

Earth, Wind, Water, & Fire

A Belgian Adventure to the Land of Ice – Part II

Travel report and photos by Gerrit Seys and Hendrik De Backer



HIGHLAND ROADS ALLOWED



NOT ALLOWED



INTRO

Part 1 of this article described the adventure of a Belgian team of 2 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon's and 2 MAN 4x4 camper trucks, touring through the inner areas of spectacular Iceland in July 2011.

Day 11

The start of the most memorable day of our journey! After an ice-cold night, a grey sky welcomed us in the morning. A very strange habit in Iceland: all gas is paid by credit card, but you have to punch in the amount first, with a maximum of 25.000 ISK. For the trucks, this means less than 1/6th of the intake of their maximum volume in diesel, so they need to repeat this procedure at least three times to be on half in the tanks. This was a bit cumbersome and annoying for other tourist 4x4's waiting in line behind us.

After fueling up, we set course for the south of the Myvatn Lake, onto the N1 towards Godafoss, a highlight we now will visit due to our detour because of the still frozen and closed F910. It is (again) a spectacular waterfall, but we soon hit the F842, which changes into the F26 a bit later. This F26 is a mythical Icelandic route, equivalent of the Route 66, because it was one of only 3 North-South connections in Iceland in the past, and it was used by a motor vehicle for the first time in 1933! We are so amazed by what we saw! This is a real trail, by times flat and fast, and then changing to crawling zones where you need to navigate every meter. All this happens with sceneries of a kilometer wide deserted valley in between two gigantic glaciers.

In utter and complete silence, we stopped at the crossroads of the F26 and the F887 for a picnic. In the

course of about two hours we had seen one or two 4x4s pass by, a guy on a motorcycle struggle with the sand, and a big 4x4 tourist bus. We decided to continue and head out to check the Laugafell hut. Laugafell turned out to be a small heaven on earth! A few Jeeps, a few 4x4 campers, and a very friendly warden welcomed us. The female warden drove a beat up Jeep Cherokee 4.0, but "as long as it takes me here in June and back home in September, it's okay", she said. It cost a mere 2 EUR to go swimming in the natural hot spring pool, so we jumped in! Heaven ... silence ... hot water ... blue sky ... This was one of the moments why we did this whole tour for!

Day 12

It was the Belgian national holiday and in Iceland, we awoke with a blue sky once again. We celebrated with Belgian chocolates for breakfast and then headed out again on the F26, which we left around noon to get to Landmannalaugar via the F208. The landscape was getting greener and the valley we drove through offered us a myriad of colors, ranging from and brown to copper and red.

We soon arrived at Geysir which is a place known worldwide for its water-bursting holes in the ground, like the ones you can find in Yellowstone. We certainly enjoyed this unique place! We found a great spot for our campsite located approximately 100 meters from the geysers so for the whole night, it was "wooosh" every few minutes when they erupted. We ended this great day with an Icelandic buffet in the restaurant of Hotel Geysir with a view on the geysers as well. Another fantastic and memorable day!

Day 13



We headed out to a new camp for the Gulfoss waterfalls, and then the F338 towards Thingvellir, the mythical place and source of the Icelandic existence where Viking chieftains used to gather and form the first version of government. At the same time, the location is well known for being the separation line between the American and Eurasian tectonic plate. You can literally have a walk in between the two plates, and this was quite awe inspiring.

But first, we had to get there. Once we arrived in Thingvellir, we found it to also be a big tourist attraction. Bling bling 4x4's and fashionable Italian tourists in big white Audi Q7s made for a big contrast with the beautiful nature. We made a quick visit and then headed back to our quiet camping spot in Geysir, where the awesomeness of the giant water bursts kept us up watching till late in the evening.

Day 14

Today was going to be a special day! We planned to set out for Thorsmork, where the camping site and hostel is either reachable by a 3 day walk, or by going through a series of glacial rivers, every next one deeper than the previous one, in a route officially forbidden for rental 4x4's. A special ex-military 8x8 truck serves as a local bus and stands as a warning at the entrance to the valley.

Our first stop took us to Selfoss, a modern European like town, cozy and well-equipped, where we filled up on

supplies. In the parking lot a random Swiss 4x4 couple in an Iveco came to ask about our experiences in Iceland. Before we had the chance to visit with them, a very sudden wind came out and started a massive dust and sandstorm. This storm was the first omen for the rest of an apocalyptic day...

On our route to Thorsmork, our destination for the evening, we drove through unbelievable landscapes in a mist of dust and sand. The pre-filters on the snorkels quickly filled up. We felt like we were driving through a Chronicles of Narnia movie and were very humbled by the grey ash-filled winds that showed and then hid from us the valleys and glacial rivers along the F210 and F261. A stop at one of the mountain shelters confirmed the winds would stay like this for the day, blowing around all the fine ash from previous eruptions.

We finally reached the camping grounds safely, and start to unwind to prepare for a barbeque. The guide and ranger drove back to get the second MAN, while the second Jeep was also left aside near the river bank.

Once we were all there, we relaxed even more and the guide explained that the very high waters of up to one meter were due to the warm winds blowing on the glaciers and acting a bit like a hair dryer. This also meant that we should not leave too late in the morning the next day, and surely before the warmth of noon set in for new high rivers. Exhausted but very happy and fulfilled, we organized our barbeque and went to sleep.

Day 15

This morning we had less wind. We had a quick breakfast and then broke up camp quickly. At rendezvous time, the guide showed up in a big Toyota HiLux and guided us back to our Jeeps. An amazing spectacle as we had to once again cross the icy river, almost waist deep ...

Once across, the winds returned and we followed the advice of the guide to not cross over the northern F210 around the Myrdalsjokull and instead followed the ring road eastbound. During our visit to the Sjellandsfoss, where we stopped to walk behind the waterfall, the weather gods must have still been sleeping because everything was dry but by the time we ended our visit, the rain was pouring down and heavy winds were hitting the Jeeps.

We continued on the ring road and by the time we reached the little village of Vik, the weather turned to a nasty thunderstorm and our visit to the "Cape Dyrholaey" was rendered quite exciting, up to the point where we feared to be blown off the rocks!

Day 16

The weather was better in the morning and we took the ring road to visit the famous Skaftafell National Park. We hiked to the waterfalls, again, and took a stroll to the visitor's center. A very nice exhibition completed a tour to the glacier which we had seen and experienced from the other side of the mountain up close, so we left the bus and guided tour for the real tourists. In contrast to the other side, this part of the Vatnajokul glacier is grey and covered in ash and looks a bit grim.

We then continued north to the famous Jokularsson iceberg lake. After lunch, we went on to Jokularsson and, once again, we arrived with a bit of disappointment. The lake was bigger, but just next to the ring road, there was also a big parking lot with a lot of cars and the lake had much less icebergs. Tourists were driven and boated around in an old Dodge DUK amphibious vehicle and in all, a lonely seal swimming around captured most of our attention.

We stopped for the night in Hofn at a campsite where the trucks were ordered off the grass by the owner who was afraid we would damage the terrain. We enjoyed the small and clean city, and set out to find a local lobster restaurant which was recommended by the old Swiss couple we had met earlier. Fantastic plates of surf and turf, lobster and lamp, fresh from the boat and the land, made for another great day!

Day 17

We left Hofn by the ring road and headed back to Egilstadir, the city where our epic tour started. We followed the 96 along the coast road and almost by accident, we came to FASKRUSOSFJORDUR. Perfectly



understandable for Icelandic people, but only clear to us after translation, this place turned out to have been a village and fishing station of French seamen. The streets have bilingual nameplates in French and Icelandic, and the little museum shows the officer's mess, the history of the town with names and people very familiar to us back home in the Northern part of France, and a few Belgians as well. The cemetery was also very impressive.

We reached Egilstadir in the late afternoon, and we headed for the camping just outside town near Fellebaer where we had a fantastic view on the mountains and the lake. Gerrit, who was sporting a flat tire on his MAN, returned to have the tire fixed. This was done the Icelandic way: three giant Viking men simply lifted the heavy tire off its support and simply started to repair the tire. The guys turned out to also be local Red Cross guys involved in rescue missions in the ice and snow with giant Nissan Iceland Patrol 4x4's. Within one hour, the tire was fixed and we were again ready to go.

Just across the tire shop, we saw a junk yard and our well trained eyes spotted seven slotted grills so we stopped to take pictures: old Jeep's, Land Rovers, Austin Champ, and a few American classics had been piled up and placed next to one another, and their faces made great pictures!

Day 18

Our last day was filled with plans for cleaning, packing, and souvenir hunting. We filled the freezers in the truck with fresh lobster and salmon at a fraction of the price we pay at home. In the afternoon, we drove around the shores of the lake and visited the home of the Danish writer Gunar Gunnarsson, with a magnificent building of lava rocks and white cement. We went to bed early because we were expected to be in the harbor at 07h30 in the morning.



Days 19 & 20

This was our final day on Icelandic soil. We got up early and left the campsite at 07h00 to drive back to Seydisfjordur. The drive took about one half hour and when we came down on the cliffs, we saw our ship, the "Noronna," entering the small fjord to unload.

At 07h30 sharp we were in the harbor and it was a busy and bustling site. Very organized and Scandinavian, all went very smoothly and once again, all passengers had to board on foot while the drivers stayed with the cars. The boat was so full that the MAN trucks almost stuck out of the ship. The sea was rough at the beginning but then calmed down. Without much trouble, the ferry stopped at Torshavn around 03h00am but we were solidly asleep. We passed the next day, reading, remembering, and sorting pictures on the laptops. We arrived once again sharply on schedule in Hirstals and this meant the absolute ending of this great Icelandic voyage. We said our goodbyes and drove home. Of course, before we left we closed the circle and planted new seeds with a simple question: "Where shall we be going next year?" The answer is open for now

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Iceland and what you should know

The opening sentence of the "Visit Iceland" leaflet says it all: two things are hard when planning for a holiday on Iceland: what to visit and what to skip?

For the off-road travelers, as we all are, it is good to know the southern part of the country is more inhabited and touristy than the north. Roads there, and in the cities, are paved and asphalted. The ring road is 1339 kms long and 95% is paved. Beyond that, there are dirt tracks all around the country.

The F-roads are a separate class and reserved for 4x4's only. They have a periodic and systematic supervision and maintenance by the ranger services. Roads without an "F" notation are not monitored. Off-roading is strictly forbidden and heavily fined. The marks and tracks made by vehicles driving through the lava landscape are a big damage and remain for years, destroying the unique landscapes for others.

Camping in the wild is forbidden in the National Parks but tolerated outside of these parks. Yet, we would still recommend to look for one of the official camping site or to stop near one of the mountain shelters. It is always useful to exchange information with other travelers or get the latest updates from the rangers on the status of the roads and the river crossings.

Iceland is also an ideal destination for starting 4x4 travelers. It is a very safe country, well equipped with beautiful nature, and great off-road tracks. You do not

need hardcore navigational skills because of the easy and well maintained road network as all tracks are clearly marked and indicated. The off-road tracks are not overly technical, and your biggest enemy will be the dust, the river crossings, and the shaking of the Jeep on the ridged tracks ...

Good tires, suspension, and shocks are a must. The vent nipple of the axles and transmission can be easily relocated, and a snorkel is not really necessary. With tons of water pushing on your Jeep once the icy rivers get about 50 cm deep, the strong current will more likely flush your car away before any water will reach your engine compartment. And as an Icelandic local Rubicon driver told us: "Then you do not need a Jeep, but a submarine ..."

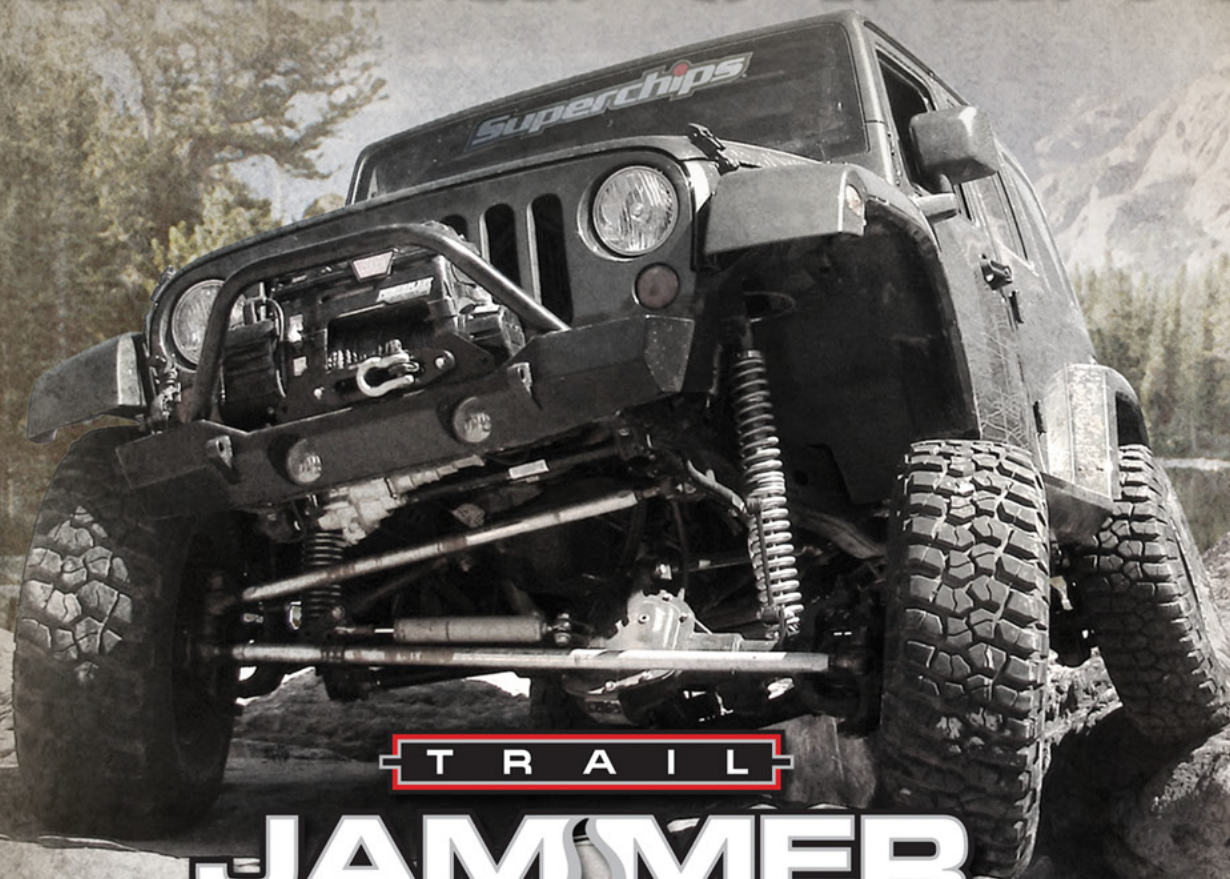
Costs: Fuel is about the same price as elsewhere in Europe and food is not too expensive. Dining out can become pretty expensive.

Weather: If you need to see the sun, don't go to Iceland. Even in summer it can rain a whole day with temperatures near 15 degrees Celsius (approximately 60 degrees Fahrenheit) But at least you will not need a flashlight as there's usually sunlight even through late/early hours..

Links:

www.visiticeland.com
www.smyrilline.nl
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