

# Southeast Iceland



Iceland's southeast is a kingdom made for trolls and ice giants, rather than creatures of warm flesh and blood. Mighty Vatnajökull, the largest icecap outside the poles, dominates the region. Even casual visitors travelling along the Ring Rd will be awestruck by its huge rivers of frozen ice pouring down steep-sided valleys towards the sea. The glacial lagoon Jökulsárlón, at the feet of the icecap, is a photographer's paradise – wind and water sculpt its chilly-blue icebergs into fantastical shapes.

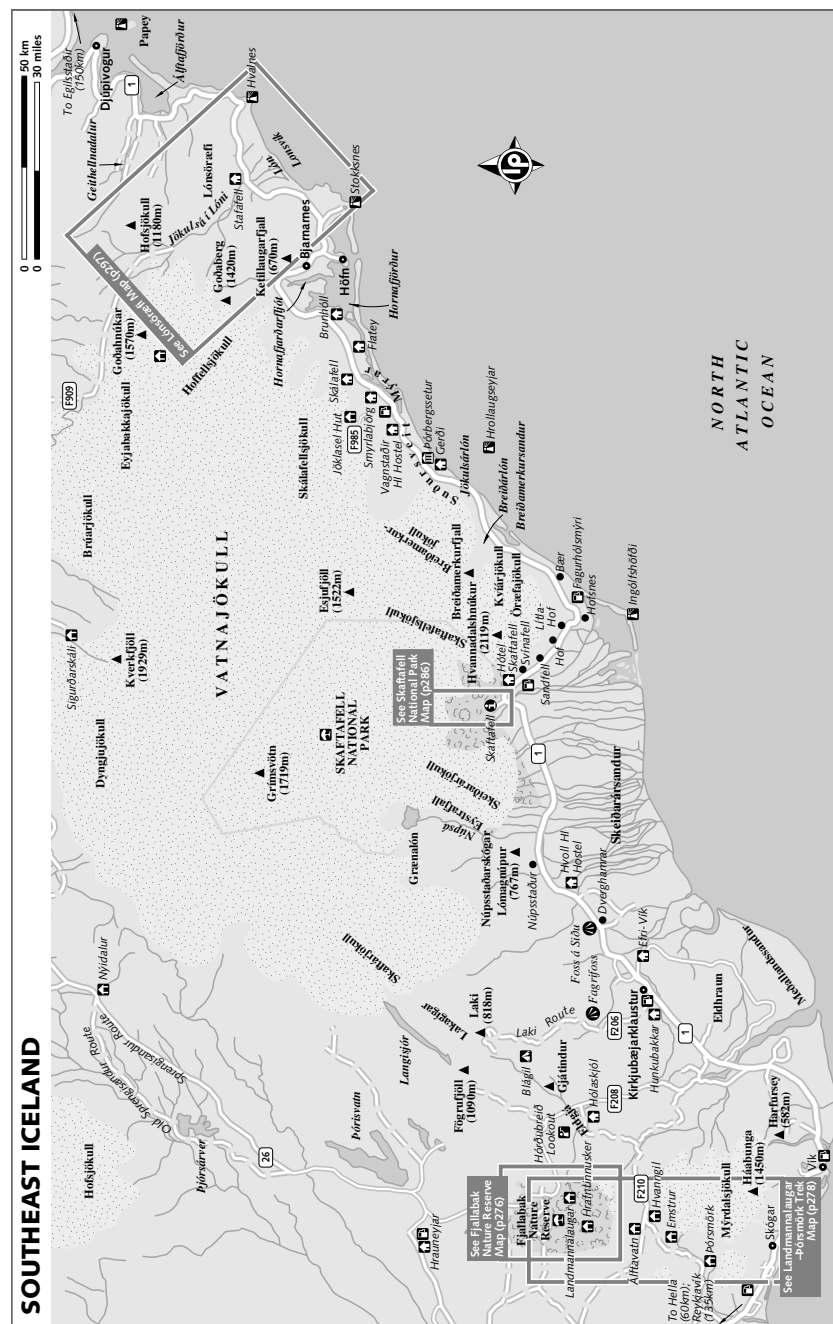
On the southern side of the Ring Rd a terrible desert of dark glacial sand unrolls. The damage is caused by the volcanoes Grímsvötn and Örafi, trapped beneath Vatnajökull. When they blow, huge areas of the icecap melt, sending powerful rock-filled rivers smashing onto the coast. The most recent *jökulhlaup* (glacial flood) was just 11 years ago.

Further inland is the epicentre of Iceland's worst eruption. In the late 18th century the Lakagígar fissure erupted in a 30km-long sheet of flame and ash, blotting out the sun and causing famine across the northern hemisphere. Today such apocalyptic fire and darkness seem far away; the fragile lava craters are covered in soft green moss and the only sound is the wind. With desolation all around, it's not surprising the Skaftafell National Park is a popular spot. This sheltered enclave between the glaciers and the dead grey sands throbs with life and colour.

Although part of the interior, we've included Fjallabak Nature Reserve and Landmannalaugar in this section. An area with mesmerising landscape and superb hiking, this 'back road' between the southeast and southwest shouldn't be missed.

## TOP FIVE

- Admire the ever-changing ice sculptures at **Jökulsárlón** (p291), a bewitching glacial lagoon
- Bathe in steaming thermal pools at **Landmannalaugar** (p277), or rise to the challenge of the **Landmannalaugar to Þórsörk** (p280) – one of the world's great walks
- Visit Iceland's favourite national park, **Skaftafell** (p285), an area of green and lovely life amid the vast dead *sandar* (sand deltas)
- Stride up **Laki** (p284) for views of three glaciers...and unbelievable volcanic devastation
- Feel like a mountaineer on an easy but exhilarating **glacier walk** (p289); make it real by scaling Iceland's highest peak, **Hvannadalshnúkur** (p289); or roar across **Vatnajökull icecap** (p294) on a snowmobile.



## FJALLABAK NATURE RESERVE

### FJALLABAK ROUTE

In summer the Fjallabak Route (F208) makes a spectacular alternative to the coast road between Hella, in southwest Iceland, and Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Its name translates as 'Behind the Mountains', and that's exactly where it goes.

First, head north from Hella on Rte 26. The F208 begins near the Sigölduvirkjun power plant on the Tungnaá river and passes through the scenic Fjallabak Nature Reserve to Landmannalaugar. From there, it continues east

past the Kirkjufell marshes and enters Jökuldalur, then travels along a riverbed for 10km before climbing to the Hörðubreið lookout and descending to Eldgjá.

For the next 40km the road is fairly good, but there are a couple of river fords, so conventional vehicles going to Eldgjá from the east may have difficulties during high water. At Búland the route joins Rte 208 and emerges at the Ring Rd southwest of Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

A non-4WD vehicle wouldn't have a hope of completing the through route. In summer, if the rivers are low, a conventional vehicle can reach Landmannalaugar from the west (F208 only) and possibly Eldgjá from the east, but the route between the two would be impass-

able under any conditions. Note that hire-car companies prohibit taking 2WD vehicles on any of these routes, so if something should go wrong your insurance would be void.

Since much of the Fjallabak Route is along rivers (or rather, in rivers!), it's not ideally suited to mountain bikes either. Lots of people do attempt it, but it's not casual cycling by any stretch.

### Getting There & Away

If you don't have a 4WD vehicle, between mid-June and early September there's a scheduled **Austurleið-Kynniserföir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) bus. It runs daily between Reykjavik and Skaftafell (via Selfoss, Hella, Landmannalaugar, Eldgjá, and Kirkjubæjarklaustur), departing at 8.30am from either end. The 11-hour journey costs 1kr8600 each way – unquestionably worth it.

The bus stops for two hours at lovely Landmannalaugar, but that's not really long enough to explore. Most travellers make a proper break here, continuing the journey to Skaftafell at a later date. The stretch from Reykjavik to Landmannalaugar (5½ hours) costs 1kr4800 each way.

### LANDMANNALAUGAR

Multicoloured mountains, soothing hot springs, rambling lava flows and clear blue lakes make Landmannalaugar unique. It's a favourite with Icelanders and visitors alike... as long as the weather cooperates! If you're thinking of popping up there for a few hours, you'll kick yourself for not allowing several days.

Landmannalaugar (600m above sea level) includes the largest geothermal field in Iceland outside the Grimsvötn caldera in Vatnajökull. Its weird peaks are made of rhyolite – a mineral-filled lava that cooled unusually slowly, causing those amazing colours.

Although Landmannalaugar gets quite chilly, the weather is generally more stable than in coastal areas, and when it does rain it's more of a wind-driven horizontal mist than a drenching downpour.

### Information

The Landmannalaugar hut wardens can help with specific questions, including directions and advice on hiking routes. There are also two green buses, which hold a tiny **information centre and shop** (☎ 11.30am–8pm late Jun–Aug) selling coffee, buns and plasters! It also sells a good

self-published map (1kr700) of walks in the immediate Landmannalaugar area.

There's no petrol at Landmannalaugar. The nearest petrol pumps are 40km north at Hrauneyjar (close to the beginning of the F208), and 90km southeast at Kirkjubæjarklaustur, but to be on the safe side you should put in enough fuel to get you all the way back to Hella.

### Hot Springs

Just 200m from the Landmannalaugar hut, both hot and cold water flow out from beneath Laugahraun and combine in a natural pool to form the most ideal hot bath imaginable. Unfortunately, since 2003 there have been itchy parasites (spread by ducklings) in the pool; they seem to be clearing up, but if you're worried, find out what the current situation is before bathing.

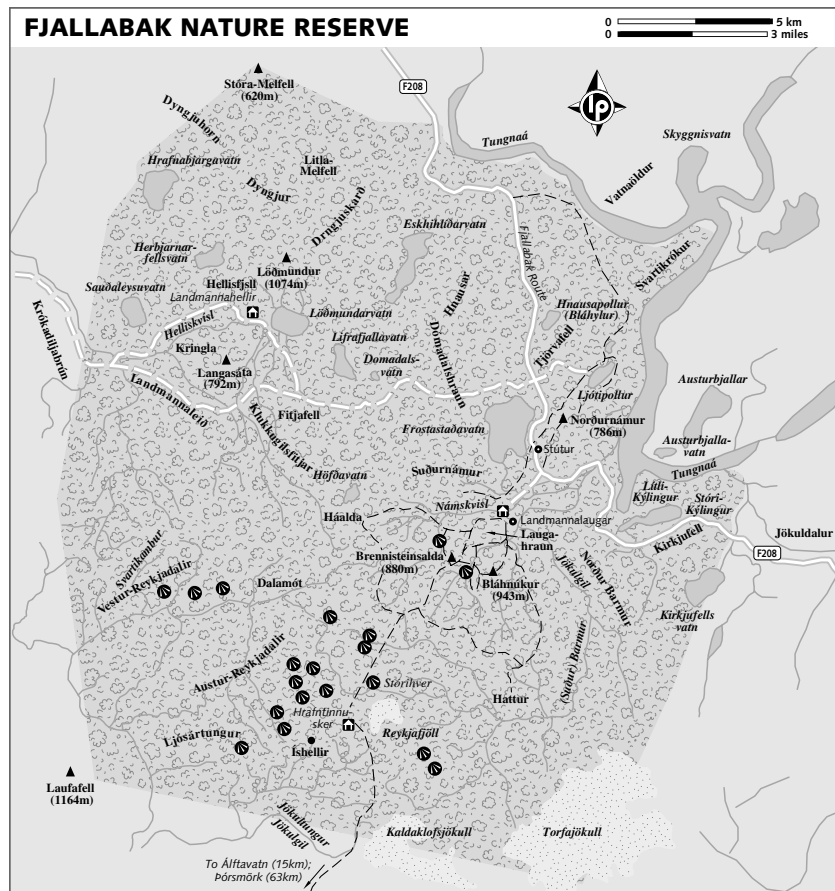
### Hiking

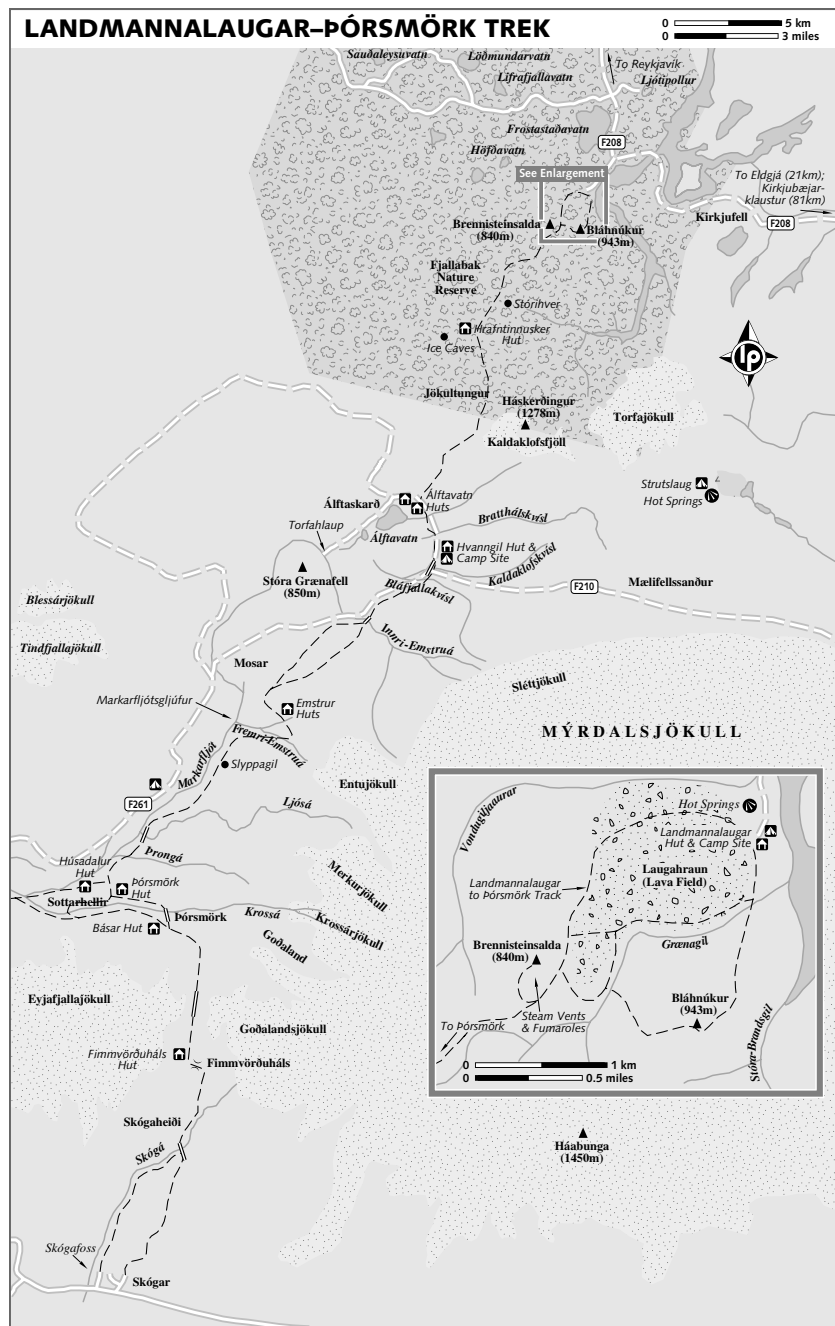
**Laugahraun**, the convoluted lava field behind Landmannalaugar hut, offers vast scope for exploration. Across it, the slopes of Iceland's most colourful mountain, rainbow-streaked **Brennisteinsalda**, are punctuated by steaming vents and sulphur deposits. Climb to the summit for a good view across the rugged and variegated landscape (7km round trip from Landmannalaugar).

From Brennisteinsalda it's another 90 minutes along the Þórsörk route to the impressive **Stórhver** geothermal field.

The blue lake **Frostastaðavatn** lies behind the rhyolite ridge immediately north of the Landmannalaugar hut. Walk over the ridge and you'll be rewarded with far-ranging views as well as close-ups of the interesting rock formations and moss-covered lava flows flanking the lake. If you walk at least one way on the road and spend some time exploring around the lake, the return trip takes two to three hours.

A fine day hike from Landmannalaugar is to the ironically named **Ljótípollur** (Ugly Puddle), an incredible red crater filled with bright-blue water. Oddly enough, although it was formed by a volcanic explosion its lake is rich in trout. That intense fiery red comes from iron-ore deposits. You can see all kinds of scenery on the way to the Puddle, from tephra desert and lava flow to marsh and braided glacial valley. To get there you can climb over the 786m-high peak **Norðurnámur**





(well worthwhile) or just traverse its western base to emerge on the Ljótípollur road (10km to 12km return trip, depending on the route). A number of routes ascend to the crater rim, but the most interesting is probably the footpath that climbs its southernmost slope. If you walk all the way around the crater rim, it's an 18km hike that takes the better part of a day.

Another good day walk from Landmannalaugar is around the peak **Tjörvafell** and the crater lake **Hnausapollur** (also known as Bláhyllur).

### Sleeping

Because the whole Fjallabak area is a protected nature reserve, wild camping is not allowed.

Ferðafélag Íslands' **Landmannalaugar hut** (☎ Jul-Sep 854 1192; sb lkr2200) accommodates 78 people on a first come, first served basis, and it books up quickly with tour groups and club members. Otherwise there's a **camp site** (sites per person lkr800) with toilet and shower facilities.

For information about other mountain huts on the Landmannalaugar–Þórsmörk route, see the boxed text, p280.

### LANDMANNALAUGAR TO ELDGJÁ

East of Landmannalaugar the F208 leaves Fjallabak Reserve and skirts the river Tungnaá as it flows past the Norðurnámshraun lava field.

After dropping into Jökuldalur the road deteriorates into a valley route along a riverbed and effectively becomes a 10km-long ford interspersed with jaunts across the odd sandbar or late snowfield. When it climbs out of the valley it ascends the tuff mountain **Herðubreið**, from where there are superb views across the lowlands to the south.

Just west of the Herðubreið lookout, a rough 4WD road heads 25km northeast to the blue lake **Langisjór**. On the far side of the lake lie the astonishing green mountains of **Fögrufjöll** (1090m), and beyond them is the black-sand outwash plain of the glacial river Skaftá.

### ELDGJÁ

Eldgjá (Fire Gorge) is a volcanic rift stretching 40km from Myrdalsjökull to the peak Gjátindur. At its northeastern end Eldgjá is 200m deep and 600m across, with odd, reddish walls that recall the fire after which it's named. Although it's not as outwardly spectacular as you may expect, Eldgjá is quite intriguing and the name alone conjures up images of a malevolently mysterious and powerful place.

In the green and fertile **Hánipufit** area, 8km south of the Eldgjá turn-off, the river Skaftá widens into an entanglement of cascades and waterfalls measuring 500m across in places. It's unusual and quite beautiful.

At Lambaskarðshólar, west of the F208 road near Syðrifærá, 5km south of the Eldgjá turn-off, there are three mountain huts at **Hólaskjól** (☎ 487 4840, 894 9977; sb lkr2000) with hot showers and a camp site. It's a great place to hole up for a couple of days.

## SOUTHERN VATNAJÖKULL

Vatnajökull is earth's largest icecap outside the poles. It's three times the size of Luxembourg (8300 sq km), reaches a thickness of almost 1km, and, if you could find a pair of scales big enough, you'd find it weighed an awesome 3000 billion tonnes! This mighty mass of ice holds Iceland's highest and lowest points – the 2119m mountain Hvannadalshnúkur, and a nameless trough underneath the icecap, 300m below sea level.

Huge glaciers, pleated with crevasses, flow down from the centre of Vatnajökull. The best known is probably Skaftafellsjökull, a relatively small glacier that ends within 1.5km of the camp site at Skaftafell National Park. Another famous beauty is Breiðamerkjökull, which crumbles into icebergs at the breathtaking Jökulsárlón lagoon.

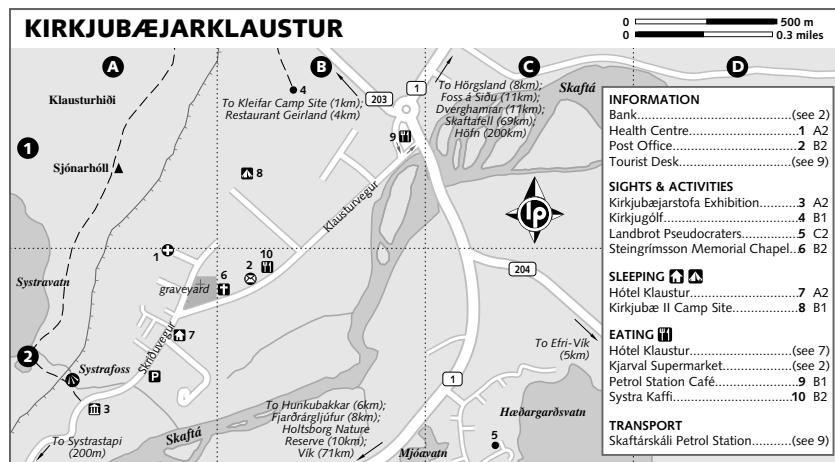
The drive from Kirkjubæjarklaustur to Höfn is truly mind-blowing. Rte 1 takes you across vast deltas of grey glacial sand, past lost-looking farms, around the toes of craggy mountains, and by glacier tongues and ice-filled lagoons. The only thing you won't pass is a town.

### KIRKJUBÆJARKLAUSTUR

pop 140

Many a foreign tongue has been tied in knots by trying to say Kirkjubæjarklaustur. It might help if you break it into bits: *Kirkju* (church), *bæjar* (farm) and *klaustur* (convent). Otherwise, do as the locals do and call it 'Klaustur' (pronounced more or less like 'cloister').

Klaustur is tiny, even by Icelandic standards – a few houses and farms scattered on a backdrop of brilliant green. It's a major crossroads to several dramatic spots in the interior – Fjallabak, Landmannalaugar and



Laki. Klaustur is also the only real service town between Vík and Höfn: there's a petrol station and a good café.

## History

According to the *Landnámabók*, this tranquil village between the cliffs and the river Skaftá was first settled by Irish monks (*papar*) before the Vikings arrived. Originally, it was known as Kirkjubær; the 'klaustur' bit was added in 1186 when a convent of Benedictine nuns was founded (near the modern-day church).

During the devastating Laki eruptions of the late 18th century, this area suffered greatly and, west of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, you can see ruins of farms abandoned or destroyed by the lava stream. The lava field, Eldhraun, averages 12m thick. It contains over 12 cu km of lava and covers an area of 565 sq km,

making it the largest recorded lava flow from a single eruption.

## Information

There's a tourist desk inside the Skaftárskáli petrol station. Further down the road is a small block of buildings containing the bank, the post office and the supermarket.

## Sights & Activities

**Kirkjugólf's** regular basalt columns, smoothed down and cemented with moss, were once mistaken for an old church floor rather than a work of nature, and it's easy to see why. The 80-sq-metre honeycomb lies in a field about 400m northwest of the petrol station (a path leads to it from by the information board, or drive down Rte 203, where there's another gate).

## LANDMANNALAUGAR TO ÞÓRSMÖRK TREK

The trek from Landmannalaugar to Þórsörk – known as the Laugavegurinn (Hot Spring Rd) – seems destined to be recognised one day as one of the great walks of the world. The best map of the route is Landmælingar Íslands' *Þórsörk–Landmannalaugar* 1:100,000 (Ikr980). In addition, there's a good booklet called *The Laugavegur Hiking Trail* by Leifur Þorsteinsson (Ikr1500), which describes sights and side trips.

In high season the trek can be completed in three or four days by anyone in reasonable physical condition. Many people do it independently, but Útivist and Ferðafélag Íslands both offer organised trips (see p333).

The track is usually passable for casual trekkers from mid-July through to mid-September. Early in the season (early to mid-July) you may need an ice axe for assistance on the steeper slopes. It positively bustles in July and August, so consider walking it in early September, when you should have crisp weather and possibly a glimpse of the Northern Lights from near-empty huts. At that time in the year, however, some snow bridges across ravines may have collapsed, necessitating detours.

At any time of year the Landmannalaugar to Þórsörk trek is not to be undertaken lightly. It requires river crossings, all-weather gear, sturdy boots, and sufficient food and water. Most trekkers walk from north to south to take advantage of the net altitude loss and the facilities at Þórsörk. You can also continue along the Þórsörk to Skógar track (see p137) and make a five- or six-day trip of it.

## Mountain Huts

Several huts along the route are owned and maintained by **Ferðafélag Íslands** (☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is). All have camp sites (per person Ikr800). Book and pay for hut space well in advance; otherwise bring a tent and camp near the huts. The following huts are listed from north to south:

**Landmannalaugar** (☎ Jul-Sep 854 1192; N 63°59.600', W 19°03.660'; per person Ikr2200) Holds 78 people; has kitchen, shower, and warden July to September.

**Hrafninnusker** (Höskuldskáli; N 63°56.014', W 19°10.109'; per person Ikr2000) Holds 36 people; has kitchen, and warden July and August.

**Álftavatn** (N 63°51.470', W 19°13.640'; per person Ikr2000) Two huts holding 52 people; have kitchen and shower, and warden June to August. Used as an alternative to the less welcoming Hrafninnusker hut.

**Hvanngil** (N 64°50.026', W 19°12.507'; per person Ikr2000) Two huts on alternative path, 5km south of Álftavatn. Holds 70 people; has kitchen and shower.

**Emstrur** (N 63°45.980', W 19°22.450'; per person Ikr2000) Two huts holding 40 people; has kitchen and shower, and warden June to August.

**Þórsörk** (Skagfjörðskáli; ☎ mid-May–mid-Sep 854 1191, 893 1191; N 63°40.960', W 19°30.890'; per person Ikr2000) Holds 75 people; has kitchen, shower and shop, and warden mid-May to mid-September.

## Highlights

### Day 1: Landmannalaugar to Hrafninnusker (12km, four to five hours)

**Stórihver** This sinister round hole, in an active geothermal zone, roars with riotously boiling water.

**Hrafninnusker** Fields of black obsidian glint in the sunlight.

### Day 2: Hrafninnusker to Álftavatn (12km, four to five hours)

**Ice caves** (side trip) Set aside up to a day to visit the ice caves 1.5km west of Hrafninnusker hut (but beware – falling ice is a real danger).

**Háskerðingur** (side trip) Across the northern spur of the Kaldaklofsfjöll icecap, the view from this 1278m summit is indescribable.

**Álftavatn** As you drop into the valley there are glorious views of Tindfjallajökull, Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull as well as many volcanic formations.

**Torfahlaup** (side trip) A 5km hike to where the mighty Markarfjót is constricted and forced through a 15m-wide canyon. Looming above is the velvety peak of Stóra Grænafell.

### Day 3: Álftavatn to Emstrur (16km, six to seven hours)

**Hvanngil** Take a well-earned rest in this pleasant green oasis.

**Markarfjótsgljúfur** (side trip) About 2km southwest of the Emstrur huts, this gaping green canyon will take your breath away.

**Fording ice-cold streams** Well, maybe not so much a highlight; more a memorable experience.

### Day 4: Emstrur to Þórsörk (15km, six to seven hours)

**Ljósá** The view from a footbridge down to the 'River of Light', as it squeezes through a 2m-wide fissure, is mesmerising.

**Þórsörk** After barren mountains, it's a delight to walk among the twisting birch trees of this grassy green woodland.

## HELLFIRE & BRIMSTONE

The 18th-century eruptions of the volcano Laki brought death and devastation to much of southeastern Iceland, especially nearby Kirkjubæjarklaustur. On 20 July 1783 a particularly fast-moving river of molten lava threatened to engulf the town.

The pastor Jón Steingrímsson, convinced it was due to the wickedness of his flock, gathered the terrified parishioners into the church. There he delivered a passionate hellfire and brimstone sermon while the appropriate special effects steamed and smoked outside. By the time the oratory ended, the flow had stopped at a rock promontory – now called Eldmessutangi (Fire Sermon Point) – just short of the town. The grateful residents credited their good reverend with some particularly effective string-pulling on their behalf.

Religious connections are particularly strong in this area. The prominent rock pillar **Systrastapi** (Sisters' Pillar), near the line of cliffs west of town, marks the spot where two nuns were reputedly executed and buried for sleeping with the devil and such other no-nos.

At the western end of the village a lovely double-raced waterfall, **Systrafoss**, tumbles down the cliffs via the Bæjargil ravine. The lake **Systravatn**, a short and pleasant saunter up the cliffs above the falls, was once a bathing place for nuns.

**Steingrímsson Memorial Chapel**, the triangular, distinctly atypical wood-and-stone chapel on Klausturvegur, was consecrated in 1974. It commemorates Jón Steingrímsson's Eldmessa (Fire Sermon), which 'saved' the town from lava on 20 July 1783 (see the boxed text, above).

Ongoing archaeological digs have unearthed 14th- and 15th-century convent houses (at the northeast corner of the old churchyard). If you want to know more, visit the small **Kirkjubæjarstofa exhibition** (☎ 487 4645; Klausturvegur 2; ☎ 9-11am & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug).

South of the Ring Rd is a vast pseudocrater field known as **Landbrot**. They were formed during the Laki eruptions of 1783, when lava poured over marshland and fast-evaporating steam exploded through to make these barrowlike mounds.

## Tours

Based at Hörgsland (see opposite), the **Jeppaferðir Ehf** (☎ 487 6655; www.horgsland.is; Hörgsland 1) company does tailor-made Jeep tours to surrounding areas, including Lakagigar. Contact it for prices.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Kirkjubæ II camp site** (☎ /fax 487 4612; sites per person 1kr600; ☎ Jun-Sep) This neat green site with sheltering hedges is right in town. It has pretty good facilities, including a kitchen, hot showers (1kr150 per five minutes) and a laundry (1kr750 minimum).

**Kleifar camp site** (☎ 487 4675; sites per person 1kr500) There's a second, more simple, camp site 1.5km along Rte 203 (signposted towards Geirland).

**Hótel Klaustur** (☎ 487 4900; www.icehotels.is; Klausturvegur 6; s/d from 1kr13,000/16,200) One of the Icelandair chain, the 57-room Klaustur looks like a Soviet-bloc hotel but contains a three-star interior with the usual businesslike rooms and a spa/sauna. The restaurant (mains 1kr1900 to 1kr3900) has an à la carte menu with typical Icelandic mains and some unusual starters – snails, anyone?

**Ourpick Systra Kaffi** (☎ 487 4848; Klausturvegur 13; light meals 1kr850-1500, mains 1kr1800-3000; ☎ 11am-11.30pm daily mid-May–Aug, 6-10pm daily Sep, weekends only Apr & Oct, closed Nov–mid-May) The most atmospheric place for a meal is this characterful little café-bar. It has a varied menu, which offers everything from sandwiches and burgers to big tilting bowls of salad, local trout and smoked-lamb mains using produce from nearby farms.

For freshly made fast-food snacks, there's the Skaftárskáli **petrol station café** (☎ 487 4628). Self-caterers have the **Kjarval supermarket** (☎ 487 4616; Klausturvegur; ☎ 9am-8pm daily Jun-Aug, shorter hr Sep-May).

## Getting There & Away

The Reykjavík–Höfn bus service runs daily from 1 June to 15 September, and on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday the rest of the year.

Summer buses depart from either end of the route at 8.30am (winter buses set off from Reykjavík/Höfn later in the day), and stop at Hótel Klaustur or the petrol station in Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Eastbound from Reykjavík, the bus passes Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 1.30pm (1kr4400), continuing to Skaftafell and Jökulsárlón. Westbound from Höfn, it passes

Kirkjubæjarklaustur at 12.40pm (1kr3300), continuing on to Reykjavík.

The Fjallabak bus between Reykjavík and Skaftafell passes at around 6.30pm eastbound and at 9am westbound daily from 20 June to 2 September. The entire route costs 1kr8100.

## AROUND KIRKJUBÆJARKLAUSTUR

### Fjarðrárgljúfur

This peculiar and darkly picturesque canyon, carved out by the river Fjarðrá, is a humbling two million years old. A walking track follows its southern edge for a couple of kilometres, and there are plenty of places to gaze down into its rocky, writhing depths. The canyon is 3.5km north of the Ring Rd; you can walk there across lava fields or drive along the Laki road (Rte 206; you'll reach the canyon before it becomes an F road).

Around the nearby Holt farm is the small **Holtborg Nature Reserve**. This is the only place in Iceland where wild roses grow naturally.

### Foss á Siðu & Dverghamrar

Foss á Siðu, 11km east of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, is an attractive **waterfall** that normally tumbles down from the cliffs. During especially strong sea winds, however, it actually goes straight up! Opposite the falls is the outcrop **Dverghamrar**, which contains some classic **basalt columns**.

## Sleeping & Eating

There's quite a bit of farmhouse accommodation in the area immediately around Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

**Ourpick Hörgsland** (☎ 487 6655; www.horgsland.is; sb 1kr2300, made-up beds 1kr3000, cottages from 1kr6900) This place, a readers' favourite on the Ring Rd about 8km northeast of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, is like a minivillage of very spacious and comfortable self-contained cottages. The two-bedroom timber cabins sleep at least six and have kitchen, lounge and veranda. There are a couple of outdoor hot pots here, as well as a shop, a café and a petrol station, and you can arrange fishing permits.

**Efri-Vík** (☎ 487 4694; www.efrivik.is; sites per person 1kr700, sb 1kr2900, s/d 1kr5900/8900) A good choice is this farm, 5km south of Kirkjubæjarklaustur on Rte 204. As well as beds in comfortable cottages, it has a nine-hole golf course, boat rental, a sauna, a hot tub and lake fishing.

**Hunkubakkar** (☎ 487 4681; hunka@mmedia.is; s/d from 1kr5900/7900; ☎) This farmhouse, 7km west

of Klaustur along Rtes 1 and 206, has simple parquet-floored rooms in the main building and cottages to rent in the grounds. Other facilities include a restaurant and horse hire. Between October and May you'll have to book in advance.

**Restaurant Geirland** (☎ 487 4677; geirland@centrum.is; Geirland; mains 1kr1500-2700; ☎ 7-11pm Jun-Aug) This restaurant is part of the farmhouse accommodation at Geirland, about 4km along Rte 203. Mains make use of fresh local produce – sea trout, lamb steak – plus there's always a veggie course.

## LAKAGÍGAR

It's almost impossible to comprehend the intensity of the Laki eruptions, one of the most catastrophic volcanic events in human history.

In the spring of 1783 a vast set of fissures opened, forming around 135 craters that took it in turns to fountain molten rock up to 1km into the air. These Skaftáreldar lasted for eight months, spewing out more than 30 billion tonnes of lava, which covered an area of 500 sq km in a layer up to 19km thick. Fifty farms in the region were wiped out.

Far more devastating were the hundreds of millions of tonnes of ash and sulphuric acid that poured from the fissures. The sun was blotted out, the grass died off, and around two-thirds of Iceland's livestock died from starvation and poisoning. Some 9000 people – a fifth of the country – were killed and the remainder faced the **Moðuharðindi** (Haze Famine) that followed.

The damage wasn't limited to purely to Iceland, either. All across the northern hemisphere clouds of ash in the atmosphere blocked out the sun. Temperatures dropped and acid rain fell from the sky, causing devastating crop failures in Japan, Alaska and Europe (possibly even helping to spark the French Revolution).

The whole Lakagigar area was included within the new 2004 boundaries of Skaftafell National Park. Wardens will occasionally pop out of the wilderness with brochure-maps of the area for sale. You should stick to paths in this ecologically sensitive region, and camping is forbidden. If you want a proper topographical map, the **Landmælingar Íslands'** 1:50,000 map *DMA 1913 II Lakagígar* shows the area, as does the Atlas Maps 1:100,000 *Langisjó* map.

**A JEEP TOUR ON VATNAJÖKULL**

**Visitor:** If there's a volcanic eruption while we're on the glacier, will we get our money back?

**Jeep Driver:** No, we'll charge you double!

**Laki**

Although Laki (818m) is extinct, it has loaned its name to the still-volatile, 25km-long Lakagígur crater row, which stretches southwestward from its base. Laki can be climbed in about 40 minutes from the parking area, and we highly recommend it. There are boundless 360-degree views from the top, of the active fissure, vast lava fields and glinting ice-white glaciers in the distance.

**Lakagígur Crater Row**

The Lakagígur crater row is fascinating to explore. The entire area is riddled with black sand dunes and lava tubes, many of which contain tiny stalactites. Down at Laki's feet, marked walking paths lead you in and out of the two nearest craters, including an interesting lava tunnel – bring a torch. Another cave, two hours' walk south of the Laki parking area, shelters a mysterious lake.

Nowadays the lava field belies the apocalypse that spawned it just over 220 years ago. Its black, twisted lava formations are now overgrown with soft green moss.

**Fagrifoss & Hell's Back Door**

Fagrifoss (Beautiful Falls) is certainly not a misnomer: this must be one of Iceland's most bewitching **waterfalls**, with rivulets of water pouring over a massive black rock. You'll come to the turnoff on the way to Laki, about 22km along the F206.

Not far from Fagrifoss is a very deep **hole** in a small slump crater, about 200m east of the Laki road. It doesn't seem to have a particular name, but locals will jokingly tell you it's the back door to hell (Hekla is the front). The hidden entrance is just 35cm across, so it's unlikely you'll find it without a guide.

**Sleeping**

Camping is forbidden within the Laki reserve; despite its death-dealing fissures, the area is ecologically very delicate. The nearest camp site, with toilet and fresh water, is at Blágil, about 11km from Laki.

**Getting There & Away**

If you want to drive, Rte F206 (just west of Kirkjubæjarklaustur) is generally passable from July to early September. It's a long 50km to the Lakagígur crater row. The road is unsuitable for 2WD cars, as there are several rivers to ford. Even low-clearance 4WD vehicles may not be enough in the spring thaw or after rain, when the rivers tend to run deep.

From 1 July to 31 August you can get to the Lakagígur area on the worthwhile **Austurleið-Kynniferðir bus** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is). The 10-hour tour (with a jumpy CD guide!) allows around three hours' walking in the crater area. It departs daily, at 8am from Skaftafell (1kr7300) and at 9am from Kirkjubæjarklaustur (1kr5300). If you're staying at the camp site or one of the farmhouses, ring in advance for a pick-up.

**THE SANDAR**

Another area of devastation are the sandar, soul-destroyingly flat and empty regions sprawling along Iceland's southeastern coast. High in the mountains, glaciers scrape up silt, sand and gravel that is then carried by glacial rivers or (more dramatically) by glacial bursts down to the coast and dumped in huge desertlike plains. The sandar here are so impressively huge and awful that the Icelandic word is used internationally to describe this topographic phenomenon.

Skeiðarársandur is the most visible and dramatic, stretching some 40km between icecap and coast from Núpssstaður to Örafi. Here you'll encounter a flat expanse of grey-black sands, fierce scouring winds (a cyclist's nightmare) and fast-flowing grey-brown glacial rivers.

**Meðallandssandur**

This region spreads across the Meðalland district south of Eldhraun and east of the river Kúðaflljót. This sandy desert is so flat and featureless that a number of ships have run aground on its coast, apparently unaware they were nearing land. Shipwrecked sailors have died in quicksand while trying to get ashore. There are now several small lighthouses along the coast.

**Skeiðarársandur**

Skeiðarársandur, the largest sandar in the world, covers a 1000-sq-km area and was formed by the mighty Skeiðarárjökull. Since

the Settlement Era Skeiðarársandur has swallowed a considerable amount of farmland and it continues to grow. The area was relatively well populated (for Iceland, anyway), but in 1362 the volcano Örafi beneath Öraefajökull erupted and the subsequent *jökulhlaup* laid waste the entire district.

The section of Rte 1 that passes across Skeiðarársandur was the last bit of the national highway to be constructed – as recently as 1974 (until then, Höfnites had to drive to Reykjavík via Akureyri!). Long gravel dykes have been strategically positioned to channel flood waters away from this highly susceptible artery. They did little good, however, when in late 1996 three Ring Rd bridges were washed away like matchsticks by the massive *jökulhlaup* released by the Grímsvötn (or Gjálp) eruption (see the boxed text, p287). There's a memorial of twisted bridge girders and an information board along the Ring Rd just west of Skaftafell National Park.

The sands are a major breeding area for great skuas (see the boxed text, p291) – particularly appropriate birds for such a harsh and desolate region.

**Núpssstaður & Núpssstaðarskógur**

Bizarrely eroded cliffs and pinnacles tower over the old **turf-roofed farm** and church at Núpssstaður. The farm buildings date back as far as the early 19th century, and the church, which is dedicated to St Nicholas, was mentioned as early as 1200. It was renovated in 1957 by Einar Jónsson and is one of the last turf churches in Iceland.

Inland is Núpssstaðarskógur, a beautiful **woodland area** on the slopes of the mountain Eystrafjall. Since it's no longer possible to cross the Núpssá river by raft, this area is best explored on a tour run by the Icelandic Mountain Guides (see right).

**Grænalón**

From the southern end of Núpssstaðarskógur a good two-day hike will take you over the ridges and valleys west of immense Skeiðarárjökull to Grænalón. This ice-dammed **lake** has the ability to drain like a bathtub. The 'plug' is the western edge of Skeiðarárjökull and, when the water pressure builds to breaking point, the glacier is lifted and the lake lets go. It has been known to release up to 2.7 million cubic metres of water at 5000 cubic metres per second in a single burst.

To get there you'll have to join the Núpssstaðarskógur tour (see below), as it's impossible to cross the Núpssá and Súlaá rivers on foot (the Icelandic Mountain Guides have special equipment, including a big 4x4!). The topo sheet to use is *Lómagnúpur* 1:100,000 (1986).

**Tours**

In July and August, the **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; www.mountainguide.is) run a guided four-day (60km) hike through Núpssstaðarskógur, over to Grænalón lagoon, across the glacier Skeiðarárjökull and then into Morsárdalur in Skaftafell National Park. The trip costs 1kr48,900 with food, camping gear, glacier equipment and transport from Skaftafell included. There's a supplement to pay if the walking group has fewer than five people – phone to check numbers.

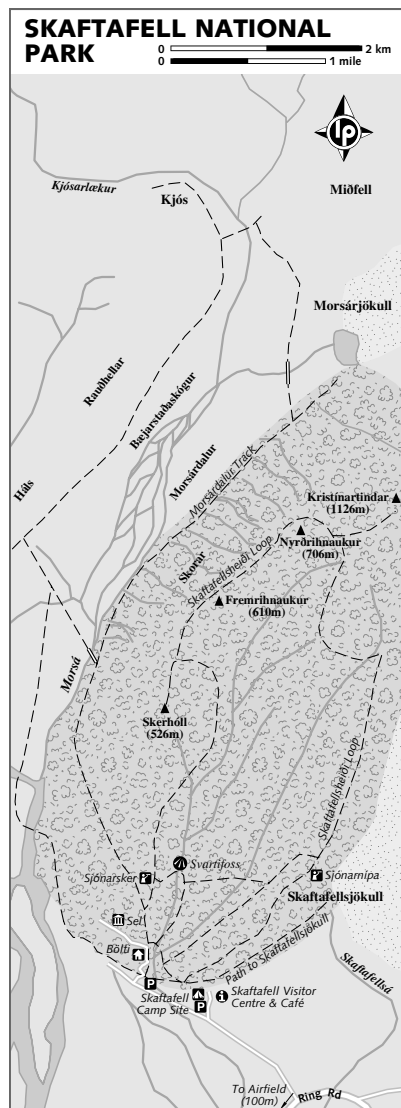
**Sleeping**

**Hvoll HI Hostel** (☎ 487 4785; www.simnet.is/nupssta-darskogur; dm 1kr1800, s/d 1kr2800/4600; ☞ Mar-Oct) Iceland's third-largest hostel is on the edge of Skeiðarársandur (3km south off the Ring Rd via a gravel road) and feels very remote despite its size. It's very much like the Reykjavík hostel in its clean new design and busy atmosphere; facilities include several kitchens, a TV room, laundry, bookshelves full of Mickey Spillane, and a payphone. It makes an excellent base for exploring Skaftafell, Núpssstaðarskógur and the surrounding sandar.

**SKAFTAFELL NATIONAL PARK**

Europe's largest national park encompasses a breathtaking collection of peaks and glaciers. It's the country's favourite wilderness: 160,000 visitors per year come to marvel at thundering waterfalls, twisted birch woods, the tangled web of rivers threading across the sandar, and brilliant blue-white Vatnajökull with its lurching tongues of ice.

Skaftafell deserves its reputation, and few Icelanders – even those who usually shun the great outdoors – can resist it. On long summer weekends all of Reykjavík (including the city's raucous all-night parties) may seem to descend. It can be lots of fun but may prove disappointing if you've come to commune with nature rather than stereo systems. However, if you're prepared to get out on the more remote trails and take advantage of the fabulous hiking on the heath and beyond, you'll leave the crowds far behind.



There's very little accommodation close to the park, so you'll need either a tent or a firm hotel booking plus private transport if you want to explore the park properly.

## History

The historical Skaftafell was a large farm at the foot of the hills west of the present camp

site. Shifting glacial sands slowly buried the fields and forced the farm to a more suitable site, on the heath 100m above the sandar. The district came to be known as Hérað Milli Sandur (Land Between the Sands), but after all the farms were annihilated by the 1362 eruptions the district became the 'land under the sands' and was renamed Örafi (Wasteland). Once the vegetation returned, however, the Skaftafell farm was rebuilt in its former location.

The modern park was founded in 1967 by the Icelandic government and the World Wildlife Fund (now the WWF), and was originally 500 sq km. It has been enlarged twice (in June 1984 and in October 2004), and now also includes over half of Vatnajökull and the Laki craters (see p283) to the west. Further expansion plans are under way – eventually, the Skaftafell and Jökulsárgljúfur (p242) national parks will join to form one 15,000-sq-km megapark – 40% of the entire country.

## Information

The helpful **visitor centre** (☎ 478 1627; www.ust.is; ☎ 8am-9pm Jun-Aug, 10am-3pm May & Sep) has an information desk with free brochures and maps for sale, good informative displays on the Örafi area, and a cool film about the 1996 Grímsvötn *jökulhlaup*, shown in peak season only.

All flora, fauna and natural features of the park are protected, open fires are prohibited, and rubbish must be carried out. In the busy area around Skaftafellsheiði, stick to the tracks to avoiding damaging delicate plant life.

Don't get too close to glaciers or climb on them without the proper equipment and training – the average ice block calving off Skaftafellsjökull would crush anyone within a few metres of the face.

**Landmælingar Íslands** (☎ 430 9000; www.lmi.is) publishes a thematic map of Skaftafell National Park showing the nonglacial area of the park at 1:25,000 and the Örafi district at 1:100,000 (2002). It's available at the visitor centre (Ikr790) and in bookshops and tourist offices elsewhere in Iceland. You can also use the *Örafi* *jökull* 1:100,000 (1986) topo sheet.

## Sel

This traditional **turf-roofed farmhouse** (admission free), built in Burstir style in 1912, is worth a glance. There's not much inside, but it's always open and the hill just above offers a good photo opportunity of the farmhouse and the grey sandar stretching out to the coast.

## Grímsvötn

The volcano Grímsvötn, mumbling away underneath the Vatnajökull ice, has been known to blow its top and release apocalyptic *jökulhlaups*. Some of its creations include the Ásbyrgi canyon (see p244), gouged out by a cataclysmic flood over just a few days. In 1934 another Grímsvötn eruption released a *jökulhlaup* of 40,000 cu metres per second, which swelled the river Skeiðará to 9km in width and laid waste large areas of farmland. Its next epic tantrum in 1996 poured 45,000 cu metres of water and icebergs the size of houses down onto the south coast, cutting off the Ring Rd – see the boxed text, below.

Grímsvötn erupted again in December 1998, and most recently in November 2004, when a five-day eruption threw steam and ash 12km into the atmosphere, disrupting air traffic. There was no *jökulhlaup* on either occasion.

## Hiking

Skaftafell is ideal for day hikes and also offers longer treks through its wilderness regions. Most of Skaftafell's visitors keep to the popular routes on Skaftafellsheiði. Hiking in other

accessible areas, such as upper Morsárdalur and Kjós, requires more time, motivation and effort.

Wild camping is not allowed in the park. Compulsory camping permits (Ikr600) for Kjós are available from the information centre. Also inquire about river crossings along your intended route.

## SVARTIFOSS

Star of a hundred postcards, Svartifoss is a gloomy **waterfall** flanked by black basalt columns. It's reached by an easy track leading up from the camp site (about 1½ hours for the return trip). However, due to immense pressure in this area of the park, rangers are encouraging visitors to explore elsewhere. If you do go to Svartifoss, it's worth continuing west up the short track to **Sjónarsker**, where there's a view disc and an unforgettable view across Skeiðárarsandur.

## SKAFTAFELLSJÖKULL

Another popular and less sensitive trail is the easy one-hour return walk to Skaftafellsjökull. The (wheelchair-accessible) sealed track begins at the visitor centre and leads to the **glacier**

## JÖKULHLAUP!

You might think that a volcano buried under thousands of tonnes of ice would somehow be less troublesome than the normal kind. You'd be wrong. In late 1996 the devastating Grímsvötn eruption – Iceland's fourth largest of the 20th century, after Katla in 1918, Hekla in 1947 and Surtsey in 1963 – shook southeast Iceland and caused an awesome *jökulhlaup* across Skeiðárarsandur. The events leading up to it are a sobering reminder of the power of Iceland's volatile fire-and-ice combination.

On the morning of 29 September 1996 a magnitude 5.0 earthquake shook the Vatnajökull icecap. Magma from a new volcano, in the Grímsvötn region beneath Vatnajökull, had made its way through the earth's crust and into the ice, causing the eruption of a 4km-long subsurface fissure known as Gjálp. The following day the eruption burst through the surface, ejecting a column of steam that rose 10km into the sky and inspiring impressive aerial photography that was televised worldwide.

Scientists became concerned as the subglacial lake in the Grímsvötn caldera began to fill with water from ice melted by the eruption. Initial predictions on 3 October were that the ice would lift and the lake would give way within 48 hours and spill out across Skeiðárarsandur, threatening the Ring Rd and its bridges, which serve as vital links between eastern and western Iceland. In the hope of diverting floodwaters away from the bridges, massive dyke-building projects were organised on Skeiðárarsandur.

On 5 November, over a month after the eruption started, the ice *did* lift and the Grímsvötn reservoir drained in a massive *jökulhlaup*, releasing up to 3000 billion cubic litres of water within a few hours. The floodwaters – dragging along icebergs the size of three-storey buildings – destroyed the 375m-long Gígjukvísl Bridge and the 900m-long Skeiðará Bridge, both on the Skeiðárarsandur. See video footage of the eruption and enormous multitonne blocks of ice being hurled across Skeiðárarsandur at the Skaftafell visitor centre.

**face**, where you can witness the bumps and groans of the ice – although the glacier is pretty grey and gritty here. The glacier has been receding in recent years and over the past 50 years has lost nearly 1km of its length.

### SKAFTAFELLSHEIÐI LOOP

On a fine day, the five- to six-hour walk around Skaftafellsheiði is a hiker's dream. It begins by climbing from the camp site past Svartifoss and Sjónaresker, continuing across the moor to 610m-high **Fremrihnaukur**. From there it follows the edge of the plateau to the next rise, **Nyrðrihnaukur** (706m), which affords a superb view of Morsárdalur, Morsárjökull and the iceberg-choked lagoon at its base. At this point the track turns southeast to an outlook point on the cliff above Skaftafellsjökull (Gláma).

For the best view of Skaftafellsjökull, Morsárdalur and the Skeiðarársandur, it's worth scaling the summit of **Kristinartindar** (1126m). The easiest way follows a well-marked route up the prominent valley south-east of the Nyrðrihnaukur lookout.

### MORSÁRDALUR & BÆJARSTAÐARSKÓGUR

The seven-hour hike from the camp site to the glacial lake in Morsárdalur is fairly ordinary but enjoyable. There's a footbridge across the lake outlet, and from there you can continue to **Kjós**. Alternatively, cross the Morsá on the footbridge near the point where the Kambgil ravine comes down from Skaftafellsheiði and make your way across the gravel riverbed to the birch woods at **Bæjarstaðarskógur**. The trees here reach a whopping (for Iceland) 12m, and 80°C springs flow into the tiny but heavenly Heitulækir to the west in Vestragil. The return walk to Bæjarstaðarskógur takes about six hours; add on an extra hour to visit Heitulækir.

### OTHER HIKES

Other possibilities include the long day trip beyond Bæjarstaðarskógur into the rugged Skaftafellsfjöll. A recommended destination is the 965m-high summit of the **Jökulfell ridge**, which affords a commanding view of the vast expanses of Skeiðarárjökull. Even better is a three-day excursion into the Kjós region. When you reach Kjós, a very difficult hike leads to the base of Þumall (Thumb), then west along the glacier edge, around the valley rim and south down to your starting point.

### Tours

The **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; 894 2959; www.mountainguide.is) is the country's mountain-rescue squad, so you can feel pretty safe on the excellent organised hikes. In summer it has a base in the Skaftafell camp site where you can book places in person.

The mountain guides lead a range of walks, including glacier walks and ice-climbing (opposite and p139); guided hikes up Iceland's highest peak (opposite); and longer backpack hikes including the challenging four-day route from Núpsstaðarskógur to Skaftafell (p285), and the epic nine-day trek from Laki to Skaftafell (Ikr99,000). See the website for more suggestions.

If all this walking sounds like an effort, there are **sightseeing flights** (☎ 478 2406; www.jorvik.is) from the tiny airfield just outside the national park over Vatnajökull, Grímsvötn, the Lakagígur crater row or the glaciers. Prices start at Ikr9000 for 30 minutes.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Visitor-centre camp site** (☎ 478 1627; sites per person Ikr600) Since Skaftafell is a national park, most people bring a tent to this large, gravelly camp site (with laundry facilities). It gets very busy and loud in summer. The only other place you're allowed to camp is at the Kjós camp site (Ikr600 per person) – buy a permit from the visitor centre before you set off.

**Bölti** (☎ 478 1626; fax 478 2426; Skaftafellsheiði; sb/d Ikr2200/7500; ☞ May-Sep) This farm, on the hill above the western end of the Skaftafell camp site, is in a superb location with dizzying views out over the sandur. There's sleeping-bag accommodation on bunk beds in six-person huts; tiny kitchen areas include a kettle and two electric rings. Book ahead in summer. Breakfast is a rather pricey Ikr1000.

The nearest hotel, **Hótel Skaftafell**, is at Freysnes (see opposite), 5km east of the national park entrance, and there's farmhouse accommodation (sleeping-bag space and cabins) at the Hof and Litla-Hof farms, 23km away.

Food in the park is limited. The café at the visitor centre has a woeful coffee machine, sandwiches and a tiny selection of groceries.

### Getting There & Away

From 1 June to 15 September, daily buses run by **Austurleið-Kynniserðir** (☎ 562 1011; www.austurleid.is) go between Reykjavík and Höfn, leaving at each end at 8.30am and passing Skaftafell

at 2.35pm eastbound (Ikr5400) and 11.10am westbound (Ikr2300). The rest of the year the Reykjavík–Höfn bus runs on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday, departing at 12.30pm from Reykjavík and at noon from Höfn.

From 20 June to 2 September there's another bus from Reykjavík to Skaftafell via the scenic inland route through Landmannalaugar and Eldgjá, departing daily from Reykjavík at 8.30am and arriving at Skaftafell at 7.30pm (Ikr8100). Westbound it departs from Skaftafell at 8am.

### SKAFTAFELL TO HÖFN

Glistening glaciers and brooding mountains line the 130km stretch between Skaftafell and Höfn. In clear weather the unfolding landscape makes it difficult to keep your eyes on the road. The premier tourist stop is the iceberg-filled lagoon Jökulsárlón. Other attractions include exhilarating glacier walks, Jeep and snowmobile tours on the Vatnajökull icecap, puffin spotting at Ingólfshöfði and horse riding.

### Freysnes, Svínafell & Svínafellsjökull

The **farm Svínafell**, 8km southeast of Skaftafell, was the home of Flosi Þórðarson, the character who burned Njál and his family to death in *Njál's Saga*. It was also the site where Flosi and Njál's family were finally reconciled, thus ending one of the bloodiest feuds in Icelandic history (see p136). There's not much to this tiny settlement now, but you can go swimming at **Flosalaug** (☎ 478 1765; ☞ 5-9pm), a complex with a shallow round pool, hot pots, showers and a camp site.

In the 17th century, the **glacier Svínafellsjökull** nearly engulfed the farm, but it has since retreated. On the northern side of the glacier (towards Skaftafell), a dirt road leads 2km to a car park, from where it's a short walk to the snout.

### ICE CLIMBING & GLACIER WALKS

From mid-May to mid-September you can enjoy daily walks up Svínafellsjökull with the **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; www

.mountainguide.is). It's utterly liberating to strap on crampons and suddenly be able to stride up a glacier, and there's so much to see on the ice. Waterfalls, ice caves, glacial mice and different-coloured ash from ancient explosions are just some of the glacier's slightly hallucinatory joys. The 'Blue Ice Experience' (Ikr3900 per person), at 10am and 2pm, is a 2½-hour walk for beginners, but it just doesn't last long enough! We'd recommend the longer five-hour 'Glacier Adventure' (Ikr6300 per person), at 9am. There's also a three-hour ice-climbing expedition using ice walls on the glacier (Ikr5900 per person), at 4pm. The only equipment you need to bring is hiking boots.

Local company **Öræfaferðir** (☎ 894 0894; www.hofsnes.com), based at the farm Hofnes, offers similar tours at similar prices Monday to Saturday year-round.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Hótel Skaftafell** (☎ 478 1945; www.hotelskaftafell.is; Freysnes; s/d May-Aug Ikr11,000/14,600, rest of yr Ikr9000/11,100; ☞ closed Dec & Jan) This is the closest hotel to Skaftafell National Park, 5km east at Freysnes. Its 63 rooms (all with bathroom and TV) are functional rather than luxurious, but staff are helpful, and even the rooms in the prefabricated buildings at the back have great glacial views. There's a good restaurant (mains Ikr2000 to Ikr3000) serving 'Sean Connery salad', fresh char, puffin, lamb and lobster, and a recommended rhubarb and cardamom mousse. A pleasant walking trail leads to Svínafellsjökull from behind the building.

**Flosi** (☎ 894 1765; flosihf@simnet.is; sites per person Ikr700, sb May-Sep Ikr2500, Oct-Apr Ikr2000) At the swimming pool at Svínafell, this place has a camp site and six basic cabins, each with four bunks, and a simple amenities block. If you have your own vehicle it's an alternative to the camp site at Skaftafell.

The petrol station opposite Hótel Skaftafell has a shop selling hot dogs.

### Öræfajökull & Hvannadalshnúkur

Iceland's highest **mountain**, Hvannadalshnúkur (2119m), pokes out from the icecap Öræfajökull, an offshoot of Vatnajökull. This lofty peak is actually the northwestern edge of an immense 5km-wide crater – the biggest active volcano in Europe after Mt Etna. It erupted in 1362, firing out the largest amount of tephra in Iceland's recorded history: nearby glaciers are liberally spattered with bits of compressed

#### ON ROADKILL

(...as an arctic tern splatters against the windscreen...) 'We don't stop for birds in Iceland. Sheeps, yes! Birds, no!'

Höfn bus driver



yellow ash from the explosion. The region was utterly devastated – hence its name, Örafli (Wasteland).

The best access for climbing Hvannadalshnúkur is from Sandfellsheiði, above the abandoned farm Sandfell, about 12km southeast of Skaftafell. Climbers should be well versed in glacier travel, and, although most guided expeditions manage the trip in a very long and taxing day (see below), independent climbers should carry enough supplies and gear for several days.

## TOURS

Local companies **Örafafærðir** (☎ 894 0894; www.hofsnes.com) and the **Icelandic Mountain Guides** (☎ 587 9999; www.mountainguide.is) run guided 10- to 15-hour ascents of Hvannadalshnúkur. The trip costs 1kr14,900 per person (minimum of two people), including transport and use of equipment. If you're looking for a challenge, this is one of the best deals in Iceland.

Transport is provided up to the snow line, where you transfer to snowshoes for the ascent to the 1820m-high crater rim. After walking across the crater, you make the final summit ascent with crampons and ice axe. You need to bring warm clothing and your own food and water. Trips run on request between June and August. Book in advance, and allow yourself extra days in case the weather causes a cancellation.

## Hof & Bær

At Hof farm is a picturesque wood-and-peat church, built on the foundations of a previous 14th-century building, and a **Viking temple** dedicated to Þórr. It was reconstructed in 1883 and now sits pleasantly in a thicket of birch and ash with flowers growing on the grassy roof.

About 6km further east, **Bær** is a farm that was buried by ash in the 1362 Örafli eruption. The walls are surprisingly intact, but visitors are asked not to trample all over them since the ruins are both protected and part of an ongoing archaeological excavation.

At the Hof farm, and beautifully situated beneath the Örafajökull glacier, the **Frost & Fire Guesthouse** (☎ 478 1669; www.frostogfuni.is; s/d 1kr7800/11,400, d with bathroom 1kr12,500; ☹ Jun–early Sep) has a variety of rooms in the main farmhouses and chalets. The majority have shared bathrooms. Prices include breakfast, and there's a brand-new sauna and hot pot. This is a good base for glacier tours to Örafajökull. Nearby

is another farm, **Litla-Hof** (☎ 478 1670), with similarly priced rooms.

The nearest shop and snack bar is at the lonely Esso petrol station at Fagurhólsmýri, 5km east along the Ring Rd.

## Ingólfshöfði

The 76m-high Ingólfshöfði promontory rises from the flatlands like a strange dream. In spring and summer, this beautiful, isolated **nature reserve** is overrun with nesting puffins, skuas and other sea birds, and you'll often see seals and whales offshore. It's also of great historical importance – it was here that Ingólfur Arnarson, Iceland's first settler, stayed the winter on his original foray to the country in AD 871. The reserve is open to visitors, but the 9km drive across the shallow tidal lagoon isn't something you should attempt, even in a 4WD.

Luckily, you can get here by hay wagon! Farmer Sigurður Bjarnason gets out his trusty tractor between May and August and runs **tours** (adult/under 12yr 1kr2000/free; ☹ noon Mon–Sat May–Aug, 9am, noon & 3pm Mon–Sat Jul) to the reserve. The half-hour ride across the sands is followed by an interesting two-hour guided walk round the headland, with the emphasis on bird-watching. You can book through **Örafafærðir** (☎ 894 0894; www.hofsnes.com), or simply turn up outside the farm at Hofsnes (signposted, just off the Ring Rd) 10 minutes before the tour's due to start.

## Breiðamerkursandur

The easternmost of the large sandar, Breiðamerkursandur is one of the main breeding grounds for Iceland's great skuas (see the boxed text, opposite). Thanks to rising numbers of these ground-nesting birds, there's also a growing population of arctic foxes. Historically, Breiðamerkursandur also figures in *Njál's Saga*, which ends with Kári Sölmundarson arriving in this idyllic spot to 'live happily ever after' – which has to be some kind of miracle in a saga.

The sandar is backed by a sweeping panorama of glacier-capped mountains, some of which are fronted by deep lagoons. **Kviárjökull glacier** snakes down to the Kviár river and is easily accessible from the Ring Rd. Leave your car in the small car park just off Rte 1 (you can't drive any further) and follow the walking path into the valley. It's quite an uncanny place: boulders line the huge western moraine like sentinels, the mossy grass is full of fairy

## HOW TO AVOID BEING SKUA-ED

One shouldn't anthropomorphise, but great skuas (*Stercorarius skua* in Latin, *skúmur* in Icelandic) are evil. These dirty-brown birds with white-patched wings even look the part: they're large, meaty bully boys with cruel curved beaks and beady black eyes that you can't outstare. You'll often find them harassing gulls into disgorging their dinner, killing and eating puffins and other little birds, or swooping down on YOU if you get too close to their nests. They tend to build these among grassy tufts, mainly in the great *sandur* regions on Iceland's southern coast.

Thankfully (unlike feather-brained arctic terns), skuas will stop plaguing you if you run away from the area they're trying to defend. You can also avoid aerial strikes by wearing a hat or carrying a stick above your head. Occasionally ravens or groups of smaller birds will get together to mob a skua and drive it off: these aerial battles are interesting to watch.

rings, and a powerful glacial wind frequently surges down from the ice above.

The 742m-high **Breiðamerkurjökull** was once a nunatak enclosed by Breiðamerkurjökull and Fjallsjökull, but the glaciers have since retreated and freed it.

At the foot of the peak is the glacial lagoon **Breiðarlón**, where icebergs calve from Fjallsjökull before sailing out to sea. Although it's not as dramatic as Jökulsárlón, in some ways it's more satisfying, thanks to the lack of people. It's set back from the Ring Rd and not immediately obvious, plus the (very rough) dirt road is extremely off-putting. It's possible to get there in a car (but don't blame us if you get stuck), or else it's a 25-minute walk from Rte 1.

## Jökulsárlón

A host of spectacular, luminous-blue icebergs drift through Jökulsárlón **lagoon**, right beside the Ring Rd between Höfn and Skaftafell. Even when you're expecting this surreal scene, it's still a mighty surprise – just count how many shocked drivers slam on the brakes and skid across the road, and make sure you don't do the same thing yourself. It's worth spending a couple of hours here, admiring the wondrous ice sculptures, looking for seals or taking a trip in an amphibious boat.

The icebergs calve from Breiðamerkurjökull, an offshoot of Vatnajökull, crashing down into the water and drifting inexorably towards the sea. They can spend up to five years floating in the 17-sq-km, 600m-deep lagoon, melting, refreezing and occasionally toppling over with a mighty splash, startling the birds.

Although it looks as though it's been here since the last ice age, the lagoon is only about 75 years old. Until 1932 Breiðamerkurjökull reached the Ring Rd; it's now retreating rap-

idly, and the lagoon is consequently growing at a rate of knots.

Jökulsárlón is a natural film set. It starred briefly in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), pretending to be Siberia – the amphibious tourist-carrying boats were even painted grey and used as Russian ships. You might also have seen it in the James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002), for which the lagoon was specially frozen and six Aston Martins were destroyed on the ice!

## BOAT TRIPS

Between late May and early September you can take a 35-minute trip on the lagoon in brilliant **amphibious boats** (☎ 478 2222; info@jokulsarlon.is; per person 1kr2200), which trundle along the shore like buses before driving into the water. Guides hop on board to tell you interesting factoids about the lagoon, and you get to taste 1000-year-old ice. Trips set off around every half-hour between 10am and 5pm daily.

But if you're short of time or money, don't think that you're missing out. You can get just as close to those cool-blue masterpieces by walking along the shore, and you can taste ancient ice by hauling it out of the water.

## SLEEPING & EATING

The **Jökulsárlón café** (☎ 478 2122; www.jokulsarlon.is; ☹ 9am–7pm Jun–mid-Aug, 10am–5pm late May & early Sep) beside the lagoon is a good pit stop for information and some of southeast Iceland's best seafood soup.

If you have a camper van with toilet, it's OK to stay in the car park. Otherwise camping by the lagoon isn't really condoned (particularly not on the eastern side, where there are lots of nesting birds). The nearest accommodation is at **Gerði** (☎ 478 1905, 846 0641; bjornborg@centrum.is; sites per person 1kr700, sb 1kr1500–3500, s/tr/q with bathroom

7000/12,500/13,500, d without bathroom lkr7600, up to 20% off rest of yr), about 13km east along the Ring Rd. This sprawling farm has a very peaceful guesthouse with great views, and cooking and lounge facilities; meals can be preordered in summer. There's also space to pitch a tent.

### Suðursveit & Mýrar

Between Jökulsárlón and Höfn the Ring Rd passes several small farms, backed by mountains and yet more glaciers.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The brand-new museum **Pórbergssonsetur** (☎ 867 2900; Hali í Suðursveit; admission lkr600; ☞ 9am-9pm Jun-early Sep, to 5pm rest of yr) pays tribute to the most famous son of this sparsely populated region – writer Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888–1974), who was born at Hali in Suðursveit. The exhibition contains full-sized models of the farmhouse where he grew up and his study in Reykjavík, illustrated by quotes from his work. Þórbergur was a real maverick (with interests spanning yoga, Esperanto, astronomy, archaeology and geology), and his first book *Bréf til Láru* (*Letter to Laura*) caused huge controversy because of its radical socialist content. It's a shame that more of it hasn't been translated into English – you'll just have to make do with the perspicacious, humorous snippets from the accompanying museum guide.

As for glaciers, if you want to get up onto **Vatnajökull**, the daddy of them all, for a snowmobile, skiing or Jeep tour (see the boxed text, p294), then this area is where you branch vertically off into the mountains. Rte F985, which leads up to the **Jöklašel hut**, is about 35km east of Jökulsárlón.

Staying on the Ring Rd, you'll cross the lovely **Mýrar**, a region of wetlands surrounding the deltas of Hornafjarðarfjót and Kolgrímaá, home to lots of **water birds**.

The prominent and colourful mountain **Ketillaugarfjall** rises 670m above the Hornafjarðarfjót delta near Bjarnarnes. Its name derives from a legend about a woman named Ketillaug, who carried a pot of gold into the mountain and never returned. A brilliantly coloured alluvial fan at its base is visible from the road.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Vagnstaðir HI Hostel** (☎ 478 1048; glacierjeeps@simnet.is; sites per person lkr650, sb dm lkr1800; ☞ May-Sep) As the home of the Glacier Jeeps outfit (see

p294), this is the obvious place to stay the night before or after a tour onto the Vatnajökull icecap. The hostel itself, by the Ring Rd 50km west of Höfn, is a simple, purpose-built house in the shadow of some imposing mountains.

**Smyrlabjörg** (☎ 478 1074; smyrlabjorg@eldhorn.is; s/d/tr lkr7500/13,100/18,000, up to 30% off out of season; ☞ closed late Dec; ☞) This friendly country hotel has 45 simply furnished rooms, all with satellite TV and attached bathroom. There's a restaurant serving an Icelandic buffet for dinner in summer, and a bar. It's a great place if you're after mod-cons but still want geese in the yard, mountain views, and utter peace and quiet.

**Skálafell** (☎ 478 1041; skalafell@simnet.is; sb lkr2900, d lkr10,700-14,600) At the foot of the Skálafell glacier, this friendly working farm has a couple of rooms in the quaint family farmhouse and three two-bedroom cabins. There are no cooking facilities, but breakfast and dinner are available. The owners offer guided walking trips to Skálafellsjökull.

**Flatey** (☎ 478 1036; flatey1@mmedia.is; sb lkr2800, s/d without bathroom lkr7400/10,600, with bathroom lkr10,700/14,600) With a pair of glacier tongues backing up to the property, Flatey has a great location and a variety of rooms in the family farmhouse or in a separate guesthouse with lounge and kitchen facilities.

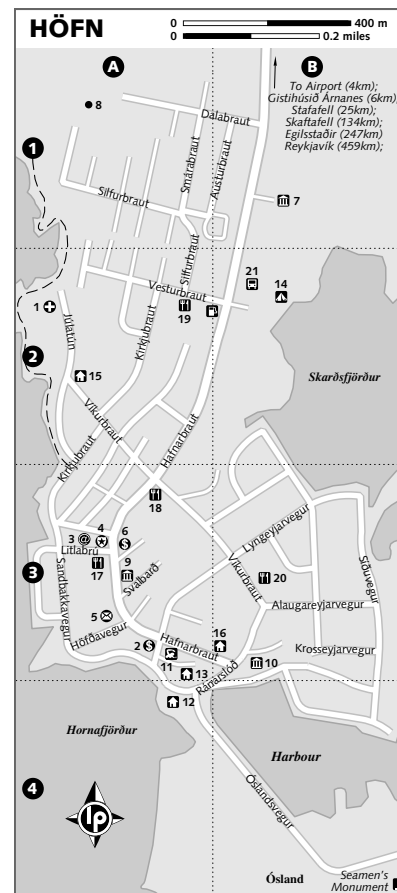
**Brunnhóll** (☎ 478 1029; brunnholl@eldhorn.is; s/d without bathroom lkr8600/11,520, with bathroom lkr10,700/14,600; ☞ Apr-Oct; ☞) A gorgeous farm property 30km from Höfn on the southern side of the Ring Rd, Brunnhóll has a cosy guesthouse and a bright, glassed-in dining room where breakfast is served.

### HÖFN

pop 1660

Although it's no bigger than many European villages, the southeast's main town feels like a sprawling metropolis after driving through the wastelands on either side. Its setting is stunning; on a clear day wander down to the waterside, find a quiet bench and just gaze at Vatnajökull and its brotherhood of glaciers.

'Höfn' simply means 'harbour', and is pronounced like an unexpected hiccup (if you're not prone to hiccups, just say 'hup' while inhaling). It's an apt name – this modern town still relies heavily on fishing and fish processing, and it's famous for its lobster and prawns (there's even an annual lobster festival). Bus travellers will have to stay overnight here, and



most other travellers stop to use the town's many services, so it pays to book accommodation in summer. Höfn makes a very handy base for trips to the glacier.

### Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 478 2665; www.east.is; Hafnarbraut 30; ☞ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug, 1-6pm May & Sep, 1-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) is also the ticket desk for the glacier exhibition (see right). Internet access at the **library** (☎ 470 8050; Litlabrú; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 11am-5pm Fri), in the community centre opposite the supermarket, costs lkr200 per hour. Landsbanki Islands and Sparisjóðurinn, both on Hafnarbraut, handle foreign exchange. The latter has an ATM, and you'll also find an ATM in the 11-11 supermarket.

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### Sights & Activities

The **Jöklaþýning Glacier Exhibition** (www.joklasnying.is; adult/under 16yr lkr600/free; ☞ 9am-9pm daily Jun-Aug, 1-6pm daily May & Sep, 1-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) explains the history and geology of Vatnajökull and southeastern Iceland in great detail. For a break from all the reading, there are a couple of films – an excellent 10-minute video of the 1996 Grimsvötn eruption, plus clips from James Bond movies made in the region. There's also a small collection of exhibits relating to glacier exploration, some altogether-too-strange glacial mice, a baffling plastic 'ice cave', and a good natural-history room. You can check that the glacier's still there from the viewing platform on the roof.

The regional folk museum **Byggðasafnið Gamlabúð** (☎ 478 1833; Hafnarbraut; adult/under 16yr lkr300/free; ☞ 1-9pm Jul, to 6pm Jun, Aug & early Sep), near the camp site, is housed in an 1864 trade warehouse that was moved to Höfn from Pappaós, further east. It has agricultural displays as well as small natural-history and marine-life exhibits.

**Pakkhúsið** (☎ 478 1540; Krossesjarvegur; ☞ 1-6pm Jun-early Sep), near the harbour, is really more of a handicraft shop than a museum, but there's a maritime display in the basement of the building, with old fishing boats, tools

## RIDING ON THE VATNAJÖKULL ICECAP

Although the Vatnajökull icecap and its attendant glaciers look spectacular from the Ring Rd, most travellers will be seized by a wild desire to get even closer.

However, access to Vatnajökull is limited to commercial tours... unless you happen to be set up for a serious polar-style expedition. The icecap is extremely dangerous: the whole thing is riven with deep crevasses, which are made invisible by coverings of fresh snow, and there are often sudden, violent blizzards. But don't be disheartened! It's a mind-blowing experience just to get near the thing, and you can travel way up into the whiteness on organised snowmobile and Jeep tours.

The easiest route up to Vatnajökull is the F985 Jeep track (about 40km east of Jökulsárlón, 55km west of Höfn) to the broad glacial spur Skálafellsjökull. The 16km-long road is practically vertical in places, with iced-over sections in winter. Please don't even think of attempting it in a 2WD car – you'll end up with a huge rescue bill.

At the top, 840m above sea-level, is the **Jöklael hut** (☎ 478 1703), with a café that must have the most epic views in Iceland. On a clear day you can see 10km across the icecap to towering snowcapped peaks and south towards the ocean – it's like being on top of the world.

From here, one of the most popular tour options is the one-hour **Skidoo ride** (per person 1kr8000). You're kitted out with overalls, boots and gloves, then play follow-the-leader along a fixed trail. It's great fun, and, although it only gives you the briefest introduction to glacier travel, an hour of noisy bouncing about with the stink of petrol in your nostrils is probably enough for most people! If even this sounds like too much, you can take a more sedate **super-Jeep** ride up onto the ice. It's also possible to do longer trips to Breiðamerkurjökull, Grímsvötn, Kverkfjöll, Órafajökull and Snæfell, as well as cross-country skiing tours (1kr16,900 per person).

If you don't have your own 4WD transport, from June to August two glacier companies can drive you up to the Jöklael hut:

**Glacier Jeeps** (☎ 478 1000; www.glacierjeeps.is) At 9.30am and 2pm daily this company collects people in a super-Jeep from the little parking area at the start of the F985. You're then driven up to Jöklael, where you can go on a Skidoo ride (1kr9800) or Jeep tour (1kr8800) on Vatnajökull – prices include transport from the F985.

**Vatnajökull Travel** (☎ 894 1616; www.vatnajokull.is) This friendly outfit does more extensive glacier 'pack-ages'. It'll pick you up from Höfn (9.40am), or from the F985 parking area (10.30am), take you up to Jöklael, where you can do the Skidoo or Jeep thing, and then drive you to Jökulsárlón for a lagoon boat trip. Prices vary according to what you select; for example, there's a pick-up from the F985 parking area plus Skidoo ride (1kr9800); pick-up from Höfn with Skidoo ride and lagoon boat trip (1kr14,800); or you can even fly from Reykjavik to indulge in Skidoo and boat trips (1kr37,200).

Coming from Höfn or Skaftafell, scheduled buses can drop you at the F985 parking area to link up with tours. In summer, there's also a daily bus from Höfn leaving at 9am that goes up to Jöklael and back, then on to Jökulsárlón, then straight back to Höfn.

and photographs. It's worth a look, not least because it's free.

Höfn is blessed with the most amazing glacier views. There are a couple of short **waterside paths** where you can amble and gape – one up by Hótel Höfn, and another round the marshes and lagoons at the end of the promontory Ósland (about 1km beyond the harbour – head for the **seamen's monument** on the rise). The latter path is great for watching **sea birds**, though if you walk to it during nesting season you will be attacked in Hitchcock style by zillions of arctic terns on the causeway road.

The **swimming pool** (☎ 478 1157; Hafnarbraut 11; adult/child 1kr300/135; ☎ 7am–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–6pm Sat & Sun summer, 7–9am & 4–8pm Mon–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat & Sun winter) has an outdoor heated pool and hot pots.

Höfn has a nine-hole **golf course** at the end of Dalabraut at the northern end of town.

Between May and late September you can go **horse riding** from Gistihúsið Árnanes (see opposite), 6km west of Höfn.

## Tours

A visit to this region wouldn't be complete without making a pilgrimage to Vatnajökull – see the boxed text, above.

## Festivals & Events

Every year in early July Höfn's annual **Humarhátíð** (Lobster Festival) honours this crunchy crustacean, which is a renowned local catch. There's usually a fun fair, flea markets, dancing, music, ice-sculpture competitions, lots of alcohol and even a few lobsters.

## Sleeping

**Höfn camp site** (☎ 478 1606; camping@simnet.is; Hafnarbraut 52; sites per person 1kr700, sb 1kr2000, 6-person cabins 1kr6500; ☎ mid-May–mid-Sep) Lots of travellers stay at the hilly camp site on the main road into town. There are also 16 good-value log cabins here, with two double and two single beds, and kitchens (but limited cooking equipment).

**Nýbær HI Hostel** (☎ 478 1736; hofn@hostel.is; Hafnarbraut 8; sb dm 1kr2200, sb tw 1kr5200) At the harbour end of town, Höfn's best budget option is a medium-sized place that's usually bustling with travellers in summer (it's open all year). It's in an old but cosy house with a kitchen, and a dining room that doubles as the common area (where many a glacier tour and long-distance hike has been dissected!). There are also laundry facilities.

**Gistiheimilið Hvammur** (☎ 478 1503; hvammur3@simnet.is; Ránarslóð 2; sb 1kr2500, s/d 1kr6500/8900; ☎) Run by the same couple that runs the hostel, Hvammur is the pick of the guesthouses for its 30 simple rooms, all with washbasins and satellite TV. Some overlook the boat-filled harbour. There's also a dining area, a guest kitchen and internet access.

**Gistiheimilið Ásgarður** (☎ 478 1365; asgardur@eldhorn.is; Ránarslóð 3; s/d/tr 1kr8300/10,200/12,300, up to 40% off rest of yr) Harbourside Ásgarður is more like a hotel than a guesthouse. All rooms have bathroom and a small TV, and some have glacier views. They're a bit boxy, but the guesthouse is in a good location and the people are very friendly. Breakfast costs 1kr950.

**Hótel Höfn** (☎ 478 1240; www.hotelhofn.is; Víkurbraut; s/d from 1kr12,750/17,500; ☎) Höfn's business-class hotel is often busy with tour groups in summer. All rooms have bathrooms and TVs, and breakfast is included. The rooms are a bit frayed around the edges – even the deluxe ones aren't particularly flash – but perhaps you won't notice the décor if you get one with glacier views. There are a couple of decent restaurants, and discounts are available out of season.

**Gistihúsið Árnanes** (☎ 478 1550; www.arnanes.is; Jún–mid-Sep sb 1kr3000, s/d without bathroom 1kr9200/11,400, with bathroom 1kr11,800/14,700, up to 30% off rest of yr)

On the Ring Rd 6km west of Höfn, this rural place is an excellent choice for its cottages and guesthouse rooms (some with balconies). Prices include breakfast. The sleeping-bag accommodation is disappointing, though – with mountain views all around, it seems a shame to be underground! There's an agreeable dining room–art gallery, with set meat and fish courses (from 1kr1800); it opens summer-only if there are enough diners – be sure to book ahead.

## Eating & Drinking

**Kaffi Hornið** (☎ 478 2600; Hafnarbraut 42; ☎ 11am–10pm Mon–Thu, to 1am Fri, noon–1am Sat, noon–10pm Sun; light meals 1kr790–1900, mains 1kr1700–3900) This log-cabin affair is a relaxed, unpretentious bar-restaurant, decorated with old black-and-white photos of the town. The food comes in stomach-stretching portions; as well as burgers, pasta, fish and lamb mains, and a serve-yourself salad bar, there are a couple of veggie options and a Höfn speciality – garlic-toasted lobster (1kr4000).

**Ósinn** (☎ 478 1240; www.hotelhofn.is; Víkurbraut; mains 1kr690–3900; ☎ 9am–10pm) The family restaurant on the ground floor of Hótel Höfn has a good choice of snacky meals (burgers, pizzas etc), and some of the tastiest fish, meat and pasta mains in town... it's just a shame about the service. If you can put up with bad-tempered staff, go for local fish dishes including Höfn's famous lobster – which you can have here as an á la carte dish or on a pizza! There's a second, smarter dining room on the top floor, with great glacier views.

**Víkin** (☎ 478 2300; Víkurbraut) This pizza place and pub lacks character, but it's a popular drinking hole and nightclub, open to 3am on Friday and Saturday nights.

The **11-11** (☎ 478 1205; Hafnarbraut; ☎ 9am–11pm) supermarket and bakery is in the Miðbær shopping centre near the library, while **Krónan** (☎ 478 1204; Vesturbraut; ☎ 11am–7pm) is close to the camp site.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Höfn's airport is about 4km northwest of town. **Flugfélag Íslands** (Air Iceland; ☎ 570 3030; www.airiceland.is) flies year-round between Reykjavik and Höfn (which appears on the website as 'Hornafjörður'). Flights run every day except Tuesday and Saturday, and cost around 1kr7000 one way.

## BUS

Buses arrive and depart at the camp site, which is a 10-minute walk from the town centre. A daily Reykjavík–Höfn bus runs from 1 June to 15 September, leaving from either end at 8.30am and arriving at 5pm. At other times of year the bus runs on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday only, departing at 12.30pm from Reykjavík and noon from Höfn.

From June to August a bus runs from Höfn (at 9am) up to the Jöklašel hut, on the edge of the Vatnajökull icecap. It stays up there for 2½ hours (giving you time to go snow-mobiling) before heading off to Jökulsárlón, where it stays for one hour, before returning to Höfn.

Höfn–Egilsstaðir buses run daily from 1 June to 31 August (Monday, Wednesday and Friday only in late May and early September). Buses leave from Höfn at 8.30am, calling at Stafafell, Djúpvogur and Berunes. Buses return from Egilsstaðir at 2pm.

## LÓNSÖRÆFI

If you're in Iceland to escape the rat race and get in touch with your inner hermit, the nature reserve Lónsöræfi should be on your list. This protected area, east of Höfn, contains some spectacularly colourful rhyolite mountains, as well as the Stafafellsfjöll peaks and the friendly, hospitable farm and hostel Stafafell to the south. There are countless hiking opportunities, from day walks to the long-distance route taking you north to Snæfell.

It's possible to camp at sites in the reserve, and there are mountain huts along the Lónsöræfi–Snæfell hike, which begins (or ends) at the Illikambur parking area. The only road in the reserve is the rough 4WD track that ends at Illikambur. There's nowhere to eat or buy food here, so bring supplies from Höfn or Djúpvogur.

## HIKING

There are many easy day hikes in the hills and valleys north of Stafafell, as well as longer hikes towards the southeast of Vatnajökull. Some of these walks require substantial river crossings, so use extreme caution, especially in warm or wet weather. For hiking in Lónsöræfi, the best maps are the *Hornafjörður* 1:100,000 (1986), *Hamarsfjörður* 1:100,000 (1987) and *Snæfell* 1:100,000 (1988) topo sheets.

The Stafafell hostel can provide information and directions for these and other hikes and routes.

## Reyðarártindur

This four-hour walk begins 7km east of Stafafell. From the road, it ascends the eastern side of the Reyðará valley and circumnavigates the peak Reyðarártindur, returning to the Ring Rd via the valley **Össurárdalur**, 11km east of Stafafell. Across the Ring Rd near the start of this walk is a **view disc** that names some of the visible natural features.

## Hvannagil

This is perhaps the best of the day hikes, a well-marked four- or five-hour walk from Stafafell to Hvannagil, at the end of the road on the eastern bank of the Jökulsá í Lóni. Head up this dramatic rhyolite valley and, after less than 1km, you'll see a sheep track climbing the ridge on your right. At the top of this ridge you'll have a view down Seldalur. Keep to the left side of this valley until you pass the side valley, **Raftagil**, which descends back to the Jökulsá í Lóni. You can pick your way down Raftagil or follow the ridge above the eastern side of Seldalur.

## Tröllakrökur

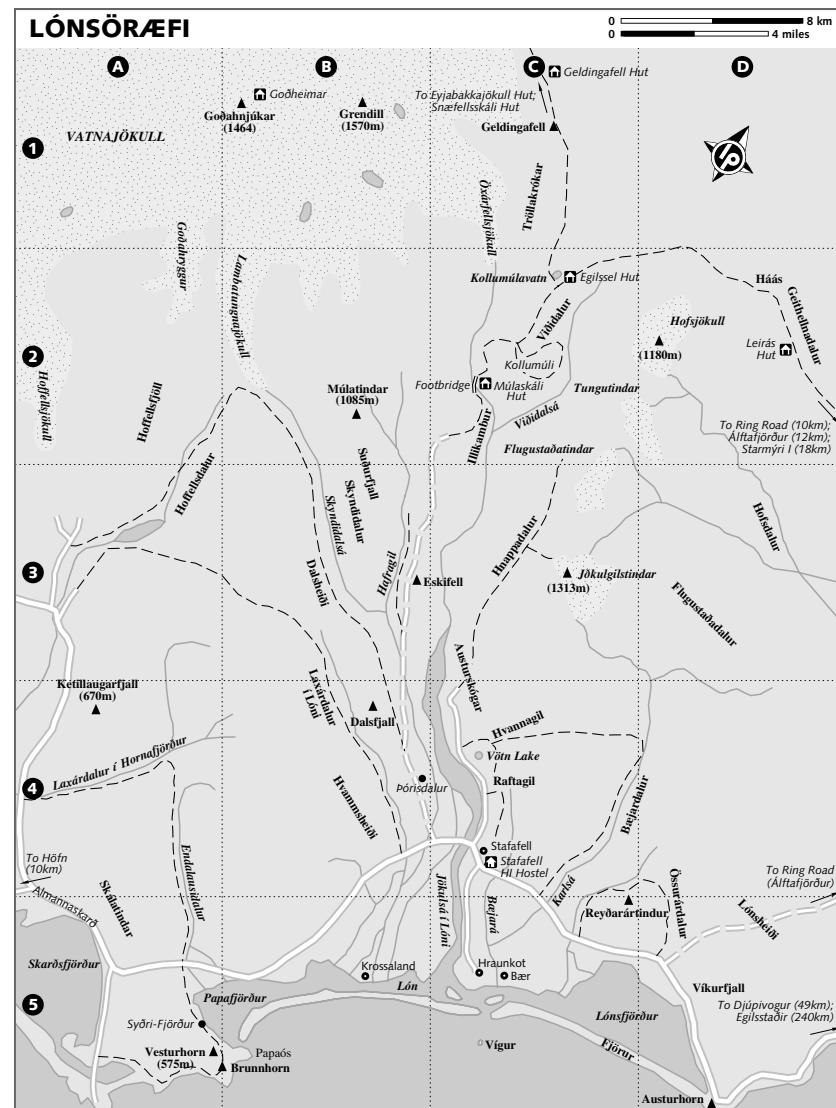
This trip begins at the **Illikambur** parking area (about 20km north of Stafafell), accessible along 4WD Rte F980. From there, it's five or six hours to Egilsel hut at Tröllakrökur, an area of bizarre wind-eroded pinnacles. Above, you can see the tongue of **Óxárfellsjökull**, the eastern extreme of the Vatnajökull icecap. Allow two days for the return trip.

## Jökulgilstindar

This two-day trip climbs up to the 1313m-high icecap Jökulgilstindar. Begin by walking from Stafafell up the 4WD track along the eastern bank of **Jökulsá í Lóni**, then continue up the valley through the Austurskógar woods toward **Hnappadalur**. You can either continue up to the headwaters of Hnappadalur or climb steeply to Jökulgilstindar from a short way up the valley. The top has a glacier, and hikers should be experienced with glacier travel before venturing onto the ice.

## TOURS

**Lónsöræfaferðir** (☎ 864 4215) is a man with a mountain bus, who runs tours into Lónsöræfi



between June and August. You can phone him directly on the mobile number, or book through **Stafafell hostel** (☎ 478 1717; [www.eldhom.is/stafafell](http://www.eldhom.is/stafafell)).

Visitors can join the day tour (Ikr5000 per person), departing at 9am, which includes approximately three hours at Illikambur and a 45-minute walk to the Múlaszáli hut. Any

hikers who want to make their way to Illikambur, where several of the walks that are outlined above begin, can also catch a lift with this tour (Ikr2500/5000 per person one way/return). Transfers over the Skjaldidalur river crossing cost Ikr1000 one way. Fishing permits and horse-riding tours can also be arranged.

## STAFAFELL

In the absolute middle of the middle of nowhere, Stafafell is a lonely farm-hostel, lost under the mountains. It makes a great hiking base for exploring Lónsöræfi; you can arrange tours and hikers' transport here, and the farmer and hostel-keeper, Bergsveinn, knows everything there is to know about the area.

Stafafell functioned as a remote parsonage until 1920, and the present church contains some lovely artefacts, including an original altarpiece.

**Stafafell HI Hostel** (☎ 478 1717; www.eldhorn.is/stafafell; sb 1kr2000, s/d from 1kr4500/6545) is one of the friendliest hostels in Iceland, thanks to the efforts of Bergsveinn, your good-humoured host. The hostel is full of light pine fittings and bright sunshine, and has a peaceful feel. There's also a **camp site** (per person 1kr600) and cottages for hire with kitchen, lounge and TV. In summer breakfast is available for 1kr800, and dinner can be arranged with notice, but it's best to bring your own food (the nearest shop is 25km away in Höfn).

## LÓN

The name Lón (Lagoon; pronounced 'lone') fairly sums up the nature of this shallow bay enclosed by two long spits between the Austurhorn and Vesturhorn. To the northwest is

the delta of **Jökulsá í Lóni**, where an enormous colony of swans nest in spring and autumn.

As with other peaks in the region, the batholithic **Austurhorn**, at the eastern end of Lón, was formed as an igneous intrusion beneath the surface and was then thrust up and revealed through erosion of the overlying material. This is the best access for strolls on the Fjörur sand spit enclosing the eastern portion of Lón.

At the western end of Lón the commanding 575m-high peak **Vesturhorn** and its companion **Brunnhorn** form a cape between Skarðsfjörður and Papafjörður. Ruins of the fishing settlement Syðri-Fjörður, which was abandoned in 1899, are still visible, and just south of it are the more intriguing ruins of Papatóttir.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses between Höfn and Egilsstaðir pass Stafafell. To board the bus, flag it down at the gate or ask one of the managers to book ahead.

From Stafafell the Ring Rd starts to head north, leaving behind glacier country and following the convoluted coast of the East-fjords. The stretch from Hvalnes peninsula to Djúpipvogur hugs the coastline and passes beneath some frightening rock and shale mountain faces that appear on the verge of a landslide!