

## TRIP 3: ICELAND 1

Iceland is much bigger than I realised – it's larger than Ireland, for instance – so you have to stay in different places. Fortunately, bus services are excellent (there are no trains) and there are many excellent hostels. Of course, you can travel by car but that's an option I prefer to avoid, apart from the occasional hitch when things are desperate. My 10-day exploratory visit took in the west, south and east coasts but did not include the interior or the north. So, omitting some tourist hot-spots, here's some less accessible and less well-known spots that I discovered.

### 31: Sugandisey, Stykkisholmur, Snaefellsnes

You may feel this is cheating because you can drive within 200m of this spot but it is so exceptional that I have to include it. If you're visiting the Snaefellsnes peninsula – and you should – try to stay at least one night in the port of Stykkisholmur so that you can drink in this view in the evening and in the morning.

On approaching Stykkisholmur, you would not expect to come across such a view, which makes it all the more special. Stykkisholmur is situated at the northern tip of a more or less flat peninsula that juts out from the main, mountainous Snaefellsnes peninsula into the island-festooned Breidafjordur. As you descend into the harbour area, you notice a substantial rock that shelters it from any northern winds – this is Sugandisey Island, joined to the mainland by a causeway.

The side of the island that faces the harbour is mainly sheer cliffs, punctuated by a flight of concrete steps up a gully. The most obvious cliff-face is shaped like the side of a loaf of bread and glows when the sun catches it (Photo 1551). The seaward side of the island slopes gently down to smaller cliffs and rocks below. The main path from the steps leads to a lighthouse from where the views are terrific.



Photo 1551: Sugandisey with lighthouse and causeway (copyright: Palmi Guthmundsson, [www.imageree.com](http://www.imageree.com))

However, even better views can be found by taking the path immediately left (not the gravel one) at the top of the steps. This ascends the harbour side of the lesser of the two bumps that make up Sugandisey. Park yourself on one of the hummocks that overlook the harbour and marvel at the all-around view:

South and South-west – an intimate view of the harbour (better than from the lighthouse) and the town, including its crazy church silhouetted against the mountains, which form a continuous arc behind the coastal plain; these mountains stretch all the way to the western end of the Snaefellsnes peninsula where the Snaefellsjökull glacier can be glimpsed

South-east – over Altafjordur, the mountains of Snaefellsnes continue eastwards

East and North-east – the multitude of islands at the mouth of Hvammsfjordur and the mountains behind them are partially obscured by the lighthouse bump, which, in my opinion, actually enhances the view

North – the whole of Breidafjordur is laid out before you and, looking past its many islands, you can see the mountains of the West Fjords region in a line stretching away to the west

West – yet more islands, past which the ocean opens up

When I was there on an August evening, the sun was sparkling the waters from above a bank of fluffy clouds topped by two lids of streaky cirrus and I anticipated a fabulous sunset, which, sadly, did not materialise.

The view was just as great in the early morning with the mountains still snuggling under a duvet of clouds and the harbour still silent before the loading of the ferry. However, at this time, it's worth going up to the lighthouse because the sun rises over Klofningur Mountain to the north-east and then fills up a valley half-way along the ridge like a cup - this cannot be seen from my favourite spot. You'll have to be up early to catch it, though – between 4 and 6 am in summer.

### 32: Rekavik-bak-Hofn, Hornvik, Hornstrandir

Hornstrandir is an uninhabited wilderness at the far north-western tip of Iceland. My visit there was my attempt to get 'remote' within the constraints of a 10-day, first holiday in the country. I went by boat on a day-trip from Isafjordur but the crew spent eight of the eleven hours ferrying us there and then rowing people ashore in various locations because an outboard motor had failed. So I only got three hours, instead of the expected six, to do a 'wilderness walk'.

The journey was pretty dramatic as the boat ploughed through large waves and occasionally dropped through the air like an aircraft in turbulence. Most of the party went off on a guided walk to the spectacular bird cliffs of Hjornbjarg, while a few of us went our own way. I took off on a walk recommended by the local ranger to a remote valley on the other side of Hornvik Bay but I didn't have time to reach it (rangers walk faster than me). Nevertheless, it was a wonderful walk.

From the landing place at Hofn, head north on a path behind the beach to the headland of Trollakambur. There you have to surmount a small, steep, slippery ridge with the help of a rope on each side. Then, after about 100m, you have to locate the path going up the hillside to your left (it's easy to miss), which brings you out onto a beautiful plateau above some spiky rock formations on the coast. On the way you have to pass a dangerous spot where the path is

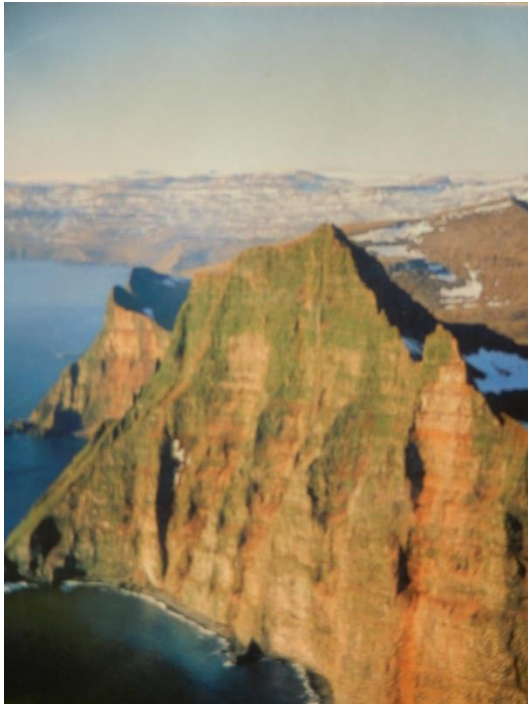


Photo 1324: Hjørnbjarg bird cliffs (copyright: Haukur Snorrason, [www.phototours.is](http://www.phototours.is))

badly eroded above a precipitous drop to rocks below. I mentioned this to the ranger on my return and he was quite dismissive: “It’s not our responsibility – everyone is responsible for themselves”. In an Icelandic wilderness, it seems, no one is responsible for maintaining the paths. Which begs the question: why have a ranger at all? The path leads you into the bay, Rekavik-bak-Höfn, behind which Rekavik valley ascends gracefully to Atlaskard pass which leads over to another bay, Haelavik. My route took me round the bay towards the remote valley, Hvannadalur. First I had to fight my way through some hugely luxuriant vegetation which harboured swarms of large flies – fortunately they were not stingers.

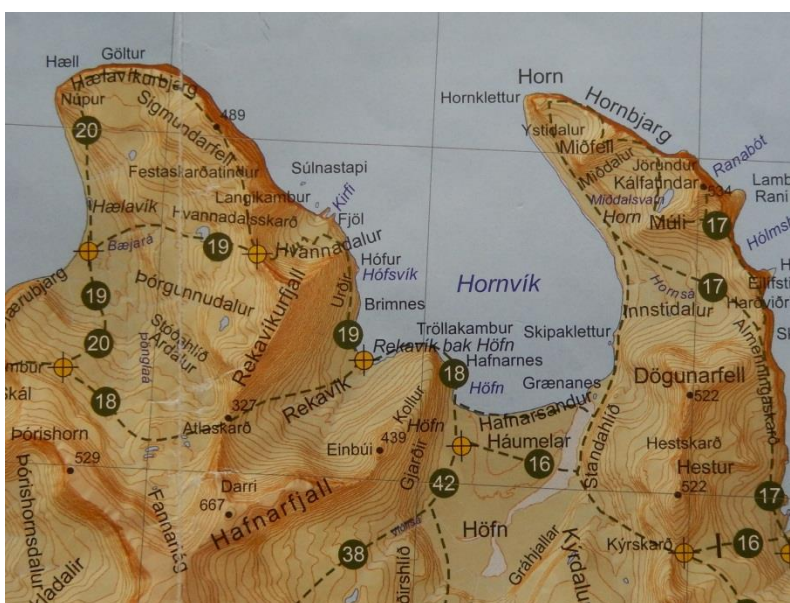


Photo 1476: map of area around Hornvík (copyright: West Tours, [www.westtours.is](http://www.westtours.is))

As you climb out of the fly-infested area, you pass a series of little stream-beds, containing a profusion of mosses and wild flowers, some boulders and a trickle of water. As you proceed round the slope, the views over Hornvik bay get better and better until you simply have to choose a stream-bed from which to admire the 180 degree mountain-scape:

North-east to South-east – the mountain-scape starts at the cape of Horn (shaped like a horn on the map, as are many of the other peninsulas in Hornstrandir) and extends all the way southwards to the peaks of Dogunarfell and Hestur; these mountains are seriously dramatic, rising almost perpendicularly from the shore at certain points and encompassing classic U-shaped valleys at others; the headland of Trollakambur obscures further views beyond Hestur, while the view back along the route you have taken round Rekavik-bak-Hofn is even better in retrospect

South - nearer at hand, a serrated ridge cuts into the sky, culminating in the peak of Darri at the apex of Rekavik valley

South-west – Rekavik valley rises up towards Atlaskard pass

West – an almost vertical mountain-side rises up behind you

North – the path to Hvannadalur continues along the even steeper western side of Hornvik bay; beyond lies the Denmark Strait

All around you can enjoy the wild flora of whichever stream-bed you have chosen.

You have to return the way you have just come. With a longer stay, you could complete a circuit by continuing to Atlaskard and over into Haelavik and turning north and then east to emerge at the top of Hvannadalur and returning by the path where this spot is located. There are hiking trails all over Hornstrandir for those who wish to camp and spend several days in the wilderness. An excellent hiking map is available entitled Vestfirðir and Dalir 1.

By the way, the return journey by boat was equally exciting: this time we were travelling with the waves and enjoyed the feeling of ‘surfing’ on top of them with just a few stomach-churning drops through the air. A bonus was the rare experience, according to our guides, of seeing some small icebergs this far south (just outside the Arctic Circle).

### 33: Godaland, Thorsmork, Fimmvorduhals

I would say this is the ‘must-do’ trail for all hikers who visit Iceland. There are other great trails, most of which I have only read about, but nothing seems to touch this one for the unique and extraordinary landscape that it traverses. It’s a 23k trek from Thorsmork (spelt Porsmork in Icelandic but pronounced Thorsmork) to Skogar via the Eyjafjallajokull eruption site of 2010. You can do the trail in two stages by booking into one of the two huts that are available roughly half-way through the hike; or you can do the trail in one go, as I did, taking on average 10 hours (I took 11). Most of the walk from Thorsmork to the huts is exceptional but I have chosen three spots that represent different aspects of the walk: the green oasis of Thorsmork, the two glaciers of Myrdalsjokull and Eyjafjallajokull and the Eyjafjallajokull lava field.

You can only get into Thorsmork by bus because there are treacherous rivers to cross (the buses are 4-wheel drive and have special high-off-the-road chassis and specially trained drivers). On the way in, the buses stop at the site where most of the water from the Eyjafjallajokull eruption came down into the valley. It’s a remarkable sight of a huge, ash-

strewn glacier and great lava-flows descending into a black lagoon. If you saw Julia Bradbury's Icelandic Walk on TV, you will have had a glimpse of the terrain I am describing.

Once at Thorsmork, you need to get off the bus at Basar, the third of the three campsites visited by the bus. Here it's best to check the weather conditions on Fimmvorduhals and give your name to the warden in case of mishap. The trail starts gently through green scrubland but soon ramps up the drama as it enters Godaland (literally, 'Land of the Gods'), a dramatic valley behind Basar which is like nothing you have ever seen before (Photo 1325). After about an hour's walking, you come to an unmistakable spur of rock on the right of the path which you can walk out upon. This affords breathtaking views in all directions: down to Basar and the flood-plain beyond; up the canyon towards Eyjafjallajokull and its glacier; and all around to spiky ridges and weirdly-shaped rocks and arches and overhangs sculpted by the weather. In between these excrescences are small trees and shrubs and lots of greenery and small Arctic flowers – "a place ripped straight from the pages of a fairy tale", as Lonely Planet puts it (5).

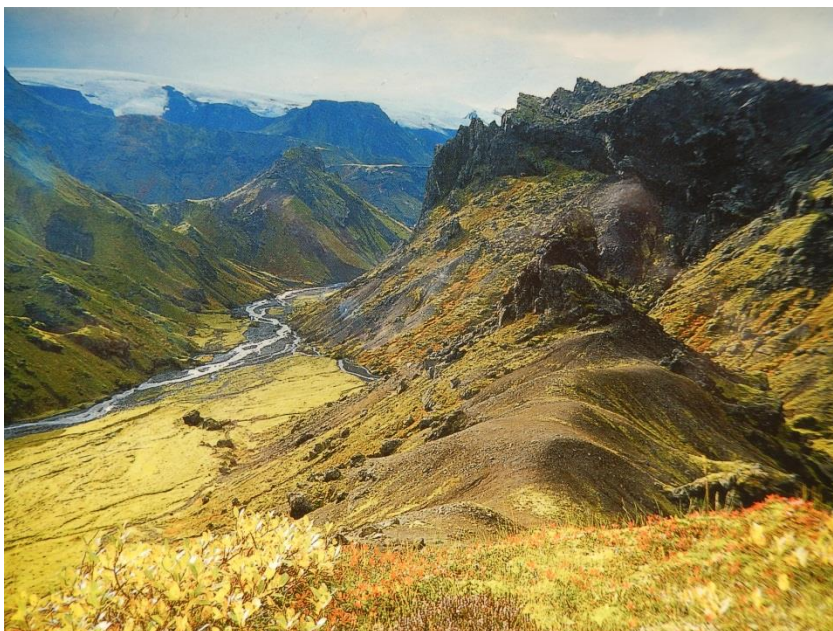


Photo 1325: Thorsmork – Godaland to the right, Myrdalsjokull to the left (photo: RAX, copyright: Laxakort hf, Reykjavik)

### 34: Between Myrdalsjokull and Eyjafjallajokull, Fimmvorduhals

Having recovered your breath, continue up the left side of this startling valley, over an arête, up a rope-assisted incline and onto a ridge where the path crosses a flat, rock-strewn wasteland and has been lined with borders of little stones. About half-way along this ridge you reach a point where you can see into the valley that separates the ridge from the Myrdalsjokull glacier to your left. The glacier sends three tongues down into the valley below where you are standing – these are dirty with ash from the eruption. The valley contains more of the weirdly-shaped rocks seen in Godaland (you can clearly work out where the idea of 'trolls' came from). Ahead is the mountain you have yet to climb with two distinct paths going up its side. To your right is the Eyjafjallajokull glacier behind a beautiful set of green rolling drumlins. At your back, you can see more of the flood plain of rivers coming down

from the glaciers and leading to the coast; while round to the north there is a vista of distant mountains stretching away to the horizon. A truly awe-inspiring spot.

### 35: Far Side of Second Arête, Fimmvorduhals

After climbing the mountain you have seen ahead, you are still not at the top. There is a 1k trek across a boulder field and a dramatic arête to cross before reaching the next spot. By now, you are entering the lava field of the recent eruption. Just after the arête, there is a steep climb up a spur on which there is a spot where you get the best view in all directions: this is at a precarious resting place next to a pinnacle of lava. Ahead are the steep rocks you still have to negotiate; to your left is the black lava flow from the eruption tumbling over the mountainside into a deep valley, more like a chasm, with a long waterfall piercing the flow and pouring into a series of cascades below. To your right is a green V-shaped valley leading all the way down to Basar and the flood plain. And behind you is the way you have come, arête, boulder field and Myrdalsjokull. It's a quite exhilarating place to stand where you realise the awesome power of the eruption and how much it has reshaped the landscape.

But you still have more climbing to do! After a while, the path does level out and you are crossing the lava field which was the focus of the eruption. There are black and red patches and snowfields and still-steaming lava but it's no longer hot underfoot on the path. As you rise, you can see, from above, the lava that was flowing over the mountainside above the second arête, and you reach two new hills created by the eruption. You can climb these and say you have stood on the newest mountain in the world. There are wonderful views of Myrdalsjokull to your left but Eyjafjallajokull keeps itself more hidden. It's hard to tell where the top of the pass is as the path weaves its way through the ups and downs of the lava plateau.

One word of warning: you may see the Fimmvorduhals hut on the skyline off to your right and there is a signpost pointing to it at one of the high points of the trail. This is not the main path, which continues straight ahead at this point (the sign post to Skogar has been removed). From here on, the weather closed in and no more extensive views were possible but the way ahead was always clear. First you come to the second hut, where the old emergency hut used to be, but it's been replaced by a new, triangular-shaped hut which serves as a resting place and can also be booked ahead for overnight stays. Then it's basically downhill. For an hour and a half, you're on a track used by vehicles to reach the second hut, then you come to a bridge over a fast-flowing river which you must cross (it's the only crossing point). Then you follow the left side of the river past numerous waterfalls – so many I got blasé about them and couldn't be bothered to leave the path to get a better look at them. The nearby scenery is pleasant enough but I can't vouch for any more distant views. My feeling, though, was that the really good stuff is on the other side of the eruption site. The trail emerges by the Skogarfoss waterfall where there is a merciful metal staircase to help you down the very steep slope with your by-now-very-weary legs. Never have I been more pleased to see the lights of civilisation.

### 36: Sjonarnipa, Skaftafell

Skaftafell is a much-visited National Park further along the coast from Skogar. By now, you are under the auspices of the mighty Vatnajokull icecap, the largest outside the polar regions. The coastal plain alternates between a fertile fringe close to the icecap and vast 'sandurs', delta-like flood-plains where rivers from the large glaciers make their way to the

coast. At the head of one of these sandurs lies Skaftafell, a green tongue of high ground between two huge glaciers which extends quite far inland before the icecap takes over (Photo 1552). It affords wonderful views of mountain, glacier, flood-plains and alpine scrub.



Photo 1552: sandur in foreground, Skaftafell to left, Skaftafellsjokull to right (copyright: Hordur Danielsson, [www.newhorizons.is](http://www.newhorizons.is))

Within the park, you can take short or long walks along marked paths from the excellent Visitor Centre (where you can leave excess baggage). I started off with the medium-length path to Sjonarnipa, which, for some strange reason, is classified as ‘challenging’. It is not – it’s a well-constructed path that traverses a hillside through beautiful woodland before emerging onto a rocky plateau with sparser vegetation and is not at all difficult, if a little steep at times. Be careful not to miss the initial right turn at the start of the path because the signpost was hidden behind an overhanging branch and I missed it: I retraced my steps and removed the offending branch but it may have grown back by the time you visit. The path has yellow marker posts and is about 2.5k long. You pass lots of purple harebells and yellow dandelions and buttercups amongst green shrubs and trees. A particularly nice touch was a tiny wooden border around a tree by the path protecting it from careless feet.

Sjonarnipa is a viewpoint overlooking the Skaftafellsjokull glacier to the east of the park:

North – you can see all the way up the glacier to where it emerges from the vast Vatnajokull icecap

East – across the glacier, rises the highest mountain in Iceland, Hvannadalshnukur, shaped rather like the head of a white rhino with part of its horn chopped off

South-east – more mountains with tongues of minor glaciers poking out towards the coastal plain

South – the flood-plain of Skeidararsandur, most of which flows from the vast Skeidararjokull glacier stretching for miles to the west of Skaftafell

West – alpine scrubland

North-west – a cirque of exquisite mountains in the northern part of the park,

dominated by the pointed crest of Kristinartindar – you would not believe it possible for ordinary mortals to scale such a peak but there's a path (classified difficult) right to the top; I didn't have the time, or energy, for that but it must be a thrilling walk with fantastic views

### 37: Sjonarsker, Skaftafell

Leave Sjonarnipa by the second path from the left (the first is the one you came up) and cross some more scrub before descending onto a green plateau with similar vegetation to that which you passed on the way up. Now you have more extensive views over Skeidararsandur and Skeidararjokull glacier comes into view. Half an hour from Sjonarnipa, you turn right and cross a mini-gorge and then there are boardwalks until you reach Svartifoss waterfall.

Lonely Planet calls Svartifoss gloomy but I found it exhilarating. The fall itself is a tall, thin stream rather like one of those dangly ear-rings and is surrounded by a kind of upside-down Giant's Causeway of hexagonal basalt pillars. Lower down is attractive green scrub, lush than on the plateau, and massive boulders straddle the out-stream, just right for tourists to sit upon. Ropes prevent you from visiting the pool at the base of the waterfall but it's a lovely spot from which to share the beauty with a bunch of other tourists - this is the spot that most people walk to (Photo 1553).

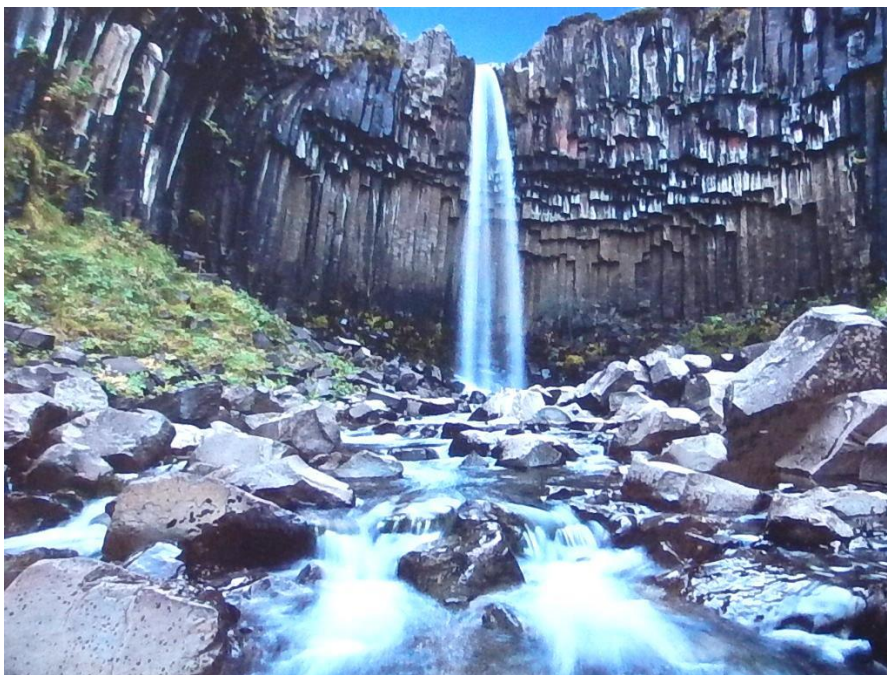


Photo 1553: Svartifoss (copyright: Skarphedinn Thrainsson, [www.skarpi.is](http://www.skarpi.is))

Moving on, it's a short, uphill walk to Sjonarsker, a viewpoint that takes in the western side of Skaftafell:

North – a different angle on the Kristinartindar cirque of mountains with its brown turrets and spikes

East – a more distant view of Hvannadalshnukur and Oraefajokull glacier to its south

South – the whole vast expanse of Skeidararsandur, spreading out its watery web



towards the sea

West - Skeidararjokull stretches away for miles towards the green coastal plain around Kirkjubaejarklaustur and the mountains behind it

The return journey to the Visitor Centre offers a choice of attractive downhill paths, taking in a few more waterfalls on the way.

### 38: Selafossar, Vestdalur, Seydisfjordur

This walk happened serendipitously. I had planned to spend the day at Borgarfjordur Eystri, which the guide books recommended as perhaps the most beautiful area in the Eastern Fjords. But it wasn't possible because of the bus schedules, so I had to spend an extra day around Seydisfjordur. This walk was suggested by the receptionist at the hostel (and by Lonely Planet). I started out very early, shortly after 6am, and that made my day because the sun was shining up the valley, glistening everything as I went.

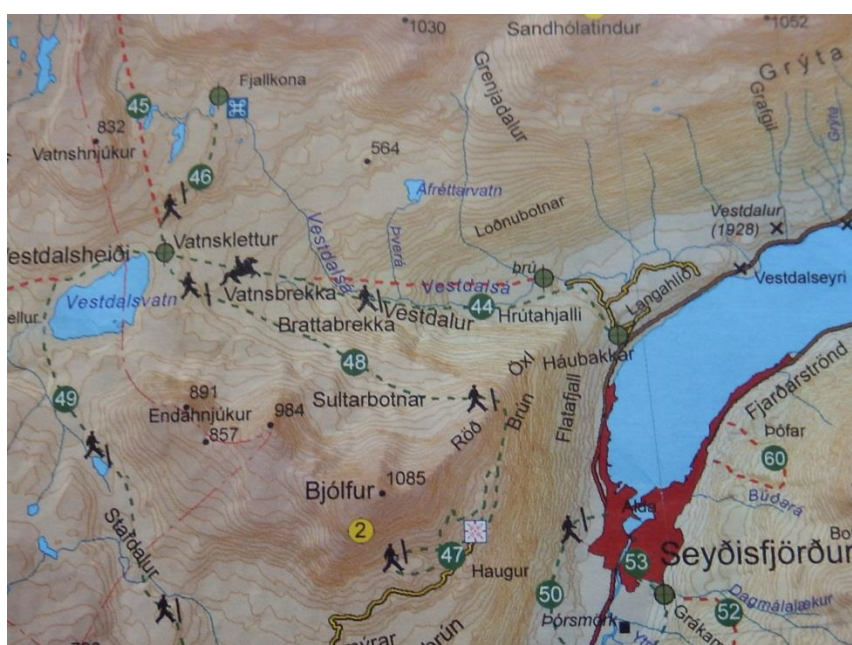


Photo 1481: map of area around Vestdalur (copyright: Landmaelingar Islands, based on data from National Land Survey of Iceland, [www.lmi.is](http://www.lmi.is))

Walk up the road on the west side of Seydisfjordur until you reach a notice-board entitled Haubakkar, which marks the start of the trail. Small yellow-tipped posts indicate the way. After about half an hour of walking along the valley floor, you reach the first waterfall, Selafossar. There are bigger, higher and wider waterfalls than this in Iceland but none that I have seen more beautiful. It is set in an amphitheatre of imposing rocks dotted with green moss, with scores of mini-waterfalls as the torrent cascades down towards the placid fjord. My favourite viewpoint was a platform about 20m nearer the waterfall than the path, reached after a short scramble over rocks:

North – the side of the waterfall cleft with mountains behind

East – the fjord opens its arms to the sea about 15k away and the surface of the fjord is punctuated by a high finger of rock about 50m away (actually it is a cleverly-

constructed cairn); on the day I was there, a seemingly endless sky, with layers of cloud receding to the horizon, was accentuated by the steep sides of the fjord; a lone fishing boat setting out to sea completed the picture

South – the other side of the waterfall with mountains behind

West – Selafossar opens like an inverted fan with the sky behind; as it enters the pool below, the fall would make a wonderful power shower, if you are prepared to brave the cold and a tricky scramble over some rocks

The morning sun lit up the whole scene and I was definitely in heaven.

There's another view of the waterfall as you ascend its southern side and then you emerge into the most perfect U-shaped bowl of a valley, with another striking waterfall at its apex, a commanding buttress of pink rock frowning over its left side and more slender waterfalls on its right. I thought I was tired of waterfalls and steep-sided fjords after nine days in Iceland and had said so to a fellow-traveller the previous day but this valley put paid to that illusion. The valley floor is more like a meadow with all kinds of grasses, purple harebells, little yellow dandelions, heather, bog cotton, clover and I don't know what else. Half an hour strolling up the path was sheer bliss.

### 39: Fossariefri, Vestdalur, Seydisfjordur

Before the second waterfall, there's a lovely spot to have a rest. It's a flat rock jutting out into the stream so that you can view the waterfall above a series of trilling cascades that emerge from a gorge just below the waterfall. You circumvent the gorge by climbing up a stream that epitomises the mountain stream of your imagination, little cliffs on both sides, tumbling water, flowers all around, the path wobbling up alongside the stream – but it's only brief for the stream-bed soon turns dry and cold.

You come out by the second waterfall, Fossariefri, which has at least four levels to it. At first, you can only see the bottom three but the best view is probably when you scale the next rise and the first level is revealed, almost by surprise. There's a rock platform about four metres off the path where you are more or less facing the first and most spectacular level:

West – the grand spout of the waterfall spews forth amongst forbidding rock faces as if from a giant maw with little drools and dribbles coming out at the sides; again, there is the temptation to risk a power shower but the risk would be too great of being knocked down, busting your head on a rock and being swept unconscious over the second level of the waterfall.

North and South – the steep sides of the waterfall cleft with mountains visible above

East – a classic view straight down the valley to the fjord: a winding stream, winding patterns on the waters of the fjord, steep fjord sides littered with snow framing the open sea, with every shade of light blue in the sea and sky; towards the horizon, clouds looked like the snow-scape of a far-off land just begging to be explored – or was it the land from which all things are born?

Above Fossariefri, another glorious U-shaped bowl of a valley is revealed, this time flatter with three similar-sized waterfalls breaking the curve of the rim at its apex. The stream here appears quite innocuous and it's hard to believe it could make such a powerful waterfall a few metres away. I took a break in the meadow and had a chance to examine the minutiae of the ground cover. It really was quite special: lots of varied green plants with no flowers so the variety was not so obvious when walking past; and many types

of grass – black tips, brown tips, caterpillar tips, bendy tips, ramrod tips, purple tips and one with bottle-brush-like white flowers. Then there was a myriad of tiny flowers, white, pink, yellow and purple, with butterflies still active in the middle of August. On an island between two branches of the stream, there was a meadow thick with dandelions, maybe safe from the attentions of the few sheep that were around.

Tier after tier, plateau after plateau, I lost count of the many rises I had to scale as the terrain became more barren and the air became colder and the stream became smaller. At one stage, the path crosses several streams and you have to search for crossing points but, in your search, don't miss the lime-green mosses that enliven the rocky stream-beds and streak the whole hillside round about. By now, the flowers and plants are becoming fewer and you encounter the first patches of snow. You pass two traditional beehive cairns whose purpose must have been to indicate the path in snow (this used to be the old postal route between Seydisfjörður and the next valley).

Suddenly, there are no more streams, just a broad track, as if an army had just joined your walk, and a boulder-strewn hillside, more of a moraine than a hillside. There is a third, and a fourth, cairn. About 20m to the right of the path, someone has made a beautiful rock sculpture out of piled stones, rather like a human body without arms and legs. The landscape is so bleak, you may be wondering why you are continuing with this strenuous walk: in my case, I wanted to see Vestdalsvatn, the so-called 'frozen lake' at the top of the valley.

The path crosses a small snow-field and a small green swathe of moss and plants, and then there is a notice board and, as you reach the notice board, the lake. The notice board proclaims Vatnsklettur and has a guest-book in a lidded pot, protected by the rocks holding up the board. It had taken me 4 ½ hours to reach this point – and I had been told it only took 2 hours, 3 at the most. Do these people never take a break?

The lake was not frozen, as it apparently is for most of the year, and is not that beautiful, but is a good enough place for lunch, if you can find somewhere out of the wind. I found a rock armchair with a footrest that at least faced away from the wind towards a snow-field that could pass as a glacier feeding the lake. It occurred to me that the lake might be in the caldera of an extinct volcano, thus accounting for the moraine-like hillsides on the way up. Around the lake are patches of snow and a few streams trickling into it, so perhaps it has a certain charm, after all.

Coming down, it was clear that there are two paths, one on each side of the Vestdalsa stream. The one on the north side looked more straight and boring and further away from the stream, so I retraced my steps on the south side. By now, the sun had moved round to the west and was slanting across, rather than up, the valley, so that all did not glisten as brightly as in the early morning. I found one more spot worthy of mention: this was on the tier or plateau above Fossariefri, where the three waterfalls are visible from below. In fact, there are at least five sizeable ones, four of which can be seen from an excellent viewpoint on a spur of rock by the first waterfall nearest the path as you descend. It looks easy to get out to the end of the spur – until you want to turn round. The spot is less dramatic than those further down the valley but it's great to see lots of green again after the barrenness above.

The return journey took me 4 hours but I've never spent a better nine hours walking in my life. The day provided an unexpected and fitting conclusion to my stay in Iceland – it encapsulated most of the things that I find attractive about the country: fjords, steep mountainsides (most of them unclimbable without a rope), streams and waterfalls, Alpine flora and pristine, unpolluted air. The only things missing were a geysir, a volcano and a glacier and I had done my best to find the last two up by the lake.

