

Iceland, land of fire, land of ice

An outstanding challenge for an outstanding country

In Iceland asphalt is not the rule. A lot of secondary roads are unpaved and a few « roads », whose number is preceded by a « F », are highly inadvisable to private cars. However, some of them are unmissable, if one wants to hear the heartbeat of the country. They're remote, potentially dangerous, and a specific logistics is required. A few examples :

F26 Sprengisandsleið (083)
F35 Áfangafell (Blöndulón) (047)
F88 Öskjuvatn (Askja) (084)
F208 Herðubreiðarháls (051)
F225 Landmannaleið (063)
F570 Jökulháls (020)
F578 Austurárdalur (050)
F821 Eyjafjarðardalur (082)

Please read this : <https://safetravel.is/blog/read-road-conditions-iceland>

The challenge adapts to this characteristic of the Icelandic road network. 40% of the climbs are asphalted, 50% are dirt roads (more or less dirty and gravelled, see the two pictures below), and the 10% left require a mountain bike. We've selected them, due to their high tourist interest.

For the road conditions: <http://www.road.is/>

A general map with road conditions and useful informations for cyclists: <https://cyclingiceland.is/>



Öxi



Kaldidalur

Earth is in motion

Iceland is for sure the most atypical European country. What strikes the foreigner, landing for the first time in Keflavik, is the black colour of the volcanic ground: dark dry lava fields around Grindavík (039-Þorbjarnarfell and 040-Suðurstrandarvegur), black desert in Möðrudalur (089), Dimmuborgir's labyrinth near Námaskarð (077),...



The country lies on two tectonic plates and is cut by a fault, that broadens 2cm a year. It can be seen in Þingvellir National Park (055-Almannagjá) and in Sandvík, where a bridge symbolically makes the link between both European and American continents.

<https://www.thingvellir.is/en/nature/continental-drift/>

No Iceland without volcanos. They are more than hundred still active. In his science fiction novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), Jules Verne set the beginning of the adventure in the « mouth » of Snæfellsjökull (1448m). The track to 020-Jökulhál (700m) climbs on its hillsides.

« Descend into the crater of Snaeffels Jökull, which the shadow of Scartaris touches before the calends of July, bold traveler; and you will reach the center of the earth. I did it. Arne Saknussem. » (Chapter 5)

In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), Ben Stiller's movie, the central figure managed to escape an eruption of the *Eyjafjallajökull*. Hamragarðaheiði (065) allows to go up to it.



Askja



Hekla

The two most volcanic climbs:

The caldeiras of 084-Askja (and the blue water of the Viti Crater), the only summit above 1000m in the Challenge. It's also the most isolated climb.

Hekla (1491m), one of the most eruptive volcano in Iceland. Landmannalaugar is the tourist center of the plateau (600m). The Challenge reaches it from the south (051-Herðubreiðarháls), south-west (064-Fjallabaksleið Syðri), west (063-Landmannaleið) and north (062-Fjallabaksleið Nyrðri).

Geothermal plants (« virkjun ») provide 70% of the energy generated on the island. The challenge includes three of them: 059-Nesjavallavirkjun, 060-Hellisheiðarvirkjun and Blönduvirkjun at the bottom of 047-Áfangafell (Blöndulón).

Iceland is also a land of water. Fjords, of course. Especially in the north-west (Zone 1), where climbs jump from one fjord to the other, passing by passes (« skarð » in icelandic) and plateaux between 300 and 500m asl (BIG 006-Hrafnseyrarheiði or 012-Klettsháls, for instance). In the east (Zone 3), 095-Oddskarð, the highest, or 094-Mjóafjarðarheiði,... In the north, from 072-Vaðlaheiði wonderful viewpoints of Eyjafjörður and Akureyri.

A few beaches, like Rauðasandur, at the bottom of 009-Rauðasandsvegur in Breiðafjörður (nature reserve listed in the Unesco World Heritage Site Tentative List), or Reynisfjara at the bottom of 067.



Rauðasandur



Vatnajökull à Jöklasel

At the most western place, Látrabjarg cliffs house a bird reserve, with a large puffin colony.

Glaciers (« jökull » in icelandic). Vatnajökull is the largest (as large as Corsica). The track to 096-Jöklasel (top at 800m) goes up to it. It houses the Skaftafell National Park. Jökulsárlón is an amazing lake. The lower part of the glacier lies at sealevel and ice blocks follow a small channel as far as the ocean, which throws some of them back to the beach. Some James Bond and Batman scenes were shot there.

A few inland tracks go between the glaciers. The Road 35, for instance, between Langjökull and Hofsjökull. The Challenge passes there thanks to 052-Bláfellsháls and 047-Áfangafell (Blöndulón). Or the Road 550, that crosses 027-Kaldidalur, in the west of Langjökull.

Some ski resorts : 031-Skálafell, 036-Bláfjöll, near Reykjavik, 042-Tindastóll, 071-Skarðsdal and 095-Oddskarð.

A lot of waterfalls : 079-Dettifoss, 053-Gulfoss and 026-Hraunfossar/Barnafoss. No trip in Iceland without this trilogy. The climbs are easy, but imperative. Near the bottom of Geyser, the real one, unique and eponym. Two others: 011-Dynjandi and Seljalandsfoss near the bottom of 065-Hamragarðaheiði.

And a few mountain lakes (« vatn ») : 029-Uxavatn, 075-Langavatn, 087-Nykurvatn, 093-Heiðarvatn, ...



Hraunfossar



Dettifoss

History is not much present. Besides the Tectonic Fault, the Þingvellir National Park also houses the ruins of the first European Parliament (Alþing, that dates back to 930).



Almannagjá in Þingvellir Nat. Park



French speaking people will certainly visit Fáskrúðsfjörður, former French fishermen village in the 19th century. No climb there, but a French museum and bilingual street names. In the « ruelle de la montée » (« Hill Alley »), distance between here and Gravelines: 1828km. Don't you know Gravelines?

A seashore and mid-mountain challenge

The Icelandic list is neither the most difficult, nor the highest. 6 tops higher than 700m asl: 084-Öskjuvatn-Askja (1082m), 082-Eyjafjarðardalur (883m), 099-Jöklasel (801m), 027-Kaldidalur (743m), 095-Oddskarð (707m) and 096-Jökulháls (701m).

The average europoints of the 146 sides (270) correspond to the 12,5km at 3,2% in 013-Steingrímsfjarðarheiði-E or to the 4,5km at 6,3% in 059-Nesjavallavirkjun. Some very easy climbs, touristic (038-Reykjanesviti, 008-Látrabjarg, 079-Dettifoss, ...) or remote (018-Fagridalur, ...) lower the average. The Big 5 is similar to the eastern BIGs : Oddskarð-NE (698pts) and Hellisheiði-NW (725pts). The Palme is awarded to 099-Jöklasel track (730pts). 071-Skarðsdal-E (716pts), 020-Jökulháls (647pts) and the former observatory 001-Bolafjall-SW (630pts) exceed 600 points as well.

Not many tremendous average grades : 14% in 071-Skarðsdal ; 12 in 039-Þorbjarnarfell and in the very short 098-Almannáskarð and 055-Almannagjá ; 10% in 088-Vatnsskarð-E, 074-Þeistareykjavegur and 070-Stórhöfði (Westman Islands).

Top 5 of the max. grades : 20% in 039-Þorbjarnarfell and 098-Almannáskarð ; 18% in 071-Skarðsdal and 016-Ennishöfði ; 17% in 086-Hellisheiði and 094-Mjóafjarðarheiði.



Sprengisandsleið

The average distance is 8,9km. The longest : 048-Öxnadalshéiði (44km), than tracks reaching the central plateau : 047-Áfangafell (43km), 051-Herðubreiðarháls (27km), Öskjuvatn (Askja), 083-Sprengisandsleið (24km), 082-Eyjafjarðardalur (22km). Back to asphalt roads: 023-Holtavörðuhéiði (22km on the Road 1) and 036-Bláfjöll (22km to the ski resort).

Average elevation gain for all sides : 323m. The Top 3 is above 700m: 082-Eyjafjarðardalur (796m), 099-Jöklasel (790m) and 095-Oddskarð (703m). The followers are above 600m : 020-Jökulháls (689m), 086-Hellisheiði (620m), 096-Austurleið (638m) and 001-Bolafjall (612m).

The four easiest climbs are places of interest : 008-Látrabjarg (cliffs and ornithological reserve, 25m), 038-Reykjanesviti (the oldest lighthouse in Iceland, 30m), 079-Dettifoss (amazing waterfall, 43m) and 033-Perlan (observatory and viewpoint of Reykjavik, 49m).



Perlan by night



Reykjanesviti

Media

No cycling race known at international level, but a charity event (1300km relay). The route travels around the island on the Road 1, passing by a dozen climbs of the Challenge. More information on : <https://www.wowcyclothon.is/route/>