

# The Interior



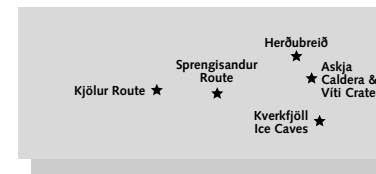
Travelling in Iceland's interior will give you a new understanding of the word 'desolation'. You may have travelled the Ring Rd thinking that Iceland is light on towns; that sheep seem to outnumber people; that you haven't run across a McDonald's for many a mile. Well, you ain't seen nothing yet. Here there are practically no services, accommodation, hot-dog stands, bridges, mobile-phone signals or guarantees if something goes wrong. Gazing across the expanses, you could imagine yourself in Tibet or Mongolia or, as many people have noted, on the moon. And those aren't overactive imaginations at work – the *Apollo* astronauts actually trained here before their lunar landing.

This isolation, in essence, is the reason that people visit. Although some travellers are disappointed by the interior's unbleakness, others are humbled by the sublime sight of nature in its rawest, barest form. The solitude is exhilarating, the views are vast, and it's immensely tough but equally rewarding to hike or bike these cross-country routes.

Historically, people used the trails as summer short cuts between north and south, if with heavy hearts. Myths of ghosts and fearsome outlaws spurred travellers along the tracks with all speed. Today it's probably wiser to worry about the weather. Conditions can be fickle and snow isn't uncommon, even in mid summer. Good warm clothing, and face and eye protection from gritty, wind-driven sand are particularly important. Road-opening dates given in this chapter depend on weather conditions – check [www.vegagerdin.is](http://www.vegagerdin.is) for the latest information.

## TOP FIVE

- Go swimming inside a volcano: the warm turquoise waters of **Viti crater** (p308), at the Askja caldera, make for unique holiday snaps
- Get an easy taste of the highlands on the **Kjölur Route** (p300), a scheduled bus shortcut between Reykjavik and Akureyri
- Marvel at icy sculptures in the **Kverkfjöll ice caves** (p309), carved out of the glacier by steaming hot springs
- Pity the melancholy ghosts and outlaws on Iceland's longest, loneliest north-south track, the godforsaken **Sprengrisandur Route** (p302)
- Pay homage to the Queen of Mountains, **Herðubreið** (p306), before exploring the desolate volcanic wastes at **Askja** (p307)



## Driving Routes & Mountain Huts

This chapter covers the main interior driving routes and attractions (although see p280 for the popular Landmannalaugar–Þórsörkirkja trek; and see p276 for the Fjallabak Nature Reserve).

Most of the routes described in this chapter are strictly for high-clearance 4WD vehicles. It's recommended that vehicles travel in pairs, so if one gets bogged or breaks down the other can drag it out, fetch help or carry all passengers to shelter. Carry lots of supplies, especially if you are only taking one vehicle, rather than the recommend two. There are very few petrol stations in the highlands – you should fill up whenever you find one.

Almost all mountain huts in Iceland are operated by **Ferðafélag Íslands** (Iceland's Touring Association); ☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; Mörkinn 6, IS-108 Reykjavík). **Ferðafélag Akureyrar** (Touring Club of Akureyri; ☎ 462 2720; www.ffa.est.is; Strandgata 23, Akureyri) operates all the mountain huts and most camp sites along the Askja Way. It's wise to reserve accommodation in advance, as huts are usually booked out in summer. For more details about mountain-hut accommodation, see p314.

## KJÖLUR ROUTE (KJALVEGUR)

If you want to sample Iceland's central deserts but don't like the idea of dangerous ford crossings, the 200km Kjölur Route has had all its rivers bridged. In summer there's even a scheduled bus that uses it as a shortcut between Reykjavík and Akureyri.

Rte 35 starts just past Gullfoss (p120), passing between two glaciers before emerging near Blönduós on the northwest coast. It reaches its highest point (700m) between the Langjökull and Hofsjökull icecaps, near the mountain Kjalfell.

The Kjölur Route is greener and more interesting than its counterpart, Sprengisandur. However, it was historically the less popular of the two, thanks to the general belief that it was infested by fearsome outlaws. The route has altered slightly since it was first established; the older track lies a few kilometres west of the current one.

The Kjölur Route usually opens in early June.

## Hvítárvatn

The pale-blue lake Hvítárvatn, 45km northeast of Gullfoss, is the source of the glacial river Hvítá. A glacier tongue of Iceland's second-

largest icecap, Langjökull, calves into the lake and creates icebergs, adding to the beauty of this spot.

In the marshy grasslands northeast of Hvítárvatn is Ferðafélag Islands' first hut, Hvítárnes, built in 1930. The hut is believed to be haunted by the spirit of a young woman. If a female camper sleeps in one particular bed (the bunk on the west wall past the kitchen), it is said she will dream of the ghost carrying two pails of water. From the Kjölur road, where the bus will drop you, it's an 8km walk along the 4WD track to the hut.

## Kerlingarfjöll

Until the 1850s Icelanders believed that this mountain range (12km southeast of Rte 35 on Rte F347) harboured the vilest sort of outlaws. It was thought they lived deep in the heart of the 150-sq-km range in an isolated Shangri-la-type valley. So strong was this belief that it was only in the mid-19th century that anyone ventured into Kerlingarfjöll, and it was only in 1941 that the range was properly explored by Ferðafélag Islands.

It's certainly dramatic. The colourful landscape is broken up into jagged peaks and ridges, the highest of which is Snæköllur (1477m), and it's scattered with hot springs. There are plans to harness the geothermal energy, although no industrial buildings scar the landscape here to date.

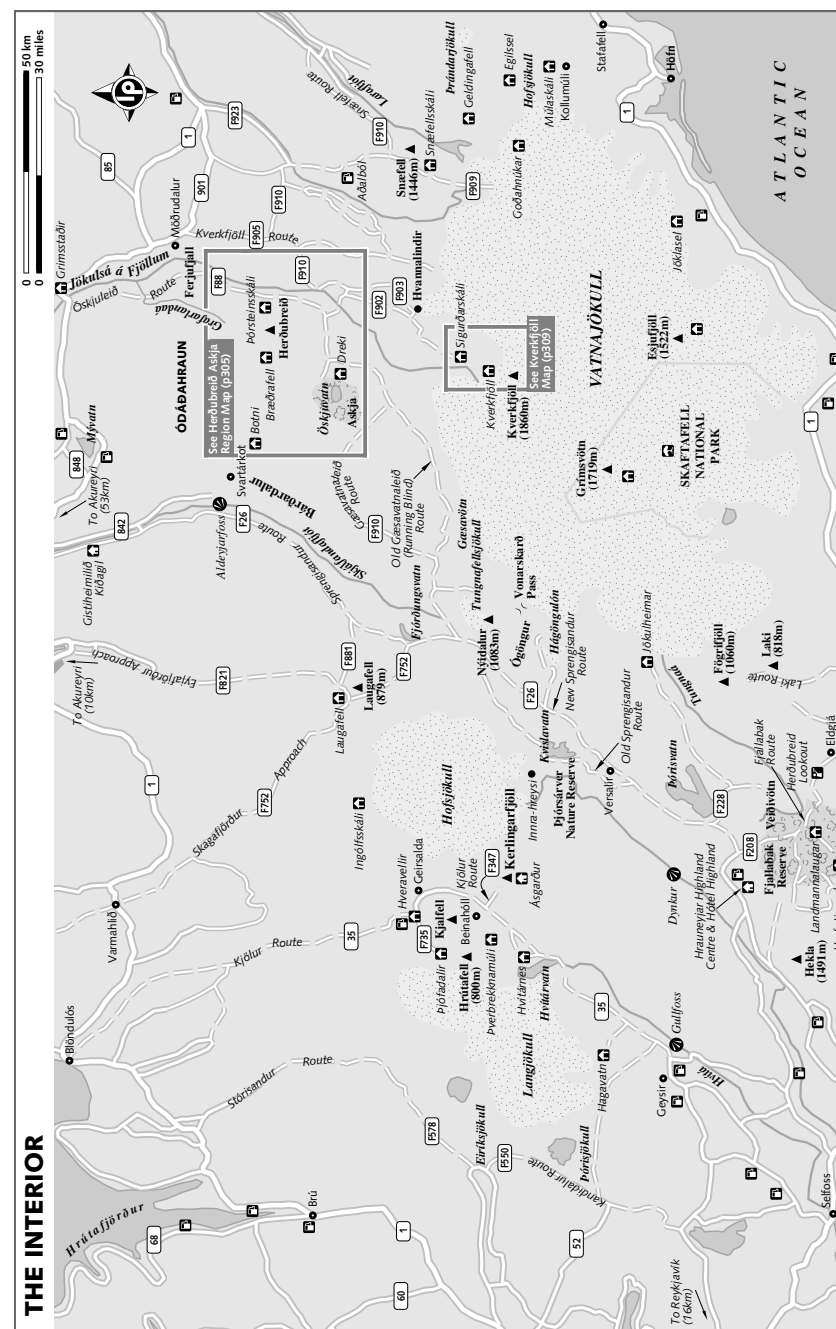
At **Ásgarður** (☎ 894 2132; www.kerlingarfjoll.is; sites per tent 1kr900, sb 1kr2200-2700, bed linen 1kr900; ☎ mid-Jun–Sep) in Kerlingarfjöll, there are 12 huts and houses with space for 120 people in sleeping bags. There's also a large camp site, a restaurant and hot tubs.

## Hrútafell

This relatively tiny 10-sq-km icecap rises 800m above the surrounding landscape. It sits on top of Hrútafell mountain, which is a *móberg* peak – shaped like a birthday cake due to subglacial volcanic eruptions. From the Kjölur Route, as soon as Hrútafell comes into view look on the eastern side of the road for a cairn shaped exactly like a Hershey's Kiss!

## Hveravellir

Hveravellir is a popular and enticing geothermal area of fumaroles and multicoloured hot springs (it's important to stay on the boardwalks to avoid damaging this sensitive area). Located 30km north of the Kerlingarfjöll



### KJÖLURVEGUR TREK

A good preparation for more challenging interior trekking routes is the easy and scenic Kjölurvegur trek from Hvitárvatn to Hveravellir. The trail follows the original horseback Kjölur Route (west of the present road), via the Hvitárnas, Þverbrekknamúli and Þjófadalar mountain huts.

From the Hvitárvatn turn-off it's 8km along the 4WD track to Hvitárnas hut. From there you follow the Fúlakvísl river (14km) to Þverbrekknamúli hut. Continue between the river and Kjalhraun lava field to Þjófadalar hut (14km). A possible detour here is across the lava field to Beinahóll. The final day is a 12km walk to Hveravellir, where you can soak in hot springs. Overall, the marked route is easy to follow and huts are four to six hours apart.

The route can be done in three days at a leisurely pace. Access is by the Kjölur bus (see below), but remember to reserve a seat for the day you want to be picked up.

turn-off, Hveravellir is the 'hub' of the Kjölur Route and the finishing point of the Kjölurvegur Trek (see the boxed text, above).

Among its warm pools are the brilliant-blue Bláhver; Öskurhólhver, which emits a constant stream of hissing steam; and a luscious human-made bathing pool. Another hot spring, Eyvindurhver, is named after the outlaw Fjalla-Eyvindur (see the boxed text, p303). Hveravellir is reputedly one of the many hideouts of this renegade, who spent much of his life hiding from his enemies in the highlands. On a small mound near the geothermal area are the ruins of a shelter where he's believed to have holed up with his wife, Halla, and their family during one 18th-century winter.

There are two busy huts here, owned by Hveravallafélag.

### Hofsjökull

Hofsjökull, east of the Kjölur Pass, is the third-largest icecap in the country, measuring 995 sq km. A massive volcanic crater lies underneath the ice.

### Sleeping

Mountain huts along or just off the Kjölur Route are maintained by Ferðafélag Íslands, except for the huts at Hveravellir, which are run by Hveravellafélag (☎ 894 1293; www.hveravellir.is). All have toilets and a kitchen, and most have running water. From south to north, they are:

**Hagavatn** (N 64°27.760', W 20°14.700'; sb lkr1200) Small hut near the southern end of Langjökull, about 15km off the Kjölur Route by 4WD track. No running water.

**Hvitárnas** (N 64°37.007', W 19°45.394'; sb lkr1800) Has a warden in July and August; hut sleeps 30.

**Þverbrekknamúli** (N 64°43.100', W 19°36.860'; sb lkr1800) About 8km west of Innri-Skúti hill, or about 4km east of the mini-icecap Hrutafell. Sleeps 20.

**Þjófadalar** (N 64°48.900', W 19°42.510'; sb lkr1200) Sleeps 12. About 12km southwest of Hveravellir on Rte F735.

**Hveravellir** (sb lkr1980) Two huts with a total of 55 sleeping-bag spaces.

### Getting There & Away

Daily from 18 June to 7 September a scheduled bus run by **SBA-Norðurléið** (☎ Akureyri 550 0700, Reykjavík 550 0770; www.sba.is) drives between Reykjavík and Akureyri (lkr8600, nine hours). It sets off at 8am from both ends, stopping briefly at Geysir, Gullfoss and Hveravellir.

In summer 2WD vehicles may be able to travel on this route, but it's not recommended as there are rivers to ford if you venture off the route and your hire-car insurance will be invalid if anything goes wrong. Drivers with 4WD vehicles will have no problems.

Of all the interior routes, Kjölur is probably the best for cycling and hiking. For a humorous account of a bike trip on the Kjölur Route, read Tim Moore's *Frost on My Moustache* (see p21 for details).

### SPRENGISANDUR ROUTE

To Icelanders, the name Sprengisandur conjures up images of outlaws, ghosts and long sheep drives across the barren wastes. The Sprengisandur Route (F26) is the longest north-south trail and crosses bleak desert moors that can induce a shudder even today in a 4WD!

Sprengisandur may be less interesting than Kjölur, but it does offer some wonderful views of Vatnajökull, Tungnafellsjökull and Hofsjökull, as well as Askja and Herðubreið from the western perspective. An older route, now abandoned, lies a few kilometres west of the current one.

The Sprengisandur Route proper begins as Rte 842 near Goðafoss in northwest Iceland.

Iceland is a harsh land and does not suffer fools. Rugged terrain and ever-changing weather have led many to their graves.

*Cheery notice on a camp-site toilet block*

Near where it becomes the F26 you'll find one of Iceland's most photogenic waterfalls, **Aldeyjarfoss**. It flows over a layer of intruding basalt columns on the Skjálfandaflijt in upper Bárðardalur. More basalt patterns can be seen in the shallow canyon above the falls. The route continues southwest through 240km of inhospitable territory all the way to Þjórsárdalur (meeting up with two other approaches about halfway through – see following).

Landmælingar Íslands has a 1:50,000 map of Sprengisandur (lkr715). The route usually opens on 1 July.

### EYJAFJÖRÐUR APPROACH

From the north the F821 from southern Eyjafjörður (south of Akureyri) connects to the Skagafjörður approach at Laugafell. This route is very pleasant, with few tourists, but it's a more difficult drive.

### SKAGAFJÖRÐUR APPROACH

From the northwest the 81km-long F752 connects southern Skagafjörður (the nearest town is Varmahlíð on the Ring Rd) to the Sprengisandur Route. The roads join near the lake Fjörðungsvatn, 20km east of Hofsjökull.

### OUTLAW COUNTRY

Historically in Iceland, once a person had been convicted of outlawry they were beyond society's protection and aggrieved enemies could kill them at will. Many outlaws, or *útilegumenn*, such as the renowned Eiríkur Rauðe (Erik the Red), voluntarily took exile abroad. Others escaped revenge killing by fleeing into the mountains, valleys and broad expanses of the harsh Icelandic interior, where few dared pursue them.

Undoubtedly, anyone who could live year-round in these bitter, barren deserts must have been extraordinary. Icelandic outlaws were naturally credited with all sorts of fearsome feats, and the general populace came to fear the vast backlands, which they considered to be the haunt of superhuman evil. The *útilegumenn* thereby joined the ranks of giants and trolls, and provided the themes for popular tales, such as the fantastic *Grettir's Saga*.

One particular outlaw has become the subject of countless Icelandic folk tales. Fjalla-Eyvindur, a charming but incurable 18th-century kleptomaniac, fled into the highlands with his family, and continued to make enemies by rustling sheep to keep them all alive. Throughout the interior you'll see shelters and hideouts attributed to him and hear tales of his ability to survive in impossible conditions while always keeping one jump ahead of his pursuers. One of Iceland's best-known folk songs describes how his wife, Halla, threw their newborn child into a waterfall when food was scarce during a harsh winter.

Its main site of interest is **Laugafell**, an 879m-high mountain with some nice hot springs bubbling on its northwestern slopes. You can stay nearby at the Ferðafélag Akureyrar **hut** (N 65°01.630', W 18°19.950'; per person lkr2000; ☎ Jul & Aug), with 35 beds, a kitchen and a beautiful geothermally heated pool. Some stone ruins near the springs are reputed to have housed escapees from the Black Death.

### Nýidalur

Nýidalur (known as Jökuldalur), the range just south of the Tungnafellsjökull icecap, was only discovered by a lost traveller in 1845. With a camp site, two Ferðafélag Íslands **huts** (☎ summer 854 1194; N 64°44.130', W 18°04.350'; sb lkr2000; ☎ 1 Jul-31 Aug) and lots of hiking possibilities, it makes a great break in a Sprengisandur journey. The huts have kitchen facilities, showers and a summer warden. Nights are particularly chilly here – something to do with the 800m elevation – so bring good warm gear.

Petrol isn't available here. There are two rivers – the one 500m from the hut may be difficult to cross (even for a 4WD). Ask locally for advice on conditions.

Although there aren't any hiking tracks per se, the hiking is great. Soft options include strolling up the relatively lush **Nýidalur valley** or wandering up the 150m-high hill east of the huts for a wide view across the desert expanses. A more challenging day hike will take you up to the colourful **Vonarskarð Pass**, a broad, 1000m-high saddle between

### OF BLIZZARDS & BONES

The spookily named Beinahóll (Bone Hill), 4km west of the road near Kjalfell, is the cue for a tragic tale. Although they realised it might be difficult so late in the season, in late October 1780 five farmers decided to return with their new flock of sheep to Skagafjörður along the Kjölur Route. When a blizzard set in they holed up and waited for it to pass, but the storm raged for three weeks without stopping, and all five men perished. Eerily, although the victims' bodies were discovered, when authorities arrived later to collect them two had disappeared.

Today, sheep and horse bones still lie strewn across the macabre hillock, and a memorial stone has been raised by the men's descendants. Icelanders believe that Beinahóll is haunted by the victims of this sad incident, and that to remove any of the bones or disturb the site is to invite permanent bad luck.

Vatnajökull, Tungnafellsjökull and the green Ögöngur hills. This route also passes some active geothermal fields.

### Þórisvatn

Before water was diverted from Kaldakvísl into Þórisvatn from the Tungnaá hydroelectric scheme in southwest Iceland, it had a surface area of only 70 sq km. Now it's Iceland's second-largest lake at 82 sq km. It lies 11km northeast of the junction between Rte F26 and the Fjallabak Route.

### Hrauneyjar

Somewhat unexpectedly, in the bleakest position imaginable (west of Þórisvatn in the Hrauneyjar region), you'll find a guesthouse and shiny new hotel – the only one in the interior! **Hrauneyjar Highland Centre & Hótel Highland** (☎ guesthouse 487 7782, hotel 487 7750; www.hrauneyjar.is; guesthouse sb from lkr2250, s/d lkr6500/9200, hotel s/d from lkr12,900/16,900; ☒ Jun–mid-Sep) lies at the crossroads of the Sprengisandur Route and the F208 to Landmannalaugar, so it's very handy for lots of highland attractions. The simple guesthouse rooms have shared bathrooms. If you want luxuries – comfy rooms, a restaurant, a sauna, wireless internet... and a helicopter pad – head for the hotel.

Staff can arrange excursions to sites of interest, including the beautiful **Dynkur waterfall**, which is a worthwhile 4WD excursion about 20km north.

Petrol and diesel are available.

### Veidivötn

This beautiful area just northeast of Landmannalaugar is an entanglement of small desert lakes in a volcanic basin, a continuation of the same fissure that produced Laugahraun in the Fjallabak Nature Reserve. This is a wonderful

place for wandering, and you can spend quite a lot of time following 4WD tracks that wind across the tephra sands between the numerous lakes. On the hill to the northeast is a **view disc** pointing out the various lakes and peaks.

Veidivötn lies 27km off the southern end of the Sprengisandur road south of Þórisvatn, via the F228 4WD road. Access from Landmannalaugar is thwarted by the substantial river Tungnaá, so you'll need private transport to get to Veidivötn. At Tjaldvatn, below Miðmorgunsalda (650m), is a camp site with huts.

### Getting There & Away

From 1 July to 24 August Austurleið buses travel the Sprengisandur Route from Landmannalaugar to Mývatn at 8.30am on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday (lkr7200, 10 hours). In the other direction, they depart from Mývatn at 8.30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Although it's a scheduled bus, it's used as a tour, with brief stops at Hrauneyjar, Nýidalur, Aldeyjarfoss and Goðafoss. A small discount is available to Omnibus and Full-Circle Passport holders.

Drivers should note that there's no fuel along the way. The nearest petrol stations are at Akureyri if you come in on the Eyjafjörður approach; at Varmahlíð if you're driving the Skagafjörður approach; at Fosshóll, near Goðafoss, if you're coming from the north along the main route through Bárðardalur; and at Hrauneyjar if you're driving from the south.

### ÖSKJULEIÐ ROUTE (ASKJA WAY)

The Öskjuleið Route runs across the interior to Herðubreið, the Icelanders' beloved 'Queen of Mountains'; and to the desert's most popular marvel, the immense Askja crater. The usual access road is Rte F88, which leaves the

Ring Rd 32km east of Mývatn, but Askja is also accessible further east from Rte F910.

For much of the way it's a flat and dull journey, following the western bank of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum, meandering across tephra wasteland and winding circuitously through rough, tyre-abusing encounters with the aptly named 5000-sq-km lava flow Ódáðahraun (Evil Deeds Lava).

Things perk up at the lovely oasis of Herðubreiðarlindir, at the foot of Herðubreið. The route then wanders westwards through dunes and lava flows past the Dreki huts and up the hill toward Askja, where you'll have to leave your car at the Öskjuop car park and walk the remaining 2.5km to the caldera.

From Askja the options are to retrace your whole journey to Rte 1; backtrack slightly onto the F910, heading east towards Egilsstaðir, or west on the Gæsavatnaleið Route (see p308) to Sprengisandur; or head east on the F910 for 22km, then south on the F902 to the Kverkfjöll ice caves (see p309).

Öskjuleið is definitely for 4WD vehicles only. Even mountain buses have been known to get bogged in treacherous sinking sands; in

2000 a tour bus was swept away; and in October 2006 a 67-year-old German woman had to walk 60km back to the Ring Rd when her engine was flooded during a river crossing! The route usually opens in mid-June.

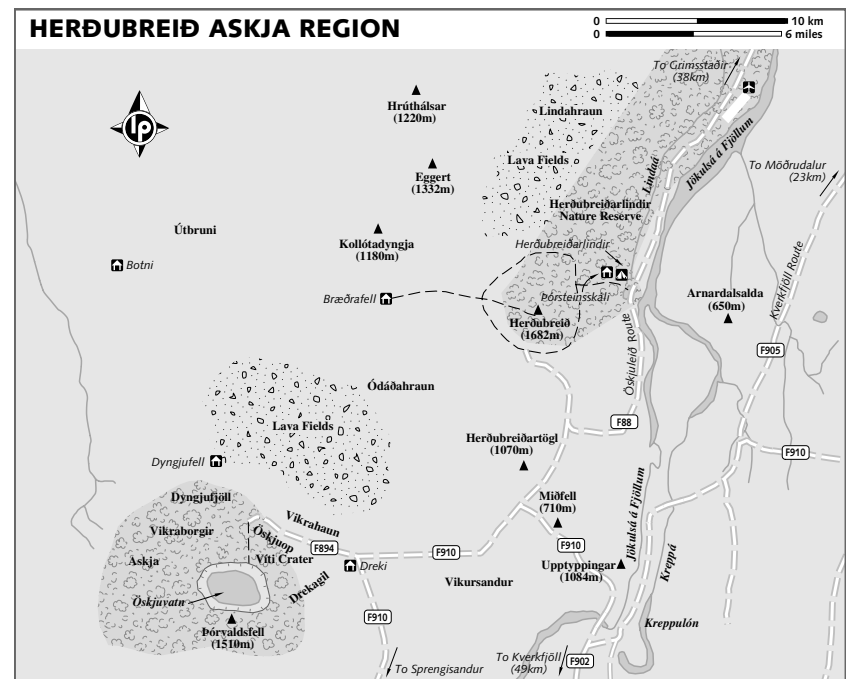
### Grafarlandaá

This tributary of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum is the first major stream to be forded on the south-bound journey to Herðubreið and Askja. It's reputedly the best-tasting water in Iceland, so fill your bottles here! The banks also make a pleasant picnic spot.

Just past the second stream crossing near Ferfujfall, a short walk from the road takes you to a dramatic canyon being formed by Jökulsá á Fjöllum – a mini Jökulsárgljúfur in the making.

### Herðubreiðarlindir

The green oasis Herðubreiðarlindir, a nature reserve thick with green moss, angelica and the pinky-purple flower of the arctic river-beauty (*Epilobium latifolium*), was created by springs flowing from beneath the Ódáðahraun lava. You get a superb close-up view



## CROSSING RIVERS

While trekking or driving in Iceland's interior you'll undoubtedly face unbridged rivers that must be crossed – a frightening prospect for the uninitiated. Don't panic – there are a few simple rules to follow.

Melting snow and ice cause water levels to rise, so the best time to cross is early in the morning before the day warms up, and preferably no sooner than 24 hours after a rainstorm. Avoid narrow stretches, which are likely to be deep – the widest ford will likely be shallowest. The swiftest, strongest current is found near the centre of straight stretches and at the outside of bends. Choose a spot with as much slack water as possible.

Never try to cross just above a waterfall and avoid crossing streams in flood (identifiable by dirty, smooth-running water carrying lots of debris and vegetation). A smooth surface suggests that the river is too deep to be crossed on foot. Anything more than thigh deep isn't crossable without experience and extra equipment.

Before attempting to cross deep or swift-running streams, be sure that you can jettison your pack in midstream if necessary. Unhitch the waist belt and loosen shoulder straps, and remove long trousers and any bulky clothing that will inhibit swimming. Lone hikers should use a hiking staff to probe the river bottom for the best route and to steady themselves in the current.

Never try to cross a stream barefoot – slicing your feet open on sharp rocks will really spoil your holiday. Consider bringing a pair of wet-suit boots or sandals if you want to keep your hiking boots dry. While crossing, face upstream and avoid looking down or you may risk getting dizzy and losing your balance. Two hikers can steady each other by resting their arms on each other's shoulders.

If you do fall while crossing, don't try to stand up. Remove your pack (but don't let go of it), roll over onto your back, and point your feet downstream, then try to work your way to a shallow eddy or to the shore.

Crossing glacial rivers can be very dangerous in a vehicle. It's best to wade across your intended route first, as described above, to check the depth. Work with the water – drive diagonally across in the direction of the current, making sure you're in a low gear. Try to drive steadily, just slightly faster than the water is flowing (too slow and you risk getting stuck, or letting water up the exhaust). If you're not travelling in convoy, consider waiting for other traffic.

of Herðubreið from here (unless, of course, you're greeted by a wall of blowing sand, as is often the case).

The mini-tourist complex has a nature-reserve information office, a **camp site** (sites per tent 1kr800) and the Ferðafélag Akureyrar 30-bed **Pörsteinskáli hut** (N 65°11.560', W 16°13.390'; sb 1kr1800; ☼ mid-Jun–Aug), a pretty cushy lodge with showers, a kitchen and a summer warden.

Behind the hut is another Fjalla-Eyvindur shelter; this one is scarcely large enough to breathe inside. It was renovated in 1922 on the remains of the original, which had long since collapsed. Eyvindur is believed to have occupied it during the hard winter of 1774–75, when he subsisted on angelica root and raw horse meat stored on top of the hideout to retain heat inside.

## Herðubreið

Iceland's most distinctive mountain (1682m) has been described as a birthday cake, a cook-

ing pot and a lamp shade, but the tourist industry calls it (more respectfully) the 'Queen of the Desert'. It crops up time and again in the work of Icelandic poets and painters, fascinated by its unquestionable beauty.

If Herðubreið appears to have been made in a jelly mould, that's not far off base. It's another *móberg* mountain, formed by subglacial volcanic eruptions. In fact, if Vatnajökull was to suddenly be stripped of ice, Grímsvötn and Kverkfjöll would probably emerge looking more or less like Herðubreið.

## HIKING

The Landmælingar Íslands topographical sheet for this region is No 84, *Herðubreið* 1:100,000 (1986).

From the Þörsteinskáli hut a marked trail runs to Herðubreið and you can then hike all the way around it in a day. The mountain looks the same from all sides, so disorientation is a possibility, but if you remember that

Kollótadyngja is west–northwest and Herðubreiðarlindir is east–northeast, orientation shouldn't be too difficult.

Herðubreið was once thought to be unclimbable, but it was eventually scaled in 1908. Under optimum conditions you can climb the mountain in summer over a long day. The route to the top ascends the western slope. It's a difficult climb, and snow, rock falls, landslides or bad weather may render it impossible without mountaineering gear. From the base to the summit (route unmarked) takes three to 3½ hours each way; allow about 12 hours in total from Heiðubreiðarlindir. Note the two cairns on the rim, which are there to show you the start of the route back down. Don't go alone, prepare for the foulest weather imaginable, and remember to inform the attendant at Herðubreiðarlindir of your intentions.

## Kollótadyngja

The peak Kollótadyngja (1180m), 10km northwest of Herðubreið, is a textbook example of a shield volcano. Its broad, shieldlike cone oozed lava gently rather than exploded violently. At its base is the Ferðafélag Akureyrar **Bræðrafell hut** (N 65°11.310', W 16°32.290'; sb 1kr1200), which accommodates 12 people and has a coal stove but no running water. The best access is the trail leading west from the Herðubreið circuit.

## Drekagil

The name of the gorge Drekagil, 35km southwest of Herðubreið, means 'dragon ravine', after the form of a dragon in the craggy rock formations that tower over it. The canyon behind the two Ferðafélag Akureyrar **Dreki huts** (N 65°02.520', W 16°35.720'; sb 1kr2200) resembles something out of Arizona or the Sinai; bitter winds and freezing temperatures just don't suit this desert landscape!

The Dreki huts are an ideal base for a day or two of exploring the area. Not only does the dramatic Drekagil ravine offer an easy stroll up to an impressive waterfall, but you can also walk 8km up the road to Askja. The old and new huts sleep 70, and there are showers, a kitchen, an information centre and a summertime warden. Camping (1kr800 per tent) is also permitted, but the wind and cold can become oppressive.

At Dreki the Gæsavatnaleið Route (F910) turns off the Öskjuleið to cross some intimidating expanses and connect with the Sprengisandur Route at Nýdalur. See p302.

## Dyngjufjöll

The stark Dyngjufjöll range, which shelters the Askja caldera and the Drekagil gorge, is what remains of a volcanic system that collapsed into its magma chamber. Þórvaldsfell, the highest point along its southern rim, rises to 1510m.

This inhospitable territory may be intriguing, but it isn't terribly inviting to the casual hiker. If you come to explore beyond the tracks and footpaths, make careful preparations and take due precautions.

You'll find overnight accommodation at the remote and basic **Dyngjufell hut** (N 65°07.480', W 16°55.280'; sb 1kr1200), also maintained by Ferðafélag Akureyrar, west of the caldera.

## Askja

Perversely, the cold, windy and utterly desolate Askja caldera is the main destination for all tours in this part of the interior. Bleak and terrible it may be, but this immense 50-sq-km caldera shouldn't be missed. It's difficult to imagine the sorts of forces that created it – pondering the landscape will naturally produce bogging thoughts about the power of nature and the insignificance of us puny humans.

The cataclysm that formed the original Askja caldera happened relatively recently (in 1875, to be exact) when two cu km of tephra was ejected from the Askja volcano, bits of it landing in Continental Europe. Ash from the eruption poisoned quantities of cattle in northern Iceland, sparking a wave of emigration to America. It's quite daunting to realise that such cataclysmic events could be replayed at any time.

After the initial eruption a magma chamber collapsed and created a craterous 11-sq-km hole, 300m below the rim of the original explosion crater. This new depression subsequently filled with water and became the sapphire-blue lake **Öskjuvatn**, the deepest in Iceland at 217m. It became the scene of an eerie disappearance in 1907, when German researchers Max Rudloff and Walther von Knebel went rowing on the lake and then completely vanished; their bodies were never found. It was suggested that the lake may have hazardous quirks, possibly odd currents or whirlpools; but a rickety canvas boat and icy water could easily explain their deaths. There's a stone **cairn** and memorial to the men on the rim of the caldera.

In the 1875 eruption a vent near the north-eastern corner of the lake exploded and

formed the tephra crater **Víti**, which contains geothermally heated water. (This is not to be confused with the Víti near Mývatn, p236), whose water is distinctly chilly!). Swimming in this turquoise-blue pool is a real highlight – the temperature (around 25°C) is ideal for swimming. The Icelandic way is to strip off and bathe naturally; if you're shy, bring a swimsuit. The route down is slippery but not as steep as it looks.

Askja has erupted frequently over the last century, and as recently as 1961 the vents at Öskjuop, near the road entrance to the caldera, exploded and formed the Vikraborgir crater row.

### Tours

Mývatn Tours runs a very popular 12-hour trip from Reykjavílið (at Mývatn lake in northeast Iceland) between 20 July and 31 August – bring your own lunch and a towel for swimming. You can also fly over the Askja crater on an hour-long sightseeing flight from Reykjavílið. See p231 for details on these.

**Ferðafélag Akureyrar** (☎ 462 2720; www.ffa.is) organises hut-based hiking tours (1kr48,500 per person) from Þórsteinsskáli hut at Herðubreiðarlindir along the Öskjuleið Route to Svartárkot in upper Bárðardalur. The route runs via the huts at Bræðrafell, Dreki, Dynjufell and Botni. The tour takes you over the vast Ódáðahraun lava flow and usually runs twice in July. With proper planning, this five-day trip may also be done independently.

### Getting There & Away

There's no public transport along the Öskjuleið Route. Take a tour (see above), or hire a 4WD and prepare for a rocky ride.

There are no petrol stations anywhere on the route. The nearest ones are at Mývatn (100km north of Askja), Hrauneyjar (235km from Askja along the F910 west, then the Sprengisandur Route south), and Aðalból (90km from Askja on the F910 east).

### GÆSATNALEIÐ ROUTE

The 120km-long Gæsavatnaleið Route (F910), also known as the Austurleið (it doesn't pass anywhere near its namesake Gæsavötn), connects the Sprengisandur Route and the Öskjuleið. It's not nearly as treacherous as it once was, since a new road has been built north of the old one and the largest river is now bridged. However, it's still difficult to drive

and you should attempt this route only if you have a lot of 4WD experience. There's little traffic, but the scenery is excellent. The road crosses vast lava fields and sandy stretches, and there are always high icecaps in the background.

The bits over the lava fields are naturally slow going, so plan on one day to drive them. If you report to the warden in Askja that you're going this way, the main concern will be that you don't camp along the way, as much of the route lies inside a nature reserve.

### Old Gæsavatnaleið

If anyone tells you that the Gæsavatnaleið is impossible, they're speaking of the old southern route best known as the road followed by the escaping hero, Alan Stewart, in Desmond Bagley's thriller *Running Blind*. It's not really impossible, but as yet no tour company is willing to brave it and, with the opening of the new Gæsavatnaleið, the route isn't being maintained. As a result, this is one of Iceland's roughest journeys, notorious for floods and deep sand drifts. It should be tackled only with at least two hardy 4WDs if you really know what you're doing, and it's imperative that you ask for advice before venturing out.

### KVERKFJÖLL ROUTE

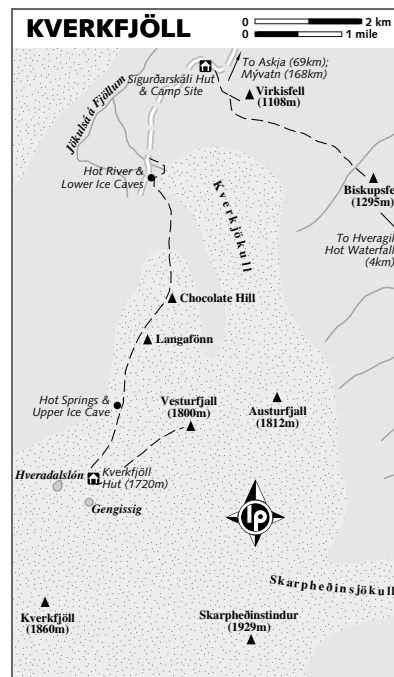
As its name suggests, this 108km-long route creeps southwards to the amazing Kverkfjöll ice caves. It connects Möðrudalur (65km east of Mývatn, off the Ring Rd) to the Sigurðarskáli hut, 3km from the lower caves, via the F905, F910 and F902.

Along the way are several sites of interest, including the twin pyramid-shaped Upptýpingar hills near the Jökulsá á Fjöllum bridge, and the Hvannalindir oasis where there is – you guessed it – another of good ol' Fjalla-Eyvindur's winter hide-outs! He even built a rather hi-tech sheepfold at this one, so the animals could visit the stream without having to face the elements. Hvannalindir lies about 30km north of the Sigurðarskáli hut.

After visiting Askja (see p307), you can follow up with a trip to Kverkfjöll by driving south on Rte 902.

The 85-bed **Sigurðarskáli hut** (N 64°44.850', W 16°37.890'; sb 1kr2000) and camp site can be booked through **Ferðelag Fljótsdalshéraðs** (☎ 20 Jun-15 Sep 853 6236, rest of yr 863 5813; ferdafelag@egilsstadir.is).

Kverkfjöll usually opens in mid- to late June.



### Kverkfjöll

Kverkfjöll is actually a mountain spur capped by the ice of Kverfjökull, a northern tongue of Vatnajökull. Over time, it's also come to refer to the hot-spring-filled ice caves that often form beneath the eastern margin of the Dyngjujökull ice.

When hiking in this area be sure to carry plenty of water, as only silty glacial water is available higher up.

### LOWER KVERKFJÖLL ICE CAVES

Besides being the source of the roiling Jökulsá á Fjöllum, central Iceland's greatest river, Kverkfjöll is also one of the world's largest geothermal areas. The lower Kverkfjöll ice caves lie 3km from the Sigurðarskáli hut, a half-hour return walk from the 4WD track's end.

Here the hot river flows beneath the cold glacier ice, clouds of steam swirl over the river and melt shimmering patterns on the ice walls, and there you have it – a spectacular tourist attraction. Perhaps this was the source of the overworked fire-and-ice cliché that pervades almost everything ever written about Iceland. Huge blocks of ice frequently crash down from

the roof – don't enter the ice caves or you risk being caught in their heated combat. There's also a danger of sulphur inhalation.

### UPPER KVERKFJÖLL ICE CAVES & HUT

From the lower ice caves, the tours continue up onto the glacier itself. After an hour climbing up the glacier tongue, they stop at a nunatak called **Chocolate Hill** to stoke up energy. From there it's a stiff 1½-hour hike up **Langafjónn** to the upper ice caves and geothermal area, where sulphur and rhyolite silt combine with the steam heat to create some of the gooiest mud imaginable. The caves here are larger than the lower ones – 2.5km long – but they aren't quite as impressive.

It's then a 40-minute climb to the Icelandic Glaciological Society's six-bunk **Kverkfjöll hut**, at 1720m. There's no water or heating, but it makes a viable icecap base. Nearby is the beautiful lagoon **Gengissig**, which was formed in a small volcanic eruption in 1961. Another hour beyond the hut will take you to the highest peak of western Kverkfjöll (1860m), with a fine view over the *kverf* (gap) through which the Kverkfjöll glacier passes.

### HIKING

A one-hour marked hike from behind Sigurðarskáli hut will take you up **Virkisfell**. At the top is an amazing natural bridge and a spectacular view over Kverkfjöll and the headwaters of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum.

There's a five-hour return hike from Sigurðarskáli hut to the 30°C hot river in **Hveragil**, where you can bathe in a hot waterfall. The wardens at the hut can provide specific directions.

### Tours

Without a robust 4WD vehicle the only way to visit Kverkfjöll is on a tour. The most popular and easiest to join is the three-day **Askja-Kverkfjöll-Vatnajökull tour** (www.sba.is; ☎ Akureyri 550 0700, Reykjavík 550 0770), run by SBA-Norðurleið. It leaves on Monday from 9 July to 20 August from Akureyri (1kr21,500, 8.30am) and Mývatn (1kr21,000, 11am).

'Tour' is slightly misleading. You really just get a bus ride and a guide for your money, and must bring your own food and organise accommodation (either book a hut or bring a tent). Hiking boots or other strong footwear, a sleeping bag and warm clothing are essential.

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