

WILD WEATHER IN ICELAND

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We had often thought about a holiday in Iceland, but the expensive air fares and the slow sea route had deterred us. However, in 1969 Icelandair introduced cheap night flights and at about the same time we found the address of a man in Iceland who gave advice on trips to Icelandic icecaps. The result of a considerable correspondence with this gentleman was that we were booked to visit three areas in a fortnight's holiday, Snaefellsjokel, an icecapped mountain of 4,000 ft. situated at the end of a peninsula to the north west of Reykjavik, Kerlingarfjoll, a group of snow mountains, Alpine in character, in the centre of the island and Thorsmork which is east of Reykjavik and lies between two icecaps, the Eyjafjallajokull and the Myrdalsjokull.

A service bus runs (two or three times a week) in the summer from Reykjavik to Olafsvik at the foot of Snaefellsjokel and we thoroughly enjoyed the six hour journey, winding in and out of the bays along the coast. The cultivable strip at sea level is very narrow and the basaltic hills rise black and barren about a mile inland so we had striking views in all directions. Olafsvik is a small fishing place where an American firm has opened a fish freezing factory and we were accommodated for two nights in a guest house adjoining the factory. As we set out for Snaefellsjokel we were warned of a bad weather forecast and how accurate this warning was. We reached the barren lava fields just below the icecap, but thick cloud, a strong wind and lashing rain forced us to turn back. We were glad we had retreated because the wind became steadily stronger and we were wet through by the time we reached Olafsvik. However, the guest house had under-floor heating so we managed to dry our clothes.

We returned to Reykjavik the next day, a Friday, and were to leave for Kerlingarfjoll at mid-day on Saturday. We were to stay in a hut equipped with pots, pans, stoves and cutlery, but we had to provide our own food and sleeping bags. We found we were members of a party of about 26, of mixed nationalities travelling in a private bus under the leadership of an Icelander. Our first stop was to view a volcano cone with a deep blue-green lake at the bottom. The day was warm and sunny and we had extensive views of distant snow-capped mountains as we drove through a forest — of dwarf willows about 18" high — until we came to the Gullfoss, a truly magnificent waterfall, at the edge of the central lava desert area. As we left Gullfoss our leader said "There is a bad weather forecast. It will rain tomorrow. We are thinking of doing a peak tonight. Are you coming?". We agreed and most of the party set off to climb Blafell, 1204 m. We reached the top, after a rough scramble over lava and between boulders in time to enjoy a fantastic sunset over the Lang-

jokull icefield. Returning to the bus we drove on over the lava desert, fording several rivers and finally reached the hut about 1.30 a.m. It was a primitive place with bunks round the walls, a few tables and stools and a kitchen better left undescribed. Next morning, true to the forecast, the clouds were down, it was raining and a gale was blowing. The snow peaks were off, but the leader took us a walk up a valley full of hot springs. It was a fantastic experience to see steaming springs and clouds of hot vapour issuing from the mountain side just below the glaciers. The colours, too, were almost unbelievable, ranging from deep orange to pale fawns and sulphurous greens and yellows. The party were preparing to move off, so we said we would find our own way back to the hut. We wanted to see more of this amazing scenery, but the leader said "You must not be long, we are moving on to Hveravellir at 4 o'clock". This was a surprise, but a pleasant one, as we would see more of the lava desert area and Hveravellir is famous for its hot springs. The hut is situated among cones of silica belching forth hissing columns of steam and boiling pools of clear blue water spilling over to form silica terraces in shades of grey, blue, green and yellow. It is centrally heated, simply by piping a hot spring through a radiator and letting it flow away and there is a heated bathing pool just outside the front door.

As we had to leave about 3.0 p.m. the next day for the long drive back to Reykjavik no climbing was possible, but we were taken a walk through a Thieves' Valley at the edge of the Regnbudajokull icefield. In a few sheltered valleys in the central lava desert, which are well-watered by the summer snow-melt, grass and mosses grow quite abundantly. In Icelandic legends these valleys are the hideouts of outlaws and thieves — hence the general name Thieves' Valley.

On the way back the leader decided that "the Tourists" of the party, 3 Swiss, 2 English, 1 Dutch and 1 Dane, had not had their money's worth so the coach made a detour of several miles to visit the Great Geyser. We arrived quite late in the evening and had a private tour of this remarkable place which is usually teeming with coach parties.

Our last trip was to Thorsmork which lies to the east of Reykjavik and is only a few miles inland. The name means Thor's Forest and this is the only place in Iceland where trees grow to a height of 12ft. to 15ft. The hut was large, new and well equipped and the guardian was a schoolmaster, doing a vacation job, who had an intimate knowledge of the whole area and was most helpful.

The coach left the main coast road and followed a devious course up a wide valley along whose gravel and boulder strewn floor several streams were flowing from the two adjacent icecaps. The route up the valley crossed and recrossed these rivers which had to be forded where there was a base of boulders, rather than gravel, to bear the

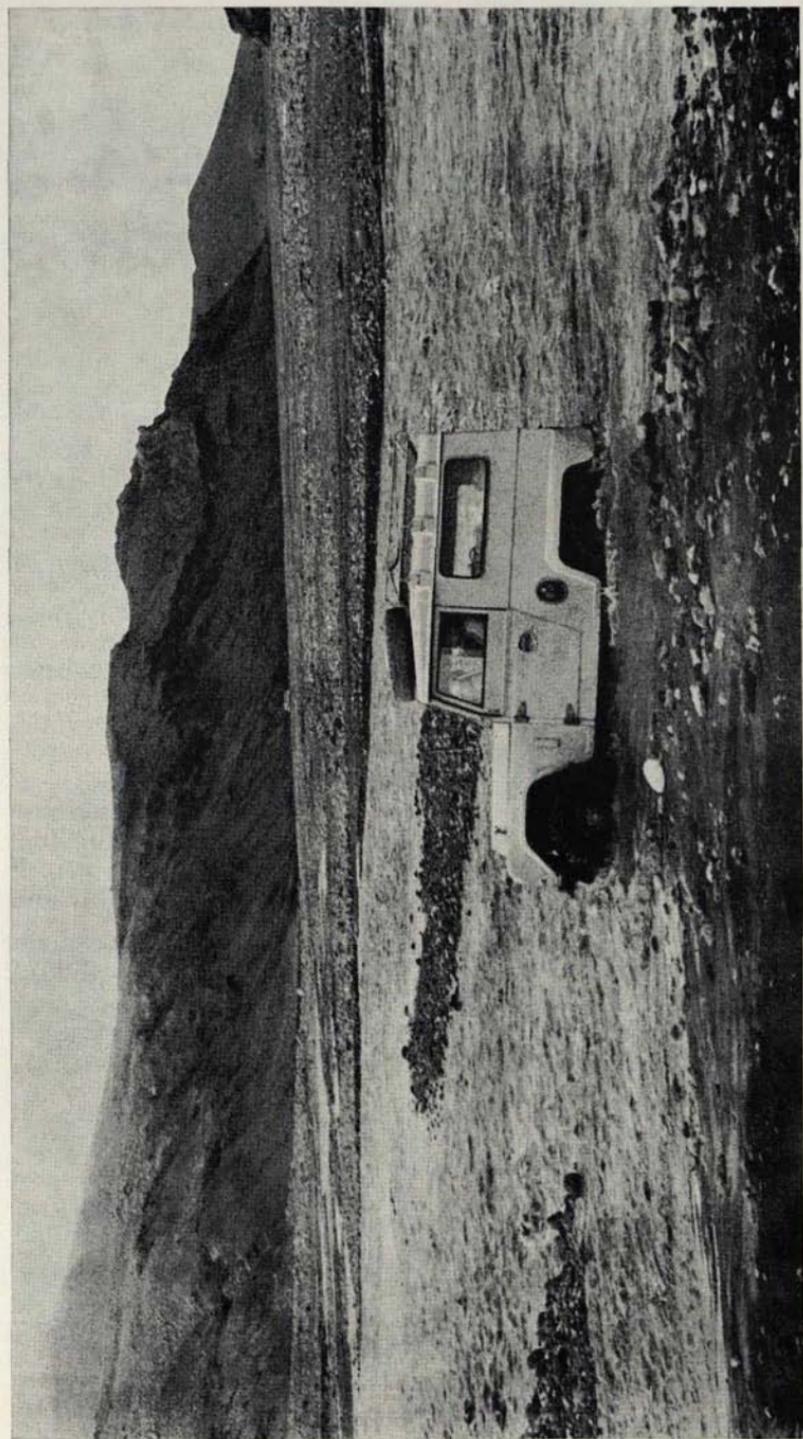
weight of the bus. The bus had a high wheel base and a luggage compartment below the passenger deck but even so the floor was a-wash a few times. Anyone shipping their own jeep to Iceland would still need specialised local help to find the fords. No other type of car could negotiate these river crossings. All the local vehicles are fitted with short wave radios so that help can be quickly sent in the event of a breakdown. Our bus gave a tow to a jeep which was stuck in the river.

Our first day at Thorsmork was dull and cloudy so we joined the guardian's party on a walk which, as the weather improved a little, gave us fine views of the weird, broken, wild tertiary landscape, topped by icecaps and fringed with hanging glaciers. The map we had was hardly more than a sketch and gave no hint of the steep valleys and sheer rocky canyons that we encountered.

Our second day was fine and sunny. A young Englishman, who was on his own, joined us and we traversed a ridge from which we were able to pick out the route on to the ice-cap. Back at the hut we discussed the route with the guardian who told us to wake him as early as we liked and said he would come a mile or so with us to show us the feasible places to wade the rivers we had to cross to reach the ice-cap. All seemed set for a good day, but by midnight it was pouring with rain and this continued for 36 hours so we were frustrated yet again and had to leave Thorsmork without getting on to the ice-cap.

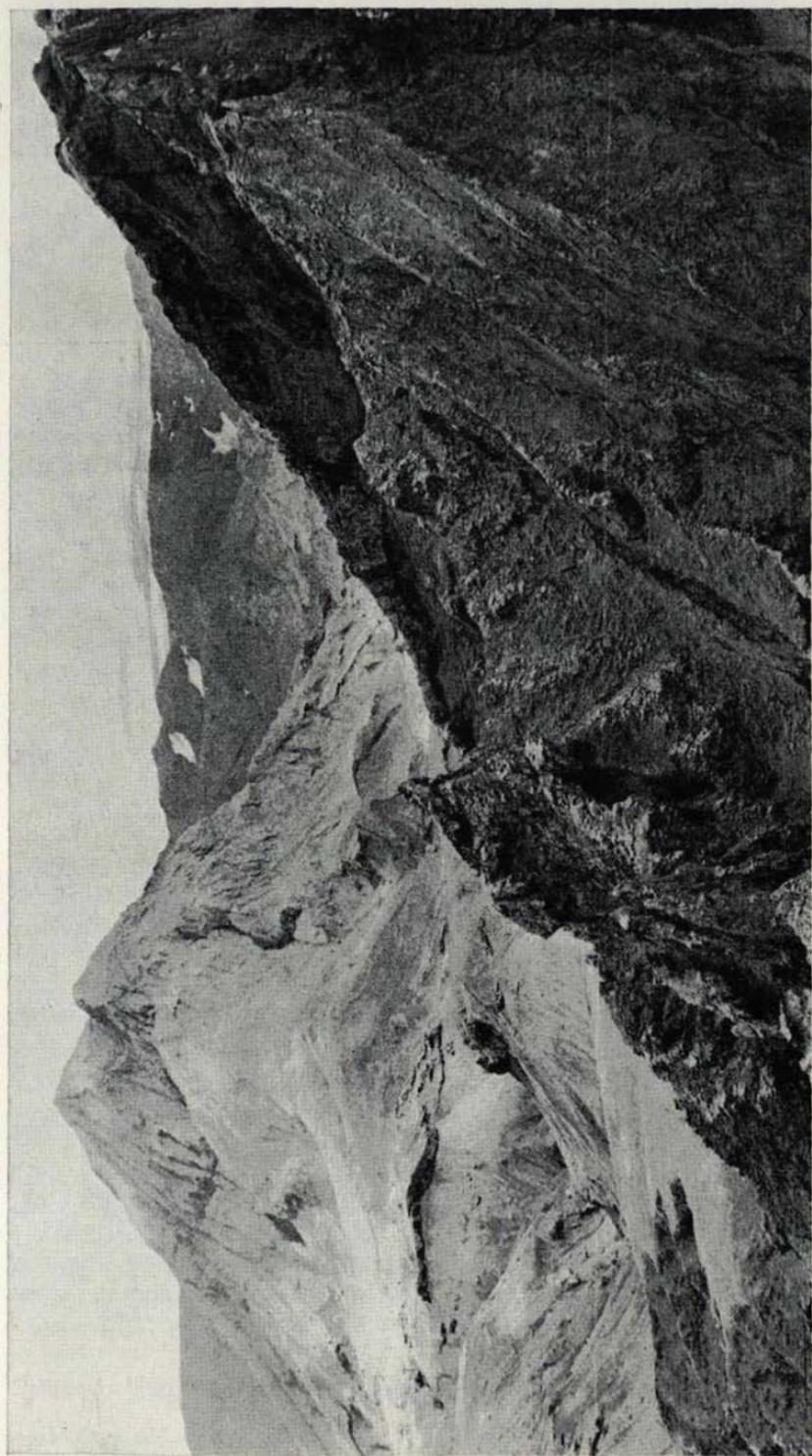
We felt we hadn't achieved very much, but back in Reykjavik we were a little comforted when we met some youngsters who had had to give up a fortnight's guided trek after one week, because they had had such appalling weather.

Even though bad weather prevented climbing, we enjoyed the strange terrain and our visits to the mountain huts. These have been built and are maintained by the Iceland Travel Association. They can, of course, be visited by private parties who have their own jeep transport, but, even so, the fords can be tricky and local knowledge is necessary. It is said that more people have met their death by drowning on the way than by accidents on the mountains themselves. We found it true that one must be prepared to sit at the foot of the mountain and wait for the weather — a young schoolmaster, on his seventh or eighth visit said, "If you can manage to come for a month, you'll get the right weather for some of the time" — and that seems about right — trying to take in three areas in a fortnight was asking a bit too much.



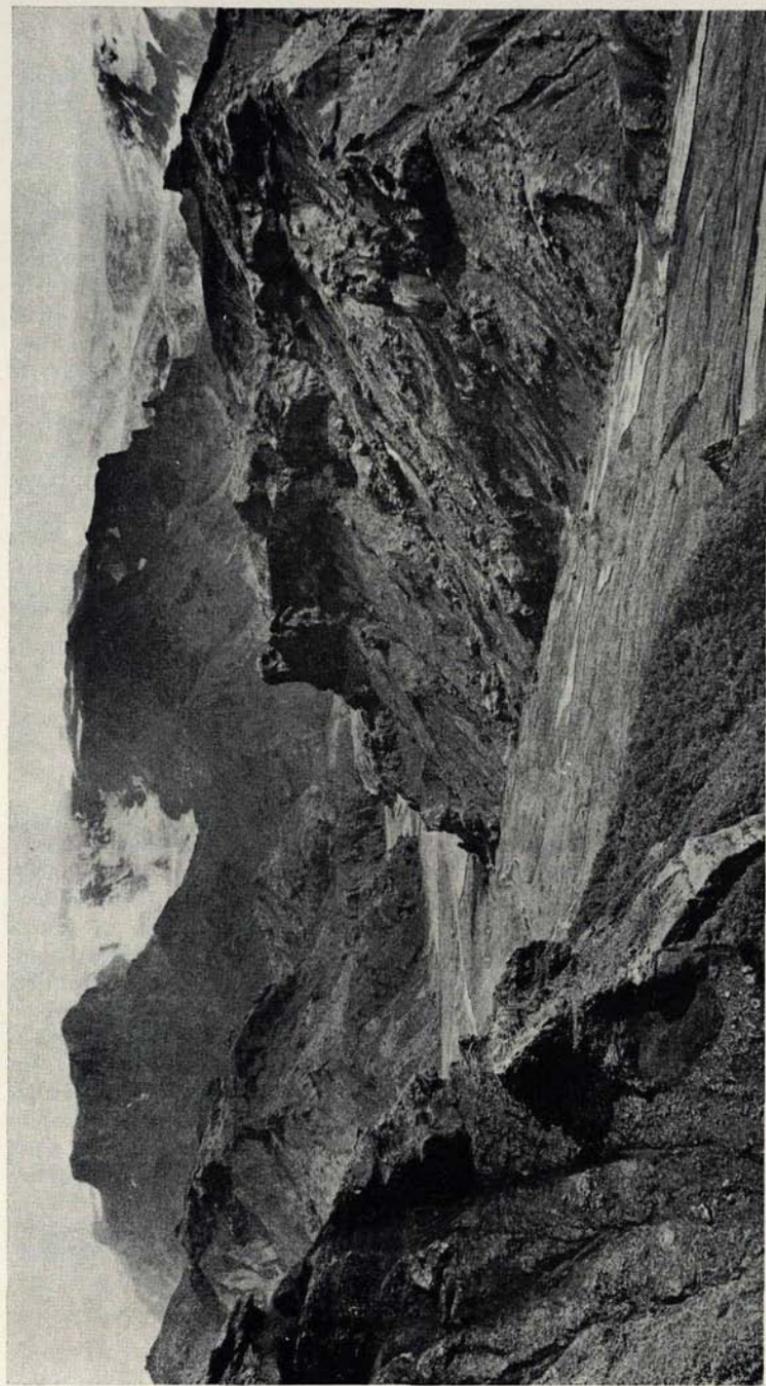
An Iceland Road

Peter Wild



Rjupnafell (Thorsmork, Iceland)

Peter Wild



Godaland (Thorsmork, Iceland)

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