

# Interior Designer Sheila Bridges on How She Fell in Love With Iceland—And Her Top Visitor's Tips

By [Regan Stephens](#) November 9, 2023

Sheila Bridges's love of Iceland began with her 50th birthday celebration. The much-lauded [interior designer](#)—whose work includes creating the iconic Harlem Toile De Jouy pattern, splashed on [Williams-Sonoma](#) cocktail shakers and [Gingerlily](#) silk caftans, as well as decorating the [Vice President's residence](#)—organized a trip for her group of friends. The chilly July jaunt, filled with horseback riding, snowmobiling, and dog sledding on a glacier, was a smashing success—so much so that it inspired a decade-long-and-counting love affair with the remote Nordic country.

“There was something about the country that seduced me into coming back again and again until I bought a true pied-a-terre,” she says. “It’s a small, cozy apartment in downtown Reykjavik with a great view of the water and Iceland’s most iconic church, Hallgrimskirkja.”

Inside Sheila Bridges's Reykjavik apartment.

Courtesy of Sheila Bridges

The designer—known for her ability to seamlessly blend the classic and contemporary—is frequently on the road, bopping from her home in Harlem or the Hudson Valley to far-flung places for work, or to soak up [inspiration in Milan](#) or Mexico City or Madrid. But she’s made a home base in Iceland for reasons that go beyond the ethereal light, the Icelandic horses, and the otherworldly landscape.

“Years ago, whenever you had to fly to mainland Europe, all the transatlantic flights had to stop in Keflavik to refuel, you couldn’t make it all the way to Europe,” she says. “And so that’s kind of how I’ve always approached Iceland—it’s the place where I stop and I refuel.”

While there, Bridges spends time connecting with friends, horseback riding, shopping for art and one-of-a-kind shoes, and, sometimes, soaking in restorative geothermal water. “It’s not Paris, it’s not London, you know, the obvious places,” she says. “But for me, it really works to relax and unwind.”

Below, Bridges shares some of her favorite things to do in Iceland.

## Go horseback riding

Photo: Getty Images

Iceland is home to roughly 330,000 people and 80,000 horses, Bridges notes. “As a former equestrian and horse owner,” she says, “those numbers look pretty good to me.” According to the designer, no one should leave the country without riding an Icelandic horse. The breed is characterized by its more diminutive stature, and has a unique gait called a tölt. (It’s somewhere between a trot and a canter.) “The horses are just very sweet, but very sturdy,” she says. Note, though, that “People call them ponies, but Icelanders get upset if you call them ponies because they’re not.”

## See (and buy) Icelandic art

If you’re in the market for art, or just a jolt of design inspiration, Bridges recommends visiting the [Listval Gallery](#). With a goal of making art more accessible, the gallery exhibits a wide range of artists and price points—and lists each work online, too. The designer has picked up pieces here for her personal collection. “They also do installation and other art consulting,” she

notes. “It is a good resource for Icelandic art.”

## Take a hot soak

Photo: Getty Images

Iceland’s renewable geothermal energy (thanks in part to its 200-plus volcanoes) not only helps heat its homes, but also its hot springs and swimming pools. Bridges suggests doing like the locals do and taking a social dip.

“Every neighborhood has its own swimming pool, so wherever you're staying, go to the local one,” suggests Bridges. (Follow the culture’s [unspoken but strictly-followed](#) rules, though, like showering before entering the water, or risk some serious side-eye from the locals.)

“Instead of going to a coffee shop, people will get together with friends in the water, and anybody can go, they’re open to the public,” she says. “It’s a big part of their culture, and gathering with your community, especially during the winter months when it's so dark. With the harsh elements, they’ve figured out how to commune with friends and family, and a lot of that centers around water.”

She also recommends the thermal spa [Sky Lagoon](#). “Want to have a quick dip in warm water, a great view, and a glass of bubbly 15 minutes outside of downtown Reykjavik? If so, then this is your place. I also like to stop here after I play tennis.”

## Sample Icelandic cuisine

Courtesy of Moss Restaurant

Icelandic cuisine is a must-try, says Bridges, whether it’s with a Michelin-

starred meal or inside a snug wine bar. On the swank end of the spectrum, the designer loves [Moss](#), the polished restaurant inside the [Retreat at Blue Lagoon](#). The multi-course tasting menu, a dazzling ode to local ingredients, ends with a flourish. “They bring out a volcanic rock—a creative way to serve macaron, chocolate truffles, and other post-dinner treats.” Also, she says, “the butter is just to die for.”

For a more casual night out, head to [Vinstúkan Tíu Sopar](#). Bridges was first introduced to the buzzy natural wine bar by expat friends living in Iceland. “The staff has a gift for recommending wine, and they do delicious small bites—plus, it’s in a cozy basement space,” a welcome bonus on a typical blustery Icelandic evening.

## Shop small

Courtesy of Magnolia

On her first trip to Iceland, Bridges stumbled into [Kronkron](#), and has been a customer (and friend of the owners) ever since. The boutique stocks high-end designers from all over the world, but also carries their own “amazingly crafted Icelandic shoes and clothing,” says Bridges. “I probably own 10 pairs of these one-of-a-kind, colorful shoes at this point—it’s my favorite store for clothing and accessories. plus they’re just lovely people.”

For beautiful Scandinavian and Nordic home furnishings, Bridges loves [Magnolia](#). The well-curated design shop sells pieces from Denmark, Sweden, and beyond, and the designers who run it are “just lovely,” says Bridges. “I’ve bought everything from art to accessories for my apartment.”