

APRIL 2025

Motorcycle Tour Magazine

# Backroads

Motorcycles, Travel & Adventure

Volume 31 No. 4



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# Touring Iceland

## Waterfalls, Glaciers and Adventure



words + images: Lance Lamberton

This past summer I undertook a nine day motorcycle tour of the entire Island of Iceland, under the tutelage of Edelweiss, the largest provider of guided motorcycle tours in the world. I have always been intrigued with exotic places off the beaten path, and Iceland seemed to fit that requirement to

a tee and then some. It did not disappoint.

Our tour group consisted of nine intrepid souls, plus our two German tour guides, Alex and Thomas, both of whom have been guides with Edelweiss for many years. The “tourists” consisted of people from the U.S., Canada, Germany and Russia.

By way of background, Iceland was originally settled by Vikings over 1,000 years ago. It lies just south of the Arctic Circle, meaning its way up there. That being so, you can run into some bitterly cold weather, even in late July/early August when I was there. Consequently, its population is small for such a large island, somewhere around 326,000, with two thirds of its inhabitants living in the vicinity of its capital city Reykjavik.

And that is where our journey began.

The first day of riding was an easy one of 133 miles onto the peninsula Reykjanes where the famous Blue Lagoon is located, and into the town of Selfoss, where we had our first overnight stay. The light travel day was the perfect opportunity to get acquainted with our bikes and new surroundings. My bike was a 750cc BMW dual sport, which was ideal for both paved roads and

dirt and gravel; of which I would soon encounter in spades.

Day two, at least for me, turned out to be a real challenge. We started the day by riding towards the hot water spouts Geysir and Strokkur, before heading north into the highlands for our first big gravel road encounter. Having little riding experience on dirt and gravel, I confess to being more

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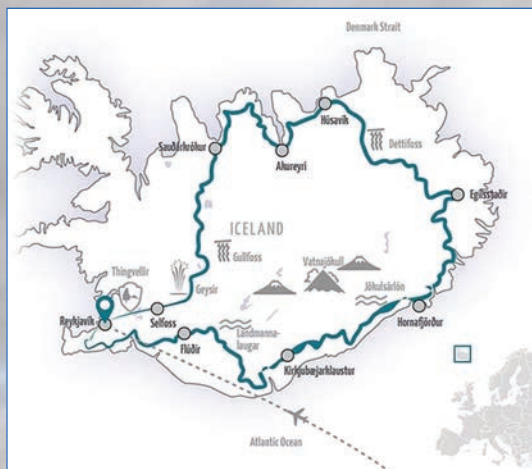
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than a little scared during this leg of the tour, white knuckling it all the way. Yet somehow I made it without dropping the bike, which gave me a great sense of pride and accomplishment.

Our final destination for the day was Saudarkrokur (don't ask me to pronounce it!) 180 miles from our starting point, and about 80% of it on dirt roads, often soaked with deep puddles. Fortunately, my Harley branded gear was up to the task and I stayed pretty dry.

After a hard day of riding on dirt and gravel the day before, I welcomed the next day of relatively easy riding on good pavement to our final destination of Akureyri, only 112 miles from Saudarkrokur and the second largest and most beautiful town in Iceland. On the way to Akureyri we had lunch at Siglufjörður, a little fishing village which was Iceland's herring capital in the 1940s and 50s. The Herring Era Museum chronicled this heyday for the town by showing films of how physically demanding it was to work in this industry.



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Since we arrived in mid-afternoon in Akureyri, we had time to do some sightseeing, and most of us did so by visiting a rather impressive motorcycle museum which displayed many vintage bikes; something I would not have expected in Iceland.

Day four was a relatively short ride of

easternmost point on our tour. On the way we rode around the Asbyrgi Canyon, a breathtaking natural formation which is about 3.5 kilometers long and 1.1 kilometers wide. Later that day we come across Dettifoss, the biggest waterfall in Iceland, and Europe's most powerful.



98 miles to Husavik, the northernmost overnight stop on our tour. Along the way, we visited two great natural sights, the Godafoss waterfall and Lake Myvatn located on a very active volcano belt with visually striking lava castles in it. For me, the most exciting part of our

visit to Husavik was the whale watching. We went on the water in boats designed for it, and had the opportunity to see many humpback whales diving up and out of the water as they fed on plankton; sometimes only a few yards from our boat.

The next day was a little more demanding; 164 miles to Egilsstadir, the



Dettifoss is fed by the glacial river Jokulsá a Fjollum, which flows out of Europe's largest glacier, Vatnajökull. It is 100 meters wide and plunges 45 meters into the Jokulsargljúfur Gorge. In fact, the most striking things to see in Iceland are its waterfalls, which seem to exist almost everywhere.

The next leg on our journey was to ride 191 miles to Hornafjörður. Our first stop this day was the Snaefellstóða Visitor Center. There we learned more about Mount Snaefell, which at 1,833 meters is the highest mountain in Iceland not covered by a glacier. As we continued heading south, we rose in elevation and dealt with near freezing temperatures, the thickest fog I have

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ever experienced in my life, and all on a very wet and slippery dirt road.

When we finally got out of that morass, we continued along the winding coast towards the Vatnajökull glacier, the largest one in Iceland and Europe, which covers 8% of Iceland's land mass. It covers an area of about 3,400 square miles and is up to 3,000 feet deep in places. Yet I am told that within 75 years it will be completely melted and gone. I kind of have my doubts.

On day seven of the tour, the good luck that we enjoyed with cool temperatures and no rain, finally gave way, at least for a day. Our trek would take us 129 miles to the southernmost part of the trip, the town of Kirkjubæjarklaustur. Try saying that real fast three times. Early into the day we took an amphibious craft tour of the Jokulsarlon,



a seven square mile glacier river lagoon where a vast number of icebergs break off and flow down to the sea from a frozen river. The only problem was the weather. It was freezing cold, with a very strong wind, and rain that felt like needles on any exposed skin. In fact, I had every bit of rain and protective gear on me, but my rain gear was not up to the task, and rain water got into my phone, requiring me to replace it once I got home.

Thank God I didn't lose my data.

Bottom line was that the weather was so uncomfortable that I barely was able to lift my face long enough into the wind to even look at the gorgeous icebergs that floated only a few feet away from us. It got so bone chillingly cold that I thought I was going to get hypothermia. When our boat tour was over, I ran to the shelter of an adjoining lodge where it took me a full half hour to stop shaking.

After that little adventure we headed up to an area with steep cliffs along the ocean with black volcanic sand beaches, and which is the nesting area for Iceland's Puffins; a unique and hardy bird most commonly found in Iceland. And while the rain had stopped, the wind along those cliffs were so strong that it was almost impossible to stand. Sure enough, once we left the cliffs and rode down to sea level, I proceeded to park my bike on some loose gravel, when a powerful gust of wind literally knocked me down and caused me to break off a piece of the front brake lever. Thus my goal to make it through the tour without once dropping my bike were dashed. Oh well.

The next day was a 134 mile trek due west to Fludir; the second big off-road day – full of challenging gravel roads and about 20 river crossings. However, given what happened to me the day before, I devised a way to avoid those “challenges” and left them to the more experienced riders in my group. And while they were fording rivers I had time to go off on my own from the base of our hotel, where I was able to get up to 175 kilometers on beautifully smooth, paved roads.

Upon leaving Fludir it was 159 miles to our final destination, Reykjavik, and for my money the most enjoyable riding day of the tour. That is because the road consisted of long sweepers, where you could see where you were

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going far into the distance because there are hardly any trees in Iceland to block your view. In that way I could navigate the line I wanted to take well in advance, which enabled me to corner harder and faster.

This is in pleasant contrast to my native Georgia, where the best riding is in the North Georgia mountains, but where your views are limited due to the thick carpet of trees all along your route.

But at long last, after Day 9 of the tour, all good things must come to an end eventually. We celebrated with the group having a farewell dinner at an excellent restaurant just a couple of blocks from our hotel.



And speaking of accommodations and meals, they were for the most part excellent. Breakfast and dinner are included in the tour package, whereas for lunch you are generally on your own. Yet that is a standard industry practice. The same arrangement applied with IMT Tours, the one other company with which I have taken a tour.

In addition, our tour guides were excellent. They really know how to do what is expected of them, and which sometimes requires them to take on such tasks as changing a tire in less than half an hour in the middle of a tour. And for me, I al-

ways welcomed their offer to park my bike when we got to a place to stop; something which I clearly did not enjoy doing.

And I especially enjoyed the friendly banter I had with one of the tour guides, Thomas, over my Harley gear. Harley is clearly not a brand that he is overly fond of, and took every opportunity to make a lighthearted dig. So I was happy to report to Thomas that on the day I got soaked, it was my Harley branded boots, pants and gloves that stayed dry, with the rain getting through my non-Harley, supposedly waterproof jacket.

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Which brings me to my final point. I notice that European riding culture puts a high premium on wearing really good protective gear, even on the hottest days, whereas in the U.S. that is generally not the case. It is not unusual for an American rider to ride with shorts, a t-shirt, flip flops, and no helmet if not required by the state. I noticed that as soon as I got back to the states and had to endure the heat and humidity of hotlanta in the summer, I started to revert to my old habits, until I decided that if it was too hot and humid to comfortably ride with good protective gear in the summer, then I'd just forego riding at those times and keep my bikes on a tender. Sorry for sounding preachy gentle reader, but this point is a takeaway from my time touring in Europe. Riding is dangerous enough without compounding the risks with inadequate protection.

You can find more information on Edelweiss Bike Tours here: [www.edelweissbike.com](http://www.edelweissbike.com) ☺

*Lance Lamberton is a retired public relations professional who lives in the Atlanta area and has been riding motorcycles since 1968.*