

## **Iceland North to South Notes**

by Tracy Ballinger (tracy.ballinger at gmail dot com)

I followed Jonathan Ley's Route across Iceland more or less in late June/early July 2019 (June 20<sup>th</sup>-July 9<sup>th</sup>). Here are some additional/updated notes on the route for others who are planning to do it. I hiked by myself for the most part, but met up with a fellow hiker, Dylan, midway, and he's contributed to this, too.

Note- it was a dry spring in 2019, apparently. Also, the maps I used were 1:100 000, and I thought this was a good scale to have. They were made by [www.forlagid.is](http://www.forlagid.is)

### **Getting There**

I flew in to Reykjavik on June 20<sup>th</sup> and stayed the night in town to do town things (mail a resupply package to Reykjahlið, buy fuel, a lighter, etc.)

- There is a post office in the Mjódd bus depot, so you could probably take care of all of these things in Mjódd very quickly and catch the bus to Akureyri without actually going into the center of Reykjavík. The City Hostel in Reykjavík has a large campground so you don't have to reserve a place if you are prepared to camp. They will also store luggage for cheaper than anywhere else in town, I think.
- Website for buses in Iceland: <https://straeto.is/en>. There were two buses a day from Reykjavík to Akureyri, and the ride is about 6 hours. From Akureyri I caught a small bus to Húsavík, another 2 hr ride. There are no buses going past Húsavík, but the Húsavík bus driver may be able to drive you to where you want to go for a large fee (24,000kr). On the bulletin board in Húsavík was also a number for someone who gives rides places, but this was also very expensive to get to Hraunhafnartangi. Might be good if you are multiple people and can split the cost.

Dylan: I started my traverse at Ásbyrgi, skipping the northern tip. I flew to Reykjavik on June 23 and to Húsavík on Eagle Air the next afternoon. From Húsavík I arranged a transfer to Ásbyrgi with Fjallasýn. It cost 25,000kr. Mid-trip resupply is now difficult because buses no longer run to Nýidalur. I called the hut upon arrival in Reykjavik, spoke to the very kind warden, and got lucky: she was able to connect me with someone driving up the next day who could carry a box of food.

### **To the Northern Tip**

I hitched to Hraunhafnartangi, and this took almost all day. It is easy to hitch in Iceland, but it's a long way still from Húsavík, so I ended up getting 4 separate rides. Also, the road that goes around the Melroakkaslétta Peninsula is unpaved after Kópasker. No one goes up that way! This hitch took forever, although Kópasker is a quaint little town and there is a tiny store that serves burgers and a campground with public restrooms. If you are there on the solstice, as I was, there will be celebrations and a live band playing in the evening.

- In short, I'd recommend hitching to Raufarhöfn instead of Kópasker, because then it is a 6mi or so walk to Hraunhafnartangi if you can't get a ride. There may

also be more people driving to the lighthouse from Raufarhöfn, so it may be easier to hitch from there, too.

### **Hraunhafnartangi to Ásbyrgi**

I did Jonathan's suggested alternate route because I don't like road walking and I had the time. From the lighthouse at Hraunhafnartangi, I walked the 870 Road west and got on the equestrian track that heads south towards Beltisvatn. A lot of the lakes on the map were dried up, but there was a good spring at 66°25.9' and 16°18.5, about 1km past where the marked path crosses a little puddle on the map, right where it crosses a contour. I never saw Beltisvatn, either, but I didn't try that hard to find it. I'm pretty sure it is dried up based on the fact that everything was dried up and I never saw the road to it, either. At the junction of tracks at 66°21' and 16°13', I followed a good track along towards the Fjallsendar hill- I believe along a "string of power lines" that Ley mentions (the orange dotted line on the map), but the lines are underground. There are occasional posts above ground to mark it, and the track is obvious.

The Leirhafnarfjöll and Fjallsendar hills were dry, but there were a few lingering snow patches that I got water from. Here I took Jonathan's suggested alternate and headed south cross-country. The terrain is more difficult, but not super difficult. It's tussock hopping, so you'll want strong ankles. There's nice cold flowing streams near the farm at Efrihólar. Also some sheep, so depending on how diligent you are about treating water, you may want to treat it. I didn't and I was fine.

South of Efrihólar the jeep tracks get confusing. The ones on the map are overgrown, but there are newer ones to follow. You just have to pay attention and maybe do some cross-country and cross a fence or two. The Fremridalur valley was totally dry except snow patches. The little pond at the south end of the valley was a gross scummy mud pit.

I next followed Road 867 west. It is a dirt road for tractors- you will probably not see any cars. The next running water was the Skeggjastaðaá at Sandfellshagi, a cluster of farm houses. Then you wander on jeep track around houses/ vacation rentals, etc. until you hit the main road and walk that to Ásbyrgi.

- The store at the gas station at Ásbyrgi has a decent stock of camp food, etc. If I did this again I would plan to resupply from there for the couple of days to Reykjahlið and would have carried less food with me at the start. (2 days and then 2 days instead of 4)

### **Ásbyrgi to Reykjahlið**

- You have to camp at designated camp grounds in the national park, just FYI, so you'll have to reach either Valshamar (12km from Ásbyrgi) or Dettifoss if you camp in this section of Jökulsárgljúfur National Park. Valshamar has faucets and flush toilets, but no showers. There is regular water along the trail until about Sveigur, and then it is very dry until you reach Dettifoss. The campground at Dettifoss is dry but there were big containers of water for hikers only to drink. No faucets or flush toilets there.

- I didn't do the crazy steep trail, but heard in addition to the downhill being really sketchy, to get back up from the river further south you have to use ropes to help pull yourself up, so that part is also hard.
- Go see Selfoss in addition to Dettifoss!!!! Do not skip Selfoss because you think it can't be cooler than Dettifoss since Dettifoss is technically bigger.

It is pretty easy cross-country to Eilífsvötn. I went around the south end and then over the north side of Hágöng, passing by the Hlíðarhagi hut that Ley describes. There is a little sheep path following the creek that runs by the hut, and the path goes up onto the plateau (Réttargrund?). It is really gorgeous up there and would be a great place to camp- very lush and green and slightly breezy, not so barren as the shores of Eilífsvötn. I got a bit confused around the top of these- it's easy to lose track of which plateau you are on. I think you could easily cross the top of Hágöng and come down around the Graddabunga, although this is not what I did. I didn't see any water from the north side of Hágöng until Reykjahlið except snow patches and tourists near Krafla.

Dylan: I hiked along the north shore of Eilífsvötn, and camped in a sheltered spot at the southwest corner of the lake. I picked a bad, cliffy route along the lake shore. If you hike the north shore, aim for the shoulder closer to Eilífur.

The Spa baths near Reykjahlið are really nice- like the Blue Lagoon except cheaper and less crowded and there is no time limit. It is a couple mile walk to the Spa Baths from the campground on the lakeshore, and you can see the Grjotagja cave on the way. I would also highly recommend the campground on the shore near town. The service is really good and the receptionists are really knowledgeable and helpful.

Dylan: I stayed in at an AirBnb in Reykjahlið, listed as JAK Homestay on the platform. The host, Stefan, is lovely and has a lot of local knowledge.

### **Reykjahlið to Askja**

- If I did this again, I would slack pack or just skip the road walk around Mývatn. It would be easy to hitch back to where you started and easy to hitch to the south of Mývatn to pick up where you left off.
- My map showed a campground on the south end of Grænavatn. According to a local woman, this campground has not been there for nearly 20 years. She also said that sometimes hikers use her barn as a toilet and she has found "number twos" in there. This shouldn't need to be said, but DO NOT POOP IN OTHER PEOPLE'S BARNS!!!!
- The creeks around Sellandafjall were running, but I imagine they dry out later in the season.
- There is a good spring just ~500m NW of Botni- the headwater of the Suðurá. I think it is slightly quicker to take the jeep road south to Botni and then backtrack a bit to get water than to head W and then S along the Suðurá. I went this way, too, because the path seemed better signed and maintained.

- Even if you don't stay in the huts, you should sign the guestbook for safety purposes. (The huts were 5,000kr to stay overnight, 2,000kr to camp, and 500kr to use the facilities. BRING CASH)
- There was water running by Dyngjufell hut. However, there was a snow storm while I was there, and there was no water flowing in the morning, presumably because it had all frozen higher up. So, fill up when you can! Even though there is a midnight sun, there are temperature fluctuations throughout the day/night that affect snowmelt/water flow.
- I didn't try to go up to Askja because of the bad weather, but Dylan told me that it was impassable with knee-high slush. It might be hard to go there until late summer.
- Dylan: I heard the pass up to Askja was impassable but tried it anyway. I turned around at the top of the pass, where the trail was covered (up to the navigation posts) in meter-high slush that I was post-holing into. The hike up to this point was beautifully stark, however, and I recommend it in good weather.
- I went over the top of Dyngjufjöll ytri sort of like Ley did, but slightly different. My map showed a little trail going down from the Fjallsend, the high point on the south side of Dyngjufjöll ytri down to F910. This trail does not exist, and I find it hard to imagine that such a path ever existed because the south side of Dyngjufjöll ytri is huge cliffs. You can get down the west side of the plateau just north of where F901 meets it (around the north side of Tröllaborgir).

### **Along Vatnajökull**

- There's no longer a bus that goes to Nýidalur, but you could easily hitch from there.

The Svedja was really roiling when we got to it. We crossed it where it empties into the Hágöngulón as it spreads out across the delta more. Even there it was pretty sketchy (crotch-high, medium fast). Not only can you not see how deep it is because it's muddy, but the bottom is sometimes loose sand, so you can sink in and lose your footing easily (I briefly fell in because of this). You could go around the north side of Hágöngulón to get around crossing the Svedja, but this means backtracking a lot! A good idea would be to use the first crossing south of Svarthöfði to gage whether to try and cross the Svedja. That looked sketchy to me the evening I saw it, and it was lower in the morning, but still knee-high and fast.

Per the recommendation of a ranger at Nýidalur (where Dylan stayed for two nights), we went cross country from the Svedja, first heading straight for Hraunbúi and then toward the gateway between Bláfjöll and Helgrindur hills. It was easy going at first- just sand and interspersed lava rocks, but got much more difficult and we suddenly found ourselves rock hopping over huge piles of sharp wobbly lava boulders. Also, there was a newly formed river/lake (formed that morning?) where the map shows a desert (the area around the little pond at 18°12' and 64°25'). It seems the water landscape of Iceland is very in flux. A GPS was helpful for some peace of mind.

There was no water near the Jökulheimar hut and it was locked. Receding glacier means less water, I guess.

We got some advice that the the Tungaá is crossable before 11am, so we attempted to cross south of Jökulheimar hut, where a jeep track goes, but were unsuccessful. Dylan got halfway across and it was hip high and FAST (he is ~5'10"). Later, we asked some guides how to cross and they said the place to do it is up near the glacier (i.e., NOT where we tried). This is also probably easier later in the season- we saw signs for jeeps saying that it is crossable only in the autumn. NOTE- I'd recommend going to Nýidalur to potentially pick up a resupply as Dylan did and also to get information from the Ranger there. The Rangers are very helpful and conditions change a lot!

We saw a handful of cars on the roads around the lakes in the Veidivötn area and eventually hitched to Landmannalaugar (short on time and didn't want to road walk). We didn't get a hitch until late afternoon when people were on their way home. Although there are very few cars, they are easy to wave down and more likely to give you a ride.

### Notes on Gear

- **Tent:** I brought an MSR Hubba Hubba because I thought I wouldn't be able to put stakes in sometimes and would need a free-standing tent. I think this was overkill and something like a Terra Nova Laser would have worked just fine. It is double layer and can withstand high winds. You can always put stakes in sand and reinforce them with rocks.
- **Filter:** You don't really need a filter, but I did use a Sawyer because sometimes all the water was very silty. The Sawyer did clog after a couple liters, but then you can use a half liter of your filtered water to backwash it and it'll work fine again. I was glad I had it.
- **Sun gloves:** I got a really bad sun rash on my hands and wish I had used sun gloves. I have not used sun gloves on other long trails I've done in desert, but in Iceland, you have the sun angled directly on you ALL afternoon and night if you are going southwest, so it can be harsh.
- **Layers:** I wore a long sleeve smart wool type top almost the whole time and often had my rain gear on even when it was dry for extra warmth against the cold north wind.