

# Iceland 1998



## By air direct to Iceland:

John Schofield, John Sterland and Denis Barker  
circumnavigated the island clockwise in a hired car  
see *Impressions of Iceland* on page 4  
and *The First Division* on page 6

Tim Josephy, Derek Smithson, Martyn Wakeman  
travelled by bus with the occasional lift in members cars;  
climbed at Skaftafell and backpacked at Þórsmörk  
see *Iceland - Premier League* on page 10

Adam Genster, an American joined them for one trip  
see *An Icelandic day with the YRC* on page 16

## By boat via Shetland and Faroe:

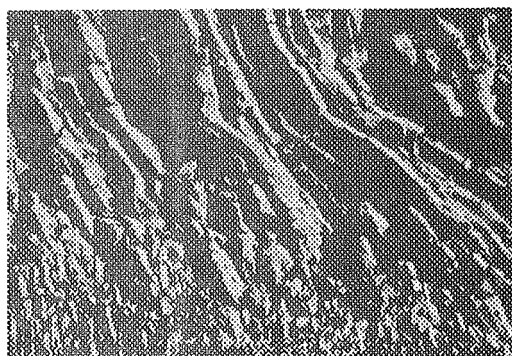
Rory Newman and Sue Thomason  
'wandered about the island'  
see *Icelandic Adventures* on page 18

David Hick, Christine Marriott and David Martindale  
circumnavigated the island anti-clockwise in their own car  
see *Travelling Hopefully* on page 24

# Impressions of Iceland

John Schofield

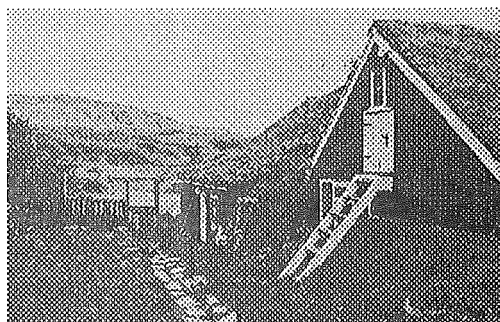
Iceland ! The sheer scale of this small island beggars description. Most of the rivers crossed on the coastal road are either raging torrents or deltas half a mile or more wide. The clarity of the atmosphere is so deceptive that one can look at a ridge and walk to it in 10 minutes, but the next time one can walk for an hour or more and the ridge is no nearer. No photograph can convey the feel of actually being there - it is a country of incredible contrasts. It is difficult to escape from the icecaps, they can be seen almost everywhere as a backdrop to distant views because of the incredibly clear atmosphere. Place names on the map are as deceptive as in Scotland. For instance Akureyri in the North of the island is a major town, and incidentally is the same size, population-wise, as my home town Otley. Otley, however, does not boast a botanical garden which compares favourably with Edinburgh's botanical gardens - and this within 50 miles or so of the Arctic Circle. Below the Vatnajekull icecap is an enormous delta-like expanse of black ash and cinders. This dreary area is 50 to 60 miles long and over 10 miles wide. One huge cinder-track with breathtaking glacier outfalls from the Vatnajekull icecap. Many mountains look simply like mine spoil heaps with a crag of volcanic rock poking out of scree-slopes of slag. Where the Icelanders have "tapped" the thermal resources of an area the appearance is that of the industrialised areas of South Yorkshire or Lancashire with steam issuing from various sources and pipework above ground almost everywhere.



Patterns frozen in the lava

Many of the roads in the west and south of the island are metalled. Most of the roads in the north, east and south-east are not. This is not to say that they are dirt roads. They are, for the most part, elevated from the surrounding countryside and properly graded a bit like our old macadamised roads were before they were tarred. But one's speed is quite limited (perhaps 25 to 30 mph) because of the loose gravel surface which, going downhill, gives very little adhesion especially when braking. Many of the vehicles outside Reykjavik have up-rated suspension and massively oversized tyres, these would loom large in the rear view mirror and overtake at twice the speed we were travelling. Also many vehicles bore signs of collision - this despite the fact that the roads were virtually empty outside the towns. Nevertheless driving in Iceland is not a problem simply because of the lack of other vehicles and the very long straight roads.

Much of the interior of the island is desert or near-desert. There are many



miles of undulating stony hills with no growth whatsoever - presumably where volcanic fall-out has sterilised the local vegetation. There are also lava-fields where previous eruptions have covered the ground in black concretion in all manner of shapes and configurations. Walking any distance over lava-fields is a virtual impossibility. Iceland is a new land and the feeling in these areas is one of total unreality. It's said that they trained the American astronauts in Iceland in order to accustom them to conditions on the Moon. Having been there this does not surprise me one little bit.

The mid-Atlantic ridge runs right through the centre of the island and as the European and African tectonic plates move away from the Americas so fissures open up and the lava boils out over the landscape. We saw this above lake Myvatn at the Krafla fissure where we actually walked over a healed-over crack in the Earth's surface. The lava was still warm, steam was issuing from various cracks and fissures and a smell of sulphur pervaded the air. The feeling was of being back at the beginning of creation and we all felt a tremendous sense of awe and wonderment at being there. In short we were totally gobsmacked! We stayed at Reykjahlid and drank a pint in the local bar (cost £4.50!). It was like a scene out of Star Wars - a frontier bar at 11.45pm and still broad daylight. It got darkish at about midnight and started getting light again at 2.30 or so in the morning.

Even small towns have a thermally-heated swimming bath and the one at Reykjavik is much the finest pool I have ever visited. After having showered and washed thoroughly one walked out into an overcast day with a fine drizzle and a cutting wind and

immediately immersed one's-self in a hot bath at 37-40 degrees centigrade. The Olympic swimming pool was at least 30 degrees, *hot pots* at 37 to 40 degrees or 40 to 45 degrees were available and a steam room at, I would guess, 50 degrees plus. After ten minutes or so one did not feel the cold.



Apart from the centre of the old town around "The Pond" Reykjavik can best be described as an architectural disaster. Indeed all Icelandic architecture is functional to a degree - houses being timber framed and clad and roofed with corrugated iron, but painted in a host of attractive colours - different fashions being apparent in different areas of the country. Contemporary church architecture, however, is *stunning* - it is called "glacial architecture" and is like nothing seen anywhere else. All of concrete, and presumably built on massive concrete rafts and reinforced. One feature of the town is the proliferation of fire hydrants at every street corner. Fire follows earthquake and Reykjavik is said to have a major earthquake every 80 years or so. It has now been perhaps 100 years since the last major tremor and there were those members of the party who said that, architecturally speaking, a serious 'quake would be no bad thing.

Of the population of two hundred and fifty thousand or so over *sixty* percent lives in or around Reykjavik and,

indeed, the whole of the South West of the island is where the landscape is least hostile and most people live. The people are lovely. Quiet, mannerly people of good bearing and they all seem to speak good English, which is no doubt as well!

The south-west is where holiday homes are seen in the most unlikely spots and this is where most of Iceland's population of horses lives. These horses are super animals - quite small and with flowing manes and proud heads they come in all colours - piebald, skewbald, chestnut, palomino. They are as lively as can be, trotting round the landscape and sporting with each other, apparently wild. They are used, we are told, for trekking and recreational purposes, but there seem to be far too many for that. However, I refuse to believe that the Icelanders eat the surplus.

There are areas which are virtually deserts and there are other areas where alpine flowers abound. Above Skaftafell the National Park is like an alpine garden and elsewhere there are fields of lupins as far as the eye can see. Not the dreary purple lupins we see in this country but lovely blue ones with a white eye. Photography is compulsory. I took over 160 photographs in three weeks which is thought to be quite modest. There is so much to photograph - particularly where the waterfalls are carving their way through the landscape.

Well, there we are. I have tried to give a feel for the country rather than a narrative of what we did. I can only hope that this article will whet members appetites to visit this fabulous island.

I shall certainly go back.



## Iceland 1998:

### The First Division

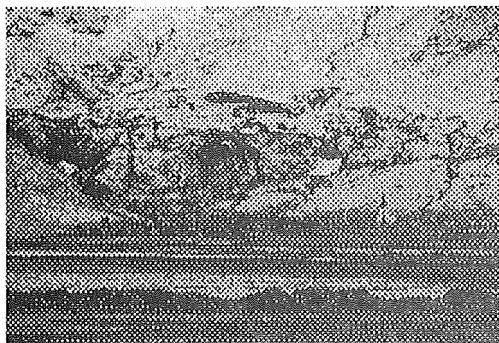
John Sterland

The YRC expedition was, like ancient Gaul, divided into three parts. The Premier division of stalwart members attacked the Vatnajokull glacier, the largest in Europe, in the South-east of Iceland, and a separate report will be written on their activities. The three somewhat aged members of what they would like to be referred to as the First division comprised John Schofield, Denis Barker and John Sterland. Their role was to circumnavigate the island in a hired car, with occasional excursions on foot into the semi-interior of the country. The third part consisted of a more independent party which risked taking their private cars, and basically covered a similar itinerary to the self-styled First division, the peregrinations of which are covered by this report.

Although Iceland's dimensions are only about 490km by 350km, the geology and landscape are on a vast and superlative scale, and three weeks is not long enough to adequately explore the whole of the country - hence John Schofield's intention of returning some time. Iceland was reached by the members of both the Premier and the First division by air from Glasgow to Keflavik, and the expedition started and finished at the youth hostel at Reykjavik.

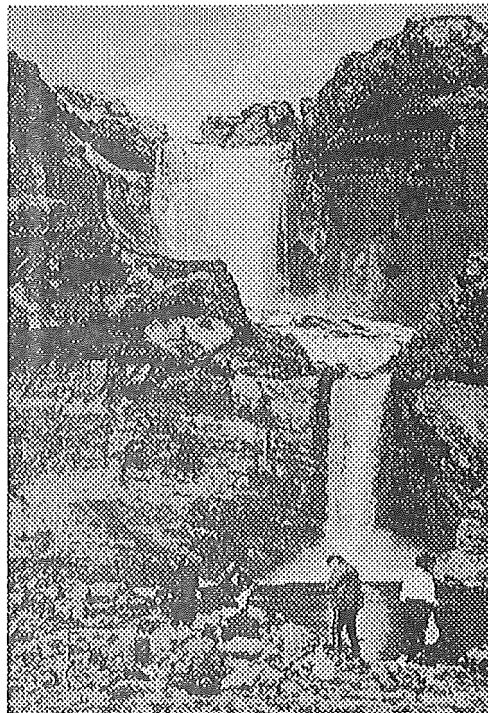
On the first operative day we, the First division, drove straight to the camp site at Skaftafell at the southernmost extremity of the Vatnajokull glacier, ostensibly to offer help to the Premier division. This proved (predictably) unnecessary, so the First division members spent the night at the nearby Bolti farmhouse. Many overnight

stops were made at farmhouses, which offered very good value for sleeping-bag accommodation, with adequate facilities for self catering, at a cost of about 1200 Kroner per night (about £11). Our first excursion from Bolti was through the Skaftafell National Park, visiting our first waterfall, Svartifoss, which was flanked by unusual overhanging basalt columns. This was on the way to ascending Nyrðrihnaukur, from which there were somewhat misty views of the precincts of the Vatnajökull glacier, some of the arms of which extended almost to the sea, where they culminated in impressive ice floes, particularly at Jokulsarlon. It was near Jokulsarlon that considerable repair work was still in progress to the coastal road and bridges following the devastation resulting from the volcanic eruption under the glacier in 1996.



Our next overnight stop was at a farmhouse at Stafafell, which was the base for a walk up the rather barren Jokulsa i Loni valley, skirted by hills which the guide book informed us consist largely of rhyolite. Perhaps we missed something in by-passing the Eastern fjords, but we were anxious to maximise our stay at Myvatn, situated firmly on the Mid Atlantic ridge and renowned for the Krafla volcanic fissure and numerous thermal springs, sulphur and mud pots etc. En route to Myvatn, in the middle of the lava desert of North-eastern Iceland, we visited one of the major waterfalls of

the country, Dettifoss. As previously mentioned, Iceland is a land of superlatives, so that Dettifoss discharges on average the greatest volume of water of any waterfall in Europe, with an average of 200 cubic metres per second falling over its face.



At Myvatn the Iceland superlative took another form in that we were privileged to occupy a private residence owned by the proprietor of the Elda camp site. He was the president of the local tourist board, and was away attending a conference at the time: his house was an excellent base for us to explore the surrounding area, which is one of amazing thermal activity. Steam issues from the ground at innumerable sites, particularly to the east of Lake Myvatn: the continuous sulphur eruptions at the Namafjall fissure are an incredible sight. All this amazingly interesting geological activity, however, is almost insignificant compared to our exploration of the Krafla volcanic area just five or six kilometres from Reykjavik, and the centre of one of the most awesome

lava fields in Iceland. The smell of sulphur is all-pervading, with mud and sulphurous water boiling and bubbling up from pools all around, and lava piled high on every side as far as the eye can see. The last eruption of the Krafla fissure was in 1984, but the surface activity gives one the impression that another eruption could occur at any time. Indeed it is officially expected that Krafla will erupt again within the next few years as the magma chamber fills.

The natural thermal resources of the area, and indeed other areas in Iceland, are harnessed for domestic and industrial purposes, such as the giant geo-thermal power station below the Krafla fissure. Various industrial uses are made of the hot springs at Bjarnarflag flats, three kilometres to the east of Reykjahlid, including the underground baking of bread. Then, of course, the thermal springs supply hot water to all houses and buildings in the area. The only downside is the smell of sulphur when one turns on the hot-water tap.

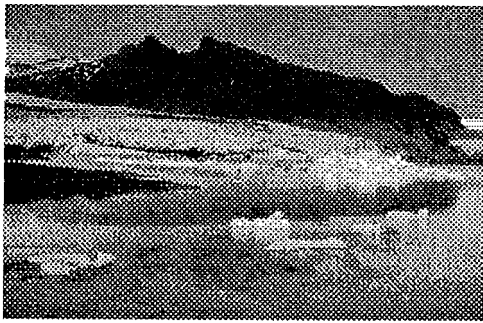
There is something of interest for everyone around Myvatn, including the fisherman and the ornithologist. Waterfowl and ducks of many species abound on the lake. In fact the bird life in Iceland in general is fascinating. Denis was able to identify most of the species we saw, including oyster catchers, northern divers, ptarmigan, arctic terns, snipe, skuas, snow bunting, plovers, wheatears, whimbels, plus hooper swans, eider and mallard duck. On one occasion, when travelling in the interior we must have passed very close to a tern's nest or colony, because our car was attacked by two very irate terns. Thank goodness we were not walking or I am sure we would have sustained severe injury. A day's walk enabled

us to explore the dominating extinct volcano Hverfell near Lake Myvatn. Its crater is 1040 metres wide, and the route over black volcanic ash led us on to inspect the convoluted black lava "castles" of Dimmuborgir close by - an area of natural lava arches, caves and pillars visited by many tourists to the area.



Hitherto the Northern and North-eastern road had a fairly loose, gritty surface, but great efforts are being made to upgrade the sub-standard stretches to the general quality of the Iceland perimeter road. Soon after leaving Myvatn the road improved, and en route to Akureyri we viewed Godfoss another awe-inspiring waterfall formed by the glacial waters of the Skjalfandaflljot, fed from the Tungnafellsjokull in the centre of the island. Akureyri is the second largest town in Iceland - a very pleasant place at the head of a deep sheltered fjord, and which derives most of its income from the fishing industry, as of course do most of the ports and small villages on the coast of Iceland. Enjoying an ice-cream, as we did, one would never imagine that it is located only about 50 kilometres from the Arctic Circle. Here we decided that we must indulge in some tough walking, and embarked on a hike up the Glerardalur valley to the Lambi hut. The climbing huts, of which there are many in Iceland, are very well equipped, and are available for the use of anyone who ventures into what quite frequently is very inhospitable and rough mountain

territory. We estimated that it was about 15 miles to the Lambi hut and back to Akureyri, but it took us ten hours of almost non-stop toil and sweat. The terrain was pretty rough, with enormous tussocks not easily negotiated by someone with short legs like John Sterland, and it was necessary to make frequent diversions to avoid snow gullies and to cross rushing streams. As Denis said, "it sorted the men out from the boys". We were so tired on our return to the town that we decided to treat ourselves to a Pizza instead of self-catering.



We were conscious that we had "leap frogged" that very interesting thermal area around Geysir in the South-west of the island, so we hastened along the Northern coast road, which seemed to present little of scenic or geological interest. After spending one more night in Reykjavik we speeded on to Geysir, the name given to it because of what is now an extinct or moribund geyser. However, the nearby Strokkur geyser, which erupted or spouted about every five minutes to reach a height of about 100 feet, was a magnificent sight, and a spectacular hors d'oeuvre to a visit to Gullfoss, perhaps the most impressive of the trio of megga waterfalls we visited. Certainly it is a photographer's joy, with magnificent views from almost any angle. At normal times it disgorges over 100 cubic metres of water per second, but according to the

guide book its maximum outflow is about 2000 cubic metres per second.

Wishing to get away from the normal tourist attractions we drove from Geysir towards the interior with intent to drive hike to the Langjokull glacier. We "abandoned" the car half way to the glacier from the unsurfaced approach track, How we could have used a fourwheel drive vehicle - essential if journeys across Iceland or into the deep interior are contemplated. The rest of the journey and return to the car was accomplished on foot, but due to the lack of time (and perhaps exhaustion) we terminated the hike at the well-sited climbing hut located just short of the glacier, and returned to the dust-covered car. In fact dust was everywhere, including about a sixteenth of an inch in the boot, such that it required an hour of cleaning at the Esso service station.

Our final day's hike was based on the youth hostel at Hveragerdi, an expanding township which has harnessed its thermal springs to heat acres of glasshouses for flower and vegetable production. We had no detailed map, but used a rough diagram of the walking area provided by the tourist office. This proved to be almost useless in identifying hills and tracks. The members of the First division usually had three different opinions of the correct way back to Hveragerdi over some very rough terrain, but with the constant use of the compass, and I believe to everyone's surprise, we finished up at exactly the intended place. And so, back to Reykjavik, reunion with the Premier division, and the flight back to Glasgow.



## Iceland - Premier League

### Derek A. Smithson

Long journeys across ice-caps, longer even than on the Jostedalsgreen, have been the subject of conversation on Club meets, at least the ones I have been on, for a few years now and Iceland's Vatnajökull being the largest in Europe caught our attention.

Coos Townsend's book's description of a horrendous trip in the area we had chosen and at the same time of year is typical in describing tent shredding winds and poor conditions underfoot (in a recent article though he rates it as one of Europe's best backpacking routes). We were loathe to accept such counsel as it did not match our *many* experiences in the mountains but in the end we had to accept that this was our first trip there and we must heed the warnings that a full crossing of the icecap was beyond our party. June was chosen to minimise the chance of strong winds.

Instead of planning an expedition for a particular route, we (Tim Josephy, Martyn Wakeman and I) decided to go and explore the possibilities. Before July access to the central area of the island would, at best, be on foot, so a crossing was only possible with a multi-day walk back to the perimeter road. The summer heat makes crossings more hazardous or even impossible. We were told ski were essential to travel on the glacier but knew our limitations and skiing roped while towing sledges was beyond our abilities. We took snowshoes designed for walking on anything from soft snow to ice. I had experience of these, proving that any idiot was safe on them, so we were confident of



covering normal hiking distances.

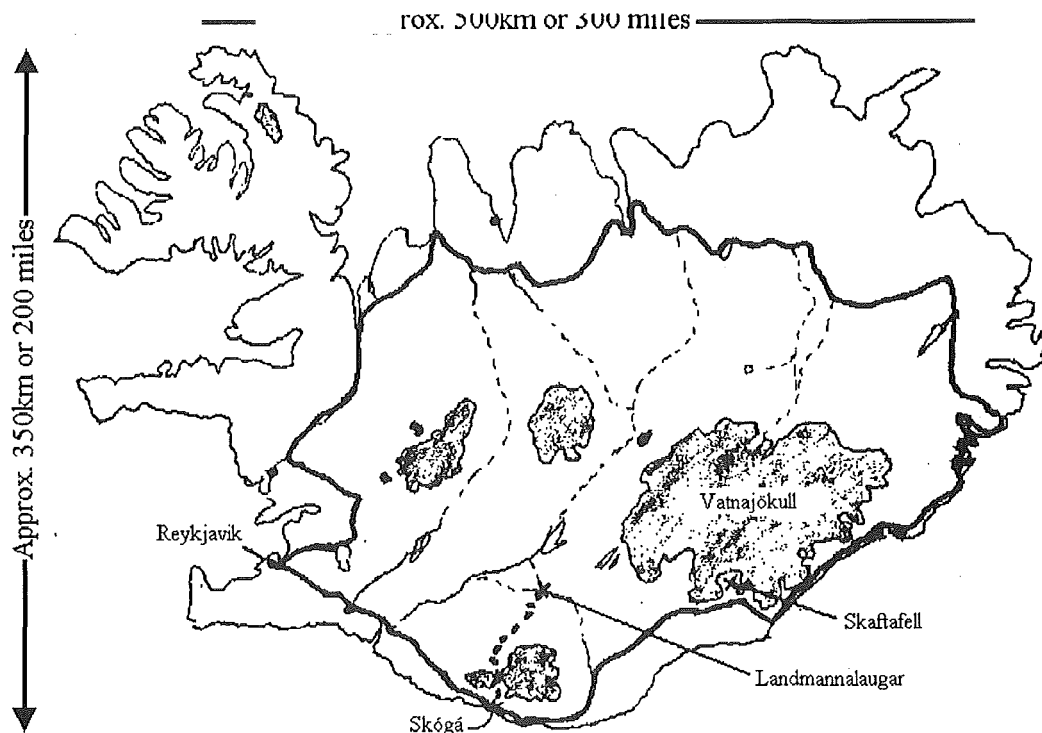
Going guideless over Icelandic glaciers and mountains requires persistence and stubbornness bordering on the pigheaded because so many things are discouraging. The Icelandic Alpine Club were very helpful but not encouraging and we came to suspect that they'd had a lot of trouble with enthusiastic foreigners getting into difficulties.

Our successful three week holiday in a small area of Iceland indicated that Iceland is a mountaineer's island, not really open to the *tourist* until late June. It is not a rock climber's island nor a one day router's (the many peaks are neither close to the roads nor the huts) and we saw no other climbers. We climbed three mountains, managed a five-day journey through mountains towards the interior and tried two *tourist attractions* but we did not experience the predicted bad weather. In fact we only donned our waterproofs for short periods. This and being before the big influx of visitors mean we would recommend the first three weeks of June as ideal.

It was not expensive for campers whose entertainment was provided by nature. We found there were long distances to travel and so early in the season there was less public transport and the camping and hut facilities were not fully operational. So it was necessary to be self sufficient and we would have been at a disadvantage relying solely on buses to get around but thankfully those members with cars came to our assistance.

It was stressful expecting facilities that turned out not to be there. Some of this was because the season had not started but





also some of the pamphlets we had were wrong. There were not food shops where we expected them, but, when they knew our problem the Icelanders helped us. This may not happen so easily when there are many visitors. We were sold some marvellous bread at Skoga that they baked themselves in wax paper milk cartons, however their muesli failed to meet our expectations. The bread kept for four days in the bottom of a rucsac - undamaged and tasty.

The most troublesome problem was fuel for the stoves. Despite books and pamphlets claiming that 'white gas', an equivalent of Coleman fuel, was readily available at garages, we couldn't even find people who knew what it was. Tim's stove, running it on ordinary petrol blew up in flames and proceeded to set light to the supporting picnic table. Tim as a highly trained mountain man required a fire extinguisher to put it out while Martyn displayed remarkable poise by photographing the conflagration rather

than risk the flames to move my rucsac to safety. We had favoured petrol stoves because of the predicted availability of fuel. Martyn worked carefully to keep his stove operating well throughout the trip and, having once said that he liked cooking, managed to cook for everyone using it alone most of the time. There are small cylinders of gas and bottles of meths available. Everything could be obtained in Reykjavik, so with a car, a day's shopping there may be the answer.

Socially the trip worked well despite our ages ranging from Martyn's almost thirty to my almost seventy. Martyn and I are notable trenchermen leaving Tim constantly in awe at our ability to consume food. At one point he came to us diffidently to suggest that we stretch our food supplies to accommodate an American who wanted to join us but did not have sufficient food. He'd worked it all out as possible as we changed the six-day trip to just five, only he failed to

account for the half bottle of whisky no longer being his and mine alone. Tim was a weather forecaster and judge of progress, which he used in true officer fashion to encourage his men. Towards the end he was being asked to continue forecasting bad weather to maintain the unbroken spell of good weather.

### Skaftafell

Just to arrive at the Skaftafell National Park, our first area, we had been driven past a fairly barren, distorted land with large areas of ice but failed to realise how very big this island is: its land area is greater than Ireland or Austria; the glacier Skeitharajokull is 15km wide at its snout as was Breithamerkurjekull, the glacier we ascended to Esjufjoll.

There were delightful moments at the Skaftafell site. David Hick and Christine Marriott's tent was pitched within one metre of a snipes nest but the bird persisted in hatching the chicks and Sue saw her leading them away to safety.

Within the Park we found a mountain, Kristinartindar, 1126m, a modest walk with a scramble to the top, and a chance to see our surroundings. It also seemed, on the map, to provide a route to the ice cap from which to gain our first experience of these snow conditions but the summit took longer than expected and the ridge to the ice was too frightening to attempt. Later conversations revealed that the locals believed it had not been traversed in summer conditions.

### Esjufjoll

Esjufiell is where an old volcano rim of mountains breaks through the icecap about 16km and 800m height from the glacier snout. Rory Newman

and Sue were to join us but ate something unpleasant the night before and said they would follow the next day, but their car took us as close as possible to the glacier. We traversed across to a central moraine which could lead us to a campsite and emergency hut. It seemed a long way even on this fairly good going and by the time we reached the moraine it was becoming misty and the glacier resembled a continuous series of peat hags caused by water channels in the ice, interspersed with obvious but obstructive crevasses, some of enormous dimensions. The glacier also had 'mole hills' sometimes more than half a metre high. Quite common they looked like good loamy soil extruded through the ice and then frozen, though they always looked as though they would be soft underfoot. The struggle to cover this short distance continued for nine hours before we sighted the hut and possible camping area. The ice, all hard and spiky, gave a good grip for bare boots but would tear a tent groundsheet to ribbons. The hut was not just for emergencies and had a charging system so we stayed in there.



Snowshoes on Lungbrekkutindur

This route was supposed to provide us with access to the top of the ice cap and we now realised that we would have to carry a camp for another full day to achieve that and we hadn't come prepared. We had missed any good snow conditions for reaching the

icecap. We found a way up the BOOm Lungbrekkutindur by linking the snow patches and avoiding the rock and scree. There was less security on the crumbly, shattered rock than there was on the steep scree so we traversed in on snow patches to a short distance below the top, climbed the 'rock' to the summit and then found a continuous snow field to carry us down, first on boots and then on snow shoes. The ridge from this summit towards the top of the ice cap looked very fragile. It had been beautiful weather, but the next day we took six hours to descend, firstly in falling snow, then rain and finally in fine weather. Rory and Sue following us were less fortunate in that Rory broke through the ice into a glacier pool with almost total immersion, so they camped and descended early the next day. There may have been a source of heat under the glacier at that point.

This outing convinced us of the inaccessibility of the icecap this June without a series of carries or using motorised vehicles. Neither of these appealed to us.

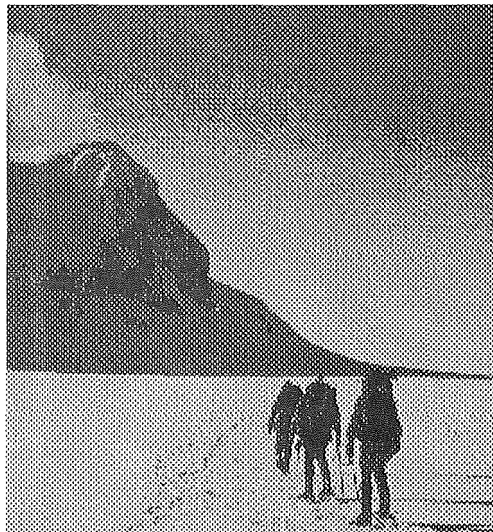
#### Hvannadalshnoekur

We then decided to climb the highest mountain in Iceland which looked so impressive from our campsite, the 2119m Hvannadalshnoekur. The times given for this mountain varied from four days to twelve hours so we decided to carry a camp and planned to stay one night.



Hvannadalshnukur on the Orrefajokull glacier

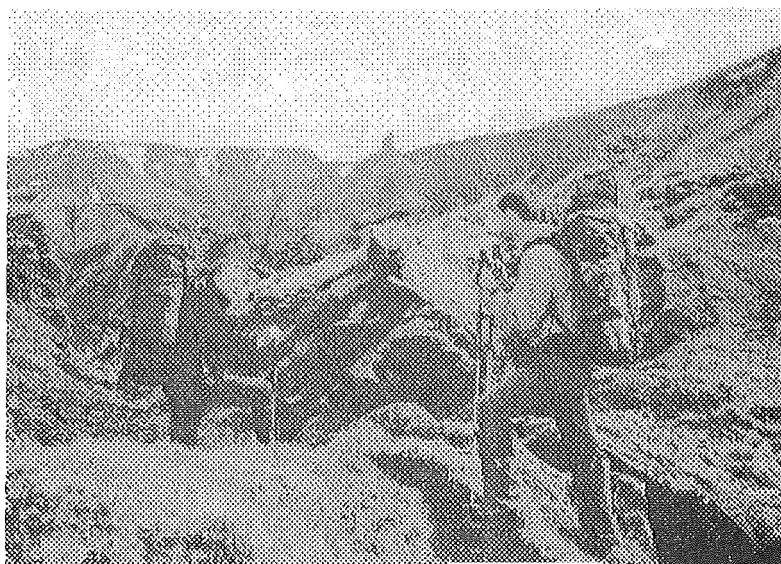
Conditions were good and we had an exhilarating outing, joined by Rory, during which we established our camp and then finished climbing the mountain in evening light on a route which left us still excited after regaining the camp. We had heavy loads, over 20kg., but because we were on a recognised route, there was an encouraging trace of a path on the lower slopes. It was hard work and we were all ready to stop when the glacier levelled at about 1500m after six hours. About half the height was gained on scree and compacted gravel, then a snow field and finally the glacier where we roped. Snow shoes were essential on all the snow and snow-covered glacier. On the steeper section near the summit the dry powder snow on top of hard snow was too deep for the snow shoe spikes to pierce so we used crampon in descent.



The top block of Hvannadalshncekur

Setting up the camp and having a hot drink and rest took about an hour and a half and we were enveloped in light cloud by five o'clock when we set out again for the summit. The cloud cleared shortly after we started. To avoid crevasses we went round to the

east side of the summit block and there found a trail made by an earlier party who had not used ropes so we removed ours. There was a trail, zigzagging up the steep snow of the top block, but just below the summit was a crevasse for which we roped after our leader made it look difficult. Since our predecessors' trail



Tim and Martyn descending to the Basar Hut on the first day

took no account of this hazard perhaps it was newly opened. The top block had numerous good climbing routes, both gullies and ridges of ice which on days such as we had would be worth a closer camp to permit attempts. We were enthralled. The summit was reached almost exactly twelve hours after leaving the car and on this clear evening we could see everything in the twilight. We descended quickly and easily, unroped and on snow shoes, to the tents where we ate and turned in after midnight.

The next morning, when we emerged from the tents we were greeted by mist and falling snow, but we had our upward tracks to follow and the weather cleared as we descended. We were back at Skaftafell for lunch and to plan a change of venue. We had almost windless conditions which were to continue for most of our trip, but what wind there was, was very cold.

#### Skoga to Landmannalaugar

We took a bus to Skoga which is the start point for a recognised,

waymarked route into the interior which we were curious to see. We were already aware that the scenery of Iceland was different to any previously seen and the interior was said to be the place to see more of it, including hot springs and lava beds. There were so few visitors that it was an opportunity to do this route without the distractions of crowds. The first day was long, up a landrover track to just under 1000m where we met what seemed like endless snow fields of wet deep snow without snow shoes. These, together with our climbing gear, had been packed into a car bound, eventually for Britain. Descending from the snow across the compacted gravel through grotesque scenery led us into a relatively lush valley with beautiful wild flowers and finally the Basar hut. The hut warden telephoned to confirmed that we did not need to return the same way but could continue to Landmannalaugar and catch the first bus of the season.

The second day gave us more grotesque moss-covered scenery with fascinating gorges and distant views of mountains and ice caps. We now

started to meet rivers that had to be forded and again proved that gaiters with rubber rands are not effective at keeping water out. Tim had wisely brought trainers to change into for these crossings. Not a long day but at the hut the water system had not been connected.

The next day included a long stretch of black desert-like ash which give no firm footing and must make life unbearable when there is a wind. There were still distant views of mountains and the moss and wild flowers were reached again later in the day. The hut was poorly equipped but would not be when the season started. The fourth day was a beautiful sunny day with a cold wind and we walked up to about 1000m where we were in a world of snowy mountains and walked on compacted gravel, on which a few wild flowers managed to survive. There were patches where the water made the gravel fluid but these were rare and illustrated the problems if this journey is made too early. Seemingly impossible boiling water bubbled out of the ground next to snow and the accustomed mountain scenery changed to ochre hillocks with snow drifts in the gullies. A long snow field led us to a centrally heated hut which felt stiflingly hot on entry. Here we enjoyed the company of a couple of Swedish men who were following the same trail. Before the evening meal we went up onto a local mountain to see other hot water springs.

We left very early the next morning to make sure we were in time for the bus without having to hurry. After about an hour across a snow field we had a gently descending route through more hot springs and more multi-coloured hillocks of shale. We stopped to admire an upward thrust of magma

(we guessed) before a lava field and to admire the lush area around the hut at Landmannalaugar. The hut was closed, a bulldozer worked noisily and the insects were biting so we moved down the road to await the bus. The cheerful bus driver, encouraged by one of the Swedes who spoke Icelandic, and the scenery, made for an entertaining journey,

Our attempt at tourism was nearly a disaster. We found Geysir itself a great disappointment with a very public campsite and again no shop for food. We managed to move to camp near Gullfoss where it rained necessitating cooking in a partly renovated toilet. The whole of this part of our visit was saved by an easing of the rain the next day, a pleasant walk to Gullfoss and the magnificence of these falls. In a series of tumbling falls the torrent turns through ninety degrees and then falls over the side of the end of a canyon which carries the foaming water in its original direction. We spent a long time just looking at the light on the water, the foam and the upsurge of spray from the final fall. But there was nowhere else of interest to us, so we rushed about and caught a bus which took us to Reykjavik for a day before we flew home.

Tim and I benefited from offers from members with cars to transport some of our gear from, and back to, Britain so avoiding hernias and excess baggage charges. Martyn was not so lucky, having to travel from Switzerland, and my last sight of him was of a disconsolate figure at the airport complaining at the £70 excess.

We did not cross Vatnajakull, the greatest ice cap outside Greenland and Antarctica, but we are all keen to return so perhaps next time.

## An Icelandic day with the YRC

Adam Genster

Extracts from the passionately written diary of an American who joined three members for a trek from Skoga to Landmannalaugar

June 14, 1998 - day five of our trek

What a glorious day it has been!

The four of us ambled out of bed at about 6:45am and began to repack our rucksacks (British for backpack not to be confused with the American word for day pack) and Martyn prepared our horrendous Icelandic porridge and tea, as has become the morning custom

It has been our experience thus far that the days start out bright and sunny, with blue skies, and that the storm systems tend to move in during the middle of the afternoon. As such, we are waking earlier and earlier each new day to begin our **tramping**.

Today was no different. The sun was shining bright. The sky was a lovely shade of blue. Lake Aftavatn looked beautiful from our red trimmed hut, with the snow covered mountains rising to the heavens in the distance, and the wondrous glaciers revealing themselves just behind them

We only paid 500 Ikr each for our stay at the hut, despite the fact that the rate is 800 Ikr for members, 1,200 Ikr for non-members. There was no warden, running water, nor gas, and the WC was locked. As such, we felt 500 Ikr was a justified fee, and so stated it in the guest book.

We shoved off a little after 8:00am, walking across a very small valley.

The most physical part of the day's journey came early - a fairly steep incline rising about 400 metres in a

short distance. It was tough, but not so tough such that one had to stop because of fatigue. However, should you look back during the ascent, you were stopped by another, irresistible force - the power and beauty of nature.

The hike up gave way to tremendous panoramic view in every direction - snow and rock and glacier and glacier and rock and snow. With each step, our new perspective surpassed the last. Each of us *had* to stop, several times, to take in as much as much as we could. None of us could take it all in - we could still be there basking, soaking it up like sponges.

At the top of the grade, we came to our first set of hot springs, which lay at the edge of a large ice cap or permanent snow field called Kaldaklofsfjoll. It truly was an amazing sight to see spouts of steam coming out of the ground, which was surrounded on all sides by fields of deep snow. Upon closer inspection, we could see the water boiling in the shallow pools. Actual bubbles coming from out of the ground less than three feet from a snow field! A very impressive sight with sulphurous springs creating beautiful collages of burnt red, clay, yellow, yellow/green, and lime.

From here on in it just kept getting better and better. Hot springs and mountains partially covered, with snow. The slopes were at times gentle and precious, at other times quite jagged and steep. In the distance, mountains, glaciers, crevasses, rock - as far as the eye could see. And, of course, beautiful lake Alftavatn, our starting point for the day, in the distance and five hundred metres below.

From our vantage point we could even see the pass we crossed days before, between the larger glacier Myrdalsjokull and the lesser glacier Eyjafjallokull. I can't think of enough superlatives to describe the views. Suffice it to say, Martyn, Tim, and Derek, with a combined 100 years of mountaineering experience among them, commented several times that they had never seen a place like this.

Thank goodness there are so many wonderful places in this world that can create such feelings in people. A completely natural endorphin rush.

We traipsed through several long snow fields to arrive at our hut rather early around 1:30pm after a short hike of 10km.

After a respite and short nap, we struck out for an afternoon stroll to check out some more hot springs. We grabbed our boots, gaiters, and Lekis, and shoved off up the snow mountainside near the hut to the top of Hrafninnusker. At this time, 4pm, the sky was a whitish grey - clearly not as blue as it had been at the start of the day.

The view from the summit was tremendous. Panoramic glory in every direction. To the distance was ocean, at least 100 km to the east. We could also see the glacier Hofsjokull about the same distance away and Hekla, an active volcano, which has erupted in 1913, '47, '70, '80, '81, and '91, was prominently in view, with the resultant lava flow.

We continued to walk towards the hot springs, each sprouting tremendous amounts of steam from the ground in several regions to the west of Hrafninnusker.

Tim, Martyn, and I went down the mountain to get a closer look, Derek

deciding to stay on the plateau and walk back to the hut.

We walked down and explored, tramping down the steep snow slopes of the peak, and then meandering playfully through snow tunnels drilled out of the water flow from several hot springs. In particular, we walked into a snow tunnel that sloped gently up a hill until it opened up to become a tremendous cavern about 18 feet high, with a hot spring as its source. Steam and sulphur were everywhere.

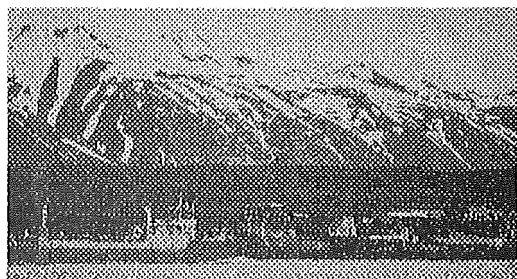
After that, we walked to two more springs that seemed intriguing from the distance. One had a pool of water over 3m wide and 5m long. However, the water was not merely boiling in this pool - it was whirling around in a tremendous fury! A vicious whirlpool. It looked like class IV rapids of boiling water cork screwing on top of itself.

The last hot spring we saw produced a tremendously strong, but thin line of steam. We saw that the water was evaporating from the pool upon impact, as soon as it came out of the spring. The entire spring was steam.

We then made our way back to the hut. When it came into view it was past 7:00pm. I was famished.

Tomorrow, we head for Landmannalaugar. Hopefully arriving before 1:30pm and the only bus - the only Reykjavik bus of the day.

Iceland - today I discovered - truly is the land of ice and fire.



# Icelandic Adventures

Rory Newman

We had a wonderful time in Iceland. Other members' reports will tell you about amazing scenery, vast deserted open spaces, huge glaciers, 80-mile views, and so on. It's all true!

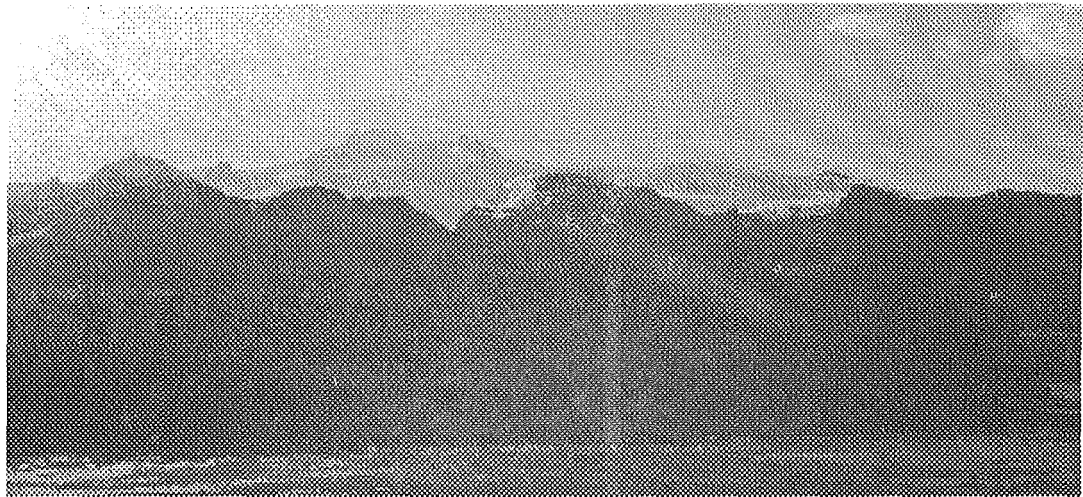
Sue and I travelled by boat via Shetland and the Faroes, taking a small car (and lots of climbing gear for various other people). We would recommend this approach to anybody with sufficient time and a robust, less-than-new vehicle (and perhaps a fairly *go-for-it* approach to driving Icelandic roads are *interesting*). We camped and self-catered throughout the trip. Icelandic weather is unpredictable, so a robust mountain-type tent is probably worthwhile. We took a standard small gas stove (cartridges) and plenty of fuel, but would have had no problems in obtaining fuel in Iceland. There are limits to the amount and value of food which can be imported (and some restrictions - no fresh meat or **dairy** products), so we bought a good deal of basic supplies as we went on. We recommend unreservedly hverbraud (geyser bread - a dark, sticky tea bread made with molasses) and skyr (a delicious low-fat yogurt or creme fraiche confection, made with a yeast culture). We do not recommend hakarl (putrefied shark buried on the beach for 6 months, then excavated for eating) - in an emergency, your companions' dirty socks would be much more appetising.

In the Shetlands, we visited Jarlshof, watched puffins and seals, and saw a pod of orcas swimming and sounding at the southern tip of Mainland. Another highlight was a click mill, of a type used until a few years ago - I

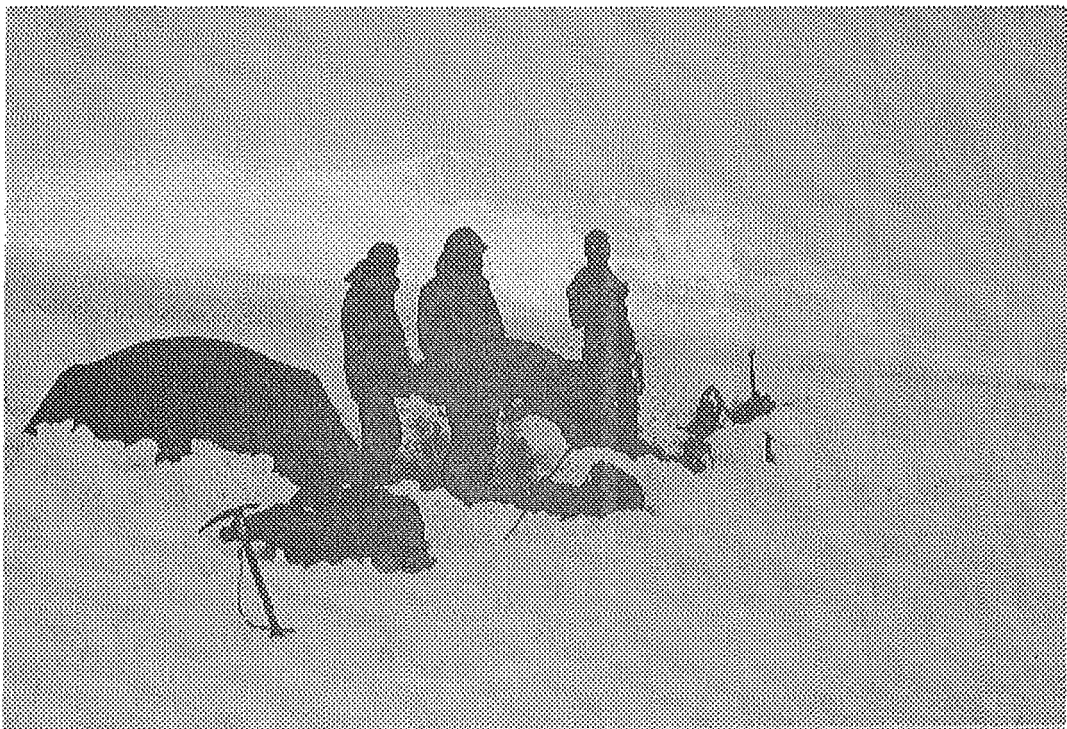
was impressed to find exactly the same basic undershot design with horizontal grindstones which I had seen still in use in Nepal.

The Faroe Islands were a revelation - basically North-West Scotland type mountains, coming straight up out of the sea. (Faroese weather is also basically North-West Scottish, only more so. However there are NO MIDGES.) The hills have steep green flanks with a lot of rock showing, and rocky summit ridges with some fairly serious scrambling opportunities. The island of Litla Dimun *averages* a 45-degree angle, and many of the bigger islands are almost as steep. It's the only place I've ever visited other than Nepal where (because there's no flat ground) people terrace hillsides for cultivation. Any heroic hard rock-climbers in the club might appreciate up to 750 metres (yes, I do mean metres) of vertical (and yes, I do mean vertical) sea-cliffs. The rock appears to be sound, but they would have to be attempted in the winter because of nesting seabirds, and the first stance would have to be in a boat as they rise vertically out of the sea. For us lesser mortals who enjoy long scrambly deserted mountain ridges, a six-month visit would enable a 'representative selection of the better summits to be reached. We intend to go back! High spots included Slrettaratindur at 882 metres (*the* highest spot in the Faroes), climbed on Midsummer's Eve, and Sornfelli. On Slrettaratindur, we met a bus-load of Faeroese, struggling slowly up the steep flank to dance on the summit (traditional). Halfway up, they stopped to lie down, complain, and eventually sing loudly to encourage themselves. An astonished hare came out to see what was making the extraordinary noise, ending up a couple of metres away from an equally astonished Sue.





Iceland's highest point seen from Skaftafell campsite and a high camp on an attempt to climb it.



Sornfelli was exciting because ROIY approached the summit via an awkward steep scramble. He then found first, that the summit belonged to NATO, and was definitively out-of-bounds to casual mountaineers, and second, that his approach had left him *inside* the security fencing, video surveillance, and other similar embarrassments. Also, the summit on the day was the summit of a radar dome. This was not ascended. Another five hills were also climbed,

but this was really a bare taste of the feast on offer.

The main areas we visited in Iceland were the southern edge of the Vatnajokull icecap, North-Central Iceland, Eastfjords. Most of this would have been possible by public transport, but having the car saved a lot of time and effort - and possible starvation of some of the other Ramblers.

## Skaftafell

All the Iceland parties met at the Skaftafell campsite on June 1st, but two parties - ourselves and Tim Josephy, Derek Smithson and Martyn Wakeman stayed for a while to climb locally. Our companions had brought multi-fuel stoves, intending to buy Coleman fuel, but when this was not obviously available, resorted to unleaded petrol. It was quite instructive to watch how different people behave when their stove explodes, converting itself into a flame-thrower, igniting the wooden table on which it rests, and melting pans and cutlery into little twisted lumps of hot metal. Tim ran for the campsite fire extinguisher. Derek ran (very wisely) much further, to fetch a bucket of water. He came back noticeably more slowly, especially as he approached what was now a baby volcano. Martyn, deciding that the jobs of running about and panicking were already spoken for, calmly took a series of photos to show the manufacturers later. After the conflagration was extinguished and the excitement had subsided, the car enabled us to get to Hofn, and therefore to purchase the only two containers of real Coleman fuel outside Reykjavik in the whole of Iceland. But for this, the awful choice of hakarl or socks would certainly have (out?)faced our noble companions.

Other highlights of Skaftafell included:

- a fairly rapidly aborted attempt on what turned out to be an unclimbed ridge (but we got a couple of nice summits out of it)

- some amazing views of icefalls (complete with sound-effects) - these would dwarf most of the big

Himalayan icefalls. Iceland's highest point is only about 7,000 feet but the glaciers and icecap are on a heroic scale, starting on the beach and going all the way to the top.

- a whole day spent walking up one of these glaciers. Eventually Rory fell through thin ice into deep water. This was surprising - glaciers aren't supposed to do that. We think the water may have started life as a hot spring under the ice, further up, and eroded its way down under the surface. By the time Rory met it, it was, to say the least, no longer hot. Rory discovered an unexpected ability to levitate, or at least to mantelshelf while wearing a 50-pound pack. Sue, anticipating instant freezing, galloped up shouting "Quick! Take all your clothes off!" This was an intriguing offer, miles from anything except miles off. Rory declined.

- a superb expedition to the highest point on the island, involving a high camp, a couple of entertaining crevasse crossings on snow bridges, a very successful trial of snowshoes, and some of the best views of a number of years climbing mountains. We were lucky to climb up through and above the cloud, reaching the summit at 9:00 p.m. in bright sunlight (24-hour daylight has its uses). Martyn fulfilled a lifetime's ambition to camp on the icecap. The rest of the party would have helped him excavate platforms for the tents, but he enjoyed it so much, we couldn't bear to spoil his fun. Derek said at the end of the day, "That may be the best day's mountaineering of a lifetime".

- an example of the laconic Iclander - the National Park warden described seeing a tidal wave 20 feet high, 3 miles wide, carrying icebergs the size of houses, exploding from the tongue of a glacier and rushing

towards his Land Rover. (This was the Grimsvotn flood of two years ago, following a volcanic eruption under the icecap.) He escaped by driving frantically out of its path. He said, "It was quite interesting."

## The Eastfjords

Highlights here included:

Rory's attempt to climb Mount Bjólfur in sea-level cloud. The attempt was severely handicapped by his inability to locate Mount Bjólfur in sea-level cloud.

Hengifoss a spectacular waterfall, 120 metres high, with red and yellow horizontal strata in a black basalt cliff

The Hotpot! - a hot spring piped into a soaking pool; ideal for tired mountaineers at the end of a trip.

The Giantesses' Rampart - a remarkable drystone wall 20 feet high and a mile long, made out of rocks the size of washing machines. It's actually a terminal moraine.

"Arizona" - our first real sight of the Icelandic interior. Black desert, with mesa-like lava hills rising out of it. In early June, the landscape is covered with purple saxifrage.

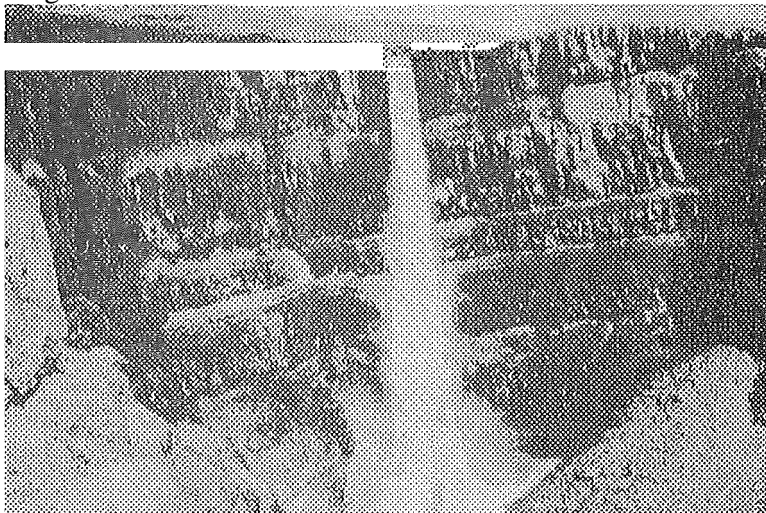
We would like to go back and spend more time in the deserted interior of the island.

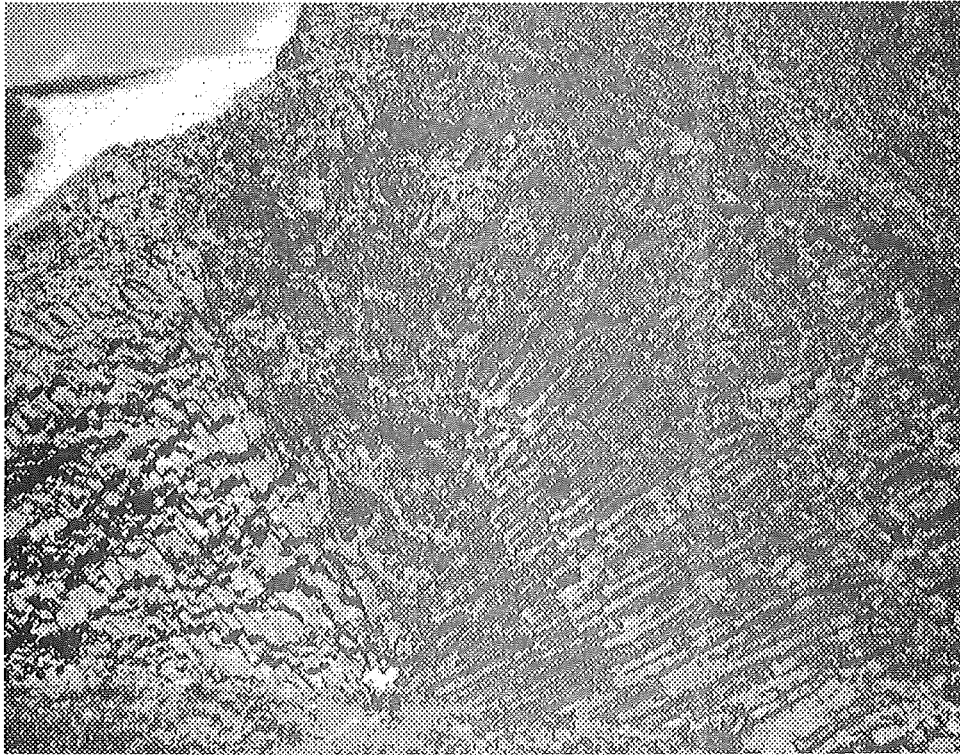
## North-Central Iceland

Highlights here included:

The Myvatn area - craters, boiling mud, solfataras, hot springs, steam vents - this place is a physical Hengifoss

geography textbook laid out as a giant interactive (possibly not with the boiling mud) experience. Geothermal power is a local industry: you drill holes down into really hot stuff and use the superheated steam that comes screaming back up to drive turbines. One local attraction is the place where a drilling crew found something slightly more active than they were looking for. Pieces of the drilling rig were found 3 kilometers away. The resulting crater known as "Homemade Hell", is 50 feet deep and 100 yards across. Remarkably, the drilling crew all survived. In spite of this, Sue thinks volcanoes are FUN! We can't begin to describe the whole thing. Go and see for yourselves. Apart from the above, attractions include an underground naturally-heated swimming pool, more breeding ducks than you will ever see anywhere else in Europe (both species and numbers), Arctic terns and snipe nesting on the campsite, and (in the Dimmuborgir) the weirdest piece of landscape we have ever seen. Tortured lava formations mimic animals, buildings, dragons, Heath Robinson machinery, etc. etc. If the Quirang on Skye was a pilot project, this is the masterpiece!





Basalt formations dwarf Rory in the Jökulsárglúfur

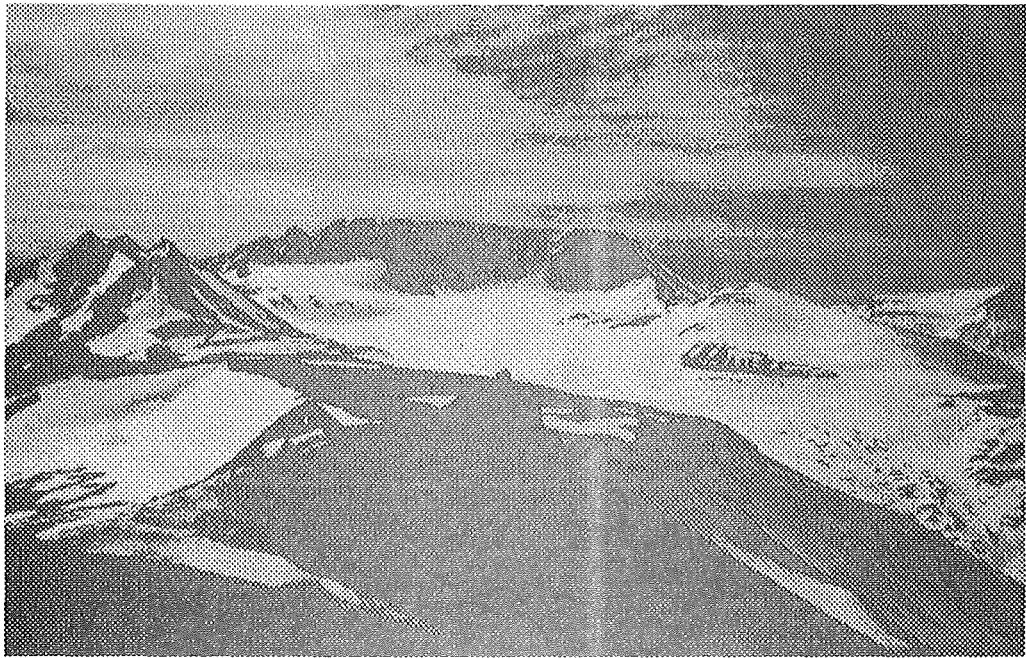
Akureyri - the place we would like to live **if** we lived in Iceland. It is a seaside town with three bookshops and a botanical garden with a complete Icelandic flora. It's also within walking distance of a series of superb-looking Alpine-style ridges. We only had time to explore one of these, but there are dozens. Most of them look either accessible walking/scrambling with an ice-axe, or as **if** they would go for a fairly light party with a couple of axes each and a short rope. Tempted?

Akureyri is also the place where a local cat enjoyed sharing our picnic lunch so much that it got into the car through the sun-roof and asked to come back to England with us. As its owner was watching anxiously from a window, we didn't cat-nap it.

The Jökulsárglúfur - this is a canyon carved by the Jökulsá á Fjollum, a glacial ice-melt river draining the northern part of the Vatnajökull icecap. It's possible (and we did) to backpack from Dettifoss

(Europe's most powerful waterfall) down the canyon to Asbyrgi (the footprint of Odin's horse). This expedition involves climbing in and out of the canyon, with stunning views of waterfalls, basalt formations, red and black lava hillsides, craters cut by the river, and, **if** you're lucky (which we were), merlins and gyrfalcons.

We could go on and on about the lake which appeared a few years ago after an earthquake, the rock formations where geology was invented, the walk through the steaming crater of an active volcano, the amazing Icelandic forests (Icelandic joke: Q. What do you do **if** lost in the Icelandic forest? A. Stand up.) etc. etc. We climbed 27 summits, we saw 45 species of birds (and several species of whales from the boat, both coming and going) and 120 species of plant including the rare Hawkweed-Leaved Treacle Mustard (who *thinks* of these names?) But we'll only make you jealous... Go and see for yourselves! We intend to.



The hills above Akureyri

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David Hick balanced while crossing the outflow at the snout of the Vatnajökull

# Travelling hopefully

David Hick, David Martindale  
and Christine Marriott

When we thought about what we wanted to do in Iceland: travel around the island, meet up with the icecap party and help them by carrying some gear if they wanted us to, and take our own camping gear, it seemed that the obvious thing to do was to take our own vehicle. Rory and Sue came to the same conclusion, and we travelled out with them although they returned a week after us. Others opted for air travel and either car hire or local transport.

John Schofield's excellent research and administrative skills provided us with tickets and ferry times. To get to Seydisfjordur on the east coast of Iceland, we would be leaving Aberdeen on Monday afternoon, spending Tuesday on Shetland, stopping off on the Faroe Islands for a couple of hours on Wednesday, and arriving on Thursday morning. High speed travel compared to the return journey. Thursday afternoon out of Seydisfjordur, Friday, Saturday and Sunday on the Faroes and Tuesday on the Shetlands, arriving back in Aberdeen on Wednesday morning. Most of our travelling was done at night.

Try telling your insurance company that you want to take your car to Iceland. We had some interesting responses. "Sorry, can't be done," was the most common. "I've worked in insurance for twelve years and that's a first," said another. It was a relief finally to have all the necessary paperwork in our hands.

And the journey was an experience in itself. We're accustomed to getting onto a plane and getting off two, three

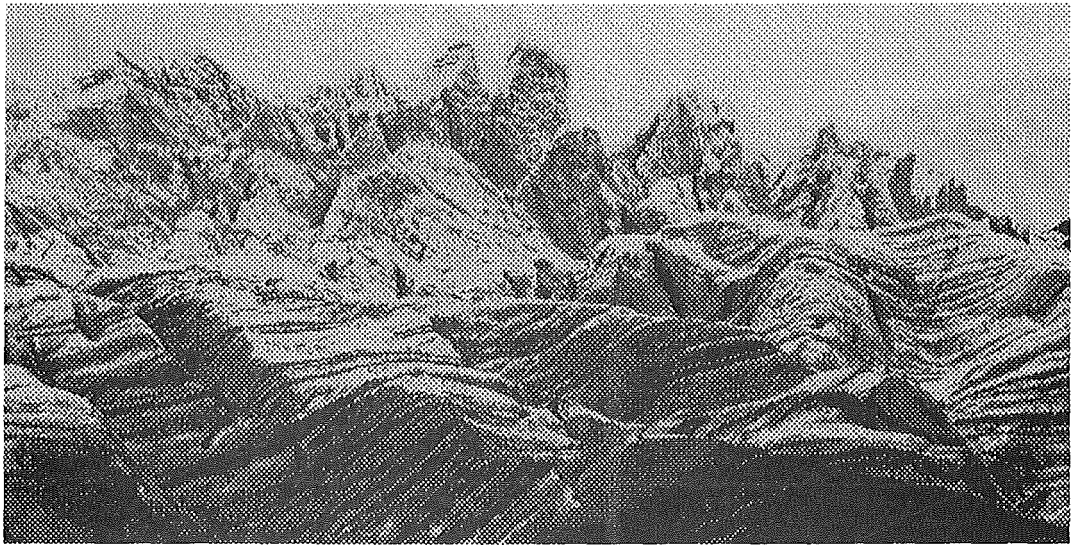


Hof

or four hours later in another part of the world. Taking the time to sail adds an extra dimension to travel, especially when there are two ferry changes to be made along the way. Passengers feel much more involved in the arrival and departure from quaysides than from airports, when they are sealed in the aircraft cabin. There's time to read, reflect and people-watch as the waters slip by.

We were on the first ferry of the year into Seydisfjordur. We shared the delight of the young Icelandic woman, a crew member, going home for the first time since the winter and the pleasure of families waiting to greet returning travellers. A band of children was playing to welcome the ferry into port.

What of the driving? There were times when the car owner got rather pensive, as he faced yet another road, only opened days earlier after the harsh Iceland winter, and still rutted with the caterpillar tracks of the only vehicles to have passed over it for the last eight months. He became expert at spotting and avoiding potholes and the larger boulders that littered the way. The car seems to have survived unscathed and it certainly served us well.



Contorted ice - Vatnajekull

### High spots

Because we travelled so early in the season, there were limited opportunities to travel into the interior, but there is so much to see within striking distance of the main ring round around the island, that in the time available to us this scarcely mattered. Early summer is the time to see the waterfalls at their finest. Access to Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe, surely the most impressive in Iceland, had opened days before we arrived. Walking on the edge of the Jokulsa á Fjollum canyon gave us great views of this and other waterfalls on the river.

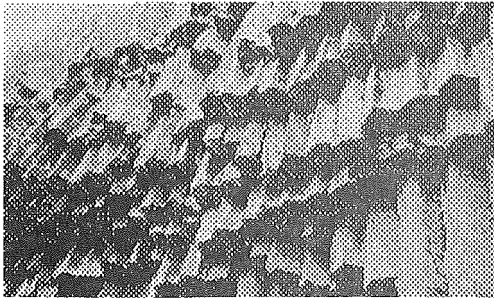
The volcano Hekla, 1491m, provided a challenging day's climbing. The early season condition of the roads necessitated leaving the car before the recommended parking spot but we

took great care to note our position against such features as we thought we could identify later. This in turn meant that there were many additional kilometres of lava fields to be crossed before beginning the ascent. This lava has been deposited in the last decade and no erosion has yet taken place. The lava is as it cooled, huge blocks of sharp, hostile rock that cuts into boots and flesh, interspersed with deserts of volcanic ash.

On the summit the snow is melted, and the soil steams and is warm to the touch from underground volcanic activity. A visitors' book on the summit showed that only three people had ascended before us this season.

We looked forward to returning to our hostel for a well earned sauna and dip in the hot pool, but could not find the car in the moon-like landscape.





Basalt at Svartifoss↗ and Kirkjubæur↘



We came upon it just as we despaired of ever finding it again, and reached our hostel after a fourteen hour day. The sauna was every bit as good as expected.

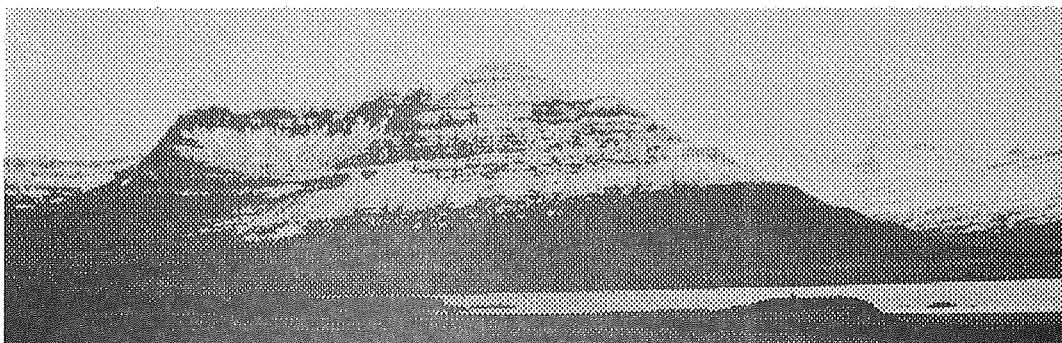
Iceland is a dream for birdwatchers. We had heard that the birds seem completely unperturbed by people, and this proved to be true. We saw

the nests of arctic terns, red throated divers, redwings and snipes, nesting feet away from our tent on the Skaftafell camp site. Throughout the night the snipes made their weird drumming sound. Other favourite sightings included the harlequin ducks, black-tailed godwits, red necked phalaropes, arctic skuas and the snow buntings which seemed to choose the darkest and most forbidding lava fields to show off their lovely black and white plumage and wonderful song.

Lake Myvatn is home to many species of water birds. Among those we saw were scaup, common scoters, long tailed ducks, Barrows goldeneye, teal, gadwall, slavian grebes and red breasted mergansers.

An exception to the 'live and let live' rule were the great skuas. On Ingolfshofdi, a promontory about 8 kilometres across a tidal lagoon, we were able to walk among the skuas' nests, but only at great risk of being divebombed by the adult birds. We had reached Ingolfshofdi in a hay cart pulled by a tractor driven by one Sigurdur Bjarnason, a true Viking who reputedly spoke English, but unlike anyone else we met refused to use it. Still, he communicated by smiles and expansive gestures.

In Iceland there is always the sense that the land is still developing. Hekla last erupted in 1991. Our guidebook told us that the ground surface at



Bulandstindur, 1068m, in the south-east



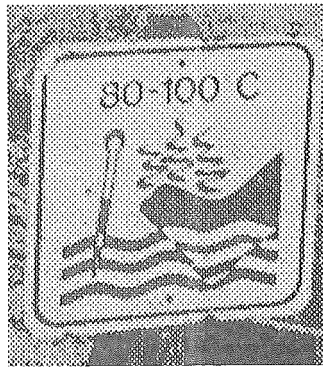


Tombolo on St Ninian's Island, Shetlands

Krafla, the spectacular fissure in the north east, is rising, a sign of possible activity in the near future. Walking among the steaming, warm rocks this was easy to believe. The tremendous floods of 1996, caused by the volcanic eruptions under the Vatnajokull icecap were visible from the campsite that the icecap party used as its base. Vegetation has only a fragile hold on the land. Much of the land appeared to be covered by fresh lava, with the only plants being mosses and lichen. In other places, flowers, including vast fields of lupins, grow miraculously out of the sand and dust of recent volcanic activity.

### The Faroes

We spent three days on the Faroes: they merit three weeks to themselves. We enjoyed wonderful weather, more contact with friendly people and relished the sight of lush grass and trees



spartan Icelandic landscape. Having left our car on the dockside of Torshavn port we walked and took advantage of the superb public transport system. Highlights were the walk to Kirkjubaer and a visit to the island of Eysturoy.



Faroes