bring a bag into the pool area and stow it discreetly). There's no need to bring soap or shampoo—there are liquid soap dispensers in the showers.

**2. Pay.** Most towns have a shareable 10-visit discount card, which can save money with as few as five adult entries. At some pools, you'll be issued a locker key or an electronic wristband that will open a locker; at others, keys are in the locks.

**3. Change.** Changing rooms are sex-segregated. Young children may go with a parent of either sex. Before entering the locker area, take off your shoes. (Many Icelanders leave them on public shoe racks, but I put mine in my locker.) Find an available locker, disrobe and lock your clothes inside, and carry your swimsuit and towel with you to the shower area.

**4. Shower.** Store your towel in one of the cubbyholes and keep your swimsuit handy. Soap down and shower thoroughly. Yes, you're expected to shower naked: Icelanders are relaxed about nudity, and showering is considered a (required) sanitary issue. (Only the touristy Blue Lagoon has some frosted-glass stalls for bashful foreigners.) Note: Iceland's water is extremely soft. You don't need much soap, and it can take a long time to wash it off.

**5. Swim and soak.** After showering, slip on your swimsuit and head for the pool area. Typically, people start out in the warm pools (usually a lap pool for swimmers, a shallower pool for recreation, and a wading pool for kids; these are typically around 29°C/85°F). Then they finish off with a soak in the hot tubs or a visit to the sauna. Each tub is marked in Celsius, and you'll quickly find your own comfort range. (For reference, 38°C is 100°F, 40°C is 104°F, 42°C is 108°F, and 44°C is 111°F.) Stay as long as you want; if you feel dizzy or uncomfortable, take a break outside or in a cooler pool. Drink water even if you're not thirsty—when you're in hundred-degree water, dehydration can sneak up on you.

**6. Finish up.** When you're done, return to the shower room, take off your swimsuit, shower again, and retrieve your towel. Towel off before returning to the locker area (they like to keep it as dry as possible). Many pools have a centrifuge to wick the water out of your suit—find it and use it. Back at your locker, get dressed, but don't put your shoes on until you exit the locker room. Return any keys or armbands to the counter.

**7. Refuel.** Most pools have tables and chairs in the entry hall where you can eat a packed lunch or snack. Most also have vending machines, snack counters, or even full-fledged cafés.

**Note:** At the pool, Icelanders usually just talk to the people they came with and generally leave strangers alone. Everyone is polite and helpful, but don't expect long conversation. At some times of day, groups of local "regulars" (often senior citizens) may seem to take over one of the hot pots, but you're welcome to squeeze in, too.

**No Phones or Photos:** Phones and cameras are strictly prohibited anywhere near the pool and dressing rooms. Just relax, and enjoy the experience.

**Eyewear and Jewelry:** Avoid wearing eyeglasses if you can—they fog up, and you won't find them in the opaque water if they fall off. (a trap can help). Clay can scratch delicate lenses; rinse glasses in fresh water when you leave the pool. On a bright day, cheap sunglasses can make the lagoon more pleasant. Because the water is opaque, there's no need for goggles. Leave jewelry in your locker to avoid tarnishing or losing a ring in the pool.

**Hair Concerns:** The minerals in the Blue Lagoon can leave hair dry and brittle. The effect goes away within a day or two. Don't

stress about this too much—the lagoon is more fun if you relax and let your hair get wet. Still, especially for those with long hair, it's smart to slather on the free conditioner (from dispensers in the shower stalls) before arid after you bathe, or keep long hair tied up and out of the water!