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FIRE & ICE

In a land of volcanoes and glaciers comes astounding beauty around every corner, in every valley and on every mountaintop



Grey. I waited and waited but all I saw was grey. We descended into Keflavík Airport, floating through a thick blanket of clouds; there was no sun, just a glow of grey wash that offered the ambient light of day. I met up with Glenn at the airport and got a transfer to Reykjavík, the capital and main hub of Iceland with around 60 per cent of the country's residents living there. Once in town I realized

how creative the locals are with their colour choices: I had never seen so many shades of grey, as if to mimic their surroundings, every shade, to match every mood of the sky. Some buildings were occasionally accented with uninspiring pastels to breathe some life into the seemingly monotone city.

It was good seeing Glenn again. We were excited to start our 11-day trip with Edelweiss Motorcycle Tours.

FAST FACTS

EUROPE'S LARGEST GLACIER

Covering a 12th of Iceland's surface, Vatnajökull is Europe's largest glacier. It was formed over the last 2,000-3,000 years (as determined by layers of volcanic ash) and has several large volcanoes underneath. It's classified as an ice cap that is 8,400 sq. km in area, and made up of 3,100 cubic kilometres of ice, lying up to 950 metres thick.

ICELAND'S F-ROADS

Iceland's highland and rural roads are called F-roads and are not to be taken lightly. They are closed in winter and open only when the weather permits. Only suitable off-road 4x4s or appropriate motorcycles are allowed on them. It's illegal to drive a regular car, even if it's four-wheel-drive, or inappropriate rental vehicles on F-roads. Doing so will void your insurance. These roads can be rough, rutted, at times have rivers running across them, and can be dangerous — but they are oh so fun for the experienced rider. There is something special about being in the highlands and seeing sights few people will ever lay eyes upon.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

For the majority of Icelanders, people have a last name that comprises, at the parent's choice, their father's or mother's first name with the addition of -dóttir (-daughter) or -son. For example, Nanna's father's first name is Gunnar, so Nanna's last name is Gunnarsdóttir (Gunnar's daughter). This means that a member of a family will have a different last name to both of their parents and their siblings of a different gender. Women also do not change their name when they get married because they obviously don't become the son of their husband's father.

DRESS WARM

The weather in Iceland is quite unpredictable and often changes between sun, rain and drizzle. The Gulf Stream is responsible for cool summers and relatively mild winters. The average temperatures in Reykjavík range from 9 to 25 C in July while December's temperatures range from -2 to 2 C. Iceland is a volcanic island, which also helps to keep winters relatively mild, considering it is so close to the Arctic Circle.

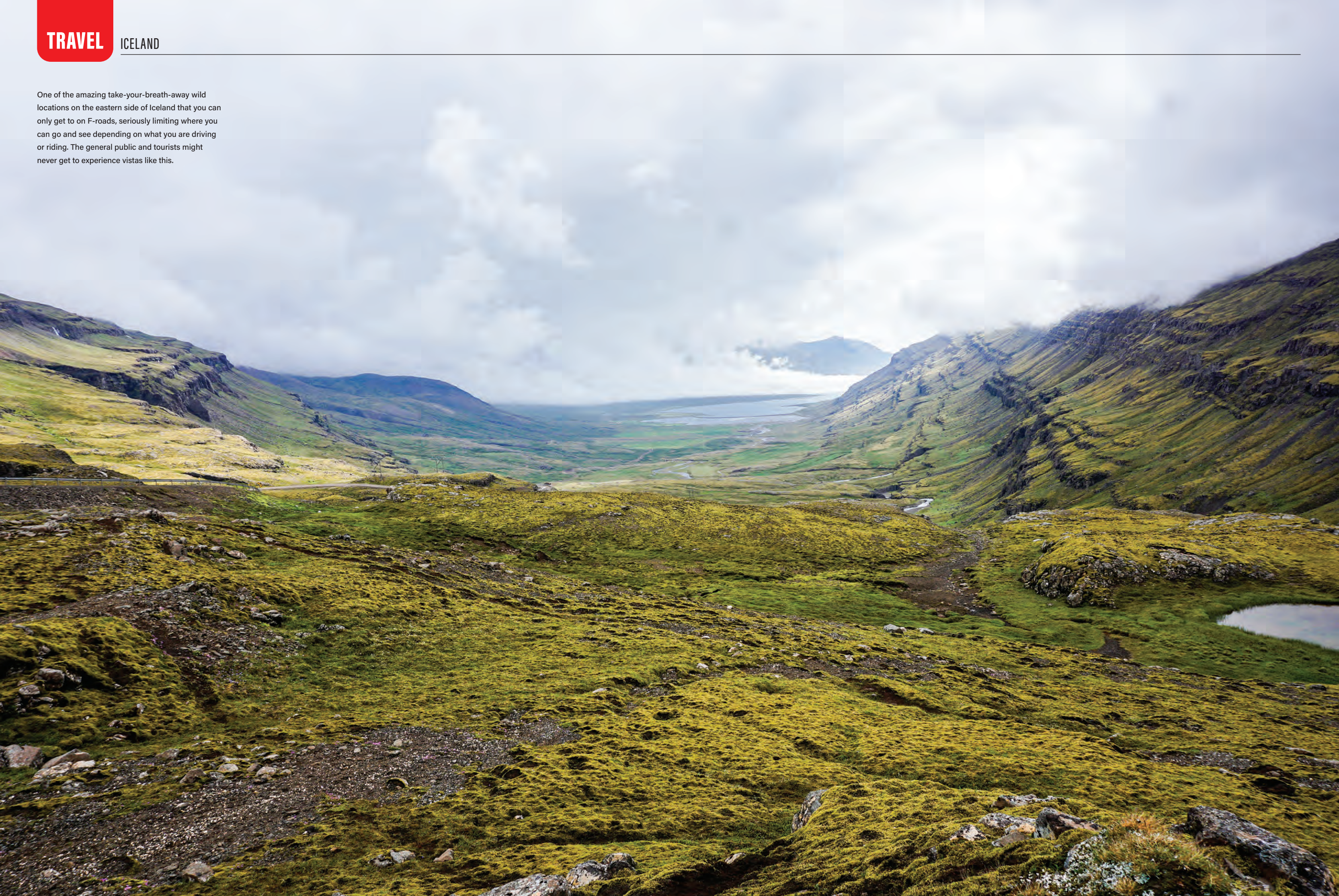
ALWAYS IN CONTACT

Edelweiss guides Thomas and Axel always kept the crew up to date via WhatsApp. Whether it was a time change for a dinner or meeting or just a reminder for leaving in the morning, we always knew what was going on. WhatsApp is the most-used encrypted messaging and calling application in the world, and works so much better than many other popular messaging apps.

A MOVING ISLAND

From the northeast corner of Iceland to the southwest corner run two tectonic plates: one is from North America and the other belongs to Eurasia. These plates can be seen in numerous places on Iceland. One, south of Reykjavik, looks like a simple riverbed, the two sides joined by a floating walking bridge, since the plates move 2 cm each year. Another location that really hits home to the size of the two continental plates is in Thingvellir National Park. This is the only place in the world you can walk in the seismic rift valley between the two tectonic plates as the walls of the crevice tower above. In theory, this tectonic shifting could very well split the island in two at some point in the very distant future.

One of the amazing take-your-breath-away wild locations on the eastern side of Iceland that you can only get to on F-roads, seriously limiting where you can go and see depending on what you are driving or riding. The general public and tourists might never get to experience vistas like this.





Axel testing the healing powers of the Blue Lagoon. (top left)
Thomas and the group admiring the vast landscape. (top right)
Emily resting in the northern fishing village of Siglufjörður. (left)



It had been a dream of ours for years to ride in Iceland and we decided to book a tour through Edelweiss to ensure we got the most out of the trip. Before we embarked on our journey, we spent a couple days walking around Reykjavík, looking through shops, and visiting Hallgrímskirkja — the largest church in Iceland, known for its architecture. We ate fermented shark, but the not-so-subtle and nauseating aftertaste of ammonia was just a little too much.

MEETING THE GROUP

In the afternoon we met in the restaurant of the hotel to meet our tour companions and tour guides for the trip. Thomas and Axel — both very personable and with an innate sense of humour — gave us a detailed run-down of what to expect on the

tour and if there was anything else to prepare before the following day's departure. Joining us on tour along with our guides would be Cathie and Billy who were each on a BMW F750 GS; Jesse, on a Honda Africa Twin with his pillion-riding partner Debra; and Andreas on a Triumph Tiger 900. Glenn and I each rode the new BMW R1300GS.

We departed Reykjavík, with the promise of finding some sunshine, but only found rain as we visited the Viking World museum, the Blue Lagoon and Geyser Gunna. We pulled in single-file to the geyser, attempting to create an orderly line of motorcycles.

Glenn and I turned around just in time to watch Billy backing up his 750GS; it would seem Axel was not

impressed with the angle that Billy was reversing so proceeded to pick up the back of the bike, with Billy on it, and move it over to line up with the other motorcycles. It only added to the comedy when Axel seemed to have barely put in any effort into the manoeuvre, while Billy's eyes were wide wondering why his feet no longer touched the ground.

RECENT VOLCANIC ACTIVITY

Part of the original itinerary had to be altered due to the recent volcanic events south of Reykjavik. Backtracking, we continued to the Blue Lagoon along a road that had been cleared of lava not long before. Lava had overtaken any brush in the area, painting the land with a sea of rippling blackness; there was still steam seeping out of the ground while riding through, though it was unclear whether it was because of the underground geysers or the lava itself. With steam curling up from the pools, the icy-blue colour of the water in the lagoon was enchanting in contrast with the dark grey and black hues of the lava rock surrounding the pools.

We continued to Selfoss, close to where we'd stay for the night, and stopped at Tommi's Burger Joint where the coffee was free, and the air

was warm. After a few minutes, the chef brought us over some fries on the house; we were very grateful for the snack and reprieve from the cold.

AN IMPRESSIVE AMOUNT OF WATER

The next day we rode to Gullfoss Falls, an extraordinary waterfall that flows almost 5,000 cu. ft. per second over its 31-metre decent that's etched its way through high plains and is cradled by 70 metre high vertical walls. Gullfoss was featured in the TV series *Vikings*. The thrashing white water contrasted deeply with the black rock walls and the vibrant green plains that blanketed the top.

We meandered on the highway, crossing over streams and rivers of the iciest blues and teals while the green flora accented the colours along the side of the banks. We had reached our first gravel stretch of the trip. Jesse and Debra adapted quickly. Billy promptly found his rhythm with gravel as did Cathy as we followed the ribbon of dirt through the otherworldly rolling hills, one after the other.

Mountains crowned with glacial plains began appearing behind the hills and we found ourselves being led

closer to the immense icefields before stopping at the Hveravellir hot springs. Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, these geothermal pools were a bustling meeting spot for travellers. Although we did not partake in the hot springs, we enjoyed watching the many sheep lying and drinking in the cooled water that had sprung up from the earth, as billows of steam spouted around them from the underground geothermal activity.

MAN DOWN

We soon found ourselves on a much looser rutted road, with Thomas in front while Glenn followed behind him. Glenn quickly found the change in terrain when he decided to take a different path from the preferred track on the right-hand bend of the road. As his bike began to lose traction, he stayed upright until the bike found its tipping point when the front wheel hit the loose dirt berm on the outside edge of the road, and the almost-stopped bike gently laid down.

Before I could get off my bike, he was already picking it up. He was fine, save for a bruised ego. It was a good lesson in maintaining space, looking ahead and reading changes in terrain.

The following morning was sunny

"MORNING WAS SUNNY WITH A HINT OF WARMTH AS WE RODE CLOSER AND CLOSER TO THE ARCTIC CIRCLE"

with a hint of warmth as we rode closer and closer to the Arctic Circle. We rode along the undulating roads, with cliffs dropping to the ocean on one side and mountains filled with greens, blues and purples on the other. We soon found ourselves burrowing through the mountains as we rode through many tunnels, with the longest reaching seven kilometres in length. We stopped at Siglufjörður before we rode to Akureyri, where we visited the Motorcycle Museum of Iceland. It is the only motorcycle museum in the country — most of the museum's motorcycles were owned by Heiðar Þ. Jóhannsson, who was a celebrated Icelandic motorcyclist.



Living on the edge. Emily takes a seat on the edge of a precipice to enjoy Dettifoss far, far below. (left) Looking at the bigger Dettifoss picture. (inset above)

"WE RODE THE CHUNKY GRAVEL ROAD WITH SWITCHBACKS INTO THE CLOUDS"

OVER THE MOUNTAIN

We stayed in Akureyri for the night before making our way to Husavik. There was an on-road and off-road option for our day, and since Glenn and I were the only two to opt for the gravel, we departed with Thomas while the others followed Axel in the chase truck on the highway route. We rode the chunky gravel road with switchbacks into the clouds, emerging from them only when we descended on the backside of the mountain to meet the highway again.

Husavik is not only the oldest settlement in Iceland, but also the whale-watching capital of the country. We arrived in good time to face the choppy seas in hopes of sighting a whale. And choppy it was: in open waters, our whale-watching boat thrashed from side to side. It didn't help that a young boy soon got seasick on the deck; luckily the seawater quickly washed it away, since the swaying of the boat saw water entering in the gunwale's drain ports. We

were lucky enough to see a few whale tails, but I was happy to be back on firm land as the cold, rain and waves had chilled me, and the rolling sea made me a little queasy.

The vibrant greens flashed by as we made our way to the massive horseshoe-shaped Ásbyrgi Canyon the next day. Legend has it that Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir stepped on the ground, imprinting the canyon into the Earth as it galloped across the sky. Every place in Iceland seemed to have exhilarating folklore of people, mythical creatures and gods steeped in Icelandic culture and passed down through generations.

A STUNNINGLY REMARKABLE WATERFALL

Thanks to Thomas and Axel's immense knowledge of the area — just one of the benefits of an organized tour — we had taken a backroad to have a better view of Dettifoss, away from the madding main tourist parking lot and busy road. The road swayed through rolling hills of greens before shifting to hues of reds and yellows. Dettifoss is unbelievably spectacular and with a flow of 6,200 cu. ft. of water per second, it's the second most powerful waterfall in Europe after the Rhine Falls. The water erupts through a large, deep canyon before twisting through the valley, offering a perfect frame for the rushing water.

We were headed for a late lunch down a gravel road when my front tire



Walking between tectonic plates — North America on one side and Eurasia on the other.

caught a sharp piece of shale that blew out the tire. I pulled over to see what had happened only to find a large gash in the tread. Luckily, we loaded it up in the chase truck and brought it to Egilsstaðir, the town we were staying in that night. Cathy offered me her 750GS to ride into town so she could take advantage of the heated back seat on Glenn's 1300GS.

The others departed with Axel the next morning while I waited with Thomas as he put the front wheel back on my GS. We were only a half-hour behind when we met everyone warming up at the Snaefell Information Centre. Snaefell is the largest mountain in Iceland and also an ancient volcano. On the mountain, a large glacier sits, and although it has receded immensely in the past years it still makes up a sizable chunk of the glacial ice in the country, of which there is plenty.

ANOTHER WET RIDE

The weather became dreary with light rain as we rode the tarmac and gravel roads wrapping around hills and mountains, each turn revealing a more scenic spectacle than the last. Soon the mist fell like a wall of water as we wound down a dirt road with switchbacks and little visibility. Windows through the mist offered a glimpse of extraordinary mountains and vistas of green leading to the sea.

Riding out of the fog to Hornafjörður, we caught glimpses of glaciers hanging down into the mountain valleys. Shades of white and blue ice carved over the mountainsides, blanketing



We'd seen black volcanic sand elsewhere but not in the same context as here. Our group was walking among glacial icebergs with an underground volcano just a kilometre or two away.



the ancient rock. After arriving at our lodging, Axel, Jesse, Glenn and I decided to take a short excursion to a glacial lake with a grand viewpoint overlooking the water full of small icebergs, set in front of a rippling glacial expanse with layers of deep ice climbing up the valley.

FIRE AND ICE

The next morning, we had a brisk ride to Jökulsárlón, a lake filled with icebergs cleaved from the surrounding glacier. Thomas and Axel had arranged for us to take an amphibious vehicle into the lake. We watched icebergs bob up and down and even witnessed a rare occurrence of one flipping upside down. It was breathtaking, floating between crystal-clear ice formations that are thousands of years old.

The icebergs would eventually catch an eddy, thrusting them into the current of a narrow mouth that led to the ocean. On the oceanside, we walked along the shore on the blackest sand you could imagine, and scattered along the volcanic sand were smaller icebergs that had washed ashore, glinting and sparkling from the sunlight. It's estimated that this massive glacier will be gone in 100 years: not from global warming, but from the volcano that sits beneath it, warming the

ground. Fire and ice, indeed.

We soon found ourselves riding along the shoreline on the other side of the ice-laden lake, greeted by steep jutting mountainsides that looked like halfpipes curling up toward the sky.

We arrived in Kirkjubæjarklaustur (try saying that five times fast ... or even just once), Axel and Thomas were elated to show us the souvenir piece of glacial ice they had gotten for us. We chipped off the ancient ice and, in a glass, poured Irish whisky over it. We clinked glasses to a great trip behind and the exciting days ahead.

THE ULTIMATE IN F-ROADS

The ride to and after Landmannalaugar was the highlight of the trip for me and Glenn, and although others wanted to go, due to the rough terrain and long ride it would just be Glenn and I riding with Thomas while Axel guided the others on a scenic paved route.

The three of us rode gravel F-roads into the mountains while the temperature dipped down to 8 C. Luckily, about an hour into the ride, there was a small encampment. We walked into a tiny cabin where three women drank tea outside. We spoke to the ladies as we curled our fingers around warm cups of coffee, trying to absorb the

heat of the cup into our hands.

We continued through the periodic mist that hid some of the astounding scenery surrounding us. We roamed through the winding valleys, past slopes etched by glaciers, donned with black stone, rust-coloured rock and vibrant greens.

It was going to be a wet day in more ways than one, not just because of the mist and clouds, but because there were numerous deep, water crossings we had to go through. With varying difficulty and currents, we would walk into and scout the larger crossings, trying to find the shallowest and safest route through.

IT MUST BE FATE

As we rode into Landmannalaugar Park, we were told we had to have a parking pass purchased online for each vehicle. The request began a long process of filling out form after form for each bike with very weak cell service. I was hungry and my patience had blown away with the brisk breeze. I pestered the park attendant with questions and scenarios attempting to prove how silly this system was — her few responding words and unimpressed expression seemed to give me all the answers I needed. We were eventually in and had two more deep

For the sake of the glacier's health, we couldn't set foot on the glacier but we could float in an amphibious vehicle among icebergs broken off of the adjoining glacier near Jökulsárlón.





Everywhere on Earth has amazing landscapes but sometimes when you're riding in a strange land you can forget where you are: the beauty and the vastness are all consuming and you think how amazing it is to ride a motorcycle through a seemingly endless, captivating landscape. Sometimes all you can say is, "WOW!" Sampling whisky at the end of the day chilled with the purest of thousand year old glacial ice. (left)

water crossings to get to the geyser area, and food.

It wasn't until after I had become completely submerged in the mountain river, gasping in the surprisingly comfortable geothermally warmed water, that I realized this was my karma for being rude to the attendant who was just doing her job. The water crossing was almost waist deep and had large rocks underneath. One of the rocks stopped me dead and the GS instantly threw me in the water, I gasped for air and squirmed to free my leg from under the bike. I picked up the bike quickly and glanced around briefly to see numerous people in the parking area who had watched the fall. A little humility has never hurt anyone. We crossed the second water crossing without issue. I quickly rummaged through my extra clothing to find a dry sweater to put on — my soaked base layer pants would have to wait until the end of the day.

AN EPIC RIDE FOR THE MEMORY BANK

After eating and sort of drying off, the three of us hit the water crossings and dirt roads again. We rode through lush half-pipe mountain valleys, with accents of pure black framing the near-luminescent greens. After finding tarmac again, we regrouped at the Geysir Hotel. The day's ride consisted of about 215 km of gnarly F-roads through deep colourful valleys, crossing mountain tops and about 20 water crossings — it was certainly not a ride for the inexperienced.

Although I had grown to quite like the usual quaint accommodations laced with character and rich in the history of the areas, this hotel was exquisite and a welcome change of scenery. The hotel was situated just across the road from the Strokkur geysir, which erupts every 12 minutes, rocketing a stream of hot water 30 metres into the air. We enjoyed a

talkative dinner, each discussing our day's rides and the different scenery of the two routes.

With the weather being mostly exceptional, apart from the first day leaving Reykjavík, all of us had forgotten what rain felt like, only experiencing mere drizzles and fog on our tour. It would seem Reykjavík proved to be the perfect home for rain clouds and as we descended along the coast we rode back into the grey. By the time we had returned to our starting point, we were soaked and ready for a proper warm shower.

That evening our group of cohesive, like-minded riders went for dinner and reminisced on the experience, the friendships, and the unbelievable scenery we witnessed while riding in one of the most incredible places in the world. The contrast to ourselves from the first to the last day became fitting with the contrast of Iceland, the land of Fire and Ice. We had taken in so much over the course of the trip we were inevitably changed, thanks to Edelweiss.

The next morning we said our goodbyes and took in the grey landscape once again as we ascended into clouds and headed home. **MM**

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS OF ICELAND
VISIT: MOTORCYCLEMOJO.COM

GLENN'S THOUGHTS ON THE 1300GS

I have always been a big fan of the boxer GS models. I've put lots of kilometres on various GS models over the years and I've owned a 1250GS for a few years now. To say I was looking forward to "living" with the 1300 for almost two weeks would be an understatement.

At first the bike seemed a little underwhelming. Maybe I wasn't prepared mentally for the change from my 1250 but me and the bike just didn't gel. It grew on me a little bit every time I got on it but my initial thought that it was now more a street bike rather than an adventure bike. Is BMW getting away from its boxer GS adventure roots? Is the company transitioning the 1300 to highway travel and is the new 900GS going to be the future ADV king?

One of the things I noticed right away was how much better the 1300 handled on the highway. The gas tank wasn't as high, creating a gradual slope from the steering head to the seat. This, combined with the lower handlebars, made it feel like I was sitting *on* the bike as opposed to sitting *in* the bike. Even with the wide handlebar, I did immediately notice how it tracked arrow-straight down the highway.

I also liked the engine and the transmission right away. Sure, at 145 hp, it has an additional 12 hp over my 1250 but I'm not one for dwelling on horsepower when it gets up into those digits. The transmission shifted smoother than my 1250 and, therefore, the quick shifter was quite a bit smoother up and down.

The bike's menu system has changed. With the wonder wheel you can select a number of functions that are then controlled by a rocker switch, and you can select two functions to control at a time on the same rocker button. In my case, it was the windscreen height and the heated grips that I kept active. The menu is intuitive and can be accessed while you ride.

I didn't like the front and rear turn signals. My bike had the front turn signals on the flexible wind protectors — what happens if you drop the bike and wind protector breaks, and therefore, your turn signal breaks? And the small rear turn signals are overpowered by the adjacent ultra-bright brake lights at the back, making them all but invisible when the brakes are applied.

As mentioned earlier, I was a bit concerned about how it would be off-road considering the different seating position and the lower handlebar. After a day or two I did rotate the bar higher, making it more comfortable standing as it was too low for me. That made a big difference.



It handled very well on the many gravel roads we traversed over the 11 days but the shining moment was on our second last day of the trip when Emily, Thomas and I separated from the group and had an epic full day of gravel roads, keeping the bike clean in more water crossings than we could count, and cresting mountain tops. The bike took that extreme punishment without even a hiccup — oh wait, there was a hiccup, a big one.

On one particular water crossing, I went ahead of Emily and, although it wasn't that deep, I watered the bike out. I wasn't going fast but just the way a wave entered under the bike, it gulped a big mouthful of water and died in the middle of the water crossing. It started again and once revved up to clear the water, I continued without issue.

After Thomas and Emily were finished laughing at me, Emily followed my path. It was then my turn to laugh. She watered out at the exact same spot. We found the perfect — or imperfect — wave.

Other than that one time in the water hole, I ended the trip thoroughly enjoying the 1300GS. The differences aren't enough to trade in my 1250 on one, but if I were in the market for another big adventure bike, I would seriously consider BMW's go-anywhere (except for one water crossing) big boxer.