

Island of **EXTREMES**

John Pearson visits the land of glaciers, volcanoes, icebergs, vast lunar landscapes, hot springs and miles of tough, 4x4-only tracks

PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS AND PAT SUMMERS

We're cresting a ridge of volcanic ash in Iceland's remote Highland interior. Ahead of us, nature is creating a dramatic widescreen monochrome panorama, framing the distant snow-covered mountains between earth and a foreboding sky. This is a beautiful, extreme place. Sitting astride the Mid-Atlantic Ridge – a huge crack in the ocean floor where tectonic plates are parting –

Iceland gets lots of volcanic activity. There's at least one major eruption every five years and much of the mountainous interior is covered with volcanic rock, lava fields and ash deserts. What makes it even more special is that many of the inland routes to those extreme locations can only be driven by members of an exclusive club – those of us with capable 4x4s. A high percentage of the 320,000 population (that's about the same as the city of Coventry, in a country bigger than Ireland) live in and around



the capital Reykjavik. There's an 823-mile mainly tarmac ring road, but turn into the dramatic interior and you're soon on gravel roads and then the F-number tracks, which are 4x4-only.

We're here with a group of enthusiasts on an Atlas Overland race adventure, led by Peter and Jo Girling. A few weeks ago I was wearing shorts on their trip to Corsica; it's now July and I've got my thermals and thick coat on.

Our adventure starts with a journey to Hull, where we catch an overnight P&O ferry to Rotterdam in Holland. We drive on through Germany to Hirtshals at the northern tip of Denmark to catch the Smyril Line ferry to Seyðisfjörður in eastern Iceland.

Days one and two

Seyðisfjörður to Kirkjubæjarklaustur

Highlight: Icebergs!

Iceland is hiding its beauty under low cloud as we leave Seyðisfjörður harbour and head west along lupin-lined mountain roads to the town

of Egilsstaðir. You're not allowed to bring meat or dairy products into the country, so we visit a supermarket to stock up our fridges.

My partner Pat and I are in our ex-G4 Challenge 110 and there are four other Land Rovers on the adventure: 2 4 TDCi 110 Utility, two Tds 110s and the Disco 4 of Atlas Overland team member Leslie Carrick-Smith, known to everyone as Carrick. There are also four Toyotas, including the borrowed Land Cruiser 80 Series that trip leader Peter Girling is using while his own replacement Toyota is being fitted out.

All of our fellow adventurers on this trip are experienced travellers and their vehicles are well kitted-out for the purpose.

'We drive through vast plains flanked by mountains, crossing glacier-melt rivers'

We detour off Highway 1 to visit the third highest waterfall in Iceland, the 128-metre one at Hengifoss, off the 931 road near Lagarfljót lake. Backtracking on to Highway 1 heading clockwise, we then cut across country on the 939 gravel road, climbing to over 540 metres through mountainous country before dropping down to rejoin Highway 1 near the steep-sided Berufjörður fjord.

We thread our way south-west along the beautiful coast road, where numerous islands are emerging from the turquoise water, like surreal desert mirages.

We're overnighing at Höfn, which has the most wonderful panoramic mountain view I've experienced at a campsite – looking towards the mighty Vatnajökull glacier, Iceland's largest.

It's a busy site and, as we'll find with many throughout the popular areas of Iceland, the facilities are seriously inadequate for the number of people who want to use them. But the magnificent backdrop more than outweighs the hassle of queueing to use the toilet and a shower that only works when you give the coin box a hard thump.

The next morning we visit the spectacular Jökulsárlón glacial lake. Here, deep blue icebergs the size of houses are breaking away from the Breiðamerkurjökull glacier and floating out to sea. The weather is still dull, but it's a magical place and it's quite special picking up lumps of ice that formed more than 1000 years ago.

Our convoy continues west, past the vast Skeiðarársandur, a 1300sq km sandur (or sand) plain formed by meltwater outwash from the Skeiðarárjökull glacier. Then we camp at a site under the rock face at Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

Days three to five

Kirkjubæjarklaustur to Grindavík

Highlight: Eyjafjallajökull volcano

Next day we start by visiting Dyrhólaey on Iceland's black sandy southern tip, where puffins, cormorants and gullmots nest in the rugged cliffs. Then we drive through an area of flatlands where hay – the only major crop that will grow here – is being harvested for winter animal feed.

Further west we turn off the road then go through a gateway and drive a couple of miles down a rough track to Sólheimasandur's black sandy beach – where there's a surprise of the aviation kind: A US Navy Dakota was forced to land in 1973 and what's left of it is still here.

Then we reach the visitor centre for the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which is run by the farming family who live in its shadow. This is the one that few of us can pronounce, but we remember the name for its spectacular 2010 eruption and the resulting ash cloud that disrupted air travel across much of the world. There's a fascinating 20-minute film, which shows the effect the eruption had on the family and the work they had to put in to clear the ash and get back into business.

Then we're getting off the tarmac, turning right on to the 250 and then the F261, our first F-road. This takes us east around the back of Eyjafjallajökull, before turning north-east. The track is festooned with rocks and we drive through vast, Mongolia-like plains flanked by snow-capped mountains, crossing some seriously cold glacier-melt rivers.



Turns out the £1.80 fare was too good to be true after all



Now all John needs is a gin and tonic big enough to put it in



Driving through the lava field that surrounds the Blue Lagoon – it could only really be Iceland



Thundering Gullfoss waterfall is one of Iceland's biggest natural attractions



The terrain gets more dramatic and the rivers get deeper as we progress, with the water in one splashing over my 110's bonnet. Just after turning left at the junction with the F210 there's a river that's deeper still. The Defenders and Toyotas could get through, but Peter Girling makes a judgement that Carrick's Disco 4 won't and we have to backtrack to Highway 1 – a round trip of 50 miles.

It's the safest thing to do. 'We've got another six river crossings after this one and they could be even deeper,' explains Peter, who's mindful that rivers get deeper during the day as the sun melts glacial ice and snow. He wants to avoid us getting trapped between swollen rivers.

There's inevitably a sense of disappointment when you have to turn back after driving 25 miles of tracks. But adventures like this are serious; there's no room for bravado. 'If in doubt, turn back' has always been our motto on LRO. Carrick's D4's air intake was perilously close to the water on the last river crossing and it would be stupid to risk flooding his engine.

After overnighting at a grassy field of a campsite near Hella, we head inland towards Iceland's Highlands, on the F26.

During my morning oil and fluid-level check I find that the 110's clutch fluid is down, so I top it up, intending to monitor during the journey. But at my first check it's gone down significantly, which is a worry. There's now a steady drip from the slave cylinder.

We're passing close by the 1491m (4892ft) Mount Hekla. This is one of Iceland's most active volcanoes, which erupted in 1970, 1980/81, 1991 and 2000 – which makes it seriously overdue for another one. Turning east on the F225 we pass through some huge lava fields, which have formed into amazing patterns. Some even look like giant apple crumble toppings.

We visit Landmannalaugar in the beautiful Fjallabak Nature Reserve, which is famous for its geothermal hot springs.

I check the clutch fluid again and it's getting worse – there's almost none left in the reservoir. Looping back around to Highway 1 we head north on the F208 across a vast area of volcanic ash and some seriously rough tracks before turning onto the 26, 32 and 30 roads. Our destination tonight is the campsite at Grindavik, on the Reykjanes peninsula, south-west of Reykjavik – which means I'll be encountering lots of traffic and road junctions as we drive around the capital. Not good without a clutch – so I top up the reservoir before we get into the busiest area and hope for the best. We almost make it, and I'm getting quite adept at clutchless gearshifting, but at the last junction in Grindavik I have to stop and can't get going again without topping up the fluid.

Fortunately the next day is a rest day for the group, and my Icelandic colleague Mark Saville has given me the contact details for a pal, Davíð 'Dassi' Garðarsson, at the Eðlabílar BMW and Land Rover specialist on the outskirts of Reykjavik (eðlabílar.is). Dassi, who drives a monster-wheeled, Tangerine-Orange-painted, Td5-engined Range Rover Classic, that appeared in the May 2011 issue of LRO, kindly supplies and fits a replacement clutch slave cylinder. Once we have an operational clutch we celebrate by taking a drive to the nearby famous Blue Lagoon, located in a lava field. This is a geothermally heated seawater spa pool containing natural minerals, including silica, which gives it the rich blue colour. The water is a by-product from the Svartsengi power station, which extracts it from 2000m below the surface. In the evening we visit the nearby Bruin Restaurant. The owner is a former fishing boat skipper – and his fish and chips are excellent.

ICELAND NEED TO KNOW

- Language: Icelandic (English widely spoken).
- Currency: Icelandic Krone (credit cards are accepted just about everywhere).
- Jobs: None compulsory, but make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- Cost of fuel: Diesel £1.04/litre (you get a discount card on arrival at the port for money off Orkan and Shell fuels).
- Camping: visiticeland.com lists 168 sites. Many open only from June to Sept. Facilities are often limited to a couple of toilets and one shower – sometimes no shower at all.
- Food: Local lamb is delicious. Plenty of fresh fish: Harðfiskur, the widely available dried fish, is smelly and an acquired taste.
- Alcohol: Expensive in bars and not available in supermarkets. It can only be bought from the state-owned Vinubodin stores. They're only in bigger towns, so stock up.
- Which maps? National Geographic's Iceland Adventure map, 1:150,000 on waterproof paper: stanfords.com, amazon.com.
- How we got there: Hull to Rotterdam with P&O Ferries (pferries.com). Daily service in each direction, 10hr 45min, prices from £129 for two people with a 110 and cabin. Fast boarding and good facilities.
- Hirtshals (Denmark) to Seyðisfjörður (Iceland) with Smyrl Line (smyrline.com). Weekly direct sailings in high season (Tuesday out, Saturday return). The 47-hour crossing calls in at the Faroe Islands en route. Various restaurants. Return cost £990 for two people with 110 and cabin with no view during high season in July 2016: £1089 for cabin with view.
- Road conditions: Many tracks in remote areas are 4x4-only. Weather means they're closed for most of the year (road.is; safetravel.is). Big fines for driving off-piste or on closed routes.



...and around the next corner of track 428, there'll be another epic vista waiting for us

parliament in AD930. Then we continue along the 365, 37 and 35 to the spouting steam vent at Geysir. Sadly the original Geyir no longer functions, but the nearby Strokkur still wows the crowds by shooting geothermally heated steam up to 30m (114ft) into the air every 10 minutes.

There are plenty of tourist attractions today, as just a short drive further along the 35 we stop at Gullfoss waterfall. There's no shortage of waterfalls in Iceland, but we're told that this is the most beautiful – and it's hard to disagree. The tarmac section of the 35 ends and we're on to gravel, passing Bláfell mountain. The track gets rougher as the miles dock up. It's like a dusty north African Dakar rally piste through bleak, barren terrain, but with the added bonus of the glaciers and snow-capped mountains of Iceland's Western Highlands as a backdrop.

Looming large to the east is the 1765m (5790ft) Hofsjökull – the third largest glacier in Iceland after Vatnajökull and Langjökull, and the largest active volcano in the country.

Days six and seven

Grindavik to Laugafell

Highlight: remote campsites with geothermal activity

We're going to be heading north-east, but Peter Girling takes us on a loop east from Grindavik, on the 428 track past Trölladyngja (Troll Mountain). There's an incredible variety of terrain as we turn each corner to see different shapes, textures and colours unfolding ahead of us.

We take the 36 to Pingvellir, a UNESCO World Heritage site, where Iceland formed the first

We turn off the 35 on to the Kjölur mountain route that leads through a valley towards Langjökull glacier to the Hveravellir campsite at more than 2000 feet up. It's wild, remote, windy and bitterly cold – but what a special location.

It's a geothermal hotspot, with steaming fumaroles where steam is gushing out of holes in the earth's crust like giant, permanently boiling kettles; and gurgling, bubbling natural hot springs. It's too cold for me to remove my clothes to get into one of the pools, but those who brave it say it's quite an experience.

Next morning we backtrack to the 35, continuing north on more Dakar-style pistes before joining Highway 1 to top up with fuel. Then we turn on to the 752 through the Vallholmur lowlands before zig-zagging steeply upwards on the F752 heading towards the Sprengisandur plateau. It's another bleak, barren area that will be covered in snow for most of the year. We ford several glacial rivers before reaching tonight's campsite at Laugafell.

This is another remote location with some bubbling geothermal springs. It's cold, but not quite so bitter as last night, so most of us take a dip. It's fun while you're in the water – which is just like sitting in a hot bath – but there's a chilly 20-metre sprint back to the heated changing rooms afterwards.

The temperature drops later in the evening and after cooking our meals we all take refuge in the ladies' changing room. It may well be July,

but it's mighty cold up here and I'm pleased that I've packed plenty of warm clothing – base layers, fleeces and insulated jackets. Wherever I travel I make sure I have adequate clothing for all weather conditions, and always carry fleece blankets to supplement our duvet in the Hannibal roof tent.

Days eight to 11

Laugafell to Ásbyrgi Cliffs

Highlight: Humpback whale acrobatics

Next, our journey continues south across Sprengisandur on the F752, turning right on the F26 to skirt around the edge of the mass of glaciers and mountains that is the Vatnajökull national park. Ahead of us appears the widescreen panorama I mentioned at the start. There's black volcanic ash stretching out to the ice and snow horizon; we're driving through a totally monochrome world as we turn south-west on the F26.

The tracks get rougher, with lots of brutally sharp, unyielding rocks to negotiate. We cross several rivers and mudholes, all the while taking in some of the most stunning mountain backdrops I've ever seen.

So far on this trip I've seen scenery that reminds me of Yorkshire, Wales, Scotland, Mongolia, the Alps and the Moon.

'I've seen scenery that reminds me of Yorkshire, Wales, Scotland, Mongolia, the Alps and the Moon'



Iceland's unforgiving weather means this track is closed for most of the year



Glacier-melt water can make river crossings more challenging than this



Moment of truth: how big is your 4x4...?

I have to leave the group for a night to take photographer Bob Atkins back to Keflavik airport, camping again at Grindavik (where my partner Pat and I can't resist treating ourselves to some more of the fish and chips). The next day we take a long, clockwise loop around Highway 1 to catch up with everyone at Fosshóli campsite, near to the thundering Góðafoss waterfall. It's a wet, miserable evening, so we're happy to take refuge in the campsite's excellent restaurant. After visiting the waterfall the next morning we make the relatively short drive north to the small town of Húsavík, which is located on the eastern side of Skjálfandi bay. The plan is to spend a couple of nights at the town's campsite, but it's crammed with campervans and there are no flat spaces

'The humpback whale performs a magnificent finale, surfacing and flicking its mighty tail'

available, so we continue around the 85 road to what turns out to be an excellent campsite, Tjaldsvæði Camping, in the shadow of the dramatic Ásbyrgi Cliffs. It's busy, but the facilities are good, with plentiful warm showers, decent toilets and even drying cabinets for wet clothes. We're over 66° north here, just outside the Arctic Circle, and at this time of year we're experiencing almost 24 hours of daylight. Húsavík, a fishing and former whaling port, has an excellent whaling museum and is the place on Iceland for whale watching – more than 20 species of whales, plus many dolphins, are attracted to its waters. We book an afternoon trip and are rewarded with sightings of several humpback whales, including one that performs a magnificent finale for us, surfacing and flicking its mighty tail out of the water.

Days 12 to 14

Ásbyrgi Cliffs to Seyðisfjörður
Highlight: Driving through dramatic lava fields
The next day we journey south on the F862, a wide gravel track that becomes a narrow gravel track through a lumpy lava field.

We visit yet another waterfall, at Dettifoss – which is reputed to be the most powerful in Europe. It's certainly big and noisy. Then we turn anti-clockwise on Highway 1 to the Namafjall geothermal area near the picturesque Lake Myvatn. Here there are several noisy, superheated steaming fumaroles and bubbling mud pots, with an overwhelming stench of rotten eggs. Gas from the fumaroles contains sulphur hydroxide, which causes the pong. We spend the night at a remote campsite at Grímstaðir, which has a cosy café but the camping area is bleak and exposed on what turns out to be a soggy, rainy evening. Undaunted, the group gathers under a couple of adjacent awnings for beers. The next day the weather takes a turn for the better and we're soon heading back into the Highland interior on the F88, passing through volcanic rock and lava fields. There are a few river crossings, then we pass the snow-capped 1682m (5518ft) Herðubreið. This is what's known as a tuya, a flat-topped, steep-sided volcano that's formed when an eruption occurs under a glacier or ice sheet. Icelanders used to think it was unclimbable because of its loose scree slopes – but some plucky mountaineer managed to get all the way to the top in 1908.



ATLAS OVERLAND



Run by Peter and Jo Girling, Atlas Overland is one of the UK's busiest adventure travel companies, specialising in small groups (typically six) of customer vehicles. Peter (with John in photo left) and Jo are renowned for their good service and many of their customers re-book year on year. Clients include solo travellers, friends and family groups, novices and experienced adventurers. They run trips to the Alps, the Arctic Circle, Corsica, Iceland, Morocco, Portugal, the Pyrenees and Scandinavia, with new destinations planned each year. They also run their popular Wessex Wanderer trips in the UK. Prices for their 2016 Iceland adventure are from £995 per person, including campsite fees and Atlas Overland guides and support vehicle on-call 24/7.

But, as a bonus, the scenery from Egilsstaðir to Seyðisfjörður that was hidden in low cloud when we arrived a fortnight ago is now revealed in all its glory. Ice-covered lakes and snow-capped mountains are sparkling in bright sunlight, making a picturesque conclusion to what has been a spectacular adventure. Iceland hasn't disappointed. It's a wonderful place to visit in a 4x4, plus it's safe, and the people are friendly and considerate. Some things are more expensive than in the UK, but fuel is

cheaper, especially with the discount card that Smyril Line gives you when coming off the boat. The scenery is breathtaking – massive lava fields, vast volcanic landscapes, snow-capped mountains, glaciers and icebergs. The off-tarmac driving has been varied, from wide gravel tracks to testing pistes reminiscent of some of the toughest ones I've driven in North Africa – but with volcanic ash instead of sand. Every 4x4 adventurer should come to Iceland at least once – but be warned. Once is not enough. **LMO**