



2018
Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition
(IMG51)

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

- Expedition manual -



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

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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 its 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 one of many peaks surrounding Öraefajökull, the southernmost 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 towards Öraefajökull, with the intent of summiting Hvannadalshnúkur. A long with the Grímsvötn area the climb is a highlight of the journey. Our route of descend from the ice filled volcano crater then goes down one of the glacier tongues crawling down the south side of Öraefajökull.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

Weather and snow conditions on the Vatnajökull Glacier Expedition 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 and huts.

Further information and booking

Please contact us via 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.

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 must 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 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 7: Traversing the ice cap towards Örafajökull glacier

Days spent following the glacier ridge southwards. A slight ascent precedes the arrival at Örafajökull volcano plateau. On our agenda is an ascent to Iceland's highest summit, Hvannadalshnúkur, at an altitude of 2110 m. Nights in tents.

Day 8: Hvannadalshnúkur and descent from the glacier

In the morning we leave our camp on the plateau and go for the summit of Hvannadalshnúkur. After that we cross the whole plateau and head down one of the glacier tongues crawling down the south side of Örafajökull. 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 makes great effort in making this expedition as comfortable as possible for all expedition members. We will be using strong expedition tents that have proven 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 different 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 a bit downhill the first day and then mostly flat until we reach Hermannaskarð. From there is a slight ascent that precedes the arrival at Örafajökull volcano plateau.

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 gets 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, water 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 timeframe and weather

Vatnajökull glacier is located in the south east of Iceland and receives substantial amounts 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 that 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 must 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 make 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/June and colder temperatures in April. For skins we recommend skin wax, at least share one between the group members. Those using klister must 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.



Photo: Björgvin Hilmarsson

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 shoveling 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 Hilmarsson

Booking and payment

When booking, a confirmation fee of 80.000 ISK must 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 must 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 must be made when booking. Cancellation terms can be seen [on our website](#).

If IMG must 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.



Photo: Róbert Þór Haraldsson

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
- 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 big bag around the luggage on the pulka
- Cabin fees and sleeping bag accommodation the last night in Skaftafell
- Tents, cooking equipment and fuel, toilet paper
- 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

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 Pór Haraldsson