



The Highlands

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Why Go?

You may have travelled the Ring Road thinking that Iceland is light on towns; that sheep seem to outnumber people; that you haven't encountered an N1 service station for many a mile. Well, you ain't seen nothing yet. In the interior highlands, there are practically no services, accommodation, bridges over rivers – or guarantees if something goes wrong.

Gazing across the desolate expanses, you could imagine yourself in the Australian outback or, as many have noted, on the moon. Those aren't overactive imaginations at work – *Apollo* astronauts trained here before their lunar landing.

The isolation, in essence, is the reason that people visit (plus the opportunity to bring geology lessons to life). Although some travellers are disappointed by the interior's ultra-bleakness, others are humbled by the sight of nature in its rawest form. The solitude is exhilarating, the views are vast – and the access is limited, so prepare well.

Good to Know

- ➔ **Kjölur route** (Rte 35) North–south route across the country. Served by summer buses. All rivers bridged.
- ➔ **Sprengrisandur route** (Rte F26) North–south route across the country. Served by summer buses.
- ➔ **Askja route** (Öskjuleið; Rte F88 or F905/910) Access from Iceland's north to Askja caldera, Herðubreið mountain and the new Holuhraun lava field. Served by numerous tour operators, primarily from Mývatn.
- ➔ **Kverkfjöll route** (Rte F905, F910, then F902) Access from Iceland's north (or east, via Rte 910) to Kverkfjöll ice caves. Served by a few tour operators.

Kjölur Route

If you want to sample Iceland's central deserts but don't like the idea of ford crossings, the 200km Kjölur route has had all of its rivers bridged. In summer there are even scheduled daily buses that use it as a 'short cut' between Reykjavík and Akureyri.

From the south, Rte 35 starts just past Gullfoss, passing between two large glaciers before emerging near Blönduós on the northwest coast. It reaches its highest point (around 700m) between the Langjökull and Hofsjökull ice caps, near the mountain Kjal-fell (1000m). Its northern section cruises scenically past Blöndulón, a large reservoir used by the Blanda hydroelectric power station. Road conditions in the north are better than those in the south.

The Kjölur route usually opens in mid-June, and closes sometime in September, depending on weather conditions.

Tours

A bit of online digging will reveal hiking and horse-riding tours along the Kjölur route (also search 'Kjalvegur'), plus a few jeep tours.

You can use the scheduled summertime buses as a day tour, or as a regular bus service.

Saga Travel

JEEP TOUR

(☎ 558 888; www.sagatravel.is) From July to October (weather permitting), Saga Travel does a one-day cross-country guided tour from Reykjavík to Akureyri (kr59,990), visiting the Golden Circle highlights before taking the Kjölur route north and stopping at Hveravellir en route (with time for bathing). You can opt to stay in Akureyri, or fly back to Reykjavík (not included in the price).

Sleeping & Eating

As well as the popular options at Kerlingarfjöll and Hveravellir, two organisations operate huts along the route (BYO sleeping bag); campers can also pitch by the huts. It's necessary to prebook hut beds.

Kerlingarfjöll and Hveravellir offer food, but you need to bring self-catering supplies for all other overnighting options. Huts generally have kitchen access, but utensils are not guaranteed.

Gljásteyn

HUTS ●

(☎ 486 8757; www.gljasteinn.is; sites per person kr1200, dm kr6000; ☀ mid-Jun-Aug) Has three well-appointed huts on or just off the route, suitable for drivers, hikers and horse riders. Huts are listed from south to north.

➔ Fremstaver

(N 64°45.207', W 19°93.699') Cosy hut that sleeps 25, has cooking facilities. Located on the south slopes of the mountain Bláfell.

➔ Árbúðir

(N 64°609.036', W 19°702.947') This good hut sleeps 30, has cooking facilities and hot showers. Located on the banks of the Svartá river, right on Rte 35 about 42km north of Gullfoss. There's a small cafe here, where you can buy food and handicrafts.

➔ Gíslaskáli

(N 64°744.187', W 19°432.508') Excellent hut operated by Gljásteyn; sleeps up to 50, has cooking facilities, dining and sitting rooms, hot showers. Located 4km north of the turn-off to Kerlingarfjöll, and 1km off Rte 35.

Ferðafélag Íslands

HUTS ●

(☎ 568 2533; www.fi.is; sites per person kr1800, dm kr5000-5500) Runs the following huts, which have toilets and a kitchen (no utensils though). Huts are listed from south to north: beds must be reserved.

TOURS TO THE HIGHLANDS

Aside from the day tours to Askja and Kverkfjöll, and the summertime buses servicing the Kjölur and Spengisandur routes, there are multiday tours that explore the central highlands area.

Icelandic Mountain Guides (www.mountains.is) has an eight-day tour travelling throughout the region, plus visiting Mývatn and Landmannalaugar (from kr315,000).

Eldhestar (www.eldhestar.is) offers eight-day wilderness horse-riding treks along the Kjölur and Spengisandur routes, for very experienced riders.

With limited time, you can get a wonderful overview of the landscapes courtesy of sight-seeing flights; check out the small-plane options from Akureyri and Mývatn, and the helicopter flights from Möðrudalur.