

# A modern take on Iceland's traditional

BY CATHRYN DRAKE  
*Special to The Wall Street Journal*

**S**HOPPING ISN'T the first reason that comes to mind when pondering a trip to Iceland. The country's mysterious and stunning landscape, featuring waterfalls, volcanoes and hot springs, is the main draw. But Reykjavik has a thriving fashion scene, and a large number of contemporary designers are taking one of Iceland's most traditional styles as a starting point: the Icelandic sweater.

These colorful, thick sweaters with intricate yoke patterns are hand-knit from wool from the island's native sheep, a mainstay of the economy since the first settlers came from Norway in the ninth century. The wool, which has long, coarse, water-resistant fibers and a soft inner layer of fine hairs that provide insulation, is durable and warm, but also relatively light.

A number of Reykjavik boutiques are selling new versions of the traditional designs, which typically used a natural palette of whites, browns and grays with border patterns to make the sweaters thicker and warmer at the neck, waist and wrists.

The company Farmers Market, opened three years ago by designer Bergthora Gudnadottir and musician Jóel Pálsson in an industrial loft near the harbor, is revitalizing the hand-knit tradition with slimmer, longer profiles.

Mr. Pálsson says that the wool of the Icelandic sheep is like a "cross-breed between Jimi Hendrix and Fabio," referring to its unique combination of wiry and soft fibers. Farmers Market woolens are made with a finer weave than the traditional sweaters, and are enhanced by a special finishing process of washing and pressing after the garment is made. The sweaters range from 14,900 Icelandic kronur (about €120) for a cardigan to 19,000 kronur for the new Reykjahlid hooded cardigan, lined with wind-proof cotton.

The nubby monotone Kross cardigan comes in white, gray, or black with a separate pin closure adorned with Swarovski crystals. The dark brown zippered Stapi cardigan has a turtleneck and a vertical cable pattern.

Iceland's first lady—and fashion maven—Dorrit Moussaieff is a big fan; the day I visited the showroom a soft gray yoked cardigan in merino and the striking new fringed Oxl shawl (12,500 kronur) were ready to be dispatched to her.

Farmers Market also has a line of accessories, including belts made of North Atlantic salmon skin, processed in the northern fishing village Saudárkrókur, which has also supplied Nike and Jimmy Choo (Eyjarslóð 9; ☎ 354-552-1960; [www.farmersmarket.is](http://www.farmersmarket.is)).

Along Laugavegur and Bankastræti—essentially one continuous street lined with cafés, bakeries and bars in the central shopping district—are a number of fashion boutiques carrying the wares of Icelandic de-



signers.

Steinunn is the showcase for designer Steinunn Sigurd, former design director at Gucci, Calvin Klein and La Perla. She says she knitted her way into couture by working closely with Ralph Lauren on his knitwear collection shortly after graduating from Parsons School of Design in New York in 1986. "I still have my Knitting 101 book, which I started with at age nine," she says. "All women used to learn in school, but they stopped some years ago, which is a shame. I came out of a home-economics class, and I'm all for it."

Ms. Sigurd's spare designs with a twist include Italian merino hand-knits in the somber monochromes of the Icelandic landscape accented with feminine ruffles. In the fall collection a crewneck jacquard sweater and a chiffon column dress will be adorned with a pattern inspired by contemporary Icelandic artist Hildur Bjarnadottir. Ms. Sigurd has just been given this year's Torsten and Wanja Söderberg Prize, the first time this annual Nordic design award has been given to a fashion designer (Laugavegur 59; ☎ 354-588-6649; [www.steinunn.com](http://www.steinunn.com)).

The French-owned Kisan Concept Store carries Farmers Market products along with children's clothes,



Left, a Farmers Market Icelandic wool sweater; above, the Farmers Market shop; right, designer Bergthora Gudnadottir (on left) with Iceland's first lady, Dorrit Moussaieff; far right, a design by Steinunn Sigurd inspired by the work of Icelandic artist Hildur Bjarnadottir.

shoes and accessories by international designers. It is opening a branch in New York's Soho neighborhood this autumn (Laugavegur 7; ☎ 354-561-6262; [www.kisan.is](http://www.kisan.is)).

Located in the oldest house in the city, between the Old Harbour and Tjörnin pond, Kraum sells Farmers Market sweaters and accessories along with fashion, jewelry and household furnishings by more than 60 Icelandic designers, including sophisticated knit dresses and shawls in Icelandic wool and chic unstructured fur accessories by Ásta (Adalstraeti 10; ☎ 354-517-7797; [www.kraum.is](http://www.kraum.is)).

Meanwhile, ELM ([www.elm.is](http://www.elm.is)) and KronKron ([www.kronkron.com](http://www.kronkron.com)) sell stylish Scandinavian designs, and Spaksmannspjájar ([www.spaksmannspjájar.is](http://www.spaksmannspjájar.is)) offers hip street styles that combine retro contours with sexy cutouts, as well as its own take on Icelandic wool sweaters.

The most traditional styles have recently had a resurgence in popularity. The patterned cardigans and pullovers, as well as hats, mittens and scarves, became widespread in the mid-20th century. The most common pattern—with the iconic yoke—is called the Lopi, named after the unspun Lopi wool used to make it. The style's origin is debated; it was possibly inspired by either the traditional costume of Greenland or a design by the Bohus Stickning, a knitting cottage industry in Sweden in the early 20th century.

The Handknitting Association of Iceland, located in the shadow of the stunning Hallgrímskirkja cathedral, has a mind-boggling selection that includes pullovers in rich earth tones and



Photos: Farmers Market



Above, traditional hand-knits in the Folk Art Museum in Akureyri; left, actor Daniel Raymont, in Reykjavik to shoot a movie, tries on the local style at the Handknitting Association shop.

cardigans—buttoned or zippered—made by women working in their homes. Prices run from 10,600 kronur to 13,200 kronur.

The shop also sells folksy hats, mittens and slippers, as well as contemporary basics, including a long wraparound cardigan in solid colors such as black, gray or red (8,000 kronur). Avid knitter Ms. Bjarnadottir, the artist, says old-fashioned lacey knits have come back in vogue, such as a turtleneck she made, constructed in a series of scalloped rows. The shop sells lacey shawls and scarves in hot pink and bright orange as well as in subdued tones like oatmeal and moss green (3,590 kronur).

Since the sweaters are individually hand-knit, the fit varies, so it pays to try each one on. If you don't find the right size or color combination, you can custom order a sweater by choosing from the skeins of yarn displayed on shelves



Steinunn

at the back of the shop. The standard designs take roughly 20-30 hours for one knitter to produce. It's also possible to bring along your own picture or pattern to have a unique sweater created for you, for an extra fee.

If you find the wool itchy, you can wash the sweater carefully by hand to soften the coarser outer fibers (Skólavördustigur 19; ☎ 354-562-4747; [www.handknit.is](http://www.handknit.is)).

The Handknitting Association also sells yarn and patterns—the various styles of Icelandic sweaters until recently were known by the numbered patterns produced by the Istex company ([www.istex.is](http://www.istex.is)).

The group also sponsors periodic "Knit Cafés" at a Reykjavik coffee shop, where artisans such as Istex head designer Védís Jónsdóttir demonstrate how to knit particular patterns. They are free and open to the public, and it is possible to request a presentation in English by calling ahead (see [www.handknit.is](http://www.handknit.is)).

And finally, at Fatasöfnun, the Red Cross's secondhand shop in the center of town, you can find racks of traditional Icelandic sweaters in a range of designs and colors at bargain prices—all still in good condition (Laugavegur 12; ☎ 354-570-4000).

**WSJ.com**

New looks for wool  
See additional images of stylish Icelandic sweaters in a slideshow at [WSJ.com/Travel](http://WSJ.com/Travel)

# hand-knit look



Left, a church in Búdir on the Snaefellsnes peninsula; right, swimmers in the Blue Lagoon.

## Trip planner: The best of Iceland

BY CATHRYN DRAKE

*Special to The Wall Street Journal*

MOST PEOPLE GO to Iceland to spend time in the spectacular scenery, but it's worth taking a day or two to shop in Reykjavik. Even though it is Iceland's capital and largest city, it has an intimate small-town atmosphere and is easy to navigate.

The recent fall of the Icelandic krona against the euro—it has declined about 33% in the past year—provides another good excuse to shop. The best time to visit is summer, when the days practically never end and the fickle weather isn't harsh. Here's a plan for a weekend in the capital city.

When you get in on Friday night, do as the natives do and take in a swim, steam and sauna at the Vesterbaejarlaug thermal pool, a local hangout.

The Reykjavik Tourist Card includes free entry to the city's seven pools, the zoo and selected museums, and unlimited rides on public buses (1,700 kronur, or about €15, for a two-day pass; see [www.visitreykjavik.is](http://www.visitreykjavik.is)).

Next eat some seafood. A fun place is the shack-like Saegreifinn, or Sea Baron, on the harbor (2354-553-1500; [www.saegreifinn.is](http://www.saegreifinn.is)).

For a more upscale experience, the excellent Sjávarkjallarinn Seafood Cellar Restaurant features inventive fusion cooking and cheeky presentation by award-winning chef Lárus Gunnar Jónasson (about 8,000 kronur; 2354-511-1212; [www.sjavarkjallarinn.is](http://www.sjavarkjallarinn.is)).

My favorite food option is the recently opened Icelandic Fish & Chips, which serves incredibly fresh organic catches of the day with such a selection of wonderful sauces—including ginger and wasabi, tarragon and white truffle, basil and garlic, coriander and lime, and mango chutney—that it's difficult to select one. Solve the dilemma by choosing a sample platter. The scrumptious onion rings are rendered relatively guilt-free with a light spelt-and-barley batter (about 2,000 kronur; 2354-511-1118; [www.fishandchips.is](http://www.fishandchips.is)).

Good lunch stops include the Sjávarbarinn all-you-can-eat seafood buffet with an Asian accent, on the waterfront across from the Epal design store (1,400 kronur; [www.sjavarbarinn.com](http://www.sjavarbarinn.com)); and the famous City's Best Hotdogs (Baejarins Beztu) stand, down the street from the Hafnarhus branch of the Reykjavik Art Museum, which is housed in a converted warehouse. In the evening, the bar and res-

taurant Boston is a stylishly bohemian, and often raucous, hangout for early or late-evening drinks, and the food is good, too ([www.artmuseum.is](http://www.artmuseum.is)).

Other options for people watching are the ultra-cool and chic 101 Hotel Bar ([www.101hotel.is](http://www.101hotel.is)), and the old favorite Café Paris, which has free wireless access ([www.cafeparis.is](http://www.cafeparis.is)).

Since most shops close early—about 6 p.m.—and aren't open Sunday, you will have plenty of time to see the sights and take in a relaxing soak or two, especially if you visit between May and August, when it's light enough to take a hike just before midnight. On the way into town from the airport, you will already have seen the surreal moss-covered lava fields.

Bus tours are an efficient way to take in the natural wonders of the diverse Icelandic landscape. For example, the classic "Golden Circle" tour visits the steaming, sputtering hot springs of Geysir and the waterfalls at Gullfoss, as well as the site of the country's first Parliament, the mysterious and dramatic Thingvellir gorge.

You can also simply take a public bus to the trail head at Kollafjördur, which takes about a half-hour, and hike up the mountain to the source of the waterfall for a spectacular view. Other easy one-day tour options include puffin and whale watching on boats leaving from the harbor, horseback riding and scuba diving and snorkeling near Thingvellir.

An alternative off the beaten track is a drive around the Snaefellsnes peninsula, whose offerings include lush fjords, volcanic peaks, dramatic cliffs and golden beaches, all dominated by the ice cap made famous in Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth."

In the quaint port Stykkishólmur—gateway to the remote and wild Westfjords—you can visit artist Roni Horn's Library of Water, a stunning Modernist building overlooking the town filled with translucent columns containing the melted ice of 24 Icelandic glaciers ([www.libraryofwater.is](http://www.libraryofwater.is)).

Just south of town is Helgafell, or Holy Mountain, where Guðrún Ósvifsdóttir, the imperious heroine of the medieval Icelandic Laxdaela saga, enigmatically revealed which of her four husbands she loved most. It is said to be her burial site. Climb to the top for a sweeping view, and then circle the church ruin three times clockwise—without looking back—to make a wish.

If you want to stay on the peninsula Saturday night, the quirky, isolated Hotel Búdir, featuring an open fireplace, a view of the glacier and an excellent gourmet restaurant, makes a romantic and luxurious splurge (21,500 kronur; 2354-435-6700; [www.budir.is](http://www.budir.is)).

If you stay at the hip midcentury Radisson SAS Hotel Saga, you can make last-minute purchases at the Handknitting Association's shop there, which is open on Sundays. They also serve a fantastic breakfast buffet including a selection of Icelandic smoked fish, homemade breads and the famous yogurt-like skyr (21,000 kronur; 2354-1706-0284; [www.radisson SAS.com](http://www.radisson SAS.com)).

A visit to the volcanic pools of the Blue Lagoon on the way to the airport will guarantee a relaxing end to a full weekend.



The restaurant and bar at Reykjavik's 101 Hotel.

## Selling big-money style in penny-pinching times

**A**KRIS DESIGNER Albert Kriemler last fall spent three days searching for crepe fabric at a Paris textile-industry trade show, with his mobile phone shut down—incommunicado.

He wanted to find the lightest possible couture-quality

### On Style

CHRISTINA BINKLEY

crepe to create all-season clothes for working women. Cost wasn't an issue—even with the current financial straits of the retail and luxury industries. "I cannot work with cheap fabric," Mr. Kriemler said in March, a day after his Paris runway show. He fingered a pleated dress with three layers of soft tulle that took four days to drape and pleat. Each stitch of the angled pleats, he said precisely, was 0.7 centimeter higher than the last.

It might seem the wrong moment for this: uncompromisingly expensive fabrics and labor-intensive designs. At \$9,950, the pleated tulle gown is aimed at a rarefied customer group. But Akris isn't taking a cost-cutting approach to surviving the current slowdown. Instead, it's doubling down on pleasing its core customers—powerful women, often career women, who seek modern, innovative clothing.

Rather than following the currently popular flirty or romantic ingenue trends, Akris imbues wearers such as Condoleezza Rice with an attitude of sleek command. Akris targets chairwomen of the board and other high-powered women, though it's less overtly dressy than archrival Armani.

As "fit models" on which to shape its designs, Akris employs not only the typical waifs but also size 12 and 14 women. Mr. Kriemler last year was one of the first luxury designers to create high-waisted, wide-legged pants, back when most of the fashion industry was still designing low-rise pants aimed at the youthful market. He says the woman he designs for "travels, she packs suitcases, she wants to get ahead."

Functionality isn't the current mode in the fashion world. But Akris is a sleeper brand that often outsells the elegant office armor of Armani, St. John, Chanel and Piazza Sempione at stores such as Bergdorf Goodman. Akris is among the top 10 sellers for Saks Fifth Avenue, says Joseph Boitano, Saks's top merchandising executive.

Indeed, the challenge for the Swiss, family-owned company now is to navigate an economy in which fewer people are buying \$5,000 suits. Caroline Brown, a former Armani executive who is Akris's chief executive in the U.S., concedes that she's concerned about the economic climate. "Any company that isn't being cautious right now wouldn't be doing its job." She noted that the shift to making seasonless clothes and clothes that will last longer sty-



Photos: Akris

Akris's \$6,950 dress with layers of tulle (left), and a dress with a tile-like pattern (right).

listically (without doo-dads that date them) is partly a response to shoppers' concerns about buying frivolous clothes that last only a season or two. Still, she says, the label's fall sales so far are ahead of last year's.

She notes that the traditional path to growth would be to pursue licensing deals to make underwear, accessories and the like—something the Kriemler family declines to do. Instead, the plan is to allow profit margins to shrink and to focus closely on what customers are asking for, which these days is seasonless styles—for instance, colors and patterns that can be worn year-round—and lighter fabrics.

Being family-owned, Akris needn't answer to the quarterly demands of investors. The ability to cut profit margins to ride out a rough period is a "luxury," says Peter Kriemler, Albert's brother and the company's president.

In fact, Akris defies virtually every rule of big luxury-brand operations established by successful rivals such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton. The company offers no high-profit-margin perfumes, handbags, shoes or logo-wear. It makes 100% of its clothes in Switzerland, a country off the radar of the fashion industry with one of the world's most expensive labor markets.

The nonconformist approach may be inspired by Akris's location far from the hubs of fashion in St. Gallen, Switzerland, on the border of the bucolic Appenzell region. Within Switzerland, this German-speaking area, known for its cheeses, is the butt of jokes about its rural populace. But Switzerland is also known for its watchmaking, and Akris clothes are made with a costly perfectionism.

Email [Christina.Binkley@wsj.com](mailto:Christina.Binkley@wsj.com)

WSJ.com

Precise collection  
See photos of Akris designs  
on and off the runway at  
[WSJ.com/Fashion](http://WSJ.com/Fashion)