

THE NEW ICELAND

Photographs by Alessandro Gandolfi





Sandgerði (Iceland): foreign workers process fish at AG Seafood. Sandgerði, and the Suðurnes region more generally, has for years had a very high proportion of migrant workers, particularly from Poland and Asia, including in the fishing and fish processing sectors. Fish processing has historically been one of the sectors in Iceland most reliant on migrant labour, which is estimated to account for around 50 per cent of the workforce.



Grindavik (Iceland): a few cars are driving along the road linking the village to the Blue Lagoon area. The road on the left, which is closed, has been covered by lava that flowed as a result of volcanic activity, which led to nine eruptions between December 2023 and August 2025: Iceland's landscape is changing extremely rapidly, even from a geological perspective.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Deisy Duran, a 29-year-old Venezuelan, has just thrown her bouquet to the women attending her wedding, in a hall at the Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar association. Deisy has just married Einar Sigurðsson, a 33-year-old Icelandic (to the bride's right): she met him online on the dating site Bumble, and they then met in person and fell in love on 21 October 2023. In 2024, she moved to Iceland permanently.

ON THIS ARCTIC ISLAND, IMMIGRANTS HAVE RISEN FROM 5 TO 20 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION IN JUST TWENTY YEARS. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A SMALL, INCLUSIVE EUROPEAN NATION SUDDENLY BECOMES MULTICULTURAL?

Iceland has historically built its identity around the idea of a small, linguistically homogeneous community closely tied to its land. Now everything is changing, and fast: in twenty years, the immigrant population on the island has risen from 17,000 to more than 77,000 people, out of a total population of around 400,000. In 2006, immigrants made up 5 percent of the population; today they account for 20 percent, and in some villages — such as Vík, 200 kilometres south of Reykjavík — as much as 67 percent. Almost all foreign residents are integrated and work in fishing, construction, farming and other sectors. Yet, as the OECD has documented, discrimination and forms of racism are increasing.



It is an epochal transformation unfolding in an environment that is itself changing just as rapidly, amid record heat, melting glaciers and threatening lava flows. Iceland has thus become a small laboratory for the future. The country is highly advanced in welfare provision, equality, gender rights and LGBTQ+ rights, but will it be able to manage such a rapid migratory transformation? Will the Icelandic social model survive even as Icelanders themselves change? “I arrived from Jamaica in 2001, when immigrants made up only 3 percent of the population,” says lawyer Claudia Ashanie Wilson, who is now also handling several cases involving undocumented migrants. “What we have seen in recent years has been a very rapid increase for such a small population. Should immigration be limited? Perhaps. But we should not forget that fertility here is at a historic low. And we need immigrants.”



Grindavík (Iceland): Marian Ziel, a 43-year-old Polish man, helps move sheep belonging to various farmers during the local 'réttir' – the large pre-autumn gathering that takes place after a whole summer spent outdoors and at liberty. Born in Mińsk Mazowiecki, Marian has a wife and children in Poland but has been coming to Iceland seasonally for the past twenty years to work on farms: "He doesn't say much," says Sandra Björk Ingadóttir, who works with him, "but he's a hard worker."



Grindavik (Iceland): people are walking along paths of black lava amidst the azure waters of the Blue Lagoon, Iceland's most famous geothermal spa. The company employs around 840 staff from 44 different countries, so much so that the Blue Lagoon itself describes its workforce as 'multicultural'.



In Seltjarnarnes (Iceland), 36-year-old American Sally Cowdin teaches ballet at the Óskandi dance school. Born in Kansas City, Sally is an actress, dancer and choreographer who has been living in Europe since she was 14 and in Iceland for two years: "A friend persuaded me to come, and now I'm really enjoying myself – there's a fabulous sense of community here."



Reykjavik (Iceland): Bilal Nlaman, a 21-year-old Afghan, at the Samhjálp centre, where he goes to eat almost every day. Samhjálp is a Reykjavik-based charity founded in 1973 that helps people in need, the poor or those struggling with addiction. Bilal, born in a small village near Jalalabad, left Afghanistan at the age of 13 and, after various misadventures in Europe, arrived in Iceland at the age of 17. However, due to complicated bureaucratic issues, he has been living in limbo for four years, without a residence permit and without a proper home.



In Vik (Iceland), the 34-year-old Scottish glaciologist Ailsa Guild, together with her mother Gail, who has come to visit her from Scotland, are strolling along the village's black sand beach. Born in Dundee, Ailsa came to Iceland to do a PhD in glaciology but is now director of the Katla Centre and engaged to her Icelandic fiancé Steinar: "I feel at home here; I love the connection with nature and the slower pace of life." In the village of Vik, 68 per cent of the inhabitants are of foreign origin.



Reykjavík (Iceland): Muslim worshippers pray at the Grand Mosque of Iceland. The Muslim community in Iceland is stable, well-organised and more visible in Reykjavík than it was twenty years ago (we are talking about around 3,500–4,000 people, 1 per cent of the total population), with mosques, imams and courses in the Qur'an and Arabic for children.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Wendill Galan Viejo, a 34-year-old Filipino nurse with a Master's degree in Nursing Management and Leadership from the University of Iceland, is giving a lecture to some colleagues at Landspítali University Hospital. Born in Cebu City, he has been in Iceland since 2015, where he found a job straight after graduating: "It wasn't easy to settle in – the Philippines is a tropical country – but I'm doing really well now. I really appreciate the clean air and water, and the balanced lifestyle between work, friends and leisure time."



Reykjavik (Iceland), a view of the working-class neighbourhood of Fellahverfi, to the east of the historic centre. Built in the 1970s, Fellahverfi is a neighbourhood of large blocks of flats, home to many immigrant families, where the average income is among the lowest in the city.



Reykjavik (Iceland): in a lecture theatre at Reykjavik University, a group of students are listening to a lecture on Arctic geopolitics given by Professor Kristín Ingvarsdóttir. In the centre is 29-year-old Nigerian Abigail Onerhime, an international relations student and supermarket cashier: "I'd like to stay in Iceland for another three years and then I'd like to explore Europe, perhaps going to the Netherlands or Norway."



In Reykjavik (Iceland), in a garden at Reykjavik University, Fatima Syeda Menahil, a 28-year-old from Pakistan, and Lii Liu, a 34-year-old from Wuhan, China, both PhD students in biotechnology, pose for a photo. Born in Lahore, Fatima is married and lives here in Iceland with her husband: "It's too hot in Pakistan; it's lovely here, and if everything goes to plan, we'll stay and live here."



In Reykjavík (Iceland), Tania Zarak Quintana from Mexico is styling her son's hair whilst her eldest daughter looks for clothes in her wardrobe. Tania, who moved to Iceland because of Covid in 2020, decided to settle there permanently: she is a film producer, the creator of two podcasts in Spanish and co-director of the Reykjavík Latin American Film Festival.



In Reykjavik (Iceland), 33-year-old American Andrew J. Yang gives piano lessons to Icelandic student Ragnhildur Björt at the Sigursveins D. Kristinssonar Music School. Andrew, born in San Francisco to a Taiwanese father and an American mother, is a professional pianist and former MMA fighter. He arrived in Iceland five years ago with his ex-girlfriend: "I've stayed here to live; people are straightforward and honest, even though it's difficult to make close friends."



Reykholt (Iceland): Julio Moukougou, a 28-year-old Italian-Ghanaian waiter (on the right), chats with some colleagues in the kitchen at Friðheimar. Julio arrived in Iceland four years ago to work during the summer season with his girlfriend at the time (with whom he is no longer together), and he has never left.



Reykjavik (Iceland), a detail of a block of flats in the working-class neighbourhood of Fellahverfi, to the east of the historic centre. Built in the 1970s, Fellahverfi is a neighbourhood of large blocks of flats, home to many immigrant families, where the average income is among the lowest in the city.



In Reykjavik (Iceland), 36-year-old Vitalja Petreikyte from Lithuania works as a labourer at the transport and logistics company TVG-Zimsen. She arrived in Iceland five years ago with her boyfriend Povilas to earn more money, and says, "I want to build a career, perhaps become a manager. "I like the people here in Iceland; they're very friendly, even though it's really, really cold."



Mathilde Plancq, aged 31, from Clermont-Ferrand, works alongside two colleagues in the organic greenhouse at the Sólheimar ecovillage (Iceland), where she is currently the manager. Founded in 1930 and now home to around a hundred people, Sólheimar combines environmental sustainability, productive activities and the social inclusion of people with disabilities, offering accommodation, employment, vocational training and social and cultural activities.



Hringvegur (Iceland): a wide river flows down to the sea from the Mýrdalsjökull glacier, Iceland's fourth-largest ice cap, which covers the active Katla volcano beneath it. One in three foreigners in Iceland lives outside the Reykjavík metropolitan area, working mainly in tourism, fishing and agriculture.



Reykjavík (Iceland): María Jiménez Pacífico, aged 36, is adjusting her daughter Zoe's sock alongside her Italian-Icelandic husband Raffaele Manna and his mother, Gutrun. María produces Colombian-inspired food products made in Iceland under the brand name Mijita, which she created herself. Born in Plato Magdalena, Colombia, María has lived in Reykjavík since she was 13 and used to work as a plus-size model for magazines and fashion shows.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Mahmoud Abusaada, a 34-year-old Palestinian nurse who works as head of the ALS unit at the Droplaugarstaðir care home, speaks with patient Baldur Hrafnkell Jónsson, 81, a former television producer and director of photography. Mahmoud arrived in Iceland in 2020; he is now married to an Icelandic woman and they have a baby girl who is just a few months old: "I come from Gaza and was looking for a safe country where I could work in the medical field – that's my dream. Of course, the winter here is long and dark, and the cost of living is extremely high."



Reykjavik (Iceland), the entrance to a house in the working-class neighbourhood of Fellahverfi, east of the historic centre. Built in the 1970s, Fellahverfi is a neighbourhood of large blocks of flats, home to many immigrant families, where the average income is among the lowest in the city. At the local school, 85 per cent of pupils are multilingual, and the most commonly spoken languages are Arabic, Polish and Filipino.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Martyna Ylfa Suszko, a 37-year-old Polish woman, arrives breathless at a business meeting. A graduate in English and Japanese from the University of Iceland, Martyna came to Reykjavik at the age of 13 with her parents, who later returned to Poland. She now works as an interpreter and is unmarried: "I don't want children; I'm happy as I am."



Reykjavik (Iceland), a view of the working-class neighbourhood of Bakkar, to the east of the historic centre. Built between the late 1960s and the 1970s, Bakkar is one of Reykjavik's lowest-income working-class neighbourhoods, home to immigrant families as well.



Reykjavik (Iceland): María Jiménez Pacífico, aged 36, is training staff who are preparing Colombian empanadas in the kitchen of Mijita, the company she founded. Born in Plato Magdalena, Colombia, María has lived in Reykjavik since she was 13 and used to work as a plus-size model for magazines and fashion shows.



Reykjavik (Iceland): 43-year-old Jamaican lawyer Claudia Ashanie Wilson poses in her office. Born in Montego Bay, Claudia moved to Iceland at the age of 18 for love and is now a highly regarded lawyer specialising in human rights, immigration and refugee law. "When I arrived 25 years ago, immigrants made up 3.1 per cent of the population; today they account for 21 per cent. That's been a very rapid increase for such a small society, and I understand the desire to limit their numbers. But the inhumane way in which the authorities sometimes treat migrants is unacceptable."



Reykjavik (Iceland), a concert at the Bíó Paradís venue as part of the fourth edition of the Reykjavík Latin American Film Festival, directed by Tania Zarak Quintana and Hugo Llanes, both from Mexico (the festival was founded by Hugo in 2022).



Photos of some international young people who have worked in the organic greenhouse at the Sólheimar ecovillage (Iceland). Founded in 1930 and now home to around a hundred people, Sólheimar combines environmental sustainability, productive activities and the social inclusion of people with disabilities, and offers accommodation, work, vocational training, and social and cultural activities.



Vik (Iceland): Andrei Babut, a 43-year-old Romanian from Arad (on the left), is working alongside an Icelandic labourer on roadworks. Andrei has been in Iceland for three years, although his family – his wife and two children – have decided to return to Romania because it is too cold. In the village of Vik, 68 per cent of the inhabitants are of foreign origin.



Reykjavik (Iceland): the four bridesmaids of Deisy Duran, a Venezuelan woman marrying the Icelander Einar Sigurðsson, are waiting for the bride in front of Bústaðakirkja, on the eastern outskirts of the capital.



Reykjavik (Iceland): the doorbells of a house in the working-class neighbourhood of Fellahverfi, east of the historic centre. One can see surnames of clearly foreign origin alongside typically Icelandic ones. Built in the 1970s, Fellahverfi is a neighbourhood of large blocks of flats, home to many immigrant families, where the average income is among the lowest in the city.



In Reykjavik (Iceland), at the Gerðuberg City Library, two young women – Marianna Heluisa Santos, aged 20, and Hellen Devi Niraula, aged 21 – are revising for a university psychology exam. Both are 'second-generation': Marianna is the daughter of a Brazilian father and an Icelandic mother, and was born here, as was Ellen, the daughter of two Nepalese parents.



In Rangárþing eystra (Iceland), a bridge spans the River Skógá a few kilometres from the sea. The river has its source in both the Eyjafjallajökull glacier and the westernmost part of the Mýrdalsjökull glacier. One in three foreigners in Iceland lives outside the Reykjavík metropolitan area, working mainly in tourism, fishing and agriculture.



Reykjavik (Iceland): at the Perlan Museum, a group of tourists are watching a visual display on a giant screen dedicated to volcanic activity in Iceland. Perlan is an interactive natural history museum that showcases Iceland's geological wonders and phenomena.



Reykjavik (Iceland): social housing flats in a courtyard off Snorrabraut Road, in the capital's historic centre, where the rich and affluent live side by side with pockets of low-income communities.



Keflavik (Iceland): Daa Atatreh, a 29-year-old Palestinian, is making a cappuccino in the café he opened three years ago, the Lava Sweet & Café. Born in Jenin and a former interior designer, he came to Iceland on the advice of a friend: "It's a safe place and I was granted a residence permit very quickly."



Hafnarfjörður (Iceland): Francesco Rista, a 29-year-old Italian, is getting ready for a guitar lesson at the Hafnarfjörður Music School. Born in Cuneo, Italy, and a lover of Baroque music, Francesco has been living in Iceland for a year with his girlfriend Emma. He used to work as a docker at the port but now works exclusively as a music teacher: "The island is small geographically but culturally it's enormous."



Reykholt (Iceland): Caterina Nowosad, a 25-year-old Polish woman, checks on the basil plants grown in the greenhouse at Friðheimar, where she works as a waitress. Born in Tomaszów Lubelski, Caterina arrived in Iceland three years ago with her boyfriend Norbert, who works in the kitchen at the same farm.



Reykjavik (Iceland), murals in the working-class neighbourhood of Fellahverfi, east of the historic centre. Built in the 1970s, Fellahverfi is a neighbourhood of large blocks of flats, home to many immigrant families, where the average income is among the lowest in the city. At the local school, 85 per cent of pupils are multilingual, and the most commonly spoken languages are Arabic, Polish and Filipino.



Keflavik (Iceland): Fida Abu Libdeh, a 46-year-old Palestinian, at the headquarters of Geosilica, the company she founded, which extracts silica from geothermal waters to produce food supplements, agricultural products and more. "I arrived in 1995 at the age of 16, and it was difficult to settle in: it took me 10 years to finish secondary school." Fida is now married to an Icelander, they have three children, and she is a successful entrepreneur dedicated full-time to geothermal innovation and the circular economy.



Grindavik (Iceland): the solidified black lava that erupted from a volcanic fissure on 14 January 2024 and flowed towards the village, destroying three houses (the remains of the homes can still be seen). No members of the three families lost their lives. Grindavik has for years been home to a significant number of migrant workers, particularly in the fish processing industry.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Sara Esfahani Zadeh, from Iran, works as a shop assistant in a supermarket at Reykjavik University. Born in Bijar (Iranian Kurdistan), she graduated in 2025 with a degree in Environment and Natural Resources from the University of Iceland. Sara is currently working and learning Icelandic, and lives with her husband and their four-year-old daughter: "I'd like to stay here and perhaps find a job in my field of study."



In Reykjavik (Iceland), 41-year-old New Zealander Maxine Hagan is rehearsing a Bollywood dance routine with a friend in a gym. Born in Auckland to Indian parents, she moved to Iceland in 2010, where she got married and had two children. Today, she is a show producer, choreographer and dancer.



Reykjavik (Iceland): Deisy Duran, a 29-year-old Venezuelan, is entering Bústaðakirkja, where she is to marry Einar Sigurðsson, a 33-year-old Icelandic. Deisy met Einar online, on the dating site Bumble, and they then met in person and fell in love on 21 October 2023. In 2024, she moved to Iceland permanently.



Kjósarskarðsvegur (Iceland), the Þórufoss waterfall on the Laxá í Kjós river, which was used as a filming location for **Game of Thrones**. Þórufoss is situated in the Kjós area, a rural and sparsely populated valley characterised by farmland, small settlements, rivers and gorges. One in three foreigners in Iceland lives outside the Reykjavík metropolitan area, working mainly in tourism, fishing and agriculture.



Krýsuvík (Iceland): a gathering of young people from around the world in a room at the so-called Krýsuvík House, one of the premises of the non-profit organisation Worldwide Friends. Founded in 2001, the organisation runs international volunteering programmes in Iceland focusing on environmental protection, sustainability and intercultural exchange.



Hafnarfjörður (Iceland): a building dominates Straumsvík Bay. It is a farm built around 1927, where cattle and sheep were once reared; it was later converted into an artists' centre and has been privately owned since 2018. One in three foreigners in Iceland lives outside the Reykjavík metropolitan area, working mainly in tourism, fishing and agriculture.



Reykjavik (Iceland), a view of Hólar, a low- to middle-income residential area. This working-class, multicultural neighbourhood lies to the east of the city centre and is characterised mainly by residential buildings from the 1970s, with a higher proportion of residents of foreign origin than the capital's average.



Photographs by Alessandro Gandolfi

+393387256647
alessandrogandolfi.com
info@alessandrogandolfi.com