

The land of fire and ice

Adventures can start on your doorstep – but Iceland offers riding experiences like nowhere else on Earth

A jolt through the bars pulls my focus back as my mind battles between reading the rapidly unfolding terrain and being distracted by the staggering scenery wrapping around me like a never-ending film set. That was close! I grip tighter with my knees as my rented Husqvarna 701 writhes beneath me in the thick volcanic sand. Stones are flinging past from the bike ahead. Everything feels loose and visceral – but I'm in control. I feel alive. And I'm on the stops, pinned across what feels like another planet, rear wheel spinning, hopping and dancing as it scabbles for traction. That was the moment I realised Iceland is pure riding bliss.

Minutes earlier I'd been teetering frantically, working to balance and control the bike across technical jagged rocks. Riding slow, moving, leaning, shifting the weight and searching for traction with the rear wheel, eyes fixed ahead looking for the next obstacle yet constantly flicking about, mesmerised by the lava field around me. I mean, how often do you get to ride on a lava field? Created during the Laki eruption in the late 18th century, it's a vast 565km² ocean of jagged rock, soft moss, deep ash, and jaw-dropping scenery. And you can ride right through it. Was I really still on Earth?

The terrain rolls beneath my wheels like an ever-changing conveyor belt of challenges: Rocky and technical one minute, soft ash fields and rivers the next, then hard lava beds, and ruts, long weight-back full throttle loose surface straights, deep sand, aggressive boulder fields, snow and ice... It's an off-road playground of every terrain imaginable. Nothing about Iceland is normal. Nothing remains the same as you hop from one extreme to the next.

Raging force of nature

Having lost count of the river crossings I was feeling quietly



Mini Viking is the man with the local knowledge

'Nothing is normal. How often do you get to ride on a lava field?'

confident every time a raging torrent blocked our path. Pick a line, stand on the pegs, steady and gentle on the throttle and staying loose to absorb those unseen rocks beneath the surface. But as the group pulls up to the biggest crossing yet I could feel my heart thumping. At least 20 metres wide, it was also deep and flowing fiercely. Our guide, aptly nicknamed Mini Viking, starts depth testing on foot (I can't help being amused that the person with the shortest legs has been tasked with seeing how deep the water is...). It's the ultimate way to flood your boots with freezing glacial melt-water, but also the only way ensure a safe crossing. Hundreds of miles from civilisation, a drowned bike is to be avoided at all costs.

Mini Viking gets halfway. The water is gushing well above his knees. I'm still amused, but it's not

looking good for the bikes. Firing up we track parallel to the raging force of nature, searching for a more forgiving crossing point. Then we spot two hikers on the far side of the river, shoes still in hands from having just waded through. If they've made it across here, we certainly can. Although I'm bemused by them being here at all – how far have they hiked? It's been a long way, and hard going on the bikes.

Crossing point chosen, it's my turn. My heart is racing, the bike's leaning on me holding ground against the flow. With water right up to the air filter's limits it's a three-man job escorting each bike. I'm tense, my legs feel like I'm struggling in wet concrete as I fight the flow, the boulders invisible as the murky water tries to tip me into the flow. Lactic

Continued over

'The terrain rolls beneath my wheels like a conveyor belt of challenges'



It's the sort of ever-changing landscape which only a bike can let you fully explore

WORDS VANESSA RUCK - @THEBIRDONABIKE PICTURES VANESSA RUCK / ALEX RUCK



Off-road bikes in their natural environment



There's always time for a photo

It's a three-person job getting each bike through



Who is Vanessa?
Known as 'The Girl On A Bike', Vanessa took to motorcycling following a life-changing cycling accident. She's always out and about adventuring on bikes and is on a mission to prove that nothing is impossible if you really want it.

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'Working together sees our party all make it across'

acid builds in my arms as I grapple to hold on, it somehow feels like one of the most demanding manoeuvres ever. Every force being exerted wants to tear the bike from under me. Going under now could be ride-ending, but working together sees our party of seven all make it across. That's some guilt-free beers earned.

Lonely planet

There is something eerie about riding in such remoteness. The reassurance of the RideWithLocals support truck being on standby is great – but out here, we're essentially on our own. It's a novelty when we see a 4x4 bouncing through the landscape, smiles and that nod of mutual respect for being out exploring this unforgiving wilderness bringing a sense of camaraderie. We're staying in huts mostly only reached by long-distance horse riders. They're fuelled on hay – but we need more appetising food and our bikes need spares and fuel – none of which are available out here. Without our support truck, we'd be walking and hungry in a matter of hours.

Every evening the truck would meet us at our night stop, meaning the luxury of not having to carry luggage and that was key to the pace we rode at. We travelled to our ability, focused, fast and adapting to the terrain. Every crest bringing a new challenge, a new feast for our senses and a test for our skills.

Spa day on bikes

"Pack your bikini today..." says our guide as we get set for another day in this lava landscape. Playing it cool, I sip my morning coffee and nod, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what was coming. Amidst the breath-taking remote mountains we approach an old picket fence, falling apart, paint peeling, abandoned and being reclaimed by nature. Weaving through a tight gap, brushing through overgrown bushes and then my jaw drops. A thermal pool appears before us, a steaming cyan oasis ready to soothe our bike-

wearied bodies. Formerly a pool for the geo-thermal plant workers, it now appears largely disused and is missing the pool-boy, but the water was crystal clear and fed by a natural spring. People say the tourist-soaked Blue Lagoon is a must see but I'd pick an isolated spot like this any day. This is the only situation where bikinis and motorcycles should converge.

Land of ice and fire

Viking pulls to a stop and points to the ground. I'm perplexed and dismounting as he crouches down returning with a palm of wild crowberries. Riding with the locals gives insights to the land we'd easily miss. Iceland, with winter weeks of total darkness and short summers, is a unique ecosystem. He explains that damaged flora can take up to 30 years to repair. I'm mesmerised by the realities of the land of fire and ice, and the knowledge that comes from riding with the locals means that a detour from the track

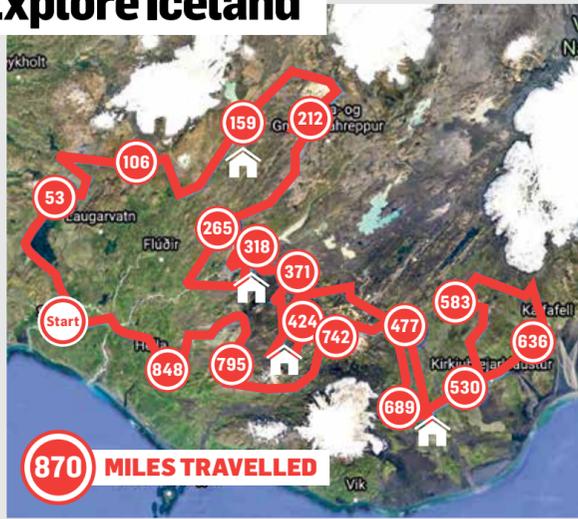
into the moss for a photo vanishes from our minds – it could never be worth a 30-year scar to this delicate landscape.

Over 2.5 million tourists visit Iceland each year to see the big sights. Hot spas, waterfalls, glaciers, geysers, tectonic plates and lava fields. They pack into coaches or hire cars. But riding here on off-road bikes changes your perspective. We can discover the must-see spots from the less trodden tracks, skipping the crowds, and seeing things most tourists might only glimpse from the plane window. We rode up close to Hekla, slept below the Myrdalsjokull Glacier, recharged in an abandoned spa, explored huge craters without a soul in sight, picked across lava fields, crossed valley basins and crested mountains, riding volcanic ash berms. It was riding heaven combined with cultural and geological discovery: A trip only motorcycles can make possible. **MCN**

The Trip Explore Iceland

Local knowledge

RideWithLocals, the only Icelandic enduro company and based just a 2h 45min flight from the UK. A fully-inclusive trip on Husqvarna 701s with a support vehicle, fuel, food, mountain hut accommodation, trail snacks, beer and all the local gen from the Vikings running it. We had six days riding, covered roughly 1400km doing 9 to 11-hour riding days and got to see the real Iceland – which is unseen by most tourists. Expect to pay around €4400 per person. www.ridewithlocals.is



Come in, the water is lovely. For once that is really true



The landscapes are like nothing you've seen



SIX THINGS TO KNOW

Vanessa and the Husqvarna rented for the adventure



Vanessa Ruck, Instagram: @thegirlonabike

'Ditch the tent, stay in mountain huts'

- 1 Icelanders welcome riders with enthusiasm to explore the thousands of miles of little-known tracks. However, with a fragile ecosystem so vulnerable to ruin from a misplaced foot, it's easy to see why it's illegal to leave the tracks.
- 2 Rapidly changing weather – sunshine one-minute, sideways rain the next, vicious winds, snow, hail and rainbows. We hit the first river-crossing 60 metres from turning off the highway. So pack waterproof socks... it's wet.
- 3 You don't need to be a pro off-roader but you do need to be comfortable on the pegs for long days riding with a huge mix of terrain, including sand and deep water crossings.
- 4 Ditch the tent and stay in mountain huts – log cabins with toasty hot showers and comfortable mattresses. The locations and the views – that's how to see Iceland.
- 5 Never call an Icelandic horse a pony, no matter how small! They're loved, ridden and, er, eaten. As one of the only animals tough enough to live out Icelandic extreme winters it's an ideal meat source and worth a try.
- 6 The biggest volcanic island globally with 30 active volcanos and treacherous terrain. Having the right communications, heaven forbid should you need it, is essential. Our guides had that sorted but it's vital to mention.



Your guide will take you to the very best places