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STIRRED AND SHAKEN IN ICELAND



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A GOLD WING AND AN iPhone:
NEIL GRAHAM ON THE PLEASURES OF A SOLO FALL TOUR
+ SO LONG SUBTLETY – NEW MONSTER PACKS
A MIGHTY WALLOP



Photographs: Michael Kreuzmeir, Michael Kutschke, James Nixon

IN LIKE A LAMB

Iceland is a country of contrasts. If things are going well, it can't stay that way

By James Nixon



I'm sitting in a softly lit hotel bar, a nearby candle gently illuminating my whisky as it's chilled by a chip of 1,000-year-old ice. Michael Kreuzmeir, one of our Edelweiss tour guides, takes a knife to the chunk of ice hauled back from Jökulsárlon, the glacial lagoon we visited earlier in the day. He hacks off another piece and pops it in his mouth. His eyes are trepidatious as they move amongst the six other tour members gathered around the table. He waits for the ice to melt on his tongue and then outlines our situation.

We're eight days into an 11-day tour of Iceland, though with what's to come tomorrow — or *could* come tomorrow — I feel like the trip is just beginning. We've covered a lot of the island, sure, but so far the riding has been relatively easy. Pavement is on par with what we have in Canada (it ranges from perfectly fine to piss-poor) and gravel roads are still roads, after all. Iceland has a lot of gravel roads — about 70 percent of the island's 14,000 km, according to Michael — with consistencies ranging from bare hard-pack to loose Froot Loops, but they're nothing our Hidenau-shod Triumph Tigers can't handle. What makes tomorrow's route from Kirkjubæjarklaustur (just call it Kirktown) to Fludir different?

The itinerary takes us through remote Landmannalaugar, a name that rolls luxuriously around your mouth like a succulent toffee. It's in the heart of the Fjallabak Nature Reserve, a Mecca for hikers who arrive in behemoth 4x4 buses and set up camp like an Occupy movement. But to get there you must



From left: Wayne, Michael, Vincent, and Jörg. Well-to-do retirees form the bulk of Nixon's tour group.



Triumph frets at being left behind but it was just miscommunication. It was a prawn shop, and not a pawn shop as the bike first believed.



The harbour at Húsavík. Whale watching from a wooden ship is slow going. Iceland's beauty is thrilling and its temperatures chilling. Ten degrees is average summer high.



Victor peruses a placard outside the herring museum. Stops are frequent and fascinating.



DESTINATIONS

EDELWEISS ICELAND TOUR — PART ONE



If it ends in “foss” it’s a waterfall. Here, Fagrifoss, one of the Iceland’s countless cascades.



Roads have narrow shoulders — become distracted at your peril. Nixon picks his way along the northern coast.



Michael Kutschke, a fellow journo, surveys the highlands from atop a wall of boulders built by glaciation. He left early to ride the Swiss Alps.

EXCURSIONS SIMPLIFIED

Edelweiss does the legwork for you

For would-be world travellers deterred by the daunting task of trip organization, Edelweiss Bike Travel may be the answer. The company — based in Austria and in operation from before I was born — looks after logistics so you can concentrate on the ride.

For Edelweiss’s new 11-day (nine of which are riding days) “Iceland — Fire and Ice” tour, that ride will be on either a kitted-for-touring Triumph Tiger 800 XCx or Triumph Tiger Explorer. (Edelweiss offers many other tours in many other countries on many makes and models — BMW, Ducati, Harley, Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, Vespa, even Royal Enfield — but the Triumphs are the only options for Iceland.) If you’re riding solo it’ll cost (all prices U.S.) \$8,600 for the XCx and another \$370 for the Explorer. Riding two-up will cost either \$6,870 or \$7,060 (per person) depending on machine.

Unlimited mileage is included in the rental, as is basic insurance (purchasing additional coverage, offered by Edelweiss, is recommended). You’re responsible for booking and paying





cross rivers. Lots of rivers. (Michael estimates there are 20 to 25 water crossings on the route.) Rain and melt water, as inevitable here as death and taxes, cause the crossings to constantly change, sometimes silting in with Iceland's black, pillowy volcanic sand, more often being washed clean to the gravel or uneven stones beneath. Throw some large rocks and boulders into the mix — which typically end up right where you want to go — and things can go pear shaped and sopping wet in a hurry. Bad news on a motorbike.

What's the draw, then? Well, there's the ride itself, a rambunctious gravel ramble through relatively untouched Icelandic highlands, with rewarding water crossings to boot. And then there's the scenery, which Michael claims is particularly stunning. "The colours of the landscape — the greens, the browns, the contrast of snow on black soil — it's incredibly beautiful," he says. The mostly reserved German has already led us to some truly spectacular sights, and he's describing this place as incredibly beautiful? I'm sold — but it's not that simple.

This is the third running of Edelweiss's "Iceland — Fire and Ice" tour. On the first tour they had dry, warm weather ("It was very un-Icelandic," says Michael) and made it to Landmannalaugar with some wet feet but no mishaps. Conversely, it rained for the *entirety* of tour two, *plus* the 10 days prior (such a period of sustained rain is unusual for the island). That made the water crossings impassable. The group had to take an alternate route via the Ring Road, entirely bypassing one of the highlights of the trip. Weather conditions for our tour have been typical, which is to say mixed: sun and cloud with a variety of precipitation (rain, fog, mist, drizzle), and temperatures ranging from mid single-digits to mid-20s. All of that, every day. If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes.

After arriving in Kirktown, Michael invites me for a ride in the chase truck to scout nearby water crossings, ones typical

An amphibious boat ride in a glacial lagoon. When in Iceland...



for flights to and from Iceland, as well as refueling your ride throughout the trip, but Edelweiss simplifies things by having your rental waiting at the hotel upon arrival. After a briefing and some paperwork, bike handover is a breeze — equally so at the end of the trip. Simply park the bike at the final hotel, return the keys and head home. (Assuming you haven't mangled your motorcycle, but that's what the additional insurance is for.)

Included in the cost are all accommodations, all breakfasts, nine dinners (you can go out of pocket for additional meals, or go hungry), a comprehensive tour information package, a meticulously planned route, a pair of knowledgeable guides and a support vehicle — in this case a 4x4 Ford. The truck transports luggage between hotels (one piece per person), and, as its bed is open to the elements, it's recommended that luggage be waterproof. Staff has waterproof duffel bags on hand in case you forget yours, or neglect to read the brochure (it happens).

You'll travel between seven and nine hours each day, covering roughly 2,000 km total (longest day 350 km, shortest 150 km) in a loop around the island beginning and ending in Reykjavik, Iceland's capital. That may not sound like much mileage, but there are many attractions (mountains, glaciers, waterfalls, geysers, museums, visitor centres, oceanic excursions and more) that quickly fill up

each day. You can follow the tour guide, or, if you prefer, you can make your own way (the guides can offer routing advice if necessary). Edelweiss grades the route as "tough" on its website, mostly on account of some lengthy gravel sections and water crossings. (Seasoned adventurers will scoff at the designation, but be warned that this isn't a Sicilian jaunt on a scooter.)

Bookings for Edelweiss's Icelandic tour are currently being taken through 2017. The window of acceptable weather for comfortable — a relative term — motorcycle touring on the island is short, which is why the tour only runs three times a year, primarily in August. Space is limited and demand is high; if you're interested, look into it soon.

And even if Iceland doesn't interest you, Edelweiss likely has a destination that does. With a wide range of tours in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and even a world tour, this company has you covered. The only limiting factor — and it could be a big one — is your budget. These tours are expensive, but you get what you pay for: good food and accommodation, properly maintained motorcycles, wonderful riding, and a hassle-free experience. Visit www.edelweissbike.com for further information.

— James Nixon

EDELWEISS ICELAND TOUR — PART ONE



There's nothing like a winding road through a desolate landscape to make you feel insignificant. The gravel roads in Iceland's interior can be challenging to novices.



of what we can expect tomorrow. “Looks good,” he says after fording them in the Ford. “These are down about 30 centimetres from the last tour.” Back at the hotel bar, he tells the rest of the group the same. “It’s definitely doable,” he says. Michael, who’s leading tomorrow’s ride (the guides alternate between leading the group and driving the chase vehicle), certainly has the chops — he wouldn’t be here if he didn’t, and he actually scouted this route for Edelweiss. (Our other guide, also German, insists on remaining nameless and not having his picture published; he doesn’t want his other employer to know he moonlights for a tour company. I ask him what he does, besides guiding. “Government work,” he says with such dour finality I dare not press further. A German James Bond, I’d wager.)

Michael’s statement that the upcoming route is “doable” is, of course, entirely dependent on the doer. I take a sip, savour the glacial coolness of my Johnnie Walker Black, and consider our rag-tag tour group. Jörg, a 50-something Belgian, is at ease on his Explorer, whether on pavement or off (it’s no surprise; he owns one at home). He did, however, sit out the practice water crossing near Gullfoss because he hates wet boots — not a resounding example of adventurousness, though perhaps one of prudence. (To be fair, he wasn’t the only one who passed on practice.) Victor, in his late 40s and a casual off-roader back home in Texas, is confident and competent. Vincent, on the other hand, is not. The mid-40s Californian is short, rotund, and soft-spoken — though he’ll speak at great length about riding technique. It seems to be a case of do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do; more than once my eyes widen as he wobbles along Iceland’s flowing coastal curves like Humpty Dumpty teetering atop a wall. (Is he distracted by dramatic scenery? Possibly — it’s never far between postcard-worthy stops here.) The roads haven’t been tight or technical, and the pace has been modest; if he’s already pushing his limits, I’m questioning his capability to make it to Landmannalaugar. Wayne, in his 60s, a retiree from Washington, leaves me equally skeptical. He rides an FJR at home and looks a little ragged on the loose stuff. “I haven’t ridden gravel in 40 years,” he says. “Thought I’d have one more kick at the can.”

And then there’s Fred and Bryna, a retired couple in their 60s from Maryland riding two-up. While he smiles stoically come wind, rain, or rough stuff, she admits to screaming in her helmet when things get unsteady. “That gravel’s going to do me in,” she says after our first off-pavement excursion, the hint of a southern drawl colouring her cadence. It’s on the second day, a 10-km section of loosely packed gravel meant to give us a taste of what’s to come. “Is there much more of this?” she asks uneasily. (Were I in their riding gear — jeans, sweaters, rain slickers and gloves that wouldn’t be out of place on a ski slope — I’d be uneasy too. Edelweiss and common sense recommend you wear appropriate riding gear, but the only item absolutely required is a helmet — though the company does have you sign a waiver acknowledging you’re riding in what is deemed improper gear if you show up ill-equipped.) Edelweiss doesn’t hide the fact that this tour involves a good amount of gravel; a perusal of its website shows smiling riders decked in adventure gear traversing gravel roads through rock-strewn landscapes. Her disquiet stirs the question: if you’re uncomfortable riding such roads, why come here? “I didn’t read the brochure,” she says.

IN ICELAND, ISOLATION DOESN'T DETER ENTHUSIASTS

This isn't a cozy modernist retreat as seen in the pages of *Dwell* magazine. It's a motorcycle museum.



Yes, there are motorcyclists in Iceland. I know because I've seen them, men and women riding Harleys and Hondas, KTMs and Kawasakis. Iceland's climate is relatively mild considering its latitude (Reykjavik averages 10° in summer, 0° in winter), but the weather is changeable and precipitation a given; it's like Ireland with ice and snow. Riders here are a hardy bunch, something Canadians can appreciate.

I caught up with a pair in the parking lot of the herring museum in Siglufjörður. (Yes, a herring museum. It's interesting, actually, even if you don't share my affinity for canned fish.) One was on a Gold Wing, the other a BMW R1100RT, just two locals out for a toot. I ask if there are many motorcyclists on the island. "Not so many, really," one says. "Iceland is a small place. But the bikers who are here love bikes." (It's a common sentiment, no matter the scene.) "There's a museum in Akureyri," the other adds. "Go there and you will see."

Located near the Akureyri airport, the Mótórhjólafn Íslands (Icelandic Motorcycle Museum) opened in 2011 and has over 100 motorcycles spread throughout its two stories and 800 square metres of exhibition halls. It was founded, in part, as a memorial to local motorcycle collector and enthusiast Heidar Johannsson, who died in a motorcycle accident in 2006. Some of the bikes on display belonged to him, while others were donated by other Icelanders, making the museum a particularly revealing reflection of motorcycling on the island.

The oldest motorcycle in the collection is a 1918 Henderson restored by Gunnar Grimsson. He discovered it in 1970 as a rusty heap at a local scrap yard. (A small placard sits beside every showpiece providing details about the motorcycle and its history, both in general and its specific history on the island.) There are small-displacement Japanese bikes — 50 cc Yamahas, Kawasakis and Hondas — alongside big-boned BMWs and Moto Guzzis, some in immaculate condition, some showing the patina of Icelandic life. There's a 1979 Honda CBX "imported from USA in late nineties," the placard states, "and Heidar bought it from

his brother in 2004." There are makes you'd expect to see in any motorcycle museum — Harleys, Indians, Triumphs, Nortons, BSAs, Ariels — but there are oddball bikes you might not expect to see here, like a 1975 Hercules powered by a Wankel rotary engine. Tucked behind it, a 1980 Benelli Sei 900. Sitting in another corner, a 1980 Maico. And, in a prime example of Icelandic motorcycling diversity, a rusty 97 cc Rixe sits beside a GSX-R1000.

It's an eclectic mix, but comes as no surprise considering what I've witnessed. I've seen Sportsters and Street Glides, GSs of every ilk, dirt bikes from all Japanese brands, a Versys, a Hayabusa, and a couple of KTM Adventures. There are a handful of dealers, mostly in Reykjavik, but, according to the pair I met outside the herring museum, many motorcyclists dissatisfied with what's available on the island will privately import bikes, mostly from Europe. If people want something badly enough, they'll find a way to get it — even in isolated Iceland.

— James Nixon

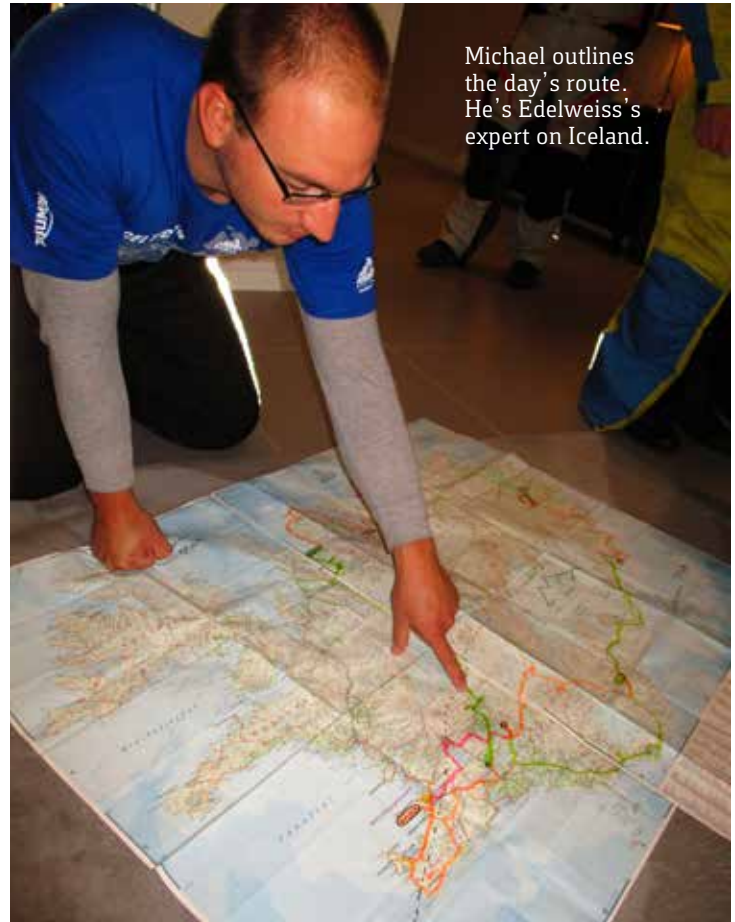


DESTINATIONS

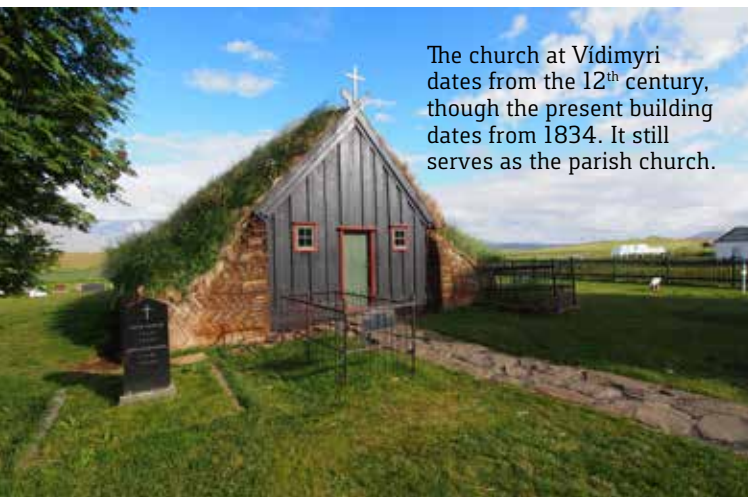
EDELWEISS ICELAND TOUR — PART ONE



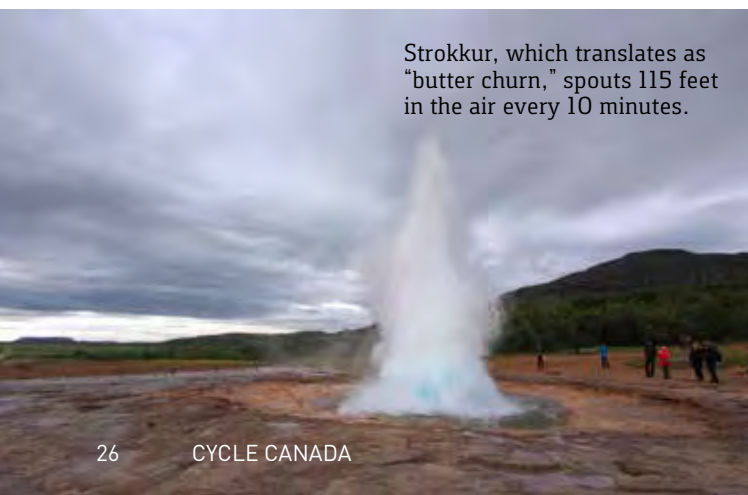
Imagine rounding a bend to be greeted by this (the glacial tongue, not Nixon). Svínafellsjökull is worth the 10-minute hike.



Michael outlines the day's route. He's Edelweiss's expert on Iceland.



The church at Vidimyri dates from the 12th century, though the present building dates from 1834. It still serves as the parish church.



Strokkur, which translates as "butter churn," spouts 115 feet in the air every 10 minutes.



If you'd rather not ride gravel you can readily circumnavigate Iceland via the (mostly) paved Ring Road. You'll see mountains, rivers, glaciers, lava flows, sulphur vents, waterfalls, fjords, fishing villages and farmsteads. But you'll miss the stunning beauty of the island's interior highlands, their harsh, barren plains standing in stark contrast to the verdant valleys below. When we head north on the F35, a ribboned gravel road running between Langjökull and Hofsjökull, two of Iceland's larger glaciers, Fred and Bryna stick to the pavement and have a happy time of it.

Until they run out of fuel. We pass them, parked in a farmer's driveway south of Saudárkrokur, after linking up with the Ring Road again. They wave and look forlorn, but aren't frantic in the manner of people trying to flag down passersby (turns out the support truck is already en route with spare petrol). A malfunctioning fuel gauge is blamed; it's always the bike's fault. (This isn't our only fuel-related incident. One poor Triumph is inadvertently pumped full of diesel.)

There have been a few more mishaps throughout the tour — nothing major, but enough to give pause before barreling into the boondocks. There was the tip-over at the hotel near Akureyri, the result of a tall-ish XCx (even with the low seat option, saddle height is 840 mm), a short rider, and unsure footing in a gravel parking lot. Then, at the Viking Café not far from Höfn, a rider somersaults off a bike after encountering deep sand on a detour to the beach. And another tip-over, caused by parking on an incline, at one of many photo stops between Höfn and Kirktown. (It's a particularly picturesque stretch of the Ring Road, sandwiched as it is between the coast

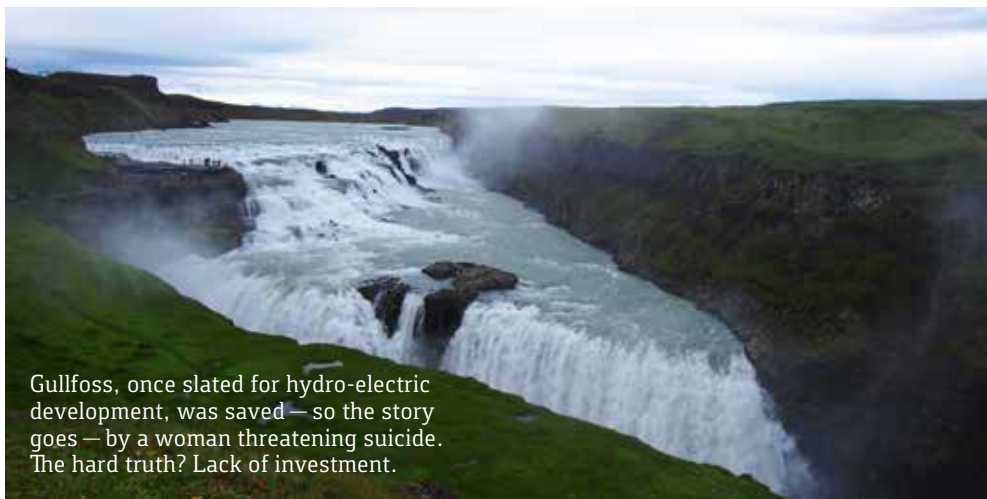
and numerous glacial tongues, some broad like a cow's, others narrow like a snake's, all part of the awesome — in the formal sense of the word — Vatnajökull glacier. Vatnajökull covers eight percent of Iceland's surface and, at 3,100 cubic kilometres, is the most voluminous glacier in Europe.)

And now we find ourselves here, in a hotel bar with well-aged ice and a serious decision to make: brave the gravel and water crossings and head for Landmannalaugar, or, the safe but sure option, detour round via the Ring Road. "It's over 100 kilometres of gravel to even reach the first water crossing," Michael says. "You can't go in and come back if it's too difficult — it's too far. Once you commit to the gravel route you can only go forward." It's so wonderfully fatalistic I'm smitten.

Fred and Bryna don't share my enthusiasm and have chosen the alternative (easier) route — and they'll take our support truck with them. "For those who choose to come to Landmannalaugar, we'll be on our own," Michael says. There's no doubt tomorrow's ride will be challenging. And without a support vehicle, the danger of becoming stranded — at least temporarily — should someone crash or drown a bike is very real.

In the morning we convene for breakfast. Tour members have had the chance to sleep on the decision of which route to choose. The mood, like the sky, is sombre as we down skyr (traditional Icelandic yogurt) and smoked salmon. It will rain today — as it has every day — but the clouds look especially ominous. Michael, resplendent in fluorescent-green riding gear, faces us. "So," he says, "who's coming with me?"

Read part two in the January issue. [CC](#)



Gullfoss, once slated for hydro-electric development, was saved — so the story goes — by a woman threatening suicide. The hard truth? Lack of investment.

