



(Right) The start of the unsurfaced Kjöllur route
(Below) Shoam plays recorder in the lipart mountains
(Far left to left) Dettifoss waterfall, a full camping load, and Iceland's island 'ring road'

Icelandic high

The land of ice and fire sounds better suited to expedition cycling than family cycle-camping. **Bjoern Backe** went with his wife and seven-year-old daughter



Now and again the TV weatherman will point to a satellite swirl of cloud or a tight whorl of isobars with the words 'Icelandic low'. He's about to talk about rain. Iceland gets even more than Britain. It's also a lot colder. The average temperature for July in the warmer southern and western parts of this volcanic island pushes the mercury above 10°C. Elsewhere it doesn't. This begs the question: why were we going there for a family summer holiday – and camping?

Well, for one thing the maxim is true: If you want to see the rainbow, you have to put up with some rain! And Iceland has a lot to offer, such as glaciers, hot springs, and raw, unspoiled nature. It is one of the last places in Europe where it still feels like an adventure to travel. Depending on just how adventurous you feel, you can cycle on paved roads around the island, or can explore deep inland on gravel tracks.

GEYSERS AND GLACIERS

I would be starting the trip with my seven-year-old daughter, Shoam, and after two weeks my wife Sam would join us. With some strenuous cycling ahead, a tandem for Shoam and me was the obvious solution. I built one that I could fold down for transport.

Shoam and I started from Keflavik, Iceland's main airport, and headed towards Myvatn Lake. To begin with the cycling was easy. We were on paved roads and there were plenty of shops for stocking up with food, as well as beautiful sites to visit. We cycled past Thingvellir, Geysir

and the Gulfoss to the beginning of the Kjöllur route.

In Thingvellir the chieftains of all the Icelandic clans met a thousand years ago to hold court and decide about new laws. Geysir is known for its hot springs and of course the impressive geyser itself, the oldest known example, one of the most impressive, and the source for the English word. Gulfoss is a magnificent waterfall.

On the Kjöllur I knew that the cycling would get a bit more difficult. Like all Iceland's highland routes, it's unpaved. We would cycle on gravel tracks. It's quite isolated too: there are no campsites or shops. Still, the Kjöllur route is known to touring cyclists as one of the easier highland routes. There are no major rivers to cross and apart from a 14km uphill at the beginning it is relatively flat.

Just when we had reached the top of this long first ascent, the sun came out and we got great weather. In front of us we had a fantastic view of the route ahead. It was lined by two glaciers: the Langjökull on the left and the Hofsjökull 40 miles to the right. That day we cycled all the way to the turn off to Kaldidalur. There we pitched our tent in the evening at the side of a small stream and had a dip to wash off the sweat of the day.

OPEN AIR POOLS

The next day we had a rest day. We left the tent at the river and cycled with an empty bike up to Kaldidalur. It wasn't so much a rest day. The sun was burning, the road ran steeply uphill for around 10 miles and the gravel was sometimes so bad that the rear wheel of the tandem



couldn't get enough traction. More than once we had to push.

The view of the valley was worth the effort. Colourful mountains of volcanic rock lay all around us. There were hot springs and even a natural hot tub to have a bath. Shoam sat and played her recorder while I took photos and then lay in the sun thinking of the days ahead. We weren't completely alone there. There is a small lodge, where we bought a ridiculously expensive burger.

A day later we rolled into Hveragerdi. While this place is a small quiet research station in winter, in summer it is a busy tourist place. When we arrived there were four buses and perhaps twenty 4x4s. It was quite a shock after the near solitude at Kaldidalur. To make matters worse, the natural hot pool there was too hot for a bath. We left to pitch our tent some miles further in the desert.

After Hveragerdi the route continued north for two days, before we joined the ring road close to Varmahlid, a place you seldom find mentioned in tourist guides. It is a small village with a few houses and a petrol station. What makes it interesting for cyclists is that it has the first shop after the Kjöllur route. And like most small villages in Iceland it has a geothermally heated, open-air swimming pool. (If you go to Iceland, don't forget your swimwear!)

Swimming pools are a part of the Icelandic way of life. Icelanders don't go to the pub at night. They meet in the pool. This particular pool had a large swimming area, two hot tubs, a slide and plenty of inflatable toys for the children. What a place to wash the sweat and dust off after a long day's ride!

VOLCANOES AND WATERFALLS

From here we continued via Akureyri – with 17,300 inhabitants, Iceland's second largest town – to Myvatn Lake. Myvatn translates as 'mosquito water'. It is the second largest lake in Iceland. It is famous for its abundant bird life and good salmon fishing. More than 20 duck species and many other birds breed here every summer. We spent several days there, visiting the site of the 1984 Krafla lava flow and the hot springs at Namafjal. We also climbed the explosion crater of Hverfjöll.

My wife arrived some days later. She had brought her bike on the bus from Reykjavik to Myvatn Lake. Together we turned north and went to the Dettifoss, Europe's highest waterfall.

The weather got colder. The road we were riding was deeply corrugated and we found ourselves fighting against

a strong wind, which sometimes brought icy rain. Cycling wasn't much fun. Still Shoam was sitting happily behind me, singing or playing word games with my wife. We continued our loop from Myvatn Lake to the Godafoss, home to a small waterfall and a petrol station with a shop.

From here, we planned to cross the Sprengisandur desert on the F26. 'I hate the Sprengisandur,' said a driver of a huge 4x4 campervan that we met. 'I can't understand why you want to go there. It's corrugated roads throughout, sand, boring landscape and rivers that are chest deep...'

Not exactly a nice trip for the family, then. However, I never trust what a car driver tells me about what is possible on a bicycle. Corrugated bits are usually avoidable with the narrow tires of a bicycle and rivers in Iceland can change their depth from one day to the other depending on the temperature and rainfall.

That said, good and careful planning is crucial. We calculated that we would need seven or eight days to reach the next shop – and we bought food enough for 12 days to be on the safe side.

“I hate the Sprengisandur,' the 4x4 campervan driver said. 'Corrugated roads, sand, and chest-deep rivers.'”

INTO THE SPRENGISANDUR

The crossing didn't start well. On the very first day we were stuck for half a day because of heavy rain. We started in the afternoon and cycled alongside a river to the south towards a little farm called Myri. From here the F26 starts and we began to ride uphill.

We cycled uphill for two days. The road was sometimes so steep that I had to scan ahead for stretches with compacted soil to prevent the rear wheel slipping in the gravel. The temperatures were just above freezing, but we were sweating in our T-shirts.

Aldeyarfoss made for a welcome stop. There's a small waterfall there with incredible basalt columns at its sides. In the evening, there was rainbow. We found a nice place to camp and tucked into some warm pasta. It was a pleasant reminder why we were doing this trip.

The landscape on the Sprengisandur has in its monotony of sand and pebbles its own beauty. You loose yourself in your own thoughts. Shoam sang children's songs behind me, making me smile.

The river crossings weren't as bad as predicted. Through most of them

(Left) The Nydalur hut in the barren Sprengisandur (Middle) Shoam's spirits seldom dipped (Right) Another chilly river crossing



“Colourful mountains of volcanic rock lay all around us. There were hot springs and a natural hot tub to have a bath.”

Not Geysir itself, but one of its namesakes at Hveragerdi

we pushed the bikes without problems. Then close to the emergency shelter at Nydalur in the centre of the Sprengisandur we reached the deepest river. This was the one that was supposedly ‘chest deep’. It reached to just above my knees, which in truth was deeper than the others we had crossed, and wider too.

It was too deep to push the bikes through with their luggage on. So I unloaded the bikes, helped my wife over the river, carried Shoam, and then started to bring our equipment bit by bit. Altogether I needed to eight trips.

It wasn't much fun in freezing glacier water and I really valued my neoprene boots.

From then on it was supposed to be plain sailing. It wasn't. A day later we had a storm. The rain blew horizontally into our faces. In one hour of hard cycling we managed to cover just four miles. Even Shoam started to complain. I quietly began to look out for a place to pitch our tent. Suddenly Sam turned her bike and declared: ‘I'm going back!’ I agreed. I turned the tandem around and half an hour later we were back in the shelter at Nydalur.

GALE FORCE WINDS

Decision time. Going on by bike meant that we wouldn't have time to visit Landmannalaugar or Geysir. I wanted to show both to my wife, but equally I would have liked to cycle the southern part of the Sprengisandur. After some discussion we decided to take the bus to Landmannalaugar. It was leaving here the next day.

To get the tandem on the bus, we used our usual tactics. With the bike well hidden we approached the driver and asked whether it was possible to carry a bike. As usual we were told that this wouldn't be a problem. We told him that it was a rather long bicycle. Again, no problem. Then we wheeled out the tandem, assuring him that we had taken it on buses before. I detached the trailer and took the wheels off the tandem. (If need be, I could fold the bike too.) Fortunately there were only five passengers in the bus, so there was plenty of space for the bicycles.

We reached Landmannalaugar in the evening. The weather was good again, so we took a bath in the volcanically heated river and then fell to bed. The next morning I work early because the tent was leaning on me. Outside a storm was raging. The wind had already pulled out two tent pegs. I raced out of the tent and to hold it down with heavy rocks.

The storm blew all day. One tent after the other disappeared from the site. Their owners gathered in the large toilet building of the campsite, which this day doubled as an emergency shelter. Everywhere there were sleeping bags drying, torn tents lying and people discussing how to finish their holidays.

We stayed in our tent, reading, and playing ludo and chess. Shoam played her recorder. Soon we heard people in the few remaining tents singing in German. Everybody smiled when they saw us. What a difference music can make on a terrible day.

A day later the sun was shining again. We took a beautiful hike through the colorful mountains. Then it was time to pack up and start our way back to Reykjavik and the airport.



Fact File Iceland

DISTANCE: around 800 miles in total, 20-50 miles/day.

TERRAIN: main roads are paved, smaller roads all gravel. Some have (deep) river crossings – check locally before attempting to cross.

WEATHER: very changeable! We got 25°C one summer day, snow and storms on others.

CAMPING: £7-£10 per night and person in towns. Outside towns we usually camped wild.

MAPS USED: Landmælingar Islands Ferdakort 1:250,000. This is a topographical map with 3 sheets for the country

GETTING THERE: by air, with Icelandair from London, Glasgow and Manchester or by Iceland Express. By ferry, with the Smyril Line from Scrabster.

BIKES USED: a self-built foldable MTB tandem with a single-wheel trailer (don't use two-wheeled trailers on gravel!), plus a Hardo Wagner mountain bike with front suspension.

USEFUL WEBSITES: the Icelandic MTB Club is a must read for anybody planning a cycling trip to Iceland. Visit <http://www.fjallahjolaklubburinn.is/content/view/112/104/>. See also <http://home.wanadoo.nl/erens/icecycle.htm>.

ESSENTIALS: waterproof, stormproof tent; good rain gear and gloves; a good repair kit and some spare parts, as there are only eight bike stores in Iceland (four of which are in Reykjavik); and swimwear, as every small village has a pool.