



2017  
**Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition**  
(IMG51)

*Nine-Day Cross Country Ski-Tour with Pulkas / Sleds  
across the mighty Vatnajökull Glacier in Iceland*

- Expedition manual -



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

## Content overview

[Expedition overview](#)

[Further information and booking](#)

[Itinerary overview](#)

[Expedition life](#)

[Equipment list](#)

[The expedition time frame and Weather](#)

[Snow conditions](#)

[Level of experience of expedition members](#)

[General preparation](#)

[Booking and payment](#)

[Included in the expedition price](#)

[Not included in the expedition price](#)

[Permits and insurances](#)



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarrsson

## Expedition overview

Vatnajökull is Europe's largest glacier by volume and second largest by area. It's thickness is up to 1000m and is about 400m thick on the average. It's highest peak is Hvannadalshnúkur (2110m) which is also the highest peak in Iceland. Vatnajökull and it's surroundings make up the unique [Vatnajökull National Park](#).

There are active volcanoes underneath the ice cap that erupt regularly. The latest eruption was in the year 2011 in Grímsvötn. The highest peak, Hvannadalshnúkur, is actually one of many peaks surrounding Öraefajökull, the southern most part of Vatnajökull, a massive stratovolcano that has erupted twice since the settlement, in 1362 and 1727.

The Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition is taking place during the bright spring days. The main goal of this adventure is to reach Grímsvötn volcano at the heart of the massive ice field. After that the course is set to direction of Öraefajökull, to Hermannaskarð pass. From there we go east, down past Mávabyggðir mountain range and to the spectacular Esjufjöll mountains. The descent from the glacier the last day is down Breiðamerkurjökull glacier, the one that feeds the famous Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

Weather and snow conditions on Vatnajökull glacier can be very diverse. The temperatures can fluctuate a lot and we can experience anything between t-shirt conditions to a hefty winter storm, even in May or June. Conditions are in many ways comparable to those of the arctic, even in spring we can be assured to find ourselves in demanding circumstances.

Accommodation is in tents (4 nights) and huts (3 nights).

## Further information and booking

Please contact us via [incoming@mountainguides.is](mailto:incoming@mountainguides.is) for further information and bookings.

## Itinerary overview

*Note: Expedition members need to be in Reykjavík no later than two days before departure. In the morning of the day before departure (Day 0), there is a meeting with the guide. NOTE: this meeting is obligatory so that the expedition leader can assess the equipment each member has brought and advise if there will be a need to replace anything.*

### **Day 0: Preparation meeting with the guide – Day before departure**

Morning meeting with the guide where he will inspect the gear each expedition member has brought and introduce the itinerary. If something is missing, ski equipment has to be rented or something else has to be arranged, there is time for that during this day.

### **Day 1: Reykjavík – Jökulheimar**

Pick up from accommodation early morning (time decided the day before) and transfer to Jökulheimar on the west side of the glacier. A super-jeep takes us from Reykjavík and up to snow line on the glacier, where we start the walk in the afternoon. First night in tents.

### **Days 2 and 3: Ascent to Grímsvötn**

We continue the ascent of the main glacier up to the vast plains of the Vatnajökull icecap. In the afternoon of day 3, our destination is in sight as we arrive to the Grímsvötn caldera near the center of the icecap. Second night in tents but the third in the comfortable Grímsvötn hut.

### **Day 4: Grímsvötn Caldera**

This day is devoted to the exploration of the magnificent volcanic caldera of Grímsvötn. This is a highly active volcanic area with frequent eruptions in the last century, the last one in 2011. The Grímsvötn caldera is actually a complex of calderas and the effects of the geothermal heat continuously melt the glacier ice to create a sub glacial caldera lake. We spend another night in the comfortable Grímsvötn hut.

### **Days 5 to 6: Traversing to the ice cap towards Öraefajökull glacier**

After Grímsvötn we following the glacier ridge southwards to the direction of Öraefajökull, aiming for Hermannaskarð pass. Iceland's highest peak Hvannadalshnúkur (2110 m) and other peaks will seem to grow in size as we get further south. Nights in tents.

### **Day 7: Hermannaskarð pass to Esjufjöll mountains**

The past night has been spent either in Hermannaskarð pass or a bit further East under Mávabyggðir mountain range. We break camp and start our very so pleasant downwards cruise to Esjufjöll Mountains. The day is not too long and the skiing less intense than the previous days so we might have time and energy to explore Esjufjöll a bit in the afternoon. Night in Esjufjöll hut.

### **Day 8: From Esjufjöll down Breiðamerkurjökull glacier**

The last leg of our journey is slightly downwards. There is no real rush in the morning and we can really enjoy the magnificent area with all the mountains, crevasse fields (safe distance away) and glacier moraines around. Last night is in a sleeping bag accommodation, in or close to Skaftafell.

### **Day 9: Return to Reykjavík**

We will be taken back to Reykjavík (private ride) in the morning of day 9 after a good night's sleep and a breakfast. If, because of weather or other reasons, we can't descend until day 9, we head back to Reykjavík in the evening.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarrsson

## Expedition life

IMG puts great effort in making this expedition as comfortable as possible for all expedition members. We will be using strong expedition tents that have proven to be suitable for the conditions we are likely to experience. Variable weather is to be expected.

Skiing per day on the glacier can be up to 7-9 hours. Each day will be divided into walking periods and the expedition leader decides the length of each period in accordance with the overall condition of the expedition members. The first days are the hardest as we climb uphill to Grímsvötn. From there we ski on the glacier plateau where the skiing is slightly downhill the first day and then mostly flat until we reach Hermannaskarð pass. The last two days are easier since the distance covered is less and we are going a bit downwards

During each period there is brisk walking and we recommend wearing wind stopper clothing that allows for good breathing, such as soft-shell. In May/June, temperatures can be quite high and rain proof clothing might be needed when skiing, even high on the ice cap. We recommend that you wear wool base layers from top to bottom, including underwear. The wool will keep you warm even if you are wet and best of all for your tent partners, it get's much less smelly than synthetics.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarrsson

Between each period there is a short break, where the expedition members can grab a snack and a drink and at midday there is a longer stop for lunch. Most people choose not to carry a back pack since all the gear can be stored inside the pulka and most find it more comfortable not to have anything on their back. However a small pack can be convenient to keep snacks, water and other things that will be used during the short breaks. But it's also good just to keep those little things as well as necessary gear for the day (the day's food, a down parka and other essentials, extra hats, gloves etc.) at the top of the pulka where it is easily accessible.

Each evening, camp is set up, snow is melted by the guide for tea/hot drinks and for the freeze dried food. After a hard day it's a good idea to get into the sleeping bag early and get a good rest since the next morning has another exciting day in store for all expedition members. In the morning, more snow is melted and after breakfast, camp is broken and the first walking period starts.

## Equipment list

A detailed equipment list will be sent to all participants upon confirmation.

## The expedition time frame and weather

Vatnajökull glacier is located in the south east of Iceland and receives substantial amount of precipitation, which also explains why it is there. The icecap is exposed to high winds from all directions and you can expect challenging conditions up there at all times of the year.

IMG is offering the Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition starting in mid-April and mid-May. In the late winter and spring the weather is getting more stable and the days are getting longer. There can be quite a lot of difference between the two crossings, the one starting earlier and the one starting later in the spring. In the May crossing, the temperatures are more likely to be considerably higher. That means it's more likely to get precipitation in the form of rain on the way instead of dry snow.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

Even though conditions this time of year (both crossings) are usually quite good, we have to be prepared for harsh weather.

Your choice in gear and clothing will have a great impact on your experience, especially if conditions are challenging. It is important that you are familiar with your gear and to have experience in winter travelling makes the expedition more enjoyable.

## Snow conditions

The surface of the icecap can range from solid blue ice by the edges to slushy conditions and hard packed snow. It is advisable to bring ski wax for warmer temperatures in May and colder temperatures in April (if wax skis are used). Those using klister have to bring it themselves and should be very familiar with how to use it. Gliding wax will be available from the guide but not any klister.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

## Level of experience of expedition members

This expedition is done on steel edge cross-country skis (Nordic skiing) so prior cross-country skiing experience is useful. We do not use alpine/ski-touring skis since they are not practical in a crossing like this. The expedition can be demanding both physically and mentally so all prior experience of longer tours, either hikes with a back pack out in nature or longer ski-tours are of great help.

For beginners in cross country skiing we recommend the [Landmannalaugar ski tour](#) before attempting Vatnajökull.

Expedition members need to be physically fit and in good mental shape, ready for team work and a flexible itinerary when weather is less than ideal.

Expedition members must be prepared to be confronted with cold weather, strong winds, fresh snow and even blizzards. Also expedition members should be ready for challenging camping and camp life. Not to mention dealing with the unexpected and unwanted, such as blisters and other bodily aches.

Good level of fitness is indeed an asset for everyone considering the Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition. Endurance and self motivation works wonders as well.

A short résumé is required to apply for joining the expedition.

## General preparation

The best preparation for an expedition like this is to engage in longer hikes in the mountains or cross country skiing, even with a back pack or a pulka. It is good that participants are familiar with their personal gear and equipment (skis, boots, clothes etc.). The more comfortable you are with your gear the easier everything becomes when adjusting to the communal gear and the expedition as a whole.

Hauling the pulka can be strenuous for the lower back so exercises that will strengthen both the abdominal and the back muscles are a good preparation. Strong back muscles make hauling easier, as well as shovelling when the necessity for building protective walls for the tents arises. Tent life can also be hard on the back and the better we prepare ourselves the more we enjoy our time on the glacier.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarrsson

## Booking and payment

When booking, a confirmation fee of 80.000 ISK has to be paid. Note, this fee is part of the total price. The confirmation fee will be paid back fully in case IMG has to cancel the trip for example because of lack of participants. Full payment has to be paid at least 6 weeks before departure. Booking can be made until 6 weeks before departure if there is still availability. Full payment then has to be made when booking. Cancellation terms can be seen [on our website](#).

If IMG has to cancel the expedition for some reason, full refund will be given.

Bear in mind that difficult conditions might result in more time needed to complete the crossing. Therefore we advise participants not to book a flight from Iceland the day after planned arrival day in Reykjavík. The arrival to Reykjavík is planned on day 9. So best is if a flight from Iceland is not planned to leave until day 11 or later.

### **Included in the expedition price**

- Guiding service by IMG expert guides
- Super-jeep transfer from Reykjavík to Jökulheimar and from there up to snow line on the glacier
- Private transfer from Skaftafell to Reykjavík after getting off the glacier
- All food during the expedition (from lunch day 1 to breakfast day 9)
- Pulka, pulka harness and a pulka bag (big bag around the luggage on the pulka)
- Cabin fees and sleeping bag accommodation the last night in Skaftafell
- Tents, cooking equipment and fuel
- First aid kit
- Satellite phone and an emergency beacon
- Solar panel to charge the satellite phone (priority) and other gadgets

### **Not included in the expedition price**

- The flight to Iceland, where the expedition begins
- Hotel/guesthouse and personal expenses in Reykjavík
- Personal gear (clothing, shoes, skis etc.)
- Personal travel insurance and trip cancellation insurance
- Any costs associated with leaving the expedition early
- Personal use of satellite phone
- Any cost resulting from delayed flights to or from Iceland
- Everything else that is not mentioned in the “Included in the expedition price” list.

### **Permits and insurances**

We recommend that all participants have their own travel insurance. A personal travel insurance should cover the loss of equipment due to evacuation and any medical costs in hospitals and towns. Most regular travel insurances should be sufficient.



Photo: Róbert Þór Haraldsson