

Pondělí 1. 8. Z chaty Dyngjufell na útulek Kistufell (5. den pochodu, plán 44 km, 168 km celkem)

Start z Drekgagill:

Day 1: We start hiking in the late afternoon. Entering a desert of black sand north of Askja brings us to a peculiar green moss Oasis of Svartá river, in the middle of black sand dunes.

Distance: 10-12 km **Walking time:** 5-6 hrs

Day 2: After filling all water bottles we cross the black desert, now with Vatnajökull glacier on the left and the Askja caldera on the right. From here the view will remind you of Tolkien's Mordor. Treading the sand in the vast space north of Vatnajökull brings us, finally, to a hill in the sand with a glacial stream flowing by. This is where we camp, next to the only water available for many miles.

Distance: 16-18 km **Walking time:** 6-8 hrs

Day 3: After the sand desert the landscape becomes more hilly and rugged. We traverse a small lava field and mount an old shield Volcano Urðarháls, to discover one of the deeper craters in Iceland. Never far away from the Vatnajökull glacier we reach the rugged emergency hut of Kistufell Mountain where we stay the night. **Na Kistufell není voda!!!**

Distance: 18-20 km **Walking time:** 7-9 hrs

Gaesvatn route

You can choose the original route, the southern one, or the new one across the lava fields closer to the shield volcano Trolladyngja. Extreme care has to be taken when **fording glacial rivers** and when the last one, just **east of the Urðarháls**, is reached the vehicles must never halt in the water during the crossing. If there is any hesitation the vehicles will immediately bog down in the moving sand. You have to select the first low gear and keep going until you reach dry land on the other side. Only that way, and without losing your nerve, you will get through. The best time of day to get through is early in the morning before the melting starts. This route is very barren and desolate and there are not many people around, sometimes you are alone. The surroundings and the scenery on a fine day simply cannot be described with words - you have to see to believe. It is almost as if you are alone in the world.

Cycling. The western section of Gæsavatnaleið (F910) connects Askja (Dreki) to Nýidalur in the middle of Sprengisandur. It attracts very little traffic and is scenically very interesting, factors which are all tempting to the cyclist. It has a reputation as the hardest route to cycle in Iceland. But it can certainly be sorely trying if the sands are too dry or the glacial outwashes are too wet. Ideal weather is cool with recent rain. In other conditions (eg sandstorm) cyclists have given up and turned back.

From the western end, F910 starts from a junction with the F26 5 km north of Nýidalur, right next to the deepest ford on the F26. The first 30 km of F910 road are mostly well surfaced for cycling, in fact generally better than most of the F26. There are several fords in the first 30 km, one of which, after about 15-20 km, is the hardest (though not the deepest) ford. The problem is that the current is very strong, and the water is turbid, so you can't easily spot the shallowest route. After 30 km there is a bridge over the Skjálfandarfljót, after which the F910 splits into the new official northern route, and the old southern route. The southern route is more scenic, slightly shorter, and the worst problems are on the sections common to both routes, so why not? Although the old route is shown as "unmaintained" on road information boards, in practice this isn't quite true. The route is clearly marked out with regular yellow stakes its entire length, and you will have reason to be very grateful for this.

The first short stretch after the junction looks like there isn't a road at all, but you are soon back on a pretty good road, and it is about 10 km to Gæsavötn. These two lakes seem rather a small and insignificant landmark to lend their name to such a significant road, but I suspect that this beautiful oasis,

at an altitude of 900 m, seemed like an extraordinary respite deep in desert. Gæsavötn provides the last good reliable drinking water until Askja, so you should carry your needs from here. There is large and luxurious private mountain hut at Gæsavötn, mainly used for winter sports, which will normally be locked and unavailable to you.

The road now becomes a bit rougher, though still easily rideable, as it gradually climbs up through lavafields to about 1200 m, which probably makes it the highest road in Iceland. About 12 km from Gæsavötn it comes to a small glacial outwash zone just 500 m from the face of Vatnajökull. You can easily cycle up to the face of the glacier. We found the outwash waters around here weren't too turbid, so this may provide another last (or first) chance to get water. Outwash zones are areas where meltwater comes out of the glacier. They typically have a flat silt surface (ie mud) cut by many small water channels. It is often very firm to cycle on, though occasionally some damper sections are a bit soft. Most of the small channels are easy to cycle across, though occasionally there are some deeper ones which you may have to ford more carefully. The water is usually very muddy, so is not useful for drinking except in extremis. In warm weather with the sun beating on the glacier, there can be a lot more water on the outwashes making them more difficult to cross. We were luckily to be crossing in cool weather with relatively little water on them. The road gets much rougher and less distinct from here, and in places you have to scout around for the next yellow marker – the tracks of vehicle drivers clearly also searching are a distraction from the correct route. You cross another outwash zone, then descend for a while into some lava, and then cross a couple of rather wider outwash zones. After this is a flat gravel plain which is excellent cycling for a few km, until you come into a rough lavafield, now just a short distance from the Kistufell hut.

The Kistufell hut (roughly 25 km or half a day from Gæsavötn, at an altitude of about 1100 m) is both an emergency hut and an unstaffed unlocked mountain hut, where you can stay the night for a fee in an honesty box. But there is no water in the area. There are some tools in the hut, such as a vice, which might be useful if you have mechanical problems. After the Kistufell hut is the roughest section of the road, as it first descends steeply and then climbs again to go over the dome of Urðarháls shield volcano. This has a large crater nearly 200 m deep (hence the surprising spot height on the map) just a short distance off the track, which is worth wandering over to look at. This part of the road is a boulder field where the road is all but invisible but for the yellow stakes. It is possible to ride much of it, but only very carefully, so it is almost as quick to walk.

The road descends steeply off Urðarháls onto a major glacial outwash. You can also detour to the face of the glacier, which is about 2 km away here. The track heads out onto the outwash, and after about 1 km there is junction marker (no signpost), and you have a choice of routes – you can see the two lines of yellow sticks going into the distance. The older route (“the sands”) is just to carry straight on north-east across the glacial outwash. After a few km, you come off the outwash and onto some sands. The outwash is easy riding provided that there isn't too much meltwater coming off the glacier. Once onto the sands, we found them wet from recent rain and mostly easily rideable, (even on my 40 mm tyres), provided we rode in the vehicle tracks. Indeed we proceeded at speed until we reached the junction with the northern F910 by a signpost reading “Askja 22 km” (the distance is actually to Dreki rather than Askja). This point is probably about 25-30 km from Kistufell. This option is not shown on many maps. The newer route (“the lava”), which is shown on most maps, forks left and heads north through a lava-field, joining the northern F910 about 31 km from Dreki. It is probably necessary to follow the newer route if there is too much water on the outwash, or if the sands are too dry to cross easily, though of course it is hard to know which will be best at the point when you have to make the decision. I would suspect the lava fields are difficult sandy riding. About 1 km east of the 22 km sign, the road went into the lava, and the sand soon became too soft to ride, even though it was damp. Short sections were rideable, but rarely for long enough to make it worthwhile given frequent dismounting. We were however lucky that the sand was sufficiently damp that we could wheel the bikes without them sinking into the sand. We were able to wheel the bikes about 14 km in 3 hours. On this section we found the sand in the wheelmarks softer, so we took a short-cut by cutting off a corner off the road, using the mountains as sighting points. Crossing this section when the sand is dry can be sorely trying, as the bike sinks in and you have to drag it, which is both slow and very hard work. People have taken all day over it. A strong wind, which the area is prone to, doesn't help either. The last 7 km to Dreki are rideable but mostly rather rough.