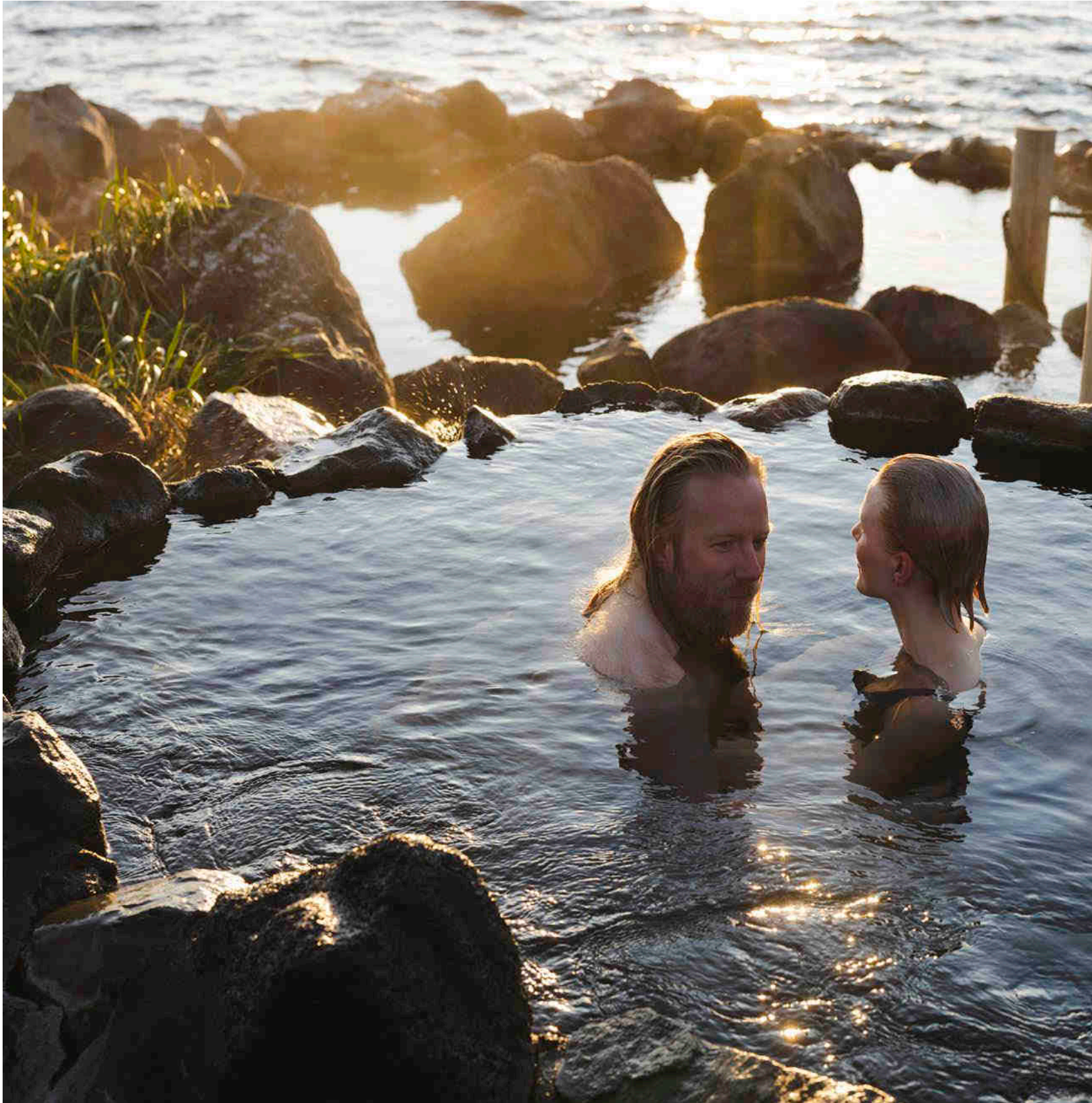






HVAMMSVÍK HOTSPRINGS

The Wild Beauty of One of Iceland's Hidden Treasures

| BY CHRISTOPHER KANAL

Iceland's magnificent unspoiled and unearthly nature has been drawing visitors for centuries. The country boasts 10,000 waterfalls and 600 geothermal springs alone. The latter have provided Icelanders with warmth, relaxation and rejuvenation since the Vikings first settled here back in 874 AD. Communal bathing in hot springs became interwoven with Icelandic culture over the subsequent centuries.

Even by Iceland's standards of superlatives, Hvammsvík Hot Springs has a spectacular setting. Located a mere 45 minutes drive from the capital Reykjavík, it is nestled off the beat and track in a glacial valley next to Hvalfjörður or Whale Fjord on the tip of the North Atlantic Ocean. Surrounded by majestic snow capped mountains and ringed with midnight black pebble beaches threaded with golden wild grass speckled with snow, Hvammsvík is centered around eight pools of various sizes and temperatures and a large steam bath. The facilities blend seamlessly into the natural landscape - local stone and timbers matched with cool black metal. Hvammsvík is not just hot springs - there is luxury accommodation set in the rocky slopes surrounding it. Since opening in 2022, the inspired brainchild of former WOW Air boss Skúli Mogensen and his partner, interior designer Gríma Björg Thorarensen, the hot spring has been drawing discerning guests and much loved by local Icelanders, no doubt drawn to a place that has remained true to the spirit of its Viking roots.

Pure, Invigorating Magic

The main reception area is located within a re-imagined Nissen hut that reflects the area's World War II role as a staging post for US and British naval and air forces - Catalina flying boats once landed on the idyllic ocean lagoon front of the building. The reception area is tastefully designed in a cozy understated Nordic style complete with artworks. The welcome is warm and friendly and the atmosphere intimate. Unlike other hot springs in the country the numbers of visitors is kept down to make the experience extremely relaxing and unhurried. Hvammsvík is unique in that regard.

Upon entering the comfortable changing facilities, one for men and one for women, and after a quick shower we entered the first pool and headed to the swim-up bar for a cool glass of sparkling wine. Each of the eight stone-surrounded pools has a different temperature from warm to piping hot. The pools closest to the ocean follow the rhythm of the moon and tides so the temperature can fluctuate but that just adds to the magic, or Töfrandi in Icelandic, of the place. The experience was invigorating and we enjoyed the warm,

mineral filled waters around us and the incredible view across the lagoon as the moon rose in the liquid blue skies of an early winter dusk. Braver guests opted to wade into the seawater lagoon where temperatures drop to single figures but we decided against it preferring the lulling warmth of the hot pool. After spending two hours in the water - you can easily stay longer - we arose and headed to the gorgeous thermal steam bath and afterwards returned to the main building for a late lunch at the Stormur Bistro.

Tasty local fayre

Using only locally-sourced ingredients the menu is simple but inspired. We opted to share Hvammsvík's delicious seafood soup and a hearty sourdough sandwich filled with roast beef, pickled cucumber, sesame sauce, egg and fried garlic. The soup was outstanding - easily one of the best we tasted in Iceland. A steaming, thick coconut based-broth was generously filled with scallops and shrimp and topped with pecans, almonds and pistachio. The service at Hvammsvík was faultless throughout our stay. The staff here are polite, genuine and responded intuitively to any requests we had.

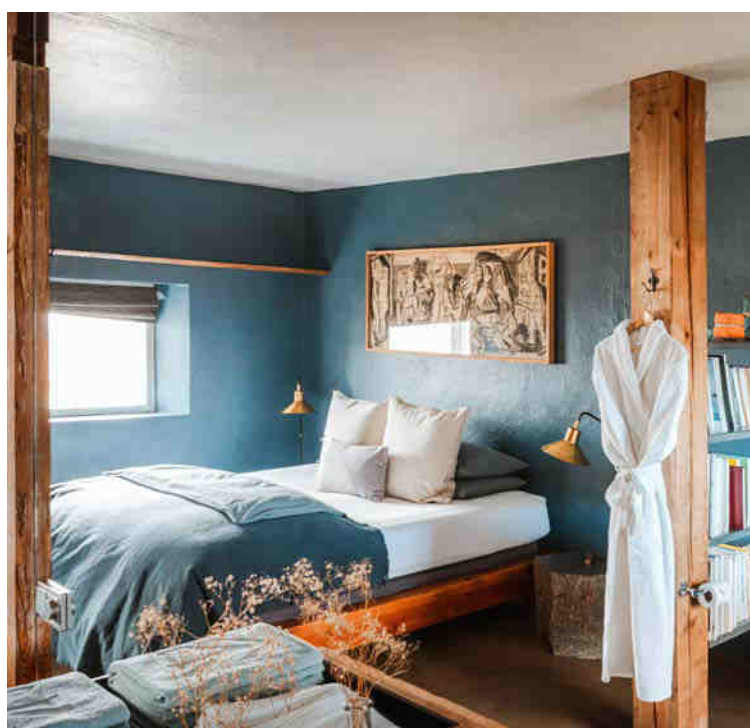
A night at the Hilltop House

As dusk turned to evening and the western skies dazzled with pastel reds and vivid greys we were driven to our lodge for the night. A short three minute drive brought us up to the magnificent Hilltop House that overlooks the fjord on one side and Hvammsvík on the other. Its location is spectacular with panoramic views for several kilometers around. The black Hilltop House is one of 12 luxury retreats at Hvammsvík. There are three other large renovated historic houses like this - the Lake House, the Club House and the Farm House - and eight newly built Artist Lodges dotted in a crescent around the hill all set well apart for privacy. Guests staying at Hvammsvík can access the Barn House, which has a recreation room, a newly built gym and lounge area and leads to a private hot spring on the beach.

The mysterious whale fjord

The Hilltop House is spacious, coolly designed and well equipped. Originally built by the Royal Navy as a clandestine communication headquarters in the war, the building has been expertly renovated as a luxury rustic lodge. Local rumor has it that in 1942 Sir Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt had secret meetings in this very house, which was code named Falcon Crest. Legends too abound in this area of Huldúfólk, or hidden people who live inside the rocks as well as trolls and witches. Below shapeshifting half seal, half human selkies haunt the shores and dark waters of Hvalfjörður.

Inside classic and modern Icelandic art hangs from the walls, books line heavy oak shelves and a fireplace dominates the main, living area. The impressive open-plan kitchen has everything you need: a chef's gas cooker sat on oak kitchen tabletop, a cavernous SMEG fridge and gourmet coffee maker. With three well sized bedrooms (one with double beds) and two bathrooms, the house can very comfortably sleep six. Space abounds for short or extended stays. Outside the house has two terraces - one is glass covered with electric heaters to banish the cold - furniture, a barbecue and a stone lined fire pit with wood seating. Best of all is the natural hot spring with two terraced pools tucked into rocky slope just below the house accessed on a pathway set with wooden steps. It was a cold night so we returned to the warmth

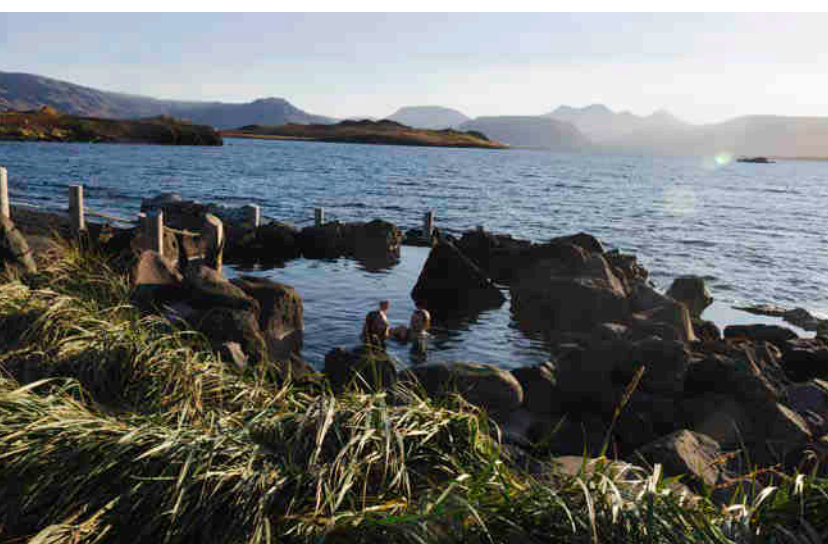
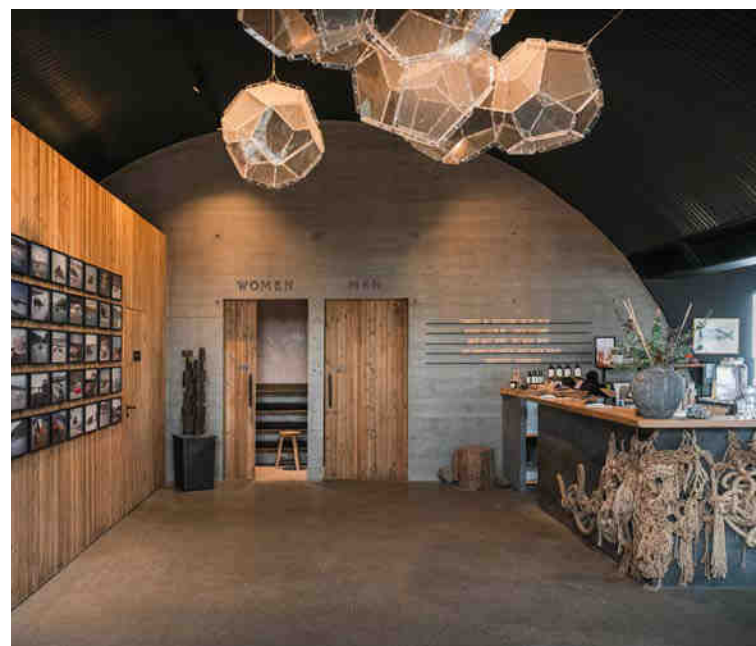




inside. We relaxed on bespoke leather furniture and gazed out through wide panoramic windows. The immense darkness outside was pricked by thousands of stars above us, their constellations criss crossing the night, as faint wisps of emerald green aurora began to languidly dance high up in the skies reaching to the north.

We stayed in the main bedroom - that includes an en-suite bathroom - on a very cozy king sized bed and fell asleep like content, exhausted children. In the summer months you can doze off to the sound of migrating whales gliding through the waters in the fjord below. We awoke just before dawn and were able to appreciate the full beauty of the location as the mountains reappeared in the emerging light around us. We tucked into a freshly prepared breakfast basket filled to the brim with artisan bread, Icelandic cheese and butter, home made pesto, ham and of course local Skyr yogurt.

Hvammsvík Hot Springs is unforgettable and gets into your skin in more ways than one. We will definitely be back. ❖



Entry to Hvammsvík Hot Springs starts at \$60pp.
 Artists Lodges from \$1,150 for two nights. The Hilltop House from \$3,000 for two nights.
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