

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Iceland
- **START/FINISH:** Reykjavik to Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon & Blönduós to Reykjavik
- **DISTANCE:** 255 & 145 miles respectively
- **PICTURES:** Ed Shoote and Sam Jones



Great rides

REAL GRAVEL RIDING



Ed at Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon

With only three days free, **Ed Shoote** flew to Iceland with his bikepacking kit. **Sam Jones** and friends hired mountain bikes there for a steadier six-day trip

The most sparsely populated country in Europe, with many of its roads unsurfaced, Iceland is an ideal destination for getting off the beaten track. There's more than one way to explore its rugged, sub-polar terrain. Ed Shoote used a lightly-loaded gravel bike, Cycling UK's Sam Jones a mountain bike with panniers.

ED SHOOTE: NORTHERN, LIGHT

'Iceland? For the weekend? Seriously?' That's the standard response when I answer what I am doing with my long weekend. When I add that I want to *cycle* across Iceland, I get a wry, contemplative smile that says: 'Is he actually serious?' Yet I have a full 72 hours before I have to be back at my desk and I intend to make the most of the time.

Straight after work on Thursday, my wife and I catch a flight from Edinburgh. Two hours later, we're touching down in Reykjavik. After a short drive together in the hire car, I unpack my bike and set off into the dark alone. I'm literally heading into the unknown, because as I ride uphill I am engulfed by a dark, dense mist – so much for the Northern Lights!

Riding into the night allows you to make

the most of every hour, and while you miss a few sights, it brings its own unique experience. But this is getting silly. I set out my bivvy bag on some lush moss between black volcanic rocks and plan to make an early start.

A HOT BATH BEFORE BED

It's a bizarre feeling waking up in a completely alien environment. Last night, I was oblivious to my surroundings; I was camping a bit too close for comfort to a sign warning of steam vents in the area. I ride due east on the famous outer ring road of Iceland. The mountains are encircled in morning mist, and steam vents and geysers add to the theatre. Daylight riding here definitely offers more!

I ride past Selfoss, stocking up on a few last-minute and incredibly expensive provisions. It's time to leave the tarmac behind and ride the gravel tracks through the desolate interior of Iceland. This is also where you leave the other tourists behind and get a true feel for the place. Travelling by bike lets you do that surprisingly quickly; I pass signs banning hire cars from driving on the gravel and immediately it's peaceful. While cars can't travel here, my fast and

Do it yourself

FAST AND LIGHT

I was dropped off and picked up by my wife in a rental car. We arrived late and the car let me start riding quickly, a little way away from the airport. I stored my bike box in the rental car. Buses, which often passed me during the day, are a good option because most take bikes. The airport has a bike-building station but no bike bag/box storage. Try the bus station or a hotel for that.

Highway 1 was busy with badly-driven hire cars in the section near Reykjavik. On the gravel roads, it was empty so I could focus on enjoying the scenery. The wet weather dampened down the coarse volcanic 'gravel' and, while rough or sandy in places, it was almost entirely rideable. The gravel tracks have many icy fords, which could cause concern after heavy rain. Don't be tempted to venture off the tracks: the environment is very fragile in Landmannaleið's famous green moss-covered landscape.



IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE TARMAC BEHIND AND RIDE THE GRAVEL TRACKS THROUGH THE DESOLATE INTERIOR OF ICELAND





Above left: Aside from camera gear, Ed travelled light, packing a bivvy bag, stove, and one change of clothing

Above: Icelandic horses. Their ancestors arrived in the 10th century with the Vikings

Left: The damped-down gravel was mostly fine on medium-width tyres

light bikepacking set-up is perfect. The main hold-up on my route is not the freezing river crossings but stopping to take photos; each corner reveals the new best view so far!

As evening approaches, it's grey and starting to drizzle but I see a wooden sign for hot springs that I can't ignore. I happily roll into a designated campsite, park my bike, strip off, and soak my legs in a blissful hot

spring river. After 200km of riding, it's the perfect way to relax. I feel light years away from my work desk, yet just 24 hours ago I was setting my email to 'out of office'.

The rain gets heavier and I don't want to leave the hot spring, but I've been soaking in it for three hours. My skin is shrivelled like a prune served at a 2-star hotel breakfast. It's time to drag myself out, dry off, and

zip myself into my Gore-Tex bivvy bag. With such a short trip, I have minimal kit: just one change of dry clothes, a sleeping bag, stove and bivvy bag, all stowed in a large Apidura seatpack and bar bag.

ICEBERG LAGOON

Saturday arrives and I reckon I have to make it another 200km to feel like I've had a decent attempt to cross the island. The tops of the hills and volcanoes are lost in the cloud but the bright green moss shrouding the black volcanic soil makes for incredible scenery. While the track is loose, it's remarkably fast and smooth for riding. I've only seen a couple of Jeeps and a

THE RAIN GETS HEAVIER AND I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE THE HOT SPRING, BUT I'VE BEEN SOAKING IN IT FOR THREE HOURS



Above: Iceland's waterfalls: a reminder of how much it rains there
Below left: Landmannaleið's bright green moss
Below: Sticking to the tracks to avoid ecosystem damage



handful of sheep so far. It's certainly a good spot to get away from it all.

Iceland is renowned for its river crossings and there are 15 on this stretch of the F208 road. The weather is dry today so I lose the feeling only in my wet feet!

I climb one final hill and the green and black mountainous landscape subsides. I can now see the sea in the distance. I ride

alongside a river that's so crystal clear I'm happy to scoop a bottle full of water and drink it straight.

Finally, at about 2pm, my detour into the interior is over: I am back on Route 1 and heading east for the 'Iceberg Lagoon'. I also now have to catch up with my wife, Marion, in order to get a lift back in time for the flight home tomorrow. The wind is calm,

a rare thing here by all accounts; normally this section would be a prevailing headwind. The locals say that if you face a headwind here, you might as well turn around!

After an hour or so, I see the first of the glaciers tumbling down to sea level – such a stark contrast from the volcanic interior where I woke up this morning.

A tiny silver Hyundai rental car honks and flashes me as it overtakes. It's my lift home! Granted, this isn't the most sociable of romantic weekends away together, but we agree to meet up by the glacier lagoon later that afternoon.

After a pleasant but long day, the light starts to fade along with my legs. The

I SEE THE FIRST OF THE GLACIERS TUMBLING DOWN TO SEA LEVEL – A STARK CONTRAST FROM THE VOLCANIC INTERIOR



BIKEPACKING BAGS REVIEW

Visit bit.ly/cycle-bikepackingbags to read our seatpack group test



Above:
Geothermal activity is visible in vented steam

Above right:
Escaping the traffic on the F225 gravel road

icebergs are closer. I have made it and I have seen so much, it's hard to believe it's still only Saturday night.

CUTTING IT FINE

On Sunday, we take it easy before driving back towards the airport for an evening flight. Along the way we see some of the guidebook tourist attractions: vast waterfalls, black sandy beaches, and dramatic lava fields.

At the last waterfall, I suddenly realise

I've misread our flight's departure time.

We drive as fast as we dare, conscious that speeding fines can bankrupt you in Iceland.

The airport appears at last. I'm convinced we're too late but we unload the car, box up the bike, and run to check-in, arriving with literally a minute to spare. Sweat dripping from my forehead, we run to the gate.

There's nothing quite like a manic pursuit of a flight to get the feeling you have squeezed out every minute of a trip. We'd certainly accomplished that.

NEXT TIME I WOULD RIDE LESS OF THE SURPRISINGLY BUSY RING ROAD AND MORE BEAUTIFUL GRAVEL TRACKS



Fact file

BIKEPACKING ICELAND

DISTANCE: 410km. 32km first night, 170km on day one, and 208km day two.

ROUTE: From the outskirts of Reykjavik, I followed Highway 1 east. After an overnight bivvy, I carried on past Selfoss, turning north on Highway 26. I was then on gravel tracks east through Landmannaleið National Park, before heading south east on F208 to the paved ring road. I finished by riding to Þjóðvegur, AKA Iceberg Lagoon, on the coast.

CONDITIONS: I was lucky because the wind was calm. It rained about a third of the time but the tracks were still good and I only pushed one short section on wet soft sand.

ACCOMMODATION: I took a bivvy bag and camped. With notoriously strong winds and little shelter, it gives more options than a tent. I stayed in two designated campsites and wild camped one night.

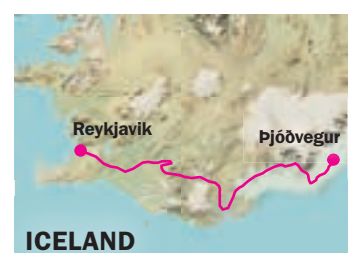
EQUIPMENT USED: I used a Kinesis Tripster ATR with 35-40mm tyres; I didn't need wider than this. I used an Apidura 14L saddle pack and 9L bar bag, plus a waterproof backpack for my camera.

MAPS/GUIDES: Garmin E-Trex GPS with open source maps and 1:400,000 F&B map.

I'M GLAD I HAD... a 100% waterproof Gore-Tex bivvy bag

NEXT TIME I WOULD... ride less of the surprisingly busy ring road and more beautiful gravel tracks.

MORE INFO: cyclingiceland.is





Above left: Shelter from the storm at Afangí refuge

Above: Sam parks the hire bike and takes a breather

SAM JONES: WHY CHUMS GO TO ICELAND

As I lie in my sleeping bag, the tent creaks under a gale force wind – the same wind we've battled for the past nine hours and will battle again the next day – and I'm honestly very happy. So what if spikes of volcanic rock are poking through my sleeping mat and I need ear plugs to block out the constant rat-a-tat flap of the tent? This is what I've been dreaming of for close to 10 months: a cycle tour through Iceland's Highlands along the F35, better known as the Kjölur Route.

The F35 (F standing for *fjall* in Icelandic, meaning 'mountain') begins in the north, not far from the coastal town of Blönduós, and runs down to Iceland's iconic falls of Gullfoss. It's essentially a gravel-lined scar, rising into an undulating plateau that cuts between Iceland's two largest glaciers, the Langjökull to the west and the Hofsjökull to the east. Pockmarked with pot holes that would sink a car, it is usually home to Super-Jeeps, Iceland's off-road buses, and, of course, cyclists.

For your true adventure cyclist, the F35 is known as one of Iceland's easier and more accessible F-roads. The 'easier and accessible' description lulled my girlfriend, Daria, and two friends, Kay and Fred, into doing it with me. We'd settled on Iceland as a destination after our first week-long cycle tour last summer in sunny Normandy. Basking in the warm glow and satisfaction of a trip that had gone smoothly and well, we decided we wanted a manageable challenge.

To put our experiences into perspective: Daria and I mostly commute, with the

odd jaunt out on weekends; Kay had only re-learned how to cycle two years previously with help from Cycling UK's Julie Rand; and Fred's cycle touring had begun when we did a few rides before our trip to France the previous summer.

WEATHERBEATEN

We'd landed in Iceland three days earlier on 14 July and picked our hire bikes up from Reykjavik Bike Tours, a family-run business since 2009, based out of what looked like two old shipping containers on one of the quays of the capital's old harbour. There, kindly George had equipped four elderly and temperamental Trek mountain bikes for us, providing some quick-links and a pair of Ortlieb panniers each. As we packed our bags in the sunshine, George told us: 'In Iceland, if you're enjoying the sunshine, don't worry, the rain will come... and if it's raining, don't worry, the sun might come!'

The following morning, we boarded a small, full minibus with our four bikes (two inside in the gangway), and headed north up Iceland's ring road to Blönduós, which was where we started our ride. I'm full of praise for Iceland's bike-friendly bus carriage policy (even if it does cost close to £30), but sadly my rear brake lever was snapped in transit. It was still usable, just a little jagged and short, so I wrapped it with Gorilla Tape. We were getting used to mechanicals. We'd suffered the first broken spoke a mile after leaving the bike shop, and Daria's chain later fell apart.

William Morris, English textile designer, poet and novelist, wrote of Iceland as a 'most strange and awful country'. Heading towards



Do it yourself

FULLY LOADED

The web is your friend: we trawled through forums (including Cycling UK's), picking up useful tips on where to stay, what to expect, and how to travel. Reykjavik Bike Tours helped with bike provision and explained travelling by bus from Reykjavik to Blönduós. While undulating and generally rough, its real challenge is the unpredictable weather and the need to carry the right luggage. It would be possible on a robust tourer or gravel bike, but better on a hardtail mountain bike or a 29+ bike where the bumps will be absorbed more easily. Feel free to contact me if you want to pick my brains in person: sam.jones@cyclingu.org.



A MERCILESS HEADWIND SAW US INCHING ALONG THE ROAD, MAKING 20 MILES A DAY



Above: Daria rides into a rising wind that seldom relented

Above right: At the start on the outskirts of Blönduós



the F35's beginning, 146 years after Morris wrote that, its strangeness delighted rather than appalled us. The road we took was ours, our only onlookers Icelandic horses (descendants of those brought over by Viking settlers in the 10th century), the odd sheep (always in threes), and a strange bird that had the call of a kazoo.

Traffic was so light, and the landscape so quiet, you could hear vehicles approaching from miles behind. Our route didn't have quite the scenery of the Landmannalugar trek, but as we passed the smallholdings on the way to the F35's beginning, following a shallow valley carved by ice millennia ago, it was hard not to appreciate the setting.

It would have been nicer if the weather was with us. Sadly, for much of our trip, it was not. As you would expect for an island close to the Arctic Circle, the weather can be fierce and changeable. For two days, we faced a merciless headwind and a steady downpour, which saw us inching along the road, making 20 miles a day. Oh, to be like those cunning cyclists grinning as they flew the other way!

NICE ONE, GEYSIR

Though we had scaled the plateau upon which the F35 largely sits, we were not treated to sweeping vistas of the glaciers we rode between. A combination of concentration on the road and generally poor visibility hid the beauty we knew must be lurking beyond the barren wasteland we were riding in.

True to George's word, however, as we rolled into the oasis of Hveravellir 70 miles and three days into our ride, the sun returned, granting a glimpse of Langjökull. We soaked weary bones in the hot springs.

From Hveravellir to the waterfall of Gullfoss,

the scenery grows from interesting to breathtaking. A ridge of jagged, mountainous teeth rises to the east, while glacial tongues lap at the waters of Lake Hvitarvatn to the west. Our view was tinged with sadness, however, as it was gained from the bus we'd taken to where asphalt began again at Gullfoss to make up lost time.

It wasn't just the road surface that changed at Gullfoss but the amount of traffic. Dual carriageways and space for cycling are largely unheard of in Iceland, so for the remainder of our trip we were stretched out in single file, occasionally buffeted by vehicles speeding back from Iceland's 'golden circle'.

After the peace of the Highlands, it was an unpleasant shock, but one tempered by the ever changing countryside along the way. The desert made way for lush green fields, rising round hills that surround the original Geysir and the aforementioned Gullfoss. The national park housing the old Viking parliament of Þingvellir on the vast lake of Þingvallavatn was beautiful.

Here the Eurasian and North American continental plates meet, and while the Vikings left no ruins to look upon, preferring to the conduct their politics in the open, the multitude of pools sheltered beneath the ridge of a rising North American plate is impressive. It was a fitting spot for our final camp of the trip, ahead of the slog back to Reykjavik.

Spectacular scenery is what makes cycling in Iceland so worthwhile. You'll not go for the food, nor the price, and definitely not for the courteous drivers, but each and every time you find you're fed up, this island provides a sight to stir your soul. Perhaps next year we'll be back to complete what we failed to finish. **C**

Fact file

THE KJÖLUR ROUTE

DISTANCE: 192 miles (145 miles by bike; 47 miles by bus) over six days.

ROUTE: North to south from Blönduós to Reykjavik, heading through Iceland's Highlands along one of the country's more manageable F-roads (Fjall – meaning mountain) the F35. The route also took in Gullfoss, Geysir and the old Icelandic capital of Þingvellir (anglicised as Thingvellir) and its surrounding national park.

CONDITIONS: Terrible! Fierce headwinds with lashing rain, all the while contending with a gravel road that is repeatedly beaten up every long winter.

ACCOMMODATION: A spot of (responsible) wild camping, otherwise campsites along the way.

EQUIPMENT USED: A five-year-old Trek 4300 MTB with Ortlieb panniers, Carradice Super C bar bag, Alpkit Airlök Dual 20L drybag.

MAPS/GUIDES: Iceland Highlands 5 ferðakort 1:250,000, Google maps, and a Garmin Edge Tour.

I'M GLAD I HAD... brought my own supplies; our Nordisk Oppland Si 3 man tent to deal with the wind and the wet; a Paramo rain jacket; a chain breaker and quick-links.

NEXT TIME I WOULD... not hire a bike but would take my Surly ECR; check the wind direction and make sure it was behind me!

MORE INFO: bit.ly/cycle-iceland-sj

