

Earth, Wind, Water, & Fire

A Belgian Adventure to the Land of Ice

Travel report and photos by Gerrit Seys and Hendrik De Backer



Traditional, usual, and logical. Every return trip back home from one holiday brings on questions about the next destination and so, while returning from a trip through Turkey with the big 4x4 MAN camper truck, we started to raise the idea of going to Iceland. The idea would be to use the ferry from Belgium and take our Jeeps and trucks with us. Iceland was, for many of us, a destination we had already been looking at in awe and some had even had plans back in the 80's to go. But now, with more time and money in our hands and with the political situation in Northern Africa being unstable as it is, Iceland came back on our radar as a possible destination for a 4x4 trip we would not soon forget.

Although initially intended as a solo holiday for one of the participating couples, the enthusiasm they were greeted with when explaining their plans to fellow overlanders soon convinced them to plan this trip into a small group holiday, based on our common 4x4 travelling equipment. We would be travelling in two giant 4x4 MAN camper trucks, accompanied by two flame red and fully-equipped Jeep Wrangler Rubicons. So, once the framework of the holiday had been laid out and the participant list was set, we contacted "Het Zuiderhuis" in Gent, a company specializing in Iceland and Northern trips, and we soon found ourselves on an info session one evening asking numerous questions about how to approach the trip, how to plan our equipment and routes, and plan for dates for the holiday and book the ferry.

The plan crystallized quickly. We were going to hit the

Icelandic mountain roads in our 4x4's for a period of about three weeks in our convoy. The option for a stopover on the Faroe Isles was selected by one of the teams, giving them another three additional days on these small sheep isles. We also quickly decided to leave the more tourist-oriented south of Iceland to the tourists, including the Reykjavik region, and instead focus on the inland mountain areas and northern Iceland.

Budget was the next issue to tackle. The ferry fee for a Wrangler and two adults soon amounted to a whopping 3500 EUR (approximately \$4,550 U.S) so imagine the price for the trucks. As there is only one ferry company, we suspected some kind of monopoly playing into the high prices of the crossing but then again, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity so we started and continued saving without regrets or hesitation!

Once the tickets had been ordered and paid, we were almost set. No visa or special identity papers were needed, no vehicle import issues. It was very easy! After all, this journey would still be in Europe. We divided the preparation tasks and one crew checked out a number of camp areas and mountain hostels and made a few online bookings. However, we made sure we did not have too tight of a schedule as we wanted to be free to go where we wanted. This was possible due to all the equipment in the giant camper trucks, allowing us, amongst others, to be fully independent for water and power, and thus allowing us to cook the greatest dishes in the field anywhere!





Day 1

The start of this big adventure brought us to Denmark where we embarked on the ferry on a Tuesday in Hirtshals. The initial drive from Brussels to the ferry harbor takes about 1,100 kilometres. Three of the teams met and broke up again on the highway with plans to get together again at the campsite near the ferry where we had a welcome drink and barbeque. Our fourth team left a few days earlier, and had already been dropped on the Faroe Isles for a small additional holiday. We would all join together on the ferry after the stop in Torshavn, the Faroese capital. There was one thing that played in the minds of the crew awaiting the ferry: the wind. At night, while sleeping, we could hear it swelling to big proportions and we got a bit anxious about its effect once we would be out on the ocean...

Day 2

It was our Flemish national holiday but we got up at 05h30, and raced to the harbor. The drivers had to enter the vehicles into the boat with an almost surgical precision which required some acrobatics to be able to get out of the vehicles afterwards. The boat was fully packed as this was the high season! The loading was done with Scandinavian precision and at 09h05 we set sail.

Days 3 & 4

The next day brought a big contrast. As we passed the Shetland Isles, the sea was calm as a mirror and we could enjoy the sightings of a few oil drilling platforms on the deck. Breakfast was fantastic, as were the aperitif drinks on the deck bar later in the day. We shared and planned our routes and loaded them onto our GPS units. Around 15h00, the ferry finally stopped in the capital of the Faroe Isles, Torshavn. The second Wrangler team had enjoyed a few days of discovery on these isles and now finally joined us on the ferry. The loading and unloading of mostly 4x4 travel vehicles and commercial lorries is a nice sight, seen high from the upper decks and once again, everything was very well organized.

The next day came and went on the ferry. We waited, ate, drank, slept with great anticipation of the Icelandic shores.

Day 5

It was an early rise and shine, especially with another bumpy ride at night. Luckily, by morning the wind had calmed down as we neared the Icelandic shore. We soon looked through the windows and onto the decks to admire the beautiful Icelandic coast, leading us to Seydisfjordur harbor, a town or port only the size of a few houses, and a very big ferry terminal. We then set off for Egilsstadir, where we intended to fill up on fuel and supplies and get some local currency before trekking towards the highlands.

Our convoy consisted of the following: A MAN truck manned by Gerrit and Frieda, both very experienced off-road travelers and President of Jeep Club Belux as well. The first Jeep Wrangler was manned by Marlyse and

Frederik, fully-equipped for independent travelling with cooking and repair responsibilities, and a big overhead rooftop tent. The second MAN truck was a slightly larger version and was driven by Leon and Luut who had their 13 year old daughter Reine with them. And finally, the second Wrangler was fully packed up to the roof rack with Anne and Hendrik and their two sons, Robbe and Berre, aged 6 and 10.

One of our goals was to reach the mythical F901 and we soon reached it but had to turn north to get into the direction of Moorudalur, our stop for the night in the highest inhabited village of Iceland.

Day 6

After a very wet night we gathered under our big shared tent in the morning for breakfast. It was raining but spirits were high. We made coffee and had a toast, and we discussed our planned routes. We planned to go north with a stop on the Detifoss and Selfoss, the two biggest and most powerful waterfalls. The route was a decent track up to the level that we met a few "tourists" with rental cars.

We started a long and exciting hike towards the waterfall with a crash of noise made by the 200 tons of water rushing down every second in a curtain 100 meters wide and 40 meters high. It was very impressive and awe inspiring, especially when considering the grey colors of the water which is caused by the lava sand and rocks that are being washed away.





The next morning, the sun was shiny and we headed for a tour around Lake Myvatn with Dimmuborgir as a first stop. This site was created by lava rocks flushed away by rain which makes for pillars in lava of about 40 meters high, locally called "lava cathedrals".

We continued the tour around the lake but along our way, things went wrong! One of the MAN trucks needed to move aside for an oncoming car on the narrow and marshy road to the center and started to slide sideways, down the side of the route. We quickly responded and assessed the situation. Things were not good as the truck had gone off the road, head first, and was sunk about in approximately one meter of marsh and bog. The rear end stuck out high in the air, and we had a

high risk of rollover. There was mud up to the axles, and our air pillows just sank into the mud when we pressurized them. Without losing much time, we decided to block the road because we needed to pull the big MAN out. So we moved the second MAN truck to the rear and it started pulling with all its power but no avail. The angle on the stuck MAN had become even worse, and the truck risked falling onto its side. A recon on foot, through the bushes and the mud near the shore, made us decide to do a forward pull. So, the second truck went back to the front, and we added a giant kinetic bungee rope throw the small MAN in 4-Low and had all axles locked. The two MAN's started a slow ballet aimed at pulling the stuck 10-tonner forward through the mud up to a point where the bank of the lake was a bit lower. It worked! The stuck MAN finally crept out and was free of the mud. Big sighs of relief. Damage report? One broken microwave that started flying around on impact but no other serious problems.

A sad thing to note: the one oncoming car who caused this drove off, tourists complained that we blocked the road, and even experienced 4x4 travelers came to have a look and then went on their way. So much for solidarity on the trail!

We headed back to camp to rearrange our gear and to let our emotions fly off a bit. In order to help with "de-stressing," we decided to go to the hot water springs in Jarboedin where in giant deep blue pools, hot water is mixed with colder streams and this is all collected to a pleasant 40 degrees, with an outside temperature of 6 degrees Celsius. We had a barbeque and headed for the tents with an additional fleece because of the cold.

We then left towards our destination of the day: Asbyrgi. We arrived a bit early and decided to head towards the northernmost point we could reach: 60° 30' north said the Garmin. In just a few kilometres of the Polar Circle, the sea stopped us in our tracks at the cape near Grotnjes. This area turns out to be a bird breeding site and conservatory, and we were literally surrounded by birds breeding when we stopped to go for a walk. The birds made it clear we were disturbing their habitat.

Days 7 & 8

During the night it got cold and in the morning, those of us in the tents started the Jeeps to heat up a bit and set out through the misty dawn to the hot showers. We headed out, back south now, towards the Asbyrgi National Park, known for its hoof-shaped rock formations. We spent the whole morning hiking in the crater and climbing up to the highest point where we enjoyed the great view and took a group photo. We decided to drive down the Jokulsa River over the F862 and have a small lunch near the Detifoss waterfall which turned out to have an asphalt parking lot and noisy Italian and Japanese tourists. Combined with the rain and the fog, we decided to just continue to Lake Myvatn.

On our way to Myvatn, we stopped near the lava fields of Krafla. In some places, the earth and soil are 80 degrees Celsius warm, and the big lava fields, created in 1982 by the last eruption, are still smoking. All these natural forces are combined and harvested by the Icelanders to produce electricity from the heat, and we even stayed in a guesthouse that has two incoming water pipes: hot and cold natural water but with a sulfuric taste and smell. We headed for the campsite in Hlid where we would stay for two days and make up camp.



Day 9

Again, we had a nice surprise when we woke up with a clear, blue sky. We made breakfast and broke down camp. We soon left and the terrain felt like driving on the moon: a quick and easy off-road track with speeds up to 100kph mixed with lava fields where you have to crawl through slowly. The lava rocks were also sharp as knives, and in between was black and grey ash everywhere.

Around noon, we reached the Rangers Hut of Herdubreid, manned by two beautiful, young blonde Icelandic ladies. Unfortunately, they brought us bad news: the F910, the mythical mountain road which we had hoped was going to take us over and around the glacier, was still closed so we would have an additional bypass of 150 kms to do the next day. We continued to drive down south to the Siguroarskali hut, on the north eastern edge of the Vatnajokul glacier, where we would stay for the night. The glacier is gigantic and very impressive! This giant lump of ice, breaking, crackling and making noise, is white but also covered under a layer of ash from recent eruptions of the Grimsvotn from 2010.

Day 10

Waking up under a clear blue sky was starting to get easy to get used to. However, going through the cold to the outdoor showers was a bit harder to deal with. So, some good hot coffee for breakfast helped and then we headed back onto the trail in the opposite direction, with a few alternative routes to the F903. It was about 8 to 10 degrees Celsius so we had our fleeces on but at the crossroads we met another ranger: young woman, blonde, and steel blue eyes wearing a t-shirt and sandals



greeting us with, "Hey, this is the Icelandic summer!" The girl stayed in the hut from May to September and she was very happy with the Belgian chocolates we brought and offered to her.

By coincidence we met another Flemish visitor, the owner of the travel agency we worked with to design this trip, before we headed out to the crater of the Askja Volcano. The road towards the crater runs in between snow fields which are still about one meter high, and it is cleared by GPS-driven bulldozers. One mistake and you are in the lava fields.

The F910 was still closed so we needed to push on through and continue our detour back by Myvatn, where we decided to stop and sleep again at the campsite we used before. On our way there, we had a small incident with a girl driving a small tourist 4x4 Suzuki. When she saw our convoy coming on the quick driving track to Myvatn, she let the Wranglers pass and then panicked when seeing the MAN trucks appear in the mirror. In too swift movements she parked but landed her Suzuki with the belly onto some rocks. One of the trucks stopped to pull her off. Proof of why the Icelandic government forbids access to some tracks to non-serious 4x4 vehicles but unfortunately, not always to non-experienced rental drivers!

Check out Part II of Hendrik's Icelandic journey in the May – June 2012 issue of JPFreek Adventure Magazine

