Descending the F570 from Snæfellsjokull, a peak steeped in legend and supernatural folklore

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN GEARD

Iceland adventure

Seeking untamed landscapes, challenging conditions, and even a spot of whale watching? Ben Searle explains the draw of Europe's most westerly point

To many, Iceland doesn't conjure up visions of dream cycling. Closer inspection confirms initial fears – cool climate, gales stirred by Atlantic lows, potholed gravel tracks, grit and vast empty distances... The unprepared cyclist might be in a for a rude and blustery awakening...

While much of the country, particularly the uninhabited interior, is as great a challenge as you could possibly want, Vestfirdir and particularly the Snæfellsnes Peninsular offer variety, stunning scenery, some of the island's best wildlife and shorter distances between civilisation. The region forms the far north-western corner of Europe, and is actually situated on the American continental plate. The region is ideal for a first cycle tour of the country and is easily accessible from Reykjavík...

It was early June and the first 12 days produced virtually unbroken sunshine as an unusually persistent spell of high pressure settled over the north Atlantic. Missing out on volcanoes, far flung Vestfirdir is off the beaten tourist track and avoids the traffic that can be found in the otherwise other-worldly and wild open spaces of Iceland.

We took the bus to Borganes to escape the frankly dreary Reykjavík suburbs and busy roads. Borganes also makes a good place to stock up on provisions before heading further north or west. As we rode out, a huge Calvos mushroom cloud formed, and from a blue sky, a fleeting shower of glistening rain drops briefly lashed down. The Langjökull icecap, 75km far to the east, sometimes visible sometimes not, had shards of grey rain sweeping over it.

The uninhabited interior, dominated by the icecaps creates its own localised unpredictable weather. Make sure you bring GoreTex or similar from head to toe, warm gloves, a hat and plenty of layers, whatever the month.

Eiríc the Red was forced to leave Iceland from Stykkishólmur, and make his fortune in Greenland. We left the same port, a cluster of gaily painted wooden homes, and sailed across Ereidafjördur on the Baldur ferry. Throughout the crossing, and as we rode along the southern shores of Vestfirdir, the length of the volcanic tract of the Snæfellsnes Peninsular remained visible – snowy peaks crested by cloud caps. The final peak, the dormant 1446m Snæfellnes volcano itself, is the crater where Jules Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Earth began.

Mountain passes

Vestfirdir is a remnant of the basalt Thulean plateau which bridged Greenland and Europe. Fifty million years of erosion and subsidence left just this region above the sea to be flattened and carved by glaciation into today's convoluted coastline of deep fjords and steep rugged headlands. These are crossed by high mountain passes, climbing up to 510 metres but at rarely more than 10 per cent.

Throughout Vestfirdir we enjoyed the constant company of birds – including cooing eider ducks, piping oyster catchers and

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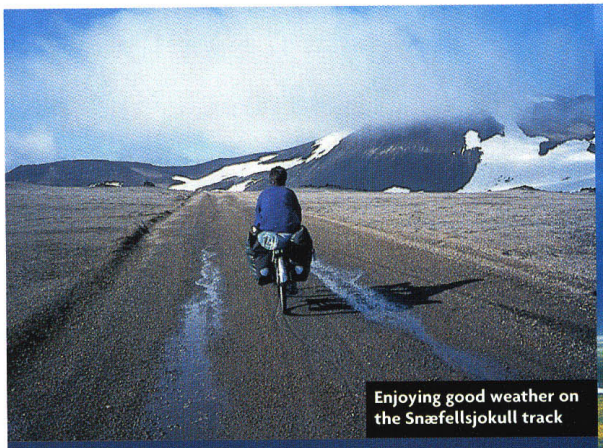
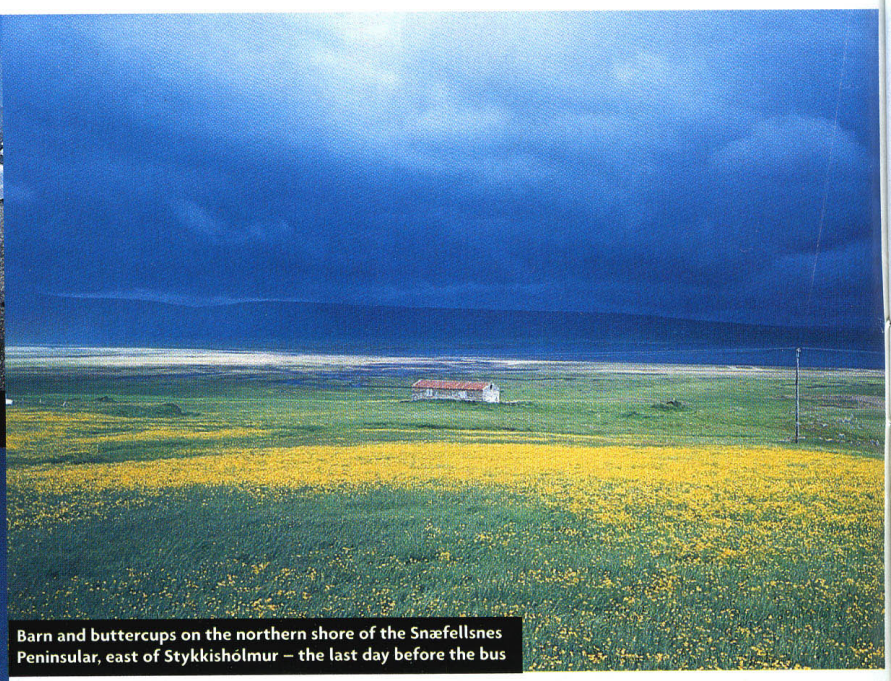
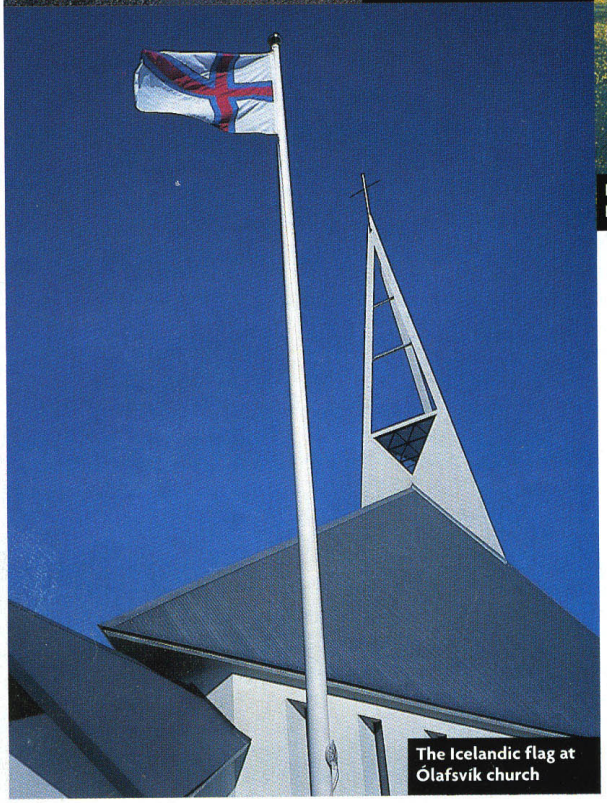


Enjoying good weather on the Snæfellsjokull track



Barn and buttercups on the northern shore of the Snæfellsnes Peninsular, east of Stykkishólmur – the last day before the bus



The Icelandic flag at Ólafsvík church

arctic terns. The latter dive-bomb intruders and earn their Icelandic name kría from their incessant alarm call. I found one 'nest' – three eggs in a roadside hollow.

The human inhabitants have also eked out a perilous living. The folk museum at Hnjótur tells the story. Amongst an odd collection of items there is a bucket carved out of a whale vertebra.

Riding on, across barren mountain tops to the Látrabjarg cliffs and the most westerly point of Europe, there is an end of the world feeling. These cliffs are home to one of Europe's greatest sea-bird colonies. Stretching some 14km and rising in places to over 400m, every ledge is covered in birds and guano. The puffins are very amenable allowing you to approach within an arm's length, and always don a slightly worried quizzical expression. Unfortunately, such a defence has not been enough to prevent them being caught and cooked. Puffin is a prized item on the Icelandic menu, although some say it tastes like sump oil.

Bike and equipment

All equipment should be well tested, particularly the suspension. Drop-bars are advantageous for hacking into winds. A compromise between knobbly and slick tyres is generally best – such as Vredestein Spiders. Most cyclists choose a quality MTB. 26in wheel touring bikes are also ideal but choose fat tyres to avoid pinch punctures. Tyres should have stout side walls.

Carry spare tubes, a tyre, spokes and tools to affect wheel repairs. Pannier racks are liable to break through constant vibration – steel racks are stronger and can be repaired by any garage.

Outside Reykjavík, bike shops are few and far between and mostly sell low-quality MTBs. Bike hire is becoming more widely available around tourist spots.

Remote tracks

Our best day in Vestfirdir was spent picking our way around Skálarfjall, the 839m headland that separates Arnarfjördur and Dyrafjördur. The road narrows and rambles along as a grassy track dancing through small rivers and passing abandoned homesteads. Across the turquoise fjord it was brilliantly sunny, but the Icelandic breeze was cool as always. The track becomes beach for 5km, and follows the base of bird cliffs. It's covered at high tide so know your tide times!

A grand sliver of razor-like cliff presented itself, Hrafnabjörg – honed to a point by glaciers from each side. We met a single sole, a Reykjavík man revisiting places from his youth. Icelanders have a strong affinity for their lands, ancestors, and continuity as chronicled in the sagas – those of Gísli, Havardur and Fostbraedur are all associated with Vestfirdir.

A small orange lighthouse marked the turning point in our journey. A portly seal languished on a seaweed-covered rock. Sea mist crept in and lopped against the cliff face as we followed its bulldozed, insecure ledge-side track.

Back on the road, we met Phil from Shetland, a regular visitor to the island. Weather beaten, he had cycled across Iceland from Seydisfjördur. Instead of taking the new 'Y' shaped 8.6km tunnel linking the valleys of Breididalur, Tungudalur and Botnsdalur near ísafjördur, he had taken the old road, now almost blocked by uncleared snow fields and land slips. Have a mishap up there and no one would find you – which concentrates the mind. We were content with the tunnel, which was exemplary in its consideration of cyclists' safety.

Roadside hut

From ísafjördur, the tired-looking Fagranes ferry (no longer in operation) took us south to Arngerdareyi – a forlorn place with only a name and no shelter whatsoever. With so little human or natural cover it can be heart warming to find even a boulder for some respite from the pitiless winds. One of Iceland's best buys (apart from the woollens) is svefnpokaplass – sleeping bag accommodation, at about £12/night. You get a bed, kitchen and often your own room. We found such accommodation nearby in a cosy timber A-framed building which we had to ourselves.

Heading south on the Dorskafjardarheidi road, we were surrounded by a bleak plateau, the ground rocky and mossy, littered with snow patches and melt water. Wild camping, away from farms is possible almost everywhere, in theory, but not here. Fortunately there is a roadside tourist hut for general use. Most such

A quizzical puffin at the Latrabjarg cliffs

huts have been taken over by Slysarvarnafélag íslands (Icelandic Life-saving Association) and you must not use these except in cases of genuine emergency. Another no-no is camping amongst rare plant life. A mountain tent is recommended for camping. We sewed mesh flaps to ours so that we could use rocks to secure it – the ground is often too loose for pegs.

Our route had returned us to the Snæfellsnes Peninsular which we made a loop of before leaving the area. The brilliant weather continued as we progressed along the southern coast, as the ever-present and mysterious Snæfellsjokull peak loomed closer and closer.

Among traditional believers in the supernatural, the Snæfellsjokull mountain is believed to have more hidden powers than any other place in Iceland. Considering that the area is known for prolonged mists and heavy rain, we felt truly blessed to have such good weather. Icelanders joked that it was like this all the time, as they made the most of lapping up the sun and ice cream. Indeed, we were even becoming sunburnt as the sun barely sets in June and early July and the air is exceptionally pure.

Fashionable hotspots

The F570 is the mountain track that skirts the Snæfellsjokull glacier, climbing steeply to 700m. Our arrival at Arnastapi coincided with Independence Day (June 17) and the last 30km was to the accompaniment of hundreds of 4x4s raising clouds of dust. There are a number of fashionable hotspots where all Icelanders seem to want to be on extended weekends. This is one of them, but most of the time you'll have places pretty much to yourself. Even so, we found a quiet corner of the campsite amongst red sand dunes, birch scrub and clucking ptarmigan.

Onwards the 4x4s proceeded up to the glacier. Expecting the track to be closed (it normally opens around July 7, sometimes two weeks later) we asked and got different answers, so headed on up anyway reaching a point where the 4x4s dare not traverse the snow fields ahead. We pushed our bikes through and guesstimated the lie of the land and route of the track. Now we were in peace again – and the first vehicles along that section of road, the snow having melted away on top. We enjoyed a long descent down to Ólafsvík, crossing more snow fields ever mindful that we could become wrapped in sudden mist, the threat of which never quite went away

World's largest creatures

Whale watching (☎ + 354 438 1450 for details) from Ólafsvík proved to be one of the main highlights of the trip. A few miles out huge numbers of squabbling seabirds signalled rich fishing grounds and minutes later we saw our first humpbacks – these were the length of the boat and swam underneath from one side of it to the other, eyeing us up and blowing the most awful breath! A little more shy, a number of rare blue whales, the largest creatures to have ever lived on the earth, gave perfect views of their tails as they dived down. The feeding frenzy continues unabated for the whole summer before the whales travel on in their mysterious ways.

Heading back to port we thought the whale show was over, only to come across a pod of orca – they had rounded upon a number of guillimots on the sea surface. The guillimots all dived down to escape on seeing the orca but only two re-surfaced...

Afterwards, we followed the track to the end of the peninsular – glad that we had decided to carry water. Despite the glacier's many rivulets, few of these actually make it as far as the sea because they disappear underground into the porous volcanic rock. We were now keyed up to look out for whale blows. Through binoculars we could identify as many

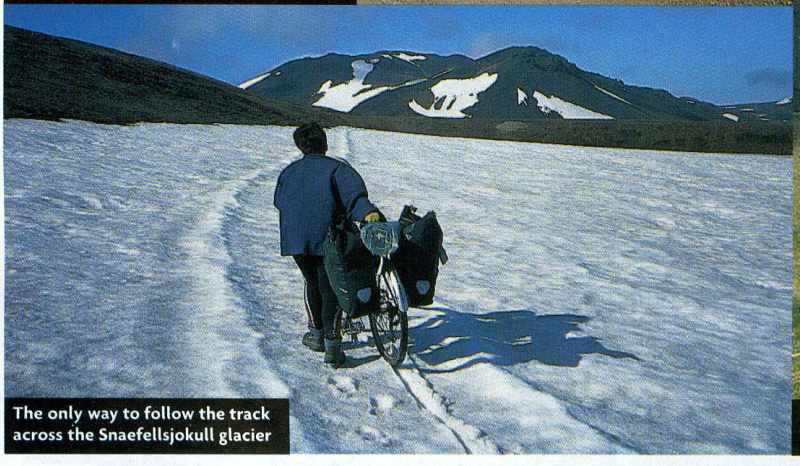
Road conditions

The road network of Iceland is being upgraded but expect arbitrary rough sections wherever you are. Except for sections of the No.1 ring road and roads near habitation, expect gravel surfaces. This usually remains rideable but can sometimes be very uncomfortable 'washboard' for miles at a time. Descents can require concentration to avoid slipping on loose gravel.

At worst the surface is loose with potato sized rocks. Except in the interior, river crossings are now rare and usually involve nothing more than wet feet.

Mountain roads (signified by the prefix 'F', eg F26), can be closed outside of the mid-July to end-of-August window. Check the regularly updated and widely posted maps showing current conditions, which can be found on the internet at www.vegagerdin.is

We met Peter and Caroline, heading for Latrabjarg cliffs and the end of the earth...



The only way to follow the track across the Snaefellsjokull glacier

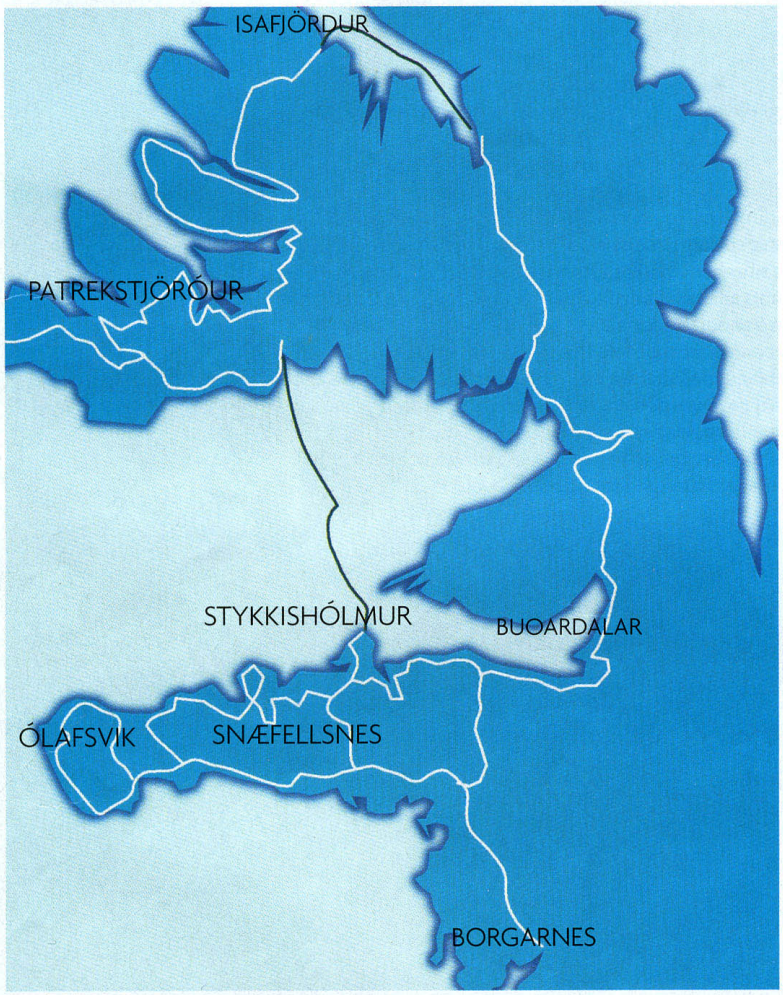
Small scale farming is becoming uneconomic in Vestfirdir and the region is slowly depopulating.

as five blue whales at any one time, some five miles out to sea. Later on we saw another pod of orca, patrolling close to land.

Heavy weather...

It started innocently enough... A small comet shaped cloud grew out of nothing in front of our eyes. It continued growing, widening out, fan-like enveloping the blue sky and becoming alarmingly grey. The wind picked up to a force eight and it started raining. Temperatures plummeted to 6°C. In a matter of a two or three hours conditions had gone from idyllic to abysmal. Over the next couple of days we struggled on to Stykkishólmur's Youth Hostel – a welcoming refuge and one of the nicest in Iceland where we waited a further two days. We couldn't wait for ever and continued east. The wind was often hard on our side, sometimes taking the bike's back wheel and swinging it around a full 90°. Skips were weighted down with concrete-filled tyres.

Curiously, the road was bathed in sunlight while the coast to our left was under black/grey cloud and the hills to our right were similarly bleak. It drizzled but the sun and wind dried off the rain spots almost as quickly as they formed. A low rainbow



Iceland: it's a fair way to ride for a round of golf

Hrafnabjörg, honed to a sliver by glaciers

entranced us forwards. The play of light and shade, cloud and billowing grass, and old, weathered, wooden buildings made it an unforgettable journey. Finally we reached the main road and the prospect of a daily bus back to Reykavík, which arrived 15 minutes later. Suddenly taken away from it all, there was certainly a sense of relief but also one of loss – all too suddenly we had stepped from wild desolation to cosy comfort.

Seasons and climate

The climate is cool, oceanic and warmer than might be expected for the latitude due to the Gulf Stream. As you travel north and east the weather generally improves. June is generally dryer than July and August, but can be windier. Summer temperatures average between 8-20°C, 12-14° is typical. Snow can fall in any month, especially in the interior, but is usually short lived.

The area described is best enjoyed in June owing to the outstanding bird life and lower snowline. The news and weather are broadcast daily at 8am in English on FM radio, or consult the internet at www.vedur.is

Getting there and getting around

Flights: Icelandair operates between Keflavík, London and Glasgow as well as other north European cities. Economy return fares start from £366. Connecting buses take you and your bike to Reykjavík avoiding a busy boring road. Contact Icelandair, ☎ 020 7874 1000.

Last year Go offered some very cheap fares, which have not yet been published for 2002, ☎ 0870 607 6543.

Car ferries: Take the ferry from Aberdeen to Shetland and pick up the Norröna to Seydisfjördur in eastern Iceland, via the Faroe Isles (non-optional three- day stay on return). Complete low season return fares start from £426.

Internal flights: A quick way to reach most corners of Iceland. About twice the cost of bus travel. Flights terminate at Reykjavík's down-town airport.

Buses: Bicycles are carried without fuss on racks at the back of the bus, or in the hold. A small charge is made. Reservations are not possible, so be prepared to wait for a later bus during the July-mid August high season. Bikes can end up filthy and expect damaged paintwork.

Contact numbers

The Baldur Ferry (Stykkishólmur-Vestfirdir), ☎ +354 438 1120.

Icelandic MTB Club (IFHK) Advice, rides and a friendly welcome. Information at the Reykjavík city campsite. Or, phone/fax +354 562 0099, internet www.mmedia.is/ifhk

Maps, Landmælingar Íslands 1;250,000 maps provide sufficient detail. These and their 1;500,000 map (good for general planning) show the general road surface.

Dick Phillips Specialist Icelandic Travel Service. Renowned Iceland expert who runs a high-quality information service for cyclists, supplies maps and tickets for ferry and air travel including a special air package for independent cycle-tourists. Prices start from £326, including. flight, five nights hostel accommodation and personal insurance. ☎ 01434 381 440.