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# Iceland and Elves: A Guide to the Country's Beliefs in Magical Creatures

Written by **RICH WARREN** | Updated 04/06/20

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Did you know there are 13 varieties of elves in Iceland, ranging in size from a few inches tall to almost human height? And that one variety has blue skin? Yes, elves—about half of the Icelandic people either flat out believe in them or won't dismiss the possibility that they exist.

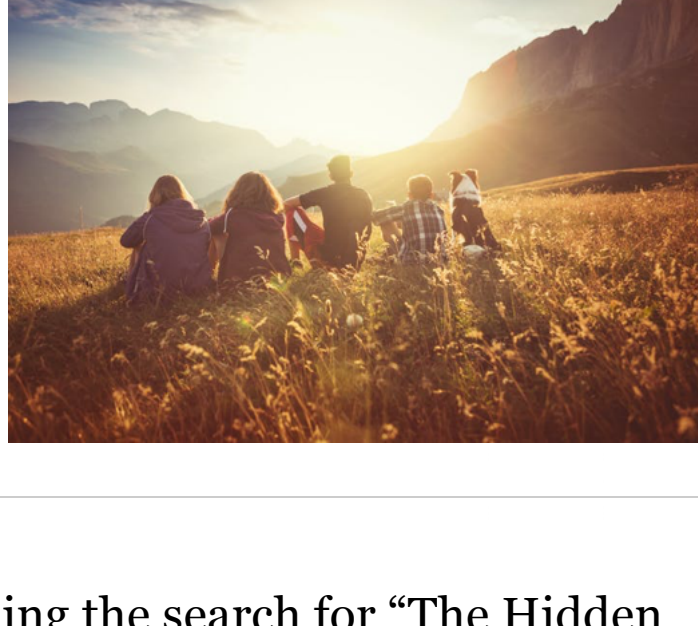
Inhabiting another dimension (but sharing our world), elves reside in the huge rocks commonly found in the volcanic landscape of Iceland so that humans won't be able to pass through and disturb them. They're said to be distinguished by their old-fashioned manner of dress, but no, they do not wear pointy hats nor curly-toed shoes.

Fact or folklore? Many, especially foreigners, will say folklore, but Icelanders share true (at least to them) stories of encountering them. Construction crews building new highways frequently steer clear of rocks where elves are said to be residing, or they carefully move the rocks to another site. A former member of the Icelandic parliament swears his life was saved in a traffic accident by a family of elves in a nearby rock.

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Visitors to Iceland can decide for themselves by joining the search for “The Hidden Folk,” as the Icelandic people call their elven neighbors, and here are a few ways to do so.

## Graduate From Elf School

There's no better introduction to the centuries-old traditions about “The Hidden Folk” than the [Elf School of Reykjavik](#). Incongruously located in a drab commercial building, the school has no chalk boards, no desks, and no final exam; it's just a cozy parlor-like setting where students sit in a circle and are regaled with stories by the headmaster, Magnús Skarphéðinsson.

The headmaster's conversation is sprinkled with “facts,” such as the differences between the 13 varieties of elves. He also weaves in tales of all the gnomes, dwarfs, and trolls that roam the Icelandic countryside, and also mixes in anecdotes or tangents about elf-related culture.

Only 2 to 3 percent of humans can see elves, according to Magnús, and although he doesn't count himself among them, he remains a firm believer. For more than three decades, he's collected oral histories from more than 1,300 people who've encountered the creatures. For instance, sometimes the mischievous elves borrow household items—one amazing story centers around a cow that was borrowed for several weeks from a farmer's barn, disappearing and then returning with no footprints in the snow outside the barn. Other times the elves bestow gifts or offer advice—one businessman routinely consults them before signing contracts. There are even legends concerning elven-human romances, but beware that those who fall in love with an elf may well be required to enter their world and leave our own.

With such a large catalog of collected stories, Magnús likes to think of himself as an elf historian, and of course, an educator whose research he's keen to discuss.

Halfway through the afternoon (the entire course is less than a day), Magnús serves delicious Icelandic cream cheese-filled pancakes and bestows a diploma upon each of his students, certifying them as graduates of the Elf School of Reykjavik.

Classes, which last three to four hours, are conducted in English and are held on most Fridays and at special sessions on other days. The cost is 56 euros, and you can register in advance via email ([mhs@vortex.is](mailto:mhs@vortex.is)).

## Take an Elf Walk

Take a quick and easy bus ride from Reykjavik to the scenic seaside town of [Hafnarfjörður](#), a place supposedly teeming with elves. In fact, it's considered to be their capital, with the Elf King and Queen residing inside a cliff overlooking the town. Consider taking an [Elf Walk through Hafnarfjörður](#) with the delightful Sigurbjörg Karlsdóttir. (You can call her Sibba.)

Sibba's route leads to the beautiful, otherworldly Hellişgerði Park, a frozen lava flow with gnarled, twisted rocks, multi-colored moss, and equally twisted trees, while she tells stories of voices that have been heard inside these rocks since hundreds of elves allegedly reside in the area. There's even a giant troll who had the misfortune of being out when the sun rose and was frozen into a huge rock—it's easy to make out his “mouth” and “nose.”

The walk ends at Hamarinn, the cliff that doubles as the royal residence. Believers swear that cracks sometimes appear in the rock face, and beautiful music can be heard coming from inside. Enter at your own risk because when the crack closes, you'll be trapped inside forever. Along the cliff is the site of a school, where Sibba claims elf children sometimes attend alongside their human counterparts. (You'll also find panoramic views of Iceland's west coast from here.)

Sibba's conversation en route is peppered with other elven information. Want to maximize your chances of seeing an elf? Stand at a crossroads during the summer solstice when elves are frequently on the move. She'll tell about the “Yule Lads,” prank-playing elves that come down from the mountains for 13 consecutive days at Christmas. And she'll show evidence of how elves can turn surly if humans try to disturb their homes. In one instance, you'll see a huge steel bar embedded in a rock that couldn't be split when workers tried to build a home on the property. In fact, so many accidents befell the workers that the project was abandoned altogether. It's a simple message: Elves are mostly friendly, but disturb them at your peril!

Sigurbjörg Karlsdóttir conducts her [Elf Walks](#) in Hafnarfjörður on Tuesdays and Fridays at 2:30 p.m. in the summertime and at other times by request. It costs 4,500 Icelandic krona (\$31), and you can reserve by emailing her at [sibbak@simnet.is](mailto:sibbak@simnet.is).

## Elves in Iceland

Elves aren't just confined to the region around Reykjavik. Plenty of people will point you to places associated with “The Hidden Folk.” One of those people is [Ragnhildur \(“Ragga”\) Jonsdóttir](#), who is one of the principal negotiators between elves and humans when troubles arise. She assisted in the movement of an “elf chapel” when it was threatened by highway construction and made international headlines in 2014 when she flew with a number of her elf friends to New York City to confer with the elves residing in the huge rocks in Central Park. (When I visited Ragga, she startled me by claiming an elf was in the room with us, listening to our interview.) Learn more about her and her elf-related talks, as well as information about a 2019 documentary she's featured in called “The Seer and the Unseen” on [the website here](#).

Other towns Ragga says are worthy of a visit are Borgarfjörður Eystri in eastern Iceland, where another “Elf Palace” can be found. Bjartmarsstein rock on the seashore near Reykhólasveit is reputedly a place where the elves have a market; people claim they've seen ships arriving bearing goods for the elves to buy. And the rocky hill called Tungstapi in western Iceland is supposedly an elven cathedral and the home of an elf bishop.

Iceland's volcanic landscape has huge boulders strewn everywhere, so the elves have no shortage of places to live. Watch for places where people have painted doors in the rocks or constructed tiny houses in their backyards, hoping to lure elves to take up residence. It's advisable not to actually climb on any rocks or make loud noises nearby—that makes the elves very unhappy. According to Ragga, if you're a lucky person blessed with the ability to see elves, just stand there and think independent thoughts. Should an elf appear, have a conversation, ask some questions. Then go report your experience to Magnús at the Elf School.

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