

FLYING WITH ICELANDAIR

AIRWAYS TRAVELER



BY KEN DONOHUE

PHOTO: BALDUR SVEINSSON

ICELANDAIR

Flight: FI 451
London (LHR) - Keflavik (KEF)
Boeing 757-200
Saga Class (Business)

CHECK IN AT HEATHROW'S Terminal 1 was quick and efficient, with its dedicated queue for Saga Class passengers. With boarding pass in hand, I went through security with equal ease. The Departures area of the terminal features a tempting array of shops and restaurants, and Business Class passengers can avail themselves of the

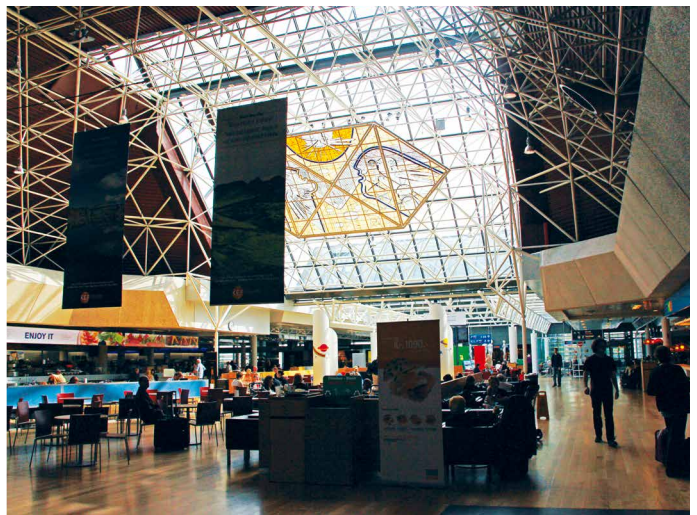
Star Alliance Lounge, located at the far end of the shopping arcade.

The lounge is tastefully appointed, with a generous use of wood accents, and there are two main areas to it. One has a bistro-type feel, with small round tables surrounded by bar stools, while the other features a larger seating area, which still felt relaxing despite the busy morning traffic. A wide

selection of hot and cold dishes was on offer, along with the usual amenities you'd expect of a Business lounge.

After sampling the culinary offerings and reading the daily news, I ambled over to Gate 5A, which, as I discovered, is obscurely located along a narrow hallway and down a set of escalators. While an issue on board the aircraft was being sorted out, no passengers were allowed to enter the departure lounge, which was shared with a Transaero flight heading out to Moscow.

The boarding process was somewhat chaotic, but only because passengers crowded around the gate counter, despite the boarding sign telling them to take a seat. I was more than glad to be able to get



past this mob, as Business Class passengers and those requiring assistance were invited to board first.

I settled into seat 2F, which was surprisingly comfortable, given the older-style recliner configuration. This aircraft was named after the Katla volcano, a particularly active mountain in southern Iceland. A bottle of Icelandic water was provided, along with a selection of nuts and crackers packaged in a small, environmentally-friendly cardboard box. A variety of newspapers was also on offer. The Icelandic music playing in the cabin added to the relaxing atmosphere.

With an announced flying time of 2 hours and 40 minutes, we pushed back at 13:15, some 15 minutes behind our scheduled departure. We taxied toward Runway 27L and noticed that, not surprisingly, the departures were dominated by British Airways aircraft. At 13:30, we commenced our takeoff roll.

Climbing over England, I immersed myself in the airline's inflight magazine, *IcelandairInfo*, which, in this particular

issue, had articles celebrating the 70th anniversary of Iceland becoming a republic, although, of course, the history of Iceland dates back more than a thousand years. I learned that large-scale emigration in the late 19th century has given rise to a large Icelandic population in Canada and the United States, providing the airline with a bounty of prospective passengers.

Once at our cruising altitude, a lunch service, with a choice of two main dishes, was offered. I was impressed with the cabin attendant delivering each course individually to the 12 passengers in the Business Class cabin, and always with a smile. The airline's menus feature photos of Iceland's stunning scenery, in this case Skogarfoss, one of Iceland's famed waterfalls, to which I would get up close later that day. The starter of smoked lamb was delicious and equally so was the main dish of salad with tender chicken and a sweet-tasting, honey-roasted nut-and-mango sauce.

At 15:05 local time, we touched down on Runway 20 at Keflavik International Airport, beginning the afternoon rush of inbound flights from Europe.



**Keflavik (KEF)
Vancouver (YVR)
Flight: FI697
Boeing 757-200
Saga Class (Business)**

I arrived at Reykjavik's international gateway, in Keflavik, looking forward to Icelandair's inaugural flight to Vancouver. With renovations being made to the airport's baggage handling system, there were fewer than normal check-in counters; however, check-in was very efficient thanks to the self-serve kiosks and helpful staff nearby assisting passengers.

The terminal was easy to navigate. Once past security, there was a bright, open area surrounded by shops and restaurants. Natural light flooded in from the glass roof above. Providing a sense of place, quotes from Icelandic sagas were present throughout the terminal.

The only indication at the gate that this was a special flight was a ceremonial photo taken of the crew before they boarded the aircraft. The departure area, at the far end of the terminal, was crammed with people, revealing the airport's space constraints at peak times. Four Icelandair flights—to Denver, New York, Minneapolis and Vancouver—were all departing within a 45 minute window. This meant hundreds of people standing in a crowded departure lounge. Given the lack of an overhead announcement, the boarding procedure wasn't as seamless as it could have been. Instead, the gate agent casually said, "Anyone going to Vancouver?" which was challenging to hear over the din of the other waiting passengers.

The Boeing 757-200, with its bright blue-and-yellow livery, was waiting at a remote stand, which was yet close enough to the terminal for passengers to walk to the aircraft. I always find it an enjoyable experience to board using the stairs, as it provides a great opportunity to size up and admire the airplane.

We were warmly greeted by a smiling cabin crew, which offered us bottles of water at the entrance to the aircraft. Having asked for a window seat when I had checked in, I located seat 2F. With only two other people in Business Class, I could've had the pick of seats. Birkir Guönason, the airline's CEO, was supposed to have joined this flight; however, a labor dispute with the company's pilots kept him grounded in Reykjavik.



Prior to take off, a hot towel service was offered, with champagne served in a less-than-business-like plastic glass. As this was a special flight, the complimentary sparkling wine flowed all the way to the back of the aircraft. With 117 passengers on board the 183-seat aircraft, the captain welcomed everyone to this inaugural flight and announced a flying time of seven hours and 15 minutes.

Pushback from gate 34 commenced at 17:35, 20 minutes behind our scheduled departure. Given the high number of departures at this time of day, both of the airport's runways were in use for outbound aircraft. As we positioned ourselves at the end of Runway 20, another Icelandair Boeing 757 departed ahead of us from Runway 11. Once airborne, we banked to the right and set a course over the North Atlantic Ocean toward Greenland and Canada.

Given the empty Business Class cabin, I received attentive service from the cabin attendants, who were pleasant and gracious, and frequently asked me whether I needed anything. A drinks service preceded dinner. I indulged in an Icelandic beer, and soon after a small cucumber-and-prawn salad was offered before an appetizer consisting of beets and apples with goat cheese and

honey balsamic vinegar. While I admired the presentation, the cheese was a little strong for my liking. Next, came a choice of three main dishes. I chose the roast chicken with garlic mashed potatoes and marsala sauce, which was delicious all round. The dessert, consisting of a white chocolate mousse with a berry compote and spice bread crumble, was especially tasty. Later, an ice cream bar was offered, along with a chocolate square. As we neared Vancouver, a delicious snack consisting of meats and fish on French bread was offered. It was a true culinary extravaganza.

Closing in on Vancouver, the snow-covered Coast Mountains below looked splendid in the late afternoon sun. The stunning peaks gave way to the Strait of Georgia, 20 miles (30 km) northeast of the airport. A few minutes on, we banked to the east and flew abeam Vancouver International Airport before turning back over Surrey, about 14 miles (22 km) east of the airport, for our approach to Runway 26R. Touchdown was at 18:05, about 15 minutes behind schedule.

Upon exiting the runway, we received an escort to the gate, and a celebratory welcome with a water cannon salute from the fire brigade. Just nine months after announcing this new twice-a-week service, the Vikings of Iceland had landed in Vancouver.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS:

Service on both flights was very good, with the cabin attendants being attentive and pleasant. Unlike those of some other airlines, the crews actually seemed to enjoy their jobs. The only negative noted was the somewhat chaotic boarding process in both London and Reykjavik. Iceland itself is stunningly beautiful and a destination you'll want to consider visiting. It's closer than you think. *-KD*

★ | **AIRWAYS RANKING**

RESERVATION	9.00
CHECK-IN	9.00
BOARDING	4.00
SEAT	6.00
AMBIANCE	8.00
IFE	7.00
CREW	9.00
FOOD	8.00
BEVERAGE	7.00
ON-TIME	6.00
OVERALL	7.30

*Airways Rankings are based on a scale of 0-10. Visit airwaysnews.com/blog/t/trip-reports/ for more information.