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# Trail Life VA-1804's Weekly News

## Special Edition: Adventures in Iceland

Issue  
#1

Keswick, VA

R.C.

## The Laugavegur Trail

### The most fun Apocalypse

Let's just say this is an awesome trail, so don't let the title trick you. We did a four-day backpacking trip down this trail, and it was a crazy, wet, cold experience. For most of the trail, the terrain was a barren, black, harsh, and unforgiving place that looked, and felt, shattered. It was like walking through the apocalypse.

Now to the details. Our days were: from Landmannalaugar to Álfavatn to Emstrur to Þórsmörk, which was 35 miles with 5610ft of total elevation gain (which is a little over a mile).

The first day was 14.8 miles with 3018ft (about twice the height of the Empire State Building) of elevation gain. The second day was 10.2 miles with 1148ft of elevation gain, and the third day was 10 miles with 1444ft of elevation gain. Finally, on the fourth day we stayed at Þórsmörk and played trekking pole baseball (which is fun). Afterwards we took what I called the super bus across several rivers and down this massive glacial valley back to the capital (Continued on next page)





One of the worst places on the trail was Emstrur which was a nightmare. It had been the longest cold and wet day and when we got there, we went to set up our tent and after two seconds everything had black sand all over it which, like I said, was a nightmare.



And on the other end of the spectrum was one of my favorite places on the trail Þórsmörk. It was like walking through the Shire (The Shire is a place of rolling hills, and peace from Lord of the Rings). At Þórsmörk it felt like you were camping on the world's most beautiful golf course.

Don't let any of this change your mind about going, because you might regret it and miss out on this amazing landscape that is full of towering mountains, beautiful waterfalls, and the not so wonderful, fermented shark. And like I said at the start, this trip was awesome but be prepared to get punched in the face, because the trail was hard. As a final statement, do this with friends and family and not by yourself.



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W.L.

## Exploring Iceland's South Peninsula

The day after finishing the hike, most of us went on a tour of the Reykjanes Peninsula. We went to an old lighthouse and visited the southern tip of the island. We also got to go to where the two tectonic plates, the Northern American plate and the Eurasian plate, are touching and we stood in the gap in between them.

After that, we were at the Blue Lagoon for a few minutes, which is formed by chemicals that were absorbed from a geothermal power plant. The water there was sky-blue and almost milky, being mostly opaque and not nearly as transparent as normal water.

We also went to a place along the coast that had a natural rock formation that caused the waves to hit it and splash up much higher than normal. The tour guide "forgot" to tell us this, and those of us who didn't notice the wave got soaked!

We then went to a grocery store where the tour guide showed us where to get fermented shark, the national food of Iceland. We all tried it at the end of the tour - no one liked it, which is what he was expecting! As you can see, the tour was very interesting and everyone enjoyed it.

*Photo below: An active lighthouse located on the south peninsula*



*Photos: (Above) Hot springs near the Blue Lagoon; (below) the gap between two continents - the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates grow further apart by 2 cm annually.*

Owen L.

### A piece of Iceland

Visiting a modern ghost town

The troop went to the town of Grindavik during our tour of the Reykjanes Peninsula. It was abandoned in May because of a volcanic eruption and 3000 people were evacuated. That's 1% of their population. Imagine if 3,000,000 people were evacuated from America.

The lava field was black and gray and there were sharp lava rocks that were still smoking. We took some of the delicate rocks home and had to wrap them in clothes to bring them back. They broke a little because of major turbulence, but I like that I have them.



A.C.

## The elusive arctic fox

### Catching a rare glimpse in the wild

The arctic fox is most commonly found in tundra near the arctic circle. They are colored grey during the summer, but their fur typically turns white in winter. They can grow up to three feet long, weigh about ten pounds, and feed on rodents and small birds. If food is scarce, it will surprisingly prey on reindeer which are many times larger. To survive in the harsh northern climate, arctic foxes have short ears, a short muzzle, and fur-covered soles that keep its feet warm while walking on snow and ice.

On our first day of hiking, we were lucky enough to see an arctic fox pup. It was well camouflaged due to its brown and grey fur. We first noticed it when it made howling noises but if it had stayed silent, we would have passed it by without seeing it. This camouflage allows it to stay hidden from predators, such as polar bears, wolves, and wolverines. Their life expectancy is about three years, but they have been known to live for up to ten years in captivity. The arctic fox is one of the most stunning creatures of the north.



*Photos from internet: The elusive arctic fox is Iceland's only native mammal. (Top) an adult fox in winter. (Below) a brown pup. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/Arctic-fox>*





J.C.

## Land of Fire and Ice

Iceland's unique geology



Lying on its own in the middle of the vast ocean is an island. But this is no ordinary island. This is the land of fire and ice. Though only the size of Kentucky, it is still home to thirty-two volcanic systems and forty-two mountain ranges. Besides that, eleven percent of Iceland's land area is glacier. Most locations cannot boast one of these wonders, yet Iceland has them all.

How was this landscape formed? In the most thrilling way possible. Volcanoes and glaciers. Fire and ice. The volcanoes in the Atlantic formed the land when they erupted, while the glaciers chipped away at the terrain as they slowly moved down mountains. They formed valleys and fjords, and they melted into rivers.

Not only is Iceland a tourist attraction because of its volcanoes, glaciers, and mountains, but also because of the hot springs, fjords, and black sand beaches. The hot springs are typically formed by rain or ground water heated by magma from underneath earth's surface. They can range in temperature from just warm to boiling. In some places there are steaming hot pools surrounded by freezing snow. The contrast between the hot and cold is stunning. The geological wonders here are unlike anywhere else.



*Photos: (inset above) Black sand beach, (left) Myrdalsjokull glacier behind lava fields covered in green moss, (right) boiling water coming up from the ground*

### Did you know?

The volcano that erupted in 2010 and shutdown airports worldwide is called E15 – but why? Because the E is followed by fifteen letters that no foreigner can pronounce – Eyjafjallajökull!



D.S.

## Icelandic cuisine

Mostly delicious food on and off the trail

Because of its harsh and rustic environment, Icelandic food tends to lean on animal products, especially seafood. Wild sheep roam the island, providing fresh lamb. During the trip, we all enjoyed several different dishes and snacks on the trail and off the trail, including the famously terrible fermented shark.

On the first day of the trip, after visiting a few of Reykjavik's landmarks and museums, we treated ourselves to 101 Reykjavik Street Food, a cozy restaurant with a nice view of Hallgrímskirkja, a large church that dominates Reykjavik's skyline. I ordered fish and chips, a European classic. Other choices included fish stew paired with a sweet rye, lobster soup, and meat soup.

The next day, after a quick dip in the natural hot springs, we set out on our hike with a mix of energy bars and trail mix paired with fresh Icelandic spring water. Once we arrived at the first hut, my dad and I enjoyed a warm pre-made package of Icelandic lamb soup. After a long hike and a creek crossing or two, we crashed for the night.

The next morning I had a warm sandwich while others enjoyed a creamy mushroom soup (I have a refined opinion on the flavor of mushrooms). On the trail that day, we enjoyed some pieces of dried fish jerky thanks to the Cloughs. After a wet day we all had some creamy pasta and smoked salmon

thanks to a tour guide that made a bit too much for the tour! The next day we were blown away (somewhat literally) by the complex flavor of the lamb jerky while on the hike. For dinner we dug into our pots of infinitely refillable meat soup.

The next day, after a long while of playing games and waiting for the bus to get out of the river we got back to Reykjavik and helped ourselves to authentic New-York pizza paired with every single live-action lightsaber fight (available for free on YouTube). The last night we went to a somewhat tapas style place, where we enjoyed Plokkfiskur (fish pie), duck, and salmon. On the flight back we had Applesin, an Icelandic soda that is pretty much carbonated orange juice. Icelandic food is a very good way to enjoy Iceland's rich culture and history.



Photo: Cured Reindeer with blue cheese

## Iceland by the Numbers

- Population: 377,000
- \$1 (USD) = 188 Icelandic Krona
- Average time to hike the Laugavegur trail: 2-5 days
- 2024 best time in Laugavegur ultramarathon: 4hr 13min

- Iceland's land area covered by glaciers: 10%
- Active volcanoes: 32, on average there is an eruption every 5 years
- Calories burned carrying a 30lb backpack on a 5% grade: 280-380 per hour

- Distance from Charlottesville to Reykjavik: 2,896 mi
- The Icelandic language includes 156 words to describe wind.
- National Geographic included the Laugavegur Trail in its list of the top 20 best trails on the planet.



O.C.

## A History Lesson

### Iceland's involvement in the Second World War

While visiting the National Museum of Iceland on the first day of our trip, one of the most interesting things was the history on Iceland's involvement in World War 2. Though Iceland was technically neutral in World War Two and no battles were actually fought on Iceland soil, there is quite a lot of interesting history around Iceland's involvement in the war.

At the beginning of WW2, Iceland was technically not a country, but still a part of Denmark. On April 9th, 1940, Germany invaded Denmark. With Denmark under German control all contact between Denmark and Iceland ceased. Informed of the knowledge that Denmark had been invaded, Iceland decided to split from Denmark to try to preserve its neutrality. This worked until May 10th, 1940, when Britain declared war on Iceland after several failed attempts to persuade Iceland to join the allies. Britain did this to prevent Germany from taking control of Iceland.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Marine battalion disembarked at Reykjavik under the command of Colonel Sir Robert Sturges and upon landing the British dispatched troops to guard the post office and to capture the German Consul Gerlach as a way to stop the news of the invasion from reaching Berlin. They also began to prepare for an invasion of 2000 German paratroopers which never came. The reason why Great Britain and the Allies invaded Iceland was to capture key weather stations and shipping routes to Russia which allowed the Allies to ship much needed supplies to Russia and to be able to predict the weather in the European Theater. The weather stations ultimately enabled the allies to predict the small opening in the weather that allowed them to surprise the Germans on D-Day that led to the end of the war.

### Did you know?

Trail Life troop VA-1804 took its name from the Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery Expedition which explored the American West looking for a water route to the Pacific Ocean in the year 1804. It is the same spirit of adventure and discovery that led our troop to the Laugavegur Trail in the highlands of Iceland 220 years later.





S.C.

## A Father's Perspective

### Seeking adventure and purpose in the Highlands

How did I end up in the middle of Iceland with two sons and a bag of freeze-dried reindeer soup in my backpack? Let's start with the obvious – the boys in our troop are ambitious and the leaders are crazy. But there's logic to our insanity and I think the other dads would agree with me on this. Let me explain. I've asked my kids to be different from the culture they live in. They don't have cell phones or use social media. Not that those things are inherently wrong, but we all know too well how quickly they can consume us and make us feel numb. I want our kids to feel alive. So instead of technology I try to offer them purpose and adventure. Sometimes that leads you down a path you never thought you'd be on – like the Laugavegur Trail in the highlands of Iceland.

We have a saying in our house: "Do hard things." It comes from a book by the same

name. Hiking 16 miles up and over a mountain that first day was not easy. We dads had to get in shape for it and I still struggled at times. Coming down the mountain on middle-aged knees is another story, and hiking along the ridge with the wind threatening to lift you off your feet can be both unnerving and invigorating. I find that a true adventure will paradoxically humble us while also giving us new confidence. These subtle life lessons are why I want to spend time doing hard things with the people I love.

What will I remember most from this trip? The landscapes we witnessed will forever be etched in my memory. It was a constant reminder of the miracle of God's creation. Even the harsh lava fields were beautiful in their own unique way. Being able to share that with my sons and our friends is something for which I am beyond grateful.

I'm also thankful for the example of other godly men. The boys were watching and learning from them, and we dads were watching the boys to see how they would respond to adversity. I am proud of how they took the initiative to do hard things. It felt as though they were literally growing up before my eyes.

At the end of the trail, we met two Icelandic women who were surprised to hear the boys had hiked the whole way. They were not joking when they insisted, "You should no longer call them boys, they are men!" We are not naïve enough to think that one hike makes a man, but we are all on a journey and I can say without a doubt these Trailmen returned home feeling a little more humble, confident, and alive. If you ask me if I'm crazy enough to do something like this again, I'd have to confess... planning for our next adventure started on the flight home.



*"That you may **WALK WORTHY** of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10)*