



ICELAND CONTRASTS

FJORDS, GLACIERS, WATERFALLS, VOLCANOES



This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day-to-day. It doesn't hope to answer everything. If you have any questions please get in touch.



Waterfall near Dettifoss. Photo Andy Dennis

- ***Widely contrasting day walks in dramatic locations***
- ***Long running classic itinerary***
- ***Remote tranquillity in the beautiful east fjords***
- ***Wild flowers and birds prolific***
- ***Lava deserts, bubbling mud and steaming fissures***
- ***24 hours daylight in June/July***

Iceland

Iceland: an enigma, a land of contrasts. There are volcanoes, lava fields, ice caps, geothermal activity and great waterfalls. Around the coastline there is a more familiar landscape of snow streaked mountains divided by deep fjords, lush green valleys, farms, often in dramatic settings and a proliferation of birds and flowers. The interior with its lava and sand deserts, great glaciers and old volcanoes could be part of another planet.

Trip summary

This trip involves day walks in contrasting terrain. We start in the steep sided coastal mountains of the eastern fjords, following faint paths along the fjords and across mountain passes and staying in a remote farmhouse in an abandoned fjord. The coastal scenery is dramatic, and we rarely meet other walkers.

Leaving the east coast, we drive across the flat lunar landscape of Iceland's interior to walk across a caldera at Askja in the active volcanic zone. We then follow a vast canyon past columnar basalt in strange formations and peer over powerful waterfalls. A visit to Myvatn rounds off the trip, with its geothermal 'wonderland' of steaming fissures and bubbling mud, and we walk in an area on top of the Mid Atlantic Ridge, still cooling from an eruption in the 1980's. In between hikes we swim in geothermal pools and whale-watch close to the Arctic Circle.

Walking

We walk 4-8 hours on most days on a wide variety of terrain which demands good outdoor clothing and strong boots. All of our holidays in Iceland would appeal to regular walkers. Much of the walking is in hilly terrain but the trails usually follow easy contours. Some adaptability is required to cope with walking off trail and a few unbridged stream crossings, usually no more than knee deep. This trip should not be confused with holidays, usually coach-based, where a walk is 1-2 hours around the main tourist hot-spots.



Geothermal swim. Photo Andy Dennis

Accommodation

Outside of Reykjavik, there are very few hotels in Iceland. During the short summer holiday season, guest houses, hostels, schools, colleges, farms and community centres offer what is universally known as 'sleeping bag accommodation', to meet the temporary demand. On some nights you will have twin/double rooms but on others there will be four or more beds per room. In the highlands, we all sleep together on mattresses in a communal room. Camping is an option on some nights if you bring your own tent. The accommodation, originating from personal contacts we have made, is warm and comfortable, always interesting and is often in exciting locations.

Transport

In the east fjords we use boat and jeep support. Once we head for the highlands, we have our own bus.

Luggage

The main luggage will travel by bus, jeep or boat. On the boat there could be some spray and in the luggage compartments of the bus it could get dusty as many of the roads are not sealed. A trek bag or similar is ideal, with your gear packed inside plastic bags as an extra precaution. While walking, all you have to carry is what you need for the day: waterproofs, fleece, lunch etc.

Food

We have a reputation for buying and cooking good, wholesome food. Fresh fish, lamb, yoghurts and dairy products are Icelandic specialities. Some help would be appreciated with chores. Alcohol is expensive in Iceland and is only available in government shops which are well spaced

out. Most people who enjoy an occasional 'tot' arrive well stocked. We can cater for vegetarians or special diets if you let us know beforehand. If you require gluten free bread, we advise that you bring some with you, as it is not usually available locally.

Climate

Northeast Iceland enjoys a pronounced rain shadow effect caused by the central highlands and we can afford to be optimistic about our chances. Occasionally, cold north winds continue right through July, but most years the summer weather is generally dry and settled, and we often walk in shorts. We can look forward to the atmospheric clarity and powerful sky patterns for which Iceland is noted. Good outdoor gear and footwear are vital however, as a dose of depressions can produce wet and windy weather, or even snow on high ground. There can be a considerable range in temperature with differing conditions, from 2° to 24°C.

Maps

Iceland has very good topographical and touring maps and these are available in tourist shops, petrol stations etc so you should be able to pick up a map either in Reykjavik or Eskifjordur. For those who wish to obtain maps prior to arrival we recommend the 1:250,000 touring map "Northeast and East Iceland" which covers all the areas included in our walking itinerary. To obtain a copy of this or other maps visit the www.ferdakort.is website (which gives some of its information in English) which provides information on ordering maps. There are also an increasing number of hiking maps being produced (often with information in English) available locally and you may be able to buy one in Eskifjordur.

Money

The Icelandic Krona (ISK) is the local currency. You will need money for a few meals, see DAY to DAY itinerary for details. Optional personal expenses might include swimming, horse riding, postcards, coffees and gifts. Note that alcoholic drinks are expensive in restaurants. A credit card is a useful backup for the unexpected, such as a coffee table book or Icelandic sweater.

Digital photography

Iceland mostly uses continental style plugs so an adapter is useful as well as some spare batteries for the highlands where there is no power.

What our clients say...

"This trek was very well organised, amazing scenery and experiences and an excellent leader"
Mark Bryant, Iceland Contrasts 2009

"The leader was excellent-very knowledgeable, infectious enthusiasm, perfectly planned itinerary done at the perfect pace. The food was terrific-great-the best ever on a trek."
Sarah Korda, Iceland Contrasts 2009

Would you recommend High Places to others? "Yes" Why?

"Good itineraries, good leadership well organised, with congenial groups."
Margaret and Christopher Lynch, Iceland Contrasts 2009

"Because it is a truly wonderful experience and different from the bog standard coach trip holiday which are rife in Iceland. Plus you see much more of the untouched and beautiful East Fjords.....and many many thanks for the best holiday I've ever been on! ☺"
Nigel Nudds, Iceland Contrasts 2009

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

This itinerary is flexible and should be seen as a guide only. Local conditions, weather or fitness could lead to changes in our daily plans. All times and distances are approximate. 'B,L,D' refers to meals included in the trip cost, i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

This trip is 14 days ex Reykjavik.

- DAY 1 Flight to Keflavik. Transfer to Reykjavik to stay in our guesthouse.
- DAY 2 There will be time for a look around Reykjavik, and perhaps climb the cathedral tower for great views of the city before an afternoon flight across Iceland to Egilsstaðir. A bus ride (45 minutes) takes us over the coastal mountains to our accommodation for the next two nights on the outskirts of Eskifjörður, a classic fjord fishing town. Farmhouse. B,D.
- DAY 3 Time to settle in and get a feel for the fjord country of eastern Iceland. A walk in the hills above the town will stretch our legs and there should be time too, to visit the local museum and/or soak in the outdoor hotpots at the swimming pool. Farmhouse. B,L,D.

- DAY 4 We set off to walk to our next destination, a remote farmhouse on the Gerpír peninsula. A track wends among hills where we may be lucky enough to see reindeer before dropping down to Viðfjörður, a deserted and beautiful fjord with eiders and terns for company. Restored farmhouse. (4-5 hours). B,L,D



- DAY 5 Following a little used trail around the coast, we traverse two spectacular headlands to reach the fishing town of Neskaupstaður (17km). Mountains built from layered lava flows, lush green valleys and one or two knee-deep river crossings make this a blissful day. From Neskaupstaður we travel by fishing boat (1 hour) around the next headland beneath immense cliffs (look out for puffins and whales!) into the tranquil and almost deserted Mjóifjörður. Hostel/schoolhouse. (6-7 hours walking). B,L,D
- DAY 6 A gradual 830m ascent from our hostel leads to a high col with tremendous views! Crossing the pass, we descend into a valley where snow patches linger well into the summer, and in August, wild blueberries abound. Our bus waits by the fjord and a 15 minute drive takes us to the fishing town of Seydisfjörður, renowned for its many beautiful old houses. Hostel. (8 hours). B,L,D.
- DAY 7 Today's route contours round a shapely mountain, then drops gently down towards the fjord past a series of waterfalls. Whimbrel, snipe, and golden plover abound, and wild flowers are prolific. Late afternoon stroll around town or perhaps a beer by the harbour. Hostel. (6 hours) B,L,D

DAY 8 Our bus arrives and we head inland towards the highlands. It is hard to describe this part of the journey, much of it resembling the landscape of the moon! Apart from pockets of occasional vegetation, it is a stark wasteland of lava fields, contorted volcanic ridges and big glacial rivers. We head over sand and lava to a mountain refuge set in a fertile green oasis of luxuriant vegetation, flowers and ferns and dwarf willow. Ducks and waders breed here in early summer including pink footed geese and harlequin ducks. We are very close to the foot of Herdubreið, Iceland's 'Queen of Mountains', which dominates the skyline. We will arrive in time for a walk through the lava. Mountain refuge. 5-6 hour drive. B,D

DAY 9 A drive (1¼ hours) through a beautiful landscape of black lava and light coloured wind-blown pumice takes us towards Askja, an enormous volcanic caldera. A track leads up onto the eastern rim of the caldera from which there is a magnificent view of Askja's crater lake. It's possible to swim in the smaller adjacent explosion crater Viti ('Hell'), formed during an eruption in 1875 so be prepared! After lunch we walk across the crater basin to reach our bus and return 'home'. Total walking approx 6 hours. (B,L,D).



Highland refuge

DAY 10 A slow drive over a lava field leads in another 3 hours to the awesome spectacle of Dettifoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe. The Jökulsá River (which we have been following all day) drains off Vatnajökull Icecap and is the longest river in Iceland. In late spring and summer when the melt water is at its height, the Jökulsá becomes a wide, roaring and frightening torrent of grey glacial water, tumbling over Dettifoss and two other huge waterfalls, Hafragilfoss and Selfoss. We will spend a couple of hours here, getting close enough to Dettifoss to feel the spray of the water.

Our journey continues by bus following the Jökulsá, until it spews out into the sea on Iceland's north coast. After replenishing stocks we drive a short distance to our accommodation in a nearby schoolhouse set among green meadows and extensive birchwoods. Walking 3-4 hours, driving approx 4 hours. (B,L,D)

DAY 11 Jökulsá Canyon. This fantastic 25 km canyon has been gouged out in the recent geological past by flash floods draining from Vatnajökull Icecap associated with cataclysmic sub-glacial volcanic activity. The canyon is almost half a mile wide, over 300ft deep and has sliced through a lava dessert. In its depths however, are accessible places with rich green woodlands and an incredible range of plants and flowers near the spring-fed streams and pools. It is home to the rare gyrfalcon and pink-footed goose.

Throughout the canyon there are vast columnar basalt formations with exposed volcanic cores, now free-standing pillars, 150ft high! A network of paths traverses

the canyon at its base or else along its rim, and we can choose which sections to explore. The walking is mostly easy despite the daunting appearance of much of the terrain. In our opinion it is one of the most fascinating and enjoyable hikes anywhere! Walking 6-7 hours. Schoolhouse. (B,L,D)

DAY 12 We drive along the coast to Husavik (40 km), a classic Icelandic fishing town which offers some of the finest whale watching centres in the world. The rest of the morning is free. Options include a three hour whale watch trip in a traditional wooden fishing boat and with a 98% sighting record (allow 50 Euros). The smaller minke whale is the most common but we have had dramatic encounters with the larger humpback whales. Or you can climb the hill behind the town, swim in the open air swimming pool with geothermally heated hotpots, or visit the whale museum. From Husavik we drive south along one of Iceland's most famous (and expensive) salmon fishing rivers to our country school house in a beautiful valley to the west of Myvatn. A late afternoon excursion reveals one of Iceland's gems – a beautiful and rarely visited waterfall encircled by columnar basalt. (B,D)

DAY 13 Lake Myvatn is the greatest duck breeding area in Europe and is ringed by a bizarre landscape of sulphur springs, volcanic craters and strange rock formations, epitomising both the tranquillity and drama of so many of the landscapes of Iceland. The volcano Krafla is situated on top of the Mid Atlantic Ridge, and we walk through lava still steaming from eruptions in the 1980's. With a magnificent variety of land forms, outstanding birdlife and an excellent swimming pool and geothermal spa, Myvatn makes a wonderful climax to our travels through the wilds of Iceland. Walking 3-4 hours+. Schoolhouse. (B,L,D)

DAY 14 A morning bus transfer to Akureyri, the main town in north Iceland is followed by a dramatic flight (1 hour) across the centre of Iceland back to Reykjavik. Then it's a transfer to Keflavik for the international flight home, or a further final night or two in Reykjavik for those who have opted to extend their time in Iceland. (B)



Jökulsá Canyon. Photo Andy Dennis

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