

Iceland Hiking

with

REYKJAVÍK CITY GUIDE

11 selected trails including 1- to 2-day hikes and
The Laugavegur Trail

41 TRAIL MAPS – PLACES TO STAY – PLACES TO EAT

JIM MANTHORPE





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A request

The author and publisher have tried to ensure that this guide is as accurate and up to date as possible. However, things change even on these well-worn routes. If you notice any changes or omissions that should be included in the next edition of this guide, please email or write to Jim Manthorpe at Trailblazer (address above). You can also contact us via the Trailblazer website ( trailblazer-guides.com). Those persons making a significant contribution will be rewarded with a free copy of the next edition.

Warning – mountain walking in volcanic areas can be dangerous

Please read the notes on Covid-19 and visiting Iceland (see p6), when to go (pp14-16) and mountain safety (pp38-50). Every effort has been made by the author and publisher to ensure that the information contained herein is as accurate and up to date as possible. However, they are unable to accept responsibility for any inconvenience, loss or injury sustained by anyone as a result of the advice and information given in this guide.

Updated information will be available on:  trailblazer-guides.com

Photos – Front cover & this page: The scalding hot springs of Stórihver (see p96) on Day 1 of the Laugavegur trek. **Previous page:** On Móskarðshnjúkar (p153).

Overleaf & p6: The mighty Skógarfoss (p126).

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□ THIS BOOK AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This guide book was researched partly in 2020-1, when the whole world was suffering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we go to press, mountain huts and other facilities for hikers in Iceland were preparing to reopen as usual for the trekking season. However, be aware that the situation could change and you should check websites such as **Visit Iceland**  visiticeland.com and, for the latest **entry requirements**,  www.logreglan.is/english/ before departure.

As in most countries it is likely that you will be required to wear a face mask in certain situations indoors. Owing to social distancing, if restaurants and cafés are unable to operate to full capacity you may need to book in advance to ensure you get a table.

Hopefully, by the time you're on your trek, Coronavirus, lockdowns and other ubiquitous words from 2020 will be nothing but a bad memory of a surreal year.



INTRODUCTION

Iceland is a land like no other. It is one of the youngest land masses on Earth, a mere 16 million years young and in geological terms still a child, growing and changing all the time. Sitting astride the mid-Atlantic ridge, a major submarine fault marking the boundary of the North American and Eurasian plates, Iceland is subject to frequent volcanic activity. As the continental plates drift away from each other the divergent fault line tears apart releasing magma to the surface.

But Iceland is not just a land of fire, it is, to perpetuate the cliché, a land of ice too. Thanks to its northerly latitude, where it brushes up against the Arctic Circle, the mountains and volcanoes of Iceland are encased in large ice caps with glaciers spilling into the valleys below. There are few places on earth where you can walk in such a dynamic landscape. A walk in Iceland takes you into a world of raw and rugged mountains where the air is tinged with the pungent scent of sulphur. Steam rises from the ground and waterfalls crash into gorges and ravines.

The popularity of hiking in Iceland has exploded in recent years, perhaps fuelled by a greater awareness of the country's beauty, thanks to social media, as well as greater accessibility by air. There is a plethora of trails across the country but the standout long distance route is the Laugavegur, a relatively short multi-day hike of 55km that weaves through a mountainous landscape of yellow rhyolite hills, dormant volcanoes and ancient lava fields.

It is the most popular hike in Iceland, and for good reason, with every turn offering up a new grand vista. There are verdant birch forests, conical peaks and vast ashen deserts, rift valleys, thundering rivers and waterfalls and the mighty Markarfljót canyon. Then there is the Torfajökull caldera; a supervolcano pitted with steaming fumaroles and hot springs. Old lava flows spill down from mountainsides as if suspended in time and wildflowers dance in the breeze, brushed by the steam from rivers flowing with hot water.

The Laugavegur will surely inspire you to explore more of Iceland and you won't be left disappointed. The Fimmvörðuháls trek,

A walk in Iceland takes you into a world of raw and rugged mountains where the air is tinged with the pungent scent of sulphur

... the standout long distance route is the Laugavegur, a relatively short multi-day hike of 55km

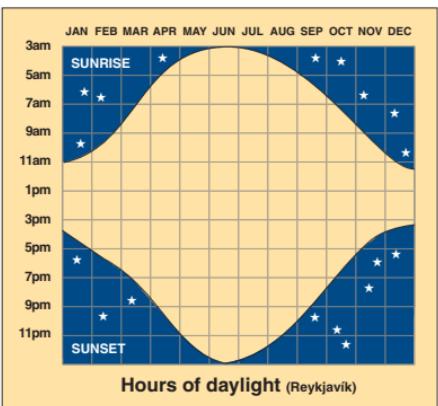
TREKKING ROUTES

Trekking route	Region	Start/Finish	Distance from Reykjavík
1 Laugavegur	Landmannalaugar	Landmannalaugar/ Þórsmörk	179km/157km
2 Fimmvörðuháls	Fimmvörðuháls	Þórsmörk/Skógar	157km/155km
3 Jökulfell	Skaftafell	Skaftafell visitor centre	324km
4a Morsárdalur & Morsárlón out/back	Skaftafell	Skaftafell visitor centre	324km
4b Morsárdalur & Morsárlón loop	Skaftafell	Skaftafell visitor centre	324km
5 Kristínartindar	Skaftafell	Skaftafell visitor centre	324km
6 Skaftafellsjökull	Skaftafell	Skaftafell visitor centre	324km
7a Mt Esja to Steinn	Reykjavík	Esjurætur Hiking Center	23km
7b Mt Esja full circuit	Reykjavík	Esjurætur Hiking Center	23km
8 Móskarðshnjúkar	Reykjavík	Car park by Skardssá river	30km
9 Glymur waterfall & Hvalvatn	Reykjavík	Car park at Botnsá	70km
10 Vífilsfell	Reykjavík	Minor rd at Jósepsdalur or Litla-Kaffistofan café**	25km
11 Reykjadalur hot springs	Reykjavík	Reykjadalur car park	48km

**Nearest scheduled bus stop, 1.6km east of minor road at Jósepsdalur



16 When to go



... in summer there is virtually no darkness ...

can be busy at weekends and public holidays, especially if the sun is shining! Esja is a particularly popular peak for Reykjavík city dwellers so if you like a bit of peace and solitude choose a weekday.

Also remember that in the summer there is virtually no darkness in Iceland so you could visit in the early hours of the day or later in the evening and have some of the most popular sights all to yourself.

although it has been done. Keep an eye on the **Ferðafélag** huts' website (www.fi.is) to see when they are scheduled to open as it changes from year to year depending on how much snow is left lying.

In the Skaftafell region and around Reykjavík the trekking season is longer thanks to the proximity to the sea and a milder climate. Expect the lower level trails in these areas to be open from May until October. Higher trails may only be accessible from June to September.

Day hikes around Reykjavík



Above: The hut and campsite at Landmannalaugar at the start of the Laugavegur trek.

Iceland – selected treks



Skaftafellsjökull from Glama viewpoint (see p141) on the Kristínartindar trail (Trek 5).



This spire is all that remains of a lava duct on the side of Brennisteinsalda (see p91).

Trek 1 – The Laugavegur





Above: Obsidian, the dense black rock formed when lava cools rapidly, is common here.

Main photo: At an altitude of 1035m, the hut at Hrafninnusker is the highest on the Laugavegur and snow lingers well into the summer.

Trek 2: Fimnvörðuháls



Trek 3: Jökulfell – Trek 4: Morsárdalur & Morsárlón



Day hikes around Reykjavík – Trek 7: Esja & Trek 8: Móskarðshnjúkar

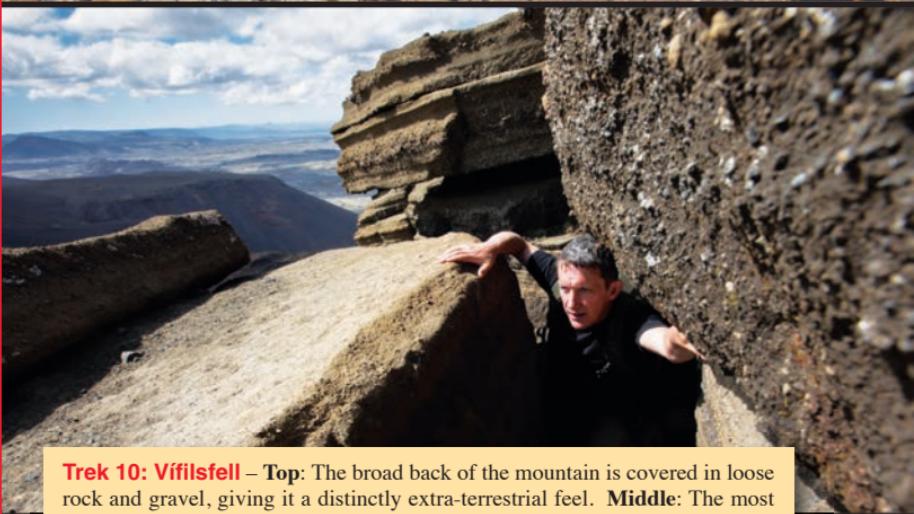


ABOVE Trek 7: Esja – The Esja trail winds through a large expanse of lupins on its lower slopes. **Top right:** From Steinн there are sweeping views of the Reykjanes peninsula and Reykjavík.

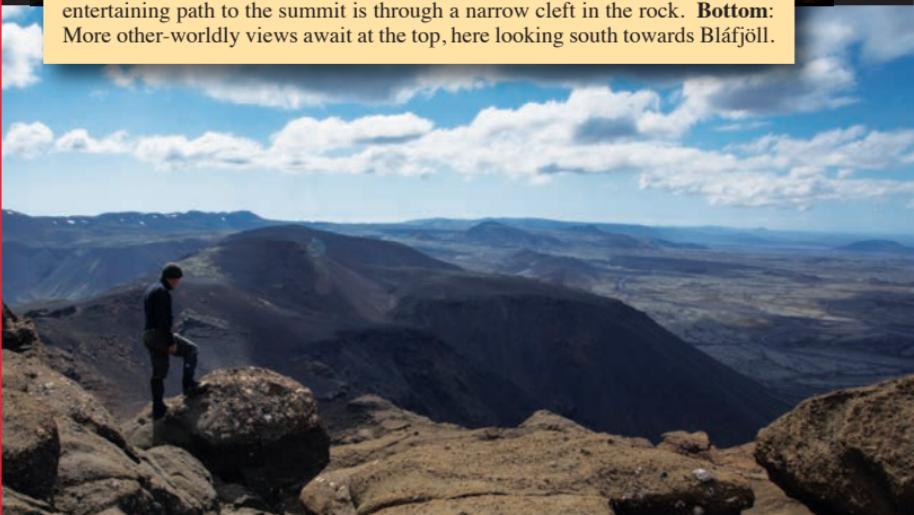
BETWEEN Trek 8: Móskarðshnjúkar – The view from the summit of the narrow ridge snaking towards the Esja plateau is spectacular. **Right:** The final climb to the summit traverses a curtain of red scree. **Bottom, right:** The lower slopes of Móskarðshnjúkar with the Esja massif and Reykjavík in the distance.



Day hikes around Reykjavík – Treks 10: Vífilsfell & 11: Reykjadalur Hot Springs



Trek 10: Vífilsfell – **Top:** The broad back of the mountain is covered in loose rock and gravel, giving it a distinctly extra-terrestrial feel. **Middle:** The most entertaining path to the summit is through a narrow cleft in the rock. **Bottom:** More other-worldly views await at the top, here looking south towards Bláfjöll.



With a group or on your own?

Some of us prefer to hike alone; there is nothing wrong with that, so long as you are aware of the risks and take steps to minimise any dangers. The advantage of walking alone is that you tend to see, hear and experience more of the world around you as you walk. You are likely to see more wildlife and feel more connected to the natural world. Rest stops, perhaps sitting on a rock with a sandwich, are peaceful affairs where you can contemplate the landscape. There is no blethering friend there to interrupt your profound thoughts on life, the universe and everything.

Of course, you may also get lonely and wish to share your experiences with a close friend. Their bletherings may be a great comfort when the rain and wind conspire to darken your mood and demotivate you. A friend is also a useful ally on tricky river crossings, and in the unlikely event of an accident it is always better to be with someone who can raise the alarm.

If you like company but have no like-minded friends who are willing to join you for your adventures in Iceland, you could consider signing up with one of the walking holiday companies listed in this guide (see pp18-19).

And if that doesn't appeal to you then why not just try walking alone. That way you get the best of both worlds; you can be alone for much of the time but you will never be too far away from other hikers. The walks in this guide are popular and you will bump into friendly folk on mountain summits, in mountain huts and at river crossings. The shared experience of being in the wilderness tends to draw people together and inhibitions sometimes felt in everyday life seem to fall away.

WALKING ALONE

Walking alone in the wilderness is often frowned upon because it is thought to be more dangerous. If you have an accident, who will call for help? In practice those who walk alone are far more aware of their own vulnerability and consequently they take fewer risks.

(Opposite) The myriad colours of the rhyolite rocks around Landmannalaugur are the result of historic volcanic eruptions. Yellow sulphurous rocks are the most common.

For Scandinavian and Spanish travellers you can fly with Norwegian (www.norwegian.com) to Reykjavík from Oslo, Bergen, Madrid and Barcelona.

From North America

Iceland Air (www.icelandair.com) fly to Reykjavík from 13 cities across the US, from Orlando to Anchorage, and also from four Canadian cities: Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal.

There are also flights from New York with Delta Airlines (www.delta.com) and Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com).

GETTING FROM THE AIRPORT TO REYKJAVÍK

Thanks to its origins as a US military base, Keflavík International Airport is located a long way from the city so you will need to take a very expensive taxi ride or a more affordable bus journey. One of the best options is to book a seat with Flybus (www.re.is/tour/flybus). They will drop you at the BSI bus terminal for 3299kr (6299kr return) or at the door of your accommodation for an extra 1000kr. Their buses operate between 3.30am and 10.15pm.

There is a much cheaper alternative; the Strætó public bus (No 55) operates between the airport and the BSI bus terminal which is near the domestic airport in the city. The fare is 470kr each way (Mon-Fri 12/day 6.35am-10.55pm, Sat 9/day 6.55am-10.55pm, Sun 7/day 10.55am-10.55pm).

Getting around

PUBLIC TRANSPORT – A SUMMARY

Laugavegur & Fimmvörðuháls

The only way to get to the trailheads at Landmannalaugar and Pórsmörk is by bus. As well as the public bus from Mjódd, there are four private bus companies



Skaftafell

Iceland by Bus (☎ +354-551 1166, □ www.icelandbybus.is)

South Coast Bus: Reykjavík to Glacier lagoon via Seljalandsfoss, Skógar, Vík, Klaustur & Skaftafell;

Jul & Aug, daily 1/day

Dep	City Hall	7.45am
Arr	Skógar	10.30am
	Skaftafell	2.30pm
	Glacier lagoon	3.30pm

South Coast Bus: Glacier lagoon to Reykjavík via Skaftafell, Klaustur, Vík & Skógar;

Jul & Aug, daily 1/day

Dep	Glacier lagoon	5pm
Arr	Skaftafell	6pm
	Skógar	9pm
	City Hall	11pm

Strætó (☎ +354-540 2700, □ straeto.is, app Straeto)

51 Mjódd to Höfn and back via Skaftafell – see p24

Around Reykjavík

Strætó (☎ +354-540 2700, □ straeto.is, app Straeto)

51 Mjódd to Hveragerði:

Mon-Fri 11/day	7.10am-11pm
Sat-Sun 9/day	8.10am -11.30pm

51 Höfn to Hveragerði:

Mon-Fri 11/day	6.38am-10.12pm
Sat 9/day	7.38am-10.38pm
Sun 8/day	8.08am-7.43pm

52 Mjódd to Höfn via Hveragerði;

Mon-Fri 2/day	8am & 5.45pm
Sat-Sun 2/day	8.10am & 3.15pm

52 Höfn to Mjódd via Hveragerði;

Mon-Fri 2/day	12.07pm & 10.12pm
Sat-Sun 2/day	12.08pm & 7.43pm

57 Mjódd to Akranes via Esjurætur

Hiking Center;

Mon-Fri 12/day	7.25am-11pm
Sat 7/day	9am-11pm
Sun 8/day	9am-11pm

57 Akranes to Mjódd via Esjurætur

Hiking Center;

Mon-Fri 11/day	6.50am-10.18pm
Sat 6/day	7.55am-10.25pm
Sun 8/day	7.55am-10.25pm

Taxis

There are no buses to the trailheads of Móskarðshnjúkar (Trek 8, p152) and Glymur (Trek 9, p154) so you will need to hire a car or get a taxi. Taxis are not cheap so if you plan to spend some time exploring and enjoying several different day hikes (see p147), it probably makes more sense to hire a car for a few days. A taxi ride to the Glymur trailhead for example would set you back around 22,000kr each way and to the Esja trailhead 8000kr each way. The following taxi companies will all ferry you to the trailheads and pick you up at a pre-arranged time.

- **Hreyfill** ☎ +354-588 5522, □ www.hreyfill.is

- **BSR** ☎ +354-561 0000, □ www.taxireykjavik.is

- **Borgarbílastöðin** ☎ +354-552 2440, □ www.borgarbilastodin.is

ON THE ROAD IN ICELAND

Do you need a hire car?

If your plan is to trek the Laugavegur and/or Fimmvörðuháls trails or hike in Skaftafell the easiest and cheapest way to get there is by bus (see p22-5). If you do hire a car you will be paying for it to just sit in a car park for several days while you are walking, not to mention the complication of getting back to it at the end just so that you can drive it back to Reykjavík.

Similarly, three of the five day hikes near Reykjavík that are featured in this book (Vífilsfell, Reykjadalur and Esja) can be reached by public transport, as can many of the other popular tourist attractions.

The only time you will need a car is for the Móskarðshnjúkar and Glymur treks and any other excursions further afield that take your fancy. However, if you plan to walk all five of the Reykjavík area walks covered in this guide, it would make sense to hire a car for five days, base yourself somewhere comfortable in the city and then drive out to the trailheads each day.

Driving in Iceland

The quality and condition of roads in Iceland varies from well-maintained hard surfaces to bumpy, dirt tracks that only a 4x4 can negotiate. If you are driving to the trailheads at Glymur and Móskarðshnjúkar you will be on asphalt almost all the way, with only the final few hundred metres on gravel.

If you are planning on doing some touring of the Highland roads (F-roads) be aware that you will need a 4x4. Regular cars are not permitted on these roads. Here are a few other things to be aware of when driving in Iceland:

- Headlights must always be on even during daylight hours.
- Roads can change suddenly from asphalt to gravel; slow down in plenty of time.
- Drive slowly on gravel sections and not too close to the vehicle in front as stones can easily be flung against your windscreen.
- Bridges are often wide enough for only one car, even on the major ring road (route 1). The car that reaches the bridge first has right of way.
- Highland roads are closed because of snow well into the summer. Some of them don't open until late June so check for the latest conditions at  www.road.is before making plans.

Budgeting

There's no way of glossing over it, Iceland is expensive. Food is expensive, accommodation is expensive and public transport is expensive. And alcohol is really expensive. On average the cost of living is 50% higher than in the UK.

There are ways of reducing your costs, of course. If you limit your time spent in Reykjavík you will spend less money. Reykjavík tends to burn a hole in your pocket the moment you step into any shops, bars or restaurants. Accommodation in the city is also eye-wateringly pricey. Consider camping instead; there is a very spacious campsite in the city with excellent facilities (see p83).

What to take

DOCUMENTS & VISAS

Most visitors from outside the EU (including the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore) will need a passport valid for three months beyond the date of entry but don't need a visa. Check the Immigration website [utl.is](#) for details. For information on Covid-19 regulations see p6 and check the Visit Iceland website ([visiticeland.com](#)) for the latest requirements.

THE PACK ON YOUR BACK

When you buy new shoes you try them out in the shop first. Do the same when buying a rucksack because you're going to be carrying the thing possibly for days on end and you don't want to be cursing it when the straps start to chafe your hips and shoulders. Make sure all the straps are adjusted so that, when full, the rucksack sits comfortably. Many people forget to tighten up the hip and chest straps which can make a huge difference in the perceived weight of the burden on your back. The hip belt helps distribute the weight so that you are not carrying it all on your shoulders.

On a multi-day trek such as the Laugavegur, the size of rucksack you'll need depends on whether you are camping. Campers will need a rucksack that can accommodate all the paraphernalia that goes with outdoor living, such as a stove, cooking utensils, sleeping bag, sleeping mat and, of course, tent. A **65- to 75-litre rucksack** should do the job. The luxury of staying in mountain huts with a roof and walls is that you don't need to take so much extra kit (although you will still need bedding) so you should be fine with a **35-litre daypack**.

Be ruthless when deciding what to take with you: a heavy rucksack is a sure-fire way of making your trek a painful chore rather than a happy jaunt.

FOOTWEAR

Boots

Do not scrimp on footwear. This is probably the most important piece of equipment. There are two main styles of boots; **leather boots** and **fabric boots**.

Leather boots are better suited to the rough terrain and loose, rocky ground characteristic of Iceland so these could be the ones for you. Fabric boots, which should have a waterproof lining such as Gore-Tex, will just about cope but be sure to get a strong pair with stiff soles that can withstand sharp rocks.

Other footwear

When packing your rucksack, and trying to keep weight down, don't be tempted to dismiss a pair of **sandals** or **trail shoes** as a luxury item. They are well worth taking if they are lightweight, and they don't take up much space as they can be

Outer layer

Lightweight, windproof and shower-proof layers are useful in light showers but for real rain you need a real jacket. You would be very lucky to avoid the rain on a multi-day hike like the Laugavegur so make sure your waterproofs are up to the job. Good **waterproof jackets** and **trousers** should be breathable, allow moisture to escape, and be windproof, to limit the effect of windchill on the body. An extendable hood is useful for when the rain gets really heavy.

Legwear

Thin, **lightweight trousers** that dry quickly and are not too tight are the most popular choice. Some come with detachable lower legs, magically transforming them into a pair of shorts. Or you can just pack some **shorts**. **Thermal leggings** are useful for cold nights in tents and take a pair of **waterproof trousers** too. Never wear denim jeans which, once wet, take days to dry.

Headgear

A woollen **hat** should be enough to maintain a snug head. Consider taking a **balaclava** too for those really windy days and make sure your waterproof jacket has a **hood**. A **neck gaiter** or **baffle** is a good way of stopping cold draughts getting in but is not essential.

Gloves

Even in summer you are likely to need gloves at times, particularly on the high ground that you will encounter on the Laugavegur and Fimmvörðuháls treks. A lightweight pair of gloves will be enough.

Swimming costume

You won't regret stuffing this into the bottom of your rucksack for the hot springs at Landmannalaugar and at Reykjadalur.

WATER BOTTLE

You will need a bottle that holds at least a litre, but preferably more. Even better are those plastic water **pouches** that hold 2-4 litres, fit snugly into a rucksack and come complete with a drinking tube that puts an end to rummaging for a bottle that has fallen to the bottom of the rucksack.

TOILETRIES

The essentials are all that are needed: **soap** (but don't use soap in mountain streams), **toothbrush** and **toothpaste**. Also worth considering are the following: a **razor**, **deodorant**, **shampoo** and **tampons/sanitary towels**. If you are spending time sleeping out rough you'll also need to pack **toilet paper** (see p50).

FIRST-AID KIT

A first-aid kit is one of those things that sits in a rucksack and, hopefully, collects dust. Never be tempted to do away with it on the grounds that it never gets used. It's there for an obvious reason. A trekker's first-aid kit should include

bag is waterproof and breathable and ensure you have a good three-season **sleeping bag** and a **sleeping mat**. This can make for a surprisingly comfortable night's sleep if the weather is in your favour. Waterproof, breathable bivvy bags cost around £150/US\$200/€170 but are hardwearing and extremely light, making them a good alternative to a tent. As well as the bivvy bag you will need the same kit as you would for camping (except the tent of course).

EMERGENCY SHELTER

It is not essential but it might be advisable to pack an emergency shelter, sometimes called a bothy bag. There are some good lightweight models that can be invaluable if the weather takes a turn for the worse and you are miles from the nearest hut. They are certainly no substitute for a tent but you can quickly pull them out of your backpack and throw them over yourself to keep the rain and wind off you when you want to sit down and eat your lunch. The larger bags are too bulky when packed up, so if you do decide to take one, make sure you take a small, lightweight one. Vango, Terra Nova and Rab make good bothy bags.

Accommodation

CAMPING

At all the Ferðafélag Íslands huts on the **Laugavegur** and **Fimmvörðuháls** treks camping is 2300kr/pp. Showers are an extra 500kr. The campsite at **Básar** is operated by Utivist (✉ +354-893 2910, ☎ www.utivist.is/english/basar-hut). It's a lovely place to spend the night with quiet pitches tucked away in the bushes all across the valley floor. Prices are 2000kr/pp and you can get a shower for 500kr. The other campsite at **Pórsmörk** is at the **Húsadalur** volcano huts where you can pitch for a rather pricey 2600kr/pp. It is open from early May to late October.

The campsite at **Skógar** (✉ +354-863 8064) is very basic but has showers and there is a nice view of the waterfall! Be prepared for bus loads of day-trip-

Renting camping equipment in Iceland

If you don't want to bring your own camping equipment from home you can rent it in Iceland. **Iceland Camping Equipment Rental** (✉ +354-647 0569, ☎ www.ice-land-camping-equipment.com; Barónsstígur 5, 101 Reykjavík) hire out all the paraphernalia you might need for a camping excursion: tents, sleeping bags and mats, clothing, camp stoves, fuel and utensils, trekking poles, boots, maps, GPS and even mobile phones. Guideline prices are €7/day for a tent, €4/day for a sleeping bag and €2/day for a camp stove (they accept payment in euros and króna).

You can find them just off the eastern end of Hverfisgata, which is the street north of, and parallel to, Laugavegur in the city centre.

ACCOMMODATION IN REYKJAVÍK

There is no shortage of bed space in Reykjavík and there are new hotels popping up all the time. It is not cheap to stay here so if your budget is tight you may want to factor in just one night in town at the beginning and end of your trip. If you stay much longer your bank account may start to bleed money.

There are ways of reducing costs; the campsite (see p83) is the cheapest option. It is a big site with all the facilities you might need including a left luggage service. Next door is the HI hostel (see p83) where you will find some of the cheapest beds in town. One advantage of staying at the campsite or hostel is that the tourist buses that serve the Laugavegur and Fimmvörðuháls treks and Skaftafell depart from right outside them.

If you prefer more privacy than a hostel then you will find no shortage of guesthouses, many of them conveniently located close to the city centre and the main drag of Laugavegur. For those with money to burn there are plenty of high-end hotels that offer world-class comfort (see pp80-4).

Suggested itineraries

LAUGAVEGUR & FIMMVÖRÐUHÁLS

The Laugavegur (Trek 1) is the most popular trail in Iceland and rightly so. It is a journey of 55km through a land of volcanoes, glaciers, hot springs and canyons. The trail takes you through verdant birch forests, over plains of ash and gravel, and across the rhyolite mountains of the Torfajökull caldera. No wonder it is considered one of the greatest treks in the world.

The two-day Fimmvörðuháls trek (Trek 2) takes you across the high Fimmvörðuháls pass between two mighty volcanoes encased in ice. The landscape on each side of the pass is distinct with waterfalls and seascapes on the south side while on the north side there are great vistas over the tortuous mountains of Pórsmörk, with its valleys cloaked in birch forest. For such a short hike it is packed with variety. Don't underestimate it though; the weather can be wild on the pass and winter conditions persist throughout the summer.

WHICH DIRECTION?

In this guide the route is described from north to south, beginning with Laugavegur and continuing on with Fimmvörðuháls. Walking from north to south means you have less height gain as you start at altitude at Landmannalaugar. There is also the psychological advantage of knowing that you are walking towards a less hostile environment in the birch forests of Pórsmörk so you can get the hard stuff out of the way. Another consideration if you are doing both treks or just the Fimmvörðuháls is that the ascent from Pórsmörk is not as severe as the ascent from Skógar.

There are, however, some advantages in walking south to north. If starting

at Skógar the wind is more likely to be behind you and the wonderful views over the mountains of Pórsmörk will be ahead of you as you descend from the pass, although the relentlessly steep gradient can be a bit of a trudge. Starting at or continuing on from Pórsmörk means you're saving the best till last since the landscape around the Torfajökull caldera is probably the highlight of the trek. You can also look forward to a dip in the hot springs at Landmannalaugar at the end of your walk.

Outdoor safety and weather

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Ah, what could be more satisfying than sitting in front of a roaring fire with a map and a Trailblazer guidebook to start planning your trek? It all looks so straightforward when you run your finger along the dashed line of the trail on a 1:100,000 scale map doesn't it? But the reality on the ground can be very different to pre-conceived ideas cooked up in the comfort of your home.

Iceland can be an unforgiving place to go hiking. The summer here is short, lasting roughly from June to August. But don't let the word 'summer' lull you into a false sense of security. Yes, you may get lucky and have day after day of clear skies and perfect temperatures for hiking but even then it will still be cold at night because of the clear skies. More typical weather in summer is for cool, even cold winds and rain. Sometimes the weather can be fierce with hurricane force winds and blizzards. It is essential that you are well prepared, have good quality warm and waterproof clothing and have a reasonable level of fitness to be able to complete your hike.

You should always be prepared to postpone or change plans if the weather forecast is bad (see the story of Ido Keinan on the Landmannalaugar to Hrafntinnusker stage of the Laugavegur trail on p95). On the Laugavegur there are river crossings to contend with too and many of the hikes in this book feature long, arduous ascents.

If you are an experienced hiker and come well prepared, you will be fine. If this is all new to you, do not be put off; come with the right gear, build up a good level of fitness before arriving in Iceland and make yourself aware of the potential hazards and you will have a wonderful time tramping through the awe-inspiring landscapes of Iceland.

MOUNTAIN SAFETY

Equipment

Effective pieces of equipment are the ingredients for enjoying the mountains. The essentials are strong boots, clothing that will cope with the worst the weather can serve up, a comfortable rucksack or daypack and a water bottle or pouch.

DEALING WITH AN ACCIDENT

If you or a companion has an accident, follow these steps:

- Use basic first aid to deal with any injuries but do not overstep your own knowledge or ability.
- Work out your position and make a note of your coordinates from the map.
- If you have a mobile phone, call for help. The emergency number is ☎ 112
- If you don't have a mobile phone try to attract attention by blowing a whistle, or flashing a headtorch if it's dark (six blasts or flashes repeated after a minute is the international distress call).
- In a group, leave at least one person with the casualty while others go for help. If there are two of you, you must decide if it is safe to leave the casualty alone. If you do, leave some spare warm clothing and food with the patient and remember to keep a note of the coordinates.

THE WEATHER

There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. Norwegian saying

Along with the terrain, the weather is the most important factor affecting a trek in the mountains in terms of enjoyment, aesthetics, comfort, difficulty and, most pertinently, safety. Understanding the weather is so important and yet it is often overlooked. You are never too far from inclement weather on a trek in Iceland. This is one of the windiest places on earth and you can also expect precipitation, be it rain, sleet, snow or hail, sometimes vertically but more often than not, horizontally.

To know what weather to expect it is important to know how it works. Low-pressure systems are bad news for hikers as these tend to bring rain, wind and thunderstorms. For settled weather you need high pressure.

Weather fronts, marking the boundary between warm and cold air masses, are usually quite benign when associated with high pressure, often leading to cloud and maybe a little light rain. Conversely, with low pressure, they are active affairs that produce prolonged precipitation.

There are three types of weather front. Cold fronts, where colder air replaces warmer air, bring intense rainfall that generally lasts for around six to twelve hours. Warm fronts, where warmer air replaces colder air, usually result in less intense rain but it lasts much longer. After the passage of a cold front the weather often turns showery but the visibility improves dramatically; a good time to enjoy wide-ranging views. Finally, occluded fronts mark the point where a warm and cold front have merged, often bringing prolonged spells of rain.

□ Weather forecasts

The **Icelandic Met Office** gives very detailed weather forecasts on a national and local level. The website ☎ www.vedur.is has avalanche and earthquake forecasts. There is also an app Vedur that you can download to your phone.

Minimum impact walking

MINIMISING YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Any respectful hiker will want to minimise their impact wherever they walk in the world but when in Iceland the need to tread lightly is all the more pertinent. Iceland's landscape is a fragile one and its flora even more so. With the recent boom in tourism in the country there has been a marked increase in the damage being done by ignorant and thoughtless tourists.

Of course, those of you reading this book, being lovers of wild places, do not fall into the category of ignorant and thoughtless but owing to the unique nature of Iceland there may be some environmental factors of which even the most savvy back-country hiker is unaware. So do read on and get clued up on how to minimise your impact when hiking in Iceland.

Stick to the trail

I confess to being a wanderer. I don't like sticking to paths; it is counterintuitive when out in the wilderness. For me the wild is a place to explore, and paths, while useful at times, restrict that urge to wander, explore and discover.

However, in Iceland even an itinerant hobo such as myself recognises the importance of sticking to the trail. This isn't just for your own safety; Iceland is a geologically young country. These are some of the youngest rocks in the world and they are still being terraformed today. Consequently the land under your feet is unstable and characterised by loose rock. Combined with sparse vegetation cover, that makes it highly susceptible to erosion and weathering. This is exacerbated if even one person 'off-roads it'. But it is never just one person; once one set of footprints is laid down it encourages others. In a short space of time, damaged vegetation leaves a terrible scar across the mountainside.

And the incredible fragility of this vegetation is another consideration. At this high latitude, and on such unstable ground with little or no soil, mosses, lichens and alpine wildflowers struggle to get a root-hold. Once the boots of unthinking wanderers have damaged this flora, in many instances it never recovers.

Always consider that, while you may think of yourself as just an individual, you are, whether you like it or not, also part of a crowd and the damage that such a crowd can cause is immense.

Cairn building

It is a recent phenomenon: the urge to build a small pile of stones at roadside beauty spots or other popular tourist sites. It has become so commonplace that thousands of these cairns have popped up in some locations. They may be an attractive sight to some but to others they are a blot on the landscape. Worse

than that, by moving stones around you can cause damage to habitats and exacerbate soil erosion.

Leave the stones where they belong!

Moss graffiti

This is a new activity popular among the more moronic fringe of tourists. It started at one particular hillside that was covered in a beautiful soft green woolly moss. By pulling the moss out to form letters, the hillside has been left scarred for decades, if not longer. Of course, it started with one word but that then encouraged others to do the same. It takes years and years for the moss to grow and just minutes for a simpleton to destroy it. If you see anyone doing this by all means politely ask them to stop or consider reporting them to the authorities by calling the police on ☎ 112.

Off-road driving

Icelanders frown upon off-road driving and for good reason. The bare gravel plains are fragile environments and the scars left by 4x4 vehicles become semi-permanent reminders of the daft behaviour of a less welcome type of tourist. In fact, off-road driving is illegal and offenders can find themselves with a hefty fine. If you see anyone off-road driving take a note of their registration plate and report them to the police on ☎ 112.

Littering

It shouldn't really need saying that littering is utterly abhorrent. It spoils the landscape for others, pollutes the soil and water and can cause injury and death to wildlife. Adhere to the old motto: if you can pack it in, pack it out. This applies not just to bottles and packaging but to organic material such as banana skins and orange peel too. These are just as unsightly as any other litter and can encourage the ingress of species that would not otherwise be in the area, causing an imbalance in the delicate ecosystem. The box on the right shows how long litter would **normally** take to decompose, but this is even more serious in Iceland where the cold temperatures drastically slow down the rates of decomposition. Always discourage others from littering whenever you see it and carry a bag with you for picking up and disposing of litter you find along the trail.

Wild camping

The law on wild camping, that is camping away from designated campsites, is not widely understood, even by Icelanders. Owing to the huge influx of tourists in recent years, the Icelandic Environment Agency (☞ www.ust.is/english/tourist-information/where-can-you-camp) updated the regulations. The key

☐ How long does it take to decompose?

Cotton rags	1-5 months
Paper	2-5 months
Orange peel	6 months
Wool socks	1-5 years
Plastic bags	10-20 years
Leather shoes	25-40 years
Nylon fabric	30-40 years
Aluminium cans	80-100 years
Plastic bottles	Forever

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ABOUT ICELAND

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Geology

Perhaps you didn't know you were interested in geology. But anyone who has stood and admired a mountain view is actually showing an appreciation for the geology of that landscape. You can take your appreciation one step further by trying to understand how those landforms came to be.

Iceland is one of the most fascinating areas to study geology in the world. Any journey through here is a journey through a geological wonderland. The shape of Iceland today is a product of the processes of volcanism and glaciation. Both are ongoing and Iceland continues to be shaped by the steady grinding of glaciers, the frequent eruptions of volcanoes, the shifting of the earth by tremors, landslides, erosion and weathering. The landscape that you walk through is a result of these continuing dynamic processes. Next time you gaze upon a view – the folds, the curves, the colours of the land – consider what it is that makes it beautiful and wonder why the land has come to be as it is.

VOLCANISM

Iceland exists because of volcanic activity. It sits on the mid-Atlantic ridge, a divergent fault line that separates the American plates from the Eurasian and African plates. On either side the plates are pulling away from each other making the Atlantic Ocean a little bit wider each year. The fault line runs the length of the Atlantic but nowhere is it as visible as in Iceland where it breaks the surface of the ocean. At Pingvellir National Park you can walk between two cliffs that represent part of the fault line; a truly tangible indicator of the tectonic movements that have shaped this part of the world.

Iceland is a young country, having emerged from the ocean between 20 and 30 million years ago, a mere blink of an eye in geological timescales. Successive volcanic eruptions and effusive lava flows from beneath the earth's crust have created new land above the surface of the ocean. The most recent and striking example of this process was in 1963 when a sub-marine volcano erupted and created a new island, Surtsey, off the south coast. Today there are 41 active volcanic systems in Iceland, some under the sea (see p52).

There are a number of short term consequences to this. On a local level, as the glaciers melt, the cliffs and slopes alongside them are more prone to rock avalanches, posing a danger to climbers and walkers. There is also a risk of increased volcanic activity in sub-glacial volcanic systems; as the ice caps melt, the reduced load can trigger an increase in magma generation which is then more likely to reach the surface.

But it is the global consequences that are the biggest threat. If all the ice on Iceland melted it would raise global sea levels by 1cm. That may not sound much but if the ice in Iceland is melting, so is the ice elsewhere in the world. Sea levels would rise significantly, having catastrophic effects on coastal settlements and arable land around the world.

Melting glaciers are the canaries in the coal mine. As we witness them melt at such unprecedented rates we can be sure that the global climate is changing rapidly. The consequences of climate breakdown, many of which are evidently occurring today, are failed crops, extreme weather events and a climate refugee crisis to name just a few cataclysmic outcomes. We should heed the warning that the glaciers give us and take action.

Fauna & flora

Iceland is an important breeding ground for many species of birds, many of which are migratory, spending the summer here and then leaving for milder climes further south in the winter. Much of Iceland consists of upland moorland and tundra where ground-nesting birds and waders take advantage of relatively few predators, enabling them to rear their young during the short summer. There are few mammals in Iceland as it has been isolated from other land masses since the sea ice between here and Greenland melted after the last glacial period around 11,000 years ago.

Iceland's thin soils do not support much vegetation but many species of moss and lichen do flourish and in the summer Arctic wildflowers add a splash of colour. Most of Iceland's woodlands have been felled but there are still some lovely native forests in some of the southern valleys, particularly near Reykjavík and in Skaftafell. The Icelandic Institute of Natural History (www.ni.is) is an excellent resource for learning more about the wildlife of Iceland.

MAMMALS

- **Arctic fox** This is the only native land mammal in the country and they arrived in Iceland before humans. During the last ice age foxes from Greenland walked across the sea ice to Iceland and after the ice melted the animals were stranded here. Arctic foxes are well adapted to life in an Arctic environment; they are small with thick, furry coats, small ears and a bushy tail that they wrap around themselves when they lie down.

Iceland but they do not breed here. They are the **harp seal**, **hooded seal**, **ringed seal** and **bearded seal**.

On very rare occasions **walruses** will turn up unexpectedly but you would be very lucky to see one of these in Iceland.

BIRDS

● **Redwing** These members of the thrush family nest in lowland, wooded areas of Iceland. They are common in and around Reykjavík and you will probably see and hear them in the birch woodlands of Skaftafell and Þórmörk. Redwings are brown with a yellowish breast with dark brown streaks, and a reddish under-wing. The head is streaked dark brown and cream. If you are staying at the campsite in Reykjavík prepare yourself to be kept awake by their incessant calls; since there is almost 24-hour daylight in summer, they never stop.

● **Northern wheatear** A summer visitor, these robin-sized chats can be seen flitting from one rock perch to another on open moorland and tundra. The male is the easier of the two sexes to identify with a striking black mask across the eyes, black wings, a grey-blue back and white underparts with a soft pinky-orange breast. They nest among rock cavities and even in dilapidated old buildings.

● **Snow bunting** Snow buntings are true birds of the Arctic. They are about the size of a sparrow but with a more striking black and white plumage. They breed across Iceland from the coast to the mountains and are resident all year, although many do migrate south to slightly less cold places like Scotland and the coast of Norway. You may see them flocking together, feeding on the ground. They often gather at popular tourist sites where they pick up crumbs dropped by messy eaters. I have seen lots of snow buntings in the car park at Jökulsárlón, the glacial lagoon near Skaftafell.

● **Ptarmigan** Another specialist of the Arctic environment is the ptarmigan, a member of the grouse family that inhabits open ground up in the mountains. They are well adapted to the cold with feathered feet and even feathered eyelids. Their call is a deep-throated, rasping croak. The ptarmigan is a master of camouflage; its plumage is a mottled grey in summer to allow it to blend in with the rocks and lichen, while in winter it turns mostly white so that it can remain unseen by predators in the snow. The males have a distinctive red wattle above the eyes. The most common view of a ptarmigan is as it flies away in a blur of feathers when they are flushed from their hiding places by hikers. Nevertheless, I have noticed that Icelandic ptarmigan tend to be less cautious than the ptarmigan I see back home in Scotland. Perhaps this is because, with the exception of gyrfalcons and a few arctic foxes, there are fewer predators in Iceland and consequently they feel less wary.

● **Golden plover** This large wader is a common sight to hikers in Iceland. You are likely to hear them before you see them as they whistle to distract you away from their nests. Be careful where you tread as they nest on the ground.

two minutes and their legs are far back on their body to aid swimming. The downside of this adaptation is that they are useless at walking. For this reason they nest close to the water's edge which makes their eggs vulnerable to flooding when water levels rise during heavy rainfall.

● **White-tailed eagle** This huge eagle, with a wingspan of nearly 2.5 metres and a striking white tail, is unmistakable when seen in flight. White-tailed eagles, also known as sea eagles, feed on a diet of fish but will also take seabirds. They are not widespread in Iceland and you are unlikely to see them on any of the hikes in this book; their distribution tends to be towards the west coast where there are better nesting opportunities on the high sea cliffs. But do keep an eye out for them as you drive past Hvalfjörður on the way towards the trailhead for the Glymur hike. You might just get lucky here. If you are really intent on seeing one you should visit Breiðafjörður as most of the eighty or so breeding pairs are concentrated in this vicinity.

● **Gyrfalcon** One of the largest members of the falcon family, this Arctic falcon has a wingspan of up to 1.5 metres. Its plumage varies from a white-grey to almost pure white, although the birds in Iceland tend towards the former. The ptarmigan is their main prey but they will also take other small birds. Gyrfalcons nest on cliff ledges in remote locations away from human disturbance.

● **Merlin** The merlin is the smallest European bird of prey species. In Iceland they are migratory, turning up in the summer to breed. If you see a small, fast flying bird with razor-sharp wings zipping low across the tundra, it is likely to be a merlin. The male has slate grey-blue upper parts with a speckled underside while the female is a duller brown in appearance. As with other raptors, the female is larger than the male.

● **Raven** With a wingspan of almost 1.5 metres, the raven is the largest member of the crow family (corvids). They are a much persecuted species and are considered vulnerable on the Icelandic Red List of birds (see en.ni.is/resources/publications/red-lists/red-list-birds for more on threatened bird species in Iceland). There are estimated to be around 2500 individuals in Iceland, although these numbers swell to around 15,000 in the autumn as migrating birds from the north stop to rest during their journey south. They are highly intelligent birds and, when in flight, can be identified most easily by their prominent head and tail and 'fingered' primary feathers on the wings. Ravens have an extraordinary variety of vocalisations but you are most likely to hear their deep 'cronking' call as they fly overhead.

● **Great skua** The great skua is a bulky bird similar to a gull, mostly brown with white flashes on the wings that show prominently in flight. Great skuas are aggressive predators and are experts at chasing and killing smaller birds, such as guillemots and puffins. They also engage in kleptoparasitism; the act of stealing fish from other birds. This habit has earned them the epithet 'pirates of the sea'. It's a good idea to give great skuas a wide berth if you see them, particu-

Puffins feed mostly on sand eels. Unfortunately sand eel numbers around Iceland are falling due to warming waters, no doubt as a result of climate breakdown. Consequently puffin numbers are also declining. Despite this, puffins are still hunted en masse in Iceland (see box p63). So maybe they are everyone's favourite then, but for some only if served with potatoes and rocket salad.

● **Guillemot** Also a member of the auk family, the guillemot is related to the show-off puffin but appears a little more sophisticated, dressed in a dinner suit of chocolate brown and white. It is also less dumpy than the puffin, with a slender body and bill. They nest in large colonies on narrow ledges and lay their eggs directly onto the rock, with no sticks. When the chicks hatch they spend just two weeks on the nest before throwing themselves off the cliff, some of them freefalling hundreds of metres, to the water below.

● **Razorbill** Another member of the auk family, the razorbill is a thick-set bird with a heavy, chunky bill. Razorbills are black with white underparts, and a white stripe across the bill. Like the guillemot they nest in large colonies and the two species will often share the same cliff faces. They can be quite aggressive, particularly to their neighbours on the nesting cliffs.

● **Gannet** Often seen out at sea, they perform great diving manoeuvres when they plunge into the sea to catch fish. The gannet is a large white bird with black wing tips, a yellow head and distinctive blue eyes. They have long pointed wings and a dagger-like bill. They breed in very large colonies on rocky offshore islands.

MOSS

Over 600 species of moss grow in Iceland. The varying shades of green create a beautiful verdant carpet that contrasts with dark volcanic peaks and glacial till (sediment). The most common mosses you may see, growing on old lava fields, are the woolly fringe mosses that grow in extensive pale green carpets across the landscape.

Mosses are usually the first plants to colonise post-glacial and volcanic landscapes, or to put it another way, when the glaciers retreat to reveal bare rock and gravel, and lava flows to form hard rock, it is the moss that grows before anything else. Where the climate allows, other plants gain a foothold in the mossy layer and slowly, over decades and centuries, a rudimentary topsoil is established to then allow other vegetation and trees to establish themselves.

You can see this steady succession in the glaciated valleys of Skaftafell. Walk up the valley towards the snout of a glacier and you will pass through a timeline of land that has been exposed by the retreating glacier. Further away from the snout of the glacier the land has been exposed for longest; here there is birch woodland. As you walk closer to the glacier, the trees get shorter and there is birch scrub, then rocky areas colonised by moss before finally reaching bare rock and ice.



Above – top: You'll see lots of moss in the glaciated valleys of Skaftafell, as here high on Jökulfell. This is the view west over the vast Skeiðarárjökull glacier. **Bottom:** The mountain avens (**left**) is the national flower of Iceland and a favourite snack for the ptarmigan (**right**).



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Above: 1. Golden plover 2. Snow bunting 3. Oystercatchers 4. Redshank 5. Puffin

● **Látrabjarg** The Látrabjarg cliffs in the Westfjords are some of the highest in Europe at 440 metres high. They are also a significant breeding site for a number of seabirds including puffins, guillemots, razorbills and Arctic terns.

● **Lake Mývatn** In the north of Iceland, Lake Mývatn is renowned for its birdlife. It is the fourth largest lake in Iceland and home to many summer migrants that come to breed along the water's edge. There is a **bird watching hide** at Neslandavík and at **Sigurgeir's Bird Museum** (✉ www.fuglasafn.is; mid May-Oct daily noon-5pm, Nov-mid May daily 2-4pm 1500kr/pp), on the north side of the lake, you can see displays of stuffed birds, as well as look at living ones out of the window. Species you may see include whooper swan, greater scaup, horned grebe, gadwall, northern pintail, long-tailed duck, great-northern diver, black-tailed godwit, red-necked phalarope, harlequin duck, Arctic tern, gyrfalcon and countless other species. Mývatn is also the only place in Europe where Barrow's goldeneye breed. The Icelandic population of this duck is something of an anomaly since most of the global population is in Alaska, Yukon and British Columbia.

● **Glymur & Hvalvatn** This is one trail in this book that is a good bet for wildlife watching. The trail up the side of the gorge to the waterfall is a good place to observe fulmars. There are hundreds of them nesting on the ledges in the gorge. It's quite a spectacle to see them wheeling about in the dark confines of the ravine. Beyond the falls and towards Hvalvatn there is high, open tundra where curlew, dunlin, redshank and golden plover are common. Harlequin ducks can sometimes be spotted on the Botnsá river.

People & history

EARLY HISTORY

The history of human settlement in Iceland is short. Viking explorers landed here after sailing from Norway and Britain in the 9th century. But it seems likely that they were not the first; archaeological evidence shows that Irish monks, known as *papar*, may well have arrived before the Vikings in the 7th and 8th centuries, staying for a time as hermits but not settling permanently. The first true settlers were the Vikings who arrived in 874AD.

We can be sure of the date thanks to the existence of the **Landnámabók** (see box p69) that dates back to the 12th century. It is a remarkably detailed account of the history of human settlement in Iceland. Since the language has hardly changed from the time it was written, it is easily accessible to Icelanders today and the book is studied in detail in schools.

The naming of the country is credited to a Norse sailor, Flóki Vilgerðarson (see box p70) who sailed to Iceland in 868 but did not settle there on this maiden visit. He endured one hard winter in the West Fjords where he witnessed sea ice

Iceland's great explorers

● **Nadodd** (8th-9th century) Iceland has a very young human history, having been free from the footsteps of humans until the 9th century when, according to the Landnámabók, Nadodd landed on the shore of south-eastern Iceland. He was one of the first Norse settlers of the Faroe Islands, and his arrival in Iceland was something of an accident. He had been sailing from his homeland of Norway to the Faroe Islands but overshot and continued sailing north-westwards, eventually coming to land at what is now Reyðarfjörður in south-east Iceland. After a short wander around and finding no human settlement he decided to return to the Faroe Islands. As he left, it was snowing so he named this new place Snæland or Snowland.

● **Garðar Svavarsson** (9th century) Hailing from Sweden, Garðar Svavarsson was the first explorer to sail around Iceland and spend a significant period of time there. He and his crew spent a whole winter there and named their temporary settlement Húsavík, or House Bay. Today there is still a village of that name in that very location.

● **Hrafna-Flóki Vilgerðarson** (9th century) Another Norse sailor, Flóki Vilgerðarson, heard about the new land to the north after Nadodd's inadvertent discovery and Garðar Svavarsson's journey. In 868, he was the first person to intentionally sail to Iceland. He was nicknamed Hrafna-Flóki, or Raven-Flóki, because he took three ravens with him and released them whenever he believed he might be close to land knowing that they would fly high and lead him there. The plan worked and he followed them to the shore in what is now Ísafjörður in the Westfjords.

It was the presence of the sea ice in the fjord that led Hrafna-Flóki to call his landing site Ísafjörður, and to eventually name the entire island Ísland (Iceland). After one hard winter he went back to Norway but later returned to settle for good.

● **Ingólfur Arnarson** (849-910) was one of the first permanent Norse settlers in Iceland and is widely credited as the founder of Reykjavík in 874, although it's worth noting that his wife, Hallveig Fróðadóttir, and his brother, Hjörleifur Hróðmarsson, were also there. Together they set up a small farm on Faxa Bay and named it Reykjavík, meaning Bay of Smokes. As hundreds more settlers arrived from the Nordic countries, and from the Viking settlements in the British Isles, the settlement grew but it remained nothing more than a small fishing village until the 20th century.

● **Erik the Red** (950-1003) was a Norse explorer and son of Thorvald Asvaldsson. According to the Sagas 'There was a man called Thorvald, who was the father of Erik the Red. He and Erik left their home in Jæderen, in Norway, because of some killings and went to Iceland, which had been extensively settled by then'. They settled in Hornstrandir in the far north-west of the country.

Following the death of his father in 980 Erik the Red moved to Haukadalur where he fell into a dispute over land with Eyiolf the Foul and killed him. As a consequence Erik the Red was exiled for three years.

In 982 he sailed west and discovered Greenland, becoming the first permanent settler there. He briefly returned to Iceland to encourage others to travel to the new land, named to make it sound an attractive place to live. The following year Erik the Red took hundreds of others to Greenland, establishing two settlements on the coast.

● **Leif Erikson** (970-1020) The explorer Leif Erikson, the son of Erik the Red, is credited with being the first European to land in North America at L'Anse aux Meadows in present-day Newfoundland. He named the land Vinland. Others followed in Leif's wake and set foot on this 'new' land but there were hostile encounters with the indigenous people. Perhaps it was this hostility that discouraged any permanent settlement there for hundreds of years until Christopher Columbus made his voyage across the Atlantic in 1492.

□ Buying alcohol in Iceland

Iceland has very strict rules on buying alcohol. Most restaurants can sell alcohol and, obviously, you will be able to do so in bars but if you want to buy alcohol in a shop you can only do so in the state-run Vínbúðin stores of which there are only a few. These stores have limited opening hours, especially outside Reykjavík where some are open only for a few hours from Monday to Friday. Note that all stores are closed on Sundays. You can check locations and opening hours on the website www.vinbudin.is. The legal drinking age in Iceland is 20 years old. Drink driving laws are extremely strict with a blood alcohol limit of 0.05%. Effectively that means just one drink will put you over the limit.

The total ban lasted until 1921 when wine from Spain and Portugal was legalised, largely because they threatened to stop accepting Icelandic cod if Iceland didn't reinstate the import of their wines. Then, in the 1930s, spirits were also legalised but because of the association beer had with Denmark it remained off limits. Many Icelanders would get round this by mixing alcohol-free beer with Brennivín, a legal caraway-flavoured schnapps, known as Black Death. Since this concoction had a significantly higher alcohol content than normal beer, ironically the beer ban had the effect of actually increasing alcohol consumption.

Through the 1980s Icelanders travelled more freely to Europe and were exposed to the free-flowing drinking culture of European countries like the UK and Germany. Attitudes in Iceland were changing and pressure was mounting to legalise beer. The nail in the coffin of prohibition came when politicians realised that the state was missing out on potential taxes on beer; foreigners were buying duty-free beer at the airport on their way into Iceland. Why not open state-run liquor stores in Reykjavík and rake in the taxes?

The 74-year ban finally ended in 1989 after parliament voted to legalise beer once again. The law changed on 1st March 1989 and beer lovers in Iceland still celebrate it every year as Bjórdagur – Beer Day – with a glass of beer, of course.

City guide

Reykjavík is one of the smallest capital cities in the world. In fact the entire population of Iceland is smaller than the populations of many of the world's capital cities. But do not fret; despite its diminutive stature there is still plenty to do and see here and there is a thriving bar scene. Reykjavík occupies a peninsula in the south-west of Iceland and from the city streets you can look across the cold sea to the mountains beyond.

Being such a small city means most places of interest can be reached on foot, which is just as well as there is no metro system. If you do need a lift, however, there is an efficient bus network to get you from A to B. Most of the places worth visiting, from museums to shops to bars, are concentrated in and around Laugavegur (not to be confused with the trail of the same name!), the touristic centre of the city. There is also plenty of accommodation in this part of town.

Reykjavík is probably one of the safest cities in the world and the locals are friendly but they have had to adjust to a huge increase in tourist numbers in recent years. As welcome as this is for the Icelandic economy, let's face it, it can be a bit overwhelming to have so many visitors to your home, so treat the locals with respect and you will get the same respect back.

There is plenty to see in Reykjavík before and after your trek. A good place to start is the building that dominates Reykjavík. The iconic **Hallgrímskirkja church** (see box p76) is the centrepiece of the city, with the best views from the top of the tower.

Iceland's **Natural History Museum of Kópavogur** (✉ +354-441 7200, ☎ www.natkop.is; Mon-Thur 9am-6pm, Fri-Sat 11am-5pm, closed Sun; free entry) is a good place to spend a rainy afternoon. It is divided into two sections: geology and natural history. The latter is full of stuffed animals and birds from Iceland, and even a whale skeleton. Before you begin your trek it's well worth exploring the geology section; wherever you trek in Iceland you will find a geological wonderland and it's good to understand a little about the processes that have shaped the land through which you are walking. It will help you to appreciate it all the more.

At the **Saga Museum** (✉ +354-694 3096, ☎ www.sagamuseum.is; daily 10am-6pm; 2200kr) you can learn about how the Vikings



Should you need emergency medical assistance, there is a **hospital** (☎ +354-543 1000, for emergencies ☎ 112, www.landspitali.is) on Túnsgata at the western end of the city.

WHERE TO STAY

The boom in tourism has led to an explosion of accommodation options. New hotels are being built every year to add to the existing places to stay. No matter what your budget, there is something for everyone, from the campsite and hostels to guesthouses and international hotels. Most of the places to stay are in and around Laugavegur and the cathedral, which is convenient for restaurants and bars, but there are also places to stay further away from the hustle and bustle of downtown. All prices quoted here are **per person** (pp), **per night**, usually based on two sharing unless otherwise stated. Prices can vary greatly depending on demand and time of year.

Around Laugavegur

[Map p81]

Most travellers choose to sleep close to the action, which means finding a place near the main drag of Laugavegur. Starting at the eastern end of this area, on Hverfisgata which is parallel to Laugavegur, is **Skuggi Hótel** (☎ +354-590 7000, www.keahotels.is/en/hotels/skuggi-hotel; 100 rooms), with a modern, minimalist style. A continental breakfast is included in the room rate which is around 9000kr.

Across the road from the Skuggi Hótel is **Heida's Home** (☎ +354-553 6435; 5 rooms; shared/private bathrooms; 6-8000kr), a delightful townhouse with an old world charm. There is a shared kitchen for guests.

A little further away from the hustle and bustle of Laugavegur, on Skúlagata, is **Kex Hostel** (☎ +354-561 6060, www.kexhostel.is; 67 beds) which has a variety of accommodation from cheaper bunkbeds in dormitories (with 4, 8, 10 and 16 bed spaces) to guest-house style single, double, twin and family rooms. All the rooms are very homely with pictures on the walls and bedside lamps. Rates are 4500-6900kr for a dorm bed and 12-25,000kr for a bed in a private room.

At the eastern end of Laugavegur is the **OK Hótel** (☎ +354-578 9850, ok.apart.hotelsreykjavik.net/en/; 3 rooms; 11-17,000kr) which has self-catering apartments and a kitchen. The rooms each have their own, unique funky decor with modern art adorning the walls.

The **Alda Hótel** (☎ +354-553 9366, www.aldahotel.is; 88 rooms) has clean, contemporary rooms that they describe as ‘swank and cozy’ with Egyptian bed sheets. You be the judge. Rates are around 10,000kr.

About half way along Laugavegur, near the junction of Lindargata and Vatnsstígur, you will find **The Swan House** (☎ +354-625 000, www.swanhouse.is; 43 rooms; 14-20,000kr) which has stylish studio apartments, each with a bathroom and kitchenette. It’s a great place that is away from the noise of Laugavegur but close enough to get there when you want to.

Close to the Hlemmur bus terminal is another huge hotel popular with business types, **Fosshotel** (☎ +354-531 9000, □ www.islandshotel.is/hotels-in-ice-land/fosshotel-reykjavik) where beds are from 7900kr/pp.

WHERE TO EAT

There is no shortage of places to eat in the city with cuisine from around the world. There are noodle joints, pizza parlours and good old fish and chips. And if you want to try some local Icelandic dishes you will, of course, find that too. Most of the restaurants and cafés are concentrated on and around Laugavegur so we will start there.

Around Laugavegur

[Map p81]

Starting at the eastern end of Laugavegur, near Hlemmur bus terminal, there is a plethora of Oriental takeaways and restaurants.

Mai Thai (☎ +354-581 1440; Mon-Fri 11am-8.30pm, Sat noon-8.30pm, closed Sun) does very tasty Pad Thai noodle dishes from 1690kr and stir fry dishes from 1890kr. Across the road there is **Noodle Station** (☎ +354-551 3198; Mon-Fri 11am-9pm, Sat & Sun noon-9pm), one of a local chain of noodle bars where you can enjoy a hearty bowl of noodle soup for 960kr (veggie) or 1680-1740kr (meat).

Nearby is **Pho Vietnamese** (☎ +354-588 6868; Mon-Fri 9.30am-10pm, Sat & Sun noon-10pm) which has a greater variety of noodle soups for around 1890kr.

Harry's Seafood & Grill (☎ +354-782 0912; daily 5.30-10.30pm) serves excellent fish and seafood. Their speciality 'Harry's fish and chips' served with soy sauce, ginger and balsamic vinegar is 3450kr.

Continuing along Laugavegur, on the north side of the road is a very good pizza restaurant. **Eldsmiðjan** (☎ +354-562 3838, □ www.eldsmidjan.is; daily 11.30am-11pm) has a huge variety of great pizzas to choose costing from 1985-4185kr.

From Italy to Iceland ... You'll find some hearty local fishy fare at **Old Iceland** (☎ +354-551 6131, □ oldiceland.is; daily 11.30am-3.30pm & 5-10pm). Try the creamy shellfish soup for 2980kr or the fillet of cod for 4190kr.

The menu at takeaway joint **Reykjavík Chips** (☎ +354-552 2221, □ www.rvkchips.is; Mon-Thur 11.30am-10pm, Fri-Sun 11.30am-11pm) is about as limited as it gets: small chips, medium chips or large chips. Nothing else. But they are good chips and there is beer too.

Svarta Kaffið (☎ +354-551 2999, daily 11.30-11pm) is a delightful café with fantastic soups, some of which are served in a bread bowl. They do great coffee too.

BrewDog (☎ +354-588 7865, □ brewdog.com/bars/global/brewdog-reykjavik; daily noon-1am; food to 10pm) on Frakkastígur, is a Scottish bar and restaurant with an American diner feel about it. The burgers are reputed to be excellent.

Another diner to try is the **Chuck Norris Grill** (☎ +354-561 3333; Sun-

It's not a cheap place to enjoy a drink but the hip atmosphere makes up for that.

The **Lebowski Bar** (see Where to eat) is a buzzing joint with a good line in cocktails but they are pricey! The most 'affordable' is the Special Lady Friend for 2150kr while the Royal Russian is 2550kr. They often have live music here on Fridays and Saturdays.

Bastard Brew & Food (see Where to eat) is a great place to get cocktails, priced around 2000-2400kr, and they also have an enormous variety of gins from Iceland and around the world. On Friday and Saturday it gets very lively here and the bar is open until 4am.

Cool little **Kaffibarinn** (✉ +354-551 1588) attracts a lot of locals as well as tourists. There's usually a friendly vibe and it's a great place to meet other travellers and locals too. There is a DJ most nights.

Prikið (see Where to eat) transforms from a chilled-out bar by day to a lively one at night where all the Bohemians hang out. There is often live music or a DJ. It stays open until the wee small hours, well after many other bars have pulled down their shutters.

BrewDog (see Where to eat), on Frakkastígur, is a Scottish brewery that has opened up a number of gastropubs around the world including this one in Reykjavík. Their own-brand beers, like Punk IPA and Dead Pony Club, are quite strong so check the alcohol content before you buy. The Elvis Juice IPA is 6.5% alcohol.

Away from Laugavegur, in the back streets near the harbour, there are some good bars that are popular with locals. The **Frederiksen Ale House** (see Where to eat) has a chilled-out feel about the place. They have lots of beer on tap including real ale. Get here early to make the most of the happy 'hour' (4-7pm).

If you feel in need of entertainment, get yourself down to **Gaukurinn** (see Reykjavík map pp78-9, ☎ www.gaukurinn.is; Sun-Thur 2pm-1am, Fri & Sat 2pm-3am), a dimly-lit venue where there is usually something happening on their small stage. You can sit at the bar and watch everything from karaoke to drag shows and stand-up comedy.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Buses for the trailheads of Landmannalaugar, Pórsmörk, Skógar and Skaftafell leave from a number of locations throughout the city. Reykjavík Excursions buses depart from the **BSI bus terminal** near the domestic airport and also from the **bus stop by Reykjavík Campsite** and HI Hostel. Iceland by Bus departs from the **Harpa Concert Hall** and the campsite while the Trex bus also departs from there, as well as from the **Kringlan shopping centre**. These details can change from year to year so check with the bus operator to find out where their departure points are (see pp22-5).

The national Strætó bus services leave, somewhat inconveniently, from the **Mjódd bus terminal** which is some distance from downtown; you will probably need to get a **taxi** (see p25) to **Mjódd**. The No 57 bus to Esja and the No 51 bus to Hveragerði and Vífilsfell depart from here.

THE TREKS

4

Laugavegur & Fimmvörðuháls

1

THE LAUGAVEGUR

Strenuousness Medium
Duration 4-5 days

[Maps 1-17, pp93-117]
Total distance 55km

The Laugavegur is the most famous hiking trail in Iceland and is fast becoming globally famous, regularly finding its way on to lists of top ten best hikes in the world. The adulation is well deserved. In a land replete with natural wonder, the route of the Laugavegur does a fine job of taking in some of the most remarkable sights that Iceland has to offer. This is a land of steaming volcanoes, hot springs, glaciers, stark deserts of ash and sand, blue and yellow peaks, canyons, thunderous rivers and even lush birch forests. At only 34 miles it is short by long-distance trail standards but each mile is full of wonder.

The route

Starting at Landmannalaugar in the heart of the Torfajökull caldera, the trail winds through a 500-year-old lava field, past steaming fumaroles and across rolling, yellow rhyolite hills patterned with late snow patches. Then

At 34 miles it is short by long-distance trail standards but each mile is full of wonder. on past steaming hot springs

and the beautiful lake at Álftavatn before crossing gravel plains and passing extinct volcanoes. Eventually, as the altitude lowers, the trail

□ Colourful rocks

Take a walk anywhere in the Icelandic wilderness and you are likely to come across rocks of varying colours. There are yellow rocks, red rocks and even blue rocks. This is particularly true around Landmannalaugar and in Kjós at the head of Morsárdalur in Skaftafell. ‘What causes this colouration?’ you will inevitably ask yourself. Here is a little guide to the colourful rocks you may see and why they are that colour.

- Yellow rocks – sulphurs and rhyolitic lava.
- Red or brown rocks – hematite caused by presence of iron.
- Grey rocks – clay minerals caused by sulphuric acid dissolving basaltic rock.

reaches the verdant forests of Pórsmörk, a striking contrast to the barren lands that came before and a welcome finale to the walk.

The Fimmvörðuháls trek can be tagged on to the end of the Laugavegur trek or tackled on its own. It is a straight up-and-over hike, taking in the high pass between the twin volcanoes of Eyjafjallajökull and Katla. It is a journey into a monochrome landscape of ash, volcanic rock and snow. Be prepared for foul weather but pray for clear skies because there are wonderful views across the other-worldly hills and deep gorges of Pórsmörk. The Fimmvörðuháls trek can be completed in one very long day if you are fit enough for the challenge but it makes more sense to enjoy it over two and stay overnight at one of the two mountain huts on the pass.

LANDMANNALAUGAR [Map 1, p93]

After the bus (see Public transport, pp22-5) deposits you in the dusty hollow of Landmannalaugar it's likely you will want to spend your first night here rather than hot foot it into the mountains immediately. Landmannalaugar consists of nothing more than a large dusty campsite and a mountain hut run by Ferðafélag. There are also a couple of green buses known as the 'Mountain Mall' that act as a pop-up shop (daily 8am-8pm) during the summer. Here you can get various essentials such as blister plasters, snacks, coffee and beer.

The campsite (2300kr/pp) is sprawled across a windy and dusty plain at the foot of the ancient Laugahraun lava field. It can be difficult to push tent pegs into the hard ground here so make use of the rocks scat-

tered across the place and tie your guy ropes to them. There is a large shower block and a marquee-style tent on some decking with picnic tables inside. Most campers take their camping stoves here to cook dinner away from the wind and dust.

The hut (✉ 354-568 2533, www.fi.is/en/mountain-huts/landmannalaugar; late Jun-mid Sep; 9500kr/pp) has 78 beds spread across four dormitories, and a large kitchen. The hot showers (500kr) are in the building shared with campsite dwellers.

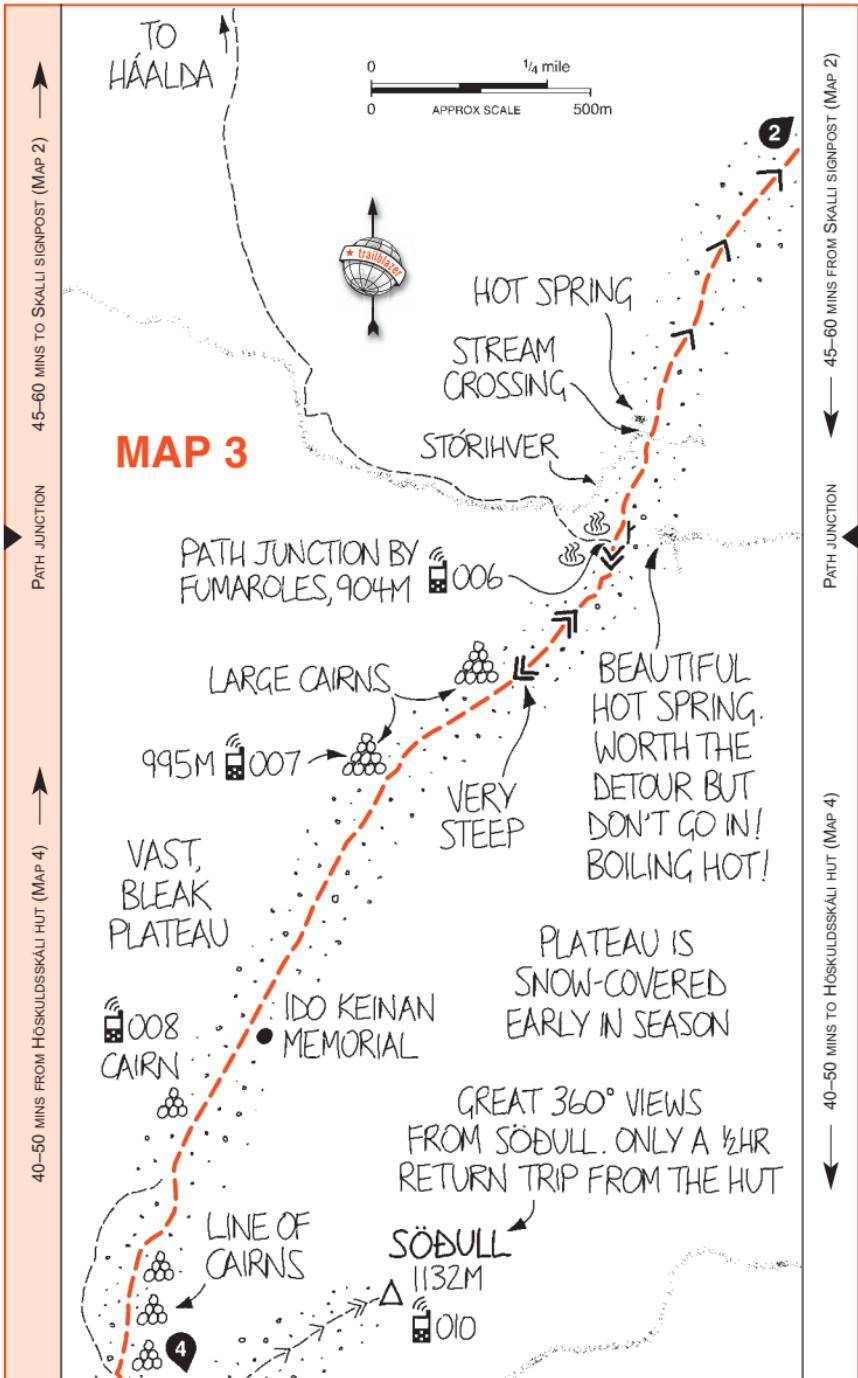
A short stroll from the hut is a natural **hot spring** that heats a gurgling stream. It's a wonderful place to relax with a drink in the evening and meet some fellow hikers. Get there early to grab the warmest spot where the stream spills in to the large pool. The edges of the pool are much colder!

DAY HIKES AROUND LANDMANNALAUGAR

Bláhnúkur: Duration 2½-3½hrs Distance 5km Ascent 355m [Map 1a]

The blue scree slopes of Bláhnúkur dominate the skyline from Landmannalaugar. It is a striking mountain and one that entices you to climb it. The summit is 945m above sea level but since Landmannalaugar is itself 590m above sea level this only leaves you with 355m of ascent. The full circuit takes about 2½ to 3½ hours. From the summit you can look down on deep valleys patterned red, yellow and blue and look south across the rhyolite undulations of the Torfajökull caldera. The mountain's ridges are fairly narrow and it can feel exposed up here, especially in a strong wind.

Head south from Landmannalaugar and cross the tiny footbridge across the river. Bear left of the foot of the ridge and then look to the right to pick up the very steep path up the side of the ridge. The rock is very loose and crumbly here so take care. Soon the trail emerges onto the back of the rising ridge and zigzags its way up the spine. You gain height quickly and the views open up all around. It's almost impossible to go the wrong way here as the trail sticks to the ridge and the land falls away sharply on either side.



(cont'd from p95) It is a sobering reminder that even in summer the weather here can be dangerous. Keep an eye on the forecast and be prepared to change your plans. These vast high plateaus are no place to be in bad weather.

As you crest the ridge ahead the hut comes into view next to a large fumarole. You are now in the heart of the Torfajökull caldera and it is time for a well-earned rest after a tough first day.

HRAFNTINNUSKER [Map 4, p97]

Although the **hut** (1035m) here is widely known as Hrafntinnusker (☎ 354-499 0679, ☛ www.fi.is/en/mountain-huts/hrafntinnusker; late Jun-mid Sep; 9500kr/pp), strictly speaking, this is the name of the mountain and the hut is called Höskuldsskáli. The hut has space for 52 spread across a large dormitory with bunks, and in a loft space where you will need a sleeping mat. If you

are going to stay in at least one hut on your journey this may be the one to choose; it is at the highest altitude of any of them and consequently the weather here can be very windy and very cold. Hardy souls will find an area set aside for **camping** among the obsidian rocks. A series of metre-high stone walls helps to keep the worst of the weather at bay. Camping costs 2300kr/pp.

Side trip to Söðull

[Map 3 p96 & Map 4 p97; 30-40 mins]

At 1132m, the peak of Söðull is one of the highest points in the area and is a tremendous vantage point for views across the vast Torfajökull caldera. And since the hut at Hrafntinnusker is already over 1000 metres above sea level it is only a hop and a skip to the top of the mountain. It's not a technically difficult climb. Simply follow the trail north from the hut towards the saddle and then pick up the trail that traverses the SE side of the mountain. This leads quickly to the rhyolite summit cone from where you can see all the way to Hekla in the west and Mýrdalsjökull in the south. The return trip takes about half an hour and is well worth it for the amount of effort required.

1.2 STAGE 2: HRAFNTINNUSKER TO ÁLFTAVATN

Strenuousness Medium

[Maps 4-7, pp97-103]

Duration 4-5hrs

Distance 12km

Total ascent 100m

By the end of these 7½ miles you will have crossed the rim of the Torfajökull caldera. As you walk, the landscape changes dramatically from the yellow rhyolite hills and sulphurous fumaroles of the caldera to the ash, gravel and vibrant mosses around the lake at Álftavatn. It is a day of transition and a day of natural wonder at every turn.

The route

From the hut at Hrafntinnusker follow the trail across a plain of smooth and shiny obsidian rocks. This extraordinary black glass is formed when lava cools very quickly, when it flows beneath a glacier for example. Below the hut the trail crosses a stream and continues across a barren plain.

Navigation can be tricky here in fog so be prepared to use a GPS to guide you and use the waypoints in this guide. If you are lucky enough to have clear weather you will be treated to a wonderful walk across an Arctic landscape that holds snow well into the summer months. In June you are likely to be walking through a lot of snow for the next hour or two. This can be hard work as the snow starts to melt through the course of the day.

... a wonderful walk across an Arctic landscape that holds snow well into summer.

There are lots of gullies on this plateau that can be full of snow. Be cautious as you cross them as meltwater tends to hollow them out underneath creating snow bridges which can collapse.

At the far end of the plateau the path dips into a gully before climbing sharply onto a wide ridge. Follow this ridge in a SW direction across more yellow rhyolite rocks. The peak to your left is 1149m **Símonarsker**. It's possible to walk to the summit here but only do so if you have experience of hillwalking and the weather forecast is fine. From where you leave the main trail it is a round trip of about 30-45mins with a height gain of 160 metres. You will need to plot your own route to the summit across the snow. At the top there are wonderful views of the glacier Kaldaklofsjökull.

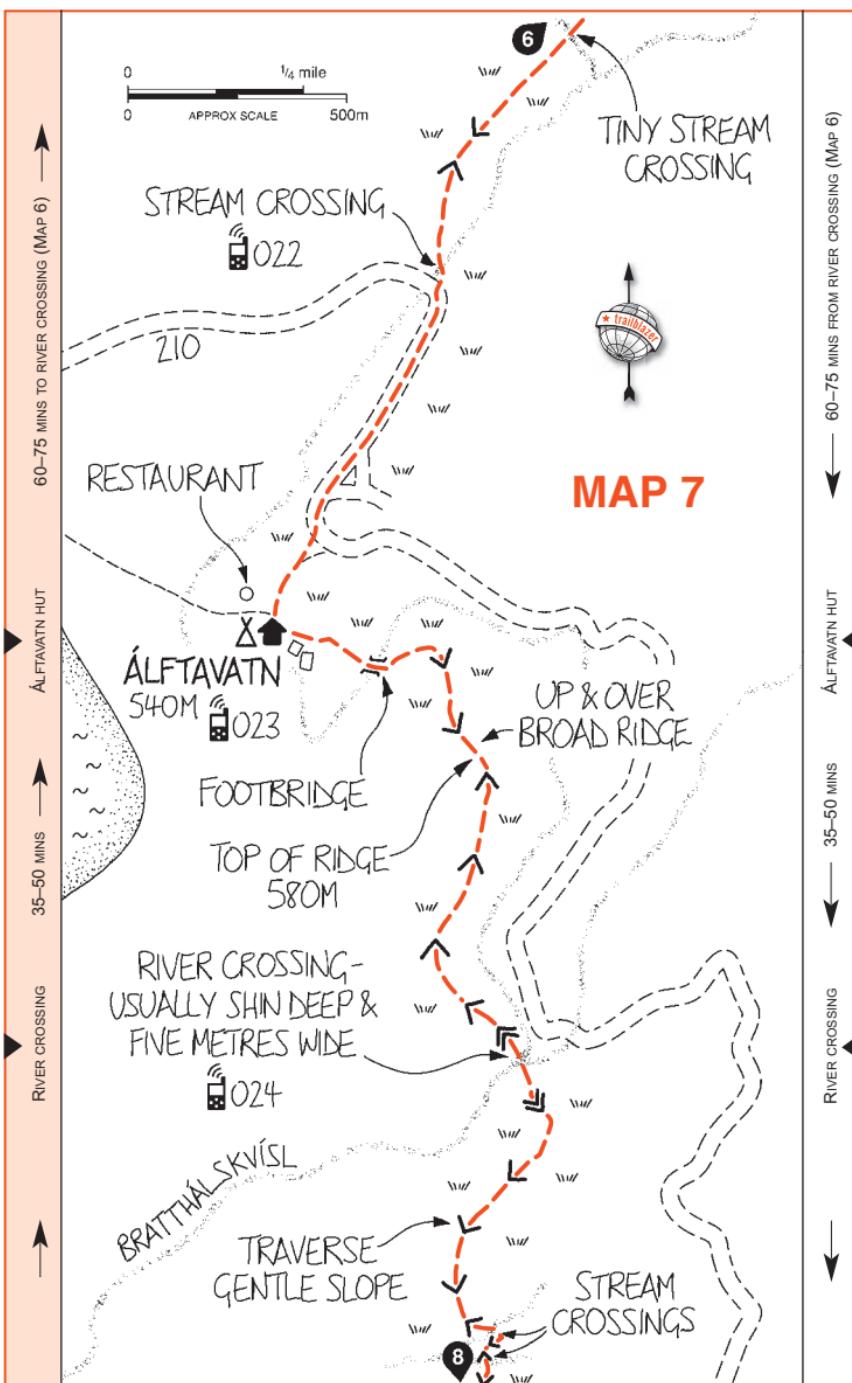
There now follows a wonderful stretch of walking along a broad ridge with far ranging views northwards across the Torfajökull caldera, all the way back to Hrafntinnusker. The trail heads SSW towards the southern rim of the caldera but before you get there you are treated to some sensational natural wonders. There

Torfajökull caldera

There are volcanoes and then there are super-volcanoes. Torfajökull caldera is in the latter category, and one of only a handful across the world. Supervolcanoes are not the simple, cone-shaped affairs with which we are all familiar; they are landscape-scale calderas that encompass entire mountain ranges and valleys. The most famous supervolcano is probably Yellowstone in Wyoming, USA, which is 45 miles across at its widest and last erupted 630,000 years ago.

By comparison the Torfajökull caldera is a trifling nine miles at its widest. A glance at any topographic map of the area will show quite clearly the circular caldera, defined by a ring of mountains. To put the scale of the caldera into real world perspective, when you start your walk in Landmannalaugar take a look to the north. The mountain towering above you is Suðurnámur. This is the northern rim of the caldera. You won't see the southern rim until you reach the mountain of Jökultungur, just north of Álftavatn, at the end of your second day of trekking.

As you walk across the caldera keep in mind that you are walking on a very thin part of the Earth's crust that floats atop an enormous magma chamber. It's a sobering thought and one that is brought to the forefront as you pass the many steaming fumaroles spitting boiling water across the trail. But don't worry, eruptions are not frequent; the last effusive eruption was in 1477. You can still see the resulting lava flow in the shape of the Laugahraun lava field at Landmannalaugar. The last explosive eruption was around 600,000 years ago.



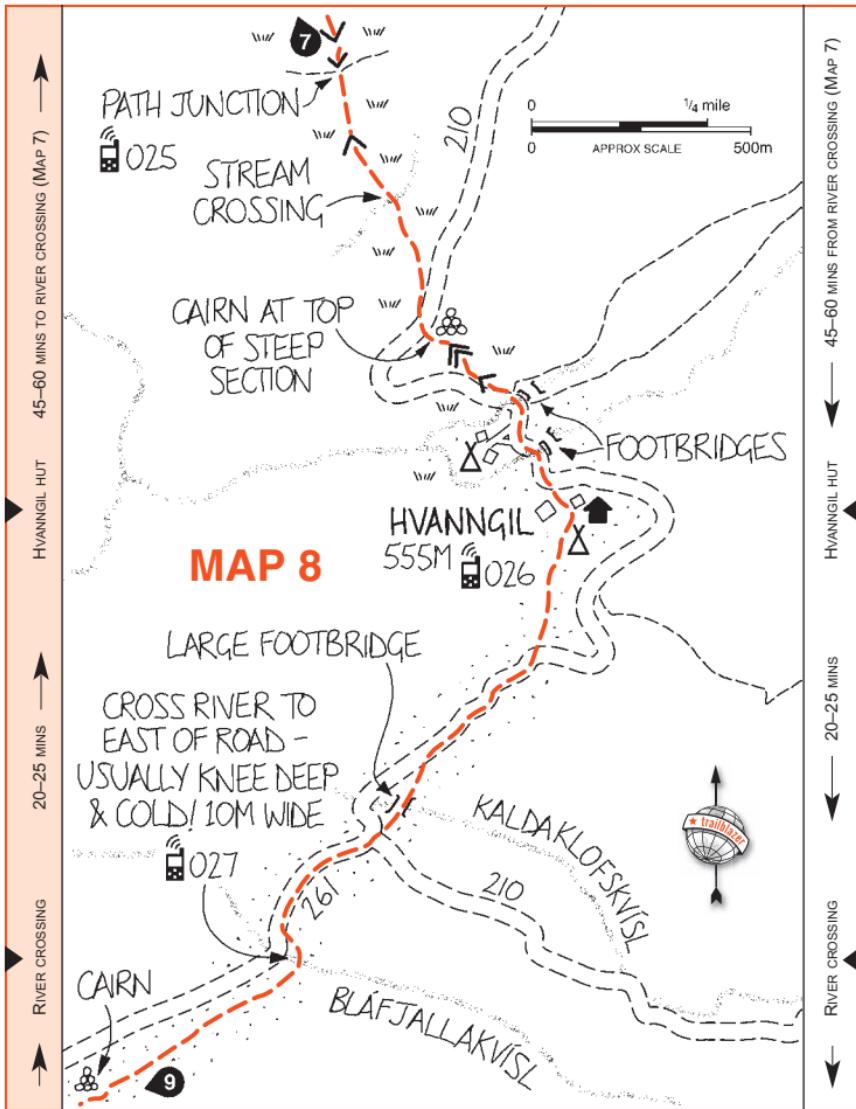
HVANNGL

[Map 8]

There is an alluring charm about this snug valley sheltered by craggy, crumbling green peaks.

The hut (☎ 354-499 0675, □ www.fi.is/en/mountain-huts/hvanngil; late Jun–mid Sep; 9500kr/pp) houses 60 people and you

can camp outside on an old lava field for 2300kr/pp. If the hut is full and you don't fancy a night under canvas then you can usually find space in the loft of the nearby old shepherd's hut. It's dusty and a little bit worse for wear but it is weather tight.



the **Markarfljótsgljúfur Canyon** (see Map 12a, p109). It is about a 30- to 45-minute round trip to the canyon and it's well worth doing. This great scar in the landscape, about 200 metres deep and 2 miles across, was carved out by a single catastrophic flood caused by a glacial outburst from the Katla volcano 2000 years ago. On a geological timescale this makes it barely out of nappies.

Back on the main trail, it is just a few more minutes' walk down the hill to Emstrur.

EMSTRUR

[Map 12, p108]

The **hut** (✉ 490-0137, www.fi.is/en/mountain-huts/emstrur; late Jun-mid Sep; 9500kr/pp) at Emstrur is actually a group of huts and together they have space for 60 people. **Camping**, for 2300kr/pp, is on flat

pitches dug into the hillside down by the stream. If they are all full, don't despair, there is a hidden area further downstream that few people are aware of so if you want the sensation of camping all alone it's well worth heading down there.

1.4 STAGE 4: EMSTRUR TO PÓRSMÖRK

Strenuousness Easy

[Maps 12-17, pp108-17]

Duration 6-7hrs

Distance 15km

Total ascent 250m

These 9½ miles begin in the rugged and barren Highlands where thunderous, churning rivers flow down from the Mýrdalsjökull ice cap and end in the verdant forests of Pórsmörk. After all the gravel and dust, these wooded mountain slopes come as a welcome change of scenery. And high above them is the icy mass of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano. It is a grand end to an extraordinary trek but it doesn't have to finish here; rather than catch a bus back to Reykjavík now, you can spend another two days on the Fimmvörðuháls trek to Skógar.

The route

After donning your pack at Emstrur head east across a stream. The trail crosses a wide bowl below a mountain ridge and for now the going is easy. Things soon get more interesting as you reach the edge of a steep precipice; it falls away to a cavernous gorge that holds the churning waters of the Fremri Emstruá, a melt-water channel that originates from the snout of the Entujökull glacier. Pick your

It is a grand end to an extraordinary trek but it doesn't have to finish here ...

way carefully down the steep path across the scree to the metal steps above the gorge. The noise of the water as it is forced through the narrow gorge is deaf-

ening and, if you don't have a head for heights, the sight of the two small bridges that negotiate this chasm, and the security ropes attached to the cliff, will have your stomach tightening.

Once on the other side the trail bears west but first take time to look south-east at the mighty Entujökull glacier, the snout of which is just two miles up the valley. As massive as the glacier looks it's worth remembering that this is just a small arm of the much greater Mýrdalsjökull ice cap. Now follow the trail across a barren plain before it climbs steeply onto a higher plateau.

metres wide and quite possibly knee-deep when in full flow, so take care and cross with a partner if possible.

After drying your feet pick up the path on the other side where it climbs into the forest. This final stretch of the walk is a delight; the greens of the forest and the splashes of colour from wild flowers are a welcome contrast from the greys, browns and blacks of the last few days. The narrow trail soon joins a much larger vehicle track and climbs to a junction where another narrow trail heads up the hill to the left. Follow this up and over the wooded ridge and down into the great valley of Pórsmörk.

The hut at Langidalur marks the end of the Laugavegur trek. If you don't plan to continue on to Skógar via the Fimmvörðuháls trek then Langidalur or Húsadalur are the main choices for accommodation. Further up valley, Básar is a good choice for an overnight stay if you do plan to trek the Fimmvörðuháls.

PÓRSMÖRK (THORSMORK)

[Map 16 opposite & Map 17, p117]

The Pórsmörk area sits astride a vast glacial outwash plain where meltwater flows down from the Mýrdalsjökull glacier. This is the only part of the trek where you will see forest of any significant extent, with lush birch woodland covering the valley slopes. It is an idyllic scene at low altitude but the bucolic nature of the valley gives way to a forbidding landscape of twisted rock and ice higher up. The profusion of mosses, ferns and birch woodland is thanks in part to the high rainfall and relatively mild climate of this part of Iceland.

Towering over the woodlands are gnarled rocks and mountains straight out of a Tolkein novel. To top it all off are not one but two ice-capped volcanoes: Katla, which is overdue for an eruption and is one of the most explosive of Iceland's volcanoes, and the infamous Eyjafjallajökull volcano which erupted in 2010 causing unprecedent-ed disruption across Europe (see box p52).

There are three options for **accommodation** in Pórsmörk, all quite far apart from each other so carefully consult Maps 16 and 17 to make sure you head down the right path for your accommodation.

On the north side of the Krossá river the **Langidalur hut** (Map 16; 9500kr/pp) run by Ferðafélag Íslands (✉ +354-893 1191, www.fi.is/en/mountain-huts/thorsmork-langidalur) is a popular overnight stop. It has bunk beds with space for 75 people in dormitories, a kitchen and showers as well

as a small shop with some basic supplies, snacks and drinks.

Húsadalur volcano huts (off Map 16; ✉ 354-419 4000; www.volcanohuts.com) are a 30-minute detour from the main trail and offer the luxury option. There is a range of accommodation including 14 private rooms with shared toilets in their Eyjafjallajökull Cabin and cheaper dorm beds too. There are two dormitories sleeping up to 16 people each (from 8400kr/pp). There are also glamping tents. Outside you can soothe those weary feet in a hot pool or take a sauna. **Camping** (May-Oct) here is a little pricey at 2600kr/pp. There is **wi-fi** in the hut. Those staying at Húsadalur will be tempted by their **LavaGrill Restaurant & Bar**. Here you can enjoy breakfast (eggs, ham, cheese and fruit) for 2300kr, lunch (soup, salad and bread) for 2700kr and a two-course dinner (lamb, pork, fish or chicken) for 4500kr. There are also veggie options and they will sort you out with a packed lunch for 2500kr.

The **Básar hut** (Map 17, p117; ✉ +354-893 2910, www.nat.is/fjallaskalareng/skalar_utivistar_basar.htm; May-Oct; 7600kr/pp) is further up on the other side of the Krossá valley from Langidalur and is a good choice for those intent on the Fimmvörðuháls trek as it sits at the start of the trail. The hut has room for up to 90 people in large dorms. **Camping** at Básar is 2000kr/pp. The campsite is well spread out through the birch scrub so if you like a bit

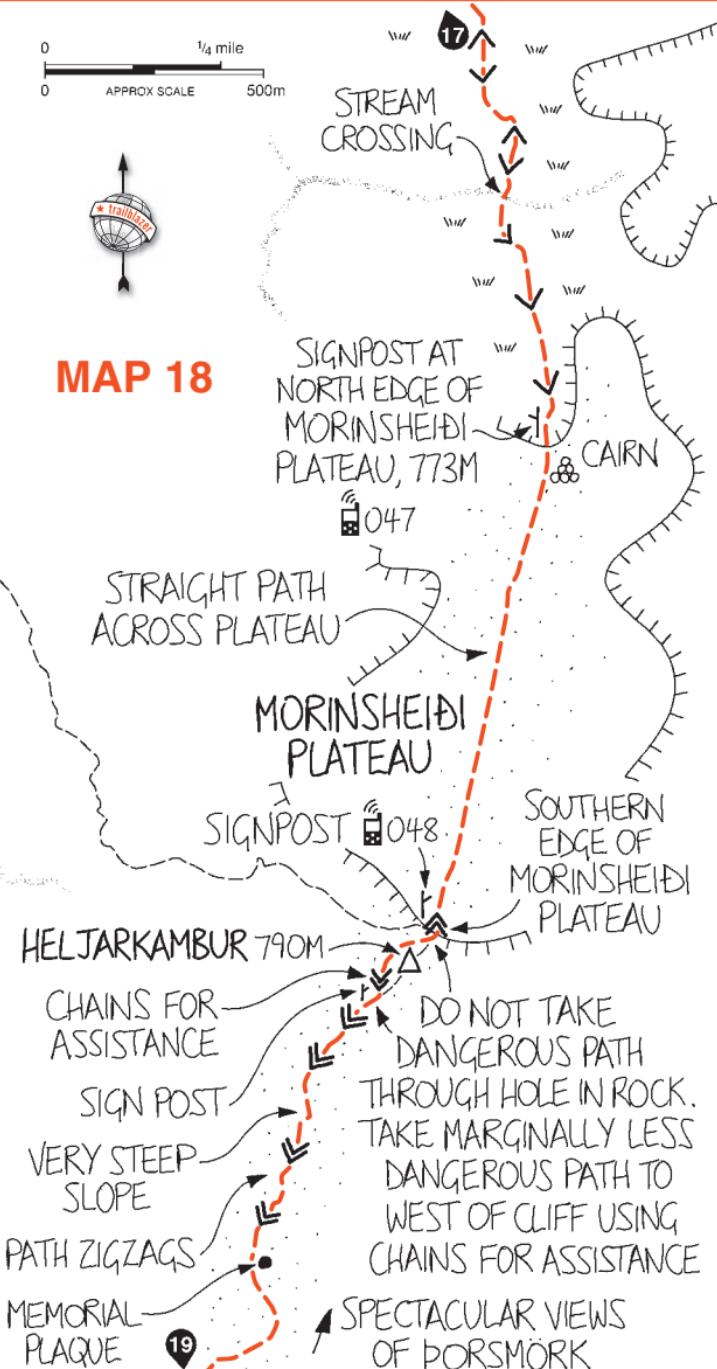
0
0 1/4 mile 500m
APPROX SCALE



MAP 18

Signpost

75-90 MINS FROM INFO BOARD (MAP 19)



90 MINS-2HRS TO INFO BOARD (MAP 19)

Signpost

If you wish to make a bit more headway before taking your boots off you can continue walking for another 20 minutes from the path junction to the Baldvinsskáli hut.

BALDVINSSKÁLI

[Map 20]

The **Baldvinsskáli hut** (www.nat.is/fi_baldvinsskali_fimmvorduhals.htm, 7000kr/pp) is a large A-frame building built in 2012 to replace the older, dilapidated hut that previously stood here. Sleeping arrangements involve rolling your sleeping mat and bag

out on the floor in the attic. As with the Fimmvörðuháls hut, drinking water is not always available although the hut warden does try to keep some large water containers topped up.

You can **camp** outside for 1500kr/pp.

2.2

STAGE 2: FIMMVÖRÐUHÁLS TO SKÓGAR

Strenuousness Medium

Duration 3-4½hrs

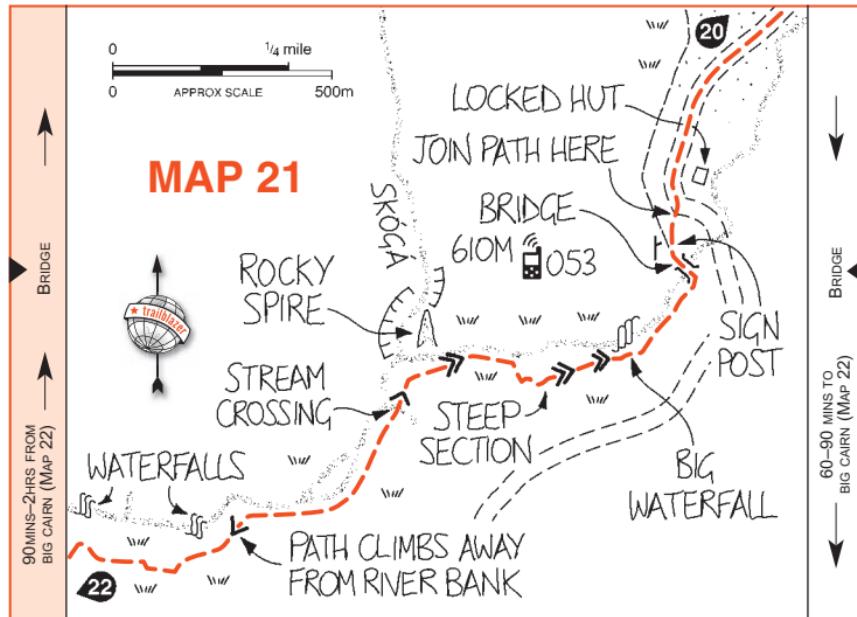
Distance 13km

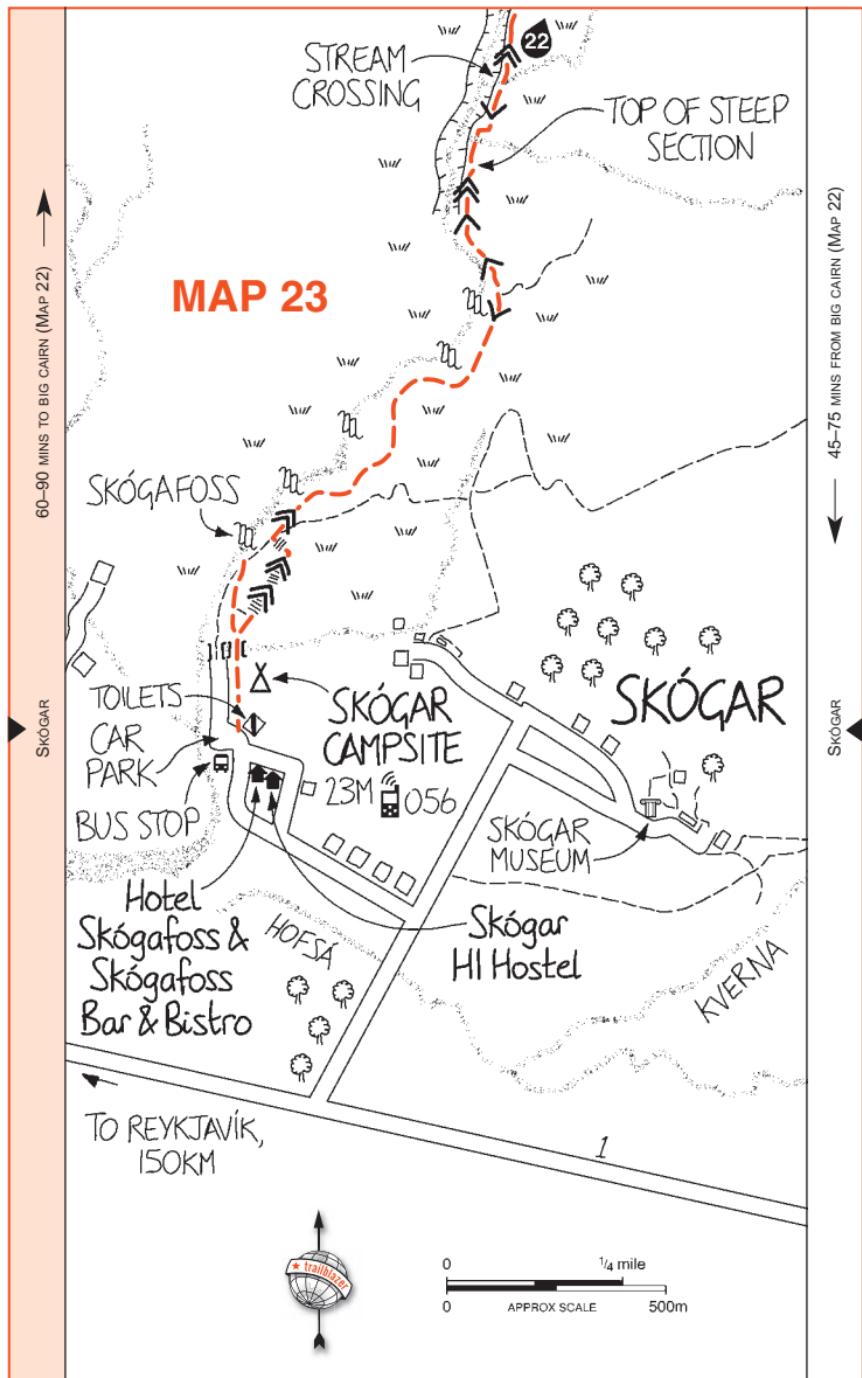
[Maps 19-23, p121-5]

Total ascent 50m

Ah, it's downhill from here, but only in an altitudinal sense. There are still plenty of natural wonders to lift your spirits, for today is a day of waterfalls. The route down to Skógar follows the Skógá river as it tumbles over a series of basalt ledges. Each one could be considered a pin-up cascade but it is Skógarfoss at the very end of the trail, that is the most spectacular of them all; a free-falling curtain of water, perfectly spilling over like water from an over-filled bath. And after sweating your way over the Fimmvörðuháls pass, a bath is probably just what you need.

(cont'd on p126)





showers and toilets. Despite the view of the waterfall this isn't the most idyllic of campsites; it is slap bang next to the busy car park and there is a constant stream of day-trippers walking past on their way to check out the falls. Pitch prices are 2000kr/pp. The showers cost an extra 300kr.

If you have just schlepped your way along the Laugavegur and Fimmvörðuháls trails, the thought of another night in a tent may be too much to bear. If so, there is the **Skógar HI Hostel** (✉ +354-487 8780, □ www.hostel.is/hostels/skogar) which has dorm beds from 6000kr and private rooms from 15,000kr for non-members. There is a self-catering kitchen and laundry facilities; handy for decontaminating all those post-trek smelly clothes before you get on the bus back to Reykjavík.

Plusher accommodation is available next door at **Hôtel Skógarfoss** (✉ +354-487 8780, □ www.hotelskogafoss.is; 4D/12T/

3F). The rooms are clean and comfortable. Rates vary but start around 8000kr/pp. They also have a large restaurant, **The Skógarfoss Bistro & Bar**, which serves good food throughout the day from breakfast through to dinner. It always seems to be busy! Soups and salads are priced from 1500kr to 2100kr, pasta dishes are 1950kr to 2350kr and there are burgers from 2050kr.

If you have time, it's worth visiting the **Skógar Museum** (✉ +354-487 8845; □ skogasafn.is; Jun-Aug daily 9am-6pm, Sep & Oct daily 10am-5pm) which is a few minutes' walk to the east. It is spread over three museums and features artefacts and displays on architecture, communications and transport. But perhaps most fascinating of all is the folk museum which has a vast collection of over 15,000 artefacts that paint a picture of life in Iceland over the centuries. The highlight is the 150-year-old fishing boat in the centre of the building.

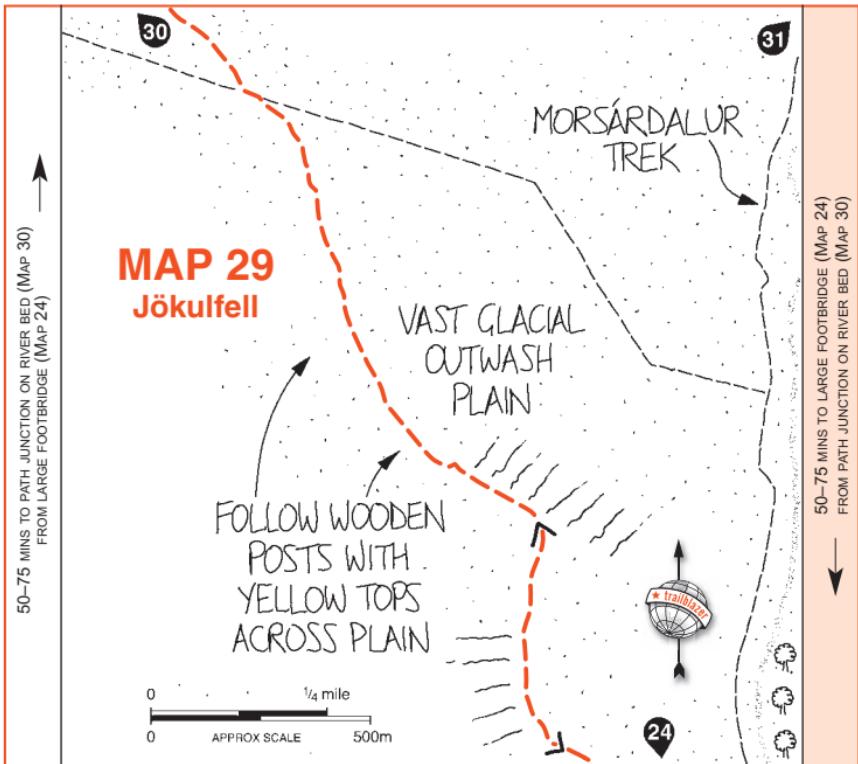
Treks in Skaftafell

Skaftafell is part of the Vatnajökull National Park that encompasses the largest ice cap in Europe. Around the fringes of the ice cap are deeply gouged valleys where the snouts of glaciers creep across the glacial till. The valleys are fringed with birch forest while higher up willow scrub gives way to steep *talus* slopes and narrow rocky arêtes.

Skaftafell is also home to Iceland's highest peak; an active volcano in the shape of Öræfajökull which sits encased in ice at the southern limit of the ice cap. To climb it requires a guide or plenty of mountaineering experience but there are other, more lowly, peaks such as Kristínartindar and Jökulfell that are more accessible. From their summits the views over the peaks and glaciers are simply staggering. Down in the valleys, trails criss-cross through the birch woodlands, cut across great glacial outwash plains and pass below the towering snouts of glaciers. All of this is accessible from one location at the Skaftafell visitor centre and campsite which means you can base yourself here and spend a few days exploring.

SKAFTAFELL [Map 24, p129]
The Skaftafell visitor centre (✉ +354-470 8300, □ www.vatnajokulstthjodgardur.is; Jun-Aug daily 8am-7pm, Sep & Oct & Feb-May daily 9am-6pm, Nov-Jan daily 10am-

6pm) is the nerve centre for the whole area. It is next to the big campsite and is where **buses** will pick up and drop off (Iceland by Bus's South Coast Bus and the public



The trail emerges beyond the woodland to follow a dirt track and then crosses a dead end road. From here on it's a long trudge across the glacial outwash plain known as Skeiðarársandur, occasionally following the line of some earthen barriers that have been bulldozed into place to act as flood defences. Follow these to the large footbridge over the Morsá river.

On the far side take the left fork at the junction. This takes you right across the valley to the other side, a walk that takes about an hour. The trail can be

indistinct in places and the terrain fairly featureless so look out for the posts splashed with yellow paint (Map 29) that guide you in the right direction.

As you cross you can contemplate how you are walking across a U-shaped valley carved out by the glaciers that now lie much further up the valley. But this U-shaped valley has lost its U-shape; the ground beneath your feet is composed of silt and stone that has been washed down by the melting glaciers as they have receded over thousands of years and filled the valley. If you were to dig a hole through all this material you wouldn't reach the bedrock at the bottom of the valley until you had gone down 250 metres.

A small patch of birch woodland marks the far side of the valley and when

... the solitude and the wonderful views make the effort worth your while.

you emerge from it you will find yourself at the foot of a side valley and a junction of paths (Map 30). Take the very faint path that climbs up onto the hillside to the west. The foot of the slope is thick with vegetation: birch, willow and lupins flourish here and the trail soon becomes indistinct so be prepared to fight your way through the foliage.

It soon peters out and you reach open rocky ground and the beginning of a punishing and relentless ascent onto the ridge above. Choose your route carefully and be prepared to slide one step back for every two steps forward as you climb the very steep slope of loose rock. Finally, and with some relief, the gradient eases and the rock becomes more stable. The ridge now is a wonderful myriad of colours: red, white, blue and yellow. A short and easy scramble through a cleft in a rock face brings you higher onto the spine of the mountain. It is a straightforward stroll along the whaleback ridge to one final steep section and then the top.

Those who suffer from vertigo might be dismayed to discover that the true summit is a tiny plinth of mossy rock that juts out into space. You may wish to crawl there on your hands and knees or perhaps just convince yourself that being able to see the summit from a few metres away counts as having reached the top. You will still enjoy the same sensational views across the Skeidararjökull glacier which, at its snout, is 15km across.

The descent is by the same route you came up.

4

MORSÁRDALUR & MORSÁRLÓN

Outback: Strenuousness Easy [Maps 24 & 29-32, pp133-7]

Duration 4-6hrs Distance 16km Ascent 100m

Loop: Strenuousness Medium [Maps 24 & 29-32, pp133-7]

Duration 5-7hrs Distance 23km Ascent 100m

If you don't fancy climbing any mountains but do fancy a long hike into the wilderness then this one is for you. Morsárdalur is a delightful valley with the Morsárlón glacier and its associated glacial lagoon Morsárlón near its head. It's a wild and beautiful spot and is a fine destination for your walk. If you are feeling really fit you can continue into the upper reaches of the valley known as Kjós where a rich palette of colourful rocks decorates the mountainsides.

The route

The start of this hike follows the same trail from the visitor centre as Trek 3 but after crossing the large footbridge (see Map 24) bear right at the next junction and follow the trail north alongside the river (Map 29) for half an hour. Turn

**If you ... fancy a long hike
into the wilderness then this
one is for you.**

right at the path junction to another footbridge (Map 31) where you then cross back over the river.

A rough trail follows the narrow strip between the churning river and the foot of the mountain slope. It's a long hour's walk from the bridge to your destination (Map 32) but it's a pleasant stroll on a mostly flat path by the river.

(cont'd from p135) To continue back towards the visitor centre bear left at the picnic benches and follow the path for about 15 minutes to a junction of paths at the foot of a side valley (see Map 30). Take a left here through birch scrub and cross back over the wide valley to complete a circle at the large footbridge over the Morsá river. Then retrace the steps you took at the start of the day to get back to the visitor centre.

5

TREK 5: KRISTÍNARTINDAR

Strenuousness Hard [Maps 24, p139 & 26-28, pp140-2]
Duration 7-9hrs Distance 17km Total ascent 1100m

This high peak on the ridge between the Morsárjökull and Skaftafellsjökull glaciers offers an exceptional 360-degree viewpoint over a wild glaciated landscape with views of the enormous Vatnajökull ice cap to the north. The final push to the summit is steep, stony and exposed and may not be to everyone's liking. But the views throughout this walk are exceptional so it's still worth doing the rest of the circuit which can be completed without bagging the summit. The walk is best tackled anti-clockwise for the most sensational views over the glacier on the ascent, looking towards the ice cap.

The route

From the visitor centre (Map 24) follow the path west behind the campsite and at the first junction take the trail leading up through the woodland. This is the main route for day trippers visiting the Svartifoss waterfall but we soon leave the main drag behind and take a much smaller trail on the right through stunted birch trees and scrub. The trail climbs steadily, passing a number of waterfalls as it does so. Keep bearing right until you reach the popular viewpoint of Sjórnarnípa (Map 26). The view over the Skaftafellsjökull glacier is sensational but take care as the ground falls away steeply here and it would be easy to slip and get a much closer view of the ice than you had anticipated.

The trail continues northwards from Sjórnarnípa, following the edge of the scarp slope above the glacier. Another viewpoint worth pausing at is Glama (Map 27) where a rocky spur juts out to provide a perfect photo opportunity with the glacier and ice cap as a backdrop. Again, watch your step; it's a long way down.

**... best tackled anti-clockwise
for the most sensational
views on the ascent ...**

(cont'd on p143)

Important note – walking times

Unless otherwise specified, all times in this book refer only to the time spent walking. You will need to add 20-30% to allow for rests, photography, checking the map, drinking water etc, not to mention time simply to stop and stare in wonderment.

MAP 26 Kristínartindar

0 APPROX SCALE 500m

GRAND VIEWPOINT!

27

ROCKY PLATEAU

BIG CLIFFS

CAIRN

TOP OF STEEP, ROCKY SECTION 062

STEEP SLOPES BY GLACIER

EASY WALKING ON A STEADY GRADIENT

CAIRN & VIEW OVER GLACIER

STREAM CROSSING

SKAFTAFELLS-JÖKULL GLACIER

OUTFLOW FROM GLACIER, 94M

059

SJÓRNARNÍPA VIEWPOINT
339M 061

BOARDWALK OVER RIVER

EASY WALKING ON SHALLOW GRADIENT

SJÓRNARNÍPA VIEWPOINT

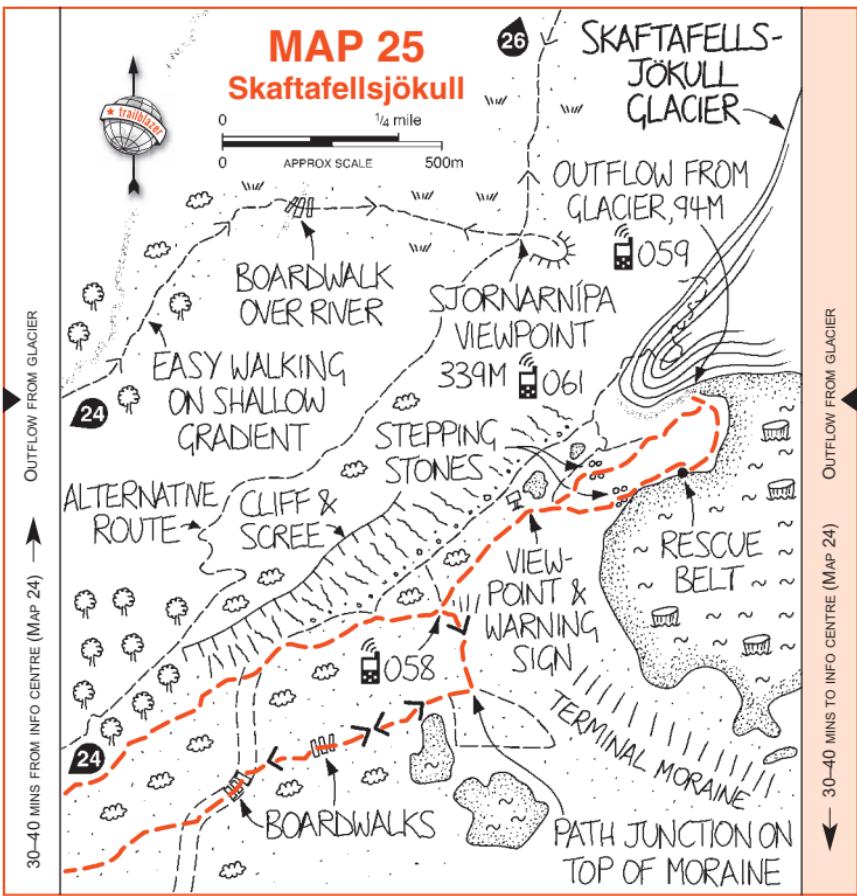
24



90MINS-2HRS TO GLAMA (MAP 27)

SJÓRNARNÍPA VIEWPOINT

60-90 MINS FROM GLAMA (MAP 27)



brief existence in the face of so much natural wonder, so why not pull up a rock and have some lunch? As you sit here pondering, this is the perfect place to consider the effects of climate change; large valley glaciers, such as this one, often have a glacial lagoon at their snout but many of them have become much larger in recent decades as glaciers have steadily retreated in the warming climate, leaving behind a depression at their snouts that fills with meltwater. The terminal moraine (the raised ridge of rock and gravel that was bulldozed into place by the glacier) now lies some distance away from the glacier and is a stark indicator of how much ice has has gone in just a couple of generations.

To return to the visitor centre you can either go back the way you came or you can follow a parallel path that avoids the crowds and makes for a satisfying circular walk. To find it, head back to the warning sign and just beyond that take a left onto the bank of terminal moraine. After one last look at the glacier bear right off the back of the moraine and follow the trail through the bushes back to the visitor centre.

Day hikes around Reykjavík

You don't have to travel far from Reykjavík to see some of the beauty that Iceland has to offer. Just a short distance from the city there are waterfalls, hot springs, spluttering fumaroles and extinct volcanoes, high windswept plateaus and hikes across the tundra where the whistles of golden plovers and curlews fly on the wind. You can base yourself in the city and hike to all of these over just five days. It is the perfect option for intrepid explorers who only have a few days to spare in Reykjavík or simply don't have time for the treks that are further afield. All the hikes described here can be reached by rental car or taxi from the city. Three of them can also be reached by bus (see 'Getting there' in each route description).

7

MOUNT ESJA

To Steinn & back: Strenuousness Easy [Map 33, p149]

Duration 4hrs Distance 7km Total ascent 950m

Full circuit: Strenuousness Hard [Maps 33-35, pp149-51]

Duration 7-9hrs Distance 13km Total ascent 1300m

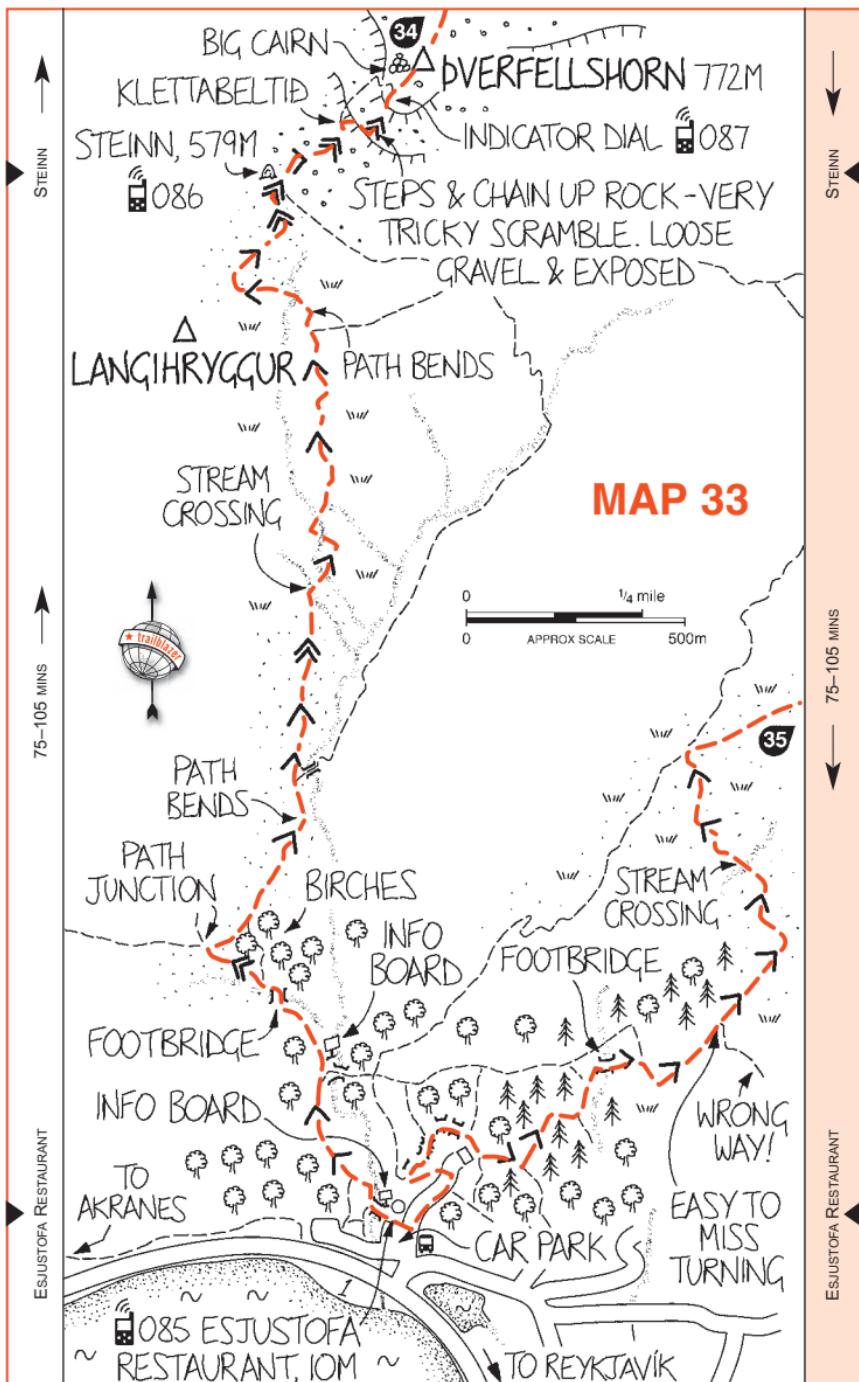
To Icelanders Mount Esja, which can be seen from the streets of Reykjavík, is their home mountain. Every weekend city dwellers flock to the mountain to enjoy the many trails that criss-cross this mighty massif. The hike up to the Steinn, just below the summit cliffs, is the most popular but if you are feeling adventurous you can continue to the large plateau and the highest point at Hábunga where it is likely to be just you with a few ptarmigan and snow buntings for company. Note that the full circuit described here is long and arduous, there is some challenging scrambling involved and the descent route is very steep, slippery and exposed. For an easier day simply do what most folk do; make the Steinn your goal and return the same way.

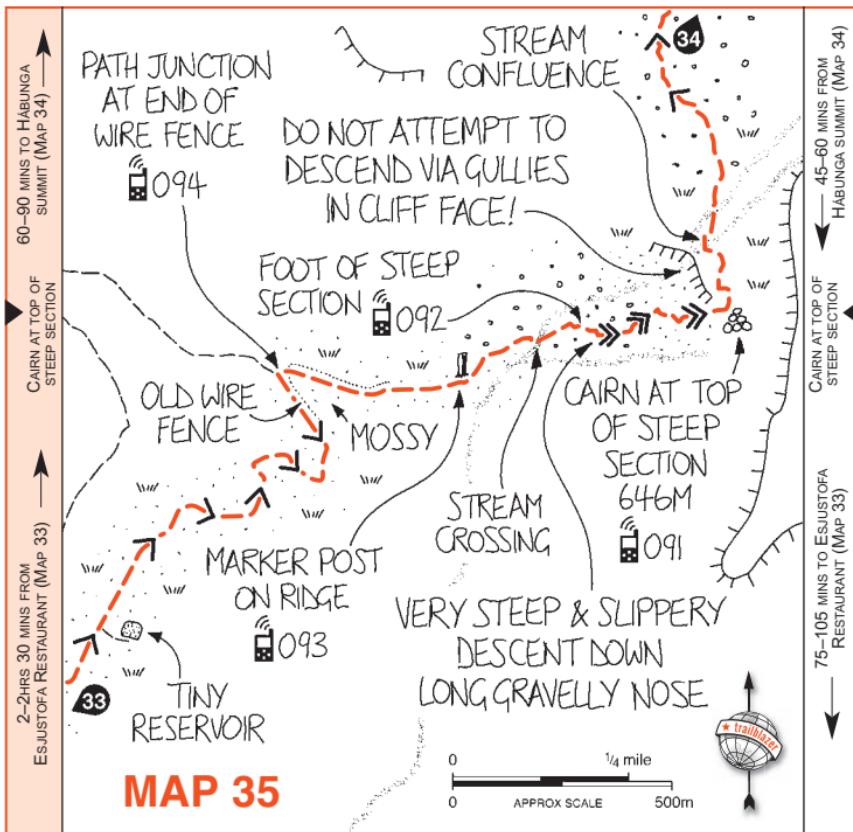
Getting there

It is 23km from the city to the trail head (30 mins drive). Follow Route 1 north from Reykjavík to the large car park at Esjurætur Hiking Center for the trail head. Strætó Bus No 57 (see Public transport, pp22-5) runs between Mjódd in Reykjavík and Esjurætur 7-11 times a day throughout the week. Alternatively, take a taxi.

The route

A number of trails start at the large car park at the **Esjurætur Hiking Center**, at the foot of Esja. There is a small café, *Esjustofa* (☎ +354-565 3200; daily 11.30am-5.30pm) here where you can get sandwiches for 1000-2100kr and





Kistufell ahead of you and to the left. Drop down into the bowl of the cirque and cross the stream. There is a faint trail that leads you towards the bottom of the cliffs of Kistufell. Don't be tempted to descend anywhere near where the stream falls over the rim of the cirque because there are sheer cliffs below. Instead, keep walking until you reach a cairn (Map 35) that marks the best descent route. It is quite a tricky descent down a crumbling, rocky nose. The stones here are small and like ball bearings which makes it very hard to keep your footing on the steep ground. You will be relieved to make it to the bottom.

From here the going is easier but it's still a fair old hike back. Cross the stream ahead and climb up the slope on the far side towards a marker post. Ahead there is an old rusty, wire fence. Follow this across mossy ground until it ends by a wide track. Follow this track down the hill past a tiny reservoir until you reach a copse of trees on the slope below you. Just beyond these trees there is an easily-missed path that branches off to the right. Take this path through the lupins and down to a footbridge. On the other side a trail leads through coniferous forest back to the car park.

9**GLYMUR WATERFALL & HVALVATN****Strenuousness Easy****[Maps 37, p155 & 38, p157]****Duration 3hrs Distance 6km [round trip] Total ascent 300m**

Glymur is the second highest waterfall in Iceland at 198 metres. It is a popular day hike encompassing not just the waterfall but the dramatic deep and narrow gorge. The rough trail climbs high up one side of this fissure to reach a wonderful viewpoint overlooking the cascade at the head of the gorge. The walk can be extended to take you into wild country away from the crowds to the shore of Hvalvatn, a high lake hidden behind the basalt cliffs of Hvalfell.

Getting there

It is 70km from Reykjavík to the trail head at Botnsá (1hr drive). There is no bus so you will need to take a taxi or rental car. Follow Route 1 north and just before the tunnel under Hvalfjörður turn right onto Route 47. At the head of the fjord turn right onto a gravel track. After 2km you will reach the end of the road and the car park at Botnsá.

The route

The first opportunity to have an accident on this walk is to trip on the ankle-height metal bar as you pass through the gate by the car park. Once past this obstacle it is an easy stroll along an undulating path. Bear left immediately after the gate and follow the trail through the birches and lupins (see box p156).

At the indistinct path junction a sign points the way towards the falls. At first it feels like the wrong way as it leads towards a cliff, but if you look close-

... a wonderful view [of] the falls: a long, thin cascade spilling into the dark chasm ...

ly you will spot the path dropping down towards a cave. In fact this cave is a natural tunnel. Steps lead down from it to the river where there is a precarious log

bridge. A cable strung above the log makes it easier to cross than it would otherwise be.

If you have chosen a weekend for your walk, there may well be lots of other people on the trail and you could find yourself queuing to cross the river. Be ready to show how patient you can be as not everyone is comfortable crossing the log and they may take some time in doing so.

HVALVATN

45–60 MINS

RIVER CROSSING

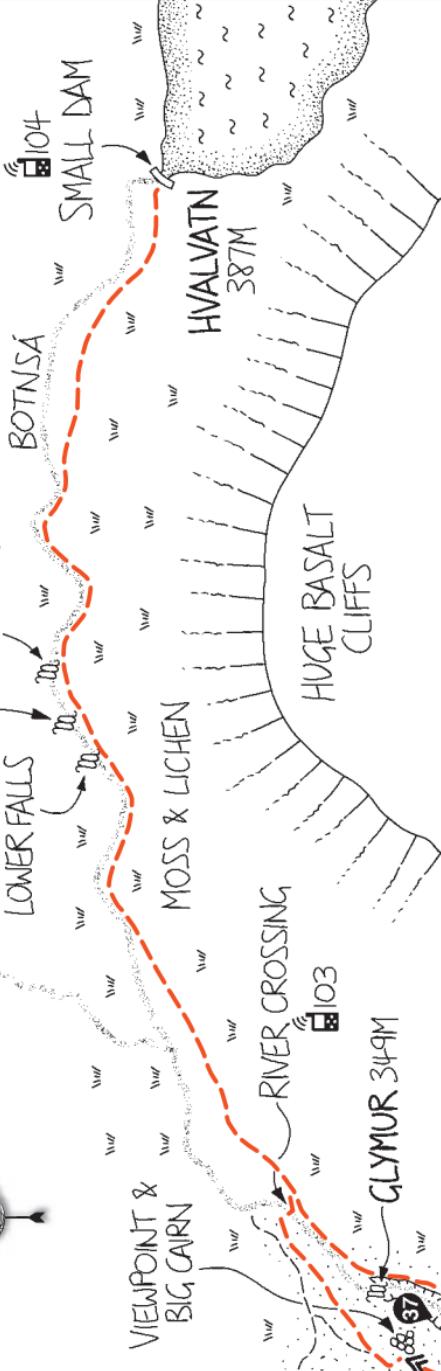
**CURLEWS GOLDEN
PLOVERS & OTHER
WADERS NEST HERE.
STICK TO FAINT TRAIL
BY RIVER TO AVOID
DISTURBING THEIR NESTS**

MAP 38

0 1/4 mile
APPROX SCALE
0 500m

BREIDIFOSS
MIDDLE FALLS

BREIDIFOSS
LOWER FALLS



HVALVATN

45–60 MINS

RIVER CROSSING

it is mostly flat or downhill the rest of the way to the bathing river.

A little further on, the trail crosses the river by way of a small footbridge and continues past some large steaming fumaroles. Depending on the wind

Look out for the impressive bubbling mud pools just off the path...

direction the steam may be drifting across the path. It is quite hard to breathe as you walk through this steam so don't linger too long; it's better to contemplate

the fumaroles from outside the cloud of vapour.

At the path junction ahead take the right fork for the bathing river. There are boardwalks and wooden screens to give you a little privacy when changing. The water is a perfect temperature for bathing and once you get in you may find it hard to get out.

If communal bathing isn't your thing and you wish to extend the walk away from the crowds, bear left at the junction and continue on the path as it swings round below a scree slope into the head of the valley. There are some more impressive fumaroles below the cliffs here. The path rises up the side of the hill to arrive on a high grassy plateau. Soon, some more steaming fumaroles come into view by a path junction and signpost. Bear right here across the grassy terrain. Look out for the impressive bubbling mud pools just off the path to the left. You may see one or two other hikers up here but it is much more peaceful than the main valley.

Continuing past the mud pools the trail joins a more distinct path and heads east. At the next junction, marked by a signpost, bear right and follow the undulating route across the hillside. At times the path is narrow and negotiates some steep ground. There is a chain on one awkward section for extra security. Beyond this the going is easy and there is one last fumarole a short detour from the path. It's well worth a look as it is one of the most impressive of all the fumaroles on the walk, with roaring, boiling water spurting out under immense pressure. Don't stand too close!

The trail descends from this fumarole back to the bathing river in the valley below. The return to the car park is to retrace your steps from here.

HVERAGERÐI

[Map p165]

This delightful small town sits at the mouth of the Reykjadalur valley and makes a good base for the walk. The locals have proclaimed their hometown the 'hot springs capital of the world' and you can't begrudge them the claim; steam from fumaroles drifts out of back gardens and the Reykjadalur hot springs are just a few miles out of town. It is a leafy town with woodland reclaiming the land around its fringes.

There is an excellent **visitor centre** (✉ +354-483 4601, Mon-Fri 8.30am-6pm, Sat 9am-4pm, Sun 9am-3pm) near the main road. Inside you can look through a glass

panel on the floor into a cleft in the ground. This fissure was exposed during construction of the building and represents part of the mid-Atlantic fault line that separates North America from Europe. So you can jump from one continent to the other across the tiled floor! Although, to spoil the fun, strictly speaking the mid-Atlantic fault line is a lot wider than just this one crack in the ground. There is also a geothermal exhibition that includes an earthquake simulator.

The visitor centre building is within a shopping centre near the main road that also incorporates a **post office** (Mon-Fri



OTHER ACTIVITIES

After the physical exertions of trekking you might like to spend a little time exploring Iceland at a slower pace. The country has no end of natural wonders to discover. Many of these are hugely popular so if you wish to avoid the crowds try to get to these sights early. Remember, in the summer there is virtually no darkness in Iceland so you could visit in the early hours of the day and have some of the most popular sights all to yourself. Here are some suggestions of places to visit that are close to the trekking locations in this guidebook.

GULLFOSS

This is one of the most famous waterfalls in Iceland. Gullfoss, which translates as Golden Falls, is on the Hvítá River and it's something of a behemoth. Colossal quantities of water crash over two ledges in the Gullfossgljúfur Canyon; it is estimated that 140 cubic metres of water falls over the edge every second.

It is one of the main sights on Iceland's so-called 'Golden Circle' tourist route, so don't expect to have it all to yourself. This place is very busy but if you can tolerate being part of a very large crowd it is worth it. You can get here by tourist bus or by hire car (approx 1hr 45 mins from Reykjavík). Above the falls there is the *Gullfoss Café* (✉ +354 486 5000, gullfoss.is; daily 10am-6.30pm).

That we can enjoy the waterfall is largely down to one woman: Sigríður Tómasdóttir, the daughter of the man, Tomas, who owned the waterfall and the land around it in the early 20th century.

She fought a long and protracted legal battle against an English businessman who wanted to harness the power of the falls for a hydro-electric scheme. Thanks to her perseverance and willingness to use her own money to pay for the legal costs, she eventually won the day and in 1929 the waterfall was protected for all to enjoy as a public space.

Sigríður's actions not only saved Gullfoss but they changed attitudes towards the environment and indirectly helped to keep much of Iceland's natural beauty intact in future years. As such Sigríður is widely revered as Iceland's first environmental campaigner. There is a plaque depicting her face by the path at Gullfoss.

GEYSIR

Another of Iceland's popular tourist sites, on the Golden Circle tourist trail, Geysir is the geyser that lent its name to geysers world-

There are lots of hiking trails, a visitor centre and a campsite. One of the best trails takes you to Botnstjörn, an emerald green lake below the cliffs with mossy boulders around its edge. Another trail climbs to the top of a huge rock, Eyjan; a wonderful viewpoint from which to look across the canyon. Ásbrygi is about a 7-hour drive from Reykjavík.

WHALE WATCHING

Most whale watching boat trips operate out of Akureyri and Húsavík on the north coast of Iceland but if you don't want to travel that far you do have options in Reykjavík.

The following all offer boat trips of around two to three hours with the chance to see minke and humpback whales, dolphins and porpoises and maybe even fin and blue whales. Prices vary from 10,900 to 21,990 kr/pp.

- Whale Iceland (✉ 354-779 8272, www.whalewatchingreykjanes.is)
- Katla Whale Watching (✉ 354-780 7575, www.katlawhalewatching.is)
- Whale Safari (✉ 354-497 0000, www.whalesafari.is)
- Elding Whale Watching (✉ 354-519 5000, www.elding.is)

□ Active volcano viewing – the 2021 Fagradalsfjall eruption

In early 2021 geologists predicted that a volcanic eruption was imminent on the Reykjanes peninsula in south-west Iceland as it had been shaken for months by thousands of earthquakes. They proved to be correct, as lava broke the surface in the Geldingadalir valley at **Fagradalsfjall** just to the north-east of Grindavík on 19th March 2021. This effusive eruption is significant because it is the first time in 800 years that a volcanic eruption has occurred on the Reykjanes peninsula. It's also notable being in such close proximity to Reykjavík, just 40km away.

As soon as the lava began to flow, thousands of people flocked to witness the spectacle and a hiking trail was quickly established. In the following days and weeks fissures began to open up in other spots in the area and at one point there were six active vents. At the time of writing only one vent was active and it's not known for how long it will continue. It could be weeks, months or years.

The walk to the volcano is understandably popular and, while the trail is easy to follow, it is an arduous hike of five miles (return total) and involves around 200 to 300 metres of ascent in remote mountain country. You'll need the usual outdoor clothing and footwear and plenty of provisions to last the day. The trail head is five miles east of Grindavík on road No 427.

Bear in mind that the hiking trail had to be re-routed because of the sudden opening of new fissures and it is possible that this could happen again. Accumulations of dangerous gases can occur and you should check the latest information on the Icelandic Met Office website en.vedur.is/volcanoes/fagradalsfjall-eruption/volcanic-gases. There is a live feed of the volcano on youtube.com/watch?v=BA-9QzIcr3c. If you'd feel safer visiting the volcano with a guide then contact one of the walking guide companies on p18 who have been quick to add the Fagradalsfjall volcano hike to their list of offerings.

APPENDIX A – ICELANDIC WORDS & PHRASES

In practice, if you can speak English, you will be able to communicate very easily with the natives of Iceland as their command of English is very good. Nevertheless, it is always a nice touch to try a few words of the local lingo to show respect. The locals will appreciate the occasional hello, goodbye and thank you in Icelandic. If you are feeling really brave you could try some of the other phrases below.

PRONUNCIATION OF ICELANDIC CHARACTERS

á as in how
æ as in island
ð as in them
é as in mess
í as in feet
ó as in flow
ö as in earn
þ as in thing
ú as in soon
ý as in feet (same as í)

GREETINGS

Hello	<i>Halló</i>
Goodbye	<i>Bless</i>
Yes	<i>Já</i>
No	<i>Nei</i>
Please	<i>Vinsamlegast</i>
Thanks	<i>Takk</i>
You're welcome	<i>þú ert velkommin</i>
Excuse me	<i>Fyrirgefðú</i>
Nice to meet you	<i>Komdu sæll (m.) / Komdu sæl (f.)</i>
How are you?	<i>Hvernig hefur þú það?</i>
I'm well, and you?	<i>Ágætt, en þú?</i>
I'm well, thank you	<i>Ágætt, takk</i>
Good	<i>Góður / góð (m./f.)</i>
Bad	<i>Vondur / Vond (m./f.)</i>

TRAVEL

Where is...?	<i>Hvor er...?</i>
Bus	<i>Strætisvagn</i>
Bus station	<i>Strætóstöðin</i>
Taxi	<i>Taxi</i>
Restaurant	<i>Veitingastaður</i>
Car hire company	<i>Bílaleiga</i>
Hotel	<i>Hótel</i>
Room	<i>Herbergi</i>
Reservation	<i>Bókun</i>
Airport	<i>Flugvöllur</i>
Departure	<i>Brottför</i>
Arrival	<i>Koma</i>
Exit	<i>Út</i>
Warning	<i>Varúð</i>

APPENDIX D – GPS WAYPOINTS

Each GPS waypoint listed was taken on the route at the reference number marked on the map as below. This downloadable list of GPS waypoints can be found on the Trailblazer website: trailblazer-guides.com (click on GPS waypoints). For more on maps and gps devices see p32.

MAP	WAYPOINT	GRID REF	DESCRIPTION
Trek 1: The Laugevegur			
1	001	N63 59.439 W19 3.667	Hut at Landmannalaugar
1	002	N63 59.447 W19 3.772	Footbridge
1	003	N63 58.902 W19 5.352	Signpost
1a	01A	N63 59.086 W19 3.559	Start of climb
1a	01B	N63 59.052 W19 3.714	Rocky protrusion
1a	01C	N63 58.794 W19 3.781	Minor summit
1a	01D	N63 58.614 W19 3.944	Foot of final climb to summit
1a	01E	N63 58.615 W19 4.158	Bláhnúkur summit
1a	01F	N63 58.372 W19 4.609	Descent point from ridge
1a	01G	N63 58.550 W19 4.895	Stream crossing
1a	01H	N63 58.660 W19 5.025	Foot of steep slope
1a	01I	N63 58.726 W19 5.024	River crossing
1a	01J	N63 58.957 W19 5.081	Signpost
1a	01K	N63 59.008 W19 4.600	Path meets riverside
2	004	N63 58.198 W19 6.742	Great viewpoint of Landmannalaugar & Brennisteinsalda
2	005	N63 57.848 W19 7.016	Signpost for 'Skalli'
3	006	N63 57.246 W19 8.617	Path junction by fumaroles
3	007	N63 56.958 W19 9.253	Large cairn, 995m
3	008	N63 56.525 W19 9.808	Cairn
4	009	N63 55.998 W19 10.079	Höskuldsskáli hut
3	010	N63 56.314 W19 9.303	Söðull summit
4	011	N63 55.391 W19 9.467	Memorial cairn
4	012	N63 55.301 W19 9.397	Big gully
4	013	N63 54.889 W19 9.532	Stream crossing
4	014	N63 54.760 W19 9.406	High point, 963m
5	015	N63 54.333 W19 9.116	End of ridge, 1002m
5	016	N63 54.024 W19 9.774	Stream crossing
5	017	N63 53.817 W19 10.102	Fumaroles
5	018	N63 53.630 W19 10.016	Stream crossing
5	019	N63 53.603 W19 9.869	Cairn
5	020	N63 53.474 W19 10.184	Signpost
6	021	N63 52.891 W19 11.792	River crossing
7	022	N63 51.888 W19 13.177	Stream crossing
7	023	N63 51.466 W19 13.630	Álfavatn
7	024	N63 50.919 W19 12.886	River crossing
8	025	N63 50.423 W19 12.984	Path junction
8	026	N63 49.915 W19 12.356	Hvanngil
8	027	N63 49.349 W19 13.172	Cross river
10	028	N63 48.344 W19 16.683	Bridge, 540m
10	029	N63 48.161 W19 17.469	Signpost

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0 5km



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