

Living on a Lava Field Shrouded in Folklore



Hafnarfjörður is a small picturesque seaside town nestled in rugged lava fields on the outskirts of Reykjavík. Its name simply means ‘harbor fjord’ and refers to the excellent natural harbor, Iceland’s oldest trade harbor, which has supported business since the 14th century. Hafnarfjörður is Iceland’s third-largest town, with just over 26,000 residents. It is situated in a field of lava that flowed from Búrfell Mountain about 7,300 years ago. On its way to the sea, the lava hardened into a multitude of picturesque formations. Townspeople have long built their homes among the rocks in order to enjoy this dramatic scenery. Many relics of former homes remain in Hafnarfjörður today and the history of the town and its people is always on display at Hafnarfjörður Museum.

Lava Formations

The lava field as a whole, named Búrfellshraun, covers some 18 square kilometers. Most people in Hafnarfjörður and in the neighboring town of Garðabær live in parts of Búrfellshraun. This large lava field can be broken into five areas all with their distinct characteristics.



The Litluborgir lava formations, by Helgafell Mountain, include pseudo craters and other endlessly fascinating shapes formed by lava running into and across a lake. The Kaldárhraun and Gjárnar areas consist of sharply upheaved lava as well as interesting surfaces, with a large expanse of undisturbed pahoehoe lava lying near the popular outdoor recreation area around Helgafell Mountain. Various remains still point to the former use of this land for grazing and milking sheep.

Many residents and visitors enjoy drives and walks through Hleinar Country Park, with the shoreline on one side and beautiful lava rocks among naturally occurring mosses, lichens and higher plants on the other. There are numerous cultural remains, such as places for drying fish, and the area also includes shorelines preserved for bird habitation.

The country park of Hvaleyrarlón and Hvaleyrarhöfði is a protected, popular outdoor recreation area with considerable educational value, partly due to its mud flats. Bird watchers enjoy coming here throughout

the year, and may spot such visitors as the grey heron, *Ardea cinerea*. With its attractive vegetation and cultural remains in a beautiful lava field, Stekkjarhraun Country Park provides a pleasant outdoor recreation area for neighboring residents.



If you don't have a car at your disposal you can see the lava formations by taking a walk through the town of Hafnarfjörður and see how the people of Hafnarfjörður have built their houses right among the stunning lava formations.

Hidden Folk

When you live in a landscape that continually reminds you of the great power that the force of nature holds over mere humans it is not surprising that you would believe that there are creatures of superior powers that live in these rocks and lava formations that surround your dwellings. Hafnarfjörður is famous for having one of Iceland's largest settlements of elves, dwarves and other mystical beings, which are collectively called the 'Hidden Folk'. Centuries-old folklore has it that whole clans of such beings reside in the rocks that make up part of the town's center.

Though Hidden Folk are visible only to those with the second sight, a great many Icelanders believe in their existence. Indeed, there is much evidence to support this belief, as stories abound of instances where the constructions of new roads or housing developments have been disrupted by strange happenings. Hidden Folk do not like incursions into their territory. They are respected by every Icelander, if not feared any longer. Nowhere is that respect more obvious than in Hafnarfjörður. There is even a Hidden Worlds tour that takes you to their home sites (www.alfar.is). Along the way, the guide relates ancient folk tales of the magical hidden worlds and describes how the town grew and developed in harmony with the Hidden Folk.



Naturally the town also offers plenty of more conventional outdoor activities, from golf and swimming to horse riding. Museums and galleries turn the spotlight on history, music and visual arts. And every

summer hordes of Norsemen invade to town for the annual Viking Festival.

So if you are looking for a unique place to visit that is full of natural wonders and shrouded in mystique and history – look no further. Come and visit us in Hafnarfjörður. We will welcome you with open arms.

By Ásbjörg Una Björnsdóttir

<http://www.visithafnarfjordur.is>

Date: 2009-11-30

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-living-on-a-lava-field-shrouded-in-folklore-article1044>