

# Iceland

## A strange land of Contrasts

**A** In between the continents of Europe and America, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, lies a seam in the Earth's surface called the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. And it was here, around 70 million years ago, that Iceland was born when a volcanic eruption caused the island to spring from the sea. Although it was only a small island at first, it has grown, through constant volcanic eruptions, into the second largest island in Europe and a fascinating land of contrasts.

**B** Iceland is one of the most active volcanic regions on earth and has hundreds of volcanoes. **1** For one thing, the island itself is formed from basalt, the material from volcanic lava. The volcanic activity also created the island's many geysers<sup>1</sup> and hot springs and is the source of the geothermal energy that Icelanders use to heat their homes and water. But the same volcanoes that created the island, and give it its power, are also a terrible danger. In 1783, the eruption of Volcano Laki led to a famine that wiped out a quarter of the population. Recent volcanoes

have also caused a lot of disruption.

**C** There was a time when the whole island was covered in thick forest. But constant deforestation by inhabitants over the years has led to serious soil erosion.

**2** This barren inner landscape is made up of sand fields, mountains and vast glaciers<sup>2</sup> with many glacial rivers that flow to the populated coastal areas. However, the countryside in the coastal areas is green and pleasant, where animals can graze and the surrounding seas have an abundance of fish.

**D** The climate is another surprise. Despite being close to the Arctic Circle, the temperatures in Iceland are mild. It's neither very cold in winter, nor very hot in summer.

**3** So, although the winters in this far northern isle are long and dark, with barely three hours of daylight a day, the temperature stays around the freezing mark and it's rarely extremely cold. The summers have bright long days, even if, at a temperature of around 10 to 15 degrees, it's not exactly sunbathing weather.

**E** As far as animal life goes, the isolation of this unique island in the middle of the North Atlantic means that it does not have many native species. **4** Polar bears have visited throughout Iceland's recorded history but there is no permanent population. The island has a low number of insect species and no native amphibians or reptiles, like frogs or lizards. Most of the species on the island are farm animals such as sheep, goats, cattle, chickens and the Icelandic horse.

**F** Though it is very sparsely populated with just over 300,000 people, Iceland, like many parts of the planet, suffers from pollution and environmental problems. Apart from the deforestation and soil erosion caused by sheep and cattle destroying vegetation, there is also some industrial pollution.

**5** The air, rivers and surrounding seas are clean. Icelanders have been careful to manage fish stocks in the sea as well as in rivers and lakes. Most importantly, the geothermal energy that nature has provided is also very clean energy.

**G** Perhaps the best way to get a sense of what this enigma of a country is like, and to understand the contrasts which have formed it, is to look at the long history and literature of the Norse people who came to live here.

**6** This unique island truly comes to life through these magnificent stories.

**1 geyser:** a hole in the earth that shoots out hot water and steam

**2 glacier:** a large mass of ice that moves very very slowly



- 1** You are going to read an article about an island country. Seven sentences have been removed from the article. Choose from the sentences (A-G) the one which fits each gap 1-6. There is one extra sentence which you do not need to use. ...

1  ...

4  ...

2  ...

5  ...

3  ...

6  ...

- A** This is because the island is in the path of the North Atlantic current which brings warm air to the island.
- B** Now the interior of the island is harsh and uninhabitable.
- C** In spite of this, the island has a thriving aluminium industry.
- D** Fabulous long tales known as Old Icelandic Sagas tell of a Viking warrior past that shaped both the land and the people.
- E** But compared to many places, Iceland has fewer problems.
- F** When humans first settled on the island, the only native mammal was the arctic fox.
- G** They have shaped Iceland's environment and history.

- 2** Find words in the text with a similar meaning to the following words/phrases. **CHECK** ...

• **Para A:**

continuous

...

very interesting

...

• **Para B:**

areas

...

beginning

...

destroyed completely

...

• **Para C:**

unsuitable to live in

...

dry and empty

...

more than enough

...

• **Para E:**

distance from other places

...

came to live

...

long-lasting/continuous

...

• **Para F:**

not crowded with people

...

• **Para G:**

puzzle

...

amazing

...

...

**3**

Find words in the text which mean the opposite of the following words. **CHECK**

- feast  $\neq$
- cool down  $\neq$
- dirty/polluted  $\neq$
- covered in trees/plants  $\neq$
- tiny  $\neq$
- not enough  $\neq$
- boiling  $\neq$
- heavily populated  $\neq$

Fill in:

current

deforestation

disruptions

eruptions

glaciers

isolation

landscape

stocks

- 1 He lives in almost total  ; he barely sees anyone else at his mountain cabin.
- 2 Iceland has an amazing  covered with volcanoes, sand fields and glaciers.
- 3 Environmental activists caused  to the logging company's work during their demonstrations.
- 4 In many seas and oceans, fish  are running low because of overfishing.
- 5 This area was formed by a series of volcanic  along the fault line.
- 6 The  was so strong that it washed the little boat too far out to sea.
- 7 Floods can occur when mountain  melt too quickly.
- 8  is causing animals to lose their natural habitats as the trees where they make their homes are destroyed.

active

climate

destroy

sparsely

literature

formed

surrounding

geysers

seam

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is a 1)  in the Earth's surface between North America and Europe where pieces of the Earth's crust move around. A volcanic eruption here 2)  the island known today as Iceland. Iceland is in the centre of one of the most 3)  volcanic areas in the world. This volcanic activity created the many 4)  and hot springs on the island. The volcanoes which created Iceland could also 5)  it. Iceland has gradually lost its trees through deforestation, and the 6)  is neither very hot nor extremely cold. The arctic fox was the only native mammal to live on Iceland before man arrived. These days, most of the animals there are livestock. Iceland is Europe's second largest island, but is 7)  populated. Iceland's rivers and 8)  seas are clean and there are healthy fish stocks around the island. A look back at old Norse 9)  helps people to understand Iceland better.