

# HOT & Cold

Down, but  
not out, in  
Iceland

The author soaks in Iceland's number one tourist attraction, the Blue Lagoon, a man-made spa of geothermal runoff.

This is not the story I planned to write; not the story I crafted over and over in my mind while I pedaled my bike on its trainer before dawn in the cold garage; or while I jogged on the treadmill during my lunch hour; or while I reclined in my seat, trying to sleep on the five-hour flight to the starting line of my adventure. No, this is not that hero's tale — the triumphant, self-congratulating boastings of a road warrior — because, simply, things did not turn out that way.

It all began over two years ago, during my annual physical. While standing goose-bumped on the doctor's scale, I faced the reality that the slow accumulation and drifting of my midsection would have to be held in check, or soon I would be forced to go out and purchase a new wardrobe.

So shortly after, I joined a health club, bought new sneakers, and a Walkman. But lacking motivation — a goal more worthy of such sacrifice — I found every excuse imaginable to avoid a trip to the club. I just

couldn't drag myself to the gym without a payoff more interesting than simply the disappearance of my love handles; I needed to visualize something exotic and enticing while gasping for air with my heartbeat hammering in my ears.

Flipping through a fitness magazine for inspiration, I came across an article that suggested training for a century ride as a way to get in shape. I had a 23-year-old Raleigh Competition 10-speed that I hadn't ridden since my 10-year-old son was born, and the idea of a long bike ride appealed to me more out of nostalgia than anything else. But even given the dilapidated state of my physique, 10 months seemed like a long time to prepare for a single, 100-mile event. So, influenced by all the Y2K hoopla of the times, the century ride idea morphed into a "millennium ride": ten centuries, back to back; 1000 miles over 10 days.

Now having the why and the what, I just needed the where. I searched the atlas for someplace not too hot or too hilly, nor too dangerous or too ordinary. But while these were important considerations, I was most worried about pace: How could I cover each day's century in the most relaxed way possible? I realized that the more daylight I had to ride in each day, the slower the speed I could average in order to complete the day's 100 miles.

Ideally, I fantasized, I would ride where the sun would never set; and studying the globe, I hit upon a place that met my requirements: Iceland. In June, Iceland averages a balmy 55°F, due to the warming effects of the Gulf Stream. While rugged and mountainous, its towns and main roads are all located along the less difficult coastal terrain. I read that its police did not carry guns, and took that as an indication of its safety; and learning about its volcanoes and ice caps and geysers and hot springs, it seemed anything but ordinary. And best of all, in June, I would be blessed with 24 hours of sunlight.

But what settled the matter was the discovery that Iceland's only "highway," a two-lane, mostly-paved road that



PHOTOS BY PAUL KRAMER

The Independent Fabrications touring bike bought just for this tour

By Paul Kramer

circles the country around its perimeter, was almost exactly a 1,000-mile loop. It seemed to be a sign that I had picked the perfect route for my millennium ride. I chose a June 17th departure date so that the northern-most leg of the ride, passing 20 miles from the Arctic Circle, would coincide with the summer solstice. When I discovered that June 17th was Iceland's Independence Day, I once again felt the hand of fate at work.

I determined to be as fit as possible by June, and having given myself this challenge made all the difference in my attitude toward exercise. In addition to the 30-minute rides before work, and the lunch hours spent at the gym, I swore off the elevator at the office, climbing the 319 steps to the 20th floor four or five times a day. I also gave up all sweets and desserts, ultimately losing 15 pounds of unnecessary baggage.

I spent many hours preparing for my trip in non-physical ways, as well. I learned about the country and its highway, exchanging emails with riders from France, Germany, and Ireland that I met on Icelandic Internet bulletin boards. I was tipped off to the steepest hills, most primitive stretches of unpaved road, and even the best places to grab lunch along the way. I researched the clothing and equipment I would need, buying all sorts of specialized paraphernalia, from Goretex socks to a waterproof camera.

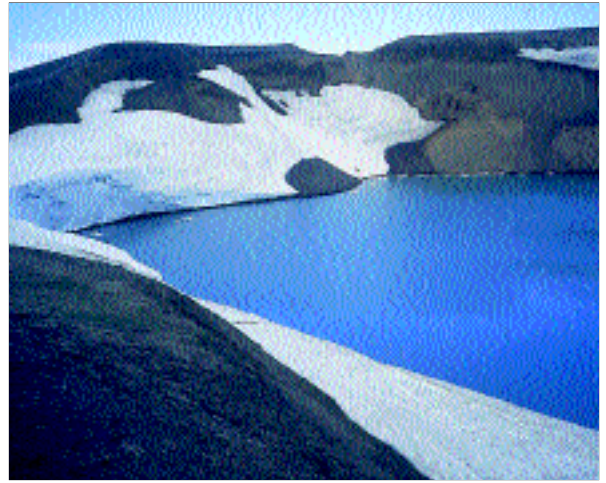
Best of all, I treated myself to a new bike: a superbly hand-crafted, steel-framed, 27-speed touring machine from Independent Fabrications in Somerville, Massachusetts. Outfitted with three bottle cages, fenders, front and rear racks, and knobby tires, I certainly would go off in style, no matter how I returned.

And wanting to pamper myself to compensate for the

ambitious daily distances planned, I made hotel reservations for each of the nine nights — not an easy feat, since there are probably not more than 20 hotels throughout the entire countryside outside of the capital.

When June 17th finally came around, I was prepared both aerobically and materially, with hand-made, laminated daily-route maps (with useful phrases printed on the backs in English and Icelandic), three different pairs of gloves (for mild, cold, and wet conditions), a plastic visor for my helmet to keep the rain off my glasses, 24 Cliff Bars, and dozens of other essentials, carefully arranged in panniers to balance the weight. I hung small waterproof tags from the zippers of each saddlebag, listing its contents to avoid unnecessary searching on the road. Then, packing it all with the bike into a hard-shell case that I rented for the occasion, I made my way by bus to the airport.

The flight left New York at 9:30 p.m. and landed five hours later at Keflavik International Airport, 6:30 a.m. local



**Not-so-ancient history. The explosion crater "Viti" was formed in 1724 when the Krafla lava field erupted. The area is still active — between the snowdrifts, the ground is hot to the touch.**

time. After spending an hour assembling my bike, I pushed the rolling pack-horse outside into the Icelandic morning.

All arrivals into Iceland land in the early morning, and all flights depart in the afternoon. Using this ingenious schedule, coupled with low fares on one-stop flights from the U.S. to the Continent that pass through Keflavik, Iceland enjoys the economic benefits of tourists having half a day to kill between flights. Tour busses line up at the airport to take captive travelers on shopping excursions to Reykjavik, the capital, 30 miles to the north, or on sightseeing trips to the local hot springs, waterfalls, and geysers (an Icelandic word, by the way). This schedule also results in the entire airport being deserted by 7 a.m.; so by the time I pedaled from the parking lot onto the road leading north, I was quite alone.

The stretch of highway from the airport to Reykjavik is not actually part of Iceland's single national highway, Route 1 (or as they call it, The Ring Road), that I would pick up in the capital to officially start my clockwise circumnavigation back to Reykjavik. It is 30 forlorn miles, even by Icelandic standards — flat, and lacking any drama in its scenery, with monotonous views to the west of the gray sea's horizon, and to the east, over ancient, moss-covered lava fields that vanish into a fog-obscured background.

I was sleep-deprived but filled with energy and enthusiasm as I pointed the front wheel north and pushed off. The day I had been imagining for so many miles on the treadmill and for countless steps up the fire stairs to my office was finally here ...

It wasn't the 40° air and the driving rain that surprised me; I had anticipated both, and was armed with a polypropylene undershirt, a fleece balaclava, neoprene lobster mitts, waterproof pants and jacket, and rain covers for my helmet, shoes, and panniers. No, it was the wind that came as a shock. It seemed to come from all points of the compass at once, with the force of a titanic ocean wave. How could all of my research have failed to warn me of this local meteorological phenomenon?

There was nothing to do but hunch down and pedal on. But even this simple strategy proved almost impossible. When the wind came at me from any direction other than directly in front or behind, my loaded frame became a sail, and my bike would tack violently to port or starboard. And being on a two-lane road, with no shoulder, this meant either veering into the path of passing cars or sailing off the road, down a steep embankment, and onto jagged volcanic debris. It took every fiber of strength to keep the front tire on the wet white line that marked the edge of the pavement.

Four hours later, I sighted the spires and towers of the only city on an island the size

# Nuts and Bolts

**WHEN TO GO:** For biking, the choice is pretty simple — summer is the ideal time to travel. You'll enjoy 24 hours of daylight, temperatures in the high-50's, and, at least in the north and east, an abundance of dry days. Just keep in mind that whenever you go and wherever you travel, you'll have to deal with the relentless wind.

**STARTING POINT:** Icelandair flies in to Keflavik, 30 miles south of the capital, from New York (JFK), Baltimore-Washington (BWI), Minneapolis/St. Paul (MSP), and Orlando. Most flights leave at night and arrive the next morning (it's a five-hour flight from New York), so most riders will want to take the first day off to rest. Buses leave the airport for Reykjavik every few minutes. If you're bringing your own bike, it shouldn't be a problem, but if not, there are several places to rent bikes in the capital.

**EQUIPMENT:** There are only two kinds of touring in Iceland — on the Ring Road, the country's single highway that circles the island (with some branches reaching into the northwest peninsula), and off-road. For the former, any comfortable touring bike should do, but be sure to bring whatever spare parts and tools you can — outside the capital you won't find much in the way of repair assistance. For biking off-road, you'll be even more isolated, with no services of any kind.

**CLOTHING:** Two words: rain gear. With the winds here, the rain falls up at times. And it will never be hot enough for a passing shower to feel anything but chilling. The good news? Even the smallest towns have swimming pools (outdoors but naturally heated) and hotpots, their version of the Jacuzzi.

**ROADS:** The Ring Road is not paved for its entire 1000-mile length — it's hard-packed gravel in the northeast corner of the country — but at the worst it's well-maintained and easy-going. The biggest danger is from the wind caused by passing trucks speeding by at insane speeds. The gust in their wake, combined with the constant ambient wind, can toss you off the shoulder. Also be aware of the cattle grates placed across the highway every dozen miles to discourage sheep from wandering off the farm.

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** Iceland is the size of Kentucky, with the population of Louisville, and over half of the population live in the capital. So while there are many hotels to choose from in Reykjavik in every price range (keeping in mind that everything in

Iceland costs more than you would expect), outside of the capital it's very slim pickings. If you go in the summer, you'll be able to take advantage of two chains of modest hotels that transform boarding schools into comfortable lodgings. Also, odd as it might sound, many gas stations have a few rooms available. Camping is allowed in most rural areas. There are some established campgrounds with washing and bathing facilities, but don't count on building a campfire — Iceland is one of the most completely deforested countries on earth.

**FOOD:** Reykjavik has the most expensive McDonald's in the world; but unless you have an irresistible urge, you can easily avoid ending up there. The food isn't fancy in Iceland, but they don't enjoy the world's second longest life expectancy by eating lots of junk food. Expect to eat either lamb or fish at least once a day, prepared simply, with a root vegetable or two. Don't expect an abundance of fresh fruits or salads.

**WATER:** Iceland is probably the cleanest country in the world. They are just beginning to market their bottled glacier water in the U.S.

**TRANSPORTATION:** There is one bus each day running in each direction on the Ring Road, so the most you will have to wait for a lift in case of an emergency is 24 hours. (Unless you're in the outback, where you just may wait forever.) The buses will stop anywhere along its route if you flag it down, and they have a large compartment in the rear, or a rack, for bicycles.

**MUST SEES:** The number one attraction is the Blue Lagoon, a man-made, lake-sized hot tub. It's best when the weather's the worst. Other highlights along the Ring Road are Dettifoss, Europe's most powerful waterfall; Vatnajökull Glacier, the largest in Europe, where you can ride a snowmobile



The biggest problem you'll encounter while observing one of Iceland's many impressive waterfalls is finding some other soul to take your picture. If you don't pack a tripod you'll never convince your friends you were ever there.

around the rim of a volcano; and the Lake Myvatn area, with its lava ejection fields, boiling mud pots, and hundreds of bird species. In the West Fjord region you can bike along miles of coastline lined with bird-nesting cliffs carved from 15 million-year-old rock formations.

**LINKS:** There are many Web sites put up by people who have biked in Iceland, and they are a good source of photos and first-hand information. Two good sites run by organizations, both providing many links to other useful sites are:

The Icelandic Mountainbike Club  
<http://www.mmedia.is/~ifhk/touring.htm>  
and the Icelandic Tourist Board  
<http://www.icetourist.is/>

## Iceland



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of Kentucky, where 150,000 of Iceland's 250,000 inhabitants live. Having averaged around 7 miles an hour, I quickly calculated that at this pace I would reach my first night's hotel at about 10 p.m., assuming I didn't make a single stop. Atiny feeling of dread began to form at the bottom of my empty stomach.

According to my biological clock, it was time for breakfast, but local time said it was time for lunch; my stomach was ready for both, and then some. I navigated the narrow downtown streets looking for a restaurant where a dripping cyclist would be welcome, finally settling on a dreary-looking candy store with a lunch counter at the back. Sliding my tray along with numb fingers, seeing that vegetarians had quite a limited selection, I settled on mashed potatoes and Gatorade. It was delicious.

I then headed out of the city on the Ring Road towards Borgarnes, 70 miles to the north. Now I not only had to deal with the cold and the rain and the wind, but also, due to the long Icelandic Independence Day weekend, had to steer clear of the early departing city travelers heading north to the town of Akureyri, whose 15,000 residents made up Iceland's second largest settlement.

Fortunately, the traffic dropped to zero when the exit came for the tunnel under the nearby fjord. The newly opened shortcut avoids 30 miles of road that snake along the edge of the finger-like bay; every car headed for it, leaving me completely alone. The countryside opened up before me like a pop-up book: a clear, shallow fjord on my left, bald and rounded hills rising up suddenly on my right, and the blacktop under me the only evidence of humanity. To top it all off, I enjoyed a tailwind as I coasted down a moderate incline at 45 mph. But, after a few exhilarating seconds, the highway twisted around the mouth of the fjord, and the tailwind suddenly broadsided me as I fought to stay upright.

Despite the conditions, I was savoring the solitude, and was disappointed when the post-tunnel traffic rejoined the Ring Road, continuing the journey northwards. Occasionally a truck driving south would approach at breakneck speed, and as it passed I would be helpless in its wake of wind and water. Literally blown off the road several times, I learned to dismount, huddle, and wait at the sight of any oversized, oncoming shape.

At one point, after pushing my bike against a headwind for about 30 minutes and becoming somewhat addled with hypothermia, I stopped, turned around, and stuck out my thumb. I stood like this for about 10 minutes, during which time about five cars whooshed past, spraying me with water before disappearing into the fog. I reflected on the fact that I was a stranger in a strange land, where, one: cars went too fast to stop, two: there was no shoulder to stop on, and three: even if they could pull over, their subcompact size would force me to abandon my bicycle and leave my gear behind. I faced up to the fact that unless a group of American tourists from some do-goody church, traveling in a rented passenger van, came along, I was out of luck. Facing my destination once again, I slugged on.

At a forlorn gas station's diner, truly in the middle of nowhere, I savored a dinner of chocolate cake and coffee, sitting in a booth with my helmet on, my fingers being too numb to unclip its strap. I considered calling the hotel and begging them to come and fetch me, but the hot coffee pepped me up and gave me the strength to go on. I headed back into the teeth of the biting wind, head down, pushing my bike along, trying to urge myself on by singing marches in a full, waterlogged shout, heard by no one.

In this way I slowly made my way to Borgarnes, the first

town along the Ring Road I came to since leaving the capital 11 hours earlier. Coming around a bend in the serpentine coastline, I made out the lights of the tiny fishing village, illuminated against the rain and fog. The bland collection of low buildings was huddled on a spit of land extending into the concave mouth of a fjord. The highway reached it by a low causeway, where the headwinds nearly pinned me in place. In a climactic end to a 15-hour day, for 30 minutes I fought for each yard separating me from my bed.

I arrived at the small hotel to find the kitchen closed, and my visions of a hot dinner dashed. Parking my bike in the basement, I removed the rain covers from the panniers to discover about a quart of water trapped in the bottom of each. With what little strength I had left, I laughed at the memory of my maniacal obsession with saving ounces as I prepared for this trip, only to unwittingly haul eight pounds of useless ballast through the day.

Then, finally reaching my room, I removed my helmet to discover an enormous welt under my chin. While its rain cover had kept the rain off of my head, it also had prevented the wind from escaping as it blew upwards from the ground. (Yes, the it even blew in that direction.) So there had been a constant upwards pull on the helmet and, subsequently, on the strap. I looked like someone who had been decapitated and then had his head sewn back on. But at that point, I couldn't worry about it; I collapsed on the bed and, undisturbed by the midnight sun, obscured as it was by the thick clouds, I sank into a hard-earned sleep. One century down and nine to go.

After battling the Gods of Wind, Water, Cold, and Fog for 15 hours in order to complete that first day's century, the balance of the trip was undramatic by comparison — which isn't to say it was uneventful. The next morning, looking out the window and seeing the same foul weather as the day before, I knew that I couldn't keep up the pace. But I was too exhausted to feel disap-

pointed with myself, and was satisfied to have made it that far. So studying the map, I revised my itinerary: I would split the two following 100-mile days in half, covering 50 miles a day for four days, arriving in the city of Akureyri on the fifth day, instead of on the third as I had planned.

There, still 650 miles from the completion of my goal, and having only five days to cover them in, I would rent a car and continue around the country on four wheels instead of two. Fortunately, the balance of the trip went smoothly. The relaxed quota allowed me to be less anxious when the wind slowed my pace to a funereal plod. And though the gusts kept up for the next four days, the rain stopped after the second day, and the two days following were crystal clear.

The third night, on the eve of the solstice, I hiked up a 2,000-foot hill across from the boarding school, converted to a summer hotel, where I was staying. The small mountain was a perfect cone, completely composed of fist-sized chunks of volcanic rock. I scrambled up it for two hours in my hard-soled cycling shoes and, reaching the top — a pointed peak just broad enough to stand on — I was just in time to watch the sun set in the north at 1:00 a.m., dipping into the orange sea to rise again 10 minutes later in the same spot. It was a moment that gave all the misfortunes leading up to it a worthwhile purpose. Whatever else might happen from here on out, I thought, can't diminish the awesome feeling of gazing out across the Arctic Circle under a golden midnight sun.

The drive from Akureyri back to Reyk-



In the Northeast the author notes, "You can travel all day without seeing a sign of another human. If it weren't for the road, I would have thought I was the first to discover this land."

javik, while not the cycling adventure I had planned, was terrific, nonetheless. I stood alone at the precipice of Europe's most powerful waterfall, not a tourist or concession stand or even a signpost in sight. I traversed the perimeter of a crater lake, ringed with snow and set within a Martian landscape of cracked sand and distorted boulders. (Nearby, NASA-trained astronauts for the first moon mission.) I hiked through a landscape of smoking earth, pock-marked with pits of boiling, sulfurous mud; while later that same day, I stood on a river bank and watched iridescent blue, boat-sized icebergs calved from a glacier drifting out to sea. And on the southern coast I walked along a beach where the sand was fine as sugar and black as coal, and immersed my body in a man-made lagoon of steaming hot water as gale-force winds blew sleet in my exposed face.

Iceland may not be the touring cyclist's paradise I had hoped to discover. But go anyway; in this amazing island of water, fire, and ice, you're guaranteed to take home memories for a lifetime. ●

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*Paul Kramer is an applications developer in Manhattan, where he's currently daydreaming about a bike trip to Labrador.*