

# GOLF ICELAND COURSE REVIEWS

## INTRODUCTION

IAGTO's Peter Walton and Giles Greenwood visited and played at the majority of GolfIceland's 18-hole courses in August 2009. The weather was particularly pleasant during the entire week with sunshine and temperatures of 17-23 degrees C and with little wind.

The objective is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of each course, but to identify details that are relevant to the construction of a golf tourism industry for Golf Destination Iceland. We have drawn on information presented here in the main IAGTO Golf Tourism Strategy Report.

## REYKJAVIK

### Keilir Golf Course

Established in 1967, the course is unique in that the first 9 holes are played through Lava, whilst the second 9 holes can be classed as Links. It is located 10 minutes from Reykjavik and close to the port, providing good access for visitors. The clubhouse is modern and has all the necessary facilities, including locker rooms and showers, as well as a restaurant. There is a golf course guide and good on course signage.

Driving to the course will not fill the visiting golfer with anticipation as you have to drive past a large Aluminium works, but as soon as you drive up to the course its all forgotten. The practice facilities are very impressive with large putting greens, indoor heated bays and heated mats. There is also a fitting centre with launch monitor equipment. In our opinion for the visitor this course is on a par with Grafarholt as probably the best in Iceland.



The front 9 holes through lava are visually exciting and interesting to play. Carved out of the lava it is not that difficult and you do have opportunities to play out of the lava if you find your ball, however one important consideration is that doing this is likely to damage the visitor's clubs. The back 9 is a links course which lets you 'open your shoulders' after the accuracy needed for the front 9. The back 9 has wonderful sea views that any golfer will enjoy. The course was also in very good condition with manicured fairways, deep, well maintained bunkers and quick greens.

The only negative was that it was extremely busy (1300 members). Even taking this into account, we would consider this to be the most appealing golf course in the Reykjavik area for visiting golfers – particularly proficient golfers.

The course receives approximately 20 tourist visitors per week, either booking direct or coming off the cruise ships. Leisure business is up but corporate business is down.

- 18 holes / 5852m / Par 71 & 9 holes Academy Course (Par 32)
- Buggy Hire: Yes
- Range Facilities: Yes, ISK 500 for 50 balls
- Rental Clubs: Yes but not named branded: ISK 1500
- Trolleys: ISK 500
- Handicap Limit: 34

### Sudurness Golf Course

Established in 1964, Sudurness has 530 members and in 2008 enjoyed 6 months of summer greens (April/May-September/October). The course is located 45 minutes from Reykjavik, but only 10 minutes from Keflavik International Airport. The managers are trying to attract stopover business as there are three good hotels (two 4 star and one 3 star) in the nearest town, but they have no tour operator business as yet. The clubhouse is a little tired, with a small restaurant and locker room. The Practice facilities include a covered bay and putting green.



Visually the course has stunning views and the course looks inviting. In our view, 70% links, 30% parkland. Some spectacular holes including their signature hole which is often quoted as being 'the most famous hole in Iceland'. It's not a demanding course, so players will invariably leave with a smile on their face. The course has a good quality course guide in Icelandic & English, however the on course signage is limited, so the visitor will constantly need to refer to the course guide. Overall a nice course but no 'wow' factor.

- 18 holes / 5983m / Par 72
- Trolleys : ISK 500
- Range Balls: ISK 300 for 40
- 6-8 Rental club sets (not top quality)

### Korpa Golf Club

This course is part of the Grafarholt, Leynir triumvirate and a very busy course. It was once an old dairy farm. The clubhouse has a small cafe that does home cooked food. Indoor and outdoor covered practice facilities, although fairly rudimentary but satisfactory for a 10-minute warm up. There is a golf course guide and signage on the course.

The course is a bit of a mixed bag as the opening couple of holes are not that interesting and have the appearance of not being that well maintained, with long walks from green to tee (some 150m from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup>), but it has some spectacular holes too. This course skirts the Atlantic ocean for a few holes, so offering great views. The holes are challenging. Remarkably, the course looked in very good condition, which is not necessarily the impression that the visitor will receive from the clubhouse or the first couple of holes.



- 18 holes / 6035m / Par 72 & 9 holes Academy Course (Par 33)
- Buggy Hire: Yes
- Rental Clubs: Yes but not named brand. ISK 3,000
- Trolleys: ISK 500

### Grafarholt Golf Club

This is considered Reykjavik's principal golf club. There are a number of key indications to the visitor that this is the city's most prestigious club and holds important tournaments. There is a large sign at the entrance to the golf club announcing to everyone that they have arrived – not seen elsewhere on the island. There are clearly visible score boards and other 'championship' related course furniture. Practice facilities are excellent with a large three storey driving range with multi area chipping and putting greens.

The clubhouse has all necessary facilities, probably the biggest in Iceland, with two restaurants serving snacks and quality a la carte meals.



Like most other clubs it has golf course signage and a golf course guide; but here also a Starter gets everyone off on time, adding a professional dimension to the experience, but it is also a necessary function at this, the busiest club in Iceland. Like Keilir, it's a very busy course with nearly every flight consisting of four players. The golf course is inland, with great height elevations and a good variety of interesting holes. However, to the visitor the views over Reykjavik will not be as inspiring as some of the more natural views offered from other courses.

Grafarholt is a tough but fair test, which all levels will enjoy, which is a sign of a good design. Our experience was that even though players were held up at some tees, round time was still within a very respectable 4 hours.

The signage works well and the golf traveller would enjoy this course, both for the off course amenities as well as the on course amenities.

- 18 holes / 6057m / Par 71
- Buggy Hire: Yes
- Rental Clubs: Yes but not named branded: ISK 3,000
- Trolleys: ISK 500
- Maximum handicap: 36 men and 36 ladies

### Oddur Golf Club

This course is a 15-20 minute drive inland from Reykjavik and the first thing that the visitor will notice is how well manicured the facility is, from the grass verges and the car park to the cleanliness of the buggies. You can tell this is a well run facility. The clubhouse is spacious, clean and serves a range of hot and cold snacks and meals. The practice facilities include a very impressive 9 hole short course with Astroturf tees and very well maintained greens.

The course is similar to a Surrey heathland style course and is very undulating. Also similar to Keilir in that it features lava on a number of holes, thus adding variety. Soaring views across Iceland also make it visually pleasing. The course is in very good condition even though it has 1400 members that all play in a short space of time. Even with this number of members, they are running at 86% capacity, and have room for increased visitor numbers. They have already produced tailored golf packages and are ready to go. They have a golf course guide and on course signage and it is the only course I played that gives free trolleys.



- 18 holes / 5908m / Par 71 & 9 hole Academy Course
- Buggy Hire: Yes
- Rental Clubs: Yes
- Trolleys: Free

### **GKG Golf Club**

This course is situated next to Oddur, 15 minutes from Reykjavik but doesn't have the spectacular views that its neighbour has. Despite its proximity, GKG is completely different to Oddur - the clubhouse is a small building that just houses the restaurant, the General Manager's office and toilets, while the pro shop is a wooden building next door. This does not necessarily promote confidence in the visiting golfer when walking to the first tee, however they will be pleasantly surprised by the number of terrific views to many holes on the course, which appears to be a feature of golf in Iceland.

The course has good signage, has a golf course guide, is in good condition and offers great variety to the golfer and is a challenge. Again, providing the golfer does not require great clubhouse facilities then all levels will enjoy this course. Recent quotes about this course include 'The second toughest in Iceland' & 'Best Greens in Iceland'.

- 18 holes / 5822m / Par 71 & 9 holes / 2559 Par 34
- Buggy Hire: Yes
- Range Facilities: Yes
- Rental Clubs: Yes. Unnamed brands: ISK 2,000
- Trolleys: ISK 500



### **Leynir Golf Club**

This course is 40 minutes from Reykjavik and the drive from the city is very scenic. Clubhouse facilities are again not of the highest level, being somewhat smaller than those of GKG. The course has a mixture of some challenging holes, but also some which the visiting golfer might find less interesting.

There are seldom problems getting a tee time at the course as Reykjavik residents prefer not to travel too far for a round of golf. There is a golf course guide and good signage throughout the course. Although it presents an enjoyable experience to the visiting golfer, it would not necessarily be considered to be a 'stand out' course for tourists.

- 18 holes / 5973m / Par 72

## **VESTMAN ISLAND**

### **Vestman Islands Golf Club**

For golfers, a visit to Vestman Island is likely to be one of their best experiences of Golf Destination Iceland. Whilst it is not the best golf course in the country, it is the entire experience and uniqueness that will make a visit to play Vestman Islands Golf Club an essential element of most first time golf visitors to Iceland. The anticipation of getting on the course and its wonderful views were extremely positive.

The clubhouse offers spectacular views and has a very smart lounge and terrace on the first floor, although from a practical point of view the changing facilities are not that good.

There is history in and around the golf course and the island provides stories of interest to visitors both centuries old and in more recent times. The golf course condition was good and it had some very tricky greens, some of which could be seen as a bit too punishing after the hard work needed to reach them! The biggest obstacle to an enjoyable round of golf for the first time visiting golfer will simply be the navigation of the course. There are many occasions when it will not be clear to the visitor which line to take off the tee (and in some cases which green to aim for). Some second shots also provide a similar challenge. Green to tee navigation will improve once the Next Tee signs have been returned. Although there is a golf course guide, distance markers on the course are few and far between and not always easy to find. This can be a cause of slow play or bad club selection for visiting golfers who are keen to enjoy every aspect of their experience in this wonderful setting.

- 18 holes / 5403m / Par 70
- Practice Facilities: Multi tiered 27 hole putting green



## AKUREYRI

### Akureyri Golf Course

For visiting golfers, the only reason for them to fly north to Akureyri will be the excitement of playing on the most northerly 18-hole golf course in the world and/or experiencing midnight golf at its brightest. Snow melts at the end of April/Mid-May and then the green keepers need time to renovate and prepare. Therefore it is playable from mid-June to end August or mid-September. The Midnight Sun is at its height from 20 June-25 July.

The immediate surroundings of the golf course are not particularly attractive but the mountainous backdrop on a clear day provides a memorable setting. The clubhouse is fairly typical of a rural golf course with 180 members. This is a walking course as there are only a couple of buggies and although rental clubs are available they are not brand quality. The course is undergoing major renovations particularly to the greens with some landscaping on some of the fairways. Although a number of the greens have been replaced, for budgetary reasons it will take a couple of years to complete these renovations. On some of the tees it is difficult to find a comfortably flat area on which to stand and there are quite a number of blind shots both from the tees and on the fairways. The front 9 and back 9 are quite different with the front 9 currently offering the better experience for visiting golfers. The managers and staff are very pleasant and will make visitors very welcome.



For the time being (until the renovations have been completed) the course is not of sufficiently high quality to attract visiting golfers purely for the golf experience. However, it will attract golfers who wish to play the most northerly 18-hole courses in the world, and if promoted as an adventure and a unique experience the course is an important part of Golf Destination Iceland's golf product.

Accessibility to the course is good with visitors even being able to participate in the weekend tournaments staged primarily for members. Tournaments usually at 08:00am with tee times available from 2:00pm onwards. Members can only book 2 days in advance. On weekdays there is plenty of capacity for visitor golf.

The Arctic Open takes place in the last week of June and although in the past it has attracted up to 30% of participants from abroad, this number has declined.

Akureyri has a newly extended long runway so they hope to attract more direct international flights. There is currently a flight to Copenhagen on Fridays & Sundays. The town of Akureyri with a population of 17,000 has a couple of good hotels (including Kea Hotel with internet access), local Akureyri beer and two very good restaurants including Frederick V. At the peak of the summer the town has an international atmosphere. 62 cruises ships came through last year. July is a good month for whale watching and there is good salmon fishing about one hour's drive from town.

- Golf course guide

## ICELANDIC COUNTRYSIDE

### Kidjaberg Golf Course

An hour from Reykjavik, Kidjaberg is an excellent golf course in an interesting location. It is the most accessible of Iceland's 18-hole export ready golf courses outside of the immediate vicinity of the capital. It is easy to reach even for self-driving golfers, with only 3 junctions to navigate in the entire journey. It will also give visitors a taste of Iceland as the journey will take the visitor through lava fields, past gas vents, over escarpments, past a volcanic crater that is easily visited and into summer-house countryside.

The clubhouse is welcoming with good clean locker and shower rooms and the offering of home cooking. There is a starter's cabin and the impression upon arrival is of a well run golf club.



The course is in very good condition and has some spectacular views over the White River and Horse Lake. On a clear day the Hekla Volcano can be seen in the distance. Insects can be a nuisance but they appear not to be biters! The two nines are quite different but both offer many interesting views.

Surprisingly, the tee-box 'furniture' around the course is exemplary and a lesson for many golf courses in more popular golf destinations around the world. There are tee box signs on both the men's AND the ladies tees. Benches as well as toilet facilities are available at strategic locations. It is a steep course to walk but there are plenty of buggies for visitors. It doesn't really need next tee signs except from the green of hole 12 to the 13<sup>th</sup> tee.

Accessibility is good from Monday to 12 noon Friday and the course is of course popular with summer-house owners at weekends with some visitors from Reykjavik.

- 3,500-5,000 from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening
- ISK 300 for driving range balls
- Golf course guide

### Fludir Golf Course

About 90 minutes drive from Reykjavik, Fludir is not in a location that would normally be visited by tourists, although the drive from Fludir to Geysir is very interesting. There is also a hotel in town and the region is very popular with summer-houses.

Fludir golf course became 18 holes in 1985 with the clubhouse being converted from a sheep shed. The course is simple in design on most holes but well maintained and with surprisingly excellent greens which are fairly small but undulating. The course is likely to appeal to older couples who will enjoy the countryside and the chance to play a nice course that is not too challenging. They will feel that they have had a taste of Icelandic countryside living, and it is therefore important that they get to experience also the lamb grill, homemade pizzas with local mushrooms and the owner's hospitality.

Even this course has a golf course planner and is easy to navigate. With 180 members accessibility is fine during weekdays with 30-40 players per day. Weekends are busier from 09:00-14:00 although there will usually be no problem accommodation visitors. Visitors should take into account that the afternoons can be colder than the mornings with the wind blowing in from the sea.



- 5061m
- Only 1 buggy although more can be called in from nearby courses for special groups

### Hella Golf Course

90 minutes from Reykjavik, this is a long trek from the city for a single round of golf. However there is a truly excellent ranch-hotel nearby and once the new port is ready Hella Golf Course will only be 20 minutes or so from the ferry arriving from Westman Island.

On a clear day 5 volcanoes and Westman Island is visible from the golf course. There are just 150 members (70% local, 30% from Reykjavik). There is no signage to the clubhouse from the small road on which it is located, and the course and clubhouse are somewhat obscured. There are renovations currently being undertaken, but unfortunately after a long drive, the clubhouse facilities for visitors are not great.



This is a deceptively tough course with small greens. Its stand out features are its 'moguls' which give this flat course character. It can be very windy and players need to be able to drive accurately and control their approach shots to make the most out of this course. It is an good course to walk although there are 6 buggies for hire.

- Buggies: 3,500 per buggy (6 buggies)
- 10 sets of Rental Clubs (they buy 3 new sets per year)
- Members can book 7 days in advance

