

The Iceland Traverse - the Ultimate Backpacking Expedition



The Iceland Traverse

Backpacking through lava fields, deserts, mountains, glaciers, rivers and green valleys

From Ásbyrgi in the Jökulsárgljúfur National Park in the north to Vík í Mýrdal on Iceland's South coast

The Ultimate backpacking expedition!



Overview:

For summer 2016 Icelandic Mountain Guides (IMG) have organized this great expedition through the Icelandic highlands, inviting you to explore some of the most remote places on earth. The aim is to cross the interior of Iceland from Ásbyrgi in the North to Vík í Mýrdal on the South coast. The expedition will take 32 days in total.

Meeting point: Reykjavík Domestic Airport

Start of hike: Ásbyrgi in Jökulsárgljúfur National Park

End of hike: Vík í Mýrdal, the southernmost settlement in Iceland

Backpacking: 32 days of backpacking and camping in the interior of Iceland

Walking per day: from 6 to 9 hours of walking

Total distance: 450 kilometers (282 miles)

Altitude: 0 – 1200 meters above sea level (0 - 3960 feet)

Maximum elevation in one day: 600 m (1980 feet).

Duration: 32 days

Expedition leader: Róbert Þór Haraldsson



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The Iceland Traverse is not an average backpacking trip but an expedition taking you through some of the most uninviting landscapes on the earth. Among the challenges facing the expedition are crossings of glaciers and glacial rivers as well as deserts of black sand and lava. Water can be difficult to find in some places and a hidden snowfield, or a glacial river may provide the water for the day. The Icelandic weather is another challenge, probably at best described as unpredictable. Everything from hot, sunny days; wet and windy days to blowing blizzards can be expected. On the other hand many wonderful and magical moments and experiences await expedition members when least expected. Even though physical fitness is required it is equally important to engage in this expedition with the right frame of mind, most likely the expedition will serve to strengthen both body and mind of all participants.

The expedition set-up

For logistical purposes the expedition is broken up into 5 separate legs. This means that participants enjoy 4 rest days enroute. On those occasions there will be accommodations in well-equipped huts (otherwise tents) and a possibility of rinsing out socks and knickers or simply relaxing. IMG delivers food for the subsequent leg to all the resting places and it might be a good idea for participants to pack essentials, like clean socks and underwear and such to be delivered to the resting places. Likewise some light packs can be sent away from the resting places to be stored at IMG headquarters to be delivered to Vík where the expedition ends. Same goes for any excess baggage that participants need to store during the expedition; small packs can be left at IMG headquarters, delivered to expedition members at Vík or picked up in Reykjavík.

It is possible to take part in the expedition wholly or in parts, joining the expedition at all the resting places for a participation in one or more legs. The first leg starts at Ásbyrgi on the 1st of July and ends at Lake Mývatn on the 4th of July with the 5th of July as the first rest day in the magical surroundings of Lake Mývatn, one of the more spectacular volcanic areas of Iceland. On the 6th of July the expedition continues completing the 2nd leg at Drekgil, in Mount Askja on the 10th of July where there is a well-deserved one and a half day rest. Drekgil hut is actually in the highlands proper and ahead of the expedition lies the desert of the Flæður and the massive Vatnajökull glacier. In the afternoon on the 12th of July the 3rd leg commences ending at Nýidalur valley on the 17th with a rest day on the 18th. Nýidalur valley is an oasis in the highlands immediately below the Vonarskarð Pass (The Pass of Hope) through which the expedition makes its way. Leg 4 starts on the 19th of July and this is probably the toughest part as the rivers to be crossed on this leg can be quite tricky. This penultimate leg ends on the 25th of July at Hólaskjól, close to the magnificent fissure Eldgjá, where a hut and yet another rest day awaits expedition members. The last leg begins on the 27th of July ending on the beach in Vík on the 31st of July. This leg brings the expedition over some of the more spectacular outlet glaciers of the Mýrdalsjökull glacier, Iceland 4th largest icecap.



As stated above the expedition starts on the 1st of July at the Information Center of Jökulsárgljúfur National Park at Ásbyrgi, after a morning flight from Reykjavík to Akureyri and a private transfer from Akureyri to Ásbyrgi. Participants are expected to meet with the Expedition Leader (EL) at a location in Reykjavík at 12:00 pm on the 30th of June where the EL will go over the itinerary as well as the equipment of the expedition members.

We can arrange accommodation in Reykjavík before and after the trip if requested, as well as transport to the domestic airport in Reykjavík at the start of the tour. Please contact us for more information. Transport from Vík to Reykjavík at the end of the tour is included.

Expedition life

This is a backpacking expedition through some of the most spectacular and/or uninviting areas in the world. Backpacking means that expedition members carry all the necessary gear on their own back during the entire expedition. However food is only carried for each leg, as fresh supplies are picked up at each resting place. Most of the nights are spent in tents but on occasions there will be huts to enjoy. In total the hut nights will be 11. The huts are of different quality, some only providing the basic needs, whereas other huts provide hot showers, flush toilets and even some new faces, i.e. other visitors. The remaining nights are spent in tents in suitable locations at day's end.

In order to make the expedition comfortable for all the expedition members a certain daily routine is followed. Normally there is an early start, with breakfast being served no later than 07.30. After breaking camp the day's walk starts. The day's walk can vary from 6 to 9 hours and is of course broken up by short snack pauses as well as a decent midday stop where lunch is enjoyed. Once the day's distance is covered the EL will scout a decent camp site and the dinner preparations start once camp is set up or as soon as expedition members have made themselves comfortable inside a hut.

There are some big rivers to cross on this expeditor. Many of them are glacial rivers with high fluctuation in their volume and size. On warm and sunny days the glacial melt off is higher, sometimes even making the rivers impassable. During the night the volume drops and makes it easier to cross them. This may at times cause the expedition to set out extra early in order to reach a river at an appropriate time for a crossing. The expedition leader is fully experienced and familiar with the best techniques for such river crossings but it may take some time to find a suitable ford. Normally when crossing rivers this big and this cold participants are required to wear all their 3 layers so it is important that the outer layer is really watertight. Also it is good to carry some prussic bands to tie the pants down around the ankle in order to prevent water from entering from that direction. Shoes for the river crossings need to stay firmly on the feet, sandals with a buckle such as **Teva Raptor** will do the trick, whereas sandals with velcro may simply be swept off the feet by the current. For the best comfort IMG recommend the use of neoprene socks for the river crossings.

Expedition equipment

IMG provide all the necessary communal equipment essential for the success and well being of all the participants and of the expedition as a whole. IMG provides suitable tents, mostly twin share ones, but there will also always be a bigger one that can serve as a cooking and eating place in case of foul weather, so some people may end up in a 3 person tent. Expedition members shoulder their equal share of the tents and other communal gear during the day. IMG are fully aware of the necessity of choosing light weight material that however can withstand the wind and weather phenomena of the highlands. Should you care to bring your own tent along it is important that it is of a good quality, strong, light and at least a 3 season one. Make sure to inform IMG of such a decision. Cooking utensils, cups, plates and cutlery are provided by IMG but you are free to bring your own, just make sure that you inform IMG of this. Where crampons and other glacier safety equipment is needed, IMG provides the necessary gear.

At the start of each leg a fresh load of food is distributed along with the other communal gear and equipment between all expedition members. This is a fact that is good to keep in mind, when contemplating the suitability of the personal backpack. There needs to be some extra space left when all the personal gear has been packed! Many backpacks come with a rain cover, despite this, we recommend that everything be packed in separate plastic bags in order to ensure that things stay dry. If you have any doubts about your backpack, it may be advisable to bring an extra one to be stored at IMG headquarters and sent to any of the resting places, should the need arise.

As for your other equipment, make sure that you are familiar with all of it and that you really trust your backpack to hold for the entire time, your mattress to provide you with a good night's sleep and your clothes to keep you dry and warm for the entire expedition. Three layer clothing is essential in order to be able to tackle the different weather conditions that can await the expedition. It can never be fully emphasized that 4 season weather can be expected throughout the expedition. If you have any doubts about your personal equipment we recommend that you bring extra sets that can be stored at IMG headquarters and sent out to the resting places if and when they are needed.

Preparation

Keep in mind that this is an expedition and preparations need to be started timely. In order for all participants to enjoy the terrain, and the landscapes of the expedition, we recommend that participants do at least 3 real backpacking tours, where they can get a feel of carrying a decent load in the mountains as well as getting to know their equipment, especially the backpack and the shoes as well as getting a feel for the clothing required. Optimal would be weekend tours. Any other physical training is not to be discouraged – the better the fitness the better the results! Do keep in mind that the best way to train for a long walk over different types of terrain is simply to do long days with a heavy pack on different terrain in various weather conditions!

For an expedition like this the most important thing without doubt are the **feet** and one needs to pay special attention to **shoes** and **socks**. We recommend sturdy leather boots, semi rigid with a vibram sole. It is important that the shoes are well worn and fit the feet perfectly for such an undertaking and it is vital for participants to have walked in their shoes with a heavy backpack on for a couple of days. The best socks are woolen or synthetic or a blend of those two materials, preferably seamless. Many hikers/trekkers prefer liners for better comfort and some believe this prevents blisters. We recommend that people bring an extra pair of boots along in case the terrain is too tough and a need for a new pair arises. The extra pair can be stored at IMG headquarters and sent to any of the resting places of the expedition when the need arises.



Medicine and health

Good health is of the essence for an expedition like this. However, some inconveniences in the health realm are to be expected as the continuous and steady walk can cause pain and strain to ligaments, joints and muscles. Therefore it is important that people bring along sufficient amount of analgesic and anti inflammatory drugs. In some countries these drugs are prescription drugs and may require a visit to a doctor. Also a sufficient amount of blister pads, band-aids and sports tape needs to be in every pack. Of course all necessary medicine should be taken along as well as EpiPens for people with known anaphylactic reactions. Bug repellent is not necessary but might make life slightly more comfortable as well as head-nets that keep the bugs out of the face. For greater comfort and well being it might be wise to bring foot lotion, such as **Gewohl** that seems to work towards blister prevention and definitely makes the socks better smelling!



Equipment list for IMG43 – the Ultimate Backpacking Expedition

Boots and clothing:

- Hiking Boots –The boots should be of leather (or leather and synthetic) with high cut to give sufficient ankle support. Preferably the sole should be soft but robust. Gore-Tex or alternative waterproof membrane is a preferable extra.
**It is important to do several long hikes in your boots with a full pack before this trip to determine if your boots fit properly. The full pack is essential on these training hikes in order to be 100% sure of your boots.
***It might be an idea to bring an extra pair of boots along, if it turns out that the terrain is too tough for your boots. The extra pair can be stored at IMG headquarters to be sent out if needed.
- Long sleeve shirt (thermal underwear) – Wool or synthetic. (Wool is preferable, less smell!)
- Long Johns (thermal underwear) – Wool or synthetic.
- Light sweater, wool or fleece (2nd layer).
- Warm jacket/sweater – Wool or fleece (3rd layer).
- Trousers (2nd layer) – Strong and light material that dries quickly. Preferably wind proof and water repelling fabric.
- Rain Jacket or an Anorak with hood – Waterproof and breathable material such as Gore-Tex or equivalents (3rd layer).
- Rain trousers – Waterproof and breathable material, Gore-Tex or equivalent (3rd layer).
- Liner Gloves – Wool or synthetic (polypropylene / polyester).
- Mittens – Wool or synthetic (should be waterproof). Two pairs if no Liner Gloves.
- Socks – Wool or synthetic. At least three** pairs for thermal and blister prevention.
**Add more pairs to be sent for each leg of the trip.
- Hat and Balaclava – Wool or synthetic. Be advised that a sun hat may come in handy!
- Head net for keeping the bugs out.

Other gear:

- Backpack – (size: 70-85 liters)
**Note: you will need to fit a part of a tent, cooking gear and food into your pack, make sure you have enough space in your pack!
**Pack cover may be of use but is likely to come off in strong winds so to be on the safe side we recommend packing everything separately in plastic bags into you backpack.
- River crossing shoes:
 - Open sandals, with good sole and buckle straps, NOT Velcro.
 - Neoprene socks are essential, these rivers are cold and some are quite wide.
- Sleeping bag – Down or fiber. Aim for a light weight and a warm bag (comfort: -10°C/-15°C). We recommend a down bags with high “fill power” or “top of the line” synthetic bags.
- Insulation mattress – A foam mattress (11 mm) will do, but a light weight air mattress is more comfortable, e.g. **Thermarest NeoAir**.
- Towel – A light weight and a packable one like a “swim towel”.
- Toothbrush and toothpaste.
- Sunglasses – Big enough to cover the eyes and with sufficient UV-protection.
- Sun protection no less than SPF 30

- Sewing kit, in case some seams need mending
- Camera, spare batteries, a memory card or films and a protective cover.
- Water container – e.g. plastic bottle (pet plastic).
- Assortment of analgesics and painkillers, e.g. *Voltaren rapid* and *Parkodin forte*, in case such things are needed. Please consult your physician/doctor in case the above mentioned medicine needs prescription.
- Sports tape, for blister prevention and/or blister treatment, bandaids.
- All other medicine needed, including Epipens.

Optional gear:

- Walking Poles – one may be sufficient.
- Gaiters – Calf or knee height and wide enough for your boots.
- Pen knife.
- Sun/rain Hat or a Cap.
- Thermal mat (for lunch breaks), one square foot piece.

****Pack as light as possible – Every ounce you carry counts****