

SPEAK VIKING · FREE GUIDE

The Modern Viking's

20-Phrase *Survival Guide*

Everything you need to not embarrass yourself in Iceland. No grammar tables. No conjugations. Twenty phrases and the reason each one matters.

You don't need perfect grammar to talk to an Icelandic.

Góðan daginn, and welcome.

You're probably wondering who I am. My name is Óskar Bragi, I've been teaching this language for over ten years, and I want to let you in on a secret.

Icelandic has four cases, three genders, and enough complicated grammar to make a linguist cry.

That's why a lot of people quit before they've properly started. They open a textbook, get greeted by a declension table on page four, and never make it to a single real conversation.

So here's what I recommend instead. Twenty phrases. No declension tables, nothing to conjugate, just a handful of words that can carry you through real conversations in Iceland. From ordering a coffee to sitting in a hot tub late at night without insulting anybody.

*Áfram með smjörið, onward with the butter,
Óskar Bragi, a.k.a. Speak Viking*

The sounds that trip everyone up.

Icelandic kept a few letters English gave up on a thousand years ago.

þ	The hard th in thing . It only ever starts a word.
ð	The soft th in father . It never starts a word.
æ	Rhymes with eye .
á	The ow in cow .
ó	The oh in go .
é	Yeh, as in yes .
í / ý	Ee, as in see .
ú	Oo, as in moon .
ö	The vowel in hurt with the r taken out. Written UH in this guide.
au	Say that ö sound, then slide it into ee. One syllable, not two.
ei / ey	The ay in day .
j	Always a y. Jæja starts like yes .
hv	Say it kv. Every time.
ll	Usually a tl sound. That's why the volcano broke everyone.
g	Soft between vowels. It thins out into a y or a light breath at the back of the throat, never a hard English g.
kk tt pp	A small puff of breath lands just before them. Ekki is EH-ki with a catch in it, not EK-kee.

* These are approximations, not gospel. No English respelling carries an Icelandic sound exactly, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something. Use them to get close, then listen to a native speaker and copy what you hear. That last part is the one that actually works.

Get these right and you're well on your way.

Every phrase in this guide comes with a pronunciation line written the way an English speaker would read it. Say it out loud. Reading it silently does nothing, and I'm dead serious about that.

SOME SIMPLE RULES TO FOCUS ON

- 1** Stress the first syllable. Always, in every word, no exceptions. Icelandic puts the weight at the front, so if you put it anywhere else people can struggle to follow you even when every single sound is right.
- 2** Don't go hunting for the word please. Vinsamlegast exists, but it's formal and mostly lives on signs and in writing. In speech, takk does that work. Put it on the end and you're being polite.
- 3** We have a tendency to switch to English on you. Don't be dismayed by it. It isn't because your Icelandic is bad. It's that we're not used to hearing it from visitors and we reach for English out of habit. Stay in Icelandic and most people will come back and meet you there.

One more thing. You will get it wrong. Everyone does, including Icelanders who move home after ten years away. Nobody is grading you. Getting it wrong out loud beats getting it right in your head.

01

The ones that open doors

Five words that change how a stranger looks at you. Start here.

01

THE ONES THAT OPEN DOORS

PHRASE 01

Halló

SAY IT * **HAH-loh**

Hello.

Hæ exists and means hi, but you already know how to say that one, so it's free. Halló is the one worth the effort. It's what you'll hear across a counter, down a phone line, and through a half-open door.

PHRASE 02

Góðan daginn

SAY IT * **GOH-than DIE-yin**

Good day.

Looks terrifying. Isn't. This is your polite hello from morning until about six in the evening. The a and the g in daginn run together into an eye sound, so it comes out DIE-yin. Don't let the spelling fight you.

PHRASE 03

Gott kvöld

SAY IT * **GOT KVUHLT**

Good evening.

After six, switch to this. Two things people get wrong. The o is short, like got, not go. And the d on the end hardens into a t, so it finishes KVUHLT.

01

THE ONES THAT OPEN DOORS

PHRASE 04

Takk fyrir

SAY IT * **TAHK FIH-rir**

Thank you.

Literally thanks for. Thanks for what? Doesn't matter. Say it constantly. Takk on its own works fine too.

PHRASE 05

Bless

SAY IT * **BLESS**

Bye.

Say it twice, bless bless, and you sound like you've been here a while. Nobody knows why we double it. We just do.

02

The ones that get you through a day

Coffee, prices, toilets, paying. Almost everything you'll need to say out loud lives in these five.

02

THE ONES THAT GET YOU THROUGH A DAY

PHRASE 06

Já / Nei

SAY IT * **YOW / NAY**

Yes. No.

Já is not yah. It's closer to yow. And listen for the inhaled já, a short sharp gasp on the way in that also means yes. It's real, and it will startle you the first time.

PHRASE 07

Má ég fá...?

SAY IT * **MOW yeh FOW**

May I have...?

The most useful frame in this guide. Má ég fá kaffi. Má ég fá vatn. Má ég fá bjór. May I have, could I have, can I get, it covers all of them. Drop the thing you want on the end and point if you have to.

PHRASE 08

Hvað kostar þetta?

SAY IT * **KVATH KOSS-tar THET-ta**

What does this cost?

Hv is pronounced kv. Always. You probably don't want the answer, but ask anyway.

02

THE ONES THAT GET YOU THROUGH A DAY

PHRASE 09

Hvar er klósettið?

SAY IT * **KVAR** air **KLOH-seh-tith**

Where is the toilet?

Klósett, not baðherbergi. A baðherbergi is a room with a bath in it. Ask for one of those in a café and you will get a confused look.

PHRASE 10

Má ég borga?

SAY IT * **MOW** yeh **BOR-ga**

May I pay?

Nobody here asks for the bill. We ask to pay. It's the same frame as phrase 07, so you already know how it's built. Say it to a server and the card machine comes to you.

03

The ones that save you

For the moment the conversation gets away from you. It will. That's fine.

03

THE ONES THAT SAVE YOU

PHRASE 11

Ég skil ekki

SAY IT * **YEH SKIL EH-ki**

I don't understand.

Better than nodding and hoping. Say it and people slow down, rephrase, and help. That's how a conversation continues instead of ending.

PHRASE 12

Talarðu ensku?

SAY IT * **TAH-lar-thu EN-sku**

Do you speak English?

They do. All of them. But asking in Icelandic first changes the entire tone of what happens next.

PHRASE 13

Fyrirgefðu

SAY IT * **FIH-rir-GYEV-thu**

Excuse me. Sorry.

Getting someone's attention, squeezing past a queue in a bakery, apologising for standing on a foot. One word, three jobs.

03

THE ONES THAT SAVE YOU

PHRASE 14

Geturðu hjálpað mér?

SAY IT * **GEH-tur-thu HYOWL-path MYAIR**

Can you help me?

Hj is a breathy y, so hjálpað starts somewhere near yowl. Ask this and people will often walk you there instead of explaining. Directions here tend to be up past the church, then left, so that's usually the better outcome.

PHRASE 15

Ég tala smá íslensku

SAY IT * **YEH TAH-la SMOW EES-len-sku**

I speak a little Icelandic.

The highest return sentence in this guide. Watch a person's face when you say it. There are around 380,000 of us. We notice when someone tries.

04

The ones that make you sound like you live here

These are the ones locals don't expect a visitor to have. Use them and see.

04

THE ONES THAT MAKE YOU SOUND LIKE YOU LIVE HERE

PHRASE 16

Jæja

SAY IT * **YAl-yah**

Well. So. Right then.

The most Icelandic word there is. It opens conversations, ends them, fills silence, and tells a room the party is over. Tone does all the work. You cannot overuse it.

PHRASE 17

Petta reddast

SAY IT * **THET-ta RED-dast**

It'll work out.

The unofficial national motto. Road closed, weather turned, plan collapsed. We say this, and we mean it. Say it when something goes wrong and you'll get a nod.

PHRASE 18

Gluggaveður

SAY IT * **GLUK-ka-VEH-thur**

Window weather.

Weather that looks beautiful through glass and tries to remove your face outdoors. You'll need this word within about two days.

04

THE ONES THAT MAKE YOU SOUND LIKE YOU LIVE HERE

PHRASE 19

Takk fyrir mig

SAY IT * **TAHK FIH-rir mih**

Thanks for me.

Say it as you leave someone's home, or when you finish a meal they cooked. You're thanking them for you, for being allowed to be there. It's the difference between a guest and a good guest.

PHRASE 20

Áfram með smjörið

SAY IT * **OW-fram meth SMYUH-rith**

Keep going with the butter.

Don't give up. Keep at it. It comes from churning butter, where the only way through is to keep the arm moving. I sign off with it, and now you know why.

Two you will never need.

Learn them anyway. They're the best party trick in this document.

Eyjafjallajökull

SAY IT * **AY-ya-fyat-la-YUH-kutl**

The rock star of Icelandic place names, and the word that broke every newsreader on earth in 2010. It's three words glued together: island, mountain, glacier. Both of those double ls turn into tl, exactly like the key told you they would.

Vaðlaheiðarvegavinnuverkfærageymsluskúra útidyrallyklakippuhringur

Sixty four letters. It means the key ring holding the key to the front door of the tool shed used by road workers on Vaðlaheiði, a mountain road in the north.

Icelandic builds words by gluing smaller words together, so there's no real ceiling. This one is famous here mostly because we enjoy watching visitors attempt it. Break it into pieces, say each piece slowly, then run them together.

Screenshot this one.

Keep it on your phone. It works offline, which matters more than you'd think out on the ring road. The say it column is an approximation, not gospel. Get close, then copy what you hear.

ICELANDIC	SAY IT	MEANING
Halló	HAH-loh	Hello.
Góðan daginn	GOH-than DIE-yin	Good day.
Gott kvöld	GOT KVUHLT	Good evening.
Takk fyrir	TAHK FIH-rir	Thank you.
Bless	BLESS	Bye.
Já / Nei	YOW / NAY	Yes. No.
Má ég fá...?	MOW yeh FOW	May I have...?
Hvað kostar þetta?	KVATH KOSS-tar THET-ta	What does this cost?
Hvar er klósettið?	KVAR air KLOH-seh-tith	Where is the toilet?
Má ég borga?	MOW yeh BOR-ga	May I pay?
Ég skil ekki	YEH SKIL EH-ki	I don't understand.
Talarðu ensku?	TAH-lar-thu EN-sku	Do you speak English?
Fyrirgefðu	FIH-rir-GYEV-thu	Excuse me. Sorry.
Geturðu hjálpað mér?	GEH-tur-thu HYOWL-path MYAIR	Can you help me?
Ég tala smá íslensku	YEH TAH-la SMOW EES-len-sku	I speak a little Icelandic.
Jæja	YAI-yah	Well. So. Right then.
Þetta reddast	THET-ta RED-dast	It'll work out.
Gluggaveður	GLUK-ka-VEH-thur	Window weather.
Takk fyrir mig	TAHK FIH-rir mih	Thanks for me.
Áfram með smjörið	OW-fram meth SMYUH-rith	Keep going with the butter.

Twenty phrases is a good start, not the finishing line.

If you say even a handful of these out loud in Iceland, something special will happen. Someone will smile, or answer you in Icelandic, or ask where you learned it. That moment is the whole point.

And then you'll want more, because twenty phrases runs out fast once people start talking back.

Come and learn it with the rest of us

I run a community for people learning Icelandic properly. Live calls, one room for every level, and people approaching this language from every angle instead of grinding through a textbook alone. Beginners and heritage learners and the stubbornly curious, all in the same place.

Founding members are at \$27 a month, and that price rises as the room fills.

Take me to the community

Reading this on paper? DM me the word **SKOOL** on Instagram and I'll send you the link myself.

Or just tell me how it went

Say one of these to an Icelander and message me what happened. I read every one of those and I answer them myself.

Gangi þér vel, and áfram með smjörið.
Óskar Bragi