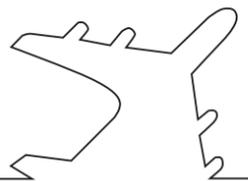


ESCAPE



TRAVEL // CULTURE // ADVENTURE



UP WE GO!

Six of the best viewing platforms

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WHEN THE FAGRADALSFJALL VOLCANO IN ICELAND ERUPTED BACK IN MARCH, IT TRIGGERED EXCITEMENT FROM LOCALS, THEN STARTED TO ATTRACT VISITORS FROM FURTHER AFIELD. **LAURA MILLAR** JOINS THEM

LAVA AT FIRST SIGHT



It's barely 9am on a weekday but already the car park just off route 427, which snakes along the coast of the Reykjanes peninsula in south-western Iceland, is filling up. An official sign demands parking fees, while Portaloo's await those in need and a blackboard advertises warming lamb soup, fish 'n' chips and hot dogs. All the infrastructure around a typical tourist attraction is here - but just five months ago, neither any of this, nor the tourist attraction itself, actually existed.

That's because it was only on Friday March 19, at around 8.45pm, that a completely new phenomenon announced itself - by shooting tons of lava spectacularly into the sky. This volcano,

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THE HOT LIST MORE NEWS THIS WEEK



Hot tub time machine

Pimp up a hot tub experience by moving from the back garden to the Thames. The Skuna Hot Tub Boat is a bespoke, electric, self-drive, wood-fired hot tub, available for launching either from Canary Wharf or Lakeside, Essex. It fits seven people, who will enjoy the toasty, 38C water temperature while gliding past some of the country's most iconic London sights.

From £225 for 75 minutes, skunaboats.com



Members only

Subscription boxes are a 'thing' for food - and now for travel too. Opodo Prime - dubbed 'the Netflix of travel' and accessed via web or app - is the leading online travel agent subscription service in the UK. For £59.99 a year, it offers a range of deals including guaranteed discounts on all flights, and up to 50 per cent off on over two million accommodation options.

opodo.co.uk/prime



Hit the Huts!

Rural Cotswolds retreat The Fish is adding five new guest huts to its nature-focused accommodation this summer. Located on the 400-acre Farncombe Estate near Broadway, The Fish is already home to a mix of accommodation including chic shepherd's huts, three treehouses and a variety of rooms and suites. The new Hideaway Huts have a double bed and a roll-top bath.

From £330pn, thefishhotel.co.uk

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It's time to go with the flow

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located in an area called Geldingadalir, south of Fagradalsfjall mountain (itself a dormant volcano), is the first to erupt here for over 800 years. Did anyone know this was going to happen?

'We have several volcanic systems in Iceland, of which Fagradalsfjall is one,' says my enthusiastic guide, geologist Siggí Björgvinsson from Southcoast Adventures (day tour £558 for up to 12 people/£46pp, southadventure.is). 'We always know they will erupt again - it's just a matter of when. There had been no movement here for 7,000 years but plate tectonics [shifts in the earth that open up cracks to release built-up pressure] could have

been going on for some time. And six weeks before the eruption, quite strong seismic activity was recorded so we knew something was going on.'

Seismic activity is nothing new in Iceland - up to 100 earthquakes happen every single day, though most are barely noticeable. But these ones were big enough to warn the residents of small fishing village Grindavik, the closest inhabited place to the volcano, that something was afoot.

Six weeks before the eruption, quite strong seismic activity was recorded

'That night I was sitting at home having a beer,' recalls Siggí, 'and my Facebook group of fellow geology geeks suddenly started, well, erupting with activity. Someone set up a call and just yelled, "It's begun!" You could see the red-yellow flare in the sky all the way from Reykjavik [over 30 miles away]. Annoyingly, I couldn't get there straight away as I had to work the next day but I've made up for it since - today will be my 16th visit.'

I bombard Siggí with questions and learn that because the lava was initially so thick and sticky, like treacle, you'd have been able to outpace it, but that now it's more liquid - well, not so much. It comes out at around 1,300C and burns its way through everything in its path. Already it's spread its way across the valley floor, creating what's known as a lava field, and today we're aiming to see the newest section, which flowed down only a couple of weeks ago, and walk up the side of a hill to peer into the craters.

Siggí sees my apprehension and laughs: 'Don't worry, we call this a tourist eruption, as it's not dangerous - although initially it released some toxic gases - it doesn't move that fast and there's no ash fall.'

Iceland's last major eruption, Eyjafjallajökull, in 2010, shut down most of European airspace thanks to the sheer volume of ash it spewed out into the atmosphere. As we prepare to hike to the top, I can smell sulphur and see plumes of smoke at the edges of the lava field, a sign it's still moving and destroying grass and vegetation in its way. Before we reach the top, thick fog descends.

'Here, we say that if you don't like the weather, there'll be more along in five minutes,' jokes Siggí but, sadly, the fog is here to stay and my dream of staring into a fiery hellscape today is foiled. We make our way back to the lava field, which has mostly cooled down to the barely more temperate 300C. At its very edges, however, the hardened black basalt is touchable, and I even walk on it, marvelling at the fact it's now become an immutable part of Iceland's landscape.

Siggí tells me further eruptions could go on for the next few decades or it could all stop next week. My advice? Go now and get it while it's hot.

Iceland is currently on the green list. Always check entry and departure requirements on gov.uk

Burning love: Laura on the still-smoking lava field at the Fagradalsfjall volcano, which started erupting, below, in March, and the aurora borealis at Iceland's Northern Light Inn



CORE BLIMEY THREE MORE UNDERGROUND-POWERED ICELANDIC HOTSPOTS



■ Thermal water heated by the earth's core feeds into Iceland's Sky Lagoon. Unlike its well-known sister, the Blue Lagoon, this spa resort is completely man-made. From £40pp, skylagoon.com



■ There's bubble trouble at the geothermal area of Seltún, also on the Reykjanes peninsula. A series of scorching, muddy pools, the water here reaches over 100C and is toxic.



■ The nearby Gunnhver geothermal area has scalding hot steam gushing furiously out of vents in the ground, looking like dragon's breath, and milky blue pools of water bubble nearby.



Discover The World has three nights including car rental, accommodation at Northern Lights Inn and Hotel Klettur, and a full-day Reykjanes peninsula and volcano tour from £568; flights from London to Reykjavik from £140 return, icelandair.com

