

Iceland and the Laugavegur Trail, August, 2013 by Denise Hall

This past summer I participated in a backpacking trip along the Laugavegur Trail in Iceland which was initiated and organized by our Club's President, Chris Heap. There were eight of us altogether in the group: Kay Methot, Liette Laniel, Ann Lane, Chris and Mary Mitchell, Chris Heap, Malcolm Hill (Chris's friend from Switzerland) and myself, Denise Hall.



The "Laugavegur" trail from Landmannalaugar to Skógar (in green)

The Laugavegur Trail from Landmannalaugar to Skógar is one of the finest and most popular hikes in Iceland enjoyed by visitors and Icelanders alike. The Laugavegur (600m above sea level) includes the largest geothermal field in Iceland outside the Grimsvotn caldera in Vatnajökull. Its weird peaks are made of rhyolite – a mineral-filled lava that cooled unusually slowly, causing amazing colours. It is located in the southern region of Iceland and is comprised of multicoloured mountains, soothing hot springs, rambling lava flows and clear blue lakes.

Our party of eight gathered in stages and stayed at the Downtown Hostel in Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, before we actually began our trek on August 3rd. A number of us traveled via Air Canada to Halifax and

then took an overnight flight from there via Icelandair to Keflavik, Iceland. From the airport in Keflavik one takes a bus to Reykjavik.



Happy Hour at the Loft Hostel in Reykjavik

I thought Reykjavik was a great city and we spent several days exploring it, getting over jet lag and carrying out the final preparations for our backpacking adventure, i.e. purchasing some fresh food to augment the dried food we had brought from Canada. We had a number of excellent meals at the local restaurants and often met to celebrate “Happy Hour” at one of the hostels where there was a deal on Icelandic beer around 4 p.m.

Early on the August 3rd morning we set out from our hostel to walk to the bus station for an 8:00 a.m. departure on a bus that drove the mountain tracks that lead to start at Landmannalaugar. This

route passes by the Hekla volcano and other volcanoes in the Dómadalur area. While sitting on the bus and witnessing the high winds, sometimes rain, and moon like atmosphere I was thinking – What did I get myself into? We arrived at Landmannalaugar around noon, had lunch in the wet and cold, and then headed south into the mountains to start our trek to Hrafninnusker Hut. This section of the trail was about



Signing in at Landmannalaugar



Views on way to Hrafninnusker



12 km long and took us past small gorges, steaming hot springs and yellow mountain ridges. We arrived at the hut around 4:15 p.m. and ate our supper right away. It was very windy when we arrived here and the wind howled all night. We were so thankful that we had chosen to do the "hut to hut" option as it was cold too. We felt sorry for the people who were struggling to pitch their tents and had to sleep in them overnight.



Scene from Hrafninnusker Hut



Sea Campions

Our destination for day 2, August 4th was to Álftavatn Hut which was another 12 km away. From the Hrafninnusker Hut we descended down in the gullies of Jökultungur with hundreds of steaming hot springs and mud pools. There were fascinating views to the south to the Álftavatn area (Swan Lake) and the Mýrdalsjökull and Eyjafjallajökull glaciers. Again we were experiencing very strong winds, so much so, that you felt you were being lifted right off the path at times. Álftavatn Hut was a nice modern one which had hot showers available but they were unavailable to us that day due to the strong winds.



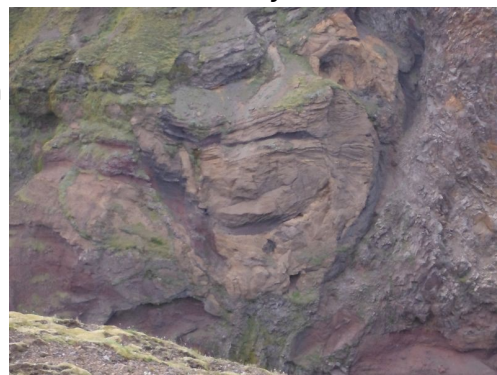
Icelandic ponies

On day 3, August 5th we headed toward Emstur (Botnar) Hut which was a 17 km trek. We passed the foot of the green conic volcano of Stórasúla before entering the black deserts of Mælifellssandur. From here we headed towards another ancient and verdurous volcano, the Hattfell and entered the Emstur region where farmers used to graze their sheep in summer. Near the Emstur Hut one can visit the magnificent Markarfljot canyon cut almost 200 m down into the rocks south of Hattfell. On this particular day we had to wade through two

rivers where one had to take off

socks and boots. The water was ice cold but your feet sure felt good afterward. Most of this trail was fairly flat. Again, it was a windy day, but we felt very lucky that most of the time the wind was on our backs. The Emstur hut we were in was in quite cramped quarters (20 people/cabin), 2 people per bunk bed (we slept head to toe) with only a 1-2 burner hot plate to prepare our meals. Hot showers were available here which some of us took advantage of for 5 kronner.

The "troll" of Emstrur



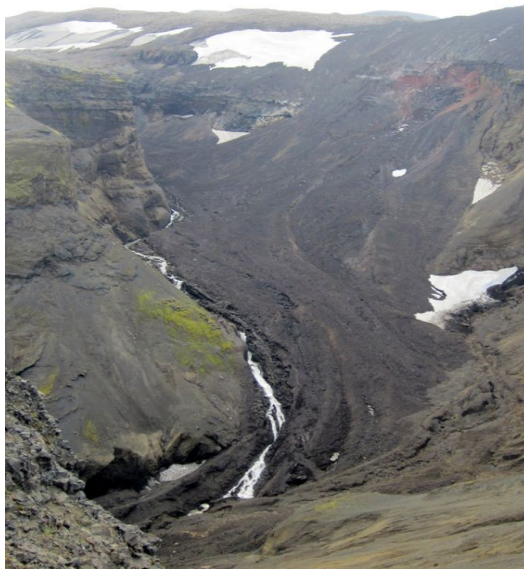


The group of us at Þórsmörk Hut

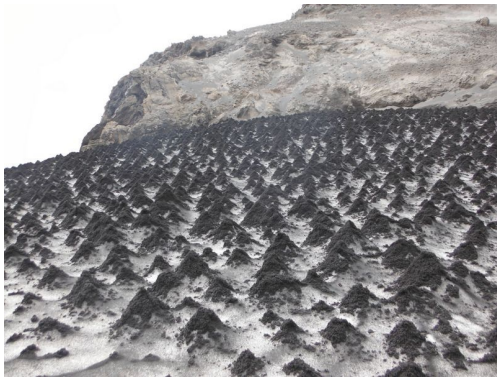
On day 4, August 6th our destination was to Þórsmörk Hut. This was an 18 km day where we continued up and down through the small valleys and gullies of Emstur, where the great Mýrdalsjökull glacier rises only a couple of kilometers away. We had one river to cross this day which actually felt warmer on the feet than the day before. Guess we were getting used to it! Our weather was also the best yet. It was sunny and warm. Towards the end of this hike the vegetation started to grow thicker and higher as we descended into Þórsmörk (the woods of Thor) green valleys filled with arctic birch forests and

colourful flowers. We all agreed that this hut was the best yet. We had our own room on the second floor with 2 tables in it as well as our beds. On the first floor there were two kitchens and a huge living room area with chairs and leather couches. There was a nice porch area to sit on and gaze at the river beyond. The warden of this hut was also very friendly and we enjoyed talking to him. He had photos of vehicles that had got stuck in the river crossing and talked of their rescues which was very interesting.

Day 5, August 7th to Fimmvörðuskáli Hut about 16 km away on top of lava fields in between 2 glaciers, Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull, was the most challenging but perhaps the most beautiful hike of our backpacking trip. Eyjafjallajökull was the volcano which erupted in April 2010 and caused major havoc with air traffic in Europe. And incidentally, throughout history, eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull have always triggered an eruption of her much larger sister Katla, who for the present still slumbers peacefully under the Mýrdalsjökull glacier – and our path will take us right between the two of them!! We climbed about 1000 meters that day which I found rather edgy in spots. Chains and ropes were available to secure footing along certain parts and not being too fond of heights I must admit that my heart was in my mouth at times.



On the way to the Fimmvörðuháls pass



"Penitentes" near Fimmvörðuskáli Hut



Ann and Mary at Fimmvörðuskáli Hut

Leaving Þórsmörk we crossed the river Krossa on a footbridge entering the magic landscapes of Goðalönd – the abode of the Gods. Nesting at the foot of two glaciers this is a wonderland of ridges and cliffs covered by a multitude of flowers and grasses. We continued up the hills leading to the pass of Fimmvörðuháls walking along the Kattarhryggir ridges with views to the impressive mountain of Útigönguhöfð up to Morinsheiði heath. At the end of the Morinsheiði plateau we enjoyed the view of the lava stream that flowed down from the Fimmvörðuháls volcano in March 2010. The lava is set with different outlets of fuming steam and decorated with green and yellow sulphur. As we gained height above Morinsheiði we came again to the lava and then to the two craters Magni and Móði that erupted prior to the main Eyjafjallajökull crater. We crossed the brand new lava at the foot of the magnificent red craters, through places where the lava was almost glowing warm inside the fissures and cracks on its surface. From here we crossed the neves of the high pass of Fimmvörðuháls, to get to the Fimmvörðuskáli Hut.

Day 5's hike had started out with clouds and then sun but by the time we had done most of our climbing and were getting close to the hut we were going through the snow and lava fields in high winds with lots of ash blowing into our faces. A German volunteer was the hut warden here. There was no source of fresh water at this hut but the warden kept us supplied with water by melting snow on the stove. Again, we had to double up in the bunk beds. What a night this proved to be! A huge storm developed with rain and gale force winds, continuing through the night and into the next morning. In fact, when we were



One of many waterfalls along the Skógaá river

preparing to leave on Day 6 the warden told us to go back to bed as no one was going anywhere as it was unsafe and we might have to stay another night. Around 8:30 a.m. after noting that the winds had died down a little, and consulting his weather source, he gave permission to anyone hiking to Skógar to leave. People hiking in the other direction (what we had hiked the day before) were told to stay put.

Day 6, August 8th's 14 km hike to Skógar in pouring rain, sleet and high winds was one that our party will never forget. It was mainly downhill, which was a good thing. We left the Fimmvörðuskáli Hut at 9:15 a.m. and got to our destination as drowned rats around 1:15 p.m. We did not stop for lunch. Wilma and Bert, a couple we met from Holland, made the

descent with us. On our way down we followed a path that came to the Skógaá River. We followed the Skógaá River taking in its numerous waterfalls and hidden gorges all the way to the famous Skogafoss waterfall. The scenery was breathtaking and I must say that I will never view Niagara Falls in Ontario in the same way again.

Upon arriving at Skogafoss we waited inside the cafeteria area in a building there to try to dry off and for a bite to eat. Many of us indulged in a few bowls of nice warm soup which certainly hit the spot. By 4:00 p.m. our scheduled bus had arrived to pick us up for the two hour ride back to Reykjavik.

So, that in a nutshell, was a description of our adventure along the Laugavegur. It was a unique experience that I am sure we all will always treasure. Thank you Chris for all the work you did to make this trip a reality!

Iceland is a beautiful country and one that I would recommend to add to one's "Bucket List". After our backpacking trip most of us stayed on for another 10 days or so to tour the rest of the island. Cars are available to rent and the ring road around the island is easily followed. My group also spent two days touring in the West Fjords which I think was my favourite part of Iceland. Apparently Iceland was experiencing one of its colder summers on record but I did not mind. It made the hiking pleasant.



Eyjafjallajökull erupting in 2010